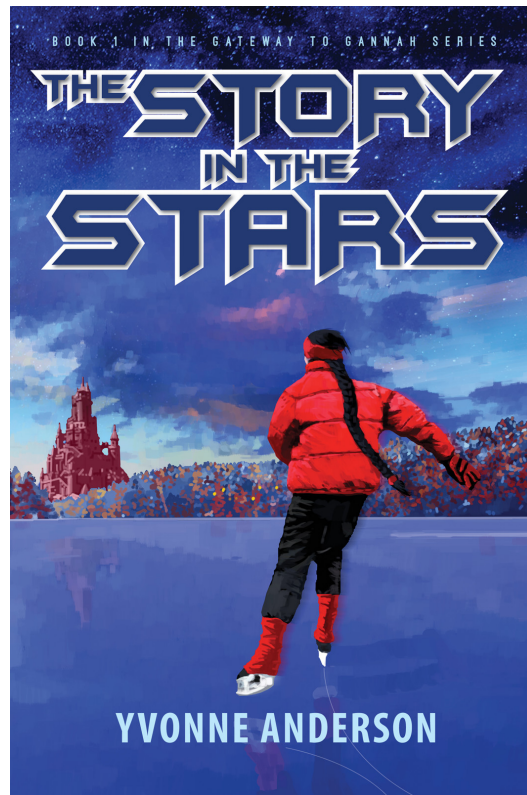




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Dassa trudged through the Ayin Forest across a crusted snow, her weary steps fueled by the nearness of her goal.

Soon, she told herself. Soon this will all be over.

On much of the planet Gannah, winter was drab as an old faded photo, but here in Ayin, the foliage boasted the colors of a prism. The trees kept their leaves until the new spring growth pushed them aside, so now, the frosty forest pulsed with color.

Dassa quickened her pace despite her exhaustion and the steepness of the slope. Labored breath billowing like smoke from a puffing firedrake, she crested the ridge and cast her gaze into the valley below.

A rush of delight coursed through her weary body. There it was—home—the comforting outlines of the domed green roof barely discernable through the trees. Revived by the sight, she hastened down the hill across the sun-spangled snow.

She smiled as the round, two-storied house came into full view. Unlike her childhood home, it was no mansion. It couldn't compare to any of the seven provincial palaces from which her father, the toqeph, reigned as the ruler of all Gannah. But she could think of nowhere she'd

rather live than in this yellow stone cottage at the edge of the forest with her husband, Rosh, and their two boys.

Nor could she imagine a more perfect late-winter's day. Gannah's volatile temper was mild that afternoon, with the sun smiling down from a brilliant blue sky and breezes caressing with a mother's gentleness. And today, this most beautiful of days, she, Atarah Hadassah Hagah Natsach, would finish her quest and be named a Nasi.

As she plunged toward the house and the last lap of her race, she felt no euphoria. But, the test had been grueling, and she still must prepare the metheq and take it to her father. Surely once he approved her offering and declared her Nasi, her elation would know no bounds.

She left the woods and traversed unbroken drifts. A shroud of abandonment lay over all. Of course it was quiet, she reminded herself. Her mother kept the children at Armown, and Rosh traveled Outside.

So why did the silence seem so unnatural?

At the house, she removed her snowshoes and used a booted foot to sweep the snow from the threshold. Once inside, she closed her eyes and heaved a sigh.

Then she shivered.

Before embarking on her trek, she'd set the temptrol to just above freezing, but the empty house felt frigid, with a chill of the spirit more than the body.

Dassa tugged off her boots, took thick slippers from the shoe-warmer by the door, then slid her feet into them. Next she shuffled through the dining area to the climate panel nestled in the gently curved, fabric-covered wall, and adjusted the control to a more comfortable temperature.

The heater rumbled awake then settled into its familiar hum as Dassa toured the vacant rooms. She hugged herself as the emptiness formed a shadow of foreboding in her heart. Nothing had been touched in her absence, but somehow, nothing was the same.

She had neither time nor strength to waste on the puzzle. Back in the kitchen, she shrugged off her travel-stained pack, laid it on the table, and pulled out a heavy tin. Though mossberries weren't much bigger than the blue spots on a damebug's back, they were weighty, and this tin was full of them.

She removed her hooded coat and draped it on the back of a chair, then opened the tin and admired the glistening purple berries. Their rich fragrance made her mouth water. Hungry as she was, though, she wouldn't steal a taste.

Every Gannahan knew the legend of the would-be Nasi who completed his quest with valor, but sampled a berry while preparing the metheq. When he then came before the toqeph, his purple-stained tongue told all. Because he'd yielded to temptation, he was disqualified from the Nasihood for the rest of his life.

The knights of Gannah wore neither badge nor uniform. The color from the mossberries eaten at their induction never left their tongues, and that was the mark of their rank. Some toqeph's mouths were black because they ate each time a new Nasi pledged.

Dassa assembled the ingredients for a pie shell. Though the metheq could be any sort of treat in which mossberries played a role, her father loved pies, and she'd picked enough berries for a nice one. Thinking of the pleasure it would give him, she scooped and measured, mixed and rolled.

An hour later, Dassa left the house with a bubbling-hot mossberry pie in a basket over her arm and ice skates slung over her shoulder. The ancient rules stated the Last Requirement must be performed entirely on foot, so she trudged past the hangar without stopping for the motorsled. If she continued on through the woods then cut across the frozen lake, she'd be at Armown in less than two hours. A baby step, compared to the distance she'd already come. She'd easily make it before nightfall.

The sun still shone undimmed by clouds, but the shadow in her heart grew darker the farther she trudged. Fear knotted in her chest, though she smelled no dangerous animals near nor sensed treacherous changes in weather.

She cast her mind toward Rosh, and their meahs connected faintly. Good. He was well. Her children, though... A mother shouldn't lose touch with her children, even under stresses like these. But when she reached for them in her meah, she felt nothing.

Perhaps she'd been away too long. She reached her meah upward, toward her Yasha. That connection remained as clear as ever. *Finish your mission*, was the message she sensed. *Finish your mission*.

So that's it. The children would be restored to her once her quest was completed. Odd, though, how she felt so desolate. Almost as if... No, she wouldn't think it.

On the bank of the lake, she sat on a rock to change into her skates. After that, the colorful tree line fell behind as she sped to her destination.

But the closer she drew to the palace, gleaming in the sun across the frozen expanse, the larger the emptiness yawned within her. What was going on? Was this part of the test? She drew the crisp Gannahan air deep into her lungs, but it failed to calm her.

Fourteen days ago, when she'd clung to the frozen cliffs, buffeted by gusts and sprayed by the icy breakers, filling her tin with the tiny mossberries, she'd envisioned this moment. Nearing the palace, carrying her prize. Lightheaded from fasting, weak from exertion, but energized by the impending victory. Then presenting her offering to the toqeph. He'd sample it. She pictured his azure eyes widening in delight as a smile stole across his face. "Not bad," he'd say, or some such grudging praise. Once he'd eaten, he would pronounce her a Nasi, and the rest of the metheq would be hers.

It would be the first food to cross her lips in a fortnight, but it was reputed to be worth the wait. They said a man could fight for seven days and nights on seven mossberries. An exaggeration, no doubt, but the tiny fruits did seem to impart unusual strength and refreshment to those who had earned the right to eat them. Her mouth watered at the scent wafting up from the basket she held in both arms.

As she neared her destination, she wondered at the absence of skate marks on the ice. Usually the surface was scarred with them, especially here, near the palace.

She glided to the pavilion on the shore. After stumping on her skates across the snow, she sat on a bench to change into her boots then started up the path to the plateau, where Armown reigned in noble splendor. Her legs felt wobbly, the basket heavy on her arm, as she plodded upward.

Intent on her purpose, Dassa maintained communion with the Yasha, putting all else out of her mind.

Then she reached the stairway cut into the stone face of the mountain, leading up to the palace. Before she'd climbed three steps, waves of sorrow radiating from the ancient pinkstone walls drove her to her knees, and she barely rescued the precious metheq from sliding down the slope behind her. A vision of death—many deaths—passed across her meah, sucking the air from her lungs. Eyes closed, she forced herself to inhale, and the frigid air cut like a blade.

She rose slowly, casting with her meah into the palace. She could make no connection with her sons. Her heart nearly stopped—they were gone. *No!* Her mother? Gone. Her father? Dim. Very dim.

A great many souls had vanished from inside those walls, from the whole city of Ayar. She spread herself farther. This death ravaged as far as she could sense.

Dropping her skates, she clutched her basket and ran up the stairs.

The preceding is a sample chapter from *The Story in the Stars*, the first book in the Gateway to Gannah series by Yvonne Anderson.

<http://YsWords.com>