



THRONE OF ICE AND BLOOD

FLAME AND THORNS: BOOK TWO

MARION BLACKWOOD

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CONTENT WARNINGS

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*For all the people pleasers out there whose sense of self-worth is deeply
connected to other people's opinions.*

You don't have to prove anything to anyone.

You are enough.

CHAPTER ONE

Ice bites into my skin. It presses against my throat and saps my strength, making me feel like I haven't slept in weeks. For one brief moment, I consider just rolling over in bed and going back to sleep. But Goddess above, I need to get that strange ice away from my throat.

While trying to pry my eyes open, I groggily reach towards my neck. Light stabs at my eyes, and I have to squint against the brightness.

My fingers brush against something cold and hard that circles my throat.

A memory flashes through my mind.

I frown.

Then the whole storm of memories crashes down over me like a merciless cold wave.

The Atonement Trials. The Ice Palace. The winner's ceremony.

And Draven Ryat snapping an iron collar shut around my throat.

I gasp awake. All lingering grogginess evaporates like mist in the sun as I sit bolt upright in bed while my heart pounds against my ribs. Blinking furiously, I whip my head from side to side.

Pale walls made of white ice meet me. And a bed with dark gray sheets, which I'm currently occupying. As opposed to the other parts of the Ice Palace that I've seen, this bedroom has wooden floorboards that cover the ice floor. I stare at a patch of sunlight that shines in from the window somewhere to my left and paints those dark wooden boards in lighter colors. My mind churns.

I have no recollection of how I got here.

The last thing I remember is kneeling in front of Draven's feet in that throne room and silently vowing to kill him. Then a wave of exhaustion crashed over me, making me sway so much that I had to brace myself on the floor. After that, everything is black.

Panic clangs inside my skull and my heart slams against my ribs.

Yanking up my hand, I desperately run my fingers over the iron collar around my throat, trying to find the clasp. That intense panic inside me surges when I can't find one. I suck in short shallow breaths as I slide my fingers down into the small gap between the collar and my neck and try to yank it off instead.

It doesn't work.

That icy feeling of the cold iron bites into my hand as I grip the collar.

I frantically search for the clasp again.

"It won't work."

A gasp rips from my throat, and I whip my head towards the sound of the voice.

Draven Ryat is seated in an armchair in the corner of the room. The light from the window only partially hits his sharp cheekbones, leaving the rest of his face in shadow. He is only wearing a pair of black pants, and his black hair is slightly damp, making it look as if he has just stepped out of the bath. My gaze flits across his body.

He is lounging in that dark gray armchair as if it were a throne. Leaned back with his legs spread and his arms draped along the armrests, he exudes power and authority. His sharp abs and muscular chest are painted with both light and shadows from the partial sunlight that filters in through the window and hits the otherwise dark corner of the room.

A small ray hits his golden eyes, making them glint, when he nods towards the collar around my throat. "You won't be able to find a clasp. Only a dragon shifter can take off a collar like that."

I stubbornly yank against the collar again. But when it doesn't come off, I'm forced to admit that he might be telling the truth. Rage burns through my chest as I let my hand drop back down.

But then a jolt shoots through me instead when my hand meets cool silk fabric. I snap my gaze down to my body, and another wave of panic washes over me.

When I passed out in the throne room, I was wearing an elaborate silver dress. Now, I'm dressed in a simple short nightgown made of black silk.

Which means that someone changed my clothes while I was unconscious.

“You changed my clothes,” I blurt out.

After everything that has happened, I know that there are a million other things that I should probably have said to Draven at this particular moment. But my mind is still struggling to come to terms with the sheer magnitude of the situation that I’m in right now, so I need to focus on something smaller. Something more manageable. Something like this.

Draven cocks his head. “Yes.”

There is an entirely unreadable mask on his face as he watches me. I grip the sheets harder, trying to resist the urge to pull them up to cover more of my body. Instead, I shift my position so that I’m sitting at an angle where I can face him head on without needing to twist my body to the side. Focusing on my anger, I try to push back the panic that is still clanging inside my skull.

I narrow my eyes at Draven. “You took my clothes off?”

“You’ve been asleep for three days.” He lifts his toned shoulders in a nonchalant shrug. “I figured you would be more comfortable in that than a ballgown.”

My stomach drops, and it takes everything I have not to show my shock. Three days? I’ve been out for *three days*?

While still trying to cover my panic and shock, I shoot Draven a hard look. “So you took it upon yourself to strip me naked while I was unconscious?”

A slow and vicious smile curls his lips. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

My heart jerks at the reminder of that afternoon in the underground forest when he pushed me up against that rock wall and fucked me exactly the way I wanted him to. Like I was his.

“And besides,” he continues. A ruthless and highly possessive glint shines in his eyes as he holds my gaze. “Would you rather it had been a random stranger who stripped you down to your underwear and changed your clothes?”

The thought of that sends a pulse of dread through me. It’s followed by the infuriating realization that he’s right. I couldn’t very well sleep in a ballgown for three days. And I most certainly wouldn’t have wanted some stranger to change my clothes.

But I will die before I ever admit that to him, so I just scoff and slide towards the edge of the bed instead.

Sheets tangle around my limbs. I shove them away impatiently before swinging my legs over the side of the bed.

“You shouldn’t—” Draven begins.

I shove myself to my feet.

My legs immediately buckle.

I suck in a sharp breath between my teeth as I topple towards the floor.

But right before I can hit it, a pair of strong arms wrap around my body and hoist me back up. My heart jerks as I suddenly find myself with my cheek pressed against Draven’s bare chest. His body is warm against mine. And his intoxicating scent of night mist and embers fills my lungs when I draw in a breath. It makes fire surge through my veins.

Which immediately makes me angry.

Struggling upright, I give his chest a hard shove. “Don’t touch me.”

“The first draining is always the hardest,” he says as if I hadn’t spoken.

And he doesn’t let me go either. He keeps his hands on my shoulders and watches me with scrutinizing eyes until he is satisfied that I can stand on my own. Once he is, he finally releases me. But he doesn’t step back.

My head spins, and my stomach aches with hunger, and exhaustion from the iron collar still clings to my bones, so I don’t dare to move yet either. I need to let my body adjust after three days of lying in a bed. So instead of putting some much-needed distance between us, I settle for tilting my head back and glaring up at him.

“The first and *only* draining,” I retort.

His face is an unreadable mask as he holds my gaze. “Draining you of magic is the entire purpose of a life slave.”

“I am not your slave.”

“That collar around your neck says otherwise.”

“If you ever drain me again, I will kill you.”

He slowly wraps a hand around my throat and holds me firmly in place while his eyes sear into mine. “You and I both know that if I want to take it, I can.”

My heart thumps in my chest. And as much as I hate it, hate it with every fiber of my being, I know that he is right. With the iron collar both blocking my magic and sapping my strength, I would never be able to fight him off. He can do whatever he wants with me, and there is nothing I can

do to stop him. He knows it. And I know it. So in the end, I just stand there with my chin raised and hold his gaze in silence.

He lets his hand drop from my throat. "But I won't."

Shock pulses through me.

"We had an audience back in the throne room," Draven continues. "Now, we don't."

I blink at him in surprise as he even takes a step back.

The shock must have been visible on my face, because Draven lets out a soft sigh and then raises his eyebrows pointedly. "I told you that I tried to save you from this, remember?"

His words from back in that throne room, his eyes so full of sorrow as he whispered soft words against my lips, drift through my mind.

I wasn't trying to sabotage you, little rebel. I was trying to save you. From this.

He did say that. And he *was* trying to save me by tampering with the trials so that I would lose.

Back in that throne room, I asked him a question that he never answered. So now, I ask it again.

"Why?"

His face immediately transforms into an emotionless mask again. "Does it matter?"

I'm just about to snap, *yes, it matters!* But right before the words can make it out of my mouth, I hesitate. Does his reason actually matter? He still collared me. He might have been trying to help me earlier, but when it all came down to it, he still made me his slave.

Something hard settles around my heart. Something I'm not used to. But it helps keep the panic and hopelessness away, so I lean into it.

A vicious scoff rips from my throat as I meet Draven's gaze again. "No, I guess it doesn't."

He smiles, but it's a cold smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

While drawing a hand over the collar around my throat, I fix Draven with a hard stare. "I will kill you for this."

For the briefest of moments, I swear that I can see true mirth and almost a hint of approval glitter in his eyes. But when he speaks, his tone is only filled with cruel mocking, so I immediately start to doubt that I ever saw it at all.

Raising his hand, he gives my cheek a patronizing pat. “That’s the spirit.”

I slap his hand away. To my surprise, it doesn’t make me sway the way moving around did earlier. My legs feel steady now. The collar still saps my strength, but I no longer feel as if I’m about to collapse.

Opening my mouth, I get ready to spit a retort back in Draven’s face. But right before I can say anything, my stomach growls. Loudly.

Draven flicks a glance down to it. I expect him to mock me about it, but when he speaks, his tone is suddenly serious instead.

“You haven’t eaten anything in three days.” He meets my gaze for a moment before he abruptly starts towards the door. “I’ll get you some food.”

Startled by the sudden change in his behavior, all I manage to say is, “I, uhm...”

Draven nods towards a pale wooden dresser by the white ice wall to my right. “Your clothes are in there. Stay here. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Before I can even figure out how to respond, he throws the door open and strides out. Leaning to the side, I glance out the doorway. There appears to be another larger room out there. Draven snatches up a shirt that was draped over a chair and puts it on before pulling on his boots too. Then he strides towards another door set into the wall of that room and disappears through it.

For a few seconds, all I can do is to stare after him.

Then I lurch into motion.

Sprinting across the floor, I yank out the topmost drawer of the dresser that Draven indicated. Just as promised, I find most of my clothes in there. All of them have been washed and folded into neat piles.

After throwing off the black silk nightgown, I shimmy into my tight brown pants and then pull the white shirt over my head. My knife is nowhere to be seen. No surprise there. But Draven has placed my leather boots on the floor next to the dresser, so I shove my feet into them before I hurry out of the bedroom.

Just like I assumed, the door to my bedroom leads to another room. It’s bigger than the bedroom, and it looks almost like a living room or a fancy sitting room or something. There is a grand desk by one wall, and a cluster of armchairs and couches around a low table. An open door shows glimpses of a bathroom by the wall opposite me. And there is another door, this one

closed, a short distance from it on the same wall. To my right is yet another door. That one is made of clear ice and leads out to a balcony. But I don't bother with any of them. Instead, I run straight towards the one that Draven used when he left.

My heart skips a beat when I shove down the handle and find it unlocked.

He left me alone and he didn't even bother to lock me in. How stupid can he be?

Flinging the door open, I dart across the threshold.

The soft white light of faelights illuminates a wide corridor made of the same white ice as the rest of this accursed castle. But as opposed to the room I just left, there are no wooden floorboards out here. Instead, only ice glitters below me and above me and around me. I quickly push the door shut behind me and then take off down the hall.

My boots pound against the pale floor and my hair flutters behind me as I sprint away. I have no idea where I am or which direction I'm supposed to be running, but there is still an overwhelming sense of hope and relief pulsing through me as I dart down the corridor and into the next hallway. I'm getting out. Right now. I can figure out how to get the iron collar off later. As long as I make it out of this castle, freedom will yet again be within my grasp.

White corridors decorated only with silver and sparkling faelights flash past around me as I weave my way through the Ice Palace. I have to duck servants and guards several times, but somehow always manage to stay just out of sight.

My muscles burn and my lungs ache as I skid around another corner.

And come face to face with a group of guards.

My heart leaps into my throat.

Throwing myself backwards, I dart back around the corner.

"What was that?" a voice comes from the corridor.

"You see someone?" another man asks.

I curse silently in my mind. With my heart thundering in my chest, I hurriedly back away. There was another corridor branching off a short distance behind me. If I can just make it there before—

The sound of boots thumping against the floor comes from around the corner.

"I'll check it out," the first voice replies.

Shit.

While keeping one eye on the corner, I practically run backwards until I reach the other hallway and can back into it.

My stomach lurches.

A yelp slips past my lips as my heels slam into something. Combined with my speed, the sudden obstacle makes me trip backwards. I flail my arms, desperately trying to get my balance back, but because of the long run and the lack of food and the iron around my neck, my reflexes are too slow.

I topple backwards and crash down on the ground.

Yells come from the guards, and the sound of their pounding feet gets louder as they sprint towards me.

Desperately, I shove myself into a sitting position and swing my legs over the long thing that I tripped over. I have just managed to twist around and get to my knees when I realize what it is.

A body.

My gaze snaps down to the pool of blood that has formed underneath it.

For one single second, all I can do is to stare at it. Stare at that body. That very dead body and the very incriminating pool of blood that I am currently bracing my palms in.

Then reality snaps back into me, and I yank my hands off the floor. Blood coats my palms, and small drops fly from my fingers when I move to jump to my feet.

But before I can so much as get off the ground, the group of guards skids around the corner.

They stop.

Shock pulses across their faces as they stare from me to the dead body to my blood-covered hands and then back again.

"It's not what it looks like," I blurt out.

"Get her!" the squad leader snaps.

Light glints in their silver armor as they all surge forward. I scramble back, trying to get away, but a boot takes me in the side of the ribs before I can even get halfway up from the floor. The force of it flips me over and sends me crashing back down on the bloodstained ice.

I gasp air back into my lungs and place my palms against the ground to push myself up.

Someone plants a boot between my shoulder blades and shoves me back down. I let out a huff as my chest connects with the floor again. And before

the sound has even finished leaving my mouth, someone is twisting my arms up behind my back. I suck in a hiss as iron manacles are snapped shut around my wrists.

With the iron around my throat, and now the iron around both of my wrists too, my already exhausted and starving body is so weak that I can do nothing but lie there on my stomach and stare at the dead body next to me.

“Tell the captain that the Master of the Treasury is dead,” one of the guards yells somewhere above me. “And that we’ve caught the murderer.”

Blood from the now disturbed pool underneath the Master of the Treasury’s corpse slowly runs towards my face where I lie with my cheek pressed against the floor, a boot on my back, handcuffs shackling my wrists, and a squad of guards from Empress Jessina and Emperor Bane’s Silver Dragon Clan surrounding me with swords raised.

I heave a deep sigh.

Well... fuck.