

**WE DON'T INHERIT THE EARTH  
FROM OUR ANCESTORS;  
WE BORROW IT FROM OUR CHILDREN.**

**—Native American proverb**

24.7681° S | 15.2959° E



## ▶ A DROP OF WATER

splashed onto Cruz's forehead.

"Emmett," he moaned, feeling the bead roll down his temple. "One more minute."

Cruz was drifting off again, when another drop tapped him on the bridge of his nose. "Okay, okay." His roommate was right. They'd be in big trouble if they were late to class. Cruz yawned, his eyelids fluttering. "You win, Emmett. I'm ..." The creamy white ceiling he expected to see was, instead, a forbidding black hole. "... up," he gulped.

He remembered now. Cruz was not in his soft, warm bed in cabin 202 on board *Orion*, Explorer Academy's flagship vessel. Not even close. He was huddled at the bottom of a cold, damp cave somewhere outside of Aksaray, Turkey. Cruz's neck was tipped back. His head, rather than being cradled in his cloud of a pillow, was awkwardly butted up against unfor-giving rock. The last thing he recalled before falling asleep was peering up into the stone well he'd fallen down. Cruz had scanned the void for any hint of light, any sign that help was on the way. He had seen only dark-ness then. And now.

"*Achoo!*" With the sneeze, Cruz's head snapped forward. A cramp shot through his neck. "Ow!" he yelled, and his cry echoed back to him. "Ow ... ow ... ow."

Cruz scooted out from under the dribble of water. Bones lay

scattered around him like driftwood on the beach after a storm. The good news was they no longer frightened him. At first, coming face-to-skull with a dozen or so skeletons *had* freaked him out. To get his heart to stop trying to leap out of his chest, Cruz had told himself it wasn't so bad. He would have been excited to uncover even a tiny piece of bone near the surface, so there was no reason to panic over finding a bunch of them so far below it, right? That sounded good. Plus, it had kept his heart where it belonged.

Once Cruz realized he had survived the tumble into the cave, his first impulse had been to reach into the upper pocket of his uniform for Mell, his honeybee drone. She could fly to the surface for help. Unfortunately, his pocket was empty. He'd left the little drone back on *Orion*. Mell was on a mission of her own. A few weeks back, Bryndis had shown him a blue door she'd discovered on the lowest deck of the ship. Cruz had left Mell perched above the mystery door to record anyone entering or leaving the room. Soon after, the drone had captured Jericho Miles on video. It was quite a surprise to Cruz. Jericho was a tech who worked in the top secret Synthesis lab in the basement of the Academy. So what was he

doing on board *Orion*? Emmett had said it probably wasn't anything to worry about, reasoning that Explorer Academy was the perfect cover for the Synthesis to travel the world and conduct classified research. Still, Cruz couldn't shake the feeling that something else was going on.

Cruz glanced at the clock on his school-issued Organic Synchronization wrist-band (aka the Open Sesame passkey band). The thin gold screen read 3:12 a.m. Seriously?

He'd been stuck here for 11 hours! The numbers were flickering. The mini solar-powered computer must be losing juice. Cruz let out a ragged breath. So far, his attempts to contact the surface had failed.

Cruz tapped his communications pin. "Cruz Coronado to Marisol Coronado."

He got no response from his aunt.

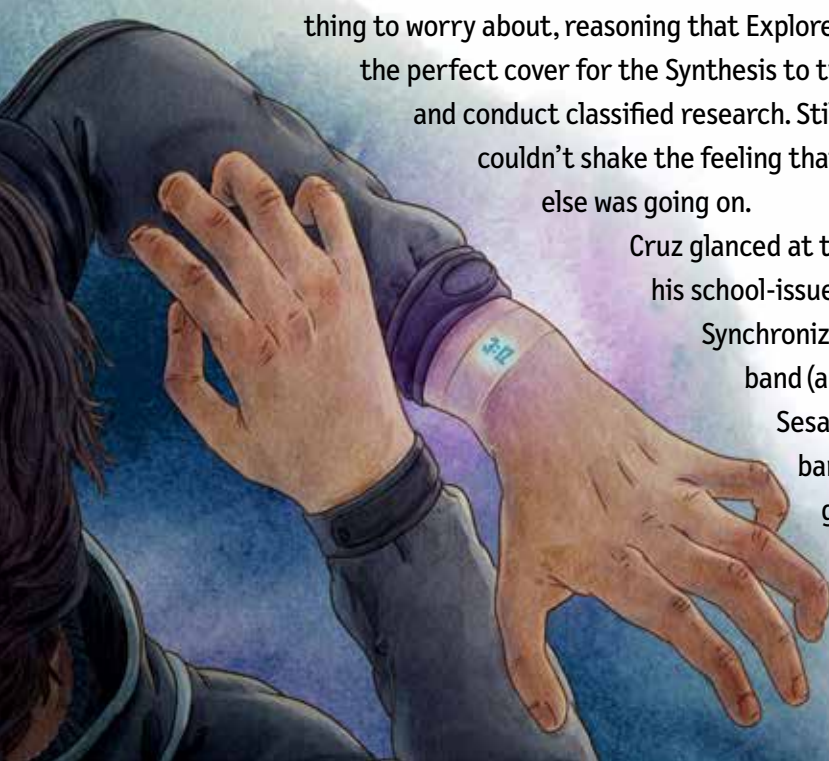
Numb fingertips touched the pin again. "Cruz to Emmett Lu?"

Again, nothing. Cruz tried the rest of his teammates—Sailor York, Bryndis Jónsdóttir, and Dugan Marsh. No answer.

Before his mishap, Cruz had been on an archaeological mission with the rest of the explorers. It had begun as a class assignment on board *Orion*. Team Cousteau—Cruz's team—had been scouring satellite images looking for looting pits, when they'd come across the outline of an unknown archaeological feature. Thinking they may have stumbled onto an ancient tomb or temple, Aunt Marisol and Dr. Luben had led all 23 explorers to the actual location in Turkey. Cruz had been excavating alongside his teammates, when he'd broken away to check out an outcrop. The rest was blurry. One minute he was examining prehistoric art on the wall of a cave, and the next he was plunging down a hole. Still, Cruz was lucky. His OS band indicated he'd suffered only a slight concussion and minor bruises. It could have been worse. Had he landed a few feet to the left, he would have hit solid rock instead of hard-packed dirt.

Cruz suddenly sat up. There had been something else, too ... before the fall. A jolt. It hadn't come from beneath him, not like an earthquake or a landslide. It was more like ...

Pressure. Yes. When he'd leaned into the space to look down, Cruz had felt a pressure between his shoulder blades. The fog of uncertainty was beginning to clear. His fall was no accident. He'd been pushed! And there was no doubt in Cruz's mind who was behind it: Nebula. Several weeks ago, he'd received an anonymous note warning him that Nebula's spies were out to steal the journal and kill him before he turned 13. Yet, Cruz still had the journal safely tucked in the upper-left pocket of his jacket. And today was November 29—his 13th birthday.





“You’re zero for two, Nebula,” Cruz shouted into the empty cavern. “I’m still alive!” “Alive . . . ive . . . ive,” proudly proclaimed his echo.

But for how long?

This was not how he’d planned to spend his birthday. His father would be calling. Maybe he’d already tried. Cruz sure wished he could talk to his dad. His mom, too. But only one of those things was truly possible. He wondered if his dad had gotten him the new hover surfboard he’d been asking for. Okay, begging for. Cruz gazed at his stone prison. Home felt like a galaxy away.

It was his own fault. Cruz had broken the two most important rules of exploring. Rule number one: Never go by yourself. Rule number two: Always tell your expedition leader where you’re headed. Cruz had done neither of those things. Dr. Luben had been the one to first point out the unusual cave to Cruz. Cruz’s only hope was that the visiting instructor would remember doing so and lead the team to the cave. It was a long shot, but it was all he had.

Cruz slid over a bit farther to avoid the dripping water, which was now a steady trickle. Listening to the water was making him thirsty. He wished he could put his mouth under the flow but knew better. The water might contain bacteria, parasites, or chemicals. If only he had his aluminum bottle and survival kit, he could purify it. However, the bottle, along with his phone, tablet, and the rest of his gear were all in his backpack. Cruz had no clue where that was—maybe snagged on one of the pointed rocks that had jabbed him as he’d tumbled into the cave.

A powerful rumble came from the pit of his stomach. How long could he survive without food and water? Emmett would likely know the answer to that (probably to the minute). Cruz knew the more general one. Without fresh water, he could survive three to four days. Four days of sitting here waiting to die? No thanks.

Before falling asleep, Cruz had searched the well for an escape tunnel. He’d found nothing, but he’d been sore and dazed then. He might have missed something. Getting on all fours, Cruz began to crawl around the perimeter of the cave. He went much slower this time,

probing every inch. There *had* to be a way out.

“Or not.” He grimaced, gently rolling a skull out of his path.

About halfway around the well, he noticed a pile of rocks stacked up against the curved wall. They might be blocking an outlet. Cruz began to move the basketball-size stones, one by one. He got into a rhythm. Bend, lift, turn, toss. Bend, lift, turn, toss.

Ten minutes later, Cruz was huffing and about to take a break, when he realized his shoes were wet. Water was seeping through the space he was making. If water was getting in, that meant . . .

A way out! Cruz picked up the pace. He moved several more rocks, then, hunching his shoulders, he wriggled into the opening. There were only more rocks ahead of him. It was a dead end. A very wet dead end.

Reversing course, Cruz scrambled to put the stones back into place, packing them in as tightly as he could. But he couldn’t keep the flow of water from gushing in. The grotto was quickly beginning to fill. Cruz had to get to higher ground. He hopped onto the only thing he could find: a rocky shelf about three feet tall. It was barely big enough to stand on. His heels hanging off the edge and his chin inches from the wall, Cruz searched for a route up so he could climb if he had to. And pretty soon he had to.

Cruz found a couple of toeholds but had a tougher time spotting grips for his hands. It was impossible to lean back *and* remain on the little ledge. Cruz reached over his head as water sloshed into his shoes. Blindly, he slapped at the stone. He was running out of time. Cruz went up on his toes, his hands pawing for a bump or notch or cranny or something to grab on to. He found nothing. The water was rising quickly . . . to his ankles . . . his calves . . .

Cruz kept slapping at the cave wall, the coarse rock shredding the skin on his fingers.

There! A knot! Not a big one, but big enough. With the water level at his knees, Cruz curled both hands around the bulge. He lifted his right foot, wedged it into the toehold, and pulled himself up. Raising his left foot, he placed it where he thought the crevice should be but hit only flat

rock. Cruz moved his foot up, searching. He tried making small circles but couldn't find the gap. His fingers were cramping. Ugh! Where was it? His knuckles were slipping. If he didn't find a space soon, he was going to lose his ...

“Arrggh!”

Cruz toppled backward, sending up a giant splash. He was back where he'd started. Cruz slapped the water in frustration. Five seconds later, he was on his feet again. Fortunately, *Orion's* science tech lab chief, Fanchon Quills, had designed their uniforms to be waterproof, but Cruz had a feeling Fanchon hadn't expected he would have to swim in the thing. In another few minutes, however, that's exactly what he was going to have to do. He zipped his upper-left pocket, where he kept his mother's holo-journal, then made sure the lower-right pocket was tightly closed, too. It contained his octopod. Both pockets were watertight, thank goodness.

Closing the collar of his uniform, Cruz felt something scrape the back of his neck. He reached behind him, his fingers closing around a metal tab. That's right! Every explorer's jacket was equipped with two critical survival items: a parachute, which wouldn't help him here, and a flotation device, which most definitely would! Except Cruz wasn't sure how to inflate the thing. He could almost hear his adviser, Taryn Secliff, say, *You'd know what to do if you hadn't glossed over the uniform instruction manual.*

“I know, Taryn, I know ...” Cruz yanked open his belt and unzipped his jacket. Wrestling free of the sleeves, he whipped the coat inside out. He found a small tab near the collar. It was engraved with a *P*—for “parachute,” no doubt. Okay, so where was the one for the float? Frantically, he went down the lining, searching for an *F* tab. He didn't find one. Cruz moaned. “How in the world am I supposed to activate this dumb flotation device?”

“Personal flotation device deployment confirmed.” The calm female voice startled him. It was Fanchon!

“Cruz Coronado, please prepare for PFD deployment,” said Fanchon. Her instructions were coming from his OS band! Smart. Connecting his

uniform to his personal computer gave him, and only him, access to and control of his gear. He should have known when all else failed, he could count on his OS band for help.

What did Fanchon mean by “prepare”? He was about to ask, when the computerized Fanchon instructed, “Please fully secure jacket, pockets, and cuffs. Beginning ten-second countdown sequence now. Ten ... nine ... eight ...”

“Hold on!” Cruz threw his jacket over his shoulders and shoved his arms into his sleeves. The water was edging up past his knees. A current was beginning to form. He had to take a wider stance to remain upright in the swirling water.

“Six ... five ...”

Cruz yanked the buckles tight on the bottom of each sleeve, then jerked the zipper on the front of his jacket up so hard he was sure he'd broken it.

“Two ... one,” said Fanchon. “PFD activation commencing.”

The hem of Cruz's jacket tightened against his hips. His cuffs and collar were sealing, too. A sudden rush of air down his back sent a chill through him. Cruz watched his sleeves slowly swell. As they did, his arms rose from his sides. His chest was puffing up, too. His jacket took less than 15 seconds to fully inflate. He felt like a giant marshmallow.

The water was still rising ... up to his hips ... his stomach ... his ribs ...

Once the water level reached his chest, Cruz lifted his feet to test if the float could hold him. It did! He was buoyant. As the floodwaters inched upward, they took Cruz with them. It was strange to be going back up the very hole that had brought him down here, but at least he was moving in a better direction. Cruz wasn't sure how far he had fallen into the shaft. He strained, looking for the gap in the rock he had fallen through.

Uh-oh. Trouble ahead. Cruz was heading for an opening on the opposite side of the cave wall. No! He needed to go up, not down. Kicking, he thrashed his arms to steer away from the hole, but the current was too strong. He was going in! The force of the tide spun him through



the opening, tipping him to one side. Water went up his nose and down his throat. Cruz came up coughing, trying to spit out water while gulping in air.

When he could see again, Cruz realized he was riding the rapids through a narrow tunnel. Of course! This must be a lava tube. Once the water had risen to the level of the tube, he'd been dumped into the passage like a helpless spider down a bathtub drain. The river was powerful and choppy. It was like rafting on the wildest white water imaginable, except *Cruz* was the raft. The swift flow tossed him from one side of the tube to the other.

Bouncing from wall to wall, Cruz quickly saw he wasn't out of the woods yet. About 30 yards ahead, there was a fork in the tube. The river was propelling him straight toward the wall of rock between the two paths. Which way should he go? Cruz kicked hard with his right foot and tried to row with his right arm, shooting for the left fork. This was going to be close! Turning his head, Cruz braced for impact. His shoulder smashed into a corner, but he made it into the left fork. Almost immediately, he felt the force of the water easing up. Was he slowing? Yes! The water level was dropping, too. A few hundred yards downstream, Cruz was able to touch bottom. Dragging his soles, he skidded to a stop on a sandbar. Exhausted, Cruz could only lie on the wet gravel, heaving. "Deactivate ... PFD."

"Confirmed. PFD deflating," came Fanchon's muffled voice from inside his puffed jacket. Cruz shivered as air escaped from vents in his collar, cuffs, and coattail. "Warning!" said Fanchon. "Organic Synchronization band detecting elevated heart rate, elevated body temperature, inadequate caloric intake, inadequate hydration, electrolyte imbalance—"

"Yeah, yeah," groaned Cruz. "OS band, switch to data readout."

"Confirmed."

Cruz usually kept his OS band stats on "readout" rather than "spoken." In all of the jostling, he must have hit the command on his touch screen. His coat returning to its original form, Cruz rolled onto his side. His legs felt like concrete blocks. His arms, too. Even his eyes were sore.



Everything was going in and out of focus.

He squinted. Was that a ...?

Snake! Cruz popped up. Thrusting his hands out behind him, he did a crab walk at world-record pace, traveling backward over the gravel and dirt as fast as his hands and feet could take him. The only thing that stopped him was the cave wall. His blood pounded in his ears. With trembling fingers, Cruz reached to unzip the pocket that held his octopod. One spritz was enough to paralyze a human for a good 15 minutes. He hoped it would have the same effect on big black poisonous snakes. Cruz fumbled for the ball. He took aim. The snake had slithered around a carved stone post...

Wait. A *carved* post? In a cave?

“Light on, full power,” he whispered into his OS band. Cruz knew the device didn’t have much power left, but he *had* to see this.

As the beam from his OS band gradually illuminated his surroundings, Cruz’s jaw dropped. Beyond the snake, which, as luck would have it, was stone, stood a maze of crumbling buildings. An ancient city! Was this real?

Slowly rising, Cruz’s wobbly legs took him toward the sprawling

honeycomb of attached structures. A few of the rectangular mud-brick walls remained intact, but many had collapsed. Cruz was able to step over many of the walls. Most of the rooms were the same size and shape. The walls had been coated with plaster and smoothed down, their surfaces decorated with red-and-black geometric paintings of humans, flowers, and animals—birds, bears, leopards, dogs, and cattle. One wall in particular caught his eye. Mounted at shoulder level were the thick horns of a bull or an ox. Cruz wasn’t sure about the species, but he knew the technique, all right. “Bucranium,” he murmured.

It was a term he’d learned from Aunt Marisol. Bucranium was an art form dating back to the Stone Age. People covered the skulls and horns of large animals with plaster, then hung the pieces in their homes and temples. His aunt had told him that sometimes, bucrania surrounded a burial place, a symbolic way to protect it from harm. Cruz only knew bucrania from the postcards Aunt Marisol used to send him. He had never before seen it in person. Cruz went in for a closer look at the smooth, pale white horns.

Cruz continued on and, barely a few steps later, saw a glint in the rubble. He picked up a figurine no bigger than his palm. He dusted it off.



It looked like a deer, though it might be a horse. It was hard to tell, its features dulled and worn by time. The deer was unpainted. Its head looked curiously outward, and a tiny black eye sparkled. Obsidian, he'd bet. Thousands of years ago, the sharp volcanic glass rock would have been used for all kinds of things, from weapons to tools to art. The deer's other eye was missing its gem. Curling the deer into his palm, Cruz continued carefully picking his way through the ruins. On the outer edge of the labyrinth, the cave ceiling sloped downward, crushing a tall, circular stone structure. Whatever it was—a temple or theater—was buried under tons of dirt and rock. Cruz could see only a few feet of a curved wall. Could this be the feature Cruz had spotted on the satellite map, the one that had brought the explorers out here?

If it was, that meant...

He had done it! Cruz had found the site the explorers had been searching for! He threw his head back. "Wahoo!" His voice was still echoing through the stone chamber when his OS light went out. Cruz was in the dark. Again. Shortest celebration in history.

Okay, so he'd made the archaeological discovery of a lifetime, but what would it matter if *his* lifetime ended here? Cruz sank to the ground. He balanced the deer on his knee and waited for his eyes to adjust. His stomach was demanding food again. His lips were dry, his throat parched. The inside of his head felt like a cotton ball, all fuzzy and soft.

He would close his eyes. For a minute.

One minute became two, two became three...

Cruz heard a noise. It sounded like static and was coming from his OS band.

"Em... to... onado."

"Emmett?" Cruz's eyelids flew open. "Emmett, it's Cruz! It's me. I'm here! *I'm here!* Can you hear me?"

He could hear cheers.

"We hear you!" called Emmett. "We've been trying to contact you for hours."

"Same here."

"Cruz, are you hurt?" It was his aunt.

Cruz tapped the health icon on his OS band.

*No medical conditions to report.*

Weird. Hadn't his band said he'd had a concussion and a hairline fracture of the right big toe earlier? The OS band must have been malfunctioning. Or he had been dreaming the whole thing.

"No, I'm... I'm fine, Aunt Marisol," said Cruz. A noise came from his belly that sounded like an airplane taking off. "Okay, maybe a little hungry and tired but otherwise all right. How did you find me?"

"I tracked your location through your OS band," said Emmett.

Cruz clasped his hands. *Thank you, OS band!*

"It took me forever to lock on to you," said Emmett. "You must have been moving around a little."

Cruz snorted. "Yeah, a little."

"It looks like you're within a half mile of a ground-level opening," said Emmett.

"I am? I'm in the dark. Which way should I go to get out of—"

"Don't," ordered Emmett. "I don't want to lose your signal again. Stay put."

"We're going to hike in." That was Dugan.

"We've got supplies," added Sailor. "We're bringing food, water, blankets, and first aid gear. Do you need anything else?"

"No." His teammates were all he needed.

"I'll call your dad," said Aunt Marisol. "Sit tight. We'll be there as soon as we can."

"Okay. Cruz, out."

"Wait, Cruz! I... we almost forgot," said Emmett. "There's one more thing..."

What was wrong *now*? "Yeah?"

"Happy birthday!" came the chorus from his fellow explorers.

Cruz managed a grin. It may not have been the birthday he'd planned on, but it was certainly one he'd never forget.