

We want to hear from you. Please send your comments about this book to us in care of zreview@zondervan.com. Thank you.

ZONDERVAN

Beyond Corista

Copyright © 2009 by Robert Elmer

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, *Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Elmer, Robert.

Beyond Corista / by Robert Elmer.

p. cm. — (The shadowside trilogy ; bk. 3)

Summary: When, after an arduous journey, fifteen-year-old Oriannon and her blinded enemy Sola are brought to the Gamma project as condemned prisoners, Oriannon has little left but her faith, courage, and the Pilot Stone given to her by her mentor, Jesmet.

ISBN 978-0-310-71423-1 (softcover)

[1. Good and evil—Fiction. 2. Christian life—Fiction. 3. Science fiction.] I.

Title.

PZ7.E4794Bdw 2009

[Fic]—dc22

2008045534

Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite #200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920. www.alivecommunications.com

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

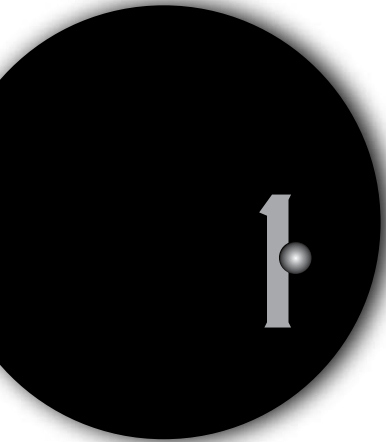
Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers printed in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Interior design by Michelle Espinoza

Printed in the United States of America

09 10 11 12 13 • 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



1

What’s going on?” Just after the impact, fifteen-year-old Oriannon Hightower of Nyssa pulled herself hand over hand out of the back room of the shuttle, making her way forward to where her friend Margus Leek had been thrown to the floor in the control room. Eye-watering black smoke made her choke on her words and gasp for breath before a burst of chilling argonite gas snuffed the fire out.

“Did we hit a mine?” she asked.

Their spacecraft shuddered and tipped to the side. Gravity stabilizers must have taken a hit.

“You mean, you don’t know?” came a low, mocking voice from the back of the control room. Huddled in the corner, a defiant Sola Minnik waved her arms for balance as an even larger explosion ripped through the underbelly of the craft and the overhead lights flickered out. The darkness made no difference to a blind woman, however.

Oriannon ignored Sola’s question and glanced up at the Pilot Stone—which still glowed a faint gold and blue from its place next to the directional displays. The array of multicolored screens still

glowed steady as well, taking their coordinates from the Stone. Or so Oriannon assumed.

“Ori!” their Owling friend, Wist, shouted from the darkness of the passenger area. “You guys okay up there?”

“Um . . .” Oriannon gripped a handhold to keep from being thrown about. “Can’t say for sure.”

Oriannon couldn’t be certain if their craft might explode at any instant, or if they’d been less fatally wounded. She flinched at the sound of grinding and twisting metal all around them; the smack and shudder of raw impacts as something hard hit the outer skin of their craft—three, four, then five times. The engines shrieked in protest, and she felt their forward momentum slow, then come to a complete stop with a rude jerk. Margus struggled back up to his chair, holding his forehead.

“What’s happening now?” asked Oriannon, rushing to help him.

“It’s like a huge hand just closed around us.” Margus pointed at zeros on a screen that normally marked their forward speed. “I don’t know how, but we’re being pulled backward!”

Never a whiner, Margus ignored the blood trickling from a gash above his eye, focusing on the ship. He throttled back so the ship lurched and they leaned to the other side. If anyone could pilot them through this, he could, though his signature grin had long since disappeared.

“Backward?” Wist struggled forward to join them as the ship jostled from side to side like a hooked fish that knows it’s going to die. But looking out the forward viewports revealed nothing except the emptiness of space. Then slowly, the nose section of a dark, silver-black Coristan Security cruiser pulled into view. It might have blended into the blackness if its windows had not been brightly lit from within. Oriannon groaned.

As emergency lights flickered on, she wondered how long they had left before this escape was all over—before they were dragged back to Corista to be executed as rebels and insurgents.

“They’re all around us,” reported Margus. “Five cruisers. They’ve caught up.”

“But how?” Wist looked around the control room as if black-suited securities might step in through the skin of the shuttle. Another metal-on-metal impact shook them nearly off their feet, and Oriannon worried about her father resting in one of the two tiny passenger cabins aft of the control room. Margus checked his instruments once again.

“Grappling hooks.” He didn’t need to yell. “They’re using grappling hooks!”

That would explain the grinding noises as large metal hooks burrowed their way more deeply into the ship’s outer skins. Since the hooks had certainly been fired from several of the Coristan Security vessels at once, there would be no way to shake free.

“Ah, I see they’ve finally arrived. Have they?” Sola smiled as she felt her way forward, turning her head each time a new hook penetrated their hull with a sickening shudder. Even if the shuttle was built with multiple skins and air locks in between, they could not survive this kind of brutal attack for long. From her own twisted perspective, Sola had reason to smile.

However, that didn’t mean she was easy to look at. The woman’s eyebrows and eyelashes had been singed completely away, while her once full head of red hair had been reduced to ugly, twisted wisps here and there. Worse yet, her face looked as if someone had blackened it with a blowtorch, while angry red blisters rose across her nose and cheekbones, framing sightless eyes still wet with rheumy, coagulated tears. It could have been worse, considering the flash bomb that had blown up in her face only hours before back on Corista. In an instant, she had gone from someone who prided herself on her well-kept good looks to a snarling, helpless apparition.

Now Sola blindly reached out and grabbed Oriannon by the collar of her tunic. “You didn’t answer,” hissed Sola.

“Let me go!” Oriannon tried to pull away, but she literally had nowhere to escape. Maybe it didn’t make any difference if they reached the way station ahead of the pursuing Security vessels. Maybe it was better to end this way.

“Why don’t you just enjoy what little time you have left?” Sola challenged her again. “Have a snack. I’ve stocked plenty of supplies. A cup of clemsonroot tea?”

“Why don’t you shut up!” Margus yelled in her direction. “Why don’t you just keep your mouth shut and mind your own business!”

“Oh, but that’s just it.” She returned another crooked smile in the direction of his heated voice. “This *is* my business, just like this is my shuttle. My beautiful shuttle.”

“You stole it,” answered Oriannon. “It belonged to the Assembly.”

Oriannon couldn’t think of anyone she wanted on this “borrowed” interlunar shuttle less than Sola Minnik, who had served as the former Security advisor to the Ruling Elders of Corista before promoting herself to First Citizen. Or, dictator, to put it bluntly. Why would anyone want to travel with the fiery woman who had deceived and then nearly killed Oriannon’s father—and probably all six of the other elders as well?

“I’m very sorry you feel that way, Oriannon.” Sola’s sarcasm dripped through her words. “There’s so much you don’t know.”

Oriannon didn’t answer. Oh, Sola was probably sorry, all right. Sorry they had caught up with her and destroyed the death camp, where hundreds and thousands of the Owling people (Wist included) had been imprisoned while being prepped for forced labor all over the planet. Sorry the Owlings had escaped. After all the work Sola and her Security forces had put into setting up the camp, she would naturally be very sorry about that.

Sola might also be sorry they’d saved her life by pulling her into the shuttle as they took off from the chaos of the camp, probes blowing up around them. She would be sorry they’d had to escape

in the same luxury craft Sola had once used to travel around the planet.

But most of all she would be very sorry the flash bomb had exploded in her face, blinding her completely and instantly. Yes, she would be very sorry about that.

“Dear Oriannon.” Now Sola shook her head. “You simply have no way of understanding. Neither does your common friend, Margus. And besides, who’s left of the Assembly, aside from your father?”

“Because you killed them all!” Margus yelled at her again. “You had no right!”

“But that’s just it. I do indeed. That’s exactly why we’ve been pursued all the way from Corista, and that’s why this little game is going to end in my favor. Because it’s my right to decide what happens next for Corista, and it always was.”

By this time, Wist stepped forward to face their unwelcome passenger, and the short-statured girl tried to push Sola away. “You be leaving her alone!”

“How noble of you to defend your friend.” Sola finally released her grip on Oriannon but didn’t move away. “And you know, I should thank you for saving my life back there on the planet. Quite unexpected. I did get a good look at your lovely Owling face, by the way, before the explosion. I’ve always admired your people’s distinct eyes and that wonderful olive tan of yours. But then, you’re probably already regretting what you did for me, aren’t you?”

“Are you being okay, Oriannon?” asked Wist. Oriannon didn’t know what to say as Sola went on with her tirade.

“In fact, by this time you’re probably thinking, *I should have just let that red-haired monster drop off the side of the shuttle back when we had a chance.* Isn’t that what you’re thinking, sweetheart? Well, it’s a little late for that. Even if you dumped me now, you still can’t get away, and I imagine that must be a lovely, sinking feeling.”

Her laugh cut short just as a bright flood of light suddenly illuminated them from outside, and a tremendous shockwave knocked them sideways. At first Oriannon thought the light came from one of the Coristan vessels.

A moment later, she knew this was no searchlight and not from any other vessel. This light shone bright as any sun in the Trion system, and Oriannon had to turn away as it poured in through the observation window.

“What in the world?” Wist cried as she shielded her eyes. Margus ducked his head to the side. Even Sola would most certainly feel the overpowering force that had gripped them.

Now their ship trembled as if caught in an awful, confused tide, much stronger than before. One of the Coristan ships scraped past them in front of the observation ports before tumbling away like a stray toy. That couldn’t be right.

Neither were the powerful explosions that rocked them. Oriannon wondered how they had not yet been shredded or destroyed. Then something else exploded inside their own ship. The ship yanked and spun as if someone was pulling all the grappling hooks into a tangled ball, while shockwaves from a firestorm of explosions rocked their world, pummeling them from outside.

This would certainly finish them off, Oriannon knew, and she whispered a last word to the Maker as she gripped the back of Margus’s chair to keep her balance.

“If this is what you will,” she whispered, falling to her knees and bracing herself, “then I’m your servant.”

12

She squeezed her eyes shut, fully expecting to open them up and see her Maker, or perhaps even the Maker’s Song, Jesmet, standing before her. She wondered if it would hurt to die. She hoped not.

Only her ears hurt. Every warning buzzer on the ship sounded at the same time, screeching an unholy symphony to rattle her eardrums.

“Please, no!” She held her ears and peeked through tears to see her first view of heaven, which looked surprisingly the same as the

control room of the interlunar shuttle in which they had been riding. She gagged on a toxic blend of smoke and sickly sweet argonite gas.

I'm still alive? she wondered, unsure whether she should be relieved or terrified, or if she could be both at the same time. A quick glance confirmed that if she was *not* alive, then Sola Minnik had come with her. That was not a good development. She ducked her head, searching for air to breathe closer to the floor.

“Ori!” Margus shouted through the confusion. Beads of sweat lined his bruised forehead as he struggled with his controls. He must have been doing everything he could to control their craft, pushing buttons and pulling up star charts on his viewers. “I need help with this!”

Though Oriannon had no idea what to do, she swallowed her terror and worked her way around the chair. The shuttle writhed and turned, buffeted about like an insect swatted by an unseen hand. Artificial grav came and went, pulling them in all directions.

Together they managed to silence the alarms, though that should have had no direct effect on their survival. But as the alarms quieted, so did the rough ride and the explosions.

“Is everybody okay?” asked Oriannon, after several long moments. By “everybody,” she mainly meant Wist, who nodded slightly. Sola had slithered off to her spot in the corner, while Margus kept himself glued to the shuttle controls.

“Look at this,” he told them. “Asylum Way Station 1 was there on the screen just a minute ago—before all this—and now it’s not there. No station, no Coristan ships . . . nothing!”

“You sure your sensors are working?” Oriannon shaded her eyes as she gazed out the viewport. For a moment longer they could see nothing but that brilliant white light. Then solar filters finally kicked in and shaded the window. “There has to be something. The Securities?”

“Just debris,” he answered, looking for himself, “and that crazy bright light. It doesn’t show up on the scans. But the ships are gone for sure, and so is the asylum station. Very weird.”

Oriannon wasn't sure what he was saying. Gone? Where would they have gone all of a sudden? But as quickly as the bright light appeared, it faded, flickering one last time in the distance like a sideways bolt of lightning, leaving them alone and drifting in the cold expanse of space—as if nothing had happened.

“It can't be *gone*.” Wist pressed her nose against the viewport as the grav field kicked in again, only several degrees crooked this time. “Like I said,” Margus replied. “That was weird. Very weird.”

Weird, yes. But that didn't explain what had just happened to them, or why.

“Maybe it was some kind of black hole,” suggested Wist.

“Only it wasn't dark,” added Oriannon. “It was light.”

None of this made any sense.

With the shaking seemingly over, Oriannon hurried back to check on her father, finding him still unconscious and tied into his bunk. He'd missed all the excitement, which was a good thing. She returned to the control room.

Meanwhile, Margus rested his cheek in his hand as if trying to figure it all out. “The thing is,” he said, “if that . . . that light—whatever it was—did something to the asylum station, it took five big Coristan Security ships with it.”

“Only not us,” added Wist.

“That's what I don't get.” Margus scratched his head, and green light from the primary nav screen made his face glow as he leaned closer. “They had ten or fifteen grappling hooks in us, and we're the ones who got left behind. We should have been dragged away with everything else.”

Maybe so. But when Oriannon looked at the Pilot Stone, still glowing in its place near the main control panel, she thought she had a clue.

“We're moving again,” she said. “Aren't we?”

Margus raised his eyebrows when he noticed a new set of numbers changing by the second on velocity gauges.

“After all that.” He whistled in disbelief. “I’m amazed we’re moving at all.”

“And let me guess.” Oriannon didn’t even need to look at the nav screens—just the Pilot Stone. “We’re headed to the next asylum station instead?”

It took Margus a moment to confirm his numbers, and he checked several screens to be sure, but finally he squinted at Oriannon.

“Asylum 2. Looks like it. I’d ask how you knew, but I have a feeling it has to do with that Stone of yours.”

He didn’t really need an answer.

“Anyway,” Margus continued, “we’re pretty beat up. So if we want to go anywhere else, it’s going to take awhile, and we’ll need to do some patching. Looks like point two five is as fast as we’re going to go—quarter-speed.”

Wist pointed to a monitor, cocking her head to the side.

“What’s that?” she asked.

A view cam trained on the outer tail section revealed shredded chunks of titanium outer skin, gaping holes, and miscellaneous pieces of hardware peeling away.

“Oh no.” Margus groaned, bringing the focus up a little and panning the cam around to show ten sharp grappling hooks still partly embedded in the outer skin. Several hooks still trailed hundreds of meters of braided cable, strangely frayed at the ends. If wind existed in space, the cables would have been flapping like flags.

“Just be telling us what to do,” said Wist.

For the next several hours the three of them shut off systems and made repairs as best they could. While Margus rerouted power and electronics from dead systems to backups, Oriannon checked for hull breaches with a handheld meter and Wist fetched tools and equipment from storage cabinets. Through all this, Sola seemed to have fallen asleep in the corner.

Margus inchwormed out from under a control cabinet with a grunt. “Duct tape.” He held up a roll. “Don’t leave home without it.”

Oriannon couldn’t help smiling, despite the danger that clung to them. No, the situation did not look promising, and she knew very well they might not make it to Asylum 2 in one piece. Margus couldn’t duct tape all the gaping holes in the skin of their craft, and what systems remained online couldn’t be trusted. He tapped at the deep amber warning light of an atmosphere monitor and frowned.

“Not good?” asked Oriannon.

He shook his head. “Looks like we’re leaking life support air faster than onboard generators can produce it.”

“It’s still going to be okay, though,” Wist said hopefully. “Right? We’ll be fixing it somehow.”

“You go right on believing that, dear.” Sola called over to them, her eyes still closed. “I can hear every word you’re saying, by the way.”

“Then you can hear this.” Oriannon lowered her voice to a near-whisper. “Jesmet cares about what happens to you, no matter what you do. Even if I don’t. Even if you never see the gardens of Seramine again or the way the Rift Valley sparkles in the sunlight or the orange flowers of a flamboyant tree. Even if you never look up into the sky again and see the Trion with your own eyes. Even then, Sola, he cares.”

Oriannon felt a twinge of guilt for reminding Sola of her blindness in a way she would never have done to a friend. But if it did some good, maybe it was okay to rub that kind of salt in this pitiful woman’s wounds.

Sola just grunted and brushed the sleeve of her dirty green tunic to her cheek as she stepped out of the room and felt her way aft to the second of the two small sleeping rooms. She kept her face pointed away from them, perhaps to shield the tears . . . or not.

“I think she’s had enough of our company for now,” said Margus.

“Or maybe she doesn’t like where we’re going.” Oriannon checked the nav screen to make sure they were still headed for Asylum 2 and glanced at the Pilot Stone as it glowed. She wondered if it would really guide them all the way.

Margus tapped the atmosphere monitor again and frowned, but said nothing.

Wist straightened up with a hopeful smile. “Maybe when we be making it to Asylum 2,” she told them, “they’ll be explaining to us what just happened.”

When, not if.

She is the optimist, thought Oriannon, ripping off a piece of duct tape to patch a run of wiring back into place. She tried not to keep staring at the rapidly declining numbers on the atmosphere monitor, even as she tried not to wonder what would happen if more Coristan ships took up the chase.

When, not if.