

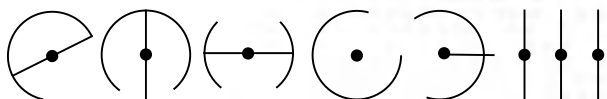
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HORIZON

DEADZONE

JENNIFER A. NIELSEN

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Library of Congress Control Number Available

ISBN 978-1-338-12141-4


10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 17 18 19 20 21

Book design by Abby Denning

First edition, September 2017

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

Scholastic US: 557 Broadway · New York, NY 10012
Scholastic Canada: 604 King Street West · Toronto, ON M5V 1E1
Scholastic New Zealand Limited: Private Bag 94407 · Greenmount, Manukau 2141
Scholastic UK Ltd.: Euston House · 24 Eversholt Street · London NW1 1DB



*To those who battle against the odds;
may victory be yours*



PRESS RELEASE FOR INCIDENT INVOLVING AERO HORIZON FLIGHT 16

**THE FOLLOWING IS THE MOST CURRENT INFORMATION
AVAILABLE.**

**Aero Horizon Flight 16, bound for Tokyo, Japan, recorded
normal takeoff.**

**The aircraft received a mild weather warning as it passed near
Fairbanks, Alaska. Approximately two minutes later, a bird
strike triggered emergency alarms.**

**Final cockpit recordings suggest massive structural damage.
The aircraft is presumed to have been lost in the arctic region.
No traces of the craft have been found.**

All 497 passengers and 16 cabin crew are presumed dead.



1

Molly

In the end, saving them would be up to her.

Molly knew this in the same way she knew her own name, or the way she knew that the sun would rise each day, just as it had this morning.

Actually, the sun wasn't a problem. It was the moon, or *moons*, that worried her. Wherever they were now, whatever this place was, images of two moons were somehow projected into the atmosphere. One was red, the other was green, and those moons—alien, unfathomable, and cold—symbolized everything that was wrong with this place. Molly couldn't shake the feeling that the moons *meant* something, something important to their survival.

Seven of them remained, out of over five hundred on a plane bound for Tokyo. After being ripped apart like an

aluminum can, their plane had crashed four days ago. Was it really only four days?

“Four days!” Javi groaned, as if reading her thoughts. He was one of Molly’s best friends, and certainly her best friend among the survivors. “Four days since I’ve eaten a real meal! I’d eat my shoelaces if I still had some Tabasco sauce to dip them in.”

“Shoelaces have no nutritional value,” Anna said. “You’d do better eating the dirt.” Anna was . . . extremely honest. Too honest, sometimes.

“If I’m this hungry on day five, I might just try it.” Javi turned back to Oliver. “I dreamed about Tabasco sauce last night. We fed it to a dreadful duck of doom—the same one that slashed Molly. Smoke came out of its beak.”

Oliver smiled, but not really. Molly was worried about him. He was the smallest and youngest, and had an innocence about him that was being leeched away by the reality of their situation. At least Javi was distracting him with what remained of the robot they’d salvaged from the crash.

“It made it through a plane crash; it could’ve won that soccer game!” Oliver said proudly.

Molly rolled her eyes. What did a soccer-playing robot matter now? She, Javi, Anna, and Oliver were all that remained of their Killbot robotics team. Today would have been the final round of competition at the Robot Soccer World Championship.

For months, getting to that championship had been top priority. Now her biggest goal—her only goal—was to stay alive. Plane crashes into impossibly strange environments had a funny way of changing one’s perspective.

There were three other survivors with them, including two sisters, Kira and Akiko. They spoke fluent Japanese and French, but only a few words of English. The final member of the group was Yoshi, who was half-American and half-Japanese and carried a chip on his shoulder roughly the size of Manhattan.

Molly looked around. “Has anyone seen Yoshi yet?”

The only answer she got was a shrug from Anna, who was standing behind Javi and Oliver, watching them work. Didn’t anyone else feel the same urgency to break camp? They’d never escape this place if they didn’t keep moving.

Molly tossed an empty backpack at Kira, motioning that she should begin filling it. But Kira only bent back over her drawing, blocking Molly from view with a curtain of hair, which was black except for a streak of purple. Kira came across as tough and a little angry, her body tense as if always ready for a fight. She was also an amazing artist who was currently working on a picture of her sister. Because nothing said “we’re fighting for our lives” like pencil sketches.

Akiko was very different from Kira. She was the shy one, who more often than not looked like she’d prefer to fade into the background. She came alive when she played her flute, though.

Even now, when the purpose of her playing was to lure in a slide-whistle bird for their last meal before the group broke camp.

“Enough!” Molly announced. “Everyone get up and help me pack! We need to get moving.” Her eyes settled on Akiko. “Bird or no bird.”

Akiko lowered her flute. “Bird,” she repeated.

“We should stay here long enough to find more food,” Anna said. “We burned through a lot of our supplies in the jungle.”

Literally burned through them, thought Molly. They’d experimented with the settings on one of the two strange devices they’d found. It had sparked the broken plane back to life, lighting up its technology so much that it exploded, nearly taking them with it.

Oliver turned his hopeful puppy-dog eyes in the direction Yoshi had gone earlier that morning. “Yoshi went hunting. He’ll find more food.”

“Unless I failed.” Everyone turned to see Yoshi stomp into camp from the opposite direction, his sword in its sheath at his side. Molly had pieced enough together to know that the sword was very old and very valuable.

“*Tabemono ga nai?*” Kira asked.

“No, there isn’t any food, and I don’t want to hear any complaints,” Yoshi said with a scowl. “We’ll just have to make do with what we have.”

Kira apparently understood his tone if not his words. Molly felt the group’s mood sink, which was the last thing they

needed. She forced a smile to her face. “Okay, then let’s take inventory. If you have anything of value—and I mean, if you have even a stick of gum in your pocket that you’ve been saving for later—then bring it forward!”

Nobody had a stick of gum, apparently, or maybe they just weren’t about to sacrifice their one chance at a minty fresh mouth to someone else. But other items did come forward.

Anna brought out the two devices they had found in the jungle. These were metal disks in the shape of a donut and about the size of a CD. Each had rotating inner and outer rings, with unfamiliar symbols on both rings. When they aligned, the matching symbols lit up, and pressing those lit symbols made things happen. Crazy things that would’ve turned Isaac Newton’s world upside down, perhaps literally. With a twist of the rings, gravity got lighter or heavier, technology went to zero or powered up. Molly suspected one setting affected the temperature in the area—something was holding back the arctic ice, after all—but she wasn’t interested in testing that theory if it risked sending the rift into a sudden ice age.

“What else do we have?” Molly asked.

They had a battery taken from a cave-dwelling robot Anna had smashed, two backpacks, a canteen half-full of water, a handful of flares, some packaged food, some bungee cords, and a radio that played only static.

“It’s not enough.” Everyone turned to look at Yoshi firmly

shaking his head. "If you'd seen what I have, seen what's ahead . . ."

Javi's brows pressed together. "What'd you see?"

"Nothing but desert. As far as the eye can see, there's nothing but dry clay soil and bare rock and sand. No food. No water." He turned to Molly. "No hope of rescue."

Molly wasn't going to let the others know how his words left knots in her stomach and sweat on her palms. Instead, she made sure they saw her smile and shrug Yoshi's warning away. "We'll rescue ourselves, then."

"How?" Oliver's eyes widened. "We don't have enough stuff to survive a backyard campout. How do we survive a desert?"

"We wasted too many supplies already," Yoshi said. "You guys were using flares like they grew on trees."

"Or like they protected us from what flew out of the trees!" Javi said. "We had to use them to keep the shredder birds from ripping us apart."

"At least in the jungle we were able to find water and food and shelter," Anna said. "We won't be so lucky in the desert. If there's no water, then there are no plants or animals. No trees for shelter."

"Or wood to build a fire," Yoshi added. "So even if we catch a bird, there'll be no way to cook it."

Oliver moaned. "We're goners for sure. Let's just stay here."

"There's no choice but to go forward," Javi argued. "If the map Anna saw is right, there's some kind of man-made

structure out there at the far end of the rift. A building means people, answers . . .”

Yoshi scoffed. “What if we don’t like those answers?”

“Molly might *need* the answers,” Javi countered. “Maybe someone there can tell us what’s wrong with her shoulder and—”

“My shoulder is fine,” Molly said. That wasn’t quite true. The injury to her shoulder from the dreadful duck of doom was far more serious than the bird’s name implied, with a green rash slowly spreading across her skin. It didn’t hurt, but it wasn’t healing, either. Not that she would tell anyone how bad it looked. They had larger problems. She planned to keep it covered and to keep her mouth shut about it.

“Maybe we should wait one more day,” Anna said.

“Or another week,” Yoshi added.

Javi stood on a rock where everyone could see him. “Stop it, all of you! We can’t stay here and we shouldn’t waste time hoping a rescue will come, because it probably won’t. Our only choice is to cross the rift and find out what’s in that building. Let’s stop saying we *can’t* and figure out how we *can!*”

The group looked from him over to Molly. She took a deep breath, then said, “Javi’s right. We are smart enough to figure this out, no matter how bad it seems. We can do this. We just have to work together.”

“That’s fine for your Killbot team,” Yoshi said. “You know each other and take care of each other. What about me and the sisters?”

Akiko and Kira smiled, as if they knew he was talking about them.

“From now on, we’re all on Team Killbot.” Molly made sure she looked each person in the eye as she spoke. “All of us.”

She thought Yoshi looked especially pleased by that, though she wasn’t sure why. She had been careful not to treat him or the sisters as outsiders. Now she wondered if Yoshi had simply never been part of a team before. He seemed like the kind of kid who had trouble fitting in.

So he wasn’t a loner entirely by choice. That would be good to keep in mind if she was going to keep everyone moving in the same direction.

Molly continued, “And if we’re going to be a single team, then we’re going to function like one. To start, we need a leader.” She looked around the group. “Any volunteers?”

Javi laughed. “Right. Everyone who votes for Molly, raise your hand.” He was the first to do so, but the rest of the team immediately followed, even Yoshi, who might have had other ideas, and Kira and Akiko, who had no way of knowing what they’d just voted for.

Molly hesitated, instantly feeling the weight of leadership. She finally said, “All right, but I can’t do it alone. Everyone gets a responsibility.”

No one spoke. Except for Akiko, who said, “Bird,” for some reason.

Molly looked around the group. “Javi, you’re my second-in-command.”

His face lit up. "Like the vice president? Deputy?"

"Annoying sidekick," Anna said.

"First Officer Spock," Yoshi added. "Can we call you Spock?"

"I'll work on my own title," Javi said.

Molly turned to Yoshi. "You'll be in charge of defending us. Kira and Akiko can look for food. I want Anna to specifically find us water while we're out there."

"What about me?" Oliver said.

Molly wished she could roll him in Bubble Wrap until he was safely home, but she knew he needed a job, to feel as much a part of the team as everyone else.

"You're our lookout," she finally said. "If something is coming, I want you to be the first to warn us."

Oliver smiled and nodded enthusiastically.

"Bird," Akiko repeated.

This time they looked in the direction she was pointing her chin. A slide-whistle bird had landed right in their camp. Yoshi stepped forward with his sword raised.

"All right," Molly said a moment later. "Let's eat, and then we move forward."