

THE DRAGON'S BLOOD

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

Kacie Aideny, Emerald Sorceress of Medora swerved left, skating around her opponent's defenses. She whipped her hockey stick back and slapped the rubber puck hard and fast into the goal net stuffed inside the malachite fireplace behind him. Dropping to her knees, she glided across the ice-covered floor of the King's Gallery, waving her arm in victory to the rows of royal portraits lining the walls. "She shoots! She scores!"

Kerric Renberg, Medora's newest throne sitter fished the puck out of the net with his stick and flipped it into his hand. "Go ahead and crow. The score's still seven to three." He angled his skates and sliced to a stop, spraying ice all over her. "Come

to think of it," he leaned on his hockey stick, "I don't think you've won a game yet, have you?" He flashed a double dimple grin at her and dropped the puck into her gloved hand.

Kacie groaned. *So cute.* "One of these days, those dimples will be the death of me."

"I'm sorry. I didn't catch that. What did you say?"

"I said, remind me, again why I taught you this game." She skated the puck back to center ice, ignoring the laughter following her down the long room. Of course he'd be a natural. Then again, now that she thought about it, Medora's new King was a natural at most everything he put his mind to.

She dropped the puck in the middle of the floor and waved a hand in the air. A digital scoreboard materialized above their heads. A flick of her fingers and the board lit up. She ticked ten seconds on the clock and skated to her side of the floor. Kerric took his position opposite her, hockey stick at the ready.

The countdown began. The two combatants glared at each other. The clock hit zero. The buzzer sounded. They sprinted for the puck.

The far door opened and the Duke of Trion cautiously stuck his head through the opening, ready to slam the door shut again at the first sight of flying pucks. "Excuse me, Sire, it is almost time for your coronation rehearsal." He eyed the two of them.

Kacie couldn't decide if her father disapproved or wanted to join them.

Kerric dropped his chin to his chest. Taking a deep breath, he squared his shoulders and raised his head. "Thank you, Your Grace." He skated to the spectator bench and untied his skates.

It was time for Kerric to be King again. Play time was over. Kacie took off her helmet, letting her long black braid fall down her back. At least he almost got in a full hour this morning.

In the three months Kerric had been on the throne, their daily hockey games were one of the few times he was able to completely relax and let off steam away from the constant scrutiny of his new court.

“I’ll inform Archbishop Dome Your Majesty will join him as soon as you change?” Duke Alexei asked.

“Yes. Thank you, Your Grace.”

Alexei bowed to the king then pinned Kacie with a look only a father could give. “Please try to be on time, Lady Emerald,” he said and closed the door.

“I’m always on time. I might not be totally put together, but I’m on time.” Kacie waved a hand over the floor and watched the ice fog up and disappear, “I don’t think my father appreciates just how much work goes into turning a twentieth century hockey player into a seventeenth century lady.” She flopped to the floor and took off her skates. “Maybe you could explain it to him. You know, a king to duke, sorta thing.” She pulled her feet in close and massaged the circulation back into her toes before she grabbed her skates and headed for the bench to shuck the rest of her gear.

The sound of hooves on the cobblestone drive below caught her attention and she detoured to the balcony. “Here comes another notable personage in a hurry to be seen at your coronation.”

The gilded ebony coach clattered to a stop in front of the palace steps and Kacie whistled appreciatively. “You should see this thing, Kerric. There’s enough gold on it

to feed a family of fifty for the rest of their lives.”

“Who is it this time?”

“Like I should know. I'm from Santa Monica, remember?” She didn't care how much power she wielded as the Emerald Sorceress. There wasn't enough magic in either of the two universes she called home to teach her every coat-of-arms in Medora and who they belonged to in only three months.

“Describe the coat-of-arms.”

“Hold on,” She gave the regal coach a second look and her eyes saucered. This coat-of-arms she knew. “I thought the crowned rampant dragon was reserved for the reigning monarch of Medora?”

“It is.”

“So why did your coach race into the courtyard without you in it?”

Sliding across the polished mosaic floor in his stocking feet, Kerric reached her side in time to see a liveried servant hurry forward and open the carriage door.

“Welcome, Your Highness. It has been a long time.” The servant bowed low.

A young woman with strawberry blond hair spilling from her traveling bonnet, stepped from the carriage. She brushed a strand of hair back from her face and looked around the courtyard. “Yes, it has.”

“Johanna.” A hundred swear words in ten different languages and a few she just made up, pounded against Kacie's clenched teeth. “What is she doing here?” She leaned over the railing, straining to hear the conversation below.

“There's a package on the seat. Get it,” Johanna ordered. “Where is the King?”

Did she just sneer the word King? Kacie threw a glance at Kerric. If he caught the slight, his face gave nothing away.

“I believe King Kerric is with the Lady Emerald going over preparations for the coronation, Your Highness.”

“Indeed.” The young woman mounted the stairs. “Take my things to my apartments. I am —”

The great doors of the castle closed, cutting off further eavesdropping.

“Guards!” Kerric bellowed.

The gallery door opened and two palace guards entered and bowed to the King. “Her Highness the Duchess of Granleigh is in the entrance court. Escort her to my private audience chamber.”

The guards backed out of the room and hurried to do the King's bidding.

“Come with me.” He headed for the door.

“Sire,” She ignored his irritated frown. “Do you really want to be dressed in hockey gear when you see Johanna?”

He clenched his teeth and pulled his jersey over his head and tossed it onto the bench. “What I want is to throw her out on her ear. I don't care what I wear for that,”

“Good thing.” Kacie snickered. “Because a smelly sweat-soaked linen shirt tucked into nylon hockey shorts isn't the best impression you can make. At least take off your shin guards.”

He frowned at the delay but shucked the heavy plastic shin guards along with his socks and stuck his feet into the pair of flip flops she brought him back from her last trip to Santa Monica. “You don't look much better.”

She looked down at her Monkees concert t-shirt, orange shorts, pink paisley Doc Martin Mary Janes and shrugged. “I've worn worse. I've smelled better, but I've

worn worse.”

“Can we go now?” He headed for the door, again.

Kacie went to the fireplace below King Harvey's portrait, at the far end of the room. “Um, Sire?”

“Now what?” he snapped.

“This way is faster.” She touched the emerald of her signet ring against a swirl on the side of the malachite mantle. A panel beside the fireplace silently slid sideways revealing a closet sized room. At the back of the hidden room a tall mirror shimmered with the reflected candle light from the gallery's blazing candelabras.

She took a fat candle off the mantle and stepped into the tiny room. Motioning for Kerric to join her, she pulled a leather cord hanging beside the door frame. The door slid shut, plunging them into pitch blackness. Raising the candle, she blew across the wick, igniting a tiny flame.

“Take us to the king's private audience chamber.” She waved her hand across the mirror's surface and a kaleidoscope of color swirled within the glass. A moment later the colors settled into the bright white and gold of the audience chamber. She held out her hand to help Kerric through. “Mind your head,”

Kerric ignored her hand and ducked his tall frame through the mirror. Stepping onto the dais, he roared for the guards.

The door opened. A footman entered and bowed.

“The Duchess of Granleigh is being escorted here. Admit her instantly. No one else is to be admitted. And send someone to the cathedral to inform Archbishop Dorne that I will be late.”

“Your Majesty.” The man bowed and backed out, closing the door behind him.

“Why do you think Johanna is here?” Kacie asked, at the foot of the dais. “And why is she traveling in the monarch's carriage?”

“That is what we are about to find out.” Kerric's voice was hard.

She looked up at his stony face, barely recognizing the man sitting on the throne. This was not the young soldier for hire who rescued her three months ago when she fell through the Dragon Mirror in Santa Monica. This hard countenanced man was the King of Medora, once again, preparing to defend his throne.

“Her Highness, Princess Johanna, Duchess of Granleigh.” The footman announced.

Kacie mounted the dais, taking her place beside the throne.

Johanna shook off the guardsman holding her arm, straightened her shoulders and sauntered across the room, as if she were entering a grand ball instead being ushered by royal guards to face the King. “Is this how you welcome visitors to Desar Castle, Cousin?”

“No, Johanna, this is how We treat the daughter of a traitor.”

The emphasis on the royal We registered. Hatred flickered across Johanna's delicate features so quickly, Kacie almost missed it. She didn't miss the blood red aura of power that hovered over Johanna's skin and gathered in her hands.

Kacie suppressed a shudder at the blackish-red of Johanna's power and twirled her finger in a tight circle. An almost imperceptible green shield crackled around the dais, protecting the King from any outside attack.

A smile ghosted across Johanna's lips. She let her power fade.

Kacie inclined her head. They understood each other.

“You were ordered to remain at Granleigh unless summoned.” Kerric continued. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn't arrest you and have you thrown in prison?”

“Oh for heaven's sake, Kerric. I—”

“You will not address Us so informally. Duchess.”

Johanna clenched her jaw and then visibly forced her rigid body to relax. “I know I behaved poorly the last time we met—”

“You tried to kill me.”

“Your pet sorceress,” she pointed at Kacie, “almost destroyed my home.”

“You threw a fireball at my head, Johanna.” Kerric countered.

“You're lucky I only blew up a tower and shattered a few windows. You should thank the King for saving your life.” Kacie said at the same time.

Johanna stared at Kacie for a moment then focused on the king. “You barged into my home and announced King Jozef — my father — was dead. Executed by your hand. You were now King of Medora and my mother, my sister and myself were all under arrest. Did you expect me to welcome you with open arms? Yes. I tried to kill you. I was hysterical with grief.” She placed a foot on the dais.

Kacie stepped in front of her, blocking her path to the King.

Johanna took a deep breath, made a face and placed a delicate hand to her nose and stepped back. “Since then,” she said, her voice low and calm. “I have had time to think over what happened. I understand why you executed my father.” She looked into Kerric's eyes. “In your place, I would do the same thing.” Her ice blue gaze, so like her father's, slid to Kacie.

Kacie stared back. *Not while I'm around, you won't.*

Johanna waved a hand as if waving away a bad thought. “While Granleigh Castle is being repaired, we moved into Woodlawn House, my father's favorite residence. I found this while going through his library.” She snapped her fingers and a guard holding a worn leather satchel stepped closer. Johanna pulled a thin leather book from the bag. “I decided to bring it to you. I hoped it would help us settle our grievances.” She held the book out to Kerric.

Kacie intercepted it.

A tiny smile touched Johanna's thin lips. “It's just a book, Lady Emerald.”

“Then you won't mind if I check it out.” Kacie ran a hand over the front and back covers, senses open for hidden magic. When she was satisfied the book contained no danger to the King, she handed it to Kerric.

He gave the plain purple leather book a cursory glance and looked up at Johanna. “What is this?”

“The coronation records of King Harvey Renberg. First King of Medora.”