

RACHEL AARON AND

Bethesda
the Heartstriker

MOTHER
OF THE
YEAR

HEARTSTRIKERS
1.5

“I answered your questions. Don’t get used to it, mortals.”

- Bethesda, Dragon Queen of the Americas

Mother of the Year

A Mailing List Exclusive Heartstrickers Short

By Rachel Aaron

Thank you so much for signing up for (and actually reading) my mailing list! Here's an exclusive Heartstriker short (set between Nice Dragons Finish Last and One Good Dragon Deserves Another) to show my appreciation. Thank you as always for being my reader. None of this would be possible without you!

Thank you and enjoy!

- Rachel Aaron

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Show: Saturday Night with Marlin Drake (Episode #1256)

Title: An Interview with Bethesda the Heartstriker

Subject: Bethesda joins Marlin to talk about family, parenthood, and her fifth autobiography, *Mother of the Year*

Air Date: 10:00 PM EST, 8/20/2096

(Intro music and title)

(Lights go up on a live studio audience impatiently watching the empty stage. Suddenly, there's the sound of a window breaking before a huge

blue-scaled dragon literally bursts through the back wall and onto the stage. The crowd goes wild as the dragon bows and waves his webbed feet before ducking behind the red curtains at the edge of the stage. A few seconds later, the now human MARLIN DRAKE, first dragon on television and host of Saturday Night with Marlin Drake struts back onto the studio stage, fixing the cuffs of his obviously rapidly put on designer navy suit while a team of stage hands roll down the backstage curtain to cover the hole.)

Marlin: And thus I cost my producers another wall.

(Laughter)

Marlin: You'd think they'd learn, wouldn't you? I mean, I've only been crashing through that wall for what, six decades now? They keep telling me, "Use the damn door, Marlin!" but I have a species level aversion to rules and a pathological hatred of concrete.

(More laughter)

Marlin: I'd apologize to those of you who just got hit by rubble, but you knew what you were getting into when you signed the waiver, so enjoy your complementary black eye, and let's get on with the show!

(The band strikes up as the stage hands finally finish lowering the curtain and run off the stage.)

Marlin: Welcome to Saturday Night with Marlin Drake! For those of you who've spent the last sixty years under a rock and have no idea who I am... can I get the name of your real estate agent? Because that's one hell of a rock.

(Laughter)

Marlin: Anyway, I'm Marlin Drake, Guardian of the Crater, First Dragon on Television, and your god for tonight. As always, we've got a great show lined up for you. Selma Banshee is here—

(Wild applause)

Marlin: —to perform her new hit single, "*It's Magic to Me*," with back up from the International Sorcery Institute's very own Thaumaturgy Pyrotechnic Chorus, come all the way out here to LA from the DFZ to

perform for us tonight. (*MARLIN grins at the audience*) I hope you brought your flame retardant gear.

(Nervous laughter)

Marlin: Now, now, don't worry. The burn ward at Cedar-Sinai is amazing! I should know, too. I've sent a few audiences there myself, and every one of them came out more attractive than when they went in.

(MARLIN flashes trademark rakish wink, audience goes wild.)

Marlin: Like I said, we've got a great show, but before we get into the mage and pony segment of the program, I've got some actual fire in the studio for you all tonight. We normally save interviews for the end of the show, but this guest dictates her own terms, and, frankly, I enjoy being alive too much to tell her no. With that, I am honored to welcome back to show one of my oldest acquaintances, the most powerful dragon in the Americas, terror of two continents, the queen of my heart and yours, Bethesda the Heartstriker!

(Music swells as BETHESDA THE HEARTSTRIKER walks out on stage to wild applause. Heartstriker International wishes the reader to know that the Great Bethesda is wearing a dress made of custom-tooled overlapping golden scales with matching boots and hairpiece. Her make-up shows off the latest in Heartstriker Cosmetics' new FeatherTouch® foundation, contour, and highlight products. She is also wearing her new signature scent, Deadly Allure, on sale now! For more information, please visit the Heartstriker Cosmetics counter at your local department store, perfumery, or wherever fine beauty products are sold.)

(MARLIN takes BETHESDA THE HEARTSTRIKER'S hand. Air-kisses ensue.)

Marlin: Great Bethesda, you honor us with your presence.

Bethesda: Of course, darling! Where else would I go? Surely you don't think I'd lower myself to appear on a show hosted by a human. Did I ever tell you about the time I went on Leno?

Marlin: Didn't Jay Leno die eighty years ago?

Bethesda: Exactly.

(Both laugh as MARLIN escorts BETHESDA THE HEARTSTRIKER to the interview couch, which has been temporarily replaced with a golden throne at the Great Bethesda's request.)

Marlin: (sits down at his desk) I understand you have a book coming out. In fact, I've got a copy right here. (MARLIN pulls out an enormous hardcover book.) "Mother of the Year: Raising Successful Children Twenty at a Time."

(MARLIN holds the book up for the audience to see. Wild applause.)

Marlin: This is your fifth autobiography, correct?

Bethesda: It is. I wasn't going to write one this year since my life is far too busy for books, but demand was so high, I decided "why not?" I've hardly begun to tell my story. It would be selfish to keep more of my wisdom from the world.

Marlin: You are the soul of generosity, as always. But what makes this book different from the last four? You've already covered your early years and rise to power.

Bethesda: As though a life like mine could be squeezed into a mere four books! But you're right, this one is different. So far, all of my books have focused on me: my life, my history, my triumphs, and so forth. But while there's definitely more to tell on that score, this time I decided to do something a little different and focus on how I became the world's most successful mother.

Marlin: Well, you've definitely got platform. It's not every dragoness who can raise... (Pause) How many children do you have?

Bethesda: Nice try, but you won't get me that easily. Do you know what my enemies would give for an exact count of how many Heartstrikers I possess? But seeing how we're old friends, Marlin, I'll give you a hint. *(BETHESDA looks at the camera)* Whatever number of Heartstrikers you think I have, there's more. We are always more than you assume.

Marlin: Truer words were never spoken. Now, I know you're here tonight to talk about your book--which comes out today, by the way!

(Applause)

Marlin: But before we get into the juicy details, you mentioned to me backstage that you're drowning in fan mail.

Bethesda: It's absolutely ridiculous. It comes in by the truck load every week. If I didn't assign an entire wing of my PR division to managing it, we would literally be buried. Not that I'm surprised, of course. The world loves a winner. But the sheer volume has exceeded even my expectations.

Marlin: Given your opinion of yourself, that is impressive. But you're not the only one keeping the postal system alive. We also receive an avalanche of mail every time you come on the show. I've actually got some with me right now. *(MARLIN pulls out a huge stack of letters from beneath his desk.)* I was hoping you'd be willing to answer a few on air for the folks at home.

Bethesda: *(Frowns)* I don't normally lower myself to—

Marlin: Surely you're not afraid?

Bethesda: Absolutely not.

Marlin: Then here we go. *(MARLIN takes a card off the top of the pile)* We'll start with a softball. Fan Sara Roberts notes that you're famous for your fashion sense. We already know about your extremely successful line of Heartstriker cosmetics, but Sara wants to know where you get your marvelous clothes. Is there a designer you prefer? And if so, where can other ladies who wish to follow your lead pick up dresses of their own?

Bethesda: *(Looking much happier as she runs her hands down her golden dress.)* I'm afraid they can't. All my clothes are custom made for me by my son, Fredrick. He's a marvelous tailor with a keen eye for construction and a dragon's flare for the dramatic. If he made dresses for anyone else, he'd shoot to the top of the fashion world.

Marlin: So why doesn't he?

Bethesda: Because I don't share. Like all of my children, Fredrick belongs to me. So many mothers make the mistake of thinking we're here for our children, but the truth is quite the opposite. Why would we bring a new life into this world just to make more work for ourselves? It's unnatural. Children exist to benefit their parents, not leech off them. Fredrick's talents are an excellent example of this. It's just like any other business venture. I invested time and resources into my son's development, which means I have exclusive rights to his output. It's all covered in chapter five of my new book, "Mothering for Maximum Payout."

Marlin: Don't you think that's a bit of a reach? After all, you didn't make those eggs alone. Surely the fathers of your clutches also have some claim to the output of—

Bethesda: Please, a dragon father does nothing. Mating flights are a contracted affair with benefits on both sides. If the male chooses to take his share of the yield in eggs, those are his children to raise and benefit from as he sees fit. But if the male asks for a different payout for his part efforts such as money or real estate or just the sublime honor of being allowed near me, that's his choice. He can't just come back later and lay claim to children the dragoness has already invested an enormous amount of her own time and effort into. Just as I don't make grabs on the eggs I've given to my consorts over the years, I don't allow them near my own. It's just good parenting. Motherhood must be absolute. If you allow the father to come in whenever he likes, your children's loyalty will be split, causing confusion and rebellion that's incredibly detrimental to a family's efficiency.

Marlin: So it would seem. But what do your children think of this? Surely they'd want to know both of their parents?

Bethesda: (*Icily*) I thought this was a question about fashion?

Marlin: Fashion and love are intimately connected! And speaking of love, (MARLIN glances back down at his pile of mail in a flawless change of subject.) Diane wants to know if there's any truth to the rumors that you eat your consorts. Are there any past lovers in your famous Hall of Heads?

Bethesda: (*Thinks it over for a moment.*) A few, but they all ended up there long after we finished our dalliances. I'm a dragon, not a praying mantis.

Any male I'd deign to fly a mating flight with is too useful to kill by definition. It was only later, when they had the poor judgement to turn on me, that I was forced to have my knight relieve them of their heads.

Marlin: Ah yes, the great and terrifying Conrad. Is he here with you today?

Bethesda: Of course. (*BETHESDA points to the left, and the camera cuts over to show an enormous man wearing a black suit and a huge sword standing just off stage*) Conrad is always with me. He is my greatest treasure and most loyal son, not to mention our clan's third most dangerous weapon.

Marlin: Third most dangerous? What are the first two?

Bethesda: (*Grins*) You'll have to ask the heads on my wall.

(*Nervous laughter*)

Marlin: Let's move on. You mention in your new book that you keep in touch with all of your children on a daily basis as a way of reminding them that you're always watching. How do you manage not to spend your entire day on the phone?

Bethesda: Easily. I use every mother's secret weapon: multi-tasking. I actually taught myself to follow four conversations at once during my five-decade trip to Europe in the eleventh century. Being able to follow multiple conversations was the only way to keep up with court intrigue and dragon intrigue at the same time, and this ability has only become more useful as my family has grown. But while I can and often do handle everything on my own, I also use modern technology to give myself that extra edge. This is why I had one of my children create a custom AR app just for me called BethesdaTalk, which you can now buy on all major app stores. Not only does our unique interface allow for multiple phone conversations at once, it automatically transcribes everything that's said so you don't actually have to listen. You can just speed read each conversation before you jump in, and they'll never know you weren't listening disdainfully the entire time!

Marlin: Ah, yes. Another fine product from the clever minds at Heartstriker International. You really do have your claws in everything, don't you?

Bethesda: Of course. Unlike those old fossils who have the nerve to call themselves clan heads, I'm a modern dragon. Victory favors the prepared and open minded, and corporate raiding is far more profitable than actual raiding ever was.

Marlin: And far less bloody. No ballistas in boardrooms.

Bethesda: At least not the usual kind.

(Laughter)

Marlin: So now that we've gotten a glimpse of how the Heartstriker works, let's talk about how she plays. Do you have any favorite vacation spots you like to slip away to when you need a break from being head of the world's largest dragon clan?

Bethesda: I don't believe in taking breaks, but I do keep a house in Hawaii for when I need some time to myself. It's a modest little place on the beach, just a few dozen rooms, but sometimes even a dragon queen likes to be cozy, and being near a volcano is so good for one's fire.

Marlin: I prefer undersea chimneys myself. The super-heated water feels marvelous.

Bethesda: Only because you're a sea serpent. Normal dragons prefer dry fire.

Marlin: *(Defensive)* I'm more normal than you. At least I have scales. Of all the dragons in the world, only the descendants of the Quetzalcoatl are feathered.

Bethesda: And all the more beautiful because of it. But we're hardly rare birds. Don't forget that we are the world's largest clan.

Marlin: How could I forget? You're constantly reminding us. But while we're on the subject, let's go for the million dollar question: how do you manage to keep so many dragons in line? We already know about your app, but what do you actually say during all those simultaneous conversations? Do you simply scare them into obedience, or is there a deeper game at play?

Bethesda: I don't understand how this is even a question. We're dragons. There's always a deeper game. I actually dedicated fifty whole pages to this

subject in chapter three, “The Motherhood Gambit.” (*BETHESDA turns to the audience.*) Dragon children aren’t like human whelps. All the human parenting books are full of mothers wringing their hands over potty training and growth milestones, but my children are born with fangs sharp enough to puncture steel. They breathe fire within their first month, learn to fly by age three, and can change shape by age five, not to mention they’re dragons. We’re born with a burning desire to conquer. When was the last time you had to worry about a twelve-year-old plotting your downfall? But that was exactly how old my heir Amelia was when I first caught her crafting a spell she claimed would banish me into the space between planes.

Marlin: How adorably ruthless! I presume you put a stop to it?

Bethesda: I’m still here, aren’t I? And this wasn’t even unusual. Dragon motherhood is full of challenges like this, which is why I always have to keep one step ahead of the pack. No dragon is born obedient, but with the right mix of guilt, manipulation, and omnipresent fear, they are quite manageable. The key is finding and exploiting each child’s individual weak point. Not that human mothers will ever have to deal with what I’ve been through, but if you’re interested in transforming you own whelps from unruly, ungrateful children into productive, profitable assets for your family, I highly encourage you to buy “Mother of the Year” and go straight to chapter four: “Love is a Battlefield.” That’s where I lay out all of my mothering strategies in detail with guided exercises that can be used with equal effectiveness on children or spouses to help you become the unquestioned matriarch of your home.

(Wild applause.)

Marlin: I see you agree with the old adage that it’s better to be feared than loved. There are some who say Machiavelli was a dragon, you know.

Bethesda: Nonsense. If he were a dragon, he would have been the prince, not just written to one.

Marlin: Good point. But while your methods are clearly successful the vast majority of the time, even you have suffered failures. We all know that you don’t tolerate failure of any sort, but we’ve had several people write in all asking the same question: do you really eat your underperforming children?

Bethesda: *(Nods.)* It would be wasteful to do otherwise. Each of my dragons represents an enormous investment of my magic, time, and resources. I'm not just going to throw all that away because one of them falls below the acceptable threshold. Once it becomes clear they're never going to pay out, eating them and reclaiming my magic is the only way to recoup at least some of my losses. That said, eating is always my very last resort. It's not that I don't want the magic back, but—as you know all too well, Drake—dragons are absolutely disgusting.

Marlin: There you go, bringing up ancient history. But while I never ate a dragon who didn't deserve it, Bethesda is absolutely right: we taste dreadful. All smoke and ash.

Bethesda: What else could you expect from self-smoking predators?

(Pause for nervous laughter.)

Marlin: On that note, we have a very morbid question from one Hisham, who seems to be a big fan of yours. He wants to know which of your children was the most delicious—though in light of the previous conversation, I suppose we should say least disgusting—and could you recommend a good wine pairing?

Bethesda: This is an utterly ridiculous question. No human is ever going to eat a dragon. It's not natural.

Marlin: But for the sake of argument—

Bethesda: You mean for the sake of your ratings, but fine. Of the few children whose failures have been so fatally catastrophic I've been forced to throw in the towel and eat them, all have been disgusting. But while I can't say which one specifically was the least disgusting, the worst by far was Gunther.

Marlin: I don't believe I met him.

Bethesda: Not many did. He was an absolute failure from the very start. All he did was hide in the bottom of the mountain and eat his feelings. He eventually got so big, we couldn't get him through the door, so I was forced to do the only logical thing and eat him before he ate us. It took me two days and fifteen bottles of Chianti in total, but I got through it, and it taught

the Gs a valuable lesson. Every one of them is a fine, productive dragon now.

Marlin: The things you suffer for your children.

Bethesda: (*Nods.*) Motherhood is cruel, which is why I must be crueler. There is no room for weakness if you want to raise strong children.

Marlin: You seem to have that part of your life well in hand. But then, you should. You've had ten clutches now, the last of which, the Js, only hatched what, twenty-five years ago?

Bethesda: Twenty-four, and they were my largest clutch yet. That said, so far, they've been quite disappointing—so soft and whiny! This modern age is no place to raise a dragon. Everything is too convenient. (*BETHESDA sighs.*) I'm not sure if I'll lay again.

(Audience groans in disappointment.)

Marlin: No K-clutch, then?

Bethesda: I'm not ruling it out, but I'm going to take a few centuries to cull the herd. I'm not a young dragoness ruthlessly building her power anymore. I'm established and respected with both American continents as my territory. I can afford to wait. Though I do have a list of K names ready, just in case.

Marlin: Your naming system is world famous. How did you come up with it?

Bethesda: Necessity. Growing up in my father's shadow, I knew my only chance was to out-breed him. I was also heavily influenced by the time I spent in Europe as a young dragoness with my mother's family. She'd also named us in accordance with the Greek alphabet—

Marlin: I see, so as Bethesda, you were second.

Bethesda: Congratulations, you know your ABCs. But while my mother chose our names for her own idiotic poetic reasons, I saw a simple system for organizing the dragon army I was determined to build. The rest is history that you can read about in my first autobiography, *Birth of a Legend*.

Marlin: A classic, to be sure. But I don't remember you talking about your mother before.

Bethesda: That's because there's not much to say. She was a weak dragon from a minor clan in what is now Italy. The only thing she had going for her was her legendary beauty and her ability to emotionally entrap the Quetzalcoatl, who foolishly allowed himself to become quite besotted. She died shortly after my brothers and I were born. To a human dragon hunter, if you can believe it. (*BETHESDA sneers in disgust.*) Absolute embarrassment. I was her only female child and resembled her a great deal, which was why my father always treated me more gently than my brothers. He thought I was like her, simpering and weak with no weapons save my beauty. A mistake he learned to regret when I stabbed him through the heart.

Marlin: And thus became the Heartstriker.

Bethesda: All proper dragons are forged in blood. Though if your viewers want the whole story, they'll have to buy the books. My second autobiography in particular, *A Heartstriker History*, has all the juicy details of how I bred and trained my first two clutches specifically to take down my father. No one thought I could do it, especially not him, but no one who underestimates Bethesda the Heartstriker lives to realize their mistake. That's what separates me from the lesser clan heads. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to win. Anything less, and you're not really playing, are you?

Marlin: And that's why we love you. (*MARLIN turns back to the audience and spreads his arms wide.*) Bethesda the Heartstriker, ladies and gentlemen! Her fifth autobiography, "Mother of the Year," goes on sale today. Whether you have children or not, buy a copy. You won't be disappointed!

(*MARLIN turns back to his guest.*)

Marlin: Before you go, Bethesda, one final question. You're often painted by the media as the Great American Dragon. Your children have held positions of power in every aspect of modern life on this continent, including the US Senate, several parliamentary positions in South and Latin America, and a former prime minister of Canada. Love you or hate you, no

one can deny that you are one of the political powerhouses in this half of the world, but do your ambitions stop there? At this point, the only dragon clans left who stand a chance against Heartstriker are the Three Sisters and the dragons of China. You make no secret of your desire for total world domination, but can you give us any details about your plans to actually get there?

Bethesda: Not on television. But I can say that by the time the Three Sleepers wake, they'll find their empire greatly diminished.

Marlin: How very interesting. But what about China? The Three Sisters might be asleep, but the Golden Emperor has been awake and active for centuries. Do you have similar plans for him? Some strategy to break his iron hold on the Pacific?

Bethesda: *(stiffens)* I have nothing to say about the Golden Emperor.

Marlin: Nothing in general, or nothing you want to say on air where it can get back to him?

Bethesda: You flatter yourself if you think the Golden Emperor watches your little variety show, Marlin.

Marlin: Don't be ridiculous, love. Everyone watches my show. But if you won't answer, we'll just have to make our own assumptions.

Bethesda: Shouldn't be a stretch. It's all you do.

Marlin: And with that, I think we're done. Thank you very much to Bethesda for sitting down with us tonight, and to everyone watching, don't forget to buy "Mother of the Year!" We'll be back with our musical-guest-slash-potential-fiery-apocalypse right after this commercial break.

(Music starts playing. MARLIN puts out his hand to BETHESDA, who walks away, disappearing into the green room with her son, CONRAD, who has yet to say a word. When the show cuts to commercial break, all commercials are for fine Heartstriker International products, which are known for their quality all over the world. When you want the ruthless efficiency and effectiveness of a dragon queen, there can be no other choice. Heartstriker International: Elevate Your Life.™)

(End Transcript)