



# 1 VOYAGERS

## PROJECT ALPHA


**D. J. MacHale**

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## To all the loyal members of The Little Click Club

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# 1

## Dark.

Pitch-dark.

The kind where you can't tell if you're next to a thousand other people, standing totally alone . . .

. . . or about to step off a cliff.

"We should stay close," Dash Conroy said, his voice echoing in the vast empty space.

"I'm fine on my own," Anna Turner replied curtly.

Anna wasn't about to show weakness or fear, especially not in front of Dash. There was too much at stake. This was a competition she was determined to win.

"We can help each other," Dash argued. "At least until we figure out what the real challenge is."

Their assignment was clear: retrieve the golden flag. Whoever got it first would be the winner. Simple, except navigating their way through the darkness wasn't their only task. Something else would be waiting for them. An obstacle. A puzzle. A test.

Danger was out there. They both knew it.

They just couldn't see it.

“I’m gonna shuffle ahead slowly,” Dash said. “If I hit something, I’ll let you know.”

“If you hit something, I’ll hear it,” Anna shot back.

Walking into the unknown had Dash’s stomach in a knot. There was no way to know if there was a hundred yards of nothing between him and the golden flag or if he was inches away from something sharp waiting to skewer him.

“Are you behind me?” Dash asked, trying not to let his voice crack with tension.

“Why? You nervous?” Anna asked coyly. “Maybe you should sit this one out.”

“No, I’m okay— Ow!”

Dash pulled his hands back quickly.

“What is it?” Anna asked anxiously.

“I hit something.” He tentatively put his hands out to discover a smooth, flat surface. “It feels like a tall desk. There’s a flat top and . . . uh-oh.”

“What?” Anna asked.

“I think it’s a control panel,” Dash said with growing excitement. “This could be how to turn the lights on.”

“No!” Anna screamed in Dash’s ear, making him jump with surprise.

“Whoa! Why not?”

“What if it’s a trap? Those switches could electrify the floor. Or open up a canyon we can’t jump over. Or—”

“Or it could turn on the lights,” Dash said calmly. “If something’s out there, we have to see it.”

Dash put one finger on each of the switches and flipped them.





Instantly, powerful overhead lights kicked on, illuminating the giant space to reveal they were inside a massive, eight-story-high white tent. Dash was right. Turning on the lights allowed them to see what was out there.

It was a fifty-foot-tall dinosaur with a long snout filled with multiple rows of teeth. Sharp teeth.

The two stood looking up at the beast in wide-eyed, stunned amazement.

“Oh, that’s not good,” Anna said, dumbfounded.

The monster reared back and let out a chilling bellow that shook the overhead lighting grid.

“Move!” Dash yelled, and pushed her behind a pile of wooden crates next to the control panel.

“I told you not to flip those switches,” Anna said in a strained whisper.

“Seriously?” Dash whispered back. “You’d rather we just walked into that thing?”

“It’s a dinosaur! Why is there a dinosaur?”

Dash peered around the edge of the crates to see the behemoth clawing at the floor with its huge, birdlike feet, scraping the surface with lethal talons. It stood in the center of the giant tent, thirty yards away, twisting its head one way and then the other like a curious dog that just heard a strange sound.

“What’s it doing?” Anna whispered.

“It seems bothered,” Dash replied.

Dash raised his hand. Strapped to his wrist was a wide, flexible band that held a small, flat computer monitor. His fingers moved quickly over the soft touch pad that covered most



of his forearm until an image appeared on the small screen. It was an exact drawing of the creature.

“That’s it!” Anna said, staring at the image over Dash’s shoulder.

“It’s a Raptogon,” Dash said, reading the info. “It eats meat.”

“Of course it does.”

“It’s got a superior sense of smell and can run up to thirty miles an hour,” Dash read. “But it has poor peripheral vision and is ultra sensitive to bright light.”

The Raptogon let out another bellow. Dash stole a quick peek to see that the animal was bobbing its head and chuffing angrily.

“What’s happening?” Anna asked.

“I think the lights are bothering it.”

“Perfect,” Anna said sarcastically. “An angry carnivorous monster.”

Dash scanned the rest of the vast space, calculating their next move. There were random stacks of wooden crates scattered throughout the tent, which could be used to hide behind, but running from one to the next would leave them exposed to the predator. On the far side of the huge tent, nearly a hundred yards away, was a raised platform with the golden flag hanging from a pole. That was the target. Whichever of them got to it first would win the challenge.

“There’s a locker,” Dash said, pointing.

Anna looked to see a coffin-sized container lying flat, twenty yards to their right.

“They must have put something in there to help us,” Dash said. “Like a weapon.”



“Man, that thing’s big,” Anna said, staring at the fidgety creature.

They both sat back behind the crates.

“We can’t outrun it,” Dash said. “But maybe it can be distracted. Let’s work together.”

“No,” Anna said sharply. “This is a contest.”

“It’s about getting that flag,” Dash shot back. “I don’t think either of us can do that alone.”

Anna stared straight into Dash’s eyes, calculating her next move.

“All right,” she said flatly. “But I don’t take orders from anybody.”

“I won’t give you any. I just want to get the flag and not get eaten in the—”

A dark shadow slipped over them, blocking out the light. They both slowly looked up to see the head of the Raptogon looming above them.

Dash instantly scrambled backward, knocking over the crates that had been their screen. The wooden boxes tumbled like dice at the feet of the dinosaur, forcing the beast to dance out of the way.

Anna was already up and running for the locker. Dash scrambled to his feet and was right after her. Anna got there first, threw it open, and peered inside.

“Nothing!” she exclaimed. “No weapons.”

Dash arrived and looked inside. “No, this is good!” he exclaimed.

Inside were two high-powered flashlights with six-inch lenses.

“It’s sensitive to light,” he added, breathless. He grabbed



both and handed one to Anna. “We’ll hit its eyes from both sides. Whichever way it turns, it’ll be blinded and we can work our way to the flag.”

Anna looked back to the Raptogon. It had regained its balance and was scanning for them.

“You sure about this?” she said, showing a rare hint of uncertainty.

“Yes,” Dash replied calmly. “It has bad lateral movement, so keep moving to the side.”

The Raptogon zeroed in on the two, shrieked, and charged. Its massive claws pounded the floor as it stormed toward its prey.

Dash quickly pressed the button on his flashlight and a powerful beam of white light shot out.

“I’ll go left; you go right,” Dash said, and darted away.

The Raptogon bared its teeth. Somebody was about to get chewed.

Dash hit it in the face with the light beam.

The monster immediately stopped and let out a hideous screech that made the hair on Dash’s neck stand up.

“Hit it!” Dash screamed to Anna.

Anna turned on her flashlight and aimed it at the Raptogon’s face.

The massive creature snapped its head from side to side as if trying to shake off the painful light.

“It’s working!” Dash exclaimed. “Keep moving to the side.”

Dash moved laterally, doing his best to keep the light focused on the Raptogon’s sensitive eyes.

The beast pounded at the ground in pain and anger, and charged for Dash.





“Stay on it!” Dash commanded.

Dash had to run for his life. The Raptogon was fighting through the pain to get to its tormentor. It shrieked. It snarled. It shook its head in anguish, but it kept coming.

“Help!” Dash screamed. “Anna! Keep the light on it!”

The beast would not be denied. Dash tried desperately to move out of the charging monster’s path, but he was running out of room. The dinosaur had him cornered. Dash banged into a stack of crates, knocking them down and then tripping over the tumbling boxes. He couldn’t keep the flashlight steady, and the monster knew it. Again it bared its teeth, sensing the kill.

Dash fell flat on his back. He kicked at the boxes, hoping they might slow the beast down.

They didn’t.

He was trapped.

“Anna!” Dash yelled in desperation.

The monster screamed, opened its mouth, lunged at Dash . . .

. . . and vanished.

Dash was left cowering in the corner with his arms over his head for protection.

A harsh horn sounded, signaling the end of the competition.

The Raptogon was a hologram. It may have seemed authentic, but there was never any real danger.

A cheer went up, followed by applause.

Dash slowly lowered his arms to see a group of kids observing the competition from a catwalk high above the floor. Several of them cheered and clapped. Others watched silently. Standing



with them was an adult man who was surveying the scene with his hands on his hips.

“We have a winner!” he announced, his amplified words booming through the cavernous space.

Dash wasn’t sure what he meant. How could there have been a winner? They had failed miserably and were nearly eaten.

That’s when the truth hit him.

He looked to the platform on the far side of the tent to see Anna standing on top, waving the golden flag in triumph.

It was a harsh lesson. He had to be careful about who to trust. It was a mistake he vowed not to make again. That is, as long as he wasn’t knocked out of the competition for having lost the golden flag.

Not all of them could win the ultimate prize. The odds had been against Dash from the beginning, but that didn’t stop him from giving it a shot.

Project Alpha meant too much.

To him.

To his family.

And to the future of the entire world.

