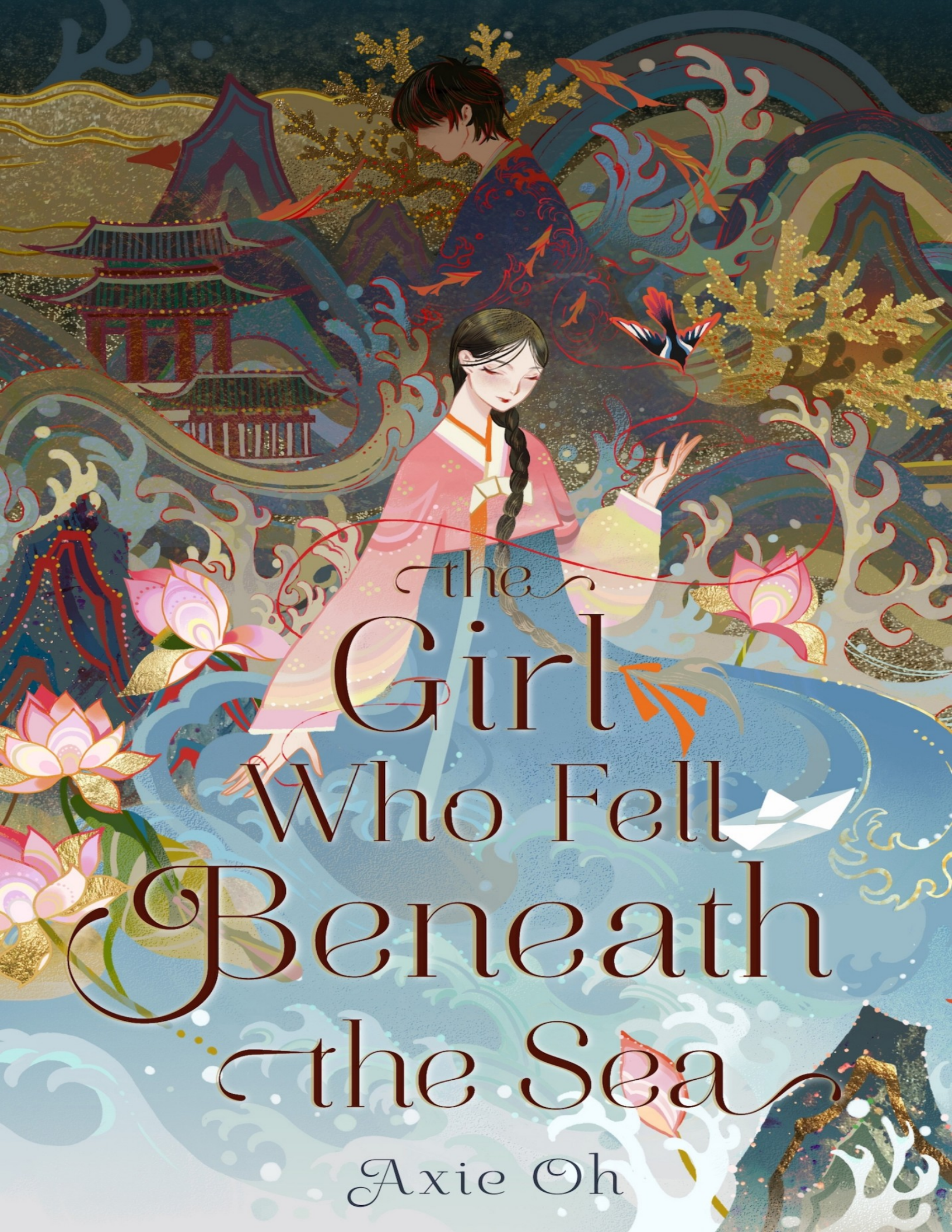




the
Girl
Who Fell
Beneath
the Sea

Axie Oh

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Who Fell
Beneath
the Sea

by Axie Oh



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
New York

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For my mom,
who has always believed in me.

1

The myths of my people say only a true bride of the Sea God can bring an end to his insatiable wrath. When the otherworldly storms rise from the East Sea, lightning breaking the sky and waters ripping up the shore, a bride is chosen and given to the Sea God.

Or sacrificed, depending on the measure of your faith.

Every year the storms begin, and every year a girl is brought to the sea. I can't help wondering if Shim Cheong believes in the myth of the Sea God's bride. If she'll find comfort in it before the end.

Or perhaps she sees it as a beginning. There are many pathways destiny can take.

For instance, there's my own path—the literal path before me, stretching narrowly through the waterlogged rice fields. If I follow this path, it'll eventually lead me to the beach. If I turn around, the path will take me back to the village.

Which destiny belongs to me? Which destiny will I grasp on to with both hands?

Even if it were up to choice, it wouldn't really be mine to make. For though a large part of me longs for the safety of home, the pull of my heart is infinitely stronger. It tugs me toward the open sea and to the one person I love beyond destiny.

My brother Joon.

Lightning streaks through the storm clouds, splintering across a blackened sky. A half second later, a clap of thunder rumbles over the rice fields.

The path ends where the dirt meets the sand. I take off my soggy sandals and fling them over my shoulder. Through the torrent of rain, I catch sight of the boat, tossing and turning upon the waves. It's a small, hollowed-out vessel with a single mast, meant to carry eight or so men—and one Sea God's bride. Already it's a distance from the shore, and moving farther still.

Lifting my rain-soaked skirt, I sprint toward the raging sea.

I hear a shout from the boat the same moment I crash into the first wave. Immediately I'm pulled under. The freezing water steals my breath. I tumble beneath the water, spinning violently to the left, then the right. I fight to get my mouth above the surface, but the waves pour into and over me.

I'm not a weak swimmer, but I'm also not a strong one, and although I fight to swim, to reach the boat and *live*, it's so very hard. It might not be enough. I wish it didn't hurt so much—the waves, the salt, the sea.

"Mina!" Strong hands wrap around my arms, pulling me out of the water. I'm placed firmly on the boat's undulating deck. My brother stands before me, familiar features twisted in a scowl.

"What were you thinking?" Joon shouts over the howling wind. "You could have drowned!"

A massive wave crashes against the boat, and I lose my balance. Joon grabs my wrist to keep me from tumbling overboard.

"I followed you!" I shout, just as loudly. "You shouldn't be here. Warriors aren't supposed to accompany the Sea God's bride." Looking at my brother now, his rain-lashed face and defiant expression, I want to collapse into tears. I want to drag him to the shore and never look back. How could he risk his life like this? "If the god should know of your presence, you'll be killed!"

Joon flinches, his eyes flicking to the prow of the boat, where a slender figure stands, hair whipping sharply in the wind.

Shim Cheong.

“You don’t understand,” Joon says. “I couldn’t ... I couldn’t let her face this alone.”

The breaking of his voice confirms what I’ve suspected all along, what I’d hoped wasn’t true. I curse under my breath, but Joon doesn’t notice. His entire being is focused on *her*.

The elders say Shim Cheong was fashioned by the Goddess of Creation to be the Sea God’s final bride, the one to ease all his sorrows and usher in a new era of peace in the kingdom. She has skin forged from the purest of pearls. She has hair stitched from the deepest night. She has lips colored by the blood of men.

Maybe this last detail is more bitterness than truth.

I remember the first time I saw Shim Cheong. I was standing with Joon beside the river. It was the night of the paper boat festival four summers ago, when I was twelve and Joon was fourteen.

It is tradition in the seaside villages to write wishes onto pieces of paper before folding them carefully into boats to set upon the river. The belief is that our paper boats will carry our wishes to our dead ancestors in the Spirit Realm, where they can bargain with the lesser gods to fulfill our dreams and desires.

“Shim Cheong might be the most beautiful girl in the village, but her face is a curse.”

I looked up at the sound of Joon’s voice, following his gaze to the bridge spanning the river, where a girl stood at its center.

With her face lit by moonlight, Shim Cheong seemed more goddess than girl. She held a paper boat of her own. It fell from her open palm onto the water. As I watched it drift down the river, I wondered what someone so beautiful could possibly wish for.

I didn’t know then that Shim Cheong was already destined to be the Sea God’s bride.

Now, standing on the boat in the pouring rain with thunder rattling my bones, I notice the way the men keep away from her. It’s as if she’s already been sacrificed, her otherworldly beauty separating her from the rest of us.

She belongs to the Sea God. It's what the village has always known, ever since she came of age.

I wonder if it happens in a day, for your fate to change. Or if it takes longer for your life to be stolen from you.

I wonder if Joon sensed this loneliness in her. Because ever since Shim Cheong was twelve, she belonged to the Sea God, and while everyone might have seen her as someone who would one day leave, he was the only one who wanted her to stay.

"Mina." Joon tugs my arm. "You need to hide."

I watch as Joon anxiously searches the uncovered deck for a place for me to conceal myself. He might not care that he's broken one of the Sea God's three rules, but he worries for me.

The rules are simple: No warriors. No women, besides the Sea God's bride. No weapons. Joon broke the first rule by coming tonight. I broke the second.

And the third. My hand curls around the knife hidden beneath my short jacket, the blade that once belonged to my great-great-grandmother.

The boat must have reached the center of the storm, because the winds stop howling, the waves cease their crashing over the deck, and even the rain lessens its relentless battering.

It's dark in every direction, the clouds obscuring the moonlight. I move closer to the boat's edge and look over the side. The lightning flashes, and in the brightness, I see it. The fishermen see it, too, their screams swallowed by the night.

Beneath the boat moves a massive silver-blue dragon.

Its snakelike body circles the boat, the ridges of its scaled back breaking the surface of the water.

The flash of lightning dissipates. Darkness falls once more, and all that can be heard is the endless roll of the waves. I shiver, imagining all the awful fates that might await us, either through drowning or being devoured by the Sea God's servant.

The boat groans as the dragon slides right up against the hull.

What is the purpose of this? What was the Sea God thinking, sending his terrifying servant? Is he testing the courage of his bride?

I blink, realizing my anger has dispelled most of my fear. My gaze sweeps the boat. Shim Cheong still stands at the prow, but she's no longer alone.

"Joon!" I shout, my heart dropping.

Joon whips his head in my direction, abruptly releasing Shim Cheong's hand.

Behind them, the dragon rises silently out of the water, its long neck extending into the sky. Seawater falls off its dark blue scales, dropping like coins onto the boat's deck.

Its black, fathomless eyes are riveted on Shim Cheong.

This is the moment.

I don't know what's supposed to happen, but this is the moment we've all been waiting for, what Shim Cheong has been waiting for since the day she learned she was too beautiful to live. This is the moment when she loses everything. Most devastatingly, the boy she loves.

And in this moment, Shim Cheong hesitates.

She turns from the dragon, her eyes finding Joon's. She gives him a look I've never seen before—one of agony, fear, and such desperate longing it breaks my heart. Joon lets out a choked sound, takes one step toward her, and then another, until he's standing in front of her, his empty hands spread wide in protection.

And with just this, he's sealed his fate. The dragon will never let him go, not after this act of defiance. As if to prove my fears, the great beast lets out a deafening roar, bringing all the men left standing to their knees.

Except for Joon. My fierce, stubborn fool of a brother, who stands as if he can single-handedly protect his love from the Sea God's wrath.

An unbearable anger rises up within me, starting in my stomach and clawing up to choke me. The gods have *chosen* not to grant our wishes—our wishes from the paper boat festival, but also the small wishes we make every

day. For peace, for fertility, for love. The gods have abandoned us. The god of gods, the Sea God, *wants* to take from the people who love him—take and take and never give.

The gods might not grant our wishes. But I could. For Joon. I could grant his wish.

I rush to the prow of the boat and leap onto the edge. “Take me instead!” I whip out my knife and make a deep slash across my palm, raising it up high above my head. “I will be the Sea God’s bride. I pledge my life to him!”

My words are met with utter stillness from the dragon. And right away, I doubt everything. Why would the Sea God take me instead of Shim Cheong? I haven’t her beauty or her elegance. I just have my own stubborn will, the one my grandmother always said would be the curse of me.

But then the dragon lowers its head, turning to the side so I can look straight into one of its black eyes. It’s as deep and endless as the sea.

“Please,” I whisper.

In this moment, I don’t feel beautiful. Nor do I feel very brave, my hands trembling. But there’s a warmth in my chest that nothing and no one can take from me. This is the strength I call upon now, because even if I am afraid, I know I’ve chosen this.

I am the maker of my own destiny.

“Mina!” my brother shouts. “No!”

The dragon lifts its body out of the water, dropping a length of its massive bulk between my brother and me, separating us. In the silence, surrounded completely by the dragon, I hesitate, wondering how much it can understand.

I grasp for the right words. The truth.

I take a breath, lifting my chin. “I am the Sea God’s bride.”

The dragon drags its body away from the boat, revealing an opening in the churning water.

Without looking back, I jump into the sea.

2

As I sink, the roar of the waves abruptly cuts off, and all is silent. Over and around me, the dragon's long, sinuous body circles, swirling a great whirlpool.

Together we fall through the sea.

Strange, but the urge to breathe never rises. My descent is almost ... calm. Peaceful. This must be the dragon's doing. It's using its magic to keep me from drowning.

My throat tightens, and my heart pounds with relief—all the brides before me, they lived.

Down into the darkness we sink, until the sea above me is the sky, and we—the dragon and I—are like falling stars.

The dragon circles closer, and through its tightening coils I catch sight of one hooded eye, opened slightly to reveal a glittering pool of midnight. Time slows. The world stops. I reach out my hand. Droplets of blood leave the open wound to trail like gemstones across the distance between us.

The dragon blinks, once. A rift opens up below me.

I drop through it into darkness.



My grandmother often told me stories about the Spirit Realm, a place between heaven and earth filled with all kinds of wondrous beings—gods and spirits and mythical creatures. My grandmother said it was her own grandmother who used to tell her the stories. After all, not all storytellers are grandmothers, but all grandmothers are storytellers.

My grandmother and I would make the short walk through the rice fields and down to the beach, each carrying one side of a folded bamboo mat. We'd spread the mat on the pebbled sand and link arms as we sat side by side, dipping our toes into the cool water.

I remember the way the sea looked in the early morning. The sun peeked out from over the horizon and lit a golden pathway across the water. The briny air misted over our faces like salty kisses. I would lean closer to my grandmother, basking in her steady warmth.

She'd always start with stories first, those with beginnings and endings, but as the orange and purple hues of the early morning settled into the bright blue of afternoon, she would begin to ramble, her voice a soothing melody.

"The Spirit Realm is a vast and magical place, but the greatest of all its wonders is the Sea God's city. Some say the Sea God is a very old man. Some say he's a man in his prime, tall as a tree with a beard as black as slate. And others believe he might even be a dragon himself, made of wind and water. But whatever form the Sea God takes, the gods and spirits of the realm obey him, for he is the god of gods, and ruler of them all."

My whole life, I've lived surrounded by gods. There are thousands of them—the god of the well at the center of our village, who sings through the croaking of the frogs; the goddess of the breeze that comes from the west as the moon rises; the god of the stream in our garden, to whom Joon and I used to leave offerings of mud cakes and lotus lily pies. The world is filled with small gods, for each part of nature has a guardian to watch over and protect it.

A strong sea wind swept over the water. My grandmother lifted her hand to her straw hat to keep it from being ripped away into the darkening sky.

Even though it was still early in the day, clouds gathered overhead, thick with rain.

“Grandmother,” I asked, “what makes the Sea God more powerful than the other gods?”

“Our sea is an embodiment of him,” she said, “and he is the sea. He is powerful because the sea is powerful. And the sea is powerful...”

“Because he is,” I finished for her. My grandmother liked to speak in circles.

A low groan of thunder rumbled across the sky. The pebbles at our feet skittered into the water and were washed away with the tide. Beyond the horizon, a storm brewed. Clouds of eddying dust and ice crystals swirled upward in a funnel of darkness. I gasped. A feeling of anticipation swept through my soul.

“It’s beginning,” my grandmother said. Quickly we stood and rolled up the bamboo mat, then walked swiftly toward the dunes that separated the beach from the village. I slipped in the sand, but my grandmother grabbed my hand to steady me. As we reached the top, I looked back one last time.

The sea was in shadow. The clouds above blocked the sunlight. It looked otherworldly, so unlike the sea of the morning that, though I had sat by the water only a moment before, I suddenly missed it terribly. For the next few weeks, the storms would grow worse and worse, making it impossible to travel close to the shore without being swallowed by the waves. They would rage uncontrollably until the morning when the clouds would part overhead, allowing for a brief ray of sunlight to peek through, a sign that the time to sacrifice a bride had come.

“What makes the Sea God so angry?” I asked my grandmother, who had stopped to gaze out across the dark water. “Is it us?”

She turned to me then, strong emotion in her brown eyes. “The Sea God isn’t angry, Mina. He’s lost. He’s waiting, in his palace far beyond this world, for someone brave enough to find him.”



I sit up and gasp in a lungful of air. Last I remember, I was falling through the sea. Yet I'm no longer underwater. It's as if I've woken inside the belly of a cloud. A white fog covers the world, making it difficult to see past my knees.

Standing, I wince as my dress, dried and brittle with salt, scrapes against my skin. From the folds of my skirt topples my great-great-grandmother's knife, clattering against the wooden floorboards. As I reach to pick it up, a flutter of color catches my eye.

Wrapped around my left palm, over the wound I cut to make my vow to the Sea God, is a ribbon.

A bright red ribbon of silk. One end circles my hand, but the other blooms from the center of my palm outward, leading into the mist.

A ribbon floating on air. I've never seen anything like it, yet I know what it must be.

The Red String of Fate.

According to my grandmother's stories, the Red String of Fate ties a person to her destiny. Some even believe that it ties you to the one person your heart desires most.

Joon, ever the romantic, believed this to be true. He said he knew when he met Cheong for the first time that his life would never be the same. That he felt, in the way his hand tugged in the direction of hers, the subtle pull of fate.

And yet, the Red String of Fate is invisible in the mortal world. The bright red ribbon before me is decidedly *not* invisible, which means ...

I am no longer in the mortal world.

As if sensing my thoughts, the ribbon gives a firm tug. Someone—or *something*—is pulling me from the other side, from within the mist.

Fear attempts to grab hold of me, and I squash it with a stubborn shake of my head. The other brides endured this, and I must, too, if I am to be a worthy replacement for Shim Cheong. The dragon accepted me, but until I speak with the Sea God, I won't know whether my village is truly safe.

At least I am more prepared than most, armed as I am with my knife and my grandmother's stories.

The ribbon flutters in the air, beckoning me forward. I take a step, and the ribbon alights against my palm in a spark of stars. Tucking my knife inside my short jacket, I follow the ribbon into the white fog.

All around me the world is still and silent. I slide my bare feet against the smooth wooden slats of the floor. I reach out a hand, and my fingers brush something solid—a railing. I must be on a bridge. The path slopes at a shallow decline, giving way to cobblestoned streets.

Here the air is thicker, warmer, filled with an aroma of mouthwatering scents. Out of the fog looms a line of carts. The closest is stacked high with dumplings in bamboo steamers. Another cart holds salted fish, strung up by their tails. A third is spread with sweets—candied chestnuts and flat cakes of sugar and cinnamon. Every cart is abandoned. No peddlers in sight. I squint, trying to make out the darker shapes, but every shadow turns out to be just another cart, a chain of them, stretching onward into the mist.

Leaving the carts behind, I enter a long alleyway lined with restaurants. Smoke from cooking fires wafts through open doorways. A glimpse through the nearest one reveals a room laid out with tables spread with dishes of food ranging from small bowls of spices to large platters of roasted fowl and fish. Bright cushions are arranged haphazardly about the tables as if revelers had been sitting comfortably, enjoying their meals, only minutes before. At the entrance, pairs of neatly placed sandals and slippers are lined up all in a row. Patrons went into the restaurant, but they didn't come out.

I back away from the doorway. Carts without owners. Cooking fires without cooks. Shoes without people.

A city of ghosts.

There's a soft breath of laughter against my neck. I turn around abruptly, but there's no one there. Still, I feel as if there are eyes on me, unseen and watchful.

What sort of place is this? It's not like any of the stories my grandmother told of the Sea God's city—a place where spirits and lesser gods gather in joy

and celebration. The fog covers the realm like a cloak, muffling sight and sound. I cross over short, arched bridges and down abandoned streets, everything around me colorless and dull but for the ribbon, achingly bright as it cuts through the fog.

How did the Sea God's brides feel, waking to a realm of fog with only a bright ribbon as a guide? There were many who came before me.

There was Soah, who had the loveliest eyes, framed by dark lashes that looked as if they were coated in a heavy layer of soot. There was Wol, who stood as tall as any man, with strong, handsome features and a laughing mouth. And there was Hyeri, who could swim the span of the Great River twice over, and who broke a hundred hearts when she left to wed the Sea God.

Soah. Wol. Hyeri. *Mina*.

My name sounds small beside theirs, these girls who always seemed larger than life. They traveled from far away to marry the Sea God, from villages closer to the capital—even *from* the capital in the case of Wol. They were girls who would never have ventured to our backwater village in any other life than the one that forced them to give up their own. These girls, these young women, they were all older than me, eighteen when they left to be brides. They walked the same path as I walk now. I wonder if they were nervous or afraid. Or if hope made fools of them all.

After what seems like hours of walking, I turn a corner and step out onto a wide boulevard. The fog is thinner here. For once, I can see where the ribbon leads. It flits down the length of the boulevard, floating up a grand sweep of stairs and vanishing through the open doors of a massive red-and-gold gate. With its ornate pillars and gilded roof, this can be none other than the entrance to the Sea God's palace.

I hurry forward. The ribbon begins to sparkle and hum, as if it can sense my nearness to the end.

I reach the stairs and take one step, then another. I'm about to pass through the threshold of the gate when a sound catches my ear. The soft chime of a bell, faint enough that if the world hadn't been blanketed in

silence, I might not have heard it. The sound came from somewhere to my left, down the stairs and back into the labyrinth of streets.

My eldest brother, Sung, thinks all wind chimes sound the same. But I think he just doesn't have the patience to listen. The clanking of bronze baubles against seashells sounds different from the tapping of tin against copper bells. The wind, too, has varying degrees of temperament. When it's angry, the chimes make a sharp, shrilling sound. When it's happy, the chimes clink together in a lively dance.

This sound, though, is different. Low. Melancholy.

I step back down the stairs. The ribbon doesn't resist but grows in length, trailing after me.

I can hear my grandmother's voice in my ear. *There are rules to the world of spirits, Mina. Choose carefully which ones you break.* There is a reason this city is veiled in mist. There is a reason I can only travel through it by way of a ribbon of fate. But the sound of the chime was close, and the truth is, I think I've *heard* it before.

The sound leads me to the doorway of a small shop off the boulevard. I brush aside the rough curtain and step inside, gasping at the wondrous sight. The shop is filled with hundreds upon hundreds of wind chimes. They cover the walls and hang from the ceiling like teardrops. Some of the charms are round and small, made of seashells, acorns, and tin stars; others are large waterfalls of golden bells.

And yet, as within the white fog, there's no wind in the shop.

But I could have sworn I heard a sound. My eyes are drawn to the far wall, where a gap at the center displays a single wind chime. A star, a moon, and a copper bell are threaded on a thin bamboo string. It's a simple construction for a chime.

I recognize it immediately.

I carved the star from a piece of driftwood and the moon from a beautiful white seashell I'd found on the beach. The bell I purchased from a traveling bell maker, pestering him as I rang each bell inside his cart, one after another. I wouldn't settle until I found the perfect sound.

I spent a week crafting the chime. I meant to hang it above my niece's cradle, so she could hear the wind.

But she was born too early. If she'd been born in the autumn, she would have lived. But as everyone knows, all children born during the storms never survive past the first breath.

Sung was heartbroken.

In a rage I've never felt before or since, I took the charm to the cliffs outside our village and pitched it over the edge. I watched as it fell and shattered upon the rocks. Last I saw the chime, it was in pieces as they were swept away into the sea.

All around me the chimes in the shop begin to jingle—somehow swaying in the windless air—until the shop is a clamor of cacophonous sounds.

Wind chimes ringing without wind mean there are spirits about.

I exit the shop, the sound of the chimes dampened to my ears. If there are spirits here, and they're invisible, watching, what do they see when they look at me?

I walk fast. The night is long, and the ribbon is a weight against my hand. Beyond the gate is one grand courtyard after another. I look at none of them. After the fifth, I'm running.

I step through a final gate, climb the stone steps, and enter the throne room of the Sea God, stopping only then to catch my breath.

Moonlight filters through breaks in the raftered ceiling, slanting broken light across a great hall. The twilight gloom of the fog is muted here, but still the eerie silence remains. No servants rush out to greet me. No guards move to block my path. The Red String of Fate ripples. Slowly it begins to shift from a bright, sparkling crimson to a deep bloodred. It leads me to the end of the hall, where a massive mural of the dragon chasing a pearl across the sky frames a throne on a dais.

Slumped over the throne, his face shadowed by a magnificent crown, is the Sea God. He's dressed in beautiful blue robes, stitched silver dragons climbing up the fabric. Around his left hand is the end of my ribbon.

I wait for the spark of recognition in my soul.

According to myth, the Red String of Fate ties a person to her destiny. Some even believe that it ties you to the one person your heart desires most.

Is the Sea God tied somehow to my destiny? Does my heart desire him most?

There's a sharp pain in my chest, but it's not love.

It's darker, hotter, and infinitely stronger.

I *hate* him.

I take a step. And then another. My hand that holds the ribbon goes to my chest and comes away with the knife.

What would the world be like without the Sea God? Would we still suffer the storms that rise out of nothing to wreck our boats and drown our fields? Would we still suffer the loss of our loved ones to famine and sickness, because the lesser gods can't *or won't* hear our prayers, fearful as they are of the Sea God's wrath?

"What would happen, if I were to kill you now?"

As the words echo in the vast hall, I realize these are the first words I've spoken aloud since arriving in the Sea God's realm.

And they're words of hate. My anger swells up like an unstoppable wave. "I would kill you now and sever the ties of our fate."

My words are reckless. Who am I to defy a god? But there's a terrible ache inside me that needs to know—

"Why do you curse us? Why do you look away when we cry and scream for your help? Why have you abandoned us?" I choke on these last words.

The figure on the throne doesn't answer. The magnificent crown he wears leans so far forward over his face that it shadows his eyes.

I take the last few steps to the dais. Reaching out, I remove the crown from the Sea God's head. It slips from my fingers to land with a thud against the silk carpet.

I lift my eyes to look upon the face of the god of all gods.

The Sea God is ...

A boy. No older than myself.