

CHAPTER 17

"I was wondering if it was just me," my mother said. "I've been hearing a 'chussshing' sound intermittently in the background for the last couple of minutes and it's driving me crazy, although it took me a while to figure out what it was. For some reason it's a difficult sound to ignore."

"That's the same noise I'm talking about," Hanna said. "It's like somebody is telling me to shut up. I noticed it off and on while Andy and I were arguing but I didn't pay much attention to it. Now it's really starting to annoy me. The sound seems to be coming at me from a different direction each time I hear it. What's weird is that I think I've heard it before, somewhere."

I could hear it and see it too. Like the music I'd heard in the dean's office and on Europa, it was gradually filling me with a vague sense of uneasiness again. My mother pointed toward the doorway.

"I just heard it again and I'd swear it came from over there this time."

"Then we can't be hearing noise from the exact same source," said Hanna. "I just heard it seconds after you showed us where you thought it was coming from but it was coming from the opposite direction."

For me, it was like sitting near one of those children's fountains that has multiple outlets squirting water at you from all different directions sequentially. The noise just seemed to bounce all around me, even as it grew more and more annoying. All of us were turning our heads, instinctively looking in the direction the sound seemed to be coming from, even though we quickly realized that there was no identifiable source. Ominously, it gradually grew louder and more intrusive.

Hanna checked her computer.

"All hell is breaking loose, and it's happening all over the world," she said excitedly after visiting her blog and several news sites. "There are a series of different crises erupting and the news outlets are full of stories about different problems cropping up everywhere."

"Are there reports of other people hearing these strange sounds?" her father asked.

"That's the common denominator," she replied. "Nobody seems to know what the sound is but an acoustics expert who has already posted on my blog about it says it seems to be manifesting itself as tinnitus. According to him this variety of tinnitus has apparently never been encountered before. From the reports I'm seeing on Drudge it looks like almost everyone in the world is suffering from it to some degree at the moment, even deaf folks."

"Do you think it has anything to do with your recent excursion?" my mother asked.

"I'm beginning to suspect it might," said Hanna as she continued to monitor her computer. "It seems to have started right around the time we returned to Earth and I don't think it's a coincidence that the Disruptors were toying with us back on Europa. They might have just been testing Andy to see how powerful he is at the moment. That would be consistent with the

tactics you described. At least that's what I think happened. We had to get out of there in a big hurry so we really don't know for sure. Hang on a second, there's more information being posted."

My mother turned to me and placed her hand on my shoulder. "Andy, where do I start? There's so little time left for you to prepare yourself for what's about to happen. Your father was very brave but even he was reluctant to fight them at the end of his life, although that might have been because his health was deteriorating so rapidly."

Hanna held up her hand to interrupt. "This just popped up on Instapundit. They've identified the noise we're hearing. It's similar to a sound that was discovered and patented by a scientist. Apparently humans are hardwired to hear and respond to it. The reason it sounded familiar was because I recently watched a TV news story about the inventor."

"You can patent a sound?" I asked.

"Yeah. It was designed to tap into a primitive area of the brain that at some point in our development influenced our fight or flight survival instincts. The neat thing about it is that people instinctively identify and turn their attention to the source of this noise, which is what makes it so useful. In fact, they recently started adding it to ambulance sirens because it draws people's attention directly to the emergency vehicle."

"Which is why we all seem to be looking in specific directions for the source, even though it appears we're each responding to different noises," my mother said.

"It's very frustrating, isn't it?" Professor Howard said. "The sound seems to be coming from all different directions at once, like we disturbed a hornet's nest or something."

"I don't know much about tinnitus," Hanna said, "but it's starting to hurt, and it might be doing permanent damage to our ears. I wonder if this means we're all going to be deafened, or is it just going to drive us crazy for the rest of our lives?"

"Tinnitus isn't caused by problems in our ears," her father replied. "It's actually the result of faulty signal processing in our brains. Now, that doesn't mean we aren't in danger because the pain I'm feeling right now is very real indeed, even though it's still at a manageable level for the moment. Either the experts are wrong about their tinnitus theory or this sound is somehow attacking our brains directly, bypassing our ears."

"I just blogged your theory, dad, so we'll see what the experts have to say about it in a few minutes. That's the nice thing about blogs, although working at this speed means that all the comments are mostly just preliminary speculation because nobody's had a chance to do any in-depth studies on it. Oh, and there's a report that this phenomenon also appears to be originating somewhere just outside our solar system, the same place as those SETI signals."

"Undoubtedly the same source as the darkness they spotted," Hanna's father said. "That's confirmation that it's the Disruptors behind this attack, if any confirmation is needed at this point. Too bad your scientist friends don't know everything we know because that might help them focus in the right areas."

"Yeah," said Hanna, "it's even possible if they knew more about what to look for, they might be able to help us do something about the Disruptors but I doubt it. Imagine what the reaction would be if I started telling stories about alien invaders. Nobody would believe me until it was too late anyway."

"Andy," said my mother, "your dad said he could usually sense their presence. Can you?"

"Yes, I think I can. I've had this weird feeling for a few days now that somebody or something was watching me, ever since I helped Hugo. It was especially strong on Europa and I can feel it again right now, in fact."

"Which is all well and good, Millie," Professor Howard said, "but knowing they're here is one thing – doing something about it is something else altogether. What did Andy's father tell you about the Disruptors that might help us deal with them?"

"He said Andy would just have to figure it out on his own. He seemed confident that Andy would find a way to defend himself if he had enough time to learn how to use his music to its full potential. According to him, in the right hands, it could potentially be the most powerful force in the universe."

"It looks like Andy won't have much time to practice, judging by how loud this tinnitus is getting," Hanna said while peering at the keyboard intently. "If they keep this up much longer people are going to start going insane."

The theremin was at my side, hanging from the shoulder strap, and I rested my right hand on it for reassurance. "Okay, how can we stop this from getting worse? Can I talk to these Disruptors? Perhaps they want something from us. If we give it to them maybe they'll leave us alone."

"Nobody has ever managed to communicate with them, which of course means it is unlikely that you can negotiate with them," my mother said. "Your father told me he tried to talk to them several times but was never successful."

"Maybe he didn't try hard enough," the professor said. "Just because negotiating with them hasn't worked in the past doesn't mean it's impossible. That's the problem in this world. Too many of our leaders would rather fight than talk, which is why we end up in so many wars. From what I've seen it seems possible that the resonance of the sounds you create through your music might be capable of bridging the spiritual and physical universes, which would make you unbelievably powerful. Just because you have that power doesn't mean you have to use it to destroy stuff. I think you have a responsibility to reach out to that thing out there and make it understand that violence is wrong."

"Andy, dad is still hopelessly bogged down in the sixties with his pacifist hippie rhetoric, but that doesn't mean he might not have a point this time. Why not play them a song and give it a shot? Maybe you can get through to them."

I put the device down in front of me, waved my hands over the theremin's antennae and played what I hoped was music that would incorporate my desire to communicate with them. I found it easy this time to create music that would convey my message. The difficult part was trying to

find a way to reach out to the Disruptors. With Hugo there had been a huge elephant standing in front of me to aim my music at, but I was at a loss as to how to direct a message to a life form I could only sense was there, especially when that life form frightened me half to death. It was like talking to a heavy breather making an anonymous call to your home – you might be tempted to reason with them to stop what they are doing but you know you'd be better off just to blow a loud whistle into the receiver to teach them a lesson.

After a few minutes of desperate attempts to engage them in negotiations, I finally gave up. "It's not working. I don't feel like I'm getting through to them and there's no sign that they're listening at all. Nothing."

Hanna sighed. "It was worth a try, but I think their refusal to negotiate tells us all we need to know about their intentions."

"She's probably right," my mother said. "Why would they bother talking? Andy, if your father was correct, the fact that they're confronting you now must mean they feel they're powerful enough to beat you and then begin reshaping the universe in their image. If you can't stop them they'll kill you and continue destroying everything in their path until there's nothing left alive in the universe except them. There's nobody else who can do this. Your father was clear about that. He'd have allied himself with others if that was what it took to defeat the Disruptors but there was nobody else who could help him. I guess that means it's all up to you now."

"According to news reports this is getting much worse all around the world now," Hanna said, grimacing. "Apparently some people are already experiencing excruciating pain. Andy, why don't you try to play something that'll drown out this noise?"

"I still think negotiating with them is the best way, but at the moment anything would be better than this tinnitus racket," Professor Howard said. "It's getting to the point where I can't think straight, and judging by what Hanna just read on the Internet I'm guessing it's soon going to get even worse for us."

I played the most soothing melody I could envision but it didn't seem to help much. Hanna and my mother both quickly confirmed that although my music was masking the sound for them ever so slightly, the pain of their tinnitus showed no sign of receding.

"Google tinnitus, Hanna, and see if there's any cure for it that we could try," her father said.

After a quick search she tried to summarize what she'd found. "There are plenty of tinnitus sites on the net. Man, what a horrible disease it is! It says here that some people are plagued with it 24 hours a day and they often get suicidal because they can't work or sleep. Folks with this disease may hear ringing or hissing or other noises in their ears and it sometimes continues for decades. No matter what the sound is, I'm sure they must end up feeling like they're being tortured after the first few hours of listening to it."

"Is there anything doctors can do for them?" I asked.

"Nope. There's no cure for it although they mention one therapy that seems to make it manageable for some patients. It involves listening to a

masking device that produces white noise.”

“What does white noise sound like? If you can describe it to me maybe I can figure out a way to reproduce it,” I said. The tinnitus was getting to me too.

“Give me a second to look that up. Okay, according to one of the medical websites white noise is a sound that contains all the frequencies a human ear could conceivably hear. If you can produce a sound with your theremin that includes all the tones it’s capable of producing then it should at the very least mask the sound of the tinnitus temporarily until we can come up with a permanent solution.”

“If there is a solution,” Professor Howard said. “Besides, whatever sound Andy makes might be even worse than the tinnitus that’s attacking us since it has to be powerful enough to drown out this awful noise in our heads. Still, I guess it’s worth a try.”

I was having difficulty concentrating because the noise of the tinnitus inside my head was becoming more and more overwhelming. The music that emerged as my hands waved over the theremin this time was terribly bland and I really had to fight to control its direction. I envisioned the sound of a garden waterfall and just kept pushing the theremin’s limits in all directions to include every musical capability it possessed. The tune was horrible at first, a veritable cacophony of bizarre sound effects even more annoying than the tinnitus, but it soon evolved to the point where it sounded exactly like the soothing whisper of water running in a small brook, bubbling and splashing and hissing.

I gradually increased the range of what I was playing. I wanted it to be heard everywhere and by everyone on the planet but it couldn’t be so loud that it would deafen everyone near me. That didn’t involve any great effort on my part because it was just a matter of envisioning the sound gradually extending its reach like a fog bank settling over the sea. As my music grew in intensity, I could feel it begin to mask the Disruptor’s efforts as the tinnitus became progressively less painful.

Hanna was the first to smile, and soon the four of us were laughing and hugging as the theremin music played on. The pain from the tinnitus gradually subsided further and finally disappeared altogether. Hanna checked the Internet ten minutes later and confirmed that people all around the Earth were reporting that their tinnitus symptoms had disappeared. After a few more minutes I stopped playing and flexed my fingers repeatedly to relax my hands. The attack had ended and I could feel the tension draining from my body, even though the effort had left me feeling exhausted. It felt good to be a winner, I decided, even if it was only temporary.

“I just visited Drudge,” Hanna said cheerfully. “According to him everything returned to normal almost immediately right around the time your music started playing. Of course nobody has any idea of your role in this little war. All the bizarre behavior people were reporting with dogs and other animals seem to have also ended, an indication that the Disruptors obviously had something to do with that as well. Interesting, isn’t it, that animals seemed to detect their presence before we did.”

“I should check on Hugo as soon as I get a chance,” I said. “I could

actually hear him calling for me over the tinnitus noise so he must be pretty upset."

"Andy, forget about your job for just a minute, will you?" Hanna said. "The important thing is you whipped their butts!"

"My son the hero," my mother said with a smile. "Perhaps we should celebrate or something?"

"I don't know if that's such a great idea," I said.

"You're thinking they might want a rematch?" Professor Howard asked.

"Yeah, I sure am. The tinnitus attack might have been launched just to get my attention, or maybe they were just pressing my buttons to see how I'd react. Or overreact."

"Or perhaps they were hoping they could wear you out, or that you'd fold under pressure," my mother said, "since they have no way of knowing how courageous you are. And you are courageous!"

"It's always tempting to assign human attributes to creatures we don't understand, even in horror movies," Hanna said, "but for all we know the Disruptors could be just acting instinctively, migrating to wherever they find life forms and then attacking them mindlessly until they're wiped out, like a virus would attack healthy human cells, or like fire destroys buildings."

"Which would mean there's absolutely no hope of communicating with them. I don't buy that," Professor Howard said. "After all, you could even make an argument that fire is alive. I just read about the seven traits of life and fire conforms to at least six of them. Fire eats by consuming raw materials and breathes oxygen in order to function and reproduce so it's pretty much a self-sustaining chemical reaction just like we are. It also reacts to its environment, is able to adapt, exhibits internal movement and even emits wastes and dies. Even though it doesn't have a cell structure, according to Andy's father life in the universe is based more on the frequency of its vibrations, or some similar concept I don't even begin to understand. The bottom line for me is that even if it looks like fire or a virus we still have to assume it's a sentient being and at least give it the benefit of the doubt and try to talk to it again."

"Brilliant, dad. Absolutely brilliant!" Hanna said mockingly. "Next time we're sitting around a campfire, try sticking your hand in the flames and requesting that the fire refrain from burning you. Andy tried talking to it and that didn't work. It's on to Plan B now."

"Hanna's right," my mother said. "Don't forget, everything Andy's father told me about them has proven accurate so far and even with all the knowledge he'd accumulated over a lifetime he still had no idea who, or what they were. The important thing to remember is that he believed they were a formidable foe, which means regardless of what they turn out to be, they're still a huge threat to us and we have to react accordingly."

"So far they've just caused a few billion earaches," I said, "but we know from what dad said that they are capable of far worse acts."

"Remember, if your father was correct," she continued, "their ultimate intention is to change the frequency of all life to match their own. That means in order to achieve their ultimate goal they'll have to destroy the universe. Make no mistake about it; this is a fight to the death."

"You'll have to deal with all that if and when it happens," Hanna said. "You've already stood up to them once. It's possible that might be enough to discourage them, at least for the moment, but maybe not. I think your mom's right — you've got to come up with a Plan B because they may have already concluded that they can beat you."

I nodded in agreement. I'd been around Hanna long enough to understand that she'd rather I was a little more aggressive when it came to standing up for myself. When she thought she was in the right, the last thing she would do was back down just to avoid a confrontation, but she had never lectured me about showing more backbone when it came to confronting bullies or neighborhood kids who dissed me. She respected the choices I made, even if she disagreed with them. Of course, the stakes were much higher now.

My mother took a couple of steps away from us and began quietly singing a song from the seventies. She was a little shaky at first, as if she was uncertain about her ability to carry a tune, but as her confidence grew she sang with a rich, clear voice that I'd never heard before. She continued for almost five minutes and by the end I was mesmerized by the sheer raw talent she exuded. Professor Howard obviously hadn't been exaggerating when he'd told us how well she used to sing back in the days before her abduction.

She curtsied in response to our applause. "My fan club!" she said, smiling.

"That was amazing, Mom," I said. "You have a beautiful voice."

"You know, after my father's death I just stopped singing," she said. "So much happened to me in such a short time and I guess I was just overwhelmed by it all. Now I feel like my life is starting all over again and I think it's time to catch up on what I missed all these years. I'd actually forgotten how good singing makes me feel."

Hanna suddenly raised her hand to get our attention. "Did you feel that?"

It was like a tiny, barely detectable earth tremor beneath our feet, and it was accompanied by a very low rumbling sound that could barely be heard.

"I think we must be having an earthquake," Professor Howard said.

"No," my mother said. "It feels more like we're standing on top of a vibrating bed or something. Maybe somebody's operating some heavy equipment nearby."

"I don't think so," Hanna's father said soberly.

"You realize we're under attack again," Hanna said matter-of-factly as she reached over and grabbed my arm.

"Why won't they just leave us alone?" my mother said. "This is so unfair."

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[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

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[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)