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WHEN Adam lifted his head to survey his surroundings, rainwater spilled down his back from his hat brim. Again.

Being already soaked, he ignored the indignity as he scanned the land before him. Hovering vapor blurred every outline of the treeless scenery, and the downpour's rhythmic song pattered across the sodden world in a soft cadence.

He squeezed water from his ponytail. Despite the damp, the air held no chill. Once the sun went down, though, it would be another story.

He strode on, boots pressing water from the fragrant loam as if from a sponge. He was grateful the mud had a solid base, thanks to what may have once been a paved highway. Who could say? The countryside bore no resemblance to the photos he'd seen of the old Yereq.

The Great Disaster six years ago had transformed this once fruitful plain into a jumble of rock-strewn hills and valleys, bogs, quicksand, and mounds of decay. A series of tremendous earthquakes — still occurring from time to time — had divided Gannah's single landmass into three continents, breaking off Yereq along the natural boundary of the Nazal River. Now they called it the Nazal Sea, and, too broad to swim, it cut him off from the settlement of the New Gannah. If he were to ever see it again — if he were to lead it, as was his birthright — he must complete this quest.

Adam slogged on until the ground fell away sharply ahead. He approached the edge and peered through the sheeting rain.

Below, a tangle of uprooted trees formed a ghostly thicket of limbs, trunks, and twisted roots. These logjams were wholly impenetrable. Any man who thought he could walk across from tree to tree would soon learn otherwise. He knew, because he'd tried it earlier.

He'd emerged from that fiasco scraped and torn but with no serious injuries. And soon afterward, he'd discovered this semblance of a road heading in the direction he wanted to go. For the past three days, its firm footing had allowed him to make excellent time. If he could keep that pace, he'd arrive at the pick-up point with days to spare.

He stared into the tangled abyss beneath him and sighed. So much for efficient traveling. But then, all good things come to an end. "And so do all things painful," his mother would often add.

His emma was full of the wisdom of Old Gannah. Where her supply of adages left a gap, his abba had a Karkar homily to fill it. Adam's multiracial gene pool gave him a galaxy of proverbs for every occasion.

The precipice he stood upon continued as far as he could see in both directions. The path of least resistance seemed to lie to the north, so he followed the ridge to the right. A few paces later, his feet sank into muck.

He plunged onward, step by laborious, sucking step, until at last he reached firm footing on the edge of a gray slab of scarred rock jutting from the sodden ground at an angle. It was as flat and smooth as a floor.

Slipping in the slime, he laid his hand on the slab for balance, smearing a swath nearly clean before he'd regained his footing.

He stared at the exposed surface. This was no random chunk of rock but was finished, polished. Where it wasn't scored and cracked, it displayed a design of sorts. A deliberate pattern. He rubbed again.

The black mud ran in frantic rivulets before the driving rain, and the pattern grew clearer. Within a circle of gold on a green field stood the letter *aleph* crowned with light: the royal symbol of Atarah.

Adam stared, trying to make sense of it, while the remainder of the mud he'd loosened trickled away beneath the pelting rain.

With that insignia, this could only be a section of floor from the throne room of one of the old provincial palaces. The nearest would be Saba, the old toqeph's residence at Yereq. But how could that be? Had he lost his bearings and wandered off course? Hadn't the ancient palace stood many leagues east of here?

The lowering sun lit the western sky with a weak, watery glow. No, he hadn't strayed. He'd been heading steadily west by northwest since he'd parachuted out of the topeller almost a week ago.

He reviewed his knowledge of geography, picturing maps and images in his retentive mind, fixing first on Saba and then his own location. He was not mistaken. This slab had traveled a tremendous distance.

Adam turned in a full circle, scanning the soggy terrain for anything else out of place. All he saw was scrubby brush cringing against the downpour. Any vestige of human life that may be here lay buried beneath a meter of mud.

He faced the slab once more, and his skin prickled as he watched the rain rinse the sign of Atarah, leaving it mud-free and gleaming. He shivered from an inner chill.

What sort of inheritance had he been born to? The throne of a dead, broken planet.

He stiffened his jaw with resolve. Old Gannah was dead, yes. Wiped out by the Plague almost half a century ago, sparing only his emma as the heir of Atarah. Sole survivor of her race, she'd been carried away on a stretcher by the rescue team sent by the League of Planets, leaving Gannah utterly desolate.

But by the Yasha's grace, Emma and Abba had married on Earth, gathered a group of adventurers, and come here to establish the New Gannah. Now she ruled over a thriving community of more than two thousand people.

A small population, yes, but growing rapidly. And the people had a proud legacy. They deserved a good person to lead them.

Awash in a storm of conflicting emotions, Adam ran his hand across the symbol on the slab. No one could say he wasn't a good man. Since childhood he'd striven for perfection in knowledge, in character, in obedience to Emma and to the Yasha. He was a strong and loving husband to Elise, a kind and supportive father to his son, and had the good of Gannah foremost in his ambitions.

But to wear the Ring of Atarah? He traced the gold circle around the *aleph* with his finger—the third finger of six.

Something clumped in his gut like a not-quite-done Cephargian blood pudding. No ruler of Gannah should be of Karkar blood. It would be a sacrilege.

He lowered his hand and stared at the circle. He'd seen that same sign on the floor in Emma's throne room beneath a round skylight. In Old Gannah, when a man was convicted of a capital crime, he was required to stand in that circle in a column of sunlight while the toqeph carried out the penalty: death by a swift breaking of the neck.

Adam knew how it was done. He'd been trained in the process, among other violent arts, in preparation for the Nasihood. But he'd never performed it on a man.

How many over the centuries had stood on this very circle and surrendered obediently to their fates? He envisioned it—a dark, bearded, curly-haired man like the Gannahans of old, short of stature but powerful of build. Head bowed in submission, regret in his heart, but loyalty to the toqeph overriding his fear.

If Adam were justly condemned of some crime, would he have the courage to take his punishment standing in silence? Or would he bring shame to himself and all Gannah by struggling or pleading for mercy?

And once he was toqeph, would he be able to execute a man who had been justly condemned? He'd often asked himself that question. He could slay a beast for food, but was he capable of killing a man?

Once he was toqeph... The ancients might consider him worthy of death for even thinking he might take the throne. But wasn't that the destiny to which he was born? Was he not the rightful heir of Atarah?

The rain poured harder. Another chill shook him from hat to boots, and a sick feeling spread throughout his midsection. Must be a combination of hunger, the exertion of a day-long hike through the rain, and the eeriness of stumbling upon a relic of the former civilization.

He should rest. He'd been moving almost nonstop for days on end, and even the Old Gannahans couldn't keep that up indefinitely. With one last look at the symbol, he sidled around the upward-slanting floor. The footing along the edge was fairly firm, as if pieces of the slab had broken off and lay beneath the mud. But would he start sinking again on the other side?

The ground remained solid for the next few paces. A well-worn animal trail led from beneath the angled rock, where it appeared a family of qaran had taken up residence. Adam followed the narrow track. If the qaran's narrow hooves didn't sink into the mud, his long feet wouldn't either.

After several minutes, the meandering trail petered out in a grassy area littered with small boulders. The mother qaran and two half-grown fawns, their neck spines not yet emerged, browsed on berries growing on tall shrubs amongst the rocks.

At his appearance they snorted and bounded away, and he made no effort to follow. He didn't need to hunt this evening. The berries would be nice, though. He approached the shrub the deer had been nibbling from.

Chophen fruits looked like closed fists. Two centimeters in diameter, the shining yellow lumps grew here in abundance. He'd never seen them before but recognized them from photos.

The first he picked was so soft it turned to mush in his hand. The second was firmer, but when a worm stuck its head out a hole and wagged at him, he let that one go too. He gave the third a good inspection before biting it in half, then discovered it was inhabited as well. He flicked the worm out and ate the rest of the fruit.

It was tasteless, full of gritty seeds, and wasn't very juicy. Perhaps it wasn't quite ripe.

He spent the next several minutes exploring the berry patch, eating enough to take the edge off his hunger. The sun sank lower, the rain still

poured, and the ravine still stood between him and his destination. He'd have to climb down eventually, and sooner seemed better than later.

He headed westward, relieved the mud no longer tried to suck his boots off, until he reached the ridge again. The drop-off was more gradual here, and nothing blocked his way. He followed another qaran trail downward with the rain.

Yasha willing, he'd have no trouble making the rendezvous. But the feeling of ill-ease remained, and the image of that yellow circle still burned in his mind.



LILEELA rose from bending over a row of third-year powl plants in the kitchen garden. "There's got to be an easier way to do this."

She smoothed back a spiral curl that had escaped her braid. Though it flopped forward again as soon as she pulled her hand away, she was too busy massaging the kinks out of her back to care.

"What do you mean? It's fun." Six-year-old Tamah opened her hand and shook out four bright orange larvae into the collection can.

"So you say." Lileela smiled at her sister despite the backache. "But you're a lot younger than me." And Tamah had never fractured her spine.

Their three-year-old nephew, Everett, worked on his hands and knees between the rows. "Is tonight Wormfest?" He picked a larva off a leaf and examined it before dropping it into the can beside him.

"Not for a couple weeks yet." Tamah's dark braids dangled as she resumed her search for larvae. "But we need to pick all these now, or they'll eat the powl plants to the ground."

Lileela wondered about that. Had anyone ever tried leaving them alone to see what would happen? "Just this one row to finish, and we'll be done."

Everett sat cross-legged. "Then can we eat?" He studied a centimeter-long larva before depositing it in the can, as if contemplating it for lunch. "These make me hungry."

Tamah wrinkled her nose. "Eww. They're no good raw."

He sniffed the can's opening, then made a face. "They're stinky."

"They're only good when they're popped." Hard to believe such disgusting things could be edible under any circumstances. But when heated over a bonfire, the larvae exploded, casting their orange skins to the winds and leaving behind tender morsels of unsurpassed deliciousness.

Everett shook the can and peered inside. "Why can't we do it now?"

"'Cause we save 'em up till we have enough." Tamah searched among a cluster of hole-riddled foliage for offending nibblers.

Lileela bent again. Using a leaf to protect her hands, she clasped a worm's fat body and pulled it off what was left of its perch. They sure were hungry little things. They might, indeed, do serious damage if left to feed. She picked off two more from the next plant.

Everett hopped up, tipping over his can. "Emma!"

After righting his worm collection, Lileela turned. She waved at her sister-in-law emerging from the alley but continued her work, unwilling to stop until she'd finished the job. "Hi, Elise. How'd it go with Dr. Jane?"

Everett ran to his mother and threw his arms around her legs, almost tripping her.

Elise grabbed his shoulders. "Easy, there. Don't knock me over."

He grinned and patted her bulging abdomen. "Would it knock Baby out of you?"

She chuckled. "No, but it would make me plenty sore." She spanned her abdomen with splayed fingers. "Dr. Jane says everything's okay. But it'll be two or three weeks yet, and Junior here is getting bigger by the moment. Must be the Karkar in him."

Everett pressed his ear against his mother's belly, then pulled away, startled. "He kicked me!"

Elise caressed her son's head. "He kicks everything that gets in his way. Including my bladder." She tossed her copper-colored ponytail over her shoulder and turned to Lileela. "What do you hear from your brother?"

Lileela plucked the last worm and dropped it in the can in Tamah's hands. She sympathized with Elise's inability to keep in touch with her husband through the Gannahan *meah* communication. "I don't feel much from him, but I don't get the impression anything's wrong."

She gave Elise a sympathetic smile. If it were Faris making his quest, she'd worry for him like Elise did for Adam. Both couples paired a half-Gannahan with a mate of off-world heritage. But there was one difference.

Lileela felt her own flat abdomen. Then, embarrassed by the unconscious gesture, she hurried to pick up the other collection can and hand it to Tamah. "After you empty these in the wormfarm, you'd better run home and get cleaned up for lunch. You have lessons to do this afternoon, as I recall."

Tamah flashed one of her frequent gap-toothed grins. "Must I run, or can I walk?"

"You must run." Lileela answered in mock-sternness. "Walking is for the weak."

Laughing, Tamah darted off, a collection can in each arm. Lileela called after her. "But don't run so fast you lose those crawlies! If they spill, you'll have to pick them all up again."

Tamah slowed, but disappeared into the alley without turning around.

Everett pulled on Elise's hand. "I'm hungry, Emma."

"You're right, it's lunchtime. And I need to visit the restroom. I think we should see what they're serving at Hu House today. It'll be quicker than going all the way home." She turned to Lileela. "Want to come?"

Lileela glanced at the house. "No, Faris will be home soon, and I promised to make him some fryrolls for lunch."

Elise winked. "I'm looking forward to giving some of those to Adam in a few days." Allowing Everett to drag her away, she faced Lileela as she walked backward. "Thanks for watching Everett for me."

Lileela made a visor with her hand to block sunlight reflecting from a neighbor's window. "Don't mention it. And thank you, Everett, for helping in the garden."

Intent on tugging his emma's hand, the boy didn't answer. Elise stopped and pulled him to her side. "What do you say to your auntie when she thanks you?"

Everett scowled. "I thought we were going to Hu's."

"After you respond politely. When someone thanks you, you mustn't ignore them. Now, what do you say?"

Pouting, he turned to Lileela. Then, with evident reluctance, he let go of his emma's hand and made a little bow. "It was a pleasure to help you, Auntie."

Lileela nodded. "The pleasure was all mine. Now, go eat your lunch."

"That's better," Elise told him, but he'd already scampered on ahead.

Lileela headed for the cool of the house. Elise was too easy on the boy. He should have been reprimanded for not having given the proper response immediately, and no mother should tolerate pouting. A child must be taught prompt obedience right from the start. She knew from experience that these things were harder to learn when you're older.

She entered through the back door, then slipped off her shoes and set them neatly on the mat. Faris didn't like it when she tossed things every which-way. Remembering his lessons in that regard, a rueful chuckle bubbled up.

Faris's deep voice came from the kitchen. "Something amusing?"

She stopped in her tracks, a warm blade of pleasure twisting in her gut as he came through the doorway. "I was, ah..." The feeling rushed throughout her whole body under that brilliant azure gaze. "Just thinking about how cute Everett is." After greeting her husband with a kiss, she stepped to the sink and

washed her hands. "It was funny, the way he and Tamah love picking those nasty beetle larvae off the powl plants."

Faris ran his hands down her hips. "Sorry I missed them. Did you remember I was coming home for lunch?"

"Of course. I just didn't expect you quite so soon." She dried her hands, then turned to face him and combed his hair with her fingers. "Have time for your daily trim?"

"It can wait."

She traced his jawline with a finger. "Everyone else on this planet wears their hair long. Why so determined to keep yours short?"

"Not everyone."

"Well, almost everyone. They get tired of cutting it every day."

He lifted his chin to tickle her face with his beard. "And they wear these long and bushy too. But I'd rather cut my hair and beard every day than look like a shaggy-maned arych."

"I'm glad." She kissed him. "I like it short."

"That's good. But" — his brows lifted — "I'm on my lunch break, so..."

"I've already mixed the filling and made the dough, so I can put the rolls together and fry them up in just a few minutes."

He drew her close. "Mmm. That's not the kind of roll I had in mind."

2



WHEN the last fryroll was done to golden perfection, Lileela tonged it from the oil and set it on the rack with the rest. After extinguishing the fire under the grid, she moved the pan off the burner. “I look forward to having those satellites working again so we don’t have to conserve electricity every way we can.”

Faris sat at the table, pencil in hand, studying three pages of neat diagrams. He didn’t glance up. “The toqeph doesn’t see that as a priority.”

She slid the rolls into a bowl, then tossed them with an herb-salt mixture. “I’d think she’d want to restore things to the way they were before.” She set the bowl on the table beside a vase bristling with mintwood sticks and nodded at his diagrams. “If you don’t put those away, you’ll get grease on them.”

His piercing gaze sent a beam of warmth coursing through her.

“Just a respectful suggestion, my husband.”

His eyes crinkled in a gentle smile. “And a good one.” He picked up his paperwork and slid it into the thin briefcase leaning against the table leg. “Lunch smells wonderful.”

She set a plate in front of him. “I think they turned out rather well this time.” She laid the bowl containing a wet handcloth to the left of his plate, a bottle of everyday blend and a glass to the right.

He put two rolls on his plate. “They look perfect.”

After she’d laid out her own lunch, he rose, and together they closed their eyes, lifted their hands, and sang the midday blessing.

Although her lips sang praises to the Yasha, her mind went to her husband. It wasn’t right that someone so strong and intense, so perfectly formed—so perfectly virile—should be unable to father a child.

The geneticists from the League of Planets who’d engineered his conception and development had seen to that. Until they were sure which gene controlled what and which mix created the desired results, they didn’t want

their creations reproducing. Or was it merely job security? Whatever the scientists' motivation, none of the renegades who'd come here seeking asylum six years ago were equipped to boost New Gannah's population.

And Lileela, of all people, had no business marrying one. As one of a mere five young settlers with Old Gannahan blood, she shouldn't have been permitted to waste that rare heritage. She and her siblings should all be fruitful and multiply and fill the planet with as much true Gannahan DNA as they could.

But the law gave the toqeph no power to say who married whom, and Lileela, independent and free to make her own choices, had no inclination to be reasonable.

Near the end of the prayer she opened her eyes a slit and stole a glance at her husband's chiseled face framed by a neat black beard—his broad shoulders and chest, gnarled with muscle—thick, powerful hands raised in joyful surrender to the Yasha.

Her voice broke. She quickly closed her eyes, swallowed, and sang the last notes of the refrain.

The blessing finished, they sat. He took her hand in his and spoke in Old Gannahan. "Thou art a joy to me, my wife. In every regard."

She squeezed his fingers. "As art thou to me."



MORNING birdsong filtered through Adam's dream and pulled him to consciousness. How long had he slept?

He opened his eyes. No light yet grayed the western sky, but the *aphaph* birds announced the dawn.

Groaning, he tried to stretch but didn't have room. This fissure in the hillside had seemed cozy when he'd settled into it a couple hours ago, but it was intolerable now. He pushed past the shrub that guarded the entrance and emerged into the pre-dawn chill. The rain had stopped, the sky cleared.

It felt good to stretch his limbs to their fullest. No stars had been visible behind the clouds when he'd crawled into his den, but now they spread across the black western sky like a spray of sparks, with the constellation Ar, the roaring lion, leading the host. Eastward, they paled in the gray glow. He calculated his position. Still on course and ahead of schedule.

He allowed his limbs a final stretch, then, on the edge of shivering, crawled behind the bush again and pulled his belongings from the cleft in the rock. The tiny birds flittered everywhere, singing to the morning, as he shook out his clothes. Still damp, of course, but they'd dry quickly once they were on.

As the sun rose, the birdsong almost made his ears ring. Brown-and-orange aphaphs, no bigger than his thumb, flitted and hopped and ran across the ground welcoming the dawn with joy.

Or so it seemed. Actually, they devoured the infinitesimal ednats that swarmed in a near-invisible mist at sunrise. As the insects rose from the ground, the birds rose to chase them. In half an hour they'd split the air just overhead, forming a noisy, gyrating ceiling. Then the ednats' short lifespan would end and they'd fall like dust. The birds' songs would turn to mourning as they scratched the ground searching for survivors. When the last gnat was gone, the aphaphs would grow silent until the next generation of food emerged tomorrow at dawn.

With the birds now at knee level, Adam moved slowly through the swirling masses of feathery glee. He smiled. Every morning in Yereq had been like this. He doubted he'd ever see another sunrise without recalling the music of this joyful rite.

A head-high tangle of thorny growth, much of it studded with moldy *harjit* berries, blocked his route. He swung southward around it, plucking any fruits that still looked edible and eating them as he went. The sun and the birds rose higher, and the air grew warmer.

Something glinted on the ground, and he bent to get a closer look. Broken glass. He frowned. The Great Disaster had scattered brokenness everywhere. But when glass was found, it was usually intact. The sturdiness of Gannahan glass was legendary.

He'd found a variety of odd things on this journey. Not just broken and rotting manmade artifacts, but also natural ones far out of place, like seashells. All this supported the theory that the Great Disaster had sent a towering wave from the sea that reached far inland, washing away everything that stood and changing the lay of the land forever.

If the Old Gannahans hadn't died in the Plague forty years ago, they'd have been wiped out by the Disaster, like the ancient Earthers in their biblical Flood.

Though the sun now filled the world with fresh, hopeful light, a shadow clouded Adam's soul. The Yasha knew best, of course. But why would He cause such destruction?

Adam reached for the Yasha in his meah, and connected, as always. But the answer wasn't what he was looking for.

I AM, was all He said.

Adam paused in his steps and bowed deeply. *Yea, Lord. Thou art.*

He kept moving, and the land grew rockier. Whenever he tried to recover his westward direction, another obstacle rerouted him to the south, until he found a stream flowing north. The temperature had been climbing all morning, and the cool, clear water refreshed him. Moreover, its minerals and nutrients should be sufficient for a midday meal. He drank deeply and splashed water on his face before following the stream northward.

Since the brook continued to meander in roughly the direction he wanted to go, Adam stayed with it the rest of the morning. Despite having to skirt a few boggy areas or detour around dense thorn-brakes, he made good time. Half a dozen shallow tributaries, easily crossed in his waterproof *hezir*-hide boots, swelled the stream.

In the second hour of Green Afternoon, Adam paused for another drink. Above the burble of the growing river, he heard the steady rumble of falling waters. He looked that direction, but boulders, bushes and hillocks prevented him from seeing very far ahead.

Beyond a house-sized boulder planted in his way along the bank, the river sluiced steeply downward through a rocky chute and over a cliff. He strode to the edge and, careful to make sure the ground beneath him was stable, he looked down.

A well-worn animal trail angled down the slope to a broad plain where the river resumed its journey. On the far side, a herd of ayal grazed among scattered saplings, the first real trees Adam had seen in Yereq. He turned his attention to the water pouring over the ledge near his feet.

It fell a few meters to fill a pool on a shelf below then spilled over onto a tall... what was that? Its color was silver-gray, whereas the rock in this area was a browner shade.

Following the animal trail, he descended the slope toward the valley, alternately studying the waterfall and watching his footing. Whatever that thing was, it wasn't rock. Too deliberately shaped, too smooth. Almost aerodynamic. The water tumbled onto the object's pointed apex and flowed down its sides.

He stopped to take a better look at it halfway down the slope. He still couldn't identify the thing, but it was certainly man-made. Gouges and scrapes were visible in its surface. It seemed to have been planted there on purpose, rising out of the riverbed perfectly centered beneath the waterfall.

He continued his descent. Of all the unexpected things he'd come across, this was the strangest.

He wondered if any other fledgling Nasi had explored lands never seen before. This province had once been peopled, of course. But Adam was the first human to set foot in Yereq since the Disaster had altered it.

At the bottom of the slope, he stopped again and studied the object protruding from the base of the falls. It was as much a mystery from this view as it had been from above. Standing beside a young zayith tree about his own height, he faced the valley. When a sudden brightness assaulted his eye, he looked for the source.

A glass bottle was embedded in the sapling to his left. Apparently it had once been buried and the branches grew around it, lifting it ever higher as the tree grew taller. Now, the sun reflected off the glass and into his face.

This place was full of oddities. A herd of ayal meandering on the opposite bank caught his attention. Confident they wouldn't charge him because of the river between them, he kept his lahab in its pocket.

But what was that? Something whizzed from behind a rock toward a young buck on the edge of the herd. Even from here, Adam could see blood spurt from the animal's neck as it fell to its knees and then dropped over.

He gasped, confused. What could have done that?

He shifted his gaze from the deer in its death throes to the rock from behind which the missile had silently flown.

A man stepped from behind it and strode toward the ayal.