

THE SAILOR CIPHER
SNEAK PEEK EXCERPT
by Trudi Trueit

CHAPTER ONE

Sailor York called it the do-or-die point.

It was the moment right before a mission began. In those tense few minutes, as you waited for the “go” signal, you could either psyche yourself up or psyche yourself out. Everything depended on the choice you made.

It was exciting. It was exhilarating. And it was . . .

Now!

Looking out across the Chesapeake Bay, Sailor filled her lungs with one last breath of fresh sea air before lowering the dive helmet onto her head. She was alone but for a fluttering heart and her own thoughts. As her dive buddy, Cruz Coronado, connected the hoses between her rebreathing helmet and oxygen tank, Sailor tried not to think about her shoulders cooking in the September sun or the swim fin pinching her left baby toe or the grilled cheese sandwich doing cartwheels in her stomach. Most of all, she tried not to think about how much was riding on their mission—because the answer was *everything*.

Do or die.

Feeling a tap on her back, Sailor’s eyes went to the computerized readout at the bottom of her face shield. Her air supply read: full. The rebreathing helmet was designed to filter out the carbon dioxide she exhaled, recycle the oxygen and nitrogen, then add fresh air from the tank before cycling it all back into her helmet again. Sailor took a few deep breaths to make sure the system was working properly, then gave Cruz a thumbs-up.

Licking desert-dry lips, Sailor clipped the remote for her Metamor-Fins to the waistband of her purple buoyancy vest. The battleship gray flippers resembled the right and left flukes of a whale’s tail. She could operate them like regular swim fins, kicking her legs independently, or hit a switch on the remote to connect them into a single motorized tail. Sailor inched the flexible tips over the edge of the anchored hovercraft. Below, gentle waves lapped against the black, oval hull of *Rigel*, the hovercraft. Sailor could hardly wait to jump into the cool water. She was still adjusting to the abrupt change of seasons.

Sailor had arrived only yesterday from New Zealand, known as Aotearoa in the Māori language her family often spoke at home. Crossing the Equator, she'd traded winter temperatures in the mid-50s in Christchurch, or Ōtautahi, for the sticky, humid 90s of summer in Washington, D.C.!

Her dive partner was holding out a pair of webbed gloves to her. Cruz was all smiles, but he wasn't fooling her. Behind the faceplate of his own rebreathing helmet, worry clouded coffee brown eyes several shades darker than her own. Everyone was feeling the pressure. Team Cousteau, which included Sailor, Cruz, Emmett Lu, Lani Kealoha, and Dugan Marsh, didn't want to disappoint Fanchon.

Dr. Quills, or Fanchon, as she preferred for the explorers to call her, was seated behind Sailor and Cruz. She was bent over her laptop, a thicket of caramel curls spilling out of an aqua sea-turtle-print headscarf. Fanchon was the tech lab chief on board *Orion*, one of six Explorer Academy ships that served as traveling classrooms for the school. The prestigious Academy accepted students from around the world, training them to become the next generation of great scientists, journalists, photographers, and explorers. Each grade level had its own adviser and faculty, all of whom stayed with them for the entire six years of their education. Sailor's class of about two dozen explorers was about to begin its second year on board *Orion*. Sailor liked all her professors, but she adored the tech lab chief.

Fanchon was, in a word, brilliant. She'd developed much of the gear the explorers relied on, including the PANDA (Portable Artifact Notation and Data Analyzer) that could identify and date fossils, the SHOT-bot (Soft Heliomorphic Observational Traveling robot), a robotic camera trap that could mimic the look of any plant, and, of course, the Metamor-Fins that Sailor and Cruz were wearing. Fanchon had also created the UCC (Universal Cetacean Communicator), a dive helmet with software that was able to translate the vocalizations of more than 80 types of whales, dolphins, and other cetaceans into human language and vice versa!

Team Cousteau had been the first to test the UCC in Canada's Bay of Fundy the year before. They'd utilized it on a class mission to rescue right whales caught in fishing gear. Wearing the helmet, Cruz had talked to the whales using simple phrases to reassure them while the rest of the team cut away the lines and nets. The UCC had worked perfectly. Until it hadn't. Once the animals were freed and Cruz attempted to surface, the life-support system had, suddenly and mysteriously, failed. Cruz had nearly drowned. When Fanchon discovered that Dr. Vanderwick, her tech lab assistant, had sabotaged the helmet, she'd shelved the project until she could ensure its safety. There was no telling how long that might take, and Sailor worried that the explorers might never get the chance to try again.

But then, three weeks ago, Sailor had received a letter at home:

Dear Sailor,

I hope you are well rested because an adventure awaits! The Universal Cetacean Communicator 2.0 is ready for evaluation. Academy president Dr. Regina Hightower has granted permission for you, as the team who helped test the first UCC, to return to campus the day before school begins to assist me in testing the redesigned helmet. Are you willing to take on the challenge? I anxiously await your reply.

Yours in science,

Fanchon

Sailor, along with Lani and Cruz, who were both from Hanalei, Hawaii; Dugan, who lived in Santa Fe, New Mexico; and Emmett, whose hometown was Toronto, Ontario, all quickly responded yes and the mission was on!

At noon today, the team had hopped into an Autonomous Auto self-driving vehicle for the 12-mile ride from the Academy campus in downtown Washington, D.C., to where *Orion* was docked at National Harbor Marina in Maryland. Fanchon and the ship's aquatics director, Dr. Pilar Jazayeri, aka Jaz, were waiting there for them in *Rigel*. Jaz then piloted *Rigel* down the Potomac River to the Chesapeake Bay with Lani beside her in the copilot's seat. Fanchon went over final instructions with the rest of the team.

For this second UCC test, they would attempt to contact a pod of common bottlenose dolphins Fanchon had been tracking in the bay. Cruz and Sailor were to go into the water, Cruz wearing the UCC and Sailor in a standard rebreathing helmet (explorers always dove in pairs, in case of an emergency). The divers' electronic Metamor-Fins, in electric mono tail mode, would allow them to keep pace with the dolphins, who could swim at speeds of up to 20 miles an hour. *Rigel* would follow, with Emmett and Dugan directing the divers and keeping tabs on their vital signs via their OS bands. Every explorer wore a wristband that monitored pulse, blood pressure, respiration, temperature, sleep pattern, immune system, and more. Technically, OS stood for Organic Synchronization but because the band also doubled as a security passkey, it had earned the nickname Open Sesame band. If everyone did their job, the equipment worked, and luck was on their side, today Cruz might "speak" to a dolphin!

"Comms check." Emmett's voice rang out in Sailor's helmet. "Oops! Hang on, minor glitch."

Sailor couldn't help a snort. In trying to put on a headset thinner than a spaghetti noodle, Emmett had gotten it tangled in his emoto-glasses. Emmett had a passion for technology, and the frames were his own invention. They tapped into his brain waves, changing shape and color based on his moods. At the moment, the circular frames were switching colors faster than a broken traffic light. It was a comfort to

Sailor to know that even cool-headed Emmett was as jittery as she was. “Okay, all set,” said Emmett. “Sailor, do you read me?”

“Affirmative.”

When Cruz, Fanchon, Dugan, Jaz, and Lani gave similar replies, Emmett pronounced all comms operational. Jaz let them know the comm link among everyone would remain open throughout the mission.

“My pre-check diagnostic shows all UCC systems are functioning normally,” relayed Fanchon. “Cruz and Sailor, be sure to keep a distance of at least thirty feet between the dolphins and yourselves. Don’t overstay your welcome. Dugan will start the stopwatch once you’re in position. Remember, if you sense any stress or haven’t made contact in fifteen minutes—”

“We’re to break off and return.” Cruz took the words out of her mouth.

Respect for wildlife was their top priority. Everyone knew they were here to communicate with the dolphins, not to disturb or frighten them.

“The pod is a mile northeast of our position, heading due south,” alerted Lani.

“This is it!” Emmett’s voice rose in pitch. “Divers, stand by for ‘go.’”

Sailor’s heartbeat thundered in her ears. She shut her eyes against the blinding diamonds of sunlight reflecting off the water. Exhaling, she pushed away all the thoughts that cluttered her mind—the scorching heat, her throbbing toe, a somersaulting sandwich . . .

“Sailor?” Cruz’s voice was so quiet she barely heard him.

She opened her eyes and turned to him. “Yeah?”

“Thanks for jumping in with me.” Cruz held out his hand.

Sailor grinned and took it. “Any time.”

“GO!”

Clutching Cruz’s hand, Sailor stepped off the edge of the hovercraft. The cold hit her like a punch to the gut. She didn’t panic. Instead, Sailor let go of Cruz’s fingers then slowly swept her arms up and down and from side to side the way Monsieur Legrand, their fitness and survival instructor, had taught them. She kept her legs moving, too. It took only a minute or so for her to acclimate. The water was murky, and Sailor was grateful for the digital compass readout in her helmet. Together, Cruz and Sailor dove to a depth of 10 feet, then headed west.

“What’s it like down there?” Emmett wanted to know.

Sailor ducked to avoid a moon jellyfish. “Like swimming in Chef Kristos’s creamy cucumber soup.”

“Stay on current course to intercept.” Dugan snickered. “And watch out for croutons.”

Something *was* coming out of the green fog, but it was no crouton. Sailor caught sight of webbed feet . . . then a shell . . .

A turtle! A flat gray head with dark spots swayed from side to side as four stubby, spotted gray legs paddled. The reptile was less than 10 inches wide, with a pattern of concentric rings on its back. Her helmet computer identified him as *Malaclemys terrapin*, a diamondback terrapin.

“*Tuh-weet. Tuh-weet.*”

Sailor scanned her readout for the source of the whistle. An oxygen alert? A dead battery in her fins?

“It’s me,” said Cruz. “The UCC is picking up the dolphins calls.”

They’d learned that bottlenose dolphins use clicks and whistles to communicate with one another. Each individual animal even has their own signature call.

“I’m turning on my Metamor-Fins and switching over to the translator,” Cruz said above the noise. He would be out of touch while he attempted to converse with the animals.

“*Kia ora!*” called Sailor, giving him a thumbs-up.

Placing his arms at his sides, Cruz straightened his legs and pointed his toes. He shot toward the surface like a torpedo, leaving her in his dust . . . well, bubbles. Sailor put her heels together, hit the toggle on her remote, and felt the flukes of her flippers attach to create her “tail.” Pressing the power button, she copied Cruz’s movements and soon was zooming upward, too. Sailor popped out of the waves like a cork from a bottle. She flattened her feet to slow the motorized flippers. Spinning in a tight circle, she searched for Cruz but didn’t spot him.

Her heart began to pound. Where could he be?

There! A black helmet was bobbing in the water about 20 yards to her east. But it was something else that made Sailor’s breath catch: the sight of dolphins bounding through the waves. Traveling south, about half a dozen of the mammals took turns breaching. Their streamlined bodies glittered silver as they hopscotched across the bay in front of her.

Cruz fell in behind the passing pod.

Sailor’s job was to stay close to her dive buddy in case he needed her, but not to intrude. She pinned her arms to her sides, pointed her toes, and was off! Head and shoulders above the surface, Sailor

bounced along the water, a human speedboat. She kept an eye on the digital speedometer in the corner of her face shield: six miles an hour . . . seven . . . eight . . . nine . . . nine-point-two . . .

Cruz was holding steady at 9.4 miles an hour.

Sailor was scanning the horizon for boats, logs, or anything that might interfere with her partner's trajectory when she saw something to her right. A fin! A bottlenose dolphin was gliding alongside her! He was barely an arm's length away. He must have been trying to catch up to his pod. Sailor banked left to give him space to do so, but he didn't continue forward. Instead, the dolphin took the curve with her. Flexing her feet, she cut her speed to eight miles an hour. He easily matched her pace. Sailor slowed to six miles an hour and still, the animal remained at her side.

Suddenly, the dolphin vaulted out of the water. He soared upward, arched, then plummeted back into the surf. Again and again, he sprang and dove, sprang and dove, sometimes crisscrossing over Sailor as if inviting her to join in the fun. Sailor watched the spray splatter the shield of her helmet. If only she could!

Could she? After all, she did have the tail for it!

Sailor clamped her arms to her sides, placed her straightened legs together, and pointed her toes. She did leave the water—well, her shoulders and torso did. Her small hop didn't come close to the dolphin's big leap. Maybe if she began from farther below—you know, got a good start. Sailor dove to about 12 feet, turned, and pointed her toes so hard she felt the joints pop. She zoomed upward. This time, her entire body rocketed out of the waves! The dolphin jumped with her, though he went several feet higher!

This is incredible! thought Sailor, splashing down. *We have to try again!*

Skimming along next to the dolphin, Sailor felt a warm glow spread through her. It began near her heart and radiated out like beams of sunlight. Relaxed and happy, Sailor wanted nothing more than to stay here in the bay and play. She felt free.

There was another feeling, too—one far more familiar in the pit of her stomach. Sailor was hungry. *Wait . . .*

For squid. *What?*

In her mind's eye, Sailor could see a group of little white squid with dark speckles darting through a bed of seagrass. Her stomach gurgled in anticipation of the soft-bodied creatures sliding down her throat— *WHOA!*

What's going on? I don't eat squid.

Then the realization hit.

These are not my thoughts.

And if they weren't hers, then . . .

In one swift motion, Sailor brought her knees to her chest. The move sent her spiraling out of control. Turning end over end, sea and sky blurred together in a dizzying haze, and she nearly blacked out. When the world stopped spinning, Sailor found herself bobbing upside down. Her heart was galloping, and she was breathing so fast the corners of her mask were fogging over.

"Sailor?" It was Emmett. "You okay? Your vital signs just shot through the roof."

"Uh-huh . . . yeah," she panted. "I'm fine . . . Operator error."

Uncoiling herself, Sailor shut down the Metamor-Fins. She looked around. Her dolphin friend was gone. So was Cruz. Crikey, she'd had *one* job!

"Sailor, hold your position," instructed Dugan. "The fifteen minutes are up. We're on our way to get Cruz and you."

"Ack . . . nowledged." Sailor put her hands over her hammering heart.

Treading water in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay, Sailor did her best to slow her breathing and calm her mind. It took all her effort. She tipped her head back, searching for something to distract her, but there was not a cloud or contrail in the vast and vivid blue.

Sailor knew she couldn't tell anyone about what had happened, not even her friends. They wouldn't understand. No one would. Most people would kill for an extraordinary ability like hers. That was the problem.

A power like this could change your life.

It could also destroy it.