

# ROAR

Cora Carmack



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  
NEW YORK

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## PROLOGUE

He had waited for this day for so many years. It had been the thing that kept him alive when all the others had died, that had kept him sane when madness was his only friend. It drove him forward when his life had not seemed worth living.

*Revenge, swift and sweet.*

He'd turned the skies to fire and ocean waves into weapons. He'd blown winds strong enough to topple walls and dropped twisters from the sky like rain. He'd brought fury and ruin like Caelira had never known, but it was not enough. Revenge had slipped through his grasp this time, but he believed in second chances.

It was time again for tempests to reign, to purge those undeserving of their magic, and start again. This was a war only he could wage.

For the storms of his world were violent, hungry beasts intent on destruction and death and despair. And they called him master.

When the first tribes of Caelira forsook their ancestors in the stars, the goddess Rezna fashioned for herself new children. Children of light and air and water and fire, children whose wrath and sorrow matched her own. And from the heavens, she poured her progeny out upon the land. The skies went dark and the earth trembled, and all of man knew Rezna's rage.

—*The Origin Myths of Caelira*

# 1

*You are lightning made flesh. Colder than falling snow. Unstoppable as the desert sands riding the wind. You are Stormling, Aurora Pavan. Believe it. Believe it, and others will too.*

It was a vow that her mother, Queen Aphra, made her swear on the day she reached twelve years. She had gripped her daughter's shoulders tight, and Rora could still remember the pinch of pain, the furious beat of her heart as she saw how afraid her mother was and learned to be afraid too.

Today that fear had led Aurora Pavan to sign her life away before she ever had the chance to really live it.

As she was primped and prettied like some kind of sacrificial offering, her mind remained stuck on her morning spent in the throne room. She recalled the rasping sound as the treaty was unrolled and the way her fingers suddenly felt too weak to hold a quill. Many days of her sheltered life had been spent writing out ideas and facts and figures for her tutors, yet in that moment, she had struggled to remember the letters of her name. Then she had met her mother's eyes, and those familiar words came to her again.

*Colder than falling snow.*

That was what Rora had to become as her shaking hand sealed her fate with a scratchy, bleeding line of ink. And now hours later a

stranger peered back at her from the looking glass, powdered white so that none of her flaws would show.

Rora's white-blond hair had been curled and bound up in an elaborate ceremonial headdress that was crowded with jewels, flowers, and four jagged crystals cut like bolts of lightning to mimic her mother's sky-fire crown. Headdresses honoring a family's ancestors were an important part of the Pavanian tradition, from the upper echelons of nobility to the poor and working class. They were donned for birth and death and every major life event in between, including betrothals. But this headdress was larger than any Rora had ever seen. It had to be anchored to the thick metal necklace she wore about her collar with embellished fastenings, and it weighed on her nearly as much the events of the night still to come.

The shimmering white powder covering her already pale skin made her look like she'd just emerged from a blizzard. Her ribs were tightly bound in a corset that squeezed and squeezed until it felt like all her organs were in the wrong place. Over that was a heavy, beaded gown whose neckline dipped low, revealing far more cleavage than she had ever shown. The fabric clung to her frame until it fanned out at her knees into a long train, and the color of the dress changed from white to ash gray to glittering black.

Rora looked exactly as her mother had always told her to be—lightning made flesh: blinding white and bright against a dark sky, and the train that pooled around her was the ground, charred black by her impact.

It was stunning. Exquisite, really. Even Rora, who hated dresses of all kinds, could tell that. It was also a lie. Every jewel, every bead painted a picture of someone that wasn't her. But that was the goal for tonight's betrothal celebration . . . to be someone else, to be the perfect Stormling princess. Because if she failed, everything could fall apart.

A creak pierced the room, and every bustling body around her froze. Rora swore that the small sound moved through her bones the same way thunder did when it was close. Then the sinister tingle of storm magic spread over her like a second skin. Her gaze slid to the box her mother had just opened, to the jewels and stones inside that plagued her nightmares.

*Stormhearts.*

The hearts were not unlike the storms themselves—darkly beautiful but with an air of menace and deadly intent. It was an apt description of her future husband as well.

Slowly the room emptied of attendants and maids and seamstresses until only the queen and Aurora remained, ruler and heir. These Stormhearts had been passed down the Pavan family line for generations, the last remaining remnants of long-dead storms that her ancestors had defeated to gain their magic during the Time of Tempests. Back then, the continent of Caelira was ravaged beyond recognition, and people flocked to the Pavan family stronghold for sanctuary. They pledged service or goods or gold to live near those who had been blessed by the goddess with the ability to challenge the dangers of the sky, those that came to be called Stormlings.

Aurora's ancestors then passed along three things to their descendants—the crown of a newly formed kingdom, the hearts of the storms they had conquered, and the magic that ran through their blood as a result.

Without a Stormheart, a Stormling might have enough magic in their blood to influence small storms of their inherited affinities. But with one of those talismans amplifying their magic, one person could single-handedly bring down a tempest savage enough to wipe whole cities from existence. And tonight, as she and her betrothed were presented to the court, for the first time Aurora would wear the Stormhearts reserved for the heir.

Her mother lifted the first relic from the box, and the hair on Rora's arms stood on end. The air crackled, and she felt far more residual magic standing close to her mother than she ever felt holding the stones herself.

This Stormheart was a cloudy, pearlescent stone and represented skyfire, the strongest of her family's five affinities. When those jagged bolts of white fire streaked down from the sky, dozens all at once, it was her mother who protected the city of Pavan. And now that Aurora had turned eighteen, she would be expected to join in the fight the next time dark clouds rolled over their lands.

“Light in your blood, skyfire bows to you,” her mother murmured before settling the stone into the hollow that had been left for it in the center of the ceremonial headdress. Rora shivered, and her mother’s eyes darted quickly to hers. Queen Aphra interrupted the ritual to ask, “Did you—?”

There was such hope in her voice that Rora couldn’t bring herself to meet the queen’s eyes as she shook her head. Frowning, her mother bent to pick up the next Stormheart. This one was a deep ruby, thin and sharp like a shard of glass.

“Fire in your blood, firestorms bow to you.”

Firestorms built quickly with little warning, and hot embers fell like hail. They could singe straight through skin; and in the flat, grassy kingdom of Pavan, they could set the land ablaze in a blink. It was said to be the rarest of all affinities. Carefully, the queen slotted the gem into an open space on Rora’s necklace. It lay over her sternum with the sharp point coming to rest at the top of her cleavage. Several smaller versions of the crystalline lightning bolts that adorned her headdress fanned across her collarbone on each side of the bloodred Stormheart.

The queen added four more hearts to the ensemble, speaking the words that her father had once spoken to her. A flat blue stone set into a bracelet for thunderstorms. The heart of a windstorm, gray and cylindrical, slid into a socket on a thin silver belt around Rora’s waist. A jagged slate-gray piece for fog adorned her other wrist. And last, her mother lifted a silver ring adorned with a small black jewel. It was the only Stormheart in the box that wasn’t ancient.

No, this Stormheart was barely twelve years old. Rora’s brother, Alaric, had stolen it from a twister that had touched down near the southwestern border of their territory. Stormling families were limited to the affinities they inherited from their original Stormling ancestors, but some believed it possible, though wildly dangerous, to gain a new affinity in the same way the first Stormlings were said to have done—by stealing the heart of a storm and absorbing its magic. At eighteen, Alaric believed he could take down a twister and gain the Pavan family another affinity.

*He'd been wrong.* He had thrust his hand into the heart of the storm to claim it as his own. And when the battle was almost won, the storm's winds returned the favor, thrusting a tree branch through the heart of the Pavan heir.

The few devout priests in the kingdom who still followed the old gods had claimed it a reminder from the skies not to reach above one's stars. Sometimes Aurora wondered if they weren't still being punished.

The ring did not rouse at the queen's touch, but remained a cold, dead gem as she slipped it onto Rora's finger. It only would have worked for Alaric or his offspring. Rora and her mother pretended it was just a normal ring. Just as Rora always pretended to be something she wasn't. And her mother pretended she wasn't disappointed with her daughter. And that they all wouldn't have been better off if Alaric had lived.

Rora would keep pretending, through the celebrations and the wedding after that. And then her entire life. She would pretend that she did not desperately wish she were better. Different. *More.*

Her mother took her shoulders in that familiar hard grip. "Remember, be confident and controlled. Do not let them intimidate you."

"I won't."

"Do not speak more than you must. Keep a tight rein on your temper lest you—"

"Lest I give myself away. I know, Mother."

The queen paused, the curve of her lips pushing into a frown. "I know this isn't ideal. I wish we had all the time you could want and could wait to find you a love match or at least someone of your choosing."

"But we don't. We are out of time. I understand."

Arranged marriages were rare in Pavanian royal history. Often, rulers chose for love, like her mother and father. Others held contests of skill for young nobles to prove themselves to the heir. But soon the skies would bruise and bleed and howl as the Rage season drew its first breath, and if Aurora was not married by then, her own little kingdom of lies would topple.

“Promise me you will try to find the good in this. To find some happiness,” the queen said.

Rora nodded. She didn’t have the heart to tell her mother how impossible she thought that was with a man as hard and cold as Cassius Locke, the second son of the Locke kingdom. The Lockes by reputation were cunning, smart, and as vicious as the storms that plagued their city by the sea. If she showed a weakness, she had no doubt they would exploit it. And if they learned exactly what all the jewels and powder and fine fabrics hid? Aurora’s last hope to keep her kingdom would unravel.

“Are you ready?” her mother asked.

A small part of Aurora screamed in revolt; she wanted to ask for permission to leave, to disappear into the wildlands and find another life. But the queen had lost enough in this life. Her husband succumbed to a disease that her magic couldn’t touch. And her son had captured a storm’s heart at the expense of his own. And the only one she had left, her daughter . . . her daughter looked the part of the perfect Stormling princess—so impressive, so ethereal, that no one would ever dare to think the truth.

That she had no storm magic at all.

Aurora’s muscles twitched involuntarily as she stood outside the throne room, as if her body might decide to run without her mind’s consent. Two of her guards, Taven and Merrin, waited a few steps behind her. They followed her inside, and an eerie silence took hold after the heavy doors closed.

Moments later Cassius Locke melted out of the shadows, looking more like a villain than a prince—dressed all in black with dark hair and eyes to match. At twenty, he was a mere two years older than she. But the prince before her seemed bigger, older . . . much more a man than she had expected. He reminded her of those thunderstorms that stalled on the horizon—growing bigger and darker as they churned in on themselves.

Their gazes met, and she held his stare, shoulders square and back. Sweat dripped down her spine beneath the elaborate costume, and a headache knocked at her temples from the weight of the headdress, but she did not let it show. His eyes dropped, perusing her form. Rora's heart thumped a little faster. The longer he looked at her, the more uncomfortable she became. And she hated herself for it. For letting him get to her.

If her mother had taught her anything, it was that no one could make you feel small unless you allowed it. So she took a deep breath and let herself believe she was the fierce and powerful girl everyone thought she was. And she stared right back.

Maybe Rora didn't have magic, but Cassius didn't know that. She had spent her whole life preparing to be queen, and she'd be damned if she spared an instant of worry for what he thought of her. She evaluated him in return and spitefully hoped it made him uncomfortable. Starting with his neatly combed midnight hair, she assessed his looks—strong brows, straight nose, pointed chin. His face was almost too symmetrical, as if crafted by an architect. Rora frowned and swept her gaze down to his broad chest and large shoulders.

Instead of making him uncomfortable, *she* began to feel uneasy with her perusal. He was too attractive. Far more handsome than any of the local young men she might have chosen. But that beauty was tempered by an air of brutality—a hardness in his eyes and the precise, sharp movements of a man who was deadly and wanted everyone to know it.

He stood a handspan taller than she, a rarity for Rora's tall form. When she finally looked back at his face, he was quirked an eyebrow, one corner of his mouth lifted in a smirk.

“Don't stop on my account. Please, look your fill. See what you're getting, Princess.” He did a slow spin, giving her a full view. She meant to scoff at his arrogance, but the sound was strangled beneath a gasp when she saw him in profile.

The folds of his black tunic left a gap down the middle of his back, revealing something that looked like armor beneath; and down the line of his spine were sharp, unnatural protrusions.

He angled his head toward her and smiled. It did not look as a smile

should. It exaggerated the strong angles of his face, making him appear harsh . . . *dangerous*.

“Did you think you’d be the only one wearing hearts today?”

He turned fully and there, piercing the back of his tunic like monstrous vertebrae, were Stormhearts. Nearly a dozen. Some were familiar—the crystalline red of firestorms and pearlescent skyfire. Others were not like any she knew. And, unlike Rora, he even had duplicates.

“H-how?” Second sons never wore Stormhearts. Those remained with the ruler and the heir.

“These belong to me, not to the Locke kingdom.” Suddenly her corset felt far more constricting, like a snake coiling about her middle tighter and tighter. A *dozen* hearts of his own? Even with Stormling powers, to take the heart from a tempest was to court death itself. Many more than just her brother had died in such an endeavor. The history books chronicled the stories, and even those few who succeeded were later plagued by tragedy and destruction, as if the storms somehow sought vengeance after their demise. Clearly Cassius did not fear the wrath of gods or storms. If he truly had taken those Stormhearts for himself, he was dangerous indeed.

“I enjoy the way it feels,” Cassius said, his voice pitched deep. “To reach a hand into the dark depths of a storm and rip out its heart.”

A shiver of unease ran down her spine. If she had magic, could she ever take that much joy in destruction? He was watching her, *reading* her, and she quickly pulled on a blank expression. Other than not having magic, that was her greatest weakness as a royal heir. She felt too much, *thought* too much; and even with years of tutoring, it was still an effort to keep the tempest inside her from showing on her face. “How was your journey?”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Long. The mountain passes were more *troublesome* than we had expected this time of year.”

“Storms?” she asked.

“Blizzard.”

Rora’s jaw dropped. “But we’re still in the Slumber season.”

“The deluge of snow that nearly trapped us in the pass at Bone’s Break

cared little what season it was. The wildlands have been even more unpredictable of late.”

As far as she knew, the Lockes had no snow blood in the family line. The snowstorms never ventured far enough south to matter in their kingdom. “Your father—was he able to control it?”

He shook his head. “None of us had ever seen a blizzard. And my father rarely faces storms these days. My brother and I battle most.”

She supposed the same might have been true for her if she had magic. Instead, she and her mother had delayed the transfer of protection duties as long as possible. It was why she had to marry now. With the Rage season looming, they were out of time.

“How did you—”

Before the question was out of her mouth, he reached his free hand back to touch the Stormheart at the top of his spine. It was a glittering white, nearly silver, and almost perfectly round. “I did not have snow blood. But I do now.”

Cold chased over her skin, and she shivered. He stepped into her space, taking both her hands between his and sliding his warm palms over the pebbled skin of her arms. “My apologies.” His voice rumbled low in the scant space between them. “The newer hearts are . . . responsive.” He used her elbows to tug her close, her palms falling flat against his hard chest. His hands kept skimming over her skin, slower now, rubbing away the cold. She told herself to pull away, screamed it inside her head, but the blood in her veins felt slow and thick like honey.

The storms in Caelira were dangerous not just for their destructive capabilities but for their magic. A potent storm could mesmerize a person, and even if you knew you should run or fight, you were too enthralled to care. All were trained to guard their minds as children, but sometimes it still was not enough. Whole Stormling armies had been slaughtered without raising a finger in their own defense, stunned into stillness even in the face of death. She wondered if Cassius had found a way to steal that skill from the storms along with their hearts. Because despite her unease, she could not seem to step out of his grasp. He leaned in close, until she could feel his breath tickling over her cheek. “You remind me of it.”

She swallowed, and the skin that had pebbled from the cold grew blisteringly hot wherever his breath touched her. “Of what?”

“The blizzard. Fierce and beautiful and unlike anything my eyes have ever seen.”

Her stomach tumbled at his words, and her mouth turned dry. She might have looked fierce in her skyfire-inspired attire, but she did not feel it. Not with him so close. He’d barely touched her, and she felt as if each of her walls was collapsing one by one.

The Pavanian princess stared at Cassius, her mouth open slightly. When she first walked into this room, Cassius had thought her stunning in her savagery, colder than the depths of winter. Her dress seduced and threatened in equal measure, clinging to her curves and adorned with carved skyfire crystals that jutted from her shoulders and head like the spikes of a warrior’s armor. And yet for all that careful pagentry, it had only taken a compliment to rattle her. She looked very young in that moment, very *sweet*, which was never a good thing for a potential ruler to be.

She donned an unreadable expression before his curiosity was satisfied, and her lilting voice turned sharp. “Flattery is not necessary. The betrothal has already been set.”

Another blast of that wintery gaze. She had unusual blue-gray eyes—wide and expressive and lovely enough to bring a lesser man to his knees. Her confident demeanor would likely have convinced most, but he had sharpened his instincts in a court little safer than a lion’s den. Tension rode her—something between unease and fear. He gripped her wrist and had the inexplicable urge to drag her somewhere else, anywhere other than the betrothal celebration that waited upstairs with his family. She was a delicate songbird, and his father was a bird of prey. They all were, Cassius included. And he couldn’t help but wonder how long it would be before this little bird had her wings clipped.

She tugged her arm out of his grasp, hard. He was tempted to take it back. That was part of his nature . . . to take. But she fixed him with

a harsh glare, and he smiled in response. Perhaps his little bird had talons after all.

*Enough.* She was not *his* little bird. A jungle cat does not care for prey, even if he wants it with a hunger stronger than any he has ever known. He pushed his more ruthless instincts aside. That would be his greatest challenge here—fighting the need to seize, command, destroy. Those were the things he was good at. The things he'd been taught since he could walk. With Aurora he would have to coax and flatter and comfort—that was his path to control.

She said, "We should probably go. They'll be calling for us soon."

Cassius offered her his elbow, and her body was tense as she curled her hand around it. But before they even took a step, it became clear that the voluminous fabric at the bottom of her dress wouldn't allow them to easily walk side by side. Cassius took hold of her hand, sliding it off his arm and lacing their fingers together instead. Slowly, he lifted her hand until his lips dragged across her knuckles. The blacks of her eyes expanded, swallowing up that lovely color and adding just a touch of sin to her sweet. She jerked within his grip, trying to pull away. Chuckling low, he put some distance between them, but he did not release her hand.

It took entirely too long to cross the throne room in her elaborate attire. She had to kick the bottom of her dress out before she stepped so that it wasn't underfoot. Cassius was willing to bet that the dress and the headpiece weighed a third as much as she did or more, but her posture remained rigidly upright and her steps smooth.

By the time they reached the staircase at the back of the throne room, her lips were open and her breathing quick. He was beginning to hate this dress, even if it did cling to her curves rather spectacularly.

"You know," he said, "I have a knife. I'm tempted to cut off the bottom of that dress so you can walk like the rest of us."

A smile flitted across her mouth, small at first, then widening into something playful and *bright*. It called to the darkness in him. "You could try. But you'd likely find that knife at your throat with my mother on the other side of it."

"Not you?"

“If I had my way, we’d burn it once you cut it off. The headdress too.”

He smiled, and for the first time in a long while it felt almost natural.

“Perhaps we’ll celebrate our wedding with a bonfire.”

Every time he mentioned the wedding, she tensed. It was, of course, already agreed upon and signed in ink, but he had plans that would not succeed if she remained reluctant.

They ascended the first few steps slowly, the beaded fabric of her dress pulled taut around her legs. He wanted to throw her over his shoulder and charge the rest of the way, but he distracted himself with studying his surroundings instead. The hallway they were leaving behind was filled with paintings and statues of the Pavan Stormling ancestors. At the hallway’s end a massive, gold-painted statue of the current queen stood in a decorative alcove. Once upon a time, there might have been altars to the old gods—places to pray for good harvest or fertility or even luck—but those days were long past. Too many years of unbridled destruction and unanswered prayers.

No, Stormlings were the gods now. It was Cassius and the people like him who either answered prayers or ignored them.

“You said you faced a blizzard on your journey, but you did it without an affinity.”

He squeezed the hand he still held. “I did.”

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, scraping at the white paint that covered her skin. She asked, “Would you tell me about it sometime? The blizzard?”

He angled his head to smile at her again, and she looked away. *Sby*. So many pieces to her puzzle. “On one condition.”

“Which is?” He had expected her to be like most of the well-born ladies of the court in Locke: sirens with claws and teeth or frightened little mice, made to be gobbled up by this world. Aurora seemed neither vicious nor weak, but she was working so carefully to show him a façade that he could not pinpoint exactly *what* she was.

He had to know. It was his curse, the reason he thirsted for the thrill of a storm. He had to know how things worked, had to know

*why*. And the girl in front of him was no different. In fact, the need to unravel all her secrets was stronger than he'd ever felt because she would be *his*. And he had a feeling that conquering her would prove more exhilarating than any storm he had ever defeated.

Rather than giving her his condition, he released her hand and wrapped an arm around the slim circle of her waist. She tried to step back, but her feet tangled in her dress, and she gripped his tunic to stay upright.

There it was. A thread of fear in those eyes. He could have stopped then, but he had little self-control when it came to these things. It was not enough to see a measure of her emotions on her face. He wanted them all. So he pushed a little more. "You might be patient enough to fight with this dress, but I am not. Let me get us to the top of these stairs, and I promise to tell you whatever story you want to hear."

She jutted her soft chin out and said, "You have a deal."

The paint had begun to wear away on her lips, revealing rosy skin underneath. Was the rest of her flushed beneath all that powder? He dragged his fingers back and forth over her side, feeling hard ridges beneath the heavy, embellished fabric. "Corset?"

She sucked in a breath, and he knew he had shocked her. Innocent. He collected each morsel of her identity like a scavenger in the jungle. He saw just a sliver of panic before she hid it away and met his gaze.

Brave little bird.

"It will have to be like this." Before she could change her mind or reason could catch up to his own actions, he bent, winding his arms around her thighs, and lifted. She was tall but slight, and he held her tight against him so that her hips pressed against his chest and her stomach hovered in front of his face. She gasped and braced a hand on his shoulder, reaching up to balance her headdress with the other. He could not see her face like this, but he imagined she was scandalized. He chuckled. "I suppose I should have given you some warning."

He risked offending her or word getting back to her mother through the guards that followed them. Both of which paled in comparison to the risk of his father hearing of his actions. He was a child, poking at

a fish with a stick, rather than reeling it in the way he was supposed to. But he could not seem to help himself.

With some measure of urgency, he started up the stairs. Her body swayed toward him, her beaded dress scraping against his chin. This close, he felt her breathing speed up. The hand on his shoulder migrated to her chest, doing her best to cover the cleavage that was only just above his line of sight.

His instincts said to push again, but this time he reined them in. He kept his head down and quickened his feet. Again, the movement made her sway toward him, harder this time without her hand on his shoulder as a brace. He turned his face to the side, and her belly pressed against his cheek just for a moment before her hand was back at his shoulder, righting her position.

He took the last few steps at a pace that was nearly a jog, and when he reached the top, he looked up at her face. Her mouth was open and soft; he knew by the rise and fall of her body against him that her breaths were ragged, and in her eyes was a gleam. Not fear. Not panic. Not even anger.

*Want.*

He could work with that.