

Instead of the groom coming by three or four times a day to fill the buckets, they were lucky if he came twice a day. The horses' tongues had begun to swell and their mouths became scummy. Their lips were parched and cracked. Each time they heard the footsteps of the groom, the horses roused themselves and smacked their lips in anticipation. But a dull, lusterless light was creeping into their eyes, and the mare knew that soon, not even human footsteps would catch their attention.

"And your name?" the filly asked. "Why are you called Perlina?"

"For my coat. When I was born, the master said that I was the color of dark pearls, but my dam said I was truly the color of the light just before the dawn."

"I don't know the sky and I don't know pearls," the filly sighed. "Mamita, sometimes I feel so stupid."

"You aren't stupid!" the mare corrected. "You just haven't seen anything but the inside of this ship, this sling."

"So what are pearls?" Estrella asked.

"Jewels — decorations that the people wear." She paused for a moment. "But I don't think my coat is like decorations. I think my coat is more like the just before."

"The just before?" Estrella cocked her head. "I don't understand."

The mare closed her eyes and tried to remember what it had been like in those meadows where she had grazed in the

early hours of the morning. How hard it was to try to describe the whole world. She began to speak slowly.

“The just before is a time of day very early in the morning. I don’t know how to describe it exactly. If we were in a meadow, I could show you. But it is as if the darkness has grown tired. And it becomes dimmer and dimmer.”

“That sounds sad — the just before.”

“No! Not at all. It’s when a new day is about to foal and sunshine is coming. There’s the promise of the sun rising.”

The filly sighed and looked about. “There aren’t promises in here, are there, Mamita?”

Perlina was stunned. It was terrible to hear a young horse talk this way. She neighed urgently. “Listen to me, Estrella. There are still promises, even in dim light. The voyage will end. We shall get to land. You will run and buck.”

“And see the sky?”

“Yes, and see the sky and the night and the stars for which you are named.”



The filly wanted to believe her dam. Everything exciting seemed to happen out in a meadow where horses could graze. Estrella was not even sure what grazing was, but it sounded lovely. She had to believe her dam: The voyage would end. The sling would fade away like the darkness at the end of night. She

would feel the earth under her hooves and stand in the long grass and even buck.

Still, despite her dam's promise, the filly couldn't help but wonder if she would ever see the open sky and a star like the one on her forehead. If only the boy would bring the water bucket more often, for they were all very thirsty.

Then, like a small miracle, the little groom did come and pour a bit of water into the bucket, filling it hardly a quarter full. But that was enough. A crack had opened up in the deck, and reflected in that scant bit of water were two stars! One was the white swirl on the filly's forehead, but the second danced like a silver splinter on the dark water.

"Mamita!" the filly neighed softly.

"What?"

Estrella delicately lowered her tongue into the bucket and lapped just a little. The silver was still there. "Mamita! I am drinking a star!"



Over the next few days, there was a phantom of a breeze, just a ruffle of wind that licked the sails and then died away. Perlina could hear the crew swearing about something they called the doldrums. They cut the rations of grain and water again. The horses were not only thirsty now, but hungry as well. Their stomachs began to make loud rumbling noises and sometimes

grating sounds as loud as the creaks of the ship as it lolled in this windless sea.

The priest prayed to his God for wind. The Seeker prayed for gold. But Perlina wanted nothing except water for herself and the filly. Her milk was drying up and she feared that soon it would disappear. She hadn't asked for a filly. She had thought she was too old to foal, but it had come. A little tawny miracle with a swirled star on her forehead, a black mane and tail, and bright stockings on her legs.

Perlina caught the faintest stir of wind that had made the brigantine creak and one sail flap languidly. But it was a taunt — within seconds, it had died away again. Yet for those seconds, that teasing wind brought something with it, a scent from the long ago. The mare knew that scent. It was the wind grass. She had never smelled that grass before, nor had she grazed on it, but there was something sweet in the smell that stirred in some long-buried part of her, the part of her linked to an ancient herd grazing at the beginning of time. The mare's nostrils flared and she tossed her mane. *Perhaps we are not sailing away*, she thought. *We are coming home!*

Perlina felt as if she had just gulped an entire bucket of water. One ear twitched forward and the other pivoted to the side. She neighed happily and the other horses turned toward her.

The Seeker's stallion, Centello, as arrogant as his master,

snorted. “Fool!” He was too stubborn to pay attention to anything except the commands of the Seeker.

But Gordo, a dappled gray stallion, fixed steady brown eyes on her. “What?” he croaked. “What is it, Perl . . .” His tongue was so thick in his mouth, he could not complete her name.

Perlina closed her eyes tight. She was seeing something, and the gray stallion sensed it. A landscape danced as if on the inside of her eyelids. There was a sea of grass blowing, and through this grass was a fleeting shape — that of a tiny horse. A horse that stood no bigger than a dog. But it was a horse. A perfect little horse.

Yes, she thought, *we are coming home!*

The other horses grew very still. They could tell the mare had felt something extraordinary. They dared not ask what, not yet. But a shiver ran through them, as if their deepest thirst were about to be slaked. There was something waiting for them, and only Perlina knew what. Freedom! A freedom like none of them had known for millions upon millions of years.