



ARISIA

2023

JANUARY 13-16, 2023

WESTIN WATERFRONT HOTEL

ANDREA HAIRSTON
AUTHOR GUEST OF HONOR

REIKO MURAKAMI
ARTIST GUEST OF HONOR

ELSA SJUNNESON
FAN GUEST OF HONOR



ARISIA

2023

13

ANDREA HAIRSTON

AUTHOR GUEST OF HONOR

14 || Excerpt from *Master of Poisons*

19

REIKO MURAKAMI

ARTIST GUEST OF HONOR

20 || Color Art Portfolio

29

ELSA SJUNNESON

FAN GUEST OF HONOR

30 || Short Story: *Ocean's 6*

4 | A MESSAGE FROM THE
CONVENTION CHAIR

5 | A MESSAGE FROM THE
ARISIA PRESIDENT

6 | CONVENTION COMMITTEE
AND STAFF

10 | ARISIA CODE OF CONDUCT
AND BEHAVIOR POLICIES

Arisia would like to extend a special thank you to Sarah Buxbaum, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Biostatistics, College of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Institute of Public Health, Florida A&M University and Tom Hanlon for their generous donation toward the purchase of Corsi-Rosenthal boxes.

January 13-16, 2023

WESTIN BOSTON SEAPORT DISTRICT HOTEL

FROM THE CONVENTION CHAIR

We take this moment to acknowledge that we come together on the unceded ancestral land of the Massachusett people. To celebrate and speculate on other presents, other futures, other pasts, we must be informed of the context we gather in. We pay respects to and honor with gratitude the traditional stewards of this land, past and present. Learn more at <http://massachusetttribe.org/> and <https://www.mcnaa.org/>

To my fellow Arisians:

The past three years have been an extended lesson in managing the unexpected. When it came time to plan for this event there was some uncertainty as to whether or not we'd even be able to have the convention. We had to come to terms with the death of our con chair, Jodie Lawhorne, and continue to prepare in his absence. Circumstances led to me taking on the role of acting con chair six weeks ago. Though the pressure and workload have been intense I can honestly say this has been one of the most rewarding and fulfilling experiences of my life. I'm grateful for the trust this organization has placed in me, the support from my fellow staff, and the work of previous members of the con chair team that has made this all possible.

In the face of a terrifying global crisis I have often longed for a better, safer, or just plain different world. During these past few weeks as I thought about what to say to you all, I kept coming back to the fact that science fiction and fantasy are often our easiest access to that better world. Science fiction isn't just about spaceships racing through the stars. It's about science and technology leading humanity to obliterate oppression, poverty, illness and pain. Fantasy isn't just about fighting dragons. It's about encountering difference and learning to embrace it.

As the pandemic rages on we need to take often frustrating precautions in order to gather. My hope is that you all see these precautions as freeing us to be together, rather than restricting us in the moment. If nothing else, no one will miss con crud!

It's been three long years since we gathered.

Welcome home.

Melissa Kaplan
Acting Con Chair



FROM THE ARISIA PRESIDENT

Welcome forward to Arisia!

Wait, what?

It's not welcome back to Arisia, because there is no going back. Much of the old world is gone, some for the worse and some for the better and some for both of those at once. Mournful as we may be for our losses, and especially for our chair Jodie Lawhorne, still we rise to meet the new world, inventing new ways of being in it. Some parts of the old Arisia are coming into the future with us, and other parts may join us later, but this is a chance to change how we think about the convention and focus on what is important to us as a community.

This year's convention is a team effort in a way that newly reflects the Arisia community's spirit. Arisia exists because you have all come together to make it exist, and so it is, too, that each of the parts of Arisia you see this weekend exist because people care about them and came together as a team. Teamwork is what community means in this new world, and we'd love to have you join us! Visit Team Arisia Services in the Revere room on the lobby level and find a team to help out as much or as little as you'd like. Even a few minutes can make a difference.

The Arisia corporation is the biggest of the teams – over a hundred people who have come forward, many of them recently, to guide us. Membership is open to anyone. The corporation chooses convention chairs, approves budgets, and sets the policies by which we'll be moving forward. It's really here that the values of the community become reflected in the priorities of the convention. Members who attend their first corporate meeting on Sunday at 1:00 in Burroughs will automatically get voting rights for future meetings. More information about joining the corporation is at corp.arisia.org/membership.

Many of the values of the Arisia community are also the values of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. This is reflected in the legislature's funding priorities, and I would particularly like to thank the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the Boston Cultural Council for their generous financial and logistical support for Arisia's accessibility, diversity, COVID recovery, and cultural outreach programs.

If there's something you value, you can help make it happen, this year or next year, directly by doing it or simply by coming to a feedback session. Now is the time to make new things happen, to reflect values we've come to recently or held for years. I can't wait to see what wonderful things you, the community, create by coming together.

Nicholas "phi" Sheckman
President, Arisia Inc.
president@arisia.org

CONVENTION COMMITTEE AND STAFF

Acting Con Chair: Melissa Kaplan

Con Chair in memoriam: Jodie Lawhorn

Meeting Scribe: Julia Austein

Con Chair Advisors: Kat Tanaka Okopnik

CON CHAIR DIRECT REPORTS

CONVENTION TREASURER

Pre and Post Con Treasury: Etana

Nicholas "Phi" Schectman

Cash Office Manager: Kelly Fabijanac

CONVENTION WEBSITE

Online Schedule: Mike Tatroe, Alex Morgan

Web IT: Benjamin Levy

VACCINE VERIFICATION

Team Lead: Priscilla Ballou

Team Members: Lenore Jones,
Rebecca Brumberger, Wendee Abramo

ACCESS

Division Head: Marc Brunco

COMMUNICATIONS

Division Head: Etana

Assistant Division Head: Priscilla Ballou

Press Liaison: Mark "Justin" Waks

Wayfinding Signage Master:

Cate Schneiderman

EVENTS

Division Head: James Boggie

Main Stage Events Area Head:

David Silber

Martial Arts Area Head: Mark Millman

Events Liaisons: Zac Hewitt

MASQUERADE

Masquerade Director: James Hinsey

Acting Masquerade Director: Suli

Masquerade Table: Suli Isaacs

MC: Andy Hicks

Judges

Presentation Judges: William Kennedy,
Carly Monsen, Carol Salemi

Presentation Judges Clerk: Suli

Workmanship Judges: Lillian Fehler,
Madeline Schmuck

Repair Table Manager: Arisia Cosplay Repair

Project Cosplay: Fast Track - Jan Dumas,
Kate Brick

Backstage Pirate: Greykell

Official Photographer: Derek Kouyoumjian

Hall Costume Awards: Northern Lights
Costumers' Guild

Masquerade Computer Guru: James Hinsey

EXHIBITS

Division Head: Benjamin Levy

ART SHOW

Art Show Director: Julia Austein

Assistant Art Show Director: Nick Brown

Set-Up/Tear-Down: William Mui,
Lori Del Genis

Mail-In Setup Chief: Eyal Sagi

Mail-In Setup: D Cameron Calkins,
Harvey Rubinovitz

Door Dragon: Richard Schmeidler,
Reggie Themistocle, Samantha Immele

Head Cashier: Andrea Senchy

Cashier: Skip Morris, JB Segal

Tally Clerk: Reggie Themistocle,
Samantha Immele

Tour Director: Zach Melisi

General Art Show Staff & Runtime Crew:
Sandy 'Pink' Sutherland

CREATORS' CORNER

Creators' Corner Liaison: Ann Muir Thomas
(Formerly Artist/Author Alley)

DEALERS

Dealers' Liaison: Ed Trachtenberg
At-Con Dealers Liaison: Heather Spencer
Tax ID Tsar: Mieke Citroen

GALLERIA MANAGEMENT

Galleria Layout: Benjamin Levy

FOOD

Division Head: Brett Sherman
Staff: Danielle Gauthier

GAMING

Gaming Team: Michael Renaud,
Patricia Adams, Daniel R. Abraham, I33t,
Anne Ratchat

Division Head: Daniel R. Abraham

Tabletop Gaming Area Head:
Daniel R. Abraham

LARPs Area Head: Anne Ratchat

Video Games Area Head: Leet

GOH LIAISON

Guest of Honor Division Head:
Melissa Kaplan

Liaison to Writer Guest of Honor:
Opeyemi Parham

Liaison to Fan Guests of Honor:
Lauren Roy

Liaison to Artist Guest of Honor:
Samantha Immele

At-Con Staff: Lauren Roy, Nick Brown,
Samantha Immele, Opeyemi Parham,
Melia Vaden

HOTEL LIAISON

Division Head: Nicholas Sheckman

Assistant Division Head, Con Spaces:
Wendy Verschoor

At-Con Liaisons: J

Innkeeper Area Head: Ellie Younger

At-Con Innkeepers: Ellie Pagan-Vargas

Space Pilot Program Area Head:
Allison Feldhusen

MEMBER SERVICES

Manager of Member Services Areas:
Cate Schneiderman

Arisians of Color Safe Space:
Opeyemi Parham

AoC Room Hosts: Marley Bessette

Blood Mobile Liaison (Blood Drive):
John Hodges

Coat Check: Linda Brennan

Coat Check Staff: Ruth Fishman, Barb Jewell,
Greykell Dutton

Cosplay Repair Station: Missy Schuman

Cosplay Repair Station Staff: Jess Steytler,
Jim L

Freebies: "Filthy Pierre"

Food Trucks: Jude Shabry

Info Desk: Kristin Page

Info Desk Staff: Matan Kruskal,
Diane Rosenburg, Jean Rossner

Line Management: Claudia Mastroianni

Quiet Room: Cate Schneiderman

Quiet Room Attendants: Bill Thomasson,
Hayden Bauer

OPERATIONS TEAM

Ops Desk Assistant Area Head: Ops Desk

At-con IT Lead: Mike Tatroe

PROGRAMMING

Co-Division Heads: Ilene Tatroe,
Dan Toland

Programming Staff (Pre-Con):
Wendee Abramo

AREA HEADS:

Art & Maker: Scott Lefton, Kevin Osborn

Comics: E.J. Barnes, Danny Miller

Communities: Tikva

Cosplay & Costuming: Raven Stern

Advisor: Milo Martinez

Fan Interest: Melissa Honig

Gaming: Mark "Justin" Waks

Literature: Mar Hammitt-McDonald

Media: Sid Hackney, Reuben Baron

Music: Jeremy Kessler

Assistant: Benjamin Newman

Relax-a-Track: Tanya Washburn

Science: Charity Southworth

Advisor: Mark Amidon

Workshops: Megan Lewis

Writing: Morgan Crooks

Nexus Staff: Ann Thomas, Jenne Foronjy,
Jennifer Tretheway, Naomi Sipple,
Nate LaRose, Wendee Abramo

PLANORAMA

Area Head: Gail Terman

Data Knurd: Dennis Duquette

Staff: Dan Franklin, Mike Tatroe,
Debbie Terman

PUBLICATIONS

Division Head: Alex Morgan

Souvenir Book: Catherine Wechsler

Pocket Program: Alex Morgan

Quick Reference: Benjamin Levy

REGISTRATION

Division Head: Melia Vaden

Assistant Division Head:
Brooks Harrelson

Registration Managers: Kelly F.,
Lenore (pre-con)

At-Con Tech Lead: K. Vaden

Pre-Con Staff: Melia, Brooks, K. Vaden,
Etana, Jasra, Lenore

At-Con Staff: Melia, Brooks, K. Vaden,
Kelly F., Peter B., Vivian A., Lenore, Etana,
Wendy V., Priscilla, Rob C., Henry L., Jasra

SAFETY

Division Head: Adam Burdick

Assistant Division Head: Tim Yee

Inter-Division Liaison Officer:
Daniel Eareckson

THE SAFETY TEAM

Safety Team Area Heads: Paige Murray

Safety Team Staff: Ben, Garret, Eric,
Aedyn, Kaylee, Shayna, Andrew

INCIDENT RESPONSE TEAM

Division Head: Tikva

Managers: Susan Weiner, Nchanter

IRT Team Members: Todd Whittemore,
Vivian Abraham, Susan Weiner, Diana
Hsu, Jean Rossner, Nightwing Whitehead,
Etana, Nchanter, WyldeKytin, Jaime
Garmendia

TEAM ARISIA SERVICES

Division Head: Erik Meyer-Curley,
Sharon Sbarsky

Volunteers Area Head: Erik Meyer-Curley

Ribbons: Sharon Sbarsky

Team Arisia Headquarters Staff:
Stirling Scott Newberry, Gay Ellen Dennett

LOGISTICS

Logistics Area Head: Kylie Selkirk
Logistics Assistant Area: Head: Rex Powell
(Un)Loading Crew: Patrick Flaherty, Cheryl Cheney, Sandy Sutherland, Mieke Citroen, Sean Philips, Jeremy Thorpe, Vivian Abraham, Steven Lee, Santiago Rivas, Joshua Burson, Zac Hewitt, Charles Olson, Ariela Zonderman, Heather Young
Logistics Drivers: Mark Hertel, JWeiss, Hobbit

TECHNICAL SERVICES

Division Head/Technical Director: Brendon Chetwynd
Assistant Division Head/Assistant Technical Director: Hayden Bauer
Technical Advisor: David Silber

DESIGN

Lighting Designer: Brendon Chetwynd, Lowell Gilbert

BUILD

Master Electrician: Lowell Gilbert
Drape Crew Chief: Covert Beach
Scaffolding Crew Chief: Covert Beach

RUNTIME

Masquerade Lighting Designer: Kylie Selkirk
Tech Suite Manager: Covert Beach
Tech Party Lead: Covert Beach
General Tech Staff: Beth Kevles, Chiara Guglielmo, Pink, Violet Zitola, Covert Beach, Bernie Gabin, Hobbit, Brett

YOUTH SERVICES

Division Head: Jan Dumas, Rebecca Brumberger
Fast Track (Children's Programming): Jan Dumas, Rebecca Brumberger
FT Quartermaster: Delenn Brumberger
Project Cosplay: Kate Brick, Lucy Backman, Mabel Backman, Charles (Spot) Backman
Teen Lounge: Vic Macchi



ARISIA CODE OF CONDUCT AND BEHAVIOR POLICIES

To help ensure our members' happiness and a successful convention, we have established a Code of Conduct and Behavior Policies for all members and staff. Please read this document and help us have a safe and welcoming convention for all.

Arisia reserves the right to revoke, without refund, the membership of anyone for just cause. This may also lead to being banned from future Arisia conventions. We will refund the membership fee of anyone who finds the policies contained herein unacceptable prior to accepting their badge. The general principles of this Code of Conduct apply to the Arisia convention and also to all the activities of the convention committee, whether before or after the convention.

GENERAL DEMEANOR

Arisia expects its members to respect each other and behave in a responsible manner. Members should respect common sense rules for public behavior, personal interaction, common courtesy, and respect for private property. Assistive devices must be considered an extension of their users' bodily autonomy with regard to touching, photographing, and other conduct. Service dogs, as defined by the ADA, are also an extension of their handlers and must not be touched, photographed, deliberately distracted, or otherwise impeded without permission of their handler..

If you wouldn't do it in public, please don't do it here. Additionally, all Staff are representatives of Arisia and therefore are held to a higher standard of behavior, even when off duty.

Reminder: The hotel is not dedicated completely to our use for the weekend. Members of the general public stay here or visit the hotel to dine and socialize. Please be considerate of non-convention individuals at all times.

Arisia forbids abusive, insulting, and/or harassing behavior. Such behavior includes, but is not limited to: stalking, discriminatory statements, inappropriate physical contact, unwelcome sexual attention, and display of hateful iconography. These prohibited behaviors can include but are not limited to those related to: race, national origin, sex, gender, sexual orientation, physical appearance, age, religion, ability, family/marital status, or socioeconomic class. Examples of hateful iconography can include, but are not limited to, those listed on the websites of the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League.

Please report any incidents in which a member of the convention is abusive, insulting, intimidating, bothersome, or acting in an unsafe or illegal manner to Incident Response Team (IRT), an Assistant Div Head, a Division Head, an Assistant Con Chair, or the Con Chair.

Sleeping in public or convention areas of the hotel is forbidden by the hotel management. This is private property.

Program participants, moderators, and event coordinators are responsible for the comfort and safety of convention members in their areas. Disruptive behavior by adults or children is not acceptable. Any request to leave an area must be complied with immediately; appeals should be brought to attention of "The Watch" (Arisia Security Staff) and directed to the responsible Division Head, the Convention Chairperson, or the Arisia Corporate Executive Board.

Convention Badges must be worn by all attendees and volunteers and must be visible to access any convention area (including Dealers Room and Open Parties). Exceptions may be made for special cases, e.g., uniformed professionals (police or nurses) and masquerade participants while on-stage (but masquerade participants do need to have

memberships in any case).

Student Memberships for ages 13-25 require a current valid student ID for students aged 18 and older.

CHILDREN AS FANS AND COMPANIONS

Note: In this section where "Parent" is used, it can mean a parent, guardian, or person charged with a child's welfare.

Arisia makes every effort to protect fans of all ages and provide a healthy environment with many opportunities for fun and learning. Children are a valued part of our membership, and we welcome their appropriate participation.

All children aged 8 and under must be with an adult, in Turtle Track (Childcare), or in Fast Track (Children's Programming) con areas.

Parents of children ages 9-12 who believe their children are mature enough (and who have their own paid membership) may choose to allow their children to freely roam the convention on their own. Any child who excessively misbehaves or engages in inappropriate, disruptive or dangerous behavior is subject to having free-roaming privileges or their entire membership revoked.

Children under 12 years old may attend with either their own paid convention membership, or with a free Kids-in-Tow membership (with and under the supervision of an authorized adult at all times). Arisia requires that there be at least one supervising adult with a membership accompanying every three Kids-in-Tow members.

Parents should make sure to be aware of the hours of Fast Track and Turtle Track. Parents who are late in picking up children may have their children barred from Babysitting and/or Fast Track at the current or future conventions.

Any unattended children (which includes: children not picked up at Fast Track/Turtle Track; children that do not have free-roaming ribbons found outside

of Fast Track) will be brought to "The Watch" (Arisia Security), who will follow procedure to ensure the safety of the child.

Please remember that the convention and hotel is not "child-proofed." There are many items (including costumes, displays, art, etc.) that are easily damaged. Additionally there are things that might place a young child at potential risk. It is the parents' responsibility to supervise their children so they do not venture anywhere or touch anything inappropriate.

Participation in some regular program items by minors may require parental permission or the presence of a supervising adult. Some program items dealing with adult topics may be closed to children under 18 years of age. Although children under 18 years of age may register as "adults," membership in the convention in no way supersedes local, state, or federal laws. Some items may require the supervision of a child by parents. It is the parents' responsibility to review the schedule and decide which items they will allow their child to participate in, either with or without adult supervision.

Please review the separate Children's Policies for a full description and restrictions.

COSTUME AND MASQUERADE GUIDELINES

All costumes are welcome at Arisia, whether created by the wearer or not. However, purchased and rented costumes are not eligible for awards. Awards are made to the creator of the costume, not the wearer.

Costume weapons are permitted, but must be peace-bonded by "The Watch" (Arisia Security) upon arrival at the convention, unless worn solely for the masquerade as part of an on-stage costume. The use of any weaponry as part of your costume, as well as the use of any special effects, must first be approved by the Masquerade Director. Remember, it's okay to surprise the audience, but not the staff.

During the masquerade, flash photography and laser pointers are forbidden. If you take photos or videos during the Masquerade, do not obstruct the view of other audience members. All electronic devices (e.g., cell phones, pagers, tablet computers) must be silenced and their screens must be dimmed.

Participants in the masquerade must read and agree to the terms contained in a separate costumer release and masquerade rules.

PARTIES IN GUEST ROOMS

For individuals or groups wishing to host a party (Open or Closed), you must register with the convention in advance and use a room in the "Active" room block. Parties registered in advance with Arisia will be moved to a "Party Host room", which ensures that you are covered by Arisia's corkage agreement (allowing you to serve food and non-alcoholic drinks).

Parties may be "open" (all convention members welcome, or with doors open or ajar, or publicly advertised) or "Closed Parties" (private, doors closed, no advertising). Serving of alcohol is not allowed in Open Party areas.

Party hosts are responsible for adhering to convention policies, hotel rules, and local, state, and federal laws, including the enforcement of the drinking age. All Party Hosts must review and adhere to the separate Party Host Rules.

SMOKING, ALCOHOL, WEAPONS, NUDITY AND ILLEGAL ACTS

The Westin hotel bans smoking in all areas of the hotel, including all guest rooms. Smoking is allowed outside the building away from the doorways.

Arisia prohibits the consumption of alcohol in all convention areas except for alcohol purchased from the hotel and consumed directly in the area in which it was purchased. The legal drinking age in Massachusetts is 21. You may be asked to provide a valid ID if ordering alcoholic beverages.

Arisia's corkage waiver does not apply to serving

of alcohol. According to hotel policy all alcoholic beverages must be purchased through the hotel.

Laws governing illicit substances, obscenity, weapons, public behavior, and the treatment of minors must be strictly observed.

The list of Illegal weapons in Massachusetts include, but are not limited to: blackjacks, billy clubs, any sort of double-edged knife (symmetrical cross-section, even if one side is dull), shuriken (throwing stars) and nunchucks. For further information see MA General Laws, Part 4, Title 1, Chapter 269, Section 10.

While the hotel is private property, the hotel is still required by the Boston Licensing Board to enforce standards of conduct and nudity. Accordingly, street-legal attire is required in all convention spaces and hallways.

RECORDING POLICY

Arisia's Code of Conduct requires respect for other attendees, including obtaining permission to make recordings (including but not limited to still photographs, audio recordings, and video recordings), not using recordings for malicious purposes, and following the applicable laws and regulations established by the hosting facility.

VENDING POLICIES

All vending (exchange of money for goods or services) must be authorized by the convention, and only take place in authorized locations. Vendors must comply with all applicable laws (including but not limited to copyright and tax laws).

OTHER POLICIES

All raffles and drawings, whether for profit or charitable reasons, must comply with the City of Boston guidelines.

Attendees may only post signs on official Arisia Sign Kiosks, located around the hotel, using the tape provided.



ANDREA HAIRSTON

Archangel of the Fantastic, Master of the (im)Possible

If an archangel is a celestial being, an angel of the highest rank, then novelist, playwright, screenwriter, director, educator, and poet Andrea Hairston is the highest of the high, the most fantastic of the celestial and the angelic.

In Hairston's masterful writing, she carefully demonstrates how it is possible to foreground marginalized people on the page when the world beyond them wishes to erase them. Her words and stories are a creation spell, an antidote against erasure. Each line hard-fought and culled from over six decades of living, learning, lifting others up, and loving.

It is the love that sings through her prose. She never lets us forget that she loves us, believes in us, no matter how hard the challenges are for her characters and for her many readers.

The genius of Andrea Hairston is manifold. It is not just her gorgeous language, the rhythms and silences that make music of her remarkable mind and expansive imagination, but it's her uncanny ability to synthesize her own familial and personal history, her ear for hearing the generational wisdom of elders and of the young as it hums through the ages.

She gathers and transforms us, inspiring us to see the world anew. Through rigorous research, the work ethic and regimen of the athlete that she is, Andrea conjures up her very own unmistakable hoodoo witches-brew of insights and healing. Whether you enter her creative worlds through her novels, stories, poems, and plays, heck, even her emails, you don't get away untouched by her generous spirit and extraordinary mind.

No matter the medium, to read Andrea Hairston's work is to enter a world built upon the twin foundations of science and magic. She navigates these spaces well. Her writing invites us to travel with her, to enter a mindful space for introspection and restoration. Such ancient pillars have long sparked the curiosity of Andrea, and we are the fortunate ones. As a writer, director, educator, mentor, colleague, or dear friend, she makes us glad to be alive and to be a witness to the power of words, the arc of her imagination. And we remain grateful that she chose a life of letters rather than a life in a lab, but she did not abandon her physics book! We know this from reading Andrea's soulful stories, the works that sing us away from self-doubt and give us hope when we are gaslit. That kind of power can only come from divine sources, natural talent, and a



life well spent honing her craft, filling her creative well. So grateful for this archangel of the fantastic, this master of the (im)possible! May your words continue to inspire us and new generations to reach for heights yet unseen.

Thank you, Andrea!

– Sheree Renée Thomas

MASTER OF POISONS (EXCERPT)

By Andrea Hairston

1. Djola

We are more likely to deny truth than admit grave error and change our minds. Even in the face of overwhelming evidence or imminent destruction, we refuse to believe in any gods but our own. Who can bear for the ground to dissolve under their feet and the stars to fall from the sky? So we twist every story to preserve our faith.

Djola thought to steer the Arkhysian Empire away from this terrible yet mundane fate. He was forty-three, handsome, and fearless, arrogant even, the Master of Poisons and second to none in the Arkhysian Empire except Emperor Azizi. When poison desert appeared in the barbarian south and the free northland, didn't he warn Azizi? For twenty years as it crept through river valleys and swallowed forests, Djola pleaded with Council and begged good Empire citizens to change their ways. As long as sweet water fell from the sky every afternoon and mist rolled in on a night wind, everybody promised to change—tomorrow or next week. Then crops failed and rivers turned to dust. Good citizens now feared change would make no difference or was in fact impossible. Who could fight the wind?

This morning, despite being fearless and arrogant, Djola retreated into a cave overlooking the Salty Sea as half-brother Nuar calmed his warhorse, a gift from Djola. Samina, Djola's pirate wife, had urged him to ride out with Chief Nuar and discuss his map for the future, since he'd refused to share secret plans with her. Sand swirled beyond the cliffs, a storm brewing, blunting the sunrise. Nuar wore pale cloud-silk robes over a lean muscled body, flimsy protection if the storm was fierce or poison, clothes for ceremony and celebration, not travel.

Mist got tangled in Nuar's crown of gray hair then drizzled down craggy cheeks. He gestured at the rising sun with an eagle claw, an official exchange, not a brotherly farewell. "Your map to tomorrow won't persuade Azizi's Council." Nuar shouted over the wind.

"You haven't even read it." Djola groaned. "You always imagine the worst."

"You should too."

"I do. My map is an escape route." Djola stepped deeper into the shelter of the cave. Bats clung to the ceiling, clicking and chirping like drummers calling protective spirits.

Nuar stroked his dappled horse who shied away from a mound of bat dung. "Council is weak men who can't talk to rivers, read a poem in the dirt, or catch the rhythm of roots in their bones." Nuar had been singing the same song for days.

"Council has me for that." Djola forced a smile. "I seek ancient conjure that would guide us."

"You're a tame savage to them, an Anawanama who can't tell what storm is coming till it smacks your face. Council won't accept ancient conjure from you."

Older brother knew Djola well, knew the secret doubts and anguish that plagued him as he sat at Emperor Azizi's table. Stung, Djola attended to his breath.

"Ancestors still smile on you here." Nuar mounted the horse and nodded at cathedral trees clutching the south edge of the cliffs. Frothy red crowns heralded new growth. Midnight berry bushes spilled purple blossoms over the edge. "Poison storms spare this cove and the canyons beyond."

Djola pointed at a sand squall skipping in from a new inland desert.

Nuar grunted. "A bit of bluster and not poison. It won't last." The horse glared at Djola, straining against the reins, eager to trot off.

"No one has tamed me," Djola declared.

"Azizi is a coward." Nuar never liked the Emperor, never understood how Djola could be a friend to their old enemies. "To preserve the Empire, Azizi and Council will sacrifice Anawanama, Zamanzi, and all the other northern tribes. They'll sacrifice their own citizens, just like in Holy City."

Djola spat out a foul taste. "High priest Hezram bleeds children for gate-conjure in Holy City. Azizi does nothing like this."

"You're a fool to trust any of these men." The horse snorted agreement.

Djola stared at plump shadows swaying above them. He wanted to shout, but why disturb bats drumming themselves to sleep? "Of course I don't trust them."

"When we were young, you wanted to charm elephants and jackals, pull fire from the air, even ride behemoths and sink pirate ships." Nuar's voice cracked. "To protect our villages, like the heroes of old."

"No shame in that."

"Unless you're the buffoon who betrays his own people."

"A clown and a traitor? Is that how you think of me?" Djola hugged himself. Their mother died when he was nine. He never met his father and grew up on the run, till half-brother Nuar found him. No People to hold him, just Nuar. "I chose a different path, brother, but am guided by the same spirit as you."

"Huh." Nuar scratched a scar on his chin from a blade meant for Djola. An old wound, it shouldn't itch. He'd always defended his younger half-brother against other chiefs, even when Djola joined the Empire's warriors. "You're no traitor, but..." Nuar gazed out. "They call this Pirate's Cove now." Water sparkled. Red rock-roses drank the mist and enchanted hummingbirds. Green and purple wings blurred as the birds dipped beaks into eager blossoms. Nuar sighed. "Anawanama and Zamanzi roamed here once, free."

"A few rogues flaunt the law, but no one steals our children or locks us up with the Emperor's blessing. Peace for twenty years." Djola had seen to that. "Your eyes are full of yesterdays. I look for our tomorrow. Lahesh conjure."

"Lahesh? Who can trust those tricksters and dream tinkerers." Nuar closed his eyes and laid the eagle claw against his cheek. "My Empire crops whither and blow your way. Azizi's promises are dust."

Djola wanted to press Nuar to his heart, taste the morning together, and remember their mother and wild adventures from their youth, not argue. "I don't need to trust them. I'll persuade them. My map has something for everyone."

Nuar's cloud-silk robes snapped in a gust of sand. He spread his arms wide. He raked the air with the eagle's claw. "I know the weather. Do you?"

"We are the weather. Your words, brother." Djola's voice reverberated in the cave. Startled bats chirped a warning he felt more than heard as they flew into darkness away from intruders. "We can't leave Azizi and Council to map tomorrow alone."

"No." Nuar shuddered.

Djola squeezed his hand. "What chance do we have if I don't risk everything?"

Nuar donned a turban and draped fine mesh across his mouth. Storm protection for the bit of bluster? He made a crossroads sign with the claw over Djola's heart, a blessing, then trotted off. Djola watched until a sand demon obscured man and horse. The orange whirl was more debris than bluster. Djola felt achy and jangly, as if he should have taken better care with his words. The wind might turn fierce, snatch older brother from his horse, and smash him on the rocks.

"Fatazz!" Djola cursed an orange sky. He should head home, but he wasn't ready for another sandstorm—sweet or poison—or a fight with his pirate wife. He just wanted to kiss Samina's purple-tinted lips, hold the deep curve of her waist, and taste the raintree scent on her skin one last time before heading to Council. Samina could fortify him for the battles ahead, if she had a mind to. The sand settled and the storm sputtered out. Djola squinted at shadows. Nuar had already vanished into the trees.

A good storm-sense didn't mean older brother was right about everything.

2. Awa

When Awa was a twelve-year-old Garden Sprite, Green Elders declared Smokeland a true realm of vision and spirits. Awa and the other Sprites were not to fear or make fun of sacred space as most people did. Smokeland was a vast territory of possibilities and maybe-nots, but never very far from what was happening right now. Smoke-walkers were intrepid adventurers exploring the unknown, dream tinkerers who shifted the shape of the everyday.

Awa never told the Green Elders or anybody, but she'd become a Smokeland-believer at six. Whenever Mother's spirit faded away like smoke on the wind, Awa held tight to Mother's breath body, sometimes for hours. Awa sang, told herself stories, or talked to bees and wild dogs until Mother returned from Smokeland with herbs from nowhere in this world. Awa hugged cold from Mother's thoughts, shook dead weight from Mother's bones, and combed fearful snarls from her wiry hair. Watching over Mother's breath body was a lot to ask of a young daughter who had snarls and sorrows of her own.

Awa's older brothers would have felt duty-bound to report a smoke-walking witch woman to Father. Being a good Empire citizen, Father would have turned Mother in to the high priest in Holy City or killed her to avoid shame, so guarding her breath body during illicit adventures fell to Awa.

Mother and other smoke-walkers reported slogging through a border realm of enchanting freaks and monsters. Before entering Smokeland proper, they were harassed by lightning bolts and spears of fire. Jellyfish explosions and poison dust cyclones were also common. Worst was a cold, dark emptiness that seeped through skin,

erasing thought, desire, and fear. To survive the border- void, smoke- walkers often drank a cathedral seed and cloud- silk potion to lift their minds above despair. This Lahesh potion eased the journey, but did not cause it. Even drugged, many people never made it through Smokeland's border realms. Their spirit bodies got lost in the emptiness or stolen by high priest Hezram for his conjure. Their breath bodies withered to bone and then dust. Awa thought of it as poison desert in the mind.

The first time she wandered to Smokeland was in the company of bees. It was the day before her twelfth birthday. She and oldest brother Kenu had opened an elephant corral left behind by thief- lord raiders and let the beasts run free. Angry villagers who wanted to sell the elephants chased after them, but the elephants escaped. Father was outraged. Awa ran away from him and Mother arguing over true love and some other man's child.

Awa followed friend honeybees as they flew sideways into the woods. Which woods, she could never say. The forest surrounding Father's lands was ancient cathedral trees whispering to one another up in the clouds. Bronze- colored bark was dappled with purple moss. Feathery needle- leaves started out red and turned green with age. Cathedral roots were as thick as Awa and oozed an oily scent that made her dizzy. In her childish memory, Smokeland- terrain got tangled with the everyday. This first time, Awa was disappointed not to find a border of fiends, exploding jellyfish, and void- smoke. She landed in a field of wildflowers by a cathedral tree grove. She moved at the speed of thought, spinning endlessly around a drop of water as it slid down a leaf. In a blink she raced from riverbank to valley to rocky peak.

A beehive the size of an elephant rested inside a tree trunk cavern. Swarms of workers buzzed about, stingers hot with venom. Dancing distress, they smelled like ripe bananas. Awa saw no reason for alarm. Trees and bushes were heavy with flowers. The ground was a mosaic of petals. Deep- throated blossoms bulged with fragrant nectar. Inside the hive, the queen pushed an egg from her abdomen into a cell every minute. Workers spit nectar into the queen's mouth. A thousand nurses buzzed over a developing brood. Drones were fat and frisky. Bee paradise.

Sentinel bees clustered around Awa's mouth. She was afraid they might sting her. Was she the danger? They spit honey and venom on her tongue, a bittersweet concoction. Night fell like a dark curtain. A cold scar moon hung overhead, a desperate lantern in deep dark. Sentinels wagged their butts and buzzed away from the giant hive. Awa flew among a thousand thousand bees toward Smokeland's border, where flowers dissolved and cathedral trees crumbled into poison sand.

The slash of moon dripped blood. Confused bees flew into the ground. They ate their own wings and stung rocks. Faceted eyes clouded over and sparking hearts burned out. A thousand thousand wings flew ahead of Awa and turned to smoke. She choked. Confronted with the famed horror of the border realm, Awa tried to slow down, tried to turn back for bee paradise, but she no longer had the speed of thought. Her mind was sluggish terror and then blank as void- smoke enveloped her. A taste of the sentinels lingered in her mouth. A stinger caught in a tooth pricked her tongue. Venom flowed to her heart and she swooned.

Father and other good Empire citizens claimed there was no realm of imagination, no true land of visions and spirits. Smokeland was sleepwalking sickness, drunken dreams, or Green Elder nonsense. That explained tattoos, burnt hair, and the treasures folks brought back from their adventures. Smoke- walkers knowing what they shouldn't or couldn't was another matter. Father couldn't explain that away. He just insisted Mother's exotic herbs and concoctions were family secrets.

Southern thief- lords sold or burned any woman who knew too much. Northern savages sliced smoke- walkers from navel to chin to expel demons. Priests and witchdoctors poisoned their breath bodies and stole spirit- blood to power gate- spells or do other conjure. This was a living death. Good Empire citizens locked up smoke-

walkers to train for priesthood if they were men or drain as transgressors if they were women. And a veson— what Anawanama northlanders called someone who was neither man nor woman— had to declare for one or another horrible fate: living as a man or dying as a woman. So . . .

Awa returned from her first Smokeland trip to Mother's garden and let the Smokeland- knowledge taste sweet on her tongue then swallowed it quickly unspoken. That made her muscles lumpy and her joints wobbly. She snorted wisps of border- void and felt dizzy.

Father was still yelling at Mother about an unruly daughter who'd end up like witch- woman Kyrie: wandering a cold mountain, bloody and bitter, childless and without love. Mother distracted him with a sack of jewels and coins while Awa struggled back to her everyday self.

The scar moon was low and the sun about to rise over Mother's garden. Silver- leafed herbs brooded around the well and spicebushes scented the air. Awa focused on cinnamony aromas. The everyday was as compelling as Smokeland. Mother must have carried Awa's breath body back from the forest.

"Forget the elephants." Mother pleaded with Father. Her willful hair was braided down in thick plaits. Her brown cheeks sagged. "This unruly child has brought in a treasure." Counting the money, Father didn't notice the wild pup licking Awa's face. Mother chased him off before Father put a bolt in his furry hide. Dogs harassed the goats who had no fat to worry away. "Selling Awa has saved your farm," Mother said.

Father looked up from his money bag at the tumble- down corn crumbling in the fields. Fruit trees were covered in a fuzzy scale. Goats bleated at kids sucking their dry teats. Father had stolen all the milk. "We'll see if the farm can be saved," he said. His eyes were flicks of flame, his trim beard patchy. "We'll see." Awa's face was flame- hot, her hands cold. They were selling her on her birthday, like a savage girl nobody wanted to feed anymore.

*Excerpted from **Master of Potions** by Andrea Hairston. This excerpt is published here courtesy of the author and [Macmillan Publishing and should not be reprinted without their permission.*

Feminist Science Fiction Convention in Madison Wisconsin

**Wis
Con**
♀

**MEMORIAL DAY
WEEKEND
MAY 25 - 29TH**

Featuring Guests of Honor
Rivers Solomon and Martha Wells

Register here
or at WisCon.net





REIKO MURAKAMI

I am beyond delighted that Reiko Murakami is this year's Artist Guest of Honor for Arisia. Not only because she very much deserves the honor, but because that means YOU, lucky attendee, get to deep dive into Reiko's beautiful, dark worlds on the grand scale they deserve. And I do urge you to dive deep. Spend time with these images... Let yourself linger. Because whether the piece that catches your eye is one of her otherworldly demons or small, gently violent surreal paintings—there is a message for you in them. This art, if you let it, will make an imprint on your soul and carve it deeper than it was before.

Reiko's work is an invitation. Come—look behind Bluebeard's door. Unwrap the green ribbon around your lover's neck.

Don't let the melancholy of truth prevent it being examined. Embrace it, see yourself in it. These shadows are comfortable and familiar to those who are no stranger to darkness. Like Ariadne's thread, they will help lead us back to ourselves.

In contrast to the dark labyrinthine journeys her art might take you on, Reiko, the person, is an absolute source of light. I don't know exactly why, but it is very fitting that someone who can create such deep, emotive nightmares in her work is also greatly at home in a big, pink sweatshirt with cats shooting lasers from their eyes. Though I think it is her kind sweetness, razor-wit, and empathy that make her so suited to ferry us into such dangerous landscapes. For truly, how can you be completely afraid of the shadows if Reiko is the one casting them? Of course, it merits being said that not ALL of her work is dark. If you look carefully, you will likely find a wicked sense of humor peeking out here and there, made all the more delightful by the company it keeps.

It is a rare privilege to experience an artist with such depth of emotion, range, and mastery to their craft as Reiko demonstrates with her work. I hope that her art will do for you what it does for me: that it transports you, reveals something hidden, and leaves you more than you were before. Take your time with her creations. Allow yourself to see where they lead you. I promise that the journey is worth it.



– Kristina Carroll





















ELSA SJUNNESON



What you may first notice about Elsa is her fashion sense, which is fierce and whimsical. If you think she looks sharp, you are correct. She is! The snark is strong in this one! If you've ever had the chance to see her speak on a panel, you'll know what I mean. But there's so much more beyond the shiny and snarky surface. Elsa is also kind, intelligent, compassionate, and an excellent storyteller. She works across multiple disciplines, from non-fiction to fantasy and science fiction to game writing and beyond. No matter where she chooses to focus her words, the result is always riveting.

Elsa is also an activist. From her earliest days she has been on the front lines of the neverending fight against injustice. Her book, *Being Seen: One Deafblind Woman's Fight to End Ableism*, is a must read, full of hard truths about the experiences of disabled people alongside effervescent wit. Elsa has the magic power to entertain and delight at the same time as she intellectually and emotionally eviscerates us.

This comes through in her fiction, too. Most recently, I was lucky enough to work with her as an editor for her selkie heist story, "Ocean's 6" in *Mermaids Monthly*. In one short story, Elsa manages to show us rage-inducing betrayal, delectable revenge, and the tender hope of healing. Also, it's just really fun to read.

If you haven't had the pleasure of discovering Elsa's work yet, what a treat you have ahead of you!

– Julia Rios

NESFA'S REGIONAL SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION

BOSKONE® 60

FEBRUARY 17–19, 2023

WESTIN BOSTON SEAPORT DISTRICT

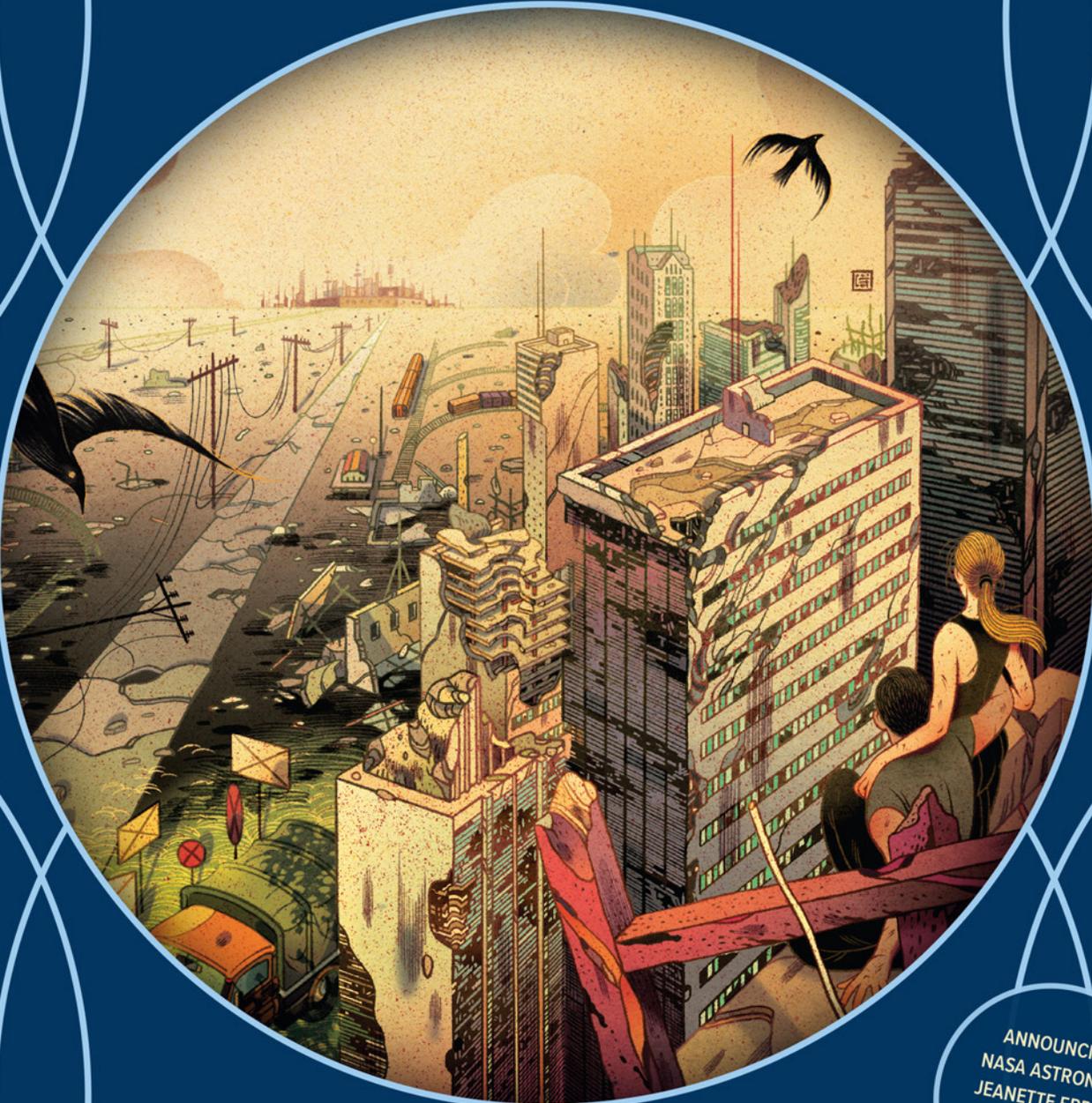


Illustration by Victo Ngai.



Join us at Boskone, the longest-running science fiction & fantasy convention in New England. For more information email: info@boskone.org

Register for Boskone 60 today by visiting boskone.org.

Featured Guests

Guest of Honor: **NALO HOPKINSON**

Official Artist: **VICTO NGAI**

Special Guest: **TUI T. SUTHERLAND**

Musical Guest: **DAVE CLEM**

Science Speaker : **JEANETTE EPPS**

ANNOUNCING
NASA ASTRONAUT
JEANETTE EPPS AS
OUR HAL CLEMENT
SCIENCE SPEAKER

Boskone is a registered trademark of the New England Science Fiction Association, Inc.

OCEAN'S 6

By Elsa Sjunneson

I dream of oceans.

The gray green water of the Irish Sea is cold. It's the frozen waters of home, the cold means nothing to me, personally – welcoming instead of a brush with death. The Baltic is a steel blue that will freeze a human in seconds. The cold still doesn't fuss me, but it's less welcoming. The Mediterranean is an aquamarine blue that feels more like bath water than the ocean.

I awaken drenched in sweat, not the sheen of salt water that drips off your skin when getting out of the sea. My legs ache to transform, stretching and twisting into muscle spasms in my sleep, trying to swim in the ocean of my dreams. It has become a nightmare to dream of the lacy fringes of the surf, because each time I wake, instead of my delicate fore-flippers slipping gracefully under the waves, I see pedicured toes.

I can't go home because that motherfucker stole my skin, and I will never forgive him.

I know, I know. Stealing selkie skins is supposed to be romantic. All salt kisses and windswept hair. It's supposed to be about trust, and love, and the act of giving the skin back and then she forgives him. That's what all you humans think anyway. That our skins are merely a metaphor for the act of giving trust.

But it is my very real sealskin. My very physical connection to the ocean that is my home.

And that motherfucker took it.

You might be asking: why didn't you leave it locked up, instead of wrapped in a wool blanket, gently placed in a lingerie drawer?

I never wanted to be in a position where I had to place my soul behind a key and a lock. I wanted it accessible whenever I needed it, so that I could slip out the door at a moment's notice, whenever the ocean called from just beyond the cracked window in my bedroom facing the sea.

~

Have you ever been to the British Museum? They have a fetish for objects that don't belong to them. Collecting objects that belong to other people was his habit – long before he discovered that he could date a cryptid, the man had spent his days working for those old colonialists who kept relics of other cultures behind ivory tower walls.

Yes.

The man who stole my skin was a museum director.

Like most of living kind, I seek connections. It is not only a human thing to want to be loved and cared for, but something that all living creatures do. Whether a selkie, or a werewolf, a Labrador or a human woman, we all crave caring beyond the bounds of our own souls.

And, as a millennial living on the coast of Scotland, I found myself like everybody else: swiping right and left on one of the many available apps, seeking out the connections I wanted to make.

His profile was charming. He liked to travel: pictures of him on some kind of expedition in Egypt, on a sailboat somewhere in the Southern Pacific (if you don't like water, we can't date.) He didn't have any attachments (Selkies are many things, but non-monogamous we are not, you can't give your skin away freely to more than one person,

you'd literally split yourself in two.) He was seeking a connection with a woman who didn't mind his long travels (the time I spend in the sea is not insignificant) and who wanted to learn more about the world and its history.

A curator at the British Museum. Back then I assumed he would share more about the fascinating history of the world, the mysteries that ancient artifacts unlock about humanity's past, not stealing things that don't belong to him from cultures that didn't consent.

My profile doesn't mention that I'm a selkie, of course.

It just says that I love the sea, that I spend more time on it than I do on land. I didn't expect that anyone would read between the lines, but Jeston did. He wooed me, he bedded me, and one day he asked me the question that I assumed no one would be smart enough to ask:

"Are you something more than human?"

We were tangled up in the sheets of his Bloomsbury flat, overlooking a busy tree studded corner of London. A short walk for him to work, a long swim and a train ride for me to visit but not an unpleasant one. I remember glancing out the window away from him, hoping that I could shield my reaction from him.

My skin pulled to me from my leather valise. A warning klaxon that I would ignore. I liked him, after all. The gentle prickle of his sometimes shaven face, the way that he always smelled vaguely of dust and pipe smoke.

I opened my mouth to speak and hesitated, the skin insisting on my silence even though I thought he ought to know.

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

"There are signs" he said, pulling me closer to him, nuzzling his nose and chin against my shoulder, pushing my nightgown strap out of the way to drop a kiss on my shoulder. "I just can't figure out how you're otherworldly, but I don't think you're human..."

I stuck with silence, pulling him beneath the ocean blue sheets that reminded me of home.

~

To say that a selkie is not human is part fallacy.

A selkie is not born. We are made. We are crafted from the skins of our ancestors, wrapped as infants in the sealskins that become ours, handed down from generation to generation by the women who love us. It doesn't matter if it is a biological parent or a stepmother or a woman who loves us because we are who we are. Each skin is a gift from family – blood or chosen.

Selkies are made by being loved so much that we are given the ocean as our home. Our mothers, our aunts, they want to keep us safe from those who would do us harm.

But there is a cost to the safe haven of the ocean: what brings us into the ocean can be taken from us. Our skins can be taken – the people we love are able to part us from the very thing that makes us whole.

I had always been careful about who I love. I was not careful enough.

After six months, I decided it was time to invite him up to the countryside for a weekend.

Mine is a small cottage. An old one. The woman who gifted me this house wrapped me in her skin when I was born. We shared the skin until she died, and when the will was read this little home came to me. It is mere steps from the waters of the small isles, and if you have very good eyes you can see the shores of Ulst in the distance.

He came in the spring. When the moss was bright and the sea was inviting. But not to him. When he approached the shore, it roared at him, and I should have known then.

But like any living creature, I do not listen to the warning signs sometimes in search of things I want.

That night the sea called to me as it often does on a full moon. The feeling of swimming in a moonlit ocean is one of the best – it recharges the skin, giving it the ability to live for another generation.

He must have felt me slip out of the bed, he must have heard which drawer I opened. He must have watched me slip out the door and crunch my way to the ocean, stark naked until I wrapped my skin around my shoulders and became a grey dappled seal.

If he had confronted me, I would have been able to tell him to leave.

But instead he kept his smug silence.

He waited until morning and while I slept he crept into my lingerie drawer and snatched what was most precious to me.

And then the bastard ghosted me.

~

The absence of my skin is not something I will survive. The longer that I stay out of the water, the more I wither. Yes, I was born human, but I am not human any longer. The ocean calls to me, and every time I cannot answer a part of me dies.

Every time I cry the salt of my tears reminds me too much of the ocean.

No one knows why I am so sad, because the secrets that I keep are for all selkie-kind.

So I stop crying. And I start thinking. I'm going to need to tell some truths in order to get help. I'm going to need to find allies. Because there is no way for one woman alone to get that skin back from whatever creepy vault he keeps it in.

It's time to start socializing.

As I walk into the cèilidh, a woman at the bar says: "It's such an interesting choice for the British Museum don't you think? Can the artifacts possibly be real?"

What artifacts...

I whip my phone out of my purse and google the British Museum at speed.

And there he is, in his best suit, smiling next to a case in which a grey dappled sealskin hangs on a mannequin, and is labeled "a true selkie skin." The exhibition description lists it alongside artifacts of other creatures whose identities should never be known. Vampire. Werewolf. Lamia. He has gone on a spree, stealing from the women he beds, I think.

Turning from the bar with a gin & tonic in hand I note the band is starting up a reel. I like reels. I knock back the last of my drink and slide into formation. But instead of facing a man, I am eye to eye with a woman.

She's wearing her family tartan, and spins into my arms with a wild cackle as she flies from partner to partner in the dance. The spark of joy that I feel when she slides her hands into mine is enough for me to ask her name after the dance is done.

She brushes her curls out of her face as the band pauses to turn the sheets of their music, and between breaths she introduces herself.

"I'm Elin. It's a joy to meet a partner like you."

"Lyall Gray," I reply. "Would you like to dance some more?" I ask, keeping her hand in mine.

Her smile is all the answer I need, and we go through another reel, a waltz and a Blind Scotsman before we both collapse into bar stools to get water and fresh cocktails.

"Want to nip outside for some air?" She asks conspiratorially as we clutch whisky glasses in our hands.

I nod and we go out the doors of the dance hall toward the beach.

Our hands touch, reaching out over the rocky beach and finding each other in the moonlight.

"You're beautiful," I mutter as our fingertips fully entangle, a smile edging its way onto my lips. "I just got out of... well... a situation. And he took something precious from me."

Her eyes widen.

"... and you're not ready..." She starts to finish my sentence for me but I stop her with a squeeze of my hand.

"It's not that. It's just that I'm not whole. He took something from me that can't be replaced."

I hesitate, but the ocean is calm. Encouraging. The ocean tells me it's all right to tell her.

"I'm a selkie and he took my skin."

Instead of shock, or revulsion, or horror, or inherent curiosity, I am enveloped in an embrace that can only come from someone who knows.

~

The grand opening of Unseen Worlds is chaos. People who want to get in the door but can't swarm every entrance like locusts. I don't know how Elin got us tickets – the woman is clever – but we arrive in style. Me in a navy evening gown wrapped in my family tartan, her in the kind of gown that you'd call subdued, except it wraps her body like a glove.

I hide my face in her shoulder as my ex walks past in his tux with a white bow tie. Her hand presses against the small of my back, and she whispers in my ear:

"He doesn't get to keep it. Neither do I. It's yours. You choose where it lives, and it belongs with you. We'll get it."

I lean against her, breathing in the scent of her, remembering that this is a person I can trust with my truth and my soul and my ocean.

Because she is a selkie too.

~

The entrance to the special collection is covered in illustrations of creatures from everywhere. Faery, vampire, werewolf, lamia, witch... and selkie.

An exhibit intended to unmask a hidden world known only by those who live in it. A perspective breaking installation by Jeston Pierre.

Just seeing his name makes me feel a frisson of rage. Elin squeezes my hand and we move through the open doorway.

The first thing that we see makes a wave of nausea roll through my whole body. A pair of fangs, I don't know how he got them. I cannot even imagine. But the small sign next to the gruesome display says they are real vampire fangs. I wonder who he took them from. Did she consent? I can't imagine a vampire consenting to the removal of what she uses to eat.

We move through the throngs of humans gawking at wolf footprints and pressed pixie wings, and all the while a thread pulls me through the crowd. I can feel my skin, feel it calling out to me, feel it pulling me closer to the display case.

It lies on a deep blue pillow that reminds me of the Baltic, stretched out over a faux seal body shape so that the skin (which does not look like a seal when it is not wrapped around me) still mimics a shape that a human would recognize.

The label is what pushes me over the edge:

Selkie Skin, origin unspecified, acquired by Jeston Pierre in Scotland.

A moan escapes my lips. My skin is practically screaming at me through the glass. It wants to be in my hands and I need it in mine. Elin's soft touch pries me away from the glass, and when I turn around I see that I've made enough of a scene to gather attention from the crowd.

"Why don't we find a bathroom, Lyall?" Elin says, her eyes filled with concern. The crowd parts, eyes following us with curiosity.

When we reach the bathroom I run cold water over my wrists and splash some on my face. I'm hoping that activating the diving reflex will help me think.

"It can't stay," I say after a moment.

"No."

"We have to take it back."

"Yes, love."

"He must be stopped." I continue to focus on the running water over my knuckles, reminding me of home.

"Bet the other... subjects" she says that word with distaste "Might want their parts back too."

A smile crosses my face. Two selkies aren't an army. But a couple werewolves, a vampire, a Lamia, and whomever else he stole those other artifacts from would be.

~

It's not hard for Elin to break into his dating profiles. His passwords are predictable. `GeniusCurator105`, `GeniusCurat0r`, `BetterThanDarwin69`.

How did I ever find this man attractive?

I don't realize I've said it out loud until Elin's giggle registers with me.

"Well he did have nice pictures." She says, turning her tablet around to face me. On the screen, all of Jeston's matches are lined up. We scroll through, reading through profiles and chat histories until our eyes ache, trying to find clues to the cryptids' identities.

The first one we find is a witch. She's a librarian in Oxford. Her profile describes her lifelong interest in occult history, a vast library of "interesting books" and a cat who she jokes is her familiar. The clues are all there. I note

her name and start hunting for a librarian at Oxford named Hess. An unusual name, easily found doing archival work at Magdalen College.

~

Hess responds instantly when I suggest we have an ex in common named Jeston.

The cafe she invites us to is close to the Radcliffe Camera. It looks out on cobbled streets filled with stressed undergraduates in robes and bow ties. Exams are afoot. Hess is a prim looking woman in her early thirties. I don't know how she got a head librarian job at Oxford at such a young age, but based on the way that she talks about the occult, it shouldn't be a surprise.

"Yes, he came and courted me and then stole some of my tools when I was out getting us croissants." she sips her coffee and eyeballs me. "So what did you come here for?"

"We know where your cauldron and books are." Elin says, sliding the bright purple Unseen Worlds At the British Museum brochure across the metal cafe table.

"That bastard put my Book of Shadows on display?" she snarls, after flipping through the glossy pages for a moment. "He took a selkie's skin for profit?"

I nod. "It's mine."

"So how are we getting our things back? I can do spells, glamours, possibly a hex? Though those can get a bit messy."

"I have a slightly more mundane question than that..." I say as she sets down her coffee cup. "Do you have access to the British Museum as a researcher?"

There's a quiet pause.

"You don't want me for my magic? You just want me for my badge?" She cackles "I think that's a first."

And just like that, we have a Face. Elin is the Hacker. I'm the Mastermind.

We still need people to do some sneaking and fighting. Fortunately I know where to look.

~

Chloe the vampire is lurking in a burlesque bar as a bar back. How did we know she was a vampire? The lack of legs on her "red wine" was a clue. She tries not to smile when we tell her what we're planning, but she says her fangs will settle back into her mouth once she has them.

Olivia (a pissed off werewolf) is working out her anger at a boxing gym, beating the pus out of a hapless human who doesn't know he's fighting the Big Bad Wolf.

There's another witch named Ora leading tours at Stourhead, making flowers grow with her fingertips.

As we speak to each woman, we discover that Jeston took not just what's on display, but dozens of sacred objects, jewels, and body parts all of which he's stashed away at the museum, waiting for the accolades.

And we make a plan.

~

We arrive at the museum at opening.

We buy tickets to the museum like everyone else. We wait in the long line, spaced out so that we don't look like a group. Ora, the flower witch cast glamours on all of us before we walked in. I don't look like myself at all, we don't want any security guards to remember me.

Only once we're inside the entrance to Unseen Worlds do we gather up close. Other museum attendees grumble about our pushing and shoving, but even in non-wolf form Olivia is imposing enough to quell most overt arguments. We make sure that we step over the threshold into the exhibit as a group, and as soon as we do, it's go time.

Hess drops a sachet on the ground, a purple fabric wrapped package of herbs that explodes in dust, slamming a ward down over the entrance to the exhibit. Just like that the horde of tourists stops in its tracks.

Do you know what it feels like inside a museum exhibit before it's open to the public? The energy is electric. A quiet hum of anticipation, the artifacts waiting to greet their adoring and curious public. The quiet settles on my skin, I turn to see the tourists all frowning at the entrance, unsure why they cannot follow us.

This is where my gorgeous, slightly terrifying girlfriend comes in. She pulls out a small device from her purse, and presses a button. The room goes dark.

"We don't have long. Go, get your stuff." Elin says with a smile.

There is a second of complete silence, before Olivia smashes the glass surrounding her wolf pelt and grabs it in a vicious hug.

Hess systematically places each of her books and cauldrons into a massive tote bag, double checking a list on her smartphone to be sure everything is hers. The vampire gleefully shoves her fangs back into her mouth with a sickening noise I wish I hadn't heard.

And me?

I walk slowly, deliberately, forward toward my skin. I lift the case off carefully, not wanting to damage it in my rush to get it back. I pick the dappled grey fur up off the seal form, my fingers sparking with magic as I reconnect with my skin once again. It feels like the ocean rolling over me.

But there's no time to spend on this moment now. The plan still has to move. I stash my skin in the bag I brought for it, and follow the other women out the door.

We leave, not by the exhibit entrance for guests, but by the exit for staff.

Hess removes her disguise, swaps an Oxford University badge onto her natty blazer, and leads us forward, our glamours already wearing off as we step through Hess' magical barrier.

The alarms going off in the distance urge me to move faster. But I hold Elin's hand and remember that we have a plan, and that plan relies upon us being clever, and slow, and deliberate. The plan relies on us looking like we belong here.

And when we turn a corner in the labyrinthine back-end of the British Museum, we see Jeston running down the hall. Clearly the wards have broken.

Jeston stops in his tracks – shocked to discover that the subjects of his "research" and his relationships have come together.

"Hess. I'm surprised to see you here..." he says, tentatively. "With these other women... how did you meet?" terror threads through his voice. He knows he's been caught.

"University business." She replies tartly. "Re-acquiring artifacts that didn't belong to the museum."

"You can't do that!" he says with the air of a man who has never been told no in his lifetime.

"I think you'll find we already did." Hess says, smirking.

"I'll just find new subjects." he says, his face darkening with rage. "You can't stop me from showing the world what you are."

I step forward.

"I think you'll find we can. Do you really want to be in a dark alley and run across any one of us?"

"You're a selkie, you can't possibly do anything to me." he says, smugness rolling off of him like fog over a deep bay.

"She might not be able to, but I will." Hess says, with a smile. "I can curse you until you beg for mercy"

Elin steps forward next.

"And if you think about harming a hair on her head, just know I have the skills to make your life very complicated." she smiles and wiggles a tablet. "I know where all your digital skeletons are buried."

A growl comes out of Olivia's throat, unbidden.

We don't wait for an answer, but brush past him. As Hess leads us out through the exit, I expect the security guards to arrive, but no one does.

We exit through a back door, out onto a brightly lit London square, and we part ways. I don't know that I'll ever hear from these women again, or for that matter, what becomes of Jeston.

But none of that matters now. We won. It's over.

~

The rocky shore greets us at sunset. Both naked but for our sealskins. As I wrap up in mine, my feet transform into a seal tail with flippers, my hands into forepaws, my head shrinks down, and my eyes grow big and brown.

I jut forward, sliding into the ocean next to Elin. Where I belong.



DOUBLE EXPOSURE Inc. ENVOY

www.dexposure.com/envoy

Upgrade your gaming experience with community, resources and recognition!

