



I Like Martian Music

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LONGTREE sat before his hole in the ground and gazed thoughtfully among the sandy red hills that surrounded him. His skin at that moment was a medium yellow, a shade between pride and happiness at having his brief symphony almost completed, with just a faint tinge of red to denote that uncertain, cautious approach to the last note which had eluded him thus far.

He sat there unmoving for a while, and then he picked up his blowstring and fitted the mouthpiece between his thin lips. He blew into it softly and at the same time gently strummed the three strings stretching the length of the instrument. The note was a firm clear one which would have made any other musician proud.

But Longtree frowned, and at the disappointment his body flushed a dark green and began taking on a purple cast of anger. Hastily, he put down the blowstring and tried to think of something else. Slowly his normal color returned.

Across the nearest hill came his friend Channeljumper, striding on the long thin ungainly legs that had given him his name. His skin radiated a blissful orange.

"Longtree!" Channeljumper exclaimed enthusiastically, collapsing on the ground nearby and folding his legs around him. "How's the symphony coming?"

"Not so good," Longtree admitted sadly, and his skin turned green at the memory. "If I don't get that last note, I may be this color the rest of my life."

"Why don't you play what you've written so far. It's not very long, and it might cheer you up a bit."

You're a good friend, Channeljumper, Longtree thought, and when Redsand and I are married after the Music Festival we'll have you over to our hole for dinner. As he thought this, he felt his body take on an orange cast, and he felt better.

"I can't seem to get that last note," he said, picking up the blowstring again and putting it into position. "The final note must be conclusive, something complete in itself and yet be able to sum up the entire meaning of the symphony preceding it."

Channeljumper hummed sympathetically. "That's a big job for one note. It might be a sound no one has ever heard before."

Longtree shrugged. "It may even sound *alien*," he admitted, "but it's got to be the right note."

"Play, and we'll see," Channeljumper urged.

Longtree played. And as he played, his features relaxed into a gentle smile of happiness and his body turned orange. Delicately, he strummed the three strings of the blowstring with his long-nailed fingers, softly he pursed his frail lips and blew expertly into the mouthpiece.

From the instrument came sounds the like of which Channeljumper had never before heard. The Martian sat and listened in evident rapture, his body radiating a golden glow of ecstasy. He sat and dreamed, and as the music played, his spine tingled with growing excitement. The music swelled, surrounding him, permeating him, picking him up in a great hand and sweeping him into new and strange and beautiful worlds—worlds of tall metal structures, of vast stretches of greenness and of water and of trees and of small pale creatures that flew giant metal insects. He dreamed of these things which his planet Mars had not known for millions of years.

After a while, the music stopped, but for a moment neither of them said anything.

At last Channeljumper sighed. "It's beautiful," he said.

"Yes," Longtree admitted.

"But—" Channeljumper seemed puzzled—"but somehow it doesn't seem complete. Almost, but not quite. As though—as though—"

Longtree sighed. "One more note would do it. One more note—no more, no less—at the end of the crescendo could tie the symphony together and end it. But which one? I've tried them all, and none of them fit!"

His voice had risen higher in his excitement, and Channeljumper warned, "Careful, you're beginning to turn purple."

"I know," Longtree said mournfully, and the purple tint changed to a more acceptable green. "But I've got to win first prize at the festival tomorrow; Redsand promised to marry me if I did."

"You can't lose," Channeljumper told him, and then remembered, "if you can get that last note."

"If," Longtree echoed despairingly, as though his friend had asked the impossible. "I wish I had your confidence, Chan; you're orange most of the time, while I'm a spectrum."

"I haven't your artistic temperament," Channeljumper told him. "Besides, orange is such a homely color I feel ashamed to have it all the time."

As he said this, he turned green with shame, and Longtree laughed at the paradox.

Channeljumper laughed too, glad that he had diverted his friend's attention from the elusive and perhaps non-existent note. "Did you know the space rocket is due pretty soon," he said, "perhaps even in time for the Music Festival?"

"Space rocket?"

"Oh, I forgot you were busy composing and didn't get to hear about it," Channeljumper said. "Well, Bigwind, who has a telescope in his hole, told me a rocket is coming through space toward us, possibly from the third planet."

"Oh?" Longtree said, not particularly interested.

"I wonder if they'll look like us?" Channeljumper wondered.

"If they're intelligent, of course they will," Longtree said certainly, not caring. "Their culture will probably be alien, though, and their music—" He paused and turned a very deep yellow. "Of course! They might even be able to furnish the note I need to complete my symphony!"

Channeljumper shook his head. "You've got to compose it all yourself," he reminded, "or you don't qualify. And if you don't qualify, you can't win, and if you don't win, you can't marry Redsand."

"But just one little note—" Longtree said.

Channeljumper shrugged helplessly and turned sympathetically green. "I don't make the rules," he said.

"No. Well," Longtree went on in sudden determination, "I'll find that last note if I have to stay permanently purple."

Channeljumper shuddered jestingly at this but remained pleasantly orange. "And I'll leave you alone so you can get to work," he said, unfolding himself.

"Goodbye," Longtree said, but Channeljumper's long legs had already taken him over to the nearest sand dune and out of sight.

Alone, Longtree picked up the blowstring once more, placed it against his stomach, and gave out with a clear, beautiful, experimental note which was again not the one he desired.

He still had not found it an hour later, when the Sound came. The Sound was a low unpleasant rumble, a sound lower than any Longtree had ever heard, and he wondered what it was. Thinking of it, he remembered he had seen a large flash of fire in the sky a moment before the roar came. But since this last was clearly not likely at all, he dismissed the whole thing as imagination and tried again to coax some new note from the blowstring.

A half hour later, Channeljumper came bounding excitedly over a sand dune. "They're here," he cried, screeching to a halt and emitting yellow flashes of color.

"Who's here?" Longtree demanded, turning violet in annoyance at the interruption.

"The visitors from space," Channeljumper explained. "They landed near my hole. They're little creatures, only half as big as we are, but thicker and grey colored."

"Grey colored?" Longtree repeated incredulously, trying to picture the improbability.

"But only on the outside," Channeljumper went on. "They have an outside shell that comes off, and inside they're sort of pink-orange."

"Ah-ha," Longtree said, as though he'd suspected it all the time. "Evidently they wear grey suits of some kind, probably for protection."

"They took them off anyway," Channeljumper said, eager to impart his knowledge, "and they were sort of pink-orange underneath. There are only two of them, and one has long hair."

"Strange," Longtree mused, thinking of their own hairless bodies. "Wonder what they want."

Channeljumper shrugged to indicate he didn't know. "The short-haired one followed me," he said.

Longtree felt the chill blue of fear creep along his spine, but immediate anger at himself changed it conveniently to purple, and he was certain Channeljumper hadn't noticed. When he had controlled himself, he said, "Well, it doesn't matter. I've got to get on with my symphony. That last note—"

"He's here," Channeljumper announced.

"What?"

Channeljumper pointed eagerly, and Longtree's eyes followed the direction to where the alien stood at the top of a nearby dune staring at

them. Longtree could feel his skin automatically turning red with caution, blending with the sand while the ever-trusting Channeljumper remained bright orange.

"Good gosh," the alien exclaimed. "Not only do they look like modified grasshoppers, they change color too!"

"What'd he say?" Longtree demanded.

"How should I know?" Channeljumper said. "It's in another language."

"And its voice," Longtree exclaimed, almost disbelieving it. "Low. Lower than even our drums' rumble."

"And they talk in squeaks yet!" the alien told himself aloud.

Longtree regarded the alien carefully. As Channeljumper had said, the creature was short and had close-cropped hair on its head. The legs were brief and pudgy, and Longtree felt a shade of pity for the creature who could obviously not get around as well as they. It was undoubtedly intelligent—the space rocket testified to that—and the fact that the creature's skin color stayed a peaceful pink-orange helped assure Longtree the alien's mission was friendly.

The alien raised a short arm and stepped slowly forward. "I come in peace," he said in the language they could not understand. "My wife and I are probably the only humans left alive. When we left Earth, most of the population had been wiped out by atomics. I think we were the only ones to get away."

Longtree felt his redness subside to orange, as he wondered idly what the alien had said. Except for a natural curiosity, he didn't really care, for he remembered suddenly the symphony he had to finish by tomorrow if he were to marry Redsand. But there was the element of politeness to consider, so he nudged Channeljumper.

"Don't just stand there, say something!"

Channeljumper flustered and turned several colors in rapid succession. He stammered, "Er—ah—welcome to our planet, O visitor from space," and motioned the alien to sit down.

"That's not very creative," Longtree accused.

"What's the difference," Channeljumper pointed out, "when he doesn't understand us anyway."

"You guys don't really look like grasshoppers," the man from Earth apologized, coming forward; "it's just the long legs that fooled me from up there. Boy, am I glad to find somebody intelligent on Mars; from the

air we couldn't see any cities or anything, and we were afraid the planet didn't have any life. I wish we could understand each other, though."

Longtree smiled pleasantly and wished the creature would go away so he could search for the last note to his symphony. He picked up his blowstring so the alien wouldn't sit on it.

"Play for him," Channeljumper suggested, seating himself by segments. "Just the last part to see how he reacts. Music is universal, you know."

Longtree was going to do just that thing, for despite Channeljumper's warning that he must compose every single note by himself, he felt an alien viewpoint might be helpful.

He started playing. Channeljumper sat dreaming, glowing radiantly, but the alien seemed somewhat perturbed by the music and fidgeted nervously. Could it be, Longtree wondered, that the incredible beauty of his composition might not translate acceptably to alien ears? He dismissed the thought as unlikely.

"Er—that's a bit high, isn't it?" the creature said, shaking his head.

Lost in the sweeping melodies, neither Longtree nor Channeljumper paid any attention to the meaningless syllables. Longtree played on, oblivious to all else, soaring toward the great screaming crescendo that would culminate with the missing note.

Vaguely, he became aware that the creature had gotten up, and he turned a small part of his attention to the action. Longtree smiled inwardly, pleased, and turned yellow with pride to think even a man from another planet should so appreciate his symphony that he got up and danced a strange dance and even sang to the music.

The alien held onto his ears and leaped erratically, singing, "No, no, stop it. It's too high. My head's bursting!"

Channeljumper too seemed pleased by this show of appreciation, though neither of them understood the words, and Longtree swept into the final notes of the rising crescendo with a gusto he had not previously displayed. He stopped where he had always stopped—and the final note came!

It startled the Martians. Then the realization swept over them in glad tides of color. The symphony was complete now, with that final alien sound. Longtree could win both the festival prize and Redsand with it. The last note was a soft popping sound that had come from the creature

from another planet. They looked to see him sagging to the ground, his head soft and pulpy.

"My symphony's complete," Longtree exclaimed jubilantly, a brilliant yellow now.

But Channeljumper's yellow happiness was tinged with green. "A pity," he said, "the creature had to give its life in exchange for the note."

"I believe it really wanted to," Longtree said, turning solemn. "Did you see how it danced to the music, as though in the throes of ecstasy, and it didn't change color once! It must have died happy to know it gave itself to a good cause."

"You could probably get by with claiming to use the creature as an auxiliary instrument," mused Channeljumper, practical once more, "and eliminate any claim that he might have assisted you. But what about the Festival? This one looks as though he doesn't have another note in him."

"There's the other one," Longtree reminded, "the one with long hair. We can save that one until tomorrow."

"Of course," Channeljumper agreed, standing up. "I'll go get it, and you can keep it safe here in your hole until tomorrow night."

"You're a good friend, Channeljumper," Longtree began, but the other was already bounding out of sight over a sand dune.

Blissfully he raised the blowstring into position and played the opening notes to his symphony. The alien lay unmoving with its head in a sticky puddle, but Longtree took no notice. He didn't even consider that after the Festival he would never be able to play his symphony again in all its glorious completeness. His spinal column tingled pleasantly, and his skin turned the golden yellow of unbearable happiness.

The music was beautiful.

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