



COURT OF LIES AND DECEIT

FLAME AND THORNS: BOOK THREE

MARION BLACKWOOD

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CONTENT WARNINGS

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*For everyone who desperately wants to have the freedom to choose their
own fate*

CHAPTER ONE

Pain crackles through my body like a lightning bolt. I cry out, but it only makes me cough blood onto the smooth surface beneath me. My mind spins. I'm lying on my stomach on what feels like a wooden table. Blinking hard, I try to push myself up, but my arms are so weak that they tremble with exhaustion. And my legs don't move at all. Another bolt of panic shoots through me.

"Careful!" Draven snaps from somewhere close to me. His voice is a vicious growl, brimming with threats and violence. "If you hurt her more, I will rip your fucking arms off."

"I'm sorry," a man stammers. "But I had to remove the shard quickly."

Blinking repeatedly, I try to get my eyes to focus on the room around me. But it's incredibly difficult because there is a sharp coldness in my back where the shard used to be. It's so intensely cold that it feels like it's burning me from the inside. And worst of all, I can feel it slowly spreading.

I gasp out a breath, and blood trickles down from the corner of my mouth where I'm lying with my cheek pressed to the cool wooden table. My hands are resting on either side of my head. I squeeze my fingers into fists and use every ounce of willpower I possess to force my eyes into focus.

My vision is still foggy, as if there is mist floating at the edges of it, and the room around me sways slightly, but I finally manage to take in my surroundings.

I'm in a room lit by bright faelights. The wall that I can see is completely covered by dark wooden bookcases. Vials and bottles in all

shapes and colors line the shelves, and various blades and tools gleam next to them. I appear to be lying on a table in the middle of the room, and there is a man standing next to me. But because he is bent over my back, I can't see his face.

Pain shoots through me again. But just like last time, I can only feel it in my upper body. A wave of terror rises up inside me, threatening to drown me in its dark depths.

Then a pair of beautiful golden eyes appear right in front of me.

“Selena,” Draven says.

And his voice is so heartbreakingly tender that tears well up in my eyes.

Agony floods his face. Crouched down next to the table beside me, he reaches out and gently strokes my cheek. His soft fingers carefully remove a few strands of my hair that had gotten stuck in the half-dried blood on my chin. Draven swallows hard and then rests his hand very lightly on my cheek.

“You’re going to be okay,” he promises. “Everything is going to be okay.”

But given the fear in his eyes, I don’t know who he is trying to assure most. Me or himself.

I open my mouth to respond, but only a whimper makes it out. That burning coldness in my back is making it hard to concentrate on anything else.

“Oh no,” the man who is bent over me suddenly says. The dread in his voice makes my hair stand on end.

For a moment, terror flashes across Draven’s face as well before he manages to hide it. With a mask of confidence on his features, he leans forward and kisses my forehead before resolutely declaring, “You’re going to be okay.”

Then he stands up and turns to face the man who was bent over me. He has also straightened, and now that he isn’t standing so close, I can see that he is a dragon shifter. His brown hair is disheveled, and his green eyes are nervous as he meets Draven’s gaze.

“What is it?” another voice demands from somewhere behind me. It takes me a second to realize that it’s Draven’s best friend Galen. “She will walk again, right?”

A hollow pit opens up in my stomach, and panic washes over me like a cold wave when the stranger doesn’t immediately reply. Instead, his green

eyes flit nervously between Draven and where I'm assuming that Galen is standing on the other side of the table.

"Her spine was severed," he finally replies, very carefully.

Which sounds an awful lot like a *no*.

That gaping pit inside me widens, threatening to swallow me whole.

"But that's not your biggest problem," the man continues before anyone can reply. His worried eyes settle on Draven. "The shard that struck her was ice fire from the Silver Clan."

All blood drains from Draven's face.

The sight of it rips the air from my lungs and sends a whip of fear through my chest.

"What does that mean?" someone else demands from the corner of the room.

Tilting my chin up slightly, I find two people standing there who I missed on my first inspection of the room. Alistair's orange and green eyes are locked on the stranger as he waits for him to answer his question. But Isera's gaze is locked on me. Her long black hair is windswept, but her silver and blue eyes are as cool and steady as ice as she watches me. There is an expression on her face that I can't read.

That burning coldness in my back creeps slowly outwards. I gasp as the searing pain makes my head spin yet again.

"The ice flames that the Silver Clan possesses can freeze a person completely," another voice replies from the same direction that Galen's voice came from. It's Lyra, the usually so cheerful soldier from the Black Dragon Clan. Though right now, her voice is grim. "Basically turning the whole body into ice."

Memories flash before my eyes of the battle that I witnessed on the mountainside outside the Ice Palace. Images of how Bane and Jessina's ice flames encased the dragons from the Purple Clan, and how their bodies fell through the sky and shattered like glass on the stones below.

Dread washes through me. I try to swallow it down, but everything in my mouth tastes of blood and iron.

"And that shard made of those ice flames penetrated her body," the stranger picks up. "Which means that their magic is already inside her." His green eyes are filled with sympathy as he glances down at me. "It's going to turn her body into ice from the inside." He looks up at the others around the

room. “It’s slower than being fully encased by ice flames, which means instant death, but no less certain.”

I suddenly can’t breathe. I feel like someone just punched me in the gut and then ripped my lungs out.

That cold and unreadable expression remains on Isera’s features as she drags her gaze up to the stranger. “She’s going to die?”

“Yes.”

A sob is wrenched from deep within my soul.

The room erupts into chaos.

Draven whips around and launches himself at Isera. Grabbing her by the collar of her silver tunic, he slams her up against the bookshelves so hard that the glass bottles rattle behind her.

“Do something!” he growls in her face. “You have ice magic too.”

“I can’t,” she replies.

His fist tightens in her shirt. “I was going to leave you. I was going to get Selena and my clan the hell out of there, and I was going to leave you collared and trapped inside that fucking Ice Palace.” He stabs his free hand in my direction. “But *she* forced my hand. She forced me to buy her time that we really didn’t have, just so that she could get the two of you out. So that she could save you.” A muscle flickers in his jaw as he grinds out, “You owe her.”

That unreadable mask on Isera’s face slips for a second. Genuine shock pulses across Isera’s and Alistair’s features as both of them flick a glance at me.

I try to tell them to stop fighting, but I only manage to cough more blood onto the table.

“Don’t you think I would help her if I could?” Isera snaps as she once more locks eyes with Draven. Now that her impassive mask has shattered, that world-ending fury that has filled her eyes these last few weeks has returned to her face. “If it was my ice, I could’ve just flicked my wrist and made it disappear. But it’s not *my* ice. It’s theirs. Which means that I can’t just make it disappear. All I can do is to move it.”

“Then move it! Move it out of her body!”

Isera’s eyes begin to glow as she channels her magic and raises a hand.

But before she can do anything, the stranger screams, “Don’t!”

Draven releases Isera’s collar and whirls around to face him. The stranger swallows and takes a half step back when Draven’s burning eyes

lock on him.

Clearing his throat, he quickly elaborates. “Moving it won’t remove it. I’ve already told you. The magic is already inside her body, which means it will continue to spread. So if you move the ice, all it will do is to make it spread faster.”

Isera’s eyes stop glowing as she immediately cuts off the flow of her magic.

For a few moments, the room is eerily silent. The stunned quiet is so damning that it vibrates between the walls like death knells.

“Then what do we do?” Alistair at last asks, shattering the tense silence. His eyes are surprisingly desperate as he glances between me and the stranger. “There must be something you can do.”

“I’m just a doctor,” he replies with a helpless shrug. “For this, you need a healer. Someone with actual healing magic. Then they could both fix her spine and remove the ice.”

Determination flashes across Draven’s face. “Rin. Rin will do it.”

“Rin Tanaka hates you,” Galen points out softly.

“Everyone hates me,” Draven growls back. “But they do as I say anyway.”

The doctor scrambles back as Draven suddenly starts towards me. Alistair lurches into motion as well, and the scuff of boots behind my back tells me that Galen and Lyra are moving too.

“Let’s go,” Draven orders with a jerk of his chin. “We’re getting out of this shithole village right now and—”

“Ryat.” Isera’s voice cracks through the room like the strike of a whip. “Stop and think for a moment.”

Draven whirls back around to face her. She is still standing by the bookshelf that he shoved her up against earlier, but she has now brushed her silver tunic down properly again. Her arms are crossed over her chest as she holds Draven’s gaze.

“If you—” Draven begins, fury lacing his voice.

But Isera cuts him off. “Rin Tanaka is in the Ice Palace.”

He jerks back slightly, as if he had completely forgotten that.

“Along with all the other clan leaders,” Isera continues, her voice hard. “We escaped during that ridiculous allegiance ceremony where you were all supposed to renew your oaths of loyalty. Remember?” Her gaze is unwavering as she stares him down. “To get to Tanaka, you would need to

fight your way back in through the entire might of the Silver Dragon Clan, along with all seven other clans.”

“Then that is exactly what I will do!”

“And how long will that take? Huh? Can you win a war against the entire world in a matter of hours?”

“She’s right,” Galen interjects before Draven can reply. I still can’t see him, but his voice is soft and gentle. As if he is trying to calm down a feral beast. But there is a hint of sadness in it too. “You know better than anyone how destructive their ice flames are. Selena will be long dead before we can win a battle against the Silver Clan alone. And with all other clans there too, we would never be able to break through and convince Rin to help us before the ice flames have spread through Selena’s entire body.”

Draven looks like someone just ripped his heart out. His mouth works up and down, but no sound makes it out. As if he wants to argue but knows that it is hopeless. The sight of it makes me want to wrap my arms around him and never let go. But I can’t even push myself up from the table.

“There is another option,” Lyra suddenly says into the ringing silence.

Everyone snaps their gaze towards her. I wish I could turn my head to look at her too, but the freezing, searing pain in my back is making it difficult to even cling on to consciousness.

The dragon shifter doctor finally seems to notice that, because he snatches a vial from one of the shelves and hurries towards me. A faint *pop* sounds as he pulls out the stopper.

“This will help with the pain,” he whispers as he brings it to my lips. Helping me tilt my head, he pours the reddish-brown liquid into my mouth.

I swallow, wincing at the bitter taste.

Draven, who was watching the doctor like a hawk, at last shifts his attention back to Lyra and demands, “What other option?”

“Yes, what other option?” Galen cuts in. “The Orange Clan is the only one who has healing magic, so there...” He trails off, and he sounds completely stunned as he finally blurts out, “Wait. Don’t tell me you’re about to suggest what I think you’re about to suggest.”

Glass bottles clink as the doctor hurries over to another shelf and rifles through it. It makes Draven focus on him again, a fact that surprises the doctor enough that he almost jumps when he turns back around and finds Draven’s sharp eyes on him.

Holding up a small green bottle, he explains, "This is like... liquid food. But twenty times stronger. It will give her body a burst of energy to help it heal the damage from the shard faster." His gaze darts to me. "So that she will be able to talk without coughing up blood."

"Then give it to her," Draven snaps. "Fast." His eyes, so full of pain, linger on me for a moment longer before he turns back to Galen and Lyra. "Stop speaking in riddles and just spit it out."

"Remember that skirmish outside the Unseelie Court five years ago?" Lyra begins. But she doesn't wait for them to reply, she simply continues speaking in a hurried voice. "After they had dragged their people back in through the wards, I watched a woman heal them right there on the grass. Watched her heal serious wounds that are beyond the capabilities of a normal doctor."

Draven goes unnaturally still. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that there is a fae with healing magic in the Unseelie Court."

Shocked silence descends on the brightly lit room for a few seconds. The doctor ignores them all as he instead gently tilts my head again and brings the bottle to my lips before pouring pale green liquid into my mouth. I swallow it quickly, coughing again when a few drops hit my windpipe instead. But at least this potion tastes much better than the last did.

The sound of my coughing shatters the stunned silence, and Draven lurches into motion. Closing the final distance to the table, he very carefully moves my body and then picks me up without touching the wound in my back.

"Then we're going to the Unseelie Court," he declares.

His incredible scent of night mist and embers envelops me as he cradles me in his arms. My heart almost shatters at the way he is holding me. Like I'm the most precious thing in this world.

Leaning down, he brushes his lips over my forehead in a soft kiss and once more promises, "You're going to be okay."

Now that Draven is holding me, I can finally see Galen and Lyra for the first time since falling off Draven's back earlier. Lyra looks cautiously hopeful, her orange eyes lingering on my face for a moment before she looks back up at Draven. Next to her, Galen is watching me with violet eyes that are filled with worry. He drags a hand through his blond hair as he shifts his gaze back up to Draven.

“The Unseelie King has never let a dragon shifter through his wards,” Galen says carefully.

Draven’s expression darkens like an oncoming thunderstorm. “He will now. Or I will burn down this whole fucking world around his head.”