The Girl of Ink and Stars

Chapter 1

The morning it began was like any other.

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. Da must have been up for hours, as it took a long time for the fire to heat the heavy clay pot. I could hear Miss La, our hen, scratching about outside my room, seeking out crumbs. She was twelve years old, same as me, but even though it’s young for a person, it’s very, very old for a chicken. Her feathers were grey, her mood was black, and even our cat, Pep, was scared of her.

My tummy rumbled as I stretched out my arms. 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 stuck a tongue out at the reflection in the polished metal above Gabo’s bed. I straightened his sheets, dustier every day but still made.

It would not do to start the day sad. Shaking the thoughts out of my head, I pulled on my school dress instead. It was as big as it had been six weeks before.

I quickly braided my unbrushed hair and hoped Da wouldn’t notice I hadn’t untangled it all summer.

I pulled aside the curtain that served as my bedroom door and carefully stepped over Miss La, who squawked as I scattered her small pile of crumbs. She narrowed her misty eyes and pecked at my ankles, chasing me farther into the main room, where we ate, talked, and planned adventures.

A big bowl of blackened porridge sat on our large pine-plank table, marooned among a sea of maps. More of Da’s maps were stuck to the walls, and they rustled as I passed, like a talking breeze.

I traced the papers with my finger, as I did every morning, watching how the silver pigment of Afrik’s rivers met those of Æygpt, how Æygpt clung to the curve of Europa Bay like one hand grasping another across the sea. On the opposite wall hung the sketchy coast of Amrica and its dragging ocean currents, labeled with strange, wondrous names: the Frozen Circle, the Vanishing Triangle, the Cerulean Sea. The paper was dyed a beautiful deep blue, and the currents were picked out in thread against it.

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

I dragged a chair to the shelves, carefully taking the jug from high up, and put it on the table next to the porridge. It was forest green and special because it was the last thing Ma had made. We used it only on the first and last days of school, or birthdays and feast days. Da kept it out of reach and washed it with great care.

“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 carved from a fragment of his great-grandfather’s fishing boat. It was my favorite thing out of the many favorite things in the room. Light as paper, it floated in even the thinnest skim of water, but most miraculous of all, it glowed in the dark. Da said it was because of the sap, but I knew it was magic.

 I hurried to clear a space on the table, shifting the Himalay Mountains onto a shelf.

Da poured the milk into Ma’s 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. He was sitting in that hunched way that meant he was thinking. His hand rested on the milk jug, and I could see the pulse in his wrist. His eyes had a faraway look.

 First days of school were hard for both of us.

 I cleared away my bowl as quietly as I could and pushed his closer to his hand. “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.