

1



"E_{ND}."

Dassa's command shut off the voice recorder. She pulled her hands out of the flexible gloves that protruded into the transparent thermoplastic box and rubbed her bleary eyes. The translation project was finally finished.

She stepped back and turned to Heegokuk, the Official Protector of Karkar Antiquities who had hovered nearby through the entire project. "That wraps it up. Any word on the magnetic storms?"

His pale, impassive face towering above her expressed no more emotion than would any other Karkar's. But she recognized the subtle jerk of his ears as a sneer, even as he tipped his head in pseudo-respect. "I have not heard, Madam Toqeph. You will have to inquire of someone with knowledge in that field."

She pursed her lips. "I'll check with Navigation. If all's clear, I'll head for the surface immediately. I'm sure you're all eager to return to your homes."

Though his face remained unchanged, Heegokuk's ears lifted in his people's version of a relieved smile as he bowed. "If you are finished here, shall I put the book back in secure storage?"

"Yes, I'm through, thank you." She nodded to the waxen-faced giant and, with one last glance at the ancient book within the hermetically sealed case, left the room.

She shook her head at the foolishness of it all. Yes, stringent measures were needed to protect the crumbling volume from further damage. It had already survived more than eight centuries, and only the utmost care would preserve it further. But why bother? The words on the pages imparted no useful information, so what good was the book?

Thanks to her doctorate in Interplanetary History as well as knowledge gleaned through more than a decade with her half-Karkar, half-

Earthish husband, Dassa was all too familiar with the twisted Karkar value system. They held anything from the Kankakar Era—the time before their planet's atmosphere became poisoned by the effects of war, requiring domes to be built over all population centers—to be of great worth, whether or not the item had any intrinsic value otherwise. If it was from the Kankakar Era, they'd reckon a petrified turd precious as a gem.

Much like the logbook she'd just translated. It had been left behind by her forefathers, the Gannahan invaders. As a favor to her people's traditional enemies, she'd just spent days uncovering such scintillating details as the number of loads processed by the Gannahan ship's laundry each week and the quantity of salt required to keep the various dining rooms' shakers filled.

She yawned as she made her way through the passageways toward her quarters aboard the aging League Starship *Promontory*. Such a waste. She hated being off planet. Hated living in a stale, artificial environment. And for such a piddling purpose! As toqeph of the New Gannah, she was needed at the settlement.

In her quarters, she buzzed Navigation but received an error message. Great. Was it the sunspots? She tried again and got through. "Mr. Gor. What's the situation with the SMEs? Is it safe to travel?"

The Glenmarrian navigator clicked his tongue. "Looking like it, Madam Toqeph. Must clear with captain first, but mass ejections and solar flares are much diminished. Think we can squeak through."

Squeak through. She knew better than to think anyone could "squeak through" a Gannahan magnetic storm. Even a little turbulence could render the shuttle's controls somewhere between unreliable and useless. "What about the magnetic clouds? Have the storms cleared?"

"Not all. Not yet," Gor said. "But it's looking good for travel."

Dassa scowled. "Where Gannah's concerned, nothing but clear space would look good."

"Will check with the captain, but I am confident it is safe."

Though something in his voice made her leery, she was eager to escape this unnatural enclosure a million and a half kilometers from home. "Thank you, Mr. Gor. Let me know what he says."

"Will do, Madam Toqeph. I know you like to leave soon."

Did she ever. Just as he and the rest of the crew would love to get rid of her so they could get back to whatever they'd be doing if they weren't here. Maybe even go home to their families.

Family. She ached to see hers again.

Disconnecting the call with Gor, she reached telepathically toward her children, telling them she missed them and hoped to see them soon.

Communication through the meah sense, an ability exclusive to natives of her planet, was a blessing. Though she could communicate with her children, she yearned to experience their presence through her other senses as well. How could she be a proper mother to them from such a distance?

Stretching her meah to its limits, she tried to make contact with her husband, Pik. But he didn't possess the necessary equipment, and the effort was futile. As always.

She flopped backward onto her bunk. Deep weariness, the inevitable result of separation from her planet, made her bones ache. This was so pointless. Why had Pik insisted she come?

When the League of Planets asked if she could translate ancient documents found in a cavern outside one of Karkar's domed cities, Pik thought she should do it as a goodwill gesture. Twenty years ago, the Karkar never would have deigned to make such a request. If their animosity had lessened so much that they would ask now, Pik said it was the least she could do to comply. She'd agreed, but regretted it every moment of the past sixteen Standard Days. And she resented Pik for sending her on this foolish errand. He never liked to assert his husbandly authority, so why do it now?

Her chiming messenger interrupted her thoughts. "Yes?"

"This is the captain. I understand you're ready to leave."

Smiling at the sound of her old friend's voice, she sat up and swung her feet to the floor. "Captain Broward. Yes, I'm more than ready. But I'm not sure about the storms. Is it safe?"

"Mr. Gor assures me the SMEs have subsided sufficiently. My shuttle pilot is willing to risk it if you are."

Dassa's brow furrowed. If there was any doubt, it would be wise to stay put.

But she trusted the captain's judgment. And was itching to get out of here. "Well then, count me in."

"I thought you might say that." His smile was audible. "Can you be at the shuttle bay in twenty minutes?"

She hopped up and grabbed her duffle from under the bunk. "I'll be there in ten."



PIK exited the storage cellar and straightened slowly, massaging the back of his neck with a six-fingered hand. Anything built by the original Gannahans had ceilings too low for a Karkar.

Or even a half-Karkar.

He breathed deeply of the sweet Gannahan air. A cool breeze fluttered through his long yellow beard and played with the blond hair flapping beneath his cap. "I believe the weather will hold long enough for us to complete the powl harvest."

Arick Bushati secured the door behind them with two heavy horizontal bars that slid into the wide door jam and latched with a twist. "Yes. In a couple of days, this cellar will be full as the others."

While Pik waited for his companion to make the door safe with the additional protection of a sturdy lock, he squinted at the brilliant sky. The *Promontory* wasn't visible up there, but that didn't keep him from looking.

He shifted his gaze to the fields before him. Undulating past the horizon in waves of fertility and promise, the land had provided abundantly for them this year. If they could keep their stores safe from marauding animals, Gannah would experience no hunger this winter, God willing.

Pik's eyes crinkled in a near-smile. God willing. There was a time that phrase would have never crossed his mind.

Bushati finished securing the door. "What have you heard from the toqeph?"

"Nothing recently, thanks to the sunspots' disruptions."

"What a shame you can't use meah communication, like the original Gannahans." Bushati pocketed the ring-shaped key as they made their way toward the old palace the settlers called home. "That must have been a marvelously handy skill."

Though Pik privately agreed, he was too Karkar to admit to admiring anything the Gannahans possessed. "Or more likely, marvelously annoying."

"Really?" Bushati craned his neck to look up at him. "Why?"

"I don't think I'd like having my mind ransacked by everyone on the planet."

Bushati chuckled. "I imagine they had a way of maintaining mental privacy. I wonder if the New Gannahans will develop meahs. Particularly your own children, since they're half Gannahan."

Pik's heart twinged. The way his children communicated telepathically with their mother and with each other made him feel like an outsider in his own family. But he merely replied, "Gannah is strange."

Bushati nodded. "No argument here. This planet has a mind of its own."



DASSA tried to control her eagerness as the shuttle neared home. She exchanged telepathic reassurances with her children. She tried once again to reach Pik, with the usual lack of success. But no worry. Their separation would soon be ended.

"This will never happen again," she muttered to herself. "Once my feet are back on the ground, I'm there to stay."

That is not thy decision to make, a quiet voice admonished in her native Gannahan language through her meah.

She flushed. She didn't speak with the Yasha, as the Gannahans called the Savior, as often as she used to. That was no fault of His, to be sure. He was always there when she called Him.

Yea, Lord, she replied in her meah. *Thy will is my will.*

She watched her beloved Gannah fill the shuttle's window. The Yasha didn't reply, but she knew He questioned her sincerity.

With good reason. For the past couple of years, she'd more or less ignored Him. Gave Him a respectful nod without listening to what He had to say, too busy and distracted to reach out to Him.

She heaved a sigh. *I'm just so tired.*

Indeed, she was weary. Weary of trying to teach a motley assortment of Outsiders how to be Gannahans. Drained from everyone's lack of

common Gannah-sense. Exhausted with being the last of her kind, even on her own planet. Spent from the labor of birthing the New Gannah and carrying the future of the settlement on her shoulders. It was like having 1,200 children, each of them clamoring for attention at once, and their father as foolish and helpless as they. Even a native Gannahan could endure only so much.

The Yasha knew her thoughts, and was unimpressed. *Art thou yet weary of hiding from Me?*

Dassa feasted her eyes on Gannah's bright colors coming into view. *Nay, Lord, none can hide from Thee.*

But thou would like to.

She shifted uncomfortably beneath her safety restraints, for He was right. She'd been trying to do everything herself, tuning out the Yasha when He sought to direct her. And why not? She was more qualified for the task of rebuilding Gannah than anyone else in the galaxy. She knew what needed to be accomplished and how it should be done.

And she was far more comfortable giving orders than taking them. From anyone.

Ah, my beloved daughter. It is time for thee to learn the difference between the true and the imagined.

Before she could wonder what the Yasha meant, a tooth-rattling tremor shook the shuttle and sent it into a spin toward the planet. A cold hand clenched her stomach as her hands clenched the arms of her seat. "What's going on?"

The pilot manipulated levers and worked controls, and his voice in her headphones sounded frantic. "It must be the solar eruptions. Nothing's working. It's like the power's been cut off."

The lights went out.

The G-force crushed her against her seat, and the frantic, spinning fall brought up vomit. They had entered the planet's atmosphere, and flapping flames obscured the view through the windows.

The shuttle lurched as the controls engaged.

Dassa breathed a thank you to her Yasha as the little ship's spin slowed to a loose corkscrew motion. But flames continued to lick its sides as it spiraled toward the ground like an incendiary drill bit.

"Pull up! Nose up!" Dassa cried, though she knew the pilot was doing all he could.

Her mind raced. Perhaps she *had* been ignoring the Yasha. And perhaps ignoring Him was the same as disobedience. And under Gannahan law, disobedience carried severe penalties.

So maybe she deserved to die in this way. But the pilot didn't. And her children didn't deserve to lose their mother, nor Pik his wife, nor her people their leader. The New Gannahans weren't yet on their feet, they didn't know the planet well enough, couldn't survive without her guidance.

She remembered how, more than a quarter century ago, her father's disobedience had brought Old Gannah to near-extinction in one monstrous, catastrophic event. *What have I done?* she screamed in her meah to whoever would listen. *Is there no hope for us?*

The shuttle made one last, lazy rotation and straightened out. Was their headlong descent starting to slow? Did they angle less sharply downward? Dassa couldn't tell what was real and what was mere hope. All she could see was flame, all she could hear was a deafening roar.

And all she could feel was regret.

2



OUTSIDE, the wind snuffled and moaned like a pack of hungry zeebim. But the only wild thing indoors was Pik's daughter, Lileela, who couldn't contain her excitement over her mother's impending arrival.

Partly because he shared her anticipation, but mostly because he couldn't have controlled her if he'd wanted, Pik allowed the curly-mopped six-year-old to ricochet around the room like a spring-loaded toy.

"Emma's coming home!" she squealed as she ran to the opposite wall, threw herself against its padded fabric, and bounced off. "Emma's coming home!" She dashed in whatever direction the bounce threw her, shrieking all the while.

The settlers used the Old Gannahan familiar words for parents, *emma* for mom and *abba* for dad. Pik would have preferred his children use the Karkar terms, but the words were too difficult for non-Karkar children to pronounce.

Besides that, Dassa didn't want to be known by what she called a foul noise. "If you want to teach them your language, that's fine," she'd said, "but please wait until they know the difference between real words and disgusting sounds. If, in fact, there is one."

As usual, Dassa got her way. But in her absence, Pik relaxed the behavioral standards and let the child burn off some energy. Even if it was a bit distracting.

He sat across a table from Adam, whom he was teaching to play hmmmjckt. Though only ten years old, the boy demonstrated a better grasp of the complex game of strategy than many adult Earthers. And he pronounced its name like a Karkar. As far as Pik could see, Adam possessed the best traits of both parents, including the sixth digit on each hand and foot.

Adam looked up from the hmmmjckt board to see his sister ram into one of the carved pillars that supported the high, arched ceiling. She fell over backward, feet flying upward. But after rubbing her shoulder with a

quick pout, she hopped up and started running again. "Emma's coming home!"

Adam turned to Pik. "Abba, would you make her stop? She'll hurt herself."

"Don't worry, that one's like Gannahan glass." He studied the board, trying to guess the boy's next move. "She's hard to break."

Adam's features resembled Pik's in both elongated shape and placid composure. Without altering his expression, he shrugged. "Well, she's breaking my ears."

Pik's own ears lifted in a Karkar smile. "Aren't you excited too?"

"Of course I am. And so are you, I can tell." Adam's eyes sparkled with a smile his face didn't quite reflect. "Should we run around screaming?"

"I'm a little old for that sort of thing, but you may join her if you'd like."

"That would be crazy." Adam stood. "But fun!"

He dodged around the chair beside him and dashed toward Lileela, shouting with her, "Emma's coming home!" in his pre-pubescent voice. Stopping in her path, he leaned forward with arms outspread as if to block her way.

Shrieking with laughter, she crashed into him with such force they both fell.

Pik started to laugh but stopped when he saw their faces. Lileela paled and stared at her brother in horror. Adam leaned back on his hands with legs straight in front, eyes wide and mouth agape.

Before Pik could ask what was wrong, they hopped up as one and cried, "What have I done? Is there no hope for us?" then burst into tears.

Pik was beside them in three strides. Stabbed by a flash of inexplicable panic, he knelt and wrapped one arm around each. "What is it? What are you talking about?"

"That was Emma, that's what she said." Tears poured down Adam's cheeks. "She was so scared!"

Lileela, trembling, buried her face in her father's shirt. He covered her small head with his hand, wondering what to do, what to say, what this meant.

Then he felt as if the floor disappeared from beneath him and he was flung through space—but just as the feeling hit him, it was gone.

Reeling, he knelt and held his children while they wept. But he knew what had happened. He'd felt it, too. Somewhere on this planet, he had no idea where, the landing craft carrying his wife had crashed.

Emma was not coming home.



THE roaring in Dassa's ears gave way to a loud, buzzing tinnitus. Something cold and wet touched her face in strange contrast to the unbearable heat. Smoke caught in her throat, and when she opened her eyes, they watered and stung. She closed them again and took shallow breaths.

Her mind foundered, foggy and disoriented. Why was she on her back? Her safety harness still held her in the seat, facing upward.

And she couldn't reach the release latch. Her right arm was paralyzed by pain. Feeling with her left hand along the harness strap toward where the clasp should be, an immovable metal object blocked her way to the mechanism. She tugged on the restraints, then tried to twist out of them, but they held her fast.

The heat and smoke were suffocating, lethal. She called the pilot, but the way her ears rang, she couldn't hear if he responded.

One thing was clear: if she didn't escape the burning shuttle craft, she'd die in minutes. She fumbled for her *lahab*. Found it. Opened the blade, cut away the harness straps, and threw them aside.

But they fell back into her face. They'd hit something.

Something that wouldn't budge when she tried to shove it out of the way. Running her left hand along a scorching metal pole, she found the pilot's lifeless body skewered on the end of it, his blood already drying in the furnace-like heat. To the right, a sizzling wall too hot to touch stopped her hand.

Then came the cold wetness again, drifting in from above. She reached upward and felt nothing but air. More fumbling and reaching, and she discovered the sharp edges of a hole. Everything hurt, especially her right arm, but, teeth gritted against the pain, she managed to squirm out from under the pole, pull herself over it and wiggle through a jagged, barely-big-enough opening in the metal skin of the shuttle.

Like Santa out of a chimney, she thought vaguely as she realized smoke poured out with her and rose into the gray late-afternoon sky.

She rolled into the fresh air, gasping and heaving. It was blistering hot here. Closing her stinging eyes, she rolled one more turn, only to fall off the ship's side—or top, or whatever she'd been lying on—flat onto hard ground, knocking the wind out of her.

She still could hear nothing. Just a loud ringing tone over a heavy, underwater-like muffling sensation.

A rock beneath her left shoulder blade, along with a continual pelting of her face by cold wetness, compelled her to sit up before she'd caught her breath. Slowly, gingerly, not even certain she could.

Sore, but more or less upright, Dassa fought for air and peered through streaming eyes at her surroundings. The mangled ship, radiating heat, loomed to her left. A short distance away, flames danced along the ground where spilled fuel burned. Pieces of the landing craft lay scattered as far as her limited vision could reach.

The warm ground beneath her was pinkish-orange and rocky. Beyond the halo of heat around the steaming shuttle lay a thin layer of snow. At the rate the flakes fell, the layer would soon be thick.

As her breathing came easier, Dassa struggled against the ringing in her ears and the confusion that strangled her thoughts. She tried to force her mind to shove the interference away, but it was like pushing on air.

The landing craft had crashed, that much was certain. The pilot was dead, and she was alive. But where was she?

She struggled to her knees, too dizzy to rise to her feet. The pain in her right arm prevented her from extending it fully. With her left hand on the ground for support and tucking her right close to her body, she put her head down and breathed deeply to clear her lungs and her head.

After a few moments she wiped her eyes on a smoky sleeve and tried again to stand. Staggering, she laid her hand on the shuttle for balance, but pulled it back quickly from the searing heat.

Her thoughts swirled like ash, turning to dust when touched. Why the disorientation? Her training as an elite Nasi knight gave her survival skills and resources beyond the ordinary. Why, then, did she feel so disconnected, unhinged, alone?

Alone. That was it. She connected with no one in her meah.

She reached toward her children, but could find them no more than she could Pik. She called out to the Yasha—and got no answer.

Impossible.

Despair rose up in her soul like a monster, but she wrestled it down with the strength of logic. This wasn't the end of everything. Her vision had improved, and the ringing in her ears was lessening. She'd likely regain use of her meah, too.

Dassa looked up and sniffed. The smell of smoke, hot metal, and fuel hung heavy in the air, but another scent now filtered through.

And it raised the hair on the back of her neck.

She touched her lahab pocket. Relief washed over her—the blade was in its place. Her confidence rose in a sudden, welcome swell. Her meah might not work, but her instincts and training remained intact.

As she strained her senses to detect the source of the scent, an animal moved into view. The arych crept low and stealthy, so fluid and furtive the snow shrouded its tawny head and back as if it were a statue. A clawed, two-pronged tail swayed behind, ready to lash out. The lion's eyes, narrowed to suspicious slits, surveyed the wreckage, and its nostrils quivered as it took in the human scents.

It looked to be nearly 300 kilograms in weight, five meters from nose to tail tip. Not huge by arych standards, but big enough to pose a challenge. Dassa licked her lips, and the bitter, smoky taste made her aware of her great thirst.

The beast bared its teeth in a feline grin, but Dassa was still too deaf to hear the growl. The lion's gaze met her own with a stare so sinister her blood nearly curdled. When it opened its mouth in an unheard roar and moved toward her, she pulled out her lahab and flicked it open.

The lion crept forward, its eyes wary. It may never have seen a human before, let alone the burning remains of a space shuttle. If Dassa was out of her comfort zone, so was her opponent.

"Begone! I am Toqeph!" she cried. With her impaired hearing, it sounded as if she shouted into a cotton-filled box. The beast's only response was a silent snarl as it crept toward her.

Keeping her eyes on the lion, Dassa sidled toward a remnant of mangled sheet metal. With slow movements, she picked it up. It was hot, but not enough to burn her, and it had a convenient protrusion on the inside

that she could use as a handle. Holding it with the injured arm caused agonizing pain, but it made a suitable shield.

Reviewing her mental map of the scattered wreckage, Dassa backed up and bent to retrieve a sturdy Pyetronium shard.

The lion moved in, its barbed tail lifted in anticipation of a kill.

One end of the shard had edges as sharp as a lahab. Dassa flung it like a dagger at the charging beast. The blade went deep into its shoulder just as the lion lunged, claws and fangs flashing.

The beast's mouth opened in a scream. Dassa felt and smelled its warm breath, but the sound was muffled by the buzzing in her head as she ducked and dodged out of its way. Other than a shuddering dent to her shield from a blow by the spiked tail, she emerged untouched by the animal's first assault. Despite the agony in her arm, she kept her grip on the shield.

The lion was now mad with pain and rage, splitting the air with bellows that fell on Dassa's useless ears.

Heart pounding, Dassa snatched up a short, twisted beam from the ground as the beast pulled back, its shoulder streaming blood. She shouted again, "Begone!" But the glare in its yellow eyes told her it had no intention of going anywhere until it had made a meal of her.

Waving the beam, she moved toward the lion. It edged back a half-meter, then stopped and snarled, poised to spring.

Fast as thought, Dassa leapt forward and jabbed the arych in the face with the metal piece's jagged end. The instant she released the shard, she grabbed her lahab. The tail struck again, hooking the shield and yanking it from Dassa's hand just as she sliced the animal's throat with her blade. The massive front paws flew up. Dassa ducked as their extended claws sliced over her head. She slipped out of range of the beast's thrashing limbs until its death throes had ended. Then she moved in and retrieved her lahab.

As she cleaned the blade, her heartbeat slowed to a more normal rate, but she didn't allow her mind to tread any path but the way out.

She ticked off the facts: First, it was daylight, but she'd been due to land in Periy province well after dark. Therefore, she must be two or three time zones from her destination.

Second, the arych had a wide range, from Har to Midbar, even as far east as Am.

Third, the rocky, barren ground here reminded her of Midbar. But it was snowing, and it seldom snowed that far south. Never this early in the year. So she must be in Har or Am.

Satisfied the blade was clean, she slipped it back into its pocket and surveyed her surroundings. Hilly to the east, higher mountains to the north.

This could be Har, but the rocks' pinkish-orange color puzzled her. She knew of only one place they existed. The rare pink stone quarried centuries ago for the palace of Armown came from Adunnim near Ruwach Gorge, the mysterious fissure that carved a deep scar across Gannah for 550 kilometers.

Dassa shivered. Wherever this was, it was cold. She had no food, no shelter, and no proper clothing. What clothes she had were so scorched and torn they gave little protection.

She looked to where the dead lion lay in a crumpled heap of fur. It would provide some of those needs. She gutted the animal, releasing its heat and stench into the air. With practiced moves, she severed its heart from the vessels that bound it within the chest.

Next she went to work skinning the creature. She wanted to use her right arm as little as possible, but the task required two hands, so she steeled herself against the pain. Though her many burns, scrapes, and bruises were uncomfortable, they would heal quickly. Her arm was of greater concern. She felt sure it was broken, but she didn't have the means to set it.



AN hour after the crash, the arych was skinned and its heart lay baking in an oven made of scrap metal, buried in smoldering coals of the wreck. She had also carved out several steaks from the animal's haunch. More than six centimeters of snow covered the ground, with more falling.

While her dinner cooked, she searched the wreck. First, she wrapped her arm with some strapping as a makeshift splint. Next, she concentrated on communications.

The ship's radio had no power, and the pilot's messenger was melted. Her own, which she'd laid beside her when she buckled herself in, was not to be found. It must have been thrown from the ship and could be

kilometers away. No radio, no messenger, no meah. She was truly on her own.

Dassa poked the rickety oven from the coals, then removed the lid with a long piece of debris. After skewering the meat and dropping it onto a flat rock, she sliced it with her lahab. As hungry as she was, it tasted good.

Huddled under the smelly lion skin, she considered the weather. If this was Adunnim, the snow was no isolated flurry. It was the beginning of a long season of bitter cold that would bury the land under several meters of frigid whiteness, not releasing the ground from its grip for months.

Captain Broward would locate the shuttle once he realized it was missing. But between the magnetic and meteorological storms, rescue could take days. By then, the landing craft would be buried in snow and she would be dead from exposure.

She ate one slice of the heart, then wrapped the rest in a piece of fabric torn from a seat. She'd found a satchel, charred but usable, in the wreckage. After removing an assortment of tools and parts, she filled it with meat from her kill. Wishing she had suitable footwear for a tramp through the snow, she slung the bag over her shoulder and set out to find refuge from the weather.

The wind blew ever colder. Flying snow obscured the setting sun as Dassa made her way through the rubble to the other side of the wreckage and headed west, the direction of home. True, home was probably 10,000 kilometers away, but the closer she got today, the less distance she'd have to travel later. Perhaps she'd find a cave, or even a rocky outcropping, to shelter in for the night. Better yet, maybe she'd find a building abandoned by the Old Gannahans. One that still had a roof and four walls. A closet full of warm clothes. A pantry stocked with canned goods would be nice. While she was dreaming, why not ask for a functional heating system? And a hot bath would be good about now.

What she really wanted, though, was a meah.

She plunged on due west for about ten minutes. Then in the fading light, she came to a stop on near-frozen feet and stared at what lay before her.

A chasm lay in her path. Ruwach Gorge. Known to be two kilometers deep, more than five hundred kilometers long, and forty across at its widest. That's what lay before her.

As far as she could see to the south and north, flat ground spread without so much as a hillock to shelter beside. Behind, nothing but snow and dusky gloom for the half-kilometer she'd just walked.

Forbidding as it was, the gorge before her was the best hope.