ONLY IF WE UNDERSTAND, WILL WE CARE. ONLY IF WE CARE, WILL WE HELP. ONLY IF WE HELP SHALL ALL BE SAVED.

—Dr. Jane Goodall, primatologist and conservationist
Seated beside Captain Roxas in the helicopter, Cruz scanned the blue swells below for a crest of white. Two days ago, Explorer Academy’s flagship had ailed from Kenya. Without him.

First, a snowstorm had delayed Cruz’s flight from New York, then mechanical problems with the plane had kept him grounded in Istanbul. Finally, he’d made it to Mombasa, where Orion’s helicopter pilot was waiting to fly him out to the ship in the western Indian Ocean.

Cruz had enjoyed semester break with his dad in Kauai. They’d worked at the Goofy Foot surf shop, ate their fill of pepperoni and sausage pizza with extra cheese, and surfed whenever they’d had a spare minute. It was like old times. Still, Cruz couldn’t stop thinking about his mother’s cell-regeneration formula. Four months ago, Cruz wasn’t sure he’d be able to find even a single piece of the cipher and now he was halfway to his goal. Only four pieces to go! He was anxious to rejoin his friends and open the holo-journal for the fifth clue.

An angular silhouette appeared on the horizon. Cruz squinted against the glare of the noon sun off the ocean, his heart thumping so loudly he was sure Captain Roxas could hear it above the engine. Was that...?

It was! They’d found Orion. The ship, however, wasn’t in motion. It had stopped a few miles west of an island.
Captain Roxas nodded to the elongated triangle of land. “Aldabra atoll.”

The explorers had learned about Aldabra in Professor Ishikawa’s class. The atoll was made up of a series of small islets that formed a reef around a lagoon. Part of the Seychelles outer islands, Aldabra was among Earth’s largest coral reefs. No wonder the ship had dropped anchor here. It was an explorer’s paradise! Approaching Orion, Cruz could see the Explorer Academy flag. It flew high above the bridge, a rippling beacon to welcome him home.

“Request: helicopter Academy One to Orion, permission to land,” said Captain Roxas.

“Request granted,” crackled the answer. “Orion standing by.”

As they hovered above the helipad, Cruz tried to see into the oval roost on the ship’s weather deck. He wondered if anyone had come up to meet him. Maybe his best friend? Lani had not traveled with Cruz to visit her own family in Kauai over the break. A new recruit with only a few weeks at the Academy under her belt, she had decided to stay behind to catch up on schoolwork and complete her required survival
training with Monsieur Legrand. Captain Roxas set the skids square in the middle of the giant EA on the pad so gently Cruz barely felt it. The pilot cut the engine and the blades spun to a stop.

Cruz flipped off his headset, unbuckled his seat belt, and hopped out of the aircraft the second the captain opened his door. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Anytime.” The pilot handed Cruz his duffel bag.

Cruz had barely set foot inside the roost when a fluffy white blob came hurtling toward him. He went to his knees and opened his arms.

“Woof!” Hubbard’s pink tongue practically licked off his earlobe.

Laughing, Cruz fell over on the fall leaves rug.

“He's missed you.” Taryn Secliff was standing behind one of the olive green chairs.

“I've missed him, too.” It may have only been two and half weeks, but to Cruz, it felt like ages. Cruz rolled to his knees. He glanced around the empty room. It was a bit weird that none of his friends had come up to meet him. He hoped nothing was wrong.

“Don’t worry.” His adviser saw his frown. “You won’t be in trouble for missing the mission.”
“Mission?” Cruz gulped. “Already?” That would explain why nobody was here.

“The teams are exploring the reef around Aldabra in *Ridley*. Team Earhart went this morning. Cousteau is next.” She glanced at her watch. “If you hurry, you might make it.”

Holding Hubbard, Cruz scrambled to his feet. He planted a quick kiss on the dog’s head before handing him off to Taryn. He sprinted for the door, then spun back. “My gear—”

“I’ll take care of it.” Taryn waved her free arm. “Go!”

“Woof!” barked Hubbard.

Cruz didn’t need to be told again. Aquatics was on the lowest level of the ship—six decks down. He flew down flight after flight, the soles of his shoes squealing at every corner. He smacked his comm pin. “Cruz to Marisol Coronado.”

“You’re here!” came the enthusiastic reply. “I was just coming up to meet you. Hungry?”

“Kind . . . of.”

“You want to swing by and we can—”

“Wish I could . . . can’t.”

“You sound out of breath. Are you running?”


“Sure. Have fun.”

“Thanks, Tía. Cruz, out.” He flew off the bottom step of the last flight of steps onto B deck. Swinging around a post, Cruz catapulted himself into the maze of corridors that led to aquatics. His lungs were heaving by the time he reached the outer door of the submarine bay. Planting his palms on each side of the round window, Cruz peered through the glass. *Nooooo!*

The compartment was filled with seawater. Through the greenish blue haze he could make out the tip of *Ridley’s* tail moving through the opening in the ship’s hull. He was late. Again. Panting, Cruz could do nothing but watch the bay door close behind the sub.
“Missed your ride, huh?” Fanchon Quills was coming up behind him. The science tech lab chief was carrying fins and a diving helmet. Her caramel curls, the tips dyed sunset orange, spilled out of a black-and-pink-striped head scarf. Wearing an MC camera headset, the lens flipped up, Fanchon looked like a butterfly with one antenna.

“My team went to check out the reef in Ridley. Without me.”

“So?”

Cruz gave her a puzzled look. What was he supposed to do? Swim after them?

“Give ’em a shout,” she urged.

“You think they’d come back?”

Fanchon smirked. “I’m no pilot but I’m pretty sure the sub can turn.”

Cruz hit his comm pin. “Cruz Coronado to . . . uh . . .”

He had no idea who to ask for. Orion didn’t have a sub pilot, not since Tripp Scarlatos.

“Jaz,” prompted Fanchon.

“Huh?”

“Dr. Jazayeri is the new aquatics director. Came in over break. Goes by Jaz.”

He got it. “Cruz Coronado to Jaz.”

“Jaz here,” replied a woman.

“I’m on Team Cousteau. I got back a few minutes ago . . . I saw you leave . . . I know it’s probably too late but . . .” He gave Fanchon a helpless look.

There was a long silence.

“We’re coming about now, Cruz,” said Jaz. “Meet us at the aft deck of aquatics.”

Cruz rocketed into the air. “I’ll be right there! Cruz, out.”

“Hold on,” said the tech lab chief when Cruz would have taken off. Fanchon removed her MC camera and placed it on Cruz’s head. “You’ll need this.”

“Thanks, Fanchon!” Cruz hurried down the corridor. A minute later, he was on the port stern watching the giant bubble that was Ridley rise
up out of the waves. Jaz expertly maneuvered the vehicle to within a few feet of Orion’s back deck, making it easy for Cruz to jump to the sub’s ladder. Scampering up the rungs, he dropped through the top hatch she’d opened for him. Emmett, Lani, Bryndis, Sailor, and Dugan were seated in a semicircle around a woman in the pilot’s seat. Jaz had olive skin and wide dark gray eyes rimmed in purplish black eyeliner. She’d twisted her long black hair into a side ponytail, and a gold hoop earring was caught in her thick hair. “Welcome aboard!”

“Thanks for doing a U-turn.”

“No problem.”

Cruz moved past Bryndis to sit at the end of the bench. Her fair hair was braided into two loose pigtails. Pale blue eyes glanced up at Cruz. She smiled. He melted. And stumbled. Emmett caught him before he did a face-plant. Sailor put a hand to her mouth, but it did little to mute her snort.

Jaz nodded to the empty seat next to her. “You can sit here if you want.”

“That’s perfect!” exclaimed Lani. “Jaz, Cruz is a sub pilot, too. Not officially,” corrected Cruz. He slid into the copilot’s seat. “I went through all the training, though I… uh… never actually took Ridley out of Orion’s docking bay. But hey, I’m a great pilot on land.”

That got a laugh.

A joystick in each hand, Jaz backed the sub away from the Orion. Once they were about 20 feet from the ship, Jaz tapped her computer screen and they heard a whirring noise. The ballast tanks on each side of the vehicle began venting. Cruz knew the tanks were used for buoyancy. They released air, allowing the sub to sink. To rise, the pilot filled the tanks with air from the compressor. The submarine slowly descended beneath the choppy waves.

“Ridley to Orion. We are good to dive, dive, dive,” Jaz said into her headset.

The sub glided through the turquoise waters at a downward angle. Jaz flipped on the headlights. Hundreds of silvery blue fish darted, half
darting left and the other half zipping right. Cruz wondered how they
decided who went which way.

“Some people think we’ve explored every inch of the Earth and
there’s nothing left to see,” said Jaz. “If only they could come down
here. We figure that at least one-third of life under the sea is still
undiscovered. Since there may be as many as a million different species
in the oceans, that leaves plenty for you guys and your kids and their
kids to find.” She’d no sooner spoken the words than a spotted eagle
ray glided toward them. Its triangular fins flared like wings in the
water.

“It’s so beautiful,” cooed Sailor.

“It’s so big,” gasped Emmett.

“It’s so . . . leaving,” said Jaz, as the ray’s long, thin tail tapped her
side of the bubble. “Start taking photos, explorers. Your MC cameras
are connected to Orion’s computer, so you’ll also get identification data
on your subjects—unless, of course, you discover a new species.”

Everyone began snapping pictures. Cruz aimed his camera at a spin-
nning vortex of yellow Bengal snappers, thought of the word “photo,”
and shut his eyes for the required two seconds. When he opened them,
he saw a tubular trumpetfish swimming vertically. Cruz took another
picture. After that came a spotted potato grouper; an orange, black,
and white-striped Seychelles anemonefish and a silvery white geo-
metric moray eel with black dots sprinkled on its head. The little spots
in a geometric pattern practically dared you to connect them. Cruz
couldn’t capture all the action fast enough.

Soon, a rocky bulge emerged from the blue haze. “We’re coming up
on the atoll’s barrier reef,” said Jaz. She was giving Cruz a sideways
glance. “Wanna drive?”

“You mean it?”

“I do.” She handed him his own headset, grabbed her tablet, and
they swapped seats.

Removing his MC camera, Cruz replaced it with the radio headset
and settled in behind the console. Cruz wrapped his hands around the
right and left joysticks. At last! It was happening. He was piloting
**Ridley**!

Jaz bent toward him. “I confess, I read the former AD’s log. He men-
tioned you.”

Cruz swallowed hard. “H-he did?”

“He said you were an excellent student and ready to pilot **Ridley**
under supervision.”

It was a comfort to know that Tripp thought Cruz was up to the
task—a small comfort, considering the former sub pilot had also tried
to kill him.

“**Ridley**, **Ridley**, Topside.” Cruz heard a man’s voice over his headset.

He swung to Jaz, who nodded for him to answer **Orion**’s call.

“Topside, **Ridley**,” said Cruz. “Go ahead.”

“Yeah, **Ridley**, time for a comm check.”

“Copy that, Topside,” said Cruz. “We are currently holding at eighty-
nine feet.”

“Ready for readings,” said the **Orion** crewman.

Jaz was pointing to the oxygen gauges, to remind him, but Cruz
knew what to do.

“Main oxygen, twenty-one hundred PSI,” reported Cruz. “Reserve
oxygen, twenty-eight hundred PSI.”

“Main twenty-one, reserve twenty-eight,” echoed the crewman.

“Cabin pressure is half a PSI above one ATM,” said Cruz. “Life support
systems are good. Visibility is about fifty feet. Continuing our descent.”

“Copy that, **Ridley**. Have a good dive.”

Jaz gave him an approving grin. It had been a test.

And Cruz had passed.

**Scanning the teal waters, Cruz sat
taller. He eased the left joystick
forward. The sub responded, gently
banking to the right.**
sub really wasn’t much different than playing a video game. The controls were virtually identical. As they neared the seafloor, Cruz leveled out the sub. This was fun—and not nearly as hard as he’d expected!

_Uh-oh._

Cruz stiffened. He’d been following the edge of the reef, but now some kind of bulge or wall stretched out in front of them. It was directly in their path. He saw a hole in the rocky barrier, but it looked awfully small. It didn’t help that large clusters of staghorn coral guarded each side of the gap. Should he bank left and look for a way around? Or keep going. “Uh . . . Jaz?”

“I see it,” she said. “It’s wide enough. Give it a tad more on the starboard thruster to line us up.”

Cruz’s shirt was sticking to his back. He was holding the controls so tightly his hands were going numb. Approaching the opening in the reef, Cruz slowed the sub. _Ridley_ slipped between the spikes of antler-like coral. Cruz held his breath. By the silence behind him, he had a feeling everyone else was doing the same.

_Please don’t scrape, please don’t scrape,_ he prayed.

Not hearing a sound, Cruz glanced back. They had cleared the coral! His teammates were smiling. Dugan gave him a thumbs-up.

“Well done,” proclaimed Jaz. “I know this is your first dive, but it will help if you can relax your death grip on those joysticks a little.”

“Right.” Cruz flexed his finger. He continued on, getting close enough to the reef ledge on the starboard side to give his team more photo ops, yet also making sure to maintain a safe distance. Lani got some great shots of a brain coral. The six-foot brownish bulb with its twisting grooves really did look like a human brain.

Cruz was checking his gauges again when a torpedo streaked across _Ridley’s_ bow!

“Whoa!” cried Dugan. “What was that?”

“A blacktip reef shark,” Jaz said calmly.

A nine-foot gray shark, its fins and tail looking as if they had been dipped in black paint, was circling them. A pointed snout turned
slightly and Cruz saw its mouth, gills, and light gray underbelly. Cruz had seen sharks at home, of course, but from a distance and from the surface. The blacktip was powerful, yet graceful, as it sailed through the water. Cruz didn’t want to hit or scare the animal, so he slowed the sub and kept his course straight and true.

“Nice,” Jaz said quietly. “Exactly how I would have done it.”

The shark went past the windshield once more before swimming away. Jaz signaled it was time to head back to Orion. Cruz made a wide turn over a bed of seagrass, attracting the attention of a green turtle. The reptile swam up to Cruz’s window. It was huge! Its mottled brown carapace had to be close to the width of a monster truck tire—maybe bigger. Cruz knew that the green turtle was named for its pale green skin. The turtle leveled off, its flippers easily stroking to match Ridley’s speed. A head turned and a hooded eyeball peered at them.

“He’s probably trying to figure out what kind of creature we are,” said Emmett.

Sailor snickered. “We need Fanchon to make us a Universal Reptile Communicator.”

“If anyone could do it, she could,” said Cruz.

The inquisitive reptile stayed with them for several hundred yards
before veering off. As they neared Orion, Cruz flipped on the air compressor to fill the ballast tanks. The sub began to ascend. His sonar showed they were within a few hundred yards of Orion. Jaz should be taking over the controls. Unless...

Cruz swallowed hard. She wasn’t planning on letting him dock the sub, was she? Jaz was making no effort to move. Jaz?” Cruz stared at her. “You should probably take us in…”

“You can do it.” Her tone was gentle but firm “You’ve practiced it in your head, haven’t you?”

“A million times, but this is real. This is—”

“Every pilot has a first docking. Don’t overthink it. One step at a time.” She rested her hand against the copilot’s console. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

“O-okay.”

One step at time, huh? Okay. Deep breath.

What did he need to do first? Contact the ship. Cruz clicked on his headset. “Topside, this is… uh… Ridley.” Geez! Cruz had nearly forgotten the name of the sub! “We’re… uh… seventy-nine feet from the ship on a south-southeast heading at a depth of twenty-five feet. Request: Open the sub bay door.”

“Topside,” came the reply. “Request received. Opening sub bay door.”

Out of the haze in front of them, the ship’s hull appeared. Cruz could see the opening in the stern. He leveled off and lined up with the bay. They were about thirty feet from the ship when Jaz said, “We’re close enough now to let momentum take us in.”

Cruz eased up on the throttle, reminding himself to relax his grip. He held his breath, as if, somehow, he could get Ridley into the bay by sheer will. They were almost there…

“Steady as she goes,” whispered Jaz.

Silently and smoothly, Ridley slipped into Orion’s belly.

Cruz wanted to celebrate, but his job wasn’t done yet. Once they’d cleared the door, Cruz extended the catch arms, which grabbed the ropes attached to the bay walls. With a couple of gentle bounces, the
sub came to a full stop. Cruz released the anchor and shut off the motor. “Orion, docking is complete.”

“Thank you, Ridley. Welcome back.”

Cruz let out the biggest, happiest breath of his life. He’d done it—his first sub dive!

They waited while a deckhand drained water from the compartment. Jaz popped Ridley’s hatch and Team Cousteau climbed out, one after the other. Cruz stayed to assist the aquatics director as she checked the tanks, batteries, and equipment. He was the last explorer out.

Cruz scampered down the ladder to join his team, who’d waited for him. “Hey, was that cool or—”

Suddenly, a tidal wave washed over him! The shock of cold water made Cruz jump. His uniform was totally drenched. Cruz threw out his arms. “What the…?”

Sailor, Emmett, Lani, Bryndis, and Dugan were laughing. Dugan was holding a bucket.

“Congrats on your first submarine dive!” Emmett led the team in a round of applause. “You earned your lemonade bath.”

Cruz brought his fingers to his lips and felt a sweetly sour sting. It was lemonade. He glanced up to where Jaz had appeared at Ridley’s top hatch. By her satisfied grin, he knew she’d had something to do with setting up the ritual. Like a wet dog, Cruz shook the juice from his hair. He pretended to be annoyed with his friends. But he wasn’t. Not really. He was proud.

Sticky. But proud.