

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a red and black corset, stands in a dark, stormy landscape. A golden eagle is flying in the sky above her. The background is a dark, cloudy sky with a hint of a landscape below.

IS SHE BEING
CALLED HOME . . .
OR STRAIGHT INTO
DANGER?

BLOOD SONG

RHIANNON HART

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THE FIRST BOOK OF LHARMELL

Rhiannon Hart



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For my mum and dad

ONE

I was thinking of blood again so I went to practise my archery. That's what I always did when I thought I was going to kill something. I hit the bullseye every time and nothing had died yet, so at least I had that going for me.

I didn't know any other sixteen-year-old girls but the ones in my books didn't obsessively fire arrows because they felt the urge to bite someone. They worried about suitors and ribbons and things. Then again, a few got fed to dragons, so I seemed to have it better than some.

There was still an hour before sundown but the forest around me was blackening into an early twilight. The light barely mattered; I could practise well into the night if I wanted to, still firing perfect shots.

Leap was curled up on my discarded cloak. His eyes were slitted and he watched me, purring when I glanced at him. Far above us Griffin was hovering over the clearing, golden wings spread against a steely sky.

My feet were tangled in the long, unkempt grass. The grounds of the Amentine palace were once the most magnificent in all southern Brivora. Now, they have fallen into disrepair. As the wealth of the House of Amentia trickled away over many generations, so too did the magnificence of the palace. The gardens were weedy and overgrown. The forest had reclaimed the land, and uncut saplings had become towering oaks. Ivy had crept inexorably up the steep castle walls, reaching far above my head to touch the windowsill of my lofty bedroom.

By the time my mother took the crown as queen, the disorder was complete. It would take huge sums of money to repair not only the gardens to their former magnificence, but also the crumbling castle, the spreading mould and unfashionable décor – money we didn't have. It was easier for my mother simply to shut up the unusable parts of the keep. So this was what she did.

I preferred it in the grounds where there were still tracts of scraggy grass and I could set up my archery range, the forest enveloping me on four sides.

The world had all but forgotten our existence, but I found I did not mind so much. I liked my solitude. If given the choice, I would prefer to stay that way forever.

But we wouldn't. Lilith was to be married. And sometime soon, all too soon, it would be my turn for a husband. As Second Daughter I would have to make my home with my husband in his kingdom, wherever that should be.

I grimaced, and swiped another arrow from my quiver. My skin crawled at the thought of someone touching me.

Lilith, on the other hand, had always detested our home for its chilly and ramshackle nature, and was looking forward to her marriage to Prince Lester and life as the future Queen of Varlint. Amentia was hers by inheritance but I doubted she would rule it from its rightful seat. Rather she would reign by proxy from Varlint. Perhaps Amentia had seen its last queen.

I notched the arrow, which I had fletched myself with Griffin's golden feathers, and aimed at the target thirty feet away. I drew back on the taut string, my eyes narrowing, seeing nothing but the ringed red circle.

Before I could fire I was distracted by the urgent drumming of hoof beats approaching rapidly. I tried

to shut out the noise but the horse's scream as it was pulled to a sudden halt made me start.

'Drat.' I lowered my bow and waited, ears cocked towards the keep.

Silence.

I raised my bow and drew back on the string. I had the red dot in my sights again when voices reached my ears. I couldn't make out the words but the speakers were agitated. Again I lowered my bow, preferring to wait until the interruption ceased. I glanced at Leap; he was tucked into a tight ball, his short silvery fur fluffed out against the cold. His purr rumbled deep in his chest, and he flexed his claws luxuriously.

I was raising my bow for the third time when a cry rang out. It was sharp and defiant, the noise evaporating quickly in the brittle air.

Lilith.

'Oh, blast it all!' I cried, hurling my bow to the ground, where it bounced harmlessly in the long grass. My concentration was ruined so I bent to unstring the bow. There was no point practising any more today. I would have words with my sister when I got inside. She had no respect for –

I noticed that Leap had lifted his head and his ears were pricked in the direction of the castle. His pupils dilated and he raised himself into a crouch.

My breath caught. Something was wrong.

I shoved my arrows back in the quiver, shame burning my cheeks. Any normal girl would have flown to her sister's aid without a second thought. I held my gauntleted wrist aloft and let out an ear-splitting whistle, calling down my eagle. She drew in her wings and dropped like a stone, only at the very last second flapping them to alight on my arm. Her black eyes flashed, and I saw that she too was craning towards the castle, unease visible in the set of her sleek wings.

I grabbed my cloak and together we raced to the western entrance, a damp and mouldering side door that was seldom used by anyone but me. The stairwell was near pitch-black, but I was guided upwards by the sound of my steps echoing off the stone floor. We emerged on a landing and Griffin flew from my arm, heading for my mother's sitting room. Leap followed, ears flat.

At the chamber door I was greeted by a tableau of despair. Lilith lay prostrate on the floor, her shoulders heaving with sobs. My mother, Renata, was crouched beside her, tenderly smoothing Lilith's red-gold hair from her brow. In her hand she clutched a parchment.

'What is it? What has happened?' I asked from

the doorway. The rawness of their emotions made me reluctant to approach. I always made a hash of my attempts to comfort others.

Renata held up the parchment. ‘A messenger arrived with this from Varlint. Lester is dead,’ she said.

‘Lester!’ He couldn’t be dead. He was simply vibrant with life: bellowing, thumping and grinning at everything, and always in the rudest of health. I’d put up with his violent cheerfulness on many occasions since he’d become my sister’s betrothed.

At our mother’s words Lilith began to sob even harder.

‘How?’

‘A hunting accident,’ my mother told me. There was grief on her face, but something else as well: fear. This wasn’t just a blow to Lilith. It was bad news for the whole country.

Leap, who was a sensitive creature, padded over and butted his head against my sister’s shoulder. She reacted brutally, shoving him and crying out, ‘Get away, you filthy beast! Get away!’

Leap jumped onto a chair, his tail lashing with annoyance.

‘Lilith!’

‘Take it out, Zeraphina,’ Renata snapped. ‘Can’t you see she’s upset?’

Miffed, I scooped Leap up and made for the door. It, it, it. *He* has a *name*.

Lilith had never liked my animals. She found their cleverness creepy and complained they watched her with disapproving looks on their faces. Which was ridiculous. Griffin couldn't manage disapproving. She could only look fierce.

Renata gathered Lilith into her arms, rocking her gently. I should have stayed to comfort my sister but all I could feel once I'd left the room was relief.

Carrying Leap, I made for my bed chamber. A flash of gold overhead told me that Griffin would beat us there. A candle was burning at my bedside, but I blew it out. It was near full dark and I pulled the tapestry curtains back from my window and gazed out. In the northern sky the clouds had broken up in places and a sliver of moon was visible. I felt a strange tug on my insides as I looked in that direction. Leap purred in my arms, the reflection of the bats flying to their feeding grounds dancing in his eyes.

I wondered how Lester had died. Whether his belly had been wrenched open by a boar's tusk, or if he'd been thrown from a horse to meet a hasty end by way of a broken neck.

Was there blood? I wondered.

The days that followed were unbearable. The grief within our castle walls was palpable and it completely threw my aim off.

Our mother wept for Lester as hard as Lilith, but her reasons were rather more mercenary.

‘I won’t marry anyone now,’ Lilith swore tearfully in the days after Lester’s death. ‘I don’t want anyone but Lester.’

Renata, in her typical fashion, ignored the wishes of her eldest daughter. She sent a flurry of letters to every royal seat with an unmarried prince, telling them of her ‘fortuitously available daughter’.

I’m sure Lester’s parents wouldn’t have put it quite that way.

From my bedroom window high up in the keep, I watched the suitors arrive, and even from that height I could see what a sorry bunch they were: paunches, bald spots, and limp white hands abounded. One sat on his horse with his legs sticking straight out in the stirrups and bounced along like a rubber ball.

Lilith refused the lot of them, sight unseen, from her bedchamber.

Then one day, a letter arrived from Pergamia, the most powerful kingdom in all Brivora. My mother’s

lady-in-waiting put the letter with its golden seal into Renata's hands as Lilith and I looked on, dumbstruck.

'It's not . . . it surely can't be . . . is it?' Lilith said, her black satin handkerchief for once forgotten in her hand.

Renata broke the seal and read quickly.

'It is an offer of marriage,' she said, not bothering to hide the astonishment in her voice. 'Pending a meeting between you and Prince Amis, the king's only son.' She gripped her daughter's arm. 'Darling, we are saved! Don't you see? Amis will be king one day. And you – you shall be queen.'

For a second, Lilith's eyes shone at the prospect: she, the princess of an obscure, downtrodden queendom, wedded to the richest, most powerful prince in all the land, and destined to be queen. Then she remembered Lester, and her eyes dimmed. She dabbed at her dry eyes with the handkerchief. 'Mother, I am in mourning.'

Renata's green eyes darkened to storm cloud proportions. I removed to a safe distance.

From that moment, our lives became a living hell. Renata screamed at Lilith. Lilith screamed at Renata. Griffin screamed at nothing at all and Leap looked permanently haunted. I could find no peace even in the furthest reaches of the forest.

Meal times were the worst, vitriol turning the food in our mouths to ashes.

One evening Renata ceased trying to reason with Lilith and simply commanded, 'Daughter, you will go, you will marry him, and you will like it!'

Lilith put down her knife and fork, her jaw set. 'No, Mother. I refuse. You can go on until you are blue in the face but I *will not marry that man*. Lester –' Saying his name made her tearful, and she paused to take a breath. 'Lester has been gone less than a month and already you want to replace him with some stranger from the north.'

The north? I looked up from the broccoli I'd been pushing around my plate. Of course, Pergamia was in the north. But why did that thought give me pause?

A memory unfurled in my mind. Or rather, a sense of déjà vu as I was certain the vision that came to me wasn't anything I had seen with my earthly eyes. I glimpsed great black trees swathed in mist and heard the surge of water as if the sea was lapping at my heels. Lights danced among the trees, in pairs like glowing eyes.

The temperature of the room seemed to plummet as if I really did stand in that bleak landscape. Keening filled the air, and craggy

mountains rose against a sky encrusted with stars. I felt a tug in my chest as if something was pulling me forward, and curiosity turned to horror as I felt the onset of the blood-hunger, the monstrous cravings I kept secret that tormented my days and nights and would flare up without warning. They began with breathlessness and cramping, and usually ended up with me writhing on the floor in agony.

‘Dead, darling, dead,’ Renata was muttering. ‘Once you say it you might start to get over it.’

Her voice came from far away, as if through water. I clenched my hands on my dress, terrified they would notice the pain etched on my face. It took all my effort not to cry out.

‘I don’t know how long we can keep up this charade,’ Renata continued. Her full attention was on Lilith, and she evidently didn’t notice that her younger daughter was dying at the other end of the table. ‘The coffers are emptying, and if I don’t do something quickly people will begin to know. I either find a way to prevent the frosts that are killing the crops, or one of you has to marry very well. As you’re the eldest, and Zeraphina is only sixteen and still a year away from marriageable age, it’s up to you to get us out of this.’

The burning subsided slightly and I could breathe again. I blinked and looked around. No one had noticed.

Lilith was exasperated. ‘Out of what? Being poor? What is so bad about that?’

‘Nothing, dear,’ Renata replied with exaggerated patience. ‘But once word gets out that we can’t raise a proper army, what do you think will happen to us?’

I hadn’t thought of that. Judging by the look on Lilith’s face, neither had she.

‘So I’m to marry for money,’ she wailed. ‘I was going to marry for love. Oh, Lester! How could you be so careless?’ She dissolved into sobs, pushing her plate away and cradling her head in her hands.

‘Yes, yes, hysterics will solve everything. In case you’ve forgotten, I’m the one who chose Lester in the first place, and for exactly the same reason you’re to marry Amis Pergamon: he’s rich.’

‘But Lester loved me. Why would this man want to marry a pauper?’

Renata took a deep breath. ‘As I said, no one knows the state of our affairs –’

‘So I’m to deceive him?’

‘Daughter, no one’s deceiving anyone if he falls in love with you.’

‘But what about me? What if I don’t love him?’

‘Darling, I rather think I don’t care.’

Lilith let out another wail and fled to her room.

‘I didn’t say you could leave the table!’

I could see Griffin shuffling impatiently by the door. She wanted to hunt, and I wanted to get away. There was a residual tightness in my chest that might flare up at any second. ‘May I go?’

Renata sighed. ‘Go, go.’

I jumped up and headed for the door, but she called, ‘Zeraphina, do you think me a monster?’

‘No, Mother.’ I put my left foot over my right, trying not to shuffle about.

‘I just want her to do her duty. I’ve always treated her well, haven’t I?’

What was appropriate here? A hug? Gushing assurance? I wasn’t sure I could manage the proper sincerity at that moment so I settled for a nod.

‘How did this happen?’ she said softly. ‘Amentia was struggling when I became queen, but things were never this bad. Winter has eclipsed all other seasons.’ She sighed. ‘At times like this I wish your father was still alive.’

I was surprised, as I rarely heard her speak of him.

‘He would have no qualms about beating her into it.’

Oh.

Renata smiled weakly. 'Off you go.'

I paced dreamily down the corridor to my room.

My senses tingled. I breathed deeply, smelling the damp stone of the castle, the snow on the wind. I fancied I could hear small creatures crawling among the leaf litter in the forest.

We reached my bedroom and Griffin flew from my wrist, out the open window and into the night. Leap sat with me on the windowsill and we gazed towards the north. The horizon was darkest there and where the clouds parted I could see a sky scattered heavily with stars. I felt the tug again. That place I had seen, the land of keening voices and great black trees, it lay in that direction. And it was calling to me.

I lay awake most of the night, feeling the pull of the north like a compass needle to a magnet. What did it mean that I felt the blood-hunger just seconds after I saw the vision of that strange land? The hunger frightened me, and I was ashamed of it. I feared what would happen to me if someone found out about it. It wasn't normal to crave blood. It was monstrous,

but monsters were no more than made-up creatures in tales to scare little children, or the delusions of a mad person. Did that make me mad?

The compulsion to go north nagged at me through the night. I argued with myself, back and forth, reasoning that I might discover what was wrong with me if I went northward, and then that it was foolish to even contemplate such a thing. It could be terribly dangerous. There was something not right about that black forest.

Sometime before dawn, restlessness forced my decision. It was foolish to remain at home if Lilith travelled northwards to meet Prince Amis. Cowering at home would accomplish nothing.

If she would go.

The hunger thrummed through me. She must go.

When the keep began to stir, I wrapped a wool shawl around my nightgown and, taking my tea tray with me, I paced the freezing flagstones to Lilith's room.

She was curled on her bedroom chair and wrapped in a blanket, her tea tray lying untouched beside her. I poured her a cup, added lemon and sugar and handed it to her. She accepted it automatically, still gazing out the window at the freezing morning. From this high up we could see the tree-tops of the

surrounding forest and a lot of heavy grey cloud. Far off, the Teripsiin Mountains rose steeply, their caps permanently frozen white and disappearing into the overcast sky.

‘Thinking about Lester?’ I asked.

She nodded.

I sat down on the rug at her feet, curling the fur from her bed around me. Despite the fires burning in the grates, the tapestries on the walls and the thick rugs on the floor, our rooms were always chilly.

From the doorway I saw Leap approaching, his eyes on my lap and a purr starting up. He liked to be cuddled on cold mornings but I surreptitiously shooed him away, not wanting to provoke Lilith. He stopped, his eyes widening. Then he gave a quick lash of his tail and stalked off.

‘Sister,’ I began. ‘I must confess that I never liked Lester. He lacked northern manners, don’t you agree?’

Lilith glared down at me. ‘What would you know about northern manners? You’ve never been to the north.’

‘Well, neither have you,’ I pointed out. ‘Shouldn’t you see it before you become an old married woman? Even if you decide not to marry Prince Amis, you should at least travel a little.’

Lilith turned her pale face back to the window. 'Zeraphina, why in the world do you even care?' Her voice was incredibly tired.

That stung. I cared about things.

I cared about the north.

I squashed that thought and tried another tack. 'Lester wouldn't want you sitting around pining yourself to death, would he?'

Lilith shrugged. The dull morning light made her look colourless, and her wan features told me that she hadn't slept well the night before, or any night since Lester had died.

'A change of scenery might help, mightn't it? It could be like a holiday. We could go to the north and –' I shrugged – 'just look around.' I winced. I was making it sound as inconsequential as a picnic.

'I want to forget him,' Lilith whispered. 'I just want everything to stop. I try to look ahead and it's like there's nothing there.' Her eyes were bleak.

'There's the north,' I offered.

'Do shut up about the north. You're as bad as Mother.'

We fell silent. I was out of ideas so I poured myself some tea and clutched the cup between my hands, the warmth spreading through my fingers.

Outside, the sky was heavy with snow. Soon a powdery white layer would blanket the land and

Amentia would grow even colder and bleaker. Another harvest season had come to an end and the granaries were near-empty. The people were living on the stores that were meant for next season's planting. Mother would have her work cut out assuring them that first Lester's kingdom and now Amis's would bail us out.

I would turn seventeen next autumn – nearly a year away, but not long enough as far as I was concerned. For all I knew, Renata had already sent the letters out. Advertising her daughter. I shivered, and not from the cold. I dreaded another's hands on me. They would find out what I was. They would be able to feel it through my skin, the monster that tormented me, that had dark hungers and urges I didn't understand. Or the hunger would give me away, the fits that left me gasping and writhing on the floor. Fortunately they remained unwitnessed, but it was only a matter of time.

But what if rather than marrying some prince, I had another destiny, one that lay to the north? I had to find out why I was being called there.

'I hear it's warm in the north,' I said. 'You could escape the winter. Go swimming. Pick berries.'

Lilith was silent, but I could see her thinking about it. She hated winter in Amentia.

‘Wouldn’t that be nicer than being cooped up in this gloomy old castle for three or four months? It’s going to be a hard winter, you know. Don’t you feel you’ll just go mad here?’

Lilith groaned. ‘Oh, all right! I’ll go, I’ll go.’

I gave a yip of delight and clutched her arm.

‘Watch the tea! Why are you so excited?’

My whole body was zinging. *The north!* I knew it was unreasonable to be reacting this way and I tried to rein in my enthusiasm. ‘Well, I’m going with you, of course. I’m sick of the cold, too.’

Lilith gave me a questioning look, but didn’t say anything.

I should have been ashamed of my lies, but all I felt was the most intense exhilaration. We were going to the north.

Mother was ecstatic when we told her the news. She was poring over the latest figures from the treasury when I yanked Lilith into her chamber.

‘We’re going!’ I cried.

She was ecstatic, I was ecstatic, but the bride-to-be looked positively miserable.

‘I’m not even out of mourning,’ she complained. ‘It’s unseemly.’

‘Mourning is for peasants,’ Renata proclaimed, and called in her lady-in-waiting. ‘Eugenia, summon the tailor, the dressmaker – Wakefield, not that second-rate one – milliner, corsetière, shoemaker, coach-maker, perfumier, and cosmetician. And the hairdresser.’ The woman bobbed and went to leave. ‘And take those dreadful papers away,’ Renata called, pointing to the accounts. ‘Tell the treasurer I’m not to be bothered with them any more.’

‘Mother!’ Lilith was aghast. ‘Won’t all that be terribly expensive?’

‘Do you think we’re going to turn up at the House of Pergamon dressed in sackcloth and ashes with our begging bowls out?’

Soon the nine most prestigious couturiers in the queendom were gathered in Renata’s quarters. She lined them up and lectured them like they were about to go into battle. ‘We’re going to need travelling clothes. The people must see our procession through the cities, and it’s got to look good. We need to raise morale. Then we’ll need more clothes for when we reach Pergamia; lighter, more summery ones, and these ones have to look very good. Then we’re going to need more for our stay at the palace, and these ones have to look *stunning*. Plus there’s the trousseau for Lilith.’

‘I’m not even betrothed yet,’ Lilith protested.

‘As good as, darling. Do you want a Pergamian tailor designing your wedding dress? No, we’ll get it made here.’

‘Don’t you think it’s a little presumptuous that I show up at this stranger’s palace with my wedding clothes?’

‘No, it’s expected. I know best, Lilith.’

I felt myself grow anxious. How long was this all going to take? I had thought we would just pack up and leave.

Renata turned back to the assembled craftspeople. ‘Now, this is the most important part: this isn’t Varlint we’re going to, it Pergamia. We need to look rich. We need to look so rich that we’re not even aware of how many pots of gold we have lying around. Those mousey clothes that Lilith wore for her last betrothal just won’t do.’ She clapped her hands. ‘Now go! I want to see styles and fabric samples this afternoon.’ Renata sighed happily and turned back to us. ‘This is going to be fun.’