

SOUND

By

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Prologue

I should play an opening thread, a catchy little introduction that incites the mind and inspires thoughts to unfurl.

Did you know I watched bands purely for pleasure when I was young? Standing still and silent from the first drum stroke, because moving, even breathing too deeply, made it harder to connect.

Wild music transforms all the anarchic emotion inside your soul, makes it breathe, and compels it to stream out of you into something bigger. Everything you didn't even know you were feeling finds a home outside your skin.

Maybe that's how I came to live in this confusing, parasitic city. **Sound** is a place where fragments of hurt are consumed like pagan offerings, suspended in the eerie space that exists within a single, eternal beat.

That's what I believe. Or is it, imagine? Maybe I'm lying, or layering the truth in too many grandiose loops. Who knows what's real? Reality is a **sound** bite I can't hear anymore, there's all this distortion...

Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God? So, help me God. Are we there yet? I'd laugh, but the **sound** might be slightly off-key.

Pieces are hidden everywhere and I'm so tired. Do you remember what we would sing, when they were tired? Around and around and around we go, where we stop, nobody knows?

Thus we launch the final stage of S.O.U.N.D., a project of far-reaching scope and unparalleled potential whose impact will resonate through the ages to remain nonpareil in the annals of human history.

An excerpt from the officiating speech of Sir Rojeh Davitsen, Director for the Symphonic Oscillatory Utopian Neural Division, July 23rd, 2054.

Coming to in a glaringly bright white room, for a few heart-stopping seconds I confuse it with heaven.

“Could you move over to the chair, please?”

Turning my head to find the speaker, I see a woman sitting behind a tinted panel. She smiles kindly. The gray in the glassy material gives a strange cast to her skin and in my dazed state I get the surreal impression she’s descended from shadows.

Lifting myself off the palette, I stumble across the space, managing to land in the specified chair without falling over my own feet.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” There’s a bad taste in my mouth, residue from the sedatives and whatever else they slipped me.

I try to stay focused as she asks mundane questions about my general physical health and mental state. They won’t let me out of this cubicle until every box is checked, every question answered. Luckily, my mind is clearing quickly, like the sky after the sudden purge of a summer shower.

“My name is Lucy, I’ll be interacting with you regularly.” She smiles understandingly at my curt nod. “The Relocation Center is visible upon entry. If you have any questions or suffer any confusion, remember, the Clinic is always available to address your queries.” She pauses. “Good luck.”

The last two words are surprising. Getting up from the chair, I look at the woman properly, noting her round, smiling face and curly locks reminiscent of cooked pasta.

“Thank you,” I murmur, trying not to run toward the exit in the wall as it slides open. Crossing the threshold is surreal; there should be fireworks as the world tilts and adjusts to a new axis.

Instead, a dimly lit cityscape stretches ahead of me. The roads are almost deserted. A handful of people wander here

and there, normal everyday types probably allocated to early morning work shifts.

The door behind me slides closed. Looking down at my feet, I swallow a mouthful of unexpected laughter. I'm standing on typical, dusty asphalt. A scene so banal, it's almost breathtaking.

People in gray are stepping out of openings all along the faux wall. Slightly disoriented, they head left, toward a building with 'Relocation' projected in bright, cheery letters across the front of the foyer. A few figures loiter around the door of the building, scattered amongst the holographic welcomers projected onto the sidewalk. Every now and then a gray-clad individual is surrounded and engulfed by colorful huggers. The welcoming cries of friends and relatives echo through the early morning quiet.

Stretching tall, I set off in the opposite direction.

"Hey lady, what are you doing?"

"You're going the wrong way."

Ignoring the friendly queries and helpful input, I stride away from the neat and orderly flow. Reaching the nearest crossroad, I stop and look around impatiently.

A movement registers in the corner of my eye and I almost run toward the guy sitting on a nearby stoop. Hunched over a sketchbook, he's scribbling furiously, untidy curly hair hiding most of his face.

"Can you help me? I'm lost."

"Lost already?" he says, **sounding** distracted. "Didn't you just get here?"

"I need directions."

Without lifting his eyes from the page, he asks, "Can't tell your left from your right?"

"Can't see the street signs, would be more accurate."

He flicks back his bangs with an impatient jerk of his head. "There aren't any."

"You mean on these streets?"

"I mean at all." He glances up, dark eyes taking in my features before returning to the sketch. "Relocation Center

gives directions.” His fingers glide quickly and confidently across the paper.

“The place with the hugging? No thanks.”

He makes an odd **sound**, a laugh mutating into a sigh. “Do you know where you’re going?”

“Hotel Vigoroso.”

His hands stop moving. Peering at me, he asks, “Family?” When there’s no answer, his attention wanders back to the drawing. “Groupie, then. Relocation Center gives directions.” Muttering under his breath, he adds, “and counseling.”

Ignoring the hint, I take a step closer. “Could you draw me a map? I need to get to the hotel right away.”

He looks up again, staring at my face for a few seconds. “Your features are extremely even. Natural, too, by the look of it.” He taps a pencil almost absently on both of his cheekbones. “Want me to walk you there?”

I should probably say no, but he is holding a sketchbook. Potential pimps and murderers don’t generally take the time to capture the moment in charcoal.

Then I remember where I am. “Yes.”

“Sit out of the way till this is finished,” he orders, fingers flying across the page. “I’m almost done.”

Moving to squat next to him on the stoop, I’m careful to keep a solid space between us. Staring down at my feet encased in the allocated gray footwear, I take a deep breath, letting it out slowly. The air tastes sharp, and strangely clean.

After a minute or two, the guy stops drawing, staring at the page in his hand speculatively. Glancing across, I choke back a gasp at the unexpected beauty of the artwork. In fast, broad strokes, he’s captured the trail of gray clad individuals on the near-empty street.

The gray newcomers are drawn in an abstract way; only those caught up in the arms of relatives have any definition. The colorful citizens hugging them, however, are carefully wrought. Oddly, the most perfectly defined ‘people’ in the sketch, if they can be called that, are the smiling holograms.

“Shall we go?” He stands up, sliding a handful of charcoal

and other artistic implements into his pockets. Flipping the sketchbook closed, he deftly winds a strip of leather around it.

I scramble to fall in beside him as he sets off with wide, purposeful strides. The road ahead of us looks naked and forlorn without any vehicles.

“Can we walk in the middle?”

“Of the road? Sure.”

He veers onto the bitumen. Walking where traffic should be makes me feel like a rebellious teenager. I listen out for horns as we move through the quiet streets, even though I know cars are banned here.

“You’re kind of beautiful,” the guy next to me observes casually, like we’re in the middle of a conversation on the subject.

“Kind of?” I can’t help smiling. It feels like the first real smile to cross my face in forever, as if the skin’s almost forgotten how to bend that way. “Thanks for the kind of compliment. You have an artist’s stare.”

His mouth quirks. “How does an artist stare?”

“In a dissective way.”

“Is that a real word?” He considers the idea. “**Sounds** scientific.”

“What I meant was your gaze seems more curious than sexualized.”

A reluctant grin stretches his lips wide. “Interesting call.”

We keep walking through the maze of quiet, unnamed streets. The cityscape around me is disappointingly average; gray tones, dusty surfaces, ordinary-looking people. The sheer blandness is unsettling.

“I thought **Sound**, would be, you know.” I wave a hand in the air, looking for the right words to encompass the atmosphere I was expecting. “Loud. More alive.”

“Oh, it is.” His mouth twists somewhere between a grimace and a smile. “They keep the area near the Relocation Center pretty stable. Wouldn’t want to scare you too soon.”

I glance at him to see if he’s joking, but he picks up the

pace abruptly, forcing me to skip a little.

After a while, I notice the streets are increasingly deserted and a lot less clean. My legs are hurting, and there's a soft buzzing in my head, like someone's humming.

"Here we are."

An enormous building looms over us. A low ache starts in my stomach at the familiar sight of old-fashioned corner turrets atop an antiquated grand hotel design. Swirls of silver and gold detailing bring a rakish breath of Baroque to the structure. "The design's very-

"Vintage?" He grins. "Adds atmosphere, right?"

"I don't know," I mutter doubtfully, following him toward what would be a museum or protected artifact on the Outside, "there's such a thing as too much atmosphere."

Opening the heavy wooden door covered in grandiose carvings, he says something, but the ambient **sounds** of casual conversation and laughter drown out his words.

Inside the hotel foyer, the floor is a muted chessboard of soft gray and black marble. Dark red couches are scattered around like oversized chess pieces thrown randomly onto a giant board. People are everywhere; draped on the furniture, mingling on the squares, their voices overlapping in a vibrant cacophony.

I try to process all the movement and laughter amidst the drinking and dancing, but my brain feels bruised and swollen.

"This way." With a reassuring grin, the artist guy pulls me toward a set of double doors on the left.

We walk into a faintly lit space that has a gentle, cocoon-like feel. Wooden floorboards and dusty chandeliers give the impression of a neglected ballroom. Tables, chairs and a bar fill the area.

The atmosphere here is quieter than in the foyer, more mellow and relaxed. People lounge with pints in hand. A few tired souls are dozing.

"Is there someone in particular you're looking for?"

I don't bother answering. The buzzing in my head is still

there and my limbs are cold to the bone. I feel strangely separate from the scene, a wary part of me retreating from the casual intimacy. With stiff, stilted steps, I weave clumsily between the tables, searching each face for familiar features.

My pulse quickens at the sight of a small stage set up against one wall. A man sits on a stool, strumming a guitar, the softest of spotlights barely defining the movement of his hands. Clever acoustics allow the simple melody to flow effortlessly through the room.

The gentle **sound** seeps inside me as I shuffle closer, blood draining from my face. It's a modern take on a folk tune I haven't heard live in years.

"Bloody hell. Gone nu-hippy in your old age, Jessie?"

Distracted by the speaker's vibrant, rich tone, I glance her way. She's sitting near the stage, legs stretched out with a bottle of wine dangling from one hand.

"Gonna pull out a tambourine?" The mischievous smile makes her look about fifteen, which is impossible, considering the city's age limit.

The blond guy on the stage finishes the final notes before looking up from his instrument, a wry grin crossing his features.

"Don't worry Ivy, I'll play something restless for you next," he yells back good-naturedly, fingers strumming in an easy, almost lazy motion.

The **sound** of his voice cuts through the noise in my head. Is this truly happening? Too scared to take my eyes off the stage, the room suddenly slants.

"Whoa," says the artist. His hand is under my arm now, holding me upright. The rough touch of his skin grounds me. Strange, because for a second I thought I was floating.

"Intro drugs are hitting early. Don't worry," he reassures, his tone kind, "happens to everyone."

It's not the drugs, but what I've done. Memories compete with reality as panic and more complex emotions storm through my system. When I sway, the motion catches the attention of the guy onstage.

He glances across, eyes sweeping casually over the two of us before flying back to settle on my face. The instrument tumbles from his hands, hitting the floor with an ugly, jarring noise.

“Don’t feel so good,” I whisper. My lids go into lockdown. Closed eyes keep everything from fragmenting, on the surface at least.

“Ces?”

Jessie’s voice **sounds** ghostly and somewhat faded, like it traveled the whole length of the ballroom to find me, even though I’m standing right here.

“Can you hear me, Ces?”

My eyes refuse to open. A part of me desperately wants to tell him how I got lost, but a thick blanket of dark fog has gotten under my skin, wrapping itself around the bones.

When I regain consciousness the girl called Ivy is waiting, so tiny in the large chair by the bed it takes me a moment to notice her.

“Where’s Jessie?” My suitcases and boxes of belongings are piled near a large window, and I frown in confusion at the muted skyline. “Why is it dark?”

“He’s at a gig. You’ve been out for almost forty hours, but if you get up now, we can still feed from his set.” With an almost sly smile, she adds, “You must be absolutely starving, Ces.”

She’s right. It’s a peculiar kind of appetite; the emotional hunger you get for good company or a special memory, fused uncomfortably with an ordinary desire to feed.

Walking with her through the semi-lit streets, I try to ignore a growing sensation of hollowness. My bones feel empty, like my body ate its own marrow while I was sleeping.

The road is alive with people, dark shapes moving in and out of streetlight range. Breathing deeply, I notice again how unsullied the air tastes.

“Still here, Brad?”

“Barely,” replies a now-familiar seated silhouette sketching on a stool just ahead. He stands in one fluid motion, pocketing his equipment and rolling up his sketchpad. “What kind of name is Ces anyway?”

“A nickname.”

“Short for?”

“Cecilia.”

“Nice,” says Ivy.

Brad taps the sketchpad against his thigh with each step. “I don’t get it.”

“Patron saint of music. Sang to God while her head was getting chopped off,” explains Ivy cheerfully.

“**Sound**’s disgusting.”

“You mean inspiring.” Ivy’s eyes are heavily rimmed in liner, Cleopatra-style, but the markings are gold instead of black. “A powerful woman in death.” Her shimmering bronze singlet catches the streetlight, giving off a slight metallic flare. For a moment she looks fierce, like an avenging goddess.

We walk in silence for a while. Around us, the barest swirl of murmured conversation fills the night air. I try catching a few gazes, but the glazed stares slide quickly across my face and away. Everyone’s attention seems focused inward.

“Why are people so quiet?”

“They’re hungry,” is Ivy’s succinct explanation.

Brad veers to the right, hurrying us down a tiny, dark alley. A large man emerges from the shadows and smiles without showing any teeth, his eyes flickering over my features as if taking a visual imprint.

“Cutting it close, I know.” Brad **sounds** apologetic.

The muscled guy merely grunts. Turning, he tugs at a rough handle imbedded in the wall until a solid metal door creaks half-open. Gesturing us through, he waits till we’ve slid into the dark space, lit only by a handful of overhead lights, before slamming the door closed.

The heavy shadows seem almost hostile, making me feel

claustrophobic. Taking deep breaths, I try to lock my eyes on the dim outlines of Brad and Ivy.

“Stairs over here, Ces.”

Following the **sound** of Brad’s voice, I make out a rickety spiraling staircase extending downward, small bluish lights scattered along the side of the rail. Carefully taking the wooden steps one at a time, I finally push through a heavy brass door at the bottom.

“This is it?”

The space around me resembles a middle-of-the road bar or club anywhere in the world. Nice, but not overly ornate. Low lights and a bar along one wall, a few stools and chairs.

“Oh, it’s not about the décor,” laughs Ivy. There’s a feverish light in her eyes now. “It’s all about the **sound**.”

Our voices echo. Despite the numbers, only a low hum of conversation fills the venue. Like the street outside, there’s an air of distracted expectancy.

I follow her as she weaves neatly through the sea of people. The crowd doesn’t seem to have a fixed demographic. Some of the men wear shirts, others singlets. A teenage girl dressed head to toe in bright purple, with purple hair and lipstick to match, stands alongside an older woman wearing a simple black mini-dress, her face scrubbed clean of makeup.

Ivy nudges me. “Check it out.” She points toward the bar.

In line with clubs Outside, the alcohol’s kept beneath the counter, but rather than standard entry pads and robotic allotments, two people are quaintly handing drinks over to anyone verbally requesting them.

Brad taps me on the shoulder before pointing to a distant corner. “They’re about to start.”

A spark of light illuminates the small stage. Jessie’s talking to the bassist, while the drummer fiddles with his seat and the guitarist adjusts his strap. A flash of painful déjà vu hits hard as old memories and new visuals twist together in uncomfortable communion.

Semi-circle shapes scattered on the edge of the stage catch my eye. It’s a style of speaker I’ve never seen before, and

when the band launches into a short **sound** check, I'm struck by the unusual quality of the amplified noise.

"Why is the **sound** so different?" I ask Ivy.

She just shakes her head. The band begins playing and my attention slips back to the stage.

Jessie is crooning hypnotically, rough growls interspersed with smooth silky tones a woman could crawl inside. The lyrics are a blend of random truths and gentle insights that mesh with the music to become a semi-lucid collective:

*lost little girl
skims around the edges
flaunting saturated hatred
of all things mundane*

*living sensory moments
it's all about avoidance
oh yeah my little sugar*

*where is the maturity
the god damn beauty?
all lost in the music
and buried in the **sound***

*chords can't save you
maybe sweet maybe*

*in an abstract way
a few thousand links
far down the chain
but I can't sing a dying soul back to life.*

Beautifully wrought, yes, but halfway through the song it's still simply music. Fighting disappointment, I turn to Ivy.

"Why isn't it working on my system?" I yell.

She places a silencing finger over my lips and shakes her head.

“Just wait,” she mouths. “Wait.”

I turn back to the stage, feeling frustrated. Jessie’s moving slowly to the rhythm, legs spread wide and firm, like he’s bracing himself against a storm of **sound**.

Something inside me shifts and I almost feel the next bar of music as a living, breathing entity.

“This is strange.”

Nobody seems to hear me. The sentence gets eaten alive, consumed greedily by freed notes hovering in the air. Then the music is inside my head, it’s crawled inside my head, and I can’t find words anymore.

“Your friend’s back with us.”

Waking curled up in the corner of an old couch, the worn leather warm and comfortable against my skin, I blink dazedly before rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

“You zoned out after a few songs.” Brad’s sitting beside me looking weirdly sated; a cat that accidentally got the cream laced with absinthe. “Happens at first.”

Nodding absently, I push back a handful of hair to find my sense of touch curiously enhanced, strands moving seductively against hypersensitive skin. Sitting upright, the air teases, skimming across my body in a light flirtation.

Around us a dozen small conversations weave a hum through the stale atmosphere. About twenty people are mingling in the tiny, box-like room, silhouettes entwined in a restless pattern.

“Backstage, then,” I murmur to myself, surprised by the inner reverb on the words. They kick against the skull like vocals let loose in a live room.

“Sleeping Beauty’s finally awake.” Planting herself on the opposite couch, Ivy offers me a lazy toast. “Bet you’re feeling pretty special right now, Ces.”

“It really is Ces.”

A woman with a tangle of red dreads stares at me

incredulously as she drops down on the seat next to Ivy.

“Hey, Jain.”

There’s more I should say, but my mind’s not working quite right. It’s ticking over a little out of time, like an old-fashioned pocket watch dropped in the ocean. The salt and sand of **Sound** are swilling up my insides.

“Hey Jain,” I repeat, having lost my train of thought. Lowering myself to the floor, I shuffle across the space between us and touch her hair. She seems taken aback as I wind one of the knotted pieces around my fingers.

“Your hair. Twisted. It’s a puzzle. Much more complicated than it was Outside.”

“Everything’s a lot more complicated than it was Outside.” Jain untangles her hair from my fingers with a sigh. “Although now you’re here, the shit is sure to hit the fan.”

Sitting back on my heels, I point at her and smile. “Something old.”

“Why?” Ivy asks. “Who is she?”

I aim my finger in Ivy’s direction. “Something new.”

“You mean you don’t know?”

The laughter bubbling out of my mouth surprises them. Every the tiniest movement feels so good. The **sounds** are changing inside me, tickling my blood like bold bursts of energy.

“Transmogrification,” I tell Ivy and Jain, but they just look confused.

“You okay, Ces?” asks Brad over my shoulder.

“Need to walk.” I reach up, toward the roof. “Want to get out.” I’m not fooled. The stars are hiding out there somewhere, even if they’re only copies.

“I’ll take you.”

Strong hands wrap around my waist, lifting me to my feet. The rough caress of so much rushing air short-circuits my nerve endings, making me shiver.

“God,” I manage to choke out.

“Jess?” Jain **sounds** worried. “Maybe you shouldn’t-”

“Don’t.”

One word, spoken so sharply it lacerates my mind like a paper cut. Looking up into Jessie's face, the emotion lurking under the skin jars me a little, breaking the hold of whatever's working on my system, at least around the edges.

"Need to go outside," I tell him, not quite knowing which outside I mean.

"Yes." He takes my hand. "See you all later," he says to the room at large.

Jain's eyes are focused on my face, the iris's brimming over with a backwash of worried thoughts. I want to tell her not to stress, that things are different, but the sentences turn shy.

Steering me across the room, Jessie sets a brisk pace, but it's not fast enough. I need to run. We weave through a few small corridors before finally reaching the stairs, and now I do run, leaving Jessie behind. Taking giant steps upward, bursting out of the door at the top of the staircase, I bolt down the alley and into the center of the street.

Only a handful of people are roaming around now. Nobody seems to take much notice as I stretch my arms wide, look up at the simulated stars, and spin. I could be a star myself, a broken-free piece of star that never wants to go home. I want to stay down here, with the music inside me.

"Having fun?"

Laughing, I manage to let go of the sky and look down, all the way down to the curb where Jessie sits, pale hair glowing in the streetlight. I owe him an explanation, but my thoughts are drowning in music, the complex sentences swallowed whole by renegade **sounds**.

"Love it here."

"Of course you do. Everyone does, at first."

Squatting down next to him, I tap a finger along the edge of his mouth. "Why are you smiling like that?"

"Like what?"

"All sharp edges and sad corners."

He shakes his head. I sit next to him on the curb and lean back, head tilted so I can keep an eye on the shiny pieces

overhead.

“Are they watching us?”

“Sure.” He **sounds** tired. “They’re always watching.”

The meaning behind his words slices slivers off the bliss I’m feeling. I suddenly remember what I wanted to ask him backstage.

“When you play, do you feed on the **sounds**?”

He shakes his head. “Making the music gives me temporary immunity. Maybe I’m using the portions of my brain needed for conversion?” He shrugs. “You’d have to ask someone at the Clinic.”

“Curiouser,” I drawl, enjoying the way the word curls around my tongue. “Is making music better than eating it?”

Pulling up his knees, he wraps his hands around them, thinking about the question for a few seconds. He looks tired, and thinner than I remember.

“I don’t know,” he finally answers.

The idea of Jessie buried away in an audience somewhere makes me want to laugh. “You’d be a bad groupie,” I inform him, managing to shake my head from side to side without losing sight of the stars.

“It’s weird, I last a lot longer than other people between inputs.” He twists his torso toward me. “Plus, the side-effects wear off faster. Maybe the act of creating music builds up a tolerance.”

“Okay,” I agree, distracted by random flashes of faux starlight that seem to be making a run for it.

“The process isn’t the same for everyone.”

“Well, sure.” I’m not really listening. The light seems to be falling everywhere, taking refuge where it can.

“Some musicians, if there’s a lot of chaos and anger in their **sounds**—” he hesitates, “-things can go haywire. I’m guessing it creates a kind of chemical imbalance in the brain? But hey, neuroscience isn’t my strong point.” He takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “Do you understand what I’m telling you, Ces?”

I try to grasp the implication of his words, but it’s hard. I

have a lot on my mind.

“What are you doing?” He grins lopsidedly at me. “You look ridiculous.”

“Concentrating,” I say with as much dignity as I can muster. “I’m astounded by the light living in your hair and am trying to count the pieces.”

Standing up, he makes an exasperated **sound** and grabs my hand, pulling me to my feet. “Come on. Conversation’s wasted on you right now.”

We set off in the direction of the hotel. I’m distracted by everything happening inside and outside my head. Stars beaming down, the simultaneous newness and familiarity of Jessie’s energy beside me, fleeting memories and random thoughts.

“I’m thinking about poetry.”

“Poetry? Are you going to write some?” Jessie **sounds** like he might be about to laugh.

“No, I’m thinking about its evolution,” I tell him frostily, “from historically significant word containers of pertinent information, to written dictaphones of purist emotion. Eventually poetry will take over, you know. It all comes down to rhythm and syntax.” I explain the ins and outs of the fascinating theory that just came to life in my head and my heart, all the way back to the hotel.

It’s when we’re climbing the staircase that I begin to feel tired, so tired I’m forced to pause. The carpet below our feet, once a grand, rich red, is worn in patches, and faded to the color of dried blood.

“You right there?” Jessie hesitates a few steps above me.

“**Sounds** stupid, but it’s the altitude.” I wave my hand vaguely. “Not enough air.”

“Here, let me help you.”

He reaches out a hand. Gripping his fingers, I notice a thin brown line has appeared around my wrist.

“What is that?” I rub at it, but the imprint doesn’t move, and I realize it’s under the skin, like an involuntary tattoo. “Get it off. Get it off!”

“Ces, listen to me. Look at me.”

With effort, I manage to take my eyes off the unexplained phenomenon and focus on Jessie’s face.

“It’s a signal, remember? The line just means you have to go to the Clinic in the morning, that’s all. Brown's not urgent, but they want you to come in.”

“Oh.” The panic subsides. “I knew that.”

Smiling reassuringly, Jessie coaxes me up the rest of the stairs. He walks me to the door of the hotel room I woke up in, and wishes me goodnight. Suite thirty-seven welcomes me back silently, flickering the light bulb in greeting.

It takes me a while to get undressed. When I finally do crash, I dream music is chasing me. It’s awful. Running’s not possible, because we’re all floating through existence. The menacing **sound** moves in the shape of a red, almost aqueous splotch. More than vaporous color, it permeates the universe around me, absorbing pinpoints of air.

Throughout the night, I wake myself up taking loud, gasping breaths, as if I’ve forgotten how to breathe in my sleep. Each time the darkness is startling and unfamiliar, the kind of unfriendly black space that manifests in hotel rooms and stranger’s homes. Every time I fall asleep again, the musical body’s waiting for me, whispering at my skin like a corrupted animal.

(Transcript Senator T. JOHNSON Thursday June 18, 2058 1.38pm):

The Opposition's stance on this point defies belief. We are talking about basic human rights, the kind a citizen cannot renounce or waive, regardless of geography Senator Foreman. You've pointed out the participants in Sound have willingly entered into a contract, but like many in this country, I don't believe such an arrangement leaves them open to the possibility of abuse. It is this government's duty to ensure they're treated fairly, in accordance with the International Bill of Human Rights. We are part of an international body involved in a monumental project. Regardless of the outcome, monitoring the conditions therein is irrefutably our responsibility.

The Opposition has questioned the funds we have injected into Sound. Yes, the cost has been phenomenal, but the potential benefits are indescribable. We all know this. Now they want to argue against the demand for access to secure information. We are not, as the Opposition has so spuriously claimed, trying to wheedle our way past the strictures set in place. This isn't about gaining knowledge of scientific advancement before other countries can become privy to said information. This isn't, as suggested so insultingly by Senator Foreman, a smokescreen pushed on behalf of pharmaceutical interests. The Opposition is embarrassing themselves with these small-minded tactics and petty implications. What the Senate is discussing today is its governmental responsibilities.

This is not about money, or industry. This is about reassuring the families and friends of citizens involved in the Sound project, that while the world focuses primarily on discoveries, we will not lose sight of the actual people behind the theories and statistics. By partially funding the formation of a committee dedicated to monitoring conditions within the city, we are ensuring Sound will not come back to haunt future generations of this country. We are progressing on this path in good conscience. Senator Foreman shames himself by throwing suspicion on the actions of this government. Please refrain from interjecting Senator Foreman, we allowed you to cast your doubts yesterday, now it's our turn to hold the floor.

We need to act now to ensure an international committee is formed and allowed access to at least superficial surveillance within Sound's walls. We are not, as Senator Foreman spuriously claims, questioning the actions of those overseeing the research. We are not insulting our allies. We are not, as was suggested to the Senate yesterday, in danger of fracturing the fragile peace treaties currently in place. This move is not about negative causality. Our concern is upholding the most basic tenets of human rights.

Walking out of my room the next morning, I almost crash into a blond woman waiting in the hallway. Stepping backward, I bump up against the doorframe.

“You’re Ces, right?”

I nod and she offers a dazzling flash of bleached teeth. Her eyes are bright and brittle, like overcooked toffee on the verge of snapping. Combined with her yellow mini-dress, it’s all a bit blinding.

“You’re so pretty!” she exclaims in a syrupy tone. “Jessie didn’t mention that.”

“Is he around?”

“Had to take an Inside/Outside meeting.” Without warning, her left hand whips out, the delicate fingers wrapping around my arm like a vice. Pulling my wrist closer to her face, she peers at the line under the skin. “Call’s not too bad, but you should head to the Clinic.” Letting go, she gives another smile, this one with even more teeth. “I’m Daisy. Daisy Hannigan.”

The smile fades from her face and she stares at me expectantly, twirling a piece of long blond hair slowly around her finger. The silence stretches.

“So, where’s the Clinic?”

“Oh, did I space?” She holds out an apple wrapped in a slip of paper. “Jessie asked me to draw you a map. Plus some breakfast, Snow White.”

“Thanks.” I unwrap the slip of paper carefully and take a bite of the apple, only to be startled by the lack of flavor. “Is this old?”

“Music makes food taste weird, same as when you’re pregnant.” She winks. “Newbies gotta eat, though.”

I take another, more cautious bite. “It doesn’t taste so bad, once you stop expecting something else.”

“Bit like life, right?” She gives a strange laugh. “All hills,

you know, when truthfully, music shouldn't rise above louder. You hear what I'm saying?"

"For sure," I agree blithely, as if the words made sense.

"I would walk you, but my hair needs washing. There's no air in it. Without air, how can anything breathe? Atmosphere is always relevant."

Daisy reminds me of gamer kids who get hooked on neurals and suffer bouts of processing deficits. Erratic attention spans and confused reactions are sure signs of cognitive dysfunction.

"Guess I should get going." She doesn't move out of the way. Instead, she stares blankly at me for a few uncomfortable seconds. "Daisy?"

"You should get going," she suggests, as if I hadn't spoken.

Maybe, in her mind, the words never arrived. Her consciousness seems fractured in places, like a broken mirror; she's still reflecting, just not as fluidly as the rest of us.

I step forward and she smiles again, but this time it's small and secretive, without the teeth. Moving closer, she confides, "I'm going to watch Shadow tonight."

Something raw twists in my stomach, and it's not the apple.

Leaning forward till our faces almost touch, she whispers, "It's a wild way to feed, Ces. If you want a taste, be in the foyer at nine."

Without waiting for a response, she spins abruptly and walks away. Once she's out of sight, I open my door again and throw the rest of the apple in the bin.

In odd contrast to her obvious flakiness, Daisy's map is outlined with almost military precision, aside from a plethora of scrawled hearts obscuring one corner of the neat directions. Squinting hard, I make a few random guesses and hope for the best.

Walking slowly through **Sound**, I feel like a tiny mannequin in an unfinished model display. No advertising litters the structures or the upper atmosphere. Every

available space is naked, creating an odd impression of cultural neglect. Inside me, reactions lying dormant till now shift uncomfortably.

The city feels lonely. Worst of all, I feel lonely inside it.

Forcing my feet to keep moving, I swallow down a tangle of emotions that taste flatter than the apple. Friendly nods from occasional passersby amplify the gnawing sense of isolation. I wish I'd remembered eyewear, more to hide behind than anything else; the simulated sunlight is predictably gentle.

"Ces crossing my path? This is almost familiar." Brad falls into step beside me, looking a little worse for wear in last night's clothes. He glances at the map in my hands. "Daisy and those bloody hearts. The Clinic is the other way." Taking my elbow, he steers me across the road and down a side alley.

He seems restless, moving with such long, fast paces I have to stretch my legs to keep up. The increased speed has unexpected side effects, slowing my thoughts and dampening my emotions, making me wonder if the body can only exert itself mildly while in transition.

"So you survived your first feed, all in one piece." Brad taps the pencil in his hand down my arm. "Acclimatized yet?"

I shrug.

He nods, as if agreeing with something I didn't say. "**Sound**'s a giant, half-made jigsaw puzzle."

"Meaning?"

He waves vaguely at the nearest structure. "The building facades are familiar, generic even, but the amenities are lacking. No vehicles, towers, receptors, incinerator bins, or even automated street cleaners." He points upward. "Not to mention a happy shortage of flashing advertorial gimmicks, hovering or otherwise. Pieces missing everywhere."

My eyes follow his hand, only to be distracted by a strange sight. Like the opposite of a falling star, a small dark blur rises in the sky. "What is that?"

"What do you think?"

"A guard," I realize, feeling foolish. The moody,

amorphous shape stands out against the bright blue expanse.
“Do they patrol heavily?”

“I prefer not to know,” he says, **sounding** resigned, “so I rarely look up.”

Taking the map from my hand, he turns it over and with quick, neat strokes, constructs a new set of directions as we walk. “From the Clinic, back to the hotel,” he explains, “minus the hearts.”

We continue on in silence. I try to wrap my head around the fact I’m inside **Sound**. Memories of life Outside are already receding, falling away like a shell that had begun to hurt rather than protect, leaving bits of my soul rubbed raw.

The **sound** of conversation on the breeze draws my eye to a passing rickshaw being overtaken by two people on a tandem bike.

“When I was little I saw gasoline fueled cars parading through our town once.” The recollection flashes through my mind in a tumble of saturated color.

“Can’t imagine those old relics on the roads.” Brad steers me toward another side alley. “I’ve never seen one outside of a museum.”

“It made me feel partly enchanted, partly disturbed.” I look back to see the quaint pedaling trio disappear around a bend. “Kind of how I feel right now.”

With a snort, he shoves the map back into my hands. “Wait till you hit disassociated. Then you’re in trouble.”

“Says who?”

He stops. “Says this lot.”

I take in the sleek gray façade of the Clinic, the highest building in **Sound**. “Wish me luck,” I mutter, feeling dwarfed by the sheer blandness of the stark, intimidating structure set to swallow me whole.

“Luck for what, Ces?” Brad laughs as he walks away. “You live in **Sound**,” he yells back over his shoulder. “There’s no place to go but crazy.”

“They were in color, and there was **sound**, but I’m not sure what they were about.”

Seated on the other side of the opaque glass panel is the same woman who spoke to me in the transition chamber. I remember her hair, how the twisted, dark-blond ringlets reminded me of shiny, cooked pasta. She’s soaking up every sentence as if starved for conversation.

“Finally the dreams stopped, and I slept till morning.” My voice cracks on the last word. Reaching for the container of water on the table, I take a few hasty gulps. “Sorry,” I manage to rasp.

She glances down to make a notation and the movement blurs her outline through the tinted glass. I get the fleeting, uncomfortable impression she’s more animated apparition than person, the truth of her transparency hidden behind a glass wall of smoke and mirrors.

Placing the empty drink container back on the white tabletop, I rub absentmindedly at my wrist. The colored line has faded completely, but the skin feels dry and itchy.

Gazing to my left, I notice a large white square positioned in the center of the cream wall. The interview room looks like the inside of a bleached plastic cube. Why would anyone hang white art in here?

When I focus on the lady behind the glass again, she’s watching me intensely.

“Is there anything you’d like to add?” she asks with an unexpectedly sweet smile.

I shake my head. “No, it’s all recorded.”

Her smile fades a little. “Procedure,” she murmurs. “Let’s try a different set of questions.”

Feeling strangely guilty, I pick up the drink container again, spinning it between my fingers.

“Do you miss the technological aspects of everyday life?”

Tapping the empty water container against my leg, I attempt to distill a jumble of observations into neat, coherent sentences. “I miss having a touch screen in my room. And my

neural transceivers. Also hate not knowing the temperature. Now, when I blink, nothing comes up.”

“This is a controlled environment,” she reminds me gently. “The temperature is on a regulated roster.”

I nod, shifting in my seat. “It’s more about being aware I don’t have access to neural link-ups and internal channels. My implants Outside were cued to start uploading feed from the second I gained consciousness.”

“But you didn’t have that today.” When I don’t say anything, she prompts, “Was that a disconcerting experience for you?”

“Not really. The music helped.”

“The music?” She leans forward. “How so?”

“That space in my mind, where all the news stories and data for the day would usually sit, wasn’t empty when I woke up this morning. I think the music was in there, keeping my mind full. Does that **sound** weird?”

“Not at all.”

I wait while she enters more data. Glancing to my left, I wonder again why anyone would hang ivory art in this room? The whole place is a disturbing explosion of alabaster surfaces. Even the water container is white.

“Have you experienced any time loss?”

“No. Apart from when I was unconscious,” I clarify, and immediately feel stupid. “When awake, every minute’s accounted for.”

“Any extreme mood changes? Aside from the emotions you’ve already described.”

“No.”

“Hallucinations?”

“How would I know?” I joke.

“Touché.” She gives a small chuckle before her expression becomes serious again. “If there is an unusual occurrence, please mention it at the following Clinic visit, however minor the experience.”

“Sure.”

“I understand it may be frightening. You might want to

forget some episodes, but we need all the pertinent information we can gather.” She pauses. “Sometimes subjects are embarrassed by experiences they perceive as suggestive of progressive deficiencies in their mental health, but the parameters differ greatly here.”

I wish she hadn’t used the word ‘subjects’.

“What’s next?”

I try not to **sound** impatient, but the fierce brightness of the room is making me uncomfortable. I’m still holding the empty container, hand clenched tight around the plastic. With a deep breath, I place the bent shape back on the table.

Taking in the crushed object, she says, “We’re almost done for today. Right now, choose ten random words to describe your impression of **Sound** so far.”

“Ten words?”

“Yes. Do it quickly,” she adds when I hesitate. “Don’t analyze your instinctive responses.”

“Frightening, weird, addictive, sad, intoxicating, strange, alienating,” I ramble, stopping to consider what my mind threw out.

“Don’t evaluate. Three more.”

“Broken and beautiful.”

“That’s only two.”

“Haunting, I guess.”

The whispered word seems to surprise her, which makes me feel instantly anxious.

“Is that okay?”

“Your opinions will always be, okay, for want of a better word. Some of those are coming from a subconscious level, and answers to the same questions will change week by week. There are no right or wrong replies.”

I nod, even though I don’t believe what she’s saying.

“You’re not convinced, are you?” She smiles again, but this time it’s a textbook showing of teeth designed to engender trust. “Next time, why don’t we pretend this is just a conversation? That we’re two casual acquaintances catching up?”

I politely manage to refrain from pointing out the only place two people would 'catch up' with a wall of protective glass between them, is prison. "Sure."

Nodding as if satisfied, she focuses on her notations again.

"Are we done?" My voice **sounds** desperate. There's too much white everywhere. I feel slightly suffocated by the lack of color.

"Almost. You mentioned you're staying at Hotel Vigoroso. Did you find your way to the Clinic easily?"

"Someone drew me a map. A woman named Daisy."

She closes her eyes for a split second, obviously accessing personnel files. "Daisy Hannigan."

"That's the one." The words come out with a bit of a sigh at the end.

"Do you like her?"

It's the first truly left-of-field question she's asked, and the mental change of gear catches me out.

"No."

She nods, as if this isn't surprising. Maybe she cross-referenced our psyche profiles, and the system told her we didn't sync up. Or maybe she's just met Daisy.

"Look, it was nice of her to draw me a map, and give me breakfast."

"But?"

"She's really... bright."

"In what way?"

"Like a blast of false sunlight turned up too high," I blurt out.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, the kind of simulated daytime experience that puts your teeth on edge and gives you a headache."

There's a gurgling **sound** from behind the glass, a laugh quickly choked down. "I think we're finished for today. Would you like to add anything else?"

"No." I stretch my arms over my head, trying not to appear too eager to leave. All the white is bleaching my brain.

"Before you get up, I'm sending a few techs in for blood

and other samples. In full occupational protection garb, they can be a little startling, but just remember, they can hear you, so you can communicate with them at any point if you feel uncomfortable.”

A wall partition opens, revealing two darkly armored figures. The reflective metallic suits remind me of molten lava. They walk toward me swiftly. One of them grasps my arm gently but firmly, face obscured by a dark visor. I realize the visor is made of the same tinted material as the protective panel shielding my ‘casual acquaintance’ during our session.

“They’re starting.”

I follow Daisy’s gaze to see a wiry, middle-aged guy settling in behind the drumkit. A slender woman walks onto the stage and picks up the bass guitar nimbly, her blond afro backlit by the stage lighting. She scowls down at the strings like a disgruntled fallen angel.

“This set should be fantastic. Do you know why he’s called Shadow in here?” Luckily, she doesn’t wait for me to answer. “Music has left shadows on his soul,” she declares dramatically. “I think it’s true. His **sounds** are definitely haunted.”

Daisy’s mouth is stuck on overdrive. From the moment we left the hotel, one inane thought after another has slithered out of her mouth and into my head, like an aurally insidious swarm of eels. At one point, I’d almost broken into a run to escape the endless voiceover.

“Some people are more alive when they sing, breathing outside their bodies with words. That’s by a poet, I forget his name. He always paints **Sound** somewhere between heaven and hell.”

She finally stops talking when the room is thrown into darkness. The crowd around us falls silent, the atmosphere becoming heavy and expectant, like the fraught final seconds before a storm.

A spotlight focuses on a tall, slim man moving to stand center stage. Wearing a simple t-shirt and jeans, he adjusts his twisted guitar strap with a single, careless shrug.

“Isn’t he beautiful?” whispers Daisy.

“Yes,” I manage to murmur. “He is.”

Without looking at the crowd, the dark-haired man starts stroking his guitar. The first touch is gentle, then, with a sudden torrent of disheveled chords, he unleashes his own demons into the air. Leaning into the microphone, his voice is strong and wild, louder than the drumsticks pounding out a relentless heartbeat for the living music.

This time, when I feed, I manage to stay conscious. The **sounds** are so raw, so angry, so needy and brutal and beautiful in their ugliness. Every now and again, a random lash of sweet **sound** gentles the atmosphere. Inside me, layers of broken light seem to mingle uneasily with the darker mood of earlier notes, like a volatile cocktail under the skin.

All I can do is watch as he moves within the music; unleashing it, channeling it, pulling it back greedily into himself. The lyrics are full of lost moments, pieces of his heart, bits of broken memories and shredded, angry dreams.

Like an animal, the music prowls restless and untamed through the mind and the soul in a purring, snarling, assault on the senses. I’m barely aware of the room, the people. I need everything I have to absorb the **sound**. Time, like a fairytale, is passing somewhere outside, beyond the thorns.

Finally, he steps back and the music dies. Next to me, Daisy takes a loud, gasping breath. The ugly blandness of the noise is jarring.

Around us, people slowly come back to life. Glancing down at my hands, I notice they’re shaking. When I look up again, the stage is flooded in a blanket of dull yellow light. Breathing heavily, the lead singer seems suddenly vulnerable, isolated and silent behind the microphone.

He stares out at the crowd, scanning the bodies carelessly. When our eyes meet, his gaze stills. The relentless, searing

focus is almost savage. He turns away to bark something at a bulky man hovering reverently nearby.

“Guess you made an impression.” Daisy doesn’t **sound** surprised. “You are really beautiful.”

I smile at her, feeling flattered. “Thanks.”

When I turn back to the stage, Michael’s offloaded his guitar to the bulky man and is climbing down onto the ground. Looking up, his eyes relocate mine and don’t let go this time.

Daisy makes a choking **sound**. “Is he-”

For the first times since we met, she doesn’t finish the sentence.

I watch in a daze as he strides through the crowd, ignoring compliments, shrugging off grasping hands, never breaking his pale-eyed gaze from my face.

When he stops in front of us, my heart feels hollow and strange. I used to imagine a parasite had burrowed into the cavity, eating away all the nutrients required to feel.

“Maybe we should go.” Daisy **sounds** uneasy.

Before I can answer, Michael’s hand shoots out, grabbing my arm in a tight grip. Dragging me along with him, he heads back toward the stage, weaving forcefully through the crowd.

The audience blurs past, leftover pieces of **sound** thrumming through my mind. He veers toward the side of the stage and soon we’re past security, marching down a dark corridor. It feels like I could splinter into neat slivers of crystal. Shaking off his grip, I clutch at his hand instead, making an anchor of the calloused fingers.

We walk into a small change room full of people. Funnily enough, I recognize a few of the faces from last night, a lifetime ago.

“Everybody out.” Conversation lulls at Michael’s growled words. “NOW.”

The unleashed rage in that single **sound** has the people in the room moving before they realize it.

“Michael, man-”

The guy doesn’t get a chance to finish the sentence. The

drummer from the set has his arms around him before he can say another word. “Move.”

“Don’t let anyone in,” Michael orders the drummer, maneuvering me so that my hips are resting against a small shelf in front of a long mirror. Designed to hold makeup, the surface is littered with beer bottles.

The drummer nods, his eyes flickering to my face for a split second.

“Don’t. Don’t even look at her.”

His focus drops to the floor. “Sure, sure,” he mumbles, before bolting from the room.

The two of us are alone in the space, Michael standing silent in front of me. My hands clench around the edges of the shelf.

He moves quickly, his lips on mine, his tongue in my mouth. It feels so different, because of the music, because my skin’s humming and my mind’s walking in new directions. He tastes of beer and sweat, pleasure and **sound**. Something inside me screams. It’s a buried, messy noise, with a hint of composition at the core.

My hands are in his hair and he shoves me back on the shelf, lifting me a little. I open my legs and he moves in fast, his body warm against my chest and slick with sweat. His hands are undoing his zipper and I want to help him but my hands are shaking and his skin feels so good and his teeth are scraping against my throat and then he’s inside me and oh god I, I can’t- I can’t... it’s sex and **sound**, rhythm and passion, all mixed up in my head. I scream. Scream outside the music as I come, scream inside the **sound** as he comes.

When I can think again, I notice how still he is.

Unclenching my fingers from his shoulders, I let my arms fall. Stepping back from me, he takes a deep, shuddering breath. Doing up his jeans, he pulls my skirt down roughly, straightening the material with shaking hands. He helps me off the shelf before backing away. His eyes are focused on the floor, hair partially covering his face.

Between us, I hear my own breathing. Heavy, lost, and

alive, because that's how I feel.

“Get out.”

The sentence is whispered, but I still flinch at the lost harmony, memory and fear scorching wildly through a faulty pop filter of adrenalin and sex.

“You're full of corroded, corrupted **sound**,” I tell him. The words taste strange on my tongue.

When he looks up, his gaze is wild. “In time, but out of tune,” he murmurs in agreement, eyes brimming with craftiness and pain.

I slide past him, taking a stream of painful new notes with me.

Music For Lovers, release date June 15 2055

Review by Angel Heart 7+74LIFEx

**/5

The 1st of what looks 2be a plethora of movie releases set in Sound. MFL introd(-j)u(-)ices us, the on___ public, to a unique die-lemma. How do we verify the validity of the location 'recreated' on screen? If a moo.V. was set in the New York seen 0_0 I would jet 2NY 4the wknd & cheq 2C if the feel was right... all in the name of VAL-I-DAY-TION ;)

But since S.O.U.N.D. is //4 better or worse// an eternal closed set, we r desteen'd 2get endless art directors mystical takes on Music-o Loony Land 4 decades. Here it's playd as > one long tribute to bacchus, major chord.

The story___ is straight4ward. Ok plot, but not invigorating, cerebral's (x)dancin' anytime soon. The first third of the movie is inter-resting 4the eyes, then clichés take over. Deep torcherd artistic types/crazy groupies/empathic religious figures/ the clichés keep on rolling till U R crushd by predictable characters. Luckily, theyR so 2D u only get a little squashd (Q. HAHAHA).

Even if, say, the S. Project really is dull in reeltime(!!) a slo-doco would be preferable to this sound+soap xtravaganza zzzzzz

Worst seen: When our heroine turns Uber Groupea & gets done backstage by Mr. Sound himself ☹

Best seen: When our heroine turns Uber Groupea & gets done backstage by Mr. Sound himself ☺ 2GTBT & Killer cliché, 4SHORE but who wood NOT wanna C wat HE sounds LYKE??xxx

The bank is musty and dull, like a long neglected museum. The room is bare of ornamentation, aside from a cluster of empty pots in one corner. I'm guessing anything organic struggled to ripen before falling to dust a long time ago.

"Here's your work schedule. Being a contributing part of the community fosters a sense of belonging," draws the lady behind the counter, **sounding** bored by her own spiel. "We keep it light at first, and it's rotational. This means at a later date you can have an informed say when declaring your work allocation preferences."

I murmur thanks, more for the detailed map of **Sound** she slid across the counter than for the list of relatively menial tasks.

"Are you interested in making a withdrawal?"

"Yes. Thank you." Taking the paper form, I fill in the request with an old-fashioned ink pen before handing it back to her. She makes a few marks on the paper and I try not to fidget. Live banking, with a person instead of a machine, is oddly disconcerting.

Quickly and efficiently, the teller counts out the strange plastic money before sliding the small mound toward me. The sight of all the little pieces, a pile of round disks and a wad of currency notes, makes me feel weird.

"Hope I remember to carry this around."

"It takes some getting used to," the teller agrees with a smile. "At first I had to keep going back to my room to get it. Where are you staying?"

"Hotel Vigoroso."

The smile slips from the face of the woman behind the counter and she slides the partition closed with a sudden, **resounding** slam.

Startled, I wait a second, but she doesn't come back. "Transaction over, then," I mutter to myself, before yelling, "You have a nice day, too," at the wall of plastic.

The girl in line behind me giggles. Feeling self-conscious, I stuff the disks into my pocket, along with some of the notes, snatching up the paperwork and the rest of the currency. Avoiding the curious gazes of those in the line, I hurry out onto the street.

Taking a meandering route back to the hotel, I soak in my surroundings, looking up reflexively now and again to check the weather. The simulated sky is clear and blue, which makes me feel foolish and reminds me that I'll never see a different horizon, or even a stormy skyscape, again.

I try not to think about the negative psychological effects of dome living, how it messes with primal parts of the brain, as I glance up one more time. Someone should render fake clouds on the roof.

Fresh music, free of manipulation, filters down the street, taking my mind off the pseudo-sky. Mesmerized, I follow the light, clean **sounds** back to their source.

Pied Piper turns out to be an elderly man sitting on the steps of an officious-looking building. Lost in a haze of beautiful blues, each note he plays seems ripe for the plucking, supple fingers coaxing the hypnotic tune from the ether.

"Take a seat." He gestures toward the step nearest him.

With a grateful smile, I sit down gingerly. My back and legs are aching. All morning I've felt the discomfort of a non-existent hump, like a phantom weight pressing down on my spine. A story an amputee told me once, about the sensory cortex creating sensations of pain on behalf of lost limbs, flits through my mind.

But that can't be right. I've never had a hump. Maybe it's dormant nerve endings for a hump that hasn't grown yet? Since I don't know much about anatomy, I'm not even sure that's possible. Pushing the uncomfortable thoughts aside, I focus instead on the music.

“New to **Sound**, Princess?” The old man’s voice is gravelly, but he speaks so quietly I have to lean forward to catch the words.

“How can you tell?”

“Acoustic **sound**’s still alive for you.” He keeps playing, the tune taking a haunted turn. “Feed on tunes for long enough and raw music gets stale on the ears. Can’t touch the soul, so much.”

The idea of losing such a simple pleasure makes me sad. “I’ll have to appreciate it while I can.”

He nods in agreement, and I relax a little, enjoying the mood he’s birthing with his guitar. Closing my eyes, I let some of the tension seep away; try to stop thinking about the implications of the story I’m weaving.

“Roy,” he says, by way of introduction.

“Ces.”

“If you don’t mind me sayin’,” he nods at the pile in my hand, “you should keep that outta sight.”

I glance down at the papers and maps, before realizing he means the currency notes. “But there’s no crime in **Sound**.”

He gives me an inscrutable look. “Tempting fate’s never a good idea. Got somewhere to doss down?”

The memory of the friendly teller turning cold when she heard my current address flashes through my mind. “Is staying at Hotel Vigoroso a bad thing?”

He takes his time replying, picking out a careful tune on his guitar. “Thing is, people have to feed on **sounds**, but there are citizens who barely touch the music. They try to live same as they did on the Outside, creating places that echo their old lives.”

“I’m guessing Hotel Vigoroso isn’t one of them?”

His face is cross-hatched with wrinkles and when he starts laughing, they all scrunch together, making me think Roy must have been right on the age cusp when he came in.

“Well Princess, there are a few wilder places in here, I’ll grant you that. Places where people’s minds are a wasteland, waiting for the music like a desert waits for rain. Sure, it’s

beautiful when seeds burst into bloom, but soon there's nothing but dust in your mouth and you're mighty parched, crazy parched, all over again."

I wait, but he doesn't offer anything else.

"You're saying Hotel Vigoroso's pretty tame?"

He nods. "Jessie runs a tight ship for a music man. Clean folk, though, they don't appreciate the way he lets some of his people drown in the feeding."

"Is that a bad thing?"

He mulls the question over. "I think that boy's not one for telling folks what to do," he finally says. "Seems to me he sees more than most."

"What do you mean?"

"Imagine the **sounds** we feed on as an ocean made up of endless waves of music. Thing is, Jessie understands some need to go deep before they come up for air."

The curiously apt metaphor makes me smile. "You mean the whole, waving not drowning kind of thing?"

He nods. "For some. Other poor souls, them caught up in undercurrents or rough waters, get the chance to find their own way back to shore. Protecting people from something vast, something overwhelming, it only keeps 'em afraid, and Jessie knows that."

"Nothing worse than getting lost in your own fears," I murmur in agreement. Hidden memories, the kind best left undisturbed, begin to stir uneasily.

Roy stops strumming in the middle of a note, gaze locked on a nearby street corner where dancing figures are spilling around the bend, spinning and pirouetting despite the lack of a **soundtrack**.

"Who are they?" I ask, transfixed by the hypnotic parade.

"Got a lot of names," he replies, placing his guitar carefully on the ground. I notice his hands have begun to tremble. "Cultists, dreamers, lost souls."

We watch in silence as the blue-robed mass progress down the street in disjointed spurts. Faces obscured by masks, they exude an eerie sense of wild abandon. China dolls, butterflies,

and lions twist and contort to internal tunes, their souls at the mercy of silent music long lost to the outside world. Light seems to sparkle flirtatiously from mirrored disks attached to wrists and polished crystals dangling from fingertips. The surreal spectacle creates an intoxicating impression of reckless freedom.

“Funny,” muses Roy. “They don’t usually wander this far over clean side.”

“**Sound** has sides?” The small flash from a mirrored surface momentarily blinds me. “Like a diamond, you mean?”

The final dancer disappears around the corner in a colorful blur, and with a sigh, Roy picks up his guitar, cradling it gently for a few seconds.

“More like a dice.” His large, wrinkled hands begin to move nimbly across the strings in a more complex pattern this time. “Could say life’s a bit of a gamble in here, sugar.”

Jessie’s penthouse is an arboretum of musical instruments and old paper print books. He’s seated in a plush chair by the window, scrawling in a battered notebook. The familiar scene plays across my eye line, too much overdrive giving the memories a gritty tone.

Wading carefully toward him, I try not to crush the flourishing undergrowth of far-flung sheet music and dirty clothes. Something splinters underfoot, and he hunches over instinctively, as if the fragile words on the page need protecting.

“Are you feeling inspired?” I pause in front of his chair.

He smiles up at me, but it’s a sad smile. “Not sure if inspired is the right word. Nostalgic, maybe.” He closes the notebook, placing it on a small table. “How are you?”

Ignoring his question, I thrust out the wad of currency.

He frowns at the cash. “You didn’t carry it around like that, did you?”

“Does it matter? **Sound**’s safe, right?”

He shakes his head. “It’s relative, Ces.”

When he doesn’t take the money, I place it next to his notebook. “Before you say anything, you should know there’s no point arguing.”

“Since I know that tone, I won’t fight you on it.”

Avoiding his eyes, I focus instead on the book near my foot, so old the ink on the cover has worn off, and the silk shirt half buried beneath it.

“Ces, I need to ask you something.”

Bending to pick up the book and the shirt, I walk over to Jessie’s bed and lay the shirt out neatly, placing the book alongside. Bringing a sliver of order to the chaos makes me feel slightly calmer. “Ask away.” The words **sound** a little sharp-edged.

Jessie gets up and crosses the room. Something about the way he moves is alien, almost predatory. A sense of wariness shivers over my skin.

“Why are you here?” His voice is barely above a whisper.

I look him straight in the eyes. “Every life is shaped by principles.”

For one disconcerting second, another gaze seems to be hitching a ride with Jessie’s. I take an involuntary step backward, but my apprehension doesn’t register.

He moves closer. “What are your principles?”

I don’t even have to think about the answer. “Be with the ones you love, or be useful.”

The conviction in my voice appears to aggravate him.

“Life isn’t that simple.” Jessie’s face is different somehow, as if the features have shifted before realigning themselves a little clumsily. “Do you really think this is useful?”

I get the sudden, strange impression someone else is guiding the conversation, and take another step back. “This isn’t right.”

For a split second the walls seem to bend inward. Furniture and ornaments begin to soften around the edges, like badly defined imitations. The room even smells wrong,

stale and clean, rather than musty and scented with sweat. The world is fast losing high notes and bass definition, like a faulty speaker only capable of wooly tones.

“Jessie, what’s happening?”

His expression changes as he reaches for me. The cool touch of his fingers has a grounding effect. The world shifts sharply back into focus, the walls receding to their rightful dimensions, the antiseptic scent fading. Jessie’s gaze is clear again, free of any hitchhikers.

He opens his mouth, but before he can speak, the **sound** of a soft, high-pitched voice wafts through the room.

“I didn’t realize we have a guest.”

The girl in the doorway is tiny and ethereal. So thin, veins press against the surface of her body, like faint blue fairy lights buried under the skin. A wispy halo of white blond hair frames her alabaster complexion. The effect would be disturbingly achromatic if it weren’t for an unsettling pale blue gaze, reminiscent of a tiger’s, or a snake’s.

Jessie’s hand lifts jerkily off my arm, like the clumsy movement of a puppet.

“Lily?” There’s a touch of horror to his tone.

The newcomer smiles blithely, her beauty fragile and hypnotic. “I’m home, love.” She glides across the room, her graceful movements unhampered by the clutter.

Stopping in front of Jessie, she places a dainty hand against his chest. “Did you miss me?”

“What are you doing here?”

Lily laughs, a sweet, tinkling **sound** edged with a hint of mania. “Why, I live here, silly,” she chides.

Her attention slide to his chest and her fingers begin fidgeting with the buttons of his shirt. Jessie removes her hands, placing her arms down by her side before letting go. She continues to beam up at him, seemingly unconcerned by the dismissal.

Spinning suddenly, her expression changes seasons, the sunny smile replaced by an icy stare. “I’m guessing you’re the new flavor.” She stalks closer.

I look into her eyes, and someone broken and vicious stares back. Our faces are so close we can taste each other's breath.

"Fresh, too. You stink of food," she hisses, lashing out to grab a handful of my hair. I notice her arms are covered in intricately patterned scar tissue.

Before I can wrench the strands free, Jessie says, "Don't move, Ces."

Ignoring the pain in my scalp, I follow his advice. He's studying Lily intently; a man faced with an elaborate puzzle he can't quite solve.

She grins slyly back, before whispering in my ear, "I know all his secrets. I have nothing to fear."

The three of us stand there, an uncomfortable, bizarre tableau broken by Ivy's unexpected entrance.

"Jessie, are you busy?" She stops at the sight of Lily, the color leeching from her face.

"Ivy, you climbed up to see me!" Lily lets go of my hair to clap her hands. Skipping over to Ivy, she hugs her hard. "Very clever for a plant," she says fondly. "I'm so happy to see you."

"I'm happy to see you, too," Ivy replies, **sounding** anything but overjoyed.

Lily lets go of Ivy and pats her gently on the cheek before slapping her so hard she nearly falls over. "But you've been bad, too. How could you let Jessie have a whore in my room?"

"Ivy bought you new dresses," Jessie announces suddenly, pointing to the walk-in closet across the room. "Four new dresses."

Lily gasps with delight, like a child at Christmas. "Did you really find new clothes for me, Ivy?"

"Sure," says Ivy with a forced smile.

"Are you going to show me how pretty you look in them?" asks Jessie.

"Each dress is a different color," adds Ivy.

With a squeal, Lily turns and runs for the closet. “I’ll only be a second,” she yells over her shoulder before disappearing inside.

Moving at lightning speed, Jessie and Ivy each grab one of my arms, practically hauling me to the door of the suite. Ivy pulls me through roughly and Jessie slams the door in my face before I can even ask him what the hell is going on.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask Ivy instead, but she just shakes her head.

A heavy lock slides rustily into place.

“Was that a padlock?”

“Among other things,” she mutters, forehead creased with worry.

“He bolted the door from the inside?”

A screeching vocal rends the air. The inhuman scream bleeds through the heavy door, desperate to reach an audience. My mind imagines the **sound** as a phonic animal clawing its way out of Lily’s throat, crazed and rabid at the promise of freedom.

“What’s wrong with her?”

Ivy doesn’t answer.

I stand there in the hallway, shivering, until Ivy grabs my hand and leads me gently down the stairs, like I’m a startled animal that’s lost its way. As we descend, in my mind’s eye I imagine a haze of party frocks spinning through the air like a dangerous, colorful tornado.

“Who is she?”

“Jessie’s ex,” is Ivy’s curt reply.

Lily’s screeching stops, replaced by an unearthly wail.

“She **sounds** like a banshee.” I can’t help shivering. “Legend has it you hear them before someone dies.”

“Cut it out.” Ivy frowns at me. “Superstition can be dangerous in **Sound**. Fear messes with people’s heads, gives them bad ideas. Don’t say shit like that again.”

We make the rest of the trip down the stairs without comment, the taut silence between us filled by the ominous **soundtrack** of Lily’s distant hysteria.

Ivy stops when we reach the landing. “Did you get a map today?”

Nodding, I pull it out of my pocket.

“This is Brad’s place,” she says, pointing to a nearby location. “Probably best if you stay there tonight. Don’t worry, he won’t mind. Can you find it on your own?”

I give the map a cursory glance. “Sure. What are you going to do?”

“Jessie will need my help.” Glancing upstairs, she rubs at her face, and I notice her cheek is already swelling.

“The music did that to her, didn’t it?”

Ivy’s eyes remain fixed on the door at the top of the stairs. “Some people break.”

I have to ask, “Shouldn’t she be in a controlled environment? Like the Clinic?”

Pulling her gaze from Jessie’s door, Ivy gives me an unreadable look. “This whole place is a controlled environment, Ces.”

Taking a detour on the way to Brad’s, I head for a street labeled ‘Daily Market’ on the map in the hopes that a little exploring will keep my mind off what’s happening back at the hotel.

Stepping around the corner is a shock. The scene resembles a recreation of a vintage fair. The street is awash with color, venders selling everything from fruit to clothing.

I stroll through the market stalls, letting the chatter of trade wash over me. Comparing this scene to the dank and somewhat depressing outdoor commerce in B or C-countries is sobering. There are no beggars here, not even holographic ones, and instead of antiquated electronic goods or dubious implants, row upon row of fresh consumables line the path.

The sight of so much produce in one place makes me feel slightly nervous, as if I’ve accidentally wandered into an elite zone in a leading A country.

Fresh aromas waft through the air, complex layers of scent that seem wildly exotic. No hint of the sickly sweet odor caused by synthetic preservatives, or the mildly rotting stench of cheap, gene-altered food substitutes.

Glancing at the whimsical paper signs, I'm stunned by the obscenely cheap prices that would cause a riot in any country (whatever the grade), but nobody here seems excited. Most people walk past the edibles, lingering over clothing, craft items and old-fashioned products I don't recognize offhand.

The whole scene strikes me as horribly ironic; the best food in the world, offered to the only people happy to walk on by. Feeling sickened by the sumptuous display, I take a deep, shuddering breath, but the aroma laden air only reminds me how quickly quality food decays.

Trying to shake off my unease, I check out the people moving up and down the market. They mingle happily in the synthetic sunlight, more animated than the people on the streets after dark.

Distracted by the bustling signs of life, I don't notice a small girl careening through the crowd till it's too late. She crashes into my leg with a dull thud and loses her balance, falling backward onto the ground.

"Are you okay?"

The child doesn't answer, just stares up at me with large, frightened eyes.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

Scrunching up her small face, she starts to cry, which makes me feel terrible.

"Can you tell me where your mommy is?"

The little girl cries harder. I stare at her helplessly, unsure of what to do next. She seems more frightened than hurt.

"I had a yellow dress as a kid. Is yellow your favorite color?"

"Is this your idea of a joke?" demands an angry voice from a few meters away. A tired looking young woman rushes over to pick up the child, hugging the girl to her almost frantically.

"She ran into me, but I don't think she hurt herself."

“You’re sick, you know that? Asking questions, making fun of my baby. You music whores are all the same.”

The venomous rage and disgust in the woman’s voice immobilizes me. I gape at her, sure I’m missing something, especially when she spits in my direction before walking away.

The little girl turns her head to look at me over her mother’s shoulder. The breath hitches in my throat at the sight of a small, round face covered in tears.

Her guileless expression breaks through the barriers in my mind. Loss, longing and pain begin to scream in a kind of paralyzing symphony. The emotional noise is confusing, but familiar. I hear a brutal, raw **sound** outside of my head, and realize it’s coming from my mouth.

Clamping my jaw shut, I manage to take small, stilted steps toward a nearby alley, leaning my back against the solid brick wall for support. Instead of being substantial and reassuring, the sensation of touch transforms into a harsh and unnatural experience.

Vertigo hits, colors and shapes wavering. The illusion is broken. Everything is shattering, inside and out. Closing my eyes, I wish... I wish I could see them.

“Are you okay?”

Opening my eyes cautiously, I find one of the music cultists peering at me through a cat-shaped mask. The world shifts strangely, drifting toward her as if she’s some kind of anchor. All the color and blur spins one final time before focusing in on her face. I get the bizarre idea she’s drawing the universe to her, pulling it home through her skin.

“Just dizzy,” I say, feeling relieved as my vision begins to realign. Yellows and reds maneuver politely around each other, systematically searching for their rightful places in the configuration. “It’s passing, though.”

Her child-like blue eyes seem to shimmer behind the cat-shaped mask. “Do you know you have a labyrinth in your head?”

“What?”

“It’s part of your anatomy.”

I give her a sharp glance, but the innocent gaze doesn’t falter.

“Seriously, I’m being legit. It’s what they call the passages inside your ear.”

I pull away from the wall, feeling steadier, the memory of whatever happened already fading.

“You look less gray. For a second I thought you stopped breathing.” The petite woman **sounds** relieved. She has long, flaming red hair that stands out in stark contrast to her threadbare, dirt-streaked blue robe.

“A group of people earlier were wearing robes like that. Are you dancers?”

She smiles, cocking her head to the side. “New blood. How nice to know someone who doesn’t know anything.”

“Excuse me?”

“About life in here.”

I wait, but she doesn’t add anything else. “Are you going to explain about the dancing?”

She grins. “Ignorance is a blissful state of being.”

“Hate to break it to you, but I’m not getting it.”

“Oh, you are, you just don’t know it,” she tells me. “That’s the twist.”

A smile takes over my mouth. “I’m Ces.”

Reaching up, she slides the mask off. Blindsided by a startling moment of déjà vu, I take a hasty step sideways.

“Lily?”

I want to ask how she escaped from Jessie and why she’s wearing a red wig, but I hesitate. If the questions make her mad, she might try to claw my face off.

“No, I’m Poppy, Lily’s twin sister. I dyed my hair red because we were always getting confused with each other.” She sighs. “In the sense that people would run screaming at the sight of my face.”

“Oh, sure.”

The idea of two women here in **Sound** sharing the same features makes me uncomfortable. I try to hide how unsettled

I am, but Poppy doesn't notice. Lost in thought, she stares at the brick wall, as if mulling something over.

"Ces, if you're new to **Sound**, and you've seen her, does that mean Lily's out?"

Nodding, I'm not sure how much to tell her. In the end, I decide less is definitely more. "She showed up at Hotel Vigoroso today."

"Course she did." Poppy looks grim. "Gotta go, thanks for the heads up." Turning around, she breaks into a run, a bright comet blurring through the slow moving crowd.

Feeling weary and sluggish, I lean one shoulder against the wall for a minute. Today's taking too long, like I accidentally pressed play on an extended mix, instead of the original version. Pulling the crumpled map from of my pocket, I work on figuring out the shortest way to Brad's place.

WARNING: POST OF THE ELITE I scored an invite to a swanky S.O.U.N.D. do. That's right, yours truly covered the soiree celebrating S.O.U.N.D.'s final professional appointments.

You won't be able to download a neural tour because the Man cut all recording devices for security reasons. (Am guessing it was more to stop watchers tallying the booze knocked back by super-smart types. Christ, they must have brain cells to spare.)

My allocated 'guide' Ted hovered anxiously, and I mean that literally, floating next to me on a nice little ride. I understood the chaperoning. You know, dear readers, that my keen insight, laced with envy, cut with curiosity, means I get angsty about S.O.U.N.D.

Guardian Ted needn't have worried. Controversy was nowhere to be found today. The S.O.U.N.D. research and analysis team includes representatives from every A-country (click here for the full professional listing) and it's neatly done.

Going over this lot with a statistical fine-tooth comb shows an almost equal divide between sexes from a mix of socio-economic backgrounds (within the A-grade map, of course). Scientists with multi-discipline credentials balanced with reclusive types focused on a single discipline. Some from privatized research facilities, others from leading educational institutions. The youngest 25, the oldest 76. No criminal records, no truly controversial career decisions. A few unpredictable choices, a lot of predictable ones. All up, a sleek selection.

Back to the party. The spread was divine, as was the scotch. From a marketing perspective, two goals dominated; personalize and humanize the over-IQ'd science types.

How to personalize? Say my name a lot, and reference hobbies. The world's best brains told me about their veggie patches and asked my thoughts on recent neural program releases.

Inviting partners and children of professionals to the event was a stroke of PR genius, considering the rumblings online in regards to families entering S.O.U.N.D. The experts behind the glass are being pitched as family folk who will show empathy (I'm guessing) toward volunteer family units.

Added bonus? Hard-hitting questions were quelled by the presence of children. I wanted to ask Ted some tough stuff, but a wide-eyed kid kept staring. Turns out eight-year-old Louise liked my hair, describing it as 'windy'. Fifteen-year-old Samuel told me he loved my writing.

A little girl with blond curls, who looked to be about three, asked for one of my sandwiches. I pointed out it was almost bigger than her head, but she said her twin would share. A double from across

the room waved, so I gave in. Between mouthfuls, food scout told me her name was Citrine and her sister was Ruby. (Clearly parents who took the children-are-precious idea too literally).

She told me mommy's going away to work. Eager Ted interrupted, informing me that yes, staff do bunk down on-site (well, on a site attached to the project), but vacation time and access visits are on the cards. I found myself nodding and eating a lot.

Yes, I was being carefully manipulated, but there wasn't much to fault. On a professional level, flawless credentials. On a personal level, the science crew and their kids are okay. On a catering level, I managed to leave with sandwiches and scotch. BLOGGED
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I wake up encircled by art. A montage of portraits, streetscapes and interiors cover the walls, hanging from hooks or resting on small shelves. An early morning glow filters through the skylight, providing gentle illumination. The faint scent of turpentine lingers in the air.

Enveloped by Brad's interpretation of the city, I pull the blanket up under my chin. I feel like I'm inside a different version of **Sound**, a place where colors are brighter, and emotions bolder. Everything is saturated, yet somehow vulnerable.

My stomach growls, reminding me I still need solid food. Letting out a breath that's almost a sigh, I throw back the blanket. My muscles are surprisingly sore, as if I ran all night in my sleep.

Walking tentatively toward the nearest wall, I wince at the pulling sensation in my legs. Stretching carefully, I reach my fingers toward the roof, ignoring the resistance in my shoulders. Making a slow lap of the room, I soak up all the art.

The paintings are captivating, but at the same time it's almost like I'm invading someone's privacy. From street scenes to portraits, there's something intimate about the imagery. Brad's created his own kind of music with the careful, meticulous brushstrokes, songs made up of color and shapes instead of notes and lyrics.

Some of the paintings are larger-than-life portraits, the skintones and textures painted with meticulous detail. Full of expression, the eyes of the subjects are mesmerizing, captured in a way that borders on hyperrealism. Certain aspects of the street scenes are blurred and lacking definition, in stark contrast to other elements within the frame that have been painted with breathtaking precision.

My focus wanders to the image of a girl slumped in a doorway, probably post-music. She's leaning back languidly, all blissful smile and broken eyes. In contrast, another artwork's infused with a sense of mania; I spot Jain amongst the revelers, dancing with wild abandon.

Gradually I notice a recurring color in many of the paintings. Similar to a photographer in love with a warm filter, Brad uses a burnt yellow wash constantly. The same shade of yellow's also a solid background in some of the portraits. He even imbues the petite genre skylines with a bold yellow cast.

There's nothing pretty or cheerful about the color. The strong pigment saturates Brad's work and is a harrowing presence on the canvases, almost pummeling its way into the mind of the viewer. Oddly, the hue reminds me of the dress the child in the market was wearing.

Managing to break my gaze from all the art, I move to fold the bedclothes neatly and try to straighten my outfit and hair without a mirror. Setting off through the house, I head for the studio space Brad showed me last night.

He's still home, standing in front of a large canvas with paintbrush in hand. The scent of turpentine is stronger here, thanks to the half-finished paintings and art utensils scattered everywhere.

"Hey," I venture quietly, unwilling to disturb him.

Brad turns and smiles somewhat vaguely. He has messy slashes of paint all over his skin and clothes. "Morning, Ces. Sleep okay?"

"Sure." I don't tell him about the nightmares starring Lily. In one, she sung me to death. In another, she slapped me so hard my teeth fell out.

He waves in the direction of a stool. Sitting down, I note the light is a lot brighter in here, the roof of the room and one outer wall made of glass. "Love the high ceiling."

"I had it designed that way, for the natural light." Mouth quirking into a wry smile, he adds, "Well, as close to natural light as I can get."

This makes me pause. To have a say in the original design, Brad must have been in the first influx of volunteers, meaning he was bound to be right on the youth limit when he entered the city. It also means he comes from money.

My stomach growls, making Brad laugh. Opening a small cupboard, he throws me some kind of nutrient bar, followed by a bottle of water with a floral graphic on the label. “Don’t forget to keep eating, Ces.”

He starts painting again. I’d love to know what he’s working on, but the angle of the easel is set to Brad’s eyes only, so I get the message.

Trying to ignore a slight headache, probably from the turpentine, I chomp down on the grainy offering and look around the space more carefully.

The studio is full of beauty, and in a way, full of **Sound**. There’s something almost reverent about the way he’s painted the people of this city.

“Did you know that during wartime, before imaging devices, artists followed soldiers into war?” I take a swig of the water. “They would sketch on the battlefield and paint the scenes in oils later.”

“Is that what I’m doing, capturing **Sound** in all its glory?” His brushstroke pauses. “You know they also caught the aftermath, right?”

I follow his gaze to a large portrait of Lily’s face and a sudden, difficult silence falls.

“They just got taken by surprise, and you were caught in the crossfire,” he finally says.

Clearing my throat, I remember I have somewhere to be. “Do you know what the time is?”

He pulls a fob watch out of his coat pocket, walking over so that I can read the clock face myself. “You should get one of these.”

I look down at the small wind-up mechanism with distrust. The idea of holding time outside my head is unnerving.

Brad seems to read my thoughts. “Hard to get used to, I know. Internal clocks made it a whole lot easier to keep track of life.”

“I’ve got my first allocated work shift this morning.” Tugging the crumpled papers from yesterday out of my pocket, I wave them at Brad.

He glances at the paperwork, pulling a face. “Good luck with that.”

“Where do you work?”

“Free pass.” He smiles smugly. “I’m a permanent artist in residence.”

Swallowing a sarcastic response about precious arty types, I remind myself he did let me stay the night. “Thanks for the spare room, and the breakfast.”

“No problem.” Brad turns back to his painting, frowning at the canvas in concentration.

Standing up, I pocket the rest of the bar. A money chip caught in my paperwork falls to the floor, rolling toward Brad. Leaning down to pick it up, I catch a glimpse of the half-finished painting on the easel. Aside from the base coat, only the barest of outlines exists on the canvas, but I recognize the profiles easily.

The fragile shell I’ve constructed since finding this refuge begins to fracture. There are echoes of too many people in the room now.

Brad’s armored his home with two-dimensional replicas of the chaos outside, and I’d let myself be lulled by the false sense of security, created with such meticulous care. But the truth is there’s nowhere safe to hide in **Sound**.

“You can come back after work, if you like, but the hotel should be okay by then.” He starts applying a thick coat of burnt yellow pigment onto the canvas. “They’ll have the situation under control.”

“Sure,” I reply, still trying to come to terms with the loss of a cocoon I hadn’t realized I was spinning. “I’ve got to get to work.”

Bolting for the hallway, I'm unsure what hurts more, the aching in my leg muscles or the tumult of emotions under my skin. Here's hoping the new job's low maintenance.

Brad's voice pulls me up. "Wait, I want to ask you something."

Turning in the doorway, I'm suddenly edgy. The photorealism in some of the paintings has become unnerving. My throat tightens and I feel suffocated, as if the simulacra on the walls have woken up and are paying attention.

"Will you sit for me?"

"Pose, you mean?" Imagining my face on the wall, my eyes stalking other people, has panic bubbling under the skin.

"I mean, will you let me work on a portrait of you sometime?"

"M-maybe," I stammer. The thought is terrifying, as if the concept's somehow poisonous.

"Think about it." He **sounds** distracted now, attention wholly captured by the canvas again.

Walking out into the hall, I close my eyes for a few seconds. The walls here are bare, but Brad's latest artwork is imprinted on my retinas, haunting my sight like a restless spirit.
