

OMEGA RISING

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

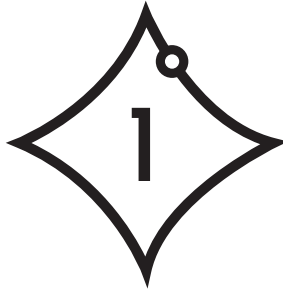
ISBN 978-0-385-38664-7 (trade) — ISBN 978-0-385-38666-1 (lib. bdg.) — ISBN 978-0-385-38665-4 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

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Ship's log 12.12

[Alpha team member: Dash Conroy]

[Comm link: audio feed, *Cloud Cat*]

*This is Dash Conroy, leader of the Voyagers Alpha team.
Everything that could have gone wrong did go wrong.
We're lucky to be alive.*

[A seven-second break in the message occurs here.]

*We are currently missing one member of our team.
The situation on the surface is too unstable for reentry.
I'm on the deck of the Cloud Cat, staring down at a
tornado churning the watery surface of Aqua Gen.*

[A four-second break in the message occurs here.]

*If I can't bring our teammate back, I will resign my post
effective immediately.*

[End of transmission]

26 Hours Earlier.

The flight deck of the *Cloud Leopard* was buzzing with ZRKs as Carly Diamond moved closer to the curved forward window. They'd only been out of Gamma Speed for a few hours, and the ZRKs were busy testing every system on the ship for possible damages. Carly stared down at the liquid surface of a planet, shimmering in the light of a sun not her own.

“Now that’s what I call an ocean,” she said, shaking her head with amazement. “It’s a planet-sized water ball.”

Gabriel Parker and Piper Williams came up beside her.

“I knew I should have packed my fishing gear,” Gabriel said. “I’d love to hook into whatever’s lurking around down there.”

Piper glanced back and forth at the sides of her air chair and felt it wobble slightly, reacting to her movements. “I can’t swim,” she observed. “Unless this contraption has a setting I don’t know about.”

Dash was checking his MTB—Mobile Tech Band—where a message from Chris had just arrived: *Planetary briefing on the main bridge in two minutes. I’ll be right there.*

Dash looked up and locked eyes with Piper. He knew he had to handle the situation delicately.

“Aqua Gen is completely covered in water. And it’s deep,” Dash said. “Deeper than our deepest oceans on



Earth.” He shook his head for effect. “The extraction team will almost certainly have to be in the water at some point.”

Piper’s eyes narrowed, and her jaw tightened. He knew that look of determination. “Not that you couldn’t handle it,” Dash rushed to say. “But there’s no sense putting anyone at unnecessary risk if we don’t have to.”

This seemed to resonate with Piper. A little.

STEAM 6000 made a few beeping sounds, like his electronic brains were calculating a big problem, and he started reeling off statistics in his tinny voice.

“Combined scoring in the submarine and watercraft training resulted in the following data: Gabriel—mission-ready. Carly—mission-ready. Dash—ninety-one percent mission-ready. Piper—”

“Don’t say it,” Piper interrupted. She moved her air chair a few feet over everyone’s heads and flew in an aggressive circle. Sometimes it was how she cooled off.

“She can really fly that thing,” Carly said.



“Impressive, yes sir!” STEAM 6000 said. “Piper—sixty-seven percent mission-ready.”

Dash shook his head and stared at the floor. “STEAM, you’re killing me here.”

Piper hovered within an inch of STEAM’s head and glared at him. “I could do it if I had to. The water just freaks me out, is all. I can’t help feeling like I’m going to drown.”


“Totally understandable,” Dash offered.





“We got this one,” Gabriel added. He cracked his knuckles for good measure. “I am so ready to ride those watercraft. Let’s do this!”

Dash was equally concerned and excited by Gabriel’s self-assurance. He could always count on Gabriel to throw himself into challenges with everything he had. But Gabriel was a big risk taker. And with a small crew literally light-years from Earth, risk was something Dash could only accept in small doses.



Chris arrived on deck, holding a tablet in one hand. He tapped out a few commands and set the tablet down on the floor. A hologram of a watery planet appeared in the middle of the group. “Aqua Gen. It’s like nothing we’ve seen so far. It will be dangerous.”

“I like what I’m hearing,” Gabriel said. “The whole planet is poisonous water, right? No, wait—the Loch Ness monster is down there, only he’s bigger than Godzilla. He’s like a building with claws and teeth!”

“Gabriel, please,” Dash said.

“Sorry,” Gabriel said, but he couldn’t help himself. “You know what a water planet has to have? Pirates! No, wait, *zombie* pirates!”

Carly punched Gabriel in the shoulder. “Zombie pirates,” she echoed, rolling her eyes.

Dash smiled. “Carly, stop hitting the other crew members.”

Chris put a hand out and spun the holographic globe, a grave look on his face: “Gabriel, you’re more right than you know.”

Piper drifted in closer. STEAM whirled to life and rolled closer too. Gabriel leaned in.

“I gotta know,” Gabriel said. “Is it pirates or monsters or both?”

And with that, Chris began the briefing for a perilous journey into the sea of Aqua Gen.

“Okay, so that’s more messed up than I was expecting,” Gabriel said.

Chris had finished most of the briefing when he was interrupted by a beep from his MTB. He checked the message, then picked up the tablet. The hologram of Aqua Gen vanished. “A team of ZRKs is having trouble with the *Cloud Cat* landing gear repair. I’ll see to it while you discuss the rest of the plan.”

With a nod, Chris handed the tablet to Dash and headed for the *Cloud Cat*.

“Are these Thermites really twenty feet long?” Carly asked.

“The fully grown ones are, yeah,” Dash confirmed, scrolling through planetary data on the screen.

“And they’re like a snake, only they’ve got suction cups like an octopus and inside those are tons of little teeth?” Piper asked.

“That’s correct,” Dash said matter-of-factly. He tapped the tablet screen a few more times, searching for information. “There are approximately six million of them down there, give or take. But they’re slow and easy



to track. They travel in schools of several thousand, so we can spot them from far away. Shouldn't be a problem."

"It sounds like a problem to me," Carly said.

Dash was determined to downplay the dangers they would encounter on Aqua Gen, because the reality was far too frightening. He kept his voice calm and assured.

"Moving on to Predator Z," Dash said. "They travel alone, so that's good. Data confirms they look and act like a giant prehistoric alligator. A fully grown Predator Z runs about sixty feet. They're kind of fast. And hungry. These we really need to avoid."

"How many are down there?" Gabriel asked.

STEAM made a few beeping sounds. "More than eight thousand, less than one million."

Gabriel rolled his eyes. "Not helpful."

"You guys, this is all going to be fine. It's a get-in, get-out operation," Dash said. "Aqua Gen is a big planet. The chances of us encountering anything that's alive are slim."

STEAM started to beep some more, and Dash stared bullets at the robot. Dash didn't need statistics on possible encounters with indigenous sea creatures that could kill them. It would be much tougher if they went into the mission afraid of never coming back. "STEAM, could you do me a favor and go find Chris? He needs to get back here for this."

The robot started to speak, but Dash cut him off. "Now would be good. Thanks, buddy."

STEAM made a sad sort of turn and moved slowly



across the flight deck of the ship, but he called back before he was at the door.

“Forty-seven percent chance of encounter with Predator Z, sixty percent chance of encounter with Thermites.”

STEAM went into double-speed mode and left the deck.

“He just couldn’t keep his big robot mouth shut, could he?” Carly muttered.

“Look, you guys, we’re going to be okay. You heard Chris—the landing site is secure and we have amazing equipment. We’ve taken down a Raptogon; we’ve survived a robot war and a molten river of fire. There’s nothing this planet can throw at us that we can’t handle. We’re Voyagers. We got this.”

Everyone looked down nervously at the blue-and-green water of Aqua Gen.

“What else?” Carly asked. “And don’t tell me there are zombie pirates down there.”

Dash looked sheepishly at the ceiling and then his crew.

“No zombies. But, umm, there *are* pirates.”

“No way!” Piper said. “You are totally making that up.”

“I wish I was,” Dash conceded, and just when he felt like he needed backup, Chris returned to the deck.

Chris strode into the room confidently. Five ZRKs hovered around him like bees near a hive as he quickly relayed a series of commands. A moment later, the ZRKs were gone, headed back to the *Cloud Cat* for final repairs. Rocket trotted happily behind Chris until he saw the Alpha team and ran over. Rocket was Chris’s golden



retriever, and everyone saw him as the ship's mascot. He was the friendliest dog in the known universe.

"I just got to the part about the pirates," Dash said.

"Ah yes, those," Chris said. There was a smidge of concern in his voice, which was a lot for Chris.

Chris took several long strides across the deck and looked down at the planet with the rest of them. "The AquaGens have been visited before," he said, worriedly staring at the surface of the planet. "It did not go well."

"What does that mean?" Gabriel asked.

Chris seemed to be calculating his answer, like a champion chess player assessing the board.

"The AquaGens are fierce when they need to be," he said slowly. "But they are a peaceful people at heart. They are intelligent beings with a developed language you'll be able to translate with our advanced technology."

"And these pirates," Carly said. "What about them?"

"While I was visiting Aqua Gen, someone else invaded this planet. These alien visitors became sort of like pirates of the planet, and have wreaked havoc ever since. They have destabilized the order of the AquaGens."

"What a bunch of jerks. Who takes over someone else's planet?" Carly asked, her eyes narrowing.

Chris looked once more at the watery surface. "They are illusive and dangerous, these pirates. But we don't know much else about them."

"Bummer," Gabriel said. "But they're not zombies, right?"



“No, Gabriel. They are not zombies,” Chris admitted as he moved toward the middle of the flight deck. Rocket followed obediently, wagging his tail. When Chris turned back, there was a grave look on his face. “It will be best if you’re not seen by anyone.”

“Got it,” Dash said. “The AquaGens are already leery of visitors from the outside world, so we need to stay clear of everyone on this planet if we can.”

Chris looked down at Rocket and made a motion with his hand that had an alien quality to it. Rocket walked over to Piper’s air chair and sat down, staring up happily.

STEAM returned and pulled up next to Chris. “The ZRKs are reporting trouble with the slogger.”

Chris’s attention turned entirely to the robot. “What’s the status?”

STEAM made a few whirling sounds and then answered: “Code red dash nine.”

For the second time in a matter of minutes, a concerned look crossed Chris’s face.

“The ship and the mission are yours,” Chris said, looking gravely at Dash. “Proceed with caution.”

And then Chris strode quickly off the deck.

Dash gazed one last time at the blue-green surface of Aqua Gen.

“Looks like we might be on our own this time.”

