

MELISSA SCOTT



FALLEN

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FALLEN

MELISSA SCOTT



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STORIES IN THIS UNIVERSE, IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

[Titles in brackets are not yet out in our universe]

Title	Era	Original Appearance (if not a novel)
“Firstborn, Lastborn”	Ancestors	<i>To Shape the Dark</i>
[<i>Firstborn, Lastborn</i>	Ancestors]	
“Sirens”	Ancestors	<i>Retellings of the Inland Seas</i>
	First Dark	
<i>Fallen</i>	Successors	
	Second Dark	
“Finders”	Salvors	<i>The Other Half of the Sky</i>
<i>Finders</i>	Salvors	
[Keepers	Salvors]	

CHAPTER ONE

We hit our mark and the capacitors fired, dropping us from hyperspace into a hail of confusion. *Beljaeger's* alarms screamed—proximity, radiation, collision, hot weapons in multiple directions—and I slapped frantically at switches, cutting out everything but the most crucial readings. “Shields hot, Hal!”

Beside me in the engineer's seat, Haliday Kim worked her own controls, diverting power from propulsion to shield generators. “Full defensive protocol.”

“Good. Keep it on.” My screens were full of shifting dots and triangles, coalescing into a pattern as the computers began to make sense of the sensor readings. More than a dozen small warships were tangled in a dogfight, swirling around an invisible point. An exit point? The roiling energies made it impossible to tell. “What in hell? There weren't any problems on Adora the last time we were here.”

“Invaders?” Haliday sounded doubtful, and rightly so: it was almost impossible to invade across interstellar space, and Adora was a single world with a unified government, unlikely to invade itself. “Unless—AI?”

“We were clear coming in.” I nudged the steering, dropping us below the plane of the main battle. “No sign of AI anywhere in range. And those all look like human ships. Make us invisible, Hal.”

“Working on it.”

I heard the click of keys as she tuned the system, damping out every speck of energy emission that might betray our

presence, and turned my attention to the sensors. We'd made a relatively early exit; the fight was between us and Adora. We could probably sneak in around the edges and make a landing vector, but then the question was whether Adora would let us in. What had happened in the last eight months to make this possible?

And that was irrelevant at the moment. We needed to get out of range before someone spotted us by accident. They might be actual military ships and not interested in stealing our cargo, but that didn't mean they wouldn't cripple us just to get us out of the way.

"We need to jump," Haliday said.

"Do we have the power?" We'd expended the capacitors breaking out of the adjacent possible; it would take time to recharge enough to open another window.

"We will—"

"How long?"

"Working on it," she said again.

Accumulated hyperspatial drift converted to velocity when we exited the adjacent possible: I had planned a looping course using that momentum to match Adora's orbit, and we were still on that line. We could swing around and run for the system's edge, where the fabric of space was thinnest, but it would require a course change and that would certainly draw attention. I was surprised no one had seen our exit, though maybe the flare had been taken for weapons fire. I could hope, anyway. But whatever we did, we couldn't risk drawing attention until we'd developed enough power to make a jump.

"Eighteen minutes," Haliday said, and made the words a curse.

My screen showed that we were skirting the lower right edge of the fighting, not close enough for cannon, but certainly within missile range. I bit my lip, watching the shapes twisting around each other. They were lighter than I had thought at first, more like standard system patrol craft than bigger warships. I didn't know what that meant about who they were and why they were fighting, but it probably

meant they all carried solid long-range sensor suites. Move too fast, and they'd spot us for sure.

I touched keys, checking course and distances. We were forty minutes out from the picket stations around Adora at our top speed, and twice that if we held our current velocity. The fight was drifting away from us, but it was between us and the usual exit from the system. We could tear open a point in thicker space, but that would take more power.

"Twenty-five minutes if we have to jump in raw space," Haliday said, guessing my thoughts.

"Better to keep on to Adora," I said.

"Depends on what they're fighting about," Haliday answered. "Nic, we can't afford to get trapped here."

"I know." On the other hand, we couldn't afford not to deliver this cargo, either. We'd been counting on it and the fast-passage bonus to keep us funded and even absorb some of the ship's debt. "We need to try to make it."

"We need to get the hell out of here," Haliday said.

I made myself grin, knowing she would be looking. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Not onboard," she answered, but didn't argue. "All right. I make it eighty minutes before we're inside the picket line."

"Agreed."

"That's at current velocity." She touched keys. "Top speed, factoring in evasive maneuvers—we might make it in thirty."

"Hold that in reserve," I said. "Let's be sneaky."

"Let's hope they're looking the other way." She paused. "We're going to need to correct the course."

"I see it." We were drifting too far to our right, away from the distant dot that was the nearest picket satellite. We needed to be inside their zone of fire, because surely these ships wouldn't risk following us there.... The sooner I made the adjustment, the less power it would take, but the longer I waited, the further out I would be, and the less likely to draw their attention. Except—no, do it now, and hope our release of energy was lost among the bigger flares from the weapons. "Get me the numbers."

“Now?”

“Now.”

“Working.” There was a little silence, Holiday’s fingers busy on her keys and the lights moving like slow plasma in my screens, white flashes popping in and out of video as missiles launched and were countered, while shimmering red frills around each dot marked the impact of plasma cannon on shields. “Right. 140 at 3.9.”

That was more power than I would have added, but Haliday knew what she was doing. “Go ahead.”

“Firing now.”

Beljaeger shivered under me, propulsion fields shifting, energy pulsing as the ship swung and steadied again against the warp and weft of space. The numbers dropped off as Haliday moved us back into stealth mode, and I scanned the sensor screens, holding my breath. For a long moment, there was no reaction, the warships all focused on each other, and then a white light bloomed. I thought it was aimed at one of the wheeling ships, but an alarm flashed on the console, warning it was on a heading that would cross our path. More alarms flickered as the missile’s sensors tried to find and lock on our electronic signature, then died as Haliday’s electronic countermeasures took hold. I worked the passive sensors, plotting the track. “It’ll pass ahead of us.”

“Unless it has a proximity fuse.”

“Your ECM should keep it from triggering.” I hoped. “Anyway, odds are they won’t be using proximity fuses in a fight like this. Too much chance of hitting a friend.”

Haliday ignored that: I was guessing and we both knew it. “Brake? Just to give a little more room?”

That would be safer, but if I were on the ship that fired at us, I’d be watching to see what happened. Our ECM package should make us look like harmless debris; if we changed course, we’d destroy that illusion. “There’s room enough,” I said, and hoped it was true.

“Falathos will be seriously pissed if we damage his cargo,” Haliday said.

“If I’m wrong, we won’t have to worry about it.” I regretted the words as soon as they were spoken, and Haliday snorted.

“That’s what I love about you, Nic, you’re always an optimist.”

The missile sped toward us, the dot growing on my screen. A secondary screen lit and windowed, offering visual confirmation, but I couldn’t make out any identifying marks on the unpainted casing. That didn’t necessarily mean anything. Most of the planetary navies got their armament from the same cartels that supplied the raiders and pirates. The plot still showed it crossing at a safe distance—well, safe if there wasn’t a proximity fuse, but Haliday’s countermeasures would take care of that. Surely.

The screen flashed red as it came into proximity range. I tensed, seeing the flash of movement in the visual display as it passed ahead of us, and released held breath as it slid out of range again. “We’re good.”

“So far,” Haliday said.

I adjusted the passive scanners, angling the receivers to cover as much of the battle as possible. The ships were still tangled, hopefully so focused on each other that we could slide into the protection of Adora’s pickets without drawing any more attention. Some of them were showing damage, the sensors picking up volatiles and vented gases, and then there was a bigger flash, bright enough to show even on visual, and a dot vanished from the screen. Another veered out of the plane of the fight, too damaged to stay, and abruptly half the dots were running, fleeing for thinner space where they could make the jump to the adjacent possible. Most of the other ships turned in pursuit, but several swung back toward Adora, putting themselves between the attackers and the planet. I flinched as our sensors pinged, and a moment later the nearest ship accelerated toward us.

“Unknown ship. Stop and identify yourself, or we will fire.”

At least it was the standard Adoreen patrol frequency. I hit

the comm button. “Fast-freight *Beljaeger*, Sevens Registry, Nic en Doroney in command. We were inbound to Adora with cargo for Falathos Industries, and jumped into your trouble.”

“Adoreen patrol ship *Rasper*. We’re matching velocities.” So much for my attempts at pleasantries. “Prepare to be boarded.”

“We’re a neutral merchantman,” I began, and the patrol ship cut me off.

“We will board and search now, or we have authority to destroy your ship.”

There was no arguing with that. “Welcome aboard,” I said, and signaled for Haliday to cut the ECM fields.

Rasper’s pilot brought her alongside in a neat display of ship-handling, and extended a boarding tube to cover our hatch. I left Haliday in the control room and went to meet them there, the ship’s documents in hand. I could hear thuds in the lock, as though they had crowded too many people into the space, but the seals were green, and I threw the switch that released the inner door. Bodies in full armor boiled out, one slamming me against the bulkhead, the rest spreading out to cover the corridor. They all carried blast weapons, and I raised my hands, the datacard still clasped in one hand. An armored figure plucked it away, and another motioned to the others. “Spread out! Scan the ship!” They looked back at me. “Crew?”

“Myself and one other. She’s in the control room. We’re not armed.”

“See to it,” the leader said.

The one who had taken the ship’s papers looked up from a handheld reader. “This checks out.”

The leader nodded. “Keep scanning.”

My mouth was dry, and I swallowed carefully. “Can I ask what’s going on?”

“There was an incident,” the leader said. “AI incursion. We dealt with that, but then this attack followed.”

“We had a clean trip,” I said. “Not even a hint of weather.” That was the word everyone used to avoid mentioning

quantum AI too directly. Probably it was only a superstition, the AI had been trapped in the adjacent possible for centuries, but no one wanted to take chances.

The leader nodded, not really listening. One of the others put a hand to their ear. "Preliminary scan is clear, lieutenant."

The leader relaxed a fraction, and removed their helmet. Her helmet, I corrected, as an identification panel lit at the top of her breastplate. Her use-name was Jonne. Not that I would risk using it unless invited, but every scrap of information was useful right now. "Keep scanning," she ordered, and looked back at me. "We need to be absolutely sure you're not infected."

"Understood." And I did. However you passed through hyperspace, you risked drawing the attention of the quantum AI, the rebels who had controlled the adjacent possible ever since they brought down our Ancestors and threw us into the Long Dark. Anketil—the last and greatest of the Dedalor—had trapped them there, outside of space and time, but even she had not been able to save us from the fall. The AI were still trying to find a way back in: existing as they did outside of time, their grievances were still fresh, unchanging and ever-present, and they would bring humanity down again if they could. "Can you tell me—this incident?"

She hesitated, but then I saw the moment when she decided it might make us more cooperative. "A ship came in contaminated. It was intercepted and destroyed. The AI was...not subtle. And this attack on top of it—we're not taking risks."

"Understood," I said again.

"Lieutenant!" That was one of the troopers, poking his head out of a side corridor. "I'm picking up something, very faint, possibly unpowered—"

Weapons clicked against armor as the closest troopers snapped into firing position, and I swallowed a curse. "I own a piece of Ancestral glass—a spoiled toy. It's in a shielded container—"

"Show me," Jonne said.

I pushed myself away from the bulkhead, careful not to move too fast, and led them down the main corridor past the commons to the crew cabins that lay between it and the control room. Haliday was standing in the control room hatch, a trooper beside her, but there was nothing to say. Another trooper was standing at my door, and I laid my hand on the lock.

“Go ahead,” Jonne said, and I let the lock taste the nanite burden that moved in my bloodstream. The hatch rolled back, the lights coming on in the narrow space, and I pointed to the shielded lockbox fastened to the deck at the head of my bunk.

“That’s it.”

“Open it.” Jonne’s tone was flat, and the troopers didn’t relax from their taut readiness.

I stepped inside, went to one knee to work the lock. I took as much time as I dared, at the same time directing my burden to share only its least complex features. The toy would barely respond to that, nothing that would frighten Jonne and her crew. “Shall I take it out?”

“Set it on the table,” Jonne said.

I did as I was told, cupping the irregular shape in both hands. Even in the cabin’s flat lighting, the inner facets sparked and shifted, threads of gold and peacock green and electric blue shimmering in and out of view. It was about the size of a human head, the outermost layer clear and smooth as crystal, and someone whistled softly.

“That’s an expensive piece,” Jonne said.

“It’s spoiled,” I said. That was a lie, but more plausible than the idea that a minor ship’s captain should own an even partially functional piece of Ancestral technology. “They—the people who found it—didn’t know what it was originally supposed to do, but all it does now is make a tone.” I ran my hand over the surface, and the glass sang, a clear sweet note with a minor undertone that made it somehow sad. One of the troopers glanced quickly at their scanner.

“I’m not picking up anything.”

“I wouldn’t carry it into the possible if it was live,” I said.

“I did a job for a team of archeologists on Elim, at the Great Works. They offered me this in part payment.”

“Is it registered?” Jonne asked.

“Yes. It’s in the packet.” I waited while she consulted her reader, watching for the moment her shoulders relaxed a fraction. “May I put it away? It’s fragile.”

“Go ahead.”

I set the toy back in its case, hiding my own relief, and straightened again. “Can we proceed?”

“You’ll need to provide a blood test,” Jonne answered.

“I beg your pardon?” That was definitely something new.

“We require a current blood sample for landing.”

I kept my expression blank, glad I’d already shifted my burden. The sample would show nothing unusual. Would an ordinary captain protest? Yes, on balance I thought they would, and I could use the extra moment to make sure everything incriminating was tucked out of reach. “All the details are on our identification—”

“We were attacked by AI,” Jonne said. “We’ve been ordered to take no chances.”

I hadn’t expected to win the argument, but I had my burden well under control. I offered my hand, and Jonne pressed a sampler against my forefinger. I felt the familiar prick, and she withdrew it, frowning at the tiny screen. “You’re clear.”

“Thank you.”

“Is your engineer a daedalist?”

I shook my head. “You saw our licenses. She can’t access Ancestral tech without special gear.”

I could see her relax just a little. “She’ll need to be tested, too.”

“Of course.”

Haliday complied without protest, but it took the better part of an hour for Jonne’s party to clear the ship. They would escort us to orbit, she said, in a tone that brooked no argument, and the patrol ship paced us all the way to the picket line. We were cleared through the satellite defenses, given landing coordinates, and a Customs team was waiting

when the elevator brought us down into the dock. By then I was dead tired, but after arriving in the middle of a battle, I figured there was no way around a thorough inspection. The Customs team went through the same processes that Jonne had done: papers, scanners, blood tests, though they didn't pick up the toy in my cabin. They did insist on inspecting the cargo compartment, when meant breaking the seals, but finally they signed off on that and Haliday and I were left standing in the airlock.

"Well," Haliday said. "That wasn't fun."

"If there really was an AI, you can't blame them," I began, then shook my head. Haliday could and would argue both sides of the question without needing evidence. "They'll know something at the guildhall. I'll ask when I file our logs."

Haliday nodded. "In the meantime, I'll raise Falathos and tell him his cargo's here. I'll see what he knows, too."

"Good idea." I suppressed a yawn. Even with chemical assists, the battle and the long flight in had left me stumbling. "I'm going to start the post-flight and then grab a nap. I'll order something from the cater-bots if you think you'll be back in time."

"If you're buying."

"Ship's treat," I said, and took myself off to the control room.

I started the post-flight diagnostics, and then practically fell into my bunk. I roused myself long enough be sure the toy's box was closed and sealed, and let myself collapse on my pillows. I didn't need to share its dreams.



We were, for once, mostly in synch with the planetary clock. I woke to my alarm, washed and found clean clothes, then checked the diagnostics. They were still running, still showing nothing but green, and I found an outside link and placed our dinner order. The hold was empty, the receipts neatly docketed, although the noise of unloading hadn't reached me.

The ship's account showed a pending payment, and I started a pot of tea.

Haliday arrived with the delivery bot and doled out the boxes, while I found cups and platters. I had ordered hot wine, a local delicacy, and a platter of savories to go along with the main dishes, enough for leftovers; and for a while we ate in silence, enjoying the taste of local food instead of the prepack we carried for the galley box.

"Falathos said he'd flagged the payment." Haliday licked the sweet sharp sauce off her fingers, and reached for more wine.

"It's pending. That's just the base payment, did he agree to the bonus?"

"He said he'd add it once he'd inspected the goods." Haliday shrugged. "You know what he's like."

I did, which was why I was asking. "I hope you reminded him of the contract."

"Of course."

I nodded. "Did you hear anything more about this incursion?"

"We're one of the first ships in after the fighting started," Haliday said. "And the local authority wasn't giving out information yet. Falathos did pass on what he'd heard about the AI, but it wasn't much. A few days back a ship dropped into the system at an unusual exit point, and didn't respond to calls. They sent up patrol craft to warn it off, and scans showed it was dead—no life support, no sign of people on board." She suppressed a yawn: she had managed some sleep on the flight in, but we were both still close to the edge of exhaustion. "They blew it to atoms, Falathos says, and then slagged the patrol ship that came in range to be sure nothing got into its systems to be taken back to Adora. There's been a heavy patrol presence on the exit lines since, which is why there were enough ships available to meet today's attack. It might just be a coincidence, but everyone's seriously on edge. So this is not the time to be messing around in anybody else's networks."

“I never,” I said, automatically, and she rolled her eyes.

“I’m serious.”

I spread my hands. “All right. We’ll keep things legal. Are they sure it was an AI?”

“What else could it be?”

I shrugged. “Dead ship doesn’t invariably mean AI. There could have been a life support failure, or pirates stripped it and launched the hulk on autopilot—that’s been known to happen. Or disease. But not necessarily AI.”

“If local authority thinks it was AI, we’ll need to tread very lightly,” Haliday said, and I nodded, knowing she was right.

“We’ll grab a cargo and get out.”

She made a face. “That may not be so easy, Nic. Everybody’s worried about losing a cargo, and once word gets out about possible AI, other systems are going to impose restrictions.”

She was right about that, too, and it was more bad news. We had some reserve funds, but we couldn’t afford too much time between contracts. Docking rent, port fees, living expenses: they all added up ruinously fast. “So no return cargo.”

“Not from Falathos. He offered to introduce us to a colleague of his who he said was willing to pay premium for a fast trip, but—” She shrugged. “That didn’t seem like such a good idea right now.”

It would all depend on whether this colleague needed our peculiar skills, or if they could be satisfied with an ordinary high-speed run. But, no, Haliday was right, it would be better to find an ordinary job, and get off Adora as soon as we could manage it. “I’ll see what’s listed at the guildhall,” I said, and hoped there would be something reasonable.



I made my way to the Guildhall early the next morning, before the frost had burned off, and the streets and buildings

were furred with soft rime as I emerged from the port tunnels and made the above-ground transfer to the mercantile district. Overhead the sky was hazed with cloud, the sun invisible, and I was glad to duck back down into the warm light of the tunnels. They were lined with shops and smaller tunnels that led into other complexes, but I'd been on Adora often enough to know the easiest route. The Guildhall itself was unprepossessing, a plain smoothed-stone frontage with narrow windows running horizontally along the two upper floors, but there was an armored guard in the door niche and as I proffered my ID button, I felt a security field wash over me, pinging my burden. I had been ready for that, felt the flash of warmth that was my burden's accepted response, and stepped up into the hall.

Before the Fall, they say there were a dozen different guilds serving the space-faring population, some generalists, some specialists; but since we rose again to interstellar travel, the old buildings and their resources had been remade into a single entity. Here on Adora, the hall had belonged to a Facienda guild, and the building had been intended as living space as well as a resource. Since the Faciendi had been physiologically altered by the Firstborn to live and work on marginal planets, few true Faciendi had survived the Fall, and most of the building's variable environments had been converted for secure cargo storage. There were still rooms for rent, and most of the ground floor was an open lobby with comfortable seating gathered around a dozen food stalls offering a variety of cuisines. Any guild member in good standing could claim two basic meals per day, and I guessed some of the people gathered at the larger of the open kiosks were taking advantage. It had been a long time since I'd been that poor, and I hoped never to be so again.

Broad stairs led to the next floor, and the log-keeper's office. I dropped off my journey tape—carefully pruned of anything improper—and went on to the hiring hall to see if any cargos were up for bid. The overhead board was only half full, proof that Haliday had been right about shippers holding

back, and the cargos that were listed were luxury produce that traveled in bulk, nothing we could handle. They were only up for bid because they'd spoil otherwise, and they weren't getting much interest. I wondered if it might be worth looking at the smallest of the lots, but decided to hold that in reserve. We'd have to make some expensive refits to the cargo area, and we'd never do more than break even.

I stopped at the chartroom next, both to update my guidance and to see who might be here to gossip with, and to my pleased surprise nearly ran into Jaezu Sulla as he was leaving an update console.

"Nic!" His grin was wide enough to be plausible, even if I suspected a certain caution behind it. "I didn't know you were on-world."

"We just got in last night," I answered. "Jumped practically into the middle of the fighting."

He glanced over his shoulder, but none of the local staff was in earshot. "I'll buy you a coffee if you'll tell me all about it."

"First-hand news is worth more than that."

"Ah, but I'm a poor man with many mouths to feed."

He had a husband and two daughters on Menau Prime and a ship-husband to keep him company when he was away from them, as well as his crew, so that was entirely his own doing. "I'll tell you what I know, but it's not much."

"Join me for coffee," he said again. "And let's talk."

I nodded and turned my attention to the update console. I'd been on Adora eight months ago, and in closely-linked systems even more recently; it didn't take long to exchange the data I'd collected for the updates from other captains, and I pocketed the disk and went back downstairs to find Sulla.

He had claimed a pod at the edge of the coffee-maker's territory, and ordered the elaborate Pavonid service, with its delicate pots and flash-steamers and half a dozen condiments in shallow gilt-glass dishes along with a plate of the traditional dry fruit-studded sweet crackers. This was lavish even by Sulla's usual expansive standards, and I made sure my burden

was pulled tight, giving nothing away. At his invitation, I took my place on the low couch opposite his and prepared my cup, then settled back and tucked my feet up among the pillows. “So,” I said, and he shrugged one shoulder.

“So. What happened to you?”

“We hit our exit and came out practically on top of a dogfight.” I wrapped my fingers around the band of insulation, avoiding hot ceramic. The coffee tasted of cotta-creme and cinnamon and oranges, with bitter depths beneath, and I concentrated on it instead of the flash of remembered fear. “We were able to go invisible before anyone spotted us, and slide out of range. After the attackers jumped out, we were picked up by a patrol ship and boarded.”

Sulla pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. “Who were they, could you tell? The Adoreen authorities are being very close-mouthed about the whole thing.”

“No idea. There was nothing identifiable on the sensors, and we weren’t looking to draw any attention. They had what looked like standard missiles and ion cannons.” For a second the image of the missile that had passed in front of me was vivid in my memory, bare metal and no identifying marks. “The patrol ship that picked us up wasn’t answering questions either. Haliday heard it had something to do with the AI incursion.”

“If it was AI. That’s not entirely clear,” Sulla said. “But I think the Adoreen believe it, or they wouldn’t have slagged the patrol ship that came into hailing range.”

“Patrol ships are built to be disposable,” I said.

“Yes, but they’re still not cheap.”

“If it wasn’t AI, then what?”

Sulla lowered his voice. “A stalking horse to set up the attack. At worst, it gets the Adoreen looking in the wrong place, and at best Adora has to destroy one or more of its patrol ships. It’s worth sending a dead ship through a jump for that.”

I let my eyes wander casually, making sure no one was in earshot. “Who’s got it in for Adora?”

“That’s the question,” Sulla said. “The current governor got tangled up in a financial scandal, and there’s a big election coming up. The Newfounder candidate is leading, and this latest AI scare is only improving her position.”

“You’re thinking those ships were Newfounders.”

Sulla raised his hands in pious horror. “Perish the thought! Of course they wouldn’t attempt to influence a planetary election by violence! These were pirates, clearly.”

“Of course they were.” A chill crept over me in spite of the heat of the coffee. The Newfounders had been gaining power for some years now. They’d started by arguing that humanity needed to rely less on salvaged and scavenged Ancestral technology—which wasn’t unreasonable—and had moved from there to demanding it be restricted or even banned. That might just barely be possible in the thickly clustered stars around Adora, and toward the old Core worlds. Newfounder technicians had developed an FTL system that didn’t depend on Ancestral tech, and that theoretically might even be invisible to the AI, but it was ponderously slow compared to the Successor drive that everyone else used. Out on the Verge, where the systems were further apart and we’d only just begun to reclaim the more marginal worlds, we’d be dancing on the edge of another Fall.

“One thing’s for sure,” Sulla said, “no one’s putting cargos out for bid right now.”

“I’d noticed that.” My tone was more sour than I’d intended, and I took a swallow of the coffee, hoping it would sweeten my tongue. “We were counting on a quick turnaround.”

“Officially there aren’t any restrictions,” Sulla said. “At least not yet. It’s just that everyone’s nervous.”

“What do you mean, not yet?”

“There is a whisper—the slightest hint of a suggestion of a rumor, nothing more—that the new government will search all the ships in port for unacceptable Ancestral devices.”

“They can’t do that,” I began, and shook my head at Sulla’s smile. “Not legally, and someone is bound to have

connections enough to take this to the High Court.” But by the time they received a favorable verdict, if they did, the Adoreen would have destroyed the stolen devices, and neither the verdict nor the money would replace what was lost. That was a risk I wasn’t prepared to take. I wished I hadn’t included my toy on the ship’s manifest.

Sulla nodded as though he understood my concerns—and possibly he did: I’d suspected for a while that he might also run a non-standard ship. “As I said, it’s a whisper, nothing more, and it depends on Cattelin winning her election.”

“When do they vote?”

“Two days from now.”

Too soon for my liking. And elections were notoriously times of trouble, an excuse for riots and looting by both sides, with the port areas and their expensive imported goods as a tempting target. “We’ll have to find a cargo.” Or leave empty, but that would eat up every credit of our reserve funds.

“I’m planning to take whatever offers.” Sulla topped up his cup, not meeting my eyes. “I’d advise you to do the same.”

“We’ll probably have to,” I said, and turned my attention to my own drink.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa Scott was born and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, and studied history at Harvard College. She earned her PhD from Brandeis University in the comparative history program with a dissertation titled “The Victory of the Ancients: Tactics, Technology, and the Use of Classical Precedent.” She also sold her first novel, *The Game Beyond*, and quickly became a part-time graduate student and an—almost—full-time writer.

Over the next forty years, she published more than thirty original novels and a handful of short stories, most with queer themes and characters, as well as authorized tie-in work for *Star Trek: DS9*, *Star Trek: Voyager*, *Stargate SG-1*, *Stargate Atlantis*, and *Star Wars Rebels*.

She won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 1986, and won Lambda Literary Awards for *Trouble and Her Friends*, *Shadow Man*, *Point of Dreams*, (with long-time partner and collaborator, the late Lisa A. Barnett), and *Death By Silver*, written with Amy Griswold. She has also been shortlisted for the Otherwise (Tiptree) Award. She won Spectrum Awards for *Death By Silver*, *Fairs' Point*, *Shadow Man* and for the short story “The Rocky Side of the Sky.”

Lately, she has collaborated with Jo Graham on the Order of the Air, a series of occult adventure novels set in the 1930s (*Lost Things*, *Steel Blues*, *Silver Bullet*, *Wind Raker*, and *Oath Bound*) and with Amy Griswold on a pair of gay Victorian fantasies with murder, *Death By Silver* and *A Death at the Dionysus Club*. She has also continued the acclaimed Points series, fantasy mysteries set in the imaginary city of Astreiant, most recently with *Point of Sighs*. Her most recent solo novel, *The Master of Samar*, came out in June of 2023.

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