

CHAPTER 19

"I'm sorry Andy. He didn't make it."

"What happened?" I said as tears started to well up in my eyes. Hanna was listening, and put her arm around me as soon as she heard the tone of my voice.

"Hugo showed up, just like you said, and I let him in through the front gate like a normal paying customer. He made his way to the elephant facility on his own and marched in like he owned the place. All the other elephants calmed down as soon as they saw him so I thought everything would be okay once the earth stopped moving, but it just seemed to go on and on."

"I thought the zoo would be the safest place for him, and it turns out the warehouse he was in collapsed right after he left."

"You made the right decision, then, and he should have been safe but I screwed up," the guard said. "When these tremors started getting worse I panicked and left the enclosure in a hurry. I guess I didn't close the gate properly on my way out, and apparently the baby decided to make a run for it. I went back a minute later when I'd calmed down a bit and that's when I realized he'd escaped. When I saw Hugo running out the gate I followed him because I figured he would know where the baby was, and sure enough he did."

David paused to compose himself. "The little guy had hidden inside a cinderblock workshop. It started to collapse as the tremors worsened and he was trapped under a steel beam. He didn't look like he was hurt that bad but I could see he was having trouble breathing. Hugo barged inside what was left of the workshop, pushed aside as much of the debris as he could, then grabbed the steel beam with his trunk and held it up until the little one here managed to crawl out. He held onto it until he knew the baby was safe and then I guess his heart must have given out from the strain of all that lifting because he just collapsed right then and there. I think he was probably dead before he hit the ground because he didn't move at all after that. Jeez Andy, I'm really sorry about this."

"Honestly David, there was nothing you could have done to save him," I said as I ended the call. I looked over at Hanna, who was crying softly, and told her how Hugo had died. She buried her face in my shoulder as my own tears welled up. My mother stood beside me and comforted me as we watched the sunset.

As darkness arrived a few minutes later, I could see the stars twinkling overhead in the night sky and I paused for a second to contemplate just how beautiful they were. At that moment I realized that the universe was singing in harmony and I was able to hear and see and feel the pulse of the core vibrating energy of creation. Now it all fell into place like the pieces of a puzzle and it all made sense to me. I was acutely aware that any limitations I'd felt while growing up were now obsolete, to say the least, and I wondered if I was capable of taking advantage of this opportunity. As I gazed up at the stars the future seemed to offer limitless possibilities, although I knew from

experience that nothing was ever that simple.

"Andy, are they really gone for good?" my mother asked, diverting my thoughts from what I had just experienced.

"They definitely are," I said. "I still don't know exactly what they were, or why they were so vicious, but I do know for sure that they don't exist anymore."

"So it's finally over," she said. "Your dad would be very proud of you."

"You did the right thing," Hanna's father said quietly. "You have some big decisions ahead of you now. If you choose to follow in your father's footsteps you could begin by exploring the universe and playing your music wherever you find an audience. Obviously that's what your dad was hoping you'd do, and it's certainly the opportunity of a lifetime, but only if you believe it's right for you."

"You had to use your gift as a weapon," my mother said, "but I hope you won't let that discourage you. This is a wonderful opportunity, but I'll be just as proud of you if you decide to stay here and be a normal person. Like Derek said, it's got to be your decision."

"You do have some interesting options," Professor Howard continued. "You might want to stay on Earth and play your music for audiences here. I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that you'd become rich and famous virtually overnight, given the unique qualities of your music. Hey, you'd be bigger than any rock star!"

"I sort of like the sound of that," I said. "Still, it would definitely be a case of taking the easy way out, wouldn't it? I mean, all modesty aside, it would be like the best hockey player in the world deciding to confine himself to playing road hockey with the neighborhood kids."

"I agree it would be a terrible waste," Hanna said, "but it's an option you should at least consider. There is one other possibility. At this point, since very few people actually know about your special gift, not to mention your role in the crisis today, you could probably just park the theremin in your closet for a few years and go on with your life as if all this had never happened."

"Hardly realistic," her father said. "You can't put this particular genie back in the bottle. There'll be investigations into what occurred today, and they'll find out about Andy sooner or later. We'd all be looking over our shoulders, expecting the authorities to kick down our doors at any moment."

"I agree with Derek," my mother said. "I must admit, it would be nice to have you around the house for a few more years so you could live a normal life. It was an option your father never had, but realistically I don't think that's going to happen now. Still, whatever you decide, you know I'll back you all the way."

"Andy," Professor Howard said, "it would be understandable if you decided to hold off on making a decision about your future, after what you've been through. I must tell you, however, that you handled yourself magnificently today. If you do choose to head out into space there's no doubt in my mind that you're up for the challenge."

I turned to Hanna. "So, I've got some decisions to make. It would help if I knew what your plans were."

"I'd like to go to university, but..."

"What if I decide to do some traveling?"

She smiled and entwined her arm with mine. "I suppose I could postpone my education for a few years to explore the universe with you."

"I'm very proud of the two of you and how you reacted to the crisis this afternoon," her father said. "Most importantly, Andy, I'm confident that you'll always take good care of my daughter. Like your mother said, you'll always have our support and love no matter what happens."

"Thanks," I said, "to both of you. To tell you the truth, I'm inclined to fire up the trailer and explore the rest of the universe but it would be nice if I knew a little more about what I'm doing before I head out. If I had a how-to manual for these abilities of mine then it might just save us going through another incident like the one with the Disruptors."

"There are no guarantees that it'll be safe, you know," my mother said.

"Given the crime rate around here, I suspect we'll probably be safer out in space than if we were living and working in the big city," I said, trying to project confidence when really I was still extremely uncomfortable with the prospect of leaving home.

"You know, if we don't stop embarrassing him with all this adulation and get a move on, we're going to be late for the prom," Hanna said. "But first you've got to do something with the trailer."

"Yeah, it would probably be best to hide it in the garage again until I figure out exactly what we're going to do with it," I said.

"Aren't you going to change first?" my mother asked.

"I wouldn't worry about that," Professor Howard said. "What with all this excitement, I expect most of the kids won't have bothered to get dressed up for tonight. It's even possible the prom might have been cancelled."

"But the fight with the Disruptors is over now," my mother said. "People will get on with their lives and put this behind them."

"Not necessarily," Professor Howard said. "After all the chaos the planet has just endured, I'm guessing most people are going to be pretty freaked out once scientists identify the source of that chaos as being extraterrestrial. Don't forget, we've just been confronted with direct evidence that there were aliens out there willing to destroy our world even though we did nothing to provoke their attack. That's got to be unsettling for people, given the fact that many of us still haven't come to terms with the ongoing terrorist threats from our more conventional enemies."

"Dad's right," Hanna said. "Drudge's web site is very active at the moment. There are already numerous theories about what caused this crisis and there are already attempts to blame this on the government. The death toll is remarkably low, which is incredible given the amount of chaos and confusion there was during the encounters with the Disruptors, so I guess it could have been worse."

"Sooner or later somebody is going to figure this out, or at least come up with an intelligent guess," her father said.

"Yeah, scientists on my blog have already begun to speculate that the

attack might have been related to the signals SETI detected, and it's only a matter of time before they connect the dots and confirm that alien life forms were responsible. It'll be the biggest story of the century."

"How sad that all those people had to die," my mother mused as tears appeared at the corners of her eyes. Hanna's father gently escorted her inside the trailer. He glanced at his watch as the door began to close behind us and turned to his daughter. "If we hurry, you two should still be able to get to the prom on time."

I left the trailer in our garage and the two of us started walking hand in hand down darkened streets. I could see that in the south end of the city there were a few streetlights still functioning, but this area was dark except for a few houses with candles lighting up their living rooms. As we approached the main entrance to the gym, Hanna pointed to the windows. "Oh, no! After all we've been through today, and now the lights are out. If the prom's been cancelled, I'm going to scream."

Officer Daniels, in plainclothes, approached just then with his flashlight, leading a small group of our classmates. "Hi guys. You're just in time. I don't suppose you brought flashlights or candles with you?"

"Sorry, but we've been a little busy for the last few hours. What's happening?" Hanna asked.

"You mean aside from the fact that Earth almost self-destructed today?" the cop said, laughing. "The power's been off around here ever since the world suddenly started going berserk, although they say it might be back on within a day or too. We had a wild day at the department and I thought for a while that they were going to make me work overtime tonight, but my boss let me off when things finally started to quiet down. I somehow ended up becoming the official prom chaperone so follow me to the festivities."

As we were escorted into the gym, which was dimly lit by candles on the tables, I heard the sound of an engine starting outside and moments later a set of portable lights on a stand in the middle of the gym lit the place up.

"Somebody brought along a generator from home," Officer Daniels said. "Should be enough juice to run the band's instruments so we might be listening to live rock and roll tonight. Now at least we won't have to depend on flashlights to see where we're going."

Hanna and I grabbed a corner table as various people from our class began straggling in, many of them carrying food and drinks. We each poured ourselves a glass of orange juice and quietly toasted Hugo and my father.

It was chaotic but most of the partygoers seemed upbeat after surviving the events of the day. Everybody was talking about their experiences, of course, and most were speculating wildly about the source of the disastrous incidents. Nobody had a clue about how it happened, or who was responsible, but that didn't stop them from creating and then spreading rumors. Two classmates with drinks in their hands sat down at our table and began arguing about the day's events after saying quick hellos.

One of them was adamant that extraterrestrial visitors must have been involved. "Anybody who wasn't hiding under a table in their basement while all this was happening knows that aliens must have been behind this.

There's no natural phenomenon on Earth that could explain how these events occurred, and only an idiot would think otherwise."

"You can call me any names you like," the second said after taking a sip of his drink, "but when the truth is finally told you'll realize how close the planet came to self-destructing because of a huge government conspiracy, aided and abetted by their corporate sponsors from beginning to end. Our fearless leaders must have decided that the world needed a new crisis because things were just too peaceful, so they unleashed their PSYOPS troops to create havoc around the world. Everyone knows the military is always looking for a new excuse to buy more toys. That's why they cooked up this near disaster in order to scare us into increasing their military budgets."

"Perhaps you're still thinking in terms of the Vietnam war?" the first student said. "Because, you realize, as far as conspiracy theories go this kind of urban legend is certainly showing its age nowadays. Explain how the entire world got tinnitus suddenly, or how the military, which basically still fight their wars with bullets and bombs, could create a vibration the almost destroys the entire Earth in a matter of minutes and then make it disappear just as quickly?"

"So you're suggesting it makes more sense to blame alien invaders for what happened? Give me a break!" the second said as he shook his head from side to side in disbelief.

"When you eliminate all the other possibilities, then yeah, the theory begins to make sense. You must have heard the weird music that started playing this afternoon. Everybody else in the world seems to have listened to it and they all agree that they've never heard anything remotely like it before. The military are good at fighting wars but when it comes to music their assets are restricted to a few marching bands that I guarantee can't play that kind of music."

"Maybe not, but that doesn't mean their friends in the CIA didn't cook this up for them. They all work together against us, you know."

Another classmate who'd been standing nearby and eavesdropping on the conversation finally decided to join them at their table. "You're both wrong," he said. "This was all just a case of mass hysteria. People just imagined it was happening and panicked. All the wild rumors that started up this afternoon made it worse. Rumors like the ones you're spreading right now, in fact."

I surreptitiously moved my hands over the theremin which was on the floor beside me. At that moment the cell phones of all three of the debaters began playing the same kind of music. The music continued to get louder as the three of them frantically scrambled to turn their phones off. Nothing seemed to work and everybody in the gym was watching them now. One of them was so frustrated that he dropped it on the floor and repeatedly stomped on it. Even that failed to end the music, which continued to play from the pile of parts until I grew tired of the game and stopped it. Hanna was laughing out loud but the three debaters were oblivious to her as they kept trying to understand what had just happened. I steered Hanna to a nearby empty table and borrowed a couple of cans of pop from a cooler.

She smiled at me. "That little trick was cool."

"It was payback for all the near misses I had on my bike while dodging erratic drivers talking on their cell phones."

"You're obviously getting less bashful about showing off this little talent you inherited. Any reason why you couldn't play a little music for our classmates tonight?"

"Maybe it's time to make my debut," I said. "Are you okay with this, Hanna?"

"Go for it!"

I placed the theremin on a chair in front of me, and with a wave of my hands over the instrument I began playing. I briefly watched the looks on people's faces as they realized the music was coming from me and then ignored them to concentrate on what I was doing. I incorporated harmless versions of some of the melodies I had used during the war with the Disruptors, just so anybody who was paying attention would realize that I'd played a role in repelling their attacks that day. Within minutes, my curious classmates had surrounded me.

I played continuously for well over an hour. Every song was original in that it was created subconsciously as I played. Although it wasn't based on anything I'd ever heard before, most of the people there seemed to enjoy what they were hearing, judging by the rapt expressions on their faces. In fact many of them eventually started to dance, which was strange to watch because they all seemed to be dancing to different music and different rhythms.

By the time I finally dropped my hands to my side, sweat was dripping from my forehead and I felt exhausted. The experience was exhilarating and I had to admit I especially enjoyed the applause and appreciation from the crowd. I was even asked to sign several autographs, which made me feel ridiculous. Fame really could become a narcotic, I decided, and I wondered for a moment how Hanna would cope if she was relegated to a supporting role backstage as my career flourished. When I'd finally had enough adulation from my fans the two of us visited the well-stocked snack table and ate handfuls of tiny sandwiches and some vegetables with dip.

"Now that you've experienced how it feels to perform in front of an appreciative audience," Hanna said, "are you still considering leaving? You've seen their reaction here tonight. Now imagine a huge stadium full of fans screaming out your name. It's your chance to be a star if that's what you really want."

"I honestly don't know what to think," I said. "If I did decide to stay here and perform, I'm guessing I'd probably burn out pretty quickly. The money would be great, and I'm sure the applause would be good for my ego, but then what? Sure, I could do some ads and appearances and hold concerts to support charities but in the end I'd probably just end up wasting this gift I inherited."

"True enough," she said thoughtfully.

"On the other hand, I figure there's probably plenty of good I could do around the universe once I learned the ropes. This may sound naive but maybe there's a chance I could actually make the world a better place."

"I think you already have," she said, smiling. "And yes, there's lots you could do out there. Sure you still want my company while you're doing it?"

"More than ever," I replied while looking into her eyes and smiling. She wrapped her arms around my waist and kissed me on the lips. At that moment a student who had just walked outside for a smoke break ran back into the gym. "Come and take a look! You're not going to believe what's out there!"

We all joined him on the lawn and stared at the spectacle unfolding over our heads. It was a huge spacecraft, so enormous that it dominated the entire night sky far above us. It was no flying saucer, however. Instead, it seemed to be made up of hundreds of different shapes and configurations. It was as if a child's box of plastic toys had been left in the sun and melted together. The entire craft was illuminated by thousands of lights, some flashing, others shining like beacons in all directions. As I stared into the night sky, more and more objects of varying sizes and shapes began appearing around it until finally there were millions of them filling the sky from horizon to horizon.

"Are they hostile?" Hanna asked.

"No, I don't think so," I replied. "I'm not getting any of the ominous sensations that I got when the Disruptors were after me. In fact, I'm not getting any weird vibes from them at all, and I don't feel the least bit threatened at the moment."

I began to hear a variety of sounds descending from the heavens. At first it consisted of just a few isolated noises, some of them resembling music, but soon the air around us was vibrating with a cacophony of discordant melodies that seemed to be competing for my attention. While it wasn't loud enough to damage my eardrums, at least not yet, it was extremely unpleasant to listen to and the flood of colors that accompanied it threatened to overwhelm my concentration.

"I bet they heard your concert," Hanna said. She had to yell to make herself heard.

I thought for a few seconds and then raised my hands above the theremin. As I did so, the noise from above ceased instantly and the sudden silence after all that racket made me flinch. I quickly regained my composure and began playing music that seemed to spring from my subconscious spontaneously, only this time, instead of entertaining an audience, I was composing a message for an entire universe. I tried to force myself to ignore the difficulty of attempting to communicate with such a diverse gathering of life forms. Instead, I concentrated on crafting a message that would tell each and every one of them who I was and what I stood for while at the same time allowing for differences in how different species would perceive what I was trying to say.

After the first few notes I was interrupted by a loud, obnoxious-sounding noise from one of the ships. I stopped momentarily, perplexed, until I realized they weren't heckling me. It took me a few seconds to understand that the alien was actually attempting to get me to lighten up a bit and play what was in my heart instead of attempting to preach a sermon

through my music. My message, they said, would be communicated more thoroughly if my audience didn't feel they were being lectured musically. I instantly grasped the wisdom of this advice and nodded my head respectfully in their direction as I gathered my thoughts.

As I resumed playing my music the aliens gradually began to accompany me until the music we produced began to resemble an orchestra made up of thousands of different instruments from every conceivable musical style combined with the kind of racket you'd expect to hear inside a busy wind chime factory. As I became more comfortable with my music I was soon able to discern contributions made by individual aliens. My brain somehow permitted me to understand what each of them was trying in turn to convey to me while I acted as conductor to coordinate their efforts and create a cohesive sound. In essence, I was playing them like some kind of giant, complex instrument.

In the midst of this process I realized that one of the alien ships was producing a unique and very appealing melody that seemed to compliment my own music magnificently. I momentarily raised my hands palm forward, then pointed my finger directly at their ship and was rewarded instantly by silence from everyone else as that particular alien entity performed a beautiful thirty second solo that almost moved me to tears. I could sense their pride at being singled out for attention and there was no trace of envy or jealousy from the rest of my impromptu orchestra as they listened raptly.

As the solo ended and everyone else resumed their playing, I concentrated on guiding a few of the aliens who, for one reason or another, had difficulty understanding the direction my music was taking. Some of them decided to leave rather than conform to my suggestions but I noted with relief that their departure was motivated more by frustration than anger. Most of the others soon became an integral part of what I now saw as a synergy of sounds. Even the few who seemed unable to master the complex notes still contributed as best they could, albeit in muted tones that didn't conflict with the overall effect. It was, I decided immodestly, nothing less than the most beautiful music ever created by any orchestra.

When I finally concluded that I'd accomplished everything I'd set out to do with my music that night I brought the song to an end and rested my hands at my side. I watched as the various space ships disappeared one by one until only the original vessel remained in the sky above us.

"Maestro!" Hanna said. "You look different all of a sudden."

"It's the power thing, right?" I said, smiling.

"Nope. It's just that, for the first time in many years you actually look happy."

"I guess I am, and it's a neat feeling," I said. "I think it may also have something to do with you being in my life though."

She ignored my comment but I could tell she was pleased to hear it because the slightest hint of a smile appeared on her lips as her face flushed.

"Andy, I was monitoring the reaction to your music on my blog. The entire world must have been listening because reports are pouring in from nearly everywhere and the reviews are spectacular! Of course everyone is wondering what just happened, and who was responsible, but I suspect it's

only a matter of time now before reporters make the connection to you. Just look around."

I did for the first time since I'd begun playing and was surprised to see everyone around me staring in my direction with various expressions on their faces ranging from puzzlement all the way to outright adulation.

"Yikes," I said. "Guess I've really blown my cover this time."

"No kidding. Everyone here is a potential witness, and you can bet they'll be calling their favorite media outlets as soon as the shock of watching that spectacle wears off. If we stay here you're going to be smothered by all the press attention, so I'm thinking we might be better off taking a little trip."

"So you really think I can lead all these folks?"

"I think you just did," she said.

I pointed at the huge spacecraft above. "My brother's on board that one, and he sent me a message while I was playing. Under my father's leadership the traveling roadshow mom mentioned played a vitally important role in bringing some stability and civility to the universe, and that collection of space debris hanging over our heads is what the roadshow uses for transportation. They want us to join them and the consensus is that they seem to believe I can build on his legacy. They suggest that we visit my father's home planet first, just so I can get a better idea of who he was and what he stood for. The people there will want to meet us, of course."

"Right," Hanna said, "let's do it. Of course we're going need time to say our goodbyes before we leave."

I smiled as I picked up the theremin and started for the trailer. "This is going to be incredible!"

She hugged me. "I'm ready anytime you are."

"Okay, but first, before we say goodbye to our parents there's some very important unfinished business here on Earth that I have to deal with before we leave. It shouldn't take too long. Then we'll head out."

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