



MORGAN RICE

TRANSMISSION

THE INVASION CHRONICLES (BOOK ONE)

Морган Райс
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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 a long-anticipated science fiction series debut. When SETI finally receives a signal from an alien civilization, what will happen next?

A 13 year old boy, dying of a rare brain disease, is the only one able to hear and decode signals from outer space. SETI confirms it is a real signal.

What is the message? How will the world react?

And most of all: are the aliens coming?

“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 #2 in the series—ARRIVAL—is also available for pre-order!

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

Transmission (The Invasion Chronicles—Book One)

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 8 books; of the epic fantasy series **A THRONE FOR SISTERS**, comprising seven books (and counting); and of the new science fiction series **THE INVASION CHRONICLES**. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.morganricebooks.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, download the free app, get the latest exclusive news, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay

in touch!

Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

“If you thought that there was no reason left for living after the end of THE SORCERER’S RING series, you were wrong. In RISE OF THE DRAGONS Morgan Rice has come up with what promises to be another brilliant series, immersing us in a fantasy of trolls and dragons, of valor, honor, courage, magic and faith in your destiny. Morgan has managed again to produce a strong set of characters that make us cheer for them on every page.... Recommended for the permanent library of all readers that love a well-written fantasy.”

--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.”

--Midwest Book Review (D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer)

“THE SORCERER’S RING has all the ingredients for an instant success: plots, counterplots, mystery, valiant knights, and blossoming relationships replete with broken hearts, deception and betrayal. It will keep you entertained for hours, and will satisfy all ages. Recommended for the permanent library of all fantasy readers.”

--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

Books by Morgan Rice

THE INVASION CHRONICLES

TRANSMISSION (Book #1)

ARRIVAL (Book #2)

THE WAY OF STEEL

ONLY THE WORTHY (Book #1)

A THRONE FOR SISTERS

A THRONE FOR SISTERS (Book #1)

A COURT FOR THIEVES (Book #2)

A SONG FOR ORPHANS (Book #3)

A DIRGE FOR PRINCES (Book #4)

A JEWEL FOR ROYALS (BOOK #5)

A KISS FOR QUEENS (BOOK #6)

A CROWN FOR ASSASSINS (Book #7)

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THE WEIGHT OF HONOR (Book #3)
A FORGE OF VALOR (Book #4)
A REALM OF SHADOWS (Book #5)
NIGHT OF THE BOLD (Book #6)

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A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)

A FATE OF DRAGONS (Book #3)
A CRY OF HONOR (Book #4)
A VOW OF GLORY (Book #5)
A CHARGE OF VALOR (Book #6)
A RITE OF SWORDS (Book #7)
A GRANT OF ARMS (Book #8)
A SKY OF SPELLS (Book #9)
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ARENA THREE (Book #3)

VAMPIRE, FALLEN

BEFORE DAWN (Book #1)

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TURNED (Book #1)

LOVED (Book #2)

BETRAYED (Book #3)

DESTINED (Book #4)

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VOWED (Book #7)

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CHAPTER ONE

Kevin was pretty sure you shouldn't be told you were dying when you were thirteen. There probably wasn't a good time to be told it, to be fair, but definitely not when you were thirteen.

"Kevin," Dr. Markham said, leaning forward in his chair, "do you understand what I'm saying to you? Do you have any questions? Do *you*, Ms. McKenzie?"

Kevin looked over to his mom, hoping she would have more of an idea what to say next than he did. Hoping that maybe he'd misheard all of it, and she would explain. She was short and slender, with the tough look of someone who had worked hard to raise her son alone in Walnut Creek, California. Kevin was already taller than she was, and once, just once, she'd said that he looked just like his father.

Right now, she looked as though she was trying to hold back tears.

"Are you sure this isn't a mistake?" she asked. "We only came in to the doctor's because of the things Kevin was seeing."

The things he was seeing. That was such a gentle way to put it, as if even talking about all of it might make it worse, or bring more of it. When Kevin had first told his mother about it, she'd stared at him and then told him he should ignore it. Finally, when he fainted, he'd woken up to find that he had an appointment with the family doctor.

They'd quickly gone from the doctor's office to the hospital for tests, and then to Dr. Markham's office, which was white-walled and filled with mementos of what seemed like trips to every corner of the planet. When Kevin had first stepped in there, he'd felt as though it was an attempt to make a cold, clinical space seem homey. Now he thought maybe Dr. Markham liked to be reminded that there was life that didn't include telling people they were dying.

"Hallucinations can be a factor when it comes to diseases like this," Dr. Markham said, in a careful tone.

Hallucinations didn't seem like the right way to put it, to Kevin. That made it sound as though they were unreal, ghostly things, but the things he saw seemed to fill the world when they came. Images of landscapes he hadn't seen, hints of horizons.

And, of course, the numbers.

"23h 06m 29.283s, $-05^{\circ} 02' 28.59$," he said. "It must mean something. It has to."

Dr. Markham shook his head. "I'm sure it must feel that way, Kevin. I'm sure that you must want it all to mean something, but right now, I need you to understand what is happening to you."

That had been part of why Kevin had told his mom about it in the first place. It had taken him weeks to convince her that he wasn't joking, or playing some game. She'd been sure that he wasn't serious at first. When he'd started to have the headaches, she'd taken it more seriously, letting him stay home from school for the day when the pain was paralyzing. When he'd collapsed

the first time, she'd rushed him to the doctor.

"What is happening to me?" Kevin asked. The strange thing was how calm he felt—well, not calm. Maybe more kind of numb. Numb was probably the right word for it. His mom looked as though she was on the verge of falling apart, but for Kevin, all of it seemed far away, still waiting to rush in.

"You have one of a group of degenerative brain disorders known as leukodystrophies," Dr. Markham said. "Here, I'll write it down if you like."

"But I've never heard of that before," Kevin's mom said, in the tone of someone for whom that meant it couldn't be real. He could see the tears she was trying to fight back. "How can my son have something I've never even heard of?"

Seeing his mom like that was probably the hardest part of it for Kevin. She'd always been so strong. He'd never had a problem she hadn't been able to solve. He suspected that was what she was thinking too.

"It's a very rare illness, Ms. McKenzie," Dr. Markham said. "Or rather, a collection of illnesses, each of which presents differently. There are different forms, each one caused by a genetic abnormality that affects the white matter, what we call the myelin sheath, of the brain. There are usually only a few hundred sufferers of each of these illnesses at any one time."

"If you know what causes them, can't you do something?" Kevin's mother asked. "Isn't there some gene therapy or something?"

Kevin had seen his mom on the Internet. Now, he guessed he knew what she'd been looking at. She hadn't said anything, but maybe she'd been hoping she was wrong. Maybe she'd been hoping there was something she'd missed.

"There are therapies available for some forms of leukodystrophy," Dr. Markham said. He shook his head. "And we have hope that in the future, they might help, but Kevin's isn't one where there is any established treatment. The sad truth is, the rarer the disease, the less research has been done on it, because the less funding there is for that research."

"There must be something," his mother said. "Some experimental option, some study..."

Kevin reached out to put his hand over his mother's. It was strange that they were already almost the same size.

"It's okay, Mom," he said, trying to sound as if he had everything under control.

"No, it isn't." His mom looked as though she might burst apart with the shock of it all. "If there's nothing, then what do we do next?"

"We use the treatments that are available to give Kevin the best quality of life we can," Dr. Markham said. "For the time that he still has left. I'm sorry, I wish I had better news."

Kevin watched his mother forcing herself to be brave, piecing herself back together a little at a time. He could tell that she was doing it for his sake, and almost felt guilty that she had to.

"What does that mean?" she asked. "What exactly are you

proposing to do for Kevin?”

“I’m going to prescribe tablets to help manage the pain,” Dr. Markham said, “and to reduce the chances of seizures. Kevin, I know that hallucinations can be distressing, so I’d like you to talk to someone about techniques for managing them, and your responses to them.”

“You want Kevin to see a psychologist?” his mother asked.

“Linda Yalestrom is an expert in helping people, particularly young people, to cope with the symptoms that rare illnesses like this can cause,” Dr. Markham said. “I strongly recommend that you take Kevin to see her, given the things he has been seeing.”

“They’re not just hallucinations,” Kevin insisted. He was sure that they were more than that.

“I’m sure it must feel that way,” Dr. Markham said. “Dr. Yalestrom might be able to help.”

“Whatever... whatever you think is best,” Kevin’s mother said. Kevin could see that she wanted nothing other than to get out of there. There was something he needed to know, though. Something obvious that he felt he should probably ask, even if he didn’t really want to hear the answer.

“How long?” he asked. “I mean, how long until I... die?”

That was still a hard word to believe. Kevin found himself hoping it would all turn out to be a mistake, even now, but he knew that it wasn’t. It couldn’t be.

“It’s impossible to say for certain,” Dr. Markham said. “The rate of progression for leukodystrophies can vary, while each

case is different.”

“How long?” Kevin repeated.

“Perhaps six months.” Dr. Markham spread his hands. “I’m sorry, Kevin. I can’t be more exact than that.”

Kevin and his mother went home, his mom driving with the kind of care that came when someone knew they would probably fall apart if they didn’t concentrate completely. For most of the journey out toward the suburbs, they were silent. Kevin wasn’t sure what he could say.

His mother spoke first. “We’ll find something,” she said. “We’ll find another doctor, get a second opinion. We’ll try whatever treatment they can think of.”

“You can’t afford that,” Kevin said. His mother worked hard at her job at a marketing agency, but their house was a small one, and Kevin knew there wasn’t a lot of money for extra things. He tried not to ask for much, because it only made his mother feel sad when she couldn’t give it to him. He hated seeing his mother like that, which only made this harder.

“Do you think any of it matters to me?” his mother demanded. Kevin could see the tears pouring from her eyes now. “You’re my son, and you’re dying, and... I can’t... I can’t save you.”

“You don’t have to save me,” Kevin said, although he wished that someone would right then. He wished that someone would

come along and just make all this stop.

It was starting to seep in what this might mean. What it *would* mean, in less time than the end of the school year. He would be dead. Gone. Anything he'd looked forward to would be cut short, anything he hoped for the future would be stopped by the fact that there would *be* no future.

Kevin wasn't sure how he felt about that. Sad, yes, because it was the kind of news you were supposed to feel sad about, and because he didn't want to die. Angry, because what he wanted didn't appear to matter when it came to this. Confused, because he wasn't sure why it should be him, when there were billions of other people in the world.

Compared to his mother, though, he was calm. She was shaking as she drove, and Kevin was so worried they might crash that he sighed with relief when they pulled onto the street where their house stood. It was one of the smallest houses on the block, old and patched with repairs.

"It will be all right," his mother said. She didn't sound as though she believed it. She took hold of Kevin's arm as they made their way into the house, but it felt more like Kevin was supporting her.

"It will be," Kevin replied, because he suspected that his mother needed to hear it even more than he did. It might have helped if it were true.

They went inside, and it felt almost wrong to do anything after that, as though doing normal things would have been a kind of

betrayal, after the news Dr. Markham had given them. Kevin put a frozen pizza in the oven, while in the background, he could hear his mother sobbing on the sofa. He started to go to comfort her, but two things stopped him. The first was the thought that his mother probably wouldn't want him to. She had always been the strong one, the one looking after him even after his father left when he was just a baby.

The second was the vision.

He saw a landscape beneath a sky that seemed more purple than blue, the trees beneath oddly shaped, with fronds that reminded Kevin of the palm trees on the beaches, but trunks that twisted in ways palm trees never did. The sky looked as though the sun was setting, but the sun looked wrong somehow. Kevin couldn't work out how, because he hadn't spent time looking at the sun, but he knew it wasn't the same.

In one corner of his mind, numbers pulsed, over and over.

He was walking across a space covered with reddish sand now, and could feel his toes sinking into it. There were creatures there, small and lizard-like, that scuttled away when he came too close to them. He looked around...

...and the world dissolved into flames.

Kevin woke up on the kitchen floor, the oven's timer beeping to tell him the pizza was ready, the smell of burning food dragging him off the floor and over to the oven before his mother had to do it. He didn't want her to see him like this, didn't want to give her even more reasons to worry.

He took the pizza out, cut it into slices, and took them into the living room. His mother was on the couch, and although she'd stopped crying, her eyes were red. Kevin put the pizza down on the coffee table, sitting beside her and switching on the TV so they could at least *pretend* that things were normal.

“You shouldn't have to do this,” his mother said, and Kevin didn't know if she meant the pizza or everything else. Right then, it didn't matter.

Still the numbers hung in his head: 23h 06m 29.283s, $-05^{\circ} 02' 28.59$.

CHAPTER TWO

Kevin wasn't sure he'd ever felt as tired as he did when he and his mother drove into the school's parking lot. The plan was to try to keep going as normal, but he felt as if he might fall asleep at any moment. *That* was a long way from normal.

That was probably because of the treatments. There had been a lot of treatments in the last few days. His mother had found more doctors, and each one had a different plan for trying to at least slow things down. That was what they said, every time, the words making it clear that even that would be something special, and that actually stopping things was something they couldn't hope for.

"Have a good day at school, honey," his mother said. There was something false about the brightness of it, a brittle edge that said just how hard she was having to try in order to produce a smile. Kevin knew she was making an effort for him, and he did his best, too.

"I'll try, Mom," he assured her, and he could hear that his own voice didn't sound natural either. It was as if both of them were playing roles because they were afraid of the truth underneath them. Kevin played his because he didn't want his mother crying again.

How many times had she cried now? How many days had it been since they'd been to see Dr. Markham the first time? Kevin

had lost track. There had been a day or two off school sick, before it had become obvious that neither of them wanted that. Then there had been this: school interspersed with tests and attempts at therapies. There had been injections and blood tests, supplements because his mom had read online that they might help, and health food that was a long way from pizza.

“I just want things to be as normal as possible,” his mother said. Neither of them mentioned that on a normal day, Kevin would have taken the bus to school, and they wouldn’t have had to worry about what was normal or not.

Or that on a normal day, he wouldn’t be hiding what was wrong with him, or feeling grateful that his closest friend went to a different school after the last time he and his mom had moved, so that she wouldn’t have to see any of this. He hadn’t called Luna in days now, and the messages were building up on his phone. Kevin ignored them, because he couldn’t think of how to answer them.

Kevin could feel the eyes on him from the moment he went inside the school. The rumors had been going around now, even if no one knew for sure what was wrong with him. He could see a teacher ahead, Mr. Williams, and on a normal day Kevin would have been able to walk past him without even attracting a moment of attention. He wasn’t one of the kids the teachers kept a close eye on because they were always doing something wrong. Now, the teacher stopped him, looking him up and down as if expecting signs that he might die at any moment.

“How are you feeling, Kevin?” he asked. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Mr. Williams,” Kevin assured him. It was easier to be fine than to try to explain the truth: how he was worried about his mother, and he was tired all the time from the attempts at treatment, how he was scared about what was going to happen next.

How the numbers were still going around in his head.

23h 06m 29.283s, $-05^{\circ} 02' 28.59$. They were there at the back of his mind, squatting like a toad that wouldn’t move, impossible to forget, impossible to ignore, no matter how much Kevin tried to follow his mother’s instructions to forget them.

“Well, just let us know if you need anything,” the teacher said.

Kevin still wasn’t sure how to reply to that. It was one of those kind things that people said that was kind of useless at the same time. The one thing he needed was the thing they couldn’t give him: to undo all of this; for things to be normal again. Teachers knew a lot of things, but not that.

Still, he did his best to pretend to be normal all the way through his math class, and through most of history after that. Ms. Kapinski was telling them about some early European history, which Kevin wasn’t sure was actually on any kind of test, but which had apparently been what she majored in at college, and so seemed to show up more than it should.

“Did you know that most of the Roman remains found in Northern Europe aren’t actually Roman?” she said. Kevin generally liked Ms. Kapinski’s classes, because she wasn’t afraid

to wander off the point and tell them about whatever fragments of the past entered her head. It was a reminder of just how much there had been in the world before any of them.

“So they’re fake?” Francis de Longe asked. Ordinarily, Kevin might have been the one asking it, but he was enjoying the chance to be quiet, almost invisible.

“Not exactly,” Ms. Kapinski said. “When I say they aren’t Roman, I mean that they’re remains left behind by people who had never been near what is now Italy. They were the local populations, but as the Romans advanced, as they conquered, the local people realized that the best way to do well was to fit in with Roman ways. The way they dressed, the buildings they lived in, the language they spoke, they changed everything to make it clear which side they were on, and because it gave them a better chance of good positions in the new order.” She smiled. “Then, when there were rebellions against Rome, one of the keys to being part of it was *not* using those symbols.”

Kevin tried to imagine that: the same people in a place shifting who they were as the political tide changed, their whole being changing depending on who ruled. He thought it might be a bit like being in one of the popular crowds at school, trying to wear the right clothes and say the right things. Even so, it was hard to imagine, and not just because images of impossible landscapes continued to filter through at the back of his mind.

That was probably the only good thing about what was wrong with him: the symptoms were invisible. It was also the scary thing

in a way. There was this thing killing him, and if people didn't know about it already, they would never find out. He could just sit there and no one would ever—

Kevin felt the vision coming, rising up through him like a kind of pressure building through his body. There was the rush of dizziness, the feeling of the world swimming away as he connected with something... else. He started to stand to ask if he could be excused, but by then, it was already too late. He felt his legs giving way and he collapsed.

He was looking at the same landscapes he remembered from before, the sky the wrong shade, the trees too twisted. He was watching the fire sweep through it, blinding and bright, seeming to come from everywhere at once. He'd seen all of that before. Now, though, there was a new element: a faint pulse that seemed to repeat at regular intervals, precise as a ticking clock.

Some part of Kevin knew a clock was what it had to be, just as he knew by instinct that it was counting down to something, not just marking the time. The pulses had the sense of getting subtly more intense, as if building up to some far-off crescendo. There was a word in a language he shouldn't have understood, but he *did* understand it.

“Wait.”

Kevin wanted to ask what he was supposed to be waiting for, or how long, or why. He didn't, though, partly because he wasn't sure who he was supposed to ask, and partly because almost as suddenly as the moment had come, it passed, leaving Kevin

rising up from darkness to find himself lying on the floor of the classroom, Ms. Kapinski standing over him.

“Just lie still a moment, Kevin,” she said. “I’ve sent for the school medic. Hal will be here in a minute.”

Kevin sat up in spite of her instructions, because he’d come to know what this felt like by now.

“I’m fine,” he assured her.

“I think we should let Hal be the judge of that.”

Hal was a big, round former paramedic who served to make sure that the students of St. Brendan’s School came through whatever medical emergencies they suffered. Sometimes, Kevin suspected that they did it because the thought of the medic’s idea of care made them ignore the worst of injuries.

“I saw things,” Kevin managed. “There was a planet, and a burning sun, and a kind of message... like a countdown.”

In the movies, someone would have insisted on contacting somebody important. They would have recognized the message for what it was. There would have been meetings, and investigations. Someone would have *done* something about it. Outside of the movies, Kevin was just a thirteen-year-old boy, and Ms. Kapinski looked at him with a mixture of pity and mild bewilderment.

“Well, I’m sure it’s nothing,” she said. “It’s probably normal to see all kinds of things if you’re having this sort of... episode.”

Around them, Kevin could hear the muttering from the others in his class. None of it made him feel better.

“...just fell down and started twitching...”

“...I heard he was sick, I hope you can't catch it...”

“...Kevin thinks he sees planets...”

The last one was the one that hurt. It made it sound as though he were going crazy. Kevin wasn't going crazy. At least, he didn't think he was.

Despite his best attempts to insist that he was fine, Kevin still had to go with Hal when the medic came. Had to sit in the medic's office while he shone lights in Kevin's eyes and asked questions about a condition so rare he obviously had no more clue than Kevin did what was going on.

“The principal wanted to see us once I was sure you were okay,” he said. “Do you feel up to walking to his office, or should we ask him to come here?”

“I can walk,” Kevin said. “I'm fine.”

“If you say so,” Hal said.

They made their way to the principal's office, and Kevin almost wasn't surprised to find that his mother was there. Of course they would have called her in for a medical emergency, of course she would be there if he collapsed, but that wasn't good, not when she was supposed to be at work.

“Kevin, are you okay?” his mother asked as soon as he arrived, turning to him and drawing him into a hug. “What happened?”

“I'm fine, Mom,” Kevin said.

“Ms. McKenzie, I'm sure we wouldn't have called you in if it

weren't serious," the principal said. "Kevin collapsed."

"I'm fine now," Kevin insisted.

It didn't seem to make any difference how many times he said that, though.

"Plus," the principal said, "it seems that he was pretty confused when he came around. He was talking about... well, other planets."

"Planets," Kevin's mother repeated. Her voice was flat when she said that.

"Ms. Kapinski says it disrupted her class quite a bit," the principal said. He sighed. "I'm wondering if maybe Kevin might be better off staying at home for a while."

He said it without looking at Kevin. There was a decision being made there, and although Kevin was at the heart of it, it was clear he didn't actually get a say.

"I don't want to miss school," Kevin said, looking at his mother. Surely she wouldn't want him to either.

"I think what we have to ask," the principal said, "is if, at this point, school is really the best thing Kevin can be doing with the time he has."

It was probably intended to be a kind way of putting it, but all it did was remind Kevin of what the doctor had said. Six months to live. It didn't seem like enough time for anything, let alone to have a life in. Six months' worth of seconds, each one ticking away in a steady beat that matched the countdown in his head.

"You're saying that there's no point to my son being in school

because he'll be dead soon anyway?" his mother snapped back. "Is that what you're saying?"

"No, of course not," the principal said, hurriedly, raising his hands to placate her.

"That's what it sounds like you're saying," Kevin's mother said. "It sounds as though you're freaked out by my son's illness as much as the kids here."

"I'm saying that it's going to be hard to teach Kevin as this gets worse," the principal said. "We'll try, but... don't you want to make the most of the time you have left?"

He said that in a gentle tone that still managed to cut right to Kevin's heart. He was saying exactly what his mother had thought, just in gentler words. The worst part was that he was right. Kevin wasn't going to live long enough to go to college, or get a job, or do *anything* that he might need school to prepare for, so why bother being there.

"It's okay, Mom," he said, reaching out to touch her arm.

That seemed to be enough of an argument to convince his mother, and just that told Kevin how serious this all was. On any other occasion, he would have expected her to fight. Now it seemed that the fight had been sucked out of her.

They went out to the car in silence. Kevin looked back at the school. The thought hit him that he probably wouldn't be coming back. He hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye.

"I'm sorry they called you at work," Kevin said as they sat in

the car. He could feel the tension there. His mom didn't turn the engine on, just sat.

"It's not that," she said. "It's just... it was getting easy to pretend that nothing was wrong." She sounded so sad then, so deeply hurt. Kevin had gotten used to the expression that meant she was trying to keep from crying. She wasn't succeeding.

"Are you okay, Kevin?" she asked, even though by then, he was the one holding onto her, as tightly as he could.

"I'm... I wish I didn't have to leave school," Kevin said. He'd never thought he would hear himself say that. He'd never thought that *anyone* would say that.

"We could go back in," his mother said. "I could tell the principal that I'm going to bring you back here tomorrow, and every day after that, until..."

She broke off.

"Until it gets too bad," Kevin said. He screwed his eyes tightly shut. "I think maybe it's already too bad, Mom."

He heard her hit the dashboard, the dull thud echoing around the car.

"I know," she said. "I know and I hate it. I hate this *disease* that's taking my little boy from me."

She cried again for a little while. In spite of his attempts to stay strong, Kevin did too. It seemed to take a long time before his mother was calm enough to say anything else.

"They said you saw... planets, Kevin?" she asked.

"I saw it," Kevin said. How could he explain what it was like?

How real it was?

His mother looked over, and now Kevin had the sense of her struggling for the right words to say. Struggling to be comforting and firm and calm, all at the same time. “You get that this isn’t real, right, honey? It’s just... it’s just the disease.”

Kevin knew that he ought to understand it, but...

“It doesn’t feel like that,” Kevin said.

“I know it doesn’t,” his mother said. “And I hate that, because it’s just a reminder that my little boy is slipping away. All of this, I wish I could make it go away.”

Kevin didn’t know what to say to that. He wished it would go away too.

“It *feels* real,” Kevin said, even so.

His mother was quiet for a long time. When she finally spoke, her voice had the brittle, barely holding it together quality that only arrived since the diagnosis, but now had become far too familiar.

“Maybe... maybe it’s time we took you to see that psychologist.”

CHAPTER THREE

Dr. Linda Yalestrom's office wasn't anywhere near as medical looking as all the others Kevin had been in recently. It was her home, for one thing, in Berkeley, with the university close enough that it seemed to back up her credentials as surely as the certificates that were neatly framed on the wall.

The rest of it looked like the kind of home office Kevin expected from TV, with soft furnishings obviously relegated here after some previous move, a desk where clutter had crept in from the rest of the house, and a few potted plants that seemed to be biding their time, ready to take over.

Kevin found himself liking Dr. Yalestrom. She was a short, dark-haired woman in her fifties, whose clothes were brightly patterned and about as far from medical scrubs as it was possible to get. Kevin suspected that might be the point, if she spent a lot of time working with people who had received the worst news possible from doctors already.

"Come sit down, Kevin," she said with a smile, gesturing to a broad red couch that was well worn with years of people sitting on it. "Ms. McKenzie, why don't you give us a while? I want Kevin to feel that he can say anything he needs to say. My assistant will get you some coffee."

His mother nodded. "I'll be right outside."

Kevin went to sit on the couch, which turned out to be exactly

as comfortable as it appeared. He looked around the room at pictures of fishing trips and vacations. It took him a while to realize something important.

“You’re not in any of the photos in here,” he said.

Dr. Yalstrom smiled at that. “Most of my clients never notice. The truth is, a lot of these are places I always wanted to go, or places I heard were interesting. I put them out because young men like you spend a lot of time staring around the room, doing anything but talk to me, and I figure you should at least have something to look at.”

It seemed a bit like cheating to Kevin.

“If you work with people who are dying a lot,” he said, “why do you have pictures of places you always wanted to go? Why put it off, when you’ve seen...”

“When I’ve seen how quickly it can all end?” Dr. Yalstrom asked, gently.

Kevin nodded.

“Maybe because of the wonderful human ability to know that and still procrastinate. Or maybe I *have* been to some of these places, and the reason I’m not in the pictures is just that I think one of me staring down at people is quite enough.”

Kevin wasn’t sure if those were good reasons or not. They didn’t seem like enough, somehow.

“Where would you go, Kevin?” Dr. Yalstrom asked. “Where would you go if you could go anywhere?”

“I don’t know,” he replied.

“Well, think about it. You don’t have to let me know right away.”

Kevin shook his head. It was strange, talking to an adult this way. Generally, when you were thirteen, conversations came down to questions or instructions. With the possible exception of his mom, who was at work a lot of the time anyway, adults weren’t really interested in what someone his age had to say.

“I don’t know,” he repeated. “I mean, I never really thought I’d get to go anywhere.” He tried to think about places he might like to go, but it was hard to come up with anywhere, especially now that he only had a few months to do it. “I feel as though, wherever I think of, what’s the point? I’ll be dead pretty soon.”

“What do you think the point is?” Dr. Yalestrom asked.

Kevin did his best to think of a reason. “I guess... because pretty soon is not the same thing as now?”

The psychologist nodded. “I think that’s a good way to put it. So, is there anything that you would like to do in the pretty soon, Kevin?”

Kevin thought about it. “I guess... I guess I should tell Luna what’s happening.”

“And who’s Luna?”

“She’s my friend,” Kevin said. “We don’t go to the same school anymore, so she hasn’t seen me collapse or anything, and I haven’t called in a few days, but...”

“But you should tell her,” Dr. Yalestrom said. “It isn’t healthy to push away your friends when things get bad, Kevin. Not even

to protect them.”

Kevin swallowed back a denial, because it *was* kind of what he was doing. He didn't want to inflict this on Luna, didn't want to hurt her with the news of what was going to happen. It was part of the reason he hadn't called her in so long.

“What else?” Dr. Yalestrom said. “Let's try places again. If you could go anywhere, where would you go?”

Kevin tried to pick among all the places in the room, but the truth was that there was only one landscape that kept springing into his head, with colors no normal camera could capture.

“It would sound stupid,” he said.

“There's nothing wrong with sounding stupid,” Dr. Yalestrom assured him. “I'll tell you a secret. People often think that everyone else but them is special. They think that other people must be cleverer, or braver, or better, because only they can see the parts of themselves that aren't those things. They worry that everyone else says the right thing, and they sound stupid. It's not true though.”

Even so, Kevin sat there for several seconds, examining the upholstery of the couch in detail. “I... I see places. One place. I guess it's the reason that I had to come here.”

Dr. Yalestrom smiled. “You're here because an illness like yours can create a lot of odd effects, Kevin. I'm here to help you cope with them, without them dominating your life. Would you like to tell me more about the things you see?”

Again, Kevin made a detailed examination of the couch,

learning its topography, picking at a tiny speck of lint sticking up from the rest. Dr. Yalestrom was silent while he did it; the kind of silence that felt as though it was sucking words up out of him, giving them a space to fall into.

“I see a place where nothing is quite the same as here. The colors are wrong, the animals and the plants are different,” Kevin said. “I see it destroyed... at least, I think I do. There’s fire and heat, a bright flash. There’s a set of numbers. And there’s something that feels like a countdown.”

“Why does it feel like a countdown?” Dr. Yalestrom asked.

Kevin shrugged. “I’m not sure. Because the pulses are getting closer together, I guess?”

The psychologist nodded, then went over to her desk. She came back with paper and pencils.

“How are you at art?” she asked. “No, don’t answer that. It doesn’t matter if this is a great work of art or not. I just want you to try to draw what you see, so that I can get a sense of what it’s like. Don’t pay too much attention to it, just draw. Can you do that for me, Kevin?”

Kevin shrugged. “I’ll try.”

He took the pencils and paper, trying to bring the landscape that he’d seen to mind, trying to remember every detail of it. It was hard to do, because although the numbers stayed in his head, it felt as though he had to dive down deep into himself to pull up the images. They were below the surface, and to get at them, Kevin had to pull back into himself, concentrating

on nothing else, letting the pencil flow over the paper almost automatically...

“Okay, Kevin,” she said, taking the pad away before Kevin could get a good look at what he’d drawn. “Let’s see what you’ve...”

He saw the look of shock that crossed her face, so brief that it almost wasn’t there. It *was* there though, and Kevin had to wonder what it would take to shock someone who heard stories about people dying every day.

“What is it?” Kevin asked. “What did I draw?”

“You don’t know?” Dr. Yalstrom asked.

“I was trying not to think too much,” Kevin said. “Did I do something wrong?”

Dr. Yalstrom shook her head. “No, Kevin, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

She held out Kevin’s drawing. “Would you like to take a look at what you produced? Perhaps it will help you to understand things.”

She held it out folded, in just the tips of her fingers, as if she didn’t want to touch it more than necessary. That made Kevin worry just a little. What could he have drawn that would make an adult react like that? He took it, unfolding it.

A drawing of a spaceship sat there, only “drawing” probably wasn’t the right word for it. This was more like a blueprint, complete in every detail, which seemed impossible in the time Kevin had to draw. He’d never even seen this before, but here

it was, on the page, looking giant and flat, like a city perched on a disk. There were smaller disks around it, like worker bees around a queen.

The detail meant that there was something neat, almost clinical, about the way it was drawn, but there was more to it than that. There was something about the geometry of it that was just... wrong, somehow, seeming to have depths and angles to it that shouldn't have been possible to capture just in a sketch like this.

"But this..." Kevin didn't know what to say. Didn't this prove what was happening? Did anyone think he could have just made something like this up?

Apparently, Dr. Yalestrom wasn't convinced though. She took back the picture, folding it carefully as though she didn't want to have to look at it. Kevin suspected that the strangeness of it was too much for her.

"I think it's important that we talk about the things you're seeing," she said. "Do you think those things are real?"

Kevin hesitated. "I'm... not sure. They *feel* real, but a lot of people now have told me that they can't be."

"It makes sense," Dr. Yalestrom said. "What you're feeling is very common."

"It is?" What he was experiencing didn't feel very common at all. "I thought that my illness was rare."

Dr. Yalestrom moved over to her desk, placing Kevin's drawing in a file. She picked up a tablet and started to make

notes. “Is it important that other people shouldn’t experience what you’re experiencing, Kevin?”

“No, it’s not that,” Kevin said. “It was just that Dr. Markham said that this disease only affects a few people.”

“That’s true,” Dr. Yalstrom agreed. “But I see a lot of people who experience hallucinations of some kind for other reasons.”

“You think I’m going crazy,” Kevin guessed. Everyone else seemed to. Even his mom, presumably, since she’d been the one to bring him here after he’d started talking about them. He didn’t *feel* like he was going crazy, though.

“That’s not a word I like to use here,” Dr. Yalstrom said. “I think that often, the behavior that we label crazy is there for a good reason. It’s just that often, those reasons only make sense to the person concerned. People will do things to protect themselves from situations that are too difficult to handle, which seem to be... unusual.”

“You think that’s what I’m doing with these visions?” Kevin asked. He shook his head. “They’re real. I’m not making them up.”

“Can I tell you what I think, Kevin? I think a part of you might be attached to these ‘visions’ because it’s helping you to think that your illness might be happening for some kind of greater good. I think that maybe these ‘visions’ are actually you trying to make sense of your illness. The imagery in them... there’s a strange place that isn’t like the normal world. Could that represent the way things have changed?”

“I guess,” Kevin said. He wasn’t convinced. The things he’d seen weren’t about some world where he didn’t have his disease. They were about a place he didn’t understand at all.

“Then you have the sense of impending doom with fire and light,” Dr. Yalestrom said. “The sense of things coming to an end. You even have a countdown, complete with numbers.”

The numbers weren’t a part of the countdown; that was just the slow pulsing, growing faster bit by bit. Kevin suspected that he wasn’t going to convince her of that now. When adults had decided what the truth of something was, he wasn’t going to be able to change their minds.

“So what can I do?” Kevin asked. “If you think they aren’t real, shouldn’t I want to get rid of them?”

“Do *you* want to get rid of them?” Dr. Yalestrom asked.

Kevin thought about that. “I don’t know. I think they might be important, but I didn’t ask for them.”

“The same way that you didn’t ask to be diagnosed with a degenerative brain disease,” Dr. Yalestrom said. “Maybe those two things are linked, Kevin.”

Kevin had already been thinking that his visions were linked to the disease in some way. That maybe it had changed his brain enough to be receptive to the visions. He didn’t think that was what the psychiatrist meant, though.

“So what can I do?” Kevin asked again.

“There are things you can do, not to make them go away, but at least to be able to cope.”

“Such as?” Kevin asked. He had to admit to a moment of hope at the thought. He didn’t want all of this going around and around in his head. He hadn’t asked to be the one receiving messages that no one else understood, and that just made him look crazy when he spoke about them.

“You can try to find things to distract yourself from the hallucinations when they come,” Dr. Yalestrom said. “You can try reminding yourself that it isn’t real. If you’re in doubt, find ways to check. Maybe ask someone else if they’re seeing the same thing. Remember, it’s okay to see whatever you see, but how you react to it is up to you.”

Kevin guessed he could remember all that. Even so, it did nothing to quiet the faint pulse of the countdown, thrumming in the background, getting faster a little at a time.

“And I think you need to tell the people who don’t know,” Dr. Yalestrom said. “It isn’t fair to them to keep them in the dark about this.”

She was right.

And there was one person he needed to let know more than anyone else.

Luna.

CHAPTER FOUR

“So,” Luna said, as she and Kevin made their way along one of the paths of the Lafayette Reservoir Recreation Area, dodging around the tourists and the families enjoying their day out, “why have you been avoiding me?”

Trust Luna to get straight to the point. It was one of the things Kevin liked about her. Not that he *liked* her liked her. People always seemed to assume that. They thought because she was pretty, and blonde, and probably cheerleader material if she didn't think all that was stupid, that of *course* they would be boyfriend and girlfriend. They just assumed that it was how the world worked.

They weren't together. Luna was his *best* friend. The person he spent the most time with, outside of school. Probably the one person in the world he could talk to about absolutely anything.

Except, it turned out, this.

“I haven't been...” Kevin trailed off in the face of Luna's stare. She was good at stares. Kevin suspected that she probably practiced. He'd seen everyone from bullies to rude store owners back down rather than have her stare at them any longer. Faced with that stare, it was impossible to lie to her. “All right, I have, but it's hard, Luna. I have something... well, something I don't know how to tell you.”

“Oh, don't be stupid,” Luna said. She found an abandoned

soda can and kicked it down the path, flicking it from foot to foot with the kind of skill that came from doing it far too often. “I mean, how bad can it be? Are you moving away? Are you changing schools again?”

Maybe she caught something in his expression, because she fell silent for a few seconds. There was something fragile about that silence, as if both of them were tiptoeing to avoid breaking it. Even so, they had to. They couldn’t just walk like this forever.

“Something bad then?” she said, sending the can into a trash container with a final flick of her foot.

Kevin nodded. Bad was one word for it.

“How bad?”

“Bad,” he said. “The reservoir?”

The reservoir was the place they both went when they wanted to sit down and talk about things. They’d talked about Billy Hames liking Luna when they were nine, and about Kevin’s cat, Tiger, dying when they were ten. None of it seemed like a good preparation for this. He wasn’t a cat.

They made their way down to the edge of the water, looking out at the trees on the far side, the people with their canoes and their paddle boats on the reservoir. Compared to some of the places they went, this was nice. People assumed Kevin was the kid from the wrong side of town leading Luna astray, but she was the one with the knack for squeezing past fences and clambering up derelict buildings, leaving Kevin to follow if he could. Here, there was none of that, just the water and the trees.

“What is it?” Luna asked. She kicked off her shoes and dangled her feet in the water. Kevin didn’t feel like doing the same. Right then, he wanted to run, to hide. Anything to keep from telling her the truth. It felt as though, the longer he could keep from telling Luna, the longer it wasn’t really real.

“Kevin?” Luna said. “You’re worrying me now. Look, if you don’t tell me what it is, then I’m going to call your mom and find out that way.”

“No, don’t do that,” Kevin said quickly. “I’m not sure... Mom isn’t handling this well.”

Luna was looking more worried by the moment. “What’s wrong? Is she sick? Are *you* sick?”

Kevin nodded at the last one. “I’m sick,” he said. He put his hand on Luna’s shoulder. “I have something called leukodystrophy. I’m dying, Luna.”

He knew he’d said it too quickly. Something like that, there should be a whole big explanation, a proper build-up, but honestly, that was the part of it that mattered.

She stared at him, shaking her head in obvious disbelief. “No, you can’t be, that’s...”

She hugged him then, tight enough that Kevin could barely breathe.

“Tell me it’s a joke. Tell me it’s not real.”

“I wish it weren’t,” Kevin said. He wished that more than anything right then.

Luna pulled back, and Kevin could see her screwing her

features tight with the effort of not crying. Normally, Luna was good at not crying about things. Now, though, he could see it taking everything she had.

“This... how long?” she asked.

“They said maybe six months,” Kevin said.

“And that was *days* ago, so it’s less now,” Luna shot back. “And you’ve been having to cope with it on your own, and...” She faded into silence as the sheer enormity of it obviously hit her.

Kevin could see her looking out at the people on the reservoir, watching them with their small boats and their quick forays into the water. They seemed so happy there. She stared at them as if they were the part she couldn’t believe, not the illness.

“It doesn’t seem fair,” she said. “All these people, just going on as if the world is the same, going about having fun when you’re *dying*.”

Kevin smiled sadly. “What are we supposed to do? Tell them all to stop having fun?”

He realized the danger in saying that slightly too late as Luna leapt to her feet, cupped her hands to her mouth, and yelled at the top of her voice.

“Hey, all of you, you have to stop! My friend is dying, and I demand that you stop having fun at once!”

A couple of people looked around, but no one stopped. Kevin suspected that hadn’t been the point. Luna stood there for several seconds, and this time, he was the one to hug her, holding her while she cried. That was enough of a rarity that the sheer shock

value of it held Kevin there. Luna shouting at people, behaving in ways that they would never expect from someone like her, was normal. Luna breaking down wasn't.

"Feel better?" he asked after a while.

She shook her head. "Not really. What about you?"

"Well, it's nice to know that there's someone who would try to stop the world for me," he said. "You know the worst part?"

Luna managed another smile. "Not being able to spell what's killing you?"

Kevin could only return that smile. Trust Luna to know that he needed her to be her usual self, making fun of him.

"I can, I practiced. The worst part is that all this means no one believes me when I tell them that I've been seeing things. They think it's all just the illness."

Luna cocked her head to one side. "What kind of things?"

Kevin explained to her about the strange landscapes he'd been seeing, the fire wiping it clean, the sensation of a countdown.

"That..." Luna began when he was finished. She didn't seem to know how to end though.

"I know, it's crazy, I'm crazy," Kevin said. Even Luna didn't believe him.

"You didn't let me finish," Luna said, drawing in a breath. "That... is *so* cool."

"Cool?" Kevin repeated. It hadn't been the response he expected, even from her. "Everyone else thinks I'm going crazy, or my brain is melting, or something."

“Everyone else is stupid,” Luna declared, although, to be fair, that seemed to be her default setting for life. To her, everyone was stupid until proven otherwise.

“So you believe me?” Kevin said. Even he wasn’t completely sure anymore, after everything people had said to him.

Luna held onto his shoulders, looking him squarely in the eyes. With another girl, Kevin might have thought she was about to kiss him. Not with Luna, though.

“If you tell me that these visions are real, then they’re real. I believe you. And being able to see alien worlds is definitely cool.”

Kevin’s eyes widened a little at that. “What makes you think that it’s an alien world?”

Luna stepped back with a shrug. “What else is it going to be?”

When she asked that, Kevin got the feeling that she was every bit as stunned by all this as he was. She just did a better job of hiding it.

“Maybe...” she guessed, “...maybe all this has changed your brain, so that it has a direct line to this alien place?”

If Luna ever acquired a superpower, it would probably be the ability to leap tall conclusions in a single bound. Kevin liked that about her, especially when it meant that she was the one person who might believe him, but even so, it felt like a lot to decide, so quickly.

“You know how crazy that sounds, right?” he said.

“No crazier than the idea that the world is just going to snatch my friend away for no good reason,” Luna shot back, her fists

clenched in a way that suggested she would happily fight it over the issue. Or maybe just clenched with the effort of not crying again. Luna tended to get angry, or make jokes, or do crazy things rather than be upset. Right then, Kevin couldn't blame her.

He watched her coming down from whatever nearly crying space she was in, winding down from it piece by piece and forcing a smile into the space instead.

“So, terrible disease, cool visions of alien worlds... is there anything else you aren't telling me?”

“Just the numbers,” Kevin said.

Luna looked at him with obvious annoyance. “You get that you weren't supposed to say yes there?”

“I wanted to tell you everything,” Kevin said, although he guessed it was probably a bit late now. “Sorry.”

“Okay,” Luna said. Again, Kevin had the sense of her working to process it all. “Numbers?”

“I see them too,” Kevin said. He repeated them from memory. “23h 06m 29.283s, -05° 02' 28.59.”

“Okay,” Luna said. She pursed her lips. “I wonder what they mean.”

That they might not mean anything seemed not to occur to her. Kevin loved that about her.

She had her phone out. “It's not right for a license plate, and it would be weird for a password. What else?”

Kevin hadn't thought about it, at least not with the kind of directness that Luna seemed to be applying to the problem.

“Maybe like an item number, a serial number?” Kevin suggested.

“But there are hours and minutes there,” Luna said. She seemed utterly caught up in the problem of what it might mean. “What else?”

“Maybe like a delivery time and a location?” Kevin suggested. “Those second parts sound like they might be coordinates.”

“It’s not quite right for a map reference,” Luna said. “Maybe if I just Google it... oh, cool.”

“What?” Kevin asked. One look at Luna’s face said that they’d hit the jackpot.

“When you type that string of numbers into a search engine, you only get results about one thing,” Luna said. She made it sound so certain like that. She turned her phone to show him, the pages set out in a neat row. “The Trappist 1 star system.”

Kevin could feel his excitement building. More than that, he could feel his *hope* building. Hope that this might really mean something, and that it *wasn’t* just his illness, no matter what anyone said. Hope that it might actually be real.

“Why would I see those numbers, though?” he asked.

“Maybe because the Trappist system is supposed to be one of the ones that have a chance of harboring life?” Luna said. “From what it says here, there are several planets there in what we think is a habitable zone.”

She said it as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. The idea of planets that might have life seemed like too much

to be a coincidence when Kevin had *seen* that life. Or seen some strange life, at least.

“You need to talk to someone about this,” Luna declared. “You’re... like, the first proof of extraterrestrial contact, or something. Who were those people looking for aliens, the scientists? I saw a thing about them on TV.”

“SETI?” Kevin said.

“Those are the ones,” Luna said. “Aren’t they based in San Francisco, or San Jose, or something?”

Kevin hadn’t known that, but the more he thought about it, the more the idea tugged at him.

“You have to go, Kevin,” Luna said. “You have to at least talk to them.”

“No,” his mother said, setting her coffee down so firmly it spilled. “No, Kevin, absolutely not!”

“But Mom—”

“I’m not driving you to San Francisco so that you can bother a bunch of nutjobs,” his mother said.

Kevin held out his phone, showing the information about SETI on it. “They aren’t crazy,” he said. “They’re scientists.”

“Scientists can be crazy too,” his mother said. “And this whole idea... Kevin, can’t you just accept that you’re seeing things that aren’t there?”

That was the problem; it would be all too easy to accept it. It would be easy to tell himself that this wasn't real, but there was something nagging away at the back of his brain that said it would be a really bad idea if he did. The countdown was still going, and Kevin suspected that he needed to talk to someone who would believe him before it reached its end.

"Mom, the numbers I told you I was seeing... they turned out to be the location for a star system."

"There are so many stars out there that I'm sure any random string of numbers would connect to one of them," his mother said. "It would be the same as the mass of the star or... or, I don't know enough about stars to know what else, but it would be something."

"I don't mean that," Kevin said. "I mean it was exactly the same. Luna put the numbers in and the Trappist 1 system was the first thing to come out. The *only* thing to come out."

"I should have known that Luna would be involved," his mother said with a sigh. "I love that girl, but she has too much imagination for her own good."

"Please, Mom," Kevin said. "This is real."

His mother reached out to put her hands on his shoulders. When had she started having to reach up to do that? "It's not, Kevin. Dr. Yalstrom said that you were having trouble accepting all this. You have to understand what's going on, and I have to help you to accept it."

"I know I'm dying, Mom," Kevin said. He shouldn't have put

it like that, because he could see the tears rising in his mother's eyes.

“Do you? Because this—”

“I’ll find a way to get there,” Kevin promised. “I’ll take a bus if I have to. I’ll take a train into the city and walk. I have to at least *talk* to them.”

“And get laughed at?” His mother pulled away, not looking at him. “You know that’s what will happen, right, Kevin? I’m trying to protect you.”

“I know you are,” Kevin said. “And I know that they’ll probably laugh at me, but I have to at least try, Mom. I have the feeling that this is really important.”

He wanted to say more, but he wasn’t sure that more would help right then. His mother was quiet in the way that said she was thinking, and right then, that was the best that Kevin could hope for. She kept thinking, her hand drumming on the kitchen counter, marking time as she made up her mind.

Kevin heard his mother’s sigh.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll do it. I’ll take you, but only because I suspect that, if I don’t, I’ll be getting a call from the police to tell me that my son has collapsed on a bus somewhere.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Kevin said, moving forward to hug her.

He knew she didn’t really believe him, but in a way, that made the show of love even more impressive.

CHAPTER FIVE

It took around an hour to drive from Walnut Creek down to the SETI Institute in Mountain View, but to Kevin, it felt like a lifetime. It wasn't just that traffic into the city crawled its way through road closures; every moment was something wasted when he could be there, could be finding out what was going on with him. They would know, he was certain of it.

"Try not to get too excited," his mother warned him, for what seemed like the twentieth time. Kevin knew she was just trying to protect him, but even so, he didn't want his excitement dampened. He was sure that this would be the place where he found out what was going on. They were scientists who studied aliens. Surely they would know everything?

When they got there, though, the institute wasn't what he was expecting. 189 Bernardo Avenue looked more like an art gallery or a part of a university than the kind of ultra-high-tech buildings Kevin's imagination had conjured up. He'd been expecting buildings that looked as though they might be from outer space, but instead, they looked a little like expensive versions of the kind of buildings his school had.

They drove up and parked in front of the buildings. Kevin took a breath. This was it. They walked into a lobby, where a woman smiled over at them, managing to turn that into a question even before she spoke.

“Hello, are you sure that you’re in the right place?”

“I need to talk to someone about alien signals,” Kevin said, before his mother could try to explain.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said. “We don’t really have public tours.”

Kevin shook his head. He knew he needed to get her to understand. “I’m not here for a tour,” he said. “I think... I think I’m receiving some kind of alien signal.”

The woman didn’t look at him with the kind of shock and disbelief that most other people might have, or even with the surprise his mother had at him coming out with it like that. This was more a look of resignation, as if she had to put up with this kind of thing more often than she would like.

“I see,” she said. “Unfortunately, we’re not in a position to talk to people who walk in off the street. If you want to send a message to us through our contact email, we’d be happy to consider it, but for the moment...”

“Come on, Kevin,” his mother said. “We tried.”

To his own surprise as much as anyone’s. Kevin shook his head. “No, I’m not going.”

“Kevin, you have to,” his mother said.

Kevin sat down, right there in the middle of the lobby. The carpet wasn’t very comfortable, but he didn’t care. “I’m not going anywhere until I speak to someone about this.”

“Wait, you can’t do that,” the receptionist said.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Kevin said.

“Kevin...” his mother began.

Kevin shook his head. He knew it was childish, but the way he saw it, he was thirteen, and he was allowed. Besides, this was important. If he walked out and left now, this was over. He couldn't let it be over.

“Get up, or I'll have to call security,” the receptionist said. She walked to him and took hold of Kevin's arm in a firm grip.

Instantly, Kevin's mother switched her attention from him to the receptionist, her eyes narrowing.

“Take your hands off my son, right now.”

“Then make your son get up and leave before I have to get the police involved.” The receptionist let go anyway, although that might have had something to do with the look his mother gave her. Kevin had the feeling that, now that there was one way she *could* protect her son, his mother was going to do it, whatever it took.

“Don't you threaten us with the police. Kevin isn't doing anyone any harm.”

“You think we don't get crazies here on a regular basis?”

“Kevin is *not* crazy!” his mother shouted, at a volume she normally reserved for when Kevin had done something *really* wrong.

The next couple of minutes featured more arguing than Kevin was happy with. His mother shouted at him to get up. The receptionist shouted that she would call security. They shouted at each other, as Kevin's mother decided that she didn't want

anyone threatening her son with security, and the woman seemed to assume that his mother would be able to move Kevin. Kevin sat through it all with surprising serenity.

It lulled him down, and in those depths, he saw something...

The cold darkness of space stood around him, stars flickering, with the Earth looking so different from above that it almost took Kevin's breath away. There was a silvery object floating there in space, just one of so many others hanging in orbit. The words *Pioneer 11* were stenciled on the side...

Then he was lying on the SETI Institute's floor, his mother helping him up, along with the receptionist.

"Is he okay?" the receptionist asked. "Do you need me to call an ambulance?"

"No, I'm fine," Kevin insisted.

His mother shook her head. "We know what's wrong. My son is dying. All of this... I thought it would help him to come to terms with the fact that what he was seeing wasn't real, that it was the illness."

Put like that, it felt like a betrayal, as if Kevin's mother had been planning for his dreams to be crushed all along.

"I understand," the receptionist said. "Okay, let's get you up, Kevin. Can I get you both anything?"

"I just want to talk to someone," Kevin said.

The receptionist bit her lip, then nodded. "Okay, I'll see what I can do."

Just like that, her whole attitude seemed to have changed.

“Wait here. Take a seat. I’ll go and see if there’s anyone around who can at least talk to you, maybe show you around. Although there really isn’t much to see.”

Kevin sat down with his mother. He wanted to tell her about everything he’d just seen, but he could see from her face that it would only hurt her. He waited in silence instead.

Finally, a woman came out. She was in her early fifties, dressed in a dark suit that suggested she had the kind of meetings where more casual clothes wouldn’t work. There was something about her that said she was an academic—maybe something in the curiosity with which she looked at Kevin. She offered his mother her hand, and then Kevin.

“Hello, Kevin,” she said. “I’m Dr. Elise Levin. I’m the director here at the institute.”

“You’re in charge?” Kevin asked, hope rising in him. “Of all the alien stuff?”

She smiled with amusement. “I think that’s putting it a bit strongly. A lot of the search for extraterrestrial life happens elsewhere. NASA provides data, some universities get involved, and we often borrow time on other people’s telescopes where we can. But yes, I’m in charge of this institute and the things that go on here.”

“Then I need to tell you,” Kevin said. He was speaking quicker than he wanted to, trying to get the words out before this adult had time to disbelieve him. “There’s something happening. I know how strange it sounds, but I’ve been seeing things, there’s

a kind of countdown...”

How could he explain the countdown? It wasn't like numbers, there wasn't an obvious point he could say marked its end. There was just a faint pulse that came with the signal in his brain, getting steadily, almost imperceptibly faster as it worked its way toward something that Kevin couldn't guess at.

“Why don't you tell me about it while we take a look around?” Dr. Levin suggested. “I'll show you some of what we do here.”

She led Kevin and his mother through the institute's corridors, and to be honest, Kevin had thought that it would be more exciting. He'd thought it would look less like an office block.

“I thought there would be big telescopes here, or labs full of equipment for testing things from space,” Kevin said.

Dr. Levin shrugged. “We have some laboratories, and we do test materials occasionally, but we don't have any telescopes. We are working with Berkeley to build a dedicated radio telescope array though.”

“Then how do you look for aliens?” Kevin's mother said. It seemed that she was as surprised by the lack of giant telescopes and listening equipment as Kevin was.

“We work with other people,” Dr. Levin said. “We ask for, or hire, time on telescopes and sensor arrays. We work with data from NASA. We put in suggestions to them about places they might want to look, or kinds of data they might want to try to gather. I'm sorry, I know it isn't as exciting as people sometimes think. Here, come with me.”

She led the way to an office that at least looked a bit more interesting than some of the other spaces. It held a couple of computers, a lot of posters relating to the solar system, a few magazines that had mentioned SETI's work, and some furniture that looked as though it had been especially designed to be ergonomic, stylish, and about as comfortable as a brick.

"Let me show you some of the things we've been working on," Dr. Levin said, calling up images of large telescope arrays in the process of being built. "We're looking at developing radio telescope arrays that might be powerful enough to pick up ambient radio frequencies rather than just waiting for someone to target us with a signal."

"But I think someone *is* signaling to us," Kevin said. He needed to get her to understand.

Dr. Levin paused. "I was going to ask if you're referring to the theory that what some people think are high-frequency radio bursts from a pulsar might be intelligible signals, but you're not, are you?"

"I've been seeing things," Kevin said. He tried to explain about the visions. He told her about the landscape he'd seen, and about the countdown.

"I see," Dr. Levin said. "But I have to ask something, Kevin. You understand that SETI is about exploring this issue with science, seeking real proof? It's the only way that we can do this and know that anything we find is real. So, I have to ask you, Kevin, how do you know what you're seeing is real?"

Kevin had already managed to answer that with Luna. “I saw some numbers. When I looked them up, it turned out that they were the location for something called the Trappist 1 system.”

“One of the more promising candidates for alien life,” Dr. Levin said. “Even so, Kevin, do you understand my problem now? You say you saw these numbers, and I believe you, but maybe you saw them because you’d read them somewhere. I can’t redirect SETI’s resources based on that, and in any case, I’m not sure what else we could do when it comes to the Trappist 1 system. For something like that, I would need something new. Something you couldn’t have gotten another way.”

Kevin could tell that she was trying to let him down as gently as possible, but even so, it hurt. How could he provide them with that? Then he thought about what he’d seen in the lobby. He had to have seen that for a reason, didn’t he?

“I think...” He wasn’t sure whether to say it or not, but he knew he had to. “I think you’re going to get a signal from something called Pioneer 11.”

Dr. Levin looked at him for a couple of seconds. “I’m sorry, Kevin, but that doesn’t seem very likely.”

Kevin saw his mother frown. “What’s Pioneer 11?”

“It’s one of the deep space probes NASA has sent out,” Dr. Levin explained. “It flew through our solar system, sending back data, and had enough velocity to send it out past the limits of the solar system. Unfortunately, the last contact that we had with it was in 1995, so I really don’t think that—”

She stopped as her phone started to ring, taking it out as if to ignore the call. Kevin saw the moment when she stopped and stared.

“I’m sorry, I have to take this,” she said. “Yes, hello, what is it? Can it wait a moment, I’m in the middle of... okay, if it’s that urgent. A signal? You’re calling me because NASA has data coming in? But NASA always has...” She paused again, looking over at Kevin, the disbelief obvious on her face. Even so, she said it. “Can I take a guess?” she said into the phone. “You’ve just had a signal of some kind from Pioneer 11? You have? No, I can’t tell you. I’m not sure you would believe me if I did.”

She put the phone down, staring at Kevin as if seeing him for the first time in that moment.

“How did you do that?” she asked.

Kevin shrugged. “I saw it when I was waiting in the lobby.”

“You saw it? The same way that you ‘saw’ this alien landscape?” Dr. Levin stared at him, and Kevin had the sense she was trying to work something out. Probably trying to work out any way he could have cheated this, or made it happen.

It was almost a minute before she came to a decision.

“I think,” Dr. Levin said, in the careful tones of someone trying to make sure she hadn’t gone crazy, “that you had better come with me.”

CHAPTER SIX

Kevin and his mother followed Dr. Levin from SETI's facility to a car that seemed far too small to belong to someone in her position.

"It's very environmentally friendly," she said, in a tone that suggested she had faced that question a lot. "Come on, it will be easier if I drive you both over. They're quite strict about security."

"Who is?" Kevin's mother asked.

"NASA."

Kevin's breath caught at that. They were going to talk to NASA? When it came to aliens, that was even better than SETI.

The drive across Mountain View was only a short one, a few minutes at most. Even so, it was long enough for Kevin to stare out the windows at the high-tech companies spread around the area, obviously drawn there by NASA and Berkeley, the presence of so many clever people in one place pulling them in.

"We're really going to NASA?" Kevin said. He couldn't quite believe it, which made no sense, given all the things he'd had to believe in the last few days.

The NASA campus was everything that the SETI building hadn't been. It was large, spread across several buildings and set in a space that managed to have views of both the surrounding hills and the bay. There was a visitors center that was essentially a

tent built on a scale that seemed hard to believe, bright white and painted with the NASA logo. They drove past that, though, to a space that was closed off to the public, behind a chain-link fence and a barrier where Dr. Levin had to show ID to get them in.

“I’m expected,” she said.

“And who are they, ma’am?” the guard asked.

“This is Kevin McKenzie and his mother,” Dr. Levin said.

“They’re with me.”

“They’re not on the—”

“They’re with me,” Dr. Levin said again, and for the first time, Kevin had a sense of the kind of toughness involved in her position. The guard hesitated for a moment, then produced a couple of visitors’ passes, which Dr. Levin handed over to them. Kevin hung his around his neck, and it felt like a trophy, a talisman. With this, he could go where he needed. With this, people actually *believed* him.

“We’ll need to go into the research areas,” Dr. Levin said.

“Please be careful not to touch anything, because some of the experiments are delicate.”

She led the way inside a building that appeared to be composed mostly of delicate curves of steel and glass. This was the kind of place Kevin had been expecting when they came down to Mountain View. This was what a place that looked out into space should be. There were laboratories to either side, with the kind of advanced equipment in them that suggested they could test almost anything space threw their way. There were

lasers and computers, benches and devices that looked designed for chemistry. There were workshops full of welding equipment and parts that might have been for cars, but that Kevin wanted to believe were for vehicles for use on other planets.

Dr. Levin asked around as they went, apparently trying to find out where everyone was who was connected with the news about Pioneer 11's message. Whenever they passed someone, she stopped them, and it seemed to Kevin that she knew everyone there. SETI might be separate from all of this, the way she said it was, but it was obvious that Dr. Levin spent a lot of time here.

"Hey, Marvin, where is everybody?" she asked a bearded man in a checked shirt.

"They're mostly gathered in the center for supercomputer research," he said. "Something like this, they want to see what the pits will come up with."

"The pits?" Kevin asked.

Dr. Levin smiled. "You'll see."

"Who are they?" the bearded man asked.

"What would you say if I told you that Kevin here can see aliens?" Dr. Levin asked.

Marvin laughed. "You can try to play up to the crazy alien hunter reputation all you want, Elise. You're as skeptical as the rest of us."

"Maybe not about this," Dr. Levin said. She looked back at Kevin and his mother. "This way."

She led the way to another part of the building, and now Kevin

had the sense of extra security, with ID scanners and cameras at almost every turn. More than that, it was probably the *cleanest* place he had ever been. Much cleaner than, for example, his bedroom. It seemed that not a speck of dust was allowed to intrude on it without permission, let alone the piles of old clothes that filled his space until his mom told him to tidy it.

The labs were mostly empty at the moment, and empty in ways that suggested they'd been left in a hurry because something more exciting was happening. It was easy to see where they had gone. People crowded in the corridors as the three of them got closer to their destination, exchanging gossip that Kevin only caught fragments of.

“There’s a signal, an actual *signal*.”

“After all this time.”

“It’s not just telemetry data, or even scans. There’s something... else.”

“We’re here,” Dr. Levin said, as they arrived at a room where the door had been left open, obviously to allow for the crowd of people trying to cram inside. “Let us through, please. We need to talk to Sam.”

“Here” turned out to be a large room, filled with blinking lights below and surrounded by walkways that made it seem a bit like a theater where the actors were all computers. Kevin recognized them as computers even though they were nothing like the small, barely working laptop his mother had bought for him to do schoolwork on. These were devices the size of coffee

tables, cars, rooms, all matte black and glittering with lights. The people standing or sitting close to them had on suits like the ones forensics people wore on TV shows.

“Impressed?” Dr. Levin asked.

Kevin could only nod. He didn’t have the words for a place like this. It was... incredible.

“What is this place?” his mother asked, and Kevin didn’t know if it was a good or bad thing that even his mother didn’t understand it.

“It’s where NASA does its supercomputer research,” Dr. Levin explained. “Work on AI, quantum computing, more advanced superconductors. It’s also the equipment they use to work on... complex issues. Come on, we need to talk to Sam.”

She led the way through the crowd and Kevin followed, trying to be quick enough to move into the gaps she created before they closed again. He hurried along in her wake until they came to a tall, slightly stooped man standing by one of the computers. Unlike the others, he wasn’t wearing a clean suit. His long, bony fingers seemed to be tying themselves in knots as he typed.

“Professor Brewster,” Dr. Levin said.

“Dr. Levin, I’m glad you could... wait, you’ve brought visitors. This really isn’t the moment for sightseeing, Elise.”

If Dr. Levin was annoyed by that, she didn’t show it. “David, this is Kevin McKenzie, and his mother. They’re not here to sightsee. I think Kevin might prove helpful with this. We need to see Sam.”

Professor Brewster waved a hand at the machine in front of them. It was even taller than he was, with pipes running up the side that were so cold they gave off steam into the air. It was only when Kevin saw the sign on the side, “*Signals Analysis Machine,*” that he realized Sam wasn’t a person’s name, but an acronym.

“You want to let a child play with a multimillion-dollar piece of engineering?” Professor Brewster asked. “I mean, he’s what? Ten?”

“I’m thirteen,” Kevin said. The difference might not be much to someone Professor Brewster’s age, but to him, it was a fourth of his life. It was *more* life than he had remaining. Put like that, three years was a huge amount.

“Well, I’m forty-three, I have a doctorate from Princeton, a building full of often frankly impossible geniuses who should *be doing their jobs*”—he looked around the room pointedly, but no one moved—“and now, apparently a thirteen-year-old who wants to play with my supercomputer just as it is about to get to work on a signal from a probe we thought long dead.”

He seemed like a man who didn’t like stress much. Kevin guessed that was probably a disadvantage in his job.

“Kevin’s here *because* of the signal,” Dr. Levin said. “He... well, he predicted that it would occur.”

“Impossible,” Professor Brewster said. “Elise, you know I have always respected your efforts to keep SETI research in the realm of serious science, but this seems to run in completely the opposite direction. It’s obviously a trick.”

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