

THE SCAR

CHINA MIÉVILLE



BALLANTINE BOOKS

PRAISE FOR *THE SCAR*

Named “One of the Best Science Fiction/Fantasy Books of the Year” by *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Locus*, *Library Journal*, and *Publishers Weekly*

“Astonishing ... This is narrative simultaneously at its most commanding and most intelligent, a massive, brawling tale of maritime piracy and supernatural obsession, and a majestic orchestration of themes such as fantasy rarely sustains.... The wholesale remaking of the fantasy epic, already commenced by George R. R. Martin, is now in full swing... *The Scar* is one of the major speculative fiction novels of 2002.... Miéville is now the towering giant of High Fantasy, and bids fair to remain so.”

—*Locus*

“*The Scar* is a massive, sprawling, inventive Hobbesian fantasy in which Miéville once again shows his fascination with invented cities of the mind.... He has trawled wide and deep, and his nets have brought up as glittering, bizarre, and curious a catch as you will ever find in science fantasy. Miéville is one of those few writers helping to reinvent a form and reviving a sense of wonder you might have thought you’d lost.”

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“China Miéville is the most original voice in recent fantasy.... [His] world is full of intrigue and counter-intrigues in a brilliantly bizarre and captivating universe.”

—*The Denver Post*

“A SPRAWL OF DARKNESS AND MAGIC.”

—*The Dallas Morning News*

“*The Scar* should establish [Miéville] as the most original and talented voice to appear in several years.... The settings are exotic and brilliantly evoked, and there’s a good sized cast of remarkable and eccentric characters. This is without question the best fantasy novel I’ve read so far this year.”

—*Science Fiction Chronicle*

“It’s more than inventiveness that makes the world of *The Scar* an unforgettable experience. There is the language and the names of the characters and places that seem alien and yet vaguely familiar.... This is one of those great novels where you never really are sure who the hero and who the villain.”

—*Orlando Sentinel*

“Those who love intricate plots will turn the page compulsively.... Those who are excited by grand feats of imagination will be endlessly fascinated.... *The Scar* is a spectacularly brilliant book that builds on the outstanding *Perdido Street Station*—and has me eagerly anticipating novel No. 3.”

—*Contra Costa Times*

“Highly recommended ... Miéville’s hauntingly evocative style and masterful storytelling place this tale of exploration, mystery, and discovery at the top of the genre.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

**“[AN] INGENIOUS, EXUBERANT NOVEL,
written with the same unnerving confidence
and sure eye for the grotesque as
Perdido Street Station.”**

—*The New York Review of Science Fiction*

“Miéville is one of the most interesting writers to hit the fantasy genre in a long time. The mixture of literary fiction, steampunk, urban fantasy, and dark fantasy is sure to be a favorite of people who are looking for something different, both in and out of the fantasy genre.”

—*The New-Star* (Monroe, LA)

“Miéville’s books straddle the boundaries between fantasy and science fiction, marrying the best elements of both to create something new. His world is one where magic exists... *The Scar* proves that you should try this now, so you can boast in later years about how you were there at the start. This one has the power to run.”

—*Starburst*

“*The Scar* is a baroque and picaresque odyssey, peopled by strange species and ambiguous characters.... Dense with ideas and inventions, unfolding at a pace that leaves readers breathless awe, gasping with wonder.”

—*The Montreal Gazette*

“AN INTRIGUING PLOT OF ESPIONAGE AND DECEIT ...

~~[*The Scar*] demonstrates enough invention and brutal energy, firmly ruled by a calm architectonic intelligence, to show that Miéville is one of the most imaginative young writers around in any kind of fiction.”~~

—*The Guardian* (London)

“China Miéville, after just three novels, has achieved literary megastar status in the sf-and-fantasy scene. It’s not commonplace gone-tomorrow megastardom, either. Miéville is quality ... *The Scar* is fantastic entertainment.... It is beautiful and entrancing stuff and the writing is superb.”

—*The Sydney Morning Herald*

“Monumental ... [Miéville’s] novels are fast-paced, humanistic, complex, and ambiguously beautifully written and possessed of a depth of understanding about the threads of soul that bind all creatures.... This is not your grandfather’s science-fiction/fantasy novelist.”

—*City Lights* (Washington, DC)

“Gripping ... One of the most talented new writers in the field ... The author creates marvelously detailed floating civilization filled with dark, eccentric characters worthy of Mervyn Peake or Charles Dickens.... State-of-the-art dark fantasy.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“ASTONISHING ...

PANORAMIC AND STUNNINGLY INVENTIVE.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Miéville loots the traditions of a multitude of genres to explode boundaries, confound expectations, and, out of the ensuing chaos, create an extraordinary hybrid.... [An] undeniable power to seduce, disturb, disgust, and, yes, uplift.... His characters can move us to laughter or tears even as his imagination makes us gasp in wonder. And as good as it is, *The Scar* is only his third novel. This prodigiously talented young writer is going to get even better.”

—*Realms of Fantasy*

“Miéville is a master of elegant, poetic description, layering a rich patina of prose upon his places and people.... [There’s] a plethora of wonders here. Miéville’s fecund imagination conjures up vivid images on every page.... [He] knocks you on your butt [and] knows how to ratchet up the suspense.... If Michael Moorcock, Tim Powers, and Jules Verne collaborated on a novel, they might stand half a chance of approaching the grim majesty of *The Scar*.”

—[SciFi.com](#)

“Miéville continues to build a planet of engrossing wonders, powered by a narrative thrust of clockwork intricacy and battleship force.... *The Scar* is a ripping, thoughtful yarn.”

—*The Independent on Sunday* (London)

THE
SCAR

CHINA
MIÉVILLE



BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

The Scar is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming edition of *Iron Council* by China Miéville. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

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Cover

Title Page

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Epigraph

Part One: Channels

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Interlude I

Interlude II

Part Two: Salt

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Interlude III

Part Three: The Compass Factory

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Interlude IV

Part Four: Blood

Chapter Twenty-one

Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Twenty-three

Chapter Twenty-four

Chapter Twenty-five

Chapter Twenty-six

Interlude V

Interlude VI

Part Five: Storms

Chapter Twenty-seven

Chapter Twenty-eight

Chapter Twenty-nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-one

Chapter Thirty-two

Interlude VII

Interlude VIII

Part Six: Morning Walker

Chapter Thirty-three

Chapter Thirty-four

Chapter Thirty-five

Chapter Thirty-six

Chapter Thirty-seven

Chapter Thirty-eight

Chapter Thirty-nine

Chapter Forty

Interlude IX

Part Seven: The Lookout

Chapter Forty-one

Chapter Forty-two

Chapter Forty-three

Chapter Forty-four

Chapter Forty-five

Chapter Forty-six

Chapter Forty-seven

Coda

Tanner Sack

Preview of Iron Council

Dedication

Acknowledgments

Other Books by This Author

Yet the memory would not set into the setting sun, that green and frozen glance to the wide blue sea where broken hearts are wrecked out of their wounds. A blind sky bleached white the intellect of human bone, skinning the emotions from the fracture to reveal the grief underneath. And the mirror reveals me, a naked and vulnerable fact.

—Dambudzo Marechera, *Black Sunlight*

A mile below the lowest cloud, rock breaches water and the sea begins.

It has been given many names. Each inlet and bay and stream has been classified as if it were discrete. But it is one thing, where borders are absurd. It fills the spaces between stones and sand, curling around coastlines and filling trenches between the continents.

At the edges of the world the salt water is cold enough to burn. Huge slabs of frozen sea mimic the land, and break and crash and reform, crisscrossed with tunnels, the homes of frost-crabs and philosophers with shells of living ice. In the southern shallows there are forests of pipe-worms and kelp and predatory corals. Sunfish move with idiot grace. Trilobites make nests in bones and dissolving iron.

The sea throngs.

There are free-floating top-dwellers that live and die in surf without ever seeing dirt beneath them. Complex ecosystems flourish in neritic pools and flatlands, sliding on organic scree to the edge of rock shelves and dropping into a zone below light.

There are ravines. Presences something between molluscs and deities squat patiently below eight miles of water. In the lightless cold a brutality of evolution obtains. Rude creatures emit slime and phosphorescence and move with flickerings of unclear limbs. The logic of their forms derives from nightmares.

There are bottomless shafts of water. There are places where the granite and muck base of the sea falls away in vertical tunnels that plumb miles, spilling into other planes, under pressure so great that the water flows sluggish and thick. It spurts through the pores of reality, seeping back in dangerous washes, leaving fissures through which displaced forces can emerge.

In the chill middle deeps, hydrothermic vents break through the rocks and spew clouds of superheated water. Intricate creatures bask in this ambient warmth their whole short lives, never straying beyond a few feet of warm, mineral-rich water into a cold which would kill them.

The landscape below the surface is one of mountains and canyons and forests, shifting dunes, ice caverns and graveyards. The water is dense with matter. Islands float impossibly in the deep, caught on charmed tides. Some are the size of coffins, little slivers of flint and granite that refuse to sink. Others are gnarled rocks half a mile long, suspended thousands of feet down, moving on slow, arcane streams. There are communities on these unsinking lands: there are hidden kingdoms.

There is heroism and brute warfare on the ocean floor, unnoticed by land-dwellers. There are gods and catastrophes.

Intruding vessels pass between the sea and the air. Their shadows fleck the bottom where it is high enough for light to reach. The trading ships and cogs, the whaling boats pass over the rot of other craft. Sailors' bodies fertilize the water. Scavenger fish feed on eyes and lips. There are jags in the coral architecture where masts and anchors have been reclaimed. Lost ships are mourned and forgotten, and the living floor of the sea takes them and hides them with barnacles, gives them caves to morays and ratfish and cray outcastes; and other more savage things.

In the deepest places, where physical norms collapse under the crushing water, bodies still float softly through the dark, days after their vessels have capsized.

They decay on their long journey down. Nothing will hit the black sand at the bottom of the world but algae-covered bones.

At the edges of the shelves of rock where cold, light water gives way to a creeping darkness, a he-crab scrambles. He sees prey, clicks and rattles deep in his throat while he slips the hood from his head, hunting squid and releases it.

It bolts from him, diving for the shoal of fat mackerel that boil and re-form like a cloud twenty feet above. Its foot-long tentacles open and whip closed again. The squid returns to its master, dragging a dying fish, and the school reknits behind it.

The crab slices the head and tail from the mackerel and slips the carcass into a net bag at his belt. The bloody head he gives his squid to gnaw.

The upper body of the crab, the soft, unarmored section, is sensitive to minute shifts of tide and temperature. He feels a prickling against his sallow skin as complex washes of water meet and interact. With an abrupt spasm the mackerel-cloud congeals and disappears over the crusted reef.

The crab raises his arm and calls his squid closer to him, soothes it gently. He fingers his harpoon.

He is standing on a granite ridge, where seaweed and ferns move against him, caressing his long underbelly. To his right, swells of porous stone rise above him. To the left the slope falls away from him into disphotic water. He can feel the chill emanating from below. He looks out into a steep gradation of blue. Way overhead, on the surface, there are ripples of light. Below him the rays peter swiftly out. He stands only a little way above the border of perpetual dark.

He treads carefully here, on the edge of the plateau. He often comes to hunt here, where prey is less careful, away from the lighter, warmer shallows. Sometimes big game rises curiously from the pitch, unused to his shrewd tactics and barbed spears. The crab shifts nervously in the current and stares out into the open sea. Sometimes it is not prey but predators that rise from the twilight zone.

Eddies of cold roll over him. Pebbles are dislodged around his feet and bounce slowly down the slope and out of sight. The crab braces himself on the slippery boulders.

Somewhere below him there is a soft percussion of rocks. A chill not carried by any current creeps across his skin. Stones are realigning, and a spill of thaumaturgic wash is spewing through narrow crevices.

Something baleful is emerging in the cold water, at the edge of the dark.

The crab hunter's squid is beginning to panic, and when he releases it again, it jets instantly up the slope, toward the light. He peers back into the murk, looking for the source of the sound.

There is an ominous vibration. As he tries to see through water stained by dust and plankton, something moves. Way below, a plug of rock bigger than a man shudders. The crab bites his lip and the great irregular stone falls suddenly free and begins a grinding descent.

The thundering of its passage reverberates long after it has become invisible.

There is a pit in the slope now, that stains the sea with darkness. It is quiet and motionless for some time, and the crab fingers his spear with anxiety, clutching at it and hefting it and feeling himself tremble.

And then, softly, something colorless and cold slips from the hole.

It confuses the eye, flitting with a grotesque organic swiftness that seems to belie intention, like a gore falling from a wound. The he-crab is quite still. His fear is intense.

Another shape emerges. Again he cannot make it out: it evades him; it is like a memory or a shadow; impression; it will not be specified. It is fast and corporeal and coldly terrifying.

There is another, and then more, until a constant quick stream dribbles from the darkness. The

presences shift, not quite invisible, communing and dissipating, their movements opaque.

The he-cray is still. He can hear strange, whispering discourses on the tides.

His eyes widen as he glimpses massive backbent teeth, bodies pebbled with rucks. Sinuous muscled things fluttering in the freezing water.

The he-cray starts and steps backward, his feet skittering on sloping stone, trying to quiet himself but too slow—small shattered sounds emerging from him.

With a single motion, a lazy, predatory twitch, the dark things that huddle in council below him move. The he-cray sees the darks of a score of eyes, and he knows with a sick-making fear that they are watching.

And then with a monstrous grace, they rise, and are upon him.

PART ONE

Channels

It is only ten miles beyond the city that the river loses its momentum, drooling into the brackish estuary that feeds Iron Bay.

The boats that make the eastward journey out of New Crobuzon enter a lower landscape. To the south there are huts and rotten little jetties, from where rural laborers fish to supplement monotonous diets. Their children wave at travelers, warily. Occasionally there is a knoll of rock or a small copse of darkwood trees, places that defy cultivation, but most of the land is clear of stones.

From the decks, sailors can see over the fringe of hedgerow and trees and bramble to a tract of fields. This is the stubby end of the Grain Spiral, the long curl of farmland that feeds the city. Men and women can be seen among the crops, or plowing the black earth, or burning the stubble—depending on the season. Barges putter weirdly between fields, and canals hidden by banks of earth and vegetation. They go endlessly between the metropolis and the estates. They bring chymicals and fuel, stone and cement and luxuries to the countryside. They return to the city past acres of cultivation studded with hamlets, great houses, and mills, with sack upon sack of grain and meat.

The transport never stops. New Crobuzon is insatiable.

The north bank of the Gross Tar is wilder.

It is a long expanse of scrub and marsh. It stretches out for more than eighty miles, till the foothills and low mountains that creep at it from the west cover it completely. Ringed by the river, the mountains, and the sea, the rocky scrubland is an empty place. If there are inhabitants other than the birds, they stay out of sight.

Bellis Coldwine took her passage on an east-bound boat in the last quarter of the year, at a time of constant rain. The fields she saw were cold mud. The half-bare trees dripped. The silhouettes looked wetly inked onto the clouds.

Later, when she thought back to that miserable time, Bellis was shaken by the detail of her memories. She could recall the formation of a flock of geese that passed over the boat; the barking; the stench of sap and earth; the slate shade of the sky. She remembered searching the hedgerow with her eyes but seeing no one. Only threads of woodsmoke in the soaking air, and squat houses shuttered against weather.

The subdued movement of greenery in the wind.

She had stood on the deck enveloped in her shawl and watched and listened for children playing games or anglers, or for someone tending one of the battered kitchen gardens she saw. But she heard only feral birds. The only human forms she saw were scarecrows, their rudimentary features impassive.

It had not been a long journey, but the memory of it filled her like infection. She had felt tethered by time to the city behind her, so that the minutes stretched out taut as she moved away, and slowed the farther she got, dragging out her little voyage.

And then they had snapped, and she had found herself catapulted here, now, alone and far away from home.

Much later, when she was miles from everything she knew, Bellis would wake, astonished that it was not the city itself, her home for more than forty years, that she dreamed of. It was

that little stretch of river, that weatherbeaten corridor of country that had surrounded her for less than half a day.

In a quiet stretch of water, a few hundred feet from the rocky shore of Iron Bay, three decrepit ships were moored. Their anchors were rooted deep in silt. The chains that attached them were scabbed with years of barnacles.

They were unseaworthy, smeared bitumen-black, with big wooden structures built precariously at the stern and bow. Their masts were stumps. Their chimneys were cold and crusted with old guano.

The ships were close together. They were ringed with buoys strung together with barbed chain, above and below the water. The three old vessels were enclosed in their own patch of sea, unmoved by any currents.

They drew the eye. They were watched.

In another ship some distance away, Bellis raised herself to her porthole and looked out at them, as she had done several times over the previous hours. She folded her arms tight below her breasts and bent forward toward the glass.

Her berth seemed quite still. The movement of the sea beneath her was slow and slight enough to be imperceptible.

The sky was flint-grey and sodden. The shoreline and the rock hills that ringed Iron Bay looked worn and very cold, patched with crabgrass and pale saline ferns.

Those wooden hulks on the water were the darkest things visible.

Bellis sat slowly back on her bunk and picked up her letter. It was written like a diary, lines or paragraphs separated by dates. As she read over what she had last written she opened a tin box of prerolled cigarillos and matches. She lit up and inhaled deeply, pulling a fountain pen from her pocket and adding several words in a terse hand before she breathed the smoke away.

Skullday 26th Rinden 1779. Aboard the *Terpsichore*

It is nearly a week since we left the mooring in Tarmuth, and I am glad to have gone. It is a ugly, violent town.

I spent my nights in my lodgings, as advised, but my days were my own. I saw what the place was to the place. It is ribbon-thin, a strip of industry that juts a mile or so north and south of the estuary, split by the water. Every day, the few thousand residents are joined by huge numbers who come from the city at dawn, making their way from New Crobuzon in boats and cartloads to work. Every night the bars and bordellos are full of foreign sailors on brief shore leave.

Most reputable ships, I am told, travel the extra miles to New Crobuzon itself, to unload at the Kelltree docks. Tarmuth docks have not worked at more than half-capacity for two hundred years. It is only tramp steamers and freebooters that unload there—their cargo will end up in the city just the same, but they have neither the time nor the money for the extra miles and the higher duty imposed by official channels.

There are always ships. Iron Bay is full of ships—breaking off from long journeys, sheltering from the sea. Merchant boats from Gnurr Kett and Khadoh and Shankell, on the way to or from New Crobuzon, moored near enough Tarmuth for their crews to relax

Sometimes, far out in the middle of the bay, I saw seawyrms released from the bridles of chariot-ships, playing and hunting.

The economy of Tarmuth is more than prostitution and piracy. The town is full of industrial yards and sidings. It lives as it has for centuries, on the building of ships. The shoreline is punctuated with scores of shipyards, building slipways like weird forests of vertical girders. In some loom ghostly half-completed vessels. The work is ceaseless, loud, and filthy.

The streets are crisscrossed with little private railways that take timber or fuel or whatever from one side of Tarmuth to the other. Each different company has built its own line to link its various concerns, and each is jealously guarded. The town is an idiotic tangle of railways, all replicating each other's journeys.

I don't know if you know this. I don't know if you have visited this town.

The people here have an ambivalent relationship with New Crobuzon. Tarmuth could not exist a solitary day without the patronage of the capital. They know it and resent it. Their surly independence is an affectation.

I had to stay there almost three weeks. The captain of the *Terpsichoria* was shocked when I told him I would join him in Tarmuth itself, rather than sailing with him from New Crobuzon, but I insisted, as I had to. My position on this ship was conditional on a knowledge of Salkrikaltor Cray, which I falsely claimed. I had less than a month until we sailed, to make my lie a truth.

I made arrangements. I spent my days in Tarmuth in the company of one Marikkatch, an elderly he-cray who had agreed to act as my tutor. Every day I would walk to the salt canal of the cray quarter. I would sit on the low balcony that circled his room, and he would settle his armored underbody on some submerged furnishing and scratch and twitch his scrawny human chest, haranguing me from the water.

It was hard. He does not read. He is not a trained teacher. He stays in the town only because some accident or predator has maimed him, tearing off all but one leg from his left side, so that he can no longer hunt even the sluggish fish of Iron Bay. It might make a better story to claim that I had affection for him, that he is a lovable, cantankerous old gentleman, but he is a shit and a bore. I could make no complaints, however. I had no choice but to concentrate, to effect a few focus hexes, will myself into the language trance (and oh! how hard that was! I have left it so long my mind has grown fat and disgusting!) and drink up every word he gave me.

It was hurried and unsystematic—it was a mess, a bloody mess—but by the time the *Terpsichoria* tied up in the harbor I had a working understanding of his clicking tongue.

I left the embittered old bastard to his stagnant water, quit my lodgings there, and came to my cabin—this cabin from where I write.

We sailed away from Tarmuth port on the morning of Dustday, heading slowly toward the deserted southern shores of Iron Bay, twenty miles from town. In careful formation at strategic points around the edge of the bay, in quiet spots by rugged land and pine forests, spotted ships. No one will speak of them. I know they are the ships of the New Crobuzon government. Privateers and others.

It is now Skullday.

On Chainday I was able to persuade the captain to let me disembark, and I spent the morning on the shore. Iron Bay is drab, but anything is better than the damned ship. I am beginning to doubt that it is an improvement on Tarmuth. I am driven to bedlam by the incessant, moronic slap of waves.

Two taciturn crewmen rowed me ashore, watching without pity as I stepped over the edge of the little boat and walked the last few feet through freezing surf. My boots are still stiff and salt-stained.

I sat on the pebbles and threw stones into the water. I read some of the long, bad novels found on board. I watched the ship. It is moored close to the prisons, so that our captain can easily entertain and converse with the lieutenant-gaolers. I watched the prison-ship themselves. There was no movement from their decks, from behind their portholes. There was never any movement.

I swear, I do not know if I can do this. I miss you, and New Crobuzon. I remember my journey.

It is hard to believe that it is only ten miles from the city to the godsforsaken sea.

There was a knocking at the door of the tiny cabin. Bellis' lips pursed, and she waved her sheaf of paper to dry it. Unhurriedly she folded it and replaced it in the chest containing her belongings. She drew her knees up a little higher and played with her pen, watching as the door opened.

A nun stood in the threshold, her arms braced at either side of the doorway.

"Miss Coldwine," she said uncertainly. "May I come in?"

"It's your cabin too, Sister," said Bellis quietly. Her pen spun over and around her thumb. It was a neurotic little trick she had perfected at university.

Sister Meriope shuffled forward a little and sat on the solitary chair. She smoothed her dark russet habit around her, fiddled with her wimple.

"It has been some days now since we became cabin-mates, Miss Coldwine," Sister Meriope began, "and I do not feel ... as if I yet know you at all. And this is not a situation I would wish to continue. As we are to be traveling and living together for many weeks ... some companionship, some closeness, could only make those days easier ..." Her voice failed, and she knotted her hands.

Bellis watched her, unmoving. Despite herself, she felt a trickle of contemptuous pity. She could imagine herself as Sister Meriope must see her: Angular, harsh, and bone-thin. Pale lips and hair stained the cold purple of bruises. Tall and unforgiving.

You don't feel as if you know me, Sister, she thought, *because I haven't spoken twenty words to you in a week, and I don't look at you unless you speak to me, and then I stare you down.* She sighed. Meriope was crippled by her calling. Bellis could imagine her writing in her journal, "Miss Coldwine is quiet, yet I know that I shall come to love her like a sister." *I am not going to think of you, Bellis, getting involved with you. I will not become your sounding board. I will not redeem you of whatever tawdry tragedy brings you here.*

Bellis eyed Sister Meriope and did not speak.

When she had first introduced herself, Meriope had claimed that she was traveling to the colonies to establish a church, to proselytize, for the glory of Darioch and Jabber. She had said it with a small sniff and a furtive look, idiotically unconvincing. Bellis did not know what

Meriope was being sent to Nova Esperium, but it must have to do with some misfortune or disgrace, the transgression of some idiotic nunnish vow.

She glanced at Meriope's midriff, looking for swelling under those forgiving robes. That would be the most likely explanation. The Daughters of Darioch were supposed to forego sensual pleasures.

I will not serve as replacement confessor for you, thought Bellis. I have my own bloody exile work out.

"Sister," she said, "I'm afraid you catch me at work. I have no time for pleasantries, regret to say. Perhaps another time." She was irritated with herself for that last tiny concession, but it had no effect, anyway. Meriope was broken.

"The captain wishes to see you," the nun said, muffled and forlorn. "His cabin, at six o'clock." She shuffled out of the door like a bullied dog.

Bellis sighed and swore quietly. She lit another cigarillo and smoked it right through, pinching the skin above her nose hard, before pulling out her letter again.

"I will go bloody mad," she scribbled quickly, "if this damned nun does not stop fawning and leave me alone. Gods preserve me. Gods rot this damned boat."

It was dark when Bellis obeyed the captain's summons.

His cabin was his office. It was small, and pleasantly outfitted in dark wood and brass. There were a few pictures and prints on the walls, and Bellis glanced at them and knew that they were not the captain's, that they came with the ship.

Captain Myzovic gestured her to sit.

"Miss Coldwine," he said as she settled herself. "I hope your quarters are satisfactory. Your food? The crew? Good good." He looked down briefly at the papers on his desk. "I wanted to raise a couple of issues with you, Miss Coldwine," he said, and sat back.

She waited, staring at him. He was a hard-faced, handsome man in his fifties. His uniform was clean and pressed, which not all captains' were. Bellis did not know whether it would be to her advantage to meet his eyes calmly or demurely to look away.

"Miss Coldwine, we haven't spoken very much about your duties," he said quietly. "I would do you the courtesy, of course, of treating you like a lady. I must tell you I'm not used to hiring those of your sex, and had the Esperium authorities not been impressed by your records and references, I can assure you ..." He let the sentence dissipate.

"I have no wish to make you feel uncomfortable. You're berthing in the passenger quarters. You're eating in the passenger mess. However, as you know, you are not a paying passenger. You are an employee. You have been taken on by the agents of the Nova Esperium colony, and for the duration of this journey I am their representative. And while that makes little difference to Sister Meriope and Dr. Tearfly and the others, to you ... it means I am your employer.

"Of course you are not crew," he continued. "I would not order you as I order them. If you prefer, I would only *request* your services. But I must insist that such requests are obeyed."

They studied each other.

"Now," he said, his tone relaxing a little, "I don't foresee any onerous demands. Most of the crew are from New Crobuzon or the Grain Spiral, and those that aren't speak perfect good Ragamoll. It's in Salkrikaltor that I'll first need you, and we'll not be there for a good week or more, so you've plenty of time to relax, to meet the other passengers. We sa

tomorrow morning, early. We'll be away by the time you're up, I shouldn't doubt."

"Tomorrow?" Bellis said. It was the first word she had spoken since entering.

The captain looked at her sharply. "Yes. Is there a problem?"

"Originally," she said without inflection, "you told me we would sail on Dustday, Captain."

"I did, Miss Coldwine, but I've changed my mind. I've finished my paperwork a de
quicker than I expected, and my brother officers are ready to transfer their inmates tonight.
We sail tomorrow."

"I had hoped to return to town, to send a letter," Bellis said. She kept her voice level. "A
important letter to a friend in New Crobuzon."

"Out of the question," the captain said. "It cannot be done. I'll not waste any more day
here."

Bellis sat still. She was not intimidated by this man, but she had no power over him, none
at all. She tried to work out what was most likely to engage his sympathy, make him
acquiesce.

"Miss Coldwine," he said suddenly, and to her surprise his voice was a little gentler. "I am
afraid the matter is in motion. If you wish I can give your letter to Lieutenant-Gaoler Catarr
but I cannot in truth recommend that as entirely reliable. You'll have the opportunity to
deliver your message in Salkrikaltor. Even if there are no New Crobuzon ships docking there
there is a warehouse, to which all our captains have the keys, for access to information, space
cargo, and mail. Leave your letter there. It'll be picked up by the next home-bound ship.
won't be much delayed.

"You can learn from this, Miss Coldwine," he added. "At sea, you can't waste time.
Remember that: don't wait."

Bellis sat on a little longer, but there was nothing at all that she could do, so she thinned
her lips and left.

She stood for a long time under Iron Bay's cold sky. The stars were invisible; the moon and
its daughters, its two little satellites, were unclear. Bellis walked, tense against the chill, and
climbed the short ladder to the ship's raised front, heading for the bowsprit.

Bellis held on to the iron railings and stood on the tips of her toes. She could just see out
across the lightless sea.

Behind her the sounds of the crew faded. A way off, she could see two guttering red pins of
light: a torch on the bridge of a prison-ship, and its twin in the black surf.

From the crow's nest, or from somewhere in the rigging, from some indistinct spot
hundred feet or more above her, Bellis heard a strain of mouth-music. It was not like the
imbecilic shanties she had heard in Tarmuth. It was slow and complex.

You will have to wait for your letter, Bellis mouthed silently across the water. *You will have
wait to hear from me. You'll have to wait a little while longer, until cray-country.*

She watched the night until the last lines of division between shore, sea, and sky were
obscured. Then, cosseted by darkness, she walked slowly aft, toward the constricted
doorways and stooped passages leading to her cabin, a scrap of space like a flaw in the ship's
design.

(Later the ship moved uneasily, in the coldest hour, and she stirred in her bunk and she
pulled the blanket up to her neck, and she realized somewhere below her dreams that the
living cargo was coming aboard.)

I am tired here in the dark and I am full of pus.

My skin's taut with it, stretched till it puckers nor can I touch it without it rages. I'm infected. I hurt where I touch and I touch everywhere to make sure that I hurt that I'm not yet numb.

But still thank whatever makes these veins mine I'm full of blood. I worry my scabs and they brim I brim with it. And that's a small comfort nor mind the pain.

They come for us when the air's so still and black without not a seabird cries. They open our doors and shine lights, uncovering us. I am almost ashamed to see how we have surrendered, we've surrendered up to filth.

I can see nothing beyond their lights.

Where we lie together they beat us apart, and I wrap my arms around the spastic matter that twitches in my midriff as they begin to herd us.

We wind through tarry passages and engine chambers and I'm all cold to know what this is for. And I'm more eager, I'm quicker than some of the old ones bent double coughing and spewing and afraid to move.

And then there's a swallowing up, I'm eaten up by the cold gulped down by darkness and gone. Fuck me blind we are outside.

Outside.

I'm dumb with it. I'm dumb with wonder.

It has been a long time.

We huddle together, each against the next man like troglodytes like myopic trow. They're cowed by it the old ones, by the lack of walls and edges and the movement of the cold, by water and air.

I might cry gods help me. I might.

All black on black but still I can see hills and water and I can see clouds. I can see the prisons on all sides bobbing a little like fishermen's floats. Jabber take us all I can see clouds.

Bugger me I'm crooning like I soothe a baby. That's for me that coddling noise.

And then they push us on like livestock shuffling rattling chains, dripping farting muttering astonished, across the deck crippled under the weight of bodies and fetters, to a swaying rope bridge. And they hurry us along and over it, all our number, and each man pauses a moment in the middle of the low-slung passage between vessels, their thoughts visible and bright like a chymical burst.

They consider leaping.

Into the water of the bay.

But the rope walls around the bridge are high and there's barbed wire hemming us in and our poor bodies are sore and weak and each man falters, and continues, and crosses the water to a new ship.

I pause like the others in my turn. Like them I'm too afraid.

And then there's a new deck underfoot, scrubbed iron smooth and clean, vibrating from engine and more corridors and clattering keys and after all another long unlit room where we collapse exhausted and changed over and raise ourselves slowly to see who our new neighbors are. Around me begin the hissed arguments and bickerings and fights and seductions and rapes that make up our politics. New alliances are formed. New hierarchies.

I sit apart for a while, in the shadows.

I'm still caught in that moment when I entered the night. It's like amber. I'm a grub in amber.

snare me and damn but it does it makes me beautiful.

*I've a new home now. I'll live in that moment as long as I can, till the memories decay and the
I'll come out, I'll come to this new place we sit in.*

Somewhere pipes are banging like great hammers.

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