

Codename: Amp

by M. T. Wyldman

The name is Alex Prescott. Many people look at me and see a typical college student: hoodie, messenger bag, and noise-canceling headphones. I give off the impression that I'm deaf, though that couldn't be farther from the truth. Ever since I was young, I've had excellent hearing. Too good, in fact. I wear the headphones not just because it's stylish but because, if I don't wear them, the sound all around me would cause me serious pain. My ability allows me to hear everything around me. Everything. I'm not sure exactly how far out I can hear, but I know it is at least in a one-kilometer radius. Everything is amplified. Luckily for me, I lived out in the middle of nowhere in Georgia, so all I ever had to hear were the sounds of nature and the random redneck going "muddin'" after a heavy rain. The doctors had no explanation for my condition and figured I would grow out of it as I grew older. My parents did everything they could to ensure I lived a, relatively, normal life. I ended up being homeschooled and I was taught to communicate through American Sign Language (ASL). I wore ear muffs used when firing shotguns that my dad owned to essentially make me deaf. It wasn't until I was a teenager that I was able to get my own noise-cancelling headphones. They're more comfortable, not as bulky, and are generally more acceptable to wear in public.

I now live in a moderately large college town in the Mid-West. It's small enough for the sound levels to be bearable, but large enough to be able to get Chinese food delivered to my door. I live by myself in an off-campus apartment because of my "special needs". I have to soundproof my room so that I can sleep at night without my headphones. If I try to remove them without being in a soundproof room, it'd sound like a jet engine is taking off right next to my face.

There were times when I thought about using my hearing abilities to help people. As I grew older, however, my abilities became stronger which, in my case, wasn't a good thing. The headphones actually now just dampen the sound around me, but allows me to hear everything at a tolerable level, instead of being completely deaf. I still use ASL to communicate, but it is tiresome to pretend to be deaf all the time. The only way I can use my abilities to their fullest would be without my headphones on and, as I've said before, a fly buzzing around my head would give me a migraine. The one thing that I'm good at was also my weakness; a kind of glass cannon.

Instead, I figured I could use my powers more covertly. I am in the Linguistics program at my university. I became fluent in Spanish in high school and have since also learned Russian, French,

and Japanese. I guess I just have a knack for learning languages. This semester I'm taking German and Mandarin. German is fun, but Mandarin is proving to be a pain. Everyone is so impressed that the deaf kid can overcome such obstacles.

The problem with lying about being disabled is when people talk bad about you while you're still in the same room. Two feet away. I can hear you, Josh, you dick. Go ahead, keep talking about that Tiffany chick you banged last night. The one that you know to be a close friend of mine. But, it's OK. I can't hear you talk about it to your other douche friends behind me. Why the hell are you even in Advance German, anyway? English is barely your first language. Between the six of you, I'm sure you have an IQ of 4.

Pretending to be deaf sucks, but I've become very good at it. I let my ears "see" for me so I don't flinch to loud or sudden noises. The professor, Mr. Klein, comes into the room, "Guten Morgen meine Studenten!"

"Guten Morgen Herr Klein." the class responds. Josh and his buddies butcher the pronunciation. Damn meatheads.

Mr. Klein walks up to my desk and mouths, "Guten Morgen." He hands me a sheet.

I reply in sign back to him and take the sheet. It's an outline of the day's lesson. He, as well as the rest of the faculty, give me notes so I can read along with the lecture. It's easier than hiring someone to sign everything for me. Plus, it's not like I actually need a signer. I'd just end up feeling guilty about them wasting their time on me. The best part about being deaf and in the Linguistics program at this school? Not having to worry about pronunciation, which is something I can't say for Josh. Every day when I take the paper Josh whispers, "Teacher's pet." and his apeman friends giggle with him. God, I hate you, Josh.

This is my everyday life. I feel guilty about lying about my hearing, but I've seen the movies. I know what the government does to people who are extraordinary. If I lay low, I'll be alright. No one is opening up my brain. The doctors wouldn't be able to find anything anyhow. Trust me, they've tried.

After Advance German I have a two-hour break before my next class, Introduction to Mandarin. It's kicking my ass. It's really hard. So, to inspire myself, I decided to go to the campus food court and get some chicken fried rice. They have a special today where they added pineapple to it. I've had it before and it's so good. I like to come here because the fortune cookies are always good for a laugh. Plus, I get to learn a new Chinese word, so... bonus.

I open the fortune cookie and it reads, "Your destiny awaits you, just open your ears and listen." In bed. Heh, I'm so immature. A little insensitive though, don't you think, Mr. Cookie? Listening is pretty much who I am. My lucky numbers are 3, 4, 16, 17, and 44. And the "Learn Chinese" word

is...

BUMP!

Someone behind me knocks me in the back of the head and sends my headphones into my fried rice. My head is suddenly filled with a cacophony of voices, street noise, and nature. I feel my head become disoriented.

“Sorry. You OK?” said the jock who bumped into me.

Other voices enter my head, saying things like:

“So I told her to stop being such a-”

“No, you cannot take Meteor Storm as your next spell, I don't care what your Intelligence is-”

“Did you get homework assignment from Mrs. Torkiv-”

“I lost my shoe.”

“I hear the temperatures are supposed to drop-”

I quickly reach for my headphones and just when I about have them on, I hear a woman scream. I quickly scan the crowd to see if anyone else heard it. Of course not. So it had to be further away. But where?

The guy that bumped me put his hand on my shoulder, “Hey, I'm so sorry. Are you ok?” A nice jock. They do exist.

I put my headphones back on and sign, “I'm alright.”

“Oh, shit, you're deaf. Uh...” he then gets much louder and uses over-the-top hand gestures, “IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO FOR YOU? DO YOU WANT SOME NEW FOOD?”

Yes, say it louder. That will definitely help a deaf person understand you. But at least he's trying, bless his heart. He's a big guy in a letterman jacket, but not of the university's colors. Must be a highschool one, so he must be a freshman. I let him know the best I can that I'm alright and I close the lid of my fried rice, place the box in my bag, stuff my fortune in my hoodie, and move from the area.

That scream, it wasn't a fake movie scream. No matter how good audio gets, I can still hear the electronic nature of those types of screams, so I can rule out a someone watching a horror movie. This sounded real and relatively close by. The drama department is also in the opposite direction, so I can rule out drama practice. I thought about trying to alert campus police, but somehow I don't think they'll believe that a deaf person heard a scream. I go into the campus courtyard and dodge behind one of the buildings. It's an alley that sees little traffic, so it's ideal for what I'm about to do. I put my hands on the headphones and take a deep breath. This is going to hurt like hell. I pull them off and brace for the noise.

Everything is loud once again, but I try to concentrate. Even though there was so much interference the first time, I was able to discern that this was the direction of the scream. C'mon, Alex.

You can do this. Someone might be in trouble.

Concentrate!

More random, inane voices enter my ears.

“You have no idea what I-”

“-is the square root of the-”

“-te amo, Maria. Pero, soy-”

“-do I have to tell you, I'm gay, you twit-”

“No... STOP!”

THERE! That's the voice I heard. All of a sudden, the other voices and noises cease and all I can hear is this woman's voice, clear as day. That's new. No time to figure this out, I can worry about it later. Right now, I need to try to find out where this woman is. She sounds familiar, I look around and see the baseball field. It would be empty around this time. It's past the season and we didn't even make it to the playoffs. If I cared about sports, I'd be sad. Right now, there's a woman being assaulted there. I can hear the sounds of her grunting in pain and being hit. I quickly, yet discretely, make my way to the field. Most everyone is either in class or eating lunch right now, so no one is around.

All I can hear is the woman sobbing, followed by a slap.

“Shut up, bitch.” said another familiar voice. Oh, dear God.

I run through the open front gate and follow a passageway to the opponent's dugout. The dugout has a four-foot tall brick wall and a chain link fence that reaches to the ceiling. I keep myself hidden as I peer through the chain link fence. I see a woman on the pitcher's mound with a bloody nose, messy hair, and dirt all over her clothes. Oh no... Tiffany.

She's surrounded by five muscle-bound neanderthals, all holding baseball bats, and their caveman king, Josh Treyor. Dammit, Josh. Stop giving me reasons to hate you. They all have letterman jackets on with their last names on them: Fulton, Bruce, Riesinger, Quick, and Battle. Ironically, Battle is the smaller of the bunch.

“You wanna tell me why I got a text from Liz about you denying that we had our “special time” last night?”

Tiffany sniffled, “We never had sex, Josh.”

“You're a lying bitch!” Josh picks up the pitcher's rosin bag and strikes Tiffany across the face with it. I want to intervene, but I'm frozen with fear. These guys have been training all their lives in athletics. I have not. Getting into a melee fight with these guys would be like throwing a twig at Superman.

“You got drunk and passed out, so I left. Whatever you think happened wasn't with me.”

“Oh, yeah?” Josh turns towards Tiffany and goes to unzip his pants, “maybe you need a

reminder of what rocked your world.” The entire gang gets a giggle.

Dammit, I need to do something. Anything. I look and find a broken bat under the bench and grab it. I know I won't be able to take them all on, but I might be able to scare them if I can make enough noise. I put my back against the wall, sitting on the ground, raise the bat over my head and strike the metal dugout bench. I was not expecting what happened next.

At first, I thought my hearing returned to normal, as the sound that came from the clash of wood on metal sounded like a thunderbolt. But as I looked back over the wall, the douche brigade were all holding their ears.

“The hell was that?” said stupid brute number one, Fulton.

“God, are my ears bleeding?” said stupid brute two, Bruce.

“There ain't no clouds. Couldn't have been thunder.” said stupid brute three, Riesinger.

“Of course there weren't no thunder. There weren't no lightnin' flash, ya idjit.” said stupid brute four, Quick.

Brute five, Battle, was dry heaving while lying on the ground. Must have messed with his inner ear. Poor little guy (though not really).

Josh shook his head, apparently disoriented. “Screw this, let's get out of here before someone sees us.” He points a finger to Tiffany, “And YOU! You'll keep quiet about this, you hear?”

Tiffany looks shaken, but unaffected by whatever just happened. Whatever I did, must have been just high enough to hit the guys but miss her. Lucky shot. She nods her head as Josh and his troops leave.

I wait a minute before I get up, just to make sure the idiots on parade have really gone. All their footsteps have made it far away stadium. I put my headphones back on and the sound returns to normal. I feel exhausted. Whatever I did took a lot out of me. There must be more to what I can do, but it'll have to wait. Tiffany needs my help. I run out to the field and kneel beside her. She's crying and oblivious to my presence. I gently put a hand on her shoulder. She's startled and knocks my hand away, screaming, “GET AWAY, JOSH!” Her eyes then soften when she sees me. “Alex!” She hugs me and cries into my chest. She asks me how I found her. She's one of the few people on campus that knows ASL, which is the reason why we became such good friends. I panic. I didn't think of an excuse. I made up a story about seeing Josh and his gang running from the stadium and, so, I came over to investigate. She seems to buy it, most likely due to still being in shock over the ordeal.

Campus police show up minutes later to follow up on a noise complaint and possible explosion. Apparently, one of the upper stories of the neighboring buildings had a bunch of unexplained cracked windows. Seeing Tiffany, beaten and bruised, they start asking questions. She denies any wrongdoing

on my part, but also will not incriminate Josh and his goons. I try to convince her that I can help identify him as being in this vicinity. She refuses. Josh is part of the jock elite on campus. We both know that even if he gets caught, all that would happen would be a slap on the wrist. Maybe a brief suspension. Not enough to jeopardize his sports scholarship. Did I mention I hate Josh? 'Cause I do.

When I get home later that afternoon, my mind returns to the dugout. How was I able to control my hearing like that? Also, where did that sound blast come from? I was about to head into my soundproof getaway but stopped in the doorway. I closed the door and headed back into my living room and sat on the couch. I take a deep breath and remove my headphones once again. My neighborhood is not as crowded and it is still before people start coming home from work, so the noise is somewhat subdued at the moment. I try different things to test my limits. I replicate the focused hearing and completely neutralized all the sound around me. Complete silence. It was a God send. But, unfortunately, it takes a large amount of concentration, so it's not something I can make permanent. From there I figure that if I can extinguish sound, I might also be able to amplify it, like what happened at the ballpark. I decide to start small and snap my fingers. It didn't seem like anything was happening until I felt dust fall from the ceiling. I look up and see several cracks in the ceiling. Oops.

I test it out some more, this time with my hands. I clap, and the entire room shakes. It seems to go out in all directions. I then decide to try my own voice. I go out to the my balcony and put a soda can out on the guard rail. I don't use my voice very often, but I try to muster as best of a shout as I can. I expected it to fly off the rail and into the back yard. What actually happened was the soda can completely exploding and flying well off into the horizon. Now I'm covered in fizzy cola. That was a lot stronger than I expected.

So, the question arises, where do I go from here? What do I do with this information? I have this gift, but I have no idea how to use it. I could try to use it to help out people like I did with Tiffany. That is too much responsibility. What if I hurt someone? I can't imagine anything I could do would be of any use. There are others who can do more that I can without abilities. What makes me so special?

I shake my head. I need to get out and get some fresh air. I grab my hoodie, bag, and headphones and head out the door. The sun is starting to set and the temperature is falling below freezing, so I grab my blue knitted scarf my mom made me a couple of years back. I'm a southerner living in the north now, so she shows her concern about me freezing to death every year. Last year, it was a matching cap. Thanks, mom.

I take a stroll around my neighborhood. It's a nice place to live. Far away from all the frat houses. It takes me longer to walk to classes, but I manage. The air is nice and crisp. Thanksgiving is

just around the corner. I'm thinking about driving back down south to visit my family. I should probably call mom and dad soon and let them know.

I get to a local park and sit on a bench. The events at the ballpark are still fresh in my mind. I was able to use my gifts for some good. I was able to save Tiffany. I was able to also put the hurt on Josh and his stooges. I feel my heart racing. Josh Treyor. That bastard always gets away with anything he wants. I feel the anger rising up inside of me. I could use my new gifts to lay the hurt on him again. I could be stronger than him. He'd never bother me, Tiffany, or anyone else again. I can make sure of that.

I put my hands into my hoodie pockets. One of these days I'll remember to bring gloves with me. I feel a small piece of paper and I pull it out. It's my fortune. I completely forgot about it. I look at the Chinese word and it struck me like an arrow: Hero (英雄). I feel my stomach in my feet. What am I thinking? Would a hero seek revenge? Where do I draw the line? If I give into my anger, won't I just be dropping to Josh's level? I then begin to think of all the things I could do. Evil, immoral things. I could hone my abilities to hurt people. But I also have the capacity for good. I saved someone today. I also hurt six others. Can I truly justify the means? I exhale and watch as my breath crystallizes and floats away. I'm walking a razor thin line of morality.

It's getting dark and cold, I should head back to the apartment. I pull my hood back so I can put my scarf on. Just as I'm about to pull it back up, I decide to pull my headphones off my right ear and give one last listen. The sound is still loud, but I'm learning to drown out the excess. I hear cars, birds, squirrels, and children playing in the park.

Something else captures my attention, though. The same, familiar, inane, jock voice of Josh Treyor. I forgot, he's an upperclassman. He also lives off campus several blocks away from me. Luckily, he's too stupid to figure that out. I hear a woman with him. It's not Tiffany, thank goodness. It's someone I've never heard before.

She doesn't sound like she's in trouble, but she also doesn't sound like she's having a good time either. She's annoyed. Josh is trying his best to get her in his bed. I get up from the bench and walk over to where their voices are coming from. It was a lot further than I thought. The entire walk, I have to listen to Josh's horrible pickup lines. Is he just being bad as a joke? If he is, the girl isn't amused.

I finally get to his townhouse nearly ten blocks away. That's about double what I thought my range was. It makes me wonder just how far I can hear now. The girl, who I learned was Liz from my long walk, is threatening to leave. Probably the same Liz that Josh mentioned on the ball diamond earlier today. They're sitting on his back porch and his backyard is not fenced in, so I hide behind a tree.

"I'm not just some slutty booty call for you, Joshua," Liz says with a raised voice, just under yelling. "I'm leaving."

Josh grabs her arm, clearly intoxicated, "No, no... c'mon baby. I didn't mean..." he puts a finger up to her lips, "shh... shh... listen, ok. Listen, shh... maybe if you just, ya know," he nods down to his crotch and makes slurping sounds.

Liz is disgusted, "You are such a pig." She turns to leave, but Josh grabs her arm. She yelps in pain, "Josh, stop! You're hurting me!"

"C'mon, baby. Joshie wanna suckie." he says with a shit-eating grin.

I've seen all that I want to see. This pervert needs to be punished. I remember the snaps I did back at my apartment. I take aim and fire a sound bullet at Josh, but I miss and instead hit the back porch light making it dark. That will work. I take my headphones off and put them in my bag. I cover up my face with my scarf and head down to confront him. Hopefully, he won't recognize me.

Josh and Liz are confused by the sudden explosion of glass and darkness around them, but he's still holding her tightly.

"Let her go!" I say in my most intimidating voice, which is difficult to do since my voice is weak.

I don't think it worked since Josh replied, "Who the hell are you? Get out of here, loser!" He tightens his grip on Liz and she falls to her knees whimpering in pain. Big mistake, Joshie.

"I said, let... her... GO!" With the "GO" I amplify my voice, sending a sound wave straight at his face. Yes! Direct hit!

He instinctively releases Liz's arm and covers his ears, "The hell was that?" He looks and points at me, "Did you just "Skyrim" me, bro?"

I suppress a chuckle. The fact that he's played an Elder Scrolls game is somehow funny to me. Seems more of the "Call of Duty" lot to me. Also, the fact that everyone around him is "bro". "Yeah, I'm the Dragonborn. Now, go back inside and leave the girl alone."

He lets go of his head and tries to stand straight. He looks disoriented, but I'm not sure it's from the blast or from the booze. "Listen here, dragon bitch. You can't tell me what to do." He comes at me with a wild right hook. I manage to dodge it and hit him with another sound bullet from my fingers to the back of the head. He loses his balance and faceplants into the grass. I rush over to Liz, who is clearly shaken and confused.

"Are you alright?" I ask with my hand extended. She takes it and I help her up.

"I... I think so," she says with a weak and shaky voice.

"Good," I reach into my bag and pull out my headphones and hand them to her, "put these on. It's gonna get loud."

She looks at me and then at the headphones very confused, but puts them on anyway. I start

walking towards Josh. My anger is boiling over at this point. Josh starts getting up, "The hell are you doing to me, bro?"

"I'm not your bro," I rub my hands and then clap them together, sending a much bigger sound wave towards him. I quickly figure a way to direct the clap to hit just him so as to not hit Liz. It hits him in the gut and he doubles over, "This is for all the girls you assaulted." I clap again, hitting him in the face, "This is for being a gigantic douche." I clap again, this time much closer to his ear. He's bleeding now. Good. "And this one," I kneel down and grab him by his shirt collar, "is for me." I pull my scarf down, take a deep breath and prepare to shout again, only this time, directly in his ear. This is, by far, the most powerful attack I've discovered. This is going to hurt and I'm going to enjoy every second of his misery. I'm going to make sure he never hurts anyone. Just as I'm about to release my attack, I feel a hand on my shoulder.

It's Liz and she's crying. "Please, stop. You're going to kill him!"

I look down at Josh. I don't see him, though. I see myself, just for an instant. I really have sunk to his level. I shake my head and see him again. Both of his ears and his nose are bleeding and he looks barely conscious. I was willing to hurt him. I was willing to kill him.

I let him go, place my scarf back up and stand, "I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

Liz hands me my headphones back. "No, don't apologize. He's a piece of trash, but not worth a prison sentence." She looks down at Josh, "How did you do all that?"

I shrug, "Honestly, I don't know. Just kinda figured it out a few hours ago." I put the headphones back into my bag, "I better go, before the police show up. I made a bit of noise."

Liz shakes her head, "I wouldn't worry too much about it. Josh is known for his firework displays. The neighbors pretty much ignore all sounds that come this way. Plus, he hasn't had a next door neighbor for the last 3 months." she chuckled, "Not even his friends want to live next to him."

Whew... what a relief. But I need to be more careful. I might not be so lucky if I use my abilities again. "What about him?" I ask.

"He's pretty drunk. I can tell him pretty much anything when he wakes up and he'll believe me. He's pretty clueless." Thank God for limited brain power.

But my mind is pretty shaken. What has this power done to me? Will I be able to recover from this? I almost crossed the line. I was willing to do the unthinkable. I let my anger drive me to almost kill someone in cold blood. I was willing and able. I reach into my hoodie pocket and feel the fortune again. Hero. The word echoes in my mind. Am I strong enough to fight my own demons and become a hero to those around me?

"You better get him to a hospital, make up some story of a firework trick gone wrong or something." I turn to leave. I feel very weak. These abilities must have taken a lot out of me. It's gonna

be a long trip home.

Liz turns me around and wraps her arms around me, "Thank you." I give her a hug but remain silent.

As I turn and head off into the night she says, "Wait? Who are you?"

I stop dead in my tracks. I didn't give that any thought. I can't give her my real name; don't need Joshie-poo to track me down. Also, the whole deaf façade would kinda be ruined. I need a codename. Soundblast? Nah, sounds like an early 1990's computer system. Shockwave? Isn't that a Transformer? I always thought my initials were kinda ironic, so I decide to use them, "You can call me, Amp."