

THE INVASION CHRONICLES (BOOK FOUR)

# RETURN



MORGAN RICE

# Морган Райс

## Return

### Серия «The Invasion Chronicles», книга 4

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*Return. (The Invasion Chronicles—Book Four): A Science Fiction Thriller:*  
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#### Аннотация

“TRANSMISSION is riveting, unexpected, and firmly rooted in strong psychological profiles backed with thriller and sci-fi elements: what more could readers wish for? (Just the quick publication of Book Two, Arrival.)”

—Midwest Book Review

From #1 worldwide bestselling fantasy author Morgan Rice comes RETURN, book #4 in a long-anticipated science fiction series. Can Kevin and Chloe survive alone in outer space? Can Luna, alone on planet Earth, avoid capture?

All hope seems lost for Kevin and Chloe as their escape pod hurtles into nothingness, as they run out of rations and supplies.

All hope seems lost for Luna as the aliens outnumber and encircle her.

If there any hope left for humanity?

“Action-packed .... Rice’s writing is solid and the premise intriguing.”

–Publishers Weekly, re A Quest of Heroes

“A superior fantasy... A recommended winner for any who enjoy epic fantasy writing fueled by powerful, believable young adult protagonists.”

–Midwest Book Review, re Rise of the Dragons

“An action packed fantasy sure to please fans of Morgan Rice’s previous novels, along with fans of works such as THE INHERITANCE CYCLE by Christopher Paolini.... Fans of Young Adult Fiction will devour this latest work by Rice and beg for more.”

–The Wanderer, A Literary Journal (regarding Rise of the Dragons)

Also available are Morgan Rice’s many series in the fantasy genre, including A QUEST OF HEROES (BOOK #1 IN THE SORCERER’S RING), a free download with over 1,300 five star reviews!

# Содержание

CHAPTER ONE	13
CHAPTER TWO	25
CHAPTER THREE	37
CHAPTER FOUR	49
CHAPTER FIVE	61
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	67

# **Morgan Rice**

## **Return. (The Invasion Chronicles—Book Four): A Science Fiction Thriller**

**Morgan Rice**

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series **THE SORCERER'S RING**, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series **THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS**, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series **THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY**, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising three books; of the epic fantasy series **KINGS AND SORCERERS**, comprising six books; of the epic fantasy series **OF CROWNS AND GLORY**, comprising eight books; of the epic fantasy series **A THRONE FOR SISTERS**, comprising eight books; of the new science fiction series **THE INVASION CHRONICLES**, comprising four books; and of the new fantasy series **OLIVER BLUE AND THE SCHOOL FOR SEERS**, comprising three books (and counting). Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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*--Books and Movie Reviews*

*Roberto Mattos*

“An action packed fantasy sure to please fans of Morgan Rice’s previous novels, along with fans of works such as THE INHERITANCE CYCLE by Christopher Paolini.... Fans of Young Adult Fiction will devour this latest work by Rice and beg for more.”

*--The Wanderer, A Literary Journal (regarding Rise of the*

*Dragons)*

“A spirited fantasy that weaves elements of mystery and intrigue into its story line. *A Quest of Heroes* is all about the making of courage and about realizing a life purpose that leads to growth, maturity, and excellence....For those seeking meaty fantasy adventures, the protagonists, devices, and action provide a vigorous set of encounters that focus well on Thor's evolution from a dreamy child to a young adult facing impossible odds for survival....Only the beginning of what promises to be an epic young adult series.”

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*--Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos*

“In this action-packed first book in the epic fantasy Sorcerer's Ring series (which is currently 14 books strong), Rice introduces readers to 14-year-old Thorgrin "Thor" McLeod, whose dream is to join the Silver Legion, the elite knights who serve the king.... Rice's writing is solid and the premise intriguing.”

*--Publishers Weekly*

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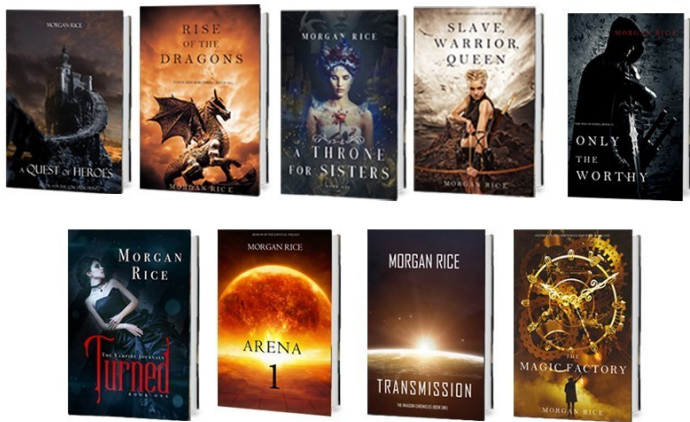
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# CHAPTER ONE

For the longest time in the darkness that surrounded him, Kevin was convinced that he had died. It felt right somehow. Everyone had told him that he didn't have long to live anyway, and then there had been the spacecraft drifting in the emptiness, the air running out little by little. After all that, *shouldn't* this be the end of things?

"Kevin," Chloe's voice called from somewhere in the space beyond that blackness. "Open your eyes."

"G'way. I'm dead," Kevin mumbled, because a part of him just wanted to go back to sleep. It wanted to drift off and relax, letting the blackness overwhelm everything. He was so comfortable that... He winced as something pinched his arm. "Ow!"

His eyes shot open to reveal a room that definitely wasn't the ship they'd been floating helplessly in. This wasn't a stolen Hive craft, where they were slowly dying after being winged by an Ilari craft and the wreckage of their world. This space was larger than that had been, and it looked almost like...

"This is a hospital," Kevin guessed. He knew what hospitals looked like by now. He'd spent so much time in hospitals, and labs, and other places that it was impossible *not* to recognize it for what it was, even though it only looked like a hospital in an alien way, with none of the devices looking like the ones he was used to.

“You’re awake then,” Chloe said, from the spot where she stood beside Kevin’s bed. She looked faintly satisfied with her efforts to wake him up, smiling to herself in a way that suggested that she would be more than happy to do it again.

“That hurt,” Kevin complained, and then a thought came to him. “Are *you* hurt? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Chloe assured him, sounding serious now. “They patched up the worst bruises when they brought us here.”

Kevin looked her over anyway, wanting to be sure, and worried that she might be trying to hide how hurt she really was. Someone had given her a kind of silvery uniform to wear in place of her usual clothes, which looked a little like the silvery scales of a fish, reflecting the light in different ways as she moved. As Kevin looked down he saw that he was wearing the same thing.

“How about you?” Chloe asked with obvious concern. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” Kevin said. “I don’t think so.”

He definitely didn’t feel any worse than he usually did, or at least, than he usually had before the Hive had chosen to make him one of them. He had pain running through his body, and dizziness threatening to rise up inside him when he moved too fast, but Kevin knew those feelings. They were so familiar that they were almost like old friends by this point. He couldn’t feel any of the sharper pains of anything broken over the top of it.

Chloe came forward and hugged him tight. “I’m so glad you’re safe.”

Kevin held onto her, even though he didn't feel like he deserved it right then. It was his fault that it had come to this. If it hadn't been for him, Chloe wouldn't have been stuck in a cell, undergoing experiments. She wouldn't have the strange, alive-looking thing bonded to her arm, tight as a second skin, its bony, insect-like surface seeming completely out of place against the smoothness of her skin.

It felt so good that she was safe that for a moment or two, Kevin didn't even think about who was missing.

"Where's Ro?" he asked, looking around for the former member of the Hive. "Is he—"

"Good, you're awake," a new voice said. Kevin turned to where a door had opened to reveal a blue-skinned Ilari woman in a dark uniform with military insignia. Kevin recognized General s'Lara from the com-cast he'd made trying to trick her and the rest of her kind. Just the thought of it made him sure that this must all be some horrible dream.

"General, *you* saved us?" Kevin said. "But I... I tried to trick you." That wasn't the worst part of it though. "I... I played a part in blowing up your world."

Guilt flashed through him at the thought of all he had done, while he saw the general's expression flicker to one of anger.

"You also helped to warn us," she said. "That gets you some consideration from us, and... well, we don't want to abandon people in need. *We* are not like the Hive."

"That's..." Kevin didn't have the words. "Thank you."

“Don’t thank me yet,” General s’Lara said. She glanced up, and she seemed to listen to something only she could hear. “My AI tells me that the others are ready to decide what to do with you. You *and* that so-called ‘Purest’ you brought with you. Follow me, please.”

“Kevin’s still weak,” Chloe argued. “He needs rest.”

“He can rest all he wants once the trial is done. Now come with me.” The general was clearly used to having her orders obeyed, already walking without waiting to see if they would do it.

Kevin looked over at Chloe, who shrugged. They knew that neither one of them truly had a choice. Hurrying to keep up, they followed the general out of the hospital room, into a set of twisting corridors whose walls had shimmering images that gave them the illusion of broad, open spaces. Here and there, Kevin and Chloe passed windows that held a view out into open space.

“We’re on a ship, aren’t we?” Kevin guessed. It didn’t feel the same as the Hive’s ships. This one didn’t have the perfect stability of gravity drives, but it was still definitely a ship of some kind.

“This is the flagship of the escape fleet,” General s’Lara said. “My AI is integrated with it.”

“So every inch of this place is... you?” Chloe asked.

“I guess you could say that,” the general replied. “My AI will connect to the others for your trial.”

“Like the Hive?” Kevin asked, and instantly knew from the general’s expression that it was the wrong thing to say.

“We are *nothing* like the Hive,” General s’Lara said, in a sharp

tone. “They force themselves upon the worlds they destroy, upon the people they make a part of them, upon each other. The misery, the *choices*, of others mean nothing to them. We join with our AIs, but we still choose what we will do, and we seek no conquest. We sat behind shields because we did not wish to slaughter others, even though it cost us *worlds*.”

Kevin could feel another wave of guilt rising up in him at that. He'd been the one to help bring down those shields and make their planet vulnerable to what came next. He'd been the one to help the Hive destroy their world, and take his. To his surprise, though, Chloe was more direct.

“You could have fought them and you didn't?” she said. “You hid away from them when you could have *stopped* them?”

“Chloe—” Kevin began, but it seemed that Chloe wasn't done.

“No, Kevin,” she said. “If she's saying that they could have done more, that they could have beaten them before they got to Earth, then they could have spared all of us this. They could have saved us.”

“We couldn't even save ourselves,” General s'Lara said, looking mournful now. “We don't have the tools to stop the Hive. We can kill them, we have the technology to beat their ships, and they just keep coming.” She seemed to listen to something again. “No, I know. Anyway, we're here.”

She gestured to a set of doors. Kevin and Chloe stepped through, into a large space filled with people. As with the corridors, images spread over the walls, but these seemed more

abstract, and Kevin could see the patterns in them. Somehow he knew that this was the AIs communicating with one another.

Ro stood on a blank circle of floor raised above the rest of it. Kevin hurried over to the alien, wanting to make sure he was all right, while Chloe was even faster, throwing her arms around him. The people there stared at them. Kevin could see so many of them, both Ilari and other aliens who had taken refuge among them, that it was hard to pick out individual faces. Even so, he knew that they were staring at the three of them without looking away, trying to make up their minds.

“Ro, are you all right?” he asked. His friend didn’t look hurt, but even so, he seemed shaken.

“I don’t know,” the alien admitted. “I am feeling so many emotions. Guilt, and fear, and... how do people *cope*?”

Kevin put a hand on the alien’s shoulder. Chloe put an arm around him.

“We do,” Chloe promised him. “And we keep doing it.”

“These three were salvaged from a floating ship,” General s’Lara said, obviously addressing the assembly. “You can see that one of them is one of the Hive’s ‘Purest.’ Of the others, one is the boy who helped to let them into our world, while the last has been changed into one of their creations.”

Kevin hated hearing him and his friends described like that. The worst part, though, was that he couldn’t deny what they were saying about him.

“We are on our way to another outpost,” General s’Lara said.

“The ship tells me that our fleet is being stalked, and so we must decide what we are to do with our new guests. Can we risk having them aboard? Are we in more danger by having them here? Are they all that they appear? Are there any who wish to speak regarding the first of them? The girl?”

There was a swirl of images and letters on the walls as the AIs communicated with one another. If he concentrated, Kevin felt as though he could get the gist of their conversations, the signals that made them up transformed for him through the same talent that had let him translate all of their other signals...

*...not guilty in all of this...*

*...a victim, not a foe...*

*...the device on her arm though...*

Two individuals stood up.

“It has been decided that I will speak for her,” a man said. “It seems obvious to us that she was a captive of the Hive, their victim, and not one of them. We should give her safety as one seeking refuge.”

A woman stood up. “It has been decided that I will speak against,” she said. “Although we have sympathy for her plight, we do not know what the aliens have done to her. The item on her arm could be a risk, because the Hive do not design anything *safe*. We should contain her, or destroy her, for the safety of others.”

General s’Lara nodded to Chloe. “Do you have anything to say?”

“What do you want me to say?” Chloe snapped back. Kevin

could see that she was close to losing her temper now, and that probably had a lot to do with how scared she was.

“Then I will say it,” the general said. “We are not a people who kill because there *might* be a threat. Chloe here is as much one of us as any of the others who have come to the Ilari in search of help. I believe that she should be welcome among us, and perhaps in time, we will be able to reverse what was done to her. Do any others wish to speak? No? Then we will talk of the others.”

Kevin felt the general’s gaze rest on him, then on Ro.

“The arguments around the others are more complex,” she said. “One warned us of the attack, and helped us, but was also the one who brought down our shields. The other is one of the Hive’s Purest, and so our foe. I know that our people are peaceful, but I find it hard to feel anything but anger when faced with this.”

Kevin looked at the walls, and now the writing buzzed around less like fireflies and more like angry bees. The arguments seemed far more complex, and his talent for translation only gave him snippets of it this time, so that it was impossible to follow along completely.

*...where does responsibility begin...*

*...where does it end...*

*...If he is one of them, he is one of them...*

*...Destroyed a whole world!*

Kevin was so busy letting the arguments wash over him that he almost didn’t hear the moment when the first person stood up.

“I speak for the boy,” a woman said, in a gentle tone. “I

feel that although he has done great wrong, he only did it when controlled by the Hive. When free, he sought to help us. He warned us. He broke free, and we should not reward that with harm. We should take him in as we did his friend.”

“I speak against,” a man said. “Whatever else is true, he *was* one of the Hive. They slaughtered more than we could count without our AIs, and he helped them. Am I supposed to watch him walk around freely, when those we love cannot, because they are dead? Are we supposed to forgive the unforgivable now?”

“I speak for the Purest,” an older man said. “They are part of a whole, and he has broken from that whole. He was twisted by who he was, but he is not that creature anymore. If he has had the courage to break free from them, we should celebrate that, not denounce it.”

“No one breaks free,” another of the Ilari snapped, and the anger there was palpable. “It’s obvious that this is some kind of trick. They tried to trick us before. They broke through our shields. They murdered our people. They destroyed our *world*. This thing was a part of that, they both were! We should destroy it before it harms us further.”

Kevin could hear the emotion coming through there, completely different from the way the Hive had been. They would have made decisions purely rationally, while this... this felt more *real* somehow.

“Do you wish to speak for yourselves?” General s’Lara said, looking over to him and Ro.

Kevin knew that he ought to, but he wasn't sure what to say. The guilt he felt still seemed as though it flowed over everything, burying any words. He knew he had to try, but the truth was that he didn't *want* to try right then.

"I don't want to speak for myself," he said, shaking his head. "I don't deserve it, and the truth... I'm dying anyway. It doesn't matter what you do to me, so long as the others are safe." It almost came as a shock to hear himself saying it, but it was the truth. It was more important that Ro and Chloe were safe than that he was. "I helped to destroy a world. I don't deserve... I don't deserve anything, but Ro broke free from the Hive. That should count for something."

Ro shook his head. "I am... I am scared, I admit that, but I will not run from what I have done. I have committed horror upon horror. I have done evil things. Once I was Purest, but now, I am not even that. I am impure. It is Kevin you should save. We made him one of us against his will. He had no choice."

"There is always a choice!" the man who had spoken against Ro called out from somewhere in the back of the room.

Kevin didn't know what to say to that. It seemed that Chloe did, though, because she shouted above the rest of it, looking straight at the man who had spoken.

"You think Kevin *chose* to be taken over by aliens?" she demanded, in a tone that would have been enough to make most people take a step back. "You think he was in control? They made him say yes to hurting me in all kinds of ways, and even

so, I don't blame him, because it *wasn't* him. It was him without any emotions, without any compassion. And if you don't have compassion, you're no better than the Hive!"

She took a moment to look around at the aliens, and for a moment Kevin thought she might be done, but then she kept going, jabbing her finger at the people around them.

"You're all standing there making decisions about us, but you haven't even *tried* to understand us. Kevin... he's been across our country trying to save our world. He's gone into space because he was trying to stop the Hive. They only took him because he was trying to stop them. As for Ro, he's fought back against everything he has ever known. He's a sign that the control of the Hive *can* be broken, and you want to... what, kill him? You'll have to kill me if you want to do that!"

She stood there glaring at them, and General s'Lara held up a hand for silence.

"I will not speak on this," she said. "My own thoughts are too conflicted. Logic demands one thing, emotion another. Yet I would ask, are we beings of pure logic? Are we like them? I don't know. It is time for us to divide."

She bowed her head, and above them, Kevin saw dancing lights buzz around as AIs talked and debated, presumably balancing the feelings of the Ilari with the needs of logic. To Kevin, they looked like swarms of angry bees moving around, shifting and splitting, then recombining in different combinations as the debate between them went on.

From down where he stood, Kevin couldn't begin to work out exactly which way the debate was going. He could catch snippets of it if he tried, but there were so many different fragments that even he couldn't begin to work out which way it was going.

Finally, something seemed to be happening. Kevin had the sense of the AIs shifting, moving into stacks, forming into groups as they made their decisions. Two blocks, one red and one blue, appeared on the surface around the edge of the room. The groups seemed close; so close that Kevin couldn't count them, and couldn't begin to guess which one was larger. He could see some AIs still buzzing around, reviewing the facts or discussing them with those they were connected with. Slowly, though, the count settled, and the groups stabilized.

Even then, Kevin couldn't guess at what the outcome was.

## CHAPTER TWO

Kevin watched out of one of the ship's windows as space passed by in a blur, stretched and bent to let the ship pass through by the power of its shields. He, Ro, and Chloe sat together in a room that was open and airy and almost empty. To his surprise, General s'Lara was there too.

Kevin flashed back, recalling General s'Lara's hand on his shoulder, after the trial.

*"We have made our decision. It seems... it seems that you will all be permitted to stay among us. You will be taken to our outpost world, and together, we will seek a way to stop the Hive. I just hope that we can find a way to do it."*

Kevin could not believe how close they had come to death. He snapped out of it and looked around.

"Don't you need to... I don't know," he said, "be in charge of the ship?"

"As if my ship would let me tell it what to do," she said. "We work *with* our AIs. We do not enslave them. That is Hive thinking."

"Kevin and Ro aren't the Hive," Chloe said, hotly, maybe a little too hotly.

"I never said they were," General s'Lara said. She seemed to be watching Kevin and Ro carefully though.

Kevin thought he understood. "You're trying to learn more

about the Hive, aren't you?"

The general hesitated, listening in that way that said she was in communication with her AI again.

"Yes," she admitted. "You and Purest... sorry, Ro here have been a part of it. You've had access to everything that it is. You can help us to understand it better. You might actually be able to help us beat them."

"I'm not sure they *can* be beaten," Ro said. "I'm sorry. I feel... hopeless."

"But you managed to break free," General s'Lara said.

"With Chloe's help," Ro replied.

Kevin nodded. Without Chloe, none of them would have been able to escape.

"I still want to know as much as you can tell us," the general said. "What is it like being a part of the Hive?"

Kevin wasn't sure that he had the words to explain it. Even so, he wanted to try. "It's like... there's this web of connections, and every one is a living thing. It's being a part of something bigger, and feeling that nothing matters but that whole."

"It's beautiful," Ro added. "But we have no way to feel that beauty. We feel nothing. No conscience, no happiness. The Hive is everything."

"Well, that means negotiating is out of the question," General s'Lara said. "Still, maybe there will be something. We'll be there soon."

"Where?" Kevin asked. He had no idea where they were

heading; hadn't even considered that they had to be going *somewhere*.

She gestured, and one of the walls shifted, providing an image of a planet. It seemed small on the screen, but was a bright point of color in an otherwise black and white view of space. It was largely green, in a way that seemed strange compared to the blue of Earth.

"This is Xarath," the general said, by way of explanation. "Most of its water is underground, but the plant life comes up to the surface. We have a small base there. It was never intended to be a home for all of us, but we will have to make it one. I'm told that it is beautiful."

"How long until we reach it?" Kevin asked. He had no real sense of how fast the ship was moving. Was it as fast as the Hive ships? Faster?

"A few more minutes. We have been folding space to get closer for a while now, but most of the delay has been to try to lose the Hive forces tracking us. We will need to be some of the first onto the surface. Come with me, we should get to one of the landers."

For the second time, the general started to lead them through the inner workings of the ship. People turned to stare at them as they passed, and while some of them seemed to be waiting for orders from the general, others were definitely staring at Kevin, Chloe, and Ro. Not all of them seemed friendly.

"Looks like not everyone agrees with the trial," Chloe said.

She sounded to Kevin as though she was ready to fight off anyone who looked at them for too long, or in the wrong way. He could see her altered hand clenching as if ready to punch someone.

“People get to disagree,” General s’Lara said. “We are not the Hive, where everyone must obey. They can think what they like, but we have made a decision the fairest way we can, and I doubt anyone will act against it.”

She didn’t seem entirely certain to Kevin, but then, he thought, how could she? She was right. Unless they controlled every mind there like the Hive, there would be no perfect harmony. Kevin would rather have people giving him odd looks than have to live without his own thoughts, his own choices.

He and the others followed the general to a hangar where a number of smaller ships sat, looking like darts waiting to be spat out by the giant mouth of the ship. General s’Lara led the way to one that was partly blackened by fire.

“Here. My own craft. I’ll show you the planet. Come on.”

The inside of the ship was stranger than the outside. It looked as though it had been patched and rebuilt so many times that there was hardly anything of the original left.

“I worked on this one myself,” General s’Lara said, and then did the glancing away thing again. “Yes, all right. *We* worked on it. Take a seat and we’ll fly down.”

There were chairs that looked more like armchairs than the kind of benches or flight seats that Kevin would have expected from a military craft. It seemed strange to have such comfort in

a general's ship.

“What’s it like being linked to an artificial intelligence?” he asked.

“It’s like being two halves of a whole,” the general replied. “They can provide more information, react faster, and work things out that I never could, but we provide the emotion and the intuition. It works.”

Kevin tried to imagine it, and couldn’t. The closest he could get was the connection to the Hive, and that had been nothing like the way General s’Lara described. It sounded more like a kind of perfect friendship, the way he’d had with Luna back on Earth, each of them filling in for the other’s weaknesses, each of them looking out for the other without question.

He missed Luna so much right then that it hurt.

“Hold on,” General s’Lara said, but in truth, the movement of the ship was perfectly smooth as it exited the larger vessel that held it, sliding down toward the surface.

As they descended toward the world below, Kevin could see the greenery ahead of them, so great that it seemed to encompass everything. For the first few seconds, it was just one giant wash of green, but then he started to make out different shades and textures within it. There were areas that appeared to be open grassland, and far more that seemed like nearly endless forests. There were patches of dark green similar to firs, and others that looked like tropical palms.

As they got still lower, Kevin started to get a sense of the

scale of them. Many of the trees seemed to be normal sizes, but there were others that were as tall as cathedrals, and whose canopies spread out to cover huge swaths of land, so that the ground beneath seemed almost like an afterthought.

“It’s a beautiful place,” General s’Lara said. “So much lives here, but it was never intended to be a world for us. It is too wild, and too many of any species will upset its balance.”

She took her ship down low, and Kevin could see buildings now, nestled amongst the trees, disguised so well that for a few seconds it was hard to pick them out from among the foliage. They hung like great fruit, or balanced in the branches, so beautifully constructed that they might have been a natural part of the forest.

“How many people do you have here?” Kevin asked.

“A few thousand. Not enough for a true civilization,” the general replied. “Even with all the people we’ve brought with us... we’re a shadow of what we were.”

Vehicles shot between the trees, moving rapidly, high above the ground. More moved slowly at ground level, disguised by shifting fields of color that changed as they caught the light.

“Do you have weapons here?” Kevin asked. He had to hope that they would have something that might destroy the Hive.

“Some,” General s’Lara said. “We like to be able to defend the places where we have bases, but the main defense we have is secrecy. This was always supposed to be a hidden place.”

“But we’re coming here now,” Chloe pointed out.

“We’re desperate,” General s’Lara said. “We’re out of people, out of places, out of everything except this. We’ll hide here for as long as we can.”

“And if the Hive finds us?” Kevin asked.

General s’Lara shook her head. “We lost them when we started to bend space. Even they can’t track us at those speeds. Unless you know something we don’t?”

There wasn’t any note of suspicion there, but even so, Kevin felt as though he wasn’t entirely trusted. He looked over at Ro, who shook his head.

“The Hive has stolen many technologies before, but they cannot track the Ilari. It was why they required you, to trace their signals. Without you...”

“Without me, they would never have been able to destroy the world they ran to,” Kevin said.

General s’Lara shook her head. “There will be others who try to blame you for it, Kevin, but I do not. You were controlled, and we are safe now.”

They flew forward, in amongst the trees, the ships finding their way between the trunks to land on great platforms that extruded from the side of the buildings amongst the trees. This close, Kevin could see that there was a whole city there.

The ship touched down and they stepped out. Inside the landing craft, surrounded by walls, there hadn’t been the sense of space there, but now, Kevin could see just how high up it all was. It was high enough that the air felt thin and made his head

hurt, while he stumbled unsteadily. His brain felt bewildered by the sheer height.

“Come on,” General s’Lara said. “I announced that we were coming as we approached, and people will want to meet you. They’re excited by the prospect of people who could break free from the Hive, and they think that you, Kevin, are very special.”

“Now I’m feeling left out,” Chloe said, but she didn’t sound as though she meant it that much.

Kevin put a hand on her shoulder. “I think you’re special.”

“You are,” General s’Lara assured her. “If you will let our scientists study you all, we will potentially learn so much.”

Chloe looked worried by that. “I’ve had enough of being studied for a lifetime.”

“We won’t force you,” General s’Lara said, and there was something understanding about her tone then. “It’s your choice. Now, come on. I’ll show you the base.”

Inside, it was every bit as impressive to Kevin as it was outside. The corridors had the same impossible scenes on them as had decorated the inside of the ships, each one turned into a canvas that it seemed the Ilari’s AIs could manipulate, since Kevin saw one of the blue-skinned aliens manipulating the wall into a strange kind of abstract work as they passed. He turned to look at them, offering a kind of bow to the general.

“Oh, stop it, Cler, you know I’m the one who should bow to you,” the general said.

They kept going, and the general started to explain the

buildings they passed through as they went.

“In theory, people take whatever rooms they need for whatever they’re trying to do, and reshape them to suit, but there tend to be common areas to it all,” she said. “There are living spaces on either side here, in pods branching off the main corridor. These spaces seem empty. You can have those.”

Was it really as casual as that? They needed a room so they got one? She led the way into a big open living space with couches and beds set out around it. The whole place was empty and still, but didn’t seem sterile in the way that Kevin knew from the Institute, and it lacked the precise opulence of the Hive’s golden towers. It was comfortable instead, and felt as though it could easily be someone’s home.

“So we just wander in and take a room?” he asked, leaning against a couch as a brief wave of exhaustion hit him.

“How else would you do it?” the general asked, sounding genuinely puzzled that there might be another way to do things. She gestured to an open slot on a wall. “This is where we get food. It will be a little slower for you since you don’t have AIs, but you can still ask for what you want. Here, let me.”

She paused for a moment in front of it, and a tray of food just... appeared. Steaming strands of blue mixed with what looked like red berries sat there.

“My AI tells me that *laxatha* should be safe for you to eat, and it’s one of my favorites,” she said. “Here, try it.”

She set it out in front of them and sat down beside them, in a

way that seemed strange for a general to do. Chloe was the first to taste the dish, and the surprised delight on her face told its own story.

“This is... good isn’t enough. It’s amazing. You have to try it, Kevin.”

Kevin took a tentative bite, and was surprised by just how good the mixture tasted. There was only one question on his mind, adding a slightly strange note to the meal while they ate.

“General s’Lara,” he said, “why are you here serving us food?”

“Because you’re our guests,” the general said.

“And that’s very kind, but you could have sent someone to do all of this. Don’t you have meetings and things you need to be at?” Kevin had met at least some important people, and he couldn’t imagine them doing this. “Why *you*?”

General s’Lara nodded. “I’ll admit that there are plenty of talks I should be having, but my AI is having at least some of them with others. Besides, here with you may be one of the most important places I could be right now.”

Kevin didn’t get it for a moment, but then frowned slightly as he did. “Because of everything that we might know?”

“I won’t lie to you,” General s’Lara said. “I think that you three may hold the key to this. We’ve been able to beat individual members of the Hive, we can do it easily when the numbers are equal, but the numbers are never equal. They just keep coming, and worse, they just don’t care. They throw creatures at us, and they don’t care if they’re killed or not. How do you fight

something that doesn't worry if it is going to die?"

Kevin wasn't sure he had an answer to that. He'd used that against the Ilari when they'd been fighting. He'd thrown ships at them, seeing their desire to live as a weakness to be exploited.

"It's the Hive's greatest strength," Ro said.

"The fact that you know them, and you were able to break free, might let us understand how to actually beat them. We might actually be able to *win* this war."

"But we don't know anything," Kevin said.

"You might not know what you know," the general said. "For a start, what do you know about this ability of yours?"

Kevin shook his head. "I hardly know anything. I hear signals, and I can translate them. I see things that need translating, and my brain just does it."

"And it's killing him for it," Chloe put in, sounding somber. Just the words had Kevin feeling sad about the prospect of the ticking clock that had restarted in his body.

"What do you mean, killing you?" General s'Lara asked.

Kevin started to answer, standing up as he did so. The pain hit him almost immediately, and he realized that the things he'd been experiencing as they landed had been a lot more than just the background symptoms that had been plaguing him since he'd come out from the Hive again.

He'd gotten so used to ignoring it that he'd done it even when his body had been trying to warn him that something wasn't right. Now it seemed that everything hit him at once.

Dizziness overwhelmed him, spinning Kevin half around, so that he dropped to the floor in stages, putting out a hand to catch himself even while it started to twitch in the beginnings of a fit that seemed to wrack every inch of him.

Pain came with it, bursting inside his head in a supernova of agony. It felt like something broke inside him then, and he would have screamed if his mouth had still been under his own control. He'd felt himself lose control of his body before when signals had ripped through him, but this was different. This didn't hold the promise of a message or an answer; the only promise it seemed to hold was the blackness that lay beyond it, threatening to rise up and overwhelm everything.

Kevin could see Chloe, Ro, and General s'Lara beside him, their lips moving as they talked. Chloe looked as though she was shouting something down to him, but he couldn't hear any of it. It felt as though it was on the other side of a curtain, and slipping further away by the second.

He was dying, and there was nothing he could do about it.

# CHAPTER THREE

Luna woke, blinking in the light, and even that was a surprise. When she'd slept, she'd expected to slide down into darkness and not wake up, consumed completely by the alien nanobots that were slowly taking over her body. Instead, she could still remember who she was, and where she was, and all the horrors that had struck the world.

It was only when her body stood without her thinking about it that she realized that something was wrong.

“No!” she screamed, but the scream just came out as a groan past lips that refused to move in response to her commands. They weren't hers anymore, not really. Someone else was pulling the strings that controlled her.

She looked around at the compound where they'd fought against so many of the transformed and the aliens, and Luna had the sense that it wasn't just her looking around in that moment. Other things were looking through her eyes, making decisions on her behalf, issuing commands without a thought for what it might do to her.

Luna fought against those commands as hard as she could, but it made no difference, just as it had made no difference the last time she had been one of the controlled. Instead, she stood like a prisoner in her own flesh while her body started to walk over to the others, held by walls made of her own muscles. She grabbed

a long shard of metal that was as sharp as any machete or knife. If it cut into her hands, she didn't notice.

Luna didn't understand that. Before, the transformed had grabbed blindly at people and tried to convert them, stupid in the absence of direct control. This, though... this felt like someone was using her for something far more focused, something far more dangerous.

She stalked forward, and it was only as Luna did so that she realized exactly who she was heading toward. Ignatius, Cub, Barnaby, and Leon stood ahead—all the people the resistance to the invasion needed. The aliens were going to use her as a knife thrust at the heart of it all, aimed to kill the only people who truly knew how they might stop what the aliens had done. If the aliens could kill them, then who would truly know how the cure worked?

Luna tried to shout a warning, but it didn't do any good. No sound came out, and while the change in her eyes would be obvious by now to anyone who looked, no one was looking. They were all too busy trying to recover from the aftermath of the battle, patching wounds and trying to find enough food for people who hadn't felt thirst or hunger for days or weeks.

Then Bobby the sheepdog ran up, growled, and bit her.

Luna didn't feel it, because at this stage, she couldn't feel anything. She looked down at the dog, drawing back her leg ready to kick him, and Luna knew that she would, in spite of all the effort she put into holding herself back. Bobby danced back,

snarling and growling, as surely as if she'd been a wolf troubling some ancient flock. Luna stepped toward him, lifting the long shard of metal now.

“Bobby, what are you doing?” Cub demanded, moving forward.

Luna turned toward him, slashing with the weapon that she held and managing to cut through the skin even as he danced back from the attack. She remembered this strength and this speed, but she'd never had the chance to use it to strike out at anyone before. She hadn't realized just how dangerous it made her.

“Luna, what's going on?” Cub demanded, dodging back from another blow. Luna saw him stare at her. “Oh no. *No!*”

Luna charged at him and the others with all the speed of her kind, breathing out vapor even though she knew it would do nothing to people already inoculated against the danger. A man got in her way and she cut him down with her shard of metal, shoving another man out of her path.

“She's transformed!” Cub yelled above the sudden chaos.

Then he did the unthinkable, and reached for a gun.

Luna was already lunging for him, shoving him back and knocking the gun from his hand so fast she could barely believe how quickly she was moving.

“Grab her!” Ignatius yelled above the chaos.

Luna struck out toward him, the need to obey the Hive besting any attempt to resist. Inside, she was screaming, but it only came out as a dull hiss. A dozen other people were on her in

that moment. Luna shook one of them off, throwing him away with more force than she could have believed, and lashed out at another.

Even so, more people piled in, and for all her strength, all her ferocity, Luna found herself pinned between them. There were too many of them to fight. She breathed out vapor in what seemed like the futile hope that it would turn some of these creatures, these humans... and even as she thought it, Luna caught herself. She wasn't what the aliens wanted her to be. She wouldn't lose track of who she was.

"She's changed," Cub said, shaking his head. "She's gone. Luna's *gone*."

He still had the gun in his hand, and his hand seemed to be shaking now, as if he were wrestling with a decision. Luna could guess exactly what that decision was, and she hated it.

"Don't say that," Leon said. "She might still be in there."

Luna wanted to scream that she *was* still in there. She wanted Cub to see that she was still there, that... well, she didn't know what happened after that.

Instead, she saw Cub lift his gun.

"I know what it's like as one of those things. Even if Luna is in there, she won't be for long. It sucks away who you are."

"But she's there *now*," Leon said. "We can still save her. The blast—"

"The blast converted people all around it during the battle, but it didn't save Luna," Cub said. Luna could see tears in his eyes

now. “She’s gone, and now I have to do... I have to do the only thing that *can* be done.”

Luna could guess what he was thinking: that this was the same as with his father, Bear; that there wasn’t another choice; that he was sparing her from a fate worse than death. Even so, he was pointing a *gun* at her, and she hated it. How could he *do* that to her? How could he think, even for a moment, that it was the right thing to do?

“Wait!” Ignatius yelled, and he was the last person Luna would have expected to step between her and a gun. The chemist and former drug maker was nothing if not a coward.

“Get out of the way,” Cub snapped back.

“We can still save her,” Ignatius insisted.

“If she wasn’t saved when the blast went out—”

“Because she was at its center. The eye of the storm!” Ignatius said. He didn’t move aside. Luna hadn’t expected him of all people to stand in the face of that kind of danger. “It doesn’t mean that she can’t be saved. We just need—”

“What? To recreate the blast?” Cub demanded, and Luna might have wanted to dry the tears in his eyes if not for the reason for them. “Recreate a random burst of alien energy tuned to just the right frequency when it hit the crystals? Do you think I wasn’t paying attention to what you’ve been saying, Ignatius? If I thought there was a way...”

He pulled the trigger on his gun and Luna saw the dust at her feet kick up. Her controlled body didn’t flinch, didn’t even react.

“That was a warning, Ignatius,” Cub said, and Luna could hear the certainty in his voice now. “*Move.*”

Luna tried to get her body to move so that Ignatius wouldn't be in the line of fire, but she was imprisoned both within her own flesh and by the hands of those who held her. They wanted this. They wanted to make sure that the most people were hurt.

“The blast let us overwhelm the nanites involved in the change for hundreds,” Ignatius said, “but we can still come up with a cure for one person at a time. We just need to process it.”

Luna saw Cub hesitate at that. It seemed to be the only thing that was enough to do it.

“You can *really* do it?” he asked.

“Not here,” Ignatius admitted. “The damage from the battle is severe, but all I need is a lab with the right equipment, and a few specific pieces of machinery.”

“And in the meantime, we all have to hold onto Luna to stop her killing us?” Cub asked.

“We can build something to contain her,” Barnaby said. He already seemed to be working on it, holding up rough pieces of metal to the remains of a motorcycle trailer as if he could already see the way it fit together in his head.

“And she'll pull in all the aliens from a hundred miles around,” Cub said.

Luna knew what he meant. The creatures controlling her would see everything through her eyes. They would know where to send more.

“We’re going to do that all by ourselves,” Ignatius said. “We owe her this, Cub, and I promise we can get her back.”

Cub stood there, but Luna could tell that he’d made his mind up. Maybe she should have felt grateful that he wasn’t going to kill her. Maybe she should have felt some pity for the tough decisions that he’d had to take already. Instead, all she could think of as he stood there was that he’d been going to kill her. He’d actually been going to *kill* her.

“All right,” Cub said. He backed away. “All right.”

Luna continued to snap and snarl, unable to help herself, while the people held her in place. She was everything that Cub feared she was, but she was more than that. She just didn’t have any way to let people know. A little further over, Barnaby was working on the enclosure designed to hold her. It looked like a kind of cage, made out of parts scavenged from the wreckage of the battle.

It came together slowly, piece by carefully constructed piece. As quickly as it came together, Luna felt herself gradually falling apart. She could feel memories sliding away into the depths of her being in a way that felt all too familiar. She’d felt this before, the first time she had been transformed, fragments of herself lost whenever she looked away from them, impossible to grasp, impossible to hold onto, like darting fish slipping through her fingers.

The memories of her parents slid into a vague kind of knowledge, with Luna unable to recall a single moment with them, a single instant spent laughing at home or arguing about

chores or even sitting down together to eat. Luna knew the facts of her life, but couldn't recall it. She couldn't truly remember what it had been like to be in school, or to sit and watch TV, or to be outside, or...

...Kevin's face came into her mind so sharply and perfectly that it might have been a photograph, and Luna clung to that image as tightly as she might have held onto a metal post in a hurricane. She wouldn't lose Kevin, wouldn't lose a single fragment of him. She wouldn't lose the moments that she'd spent with him. Those moments seemed etched into her, from being there with him at the NASA Institute, to fleeing to the bunker and hiding from the flow of the vapor, to trying to bring down the aliens together.

There was something brighter about those moments than the rest of it, somehow. They stood out in Luna's mind indelibly, and she managed to cling to them, holding onto thoughts of Kevin, and to all the things that she felt for him. That need, that love, seemed like a beacon in the dark that threatened to engulf her,

"Bring her this way," Barnaby called out, and Luna looked up to see that he had completed his holding cell, so quickly that it stood as a reminder of just how talented he was when it came to building things. It looked roughly made, but the metal was thick, and the gaps between the bars were small enough that even Luna wouldn't be able to slip out.

They carried her toward it, and her body fought even if Luna's mind hoped that the cage would be strong enough to hold her.

She felt her foot connect with a man's jaw, her elbow slam into someone's stomach. She felt blows connect hard enough to bruise or break bones, and it didn't seem to make any difference. Most of the people carrying her now weren't members of the Survivors, or at least, Luna didn't think they were. Instead, they had the ragged look of the people who had previously been transformed. They seemed willing to help her even when the others were afraid.

They picked her up and flung her into the cage. Luna didn't feel the landing. Instead, she rose and stormed for the door, but even her unbridled speed wasn't enough to make it there before the metal slammed into place and the Survivors managed to lock it shut.

Luna threw herself against the bars, testing the strength of them. The pulsing instructions of the Hive told her to tear her way free and kill, to do as much damage as she could before they cut her down, but the metal didn't give way under her hands, even when she tore at the bars hard enough to make her fingers bleed. That should have hurt, but like everything else as one of those transformed, it seemed to pass in a dream, almost happening to someone else.

The only problem was that the someone else was her, and this would *really* hurt if Ignatius was right about being able to change her back.

"Where do we go to process what we found?" Leon asked Ignatius and Barnaby. "We just need a lab, right?"

Luna tried to look away. She didn't *think* the aliens were dragging knowledge of the Survivors from her, but she had no way of knowing. Cub was right about that much: she was a threat to the rest of them with every moment that she was able to see and hear. She could draw in hordes of the controlled as surely as a beacon.

"It can't just be any lab," Ignatius said. "We're going to need specific pieces of equipment. The university would have had them, but with the attack, I'm worried that they might be gone."

"Where then?" Leon asked.

Luna saw Ignatius shrug, and in that moment she knew that this was anything but certain. Ignatius had made the process of bringing her back seem so simple, but he obviously didn't actually know where to find what they were looking for. None of them did, and somehow, Luna suspected that she only had a limited amount of time before everything she was disappeared for good. Even now, she could feel the weight of the aliens' infection pressing down on her, crushing everything that she was. It felt as though there was a hand behind it, closing slowly on her and *making* that happen.

"There are spots that might have what we need," Barnaby said, pointing out over the city like a tour guide. "There are industrial buildings that way, and if we can find a chemical plant, it will have everything we need. Or we can go that way and look at more academic buildings. Or we can go deeper into the university and hope that something survived."

Leon thought for a moment or two. Luna knew what she would have chosen, wanting to get to the nearest option, even if it was the least likely. She wanted this done as quickly as possible, and not just because she didn't want to spend any more time than she had to as the thing she was. She knew that every moment she was like this was a threat to all of the others.

It seemed that Leon disagreed, though, because he pointed to the factory buildings.

"They're our best chance," he shouted to the Survivors around him. "Ignatius and Barnaby will tell you exactly what they're looking for. We need the right equipment to save Luna, and to save other transformed we find."

The group gathered around them. There were so many now; practically an army, although that would have implied that they all had some kind of discipline rather than just moving forward together because they wanted to. They marched forward in the direction of the waiting factories, going on foot now since the school bus wasn't going anywhere in the wake of the battle. They dragged Luna along on her trailer, its wheels squeaking with every turn, its frame bouncing with every jolt of uneven ground. She felt like an exhibit in a museum, or perhaps like a captive in some ancient war, put on display before her death.

*I'm not going to die*, she told herself, trying to get herself to believe it. She clung to the thought of seeing Kevin again, the only point of certainty while more and more of her started to slip away.

Their procession set off toward the factories, and Luna just had to hope that they would be in time, before she lost even the parts of herself that managed to cling onto thoughts of Kevin.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Kevin was walking through places he knew, places he'd been. He was wandering around them in odd combinations that made no sense, drifting from one to another as smoothly as breathing. He was walking on the Hive world ship that he'd been to, and the streets shifted so that they became the streets of Mountain View, where he'd grown up. He walked through a door, and now he was in the Colombian rainforest, with military people all around him, ready to fight for the right to control the Hive's capsule.

Each step brought a different moment, shifting and changing so that it was hard to keep track of them all. He moved from moments in the signal chamber, deciphering the messages sent to the Earth, to the first instant when he'd seen people changing into monsters, knowing that they were too late to stop the invasion...  
...to the instant when the doctor had told him he was dying.

Kevin became distantly aware of his body then, although it was so far away that he seemed to be floating above it. He could feel the pain in his head, so great that it felt as though it was exploding. The tremors in his body seemed to claim him so completely that it was impossible that he could be moving through any of these places.

He couldn't be, he knew. He was dreaming, he was remembering, and he was dying.

You shouldn't be told that you were dying when you were

thirteen years old. He remembered thinking that, right back at the start of all this, in the office of the specialist. Now, nobody was telling him; he just knew it, as surely as he knew what a distant signal meant, or the sound of Luna's voice.

He could feel the progress of the disease within him. It had been halted for the brief period that he had been a part of the Hive, but it had been far too close to this moment when they had stopped it.

More moments slipped through his dreams: sailing along the coast with Chloe and Luna; being in the bunker, there together in one corner of the dormitory, for that one brief night when it had been safe. Kevin wasn't sure whether this was just a dream, or the thing he'd heard of where people's lives flashed before their eyes before they died, or something in between.

More pain flashed through him, this time seeming to clench around his heart and crush it, holding it still so Kevin couldn't feel it beat. It was the kind of pain he couldn't have believed existed; the kind of pain that seemed to encompass everything at once.

There were so many images in his dreams; so many things he'd done that he might never have had a chance to if the world had been a different place. If he hadn't had his power, would the Hive still have come? Would he have been all the places he had, seen all the things he had?

However much Kevin had done, it wasn't enough. He didn't want to die. He hadn't wanted to die at any point in this. It wasn't *fair*.

“Come on, you have to do something!”

The words seemed to come from a long way away, Chloe’s voice drifting in through a thin gauze that was still far too thick to reach through.

“We are attempting to,” a voice replied, and although Kevin didn’t recognize the individual, he recognized the Ilari language. “If we’d had time to study what was happening with him...”

“There is no time,” General s’Lara said. “Do what must be done.”

“Wait,” Kevin tried to say, but the words wouldn’t come out. “What do you *mean*?”

Then pain hit him, and if he’d thought he’d known what pain was before, this was a hundred times worse. It seemed to run through every cell of him at once, burning and freezing, tearing at him and crushing. It was as though it was tearing him apart, atom by atom, and rebuilding them one after another. Each cell was subtly different, subtly changed, and now it felt like a cool wave running through him, transforming him as he went.

Blackness rose up for him again, but this didn’t feel like the blackness of death. Instead, it felt soothing, and gentle, and pure. It wrapped around Kevin as surely as a blanket, and finally, he could feel his body again.

“You can open your eyes now, Kevin,” General s’Lara said.

Kevin’s eyes felt gluey and hard to open. He felt tired...

“Kevin,” Chloe said, far less gently. “Wake *up*.”

Kevin’s eyes flashed open, and he saw the room around him,

white walled and gentle seeming. There were blue-skinned aliens around him, in pristine uniforms that seemed familiar. It took him only another moment to realize that this was yet another hospital. He was spending far too much time in these places. General s'Lara was there, looking on with obvious concern. So was Ro, and it was even stranger seeing the expression on the face of an alien species that normally had no emotions.

Then there was Chloe. She stood over him, and Kevin could see that she had been crying, although now her tears seemed to be ones of joy rather than pain. She reached out for him.

“Kevin, I thought you were dead!” she said. “I thought...”

“I thought I was dead,” Kevin said, trying to make a joke of it even though it was anything but that. He could still feel the pain that had been clamped around his heart, so crushing and dangerous and deadly. He'd truly thought that he was going to die. He'd thought about all the things he'd done, and all the things he was going to lose.

As Kevin looked over at Chloe, though, he felt a burst of shame, because it hadn't been *her* he'd thought of in that moment when he'd been so certain that he was about to lose everything—it had been Luna. It had been times with Luna that had come into his mind when he'd been thinking about moments from the past that mattered. It had been Luna's memory he'd grasped hold of and kept close to him in the moments when he was dying. It had been Luna, not Chloe, whom he'd been so afraid of losing. Just looking at Chloe now felt like a betrayal, even though it was

something that he couldn't help.

"Kevin, what is it?" Chloe asked. Of course she'd seen it.

"It's nothing," Kevin said, dismissing the thought. Instead, he stood up and walked around the room, trying to assess how he felt, ready for his body to be weak and ready to collapse from the effort involved even in trying to move. He was actually a little surprised that the medical staff there let him, but maybe they wanted to test how he was too.

Instead of collapsing he felt... healthy. Kevin wasn't sure he'd ever felt that healthy, at any point in his life. He could breathe easily, and there was no pain in his head, no tightness in his chest. It was only because all the things that had been wrong with him were gone that he was able to realize just how bad the sickness had been.

It felt as though there had never been a day of his life before this when he had been truly well, because this wellness felt almost alien compared to everything that had gone before.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Chloe asked him, and Kevin nodded. He wasn't sure how he could describe it.

"I don't think I've ever felt this good," he said. He looked around at General s'Lara and the medical staff, who all seemed to be looking over at him as if trying to check that things were working as they should. "What did you do?"

"We cured you," the general replied. "We scanned your body, searching for defective patterns, and then used our healing technology to overwrite those patterns with something new. Your

brain has been stabilized, so that your illness cannot progress.”

“And my ability to translate signals?” Kevin asked, and then realized the answer to that question before any of the others could say anything. The Ilari weren’t speaking his language, but their own. He could still understand them, could still sense the signals of the AIs communicating with one another, and could still translate them when they got too loud.

*...appears to be fully recovered...*

*...may be necessary...*

“The procedure should have affected nothing but your illness,” General s’Lara said, with a glance across to one of the medical staff, who nodded. Kevin could see her relief at that confirmation.

Kevin should have felt joy at that. He *did* feel joy, but there was more to it than that. He felt as though this should have been harder somehow. After all the work that scientists had done on Earth trying to stabilize and heal him, it felt impossible that these aliens could just make him well with so little effort.

“You... healed me,” he said. “*Why?* Why did you heal me? You know what I did. You know I’m responsible for the destruction of the world you hid on.”

“And we tried you for that,” General s’Lara said. “We agreed to let you stay. Do you think we would hold back our healing from you when we had the ability to help you? That is not who we are. It is not *right*.”

The sheer goodness and benevolence of that overwhelmed

Kevin in that moment. How could these aliens be so benevolent? It seemed impossible that anyone could be so generous to someone who had done so much to hurt them. After all that he'd done...

"It wasn't your fault, Kevin," Chloe said.

Kevin wished he could believe that. All he could do was feel amazing levels of gratitude that the others felt that way.

"Thank you," he said to the general. "I... I don't know what to say."

They'd given him back his life. They'd healed him, when no one else could do it, and they'd done it when he was sure they had every reason not to do it.

"You don't need to say anything," General s'Lara said. "We help those who truly need it. We seek peace where it can be found. We *forgive*."

That seemed impossible to believe. Kevin wasn't sure he would be able to manage to forgive the Hive. If he had a chance to destroy it, then he would. And yet... he looked across to Ro. Kevin didn't hate him. He even trusted him, and yet the former Purest had been one of those trying to destroy his planet.

"I have so much to learn," Kevin said.

He looked across to Chloe, and again, he had the feeling of guilt that he'd been thinking of Luna and not her when he'd been dying. Chloe had been the one who had been there with him on the Hive's world ship. She'd helped him to escape. He knew what she felt about him, and he even felt some of it too... but

it was Luna whose face was there when he shut his eyes, Luna he thought about in every spare moment, even though there was every chance that she was lost in the mass of the transformed.

“You’ve been given a fresh start, Kevin,” General s’Lara said, gently, as if she understood the sheer enormity of everything that was happening for Kevin. “The question is what you choose to do with it.”

Kevin couldn’t stand there in the room right then. It was too much. It wasn’t just that he didn’t know what to say, or what to think. He wanted to breathe the open air in that moment. He wanted to remind himself that he was actually *alive*. That he could actually potentially have a future.

There were doors from the medical bay leading out onto a kind of balcony that appeared to have been grown from the tree itself. It curved around like some great fungus growing out of the trunk, more than big enough to hold him and a dozen others. Kevin stepped out onto it, the trees surrounding him, the beauty of the world spread out below. Here and there, small ships darted between the trees as agilely as birds, or up to the larger vessels in orbit. Birds bigger than Kevin nested in some of the branches, singing songs that filled the space with music, while creepers hung down almost to the ground, and furred creatures half Kevin’s size clambered up and down them.

The air was sweet out there, and it wasn’t just the musk of forest flowers and the leafy canopy, although that helped. It was the fact that he could take a full breath without pain, and stand

there without the dizziness that came from his leukodystrophy threatening to overwhelm him. It was so strange standing there like that, and the longer Kevin did it, the more certain he was that his whole life had been affected by this disease. He'd *thought* that it had only come into his life in the last few months, but one breath of the air here told him that it had always been a part of him, lurking and waiting, only seeming to come to life at the point where it got too bad to deal with.

He stood there looking out at the enormity and the beauty of the world around him, and the sheer emotion of it all felt simply overwhelming. So much had happened to him, and now, he felt healthier than he had ever felt. Even so, he felt tiny against the scale of it all. He felt as though there were too many things that he didn't know; too many things that he still needed to learn and understand. He had all of this new life to spend, and there was so much to learn and do in it that even now, he didn't know if it would be enough.

"Kevin, are you all right?" Chloe asked, coming out after him.

For a moment or two, Kevin wanted to hide behind the strangeness of everything that he had experienced. He wanted to tell her that it was just about the shock of what had happened, or about the sudden healing. He wanted to pretend that everything was all right. He wanted to lie, even though Chloe was the one person who deserved so much better than lies.

He knew he couldn't, though.

"I... Chloe, there's something that I have to tell you."

“You love Luna,” Chloe said. She stood there, still as a statue, not saying anything, obviously leaving it until Kevin was willing to say something. It took him a moment, simply because of the shock of Chloe beating him to it.

He nodded. “I... she’s been my friend forever. I think about her all the time. I wish... I *wish* I could feel that way about you, but I don’t.”

Chloe stood there for what seemed like forever, and Kevin found himself wishing that he hadn’t inflicted this kind of pain on her, even as he knew there hadn’t been any other choice. He didn’t want to hurt her, but he didn’t want to lie to her either. Kevin waited for her to explode at him, shout at him, react with all the emotion that he knew filled her to the brim. Instead, she just stood there, as still as a statue.

“Yes,” she said at last. “I know.”

“You know,” Kevin said. “That’s it?”

“What do you want me to say?” Chloe shot back, and Kevin could hear the pain there now. “It hurts, of course it hurts, but I saw in the Hive how much worse things could be. I saw how evil it is to try to force what I feel onto people. I...”

Kevin could see the tears building in her eyes, and he put his arms around her automatically, holding her close to comfort her. He was pretty sure that the person who had just told you they didn’t love you shouldn’t be the one to comfort you for it, but he did it anyway.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I wish—”

“What do you wish, Kevin?” Chloe asked. “That none of this had happened? Don’t wish that. I don’t.”

A part of Kevin did wish it, in spite of that. He wished that the alien invasion had never happened. He wished that he hadn’t opened the capsule they’d sent, or that he’d been able to do something to stop the damage that had been done. He couldn’t count the number of people who had been hurt, or worse, because of the things that he had done. If he could take those things back, he would, simply because Kevin hated the pain that was in the universe because of him. Yet, if that hadn’t happened, he would never have met Chloe. He would never have done half of the amazing things that he had done.

Kevin knew then that Chloe was right: he shouldn’t wish that things were different. Even so, he was still contemplating how to answer that when he saw the skies starting to darken, an all too familiar shape moving into place above the world.

“No,” he whispered. “No...”

The Hive world ship moved into place like some kind of trick of the eye, one moment not there, the next there. It hung above the Ilari world, dominating the skyline, ships already starting to pour down from it, making it look as if it were easy to move something so huge and terrifying.

Kevin saw General s’Lara rush out onto the balcony with the same horror that he felt in that moment. They’d thought that they were safe. They’d thought that they had time, at least.

“How?” she asked. “How did they find us when we lost them?”

She looked from Kevin to Chloe, and back toward where Ro stood within the medical bay. Her suspicions were obvious to Kevin, and it was hard not to share them. Not that he thought for a moment that Ro would have done anything deliberately, but what if there was some residual connection to the Hive? What if they were tracking Kevin, and not Ro?

He was still thinking that when Chloe moved forward, holding up her arm.

“It... it’s pulsing. I think... I think they’re tracing it. Get it off me. Get it *off!*”

Kevin didn’t want to know what to say then. Above them, the world ship held its place, raining down smaller ships with the promise of death. Kevin looked up at them, feeling the sheer unfairness of it all. The Ilari had just saved him, had just given him the chance to live out the rest of his life.

Now the Hive was here, and Kevin couldn’t see any way that they weren’t all going to die.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Luna was... Luna *was*. She had to try to remember that. She had to remember that she existed, and was real, and was not just... just... no, the memory and the words were slipping away even as she and the rest of the... the *Survivors*, that was it, made their way toward the factories that they'd picked out as the likeliest spot to have the things they needed.

Luna raged against the inside of her cage, tearing at the steel as if her hands might be able to rip through it. She could see the blood on the bars now, and she couldn't even remember where it had come from. Was it her attacking the metal, or was it something else? She tried to stop herself, but she had no control over her body. The aliens who had control of her wanted her to find a way out of there, to find a way to kill, no matter how much it damaged her in the process.

"Hold on, Luna," Ignatius said. Even he sounded worried now. "We're going to find a way to process the cure. We're going to bring you back to yourself."

It wasn't herself that Luna was thinking of in that moment, though. She was thinking of Kevin instead. Kevin was the one whose memory she held onto the way a climber held onto rocks for fear of falling. She clung to his image, but now even memories of him were starting to fade, as ragged around the edges as a... as a... she couldn't remember what. She *could* remember traveling

across the country with him. She could remember the fun times before all of this had started, when they had still just been friends, but so much of what had come in between had started to slip away. Even so, she clung to Kevin as tightly as she could, and by doing that, she seemed to cling to some of the rest of it. She recognized Bobby the dog running amid all of it, staying as close as he could to her. He wasn't growling now, but maybe that was because he recognized that she couldn't hurt anyone.

They were approaching the factories now, and Luna could see the others looking around with the kind of obvious caution that came from too many bad experiences. There were so many of them now; practically an army, and a part of Luna said to her that she should be trying to make them into things like her. She breathed out gas at them even now, though it had no effect, thanks to the cure.

Some of them looked at her with fear as they walked, as though expecting her to hurt them at any moment. Some fingered weapons, as if unsure whether to use them. She recognized one of the ones doing it as being named Cub, but she couldn't remember anything else about him then, or why it hurt so much that he was one of the ones closing his hand around the butt of a gun.

"Looks as though this place has been the site of a few battles," Ignatius said, turning to Leon. "Are you sure they'll have what we need to process ore?"

Leon shrugged in response, and that was a long way from comforting to Luna. "I'm not sure of anything. There have been

sounds of fighting around the factories, and the transformed might have scavenged. We don't know what's here.”

Luna didn't know what to think about that. In truth, she could barely think at all by that point. In spite of Leon's reservations, the group pressed forward cautiously among the remains of the factory buildings, looking around them as they went as if searching the shadows for enemies. The whole place looked as skeletal now as the carcass of some great creature made of steel, portions of walls damaged or even collapsed in whatever fighting there had been around there.

They took her on her juddering cart through into a space where the sign for a chemical company hung at an angle, looking as though it might fall at any moment. Vats and canisters stood wherever Luna looked, some large enough to be crossed by walkways of perforated metal. A few of the vats looked empty now, looted or leaking or just evaporated, but several rippled with chemicals, bubbling here and there in ways that promised death for anyone unlucky enough to fall in. Debris littered the floor so that it was hard to pick a way between it, from girders that looked as though they had fallen from the ceiling, to boxes scattered here and there that looked as though they had been searched for their contents.

The Survivors spread out around Luna, starting to search the factory, moving between the piles of debris and picking through what was left, presumably in the hope that one of them would contain something useful.

“What are we looking for?” one of them called over.

Barnaby answered that one. “We’re going to need machinery for processing chemicals into a usable form. Not the vats. Look further back.”

All Luna could do was wait and hope, and she hated the waiting. Part of her hated it because it meant that she couldn’t kill any of the people around her, but Luna knew that part wasn’t really her, just the part that was controlled. The bigger worry was that the more time passed, the harder it was to remember that. She couldn’t wait, because there was no *time* to wait.

“Here!” Leon called, from behind a pile of junk. There was a noted of hope in his voice, but Luna didn’t dare to share it right then. “Barnaby, Ignatius, come look at this.”

Luna saw the two of them disappear behind the same pile. Seconds passed, then minutes.

“Bring Luna,” Ignatius called out, and his hope felt somehow more solid, because he knew what it was they were looking for.

The figures around her wheeled her forward, across the roughness of the factory’s floor. Through the bars of her cage, Luna saw machinery she didn’t understand, but some of it seemed to be designed to grind, while parts of it scanned and parts of it liquefied. From the scuff marks on the floor, it seemed that Barnaby and Ignatius had dragged a couple of parts of it closer to one another in order to lash pieces of it together, while a couple of smaller pieces of equipment had been duct taped together to make a larger whole, albeit an unsteady one.

The two of them were working on the ore, and, from the way Luna threw herself at the bars even harder then, she guessed that they were achieving something. She kept going until—

“Stop!” a voice ordered, and it sounded like a voice used to giving orders and having them obeyed. “Stop, right now!”

Men and women came out of hiding places around the factory. All of them held guns that looked far more sophisticated than anything the Survivors had. Most of the people there looked as though they knew how to use them too, moving smoothly, aiming accurately, and not betraying a hint of concern as they surrounded Luna and the others.

“What are you doing here?” the man in the lead demanded. He had a pistol leveled at Luna. “Why have you brought one of those *creatures* here?”

“Luna isn’t a creature,” Leon said, obviously deciding to take charge. “She’s our friend, and she saved all of us. We just need —”

“You just need to *leave*,” the man said, “and you need to do it at once. I am Captain Harris of the Seventy-fifth. I have kept my people alive through discipline, and by making the choices that have to be made. I will not allow looters in our area, and I will kill the alien scum on sight!”

There was a crack as he fired, and Luna heard the ping as the bullet ricocheted off the metal of her cage, close enough that she was sure she could feel it passing close to her. Weirdly, she didn’t flinch or feel afraid, although perhaps that was because the

progress of the alien vapor within her.

Around Luna, the guns of the Survivors came up, along with all the weapons held by the rest of the people they'd saved. The figures above had the more advanced weapons, but there were far more of those below, and plenty of them looked ready to fight and die if they had to.

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