

SHIELD OF SEA AND SPACE

The Chaos Knight
BOOK THREE

ERIN HOFFMAN



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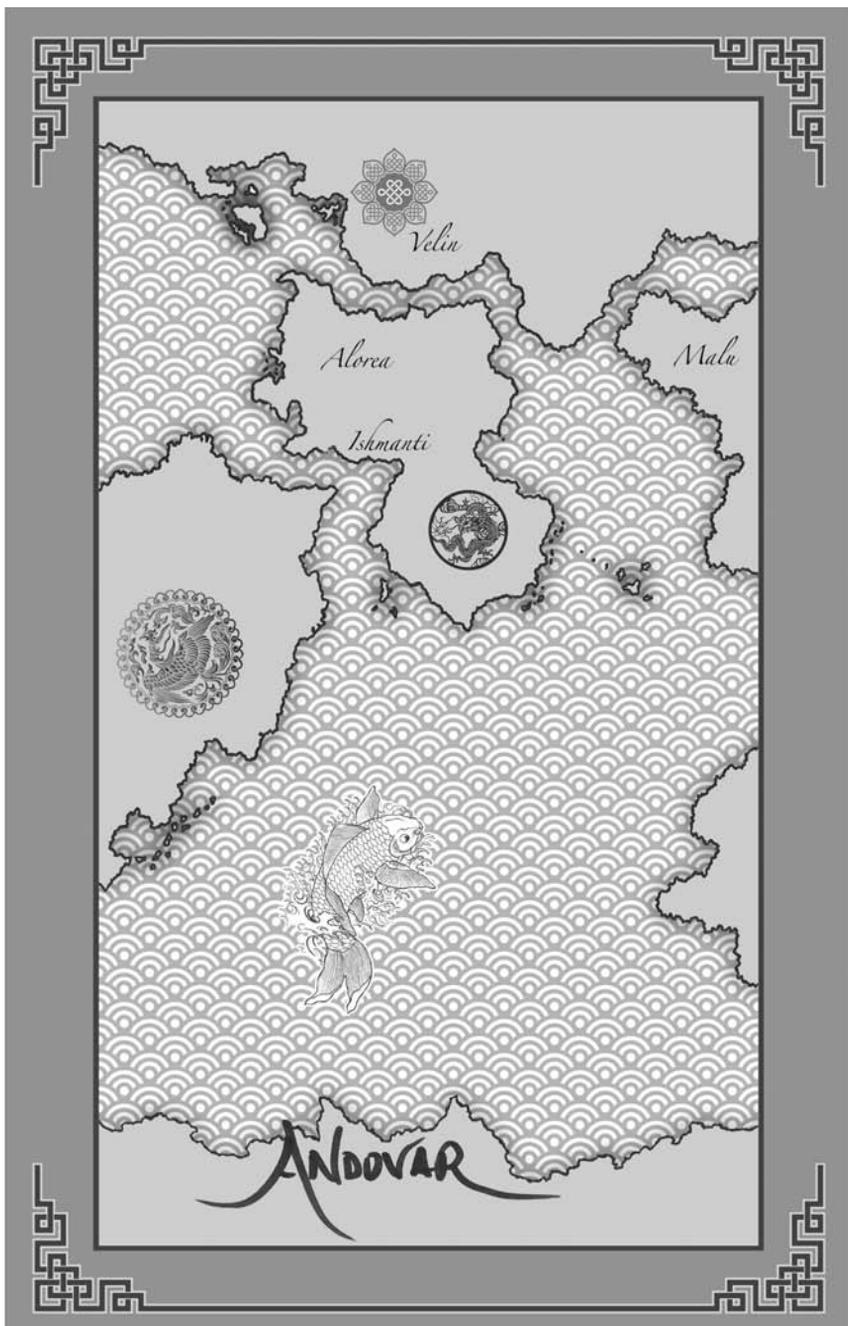
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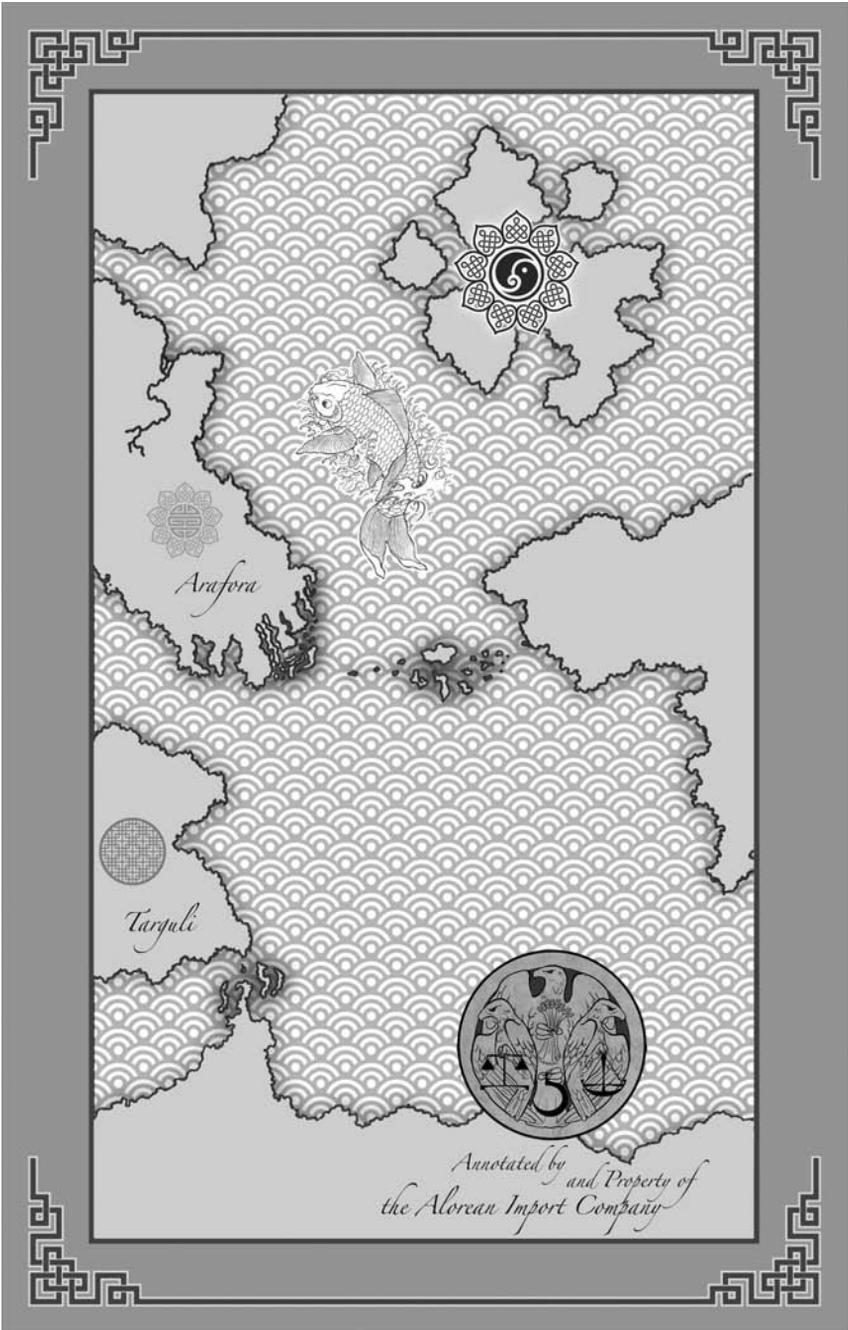
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To Jay
(Of course.)





*Annotated by and Property of
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“I love those who do not know how to live for today.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche

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PART ONE

MAZE OF DREAMS

CHAPTER ONE

AN AUSPICIOUS BIRTH

The halls of the imperial palace were empty, not just this predawn hour but for many months before it, and so only the most loyal imperial stewards remained to hear the labor cries. Deep within the royal apartments, where they'd retreated after the court's exodus, was the birthing chamber where generations of Alorean emperors and empresses had been born.

Only the mother's wails—brave, determined—echoed through the vacant halls; the rest, over a dozen gathered and more waiting anxiously beyond, gave their earnestness in silent prayer. They hoped to witness the birth of another imperial heir.

Ariadel knelt at the bedside, her fingers laced with Calphille's and locked tight, whispering encouragement between the screams. She brushed a sweat-soaked strand of hair from Calphille's forehead gently, then spared a look at Vidarian. He started at the worry in her eyes, then realized it was directed at him: she remembered, no doubt, how it had nearly killed him to watch her birth their daughter only four months earlier. The memory caused his stomach to flip, but he smiled back, and she returned her attention to Calphille.

As was his habit every unattended moment, he thought of Ailenne, and whether she was safe. At four months old she was already showing signs that Endera swore were unmistakably fire priestess gifts, though even the gryphons could not explain why she was showing them so early. The mystery resulted in an assortment of fire gryphons passing in and out of the palace to observe his daughter—an honor, but also a little unsettling.

The high, throaty wail of a newborn pierced through his thoughts. "A girl," Ariadel told Calphille, and the whispers passed behind them with an edge of excitement: "an empress!" Alorean had not had an empress in over a century.

“What shall she be called, my lady?” Whereas before Ariadel had spoken for Calphille alone, now she raised her voice so that the listeners in the hall could hear.

“Revelle,” Calphille said, hoarse but clear. “Revelle Aslaire.”

Renard, now head steward, glanced around the room, then knelt, hands raised toward Calphille and the babe. “Hail Empress Revelle, heir to the Aslaire dynasty, Empress of Alore!”

Vidarian had to blink sudden water from his eyes at the knowing smiles Ariadel and Calphille turned on him. Revelle had been his mother’s name. Hers was an old Alorean family, devout in their dedication to the empire.

The other stewards took up the call, kneeling in rows:

“Hail, Empress Revelle!”



Many hours later, Vidarian pored over documents stacked high upon what had been Lirien’s desk. It was strange to think that less than a year ago the emperor had granted him audience here and shown him what few knew: the dilapidated state of the imperial finances. Now Lirien was gone, and as he willed his tired eyes to focus on yet another ledger, Vidarian was all too familiar with Alore’s tenuous solvency.

The Alorean Import Company had laid a clever trap. The problem wasn’t Alore’s fundamental value—its fertile bread-lands and sophisticated crafters still produced goods valued all across Andovar—but by goading the empire into war after costly war the Company had succeeded in indebting both Andovar and Qui to itself. A convoluted series of agreements that took an army of scholars to unravel revealed only how impossible it would be for either empire to fully settle those debts.

With the death of the emperor, the Imperial City itself would very nearly have fallen into chaos were it not for Thalnarra’s pride, Calphille’s own surprising governing acumen, and unexpected support from the West Sea Kingdom.

Marielle, a pair of silver wire-rimmed spectacles perched on the tip of her

nose, traced down the rows of ledger lines with a fingertip. “Aye, sir,” she said, tapping an entry, and showing her own fatigue in calling him “sir,” a title that no Sea Queen ever need use. “Ferhian’s right. The Weavers Guild is in arrears by nearly ten thousand lora.”

“We’ll have them pay it out in cloth or fibers, if they must—coin to the grainmen if they can spare it. Proceeds to relieve Downbridge.”

“I’ll see it done,” she said, marking the page with a bit of ribbon and collecting up the ledger, along with two others in which they’d found similar errors. “You should get some rest.”

“I’d be lost without you, as usual,” Vidarian sighed.

“It does appear to be our fate —Captain, sir.” Marielle’s eye twinkled as she stood and gave a jaunty half bow, this time exaggerating the old title. She draped a discarded coat across her arm and left the study.

Vidarian knew better than to interpret her ease as weakness. It was the first time in over a hundred years that the West Sea Kingdom was at peace with the Alorean Empire. There remained dissidents among the captains. Marielle kept a firm hand on them in part by observing caustically that, as the neighboring empires did not yet recognize Calphille and her daughter’s claim to the Aslaire throne, they were all still technically pirates.

It was, at least, one less enemy to worry about. Though Calphille had rather miraculously retained her hold on the core of the court, the Alorean Import Company had withdrawn from the Imperial City following their defeat at Gryphonslair (the odd name for the remote desert encampment had stuck, rather to the amusement of the gryphons themselves), taking commerce with them. Several imperial cousins by now had made clear their intentions to recapture the throne, and the reprieve with Qui was precarious at best. When the gryphons had arrived in the city—without whom one of the cousins would certainly have seized the palace—more than half of the remaining citizenry had departed in fear, most of them merchants and craftspeople of means. Those who remained did so out of need, and the city crept by from day to day on the cusp of anarchic violence and poverty.

A tiny jeweled hummingbird buzzed into the room as soon as Marielle

departed, arriving with a rattling whirl of mechanical wings. It zoomed straight up to Vidarian and hovered an arm's length away from his face.

"Fairy-lights," the bird twittered, mimicking a high courtly accent. "I will have fairy-lights on all the fig trees." Khalesh, the Animator, had been unsurprised at the odd utterances of the tiny automata. They did have some memory, he'd explained, and before activated by their far-speaker would sometimes regurgitate fragments of messages they'd carried before. It was disorienting to think that the courtier the bird mimicked had probably been dead for a thousand years or more.

The bird's eyes, tiny gems that glowed green, changed color as its telepathic contact took over, darkening to blue and then lightening to lavender. It spoke then with a higher and even more metallic version of Iridan's cultured voice. "*I'm sorry to interrupt, lord regent.*" Iridan was quite intelligent enough to realize that Vidarian was not actually "regent"—it was a kind of shorthand used to describe his function in Calphille's court—but the automaton's incredible politeness did not permit him to use a lesser title.

"I've told you there's no need to apologize," Vidarian said. "And not to call me 'lord regent.'"

"*It's the delegation from Qui, Captain,*" the bird/Iridan said, flowing effortlessly into another now equally dubious title. "*I'm afraid they are quite insistent. I don't believe they can be put off again.*" That would explain the "regent." He was likely communicating via relay sphere with the Qui imperial palace. Vidarian hoped they couldn't hear him.

"Convey my apologies," he said more carefully. "And arrange a council for tomorrow."

"They would like very much if you would speak with them now."

The wind-up toy rattle of the hummingbird's wings filled the silence while Vidarian's mind worked. The Qui had never been so insistent before. If anything, getting a definitive answer from them had been like trying to catch river eels with his hands. A demand for an immediate audience must have grated on their sensibilities, and couldn't be good. "Tell them I'm on my way to the relay chamber," he said at last.

The hummingbird's glowing eyes brightened and its wingbeats, already a blur of movement, picked up speed. While telepathically connected to Iridan—a feat theoretically possible for a human, but thus far only the automaton could manage it—the little bird also relayed his emotions automatically. This had the odd side effect of conveying emotion that Iridan's own body hid; as he had been built for diplomacy, his own eyes showed only what he deliberately told them to.

After a little midair pirouette—the bird's equivalent of a nod—it buzzed out the door, and Vidarian followed, flipping the book of accounts shut as he rose.

He followed the flash of the hummingbird's wings through the warren of hallways, chambers, and stone-tiled garden paths to the old palace. Vidarian marveled that these passages that had been dizzying less than a year ago had now become second nature. The brass hummingbird urged him on with its own speed, zipping around corners and finally disappearing down the long guard-flanked hall that led to the Relay Room.

Without its usual complement of nine telepathic relay officers, the octagonal chamber seemed empty enough to echo. Their blue-lensed glasses were tucked into protective cases; only Iridan maintained the relay sphere now. The great stone orb glowed in the center of the table, and Iridan's hand upon it had summoned illusion magic, an amazingly refined use of fire energy that relayed the visage of a Qui councilor into the air above the relay sphere.

"Fair greeting to you, Vidarian lord regent," the councilor said. "I am told by your golden attendant that today is the day of a most auspicious birth. I convey our fondest congratulations." It was unusual, but something of a relief, for one of the Qui representatives to come so close to what seemed like a point so early in a conversation. Indeed, the councilor looked flustered by this. A tiny strand of hair had pulled loose from beneath his silk hat. Vidarian had never seen one of the Qui councilors in anything other than immaculate condition.

"Thank you, councilor. I will deliver your congratulations to the Empress Dowager. Aloreia has not had a crown princess in living memory."

This amplified the (still nameless, for they never introduced themselves individually) representative's discomfort. His hands came together at his waist, ever so subtly clenched.

It might be cruel to deliberately torture this high-ranking but ultimately powerless councilor, but Vidarian couldn't help himself. Qui had been playing both sides of the sand table for months, refusing to officially acknowledge Calphille but claiming to support peaceful relations with Alorean. And as always, Alorean Import Company "advisors" remained near at hand.

Iridan evidently did not condone Vidarian's plan to remind the councilor of his country's difficulty. He coughed. Vidarian turned toward the automaton in surprise. He hadn't known Iridan *could* cough, and wondered how it was accomplished. Iridan gave the slightest shake of his head, and Vidarian sighed. "I must apologize once more, councilor, for delaying our promised trip to your palace."

The councilor's hands relaxed with relief as he fled back onto safer verbal terrain. "Emperor Ziao is most anxious to make your acquaintance."

Out of the corner of his eye, Vidarian saw the hummingbird's tiny eyes brighten. It must still be picking up emotion from Iridan, and if the automaton thought this statement important, Vidarian was going to tread carefully. "I am of course most honored by the emperor's attention."

The slightest dip of Iridan's chin indicated this was at least an acceptable response. Knowing the Qui he probably should have made some sort of obeisance at the mere suggestion that their emperor might want to be physically in his presence.

"When might we expect you?"

The directness of the councilor's question raised the hair on the back of Vidarian's neck. Every other negotiation had been a dance of subtleties spread out over days. Now that Revelle was born, it appeared Qui patience was at an end. "It's a long journey—we'll need many weeks to prepare . . ."

A trace of a frown almost crossed the councilor's face. Another strand of hair slipped loose from his cap and he all but fidgeted. "We understand that you have the star passage technique."

Vidarian stared for a moment, then realized he must be talking about the gryphons' ability to open gates across large distances when working together. "Our gryphon allies can open such passages," he said. "But my understanding is that they require another gryphon at the destination that can communicate the location to them."

A wave of relief swept over the councilor's face. He had clearly been expecting an outburst when he revealed their knowledge of the gryphon's gates. Come to think of it, how *bad* they known? "In this we can assist." He turned to the right and beckoned. A shadow approached, and when the councilor touched it, the relay sphere picked up its image with a burst of light.

It was a gryphon, but one unlike any Vidarian had seen. Its round face was ghostly white, its black eyes large and round. A slim beak almost disappeared into the soft, needle-thin feathers of its cheeks. When it bobbed its head in a greeting, its neck moved fluidly, its feathers merging at the edges, hairlike, where those of the gryphons he knew would have scissored like scales.

"This is Tephir. He is most curious about your star passage gryphons."

When Vidarian found his voice, he managed, "I am sure they will be quite pleased to speak with him. If they knew of gryphons in Qui, they have not spoken of them."

"Tephir and his people have lived here in secret for many centuries," the councilor explained. "They are the keepers of the Imperial Library." Now the white gryphon made a strange gesture with his foreclaw, and Vidarian saw that all but one of the talons on his long "fingers" had been removed in what appeared to be a deliberate and long-ago amputation.

// It will take some hours to fluently join my mind to your gryphons' there, // Tephir said, his voice delicate and cultured like fine water-pressed paper in Vidarian's mind. *// But I am confident the transfer can be made. //*

Again some several moments passed before Vidarian regained himself, realizing that the Qui councilor was staring at him. "We'll begin right away," he said at last.



Ariadel was in the antechamber to Calphille's suite of rooms, supervising. Their daughter was in her arms, inquisitively watching the flow of attendants and visitors that passed through the doors bearing supplies or colorfully wrapped gifts. Rai, wolf-shaped, curled in the corner of the room. The shapeshifter—Vidarian still had difficulty thinking of him as a dragon—was larger than ever, and more elaborately spine-ruffed than he had been as a pup. His eyes rarely left Ailenne these days. Beside him lay Raven, cat-shaped; the smoke-grey kitten Ariadel had plucked from the Val Harlon dock long ago had become a scarlet-tipped adult, and a shapechanger as formidable as Rai.

"We'll come with you, of course," Ariadel said. Rai's ears perked toward them.

"Into Qui? You and Ailenne? You—can't," Vidarian finished lamely, caught between protectiveness and the realization that he was wading head first into treacherous reefs.

"I'm sorry," Ariadel said, with a dangerous honey sweetness. "At some point, without my knowledge, did you manage to learn spoken or written Qui? Will you be bringing anyone familiar with their customs?"

"Iridan—"

"You know as well as I do they'll never accept an automaton for truly delicate matters of negotiation. The Alorean court certainly wouldn't, and they at least are familiar with Iridan."

"*She is correct, sir,*" the bird chirped from Vidarian's shoulder. He jumped; it was so light in weight that he'd forgotten it had followed him to Calphille's rooms.

"None of this makes it remotely reasonable for me to bring my wife and infant daughter into the heart of an enemy empire," Vidarian said.

"By all means don't," Ariadel replied dryly. "Instead leave us in the heart of a besieged capital surrounded by assorted nobles all threatening to send assassins after the 'inhuman usurper' we protect." He must have looked stricken, for she gave him one more sardonic glance and then took pity, softening. She leaned toward him, balancing their daughter in one arm, and touched his arm. "We left 'safe' behind long ago, my love. This is the life we chose."

// AN AUSPICIOUS BIRTH //

Vidarian clasped her hand in both of his. “You know your strength is the last I would doubt. If it weren’t for the children—”

At that moment, one of the midwives pushed open the door from further inside the suite, bearing Revelle, who, though only hours old, squalled heartily. She was already strong.

Vidarian was glad to hear the power in her cries. “She has a winding path before her,” he said. “Even if she were fully human—”

A dry chuckle behind them turned both their heads. It was another attendant, this one from Calphille’s people, a far-distant cousin, she’d said. In ones and twos dryads had been arriving in the Imperial City, wakened from their long slumber by the opening of the Great Gate. This one was one of the most wizened old women Vidarian had ever seen. In her tree form she was a bizarre, tall plant from the deserts of the far southern continent, a pulpy tree covered with needle-like thorns as long as Vidarian’s fingers.

“Centuries ago my people became one with the blood of Andovar and gained our shapechanging abilities. We do not borrow our magic from the land, or from your strange goddesses —our magic is our own.” She smiled, and her small white teeth called to mind the thorns of that arid plant shape. “Perhaps it is we who are ‘fully human.’”