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# BLOOD STORM

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# BLOOD STORM

THE SECOND BOOK OF LHARMELL

Rhiannon Hart



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

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## ONE

I spied the harming from two hundred yards off. A hooded cloak concealed its features, but I could picture its black hair, its icy blue eyes – eyes that mirrored my own. I am a harming, but I am un-Turned. With great hardship and pain I have resisted the pull of the tors, the chanting that calls those with Lharmellin blood northwards, home to Lharmell.

I raised the crossbow with my right hand and dug my heels into the horse's sides. 'Yah!' I cried, leaning forward, eager for the kill. We galloped across the dusty expanse of ground. I gripped the horse with my knees, steadying myself for the shot. I wasn't adept at firing a crossbow. My weapon of choice is a traditional bow but that has its disadvantages.

To start, you can't fire one-handed, so it's difficult to make a kill while on the move.

I aimed at the harming's chest, the expanse between us closing fast. At thirty yards I fired. The bolt thudded into a tree, yards wide of its mark. 'Blast!' I pulled my horse around and reached for another bolt.

The thunder of hooves bearing down on us made my horse scream in panic. Rodden was hot on our heels. He aimed his crossbow and fired, severing the rope that suspended the dummy from the tree branch. It landed on the ground with a thump and straw fell out from inside the cloak. Rodden wheeled his horse to face me. His white-blue eyes flashed. 'Lucky I'm here, or else you'd be dead.'

I swiped sweat from my upper lip with the back of my hand. 'Thank you, Rodden. Thank you for saving me from the nasty bundle of straw. How will I ever repay you?'

The sarcasm was completely lost on him. 'You can repay me by learning to fire your weapon. You're an absolutely terrible shot.'

That was rubbish and he knew it. 'Who wiped the floor with you at an *archery* tournament five months ago? In front of the whole court? Oh, that's right. It was me.' There was no way I would have lost that

tournament, not when losing meant that I would've had to marry him, the stuck-up, arrogant jerk. I'd rather be Turned.

'By the barest fraction of an inch, Zeraphina. And clearly your skill doesn't go far. It's all very well firing at a stationary plank of wood at twenty paces, but how useful will that be when we're being ambushed by harmings? And if you can't fire from horseback, how will you manage from a brant?'

I turned my horse and trotted back to the other end of the field. 'Do you have to lecture me?' I called over my shoulder.

The sun was blazing overhead and my feet felt like they were cooking inside my dusty riding boots. Goodness knows why we had to train right in the heat of the day. It was particularly sadistic of him. My skin was becoming tanned and freckled in the Pergamian summer sun. Coming from the southern queendom of Amentia, where in places the ice never thaws, I wasn't used to such heat. I was thankful for the airy trousers and shirt that had become my uniform of late. If my mother, Queen Renata, could see me now she'd have an apoplexy. Even she wouldn't wear corsets in this heat, but she would be firmly against a princess of Amentia wearing trousers, and would be wild with rage at the sight of

me straddling a horse. Young ladies, I could hear her saying, ride side-saddle *only*. Thank goodness she was safely in Amentia and I could get on with things.

At the edge of the field I turned and watched Rodden string up the harming dummy. Then he rode away with a flourish of his arm, giving the dummy a wide berth – too wide, in fact. I wasn't that bad a shot. It was testament to our partnership that he could needle me at two hundred paces and without saying a word.

*Concentrate*, came his thought-pattern, more feeling than word, but I caught the sentiment. I flung up my wall to block him out.

Not far off, Leap lay beneath a tree, watching us with half-closed eyes. Leap was my cat, and a very clever one. He came from the sewers of Verapine and his silvery fur was slick like an otter's. With his luminous green eyes he could see even better in the dark than me. Griffin was circling overhead in thermals rising from the heated ground, her eagle-eyes scanning the landscape for furry morsels. These two were the only creatures in the world who knew the real me, had seen my darkest moments, and still loved me unconditionally. Rodden knew my true nature, and I his, but all that was between us was a grudging respect. Once I had wondered if there

could be something more, but I had been mistaking the intimacy of thought-patterns for true intimacy. I knew better now. Plus, the danger we were in was hardly conducive to romance. We lived in constant dread of the Lharmellins just across the Straits of Unctium, not to mention our own volatile natures. It was difficult to trust another when you could barely trust yourself. I had succumbed to the pull of the tors of Lharmell once and nearly paid the price with my life.

I galloped at the stuffed harming. This time my bolt stuck in the thing's arm – not a fatal shot with regular arrows, but if this had been a real harming and the bolt was tipped with yelbar, an alloy poisonous to those with Lharmellin blood, it would eventually cause death.

Rodden gave me a curt nod and said, 'Let's call it a day.' We turned our horses towards the stables and let them set their own pace back. On my wrist was a leather gauntlet, and I held my arm aloft as I called Griffin down with my mind. She alighted in a flash of golden feathers, her sharp talons digging into the leather. Griffin was not only a deadly hunter and a sharp lookout, she'd been known to attack harmings with her razor-sharp beak and claws. Leap followed behind us.

As I dismantled my crossbow and put away the bolts, I considered what Rodden had said about firing from brant-back. Neither of us had talked about what would happen next. I had spent the whole spring at the palace. A long time, it was true, but not so surprising considering my sister Lilith was newly married to Prince Amis and my home was so far away. But I hadn't been idle. I'd been reading everything I could on Lharmell, and quizzing Rodden too. He was generous with his knowledge, but as soon as I asked details about himself, especially his past, he clammed up. I'd been hesitant to speculate out loud about the future, lest he suggest I was better off at my own palace, but I'd been thinking hard. I suspected he had been too, but he wasn't the most forthcoming of men. He'd never even told me how he became a harming.

I felt a tightness in my chest, a smarting that radiated down my arms and up the back of my throat: I was thirsty. I thought of the rabbits Rodden kept in his room, and my mouth watered. Blood was life and ambrosia to harmings. It made us hum with vibrancy and power, gave our bodies unnatural strength and honed our senses like a knife edge. I would die without blood, but for me the act of feeding was laced with guilt and revulsion – afterwards at least.

The moment the liquid life touched my tongue, I felt drinking it to be the purest, most candid deed in the world.

But I wanted to be free of the tors and the blood-hunger. I was kept going by the hope that one day I would be – as well as an iron resolve to maintain whatever humanity I had left. But there's little to feel human about when your body craves blood.

I'd seldom heard the Lharmellins' chanting of late and it was rare to see brants swirling in the night sky since we'd returned from Lharmell several months ago. But whether we had dealt our enemies a serious blow or merely slowed them down, we were yet to discover. Killing the Lharmellin leader and disrupting the Turning ceremony wouldn't have finished them; it may have prevented new harmings from being made, or it may have done nothing. We just didn't know yet.

At the stables a footman approached with a letter for me. I looked at the seal and felt a twinge of annoyance. The mark was a griffin rampant, the Amentine standard. Which could only mean the letter was from my mother. They were becoming increasingly frequent and tiresomely similar.

I tucked it into my pocket and helped Rodden unsaddle the horses and brush them down. While

he was occupied trying to dislodge a stone from his horse's shoe, I wandered out to find shade under a large oak, and opened my letter. In Renata's firm, black strokes I read:

*Darling,*

*What a warm summer we are having! The mornings are quite clear and we can see all the way to the Terip-siin Mountains. I hope you are keeping out of the sun and applying the lotion I sent you. Lilith tells me it's scorching hot but there are all sorts of things to do, such as sea-bathing. What fun you must be having on your little holiday. Has anyone interesting turned up at court? I did hear a whisper that Prince Folsum might be there with his sister, Penritha. What a dear thing she was as a baby. And I'm sure I don't need to remind you that he is a first son and will be King of Ansengaad one day.*

*Do send my love to your sister and tell her from me that nothing will secure her place at court better than giving her husband an heir. And please encourage her to make it a son. Not only will daughters drive her mad and send her broke, but Pergamians are very fond of a home-born king.*

*Lastly – and I should have said this first – I needn't*

*remind you that it is your birthday in a few months. I would like you home by then to discuss certain matters of your coming of age, and I fear you are trespassing too long on King Askar's hospitality. The whole spring you've been absent! I'm sure you've never been so fond of your sister. And it is very selfish to leave me all on my own. I am quite bored to tears. Do come home.*

## R

I folded up the letter. I kept on folding until it was the tiniest square I could manage, trying to obliterate the thing. How could she write such stupid sentiments? I wasn't on holiday. She knew very well why I had to 'trespass' on King Askar's hospitality. Un-Turned harmings were compelled north by the tors, and travelling south meant excruciating pain. Besides, I didn't *want* to go home. As frustrating as I found him, being with Rodden and learning about Lharmell was far more exciting and fulfilling. Renata would want to fill my days with dress fittings, letter writing and visits from exceedingly dull people. She would drive me batty with talk of husbands.

I ground the letter in my hands until the parchment began to crumble and let the pieces blow away on the breeze.

I had seen this Prince Folsum at the stables one day earlier in the summer. He possessed some very fine black horses. I had taken an immediate dislike to him when he'd shoved one of his horses rather savagely for treading on his toe. He'd then bellowed at it for several minutes, upsetting all the horses in the stable. The footmen had raised their eyebrows, but could do nothing. He was a prince.

I paused for a moment, wondering what it would be like to be married to such a man. Then I shuddered. Undoubtedly it would be dreadful.

As I entered the bailey, I spied Rodden crossing the flagstones with Hoggit, the paunchy, pock-marked captain of the guard. Their expressions were grave and they were consulting a piece of parchment. Rodden was King Askar's right-hand man, his advisor in all things pertaining to the Lharmellins. He was a tall man, and black-haired as all harmings are, and walked with a confident stride. Some might say he had fine cheekbones and broad shoulders, and a pleasantly foreign aspect. His figure was lithe and athletic, so different from Prince Folsum's over-muscled frame. I suppose you could say Rodden was handsome, though I would never care to. On those rare occasions when he smiled it could quite take your breath away. So I'd been told.

Hoggit departed, and Rodden looked up at my approach. ‘Bad news?’

‘Just my mother. You?’

‘Yes. Dead bodies.’

‘Regular dead bodies or bloodless ones?’

‘Bloodless.’

I felt a stab of alarm. ‘It’s starting again, isn’t it?’

He regarded the parchment and sighed. ‘I don’t think it ever stopped.’

‘You mean there have been more? Why didn’t you tell me?’

Without looking up, he said automatically, ‘Mortality reports are my affair, Zeraphina. The captain of the guard reports to me.’

I gritted my teeth. He was twenty-three years old – his birthday having been in spring – to my sixteen but sometimes he behaved as if the gap was decades. ‘Not when they’re killed because of Lharmellins. Then it’s my affair, too.’ I thought he had stopped keeping me in the dark. Alarm made my voice shrill. ‘You can’t go on keeping things from me.’

‘I haven’t kept anything from you. I didn’t know until now about the destitutes. I suspected, but I wasn’t certain.’

‘You should have told me what you suspected. It’s my right to know. We’re partners, aren’t we?’

Rodden raised an eyebrow at me. ‘You’re royalty. You have a responsibility to your people. It’s my job to worry about the dead bodies.’

I bristled. ‘May I remind you that *we* didn’t kill the Lharmellin leader. I did.’ I stalked across the bailey.

‘Zeraphina, wait!’ He jogged to catch up with me. ‘I’m sorry. It’s my habit to be private. Here.’ He held the report out to me. ‘I should have given you the others, too. Until now, though, I wasn’t sure that the bodies had anything to do with the Lharmellins. Look here,’ he said, pointing a finger at a column of figures. ‘There has been a spike in the number of beggars and cripples found dead. No one bothers much to investigate how they die, but a fortnight ago I ordered that all bodies be checked for exsanguination. Do you see what it says?’

Next to a list of destitutes was the notation ‘EXS’: exsanguinated. ‘All of them?’

Rodden nodded. ‘They’ve been put back on the streets and arranged to look as if they died in their sleep.’

‘I thought harmings just dumped bodies when they were finished with them.’

‘They used to. But it seems they’re getting smarter.’

‘That can’t be. We killed their leader only a few

months ago. They're supposed to be disorganised and weak. Renata says they're having a warm summer in Amentia.' Our queendom had been blighted by ice for decades, something we Amentines had attributed to a natural but unfortunate change in the weather patterns. But Rodden suspected there was more to it. The Teripsiin Mountains of Amentia were rich in metals, including yelinate, which was used to create the alloy yelbar. Yelinate was all but useless to humans, but yelbar was fatal to Lharmellins and harmings. Even un-Turned ones like us. Rodden believed the Lharmellins had learnt of Amentia's yelinate and had been trying to freeze out potential mine-works. A temperate summer might indicate that our enemies' power had waned. 'Do you think it's just a coincidence or a trick to put us off our guard?'

Rodden raked a hand through his black hair. 'I don't know. I don't understand it either. I have been uncertain how to proceed. The thaw in Amentia suggested that the harmings and Lharmellins had grown weaker, but this report seems to indicate otherwise.'

'I've been thinking a lot about it, too,' I admitted. 'What we might do next. It's not right they go on killing people. When will it stop?'

‘It won’t stop.’

‘Not unless we do something.’

He met my gaze, hesitating.

‘Tell me,’ I urged.

‘Not here.’

We climbed the stone steps to the battlements and made our way along the parapet, heading for his quarters in the northernmost turret of the palace. From this height, under a vaulted blue sky, we could see over all of Xallentaria, the capital city of Pergamia. I saw the tree-lined boulevard that led from the palace to the city, the spires and domed roofs in the distance. In the east were the wilds of the king’s hunting grounds, home to deer and tusked boars. To the south, beyond the city walls, were heat-shimmered olive groves and farmhouses; to the north-west were the docks. Xallentaria was a major trading port and hundreds of ships were in the harbour. The sight of a full sail bearing a ship out to sea could make my heart contract with longing. I ached to be on deck, free from the tors at last and heading away, anywhere, without fear of pain.

I avoided looking northwards as I knew what I would see: a vast, empty ocean stretching all the way to the horizon. The tors of Lharmell weren’t visible from this distance, but I knew they were there.

I could feel them calling to me, tugging at the cord between us.

When Rodden and I reached the top of the spiral staircase, I saw that the place was a mess of papers and books as usual, and only thin rays of sunlight filtered through the arrow slots. Griffin flew from my wrist to perch high up in the rafters. Leap crouched by the rabbit hutch, his tail undulating with curiosity. Inside, brown rabbits hopped about on straw. I felt my pupils dilate at the sight. I would have to feed soon.

Most of the books were familiar to me now, and I'd spent many hours poring over them as well as Rodden's maps and other charts. I'd learned, for instance, that bennium, one of the components of yelbar, the metal poisonous to those with Lharmellin blood, could be found deep in the desert of Verapine. I also knew that there wasn't any bennium at the palace, and Rodden had barely any yelbar.

I spread a map over the books and general litter on his desk. Near the top was Pergamia, a sausage-shaped country painted in brilliant, lush green, which stretched east to west across the northern part of Brivora, the great continent on which we lived. Far to the south was Amentia, my tiny, landlocked home. The artist had painted mountains and fir trees

and intricate snowflakes. Directly north of Pergamia lay the Straits of Unctium, the sea that separated Brivora from Lharmell. Lharmell was a small island, dominated by a ring of tors surrounding a bowl-shaped valley. The Lharmellins' lair. I had been there: it was an ancient spent volcano, a crater of basalt and black volcanic glass. Just seeing it on a map was enough to tighten the tor-line connected to my body. Much of the island was blackened, dead forest. The dirt and skeletal trees were poisonous to humans. Because we were part-human, the toxins had burned Rodden and me, but the Lharmellin blood in our veins prevented us from being poisoned to death. Humans, on the other hand, would die quickly if they stepped into the forest. I remembered the acid rain, and shuddered.

'Here,' I said, moving my attention from Lharmell and pointing to Verapine. It was on the continent of Ossiria, an hourglass-shaped landmass west of Brivora, the Osseran Sea in between. It was a large country, made up mostly of desert. The first time I'd looked at the map I'd not been able to believe such a huge, barren expanse existed. 'Verapine. That's where Leap's from, but it's also the only place in the world where bennium occurs naturally, is that right?'

Leap looked around at the sound of his name, his tail curling into a question mark.

‘Yes.’

‘Would an alchemist have any bennium?’

Rodden shook his head. ‘No, it doesn’t have a great many uses, so unfortunately no one trades in it.’

‘How long would it take to send someone for it?’

‘Weeks. Months. It’s funny you should mention bennium, though. It’s been on my mind too.’ He cocked a dark eyebrow at me. ‘I was thinking we could go and get some.’

I looked again at the map. ‘Wouldn’t that take a lot of time?’

‘Yes, but it would be well spent. There are things we could learn while we travelled.’

I gripped his arm. ‘I’ve been thinking that too. We don’t know how many harmings are out there or what they’re saying to one another. About us. About the Turning we disrupted.’

‘Exactly. And there are people we could talk to in the Pergamian cities. The captains of the guard know to look for exsanguination, but they might have left details out of their monthly reports that could be useful to us.’

*We. Us.* His words made excitement bubble up inside me. Our journey into Lharmell had shown

how well we worked together. And the idea of travel was thrilling. I wouldn't have to go home, at least for now. It seemed almost shameful to consider an expedition across Pergamia, the Osseran Sea and deep into the desert an adventure when so many people were dying every day and even more lives were at stake, but it was an adventure just the same.

'We could travel by land across Pergamia,' he said, and his finger ran across the names of cities: Rendine, Ercan, Jefsgord. 'Then by boat to Verapine. Here's the capital, Pol.' He tapped the map. 'It's a slum city. Some of the poorest people in the world live there. Brivorans would think it an ugly, dirty place, but it's not.' He smiled. 'It's quite beautiful when you look past the patched houses and dirty streets. The people are proud, and very talented. They're happy, too – there's such a great sense of community. You don't get that here as much, where most people have plenty.'

'Have you been there?' I asked.

'You could say that,' he said, frowning down at the map. 'The desert sands are used to make a very special kind of glass. That's another reason we should go ourselves – the glass could prove very useful. And then through the desert for the bennium.' He looked up, his eyes challenging me. 'If you think

you can handle it. I could always go alone. In fact, I should. It's hardly right for me to travel with you unchaperoned.'

I jutted my chin. 'Nonsense. Who'll watch your back and keep you from walking into an ambush if Leap and Griffin and I aren't there?'

He looked down at the map, a smile tugging at his mouth. If I didn't know better I would say he was pleased at my insistence. 'And we will have to go to Amentia.'

I groaned. 'Really? Renata will never let me leave. She'll have me married the instant I step foot in the castle.'

'We don't have to go to the capital. Remember the mines that were set up after Lilith and Amis's wedding?'

I nodded. Ostensibly they were to mine copper and tin, but the vital activity was the mining of yelinate.

'We should inspect progress and collect the yelinate we'll need. But do you really want your mother to discover you went all the way to Amentia without seeing her?'

'Yes.'

Rodden rolled up the map. 'You say you want to retain your humanity. Well, human girls like to

visit their mothers. You should be thankful you have a mother.'

He turned to put the map away and I gave him a sharp look. His mother was dead? I tucked that little bit of information away in a corner of my mind. I was gathering intelligence on him: one day I would be able to piece all the morsels together and he would find that, despite the secrets he kept from me, I would know everything. At the rate I was going it would only take me, say, eight hundred years.

'Fine, fine,' I muttered. 'But we're leaving before she has me walking up the aisle.'