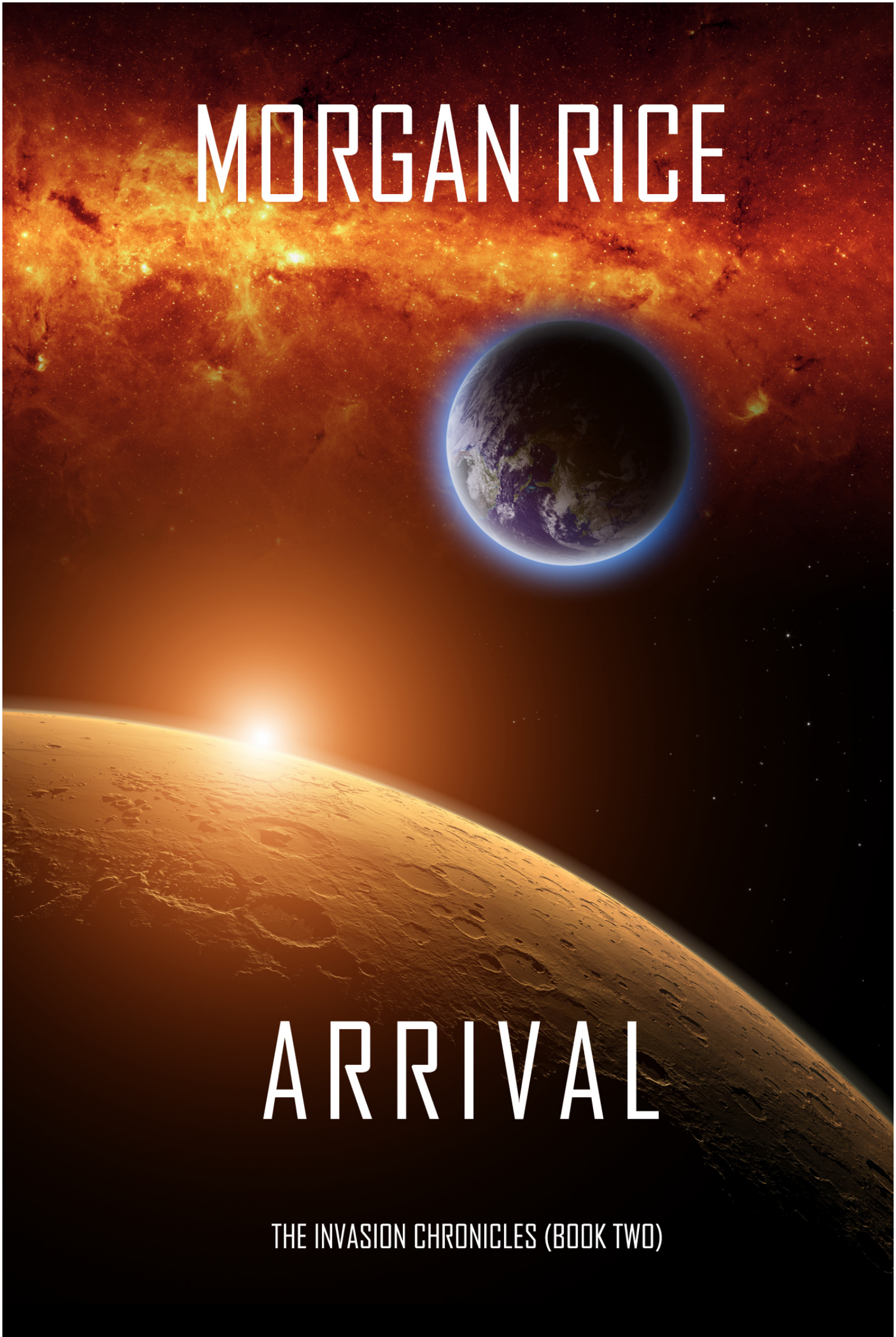
MORGAN RICE
ARRIVAL
THE INVASION CHRONICLES (BOOK TWO)

The Invasion Chronicles

Морган Райс

Arrival

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»
2018

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“ARRIVAL 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 a long-anticipated science fiction series. SETI has received a signal from an alien civilization. Is there time to save the world? In the aftermath of SETI’s receiving the signal, 13 year old Kevin realizes: he is the only one who can save the world. But is there time? What must he do? And what do the aliens plan next? “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) Book #3 in the series will be available soon. 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!

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Morgan Rice
Arrival. The Invasion Chronicles—Book Two

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 (and counting); and of the new science fiction series THE INVASION CHRONICLES, 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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Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

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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."

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--Publishers Weekly

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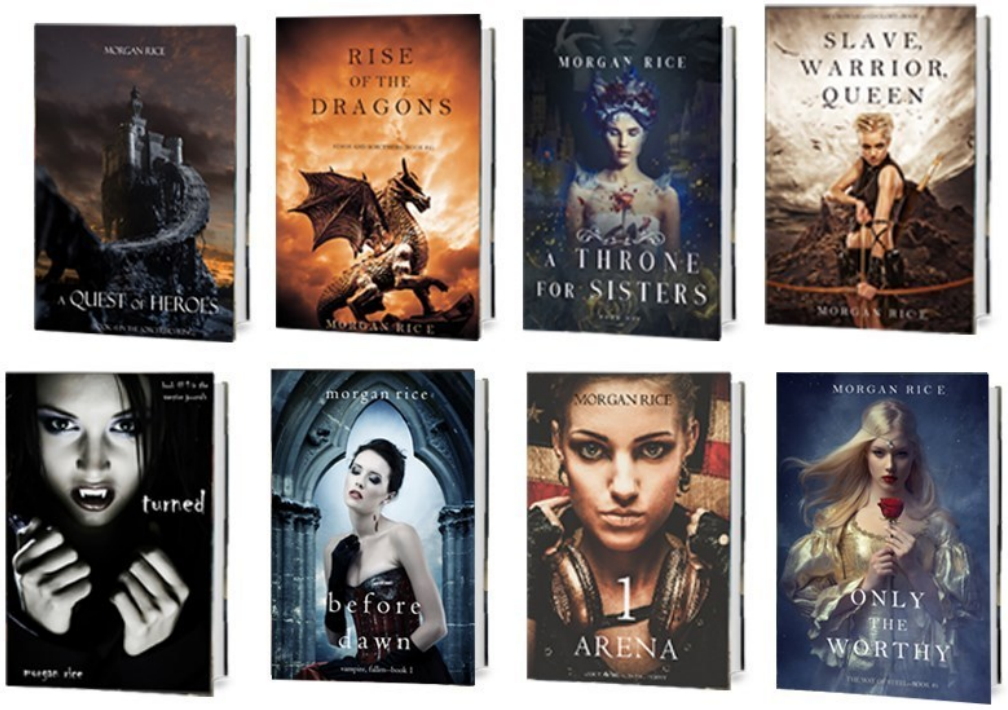

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CHAPTER ONE

Kevin slammed the bunker's wall of monitors, partly in frustration, and partly because he'd seen it work on TV. It didn't work here, though, and that only fueled the frustration he felt.

"They *can't* just go blank," he insisted. Weren't these systems supposed to be designed to survive just about anything? "Not now, not like this."

Not when they'd just seen the world all but ending, people gathering while alien ships swept in over them. Beside him, Luna was staring up at them as if expecting them to come back on at any moment, or maybe just because she was imagining her parents out there somewhere, clambering into an alien ship.

Kevin put an arm around her, not sure if he was comforting her or trying to comfort himself.

"Do you think people are all right?" Luna asked. "Do you think my parents are?"

Kevin swallowed, thinking of the people lining up to go into the ships. His mother would have been somewhere among them too.

"I hope so," he said.

"It feels wrong," Luna said. "We're safe here in a bunker, while everyone else is stuck out there… how many people do you think were converted?"

Kevin thought about the vast seas of people there had been on the screens before they went blank, and the dwindling numbers of people there to report on it all.

"I don't know, a lot," he guessed.

"Maybe everybody," Luna said. "Maybe we're the last ones."

"We should look around," he said. "Maybe we can find a way to turn it all back on. Then we can see."

He said it as much to try to distract Luna as because he thought they had a hope of doing it. What did they know about fixing computer systems? If one of the scientists from the NASA institute had been there… maybe Dr. Levin… but they were gone, just like everyone else. They'd been transformed by the vapor, turning into things that had chased after them and hunted them.

"Come on," he said to Luna, gently pulling her away from the screen. "We need to look around."

Luna nodded, though she didn't seem to be taking much of it in right then. "I guess so."

They set off through the bunker underneath Mount Diablo, and Kevin looked around, surprised by the sheer space of it. If they'd been looking around a place like this at a different time, it might have seemed like an adventure. As it was, every echoing step reminded Kevin just how alone they were. This was a whole military base, and they were the only ones in it.

"This is cool," Luna said, her smile too bright to be real. "Like sneaking through warehouses."

Kevin could tell that her heart wasn't in it, though. She might have been trying her best to be the old Luna, but what came out was too flat for that.

"It's okay," Kevin said, "you don't have to pretend with me. I'm…"

What could he say? That he was sad too? It didn't seem like enough to encompass the end of the world, or the loss of everyone they'd known, or any of it, really.

"I know," Luna said. "I'm just trying to be… hopeful, I guess. Come on, let's see what's here."

Kevin had the feeling of her wanting the distraction, so they headed deeper into the bunker. It was a huge space, which looked as though it could have housed hundreds of people if it needed to. There were pipes and cables leading away into its depths, and signs stenciled on the walls in yellow paint.

"Look," Luna said, pointing, "there's a kitchen that way."

Kevin could feel his stomach rumbling at the thought, and although it didn't cut through the rest of it, the two of them turned off in the direction the sign indicated. They walked down one corridor, then another, coming out into a kitchen that was built on an industrial scale. There were freezers set

toward the back, behind doors that could have protected a vault, and other doors that seemed to lead off into storerooms.

"We should see if there's any food in them," Luna suggested, opening one.

The space behind was even larger than Kevin might have expected, stacked with box after box. He opened one and found silvery, sealed packets that looked as though they would keep forever.

"There's enough food to feed us for a lifetime here," Kevin said, and then realized exactly *what* he'd just said. "Not that… I mean, we might not have to stay here forever."

"What if we do, though?" Luna asked.

Kevin wasn't sure he had a good answer for that. He couldn't imagine living forever in here. He could barely imagine a lifetime, let alone one night, spent in a bunker. "Then I guess we're better in here than out there. At least here we're safe."

"I guess so," Luna said, with a look around at the walls that seemed to assess how thick they were. "Safe, yes."

"We should see what else is here," Kevin said. "If we're going to be staying here, we'll need other things. Water, places to sleep, fresh air. A way to talk to the outside."

He counted them off on his fingers as he thought of them.

"We should see if there are other ways in or out, too," Luna said. "We want to make sure that no one else can get in."

Kevin nodded, because that seemed like an important one. They started to search the bunker, using the kitchen as a kind of base, going back and forth between it and the main control room, which seemed curiously silent without anything on its screens.

There was another room nearby that was filled with communications equipment. Kevin saw radios and computers. There was even something that looked like an old-fashioned telegraph machine in the corner, as if the people there didn't trust that the more modern equipment would be there for them when it was needed.

"They have so much stuff," Luna said, pressing a button and getting a burst of white noise in response.

"*We* have so much stuff now," Kevin pointed out. "Maybe if there are other people out there, we'll be able to communicate with them."

Luna looked around. "Do you think there are other people left? What if it's just us?"

Kevin didn't know what to say to that. If he was going to be trapped as one of the last people in the world, there was no one he'd rather be stuck with than his best friend. Even so, he had to believe that there were others out there somewhere. He had to.

"There must be other people somewhere," he said. "There are other bunkers and things, and some people will have worked out what was happening. There were people broadcasting pictures, so they must have known what was going on."

"But the screens went blank," Luna pointed out. "We don't know that they're still out there."

Kevin swallowed at that thought. He'd assumed that the signal had just cut off, but what if it wasn't the signal? What if the people sending it were also gone?

He shook his head. "We can't think like that," he said. "We have to hope that there are more people out there."

"People who can kill the aliens," Luna said, with a harsh glint in her eye. Kevin got the feeling that if she'd had the means to fight them, Luna would have been out there right now trying to take them on.

Kevin could understand that. It was a part of who Luna was; a part of what he liked about her so much. He even felt a part of the same anger, feeling it bubbling up inside him at the thought of being tricked by the aliens, and at everything that had been taken from him.

He needed the distraction of looking around the bunker as much as Luna did, because the alternative was thinking about his mom, and his friends, and everyone else who might have been standing under the alien ships when they came.

They continued looking around the bunker, and it didn't take long to find what looked like a back way out. The words "Unsealed Environment. For Emergency Escape Only!" were stenciled above a hatch that looked like the torpedo tube from a submarine, complete with big circular handle to seal it. It seemed barely big enough for most people to crawl through. Of course, for Kevin and Luna it would mean plenty of space.

"Unsealed environment?" Luna said. "What do you think that means?"

"I guess it means that there's no airlock on this exit?" Kevin said, not sure. The words stenciled around it made it sound like something hugely dangerous to open. Maybe it was.

"No airlock?"

"People wouldn't want one if they had to get out fast."

He saw Luna's hand go to the gas mask that she'd had to wear for the whole drive over, and that now hung from the belt of her jeans. Kevin could guess what she was thinking.

"There's no way the alien vapor can get in here," he said, trying to reassure her. He didn't want Luna to be scared. "Not if we don't open that door."

"I know it's stupid," Luna said. "I know that the vapor probably isn't even out there anymore; that it's just the people they've taken over…"

"But it still doesn't feel safe?" Kevin guessed. Nothing felt safe right then, even in a bunker.

Luna nodded. "I need to get away from that door."

Kevin went with her, back into the bunker, away from the emergency exit. It actually made him feel a bit safer, knowing that the two of them could escape if they needed to, but he hoped they *wouldn't* need to. They needed somewhere safe, right then. Somewhere they could hide from the aliens until it was safe to come out again.

Or until his illness killed him. That was a particularly horrible thought. There weren't any tremors from the leukodystrophy right then, but Kevin had no doubt they would be back, and worse. Only the fact that they had bigger things to worry about forced him to push thoughts of it away, and what did it say that it took an alien invasion to make his illness look insignificant?

"I think there are rooms down here," Luna said, leading the way down one of the corridors. There were. There were whole dormitories there, with rank after rank of bunkbeds that were mostly no more than metal frames, but with a few that had possessions by them, along with mattresses and bedding.

"You'd have thought that some of them would stay inside," Kevin said. "It makes no sense that there's *nobody* here."

Luna shook her head. "They would have gone outside to help. And then… well, by the time they worked out it was a bad idea, the aliens would have controlled them."

That made a kind of sense, but it was still a horrible thought.

"I miss my parents," Luna said from nowhere, although maybe she'd been thinking it all this time. The pain that had come from Kevin's mom being taken hadn't gone away; it had just been pushed into the background by the need to keep doing things, by the need to get to safety, and to make sure that they would both *stay* safe.

"I miss my mom, too," Kevin said, sitting down on the edge of a bed frame. He found that it was impossible to picture her then as she'd been before the aliens came. Instead, the image that sprang to mind was of her as she'd been on the doorstep of their house, controlled by the aliens and trying to grab him.

Luna sat on a bed frame of her own. Neither of them had picked one of the ones with bedding. That didn't feel right somehow. Those felt as though they belonged to someone, and their owners might be back at any moment.

“It’s not just my parents,” Luna said. “It’s all the other kids at school, all the people I’ve ever met. They’ll all have been taken. All of them.”

She put her head in her hands, and Kevin reached out to take her hand, not saying anything. It was just as enormous for him in that moment, with the thought that everyone out there in the world might have been taken by the aliens. Ordinary people, celebrities, friends…

“There are no people left,” Luna said.

“I thought you didn’t like people anyway,” Kevin countered. “I thought you’d decided that most people are stupid?”

Luna smiled slightly at that, but it looked as though it took an effort. “I’ll take stupid over controlled by aliens any day.” She paused for a moment. “Do you think… do you think that people will ever be all right again?”

Kevin couldn’t look at her. “I don’t know.” He couldn’t see how they would. “We’re safe though. That’s all that matters.”

It wasn’t, though. Not by a long way.

***

They looked around the bunker until they found more bedding, not wanting to take anything from the bunks that were already set up. Those remained as pristine as if their owners might come back at any moment, although Kevin had to hope they wouldn’t, because he guessed that the aliens controlled them now.

They went back to the kitchen long enough to get something to eat. The packet said chicken, but Kevin could barely taste it. Maybe that was a good thing, judging by the look on Luna’s face.

“I’m never going to complain about having to eat vegetables again,” she said, although Kevin suspected that she probably would. She wouldn’t be Luna if she didn’t.

When they were done, they took turns cleaning up in one of the bunker’s bathrooms. They could probably have just picked a bathroom each, or two, or more, but Kevin, at least, didn’t want to be that far apart from Luna just yet. Even when the time came to pick bunks, they chose ones almost next to one another, when they had the whole space of the dormitory to choose from. It was like a little island picked out in the middle of it, and if he tried really hard, Kevin could almost pretend that it was some kind of sleepover. Well, no, he couldn’t, not really, but it was good to at least try.

They turned off the lights, using military-issue flashlights to guide them back to bed. Luna hopped up onto the top bunk of her chosen bed, while Kevin took the bottom level of his.

“Afraid of heights?” Luna asked.

“I just don’t want to have a vision halfway up and fall onto the floor,” Kevin said. Not that he’d had any visions since the one warning him about the invasion. Not that it would do any good now if he did. He found himself wondering what the point of his visions was when none of it had helped.

“Right,” Luna said. “I guess… yeah, I guess you should be careful.”

“Maybe in the morning things will look better,” Kevin suggested. He didn’t really believe it.

“We’d have to see it before it could look better,” Luna pointed out.

“Well, maybe we’ll be able to find a way to see things again,” Kevin said. If they did, though, what might they see? Would they see hordes of aliens out there in the world now? A barren landscape with nothing in it?

“Maybe we’ll work out what we’re going to do next,” Luna suggested. “Maybe we’ll dream of a way to make all of this better.”

“Maybe,” Kevin said, although he suspected that any dreams he had would be dominated by the sight of all those silent people.

“Sleep well,” Kevin said.

“Sleep well.”

In fact, it seemed to take forever for Kevin to fall asleep. He lay there in the dark, listening to Luna as her breathing deepened and she started to snore in a way she would probably never admit to when awake. This would have felt very different without her here. Even if there had been someone else there, Kevin would have felt alone, but as it was…

…As it was, he was still almost alone, but at least Luna was there to share in the loneliness of it. Kevin couldn't get away from the thoughts of what had happened to his mother, to everyone, but at least he knew that Luna was safe.

Those thoughts followed him down into sleep and into his dreams.

In his dreams, Kevin was surrounded by everyone he'd known. His mother was there, his friends from school, his teachers, the people from NASA. Ted was there, with military gear slung all over him, and Professor Brewster, his face in a scowl that suggested he disapproved of everything Kevin had done.

Their features twisted as Kevin watched, becoming every alien from a sci-fi movie ever. Some of them became gray-skinned and big-eyed, while others looked more like insects with plates of armor across them. Professor Brewster had tentacles coming from his hands, while Dr. Levin's eyes were on stalks. They lumbered toward Kevin and he started to run.

He ran through the corridors of the NASA institute, barely able to keep ahead of them as they poured out of doorway after doorway, and even though he'd lived there, Kevin couldn't find the way out to safety. He couldn't find the way to make this better.

He dove into a lab, shutting the door behind him and barricading it with chairs and tables and anything else he could find. Even so, the transformed people on the outside of the room hammered on the door, their fists pounding against it while, for no reason Kevin understood, an alarm started to sound…

Kevin woke with a gasp. It was still dark, but one look at the time on his phone told him that was just because they were underground. In the background, an alarm was sounding, the dull buzz of it constant, while underneath it, there was a dull, metallic thudding.

He knew Luna was awake, because she turned on the lights.

"What is it?" Kevin asked.

Luna looked at him. "I think… I think someone wants to come in."

CHAPTER TWO

They rushed down to the command center, the knocking louder now that they were closer to the entrance. Even so, with the airlock in the way, Kevin was impressed that the sound was carrying. What were they hitting the door with?

Luna didn't look impressed; she looked worried.

"What's wrong?" Kevin asked.

"What if it's the aliens, or controlled people?" she demanded. "What if they're going around, rounding up survivors?"

"Why would they be doing that?" Kevin asked, but fear crept into him at the thought of it. What if they were? What if they got in?

"It's what *I'd* do if I were an alien," Luna said. "Take over everything, make sure there's no one left to fight back. Kill anyone who gets in the way."

Not for the first time in his life, Kevin vowed never to get on Luna's bad side. Even so, he could hear the fear underneath her words. He could even share it. What if they'd run all the way to somewhere that felt safe, only for it to be falling apart already?

"Can we see who's out there?" Kevin asked.

Luna pointed to the blank screens. "They've been dead since last night."

"But that's just the signal from around the world," Kevin insisted. "There must be… I don't know, security cameras or something."

There had to be. A military research facility wouldn't stay blind to everything happening around it. He started to press buttons on the computer systems, trying to find a way of getting them to do what they wanted. Most of the screens there were blank, the signals from around the world cut off, or blocked, or just… gone. Luna started pressing buttons beside him, although Kevin suspected that she didn't know what to do any more than he did.

"Whoever it is, I don't know if we should let them in," Luna said. "It could be anyone out there."

"It could be," Kevin said, "but what if it's someone who needs our help?"

"Maybe," Luna said, not sounding convinced. "Whoever it is, they're hitting the door pretty hard."

That was true. The metallic echoes of each blow reverberated through the bunker. They came in groups of three, and slowly Kevin started to realize that there was a pattern to the spaces between them.

"Three short, three long, three short," he said.

"You mean SOS?" Luna asked.

Kevin glanced over to her.

"I thought everyone knew that," she said. "That's about all I remember."

"So someone out there is in trouble?" Kevin asked, and the thought of that brought a different kind of worry. Should they be helping, rather than hesitating? He spotted a picture of a camera down in the corner of one of the screens. He pressed it, and now the screens lit up with images from security cameras around the deserted base.

"That one," Luna said, pointing to one of the images as if Kevin didn't know how to pick one out from the rest. "Here, let me."

She pressed a button, and the image came to fill the screen.

Kevin didn't know what he'd been expecting. A horde of people controlled by the aliens, maybe. Some soldier who knew about the base and had fought his way across the country to get there. Not a girl their age, holding what looked like the remains of a signpost and banging it against the door in a steady rhythm.

She was athletic and dark-haired, her hair cut short and a stud through her nose as if daring the world to say anything about it. Kevin could see that her features were pretty, very pretty, he thought, but with a tough edge to them that suggested she wouldn't appreciate being called that. She was wearing a dark hooded top with a leather jacket over it that seemed a couple of sizes too big, ripped jeans, and hiking boots. She had a small rucksack, like she was just on the mountain for the hiking, but the rest of her looked more like a runaway, her clothes streaked with enough dirt that she could have been out there for weeks before the aliens came.

"I don't like this," Luna said. "Why is there just one girl out there, trying to get in?"

"I don't know," Kevin said, "but we should probably let her."

That made sense, didn't it? If she was asking for help, then they should at least *try* to, shouldn't they? The girl was looking up at the screen now, and although there didn't seem to be any sound, she didn't look happy at being left out there.

Luna pressed something and now they could hear her, microphones picking up her words.

"…to let me in! There are still those *things* out here! I'm sure of it!"

Kevin found himself looking past her on the screen, and sure enough, he thought he could make out the signs of people there, moving with the odd purposelessness that suggested the aliens had them.

"We should let her in," Kevin said. "We can't just leave someone out there."

"She's not wearing a mask," Luna pointed out.

"So?"

Luna shook her head. "So if she's not wearing a mask, how is the alien vapor not converting her? How do we know that she *isn't* one of them?"

As if in answer to that, the girl on the screen moved closer to the camera, staring straight up into it.

"I know there's someone in there," she said. "I saw the camera move. Look, I'm not one of them, I'm normal. Look at me!"

Kevin looked into her eyes. They were wide and brown, but most importantly, the pupils were normal. Not shifted to pure white the way the scientists' had been when the vapor from the rock had claimed them, or the way his mother's had been when he'd gone home…

"We have to let her in," Kevin said. "If we leave her out there, the controlled people will get her."

Sure enough, Kevin could see figures in military uniform moving forward, moving in unison, obviously under the aliens' control.

He ran for the airlock and used the key Dr. Levin had given him to open it. Beyond, the girl was there waiting, while the former soldiers were closing in now, breaking into a run.

"Quick, inside!" Kevin said. He pulled the girl inside the airlock, because there was no time to waste. He went to pull the door closed, knowing that they would be safe the moment it was there between them and the controlled who advanced on the base.

It didn't budge.

"Help me," Kevin shouted to her, hauling on the door and feeling the solidity of the steel beneath his hands. The girl grabbed hold of it with him, pulling at the door, throwing her weight back to try to move it.

A little way away, the former soldiers were advancing at a run, and it was all Kevin could do to keep his attention on the door, not on them. It was the only way he could keep his terror at bay and focus on throwing his own weight back, pulling at the door.

Finally, it gave way, grinding into motion as they dragged it closed. Kevin heard the echo of it as it slammed, locking with a click that rang around the airlock.

"*Decontamination Procedure Starting,*" an electronic voice said, the way it had when Kevin and Luna had first arrived. There was the rush of the air being cleaned by the bunker's filters around them.

“Hi, I’m Kevin,” he said. He suspected that there should be something more dramatic to say at a moment like this, but he couldn’t think of it.

The girl was silent for a moment or two, then seemed to realize that Kevin might be expecting an answer. “I’m Chloe.”

“It’s good to meet you, Chloe,” Kevin said.

She looked at him quietly, as though assessing him, and seemed almost ready to run. “Yeah, I guess.”

The other door to the airlock clicked open. Luna was waiting for them, smiling her most welcoming smile, even though she’d been the one arguing against letting Chloe in.

“Hello,” Luna said. She held out a hand. “I’m Luna.”

Chloe stared at it, then shrugged without taking it.

“This is Chloe,” Kevin said for her.

Chloe nodded in not very enthusiastic agreement, looking around warily.

“Where is everyone?” she demanded at last.

“There’s no everyone,” Luna replied. “There’s just us. Me and Kevin.”

She stepped over next to Kevin as if to emphasize that they were a team. She even put a hand on his shoulder.

“Just you two?” Chloe said. She sat down on one of the command center’s chairs, shaking her head. “All this way, and it’s just you two?”

“Where have you come from?” Kevin asked.

“That doesn’t matter,” Chloe said, not looking at them.

“I think it kind of matters a bit,” Luna shot back. “I mean, you’ve shown up out of nowhere, and you’re asking us to trust you.”

Chloe looked over sharply, shrugged again, and then walked out of the room. Kevin went after her, mostly because he suspected that if Luna went after her there might be some kind of argument, and also because there was something intriguing about Chloe. There were so many things they didn’t know about her.

“You don’t need to follow me,” Chloe said, looking back as Kevin followed her along one of the corridors.

“I thought I could show you round,” Kevin said. “You know… if you want.”

Chloe shrugged once more. There seemed to be nuances to her shrugs, and it seemed that this one meant okay. Kevin wasn’t quite sure what to make of her.

“We’ve been looking around since we got here,” Kevin said. “There’s a kitchen and a storeroom down here, and some bathrooms here. This is the dormitory where we’re sleeping. Pick out a bed if you want. I’m down that way, and so is Luna.”

Chloe picked a bed. It was the other side of the room from the ones Luna and Kevin had chosen.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” she said, “but I don’t know you, and…” She shook her head, not finishing that. There was a haunted look to her as she did it.

“Are you okay?” Kevin asked.

“I’m fine,” Chloe shot back, but then softened her voice a little. “I’m fine. I’ve just been used to looking after myself for a while. I guess I’m not very good at opening up to people.”

“Okay,” Kevin said. He stepped back toward the door. “I can go if you don’t want to—”

“I ran away from home,” Chloe said. It was enough to stop Kevin where he was.

“What?”

“I mean, before the aliens came,” Chloe continued. “My mom shouted at me all the time, and my dad was… well, some stuff happened, and they all said I was crazy… anyway, I have a cousin up north. I thought if I could get to him, I’d be okay, and then the aliens came.”

To Kevin, it sounded like she was skimming over a lot of stuff, but he let it go. A lot of the pauses had the feeling of gaps that hid the kind of stuff that hurt too much, as if pretending would

make it all go away. He knew about that. Like if he pretended everything was fine, his illness wasn't really there.

"How did you survive out there?" Kevin asked.

"I did what I had to," Chloe said, sounding defensive, and also kind of haunted again. "Wait, you mean when everyone else changed? I was… I guess it was just luck. I was inside away from everyone when it started happening, and people said there was a gas or something, but by the time I got out, it was just those things trying to grab people and breathe on them."

"By the time you got out?" Kevin said.

"This butcher locked me in his meat locker. Said I was trying to steal from him."

Was that somewhere that might keep the alien vapor out? Did it mean that Luna and he didn't need their masks anymore?

"It will be okay," Kevin said.

Chloe gave him another of those shrugs. "You're the kid on TV, aren't you? When you said your name was Kevin, I didn't get it, but I think I recognize you. Is that why you're here? They stashed you in a safe place because you're the boy who knows about aliens?"

Kevin shook his head, moving back over to her. "They didn't put me here. Dr. Levin gave me a key to fit the bunkers they have, and told me about the one under the NASA research center, but that went wrong. Luna and I had to find this place by ourselves."

Chloe nodded. "Luna… is she your girlfriend?"

People were always assuming that. Kevin couldn't understand why. It seemed obvious to him that Luna would never be his girlfriend.

"She's my friend," Kevin said. "We're not… I mean…"

It was weird how talking about aliens was easier than talking about exactly what he and Luna were.

"Strange," Chloe said. "I mean, you seem nice. I *definitely* wouldn't leave you as just a friend. I wonder—"

Kevin didn't get to find out what she wondered, though, because a pointed cough came from the doorway. Almost as pointed as the look Luna gave them when Kevin turned around.

"I wanted to see what was taking you both so long," she said, and she didn't sound happy. She looked… almost jealous, and that didn't make sense, because nothing was happening here, and in any case, Kevin and Luna weren't like that. Were they?

"Hi, Luna," Kevin said. "Chloe was just telling me about herself."

"I bet she was," Luna said. "Maybe she can tell me some of it too. And maybe, while we're doing that, we can work out what we're all going to do next."

***

They went through to the kitchen area, because none of them had eaten breakfast yet. Kevin went to get supplies from the storeroom, not entirely sure if he should leave Luna and Chloe alone right then.

Kevin picked out a packet that claimed to be blueberry pancakes, and took it out to them. They were quiet, which was kind of worrying in itself—Luna was almost never quiet.

"I found blueberry pancakes," he said.

"That's great," Luna said. "I love blueberry pancakes."

"I like them too," Chloe said, although Kevin got the feeling she'd only said it because Luna had.

"Well, I don't know how good they'll be," Kevin said.

The answer to that was simple: they tasted like something that had been in a packet in a storeroom for longer than they should have been. Even so, he was hungry enough by then to eat all of his.

"How did you hear about this place?" Kevin asked Chloe while they were eating.

"My dad… his job meant that he… heard things," she said, but didn't expand on it more than that. Kevin suspected that if Luna had asked rather than him, she wouldn't have said even that much.

"So you trekked here, and battered on the door until someone let you in?" Luna said. She didn't sound to Kevin as though she believed it much.

"I had to go somewhere," Chloe said.

"I wonder if there are other places like this where people have managed to hide out," Kevin said before that could turn into an argument. He wanted them to get along, if they were stuck there.

"If there are, we can't contact them," Luna said. "There's still no signal coming in through the screens, and all those communications devices are useless if we don't know who we're connecting to."

"Maybe you're just not turning them on right," Chloe said.

Luna gave her a pointed look.

"We can stay here as long as we need to, anyway," Luna said. "We're safe here. We talked about this yesterday, Kevin."

They had, and it had been a comforting thought at the time, but was that it? Were the three of them just going to stay there for the rest of their lives?

"I might know about a place," Chloe said, between mouthfuls of pancake.

"You just happen to know about somewhere?" Luna said. "The same way that you heard about here?"

To Kevin, she sounded suspicious. He wanted to give Chloe the benefit of the doubt, but Luna sounded much less like she trusted her.

Chloe put down her fork. "I heard about it on the way here from some people I met. I figured that this was closer, and safer. But if there's no one here…"

"We're here," Luna said. "We're safe here."

"Are we?" Chloe demanded, looking around at Kevin as if for confirmation. "There's supposed to be a group toward LA who are helping refugees gather together and stay safe. They call themselves the Survivors."

"So you want us to go all the way to LA and look for these people?" Luna asked.

"What's *your* plan? Just sit here and wait for things to get better?"

Kevin looked from one to the other, trying to work out the best way to keep all of this calm.

"We have enough food to last forever, and maybe we'll get the radio working soon. We can't just go out there when there could be anything."

Chloe shook her head. "Things don't get better. Trust me."

"Trust you?" Luna said. "We don't even know you. We're staying here."

Kevin knew that tone. It meant that Luna wasn't backing down.

"Listen to the perfect little cheerleader, thinking she's in charge," Chloe shot back.

"You know nothing about me," Luna insisted, in a dangerous tone of voice.

Kevin could barely work out why they were arguing. He'd been trying not to get involved, but now it seemed as though he might have to.

He stood to say something, but stopped, because pain shot through his head, along with something else, a feeling he hadn't had in days now.

"Kevin?" Luna said. "Are you all right?"

Kevin shook his head. "I think… I think there's another signal coming through."

CHAPTER THREE

Numbers flashed through Kevin's mind, bursting through it in rapid sequence, seeming almost to burn themselves onto his brain. They seemed too fast to hold onto, but Kevin knew he had to try. He grabbed for them…

Kevin woke, blinking up at the top bunk of the bed he'd chosen from the floor. His head ached like he'd been hit on it, but it wasn't that. It was just the pain that came as his body tried to process an alien signal it couldn't handle, trying vainly to grasp onto it. He put a hand to his nose and it came away stained by a thin stream of blood.

"Here," Luna said, handing him a cloth.

"Thanks," Kevin replied.

Chloe was watching him from the other side of the bunkbed, as though it was a barrier between her and Luna.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "What happened?"

"I told you what happened," Luna said. Kevin could hear the annoyance there.

Chloe shook her head. "I want to hear it from him."

Kevin swallowed. "I think… I think there's a transmission."

"I *told* you," Luna said, with a certain satisfaction, then looked back to Kevin. "Wait, you *think* there's one?"

Kevin could understand that uncertainty. Before, the transmissions had all been so clear.

"There weren't any words," Kevin said. "It was all numbers."

"Like the first time," Luna said.

Kevin nodded, struggling to sit up. When he blinked, he could see the numbers clearly, burning behind his eyelids, there whether he wanted to see them or not.

"So this is how it happens?" Chloe asked, sounding almost excited about it. "You get actual transmissions into your brain?"

"I get hints of things," Kevin said, "but the actual transmissions come through NASA's radio telescopes. I'm just able to translate them."

"That's… amazing," Chloe said.

It was easy to forget that there were people out there who hadn't seen him doing this plenty of times before.

"It's not something fun," Luna said. "You can see what it does to Kevin. And all the trouble that's come from it too… not just the aliens coming here. We've had people threaten us, try to kill us, people not believe Kevin. Do you know what it's like, not being believed when you're telling the truth? Being told that you're crazy?"

Chloe had been looking increasingly angry as Luna spoke, but once she said that, Chloe went quiet.

"Yeah," she said softly. "Yeah, I do."

She went and sat down on the corner of one of the other beds, and Kevin saw her fingers drumming together as though there was a lot she wanted to say, but didn't. Kevin might have asked her what was wrong, but Luna was speaking to him again.

"So this means that there's another message waiting?" she asked. "Another transmission from the aliens?"

Kevin nodded. "Not the ones who invaded, though. This felt more like the way it did with the other ones. The ones who tried to warn us."

"I guessed that," Luna said. "I mean, what are the invaders going to say now? Surrender and be destroyed, puny humans? Resistance is futile? What kind of aliens gloat when they've already beaten you?"

"Everyone else does," Chloe muttered, then stood up and walked out.

Luna made a face at her retreating back. "What's her problem?"

Kevin shook his head. "I don't know. I get the feeling that something pretty bad happened before she came here."

"You mean worse than the world being invaded by aliens?" Luna asked. "Or worse than being grabbed by a guy with a gun at a press conference?"

"I don't know," Kevin repeated. He got the feeling that he should probably go after Chloe, but he didn't feel strong enough to do it yet, and in any case, he also had the feeling that Luna wouldn't be happy with him if he did.

"I figured she would have told you," Luna said. "I mean, you looked to be having a nice talk when I showed up before."

It sounded almost jealous, but why would Luna be jealous? She had to know that she and Kevin would always be best friends, and nothing would come between that, right? And as for anything else… well, that would imply that Luna was interested in being more than just his friend, and Kevin couldn't really believe that would ever happen.

"She didn't really say much," Kevin said. "Just that she ran away."

"Looks like she's good at that," Luna said, with another pointed look toward the door.

"Luna," Kevin said. "Can you at least try to be nice to her? I mean, I don't know why you're even mad at her. I'd have thought you'd get along."

"Because we're both girls?" Luna said.

"No!" Kevin said hurriedly. "I mean, because you're both…" He tried to think of the right words. Would tough be right? Chloe certainly looked it, while Luna didn't, but Kevin knew from experience that she was.

"We're nothing alike," Luna said. "She called me a cheerleader."

She made it sound like an insult.

"Well, you were on the—"

"That's not the point," Luna said, but then stopped. "Okay, though. I'll be nice. I guess if we're all stuck in a bunker together, we'll have to get along. But I'm doing this for you, not for her."

"Thanks," Kevin said.

"Of course, if there's some new signal, then we're not going to be able to stay in the bunker, are we?" Luna said, sounding as though it was all pretty obvious. Maybe it was to her. Luna had always been good at coming up with plans for things. Quite often, they'd been plans for getting into more trouble.

Kevin hadn't thought it through yet, but Luna was probably right. If there was a new signal, then they had to find out what it meant, and there was only one place they could do that.

"I think we have to go back to the research institute," Kevin said.

"Even though we barely got out of there the first time?" Luna said. "And we don't know what's on the message, and we don't know if it will do any good when the aliens have already taken our world. It *could* just be 'sorry, we tried to warn you.'"

"What if it's not, though?" Kevin countered. "I mean, do you really believe they'd send a message all the way across space for that?"

"No, I guess not," Luna said, looking more serious now.

"What if they found a way to beat the aliens, or force them out of controlling people's bodies?" Kevin said. "What if they give us some way to make this better? We have to go back. Well… I do. I mean, you might be safer if—"

"Finish that thought and I'll punch you," Luna said. "Of *course* I'm going to come."

"But I thought that—"

"You thought you'd leave me behind while you had an adventure by yourself?" Luna demanded.

Kevin shook his head. “I thought that we’d finally gotten somewhere safe. I thought maybe you wouldn’t want to give that up. I *have* to be there to translate the message, but no one else—ow!”

He rubbed his arm where Luna’s fist had connected with it.

“I told you I would,” she said with a broad smile that suggested she wasn’t remotely sorry. “I’m coming with you, because *someone* has to keep you from getting grabbed by controlled people. Besides, if there’s anything there that will let us turn around and kick their asses for what they did, I want to know about it.”

That was part of what was so incredible about Luna. She didn’t give up, even when everything said that it was the sensible thing to do. She’d fight anything, up to and including an alien invasion.

“Did I ever tell you how amazing you are?” Kevin asked.

“You don’t need to tell me,” Luna said with another grin. “I just know. Frankly, you’re lucky you get to be my friend.”

“True,” Kevin said. He turned serious for a moment. “We need a plan if we’re going to go back.”

“We’ll need supplies,” Luna said, starting to check items off on her fingers. “We’ll need food, maybe tools to get inside, masks…”

“Chloe said that the vapor was gone,” Kevin pointed out.

“And how does she know?” Luna countered. “Okay, maybe, but I’d rather have one with me just in case. *You* can have the job of telling her that we’re going.”

“Maybe she’ll want to come with us,” Kevin said.

Luna made a face. “I guess it’s better than leaving her here and wondering if she’ll let us back in again. I’ll get started getting supplies together. You go and talk to her.”

***

Kevin made his way through the underground complex, looking for Chloe. It took a while to find her in the tangled corridors and storerooms, but eventually he heard her ahead. She seemed to be talking to herself.

“I can’t do it… I can’t do it…”

Kevin cautiously looked through a doorway to find Chloe sitting on the floor of a storeroom. There were things scattered around in a spread that didn’t look accidental. It looked as though she’d swept her arm along one of the shelves, knocking everything to the floor. She had her head in her hands and seemed to be crying.

“Chloe?”

She looked up as Kevin approached, wiping away her tears as if afraid they might be used against her.

“I’m fine,” she said, before Kevin could even ask if she was okay. “I’m fine.”

“I used to say I was fine when people asked me about my illness,” Kevin said, moving to sit down beside her. “It mostly meant I wasn’t.”

“I just get… upset… sometimes,” Chloe said, and Kevin guessed she’d picked that word carefully out of all the ones that had come to her. “I do stuff without really thinking. It’s part of why people said I was crazy.”

“I don’t think you’re crazy,” Kevin said.

Chloe sighed. “You don’t know me yet. Did you just come here to see how badly I was messing up?”

“No, of course not,” Kevin said. “We… I… think that we need to go back to the NASA research institute. With what I saw, there might be a message, and it might be important.”

“You want to go into the middle of the city, to a place that might be full of them?” Chloe replied. “That’s…that doesn’t make any sense. We could go anywhere. There are the Survivors in LA, or my cousin up north…”

"We need to do this," Kevin said. "Luna's collecting supplies, and we'll work out a plan for getting there safely. You could stay here if you want, though. You don't have to come with us if you don't think it would be safe enough."

"You don't want me to come with you?" Chloe said, and now she sounded as upset as she'd looked before.

"That's not what I said," Kevin said.

"It's what you meant, though, isn't it?" Chloe shot back.

"No," Kevin replied. "I just thought you might not *want* to come. You said yourself it might be dangerous."

Chloe shrugged. "Whatever."

"Chloe," Kevin said. "I don't want to—"

"Whatever," Chloe repeated, in a dull tone. "Do what you want. I don't care. Go off and make your stupid preparations."

"Chloe—"

"Go!" she snapped.

Kevin went, hoping that if he left Chloe alone for a while, they might be able to talk about it again later or something. That was what people did, wasn't it? They talked about things and made up?

For now, he knew he should probably help Luna find supplies for their journey. They would need all kinds of things, from gas for the car that they'd left waiting outside to clothes, to maps. He passed a door with the word "Armory" printed above it and tried the handle, but it was locked. Maybe that was just as well. He doubted that he and Luna could fight their way through a horde of controlled people no matter how many weapons they had. Besides, just the thought of it made him picture his mother running toward him, or the scientists from the Institute, or Luna's parents. He didn't think he would be able to hurt any of them.

He was still thinking about it when he heard alarms going off in the direction of the control room.

Kevin ran there, hoping it would all just be some false alarm or minor fault, but in his heart, he knew it wouldn't be. He knew exactly who would be responsible for that alarm, and he didn't want to think about what she might be doing.

He saw Chloe as he ran into the control room. She was pressing buttons on the computers through a haze of tears, stabbing at them with her fingers as if pressing them harder would make them work better.

"Chloe, what are you doing?" Kevin demanded.

"I don't have to do what you say. I don't have to do what *anyone* says," she said, in a determined tone. "You can't keep me here. I need to get out!"

"No one's trying to—"

"I thought you liked me. I thought you might be my friend, but you're like all the others. I'm going. You can't stop me!"

She pressed something else, and the tone of the alarms changed. Computer-generated words blared over the speakers.

"Emergency Evacuation Procedure begun. Opening doors. Please exit the base in an orderly fashion."

"What?" Kevin said. "Chloe, what have you done?"

"What's she doing now?" Luna asked, as she ran into the room. She had a backpack over one shoulder that she'd obviously been using to collect supplies, still half open because of the hurry to get there. She didn't look happy.

Not as unhappy as Chloe did, though. "You were going to leave me behind here like some kind of… of *prisoner*," she said, and her tone was frantic, angry, and scared all at once. "You're not going

to keep me here. I'm going to my cousin. I'm going to find out what happened to him. Then I'm going to the Survivors."

Behind her, the great door to the airlock was swinging open. To Kevin's shock, so was the outer door, both of them opening at once in a clear path to the outside. Kevin could see the mountain road outside, and the trees. Worse, he could see figures moving out there, turning toward the sound almost in unison.

Pretty much as soon as the way was clear, Chloe darted through the doorway, out onto the mountain. Kevin was too shocked by it all to try to stop her, and Luna was pulling on her gas mask in a hurry, obviously still unsure about whether to trust the air outside or not.

"The door, Kevin!" Luna yelled as she hurried to put it in place. "We need to close the door."

Kevin nodded. "I've got it."

He hoped he had it, at least. He could see the people outside advancing toward the door, more of them than he could have believed given that the aliens were supposed to have taken the people. There were soldiers and hikers, whole families moving in a kind of stilted, silent coordination.

Kevin pressed buttons on the computer, hoping to undo whatever had been done. Nothing seemed to have any effect. It didn't help that he didn't have a clue how the computer system here worked. It wasn't as if everything was labeled for anyone who wanted to try using it. Besides, he suspected that an emergency door opening like this wasn't *supposed* to be easy to undo, in case people got trapped inside. He mashed at the computer's keys, hoping to find some combination that might do something.

None of it worked. The doors stayed open, a clear path standing to the outside, and now, along that path, the people controlled by the aliens were stalking forward.

They were coming.

And if they reached the bunker, Kevin was terrified of what would happen next.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Run!" Kevin yelled as the people the aliens had converted closed in on the bunker. Luna already seemed to be taking his advice, running back into the confusing depths of the place, so fast that Kevin had to push to keep up.

They'd always been good at running away. Whenever they got into trouble for being somewhere they shouldn't be, they always managed to keep ahead of whoever was following them. Well, most of the time. Well, at least better than half. This time, though, Kevin suspected they would get something a lot worse than a stern warning if the creatures behind them caught up.

He could hear the thud of their feet on the bunker's floor as they followed, the sound of their pursuit silent except for the clatter of boots against concrete. They didn't call out in their pursuit, didn't screech or scream or demand that Kevin and Luna stop. Somehow, that made it all scarier.

"This way!" Luna called out, still leading him deeper into the base. They passed the armory, and now Kevin *did* wish he had some kind of weapon, simply because it seemed like the only way they were going to be able to get out of there in one piece. Since he didn't have one, he settled for knocking over whatever he passed as he ran, pushing a cart into the path of the advancing people, closing doors behind him. Crashes told him when they slammed into the obstacles Kevin was putting in their way, but so far none of it seemed to be slowing them down even a little.

"Quiet now," Luna whispered, pulling Kevin into another corridor and slowing down to a tiptoe. A crowd of hikers and soldiers hurried past just a second later, moving with all the speed and strength that seemed to come from being controlled by the aliens.

"Why are they so *fast*?" Kevin whispered back, trying to catch his breath. It didn't seem fair, them being that fast. The least you should be able to expect from an alien invasion was to be able to run away from it properly.

"The aliens are probably just making them use all of their muscles," Luna said, "not caring if they hurt them. You know, like when grandmas lift cars off people."

"Grandmas can lift cars off people?" Kevin said.

Luna shrugged. With her gas mask on, it was impossible to know if she was making fun of him or not. "I saw it on TV. Have you got your breath back yet?"

Kevin nodded even though it wasn't exactly true. "Where are we going? If they're smart, they'll have left people by the entrance."

"So we go to the *other* entrance," Luna said.

The emergency exit. Kevin had been so busy thinking about the bunker being overrun that he'd pretty much forgotten it. If they could get to it, then maybe they had a chance. They could get to the car and drive to NASA.

"Ready?" Luna asked. "Okay, go."

They scurried along the corridors, and somehow, not seeing the controlled people was worse than seeing them. They were so quiet that they could have been around any corner, waiting to grab them, and if they did, then what happened next wouldn't be worth—

"Run!" Luna called out as an arm grabbed for her from around the next corner. It succeeded in getting hold of the cloth of her shirt, and Kevin slammed forward, throwing his whole weight against the arm like he was trying to tackle it.

The grip broke free and he and Luna were running again, taking twists and turns at random to try to lose their pursuers. They couldn't run faster than them in a straight line, so they had to look for spaces where the controlled people couldn't follow, and try to use the maze-like layout of the bunker against them.

"It's in here," Luna said, pointing to a doorway.

Kevin had to take her word for it. Right then, he felt so lost that he couldn't even tell someone the way back to the control room. He plunged into the section of corridor after Luna, then shut the door behind them, grabbing a fire extinguisher and trying to use it to jam the door shut. It looked as flimsy as cardboard compared to the controlled people's strength.

Now they just had to get the escape hatch open.

Kevin put his hands on the wheel, trying to turn it. Nothing happened; it was so stiff it felt as though it might have been made from rock. He tried again, his knuckles going white with the effort.

"Maybe a little help?" he suggested.

"But you seemed to be having fun," Luna shot back from behind her mask, before gripping onto the locking wheel with him and hauling at it. Still it was stuck.

"We need to try harder," Luna said.

"I'm trying as hard as I can," Kevin assured her.

"Well, unless you want to go ask one of the controlled people for help, we need to do more. On three. One…"

A clang came at the door Kevin had barred.

"Three!" he said, pulling at the wheel with every scrap of strength he could pull together. Luna seemed to have the same idea, all but hanging her weight off the thing.

Finally, as a second clang came from the door they'd barred, the thing shifted. They spun it open while Kevin's muscles complained, and then Luna dove inside headfirst, not waiting to see if Kevin wanted to go first. He hurried after her, shutting the hatch behind him in the hope that the corridor would just look empty to anything following.

The space beyond was narrow, little more than a kind of crawl tunnel. If the two of them had been adults, they would probably have barely fit. As it was, there was enough space to scramble along on their hands and knees, hurrying to another hatch at the far end. Thankfully, *this* one wasn't stuck, and opened smoothly to reveal the mountainside beyond.

"We need to be careful," Luna said softly as the two of them dropped down onto the mountainside. "They might still be out here."

They were, because Kevin could see figures further off, moving up the slope as if to get to the front entrance. There were some trees nearby, so he and Luna slipped into them, staying low and trying to keep out of sight.

They crept their way up the mountain, trying to work out where exactly they'd hidden Dr. Levin's car. If they could get to the car, then they could get out of there, leaving the alien-controlled people, and go to the base.

Kevin spotted it a little way away, right where they'd left it, tucked out of sight. He crept toward it… and that was when he saw Chloe coming around a bend in the mountain road, from the parking lot at the summit. A pair of tourists, moving with the strangely coordinated silence of the alien controlled, were running after her, and they were gaining.

"We have to help her," Kevin said.

"After everything she's just done?" Luna shot back. "It would serve her right if we left her to become an alien too. She'd probably be less trouble."

"Luna," Kevin said.

"I'm just saying that she *totally* doesn't deserve our help," Luna said.

The controlled people were almost at Chloe now.

"That's probably true," Kevin said. He started forward. "I'm still going to help her, though."

He set off in Chloe's direction and wasn't that surprised to find Luna running alongside him.

"I'm doing this for you, not her," Luna said.

"Of course," Kevin agreed, running faster.

"And you can stop smiling about it," Luna continued. "I'm just doing this because you'll only get aliened if I don't help."

"Aliened?"

"I'll think of a better word later," Luna said.

They were almost at Chloe now. One of the controlled people reached out for her but Kevin and Luna were faster, grabbing her and pulling her off the path and down into the trees. The slope made it treacherous, but maybe that was a good thing as one of the controlled people came tumbling past them.

"You came back for me," Chloe said. "You—"

"Stop talking and keep running," Luna snapped. "The car's just ahead."

And the remaining hiker was just behind, moving with all the tenacity of a wolf chasing a deer. Kevin didn't want to think about how that kind of thing usually ended, he just kept running, switching directions through the trees.

The alien-controlled hiker grabbed for him and Kevin managed to dodge. To his surprise, Chloe was there, pushing the man from the side, sending him tumbling further down the slope, scrambling to stop his fall. She grinned at it, although Kevin winced, because even if there was an alien controlling that body, it still belonged to someone, and if they ever got it back, they would probably want it without broken bones.

"Get in!" Luna yelled from ahead. She was at the car now, hopping in at the driver's side.

Kevin and Chloe ran for the car and got in as Luna started to turn the key. Kevin heard her cursing under her breath as she did, and it only took a moment to realize why: The car wasn't starting. It made a kind of whirring, coughing sound, but other than that, nothing happened, no matter how many times Luna tried to get it to go.

Fear rose up in Kevin then, although there had been more than enough of it sloshing around in him anyway thanks to having to run away from alien-controlled people. He looked around at the trees, trying to spot movement, looking for any sign of the controlled people. Not just the ones who had stumbled down the slope, because there would be more. There always seemed to be more.

"It's not working," Luna said.

"It's not going to work," Chloe said. "You've flooded it."

"As if you know anything about it," Luna shot back.

It had the feeling of an argument that would take too long and be too loud; that would still have them sitting there when more of the controlled people came. Already, Kevin thought he could see rustling in the trees.

"We have to go," Kevin said. He thought he could see shapes out beyond the nearest trunks. "We have to go *now*."

He got out of the car again and the others followed with obvious reluctance. At least they followed, slipping away into the trees just in time as Kevin looked back to see hikers and soldiers, park rangers and families, descending on the car in a silent, coordinated mass. Some of them looked around, seeming almost to sniff the air. Kevin hurried away as quickly as he dared.

"They won't be distracted by the car for long," Kevin guessed. "We need to think of something else."

"There are plenty of cars up in the parking lot," Chloe said.

Luna snorted. "That we don't have keys for."

"I don't need a key. That's what I was up there doing, until they charged after me." She still sounded as though she wanted to pick a fight, but right then, if they could all get out of there, Kevin could live with that.

"We'll need to keep quiet," Kevin said, and the others looked at him as if he'd just said the most obvious thing in the world. They all crept forward, making their way up the mountain to the summit and the parking lot that stood there for visitors. For the moment, at least, it seemed to be empty.

"You might as well take off that stupid mask," Chloe said to Luna. "I told you, whatever they put in the air is gone. Or are you scared?"

The last one was enough to get to Luna. Pointedly, she reached up and took off her mask, hanging it from her belt.

"I'm not scared," she said. "I'm just not stupid."

"We need to find a car," Kevin said, interrupting before they could argue again.

There were plenty to choose from, left wherever they'd been parked by the people visiting the mountain. There were SUVs and minivans, modern cars and old ones in all kinds of colors and—

"That one," Chloe said, pointing to a pickup truck that looked beaten up to the point where Kevin was amazed there was anything left of it. The paintwork was peeling, rust showing through in spots. "I'll be able to start that one."

They went over to it, and it turned out that one of the windows was open a crack. Chloe pulled it down further, then reached in and opened the door.

"Doesn't it worry you that she knows how to do all this?" Luna asked Kevin.

Chloe looked back over her shoulder. "Not all of us get perfect little lives, cheerleader."

Kevin was almost grateful for the sight of a group of the controlled people advancing slowly, obviously searching.

"Quick," he said, "in the truck!"

They got in, keeping their heads down. Chloe was in the driver's seat working on something with the ignition. It seemed to be taking a long time.

"I thought you said you could do this," Luna whispered.

"I'd like to see *you* try," Chloe shot back.

"Just so long as you can get us to NASA," Luna said.

Chloe shook her head. "We're going to LA."

"San Francisco," Luna insisted.

"LA," Chloe shot back.

Kevin knew he needed to intervene, because if he didn't, they would probably still be arguing when the controlled people caught up to them.

"Please, Chloe, we *need* to hear this message. And… well, if it doesn't work out, *then* maybe we could go to LA. Together."

Chloe was quiet for a minute. Kevin dared a glance over the dashboard. He hoped she made a decision soon, because the group of controlled people was getting closer.

"I guess you *did* kind of save my life back there," Chloe said. "Okay."

She kept working at what she was doing with the ignition. The engine gave a cough. Kevin looked up to see every alien-controlled person there staring at them now, looking at them with the intensity of a cat that had just spotted a mouse.

"Um… Chloe?"

They started to run forward.

"Can you do this or not?" Luna said.

Chloe didn't answer, just kept working on whatever she was doing. The engine spluttered again, then roared to life. Chloe looked up in triumph.

"See! I *told* you that—"

She stopped short as a figure slammed into the truck, making a grab for them.

"Get us out of here," Kevin said, and Chloe nodded.

The truck lurched forward as she drove, apparently not caring if she hit the controlled people or not. They swerved around a car, and a soldier threw himself into the truck's path. Chloe didn't slow it down even for a moment, and the crunch as they hit him was awful. He bounced off the hood and rolled to his feet, but by then they were already away.

Or kind of away, anyway. There was only so fast they could go on the mountain road, especially with the risk of abandoned cars in the way, left wherever people had been when the vapor converted

their occupants. Chloe was weaving around them, but it still slowed them down enough that the controlled people running behind were keeping up.

"They're not giving up," Luna said with a glance back.

"They don't get tired, they don't stop," Chloe said, and something about the way she said it suggested that she'd learned that the hard way. "Everyone hold on."

Kevin clung to the dashboard as they sped up, the truck rolling alarmingly as it sped around the obstacles in the way. Kevin was sure they would crash at any moment, but somehow, impossibly, they didn't. Chloe wrenched the wheel from one side to the other, and the truck lumbered along in response.

They skidded close to the edge of the road, and Kevin didn't know which would be worse: crashing or being caught. Chloe seemed to have made up her mind, though, because they didn't slow down. They sped down off the mountain, and now Kevin could see the controlled people falling further and further behind.

"We did it," he said. "We survived."

Luna hugged him. Over her shoulder, Kevin could see the look on Chloe's face while she did it.

"Now all we have to do," Luna said, "is go into the city, break into a place we barely got out of, and find a message from a second set of aliens without being grabbed by the first ones."

Put like that, it seemed like an impossible task. Kevin could barely imagine making it to the NASA institute in one piece, but they still had to.

It was the only hope the world had.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I'm tempted to say 'are we almost there yet,'" Luna said, with a smile across at Kevin.

Kevin should have guessed that one of the biggest dangers of a road trip like this wasn't just the risk of crashing, or being ambushed by people controlled by aliens, or anything like that. It was the possibility that Luna might get bored enough to start thinking of ways to entertain herself. He had no doubt that would mean an argument with Chloe, and since Chloe was driving, that didn't feel like a good thing.

Lots of things didn't, from the alien spaceship hanging moon-sized and ominous in the sky, to the silent near emptiness of the roads. All of it just reminded him how weird this whole situation was, and how much the world had changed almost overnight.

"Can't you drive any faster?" Luna asked.

"You want faster?" Chloe said, and hit the gas.

Kevin clung on. Once they got off the mountain, the roads opened up a little, but that didn't mean they could just go as fast as they wanted to. For one thing, Kevin doubted that Chloe had any more of an idea of how to drive than he or Luna did.

For another, there were still too many cars in the road for that.

"Slow down," Kevin said as they blitzed their way around a Chevy parked in the middle of the freeway, its owner long gone. They barely skidded their way past a motorcycle that had been left on its side, just abandoned. "Chloe, please slow down."

They slowed a little, and it was probably just as well they did. There were cars strewn everywhere now, mostly just left wherever their owners had been converted, but some of them were little more than twisted lumps of metal where they'd obviously crashed.

A tanker lay on its side by the edge of the freeway, gas seeping into the earth around it. One spark would have set it off, and right then, Kevin thought he understood how it felt.

"We need to work together," he said, trying to calm things down a little. He tried to think about what his mother might have said in a situation like this, or Ted, or Dr. Levin. The only problem with that was that it hurt too much to think about all the people who had been taken from them, who might even now be on the ship that hung like a second moon in the sky.

"We've… everyone else is gone," he said, choking back the hurt. "We've all lost people. We've all had bad things happen." It didn't seem like a big enough thing to say to contain the full horror of it. "All of us are hurting, and we can't argue just because it's bad. We'll only get through this if we work together."

The others were quiet for a little while.

"Okay," Chloe said at last.

"Yeah, I guess," Luna agreed.

They drove on, the ancient truck rattling and bumping its way along roads littered with the debris of people's last moments before the aliens took them. There were abandoned fast food cartons and abandoned vehicles, pets left to wander by the side of the road, and people who lay where they'd fallen when cars had hit them, so still that it was obvious there was nothing that could be done to help them, even if Kevin had known anything about medicine.

He looked up at the sight of the alien ship in orbit above the world. Was his mom up there, or was she on one of the ships that he and Luna had seen come down from it to hover over the cities of the world? Maybe she'd been left standing around, waiting for something else, the way the hikers and the soldiers on the mountain had. Kevin wasn't sure which of those options he should be hoping for. None of them sounded good.

"Look," Luna said, pointing.

Kevin saw what she was pointing at right away. The big ship that had moved into place above San Francisco was still there, hovering improbably above the city while occasionally much smaller forms darted down from it. After so much stillness on the roads, that movement was almost as jarring as the fact that there was an alien spaceship just sitting there.

Almost.

"We're actually driving towards that," Chloe said. "This really doesn't seem good."

"Well, that's one thing we can agree on," Luna said.

It was probably about the only thing they did agree on, but they still had to go there. They had to do this, because right then, it seemed like the only hope anybody had. Kevin swallowed at that thought. It was too much pressure; far too much.

The alien ship was high enough above the city that it took another ten minutes before the buildings below started to come into view, skyscrapers jabbing up into the air below it like fingers trying to reach up to touch it. As they got closer, the roads got busier too, with more and more abandoned cars, so that they had to slow almost to a crawl to pick their way through safely.

"At least we're not on the other side of the road," Luna said. She had a point. The way out of the city was so clogged with cars now that it seemed impossible that anyone might be able to drive through the chaos of it. It looked as though they'd gotten out only just in time the first time around.

"It's going to make getting out of the city again kind of hard," Kevin said as he thought about it. He didn't like the idea of being trapped in there. Maybe there would be some easy way to deal with the aliens once they got to NASA and listened to the new signal, maybe they wouldn't need to leave again before this was all okay, but looking at the sight of the alien ships, it was hard to believe it.

"It's easy," Chloe said. "There's no one on the road, so we drive the wrong side."

That would do it. It was weird, though, that, even with what looked like the end of the world, it still felt wrong even thinking about it.

"Which way?" Chloe asked.

Kevin pointed, hoping he had it right. He'd been living at NASA for so long, but it wasn't as if he and his mom had driven there more than a few times. They headed deeper into the city, trying to follow signs that looked as though they would lead them closer to where they wanted to go.

The city was eerily quiet. There was garbage left in the streets and animals wandering about, but Kevin didn't see any signs of people. He guessed that anyone this far into the city had walked to the spot where everyone had stood looking up at the ship that hung there. He wanted to try to ignore it, but it was impossible. Even when he did tear his eyes from it, it just meant that he looked past it to the even bigger shape hanging far out in orbit.

"Almost there," Luna said. "We need to go right here."

Kevin guessed that she'd been paying more attentions to the directions than he did. He was glad that one of them was certain of the way, at least. They pulled around the corner, into the Mountain View district, and Kevin saw the NASA center ahead.

Somehow, it managed to look even emptier than the rest of the city as they approached. Maybe it was just that Kevin was used to the whole place being so much busier, filled with people there to see what was going on, or there to see him, in the last few weeks. When he'd been in there relaying the messages on TV, there had been so many people waiting outside that it had seemed there was no way in or out. Now, the route to the research center was silent and still, no sign of people anywhere.

"There's something sad about seeing it like this," Kevin said. He thought about all the people who had been working inside when the vapor had started to come out. Would they still be in there? He hoped not.

"At least it means we're not having to run away from people controlled by aliens," Luna said. "I hope."

They drove up as far as the security barrier, then Kevin and Luna got out to open it. It took both of them to move the weight of the thing, lifting it up and leaving it up so that Chloe could bring

the truck through. From here, the research center looked even emptier, its size only emphasizing it. The doors all stood open, left that way by whoever had come pouring out, controlled by the aliens.

"We need to be careful," Kevin said. "There might still be some in there."

"There won't be, will there?" Chloe asked. "I thought they'd all be in the ships or something by now."

"You don't have to come in," Luna said.

"I didn't say that."

The three of them crept forward, staying quiet as they went in through the open doorway. Still, there was no sign of anyone, which managed to be both a relief and kind of creepy at the same time. All the doors inside the place were open, most of them looking as though they'd been broken open by force as the controlled people struggled to get out.

"At least it means that we'll be able to get where we need to go," Luna said.

"Where *do* we need to go?" Chloe asked, looking over to Kevin. "Which way?"

"The computer pit," Kevin said. He'd been thinking about this most of the way up. They would need to find a way to get the computers to reorient the radio telescopes to match the numbers in his head, then listen to the feed in the room the scientists had set up for him to do just that.

He started to lead the way, through doorways that he'd never had clearance for, thinking about all the people he'd seen working there in the different labs and offices. All of them were gone now, their things left behind as if they might be back for them at any moment.

"It's like a ghost ship," Chloe said, echoing what he was thinking. "Or like one of those towns where everything is set for dinner, and the people are just… gone."

It was definitely a weird feeling, but Kevin did his best to ignore it as he led the way down to where they stored the supercomputers that the research center had been working on. He had no doubt that one of them would be able to let them hear the signal, even if he wasn't quite sure how they would do it. They'd have to work that part out as they went.

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