

CHAPTER 14

I managed to get a couple of hours of restless sleep but my dream-filled slumber was interrupted by one particularly disturbing thought that thrust me jarringly into wakefulness. I couldn't stop thinking about it so I had to get up and wander around the house to consider the ramifications of what I was about to do. I knew I didn't have much time to come up with an alternative plan. In fact, the whole thing seemed so far-fetched, so foreign to everything I thought I understood about the world, that I was reluctant to even attempt it. I knew there were a thousand reasons why it shouldn't work, but I was desperate enough to consider anything at this stage so in the end I decided to go ahead.

I called Hanna to arrange our day but decided not to tell her about my plan right away. I knew it would upset her, and there was no point in getting her hopes up unnecessarily.

She was very excited. "The reports debunking the SETI story were unfounded, it turns out, and the story is back in play. I just read on Instapundit that somebody has now definitely confirmed the location of that mysterious signal I was talking about. Apparently its source may be sitting somewhere near our solar system at the moment, although they still haven't been able to identify what it is. The bottom line, according to what I'm hearing now, is that it's extremely unlikely that the signal originated here on Earth, although I haven't been able to confirm any of this with my usual contacts because they aren't returning my e-mails at the moment. Too busy, probably. Meanwhile, that darkness that's flooding the universe seems to be spreading faster than anticipated so it looks like I'll be fairly busy today tracking down rumors."

We agreed to meet later at the hospital. I then paged Professor Howard, who called me back almost immediately

"Andy, I just had coffee with Officer Daniels at the high school so I've already heard all about the incident involving your elephant friend. He was pretty impressed with the way you handled yourself, by the way."

I didn't say anything because I was trying to think of a way of broaching the subject of this new plan I'd dreamt up this morning.

"We have an urgent problem that we need to discuss," he continued. "It seems this instrument of yours is starting to attract attention through word of mouth. I've already heard some outrageous rumors floating around the university about you and your theremin, as well as your involvement in the elephant caper last night, so it's only a matter of time before the media picks up on it. You're going to have to do some serious thinking about what comes next."

I decided to go for it. "I already have. Reaching into the mind of that Alzheimer's patient really freaked me out at first. To be honest, I'm only just beginning to consider the incredible potential the theremin might have to make a difference in people's lives. Who knows, maybe someday it could even heal folks like Mrs. Harriman."

"Well, it certainly might enable you to do all that and more, assuming it keeps working and you get an opportunity to explore its full potential. However, the important question is, are you absolutely certain you want to continue? There could be some unpleasant surprises ahead, you know, and I would hate to see you get hurt or accidentally hurt someone else in the process."

"Hey, I'm not about to go on a power trip and start messing with people's lives unnecessarily, if that's what you're getting at. There was one idea, however, that I want to bounce off you before I try it, because frankly it scares the hell out of me."

"I think I know what's coming, but go ahead."

"It's about my mom. If the theremin can do all these incredible things we've seen so far, then maybe it can make her better again. Do you think there's a chance it could work?"

Professor Howard didn't say anything for a minute, and when he did talk his voice was shaking with emotion. "Andy, you're obviously way ahead of me on this. The idea of curing your mother's brain tumor never occurred to me. My God, I thought you were just going to suggest playing the theremin at the prom!"

"But could it work?"

"It's a wonderful thought but we're sailing into uncharted waters here, you understand. It's obviously a powerful musical instrument but I just don't know about the healing part. I mean, barring a miracle, we know there's no way she's going to survive. If you did manage to cure whatever damage the tumor has done to her with your music, and that's a big if, isn't there a very real possibility that by playing God your actions might have unintended consequences?"

"What have we got to lose? I'm thinking that if I save her life I can worry about the ramifications later. Remember, it's my mother we're talking about now and I want her back!"

"When it comes to matters of life and death, I've always believed that it's very simple – you are, and then suddenly you aren't. She's still with us, so it's not like you're trying to raise her from the dead or anything as ghoulish as that. If nothing else, I guess it's possible your music might make her more comfortable if she's able to hear it. After all, that's why I gave her the CD player to listen to. Mind you, that's a far cry from curing her, of course. Look, give me a minute to think about this, will you?"

"That's the other thing that concerns me," I said. "She may not have much time left, and if there's any hope at all I have to go ahead with this right away. If I wait until it's too late then I'll never know if I could have saved her, will I? The only risk is that I'll end up looking like a fool in front of the nurses if nothing happens."

"You know something," Professor Howard said, "I wonder if maybe you might be on the right track. There is precedent for this, sort of. I know that music can affect various systems of the body, including memory, heart rate and breathing. Come to think of it, I recently heard about a study that showed how people drumming on hand drums produced an unusually high level of the immune cells that carry out search and destroy missions against

cells infected by viruses. It apparently works with cancer cells as well. If music can accomplish that much, then curing the damage from a brain tumor might also be remotely possible. Of course that's just a theory at the moment, since to the best of my knowledge nobody has ever done it."

"So how do I go about trying to save her?"

"I haven't got a clue. Perhaps you just have to envision the cure happening spontaneously inside her body as you create your music, although that's only an uneducated guess. You know, some people believe they've experienced spontaneous healings after swimming with dolphins, and that may serve as sort of a model for your efforts. I wonder if that might be the best approach?"

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean," I said.

"Well, dolphins have a knack for discovering people's injuries and disabilities using ultrasound produced by their natural sonar. Apparently they often seek out these trouble spots and touch them when they're swimming with humans, almost as if they were doctors treating a patient, and then direct their ultrasound through the water and into the person's body. Since we know ultrasound is used to treat sports injuries, the current theory is that the dolphins somehow treat certain injuries the same way."

"But how can I influence what's going on inside her body when all I know about the disease that's killing her is that it's called a brain tumor? I'm not a doctor."

"No, but we already know there's nothing a doctor can do for her anyway. You've got to think outside the box on this one. Look, scientists have determined that interactions with dolphins do create measurable differences in various parts of the human body, like the brain and the immune system, for instance. Nevertheless, they still have no idea if dolphins can actually heal more serious illnesses. If you're going to try to help your mother, I'd recommend that you emulate the dolphins by imagining that you're exploring her illness and then attacking it with your music. I know cancer patients are sometimes instructed to create images in their minds of little Pacmen moving through their bodies, devouring all the cancer cells in their path. In your mom's case you would have to repair the injury to her brain and then create new pathways in her neural networks so whatever damage has already been done can be repaired. I realize how strange this must sound, but is it starting to make sense to you at all?"

"Not really, but I still have to try."

"Of course. Just don't get your hopes up. I'm going to meet you at the hospital before you try this, if you don't mind. Okay if I bring Hanna along?"

"Sure. I could use some support as long as you think this won't upset her too much."

Professor Howard had given me much to think about as I rode my bike to the hospital. The nurses waved a greeting and ushered me directly into her room. My mother's condition had not changed since I'd last seen her, although she was in a private room now which probably wasn't a positive development. One of her feet had strayed from underneath the hospital blankets that covered her. It was ivory white and it looked lifeless, as if a mortician had already drained the blood from it.

I removed Professor Howard's headset from her ears and sat beside her to tell her what had happened since I'd last seen her, and to reminisce about old times. What a shame she wasn't able to talk to me, just when I needed her advice the most. I was beginning to realize just how much I was going to miss my mother if this attempt to heal her didn't work. At that moment, Hanna and her father walked into the room.

"I Googled tumors," Hanna said. "If you're looking for a way to visualize what you have to do, you might want to emulate an experimental technique I read about where they use high-intensity ultrasound like a microwave to cook tumors. The dead tissue is then absorbed by the body and eventually disappears."

"Good luck," her father said.

It was time. I acknowledged them with a nod of my head and then began moving my hands rhythmically over the theremin, which instantly came to life with its familiar green glow. This time I felt like I was more in control of the creative process because what emerged seemed to mirror my thoughts exactly.

I could tell that nobody else in the hospital could hear me because people walking past the door continued on their way without pausing. I finally kicked the door shut with my foot anyway so we'd have some privacy. I concentrated on reaching through the fog of my mother's unconsciousness in the same way as I had done with the Alzheimer's patient. It was even more difficult than I'd anticipated and my first attempts didn't seem to help. Somehow I had to find out where her essence was so I could reach out to her, heal her injuries and bring her back into my life. I watched her carefully for any sign that she was responding to my music.

The more I played, the more it seemed to envelop the two of us in a colorful protective cocoon that shielded us from the world outside. I instinctively understood that we were about to travel together to a place deep inside her mind, using the music as my surgical instrument. The journey, when it began, was like running through a maze, with frustrating dead ends and endless winding passageways that seemed devoid of any signs that my mother had ever passed that way. Each failure made me more determined to unlock the secret to awakening her, but the potential alternatives seemed endless and I sensed that time was running out. Could there be a shortcut? Was there another way of reaching her before it was too late?

I visualized tiny nanobot repair crews roaming inside her brain, microwaving the tumor with their rayguns until it was cooked to death and then seeking out damaged areas and replacing them with healthy cells. It took a while before I was satisfied that this could be effective, but as soon as I was sure I was headed in the right direction I cut loose with a medley of the wildest music I'd ever heard.

It was working! In just a matter of minutes her color gradually returned and her breathing became less and less labored. I finally stopped playing as her eyes opened and she looked around the room with a puzzled expression on her face.

"Andy?"

"It's okay, Mom. Take it easy."

"What happened? How did I end up here?"

"Brain tumor. You went into a coma back at the house but I'm sure you're going to be all right now."

Hanna rushed over and gave my mother a joyful hug and then looked over at me for an explanation.

"I don't know how it worked. It just did," I said.

Hanna's father walked over to the other side of the hospital bed and held his hand out for mom to hold. "It's good to see you again, Millie. How are you feeling?"

"Fine, I guess, considering that I just had a..."

She paused, her eyes transfixed on the theremin. "Ah, now I understand what must have happened. You used this to bring me back, didn't you?"

"I had to, Mom. It was the only way to save your life."

She closed her eyes, deep in thought, and for a moment I feared that she might have gone back into a coma. She managed to raise herself into a sitting position with a little help from Hanna and Professor Howard and then opened her eyes again.

She smiled at all of us and spoke in a surprisingly strong voice. "Andy, I've been trying to prepare myself for this moment since the day you were conceived. To be honest, I'd hoped it would never come to this, but now it has. I guess you're already aware that you were born with some unique abilities. Because of that your life is going to change dramatically in the next little while, but only if that's what you want to happen. It's important you understand that it's your decision to make and that you should do what's right for you. I just wish your father was here now to help you comprehend what I'm about to tell you."

"My father?"

"For reasons you'll understand soon enough, I could never reveal to you, or anyone else for that matter, the truth about who your father was. It's not easy to explain what occurred back then, and sometimes I'm not even sure I fully understand it myself. When I was your age something happened to me that changed me profoundly. To put it bluntly, your father abducted me from my house one night after stalking me. Sounds pretty revolting, doesn't it? Still, that's how you'd describe what happened in modern terminology, although back then it probably would have been called a plain old kidnapping."

"Are you saying you were raped?" Hanna asked incredulously. "Why didn't you tell the police about this after you escaped from him?"

"If only life were that simple, my dear," my mother said gently. "Oh, I was scared half to death at first, although I soon learned he had no intention of harming me, or making me do anything against my will for that matter. Far from it, in fact. I still don't know why he picked me to fall in love with, or what there was about me that attracted his attention in the first place, but he was definitely in love. I sensed that the minute I woke up beside him, and as I got to know him better over the next week or so I gradually came to reciprocate that love."

"Mom, how could you possibly fall in love with somebody who had kidnapped you?"

"You would understand how that could happen if you'd ever had a chance to meet your father, Andy. He was the most incredible person I ever encountered, and as soon as I got over being afraid I discovered he was charming and thoughtful. He courted me, in his fashion, and I have to admit, I found him quite irresistible. It was almost a case of love at first sight, if there's really such a thing."

"Sounds to me like we're talking Stockholm syndrome here, if you don't mind me saying so," Hanna said.

"Ah, the story of the hostage who ended up sympathizing with her hostage-taker," my mother said with a smile. "Given the bizarre circumstances, that's a reasonable theory, but the reality was much different. Let me start from the beginning and perhaps you'll understand where I'm coming from. I went to bed one night and the next thing I remember was waking up inside a spaceship. He was sitting there beside me, looking directly into my eyes, and I screamed so loud I almost deafened myself."

She looked at the expressions on our faces and began laughing. "And yes, I know exactly what you're thinking right now, and I don't blame you. Sounds like something you might read in a supermarket tabloid, doesn't it? World War II bomber spotted on moon's surface. That kind of garbage."

"You aren't hallucinating, are you Mom? I mean, you've just been through a serious illness."

"No, but I sure thought I was hallucinating when I woke up that night, I can tell you. Your father smiled and assured me that he meant me no harm, and then gradually introduced me to his world."

"But Millie, he was a freaking alien!" Derek Howard said as he reached over and tucked a pillow behind her head to make her more comfortable. "How could you stand being touched by him? It's unnatural!"

She smiled at him. "He was an alien, yes, but he didn't look all that different from us. In fact, after I finally began to relax I felt very comfortable being around him. He showed me many things that I couldn't begin to describe to you, but mostly we just communicated with each other, the same way two normal people on a first date would begin a relationship."

"Except he was an alien," I said incredulously.

"To be honest, after a while it didn't seem to matter. He treated me with respect and shared his innermost feelings with me. What more could a woman ask for? I trusted him, and before I knew it I had fallen in love with him. Later, when he explained that all this had happened because he wanted an heir, the idea seemed logical enough. Of course nothing in life is ever that simple, and our relationship was no exception."

"Meaning this was only an alien's version of a one-night stand?" Hanna said.

"No, it wasn't like that at all. He was dying. Actually, to be precise, his soul was dying. He wasn't sad about it, or angry. In fact, he seemed to be looking forward to death, almost as if it was a logical conclusion to his existence. And what a life he'd had! I gather he was something of an anomaly where he came from because he was born with some very unique

qualities that Andy has apparently inherited.”

“So if he was an alien, and I share his genes, why don’t I look like a freak? I mean, am I going to start growing tentacles or something?”

“No,” she said, laughing. “From what he told me, his people have been visiting Earth ever since we evolved, sharing DNA and heaven only knows what else with us, although it’s more DNA of the soul than DNA as we understand it. I do know that in many respects he was as human as we are except for one very important difference, and this is where it gets complicated. Through some freak of nature the unique combination of his human and alien attributes mutated in a way his people couldn’t replicate, and he was born with a genetic makeup that was related somehow to the vibrations that created the universe. He couldn’t explain to me how or why that happened because he didn’t know. The bottom line is that everything that exists is based on and controlled by vibrations, or I guess a better term would be frequency, but don’t ask me to explain how that works. I do know he and his music had the ability to manipulate that crucial frequency that is the basis of our existence, which in effect made him the most powerful force in the universe.”

“What exactly did he do with all these incredible powers?” Hanna asked. “And what does that have to do with Andy’s ability to play the theremin?”

“Everything. The fact that Andy was able to cure my tumor means that he’s obviously inherited some or all of his father’s unique abilities, and that’s obviously a positive development, even though those abilities were both a curse and a blessing to his father. The music he created was extremely powerful in ways that defy our understanding. According to what he told me, his role was more like a goodwill ambassador most of the time. He had assembled kind of a traveling roadshow that moved from place to place throughout the universe, performing, mentoring and basically doing whatever needed to be done. He solved problems, negotiated an end to disputes and generally entertained while showcasing the kinds of qualities and values he and the people from his planet stood for. You see, all worlds have one thing in common aside from vibrating at the same frequency: music. Sometimes he just used his gift to entertain, although in his case that might mean playing for an audience of different life forms numbered in the billions. His ability transcends any particular species or language, which is handy because during his lifetime he ended up exploring many different areas of the universe and introducing his music to countless new civilizations.”

“So he was more than just a musician then, wasn’t he?” the professor said.

“Absolutely. The fact that he had this unique ability meant that he had the power to influence what happened in the universe, or at least the parts of it he was familiar with. He could communicate with different species, restore harmony to entire planets or mediate disputes between warring galaxies. It was one heck of a neat job according to him, and he loved doing it. His existence apparently had a stabilizing effect on the universe, establishing a kind of balance of power that convinced different factions that there would be no point in fighting each other.”

"Why wouldn't he marry someone on his own planet if he was so desperate for an heir?" Hanna asked.

"He tried. In fact, he told me he'd already fathered a son with another woman. Unfortunately that child never inherited the particular gift he himself was born with. I didn't have a chance to meet his son because just before the two of us got together something terrible had happened to his part of the universe. As best he could determine, a faction he referred to as the 'Disruptors' had managed to conquer his home planet while he was away. They had apparently invaded most of the area of the universe he was familiar with, and as a result he lost contact with everyone he knew, including his son. I could tell he was devastated by the loss because when he told me about it he had tears in his eyes. It was really the only time I saw him express any sadness."

"So Andy was kind of a designer baby," Hanna said, "like those parents who give birth to a child so it'll be compatible for a bone marrow transplant for an older sibling with leukemia?"

"That sounds so harsh, but yes, that was his intention. As far as he knew there was nobody else in the universe that could do what he did. When I became pregnant he hoped this unique ability would be passed on to our child. He was upfront about it and I understood exactly what was involved. Andy, your father gave me a choice, and after some thought I decided it was the right thing to do. Like those parents with the designer baby, it doesn't mean I love you any less even though I knew there was a chance you'd inherit some rather incredible qualities from him. It's your birthright, and it's up to you, and you alone, to decide what you want to do with it."

"If this is genetic, then are you saying the music comes from me and not the theremin?"

"Exactly. The theremin is just a tutor your father left behind to teach you the skills you'll need to master if you decide to follow in his footsteps. I'd read about theremins somewhere and figured it would be a convenient form for the device to assume because nobody would take any notice of it."

"Sort of hiding in plain sight," I said. "Very clever. So is it just a musical instrument, basically?"

"Much more than that. It's also programmed to make sure you don't do anything stupid with your talent, like accidentally destroy the planet, until you learn its strengths and limitations. Sort of like a circuit breaker in an electrical panel. Your father said the theremin would be able to determine whether or not you have the gift as soon as you touched it, and then you would have to decide what to do next. Obviously you must have inherited his abilities or I wouldn't be here talking to you now."

"So why didn't the theremin test him earlier?" Hanna asked. "If we hadn't stumbled across it in the attic, Andy might never have had the opportunity to try it out."

"Yeah, and it would have been nice to know the truth about my father a little sooner," I said quietly.

"Your father was particularly keen on making sure you had the opportunity to mature and grow up before you had to deal with all the responsibilities that accompany this special ability of yours. His people

discovered the fact that he was born different at an early age so he never had the chance to experience whatever passes for a normal childhood where he came from. He didn't want that to happen to you. There was nothing I could do to prepare you for this, other than to raise you the best I could and hope that you turned out okay. I like to think I did a pretty good job. Besides, it was important that the Disruptors didn't discover your existence before you had a chance to grow up. That's the reason I could never allow you to sing or learn any musical instruments."

"So that's why you forced Andy to lip-synch when the rest of our class was singing together back in the second grade?" Hanna asked.

"Exactly. Had he got himself too deeply involved in music he might have accidentally managed to stumble across the unique talents he'd inherited before he was ready to handle them. His father's enemies would have detected that and then they would have come after him."

"So, hopefully we still have some time left before all this happens?" Hanna's father asked.

"I don't think so," she said. "My memory of that last night in the kitchen is a little vague, but from what Andy told me about his encounter with Hugo I assumed he'd just let the cat out of the bag by using his special abilities to help the elephant. That's all it would take according to what his father told me. They know he exists now, and they'll eventually attack, although from what his father said they'll check him out pretty carefully before making their final move."

"They've already started that," I said quietly, which caused my mother to nod knowingly.

"So why didn't they come after his father while he was still alive?" Professor Howard asked.

"They're cowards," she said. "The Disruptors were deathly afraid of Andy's father because he was the only one in the universe who could thwart their plans. He told me they were probably holed up somewhere, gaining strength and regrouping after their first encounter with him, waiting for some kind of an advantage before they attacked again. What ended up happening was their version of MAD, you know, the Mutually Assured Destruction scenario we all grew up with during the cold war, where neither of them could defeat the other without destroying the universe, at least until one of them developed an edge that would give them a decisive advantage. They had no way to know that his father was dead, but if they detected Andy using powers identical to his, and determined that he was not yet as capable as his father, then they might have been tempted to attack him before he had a chance to hone and perfect those skills. "

"I don't understand how Andy could have inherited this incredible ability, solely because of his genes," Hanna said. "This is just too strange."

"I don't understand how it works either," my mother said. "His father told me that all of his experiences would be locked inside Andy's genes but that was no guarantee that he'd be able to access them. That's not as off the wall as it sounds. I've done some research over the years and I learned that many scientists believe the ability to appreciate music has been part of our biological heritage since the beginning of mankind. Apparently it exists in

several different structures of the brain. The capability of making music may have evolved as part of the process of reproduction and survival, just like problem solving or speech. So Andy's gift may just be another genetic variation, but a variation of a far higher order."

"If I'm so special, why do I feel so ordinary?" I asked.

"Andy, you have no idea how unique you really are. As was the case with your father, this music comes directly from your soul, for lack of a better term. The soul I'm talking about has nothing to do with religion as far as I know, and it might be more accurate to refer to it as your essence. No, your gift comes from a place that even your father's people didn't understand, despite the fact that their technology is obviously far more advanced than ours."

"So, that means nobody could clone him," Hanna said.

"No, they couldn't, because this ability can't simply be duplicated through DNA or whatever sophisticated building blocks they had access to. Andy's father was obviously a very important person in their world and there was constant pressure for him to provide his people with a successor, especially when it became clear that he was dying. That he picked me to be the mother of his child was no accident because he told me he'd been watching me for years and knew everything about me. He never did explain why I was his choice, but as Andy grew up I eventually understood what an honor it was."

"What happened when you returned home?" Hanna asked. "Had Andy's grandfather died by that point?"

My mother hesitated, and then wiped a tear from her cheek. "That's when everything started to go wrong. I hadn't been able to phone home, of course, because we'd been off exploring Europa, and it honestly never occurred to me that there would be a problem. The plan was that the two of us would meet my dad so he'd at least know who the father of his grandchild was. We weren't going to tell him about the alien thing, of course. It seemed so logical at the time, believe it or not, and I just thought everything would be fine after that. Pretty naïve, eh? Anyway, Dad must have assumed by then that something horrible had happened to me after I'd been missing for that length of time. When we appeared on his doorstep, unannounced, he collapsed with a heart attack."

"How horrible for you," Hanna said.

"It was a nightmare. Andy's father wasn't able to use his powers to revive him, because he was in bad shape by then himself. He probably wouldn't have considered trying anything like that anyway because that would have alerted the Disruptors to his condition and location and left him vulnerable to an attack. We did the best we could but there was obviously nothing we could have done to save my father's life. I called an ambulance, of course, but it was too late. I felt horribly guilty about him dying that way, and I still do."

"What happened to Andy's father?" Professor Howard asked.

"As I was waiting for the ambulance he simply faded away, almost like a ghost, and within seconds he had completely disappeared. They're the opposite of humans in that their bodies disappear when their essence dies

instead of the other way around, although in the end it still amounts to the same thing: death."

"That must have been very traumatic," I said, "watching the people you loved the most die right there in front of you. Wasn't there anyone you could turn to for help?"

She smiled at Professor Howard. "No, not really, although Derek was wonderful to me. He was pretty much my best friend back then but I couldn't tell him or anybody else what had happened to me. Who'd have believed me anyway? The horrible rumors about me were all over the map but I just ignored the gossip and eventually it died down. It was pretty lonely, but I knew my baby was on the way and that made life bearable."

"Mom, I don't think I appreciated how much you sacrificed in order to raise me until I found out I was going to lose you."

"You were worth it, you know. Besides, that's what mothers do."

"Now that I've learned the truth about how I came into the world, I've obviously got to make some important decisions. Like, for instance, what am I supposed to do next?"

"You have some tough choices ahead of you, and you probably won't have much time before the Disruptors come after you."

"Hang on a second," Hanna said. "Does this have anything to do with the blackness that seems to be darkening the universe all around us? And is it related to those signals SETI has been studying?"

"Then they're already here," my mother said quietly. "I don't know anything about those signals, but this bit about the darkness is exactly the kind of scenario Andy's father predicted. I'm surprised it's happening so quickly, though."

"So these really are aliens, and they pose some kind of threat to us?" Professor Howard asked incredulously.

"Oh yes, that'll be the Disruptors. It can't be a coincidence that this would be happening right after Andy used his unique talents for the first time. His dad apparently had some kind of a showdown with them just before we met and forced them to back off temporarily. It took every bit of strength he had since he was so sick then, and he hoped to buy his heir as much time as possible. He assumed they hadn't figured out that he was dying, so thanks to this MAD business I mentioned he was pretty sure they wouldn't come here looking for trouble until they were ready for a return match. I was really hoping we'd have more time."

"So this blackness that currently seems to be choking out the universe is caused by the Disruptors?" Hanna asked.

"I'm afraid so. He wasn't sure if the darkness is actually the physical representation of what they are or just a subset of their entity, a living substance they create while disabling and then conquering other planets and species."

"So what exactly are they?" the professor asked.

"He didn't know much about their composition," my mother said. "If I understood him correctly, everything in the universe is comprised of tiny vibrating fundamental strings, by and large existing in harmony until recently. He believed the fundamental resonant frequency of the Disruptors

is different than that of everything else in the universe for some reason.”

“In other words,” I said, “they don’t belong here?”

“Probably not. The Disruptors had been gradually conquering various areas of the universe for a while before I met your father, one area at a time, leaving all life forms they encounter in a state of stasis that nobody has ever managed to overcome. Your father believed that they thrive on chaos and fear, and although he managed to defeat them temporarily he never managed to learn much about them.”

“So what’s the end game?” Hanna asked.

“Andy’s father believed that their intention, once they had absolute control over the entire universe, was to reshape everything in their image which would mean remaking the universe into a form consistent with their own fundamental resonant frequency.”

“Which would mean that life as we know it would cease to exist?” Hanna said quietly.

“Yes,” she responded.

“How do we stop this from happening?” I asked.

“From his studies of their activities, your father theorized that the Disruptors would probably have only one opportunity to initiate this violent transition because it would require the expenditure of all their life energy and, like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar to a butterfly, once they started they were irrevocably committed to either completing the process or dying. He suspected that they would potentially be vulnerable to counterattack during the transition but that was just an educated guess on his part. I know this is important because he repeated it several times, hoping that you would eventually use this information to carry on the fight after he was gone.”

“Which would explain why they were afraid of him, wouldn’t it?” Hanna said. “With him still around they could never take the chance and begin the end game because his intervention might be enough to stop them in their tracks, possibly even kill them in the process.”

“That’s the theory, yes,” she said. “Andy, for what it’s worth, I could tell that he felt horrible about dropping this in your lap, knowing that you might suddenly find yourself with the fate of the universe quite literally resting in your hands. He desperately wanted to be around for your upbringing because he hoped that you would have a happier childhood than he did before you were thrust into this role. Because he was dying he trusted me to carry out his last wishes, and I hope he’d have been proud of the man you’ve turned out to be. I know I am.”

“So what do I do now?” I asked as I hugged her.

My mother thought for a moment. “Go to his ship. You’ll be safe there and it’ll give you a chance to learn more about your strengths and abilities in order to prepare yourself for the Disruptors.”

“His ship?”

“Your father left his space ship in the garage, and it’s yours now.”

“In our garage?” I said. “I’ve been inside the garage and there’s nothing there.”

“It’s disguised as an antique Bowlus trailer at the moment,” she replied, “but you’ll soon discover that what you see is not necessarily what

you get.”

“So we’ve had a flying saucer sitting in our garage all these years in the shape of a trailer?” I said. “Awesome!”

“Clever disguise, wasn’t it? I suggested the trailer idea to him since a neighbor had one and it looked innocuous enough. It was an ironic choice, when you think about it, since your father used to wander around the universe accompanied by what he described as a traveling road show. Andy, only you can activate the trailer. I have no idea how all their technology works, so I can’t help you there, but I’m sure you’ll be able to figure it out. You just have to tell it to open its door and apparently the theremin will take care of the rest.”

“I guess there’s no manual that comes with this space ship?” Hanna asked.

“In a sense, yes, there is. Basically, you give the ship specific instructions and it’ll automatically transport you wherever you want to go. Traveling is really a very simple process in some ways, although obviously I really don’t have the foggiest idea how it works. Later, when I get a chance, I can show you what little I learned about his space ship during my trip but I’m way too weak to travel at the moment. Andy, why don’t you take Hanna and Derek with you and try it out?”

“Go ahead, Hanna,” her father said. “I’m staying here with Millie.”

“Hang on a second, Mom. Don’t you think the four of us should stick together, given the fact that we have no idea what’s going to happen next with these Disruptors?”

“If it’ll make you feel any better, I promise you that I’ll join you as soon as possible. The ship is a sort of refuge for you, by the way. I know from my conversations with your father that the Disruptors never managed to penetrate the ship back when they had their confrontation, although he wasn’t sure how long it would hold out if they really got serious about trying to destroy it.”

“In other words,” Hanna’s father said, “if Andy isn’t able to send these folks packing there won’t be anyplace in the universe that’s safe other than the inside of that trailer, and even that may not be enough to protect him.”

“Exactly.”

“What if Andy decides not to get involved in this dispute?” Hanna said. “What happens then?”

“Well, in the event the Disruptors decide not to attack us for some reason, and if Andy chooses to stay here on Earth, then I guess life goes on as usual. If nothing else I expect he could have an interesting career as a musician here. It would be a terrible waste in some ways because there’s so much he could accomplish elsewhere, but that’s ultimately his decision to make. And your decision too, of course, if you two choose to spend the rest of your lives with each other. I’d always hoped you would get together at some point, you know.”

“Don’t go there, Mom!” I said, blushing.

“It’s something the two of us will have to talk about in the near future, when the time is right,” Hanna said, brushing the topic to one side with a dismissive gesture. “So, what if he does get involved in his father’s dispute

with these Disruptors and convinces them to change their ways? When you talk him about accomplishing things elsewhere, exactly what are you referring to?"

"Well, first he could visit his father's side of the family and perhaps learn more about his potential role on their world. It would be one heck of an experience, and of course he'd be free to return here whenever he wants to. His father's people are more civilized than we are, apparently, and they'll never try to make him do anything he doesn't want to. You could join him if you like, Hanna. Just don't forget, I'm counting on you folks coming back here for vacations if you do decide to leave. For one thing, I'll want to meet my grandkids."

Now it was Hanna's turn to blush. "I think it's way too early to start talking about us having kids."

"Sorry, I was just thinking out loud," my mother said with a grin.

"You should get some rest after everything you've been through, but before we leave there's something that's been bugging me ever since we looked inside your family albums," Hanna said. "I noticed that all the pictures of you were removed, and neither of us could figure out why."

My mother grinned. "Yeah, I can guess how that must have looked to you. It's simple, really. After I arrived home, the authorities and the reporters wouldn't leave me alone. My picture was everywhere for a while, in the papers and on the TV newscasts, and after the first few times I started to get nauseous every time I saw it. In my mind those pictures always had a fiery red glow, and pretty soon it was driving me crazy."

"Hang on a second, Mom. That was because of your synesthesia, right?"

"Exactly. I've always associated colors with different things, like sounds and letters, for instance, but I never told anybody about it. Except for you, of course. After a while I got used to it and it never bothered me. I didn't even know they had a name for this weirdness until you told me you had the same problem. Then I did some research and we learned about synesthesia together."

"You have no idea how important it was to find out we had this in common back then," I said. "It made all the weirdness so much easier to deal with."

"In my case, I ended up getting rid of all the pictures of myself and my synesthesia soon receded into the background again. I hoped you'd eventually find a way to deal with your synesthesia on your own."

"He seems to be managing all right at the moment," Hanna said with a grin. "We should get going. This place is really starting to get to me."

"Don't you worry about Millie," Professor Howard said. "I'll make sure the doctors check her over, and then the four of us will get together and talk about the future."

"Your father's right. Instead of waiting here, why don't the two of you hit the road," my mother said. "I'll have to ask how a healthy patient checks out of this place now that I won't be leaving in a hearse."

Hanna kissed her on the cheek, but when I bent over to do the same she held up her hand to stop me.

"I'm sorry, son. I know all of this must come as a shock to you, but as you learn more about your heritage I hope you'll eventually begin to understand my relationship with your father. Now why don't you drop by the trailer and have a look around inside. There's a lot you will have to learn and I'm afraid we may not have much more time."

At that moment her doctor pushed the door open impatiently and swept into the room. "Sorry if I'm interrupting something."

He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw my mother. "What the..."

Derek Howard smiled. "It's a long story, doctor. If you'd care to give your patient a thorough examination to confirm what you can see with your own eyes, I'll wait out in the hallway."

The doctor just stood there with a shocked look on his face and didn't seem to notice Hanna grab my arm and pull me out of the room.

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