



REALM OF WIND AND VINES

FLAME AND THORNS: BOOK FOUR

MARION BLACKWOOD

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CONTENT WARNINGS

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

For all of you who keep putting off doing what you really want while waiting for a perfect moment, because life is just too crazy right now.

There will never be a perfect moment.

Life is always crazy.

So start living it.

CHAPTER ONE

Winds tug at my hair, making it flutter behind me. The air tastes of salt and seaweed and freedom. Sunlight glitters like jewels in the endless water before me. I stare at it. The sea. It's breathtaking.

I have never seen the sea before. I didn't realize that it would be this massive. It's just water, spreading out completely uninterrupted. As far as the eye can see. An entire world of possibilities could be waiting there just on the other side of the horizon. The thought of it makes my heart flutter. When this is all over, I want to see it all. I want to see every inch of this world that I have been denied all my life while I was trapped in the Seelie Court.

My gaze flits to the west. Somewhere out there is the Western Isles. Draven's home. A mass of islands where the rest of the Black Dragon Clan are currently hiding. I wonder what it looks like.

A knife is pressed against my back.

I go still.

Even through my black fighting leathers, I can feel the tip of the blade firmly against my back, right by my left kidney.

"One small push is all it would take," a dark voice says from behind me.

My heart squeezes tight at the sound of Draven's voice. His dark and commanding voice that always makes my spine tingle. But now, ever since I forced a wildfire of hatred into his chest two weeks ago, every word he speaks to me is always laced with threats.

The overwhelming heartbreak inside me threatens to rise up again. A massive black wave, pressing in on me from all sides, suffocating me. But I know that if I let it crash over me, I am going to drown in it and never

recover. So instead, I feed the rage and hatred burning in my own chest. It helps me block out the agonizing pain inside me and turns my heart into cold black ice.

“One small push,” Draven repeats as he flexes his hand on the knife against my back, making it push a little harder against my fighting leathers. “And then this blade would puncture your kidney and you would fall over the edge of this cliff to drown in the sea below.”

I resist the urge to look down at the sheer drop right before me. My toes are right at the edge of the cliff, and waves crash against the stones far below. Instead, I turn my head and meet Draven’s gaze over my shoulder with a look full of challenge.

“If you really wanted me dead, you would’ve killed me already,” I declare. “But you haven’t. Because deep down, you know that you don’t actually hate me.”

Anger flits across his face, and he clenches his jaw. “Again with your desperate theories.”

“It’s not a theory. It’s the truth. You love me. In order to save your life, I made you hate me by forcing a wildfire of hatred into your chest.”

“No,” he grinds out between gritted teeth.

We’ve had versions of this exact conversation several times in the past two weeks. I have tried to explain to him what really happened. I’ve tried to remind him of everything we have said and done for each other before this. I’ve tried to convince him with logic and truth. But every time, that unnatural flame of hatred that still burns fiercely in his chest finds excuses and explanations to justify itself. To condemn or even outright rewrite his past emotions to fit this newfound hatred.

“No,” Draven repeats, more forcefully this time. The knife pushes harder against my back. “I hate you because I finally realized what you really are.”

“And what’s that?”

“Someone who ruins everything around you.”

The words are a precision strike right through my heart. It’s so violent that I almost gasp.

My mother’s words echo through my mind. *You ruined us. You ruined everything.*

They’re followed by the words of that Unseelie fae from the White Faction when she attacked me in that forest. *You ruined him! You ruined*

everything!

Pain crackles through my chest like a vicious lightning bolt. I try to swallow it down, but I can't breathe. That oppressive wave of dark despair and crippling guilt inside me lurches in from all sides, wrapping around my chest like strangling vines. I try to draw in a breath, but no air makes it past my throat.

Panicked, I sweep my gaze over the area around us.

A short distance away, down on the sand beneath the cliffs, an old human man is fishing. Summoning my magic, I create a warm sparkling yellow flame of joy and shove it into his chest.

Pleasure floods my body.

Closing my eyes briefly, I inhale it like I'm starving. It's like floating on a perfect cloud. Like a warm sparkling hug. Like the perfect embrace telling me that everything will be okay. Every time I create emotions from nothing, I'm rewarded by this euphoric sensation. It's incredibly addictive, but it also helps smother the pain that flared up inside me, so I bask in that pleasure for another second before releasing my grip on my magic.

The connection to the old fisherman is broken, so the pleasure is gone, but I know that the unnatural flame of joy still remains inside him. Just like the hatred remains inside Draven.

Draven glances towards the fisherman, who has started to whistle now, but since Draven is standing behind me, he couldn't see that my eyes were glowing and therefore doesn't know what I just did. After presumably checking to make sure that the human isn't watching us, he focuses his attention back on me again.

"Do you know how much easier everyone's lives would be if you simply ceased to exist?" Draven snarls in my ear.

The pain tries to strangle me again, but with both the burning rage and hatred that now fills my soul as well as the lingering feeling of pleasure from when I created that emotion just now, it thankfully can't get through. So instead of feeling hurt, I let out a mocking scoff and arch an eyebrow at Draven over my shoulder.

"It's cute how you think that's going to hurt me." I give him a pointed look. "I grew up in a home where my parents told me that exact thing all the time, remember?"

A muscle flickers in his jaw, and he flexes his hand on the hilt of his blade again.

Just when I think he might actually follow through on his threat and ram that knife into my kidney, a voice echoes from the edge of the woods behind us.

“Oi!” Alistair bellows. “They’re back. Let’s go.”

Draven remains looming behind me, his knife still at my back, for another second. Then he clicks his tongue in annoyance and spins on his heel before stalking back down the path. Turning around as well, I run a hand over my back where the knife used to be, but I can’t feel any damage to the leather. Draven is already halfway to the trees.

I watch his powerful body as he expertly spins the blade in his hand and then slips it back into his thigh holster. Fire flickers through my veins. He is *mine*. And by all the gods and demons in hell, I will make sure he fucking remembers it.

Letting my hand drop back down again, I start down the path as well. Before I leave the edge of the cliff, I cast one last look at the old human fisherman. He is still whistling joyfully as he fishes down there on the beach below.

Deep down, I know that I should feel bad. Even though I gave him a positive emotion, I still changed his personality permanently. It’s wrong. I know that. But I still can’t bring myself to care. Because if I start to care about that, then I will start to care about everything else again too.

My gaze slides back to Draven as that world-ending pain tries to swallow me once more.

No. I can’t care about the fisherman. Because then I will start to care about the way Draven looks at me now. And I will not survive that.

So I straighten my spine and leave behind the human whose life I permanently change without another thought as I instead follow Draven back to the tree line.

Alistair, who is also wearing the black fighting leathers that Jocasta gave us during the Great Games in the Unseelie Court, is leaning one shoulder against a tree trunk. His arms are crossed over his chest and there is a hint of impatience in his orange and green eyes as he watches us.

I’m thankful for it, because I hated the sympathy in everyone’s eyes when they found out what happened to Draven. Alistair was one of the first to realize that, and he quickly started treating me and Draven as if nothing has changed. It honestly surprised me since I hadn’t thought Alistair was

that perceptive. But, as I've come to realize time and again, most of my preconceived notions about Alistair have turned out to be false.

"If you're done playing indecisive assassins, we've got a job to do," Alistair drawls as Draven and I reach him.

Draven cuts him a sidelong glance. "I could always practice my decisiveness on you, if you want."

"Uh-huh. You know, it's very difficult to stab someone with a blade that has been melted."

"Hard to melt a blade when it's already lodged in your back."

Alistair tips his head to the side, as if conceding the point. Pushing off from the tree trunk, he straightens and runs a hand through his curly blond hair before falling in beside us as we walk back into the woods towards where the rest of our companions are waiting.

When we come into view, Lyra and Galen immediately glance between me and Draven. They probably guessed what he was going to do when he left them to join me on the cliff, because a hint of relief flits across their faces when they see us.

Next to them, Isera watches us with that customary cold expression in her blue and silver eyes. She's one of the few who never gave me those awful sympathetic looks after she found out about what I had to do to Draven. She simply told me that I made the right choice and clapped me on the shoulder, and that was that. I don't think anything has ever made me like someone more than that simple act.

"It's clear," Isera declares while sweeping her long black hair off her shoulder. "No one from the Silver Clan is in the Seelie Court right now."

"We should still open the portal inside the thorn forest," Orion Nightbane adds, his black and silver eyes as sharp as ever. The spiky black crown on his head glints in the afternoon light as he cocks his head. The movement sends ripples through his long dark blue hair. "We just need an exact location."

"The opening where the river is pushed back up to the forest floor after being underground," I reply as we come to a halt in front of them.

Orion slides his gaze to the Unseelie fae with shoulder-length brown hair beside him. "You know it?"

Grey, the man with portal magic from the Unseelie Court, gives his king a nod. "Yes."

"Then let's get this over with."

A sparkling blue rectangle rises up from the ground as Grey summons a portal. My stomach twists and an unexpected pang of nausea rolls through me when the thorn forest around the Seelie Court becomes visible through that magical doorway.

Lyra claps her hands, startling everyone. But there is a bright smile on her lips as she strolls straight towards the portal. “Alright, let’s go see the dryads.”

Her genuine excitement dispels the heavy emotions that tried to settle over me. Straightening my spine, I draw in a deep breath.

Then I stride through the portal and back into the twisting thorn forest that has imprisoned me all my life.