



Trion Rising

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I thought you said you knew how to fly this thing!”

“I did. I do. Trust me.”

Easy for him to say. Oriannon could only grip her stiff bucket seat with both hands and count down the final seconds of her young life. She cringed at the buzz of a high-pitched warning.

“On present course, nine seconds to impact,” came the metallic warning voice. “Eight seconds . . .”

Ori wondered how she had let Margus Leek talk her into sneaking aboard the little two-seat interplanetary pod. It was fast, but built for speed and certainly not comfort. If she stretched her arms even a little she would elbow the pilot.

“Relax, Orion.” Margus Leek yanked the joystick to starboard, and their pod brushed by the antenna of a rather large telecommunications satellite. “I grew up flying these little things.”

“Tell me why I don’t feel any better.” Oriannon tried not to scream as they buzzed by another piece of space debris—an old fuel tank—leaving it spinning in their wake. “And my name isn’t—”

“I know, I know. Sorry. You don’t have to tell me. It’s Ori-ANN-on.” When he smiled, she could almost see his eyes twinkling through his scratched sun visor. “Oriannon, Oriannon. Don’t

know how I can forget a VIP passenger like the esteemed and honorable Oriannon Hightower of the Nyssa clan.”

“It’s just Oriannon, okay?” she told him. “Forget all the other names.”

He laughed as they dipped below an orbiting solar collector, close enough to read the warning label on the underside. She closed her eyes and wondered what it would be like to grow up without all the baggage that came with being an elder’s daughter. If her father wasn’t an elite member of Corista’s ruling Assembly—

But the impact buzzer sounded again, and she snapped her eyes back open.

“Whatever you say, Just Oriannon.” Margus smiled again. “And don’t worry. I’m watching where we’re going.”

Could have fooled me, Ori thought.

Now Margus readjusted his nav-system by passing his index finger across a colored grid screen and tapping in several coordinates from memory. The move doubled their speed and set them on a direct course to Regev, the largest of their world’s three suns. Anything not strapped down, including Ori’s lunch sack, crashed into the back of the small cargo area behind their seats.

“So how about a tour of the Trion?” asked Margus, sounding like a tour guide.

As they picked up even more speed, Ori frowned and twisted the family ring on her finger—the ring with the tiny, brilliant blue corundum stone set in the distinct diamond shape of Saius. As the second largest but most intense of their suns, the real Saius now filled her eyesight even more than it had back on the planet’s surface.

Unfortunately, she could also smell overheating deflectors, like burning rubber. Did he really have to jerk them around so much? This time the impact alarm insisted they veer away from a restricted zone.

“Immediately!” screeched the buzzer voice.

“What’s that all about?” asked Oriannon. Margus silenced it with a tap to the flashing amber screen.

“No problem, Your Highness,” he told her just before they flew straight into a blinding white light and every alarm in the pod went off at once.

“Margus!” Oriannon held a forearm to her face, but that did not help her as they tumbled out of control in a maelstrom of warning lights and screeching alarms. So this was how her life would end? She broke out in a sweat and gagged at the nose-burning smell of fried electronics.

“Do something!” Oriannon cried. She coughed and held on as the inside of the pod warmed to sizzling. In the blinding light she couldn’t even make out Margus sitting next to her.

“Just a sec,” mumbled Margus. And as quickly as the light had overpowered them, it suddenly blinked out, leaving them spinning slowly, silently, and in the dark. A lone alarm buzzed once then died to a pitiful whimper.

“Are you going to tell me what just happened?” Ori slowly lowered her arm and blinked her eyes, but the horrible flash of light and heat still echoed in her eyesight. It would take several moments to get used to normal space light once more. Margus shook his head and tapped at the control panel in front of him, as if he were trying to wake it back up. A few of the dials flickered, but not all.

“Weirdest thing I’ve ever seen.” He looked around and behind them. “I think we got caught between two of those big solar reflectors, and—”

“And what?”

“And, uh, it’s probably a good thing we didn’t stay back there.” He jerked his thumb and tapped the instrument panel once more. “Looks like it cooked us a little.”

A little? Ori swallowed hard, wishing she could just stop this ride and get out right there.

“Look, Margus,” she finally whispered, choking back the bitterness that curled her tongue. “I don’t know what we’re doing here, and my dad’s really going to be upset with us when we land. *If* we land. We’ve got to turn around right now.”

“That’s the one thing we can’t do.” Margus was sweating under his silver flight helmet visor too. “We can’t go back that way. Better just enjoy the view. There’s the Trion, see?”

The Trion — which meant “three lights” in the ancient Coristan tongue — was made up of three suns. Regev, a red giant, never blinked as it cast a perpetual rosy glow over the brightside of Corista. This rosy glow was offset by the white-blue of Saius, a much brighter and more intense flame. Between the two suns, the Brightside of Corista never saw darkness. Heliaan — the smallest, distant yellow sun some people missed — stayed in the background. Together the three suns joined to create the flickering violet hue of the pretty Coristan sky, though it had turned darker the higher they climbed.

But right now Oriannon wasn’t impressed. She peered up through the clear plexi bubble over their heads, the only barrier between them and the cold vacuum of space and the searing light of one of those space mirrors.

“You sure we can’t just go back?” she asked, shaking off her jitters.

“I’ll get us back, Your Highness.” By this time he’d removed a panel and was yanking out circuits. “Just have to override a couple systems, and we’ll be good to go. My dad showed me how to do this once.”

“While you were up here?”

He paused a moment before answering.

“Uh, no. Back in his shop. But it should work.”

So he wrestled with the controls as they bounced from one space mirror to the next, ducking behind them to avoid being fried all over again. Margus touched one wire to another, showering sparks in his lap but firing the ship’s thrusters as they glided — the long way — between the orbits of their home world and eleven other distant moons, all circling the big planet.

“I never knew there were this many of these mirror things up here.” Ori braced for the next deflector bump.

“Must be hundreds of them,” Margus said as he nodded. “I just don’t get what they’re for. There’s something strange about all this.”

Strange wasn’t quite the right word. But all Oriannon could do was look out the window as they dodged the curved mirrors, each one many times bigger than their little pod. She couldn’t pretend to care about the stunning view Margus had promised before they took off on this horrible ride. But if she cared to look, Oriannon would have seen the lush green landscape of Corista below, bathed in the trebly bright light of their three suns.

In fact, if she had cared to, she could recite every detail of the landscape. Sometimes her eidich’s memory came in handy, if she could just put aside all the mental baggage that crowded her brain with bits and details, faces and names, trivia and conversations that would never go away.

The Plains of Izula reminded her of a quilt her grandmother Merta had once showed her, decorated by patchwork fields of grain and orchards of every colored fruit a person could imagine: trees loaded with golden aplon, deep purple pluq, and her favorite, the lip-puckering orange simquats. And when she finally looked down, she couldn’t help catching her breath at the forest green, myrtle green, emerald green, fern and sea green, lime green, moss green, deep cobalt green, viridian-that-matched-her-eyes green, olive, and everything-in-between green. Here it stretched all the way to the horizon, which wasn’t far in this tiny, well-watered garden planet, Corista.

And there! In the Highlands, not far from the boundary between light and dark, was Seramine, perched like a jewel in the jade crown. Seramine, the capital city, her city. Were they finally getting closer? Even at this height she could imagine how the bright windows of grand whitewashed palaces and halls seemed to catch blue and red rays of sun, winking back at her. Did they know she was up here watching?

Once more, they bumped off the back side of another orbiting mirror, sending them spinning into the clear. Oriannon instinctively gripped the handle next to her seat, ready for anything.

“Sorry.” Margus pointed ahead. “But see? I think we’re all clear now.”

“Wonderful.” Maybe she didn’t sound as enthused as he would have liked. “I’m still thinking about what my dad’s going to say.”

“I thought you said he was always too worried about Assembly stuff to pay much attention to you. Is he really going to worry about one little borrowed pod?”

“You don’t know my dad. And the pod—are you sure you can land this thing now?”

She adjusted the headset of her comm and went back to peering out through the hard-shell bubble—just before a new screech of warning alarms pierced the tiny cockpit.

“So it needs a little maintenance.” Margus shrugged and replaced a circuit panel, bringing back the lights while spewing a plume of smoke at her feet. Oriannon could only hold her hands over her head and close her eyes. She hoped it would all just go away, and soon.

But once more the pod jolted and lurched to the side. And as Margus grappled with the controls, they once more spun out of control, falling like a delicate cerulean flower petal through the edge of the atmosphere. Even without looking she could feel the heat radiating from the bubble above their heads, but this time the fabric of her silver coveralls kicked in with coolant that flowed through its built-in blue tubing. If they were going to die in this little pod, at least they would die comfortably.

“I think,” she moaned, trying to ignore the butterflies in her stomach. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“You might want to hold off on that a few minutes, Your Highness.” Besides that infuriating grin of his, he could also sound infuriatingly cocky. Maybe that’s why she liked him, though she’d never admit it. After a few minutes the shuttle spun a final time,

then rocked from side to side like a hammock, before the scream of wind around the cockpit told Oriannon they'd dropped back down into Corista's violet atmosphere.

"Forty-eight thousand clicks," announced Margus, as they swooped ever lower, leaning dangerously to the side. And now he could have almost passed for a Coristan shuttle pilot, instead of a fifteen-year-old impostor who had hijacked the little pod for a silly joyride. "Forty . . . no, wait."

He tapped on a dial with the palm of his hand. That dial wasn't working, either.

"Margus—"

"No worries." Didn't he ever worry about anything? "We don't really need that thing. It's just for show."

"I don't believe you, but listen—"

He looked over at her with his eyebrows arched, waiting for her to finish.

"Thanks." She finally got the word out.

"What, for getting you into trouble or for almost killing you?"

"No." She shook her head. "For not giving up."

He shrugged. "No wor—"

"Don't say it." She interrupted him. But it didn't matter now as they finally slipped into a landing pattern, a lineup of incoming shuttles and pods—each separated by only a few meters and held in place by point-to-point tractor beams. Oriannon wished she could slump just a little lower in her seat so the pilot in the larger shuttle behind them wouldn't recognize her. But she could hear every word that now crackled over the comm line, which seemed to work.

"You're out of order, Bravo One-Nine," came the voice over the comm. That would be the guy in the shuttle. And it sounded just like someone complaining that Margus cut into the lunch line at school.

"Sorry," Margus responded through his own headset. "We've got mechanical problems. Need to touch down right away."

“Stand by,” came the voice again, and a moment later the shadow of the much-larger ship hovered over them, and they felt the lurch of a grappling pad pulling them up.

“Hey, ah . . .” Margus got back on the comm line. “We don’t really need a tow.”

We could have used one a long time ago, thought Oriannon.

“Relax,” the voice told them. “We’ll have you back to port in just a minute.”

Or ten. Either way, Oriannon held her breath until landing thrusters screamed and she felt a comforting *thump* as they finally landed, upside-down, in the midst of Spaceport Corista. While the engines wound down, a beehive of workers in blue coveralls bustled around the ships, attaching power cables and fluid exchangers, rolling up with floating lev-carts full of tools.

“So how do we get out of here without anybody seeing us?” she wondered aloud, raising her voice to be heard over the scream of still more engines.

“Too late for that.” Margus hit the canopy control so it lifted clear with a whoosh of air. “Follow my lead.”

“That’s what got us into trouble in the first place,” Ori mumbled, but she climbed out after Margus, and they hopped down to the tarmac. Her knees buckled for a moment as she readjusted to the planet’s light gravity.

“Coming?” Margus already had a step or two on her as they hustled past dozens of parked shuttles, pods, and cargo ships. They nearly made it to the hangar exit when one of the workers caught up with them.

“You! We didn’t get your flight plan download.” A tall Coristan with typical olive-colored skin and typical sunshades tapped his clipboard. “In fact, looks like you were flying through a restricted area, and I don’t even have an original flight plan for your unit. It’s still in the maintenance pool.”

“I know.” Margus had to crane his neck to look up at the worker. He inched toward the exit as they spoke. “We just had it out to test the systems.”

“You know that’s not how we do things. But, hey—” The worker crossed his arms and looked them over a little more closely. “Aren’t you Supervisor Leek’s kid?”

By this time Oriannon was ready to melt through a crack in the concrete floor.

“Uh . . .” Margus had to be looking for a way out too. “We were on assignment from the Assembly.”

Oh, Margus, she thought, anything but that.

And sure enough, the worker threw his head back and laughed, long and hard.

“Nice try.” He finally stopped laughing long enough to notice Oriannon, and it probably didn’t do any good that she tried to look away. “You’ll come with me to the office, and we’ll . . .”

His voice trailed off, and he stared at Oriannon’s hand. Her ring, actually.

“Like I was saying . . .” Margus tried to explain once more, but this time the wide-eyed worker waved him off.

“I didn’t realize,” he muttered, backing up a step. “Sorry to bother you. You know the way out?”

Margus looked at the guy with an expression that said *Hub?* But Oriannon knew exactly what had just happened. She answered for the both of them.

“We know the way. Thanks.” And she didn’t waste any more time chatting. But a quick glance up at the corner of the huge hangar area told her what she was afraid of: A small, grapefruit-sized security probe hovered like an eye in the sky, its red light telling her that it had not missed a thing. In fact, the small silver sphere had probably recorded every word of their conversation with the maintenance guy.

“That was cool!” whispered Margus as the double doors slid open for them. “What did you do, some kind of mind control?”

She fingered the ring. “Something like that.”

Only problem was, she knew that what had spooked the hangar worker wasn’t going to impress her father.

And the trouble, she told herself, hasn’t even begun.