

Chapter One

For an instant, like a single beat of wings, Annika scented the sea, heard the voices lifted in song. Here then gone, a blur within the blur of color and speed, but it swelled in her heart like love.

Then came a sigh, and the echoes of sighs, another kind of music. Bittersweet. And this washed through her like tears.

So with joy and sorrow mated in her heart, she fell. Tumbling spiraling, spinning in a breathless rush that added a reckless thrill and quick panic.

A thousand wings beat now, a thousand and a thousand more, with whipping wind, a wall of sound. And color flicked away into the dark as she landed abruptly enough to lose her breath.

For a moment she feared they'd landed in some deep, dark cave where spiders would crawl, and worse, much worse, where Nerezza waited to strike.

Then her vision cleared. She made out shadows, what she knew as moonlight, and felt the firm body beneath hers, the arms wrapped tight around her. She knew that shape, that scent, wanted to snuggle right in, Nerezza or not.

It was a wonder, a star-struck sea of wonder, to feel his heart beat, so fast and strong, against hers.

Then he shifted a little, and one hand slid up, then down her hair. The other skimmed wonderfully over her bottom.

She snuggled right in.

“Um.” Both hands came to her shoulders now, but his voice spoke close enough to her heart that his breath tickled it. “Are you okay? Are you hurt? Everybody okay?”

She remembered her friends—not that she'd forgotten them, not ever. But she'd never lain so intimately on a man before—on Sawyer—and she liked it very, very much.

She heard grunts, short groans, some cursing. Doyle's voice, close by and annoyed, clearly said, "Fuck me," which she knew wasn't an invitation to mate, but an oath.

She didn't worry about Doyle. After all, he was an immortal.

"Sound off." That was Bran, somewhere a few feet away. "Did everybody make it? I've got Sasha. Riley?"

"What a ride!"

"One you finished with your knee in my balls," Doyle added.

Annika heard a thump, which she interpreted as Doyle shoving Riley and her knee aside—as balls, she'd learned, weren't just the round toy that bounced, but a man's sensitive area.

"I'm here," she called out, and experimented by wiggling a little on Sawyer's sensitive area. "Did we fall out of the sky?"

"Not far from it." Sawyer cleared his throat and, to Annika's disappointment, shifted again and sat up. "I couldn't slow it down. I've never taken six people this far. I misjudged, I guess."

"We're here, the six of us, and that's first on the list," Bran stated. "Now, are we where we aimed to be?"

"We're inside," Sasha commented. "I can see windows, and moonlight through them. Wherever we are, it's still night."

"Let's hope Sawyer and his time- and space-bending compass got us where and when we want. So let's find out."

Riley pushed to her feet. The scientist—archaeologist. Annika rolled the word in her mind as her people, the merpeople, had nothing to compare. They had no lycans either, she thought, so nothing and no one quite like Riley existed in Annika's world.

Dr. Riley Gwinn—tough, compact body, wide-brimmed hat that had somehow stayed on her head—strode to the window.

"I can see water, but not the view from the villa on Corfu—we're higher up. A road, steep, narrow. We've got steps leading down to it. I'm pretty sure this is Capri, and this is the villa. Bull's-eye, Sawyer.

Kudos to the traveler and his magic compass.”

“I’ll take them.” He stood, hesitated, then held out a hand to help Annika up. Though her legs were strong and agile, she let him.

“Let me see if I can find the lights,” Riley began.

“I can help with that.”

Bran, on his feet, an arm around Sasha, held out his hand. The ball of light hovering over his palm illuminated the room.

Seeing her friends lifted her heart as the song had. Sasha, the seer, with her hair like the sun and her eyes of the sky, and Bran, the sorcerer, so handsome with his magick lighting him. And Riley, one hand on the butt of the gun on her hip—at the ready—her dark gold eyes looking everywhere at once as Doyle, a warrior through and through, stood with his sword already drawn.

And Sawyer, always Sawyer, with the compass of the traveler in his hand.

They might be bruised and bloodied from the last battle, but they were safe and together.

“Is this our home now?” she wondered. “It’s very pretty.”

“Unless Sawyer dropped us at the wrong address, I say this is the new HQ.” Though her hand stayed on her gun, Riley moved from the window.

The room had colorful cushions on a long bed—no, Annika reminded herself, a sofa. And chairs and tables with pretty lamps. The floor—they all had reason to know—was hard, with large tiles the color of sun-beaten sand.

Riley moved to one of the lamps, turned the switch and, with the magic of electricity, it lit.

“Let me get my bearings, make sure we’re in the right place. We don’t want a visit from the *polizia*.”

Riley moved out of the room through a wide, arched opening. In seconds, more light poured through. Sheathing his sword, Doyle moved out after her.

“Here’s all our stuff, at least it looks like all of it. And it looks like it had a softer landing than we did.”

Annika peeked out. She didn’t know what to call the space with its big door facing the sea, and the

archways leading to other spaces. But their bags and boxes sat in a pile in the center of it.

And with a muttered curse, Doyle heaved his motorcycle upright.

“I had to drop the stuff first so we didn’t end up landing on it,” Sawyer said. “Bull’s-eye or not, Riley?”

“It fits the description I got,” Riley went on. “And the location. There’s supposed to be a large living area with glass doors leading to a . . . And here we go.”

More lights, and as Riley said, a large room with more of the sofas and chairs and pretty little things. But best, oh, best of all, the wide, wide glass to bring in the sky and sea.

When Annika rushed forward to open the glass, Riley stayed her hand.

“Don’t. Not yet. There’s an alarm system. I have the code. We need to turn it off before we open this, or anything else.”

“Panel’s right here,” Sawyer told her, and tapped it.

“Give me a sec.” Riley dug a piece of paper out of her pocket. “Didn’t want to trust my memory in case the trip scrambled my brains.”

“Shifting doesn’t scramble brains.” Grinning, Sawyer knocked his knuckles on Riley’s head as she keyed in the code.

“Go ahead and open it, Annika.”

When she did, she twirled out onto a wide terrace, where there was night and moon, sea and the scent of it all, all perfumed with lemons and flowers.

“It’s beautiful! I’ve never seen it from so high.”

“But you’ve seen it before?” Sawyer asked her. “Capri?”

“From the sea. And beneath, where there are blue caves and deep water and the bones of ships that sailed long ago. There are flowers!” She reached out to touch the petals of flowers spilling out of hefty pots in bright colors. “I can water and tend them. It can be my job.”

“Deal. This is the place.” With a satisfied nod, Riley set her hands on her hips. “Kudos again, Sawyer.”

“We should check through it in any case.” Bran stood at the opening, dark, intense eyes scanning the sky.

Nerezza often came from the sky.

“I’ll be adding protection over the more usual alarm system,” he continued. “We caused her pain, and harm, so she’ll unlikely gather herself enough to come at us again tonight, if indeed she can find us. But we’ll all sleep better with a layer of magick over all.”

“Split up.” With his sword sheathed, his dark hair tumbled around his hard, handsome face, Doyle nodded agreement. “Go through the place, make certain it’s clear and secured.”

“Should be two bedrooms down here, four more upstairs, and another common space. It’s not big and plush like the villa, and we won’t have all that outdoor space.”

“Or Apollo,” Annika put in.

“Yeah.” Riley smiled. “I’m going to miss that dog. But there’s room, and it’s well located. I’ll take the upstairs.”

“You just want first call on the bedrooms.”

Riley grinned at Sasha, then frowned. “You okay, Sash? You’re pale.”

“Just a headache. A regular headache,” she said when all eyes turned to her. “I don’t try to fight the visions anymore. It’s just been a very long day.”

“And so it has.” Bran drew her close to his side, whispered something in her ear that made her smile and nod. “We’ll take upstairs as well,” he said, and with Sasha, vanished.

“Oh, cheat! No fair using magick!” Riley charged toward the steps and up.

“Three up, so three down to clear this floor. I’d sooner bunk down here,” Doyle said with a look around, “closer to the outside access.”

“You and me down here then,” Sawyer decided—to Annika’s disappointment. “Closer to the kitchen and the food. Let’s see what we’ve got.”

The two bedrooms stood side by side. Not as big as the ones they’d left behind on Corfu, but with nice beds and pretty views from the windows.

“Works,” Doyle stated.

“Works,” Sawyer agreed after opening another door to a bathroom with a shower.

The door slid in and out of the wall, delighting Annika so she had to push it in, pull it out a few times before Sawyer grabbed her hand and pulled her away.

They found another room with what Sawyer called a bar, a big television on the wall (she *loved* television), and a large table where colorful balls stood in a triangle on a green top.

Annika stroked her hand over the top. “It isn’t grass.”

“Felt,” Sawyer told her. “It’s a pool table—a game. You play?” he asked Doyle.

“What man who’s lived a few centuries hasn’t played pool?”

“I’ve only lived a few decades, but I’ve played my share. We’ll have to have a game.”

There was a powder room—though no one powdered anything in them that Annika had seen—and then the kitchen and eating area. She knew immediately Sawyer was pleased.

He wandered through it. A tall, lean body that moved, she thought, as if never hurried. Her fingers wanted to brush through all the dark gold hair the sun had streaked, shaggy and windblown from the traveling. And eyes, gray like the sea in the first silver light of dawn, that made her want to sigh.

“The Italians understand cooking—and eating. This is excellent.”

She knew something about cooking now, had even learned to make a few dishes, so she recognized the big stove with its many burners, and the ovens for baking and roasting. A center island held its own sink, which charmed her, and another sink—wider—stood under a window.

Sawyer opened the box that kept things cold—the refrigerator, she remembered. “Already stocked. Riley doesn’t miss a trick. Beer?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Doyle said.

“Anni?”

“I don’t like the beer very much. Is there something else?”

“Got your soft drinks, some fruit juice. And wait.” He pointed up to a rack holding bottles. “Wine.”

“I like the wine.”

“Got you covered then.” He chose a bottle, passed a beer to Doyle, took one for himself, then wandered to a door. “Pantry, also stocked. We’re in business.”

He opened drawers until he found the tool to open the wine. Corkscrew—such a funny word.

“I don’t know about anybody else, but I’m starved. Shifting that many that far, it hulls you out.”

“I could eat,” Doyle decided.

“I’m going to throw something together. Riley was right, Sasha looks pale. We’ll eat, drink, decompress.”

“Have at it then. I’m going to check outside.” With his sword still sheathed on his back, Doyle went through another wide glass door.

“I can help you make the food.”

“Don’t you want to grab up a bedroom?”

“I like to help make the food.” With you, most of all, she thought.

“Okay, let’s keep it simple. Quick pasta, tossed with butter and herbs. And we’ve got . . . yeah, we’ve got tomatoes, mozzarella.” He pulled the cheese from the refrigerator, handed her a tomato from the bowl on the counter. “You remember how to slice these up?”

“Yes, I can slice very well.”

“You slice them up, then find a plate or tray or platter.” He spread his hands to show her size.

He had strong hands, but was gentle with them. Annika thought gentleness was its own kind of strength.

“And you lay them out with the cheese on top of the tomato,” he continued, so she knew to pay attention. “Drizzle this olive oil over them.” He set a container on the counter.

“Drizzle is like rain, but only a little.”

“You got it. Then you’re going to take this.” He walked over to the windowsill, where some pots sat, and broke off a stem with leaves. “It’s basil.”

“I remember. It adds flavor.”

“Yeah. Chop it up some, sprinkle it over everything, grind a little pepper on there, too, and that’s a

wrap.”

“It’s a wrap.”

“It’s finished,” he explained.

“I will wrap it for you.”

Pleased, she braided her waist-length black hair back and away. She got to work while he put a pot of water on the stove, poured her wine, drank his beer.

She liked the quiet times with him, and had learned to savor them. There would be more fighting; she knew, accepted. There would be more pain. She would accept that, too. But she had been given a gift. The legs that allowed her to walk out of the sea and onto land, if only for a short time. The friends who were more precious than gold. The purpose that was her legacy and her duty.

And most of all, Sawyer, whom she’d loved before he even knew she existed.

“Do you dream, Sawyer?”

“What?” Distracted, he glanced back at her as he found a colander. “Sure. Sure, most everybody does.”

“Do you dream of when we’ve done our duty, when we have all three stars? When the Stars of Fortune are safe from Nerezza? When there is no more fighting?”

“It’s hard to see that far when we’re in the middle of it. But yeah, I think about it.”

“What do you wish for most, when this is done?”

“I don’t know. It’s been part of my life for so long—the quest if not the battle.”

But he paused in what he was doing, considered. She thought that—the paying attention—was also strength.

“I guess, maybe, it would be enough for the six of us, knowing we’ve done everything we had to do, to sit on a warm beach and look up and see them. See the three stars where they’re meant to be. Knowing we did that. That’s a pretty big dream.”

“Not for wealth or long life?” Her gaze slid toward him. “Or a woman?”

“If I could rub a lamp, I’d be an idiot not to take all that.” He paused a moment, shoved his fingers

through his shaggy blond hair. “But the friends who fought with me, that warm beach? That would do just fine. Add a cold beer, and it sounds perfect.”

She started to speak again, but Doyle came back through the doors.

Though a tall man, and well muscled, he moved lightly on his feet.

“We don’t have the outdoor training space we had in Greece, but we’ve got a lemon grove we could use, and more privacy than I figured on. Though Bran could add to that anyway. There’s a garden—smaller scale than the one at the villa. And pots of herbs and tomatoes out on the terrace. Big table out there for eating, and that portion’s covered by a grape arbor. Shady, but the bees may be an issue. We’ve got a pool.”

“Yeah?”

“Again, smaller scale than Corfu. It’s right off the patio deal, which is probably why they planted trees on either side of the grounds. They’d want some privacy. Do you care which bedroom?”

“Nope. Take your pick.”

“I will. I’m going to stow my gear.”

As he went out, Riley came in.

“You guys read my mind.” She walked over, slung an arm around Annika’s waist. “Starving. What are we having?”

“Sawyer is making pasta, and I’m making tomatoes and cheese with the oil and herbs. We’re going to eat, drink, and decompress.”

“I’m for it.”

“Your friend of a friend stocked the kitchen,” Sawyer told Riley.

“Yeah, we owe for that. Beer or wine?” To help her decide, she took a swig from Sawyer’s bottle, a sip from Annika’s glass. “Tough choice. It’s pasta, so I’m going for the wine. Bran and Sasha beat me to the master—but there’s two of them in there, so that’s fair.”

“Doyle and I are bunking down here. Two rooms and a full bath. It works.”

“Good enough. Annika, you get your choice of what’s left up there. Sasha and Bran will use

whatever's left over to set up her studio and the magick-works. Terraces up there, too. We won't be able to walk to the beach from here, but we can take the funicular."

"What is the funicular?" Annika asked.

"It's like a train, but in the air. You pay, and you can ride it down to town, or closer to the beach, or—"

"I want to ride it! Can we ride it tomorrow?"

"Maybe. It's a strong walk down to the shops in Anacapri and a steep hike back. And to get down to Capri town means a bus or cab or a serious hike. No cars in Anacapri. If we need one, I'll find us a ride, and we'll park it in Capri, but mostly we're on foot or public trans. I'm going to do a quick check outside on security."

"Doyle just did." Sawyer slid spaghetti into the pot of boiling water.

Riley hesitated, glanced toward the door. Then shrugged. "No point in me walking in his footsteps."

"We have a pool," Annika told her.

"Yeah, I got that. And I might just try it out before I turn in. Table out there, right? Why don't we eat outside?"

"I'm for it. Set us up."

Riley poured herself some wine, lifted it to Sawyer. "I'm all over it." She got another glass when Sasha came in with Bran. "Wine—it'll put some color in your cheeks."

"I'd love some wine. And food. Sawyer, Annika, you're the best."

"Italian beer? I'll be happy for that." Bran opened the refrigerator, got his own. "Doyle?"

"Our immortal's stowing his gear." Sawyer stirred the pasta as steam puffed. "We're taking the two bedrooms down here."

"That leaves you a choice upstairs, Annika."

"Riley said you need a room for your painting and for Bran's magicks. You should choose it. I'm happy with whatever is left."

"If you really don't mind we could take the room across from ours. It's the smaller of the two left,

and big enough for what we'd need. And yours would face the sea. You'd rather wake and sleep with the sea."

Touched, Annika moved to hug Sasha. "Thank you."

"I'm across from you," Riley told her. "I love me a sea view as much as the next guy—or mermaid—but there's something to be said about looking out over a lemon grove."

"And guarding the rear flank," Bran added.

"And that. We're eating outside. As soon as I find plates."

She found them, as colorful as the cushions. With Sasha helping to set up, they went out as Annika meticulously added the herbs to her dish.

"Is this right? Did I do it the way I should?"

Sawyer glanced at her tray. "Looks perfect. I just need a few minutes to put the rest together."

"But we need candles! And flowers." Annika dashed out to hunt up what she considered a properly set table.

Sawyer tested the pasta, turned off the burner. "Sasha okay?"

"A little more shaken, apparently, than the rest of us. Food and rest should do the trick." He looked over as Doyle came back in. "I've done a basic protection spell on the house and grounds, but will want to layer over that before we turn in for the night. She'll find us, sooner or later, and she'll be right pissed."

"She'll find us," Sawyer agreed as he drained pasta. "It'll be a lot tougher for her to find the Fire Star where and how you've hidden it."

"Which says to me she'll come harder for the next." Doyle lifted his beer, drained it. "In her place? I'd decide I'd underestimated my enemy in the first round of things. Her pride would lead her to that conclusion. She'll go harder, bloodier."

"And it may be cannier," Bran added. "Much of what she did was rage and violence. Whatever it cost us, it cost her more. She may, if wise, consider more strategy than force. We'll need to prepare for that."

"We need to eat." Sawyer dumped the pasta into a bowl, tossed it with the butter and herbs he'd

prepped. “And we need to sleep.”

“You’re not wrong. And we need to celebrate, however briefly, the fact that we’re safe, whole, and together.”

“And ready to search for the next star.”

Bran nodded at Doyle. “For the next. Water or ice, we can’t know, not yet. But the fates sent us here, where the inestimable Riley has again secured us a roof and beds, food. Tomorrow’s soon enough, isn’t it, to plot our own strategies?”

“It’ll have to be, because this is ready. Grab that tray, will you? And the wine. And I could use another beer.”

Sawyer stepped out into the lemon-scented night where a slice of moon shot soft blue light over land and sea.

Annika, being Annika, had fashioned a bouquet of flowers out of napkins, and gathered candles from around the house.

“I couldn’t find the . . .” When the word escaped her, she mimed striking a match.

“Matches,” Sawyer supplied.

“I’ll take care of that.” Bran simply flicked his fingers, and the tea lights and tapers glowed.

With a laugh, Annika clapped her hands. Then rushed over to hug Bran.

“I hugged Sasha and Riley. We’re all together, in this new place.” She turned to wrap her arms around Doyle, coaxed a smile out of him. “We have good food and good friends.”

Last, she turned to Sawyer, embraced him, indulged herself by breathing in the scent that was only his. “Nerezza is not with friends, and can’t have what we have.”

“She doesn’t want what we have.”

Sasha swayed once, then straightened. Her eyes were dark and deep, and saw more than the sea and the slice of moon.

“She has no wish for friends or love or affection. She is lies and greed and ambition, all dark. She is the dark. Now she rages, and she knows pain. But soon she’ll seek, and plot, and come. She thirsts, and

the thirst is for blood. Our blood, for nothing else can slake that thirst. She will come, however we curtain our world. The Globe of All will find us. And she will find another, one to join in the hunt. Greed blinds, greed binds. The god takes the man; the man takes the god in a bargain sealed in blood. On this island, in these waters, in the songs, in the sighs, there will be battles new. Blood runs, pain strikes. And betrayal comes with smiles.

“On this island, in these waters, in the songs, in the sighs, the star waits, blue and pure, for the innocent and the valiant. It is not tears that form the Water Star, but tears will be shed before it is found.”

She swayed again, white as a ghost. Bran caught her to him, held her. “Just breathe, *fáidh*.”

“I didn’t fight it. I swear I didn’t try to block it. I just . . . Everything just felt a little off.”

“The shift. I’ve never traveled with a seer before, not anything like this,” Sawyer added.

“Scrambled brains?”

Sawyer slanted a look at Riley. “Not exactly, but maybe the vision just needed to, you know, catch up. You want some water? I’ll get you some water.”

“No, no, I’m all right. Better.” Sasha breathed out. “Actually better. It was like I couldn’t quite get my balance. Now I can. So maybe, yes, maybe it was the shift. And God, it’s been a day, hasn’t it? I’m just going to sit down.”

“And eat.” Moving quickly, Annika filled a plate with pasta, scooped out the tomato and mozzarella. “You need to eat the food.”

“And I will. We all will. It came on so fast. It was, yes, like it caught up and slammed into me. And so much of it’s brutal. Just the feeling inside it all. Her fury and need to destroy us. Not just hurt or kill now. Destroy.”

“You said she’d find someone,” Riley reminded her. “A man.”

“Yes, but I don’t know if it means male or just human. But she’ll find someone, and this person will join forces with her.”

“After battling a god?” Doyle heaped food on his plate. “I’ve no worry about dealing with a mortal.”

“Says the man who can’t die,” Riley put in. “Humans are canny, cagey, and dangerous. If Nerezza

makes a deal with one, it's because he—or she—is useful to her. Don't get cocky.”

Sawyer passed the bowl to Annika. “Well, now we know which star we're looking for in and around Capri. The Water Star. We can take that off the list of what we need to figure out.”

“It's blue, and beautiful. Unearthly blue. I don't know if I can capture the tones of it with paint. The Fire Star, it flashed and burned. And this . . .” Sasha closed her eyes a moment. “It glowed and seemed to . . . ripple. Water? Maybe that's why.”

After she'd wound pasta around her fork, sampled, Sasha closed her eyes again. “Oh, this is good, Sawyer. This is just exactly right. I'll take the breakfast shift.”

“No, I've got it. You get the morning off.”

“I can help again.”

“And see.” He gestured to Annika. “I've got my top sous chef, willing and able.”

“I made this.” Annika carefully cut a bite of the salad. “And it's good.”

“Damn good,” Riley concurred, and took a second helping. “I'll hit research mode tomorrow. Maybe it's knee-jerk to figure the Water Star's in the water, but the first was—or under it. I know some of the caves around here, water and land. I'll find out more.”

“You spoke of both land and sea,” Bran pointed out. “Of songs and sighs.”

“Like when we were flying.”

“What?”

“Not flying,” Annika said to Sawyer. “What it feels like to fly, or what I think it would feel like to fly. The traveling. The songs and the sighs when you brought us here.”

“What songs and sighs, Annika?” Bran's dark gaze arched to her.

“You didn't hear them?”

“No.” He glanced around the table. “I don't think the rest of us heard anything.”

“All I heard was the tornado.” Though she watched Annika, Riley continued to eat. “I've been through a few, and that's what traveling Sawyer's way sounds like to me. But you heard singing and sighing.”

“Only for a moment. It was so beautiful. It—” She pressed a hand to her heart, then cupped it out. “It made my heart big. There was the wind, and the colors and light. It’s very exciting. Then the songs, just music with words I couldn’t hear all the way. And sighs, but not sad ones—or not all sad. Sweet, but with some sadness. A little sorrow with the joy. Is that right?”

“Mermaid ears, maybe?” Riley speculated. “Water Star, mermaid. Interesting.” She took another bite of pasta, smiled. “We’re going to need another boat. I’ll get on that.”

Later, when the house was quiet, when all her friends slept, Annika stepped out on the terrace outside her new room. The sea drew her—she was of it, from it. She wished she could fly down to it, wished she could swim inside its heart for a little while.

But the sea must wait.

She had the legs, and she prized them, though now that she’d told the others what she was—she’d had no choice—her time with them was a ticking clock.

So she wished on the moon-slice over the sea that she might sing and sigh inside Sawyer’s heart, in the time she had left. She wished he might feel what she felt, if only for a single day.

Duty came first, and she would never shirk it. But she could hope inside her heart that she would do her duty, fulfill her legacy.

And know love before she returned to the sea forever.