



*The Owling*

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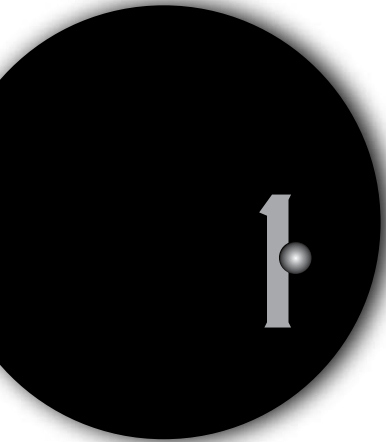
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# 1

**O**riannon jerked awake, jolted by the shuttle's sudden dive and the high-pitched whine of ion boosters. The unseen hand of several *Gs* squeezed her squarely back in the padded seat, and she gasped for breath.

*Where were they?*

Off course, without a doubt, and certainly not heading home. The fifteen-year-old managed a glance out a tiny side viewport, though her eyeballs hurt to focus and her stomach rebelled at the sudden drop. Outside, space appeared cold, dark, and colorless — not the dense, bright violet atmosphere she would have expected to see above irrigated farms and the well-watered surface of Corista, her home planet.

Just across the aisle, her father unstrapped from his grav seat with a grunt, gathered his gold-trimmed ceremonial robe, and struggled down the narrow aisle of the shuttle toward the pilot's compartment. Several passengers screamed as they banked once more, sharply, and the engines whined even more loudly. He seemed to ignore the panic; he put his head down and tumbled the last few feet to the flight deck.

“What’s going on here?” Father always remained polite, even when he was pounding on doors. “I’d like a word with you please.”

The pilot would have to listen to an Assembly elder, one of the twelve most important men in Corista, aside from the Regent himself. But Oriannon’s father kept pounding, and Ori gripped the handle in front of her as they made another tight turn. Light from the three Trion suns blinded her for a moment as it passed through the window and caught her in the face. When she shaded her eyes, she saw something else looming large and close.

“Father?” She tried to get his attention over all the noise. “I know where we are.”

But he only pounded harder, raising his voice above braking thrusters as they came on line. She felt a forward pull as the shuttle engines whined, then seemed to catch. Still they wagged and wobbled, nearly out of control. Outside, a pockmarked asteroid loomed ever larger, while sunlight glittered off a tinted plexidome built into the surface.

From here the dome didn’t seem much larger than Regent Jib Ossek Academy back home, but Oriannon knew it covered what would have been a deep impact crater on the near side of the huge space rock’s surface. This was obviously no planet, only a remote way station called Asylum 4—one of twelve ancient Asylum outposts. Why had their shuttle diverted here?

By this time everyone else on the shuttle must have seen the asteroid out their windows as well. Now it filled each viewport with close-ups of the tortured surface, scarred by thousands of hits from space debris and tiny asteroids. But instead of an announcement over the intercom, shuttle passengers were met only with a strange silence from the flight deck.

“I insist that you—” Oriannon’s father couldn’t finish his demand as he was thrown from his feet by the impact. Oriannon’s forehead nearly hit the back of the seat in front of her. A loud squeal of scraping metal outside told everyone they’d made full contact with Asylum 4’s docking port.

And then only silence, as the engines slowly powered down. Her father rose to his feet, and no one spoke for a long, tense moment. Air rushed through a lock, and they heard the pilot's emergency hatch swing free. Still, the twenty-one passengers could only sit and wait, trapped in their sealed compartment without any word of explanation and without any fresh air. A couple of men rose to their feet and pushed to the front.

"We need to get out of here!" announced one, but Oriannon's father put a stop to it with a raised hand.

"Just be patient," he told them. "I'm certain we'll find out what happened in a moment."

Or two.

Several minutes later they heard footsteps and a shuffling before the main hatch finally swept open and they were met with a rush of cool air—and a curious stare.

"Are you people quite all right?" A small man in the rust-colored frock of a scribe looked nearly as confused as Oriannon felt. "Where's your pilot?"

"We were hoping you would tell *us*." Oriannon's father tried to take charge of the chaos that followed as everyone shouted at once, trying to find answers in a place that only held more questions. Why were they brought here, instead of back to Corista?

"Please!" The scribe held up his hands for silence. He didn't look as if he was used to this much company—or this much shouting—all at once. And how old was he? Oriannon couldn't be sure, though he appeared wrinkled as a dried aplon, and wispy white hair circled his ears as if searching for a way inside. Yet his pleasant green eyes sparkled in an impish, almost pleasant sort of way, and judging by the way his eyes darted from side to side, he seemed to miss nothing.

"I'm very sorry for the confusion," he continued, "but all are welcome here at Asylum Way Station 4. As you probably know, it's the tradition of the Asylum outposts to welcome all visitors. Although I must say . . ."

He glanced at the hatch beside him, where trim along the bottom edge had bent and twisted during the rough landing. The ship's skin, though gouged and damaged, appeared not to have been breached. It could have been worse.

"Whoever piloted your craft here was either in a very great hurry, or perhaps in need of a bit more practice in the art of landing."

No doubt about that. But as her father introduced himself, Oriannon noticed the hatch hydraulics hissing a little too loudly while an odd thumping sound came from inside the craft's wall, weak but steady.

"I'm Cirrus Main," the scribe went on, bowing slightly to her father. "And we're especially honored to greet a member of the Assembly. I cannot recall the last time we enjoyed a visit from an elder, though I should consult our station archives to be sure. There was a day, several generations ago, when—"

"But what about the pilot?" interrupted another passenger, a serious-faced man a bit younger than her father. "Didn't you see him? We didn't fly here ourselves, you know."

The scribe seemed taken aback by their rudeness, blinking in surprise.

"Please pardon my lack of an immediate answer for you," he replied, holding his fingertips together and his lips tight. "Most of us were otherwise occupied in the library when this incident occurred. However, in time I will inquire as to whether your pilot was seen disembarking and attempt to discern his or her disposition."

"The pilot will answer to the Assembly," replied Oriannon's father. "We were returning from a diplomatic mission to the Owl-ing capital on the other side of the planet and on our way back to our capital city of Seramine. We should never have been brought all the way out here."

"Ah, but do not all things work for good to those who are called according to . . ." The scribe forced a shy smile, opened his mouth to say something else, then seemed to change his mind. "But

never mind. Our protocols here on Asylum 4 require us to offer sanctuary to all, you see, no matter the circumstances.”

“Sanctuary?” barked the serious man. “We need some answers, and you’re—”

“As I said.” The scribe raised his hand for peace. “We simply cannot say who brought you here, other than the Maker himself. However, we are quite pleased it appears you’re all unharmed.”

Yes, they were. But then the shouting started all over again, most of it to do with who was to blame for this unscheduled stop, who was going to be late for their appointments, and how soon they’d be able to get home. Finally their host had to raise his hand once more.

“Please let me assure you that despite the apparent confusion of the moment, we will extend every effort to make your stay as comfortable as possible, so that you may return to Seramine in due course. In the meantime, I trust you’ll agree to observe our protocol.”

“Remain silent before the Codex.” Oriannon quoted an obscure, ancient commentary. “And at peace before all.”

“Who said that?” Cirrus Main searched the crowd with a curious expression. She shrank behind another passenger so he wouldn’t see, but couldn’t quite hide her head of tousled black hair.

“My daughter is an eidich,” explained Oriannon’s father, taking his place at the front of the little crowd. “Oriannon remembers everything she reads in the ancient book. Every word.”

That was true most of the time, with certain annoying exceptions over the past several months that no one needed to know about.

“I’m familiar with eidichs,” answered the scribe, raising his eyebrows at Oriannon. She couldn’t really hide. “Although there were once many more than there are today. In fact, when I first came from Asylum 7, years ago, we knew of several . . .”

His voice trailed off as he seemed to put aside the memory with a sad shake of his head.

“I’m sorry.” His face reddened. “You didn’t come here to hear an old man’s stories. But perhaps you’ll find clarity here. That is, after all, the purpose for which this outpost was created. So if you’ll follow me, I would be most pleased to show you the facilities.”

“We do appreciate your hospitality,” said her father, looking around at the group, “but we can only stay a short time, until we get another pilot and the shuttle is prepared to return.”

Oriannon shivered—but not because of the cool, musty air that smelled of far-off worlds, aging dust, and something else she couldn’t quite identify. She followed as Cirrus Main led them through narrow hallways blasted out of rough, iron-stained rock. They walked through a network of prefabricated but obviously ancient modules anchored to the surface of the asteroid at three or four levels. Chalky rust tarnished most of the walls. And through viewports she could see the sheer face of the crater rising up on all sides around them before finally meeting the umbrella of the plexidome above. This place had obviously been constructed generations ago. She craned her neck to see hanging gardens and flowing plants cascading from terraces cut precariously into crater walls. The scent of cerise and flamboyant joined rivulets coursing over small waterfalls as moisture condensed on the inside of the dome. She found it odd to discover the faint perfume of Coristan flowers at such a remote outpost.

“I suppose it’s a bit like living in a greenhouse,” their host admitted, ducking past a stream of spray. “It is an environment, however, to which one becomes accustomed.”

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They paused for a moment to watch a viria bird flitter across the upper expanse inside the dome. Here, under the plexidome and against the cold void of space, the freedom of small fluttering wings appeared strangely out of place.

“Remain close behind me, please,” he told them. “Our environment is rather fragile, as I’m sure you can appreciate.”

By now Oriannon had made her way to the front of the group, where she could hear everything Cirrus Main told them about the

water recycling system and the gardens, and the delicate balance of work and study that made their home livable. Here and there other residents, each one dressed in red work coveralls, quietly tended the gardens, harvesting fruit and adjusting irrigation controls. None seemed to notice that this group had been brought here under strange circumstances, or even that they had been brought here at all. Oriannon saw a young face staring at them from the far end of the dome, but the little girl ducked out of sight behind a humming generator.

“Some of us have families here.” Cirrus Main must have noticed the little girl as well. But he didn’t stop as he led them up a stairway, through a set of noisy airlocks, and finally back into a large, high-ceilinged room where ten or twelve other red-frocked scribes sat at tables, leaning close to each other in animated discussions. Here the polished stone floor contrasted with the worn look of the rest of the station, while the dark pluqwood trim and carefully inlaid ceiling of planets and stars in copper and stone suggested a different type of room. Certainly it looked less utilitarian than the rest. Cirrus gestured at a wall filled with shelves.

“Our library.” He crossed his arms with obvious satisfaction and lowered his voice, as if they had entered a holy place. Oriannon carefully picked up a leather-backed volume from a stack on a nearby stone table. “Mainly theological, but also a bit of the fine arts,” he said. “Some of Corista’s finest ancient philosophers, Rainott, Ornix . . . You know them?”

Of course she did—at least every word that had ever been digitally transcribed. Oriannon nodded as she riffed through the pages, sensing something entirely different among them. Here the carefully inscribed words came alive in a way that the ones in her e-books never could. Each page appeared hand printed, in a script that flowed carefully across each line with a sort of measured serendipity. Here a real person with hopes and dreams had actually written the words on a page—laboriously, lovingly, one letter at a time. Some of the pages even showed flourishes and highlights,

making the book more a work of art than merely a collection of thoughts.

“I’ve never . . .” She held back a sneeze. “. . . seen so many old books in one place. Back home they’re all under glass.”

“Like everyone else,” he told her, slipping the book from her hands and holding it up for the others to see. “You’re accustomed to words in their digital form. Here we study the Codex as it was first recorded—in books and on pages, scribed by hand many generations ago, in a day when we still had calligraphers among us. They brought us words from the Maker’s heart, straight to the page.”

He sighed deeply as a couple of the other passengers stood off at a distance, arms crossed and muttering something about how old books weren’t going to help get them off this rock. But he smiled again as he lovingly smoothed a page before returning the book to its place on the table.

“We seek the Maker in these pages,” he said, closing his eyes and rocking back on his heels. He paused as if actually praying. “Sometimes, if we’re very quiet, we can hear his whisper.”

In the books? Oriannon thought she might hear such a whisper too, as she listened to water tinkling from outside and the gentle murmur of scribes discussing their wondrous, ancient volumes. In fact she could have stayed there much longer, but their silence was interrupted by hurried footsteps as a younger scribe burst into the room and whispered something obviously urgent in Cirrus Main’s ear. The older man’s face clouded only a moment before a peaceful calm returned.

“Your pilot seems to have been found,” he told them. “Locked inside a storage compartment in your shuttle. We have yet no idea how he came to be there, only that one of our maintenance people located him.”

“Alive?” asked Oriannon. She shuddered at the thought.

“Oh, I’m alive, all right.”

Oriannon and the others turned to see the Coristan shuttle pilot in his cerulean blue coveralls standing at the entry through which they'd just stepped. He rubbed the back of his neck.

“But I'll tell you something,” he added, his voice booming through the library. All the scribes froze at their seats. “When I find the Owling who hijacked us, he's going to wish he'd stayed on his side of the planet.”





## 2

Oriannon had no idea how so many black-suited securities made it to Asylum 4 so quickly, all the way from Corista. In any case, within minutes they had docked their ships and swarmed through every passage and study room of the little way station. Their round, black security probes filled the air as well. Each probe, the size of a small head, flew around illuminating corners and under tables, checking for signs of its prey.

Meanwhile the scribes stood with their opened books, looking as if a horrible flood had overtaken the peace of their home and they had no idea how to make it go away.

Oriannon ducked into a corner as another probe flew by at shoulder height, and she shivered. By the way they flew, she knew these probes were different from the irritating, but mostly harmless, mechanical sentries that for years had harassed her in school, checking hall passes and keeping track of schedules. Or even those on the streets of Seramine, conducting routine security checks and announcing special prices at local cafés. She assumed these probes were similarly enhanced with an animal's eyeball plugged into a titanium socket in the side of the biomechanical hybrid. That part looked the same, at least. She just wondered how the aggressive new