The Girl of Ink and Stars

Chapter 1

I woke in my narrow bed, sunrise just starting to brighten the mud walls of my room. The smell of burnt porridge hung on the air. I could hear Miss La, our hen, scratching about outside my room, seeking out crumbs. Her feathers were grey, her mood was black, and even our cat, Pep, was scared of her. Pep was sprawled across my legs, and he yowled loudly as I sat up.

“You awake, Isabella?” Da called from the kitchen.

“Morning, Da.”

“Porridge is ready. A little overready, in fact . . .”

“Coming!” I eased my legs out and smoothed the cat’s rough fur where it had ruffled in the night. “Sorry, Pep.”

He purred and closed his green eyes.

I washed my face in the basin by the window and pulled on my school dress. It was as big as it had been six weeks before. I quickly braided my unbrushed hair and pulled aside the curtain that served as my bedroom door. A big bowl of blackened porridge sat on our large table, among a sea of maps.

“Fetch the jug, would you?” Da’s voice made me jump.

I dragged a chair to the shelves, carefully taking the jug from high up, and put it on the table next to the porridge.

“Good morning, little one.” Da limped from the kitchen. I rushed to take the milk pail and cups he was carrying.

“You shouldn’t walk without your stick,” I scolded.

Da had broken his leg as a young man, leaping from the jetty of an Æygptian port onto a moving ship that was leaving for Amrica without him, and now used a walking stick.

Da poured the milk into the jug, then settled down on the bench next to me and grinned. “Pick a pocket.”

 I rolled my eyes. “Left.”

He wiggled his eyebrows like two black caterpillars. “Right answer.” He pulled a small jar from his pocket.

 “Pine honey!” I unscrewed the lid, and the smell filled my nostrils, making my mouth water. “Thank you, Da.”

 “Nothing but the best for your first day back at school.”

 I shrugged. “It’s only school. . . .”

 “Oh, well, I suppose I’ll just have to eat all of this myself, then. . . .” He took the open jar and mimed pouring the honey into his mouth.

 “No!” I grabbed it back. “You’re right, it’s a very important day. I’m only surprised you didn’t get two jars.”

The honey was so good I hardly noticed the porridge was burnt, but when I looked up, Da’s food was untouched. His eyes had a faraway look.

I cleared away my bowl as quietly as I could. “I’ll see you later, Da.”

 When he didn’t answer, I picked up my satchel and left the house, closing the peeling green door gently behind me.