INСПІРОДИНИЙ ІЗ НАСТОЙЛИВИМИ І РОЗКЛАДАЮЧИМИСЯ ТРОЩИ МІСЄВИХ АДВЕРТЮР І ЕКСПЛОРУЮЧІ СОЦІЕТІ

**EXPLORER ACADEMY BOOK ONE: THE NEBULA SECRET**

Adventures, danger, and a thrilling global mission await 12-year-old Cruz Coronado as he leaves behind his home in Hawaii to attend the prestigious Explorer Academy, where he and 23 other kids from around the globe will train to become the next generation of great explorers. But for Cruz, there’s more at stake. No sooner has he arrived at the Academy than he discovers that his family has a mysterious past with the organization that could jeopardize his future. In the midst of codebreaking and cool classes, new friends and amazing augmented-reality expeditions, Cruz must tackle the biggest question of all: WHO IS OUT TO GET HIM ... AND WHY?

“ABSOLUTELY BRILLIANT!”
— T. A. Barron, author of the Merlin Saga

**PRE-ORDER YOUR COPY NOW!**
Available wherever books are sold.

SPECIAL OFFER:
TURN TO PAGE 40!

National Geographic
ExplorerAcademy.com
Copyright © 2018 National Geographic Partners, LLC

Enjoy this SNEAK PEEK
then share it with a friend.

TRUDI TRUEIT
SNEAK PEEK AT CHAPTERS 1-4!

EXPLORER ACADEMY

THE NEBULA SECRET

TRUDI TRUEIT

UNDER THE STARS

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
“CRUZ!”

His name floated easily to him across the water. Cruz turned to see his dad waving him in from the beach. It couldn’t be time to go already, could it? Knee-deep in the warm surf, Cruz raised an arm. He spread his fingers to ask—beg—for five more minutes. “Please,” he whispered into the evening breeze.

In about three hours, he would be leaving for Explorer Academy. It was a long way from Kauai to Washington, D.C.—4,882 miles, to be exact. And Cruz was scared. What if he didn’t make any friends? What if he couldn’t handle the training? What if he disappointed his family, his friends, his teachers, and everybody who expected him to be something even he wasn’t sure he could be?

His father was giving him the thumbs-up. Yes!

Pushing the what-ifs from his mind, Cruz faced the tangerine sunset of Hanalei Bay. He would think about everything else later. He slid his belly onto the surfboard and began windmilling his arms through the tepid teal waters as he’d done thousands of times. He’d been surfing for as long as he could remember. His dad teased him that he spent more time in the water than out of it, which was probably true. Cruz loved the sweeping motion of the waves. Water was constant and dependable. Comforting.
Approaching the break, Cruz grasped the sides of his surfboard. He pushed the nose underwater in a smooth duck dive and the swell passed over him. Surfacing, he paddled out a bit farther and cut a 45-degree turn that put him parallel to the beach. Lining himself up with the end of the long pier, he sat up and straddled his board, legs dangling. He liked the take-off zone. It was “the calm before the ride,” as Lani liked to say. Bobbing like this, he could think about anything or nothing. The choice was up to him. On his last day at home, Cruz didn’t want to think. He wanted to feel. He wanted to feel every sensation. And remember.

To his left, beyond the crescent-shaped inlet, rose the emerald peaks of the mountains on the northern shore. In the fading light, it was easy to pick out the white waterfalls cascading down the creases of the hills. Cruz spotted his dad walking through the parking lot—geez, sailboats 20 miles offshore could probably see that crazy-bright yellow-and-blue-zigzag shirt. His father would be headed back up to the Goofy Foot, their surf shop, to close for the night. Cruz glanced right, into the deep orange sunset. It was as if the glowing orb had rolled out a carpet of light across the ocean for him, just to say goodbye. He was sure going to miss this place.

“You don’t have to go, you know,” Lani had said last spring when he’d told her he’d been accepted into the Academy. Her words stung. Lani was his best friend—the one who always found the silver lining. Not that he blamed her. They had both applied to the school, yet only Cruz had been accepted. It had come as a shock. He had thought Lani surely would have been chosen over him—she was so much smarter and more creative. But then the certified letter had arrived. For him. It was impressive, with its fancy parchment paper and shiny gold seal.

Cruz’s aunt, Marisol, who taught anthropology at the Academy, said they only accepted 25 or so students per class from around the world. It was quite an achievement to be admitted. Still, Cruz wondered, had he earned it? His aunt had likely pulled a few strings to get him in. Or it could have been offered out of guilt. Cruz’s mom also once worked at the Society—she had been a neuroscientist with the Synthesis, its scientific arm. Seven years ago, there was a bad accident in her lab. It had taken her life. Another Synthesis scientist, Dr. Elistair Fallowfeld, had
“Come on, Lani,” he had pleaded. “I need your support.”
“Okay, okay, but you’d better stay in touch or so help me I will track you down all the way to the North Pole, if I have to.”
She wasn’t kidding. If Cruz had learned anything it was that when Leilani Kealoha said she would do something, she meant it.
“Absolutely,” he’d said. “Easy as Dad’s guava pie.”
She had folded her arms. “You know I hate pie.”
Girls.
There! Cruz spotted his wave. Dropping his chest, he flattened himself against the board. As the swell rolled in behind him, Cruz turned for shore and paddled hard. His strokes were strong and deliberate. Timing was key. Pop up too early and he’d miss the crest. Go too late and he’d wipe out. Cruz could feel the surge growing behind him.

Almost time. Just . . . a few . . . more . . . seconds . . .

When he felt the tail of his board begin to lift, Cruz arched his back, pushed off with his hands, and planted his feet under him—right foot in front and left foot in back, in goofy foot position. Most right-handed people surf with their left foot in front, but not Cruz. Slowly, he lifted himself into a low crouch. The moment the wave broke under him, he let go of the board and rose, arms out for balance. Cruz felt the familiar smooth glide of success. He’d hit the crest perfectly!

“Woo-hoo!” he yelled, angling the board inward. Mist sprayed his face as he made a sweeping S pattern through the curl of water. Cruz shifted his weight, skimming left, then right, then left again to ride the swirl as fast and as far as he could. Surfing made him feel powerful. Free. Invincible! If only the feeling lasted longer than a TV commercial.

Cruz rode the wave inland until it dissipated into foam. Reaching for the Velcro strap on his ankle that tethered him to his board, his hand hesitated. It hadn’t been five minutes, had it?

Maybe one more run . . .

Charging back into the foam, Cruz tossed his board into the water, hopped on, and paddled out past the break. As before, he scooted upright to straddle his board. Cruz was lifting his left foot
to double-check the ankle strap of the leash when he felt a tug on his right heel. It wasn’t a swish, like a fish or turtle passing. It was a good pull. And it could mean only one thing: shark! Cruz tried to slide to the left side of his board, away from the shark, but it had a firm hold on his ankle. He was being dragged down, away from the surface.

Don’t panic! KICK!

Cruz clung to his surfboard, the only thing that would keep him afloat, and kicked with all his might. If he could manage to turn around, he could use the board to bop the shark on the nose and break loose. As he struggled, a million thoughts raced through his head.

Stupid! Sharks feed at dusk. You should have gone in when Dad called. You’re not supposed to drown. Stupid!

He was swallowing water. He couldn’t breathe.

No. No! NO!

The words pounded in rhythm to his heart.

He would not die this way.

With his lungs burning and his energy waning, Cruz twisted his body in one last effort to strike a blow. He lashed out and his fist hit something smooth and hard. Bubbles swarmed around him. He saw a yellow snake. No! A tube. This was no shark. It was a person! His thrashing had knocked the air hose loose from the diver’s tank. Cruz felt a sharp pain in his ankle and then, suddenly, he was free! Through the bubbles, he caught sight of a pair of fanning fins. The diver was moving away.

Cruz stroked for the surface, his chest on the verge of exploding. He pushed his arms up through the water, up and out, up and out. He kept his feet moving, kicking, kicking, until finally he breached the surface. Cruz gulped as much air as his lungs could handle. Treading, he spun around, his eyes darting from the pier to the beach to the horizon and back. He did several circles, but didn’t see anyone nearby.

Take it easy. You’re okay. He’s gone. You’re okay.

Cruz flung his arm behind him, groping for his surfboard, still tied to his leg. He tried to slide it under his body but was shaking so much it took him a few tries to do what usually came naturally. Clutching his
board and looking over his shoulder, he rode the tide in until he scraped bottom. Still gasping, Cruz rolled off the board and onto the wet sand. Never had he been so happy to be back on land! He lay on his back for several minutes, feeling himself breathe. His hands tingled, his throat was raw, and his right ankle throbbed. But he was alive.

As Cruz stared up at the deep violet sky, at the first winking stars of night, one word kept scrolling through his brain: Why?

“THAT must have been some tsunami,” said his dad, locking the door of the surf shop behind Cruz.

“Huh?”

“You look a bit dazed, son.”

“I’m okay.”

“You cut your leg.”

“I did?” Cruz glanced down to see a red line of blood dripping from a gash on his right ankle. “I... I guess I snagged it on some coral.”

His dad led him to the bathroom in the back of the store. He cleaned the wound. “It’s a good cut, but it doesn’t look like it needs stitches. I think you’ll live.”

His dad’s words, meant to be soothing, sent a shudder through Cruz. He was lucky to be alive. Maybe Cruz should tell his dad what had really happened. If he did, though, his father might change his mind about the Academy. Dad was already on the fence as it was. At first, he hadn’t wanted Cruz to go to the school. He’d said Cruz was too young and it was too far from home and the expeditions were too dangerous, but they both knew there was only one reason behind his objection—and it had nothing to do with age, distance, or risk.

After Cruz’s mother died, his father had moved them back to Kauai, where he had grown up. Starting over wasn’t easy, but they had managed. Cruz’s dad opened the Goofy Foot surf shop. Cruz enrolled in
a new school and made friends. They found things to do to keep busy on the weekends. They surfed every great and not-so-great beach on the island. They hiked dozens of trails, from Sleeping Giant in the east to Waipo’o Falls in the west. They even took a rock climbing class. In time, Cruz and his father had begun to heal. Things were stable now—not perfect but no longer raw and painful. Like the beach at low tide, life had a steady and sure rhythm to it. Now Cruz wanted to return to the place where their family had been torn apart, to possibly open the wounds all over again.

“I’m not sure I understand.” His dad had stared at him in wonder. “After all that’s happened, why would you want to go back there?”

“I want to go everywhere, Dad. I want to be an explorer.”

“You were so young. How could you remember . . . ?”

That much was true. Cruz was five when his mother died. Maybe if he could recall more about their life before this one he wouldn’t feel such an urge to go. He’d be satisfied. Or terrified.

“Cruz?” His father was nudging him back to the present.

“Yeah?”

“I said, you’re not hurt anywhere else, are you? Did you hit your head?”

“No.”

“Why don’t you go on up? I’ll finish here. By the way, Lani came by.”

“She did?” Cruz wondered why she hadn’t come down to the beach.

“She left something for you. One sec.” His dad went to the front of the store and returned with a small turquoise gift bag.

Fishing through layers of tissue paper, Cruz took out a card and a white, square box. He opened the card.

Now you can control Mell anywhere, anytime. Well, not anywhere.

Your range is about 4,000 feet.

Aloha, Lani

P.S. I told you I could do it!
Cruz lifted the lid off the box. Sitting on a cushion of cotton was a tiny pin in the shape of a honeycomb. He let out a laugh. Leave it to Lani to not only take him up on a dare but to come through. “She did it!”

His dad tilted his head. “What is it?”

“It’s to communicate with Mell,” said Cruz, holding the pin up between his thumb and index finger. “Lani made a voice-command remote so I don’t have to use the controller or my phone. I’m pretty sure her mom helped her with it, but still…”

“She’s a smart one, that Leilani,” said his dad.

Forgetting about his ankle, Cruz zipped up the back stairs to their apartment above the store. He raced to his bedroom and attached the pin to his T-shirt. “Mell, turn on,” he said loudly and clearly.

The tiny carbon-fiber bee sitting on his shelf flashed its eyes from black to gold. The remote worked!

“Mell, come to me,” said Cruz. Within seconds the computer honey-bee, only slightly larger than a real bee, hovered inches from his nose. “Mell, sit on my shoulder,” he said. The bee obeyed. Wild!

Cruz flipped open his computer. The second Lani answered the video call, he burst out, “Mell, speak and wave to Lani on the computer.”

Buzzing, Mell wagged an antenna.

Lani laughed and waved back. “I’m just glad it works.”

“It’s perfect.” Admiration dripped from his words.

“Make sure you give it clear commands, okay?”

“I will. Thanks, Lani.”

“You’re welcome.” She beamed.

“Hey, how come you didn’t come down to the beach?” asked Cruz.

“I don’t know.” Her smile melted. “I figured you’d want to be alone. Last day and all.”

“You should have.” He checked behind him to make sure his dad hadn’t come up. “You are not going to believe what happened to me!”

“What?”

“Someone tried to drown me!”

She snorted. “Sure they did.”

“I’m not kidding,” he said. “They grabbed my leg and tried to drag me underwater…”

“I’ll bet it was one of the lifeguards pulling a prank. Who’s that kid that’s always throwing grapes at us when we go by? Manu or Mano Somebody—”

“It wasn’t a lifeguard, Lani. It was someone in scuba gear: fins, mask, tank—the works. I’m tellin’ you, he tried to kill me and he almost did.”

Her expression changed when she realized he was not joking. “Who would want to hurt you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you okay?”

He turned his ankle. It had stopped throbbing. “Yeah.”

“Your dad must have freaked out when you told him.”

“I didn’t exactly—”

“Told me what?”

Cruz spun. “Uh… hi, Dad. She means about the coral.” He turned back to Lani. “Nah, he’s seen me do much worse than that!” Cruz made an O shape with his mouth to signal to her he didn’t want his dad to know any more.

She got the message. “Have a good trip, Cruz. Be safe, okay?”

“I will.”

“Because if you don’t watch your step, I’ll track you down all the way—”

“To the North Pole—I know.” Cruz touched the honeycomb pin. “Thanks again.”

“Alotah,” she said, her voice cracking.

“Alotah.”

His screen went dark.

Cruz’s dad was sitting on the edge of the bed, a cream-colored envelope in his hand.

“Is that for me?” prompted Cruz.
His father tapped the envelope against his knee. “Yes.”
Another 30 seconds passed.
“You…uh…planning on handing it over this year?” teased Cruz.
He guessed it must have money in it. His dad always had a hard time parting with dollars.
“That’s a good question.” His dad rubbed his forehead. “Sorry. I’m not quite sure how to do this.”
Cruz sat up. Maybe it wasn’t cash, after all.
“I’ve practiced it a thousand times,” said his father, “and now I can’t seem to…I guess I should say it and be done with it, right?”
“That’s what you always tell me.”
Okay. Here goes. Straight out. Just gonna say it.”
“Daaaad.”

“It’s a letter from your mother.”
Cruz jumped and Mell fell off his shoulder. The bee quickly recovered and circled up to land on him again. “Mell, turn off,” ordered Cruz, catching the robotic insect. He placed it on his desk. “It’s from…Mom? I don’t get it. How…?”
“We never talked about her projects,” explained his dad, “but I knew her work at the Synthesis was…difficult. Even dangerous. I made her a promise that if anything ever happened I would give this letter to you on your thirteenth birthday.”
“But I won’t be thirteen until—”
“November twenty-ninth, I know,” he said, “but you’ll be at the Academy then and it doesn’t seem right to make you wait until winter break…I did promise, but…” He stood up. “It’s bad timing now, isn’t it? You’re leaving in a couple of hours. What was I thinking? We should do this later—”
“No!” Cruz leaped up. Was his dad kidding? Cruz had no intention of waiting even one more minute for a letter from his mother. “It’s okay, Dad,” he said gently, holding out his hand. “I can handle it.”
His dad placed the envelope in Cruz’s outstretched palm, his body instantly relaxing, as if he was glad to finally be rid of the burden. He saw Cruz’s open suitcase on the bed. “You all packed?”
“Pretty much.”
“Are you sure you want to take that?” He nodded to the silver metal dome the size of a small snow globe tucked into the corner of the suitcase.
“Why not?”
“It’s more delicate than it looks. It could break on the flight. Or get confiscated if the authorities think it’s a weapon.”
His dad was right, of course. He couldn’t risk losing his most prized possession. Cruz’s shoulders sagged. “I’ll leave it.”
“Don’t worry, it’ll be safe here.” Standing, his father headed for the door. “You should take a catnap if you can, son. It’s a long flight.”
“Dad?” Cruz held up the letter. “Don’t you want to…?”
“No. It’s for you. I’ll wake you in an hour.” He left, softly shutting the door behind him.

Cruz stared at the parchment envelope. Turned it over a few times. There was no writing on either side, not even his name. What was he waiting for? Cruz slid his index finger under the flap. It easily popped up.

His pulse quickening, he took out a thin, folded page made from the same creamy paper as the envelope. Gently, Cruz unfolded it. The black ink was a little faded, the slanted handwriting like delicate lace:

My dearest Cruz,
If you are reading this, it means I am not with you, and for that I am truly and deeply sorry. Bringing you into the world and watching you grow has been my greatest joy. I would love nothing more than to be there in person to give you a birthday hug, but sadly, this letter will have to do. My wish for you this year, and for all the years to come, is a life filled with discovery, passion, contribution, friendship, kindness, peace, and love. These are the things that give our lives meaning, whether we live for a day or a century. Happy 13th birthday. Never forget, you are an extraordinary being. Most important, never forget I love you.

Mom

Sometimes Cruz missed his mother so much it hurt. Physically hurt. Like when you have the flu and ache from your bones out. Cruz took the metal dome from his suitcase. It felt cold. Placing it on his nightstand, he tapped the side. Instantly, a three-dimensional holographic video recording of his mother appeared a few inches above its silver projector base. Cruz was in the video, too. He was about three years old. They were at the beach. He didn’t know where, but it must have been chilly, because they were both bundled up. Cruz was wearing a yellow raincoat with ducks around the hem and a matching hat. In his yellow galoshes, he was intently digging a trench around himself with a red plastic shovel. Watching him create his own little island in the sand and knowing she’d have to rescue him when he finished, his mother couldn’t resist giggling. Her long blond hair billowed in the brisk wind like a festival of kites.

“Look at him dig, Marco,” his mom said to his dad, who was behind the camera. “Our budding archaeologist.”

“And you were so hoping he’d go into neurobiology,” teased his dad.

“He can do both,” she said, turning to her child. “You can do anything you set your mind to, Cruzer.”

“Mama, help!” It was strange, watching his tiny younger self hold out his little arms to her.

Bending to scoop him up, her gray-blue eyes crinkled with happiness. The scene flickered, then faded into nothing with the two of them locked in a tight hug.

Seeing his mother usually comforted Cruz, but not this time. Not tonight.

Tonight, he hurt.
him and all he could see was a ton of blurry pink birds. Cruz didn’t mind. He’d missed her, too. He squeezed back.

His aunt pulled away to inspect him. “You must have grown a foot since spring.”

“Three-quarters of an inch.”

“Then it must be all this hair.” She tugged on a lock above his ear that was the same dark chocolate shade as her own. “Doesn’t that brother of mine ever take you for a haircut?”

Cruz rolled his eyes. “Aunt Marisol.”

“Did you get my postcard from Italy?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And?”

“You’re going to have to give me harder stuff to decode.” When she gave him a disbelieving smirk, he said, “Your message said you were excited for me to come and that you’d meet my plane… oh, and to look for the pink birds.” Cruz eyed her outfit. “You weren’t kidding, were you?”

“Good work. Tell me how you did it?” she asked. He knew finding out how he’d gone about deciphering her message was her favorite part of their game.

“Let’s see; there was a picture of a lion statue on the front of the postcard and the postmark was from Narni, Italy, so it was pretty obvious you were referring to your favorite series, the Chronicles of Narnia,” said Cruz. “Once I knew that, I had to figure out which book of the seven you’d chosen for a cipher. At first, I thought it was The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe ’cause of the lion statue, but The Magician’s Nephew seemed a better choice, since I am your nephew and you wouldn’t want to make it too easy for me. Next, it was a matter of figuring out which page to use as the cipher. On the jacket flap I read that C. S. Lewis’s birthday is November twenty-ninth, which is also my birthday. I knew that had to be more than a coincidence. I flipped to page eleven and started with the twenty-ninth word and ta-da—message decoded.”

“Nicely done, Special Agent Cruz,” said his aunt. “Narnia was your

AS THE plane banked left and the spire of the Washington Monument appeared in his window, Cruz nearly let out a cheer. He’d made it! After 13 hours (including stops in Seattle and Detroit), a soggy veggie burger, a broken seat-back TV, and a howling Chihuahua three rows back, he was finally about to touch down in the nation’s capital.

His left leg was asleep and his right ankle itched. Oops! He’d promised his dad he would change the bandage on his cut before he got to Washington, D.C. Technically, he still had about five minutes to make good on that vow. Quickly, Cruz slid down his sock and pulled off the old bandage. Where last night there had been a long red gash, there was now a thin pink line. Maybe the wound hadn’t been as deep as his dad had thought. Cruz balled up the bandage and stuffed it in his pocket. Once the plane touched down at Reagan National Airport, Cruz sent his dad a quick text to tell him he’d arrived.

Inside the terminal, Cruz spotted his aunt right away. She was wearing a bright pink suit and a scarf with pink flamingos held in place by a giant enamel flamingo pin. Didn’t it figure? Aunt Marisol had the same bold taste in clothing as Cruz’s dad. Athletic yet graceful, his aunt also had the same off-center smile and bright white teeth as his dad. Her thick, dark hair was pulled into a loose bun. Pink high heels were striding toward him. Within seconds, a pair of arms were around
mom’s favorite series, too. She must have read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* a hundred times. The two of us would use it to write coded notes to each other back in our Academy days when we were supposed to be listening to our teachers—not that you’d dare do anything like that in one of my anthropology classes, right?”

“Never.” He gave her a Cheshire grin.

“Oh, I nearly forgot! I brought someone from the Academy with me.” Aunt Marisol motioned toward a boy about Cruz’s age standing near her. He was wearing a Toronto Blue Jays baseball cap, oval-shaped lime green glasses, a blue T-shirt, and jeans. “This is Emmett Lu, one of your roommates. Emmett, this is my nephew, Cruz.”

“Hi!” said Cruz, a little too enthusiastically.

“Hey.” Emmett nodded. “Dr. Coronado was telling me about the bee drone you built. Did you bring it?”

“Yes,” said Cruz, lifting his backpack, “but I didn’t build Mell. I only programmed it. Although I did upgrade the camera from a thirty to three hundred millimeter, ten-X cinema zoom.”

“Cool! I can’t wait to see it in action.”

“I’ll fly it for you when we get to the Academy.”

“I had a feeling the two of you might hit it off,” said Aunt Marisol, tapping at her phone. “I’ll meet you at that grill near the main entrance. Emmett, you know the one, right? Good. If you’re hungry, get something to eat because the dining hall at the Academy will be closed.” They watched her rush off, the ends of her long flamingo scarf becoming wings.

They went to baggage claim to pick up Cruz’s suitcase, then headed up to the café. The smell of cooking food set Cruz’s stomach rumbling. They stood in line and Cruz ordered a grilled cheese sandwich and a cup of tomato soup. He offered to buy something for Emmett, too.

“Thanks, but I’m fine,” said Emmett. He took off his cap, pushed his black hair up off his forehead, and straightened his green glasses. “I had thirds at dinner an hour ago.”

“Dinner?” Cruz glanced at the airplane-shaped clock above the cash register. It read three minutes after 7 p.m. “This is lunch for me. It’s only one o’clock back in Kauai.”

“That’s right, you’ve lost time,” said Emmett.

“Six hours of my life—gone, poof! It doesn’t seem fair, does it? We should build a time machine for people who fly so they can get back some of their lost time.”

Emmett started to laugh, then paused. “You know, that would be a cool project. We’d win the North Star, for sure.”

Cruz knew about the North Star award. It was given to the new explorer who showed the most promise at the end of his or her first year.

“We could be the first co-winners in school history,” said Emmett.

“Sounds good to me,” said Cruz, tasting his tomato soup. It was hot and a little spicy. Perfect!

“My dad won the North Star when he was at the Academy.” Emmett slid his triangular, sky blue frames up his nose.

“No pressure there, huh?” Cruz did a double take. “Hey! Weren’t your glasses green a minute ago? And round?”

“They’re emoto-glasses. They change color and shape based on my emotions.”

“Now that is cool. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“You won’t. I made them.”

“You made them?”
Cruz finished his soup and half of the grilled cheese sandwich before sliding the plate toward Emmett. “Sure you’re not hungry? I’m full and there’s still plenty left.”

“If you’re not going to eat it…” As Emmett reached for the toasted triangle oozing cheddar, Cruz noticed a gold band on his wrist. It was more than an inch wide yet paper thin, with an opaque white screen that shimmered when it caught the sunlight. This must be something Emmett had invented, he thought. Cruz waited to see if the gold band would change color, too. It didn’t.

They talked about other stuff, like their favorite sports (soccer for Emmett, surfing for Cruz), favorite foods (lasagna for Emmett, pizza for Cruz), and their families (neither of them had siblings).

“There’s my aunt,” Cruz said as Emmett took his last bite. High heels were click-clacking toward them. Aunt Marisol was pulling a purple suitcase on wheels. “Sorry… we took so long.” She was out of breath.

“Where’s the Kiwi?” Emmett looked past her. She pushed aside several strands of hair that had fallen from her bun. “Coming… Bathroom stop… Here we go!” Aunt Marisol flung her arm around a pair of shoulders. “Boys, meet Sailor York.”

Cruz and Emmett froze. This was their new roommate?

“Hi,” said a slim girl with mocha brown eyes and olive skin. “Good to meet ya.”

“H-hi,” said Cruz.

Emmett’s brow wrinkled. “I didn’t think they let boys and girls—”

“They don’t,” clipped Aunt Marisol. “Minor glitch. We’ll sort it out. And the sooner the better. Let’s go, everyone.”

Cruz and Emmett froze. This was their new roommate?

“Hi,” said a slim girl with mocha brown eyes and olive skin. She flipped back a lock of long hazelnut-colored hair: “Good to meet ya.”

“H-hi,” said Cruz.

Emmett’s brow wrinkled. “I didn’t think they let boys and girls—”

“They don’t,” clipped Aunt Marisol. “Minor glitch. We’ll sort it out. And the sooner the better. Let’s go, everyone.”

Cruz and Emmett cleared their table. Everything went into recycle and compost bins. As they trailed Aunt Marisol and Sailor to the exit, Cruz noticed Emmett kept glancing behind them. “Did you forget something?” he asked.

“No.” Emmett’s glasses had morphed into half-moons the color of raisins. “I was… uh… watching to see if that guy was still around.”

“It’s a simple program, really. You inject a few neurotransmitter nanoproducts into the bloodstream to target the brain and lock on to key neurons, which then relay levels of dopamine, serotonin, and noradrenaline to the microprocessor in the glasses, which then selects the preprogrammed corresponding color in the visible spectrum in real time. Easy!”

Cruz dropped his spoon.

“The tricky part,” continued Emmett, “was creating a lightweight composite that wasn’t too thermally sensitive. The last thing you want when you get mad is for your glasses to melt into a puddle on the floor. That took me a few tries. Okay, fifty-seven tries.”

Cruz let out a low whistle. He wouldn’t have kept at it for that long.

“Once I had that,” said Emmett, “it was only a matter of designing the receptacle frames and producing them on my 4-D printer.”

“4-D?” Cruz knew 3-D meant height, width, and depth. “What’s the fourth D?”

“Time, of course. That’s not my theory. That’s Einstein’s. Well, technically, Einstein’s professor’s theory, but Einstein made it famous.” He grinned. “That’s why your time travel idea isn’t as out there as you might think. Right now, I’m working on fabric that will transform itself based on the wearer’s preferences. Say you want your shirt to go from crew neck to V-neck or from floral to stripes. All you’d have to do is think about what you wanted and the fabric would comply.”

“Could you really do that?”

“Yes,” he answered matter-of-factly. “It is possible. We already have mind-control technology for digital gear, like cameras and computers, so it’s not out of the realm of possibility to extend that to ideas, memories, and even dreams. I still have some work to do on Lumagine. That’s what I’m calling my fabric—you know, Lu, for my last name, combined with ‘imagine.’ But I’ll get there.”

Cruz chuckled. “If I were you, Emmett, I wouldn’t worry about losing that award.”

“Thanks,” Emmett said shyly, his triangular glasses softening at the tips. “We’ll see.”

Cruz finished his soup and half of the grilled cheese sandwich before sliding the plate toward Emmett. “Sure you’re not hungry? I’m full and there’s still plenty left.”

“If you’re not going to eat it…” As Emmett reached for the toasted triangle oozing cheddar, Cruz noticed a gold band on his wrist. It was more than an inch wide yet paper thin, with an opaque white screen that shimmered when it caught the sunlight. This must be something Emmett had invented, he thought. Cruz waited to see if the gold band would change color, too. It didn’t.

They talked about other stuff, like their favorite sports (soccer for Emmett, surfing for Cruz), favorite foods (lasagna for Emmett, pizza for Cruz), and their families (neither of them had siblings).

“There’s my aunt,” Cruz said as Emmett took his last bite. High heels were click-clacking toward them. Aunt Marisol was pulling a purple suitcase on wheels. “Sorry… we took so long.” She was out of breath.

Emmett looked past her. “Where’s the Kiwi?”

She pushed aside several strands of hair that had fallen from her bun. “Coming… Bathroom stop… Here we go!” Aunt Marisol flung her arm around a pair of shoulders. “Boys, meet Sailor York.”

Cruz and Emmett froze. This was their new roommate?

“Hi,” said a slim girl with mocha brown eyes and olive skin. She flipped back a lock of long hazelnut-colored hair: “Good to meet ya.”

“H-hi,” said Cruz.

Emmett’s brow wrinkled. “I didn’t think they let boys and girls—”

“They don’t,” clipped Aunt Marisol. “Minor glitch. We’ll sort it out. And the sooner the better. Let’s go, everyone.”

Cruz and Emmett cleared their table. Everything went into recycle and compost bins. As they trailed Aunt Marisol and Sailor to the exit, Cruz noticed Emmett kept glancing behind them. “Did you forget something?” he asked.

“No.” Emmett’s glasses had morphed into half-moons the color of raisins. “I was… uh… watching to see if that guy was still around.”
The hairs on Cruz’s arms stood up. “What guy?”

“He was on your flight, came through the gate right after you. I saw him at baggage claim and again at the café. When we got up to leave, he got up, too, even though he hadn’t touched his food. That’s what got me wondering—”

Cruz whirled. “Where?”

Emmett’s head swiveled. “I . . . uh . . . I don’t see him anymore . . . He must have gone the other way.”

“What did he look like?”

“He had sunglasses on so it was hard to see his face, but he was wearing a leather jacket, jeans, and black cowboy boots. I think it had snakeskin print on the toes. I’m not sure. It could have been a cow print.”

Cruz didn’t like the sound of this. First someone tries to drown him, and now he’s being followed?

Emmett shrugged. “Guess it was one of those weird coincidences, huh?”

“Guess so,” said Cruz, but he wasn’t convinced.

If Aunt Marisol’s puzzles had taught him anything, it was that coincidence is rare. Things almost always happen for a reason, even if you don’t see it. Cruz took another glance behind them. He saw nothing.

TO DISCOVER. TO INNOVATE. TO PROTECT.

Cruz forgot to exhale as his gaze swept over the school’s motto, etched in marble above steel doors, a row of white marble columns, and a steep, pointed roof that seemed to tap the sky. He remembered to breathe again only when they reached the summit of the limestone steps.

“That’s our room,” said Emmett, pointing to a window in the top corner of the building. “Fifth floor, last window on the left.”

The inside of the Academy was almost as imposing as the outside. Blinding white marble with tiny black veins running through it covered the walls and floor of the vast lobby. A relief map of the world covered almost an entire wall. Fan-shaped black sconces sent V-shaped rays of light upward, while ornate, black iron lamps topped with trapezoid black-and-white stained glass shades illuminated the simple lines of black leather chairs and sofas. Most of the seats in the spacious room were filled with middle- and high-school-age kids talking or bent over their phones and tablets. Plush black-and-white rugs led to a tall, black granite front desk so shiny Cruz could see his reflection in it. Cruz motioned for Aunt Marisol to go ahead of him with Sailor.

“See you up there,” Emmett said to Cruz, heading for the elevator. “Fifth floor. Mount Everest room. FYI, all the dorm rooms are named after natural wonders of the world.”
Of course they were! This was Explorer Academy, after all.
While Cruz waited to check in, he studied the rug beneath him. It was woven with Egyptian figures and hieroglyphs. Thanks to Aunt Marisol’s cryptographic puzzles, Cruz was familiar with the ancient form of writing. He knew what many of the symbols stood for, like the looped cross, which was the sign for life, and the sun, which represented the passage of time.

Aunt Marisol turned from the desk. “Sailor is all set in one of the girls’ rooms.”

“I’m in the Great Barrier Reef room,” giggled Sailor. “Doesn’t it just figure? I’ve come fourteen thousand kilometers away from home only to end up down under all over again.”

They laughed.
Sailor picked up her suitcase. “Thanks for everything, Professor Coronado. See ya in class. Sweet as to meet you, Cruz.”

“Sweet as what?”

“Just ‘sweet as.’ It’s a Kiwi thing. I know it’s a sentence fragment, but…”

Cruz felt himself relax. Maybe making new friends wasn’t going to be as hard as he’d imagined. “Sweet as to meet you, too,” he said.

“Do you need help getting settled?” his aunt asked as they watched Sailor roll her purple suitcase to the elevator.

“I’ve got it,” said Cruz.

She let out the same satisfied sigh his dad did on Saturdays when he got the last item crossed off his to-do list. “I’m going to head home and check in with your dad. He said you injured your foot surfing.” She glanced down. “You okay?”

“Yep. See?” Cruz bounced from one foot to the other. His ankle felt as if it had never been hurt at all.

“Good, so call or text if you need anything.” A slow smile warmed her face. “You’re going to love the Academy. How many kids your age get to go on an archaeological dig for a lost civilization or help save an endangered species? It’s the adventure of a lifetime, you know.”

“I know.” He was excited, but nervous, too.
She squeezed his shoulder. “See you tomorrow.”

Bye, Aunt Marisol.”

A boy a year or two older than Cruz, his leg slung over the arm of a leather chair, nodded toward the pink suit leaving the lobby. “Is that your aunt?”

Cruz pretended not to hear.

“Hey! I’m talkin’ to you, surfer dude!”

Cruz glanced down at his Goofy Foot surf shop tee. Hesitant, he tapped his chest.

“Yeah, you.” The boy was wearing a red T-shirt that said I’m Kind of a Big Deal. “Is Professor Coronado your aunt?”

“Uh…well…” Cruz inched toward the front desk, but the young woman who’d helped Sailor had stepped into the back office.

“Guys, get this,” barked Big Deal. “He’s Dr. Coronado’s nephew.”

Four heads spun. “Who?”

Cruz felt his face glow. “I… I…”

Big Deal let out a whistle. “Renshaw, you and all the other newbies might as well kiss the North Star award goodbye right now.”

“Not me,” spouted a gangly boy sitting nearby. A sunburned nose
and cheeks were covered in brown freckles. His hair was cut so short you could see a small mole on the side of his skull. “That award is mine. Dugan Marsh. M-A-R-S-H. Spell it right on the trophy, people.”

That got hoots from the younger explorers and snorts from the older ones.

“Thank you for that bold yet premature comment, Mr. Marsh.” The desk clerk was back, her shoulders barely clearing the top of the granite desk. The petite woman had bright green eyes and a short crop of hair that reminded Cruz of a sparrow’s feathers. A badge reading Taryn was pinned on her red turtleneck by her collarbone. “Need I remind you,” she said sternly, “that the North Star award is based on many factors, including performance, attitude, and potential? The administration, faculty, and staff have input in selecting the winner, and I can assure you that no one, not even this young explorer here, will get preferential treatment.”

A hush fell over the lobby. All eyes turned to Cruz, who wished he could disappear into the carpet and hide among the Egyptians. This was not how he’d wanted to start things at the Academy. This kind of news was bound to spread faster than head lice at summer camp. Everyone would believe he was here because his aunt had pulled strings. How could he blame them when a part of him believed it, too?

“Also, there’s no trophy,” said Taryn. “The winner gets their name engraved on the big crystal pyramid in the library.”

Cruz felt a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t let him get to you,” whispered a voice. Turning slightly, Cruz glanced up into friendly eyes that not even a mass of dark curls could hide. “I’ve heard some of the recruits will try to mess with your head,” said the boy, who was a good two inches taller than Cruz. “Some of them can’t handle friendly competition.”

“I can,” said Cruz.

“Then we’re going to get along great.” The boy stuck out his hand. “Zane Patrick.”

“Cruz Coronado.” Cruz clasped ebony fingers and they shook. Zane had a strong grip.

“Rrr-ruff!” They looked down to see the eager, black button eyes of a West Highland white terrier gazing up at them.

“Hiya, pup!” said Cruz, kneeling.

“That’s Hubbard,” said Taryn. “He’s my dog but he gets spoiled by all the attention from the explorers, so he thinks he owns the place.”

Cruz let the Westie give his hand a good sniff before scratching the dog between his ears.

“Ruff, ruff!” Hubbard’s tail became a fluffy white pendulum of joy.

“Next please.” Taryn was calling for Cruz. Standing, he stepped up to the desk.

“I’m Taryn Secliff, your dorm adviser. If you have any questions, problems, concerns, complaints, needs, or wants, you are to come to me. I’m around twenty-four seven, except Saturdays between noon and seven p.m.—that’s my afternoon off. During the day, you can usually find me working here at the front desk, and at night you can find me on the fifth floor in the Sahara room, just off the elevator between the girls’ and boys’ hallways—that’s where I live. From there, I hear, see, and know everything that goes on. Everything. Got it?”

Translation: Don’t do anything stupid, Cruz thought.

“Got it,” said Cruz.

“Oh, and please don’t feed Hubbard. He had a bit of a weight problem with all of the explorers slipping him food, so now all meals and treats come from me.”

“Okay.”

“Hold out your left wrist, palm up.”

Cruz’s heart fluttered. “My . . . my . . . ?”

“Yes, your left arm. And remove your bracelet.”

Cruz slid off his elastic Aztec dragon bracelet made from red and green beads—a birthday gift from Aunt Marisol last year. His dad had one, too.

When he held out his wrist, Taryn said what she knew she’d say. “Such an unusual birthmark.” She turned his arm to get a better look at the rose-colored, twisted ladder on the inside of his wrist. “It looks like a
double helix. Very cool.”

He had not expected her to say that. For most of his life, he had been teased about the two-inch blemish. He had learned to use wristbands, bracelets, watches, sleeves, and even duct tape to keep it hidden.

Taryn snapped a gold band like Emmett’s on him. Over the next 15 seconds, the band slowly tightened, conforming to his arm like a second skin. It was so light he barely felt it. “This is your OS band. It stands for ‘Organic Synchronization,’ although the explorers just call it the Open Sesame band. It’s your passkey. Hold it up to a security cam and it will get you into anyplace explorers are allowed in the complex. It uses the electrical activity of your heart to identify you.”

“It’s a miniature electrocardiogram machine?”

“Precisely. It also monitors all vital signs, brain function, immune system, growth patterns, physical activity, calorie count, and whether you’ve brushed your teeth.”

“Really?”

“Just kidding about that last one.” Cruz chuckled.

“However, do not lose it or you really can kiss the North Star award goodbye. Carelessness is one of Dr. Hightower’s pet peeves.” Cruz gave her a solemn nod. “I won’t forget.”

“A word to the wise?” She cocked an eyebrow. “Don’t focus on the award. You’ll try too hard. Desperation almost always leads to error.”

“Then what should I do?”

“Work a lot. Play a little. Let the rest take care of itself.” Taryn handed him a computer about the same size and thickness as a greeting card. It had a black neoprene protective covering. “This is your digital notebook. Use it for all assignments, training sessions, and field notes. It has a keyboard touch screen but also a stylus embedded at
YOU COULD WIN
A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME TRIP!

One Lucky Family of Four will experience a spectacular ship-based expedition, just like the students at Explorer Academy!

Grab your parent or guardian and go to exploreracademytrip.com to enter for your chance to win the grand prize in the Explorer Academy Sweepstakes!

ALASKA’S INSIDE PASSAGE

Experience the remarkable beauty of Alaska’s famed Inside Passage on this thrilling eight-day voyage. Get up close to icebergs and calving glaciers. See orcas and humpback whales, then listen to them with the ship’s hydrophone. Visit Glacier Bay National Park, learn about Alaska’s rich Native American heritage, and pass by islands teeming with wildlife, including brown bears, sea lions, sea otters, and perhaps the world’s highest density of nesting bald eagles.

Grand prize trip is courtesy of National Geographic Expeditions.

NO PURCHASE NECESSARY TO ENTER OR WIN. A PURCHASE WILL NOT IMPROVE YOUR CHANCES OF WINNING.

Sweepstakes begins on or about May 1, 2018 at 12:01 am ET and ends on May 31, 2019 at 11:59 pm ET. Must be 18 or older. Limit 1 entry per person. See Official Rules at www.exploreracademytrip.com for complete information, including entry periods, additional eligibility restrictions, prize descriptions/restrictions/ARVs and complete details. Void where prohibited. Sponsored by National Geographic Partners, LLC, 1142 17th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036.
Explorer Academy is sure to AWAKEN READERS’ INNER ADVENTURER AND CURIOSITY about the world around them. But you don’t have to take my word for it—check out Cruz, Emmett, Sailor, and Lani’s adventures for yourself!

—LeVar Burton, actor, director, author, and host of the PBS children’s series Reading Rainbow

In the midst of the FAST-PACED ACTION, Explorer Academy captures the power of learning through exploration. The excitement of hands-on discovery is modeled in Cruz’s adventures, which encourages kids to take on the mindset of explorers!

—Daniel Raven-Ellison, National Geographic Explorer and Guerrilla Geographer; creator of kids’ initiatives Urban Earth and Mission: Explore

The book dragged me in and I could not wait to finish it from the moment I started reading. I liked everything about the book!

—Christian, age 10

I really liked all the different little mysteries coming together in one big answer ... It was one of my favorite books and I can’t wait for the sequel!

—Lucy, age 12

“BEING AN EXPLORER means being a storyteller. With the Explorer Academy book series, National Geographic is using the power of curiosity and exploration to inspire the next generation of curious kids to go out into our world and discover something unexpected.”

—James Cameron, National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence and acclaimed filmmaker

“A FUN, EXCITING and action-packed ride that kids will love.”

—J.J. Abrams, award-winning film and television creator, writer, producer, and director; credits include Star Trek and Star Wars films

“ABSOLUTELY BRILLIANT! Explorer Academy is a fabulous feast for mind and heart—a thrilling, inspiring journey with compelling characters, wondrous places, and the highest possible stakes. Just as there’s only one planet Earth, there’s only one series like this. Don’t wait another instant to enjoy this phenomenal adventure!”

—T.A. Barron, author of the Merlin Saga
PRE-ORDER NOW

and receive a **FREE** digital issue of *National Geographic Kids* magazine, featuring Explorer Academy games

Ask a parent or guardian to email an image of your receipt to exploreracademy@natgeo.com for this EXCLUSIVE offer.
EXPLORER ACADEMY
THE NEBULA SECRET
A NOVEL

Adventure, danger, and a thrilling global mission await 12-year-old Cruz Coronado as he leaves behind his home in Hawaii to attend the prestigious Explorer Academy, where he and 23 other kids from around the globe will train to become the next generation of great explorers. But for Cruz, there’s more at stake. No sooner has he arrived at the Academy than he discovers that his family has a mysterious past with the organization that could jeopardize his future. In the midst of codebreaking and cool classes, new friends and amazing augmented-reality expeditions, Cruz must tackle the biggest question of all: WHO IS OUT TO GET HIM ... AND WHY?

“ABSOLUTELY BRILLIANT!”
—T. A. Barron, author of the Merlin Saga

PRE-ORDER YOUR COPY NOW!
Available wherever books are sold.

SPECIAL OFFER:
TURN TO PAGE 40!

Copyright © 2018 National Geographic Partners, LLC

Enjoy this SNEAK PEEK then share it with a friend.