

The Secret in the Bookstore
UNUA #11: Remy Estrio's Story by Alondra Caceres

Sometimes I wish my mother had been a horrible person. An addiction to drugs or alcohol, mental problems that kept her away from the normal human world, for a brisk moment I wished she was dead. Maybe she is but how would I know that? No matter how much I wished all this was true, it wasn't. My dad always told me how wonderful she was, the best woman he could have ever fallen in love with. He told me her hair smelled like flowers all the time, she was 5'5, beautiful brunette hair and the most amazing hazel eyes. She sounded like a girl any guy would be lucky enough to have. It showed how much my father loved her, so I wonder to myself all the time, why did she leave? I wonder if she's secretly down here with us. Living her new life and forgetting the one she left behind.

I close my eyes and breathe, in and out, in and out. Closing the album of pictures of when my mom and dad were young. I rub my eyes until I see shapes and colors like a kaleidoscope, and just sit in my chair. It's eerily quiet, not unusual in a bookstore but it felt different today. Like a lingering presence wanted to make itself known but couldn't.

I watched the grandfather clock in the corner opposite the wall just tik and tok away time, reminding me that the world doesn't stop just because mine did.

It's been 3 years since my dad died and I'm stuck. Stuck in a world where I thought he would always be. He left me a 90-year- old bookstore, with books older than this underground world. Dust coats each and everyone, the shelves and floors creaking with the tiniest movement. Every book was still in the same spot, my dad had OCD and wanted each book in the same spot no matter what. Occasionally I have four regulars who come in and pick out new books to rent and then they bring them back whenever they're done. I try to remember where my dad always kept them, but as time goes by it gets harder and harder.

I look out the only window in my building, wondering when someone will stop and walk in. I have two volunteers who come in my store and help dust off shelves and keep the bookstore tidy, usually the only company I get. I loved to talk to people. My bookstore is on the outskirts of the town square, next to a newspaper building. Close to the tunnels that travel to other towns in the UNUA. I used to walk into town and people-watch. Not in like a weird creepy stalkerish way, but I'd walk around and go into stores to get what I needed and enjoy being outside of my building.

Clearing my head of the past, I walk around my desk to reshelve some books that I had left on a return cart. It's 6:45 pm and I close at 8pm, plenty of time to greet the few people who walk in. I hear the bell chime at the front door and beam with happiness.

"Welcome to Books Above! I'm in the back if you need any help finding something specific." I grab four books and walk to their designated area.

"Hey Remy it's just me Ceres. I just came in to see if you need help at all before closing? I came by the newspaper office to get my daily news and thought might as well."

Looking up I find Ceres, we've been friends for a few years and she has helped me out a lot around the bookstore. She owns the only tailor shop in the UNUA #11. People get clothes from her all the time, she's very talented.

"Ah, Ceres! I thought you were finally a customer. Not that I'm upset you're here, not at all. I actually could use some help." Pulling over a new cart full of return books, I instruct Ceres where specific books go and in what order. I trust Ceres to handle these books because of how many times she's been with me over the years.

Some time goes by and it's already 7:56pm. I look around at the progress I've made and become very proud with myself. I was so distracted by my work I completely forgot that Ceres was still here.

"Hey Ceres it's almost closing time so it's okay if you haven't finished up, I can finish everything tomorrow morning." I wait for a response, nothing comes.

"Ceres?" Walking over to where I knew Ceres would be, I couldn't believe my eyes.

"What do you think you're doing?" I say furiously.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Ceres says as she's putting the books in her bag. She's putting *my* father's treasured books in *her* bag. I do own a bookstore and people do take books but it's a whole process; they give me their information first and the information of the books they're taking so that I have a record.

"You need to put the books back and leave. Get out of my shop. Don't come back, I don't want you working here anymore."

Ceres ignores me and continues putting the books in her bag.

"Hey, I'm talking to you!" I storm over to Ceres and grab at the bag full of books.

"This is what the people deserve!" Ceres says yanking the bag free from my hands. What do the people deserve? What in the world was she talking about?

"These are my books! They belonged to my dad and you need to give them back and get out."

"These belong to everyone. Do you even know what's in here?"

"I don't care. It's just a bunch of old information but it matters to me because they were my dad's"

"It's not just your dad's nor is it just old information. It's going to help the people." Ceres says as she looks back at the shelves. I was beyond confused; Ceres has worked with me for years and has never done anything like this. I trusted her. I had to do something, I couldn't just let her get away with this.

"Okay that's it, I'm calling the police." I'm already walking towards the phone on the wall.

"I'm sorry I have to do this!" Do this? Do what? OW. She hit me!

"Hey! What has gotten into you?" I whirl around rubbing the back of my head, shocked that she would even think about hurting me.

"You need to listen to me! These aren't just old books with useless information!" I was too beyond confused and curious to not give her a chance to explain.

"This better be a good explanation."

"These hold records of the people who went to the surface and the government is hiding it from us." People went to the surface? The government knew? This can't be true. My dad would never have held information like that from me.

"I think my dad would have told me if I had something that valuable, you're lying!" I had to believe he would. I had to.

"He was a part of the government! Don't you see we are trapped down here, they don't want us leaving and we need to know why!" Ceres tries to walk past me.

I get in her way. There's no way she's leaving without telling me everything. "I will call the cops on you, so finish explaining."

"Look, I already told you everything that we know!" It's not enough.

"We? Who else knows about this with you?" I say.

"I can't tell you, not yet. Just trust me when I say that these books could help us all get out of here, live a better life."

I look at her. Too many emotions and questions running through my mind. "Why couldn't you just ask?"

I would've helped her, given the right time and information. I could've done something.

"Not many people agree with our mission and I thought you would be the same" I contemplate the information she has given me. How could I ever trust her again? I need time to process everything.

“Fine. Take the books, but I trusted you to work here, and I don’t think I can let you back in.”

“I’m sorry but I had to do this.”

“Do I at least get the books back?” I had to get them back somehow. They were important.

“It’ll be a while but eventually you will.”

“Maybe I’ll see you later then.”

“I’ll be expecting you” Ceres says as she walks out the door.

Maybe I’ll see you later? Seriously? I can’t be involved in a revolution. What did she mean by my dad being part of the government?

Locking the front door, I turn and walk around my bookstore; there has to be a clue around here. If it's true that my dad was part of the government he had to have left something when he passed away. Sifting through each and every book which took me till 11:25 pm and I found nothing. Those books might've been the only ones with information and they were in my store this whole time. Why didn’t my father trust me with this?

I called it a night and decided to get some rest. Standing in the middle of my room I think, this room has never been changed, not one poster, not one frame, nothing. I used to think it was because of my dad’s OCD and he wanted everything to be perfect. But after tonight... there's a new thought. What if there's something in this room?

I frantically start to throw everything around the room, there has to be something, anything, a secret key, a note, a safe. After a few minutes of defeat, I sit on my bed trying to regain my breath. Breathing in and out, I look at the mess I've made, then something catches my eye. My dresser is the only thing that hasn't been moved. I walk over to it and push it away from the wall. The wall was bare, except for a square-shaped patch. Like someone punched a hole in the wall and tried to repatch it with cement. I go and look for a hammer; I'm really hoping I don't make a huge hole in the wall for nothing. I swing the hammer into the wall and it cracks open. After a few tries I make a hole big enough to fit half my body into. Setting the hammer down I peek into the wall. There, in the middle of a small room, is a brown box covered in dust and mold. Gross.

Kneeling on the floor, I drag the small box out from the small room and dust off the top. In small lettering it states “*BEFORE.*” Before what? Giving myself a moment to process, I think to myself, is this more information about what Ceres was talking about? I flip open the box and inside are at least 40 files of information. Flipping through each one, I stumble upon one specific file that looks slightly different than the others. It’s been laminated, like someone knew this box would be hidden away and didn't want it to be damaged.

I get comfy on the floor and start reading through the file. A few hours later I find myself staring at the wall, trying to process what I've just read. My entire life I thought there was no going back to the above. Everyone was told it was impossible because of how badly the nuclear war had damaged the surface. It was all a lie, a lie to keep the people down here and rot away. This file is evidence that there’s a chance people can go to the surface and no harm would be done. There’s a chance people can rebuild and go back to the way it was before.

I had to get this information to Ceres. She said something about a mission, a rebellion, this could give them more motivation and power to achieve their goals. But what did my dad have to do with any of this? Why had he never told me? I don't know what to believe anymore. All I know is that this needs to go out into the public for everyone to know.

Picking up everything and putting stuff away to where it belonged, I stop in my tracks hearing a rumbling sound coming from outside. Walking over to the front door I swing it open to find people panicking and screaming. What the hell is going on? I look around frantically trying to understand. Seeing an old lady crossing the street on her phone, she might have answers. I ran in her direction.

“Excuse me! Ma’am! Can I ask you a question please!” Stopping in her tracks the lady turns and looks at me with confusion.

“Yes?”

“Why is everyone freaking out, everything was fine not too long ago, am i missing something here?” I was genuinely confused, I needed answers.

“Have you not heard yet? It's all over the newspaper!” Clearly I haven't.

“ One of the tunnels leading to other towns collapsed. All the food and supplies have been cut off from our town.” Well that was very unexpected. I wonder how that happened.

“Wow, okay thank you so much” without waiting for a reply I walk back into the store and grab my stuff. This is the perfect opportunity to go and find Ceres. Everyone will be distracted by the tunnels and won't look my way. I'll stop by her shop and find a way to be a part of this rebellion.