



EMPIRE OF FLAME AND THORNS

FLAME AND THORNS: BOOK ONE

MARION BLACKWOOD

EMPIRE OF FLAME AND THORNS

FLAME AND THORNS

BOOK ONE

MARION BLACKWOOD

CONTENTS

[Content warnings](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Bonus scene](#)

Copyright © 2024 by Marion Blackwood

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by reviewers, who may quote brief passages in a review. For more information, contact info@marionblackwood.com

ISBN 978-91-989042-6-0 (ebook)
ISBN 978-91-989042-7-7 (paperback)
ISBN 978-91-989042-8-4 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-91-989042-9-1 (special edition)

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All the writing and artwork in this book was created by a real person. No generative AI was used at any point in the creation of this book. The author expressly prohibits any entity from using this book to train AI technologies to generate text or images.

www.marionblackwood.com

CONTENT WARNINGS

If you have specific triggers, you can find the full list of content warnings at: www.marionblackwood.com/content-warnings

For everyone who dreams of being swept away on a grand adventure.

Especially if that adventure involves an enemies to lovers romance with a smoking hot guy with wings. And dark hair. And very questionable morals.

CHAPTER ONE

You'd think that being a part of a badass secret resistance movement would involve something a lot more glamorous than sitting on a cold stool, wrist-deep in fish guts. But apparently not.

Shifting my weight on the wooden stool, I discreetly scan the street around me for dragon shifter patrols while I continue to gut the mountain of fish waiting for me in the buckets below my stall. Only other fae like me occupy the street at the moment. Or maybe not exactly like me. As far as I know, the young brown-haired guy a little farther to my left is the only other member of our resistance group out here. Everyone else on this particular street is a civilian. Mostly because the real action, the actual important work that the resistance is doing, is taking place *inside* the building behind me.

A chilly fall wind whirls down the street, tugging at my clothes and my long silver hair. I resist the urge to raise my hand and push a stray strand out of my face since it would only smear fish guts across my cheek. Instead, I flex my cold fingers around the knife handle in an attempt to get some warmth back into my hands.

Gutting fish might not be the most desirable job ever, but after the dragon shifters slaughtered all the dragon riders and conquered the Seelie Court, we lost the ability to decide our own lives, so I can't really choose anything else. It has been millennia since then, and generations have come

and gone for both our races, but they still rule over us with the same brutal iron fist.

But not for long. Or at least, not if we can finally organize a strong enough resistance to overthrow them.

I cast a discreet but very longing glance up at the windows high above me. The leaders of the resistance are meeting somewhere in there. Plotting. Scheming. Discussing crucial plans and making important decisions. I so desperately want to be in there. But instead, I'm out here. Gutting fish.

A faint clanking sound comes from the left.

My heart leaps into my throat, and I snap my gaze towards it.

Jeiman, the young brown-haired guy who is also watching the street, frantically tries to straighten the stack of copper pots that he almost knocked over.

I shoot him a look before returning my gaze to the street.

Mabona's tits, how did I get stuck with him for this job? I've been working for the resistance for years, and yet I'm still assigned as a lookout together with this damn rookie who started last month. I should have moved up the ranks by now. I should be inside, helping them plot and scheme. Not sit out here as if I'm some fresh recruit that needs to prove herself. I have proven my loyalty. And yet, they still don't trust me.

Stabbing my knife into the wooden board before me, I blow out a bitter sigh before reaching down to switch from the now empty bucket to one filled with dead fish. Another cold wind rushes between the buildings. The few fae civilians who are walking down the street flip their collars up against the chill. One particularly miserable-looking guy stops right in the middle of the road and heaves an endless sigh.

Behind me, warmth and the soft murmur of voices spill out from the door to the tavern.

The miserable-looking fae man turns towards it. Then he abandons whatever it was that he was doing and instead marches straight through the door and into the tavern's alluring warmth.

I can't really blame him. It's an overcast and chilly afternoon, and the winds that keep rushing between the rows of wooden buildings aren't exactly helping either. I once more flex my hands to get some warmth back into my fingers while wishing that I was indoors, doing something important at the meeting upstairs.

Though I suppose I can't be too bitter about the fact that the higher-ups still don't trust me. They barely trust each other. They always wear masks at their meetings so that no one knows who they really are. It's to keep the resistance safe in case one of them is captured. If they don't even know who their co-conspirators are, they can't have that information tortured out of them by the Shadow of Death.

A ripple pulses through the air.

My breath catches.

There is no sound. No movement. Nothing in sight.

But something is wrong. I can feel it.

The fae on the street tense up. Then quickly hurry down the road.

One second later, a dragon shifter patrol rounds the corner and marches onto the street.

My heart jerks.

Shit.

While twisting as if reaching for another fish to gut, I discreetly smear some of the slimy stickiness that coats my fingers on the window behind me. Another lookout, who will be mixed in with the civilians inside the tavern, will see that mark and sprint upstairs to inform the leaders of the resistance that it's time to get the hell out.

I keep an impassive expression on my face as I pick up the fish that I pretended to reach for while keeping one eye on the dragon shifters.

They look like humans. Or at least what I think humans look like, since I have never seen one in real life. Only fae live in the Seelie Court. Well, fae and some shifters from the Red Dragon Clan who are here to make sure that we remain exactly where they want us. Which is on our knees and underneath their heel.

Gray light from the overcast sky falls on their red leather armor as they continue in my direction. Thankfully, they don't appear to be in a hurry. If they continue at that pace, our resistance leaders will be able to leave the building by the back door before they can make it inside the tavern.

I place the fish I picked up on the wooden board of my stall. Now, I just need to—

A loud clattering noise explodes across the street.

I whip my head around.

To my left, Jeiman has leaped to his feet, knocking over the pile of copper pots in his haste. Panic is written all over his face. His gaze darts

down to the metal pots, which are still bouncing and rolling across the cobblestones. Then he casts a panicked glance at the patrol that has turned to stare at him from farther up the street.

Don't, I beg silently in my mind while trying to catch Jeiman's eye. Please, don't—

He bolts into the tavern.

Fuck.

The dragon shifters lurch into motion as well. With one hand on their swords, they pick up the pace and stalk after him. Suspicion swirls in their eyes.

I have to suppress the urge to growl in frustration. Jeiman might as well have put up a bloody sign that says: *suspicious shit is happening in here*. Why did they have to assign such a rookie as my lookout partner?

Quickly wiping off my knife, I hide it in my clothes and then dunk my hands into the bucket of water to clean off any traces of fish guts. Then I slip away from my place on the stool and disappear in through the side door while the soldiers aren't looking. I need to find a way to stall them inside the tavern so that our leaders can get out unseen.

Warm air hits me like a vibrating wall as I sneak into the packed tavern. After the long hours gutting fish in the crisp air outside, the warmth is almost suffocating.

I flick a quick glance around the room. As always, most people are already deep in their cups despite it only being afternoon. A fire burns in the hearth by the opposite wall, bathing the room both with golden light and warmth. At the bar, the tavern keeper is pouring drinks as if nothing is wrong.

My stomach flips when I notice that there is a small gap in the door that leads to the stairwell and the secret back door. Through it, I spot someone in a cloak and mask shoving Jeiman up against the wall in what is no doubt rage and panic. Behind them, the other leaders of the resistance are still sprinting down the steps, trying to escape before the patrol barges in. I need to—

The front door of the tavern is yanked open.

Dread pulses through my chest as the soldiers in their blood red leather armor stalk into the room.

Dead silence spreads like a wet blanket across the whole tavern. The fae who were drinking close to the door shrink back and lower their gazes,

trying not to draw attention even though they're just normal civilians. By Mabona, if they only knew that they are not the ones who need to hide right now.

A man with blond hair, who appears to be the captain and leader of the patrol, sweeps his hard gray eyes over the room. "What's going on here?"

No one even dares to breathe.

From this angle, I can still see our leaders quietly running down the stairs and out the back door. It's not visible from where the patrol is, because the door is thankfully blocking the view from that angle. But if they move a little closer, they will see it. And then, we will be well and truly fucked.

I need to do something.

The captain takes a step forward.

Snatching up a glass of liquor, I adopt a drunk expression and walk straight towards the soldiers.

Since everyone else is sitting still and quiet, my movements draw their attention immediately. I make sure to keep my steps a little wobbly and my hips swaying a lot more than necessary. The captain narrows his eyes at me.

"Wow," I say, coming to a halt in front of him. I make my voice breathless as I tilt my head back to look up into his stern face. "You're hot."

Shock pulses across his features, and he jerks back a little. Whatever he had been expecting me to say, that had apparently not been it. Clearing his throat, he draws his eyebrows back down in a scowl.

"I said," he begins, his voice once more filled with menace. "What's going on in here? And where's the guy who rushed in here?"

I make a disappointed noise. "Oh, you're into guys? That's such a shame."

One of the soldiers chokes on his breath.

The captain's cheeks flush bright red, and he splutters out, "No, that's not what I—"

"Because you have such a handsome face," I continue, interrupting him.

"Well, I..." He seems to be unsure of how to react because he simply trails off and stares at me as if I've grown a second head.

To be fair, this must be a first for him. No fae would ever be stupid or suicidal enough to willingly go near a dragon shifter, let alone flirt with one.

“Though I still don’t understand how you can only have one eye color,” I say, keeping my voice slightly slurred and my words the epitome of drunken ramblings. “Such limited combinations.”

He scowls now, almost looking a little offended. Which was exactly my goal. Anything to keep him distracted and entirely focused on me while the resistance leaders escape out the back door.

“Better than having two colors like some kind of freak,” he bites out.

Dragon shifters, and humans too presumably, all have only one eye color. Like brown or gold or violet or something equally mundane. We fae seem to be the only ones who have normal eyes with two colors. Not one in each eye. Instead, both colors are mixed like swirls of paint in both eyes, offering lots of combinations. My own eyes, which are turquoise and lavender-colored, are not unique by any means. But I much prefer them to the odd one-colored eyes of the shifters and the humans.

“Hmm,” I murmur in response to the captain’s insult while taking a sip of the drink I swiped earlier and swaying a little, as if I’m severely drunk already.

The captain looks like he’s about to stalk past me and continue searching the room, so I reach up with my free hand to trace my fingers over his cheek.

His hand shoots up.

Fingers wrap around my wrist like steel bands, stopping my hand.

“Do not touch me with your filthy fucking hand, you worthless fae bitch,” the captain growls at me.

Rage burns through me at his words, but I keep the expression firmly off my face and instead just lower my hand again. “I just—”

“Is there a problem?” a voice dripping with command cuts through the room.

Clothes rustle as the whole tavern whips towards the source of the voice.

My heart stutters as my gaze lands on the man who has just walked in through the side door.

He is wearing black dragon scale armor, and his black hair has been swept back from his face as if he has carelessly run his hand through it. Unflinching power radiates from his muscular body, and there is a calculating and highly ruthless glint in his golden eyes.

As opposed to the other dragon shifters in the room, his wings are also out. The vast majority of dragon shifters can only maintain two forms: fully human or fully dragon. Only the most powerful ones can do what is called a *half-shift*, which is to shift into a human form but with wings.

I stare at those imposing black wings that are clearly visible behind him even though he hasn't even spread them out fully. Then my gaze drifts to his tall and powerful body. Then back to his lethally handsome face.

He is, by far, the hottest man I have ever seen.

And yet, all I want is to never have to lay eyes on him ever again.

Because this is Draven Ryat. The Shadow of Death. Leader of the Black Dragon Clan. Commander of the Dread Legion and second only to the Empress and Emperor of the Iceheart Dynasty themselves.

He is one of the most powerful and dangerous dragon shifters in the world. And the most ruthless. According to rumors, he sold out his own clan to the Icehearts in exchange for power. He has slaughtered thousands. Burned cities to the ground. Conquered and destroyed. He and his Black Dragon Clan are crucial in keeping all the other dragon clans firmly underneath the rule of the Icehearts.

If anyone can break the entire fae resistance before it has even had a chance to fully grow, it's him.

The tavern is dead silent as Draven prowls towards me and the captain from the Red Dragon Clan. The captain might be from a different clan, but Draven is still his ultimate commander. So when he approaches, the captain takes a step back and lowers his chin in deference.

"Just some fae who—" the captain begins, but Draven cuts him off.

"I wasn't talking to you." His golden eyes slide to me, fixing me in place with a penetrating stare. And when he speaks again, threats lace his tone like sharp blades. "I said, is there a problem?"

My head spins with different plans and choices and decisions. What is he even doing here? The Red Dragon Clan is responsible for maintaining order in our city. So what is Draven Ryat doing here? And what am I supposed to say in response to his question? Yes, there is a problem? No, there is no problem? I don't know which answer will keep him from searching through the whole tavern. I don't even know if all resistance members have already made it out. Maybe they have. It has been long enough that they must have. But from this angle, I can't tell.

All I know is that I need to do something to keep the Shadow of Death from breaking our resistance before we've even had a chance to fight back.

So I do the only thing I can think of.

I throw my drink in his face.