

## **CHAPTER 18**

I landed the ship just outside the warehouse. Hugo trumpeted a joyous welcome to me as soon as I poked my head through the door. The four of us crowded up to the bars as the elephant used his trunk to sniff my hair.

"He's definitely glad to see you," my mother said.

"Yeah, but he's trying to tell me something and I can't quite understand him."

"These Disruptor characters don't give up easily," Professor Howard said as he turned to Hanna. "The vibrations seem to be getting more pronounced. Check your blog. Do any of your sources know exactly what they're attempting to do to us yet?"

We waited in silence as she used the integral mouse on the keyboard to scroll through her blog as well as a number of other websites. I tapped my fingers against the upper surface of the theremin and looked over her shoulder. My mother hummed an old Beatle's tune and Professor Howard stared up at the warehouse ceiling as if searching for a sign that the aliens were approaching.

"It's complicated according to the preliminary reports that are now trickling in," Hanna said when she was finally satisfied with the quality of the information she was getting. "Apparently our planet vibrates continuously, similar to a violin string being plucked or a bell ringing, although nobody knows what causes these vibrations. They're called 'background free oscillations' or 'the hum' for short. Scientists have just discovered that something is messing with the Earth's natural oscillation modes, which is unprecedented."

"I guess it would be safe to assume that it's the Disruptors at work again," her father said. "I wonder how they're doing this to us."

"According to one scientist who just posted to my site, the Earth is now vibrating at an unnatural frequency, which appears to be why we're experiencing these minor tremors. He suspects that some unknown external force is responsible for the disruption. Since nobody else has any idea about the Disruptors and what they're really up to, it's just an educated guess on his part."

She paused as she alternated between several different sites, looking for more information. "Hang on a second. There's another urgent update that's just popped up on Instapundit."

"Why do I get the feeling you have more bad news for us?" her father said, grimacing.

"It's not good news, that's for sure. From the reports it would appear that the Disruptors must be experimenting with different inputs and frequencies, some of which the scientists can't seem to detect yet even though they can certainly measure the consequences readily enough with their seismographs. The number of seismic events occurring around the world is definitely increasing, although so far the earthquakes are scattered

and relatively minor. I'm guessing that if this keeps up they'll eventually stumble across the right combination of vibrations that'll trigger massive disturbances within the Earth."

"But the planet has experienced earthquakes since the very beginning of time and it's always survived," Professor Howard said. "There's no reason why we couldn't live through one more."

"Dad, this isn't just another localized earthquake we're dealing with here. The results would be catastrophic. If the experts are correct, and I suspect they are, then the planet is doomed unless we manage to stop the Disruptors or at least change their minds about destroying us. It's like when you had kidney stones and they used a lithotripter to produce sound waves to break the stones into tiny pieces without damaging your body's soft tissues. In this case, the planet will eventually shake itself to death from the inside out, and us along with it."

"Hopefully the Disruptors haven't heard recordings of Enrico Caruso, the opera singer," Professor Howard said. "They say he could shatter a wine glass by singing a single note at the sympathetic frequency of the glass. If they hit the right note, on a much bigger scale, then..."

"We're toast," Hanna said, completing his thought. "That'll be it for the planet, and presumably the universe, unless we can stop them."

"This is getting depressing," my mother said. "Still, there's a big difference between creating a minor vibration that we can barely feel and the destruction of the entire universe. Maybe the Disruptors won't be able to pull it off."

Hanna waved her hand in our direction. "I wouldn't count on it. Somebody just posted the latest developments online. The experts are now comparing this attack to an experiment carried out by Nikola Tesla in the thirties. His laboratory was smack in the middle of a large city at the time. Apparently he attached a small mechanical oscillator to an iron post that was part of the building's structure. As the vibrations sped up he began to notice that everything in the lab reacted to the input differently. Things like the windows, heavy machinery or even the floors would suddenly begin vibrating violently as they came into resonance with the oscillator. What he didn't know, at least until the cops burst through his door to put an end to the experiment, was that his entire neighborhood had been terrorized by the oscillations. That seems to be what's happening to Earth now."

"In other words, we could all end up as space dust if they keep this up," my mother said.

"I thought the Tesla story was just another urban legend," I said. "It sure sounds like science fiction to me."

"Apparently it actually happened, and there were plenty of witnesses who verified the story. Everybody who experienced it said they'd sensed impending doom as their windows shattered and their floors and walls groaned. It seemed like their houses were about to disintegrate so it must have been a very frightening experience at the time."

"How did he manage to accomplish this, given that he was working with technology from the thirties?" Professor Howard asked.

"Tesla theorized that every life form on Earth, along with the planet

itself, vibrates and resonates in harmony," Hanna said, waving her hands rapidly from side to side as if she was simulating the vibrations, "but he suggested that if somebody ever managed to create pure resonance they could potentially destroy the world by destroying that natural harmony. Back then people just thought he was a crank and ignored him. The conventional wisdom, though, is that Tesla was a brilliant scientist, well ahead of his time, and many in the scientific community now seem to think he might have been on the right track with this idea. The Disruptors' attack could end up proving that he was right all along, although if that's the case there won't be anyone left alive to witness it anyway."

"Except me, I guess," I said. Everyone ignored my remark.

"You know, I remember encountering something similar one time when dad and I were on vacation," Hanna said. "Remember when we toured those ancient underground tombs? It was an incredible experience for me because of the thousands of years of history behind them. One in particular was like a huge cavern. Do you remember what happened there, dad?"

"I think I know what you're getting at," Professor Howard said. "The acoustics were like nothing I'd ever heard before. The guide had a boom box with him and he placed speakers at each end of the tomb. He then sat us down in the middle of the chamber and played some sort of traditional chanting music, loud enough to wake the dead. And then it got interesting."

"Wasn't that wild?" she said. "At first I thought it was just me but after a while everybody inside the tomb started remarking about how strange it made them feel. It was almost like we were hearing music from another world. The noise seemed to fill the tomb so completely that I couldn't tell where it was coming from. It was so confusing that at one point I was certain it was coming from inside my skull. Very disorientating."

"I really thought you'd gone nuts until I experienced the same sensation," he said with a smile. "It was intensely disturbing at first and one person actually threw up because she said she felt so dizzy it made her physically ill. This went on for the longest time but most of us didn't want it to stop because it was so entrancing. Eventually everybody that stayed for the demonstration experienced the same bizarre sensations. The guide then shut the music off and began to explain what had happened."

"Yeah, it wasn't magic after all, although at that age I was ready to believe it might have been," she said. "According to him the stone walls of the tomb amplified the chanting in such a way that the sound behaved differently than it would in a normal environment, creating several unusual audio effects. He put on a different tape and showed us how it worked. It was all about a form of sound waves called 'standing waves' which were identical except that they were traveling in opposite directions. In a place like the tomb, standing waves could either augment the fullness of the sound as we heard it, or, in certain circumstances, they could actually cancel each other out."

"This was no accident," her father said. "The guide speculated that the tomb had been specifically designed to create spiritual experiences for the people worshipping there. They accomplished this through the uniqueness of the sound effects. Can you imagine how primitive people would have reacted

when they first encountered music that practically reached out and touched them?"

"Well, these vibrations are already scaring the hell out of me," my mother said, "and I think they're getting worse."

"I'm not sure it's safe inside this warehouse," Hanna's father said. "It's seen better days, and if these tremors keep getting worse it won't last long."

"We certainly can't leave Hugo here," my mother said.

"I can let him out of the enclosure, but then what do we do with him?" I said as I stroked his trunk, which he was still using to sniff me.

"Whatever you're going to do, you'd better do it quick," Professor Howard said. "You're going to have to concentrate on dealing with the Disruptors. Don't forget how high the stakes are."

"He knows, dad," Hanna said. "We all do, but let's not add to the pressure he's under."

I concentrated on the noises Hugo was making and the colors those noises produced, and forced myself to open up my mind to whatever he was trying to communicate to me. It only took a few seconds to realize that he was aware that there was some kind of a crisis going on all around him. Even though he couldn't understand what was happening, he wanted desperately to be with his friends at the zoo so he wouldn't be alone.

In the end I had no choice. I let Hugo out of the enclosure and escorted him outside the warehouse through one of the giant cargo bays. He stopped for a second, trumpeted a cheerful goodbye to me, and headed off in the general direction of the zoo.

"Do you think he's going to be okay?" Hanna asked. "I mean, all those cars..."

"He was in the circus long enough to figure out how to navigate his way around humans," I said, "and I know where he's going so I'll make sure he gets a warm welcome."

I turned to Hanna's father. "Mind if I use your cell phone?"

I called the zoo and luckily David, the security guard, was working. "David, you're about to get a visitor."

He assured me that he'd make sure Hugo got to rejoin his friends as soon as he arrived at the zoo. It was a relief to know that Hugo would be taken care of, so now I could get down to business. The four of us stood beside the trailer and stared at the sky. The sun was out and there were a few clouds overhead so there was no sign of the gradually encroaching darkness but I still felt vaguely claustrophobic, as if the world was closing in on me. The constant reminder of the Earth vibrating beneath my feet served as a valuable reality check, however.

"Andy, there's something you might want to try before it's too late," Hanna said. "I'm thinking maybe you could bounce the Disruptors' music back at them so that when the two sounds meet, they would cancel each other out. That way maybe the planet would stop this damned shaking and it might buy us a little more time to come up with a better plan. What do you think, dad? Is it worth a try?"

"In theory, yes, it might just stop us from self-destructing," her father said. "The only way it will work is if the sound waves meet while fully out of

phase, which means that one of them has a crest at the same time as the other has a trough. It's called fully destructive interference."

"Andy, I say give it a shot," Hanna said.

It definitely was getting worse and I could hear a growing rumbling noise as the ground began to shake a little more violently. It was only a matter of time before the Disruptors stumbled across the correct vibration levels to destroy the planet so it was clear that I had to act now. I tried to concentrate on identifying the Disruptor's sound waves, which I couldn't hear to begin with, and I soon realized that wouldn't be possible. The problem seemed almost insurmountable until I forced myself to sort through all the colors I could see swirling around me, colors that represented all the sounds I could hear at the moment.

It went beyond the synesthesia, however, because in the process I began to experience strange colors that must have represented sounds I couldn't hear but rather sensed were there. It was like discovering a parallel universe and each color pattern seemed to introduce me to a new emotion or experience. After a few minutes becoming accustomed to this new world I was finally able to pick out one that didn't seem to belong for some reason.

I wasn't sure how I was able to reach this conclusion, only that my instincts told me beyond any shadow of a doubt that I was correct. The anomaly resembled a trail of random black dots and dashes that seemed to be descending from the sky towards Earth, although I couldn't see where they originated from. I momentarily considered what would happen if we climbed into the trailer and followed the dots and dashes back to their source but dismissed the idea because I had to admit I wasn't brave enough to risk a direct confrontation with the Disruptors just yet.

In fact, I didn't even want to know what they looked like. Responding to their attacks from a distance was far more comfortable than fighting it out with them, face to face, because this way it was like playing a video game. If in the end I had no choice but to destroy them, I preferred that it be done in an abstract sense like a Pacman swallowing an icon on the computer screen. The more I thought about it, the less certain I was that I could bring myself to kill them, regardless of how dangerous they were.

I stared at the dots and dashes until I managed to transform that image into sound wave form. I then used the theremin to create the anomaly's twin, a sound which I synchronized with the original sound and then sent upwards toward the general direction of the Disruptors. As a result, the sound as I envisioned it now resembled one solid black line with peaks and troughs that disappeared somewhere in the sky above them.

"Andy, the vibrations are just getting worse!" Hanna said.

"You must have got it wrong," Professor Howard said. "They didn't cancel out. If the phases are shifted by 180 degrees, the two waves in the same phase combine and their effect is doubled."

"Okay, it's not working. I've stopped what I was doing," I said. I could feel the vibrations diminish slightly as I spoke. Unfortunately, the relief was only temporary, and the vibrations carried on roughly at the same level as before.

"Sorry, Andy, but I still think it was worth the risk," Professor Howard

said. "Honestly, I can't think of another plan, but anything beats sitting here waiting for them to hit the right note that ends everything."

I tried to concentrate on finding a way to deal with the Disruptors but drew a blank. As my mind wandered aimlessly I began to speculate about what made them the way they were, and within seconds I realized with a start that I could now comprehend what they were thinking, almost as if I was privy to their private conversations. Perhaps the effort I'd made to understand Hugo had rewired my brain somehow, giving me access to yet another facet of the unique abilities I'd inherited. Maybe the ability had always been there, lying dormant somewhere in my subconscious until I finally learned how to access it.

"Believe it or not," I said to Hanna, "I'm able to hear them now."

"The Disruptors?" she said. "You're kidding."

"Nope. I can't hear specific words but I can pretty much understand their intentions. The best way to describe what they're saying would be to compare it to one of those military movies where the troops are learning how to use their bayonets by stabbing straw dummies while shouting "kill" repeatedly. It sounds pretty bloodthirsty, actually, and as far as I can tell their thought processes aren't much more complicated than that."

"In other words, they exist as a life form whose only purpose is to destroy," Professor Howard said.

"Yes, and they're already in the process of launching that final attack my father predicted. The vibration we're feeling is just the beginning of their attempt to change the frequency of the entire universe. They're desperate; they know there's no turning back and they want more than anything to transform the universe into their own image."

"You need to find a way to take the fight directly to them," Hanna said.

"I'm thinking it's all about science," Professor Howard said. "If there's another way to defend against their vibrations, that's where you'll find it."

"You're wrong, dad. When we were confronted with the tinnitus threat we came up with a few scientific theories and Andy was able to use them as a framework for his unique ability to fight the Disruptors. It worked well, at least until this little setback, but I think we're going about it the wrong way now."

"But how else are we going to enable Andy to focus his efforts in the right direction?" her father asked. "He can't just flail away at random, firing off fireballs into the sky. The most he'd accomplish would be to annoy the Disruptors, and maybe win a few battles, but meanwhile we'd lose the war. We have to identify their weaknesses and their vulnerabilities. Maybe some of those scientists you have access to on your blog can help."

"I still disagree," Hanna said, undeterred by his skepticism. "If you look at some of the incredible things Andy has done so far, it's getting more and more obvious that he just needs to use his imagination to visualize the end result and then make it happen. Our scientific theories just provided him with concepts that helped point him in the right general direction. This time he's going to have to confront the Disruptors in a fight where none of us understand what the rules are, and he'll have to improvise and find a way to

defeat them before they can react.”

“I don’t think I get it yet,” I said, and the exasperation crept into my words even though I was trying to force myself not to panic. “I mean, if I could have ended this fight by now, of course I’d have done it, but how am I supposed to do it?”

“I think I know what she’s trying to suggest,” Professor Howard said. “You seem to be able to create music that originates in your soul, for lack of a better term, and then transmit it directly to somebody else’s soul. Rather than playing defense every time they come up with a different way of attacking, maybe you should take the fight directly to them. Remember, they have all the time in the world to continue probing you for weaknesses as the universe disintegrates around you. If you happen to lose one battle in this war before they’re defeated, the game’s over for our side. Permanently. You already have the tools, I suspect, so you just have to figure out how to use them before it’s too late.”

“Exactly,” Hanna said. “Play the Disruptors a song but make it one that’ll tear them apart. More of the same kind of stuff you used against Keith when he tried to steal your theremin, perhaps, only this time make it more powerful and violent enough to get their attention.”

“Come on! You’re saying that just because I can lay a beating on a schoolyard bully, then I should be able to save the universe from an all-powerful force bent on destroying it?”

“First of all, take a deep breath and relax,” my mother said in the same voice she used to scold me with for neglecting my homework. “You’re letting the pressure get to you.”

“Okay, okay, I’m relaxing. Now what?”

“Try mimicking the sound the Disruptors make,” Hanna suggested. “It scares the hell out of me, so maybe it’ll work against them if you can convince them you’re every bit as powerful as they are. Imagine pulverizing them with a baseball bat if that helps.”

“I think you might be on the right track,” her father said. “Maybe try playing some hard rock only make it so loud it’ll scramble their brains, if they have any.”

“We’re going about this the wrong way,” my mother said. “What you need is a sound that’s directed at their particular weakness, whatever that is. Remember, they thrive on chaos and fear, so if you confront them with music they find threatening, they’ll probably just react by growing stronger. Instead make it something they don’t want to hear, flood their consciousness with it until they can’t function anymore and then do whatever you have to do to stop them while they’re distracted.”

“I’ve had a song that’s been playing inside my head ever since I was old enough to remember. I call it my earworm. I can’t even begin to describe it to you, it’s so strange, but I’m sure it must have been inherited from my father somehow.”

“I always wondered if it had been passed on to you but I could never ask you about it, for obvious reasons,” my mother said.

“So it did come from my father, then?”

“Yes, he told me that it was a gift he wanted to give me so I could

pass it on to you while you were developing inside the womb. Your earworm was one of the signs the theremin was checking for to determine whether or not you had inherited your father's abilities."

"So what exactly is it?" I asked.

"I thought you'd have figured that out by now," my mother said with a huge grin. "It means "I love you" in your father's language, and what you're hearing is actually the sound of him singing it. I wish I could have sung it for you while you were a baby, but of course I could never begin to duplicate his music."

I grinned back at her. "If I was a Disruptor kind of guy, I can't imagine anything I'd dislike more than to listen to "I love you" over and over again. Let's see what happens, shall we?"

The first thing I had to do was locate the Disruptors. I had no idea whether they were made up of multiple life forms or not so I concentrated on allowing my music to search out the entity's soul, or what passed for its soul. It was similar to transmitting sonar pings because in this case I was sending the music in all directions and monitoring the sounds that bounced back to my location for signs that they had encountered what I was looking for. It was, I now realized, the same technique the Disruptors had probably used to locate me on Earth. Moments later I was rewarded by hearing an out-of-tune sound as one of the musical notes returned to me. It had been altered by its contact with the Disruptors and I hoped that this alteration to its basic makeup could only have occurred while it had been in close proximity to the entity's consciousness.

The earworm emerged from my body just as it had done back when Hugo needed it but this time it parked itself silently in front of me and seemed a little hesitant to proceed. It finally occurred to me that my earworm was a living creature and I was sending it on a task that it might not return from. The earworm seemed to understand what I was asking of it and cheerfully shot off in the direction of the location where the Disruptors were hiding. As the earworm departed I could hear the sound of the warehouse collapsing behind me and a cloud of dust surrounded us, making it difficult to breathe temporarily.

I waved my hands over the theremin and pointed my music in the same general direction as the Disruptors, playing as forcefully as possible in order to flood the area with music as a distraction so the earworm might be able to sneak up on them and infiltrate their soul like a virus. Without the earworm's presence inside me as a buffer against the dreadful sound of the Disruptors attacking I began to feel panicky again, so I quietly hummed one of my favorite songs from Five For Fighting to take my mind off the battle momentarily. It worked. Even though I was dead tired the effort to maintain control of my emotions seemed to invigorate me as my earworm disappeared from sight altogether, presumably swallowed up by the entity.

Moments later I heard the faint sound of my earworm! It sounded scared but the familiar tune was still as powerful and beautiful as ever. I waited a couple of seconds and then quickly changed my music to act as a conduit for my unique frequency, the manifestation of the vibrations that had traditionally shaped and maintained the existence of the entire universe. I

channeled my hatred for what the Disruptors stood for into the music and focused it directly at their location. I wanted to make the melody act like a fire hose to transport the essence of what I represented directly inside the Disruptors via my earworm, creating what I hoped would be a giant malignant tumor for them that would end their attacks against civilization.

The first indication I had that it was working was a series of pleading voices that intruded on my concentration and threatened to drown out the sound of my earworm.

"Please don't hurt us!"

"We're sorry we threatened you."

"We can negotiate an end to our war. You can be one of us."

"Your father was one of us, although he never understood that."

"Please stop killing us! You know it's wrong to kill."

I was momentarily tempted to stop what I was doing out of a misplaced sense of compassion for my enemy, and I think I even lessened the impact of my music slightly, until another voice from the same source, muted but still clear, spoke in a tone dripping with venom.

"We knew you would weaken. Surrender now and become one with us and we will build a new universe together!"

Surrender? As if! I resumed playing my music through the earworm in a deliberate effort to erase all traces of their existence. It was a shock to discover the amount of rancor I had buried deep within my character but that didn't deter me from following through with my intention to eliminate them once and for all. I sent every bit of negative energy I possessed in their direction. It occurred to me at that moment that I was actually trying to kill them. I didn't want them to "pass away" or "succumb" or "expire" or any of the other words and phrases society uses to mask the ugliness of death. I wanted them dead.

The end, when it came, was almost anticlimactic because all that was visible was a momentary glimpse of the Disruptors as they blew up like an over-inflated balloon and were instantly transformed into a formless black hole in the sky overhead. Then, after a terrifying, horrific scream that impacted me like a glass of ice water thrown in the face, all traces of the Disruptors simply vanished. Seconds later I began to notice that the vibrations beneath my feet were gradually decreasing until finally the planet seemed to relax and resume its original stability and calm. It was over.

"Andy, what just happened?" Hanna asked.

I put the theremin down on the ground beside me. "My earworm burrowed its way into the Disruptors' subconscious, just like I asked it to. I guess I must have managed to interrupt them in the process of altering the frequency of the universe because just as dad predicted, they're gone for good now."

"Andy and the walls of Jericho again," said Professor Howard with a relieved smile.

Mom laughed. "They came here to bury us..."

"...and Andy performed a funeral dirge for them instead," Hanna said, finishing her sentence. She hugged me and then promptly returned to her computer.

"Now this is good news! Scientists are confirming that Earth is back to producing its normal humming sound."

"And the body count?" her father asked.

"Not as bad as it could have been, even though there are numerous reports coming in of structures having collapsed all over the world. In this case the vibrations increased gradually, which of course is not typical in a normal earthquake, so most people realized there was a problem and were able to escape in time to avoid being trapped."

Hanna's father shook my hand and my mother just stood there, staring at me with a smile on her face and tears running down her cheeks.

Now that my senses had been stretched far beyond their original capabilities, "the hum" sounded to me like the purring of a contented cat whose ears were being rubbed. The world around me had a warm, golden glow that seemed to radiate peace and contentment, and for the first time in days I no longer felt like something was stalking me. My satisfaction was complete when I heard the familiar sound of my earworm eagerly returning to me.

After patting myself on the back for a few more minutes I realized there was unfinished business to take care of. I used the professor's cell phone to call David at the zoo, and I knew immediately from the tone of his voice that the news was not good.

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