

SWORD OF  
FIRE AND SEA



# SWORD OF FIRE AND SEA

*The Chaos Knight*  
BOOK ONE

ERIN HOFFMAN



an imprint of **Prometheus Books**  
Amherst, NY

*for Brenn and Kristin—  
two very talented ladies who believed*

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## 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



## CHAPTER 1

# 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 flag 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 its 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 secure 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 these 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 easily 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 the 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 they 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 no warmth in her voice. "I had hoped this wouldn't be necessary. Seventy years ago your great-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 Sharlin 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 too tightly for 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 Vko-rtha who seek her are telepaths, and can sense any such metal when it comes near the life flame of a fire priestess. It acts as 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 were 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.”