

The Foal

The mare felt the foal shift inside her and kicked her leg in discomfort. The foal was coming soon, and the mare should have been on four legs instead of buried in a hold, hanging in a sling rocked by every wave the ship encountered. The mare should have been surrounded by straw or, better yet, soft grass in a meadow. *What a place to be born!* she thought. *A pitching ship in the middle of a sea!* The mare could sense the restlessness of the other horses around her. They knew what was about to happen.

The beam of the ship was wide, and ahead of her she could see at least eight other horses, ears twitching. The smaller animals — the goats and the pigs — were in separate stalls and out of sight. But it was the horses the mare cared about. She could see their ears flick forward, listening for the men, and then pivot back to her to hear if the birth had started.

They were in the mid-deck hold, near the pillars of the brigantine's two masts. Their stalls were padded with bales of straw so the horses wouldn't be injured when their slings

swung too violently. The mare looked down at her legs hanging uselessly in the shadows. Her hooves barely touched the floorboards.

The mid deck was sweltering. Breezes couldn't reach the hold and there was little light. The horses couldn't sense the time of day. It was never bright nor completely dark; there was only shadow and a perpetual dimness that was not like any dawn or twilight the mare had ever known.

The last time she had foaled, it had been in a stall on land — dry, unmovable land — and the time before that, in a meadow. It was of course the best place of all to give birth. She remembered that colt well. His coat was beautiful, dappled like a herd of small moons sliding behind clouds. She called him Sombra Luna, Shadow Moon. And now another was on its way. Was it possible, she wondered, that the Seeker and his men did not know? She herself had been surprised. She thought she was much too old to foal. But surely they had seen her belly when they fitted the sling around her on the day before the voyage began from First Island. No one had said anything, but perhaps they were anticipating a short trip and the distances had turned out to be greater than they'd thought. She'd heard the blacksmith and the groom talking about how long the voyage was taking. The groom was just a boy, as gawky as the foal soon to be born.

She felt a sudden wrenching pain and gasped. The young

groom leapt from his hammock and rushed to her stall. The ocean had grown a bit calmer, but the mare's sling swayed back and forth in a disconcerting rhythm. The groom stroked her head. Then his eyes fell upon the large stain that was spreading rapidly through the canvas of the sling.

"*¡Dios mío!*" he screeched.

Within seconds the blacksmith was there with another groom.

"It can't be!" the blacksmith exclaimed.

It is! the mare thought. She gave him a withering gaze. The young groom's eyes had fastened on a small wooden carving of a woman with a darkly stained face, her hands pressed together in prayer. His mouth moved as if he were speaking to her.

"Don't pray to the Virgin, foolish boy. Get the doctor!" the blacksmith ordered.

Who's foolish? thought the mare. *All of you!* The men had been all too obsessed with their dreams of gold to see that the old mare could be in foal.

The doctor came. The sling was lowered and the stall was quickly banked with more straw bales.

"*¡Calma! ¡Calma!*" the blacksmith whispered.

Was he telling *her* to be calm, or the sea? the mare wondered. She hoped it was the sea. Giving birth was hard enough on dry land, and the ocean seemed to be growing more boisterous. But she could take care of herself. What troubled her was

the thought of her foal being born in the hold and confined to a sling. How would a foal ever learn to stand on this swelling sea? She groaned deeply and her eyes rolled back in her head. She could hear the groom praying. But the blacksmith and the doctor remained silent as they removed the sling and helped her lie down against the bales of straw.

Time passed, but the mare couldn't tell how much. The perpetual half-light in the hold hardly changed from morning to afternoon to night. She felt the doctor and the blacksmith both pulling. The front legs were halfway out. One more pull? No, two.

"A filly!" the blacksmith finally said. "And so quick!"

"She's foaled before," the doctor said while clearing off the smooth white sac that covered the foal's body.

The mare turned her head and began licking her newborn's face. As she licked the foal's face clean, she saw a lovely white mark emerge on its pale forehead. The mare nickered with soft delight.

"Look!" the groom exclaimed. "She's trying to stand already."

The little filly staggered onto her legs, which seemed to be longer than her body. Although she had given birth twice before, the mare could never get used to how long a foal's legs were. Even though the filly was smaller than her dam, her legs were almost as long.

The filly staggered a step and fell down, her legs in a scramble. “Too many legs!” her dam nickered. “You’ll have time to sort them out. You’ll see!”

But just then, the seas roughened. A straw bale tumbled and knocked the filly down on her next try at standing. She went into a rolling tumble.

“Get her in a sling. And the mare, too. Get Perlina in a sling,” cried the blacksmith.

“And what do we call this one?” the older groom asked, nodding toward the filly.

“Jacinta!” said the tall man just arriving. He was the Seeker, the captain of the ship. He named the horses. “Let us give thanks for this blessing. Let us take it as a sign of good fortune, of grace and the merit of God. Let us pray.” And then, despite the rolling of the ship, the men fell to their knees beneath the statue of the dark Virgin.

“Good fortune?” the mare muttered as she looked across at her filly. *We are in separate slings and they call that good fortune and grace of their God? How will my filly nurse? How will she learn to stand? And Jacinta!* she raged silently. *He names my foal after his mistress!*

“By my withers!” She whinnied now loudly and in protest. However, between the roar of the sea and the voices of the men — for the padre had now come down to lead them in prayer — no one heard her.

The mare looked over at her foal. The mark on the filly's forehead looked like a swirled star. And the mare knew, whatever the man called her filly, she would name the foal Estrella. "Estrella! I shall call you Estrella!" she nickered. The foal looked into her mother's huge dark eyes and seemed to understand. She had been named for something bright and luminous, something that existed beyond the dark, rank air of the hold.