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ICY wind stung Dorona's face as she trudged through the driven snow. If not for the weight of the sled she pulled, the gusts might have carried her away.

The distance between Reyach and Nagan never seemed so far. She squinted and tried to blink off the flakes that clung to her lashes and obscured the sight of Asher, the Guardian she followed. She didn't know much about him, but the shortness of his beard showed him to be not much past eighteen. His brother, Amos — somewhat younger, since he was clean-shaven — took the rear. Their job was to make sure she arrived safely within Nagan's walls.

She flexed her shoulders and repositioned her hands behind her, but the sled grew heavier with every step.

Asher connected with her meah. *It's good you called us when you did.* Nonverbal meah communication wasn't telepathy, exactly, but was accomplished through the workings of a small gland at the base of the brain of every warm-blooded creature on Gannah — human and animal alike. It enabled them to communicate with one another with wordless ease.

What do you mean? she wondered.

Amos answered from behind her, also through the meah. *The chief just notified us that the roads will be shut down until morning.*

So we'll get you through the gates, Asher added, then take off for home.

Nagan's walls loomed ahead, though she could barely see them through the blowing snow. *Where's home for you?* Hers was behind her, in Reyach.

Which she now knew she wouldn't see tonight.

Moqedah, the brothers answered together.

That would be an hour's trek in good weather, and it was already nearly dark. *There are only two of you,* she noted. In these perilous times, there were supposed to be no fewer than three traveling together outside chatsr walls.

The chief says that's not a problem as long as we keep our wits about us, Asher assured her. *The beasts hole up in this weather.*

His brother stopped and turned to face Dorona, speaking aloud, "Would you like some help with that?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you. It's my burden to bear."

His meah must have told him she didn't mean it, though, because when she caught up to him a couple steps later, he took hold of the bar that served as the sled's handle. "Please, allow me. I won't tell anyone you didn't pull it all the way."

Amos's voice came from behind. "With all that snow built up on it, it's got to be twice as heavy as when we set out."

She relinquished the sled to Asher, then turned to look. It was thickly blanketed with white, a shapeless lump in the blowing snow.

Amos bent down to push from behind, Asher pulled, and the three of them picked up their speed. They ran, stumbling, as fast as they could through the deepening drifts.

Relieved of the weight and anticipating the end of her journey, Dorona laughed. She'd always loved snow but seldom had the freedom to get out and enjoy it like this.

Freedom. It would be two more long years before she'd reach the marvelous age of sixteen and be a free woman at last. She'd be her mother's slave no longer and could do whatever she wanted. Men would bow to her, acknowledging her worth as a Gannahan woman. She'd answer to no one. The thought made her smile. Such freedom was unimaginable. Where should she live? What career should she choose? Whatever she did, it would be far, far away from the family bakery.

Maybe she'd be a Guardian and escort travelers. Maybe get a clerical job at the fabulous palace in Armown, where she might see the royal family. Better yet, maybe she'd work at Book House, and... Her smile deepened.

They were all three laughing by the time they reached the chatsr gates, enjoying the run together. Yes, maybe she'd be a Guardian and run outdoors every day.

The brothers turned the sled back over to Dorona, then grabbed two shovels from the rack on the wall. While she waited for them to clear the snow away from the gates, she brushed off the locker strapped to the sled. In this storm, it wouldn't be clean for long.

Amos replaced the shovels while Asher opened one of the gates.

"Please, don't leave right away." Dorona picked up the sled's handle. "My em told me to give you each an almond roll for your efforts on our behalf."

Their faces brightened and meahs exuded thanks. "Those are worth waiting for!"

Inside the chatsr, she sought a place out of the wind. A large elah tree near the wall created a semblance of shelter, and Dorona maneuvered the sled into the meager protection. The glow of the streetlights didn't quite penetrate the shadows and the blowing snow, but she could see well enough to loosen the straps holding down the locker, then opened the lid, releasing a sweet, yeasty aroma. She selected two small paper bags, checked to make sure they held what she thought, and handed one to each of the brothers.

Asher opened the bag and inhaled deeply, while Amos wrapped his in both hands and held it to his chest, smiling.

She bowed to them each. "My em and I appreciate your help. And so do our customers." Then standing upright, she said, "But now, I must make my deliveries."

Asher grinned. "Tell your mother we appreciate her generosity. The Yasha be with you, young Natsach Dorona Apfah."

She bowed again. "The Yasha be with you as well, Natsach Asher Chaqar" — then to his brother — "Natsach Amos Chaqar. I am pleased to have made your acquaintance."

The guardians waved and turned back to the gate while Dorona latched the locker and replaced the straps. By the time she'd pulled the sled into the courtyard, the Guardians were back outside the walls. She sent a little meah-prayer toward the Yasha for their safety. She wasn't sure if the Yasha cared about such requests, but she couldn't bear the thought of animals attacking those nice young men on their way home.

As she rounded the side of the first building, a blast of wind brought a gust of memory, and she shuddered. It was less than three years since her father had been killed by a dowb and fed to its family. Asher and Amos didn't deserve that.

But then, neither did her father. Nor did his family deserve such a devastating loss. Their whole world came apart when he fell.

She firmed her chin. She had her answer: no, the Yasha didn't care about such things.



NO one asked Caleb to man the front desk this evening, but the Book House staff had been sent home because of the storm, and it was a good place for him to work on his project. He could spread out his books and papers in as big a sprawl as he pleased, and with no visitors coming in this afternoon, he worked without interruption.

The designing part would eventually be done on a computer, but his mentor, Mr. Lyfar, recommended learning to do it by hand until he understood all the processes. "Before you can instruct the technology what to do," he'd told Caleb, "you must know what you want it to do."

Caleb worked happily for over an hour, reading and calculating and sketching, until it grew dark outside and his rumbling stomach prompted him to glance at the timemial on the wall. The second hour of Violet Evening was just entering the dial's window. Chana would have dinner ready soon.

Before he could reach for her in his meah, hers contacted him to say dinner would be served as soon as the bread arrived.

How did she know to answer a question before he asked it? The unusual sensitivity of her meah often disturbed him, but this evening, anticipation overrode his disquiet. Chana had ordered those wonderful Brave rolls from the Apfa Bakery – and Dorona would deliver them.

But wasn't the rail tube shut down for repairs? How would she get here in the storm? His gaze went toward the front entrance.

Almost as if he'd summoned it, a hum signaled the opening of the exterior doors, and the motion-sensitive lobby lights came on. After a few moments of odd scraping and clattering in the lobby, the interior door slid open. Along with the scent of cold air, a snow-covered Dorona bustled through, holding a bakery box.

Her glowing violet eyes locked with his in the desk's lamplight. "Caleb!" She stomped her feet on the entrance mat, smearing its colorful designs with white. "I didn't expect you to be waiting for me."

He gathered up his papers in a hurry. "I wasn't. I was just using the big work station for a project, and then, there you were, blowing in out of the storm. Are you frozen solid?" He tamped the pages' edges on the desk to straighten them, then slid them into a folder.

Her caramel-colored cheeks were rosy, her violet eyes brighter than he'd ever seen them. He always thought she was pretty, but when did she get so beautiful?

When she pushed back her hood, melting snow drops glistened like jewels in the curly wisps of black hair around her face. "Me, frozen? Not even a little. I love the snow, and it was fun walking around in the wind delivering the orders." Approaching the desk where he finished gathering his things, she held out the box. "I saved yours for last." Her flush deepened. "I mean, I saved Mrs. Bookman's. I mean, here are the rolls your stepmother ordered."

He shoved his folder and books in his knapsack and, through his meah, let Chana know the rolls had arrived. Because of the weather, he also asked, and obtained, permission for Dorona to stay and eat with the family.

He took the box from her. "Take off your coat and boots and come upstairs. You're invited to have dinner with us. You must be hungry after your adventures."

She removed her gloves first, then her coat. "It was an adventure, wasn't it? With the tube down, I had to walk from Reyach. A couple of Guardians went with me, and it was fun running through the storm with them, they were really nice. They told me if I'd started much later, I couldn't have come." She found a chair nearby and sat to remove her boots. "Ema wouldn't have been happy about that. At all. She counts on me to deliver her orders on time. She says it's very important not to let her customers down."

Caleb watched her in fascination. She was unusually animated today – until she mentioned her mother being displeased. That sobered her up right away.

He carried her things to the nearby coat room. "She can't blame you for the tube being down. Not for the weather, either."

"She would have, though, if the orders weren't delivered as promised. Whenever anything goes wrong, it's always my fault."

Caleb thought Dorona must be mistaken. No parent could be that unfair. For whatever reason, though, she was always terribly worried about making her mother angry. He wondered what that must be like, for he'd never had a mother to worry about displeasing. "She won't mind you staying for dinner, will she?"

Dorona must have been communicating with her as they spoke, because she answered with more confidence than usual. "Not at all." She chuckled. "As long as I don't eat more than's polite."

"Then let's go." He slipped on his knapsack, then took the bakery box in one hand and reached out to her with the other. She grinned up at him and took his hand. They were each two years away from adulthood, and there was no prohibition against physical contact between children.

Reveling at the feel of her hand in his, he led her through the lending library section, then through the bookstore, and up a gently winding stairway near the back.

She looked around with interest. "I've never been in this part of the building before. It's beautiful. And look how every step is made to look like a book! That's so fun! But what are the titles?"

"They spell out different adages, one or two words per step." He stopped partway up the flight. "Down there, the first three steps say, 'Education lasts a lifetime.' Then there's a blank one, and the next ones say, 'A good education will teach good happiness.'"

"Oh, I see! Look, we're standing on the 'happiness' step!"

Caleb's heart gave a little skip. "So we are. I wonder what that means?"

She squeezed his hand and grinned. "Yes, I wonder." She peered at the edges of the next steps going up ahead of them. "The next group says" – reading one step at a time – "'The fear... of the Lord...'"

Caleb finished for her as he led up upward again. "'Is the beginning of knowledge.'"

"This is the most wonderful stairway I've ever seen." They passed the landing to the second floor and continued upward. "Besides your apartment, what all is up here?"

"Offices. The rare books room, with books you can read but not take out of the building. There's a meeting room on that floor too. The third level is restricted to people who've completed the Sixth and Seventh education levels. There are some ancient and one-of-a-kind books up here, and a big section with foreign volumes from other planets. Those are unreadable by anyone without specialized language training. There's also a lounge, and a big conference room with a kitchen, for when officials use the room to entertain."

They continued to climb. "And on top, my abba's office, the room where old books are restored, and Chana's art room. And, of course, our apartment." The stairway ended as he spoke, and he gestured down a hall.

"There's no door to your apartment? You just walk in?"

"No one comes up here but us. Abba says closed doors make everything feel stuffy and stale, so he wanted the whole place open." Caleb then added, "We have doors on the bedrooms and bathrooms, though."

"I should hope so." She giggled. "Something smells wonderful."

The aroma of food called them into the suite. Without considering why, they let go of each other's hands as they neared the entrance and shielded their meahs so others wouldn't sense their feelings for one another.

"The Brave rolls are here," Caleb called, then handed the box to Dorona. "You should be the one to carry them in, since you're the official deliverer."



DORONA'S insides quivered at the thought of meeting Caleb's family. Mr. Bookman came from a prominent family, and his wife wrote and illustrated a popular line of children's books. All Dorona's family did was make bread.

But, she reminded herself, it was very good bread. Mrs. Bookman had ordered it from the bakery, so they must think it better than ordinary bread. Dorona had nothing to be nervous about, right?

Mr. Bookman stood watching the newsfeed on a wall screen, but he turned to them when they entered. Though no taller than the average Gannahan, something in his bearing made him intimidating. His black beard was sternly captured in one thick braid and his hair confined in another behind him, both clamped at the ends with engraved bands. His tunic's embroidery boasted of his wife's artistry, and his leggings ended at bare, brown feet standing confident and comfortable in his domain.

Caleb bowed. "Ab, please allow me to introduce my friend, Natsach Dorona Apfah. Dorona, please meet my father, Bookman Adir Natsach."

She bowed deeply, as a good Gannahan should. "I'm's very happy to meet you, Mr. Bookman."

The man's cold, violet eyes disputed the warmth of his words. "It's pleasant to meet you as well. Thank you for bringing the rolls." His gaze hardened even more. "But how did you get here in this snowstorm? The reports say the tube is still shut down for repairs, and all the roads are closed in the blizzard."

She bowed again. "I arrived just before the roads were shut down, pulling a sled from Reyach."

His brows lowered with disapproval, disconcerting her, and she hastened to explain. "The Guardians made sure I got here safely. They were very kind, and I was glad of their company."

Though Mr. Bookman nodded, his expression didn't change, and a taint of stale anger wafted from his meah.

Under his bitter glare, Dorona babbled. "I left my sled and everything in the lobby. I hope that's all right? I moved it to the side so it won't be in anyone's way, but of course in this weather, probably no one'll come in, so I suppose I could have left it in the middle of the lobby and no one would care. I didn't want to leave it out in the storm or it would be buried in the snow, and—"

Mr. Bookman raised a hand to stop her. "The lobby is the best place for it under the circumstances. You did the right thing."

She bowed again. "Thank you, sir." *He's a little scary*, she added to Caleb in her meah.

Mrs. Bookman came in then, carrying the baby. Whatever Dorona may have expected a famous author to look like, Caleb's stepmother didn't match the image. Her ash-gray smocked tunic and charcoal pants were nice but ordinary, and with her deep red collar and single braid wrapped like a crown around her head, she was the image of the traditional Gannahan wife.

The collar, a red band fastened around the throat, identified a woman as being married. It was given to a bride by her mother upon her marriage, replacing the white collar of emancipation she wore from the time she'd come of age. Mrs. Bookman's unadorned collar was of modest size.

The baby, Sarai, looked to be about eight months old. Her round cheeks and soft, dark curls captured in multiple short pigtails made her indescribably adorable.

Caleb once again made the introductions. Mrs. Bookman responded to Dorona's bow with a welcoming smile. "I'm so glad you've come." She glanced at the bakery box. "Are those the rolls?"

Dorona was so wrapped up in meeting Caleb's family that she'd forgotten she held them. "Oh, yes." She bowed again. "I appreciate your invitation to dine with you this evening."

She thrust the box toward her, but Mrs. Bookman didn't take it. "Why don't you bring those into the dining room. I have a basket ready for them." Her manner was as warm as her husband's was chilly.

With a nod for Caleb to follow, Mr. Bookman headed after them. "I think we might as well go in too."

Caleb slipped off his knapsack. "I need to put this in my room and then wash up. I'll be right there."



CALEB wondered why he felt so unsettled. Having dinner with Dorona should make him happy. And it did. But there was a longing wrapped up with that happiness, a feeling of incompleteness. As if something in their friendship was lacking.

Ordinarily when he felt unsure, he talked to the Yasha about it, but this evening, the thought made him uncomfortable. Why bother the Lord of the Universe with something so inconsequential as a boy's confused feelings? Surely He had more important things to think about.

At the same time, that very reluctance to talk to the Yasha added another layer of discomfort to Caleb's suffering soul. He didn't know why this should be such a private thing, but he was determined to keep it to himself.

Whatever it was.

