

ROAR AND LIV

AN
UNDER THE
NEVER
SKYY
STORY

VERONICA ROSSI

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HARPER

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

For Gui and Pedro

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I make my move when the tribe is asleep. Footsteps light, I skim across the dirt clearing, the chirp of crickets the only sound in the calm spring night. When I reach Perry’s house, I climb onto the window ledge and stretch up, grasping the rusted flashing that borders the roof.

Here goes.

One.

Two.

Three.

Swinging my legs out and up, I flip myself onto the roof. My landing is almost silent—just the brush of my knees on the stone tiles as I ease my weight down and the slosh of the jug of Luster that’s tied to my belt. People say I’m quiet as a cat. If they could hear as well as me, they’d know that cats are actually pretty loud.

Standing, I dust off my pants and scan the shadowed homes that circle the clearing. I hear a distant snore. The quiet creak of a door somewhere. Otherwise, nothing.

I head for the warm thread of light that seeps through a hole in the roof. It comes from a small gap where a tile cracked a few years ago during an Aether storm. I tread lightly and avoid the noisy spot where Perry and Liv are asleep in the house, but I’m not skulking up because of them. It wouldn’t matter if they heard me coming, but their brother, Vale, is inside as well—home only hours ago from his trip to the north—and I won’t chance waking him.

Kneeling by the sliver in the tiles, I bend down and peer through it, blinking as my eyes adjust to the light . . . and see a falcon with its wings spread wide. The tattoo on Perry’s back. He’s sprawled on his stomach in the loft, which is right below me. I try to look for Liv, knowing that if Perry is here she’s curled up in front of the hearth, but I have a poor angle. There’s only one way to see her tonight.

I bring my mouth to the hole and raise my voice just enough. “Perry! Wake up!” He doesn’t move, so I try a little louder. “Wake up, you oaf!”

Perry rolls onto his back and starts to snore.

There’s a saying that warns people against waking sleeping giants. I should listen to it, but I want to see Liv too badly. I pull the jug of Luster from my belt and unstop the cork, muffling the *pop* with my hands. It’s a shame to waste it, but I don’t see any other way—and this could be entertaining. I bring the jug to the gap and pour the Luster through it.

I hear a solid *thump* as the roof shakes beneath my feet. The warm light from inside disappears. Three fingers poke through the hole. Scrabbling, wrathful fingers full of murderous intent. After a moment, they’re replaced by a green eye that’s shiny like a cat’s—*really* like a cat’s.

Perry mutters a few curses and then asks, “What’s wrong with you?” His voice is muffled, but I hear him perfectly.

“Get Liv and meet me on the northern trail,” I say.

The cat eye moves left and right as Perry shakes his head. “No. Beach trail. Someone poured Luster on me and I have to wash it off.”

“Right. Beach trail in five minutes. Don’t take too long.”

Only one finger appears this time. The obscene gesture makes me grin.

I recork the Luster and climb down. There’s one more thing to take care of before I meet Perry and Liv. I cross the clearing again, guided by the light of the Aether, the rugged cottages of the Tide compound spreading around me.

At Brooke’s house, I rap softly on the door.

She eases it open a few moments later and smiles. “The cave?” she whispers.

Brooke is Liv’s closest friend, and for the past year she and Perry have been together. Half the time Perry has been trying to end it. Perry will probably be streaked at me for bringing her along, but so what? I like things the way they are.

I nod and lift the bottle of Luster. “You coming?” I ask, though I already know she is. Brooke is always up for anything when Perry is involved.

“I’ll get my bow.” She disappears into the house.

I look around the compound as I wait. When it’s quiet this way, it’s easy to remember the night I came here with my grandmother twelve years ago. I was barely seven then. Gram and I walked up out of the darkness on a spring night just like this. We’d been traveling for weeks and the soles on my shoes had worn through. Gram knocked on the first door we came to, and when Perry’s father answered, I thought he was the biggest man I’d ever seen. He invited us inside and had bread and fennel soup brought to us. Three kids watched us from the loft above as we ate, but it was the girl who couldn’t take my eyes off.

The next day Gram and I were given a room behind Bear and Molly’s house, which was really a storage shed with wooden walls that made clicking sounds as they expanded during the rainy months. My gaze moves to their house now. Gram is gone and the walls stopped clicking a few years ago, but I still sleep there.

Brooke returns with a bow and quiver over her shoulder and we make our way out of the compound without a word. Where we’re going, the northern cave, is an hour away. It’s still part of the Tide territory, but there’s always a risk when you travel that far away—especially at night—of being attacked by the dispersed. The danger is part of the fun.

As we approach the beach trail, I spot two tall figures with pale hair up ahead and frown. It ruffles me a bit, not being able to tell apart my best friend from my girlfriend from this distance. But then one of the figures dashes across the sandy trail and jumps into my arms and I’m reasonably sure it’s Liv and not Perry.

“Can’t you be away from me even a few hours?” Liv whispers in my ear.

I pull her closer. The way she feels against me makes my heart stop. “Of course not.”

“Me either.” She plants a kiss on my cheek and darts away before I can kiss her back, leaving me smiling at the darkness.

We walk the beach trail, winding our way to the ocean. When we reach the water, Perry launches himself into the dark waves as Liv, Brooke, and I wait along the shore.

I drop my arm over Liv’s shoulders. “He’s overreacting, isn’t he? I didn’t spill that much on him.”

Liv taps the bridge of her nose. “It was enough,” she says, and I understand. Like Liv, Perry is a Scire and has a sense of smell as strong as my hearing. It wasn’t being wet or sticky that was bothering him, it was the sweet scent of the Luster.

When he's done swimming, we pick up the northern trail, which will take us all the way to the cave. ~~The Aether does a slow dance above us, flowing in veils that give enough light to keep us from stumbling in the darkness.~~ Even so, Perry takes the lead because of his night vision. Because Perry is out in front, Brooke is out in front.

"Well?" I ask Liv as we settle into a comfortable pace. Her long blond hair shines in the darkness and the line of her nose is painted in blue Aether light. "How was he?"

He is Vale, Liv and Perry's older brother. He's also the bastard who leads the Tides as Blood Lord and who has never approved of my relationship with Liv.

"He's fine," Liv replies. "He was tired from the trip. I could tell he was anxious to get home." Vale arrived earlier, after supper. For the past month, he's been away negotiating with a northern Blood Lord, Sable of the Horns. The Tides' food situation is getting desperate. Aether storms for the last few winters have been brutally strong, torching stretches of farmland, so our crop yields have dropped lower than ever. Vale told us that when he returned from seeing Sable, he'd have solutions. He promised us we wouldn't go hungry.

"He was in good spirits, seeing Mila and Talon," Liv continues. Vale's wife and son are both ill. It's been hard for Perry and Liv, and I can't imagine how that must make Vale feel. I try *not* to think about it. I'd rather not waste my sympathy on him.

Liv kicks a stone. I hear it skitter over the dirt trail. "I think he was relieved to see they're doing well. I mean . . . as well as can be expected. He spent most of the night telling Talon about his travels through Ranger's Edge. He said it was the hardest journey he's ever taken. That he didn't know what cold was until this past month."

I nod. The Edge is known for its harsh winds and icy slopes. "Anything else?" I ask. Like everyone else, I want to know what solutions Vale has come up with.

Liv is quiet for so long that I begin to wonder if she heard me. Finally she looks over and says, "He asked me to go hunting with him in the morning."

My knees lock up. "He did?"

Liv turns when she realizes I've stopped. She nods. "Perry was there too, but Vale was clear. He only wants me to go with him."

"Huh."

"Yeah," Liv says. "Huh."

As we resume our walk, I can't stop thinking that this request—command?—is strange. Vale seldom hunts; he's usually too busy attending to his duties as Blood Lord. When he does hunt, he rarely includes Perry or Liv. My guess is that he doesn't like competition and wants to be the only Scire.

There's little warmth between the siblings now, but it wasn't always this way. When their father was still Blood Lord, they were close. We all knew what happened to Perry in their house when Joda drank, and I think the terror of those nights kept the three of them bonded. I can still remember Liv and Vale sitting on either side of Perry in the cookhouse, pressed against him like a human shield after he'd taken a beating. But when Vale became Blood Lord after Joda died, things changed. Vale kept Liv and Perry at a distance now. The day he put the Blood Lord chain around his neck, he became the lord first and their brother second.

Liv's voice pulls me from my thoughts. "What do you think he wants?"

"Maybe he just wants to hunt," I say, but we both know that can't be true.

Vale always has hidden motives.

After an hour, the trail brings us to a bluff overlooking a small cove. Perry and Brooke have already climbed down to the beach. I see the flash of sparks below—a blade striking flint. Perry is at work starting a bonfire.

Liv and I descend the slope, a climb we've done a hundred times. When I hear her foot slide on the loose dirt behind me, I offer her my hand. "Here, love."

"I'm fine."

"Well, I'm not. I'm scared. Take my hand?"

She humors me—I never fall—but I get what I want: her hand in mine. An excuse to feel a bit of her strength as we make our way down the hill. And a window into her thoughts.

We climb a little farther down before I hear her.

Still scared, or are you better now?

Her voice is clear in my mind. As clear as if she'd spoken into my ear. I don't know any other Aurochs who can hear people through contact. Like Perry's night vision, my Sense came in a different shade than is usual.

"Terrified," I answer. "I may need you to hold me later."

Liv pulls her hand free and shoves me softly. "Then move faster."

By the time our feet find the sand, Perry has the fire burning well. He sits before the dancing flames with Brooke nestled against him. Her hand is resting on his thigh. His arm is around her waist. Probably, they're not splitting up tonight.

When Perry isn't around, Brooke asks Liv and me why he doesn't like her more. "Why am I always the one chasing him?" she says, and gestures to herself. "What more can he possibly want?" Self-confidence is not a problem for Brooke. Perry's never going to be the one chasing her, but that's not how I answer. I tell her that he just needs time and that she should keep trying to seduce him. I'm a good friend to Perry like that.

I sit on the opposite side of the fire and Liv sits between my legs, leaning back against my chest. We've perfected this position. I love the way her long legs look stretched out in front of me. The top of her head is only inches from my lips. I press a kiss there, and then take a drink from the jug of Luster. It goes down like liquid coals, spreading heat through my stomach and out to the rest of me. I pass the jug to Liv, and sit back on my hands.

Brooke and Liv talk about something Talon said earlier, a puppy crush he has on Willow, who at thirteen is nearly double his age of seven. Perry smiles, as he always does when talk turns to his nephew. I suck the taste of spiced honey from my lips, my focus shifting to the sound of their voices as the Luster wraps me in a mellow fog. I draw a deep breath, feeling Liv's weight against my chest, smelling salt and water and fire in the air. After a little while, I hear what I've been waiting for. Husky and pure, Liv's laugh is the best sound in the world. I close my eyes and savor it.

This is what I wanted tonight. Time away from the tribe with Liv and Perry, and even with Brooke. With no responsibilities and nothing to do except *be*. It hasn't turned out the way I expected, though. I have everything I need right here, but I can't shake the anxious feeling in my gut. Why does Vale want to talk to Liv alone? And why so soon after his return from the north?

Some time later, Perry stands. "Let's leave these two alone," he says as he pulls Brooke to her feet.

Right. I'm sure that's exactly what's motivating him. They head off together into the darkness toward the cave just up the beach. Definitely not splitting up tonight.

When they're gone, Liv turns in my arms. "I guess we're alone," she says, giving me an innocent look that's anything but.

“Mm hmm. I guess we are.” I slide my hand beneath her chin and bring my lips to hers. Her skin warm and she tastes like Luster. Somehow there is a bit of sand in our kiss. With Liv, there is always something unexpected, but not the way she makes me feel. That never changes. One kiss and I’m hungry—starved for more of her—but she surprises me by drawing away. Leaning back, she studies me through narrowed eyes.

“What is it, Livy?” My hand is wrapped around her hip. I slide it to her back so I can think clearly. Somewhat clearly. So I have a chance at holding a coherent thought in my head.

In the firelight Liv’s long lashes look like gold threads. Her gaze shifts from my left eye to the right and back, like she’s searching for the one that will open to my soul. The truth is either one will.

“I shouldn’t have said anything earlier,” she says.

I shake my head. “No. Of course you should have.” As a Scire, Liv can scent my temper. She reads my moods, no matter what I do. I can’t protect her from my worry. “Don’t ever keep things from me. You always know how I feel, and I want the same. No secrets . . . all right?”

Liv nods. She stares into the darkness, her eyebrows drawn in thought. “Do you think it’s about us?” she asks after a moment.

“Yes.”

“You do?”

I shrug. “You’re part of me, Olivia. Anything that involves you is always about us.”

Liv’s mouth curves into a smile. She brushes her thumb over my bottom lip. Maybe the sand came from me? I don’t know, and the way she’s staring at me, it’s all I can do to keep my breathing even.

“I like it when you call me *love*,” she says.

“What? I’ve never called you that.” Lie. I do it all the time. “Oh, you mean earlier? I said *Liv*. You just have terrible hearing.”

She jabs me in the ribs.

“Ouch!”

“What was that?” Liv says. “I couldn’t hear you.” She digs her fingers into my side again.

“You asked for it now.” I twist away, pulling her with me, and the battle begins. We roll over each other, tumbling, wrestling, tangling in the sand until my hands find her hands and my lips find her lips and then we slow. We slow and slow and slow until we move together as one.

What do you think they're talking about?" I ask as I circle back to Perry.

We're on sentry duty on the eastern post. Our lookout spot is under the shade of an oak tree at the top of a knoll. The warm spring morning has given way to a hot afternoon. I've created a small track of trampled grass around the tree, where Perry sits. My gaze moves to the woodland to the south. Liv and Vale are out there somewhere.

Perry plucks a blade of grass from his mouth. "You know that's the twentieth time you've asked me that."

"I didn't know that. Should I stop?"

"Not if you're trying to drive me mad." Perry puts the blade of grass between his teeth and gives me a wide grin. "You're close."

"It would help if you said something besides *I don't know*. Give me something, Per. Anything at all." I point to the ground. "What do you think they're saying this very second?"

"This very second?"

"Yes. Right now."

Perry's gaze moves across the green hills to the south. "I think it's the second *before* one of them says something. Maybe they're taking a moment to think. Maybe they're breathing—I hope they're doing that."

I lift my hands. "Never mind." I go back to pacing circles around the oak tree until my thoughts overflow again. "But maybe he isn't going to do what we all think he's going to do."

I frown, noticing that Perry has a feather in his mouth now. I'm about to ask why so many things are suddenly ending up in his mouth when I see that he's replacing damaged fletching on his arrow. He plucks the feather from his lips and threads it onto the wooden shaft.

"I'm going to need more than that, Roar. Who isn't doing what we all think?"

"Your brother," I say. "People have been wondering what kind of deal he made with the Horned Bear and Molly think he's selling off part of the territory in exchange for food. And I've even heard a few rumors that he went to pledge the Tides to Sable, but they're just guesses." I take a step closer to him. "What if Vale's plan is something completely different? Something no one's even thought of?"

Perry brings the arrow to eye level and inspects the goose feather he's just slotted into place. "It's the best possible. He was vague about his plans before he left."

"That's right," I say. "And it would be just like him to do something surprising. Something underhanded."

Perry cuts a dark glance my way. "That's not what I said."

"But it has crossed your mind. He's devious, Perry. And he's a hypocrite, too. He marries Mila, Seer, but he has a problem with Liv and me being together because I'm not a Scire? How can he do that? It should be our choice, not his. Traditions are for the faint of heart. Are you going to refuse to let

with anyone who isn't a Scire?"

Perry sweeps the leftover feathers into his leather satchel. "I'm going to forget you said those things about my brother," he says without looking at me, "and I won't waste my time talking about something that's years away from happening to me, if at all."

I have no idea what kind of answer that is. "Do you mean you *would* refuse?"

Perry looks up, his eyes darting past me to the slope below. He jumps to his feet and yanks his bow across his shoulder. I see what he's spotted. Our replacements, Collins and Wylan, are walking up the hill. Our sentry shift is over.

"Let's move. Vale and Liv should be back by now," Perry says, his words clipped. He rushes down the hill, bow in hand, his feet tearing down the grassy slope.

It's only now, in this very second, that I realize he's anxious, too.

As Perry and I approach the eastern entrance to the compound, I hear a sound that turns my blood to ice.

Liv is yelling.

I sprint across the clearing to her house, leaving Perry behind, and barrel through the door past Mila, who is leading Talon outside. Vale's broad form fills up the small common room. His dark hair is pulled back by a leather strap, enhancing the sharp lines of his profile. With his coloring and muscled build, and especially with the heavy links of the Blood Lord chain around his neck, he looks just like his father.

Liv stands by the hearth. As far away from Vale as she can be. She turns to me, her blond hair whipping out. She's out of breath and her eyes flash with rage. I have never seen her this furious. She stops me dead in my tracks.

Vale sees me and purses his lips. "Leave," he says, pointing to the door. "This has nothing to do with you."

"How can you say that?" Liv yells. Her voice is hoarse from screaming. "You *know* it does!"

"For the last time, Olivia, I will not tolerate that tone of voice."

"You're not my father, Vale!"

"But I *am* your lord. Lower your voice or you'll be sorry."

I don't understand what's happening. Usually Vale and Perry are the ones at the point of going to blows. Usually Liv is trying to stop them.

"You want to tell me how to *talk* now? Well, you can't anymore! You gave me away. You lost that right when you sold me!"

"What?" It's only one word, but my voice breaks on it.

Liv turns to me. "He wants me to marry into the Horns. He *sold* me to them! Tell him, Vale! Tell him what you did."

"I don't *want* you to do this, Olivia. I need you to."

Sounds splinter like a mirror breaking. Vale is still talking, but I don't hear him any longer. I hear Liv's words in fragments.

Marry

Horns

Sold me

My hands are shaking. I squeeze them into fists. My mind isn't working fast enough. I can't believe what I've just heard. It makes no sense. I'm yelling before I've caught up with my thoughts. "No! You can't do this!"

“Get him out of here,” Vale commands Perry, who stands at the threshold.

The timbre in his voice—impatient, irritated, like I’m a nuisance, a stray dog that has wandered—snaps my control.

I lunge for Vale, swinging.

I’m quicker than anyone in the Tides, but he’s ready for me and turns away. My fist barely grazes his mouth. Vale answers my punch with a blow to the back of my head, catching me behind my right ear. My vision goes black. I pitch forward and my elbows crash against the floorboards. Vale’s foot—it must be his foot—slams into my back, sending me onto my chest.

My right ear rings, the sound disorienting, consuming me. I blink hard. A sideways room appears but it’s blurred and rocking and won’t stay still. I hear Perry curse behind me. My teeth slam together as he wrenches me upright, and then yanks me toward the door. The room won’t stop tilting; Vale’s blow has thrown off my balance. I stumble after Perry, struggling to keep my feet beneath me. We squeeze through the doorway, our shoulders jamming together, and burst out into the open.

“Fool!” Perry says under his breath. He’s still gripping my arms and good thing, too. If he lets go, I know I’ll kiss the ground again.

It’s dusk and almost everyone is here, gathered in groups around the clearing, gaping at us. Soon it will be supper, but that’s not why the tribe is milling around. Not anymore.

“Where’s Liv?” I ask, looking over my shoulder. I don’t see her behind me.

“Shut up and walk,” Perry growls.

We make it halfway to the eastern gate when a voice lashes out behind us. It’s deep and commanding, but sharp as a whip crack.

“Peregrine, *stop.*”

Just keep your mouth *shut*,” Perry says through his clenched teeth. He releases my arm and we turn to Vale, who creates a wake as he strides through the gathered crowd.

“Let him cool off, Vale,” Perry says. “Let him walk away.”

That’s not going to happen. Vale’s lip is gushing. Blood rolls down his jaw and drips off his chin, speckling his pale shirt. I didn’t hit him squarely, but even a light punch will push the tender skin against a tooth and break it open.

Seeing the blood makes me realize what I’ve done. I could punch anyone in the tribe and the punishment would be extra work. Maybe a day without food. But Vale is our Blood Lord. I’ve made a direct challenge to his authority. What I’ve done could get me thrown out of the tribe—or worse. For sure, it’ll get me a beating.

“Leave him out of this, Vale!” It’s Liv. She rushes up, the hilt of her half-sword peeking over her shoulder.

Vale’s mouth pulls into a smirk when he sees her. “Well, which is it, Olivia? One moment you tell me he *is* involved and the next he isn’t.”

Liv answers by reaching up and drawing the weapon at her back in a brisk, powerful swipe.

There’s a ripple of movement. Hissing sounds carry to my ears from across the clearing as swords slide from their sheaths. The Tides warriors have taken oaths swearing to protect Vale at all costs. I’m one of them. I swore to do that myself.

What have I started? Suddenly everything feels out of control.

Vale lifts a hand. “Stand down,” he says, annoyed. “Put away your weapons.” Around me, knives and swords lower and disappear.

Satisfied that he has the tribe under control, Vale draws two fingers over his chin and then holds them up. The blood on them is bright red even in the fading daylight. “Just so we’re clear,” he says to me, “you’re involved now.”

He steps closer, the crunch of his boots on the dirt carrying to my ears, though the ringing hasn’t stopped. Vale draws near enough that I see the dark green of his eyes. Close enough that I see Perry and Liv in his strong nose and the slight tilt of his head. In the way he measures me, like he’s gauging the heat coming off a fire.

“Because you mean something to my brother and sister,” he says calmly, “I’ll give you a choice ordinarily wouldn’t. Leave?” he asks. He shifts his weight, tilting his head to the other side. “Or stay and pay the price?”

Banishment or a beating. It’s an easy choice. “Stay,” I answer.

Vale’s eyebrows climb. He smiles. “You might regret that.” He looks to Perry, who’s still beside me. “Hold him, Peregrine. And keep him still unless you want to take his place.”

The hair on my arms lifts. It sounds like an offhand comment—but it isn’t. Nothing is coincidental.

with Vale. He calculates everything.

~~“No, Perry!” I won’t let him take my punishment. I step in front of him, but he shoves past me.~~

“Since you offered,” he says, “I will take his place.”

Vale’s eyes widen, but his surprise is false. He shakes his head, like he’s disappointed, but he’s gotten exactly what he hoped for. “If that’s what you want.”

“I do,” Perry says, still as death. “And I’ll try not to hit you back.”

A murmur moves through the crowd. Perry has taunted Vale in front of everyone. There’s no turning back now.

I move to Liv’s side and whisper, “I’m sorry.” It’s a weak offering, but there’s nothing I can do. This isn’t about me or Liv any longer. I don’t know how this became a battle between Perry and Vale, but that’s how everything seems to end up.

Perry and Vale.

Liv doesn’t answer. She doesn’t even look at me. Her eyes are fixed on her brothers. Brook appears at her other side and glares at me.

I look away and scan the people around us, finding Bear and Molly, Gray and Old Will. I know what they’re thinking. We’re all remembering the shadow of bruises on Perry’s face. On his arms and back. Only the youngest in the tribe escaped those memories—those too young to have known Joda. The rest of us carry the guilt of those beatings inside us. We were afraid of Perry’s father. We did nothing to stop him. And here we are. In the same situation again.

A small figure darts out from the crowd. Talon looks from his father to Perry. “What’s wrong? What are you doing, Dad?”

Uncertainty flickers in Vale’s eyes. “Get home, son,” he says. When Talon doesn’t move, Vale says, “Mila, take him inside.”

Talon dodges out of his mother’s reach. “No! I don’t want to go!”

“Talon,” Perry says, “it’s all right. Go inside.”

When Talon stops to listen to Perry, Wylan grabs his arm and drags him away. For long moments after I can’t see him, I hear Talon arguing, his voice raised, crying, as he’s hauled to his house.

At the solid thud of a door shutting, Vale walks up to Perry. They stand eye to eye, both well over six feet tall. Vale is older by seven years. It has always been a significant gap, but I don’t see a distance between them now. They are so different—one dark and the other light—but the look in their eyes is the same. Unbending.

This is the challenge we’ve all been waiting for. It will be, if Perry does what he’s threatened and fights back.

He holds his arms out wide. “I’m ready, Vale.”

I see that he *is* ready. Perry has taught me everything I know about fistfights. I take in his broad stance and the loose set of his shoulders, and hear his voice telling me, “It hurts less when you’re relaxed.” I see his expression grow distant and hear him say, “Never show emotion. It only feeds them.” If anyone knows how to stand and take a hit, he does. Perry won’t even flinch. I know he won’t.

Talon is shut inside his house, but through mortar and tile and across a hundred paces I still hear him crying. Outside the tribe is silent.

Bracing.

Vale drives his fist into Perry’s stomach. He moves surprisingly fast for someone his size, and he’s merciless, using the full power of his substantial strength.

It’s a hammer of a blow. I know because Perry doubles over and my breath is gone and Liv is trembling beside me. I know because Perry gasps as he hugs his waist and Vale is flexing his hands.

opened and closed. The blow hurt him, but not nearly as much as it hurt Perry.

When Perry straightens, his face is red. His eyes are half open and unfocused like he's somewhere else, maybe in a memory. If he is, I don't want to know what it is.

"That was for Roar," Vale says. He speaks quietly, for Perry's ears only, but I hear him. Every Au in the clearing hears him. "This one is just for you, little brother. Try not to hit me back."

He punches Perry again in the same spot. Even harder.

This time Perry buckles and falls, thudding down to one knee. I watch him muffle ragged coughs against his forearm. I watch his shoulders shake as he struggles for control over the pain we all know he's feeling. I see it through a blur. He was quick to recover after the first punch, but not this time. Every second that passes, my ear rings louder. Every second, I'm closer to drawing Liv's half-sword and going after Vale.

Liv tenses beside me. I grab her hand, keeping her at my side. Neither one of us can step in right now. Perry has to stand on his own. If he doesn't, Vale wins.

Finally Perry climbs to his feet, but he's hunched over, unable to straighten all the way. I notice that he's failing at one of his own lessons; there is hatred in his eyes.

"Are you finished?" he asks, his voice strained.

Vale isn't done. I know he isn't. But Liv breaks away from me and hooks her arm through Perry's. "Yes, he's finished," she snarls at Vale. "You've brought enough happiness to our family today haven't you?" Then she looks at me as she tows Perry away, her gaze willing me to follow.

She didn't need to tell me. Wherever they go, so do I.

No one says a word in the half hour it takes us to walk to the sea. I'm stuck listening to the shallow breaths my best friend is taking because of me.

I should have known Vale would do this. Perry is fiercely protective of Liv and Talon and me. Over everyone in the Tides. Vale took advantage of that trait. He twisted the situation so he could show his dominance over Perry—the main threat to his power as Blood Lord. He even calculated the blows he delivered, punching Perry in the stomach so the result of his punishment would be hidden from the tribe. Tomorrow, instead of remembering brutality, the Tides will remember justice.

I know he planned it that way. It's all clear now. All the strategy I just witnessed.

It makes me sick.

When we've left the compound behind us and reached the pressed sand by the water, Liv stops. It's almost dark and a thick blanket of fog is rolling in from the ocean. It tumbles toward us, swirling through the air in waves.

"I want to see, Perry," Liv says.

I shove my fingers into my hair, tugging until my scalp hurts. I know where this is going. There's more torture to come.

Perry shakes his head. "It's nothing."

"Show me anyway."

"Liv—"

"I don't care! Let me see."

I hate this. They did this when they were younger, too. Liv always had to inspect him afterward. It's like she wants to feel each and every bruise herself.

Perry mutters a string of curses. Liv crosses her arms and waits. She never backs down. At nearly six feet, she's only a few inches shorter than him and every bit as stubborn. At times like this I wonder if they're twins who were somehow born a year apart.

Perry shakes his head and finally relents. He looks away, his neck corded, his arms flexed so tight as he lifts up his shirt that I half expect the material to tear. A bruise has already bloomed on his stomach—I see it even in the twilight—but the worst part is the look on his face. I bite down until my jaw aches, willing this moment to end. Shame doesn't belong on Perry. It's the last thing he should ever feel.

After a moment, he tugs his shirt down. "Enough, Liv. I'm fine," he says, but Liv still doesn't move away. I know she's searching for his temper to see if he really *is* fine.

"You are?" she asks.

Perry nods. "Yes," he says. He sounds spent. Liv's concern has worn him down. Force has never been the way to break him. I wonder if Vale knows that.

Liv steps back, satisfied at last. She looks at me and I can't ignore how this started any longer. "What did Vale say to you, Liv?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm not doing it," she says dismissively. She strides toward me. "Have you lost your mind, Roar? How could you do that?"

"I need to know what he said."

"Vale could've had you killed! Did you even consider that?"

"Olivia, tell me."

She shoves me in the chest. "Did you even *think*?"

I grab her wrists, trapping her hands against me. She tugs away, but I hold her fast and stare into her eyes. I want her to tell me I'm imagining everything. That none of this is really happening. "Please, Liv . . . I need to know what he said."

I release her hands and she takes a step back. She looks to Perry and back to me. I don't recognize the expression on her face. "He told me he made an arrangement. All the food we need? Vale sold me for it. I'm supposed to marry Sable." Her mouth quivers into a humorless smile and she glances at Perry again. "He fetched a good price for me. Enough food to keep the Tides fed through next winter. I guess I'm expensive."

She tries to laugh but it's strained and thin. Nothing like the sound I know. And then her eyes fill and she turns her back to me and everything inside of me rips and tears. Every muscle. Every bone in my body. I can't move. I can't move and the ringing that had just begun to fade in my ear is drowned out by the roar of blood.

She's *mine*. The words rage through my mind.

Liv is mine.

I must have spoken them aloud because Liv's shoulders jolt and she darts away. I follow her and collide with Perry, who's saying something to me. There's a gap that feels like an hour before his words sink in.

"Let her go. Give her some time, Roar. She wants to be alone."

I watch as she disappears into the curling fog. Liv flees when she's unsure. Like Perry, she thinks on the run. I know this, but my stomach still twists as I watch her leave. I want her to need me right now. She doesn't. Somehow, I both hate her and love her for it.

For what feels like a lifetime, I stare at the spot where she vanishes. Then I look at Perry. "What do I do now?" My head pounds from Vale's punch.

Perry rubs a hand over his jaw. "Stay here," he says. "I'll be back."

Pressing a hand to his stomach, he jogs back to the compound.

When Perry is gone, I look around me. The fog has moved inland and I can't see more than a hundred paces in any direction. The surf is rougher than it was last night, the waves foaming as they pound against the beach. I picture bruises spreading across the sand and shake my head, trying to get the image to go away.

Pulling my knife from the sheath at my belt, I spin the blade around my wrist, tossing it, flipping it fast, fast, faster, concentrating on just this. On the focus I need in order to do these tricks and keep my fingers intact.

Without Perry and Liv, I feel unhinged and I shouldn't. I should be more like my mother, who didn't let herself care. Who moved from one man to the next with the seasons. There was always someone better, worth uprooting everything for. A new man for me to call *father* for a few months when, in reality, my father was nothing more than a roaming trader who was a drunk.

Rush. His name comes to me now. Mother said he was the most beautiful thing she'd ever laid eyes on, next to me. That's what I was to her: an achievement in fine looks. A face that she could pinch and kiss and then send away.

It took all of one day for Liv to understand me better. Less than a day. The very morning after Gram and I came to the Tides, Liv and Perry tracked me down in my new home in the shed. "I think you should be our friend," Liv said. I didn't even know her name yet. Then, she was just the golden-haired girl from up in the loft. When I asked her why, she replied, "Because you need us." I looked at Perry, who said, "All right," and then I said, "All right," and then everything *was* all right.

I fumble the knife and the blade slices into my finger. Cursing, I suck on my thumb, tasting copper. It's been years since I cut myself.

"First rule of knives: they cut."

I look up at the voice. Perry walks over, a bottle of Luster in one hand. "I thought this would help." He gives it to me and sits. "Has she come back yet?"

Unstopping the cork, I take a drink. "No. Not yet." I drink again, feeling the warmth of the Luster move through me. Maybe my father and I have more in common than our looks. "I can't let that happen, Perry. We have to find another way. We have to do something."

Perry nods. "I'll talk to Vale." His gaze slides over to me. "But I doubt there's anything I can say that will change his mind."

"You *can* change his mind. He's scared of you. He knows the tribe would do well with you as Blood Lord."

"The tribe doesn't want me as—"

"They *do*."

"There are plenty of people who doubt whether I could—"

"To hell with the doubters."

Perry smirks at me. “Roar, if you interrupt me once more, I’ll . . .” He rubs the back of his neck and lets out a breath. “I’ll stop talking.”

“Doubters don’t mean a damn thing,” I tell him. “I doubt it’ll rain tomorrow, but that doesn’t mean I *control* the rain. What I *think* has no bearing on what *is*. You would make a great Blood Lord. Better than Vale. Better than your father.” I take another pull and then pass him the bottle. “The wise ask questions, Perry. The weak doubt.”

He gives me a halfhearted smile. “Where’d you hear that?”

“I just thought of it. And see? I’m right.”

We fall silent and I know it’s my doing. I’m the one who brought up his father. The bottle grows lighter as we pass it back and forth. The heat of the Luster begins to pull me back together. When Perry leans back onto his elbows, I catch him wincing from the corner of my eye. If I’d been the one to take Vale’s punches, I’d probably still be down. I’d be pissing blood for a week, no doubt.

I’m not sure how he came between me and Vale. Why he had to confront Vale on my behalf, on Liv’s, or anyone else’s in the tribe. When it matters—when it’s a tough situation—Perry always gets pulled in.

I look at my thumb, seeing a dark line where I sliced through a callus. I wonder if it’s the same thing with him. He’s been through enough—with both his father and Vale—that we think *he* callused. That taking a blow is easier for him because he’s made of tougher material than the rest of us. Maybe so. Maybe he is tougher. But when a cut is deep, it’s still just flesh beneath.

“Thank you for earlier,” I say, breaking our silence. What I really want to say is I’m sorry, but those words don’t seem to want to come out.

“Course, Ro. Anytime.” His tone is casual, but I know he means it. “I’ll talk to Vale tomorrow. You know I’ll do everything I can.”

I nod. What I know is that he *has* to do everything he can. Vale would never listen to me—especially not after tonight. And Liv can’t marry someone else. It can’t happen.

“We were supposed to be brothers one day, Per. Real brothers . . . *family*.” I don’t know what I’m saying. The Luster is speaking for me. But I can’t take the words back.

Perry looks right at me. “What do you think we are?”

I turn to the sea and stare at it. I watch the waves until the tightness in my throat loosens and I’m breathing normally again. He’s right. We are family. I’m not terrified of what I could be losing in the future. I’m scared of losing what I already have.

Beside me, I hear the slosh of the bottle as Perry takes a drink. Minutes pass before he speaks again. When he does, he’s so quiet that I know the words aren’t really meant for me.

“You’re better than a brother,” he says.

After an hour or two or four, Liv walks up. My head feels better and the ringing in my ear is gone, but my eyes don’t seem to be working because I can’t bring myself to look at her directly.

Perry climbs to his feet. “In case you’re really wondering,” he says to me, “it is going to rain tomorrow.” He taps his nose like Liv did last night. “If you ever want to know, just ask.”

He looks at Liv, watching her for a long moment. “See you at home?”

Liv nods. “See you at home.”

Perry heads south along the beach, which isn’t the way home. I wonder if he’ll spend the night on his own, thinking of all the ways he could’ve fought back against Vale. No, I don’t wonder. I’m sure that’s what he’ll do.

Liv sits next to me and takes the bottle. “You couldn’t even save a drop for me?” she says when she

realizes it's empty.

"I didn't know if you were coming back."

Her head whips over to me. "What?"

"I thought you were so eager to meet your future husband that you'd already left."

"Stop, Roar."

I don't. "Why even waste your time with Luster? Sable is rich. He'll give you the best. The finest wines."

I don't know what's wrong with me. She's hurting. Why am I trying to hurt her more? I make myself shut up and press my finger against the cut on my thumb until it stings. It's such a small amount of pain. So bearable.

"This isn't what I want, Roar," she says. "You know that."

Do I? I always assumed my future would be with her. I thought she wanted the same thing, but now I realize I'm not sure. I don't know what she wants. We've never talked about it before. We've never needed to.

I look at her. "What *do* you want?"

Her back stiffens. "How can you ask me that?"

"Easy. I'll do it again. What do you *want*, Olivia?" My voice is sharp, more demanding than I intend.

Liv springs to her feet. "I want to make my own choices! I want my life to be mine again! I want my brother to care about what I want. I want out of this situation!"

I'm up in an instant, pulling her against me. "I'm sorry, Liv. I'm sorry." I kiss her forehead, her cheek, and her nose, and then her forehead again. There's pressure in my lungs. She didn't answer my question the way I wanted her to, but I'm powerless against her pain. "It's all right. Everything's going to be all right."

I run my hands over her back, smoothing away the tension. Slowly she relaxes. Slowly she turns her head and rests it on my shoulder. Then I feel her fingers loop into my belt at my lower back, where she likes to hang her hands when I hold her, and I know we're fine. I know we're good again. The waves crash and we stand there. Her weight easing against me. Mine easing against her.

It's a long while before she speaks.

"I'm scared, Roar," she says. "I hate being scared."

"Hey." I tip her chin up so I can look into her eyes. "It's going to be all right."

"How could I ever leave you?" she says.

I swallow and shake my head. I can't hear those words. "You won't have to. We'll figure it out, I promise. I won't let anything happen to us."

As I speak, Liv slides her hands under the hem of my shirt, pressing her fingers into my back. Her lips brush my jaw, gentle but insistent, and it's impossible for me to talk anymore. I pull her against me, not so gentle. More insistent.

We end up on the sand trying to forget the past hours with kisses and whispered words. It doesn't work. People say only Scires can render, but it's not true. I feel her sadness and her fear. Whatever Liv feels, I feel.

I hold her and watch her drift asleep in my arms. I watch her for a long time afterward.

Then I force my eyes closed, and still her face is there.

This girl. She's all I see.

The sound of giggling pulls me from a dream—nightmare?—of Liv in the middle of the clearing wearing a long white dress.

“They’re waking up, Uncle Perry.”

I peer up and see Perry standing above me. “About time,” he says.

Liv is pressed to my side, her head resting in the hollow of my shoulder. My arm is around her, but it’s completely numb. I doubt we moved an inch the entire night.

Talon has a metal pail and a shovel and he’s busy burying Liv’s legs in the sand. Judging by the weight I feel over mine, he’s already gotten to me.

Liv stirs. She peels away from me and sits up. “What happened to me? My legs are gone!” she shrieks. She wiggles her toes and acts surprised when they pop out of the sand. “Who did this?”

Talon and Perry point at each other at the same time.

“How dare you!” Liv says, glaring at Talon. She jumps up and dashes after him, yelling over her shoulder, “I’ve got the little one!”

I lay my head back and stare up at the Aether, listening to Talon’s happy shrieks. Since he got sick everyone makes an extra effort to get laughs out of him.

“You’re not going to chase me?” Perry says.

I shake my head. “No. No, I’m not.” The cut on my thumb stings and my neck is stiff. I’m not sure if it’s from two nights of sleeping on the beach or the punch I took from Vale. Probably both. “How do I look?”

“The part of you that I can see? Like death.”

“That sounds about right.” I sit up, stretching my arms to get my blood moving again.

“I talked to my brother,” Perry says.

I freeze. *My brother.* Perry only calls Vale that when something is wrong. This won’t be good. I unearth my legs and force myself to stand. Strangely, now that the weight of sand is gone, I miss it. “What did your brother say?”

Liv is far—out of hearing range for her—but she looks at us. She tells Talon to get a fishing line from the water and that Perry will join him soon.

“He’s not going to change his mind,” Perry says, when she comes over. “He said that he has to make this decision as Blood Lord. That it’s not an easy one, but he has no choice.” Perry crosses his arms and stares at Liv for a few moments. “He, uh . . . he wants you to leave tomorrow, Liv.”

Suddenly I can’t get enough air into my lungs. One day. I have *one day* left with her? Liv has gone pale beside me.

“Is that it?” I hear myself say.

Perry shakes his head. “He agreed to let you and me take her to the Horns. It’s a two-week journey. . . . I know it’s not much, but even that took some convincing.” Perry rubs the back of his

neck and gives me a strange smile. “He also wanted me to tell you, specifically, that you’re a deceitful bastard and that he’ll have you hunted and killed if you interfere with his orders.”

Perry’s eyes flick to Talon, who’s calling for him by the water. “I’m going to go,” he says. “But you should both know that I don’t want to hear a word about what you’re thinking or planning, or you’re doing either of those.” He leaves before we can respond.

The message is clear. Vale has set the rules. Whatever Liv and I do from now on will be in defiance of his orders. If Perry learns we’re planning something, he won’t be able to lie about it to Vale. He’ll be punished for helping us. Again.

Liv looks at me. We need to talk, but I realize we can’t do it here. I’m not the only Aud in the tribe, and if Vale is really concerned about us defying him, then he’s most likely having us watched. Our plans will have to be made far away from the compound.

I can tell Liv is thinking the same thing. Not now. Not here. But there is something I can say.

“I think you should be my friend,” I tell her. “All right?”

She smiles, and I know she’s remembering. “All right.”

In light of the fact that I can’t stop daydreaming of all the ways I’d like to slit Vale’s throat—and that he can scent my intentions through my temper—I decide it’s best to spend the day away from the compound.

Perry and I head to the southern woods to hunt as Liv stays behind to say her good-byes and pack. It’s nothing I want to see her do, anyway. It shouldn’t be happening. She shouldn’t be leaving, but that part can’t be changed. My focus now is to get her away from Vale’s control . . . and then?

I don’t know.

We could rush into a marriage, but Vale, Blood Lord of the Tides, is known all over this region. People in the neighboring tribes would suspect his sister’s hasty wedding, especially if it’s carried out away from Tide land. Most likely, Liv and I would be tied up and hauled right back to Vale. To marry, we’d need to go far, weeks away, where no one would recognize either one of us.

I’ve done my share of immoral things, but stealing a girl from her guardian and claiming her as mine is a lot to take in. Running off feels too close to what I saw my mother do plenty of times when she was younger. I never wanted to do the same. Where Liv is concerned I’ve tried to do things the right way. There’s no possibility of that anymore.

The more I think about running off and marrying her, the more my head starts to spin. I’ve never seen a decent example of a husband. What I’ve seen are men who shine like silver at first, then tarnish, and eventually disappear. Is marriage something that has to be taught, or can you learn it by ear?

I wonder if Liv is thinking about the same things. She never had a mother—does that make her want to avoid marriage? Does she even *want* to be a wife? We’re both nineteen—old enough—but we’ve never once talked about getting married. I realize I’ve been thinking the words *marriage* and *wife* so much that they’re starting to sound strange in my head.

On the game trail up ahead of me, Perry slows. It’s drizzling—just like he told me it would last night. I watch as he sets up and takes aim at a deer, drawing the bowstring back to his jaw and holding it. He looses it, and the arrow sails wide. The deer startles and springs away.

“That was terrible,” I say. I can count the number of times I’ve seen him miss a shot like that on one finger. It just proves that nothing feels normal anymore. “You missed by almost a foot.”

Perry turns to me. “Whose fault do you think that is?”

If the tone of his voice wasn’t enough of a clue, the grim set of his mouth is. “Mine?”

He shakes his head. “Your nerves are getting on my nerves,” he says, before he leaves to retrieve

his arrow.

~~I mutter an apology as I watch him go. I know just how to calm myself down. As we pick up the deer's scent trail again, I go back to daydreaming about drawing my blade across Vale's throat.~~

That night, Vale has a lamb slaughtered for supper. Because it's Vale, I question this decision, wondering if he intended it to carry deeper significance.

While he has kindly granted me permission to escort the girl I love to her forced marriage, Vale makes sure I'm excluded from the high table in the cookhouse. I take my meal to a table by the door while Liv and her family feast together at the opposite end of the hall.

Liv sits with Talon and Mila, smiling as she talks to them. I can tell she's keeping up a cheerful front for their sake. Around me as well, people pretend to be cheerful, chattering about Liv's marriage. It'll be great for the Tides, they say. An alliance to one of the most powerful Blood Lords alive and more food to get us through the winter. Everyone is happy. Everyone is cheerful, cheerful, cheerful.

"You know what's unfair?" Brooke says beside me.

I push my plate away and stare at the mug next to it. Even Luster has no appeal tonight. "Life?"

Though there are hundreds of people between us, I feel Vale's attention on me and look up. He's enjoying my misery. Nearby Perry rips into a haunch with his teeth while Wylan, the fool, talks his way off. It's unwise to come between Perry and food.

"This." Brooke yanks up her sleeve, showing me the jagged Seer marking around her bicep. "Just because we aren't Scires, we don't even get a chance?"

She's talking about what's happening to Liv, I know, but she's thinking about Perry.

"We don't choose the Sense we're born with," Brooke continues. "I didn't decide to be a Seer any more than you decided to be an Aud." She grabs my wrist, startling me. Her hissing continues in my mind.

Vale didn't marry a Scire. It's like he makes the rules only for the rest of us. And what's the point of keeping the Scire line strong, anyway? Why is smelling everything all the time so damn wonderful?

I said these very words to Perry just yesterday, but I don't want to talk about this now. I'm tired of my problems. And I won't give Vale the satisfaction of seeing me suffer.

I lean into Brooke's shoulder and sniff. "You smell pretty good."

Brooke yanks her hand away from mine and shrugs me off. "Tell that to your best friend."

"Sure," I say. "I'll tell him." I won't. It wouldn't make any difference, and he knows how she smells better than I do anyway.

Brooke looks at me, her blue eyes piercing and clear as glass. "It's a shame you're not a Seer, Roan. Everything would be so much easier if we liked each other."

"I do like you."

"Yeah." She sighs and turns her attention back to Perry. "I meant more than like."

I know what she meant, but Brooke and I are never, in this eternity, going to be more than friends. If that's even what we are now. I tip my head to the side—it works for Perry—and take a slow look at her curves. "I could more than like you."

The stress must be getting to me because I'm messing with Brooke. She has a dark streak that I'm not equipped to handle like Perry, who scents her moods a mile away. I continue despite myself.

"If you're looking for something that's purely physical, I'm definitely interested. We'd have to get Perry's and Liv's approval—hey!" I fold over my ribs, where she elbowed me.

"You were dropped on your head, Roar! A hundred times! It's the only possible explanation." She jabs me in the ribs again. "And try eating some *food* once in a while. You're nothing but bones."

Her last comment is begging for an off-color remark but I refrain. Clearly she's miserable. I have no other choice. It's time to do something that goes against my nature. "Listen, Brooke. I'm going to be honest with you—"

"Why start now?" she snaps.

"That stings. Do you feel better about yourself?"

She rolls her eyes, but suddenly her lower lip is quivering. My thighs tighten up as I fight the urge to sprint for the door. All I wanted was to blend into this sea of cheerfulness. Just for an hour. Just for ten minutes.

"Brooke, I was only teasing." I nod toward Perry. "All I was trying to say is that he's not like the rest of us. He's missing something that doesn't let him . . . that isn't . . . that makes him . . ."

I stop myself and reconsider. What I'm trying to say is that Perry's missing something critical. Maybe it's the ability to trust deeply. I don't know. But the way I see it, when you've been hurt by someone you love like he has, why would you ever seek love out? Why would you ever risk being hurt again? It wouldn't surprise me if he never has anything like Liv and I do.

That's all far more than I want to tell Brooke right now—or actually ever—and I'm starting to depress myself, so I just say, "I think you should move on."

Brooke's mouth pulls into a sarcastic smile. It's easy to forget that she's pretty when she smiles that way. "Is that what you're going to do? Move on from Liv?"

Never. I take a sip of Luster and suck the sweet liquid from my lips, giving myself a moment before I answer. "Yes."

Brooke rolls her eyes. "You're such a liar, Roar. Your temper smells like turnips. Or whatever it is that lies smell like."

That makes me laugh. "No. My lies smell like honeysuckle."

Her eyebrows draw together in confusion. "*Honeysuckle?*"

I shrug, not bothering to explain that the word amuses me. *Honey* and *suckle* don't seem like they should go together.

The noise of the cookhouse rises up around us as we fall silent. I know this is hard for her. She's losing her best friend and seeing the truth of what she means to Perry—which is not enough. My gaze moves back to the high table. Liv is still talking to Talon. Perry is still eating. I understand exactly what Brooke is feeling.

The world wouldn't be the same without them.

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