

**Chains & Flames:
A Dragon Love Story**

By Shelly Laurenston

Chapter One

"You demanded my presence, Queen Addiena?"

The Queen didn't even look up from her book. "Is it so hard for you to call me mother?"

Actually...yes it was. "You demanded my presence, mother?"

Sighing, the queen laid down her book and looked at her oldest daughter. "How I do love that sneer."

Rhiannon, First Born of the Dragon Queen, First Born Daughter, White Dragonwitch, and heir to the Queen's throne, sat back on her haunches. She brushed her long white hair out of her eyes and stared at her red-haired and red-scaled mother. "Can we just get this over with? I have things to do."

"Really? Like what?"

Damn. She really didn't have anything to do; she just didn't want to be here. Rhiannon and her mother had never gotten along. Never learned to tolerate each other. There was even a story passed among the Queen's court that when freshly hatched, Rhiannon bit her mother on the neck when she tried to cuddle her new daughter. But Rhiannon didn't believe that for one second.

True, she believed she bit her mother, but she didn't believe her mother tried to cuddle her.

"What I have to do is my own concern. Can we just speed this along?"

"Fine." Her mother moved forward a bit and Rhiannon's entire body tensed at her approach, especially as she watched the Queen's guard follow. "I've made a decision."

Rhiannon's eyes narrowed. "About?"

"You. It's time for you to be mated. To be Claimed. And I've chosen your mate. One of my finest warriors. Bercelak the Great."

Snorting a laugh, Rhiannon stared at her mother. "Bercelak the Great? Don't you mean Bercelak the Vengeful? And that low-born lizard is your choice of mate for me?" She laughed louder, harder. "You have gone mad!"

Her mother's blue eyes glittered dangerously in the low-lit chamber. "He's the one I've chosen. He's the one who shall Claim you."

Rhiannon's laughter died in the face of her mother's cold expression. "What? Why?"

When the red dragon only stared at her, Rhiannon exploded. "You callous, deceitful bitch!"

Her mind screamed when she thought of Bercelak the Vengeful. A Battle Lord of her mother's court, everyone knew Bercelak as dangerous, mean, and generally unpleasant. In all the years she'd known him, she'd never seen him smile to anyone...except her. And it was only once.

Constantly he watched her, ignoring the rules of rank, until she finally told him in all honesty to stop staring at her like a horse cooking on a spit or she'd rip the horns from his head.

He'd only smiled at her. For the first and only time, he smiled. When she'd threatened him. She did not take that as a good sign.

At the time, she feared she'd have to protect herself from a forced Claiming. They were rare, but they happened. Then the Dragon Wars began. A battle of dragon against dragon in pursuit of power. As her mother's champion, Bercelak led that war and she hadn't seen him since.

But the wars were over, her mother's reign secure. And apparently, as reward for his loyal service, her mother planned to hand Bercelak Rhiannon.

"I've made up my mind. We'll have a ceremony at the next moon to celebrate your union. You will attend. You will look beautiful. And you will let him have you."

"I know why you're doing this. I know what you're up to." She hated the desperation in her voice. She hated her mother.

When the Queen only stared at her, Rhiannon continued. "You fear I'll take your throne before you're ready to give it up. You're afraid if I mate with someone not loyal to you, I can have it all...and you'll have nothing. So you hand me over to that piece of trash!"

"Why, Rhiannon. That's a horrible thing for you to believe about your loving mother."

She said it so flippantly that Rhiannon knew she'd been right. Her mother feared her. Feared the loyalty she'd built up among the other dragons and in court. She feared her excessively—and surprisingly—still weak-but-growing Magick skills.

Her mother feared her. And for that the bitch was willing to hand Rhiannon off like a human slave.

Rage blinding her, Rhiannon lashed out at her mother with one of her claws, but her damn guards, who protected the Queen's life like it were their very own, were there before her forearm barely left her side. They shoved her back. Her! A princess!

"You'll not do this to me, you old whore!" she screamed, unable to control herself any longer.

The hurt and pain eating away at her like a parasite. "I'll take your throne...I'll take your power and your treasure! And I'll leave you to rot!"

Cold, crystal blue eyes stared at her and she knew she'd never find mercy there. Never. "You'll regret this, little bitch."

"Go to hell."

Rhiannon took several steps back until she stood a good distance from her mother and those insane guards of hers. Then she turned and stormed off.

She'd regret nothing. But she would make sure her mother regretted everything.

Bercelak the Great, Dragonwarrior of the Dragon Queen Throne, Ninth Born Son of Ailean the Slag, Ruling Commander of the Dragon Queen's Armies, and on and on and on, marched through the place he'd grown up in. Unlike most dragons, his first home had not been a cave...but a castle.

He stalked through the halls, nodding in greeting to his many siblings as he passed. Including himself, there were fifteen of them. Some mated. Some not. Some already with their own offspring. Before entering his father's home, he had to shift to human and put on human garb.

His father, Ailean, insisted on it. For reasons unknown to any of them, their father loved being human. Not for part of the time, like some of his kin and, at times, even himself. But all the time. He only turned back to dragon to fight or to fly somewhere quickly.

To this day, Bercelak had no idea how his mother, a beautiful dragoness of royal blood tolerated the old bastard. He was loud, rude, and crude. Growing up with him had been a horror to every male offspring he had. The females fared much better, but as they came into full age, they found that having a slag as a father worked against them when time to mate came along.

Everywhere they went, their father's reputation proceeded them.

Now he had to face the old bastard and he didn't know why. Ailean had demanded his presence, sending four of Bercelak's brothers to bring him back. Not wanting to kill his own kin, Bercelak had finally agreed to return to the castle. But he wanted this over with so he could go home. Now that the wars were over he had plans to make and his father was delaying him.

He stormed into his father's study, then winced and turned away. "Think you could get off my mother long enough to tell me why you demanded my presence?"

"When did you get so shy, boy?"

He heard his mother slap his father, which she seemed to do often, then he could hear her getting off the desk he'd tossed her up on and pulling her clothes back on. For Ailean, his mother stayed human. Bercelak just didn't know why.

"Put your clothes on!" he heard his mother hiss and he shook his head. The bastard lived to embarrass him. He did a good job of it, too.

His mother's hand rested on his shoulder. "My son."

He turned and looked down into her beautiful face. "Mother." He kissed her on the cheek. "I'm glad to see you."

A corner of her mouth quirked up. "Really? I have to admit that with all of my hatchlings, it's hardest to tell with you."

"Boy." His father, who finally pulled on his leggings, leaned against the desk. Why the old bastard insisted on calling him that, he'd never know. He wasn't human and he was no "boy." But still, his father called him, more than any of his brothers, "boy." Most likely because he knew how much it irritated the living hell out of him.

"Father. You sent for me."

"Aye. Word came from the Queen today."

His mother stiffened beside him. She always did that whenever a mention of the Queen came up.

"About?"

"Princess Rhiannon."

His heart stopped in his chest. "What about her?" Although he was afraid to ask. The acrimonious relationship between mother and daughter had almost taken on legendary proportions.

And Rhiannon was barely a hundred-and-twenty-five winters. Gods, could the Queen have finally done something to her?

"You are to have her."

Bercelak frowned, which seemed amazing even to him since he frowned most of the time. But this made him frown more.

"What does that mean?" his mother asked before he had a chance. "He is to have her?"

"It means that the Queen wants you to mate with her daughter."

"Over my dead..."

"Shalin," Ailean cut her off. "This isn't your decision. It's the boy's."

"Yes, but..."

"I know how you feel about Adienna, Shalin. But, again, this is Bercelak's decision. Not yours."

Not mine. Nor the Queen's." Silver eyes focused on him. "If you don't want her, tell me now and I'll fight the Queen on this. I haven't seen her in centuries, but I'm sure I can still be quite..." his father grinned, "...persuasive."

Shalin snorted and turned away, but his father continued, "But I wanted to give the option to you. What is your decision?"

He had no decision to make. He'd made it long ago the day he saw the white dragoness. He was barely fifty winters and she was already fifty-two. An older dragon. He'd never been to court before and he'd accompanied his mother this time. He made his first misstep as soon as he entered the Queen's Hall. He stomped on the snowy white tail of a princess. Her rage was instantaneous and without waiting for an apology, she sent the tip of that tail directly for his eye. What few knew but eventually learned was that all of Ailean's children were raised...well...*differently* than other hatchlings. Bercelak couldn't remember a day when his father didn't come jumping out of somewhere dark, grab his tail and toss him across the room. Not to be abusive—although it was—but because he wanted his offsprings' reflexes to be better than anyone else's.

And, to Bercelak's annoyance, it worked. While other dragon warriors were caught off guard or ran from fear during battles, Bercelak never flinched, never feared, and he definitely never ran. Not ever. Instead, he destroyed any and all in his way until they finally gave him the title of Queen's Battle Lord. The highest rank a low-born warrior dragon, such as himself, could hope to obtain.

So, on that day, when he saw that razor-sharp tail point coming for his face, he reacted as he would with any of his kin...he grabbed hold of that tail and swung, flinging the princess and heir to the Queen's throne across the Queen's Hall and right past her mother.

As the Queen's guard took firm hold of him, he thought for sure he'd die that day. But the Queen...she had other plans. And, to be honest, didn't seem to care how he'd treated her daughter.

But he did care. After that, he tried everything to get Rhiannon to forgive him. To get close to her. But when she saw him, she rolled her eyes and went the

other way. If he tried to speak to her, she yawned in his face and left him standing there.

Eventually, he left her alone. Yet he never gave up wanting her. And that hadn't changed. That would never change.

"I'll take her."

His mother gripped his arm. "Bercelak—"

"It's all right, mother. I know what I'm doing." He looked at his father. "I'll take her."

Ailean grinned. One of those big, toothy grins that annoyed Bercelak to no end. "Somehow I thought that's what you'd say. She'll be waiting for you at your den."

Bercelak and Shalin passed glances. He thought for sure he'd have to go get her himself. This was Princess Rhiannon after all. And she never let anyone forget it.

Bercelak tilted his head to the side. "She will?"

Rhiannon took to the air as soon as she walked out of Devenallt Mountain. She flew and flew, determined to make it back to her own den before nightfall. She had much planning to do since she knew her mother would probably plan a counterattack of some kind immediately. Her den was a stronghold. With the help of wizards loyal to her, she'd put up so many Magickal and physical defenses around her cave home, there was no way her mother would ever be able to break through.

She flew past forests and towns. Castles and farms. Few saw her. The ones who did screamed in terror and ran away. Gods, she must be angry. She didn't even go down and snatch a quick meal from one of the villages or simply revel in their screams.

She headed to open sea, moving quickly since the wind was with her. She neared a large mountain when she felt it. A small tickle in her stomach. She knew

it was her mother and immediately chanted a spell to raise stronger barriers around her body. But before she could get them in place, the power of the gods passed through her like a flash of lightning...and then she was falling.

Desperate, she tried flapping her wings, but nothing. Then she looked down at herself...and she screamed in horror.

Human. Her mother had shifted her to human. And she was unable to shift back!

Seconds before she hit the ground, she had one last thought...

Oh, shit.

Bercelak stared at the naked female crumpled in front of his den. White hair, matted with blood and dirt covered her except for the small odd brand on her bare shoulder.

Leaning in, he sniffed her. No...she wasn't human. She was dragon.

Well...there goes dinner.

He pushed her with his snout, forcing her onto her back. When he saw her face, his heart stuttered in his chest for a second time this day.

Rhiannon. Princess Rhiannon. His Rhiannon.

He looked her over. She was bloody and broken. He looked up at the sky and realized that's where she'd dropped from. No wonder the Queen said Rhiannon would be waiting for him at his den. This was where she'd dumped her daughter.

This can't be good.

Yet it didn't matter. He finally had her. He had his Rhiannon. And he planned to keep her... forever.

Screaming. Why is there all that screaming?

Rhiannon moved and the screaming became decidedly worse, but she also realized the screaming was in her head.

She put her claws to her forehead, hoping to push back the pain...except something didn't feel right. Her head felt different. So did her claw. By sheer will, she opened her eyes and stared at her talons. Except they weren't her mighty white talons she proudly kept sharpened. They were—she frowned in confusion—they were nails.

Human ones. So was the claw those tiny useless nails were attached to. Not her mighty claw, but the claw of a human. A...a hand.

She looked down at herself and realized she hadn't been dreaming. Human. Her mother had turned her human. She'd shifted to human many times, but only to fool the humans around her...well, and to see if her human form was remotely attractive. Otherwise, she lived her life as a dragon and never understood those who didn't. Why anyone would want to be human was beyond her understanding...and damn it all, she was brilliant!

Knowing she needed to calm down, Rhiannon took a deep breath and slowly released it. Once she'd cleared her mind and the screaming in her head lessened, she said the chant that would shift her back. Bright colors of Magick sparked off her human body...then nothing. Absolutely nothing.

"She took your powers."

Rhiannon turned her head and looked over at the black dragon watching her.

"Bercelak," she sneered. Of course, where else would her mother make sure she dropped but at the feet of the one dragon she never wanted to see?

I hate that bitch.

"Rhiannon."

Growling, she forced her human body to sit up. "You will, Low Born, call me by my title. I'm *Princess* Rhiannon to you."

He stared at her for a moment with his typical frown—did he have any other expression?—then he snorted. "Princess you may be. But at the moment you are one without powers or claws." He stood up and took several steps toward

her. "You are human. No wings. No way to escape me. It was a good thing I recognized you or I might have had a lovely meal of you with some parsley. And potatoes."

Two more steps brought him closer, and Rhiannon ignored the pain in her head and backed up.

"All that soft skin and those breakable bones," he fairly crooned. "We can't let you out in this cruel world so defenseless, princess. You'll need me to care for you. To protect you. Just as I had to do today. If it hadn't been for the skills my mother gave me and what I learned on the field of battle, I may not have been able to heal you."

"I need nothing from you, Bercelak, son of a slag."

He stopped moving, his cold black eyes locking on her face. "Since I know for a fact your own mother took a turn on my father's cock, excuse me if I'm not truly insulted." His head tilted to the side. "We aren't kin, are we?"

"You..." Stunned that anyone dare speak to her in such a manner, Rhiannon forced herself to her feet. The screaming in her head became decidedly worse, but she didn't care. She wouldn't let the arrogant bastard treat her like this. No one, absolutely *no one*, treated her like this.

"Listen to me well, Low Born. Don't think for a second I won't cut your heart from your worthless hide and wear it on my head...like a hat."

Bercelak spit out a spell. Flame burst around the dragon and faded, leaving only his human form. And, oh, by the dark gods of fire, what a human form. Coal-black hair reached down his back, sweeping around his narrow hips. Because he was a battle-dragon, his hair was shorter than the royalty he protected. He also had scars. Lots and lots of scars, some in the most interesting of places. One brutal scar curved under his right eye. Oh, and his eyes...black like his hair. Dark and fathomless, glaring at her from under black brows. But his body...she never thought of human bodies as all that pleasing. Especially the male ones. Until now. All those muscles and those big strong shoulders. Everything about him was perfect. His face, his body. His scars.

She stared at him as he marched over to her, forcing her to back up against the cave wall. She winced, the rocks pricking the soft human skin she'd begun to detest. She felt weak, defenseless.

How do you humans live like this?

"Tell me, Princess...do you really think someone is coming here to rescue you from me? I am all you have. Even your mother has deserted you."

"She deserted me a long time ago."

It seemed like his naturally hard expression softened a bit at that. "I know she did. It hurt you."

She gave a short, cruel laugh. "Nothing hurts me, Low Born. Absolutely nothing."

"How is that possible?" And for some reason he sounded as if he truly cared about her answer.

"When you stop feeling anything, you find it quite possible."

One big hand cupped her cheek. "I have no desire to hurt you, princess. But I do want you to feel. I want you to feel everything when you're with me."

Rolling her eyes, "Oh, please, Low Born. Don't try seducing me." Planting two hands against his chest, she shoved him back and moved away from the wall. "I'm not a child. I've been seduced by the best." She looked him up and down. "Those of *royal* blood. And it pains me to tell you that you are sorely lacking." He leaned back against the spot she just vacated, his arms crossed over that gorgeous chest.

"Does my lack of royal blood truly bother you?"

"No. It insults me," she answered honestly. "Are you the best my mother could come up with? I'm not some table scrap to be tossed off to her favorite battle dog. I am of royal blood. The daughter of a king. To be quite honest, I deserve better than you. Now, Low Born, you'll escort me to the closest exit."

He moved so fast, she didn't have a chance to jump, much less run. His hands slipped around her neck, holding her in place. She thought he'd try to choke the life from her—unfortunately, it wouldn't be the first time that

happened. Instead, he towered over her, staring down into her face. His black eyes locked with hers.

"When I'm done," his low voice said softly while his face still looked so intensely...cranky, "you won't be able to imagine your life without me. You'll pine for me, wanting me like you've never wanted anything before in your life. You'll miss me when I'm gone and desire me when I'm right beside you. No other male will ever be good enough. No other male worthy of taking this body and bringing it and you pleasure you've only dreamed of. And when you're coming and screaming my name, begging me to keep you as my own, I'll Claim you. And your heart and soul will belong only to me. But until that time, princess, you're not going anywhere."

Then he released her and walked away.

She waited until he was far enough away he couldn't hit her and said, "Oh, yes? You and what army?"

He stopped walking, looking over his shoulder at her. Unable to meet his gaze, she rubbed her eyes with one hand and sighed. "Well that came out terribly wrong."

Chapter Two

Bercelak dropped the cow carcass on the ground and stared at it thoughtfully. Now, if Rhiannon were dragon, he'd merely sear it and they'd feed. But with her being human at the moment he'd have to adjust. At least until she got her powers back.

So, using his talons carefully, he removed the animal's hide, tossing it aside. Then he put the animal on a spit over the pitfire. He chose some of his best and most precious herbs—obtained from the Desert Lands of Alsandair—and seasoned the cooking meat.

With a sigh, he sat back to watch the flames and think.

Princess Rhiannon was definitely as mean as he remembered...and it only made him want her more. Not surprising. Dragon males liked their females dangerous. It made the mating that much more interesting and intense. Of course, calling him "low born" was beginning to grate on his nerves.

No one had to remind him of his father.

The other dragonwarriors he fought with never understood why Bercelak never flinched during battle. Never showed any signs of fear or panic. If they lived the way he had, they wouldn't either. But until you were awoken in the middle of the night with, "*We're under attack!*" and thrown out of bed by your well-meaning but clearly insane father, you didn't know what fear was.

His mother was of royal birth. His father...not so much. Which meant no one handed Bercelak a damn thing. He worked for everything he had and he did it with one thing in mind. Crystal blue eyes, long white hair, and a snarl that could scare an army of demons.

The day he met her—when those gorgeous blue eyes locked on him with such hate—he knew he had to have her.

"I want his head!" she'd screeched. And for a minute, he thought she'd get it.

But then he heard, "Oh, leave him be. As usual, my daughter is overreacting."

A red dragon, big and beautiful, walked toward him. "He didn't mean it, Rhiannon."

His mother bowed but he continued to stare at the Queen. And he knew it was the Queen. Just the way she moved and held herself told him that. He'd been in awe.

She'd motioned for her guards to release him and smiled, showing her fangs. "Shalin's son."

Now free, he immediately bowed. "Yes, my Queen. Bercelak the Black, Son of Ailean."

"Yes. You look very much like him. So handsome." A red claw with pitch-black talons reached out and caressed his jaw. He felt his mother stiffen beside him and knew this was for her benefit more than his. For years Bercelak had heard how the Queen had taken one turn in his father's bed like so many others before her but, unlike all the others, she had never forgotten Ailean. Nor had she forgiven him. For the very next morning he left the then-future queen to meet with Bercelak's mother and the Queen's one-time friend, Shalin. Who, if the story was to be believed, threw an ax at his father's head when Ailean tracked her down in the royal court archives doing whatever scholars do.

Bercelak never believed any of the stories. His low-born father with a dragon princess? Not bloody likely, he used to think. Still...one look at the female before him and he wondered if perhaps all the stories were true. For she looked at him with something he could not name. Perhaps something he did not want to name. At fifty winters, he was much too young for such deep thoughts.

"Tell me, Son of Ailean, what is your life's dream? Wizard? Warrior? Sword maker? What is it you think of when you lie awake at night?"

He answered honestly, unable to lie to those dark blue eyes. "Of glory and wealth. Of power."

"I see. So you may look like your father, but his aspirations had never been as lofty." She glanced at his mother, but he didn't realize until years later what that look meant. Then she turned and walked off.

"You shall stay here, Son of Ailean," the Queen casually tossed over her shoulder. "You shall train to be one of my battle-dragons. You will protect this throne and me and anyone else I deem worthy."

Then she was gone. Up the stairs to her private chambers.

Her daughter stomped her foot and glared at him, before marching off in quite a rage.

Once activity began again in the court, he heard his mother mutter under her breath, "I hate that bitch with every fiber of my being."

Still, his mother left him there when she returned home. She had no choice. After that, the Queen's daughter treated him like so much trash caught between her talons. And the more she did, the more he knew he'd do anything to win her. The meaner she was, the more deadly he became. Soon, with the moniker of Bercelak the Vengeful firmly in place, he led the troops into the war against the lightning dragons...the barbarians. Barbarians they may be, but worthy opponents. The war lasted decades, but when the smoke cleared, Queen Addiena's throne stood secure and she graced him with the new title of Bercelak the Great. Fair enough. He'd earned it and had the scars to prove it.

Now he wore the elaborate armor of Battle Lord, Dragonwarrior Leader, and Queen's Champion. He had the attention of every female from the lowest born to some of the most important royalty. And although he found pleasure among those scales, he knew there was only one who he wanted for life.

"I must feed. I'm starving."

Pulled from his revelry, he looked at the princess and frowned.

"You put on clothes." She wore a bright blue robe she must have taken from his treasures. It covered her from shoulders to feet. Although the color of her robe brought out her eyes, he liked seeing her naked. Then again, hiding those delicious full breasts and gorgeous ass from his view was probably for the best. At least for now.

"This skin is so fragile..." She shook her head. "I don't know how they tolerate it. Being so defenseless. At least forest animals have fangs or claws or, at the very least, good instincts. Humans have none of these things."

He shrugged. "A few do. They vary."

"You like them?" She didn't sound haughty, merely curious.

"Not really. I find them treacherous and painfully annoying. Although made with the right seasoning...they are *very* tasty."

She nodded in agreement. "This is true."

Of course, he'd only been joking.

With a quick shake of his head, he said, "Why, princess...did you just agree with me?"

Startled, she blinked. "Uh...no. No, of course not." She turned away from him, walking over to a boulder. She sat on it and looked at him, her head held high. "I'm hungry. I await food."

He had to give it to her. She certainly didn't let a change in her current circumstances faze her for long. "Then you best get that rump in gear. The potatoes and vegetables are over there. There's a pot to cook them in and fresh water. Good luck."

Her mouth dropped open. "You...you expect me to cook food?"

"I did the hard part. I went down to the farm, scared the little farmer, and took his cow. Then I removed its hide, the cow's not the farmer's, placed it on the spit, and now watch it while it cooks. The least you can do is cook some vegetables. We'll eat like humans. With plates and utensils...and a table."

"But I don't know how to cook."

"Then you best learn, princess. I'd hate for you to starve."

She *despised* him. Rude, arrogant, low-born dragon!

Was this to be her life for now on? Trapped in this human body, forced to cook food for an angry-looking peasant?

Couldn't her mother have just killed her instead? Wouldn't it have been kinder? "I don't see that beautiful ass moving, princess."

She glared at him, about to tell him to go to hell when her stomach rumbled. By the gods! What was *that* sound? Was she dying?

She looked down at her stomach, her hands clasped over it, and for the first time ever, she heard Bercelak laugh. Even more shocking...she kind of liked the sound of it.

"You are merely hungry, Rhiannon," he said kindly. "Do as I ask and we'll eat soon enough. I promise."

Groaning in annoyance, she slid off the boulder and walked over to the pitfire. As he said, he had potatoes and some other vegetables out beside a large pot filled with water. Another bowl of water beside it. Crouching down, she studied the food in front of her. In fact, she studied the food for about five minutes, until she heard the low born lean his long body over and, his snout right behind her, say, "What, exactly, are you doing?"

She ignored that shudder his low voice elicited in her body. Dammit, she *had* to ignore it! "Deciding my next plan of action."

"To cook potatoes, you need a plan of action?"

"Everything in life needs a plan of action, Low Born. I just don't randomly do things and hope everything turns out all right."

"But where's the excitement in that? The fun?"

"Fun?" She looked at him over her shoulder. "When do you *ever* have fun?"

"I have fun," he snapped. "In fact, I'm a very fun person."

"Really?" Still crouching, she turned and faced him. "And what do you do for fun?"

"Lots of things."

"Does most of those things involve killing something?"

"On occasion," he grumbled.

"Exactly."

"Well what do you do for fun?"

She shrugged. "I enjoy when the villagers near my den run for their lives." She grinned. "All that screaming."

He shook his head, the tip of his snout brushing against her human body. "I guess that's something."

The Low Born leaned back, returning to the carcass. She had to admit, at least to herself, it smelled delicious. And, dammit, so did he.

"I must say, princess, I'm surprised you haven't been able to shift back yet."

She shrugged. "My skills have always been weaker than my mother's."

"That seems strange. White dragons are known for their powers."

"Well, apparently I'm the exception to the rule." She stared at the potato. Odd looking vegetable. "My Magick has always been weaker and I'm much smaller than most dragons. One of the wizards who trained me called me the runt of the litter."

"That's a cruel thing to say. I can kill him for you, if you'd like."

Rhiannon barely bit back her smile or surprise. No one had ever offered to kill another for her—at least no one she ever believed. But she believed Bercelak. "No. No. That's not necessary. He merely spoke the truth."

"Well, there's truth and then there's just being a right bastard."

"You know, you're not—" She stopped herself abruptly, but the dragon's black eyes were on her in a second.

"I'm not what?"

"Well...you're not quite what I expected."

"And what did you expect?"

"To use your words...a right bastard, I guess." Definitely not one who would cook her a meal. And he hadn't yelled at her once. She really expected him to be much more...brutal. Brutal and deadly and he wouldn't be happy until she was crying, which she would never do.

"That I can be during battle. I don't feel the need to be that way when I'm home."

Squeezing the potato to see if it were juicy like fruit, she muttered, "There are some who say you're cruel. Heartless. And not just to our enemies."

"And who says these things?"

"You want me to tell you so you can go and hunt them down? I have not forgotten that before you were Bercelak the Great you were Bercelak the Vengeful."

"Do you know how I got that name?"

"No." And she shouldn't care, but she was kind of curious.

"Because of Soaic."

Ahh, Soaic. She'd taken a turn with him once. It was all right, but nothing that she'd right down in a diary. Plus, Soaic feared her. They all did. To be truthful, Rhiannon's reputation wasn't much better than Bercelak's and she had yet to wake up with the dragon she'd gone to sleep with. They slipped out like they feared she'd wake and simply kill them for her amusement.

"Aye. Soaic." She shrugged. "He has had much to say about you."

Bercelak poured liquid over the cooking carcass. "That's what I thought. You know that scar Soaic has on his right hind quarter? The one that even his scales can't hide?"

"Aye. He received that during the battle of—"

"He received it when I ripped him open from hip to claw."

"Why would you do that?" Not knowing what else to do with the stupid potato in her hand, Rhiannon dropped it into the water.

"Did you clean that first?"

Growling, she stood and turned to face him. "Did you tell me to clean it first?"

"You've truly never cooked for yourself before?"

"Not only am I a princess—so I don't have to—I'm a dragon. There's a universe of cattle at my disposal. Why would I waste time cooking *anything?* *Ever?*"

"Have you never spent anytime around humans? At all?"

"Only when I talk to them before feeding. But I don't do that often. I find when they start sobbing it's harder to have a peaceful meal."

He chuckled at her words. Bercelak had never laughed at anything. At least that was the rumor in court. But she'd gotten him to laugh twice. *She* did. Rhiannon bit the inside of her mouth to stop from smiling with pride.

Bercelak shifted, grabbed a pair of black breeches, and pulled them on.

She frowned, confused at why he was putting on clothes. He saw her expression and shrugged. "Trust me, princess. This will be much easier if I'm dressed."

With a sniff of dismissal, she turned away from him. Closing her eyes, Rhiannon worked hard to ignore the beauty of the dragon. And all those battle scars did nothing but enhance it. She'd never reacted this way to any male, dragon or human. Perhaps it was this unruly human body she had to tolerate. She didn't know, but she did know she didn't like it.

"You never told me why you attacked Soaic."

"He spoke ill of my father." He reached around her and pulled the potato out of the boiling water, casually dropping it back on the pile. "I don't allow anyone to speak of my father that way."

"You allowed me." Rhiannon winced. "Well that came out horribly wrong." *What if the big bastard hadn't noticed?*

He gently tugged a strand of her hair. "True, but I had no intention of mating with Soaic."

She slowly turned to face him. Although he didn't touch her, he still stood as close as possible. She could smell him and he smelled quite nice. No perfume like some of the royals. Nor the smell of blood for those who took less care cleaning themselves.

"We, Low Born, are not mating."

"Yes we are."

"No. We're not."

"Why?" And he seemed truly perplexed. "Have you never been—"

"Before you even finish that statement...no. I'm not a virgin. Haven't been for quite some time. I leave virginal female royalty to the humans."

"So then I don't understand why you're so set against us being together. We're both attractive and of breeding age. Both extremely intelligent. And quite worthy of each other's company. So I'm not sure what the problem is"

Oh, well when he puts it like that... "Did you think my mother's orders would send me willingly to you?"

He frowned in confusion. "What does your mother have to do with anything?"

"I'm only here because of her."

"True. But you'll stay, princess, because of me."

She laughed. Dragons were naturally arrogant, but by the dark gods of fire this one made the rest of them look insecure and unsure of themselves.

"Will I now? And why would I do that?" She glanced around his sparse cave fit for a battle-dragon rarely home, but not a princess. "Your grand riches? Your royal standing? Really...what reason would I have to stay other than this human body can not fly?"

She was pushing him. She knew she was and yet she couldn't stop herself. And when he didn't answer right away, she felt a vague sense of disappointment. She truly thought he'd be up to the challenge. Unlike others in her mother's court. Shame she was wrong.

"That's what I thought," she sniffed again and turned, walking off. He could fix his own damn potatoes.

But she never should have turned her back on him. His hand threaded through her hair and snatched her back to his side. Bracing her hands against his big chest, he pulled until she looked up at him.

It wasn't a vicious pull. Or even brutal. It was just...in control. And gods be damned...it felt so good.

"Don't walk away from me when we're talking." He said it calmly. No trace of anger or rage. Actually, she saw amusement and lust in those dark eyes. Even

his frown had faded a bit. "If you're going to ask me a question, you have to give me time to answer."

"Let me go," she snapped.

"No. Not until we're done." His eyes roved over her face as he spoke, like he was drinking in her every detail. "Now, you asked me a question. You asked what I could give you to entice you to stay with me?"

He tugged the strands of hair he had a grip on and she desperately fought the urge to moan out loud.

"What I'll give you is someone worthy of you. Someone who can handle a dragoness such as yourself. I don't fear your rages. I don't fear your acid tongue. In fact, I like you mean. The meaner, the better."

She opened her mouth to say something, but another tug had her growling instead. "Except," he continued, "when we mate. Then you'll give yourself to me...completely. You'll let me do whatever I want to this body. Whether human or dragon...because we'll play with both, princess. We'll play a lot." This time he grinned. A full grin showing beautiful white teeth and fangs as well as the handsomest human face she'd ever seen. Immediately her nipples hardened under the robe and a sudden, hot, slick wetness slid down between her legs.

"That's not to say you shouldn't put up a fight every once in a while. I don't mind a few battle scars coming from you. But in the end, so to speak, you'll submit to me. Willingly. Happily. And with a smile on this gorgeous face. And when you rule as queen, I'll be by your side. Your consort. Your battle-dragon. I'll protect your throne and you with a fierceness no one has ever known. You'll wear my mark boldly and with utter pride. Together, we'll breed sons and daughters who will make us proud and carry on our blood line. We'll be a mating to be feared. To be spoken of in whispers. And when we go to meet our ancestors in the next world, we'll spend eternity together. Terrifying those who came before us."

His other hand came up, softly caressing her cheek then slipping down her jaw, her neck, until it slid under her robe and took firm but gentle hold of her breast. "That is what we'll do, princess. And that is why you'll stay." She panted as his hand squeezed her breast, his fingers playing with her sensitive nipple.

"Because at the end of the day, you're going to love me. I promise you that."

His mouth hovered close to hers and she lifted her chin a bit, waiting for him to kiss her. His lips brushed over hers and then he said, "Now. Let me show you how to make boiled potatoes so we can eat."

He released her. Just like that. She stared at him in shock as he crouched down beside the boiling pot of water. "You see," he said calmly, "first you have to clean off the potato before you cut it up."

And for the first time in Princess Rhiannon's life she didn't know whether to kill or cry. At the moment, she was certain she may do both.

Chapter Three

With a happy sigh, Rhiannon pushed the empty plate away and leaned back against the boulder. "All right," she said while licking grease off each finger, "that was amazing."

Bercelak smiled again and she was shocked his face hadn't cracked. In more than seventy years, she'd never known the dragon to smile at anyone or anything. No matter what awards and treasure her mother bestowed on him or when others may have said something funny. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, princess."

"What I don't quite understand is...well... "

"Yes?"

"How you know so much about humans? You can cook like them. You know what they should eat. How they eat. What utensils to use." They'd forgone the table when Bercelak couldn't remember where he'd put it last.

Pouring more wine into her goblet, Bercelak confessed, "My father."

She gasped. "Good gods, your father's not a human?"

He shook his head. "Now that would be quite a trick... since humans and dragons can't breed. No, princess, he's not human. He just prefers human company."

"He does? Why?"

With a shrug, "I don't know. He just does. He thinks they're interesting. And he loves the females."

Rhiannon shook her head and grinned. "Your father has quite a reputation."

"Aye. That he does. And he's damn proud of it. It'll be interesting when you two meet."

She looked up from her goblet of wine. "Meet? Why would we meet?"

"I have to introduce you to him before I Claim you. He's rather insistent on some of the Old Ways."

"I don't want to be Claimed by you, Low Born."

He growled. Low and deep from his chest. She ignored the odd little bumps that spread across her human skin, praying it wasn't some kind of strange human disease.

"Stop calling me that. I do have a name." For a brief moment, he sounded like a cranky hatchling, rather than a feared Battle Lord.

"Fine. I don't want to be Claimed by you, Bercelak. But it's not personal. I don't want to be Claimed by anyone. No one has Claim on me and no one ever will."

"But don't you want to Claim someone? Don't you want someone to breed with and to call your own?"

"No."

"Not at all?"

"No."

"I don't understand. There is so much passion burning inside you. So much desire. I see it in your eyes. You need to release it or you'll become—" He stopped speaking abruptly and looked down at his empty plate.

"Like my mother?" His eyes slowly rose up to look at her. "You fear I'll become like her?"

Trust me, Low Born, I'm making sure I never become like her."

"But you already are. As surely as you sit before me now as human. The more you harden your heart. The more you cut yourself off from everyone and everything... "

"Dragons were meant to be alone."

"No. Dragons are social. We just don't need to spend endless amounts of time with each other like humans. But you... they say you go to your den and aren't seen for years at court or anywhere else. You don't see your kin. You've seen no one since the death of your father."

She winced at that. The one being she missed with all her heart was her father. He'd loved her. Cared for her. And protected her from her mother. But with him gone... she had no one.

Her siblings were petty and only wanted the throne or what they could grab from the Queen's treasure. The other royals were not to be trusted. And the unclaimed dragon males did truly fear her.

"You're young, Rhiannon. Much too young to cut yourself off from everyone and everything.

What your mother did to you was cruel...but perhaps we should see the good in it. It forced you out of your den and into the world. The world you'll one day be queen of."

Finally, she looked Bercelak in the eye and said with all honesty, "Do you truly believe I'll live long enough to be queen?"

Bercelak leaned back against the boulder he sat next to and placed his arm on the knee of his raised leg.

"Why would you say that?"

"She wants me dead. She's always wanted me dead. Why do you think she sent me to you?"

Bercelak didn't know whether to be insulted by that last statement or merely horrified. "What the bloody hell does that mean?"

"Don't be a fool, Low Born. She's testing your loyalty. Once you Claim me...she'll expect you to either drag me back to her court in chains or to kill me."

"That's not true." He shook his head. He refused to believe that could possibly be true.

"What? You think she sent me here because she thought we'd fall in love? That we'd look in each other's eyes and have a beautiful and meaningful Claiming? Try again. I'm in her way.

Since my birth, I've been in her way. When I was younger, I was just annoying. Now she despises me and wants me dead. And you... " She gave him almost a pitying look. "She thinks of you as her pet. A well-trained war horse. Or some over-sized battle dog. And she's dropped me right in front of that dog, completely defenseless, and left me. Hopefully to die."

"And you actually believe I'd kill you on your mother's orders?"

"No." She looked weary. Exhausted. "But I wouldn't put it past you to try and break me."

"You're not a horse, Rhiannon."

"I know that."

"Then why would you even think that?"

She let out a long breath. "Your reputation precedes you, Bercelak."

His frown deepened. "Now what the hell does that mean?"

"Rumors of what you do to females once you have them here have circulated the court for years. I hear everything."

He raised an eyebrow, even more intrigued. "Oh? And what are those rumors?"

"Forget it. This conversation is getting uncomfortable."

"Forget nothing, Princess. Tell me what you've heard. And I'll tell you if they're true."

"Fine." She stared him straight in the eye and he adored how she didn't back down from a fight. "Banallan the Gold said you kept her chained here for days."

Bercelak grinned. He couldn't help himself. "I did."

Rhiannon's body flinched the smallest bit and her brows pulled down into a brutal frown.

"But she wasn't forced if that's what concerns you. If memory serves, she enjoyed every second of it...immensely."

Rolling her eyes, she snorted in disgust.

"What else, princess? What else has you so concerned?"

"Derowen the Silver."

He really had to search his brain for that one. Derowen the Silver? Gods, it had been ages since he lay with a silver. "Oh. Do you mean old Gobrien's daughter?"

"Yes. That silver."

My, what was that tone in her voice? "Yes, I remember her. What about her?"

"One of my mother's guards said he could hear Derowen screaming from nearly a quarter league away."

"Aye. She was a noisy one. Fun...but noisy."

"He said she sounded in pain."

"Well, there's pain...and then there's pain." He grinned at the expression on her face. "Anything else?"

"I heard what you did to the Argraff twins."

"Yes. But I only had one. My brother had the other. Don't ask me which. They both look exactly alike. Imagine coming from the same egg."

She looked at him in horror. "Dark gods! You're as bad as your father."

Bercelak laughed outright at that. He hadn't laughed so much in his entire life. Always so serious and intense, with much on his mind, this was the first time he ever felt he could relax. "Not in a million ages. There aren't enough dragons in the universe to compete with him. No, I'd be forced to involve humans, elves and, rumor has it...centaurs."

"I'm done with this conversation." She stood up but he reached over and grabbed her wrist.

"Tell me, princess, what truly bothers you?"

"Nothing. But if you think you'll chain me here and turn me into some broken dragon available at your beck and call, you're as insane as my mother. I bend for no male, Low Born."

"I have no desire to break you, Rhiannon. I like you mean." He growled that last part and her breathing sped up. As, it seemed, did her desire to get away from him. She tried to yank her arm from his grasp, but he didn't let her go.

Bercelak sat up until he rested on his knees in front of her. "Perhaps it's time to set up some rules."

"Rules?"

"Aye." He tugged her until she grudgingly knelt down in front of him. "So that you feel more comfortable."

She watched him with narrow eyes, but she did relax a tiny bit. "All right."

"If there's anything you don't want me to do when we're together...say no."

She stared at him for a long time, then shook her head. "That's it?"

"That's it."

"All I have to do is say no?"

"Aye. You say no...and I stop."

"That sounds very odd to me."

"Why?" He leaned over and gently kissed her neck.

"I...I don't know. It just does."

He kissed a spot under her ear. "Let me explain it to you this way... you say 'don't', I will. If you say 'stop', I won't. If you really want me to stop, you'll have to say 'no.'"

While keeping a tight rein on her left wrist with one hand, he used the other to wrap around her waist and pull her closer to him. "You can beg me, Rhiannon. Beg and plead for me to stop, and I won't. Because between us, there will be only one word that will stop me.

And it's 'no.' Now do you understand?"

Her body melted against his, her head tipping to the side so he had better access to her neck. "Aye. I understand."

"Good." He slapped her ass. "Now you should go to bed."

It took her a moment, but suddenly she pulled away from him. "What?"

"To bed, love. You look exhausted. I've fixed a place for you down the cavern and to the left. It has a bed and everything. Until you can shift back to dragon, no floors for you."

As hard as it was, he pushed her away and stood up, dragging her with him. "Besides, tomorrow we travel into Kerezik."

A bit dazed, she allowed him to pull her up. "Why?"

He didn't want to answer that, at least not honestly, so he dragged his hand along her cheek. "Are you all right? You look a bit... ow!"

She punched him. Right in the face. And the female had a right hook that could destroy the jaw of a strong human male.

"What the hell was that for?"

"You play games with the wrong female, Low Born," she snarled. She walked away from him, her robes swirling around her. "Do you think I'm like one of those stupid whores you had here before? Do you think you can toy with me?"

Rubbing his jaw, he looked at her. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Liar. You know exactly what I'm talking about. You hope to leave me wet and wanting so that I'll come begging for your affections like some dog looking for food."

Damn. She was right on that. He was.

He stepped toward her. "Rhiannon—"

"No. Say nothing," she growled.

His eyes narrowed. Why was she so angry? Angrier than he'd expect since she figured him out quick enough.

Of course, it could be...

"Are you already wet for me, Rhiannon?"

She turned on him like a coiled snake. "What?"

"You heard me, princess." He walked toward her and immediately she stumbled back away from him. "If I put my hand on your pussy right this second...will it be dry like the deserts of Alsandair or wet and desperate like the Kennis River?"

She slammed into the far wall and immediately Bercelak placed his hands on either side of her head, caging her in. She looked caged in, too. Like a wild animal about to snap.

"Perhaps I should find out."

"Get away from me, Low Born!"

"Now, Rhiannon," he gently admonished as he used one hand to yank off the belt holding her robe together, "you know those aren't the right words."

Gorgeously naked underneath, Bercelak placed his hand against her breast and squeezed before moving down her body, past her hips, only to slip his fingers between her trembling thighs.

"Wait..."

"Still not right," he murmured, unable to turn away from the sight of his hand disappearing between her legs. As soon as two of his fingers slid inside her they both let out a low moan.

So wet and hot. Like a volcano. Just thinking of having his cock buried there for several days or years was making him shake like a young one.

He started shafting her with his fingers and she groaned in response, her eyes shut and her teeth biting into her bottom lip. Leaning in close he kissed her cheek and couldn't help but mutter, "Mine, Rhiannon. You're mine."

And that's when he felt her claws slash across his face.

Yanking his hand out of her and away, he stumbled back. He could feel and smell the blood dripping down his jaw.

"I belong to no one, Low Born. And if you hope to trap me with this game, you are sadly mistaken."

He didn't even wipe the blood away as he stared at her. As they stared at each other.

Their eyes locked in silent battle.

"What are you talking about?"

"You force me into a Claiming, and I can fight you with the Elders. And we both know it."

Aye. He did know that.

"But if I let you willingly take me...fuck me, I have very little room to argue, now do I?"

She pulled her robe together and knotted the tie around it. "You'll have to work a little harder than that, Bercelak the Vengeful, to ever hope of Claiming me."

Rhiannon walked past him, her shoulder brushing his as she stalked out. "I will be Claimed by no one, Low Born," she said over her shoulder. "But especially not by you."

She disappeared around the corner and although his cock was so hard it hurt, he still couldn't help but smile. Because she didn't even realize...she still never said the word, "No."

Once a good distance away from him, Rhiannon stopped and slid down the wall. She glanced at her hand. For several seconds it had returned to claw. Promising. She may be able to revert this spell yet. But she couldn't worry about it at the moment. Not when thoughts of a black-eyed dragon kept playing through her head. Just with his fingers he'd managed to make her feel...full. For those few seconds she *was* his.

Gods, could she be any weaker? What kind of queen would she be if she couldn't keep the local riff-raff from her pussy?

But was it really that simple? She'd let Bercelak get away with more in the few hours she'd been with him than with any other dragon she'd ever met. And, she had to admit, it wasn't merely because her mother had trapped her in this weak, human body. No, it was worse than that. She liked Bercelak's touch. She liked having his hands on her. She was, in fact, beginning to like him.

And she absolutely hated him for it.

Chapter Four

Rhiannon spent the hour before dawn trying to undo whatever her mother had done to her so she could shift back to dragon. But to no avail.

She missed her dragon self. She missed her wings and her talons. She missed being able to take a horse for a quick meal.

But most importantly, she felt unsafe in this human body. She poked at her skin and it hurt. She dug her nail into her forearm and it bled. *By the gods! How do these humans live like this?*

And then there was Bercelak. She thought for sure he'd come to her last night. He'd come to Claim her. And she'd been prepared, too. Ready to challenge him as human. Ready to die if he'd come as dragon. But he didn't come at all. And, in the end, neither did she.

Damn him! She'd never had a male, any male, make her feel so...so...needy. And not for food or safety or any of those important things. But for sex. She wanted a lusty ride from that bastard and she hated him for making her feel this way. Especially when she'd been so comfortable with not feeling anything at all.

"Are you ready?"

She looked away from the early-morning two suns to the dragon standing beside her. They stood at the mouth of his den, leagues above the earth. If she fell from here now, she'd die. Perhaps that was what her mother had hoped for. That her human form would crumple and Bercelak forced to deal with the remains.

"I'm still waiting for you to explain to me why we are going to Kerezik?"

She pulled at the collar of the dress she wore. It wasn't in any way high. In fact, it scooped dangerously low across her breasts. Much more and her nipples would show. She hated wearing clothes, but she felt terribly bare without them, and felt suffocated when she had them on.

"We are, in fact, going to the valley between the grand mountains of Kerezik."

"Fascinating. Still waiting on why."

He looked at her and his scales barely hid where she'd ripped into his flesh. She didn't bother to hide her smirk at that.

"And you'll continue to wait," he growled. "Now get on, dragoness. Or I'll bring you there in my claw."

Without another word, she hoisted herself onto his back. "I haven't ridden on the back of another dragon since I was no more than a hatchling. This might prove to be fun."

To emphasize that point, she dragged her hands through his hair before taking a firm hold. She heard his stifled moan and bit her lip to keep from laughing. There was only so much mocking any dragon could take.

Without another word, Bercelak hit the skies and headed toward Kerezik...and whatever was in Kerezik.

"And you remember my mother."

Rhiannon barely held her growl in as Bercelak introduced her to all his kin. An extremely large, handsome brood who all felt the need to be human on this day. Even Bercelak brought a change of clothes with him. Chainmail leggings and shirt and a dark blue surcoat with the crest of humans destroyed by the Queen's army long ago.

He introduced her to all his kin as the female he intended to Claim.

Bastard!

His mother briefly bowed her head, but she saw the hate in the woman's eyes. "Princess."

"Mistress."

Gold eyes turned to Bercelak. "May I speak with you a moment, my son?"

"Of course." He nodded at Rhiannon. "I'll be right back."

"As you like," she muttered, wishing she'd ripped his throat out the night before.

Someone, she had no idea who, placed a goblet of wine into her hand while she leaned against a large dining table already laid out in preparation of a feast.

"I'm Maelona."

"I remember," Rhiannon sighed, unable to hide her annoyance at her current situation.

"Bercelak's youngest sister."

Rhiannon fought her urge to say, "So?"

"I'm a witch, too."

Now Rhiannon looked at the female in surprise. A petite green dragon with Bercelak's black eyes, she was extremely pretty as human with her dark green hair. And she probably glittered like emeralds when dragon. She leaned against the table beside Rhiannon.

"Witch? Me? My skills are..." Rhiannon shrugged. "Weak." Embarrassingly so.

"Really?" Another sister, Ghleanna or something, leaned against the table on the other side of Rhiannon. "That's surprising. A white dragon with no Magick at all? Doesn't sound right."

Was anything right at the moment?

"Perhaps."

"Ever wonder why?"

"Ever wonder why what?"

"Why your Magick seems to be lacking?"

"No. I just assumed I was born that way."

Ghleanna, a black dragon and several decades older than Bercelak, raised one glossy black brow. "Perhaps."

"What does that mean?" Rhiannon had no patience for word games with the lower classes.

Instead of answering the question, Ghleanna asked one of her own, "You do know that your mother was with our father. Long before any of us were born, of course."

"Ghleanna!" her younger sister admonished.

“What? I don’t think it’s a secret.”

“It’s not.” Rhiannon sipped her wine. “From what I understand there are few of a certain age who have not lain with your father.”

“True enough,” Ghleanna laughed. “My father has a way with all females. It’s in his blood.”

“And passed down to all of you, I suppose?”

“A couple of our brothers. And one of our sisters.”

Rhiannon murmured while staring into her goblet, “And Bercelak.”

Both sisters spit out their wine.

Rhiannon looked between the two women, one eyebrow raised.

“Something I said?”

“Bercelak who?” Ghleanna demanded as she wiped her chin.

“*Our* Bercelak?” Maelona asked in surprise.

“Well...yes.”

“He’s *nothing* like father.”

“Father’s very jovial and happy.” Maelona explained. “Whereas Bercelak is very...um...”

“Sour and impossibly cranky?”

“That’s not fair, sister.” Maelona looked at Rhiannon. “He’s always been nice to me.”

“He’s been nice to me, too,” Ghleanna interrupted. “But he’s still not exactly the life of anyone’s party. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him smile.”

“Mother said he used to smile...you know...until father,” she shrugged, “well...you know.”

Ghleanna took another gulp of wine. “Father’s way of raising us differs from most.”

“You do learn to stay on your guard. I’ve never been captured or harmed during battle.”

“Aye. That’s true.”

Curious at what their reactions might be, Rhiannon admitted, “Bercelak smiles at me.”

Both sisters froze at Rhiannon's words. Then they slowly turned to face her.

"He smiled? At you?" Ghleanna asked softly.

"Aye. A few times yesterday. And once before many years ago."

Ghleanna's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure it was Bercelak?"

"I think I'd know. I've only been held captive by one black dragon these days."

Maelona shook her head in wonder. "That's fascinating. I'm not sure any of us have seen him smile. Ever."

"I thought he was physically incapable."

Rhiannon frowned at Ghleanna's words. "Well he's not," she snapped.

Wait. What was she doing? Why did she feel the need to defend the bastard? Gods! She was pathetic!

With a growl, Rhiannon walked away from the two females, leaving them to chatter to each other in low whispers.

Bercelak took his mother's hands. "Please. Trust me."

"I trust you, son." His mother's gold eyes shifted to the female of his dreams. "It's her I don't trust."

She pulled one hand away and her cool fingers carefully slid along her son's jaw. Right where Rhiannon had clawed him the previous eve. Healing nicely, it still felt a bit sore. "What is this? Did she do this to you?"

"I angered her."

"Is this going to be your life? Praying you don't anger the crazy bitch because you fear she'll kill you in your sleep?"

Bercelak looked at his mother in mock surprise. "Why, Mother. I'm shocked at your words."

"You sound like your father." She went up on her toes to get a better look at his wound. "I won't tolerate her hurting you, my son. I'll kill the bitch first."

“Weren’t you the one who tried to cut father’s throat before he Claimed you?”

“He deserved it. You, however, do not.”

“How do you know that?”

“I know my son. I know all my hatchlings.” And she protected all of them. Even from their mad father. “Can’t we get you someone else? Someone...kinder?”

“I don’t want kinder. I want Rhiannon.”

They both watched as Rhiannon walked across the room, a goblet of wine in her hand. A large dog ran up to her and she crouched beside it. She ran a hand over its hide and then leaned in and sniffed it.

“Rhiannon?” he called out softly. She glanced at him over her shoulder. “No.”

“No what?”

“He’s a pet. Not a treat.”

She frowned. “Pet?” She let out an annoyed sigh and stood up, walking around the beast as if he no longer existed.

Bercelak smiled at her confusion over human living and he heard his mother gasp.

“What?” he asked, looking down into her beautiful face.

“She made you smile.”

“Aye. Rhiannon always makes me smile.”

Shalin dropped her head against her son’s chest. “Dark gods, I’ve lost you forever.”

Bercelak rolled his eyes. “I think, mother, that’s a tad extreme.”

Sipping her wine, Rhiannon looked around the hall. Bercelak didn’t take her to some mountain fortress to meet his kin. Ailean kept his family in a castle. A gorgeous castle nestled in a valley between the Taaffe Mountains of Kerezik. But this seemed a strange way for any dragon to live. The only way to enter the

building was to shift to human. No one in dragon form could get through the doors without destroying the building in the process.

Rhiannon had heard many tales about Bercelak's father, Ailean the Wicked. In fact, details about his many, many, *many* loves and conquests filled volume after volume of books her own father would never let her read. She'd always heard Ailean preferred to live among the humans, but she never realized to what extent until now.

He even had human servants who seemed to have no fear of the dragons they served.

Strange.

"Well, well, well," a great voice boomed behind her. "My son's female." Before Rhiannon had a chance to argue that particular point, a large hand slapped her in the back as way of greeting. She stumbled forward, thankfully right into Bercelak's arms; otherwise she would have ended up face down on the marble floor.

Bercelak helped her to her feet. "Are you all right?"

"Aye."

"Fragile little thing, isn't she?"

Growling, Rhiannon turned around to face the one behind her, but she froze on the spot and stared.

By the dark gods of fire, he's gorgeous!

This had to be Ailean. Built much like Bercelak and all Bercelak's brothers, the dragon had blue hair streaked with the white of age that reached down his back and swept across the floor. His sharp silver eyes looked back at her with curiosity as sinfully full lips tilted into a smirk that made her knees weak. All this explained why his offspring were so beautiful—their father was that and so much more.

No wonder her mother had taken a tumble in this dragon's bed. He had to be at least in his fifth or six hundredth winter and yet he was strong, powerful, and deadly attractive still.

When she didn't say anything, simply stared at him, Bercelak nudged her shoulder.

"Say something," he near snarled between his teeth.

So she did. To his father. "You are absolutely gorgeous."

Ailean grinned and looked at his son. "Well, at least we know she has damn good taste."

"Excuse us."

Then Bercelak was dragging her from the room, but she continued to stare at Ailean until a door slamming shut in front of her, cut off her view.

This wasn't the first time a female he was intimate with stared at his father with such keen interest. Before he never cared. But this was Rhiannon...*his* Rhiannon. And jealousy was fairly choking him to death at the moment.

He turned her to look at him, both hands gripping her upper arms. "Could you have been more obvious?"

She blinked in confusion. "Obvious about what?"

"Your blatant admiration of my father."

"Well even you have to admit he's bloody gorgeous!"

He didn't have to admit a damn thing.

She winced. "Oooh. Well that came out terribly wrong. What I mean is...I suddenly understand my mother a little better." She grabbed onto the arms holding her. "If he looks like that as human, what by the dark gods does his dragon-form look like? It must be magnificent!"

He couldn't take anymore. Hearing her talk about his father like that filled him with a territorial need he'd never had with any female before.

The grip he had on her arms tightened as he pushed her against the far wall. She only had time to let out a gasp before his mouth covered hers. She struggled, her arms trying to yank away from his hands, but he refused to let her

go. Instead he tilted his head to the side, getting a better angle, his tongue thrusting between her lips and into her warm mouth.

He felt her move her leg and not wanting her to shove her knee in his groin, Bercelak pushed his hips forward, trapping her lower body with his own.

She gasped again and his rational mind demanded he release her. But her hips tipped forward the tiniest bit, pushing herself against his rapidly growing erection. He stilled, afraid he may be misreading her, but then her tongue gently rubbed against his.

That was all he needed. He released her arms so he could dig his hands into her hair, holding her head still for his kiss. Her arms, now free, wrapped around his neck and pulled him closer. Her response, nearly chaste in its carnality, had his legs shaking from lust. His control broken, Bercelak thrust his hips against hers. She groaned into his mouth and his hips thrust again, determined to give them both release.

But a banging on the door stopped him.

"Oi! Brother!" He could hear his brothers laughing hysterically from the other side of the door. "Father begs your attendance at dinner, O mighty battle-dragon, defender of the Queen's throne!"

"And defender of the Queen's daughter!" one of his sister's yelled as well.

He went to pull away, but Rhiannon clung to his neck with a grip bordering on painful.

"No. Don't stop," she panted.

Gods, he'd gotten the spoiled little brat to beg. Well that gave him a nice bit of hope he didn't have the previous eve.

"Sorry, princess," he gasped out. He wondered if she had any idea that no female, dragon or human, had ever made him this desperate before. Bercelak the Great did not lose control. Ever. Until now. "My family awaits. And unless you'd like an audience for this, I suggest we go."

He pulled away, letting his hands slowly fall away from her body. What he wouldn't give to be able to rip that dress off her and take that delicious body until the two suns rose...several weeks from now. But he'd do that if he only wanted

her for a night or a few days. This game they played was for the rest of their lives.
Winner take all.

His heart belonged to this dragoness, whether she wanted it or not.

And she damn well better want it!

Chapter Five

“So how’s your mother?”

The entire table froze, all eyes not on Ailean or Rhiannon, but on Bercelak’s mother, Shalin, who’d asked the question.

Rhiannon cleared her throat. “She’s fine. Although I pray for her death every night, mistress.”

Well that re-focused everyone’s attention back on her.

“Should we guess you’re not close to your mother then?” Ghleanna asked as she expertly used the human utensils to eat the seared flesh on her plate. Starving, Rhiannon wished she could just pick the meat on her plate up with her fingers, but decorum instructed she follow the lead of those whose den it was.

“She detests the ground I walk on. But it’s a mutual dislike.”

“She fears your power,” Maelona offered as she kindly showed Rhiannon which utensils to use without letting on to the rest of them.

Giving a small nod of thanks, Rhiannon followed her example. “My power is nothing compared to hers. And she knows it.” She cut the meat on her plate, her mouth already watering.

“You’re incorrect,” Shalin said softly. “You have much power. Much more than your mother’s. The Magick’s all around you. I can see it.”

Rhiannon chewed on her food. She found herself enjoying these cooked meats almost as much as the raw stuff she normally ate.

Except...she did miss the screaming. Although not the sobbing.

After swallowing, Rhiannon said, “I was just discussing this with your daughters. I’ve had many teachers, mistress. And all of them said I was quite the sad failure.”

Ghleanna swirled her wine-filled goblet while one foot rested up on the chair, the hand holding the goblet braced against it. “I’ve thought about this a bit since we spoke, princess. And I think they lied to you.”

Rhiannon’s eyes looked up at the female sitting across from her. Ghleanna did not waste time wearing dresses or any other human feminine trappings. She

wore black breeches, black shirt, and high black boots. She kept her thick hair short, which Rhiannon had never seen before on a dragon.

“Why do you say that?”

“You’re a white dragon. The power you have was born within you. Like the barbarian Kyvwich witches from the north or the Nolwenn witches from the Desert lands. Your power flows through your veins and nothing your mother does can take that away for good.”

Rhiannon swallowed another bit of beef. “Then why are my skills so lacking? Why can I do so little?”

“It took me a bit but I think I finally figured it out. When you trained you were always dragon, weren’t you?”

“Of course.”

“So they would have never seen it because of your scales.”

“Seen what?”

Ghleanna motioned to Rhiannon’s shoulder with a gesture, bare where the dress dipped down. “That brand you wear.”

Glancing down at it, Rhiannon shrugged. “Aye. All my siblings bear this mark. To be honest, I forgot it was there.”

“Well, it’s that mark that keeps you from your true strength, princess. And I’d bet my treasure your mother knew it when she had it placed on you.”

Frowning, Rhiannon looked down at the mark on her shoulder.

Bercelak should have paid more attention to the females’ ongoing conversation. Instead, he sent threatening looks to his two youngest brothers and several of his oldest when they leered at Rhiannon.

Then his baby sister gasped in shock and he turned in time to see his female take her eating knife to the small brand she had on her shoulder.

“Rhiannon!” But it was too late. She’d already shoved the point into the flesh around the brand and dug under it, flicking out a chunk of skin and muscle.

His kin burst into surprise gasps and comments as he pushed himself away from the table and went immediately to her side.

She stared down at the wound gushing blood. "I feel nothing."

Crouching down beside her, Bercelak took a cloth from off the table and placed it over the wound. "Nothing? You feel no pain?"

"Oh. I feel pain. Lots of pain. But nothing else."

He worked hard to understand her words, but failed miserably. "What are you talking about?"

She grabbed hold of the cloth and stood up. Holding it against her arm, she walked away from the table, his entire family watching her.

"Nothing's changed." She turned and faced them. "Are you sure about that brand?"

"It was a guess," Ghleanna answered, her eyes wide with shock.

"A guess? That would have been nice to know before I cut it out of my arm."

"Well, you mad cow, how were any of us to know you were going to do that?"

"What did you expect me to do? You tell me—" Rhiannon abruptly stopped talking.

Bercelak stood up as her blue eyes locked onto his. "Gods, Bercelak. It hurts. It hurts," she whispered. Then her arms flung out and her body lifted off the floor.

"*Rhiannon!*" He moved toward her, but two of his sisters grabbed hold of him. "*Let me go!*"

"No, brother. Leave her be," Ghleanna ordered against his ear. "You can't help her."

Bercelak watched as the Magick of his kind tore through Rhiannon's body, looping around her limbs, cutting through her chest and stomach, pouring off her like rain water.

"*Do something!*" he roared, unwilling to watch her writhe in pain. "We can't leave her like this."

“Naught we can do, but wait until the gods are done with her,” Maelona whispered.

As soon as Maelona said the words, Rhiannon’s body slowly rose up toward the ceiling. In fascinated silence, he and his family watched her rise and rise.

Then...she dropped. Like one of the gods slammed her with their mighty claws. But the force behind it was so great, Rhiannon’s body slammed through the floor of the Great Hall, disappearing from their sight.

“Gods!”

“The dungeon! She’s gone to the dungeon!”

“We have a dungeon?”

Bercelak’s father led the way into the rarely used lower floors of the castle. Cobwebs hung everywhere and they could hear the noises of small, frightened animals scurrying through the dank place. They found her right where she’d landed.

Bercelak ran to her side. “Rhiannon?” Ghleanna and Maelona crouched next to her.

Leaning over Rhiannon’s body, Maelona let out a deep sigh. “She breathes.”

Angry and unable to take it out on anyone else, Bercelak pushed Ghleanna’s shoulder. “Why did you have to tell her that?”

Growling, Ghleanna pushed him back. “How was I supposed to know she’d do something that bloody stupid?”

“Stop it.” They both looked down to find Rhiannon’s eyes open and staring at them. “Stop fighting.”

“Rhiannon, are you all right?”

She blinked. “My head hurts a bit.” She licked her lips and Bercelak hated himself for wanting to kiss her again as opposed to taking care of her. “And every part of my body’s on fire.”

“Not surprising,” Ghleanna offered. “When that much Magick goes through you, princess, you can expect a large bit of pain.”

Rhiannon turned those blue eyes to Bercelak's sister. "That, too, would have been wonderful to know *before I did this!*" she ended on a healthy yell.

With a shake of his head, Bercelak carefully slipped his arms under Rhiannon's neck and knees, lifting her off the floor as he stood. "Let's get you back upstairs, princess."

"I'm still hungry, Low Born," she muttered.

But before he could promise her food, she was snoring.

Rhiannon yawned and stretched. She felt amazing. Alive with power. She could hear things...sense things she'd never been able to before. She could actually see tendrils of Magick swirling around her.

She watched one small pink one twirl and twirl and twirl. She turned over, her eyes following it until she realized Bercelak lay next to her in the bed. Awake, his head propped up on one arm, he watched her with warmth, which did nothing but cause her the highest level of anxiety.

Then she realized that except for the thin animal skin covering them, they were both quite naked. As dragon, this would mean nothing. But in human form...

"Ow!" he snapped as her fist made contact with his hard chest.

"Why are we in bed together? What have you done?" She went to punch him again but he grabbed both her wrists, pushing her onto her back.

"Stop hitting me!"

"Get off me!"

"Not until you calm down!"

Very hard to calm down, though, when Bercelak's warm, heavy body lay directly on top of hers. Part of her would like nothing more than to open her legs to him. All that Magick running through her system had done nothing but increase her overwhelming desire to have this dragon fuck her—hard, long, and with absolutely no mercy.

Aye. That's what she wanted.

Good gods! What have I done to myself?

"Calm down, Rhiannon, and I'll let you go."

He spoke calmly, soothingly. Like he were trying to coax a yummy mare over to him before taking her off to be a snack.

Rhiannon had no choice but to comply. As human she was still so weak compared to him.

Taking a deep breath, she forced herself through sheer will to relax. It worked, but instead of releasing her, Bercelak stared at her face. Specifically her mouth.

"Bercelak?"

"Mhmm?"

"Let me go."

"Are you sure?" And he looked at her with such desperate longing she smiled.

"Aye. I'm sure."

With a groaned sigh of resignation, he released her wrists and rolled onto his back. Still, she had to bite her lip to stop herself from laughing at the sight of his erection creating a nice tent with the bedding.

"You're too cruel to me," he groaned.

"Why? Because I won't let you have your vile way with me?"

"Yes. That's exactly why."

He sounded so wounded, it forced Rhiannon's smile into a brutal grin. "Poor thing. How you've suffered so."

"Don't mock me, wench." His arm slipped around her waist and pulled her over so she rested against his chest. "You seem to enjoy teasing me and I was so worried about you."

He was worried about her? "Really?"

"Aye, Rhiannon. I feared I lost you. Especially when you went through the floor...it's marble, you know. Thick, unyielding marble."

She blinked. "Oh. I...I guess the gods protected me."

"I guess." He paused a moment, then said, "Can you shift back now?"

She reached inside herself but after a few moments, she knew. "No. I can't."

"Perhaps soon, though."

"Perhaps." Or, perhaps she'd be trapped like this forever. Stuck in this weak body until her ancestors called her home. But one look at her human body and they'd most likely send her away in disgust.

"Don't worry, Rhiannon. I promise we'll fix this. Soon you'll learn to manage the Magick that flows through you and then nothing will stop you."

"You seem so sure."

"Because I am sure. Now," he kissed her forehead, then her cheek as he moved down her body, "let's no longer talk."

She pushed against his chest, but even she had to admit it was a very half-hearted effort. But what could she do? Especially with him nibbling under her chin and his hands roaming over her body.

"Bercelak," she panted, "stop."

He chuckled seconds before his mouth closed over one hard nipple and sucked. His "rules" came rushing back to her and she realized he wouldn't stop. If she wanted him to stop, she'd have to say "no."

She said, "Don't."

A deep groan reverberated through her breast from his mouth while one of his big hands slid up the back of her leg, settling between her thighs. One of Bercelak's large fingers slid inside her and Rhiannon heard herself whimper. Gods, the beast had her whimpering like some weak human.

Still, it felt so damn good. His fingers making her body go wild. His tongue and lips teasing her nipples.

Rhiannon wanted release. Preferably now. But she would never ask. So, instead, she said, "Bercelak...we mustn't."

Like that she was flat on her back, Bercelak's hard body pressing down on her, pushing her into the mattress.

Oh, she enjoyed these rules of his. She didn't have to act like the slag she currently was. Instead, she could pretend this was all beyond her control when, in fact, he'd given her complete control. How did he know all this would turn her into a ball of flame? How did he know her so well? She'd never spent any time with him. Barely spoke to him unless her mother was around and she didn't want to hear her telling her she was a horrible bitch.

Or was it that they were merely well matched? Dragons believed that their true mate waited "out there" for them. The one meant to be theirs until their ancestors called them home.

Could her true mate truly be this overbearing, cranky, arrogant bastard?

He moved down her body, his tongue leading the way, until his big shoulders pushed her legs apart and he settled his face between her thighs.

For the moment, she answered her own question out loud. Actually, she screamed her answer. "*Yes! Gods, yes!*"

Hearing her scream out in lust nearly sent Bercelak over the edge. He gripped her thighs tighter and delved deeper inside her tight pussy. She groaned and bucked under him, her hands digging into his hair.

Gods, she tasted good. Smelled even better.

This was the Rhiannon he always knew existed. The one he knew would be his forever. He'd wanted to wait until they returned to his den before taking her since he had no doubts he'd *never* be able to wait until their Claiming. Which, due to her royal lineage, must take place at the full of the moon...four very long days away.

Still, he never planned to do this here, in his father's house. But he couldn't help it. Especially with her goading him. That "we mustn't" nearly killed him. She knew exactly how to entice him. She understood him better than anyone; she just hadn't realized it yet. She would. Soon she'd understand everything.

She'd realize that apart they were strong...but together they were unstoppable.

One of her hands released his hair and grabbed hold of the headboard. She writhed beneath him, unable to move her hips because he'd pinned her lower half to the bed while his tongue tormented her toward release.

"Bercelak," she whispered his name and his entire body clenched. "Gods, Bercelak..." She probably didn't even realize she'd said it out loud, but it was all he needed to hear.

He closed his mouth over her clit, suckling. Rhiannon's entire body bowed and she let out a shattering groan. He felt her toes curl and uncurl where they rested by his shoulders and he feared she'd break the headboard with the way she was holding it.

Finally, she settled down and Bercelak moved back up her body until he hovered over her. He took firm hold of both her hands—after prying one of them from the headboard and the other from his hair—and pinned them over her head.

Then he waited.

After a few moments, Rhiannon's eyes slowly opened and he smiled down into her face.

"Feel better?"

Giving a wicked grin he prayed he'd be able to keep on her face the majority of the time they were together, she nodded. "Aye."

"Good." His grip tightened on her wrists, pushing them down onto the mattress. She raised an eyebrow in question.

"My turn," he answered as he slammed his hard cock inside her, letting her delicious roar of surprise wash over him.

Chapter Six

Finally, her mind cleared and she could again see straight. But by then...it was too late.

She felt his cock push inside her with no warning, no preamble. And it felt delicious. It also meant she'd have little grounds to refuse his right to Claim her. If he hadn't made his intentions clear in the beginning, she could have used him until the two suns burned away and the oceans disappeared and he'd still never be able to have her without her agreeing. Yet she knew his intentions and without any force whatsoever, he'd taken her—and she let him.

The dragon elders would have little patience for her denials of his Claiming now.

Damn him!

"Rhiannon," he whispered in her ear and her entire body melted. "I'm going to fuck you, Rhiannon. I'm going to make you come...again." She rolled her eyes at that and she felt his smile against her cheek. "It will always be this way with us, you know. Always."

She doubted that, but then he started moving and she stopped thinking about much of anything except how good he felt inside her.

Bercelak held onto her arms, but her legs were free. She wrapped them around his waist, her heels digging into his ass. He growled at that and kissed her while his hips continued to move against her, his big cock powering into her over and over again.

Her tongue met his and she cried out in desperation. Amazing that after what she'd just experience, she now wanted more. So much more.

Kissing her cheek, licking her chin and throat, Bercelak continued to push her toward another blinding climax. She tried to pull her hands away, but he took a tighter grip and pushed them deeper into the mattress.

He won't let me go, she thought to herself and that's when his mouth clamped over her breast again, sucking hard on her nipple.

Her release hit with brutal swiftness, tearing through Rhiannon's entire body the way the Magick had, only this time no pain. Just pleasure. Wonderful pleasure.

Panting and trying to focus, she realized Bercelak had come inside her and now lay collapsed atop her.

That's when she had to admit—at least to herself—that it didn't feel too bad to have him there.

"Rhiannon?" It felt like ages until he could get up enough energy to say that.

But when she didn't answer him, Bercelak became seriously concerned. Scared he may have accidentally hurt her, he pushed himself up on one elbow, looking down at her.

"Rhiannon?" he said again, louder.

"Mhmmm?"

She sounded sated.

Bercelak couldn't help but smile. It felt nice to smile. "Are you all right?"

Slowly, her eyes opened, staring at him in wonder. Then, just as quickly, her eyebrows pulled down into a brutal frown. "This changes nothing, Low Born."

Bercelak laughed out loud and that felt even better than smiling. "Sorry, princess. This changes everything. And we both know it."

Growling, she tried to pull away from him, but he caught hold of her waist.

"You're not going anywhere."

"Let me go."

"No. I want to talk first."

"Talk?" She looked absolutely horrified at the idea.

"Aye. Talk. Make sure we are both clear on a few things."

She relaxed back, but watched him warily. "Clear on what things?"

"The next full moon is in four days. At that time I'll Claim you."

"Wait—"

"No. I won't wait, Rhiannon. You're mine as I am yours. Nothing will change that."

Angry, she pulled away from him, scrambling across the bed. "This isn't fair. It was the Magick...it changed..."

He shook his head. "Try another tact, princess. I won't believe the Magick made you, of all dragons, do anything you didn't want to do."

"But—"

Frustrated, he barked, "No! No more excuses. No more denials." He pulled his body up and, on all fours, moved toward her.

Eyes wide, Rhiannon moved back away from him. The bed was big, but it wasn't that big.

Her back leg slid off the bed, almost tumbling her onto the floor. But Berce lak grasped tight hold of her wrist.

"Wait—"

He ignored her plea, yanking her onto the bed.

As he placed his body over hers, she snarled, "I'll never love you, Low Born!

Never!"

His heart stuttered to a stop. He wanted her love. Needed it, even. This wasn't about taking a royal as his mate. This was about Rhiannon and only Rhiannon.

He'd loved her since he saw her and, he had admitted to himself years ago, he would always love her. No female would ever compare with her. And now that he'd actually been inside her, had actually heard her cries of passion and felt her lust, he wanted no other female in his arms. Only Rhiannon. Always Rhiannon.

But what he knew of his Rhiannon, no "sensitive" male would ever live in her bed...*own* her bed. So, the side that wished to care for her—that wanted to make her laugh as well as see her smile—he pushed that part of him aside. He would bury it until he'd Claimed her. Even if he missed the next full moon, he'd only Claim Rhiannon if she loved him. Nothing was worse than being with someone who didn't love you and never would. Dragons lived many years and that was too long to live without a true mate to care for you.

So he buried the part of him that cared and brought out the warrior. The merciless battle-dragon who had destroyed more dragon kingdoms than he could remember.

He dug his hand into her hair and snatched her head back. One of her hands reached up and gripped his shoulder, trying to push him off.

"Perhaps we should understand each other, princess. I will have you. I will make you mine until the end of time. Challenge me if you wish, but you'll lose in this battle. I promise that you'll lose."

Clear blue eyes glared at him but he also saw the heat in them. With her hatred came her lust. Just as he knew it would.

He pulled her head back a little farther and the hand on his shoulder dug into his flesh.

"I think it's time you understand how things will work between us, princess. I think it's time I show you."

Bercelak banged on his older brother's door again. Finally, Addolgar pulled the heavy oak door open.

"What?"

"I need your chains, brother."

Addolgar stared at him for several long seconds. "Should I ask why," he finally said.

"No."

"The cuffs only, or the collar as well?"

"All of it."

With a shrug, Addolgar went back into his room. Bercelak heard his brother speaking to his mate, shaking his head when he heard her snap, "Where do you think you're going with our chains?"

"It's for a good cause," Addolgar said over his shoulder as he handed the chains to his kin. "It's brought me luck, brother. Perhaps it will work the same for you."

He fucked me to sleep, she thought as she forced herself awake. The suns showed brightly through the narrow windows and she knew it was late in the morning.

The last thing she remembered at all was him bathing her, against her muttered protests, in fact.

Rhiannon shook her head to clear her exhausted mind, but the sounds of heavy chains froze her. She went to touch her throat, but her hands would only move so far. She turned her head and saw that metal cuffs held her wrists, the chain tightened so her arms didn't stray too far from the headboard. She couldn't see or touch the collar around her neck, but she felt it well enough. Heavy metal weighing down on her shoulders. Even her feet were shackled, the chains securely locked to the end board.

"Bastard!"

"Oh, good. You're awake."

"Release me! Now!"

He smiled and she took very little comfort from it. "I think not. I like having you at my disposal. All wet and ready to fuck when I so choose."

She'd spit at him if he were any closer. Especially when she felt her body respond so immediately. Her nipples peaked and wetness seeped from between her legs. He saw it, too, and his grin grew wider.

She fought the chains again. "I'll scream for help."

"I wouldn't bother. Remember whose family this is. Ailean the Wicked. Somehow he managed to woo my mother who, I've been told, tried to kill him more than once before their Claiming. So, I seriously doubt he'll find this such an...extreme form of courtship."

"I am a Princess," she argued, "you can't treat me—"

"You are a princess," he cut in. "A beautiful princess who belongs to me."

He finally walked over to her and she stared hard at the human body before her.

Gods, why did he have to be so beautiful?

"Tell me you're mine, Rhiannon, and I'll let you go."

Angry and lustful all in one turn, Rhiannon turned her face away.

"Tell me, Rhiannon." His fingers slid up her calf, teasing the skin with just the tips of his fingers. "Tell me," fingers slid between her thighs, soft kisses followed, "or I'll be forced to get it out of you...somehow."

She shuddered and, to her shame, it wasn't from fear or anger. But lust. Her weakness sickened her. How could she ever hope to be queen, when she couldn't even tell this bastard "no"?

Kisses turned to licks trailing over her sex and across her lower belly.

"Such simple words, Rhiannon. 'I belong to you, Bercelak.' Say them and let's be done with all this."

Turning her neck, the collar bit into her flesh a bit. She closed her eyes in horror when she realized how much she liked it.

"I won't," she choked out, his tongue teasing the very tip of her nipple. "I won't say it."

"Fine. Then I guess we'll have to do this the hard way." He pulled away from her and she briefly wondered what the "hard way" was? She couldn't imagine Bercelak hurting her. At least not without some proper begging involved. He stretched out beside her, his head in her lap. She watched through narrowed eyes as he kissed her sex, his tongue pushing in to tease her clit the tiniest bit.

She groaned, her eyes closing and her body tightening. Then he stopped, pulled back and blew on her. Gently.

Her eyes snapped open and he gave her that gorgeous smile. For someone who rarely smiled, he seemed to be doing it a lot all of a sudden.

Because of her?

"Give me what I want, Rhiannon, and I'll give you what you want."

Refusing to speak, she shook her head. The collar, warm from her body heat, felt wonderful resting against her flesh.

"As you wish." He leaned down and began teasing her again. Growling, she looked away, only to see his engorged cock bobbing there, Bercelak's hand gripping it firmly, stroking it slowly.

Unable to stop herself, she growled with wanting and Bercelak's mouth stopped moving. He lifted his head and looked at her. They stared at each other for several long moments, then Rhiannon licked her lips. Bercelak groaned and growled all at the same time while he easily pushed himself up until he rested on his knees. He moved toward her, his cock leading the way.

She no longer looked at him, but at it.

Straddling her chest, Bercelak slid his hand behind her neck and gently lifted her head up. She opened her mouth and he slid his cock inside her. They both closed their eyes on a moan as Rhiannon sucked, loving the way his body shook as she took possession of him.

"Gods, Rhiannon," he whispered. "Gods that feels good."

She thought about torturing him the way he'd been torturing her, but she didn't want to. She liked having his big cock in her mouth. She liked having him over her. She felt no fear, no sense of dread, wondering when he'd prove what a bastard he was. So she sucked and she licked.

His hands tightened in her hair, holding her head still. His cock moved in and out of her mouth as he neared release. Finally, he pushed into her one last time. She nearly gagged as his seed filled her mouth, bursting into the back of her throat. But she swallowed and sucked until he pulled away from her and dropped down on the bed.

Feeling smug, she licked her lips again and watched him panting, a light sheen of sweat over his body.

Now he wouldn't be able to resist her. Now he'd rip these chains off her and fuck her until they both passed out.

That's what she waited for. And she kept waiting.

Eventually, Bercelak gave one big satisfied sigh, then leaned back against the bed, his hands behind his head, his legs crossed at the ankles. His enormous feet resting by her head.

He looked up at the ceiling. "So which would you prefer, Rhiannon? A male hatchling first? Or a female?"

Her eyes widened in shock and, to be quite honest, panic. "Wha-what?"

"For our first. Male or female? I like the idea of a female. I've always wanted a daughter." He smiled at her and it was the warmest smile anyone had ever given her. "I want her to look like you." Then his eyes returned to the ceiling as if he could see their entire future—their entire future together—playing out above their heads. "But a male offspring would also be nice, too, don't you think? He could take care of his younger siblings. Now I don't think we have to have as many as my parents. Fifteen is excessive, but...definitely more than two or three, don't you think?"

Unable to look at him anymore without screaming, Rhiannon stared out the window and debated the logic of flinging herself from the ledge...after he released her, of course.

With a pathetic roll of her eyes, Rhiannon sighed but it came out more like a sob.

Chapter Seven

He finally released her arms and legs, and allowed her enough chain to get to the chamber pot and the bath. Other than that, he kept her tied to the bed for the remainder of the day and well into the night.

Rhiannon really wished she could say she hated him. Hating him would make this so easy. She would promise him whatever he asked, wait until he untied her, and then she'd cut his currently human throat with a jagged piece of glass or simply rip his throat out with her teeth. Whatever was convenient.

But she didn't hate him. And she hated herself for not hating him.

Pathetic female.

Rhiannon yanked her chain again. When Bercelak decided to leave her alone for a bit, he quickly realized the headboard wouldn't last two seconds against her strength and rage. So he wrapped the chain around a pillar and locked it. With an annoyingly happy smile, he kissed her on the cheek with promises of returning and walked out.

That had been nearly an hour ago and he still had not returned.

A soft knock at the door had her grabbing an animal fur from the floor and wrapping it around her body since these human servants reacted so dramatically to any kind of nakedness. Why they would react that way over their own bodies with someone they didn't lust for, she had no idea.

"Come." Might as well...since clearly she wouldn't be for quite awhile.

The door pushed open and Ghleanna and Shalin walked in. Gleanna held a tray of food, the smell bringing Rhiannon's stomach to growling life, and her mother followed with a goblet and decanter.

Rhiannon prayed that was wine she had with her, because she needed to numb her brain before she began destroying things around her for her own amusement.

"We thought you might be hungry."

"I'd like the key even more."

The two females looked at each other but, not surprisingly, it was Ghleanna who spoke, "You've lost your mind, princess, if you think we're about to get between you and my brother on this."

"Fine!"

She turned, the chain winding around her throat, and stalked back across the room.

"Now, now," Bercelak's mother soothed. "No need to get angry. Everything will be fine. I promise."

"Your son is unreasonable."

"My son is in love."

At Shalin's words, Rhiannon spun around, but the chain pulled tight around her throat, snapping her head back.

"Ack!"

Bercelak watched one of his younger brothers pass out and drop to the floor. All that wine...he should have known better. His father's wine could kill an elephant.

Ailean's hand slapped him on the back. Anyone else, even dragon, would go flying. But all of the old dragon's children learned to have sturdy backs and good balance.

"Don't worry, son. You'll break her."

Rolling his eyes, "I don't want to break her. If I wanted that, I'd have chosen one of those insipid royals."

"But you didn't choose her," his brother Caerwyn felt the need to say.

"Her mother may have thrown her to me, but I'd chosen Rhiannon long ago. Everything I've done, every battle I've won, every rank I've earned has been for her. To be worthy of her."

"You *are* worthy of her." His father sat down in a chair, putting his feet up on the table. "You're my son."

“Oh, yes. *That’s* been quite helpful.”

His brothers and two of his hard-drinking sisters laughed in agreement, but his father looked at his brood in confusion.

“What does that mean?”

“Come on. You can’t tell me you don’t know. Your name follows us around like the stink on a dog.”

“Everyone knows you, father,” one of his sisters offered up. “And what they know isn’t good.”

His father, always jovial and smiling, looked suddenly angry. “So you’re saying—”

“That you’re an embarrassment? Yes.” Bercelak didn’t mean to be cruel, but he wondered if his time with Rhiannon wouldn’t have been a tad easier if his father hadn’t been known throughout Dark Plains as Ailean the Slag.

“I’m still your father, *boy*! So watch how you speak to me! It’s not my fault you can’t get the little bitch to submit. Perhaps if you were more like me, this wouldn’t be a problem.”

If it hadn’t been for his siblings grabbing hold of him, Bercelak would have torn the old bastard apart.

“Oh, I tried to kill him twice. Almost succeeded that one time.” Rhiannon watched as Bercelak’s sweet mother made a line across her throat with one finger. “Sliced his throat from here to here. But he shifted to dragon before I could finish. His scales prevented him from bleeding to death.”

Rhiannon glanced at Ghleanna, who looked bored and unimpressed. Trying not to move away from the older dragoness, Rhiannon said, “Why...that’s a lovely tale, mistress.”

“No. It’s not. But it is to say that the males of this brood are not looking for shy retiring mates. The more you fight my son, the more he wants you. After I cut Ailean’s throat, he Claimed me one moon later.”

“Do you...” Rhiannon looked away from Shalin’s steady gaze.

“Do I what?”

“Well...ever regret being with him?”

Shalin leaned back in her chair, a soft smile on her lips. “No. I’ve never regretted being with him and I can’t even imagine my life without him. I do, however, regret how hard his reputation is on our offspring.”

Ghleanna snorted as she stared out the window. “That’s a bit of an understatement.” She looked at Rhiannon. “Where my brothers have done well by our father’s reputation, his female offspring have not. I’ve beaten more than my fair share of dragons nearly to death who thought I was some kind of whore they could treat as they like.”

“Now she sees no one.”

“I won’t be treated like trash, mother. I love my father...with all my heart, but there’s not a day that goes by that I forget I’m the daughter of Ailean the Wicked.”

“Your father has done the best for his offspring, Ghleanna. You included. Between you and I, you are one of his favorites. It would hurt him to know this was how you feel.”

“And it hurts me to be alone. And yet, we all must endure.”

If not chained to the spot, Rhiannon would leave mother and daughter to finish this discussion on their own. If for no other reason, she felt a bit jealous. A very large bit jealous. Her arguments with her mother were nothing like these. If it hadn’t been for the protection of her father, Addiena probably would have killed Rhiannon long ago. That was why every new moon, Rhiannon sent a prayer to the gods in honor of her father. Because he above all others loved her.

Now Shalin wanted her to believe that Bercelak loved her. Could he? Could anyone? She wasn’t exactly the easiest being to get along with.

Bercelak’s mother reached over and grasped her daughter’s hand. “We’re here for you, love. If you let me, I can help you.”

Ghleanna shook her head and looked out the window, her grip tightening on her mother's hand. But they were startled from their silent moment when the bedroom door opened and Bercelak entered.

Rhiannon stood up as soon as she saw his face. "Gods, what happened to you?"

"Nothing," he grumbled as he walked across the room. "Just a little discussion with my father."

"You promised me you wouldn't fight with him anymore," his mother accused, standing up so she could get a closer look at her extremely tall son.

"I didn't. I was arguing with someone else and he decided to end it."

Rhiannon reached up and touched the black and blue mark around Bercelak's eye. It startled him, and he turned to her so quickly she snatched her hand back and turned away from him.

"Um...we best be going," Shalin said as she made a hasty retreat. "Come along, Ghleanna." She heard mother and daughter leave and it took all her strength not to demand they stay.

"Rhiannon?"

"She's very sweet, your mother."

"I know."

"She brought me food and wine. Made sure the collar wasn't too tight." Gods, she was babbling.

"Rhiannon—"

"Ghleanna can actually talk to her mother. That must be nice."

"Rhiannon." He turned her around to face him. "Stop."

"Stop what?"

"Avoiding me."

"I'm not." Yet she wouldn't look him in the eye. Really...exactly how was she supposed to rule a kingdom?

Bercelak's big hand gripped her chin and lifted her face.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

“Then why are you looking at me like that?”

Finally, she couldn't stand it anymore. Her hand reached up and she gently ran her fingers over his wounded eye. He stared down at her in wary shock, but she couldn't stop herself.

“Are you sure you're all right?”

Gods! What had the bastard done to her?

This had to be some sort of trick. Some sort of grand trick she thought she could play on him for her own amusement. But her eyes looked so sincere, and her fingers on his face were gentle and so careful.

Gods, was she actually concerned about his welfare? About his health? This had to be progress. Yet, she looked appalled at herself for even asking.

“I'll be all right. I've taken worse hits from my father. Growing up in this family, you learn to deal with surprise attacks.”

She pulled her hand away. “Good. Yes, very good.”

Rhiannon tried to turn away, but he pulled her back around again. “Aren't you going to greet me?”

“Greet you?”

He nodded and leaned down until his lips hovered over hers. “Anytime I return from defending your throne you should make sure to greet me like this so that the entire court knows you care for me.”

“I don't care—” But he cut off her denials with a kiss.

Gods, for someone who didn't spend much time as human, Rhiannon truly knew how to kiss like one. Her warm tongue teased his, her throaty groans slowly destroying his control.

Somehow, he pulled away from her and Rhiannon looked up with absolute frustration. “What now?”

Bercelak pulled the thin silver chain he currently wore around his neck out from under his shirt. He kept the key to Rhiannon's bondage on it. He unlocked the collar at her throat while she watched him with narrow eyes.

"What is this? What are you up to?"

Taking her hand, he pulled her onto the bed with him. "One of my brothers told me he got word from one of his friends at court..." Gods, how did he tell her this? He looked into Rhiannon's clear blue eyes. They stared at him, waiting. No. There would be no delicate words for his female. She deserved nothing but absolute truth.

"Rumors are flying around Court, Rhiannon."

"Rumors? What kind of rumors?"

"Some are saying your mother wants you dead."

She shrugged. "I already knew that."

Rhiannon said it so nonchalantly. Whereas his kin would never believe in a million lifetimes Shalin would ever harm them in anyway, Rhiannon took it for granted her mother would.

"You are handling this much better than I did." That was actually how he got the black eye. His brother told him the news. He called him a liar. They pushed, they shoved, they yelled, and then the hitting started. It wasn't until their father, who tolerated no fighting among his offspring, jumped in. With one punch he snapped Bercelak out of his rage and with one solid backhand across the face, Ailean controlled his younger son.

"What's there to handle? This is the way of my life. Always has been. My father warned me long ago this time would come. That's why he made sure I was trained."

"Trained?"

"Aye. Whether human or dragon I can handle sword, mace, dagger, bow and whip. I also know many forms of hand-to-hand combat." She smiled and he saw pride light up her eyes. "And I can do things with flame that would amaze even you."

He wondered if she even realized he still held her hands while they talked.
“Amaze even me, eh?”

“As a battle-dragon you must have seen many amazing things.”

Rubbing the back of her knuckles with his thumbs, he said, “Nothing as amazing as you, Rhiannon.”

Startled, she cleared her throat and looked away from him. “So what does this change?”

“Maelona knows a witch who may be able to help you now that you have your full powers. Tomorrow we’ll go see her together.”

“I don’t need you babysitting me, Bercelak. I think I can talk to a witch on my own.”

“She’s a very old dragon, Rhiannon, who will no longer shift to human. And I’ll not risk you.” Old dragons could be a bit unstable. Catch them on the wrong day and they would rip the scales from your body without a seconds thought. And what they were known for doing to humans...

Sighing, she nodded. “Fine.”

“We’ll go in the morning.” Bercelak finally released her hands so that he could push the fur from her shoulders. “Tonight I have other plans.” She tried to hide her smile, but she didn’t do a very good job. “And I wonder what plans those could be.”

Chapter Eight

"A white dragon, too. Haven't seen your kind around in a bit."

Rhiannon sighed heavily, mostly from boredom, as Bercelak stood in front of her trying to get the old bitch to help them.

Donnfhlaith, an old brown dragon—*I didn't even know their kind still existed*—had been keeping her waiting for nearly half the hour.

"Mistress," Bercelak tried again with a patience Rhiannon had become well acquainted with, "we truly need your help."

"She can't shift back to dragon, can she?"

"No. She can't."

"Well, I can't help her with that."

"Fine!" Rhiannon's patience ran out. She stormed around Bercelak. "If you won't help me, I'll find someone who will!" she yelled up at her.

The old dragon cackled hysterically. "Gods, Bercelak! Do you know what you're getting yourself into with this one?"

Rhiannon, uncaring she had no protective scales, growled and moved forward. But something grabbed hold of the back of her gown and she turned to see that the tip of Bercelak's tail had caught hold of the thick material and held her in place. She glared up at him and he winked.

She really should hate him, except he looked so regal in his full battle-dragon armor worn to impress the old bitch dragon. The metal breast plate, used to protect not only a dragon's chest but their vulnerable underbelly during battle, fairly glowed with the fire coming from the pit. His possessed an intricate design of Bercelak's past battles. The detail of the work showed his rank. Then there were the scars covering a good portion of his body...

Gods! What had he done to her? When did she become one of those lovesick females? How did she allow this to happen?

"Mistress, I ask you again...will you help us?"

"I can't change her mother's spell, Bercelak. The queen either has to die or your lady love will have to reverse it on her own."

"And how do I do that?" Rhiannon sighed out dramatically.

"Try this." The old witch lobbed a book at her. Written by dragons, the book was enormous and with Bercelak's tail holding her in place, she could only cringe as it neared her head. But one black claw reached out and snatched the book from the air.

"Ahh. Thank you, mistress."

"Keep it. Soon I'll need none of this any longer." The dragon slowly turned and headed back deeper into her lair, but over her shoulder she said, "You do know that you two are well matched, don't you? You, princess, allow him to be kind rather than just a killer. And Bercelak allows you the ability to be a right bitch whenever you want."

"Aye," she continued, her voice echoing in the cavern as she disappeared into the darkness. "You two are perfect together. And one day...one day your children will change everything."

Bercelak watched his sister and mother work with Rhiannon to find the spell that would break the Queen's hold.

They'd been at it for hours, and he could see his female's patience begin to wane.

When she literally roared in frustration, shaking the table they were all working on, he knew she badly needed a break.

"This is useless!"

"Come, Rhiannon." He grabbed hold of her wrist and dragged her toward the exit.

"Mother? You'll be all right?"

"Go, go." His mother didn't even look up as she shooed them away. Except for one other brother, his poor mother was the only scholar of the clan. Deciphering ancient text was the kind of thing she lived for. "I'll be fine."

Using that to his advantage, Bercelak dragged Rhiannon from the castle and toward the woods.

"Where are we going?"

"You are dangerously tense, my love. I fear for my family's safety."

She dug her heels into the soft ground and he turned to look at her.

"What?" he asked.

"Don't say that again."

"I know you'd never hurt my family, Rhiannon."

"Not that. Never call me your 'love' again. None of that."

"You're unbelievable, princess." He headed back off, yanking her along behind him. "You argue the most insane things."

"I think not. I need none of those insipid endearments from you."

"Oh, you'd prefer them from another?"

"There is no other."

He stopped again and looked at her. "And it will stay that way, princess. There will only be me. There will only be you."

Shaking her head, "I don't understand you, Bercelak. Truth told, you could have anyone. Low born or royal. Do you truly wish to be consort to a queen so badly?"

"I don't want 'anyone,' Rhiannon. I only want you. Since I saw you that first time I've only wanted you. That has never changed. That never will change.

Whether you take your mother's throne or leave it to one of your siblings, it won't change how I feel about you...and I think you know that. I think you fear it."

She pulled her arm out of his grasp and took several steps away. "I may never be dragon again. I may be trapped in this weak human body forever. I may never be queen. I may never rule. And one day you may have to choose between my mother and me. One day she'll make you choose."

"There is no choice. It will always be you, Rhiannon. You will always be my first and only choice. Your well-being is all I care about. Human or dragon, queen or low born...I will make it my life's work to protect you and any offspring we have. I will not let anything harm our family. And I will definitely not let anything harm you."

He grabbed hold of her hand again, bringing it to his mouth so he could kiss her knuckles.

"My heart belongs to you, Rhiannon. It will always belong to you."

Frowning, she looked away then down at the ground. He knew she'd reject him again. That fear of her feelings would make her run, but he was willing to wait for her. He had no choice. No other female would ever do.

Then, to his shock, she slowly reached her free hand out for him while she kept her eyes on the ground. He grasped it and gave a small tug. She shuddered once, then she was against him. Her arms wrapped tight around his waist, her head on his chest.

He closed his eyes and sent up a silent prayer to the dragon gods who protected him in battle and life.

Big hands smoothed up and down her back. He didn't speak. He made no triumphant proclamations. He merely held her tight and let her be part of him.

She let his strength flow through her. He gave it to her gladly, with no regrets and without asking for anything in return.

When the silence became too much for her, she said, "Where were you taking me?"

"Come. I'll show you."

Gently, he unwrapped her arms from his body and, taking possessive hold of her hand, again guided her away from the castle. After several minutes, she heard the sound of rushing water and her heartbeat sped up. Soon they came upon a river, the water not so rough a human could not use it.

"Water," she sighed. "It's been ages since I bathed in anything but a tub."

"I know. I meant to bring you here yesterday, but I became sidetracked by that chain."

She smiled while Bercelak moved behind her. There was no surprise when his hands came around and began to untie her bodice. "You know, Bercelak, my hands work quite well."

"I'm sure they do. But one thing they teach warriors of all breeds is how to tie and untie knots."

He made quick work of the ribbon holding her bodice together and soon his hands slid across her exposed breasts.

Rhiannon sighed again and leaned back into Bercelak's hard body.

"You know, princess, I think you being so tense is what has made banishing your mother's spell that much harder."

"Oh, you do, do you? And where did that tenseness come from? Perhaps because some mad bastard had me chained inside a bedroom for hours?"

"No. That's not why."

She grinned. He really was mad. And, apparently, all hers.

"I think that's what we should work on today. Getting you to relax."

The dress slipped off her body and down her legs, pooling at her feet.

"Is that right?"

"Aye. I want you relaxed and calm. The Magick will probably just flow from you then."

She had to admire his ability to spin centaur shit into fine gold.

Soft lips kissed her neck. Strong teeth nibbled the flesh beneath her ear. Large calloused hands kneaded her breasts before slipping down her body, rubbing soft circles into her skin.

"One day, Rhiannon, you'll be dragon again. I won't stop until we make you whole once more."

Pulling from his arms, she smiled up into his handsome face. "We'll worry about that later. There's a river waiting for us." This time, she took his hand and brought him to the river's edge. She pulled off his shirt and unlaced his breeches. He toed off his boots while she dragged his pants down his legs. She teased his screaming erection with the tip of her nose and he groaned.

"You truly are evil."

She laughed. Bercelak was the only living being she could name who made her laugh with him as opposed to at him.

Dragging her hands along his powerful thighs, she stood up. Leaning in she kissed his bare chest. Bercelak sighed and muttered her name. His arms again wrapped around her, pulling her tight against him. She had to admit, she did like feeling his naked human flesh against her own.

Rhiannon dragged her hands down his lower back and across his ass. Her fingers dug into the flesh of his cheeks and gripped him tight. Chuckling low, he grabbed her shoulders and held her away from him.

"You don't play fair, princess."

"I didn't know I was supposed to."

"Good point." He lifted her up easily, tossing her over his shoulder. "I truly hope you can swim with that human body of yours, princess."

"I can learn."

They swam for a good while. Rhiannon continued to tease him, torment him. She seemed to enjoy it. She actually smiled. He loved seeing her smile. When she moved up behind him in the cold, clean water and took firm hold of his balls, he'd had enough. He dragged her out of the water and into the trees.

Laying her out on the ground, he stretched out beside her.

"It's time I teach you who's in charge," he grumbled.

"That would be me."

"So sure are you?"

Her hand reached out and took firm hold of his cock. Bercelak groaned, his head dropping forward and rubbing against her.

"Yes," she muttered smugly. "I am sure."

But two could play this game of hers.

While she slowly stroked his cock, he eased his hand down to her sex. He slid a single finger inside her and she arched into his hand.

Grinning, he watched as she bit her lip and pumped her hips against his hand.

"Want more?"

She nodded, a small whimper coming from her throat.

He thrust another finger inside her and she cried out. He continued to fuck her with his hand while his mouth wrapped around her breast, his tongue teasing the nipple.

Rhiannon's strokes on his raging hard cock became a little more fitful, not nearly as graceful as before, but she didn't release him. She stroked him with one hand and dug the other into his hair, clutching the back of his head, holding him to her.

They both continued touching and rubbing each other, pushing each other to come.

When her legs began to shake, Bercelak thrust harder and teased her clit with his thumb. Her hand gripped him tighter, stroking and stroking until they came together, writhing and grinding.

When they finally released each other, he looked into her eyes and together they said, "You're absolutely mad about me."

She burst out in delightful laughter, but he covered her mouth with his hand.

His body tensing at the smell of human flesh nearby.

Rhiannon's blue eyes watched him, but she said nothing. She didn't fight him.

They waited and he wasn't surprised when human soldiers stepped into view. Thankfully, they were so deep into the trees that none of the men could see them.

There were a lot of them—at least a battalion—and they had two large catapults equipped with long, thick spears. Perfect for taking down a dragon. This wasn't the first time humans came to his parent's home in the hopes of capturing or killing one of his kind for sport. Nor would it be the last.

Leaning into Rhiannon, he whispered in her ear, "They've come to hunt us. You need to get back to the castle. Get my father. My brothers and sisters."

Again, she didn't argue. Merely nodded her head and brushed her hand against his jaw.

"Wait until I challenge them...then run. Understand?"

She nodded once more.

He kissed her forehead and stood up. Shifting as he moved away from her, he knocked down trees and startled the unsuspecting soldiers.

The humans attacked immediately, but Bercelak still took a quick moment to make sure she'd followed his orders. She had. He could see her long body darting through the trees. Knowing his family would protect her, he turned his attentions back to the soldiers moving on him.

Rhiannon barely cleared the trees when big arms wrapped around her and yanked her back into a large, armored body.

"Gotcha!"

There were four of them and she was naked and unable to change. Nay. Not good.

"Willing to whore yourself out to a dragon. So I guess you'll be willing to take us on as well, eh?"

The one holding her threw her to the ground. She kicked out, nailing one in the groin. When he doubled over, she slammed her fist into his jaw. She felt bone shatter under her knuckles. Her father would be proud.

The soldier stumbled away, staring at her as Rhiannon scrambled to her feet.

"Gods, she broke his jaw," one of them said in awe.

She truly did detest them. Humans. Vile, horrid creatures that smelled awful and seemed averse to general bathing.

The three still-undamaged men, stood around her now. Surrounded her. But before they moved a roar from the river's edge caught all of their attention.

Rhiannon turned in time to see some human twisting a broad sword into Bercelak's back. Others had ropes around his snout and neck.

"No." She didn't know she said it out loud until she screamed, "No!" But before she could run back to the castle for help, the men surrounding her attacked. One slamming his fist into her stomach, another grabbing hold of her hair. Yet it was the one who slapped her face that caused her the most anger.

The rage swept through her and she roared.

Humans. Humans were treating her like this!

"Look at her!" one of those insipid little humans yelled, and Rhiannon turned toward them. It took her several moments to realize she now glared down at them. And with a quick glance at herself, she saw that she was dragon again.

Grinning, she watched the men who had been so ready to beat and rape her, run for their lives. She snapped one up, biting him in half. Another one she backhanded into the trees, loving the sound of his spine snapping as he hit a sturdy trunk. But the one who slapped her...him she picked up in her claw and bathed in his screams as she ground him to wet pulp.

Once done, she headed back toward Bercelak, determined to help him now that she actually could. But as soon as she burst from the trees, they screamed warnings and suddenly ropes wrapped around her throat.

"A pair," one of them screamed. "A breeding pair! Bring 'em back alive."

Chapter Nine

Bring them back alive? Well that was unacceptable. No one was bringing her or Bercelak anywhere.

But the ropes around her neck cut into her throat in such a way she couldn't breathe fire. Whoever sent them knew how to hunt dragons.

Still, Rhiannon had other talents.

The power buried inside her for so long now soared through her body, and she used it to full advantage.

She flicked the talons on her right claw and the line of men beside her flew back. With a flip of her claw, she set another line of soldiers on fire without even needing to open her jaw or speak a chant out loud.

Her ability to harm them without doing much more than think in their direction confused the men, which allowed her to pull on the ropes holding her. She dragged the soldiers over to her in the process and as they got close she stepped on them, enjoying the little squishy sounds they made.

While she finished off the few who'd targeted her, Bercelak destroyed the others. The broadsword still protruded from his back, but he no longer seemed to notice or care.

Yanking the rope off her throat, Rhiannon finished off the few soldiers running from her with a blast of her flame. Showing off for Bercelak, she let it whip out and around trees. Circling around until it leaped out in front of them, enveloping them in fire.

She looked at Bercelak and smiled. "Not bad, eh?"

"I thought I told you to go back to the castle? Was I not clear?"

He was angry, which made her defensive. "I did what I had to do. I'd do it again. And I don't owe you, Low Born, an explanation for anything I do!"

"So," he barked while struggling to reach the broadsword sticking out of his back, "I can not rely on you to follow simple instructions? That's what you're telling me."

"What I'm telling you...oh!" She stormed around him and, without an ounce of mercy, yanked the steel from his back.

His pained roar rang out over the valley.

She tossed the weapon down. "What I'm telling you is I did what I thought was right. I'll always do what I think is right. Including protecting you if I deem it necessary!"

"I don't need your protection!"

"And I don't need you!"

She went to walk around him and out of the valley, but his tail caught hold of hers, yanking her back.

"Rhiannon, wait."

"No!" But with their tails locked together, she couldn't leave. And Bercelak wouldn't let her go. "Release me, Low Born!"

"Stop calling me that!"

"Then stop acting like it!"

Both crouching down now, their tails locked, they circled each other. Both ready to attack at a seconds notice.

"You make everything so difficult, Princess."

"No. I don't. I don't need you to baby me, Bercelak. To always protect me. I can't be queen if you're constantly stepping in and telling me what to do."

He stopped moving. "I was only trying to protect you. It's my job to keep you safe."

"No. It's not. If I'm ever queen, I'll have guards for that. They will protect me from enemies. But I'll not bed them."

His black eyes focused on her face. "You better not."

She finally chuckled. "I hadn't planned on it."

"Good," he grumbled while he took several steps toward her. "I'd hate to kill all those guards for no reason."

Rhiannon grinned and moved around him, their bodies getting closer and closer. "I will always listen to your council, Bercelak. But you must trust me to make the best decisions I deem necessary."

He stared at her body, but didn't respond.

"Bercelak?"

"What?"

"I'd actually like an answer on that one."

He turned back to her face. "An answer on what?"

"Your attention seems to be waning."

"Not really." His eyes again roamed over her dragon-form. "You're dragon, Rhiannon."

"Aye, Bercelak. I am."

"Then come to me. I plan to take you as dragon."

She knew how this game was played, although she'd never found anyone worthy. Until now.

With a shake of her head, her white hair falling around her, "You'll have to catch me first, Low Born."

Then she took to the darkening skies, her lover hot on her tail.

It was her screaming that woke him the next morning. Bercelak scrambled up and searched the area for more soldiers. But all he saw was a screeching Rhiannon.

A screeching *human* Rhiannon.

"Look at me! What happened?"

He had no idea. When they'd finally worn themselves out after finding many more uses for their tails, they'd nearly passed out more than fell asleep. Exhaustion of the day and night finally catching up with them.

But when they'd slept, Rhiannon the dragon lay curled against his side. Her light sleep-growls making him feel more content than he ever had before.

Yet here she was before him in the harsh light of the two suns. As human. It didn't matter to him whether Rhiannon was human or dragon. As long as she was his. But he knew it bothered her, which meant he had to fix this.

"Rhiannon—"

"Look at these spindly things!" Her arms flailed wildly over her head. "And all this soft, useless flesh!"

If she were trying to get him hard and lusty, she was succeeding quite nicely.

She turned and pointed at her ass. "And I could be wrong, but I think this thing is even bigger than is normal for a human my size. How is that acceptable?"

Quickly, Bercelak shifted. "Rhiannon, calm—"

"Don't tell me to calm down! That bitch did this to me, and I'll make her pay for it."

She stormed off and Bercelak had a hell of a time keeping up with her. Anyone else, he'd assume they were merely spouting centaur shit about challenging the Queen. But he would put nothing past Rhiannon, especially when she was this angry. Yet she could not face her mother now. Forget the guards who never left the Queen's side. Rhiannon was still human—and clearly would remain that way as long as the spell remained unbroken—her powers not nearly as strong as when she was dragon. And since he'd never seen the Queen shift to human in all the decades he'd been at her court, he somehow doubted she'd do it now if her daughter issued a challenge. In fact, he felt relatively certain nothing could get the Queen to shift to human while Rhiannon still breathed.

"I wish you'd stop for a second so we can talk."

"Talk? About what?"

"About what we need to do next."

"Besides kill my mother? I have no idea."

Grabbing hold of her arm, Bercelak pulled her up short and turned her to face him. "We're in this together, Rhiannon. You and me. What hurts you, affects me the same way."

"You don't understand."

He gripped her other arm gently and pulled her close. "Then explain it to me."

Rhiannon took a deep breath and stared at the ground. "She knew how much this would hurt me. How much not being dragon would...would eat away at

me until there was nothing of me left." She looked up into his face. "I know you don't see it. I know you don't see my mother's true intent. You've always had a blind spot when it came to her. But she won't be happy until she's destroyed me, Bercelak. Until she's taken every last bit of me. Your family...they love each other. Your mother protects all of you, and your father—he'd die before he let anything happen to one of you. But I don't have that with my mother or my siblings. I never have and I never will."

She took a deep breath and pulled out of his grasp. "She will make you choose, Bercelak. I know you don't believe it. But trust me on this."

With one sad, long look at him that completely destroyed his heart, she turned and walked off. Back to the castle and the safety of his kin.

Rhiannon sat on the slanted ledge outside her room, staring out over the battlements of Ailean's castle and lands as the two suns faded to make room for the night. All that kept her from falling was her sturdy foothold on the slats.

She wondered what she'd do next. Wondered where this particular path was going. She knew now she loved Bercelak. She knew it because she'd risked her life for him and because seeing the hurt look on his face had ripped the heart from her feeble human chest. She loved him, but she could only bring him pain. Her mother would make sure of that.

Gods, how she hated that female. Her own mother. No matter what humans thought, dragons were not the godless creatures they believed her kind to be. They loved, they despaired. They felt joy and pain. They experienced all those things humans thought only their kind could feel.

For more than eighty years, Rhiannon had cut off her heart. She didn't allow herself to feel much of anything, but still her mother found a way to hurt her. Not really surprising, though, since only a mother knew how to truly hurt or enhance their children. Where Bercelak's mother always had a kind word or a soft touch for her lawless brood, Addiena only had derision and complaint for hers.

Rhiannon didn't realize how much she'd missed having her mother's love until she came here. Until she watched Bercelak's kin with each other.

Part of her wanted to hate them. Hate them for giving her hope she could one day feel as safe as they all did. That one day, she'd have a family that fought and screamed and generally annoyed each other to near death, but who still loved and protected each other as if it were their right.

But no...she'd never have that. She'd never have that life.

She sighed and debated whether to go back in when Maelona screamed, "Don't jump!" It startled her and Rhiannon felt her body slip on the smooth tiles, her balance gone. She slid down, her hands scrabbling for something to grab onto. Her human body would never survive this fall and she had no idea how to stop herself without wings.

Her legs flailed over the side of the ledge and she slid into nothingness.

Bercelak, leaning back in his father's favorite chair, took the goblet of wine his mother offered him. He glanced at her and she smiled.

"Don't worry. It's not your father's wine. It's mine."

Nodding, he took a long drink.

Her hand slid over his face, cupping his jaw. It was something she did often because she could.

"Mother?"

"Hhmm?"

"Have you ever regretted being with my father?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that question?"

"Sorry?"

"Nothing." She sat down at the table across from him, her hands sliding through her gold hair. "That is not an easy question to answer, my son. At least not to you."

"Why?"

"Because you're not as easily put off as your kin." She gave a delicate shrug. "Look, there are sacrifices all mates must make for each other. And you do it willingly because you love them."

"You hate spending so much time being human, don't you?"

She was quiet for a long moment, then said, "I miss my cave. I miss my privacy. I've learned to tolerate this body because..." She gave a soft smile and her son held his hand up.

"I understand." If there was one thing he and the rest of the universe knew about his father was that the bastard knew how to pleasure a female. But Ailean took special delight in exploring a woman's body. "So you have given up much."

"No. I still have my cave. I go there when your father leaves for war or to travel. When I'm alone, I am always dragon and I revel in it. But nothing, absolutely nothing brings me as much joy as your father."

"He's loud and obnoxious."

"He's hilarious and passionate and your father."

"More's the pity."

His mother's hand slamming down hard on the oak table, caused Bercelak to jump when Bercelak didn't jump...ever.

"Your father loves you, brat. He would die to protect you and only wants you to be happy. I never saw a dragon look as proud as he did the day he saw your frowning face look up at him first time. Even then he knew you were special. Different. So don't think for a second that you can dismiss him and definitely don't think you can put him down to me. I won't tolerate it."

Bercelak bowed his head. "I'm sorry."

He heard his mother take in a deep breath. Then another. Finally, she said, "It's all right. I know you're frustrated and unsure what to do. But I know you'll do the right thing."

"I hope you're right."

The study door opened and his father walked in, stopping short as soon as he saw the pair of them looking so serious.

"Oh, sorry. I'm not...uh...interrupting something that will make me uncomfortable, am I?"

Shalin laughed. "No, you old bear. You're not. Just talking with our hatchling."

Ailean nodded his head. "Good. Good." He walked up to his mate, but spoke to his son. "Nice work with those soldiers out there, by the way."

"Thank you, father."

"Your female did a nice job as well. I'm impressed she's not some vapid princess."

"She protected me."

"Good. Good." His father scooped his mother up, sat in the chair, and then re-positioned her on his lap, holding her close like he always did. "I like her, if that means anything. She's a bit rough around the edges, but I think that's because she had no choice with that bitch of a mother she was cursed with."

"I agree," Bercelak replied solemnly. "I just don't know how to make her happy."

"You'll learn that in time. Of course, you may want to see if she hit the ground or not. I just saw her sliding off the ledge under her window."

Bercelak's head snapped up. "What?"

A strong hand grabbed hold of her wrist. "Gotcha!"

Rhiannon looked up to see Ghleanna smiling down at her. "Almost lost you there."

"Your sister scared the centaur shit out of me!"

Ghleanna easily hauled Rhiannon back into her room window. "She's as skittish as a colt that one. Thought you were leaping to your death."

"I haven't become *that* human."

"I'm very glad to hear it."

Maelona shrugged. "Sorry. I had a moment of panic."

"She has lots of those," her sister joked.

"No I don't! I just saw her sitting out there and became worried."

Kicked open, the door slammed against the wall and Bercelak strode in.

"Why were you hanging off the ledge?"

Glancing at Ghleanna, Rhiannon said with forced seriousness, "I couldn't take it anymore. I decided to end it all."

He frowned in confusion. "What?"

Ghleanna grabbed Maelona and pulled her from the room. "We'll just leave you to it, eh?"

The door closed and Rhiannon looked at Bercelak. "Do you really think I'd do something stupid? Do you think so little of me?"

"All my father said was that he saw you falling off the building."

"If he saw me, why didn't he help?"

Bercelak snorted. "My father? Do you have any idea how many times the old bastard's thrown me off the battlements while I was human? For him that's merely a test of courage and speed."

"Your father is—"

"Frightening? Horrifying? Disturbed?"

"Interesting."

Bercelak rolled his eyes and gave a short shake of his head. "Forget him." His voice dropped impossibly lower as his black eyes locked on her. "Come to me, Rhiannon."

Stepping around the bed so that it stood between them. "Why should I?"

"Because I ordered you to."

Rhiannon laughed out loud. "As if that means anything."

Picking up the cuff still chained to the bedpost, he held up to her. "I see it will be the hard way again this eve."

"You'll have to get that on me first, Low Born. And I don't think you can manage."

He grinned, apparently more than eager to take her up on her challenge, but another knock at the door had him cursing instead.

"What?"

One of Bercelak's brothers pushed the door open and looked in. "We need you downstairs, brother."

"What is it?"

"The Queen's guard are here to speak with you."

Rhiannon held herself still, unwilling to react to this news, but she saw the color drain from Bercelak's face. It wasn't fear for himself but for her that brought that reaction. She knew that now.

"Tell them I'll be right down."

His brother nodded and left.

Bercelak turned to Rhiannon. "Come to me, Rhiannon."

She did without question this time and he put his arms around her, holding her tight. "Stay here until one of my kin comes for you."

She nodded and felt his lips brush against her forehead.

Then he released her and was gone.

Chapter Ten

The full moon had come and gone and still Bercelak had not returned to her.

She knew he'd intended to Claim her on the night of the full moon as custom dictated, but she'd spent the night alone in her room, staring out at the battlements and praying to the dragon gods for her lover's safety.

His family had done what they could to keep her spirits high, but even she could see how they'd begun to worry as the days passed. Even Bercelak's father had begun to look serious.

Now she sat in their dining hall, a book in her lap but unread while she stared blankly across the room. Bercelak's kin kept themselves busy by sharpening weapons, reading, talking, or setting things on fire with small bursts of flame. Still, they always stayed close to her, protecting her as they no doubt promised Bercelak they would before he left.

Shalin sat near her studying the book the old dragonwitch had given them, but as far as Rhiannon knew, she still hadn't found any way to reverse the Queen's spell. Although Shalin did think she'd found the spell the old bitch used on Rhiannon in the first place. At the moment it looked as if she may have to kill Adienna in order to break the spell...like she had a chance in hell of that. Not with her human and her mother surrounded by her damn guards.

Part of her had given up hope she'd ever be able to shift into dragon again. But that concern paled against her fear of what may have happened to Bercelak.

"Lord Bercelak has returned!" one of the human servants yelled from the courtyard.

Rhiannon stood up so fast, she knocked her chair back. The book fell from her lap, completely forgotten. She pushed past Bercelak's kin as they all made their way to the dining hall doorway. As dragon, Bercelak released his battle armor so that it clattered loudly to the courtyard grounds. He stepped over it and shifted to human without missing a step.

Her knees weakened at the sight of him alive and seemingly unmarked. Yet she saw the look on his face. Something was wrong and she could only guess what.

Naked, Bercelak took the steps leading to the hall two at a time. With only a brief nod to his mother, he took tight hold of Rhiannon's hand and dragged her toward the stairs. Glancing back at his confused family, she followed because she had no choice. He led her up the stairs and back to their room. He pulled her inside, closing the door behind them.

Once inside, he released her and strode to the window. He stood where she'd stood night after night waiting for his return. She'd even slept in a chair because she couldn't bring herself to return to the bed without him.

He clasped his hands behind his back, his legs braced apart.

For many minutes, Bercelak said nothing and she waited while staring at his human body. She'd never seen his muscles so tight and tense before, even when he was fucking her.

Finally, he said, "You were right. About your mother. And, apparently, about my reputation among most of her court."

She still didn't speak, letting him get this out in his own way.

"She wants me to break you, and then—I'm certain—she's going to demand I kill you. To prove my allegiance to her. And," he choked out, "she seems to think I will."

Bercelak cleared his throat, then went on. "The first thing she asked me was whether I Claimed you already and when I said no, she seemed relieved. She knows it would be hard for any dragon to kill their mate. That's why she kept coming up with excuses to keep me there so that the full moon would pass. From what I could tell among the court gossip, she thought the fall would kill you." He looked over his shoulder at her and Rhiannon saw the love and pain in those beautiful black eyes. With a soft smile, he said, "She underestimated your will to survive, I think."

He turned back to again look out the window. "She wants me to bring you to court in three days time. Broken and chained. I think then she'll expect me to kill you."

Rhiannon walked up to Bercelak. She ran her hands across his strong shoulders and down his back, enjoying the feel of his flesh and muscle. Leaning forward, she kissed him between his shoulder blades. Sighing, Rhiannon wrapped her arms around his waist and rested against him.

"I'll go back tomorrow. One of your brothers can—"

Bercelak turned around so fast, she almost fell flat on her ass.

"You'll do no such thing!" Grasping her upper arms, he pulled Rhiannon hard against him. "You'll stay here with my family is what you'll do! I'll take care of your mother."

"No! She'll destroy your family just to get to me and I won't allow that!"

Lifting her so that she had to go on tiptoes, Bercelak leaned in close, "Who said I was giving you an option, princess?"

"Who said you had to, Low Born?" she snarled in return. "This is my problem to deal with. Not yours. And definitely not your family's!"

"Unless we decide it's our problem."

Startled by the presence of a third, the pair pulled apart and looked at Ailean. He stood in the open doorway, leaning casually against the frame with his arms crossed over his massive chest.

"Neither of you will face that old bitch on your own."

"This isn't your problem, father."

Bercelak was using all his control to hold in the rage he felt. It had been growing day by day, especially as he played the oblivious fool for that bitch queen. All that kept him going was the thought of getting back to his Rhiannon and making sure she was safe.

Now, with his father staring at him and acting like all this was some meaningless diversion, he didn't know how much longer he could keep this up before he snapped like so much dry wood.

"You're my son," he said calmly. "That makes this my problem."

"Actually," Rhiannon interrupted, "she's neither of your problems. She's mine. And I'll deal with her."

"Like hell you will!"

"Don't bark at me!"

"You'll do as I tell you!"

"Like hell I will!"

The lash of flame came out so quickly, they barely missed moving in time. But Bercelak pulled back, his arms around Rhiannon, and the flame slammed into the wall behind them.

"*What the hell are you doing?*" Bercelak yelled at his father, his control gone.

"*Getting fed up with both of you!*" Ailean yelled back, stunning Bercelak into silence. His father never yelled. Ever. He never had to. He found it much more annoying to mock people than to yell. Only one being ever forced him to yell...Bercelak's mother.

"I hate to break this to the both of you, but this has very little to do with either of you. True," he motioned to Rhiannon, "she wants you dead all right. But she could have done that at anytime. And the way her court fears her, no one would dare question it. And you," now he motioned to Bercelak, "she doesn't use to get to her daughter. She's using you to get to me. And dumb ass that you are, you fell right into it. I've been telling you for years to watch your back with that bitch and you refused to listen. Now she's found a way in. And she knows if she hurts you, if she destroys you, she destroys me. Because, as much as it pains me to admit it, you're my son."

Ailean took a deep breath, closing his eyes briefly. He let it out and that silver gaze focused back on Bercelak's face. "She's right. Whether you go to her or Rhiannon goes, whether you kill her or not, they'll come here to destroy the rest

of us. And I plan to lose none of my offspring to that slag bitch or any other. Have I made myself clear?"

Rhiannon opened her mouth to speak, but Bercelak covered it with his hand while his other hand held her in place. He nodded at his father. "Aye. You have."

"Good. Now, you've got tonight. Fuck until you're both raw, but when the two suns rise, we decide how we handle this. Together. As family. You've got some of the meanest, scariest, battle-ready minds at your disposal, boy. Use them." He turned and headed to the door. "I'll have food sent up. I'll see you in the morning."

The door slammed shut behind him.

Rhiannon pulled Bercelak's hand off her mouth. "Well, that was...interesting."

Bercelak's eyes narrowed as he stared down at the top of Rhiannon's head.

Rhiannon glared at Bercelak. "Why did you put this back on me?"

Bercelak fingered the collar around her throat and she punched his hand off. How dare he!

"I don't want you to do anything stupid. I don't want to wake up in the morning and find you gone. Off to martyr yourself to that bitch."

She pulled at the chain, but it was as strong as the pillar Bercelak had wrapped it around. "This is ridiculous! Let me go!"

"You heard my father's orders. We are to fuck." He grabbed her around the waist and tossed her onto the bed. "It's best we obey him. You saw how angry he was."

"You son of a—"

"Ah, ah, ah. Watch what you say to me." He grabbed her hips and flipped her over onto her stomach. She heard his sharp intake of breath, felt his fingers tighten on her body. "I've been thinking about this ass for days now."

The flat of that palm slammed across her right cheek and she froze. Good gods! Some low-born dragon had just slapped her ass.

And she enjoyed it!

As if to prove it, Bercelak's big palm came down on her other cheek.

She kicked out, trying to strike the big bastard in the balls, but he pinned her legs down with his own.

"I can't believe you tried to kick me. Your lord and master."

"My...oh, you insane bastard!"

Another slap rang off her ass and she squealed. Like some weak human, she squealed!

"Be nice to me, princess."

"Get off me!"

"Interesting. I'm not actually hearing the right word. I wonder why?" His hand slid under her body, and his index finger slid inside of her. She bit her lip to keep from moaning, but Bercelak chuckled anyway.

"Why, princess. You're dripping wet!" Teeth nipped her backside. "I guess you like me slapping your ass then."

"I do not!"

Another slap bounced off her cheeks and, unable to stop herself, Rhiannon moaned.

"Oh, yes, Rhiannon," he whispered in her ear. "I love when you moan like that."

"Let me go."

"Not yet, princess. I don't think you're nearly wet enough." His hand returned to her pussy and Rhiannon squirmed as his fingers played with her clit.

Fingers circled and circled and circled. One more touch and she'd come all over his hand, and that's when he pulled away.

"No!"

"Oh. You want me to stop?"

"No!" She took a deep breath. "I mean...don't stop."

"All right then." He slapped her ass again.

"Ow! That wasn't what I meant!"

"It isn't up to you, princess. Your pleasure, like your safety, is up to me. Once we make you queen, you'll have bigger concerns. Like making sure the dragon kingdom is safe from enemies and controlling the elders. You'll negotiate with the kings of other races and destroy those who would dare question your reign." He leaned in close, his tongue flicking her ear while his finger went back to caressing her clit. "But when you come to our sleeping place, when you lie beside me at night...then you'll belong to me. The worries of your day will be left outside because you will give yourself over to me and I will make you scream in pleasure until all of Devenallt Mountain thinks I must be killing you.

"Do you understand me, princess?"

She nodded, unable to speak as she desperately sought the release he kept just out of her reach.

"That's not a clear answer, princess."

Another slap on her ass had her screaming into the pillow, "Yes! I understand damn you! Yes!"

He said nothing else as he flipped her onto her back and buried his face between her thighs. As soon as his tongue touched her clit, Rhiannon screamed in release. Her entire body shaking at the strength of her orgasm. But Bercelak didn't stop. He sent her over and over again and again, until she was sure she'd die from the pleasure of it. Then he was over her, his hard, throbbing cock shoved inside her.

He slammed into her, making sure—she knew—that her sore ass rubbed against the animal skins covering their bed. He fucked her with powerful, forceful strokes until she sobbed in absolute joy. Then her Bercelak roared as he came deep inside her.

"Son?"

Bercelak forced his eyes open. His mother stood at the foot of the bed, looking much too sweet to have ever spent a night—much less hundreds of years—in his father's bed.

"Aye?"

"We're waiting for you two downstairs." She smiled as Rhiannon stirred awake next to him. "I think we have a plan."

Chapter Eleven

Bercelak, in his finest dragon-armor, led a still-human Rhiannon to stand before her mother, while Queen Addiena watched them in smug silence. As always, her dragon guards hovered close, watching the pair with wary eyes.

A collar around Rhiannon's neck, cuffs around her wrists and ankles with a silver chain running through the loop on each was clasped firmly in his claw, keeping her in complete control.

Bercelak bowed low before the Queen, resisting his urge to look at Rhiannon. The family had decided that any eye contact between the lovers would be a bad idea. They said the couple's feelings for each other showed too brightly to hide from Addiena.

"My Queen. I present to you, Princess Rhiannon."

"Ahhhh," the Queen sighed out while staring coldly at her own daughter. "I knew you'd be the right one for her, Bercelak. Look how she's finally learned her place."

"No female comes to my bed, majesty, without learning that I am master."

Rhiannon's head dipped even lower and he knew she was doing her best to hold in the laughter. *Mad bitch*, he thought with a hidden smile.

"Good. Good." She walked toward to the pair. "I knew you'd never disappoint me, Battle Lord."

The Queen slithered closer—and it was a "slither," Bercelak noted—causing Rhiannon's body to tense up.

"We have much to discuss, you and I, Bercelak."

"Of course, my Queen. But first, as tradition dictates, I've brought my father with me to meet my intended mate's...kin." Gods, he almost said "victim."

At his words, Adienna's head snapped up and her eyes found Ailean immediately. Human, the older dragon wore a lush, blue cape that covered him from head to toe and matched his hair color.

Once the old bitch saw him, she couldn't turn away. She was mesmerized by him and Bercelak realized then that his father had been right...all of this had

very little to do with him and Rhiannon and everything to do with the love one dragon had for another.

He understood that feeling. He had it for Rhiannon. The only difference...Rhiannon returned that love. Ailean had love only for Bercelak's mother, which was why Adienna hated them all.

Rhiannon peeked up from under her hair and watched her mother walk around them to face Ailean.

"Ailean."

With a small bow of his head, "My Queen."

"Now, now, Ailean. Is that title necessary between old friends? I'll always be Adienna to you, yes?"

Unable to help herself, Rhiannon rolled her eyes and Bercelak gave a sharp tug on her chain to remind her that at the moment she was all contriteness and submission. It wasn't easy, though. Especially when all she really wanted to do was punch her mother in the face.

"You know, Adienna, I had to take this opportunity to see you again. It's been so long."

Her mother practically melted at Ailean's words and Rhiannon's heart went out to her long-dead father. She could only hope he had or would meet his true lifemate in the next world since clearly he hadn't in this one.

"I've missed seeing you, Adienna," Ailean continued. His voice was like the sweetest honey. Low and deep making anyone listening think about fucking. Lots and lots of fucking. "Gods, you're still so beautiful. But..."

"But? But what?" And Rhiannon could hear the desperation in her mother's voice.

"Would you shift for me? Would you show me your human form once again? I did always love looking at you as human."

Rhiannon didn't turn around, but she felt the flames heralding her mother's shift. Now she was as human as Rhiannon, shocking her daughter. It may have been centuries since last the bitch shifted to human.

The guards, clearly also concerned by this sudden event, moved closer to their Queen.

"I thought you'd come to see me much sooner than this, Ailean."

"I know. But with fifteen offspring to raise, I lacked time. My mate needed me."

Adienna snarled and suddenly her mother moved in Rhiannon's line of sight. Gods, the old bitch was beautiful as human. Perhaps even more beautiful than Shalin...and how that must have nettled her mother no end.

"Ah, yes. Your mate," she sneered. "How is dear Shalin?"

"She is well. And very happy."

Adienna's eyes narrowed dangerously and Rhiannon knew they were quickly running out of time. "Is she?"

"Aye." Ailean stepped in front of the Queen. His big hands reached out and gently caressed her face, her neck, and although her mother did her best to keep her growing anger hot, apparently she couldn't ignore how those hands stroking her made her feel.

Rhiannon watched silently as Ailean kissed her mother's forehead, her cheeks, her nose while he slowly stepped forward. Lost to the feel of him, Adienna didn't even pay attention to where he led her.

"You know, Adienna, Shalin always regretted how the two of you ended your friendship."

Friendship? What bloody friendship? Damn! And things were just getting interesting!

"That was her choice, Ailean. How was I to know she wanted you for herself?"

"That no longer matters, my dearest. But she did send you a gift."

Leaning her head back so that Ailean could kiss her throat, "Gift? What gift?" she moaned.

Rhiannon leaned forward now that Ailean had maneuvered the female directly in front of her and whispered, "Why, my Queen..." The chain held tightly in both hands, Rhiannon wrapped the heavy silver around her mother's throat and yanked her close. "...this gift!"

The guards attacked immediately but Ailean shifted and he and Bercelak faced them together.

Flames rose up from her mother, but immediately sputtered out.

Using nearly the same spell Adienna used on Rhiannon, Shalin imbued the chain so that the bitch couldn't shift.

Her mother knew it too, based on the sudden and brutal fight she put up, clawing at her daughter's arms and face.

Growling, Rhiannon pulled her away from the fighting dragons and over to a corner. "Come, mother, let us discuss this in private."

Bercelak had to hand it to his father. The man could seduce the dragon gods of their gold if he set his mind to it. He'd thought it a rare chance that Ailean would still be able to affect the Queen as he once did. But he did all he'd promised. He'd gotten Adienna to shift to human and had maneuvered her close enough to Rhiannon so that Bercelak's mate could use the chain his mother had given them just that morning.

When his mother had woken them up yesterday morning with words of "a plan," Bercelak had felt a little wary. Left to their own devices, who knew what crazy nonsense his kin would come up with. And when he heard the plan, he thought, "See...crazy kin means crazy plan." Yet it had worked. His father's seductive ways still held true. Thank the gods.

While the guards stayed focused on the three of them and the Queen, they never saw his siblings slip into the Queen's Hall, using the shadows to their advantage. Prepared for battle, they moved as soon as Rhiannon wrapped that chain around the Queen's throat.

The Queen's guards, some of them his own comrades, really thought they could beat the low-born family with their well-trained ways. Bercelak snorted at the idea as he twisted one dragon's head around until the bones cracked, breaking into pieces; while his tail impaled another dragon, attempting to sneak up behind him, under the chin. Growing up with Ailean the Wicked as a father prepared all of his offspring for any kind of battle. He'd trained each of them at hatching to fight any and all in their way. And even though his sisters were definitely a little more gently treated than the males of his kin, they were much more brutal and Bercelak winced when two of his sisters ripped a dragon to pieces between the two of them.

He turned and searched for Rhiannon. He trusted his mother's Magicks, but he didn't know how strong or weak her skills in comparison to the Queen's.

Quickly, he located his mate and her mother over in a corner. Rhiannon still had the bitch by the throat with that chain, which meant she still couldn't shift. But five of the Queen's guards were advancing quickly and Rhiannon couldn't fight them off or run with her mother in her arms. Besides, he knew his Rhiannon...she'd never run.

Storming across the hall, Bercelak batted bigger dragons out of his way like they were toys. Nothing would keep him from reaching Rhiannon.

He grabbed two guards around the neck, yanking them back and throwing them at his brothers who'd followed him over. He went for two others, but suddenly a small troop of battle-dragons attacked him, swarming over him en masse.

Desperately he fought, trying to get to Rhiannon. He saw the Queen's guard begin to move again and the grim determination on her face. Then her arms jerked to the right, the sounds of bones cracking reaching Bercelak's ears. As the dragons approached her, Rhiannon suddenly let out a sigh. For a brief moment, he thought one of them had run her through with the tip of their tail. But flames, bright white flames swirled around her and then Rhiannon was Rhiannon the White Dragonwitch. Most powerful dragonwitch in the land. And now...Queen Rhiannon.

Her power fully free, her dragon-form back, she lifted her head and, with a powerful roar, unleashed a line of flame that singed the rocky ceiling above her head.

Everyone stopped fighting and all eyes focused on her.

She kicked out with her front claw and her mother's limp human body, the neck broken, flew across the hall floor and slammed into the opposite wall.

Bercelak's cock stirred as Rhiannon's blue eyes settled on those of her court.

Rhiannon had never felt so strong, so alive before. Power, power of the gods, flowed through her veins when it never had before. Even her dragon-form was bigger. All these years she thought she was just tiny, a runt. No. Clearly her mother had been holding her back...but no longer.

She stared at the dragons of her court. She was Queen now. It was now her turn to rule.

But first...

With a short chant, she released a line of white flame imbued with powerful Magicks. Like a snake, it slid around the hall, avoiding Bercelak and all of his kin until it reached each of the old Queen's guard. With lightning-like precision, she tore into them, leaving nothing but a pile of ash and some burnt scales.

The others, the ones whose loyalty was to the current queen, rather than to Adienna herself, watched in horror, most likely waiting for her to go after them next. But she had no intention of killing those loyal to the throne. They just needed to remember who the throne now belonged to.

"My mother is dead," she said flatly to the survivors. "I am your queen. Bow to me now and show me your undying allegiance or leave Devenallt Mountain and Dark Plains forever and hope I never see you again in this life."

She thought there would be moments of waiting while people decided. There wasn't. As one, they all bowed before her.

All except one.

Bercelak stood tall and stared at her, not bothering to hide his smile. She motioned for him to kneel, trying her best to look suitably haughty. He smirked in return. So, with everyone else's head bowed in supplication, she took a moment to stick her tongue out at him.

He laughed loud and long, scaring everyone else—even his family—nearly to death.

Bercelak walked with his father, now in dragon-form for the trip down, to the entrance of Devenallt Mountain. "Sure you won't stay for awhile?"

"No, lad. Your mother waits." He grinned. "And I don't like to keep her waiting...much."

Shaking his head, Bercelak mirrored his father's grin. "Gods forbid you leave a female waiting."

"Only one female now. Just like you." His father glanced back into the cave as if to assure they were truly alone. "Although I wouldn't wait too long, boy. She is still unclaimed and there were many who watched her with eager eyes."

"She's beautiful, so I'm not surprised. But I'll not give her up."

"Of that I have no doubt. Your lust comes off you in great waves when she's around."

"True. But still, tradition dictates I wait until the next full moon."

"Don't be a fool, boy. She's Queen. You two make tradition. So do what you like, eh?"

Bercelak nodded in agreement, then took a large breath and said, "Thank you, father. For all your help today."

His father waved his words off with his claw. "You're my offspring, Bercelak. No words of thanks are ever needed."

"Well, I'll say this then—I no longer detest you."

Laughing, his father slammed his claw against his son's back. Anyone else would have toppled from the mountain with a snapped spine but Bercelak, as always, stood strong. If for no other reason, he'd rather not hear his father's mocking laughter following him down. "Now that's good news indeed! Your mother, at least, will be very happy."

"But you..."

"Could care less. I only want my children strong enough to survive these times." The old dragon grinned and Bercelak saw his rows and rows of fangs that grew as age came upon them all. "And since you are now consort to the Queen, I'd say I've done my job, wouldn't you?"

Bercelak nodded. "Aye. That you have."

"Then, my strong son...you best Claim that deadly wench of yours or lose her forever."

With those words, Ailean the Wicked took to the air and back to Bercelak's mother: Shalin...the Tamer of Ailean the Wicked.

Bercelak turned and headed back to the Queen's Hall. As he passed other dragons, they greeted him but none challenged him. Instead they kept their eyes turned away. Except for some of the females who openly showed their lust. Apparently the fact that he hadn't Claimed Rhiannon caught their interests as well.

Many of his brothers and sisters waited for him in the Hall. They would stay until Rhiannon's reign was secure. The best fighters of his kin, including Ghleanna, had gone off to confront Rhiannon's siblings. They would not wait for them to come to her.

"Everything all right?" he asked his remaining siblings.

They all nodded, but Addolgar motioned up the many stairs that led to what would now be Rhiannon's bedchamber...his bedchamber.

"She's gone up. Lots of activity with the servants since she went up there, too."

Bercelak nodded as he stared up that long corridor. Strange how he suddenly felt a little...well, nervous. A Battle Lord who'd faced death on many, many occasions made nervous by one white dragon?

Then again, what if she'd changed her mind? True, they'd already been lovers but she could, in theory, make a case with the elders. The thought that she may have changed her mind chilled the blood in his veins. He couldn't lose her now.

Of course there was only one way to find out what she thought. And that was to face her head on as his father had trained them all to do with every challenge.

"Worried she changed her mind?" Addolgar asked.

"It's not an unreasonable thought."

"Aye. Perhaps. But you'll never know until—"

"I know. Until I face her."

"The worse she can do, brother, is turn you to ash."

Bercelak looked at his kin and his brother merely smiled.

"Bastard."

With those last words, Bercelak headed up the stairs to his future.

Chapter Twelve

Still as dragon, Bercelak walked into the Queen's chamber only to find it empty. Completely empty. Which seemed strange. He figured Adienna would at least have a treasure to rest upon.

Personally, he found laying on gold and jewels rather uncomfortable.

"Ah, my Lord, the Queen has moved chambers."

Bercelak turned to look at who spoke to him, but he didn't see anyone.

"Down here, my Lord."

He looked down and his eyes widened in surprise. This was no dragon in human form, but a human...sort of. It was actually a centaur. A female. Quite pretty—although she smelled like horse. Which made him a tad hungry.

"And you are?"

"I am attendant to the throne, my Lord."

"I've never seen you before."

"I often stay in the shadows. As you can imagine, my Lord..." she glanced at her hindquarter which was, well, a *horse's* hindquarters, "it is much safer for me that way."

With a smile, Bercelak nodded his head. "I understand."

"Please, my Lord. Follow me. She's waiting for you."

"Is she armed?"

The centaur's head tilted to the side. "I'm sorry?"

"Never mind." He motioned to her. "Go. I will follow."

She did and he admired the beauty of Rhiannon's servant. Her hair and hide were a dark brown, but her eyes were a startling blue. Her long hair covered her chest, so she wore nothing but her skin and hide. How he'd never seen her before, he'd never know. But centaurs had strong Magicks, so perhaps she could protect herself from the dragons' keen senses.

She stopped outside a smaller but still enormous chamber. "She is inside, my Lord."

"Thank you."

With a small smile, the centaur said, "I will make sure no one disturbs you at least until morn."

Bercelak chuckled and said again with much sincerity, "Thank you."

Then she was gone. Just like that. Bercelak looked around but he couldn't see her anywhere.

Interesting, but of no real concern. Besides, he had bigger issues at the moment.

With a deep intake of breath, Bercelak entered the new Queen's chamber.

"Rhiannon?"

He couldn't see her anywhere, but he did see the enormous bed she had set up in one corner. That made him smile. Seemed his princess had come to enjoy the benefits of a human body.

On a whim, he shifted to human and walked toward the bed. "Rhiannon? Where are you?"

He reached the bed and looked down at the animal skins covering it. He felt his cock harden at the thoughts of what he planned to do to his princess in this bed. What he planned to do to her for hundreds of years if all went as he hoped.

"Rhiannon?" he called again.

Suddenly she slammed into his back, her arms around his neck, her legs around his waist. She was human and deliciously naked.

"Ha!"

It took him a moment, but he realized Rhiannon was...well...*attacking* him.

Grunting, she had firm hold of his neck and actually tried to throw him on his back.

"What in bloody hell are you doing?" He wasn't angry. Just greatly perplexed.

"What?" she panted as she did her best to drop him to the floor. "You thought this Claiming would be easy? You'll have to fight for me!"

The fact she couldn't get him to budge or even wind him, seemed to irritate her as she growled in his ear. Of course, the sound only made his cock pulse in time to his heart and lust.

Crossing his arms over his chest and bracing his feet apart, "Didn't I just fight for you?"

"No. You fought for your Queen...which is me. But in order to Claim Rhiannon the dragoness, you'll have to fight *me*."

"Oh. Is that right?"

"Well, you didn't think I'd just roll over, did you?"

"Actually I was hoping for an on-all-fours sort of thing."

"You'll have to do more than hope, Low Born."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!" she said with her usual dose of arrogance.

With a smile, Bercelak reached back with one arm, his forearm stretching over her and his fingers taking tight hold under her armpit. He flipped her over his shoulder and slammed her onto the bed.

"I win!" he cheered.

Bastard!

She should have been much sneakier. She forgot the stories his siblings told her about Ailean's way of raising his offspring. When she slammed into his back, although she knew he never sensed her coming, the big ox never even moved. She could have been a fairy or a piece of dust from the way she affected him.

Gods, she loved him.

She looked up into his smiling face. He'd knocked the wind out of her by slamming her on the bed so hard, but she really had no one to blame but herself.

He moved closer but his big feet hit something under the bed and he glanced down only to look back at her with a huge grin. He did that a lot now, and she loved it.

"I'm guessing my sisters helped you get your chamber set up, eh, Rhiannon?"

He reached down and when he stood tall again, he held those damn chains in his hands. "I love how my kin cares for me so."

"Dammit!" She tried to scramble away from him, but as strong as he was, he was also unbelievably fast. He caught hold of her around the waist and slammed her back to the bed.

"Oh, no, no, my love. You wanted me to Claim you properly. Then Claim you I shall. So that *everyone* knows it."

Gods, what did *that* mean?

The collar snapped around her neck and she growled in protest.

"Don't complain. You know you love it."

She did, but she wasn't about to admit that.

Once he had the collar on securely and the chain that ran from it in his hand, he pulled her up the bed until her head nearly touched the headboard. Then the bastard clamped cuffs on her wrists and chained her arms to the bedpost.

And his sisters suggested this bloody bedpost! *I'll have to thank them later*, she thought happily to herself.

Now it was true she could, finally, shift back to dragon at anytime, but then so could he. Besides, where would be the fun in that?

With both her arms bound, Bercelak stood up and stared at her. Gods, the heat in his eyes made her wet and needy. Like it always did. No one had ever looked at her like that. True, she'd seen lust before, but never so mingled with love.

He glanced at her legs. "Hhmm. I'd hate for you to kick me," he muttered to himself.

"Don't you dare!"

Which, of course, meant he would dare.

Bercelak's big fingers dragged along her body as he slowly walked to the foot of the bed. He stopped long enough to gently grip a nipple between thumb and forefinger and squeeze. She barely stopped that moan in time, but he saw her struggle and grinned.

Then he was moving again. Once he reached the end of the bed, he locked a chain to the tall bedpost and then grabbed hold of her foot, cuffing it.

He walked to the other side, the whole time staring at her.

"Gods, Rhiannon, you are beautiful. Whether as dragon or human...you're beautiful."

She'd had other males say similar words to her in the past, but never with such passion and, because Bercelak wanted only her and not her crown, those words meant so much more than anything anyone had said before.

Her other foot locked to the bedpost, she now lay spread eagle and open for his pleasure. She couldn't wait.

Instead of taking her, though, he stared at her for long moments and finally she couldn't stand the silence anymore.

"What? What are you staring at?"

"I'm thinking about what I'm going to do to you. I want everyone to know that you belong to me, Rhiannon. Everyone. Tell me now if that's not what you want."

Ooh. This was going to hurt. But it would be a short-lived pain and she wanted all to know she belonged to him. She wanted dragons from far and wide to know that to even look at her was to risk her mate's wrath.

"No more words, Low Born. Don't waste my time. Just do what you intend or let me go."

He nodded once and then he was on the bed, his mouth over her human foot. Right by that oddly shaped "big toe." Bercelak's talented tongue slid across her toe and down the top of her foot. And where his tongue went, a brutal pain followed as he burned her. Most dragon mates marked a shoulder or wrist. Some a breast or, the one's with senses of humor, the ass. But Bercelak was his father's

son and when he took a woman he wanted everyone to know he'd Claimed her. Kin or enemy. Friend or foe. They would all know.

She bit her lip to keep in the screams of pain she wanted to unleash as Bercelak's tongue wound its way across her exposed body. And where his tongue couldn't reach, he let out a lash of Magick-imbued flame to do the job for him. But even as the pain grew worse and worse, so did the feeling that was growing steadily along her spine and in her pussy.

As she fought to keep her cries of pain in, she also fought to keep in her screams of lust. By the time his tongue slid across her belly, she arched her back and screamed out her climax. But he didn't stop. Not her Bercelak. He kept going, his tongue moving up her body, across her ribs and around one breast to lash across a nipple. That's when another climax racked her. Still, he wasn't done. His tongue slid across her upper chest and collar bone, then across her neck, finally stopping as he stroked her jaw.

For a moment she thought he'd splash it across her face, but she'd hate to give him anymore scars than he already had.

"Does it hurt?" he whispered in her ear.

"Aye."

"Do you care?"

"Nay."

"Do you want me to fuck you now, princess?"

It should insult her that he still called her by that title, but she wanted him to call her that until they were grey Elders. She wanted to always be his princess because she had thousands who would see her as their Queen.

"Get on with it, Low Born," she snarled.

And she saw her Bercelak smile just before his mouth slammed down on hers. He kissed her hard, snatching the breath from her lungs and her ability to think or reason. Then he was on top of her. His flesh pressing against hers. She cried out from the pain of his skin rubbing against her fresh burns, but the sound was lost inside his mouth. Then he was inside her and she immediately climaxed before he finished the first stroke.

He slammed into her, forcing his hard cock into her body again and again, as words tumbled from his mouth and it took her a moment to understand what he kept chanting over and over against her ear.

“I love you, Rhiannon. I’ll always love you. I’ll always love you.”

Bercelak came with a roar, pouring his seed into her hot, tight body as she came yet again, this time screaming his name.

Collapsing on top of her, Bercelak wrapped his arms around her and held Rhiannon tight. She was his now and every dragon would know it.

She gasped for air beside him and he realized he couldn’t keep laying on top of her like this. As dragon they were now of equal size. But as human, she was still smaller than him, although taller than most human males.

He used his arms to push himself off her body. He rolled over and lay beside her, his head cradled in the curve of her still bound arm.

“I love you, Rhiannon,” he whispered as if others could hear.

She whispered back, “I love you, Bercelak.” He’d waited so long to hear that, and it felt even better than he used to imagine it would.

He reached up and unshackled her. He glanced down at her feet, temporary exhaustion weighing him down. “Think you can take care of those?”

“Aye.”

Her hand waved tiredly in the air and the shackles unlocked and dropped from her feet.

“You know, love, your new skills could get in the way of our mutual enjoyment of you being bound.”

She smiled, her white hair plastered to her sweat-covered forehead. “Only if we let it.”

He grinned and turned over, laying on his stomach. “All right, then, princess. Your turn.”

She stared at him in confusion. “My turn what?”

“To Claim me. I’d like you to avoid the face, though. I think I have enough scars there, don’t you?”

She stared at him in surprise. It wasn’t that females didn’t mark their mates, but it rarely happened in the beginning. Most males needed to show their dominance and did it with the Claiming. Years later, after all had settled down, did the females finally mark them.

“Are...are you sure?” She couldn’t seem to get that look of shock off her face. It made him smile. She usually hid her surprise so well.

“Am I sure that I want everyone to know I belong to you as you belong to me? Oh, yes, love. I’m very sure. Now,” he settled down, his head resting on his crossed arms, “what was it you said to me? Oh, yes...No more words, princess. Don’t waste my time. Just do what you intend or let me go.”

Before he could say another word, Rhiannon straddled his ass and he just *knew* this was going to hurt.

“My Lord.”

Bercelak forced his eyes open to find the centaur standing beside him. She leaned in and whispered. “I’m sorry to awaken you, my Lord. But your kin have asked to speak with you.”

He glanced around, his eyes still trying to focus. “Is it morning?”

The centaur smiled, most likely remembering her promise from the night before. “Yes, my Lord. *Late* morning.”

“Tell them I’ll be right there.”

Without another word, she bowed and left.

Rhiannon, still human as was he, was pushed up tight against his side, her head nearly buried in his armpit. She slept deep and looked beautiful doing it.

He smiled as he remembered their Claiming from the night before. With all that screaming and roaring and snarling, the whole Court must have thought

they were killing each other. He kissed her forehead and dragged himself out of bed.

Without even thinking about it, as human he went to the Queen's Hall. He had every intention of getting right back into bed and enjoying Rhiannon—*his* Rhiannon—even more before first meal. Then he'd spend the rest of the day and eve taking her as dragon.

Several of his brothers and Ghleanna, all those who went to track down Rhiannon's kin, waited for him.

One of his younger brothers whistled. "Gods, Bercelak. What did that female do to you?"

"What is it?" he barked, his arms crossed over his chest and his feet braced apart. He was in no mood for his siblings' antics when he had the woman of his dreams waiting for him back in their bedchamber.

Ghleanna answered, "By the time we arrived, her three brothers and that viper sister of hers were long gone. Word is that two of her brothers went into the Northlands."

"Northlands?" he scoffed. "The lightning dragons will eat them alive. What else?"

"While the sister and the other brother went to the desert lands of Alsandair. Those dragons might help them."

Addolgar stepped forward. "There's no guarantee the lightning dragons won't help them either. They may be barbarians, but they are greedy ones. They'd love to have this territory."

"And they'll never get it."

At the sound of Rhiannon's voice, they all turned except Bercelak. When around others he would never turn away from those who may harm her. Now that she was Queen, even with her mother dead, Rhiannon was in more danger than she had been before. So, instead, he gave a quick glance at her over his shoulder. She stood before them as human, completely naked, the marks of her Claiming pitch black against her skin and the collar and chain still around her neck.

Bercelak had never loved her more.

“Gods, Bercelak!” his sister exclaimed. “What the hell did you do?”

He knew what she meant. He’d branded a dragon the entire length of Rhiannon’s body, the tail starting at the very tip of her foot and reaching up one leg, across her stomach, around her back and across her ass, then back around and up her ribcage, across her breast, then upper chest and collarbone, until it rested across her neck and stopped at the right side of her jaw.

But even though he knew what his sister meant, he didn’t answer her. Their Claiming was their Claiming and no one, even his nosy kin, had any say in it whatsoever.

He spoke to Rhiannon without turning around, “What do you want us to do? Do we follow them?”

“No. I’ll not send out troops to bring back four dragons,” she stated with confidence. “But that doesn’t mean we won’t be prepared for them. If they come back here, with or without dragons from other regions, we’ll rip the scales from their body and tear their flesh apart.”

Bercelak bit back his smile as the entire hall fell silent at Rhiannon’s casually dropped words. He knew she meant it, but it was the coldness that frightened the rest of them. It didn’t frighten him, though. He’d always known she’d make a wonderful queen. He never had a doubt.

“We have things to right here first,” she continued. “My kin can wait until they do something stupid.”

She grew silent and he could feel her eyes boring into his back, examining her own mark. A dragon burned into his human flesh covered his entire back and, to his amusement, his ass as well. His body grew tight while his cock grew hard at the thought that his female wanted him as much as he wanted her. And he didn’t bother to hide his reaction. *Let them see. Let them see it all.*

“My bed grows cold, mate,” she murmured behind him. “Don’t leave me waiting.”

With that she turned and walked back to her bedchamber. Her chain dragging behind her.

Bercelak focused on his family. “We leave them for now as she said, but we’ll be ready for them should they return.”

His brothers nodded as did his sister. They were all part of Rhiannon’s court now. No longer the low borns, but royalty.

With a nod, he turned and walked back up the stairs. He heard one of the other dragons, not his kin, mutter to a comrade beside him, the voice filled with disgust, “She’s marked him already. Look at his back.” The dragon snorted. “Well, we see who has the cock in that family.”

Bercelak kept walking, even as he sensed his kin silently backing away from the one who spoke. As he reached one of the weapon stands at the edge of the hall, he grasped a long pike, turned, and threw it with unerring aim.

The pike slammed through the dragon’s neck, yanking him back, and impaling him to the marble wall behind him.

Bercelak turned to the rest of the court who watched him in fear. All except his kin. They looked down at their feet or at the ceiling. Because they knew if they looked at each other they’d burst out laughing. Which would definitely destroy the terror thing they were all striving for at the moment.

He smiled, which seemed to scare the royals even more. “I didn’t hear him. What did he say?”

No one answered. No one dared.

“That’s what I thought.”

With that last bit sneered at those too weak to challenge him, he went back to his bedchamber and made his mate scream his name for the remainder of the morning...and well into the afternoon.

Epilogue

195 years later...

Snarling, Rhiannon marched back toward the family’s cave. While Devenallt Mountain held her throne, it was this cave where she raised her hatchlings. And what spoiled, rotten little hatchlings they were!

Without even thinking, she stormed past her mate, busy with his kin looking at attack plans. Her throne was at risk and they would be going to war. Already her two eldest had been given the armor of battle dragons. She didn't want them to go, but they were old enough now to make their own choices.

Bercelak's claw grabbed her upper forearm, holding her in place. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She tried to pull away, but his grip was like a vice.

"Leave us," he commanded the dragons in the room. And, without hesitation, they did.

"What's wrong, Rhiannon? Tell me."

She yanked her forearm away and glared at her mate. "Your," and she punctuated that "your" with the tip of her tail in his face, "viper offspring cut off his tail!"

Bercelak shook his head in confusion. "Cut off whose tail?"

"*Gwenvael's!*" she shouted, so angry, she could barely see straight.

But instead of Bercelak demanding his offsprings' presence so he could tell them what horrible little bastards they were, he burst out laughing.

"I'm sure he deserved it."

Her tail slapped him across the neck. "This isn't funny!"

"Oh, Rhiannon, just repair it. You baby him too much."

She slammed her foot down, shaking the cave walls. "I can't!"

"Why not?"

"When I caught them, I yelled right as Fearghus was throwing the tip to Briec. Briec was so startled that it slipped past his hands and into the river—they have not been able to find it."

Bercelak cleared his throat and worked hard to keep his face straight. "It's an easy enough thing to happen, my love."

Her tail slammed into Bercelak's chest, which didn't even budge him. "You raised them very much as your father raised you, *my love*. Those little bastards don't *get* startled!"

Unable to hold it back anymore, Bercelak once again burst out laughing. “*I know!*”

“Oh!” Rhiannon turned and started to storm away, but Bercelak’s forearms wrapped around her and he pulled her dragon body tight against his own.

“Don’t be angry, love. Please. I’m sorry.” He gave a valiant try at not laughing.

“It was horrible, Bercelak. Blood was flying everywhere, and he just kept swinging that tail around.”

With one snort, Bercelak started laughing again.

“You know,” she growled, “you wouldn’t think this was so funny if it were your precious Morfyd or Keita.”

As she knew, that sobered him immediately. “No, I would not.”

“Well that’s how I feel about my Gwenvael.”

“Again...you baby him too much.”

“And you’re too hard on him because he reminds you of your father.”

“From the time he was twenty winters I kept finding him with my father’s kitchen staff.”

“He’s lusty.”

“He’s a whore.”

“Oh!” She pulled out of his arms. “I won’t discuss this anymore. You’re irritating me, Low Born.”

She turned to walk away from him, but his voice stopped her.

“Don’t walk away from me, Rhiannon.” There was no threat in his voice. Only delicious promise.

“Shift,” he ordered with a low purr.

“Why should I?”

“Because I told you to.”

She did her best to hide the shudder that went through her body and shifted to human. In seconds, his human arms wrapped around her from behind, then his low voice muttered in her ear, “You are much too tense, princess.”

“Think you can help me relax then?”

“Oh, aye. I know I can.”

His hands on her breasts, he pulled her back until she knew they were right by the table with all its elaborate battle plans and maps. And that’s right where he tossed her.

Stepping between her legs, Bercelak’s head lowered until his mouth covered her breast.

Moaning, she leaned back, her legs wrapped around his waist, her hands buried in his silky black hair. After all this time, he still felt so very good.

But they kept forgetting one small thing—actually, five not-so-small things...

“Gods!” Their eldest son barked. “Can you two not find a private alcove or, at the very least, a bed?”

Rhiannon looked over to see her children at the entrance. Her eldest, Fearghus, slapped his claws around the eyes of her two youngest, Keita and Éibhear. Morfyd looked appalled and embarrassed, Briece looked bored and Gwenvael, of course, applauded.

“It’s nice to see old dragons fucking, isn’t it?” he cheered. And she suddenly wished that *she’d* taken his tail.

Bercelak lifted his head and roared, “Out, you little bastards! *Out!*”

Morfyd couldn’t move fast enough. She practically sprinted from the room, white hair flying behind her. *I really will have to find a way to toughen that little dragoness up.* Briece snorted and walked away, reaching back to grab Gwenvael’s wounded tail and drag the cheeky little bastard yelling and threatening and still bleeding from the room. Fearghus lifted up his young kin and walked out while Keita tried to remove her brother’s hand so she could get a better look and Rhiannon’s sweet Éibhear just kept saying, “What? What am I missing? *What?*”

Once they’d left, Bercelak focused those black eyes on her. Eyes that her eldest son had.

“*You* wanted hatchlings.”

“I know. I just didn’t want *those* hatchlings. Personally, I blame your father.”

Bercelak's eyes grew wide. "Excuse me?"

On a burst of laughter, she exclaimed, "Well that came out horribly wrong!"

"Oh, that's it, princess. You've got to make it up to me now."

With that, he lifted her up and tossed her over his shoulder.

"Where are we going?" she demanded, even as she kept laughing and he stalked off deep into the cave.

"Where do you think?"

And, laughing, they said together, "To get the chains!"

-End-