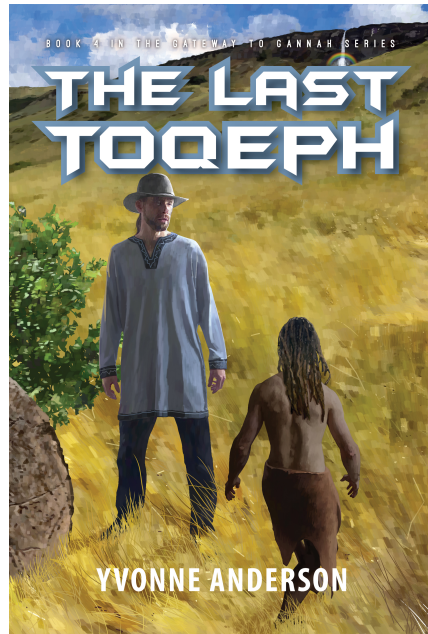




1



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

Being soaked already, 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 path vanished ahead where the ground fell away sharply. 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 in a fiasco from which he'd emerged from that fiasco scraped and torn, but with no broken bones.

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 easy 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. 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 the muck.

He plunged onward, step by desperate, sucking step, until at last he reached firm footing on the edge of a gray slab of scarred rock. Jutting from the ground at an angle, it looked like the floor of some ancient hall, broken and tipped upward.

He slipped in the slime on its muddy shoulder and grabbed at the leaning slab. His hand smeared a swath nearly clean before he'd caught his balance. He stared.

This was no random chunk of rock. The mud concealed a polished surface. Where it wasn't scored and cracked, it seemed to display 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, 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, clearing the circle on the floor.

For that's what this certainly was. A piece of the 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 this be? Had he lost his bearings and wandered off course? The ancient palace had stood many leagues east of where he now journeyed.

Though shrouded in clouds, 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 near-photographic mind, fixing first on Saba and then his own location. He was not mistaken. This slab had traveled hundreds of kilometers.

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. If any other vestige of humanity existed here, it was 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 two thousand people.

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

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 on the floor 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 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 and 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?

The ancient toqephs might consider him worthy of death for even thinking to inherit 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.

It might be wise to 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 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 didn't sink into the mud, neither would he.

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.

Seeing him, 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 berry.

It was 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 found 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 the hair 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, centimeter-long 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, dark braids dangling as she resumed her search for larvae, answered for Lileela. "But we need to pick all these now, or they'll eat the powl plants to the ground."

Lileela wondered about that. Had anyone tried leaving the little critters 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 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 imitated his aunt's expression. "They're stinky."

"They're only good when they're popped." Lileela had a hard time believing 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 tossed a casual wave at her sister-in-law emerging from the alley but continued her work, unwilling to stop again 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 both his shoulders. "Easy, there, bruiser. 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 second. Must be the Karkar in him."

Everett pressed his ear against his mother's belly then pulled away quickly. "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?" She sounded as if she was almost afraid to ask.

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 smile of sympathy. 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. "Do I have to 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 immediately 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 this one 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. "What's so 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." She stepped forward and greeted her husband with a kiss. "It was funny, the way he and Tamah had such a good time picking those nasty beetle larvae off the powl plants."

Holding her gaze captive in his, 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 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?"

He brushed her curls back from her face. "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 that's not for me. 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."

"And at least I'm not like old Dmitry, shaving his whole face and head three times a day."

She chuckled. "He likes the look, I guess. Won't let it go no matter how hard it is to keep up."

"That's his problem. As for me" — his brows lifted — "I'm on my lunch break, so..."

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

He drew her close. "Mmm. First, how about another kind of roll?"

The preceding is an excerpt from *The Last Toqeph*, the fourth and last book in the Gateway to Gannah series by Yvonne Anderson.

<http://YsWords.com>