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Opening extract from
The Girl of Ink & Stars

Written by
Kiran Millwood-Hargrave

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Chicken House

2 Palmer Street

Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS

United Kingdom

www.chickenhousebooks.com

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Braque

THE ISLE OF JOYA

Gromera

Latitude 28° 05' 36" N

Longitude 17° 06' 35" W







CHAPTER ONE

They say the day the Governor arrived, the ravens did too. All the smaller birds flew backwards into the sea, and that is why there are no songbirds on Joya. Only huge, ragged ravens. I'd watch them perch on the rooftops like omens, and try to squint them into the chaffinches and goldcrests Da drew from memory. If I imagined hard enough, I could almost hear them singing.

'Why did the songbirds leave, Da?' I'd ask.

'Because they could, Isabella.'

'And the wolves? The deer?'

Da's face would darken. 'Seems the sea was better than what they were running from.'

Da would tell me another story then, about the girl-warrior Arinta, or about Joya's mythical past as a floating island, and refuse to say more about the wolves and the backwards birds. But I kept asking, until the day came when

I found my own answers.

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 thirteen 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 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 over-ready, in fact . . .'

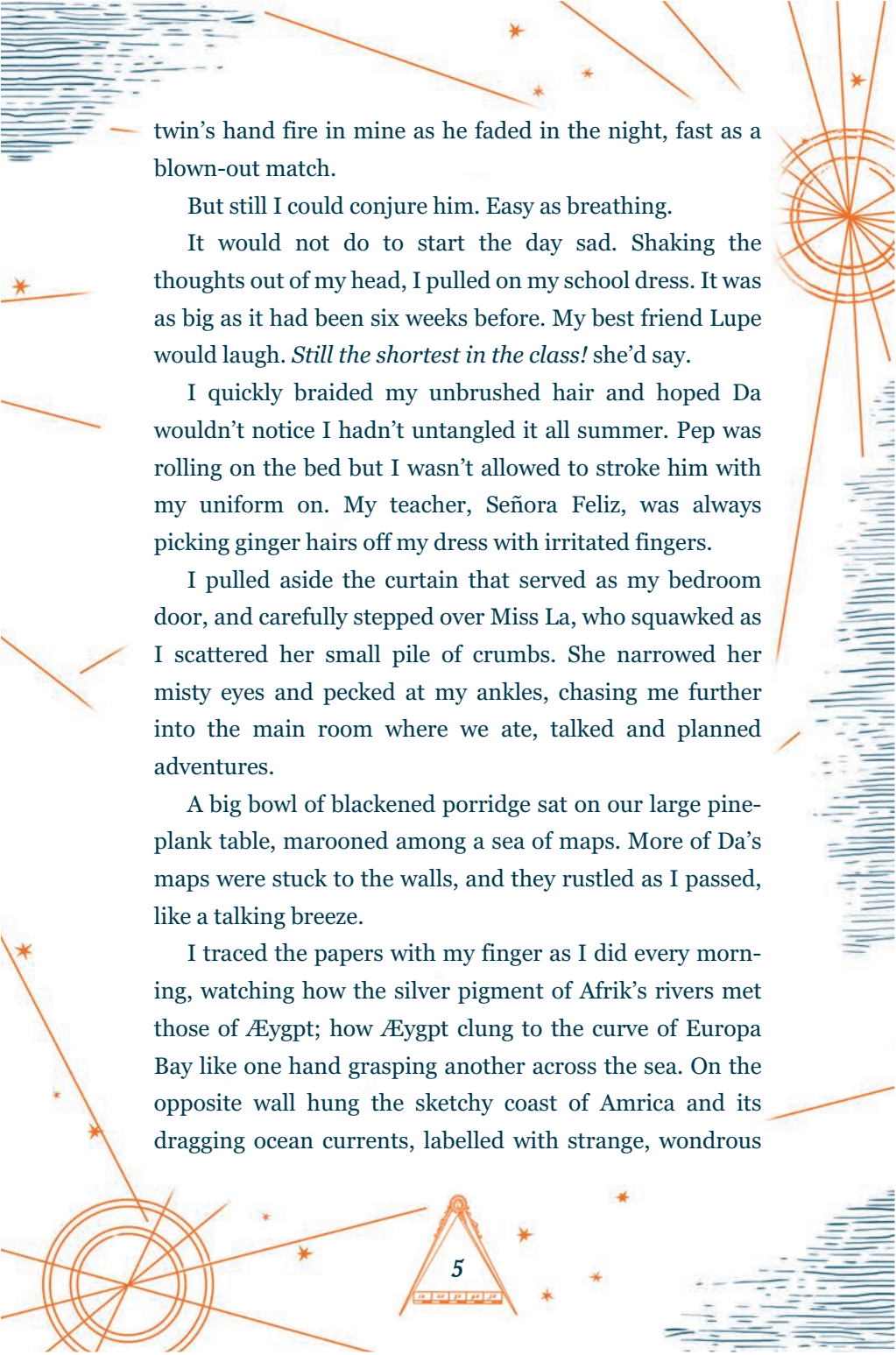
'Coming!' I eased my legs out and smoothed the cat's rough fur where it had ruffled in the night. 'Sorry, Pep.'

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, straightening his sheets, dustier everyday, but still made. The voice line arched next to his pillow – a long, thin hollow Da had etched for us up the walls and over the ceiling. When we pressed our lips to it and whispered, it carried our voices so we could talk even when we were at each end of the room in our separate beds.

Three years now. Three years since I sat there, my





twin's hand fire in mine as he faded in the night, fast as a blown-out match.

But still I could conjure him. Easy as breathing.

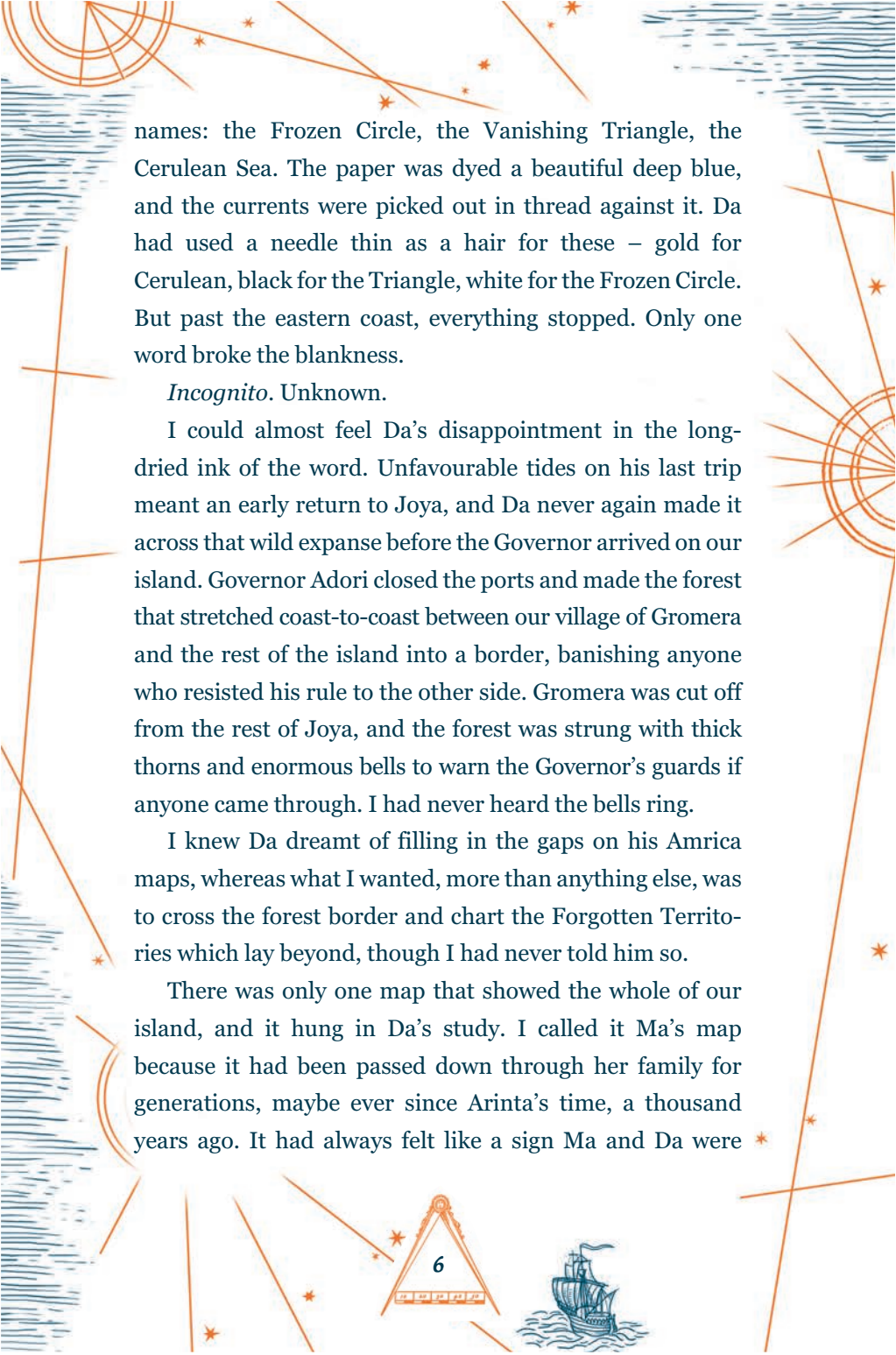
It would not do to start the day sad. Shaking the thoughts out of my head, I pulled on my school dress. It was as big as it had been six weeks before. My best friend Lupe would laugh. *Still the shortest in the class!* she'd say.

I quickly braided my unbrushed hair and hoped Da wouldn't notice I hadn't untangled it all summer. Pep was rolling on the bed but I wasn't allowed to stroke him with my uniform on. My teacher, Señora Feliz, was always picking ginger hairs off my dress with irritated fingers.

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 further 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 Ægypt; how Ægypt 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, labelled with strange, wondrous



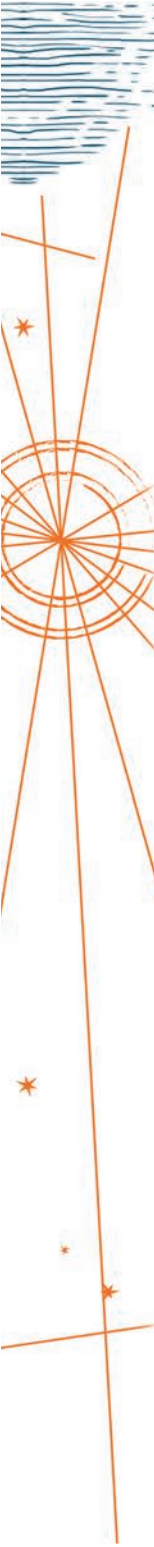
names: the Frozen Circle, the Vanishing Triangle, the Cerulean Sea. The paper was dyed a beautiful deep blue, and the currents were picked out in thread against it. Da had used a needle thin as a hair for these – gold for Cerulean, black for the Triangle, white for the Frozen Circle. But past the eastern coast, everything stopped. Only one word broke the blankness.

Incognito. Unknown.

I could almost feel Da's disappointment in the long-dried ink of the word. Unfavourable tides on his last trip meant an early return to Joya, and Da never again made it across that wild expanse before the Governor arrived on our island. Governor Adori closed the ports and made the forest that stretched coast-to-coast between our village of Gromera and the rest of the island into a border, banishing anyone who resisted his rule to the other side. Gromera was cut off from the rest of Joya, and the forest was strung with thick thorns and enormous bells to warn the Governor's guards if anyone came through. I had never heard the bells ring.

I knew Da dreamt of filling in the gaps on his Amrica maps, whereas what I wanted, more than anything else, was to cross the forest border and chart the Forgotten Territories which lay beyond, though I had never told him so.

There was only one map that showed the whole of our island, and it hung in Da's study. I called it Ma's map because it had been passed down through her family for generations, maybe ever since Arinta's time, a thousand years ago. It had always felt like a sign Ma and Da were



meant for each other, that he was a cartographer and her only heirloom was a map.

Each of us carries the map of our lives on our skin, in the way we walk, even in the way we grow, Da would often say. *See here, how my blood runs not blue at my wrist, but black? Your mother always said it was ink. I am a cartographer through to my heart.*

‘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 made. We used it only on the first day of school, and on birthdays and feast days. Da kept it out of reach and washed it with great care.

I could remember Ma, sometimes – dark eyed and mostly smiling, smelling of the black clay she worked with, making pots for the villagers and delicate pieces for the Governor. Or maybe I imagined her, like the songbirds.

‘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 Ægyptian port on to a moving ship, and now used a walking stick carved from a fragment of his great-grandfather’s fishing boat. It was my favourite thing out of the many favourite things in the room. Light as paper, it floated in even the thinnest skim of water, but most miraculously 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 on to 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.

