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Serenity

GEZANE UNIVERSE NOVEL

Their uneasy alliance could lead to love—if the demon will allow it.

Melchior, King of the Bhresyas, is quickly growing tired of the war between his kind and the humans who view them as demons. He proposes a peace treaty with the most powerful human kingdom. His only stipulation? Once she comes of age, the human queen's daughter must be his bride.

Serenity has spent her entire life preparing for her role at Melchior's side. Other women might be frightened, but she embraces her destiny, knowing in her heart that she and Melchior have been twined together by fate.

While he wants cooperation between their two peoples, his union with Serenity cannot and should not lead to love. The more she tries to bring them together, the harder he pushes her away—until she lands in the arms of those who would do her harm.

Love is the answer. But before Melchior admits to his, it may be too late.

A Gezane Universe Novel

Warning: this title contains cursing, a sociopathic heroine, horny males and copious amounts of gratuitous violence.

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Prologue

Rhiannon stared in silent horror as King Kiros, her father, was impaled.

“Run!”

She didn't know who had spoken or for whom his words were meant, and didn't care since her father had all her attention. He slid off his assailant's blade to the floor, blood spurting from the wound with every beat of his heart. He clutched at the wound to keep the blood from escaping, but it seeped through his fingers.

Rhiannon crawled to her father. She had to help him. He couldn't stop the blood oozing from his back. She could hold the wound. The mages would come and heal him soon.

“Rhiannon, stop!”

She screamed when someone grabbed her from behind and hauled her to her feet. The man jerked her towards him but she strained to keep her father in her sights. She had to help him.

The man shook Rhiannon until she braced herself on his arms to get him to stop.

“Wake up, damn you! We have to get out of here before Melchior arrives!”

Rhiannon tried to focus on the man. She blinked several times before she finally saw him. She whispered in confusion, “Wit?”

Her brother.

She hadn't seen him in over a year. On a whim, Kiros had moved the entire royal family to the Western Cheslav palace and only Wit was left behind. Her father said it was so Wit could petition the other kingdoms for aid in the coming battle. How Kiros had known war would break out, Rhiannon was never able to ascertain. But, break out it did. It took seven months before the battle reached the palace.

“Yes, it's me. Wit. Now, let's go,” he demanded. He pulled her towards the inner throne room.

Rhiannon allowed herself to be pulled two steps before she balked. She gasped in horror as she realized what Wit was doing...or not doing, as the case was. She urged, "Father! We must help father, Wit. The mages—"

"The mages have fled, Rhiannon. Father is dead! Now—" His words choked to a halt and blood gurgled past his lips.

"Now you are dead, little prince," said Wit's killer. The killer jerked his blade sideways out of Wit's body. Blood and entrails painted the nearby walls. The killer smiled at Rhiannon. He brought the stained blade to his lips and lapped at the blood.

Rhiannon fell back with a horrified scream. She didn't freeze as when her father was killed. No, this time she ran. She didn't stop running until she had reached the inner throne room. Closing the doors took all her weight and strength, but she did it.

She wasn't quick enough with the lock. The rational side of her brain reasoned that no lock would have held against her brother's killer. He burst through the doors with a maniacal laugh and Rhiannon screamed in response.

The killer advanced on her with lethal intent. She couldn't take her eyes off his blade. Wit's blood left a trail marking the path the killer took.

He lifted the blade. With a final laugh, he charged her.

Rhiannon squeezed her eyes shut.

The blow never came. Instead, the sound of flesh meeting flesh then something heavy hitting the wall reached her. She made herself open her eyes and found her would-be assailant half embedded in the far wall. The one who'd put him there stood with his back to her.

"Melchior," she whispered.

He paid her no heed. Melchior had eyes only for the one he felled. "Guthr, you play with your life when you disobey my orders."

Rhiannon gasped and backed away. She moved slowly, hoping not to be noticed. Her destination was Kiros' throne and the secret passage behind it.

"She's just another human. What does it matter?" Guthr snapped. He picked himself out of the imprint his body made in the wall then flicked bits of rock and mortar from his bare shoulders. His manner was indifferent and a bit annoyed.

With a snarl of fury, Melchior snapped off Guthr's right horn. Guthr hissed with pain and moved his sword between them. Melchior roared. Guthr responded with a growl of

his own but didn't attack and Melchior didn't reach for the battle-axe strapped to his back.

Guthr seemed to weigh his options then lowered the sword and backed down.

"Out," Melchior said.

Guthr grumbled all the way out of the throne room and slammed the doors closed behind him. Melchior threw Guthr's horn at the double doors. It pierced the left door, splintering the wood.

"Demon," Rhiannon said then slapped her hand over her mouth.

"Bhresya," Melchior replied, facing her. His dual-colored red and yellow eyes flashed at her and she ducked further behind her father's throne. He gave her a mock bow and greeted, "Queen Rhiannon, it is a pleasure to finally meet you."

"Queen?"

Melchior approached the throne. "Of course, Your Majesty. Kiros is dead, as are all of his sons and your husband. That would make you queen." He smiled at her. "You seem surprised."

With courage she didn't know she possessed, Rhiannon abandoned thoughts of escape, came out from behind the throne and faced Melchior. "You mock me, *King* Melchior. You killed my entire family, thus making me queen, but my reign will last no longer than it takes for you to kill me."

Melchior stopped at the edge of the throne dais steps and looked up at Rhiannon. "I have no intentions of killing you, Queen Rhiannon. Of all the royal family, you alone will survive this day."

He jumped.

Rhiannon fell back against the throne with a gasp. Melchior landed a few feet in front of her and she held her hands out to protect herself. "Demons cannot lie. You said you wouldn't kill me."

Melchior laid a hand on her stomach, ignoring her attempts to get away from him. "You are right, Queen Rhiannon, bhresyas cannot lie. We are physically incapable of lying—unlike your father, and the rest of you humans." He smiled at her, showing fanged teeth. "You carry triplets from your late husband. You must be happy."

She stared at him in stunned silence.

She was pregnant? She had wondered...hoped, but the death of her husband three days ago had thrown all thoughts of children out of her mind.

“One of the three you carry is a girl. I want her,” Melchior said, removing his hand and backing up a few steps.

That woke her up. She surged off the throne, confronting Melchior. “I would never give any child of mine to you, you beast.”

Melchior laughed. “I find your words amusing considering your father had no problems giving you to me. Or, I should say, he promised you to me. When it came time to honor that promise, he changed his mind.”

“What are you talking about? My father never promised me to you.”

He nodded and his amusement vanished. “That alone is why you survive this day, Queen Rhiannon. You didn’t know of your father’s deception.”

“What deception?”

Melchior indicated Rhiannon should sit. When she didn’t comply, he said, “My story isn’t long, but I don’t wish you to strain yourself and hurt my future bride.”

“Bride?” she asked, sinking back slowly.

“When your mother was pregnant with you, I approached King Kiros to stop the constant violence between our two peoples. I had only one stipulation—you would be my bride to cement the peace treaty.”

“He agreed to this?”

Melchior pulled a folded sheet of paper from the pouch on his belt and held it out to Rhiannon. She took it and scanned the contents of the treaty Melchior and her father had signed. Kiros had indeed promised Rhiannon’s hand in marriage to Melchior in order to ensure peace.

“You restarted this bloody war after nineteen years of peace because you couldn’t marry me?” she asked incredulously.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Queen Rhiannon. No human woman is worth this much blood. No, *you* are not worth this amount of carnage. My wife and three children are.”

Rhiannon’s hand went to her mouth as a horrible thought took hold. “What do you mean? What happened?”

Melchior clenched his hands. “Your father happened. He had my wife and children assassinated over a year ago.”

That’s how Kiros had known. Rhiannon bowed her head, ashamed that her father could do something so cowardly rather than simply accept peace. Kiros possibly wished to kill Melchior, as well. That was why Wit was sent to find allies against the coming

war. A war only Kiros had known would start. She asked, “Did...did you marry her when you couldn’t marry me?”

“No. Asha was my wife of sixty-eight years. My youngest child was your age,” Melchior answered softly.

Rhiannon had forgotten demons aged at a different rate than humans. Then how old would that make Melchior? She didn’t think that question was appropriate at the moment, but another was. “You would have married me while still married to her?”

“You sound surprised at the concept of polygamy, when I know many of your human kingdoms embrace it.” He pulled another paper from his pouch, this one rolled instead of folded, and handed it to her. “That time has come and gone, Queen Rhiannon. This is the future.”

She read the paper. Her eyes went wide with astonishment. “This isn’t a peace treaty. It’s a war proclamation.”

“You misunderstand my intentions.” He turned and walked down the stairs. “So long as your daughter becomes my bride in nineteen years, war will be avoided. I shall not make the same mistake twice. I let Kiros renege on our agreement without punishment and he had my family assassinated.” He turned and looked up at her. “I will remain with the living for another three hundred years or so. I can repeat this madness until one of your line decides to honor your word. Or, you can end it all with this simple bargain. Your choice.”

Rhiannon read over the treaty again. She looked at Melchior and he watched her with a blank expression. “I cannot decide a peace treaty on behalf of all the kingdoms.” She didn’t want to decide a peace treaty at all.

She wasn’t supposed to rule. That was for her brothers to do. She’d received no training. It was all too much too fast. She knew almost without a doubt Melchior had planned for her uncertainty and ignorance so he could take advantage.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Queen Rhiannon. Cheslav is the strongest of all the human kingdoms. The other kingdoms followed Cheslav into this war—and the original war. They will follow Cheslav out of it.” He crossed his arms.

She shook her head, not wanting this responsibility. Fellen, her eldest brother, was supposed to rule after Kiros. They were all gone. Even her husband of six months was killed. That news had brought much grief when it reached her. They were childhood friends and had married because of love. Kiros had rushed the wedding, citing joy as an

excuse for his haste. When in fact, he'd wanted her wed so the treaty he'd signed would be void.

Her mind wandered to the horrors she had seen just moments before. Kiros and Wit killed before her eyes and other scenes that would haunt her nights for the rest of her life.

No, this had to end.

She straightened, her resolve firming along with her spine. She held out the treaty to Melchior and declared in a firm voice, "I want something changed before I agree to this, King Melchior." She waited for Melchior to retrieve the treaty, but he didn't move. She shrugged and dropped the page. It floated and fluttered then zipped down to Melchior's open hand, eliciting a gasp from her.

Her surprise was stupid. All *bhresyas* possessed some magic. Melchior had already used his powers once when he told her about her pregnancy.

"What change do you wish, Queen Rhiannon?"

"I give you my daughter's hand in marriage and you give me Guthr's head. Both will be evidence of our—humans and dem...*bhresyas*'—path towards peace," she answered then held her breath.

Would he agree to her condition?

"Because he attacked you?"

"No, because he is the stuff of nightmares. Of the entire *bhresya* army, Guthr is the cruelest and has the greatest bloodlust. The death of thousands can be laid at his feet. He even went so far as to try and disobey you."

"I agree. Such as he won't be needed in times of peace and he grows harder and harder to control. But, your daughter is not worth my most ruthless general."

"Then what is? I won't change my mind. Guthr must die."

"Not 'what'. Who? Tiann. One ruthless general's death for another. Your daughter's hand for peace. Tiann's and Guthr's deaths for proof."

Rhiannon looked at his dual-colored eyes. A ring of red surrounded a ring of yellow with his black pupil in the middle. According to her father, all *bhresyas* had dual-colored eyes, but only those of the royal bloodline had eyes of red and yellow. She wondered if it was always red on the outside and yellow on the inside or if it switched. Her question would be answered if she'd seen Melchior's children. She'd bet Tiann knew.

"Tiann is father's top assassin as well as his strongest general."

"Yes."

Rhiannon's statement was more for herself than Melchior, but his agreement firmed her resolve. "My daughter's hand in marriage for peace. Tiann's and Guthr's deaths for proof," she said with a nod.

The change was made instantly and the page floated back up to Rhiannon. She signed it, let it fall back to Melchior, and he signed the document as well. A duplicate of the treaty appeared in his other hand and he sent it up to Rhiannon.

She looked it over to make sure nothing had changed then looked back at Melchior. "I won't be like my father. In nineteen years, my daughter will marry you. This war is at an end."

"This is only a ceasefire, Queen Rhiannon. If the war restarts, you will probably find yourself lacking allies, as the other kingdoms will know the true reason behind the bloodbath."

"I don't understand."

"You have a copy, I have a copy and I have sent a copy to all of the kings and queens of the other five kingdoms. They blame the bhresyas for the restart of this war. If you are more like your father than you want to admit, then the bhresyas won't be blamed again." Melchior pulled open the throne room door and exited, leaving the door open behind him.

Rhiannon slumped and stroked her flat stomach.

Triplets.

Thanks to Melchior, she knew she would have two boys and a girl. A girl whose life was decided for her already. Rhiannon hoped her daughter would forgive her.

She strangled back a scream when Melchior re-entered the throne room. He set a furry bundle on the floor. It looked like a puppy, but its fangs were too big for its mouth and its claws looked permanently extended and very lethal. It was also a very dark red, almost like clotted blood.

Melchior said, "A present for my intended. It is a thondi, a bhresya hound. They are extremely loyal."

Rhiannon didn't know what to say, so she didn't say anything. She stared at the puppy and it stared back at her. Melchior turned to the throne room door and pulled out Guthr's severed horn.

"So long as you are leaving presents, King Melchior, you could leave the horn," Rhiannon said. Her words were casual, as though Melchior had come to pay a social call instead of massacring her entire family. She descended the throne dais and crossed the

room to stand next to him. The top of her head reached his chest...barely. She looked up at him with her hand held out.

She didn't know where she got the strength when her only desire was to hide in a safe place and cry for her loss. Someone else should have to deal with this mess, but everyone had fled. It was just her and she was queen.

Melchior laid the horn in her outstretched hand. "What will you do with it?"

The weight of the horn demanded she use two hands to hold it. It was flame red, like its owner. "I plan to give it to my daughter. It will be the beginning of a very long explanation."

"In nineteen years, Queen Rhiannon," Melchior said with a bow.

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Rhiannon's head lolled back against the bed. She felt the pressure of the babes inside her straining to be born but none of the pain. This didn't worry her as much as her inability to talk or move.

"Rest easy, Queen Rhiannon. I don't want to hurt you and I don't want to hurt your sons," the midwife said. "I only want the girl. She must die."

Rhiannon's mind screamed where her mouth couldn't. Where were her guards? How had she ended up alone with this woman? She didn't want her daughter to die. Melchior would restart the war!

Another figure entered the room via the window terrace. Rhiannon couldn't make out his face as he was hooded and cloaked. She only noticed him because the bhresya puppy, who stood beside her bed, growled at the man and bared his teeth.

The man ignored the puppy and snapped at the midwife, "What are you waiting for, woman?"

She spread Rhiannon's legs. "The babes come. You said only the girl was to die."

"Yes, yes. Hurry up." He looked at the doors then back at Rhiannon. "Don't worry, Your Majesty. No harm will come to your sons or you, but the girl cannot survive this day."

"Ah," the midwife gasped with pleasure as the first baby appeared. She cleaned the baby then bundled it up and placed it on the bed next to Rhiannon. "A son is born first. You should be proud, Queen Rhiannon. Luck comes to those who bear sons first."

The woman was mad. Rhiannon was drugged and helpless to stop her daughter's murder. How was that lucky?

The midwife smiled, oblivious to Rhiannon's distress. "You should thank me, Your Majesty. Many women would beg not to feel the pain of childbirth as you are not. You simply lie still as the muscles of your body push the babes free of your womb." She ducked her head and helped the second baby into the world.

"Here she is!" The midwife cut the cord but didn't bother to clear the child's mouth and nostrils.

The puppy's growling became louder when the shrouded man came nearer to the bed.

"Shut up, you stupid beast," the shrouded man said, kicking at the puppy.

The puppy jumped back with a startled yelp.

"Ignore it," the midwife snapped. She handed the girl over to shrouded man. "Do it. I need to deliver the last child."

"Why did you let the beast stay in here?"

"It wouldn't leave. 'Tis a demon. I'll not touch any of their kind—not even to banish that hound from the room."

The shrouded man pulled his dagger. The baby in his arms cooed. She smiled at him and he smiled back. He rested the blade against her throat and whispered, "Goodbye, princess."

The man screamed in pain as the bhresya puppy latched on to his ankle. He dropped the baby in order to pry the puppy off his leg.

The puppy jumped away from the man, planting himself over the baby and growling.

Banging sounded at the door.

The shrouded man swore under his breath and tried to get around the puppy. He only got snapped at for his trouble. "Help me, you damn woman. The daughter must die."

"Queen Rhiannon! Queen Rhiannon, answer us!" Guards banged on the thick wood door.

The midwife picked up the blanket she would have used to swaddle the last baby and threw it at the puppy. Once it surrounded him, she snatched at the corner. Her actions gave the puppy a target and it buried its fangs in her throat through the blanket. It didn't release her until she stopped screaming.

The puppy shook off the blanket. He growled at the shrouded man in warning when he moved closer.

The shrouded man grabbed for the baby.

The puppy proved to be the faster of the two. It clamped down on the shrouded man's hand, tearing through flesh and bone until the hand severed from the man's wrist. The man fell back with a scream of pain. He wrapped his cloak around and around his wrist to stop the bleeding.

Wood splintered. The door to the chamber gave way under the assault of the guards, who took in the scene in horror.

The shrouded man used their confusion and fled the room the way he had come.

"See to the queen," ordered one of the guards. He gestured to a few men behind him and ordered, "Go after the assassin."

One guard knelt on the bed beside Rhiannon's legs then looked back at his commander. "The babe is crowning."

The commander pushed the man out of his way. He bent between Rhiannon's legs to assess the situation himself. "I'll deliver the babe. Get the girl off the floor." He caught the baby just in time. "Your other son is safe, Queen Rhiannon."

The guard that was displaced stood staring at the growling puppy. He looked from the puppy to the dead midwife.

The mages entered the room and cured Rhiannon of the enchantment the midwife had used. Rhiannon stumbled to her feet and almost dropped to the floor when pain knifed her insides. The mage nearest her kept her standing.

"Finish healing me," she snapped.

The mage who held her said, "My Queen, it is best if you heal naturally. Too much magic has entered your body this day. More mingled with—"

"Finish!" She shook the woman as best she could while being held.

The mage sighed then nodded to her associate. The other stepped forward and laid his hands on Rhiannon's stomach. Within moments she could stand on her own.

She shrugged off the mage who held her and walked towards her daughter.

"No, Your Majesty. The pup is crazed. He will kill you like he killed the midwife," pleaded one of the guards. He grabbed her arm to try and stop her.

Rhiannon glared at the man and he let her go. She knelt in front of the puppy and smiled at him then said in a soothing tone, “You know me. You’ve occupied my bed for the last eight months.” She held out her hand to the puppy. “You may be her protector, but I’m her mother.”

The puppy sniffed her hand. His jaws went slack, then he licked her fingers and gave a little bark. She scooped up her daughter. The puppy sat back and watched her.

Rhiannon stared at her daughter in wonder. Not a sound. She hadn’t cried through the whole ordeal—not even when the shrouded man had dropped her.

Rhiannon ran her hands over her daughter’s body to make sure the babe wasn’t injured in the fall. The baby giggled and flailed her arms. Rhiannon stopped searching and stared. How could her daughter laugh? She was almost killed.

“She’s so serene, Your Majesty. Who would think this bloodshed heralded her birth,” the commander said.

Rhiannon stood with the help of a nearby guard. She signaled the commander to carry her sons and exited the room. She didn’t want her chambers anymore. They were marred with blood that no amount of cleaning would ever erase. Just as she had moved to the Eastern Cheslav palace to escape the memory of her father’s, brothers’ and husband’s murders, she would leave this room.

The puppy followed her, staring up at her and the baby.

She said, “You are right, Commander. She is serene and that shall be her name... Serenity.”