

WEST OF JAWS

Book 1 of the Sennenwolf Series



CAPES



West of Jaws

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TOTW / INGC

PRAISE FOR SENNENWOLF
SERIES

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

-Kirkus

“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

“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
(Long Live the Rat King)

SPECIAL NOTE

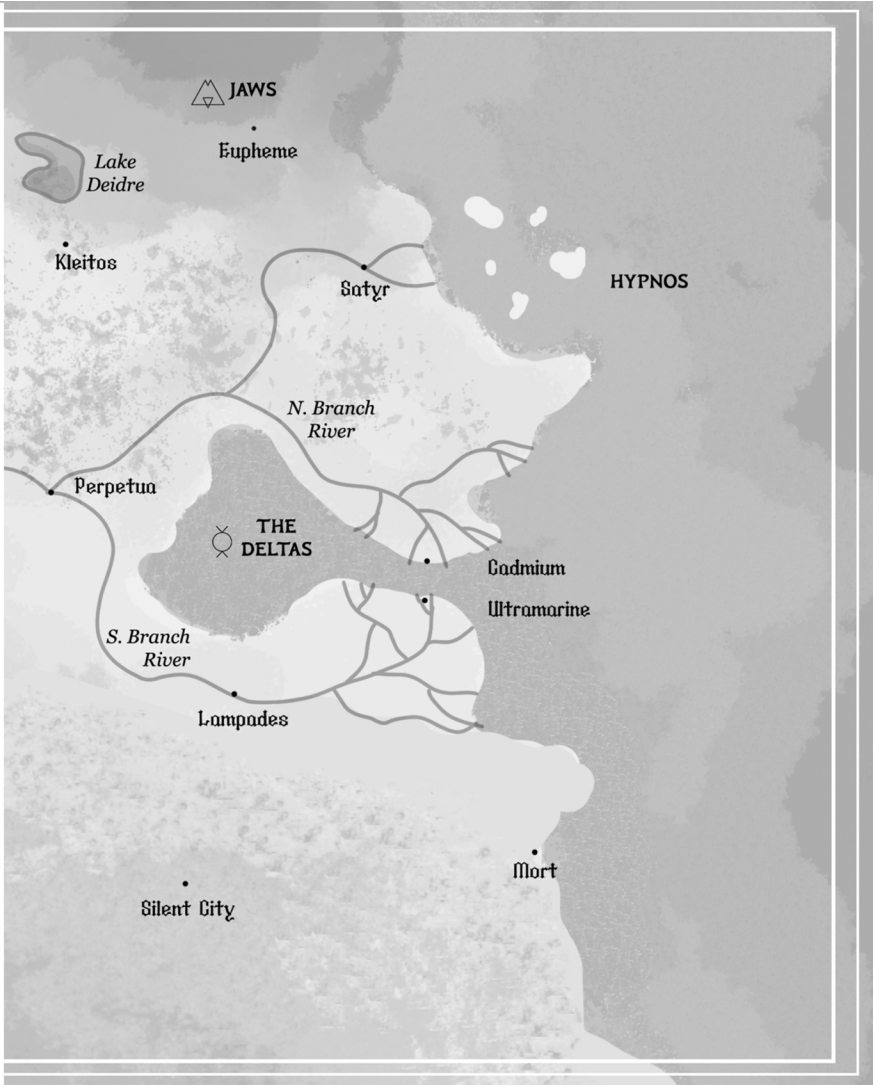
There are three things you should know about this book.

First, it's pronounced *an-tib-go-nee* (Antigone), *its-if-fob-nee* (Itzifone), and *nib-nib-go-nee* (Ninigone). You get it.

Second, there's an extensive glossary in the back.

Third, this book deals with *adult* themes, like titties and violence and true love and snortable powders. If that line felt a little abrasive, this book isn't for you.





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CHAPTER I
LITTLE ESTEBAN
HELISENT



*Honey Heli,
Antigone is everything we always knew it would be. Get here. Fast.
Mint Mili*

I splay my body across the dirt road and lay flat. “Ninigone, can you see what I’m doing?” Unsure if my appeal is working, I try to conjure a few tears. I’m already covered in tiny flecks of debris, but I’m drunk enough not to care. I’ll do anything to shirk this responsibility.

I glance at her through a slitted eye; the witch crosses her arms. “This is me *begging you not to do this.*”

Ninigone sucks on her teeth, then she glances at the thin witchling to her left. I don’t spare a glance at the newcomer. If I look her way, I’m sure Ninigone will take it as capitulation, and the *last fucking thing* I’m going to do right now is agree to mentor a witchling from Antigone.

The hood of Ninigone’s tawny cloak shakes in the wind. Her tone is measured as she stares down at me. “Young

Esclamonde here needs a mentor to introduce her to life in Luz. Like the witchling, you once lived in Antigone, which makes me think you'd be a *spectacular* mentor."

I groan and turn back toward the dirt. I know my tantrum won't change Ninigone's mind, but it might make the witchling hate me enough to go home or request a different mentor.

Ninigone turns toward the witchling and lowers her voice. "Don't mind the theatrics, Esclamonde. You'll get used to it."

I rise with a scowl and float into the air, wiggling my cloaks clean. I stare down at the witchling. I don't know anything about her, but I hate her golden eyes, her white hair, her too-large red cloak. How primly she's fit her bottomless bag across her body.

I hover a foot above the witchling. "Do you drink and dance? I don't like innocence, little Esteban."

The witchling gulps. "My name is Esclamonde."

I look at Ninigone. "Is she allowed to talk back like that?"

The witch's stern expression doesn't waver. "Yes, Helisent. Especially when you mispronounce her name."

I stay focused on Ninigone. "Did the Class put you up to this? I give Luz all the magic it needs. You can report back that I'm handling my duties here with *aplomb*."

"I'm Head Witch of Luz. The Class doesn't put me up to anything. I manage myself, *thank you*."

"You still report back to them, though," I mumble. Then I raise my eyebrows and try a new tactic. "Look, I think we can agree this isn't going to work out. And that's not going to look bad on *me*. I'm not Head Witch of Luz. That's your job, which means the mentee is your fucking problem."

"You're making this a bigger deal than it is." Ninigone takes a deep breath that wrinkles her arched nose. "Take her home, let her get settled in, *sober up a bit*, then give her a tour

of Luz. Show her how the city works, where she can find what she needs. Guide the witchling with some care and, if I may be so bold, *kindness*. You can start by not floating like that. It's very threatening."

I'm still hovering a foot above Esclamonde. The loose fabric of my velvet peach robe collects around me like soft wings. My nose curls like Ninigone's, my lips pinch into a frown.

Luz's square, brightly painted homes sit in silence nearby. No one is awake early enough to see my little tantrum. Even if they were, I doubt anyone living in Luz's arts district would be surprised. I'm a known quantity after four years in the city—especially in the wide tree-lined streets where other Luzians live a similarly loud and feckless lifestyle.

Still, I study the dark windows of the homes in the hopes someone will wake up, bear witness to this fucking travesty, and hammer home the point to Ninigone that I'm not cut out for this.

Nothing.

With a sigh, I open my hands toward the Head Witch. "I've never done this before. Shouldn't she at least be a *little* intimidated by me?"

"Esclamonde traveled *alone* from Antigone. She arrived thirty minutes ago. Don't you think she's had a hard enough time?"

I snort. "What? Are there bandits in Septegeur and Rhotidom now? The last time I traveled between Luz and Antigone, it was like an extended vacation." I glance at Esclamonde, clarifying, "I met *a lot* of friendly gentlemen."

The joke doesn't land. The witchling adjusts her red cloak with a twitch of her hand. "I'm twenty."

"*She's twenty!*" Ninigone reiterates with a hiss.

I throw my hands into the air. "Oh, my moons, it's a *child*."

Though first repulsed, I realize the witchling's age could be an excuse.

Luz is home to all five stripes of nymphs: dryads, okeanids, oreads, hesperides, and naiads. Most retain elemental powers from the homelands where they were born, tied to the forests, oceans, rivers, volcanic cones, and stretching plains... but there's one thing all nymphs have in common.

They want to have fun. The not-for-children kind of fun.

I lower myself back onto my feet, clear my throat, and straighten the wild white hairs near my temple. "I live in a *warren*. I can't bring Esteban back to an adult warren with me." I study Esclamonde's wide black pupils. "Do you know *anything* about warrens? Or nymphs?"

She nods. Her voice is small as a sparrow. "Warrens are where nymphs live together. I know a good amount about all five types of nymphs. There were fourteen in my secondary school."

I try not to scoff. "Wow, a full baker's dozen."

A set of wooden shutters clack against a squat home close by. I whip my head to see if I know the being who opens their window to the breaking dawn; unfortunately, the okeanid is a stranger.

She cranes her head over a row of potted flowers. Her cool dark-brown skin is ragged and aged, but her turquoise eyes catch the light and shine like jewels.

I glance at Esclamonde, who studies the nymph like she's never seen an okeanid before.

At her side, Ninigone brandishes a bland political smile at me. She takes the momentary distraction to back away.

As she retreats, Ninigone uses whispering magic to murmur smoothly in my ear, "You'll do wonderfully as a mentor, Helisent. It's time you played nicely with other wielders."

She turns around and heads south along the Septima

River, which cuts through the city from the northwest. She studies the calm crystal waters as the long tail of her cloak catches in the wind.

Just so she doesn't think she's gotten the better of me, I project my voice into her ear through the same form of whispering magic. "You have a piece of food caught in your teeth."

It's not true, but not all magic has to be great. It just has to be cunning.

I turn back around to see Esclamonde and the okeanid staring at one another in a wordless standoff.

The okeanid looks at me. "New witchling, then?"

I nod.

With a grunt, the okeanid jerks her chin toward Esclamonde. "Ever seen eyes like these close up? You can hear the ocean's echo. Come here. I need a light spell. My oil lamps are low. We can barter."

Esclamonde looks to the ground. "I'm a mentee. I'm not qualified to barter yet."

The okeanid snorts. "You don't need a permit to barter, kid. Just something worth trading. Do you know how far from the ocean we are? My magic hasn't followed me here from Hypnos. A closer look at these eyes is all I have to offer." She gives up on the mentee, looking at me next. "What about you? Let's barter."

I float into the air and approach the window with my signature smile. "I can give you all the light you need, dear nymph. But I've seen okeanid eyes before. What spirits are you willing to barter?"

The okeanid ducks back into her house. The lamps inside haven't been turned on—I can't tell if she's out of magical oil or if it's too early for lights.

After a shuffle of wooden furniture and groaning floorboards, she steps back into view in the window frame and

squints at a bottle in her hand. “It’s some kind of liquor. I’m not sure how much is left.”

The okeanid hands me the bottle, then holds up an empty glass cylinder the size of her hand.

Inside the cylinder, a coiled wire runs from one end to the next. The shimmering copper helps store amorphous magic, called dove. Dove, often used to barter by wielders like me, can be used for just about anything—magical oil for lamps is a common request.

I raise the brown bottle of liquor. It’s only half-full, but a single cylinder of dove isn’t worth much more.

I reach out and tap the rounded end of the glass cylinder. At my touch, golden light fills the glass piece, catching on the wire inside and pooling like rich liquid.

The okeanid winces from the light, then she turns to set the cylinder down. Out of view, it fills her ruddy kitchen with honeyed hues.

“You didn’t have to give that much dove.” The okeanid sets her burly arms on the window frame and folds them. “I only had enough to barter for what’s left of the liquor.”

I take a long swig of the sweet brandy and drift back to the ground near Esclamonde. “We’re squared.”

With a yawn, the nymph looks back at Esclamonde. “Welcome to Luz, little witchling. What are you so nervous about? Ninigone might spin all this bullshit about rules, but there are only two things a new wielder needs to know in Luz—and I’m sure you’re already aware of one of them.”

Esclamonde nervously looks at me. Eventually, she shakes her head.

“When in doubt, do as the nymphs do.” The okeanid lowers her chin. “And *always* step lightly on the triplemoon.”

Esclamonde nods. “Always do as the nymphs do, and always walk lightly on the triplemoon. Got it.”

The okeanid’s turquoise eyes twinkle like the pale oceans in Hypnos. Cast against the midnight hue of her skin, it’s

difficult to look away—even for me. Esclamonde doesn't stand a chance. The mentee's mouth falls open as she locks eyes with the nymph; the nymph bears a sultry smile as she drinks the witchling's fleeting *desita*.

The witchling is too young and inexperienced to even register the exchange.

"Esclamonde." I clap my hands, jarring her from the trance. "Let's go. Say goodbye to the okeanid."

Esclamonde chirps a goodbye, which the nymph returns with a wink.

I guide us east toward my warren as the sun rises. We walk slowly; she sticks close to my side, bumping into my shoulder as she stares around with her neck tilted back.

Asymmetrical houses stacked at odd angles fill the residential arts district. Though painted brightly and covered with ornaments, the houses don't look particularly stable.

One of the few things wielders and wolves have in common is how leery we are of nymph construction. Wielders built Antigone by weaving iron between the stone pillars that crane skyward, while the wolves pulled slabs of marble from Velm to carve impenetrable cities.

The nymphs tend to settle for whatever resources are within reaching distance.

"Miss Helisent," Esclamonde murmurs, "I feel a little..."

She feels the haze that comes after *desita*.

The fourteen nymphs she grew up with must not have clued her in to the workings of *desita*. It's a feeling brewed between two or more people, a type of collective well-being that is tangible enough for the demigods and their nymphs to feel. To *consume*.

Desita, that collective feeling of joy and bliss, animates the demigods; and what gives the demigods life is then given new animation through the elemental powers of the nymphs.

It is a living system that connects the nymphs to their demigods.

Those are the barest basics. And if Esclamonde doesn't know them, then it means she likely spent most of her life in Antigone's upper tiers. Far from the ground. From the nymphs. From their demigods.

My gut sinks as I realize just how far behind the witchling is. "What—did you grow up in Antigone and *never* leave?"

Esclamonde's voice lowers. "I don't like ground-walking, so I never went to any of the festivals in Septegeur."

"Good to know." *I'm going to kill Ninigone.* "What you just felt is called desita."

"I know what desita is—or I've heard of it." The witchling chatters like a scholar in the making. "It's what the demigods take from the nymphs that live in their territory. They come to festivals to take desita from all who attend—wielders and wolves, too."

"They aren't *taking* desita." I roll my eyes at her phrasing—she must be straight from Antigone, after all. "The nymphs organize festivals to *offer* desita to the demigods. The bigger the group, the better the desita."

"Septegeur is a forest, so it's home to dryads and their dryad demigods. I think there are three. You should keep an eye out for them the next time you go back—the demigods are the real reason Antigone is bountiful. Wielders can build all we want, but without the demigods, the earth suffers. And what good is a city built in a dead world?"

Esclamonde's boots shuffle to a stop on the dirt road. She bites her lip and glances back in the direction of the okeanid's home.

She points to the marigold house, dumbfounded. "My—bliss? *My* desita? I didn't think wielders could feel it..."

"We feel it. You had never seen eyes like the okeanid's before. Your wonder was desita, and she took a bit. It gives them energy. Don't let it scare you." I nod. "The nymphs aren't like us. They put a high value on joy. And the haze will

go away in a minute. Desita exchanges always give wielders a little hangover.”

Esclamonde pulls a notepad from her bottomless bag and jots down a few lines.

At the same time, I empty the bottle of liquor with a sigh. “And about the ground-walking—I know you don’t like it, but wielders don’t hover in Luz. We walk like the nymphs and wolves. The only exceptions are for children and adults over one hundred years—and even they use a lilith instead of free-floating. Did you bring one?”

The witchling reaches into her bottomless bag. She pulls out a ratty sitting cushion, which barely squeezes from the bag’s narrow opening. The square lilith’s white fabric is faded, the red stitching half pulled loose.

Esclamonde smiles as she shows off the shitty lilith. It floats in the air at her hip, as though waiting for her to take a seat. “My grandmother made it when...”

She trails off as I guide us onto the largest street in Luz’s northern district, lilith following. Alleys branch out from the wide path, leading like tributaries further into the city. Mature trees line the road, disappearing into the apartments and shops around them. Some trunks act as load-bearing pillars before poking through the roof to offer shade.

As we amble, shutters clack open and wake the canaries. Soon, the birds’ high-pitched songs echo through the quiet street. A few shops have already opened their doors. One baker slaps fresh bread onto a cart, while a florist two doors down mists her seedlings.

I stop so Esclamonde can take in the scene.

I can’t remember my first time in Luz. What it felt like.

I was already out of wonder by then.

Still, I try. “Pretty different than Antigone, huh?”

She doesn’t respond, and I realize she’s not focused on the scent of the bread or the birdsong above. Her eyes glitter

as she watches a trio of wolves exit a building on the other side of the street.

She takes a subtle step behind me.

I study the trio of tall brawny women, but don't find anything suspicious about the wolves. Each has their blue-black hair slicked back into a modest bun, and each wears three golden torcs—two around their upper arms and one around their necks. One even has loose uncurled bottoms to her harem pants—a style unique to Luzian wolves.

I crane my head toward Esclamonde and whisper, “So you had fourteen nymphs at your school. And how many wolves?”

Her body tenses, causing her knees to hike up toward her chest as her feet lift from the ground. She clasps my arm tightly as she involuntarily hovers into a compacted shape.

“I'll take that as zero.” I pause as the wolves head in the opposite direction as us, hoping Esclamonde will calm down. They don't spare a glance in our direction, chatting happily. “But you *have* seen a wolf before, right?”

“Of course, I've seen a wolf before. It was a drawing. Very realistic. I found a book—”

“That doesn't count.” I rub my temples with mounting frustration. “Okay, look, what the fuck are you doing in Luz if you're not much of a ground-walker and you're terrified of wolves?”

Part of me wonders if the Class is testing me.

They've kept quiet about my existence since I left Antigone six years ago and Alita four years ago. Suspiciously quiet.

Esclamonde scoots her butt onto her square lilith, tucking her legs under her and letting her red cloak slip behind her. *Wonderful*. She floats at my side as I continue toward the warren.

I try to summon the kindness Ninigone suggested before. “Here's the thing, Esteban—there are just as many

wolves in Luz as there are wielders. You can't shit your skirt every time you see one. It's offensive. The War Years ended before your grandmother made her lilith. I know they still talk about Bloody Betty and all that other bullshit in Antigone, but the rest of the world has moved on. Okay?"

As more windows open to the morning, the pastel canaries common to Luz line up along the terraces. They chirp and hop for food, which many residents oblige by tossing out scraps. Nymphs and wielders and wolves lean from their windows to greet their neighbors, chatting about strange dreams, bartering for breakfast, and predicting the day's weather.

As Esclamonde stares around, her apprehension fades into curiosity.

She shouldn't be sitting on the lilith, but I let it slide. She's certainly a nervous type.

I go on, "And you didn't answer my question. Why come to Luz if you're terrified of wolves and ground-walking?"

Esclamonde tucks her choppy white hair behind her ears. "Because you're Helisent West of Jaws. You're the most powerful witch in Mieira. My mother said so."

I narrow my eyes and study her features. I think back to the years I spent in Antigone and try to assign her features to a family line. She has the arched curved nose and wide eyes all wielders share, but her face is narrower than most.

I come up short. "What's your full name, witchling?"
"Esclamonde Black Rock Antigone."

I try to remember if I knew anyone from the Black Rock neighborhood in Antigone. It was a residential area for traditional wielders who could trace their lineages back to heroic acts from the War Years. Of the Class's six members, three grew up in Black Rock.

At least that explains her fear of wolves.

I lower my voice again. "Here, I'm just Helisent. No West of Jaws. No 'most powerful' of anything. Got it?"

Esclamonde's face tenses. "But you're the—"

"The nymphs place value on joy, on *desita*, not power. Not intimidation—they're not like the Class, Esclamonde. And I'm like a nymph at heart. All I want from life is a little bit of bliss."

I recite the mantra in my head so often that it sounds weird being spoken aloud. Somehow, it's less comforting.

Finally, my building comes into view. "We're almost to the warren."

As the arts neighborhood bleeds into the market district, the modular wooden homes give way to cobbled, three-story buildings. Arched windows encircle the cobbled edifice where I live in an apartment with seven others. Though less colorful than the rest of the street, and certainly colder, little noise escapes the walls.

I point to the uppermost archway, which is painted peach like my robe. Drooping plants hang from the ledge, and white canary poop dots the painted stone.

"That's home." I grab the witching's wrist before she mistakes it as an invitation to float up. "We take the stairs."

The foyer is frigid and dim in the early morning. Already, a ruckus echoes from the five apartments inside. The witchling hesitates at each doorway, as though she's never heard a lover's quarrel or the high-pitched squeals that accompany a cold bath.

Her face tightens as we reach the landing on the top floor. The sound of sleepy moaning drifts from the seam beneath the door.

Esclamonde stares at me, face tense.

"I told Ninigone I lived in an *adult* warren..." I roll my eyes. "Look, I don't remember what it was like to be twenty, so you'll have to remind me if we're doing something that makes you uncomfortable. There are eight of us. Six nymphs, two wielders. Remember, the nymphs will prioritize your well-being with the same attention and care as

their own. If I'm not around, just hint that something displeases you and they'll probably come up with five solutions. Okay?"

Esclamonde moves her gaze to the door handle. "And the other wielder?"

"Oh, his name's Pen. He's from Alita. He's basically a nymph."

She nods. "Okay."

I open the door and then slip aside, quickly shutting it behind me to block the mentee's view.

Like all other warrens, the only walled room in the apartment is the bathroom. The open rectangular space is divided by stacked plants, which crane toward the four massive windows where a few canaries lurk in search of breakfast.

A pile of mats, pillows, and blankets is laid out before the largest window in the center of the room. Toward one end, slack hands and feet poke out from the blankets, twitching now and then; I estimate at least four nymphs lay sound asleep beneath.

The other three are easier to pick out.

Onesimos lays on top of the covers, touching himself as he stares at Zopyros and Pen. Zopyros sits up as though she's just woken, blanket pooling in her lap to expose her freckled pale skin. Pen's wiry white hair pokes out from the blanket's edge as he kisses and nuzzles her breasts. One of his square hands reaches up to caress her back.

Onesimos's expression lightens when he notices me. "Good morning, darling witch."

I clear my throat to get their attention, but all I receive are lazy, invitational smiles from the trio.

Wishing I could join, I stare at the ceiling and break the news instead. "Look, you're all going to hate me, but there's a terrified witchling outside. Ninigone says it's time for me to become a mentor."

The nymphs don't look too surprised. Pen, on the other

hand, lifts himself onto all fours and sits back, staring at me as though he's about to scream the word *no*.

I get the worst of it out before he can. "She's only twenty, so... get dressed. And she's from Antigone."

Zopyros, a hesperide, and Onesimos, an oread, look prepared to receive the witchling. Both wear faint smiles, eyes glittering as they stare at the front door behind me.

Pen, on the other hand, crosses his arms. The blankets are pulled back and collected around his ankles; aside from a string necklace, he's naked. "Ninigone made *you* a mentor? You're a city sponsor. This is way beneath you. How long is the witchling staying?"

I throw my hands up. "These are questions for the ether, Pen. Please just put your cock away so she can come inside and take a bath."

I lean back to open the door and angle my head outside. Esclamonde holds her shoulders as though afraid of losing an arm to the hallway's cool shadows.

I tell her, "You can set your bag down and take a bath. I'm sure you need one. Ready?"

Her eyes widen. "Are you sure that—"

"Yes." I have no idea what she was going to say, but life in Luz moves fast, and she's already behind. I grab the sleeve of her red cloak and guide her inside.

Onesimos smiles and waves from the center of the bed mats. "Welcome, witchling. I'm Onesimos Eupheme Jaws."

While okeanids have dark-brown skin that's cold as winter on the water, oreads like Onesimos have warm chicory-brown skin. His tight curls are the color of burned vermillion, just like his vibrant pupils. His affectatious grin tends to hide their beauty.

Zopyros leans against him. Side by side with Onesimos, her skin looks like speckled eggshells. "Hello, witchling. I'm Zopyros Left Hand Gamma." She points at the door at the far end of the room. "The bathroom is there. Helisent can

warm the water if you like. I always ask her to warm mine in the mornings. Aren't baths such a wonderful way to greet the sun?"

Esclamonde gulps audibly as she turns for the bathroom.

Though Onesimos and Pen are covered, Zopyros's breasts remain bared. Only thin wisps of her dark brown hair, dangling to her waist, cover her pink nipples.

"Okay." Esclamonde looks back at the bed mats with every other step. Her red robe catches on the doorframe and she rips it toward her before shutting the door.

A moment later, a shaking breath echoes into the main room. It's followed by a quick sob, then the sound of running water.

With the stuffy witchling out of sight, Pen extracts himself from the bed mats. His half-hard cock sways with each step as he heads toward the kitchen and pours himself a glass of water.

I stare after him, eager to commiserate about the witchling.

He leans against the counter, takes a long swig, and looks at me. Instead, he says, "Someone's trading information about Oko at Solace. Heard a naiad bring it up last night."

I look at the bathroom door, then back to Pen, then back to the bathroom door.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

CHAPTER 2
AN AMAZING PERSONALITY
SAMSON



*My son,
The greatest action is often inaction; your people will remember all
you never said. Your face is speaking to them, Samson. Your body.
Your ala. Words are nothing. They will not defend against Night.
They certainly did nothing against the wielders.*

I stare at the overstuffed satchel set before the door.
My gut drops before my mind catches up to the most probable conclusion.

He's leaving. Probably for good.

I rub the sleep from my face and search the halls for Rex. I can't see or hear him, but his scent drifts from the estate's farthest guest bedroom. I can tell by the scent's density that he's been there since he woke up; only a faint trail of his ala runs from my bedroom to his.

The blue rucksack before the door is meticulously packed, down to its shined buckles and leather straps. When Rex arrived at the Luzian Estate last week, I thought the bag's bulging sides meant he'd stay longer than a few days.

I rehearse a few lighthearted phrases to beg him to stay without actually sounding like I'm begging him to stay.

Look, I know I'm running out of freedom, but I'd like to enjoy my last months with you.

It sounds too needy.

I rephrase. *Rex, what if we just let things be as they are? Just for as long as we can?*

It's too vague.

I clear my throat and take a deep breath. It does little to calm the deepening rut in my stomach.

Here's the truth. *Rex, I'm not prepared for what happens in Silent City, and you're the only being that makes me think I'll ever fill Imperatriz's shadow.*

I roll my shoulders and prepare to face Rex when I hear his feet against the marble floors. Like with most housing in Velm, the Luzian Estate is kept minimal. Sounds reverberate; alas linger and intensify.

I listen closely.

Someday, I'll think back on this time when we could afford the delusion of being young lovers like everyone else in Luz.

Rex steps into the foyer with a sigh. Similar to his tidy satchel, his harem parents are neatly rolled at the ankles, and his long navy tunic smells of fresh cedar soap. Golden torcs hug his biceps, along with a third at the base of his neck. They twinkle as though newly shined.

His blue-black hair is slicked back into a tight ponytail, then looped to conceal its length.

Sneaking out of my bed at dawn is one thing, but tying his hair back is another.

Every rehearsed thought splinters in my mind and shatters like glass.

I sound just as desperate as I feel. "We'll part as friends, then?"

Rex clears his throat, reaching back to feel at his tight bun. “You smelled my hair last night, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t realize it would be the last time.”

Rex heads to the door and reaches for his satchel. With a few brusque movements, he loops his arms through its straps and adjusts its weight on his back.

He sighs and licks his full lips. I try not to stare at his features, try not to feel like they’re a part of my own face. “Samson, we’ve had our fun. Seven years of it, if I’m counting correctly.”

“Nine years, if you count our first summer in Mort.” I’ve never considered myself a petty wolf, but I guess there’s always time to learn more about myself. A good leader should be honest about his faults—I’ve found it usually involves learning something the hard way. I am Samson 714 Afador. I am the imminent Male Alpha of Velm. “And I can’t believe you’re doing this.”

Normally, Rex’s fixated stare and the blue hue of his black eyes comfort me. Seeing his precise mind at work behind his calm focused features reminds me that I’m capable of the same degree of self-control and insight.

This morning, it feels more like an act of war.

Not only has Rex tied up his hair to lessen the potency of his ala, but now he wants to manage a final goodbye with the same casualty as our earlier partings.

His words, at least, are weighed. “When Night returns, you’ll be marched into Silent City and married to Brutatalika or Menemone. I’ll be married shortly after. What else do we need to hash out here, Samson? We both know what Velm expects from us.”

He’s right.

And still...

I glance at the shined marble walls and feel the cold chill of the stone creep into me. Despite the vibrant and bustling city outside, I feel like I’m standing in a tomb.

For a long moment, neither of us speaks.

Finally, Rex says, "I shouldn't have tied up my hair. I just don't want this to be any harder than it already is."

I shrug. Even if I won't have one last intimate scent, I have the remnants of his ala tangled in my sheets. With no visitors expected in the coming weeks, I'll at least have his ghost for the rest of my time in Luz.

I cling to this and let Rex decide when my silence is enough.

With a heavy sigh, he turns and slides the door open. He stares into the narrow courtyard. Lily pads float in a marble basin filled with water, surrounded by ripe grass. It's a far cry from the madness of the city waiting beyond the shoulder-high marble wall.

Luz's cacophony floats over to us.

Echoes of laughter and the hustle of wooden carts skitter through the empty halls behind me. The scents of leaves, freshly baked pies, burning peat, and the musk of healthy bodies are close behind.

Rex looks back over his shoulder. The street's noise fades his question. "Do you know of a place called Soulless?"

"Soulless? No."

"It's on the outskirts of the city, near the watermills and magical processors. It's one of the taverns where wielder and nymph bounty hunters trade information. Yesterday, I had a drink with Ferol nearby. I overheard a naiad bring up a witch named Oko. They were talking about trading what they knew about her at Soulless."

I stare at his profile while my mind chases his words.

Oko.

"Did Ferol notice?" I ask.

Rex flinches, as though offended that I'd insinuate he told Ferol about my interest in Oko. "No. I said nothing." Then he clears his throat. "Goodbye, Samson."

I don't say goodbye.

I watch him step into the courtyard, then reach back and slide the paneled door shut to seal me inside the frigid marble walls.

It's the only revenge I'll ever level against him—the withholding of that final goodbye.

It won't feel like much at first.

But I know better than anyone how the years will compound that wordlessness into something more poisonous than a seething.

I cry where I stand, then wipe my face clean.

That's the worst thing about the marble walls common to wolves: even a whisper echoes.

I meditate in the interior garden, forgo the meditation for chain-smoking, then make my breakfast. I cry before I eat, and then again after. At least I'm full.

It's not all Rex.

There are a lot of marble things that I can't handle.

By midday, I'm calm again.

I pass the basin of water in the courtyard on my way to the street.

When wolves, wielders, and nymphs built Luz over two centuries ago, my people stuck to the southern outskirts, close to the plains of Gamma, which lead into the towering mountains of Velm.

The first marble buildings erected in Luz have since been converted into schools and housing. Aside from the private estates shared by Velm's Alphas, the rest of the neighborhood's constructions are decidedly Luzian: cobbled stone, wrought iron, and brightly painted wood.

Some like to say Luz was where peace was born between

Mieira, land of nymphs and wielders, and Velm, land of wolves.

But that peace quickly took a hedonistic turn. (Some like to say that's how Luz's peace has survived so long.)

I head east from the estate. I follow a marble irrigation canal eastward, toward the markets. I don't know where Soulless is, but the watermills are easy enough to find.

I stare at the trickle of crystalline waters, attempting to angle my face away from the wolves, wielders, and nymphs who hustle by on the street. As one of the most diverse cities in Mieira, I don't often stick out—but wolves who notice me offer at least a nod of respect or a polite smile.

Before I cross a single street, four wolves acknowledge my passing.

My father, the Male Alpha of Velm, has a more commanding ala. As the *Kulapsifang*, or inborn Alpha of my generation, my scent is almost just as noticeable to passers-by.

I light the cigarette I rolled in the estate. The smoke and scent help hide my face and ala. While heading to a seedy tavern in search of information from a bounty hunter isn't strictly forbidden for Velm's upper echelon, I'm running parallel to a line that shouldn't be crossed.

Wolves don't bounty hunt like wielders and nymphs.

Only war bands are permitted to track perpetrators. And when they find them, regional pack leaders decide on a punishment. Eventually, though, that authority tracks back to Bellator. To Velm. To my father and my future throne.

I pause as a wolf steps in front of my path.

His ala wafts over me as I study his wide, pleasant face. Though his scent is powerful, at least past its 400th generation, his upper arms and neck are free of golden torcs. His shoulder-length hair is untied and messy. Rather than navy blue, he wears long white layers.

An unnumbered wolf.

My mind switches to my arms and neck where my own torcs hold me lightly.

I study the wolf's measured smile as I exhale a plume of smoke.

I never know how to relate to outsiders.

"Samson 714 Afador!" The wolf angles his body to subtly block the pedestrians around us.

To his left stands a tall hesperide. Her light-brown skin is speckled with pale marks, like the birch trees that crane near riversides. Though most nymphs and wielders stand at the chest of a wolf, she reaches past my shoulders.

"Hello, good morning—are the demigods smiling upon you today?" The unnumbered wolf's smile expands, as though expecting a genuine response from me.

As a representative of Velm, and the heir to its leadership as the Kulapsifang, I hear unsolicited opinions and advice almost daily. My interactions range a dizzying spectrum. Last week, an okeanid far from home asked to touch my hair. The week before, a wolf from Gamma approached me about reforming a war band.

There are four responses that work on any occasion.

Today, I pick my favorite. "You look healthy."

The unnumbered wolf raises his eyebrows. "What a response. Thank you. I suppose I do look healthy. My name is Gautselin Mort."

Without a generational number (714) or a family line (Afador) to cite, unnumbered wolves name themselves like the nymphs and wielders: after the neighborhood or region where they were born.

He gestures to his companion. "This is Chariovalda South of Gamma."

I turn toward the hesperide. She smiles with twinkling white teeth. "Hello, Samson 714 Afador." She tilts her head, which sends her bejeweled necklaces shifting loudly into new positions. They twinkle like her hazel eyes.

“You also look healthy.” I turn back to Gautselin Mort and fish for a polite way to ask what the fuck he wants. “Have the demigods smiled upon you today?”

“They smile upon me each morning.” Though his words are vague, his continued smile is genuine.

Gautselin gestures toward an open plaza nearby; the temple district. Massive stone slabs frame an open space in the triangle where the Irme and Septima Rivers meet to form the Mieira River. It was built for the demigods to observe the city and drink in desita at their leisure. Almost the entire city can pack into the vast space, which is outfitted with bare marble columns that stretch toward the clear sky.

Luz is a common stopover for hesperide demigods that come from the plains of Gamma, for dryad demigods that come from the forests of Septegeur and Rhotidom, and for naiad demigods that crawl out of the Septima, Irme, and Mieira Rivers.

I inhale a deep breath in search of the hypnotic ala of a demigod, but can't find one.

Gautselin says, “A hesperide demigod is on the way from Gamma now. It's bringing a queen.”

That explains the group of nymphs frantically sweeping the worn stones. Only the imminent arrival of a demigod, especially one with a queen or king in tow, can spur such frantic work from a nymph.

Chariovalda tilts her head again as she studies the temple district. “The hesperide demigod and its queen will bring a great bounty. I can feel both already. This queen is young; her fields bore grains through the rainy season. She will rule for at least a decade.”

The nymph raises a hand and wiggles her fingers toward me. The familiar fragrances of Gamma's plains lift from her fingernails in a magical gust: foxglove, wheat, barley, nitrogen-heavy soil, fetid compost, dry fibers.

Though not a demigod or a Gammic Queen, Chariovalda has access to some of their elemental powers. To a lesser degree, her magic can also influence the wind and crops.

I make a mental note to study the nymphs more.

The Male and Female Alphas rule Velm; the Class rules wielders. But nymph magic and power are bound to geography and the whims of their demigods. A nymph's magic is tied to the environment where they were born, which means Chariovalda will lose her power if she wanders too far from Gamma.

Still, I'm not sure how a demigod chooses a queen or a king. All I know is that demigods pluck their leaders like fruits from groves then grant them special powers and rites tied to the land. They take them on a tour of neighboring cities to show the queens and kings off, to share their bounty, and then deposit them where they're needed most.

As Chariovalda mentioned, queens and kings perform incredible natural feats, like churning out grains during the rainy season.

Delightful as it is, it has nothing to do with me.

I turn my gaze back to Gautselin. "May you enjoy the bounty of the hesperide demigod and Gamma's latest queen."

He doesn't shift out of my path. "I'm here to offer my bounty to *you*, Samson 714 Afador." *Ah, there is it.* "Chariovalda and I run a pleasure house called Coil. It's located near the watermills. Think: red curtains and mirrors full of starlight. Right now, four unnumbered wolves work there."

I train my face in neutrality.

Even sharing a conversation with an unnumbered wolf grates at me. First, there's suspicion; wolves aren't born unnumbered. Why did Gautselin abandon his pack, his family, and his people to live untethered to the wolves? He may be a criminal.

Second, there's wariness; what does he want from me—

to be associated with the Kulapsifang, to have a friend close to the Alphas, to have some tie to his people? Just like I can offer no protection or justice to an unnumbered wolf, I also can't offer them a boon.

Lastly, there's reputation.

As I prepare to become Alpha as the Kulapsifang, I owe my people service. Unnumbered wolves, with no pack, no rank, and no family name, don't count. Unless one blocks my path, I don't acknowledge them.

Gautselin inches closer to me.

I study the gleam of the blue-black irises rimming his pupils. The faint lines of his cream-colored skin. My eyes flash to his neck and his bulging jugular.

"We would be honored if you visited Coil. I'm sure the thought of spending the night with an unnumbered wolf isn't appealing." Gaustelin scrunches his nose as though commiserating. "But we have the finest professionals from across Mieira—wielders and nymphs galore."

I look from the unnumbered wolf to Chariovalda.

Her smile is just as ardent and hopeful as his.

Gautselin takes a quick step away from me, clasping his hands behind his back. "I've kept you long enough. Enjoy your day, Samson 714 Afador. And please consider visiting Coil if you're ever in need of a warm body, a listening ear, or a goblet of liquor."

I step past the pair without another word.

Offers from pleasure houses aren't uncommon, though I've yet to take anyone up. With less than a year of freedom left, a warm body and a listening ear have rarely sounded better. A goblet of liquor, too.

At the last second, something else comes to mind.

I turn back to Gautselin and Chariovalda. "You said Coil is near the watermills. Do you know of a place called Soulless? I'm headed there now."

Gautselin slides his eyes to Chariovalda, then back to

me. He offers a casual shrug. “Sure, Coil is near Soulless. We can take you now if you’d like to go. They’re on the opposite side of Luz.”

I nod. “I would appreciate it.”

Chariovalda steps between Gautselin and me as we take off, which I also appreciate. It lessens the impression for passing wolves that I’m conspiring with an unnumbered wolf. Even though I am.

As we walk, Chariovalda wraps a hand around Gautselin’s wrist.

With every step, my eyes twitch in their direction and zero in on the light grip of her speckled skin against Gautselin’s pale wrist.

He barely seems to notice the touch.

The journey takes a while.

Each time a wolf approaches to greet me, offering something basic like a drink or food, or to make a request for me to pass on to the city leaders, Gautselin shuffles away with Chariovalda. The pair linger close by until the numbered wolves move on. If it bothers them to be wayward outcasts, they don’t mention it.

By the time we near the magical processors that precede the watermills, night has fallen. In the dimming light, I can hear and feel the deep infrasound of magic as it toils underground. Powerful wielders offer amorphous dove, which is distributed through subterranean channels throughout the city for infrastructural needs: running water, street cleaning, construction, trash disposal, storage.

Chariovalda doesn’t notice, but, like me, Gautselin continues to glance in the direction where the unsettling infrasound hums.

On the eastern edge of Luz’s market district, strings of lamps with magical oil crisscross the narrow streets, casting

the dark wooden buildings with golden light. Though none of the structures look fit to last a century, they've already survived two. The planked walls smell of warm earth and spices from the merchant stalls, which sit packed away for the night.

By the time Chariovalda and Gautselin deposit me at Soulless, I haven't thought of Rex in an hour. The pair leave with a goodbye and I watch them go, waiting for the nymph's small hand to encircle his wrist again.

I take a deep breath and turn back toward the bar. I roll another cigarette and light it as I study Soulless from the doorless entrance.

The lights hanging from the rafters flicker, as though running low on magical oil. Nymphs and wielders sit crammed together at the long bar. Puddles of booze and fallen shoes litter the floor at their feet. Before the bar, wooden chairs and tables dot the floor in disorganized clusters. I can't tell the informants from the bounty hunters—or figure out who's just a regular.

No one notices me enter.

I inhale deeply in search of a naiad's ala.

I find a pair of the nymphs huddled together at a table. Their flat light-brown hair pools on the table. Like okeanids, their elemental powers relate to water. The freshwater nymphs have similarly blue eyes, but their skin is almost as alabaster as mine.

I suck down the rest of my cigarette, then head over.

"Excuse me." I squat on my haunches so I'm not towering over the pair. "I'm looking for information about a witch named Oko. Do you know who I could speak with?"

The younger naiad looks away. The elder sucks on her teeth, then she jerks her chin toward the opposite end of the bar. "You're too late. Already traded what I know about Oko—and looks like someone's already bartering for the information."

I follow the naiad's gaze to where a trio barter in the corner.

A lean warlock with an emerald cape throws his hands out as he speaks with a witch. The witch wears an ostentatious velvet peach-colored robe. Behind the swaying robe lingers a young witchling in a red cape.

The witchling locks eyes with me.

She presses her back against the wall.

My attention immediately focuses on her physical signs; her heart rate increases, while her sickly-sweet ala grows in potency. Both are signs of fear. As I approach the group, I try to lessen my bearing and presence.

It rarely works.

I'm second in power only to my father, Clearbold 554 Leofsige.

The witchling grabs a handful of the witch's peach robe, but the witch swats her hand away without sparing a look from the warlock. Her peach robe floats into the air, as though she's lost track of her magic.

She and the warlock don't notice me until I'm a foot away.

By then, the witchling's knees have risen toward her chest. Her compacted body lifts from the ground. I can't remember the last time I saw a wielder get so nervous that they started hovering. I chalk it up to her young age and my terrifying frame.

The warlock offers me a smile when he registers my presence. "Welcome, friend. Would you like—"

"No!" The peach-robed witch spares a livid glance in my direction. She steps between me and the warlock, as though she could block me from view. "We're fucking bartering right now, Itzifone. Look, I'll—"

"How many times will I waste my information on you, Helisent?" The warlock bears his palms to her. "You aren't the only being in this world who's looking for Oko."

At least I know I've found the right informant.

"So?" The witch's voice raises to a screech. "You're going to trade it to fucking Clearbold's son?" She whips her head toward me, baring her teeth. "Hello, Samson 700-something Afador. Can't you see I'm a little fucking busy right now? Look—you're scaring the witchling. She'll be up in the rafters any second now. Why don't you have a seat and wait your fucking turn?"

It's not my first time dealing with a hysterical wielder.

I speak in a neutral tone. "It is for the warlock to decide whether or not to barter with me."

I look at the witchling, who's a few feet out of arm's reach above. I wonder where she's from—at least as far north as Antigone, possibly even Metamor.

I try for a smile as I study her wide golden eyes. "There's no reason for my presence to frighten you, young witch. My name is Samson 714 Afador. I'm the Kulapsifang of Velm—"

"She's not scared of you *specifically*; she's scared of all of you *in general*. Leave her alone." The witch bares her teeth at me again then looks up at the witchling. "What did I tell you? Get out your lilith if you're going to start hovering. Try to look dignified!"

Ah, the witch is a mentor.

I spare another glance at the mentee. Her jaw clenches as she reaches for her bottomless bag and shoves her hand inside without taking her eyes off me.

Itzifone raises his eyebrows with an optimistic grin. "What do you have to offer me, Samson? Let's barter."

Rather than interrupt again, the peach-robed witch turns. Her features strain as she looks from me to the warlock. Like all wielders, she has large eyes and a narrow nose, but her face is wider than most. Her round cheeks give her a younger appearance, but I can tell by her ala that she's at least thirty years old.

What does she want with Oko?

I tell the warlock, “I’m interested in hearing what type of information you have on Oko. I’d like to find her to have a conversation face-to-face.”

I don’t give up anything more than that. I’ve barely put the pieces together enough to know what I should ask Oko if I manage to find her.

The warlock nods. “Interesting. Unfortunately, I can’t provide hints about what information I have. I can only barter with you for the information provided by a naiad who ran into Oko near Perpetua. Now, what do you have to offer me?”

I hadn’t prepared an offer; I went from Rex leaving me to being escorted around the city by an unnumbered wolf and a hesperide.

I clear my throat. “What interests you?”

The warlock doesn’t skip a beat. “I’d like to spend a week in that estate of yours.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Which estate?”

Please say Luzian.

“Esclamonde, did you hear that?” The witch looks up at her mentee with a wild cackle. “He has so many estates that you have to be *specific* about which one you’re talking about.”

The warlock ignores her. “The *real* thing, of course. Bellator Palace—or I guess that’s not an estate, huh? I saw it in a book once. Looks very nice. A bit *cold* with all that marble, but they say the peat in Velm never stops burning. Oh! And the furs! What do they say about the furs of Velm...?”

A wielder has never stepped foot in Bellator Palace, but I don’t break the news to Itzifone. “Bellator Palace is not my home. I can’t offer you hospitality there.”

Itzifone nods and chews his lip. “Which palace is yours then? I thought they were all *yours*. The land, the palaces, the furs.”

“They belong to the *Alphas* of Velm. As such, they belong only to my father for now. I will inherit them in time.”

The warlock’s face twists. “So, you can’t offer me hospitality in *any* of the palaces?”

“I can offer you one week in the Luzian Estate, but we’d be sharing it.”

Itzifone points to his own chest. “Not for me.”

Fuck, that ended fast.

He turns his hands to point at Helisent while I wrack my brain for a better offer. “Back to you, witch. I’m decidedly unimpressed by the wolf’s first offer.”

She snorts. “Well, what the *fuck*, Itzifone. You just said you weren’t interested in bartering with me and now you’re here *begging* for another offer. Why don’t *you* tell *me* what you’re looking for?”

The warlock purses his lips as he thinks, glancing from me to the witch. After a long sigh, he offers me an apologetic shrug.

“I’d rather give you the information since I’ve been down this road with Helisent before. I mean, why keep handing someone information if they don’t use it? But, in the end, Helisent has something I’d very much like, and you can’t even offer me a week of solitude in the Luzian Estate. Maybe when you’re Alpha of Velm, my dear wolf.”

Helisent’s smile is saccharine, almost threatening. Again, her peach robe collects around her, as though she’s only half in control of her magic.

My jaw clenches. I look back to the warlock. “And what can the witch offer you that I cannot?”

Itzifone looks at the witch’s ample bosom and says, “An amazing personality.” He looks at me and shrugs again. “Sorry, friend.”

I clench my jaw and try to find the right words to convey that my search for Oko isn’t just personal.

Do you remember Imperatriz, the Female Alpha of Velm? Oko has information about her.

It's too accusatory.

I will give you whatever you want when I'm Alpha if you share this information with me. It's more valuable than you could understand.

Too desperate.

Oko might be the only person with information that can lead me to my mother or her remains.

That's it—

If only I could force myself to say those words.

I look from Itzifone's golden eyes to Helisent's smug grin. I even glance at the terrified witchling watching from the rafters above.

A laugh from the bar jars me.

Without another word, I turn away from the wielders and leave the bar.