

CHAPTER 12

"I find it hard to believe that this theremin, which produces such beautiful music, could also be designed to be used as a weapon," Hanna said as we drove toward the old folk's home to visit her grandmother. "Why would somebody go to all the trouble of inventing a device like this? It doesn't make sense."

Her father laughed. "Think of the most beautiful classical music you've ever heard and then imagine it being played on tinny speakers outside a fast-food restaurant in the early hours of the morning. Although that same song may have entertained millions and millions of people who love hearing it, in this instance it's being employed as a way to keep gang-bangers from congregating outside the premises. You've got to wonder how the composers would feel if they were still alive today and heard their music being played specifically for people who hate the sound of it."

"I guess it's the same as national anthems," Hanna said. "Ours makes us feel patriotic about our country, which is a good thing. On the other hand, the music the Nazis chose as their anthem, regardless of how beautiful it may or may not have sounded, was used to motivate people to support an evil cause."

"Exactly," said Professor Howard as he slowed for a stop sign. "Bagpipes are another great example, and one that's particularly close to my heart since I've always wanted to learn how to play them. They're an acquired taste so people tend to either love them or hate them, but anyone who hears them played by a proficient piper at a funeral would have a tough time not tearing up in response to their sad lament."

"I was always afraid that you'd bring a set home and start practicing," Hanna said as she laughed out loud, "and I would have run away from home rather than have to listen to the sound of howling banshees driving me insane."

"Now that I'm going to be living on my own, I may decide to finally take the plunge," her father said. "There's another side to bagpipes that you might not be aware of. They also have a long history on the battlefield. At a critical point during the Battle of Waterloo, for instance, Wellington discovered that his troops were wavering after their band had been silenced for some reason. He ordered the pipers to resume their playing and his soldiers rallied at the sound of the bagpipes and eventually won the battle. The same pipes that can move people to tears can also motivate them to kill their fellow man, although as something of a pacifist myself I certainly don't approve of them being used for that purpose. Nevertheless, it's a good example of how a musical instrument can be used for more than just entertaining an audience."

Hanna's grandmother was watching for us from her window as we drove up. By the time we walked up to the front door she was already there, waiting to greet us with hugs and smiles. We accompanied her to the cafeteria where she commandeered a table for the four of us as Professor

Howard ordered a round of soft drinks and coffees at the counter.

"How has your day been so far, granny?" Hanna asked.

"Same old, same old," she said. "Why would today be any different from any other day?"

Her eyes were twinkling as she launched into what had become a ritual every year on this date for as long as I had known her. She would studiously avoid mentioning her birthday, and anybody foolish enough to do so would receive a light-hearted but colorful reprimand.

"Andy, I was terribly sorry to hear about your mother," she said as she touched my arm.

Hanna's grandmother gratefully accepted a coffee from Professor Howard, and then turned to Hanna with a question "Have you been following the story about that signal from space?"

She watched a lot of TV, and spent countless hours listening to the radio in her room as she explored the Internet. Like her granddaughter she was a news junkie, and she faithfully monitored a variety of all-news stations so they could debate current events whenever Hanna visited.

"Granny, you probably know more about it than I do because we've been busy shopping and I haven't had a chance to check my blog. The last thing I heard was that whatever it is they're monitoring, it's getting closer. Do you figure it's for real this time?"

"Wouldn't that be something if it was," her grandmother said. "Maybe the aliens will take us to a planet where we won't grow any older, like that lovely Ron Howard movie with Don Ameche in it."

"Want to bet that whatever planet they were taken to, they still had to pay taxes?" Professor Howard said as he sipped his coffee.

Hanna waited for a lull in the conversation and turned her computer on so she could visit her blog.

"Damn! Looks like it may be another false alarm," she said as she scanned the screen. "There's a breaking story on the Drudge Report that claims several reputable astronomers now feel the signal originated from natural sources, probably an echo from some mysterious sound produced here on Earth. They also quote a congressman who accuses SETI of exaggerating the significance of this incident as part of a ploy to increase their budget next year. So there you go. If these reports are accurate, and they may or may not be, it might turn out to have been much ado about nothing."

"Well, that's too bad," Professor Howard said. "I'd love to be around long enough to find out for sure that there is life on other planets, and the best evidence of that would be a visit by them. It has to happen sooner or later. Hey, maybe next year around this time we'll have some new alien friends with us to celebrate whatever the heck it is we celebrate around here."

He smiled as he said it, as if challenging Hanna's grandmother to admit publicly for the first time that it was her birthday. She glared back at him for a few moments but soon gave up and grinned.

"Are you saying you don't enjoy your visits here to the old folk's warehouse?"

"It's not that we need a specific reason to visit your home, of course," Hanna, always the peacemaker of the family, said hastily. "It's always good to see you, granny, even if I'll have to fly across the country to do it when I'm away at university. Say, have I mentioned recently that you don't look a day over 60?"

"Well, thank you for the kind words, child. Not that I buy into that kind of flattery, mind you, but don't ever let that stop you from trying."

"I saw an ambulance pulling away as we drove up," I said. "Was somebody injured?"

"Unfortunately, this has not been a great day here at the manor," Hanna's grandmother said. "The TV in our main lounge broke down this morning, which is a disaster because now it'll be at the shop for a week and they never seem to leave a loaner when this happens. Then we found out that one of our ladies passed away in her sleep last night. She was very popular with all the folks here, so needless to say, everybody's upset. Goodness, she just had her eightieth birthday party the other day and everyone figured she'd outlast us all because she was doing so well. Very sad."

"Did you notice what Andy's carrying around with him now?" Professor Howard asked his mother-in-law, changing the subject.

"It looks like a theremin," she said, "although I could be wrong as this one is a lot smaller than the one I remember seeing."

"Very impressive," Professor Howard said. "How did you know that?"

"I heard it played at Carnegie Hall once, many years ago, by a woman named Clara Rockmore," she replied. "At least I think that was her name. The theremin was featured in all the papers back then, and my mother insisted that we see it when we visited New York."

"That must have been an interesting time to be alive," Hanna said.

"Oh, it definitely was, although to be honest with you I much prefer living in the present tense, if for no other reason than the invention of the TV. It's a Godsend when you have nothing else to do all day, although people around here tend to get grumpy when they can't watch their favorite soaps. Not that I'm complaining, mind you."

"So how is it you remember this concert so well?" Professor Howard said. "That was a long time ago."

"Wondering if I'm imaging things in my old age, are you?" she said with a mischievous smile. "No, I haven't gone senile, like my good friend over there in the wheelchair."

I hadn't noticed her at first. The woman she was referring to was tied to her wheelchair with cloth straps so she wouldn't fall out. Her vacant expression appeared to be frozen on her face, relentlessly unaltered by any of the sounds or activities around her.

"That's poor Sadie Harriman," Hanna's grandmother explained. "She's in the end stages of Alzheimer's, as you probably guessed from her appearance."

She must have noticed the concerned look on my face because she smiled and shook her head. "Not to worry, Andy, she can't hear us talking about her. Even if that was still possible, she'd have no idea who we were or

what we were talking about, and within a couple of minutes she would forget what happened anyway."

"That must be horrible for her," Hanna said.

"At first, yes, but in the past year or so her condition has deteriorated rapidly to the point where she's lost all her memory along with her ability to learn and to reason. Till then, even though she couldn't carry on a conversation, she could still communicate through facial expressions and body language. She even used to sing along with me when it was a tune she knew from her past because her long-term memory was the last thing to go."

"There isn't much hope for a cure for Alzheimer's yet, I'm afraid." Hanna said as she reached out and cupped her hand over her grandmother's arm reassuringly.

"No, I wish there was. Unfortunately Sadie's mental impairment is irreversible, and nobody seems optimistic that there's a cure in the works any time soon."

"How awful," I said.

"Yes, but that's life, isn't it? My doctor tells me that half of the folks who reach their eighties already have Alzheimer's, although the degree that the disease affects them varies from person to person. Sorry, I shouldn't prattle on about something this depressing when you're here for a pleasant visit."

She paused, lost in thought momentarily as she stared at Sadie Harriman. "Now what is it that we were talking about, anyway?" she said without a trace of irony in her voice.

"The theremin, granny," Hanna said politely.

"Oh, of course. Yes, I remember the concert well, even though I was very young at the time. What struck me was the magical quality of the device. I'd never seen or heard of anything so futuristic. Back in those days nobody could understand how the inventor was able to create a device so advanced at a time when radios were still considered high tech. So tell me, is this a real theremin?"

"To be honest," Professor Howard said, "we're not sure. It makes music all right, but we don't know how it does that. At the moment, Andy seems to be the only person with the ability to play it."

"Well," she said, "I don't care how it works, as long as it does. As you know, we often have retired musicians drop by to perform for the residents, although most of the ones we've seen recently don't seem to have much of a repertoire. Andy, if you're willing, why don't you give it a try? I know everyone would be tickled pink to hear you play, especially since a theremin is dramatically different from what we're used to around here. We get a lot of mediocre piano players and the like."

"I don't know," I said with a smile. "Are you sure this crowd won't riot if they take a dislike to me? I'm definitely not a professional musician."

"If you're worried that these folks might not appreciate your music, please don't be concerned. There are a few armchair critics who might get upset by the sound of rock and roll playing a little too loud but most of us have hearing difficulties anyway. I'd really appreciate it. Please! As a favor for me?"

How could I say no?

She rounded up as many of the residents as she could on short notice and they arranged the cafeteria chairs in a semi-circle in front of me. Several people stood by the doorway as if poised for a quick retreat should the music not be to their liking. I noticed that one of the staff members was careful to park Mrs. Harriman's wheelchair front and center so she'd have a good view of the performance.

I started out with the intention of playing something that I thought might appeal to my audience but soon became engrossed in the process and allowed my imagination to take over. The easy listening type of melody I began with quickly evolved into hard-driving rock music and my hands soon seemed to be flying through the area over the theremin's antennae. At one point, after I realized where the music was taking me, I looked around to see how my audience was reacting. They all seemed transfixed, which was the very best kind of feedback I could have hoped for. Even the people by the door had moved closer to the theremin, and one couple was actually dancing their way around the tables like ballroom dancers, only slower. Much slower.

I was about to return my attention to the process of making music, which had continued unabated even as my concentration wavered, when I noticed Mrs. Harriman's right index finger tapping rhythmically on the arm of her wheelchair. I stared at her for several seconds to make sure I wasn't imagining it but she was definitely responding in her own fashion to the music. In fact, her lips were moving very slightly and it appeared that she was singing along, although I couldn't hear her voice. Of course I had no way of knowing if it was my music she was hearing, or perhaps some song that was only playing inside her brain, or what was left of it. Either way, there was obviously some part of her intellect that was still alive and functioning.

Hanna's grandmother must have seen me watching Mrs. Harriman because I heard her gasp out loud as she too noticed the tapping finger. She pointed that out to a young woman standing beside her in a white jacket with a stethoscope draped around her neck. Her eyes in turn widened and her jaw dropped.

Everyone in the room except Mrs. Harriman clapped as my impromptu performance ended with a musical flourish. Those that could get to their feet without the assistance of a walker gave me a standing ovation. Several of the more enthusiastic residents gathered around me to admire the theremin after I modestly informed them that the concert was over because I didn't know any more songs. Nobody believed me, of course, but they were far too polite to call me on it. The attention was exhilarating, as it had been back at the mall, and I could see how this kind of adulation from an audience could easily become addictive. A very pleasant elderly gentleman even asked me for my autograph.

Hanna and her grandmother were sitting on either side of Mrs. Harriman when I finally managed to extricate myself from my adoring fans. Professor Howard was talking to the lady in the white jacket, who, not surprisingly, turned out to be a doctor.

"Andy," he said, "the doctor here is very curious about your theremin and how it managed to break through to Mrs. Harriman's subconscious.

They've tried everything, including music therapy, to attempt to breach the defenses her brain has erected as a result of this disease. Somehow you managed to accomplish the impossible."

"That's right," the doctor said. "With some people the Alzheimer's leaves the patient's long-term memories relatively intact but destroys their ability to access them. That was the case with Mrs. Harriman until just now. During the initial stages of her illness we were able to communicate with her through the music she loved, and you could tell by her expression that we were triggering some happy recollections. Then all of a sudden she stopped responding to everything we tried and quickly began fading away. We finally gave up and began preparing her family for her imminent death. And now this..."

"Does this mean I've managed to heal her somehow?" I asked incredulously.

"No, that's impossible," she replied. "The damage that's been done to her brain is irreversible. You haven't cured her disease but you've somehow managed to communicate with what's left of her mind. I'm sure there must be a rational explanation for what just happened but I'll be damned if I can come up with it."

"Over here, doctor," Hanna's grandmother said urgently. "I think she's trying to say something."

Mrs. Harriman's voice was just a hoarse whisper and I had to listen carefully to understand her words. Her expression didn't change when she talked, and the only way I could tell it was coming from her was by the slight movement of her lips as she spoke.

"I heard the beautiful music," she said slowly, "and I had to find out where it was coming from. At first I thought my time had finally come..."

"Mrs. Harriman, do you know where you are?" the doctor said.

"No, nor do I care, really. I fought this illness at first, but I'm in the place where I belong now. Happy, and content, and ready for whatever comes next."

"Where exactly do you think you are, Sadie?" Hanna's grandmother asked.

"I assume I'm still sitting in the old folk's home, the same place I've been sitting for the last few years, but that's not where I'm living now. I discovered that after I reached a certain stage with Alzheimer's my brain carved out a sort of cave where all my dreams and happy memories are kept. It's all that's left now of the person I used to be. I retreated there when I finally gave up the fight and that's where I'll stay until the next step, whatever that may be. I'm hoping it's more of the same, actually. I've lost all track of time, and I'm not interested in learning how long I've been sitting here waiting to die. It's not important to me anymore. Honestly."

"Mrs. Harriman," the doctor said, "I'm curious to know whether or not you'd come back if you could."

"No, I don't think I would. I was a nurse, you know. I saw so much death during my lifetime that I gradually found myself growing comfortable with the process. I know, that must sound so cynical! That's not to say I'd ever allow a patient of mine to go before their time, but usually there was a

point when enough was enough and it was clear that we had to let them go. That's where I'm at right now. The person I used to be is gone forever, so there wouldn't be any reason for me to try to return to this reality anyway, would there?"

"I really wish you could," Hanna's grandmother said as tears welled up in her eyes. "You've been a good friend to me over the years. I hate the thought of losing you, but I understand what you're saying."

"I feel the same way about you," Mrs. Harriman said. "I'm just glad I got to say my final goodbyes. It's time for me to take my leave now."

"I understand," the doctor said, "and of course we'll respect your wishes. Good luck to you."

Mrs. Harriman stopped talking and seemed to slump back in her wheelchair, returning to the same state of near coma that they'd witnessed earlier. We left her there and filed out of the cafeteria into the facility's entranceway without speaking. It was Professor Howard who finally broke the silence.

"I felt like we were talking to a ghost. Did I imagine that, or did it really happen?"

"Oh, it was for real," the doctor said. "I guess it's possible the neural networks in her brain may have created some new pathways, and it's even conceivable that I was wrong in my diagnosis since we usually have to wait for an autopsy to confirm Alzheimer's. Still, everything I've learned over the years tells me that what we just saw couldn't have happened. Whatever magic there is in that theremin of yours needs to be explored by scientists who know what they're doing because it's obvious that you and your music somehow triggered her temporary recovery. This is one for the medical journals."

"We're in the process of finding out what exactly it's capable of, doctor," Hanna said as she and her father kissed her grandmother on the cheek and said their goodbyes.

"Are you going to be okay, granny?" Hanna asked.

"Of course, dear. What just happened in there was a little sad, sure, but it also gives me hope that there may indeed be a happy ending waiting for all of us at the completion of our lives. I'm not religious, as you know, but I now find myself believing in something very special, even if it isn't exactly the same as religion."

As we left the building I began to notice a cacophony of sound that was growing in intensity as we climbed into the car. It sounded like we were inside a crowded dog pound, listening to every neighborhood dog barking as loudly as it could.

"What is that?" Professor Howard said.

"It appears that the dogs around here are uptight about something," Hanna said.

"No kidding. It sounds to me like every dog within hearing is going nuts. That isn't just a few dogs barking at a passing mailman," the professor said.

"Don't animals react in weird ways when there's about to be an earthquake?" I asked. "Maybe they're trying to tell us the earth is about to

move.”

“That’s the theory,” Professor Howard said, “but I wouldn’t expect to hear them all going berserk at the same time like this. Listen. It’s getting even louder now. What the heck has gotten into them? They sound like they’re deathly afraid of something!”

The hearing range for dogs is far higher than that of humans and I wondered if they were now able to hear the same frightening sounds I’d been listening to off and on since the meeting in the dean’s office. If so, then it was no wonder they were upset. I could hear those sounds myself and the dark cloud was once again hovering menacingly over my head. In reality, I was just as scared as they were but had no way to show it.

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[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)