

*He crossed dimensions to claim her as his queen-but her reign may destroy his world.*

Adrienne Backett wants two simple little things this spring break: rest and relaxation. After nearly four years of slaving away for her college education, she deserves a holiday. What she gets is pulled into another dimension by a man who claims she's his rightful queen.

Malik, King of Ulan, has until his birthday to find his bride before he must forfeit his throne. When a spell reveals her location, he will do anything, even cross dimensions, to claim her as his own.

As if fending off a lusty king isn't enough of a headache, Adrienne finds herself a pawn in a rival monarch's plot to bring Malik's world to its knees. But is the real danger being stuck in the middle of a power struggle between rival kingdoms? Or the damage Malik could do to her heart?

*A Bron Universe Novel*

**Warning: this title contains adult language, talking animals, violence, and scenes of near rape.**

# ADRIENNE

*D. René Bagby*

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## Dedication

To my dad, who gave me my first romance novel and my love of reading.

To my mom, who knew I could and would do it before I was totally sure what *it* was.

To Ms. Morse, my high school English teacher and my very first beta reader (and editor).

To Mr. Boyle, my college Creative Writing professor, who taught me to write for my audiences' tastes as well as my own.

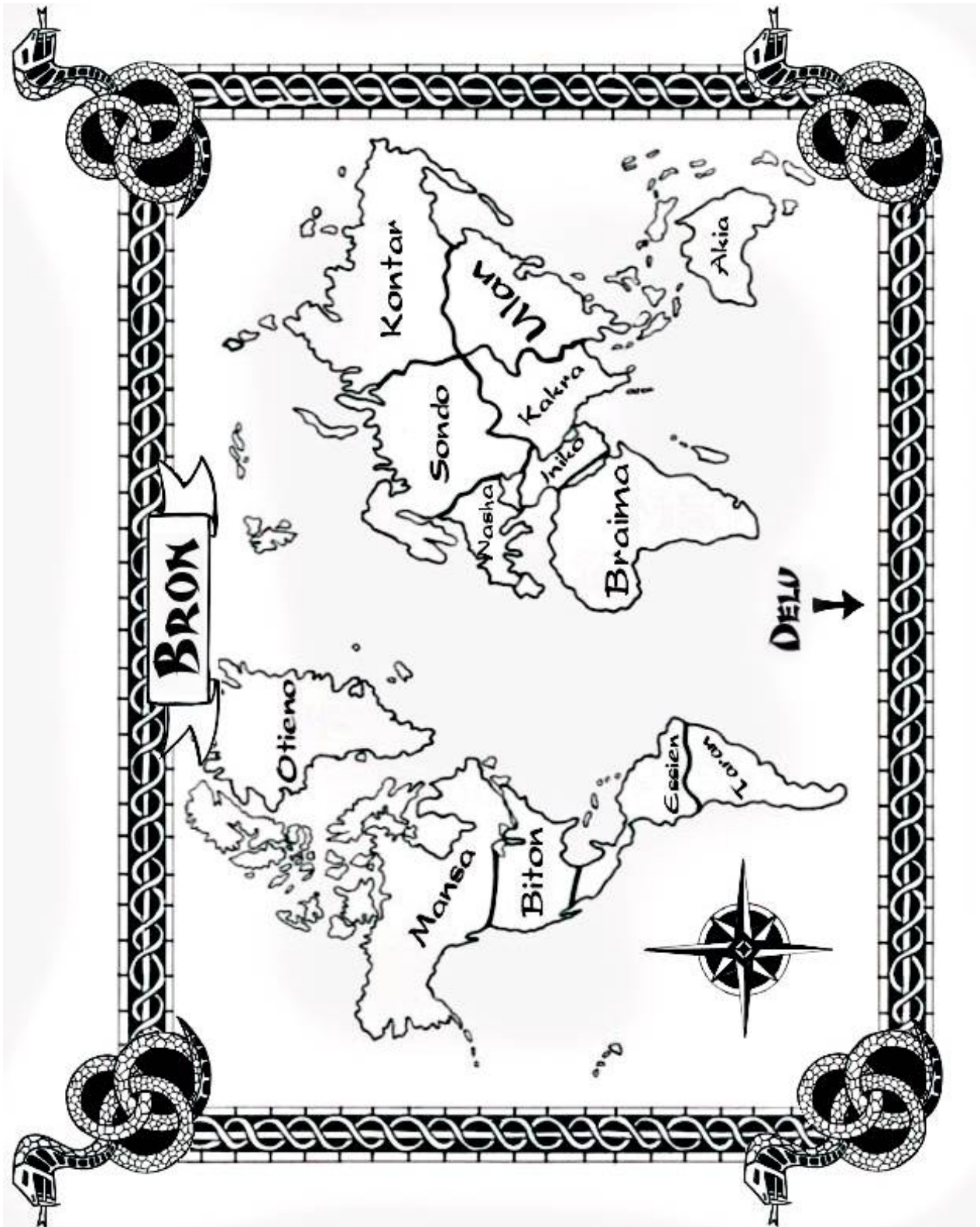
To Panya, who—as my beta reader—was forced to put up with the dynamics of a romance novel when she normally reads straight fantasy.

To Terez, who has to put up with my whining before, during and after the writing process.

To my husband, who has to put up with everything.

To Liz, my first fan—even if we never did finish that comic.

And, to Samhain Publishing, Ltd. for giving me this chance to unleash my madness, uh, creativity on the world.



## Chapter One

*March 17, 2006*

Adrienne shuffled papers around the desk. She cupped the phone between her head and shoulder so she could lift a stack of folders with both hands. She had put the pen on the desk earlier. By all rights, it should still be there. It couldn't have gotten up and walked away. Adrienne would like to think she would notice a walking pen...and have a camera handy, because no one would believe her otherwise.

"Adrienne? Adrienne, are you listening to me?" the woman on the phone asked in an annoyed voice.

"Yes, Mother, I'm listening to you. I'm also in the middle of grading tests. The Scantron machine picked today of all days to break. I promised Ms. Evers I'd get the tests graded and the mid-semester marks on the website before I left for the night."

"Why couldn't this Mrs. Evers person do that herself? You're a teacher's aide, not a teacher, Adrienne."

"I know what I am, Mother." Adrienne sighed. She checked the spot directly in front of her. The pen hadn't been there the first three times, but she might have overlooked it.

It wasn't there.

"And Ms. Evers isn't married—yet," Adrienne continued. "Her

fiancé dropped by with plane tickets earlier today. She wanted to put him off because of this whole mess with the midterms, but I wouldn't let her. I'm not doing anything important and I don't have to catch a plane. I'm driving. Besides, I prefer night driving. Less people on the road."

Against her better judgment, Adrienne moved from behind the desk to search on the floor in her immediate vicinity. She hadn't put the pen on the ground, but it never hurt to check in case she'd knocked it off the desk while looking for it.

"I just called to let you know I'll be home tonight after I finish. I've already finished with the tests and now I'm calculating grades. It won't be but another hour, at most." What started as a simple conversation had turned into a two-hour-long lecture.

"That's just my point, honey. Your father and I don't want you attempting a three-hour drive so late at night," her mother complained.

"I'll be fine. Aha!" The pen was on her chair. How it had gotten there, she would never know and didn't care. Ten minutes had passed while she searched for the stupid thing.

Her mother asked in concern, "What?"

Adrienne shook her head even though her mother couldn't see her. "I found my pen. Look, Mom, I gotta go. I'll get to the house in another four hours. Don't wait up. I'll be fine. And make sure Castor and Pollux stay out of my room."

The muffled voice of her father filtered through the phone. Adrienne couldn't make out what he said.

Her mother translated, “Can’t you let your father come get you?”

“And be home without a car for a week during spring break? No way. Bye, Mom.”

“Wait, Adrienne—”

She hung up the phone. Her mother liked to argue a point until the other person gave in just to shut her up. The only other option was to cut her off. Sure, Adrienne would catch an earful once she got home, but she had won herself a few hours’ reprieve.

It was almost eight o’clock. The darkness outside turned the glass of the window near the desk into a mirror. Instead of looking out and seeing the campus below, Adrienne’s light brown eyes stared back at her. She smiled at her reflection. Her hair looked horrible. She smoothed a few errant black strands back over the rows of braids that graced her head. It didn’t help. She would have to redo the braids when she got home.

This late at night, on an empty campus, no one would see her to care what her hair looked like. *If they could see me in the dark*, she thought with a quiet laugh. Adrienne’s cinnamon-brown complexion had the uncanny ability to turn her invisible on dark nights.

Speaking of night, if she didn’t get to work soon it would end and she would be stuck on the highway in morning rush hour—exactly what she wanted to avoid.

Pen in one hand and a calculator in the other, she tallied the midterm grades of the students from the Introduction to Literary

History class. Adrienne was glad she'd already taken Ms. Evers's course. The teacher used harsh and rigid rules in her classes because she loved the subject. That love had transferred to Adrienne, and in another two months, she would graduate with an honors degree in literary history.

The only thing she looked forward to more than graduation was spring break. That time had come, albeit an hour later than what she had quoted to her mother. Adrienne punched in the last grade, gathered up her stuff and bade farewell to the English department building.

She made sure she had her car keys in her hand and Ms. Evers's office keys in her purse before the building door closed behind her. After hours, the door had an automatic lock that needed a key code Adrienne didn't know, since she was a student.

Adrienne followed the lighted path to the parking lot a few yards away. Her car seemed to smile at her, like it knew they were headed home. The restless movements of her hand made her keys jingle at her side. Just a few more feet and she would be on her way home for rest and relaxation.

"Spring break has officially started," she declared.

"Yes, it has," agreed a man from the shadows.

Adrienne gasped in surprise. She clutched her purse to her chest as the man who had spoken stepped onto the path in front of her.

There was another man with him. He kept to the shadows the large oak trees cast in the lights of the street lamps.

It took a while for Adrienne to register the face of the man who had spoken. He'd traded his designer shirts and tailored slacks for a non-descript black tee shirt and jeans. He'd even covered his blond hair with a black skullcap.

“Josh?” she asked to make sure.

“In the flesh, teacher's pet.”

Adrienne gave a nervous laugh. She took a step back from the men. “What are you doing on campus this late? I thought you would be halfway to Europe...or someplace equally as expensive.”

“I thought I would be too,” he said with an offhand shrug. “I mean, I had the tickets and was all set to leave. Just one problem. Go on, ask me the problem.”

Something didn't feel right. Adrienne looked around for an emergency phone. There wasn't one in sight.

*Figures*, she thought.

She looked back at Josh and her car, which was a few steps past him.

“What's the problem?” she asked, hoping to stall until one of the night security guards came along. Maybe he wanted to scare her. It was late at night and people had to get their jollies somehow. She wished they had chosen another target, but as one of the last remaining students on campus, she was the lucky winner of the booby prize.

“You,” he said flatly. He started up the path towards her. “I pride myself on having pretty good scores. I mean, I pay enough money for them,” he said with a chuckle. “This semester has been

crap for me, though. It took me a while to figure it out, but it's all started and ended with you."

"Me?" she asked as she backed up more. She needed to get back to the building. Adrienne may not know the code, but there were still a few teachers there doing last-minute grades.

"I knew I would have to be careful with the bribes these last two semesters. Seniors are under more scrutiny. All my planning went to pot when I found out our teacher was a lazy bastard and he left it up to our peers whether we should pass or fail the senior sem."

Now she understood. "You plagiarized that paper. I might have overlooked a quote here or there, but I found the exact same paper on the internet. I had to point it out to the professor," she explained in what she hoped was a stern yet somewhat sympathetic voice. She didn't feel any sympathy for the lazy prick. He only needed to think she did.

Josh's sneer let Adrienne know he didn't buy it. "Who, in turn, took it to the dean of the English department and then the president of the school. I've been expelled. Seniors don't get second chances. One mistake and you're out of there, bucko."

"Oh, shit." Adrienne turned tail and ran. The building wasn't that far away. She could make it.

Why had she worn a long skirt today? She grabbed handfuls of the skirt and hiked it up to her thighs so she could run faster.

"This was your one mistake, Adrienne," Josh yelled after her.

She screamed when someone tackled her. She barely had time to raise her hands to keep her face from bouncing off the ground.

Her assailant flipped her onto her back in one move. It was Josh's friend.

Adrienne hit him with her purse and kicked him. The man grunted. Her attack didn't seem to faze him in the least. He smiled at her and beckoned her to hit him more. She obliged him because she might land a lucky hit and get away.

"How do you like Greg? He's an old buddy of mine from back in high school. We used to con idiot girls into sex, then tally up our points with a few other friends. I won, even though some of those twits needed convincing, like you." From his back pocket, Josh produced a credit card-sized digital camera. He clicked a picture.

The flash dazzled Adrienne. She squeezed her eyes shut before he flashed another picture. Stars danced around the backs of her eyelids.

"Don't do this."

"That's what the other girls would say. 'No, please,' or 'Stop, don't do this, I beg you'. In the end, they all loved it. It's not like I'm going to kill you or anything. I'm going to take some nice little pictures of Greg and you. Not showing Greg's face, of course. After spring break, you'll go tell the dean you switched out my paper with one you found on the web. Call it academic jealousy or some shit like that. Make up something that sounds plausible and pathetic. You look like you can do pathetic."

"Like hell I will," she screamed. "Let go of—"

Greg pressed his hand over her mouth, cutting off her high-pitched command and her ability to yell for help. She continued

swinging her purse while scratching his wrist with her free hand.

“Or else these pictures end up all over the campus grounds and website... Oh, and I might send a few copies to your parents.”

“Dude, quit talking and cuff her already,” grunted Greg as he caught another smack in the face from her purse.

In her struggles, Adrienne saw an emergency phone near the door of the English building. *Typical*, she thought angrily.

Maybe she would get lucky and a campus security guard would happen by.

Josh pocketed his camera and pulled out a pair of handcuffs. When he got close enough to Adrienne to cuff her, she changed targets and whacked him with her purse.

He clutched his mouth and hissed through his fingers. “Damn it, Greg, hold her.”

Greg reared up and planted his fist in her stomach.

All the air left Adrienne’s body. Her assault on the two men was forgotten as she tried to get breath back into her lungs. One of the men took her purse away while the other stretched her arms over her head and snapped the handcuffs around her wrists.

“Take her in the trees while she’s still out of it,” Josh commanded.

Adrienne could only glare at the smirk Josh threw her way.

Greg grabbed the chain of the handcuffs and used it to drag Adrienne towards the trees.

Josh patted one of the oak trees as he walked past it. “Never thought these stupid oaks would be useful for anything—other than

firewood.” He bent over and pulled off one shoe and sock and tossed the sock towards Greg.

“Gag her, too. Don’t want campus security getting nosy.”

*Gemmabulan 17, 6954*

The forty-eighth King of Ulan, Malik, showed all the signs of a man well past the limits of boredom.

He held a crystal goblet that he twisted back and forth, which made the liquid inside swirl and slosh over the edge. The droplets splashed on the polished marble floor of his twenty-step throne dais and on the edge of his black leather boot. He’d slung his other hand over the arm of his throne so his fingers could make lazy circles in the fur of his pet, Feyr—a giant black panther-like cat whose temperament usually matched that of his master.

Feyr let out an angry growl every few breaths. The cat’s vocalizations indicated Malik’s mood wasn’t all that it seemed. His outward calm, a façade he perfected years ago, served to hide his true feelings from the people around him—like the only other person in the room, a honey-colored leman who had her head buried in his lap.

Malik couldn’t recall her name and didn’t care enough to try. She wasn’t the woman he wanted.

He wanted his bride. Her absence had caused his fouler-than-normal mood. Malik had three months to find a suitable bride and

marry her before he had to forfeit his throne.

Locating his bride was supposed to be an easy task. Forty-six generations ago, Malik's ancestor had cast a spell on the royal bloodline that would locate a perfect mate for each heir to the throne. Malik's woman had yet to be found.

With time running out and Malik's patience at an end, the leman before him had better start to please him soon or he would take his frustrations out on her.

Feyr let out a loud roar.

Malik looked away from the leman to the throne room doors. They had opened without his permission. He watched High Chancellor Travers enter the room. The palm-sized glass orb he held completely engrossed the man.

"If you value your present health, Travers, you will give me a good reason for your intrusion."

Travers jerked to attention. He looked around himself, then at Malik. He cleared his throat, coughed a few times, and then said, "Sorry for the interruption of your time with Lady Juven, Majesty."

Malik shifted so his weight rested more on one hip. The movement made Travers jump.

The man rushed out, "I have located your bride, sire." He held out the orb as proof of his statement.

"Bitch," yelled Malik. He dropped his crystal goblet, balled his fist into Juven's thick brown hair and jerked her away from his lap. The crystal goblet shattered on the marble floor and sent droplets of crimson liquid running down the throne dais stairs like rivulets of

blood. Juven had bitten him...hard. Malik's other hand cracked across her face. The force of his blow sent her flying down the stairs. Feyr followed her progress. He snapped at her feet and growled every time he missed.

"Feyr."

A single word from Malik halted the cat, who was primed to attack the woman once she stopped rolling. Feyr stopped one step above Juven and sat on his haunches. He glanced up at Malik, then back at his prey with a tiny chirp of impatience.

Juven clutched her face. Malik saw fear in her light brown eyes. "Forgive me, Majesty," she cried.

"You remain unscathed only because I refuse to sully my good news with your blood," Malik snapped. He ignored Feyr's whine at the news of Juven's pardon. "You have lost my favor, Juven. Return to the others."

Juven tripped over herself in her hurry to get out of the throne room.

Feyr climbed the dais steps and resumed his place at Malik's side. He growled when Malik patted his head.

"There will be other times, Feyr," Malik whispered. His words were meant for Travers. The man would know true pain if he brought false hope. Malik's bride wasn't a subject to be mentioned lightly or joked about.

Malik straightened his clothing and sat. The rage he'd displayed only moments before disappeared like the small piece of lint he flicked from his shoulder. The pain and damage of Juven's bite

healed without Malik having to concentrate on it. Such magick was as involuntary as his heartbeat, and happened when needed.

“Well, High Chancellor, why is she not here? I wanted *her* brought to me, not *news* of her,” Malik said.

“She is located on an alternate Bron, Majesty. The parallel dimension caused the delay of the blood spell—or that is my guess. Only you are strong enough to handle an interdimensional portal.”

Malik took the compliment even though he wasn’t sure he could handle a portal that bridged dimensions. He’d never tried before.

For his bride, he would make it work.

“Show her to me.”

Travers nodded. He spread his hands away from the orb, which floated and expanded.

“What is this?” Malik roared.

The orb showed two black-clad men with a bound-and-gagged woman—his intended bride he assumed—held between them. The larger of the two men was using a knife to cut the woman’s clothes away.

Malik snapped his clawed hand towards Travers. The other man grabbed his neck and gasped for air. Malik said in a harsh tone, “If this is your idea of a joke, High Chancellor—” Rage choked his words when one of the men manhandled the woman’s bare breast. The woman’s muffled cry and Travers’s yelp of pain mingled with each other.

“*You’re hurting him.*”

“I want to hurt him,” Malik growled.

*“No, you want to hurt them. I suggest you hurry up before they get much further.”*

Malik made an angered noise before flinging his hand outward. The motion sent Travers careening into the throne room doors. The sound of the man’s pain as he hit didn’t alleviate Malik’s mood. He looked at the two men in the orb.

“She is your bride,” Travers croaked. He tried to stand with the help of the wall but ended up in a heap on the floor.

“Get out.”

Travers nodded and crawled out of the room. The doors closed after him.

Feyr leapt from the throne dais, landing in front of the orb. He glanced back at Malik with a questioning look.

Malik said, “You are not coming, Feyr. This is between me—” a sword appeared in his hand and he pointed it at the assailants, “—and them.”

He pushed his power through the sword. It hit the image with a loud crack. Instant, cold fear hit Malik mere moments after the interdimensional portal formed. His breath fogged.

This was his bride’s fear. He could feel her emotions, which proved her identity. And the feeling of it added to his overwhelming need to see the blood of both men smeared on his sword.

The larger of the two assailants had his back to the portal. The man’s companion, who faced the portal, would be able to see Malik—and his own imminent death—if his attention wasn’t so focused on the woman.

Their mistake.

Malik hurtled his sword like a spear towards the bigger man's back. He leapt from his throne and followed the sword's path. The time had come to claim what was his.

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## About the Author

D. Reneé Bagby is the type of woman who lives in her imagination. She visits the real world only long enough to spend time with her husband and two cats and go to her day job. If it weren't for bills, hunger and fatigue, Reneé would more than likely spend all her time trying to get the stories that are in her head onto her computer.

Reneé is also the type of woman who looks forward to getting lost just so she can find a new way home. She approaches her stories in much the same way. If there's a roundabout way to get from girl-meets-boy to girl-and-boy-live-happily-ever-after, she's sure to find it and write it.

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