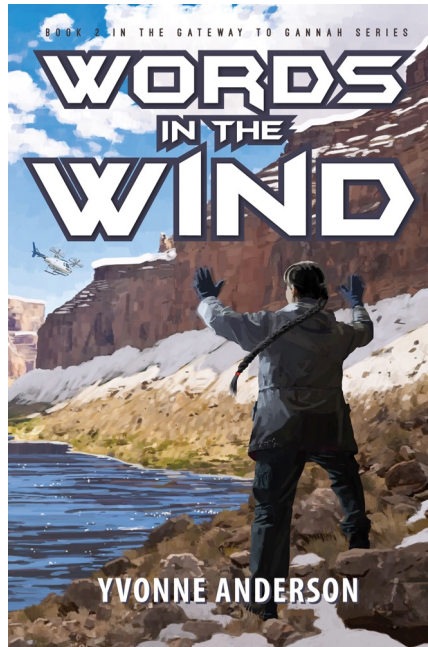




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"End." Dassa's command shut off the voice recorder. She pulled her hands out of the flexible gloves that protruded into the transparent thermoplastic box and rubbed her bleary eyes. The translation project was finally finished.

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. "Have you heard from the toqeph?"

"Not lately. The sunspots have been disrupting transmissions."

"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 marvelously annoying."

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

"I'd rather not have 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 say."

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

She flushed. She didn't speak with the Yasha, as the Gannahans called the Savior, in her meah as often as she used to. That was no fault of His, to be sure. He was always there when she called Him, and His words were always true. How could they not be? He was the Truth.

But the truth could be hard to swallow. Sometimes she'd rather ignore it.

Yea, Lord, she replied in her meah. *As Thou wilt it.*

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. In the past year or so, she'd been more or less ignoring Him. Giving Him a respectful nod without listening to what He had to say.

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.

But the Yasha was unimpressed. *Art thou weary of hiding from Me?*

Dassa feasted her eyes on Gannah's bright colors coming into view. She answered without much thought. *Nay, none can hide from Thee.*

But thou wouldst like to.

She shifted uncomfortably beneath her safety restraints. *Of course I don't.* She wasn't lying, exactly — she said what she wanted to be true.

A cold hand squeezed her stomach as a tooth-rattling tremor shook the shuttle and sent it into a spin toward the planet. She 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 were within 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 trying.

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.

The preceding is an excerpt from *Words in the Wind*, Book 2 in the Gateway to Gannah series by Yvonne Anderson.

<http://YsWords.com>