

DROWNING MERMAIDS



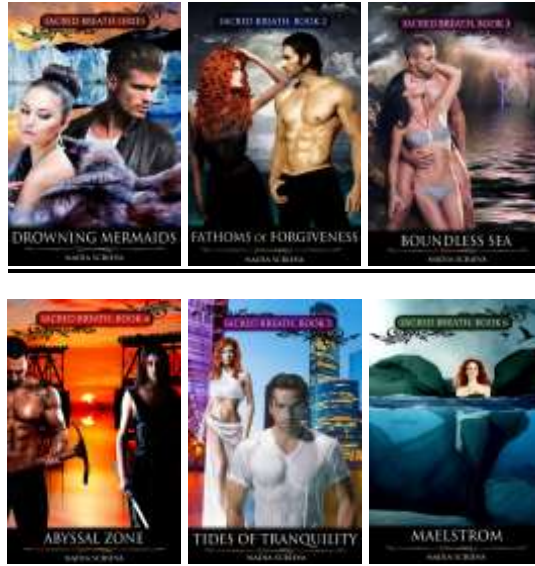
Book One of the Sacred Breath Series

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NOVELS BY NADIA SCRIEVA:

Sacred Breath Series



Thirty Minutes to Heartbreak



Novellas



For Samantha Major; the girl with the mermaid tattoo and unquenchable zest for adventure.

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PACIFIC KINGDOMS



MAP OF THE UNDERSEA

ATLANTIC KINGDOMS



MAP OF THE UNDERSEA

We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea, whether it is to sail or to watch— we are going back from whence we came.

John F. Kennedy

CHAPTER 1: CHANGE IN THE SEAS



“To our lost friend.”

“To Leander. I hope he’s in a better place than this—one with more tolerable temperatures.”

“So anywhere? Including hell?”

“I’m not sure what I believe about the afterlife,” the young man responded thoughtfully, “but I am positive that the fires of Hades are a tropical paradise compared to Alaska.”

The older man laughed at this, temporarily transforming his sorrowful face. “Cheers, kid.”

“Cheers, Captain.” The two men nodded at each other solemnly before clinking their mugs together. The younger one took a long, satisfying swig of the brew before smiling in appreciation. “You know, this club is a lot wilder than I expected. I figure if I’m going to kill myself for money, I might as well spend it on some quality entertainment in the downtime.”

“Kid,” said the grey-haired man, shaking his head disapprovingly, “too much of this kind of ‘entertainment’ will be the precise thing that gets you killed on the job if you’re not careful.”

“I’ve been lucky in my life so far. I don’t intend for that to change. Want to get a seat closer to the stage, Captain?”

“No, thanks, Arnav. You go ahead. My leg’s aching something awful.”

“An excellent excuse to save your dollar bills!” Arnav joked before clapping his friend on the back and heading to the center of the action.

Captain Trevain Murphy leaned back in his chair, mulling over the details of the previous days. He had always been fortunate on the waters; he had always somehow scraped by until the end of the season without a single casualty.

He was a firm believer in not allowing the sea to collect the souls of his men. Although they took their food from the sea’s open mouth, he did not believe it was necessary to offer up human sacrifices for this privilege. He had stayed in business long enough without appeasing any pagan gods—and he was quite certain that the gods did not pay close attention to Alaska anyway. Trevain did not accept that losses were bound to happen as most others did. He held that they were the result of carelessness and inefficiency, and he chose his men cautiously to avoid having either of these blights on his boat.

The conditions of Leander’s demise had been strange. The captain had begun to wonder in the moments before the incident whether the man had been feeling all that well.

“*Did you hear a strange noise, Captain?*” Leander had asked in his suspicious but respectful manner.

Trevain had briefly paused, as if to listen, to satisfy the man. Perhaps his mind had been too occupied with the remaining tasks on board, but he had heard nothing. “*Just the whistling of the wind, Leo. A storm’s not far off, but we’ll be home long before it hits. Why are you so agitated?*”

“*I just... I swear I saw something in the water earlier.*”

“*Like what?*”

"I don't know." Leander had been so tense that he twitched when Arnav dropped a coil of rope a few feet away from him. *"I am a bit tired and feverish. Might just be coming down with something and seeing things."*

"Just relax—we'll be back to shore soon. A hot meal and a warm bed will fix you right up, son." Now, in retrospect, his own words made him cringe.

The weather had been benevolent while the day had unfolded smoothly. There was no way that Trevain could have expected anything unusual on such a humdrum fishing trip. After hauling up the pots and completing all of the most grueling tasks, the crew had begun to bask in their communal sense of accomplishment and good cheer. They had been turning the ship around and preparing to head home when the first mate, Douglas, had noticed that Leander was missing. None of the men could find him below or above deck, and no one had shouted for a man overboard. Everyone had been puzzled, and Trevain had felt the first pangs of true panic he'd experienced in over thirty years. Leander had just seemed to vanish.

The crew had suggested that the young man they fondly called "Leo" might be taking a nap somewhere. It had been a long trip on the water, and the seasoned seamen were used to working inhuman hours. They had considered that he had been hiding or trying to pull some strange kind of prank. It had only taken a few hours for the *Magician's* temperament to progress from mildly amused to generally annoyed and finally to disbelieving and appalled. It was hard to accept that a man was dead when there were no details to process regarding the incident. Nothing to examine, nothing to understand.

The last person to speak with Leander had been Edwin, the Canadian. When asked about the conversation repeatedly by the crew, Edwin lost his cool at having to revisit, dozens of times, that Leander had only told him that he was going to take a leak. The Canadian had cursed incessantly, while wiping tears from his eyes with his sleeves. *"I thought it was safe enough for him to go to the fucking washroom on his own. I didn't think he was in danger of drowning while urinating! Toilet monsters that grab you by the wang and pull you down to a horrifying death-by-piss haven't exactly been my major concern since preschool."*

Now the men were drowning their woes in women and booze. They loved the occasional sojourn in Soldotna for that purpose, but their woes usually did not require such a substantial sloshing to be adequately submerged.

As Captain Murphy sat in a secluded corner of the strip club, he frowned until his face creased with dozens of dismal trenches. The lines deepened and intersected to create a roadmap leading to nowhere as he inwardly labored to find the path to understanding how he had lost a man. He had always prided himself on being able to bring men home to their wives and children at the end of the season. Leander had been young, and had no children depending on him—but he had a girlfriend that he had spoken of often, one whom he had hoped to marry. He also had loving parents. There had been an established place for him in the world which had now collapsed.

No obvious, detrimental mistake had been made and no miscalculations could be identified. There was no one to punish or blame. Trevain could not yell at the men to reinforce or avoid a certain action in the future to prevent this from occurring again. There was nothing to correct, there was no lesson to be learned. Nothing had really gone wrong. It had been a random, quiet, shadowlike loss.

Had Leander just decided to dive off the side of the boat when no one was looking, just for the hell of it? Had he plunged himself into the cold depths to see how far he could swim down into the sea before he sucked in a breath of saltwater? These were the types of scenarios

that floated through the captain's mind as he tried to imagine what had happened to the deckhand. The situation seemed *that* crazy. Trevain couldn't shake the feeling that something had changed. There had been some kind of major change in the seas since he was a boy, and he no longer knew the waters as well as he always felt he had.

The ocean was not usually quiet and mercenary-like in her brutality. There had always been plenty of fanfare to announce her burgeoning rage. The sky would use its whole canvas to display a bloodbath of remarkable colors in unmistakable warning. Trevain had always interpreted the message correctly: "She is ravenous. Do not go out to fish today. She will rape you." It had very little to do with the weather—of course bad weather presented a technical danger. Trevain was more concerned with some quality he could not quite describe, but could intuitively feel and gauge—bad energy, perhaps.

Oftentimes the crew would call him silly and superstitious. Trevain would patiently point out other signs of trouble as he sternly forbade the men to sail. Large, dark birds like falcons and eagles would leave their secret roosts and venture out, flying in erratic and confused patterns over the shoreline as if trying to discern the source of an unknown crisis. There might be a certain mournful sound in the wind or a certain morbid chill in the air. It was as if everything on the planet was privy to some knowledge that escaped Trevain. Everything was pulsating with the excitement of some indefinite impending carnage. Trevain felt that being human automatically precluded him from being on nature's mailing list for memos about this sort of thing, but he would not allow that disadvantage to cripple him.

"We have all lost touch with nature," Trevain would lecture threateningly, pointing at his only Inuit crew member, "yes, even you Ujarak." The accused man would shrug his innocence and chomp down on his cigar nervously as the captain continued his tirade. "If your greed for a few dollars is greater than your inclination to live, then by all means, go out and fish! Be my guest, take the boat." Trevain would turn around and march away from the docks, with a parting wave and a mocking challenge, "Go out and fish!"

Of course, no one did.

One by one, the crew would lose their motivation for the intended trip. Without a tenacious leader to rally them, they would disband within minutes and trickle off into homes, bars, and hotel rooms. Sure enough, by the time they gathered again they would have heard of at least one accident or casualty on another fishing boat. They would return to work with the high morale that came from knowing they had escaped the ultimate misfortune. They would hastily remove their hats when speaking of the lost or injured man, and have their faith in their captain renewed to the greatest magnitude.

For decades, although men had come and gone from his crew, that was the way things had worked. Until Leander. Until a few days ago when Captain Murphy had been unable to inform his crew of impending danger. He had not noticed any distress in the birds, the sky, or the winds. His usual indicators had failed him. It was as if even *they* had been unaware of the ocean's ire.

Maybe Leo was just mentally unstable, the captain thought to himself. I could have overlooked something when I hired him—maybe he was hallucinating, and he saw or heard something which caused him to jump overboard and dive to his death when we were all occupied. Maybe it was just a singular event. Something out of my control.

As he tried to mentally reassure himself, he leaned back and drank deeply of his cold beer. He did not feel very reassured. Smiling wryly, he imagined that he suddenly understood what it was like to be a veteran master of some now obsolete technology: that which he had been

most intimate with had gone and innovated itself on him. Yes, he was fairly certain there had been some kind of eerie change in the seas he had come to know so well, and he was pretty sure that it did not have anything to do with global warming.

CHAPTER 2: SHE DANCED POWER



Captain Murphy had not intended to even glance at the stage.

While his shipmates found the hollering and raucous energy of the crowd distracting and healing, he felt that remaining silent in a corner while slowly nursing his drink was a better way to pay homage to the memory of his shipmate. Staring very hard at the droplets of condensation gathering on his glass, and following them as they trickled down into a little pool on his coaster, was his manner of protest.

Why should he seek to experience anything resembling fun when Leander no longer could? The man had been robbed of his life while working under *his* watch. Trevain was the ship's captain—the ultimate authority: God of his boat. This made him ultimately responsible. He felt it more than ever as he lifted the cold beer to his lips again for a long swig.

The last simple, coherent thought he would remember having before his mind was plunged into a war with itself for fourteen minutes and twenty three seconds was that he definitely needed to get something stronger.

He really had not meant to look.

However, sometimes a word of certain significance can draw a man out of his reverie. When the DJ announced her name, it brought back the memory of his mother's voice reading to him when he was a child.

"Now gentlemen, get ready to be blown away by our mysterious newcomer. She's the girl you've always dreamed of, but never thought you'd actually meet in the flesh: *Undina!*"

He glanced up for a moment, his eyes falling upon the dark-haired woman who was slowly ascending the stairs to the stage. The length of her hair was astonishing—it flowed almost down to her knees. He felt immediate curiosity about the way her stormy eyes were downcast and her mouth set in a grim line. He felt further curiosity when he saw her light graceful steps—she was wearing ballet slippers! Not eight inch heels that made her steps awkward and clunky, but real dancing shoes.

Despite his escalating curiosity, Trevain managed to yank his eyes away from the stage and focus again on the droplets sitting on his beer glass. He had no business looking at such a young girl, he told himself. She might be an adequate dancer, someone moderately trained in ballet but not skilled enough to be a prima ballerina. She might have chosen an interesting stage name which suggested she had some mild knowledge of art or literature, and it might be entertaining to speak with her...

Trevain clamped the thought by the neck before it could gasp its first breath. He would not, absolutely would not, even *consider* speaking with such a young girl. He would not behave foolishly like the other older men who frequented this club and places like it. He was here for the sake of his crew's morale. He was not even a patron of this place, not in the traditional sense, not really. He would not sit with her, converse with her, and tentatively place his hand on her knee in desperation to touch her to be assured that she was real. He had just about as much business doing so as the disinterested droplets of condensation on his glass.

Why was it so quiet in the club all of a sudden? Several strange, hushed seconds of silence made Trevain wonder if he had been transported to a different venue. Was this the same rowdy, vulgar club that he despised? What was happening on the stage? An asymmetrical bead of water joined with its neighbors and slowly began its descent. Trevain put his finger on the glass, destroying the slow moving droplet and quickly tracing its path with his roughened skin.

I will not look. I will not look. He mentally chanted a mantra of encouragement to himself, trying to gain strength from watching the apathetic and asexual water droplets and participating in their gravity-induced activities. Carefully picking up the glass and bringing it close to his face, he could almost successfully pretend he was one of them. He clung to the glass in a strange suspension. Until the silence ended.

One massive, powerful voice filled the club—only overwhelming, bewitching soprano vocals, no music. There was no need for music, for the voice itself would have shamed a harpsichord. Trevain's first instinct was to close his eyes and let the voice wash over him, but he had been struggling so valiantly to do the opposite of what he most desired that he instead savagely lowered his glass to its coaster and turned his head toward the stage. He looked.

Later he would not be able to describe exactly what he saw, or how it affected him. A slender gracefully extended arm, an expression contorted with longing and yearning of the truest kind. Eyes flashing like lightning, lips parted with vulnerability.

The woman's feet moved across the floor with such ease and liquidity that he could have believed she was flying. Yet when they hit the ground after certain spins or jumps, he could hear the solid sound they made, even over the enchanting volume of the music. Those long, slender, girlish legs were deceiving in the strength and flexibility they possessed.

She danced power. Yet there were moments of such tenderness! She would pause, and hesitantly beseech the audience with a pleading look. It was heartbreakingly poignant—as though she were seeking wisdom to correct the error of her ways. Then she would suddenly be fierce, and her movements would be so sudden and quick and sure that he had to hold his breath to properly absorb her furious, vengeful sequences.

Absorb he did, and consumed he would have if it were possible.

Oddly enough, he recognized the first two of the songs she danced to. One was from the opera *Rusalka*, and another was from an opera called *Undina*, which must be her namesake. Trevain's mother had loved obscure pieces of opera, and on any given day in their household when he was growing up such songs could have been heard playing as Alice Murphy had gone about her housework.

He was startled as the woman on stage fell quite suddenly to a lowered position, and continued to dance from her knees. She was sometimes so still, stationary, and quiet, and then she would be explosive—she would be everywhere at once. Every single moment of her dance had him fully engaged, and he could not have looked away if he tried. He did not even realize that he was craning his neck for a better view.

When she gracefully lifted her dress to slowly remove her lace panties, Trevain was again surprised. She did it in a manner which was so relaxed that she could have been in her own bedroom, yet so careful that no skin was yet exposed. She was fulfilling the requirement of removing an article of clothing during the second song, he knew. However, the article she had chosen to remove showed nothing. As she continued to dance without her panties, her skirt swirling around her thighs was suddenly tenfold as tantalizing.

He found himself staring at the glittering red fabric as it billowed in the breeze created by her motions. He found himself staring at her smooth tanned thighs, illuminated by the flashing

lights, and hoping for a glimpse of more of her skin. He found his lips had become very dry, and he licked them to moisten them. Trevain thought he imagined for a moment that the woman, Undina, cast a smug and proud look in his direction, as though she knew how impatient he was to see more—as though she knew the effect she was having on him. She was far too young to exhibit such confidence. Also, there was no possible way she could have known the true extent of what her dance made him feel. It was beyond anyone's comprehension, including his own.

Before long—it certainly felt like an instant, the woman on stage was removing her dress. Trevain felt his heartbeat quicken, and almost thought he should look away. She was too young, too young for him to behold in the nude! Yet it was the nature of the establishment, and although the girl had perhaps taken refreshing liberties with her choice of music and her style of dance, she conformed to the basic rules of the job.

As the melody played, whimsical and feminine, Undina stood with her back toward the audience. She glanced back at the enrapt onlookers as she slowly, *achingly* slowly, slipped one scarlet strap of her dress off of her right shoulder. Her fingers were extended to emphasize the drama of the gesture. She smiled then, one of those carefree smiles of youth, and her once stormy eyes seemed to twinkle with mischief and delight. She did the same with her other shoulder, yet it was somehow different. The subtlest change in her expression seemed to change the mood from light and airy to somber and sultry.

She tossed her impossibly long dark hair to the front of her body and began sliding the crimson dress down her back. Trevain watched closely, drinking in each new inch of velvety tanned flesh that Undina exposed. Her skin was flawless as it hugged the sinews and contours of her back, and in the atmospheric lighting of the club, almost luminous. The contrast of her skin against the bold burgundy hue of the fabric was striking. She arranged her dress around her hips before slowly turning to face the audience. She crossed her arms over her chest in a display of modesty as she moved forward, gentle steps in time with the music.

Then her arms were gone, and her face was proud and bold as she bared her breasts—unbearably round and firm collections of flesh. As she moved back into her dance, using one hand to hold her dress around her hips, Trevain wondered at how impressively young her body was. He marveled at her athletic silhouette when she arched backwards with extended arms, and he marveled at how she seemed conscious of her motions to the perfectly extended tips of her fingers and pointed toes.

She danced not only shamelessly, but proudly when she was nude, and had cast the dress completely aside. Her motions were not as wild and powerful, but they were careful and precise. Her steps were so controlled and gentle that her breasts did not shake when she moved. She moved as though her limbs were cutting through a substance far more viscous than air—almost as if she were underwater.

She was dancing the nighttime. She had taken them through the course of a full day, through energetic mornings, brilliant noons, mellow evenings, and now it was the quiet, peaceful night. Or perhaps she was dancing the winter. Having already paid homage to the midnight sun, she now saluted the midday moon.

Then it was over, as solemnly as it had begun. Undina stood completely nude, with a hauntingly serene and satisfied expression on her face.

The crowd erupted in applause, in thundering, most appreciative applause. Undina inclined her head in polite acknowledgement. In the midst of the loud clapping and cheering, she looked up at the audience, and her eyes met with Trevain's. She gazed at him, and he gazed back at her, enraptured. Their eyes were locked for a moment in a quiet, private intensity. As the

music and applause subsided, her expression darkened once more and her eyes lowered. She quickly gathered the garments she had disposed of, and in an instant she had disappeared backstage.

Trevain used his tongue to moisten his dry mouth. He exhaled. He mused at how shaken and affected he was. *It was a work of art*, he told himself. *It was just as if I had entered any museum and observed... some work of art.*

He felt emotionally drained. Grasping his beer once more, he brought it to his lips and poured the remaining contents down his throat. As he lowered it to the table, he noticed a particularly large droplet sliding down the glass. A tear.

He moved his hand to his eyelashes to scrape away any others that threatened to fall. *One tear is acceptable*, Trevain reasoned, *considering that a man just lost his life. One tear is acceptable.*

He knew quite well that Leander had not crossed his mind for what must have been over fourteen minutes and forty-six seconds.



Her cheek grazed her knee as she waited backstage, doing simple stretches. A woman with large fake breasts tottered by shakily on towering heels, sending her a suspicious glare. Aazuria was stricken by the disproportionate size of the woman's breasts with respect to the rest of her emaciated body; she remembered something her personal doctor had told her about new procedures which augmented certain physical attributes. It was fascinating, but not really of much significance to her, and she returned to pressing her forehead flush against her leg.

The carpet under her bare legs was rough and abrasive. She imagined that it was already leaving ugly scratches on her newly-tanned skin. As she straightened slowly from the stretch, she stared at the unfamiliar color of her knee. She missed being underwater. More women strolled by, sending her more distrustful and disdainful looks. Aazuria sighed to herself, and continued to pull her muscles taut. She focused on the comforting ache in her tendons as she tried to bury her homesickness and override the upsetting images from her recent past which flashed just behind her eyes.

A redheaded woman burst into the room, strutting buoyantly on her six-inch pumps as if they were springs. Her whole body was finely toned and her height was intimidating; at six feet tall she towered over the other women in the room who barely came up to her chin. Her pleasant laughter rang out loudly in the dressing room.

"For Sedna's sake! Zuri, you really don't need to stretch. Don't bother giving this any effort! It's supposed to be a low-class, inferior form of entertainment." The redhead turned to the women who had been watching Aazuria with airs of superiority and glared at them. She flung her hand towards the exit as she barked an order, "Skedaddle, bitches."

The women quickly complied. Aazuria smiled up gratefully at her protectress. "It is not worth doing unless it is done properly, Visola."

"Then show me how it's done, Princess," Visola said with a wink. "Just be careful not to overexert yourself. Those lovely legs of yours aren't used to these ghetto conditions."

"Are you referring to the club or the land?" Aazuria asked as used a knuckle to knead her thigh.

“Both. I’ll be watching.”

“You have always been watching,” Aazuria said fondly. She heard the first few notes of her song begin, and she rose to her feet nervously. She took a deep breath, feeling the unfamiliar air fill her lungs—it felt extraordinarily empty. The muffled voice of the DJ filtered backstage:

“Now gentlemen, get ready to be blown away by our mysterious newcomer. She’s the girl you’ve always dreamed of, but never thought you’d actually meet in the flesh: Undina!”

Visola smiled. “Not a bad introduction. Why did you choose to use your mother’s name?”

“It was the first thing that came to mind when they asked.” Giving her friend a gentle shrug, Aazuria glanced at the exit with foreboding. “Well, here I go.”

“Break a le—”

“I would much rather not.” When she pushed past the beaded curtains, Aazuria immediately felt the vibrations of music seeping into her bones. Her fingers twitched with the desire to move before she had permitted them to do so, and she exercised discipline to quell them. *To do this correctly means moving precisely when the music commands me to—I will not waste a single motion.* Her eyes were downcast as she ascended the stairs, feeling a strange sense of simultaneous nervousness and excitement. She had always been confident in her dancing technique—she had studied various styles on various continents, and she had practiced for hundreds of years. She usually trained in water, and it was far more difficult to dance in water than it was on land. By all accounts, this should be a cinch.

The familiar vocals began, and Aazuria finally surrendered to the yearning of her limbs and plunged them into motion. A burst of energy began in her chest, and visibly traveled throughout her every cell. Indescribable sensations of loveliness washed over her, as they always did when she began dancing, reaching her lips to settle there in a subtle curve of pleasure. Once she had expertly commenced her art, she turned to gauge the reaction of her onlookers.

The audience was a sea of eyes. Adoring eyes of those seeking something from her dance which she would never be able to give them. They were seeking the things which they did not really need. They sought sex and excitement or momentary stimulation, but her every gesture and expression, her every step, was dancing in homage to something transcendent and everlasting.

Slowly, the audience was pulled out of the realm of their own expectations and into the realm of her creation. Yes, she could hold them spellbound with a little help from the haunting sound of her sister’s recorded voice. Aazuria was strong enough to guide them all—she had always been in a position of leadership, and this was no different. She created the atmosphere; she poured her personality and her principles into it, and she invited them inside for a moment to glimpse the décor of her soul. She felt like she was challenging their roughness with her grace, and ultimately, she was winning. She was overpowering them.

She spun, and spun, until she felt windborne. There was an impossible fire within her which seemed to radiate forth from her center. All of the elements coalesced in her emotions, and as always, she felt far greater than herself when she danced. Aazuria felt a memory of her father’s face return to her, but she flung her head to the side, casting it away from her thoughts before it could cause her harm or interrupt the flow of her kinetic thrill.

There might be other moments of her life when she was twisted into various uncomfortable shapes by exterior forces, but for now, at least, she was in complete control. The stage was hers, the audience was hers, and time was hers. She could bend it and make the moment last an instant or a lifetime, depending on her whim. She could manipulate all of their

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