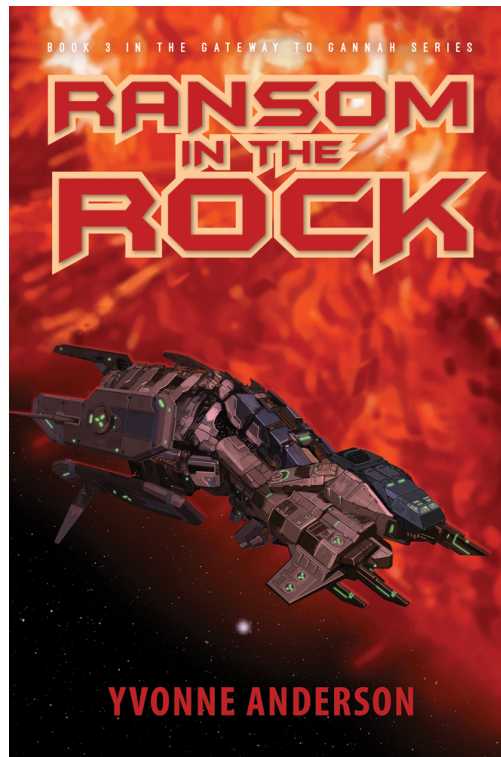




1



Her chest tight with dread, Lileela opened the closet.

She could only bring one outfit. One outfit? How insane was that? No way in Karkar could she narrow her wardrobe to one item. It was almost enough to make a girl scream. But, tempting though it may be, fifteen was a little old to be throwing a tantrum like a toddler.

She chewed her lip, trying to think.

It should be a multi-piece ensemble. Though technically one outfit, she could wear separate parts on different occasions, making it seem like more. But then, she'd have to coordinate it with something Gannahan, and that would putrefy the entire look.

She'd never survive this.

Swallowing a sob, she climbed the stepstool to reach the control that activated the display. One by one, each item in her closet appeared on the screen then faded away to reveal the next.

This was going to be a tough decision.

"Lileela?"

Great. Aunt Skiskii was here already.

"We need to get to the shuttle bay."

Ignoring her, Lileela watched the delicious parade of apparel march past her vision. If she took the knee-length brushed yueeed jacket and the Eutarian silk blouse—no, not that silk. The paler one, with the little flecks of—no, maybe the solid would be better.

"What's this?" Skiskii's voice could cut through glass.

Lileela limped down from the stool and exited the closet, leaving the display running. "What's what?"

"These cosmetics in your case. What are they doing here?"

Lileela tipped her head back to look her aunt in the pale yellow eye. "I'm taking them. What else would they be doing there?"

Skiskii's ears tilted back. "Weren't we told they don't wear cosmetics on Gannah? And you've scarcely left room for clothes. You said you were bringing one civilized outfit, but I don't see it."

"I haven't packed it yet." Lileela slipped between Skiskii and the suitcase. "Still trying to decide which one I want."

Skiskii's exasperated sigh reverberated around the room. "What have you been doing all day, buying every eyeliner on the ship? You've got a lifetime supply in there."

"That's the plan. If they don't wear cosmetics on Gannah, that means I can't buy it there, which means I'll have to bring my own. Because I'm not about to walk around with a naked face the rest of my miserable life."

Skiskii's lips parted as if she was about to shriek again but then her ears tipped outward. "Well. Well. I suppose it can't do any harm. But we do need to get to the shuttle bay, so let's grab whatever else you're bringing." Two swift, long-legged steps put her in the closet. "Let's see..." Pressing an icon, she changed the display to one that showed thumbnails of the entire contents.

Row after row of miniscule images filled the wide screen. Lileela was proud of her wardrobe, but it did make choosing difficult.

She watched her auntie—actually, her cousin; Skiskii was her father's first cousin on his mother's side—scan the selection. She'd miss the old thing. More than she cared to admit. That was one reason she had such a hard time deciding what to bring. It wasn't just clothes she'd be leaving behind.

"Here." Skiskii pressed a selection. "This is perfect." She chose the very jacket Lileela had been thinking of, along with fashionably snug trousers and a filmy but triple-layer ruffled blouse, the color of which picked up the mauve of the jacket's piping. To Lileela's delight, she added a floor-length skirt besides.

Lileela couldn't have chosen better herself. "Oh, grab that cream-colored sash, too. And I've got the most darling bangles to match the jacket buttons." She scurried to her jewelry armoire and flung it open.

That was another thing she would sorely miss. What sort of accessories would she find on Gannah? Trying to remember if her mother wore jewelry, all she could recall was a ring. The signet of her authority as toqeph.

The closet rack whirled as it spit out the clothes Skiskii selected. While she removed them from their hangers and folded them, Lileela boxed the earrings and brooch, along with a neck chain.

Her hands trembled, and she took a slow, deep breath, trying to calm herself. The breath turned into a sob.

Skiskii left her folding and reached for Lileela, pulling her into a long-limbed embrace. The grinding noise in her throat was supposed to be comforting, and to a Karkar child, it might have been. But it only made Lileela's tears flow more freely. She was no longer a child, though on Skiskii's planet she was the size of one. And she was only one quarter Karkar, though she could barely remember living anywhere else.

"I don't want to go, Auntie!"

Skiskii's dinner-plate-sized, six-fingered hand stroked Lileela's dark, curly-bobbed head. "I know you don't, dear one." She crooned like a Cephargian alley cat yowling in pain. "I know you don't. But Gannah is your home. You were born there, your family's there."

Lileela pulled away. "You're family, and you're not there. I don't remember my parents anymore, and I've never seen my younger brothers and sisters. Why do they even want me?"

Skiskii's ears wobbled. "Your parents love you. They've missed you. The family's not complete without you."

"That can't be." Lileela pulled out a tissue and wiped her eyes. "There's got to be some other reason."

Skiskii sat on the vanity bench, but she still had to look down at Lileela. "They do love you. You've been gone for so long, and they want you home so they can get to know you again."

For a moment, Lileela felt her auntie's sorrow at never having had a child of her own. But that moment was short, fleeing before her greater self-pity.

"Your neurological treatment has been a considerable expense to them, you know."

Lileela pouted, a feat that never failed to impress the blank-faced Karkar. Especially when she managed to produce a few tears in the corners of her eyes, like she did now. "Why should that worry them? They're rich, they own all of Gannah, but people there don't use money. It wouldn't burden them to keep me on Karkar the rest of my life."

Skiskii's answer was cut short by an urgent beep followed by a whistle from the speaker above the door. Then an electronic voice intoned in tinny Karkarish, "Lileela Pik. Please report to Shuttle Bay Three immediately. Lileela Pik. Shuttle Bay Three."

Skiskii hopped up and turned back to the half-packed suitcase. "We've got to scoot. We should have been there a quarter hour ago."

Lileela slammed the jewelry box into the bag. "All right. If you don't want me any longer, I'll go down to that awful planet. But—"

"That's not the case, and you know it." Skiskii's ears twitched in irritation. "Stop acting like the spoiled brat I've allowed you to become." She snapped the bag shut.

Lileela let out a shriek. "Wait, I need shoes!" As fast as her labored, deliberate gait allowed, she moved to the closet and up the stepstool. "I know which ones I want, it'll only take a sec."

When the shoes she selected emerged, she tossed them to her auntie, who stuffed them into the suitcase and closed it again with swift movements.

Skiskii snatched the case with one hand and ushered Lileela out the door with the other. Lileela went, but she scowled all the way. "This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of. Just one decent outfit, one real pair of shoes, and no cosmetics. They're going to make me dress like a barbarian—"

In the hall outside, Skiskii slid the bag into the rack in the back of the scootercart. "Yes, yes, just get in. I'll drive."

"Oh, my tote!" Lileela limped back into her room, grabbed her purse and returned to the scootercart while continuing her rant. "A barbarian, I tell you. They'll have me dressing in scratchy old sacks and eating with my hands."

The cart lurched forward, slamming Lileela into the seat. "Eating nasty roots dug out of the filthy, wormy ground, and then picking my teeth with a stick. After all you and Uncle Ogliziizl have gone through to teach me how to be civilized, they're going to want me to go back to—"

"That's enough, Miss Lileela." Skiskii's stern voice would have sent Lileela cringing to the far side of the scootercart if she hadn't known her auntie was all bark and no bite.

Skiskii pulled the horn, and people in the hall moved out of her way. "I know you don't want to go, but we have no choice. The arrangements have been made, and it's out of our hands."

Lileela crossed her arms and scowled at her shoes. They were cute shoes, too. She was certain never to find anything like them on Gannah. "So what am I, a commodity to be traded by agreement between planets?"

Skiskii sighed. "We've been through this, Lileela, and I won't explain it again. Your parents have finally come up with the means of paying for your care. And it's a king's ransom. You should be touched that they'd —"

"Pay so much for my release? Some release. They're buying me from Karkar so they can use me for a slave. My father used to beat me, did you know that? He beat me with a rod, then made me sit in a drab, gray room for hours on end, just because he didn't like the way I was dressed, did I ever tell you that?"

"He did not. Don't expect me to believe that."

"He did! And I was little then. How do you think they'll treat me now? They're Gannahan, they'll do terrible things to me!"

Skiskii cornered a little too abruptly, and Lileela had to grab her tote to keep it from flying out of the cart.

"They're your parents, they love you. The League of Planets has ordered us to turn you over to them now that they're able to pay off their debt. I have no doubt you'll be well cared for there."

"Humph." Lileela smoothed a curl back from her forehead. "I'll remember you said that when I'm imprisoned and forced into hard labor."

Skiskii negotiated another turn, a little more carefully this time, onto the last hall before the shuttle bay elevators. "It will be nothing like that, and you know it." She patted Lileela's leg. But her worried ears and tearful eyes belied her comforting words.

Adam watched through the glass as the last truck pulled up behind the others at the edge of the landing field.

Try as he might, he couldn't grasp why those rocks dug out of the ground were so special. Why the League had refused to allow his sister to come home until Gannah agreed to provide a sufficient amount of them.

Nor why they were worth a man's life.

In all his twenty years, he'd never known anything so perplexing.

The drivers left their trucks and crossed the grass to the building where Adam and the others waited. Steamy air poured into the lobby as they filed in through the entrance.

One of them approached Adam's mother and bent forward in a respectful bow. "It's all here, Madam Toqeph. Five tonnes of raw zahab ore, five tonnes of nechosheth, and a hundredweight of uncut green keliystone."

"Thank you, Jax. The transport is expected in ten minutes, so you're here in good time." Emma turned from Jax and looked up at Adam. "Do you hear anything from your sister?"

He shook his head. "She doesn't seem inclined to communicate with me."

Adam glanced at his father on Emma's other side. Abba's waxen Karkar face revealed nothing, but his ears quivered with suppressed anticipation, and tension radiated from his whole being in almost visible waves.

It was Abba who had put Lileela on that starship for Karkar after her spinal cord injury, and it was Abba who felt responsible for her return.

Adam and his sister had been close as children, and their separation had been difficult to adjust to. But at least he had the ability to maintain contact with her through what Abba called meah telepathy.

Adam wasn't sure if telepathy was the right word, because there was nothing extra-sensory about it. But since only native Gannahans possessed the gland that performed the function—and since only Emma and her children were native Gannahans—and since Emma's meah had been damaged in an accident—it was, in fact, a rare ability.

An ability that Lileela lately chose to not use.

She didn't want to come home, that much was clear. But Adam didn't tell his parents. Since he didn't understand her reluctance, he couldn't explain it to them.

Why would anyone not want to live here? Yes, Karkar was the planet of their father's birth. Beside the superior medical services she'd been sent there for, it had many other interesting things to offer. But when he tried to imagine being cut off from his beloved Gannah, Adam felt suffocated. Lileela should be eager to return and breathe freely again.

The trucks' drivers mingled in the lobby, their voices joining the other eager murmurs humming throughout the room. A visit from Outsiders was a rare event, and never had they brought such precious cargo.

He reached in his meah toward Lileela, but she still shut him out. The last time he'd seen her, she'd been fighting for her life, breathing with the help of a respirator, a terrified five-year-old who'd never known anything but Gannah. Now she was, under Gannah law, only a few months away from the age of adulthood, and with Outerworld experience that Adam could only imagine. Was that why she was cutting him off? Was she ashamed of his ignorance, embarrassed by his provincialism?

Or was she once again a frightened little girl facing a great unknown?

He wished she would let him in. He wanted to comfort her like he used to, help carry her fears. He was also eager to learn from her, for the things she'd seen in the past ten years could be a great benefit to Gannah.

After more than twice the ten-minute estimate, a rumble filled the ears, first of the native Gannahans with their keener senses, and then the others as well.

No one spoke as the ship drew closer. No one could have heard their words if they'd tried. Before the gigantic vehicle began its final, hovering descent, many covered their ears with their hands, even though they'd all inserted earplugs as the transport's approach grew louder.

The thunderous noise, the ground-shuddering vibrations, the massive size and flashing lights of the mechanical monster that eased itself onto the landing pad in clouds of smoke and flame both excited and repulsed Adam. This beast was a marvel of engineering, nearly magical in its abilities, but it was a dirty, foreign thing. A violation of Gannah's air and soil, a threat to the purity and stability of the planet.

But it carried Lileela home. For that, he would forgive it anything.

The preceding is a sample chapter of *Ransom in the Rock*, the third book in the Gateway to Gannah series by Yvonne Anderson.