

## Clean and Bright

Susan's head pounded as she stared at the bright whiteness surrounding her. The ripples of the carefully engineered dampers cast incomprehensible shadows in their soft nooks and crannies, the bleached foam suffocating her within the tiny space. Beneath her feet the network of thin cables formed a spiderweb, channeling the sounds of her loose clothing and heavy breathing away from her before they could reach her ears. All she could hear was the pounding of her heart. She stomped her foot but the walls sucked the sounds into a void. Snapping her fingers, she felt the pads rub against each other like sandpaper, the smack of her thumb against her index finger, but as though the volume had been turned off, she heard nothing.

She tried to hum. It was an odd sensation, the vibration of her chest ripping against the t-shirt, and finally, her inner ears awakening. But it was not her voice as she was used to. Instead it was like the shadows on the wall as a streetlight shines in through a half-open window to fall on the speckled cement of an empty garage. Like a fog horn, this shadow of a sound cut through the white mist of the room and filled her head with a pulsing light. It billowed like a storm around her face, ringing through her nose and against her temples. It clung to her ears and buried her in the tar of a resonate unison.

Suddenly the white wall to her right flew open and the mist began to slip away through it as the dimension of sound re-entered the room. A shrill shout pierced the room as a young girl, perhaps only five years old, tumbled down onto the wire mesh of the floor. Murmured voices filtered in from outside as the flash of a white lab coat, slightly stained along its hem, brushed against the door. It closed. The mist engulfed them again. The girl stared at Susan expectantly

and opened her mouth as though calling out, but could not break the silence. Confused, she threw her head back as if to scream, and when she looked back down her deep brown eyes shone with trembling liquid. She began to cry, wiping her tears against the flowing white sleeves of her dress, curly brown hair falling around her face.

“Please, sweetheart, it’s okay,” Susan begged, her hands pressing into the wires as she knelt to comfort the girl, only to realize that her words had been stolen by the void of silence engulfing them.

The girl backed tentatively away until she pressed up against the white bumps of the insulation foam, the amber pools of her wide eyes rising to meet Susan’s brown orbs, her lower lip trembling.

Susan tried again, feeling the denim of her jeans shift as she slowly crawled forwards, sitting back on her heels and raising her arm towards the child. Tentatively, the child touched her fingers then scooted forwards across the floor, the skirt of her dress catching on the spider webbed wires and dragging behind her. Susan reached up with her other hand, and lightly pulled her curls from her face, the lightly freckled skin soft against her palm. The girl stared up at her, opal eyes shining in the harsh light with a shimmery reflection. Falling forwards against Susan, the child clung to her tightly. Susan slowly stroked her back, bending forwards until her forehead pressed against the child's. Softly, gently, she began to hum. “Edelweiss, edelweiss...” Her shadow voice shimmered in the mist, embracing to the form of her body and pulsing in her ears. The emptiness of the room disappeared as the pair was lost in the flowing melody. Then, like a light rippling out from beneath the water, a soft young voice entered into Susan’s head. The

child's humming blended with her own and together they lifted the shadowy voice off the floor and filled the room with light, slowly illuminating the mist.

Applause.

The door was thrown open, and a group of tall blonde men in lab coats smiled down at the mother and daughter tightly embracing upon the floor of their experiment. Pulling the girl up off the floor the closest man passed her to a nearby aide who quickly carried the girl away down the long tiled hallway. A second man entered the room and pulled back Susan's hair, placing his hand against her neck he grabbed a hard metal plug and twisted harshly, his eyebrows furrowed.

"Thank you for your assistance. Your help as a volunteer has been greatly appreciated."

Susan looked around the room in shock as the memories returned to her. She recalled the paperwork, the promise of compensation, a final chance to prove to Lydia that she could be a good mother... a bright blue dotted line underneath pages of documentation and rapid fire checkboxes. Only a few hundred dollars, just to tie them over... Maybe even buy Lydia that American Girl Doll for her birthday...She would love that...She was so small... even for a six year old... no larger than that child... those large brown eyes, her Lydia's eyes...

"I never—" She stammered, her eyes widening in shock as she saw the red beeping alarm of a heart rate monitor go off and she felt the sting of a hypodermic needle as the world faded into blackness.