

MELISSA SCOTT

WATER HORSE



PRAISE FOR WATER HORSE

Sumptuous storytelling, well-defined characters, and superb attention to detail animate this outstanding epic fantasy from Lambda Literary Award winner Scott (*Trouble and Her Friends*). // Scott crafts an elaborate, rousing narrative of shifting alliances and supernatural intrusions into the natural world while taking the time to establish deep, handsomely delineated relationships and nuanced LGBTQ characters. This is epic fantasy done right.

— *Publishers Weekly*

Scott's complicated world fills up space, spills off the edges of the page into uncharted territory. It feels real, satisfyingly deep—and at the same time, those tantalising hints of other stories, other histories, made me intensely curious for more. I read *Water Horse* in a single afternoon's sitting, in a year in which I've frequently struggled to finish novels, or even start them at all. Deft and atmospheric, with Scott's trademark elegant prose, *Water Horse* is an engaging delight.

— Liz Bourke, *Tor.com*

An epic fantasy novel that reads like science fiction... // *Water Horse* takes place in a well-drawn, meticulously-presented world where a finely-codified technology of magic is based on music and oaths. The world has a long, eventful history and a baroque social-political structure... // Melissa Scott stirs all of this worldbuilding into her tale very artfully, in ways very familiar to science fiction readers. // ...a delicious struggle between fate and free will.

— Don Sakers, *Analog SF*

Water Horse is a magnificent and haunting book, a fantasy epic that will sweep you away. Melissa Scott is a writer at the height of her powers, and this is a virtuoso performance from a modern master. // If you are a lover of epic fantasy, queer heroes, or meticulously created worlds so real you could fall into them, you must not miss *Water Horse*.

— Jo Graham, author of the Locus-nominated *Black Ships* and the Spectrum-nominated *Stealing Fire*

A powerful tapestry of sword-forging and sorcery. // ...bad-ass harpers, a compelling bisexual king as our protagonist, // intense politics and a clever magic system, all packed into a single epic volume. This one crept up on me, and I'm still thinking about it days after I finished the final chapter.

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

Melissa's Scott's *Water Horse* is a rich and deep epic fantasy full of the deep worldbuilding, immersive writing, intriguing magic, and strong characters that I come to expect and crave in her writing. Just as importantly, the novel provides a framework and exemplar of a story where heroism, valor, strength of character and rising to

the occasion are not trampled and mocked and denigrated... // ...a book stunningly well suited to our times.

— Paul Weimer, SFF book reviewer and Hugo finalist

I've been hearing about *Water Horse* for a couple of years now and I'm delighted to say that the wait was totally worth it. The world building is gorgeous, the plot is compelling and the characters are unforgettable. I'm already hoping for a sequel! This will definitely be one of my favorite reads of the year and beyond.

— Catherine Lundoff, award-winning fantasy author
and publisher, Queen of Swords Press

Also by Melissa Scott (selected works):

Dreamships

Trouble and Her Friends

Dreaming Metal

Shadow Man

Night Sky Mine

Finders

WATER HORSE

MELISSA SCOTT



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

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To Jo, with thanks.

One omen is the best: defending one's country.

—Hector in *The Iliad*

Nothing's as soft as water,
yet who can withstand the raging flood?

—Lao Ma in *Xena, Warrior Princess*

MAP OF ALLANOTH



CHAPTER ONE

She crouched in the stern of the barge, listening to the thud of the oxen's feet as they made their slow way up the haulage path, and the chant of the men at the wheel that opened the sluice behind the barge. Water lapped against the hull, rising slowly in the coffin that held it: this was not a great rise as the steps of the water-stair went, but even a small lift took time. The water could only flow so fast, diverted from the downstream channel. But it was enough to lift the barge, heavy with casks of the new year's wine, and she could see lights in the distance, the great smokeless flares of witchlight that illuminated the docks at Nen Elin. There was sunlight, too, narrow fingers reaching down from the cavern's roof to strike sparks from the water: even here the Blazing One was present, and she hugged that knowledge to her heart.



At the bow gate someone shouted an order and the men bent their backs to the wheel again, closing the sluice. The rush of the water slowed to a trickle, no louder than the slap of the little waves against the hull, and the captain called for poles. She was slow to respond, her eyes still drawn by the strands of light, and the bargemaster clouted her shoulder.

"Meleas! Blood and bones, your wits have been wandering since we left Nen Ddaur. Get to work, or the captain will leave you here."

She scrambled to her place, hoisting the heavy pole so as

not to foul the others or the sides of the coffin, and the gates opened in front of them releasing the barge into the docking pool. The ground was shallow here, the water of the main channel slowed and tamed, and she dug her pole into the stony bed, falling easily into the familiar rhythm. The dock drew closer, wooden pilings built out from a shelf carved from the living rock. The witchlights flared high as a man, colder than sunlight and throwing paler shadows.

She had been promised Esclin Arros, promised the ruler of the Hundred Hills, and for an instant she faltered, her pole missing its ground so that she jerked and nearly fell, but she recovered herself, her breath white in the cold air. They had promised, the Blazing One had spoken—the arros should be here. She couldn't see from the barge's deck, her view blocked by the great casks, and in desperation she leaped to the dock to take the stern line. The sternman swore at her—that was properly his job—but she ignored him, walking backward along the dock with all her weight on the heavy line. The others dug in their poles, easing the barge to its place, and she looped the line around the bollard, snugging the stern tight against the pier. The dock workers crowded close, and she put the hoist between herself and the barge. The Blazing One would not abandon her. The arros would be here; it was only her task to have faith and do as she had pledged.

She edged away from the pier, scanning the gathering crowd. The arrival of a barge was always an event, children and dogs and anyone not tied to their work glad to seize a moment's holiday. She dodged a trio in dirty smocks, obviously escaped from the kitchens, and flinched back behind a tree-carved pillar as one of the household archers hurried past. There were apprentices from the forge, come all the way from the roof—full-fledged smiths, too, their wool gowns hastily shrugged on over shirt and hose. They must have started down as soon as the barge reached the last step of the water-stair, ready now to gawp and gossip. She could feel the knife hot against her thigh beneath her worn gown. Surely the arros was not immune to such desires—surely he would come to see.

And then she saw him, coming down the shallow steps that led up into the nenn itself: a man gold as ripe wheat, his bone-white hair loose on his shoulders and the blind eye covered by a patch as red as blood. The Blazing One had put her on his blind side, the better to speed her work; she would need to strike hard and fast to get through his cloak, black lambskin with the fleece left long, but the blade was honed and blessed and ready. She glanced up at the spear of light plunging down from the vaulted ceiling, a pinpoint bright as the Blazing One, and stepped into the crowd as though into a stream, hauling at her skirts as she went.

She ducked past the first two women, dodged an archer who was shedding his gown to join the line of men helping unload the barrels. He shouted after her, more annoyed than alarmed, but then as she ignored him, boring on through the crowd, his voice rose and sharpened.

“Hey! You there!”

Meleas ignored him, the dagger in her hand now, held low against her hip. The rays of sunlight stabbed down into the dock, filling her with the Blazing One’s fire; she would meet the arros in one of those shafts of light, and she exulted in the realization.

“Careful!” A woman caught at her sleeve, but she jerked free, pushing forward past a stocky man and another woman in a worn surcoat. The sunlight beckoned, the white-haired arros just outside its reach.

“Stop, you!”

She flung off the blocking arm, but other hands reached for her, and she spun free, displaying her dagger so that they fell back for the moment she needed.

“The arros!” someone shouted. “Look to the arros!”

He turned at that, the good eye widening pale as ice as he brought the lambskin cloak up like a shield. She ripped at it anyway, the blade tangling for a moment in the trailing fur, and then she’d freed it and lunged again with a cry of fear and rage. The arros turned away like a dancer, the whirl of black leather obscuring his movements, and then his men

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were on her, driving her to her knees and then flat on her face on the grit and stone of the dock. She had failed, failed, and the sunlight failed with her, fading as though the Blazing One turned from her in disgust, and she began to scream.

CHAPTER TWO

They gathered in the room that should have been the consort's had there been a consort at Nen Elin, Esclin Arros pacing the narrow space while his people stayed out of his path and one page built up the fire while another poured wine. Esclin reached for the first cup, but Kelleiden Smith caught his hand.

"Wait."

"A knife and poison in the same day?" Esclin paused nonetheless, and Maeslin Steward fetched a misshapen lump of nacre on a silver chain. He dipped the nacre in the wine, lips moving as he whispered the incantation. He drew out the shape unchanged, and the page from the hearth hastily produced a bit of linen to wrap it in.

"It's as well to be sure," Maeslin said, and handed the cup across.

Esclin took it, looking into the red depths for a moment before he took a swallow, barely tasting the familiar spice of this autumn's vintage. "Have you found out who she is?"

Ilgae Marshal shook her head, the red-gold curls that betrayed her Exile blood caught back hastily with a thin strip of leather. "Not yet. The barge master says she's called Meleas, he doesn't know a second name for her. He thinks she's from Ramnos, but she's been working the Hidden River since the spring."

"What does she have to say for herself?" Kelleiden asked.

"She doesn't," Ilgae said.

Esclin lifted an eyebrow at that, and Ilgae spread her

hands. “You heard her at the dock. It was all we could do to get her to stop screaming, and since then she just sits and rocks, won’t say a word. She’s in the cells, I’ve left Rota with her.”

“Then you think she’s mad,” Kelleiden said.

“She’s not acting like a sane woman,” Ilgae answered.

“Mad or not,” Maeslin said, “we need to know who’s behind her. Who put her up to this.”

“Must there be someone?” Esclin took another swallow of his wine, glancing from face to face to judge their answers.

“Does she have some quarrel with you?” Kelleiden asked in turn, and Esclin allowed himself a thin smile. Of all of them, Kelleiden had the right to that question, both as the master smith and as the man who’d shared Esclin’s bed most often for the last two decades.

“I’ve never seen her before. Not that I remember, anyway. And I’ve no quarrel with Ramnos or its people.” Esclin sighed. “So, yes, I take your point.” He rested his hip on the long table, automatically turning so that his blind eye was toward the windowless wall.

“There are the omens to consider,” Ilgae said, after a moment. She would not meet the arros’s gaze, staring intently at the carved stone wall.

“I don’t see that it’s relevant,” Esclin said. The summer’s fighting had ended in stalemate, just as it had for the last four years, and at harvest-tide the public augury had been at best ambivalent. As the nenn’s speaker, the White Mistress’s voice, Rota had put her best interpretation on it: the day a wheelman entered Nen Elin was the day the nenn would fall. A week later, a wandering seer, a servant of the Huntress, one of the lesser gods of the hills north of Nen Gorthen, had arrived with a warning that Esclin courted his father’s fate. Esclin dismissed that as one last thrust in the long quarrel between his mother’s people and his father’s, but he knew that he had not had the effect he’d hoped.

He saw Ilgae and Kelleiden exchange glances, and then Kelleiden said, “Is it not?”

“No.”

“Our folk will think so,” Ilgae said. “Whatever the truth of it.”

“Let it go,” Esclin said, and gestured impatiently for the page to serve the others.

Kelleiden accepted a cup from the hovering page. “Does anyone in the household know her?”

“Not that I’ve found,” Maeslin said. “My people are still asking questions, but the dock men say she’s a stranger to them. And to the kitcheners.”

“They’d say that regardless,” Esclin said.

“Yes, but I believe them.” Maeslin gave a crooked smile. “They’re not all of them that good liars.”

“Why, then?” Kelleiden shook his head. “We’ve no quarrel with Ramnos.”

“It’s an Exile town,” Ilgae said.

“The Exiles should have no quarrel with us.” Esclin took another swallow of his wine. His free hand was trembling, pure physical reaction, and he flattened his fingers against the sanded surface.

“Manan does. From whence the Exiles come, and Ramnos is a traders’ town before all. And Manan elected a new lord paramount at the equinox.” Kelleiden met the arros’s eyes squarely.

That was true, of course, and they were back to the truth that Esclin had been avoiding. He fixed the smith with a minatory stare. There was enough to worry about as winter settled over the Hundred Hills without raising that particular specter.

“People will talk,” Maeslin said.

“I’m still alive,” Esclin said, with a smile he didn’t feel. “I’d call that a good portent.” He won a few smiles at that, but Ilgae shook her head.

“It’s not a joking matter, Sire.”

“And I will consult with the speaker,” Esclin said, “but that’s not the matter at hand. I want to know who sent this girl—”

The door swung open, Ilgae turning automatically to place herself between it and the arros, Maeslin and Kelleiden reaching for their knives. Esclin had his own knife half drawn at the sound, and then realized that it was his daughter Talan in the doorway.

“I’m sorry, Father, but the matter’s urgent. The girl—Meleas—is dying.”

“Dying how?” Esclin sheathed his dagger without apology.

“Burning up with fever,” Talan said. “Rota said you should come.”

Esclin nodded. “Has she spoken?”

“Not a word.”

Esclin closed his lips over his first response. “Maeslin, keep questioning our people, see if anyone knows anything. Ilgae, I’ll want you to tighten the watch for a day or three. Kelleiden...” He looked at his daughter. “Yes, we’ll come.”

The cells lay toward the heart of the mountain, below the halls and storerooms and as far from the main gates and the docks as was practical. Talan knew all the shortcuts, leading them unerringly through the narrow hall between the kitchen and the armory, then down the twisting stair that led to the lowest levels. Esclin plucked witchlight from the air to supplement the hanging lamps and Talan did the same, the shadows wavering uneasily in the corners.

The corridor ended in a broad, low-ceilinged hall, the air thick with silence. More lanterns hung at stingy intervals, perpetual twilight, and at the door of the largest cell, two archers straightened to attention.

“Arros,” one said, and a shadow moved within the cell, resolved into a stout woman drying her hands on her apron as she came to the door. Her hair was braided with beads and tiny bleached-white bones, the badge of her office, and at Esclin’s side Kelleiden touched his heart in acknowledgment. She caught the gesture and dipped her head, but her attention was on the arros.

“You’re too late.”

“What?” Esclin froze. No natural illness worked so quickly. “How can that be?”

“Her god forsook her.”

The speaker stepped back, beckoning them into the cell. Talan hesitated—she had not seen very much of death, after all, would only be sixteen at the spring lambing—and Esclin stepped past her. Kelleiden came with him, positioning himself in the arros’s blind spot out of long habit. Talan hovered unhappily behind him. The air was cold and smelled of death, in spite of the bucket of water and the newly mopped stones. The girl’s body lay on the stripped cot, the straw emptied from the mattress and swept aside to be burned, a piece of linen covering her from breast to thigh. She looked small and pinched, her skin already waxen, like a votive figure ready for the offering.

“What happened?” Esclin took a step forward, waving his ball of witchlight closer. There were no signs of injury, not even bruises from the struggle at the docks, and he looked again at Rota.

“She stopped screaming when the guards brought her down into the dark,” Rota said. “They had searched her, but the only weapon on her was the knife she tried to use on you. They had sent for me straightaway, I was here within a quarter-hour, and probably less. I found her balled up in a corner, rocking back and forth. She wouldn’t speak to me, and I admit I was sharp with your men, thinking they’d mishandled her.”

“But they had not?” If they had, they would pay: everyone knew that rule.

“I don’t believe they had.” Rota dipped her head in apology.

“Well for them,” Talan muttered.

Esclin put out his hand to silence her, and Rota went on as though she hadn’t spoken. “I’d not been here very long—my girl had brought the water and I’d sent her for a calming tea when I saw the prisoner start to shiver. I checked her, and her skin was hot to the touch, burning hot. I got her onto the bed, though I don’t think she knew herself then, and her eyes rolled back in her head. She was beyond swallowing by the time I brought a dipper to her lips.” She nodded at Talan.

“The thegen was here, so I sent her to fetch you. But she didn’t last.”

“She never spoke,” Esclin said.

“Not to me, and not to the soldiers.”

“And this fever...” Esclin studied the body again, unwilling to come closer, and Rota gave a thin smile.

“Not natural. And not, I think, contagious.” The White Mistress would know, ruler of both death and healing. Esclin nodded.

“There is this you should see.” Rota stooped over the body, folding back the lower edge of the linen. She flexed the girl’s leg, bending it and turning her knee outward to expose the inside of her thigh, revealing a round red mark. A birthmark, Esclin thought, and in the same moment realized it was too perfect a circle. It was a ring of flame burned into her flesh, the mark of Manan’s newly dominant god, a red shiny scar.

“That’s what you meant. ‘Her god deserted her.’”

Rota nodded and eased the girl’s leg straight again, adjusting the linen to cover her more completely. “She is—she was sealed to the Blazing One. She sought your death, and when she failed, she died. That’s how I read the signs.”

“Sent by whom?” Esclin asked. “Besides the god.”

“That,” Rota said, “I cannot tell you.”

Kelleiden said, “The lord paramount wouldn’t grieve for your death.”

“He’s better things to do than cultivate assassins,” Esclin said. “Can we give her proper rites?”

“Not I,” Rota said. “That’s the master smith’s domain.”

“Not mine.” Kelleiden straightened.

“She tried to kill you,” Talan protested.

“She failed. She’s dead. I won’t harm her further.” There was no need to court further misfortune. Esclin looked over his shoulder. “Well, Kelleiden?”

“I will not touch those rites. That fire is not mine.” Kelleiden controlled himself with a visible effort. “There are Exiles in the home-guard, one of them will know what’s proper.”

“My people will lay her out,” Rota said. “We’ll shroud her, too. That can do no harm.”

“Good,” Esclin said, and Kelleiden caught his sleeve before he could turn away.

“Esclin. You need to take precautions. I doubt this will end here.”

Esclin gave him a reproving glance, but Rota said, “The master smith is wise.”

“Another augury?” Esclin asked.

“Only what I saw before. Add to that common sense and a lifetime at court.” Rota gave a thin smile. “You need the royal sword.”

Esclin grimaced and looked at Kelleiden, who kept his face expressionless. The royal swords were the greatest of the great symbols of Arra’s Folk: blades forged of star-fallen iron, sealed to each arros by blood and fire. Both the smith and the speaker had declared it time Esclin claimed one. But the speaker had added another ill omen at the equinox: *The royal sword made*, she had chanted, deep in trance, *by the arros betrayed*. No matter how she tried to hedge those words after, or how hard he tried to twist their meaning, no one was about to forget them. “I will be careful. As will Talan.”

She gave him an impatient look. “I’m always careful.”

“Keep Cat Meirin by you,” Esclin said, and she nodded. There were more things he wanted to say, more strictures he wanted to lay on her—she was the child he had raised as well as his heir—but she was a woman grown, and responsible for herself. “Then ask Ilgae to see if any of the Exiles will perform the rites for this girl.”

“I will,” Talan said, and turned away, collecting her witchlight as she went. It receded along the corridor, leaving them with only his own light and the duller lanterns.

“Is there anything else I should know?”

Rota shook her head. “If I do find more, of course—but I don’t expect to.”

“No more do I,” Esclin said, and cupped his witchlight in his open hand, drawing it back to hover at his right shoulder.

Kelleiden kept place at his left as they started down the corridor.

“Cat Meirin will keep her safe,” the smith said. “And, more to the point, Talan will put up with her. That was a good thought.”

Esclin nodded. Cat Meirin was Talan’s milk-sister, her mother Lysse had been Talan’s nurse from babyhood. She was six months older than Talan, and a head shorter, small and fierce as the mountain cats from whom she had taken her name. She was deadly with bow and knife and sword, and if her tongue stumbled, her hands did not. “Let’s hope so.”

“And yourself?”

Esclin gave him a sidelong smile, knowing what the smith was really asking. “When have I ever slept alone? But I’d be glad of your company these nights.” As he had hoped, Kelleiden breathed a laugh, and together they climbed back toward the halls.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa Scott is from Little Rock, Arkansas, and studied history at Harvard College and Brandeis University, where she earned her PhD in the Comparative History program. She is the author of more than thirty original science fiction and fantasy novels as well as authorized tie-ins for Star Trek: DS9, Star Trek: Voyager, Stargate SG-1, Stargate Atlantis, Star Wars Rebels, and the anime series gen:LOCK. She has won Lambda Literary Awards for *Trouble and Her Friends*, *Shadow Man*, *Point of Dreams* (written with her late partner, Lisa A. Barnett), and *Death By Silver*, with Amy Griswold. She has also won Spectrum Awards for *Shadow Man*, *Fairs' Point*, *Death By Silver*, and for the short story "The Rocky Side of the Sky" (Periphery, Lethe Press) as well as the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. Her most recent solo novel, *Finders*, was published at the end of 2018 and she is currently at work on the next book in the sequence.

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