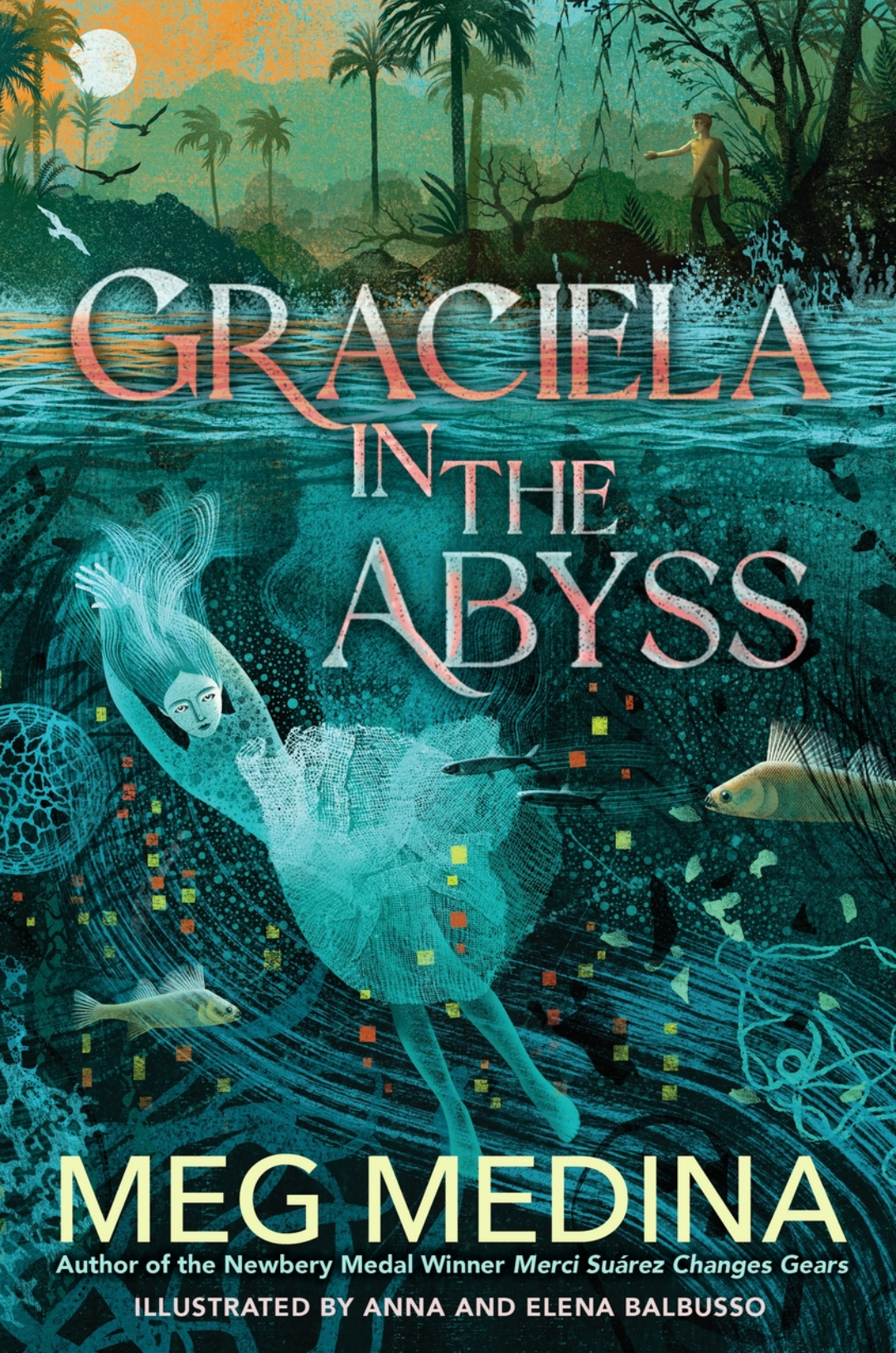




GRACIELA IN THE ABYSS

MEG MEDINA

Author of the Newbery Medal Winner *Merci Suárez Changes Gears*

ILLUSTRATED BY ANNA AND ELENA BALBUSSO

GRACIELA
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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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For everyone who has wandered in an abyss

MM

*Dedicated to our beloved parents, mom Albertina and dad Ennio,
who follow us from the sky with their infinite love*

AB and EB

PESCA GROTTA

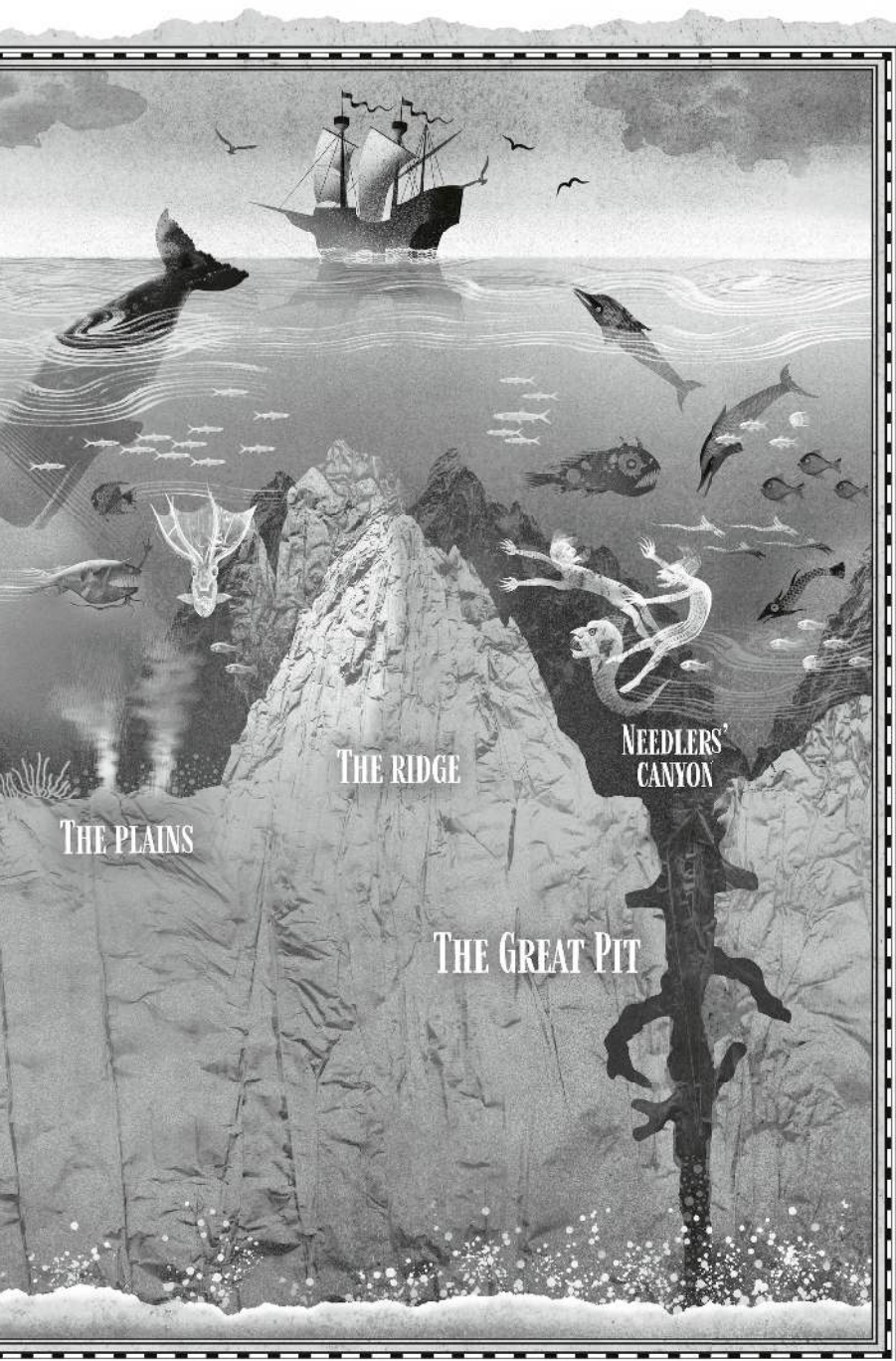
LAVA TUBE

THE SLOPE

THE
GUYOT

THE DEEP

THE EARTH'S FORGE





PROLOGUE

Black water on a summer day always means someone will die. Like every good fisherman, Graciela Lima's father had shared that knowledge with his daughters from the cradle, just as surely as he'd taught them to mend nets and set crab traps in the shallows.

But, although the water churning below the cliffs was the color of dark oyster shells, on the morning of her thirteenth birthday, Graciela's only thoughts were of being a year older. She wanted a special day. So she begged her older sister for a picnic on the bluffs until, remembering how to have some fun, Leticia had finally agreed.

They climbed against the wind and over the loose rocks.

They ate olives and cheese and had a contest to see who could spit pits the farthest. They told each other

the shapes they saw in the clouds and let the sun redden their cheeks.

Then, while Leticia dozed, Graciela unlaced her worn leather boots, which were already too small and pinching at the toes, and she walked to the cliff's edge. She peered down the steep drop at the boulders below. The rocks looked like monsters' teeth, and the dark water raged with white ocean foam, opposite colors clashing. Each battering wave sent a spray of seawater high into the air that soaked her dress through.

Salt water dripped from the ends of Graciela's curls as she leaned even farther. She called over her shoulder to her sister. "Come look down if you dare, dormilona."

Leticia rose to her elbows sleepily and startled when she saw her sister at the outcrop. The cliff was so very high.

"Mamá will punish you when she sees those wet clothes," Leticia said, trying not to sound as alarmed as she felt. Her black hair lashed her face as she got to her feet. "She won't make you cake. Come back from there."

Graciela ignored her. A bossy older sister could be such a bother, especially one like Leticia, who was now sixteen and had, of late, become criminally responsible and obedient, like the proper young señoritas Mamá hoped they'd both become.



Graciela turned back to the water and looked out over the ocean. She suddenly wished that her life could be bigger than being thirteen. How, Graciela wondered, could mending socks and going to market ever be exciting? Not even Leticia had an answer for that.

“What’s your plan, burrita?” Leticia asked. She took one step toward Graciela and then another, as if walking on something very breakable. “It’s far too high to jump in for a swim. Come away from there before you fall.”

Graciela curled her callused toes stubbornly against the cliff’s edge. Blades of grass sprouted between the warm stones.

“I might enjoy a dip,” she said with mischief in her voice. There was a deep satisfaction in being contrary, even if it was only to Leticia.

“Don’t be silly,” Leticia said. “You can’t swim. Now step back.”

It was true. Papá had deemed swimming unladylike, another thing forbidden.

Graciela turned to argue just as her sister reached her. But all at once, the wind gusted sharply and tore her from the cliff.

For a fleeting moment, Graciela felt as weightless as a kite hovering. The seconds seemed to slow, but the



breathless joy was only temporary. She had only enough time to see the anguish in Leticia's face as she reached an outstretched hand to save her.

Then came the heavy drop.

Graciela broke the dark water with a crash.

Down she sank as the sea pulled her away from the sister she loved to a place where everything became cold and all light vanished from above. Graciela's eyes grew heavy, and her heartbeat slowed in her ears. Finally, there was only silence.

She rested at the bottom of the sea through Mamá's wails about the curse of having reckless daughters. She slumbered on as Leticia died of yellow fever a few years later, when the disease arrived at the docks from Cuba. She was motionless through the years that her father grew old and bent with age. In fact, she lay on the silty seafloor until the bones of all who had ever known her had turned to dust in graveyards and her name had been completely forgotten.

When she finally awakened one hundred years later, Graciela sat up, shocked at the dark water all around and at her own now-translucent skin. Hagfish, writhing like eels, sucked away the last morsels of meat from what was left of her bones. There wasn't even time to scream before she heard a voice in the darkness.



“Don’t be afraid,” it said. “I’m Amina.”

Graciela saw a pale green light pulsing from a creature unlike any she had ever seen. Amina’s face, body, and arms were jellylike, but she had no legs at all that Graciela could see. Instead, the shimmering tunic she wore ended in ragged edges that resembled Spanish moss hanging from a tree. Kelp-like hair floated around her head like tentacles.

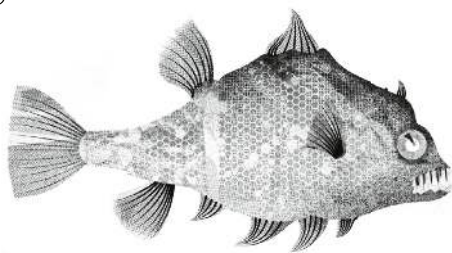
Amina offered a webbed hand and smiled to show a set of teeth made of mottled pearl.

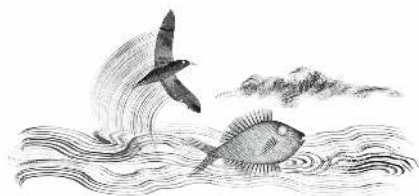
“A girl’s spirit isn’t meant to die,” she said. “You are part of the deep now, Graciela. And I will be your Guide.”



PART ONE

The Living and the Dead





CHAPTER 1

Being dead was hard work.

Back when Graciela was alive, she had never wondered how the sound of waves got inside shells or how gentle sea breezes happened. She'd never questioned why sad feelings suddenly seemed easier to bear at the shore. When she and Leticia scoured the beach to find sand dollars and other treasures, neither of them had ever imagined how those things found their way to land to begin with.

Now Graciela knew the truth.

It was the work of all the sea spirits like her, each with a job they selected. Fog Haunters. Mind Easers. Shell Musicians. Current Masters. The list of vocations was endless for those who had been buried or lost at sea, in one way or another. And together they made the living world more bearable by keeping the sea in a delicate balance. Everything had its counterpart—sun and

moon, air and water, light and dark, storm and calm, good and bad.

It had been Amina, of course, who had pointed Graciela toward the work of a Glazier in the first place.

Soon after Graciela's awakening, they'd come to the edge of a current that was sweeping trash along. Amina conjured a motus spout to draw a bottle to her as it passed by. "This might be perfect work for you."

"Working with garbage?" Graciela had said, horrified. Deprived of living, she was already feeling as discarded and forgotten as the broken beer bottle Amina was admiring.

"Making transformations," Amina replied gently. "Everything can be changed. It just takes time and patience, Graciela, and there's plenty of *that* in eternity."

Now Graciela's sparkling creations—each piece of glass meticulously ground against her pearl teeth—found their way all over the world.

She had just added her most recently finished piece of sea glass to a pile of medium-size greens when her vision grew blurry, and a pleasant prickle rose through her as she tidied the piles. She liked to organize the pieces by color and size to make it quicker and easier to choose among them later, while leaving them at the shore.

In her mind's eye, she could see the colored threads



in her mother's neatly ordered sewing box, and the metal thimble like a tiny top hat.

"Hurry, Mamá!" A voice broke through Graciela's memory and startled her.

It was one of the older girls who'd drowned in a shipwreck only a few years before Graciela. Her glittering tunic flashed an impressive silver glow of happiness as she swam by.

Show-off, Graciela thought.

The girl's Custoda, who cared for her like a parent, followed worriedly in the effervescent wake. "Stay close, young miss," she scolded. "There's danger in the above!"

Graciela watched them go. As she looked up into the darkness, she felt the intoxicating pull from above growing stronger.

The full moon was high. It was Luring Tide at last.

The darkness was widening, seeping slowly like ink through a blotter as the sun set in the living realm. It was time for all beings—alive and dead—who dwelled at the bottom of the sea to rise and roam in places where they were not usually found. And tonight's widening time was accompanied by a pearly moon, which meant that spirits—especially young ones, still somewhat fresh from awakening—could remember their living days



better in its glow than they could in the deep, where they could catch only gauzy bits of memory.

“Are you ready to go?” Amina said, sweeping in. She was always one of the last spirits to rise, but enthusiastic all the same.

“Almost,” Graciela said. Comfort washed over her at the sight of her best friend. “I’m just packing up.”

Amina perused the glass pieces as she waited.

“Ooh,” she said as a caramel-colored oval caught her eye.

“From a whiskey flask,” Graciela explained. Now, of course, it was something precious.

Amina studied the frosted surface for imperfection. “Good job on this one,” she said. “It looks like a candy! Someone will be very lucky to find it.” She held it up to her hair and grinned slyly.

“It’s not ready yet, *someone*.” Graciela had already decided to give it to Amina, but she liked to be the one to decide when to give her glass away and to whom.

Amina surrendered the piece with a disappointed shrug. She had made a habit of decorating the remaining wisps of her braids with Graciela’s pieces. A sea spirit’s eyes could see all colors, even in the deep. Amina liked yellow adornments from tableware she found in



shipwrecks, teal ones made from old inkwells, cobalt blues from shattered perfume bottles, even white ones fashioned from broken pitcher handles. Eventually they would drop from her hair as the strands faded. But for now, the pieces clattered faintly like wind chimes when Amina swam, a sound that Graciela found calming. Even as they wandered through the darkest waters together, she could hear Amina nearby and know she was not alone.

“Shall I help you sort, then?” Amina asked. “You’re taking so long.”

“I’m almost done,” Graciela said.

She stored the last few pieces of glass in the proper pouches of the sack she kept affixed to her waist. It had been a gift from Amina, who’d made it from a scrap of an old death shroud she’d saved after an awakening. Useful as it was, Graciela hoped she wouldn’t need this kind of purse much longer. Eventually the last vestiges of her living clothes would disappear completely. Then she’d wander in the shimmering tunic that older spirits wore, one with flowing pockets that Glaziers needed, the kind that resembled the bright shine of the waves.

She turned to Amina. “Let’s go,” she said.

Spirits around them were rising quickly, leaving





pretty streaks in the water. The first flashes of fish were beginning overhead, too, signaling that their nightly hunts had begun. From one moment to the next, fishes' flanks changed from molten silver into rainbows. A soft blue pulse appeared above. A moment later, a green light glowed farther off, twirling like a corkscrew. Yellow dots began to rain like confetti to their left. White starbursts followed from the right in reply, until soon the water was alive announcing the life-and-death battles awaiting. Some would eat. Some would be eaten.

Amina and Graciela wove their way through the bursts of color, but already the moon's effects were growing stronger. Graciela felt a familiar giddiness rising inside. She grew lightheaded and dreamlike as the flashing lights multiplied. And soon the moon pulled her into her memories.

Fireworks once again.

Loud booms sounding overhead as the village gathered.

Her fingers clinging to Papá's rough pants in a crowd, the stench of cod still in the fabric.

Looking up beyond his shoulders, where Leticia was already perched, and watching blossoms of light cascade through the night sky.

"Graciela, pay attention!" Amina said.

"Oh!" Graciela said, jolted into awareness. She'd



begun to fall behind without realizing it. She hurried to catch up. “Sorry!”

Most spirits cherished their memories of living days, but Graciela had not yet mastered how to deal with the feelings they brought with them—or with the burning question that she was long overdue to abandon: What if she’d lived longer?

She might have grown taller than Leticia, learned to play the guitar, or someday kissed Emilio, the cheese maker’s handsome son. She might have been an artist or adventurer. She might have been someone who the living world would still remember.

Sometimes she wanted nothing more than to erase the past altogether. That way, she wouldn’t care about having died too young. She wouldn’t be angry that her life had ended like a guillotine dropping. She wouldn’t regret missing whatever fun there might have been in growing up.

A small splash and squeak made her turn. A fierce-looking anglerfish had a squid clamped in its underbite of razor-like teeth. As it brushed past her, victim dangling from its glowing jaws, it stared at Graciela.

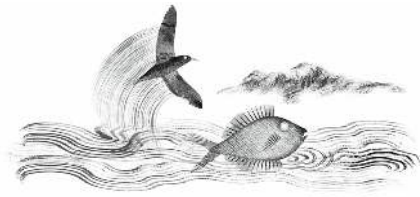
At least she had her sea sister. A friend who helped deliver her glass to the shore and ease the everlasting



sting of it all. Now Graciela made something beautiful from what the world discarded. She transformed it, just as Amina had said, and it bore her mark forever, even if those who found her pieces were unaware of it.

It was almost like she was not really gone at all.





CHAPTER 2

They had not traveled far when a low groan sounded through the darkness.

It was an unmistakable noise that reached a long way through the water, piercing through their haze of contentment. Graciela stole a glance at Amina and tried her best to pretend she hadn't heard it. They were not halfway to the cove, where they planned to leave the glass after they surfaced.

But Amina stopped short, hovering, and turned to listen. She swiveled her yellow eyes, one larger than the other, in the direction of the disturbance.

"It could be one of the mud volcanoes belching," Graciela said hurriedly. She tried to keep her voice bright.

Amina shook her head. "It's an awakening," she said. "I'll have to go to them."

Graciela gave Amina a pained look. Here was the

trouble when your Guide handled awakenings in this part of the sea.

“They might not be ready,” Graciela argued. “We can still go to the cove and be back before they awaken.”

Amina gave her a long look that told Graciela she’d already lost the argument.

“The first moments are the worst,” Amina said. “I can ease things for them. You know that.”

“But widening time has already begun, and it always seems to end so quickly,” Graciela objected. “And what about delivering my glass?” Being cheated out of her evening plans wasn’t as unfair as being cheated out of growing up, but awakenings always stirred a fear that she tried to keep coiled inside her.

“We’ll take it above at the next widening,” Amina said. “Or the one after that. There’s always time, you know.” The pearls in her mouth sparkled as she chuckled at her own joke.

The thick layers of nacre made it plain to see how much longer Amina had been a spirit than Graciela had, how much more she knew about everything. One pearly layer had grown over the next since she had awakened, and now the gemstones were thick and hard in Amina’s mouth.

“That’s not funny,” Graciela said, careful not to



show her own teeth, which were still the thin, pale gray of a young soul. “And besides, that’s a lie.” Eternity did *not* guarantee their existence together was forever. In fact, they both knew an awakening—maybe *this* awakening—could take Amina away.

“You’re right,” Amina said. “We’ll take it soon. I promise.”

“I can take it myself, you know,” Graciela said. “I know the way.”

Amina gave her a pointed look. “That’s just Luring Tide talking. You know you shouldn’t go alone.”

“I’ll concentrate,” Graciela said. “I promise!”

“And if you forget?”

Every spirit knew the danger. The moon was magical for its memories, but its entrancing glow—and the swollen tides that came with it—tore the veil between the realms just enough so that spirits could be seen by the living. Any number of things could spell your permanent end in an instant if you were spotted and exposed to air. A sturdy net, if a spirit’s clothes hadn’t yet vanished. A hungry bird mistaking you for a shiny meal. A wave hurling you unexpectedly toward the sand if you were too close to the shore.

Hard Death followed.



It was a most painful and final demise for a spirit, which happened rarely, but just often enough to cause worry. If you looked closely at the driftwood that littered the beach, you might find a piece that contained the mangled remains of a spirit trapped inside. Twisted and dried to wood, as the elders repeatedly warned, those poor spirits' desiccated eyes and screaming mouths were frozen in the shapes of knot-holes forever.

"I'll stay under the water," Graciela insisted, "and let the tide wash the pieces in."

"Don't go alone," Amina said again. "Not yet."

"Why not? I should practice being solo," Graciela muttered. "I'll need to know how to take care of myself without you one day, won't I? When you leave."

"Graciela," Amina said. Her future role in the sea was a tender subject between them, and one that neither of them liked to discuss. "If you don't want to help me with the awakening, just wait here until I return."

Return. Graciela felt the word twist inside her. *But will you return? Or will you be taken away?*

A long, sad wail filled the water. Amina looked toward it, her ears twitching as her larger eye swiveled again in the direction of the sound. It was the frightened



cry of a young one, and it was so mournful that even the beaked whale mothers, miles away, clicked worriedly for their calves.

“Listen to them, Graciela,” she said. “Don’t you remember how it felt to awaken?”

Graciela felt the twinge of her conscience. Of course she did. Who liked finding out they were dead?

She also remembered the promise she’d made to Amina all those years ago.

“Fine,” she said. “We’ll go to them.”

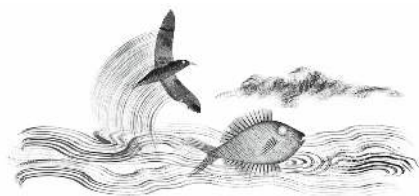
“Thank you,” Amina said. A contented silver light was already pulsing from her abdomen and glowing brightly through her tunic. The jangle of the remaining glass beads in her braids made Graciela’s heart ache.

Another sad wail filled the sea.

“Let’s hurry,” Amina said. “I’m needed.”

But what if I need you more? Graciela thought as she swallowed hard and turned away from the surface to follow.





CHAPTER 3

We make so many promises.

We promise to be good. We promise to be brave. We promise to be careful. We promise not to forget important things and not to tell someone's secret.

But sometimes our promises are nothing more than white lies we tell to get what we need. They are no truer than illusions.

Graciela knew this very well.

Amina had been plain with her from the start. Choosing to stay with a Spirit Guide instead of accepting a new sea Custoda was risky, especially if the Guide had aspirations.

"All spirits fade until, in time, we become one with the sea and connected with all who have come before," she'd said. "But I wish for a different path before that happens.

The Almas, who guard all the secrets of the sea, may call me to their service, and if they do, I will join them at their castle, Salemúria, to help rule the realm. If I am called, I will leave you. Can you promise to accept that?"

And why had Graciela agreed?

Because something about Amina felt so much like her sister, Leticia, that Graciela could not let her go. She could not allow herself to believe that the world would be so cruel as to take a sister from her again. It would not separate her once more from those who mattered before she was ready to let them go.

And besides, Amina had said *if*, not *when*.

If I am called . . .

If was a word for impossible or unlikely things, Graciela had reasoned.

If I were alive again.

If I had not fallen from the cliff.

If I had not made a stupid mistake.

"I promise," she said.

It was a lie.

Dread made Graciela clumsy as they swam deeper into the abyss. Her mind was too worried to move in rhythm like Amina, who undulated easily through the bits of



sea snow that were always drifting down from above.

They headed away from the slope that the others had followed toward the surface and swam downward.

Amina's shimmer was the only thing that lit the way as they went. Occasionally it was bright enough to see the feather stars that skimmed along in the silt below, cleverly masquerading as brown palm fronds. It was an impressive disguise, even here in the deep, where everything cloaked itself in one way or another to survive. Even spirits knew how to hide. Amina had taught her how to mask as a jellyfish in an instant and how to slip inside thick sea mists to protect herself from air. She had made Graciela into an expert at becoming what the living thought were cool patches of cold water at the shore, too.

"Is it much farther?" Graciela asked. She longed to rest a bit, but she knew better than to ask for a pause. Nothing deterred Amina when a new soul was arriving.

A few moments later, the ridge finally came into view.

The towering mountain range began far away in the cold waters of the north seas, where spirits chopped glaciers into icebergs. It stretched all along the seafloor to the tip of Africa, where other spirits managed the southern gyre, swimming in a giant, ever-moving circle to keep the current flowing.



“There,” Amina said.

Fear clotted in Graciela’s chest as she located a child-size bundle wriggling furiously. Whoever was inside was struggling to get out.

“A little one,” Amina whispered. “Let’s hurry.”

The ropes that bound the burial shroud were still tight, clear evidence that someone had carefully prepared it. Jealousy sank its fangs into Graciela. No one had lovingly prepared *her* body for eternal rest, of course. She’d died barefoot, in her stained picnic dress, the pale image of which remained as her death-day frock, a mocking reminder of her accident. Amina promised Graciela that the old dress would vanish completely one day. But *when* that would happen was a mystery, like so much of life in the abyss.

“In time and when you’re ready,” Amina always told her. What did *in time* mean here, where existence was measured not with the sun, or with minutes ticking by, or with days and seasons and years? Here, time stretched on a string, with only awakenings, widening time, and Luring Tides to break up the endlessness of it all.

Amina circled the bundle, looking for the easiest place to begin the work of freeing the spirit from its shroud. She was very particular about unbinding with gentleness



and respect. An awakening was a sacred passage, she said, although, admittedly, it could sometimes be bruising work for a Spirit Guide. You could crack a pearl tooth chewing away the ropes that bound their remains.

Graciela looked around nervously for the horned mermaid's purse that would be accompanying the body. The Almas knew the name of every soul committed to the sea and etched a naming purse as each soul reached the equivalent of one hundred years of sleep.

But other things came in naming purses, too—messages from the Almas that could change everything.

"Why don't you focus on getting them out?" Amina said softly.

Graciela bit down savagely on the rope. Her worried eyes followed her sea sister as Amina hunted for the purse.

Finally she spotted it.

"Samuel," Amina announced after looking inside.

Just a name in the ancient language of the sea.

"Nothing else?" Graciela blurted out. "You're sure?"

Amina nodded and released the purse into the current, watching as it floated away. A tang of disappointment spread in the water, and though Graciela could hardly contain her relief, she found herself wanting to



offer Amina comfort, too. Suffering was strange that way. It didn't have to be your own for it to hurt.

"I'm sorry," Graciela said at last.

It was a kind lie and the very least she could do.

"They will call you to duty one day," Graciela continued. "I'm sure of it." She could not bring herself to add, *And then you can leave me as promised.*

"Maybe so," Amina said softly, "but apparently not today." She looked back to the bundle with sad eyes, the tiniest sheen clouding them, almost like tears.

"Let's free him," Amina said, resigned.

Together, they got to work.

Graciela and Amina labored until the ropes snapped at last and the burial cloth floated open like a specter. Inside, the spirit of a little boy sat up groggily, thin and rumpled as a hatchling. An illness had likely killed him, Graciela thought, for she could see no signs of an accident.

As he yawned, unaware of being watched, the last of his bones crumbled into gravel beneath him. His eyes had already grown owlshly large. A faint outline of his former short pants and vest clung to his newly translucent form. Then he looked down at his hands,



confused. He held one up to his eye and looked through it in wonder.

Amina spoke gently to him over his shoulder.

“Don’t be afraid,” she began as she always did.

But when Samuel turned to see who had spoken his name so sweetly, all wonder drained from him. He looked from Graciela to Amina as if they were the stuff of nightmares.

“It’s all right, Samuel,” Amina said. “You are safe.”

But it was no use.

He scrambled away and released a bloodcurdling wail as if monsters were devouring him. The sound frothed the water into a shrieking spout that jettisoned upward. Graciela felt the last of her weak light flicker out in exhaustion as she watched the shriek disappear overhead.

“Go rest,” Amina told her as Samuel’s lament grew even louder. “This may take some time.”

“And there’s always plenty of that here,” Graciela said wearily.

They exchanged knowing smiles, and then Graciela went off to wait. She nestled on nearby rocks and lay back to watch the white flakes falling from above. She knew what the drifting particles really were. They were



bits of death. The tiniest remains of rocks, plants, fish, and other living things descending to the ocean floor to be forged in the earth's belly and spewed one day anew.

Life and death were always in motion here, just like the tides.

Like it or not, the sea was both cradle and grave.



CHAPTER 4

High up on the bluffs of Pesca Grotta, Jorge Leon, the blacksmith's boy, crept to his window and stared out at the dark sea. The full moon's reflection had paved a white path across the water that looked sturdy enough to walk along. *Where might a road like that lead?* he found himself wondering groggily as he admired the glow. It was the kind of impossible idea that Jorge was fond of puzzling over.

Something had awakened him. He was sure he'd heard cries, and they seemed to be coming from the cove. He thought it might be an injured animal, but it had sounded so frightened and otherworldly that even the shearwaters had stopped their normal racket to listen from their nests in the rocks.

Jorge shuddered, thinking about fishermen's tales of sea spirits who haunted the waves in the hopes of drowning some unlucky soul. Though he'd lived in

Pesca Grotta all his life, he'd never been easy with the sea, especially not at night, when the aquamarine waters were drained of their color and became a gloomy and endless expanse. Being near water wasn't natural to blacksmiths, his father said. Water was danger.

He was a boy from the Leon fire clan, as the *L* branded on his arm proved. One generation to the next, the Leons all bore a copy of the maker's stamp they hammered into every piece.

He took a deep breath to clear his head. The embers in their backyard forge had long since died, though he could still smell cold ash in the air. It would be hours before he'd have to stoke the coals and start the day's endless work on hooks, knives, and all the other bits that Pesca Grotta's fishermen demanded. Then the bellows would groan to life again, and the clanks of his father's ferocious hammer would ring out like a buoy bell in the chop.

"Faster, boy!" a man growled.

Jorge held his breath, listening. It was his father calling out from his dreams. Even asleep, Armando Leon was a harsh man who spoke to his son in orders and threats. The blaze of the forge had long ago burned away any gentleness that might have once existed.

Sometimes Jorge wondered if the same would



happen to him in time. All the Leons had been blacksmiths as far back as anyone could remember—not that anyone in Pesca Grotta liked to think about the Leons. Jorge’s father, Armando, was a brute. His grandfather Serafin, a drunk who had wandered to Pesca Grotta’s pier one night, fallen in, and drowned. And, of course, his great-grandfather Ignacio—the most infamous Leon of all. Each lived by forcing things to their will with fire and strength.

Jorge was nothing like them, much to his father’s dismay. His disposition was not fiery. He was thin (thanks to his mother’s terrible cooking) and quiet (because no one ever listened to him), and he had the soft eyes of a seal pup (that saw everything in a gentle way). And when Jorge worked metal, he never forced things, the way his father did. He coaxed metal into shapes like an artist. That was the secret to his strong and simple designs. His favorite things to make were toys.

But here in Pesca Grotta, a blacksmith’s only job was to be useful to the fishermen who had lived there for generations. There was no room for someone who dreamed of making inventive and joyful things like cat-shaped flying machines or bronze coaches drawn by dragons with sea-glass eyes or roller skates for crocodiles. There was no room for making unusual objects,



especially not if you were a Leon, a name that still made some fishermen spit on the ground, thanks to their century-old grudge. “Never trust the Leons,” they grumbled. “It could cost you your life.”

Jorge’s classmates laughed at the smell of ash on his clothes and at the way his scorched hair stuck up like hay. It was easy to hunt Jorge with taunts and barbs that seemed to hook into him so easily. “Fire can’t overpower water,” a boy at school once boasted before chasing Jorge up the hill.

The boy hadn’t dared follow Jorge all the way home, though. No one did unless a tool had been so badly damaged that there was no other choice. And even then, it was left at the gate with a note and the payment in advance. For starters, the forge made the air hot as an inferno, and the steep hillside was thick with thorny bushes that pricked your skin and caused oozing rashes. Jorge was on strict orders never to stray inside the dense growth when he cleared the walking path with his short machete. Biting spiders, his parents warned. Long-eared bats.

But more ominous than the heat, brush, or bats was the matter of the blacksmith himself. Armando Leon was a massive man with an ogre’s sunburned face and an angry disposition to match. And Imelda, his squat wife, was no better. She was the daughter of a pickpocket



who'd died in childbirth and a fisherman who'd sailed off and never returned. Armed with a sharp tongue and a small heart, she despised visitors of any kind. Even the stray cats that came looking for scraps knew to keep their distance from her broom.

Jorge listened for a long while to make sure his parents were still dreaming. His mother was a particularly light sleeper. She claimed to be able to hear even the tiniest mouse scratching inside the walls.

When he was absolutely sure it was safe, he came back to his bed and reached beneath his mattress. Then he held up his latest creation in the moonlight.

A charming metal cricket sparkled in the light. It made him smile just to look at it. It was most lifelike, though larger than a real one—the length from his wrist all the way to the tip of his longest finger. He'd drawn the plan months ago in his secret notebook—also kept under his mattress and far from his parents' disapproving eyes. He'd dreamed and drew up designs each night until he was able to forge them secretly from pieces of broken hooks, chicken wire, and other scraps. He'd finally finished the cricket that very afternoon while his parents were napping. The crowning touch was the chips of sea glass he'd used for the eyes. He'd found them a while back on a delivery trip to return some sharpened knives



to the tuna merchant. The specks of pretty purple glass at the edge of the sand had caught his eye.

Now was the perfect time to see if the toy worked as he hoped.

Jorge placed the cricket carefully on the ground, and then, with a pinch of his slender fingers on its legs, it sailed across the room in a wide arc, much farther than a real cricket could ever jump. His heart raced as he fetched it, and on the second try, it leaped even farther.

“Who’s there?” His mother’s voice was a knife through the air. The springs of her sagging bed squeaked as she rose.

Jorge had no chance to retrieve the cricket. He jumped back in his bed and pulled up the sheet just as Imelda opened his door. Her wiry hair was wild, and her lips were set in her usual frown. She held up a lantern and pinned him with its light.

“There were noises,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “Was it you?”

Jorge blinked into the beam of light. But before he could answer, another bone-chilling wail rose from the waves.

Imelda paused to listen, too. Normally, she complained about the racket of night creatures. But now she crossed to the window, and the corners of her mouth





twitched as she stood there until the last notes faded.

“What is that, Mamá?”

“Nothing but the wind,” she muttered, though something in her expression told him she knew more.

“Wind?” he asked. It had never sounded like that before.

She turned to him abruptly and snapped, “Don’t be a coward.” Then her lantern caught something that glinted in the corner, and she turned her suspicious eyes toward it. Holding up her light, she spotted the shiny cricket at once, thanks to the sparkle of its eyes. She lumbered over despite her painful bunions and snatched it up.

“What’s this?” She inspected its finely wrought legs with a sour expression and turned to Jorge in accusation.

Jorge’s tongue went dry. Imelda and Armando didn’t approve of toys, never having had any of their own. They didn’t like wasting time, either, or the fact that their son had fanciful ideas for inventions in general. Whenever they found one of Jorge’s drawings, they tossed it in the fire. It’s why he always kept his notebook tucked out of sight.

She took two steps closer to him. “You’ve been wasting time again, haven’t you?” she hissed.

Jorge blinked. What would she do to him this time?



Yank his hair? Tweak his ear until it was throbbing and red? He braced himself. "It's just a toy, Mamá," he said.

"What have I told you about making toys when you should be working?" she demanded.

"*Foolishness doesn't feed us,*" he said dully. But he knew it wasn't true. Joyful things fed the empty spots inside a person. At least that's what toys did for him.

"That's right. It does not."

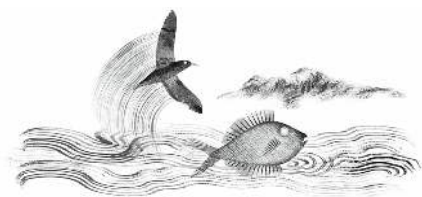
"I'm sorry," he said, hoping she'd go back to bed.

"*Sorry?* If I find you wasting our scraps to make another toy, I'll burn out your tongue and melt everything you own in the forge myself!" Turning him to cinders was his parents' favorite threat. When he winced, she grinned, showing her crooked brown teeth. Then she threw the cricket out the window to settle the matter.

Jorge turned over as his mother's footsteps receded and the springs of her bed squeaked. He'd have to find the cricket tomorrow when she wasn't looking. Then he'd hide it again.

His eyes grew heavy until, at last, he was safely in his dreams, running along a path far from his parents' scoldings and the question that was always at their lips: "*What kind of worthless boy are you, Jorge Leon?*"





CHAPTER 5

“Couldn’t *anyone* quiet him?” The Admiral shot Amina and Graciela an imposing glare as they arrived at the guyot, a large flat-topped seamount where the spirits gathered. Though he was mostly transparent, Graciela could still see epaulets on the shoulders of his eternal shroud. Once a career naval officer, the Admiral was very particular about keeping things orderly, and he believed wholeheartedly in observing decorum at all times. “You’d think the little rascal had never heard of dying!”

Graciela couldn’t blame the Admiral. It had been a struggle to calm Samuel. In the end, Amina had been forced to disturb Berta, who had been an esteemed medicine woman in her village before a plague wiped everyone away. Now she was a Healer, but not even her calming herbs had helped. It was only exhaustion that had finally silenced Samuel. The child still looked terrified while floating in trancelike somnus.

As one of the oldest spirits, Berta was even more transparent than the Admiral, barely visible except for the last of her shimmering tunic and her long, elegant fingers. Her voice was as soothing as lapping waves.

“You could be more patient, Admiral,” she scolded gently. “I seem to recall that you weren’t so chipper on awakening, either.” She’d seen most everyone arrive—even Amina.

A few of the Mind Easer spirits who were waiting for an appointment with Amina began to giggle.

“True,” Amina said, stifling a smile. It was common knowledge that the Admiral had threatened to disembowel her when he first awoke—unaware that bowels were not a concern anymore.

“Never mind that!” The Admiral swatted irritably at the remoras that were trying to graze in his phantom beard. “It’s order we need around here! Order, dignity, and quiet!”

Nearby, the Fog Haunters murmured in agreement. Together, they made a most unpleasant cacophony of ominous groans. They were a rather humorless bunch, normally in charge of adding unsettling sounds to fogs to make them more eerie. Elizabeth, their self-elected spokeswoman and a former opera singer, looked especially peeved. She spoke up at once.



"I quite agree with the Admiral about the disturbance, Berta." Her voice sounded like someone sawing squeaky notes on violins and cellos.

The Admiral's cheeks flushed with color at the compliment, and he gave Elizabeth an appreciative nod. Everyone knew he was fond of her.

"My nerves are in utter tatters from that wretched child!" Elizabeth continued. "It's the rest of us who need calming, thanks to him!"

Elizabeth's nerves were always "in utter tatters" about one thing or another, but nothing put her on edge more than children, whom she loathed. In fact, one of her favorite parts of being a Fog Haunter was adding her voice to sea mists that seeped in through bedroom windows at night. The lower register of her mezzo-soprano was terrifying, and she prided herself on inducing children's nightmares.

Just then, a whoosh of bubbles erupted.

"Boo-hoo! Looks like we've got a screamer!"

Two spirits zoomed around them, shrieking and cackling. Their hair was all rigid points like the bodies of spiny urchins.

Needlers. They were back from the hunts, and their faces were flushed with excitement.

