

MELISSA SCOTT

FINDERS



PRAISE FOR FINDERS

Space travel and faster-than-light drives blend with world mythology...
//...a fun story with convincing worldbuilding and a delightful triad
romance at its heart.

— *Publishers Weekly*

Space Opera with a fine, wide sweep of time behind it, intriguing
“Clarkean” magical science, and an engaging, edgy threesome of central
characters. Fun to read, and best of all, the promise of more to come.

— Gwyneth Jones, author of the Aleutian trilogy, winner
of the World Fantasy, Clarke, Dick, and Tiptree awards

An action-packed space adventure with so much heart. // This
thought-provoking, crunchy science fiction novel comes with deep
conversations, technological wonders...

— Tansy Rayner Roberts, author of the Creature Court trilogy,
winner of multiple Ditmar and WSFA Small Press awards

Scott’s science fiction has always been remarkable for its world-
building and *Finders* is no exception. Once you read this thrilling
new science fiction saga with its unforgettable characters, you’ll be
wanting more.

— Catherine Lundoff, award-winning SFF author

Also by Melissa Scott (selected works):

Dreamships

Trouble and Her Friends

Dreaming Metal

Shadow Man

Night Sky Mine

Note: the crew of the *Carabosse* made its first appearance in “Finders” (*The Other Half of the Sky*, Athena Andreadis editor, Kay Holt co-editor; Candlemark & Gleam 2013), and *Finders* readers will hear echoes of two important mythic presences encountered in “Firstborn, Lastborn” (*To Shape the Dark*, Athena Andreadis editor; Candlemark and Gleam 2016).

FINDERS

Melissa Scott



Candlemark & Glean

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For information, address
Athena Andreadis
Candlemark & Gleam LLC,
38 Rice Street #2, Cambridge, MA 02140
elois@candlemarkandgleam.com

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CHAPTER ONE

A SALVOR'S GUIDE TO THE ANCESTRAL ELEMENTS:
Display mode: pocket, long form

BLUE (Standard Palette 15th ed. VS 1-199): the most common element. Can be found alone, as part of an Ancestral device, or in conjunction with other elements. Made up of interlocking hexagonal units. Carries instructions and programming.

GOLD (SP 15th ed. VS 400-599): appears in about the same frequency as RED, usually found in Ancestral devices, rarely as “depot nodes” unconnected to any other element. Base units are spherical, dodecahedral, or icosahedral, and are generally twice the size of a BLUE hexagon. Absorbs and responds to input from BLUE instruction sets.

RED (SP 15th ed. VS 600-799): appears in about the same frequency as GOLD, usually found in Ancestral devices, almost always found in conjunction with both GOLD and BLUE. (Claims of depot nodes and RED/GOLD hybrid nodules remain unproven.) Base units are tetrahedral, octahedral, or, rarely, deltohedral, and are generally twice the size of a BLUE hexagon. Responds to GOLD input with action/output.

GREEN (SP 15th ed. VS 200-399): the rarest of the elements. Can be found alone or as part of an Ancestral device. Base units are cylindrical and half the size of a BLUE hexagon. Provides “life” to the other elements, which remain inert unless activated by GREEN.

WARNINGS:

ALWAYS OBTAIN ACCURATE SPECTRA USING CERTIFIED DEVICES.

DO NOT COLLECT materials that do not match the listed spectra. Elements which do not match the listed spectra on standard devices are damaged, drained, or not elemental material, and have caused death, injury, and catastrophic illness.

The publisher of this guide is not responsible for damages resulting from failure to follow this guideline.



A thousand years ago the sky cities fell, fire and debris blasting the Burntover Plain. Most of the field was played out now, that handful of towns that had sprung up along the less damaged southern edge grown into three thriving and even elegant cities, dependent on trade for their technology now rather than salvage. Cassilde Sam had been born on the eastern fringe of the easternmost city, in a Glasstown crèche above the Empty Bridge, and even after two decades of hunting better salvage in the skies beyond this and a dozen other worlds, the Burntover still drew her. It was the largest terrestrial salvage bed ever found; it still had secrets, depths not yet plumbed.

But not today, not by her. Never by her, unless something changed.... She closed the shutters in the window above the workbench, cutting off the seductive view, the raw land of the Burntover rusty beyond the black-tiled roofs of Maripas. There was snow in the air, the thin hard flakes that came across the Blight and carried the sting of that passage. Two hundred years ago, that snow would have been a threat to everyone in the city, carrying poison enough to burn and even kill, if the circumstances were right; even fifty years ago, people had taken the snow seriously enough to stay indoors while it fell. And even in her own childhood.

She remembered those days with sudden, startling clarity, running for home through emptying streets while the sirens wailed and the red-and-black banners blossomed on every screen and from every city flagpole. The crèche doubled as an official shelter, and almost always there had been strangers trapped with them, travelers, teachers, neighbors, the occasional visiting parent, share and share alike of whatever supplies they had to hand. After a couple of days, tough young men hooded and goggled and gauntleted would brave the searing wind to sell overlooked necessities at three times their normal prices. But now that Racklin had unlocked the Aparu-5 command set, and the GOLD based satellites could reliably measure the drifting toxins, it was only the compromised that avoided the incoming snow. People like her.

She looked down at her hands, the skin paper-thin over her knuckles, a few darker sunspots showing against the brown. She'd always carried a healthy weight—solid curves that made her lovers grin—and muscle maintained by the work at hand, but over the last year she'd grown gaunt, the flesh melting away from her bones. She killed that thought, and turned her attention to her workbench, frowning at the scrap of BLUE floating in the matrix. It showed the familiar halo that indicated dissolution had begun, and she switched on the power, feeding gentle current through the conductive gel. The BLUE shimmered and split, breaking into dozens of tiny hexagons, the building blocks of a command chain. She slid the matrix into the reader, peering down through the magnifying lens, reading the patterns backlit against the pale jelly. All of them were familiar, disappointing: plain scrap, part of a bag she'd picked up in the high-market beyond Barratin. It was a useful source of spare parts, not the sort of thing that contained new code.

And that was a reminder of repairs she needed to make, something to take her mind off her own problems. She hauled out the sensor core from *Carabosse's* ventral array, ran the sonic probe around the faint line that marked the hemisphere, and split it open. The BLUE inside was badly faded—the instruction sets wore out over time, though no one

had ever been able to isolate the exact cause. Luckily, it was a simple set, and she pulled out another matrix, touching keys to set the gel to incubate. She had a full supply of blocks in her kit, and began hooking them out of their storage cells, building the instructions block by block against the pale gel. *Go seek hold go*, the delicate hexagons slotting neatly against each other to create a larger ring. *Fix track find go...*

When she reached the second clause she hesitated—she'd had an idea about that, a different, perhaps more efficient way of defining the search—but this was not the time to experiment. Even with all the documentation in the world, Dai wouldn't be able to figure out what she'd done, and there was an ever-increasing chance that she wouldn't last to explain it to him herself. She finished the pattern, the rings joining to create the familiar snowflake of a BLUE control string, and set the matrix to cure overnight.

That was the end of the chores she'd brought with her from the ship. She shut down the workbench and drifted back to the narrow kitchen, where the clock read four minutes past the sixteenth hour. She filled the iron kettle that came with the rented room and set it to boil on the island's largest eye while she dug out a packet of tea. The Ancestors had to have been fond of tea: there wasn't a single Settled World, Core to Edge, that didn't boast some decoction of boiled leaves and berries. Ashe had laughed at the idea, in the days before the war, before she'd gotten sick—but she wouldn't think of that now, either. Ashe was gone, and that was the end of it.

A chime sounded, and she glanced at the cooktop, but instead the door slid open. She reached for the narrow-beam welder she kept handy in lieu of a blaster when she was on a civilized world, but relaxed as she saw Dai Winter in the doorway.

She slipped the welder beneath the counter as he let the door close behind him. He had done his best to brush away the snow from the shoulders of his coat, but the smell of it came with him, dank and bitter. It caught in her throat, and Dai hastily shed the offending garment, hung it in the bathroom and turned the vent to high.

“Sorry,” he said, still keeping his distance, and his pale eyes were filled with concern.

Cassilde swallowed her cough, tightening the muscles along her ribs to hold it in. She took a careful breath, mouth pressed tight, nostrils flaring; she choked again, swallowed bile, but the second breath came more easily. “I’m all right.”

She sounded breathless, she knew, but blessedly Dai took her at her word and set the stacked tins that held their dinner on the counter beside the now-singing kettle. The food came with the room, at a surcharge, from the *bilai* on the ground floor: another small luxury they pretended they could afford.

“Bad day?” he asked, carefully casual, and began unlatching the tins. The waiter-boy would come along after midnight and retrieve them from outside the door.

“So-so. Though I put together fresh BLUE for the ventral core, so that’s a win.” Cassilde set the tea to steep. “And you?”

Dai avoided her eyes. “All right. The snow’s supposed to end tonight, you’ll be clear in the morning.”

“To do what?” She controlled the urge to clash the enameled iron cups that matched the kettle, set them gently on the counter instead. “We’re not credentialed to bid on any of the jobs at hand.” And if they couldn’t bid, there would be no money, and they were already at the end of the savings.... It was not something she needed to say, but Dai grimaced as though he’d heard the words.

“I shouldn’t have fired Lanton,” he said. “I know that. But he was impossible.”

“And he was skimming from the take,” Cassilde said. “And you’re right, that would have gotten us in trouble sooner or later. But we should have had the replacement in line first.”

Dai dipped his head. He was a big man, taller than she by more than the breadth of his hand, and she was by no means small. A dangerous man, one might have said, looking at him, with his knotted muscles earned in high salvage, hauling significant mass in varying

gravity, sandy hair cropped short, the evening's stubble coming in pale on his lantern jaw. She'd taken his measure long ago.

"We've had an inquiry," he said. It was something of a peace offering. "An answer to your notice."

"Oh?" She was intrigued in spite of herself. With new permits up for bid, on a new section of an Ancestor's wrecked sky palace, lost in long orbit for at least a hundred years, scholars with a class-one license could name their price. And the ones they might afford, the ones with a class-two license and a supervising master, were already hired. Even Lanton had a new job, with someone who should have known better. "What's the catch?"

"I think it's Ashe," Dai said.

Cassilde froze just for an instant, then very deliberately poured them each a cup of tea. Summerlad Ashe had been their first scholar, partner and lover and friend, brilliant and unscrupulous as you have to be in salvage. But when the Trouble broke, he'd chosen the Entente over the Verge, and put those same talents to use against them. She'd be damned if she trusted him again.

"He wouldn't dare," she said firmly, as though she could make it true, and Dai nodded, turning his attention to the *bilai* tins.

They didn't speak of it again over dinner, or after, focusing instead on the routine of weather and ship maintenance and the list of permits still up for bid. They couldn't do anything without a scholar, though Dai poked at his board for a while in an attempt to find something.

"Nothing in the class-threes. What about the class-fours?" he said, and turned the board so she could see the screen. "If we got a couple of them, we could work under remote supervision, and still make a decent profit."

Cassilde took the board, running her fingers over the screen to follow the math. Class-four salvage was the least demanding, wreckage that was presumed to contain only standard materials, none of the Ancestral elements that brought in the real money. "These are all high mass. *Carabosse* can't handle them."

“I marked three that are within tolerance.”

“Right.” Cassilde skimmed through the first survey reports, hoping to be convinced. Yes, they were all three within the limits, but with the fuel they’d have to spend to get them in, and the ordinary metals indicated in the survey.... She shook her head. “I don’t see it. I’m sorry.”

“We have to do something.”

“I know.” Cassilde held out the board and Dai took it from her. “We have to talk to this person. It would be stupid not to.”

“I know,” Dai said, and tuned the board to entertainment.

She thought she was tired enough to sleep early, but the Lightman’s cheated her, shortening her breath every time she lay down, and by the time Dai came to join her, she was wide awake again. She sat up, reaching for her wrap, and Dai gave her a wary look.

“All right?”

She shrugged. “Can’t seem to get comfortable.”

“Take the rest of the pillows.”

“Thanks.” Dai shoved them to her side of the bed, and she stacked them into a rough pyramid, but didn’t lean back.

“I’m awake,” she said. “I’m going to brew a cup of sleep-eze and try again.”

“All right,” he said, and settled on his single pillow, but she felt his eyes on her as she left the room.

She set the kettle to boil again, found the box of foil packets, and emptied first one and then a second into the empty cup. Two was supposed to be the maximum dose for someone half again her size, but she’d developed a tolerance over the years. While the water heated, she reached for her own board, called up the answer to her advertisement. It had been deliberately low-key, intended to discourage treasure-hunters and novices, and the response was just as bland, anonymized credentials and an offer to meet at one of the teashops in the Saranam. All perfectly normal, all what you’d expect at a time when scholars were in high demand. There was nothing at

all that reminded her of Ashe. She touched the screen, confirming the appointment before she could change her mind.

The water was boiling, and she mixed the sleep-eze without really paying attention, the cherry-sweet scent rising as she stirred. When it was cool enough, she drank it off, and turned back to the bedroom. Dai's eyes opened, but he said nothing, waited as she settled herself carefully against the pillows. This time, her breath didn't catch, and she reached across to squeeze his shoulder. She saw the flash of teeth as he smiled, and then closed her eyes, letting the drug take hold.



She was late for breakfast, rose heavy-eyed and paid for a double-long shower before she could bring herself to face tea and biscuits and the inevitable pork-product slices. Dai didn't say anything, however, his attention instead on his board, tuned to news mode, and she managed to eat enough to forestall any further comment.

"They've put up a couple more lots for bid," he said, after a moment.

In spite of knowing better, she felt a surge of hope. "Anything we could go for?"

"Not without a scholar."

Cassilde swallowed a curse. Of course not, and of course she should have known. "I agreed to the appointment."

Dai looked up sharply. "And what do we do if it's Ashe?"

"It won't be," she said.

But of course it was. Dai checked in the doorway of Brass-an-Saranam, the teashop where the high-class salvors did business, and Cassilde put her hand in the small of his back and pushed him on. Ashe gave them both his usual sardonic smile, and waved a hand toward one of the sunken booths.

Three steps down, it was quiet and warm, the winter light diffused and colored by the amber skylight and the translucent window. She

had wondered how Ashe could show himself here, where he and his desertion were known, but in the dim entry there had been a shadow disfiguring his cheek, and in the light of the booth it resolved to a data mote the size of his thumb clinging to the skin beneath his left eye, drawing attention from his prominent nose and well-shaped mouth. There had been a fad for motes in the last year or so, at least for deactivated ones, worn like bright jewels on skin and hair, but this one was active, his skin pink around the spots where the fine wires had burrowed into the nerves.

“Clever,” she said, and he bowed.

“Thank you.”

“Looks painful,” Dai said.

For a moment, she thought Ashe would deny it, but then he shrugged. “Uncomfortable, sometimes. You get used to it.”

Cassilde lifted an eyebrow at that, and stepped past him to take her place at the head of the low table. Both the cushions and the footwell were heated, and she wriggled her toes where the others couldn't see. The Lightman's that was slowly killing her left her sensitive to cold.

“You think damn well of yourself,” Dai said, to Ashe, who shrugged again.

“I'm good, and you know it.”

“You're as good as you say you are,” Cassilde said. “And so are we. Our skills are not at issue.” She stopped, seeing a waiter-girl approaching with a filled tray. “Bribery, too.”

The color rose in Ashe's sallow face, but he made no answer. And that was odd: he disliked being caught in one of his schemes almost as much as he disliked the given name he never used.

Cassilde let the girl serve them, a pot of floral tea for herself and Dai, coffee for Ashe, thick and ropy in its copper pot. Verge versus Entente again, the teas of the far-flung Edge systems poised against the coffee popular in the Core, where the stars lay close enough to each other that the Ancestors had knit them into retimonds, worlds and systems linked by a single communications web. There were

plates of biscuits as well, pale circles decorated with sugared flowers or stamped with a star and crescent moon: definitely bribery, she thought, not provocation, and settled to enjoy it while it lasted.

She watched the men eye each other as they all took ritual tastes of the food. She was not so naive as to think Dai was the only one who had been hurt, for all that his face showed his pain more clearly. Ashe might cultivate a brittle disdain, but he had felt the break perhaps more keenly. Of course, he had chosen to leave, and not long before she'd been diagnosed with Lightman's, when they were still wondering what the odd symptoms might mean—but that was unfair. The Trouble was well begun, and his obligations had been complex. Still, the old suspicion sharpened her voice.

“What do you want, Ashe? Exactly and in detail, please.”

“I'm offering to go in with you on a bid for some section of this latest discovery,” Ashe said. Only the flicker of his gaze, one quick glance from Dai to her, betrayed that he was not as utterly confident as he sounded.

“Offering,” Dai said.

Cassilde ignored him. “Why?”

Ashe shrugged. “You need a scholar, and I need work—”

Cassilde slammed her hand hard on the table, rattling the teacups. “Don't give me that! What do you want, Ashe? Tell me now and tell me straight, or walk away.”

Even then, he hesitated for an instant. “I want to bid on a specific piece of the contract—it's not an obvious choice, but I have reason to think it may be more profitable than it looks at first sight.” He touched the data mote in his cheek. “But it will take a really good team to pull it off. You're the best I know. Still.”

Cassilde poured herself another cup of tea. That was Ashe for you, the lure of the exotic larded with compliments, *no one can do it but you*, and yet.... She looked at Dai, saw him already half willing to believe. “What does that thing tell you?”

“My mote?” Ashe touched it again, the almond-shaped body

glowing pale green behind a blackened filigree. The golden wires glittered where they pierced his skin.

“What else?”

Ashe smiled, ruefully. “You’re right, that’s how I got my information. It’s a Palace piece, I’m sure you can see that. It was inert when I got it, but I had a speck of GREEN left, and I—revived it. And when I compared its records to the first scout reports, I saw that the Claim-court had undervalued one segment—well, not undervalued, precisely, it’s a fair value for the obvious salvage, but there’s more there.”

“How’s it classed?” Cassilde asked.

“It’s a class-two site,” Ashe answered. “No direct supervision required, unless you find something outside spec. Otherwise it’s just the share-out at the end.”

Dai shook his head. “If we bid on something like that, everyone will know we’ve got a lead.”

“Not really,” Ashe said. “You’ve just lost your scholar, you’ve got a new one on short notice, untried, an unknown quantity—you’ve never worked with me under this license, no one needs to know you worked with me before. Why wouldn’t you bid on a class-two, and take the sure thing?”

“Because we don’t do sure things,” Cassilde said.

“No,” Dai said slowly. “It could work.”

It could. It probably would, like all Ashe’s schemes, though like all Ashe’s schemes there would be a dozen things he hadn’t mentioned, and trouble to spare. And it was tempting—there was the possible payout, certainly, and they desperately needed one good run. The chance that they would find something truly unique, some as-yet-unknown artifact, the secret of the Ancestors—well, that was the dream of everyone who went into salvage, no secret and no surprise. Somehow she’d find the money for the bid.

“Is the license real?”

For a moment, she thought he’d turn it into a joke, but he read her better than that. “Yes.”

“All right. I’m willing. If Dai agrees.”

Dai nodded. “Yes. I’m in.”

“Right.” Cassilde looked back at Ashe. “You’ll show us this segment, and if it’s what you say—we’ll take you on. Standard contract, quarter shares with one for the ship, and everything in writing. Is that clear?”

“Clear,” he said, and she pretended not to have seen the flicker of hurt in his dark eyes.

“So show me.”

“I’d rather not do it here,” Ashe said, and she thought it took an effort not to look over his shoulder. “Perhaps somewhere more private?”

Cassilde’s mouth tightened, and Dai gave a heavy sigh. “There’s always the ship,” he said.

They took the public tramway across the city, the express line that ran high enough that they wove in and out of the bands of mist that were indistinguishable from the lowering clouds. The line terminated at the port, and from the station she could see the vast expanse of the landing field stretching empty into the fog. A few lights cut through the murk—the field beacon, of course, and the band of red and gold that was the tower, fainter lights that marked the hangars and machine shops and support buildings. A long way off, a siren sounded, and a moment later light flared, a ship lifting from one of the middle tables. The color of the light marked it as an in-system ship, burning chemical fuel at least for the lift: a shuttle staging out to the jump-out station and the big intersystems ships.

The ship was parked outside rather than docked in the security of a hangar: it was a reasonable enough savings here on Cambyse, far enough from the Entente’s core to be spared the pilfering endemic in those ports, and close enough to the Verge that most people recognized what ships were worth robbing. They took the auto-taxi to the field edge, and walked from the gate, where the Port Security kiosk glowed golden in the fog.

Carabosse had never been impressive, just another pre-war Fairy-

class scout bought surplus and converted for salvage. They had added a second pair of cannon after the war, when the weapons were cheap and things were still unsettled enough that demobbed crews were raiding the more distant salvage fields, and the welds still showed raw against the fading paint. The outboard grapples were folded neatly against the ship's belly between the landing struts, and they and the bulk of the oversized engines at the stern coupled with the dropped sensor bulb forward gave the ship a hunched, insectoid look. Cassilde glanced over her shoulder, waiting for Ashe to complain again about having to carry cargo outboard, but he dropped his gaze and followed her meekly up the ramp.

The planet-side environmentals spun up as she came through the hatch, lights flashing to life as she led the way to the main midships compartment. Central lit up at her approach, screens flaring to standby, heat seeping from the floors, and she dropped into her usual chair at the head of the narrow table. "Dai, why don't you start some tea? Ashe, let's see what you've got."

Dai turned to the galley console, and Ashe produced his board from beneath his coat, unrolling the spare screen to show the clustered documents. Cassilde took it, the images rotating to find a convenient position, and began to page methodically through the records. It was a fairly typical find, the kind that was becoming increasingly rare in the Cambyse system, chunks of loosely associated wreckage drifting in long orbit that had only just come into range of a salvage ship. The scout that had spotted the first of the chain had been a small-time operator, their ship even smaller than *Carabosse*; they'd had neither the manpower to exploit the find themselves, nor, probably more to the point, the firepower to keep it. Wisely, they'd taken it to the Cambyse Claim-court, accepted the finders' fee, and left to it to the Court to establish the patrols that currently kept off looters while the recovery bids were still in process.

It definitely hadn't been a ship; that was obvious just from the general description, for all that the Claim-court had been scrupulously

noncommittal. The individual units were too large, too specialized—too complex in places, too simple in others, though obviously they'd once been part of some coherent whole. It couldn't be anything but the ruins of one of the Ancestors' orbital palaces. Before the Fall, the First Dark, there had been dozens of them in the Cambyse system, weaving a bright artificial ring around Cambyse itself. Most of them had been salvaged long ago, but others occasionally appeared, either returning on long orbits or possibly abandoned in transit between systems, and there was always a bidders' war over what were likely to be the richest sections.

"Which one did you want to bid on?" she asked, and Ashe leaned over her shoulder to touch keys.

"Here—this big trailing section. It masses low, and the quick scan confirmed it's hollow. The Court survey has it pegged as possible support or storage volume, based primarily on its position in the train, but I don't think that's right."

Cassilde scanned the numbers. "Not tech-rich."

"No. The mass is too low, and there aren't enough exotics."

Dai set two cups on the table, keeping a third for himself as he looked over Cassilde's other shoulder. "Yeah, but would they show on a quick scan like that?"

"If it was engineering or control space, it would," Cassilde said. Not much tech meant not much of the Ancestral elements. Maybe a decent amount of BLUE, the most common of the bunch, but everyone needed BLUE. Between that and the non-exotic salvage, they might be able to clear enough to replenish the GREEN she'd had to use on herself lately.

"Absolutely," Ashe said. "But I think it's living space—passenger volume—and you know that's where the most interesting goods are always found."

That was at least partly true, Cassilde thought. In the past, the most valuable finds had come from what seemed to have been the habitable volumes of the palaces. They weren't necessarily the most

useful things—those had been the drive and navigation units from what were deemed tenders and runabouts, simple enough that the humans known as the Successors could not only borrow but mostly reproduce. They had gone down to the Second Dark, but enough of that knowledge had been saved, and the revived civilization of Entente and Verge had built on it to develop re-engineered FTL, the REFTL drive that carried trade throughout human-settled space. But the finds that made salvors' fortunes these days weren't the technical innovations; it seemed as though everything that human science could reproduce had already been found. These days, the money was in elementals, and the weird. And if there was enough of either—at worst, she might live long enough to make another strike, leave Dai with at least enough money to keep the ship.

She damped that sudden hope. “What do you think we're looking for? What does that bug tell you?”

“Toys,” Ashe said promptly. “I'm not pretending it's anything important, but you know the kind of money they bring. Enough to earn all of us a new stake.” He shrugged. “And at the very least, there will be raw materials to take.”

“You'd be willing to go for that?” Dai asked. He sounded skeptical, and Cassilde couldn't blame him. Ashe had always fought to preserve their finds intact.

“I think there are toys there,” Ashe said. “Good ones, maybe even unique and fabulous things. From everything I've been able to work out, this was the owners' living space, not the crew's. The things that could be there—it's almost unimaginable.”

Dai stared at him, and Ashe said, “And, yes, if we don't find anything else worthwhile, we can recoup costs on salvage value alone. I'm good with that.”

“I don't believe him,” Dai said, to Cassilde, and she nodded.

“Neither do I.”

“I need the work,” Ashe said. “And for this I need a team. It's not that complicated.”

That could be true, Cassilde thought. Ashe was, as she had said, every bit as good as he claimed, but he wasn't an easy man to work with. "All right," she said. "Put together a bid, and if I approve it, we'll put it in."

"May I stay on the ship?" Ashe asked. "Your find-files are here anyway, and it would just be easier—"

"No," Dai said, and Cassilde lifted her hand.

"Why can't you work at wherever it is you're staying?"

"I'm not really staying anywhere." Ashe gave her a look that mingled annoyance and embarrassment. "I told you, I needed the work."

"That badly?" Cassilde cocked her head in disbelief.

"That badly." Ashe shrugged. "Not everyone loves me since the Trouble."

And that was certainly true. Cassilde glanced at Dai, saw the same uncertainty written in the big man's face. She lifted her eyebrows, and received the faintest of nods in return. "You can stay," she said. "In fact, it might be just as well for us to move back aboard, too—it'll save us money we can use for the bid. Dai, why don't you go back to the hostel and make arrangements? I'll stay here and work with Ashe."

Something flickered across Ashe's face, but was gone before Cassilde could be sure what she'd seen. "Thanks."

"Do you have baggage somewhere?" Dai asked, with only a little reluctance. "I can fetch it."

Ashe shook his head. "I've been traveling light."

He prodded the bag he'd brought with him from the teashop. He meant to imply he'd been working passage, she thought—he held, or used to hold, a tech-2's license, and there was always work on the intersystems ships for technicians—but she'd never known him to manage with fewer than two bags before. And if that single carryall was all he currently owned, then either he was in serious trouble or he was in truth poorer than she'd ever known him to be. With her luck, it would be both. "Then we'd better put together a good bid," she said, and nodded for Dai to leave.



She spent the rest of the day watching over Ashe's shoulder as he roughed out the bid and filled in the details at her direction, then sealed the final version and submitted it before she could change her mind. She would be emptying every account they had to make this work, but even if they found nothing more than what the original survey said was there, they should make a small profit. If things broke badly, of course—she put that thought aside with the ease of long practice. They would make their own breaks; they always had.

Dai returned at sunset, and he and Ashe hauled the baggage cart up the ramp in the day's last watery light. There was no place to put Ashe but in his old cabin—they had always each kept space of their own, though she and Dai still shared the big bed in the master's cabin and even Ashe seemed to feel the awkwardness, retreating to its privacy as soon as they had finished a quick dinner. Dai waited until his door was solidly closed to take her arm.

"I want to make a round of the port bars," he said, not quite whispering.

"Problems?"

He shook his head. "I want to get a feel for the job. There's bound to be gossip." She waited, and he gave a reluctant smile. "And, yes, I'm curious about Ashe."

Cassilde nodded. "So am I. But the job comes first."

"Understood." Dai shrugged himself back into his heavy coat, and Cassilde closed and latched the hatch against the night wind.

She was in bed by the time Dai returned, the ship powered down for the night. Ashe was presumably asleep, or at least hiding in his new/old cabin, and she saw Dai hesitate as he slid the door open. He saw she was awake, and relaxed slightly, stripping off his vest and pullover and subsiding onto the edge of the bed to unlace his boots. She sat up, propping the pillows behind her, and waved a hand across

the nearest sensor to bring up the lights. He smelled of cold and the snow, of beer and frying and other people's mists, only the bitter tang of the snow to tell her this was Cambyse and not any of a dozen other ports.

"Any news?"

Dai shrugged. "Lots of gossip about the find, but nothing I hadn't heard. People are really confident, though."

Cassilde considered that. It was the first floating palace found in the system in at least five years, and the orbit almost certainly ensured it hadn't been stripped yet. A certain confidence was warranted, and had driven the bids higher than usual. "No surprise. Any talk of claim jumpers yet?"

"Only the usual. If there are any, they'll go for the obvious pieces first."

"What about Ashe?"

"Nothing." Dai stood up again to finish undressing, slid between the sheets beside her, cold radiating from his skin. "No interest, no talk, nothing."

"It's been eight years." Eight years since the Trouble ended, settled by mutiny and a coup that Ashe had somehow briefly been involved in, eight years since there had been any reason to notice him. Maybe it was enough. Cassilde waved her hand across the sensor to dim the light again. She wound herself companionably around Dai, his skin still cool to the touch. He shifted to make them fit, and she felt him sigh.

"What do you want to do about him?"

Cassilde froze. She knew exactly what he was asking, but she would be damned if she'd admit it. "What do you mean?"

Dai sighed again. "I'd take him back."

"I wouldn't." She paused, considering. She had forgiven other lovers before this—even Lalie, and what she had done had been objectively worse—but somehow Ashe was different. "Not just now, anyway."

“If it would upset you—”

She shook her head. “No. Do what you want, it doesn’t bother me. I just—I suppose I want an apology first.”

“I think it’s the only way I’ll ever get one,” Dai said.

And that was possibly true, and possibly involved a certain amount of coercion, and she turned her head away. “I mean it. Do what you want.”

“I will,” Dai said, and closed his eyes.



She slept late the next morning, woke alone and emerged from the cabin washed and dressed to find Ashe at the library console in Central, files open across multiple screens. Dai was scowling at the galley station—checking supplies, she assumed, and Ashe spoke without looking away from the screens.

“Who’s been keeping your find-files for you? They’re an idiot.”

“Ass.” It was all she had, short of hitting him, and she turned on her heel and stalked away, half expecting to hear the sounds of a fist-fight behind her. She made her way down the full length of the ship until she reached the darkened control room. She keyed off the lights that came on as she came through the hatch, and settled into the co-pilot’s seat, automatically assessing. She was cold, her fingers white and numb: that was the walk. It and the anger had left her short of breath as well. She could feel her lungs straining, each breath pinched close and tight, and for a moment she was tempted by the speck of GREEN she kept for the really bad days.

She drew her knees to her chin, forcing herself to breathe slowly, carefully, and the worst of the spasm passed. GREEN wasn’t meant to be used as medicine, but, as with all the Ancestors’ artifacts, over the centuries humans had figured out more ways to use the substance. It would clear her worst symptoms, buy her a week or two of normal breath and movement, but it would not cure her. And every pinhead

dot of GREEN that she used to prolong her life was GREEN that could not be used to power the ship's Ancestral devices. And without GREEN, nothing would function. She'd had to make that choice too often lately, choosing between her own health and the ship's, and they had no money for more when their stockpile was exhausted. In fact, if they didn't find GREEN on this current job, they'd be in serious trouble.

If only the Ancestral elements didn't fade over time—if only someone, anyone, could find a way to restore their potency. But that was the Grail of the true scientists, the elemental physicists in their orbital labs, not a problem that could be solved by salvage. All salvage could do was find a few more pieces of the Ancestors' wreckage, and keep the systems going a little longer.

"Silde?" Dai loomed in the open hatch, taking stock with a single glance. "You good?"

She nodded, and saw him relax. "And you?"

Dai gave a crooked smile. "Ashe has some extra specs for you."

And that meant that whatever words might or might not have passed between them, they'd achieved enough of a truce that she wasn't allowed to challenge it. "Right," she said, and uncoiled from the chair. "How's it look?"

"Not bad," Dai answered. "You'll see."

Ashe had all the screens filled and a model projected above the table, one corner overlapping the teapot. Cassilde moved it, unreasonably annoyed, and Ashe gave her a half-smile that might have been meant as an apology.

"I've worked up a model from the original bid data. It's not perfect—gaps are red, guesses yellow—but it looks like living quarters to me."

Cassilde turned the model slowly, studying the details. The outer surfaces were taken directly from the original finder's observations: a truncated hemisphere, half stony asteroid, the other smooth metal. Ashe had marked an airlock or pressure door in yellow on the metal side, an obvious way in if he was right, and in spite of herself her spirits

rose. She peeled back the surface to reveal an interior of five chambers, the airlock and a smaller space beneath it, then a larger room and two more chambers leading from airlock to hull. There was quite a bit of red, but the layout was familiar, and she looked back at Ashe.

“How confident are your guesses?”

“Sixty, sixty-five?” He reached for the model in turn, adjusted it to show only the darkest lines and the yellow ghosts. “I’m ninety percent sure on this, the big interior volume and two smaller ones.” She nodded, and he turned it again, building back the earlier image.

“What’s in it?” Dai asked, leaning on the back of a chair.

“That’s the question,” Ashe said. “Toys, like I said. If it’s living space, I’d expect there to be RED and GOLD between interior skin and hull. But it could be almost anything.”

Cassilde’s eyes narrowed. That wasn’t much to base a bid on, wasn’t nearly enough to send Ashe back to them. “What are you really looking for? What does that thing tell you?”

“I don’t know,” Ashe said. He was wearing the mote at the base of his throat today, and he touched it nervously. “That’s the trouble. I mean, yes, I have every reason to think there will be toys, but all this says is that this is, or was, a critical area, holding something vitally important. The implication is that it’s lifesaving, maybe some sort of rescue device, or something medical, though I can’t make that fit with the other things it’s telling me about the section. Why would you put a lifesaving device in the middle of a residential area?”

This was why they’d taken on Ashe in the first place, Cassilde thought, caught up in spite of herself in the possibilities he was sketching. Even without the mote’s help, he’d always had the gift for seeing the Ancestors’ relics as they were meant to be.

“If the owner had a medical condition, maybe?” Dai said.

“The Ancestors were supposed to have been both incredibly long-lived and impossibly healthy,” Cassilde said. “So say the records and that’s confirmed by everything we’ve seen of their surviving ground settlements. No hospitals, no clinics, no medical facilities of any kind—”

“Except for the tower on Devona,” Dai interjected.

“If you agree that’s a medical facility,” Ashe said. “Which I don’t.”

“So you’re going to agree with Orobandi on that?” Cassilde lifted an eyebrow.

“Embarrassingly, yes,” Ashe said. “I think the Ancestors were, if not actually immortal, possessed of such an immensely long lifespan and the ability to heal almost any injury that they might as well have been. Whatever human beings were to them, there was a fundamental physiological difference between us.”

The words were more bitter than Cassilde had imagined, looking at her white, numbed fingers. “Which brings us back to the question. What do you think is there?”

“I don’t know,” Ashe said again. “I can’t translate everything this thing tells me, and I can’t guess, not from what I have. But if it’s something the Ancestors thought was good for healing—imagine what it could do for us.”

Cassilde flinched at Dai’s stricken stare, heard her own breath sharp before she got herself under control. “Asshole. Get out. Our contract is cancelled.”

“What?” Ashe looked genuinely bewildered. “You can’t say this is a bad idea—”

Dai closed his fists, but his voice was frighteningly controlled. “You heard her, Ashe. Off the ship.”

“But—”

“The Lightman’s is now third stage,” Cassilde said.

She heard Ashe’s breath catch in turn, his eyes suddenly wide. There was nothing beyond the third stage, the point at which GREEN was required in ever-increasing doses just to maintain function. No one had ever been able to afford enough of it to know if it would preserve life indefinitely.

“If I’d known that,” Ashe said, “I’d have put it to you right away. What I thought I had, I mean.”

Cassilde studied him for a long moment, trying to read his true feelings. He looked contrite, appalled, shocked into silence—but this was Ashe, who'd always been the best liar of them all. And also the one most capable of casual, unanticipated kindness. She let out her anger with her breath. "Well. Now you know."

"Now I know," he echoed, and glanced at Dai. "I can't promise anything. You have to understand that. It's only hints and shadows."

"Better than nothing," Dai muttered.

Cassilde looked away. Hope was a luxury she couldn't afford, but she couldn't bring herself to deny it to Dai. "Right. We carry on."

Relief flickered across Ashe's face, and Dai sighed deeply. "You want me to price out supplies?"

Cassilde nodded. "Use the rainy day account. You'll need it."

"Right," Dai said, and reached for his board.

"In the meantime—" Cassilde pushed herself out of her chair, grateful that her legs didn't weaken. "In the meantime, I'm going to plot some preliminary courses. Buzz me when we get an answer from the Court."

"I'll do that," Dai said.

Cassilde nodded, and turned away. As she stepped over the hatch combing, she heard Ashe's voice, soft and aggrieved—*You could have told me*—but she did not look back.

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 thirty 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 novels 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 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.” Her most recent short stories “Finders” (*The Other Half of the Sky*) and “Firstborn, Lastborn” (*To Shape the Dark*) were both selected for Gardner Dozois’s *Years Best SF* anthologies.

Her most recent novel, *Point of Sighs*, the fifth novel in the acclaimed Points series, was released in May, 2018, and *Finders*, based on the short story, will be out at the end of the year.

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