

SEED OF VEX

Book 2 of the Sennenwolf Series



CAPES



Seed of Vex

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TOTW / INGC

PRAISE FOR SENNEWOLF SERIES

“A playful twist on the fantasy genre... Who knew witches liked to party?”

-Kirkus

“...A series worth committing to. Very highly recommend.”

-Reader's Favorite

“Mutual interests give way to an unlikely alliance between a powerful wielder and the imminent Male Alpha of Velm in Capes’s beautiful, romantic fantasy novel *West of Jaws*.”

-Foreword

“A perfect read for fans of Witcher and similar fantasies.”

-IndieReader

“A rich fantasy romance with characters you’ll love and a twisting storyline that will keep you hooked.”

-LoveReading

“The story is one of the most compelling I’ve ever read with such a fresh voice and unparalleled narrative.”

*-Erin K. Larson-Burnett, Author of *The Bear & The Rose**

DEDICATION



For The Rat King (Part II)

HELLO, READERS...

I'd like to part the veil for a moment and let you know what to expect from this book. I don't want to spoil anything about the Sennenwolf Series, but I think it's fair to say that *Seed of Vex* will take our fictional friends in a... new direction. It might feel a little jarring, but it's all part of the *plan*.

I organized this series as a five-part saga from the start. The first two books focus on Helisent's development. The next two focus on our beloved boy-wolf. And the fifth... well, I guess we'll all find out together what happens then.

Enjoy!

Capes

P.S. I've added new worldbuilding, character, and terms guides to the back of the book.

PREVIOUSLY IN THE SENNENWOLF SERIES...

After months of searching, Helisent West of Jaws and Samson 714 Afador track Oko and Anesot to the jungle capital of Alita.

Helisent wants to hold the pair accountable for the murder of her sister, Milisent West of Jaws. Samson wants to interrogate Oko for information about his missing mother, Imperatriz 713 Afador.

In Alita, Helisent realizes that Samson is searching for Oko in order to find his mother. She accuses Samson's father, Clearbold 554 Leofsige, of colluding with Anesot to get rid of Imperatriz. Enraged by the insinuation, Samson and Helisent argue and then part ways.

Separated, Samson hunts down Anesot, hoping to uncover anything about his mother's whereabouts. The warlock demands Samson shield him from Helisent in exchange for information. Just like Helisent had predicted, Anesot admits that he marooned Imperatriz on a distant island on behalf of Clearbold. Meanwhile, Helisent hunts down Oko and forces the witch to take her to Anesot.

When she arrives, Helisent finds Samson shielding Anesot. Unwilling to hear the wolf out, Helisent kills Anesot to avenge her sister.

With Anesot dead, Samson attempts to get answers from Oko but is mortally wounded. Unwilling to lose him, Helisent wields a healing spell that's powerful enough to save Samson's life—but it also wipes all memory of the last four years from both of their minds.

Seed of Vex starts eight months later.



HOUSE OF TALOS

Silt

pit

STRETCH

Dexerxes

(Shipwreck)

• Plet (City)

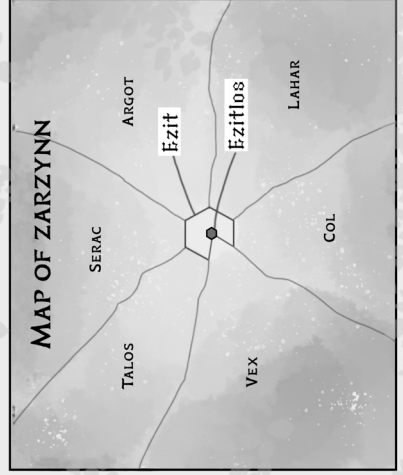
New Hymos

PLET

• Portal to Ezit

Hella

HOUSE OF VEX (ZARZYNN)



HOUSE OF COL

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INTERLUDE I
(DON'T DO IT, HELISENT)



I stare down at my bed.

Onesimos rests on his side, facing the rough black wall my bed is pushed up against. His wiry vermillion hair is matted on one side from laying the same way every morning. Esclamonde lays on the other side of the bed, arms outstretched like she's prepared to catch him from a nightmare. Her foot twitches. Onesimos snores. A tattered blanket lies pooled between them.

I stare at them, standing in the center of the room.

I turn and glance out the front door, which hangs open.

Sunlight blankets the uneven horizon of volcanic cones beyond my hovel.

Don't do it, Helisent.

I blink at the world that waits past the front door. "I'm going to do it."

Already, my stomach is in knots. I change my mind—

I turn back and kneel on the edge of the bed, knees sinking into the mattress. I stare at the space between the witchling and the oread. I try to force myself into the bed like I have for the last eight months.

It doesn't work this morning.

I change my mind again.

I step away from the bed. As though moving of their own accord, my feet backtrack to the opened door. My bottomless bag waits on a square table beside it.

I open the faded leather bag's clip, then reach inside.

I look at the bright light spanning the Jawsic countryside, the cloudless sky above.

Don't do it, Helisent.

I flick my fingers, casting collecting magic into my bag. Its contents flutter upward toward my hand. Carefully, I divest the bag of its contents. They stack in teetering piles on the table; a notebook, a bracelet, the tattered remains of notes my father writes me. I don't watch the items collect.

I look out the door again. Grass rises from the hill-like cones in narrow seams, crawling over them like veins. On and on, the hilly cones roll westward—eventually, they end in freedom.

In the ocean.

In Hypnos.

The knots in my stomach tighten as the bag's contents clatter and stack. A few shoes, an extra pillow, and a series of empty bottles find a place. A brown suede pouch is the last item to float free of the bag.

I've done this before: emptied my bottomless bag with my eyes locked on the western horizon. I've done this before: toyed with the brown suede pouch and the strange object it holds.

Inside is a circular white marble piece, which looks like a wheel.

I sniff the marble, then bite it. It's hard and scentless.

And obviously Velmic. I hold onto the white marble, then I search my pile of belongings for a letter.

In one hand, I hold the marble piece. In the other, I reread the letter sent to me last month. The words don't actually matter. My tracking magic will lead me to the letter's writer.

Some okeanid-witch named Butter.

I really only need Butter's note to find her in Hypnos, but the marble piece...

I don't know why I can't leave it behind. Maybe I've never been good at letting go of things I hate.

I hold it in my hand beside the letter from Butter, then use fire magic to send my pile of belongings up into flames. I cast smothering magic to shelter Onesimos and Esteban from the sounds and scent.

Firelight wheels around the room, glinting off the dim lava stone walls like lightning.

Onesimos snores while flames consume the items, crunching and lashing.

Esteban's foot kicks again.

Maybe if I remembered them, I'd stay.

Maybe their devotion to me would mean more if I could recall the last four years of my life.

When the flames simmer and die, uneven piles of ash remain; the world will have nothing to track me with but scattered ash.

I turn toward the door.

Don't do it, Helisent.

You are banished.

Lay low and the Class will free you soon.

I take a step away from the piles of ash and my sleeping friends. I look down at the white marble piece, then at the letter from Butter. I push the door all the way open, then step from the threshold.

I flinch from the light, raising a hand to block the sun. "Okay." I clear my throat, trudging westward. "Here I go."

INTERLUDE II
(THEY'RE JUST NIGHTMARES, SAMSON)



A warm hand wakes me by the shoulder.
With a gasp, I open my eyes.
A nightmare hangs in my mind like smoke from a fire.
As though imprinted by a flash of light, I see a witchling in a yew tree.
I blink away the image slowly.

“Good morning, Lapsi.” Brutatalika strokes my cheek. “You had another nightmare, but at least you slept in.”

I take a few deep breaths and open my eyes, legs tangled in my sheet. Brutatalika lays next to me, head propped in her palm. Her blue-black eyes scan me while her finger traces my cheek, my jaw, my hairline.

I know what her dotting eyes tell me:

They're just nightmares, Samson.

Just a trick the red witch uses to punish you.

I close my eyes. The witchling watches me from the threshold of the dream; her cape is blood-red, just like her irises and the yew's berries. In most nightmares, the witchling, aged around twelve or thirteen, waits for me in the canopy. She stares down, giggling and trying to direct my attention to something higher in the tree.

Her hands are full of red strings; some are already tied around my arms and wrists in the dreams, like an animal slowly being fettered.

It's just a witchling in a tree. Just a few red strings, light as twine.

I don't know why I can't let it go.

I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling.

Brutatalika runs a hand through my hair. Unlike me, my wife is fully dressed and ready for the day. She lounges across the blanket, shined torcs catching the light from the window. It glints off the golden studs in her lobes; my wedding gift to her.

“You have driproot, right?” She looks over her shoulder toward the door. My satchel sits beside hers, both full and neatly packed and ready for months on the road.

I sit up and she mirrors me. “I do. Thanks for waking me.”

I lean toward Brutatalika, wrapping my fingers around her arm. With a quick smile, she leans back to kiss me. I close my eyes and take all the comfort I can from the touch.

I still have nightmares about the red witch—

But Helisent West of Jaws didn’t destroy me, like she intended.

I survived my brush with death in Alita, then went on to have my wedding in Silent City. Despite the witch’s plans to end me, Sutnazzar 712 Afador carved my name into a pillar above Imperatriz 713 Afador’s. And then she carved Brutatalika 567 Sigivald’s name next to mine.

I like to think things have been normal since that day two months ago.

Like we have most mornings since our wedding, Brutatalika and I get ready for the day side by side. Since she’s already dressed and packed, she helps brush my hair, then tugs it into a bun, then slides my torcs into place on my upper arms.

I tighten the straps of my satchel, then sling it over my shoulder. Brutatalika does the same at my side. I slide the door open, then she steps in front of me, blocking my path with sparkling eyes.

I slide my thumb over her pink lips, scanning her features and filling my lungs with her ala. It’s imprinted in my psyche now; not just as the ala of a loved one, but as a critical extension of myself. After two months spent together, our alas are layered at all times.

She smells like rosemary, like the birch logs the winter fires slowly consume.

Brutatalika takes a deep breath and sets her forehead against mine.

She’s much more affectionate than I would have imagined. And

I'm much more receptive to that softness than I would have thought, too. I lean forward, lifting my chin for another kiss.

"Be safe, Lapsi," she whispers against my lips.

"Be safe, Tali," I whisper back.

"I mean it. You're heading north—and she's still in Jaws."

"I know where the witch is. I'll be careful." My heart thumps in my chest. I fear the red witch... but I fear my own people, too. "I'm more worried about you. Malachai has been camped out in Mort since the wedding. I heard there's a new symbol in the city."

A letter arrived two days ago outlining the symbol's design and where it's been carved around the coastal city—near the river where elders wash clothes, where the merchants drink at night, where the children play after school.

Brutatalika presses her lips against mine. "I read the letter, Samson. I'll be mindful." She sighs again. "Are you sure we should part ways? Why don't we travel together? It can't be unprecedented to stay side by side for the grand tour."

I smile faintly; it's good for the Female Alpha to want to stay close to the Male Alpha. Still... "Newly married Alphas do their tours separately. The public has seen us together. Now, they want a look at our courts separately. And speaking of courts..."

I imagine my packmates are waiting in line at Cadmium's northern streets, prepared for the journey to Satyr. I imagine Brutatalika's court waits in a similar formation at the city's southern port, prepared for the journey to Ultramarine.

Brutatalika's response is a tsk. She turns away from me and guides us into the hallway.

I follow, a knot building in my stomach as we head for the Cadmium Estate's front gate.

They're just nightmares.

Just a trick she uses to punish you.

But I can still see the red witchling from the nightmare this morning. I can see the threads of crimson woven through her irises; they're the same color as those tied around my arms, my wrists—even my ankles. I can hear the exact tone of her high-pitched cackle when she leaned down to sneer at me.

I remember what she said, too.

"I'm free now, boy-wolf."

CHAPTER 1
THERE'S ONE FOR EACH
OF YOU
HELISENT



*Honey Baby,
I taught you to follow your bliss because I wasn't good at much else myself. But
maybe you are. Sometimes, the only thing over the next horizon is another
horizon.
Papa P.*

I stomp through the ragged forest and wish I wouldn't have burned my lilith with everything else in my bottomless bag.

These legs are not made for walking.

I'm also *ruining* my white suede boots. (They're beige now.)

But all that's left in my bottomless bag is the Velmic talisman and a note that's leading me to Butter. I'd considered keeping my lilith, but the cushion wasn't nearly as impressive without its dangling metal ornaments.

And the Class took off with most of them after the incident in Alita.

One member even insinuated that I used the largest rod to impale the Kulapsifang of Velm. Samson 700-whatever Afador.

With each step, my mood worsens.

I'm exhausted after spending the morning wandering the coastal forests of Hypnos. My white hair is tangled from the wind, my brown

skin dry and sunburned, my dress littered with twigs and dirt. And my white boots are now beige.

I'm on the edge of hopeless after a week of lonely and suspicious travel.

How far away can the ocean be?

With a sigh, I lean against a short fig tree. The curved leaves offer little shelter from the sun, but with the windy winter whipping through Mieira, I don't mind. I wipe the hair from my eyes.

I just need to figure out where I am...

I've been heading southeast blindly in search of the beach. Two days ago, I passed through Satyr—and haven't seen civilization since.

I swear I can *smell* the briny ocean...

Somewhere over the next horizon.

Somewhere Onesimos and Esteban and the rest of the world won't find me. At least, not anytime soon.

To my left, someone snorts. "I can't fucking believe you did it."

I turn to find a strange-looking woman beelining for me. I scan her twice, confused by her features. Her loose curls are white, tinged at the ends with cerulean. Her soft skin is a few shades darker than mine, while her eyes glitter with gold and turquoise.

Neither okeanid nor witch... unless she's both.

Hello, Butter.

She stops before me, holding aside a branch. Her smile is broad, almost unbelieving. Her features are smooth and flat, aglow with a promising youth I can pinpoint now that I'm leaving it behind.

The okeanid-witch snorts again. "You look like shit. Have they been starving you in Jaws?"

Compared to her, I probably look worse than shit. She wears a long and flowing robe; the orange dye is faded, but the fabric is impeccably clean. It even matches her bottomless bag, which has dusky yellow sequins.

Like I annoy her, she goes on, "And why have you let the Class keep you in Jaws for this long? They can't enforce anything. Especially not against you."

I blink, surprised by her argument.

Onesimos had begged me to respect the banishment in hopes of a better future; witches are long-lived, after all. Esteban said not to think about it; then she'd hand me some dextro.

Rather than respond, I narrow my eyes and reach into my bag.

I pull out the folded letter, then clear my throat. “Hey, come meet me in Mid City. Half the beings here are banished. No one will notice you. Except me. I’ll keep a lookout for you. We were friends, by the way. I’m Butter. Did anyone tell you about me?” I study her orange robe, her bare feet and relaxed stance, her magenta lips. “I thought you’d look different.”

She rolls her eyes. “Sorry to disappoint.”

I glance around to make sure we’re alone.

Near the coastline, the towering giants common to Rhotidom give way to squat pines and gnarled fruit trees. Dry leaves and broken branches litter the ground, tumbling in the wind. I don’t see anyone spying from the other side of a trunk.

“Are we close to Mid City?” I ask. “I’m not much of a traveler.”

“It’s an hour away. Come on.” Butter takes off with a wave of her hand, and I follow at her side. Unlike me, she doesn’t trudge. She looks... hopeful as she waltzes into our future. “I would have thought you’d like the traveling after spending eight months trapped in rural Jaws.”

I shrug. “Maybe you didn’t know me that well, after all.”

(Which is fine. I don’t really know myself that well anymore.)

I glance sideways, studying Butter’s features. “Do you want some help with your hair? You need to pick a lane here. Is it white like a wielder or... blue...? And why blue?”

Butter throws an arm around my shoulders and tugs me closer. I awkwardly try to keep up; she’s a few inches taller than me. Her curls fall across my face, itching and blinding me.

“This is my real fucking hair, sweetheart. I figured you would have told Onesimos or Esclamonde about me. Or at least about the letter. Wow, okay—let’s catch you up on our friendship.

“Last year, you came to Ultramarine to speak with my grandmother, Kierkeline Ultramarine. I led you to her, which is how we met. My grandmother sent you in search of Mieira’s other Ghost-Eater. The other one lives in Alita—in case you were wondering why you ended up there.

“There’s something else you should know, too. I guess you had bartered a look at your form with Kierkeline. My grandmother has

told everyone in Ultramarine that you have six bloodred horns. Like ram-sized horns. The cat's out of the bag.

"Oh! And about my hair. Aside from my grandmother Kierkeline's blood, from my mother's line, I'm all okeanid. That's why my hair is white and blue and whatever it wants to be. Nymph magic, baby."

I weigh her revelations as we crest a low hill. She unslings her arm from my shoulders, glancing at me as she waits for a response.

She's not the first being to hand me a series of wildly interesting and deeply empty details about a life I don't remember.

The realization that Ultramarine knows about my bloodred horns is particularly novel, but I don't know if I feel shy about it.

More and more, I like the idea of the world knowing about my horns. I don't want them to fear me, but I need the world to know that banishing me is idiotic.

That controlling me is impossible.

Still... using brute force to convince others I crave peace won't fix my problems.

I chew on Butter's words as we pause on the hilltop. A few thatched huts come into view amid the distant horizon of sparse, rolling forest. Sunlight twinkles in a cloudless sky.

"Tell your sweet grandmother to be careful talking about my horns. There are too many wolves in Ultramarine for that. The last thing I need is another indictment from Velm."

I don't actually care about Velm—

I just want Velm to stop caring about me.

Butter reaches into her bottomless bag, hidden in the folds of her loose cloak, and pulls out a small packet wrapped in a faded green leaf. As we get moving down the hill, she packs it between her teeth and cheeks.

"Want one?" she asks. "It's betel nut."

I narrow my eyes. "Sure."

"I was kidding. You hate it."

"Oh."

We walk for the next few minutes in silence. Eventually, she reasons, "She talks about your horns to give you glory, not to make you sound dangerous."

I tsk as the wind whips my hair. "Sure, but the wolves fear me even at my most *glorious*. If you know what I mean."

Butter spits to one side, then she stares ahead. “My grandmother is working on a memory-restoring potion for you and Samson 714 Afador. She hasn’t stopped working on it since she heard panic magic wiped both of your memories in Alita. Before she was a GhostEater, she was a healer. I guess there’s a psychological element to healing—she’s using what she knows about that to brew the potion.”

I keep my eyes on the horizon.

I let Butter work through her memories of me. It’s probably more taxing on her than it is on me at this point.

Eight months ago, I would have hunted down the GhostEater, desperate to remember what happened in Alita to prove (with grimoire) that I never hurt the Kulapsifang.

And now...

“I guess that’s nice of her. Kind of weird she cares so much about my honor.” I tuck Butter’s letter away, then adjust the strap of my bag. “I’m tired of convincing the world I’m not dangerous.”

I’m tired of convincing *myself* I’m not dangerous.

Maybe I am.

Butter keeps quiet for another stretch. She keeps spitting reddish saliva as we shuffle through the dry leaves. “Is that why you left Jaws? The first time I wrote to you, you responded saying you’d wait until you remembered everything—which doesn’t make any sense. Kierke-line ignores the mandates from the Head Witch and Warlock of Ultramarine all the time. They still let her sponsor the city. So—why did you let them? Eight months is a long time.”

I take a deep breath.

The answer is so pitiful; I bury it inside of me rather than admit it to Butter right now.

Because I wanted them to like me.

To approve of me.

To let me belong.

I wanted them to know I’m not dangerous. And now...

That neediness has hardened—and I’m not sure into *what*.

I exhale the long breath I drew in. “I guess I was having fun with Onesimos and Esteban. Jaws specializes in dextro and wine.”

Butter cackles loudly. “Well, there’s even more in Mid City. I hope you aren’t tired of partying. Oh, and you don’t need to worry about

disguising yourself. Feel free to bust out the velvet robe. I meant what I wrote in my letter. Mid City is full of banished beings.”

“Ah, the velvet robe...” I muse. “I’ve heard many tales of a velvet robe. I have zero memory of its existence and no idea where it might be today.”

Butter’s eyebrows bunch. “Someone stole your velvet robe?”

I nod. “It’s one of the thousands of indignities that have befallen me since Alita.”

Past the thatched huts on the horizon, the glittering ocean comes into view. I’d forgotten about this type of blue; a base of indigo that bubbles into a stretch of candied cerulean. Dark brown boats float on the shallow beach, casting their black shadows onto the sandy bottom.

I pick up my pace, desperate to set my feet in the ocean’s warm currents.

Butter keeps up at my side.

Neither of us brings up the robe again.

When we pass the first cluster of huts, I ask, “Can you actually change the tides like the rest of the okeanids? Or is most of your magic from grandmother GhostEater?”

Butter snorts proudly. “I can do it all. That’s why I look like a witch and an okeanid. I’m the best of both worlds.”

She chatters on—and it’s just enough to distract me.

Distract me from the fact that this fucking beach probably isn’t the answer I’ve been searching for; it must linger on the next horizon.

Part of me knows I’m running from something I can’t escape.

Something that’s in my mind.

It’s like the last four years are a pitched black room, and I can run my hands over everything in the room to feel the shape of those memories, but I can’t open the shutters to let in the light and see what’s stored there.

There is something very important in that room.

Standing in the center, taking up a lot of space. Silently.

Sometimes, I wonder if it’s alive. Sometimes, I swear I can hear it breathing deeply and calmly.

“I have a little hut on the beach that we can share. Everyone in Hypnos needs dove, so we can barter and live like queens here. Oh! And speaking of queens, an okeanid demigod just brought Hypnos’s

latest monarch. Her name is Otrera. Have you ever seen an okeanid demigod? They're *beautiful*. Bluer than the rest. And I think..."

My ear twitches now and then, tallying Butter's words as she keeps explaining things I never asked about.

But mostly, I'm stumbling through a dark room where my dead memories sit like stacked shoeboxes.

I'm staring at the horizon and wondering what the fuck comes next.

The next few days pass in an *exceptional* stupor.

I was wrong to doubt Butter. I was wrong to be upset about the white boots turning beige. Who cares about the velvet robe, either?

It's almost enough to erase the guilt of leaving Onesimos and Esteban in Jaws.

I'm sure they'll track me to Hypnos soon—assuming they can be bothered with my existence anymore.

I'll have a few months here until Butter tires of me.

For now, she and I keep things simple.

She didn't lie; she has a thatched hut on the beach. Its woven walls are starting to disintegrate, but we don't care about privacy.

In the early afternoon, we wake up sticky and unkempt inside its sandy, salty walls. We stumble into the daylight and stagger toward the shallow water. The low tides turn the beach into a warm bath, even in the last weeks of the windy winter. And, for whatever reason, I'm not nearly as prone to drowning as I once was.

Our frolicking usually wakes the neighbors. They come outside with their drinks, and then we assemble a basic meal. Sometimes that meal is only dextro and powdered sassafras. Other times, it's dextro and a few magical mushrooms plucked from the cow shit that dots the coastline. Much like us, the lazy cows wade into the calm water before shuffling back onto land to eat and sleep and huff.

By nightfall, me and Butter are flying.

We make many friends.

And no one recognizes me as the dangerous red witch who was banished to Jaws for wounding the Kulapsifang of Velm.

Even when Butter introduces me to the okeanid queen, who shouts and laughs most nights in Mid City's single tavern, she doesn't bat an eye. The Hypnotic Queen's blue eyes are darker than the rest

of the brown and black-skinned okeanids. Her thick, soft hair is half pulled back into a puff style, layered with sparkling lapis lazuli gems and aquamarine quartz.

By sunrise, Butter and I stagger back to our thatched hut. Some nights, she goes home with one of the okeanids who lives to our left. Some nights, I go home with one of the dryads who lives to our right.

One morning, dawn tangles on the eastern horizon of ocean. Rather than head inside the hut or to one of our neighbor's, we shuffle into the water and finish our drinks.

A black silhouette looms on the ocean near Mid City's five or six streets. The vessel is ten times the size of the rowboats the fishers push into the waves in the mornings. I squint, wondering if it's a boat at all—or maybe a house on the water.

Butter hiccups at my side. "See that? It's a proper ship. A weird hesperide sails up here from Cadmium every now and then. He's a merchant. Once he's bartered all his goods, he throws parties onboard—and I heard he bartered everything a few days ago."

She hands me her half-drunk ale.

The goblet is heavy, teetering. "Butter, why haven't you just switched to brandy yet? You hand me a half-drunk ale every morning. Will Queen Otrera be at the party on the boat? I want to make her my friend. Like a proper friend, not just someone we get fucked up with."

She leans back to stretch. "Because brandy makes me act crazy. And it's a *ship*—not a boat."

As sunlight leeches into the sky from the east, more of the ship's hulking shape comes into focus. I've never seen anything like it. At least, not that I can remember.

"Yeah, of course," Butter says. "The hesperide lets anyone onboard. And he loves okeanids, so Queen Otrera is a shoo-in."

Maybe a life at sea would be freeing—the ship certainly looks spacious enough. Larger than my hovel in Jaws, larger than the hut I share with Butter. Three poles shoot up from its deck, slack fabric collected against each. It looks like one hundred beings could fit on board.

Butter yawns, then she hooks her arm through mine. "Come on. Let's go to sleep."

I pour the rest of her warm ale into the waves as we amble onto

the shore. Our feet sink into the sand and salt water pinches our skin as it dries on our legs. Our shack sits just past the beach, sheltered beneath a pine and palm tree that look at odds with each other. Inside, cool sand dusts the woven mats. I use sweeping magic to clean it before we lay down.

Butter falls onto her bed mat and settles in, tugging her blanket over her shoulders.

On the other side of the square room, I take off my bundled necklace and hang it from a nail on the wall.

The salt water has started to decay a few of the metallic pieces.

I snap my fingers to lift the hiding magic that disguises the colorful thread and dangling pieces. Though once vibrant, dark brown goo coats the strands. I know it's blood, but I can't remember how the necklaces came to be soaked—*and whose blood is it?*

The answer is in the black room of memories.

I settle onto my bed mat as Butter starts snoring. I set my head on my folded arm and stare at the necklace. I study the stained thread, the goo wedged into the crevices of the metal charms.

"Helisent West of Jaws," I whisper, "what happened to you?"

The ship is fucking awful, but I stick around in the hopes of impressing Queen Otrera.

She wears pale blue layers with white embroidery. Beads of lapis lazuli layer her half-pulled-back hair once again, nestled into her soft, tightly packed curls. Other shined decals dot her earrings and necklaces, glinting with moonlight.

It's hard to look away from Otrera—and not just because I'd like to make nice with the queen. It's her smile. I've never seen a person *smile* so fully or so often. I keep glancing over my shoulder, expecting to see a blue-hued okeanid demigod peeking over the ship's railing and drinking in our desita—nothing.

I'm surrounded by a reeling crowd instead.

They make it impossible to approach Otrera.

The queen doesn't walk around, instead shifting to direct her smile toward the next being who approaches her; they offer her drinks, small treats, more twinkling jewelry. And rather than rush forward, she stays planted in the same place, nodding and offering a few words.

Rowdy nymphs and wielders (even a few wolves) wander onto the ship from its slanted gangplank, each louder and drunker than the last. Most beeline for the queen.

After eight months of parties for three, it's a disorienting madness.

With each passing moment, I find it less appealing.

The deck tilts as the ship bobs in the water. Stars glitter against the black ocean past the ship's wooden banister. Overhead, all three moons wane toward slender crescents. Even Marama's massive pink-gray face trickles down dainty, faded hues. Firelight sconces provide most of the light, flashing over sweaty limbs and crazed smiles.

I steady myself on the deck's banister before finally making my way to the queen.

I don't have drinks or treats or jewelry to offer—just the promise to give Mid City all the dove it needs. I've also prepared a short list to flesh out exactly what my dove could do here. (It starts with a sewage system and ends with a dancehall.)

Before I reach Otrera, she breaks away from a doting group and heads below deck. I follow her, ducking and slipping around the wayward crowd. As I take the stairs to the lower deck, I catch Butter heading back upstairs.

I grab the okeanid-witch's shoulders and redirect her. "Come with me. I want to talk to Otrera. Now's our chance."

Butter giggles as I turn her around, falling against the wall. "Careful!"

We rush down the stairs. The queen's pale layers float behind her as though caught in a tide. She heads into one of the square storage rooms and we follow her, almost running into two hesperides in the doorway.

The men back up; we apologize to them as they apologize to us.

The nymphs wear clean leather layers and wide-brimmed hats. Dark spots speckle their fair skin, along with a few pale scars. Their brown hair sits tangled to their chests near their silver captains' badges.

It must be their ship.

One of the men smiles. The other watches Butter and I step into the room with a frown. We head toward Otrera, who takes a seat on one of the barrels lining the walls. It looks like the dark wooden

barrels were used to transport goods up and down the coast. They smell old, slightly rotten.

I look back at the hesperides, prepared to ask for a moment alone with the queen. Then I realize how strange it is that two hesperides command the ship.

Wouldn't an okeanid have an easier time navigating currents and facing wild seas?

And what kind of sailors wear leather?

I brush off the details.

I know even less about tidal currents than I do about the skills it takes to sail ships. About what clothes sailors should be wearing.

"Butter! Come here." With a smile, Otrera beckons my friend over to her.

The hesperides stand aside as though suddenly shy or uncertain. I glance at the doorway, expecting them to leave.

Butter takes a seat next to the queen on one of the wooden barrels. It's large enough that neither woman's feet touch the ground. They dangle like children's legs, mirroring the innocent smiles on their lips.

Otrera nods toward the hesperides. "These dear nymphs captain this ship. They just came from the Deltas—and they say they have a gift for me."

The men offer unenthused smiles to me and Butter. One does a double-take when his eyes meet mine. He takes a quick step away from us, tucking his arms behind his back; I can't tell if he's nervous or surprised to see me.

He's younger than his cohort, and a bit plain. His eyes flash toward me again, then lower. "Hello."

I offer a quick wave to the hesperides, then take my place next to Butter and Otrera on the barrels.

The younger hesperide clears his throat as he watches me. "You don't remember me? From Cadmium?"

I roll my eyes—so that's what his weird behavior is about. We must have slept together at some point. "I don't remember the last four years, my dear hesperide. Give me another month or two. I'm sure your face will be the first thing that comes back to me."

The older hesperide looks at his companion; they stare at one

another, but I can't tell what they're communicating between their widening eyes.

As though he suddenly understands, the elder hesperide gapes at me. "*You're* the red witch who lost her memory in Alita?"

I suck in a breath, sliding a glance toward Otrera to see how she's handling the revelation.

The Hypnotic Queen raises her eyebrows, returning my gaze as though expecting an explanation. She may not have batted a lash at my real name, but pretty much everyone in Mieira has heard about *the red witch in Alita* and what she (allegedly) did to Samson 714 Afador.

I toss a dirty look to the hesperides. "You can call me Helisent, thank you." I clear my throat and turn back to the queen. "It's a misunderstanding with the wolf. I wasn't banished by any nymphs or demigods—just the Class. I'm only in Mid City for a little vacation. I swear not to do anything you wouldn't do."

Otrera looks unconvinced, but the younger hesperide claps his hands together before she can respond. He steps forward and brandishes a wide, hopeful smile at us. He raises his square hands; three necklaces dangle and twist where they're strung between his fingers.

Clunky, pinkish stones line their threads.

They almost look like chunks of Marama, slightly aglow and alluring like moonlight.

"There's one for each of you," the hesperide coos.

He sweeps one over my head, another over Butter's disheveled curls, and then the last over Otrera's tightly packed curls.

I glance down to see if the necklace looks good on me; it's sort of pretty. To my left, Butter and the queen do the same.

That's when everything starts to feel weird.

Really weird.

Bad weird.

The women at my side don't lift their heads back up.

The pair slump forward as though on the verge of passing out.

The younger hesperide faces me. He keeps smiling, his cheeks dimpled.

Why am I so tired?

I look back to the women. The older hesperide steps forward and lifts both hands to cup their foreheads, preventing them from falling

forward. The queen's eyes are fully closed, her lips parted and slack like she's been asleep for hours.

Butter doesn't conk out quite so quickly.

She looks at me, eyes squeezed as though she's fighting sleep.

Her lips twitch like she's trying to say something.

Then her shoulders slump as she passes out with the same totality as Otrera. The hesperide shifts his weight to keep the women upright. His arms flex as he grunts, shuffling the women up into a sitting position.

I try to move, try to sit back, try to figure out if the younger hesperide is still smiling at me; he is.

Bad—bad—bad—

Where is my panic magic?

My fingers flex, anticipating some kind of show.

Nothing.

The younger hesperide isn't smiling anymore.

His narrow eyebrows tug together and his lips press into a line. "This is going to be really unpleasant. For me, too—your magic is in my blood now. But that's how it goes. Ezit will give us *anything* if we pass you off alive."

A huge breath rattles my body as I suck down a breath and try to cast magic.

Again, nothing.

With each passing second, a heavy and unpleasant hum emanates from the pink stones that press against my shoulders and collar and back. Every thread of magic I attempt to cast floats back to the pale, pinkish stones.

The older hesperide shifts away from Otrera and Butter. He stares at me for a moment. Then his broad hands take mine where they're slack in my lap.

Terror spreads through me like a white-hot flood.

Bad—bad—bad—

Not my hands—

Where the fuck is my panic magic?

His pointer fingers slide under my wrists, his thumbs pressing down on top of them.

My slack body follows his momentum as I slump atop the wooden barrel.

Revelers start a chant on the deck above.

Even if I had the energy and sense to scream, they wouldn't hear me.

The younger hesperide turns away from us and pulls a strange box from a wooden crate.

It's not a *box*, necessarily, just a frame made of the same pink stones that encircle my neck. In the center of the boxed frame is a single rod of the same stone.

The younger nymph holds the box while the elder arranges my hands inside of it. As soon as my palms touch the cylindrical bar in its center, red light fills the room, leeching from my eyes.

The hesperides freeze.

My heartbeat flutters as I wait for them to back off; I'm in my form, and they should know not to trifle with a seven-horn.

But I don't feel any spark of panic magic.

I can't even wield the instinctual magic that hides my form anymore.

My heavy horns drive my head forward. My body follows their momentum as they fall toward my hands and the box. The elder hesperide curses and grabs one of my horns to keep me from toppling over. My neck bends as my head lifts at an awkward angle.

That's when I finally admit what's happening.

In a few seconds, it all takes shape: they're going to break my hands and then they'll hand me over to...

What did they say?

Who wants me alive?

The men force my fingers around the cool cylindrical bar, fitting them tighter. All I can see is the ground and a sliver of the pink-stoned frame that the nymphs hold in front of me.

"Do it now," one of them says.

"No—make sure she's out first. We can't risk it if her magic is still awake."

"Just break her hands. There's no way we're taking the fucking Vexen to Zarzynn with her hands intact."

"She's my familiar."

"She's the last Vexen. Move."

"Jen, we're not—"

“Pel, the rosarium won’t be enough to keep her quiet until we get to Pit. Move. *Now.*”

I try to take in enough air to yell—either for help or to beg them not to do this.

It would be a lot scarier if I were more cognizant.

“Okay. I really am sorry about this.”

Bad—bad—bad—

No—no—no—

There’s a black room where all my forgotten memories await me.

That’s where I go now when the hesperides break my hands against the cylinder.

That’s where I go to lay down and die just like everything in my mind.

CHAPTER 2
ACROSS—ACROSS—ACROSS—
SAMSON



*My grandson,
Your mother was never one for patience. Wherever she is now, I like to think
she's learning that lesson. And so are you, my Kulsapsifang. But life can be
unkind, and sometimes, patience yields nothing.*

I scoot to the edge of my bed and massage the scar tissue on my chest.

Since the scar healed last autumn, I've taken to prodding it—more out of habit than anything else.

This morning, the scar sends shooting pains through my chest with every breath. I gasp with each intake, paranoid about the pain. The scar didn't hurt like this even when it was still open and unhealed.

Instead, the shooting pain concentrates around my chest.

My heart.

Something is *very* wrong.

I lean forward, then glance around my quiet room in Satyr. There's no sign of a break-in. No sign that the red witch found me in the night.

Am I having a heart attack?

Desperate for insight, I search through the endless pit where my memories of the last four years lay in darkness. I even search for the recollection of a nightmare—*maybe the witchbling in the yew tree had something to say to me before I woke up?*

I remember suddenly—

Last night I dreamed for the first time of red strings—without the witching present.

I'd been sitting in the canopy of the yew tree, precariously balanced. I'd looked around, expecting to see the witching with her hands full of bright red string.

Instead, there was a woman seated nearby. Seated on the other side of the yew's trunk, I couldn't quite see her face or make out her features. She had white hair, she was an adult, and she was staring in the opposite direction as me.

I didn't want her to see me. I could sense that she loathed me, that she wanted to harm me—

With a gasp, I looked down to find myself covered in red strings. Unlike my dreams with the witching, the strings weren't loosely roped around my limbs. Instead, they were smothering, taut, and tightening quickly.

The witch had turned to face me—and rather than meet her gaze, I'd woken up with a lash of pain to my chest...

More and more, I've started to wonder if the dreams might not be dreams.

If they could be...

If the witch is still...

No.

It's too early for those thoughts.

I glance at the door. Though the blush of morning light brightens with each minute, the street outside my rented room is quiet. I listen for any sounds of life from the rooms surrounding mine; my packmates are sleeping close by. A few weeks into our tour of Mieira, we're all happy for the chance to sleep on a mattress.

I settle in where I'm seated on the edge of mine.

One of my packmates will wake up soon and I can call out for help—though I'm not sure what sort of help they can offer.

Until then...

I try not to move. Try not to die.

At least Brutatalika isn't here. She's understanding about my nightmares, but a physical deficiency is harder to ignore than a psychological one.

What started as a political marriage two months ago slowly turned

into a genuine friendship—and, in the last month, a fledgling love. It's a promising start to my future as Alpha, but I'm still curating the man my wife thinks I am.

I don't even want to show this weakness to my pack, and I hand-selected each member based on their devotion to me and to Velm.

I reach for the cup of water at my bedside.

It shakes as I bring it to my lips.

I pat my chest with my other hand, laid flat on my peck. "Don't fail me now."

Once, I'd thought marrying the Female Alpha would solidify my place in Bellator Palace.

But my father, Clearbold 554 Leofsig, Male Alpha of Velm, married a stand-in Female Alpha when my mother disappeared seventeen years ago. They produced a spare heir, Malachai 555 Leofsig.

Malachai and his mother didn't attend my wedding.

They stayed in Mort, chipping away at my reputation in Velm's southeast. Crafting a new symbol to replace that of Afador, of Velm. Several villages south of Mort didn't raise the black ribbons in celebration of my marriage. Instead, word has spread of white ribbons.

White ribbons with a new symbol painted at their fluttering ends.

I carry my mother, Imperatriz 713 Afador, Kulapsifang of Velm and its rightful Female Alpha, in my blood. I carry her legacy in my body.

In this fragile heart.

I groan with pain, trying not to hate myself for what happened in Alita. For whatever foolish reason drove me toward the red witch and, invariably, this chest pain right now.

When the ache doesn't lessen, I stand and stagger to the window.

I pull open the shutters and drink in the cool morning air. Pale light falls across the empty dirt road passing through Satyr's city center. With less than three thousand residents, there's no local estate for wolves. And while the pack leader invited us into his home when we arrived last night, five grown wolves require too much space, food, and resources for comfort.

I led my pack to one of the city's empty hostels instead.

Bordering the wild jungle of Rhotidom, the wasted cones of Jaws, and the sleepy beaches of Hypnos, Satyr sits at a dreamy crossroad. Oreads from Jaws, okeanids from Hypnos, and dryads from Rhotidom outnumber the small wolf and wielder populations.

Across the street, an oread splits open an orange. His vermilion hair sits in thin, even locks. Two more hang from the fuzzy beard hugging his chin.

He smiles and waves when he notices me, seated on a short stepping ladder. “A big commotion just came into town. They’ll get here soon. It’s Hypnos—I’d bet anything. Another ship came in, then it left.”

The farther north I travel with my pack, the more oreads we’ve met.

They confound me.

The rest of the nymphs’ elemental powers are easy enough to quantify; an okeanid controls coastal tides, a naiad manipulates freshwater, a hesperide summons wind and seedlings, a dryad can sniff out anything in the forest.

Aside from being able to start small fires, which seems vague enough, oreads also have elemental powers tied to metal.

I’ve noticed a few shifting their feet in places where I can smell high levels of iron, magnesium, and calcium in the soil. Satyr’s unpaved streets are rich in all three.

I leave the oread to his cryptic musing. I turn and dress, pausing to groan and hold my chest and curse the red witch.

By the time I’m presentable, I hear Berevald and Rex stir in their rooms near mine. Water splashes from one, a yawn echoes from another.

Then a ruckus kicks up on the street.

I leave my room and shut the door behind me. The oread on the step ladder looks from me to the City Council that hustles my way.

In the center of the group walks the local male pack leader. The nymph authorities surround him: an elder okeanid and oread, along with a middle-aged dryad.

I walk into the center of the street. With each step, I grit my teeth to avoid flinching from the lashing chest pain.

“Samson 714 Afador,” the wolf starts. “Did you sleep well?”

It’s a polite question. The group’s eyes glitter with urgent news, their features twisted with tension.

“I slept well.” I stand at an awkward angle to hide my discomfort. “I am here. What happened?”

The elder okeanid steps forward. Her eyes are clear like the crystal

beaches east of Satyr, her voice steady and deep. “Word arrived of another kidnapping in Mid City. They took a Hypnotic Queen, Samson 714 Afador. And a powerful witch. *We must sail—*”

“We must *convene* in Mid City to decide on a solution,” the wolf cuts in. “There must be a response to these abductions, Kulapsifang.”

These abductions?

Clearbold hadn’t mentioned any disappearances in Hypnos when we parted ways in Silent City. And we spent the last day there hashing out Velm’s most pressing issues.

The oread sets a hand on the okeanid’s shoulder. He squeezes in commiseration, then looks at me. “How many ships will we watch disappear on the horizon?”

Does Clearbold not know?

The gears in my mind start turning. I need to send word to Bellator, to the pack leaders in Mort, in Cadmium, in Ultramarine, in Eupheme—all the cities on or near the coastline.

The urgency of this news helps quiet my chest pain. It doesn’t alter the numbing ache—just distracts me from its presence.

“An okeanid demigod selected Queen Otrera two weeks ago,” the dryad chimes in. “They *cannot* have our queen, Samson 714 Afador.”

To my right, Berevald and Rex step into the street. Like me, they wear freshly cleaned tunics and harem pants, along with shined torcs on their upper arms and necks. Dark rings hang under their eyes, stark against their pale skin. We arrived late last night, and dawn has barely broken.

“Did you unpack?” I ask the pair.

Berevald and Rex shake their heads as they approach.

Compared to my other two packmates, Rex and Berevald are eager to be useful to me. Though the others respect their roles as part of the Alpha’s pack, both have left behind wives to join me in establishing diplomatic ties across Mieira.

I can appreciate how unideal that setup is now that I’ve been away from Brutatalika for a few weeks. Her ala has started to fade from the items I keep hidden in my satchel; her hair tie and a small leather pouch she used to store herbs.

Rex studies the City Council, then glances at me with a glint in his eyes. Unlike the rest of the group, Rex can read my current state. As

one of my primary caretakers after my injury in Alita, he's probably already registered my off-kilter stance.

Berevald 522 Firstin doesn't notice. Though a critical thinker, Bere is often hung up on all the wrong details. Right now, he seems to be focused on the oread who digs into his second orange on the stepladder across the street.

"We're going to Mid City," I explain. "Leave a note for Pietrangelo and Riordon to wait here for our return. We haven't rested since we left Cadmium. They can take a few days off."

Berevald spares one last glance at the nymph before turning and following Rex back to their rooms. Unlike Rex and I, he hasn't pulled his hair into a bun. It dangles to his belly button, soft and puffy from its morning brushing.

The City Council watches the exchange, eyes flitting from me to my pack.

The okeanid takes another step forward to set her palm on my arm. "You'll go to Mid City even though no wolves were taken?"

I nod, trying not to glance at her hand. Nymphs always forget not to touch. "Wolves live in Hypnos. Their well-being is my responsibility, too."

The nymph's hand tightens on my arm. "Good. They killed sheep for you last night. We will eat before you leave. Mid City is three days' walking from here—you need to move quickly. The locals in Mid City are preparing a ship. They want to follow the kidnappers this time. We will send word for them to wait for the Kulapsifang."

The council parts ways, but the wolf stands at attention in the middle of the street.

I hold my place, forcing breaths in and out of my lungs at a measured pace. I need the respect of every pack leader I meet during this journey—and physical weakness won't help me foster that.

"Thank you, Samson," he says.

His appreciation is noted, but behind it lies surprise.

Had he expected me to say no?

Eldred goes on, "Clearbold avoided the conflicts in Hypnos. He said it was a wasteland of drunken wielders and lazy nymphs."

He sweeps his hands behind his back. For a long moment, he studies me, but I can't think of the right words. Clearbold's response seems underwhelming, if not outright suspicious.

My Alpha taught me that wolves don't live free of nymph and wielder trials. The okeanids, in particular, have a longstanding relationship with Velm. We trade goods, food, crafts, and more—and that trade is facilitated along the coastlines where okeanids manipulate the tides.

Okeanids notwithstanding, there are wolves in Hypnos. Maybe not many, but even if it were only one wolf, he or she would be afforded protection as my ward.

(A wolf's blood belongs to Velm; to Hetnazzar; to me.)

"I was born in Mid City seventy-two years ago." The wolf raises his chin. "Locals call it Sunrise because sunlight blinds the village every morning it wakes, and we'd give our sight to be bathed in it. I never once thought of it as a wasteland."

After my wedding, my wife and I stood in the snow outside Rouz. We decided on a list of simple agreements that would dictate our marriage.

The first was to live and lead as our own authorities.

Not as descendants or heirs to Clearbold. Certainly not to Emerel.

But to Velm. To each other. To the Afador line and to Brutatalika's Sigivald heritage.

This isn't the first mess of Clearbold's that I've run into since beginning my tour in Cadmium. I can sense it won't be the last, either.

I meet the pack leader's gaze. I hope he sees an Alpha who is worthy of his loyalty, but I can never quite discern the twinkle in the eyes of the pack leaders who stand before me. Not yet, at least.

"I understand." I bow my head, then turn back to my room and collect my bag.

We make it to Mid City in two days.

By then, our cheeks are pinched with sunburns. Just like the forest thins and the trees shorten, the clouds also seem to disappear. And though my pack once traveled to these same beaches while in our first war band, that was over ten years ago.

I don't remember the constant sunlight or the nauseating scent of the salty ocean.

Our only saving grace is the cool breeze that shivers through the trees and dry grass.

Along with the dryad and male pack leader from Satyr, we've pushed our bodies to make it to Mid City before the locals sail after the kidnappers.

We arrive just in time.

They guide us to the village's center. A wide lane runs between a few single-story wooden buildings with thatched roofs and sand-blasted floors. Scraggly plants climb across the wooden panels, their pink flowers shivering in the breeze.

A raucous mob mills where the lane ends at a low dune. Just beyond it sprawls the broad, endless beach.

Unintelligible shouting heightens as we wander closer. Most of the group has the dark skin of okeanids and oreads, interspersed with the rich olive of wielders and their stark white hair. I tally a few wolves, one of which is unnumbered, and a few naiads with flat brown curls and skin almost as pale as mine.

The mob seems to be haranguing two individuals. The first is a warlock with a skinny frame and a boyish face. He wears a long white cape reminiscent of the Class. The second is a regal dryad with luscious locks of emerald hair and a flowing lilac cloak. His broad, smooth features are handsome, his eyes twinkling with calm certainty despite the noisy madness around him. I can't tell if he's broad-chested or prefers to stand in a way that makes him seem imposing.

I filter through their alas; the white-cloaked warlock smells familiar. While Samson doesn't remember anything from the last four years, my fangself isn't quite as helpless.

He's gained authority since I woke in Alita, invigorated by a strength I can't fathom or see. My body was weakened after the witch maimed me, starting with this mark on my heart, but Samsonfang grew stronger.

Though the moons aren't nearing full, Samsonfang peeks through my thoughts.

He whispers, ***You have met this warlock before. You don't remember, but I do.***

I study the lanky warlock. His bright golden eyes dart around the crowd, lips parted like he's ready to speak. Though his cheeks are full, his face almost cherub-like, his busy eyes betray any notion of innocence.

The dryad with the flowing lilac cloak next to him has the pungent

ala of a king. In appearance, nymph royalty doesn't stand out. It's only their alas, tangled with the rich notes of a demigod, that differentiate them.

The pair widen their eyes when they see me approaching with my small group.

The warlock throws his hands up in my direction, as though relieved. "Samson 714 Afador! They sent word that you were coming but I thought it was a joke."

The mob standing around the warlock and king turn to face us.

Two dozen nymphs, wielders, and wolves study me, Rex, and Berevald with crooked, unimpressed expressions. A few open their mouths, as though preparing to start shouting in our direction.

Their alas come into general focus; most have traces of adrenaline in their systems, along with plenty of cortisol. Exhaustion and fright hang in the air, just as palpable as the ocean's salt water.

The king seizes the momentary silence to address the crowd. "Please, leave us in peace to decide on a solution. We have heard your qualms—give us time to rest and debate."

The white-caped warlock shuffles past the king to intercept me.

The dryad hangs back to listen to a few more comments; one okeanid seizes his lilac cape, sobbing loudly.

When he reaches me and my packmates, the warlock wraps his hand around the back of my elbow, directing me toward the beach. Satyr's City Council hangs back amid the crowd.

I don't appreciate the touch—or warlocks in general—but the wielder at least starts a breakneck explanation as he leads us into the sand.

"Hello, Samson 714 Afador. My name is Absalom Metamor—I'm sure you don't remember me. I was the Head Warlock of Luz until recently. That's where we met." He cranes his neck to glance behind us; Rex and Berevald follow close at our heels. "Who are they? Is this your pack? I heard you got married—congratulations. You're doing your little tour now, right?"

I glance where his tapered fingers still clutch me.

My feet sink into the sand as Absalom leads us toward a bare shelter near the calm tides. Four poles support a thatched roof, which provides a square patch of thin shade. A large jug of water awaits us, along with wooden cups.

“Thank you. And this is only half my pack. That’s Rex and Berevald.” I study the warlock’s tense expression. “Aren’t you a bit far from Luz as Head Warlock?”

“I said I *was* the Head Warlock of Luz. Now I take care of... other things for the Class. I was north of Satyr when I heard Helisent West of Jaws went missing—I came here looking for her. I made it to Sunrise the morning after the kidnapping.”

The ache in my chest flares at his mention of the witch’s name.

Though the pain that first woke me in Satyr has lessened, the witch hasn’t wandered far from my mind. At least once an hour, the pain spikes, as though she’s wielding one last spell against me from afar.

And this warlock thinks she was kidnapped with the others?

Absalom unhands me once we reach the shade. He looks over Rex and Berevald, then checks behind us as though making sure we’re alone. Back in the village, the wolf and the dryad from Satyr are occupied with the crowd, hands gesturing as they stand between the locals and where we sit on the beach.

Absalom points to the massive jug and stack of wooden cups. “There’s freshwater.” He sits down, gathering his robe.

I sit down; Rex and Berevald mirror me. I reach and fill the first cup of water, passing one to Rex and a second to Berevald. “Do you think the red witch had something to do with the disappearances?”

Absalom flinches, leaning back while his eyes dart over me. “What? No. What are you talking about? A whole ship of okeanids was taken—Helisent included. Apparently, the ship belonged to a hesperide merchant and his apprentice. The locals have known them for a few years. They don’t have any useful information to share on either.”

I sip on the water and wonder how a being as powerful as the red witch gets *taken* anywhere against her will.

The dryad king ducks into the shelter and sits next to Absalom. He smooths the emerald waves of his thick, shoulder-length hair as he studies us. His small eyes, pitted with amber irises, flit across me. I can smell his jacaranda jewelry: rings, earrings, and a beaded necklace.

“Samson 714 Afador.” The king bows his head. With a deep sigh, his puffed-out chest recedes to an exhausted slump. “I greet you and

your packmates on behalf of my demigod in Rhotidom. My name is Hemlock East of Alita. Did Absalom tell you what happened?"

"We've heard different accounts of the kidnapping over the last few days." I nod in confirmation. "What I don't understand is how any being could *kidnap* Helisent West of Jaws. According to a Ghost-Eater named Kierkeline Ultramarine, she has very large horns. There's no controlling the witch—certainly no kidnapping her."

Absalom looks at the Rhotidic King. Hemlock looks back at him.

Then the nymph turns to me and raises his eyebrows. "It's a pretty terrifying thought, isn't it? That something *more powerful* than the witch took her."

"Is it scarier than the possibility that the witch is out of control?" I ask. "That no banishment or law could bind her? There was nothing stopping Helisent West of Jaws from leaving Jaws. And there's nothing stopping her from—"

"Oh, *watch your fucking mouth*, boy-wolf," someone shouts.

Past Absalom and Hemlock, a warlock steps into the sand from a grassy dune.

The squat man is led by a round, healthy belly. Two well-built warlocks flank him, a full head taller; their alas tell me the men are related. Father and sons—twins, in fact. The twins have thin faces with large eyes and neat, pulled-back hair. Their father has rounder and softer features—though his eyes are just as bulbous.

They're reddened, too, like his nose.

Salty tears smear his cheeks. His heart ratchets in his chest, flitting like a desperate bird. His golden eyes dart around the shelter as he and his sons approach.

You met these warlocks, too, Samsonfang coos. You don't remember, but I do.

Absalom licks his lips and inches closer to me and my pack. He turns, as though afraid to keep his back to the trio of warlocks.

The elder warlock focuses on me. His features bunch with anger. "You're worried the witch is out of control? Let me tell you something, she was born out of control. They all were!"

"One rainy spring, my four children took me hostage. And there was no mercy for their papa. I was tied up by the ankle with a magical rope and left to rot in a pit. They said they wanted to train me to dance so we could all join the circus."

He raises a finger, baring it at Absalom. “My sons took no pity on me—look at their faces! *No pity*. Milisent West of Jaws also showed me no pity. I spent seven nights imprisoned in that pit. But Helisent came to me. She gave me wine and scraps of pancakes. She sang me songs and made me a roof out of broken tiles.”

I take a deep breath as the wielder’s shouting echoes around me.

The father and sons stand in a triangular formation. Absalom continues inching a safe distance away from them, chin lowered. The twins switch their gazes from Absalom to me often, as though unsure who to address first.

The eldest keeps chattering in the meantime, hands flying around. “And that *frightens* you? Ha! You should thank the moons Yngvi and Yves don’t have her power. You should thank the moons my first daughter isn’t alive to witness this. The Class has *fucked it* on this one, Absalom! I told you a banishment would *do nothing*.”

Absalom’s nostrils flare as he takes in a steadying breath. He doesn’t look prepared to act—just to endure. “I realize that, Parsifal.”

The elder warlock lowers his voice. “So, you knew that Helisent’s banishment would do nothing? And yet you still lingered around Jaws keeping tabs on Honey Baby and reporting back to the Class like *a sniveling pervert*?”

Absalom’s jaw clenches. “I told them it was useless to punish someone they couldn’t control.”

Helisent’s father, Parsifal, takes a deep breath. He rubs his temples, gritting out, “Then why does the Class hurt the things it fears? Why does the Class accept my daughter’s dove and reject the witch who provides it—even after they refused to bring Anesot and Oko to justice for Milisent’s death?”

Parsifal’s head angles, eyes twinkling with a tendril of infrasound. I swear the sand beneath us shakes, shivering and fizzing.

His voice drops to a growl. “You may think nothing of me, Absalom Metamor, but you would do well to remember who mothered my witches. Andromeda North of Skull is watching us from death. And she will wait for you at its threshold, *you slimy fuck*.”

Parsifal looks toward the glittering ocean. Almost wistfully, he says, “The Class is to blame for my daughter fleeing her banishment in Jaws. The Class is to blame for whatever took Honey across—across—across—”

With deceptive speed, the warlock bolts from the shelter. He rushes past where Absalom stands with his shoulders slumped, hustling into the wet sand and balling his hands into fists.

With what looks to be all his might, Parsifal screams, "Helisent!"

I sit back, gut clenching.

His voice fills my mind with doom.

The pain in my chest ratchets.

"Helisent!" the warlock shouts again. He collapses into the sand and leans forward onto his hands. He sobs loudly, body shaking.

For a split second, I'm looking into the past.

For a split second, I remember doing something similar outside of Mort.

I was twelve years old. I had just arrived on the coast after hearing of Imperatriz's disappearance. I knew I was far from where she had disappeared in Hypnos; farther from whatever place she had gone. Mindless with fear, anxiety, and doom, I had bellowed her name into the unhearing waves. Again and again. Until I fell with wearied exhaustion.

(And even then, I'd hiccuped the word *mama*. Even if she didn't respond to her name, I knew she'd respond to that call. I knew that call connected us like a trunk bridges roots to branches. I knew it as a type of magic. One that failed.)

One of the twins heads to his father. He sinks into the sand at Parsifal's side, murmuring small words of comfort.

The other twin stares at me from the other side of the shelter.

According to Samsonfang, I once knew this warlock.

Now, we watch one another with suspicion and antipathy.

He takes a step forward to squat in front of me so we're at eye level. "Watch your fucking mouth when you speak about my sister. She's the only one we have left." He angles his chin, nose curling with loathing. "You have no idea how fucking *stupid* you're going to feel about this one day."

I already feel stupid. I shouldn't have brought Rex and Berevald here. The only thing more ill-advised than entangling myself in another affair with Helisent West of Jaws would be *sailing away* from Mieira and Velm to do so.

The warlock stands and turns away.

He joins his family in the sand. The father continues to weep, shouting theatrical nonsense toward the waves every now and then.

Absalom returns to his place next to Hemlock East of Alita. With a sigh, he glances at the hunched trio.

“I’ll save us all a bit of discomfort here,” the king says with a strange smile. “I don’t particularly believe Helisent would have had a reason to hurt you in Alita, Samson 714 Afador. You will find this is a sentiment shared by many in Mieira; the witch was a sponsor to quite a few cities. Her dove has been missed *dearly*. And please remember, she is a friend of the nymphs. The demigods have not banished her.

“Only wolves and wielders.

“However, I will wait until either you or Helisent remembers the last four years before making any more conclusions. Please understand that my interest in chasing that ship is to find and return *all* Mierans—even those currently banished by your and Absalom’s people.”

I nod, relieved by the simple explanation even if it’s laced with quiet condemnation.

I study Absalom next. He finally tears his eyes away from the trio on the beach. “Before the incident in Alita, I knew you and Helisent as partners in some sort of mutual endeavor. I won’t waste my breath with what I think that mission was. I’ll only tell you that I’m going to sail after the kidnapped okeanids for the same reason as Hemlock. And so long as I represent the Class, Helisent’s well-being is my problem.”

Absalom brushes the hair from his face, golden eyes burning into mine. “And I understand if you want nothing to do with this on account of what happened in Alita. With Helisent. Hemlock and I will spread the word that you arrived and offered us thoughtful counsel on behalf of Velm.”

I glance toward the ocean.

For a split second, it’s all very familiar again.

I remember staring into the ocean outside of Mort and wondering desperately what awaited me on its far side. Wondering where my mother had gone. Wondering when I’d also leave the shore to find her.

I’m keenly aware that these are the same beaches where Imperatriz disappeared seventeen years ago.

And yet...

I look from the warlock to the king. “I’m sure both of you under-

stand that I won't participate in any cause that involves Helisent West of Jaws."

I set my hand on my chest. Pain sparks and then slowly fades, like a dying heartbeat. Aside from fearing the witch might kill me once and for all, I know Malachai will make power grabs in my absence; he's making them now in my presence.

The redrawing of the Afador symbol in Mort is only one of three pressing incidents that mark a coming change in Velm.

I clarify, "I *can't*. We will find lodging tonight and stay until morning. Feel free to call on me and my packmates."

Absalom nods, offering a weak smile.

The Rhotidic King looks less accepting. His brow scrunches as I stand, and my pack follows suit. He doesn't say goodbye, just slowly crosses his arms as we turn and leave the shelter.

He thinks I can't hear him as we walk away. "What did I tell you, Absalom? Velm has a *border*, and it moves farther south each year."

I wake in the middle of the night, groaning as I sit up and clutch my chest.

The pain that started in Satyr rattles my chest and shakes my bones. I gasp for breath and force myself to sit up in the tiny, thatched hut.

My feet nearly graze its far end where a doorless entrance leads to the beach.

Beyond the sound of the gentle waves, I hear whispering. My nostrils flare as I catch the alas of Rex and the warlocks from earlier; the weeping father, the livid twins. And past theirs is a witch's ala—the GhostEater from Ultramarine.

I'd met her briefly when passing through the city, at which time she'd cornered me in a tavern and attempted to speak with me about the red witch.

Her name is Kierkeline.

What is she doing here?

"We'll ask him in the morning," Rex whispers. "Give him time to—"

"There is no time," the GhostEater hisses. "They're going to sail

tomorrow morning. My granddaughter was also on that ship, my dear wolf. I won't let them delay leaving."

"We do it now," Parsifal says. "Just wait until he—"

"*Shh*," Rex cuts in.

He must have noticed the shift in my breathing pattern.

I've barely stirred; I sit frozen on my bed mat, one hand on my chest and the other on the ground.

I stand with a groan and head for the door. I ignore the lashing pain in my chest, which extends to my back and down into my abdomen. For the first time, I can sense a slight hum within my body, like the shivering bass of infrasound.

What the fuck is inside of me?

I push away that nightmarish thought for another time.

I need to figure out how to breathe—how to ease this pain—

I stagger one step toward the hut's entrance. Rex's large frame blocks the moonlight as he steps in front of me. He flattens a hand against my solar plexus to stop me from advancing.

I fall still. I'm still half-asleep, but now warming to the notion that Rex might have been colluding with the wielders outside of my hut.

"Samson," he says. "Are you well?"

My back hunches as I try to alleviate my aching. I search the air for the wielders' alas, trying to figure out which direction they scampered off in. Heavy shadows fill the gaps between the huts and trees.

"My chest," I manage. Sweat dampens my skin. My breaths come ragged the longer I stand before Rex. "Who were you speaking with?"

"Do you trust me?"

My nostrils flare as Rex's hand flexes against me, goading me back into the hut.

He's never given me a reason to distrust him—but he's also never asked me such a pointed question at such a dubious hour. And not when I felt physically weak.

Not with the Leofsig line carving new symbols into the marble of Mort.

My adrenaline kicks in. "Rex—"

"Do you trust me, Samson? Yes or no."

"Yes. Why were you speaking with—"

"I need you to drink the memory-giving potion the GhostEater offered you in Ultramarine. Kierkeline is here. Her granddaughter was

one of the beings kidnapped. I believe we can trust her. I need you to take the potion.”

I narrow my eyes. His voice is low, his tone calm and direct.

I zero in on each of his words. I didn't tell him, or anyone, about the offer Kierkeline made me in Ultramarine.

I definitely didn't tell anyone her name.

When did she find Rex? What did she tell him just now?

“Then accept the potion from her. I won't take it now—I'll take it when I'm ready, Rex. On my own time.” And when I don't feel like I'm on the verge of a heart attack. “I need air. Move.”

But my packmate doesn't shift.

Parsifal takes a step into the moonlight to my left and looks up at me. Unlike this afternoon, he looks both lethally calm and pointedly unhinged.

“Did it start three mornings ago, Samson?” the warlock asks. “The chest pain?”

It did, but I don't tell him that.

I shift my weight onto my back leg, trying to straighten my spine.

Beneath the aching, I can feel a deep buzzing...

Of infrasound.

The warlock goes on, “Even if a wielder doesn't know healing magic, their panic magic can... fill in the gaps. It rarely pans out well in the long term. And I wonder...” Parsifal's golden eyes linger on my chest, near where Rex keeps his hand pressed flat. “If my daughter was helping you instead of hurting you, like I believe, there may be a little seed of her magic inside of you, Samson 714 Afador.”

The thought almost sends me into hysterics.

If the red witch cast some sort of lasting spell on me, then my life just got infinitely more difficult.

More *fucked*.

“What?” is all I manage.

My patience snaps, temper unrolling as I realize the gravity of every bad decision I made last year. The chest wound is only the beginning if what the warlock says is correct. If the witch implanted her magic into me like poison.

What if this follows me for the rest of my life?

What the fuck do I tell Brutatalika?

The warlock opens his hands to me. “My daughter's magic—”

“Get away from my hut.”

Parsifal takes a quick step back. I grab Rex’s wrist so I can move and charge onto the beach—I need air, need to breathe, need to find some comfortable position to ride out this pain and the realization that I may be cursed with Helisent’s magic.

But Rex digs his heels into the sand. He braces his hand. “Samson—Samson, *you need to trust me—*”

“Get out of my way,” I growl.

I push against his hand, then against his chest. As soon as I attempt to exert any force, I buckle at the waist, pain ratcheting through my chest and ribcage and spine.

With a single step, Rex forces me back into the hut.

He pulls me close to him with a fistful of my tunic. He whispers into my ear, words hot and quick, “I found your bag when I picked you up in Alita to take you back to Bellator. Inside, you had a note that was written for Imperatriz. She was in Hypnos searching for a witch named Oko when she disappeared—the witch you were hunting with Helisent West of Jaws.

“Forget the witch for ten seconds—focus on Imperatriz. What if you learned something useful about her disappearance? They found Oko dead alongside Anesot. Maybe she told you what she knew about our Alpha’s disappearance before you were injured.”

I stagger back as he releases my tunic.

My mouth falls open. For a split second, my mind focuses solely on the possibility Rex just presented.

Just like I have no memory of what happened in Alita, I have no clue what motivated me to work with the red witch. (I don’t know what she looks like, whether the witchling I see in my dreams is a figment of my imagination or partly real. I can’t fathom who the grown witch is, either.) Clearbold told me he didn’t know what Helisent and I were doing journeying across Mieira.

Of all the possibilities I had considered, something as dire as my mother’s disappearance seemed too unlikely. Too important to trust with a witch like Helisent. With a witch at all.

But Rex wouldn’t lie, especially not for a wielder.

He lowers his chin, studying me as I stand motionless in the center of the hut. He clears his throat. “And I’m sorry about this.”

I almost ask him what he’s sorry about. Then he rushes forward.

Rex lowers his body to sweep my legs out from under me. I clench my eyes as I land on my back, exclaiming from the pain before Rex positions himself over me and uses his large hand to cover my mouth.

I raise my knees to struggle, but his weight pins my abdomen. The hand covering my mouth presses my head back against the bed mat. At the same time, his legs lock mine—and then two more large, shifting masses pin my arms.

I suck in a breath through my nose to study their alas; the twins from the beach. Each warlock pins one of my arms, bearing their weight at my elbows.

I jerk and writhe, managing to displace Rex for a second—

I freeze when someone grabs my balls.

Fingers wrap around one of my testicles. Another set of fingers pinches the skin attaching them to my body.

Holy fucking shit. Samsonfang stampedes into my mind and assesses the situation. ***Stop moving.***

My stomach clenches as my temper spirals, gaining momentum as I start to tally the exact weight and strength of the beings that keep me pinned. The discomfort in my chest hasn't stopped, but my adrenaline cloaks it well. It sends unfathomable energy throughout my body.

"Once I told you I have less reason with each I lose! Do you believe me now?" shouts Parsifal, hidden behind Rex; he's the one holding my balls. "Just hold still, my bucking bronco."

I will break the warlock's teeth for holding me like this—

I will beat his sons, wait until they have children, then beat them, too—

Rex strains to keep me pinned. Even though I'm no longer fighting, it wouldn't take much to incite more chaos. He pants as he stares down at me. "I'm going to move my hand. Don't shout or the Ghost-Eater will do magic on you. She's not fucking around, Samson. *You need to drink the potion.* Just do it, okay? Just *trust me.*"

I start thinking about what I'll do to Rex for spearheading this offense.

I'll cut him out of my inner circle, then challenge him to a waricon.

I'll find my own warlocks to pin his arms and manhandle his testicles.

You're outnumbered. Think fast, Samson.

Rex lifts his hand and something moves toward my lips. A cold, bitter liquid falls straight into my mouth, sliding down the back of my tongue and forcing me to either swallow or choke. On instinct, I fight as I suck down a breath.

I cough, body buckling as the pinning forces slide off of me.

I roll onto my side as horrible pressure mounts in my head.

Memories begin to filter through my mind, too fast to hold onto.

I can feel myself in the hut, braced against the sandy bed mat as a cool breeze passes over me. But all of my attention is focused internally, on each memory that finds its way back into my psyche.

I lay on the floor, in the hut and not in the hut, as someone holds my head in their lap.

Adrenaline shivers through me as the memories take shape. Panic mounts, along with pain—

I shift onto my side, grappling with something—

Something is caught inside of my breast bone, lodged and unnatural—

A copper metal piece juts from my chest, coated in hot blood—
I'm dying—I'm dying in a memory—

And there's a witch here beside me. Her face is round, her cheekbones high. Tears fill her eyes as she hovers over me on her knees. Blood coats her hands, droplets sprayed across her chest and face.

She's killing me.

I'm dying in this memory.

Unless—

Is this really—

And that's her—

Lekeli Kelnazzar—

This isn't what I thought—

She must love jewelry.

I wake to bickering.

My head rests against a soft thigh, my cheek against a sturdy calf. Sweat coats my hair, clinging to my forehead. My mouth is dry and my tongue swollen.

Someone wipes a strand of hair from my brow.

“Stop touching him,” Rex says.

"You're touching him, too," Yngvi says.

"I'm part of his pack," Rex says. "He's my Alpha."

"Yeah, but now he's going to remember me. I'm basically part of his pack, too."

"No, you're not. Not even close."

"I ate dinner with him in Alita. And he had a close relationship with my sister. I'm owed special allowances. And what are you owed, Sweet Roxanna?"

"My name is Rex."

"You look like a Roxanna."

"And which one are you again?"

"Yngvi. I'm the eldest."

"You talk too much."

"Look, I'm actually on my best behavior right now, so if you think this is me talking too much, then we'll never be friends."

"Was that actually something you thought would happen?"

"Well, me and Samson are friends. I figured I'd be friends with his whole pack. Or are you guys grandfathered in based on generational count? What's yours again? 300-something?"

"563, thank you." My head shifts as someone moves; then I hear a gentle slap. "I said stop touching him."

"Were you this fussy when he was with Helisent? If you think I'm touchy, you should spend more time around—"

"I'm well aware."

"We should probably wake him up. They're going to start loading the ship soon."

"He needs rest. Give him another hour."

I lick my lips and open my eyes. Bright light floods the hut from the entrance near my feet. My head rests in Rex's lap, his legs folded together. To my right, Yngvi sits cross-legged, staring at me with shadows beneath his eyes. Yves lays at my side, asleep with his head in his brother's lap like Rex and I. All I see is a mess of Yves' white hair, half-freed from its hair tie.

Rex leans forward to meet my eyes. His jaw and brow pinch guiltily. "Are you okay?"

Yngvi looks just as uncertain. He glances at Yves, then the entryway. I didn't touch your nuts. I swear to the moons."

I can't fathom their banter yet.

The last four years stew in my mind.

A lump swells in my throat.

I groan as I sit up. Pain flares around my scar, though it's more manageable than last night.

Rex helps me, bracing his arms against my shoulders and back. The coarse sand clings to my damp body as I adjust to a sitting position. I look down and realize my pants are soaked to the knees, the sand beneath me just as wet. The scent of urine fills the thatched walls, dense enough that I imagine even Yngvi can smell it.

I barely register the mess.

I stare past the entrance and into the ocean.

I have no idea how long I laid in a stupor, at which point I pissed myself, whether I slept after my memories found their places in my mind.

But it's all there now.

I see it all.

I *feel* it all; it begins with wrath and helplessness, then spirals to encompass a fuller range of emotions. Love, anguish, terror, regret, hope, denial, and that unwavering drive to claim and possess and protect the things that are *mine*.

These are the bare facts:

I betrayed Helisent in Alita to protect Anesot and she spent her magic saving me after I failed to interrogate Oko. Helisent was banished for this; I returned home to a palace.

And then I married Brutatalika.

(I *married* Brutatalika. I am *married*. I have a *wife*.)

And then... then someone took...

My breaths come faster as reality settles into a more comprehensible shape.

Yngvi leans onto his elbow to meet my eyes. "So, do you remember everything or what?"

I can't find my voice to confirm that I do.

But I do—

These are the rest of the bare facts:

Anesot came from a world called Zarzynn where breath is more important than love. He is responsible for launching the kidnapping of okeanids on Mieira's coasts, who are turned into necromancers by something called a vampire in Zarzynn.

To pave the way for this trade, and to please Clearbold 554 Leofsige, Anesot lured Imperatriz 713 Afador onto a ship in Hypnos. This ship sailed to a place called Stretch and stranded my mother on an island called Pit.

Her disappearance gave Clearbold the chance to replace the Afador line with the Leofsige line. And when Imperatriz was gone, my father sent me to kill the wooly hoping I would die. He provided Velm a spare heir not out of caution, but as part of a long-term plan.

Clearbold knew that Helisent and I were searching for Oko last year; I told him myself what we were doing in Luz. He has pretended for eight months not to know.

Clearbold has lied to me; often, repeatedly, and with great care.

Clearbold has hurt my Female Alpha, my Kulapsifang.

My mother.

(These are the easy facts.)

Past the entrance to the thatched hut, the shallow beach glitters, pale and fragile as dawn breaks on the horizon.

With a groan, I roll forward onto my knees, then brace my hands to rise to my feet. I stagger into the light, dragging my feet through the cool sand until I reach the ocean.

I keep walking until the water reaches my belly button.

I set my hand on my chest where my scar aches with a low, endless agony. I pat the area twice—not to alleviate the pain, but with the hope that Helisent’s magic will feel my touch wherever she was taken.

These are the last bare facts:

Helisent West of Jaws how Velm belongs to the moons.

And someone took...

Someone took...

I set my hand flat on my scar.

I can’t face that thought just yet—

That if Helisent’s magic resides in my chest, then the pain I feel is a reflection of some harm being done to her.

And that’s because...

Someone took Helisent West of Jaws from Hypnos.

And she is not the first woman I have lost on these shores.

I remember the scent of her ala and her perfumes, the cadence of her laughter and snoring. Her red irises catch my attention like her bright jewelry, like the poisonous berries of the yew tree.

I remember the taste of her pussy, of her skin, of her brandy.
Memories of her float through my mind like clouds, overlapping
and disappearing before taking form again.

Samsonfang floods my mind with each.

Find her.

Again and again.

Find her.

I close my eyes.

In my mind, I see Helisent staring at me where she lies nestled in
my bed in the Luzian Estate. Her white hair is messy and strewn
across the pillow, her shoulders bare and soft where they poke above
the sheet. Our alas are layered in the room, complex and intertwined.
She smiles as she stretches out and sighs.

I can hear her voice with clear precision, can see the exact twinkle
in her fake golden irises when she says, “Good morning, sweet wolf.”

Find her.

I take a deep breath and try to let go of the memory.

I open my eyes and stare into the horizon of azure ocean and
blinding sunlight.

“I am coming to find you, little bird,” I swear into the dawn. “And
I am going to fucking kill whoever did this.”