

Musiclight

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Once again I woke and descended—or ascended—to that room bathed in the light of two huge hands of fire, clasping. I stood, watching their frozen, fiery interlinking fingers. Ribbons of flame, or spreading ink in water, clouding, reaching with wisps and tendrils, intense with light. Unmoving. It was the sky above me, or the depths, and I alternated, without moving, between standing at the base of a great pit, staring up, and peering down from the edge of a precipice. Dark clouds swarmed around it. It is not fair to say that it lay in a field of black, but rather that nothing else had light. I was alone, in the blue dim of the safety lights, in the divine stare of this insensate but colossal phenomenon.

I was cold, but did not turn on the heating. My feet would warm the floor. My arms would warm each other. My shoulders were bare, and my ears were icy, but orange-red breathed all over my skin and it appeared as if I were warm. I concentrated on being still, remaining still, thinking still. My mind was still. All that was became the sight outside, scant millimeters of glass and a thousand years distant. I listened. There was the slight hum. Energy, forwards, air, lights, life, the Saint Orphée. I did not turn the heating on for the noise it would make; a thrum. If I could, I would have silenced the whole vessel, stopped it from turning, producing air, closed it down. Maybe when it was silent, before I fell silent, I would be able to hear it, hear the thing that woke me every night.

Hear its whispers.

Once again I awoke. I shifted into a sitting position, drawing away the blankets and walking through the stuffy dark. The room—so small—let me touch all its walls, so warm as to almost be soft. I ran my fingers along. I sat on the bed and thought, and the dark in the cabin was the dark of the corridors was the dark of the outside, overwhelming dark. This is what drowning felt like. I knew that if I got up I could find a light, such as the skirting lights of the corridors, and crouch near it and know that this light never went out. To touch other skin—but not for years in any direction. I would wander the passageways deep in dawn, for the Clasping Hands made eternal dawn, and only sometimes hear the soft pat of others' feet.

That is what drowning felt like. To be enclosed completely by that which suffocates life. I closed my eyes and discovered another darkness inside, and this made me bite my lip and brush away droplets from my cheeks.

I was dead.

I was a ghost, haunting the ship. I flitted from empty place to empty space, soft-as-nothing footsteps, chasing the other ghosts of the ship, cold and quiet. Dwelling in blue-grey light, nameless, the wraith of the *Saint Orphée*. Sometimes I saw strange graffiti. Down in the coal-cellar, where black weight from collapsed stars fed the engine, was a picture of many arrows. In the cafeteria the word *help*. Once on every table, scratched in, probably with some smuggled metal cutlery. The squealing sound would have stopped me from making the effort.

And in many corridors, in storerooms and cabins, in alcoves—the hieroglyph, the gauntlet star. I had drawn this myself, many times, a crisscross pattern that some thought looked like a star, which others saw as a mailed fist.

It was on the wall of the old doctor's cabin, painted in ugly blue, which turned

purply in the gaze of the Clasp Hands.

I listened. I always listened.

My skin was so cold, and I gently held my hands and sat in the dark, wondering whether to find a source of light. Even the blanket did not help, but it was coarse and made me irritable. The bathroom light still worked. I sat on the edge of the sink, shivering, feeling that the cold had sunk all the way in, had consumed all my flesh. I was dead. There were nail-scissors and I tried an experiment, exploring here and there, making more and more to see if anything were true, making more and more because I could not see through my tired. I was proven false by the amount of blood, and I turned on the shower and washed it away, noting that when red and water mixed it looked like the nebula.

One side of the ship is always midnight, one is always dawn. I crept from one to the other, moving toward light, slipping through vacant corridors as though hunted. I felt stuck and unsafe, and wanted to move faster, to escape. I moved further and further forward, searching for the room that was—closest. I heard, in parallel worlds, or perhaps just the next corridor, other journeys, moving as I moved. Sometimes shapes moved in front of me, sometimes I thought I heard them behind me.

The room that I found had once been the doctor's. From the passageway fingers of orange crept from under the line of cabin doors. This night I felt I was descending, carefully watching my footing as I negotiated the perceived slant of the floor. I stepped down into the orange glow, almost vertiginous from the depth. I grasped the chair as I entered, steadying myself.

Iain was already there, sitting on the bed with arms back, face studious and sad. Crumpled with worry. I wondered if I looked the same, with dark eyes and a pained frown. My hair hung in little struggles, some of which I had begun to chew on. The nebula threw strange shadows on his face, and his eyes were smudges of grey.

I sat next to him. For a moment we were silent, watching, listening. Then I could hear the beat of his heart, the hush and hush of his breath. I strained for as long as I could, listening past him, but eventually something within us relented and relaxed. He took my hand, and it was the most life I had felt in some days. The nebula stayed in my vision, lingering, and then I curled up and became a circle on the bed. Iain kept my hand.

"It's only from this direction that it looks like clasped hands. Every perspective has a different name: the psyrenes call it the Braided God."

"I know," I nodded. "Every time I see it I think of them."

I could still see it with my eyes shut, an afterimage, slowly deforming. The first time I had seen it in motion.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"Where has anyone been? Whatever's happened to this place, people have begun to hide themselves away. We've become the secret people."

"We're a ghost ship."

He thought about this.

"This is the best place to view the nebula from. I've tried different cabins along this side. I spent the last few days moving from one to other. I've been getting food from the kitchens."

"So have I."

"I don't know where the cooks are."

"I heard that they were in the infirmary."

"What for?"

"One for self-harm. One for locking himself into the freezer cabinet. I'm not sure. One I heard starved to death."

"I thought there were only two."

“There might be. I only remember two.”

“Who did you hear this from?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember seeing anybody.”

He held my hand tighter.

“I’ve seen the captain,” he said. “It’s the same as not seeing anyone.”

There was a light knock on the door. I stiffened, but Iain did nothing. A new figure entered, illuminated by Claspings Hands.

“I heard voices,” he whispered, and I realised that we had been whispering

too. There is a secret power in the whisper.

I sat up and blinked and, for the first time (so it felt), I yawned. Iain shifted across on the bed, but the figure took the seat I had grasped earlier. There was no talking. Little silences grew in the corners of the room, under the table, between books on the shelf. I watched them grow with a small pleasure, sharing silence, sharing warmth, returning. I could hear the third person shifting in his chair, listening for more whispers.

They came. One by one I saw the flitting shadows of the corridors, the quiet footsteps from just-out-of-sight. The medical assistant entered, the tall one, followed by the storemaster and two of the engineers. They found places to sit or stand and we, the strange entity that we had become, turned our attention away from ourselves, away from thought, to the Claspings Hands. Slowly the room filled, until the quartermaster herself entered, grim and broad-shouldered. Her eyes would normally have set us to work, moved us from inaction to duty, cleared us from the room. I could not see them, but I felt her gaze, and it too found the image beyond the window, and it stared with such ferocity that I thought the window would start to vibrate. She stood without looking away, careless clothes draped about in semi-sleep, giving centre to the group. Then, with a shudder, after what was a second or an hour, she left, pushing her way through newcomers.

I decided it was time to leave too. I stood, and Iain’s fingers slid through mine. We began to part, to mill back towards our cabins, our items, our jobs, as though this midnight occurrence was no more than coincidence, as though each person were invisible to others. I wandered too, stopping only to see the medical assistant, face and hands pressed against the glass, eyes closed.

“Are you alright?” I asked, and reached with my hand.

She shook her head. "I need help."

"I can help you." Her hand stayed with the glass.

"I'm so cold, and so far. Come and get me." She looked at me, and the shimmer of tears showed on her cheek. "Please. Come and find me. Come and get me."

I did not. I left her, and the others, and I buried myself in my bed and cried.

I stayed for a long time in the midnight. I could hear people passing to and fro in front of the door. I stayed low, on the bed, arms pressed against my body. Now and then someone would knock—I can't imagine who. I have no idea whether they thought I was in there. The cabin made a muffled but hollow sound (like I imagine an empty skull would, or an empty amphora). I liked being part of the hollow sometimes, but at other times I would lunge for the door. I woke one night in emergency, scrambling for things around me, life-giving objects. An alarm sounded, a resonating noise I had never heard before, a voice of some great machine, and the place flooded with violet light. I was grasping at the door, reaching in a way I never had before, as though for a handle that didn't exist, before I realised I was a dream. I had stepped in that world only briefly. Now, awake, cold, (eyes strange), I held my hand against the door and wondered in which place I was a ghost.

I clasped and unclasped my hands, testing them together. The cabin suddenly seemed so small, but I had nowhere to go. I was trapped. Eventually food would drive me out into the corridors, where I had roamed before. I was trying, with the fleshy little hands I called my own, to replicate the thing that was the braided god, or the god of whispers, or whatever they called it. It was not possible with a human amount of fingers, but I could see here and there how it might have begun. I wanted to see it again. When I looked at my hands I saw the criss-crossing on my arms and frowned, noting that the shape was familiar, like a septacle or a closed hand.

Help me. Help me leave here. I need to get out. Come and get me. Please find me.

Iain found me. For a moment we just hugged, but it was one of those infinite moments, where midnight is forever.

We walked. When they built this vessel they built an enormous structure, a giant of metal and parametal, a thing to carry a portion of world across the skies. From inside, soft foot to cold floor, walking quietly up toward the doctor's old cabin, the ship was tiny. And empty.

We found the doctor's practice crowded, however, a second meeting at dawn. Iain and I took places on the floor, I crosslegged, and waited. I noticed the medical assistant still pressed against the window, face drawn. She pawed lightly with her hand.

"We have to go to the nebula," someone said.

There was a murmur.

"It's true. We have to move from here, at least."

"That's for the captain to decide."

That brought a particular silence, as though there were no captain.

"It's the only place," said one of the engineers.

I agreed. I felt it too. All was orange light. All was clasp hands. The room was filled with both. Everyone was affected by both. The light did not pulse: it was steady, unending. But the people did—they pulsed through the ship, hiding and emerging, finding this view, scattering and gathering. The nebula made us pulse.

"Like music. Light like music." A vacant voice from the back.

"You're right," said someone. "We have to go. I can hear the song."

There was a sneeze, a distinctly human and biologically involuntary action. It echoed, or felt as though it did, though the sound ceased. Everyone turned to look, as if stirring a memory.

"We should tell the captain."

"We should make the captain."

Assent, dissent, caution. A stronger voice said, "There is no captain."

The quartermaster, thicker and grimmer, said, "The captain says we stay. The captain says we stay where we are. We stay the course. We stay."

The first person, standing now, said, "The captain is gone."

I turned to Iain, who had mentioned the captain yesterday. He shook his head.

I looked at the nebula. How could the captain say we stay? Whatever our mission had been, it was certainly not now. It was vanished, folded over by the waves, the bulk of grey-blue, whose fretted currents played us into the open stare of this gold-orange cloud, this spectacle, this mystery.

We must go, I thought, perhaps out loud.

“Help me,” said a taller man. The phrase plucked me to my feet, and many others, though whether meaning or memory took them I cannot know. I stood because the words ate at me, surrounded me, both created and destroyed a myriad of thoughts in my mind.

The quartermaster said, “You should not. The captain is right.”

Someone said, “No.”

“I do not advocate violence. This is a ridiculous. I do not blame the captain for something that is a collective failure of belief. I am like you. I am scared, without reason. I feel trapped, alone, afraid, without source. I scratch words into the walls, in the dark, I sorrow. All without my sense of self. But the captain is without this. This is the path that will lead us out.”

One if the engineers had been in discussion with the other, and said, “I nominate you.”

“One each, if the quartermaster will not join.”

“I join,” she said. “I will not fight.”

“There should be three or four of us, if we are to do it without harm.”

“All of us.”

“Too many. We should take the field-cutters.”

Like rain they left, a perfunctory exeunt in ones and threes. The quartermaster sat, airless and bloodless, on the bed. I thought she would lie down. Instead she knit her hands together and listened for the song, which she could not hear alone.

I was still standing, and I went to move, but the medical assistant said, “Help me.”

“You should help us,” I said. “We are making progress.”

She shook her head. She was like a little doll, peering out behind the glass of the shop window, her only phrase haunting the interior.

“Are you coming?” said Iain.

I could not answer. I wanted to be helped, too. I felt afraid with the girl for a moment, afraid and urgent, and yearning for the shapeless beyond the glass. I touched the window.

“We should help her.”

“I’m not,” he said. “I’m helping the engineers.”

He left. I wondered, if he found the captain, whether he could.

“Help me,” she said.

I took her hand.

We went beyond the glass. There was a little shudder as our capsule left the main body, and it floated for a moment, like dreaming, as the larger turned away. If we had watched we would have seen it disappear into a point of light, another star, married into a constellation. We did not. Instead we looked at the Claspings Hands as they approached. We wanted to travel until its fingers caught us, carrying us into its warm palms. We wanted to be cradled.

There was a long silence. It made a straight line between the vessel we had left and our destination. We were balanced as though on a string, that any noise might move us, lose us. There was a long fall of the abyss, and worse, it was all directions. All but the nebula. It was a magic that summoned, a crying voice that no mother could resist. It was tears, or blood, or each together, a wound in the sky that collapsed futures into itself.

I played with my fingers to pass the time. I counted each, and again, to numbers beyond what I imagined. I performed Incy Wincy Spider. I wished for string, so that I could perform the tricks of childhood. I wanted to tie some around each finger and remember.

The medical assistant just watched. She moved every hour, switching between the small front window within which began the nebula, and pressing her hands against the bulkhead, which was physically closer. I shut my eyes a lot. Maybe I slept—it seems unlikely. Excitement grew as we closed in, the excitement that we were becoming the area we sought. My heart told my ribs, and my ribs told me pain, and I had to sit, hungry and thirsty, counting the beats in the song, straining my ears and listening. In the sky, the great cloud did not get bigger, because it was a thousand years away. But its spirit began to touch us, and the medical assistant began to sing. Single, wordless notes.

It has a voice, I thought. It was a beautiful, mournful voice.

A star appeared.

“Help me,” sang the medical assistant. “Help me.”

I ignored her. I watched the star flicker and spread, in an hour transforming from less than light to a bloom of blue-white. A tendril emerged.

“I’m alone,” said the medical assistant. She crawled against the wall and sat there, sightless, blinking. In a moment more she was no longer the thing she had been, but a child, rubbing her arms together, wet-dew eyes. I

knelt down and held her. She shivered, and I hugged, and she hugged back, and I thought of the two of us lost in the vast. There is a time when crying stops feeding in and starts flooding out, and I held her while her body whispered its sadness. My hands could have been shaking. I joined her for a bit, and when I came back I realised that she was cold and asleep, gently resting on my shoulder, her chest so feebly breathing in and out that for a second I had thought she was dead.

“Hush,” I said.

“I’m so alone,” she couldn’t say. “I’m alone and I’m lost. You need to help me. You need to come find me. I need you.” She looked at me with deep brine eyes and I forgot. “Please. Please, I need you. We are breached. Our air is running out.”

She sat and we shook together, more than comfortable for being on the floor.

Those things that are incomprehensible, sizeless, not-gods walked past our little craft. I could hear their footsteps. We crouched, and they moved on, talking in their adult voices, pausing sometimes to see if we were listening.

The star became a line, a wide needle, then a flange. It stayed this way for maybe an hour, and then metamorphosed again. It was a metal arrowhead, sitting in space. I stood up and wearily—as if I had grown up all over again, passing through years in seconds and feeling the exhaustion of those events—found the controls and moved us closer. The medical assistant stayed where she was, and I felt sorry for her. The other craft, turning lazily as if upset by tides, pointed its arrow-nose in a twisted spiral.

I stared at it for a long time, noting the strange angles and meanings in the metal. Our ships represented, in some way, us as a species: what we found practical and beautiful, what was necessary and what was wasteful. This species was—emotional. The design was clever as a logical puzzle is clever, sharp as an answer, mysterious as a question. It resonated. In this ocean, that was something hard to do. On the top, or the part I nominated as the top, was the flashing, seeking violet light of the emergency beacon, transmitting across the psyrene wavelength of thought.

“Help,” I said. “Come to me.”

A huge part of the ship was gone. Everything inside was dead. It was a dark wound, lit eerily by the sudden strike of an internal electrical storm, by the constant bloodlike glow of emergency lighting. An object that was

definitely a door arced about the ship. If I had known of their biology, I could have seen those that were bodies.

On the side was a symbol, possibly a name, etched in. It resembled a star, or a mailed fist.

The medical assistant began to scream, to scream and scream for help, to shake, and I knew that she would be tearing at her skin and scratching blood from her face. I took our craft and moved it in a line that swept the beacon from the top of their ship. It raked across our belly and died.

Breath came to me, and I fought everything down, struggling up. Weight left, showing me burnt out arms that would become new again. My lungs were cold, as if with first air. I thought to myself, and they were mine.

We sat for the longest time, she and I, and shared names.

(I am Michelle and she is Will.)

The silence felt true, the strange background frequency removed. The Claspings Hands were void, lifeless, as if the soul had been sucked out, dissipated in seas that did not care. We shared one of those currents as we returned, passing through all notes and motes, letting all manner of particles and frequencies pass through us freely, though we remained untouched. I felt a bit like I was heading up. The medical assistant took to sighing, though eventually I saw the blood regain her cheeks. She sat near me as I found the signal of the *Saint Orphée*. Under her breath I heard a song, quiet but pleasant.

I hummed my own.