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)

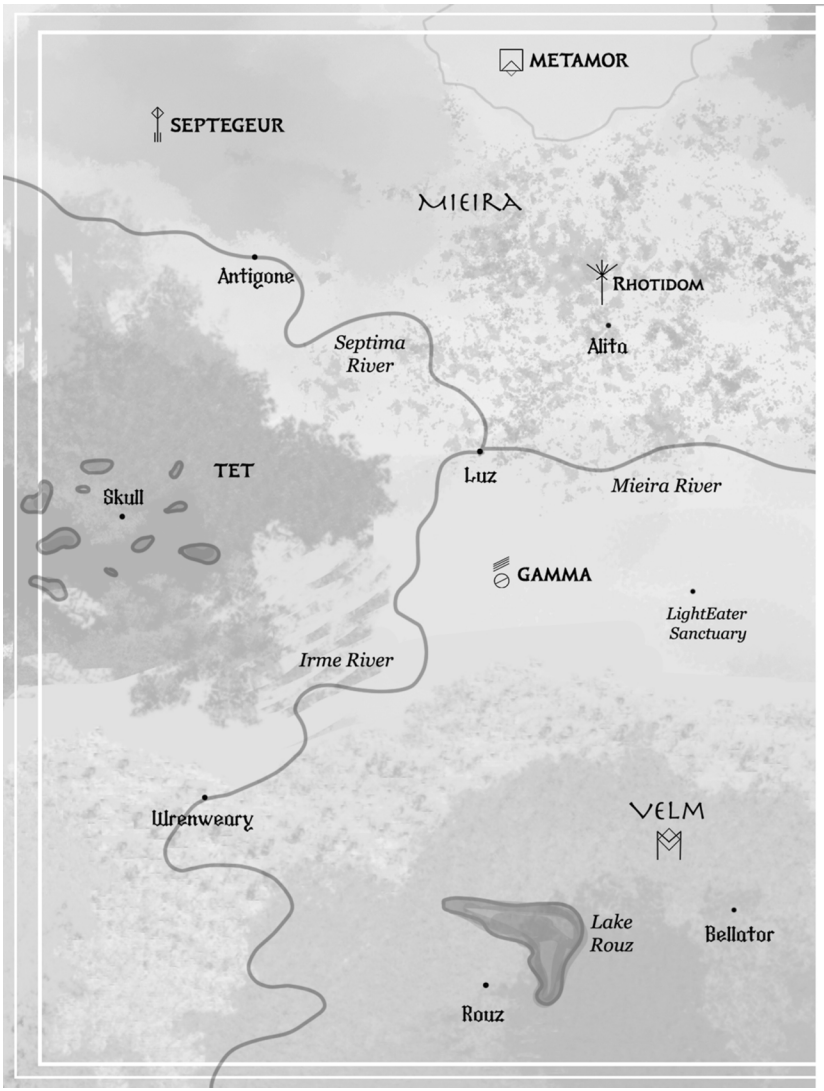
SPECIAL NOTE

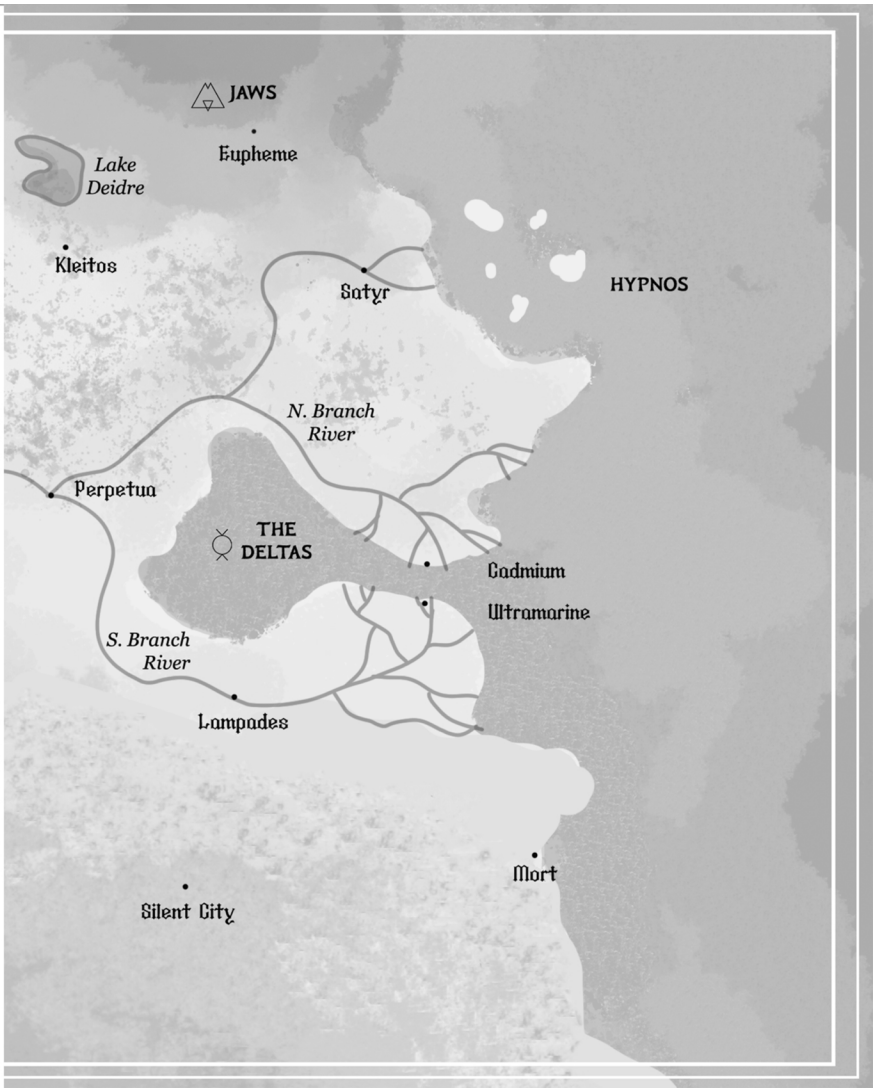
There are three things you should know about this book.

First, it's pronounced *an-tih-go-nee* (Antigone), *its-if-foh-nee* (Itzifone), and *nih-nih-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.


METAMOR
SEPTEGEUR
MIEIRA
Antigone
RHOTIDOM
Alita
Septima River
TET
Skull
Luz
Mieira River
GAMMA
LightEater Sanctuary
Irme River
Wrenweary
VELM
Lake Rouz
Bellator
Rouz


JAWS
Eupheme
Lake
Deidre
Kleitos
Satyr
HYPNOS
N. Branch
River
Perpetua
THE
DELTAS
Cadmium
Ultramarine
S. Branch
River
Lampades
Mort
Silent City

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CHAPTER 1

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.