

MELISSA
SCOTT



THE MASTER
OF SAMAR

PRAISE FOR THE MASTER OF SAMAR

Lambda Literary award winner Scott (*Shadow Man*) sets a solid mystery plot within an aristocratic, Victorian-esque commonwealth held together by magical curses. // Scott hits all the expected beats, and her dark magic system keeps the stakes high. Fans of Victorian fantasy will want to check this out.

— *Publishers Weekly*

Intricate and elaborate scheming both civil and magical, in a wonderfully-realized city. I am in awe!

— Ellen Kushner, author of the fabled *Riverside* mannerpunk novels, host of the influential WGBH/PRI series *Sound & Spirit*, winner of the World Fantasy and Locus awards

Intrigue and bricolage. Complicated characters. Action and unpredictable mystery. This is exactly what I want in a fantasy, and *The Master of Samar* delivers.

— Sherwood Smith, creator of the immersive Sartorias-deles and Wren universes, Nebula award finalist

In 1985, I picked up a new novel with the intriguing title *Five-Twelfths of Heaven*, a second novel by a writer new to me. I

haven't stopped reading her since, because Melissa Scott is that good. *The Master of Samar* is one of her best.

— Cynthia Ward, co-creator (with Nisi Shawl) of the acclaimed fiction writers workshop, *Writing the Other: Bridging Cultural Differences for Successful Fiction*

//...a rousing and exciting story, and Melissa Scott is a master of the genre at her best. My heart was in my throat more than once. The magical system is intricate and fascinating, and the last several chapters are unstoppable—you are compelled to keep reading straight through to the satisfying conclusion. *The Master of Samar* is a gorgeous fantasy novel. Longtime readers of Melissa Scott will be reminded of her popular *Points* series. I hope there's a sequel—I would love to visit this world again!

— Jo Graham, author of the acclaimed *Numinous World* historical fantasies and *The Calpurnian Wars* space operas

Melissa Scott's *The Master of Samar* is a character-driven fantasy whose strong use of contract magic, old secrets and the lies we tell each other and ourselves shapes the past, present and future of the characters and the city-state that they are bound to. It is an immersive and enthralling read.

— Paul Weimer, SFF book reviewer and Hugo finalist

Also by Melissa Scott (selected works):

Dreamships

Trouble and Her Friends

Dreaming Metal

Shadow Man

Night Sky Mine

The Order of the Air
(series, Jo Graham co-author)

Death by Silver
(first in series, Amy Griswold co-author)

Finders

Water Horse

THE MASTER OF SAMAR

MELISSA SCOTT



First edition published 2023

Copyright © 2023 by Melissa Scott

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Please respect authors' rights; don't pirate!

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
In Progress

ISBN: 978-1-952456-16-9 (paperback), 978-1-952456-17-6 (ebook)

Cover art by Heeseon Won
Book design and composition by Athena Andreadis

Editor: Athena Andreadis
Proofreader: Patti Exster

www.candlemarkandgleam.com

CHAPTER ONE

It had been years since Gil Irichels had poled a boat through the canals of Bejanth, but some skills were worn so deep into the bone that they could not be forgotten. His bodyguard Arak min'Aroi crouched in the center of the boat with the piled baggage, her hunched shoulders the only sign of her unease. By contrast, Envar Cassi knelt barefoot in the bows, already holding the mooring rope. He, too, had been born in Bejanth, and had not forgotten how to navigate its waters.

The house loomed ahead, three stories with an alley to one side and a narrow cut-through canal on the other, shutters closed and the black wreaths still on the upper windows. The canal channeled the wind, and the dyed feathers were looking bedraggled: time and past to have them down, Irichels thought, adjusting his stroke to bring the boat alongside the narrow platform.

Envar leaped the narrowing gap, mooring rope in hand, and Irichels shifted his pole to stop the boat from colliding with the crumbling stone. Envar walked backward along the dock, pulling them forward until he could loop the rope over the bollard and draw it tight. Irichels racked the pole against the outside gunwale and stepped ashore to fasten the stern tie. Arak looked up at him, one hand still clutching the nearest cleat. "This is your house?"

For my sins. That was a dangerous comment, here where the house could hear him, and Irichels merely nodded.

"Most impressive," Envar said. He came back down the

dock, and Irichels saw the moment he thought of offering Arak his hand. Arak's glare dissuaded him, and he came on down the dock, looking up at the house. "You'll need to take the wreaths down, of course. Unless they're for your arrival?"

That was closer to the bone than Envar could have known. "The advocate said no one has been living here since my aunt died."

"Not even staff? How unfriendly of them." Envar continued staring up at the house, pale eyes noting every crack in the plaster, the peeling paint, the time-blurred carvings on the shutters and the downspouts. Even the once-brilliant peacock blue door had faded. Behind him, Arak wobbled to her feet and stepped awkwardly onto the dock, straightening with a scowl that dared anyone to comment.

"Now what?"

Irichels took a deep breath. "Let's get the baggage up, and then we'll go in."

Envar stepped back into the boat to toss their bags to Arak. Not nearly enough of them, Irichels thought, not for his new status—master of Samar with the family vote in the Lower Assembly—though they had seemed more than sufficient for a traveling cursebreaker. Three sets of saddlebags, a larger, shapeless bag still stained by the straps that had held it to the mule, the cases that held their weapons, and an incongruous woven basket that Envar had acquired that morning: it was lucky the house should still contain some furniture. Irichels could feel the weight of the key in his purse; and because he wouldn't give the house that satisfaction, he drew it out and stepped briskly to the door.

The lock resisted for a moment, or perhaps that was only his imagination. He pressed harder, and the tumblers caught, drawing back the heavy bolt. He pushed the door open all the way, and saw for an instant the inner courtyard ablaze with light and color. The vision vanished, replaced by reality: the dark hall, the filtered sunlight in the inner court, the utter silence where there had once been the music of birds and water. He hoped someone had released the birds when

THE MASTER OF SAMAR

his aunt Maritsa died, if they were not going to maintain the house.

He crossed the threshold and felt the subtle shift that meant the house was aware of him. There was the familiar smell of cold ashes, sour and oddly comforting, and the sense of weight receded, vanishing into the shadows. Behind him he heard Envar's quick intake of breath, glanced back to see the surgeon's considering expression. "You didn't mention *that*," he said.

Arak dropped the first load of saddlebags on the tiled floor, set her cased crossbow more gently beside them. "There is something here."

"It's a very old house," Irichels said, and heard his voice defensive.

"And your family's lived here for centuries," Envar agreed. "But *that* doesn't always happen."

"No." Irichels' mouth tightened in spite of himself.

"A spirit," Arak said. "Yes? A daemon of the house?"

Irichels knew the highland term that Arak really meant, and hoped the house didn't. "In a sense."

"It's more that the house has been a center of the family's attention for long enough to become a daemon," Envar said. "Every one of you, family and household, must have acknowledged it for generations, and that's fed it." He gave Irichels a sidelong glance. "You don't much like it, my heart."

That didn't need to be said out loud. Irichels swallowed the words, said instead, "It never much liked me." He heard Arak mutter something, curse or propitiation or both, and straightened his shoulders. "Let's get everything inside, and see what they've left us."

All in all, it was better than he had expected. The newer, smaller pieces of furniture had vanished, of course, and the family plate was—he hoped—locked in the vault of the Moravai Bank, but the massive old-fashioned pieces that he remembered from his childhood were not only still present, but tucked neatly under linen dust covers. The mattresses that belonged on the heavy four-posters had been rolled up and

stored away, but there were linens in the press, sweetened with herbs, and the curtains had been knotted up against the dust. When he turned the tap in the first bathing room, there was a rumble and then a rush of cool, sweet water from the rooftop cistern.

He carried his bags to one of the bedrooms at the front of the house, where the windows looked out onto the canal rather than the houses across Weaver Street, and wrestled with inner and outer shutters until he could retrieve one of the tattered wreaths and let in the afternoon light and a breath of warmer air. He turned back, wreath in hand, to find Envar waiting in the doorway. "Not the master's bedroom?"

"I want a fresh mattress first." It was the best excuse he could think of, and from the look on Envar's face, he didn't believe it either.

"Where do you want us to sleep?"

Irichels set the wreath beside the cylindrical stove. "Wherever you like. There's no shortage of rooms."

"Well. I'd like to sleep with you, of course—"

"And you know you're welcome," Irichels interjected, hoping to deflect the conversation, but Envar went on implacably.

"But you must know that's not a good idea. You're the master here, you have to act it. It wants a master."

"It doesn't want me," Irichels said.

"You're what it's got," Envar said. He came forward to rest one hand on Irichels's cheek. "You have to assign us rooms, my heart, or it'll give us no peace."

That was probably true. Irichels closed his eyes for a moment, letting himself lean just a little into the touch, then straightened with a sigh. "All right. Let's take a look." Envar stepped aside, letting him return to the hall, and he leaned over the balcony to call down into the courtyard. "Arak! Come up, will you?"

There was a moment of silence, and then Arak came into view, scowling and wiping dirty hands on a rag. "Right now? I was trying to get the boiler started."

THE MASTER OF SAMAR

“It can wait,” Irichels said, and a moment later Arak appeared on the stairs.

“Are there beds, even?”

“You can try the mattresses if you want,” Irichels said, “or use your bedroll. I’ll have someone bring fresh stuffing tomorrow or the next day.” He looked along the hall. “These front bedrooms have box beds, so they’ll be more comfortable until we can get settled properly. I’m taking this one. Arak, Cass, you can have the next ones along—Arak, you take the one next door.” He saw Envar give a faint, approving smile, and thought he felt some of the distant pressure ease.

“All right,” Arak said, and pushed the door open. “I’ll get the fires going, and then bring the bags up. There’s about two days’ worth of fuel in the coalroom, if we’re careful, but you’ll want to order more.”

Irichels nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He had never wanted this, never wanted the house or its insatiable needs; and now that he had them, his first instinct was to flee the city. The house would need staff—a cook and housekeeper at minimum, a few maids to be the housekeeper’s hands and feet, someone to do the rough work, and maybe a boatman for the errands—and he felt the weight descending, cold and airless as misery.

Arak was already heading down the stairs, apparently oblivious. Envar touched Irichels’s shoulder. “There must have been servants when your aunt died. Is there anyone you could get back? Someone that you’d want back?”

The advocate had given him a list, among the sheaf of papers he’d turned over. Probably there was no one he remembered—it had been years since he’d been back in Bejanth—but it was a start. “I can see.”

“Good.” Envar nodded. “Then let’s take another look round before the light goes. You’ll feel better once you’ve gotten more settled.”

To Irichels’s surprise, he found that was true. There was no point in opening up the formal parlor or the grand dining room, but he found the controls of the fountain and

set it going again, the water a welcome break in the silence. The bird cages were all empty, for a mercy: empty and swept bare before the servants left, and he hoped the birds had found good homes somewhere. Arak had taken over the low-ceilinged kitchen with its door opening to the water alley, and there were fires in the stove and the boiler. The massive worktable had been built in place and could never be moved, but there were sturdy chairs and stools, and Envar's basket proved to contain a ham and bread and half a cheese as well as bottles of wine and brandy.

"What we're shortest of is oil and candles," Arak said, as night fell and they retreated to sit around one end of the table in the fluttering light of an eight-branched candelabra. Irichels remembered that it had once graced his grandfather's workroom, a heavy piece of bronze with cups shaped like tulips. "After that, charcoal. The weather's warm still, but we'll want it for cooking and the boiler."

Irichels nodded, and tossed off a glass of the brandy. There had probably been better in the wine pantry, but those shelves had been emptied along with the rest of the portable goods.

Envar carved himself another sliver of cheese. "Did you find anyone you'd want to bring back?"

"I haven't looked." Irichels poured himself another generous glass, then added a second reckless measure. Neither of the others said anything, and Irichels sighed. "Hand me the folio, then."

Arak stretched to reach the leather folder, and Irichels sorted through the documents, squinting in the dim light. He found it quickly enough, was surprised to see a familiar name at the head of the list. Martholin had been the cook when he was a boy, but apparently she'd risen to housekeeper over the years. That was unexpected, and unexpectedly pleasant: she had always been kind to him, had always been willing to let him sit in a corner out of sight, always had a smile and a taste of whatever was on the stove. The list gave an address, on the edges of the Palinade: she might be glad of a job, if she was

THE MASTER OF SAMAR

living there. "I'll write her in the morning," he said, and tied the folio shut again.

Envar tidied the food away while Irichels finished his glass, and Arak leaned back on her stool, head cocked to hear the sound of the fountain. "This must have been a fine house once."

Irichels was aware of Envar's swift look, and answered carefully. "Busier, anyway."

"You were raised here?"

Irichels couldn't blame the hillwoman for the note of surprise. He looked nothing like the sort of man who would come from a house with a seat in the Assembly: too broad in the shoulder, too dark, too hairy, with coarse blunt hands and feet as big as barges. Envar looked more like an aristocrat, thin and sharp-boned, for all that he had been born in the Limmerwil, the slums on the seaward edge of the Orangery. "I was born in Bellem," he said, abruptly unwilling to deny the father he could only just remember. "My father was Ystelas min'Yver, the tarmynor of Cal'Innis—"

"I knew that," Arak said, her posture shifting slightly in response to the hillfolk title, not a clan chief but leader of a collateral branch of the family. *Otherwise I wouldn't have taken service with you*, her tone implied. The min'Aroi had lost lands and power when the high king Venarak ascended the Sede, and the warriors of their service caste had been reduced to common free-swords, but they had lost none of their pride. "Why weren't you raised there?"

"My mother Irichel was a preceptress in the tarmynor's household," Irichels said. "She renounced her vows to marry him as one of his third-rank wives. He died when I was five, and Mother had no allies in the household, so we came back here to live with my grandfather." Much good that had done them: his grandfather had never acknowledged the marriage, which was why Irichels carried her name instead of the family's, but there was no point in saying so. "When I was fifteen, Mother rejoined the Oratory, and I went to the University in Tarehan. I proved good at curses, and—well, the

rest you know.”

Envar’s eyebrows flicked up at that, but he said nothing. Arak said, “And you never came back?”

Irichels shrugged one shoulder. “There was never any need.” His mother had had three brothers and another sister, though Maritsa had also chosen the Oratory. At least two of the brothers were married, each with at least one child, but somehow in the twenty-five years he’d been away, the family had died off; not just the direct line but all the cousins, until there was only himself left to claim the mastery of Samar. He frowned then. On the road from Tarehan, he had been too nervous to think clearly, too preoccupied with the responsibilities he had never wanted, had always avoided. But now—

“I wondered when you’d get there,” Envar said.

Arak looked at him sharply. “You think something’s wrong? Besides the daemon?”

“I think it’s odd that the entire family is dead,” Envar said.

“It’s been twenty-five years,” Irichels said, but there was no force behind the protest. “People die.”

“I’d look twice if it was business,” Arak said, and Irichels couldn’t help nodding.

“And that’s another thing I suppose I’ll have to do. Look into it, I mean. But not tonight.” He set down his empty glass and pushed himself away from the table. “Come on, let’s lock up and then to bed.”

It took nearly half an hour to make the rounds of the ground floor, making sure all the doors were locked and the windows were barred from the inside. Irichels climbed the stairs in the light of a single candle, Envar at his heels, and paused in the door of the room he’d chosen for himself. “I would like it if you’d sleep here.”

Envar smiled. “Always.”

The floor of the box bed was sound, and easily big enough for two. There was no pitcher to match the heavy stone basin in its cabinet, but there was a lighter basin in the bath that would serve, and Irichels washed quickly, not bothering to

THE MASTER OF SAMAR

heat the water, while Envar laid out his own blankets. He left the water in the basin, blew out the candle, and climbed over Envar to put his back against the wall. Envar settled against him, and Irichels touched his cheek to feel his smile.

They lay comfortably entangled, both sets of blankets drawn over them for now. Irichels closed his eyes, drifting toward sleep, and jerked upright at a thud from the adjoining room. “Arak?”

“I’m coming to you.” Arak’s voice was grim.

Envar propped himself up on one elbow. “What’s wrong?”

“Your daemon.” The connecting door clicked open, closed again, and Arak came toward the bed, the dagger in her hand glowing softly. “Tell it to leave me alone.”

“To me,” Irichels said, and reached for the familiar warding spells as Arak fetched up against the box bed’s wall. Behind her, the shadows seemed deeper than before, and Irichels could feel a presence behind them, old and heavy.

“Wait.” Envar caught his hand before he could form the first sign.

“What?”

“Don’t.” Envar tightened his hold. “Arak, put the knife down.”

“No.”

Envar went on as though the hillwoman hadn’t spoken, pressing close to Irichels’s ear. “This is your house, your home, your family—your daemon. You can’t shut it out, that’s what upsets it.”

It hates me. It’s always hated me. Irichels swallowed the words, knowing better than to say them aloud, and flattened his hand against the wall of the bed. But Envar was right, he did belong here—no matter how much he wished he didn’t—and he tried to put that conviction behind his words. “Leave Arak alone. Leave my friends alone.”

The darkness thickened, flowed closer. Arak bared her teeth at it, but lowered the dagger to her side. Irichels held himself very still as it rose like a wave. In his inner sight, he could see flashes of its power, colors that weren’t there

tracing shapes in the dark. It had always been present, part of the house. It had slipped into his room when he was a boy, trailing nightmares, and lurked in the corners when he was older, jealously herding him away from the things that weren't his. He wanted nothing more than to draw the charm, set his wards flashing into place, but he trusted Envar. *One more step*, he thought. *I'll give it one more step, two more, I can wait, there's time—*

And then it was gone, between one heartbeat and the next. The darkness was as absolute, but lacked color and weight, and once again Irichels could make out the faint blue gleam of Arak's knife. "It's gone."

"Gone where?" Arak demanded.

"One of the back storerooms, under the master's rooms," Irichels said. He had been there once, on a dare, him and three cousins huddling and poking at each other until they all crossed the threshold in a rush, to see sagging shelves piled with boxes and bundles, and beyond them a white stone set into the foundation wall. They had all felt it turn to them, and then the candles had gone out, and they had fled back to the courtyard and the sunshine and the songs of birds. He worked his shoulders, and felt Envar sit up beside him.

"You belong here," the chirurgeon said again. "So you can't shut it out."

"I don't want it," Irichels said softly. "I don't want any of this."

"And you can settle it and go away again," Envar said. "But you have to settle it. It's...been grieving, here all alone."

Irichels tipped his head back against the wall, feeling unexpected pity welling up in him. Samar had fed the thing for years—centuries—and then in a few short decades the family had dwindled and died and left it alone in the empty house, alone and bewildered and, yes, grieving, insomuch as such a thing could grieve. "I'm...sorry for it," he said, and knew that in the morning he would pour the dregs of the night's wine at the base of its pillar.

"I'm still sleeping in here," Arak said.



Irichels woke late and dragged himself downstairs in the unforgiving sunlight to find tea and toast already made, and Arak and Envar arguing about how much charcoal to use to keep the boiler going. “We’ll order more tomorrow,” Irichels said, and Arak scowled in his direction.

“Can you afford that? Fuel can’t be cheap here.”

“There is money in the bank,” Irichels said. “Enough to keep us for a while.” *While I decide what to do.* Envar’s eyebrows twitched at that, but he kept the toasting fork steady above the fire.

“They’ll let you draw on it?” Arak sounded even more skeptical than usual, and Irichels sighed.

“I really am the heir. Everything here is mine.” *My responsibility as well.* That was less comforting, and he scowled at the tea. If he was going to return to Bejanth, he was going to take up its more expensive habits. “We need to order kaf, too.”

“Now that would be a treat,” Envar said, and withdrew the fork from the fire. He plucked the bread off the tines and tossed it in Irichels’s direction. Irichels caught it, juggling it for a moment until he could rest it on the chipped saucer one of the others had found.

“I will not drink that disgusting stuff,” Arak said.

“You can have all the tea you want,” Irichels said. He took a bite of the bread and reached for the folio he had gotten from the lawyers, his heart sinking as he glanced through the first few sheets of paper. There was, if this could be trusted, plenty of money and a decent amount still coming in from investments, but they couldn’t be left to run themselves, at least not in their current state. And if he was going to live here, he needed supplies, charcoal and food and wine at the very least, and staff to manage the daily work. He would need to write Martholin straightaway, see if she would come—and

of course he had neither paper nor pen to hand. He swore under his breath and crammed the last of the toast into his mouth, pushing back his stool. He had ink and pens in his saddlebags, and almost certainly a few scraps of paper; if any was left in the house, it would be in the workroom tucked into the corner behind the stairs. He should check there first, and see what had been done with the books.

“Gil?” Envar asked, and Irichels waved a hand.

“I need to get to work. I’ll be in the workroom if you need me.”

“And where would that be?” Arak muttered, but softly enough that Irichels could ignore her.

The courtyard was drowned in sun, the water chiming gently in the fountain. The colored flagstones outlined spaces for planters and birdcages and delicately wrought metal benches, but all but a few of the largest planters were gone. The trees—oranges that had been there and fruiting since he could remember—looked wilted; restoring the fountain should have also restored the hidden irrigation system, and Irichels hoped it wasn’t too late to save them.

The entrance to the library was in the shadows under the stairs. He pushed open the heavy door, expecting in spite of knowing better to be chastised for interrupting, but there was only darkness and the dim shapes of looming furniture. He shook himself and felt his way past the heavy chairs and the enormous worktable to unlock the shutters. The light from the street was blinding, great squares of sun crossed by the bars that protected the narrow windows, and he blinked hard as he opened the next set of shutters.

The windows gave onto Weaver Street, and were set high enough that passersby couldn’t see in; by their light, he could see that the shelves along the outer wall had been plundered, only a handful of forlorn-looking volumes remaining. The locked presses on the other wall seemed to have fared better, the unmatched bindings still familiar after all these years, and he wondered if Maritsa had had to sell the lesser part of the collection. Surely not, if the lawyers’ accounts were

THE MASTER OF SAMAR

accurate—unless she had chosen to live beyond her means, which was possible. He sighed, and fumbled with the chatelaine's keys until he found the one that fit the cupboard where his grandfather had kept his supplies.

It had not been touched, it seemed, and he stared for a moment at the familiar contents: the stacks of squared paper, the brass pots for ink powders, the heavy glass flasks for oils and water, the brushes and rubbing stone and ink sticks for formal correspondence. The sticks of wax had melted, were fused into a single multicolored lump, and he was aware again of the house seal resting in his purse along with the keys. He would need it now, if he was going to persuade Martholin to return.

He set the folio on the worktable and mixed himself a bowl of plain iron ink, then took it and pen and paper back to the worktable. It felt strange to sit in the chair that had been his grandfather's, and he felt the daemon stir at the presumption. *Grandfather is dead*: the reminder was as much for himself as for the daemon, and he trimmed the reed pen carefully before he began to write.

The letter to Martholin was easy enough, a simple request for her help in re-establishing the household, with an offer of generous pay for even a temporary visit. The note to the bank was just as easy, a request to reopen the family accounts, as was the letter to the lawyers asking for another appointment to review some of the papers. Even the official letter to the Assembly stating his claim to Samar was easy enough: there was a copy of the Formulary in the cupboard, along with the brushes and night-blue ink sticks and the polished paper. He found the correct model and read through it three times while he rubbed ink into the stone, then copied the stately phrases in his best calligraphy. The Formulary advised him of the proper fold, and informed him that he could use the Samar house seal as long as it was formally defaced.

Instead, it was the orders for fuel and food that defeated him—how much, who to patronize—and finally he bundled the papers back into the folio and locked everything back in

his grandfather's cupboard, then headed for the kitchen. No one was there, of course, and he stepped back into the portico that ran along the courtyard's south side. "Cass? Arak?"

For a moment, there was no answer, and then Arak leaned over the railing from the second floor. "Yes?"

"I need—" Irichels stopped, sighing. What he needed was staff, not friends who were strangers to the city. "I need someone to find a post-boy to take some letters."

"And exactly how do I do that?" Arak came down the stairs, frowning.

"I can show you." That was Envar, emerging from the direction of the empty ballroom. "Or I could go myself if you'd rather."

"If you'd show Arak, I'd appreciate it," Irichels said, and sighed again as Arak bridled.

"I am your bodyguard, not a page. I should stay with you."

"I need you to get to know this neighborhood," Irichels said. "I'm going to need people I can trust." Arak's frown eased at that, and she accepted the bundle of letters.

"We should also fetch in more supplies," Envar said. "And—listen to the gossip while we're about it?"

"That couldn't hurt," Irichels said.

"Is there anything in particular we should ask about?" Envar asked.

"I wish I knew," Irichels answered, and reached into his purse for a handful of coins.

When they were gone, and the street door locked again behind them, Irichels stood unhappily at the foot of the stairs. He knew what he should do, of course, and knew equally well how much he didn't want to do it. Maybe it would be better to wait until they returned—he might need their support, after all—

He shoved the thought away, and went back into the kitchen, rummaging through their scant supplies until he found an unbroken cup and the nearly-empty bottle of wine. He poured the cup half full and left the kitchen by the side door.

THE MASTER OF SAMAR

This part of the house was a maze of small, badly-lit halls and storage rooms, but he remembered the way well enough. Down the hall behind the portico, then past the workroom and into the middle room where various bits of equipment had been kept. It was as emptied as the rest of the house, and when he snapped his fingers to light the single lamp, the wick sputtered and died: no oil left in the reservoir. He swore under his breath, and conjured up a marsh-wisp instead, the pale twist of flame floating in the air above his head. By its light, he found the door to the next room, and the key, and turned the lock. For a moment, it resisted; then the door sagged back, the hinges groaning softly.

The room was much as he'd remembered it, filled with racks and shelves to store valuables that were only used in certain seasons—festival ornaments, the enormous wine bowls for the family's public feast day, chests that probably held linens and formal wear. It was less picked over than the rest of the house: either the lock or the daemon's presence had protected it. Irichels snapped his fingers at the hanging lamp and it grudgingly caught, casting more shadows than light.

It didn't matter. He could see the white stone, vivid in the gloom, set into the southeast corner of the foundation where land and sea came together. He could feel the daemon, too, sullen and massive, an almost tangible presence in the cluttered space. He took a step forward, threading his way between the racks, and overhead the lamp winked out. Out of oil, he thought, and scowled at his own reaction. He knew better than to dismiss a sign like that, and sure enough he felt the daemon rouse and surge toward him, rising like a black wave that dimmed the stone. Every instinct screamed at him to ward himself, but he held himself still. Envar had been right the night before, it was Arak's warded blades that had set it off. In the past, he'd tried to block it out, as though it and he were strangers. He was Master of Samar now, and the daemon was bound by that blood inheritance, no matter how much it hated the bond.

He took a step forward, into the looming dark, and it parted for him. He could feel how much it grudged that concession,

could feel its anger and frustration and, yes, a strange wild grief, a hollowed thing that echoed the empty house. However much it hated him, it hated what had happened more.

He paused at the base of the stone, plain white marble that had once been carved with symbols. In the wavering light of the marsh-wisp, there was no making out what they had once said; he doubted he could read them without bringing in paper and charcoal to trace the shapes, and there was no need to provoke the daemon that far. Instead, he poured the wine in a thin stream onto the depression at the base of the pillar. In spite of his care, a few drops splashed, spattering the stone like blood.

“I am sorry for the losses to the house,” he said aloud. “I honor your mourning.” The daemon swirled, swelled, cold air rushing out of nowhere to pluck at his sleeves and hair.

You never wanted—

“I’m Master of Samar now,” Irichels said.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, I'd like to thank Jo Graham and Amy Griswold for their willingness to read early drafts—this was a pandemic book, and their encouragement and willingness to travel with me was a bright spot in a bleak time. I'd also like to thank editor extraordinaire Athena Andreadis, who came back after the first read with a comment so simple and perfect that it should have been part of the book all along, and whose insight continued to improve every draft.

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*, *Star Wars Rebels*, and the first season of Rooster Teeth’s anime series *gen:LOCK*.

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 latest short story, “Sirens,” appeared in the anthology *Retellings of the Inland Seas*, and her text-based game for Choice of Games, *A Player’s Heart*, came out in 2020. Her most recent solo novel, *Water Horse*, was published in June 2021, and *Fallen*, sequel to 2018’s *Finders*, will be out at the end of 2023.

THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES ONLINE



VISIT THE CANDLEMARK & GLEAM WEBSITE TO

Find out about new releases

Read free sample chapters

Catch up on the latest news and author events

Buy books! All purchases on the Candlemark & Gleam site are DRM-free and paperbacks come with a free digital version!

Meet flying monkey-creatures from beyond the stars!*



WWW.CANDLEMARKANDGLEAM.COM

*SPACE MONKEYS MAY NOT BE AVAILABLE IN YOUR AREA. SOME RESTRICTIONS MAY APPLY.
THIS OFFER IS ONLY AVAILABLE FOR A LIMITED TIME AND IS IN FACT A COMPLETE LIE.