

# SWORD OF FIRE AND SEA

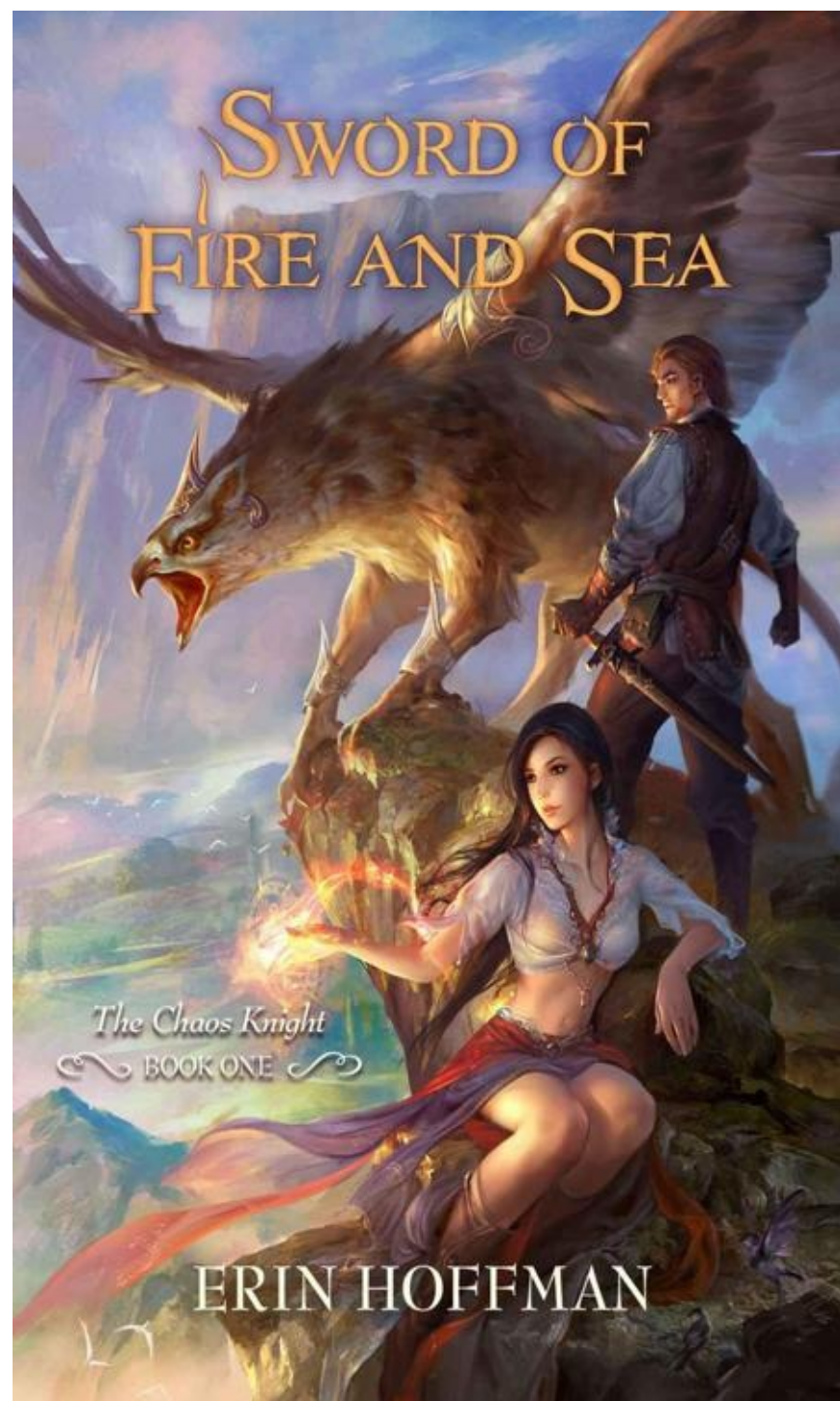
*The Chaos Knight*  
BOOK ONE

ERIN HOFFMAN

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*for Brenn and Kristin—*

*two very talented ladies who believed*

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# Andovar



## The Western Reaches

What I need is to become clear  
—on what I must do, not what I must know. —  
—Søren Kierkegaard

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PART ONE

EMERALDS

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CHAPTER I

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# A DEAL IN SIANE'S EYE

**T**hough the coastal island of Siane's Eye was lush with whispering palms and tropical flowers too exotic for the names of men, the wind that swept ever outward from its alabaster monuments came chill as a lifetime of penance. It prickled Vidarian's skin, but he hardened himself to it; the Sisters would not see a Rulorat captain hiding his hands like a saltless boy.

He turned to salute the *Empress Quest*, waiting far below in the green harbor waters. A signal flare acknowledged his safe arrival, and that the crew would await his return.

One last bridge separated the small viewing ledge from the white temple of the goddess of the air, but now that his stomach expected its sway, it was harder to cross than the first. The only sea or land access to the Eye was via an arcing bridge of interlocking alabaster blocks. Whatever bound them was supple, free to the play of the cold wind, and though it bore carved handrails, the memory of it lurching—unfriendly foliage all that awaited after a plummet thrice the height of the *Quest*'s mainmast—would be with him some time.

Setting courage between his teeth, he boarded the second bridge, locking his eyes on the waiting temple, willing his legs to interpret the sway of the bridge as the rhythm of a deck. Familiar. Safe.

Then he was across, the yawning green that haunted his peripheral vision swallowed by security earth and smooth cobblestones. A figure wrapped in gauzy robes perpetually at the play of the temple wind stood by to greet him.

Upon reaching the first white arch of the temple Vidarian covered his surprise at the aged face beneath the diaphanous hood by bowing smartly from the waist and removing his tricorne. He did not know what he found more peculiar: the lines etched like weathered sandstone against the woman's cheeks, or the strange striped lizard that coiled tightly about her left forearm. The little beast was pale green, skin like pebbled sand, and its many-striped eyes moved independent of one another.

"Welcome, Captain." The priestess's voice was like vellum crumpled and straightened many times, latticed and soft. Her eyes were the translucent grey of a winter sea. "Priestess Endera awaits you within. We of the Eye are pleased to bring water and fire together once more."

"I wondered at that. I should have thought the priestess would call me to Val Harlon," he ventured. The lizard's near eye tracked him.

"For undertakings of import, the air sisters have ever been the conduit for the volatile elements." She gestured to the alabaster. "We are the bridge."

"Truly extraordinary engineering," Vidarian said with genuine appreciation. "What substance is it that holds them together?"

She blinked; lambent, alien. "Why, air, of course."

And so they had swayed, the bonds of all the elements not as strong as they once were. His stomach gave a lurch as he involuntarily imagined those bonds failing at just the right moment. He thanked the air priestess and pushed his thoughts along; if she did know what Endera had planned for him, she would hardly give any sign. "Please lead the way," he said instead, and she smiled and turned on soundless feet toward the next temple arch.

Hanging from the ceilings, arches, and indeed every available surface of the white alabaster were

feathery fronds of olive-green vegetation that dropped no roots, though they clung in places to the stone. They drank thirstily from the air, lifted by the breeze that came from the temple's core. Tiny golden blooms no larger than Vidarian's thumbnail peppered some of the plants, and from them danced slender black butterflies, their wings shimmering blue in the dim light. Here and there another of the strange striped lizards clung to a vine or alabaster column; wherever they passed, each tracked Vidarian with one weirdly telescoping eye.

The pressure of the moving air grew stronger as they passed further into the temple, born from the Windwell at its very center. His companion's light robes, made of wound scarves, now lifted steadily behind her like so many pennants from a festival barge. At the next hall, its vaulted ceiling eastward three times the height of a tall man, she turned and led him down a quieter passageway out of the wind, and thence into a carpeted reception room lit by lanterns of blue oil, their crystal chimneys throwing shards of pale light in shifting starbursts against the white walls. The air priestess bowed, lifted a hand unburdened by reptile, and turned back down the hall.

At a delicate table of pale maple wood sat Endera, whom Vidarian had met only once before and that two decades ago. Her voluminous wine-red robes defied the gentle delicacy of the air temple, as did the rich gold of her skin and eyes. She motioned him to the seat opposite her, and poured him a cup of tea that, by the gold leafed embossing on its nearby shipping packet, would have kept the child of a merchant family in silk for a year. Vidarian sat.

"Well, priestess? Your little waifs were quite—insistent—that I meet you here, and I have their bruises to prove it."

White teeth flashed beneath the velvet hood. "*Well trained*, dear Captain, is the term I believe you're searching for."

"Of course." He picked up his tea. Inhaling deeply of its sweet, subtle fragrance, he took a gulp and tried not to think about the price of the hot liquid that slid down his throat. As it reached his stomach, a secondary flavor—just a touch of floral bitterness—bathed his tongue, but it brought with it a welcome awakening of the senses.

Siane's Eye was neutral territory. Though Vidarian would have liked to ignore the summons from Endera, certain obligations forced his hand, but his cordiality only went so far. He enjoyed the tea as much as one might, but waited without speaking long enough for his impropriety to become clear.

The fire priestess's carnelian circlet glowed suddenly as she leaned forward into the lamplight. Even in shadow her face was statuesque, suspended in the agelessness of long-held authority. "I have a task for you, Captain. Your ship and lineage make you uniquely suited to it, and I am willing to pay well." Vidarian was about to make a quick retort that he was not to be "tasked," but the air stopped in his chest as Endera began to move one arm across the table.

With casual grace, the priestess turned over her hand, emptying a black velvet pouch into the air. Vidarian's breath moved again, drawn swiftly inward, as a pair of slender cabochons each the size of his thumb clattered down onto the table.

The green stones glowed, and not from the blue light of the lanterns. Vidarian's hand moved toward them out of pure human reflex—but he withdrew just in time. Still, the heat that he knew the stones held seemed to burn on his fingertips. More wealth sat before him than any ten of his comrades had ever seen. "Sun emeralds," he said, breath ragged in his throat. "Dear priestess, who have you taken under your wing that could possibly be worth such a price?"

"She was under my wing already."

"You can't possibly mean—"

"I do." No hint of any emotion colored the priestess's face as she lifted her teacup to her lips and sipped, cradling the porcelain in long-fingered hands. This Vidarian saw peripherally, locked as he was on the stones lest they disappear, knowing envy greener than sun emeralds was alive in his eyes.

“She requires escort to my sister in the Temple of Zal'nehara. Circumstances demand that this route move along the western coast.” For only a moment Vidarian glanced sharply upward; to tour the western coast to get to the Temple of the Sea was to make a trip of perhaps twenty days take several months. But his attention was drawn magnetically back down to the emeralds, and Endera smiled catlike. “Lovely, aren't they? And near priceless.” Her voice was sweet music in his ears, a persuasive spell.

Abruptly Vidarian pushed back from the table, his spine sinking into the plush seat cushion. A faint sneer twisted his lips as he stared at the table, morbidly fascinated. “Not on your life, Priestess. Those gems are worth more than I am, more than the *Quest* and all her crew. That's dangerous.”

Endera's hands froze around the cup and her tone dropped a few degrees. “Then name your price.”

A thousand prizes leapt to mind, dizzying him. A ship to mate his *Empress*, swift as a gull and strong as a kraken—five ships, ten! He could be Admiral Vidarian Rulorat, and he knew that if he asked it of her, Endera would make it so. Those two emeralds alone would purchase enough wealth to keep him fat and rich for the rest of his days. But...

“There's no price could be worth such madness,” he said, pushing himself to his feet. “I'm sorry, Priestess. My crew would have me tossed if I brought a fire priestess on board; you must know that. Much less for a tour through the Outwater, full of pirates and Nistra knows what else. Good day to you.” He turned and strode for the exit, making a break as quickly as dignity would permit.

“Sit down, Captain.”

He stopped in the threshold but did not turn, riding the swell of temper that threatened to break over his composure.

“I am a very busy woman, Vidarian. I had no intention of calling you to this meeting to waste your time and mine with fruitless negotiations.” Endera slowly finished her cup of tea, but there was a warmth in her voice. “I had hoped this wouldn't be necessary. Seventy years ago your grandfather made a commitment to my predecessor on behalf of the Rulorat family. The Breakwater agreement. You know of it.”

Vidarian sat down. The swell had died to a bubbling tide of dread.

“I am invoking that commitment, yet I wish our engagement to remain cordial. So let me try this again.” She leaned forward. “Name your price, Captain.”

His throat was dry, but the teacup was empty, and he did not move to refresh it. He permitted himself a brief clenching of both fists, then dove in, protocol be damned. “What makes you think, Priestess, that I should abide by an agreement dormant these last thirty years? It was not an agreement I made, nor my father.”

He'd pitched his voice to rattle her, but she didn't even pause. “Our last renewal was indeed thirty years ago,” her voice like tumbled glass, “two years before you were born, dear Vidarian.” At her maternal, understanding smile he clenched his fists again below the table. “I certainly know this must be difficult for you, but think what your father would have done.”

Of that there was no question. And yet... “He'd have known to cross the Outwater with a Sharl priestess on board would be madness too, Priestess.”

“A risk, most certainly. For which you are offered very generous compensation, Captain.”

The compensation sat on the table between them, still glowing, and not with reflection. A wildness seized Vidarian. “Binding magic. Those emeralds, tied to my life—destroyed when I am.”

Endera was silent for a long moment. After a small eternity she reached forward and placed her hand across the priceless stones. A smile turned her scarlet lips, dazzling and dangerous. “You are an intriguing man, Captain,” she said, and there was laughter in her voice. “I agree to your bargain.”

Then, without speaking, she focused intently on the jewels beneath her cupped hand. Bright golden sparks kindled in the depths of her eyes, and a glare like summer sunlight speared through her fingers.

from the emeralds, leaving dark spots spangled across Vidarian's vision. For one wrenching moment he felt as if the breath had been drawn out of his chest—then all was as it had been. The light was gone from beneath the priestess's hand, and from her eyes. She withdrew her hand.

“It is done.”

This time Vidarian did not stop himself when he moved to take up one of the stones. Its immediate surface was cool to the touch, but the heat that burned within stirred his very soul.

An ocean of light swirled inside the polished stone. The sun emerald was green only around the outside, winking golden when turned in the lantern light. It was heavy—heavier than any other jewel he'd touched. Only reluctantly did he slide it into his left hand and pick up the next.

As soon as he touched it he knew something was wrong. This stone was not heavy, and the light that danced within it formed twisting flames. His eyes darted up to Endera. “What is this?”

“Such an observant lad,” she smiled.

“What did you do?” he asked sharply, dropping both jewels back on the table without a care for their value.

“Be careful, Captain,” the priestess warned, golden eyes suddenly sharp. “All things come with a price. This emerald is not bound to you. It is bound to the priestess you will escort, and both will remain in my possession until you return. You privateers call it—insurance.” Endera reached again across the table and brushed a golden fingernail across the first of the emeralds. A cold shiver ran up Vidarian's spine. “All things with their antithesis,” she murmured, regarding the stone with disturbing intensity. Her eyes were lazy, thick lashes low as she looked back up at him. “The cardinal rule of spirit magic, and indeed all magics, holy or not. In order to bind that stone to your life, I had to bind some of your life—just a little part—to the stone.” Her smoldering gaze sharpened with her voice. “You will escort Priestess Windhammer, Captain, and you will see her safely to the Temple of Zal'nehara and the protection of my sister, where the sea will mask the fire within her.” She picked up the first of the emeralds and tucked it into the black velvet pouch. When she held it out to him, he accepted it without thinking, numb. “Then you will return here, and I will give you not only the other emerald but also two sun rubies of equal size. You will be a rich man, and Priestess Windhammer will be safe.”

Vidarian stood stiffly, dumbstruck. Before he could think, Endera spoke again in a clear dismissal. “She will meet you at Val Harlon's east pier tomorrow evening, number ten.”

Still rebelling at how thoroughly he had been caught in the priestess's web, but unable to refuse with the offer of the stones now doubled, even if his life did *not* depend on it, Vidarian managed, “So be it, then.” He did not offer his hand; the bargain, as she had put it, was already sealed entirely to his liking.

Endera smiled.

Giving a stiff bow, Vidarian turned to stalk away, but the priestess's voice caught him just as he lifted the velvet curtain.

“One more thing, Captain.”

Vidarian froze.

“You will have no steel that bears a polish near this priestess. The Vkortha who seek her are telepaths, and can sense any such metal when it comes near the life flame of a fire priestess. It acts on their eyes.”

“Priestess, you can't possibly be serious. Our anchors, the fittings for the ship—”

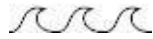
“Are all salt-encrusted and infused with the energy of the sea. These are no risk. Only any *polished* steel that your crew may bear will be. Steel, well cared-for, retains the memory of its origin; it recalls the flame that birthed it. Each fire priestess past the initiation rite carries within her a thread of the great Mother Flame, and it calls to all its brethren.”

Unthinking, Vidarian reached for his sword, and Endera's eyes followed his hand. "This sword was my father's, and his father's before him. I'll not leave it in any port."

"Then keep it," she said, "but keep it covered at all times when you are in the presence of Priestess Windhammer. Any consequences that follow should you fail are yours to deal with—but if there's anything left of you when the Vkortha are through," she tapped her fingernails on the table, and for a moment they flared like tiny suns, "there won't be when I am."

Vidarian bowed again, tight-lipped, and strode through the arch before he could ensnare himself further. The priestess's soft voice came to him as he paused to return his hat to his head, as if it weighed his fate.

"Protect her well, Vidarian."



Vidarian left the Eye as though propelled by its unceasing wind. But as he passed through the final archway, the old air priestess lifted her narrow hand, and he stopped, just short of stumbling.

"I would never question a sworn Sister," she said without preamble, gently stroking the chameleon's back. "Yet I have known Endera for many years. Her movements are her own. And she did not come here under the command of Sher'azar." She drew a tiny crystal whistle from her wide belt. "Take this. If it hasn't yet faded, it summons a powerful wind, the Breath of Siane." As she smiled, her eyes vanished into the vast wrinkles above her cheeks. "You cannot imagine its value. Carry it wisely."

As she passed him the whistle its tightly coiled strand of braided linen came unwound, and Vidarian lifted his hat, partly in salute to the air priestess, partly to allow the whistle around his neck where he tucked it behind his neckerchief. The thought of returning to his crew with this errand had thrown his thoughts into a gale, and he felt a rush of gratitude for the kindness from this priestess of that turbulent element.

"Go with the blessing of Siane, Captain, though your winds be fierce or fair." Her pale eyes were distant, but deep within them, as in the gullet of a hurricane, there was the glow of distant lightning. She smiled. "I suspect you'll need it."

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# THE CREW OF THE EMPRESS QUEST

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**M**arielle, the *Quest's* first mate, was waiting at the alabaster bridge.

Vidarian bit back a sigh as he saw her. In truth, the sight of her was steadying, but they'd agreed her responsibility was with the crew, not on the island. And from the set of her shoulders, at that moment she was not Marielle, First Mate, but Marielle I-Changed-Your-Swaddling-Clothes, Captain Sir. He averted his eyes from her aggressive grey stare out of reflex, only for an instant, which of course made things much worse.

“Dare I ask, Captain Sir, what you have gotten us into this time?”

Batten and caulk. And forge ahead.

“We've taken a commission with the Sharli Priestesshood, an escort mission to bring one of the number to the Temple at Zal'nehara, where the Nistra followers there will take charge of her welfare.” Marielle's eyes widened at about every fourth word.

“Direct through the bloody Outwater? I presume you told them how mad an idea that is?”

“She invoked the Breakwater, Marielle.”

Marielle crooked three fingers in the sign of Nistra, warding. “A name your granddad had no business agreeing to! It's a bad affair, getting between goddesses, to say nothing of a call-the-wave-down-on-me bloody agreement name like that.”

As with all true many-decade friends, Vidarian and Marielle had small, specific, manageable habits that drove each other insane. For Vidarian, Marielle's was her unavoidable religious affectation. He batted down some more. “Please try to be reasonable, Marielle. Your superstitions—”

“Are nothing of the sort, they are concrete and provable and as old as the sea herself. The crew won't have it, sir, and I don't allow as I should either,” Marielle bristled, gripping the ends of her waist sash in agitation. “The Wake knows they've plenty of ships of their own, these priestesses. Why the *Quest*?”

“They do have their own ships. And you know my obligation to them.”

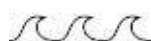
“Your granddad building some ships really don't—”

“This truly isn't up for discussion, Marielle.” He stared her down, and her mouth clicked shut, but sternly as ever. “I'm sorry. I don't like it any better than you do. But I can't take my family's name and ship without their obligations. You've sailed with enough Rulorats to know that.”

Her angled eyebrows said she was almost convinced. “Will you at least consent to asking the seer witch for Nistra's forecast on this? I'll warrant you weren't foolish enough to take this on without advance payment.”

Vidarian folded his arms, instinctively moving to brush the velvet pouch in his front pocket surreptitiously. “I'll allow it if you insist. Though nothing changes, Marielle. The *Quest* is committed already.”

“It'll be a forewarning, at least. Captain Sir.”





Marielle's cabin was as large as Vidarian's, being in previous generations allocated to his grandmother, when she and his grandfather had captained the ship together, all except in formality. Marielle had it so stuffed with gear and paraphernalia that it looked perhaps a third its true size.

In the back of the cabin, bolted to a table near the bed cabinet, was a large glass shelter that contained a currently purple-spotted green octopus and a large quantity of salt water. Marielle had acquired the sea witch, a peculiar southern sea creature quite famously expensive (and invaluable on ships of any merit), in a wager many decades ago.

Wordlessly, Marielle pulled her prayer book from a shelf beneath the table and opened it to the section on prophecy via sea witch. Nistra followers had discovered the sea witch's unique capabilities over a hundred years ago and instituted their use wherever possible. They needed a steady diet of small crustaceans, fresh and alive, which presented some problem to followers that lived too far inland, but Marielle kept a ready supply pulled up from the sea floor at all times. Now she pulled a leather pouch from a rack beside the bookshelf and dropped a handful of calcified sand into the water. The witch turned completely and unsettlingly transparent.

Still not speaking, she reached out a hand, palm up, toward Vidarian. He frowned just to register his disapproval and pulled the velvet pouch from his pocket, then slid the emerald from it and into his waiting fingers. Without looking at it, as if she instinctively knew its hypnotic properties, she dropped it into the tank.

From the initial flash of bubbles the emerald dropped straight down, sinking with barely a drift right or left to rest, glowing, among the rocks at the base of the tank. The octopus writhed, reaching for the glass borders of its tiny domain like a man thrown overboard in a tempest. Then it turned the deep red of a flesh wound aged in the sun.

Marielle's face was impassive as she quickly turned the wax-slick pages in her prayer book. Carefully inked illuminations played out identical octopi in a spectrum of colors. When at last she came to the shade that closest matched the octopus's current color, with some flipping back and forth of pages to be sure, she froze and bent over the description. The prognosis was not good. Vidarian once caught the words "...except in great defiance to your safety of mind and body will..."

He prepared for the explosion as she gently, carefully closed the book. But her voice was unexpectedly low and soft.

"It ain't never come to good, your family and Sharli, Sir. Never."



As the sun bloodied the sky to the west of Val Harlon the next evening, the *Empress Quest* bobbed in the green water at dock nine. A slender black knife of a rivership bearing the banner of Temple Kara'za rested beside her, and as twilight settled in, a hooded figure descended from the ramp next to the dock ten marker.

Endera's charge wore a sweeping skirt of burgundy crushed velvet and a cloak of the same, seeming not to notice the cloying heat that kept all of the sailors and passersby displaying maximum skin, even in the wind-chased evening. A belt of carved onyx cinched her narrow waist, matched by a glittering pendant around her neck. Where Endera had been a polished, silvery flame with alabaster skin and golden hair and eyes, this Priestess Windhammer was a dusky ember, dark gold hair, complexion and raven black the long braid whose tail brushed past her hips.

"Ariadel Windhammer," she said, hesitating slightly upon reaching him. She extended her hand—a small, petite thing. Delicate though she might be, the priestess had a strong, firm grip. She was complete and total trouble.

Finally, he managed, "Vidarian Rulorat, captain of the *Empress Quest*."

Her smile was morning breaking over the eastern sea. "Rulorat, truly? I should have trusted Endera."

to find me a stalwart guardian. Your family is renowned on the seas.”

Vidarian was about to answer when a soft, plaintive mew echoed up from one of the crates stacked beside the pier.

Ariadel blinked. “Do you hear that?”

“Just a dock cat.”

“Nonsense. I doubt if its eyes are even open yet.” Like a predator herself she crouched and listened intently, moving silently among the crates on the dock. The source of the mew made the mistake of scuttling from one crate to the next, and Ariadel pounced.

She pulled it from the crates as one might an unsuspected treasure. The molten light of the setting sun flashed in the kitten's green eyes, and then across Ariadel's dark ones.

Vidarian blinked, then squinted suspiciously at the kitten. It was more a ball of grey fur than a creature, though punctuated with pink ears and nose. Despite being fluffed into a rather rotund shape, bones showed through its skin where the patchy fur exposed it. Doubtful it would be much of any use at all as a mouser.

“I feel she must come with us,” Ariadel said, curiously fixated on the creature's eyes.

He nodded, diplomat enough to hide his skepticism. One picked one's battles. “If it's your wish, Priestess.” Vidarian swept his arm in an invitation toward the gangplank ahead.

The *Empress Quest* was a sleek double-masted schooner of eighty-five feet in length, carved from red teak, light and strong. Shallow-bellied for a seagoing ship, she rode high in the water, with pennants snapping in the breeze. She was currently one of the larger ships in the harbor, built for the rugged coastline, barnacled where her waterline had once been higher from prolonged exposure to rough waters. There was nothing in the world lovelier than the sight of her bobbing at port, and so it was with some misgiving that Vidarian observed the priestess's reluctance to board.

Finally he held out his hand to her, and she stared at it for a moment before accepting his assistance. As she stepped onto the plank, she murmured, “Pardon my moment. I've never been on the high sea before,” but it was with the curious calm one would observe a foreign delicacy at dinner. Still, her grip on the kitten gave her away—its eyes looked about to pop out in her firm grasp.

“Windhammer,” he said, partly to distract her. “Strange name for a fire priestess. Have our families met before?” She did not look at him, but seemed bent on taking in every detail of her surroundings as they stepped onto the *Quest*'s fine deck.

“My father's name,” she said distractedly. “The fire in my veins is from my mother. A remote cousin of Priestess Endera's. Oh!” She exclaimed in surprise as the grey kitten suddenly squirmed loose (likely in protest to her death-grip, though Vidarian certainly wouldn't say so) and landed on the deck with a thump. In a shot the kitten was off, streaking toward the galley as if it knew exactly where it was going.

Vidarian watched in chagrin. Then, raising a hand to his cheek, he called out, “All hands prepared for sail! Ms. Solandt, bring us out!” The sudden loudness of his voice startled the priestess slightly, but she recovered, watching the stream of men that poured out of the forecastle with slightly narrowed eyes.

“Oughtn't I meet the crew?”

He grinned. “After we're settled on route. My *Empress* grows impatient if docked too long. Shall we?” He raised a hand toward the main hold, and she followed his gesture, but somehow managed to make it look like it had been her idea all along. Trouble indeed.



The forecastle's anteroom, by his grandmother's tradition, was as ornate as a wealthy landsman's stateroom, and used to honor individuals of the crew on special occasions. Heavy mahogany cabinets

and a massive matching table, all intricately carved with water nymphs and merfolk, were bolted to the polished teak deck, their fixtures hidden by carved clawed feet. A pair of runners covered the deck to either side of the table, patterned in the voluminous chrysanthemum designs peculiar to the continent-island nation of Targuli. Each was of thin but surprisingly soft silk, woven at an astronomical thread count and also stapled discreetly to the boards. Vidarian shut the thick doors behind them, cutting off the bustle of the crew's quarters.

Ariadel took it all in with cool aloofness, thick lashes masking her half-closed eyes. She, of course, was used to much greater splendor than this—but Vidarian guessed that the watery theme was not quite her cup of tea.

Speaking of which, he moved to a silver tea service that he'd asked Marks to lay out prior to the journey. Sitting in a polished rack fixed in the center of the lacquered table, the teapot was a tall silver affair rimmed with filigreed roses. Two matching cups sat on silver saucers nearby, and Vidarian deftly measured out portions of dark honey-colored tea for both of them. Ariadel accepted her cup gratefully, exclaiming over the detail and skill of the worked metal. "My mother's," Vidarian explained, not diffident, and Ariadel turned her attention to the tea.

However, as she took her first sip, she worked quite obviously to avoid spitting the liquid back out. "It's cold!"

Vidarian cleared his throat to hide the start of a laugh. "Your pardon, Priestess. The tea is from Insartia, and intended to be enjoyed chilled. It's been quite warm out." Taking up his own cup, he swallowed a mouthful of the tea, enjoying its herblike, minty overtones. "We'll be under way shortly, and I'm afraid I must leave you to attend the launch. So if you'll pardon my directness—" he looked over his cup for permission, and continued at her cautious nod, "you are not, of course, obligated to tell me, but why are they searching for you?"

Ariadel stared into her cup as if the answer would rise from its glassy surface. After a long moment she said, hollowly, "I know where they live."

Vidarian frowned. "You are only one person. Surely others know the location of their operations. They must have spies, staff, orderlies?"

The priestess shook her head, increasingly subdued. "Not that simple, I'm afraid. They migrate, but they have a single unmoving fortress on an island in the Farwestern Sea. I happened to stumble upon its location, and they read the signs of my presence." She took a quick draught of the tea. "It was not intended that they should be able to do so."

Cradling his cup between his hands, Vidarian traced the silver roses with his eyes for a moment. "I gather this is somehow Endera's mistake."

"She knew the risk." Ariadel abruptly set down her cup. "The knowledge was worth it. And she knew that her sister at Zal'nehara would protect me. The Daughters of the Sea have been searching for the Vkortha fortress unsuccessfully for years."

Knowing it would be futile to mask his ignorance, Vidarian simply asked: "The sea is their domain, and they could not find the island? And if you have told others, why are you alone hunted?"

"Their domain was their weakness. They are too familiar with the environs of water, and the Vkortha have many layers of telepathic camouflage on the island. It took fire to penetrate them, for they were woven in with the patterns of the ocean itself, with which the Zal'neharans were too familiar. And I have told no one else. Endera has a certain latitude from Kara'zul, but they would not have approved of any such official cooperation with Zal'nehara, and know nothing of my efforts here."

Vidarian shook his head, with a terse smile. "I won't pretend to understand temple politics." He would have said more, but three tones from a brass bell atop ship cut him short. Setting the cup aside, he offered his hand to Ariadel. "If you'll excuse me?"

Her touch was like fire—not surprising, perhaps, if one had time to think about it. Vidarian hadn't. And like fire, it didn't let go easily. “Captain, I have little doubt that Endera tricked you into this.”

Vidarian laughed softly, dodging her earnestness by dint of a quick step backward and a respectful half-bow. “It was my own folly, Priestess, and I intend to make the most of it. The *Quest* and her crew have no equal on the sea, I promise you that.”

## A BOLD DISPLAY

**F**or the next two weeks Ariadel could rarely be seen abovedeck, plagued as she was with seasickness. Or it was certainly sickness, and certainly from the sea travel, but unlike any Vidarian had ever seen. She spent most of her time in meditation, and was friendly if demure at meals with the crew—she had even entirely won Marks, the cook, to her side by dint of her willingly shared Velinese cooking techniques.

No one on a Rulorat ship would be intimidated by ability, but Marks, an old stick of a ship's cook who had served under Vidarian's father, had a certain pronounced discomfort when it came to revealing admiration for the priestess's particular expertise. When pressed, he was a stoppered bottle uncorked—"And her knife skills, Captain—I know chaps'd pay good honest scratch at the academy to watch that woman shred ginger!"—but each admission came with guilt more worthy of an easterly cathedral. Because only Vidarian of all the crew knew that Marks had, in his youth, aspired to be a land chef in one of the imperial courts, he was the sole recipient of the cook's confessions, and so over the course of those first early weeks acquired, not quite willingly, a rather thorough education in the culinary comparison between the Velinese mainland and the sprawling southeastern empire.

When not administering jovial cooking lessons, and instead caught unsuspecting by a knock at her door, the priestess's eyes had a furtive look, pinched as if all the world were pressing down upon her. But by the third week she'd improved significantly, enough to explore the ship in earnest. While making the rounds one morning Vidarian noticed a suspicious amount of handiwork being done aft of the main deck: net weaving, sail patching, minor woodwork—someone had even hauled a barrel up from stowage for recaulking.

He found Ariadel at the eye of the storm, whispering to the lamps. The sight brought him up short, and he only realized he was staring when Calgrath, a spry and time-wrinkled topman who as far as Vidarian knew hadn't actually aged in a decade, addressed him in an awed mutter.

"Somethin' else, ain't it, Cap'n? She been at it all morning—already fixed the row lights along the port corridor." Vidarian almost quailed to hear the reverent note in Calgrath's voice; he'd seen the mate stoically extract sea urchin spines from a cabin boy's foot, fight a pirate with only a flying jib to his back, and laugh through a storm that sent half a dozen salted sailors back to land permanently. For fifteen years only the moonlit glaciers of Val Morhan had awed him.

As the priestess whispered to each lamp, the cuffs of her velvet robe hiding her raised hands and obscuring her words, the flame within leapt up like a loyal puppy to a long-missed master. She left a trail of bright flames behind her, and yet with every invigorated flame the assembled crew collectively held its breath.

Vidarian cleared his throat sternly, and the spell was broken. Crewmen and –women jumped in startlement, then made a good show of shouting duties to one another as they returned to their assigned work. Vidarian did his part by glaring in dissatisfaction, but he couldn't help being relieved for all their sakes that it was him who caught them gawking and not Marielle. The first mate had been efficient and professional as always, but one swore the skyglass climbed whenever she and the priestess were within ten feet.

Having completed charming the lamps, the priestess was asking Revelle Amberwright, munitions lieutenant, about the location of the stored powder when Vidarian closed enough to make out her words. The officer colored, her high cheeks darkening, and made her apologies as Vidarian approached, claiming urgent duty on a staff inspection, or surely she would be glad to give the priestess a personal tour. It might even have been true. She saluted as she hurried past.

“Something I can help you with, Priestess?” Vidarian asked, to defuse the puzzlement on the priestess's delicate features.

“I'd thought to look over your powder,” she said, courteous but not masking her eagerness. The curiosity of the priestesshood was legendary; few he knew had much experience with the followers of Sharli, but by the priestess's demeanor he assumed they must be much like the Nistrans, endlessly fascinated with poking at their chosen element and documenting how it twitched. Merchant vessels rarely complained—their curiosity was a generous one, and filled many a captain's purse. “My temple has been studying the dwindling potency of firearms enhanced in the last decade. We believe we may have a remedy.”

“I am not, as you might imagine, anxious to see my ship turned into a laboratory,” he prevaricated, thinking of Marielle and swallowing his immediate hope and greed. It was true, what she said: the past two decades, not just one, had seen the accelerating decline of distance weapons. It meant close battles, when they couldn't be avoided. Uglier ones.

“It could mean a great difference to your defenses,” the priestess argued, echoing his thought. “I am, of course, eager to lend any assistance I may for your crew's welfare, and my own.”

“You'll want a sea test,” he allowed. “A hand cannon would be enough.”

“It would suit perfectly,” she smiled.



The scuttlebutt flew quickly, as it always did. By the time Vidarian had collected a hand cannon and its gauge, a collection of observers had gathered at the windward bow. Marielle, by fortune or her own design, was relieving the quartermaster at the helm and thus out of sight.

Ellara Stillwether, munitions officer, accompanied Revelle and the priestess, observing the procedure carefully. She and her lieutenant took careful measurements, assisted by Lifan, their little windreader. The priestess had been shocked at first to discover a child on board; Vidarian, in turn, had been surprised that she was unfamiliar with the custom. Lifan was Ellara's cousin, and fiercely guarded her. Ellara herself had served as windreader on the *Quest*, when she could—the ability faded with the onset of adolescence. Ariadel assured them that no such parallel existed for fire, which typically appeared *after* adolescence if at all. For Lifan's part, she was as brightly intelligent as her protector, and showed a steady knack for figures that made Vidarian sure she would one day follow in Ellara's footsteps, if the land didn't lure her away.

After a full battery of initial calculations was complete, Ellara meticulously loaded the hand cannon, tamped it, laid its neck across a mark on the bow, and fired. The shot echoed over the calm water, and when it finally arced down to splash into the blue, Revelle called out a time and trajectory estimate.

As they prepared for the second shot, Ellara solemnly passed the flask of powder to the priestess. What followed was significantly more satisfying to the attentive eyes of the crew than her earlier performance with the lamps. On the deck she spread a linen cloth, and upon this spread a measure of powder. With her hands just above it, but never touching, she began a rhythmic chant, twitching her fingers to its beat. Vidarian would admit to no one that his own heart lurched when the powder began to glow; the gasps of the crew were enough.

Gradually the glow faded, and the priestess tipped the powder back into its flask by rolling the

linen into a funnel. She handed the flask back to Ellara, who accepted it with reverence barely masked by her outward veneer of skepticism, and wadded the linen away into a pocket, of which her robes seemed to contain many.

Without ceremony Ellara directed Revelle and Lifan to take their readings again, and they complied swiftly. Then Ellara loaded the cannon once more, her movements as measured and diligent as if she were at her officer's test again.

The crew erupted in a furor as the shot sailed out across the water, easily a third again the distance of the first. Some whooped with delight, others murmured appreciation or amazement—and above them all, Ellara voiced a strident cry that checked the others. “Captain! Our calculations!” Her dark eyes were flinty with concern, darting as they doubtless raked through the hundreds of adjustments that the priestess's powder implied for their defenses.

“Ms. Amberwight,” Vidarian spoke without turning from the water. “My quarters. You'll find a red leather book on the third shelf. Fetch it, please.” The priestess's head tilted in inquiry as the lieutenant saluted and hurried off. “My grandfather's log,” he explained. “He had a fascination with munitions. The middle section is entirely devoted to trajectory calculation tables. Outdated, we thought, even in my father's time.” He laughed.

In moments Revelle had returned with the requested volume. She offered it to Vidarian, but he gestured instead to Ellara, who looked about ready to pounce. Or explode. She was too professional—narrowly—to seize it from her lieutenant's unprepared hands, but neither did she waste time in finding the page Vidarian directed her to.

“The measurement is quite close,” Ellara said, her eyes intense on the text when they were darting to her wax tablet for comparison. “We'll want to run more tests...”

“There should be enough of the new powder for several,” Ariadel offered. She seemed slightly fatigued, but satisfied as a housecat, leaning against the bow.

The sun was beginning to drop over the water to the leeward side, and here the forecastle cast a long shadow that just reached them. Celer, one of the two cabin boys, had fetched a lamp and now bore it up near them, a fine excuse to get a close-up look at the powder that his height had not previously afforded. A glint from the priestess's hands caught Vidarian's eye; a pale blue residue clung to her palms. Vidarian wouldn't have noticed it if not for the flickering lamp, but as she lifted her hand, the residue glittered like powdered graphite. And yet she had not touched the powder.

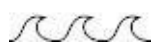
“The tests, I'm afraid, should rightly wait for tomorrow, and daylight,” Vidarian said, and though both Ellara and Revelle looked as though they'd like to object, they could hardly slow the sun, and quelled their objections. Ellara surely was mentally concocting some way to float lamps on the sea's surface so as to prolong the experiment, but she would have to settle for poring over the elder Rulorat's book into the deep hours of the night, as she doubtless would.

“Priestess, if I may?” Calgrath offered, and Vidarian turned to him in surprise. He gave a little bow, excusing himself, but continued, “Our medical kit? Surely—”

“It would take a trained specialist in the medical arts to adjust those. I dare not risk imbalancing them,” Ariadel apologized, and added, “I'm sure your ship's mender has them in the best condition possible.” This won a smile from the old seaman; the priestess could not know that the mender in question, currently on a watch shift if Vidarian recalled the day roster, was Calgrath's young brother-in-law; but the keenness in the old man's eye when it came to medicine should have told her enough.

“Priestess, a word, at your convenience?” Vidarian ventured, and Calgrath bowed himself away.

“Of course, Captain.”



Back in the wood-varnish embrace of the forecandle anteroom, Vidarian sat quietly, not speaking while Marielle, off from her shift at the helm, delivered the familiar silver tea service from the galley almost certainly prompted by Marks. The grey kitten, which had been confined to the forecandle after three times managing to raid the galley (and nearly losing its life to the cook on the third) slept soundly, curled on a brocaded chair.

“Will you be liking anything else?” Marielle asked coolly, once she'd settled the tray. She was a scant degree off, in the angle of her hips, from bodychecking the priestess, as if to deny her presence.

“No, thank you, Ms. Solandt.”

“Very good, sir,” she nodded, and finally spared a glance for the priestess, out of protocol. “Nistra's peace.” She bowed, and left, shutting the door behind her.

The priestess permitted herself a soft laugh once the door was safely closed.

“Something amuses you, Priestess?” Vidarian couldn't quite keep the frost out of his tone.

Her laughter stilled. “Just an odd expression, it strikes me,” she said, and leaned forward, folding her hands self-consciously. “It seems I've done something to offend you, Captain.”

“Only insofar as you've been playing tricks on my crew, Priestess,” Vidarian said. “Neither they nor I, deserve such.”

The priestess's eyes widened; her etiquette training surely did not cover direct confrontation. Better, Vidarian thought, that she learn sea ways quickly—he reined in his anger to a cool implacability, but was startled, himself, to find that there was disappointment there as well.

When she didn't answer, Vidarian continued, “There was something on your hands. You added it to the powder.”

She stiffened. “I said that we had a remedy, not that it was supernatural.”

“But the chanting, the hand-waving, the glowing. The lamps. Trickery, yes?” As he spoke he heard his father's anger in his own voice, the rumble of distant thunder.

“They're not fairly ‘tricks,’” the priestess insisted hotly. “They do work.” Now her hands came together under the cuffs of the robe, vanishing.

“But it's nothing to do with elemental manipulation.”

“It's nothing to do with my elemental ability,” she corrected, but reluctantly, a deer brought to bay. “It *is* manipulation.”

“Why?” he asked simply.

She surprised him by sliding to her feet, rising gracefully as a courtier. She inspected her upturned palms ruefully, then brushed them against the velvet robe. A pang of uneasy guilt shot through him at the distressed curve of her shoulders, the set of her jaw. He'd meant to chasten her, to demand forthrightness, but not to wound her. “I've never been skilled with the necessary deceptions,” she sighed.

“Necessary?” His voice was sharp again, and he took a deep breath. “Why should deception be necessary?” he continued, willing his grandmother's civility, calling up arduous etiquette lessons from his childhood.

She turned, the robe swaying gracefully with her, but with more weight, his sharper eye concluded than velvet should account for. “Your people have noticed the fading of your tools, you've said as much yourself—over decades.” He nodded, but rather than pursuing her case, the priestess bafflingly turned away again, and then back to him. She searched for something in his eyes, boring into him until he could feel his cheeks heating. “What I'm about to say would have me confined to Sher'azar for a decade, if Endera or anyone else found out,” she began, but now that she had committed this much do not hesitate. “The tools aren't simply fading. Our ability to manipulate the elements has also been dwindling—not merely for decades, but for the better part of a century.”

A cold fist of dread clenched in his stomach. “The sea wars—”



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