

CHAPTER 10

"Any plans for tomorrow?" she asked as we left the classroom.

"I have a few things I'd like to do around the house, but other than that, nope."

"Do you want to drop by my grandmother's place with us? I know she'd love to see you."

"Aren't you going to be busy with this latest SETI story?"

"Definitely, if it's legit, but that's the beauty of my job – I can access the blog from anywhere."

"So how reliable are these reports about SETI? Can you trust what you read in the mainstream media about stories like this?"

"Not usually, especially with breaking news stories, but I suspect my best stuff will come straight from the horse's mouth. As a major story like this develops, the university's science blogs can act as a clearinghouse and follow the story's progress just by keeping track of the various experts who'll be investigating it and then updating the website constantly by adding their reports. That way anybody studying the phenomena can keep track of everybody else's progress just by visiting our blogs, which means they don't waste time looking at different aspects that have already been investigated."

"So why will all these experts come to your blog? What's to stop them from going elsewhere?"

"Nothing, except for the fact that I'll eventually build up the blog's credibility by consistently being there for them when they need a voice, sort of the science nerd's version of Drudge. Since you're not into the Internet like I am, The Drudge Report is a news aggregator that many people go to for links to the latest gossip and breaking news. When a story as important as this SETI one breaks, I just open up a special section of the site to focus on it. Through my contacts at the university I'll eventually get to know who the real players are and make sure their reports are chronicled in a logical sequence as they're submitted. I'll add a little bit of analysis from time to time, and maybe a few comments if I have anything useful to say. There's a separate section for comments from the great unwashed so normal folks can monitor the pros at work without making a lot of useless noise that would interfere with the process."

"So how will the blog make money?"

"Now that's the million dollar question!" she said, laughing. "When I find out, I'll e-mail you from my business jet."

I had a lot on my mind as we left the music building. I wasn't paying much attention to my surroundings because I was still feeling uneasy, which I blamed on the lingering aftereffects of my illness during the morning meeting. The two of us left the building without a backward glance and walked across the parking lot on the way home. The first indication I had that we were in trouble was the sensation of something solid and heavy hitting me a glancing blow in the back of my head, knocking me face down onto the pavement. The theremin dropped beside my face but appeared to

be still intact when I opened my eyes.

I slowly rolled over onto my side, resting one hand on the theremin for support as I tried to ascertain what had just happened to me. As my eyes refocused the answer became obvious. Keith Henderson was standing several feet away with a baseball bat in his hands, staring at me malevolently.

"I want that thing!" Keith sneered as he raised the bat over his head threateningly. "Give it to me or I'll hit you again, and this time you won't wake up."

I saw a slightly blurry image of Hanna leaning against a nearby light pole. She was holding her left arm as if it were in a sling and crying in pain. The bat must have struck her after it glanced off my skull. As I tried desperately to get to my feet and defend myself, Hanna stepped in between the two of us in an attempt to shield me from Keith, who was gradually moving toward me again. I watched in horror as my attacker turned in her direction and shifted the bat behind his shoulder. It looked as if he was about to hit her with all his strength in much the same way a baseball player would try to hit a pitch out of the park.

I needed to do something to protect her but for some reason my body wouldn't cooperate and I couldn't make myself stand up. I tried to shake the dizziness out of my head but my legs seemed to be paralyzed and I couldn't quite manage to get to my feet to intervene.

Frustrated, angry and more scared than I'd ever been before, all I could do was wave my fist at Keith and scream at him to stop what he was doing. The theremin, which was now giving off an intense, blood red light that hurt my eyes, was still on the ground beside me. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. I watched as a stream of translucent cone-shaped objects emerged from the theremin. They resembled a series of expanding smoke rings that shimmered and shook and sounded like the roar of a jumbo jet taking off from the airport as they converged on Keith's location. Just as the bat was about to impact Hanna's head the objects hit Keith like a truck.

Several windows directly behind the young man disintegrated instantly into a fine powder and drifted slowly to the ground. The bat he'd been wielding like a club was reduced to a shower of splinters in mid-air. Keith staggered backwards, screaming in agony and bleeding from both ears. He fell to the pavement, flat on his back and motionless as time seemed to stand still. Just as I was beginning to think Keith had been killed, he shook his head, looking disorientated and confused, and then abruptly shot to his feet. He looked around as if wondering what had hit him and then with a haunted look on his face he started running toward the street like he was being chased. I could hear his anguished cries receding into the distance as he ran away.

Hanna knelt down beside me and hugged me tightly with her uninjured arm.

"Andy, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think so." I noticed blood on my hand after I used it to check a bruise that was already forming on the back of my head. "My legs seem to be moving now, so I guess I'm not paralyzed. I'm probably feeling better

than Keith is right about now. How about you? Is your arm broken?"

"I think it's just bruised. It could have been a lot worse, you know. That idiot was going to take my head off if he hadn't been stopped!"

"We were lucky."

"No kidding. What do we do if he comes back?" Hanna asked.

"I expect we won't have to worry about him returning for more punishment. Did you see the look on his face?"

"Yeah, I've never seen anybody that scared."

"What the heck caused him to do that to us? He said he wanted the theremin, but..."

"That's insane. He was willing to risk killing us with that baseball bat, just to get his hands on your theremin?"

"He must have flipped out after hearing your father mention that it was as valuable as a Stradivarius."

"Did you hear the noise it made as Keith got zapped? It was awesome! You were awesome!"

"Not quite. First of all, I was so scared I couldn't even get to my feet to protect you. At that point I wanted Keith dead more than anything in the world. I'm not sure how that thought translated into what the theremin did, but if the blast had been a little stronger I might have got my wish."

"So what? It saved my life, and you made it happen. That's all that counts."

"Don't you understand? I almost killed him. How awesome would that have been?" I shook my head in disgust. "This whole thing with the theremin is getting out of control, and I have to admit, it's scaring the hell out of me now."

"Quit being so negative. You did the right thing and you have nothing to be ashamed of. Would you rather I'd been killed so you could feel better about yourself?"

"Of course not."

"Okay, then quit feeling sorry for yourself. This is the neatest thing that's ever happened to us, so maybe we should just go along for the ride and see where it takes us."

Just then Professor Howard ran out of the university building. He checked the two of us over and told me he'd take me to the emergency room to get medical attention for the bruise that was now swelling up into an egg-shaped lump on the back of my head. He handed me some tissues to hold over a slight cut on my scalp that was still bleeding. I refused his offer, of course. I wasn't going to let myself be forced to see a doctor over something this minor.

"I saw what happened from my classroom window," Professor Howard said as he checked Hanna's injury. "You're lucky he didn't kill you both. What the hell provoked him?"

"He was trying to steal it," I said, pointing to the theremin which sat at my feet, looking rather benign now that all the excitement was over.

"I've already notified the police," he said. "We have no choice when it involves an assault as serious as this."

We waited with him in his office to make a police report of the

incident. When Officer Daniels arrived, the first thing he did was to separate the three of us so he could interview us one at a time. I was last. Officer Daniels examined my injuries as Hanna and her father waited outside in the hallway.

"It's not a coincidence that I got assigned to this call. I was monitoring my radio when I heard your name mentioned, so I volunteered to take it. In fact, I'd just finished talking to the principal about you."

I had a sinking feeling that I was in even more trouble.

"Relax," the officer said. "That remark about Keith's essay got him thinking. He went back and checked the essay, ran it through one of those plagiarism software packages and discovered that it was copied off the Internet. Your school requires the completion of a portfolio in order to graduate, and that essay was part of the portfolio. Do you get my drift?"

"He's in as much trouble as I am?"

"More, actually. The principal has already notified Keith's father that his son won't be graduating with the rest of his class. Presumably he would have passed that information on to Keith right away, which might account for why he was so violent. I imagine he took the news personally."

"He would."

"Yes, he would, wouldn't he? Anyway, you're a lucky young man. Getting hit in the head with a baseball bat could have killed you. The cut on your scalp isn't bleeding anymore, and in fact it's already starting to heal. The bruise you might want to put ice on, because it's going to hurt. If you won't let me call an ambulance for you, you should at least drop by your doctor's office and have him take a look at it as soon as possible. There could be a concussion, you know."

"I will, as soon as I get a chance."

"Good. Now, I've heard Hanna's and Professor Howard's versions of what they saw. Why don't you tell me your side of this story?"

"It all happened so fast. One minute we were just walking across the parking lot and then all hell broke loose and I found myself lying on the pavement. I know I got hit on the head and I guess it was the baseball bat he hit me with. The next thing I remember clearly after that was the pain. Then everything that followed was just a confusing blur. The last I saw of Keith, he was running away."

"You would certainly have been justified if you'd used force to defend yourself after being attacked like that. Did you hit him?" Officer Daniels asked.

"No, I didn't get a chance to, unfortunately. I couldn't even get to my feet right away. I think his attempt to take Hanna out with the bat was so violent and out of control that he lost his balance and fell backwards onto the pavement. If he's injured that's probably how it happened, although he can't be hurt too badly because it didn't seem to slow him down at all as he ran away."

"Why'd he do that, anyway?"

"I don't know why he stopped fighting, unless maybe he suddenly felt guilty about doing this to us for no reason."

"As you might have concluded after that meeting at the principal's

office, I've had previous dealings with Keith, so I doubt very much he was feeling guilty about attacking you," the officer said. "What happened to the window behind him?"

"I'm not sure, but I think as Keith fell the bat must have gone flying through the air and struck the window a glancing blow."

Officer Daniels harrumphed at that suggestion, "There's a bit of a problem. I got a phone call from our detectives a few minutes ago. They went to Keith's apartment to arrest him for robbery and discovered that he's already confined to a hospital bed, nursing his wounds. Apparently he had some kind of a nervous breakdown. He's also got some major damage to his hearing but the doctors believe that's just temporary. They aren't saying exactly what's wrong with him, only that he'll be staying in the hospital for a few more hours to be checked out."

"So what happens next?"

"We'll interview him and he'll be arrested when the doctors are done with him but I imagine his father will bail him out pretty quickly. That's what usually happens when he gets into trouble with the law. We've charged him before but we've never managed to make anything stick. I can't promise you that he'll do serious time for what happened today, but we'll see what we can do."

He ended his questioning after advising me again to get medical attention and explaining how the criminal case against Keith would proceed through the courts. I thanked him politely for his concern as he left. Even though he was a pleasure to deal with, and I knew I hadn't done anything wrong, I still was relieved that I hadn't managed to talk myself into further trouble during the interview.

"So, what's the verdict?" Hanna asked as I rejoined her and her father in the hallway.

"Oh, Keith will have to explain his actions to a judge at some point but he probably won't do any time because even though he's already been in lots of trouble with the law he's never been convicted of anything serious. He said the detectives will interview Keith to get his side of the story, but that'll have to wait."

"Oh?" said Hanna.

"He's in the hospital, and although he was banged up a bit, and lost his hearing temporarily, he'll survive."

"Andy, did your theremin do that to him?" Professor Howard asked. "I mean, I saw his reaction to whatever hit him and I could see from my window that it wasn't caused by your fist connecting with his face."

"The theremin really did the job this time. In fact, it saved our butts," Hanna said. "As far as I'm concerned, Keith got what he deserved."

"But you made it happen, right?" Professor Howard said as he looked in my direction.

"I think so. In fact, I'm sure it was me that was responsible. I wanted more than anything to stop Keith from hurting Hanna, but I wasn't fast enough to do anything about it on my own. The theremin reacted when I couldn't, or at least that's the way it looked from where I was on the ground."

"Try to remember what was going through your mind at the time," Professor Howard said.

"Well, I was waving my fist in his direction, and the next thing I knew he was knocked right off his feet by some kind of force emanating from the theremin. It looked like it was giant smoke rings or something that hit him, only more solid when they made contact, obviously. Could you see them from the window?"

"I don't think so, although it was pretty confusing because it all happened so quickly."

"I don't know how I did it, but yeah, it was definitely something I wanted to happen. I remember thinking how simple it would be to hurt him even more than I did, but I knew that would be wrong so I pulled my punch, so to speak. Still, what kind of a person does that make me? I've never had a fight in my life, and yet today I almost killed a guy."

"Andy and the walls of Jericho," sighed Professor Howard.

"From the Bible?" Hanna suggested.

"Hanna, your mother didn't have a religious bone in her body, but she would probably still have been very pleased that you recognized the reference, even though you've chosen never to set foot inside a church. Yes, that's what I'm referring to. According to the scriptures, Joshua and some buddies decided to attack the walled city of Jericho. They circled the city, remained totally silent for a week, and then sounded seven trumpets made out of ram's horns. That and a lot of yelling and screaming was supposedly enough to bring the walls tumbling down and thus win them the battle."

"Another urban legend?" said Hanna with a grin.

"Probably," her father agreed. "Still, there have been plenty of instances where sound was used as a weapon. In fact, in World War II the Nazis built an experimental weapon they called a 'Sound Cannon' which produced a high-pitched tone that was lethal at short range. Fortunately it didn't have the range to be useful on the battlefield or the war might have ended differently."

"Come to think of it," I said, "I heard the scientists at work discussing how predators use sounds to assist them while they're hunting and killing other animals."

"Yeah," Professor Howard said, "I saw a nature show once that showed tigers using a loud roar to stun their prey as they move in for the kill. I imagine it's very effective up close, although I don't think very many humans have heard that sound and lived to tell the tale."

"Dad, I seem to remember you talking once about dolphins doing much the same type of thing," Hanna said.

"They do. Dolphins apparently emit a medium frequency buzz when they're hunting on the seabed. In some cases eels that have been flushed from hiding seem to be stunned by the sound, which is just enough to leave them vulnerable to attack. There's even research that suggests sperm whales use infrasound pulses to stun giant squid in order to make them easier to catch."

"Those rings that hit Keith must have sounded like a lion's roar to him as they impacted," Hanna said. "I thought he was going to croak. You could

see the terror in his expression.”

“Is it possible that whoever built this theremin could have also incorporated some kind of a sound-based weapon?” I asked.

“Interestingly enough,” Professor Howard said, “there are rumors that our government has recently been experimenting with both low and high frequency acoustic weapons, ostensibly for crowd control and other non-lethal applications. Of course any research that explores a source of energy this potentially destructive could also be used to produce battlefield weapons designed to kill the enemy. So yes, there’s a very real possibility that your theremin may have been created with the capability to produce music and protect itself simultaneously, although I find it difficult to believe both of these sophisticated technologies could be combined in a package this small.”

“Wouldn’t it need an outside power source to produce that kind of energy?” Hanna asked.

“That brings us back to the issue of the theremin’s power source, whatever that might be,” Professor Howard said. “Theoretically, given what it seems to be capable of, its batteries should be much larger, and thus much more powerful than you could cram inside a box this size. Still, given the rapid progress of technology these days almost anything is possible. I mean, the average laptop has far more computing power than the room-sized computers I used to play with when I went to university back in the dark ages. Those monsters used to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to build, whereas a laptop these days is almost disposable.”

“And when you think about it,” said Hanna, “I suppose there might be a simple explanation for what the theremin did to Keith. Dad, do you remember last year when you gave me one of those little handheld screamers to ward off muggers? It cost, what, a couple of bucks? The thing was powered by just one double-A battery and yet it was loud enough to wake the dead. I can vouch for that because a friend of mine had one, and it went off by mistake during an exam once. One of the guys sitting beside her was so startled by the noise that he fainted.”

“That makes sense to me,” I said, “at least up to a point. I agree that it wouldn’t be all that difficult to increase the volume of a device like your screamer so that it could hurt somebody’s ears. And I guess it’s conceivable that it might even be powerful enough to temporarily disable an attacker, or break the windows behind him.”

“And don’t forget that time we were standing at a bus stop when a boom car pulled up in front of us,” Hanna said. “I remember how the vibrations from his music were so loud that the ground was shaking. Of course he had more power in his car stereo system than you could ever cram into a portable boom box.”

“I thought my eardrums were going to burst,” Andy said.

“Remember how sick I got from the vibrations? The car was ten feet away, and I still felt so nauseated that I thought I was going to throw up. It affected you as well.”

“Sure, but consider how far Keith was from the theremin when he got knocked to the ground. That sound wave it produced was extremely powerful, and unlike a typical loud noise which would tend to spread out 360

degrees from the source, this one was directed specifically at him. I don't think that's the kind of reaction you could expect from a souped-up screamer or even a powerful boom box. Making him nauseated is one thing, but kicking the stuffing out of him is something altogether different."

"Unless the rumors that our government has recovered alien technology from the Roswell crash site are true," Hanna said half-seriously.

"Yeah, like any government could ever keep a secret like that for decades," Professor Howard joked. "If nothing else, some congressman would have spilled the beans by now after a night of heavy drinking and womanizing, just to prove how important he is. Very few media outlets actually employ real investigative journalists these days, but there are enough tabloid reporters snooping around to guarantee that nothing that interesting could ever remain secret for long. No, there's got to be a logical explanation for what your theremin did. I think we should look for answers a little closer to Earth, myself."

"And what does it matter where the theremin came from anyway?" Hanna asked. "The important thing is that it plays music that's loved by everyone who's heard it, even though for some reason only Andy has the talent to master it so far. We can learn more about it later when we have more time. Meanwhile, we should consider all our options before it's too late."

"Too late?" her father asked.

"Yeah," she replied, "like maybe the government finds out about the theremin and seizes it. Then we'd never see it again. That's what governments tend to do."

Her father smiled. "Anti-government rhetoric? Why, there's hope for you yet! I thought all was lost when my daughter the Goth suddenly became a rabid right-winger, but maybe some of my liberal indoctrination rubbed off on you after all."

Hanna smiled back, but it was a forced smile which reflected their often tempestuous relationship, a relationship that was severely strained lately by their marked political differences. Her father lumped conservatives in with soldiers, police officers and Republicans, all of whom he felt were inherently evil and never to be trusted. I knew he believed Hanna had rejected liberalism as a way of rebelling against what he believed in, and he did indeed take it personally. On the other hand, I had listened ad nauseam to Hanna justifying her Damascus road conversion last year after she studied 9/11 and the War on Terror. She was as sincere and intractable in her beliefs as her father was in his, although she never tried to force her conservatism on anyone else.

"Hanna's right," I said, tactfully changing the subject. "This instrument, this theremin, might be my chance to become rich and famous. Do you two realize how few people in the world actually get this kind of opportunity?"

"You know, this could get very interesting," she said. "It'll be no different than being a rock star or a famous actor. Money. Cars. Houses. Everything you could ever want. That can't be a bad thing."

"Not necessarily, I guess," said Professor Howard thoughtfully,

"assuming you're controlling what the theremin does, and not the other way around. Still, there's also something to be said for a life that doesn't revolve around greed and materialism."

"I honestly don't understand how it works," I said, "but I can tell you that now, every time I touch it I get the feeling I was born to do this. I can't explain it, but the whole thing just feels right, even though the theremin's power still scares me a bit. Okay, to be honest, a lot. And of course having seen how many celebrities screw up even after they acquire everything they've ever wanted, well, that scares me as well."

"It's going to be fine, Andy," Hanna said with a smile. "Assuming you don't dump me for the first attractive groupie that comes along, I'm pretty sure we can learn to live with the ramifications of instant fame and fortune."

"Are you forgetting what happened to Keith?" I said, shaking my head. "No, I still feel bad about that."

"Lighten up," she replied. "Forget about him. Think rock star. Think truckloads of cash."

"I don't know about the fame and fortune thing. Anything that can make me feel this good must have a downside."

"He's right, Hanna," Professor Howard said. "He has got to be realistic about this. It's going to change his life, one way or another. For instance, will he feel comfortable having to look over his shoulder for stalkers and paparazzi for the rest of his life? All too often that's the price of fame these days."

"Like, life's a tradeoff, isn't it?" she said dismissively.

"Maybe this is all a little premature anyway," I said. "Remember, we don't know yet how this theremin works. For one thing, it isn't going to be easy selling CD's of my performances if the music can't be recorded. Maybe there isn't any money to be made off this thing after all."

Professor Howard laughed out loud. "I was just thinking, if it plays different music for everyone who hears it you could end up with some pretty diverse crowds at your concerts. Acid rock on the left side. Easy listening up front. Country and western hiding way in the back. Depending on how far the sound carries, you could sell out a stadium the size of Los Angeles every weekend. Now there's where you could make some real money. Of course playing the same old concerts regularly would probably get pretty boring after the first few, wouldn't it? I mean, what do you do with yourself after achieving all your dreams and fantasies while you're still in your teens?"

"Discussions about rock stardom always seem to return to the question of groupies," I said, grinning at Hanna. "With a crowd that size, just think how many attractive young women I could expect to meet in an average year. Of course the question is purely academic, since we both know I'm not the least bit interested in anyone other than you, Hanna."

Her father mimicked vomiting motions, and then smiled. Sort of.

"I know that, although it's nice to be told from time to time," she said as she playfully punched me on the arm. "We've got to hit the road."

"I'm going to stay here and do some more research on the Internet," Professor Howard said. "Andy, are you coming with us to visit my mother-in-law tomorrow?"

"That's the plan so far," I replied. "I think I still owe her some money from the last cribbage game we played, so I'd better show up to pay off my gambling debts."

"I guarantee she'll remember exactly how much you owe her, so bring extra pocket change with you," the professor said. "I haven't seen her in a few weeks and it's her ninetieth birthday so she'll be expecting us. Even though she doesn't celebrate birthdays, or even acknowledge them, the least we can do is have a good time in her honor. I'll let you know when we're leaving. Oh, and I have a few quick errands to run at the mall on the way if that's okay with you two."

As we walked toward the car, I held the theremin in my left hand and wrapped my other arm around Hanna, being careful not to jar her sore arm. I shuddered as we walked past the spot where Keith had attacked us. We were both lost in thought for the moment, but I could see a look of concern on her face before she caught me glancing in her direction. A maintenance crew was already replacing the broken windows, but other than that there was no trace remaining of the confrontation.

Dark clouds now blotted out the sun and it looked like it would rain soon. Something was wrong, and an eerie sense of foreboding threatened to overwhelm me. I could still feel the aftereffects of the sickness that had overcome me so violently earlier in the day so I suspected that might be influencing my mood. Still, I couldn't shake an overwhelming feeling that something horrible was about to happen.

It was worse than a normal premonition, which I knew was usually only my subconscious playing tricks on me. Premonitions aren't real, although certainly they could still come true, either by bad luck or by coincidence. No, this was more like the sensation of standing on railway tracks, paralyzed with fear, as you watch a train speeding in your direction. You hope you're in the middle of a nightmare and that you'll wake up just before the impact and everything will be okay again. Then you feel the impact of the train hitting you. At the moment I felt like I was standing on the tracks, listening to the train sounding its horn to warn me and yet unable to get out of the way in time.

I spent most of the night hanging with Hugo, doing the routine chores that had to be done and generally just killing time. I got a couple of hours sleep curled up on a couch in the office and awoke just in time to avoid meeting Professor Blenheim as she arrived.

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