

1

Other than the familiar underground rail tube, Dorona had never ridden in a vehicle before. On Gannah, people traveled on foot within their chatsr, and for longer distances by rail. Automobiles were so scarce, she'd only once even seen one on the road.

But now she rode in the backseat, while her father-in-law, Resh, drove the mechanical beast that carried all their worldly goods.

All they could take, anyway. Nearly everything they'd prepared for shipment to their final destination of Arawts was in storage in the lower level of Book House. Turns out they weren't allowed to bring all those things, and what they'd already shipped there was sent back.

"Your quarters will be fully furnished," the Superintendent assured them. "And whatever clothing you're used to wearing in the rest of the world will be inappropriate here." She'd provided them with a list of what to bring—and it was a short list. Most of the items in the truck were for their travels, not for use at what would be their new home.

The prospect of living in the rigid community of Sela in the desolate province of Arawts filled Dorona with trepidation. But she and her husband, Caleb, had no choice. It was a rare kindness of Resh to take them on a world tour first, landing at the Birthing Center in Periy in time for her child to be delivered. They wouldn't have to be in Arawts for another month after that.

Caleb's stepmother, Chana—in the same stage of pregnancy as Dorona—sat up front with Resh. His half-sister, Sarai, sat in her child seat on Caleb's other side as the scenery flew past the glass dome enclosing them. Dorona gazed at the familiar sight of the colorful trees and clasped Caleb's hand. Using the wordless communication their Gannahan genetics provided through their meahs, she let him know how much she'd miss Ayin.

He understood. *But remember, his meah conveyed, how beautiful Qorach was when we went there for our wedding? The Creator has made all the provinces of Gannah beautiful, each in their own way.*

She squeezed his hand. *You're right. But I'll miss Ayin.*

I prefer to look forward to what's ahead rather than regretting what's behind.

She sighed. He was right about that, too. But her faith in the Yasha didn't seem strong enough yet to create that attitude in her.

How could she look forward to what was ahead when she had no idea what that was? All she knew for certain was that their first stop on the journey, though it was near, would be the most difficult. For they were going to Reyach to say goodbye to her em, her brother Dan, and sister Dvora.

How could she bear to leave them?

But the truck was already approaching the chatsr where she'd grown up. She steeled her jaw against tears as they trundled through the opening under Reyach's wall and into the parking garage beneath.

After Resh parked in the visitors' area, they climbed out of the vehicle and headed for the exit. Sarai walked well enough that she no longer needed to be carried, but Chana held her hand, and Dorona held Caleb's.

At Sarai's slow pace, they passed by the Auto Authority office. Dorona had never paid any attention to it before, but now she looked through the wall of windows. Someone sat at a desk behind the counter, but there wasn't anything else going on.

After that was the all-to-familiar Shipping Office. Tewodros Zibiah stood by a conveyor speaking to Natsach Lydia, who was now hugely pregnant. Her four-year-old son, Enoch, walked awkwardly nearby, putting his feet heel-to-toe along a line in the floor as if balancing on a narrow beam. Seeing Zibiah and Lydia brought back the memory of that horrible day when Ema was first arrested, and Dorona's blood ran cold.

She'd lied to her em that day, telling her she'd look for the weaverrat when she had no intention of doing so. A lie was the worst of crimes, and Dorona felt sick at how easily she'd told it. No wonder everything had spun out of control that day – Ema's fight with Zibiah leading to her arrest, the stopped-up drain flooding the kitchen, and Ema's rage when she saw the water everywhere. It was all Dorona's fault. If she hadn't lied – if she'd been a good Gannahan and done what her em had told her to do – none of those things would have happened.

Just then Sarai spied a bright red bead on the floor. She slipped away from Chana and ran to pick it up, then popped it into her mouth. Chana hurried to her. "No, Sarai!" She grabbed the child and stuck her fingers into her mouth to remove the bead. "That's not food!"

Chana's swift movement outside the window must have caught Zibiah's attention, for she looked toward them – and met Dorona's gaze. As Chana handed the wriggling Sarai to Resh to carry, Lydia gestured to Enoch to come over and stand with her, and Zibiah's meah wondered if Dorona had come to Reyach to make trouble again.

With a flush of horror, Dorona realized Zibiah's question was less an accusation than a painful memory of her husband's anger. Yes, Zibiah had been unkind to Ema and deserved the punishment. But the situation was Dorona's fault to begin with, and shame stabbed her like a blade.

Resh spoke to Sarai — "Hush, girl. Settle down" — but Dorona took the admonition personally, as if the Yasha spoke to her racing heart.

The Bookmans continued down the hall toward the tube station, and Dorona never missed a step as she turned away from the Shipping Office and walked with them, but she squeezed Caleb's hand so hard he yelped. "What's going on?" he murmured aloud, while his meah touched hers gingerly, feeling for wounds.

Dorona shook her head. "I'll tell you later." Her weight of guilt was too great to speak of it now.

They passed through the rail station, then rode the moving stairway to the surface. Sarai twisted around in her father's arms to examine it, as if trying to figure out how the thing worked.

Behind them, Caleb chuckled. "Isn't it funny, Sarai?" He spoke in the high-pitched voice people often use with small children. "The stairs move all by themselves. How do they do that?"

She grinned at him and flapped her arms, giggling.

When they reached the top, Chana said, "I smell the bread from your family's bakery. It's heavenly!"

Dorona felt sad and happy at the same time. "It smells like home."

They continued into the courtyard, where Resh paused. "I see where we're going." He nodded toward the building with the enormous stone loaf of bread embedded in its face. "But I'll let you lead the way, Dorona."

Still clinging to Caleb's hand, she went ahead of them across the plaza. As she neared the building, one of the children playing in front shrieked and ran to her. "Rona! It's Rona!"

The two children she'd been playing with stared at the strangers as her little sister Dvora threw herself into Dorona's arms.

Dorona relished the hug. "I'm so glad to see you." Then she looked up at the other children. "Hi, Lily. Hi, Seth. I'm glad to see you too." She turned back to Dvora. "Where's Dan?"

Dvora made an exaggerated sad face. "Ema said he had to finish his arithmetic lesson before he could come out and play." Then she took Dorona's hand and tugged. "Let's go in."

Dorona didn't budge. "Aren't you going to greet the rest of the family?"

As if suddenly realizing they were there, Dvora turned to the Bookmans. She flashed Caleb a smile, but she bowed first to Resh, with a, "Hello, Mr. Bookman. Hi, Sarai," then to Chana. "Hello, Mrs. Bookman." Then finally, she hugged Caleb.

Dorona was surprised at her mature behavior. "What a big girl you're getting to be, and such a good Gannahan!"

"Yeth—I mean, yess." She hadn't quite conquered the lisp. "Ema's been teaching me. She said to make sure I greeted everyone poppery."

Dorona smiled at the mispronunciation.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Dvora turned again to Resh and Chana, gesturing toward the other children who still stood staring. "Mr. and Mrs. Bookman, please allow me to in-toe-duce my friends." She spoke their names slowly and carefully. "Natsach Seth Natsach and Natsach Lily Natsach." She giggled. "That's a lot of Natthachth."

Chana smiled. "It certainly is." She and Resh both nodded to each of the children. "Seth. Lily. It's a pleasure to meet you."

If her friends knew how to reply, Dvora didn't give them time to give the proper response. "We're going in now. Bye." She scampered on ahead, leaving Dorona and the Bookman family to follow through the arch in the wall.

They went around the corner to the back of the building and found her replacing the lid on the trash bin.

"Ema!" Dorona cried, and ran to her. "You've been working on Dvora's manners. She did wonderfully with the introductions. And she hardly lisps at all anymore."

Beaming, Ema released Dorona from a hug and addressed the visitors, bumping hands with Chana but nodding at Resh and smiling at Sarai. "Please come in." She led the way, and they filed after.

Ema put her hand on Dorona's arm. "Take them to the front room, dear, and I'll bring tea."

Dorona did as she was asked, and a moment later, Dan came running, holding a workbook. He dropped it on the floor to give Dorona a hug, then bowed to the Bookmans, then hugged Caleb. "You're my brother now, aren't you? I always wanted a brother."

Caleb grinned. "Me too. I'm glad you're mine."

Ema called from the kitchen, "Did you finish your lesson, Dan?"

He went to the doorway and bowed. "Yes, Em. Can Dorona check it for me like she used to?"

"Of course," Ema said from the kitchen.

Dan picked up the rumpled workbook and gave it to Dorona. "Did I do it right?"

Beside Caleb on the sofa, she patted the spot beside her. "Come on up here, and we'll take a look at it."

While she and Caleb peered at Dan's work, Dvora grabbed the new set of Spotted Stones from a nearby table, opened the box, and showed them to Sarai. "Aren't these pretty?"

Sarai went wide-eyed at the sight of them, and Dvora set them on the floor so they could play.

Ema carried in a tray laden with old-fashioned tea sets, the kind where each person got a tiny pot of their own on a small, matching tray. The teapot's lid was an inverted cup, and the tray also held a tiny honey pot with a stir stick. That manner of serving tea was commonplace a hundred years ago but was rarely seen now.

"Ittai's parents gave us these as a belated wedding gift. Aren't they adorable?" She bent down and looked at Sarai. "Speaking of adorable, aren't you the cutest thing ever? Would you like something too?" She picked up a half slice of Brave bread from the tray, looking up at Chana. "May I?"

Chana nodded. "Of course. She loves your bread."

"And if she gets thirsty, I brought her a little glass of watered blend." There was blend and bread for Dan and Dvora, too, but theirs had a thin film of honey on it.

The adults each picked up a tea set, put the cups upright on the little trays, and poured their tea through a strainer. Then they laid the strainer on the tray and stirred honey into their tea. The ancient ritual was so good, so Gannahan.

But Dorona wasn't. Her eyes blurred with tears. The shame that had welled at seeing Zibiah and Lydia wafted up from her heart like steam from the teapots.

She tried to swallow her guilt by thinking about something else. "These are gifts from Ittai's parents, you said? Where is he?"

"At the bakery. He'll be along shortly." Ema sighed and looked back and forth between Dorona and Caleb. "Marriage is so good. I hope you're as happy with yours as I am."

"We are," Caleb said.

Dorona agreed, but she didn't deserve this happiness. She choked on a sob and had to put her tea set back on the table. "I'm so sorry, Ema..."

She felt everyone's alarm, but she couldn't stop herself. "I... you're teaching Dvora and Dan so well, the things I never learned, I'm so sorry, I was such a naughty child and I..."

Caleb tried to put his arm around her, but she hopped up and went to Ema, who put down her tea tray to hug her.

"What are you talking about, sweet? You were always a good girl, such a good helper for me." Ema suddenly stiffened. "Did someone tell you otherwise? Because if that boy's telling you you're no good, he's wrong about that—"

"No, Ema! Caleb's wonderful, he's never even suggested such a thing. It's just that... when I saw Tewodros Zibiah and Natsach Lydia at the Shipping Office..."

Ema stiffened even more and held Dorona out at arm's length. "You saw who where? Why? What did they do? What did they say to you?"

Dorona shook her head. "They didn't do anything, I just saw them through the window when we went by. It looked like Lydia was shipping a package and Mrs. Tewodrow was helping her print out a label or something, but they looked up and saw me. And everything about that awful day came back to me."

Caleb had risen and approached, and now he took her by the shoulders and directed her back to the sofa where they'd been sitting. "Come over here and sit down. Tell us what you're talking about, because I think we're all confused."

Somewhere during Dorona's embarrassing performance, Sarai started whimpering and Chana pulled her into her lap. Dan and Dvora stared at the floor, faces pale.

Dorona sat beside Caleb and put her face in her hands, shaking her head. "It was all my fault. If I'd done what you'd told me that morning, the sink wouldn't have gotten clogged—" She couldn't bring herself to speak of all that happened after that.

Ema's meah probed Dorona's, searching for understanding. "Oh. That." She sank into a chair.

Dorona nodded. "When you left for the bakery that morning, you told me to look for the weaverrat. You told me to find it before I did anything else. I said I would, but I lied. I had no intention of doing that. And I disobeyed you, I took the kids to the gym instead, and then... and then later, when I was at the bakery, Dan found the weaverrat and tried to wash it down the drain..."

Through her meah, she tried to convey to Caleb a little of the rest of the story, but Ema, Dan, and Dvora knew it too well.

"What happened next was all my fault," Dorona sobbed. "I was never a good daughter. I lied to you, and disobeyed you, and all sorts of bad things happened because I was so bad..."

Ema glared down at her. "You lied?" Her voice grew shrill. "You lied to me? And deliberately disobeyed? How dare—" Ema suddenly stopped shrieking and put her hands over her mouth. "Oh, I'm so sorry. That's what I used to sound like, isn't it?"

She came and fell to her knees in front of Dorona, taking her hands. "We were a mess, weren't we? All of us. I allowed things to fall apart after your father died. Yes, you did bad things, all children do, but I didn't teach you. I loved you so much I didn't want to have to punish you, so I only did when I couldn't stop myself." She released Dorona's hands and pulled her into her arms. "And by then I was out of control. I was wrong. I knew better. But I let my emotions dominate me."

Between Ema hugging her from the front and Caleb from the side, Dorona nearly suffocated, until the voice of Ema's new husband, Ittai, broke in. "Well. It appears I'm interrupting something."

Ema hopped up and ran to him. "Oh, Ittai, you were so right. Look what I've done to my family."

Ittai put one arm around Ema while Dvora ran to cling to one of his sturdy legs and Dan leaned against the other. Ittai put his free hand on Dan's head.

Dorona made one last sob. Her shameful actions had nearly destroyed them all, but the Yasha intervened in an astonishing way. She was in good hands now with Caleb, and her family was safe with this strong, wise man. But her meah told her Chana and Resh—who'd sat watching in shocked silence—were deeply moved, but by different emotions.

Especially Resh.