

OFF THE COAST  
OF THE UNITED  
KINGDOM



## ▶ RUBBING THE SLEEP from

his eyes, Cruz glanced at the screen of his paper-thin gold wristband. 5:51. *Shoot!*

“Security off. Lights on, low,” hissed Cruz so he wouldn’t wake his roommate. Flinging off his comforter, he scurried to his dresser, pulling off his pajama top as he went. Blinded, Cruz stubbed his toe on the corner of a chair. He stifled a yelp as he wrestled free of his top. Cruz tugged open his top dresser drawer and grabbed a pair of socks. One drawer below that, he whipped out some jeans and his favorite faded orange *Surf’s Up!* tee. He was hopping around the cabin, one leg in his jeans, when Emmett Lu lifted his head from the pillow.

“What’s going on?” Emmett glanced at his own wrist. “We’re not late for class.”

“No, but I’m late for Aunt Marisol.” Cruz fell backward on his bed so he could wriggle his other leg into his pants. “The helicopter’s coming at six.”

“I thought you said goodbye to her last night.”

“I did.” But wide awake at 2 a.m., Cruz had changed his mind. His dad was missing. Nobody had seen or heard from him in days. Aunt Marisol was flying to Kauai to help in the search for him. That was all that mattered. *That* was where Cruz belonged—not here on board *Orion*, studying and traveling with the rest of the freshman class of

Explorer Academy. “But now I want to go with her,” said Cruz.

He fully expected Emmett to disagree. Emmett would start listing all the reasons why Cruz should stay: He’d get in trouble for leaving the ship, he’d fall behind in his classes, he’d miss out on their next mission, he’d be letting down Team Cousteau, and on and on...

“Okay,” croaked Emmett.

Buttoning his jeans, Cruz froze. That was it? Emmett’s emoto-glasses were on his nightstand. Without the shape-shifting frames to reflect Emmett’s feelings in color and form, Cruz wasn’t sure what his roommate was thinking. Did he mean “okay” as in, *Go get ’em, I support you a hundred percent?* Or “okay” as in, *Go ahead, but I’m telling you it’s a bad idea?* Cruz watched a groggy Emmett slide on his emoto-glasses. In seconds, the frames morphed from flat lime ovals to dark purple circles with pulsing pink streaks. *Yes!* It was the first one.

Emmett yawned. “You packed?”

“Nope.” Cruz swung to sit upright and unrolled his socks. “I was going to do it when I got up, but my alarm didn’t go off.”

“The alarm on your OS band? It didn’t go off? Is that even possible?”

Their Organic Synchronization bands, aka Open Sesame bands, measured vital signs, general health, physical activity, brain waves, and growth patterns. The bands’ security features gave each student access to every place explorers were allowed to go on the ship. How could a simple alarm not have activated on such a technological masterpiece? Answer: operator error.

“It is when you forget to set it,” admitted Cruz.

Throwing his navy-and-white-pinstriped comforter aside, Emmett jumped out of bed. Scurrying to the closet, he flung open the doors, grabbed Cruz’s duffel bag from the top shelf, and started filling it with clothes from Cruz’s drawers. He yanked Cruz’s uniform jacket off its hanger and tossed it to him. “Call her. I’ll get your toothbrush.”

Pulling on his left sock with one hand, Cruz tapped the comm pin attached to his jacket with the other. “Cruz to Marisol Coronado.”

“Marisol here.”

He heard an engine in the background. *No!*

“Aunt Marisol, are you still on board *Orion*?”

“I am, but...” The rest of her sentence was drowned out by the *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh* of helicopter blades.

“Wait! Aunt Marisol, wait for me!” There was no time for the right sock. Dropping to his knees, Cruz grabbed a shoe half sticking out from under the bed. The other shoe was next to the box that contained his mother’s things. He pushed the box farther under his bed, then stood, cramming his feet into his sneakers.

“Taryn’s gonna kill you.” Emmett zipped up Cruz’s duffel bag.

Explorers were not supposed to leave the ship without permission. Cruz had broken that rule once already during their stop in Iceland. Taryn Secliff had warned him not to do it again, and disobeying his dorm adviser was never a good idea.

“I know.” Cruz shoved his arms into his jacket. He grabbed Mell, his honeybee drone, tucking her into an outer pocket.

“I’ll handle it. You know Taryn. Hard outer shell, marshmallow center.” Emmett slung the strap of the bag over Cruz’s shoulder. “*Zù nǐ hǎoyùn*,” he said. It meant “good luck” in Chinese, which Cruz was going to need if he hoped to make it to the top deck of the ship in four minutes. Emmett opened the door, his glasses streaked turquoise and yellow.

“Thanks, Emmett. I’d have had to leave without my stuff if you hadn’t—”

“Just go!”

Cruz rushed past his roommate and down the empty passage. He had almost made it to the elevator at the other end when he heard Emmett call his name.

“What?” Cruz shouted, not glancing back.

“I forgot to pack underwear.”

Snorting, Cruz nearly hit the wall. He caught the corner and swung around it, launching himself into the two-deck atrium. Cruz charged up the starboard side of the curved grand staircases to the empty

third-deck lounge, then up another flight to the fourth deck. He thought he heard someone following him—probably one of the security guards trying to get him to slow down. Nice try. By the time Cruz hit the set of stairs leading to the bridge deck, he was panting, but he had one more deck to go. He took the last flight two steps at a time.

The oval observation roost on the weather deck of *Orion* was cozy yet still had room for a few nubby olive green chairs and a big rug with a fall leaf pattern. Portholes looked out over the helipad—a flat landing zone that was labeled *EA* in letters so big Cruz was sure they could be spotted from space. Hitting the top step, Cruz squinted against bright floodlights that lit up the deck. He could make out a chopper with *Explorer Academy* painted on the side. He heard a noise behind him. “I’m sorry I ran, but—” Cruz spun to face his accuser. “Hubbard?”

“Woof!” replied the West Highland white terrier, bouncing in his yellow life vest.

Winded, Cruz put his hands on his hips. “How did you get out of Taryn’s cabin?”

Hubbard cocked an ear as if to answer, *Beats me.*

*Great!* Cruz was going to be in even bigger trouble when his adviser awoke to find her dog missing. “Hubbard, go home.” He tried to sound stern.

The little white dog lowered his head.

“Right now.” Cruz pointed to the stairs. “Go, Hubbard.”

Hubbard let out a whimper. It melted Cruz’s heart.

The helicopter’s engine was revving. Out the window, Cruz could see a gap between the landing skids and the deck. They were taking off!

“Forget that last order,” he said to the Westie. “Stay, Hubbard! Stay!”



Spinning, Cruz punched through the door and raced across the pad. Once Cruz was on board the chopper, he’d call Emmett to come for the dog. “Wait!” he yelled at the rising yellow bird, waving both arms.

A blast of wind slapped him. Hard. Suddenly, Cruz was staring into darkness and struggling to breathe. He was flat on his back, the zipper of his duffel digging into his shoulder blade. It felt as if every last ounce of air had been pushed from his lungs. A minute later, still gasping, he saw a face hovering over him. Aunt Marisol’s long, dark hair swirled around her chessboard-print raincoat. “You okay?” she shouted above the whirring engine.

Cruz tried to answer but couldn’t get any sound to come out. He’d never been kicked in the chest by a bull before, but he had a feeling this was probably what it felt like. Slowly, he pushed himself up. Taking his duffel, his aunt helped him to his feet and motioned to the door of the roost. Cruz understood. She held up a finger to the pilot to signal she would return. As they made their way inside, they heard the chopper’s engine powering down.

“What do you think you’re doing?” demanded Aunt Marisol the second the door closed behind them.

“I... You... We...” rasped Cruz.

His aunt glanced down at his bag before tossing it into a chair. “I guess it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? You were coming with me.”

Hubbard trotted over to them.

Aunt Marisol’s jaw dropped. “You were going to bring Hubbard, too?”

“No! I ran up here... turned around... there he was.”

“I’m not surprised.” Her lips turned up at the corners, but only briefly. “Taryn’s going to kill you, you know.”

“I know.” She now had two good reasons for it.

Aunt Marisol’s grin faded. “Cruz, I’m sorry, but you can’t come.”

“Why not?” He was still hoarse.

She glanced around before hissing, “You know why.” Aunt Marisol meant he needed to keep looking for his mother’s cipher. Cruz had uncovered two of the eight pieces engraved with the formula for the

regenerative serum his mom had created while working for the Synthesis, a secret scientific branch of the Society. So far, Cruz had managed to stay one step ahead of Nebula, the drug company that had killed his mother to stop her from developing the formula and was now bent on destroying all traces of it. “Cruz, you’re the only thing standing between Nebula and your mom’s work,” said his aunt.

Cruz rubbed his right thumb against the rose-colored double-helix birthmark on his left wrist the way he always did when he was wrong and someone else was right. It was true. Petra Coronado had programmed her holo-journal to unlock for one person: Cruz. Only her son could access the clue to find the next piece of the cipher. This was no time to put everything on hold, especially with Nebula out there, waiting to strike. Who knew how much time Cruz had before they did?

“The only thing I care about right now is finding Dad,” cried Cruz.

“Of course.” Her voice softened. “I know how you feel, Cruz. I’m feeling the same way. But you have important things to do. *Here*. You can’t ignore your responsibilities. And you have my word that I’ll do everything I can to locate your dad. He is my brother, after all. I’d walk through fire for him.”

“I know, but...” How could Cruz make her understand? His mother’s death seven years ago had been the worst thing that had ever happened to Cruz. Without his father, he didn’t know what he would have done. His dad had been there for him through every surfing competition where moms lined the beach to cheer on their kids, through every nightmare that shook Cruz from sleep, through every birthday and holiday and *any* day when Cruz missed his mom so much he was sure his heart would snap in two. Cruz had been there for his dad, too. They had a strong bond. Even now, one never let more than a few days go by without calling or texting the other. All of Cruz’s texts and calls to his dad over the past several days had gone unanswered. Something, he knew, was terribly, terribly wrong.

“Besides, while I’m gone,” his aunt was saying, “I was counting on you to assist Dr. Luben—”

“Dr. Luben? From the seed vault?” Cruz liked the English archaeologist, who had given the explorers a tour of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway.

“Yes, he was gracious enough to step in for me on short notice,” explained his aunt. “However, it’s been years since he’s led students on an expedition.”

*An expedition!*

“Where?” pressed Cruz.

“I... uh... can’t say.”

“It’s a secret?”

“Not exactly. All I can tell you is that you’ll learn more when you reach Barcelona.”

*Spain!* They were going to Spain!

“I wish I could tell you more.” She bit her lip. “I wish I could *go*. It looks like we’ll have to wait a little longer to do a dig together. Anyway, I’m sure Dr. Luben will do an excellent job, but this is your class’s first venture into archaeological fieldwork and I’d sleep better knowing one of my top explorers is here to lend a hand. Plus, Archer will be kind and tell me what I want to hear—teachers have a way of doing that—and I want to know how things are *really* going.” Her forehead crinkled. “So, will you do this? For me?”

Aunt Marisol rarely asked for a favor. And since it was clear she wasn’t going to budge on letting him go with her, he might as well help her out. “All right,” surrendered Cruz. “But you have to be honest with me, too. I want to know what’s going on at home—even if it’s bad.”

Swallowing hard, she nodded. “Okay. It’s a deal. No secrets. Now I’ve really got to get out of here or I’m going to miss my flight.” She opened her arms.

Cruz gave her a hug.

“It’ll be okay,” she whispered, planting a kiss on the top of his head. “We’ll find him.”

He hoped so. Suddenly, tears were clouding his vision. When she released him, Cruz quickly wiped them away.

Aunt Marisol gathered up her hair and tucked it into the back collar of her coat. “When are you going to open the holo-journal for the next clue?”

“Tomorrow, I guess. I want to wait for Lani.” Cruz had made a promise to himself that he would never open his mom’s journal for a new clue without Lani. They may be 7,000 miles and nine time zones apart, but they were still best friends. “Sailor, Emmett, and I will video call Lani after the Halloween party,” said Cruz.

“Tell Lani I’ll see her soon.” The plan was for Cruz’s best friend from back home, Leilani Kealoha, and her mom to pick up Aunt Marisol at Lihue Airport, in Kauai. “I’ll call you when I get there.”

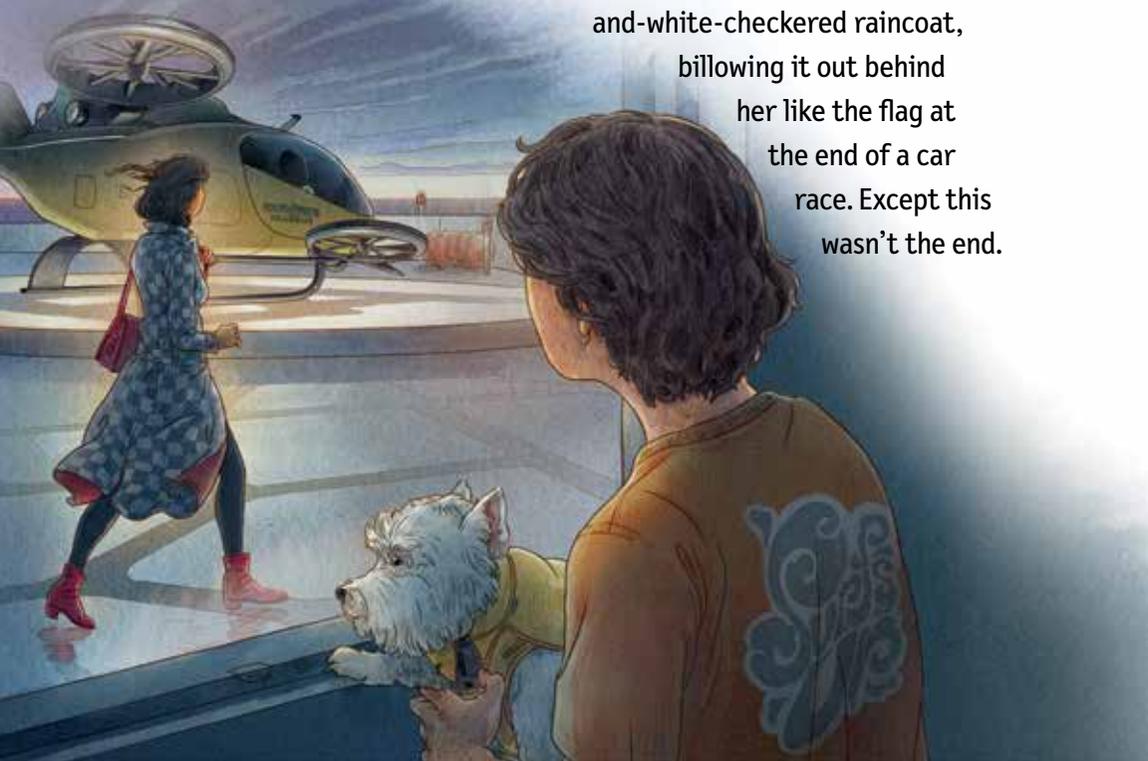
“Aunt Marisol?”

Her hand on the latch, she glanced back.

“Be careful.”

She gave him the smile that always made him feel completely special. Completely loved. “You too.”

Scooping up Hubbard, Cruz went to the middle porthole to watch his aunt leave. As she hurried across the helipad, the wind caught her long black-and-white-checked raincoat, billowing it out behind her like the flag at the end of a car race. Except this wasn’t the end.



Nowhere near it. Cruz was scared. For her. For his dad. For himself. The three of them had always been a team. Together, he knew they could face any obstacle and overcome any challenge, but apart ...

Well, Cruz had never been without at least one of them at arm’s length. Until now.

He wondered if this was how Emmett, Sailor, Bryndis, and the rest of the explorers felt. None of them had family on board.

Aunt Marisol climbed into the chopper and the engine roared to life, the rotor blades becoming a blur. The helicopter gently lifted off.

Cradling Hubbard under his left arm, Cruz waved with his other hand. The deck’s lights were bright. He couldn’t see Aunt Marisol through the windshield. Wasn’t sure she could see him, either. Still he kept waving, even as the chopper turned and headed east toward Ireland. Cruz dropped his hand only when the bird’s red tail beacon vanished in the clouds.

The lights on the weather deck were dimming, the black sky turning dark blue. The smell of bacon tickled his nose. It wouldn’t be long before the rest of the explorers would be up. Cruz looked down into a pair of chocolate-chip eyes. Feeling a heart jump beneath his hand, he untwisted a tangled zipper tab on a tiny pocket of the dog’s yellow life vest. “Guess it’s just you and me now, Hub.”

A pink tongue curled up to lick his chin.

Cruz slung the strap of his duffel onto one shoulder and, holding Hubbard close, went downstairs to face the day.