

1st Place - P.J. Manley

<OH ANDREW>

The pounding of her own heart roused her from sleep. Her eyelids pried themselves open to expose her vision to growing darkness; the fire had all but gone out. The moon cast beams through rain-mottled glass from the window at her back, throwing the streaming shadow of the windowpane across the hardwood floor before her. The silhouette of the chair on which she sat loomed over the canvas of moonlight, a lone gargoyle in the night perched on the salmon-hued cushions of the sofa across the room. The rain hummed on the roof overhead.

The pounding came again--this was not her heart, she realized. The door shook, sending tremors through the main floor. Somebody was in a great hurry to get in out of the storm.

Him. She felt it in her old bones. The article in the morning paper, the visit from the police, and now, a knock at her door in the wee hours of the night. It could not be coincidence; she did not believe in luck. It was him, she was sure of it.

With more effort than perhaps it should take to get out of an old, overstuffed chair, she rocked to her feet and scuttled across the area rug, through the doorway into the darkened main hall. To her left, the front door stood as a loyal barrier against the tumultuous world beyond. The wind beat against its face, drove rain against its solitary window of frosted glass, but the door stood firm and bolted in place. Only she could open it.

As she reached for the knob, her instincts willed her to hesitate, but her heart drove her on without pause. Knobbed fingers clasped the brass orb, gave it a turn, and the house's greatest sentinel made way from the sweeping gales. Rain and mist flew into her face from the darkness of the night, and the moon traced out a single hooded figure on the doorstep.

Yes, it was him.

An apparition, he was. Tall as her late husband, broad in shoulders and narrow in waist--healthy. Or perhaps, he might've been, had his shoulders not been hunched, his breathing labored, puffing white mist with every rattling gasp. He had one hand braced on the doorframe; she watched it tremble.

"Can I come in?" he huffed, voice husky and quiet. The rain drowned out most of it.

She nodded, and swept the door open wider for him. He stalked in, like a predator. Like a ghost. He trailed water from his rain-soaked coat and boots, and the faint waft of alcohol--medicinal, she thought. It smelled like her brand. She eased the

front door closed, sealing the house from the rain once more. She patted its dark surface; such a faithful old door...

"The fire's still burning..." the young man murmured from where he had paused in the parlor doorway. "Were you waiting?"

There, she hesitated. He would know she knew, if she said yes. But then, she had no explanation for why the fire was still burning, and he would know her lie, if she said no. There was no help for it.

She nodded a little, wringing her hands and approaching him in the dark. "I... I thought you might come."

"The newspaper."

"Yes."

"Hn. I'm sorry you had to read that." He leaned against the doorway, an agonized groan rumbling up following his words.

She swallowed the thickness swelling in her throat, and gestured further into the house. "You're injured. Get off those wet things and go lie down on the sofa, and I'll start some hot water."

"I cannot stay long," he said, but he stepped into the parlor anyway.

"I know. It won't be long."

She left him there in order to venture deeper into the belly of her home, plunging through the inky shadows of the kitchen with familiarity as her guide. From the pantry, she withdrew the old kerosene lamp, which she promptly lit and set like a sentry on the island counter at the center of the room. From the cupboards, she took a bowl and towelette, and set them

beside the lamp. Then from the stovetop, she took the iron kettle to the water pump, filled it as full as she could carry, and then returned it to the burner. A little kindling and a match in the stove's mouth, and the heat was soon rising to the stovetop.

In the meantime, she took the lamp and hurried to the washroom. There, she grabbed more towels, gauze, cotton, and a spool of thread from the shelves before returning to the kitchen. Who knew what he had done to himself this time.

"...took a bullet to the back in the escape..." That was what the police captain had said earlier. Recalling the words stilled her hands, leaving her to stare blankly at the lamp's little flame. Its flickering made the shadows twist and writhe in an ominous dance.

She blinked. No time to waste.

Gathering up her things, she hobbled back to the parlor, where she found the fire stoked to life once more and the young man hanging his coat over the grate. He'd already set his boots as close to the coals as he could safely put them.

In the new orange glow, she could not miss the glistening patches of crimson that made his once-white shirt stick to his body. And the sheer amount of it told her it was a wonder he was still standing. Splattered over his chest, his stomach, spilling down his back, streaking across his trousers... More blood than flesh at this point.

The swelling of her throat turned to burning behind her eyes.

"Oh, Andrew..." she whispered, breath stolen away.

He turned to face her--but not before she saw it. On the left side of his back, framed in red, a tiny pinpoint of a hole torn in his shirt, still moist.

The fire and moonlight cast his face in a stark and frightening light, highlighting his sharp jaw and piercing eyes, empty of emotion. Eyes she could remember turning up in youthful joy while she read him to sleep.

That boy was gone. She mourned him.

"The water?" the young man asked, gruff as before.

"Heating," she stammered, recalling her purpose. She laid her armful of things out on the sitting table beside the sofa to which she had directed him earlier. "I'll go and fetch some of your father's old clothes..."

He nodded and, with a grimace, sank down onto the sofa. "Be quick."

Haste drove her from the parlor, to the staircase in the main hallway that led up to the second floor. Her hand gripped the rail harder than it needed to; the wood groaned under the undue stress. Time-tested steps led her to the master bedroom--her room--and to the closet there. The one she had not dared to open since her husband passed.

She thought no thoughts as she rummaged through its contents in the dark. She could not let herself. If she did, she would not survive the night. She could only bask in the hum of the rain outside, and follow her instincts--the ones that told her to do all she could for the man downstairs.

Gathering up a loose shirt and brown pants, she shoved the drawer and the closet door shut, turning around in the same motion. From the corner of her eye, she spotted a face in the corner, beside her bed, and her breath caught in her throat.

The moonlight made the pale man even paler. His dark eyes nestled deep in his face, so that the shadows that played over his skin likened him to a skull. His head seemed to float, the dark creases of his suit all but vanishing in the night's depth. He offered her a tight-lipped smile--grim, grim, grim.

She shook her head, and practically ran out of the room.

Did you forget we were still here? His face had almost mocked her.

If she were honest, she would have said that she had. She had happily forgotten, enough to wander off to sleep as she waited for her visitor.

Down the stairs she went, almost stumbling in her haste. The rail saved her, objecting to her harsh grip even louder before she reached the bottom. She gave no pause there, and continued into the kitchen, where the kettle had begun a weak wail, a slowly-building plea for mercy. Taking up another towelette in her free hand, she grasped the kettle's handle and hoisted it up with a grunt.

She had almost hired help three days past. Now, she was eternally grateful that she hadn't. She would have trusted no employee to keep this quiet.

She could barely trust herself to keep it quiet. But nothing--not age, not fear, not torment--would keep her from doing what needed to be done.

Into the parlor she went again, putting the window at her back, hastening to set the clothes beside the old English volume of Crime and Punishment, so that she could empty the kettle's contents into the bowl. Across the table from her, rid of his soiled shirt, Andrew lay sprawled on his belly across the salmon sofa's worn upholstery, eyes scarcely cracked and watching her. A peace had settled over his face now, softening it and drawing up a familiarity that made her heart ache.

"Don't worry, darling," she muttered, setting aside the empty kettle and gingerly taking up the bowl by its lips.

"Mother will make everything better."

He laughed. Then he groaned. She hauled the heavy bowl to his side and drowned a towelette in the scalding water, hardly flinching at the heat on her fingers. When she turned to brush the cloth over his back, the sight of the wound made her stop.

Was the bullet still inside? Her general knowledge could help her sew minor wounds shut, but she did not possess the skill for any sort of extraction.

"Caught a bad break after the last job..." Andrew muttered, breaking her from her thoughts. "Couldn't shake the hounds until I got to the river."

...whole family dead...

The newspaper hadn't spared details.

She swallowed thickly and then gently stroked the wet cloth over his skin, washing the blood away. Then she rinsed it in the hot water, and did it again. Again and again until his back was clean save that single, bloody hole. Only then did she venture to dare and touch it. She pressed the cloth gently to it, and flinched when the young man did.

"Is..." she began, unsure of how to ask. "Is the bullet-?"

"Straight through. Exit wound's worse."

Her eyes widened. "Andrew! If... if that's true, then why are you lying like that?"

He took his turn to hesitate, glancing away from her in favor of the hearth instead. He gave a minute shake of his head. "...I didn't want you to see. I have pressure on it though, don't worry... I'm not an idiot."

A sigh escaped her. A part of her wanted to laugh. But the rest of her drowned in a deepening sadness that choked any and all humor from the air around her. "Oh Andrew... yes you are."

She would have to see it either way. But she would let him have his way for the moment, while she worked on the wound in his back.

He kept terribly silent as she began her sewing. Despite his initial discomfort at the cleaning of the wound, he'd since schooled his face into a likeness of stone--impassive and cold. That expression gripped her heart more than any cry of pain would have.

When he spoke again, she jumped.

"What did the newspaper say?" he asked.

A breath of a beat passed between them, while the black and white print flew to the forefront of her mind. She remembered the smell of chamomile and roses; she'd been sitting on the back porch when she read it, enjoying the crisp morning air. Before the storm clouds had moved in.

She kept her words detached, putting most of her focus into her needlework.

"It said that the governor and his family were all killed three nights ago. Nobody knows why." She shook her head to herself, remembering the detail into which the article had delved. "Gruesome business... Terribly sad."

His answer came in the form of a derisive, bitter scoff-- after which, his stony mask almost broke in pain.

"The governor was a pompous coward. The world's better off without scum like him."

She cast him a pointed glance. "How much was the bounty?"

A pause. "...Enough. All of it goes to a good cause, so that makes it worth it in my book."

"A good cause..." Her turn to force false laughter. "And you're hunted for your trouble. Do you ever wonder why, son?"

"No. But a man has to do what a man has to do to survive in this world."

"No matter the people who fall in his wake." She knotted the last stitch on the bullet hole and then sat back to observe his face. He'd closed his eyes, completely trusting. She caressed his chiseled cheekbone with her thumb, and his eyes fluttered open.

"Sometimes I wish I could know what I might've done..." She searched his gaze and watched his eyes widen. "Perhaps if I had been a better mother--"

"No," he hastened to cut her short, reaching up to clasp his large hand around her frail one. "Don't you ever think... that. You know this life was my choice."

Again, her eyes pricked and burned and grew blurry, so that she could no longer clearly define his face in the haze. "Then why, Andrew? I want to understand... why."

His grip tightened around her hand. "Because I'm angry. And poor. And because there are some people on God's good earth who need to pay for what they've done to others. How they've trampled everyone in their pursuit of selfish goals."

How sure he sounded. His passion invigorated every word, and for a moment, she found herself longing to believe him. It did indeed sound like a good cause, a quest for righteous vengeance, justified by the cruelty of the fortunate against the suffering of the less endowed.

For the breadth of a moment, she let herself agree. Her sorrow receded, like a wave off the sands of a distant beach.

Then she remembered the newspaper. The pale man upstairs. The blood on Andrew's shirt--too much, far too much to come from one man.

The governor had been a husband and father. A beautiful wife. Three little girls, ages four, eight, and ten. All killed for the sake of that ambiguous force called justice.

She found herself shaking her head, and two tears escaped from the rims of her eyes. "Oh Andrew... and what of you? Have you not trampled everyone in pursuit of your goals?"

He did not answer. His grip remained tight around her fingers. And then, she sensed another presence behind her, a third exhale separate from hers and Andrew's.

"Justified or not," said the silky voice of the head detective--the pale man from upstairs, "murder is murder. And we have you, Andrew Wood, pinned on accounts of thirty-one murders in the last two years."

Andrew's hand let go. She opened her eyes.

For one terrifying second that lasted far too long, he struggled to launch himself from the sofa. His arms shook. The gauze he had pressed over his wound dripped fresh blood. A weak flicker of lightning outside highlighted him in silver-blue.

She held her breath.

The detective cocked his gun.

Andrew raced for the glass.

"Stop!" she shrieked, voice breaking in the effort. The footfalls ceased. Silence fell around them in a stifling blanket, broken only by a distant rumble of thunder.

Tears fell unbidden from her eyes, now. She knew what was to come. In fact, she had agreed to it.

"Andrew..." the word came out choked. "You can't... you can't. They're waiting for you outside..."

"Your mother's been terribly cooperative," said the detective with jarring nonchalance from beyond her sight. "Make this easy on her and come quietly."

She could hear Andrew's labored, rattling breath, but couldn't bear to look back. When her son's voice rose above the hum of the rain on the roof, grief at last took full hold of her heart and squeezed until it hurt.

"Mother..." The stony facade had left his words, leaving nothing but a frightened boy behind. "I don't... I don't understand. Why would you do this?"

Slowly, she stood from her place by the sofa. Her knees, aching and threatening to give out, shook beneath her own weight. Her shadow rose across the back of the bloodied sofa--a gargoyle of the night. She swallowed the cotton in her throat.

Then she dared to glance over her shoulder at the young man who stood framed in glistening glass, outlined in moonlight, chest covered in crimson. And she found that his expression of open betrayal hurt her heart less than the coldness she'd seen before.

Because that face... that was a face she knew. And compared to the expressionless statue she'd grown used to, this emotion was welcomed. She was a cruel woman.

"To me--your... I'm your son," he blurted. "Why would you do this to me?"

The detective loosed a pair of handcuffs from the pocket of his lengthy coat, while she dared to meet Andrew's pained eyes. She listened to his breath a little more, and then tried to

smile. All the pain in her heart came swelling up with it, and poured tears down her cheeks.

"Oh Andrew..." she murmured. "Because I love you."

His brow furrowed--confusion and hurt warred on his rugged face. The detective stepped once, twice, closer to him, the handcuffs jangling from his fingers.

Then the young man turned on his heel and threw himself against the window. Glass and frame shattered, splintered, fell over his fleeing form like a shower of sparkling crystals. The downpour washed the blood on his back away better than any warm, damp cloth. His silhouette vanished into the dark.

Then came the series of gunshots. And then silence once more, save for the hum of the rain on the roof.

2nd Place - Jacqueline Oka

Bookends

Room 317
Chester Williams
Private Investigator

Usual sign. Usual occupation. Usual trench coat. Same smoky haze in the room, same pulled shutters, same pitter patter of neverending rain.

1921. War's over, boys are home. Ragtime is in and absinthes are out. This means business has been good, but not that that's any comfort. My line of work relies on murder, theft, and malcontent. Shady alleys and absent morals make my bread and butter. Lack of alcohol tends to make these things flourish. A bit amusing, if you think about it. Banned to dispel vagrancy, but here we are, a surplus of speakeasies on our hands and the mafioso letting it flow. Heaven help Harding if he tries to stop it.

It was a bitter Wednesday evening when the client in question showed up, coat drenched and hat askew. A dishevelment I was accustomed to, as most patrons are in a bit of a hurry.

He paid little heed to the usual introductions, crossing the room in two quick strides.

"I'm here for a murder investigation."

Typical.

"Whose death?"

“Mine.”

Atypical.

I sat up straighter, shoes off the table. “Details. Sit and spill.”

The young man took the offered chair, leaning forward with a determination not often seen in murder victims.

“My name is Kent Linston, bookshop owner, bachelor, recently returned member of the 69th Infantry Regiment. I was supposed to be dead five hours ago, bleeding out on the corner of Albion and Second.”

“How do you know you’re supposed to be dead?”

In reply, Kent produced a parchment from his pocket, handing it over with a grim smile. “The courier was thankfully inept at his job. It was in a book, and lucky happenstance granted I found it first.” He tossed a novel onto the desk, back cover torn. “They did a clever job of it, slitting the case edge. But I had a little mishap with the shelf, and it tumbled and tore.”

I turned the book over, inspecting the cover. A Cheshire smile greeted me, deck of cards fanned beneath the title.

“Carroll?”

“Aye. Murder note in a picture book. A bit dark, if you ask me.”

I nodded, but was already occupied with reading the paper, intent on confirming my suspicions. Of all the damned books it could be, it had to be that one. I suppose I should be thankful, as it made the list of potential hit-men much shorter, but I was bothered all the same. This would require a reunion that was far too prolonged, and I didn’t much fancy an audience when it happened.

The note was simple, four words and just as many digits.

Linston. Albion. 8/7. 12 PM. Two shots.

I flicked to a new page in my ledger, words quick to copy. “They knew you would be there.”

“Well, that wouldn’t exactly have been hard to figure. I usually pop down to Ketter’s for a Cuban twice a week. Have ‘em cheap after twelve .”

Creatures of habit are always the first to die. Hired guns prey on predictability.

My pen tapped against the page, considering. “Anything else you may know about this situation?”

“Well.” Kent leaned back in his chair a bit, suddenly focused on the wallpaper. “Product shipments come through the cellar. For all the stores along the row. Sometimes, there are bottles in with the new books. If I find them, I just avoid the box for awhile, and it disappears. I don’t ask questions, and my windows stay unbroken.”

Not a surprising reason for not running to the coppers first. A fair amount of clients had questionable backgrounds and connections.

Unlucky for him, the police were precisely where we needed to go.

The station was locked, but I let myself in. The office I was looking for resided at the end of the hall, sign rather similar to mine. A light was clear through the frosted window, as expected. Marion Levard was never one to go home early

His line of work fell more closely to mine than it did your typical police excursions. Badge was seldom worn outside his coat pocket. Best not to draw attention in these situations.

Back alley shoot outs and smuggled cargo were a bit more relevant to his interests than broken windows and petty theft. Halfway to a gumshoe, but not quite there. Useful in a pinch, and with an eye for detail. Not bad with a gun either.

The man in question looked up from his desk as we entered, dropping the pamphlet he had been reading as he stood to greet us. “How may I help you this evening, Miss Williams?”

“Contingency assistance.” I nodded towards Kent. “He’s doomed to die, and I’d rather it didn’t happen.”

“Well that is an unfortunate situation.”

Marion stepped out from the desk, hand proffered towards the walking dead. “Pleased to make your acquaintance. Where shall this lack of death be taking place?”

“We’re visiting Malachi.”

“Ah.” Marion said nothing else, but reached behind his desk to pull two guns from the drawer.

* * * * *

Alleyways in Manhattan are questionable places to be at night, which perfectly suited the figure I was looking for. Six-foot one ambiguity in a fedora.

The streets were still slick with precipitation, dim electric signs casting light across the puddles, but it was the shadows that really mattered. Such as ones belonging to white clad hit-men standing on street corners.

Sebastian Malachi was never one for complications. If it could be sorted with a gun, it’d be done. If smooth words could fix it, it may as well have never been broken. He tolerated frippery with an ease I found annoying. Friendly face with a soul skewed enough to match his tilted

hat. There was an air of assurance about him, as if every problem you had, he could fix it with a few choice words and a smile.

Handsome as hell and twice as dangerous.

That smile was here now, unusually genuine, as was the curiosity in his eyes. “Well good evening, madame. And what brings you and your lovely entourage to this part of the neighborhood?”

His cat eyes passed over Kent without a second glance, lingering on Marion a moment before flicking back to me. “Care to take this meeting somewhere more private?”

“The alley will suffice.”

He nodded, taking a step back into the penumbra he had previous vacated. I followed suit, book weighing heavy in my pocket.

Sebastian leaned against the wall, arms folded, watching Kent. “Who’s the twitchy fellow?”

“The man you were supposed to kill.”

His eyebrows raised, hat tilting. “I was never informed.”

“Looks like you’re slipping then, Malachi. You missed your drop.”

I held out the bit of parchment. “This is Lester’s script. Don’t pretend otherwise.”

He looked at it, hands in his pockets now. “How do you know it was me this was intended for?”

In response, I held up the book.

“Ah.”

“It’s you, Cheshire. So spill. What’s the beef with the bibliophile?”

“I don’t pretend to know my master’s business. I just do as he says, and make sure to wash up the blood when I’m through.”

“You’ve got whiskey flowing from the basement. Why would you want to give that up?”

“Hell if I know. Tend not to question things. That’s what makes people lose limbs.”

There was a heavy silence, each of us waiting for the other to offer something more. I watched the end of the street, the light of two cigarettes indicating the places of Kent and Marion. Sebastian’s gaze followed mine, visage as composed as ever, but the fold of his arms showing a familiar flicker of annoyance. “Still hanging around with Robin Hood?”

“Marion is good at his job, despite your prejudices.”

“You want to be like them then? Carrying a badge and mucking about with all the other fuzz? They’re just as corrupt as we are, and you know it.”

“He’s an exception to your truthful cynicism. And I find it far more useful to have the law on my side than after me.”

“Yet here you are.”

“Here I am.”

Five months had done little to change Sebastian, although I hadn’t expected it to. His languid composure had always been a difficult read, but there was a new pull to his jaw, a line to his eyes that showed an unfamiliar tiredness. Sebastian seemed to notice my observance, turning his head abruptly to fall back into the shadows of the alleyway. There was silence for a moment, then he spoke, obscured eyes focused determinedly on the the end of the alley.

“Lester misses you, you know. ”

“He shouldn’t. I write him weekly.”

“He’s not the only one.” Sebastion’s gaze turned to me now, hat brim casting shadows as he did. “And you don’t write to the rest of us.”

“Think long enough, and you might find some reasons for that.”

I took a step away from the wall, ready to depart. This was not a conversation I had the time or desire to continue. Not here. Not now. Maybe not for another five months.

Hands back in his pockets, Sebastion rocked on his heels slightly, eyes now on the others. He looked as though he wanted to speak again, but kept quiet. I pocketed *Alice*, tucking the note back into my hat brim. Sebastion drew a cigarette from his sleeve, voice a forced return to brusque normality. “You visiting the Italian lot then?”

“Eventually, seeing as how you know nothing.”

“Mind the crossfire then.”

“Duly noted.”

I turned to go, but Sebastion caught my sleeve, words quick as he finally said them. “I just don’t think he’s competent. Take Everret. Take Donnie. Don’t take Marion.”

“Worry about your own safety, Malachi.

I stepped away, and his hand dropped.

“You’ll be back this evening then?” He was watching me, cigarette aglow.

“We’ll see.”

* * * * *

“How’d it go?”

Marion was waiting, eyes on the alley where the spark of Sebastion's cigarette could still be seen. Kent has been occupying himself with an odd sliding puzzle, but looked up as I re-

turned. I pulled up my collar, buttoning it against the chill. “He doesn’t know, and he won’t kill you until we have reasons.”

“That’s very comforting.”

“Relax. You’ll stay out of the morgue. But first, we’re going to take a look at your shop.”

The walk down to the wharf was short, as the streets were devoid of traffic at this hour. It was a small store, windows well polished and doors swinging open on silent hinges. Everything was surprisingly clean, a stark contrast to my own disheveled office. The shelves stood straight and well stocked, albeit with little room between. A single pouf occupied the far corner, but what with the bookcases and the counter, there wasn’t much space for other chairs.

“There’s a bit more breathing room back here.”

Kent held open a door I had mistaken for more shelves, itself covered in stacks of novels. The copper and I followed after, entering into a small but still tidy office. A pile of books rested on the table, covers mottled. Some were missing their fronts entirely, cases in their own stack beside the now bare pages.

I turned one over, inspecting the blotted paper. “What are these for?”

“Rebinding. Had some water damage from the cellar. Pulled ‘em up Sunday, hadn’t gotten around to fixing it yet.”

I ran my fingers over the edge of the book. It showed no signs of tampering, but these things often don’t. Opening the novel, I bent it back until the spine cracked and a gap opened between the cover and the pages. I hooked a finger through, tugging on the cover until the book fell free of its case.

An oblong object accompanied it.

It was a thin packet, wrapped in wax parchment and sealed closed. I tore off the top, peering inside. A brown substance greeted me, light and powdery. A floral scent emanated from within, but I knew well enough not to take a closer sniff.

Opium.

Damn.

Kent stared at the packet a moment, then grabbed another volume, deftly breaking the spine and tilting it over. A second packet fell onto the table.

Marion was already writing away in his notebook, taking stock of the number of tomes around us.

After opening, there were seven sachets in all. An estimated ten grams apiece. Rather hefty sum when converted to coin. Marion let out a low whistle, a hint of admiration evident.

“How many new books do you get in per week?”

“It varies depending on the season. Thirty or so at the moment.”

“That’s a whole lot of cash.”

I adjusted the papers, setting the line straight. “You pulled their shipment. And when things go missing, so do people. Must have figured you found them out. Had to pop you off before you could snitch.”

“What now, then?”

“Now I have to make some negotiations.”

* * * * *

The rain was falling again as I approached the street corner, collar up and hat down against the wind. He was still there, dry under the canopy of the shop.

I leaned against the wall beside him, watching the water drop from the tattered awning.

“Tell Lester to call off the hunt. Marion already knows. He’s elected to turn a blind eye to the basement if you cut the drugs. Otherwise, he’s coming down hard and smoking out your little rat’s nest.”

I held out the packet, still watching the road. Sebastian took it, a crinkling sound accompanying as he inspected the contents. “What’s this?”

“Poppy tears.”

“We deal liquor, not narcotics. This isn’t ours.”

At this, I turned, looking straight into those cat eyes that had lied so many times before.

“Well evidently, someone’s keeping secrets.”

“We take odd jobs. You want a corpse, we make a corpse. No questions asked.”

“Time to start asking.”

He tilted his head a bit, that blasted smile playing about his lips. “That’s your job.”

I lit a cigarette, turning to watch the flicker of neon on wet pavement rather than those damn irises of his. “I don’t work for free.”

“Not even for me?”

“Especially not for you.”

With that, I turned, walking back into the pouring rain.

3rd Place - Jared Schmitz

The Surveyors

The thing that they absolutely do not tell the new recruits when they sign up for the International Planetary Survey Corps is this: that even if the planet we're surveying already has people on it, we've still got to report it as "uninhabited." Those people don't officially exist. They get out there in all kinds of ways. A navAI crashes and sends a ship off course. People flee the law. Religious cults blast off for ultimate isolation. Hell, I once heard of a family strapping an old water tank to an emergency beacon in order to escape the ghettos back on Earth. People will do anything to find a better life. And of course, these people usually end up on the only inhabitable world in twenty parsecs. Where else are they going to go? Even if they've got habitat domes (which they usually don't), they never have the means for terraforming.

Command stuck me with two greenhorns on my first run after vacation. Two all-too-short weeks in the underwater pleasure domes of Europa, then back out, back to the grindstone. I didn't tell Connie and Farah what to expect. Greenhorns have to learn by doing. And, honest to God, I didn't think we'd run into squatters so soon. I thought we'd just spend a year or two

wandering around with them moping about the boyfriends they'd left behind (I learned a long time ago that it's no use trying to keep up relationships after you join the Corps. Lost two husbands before I got that rammed into my skull hard enough) with nary an inhabitable world to be seen. But I've been in this gig long enough, I should've known better than to believe my own predictions.

When we came out of foldspace over Phalanx-2B, the place already looked perfect. Too perfect. I knew right away that something fishy was in the air (call it a woman's intuition—don't dare to call it a big nose). Roughly Earth-size, on the inner edge of Phalanx's habitable zone, 2B spun away with a surface soaked in green. When we sent down our first probe—Connie had named that one *Adventurer* with typical greenhorn enthusiasm—it sent back readings consistent with a nitrox atmosphere well within human breathability parameters and a temperature index that made me daydream fondly of the saunas on Europa. The telescopes showed a world covered in rolling plains and dense forests, with oceans so green they looked like a St. Patrick's Day parade. If that wasn't too perfect to be real, I didn't know what was.

Of course, Connie and Farah still thought it would be like this all the time. They looked at each other with that grin that says "I knew the old codger was just being a grump." Greenhorns always think this's what their life is going to be like. Garden world after garden world, maybe naming some of them after yourself. I could see the debate brewing already: do we call it Connieland or Farah's Landing?

"This is amazing!" Farah said. "Captain, I thought you said it would be years before we found anything with a Habitability Quotient over two." She looked back at me with a mischievous glint in her dark eyes.

She'd learn. I crossed my arms, my mechanical left arm cold against the skin of my right. "Don't get your panties in a bunch," I said, trying not to show my own amazement at this once-in-a-lifetime happenstance. No one ever finds a garden world on their first run. "We've got more probes to send down."

"But, Captain," Connie said, her thin blonde brows shooting up into her bangs, "can't we just go down ourselves? *Troublemaker's* readings look good—we wouldn't even need helmets. I know the Ops Guide says—"

"We're sending more probes," I said. "You learned this in the Academy. Don't jump the gun. Going off Ops gets people killed."

Connie's brow wrinkled in a way that made her look more coy than angry, but I knew the expression for what it was: her version of a peeved frown. She didn't seem capable of scowling.

Farah just shrugged and launched the next three probes. She had a good head on her shoulders, that one, though she was too reckless for her own good. I'd been like that when I was her age. That's the sort of thing that leads a woman to lose an arm.

I plugged the index finger of my left arm into the control console. It did have its benefits: by plugging in, I could interface with computers using only my brain. Took me ages to learn that skill, but it isn't true that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. It's just excessively painful to do so.

An array of readouts spread over the glass in front of me. I had camera angles from all three probes, plus a medley of readings from their instruments. Phalanx-2B was beautiful. I had to admit it. The new probes showed me more emerald oceans, sheer mountains like vast columns holding up the clouds, and herds of huge, long-necked herbivores. One of the probes pitched to show the sky, and Phalanx-2B's three moons showed up like the pearls my second husband gave

me right before the divorce. My stomach flooded with the warmth of seeing a new planet. This was the best part of the job, the thrill of discovery, the awful feeling of smallness I always got when I saw an undiscovered world on the screens. The girls oohed and aahed—they were seeing most of the same images.

I lowered my brows, scanning the images for some sign of danger. The greenhorns could sit there in awe and wonder if they wanted. I'd found out what was really going on.

“Connie, keep your eyes on the atmo and climate readings,” I said. “Farah, drive Probe 3—er, sorry, *Lady Lucy*—down to that mountain range there and go for a soil sample.” Only a few weeks on ship together and already I felt guilty when I forgot to go along with their silly names for the probes. I was slipping.

The younger women leaned forward on their couches, their excitement palpable. Farah brushed a wave of dark hair back from her eyes and then focused on steering the probe down, her tongue sticking out between her teeth. Connie pulled her vision gear down over her eyes; the glasses would add their own overlay of readouts to what she was already saw on the screens. With a nudge of my mind, I flicked my view over to the *Lady Lucy*. As it went deeper into the planet's atmosphere, the images from its cameras became brighter, sharper. I could see now that the mountains were honeycombed with yawning caves.

“Try and get into one of those caves,” I told Farah. “I want to know what the mountains are made of.”

She nodded a fraction, the movement sending her hair back into her eyes. She ought to have shaved it all off—I did that years ago. No need for surveyors to worry about looking good. Isn't no one who looks good after two years on ship, scanning the arse-end of the galaxy.

The mountainside glinted and sparkled as the probe approached, tiny flecks of mirror-like stone becoming more visible every second. Farah steered the *Lady Lucy* ever-closer to the nearest cave, which the ambient light made out to be no more than a thick black wall. Holding her breath, she directed the probe inside. I held my breath, too. Some silly, childish part of me could hardly bear the anticipation. All three of us let our breaths out when the cave's interior became visible.

It looked like the inside of a mouth—smooth, shiny, faintly glistening. I stared, fascinated. Were those strings of mucus stretching between the ceiling and the floor? Were all those bumps the taste buds of a massive tongue? I had never seen anything quite like—

Farah and Connie let out startled gasps. It took me a moment longer to see what had got them so surprised: what appeared to be a human child, about ten years old, had come tiptoeing out of the back of the cavern. I leaned forward, gripping the armrest of my seat with my right hand.

“Connie,” I snapped, feeling the cold clarity of adrenaline rushing into my veins, “double-check. Phalanx-2B is on the Unsurveyed List, isn't it?”

Connie, her face suddenly even paler than usual, pulled up the list on her screen. She tapped it wither fingertip, highlighting the name: Phalanx-2B. My stomach lurched.

“Nice and easy,” I said. “Bring the probe in closer. Could be a trick of the light.”

“Captain, that—that definitely looks like a kid,” Farah said, but she obeyed my order.

The child, or whatever it was, grew in the viewscreen. It certainly seemed human, with its long, straggling hair and its face too dirt-smearred to guess at gender. A smile broke through the dirt. It stepped towards the probe, raising one grubby hand.

“Don’t let it touch the probe,” I said, but Farah was already pulling back, keeping the *Lady Lucy* just out of arm’s reach.

The thing stepped forward, reaching out with a hesitant smile on its face, just as any child might. What could it be? There were some alien creatures that could mimic the human form, but I had never seen one that could come up with such a close match. And to do so based off of nothing but a probe—that was more than I could understand.

“Captain,” Farah said, her voice unsteady with nerves, “what should I do?”

I pursed my lips, staring at the child-thing. It looked totally real, its eyes open in wide-eyed excitement, a hint of guilt in its movements, as if its mother had told it not to mess with strange hovering objects.

“The probe is picking up audio!” Connie shouted.

“Put it on speakers,” I said.

The soundscape of an alien world flooded the ship’s command bridge. Wind sang across the entrance of the cave, while something that sounded like a cross between a piano and the warbling of a finch twittered intermittently from behind the probe. Something like water dripped from the back of the cave, along with a sort of wet crinkling sound. Then the child-thing spoke, its voice cutting across the background noise like a knife.

“What are you?” it said, in perfect English. It sounded like a little boy.

Farah’s hand twitched on her control stick. The probe jolted.

“I’m not gonna hurt you,” the child-thing said, stretching out its hands in a placatory gesture. It stepped towards the probe, moving slowly and carefully.

“He thinks the probe is scared,” Connie said. “That—that has to be a human, doesn’t it?”

“Scan it,” I said.

“But the radiation—”

“If it’s human, the scanner won’t put out enough radiation to hurt it. If it isn’t, then... well. Best not to take chances.”

“Aye aye, Captain,” Connie said. She touched the screen of her console, activating the scanner. Moments later, readings scrolled down all three of our screens: as far as the probe could tell without taking samples, that thing was human.

I let out my breath in a long, heavy sigh. Human. A child-mimicking alien might have been less problematic.

“He *is* human!” Connie said. She and Farah both looked back to me, their eyes wide.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. How had humans gotten all the way out to Phalanx-2B? People just couldn’t make my job easy. Damned independents. There’s ways to get charters if you want to set up your own colony, but you’re not supposed to go to an unsurveyed planet. Maybe that boy and his family are shipwreck survivors. Could be. But the only ships that might be this far out of civilized space would be pirates, weird cultists—and the occasional IPSC ship. No children allowed on IPSC ships, and the Corps is very strict about maintaining single-gender crews, so it couldn’t have been one of ours.

I squinted at the boy, who had started trying to lure the probe with what looked like a strip of jerky. Pirate, cultist, refugee, whatever—didn’t much matter who they were. Anyone on Phalanx-2B meant trouble.

“Shouldn’t we go down there?” Connie asked, breaking into my thoughts.

I looked up at my young crewmates, frowning. This was where it got hard. Ordinarily we’d land on a planet like this, once spending a few days to confirm the readings from the probes and fulfill all the necessary prerequisites in the Ops Guide. But it was against protocol to land

anywhere with humans or “sufficiently advanced natives” (as if the IPSC is ever going to find sentient aliens). On the other hand, if this child was the sole survivor of a shipwreck, we couldn’t just leave him.

I hoped there was no one else. Squatters were squatters, but it never sat right with me that we had to treat them like they didn’t exist. Whoever got to a planet first *ought* to keep it. Not for the first time, I wondered why I hadn’t just packed up my life and gone out to the Edge, where there was no government to tell you what to do.

But I still had to decide what the hell to do about that child.

“Pull the probe back,” I said, after thinking it up and down for a few minutes. “We’ll come back and check on that kid later. For now we need to see what else is here.”

Farah looked like she wanted to protest, but she obeyed.

“Now set the probes on a planetary search pattern.”

Connie twisted around in her seat. “But, Captain, what about the child? Shouldn’t we—”

“If he’s made it this long, he can make it a little longer. We need more information.”

Connie pursed her lips, but didn’t argue further. Greenhorns always learned pretty quickly that it wasn’t much use arguing with me. I frowned down at the readouts on my display, as the probes went up high enough to do wide-ranging scans of the entire planet. Now we just had to wait.

#

After a week in orbit, we were all three of us bored enough to think the international trade regulations might make for some interesting reading. That was the trouble with being a surveyor: sometimes it was the most exciting job in the galaxy. Most of the time, it was just pure,

unadulterated boredom. But I liked the quiet. Connie and Farah weren't used to it yet. Always took greenhorns a while.

It was on the beginning of the eighth day, just when I was thinking that boy really was a lone survivor, that we finally found the thing I'd been dreading all week: a human settlement. It shouldn't have taken us so long. If I'd been thinking straight, it wouldn't have. The location was obvious. It was buried deep within the pillar-like mountains where we had first found the little boy, hidden within a gigantic cave a few kilometers to north. From what the probe could tell, it was made of a combination of local stone and wood, and the remains of a spaceship. There were distinct heat signatures for twenty-nine people. They moved about in the unhurried way of a quiet village, seemingly without a care in the world—though they must have been afraid of being discovered, if they'd built their settlement in a cave.

Twenty-nine people. Not enough for a viable colony. When we discreetly pinged the settlement's computer, it didn't return a charter. Of course I'd already known it wouldn't, but a captain's got to be sure. Didn't seem likely they'd been shipwrecked, because they could've been broadcasting a distress signal if they wanted to. But they weren't.

Squatters, then.

“We should go down and talk to them,” Connie kept saying.

“It's against protocol,” I said, for what must have been the fifth time.

“But they might need our help. We have medical supplies—food—”

“They seem to be doing just fine. Have you been watching the feeds? They're over there merrily depopulating the local animal community, mining, having weird religious services... they don't need our help.”

Farah, who had been unusually quiet, looked up around her too-long hair. “This is a perfect planet,” she said. “If we follow the protocols, someone will put a colony here and those people won’t stand a chance.”

Silence fell over the ship’s mess. I could see in Connie’s eyes that she’d been thinking the same thing. So had I.

“We’re surveyors,” I said, looking them each in the eye. “We’ve got to report *all* the planets we discover to HQ—and especially the ones as perfect as this. Even if someone else got to them first.”

“But it isn’t fair,” Connie said, brow furrowing. “They were here first. So they don’t have a charter. That’s just a piece of paper, just—”

“They shouldn’t have come here,” I said. “They had to know this isn’t free space. It’s not the Edge. It’s not been surveyed. The Exploration Treaty is public knowledge.”

“They’re just trying to start a new life,” Connie said.

“They shouldn’t have broken the law,” I said. Greenhorns: why do they send greenhorns for these missions? But the fact is that we can never know what kind of planet we’re going to find. No one could’ve predicted that we’d find a garden world that already had people on it.

“But we don’t know why they did,” Connie said. “And what if they didn’t know the law? What if they’re from somewhere on the Edge?”

“They—they had to have known,” Farah said, her voice much quieter than mine or Connie’s. “You don’t get a ship without being aware of where you aren’t supposed to take it, even if you’re from the Edge. Especially if you’re from the Edge. Those people can’t afford to lose a ship by accident.”

“Then why would they have come?” Connie asked, her voice shrilling.

“They probably thought no one would find them,” I said. “Reasonable assumption. Galaxy’s a big place. But they’re still breaking the law.”

“A law made by governments they might not even be a part of!”

“Still the law.”

Connie stared at me, her face, for once, twisted into a convincing glare. “We’re reporting it to HQ, aren’t we,” she said.

“We are,” I said.

Connie took a deep breath, her mouth working as if she wanted to shout. But instead she stood and hurried out of the ship’s mess, her face turned away. Farah and I sat there for long moments in silence.

“Protocol is protocol,” I said.

Farah sighed.

We left Phalanx-2B an hour later. There were more scans to be done, much more to discover, but I didn’t want to risk Connie attempting to make contact with the squatters. It left a hollow feeling in my chest, but what could be done? We had to do what we had to do. The greenhorns had learned their lesson.

When we got back to HQ, Connie turned in her resignation. Farah stayed on. I wanted to tell Command to go to hell, but I didn’t. I wanted to ask who was getting colony rights to Phalanx-2B, but I didn’t. The job’s the job: ugly though it sometimes is, we’ve got a galaxy to discover.

Finalist - Catsi Dee Quincy

There Is No Fountain In Fountain, Pennsylvania

Cas had plenty of time to think on the long bus ride from New York to Harrisburg.

The social worker had driven him to the bus stop and give him her phone number (again; he thought he had about five copies of her number in his bag now), telling him to call if he had any problems at all. She made sure he knew where he was getting off the bus—a stop in Philadelphia—and which bus to get back on when he got there.

She'd bent down, which was degrading, and put both her hands on Cas's shoulders until he looked her in the eye, which was more degrading. Very calmly and almost over-enunciating each word—she had a tendency to do that—she asked if he was alright. Cas nodded. She told him again to call her if he needed anything, or if he didn't like staying with his aunt, and did he understand. Cas nodded again.

Finally, she straightened up and walked him to the bus, watching as he got on. He didn't look back. He didn't really like her. She cared, sure, but only because that was her job. She didn't seem to quite get that Cas understood her and everyone else around him, even if he didn't acknowledge them.

Cas was quiet, not an idiot. They'd made sure.

The psychologist said he was fine, IQ-wise. He was smart and aware, and had no comprehension problems. He did great in school. His grades were almost always A's.

He just... didn't look at people and he didn't speak unless he had to.

It was level one autism, the psychologist said, and social anxiety aggravated by neglect and potential abuse. Cas forced his mouth open and said that his dad never hit him (because he had to say that). His social worker didn't believe him. Cas said the bruises were from a sports accident (he didn't play sports). At that point, they stopped listening to him altogether.

Cas stared out the dark window. His social worker had reserved the seat next to him, even though she wasn't coming along. Someone had tried to sit there, and Cas momentarily panicked before setting his suitcase on the seat and holding up both of his tickets. He never looked up to see where they went. He wanted to stare out the window and think, finally alone after a week of chaos.

The glass was cold. Cas leaned his head against it to wait out the two hour drive to Philadelphia.

After switching buses in Philadelphia, he waited out another two hour drive. He dozed off a couple of times, never managing to stay asleep for more than a few minutes before the bus jolted him awake and his head bumped the window, startling him awake. He felt panicked for a moment before remembering where he was.

After awhile, he just gave up trying to sleep at all.

He stared out the window, watching the passing headlights of cars on the highway until they stopped at the bus station in Harrisburg. Cas stood up, staring at the ground ahead of him while the rest of the passengers made their way off the bus. He gripped his suitcase handle, twitching his hand at his side and tapping his fingers on his leg. Eventually, the movement in the aisle stopped, and Cas threaded his way through the seats to the front. The whole ordeal had felt very claustrophobic. All Cas wanted now was to go home and cry and sleep.

Except he wasn't going home. He was going to Aunt Em's, and he probably wasn't ever going to go back home.

Cas swallowed hard, trying to get rid of the lump in his throat and the tears stinging the backs of his eyes. He needed to be able to see to find Aunt Em outside.

As it turned out, he didn't really need to look for her. She was waiting right by the bus stop, and he barely took three steps off the bus before she was at his side. Her arms went around his shoulders. He stiffened at the rough, scratchy fabric of her coat brushing against his chin.

"Hi, Cas," Aunt Em said, stepping back to hold him at arm's length and study him. "Are you all right? The trip was okay?"

Cas nodded, slowly forming the words 'it was okay' in his head, and never quite getting them out before a second figure joined Aunt Em. It was his cousin, Olive, who he hadn't seen in almost four years. Two years older than he was, Olive had skipped out of their every-other-Christmas get-together because she was with a friend. Cas knew Olive didn't like him. As kids, they'd tried to get along, and Cas really did want to play with her. Olive didn't play like Cas did. She didn't like his rules and kept taking his things from the order he'd carefully placed them in. Cas remembered both of them screaming, and then Aunt Em and his dad telling them if they couldn't get along, they couldn't play together at all.

So they didn't, and they'd never patched things up after that.

Aunt Em took his suitcase just to hand it to Olive and headed for her car, parked nearby. Cas followed. Olive opened the back door and slid the suitcase onto the seat, then got in the front seat. Aunt Em said "*Olive*" in a sharp tone, but Cas just got in the back next to his suitcase.

Aunt Em started the car. Cas patted his knee repetitively, jittery as the car pulled away from the bus station.

After a moment of awkward silence, Olive announced that she was hungry.

"Do you want something to eat?" Aunt Em asked.

It took Cas a moment to realize that she was talking to him, and then another moment to figure out how to respond. "Uh, not... Not real—"

"Did you have something on the bus?" Aunt Em interrupted.

Cas shook his head.

"I'll get you some fries," she said.

They went through the drive-thru at a fast food place. Aunt Em asked if he wanted a drink, and he managed to ask for water. He didn't manage to ask for something other than fries, though, so when she handed them back he spent more time wiping the frustrating, salty texture off of his fingers than he did eating. The water was good, though. It was cold and nice.

The drive from Harrisburg to Aunt Em's house was nearly an hour long. They drove out of the main town and back through woods, until the lights and other cars were left behind. Aunt Em lived in the middle of nowhere. Cas had visited once before, but he hardly remembered it. His leg jittered and he started tapping again. He wanted his own room, not his room at Aunt Em's.

The social worker had not believed him when he said his dad was fine. The psychologist had not believed him either. Somehow, Cas had managed to live twelve years of his life without anyone being concerned about him being *differently abled*. (That was a phrase he'd heard a lot over the last week.) His dad had always said he was a little different, but he just said Cas needed to work harder to make up for it. Try harder to sit still, concentrate harder at school, and just work harder in general to stop the bad habits he'd picked up.

And then had come the whirlwind of events starting when Cas broke down screaming at school. His dad had yelled at him for oversleeping, he missed the bus and was caught in the rain, and then when he got to school he couldn't change out of his wet clothes. When some kid said that they could just put Cas, dripping clothes and all, in the dryer, Cas had lost it. Later, the same kid said she was just joking.

It hadn't sounded like a joke to Cas.

They'd had a substitute teacher that day, and if they hadn't, Cas thought he'd still be home and nothing would've changed. The substitute teacher had a daughter with Asperger's, and when he heard Cas's meltdown, he told Cas's father that he should look into getting Cas to a psychologist. His dad had hung up on the teacher, and then the teacher had called child protection services.

Social workers had shown up the next day and everything flipped upside down. Cas was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder and anxiety, and then his social worker noticed the bruises on his neck, and then—because he hadn't made it bad enough yet—his father showed up to the house too drunk to pronounce his son's name.

Within hours, they'd contacted his aunt and purchased bus tickets. There was a lot of other stuff going on that Cas didn't get. Paperwork stuff, legal stuff. He kept hearing the word

‘court’ come up. He knew that wasn’t going to be good for his dad. It probably wasn’t going to be great for Cas either.

They reached a sign that read ‘Welcome to Fountain, Pennsylvania.’ After that was another long stretch of road with nothing but trees on either side. The trees were too close to the road. They had trees in New York, but not this many and not all at once.

They reached a small town, and Cas felt a bit lied to as they drove through it. There was no fountain, as far as he could tell, in Fountain Pennsylvania. Aunt Em pulled up in front of a small white house and turned off the car, parking in the street. Cas jittered, then slid his suitcase off his lap. It felt strange to be here. It was too late—it was after midnight, and that was too late to be getting anywhere.

A little part of him whispered that he was being ungrateful. But he just wanted to go home.

Going to bed had been hard. Even harder was getting up the next morning.

Cas woke up at the same time every day. He woke up at 5:45 and got up at 6:00. In the fifteen minutes between, he pulled his favorite blanket over his head and felt the soft underside on his cheek. He breathed quietly under the blanket until he got too warm, and then he kicked it off until he felt cold. Then it was six, and he got up to get ready for school.

This morning at Aunt Em’s, it was 6:13 when he woke up. He had his blanket—it was one of the first things he’d packed—but it wasn’t his bed, and it felt different. It was in the

wrong position in the room, and the window was at the wrong end, and the sun came in a completely different way.

He stumbled out of bed, jittery and disoriented and so, so anxious, and got dressed.

Cas didn't want to go downstairs at first. He sat on the edge of the bed and tapped his knee and stroked his blanket. Then, he heard noises downstairs—a fridge opening and the unmistakable sound of someone pouring orange juice. He was thirsty, so he got up, smoothed out his blanket until there were no wrinkles, and went down to the kitchen.

Olive sat at the table eating toast and drinking orange juice. Aunt Em smiled at Cas from the stove.

“Good morning, sweetie. You're up early.”

He wasn't. He was up late.

He looked at Olive's glass. Could he ask? Would that be okay?

Aunt Em noticed him before he could struggle over it for too long. “Would you like some orange juice, Cas?”

He nodded. “Yes please.”

“And what would you like to eat?” She got the orange juice out of the fridge again and poured a glass, setting it on the table and gesturing to a chair. Cas sat. “We have toast, cold cereal, oatmeal, eggs...”

Cas sipped the orange juice. It was cold and felt good on his tongue and throat. “Um... Cereal. Please.” He tacked the last word on quickly. His knee bounced under the table.

“Frosted flakes or cheerios?” She took the boxes out of the cupboard. Cas stuttered, liking both and not knowing which to choose. She set them on the table next to him, then got out a bowl and the milk.

Cas grabbed the nearest box—cheerios—and poured it into the bowl. He set the box back, rolling the bag down and folding the top flaps, and then shook his bowl until the cereal was even across the bottom.

Aunt Em started talking while he got the milk. “I called the school this morning, Cas. If you’re okay with it, you can start this morning. Is that all right? You’ll be on the bus with Olive, and she’ll make sure you’re settled in. She’ll introduce you to her friends so you know some people. That Russo boy is at the same bus stop, isn’t he?”

“Mom,” Olive said, her voice vaguely annoyed. “I don’t think Cas wants to hang out with my friends.”

“Introduce him to that Russo boy from down the street,” Aunt Em said again. “Wesley.”

Olive huffed a sigh. Cas’s spoon clinked against his bowl while he ate, five cheerios at a time.

It was cold out. Cas fixed his scarf again, trailing Olive down the street. A group of other kids already crowded around a corner of the sidewalk. Cas hung back while Olive caught up with another girl.

He stared at the cracks in the sidewalk before looking at his watch. It was 7:03. Olive said the bus came at 7:05.

“Hey,” a voice said near him. Cas moved his line of vision and saw a boy standing near him. He was facing towards Cas, and Cas realized he was probably talking to him. A jitter of anxiety filled him.

“You’re Olive’s cousin, right?” the boy said.

Cas blinked, once, twice, then nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’m Wesley.” He stuck out a hand. *That Russo boy from down the street*, Cas realized.

He raised his own hand and shook it.

“Cas,” he said. Wesley wore jeans and a red hoodie that looked soft. Cas put his hand back at his side, tapping his leg.

“Nice to meet you, Cas.” Wesley rocked back on his heels in a gentle, comfortable motion. “Eighth grade, right?”

Cas nodded.

“Cool. We’ll probably end up in classes together. School’s too small to split us up much.”

Cas nodded again. Wesley seemed nice enough, so he took the time to come up with an answer. To his surprise, Wesley stuck around long enough for him to say it.

“How small is the school?” Cas asked.

“I think there’s, like, two hundred kids total,” Wesley said. “And our high school starts in seventh grade. We don’t have a middle school.”

Cas blinked again. “That’s small.”

“Probably,” Wesley agreed. “You’re from New York, right?”

For the third time, Cas nodded. “Brooklyn.”

“I’ll bet you’re used to big schools, then,” Wesley said. “Hopefully it’s not too much of a shock. Just let me know if you need any help getting around, okay?”

Cas felt a little smile tugging at his lips. “Okay.”

“Okay.” Wesley smiled. The bus pulled up. Cas hung to the back, waiting for the rest of the crowd to get on first.

Wesley hung back with him.

The school *was* small, and it was strange at first. But he would get used to it, especially with Wesley's help.

Wesley laughed a lot, and Cas liked how it sounded. He also liked how easily Wesley spoke, to anyone, even to Cas. He'd never once left his side, except for when the principal had called Cas into her office where he'd met the woman who would be his Aid—someone to help him when he felt anxious in class and to stay with him during a special break that he got after lunch to relax and de-stress.

Cas had never had anything like that before. It was unusual, but it felt nice to have someone there just to help him. His leg didn't jitter quite so much after he got back to Wesley.

The bus dropped them off at the same place it picked them up. Wesley followed Cas out, chattering about something someone had said, and about a project Wesley had due next week, and if Cas had any homework to just ask Wesley because he'd be happy to help.

"Thanks," Cas said.

"You're welcome," Wesley said easily. "For what?"

It took Cas a moment to answer. "For helping."

"With homework? I haven't done that yet."

Cas shook his head. “With today.”

“Oh.” Wesley shrugged, shoving his hands inside his hoodie pocket. “I was just hanging out with you because you’re nice. I like you.”

Cas cocked his head. That was another thing he was not used to. There were a lot of firsts today, here in Fountain. “I like you too.”

Wesley grinned again. “Cool. Do you wanna hang out again later? I gotta do chores for my mom first, but we could grab dinner or something. Allegro’s within walking distance.”

Cas frowned. “What’s Allegro?”

“Sorry, I forgot you didn’t know,” Wesley apologized. “It’s a pizza shop, maybe ten minutes walking distance from my house. Which is right there, by the way.” He pointed at a house on the other end of the block. The porch had peeling red paint and a bike’s handlebars peeking over the top rail.

“Okay,” Cas said.

“I’ll come over to your house at six,” Wesley said. “If that’s okay.”

Cas nodded. “Yeah. That’s okay.”

“Okay.” He waved. “See you, Cas.”

Cas waved back.

Cas liked Allegro Pizza—a red and green sign hung over the door, and the building was made entirely out of old red brick—but he did not like the crowd inside. Wesley said that if Cas liked, they could just get the pizza and go somewhere else to eat it. Cas agreed, and he hung back

while Wesley ordered individual slices and a drink for each of them from the soda fountain by the door. Wesley mixed root beer with cherry coke. Cas just got lemonade with a lot of ice.

“C’mon,” Wesley said once they were outside. “We gotta go back the way we came, but I’ll show you my favorite place to hang out.”

“Okay.” Cas sipped his lemonade through a straw while he followed Wesley along the sidewalk. He turned before they reached their street, back through an alley until they reached a sort of park. It was heavily overgrown, with outdated playground equipment covered in plants and bugs. Cas wrinkled his nose.

“It’s pretty old,” Wesley admitted. “My parents probably played here. But this is what I wanted to show you.”

He led Cas to a short, squat building made of cinderblock that was probably white at some point. Along the back, someone had built a ladder up the back wall. Wesley stepped onto the bottom rung, stretched up and set his pizza and drink on the roof of the building, and then climbed the rest of the way up. He leaned back over the edge of the roof to look down at Cas.

“Come on up. I promise, it’s safe.”

Cas had only met Wesley today, but he trusted him. He reached up, and Wesley took his lemonade and pizza, setting it next to his own. Cas gripped the ladder and climbed up. It wasn’t too high, so he didn’t mind. Transitioning from the ladder to the roof was the hardest part, but Wesley caught his hands and helped him up.

“Ta-da,” Wesley said once Cas had gotten his footing and started to sip his lemonade again. “My secret home.”

Cas looked around. A blanket stretched out on the roof, but other than that, there was nothing up here. Wesley made his way to the blanket and sat down.

“It’s not much,” he said, smoothing out a wrinkle. “But you can see the stars really well from here. A lot better than from my room, anyway.”

Cas sat next to him on the blanket. He tapped his knee with one hand and held his lemonade in the other.

“I brought this,” Wesley said, pulling a map out of his backpack. “It’s Fountain. I marked down my house—” he pointed to a red circle, and another one almost right next to it— “and yours. And here’s Allegro, and here’s where we are now.”

Cas leaned over to see better. Wesley turned the map.

“It’s probably pretty confusing for you here,” Wesley said. “When you’ve lived here long as all of us have, you kind of get used to the local language. The next town is thirty minutes away, so we don’t leave a lot. Everyone knows everything about everyone, so if somebody has an inside joke, everybody knows it.”

Cas frowned.

“So I’ll teach you,” Wesley said. “I want you to feel at home here. You gotta know the language if you want to know what’s going on.”

Cas nodded. “Okay.”

Wesley laughed, clear and easy. “Okay.”

And then, after a pause, Cas said, “Did you know I was coming?”

“Yeah, your aunt told my mom, and your mom told me, and I remembered seeing you a few years back when you visited over Easter. I’d wanted to ask you to play then, but you didn’t see me and then you left the next day.”

Cas looked at him. “I’m sorry I didn’t see you. I would’ve liked to meet you then.”

Wesley smiled. “At least we get to meet now, right? And now we’re neighbors.”

“Yeah,” Cas said. And that was one good thing about living here. Wesley.

Wesley ate his pizza and pointed out other places on the map around mouthfuls of food and soda. Cas nibbled at the pizza and wiped his fingers off on a napkin, then sipped his lemonade until it was only ice. The sun sank down behind them until it was too dark to see the map. Wesley folded it, then pointed upwards.

“See? Told you the stars were better out here.”

Cas craned his neck and looked up. He was a city boy, and in crowded New York, you didn’t see the stars a whole lot. Out here in the country, you could see all of them. He stared up at the brilliant pinpricks of glowing white all over the sky. He stared at them until Wesley laughed.

“They’re not going anywhere, I promise. You can look away for a little.”

He looked at Wesley at his torn jeans and his soft red hoodie, and then he met his eyes for the first time. Wesley had light hair, cut short on the sides and fluffy-curlly on top. When he smiled, his blue eyes crinkled at the corners.

Cas looked down at his knees. His fingers tap-tap-tapped over and over. He reached one hand up, playing with the hair at the back of his neck, brushing over the bruises. Fading bruises that his dad had told him not to show anyone or else Cas’s life would be flipped over and ruined. Fading bruises he hadn’t shown anyone, and still everything had changed.

“Wesley,” Cas said on impulse. “Why isn’t there a fountain?”

Wesley laughed. “I don’t know. There’s a lot of rumors and legends, but I don’t really think any of them are true. Maybe there used to be a fountain and they took it out.”

“I would’ve liked it,” Cas said.

“We’ll make one someday,” Wesley said. He leaned back on his hands and looked at the park below them, as if he was imagining a fountain in the middle of the tangled grass. “We’ll put it in there and it’ll be our secret fountain.”

“Okay,” Cas said, and he smiled.

“Okay,” Wes said, and he smiled back.

Finalist - Hannah McManus

The Girl and the Star Keeper

"Where do the stars come from, grandfather?"

Grandfather leaned back in his chair, a smile tugging thoughtfully at his lips. "Are you certain you want to hear this story again? I know plenty of other ones you have never heard."

His granddaughter shook her head. "I want to hear about the stars."

So he took her on his lap and told her again how the stars had first been lit by the Ancient One, and how they were hung out again each night by the Star Keeper, who looked after all of the stars with love and joy, and polished them with tender care.

"What about the Star Keeper?" the girl would ask. "Is he alone?"

And as every night, her grandfather had no answer.

Every night passed the same.

Until one night, the stars did not come out.

"It is likely just cloudy," the farmer's wife said.

"They will be out tomorrow night as usual," said the baker.

"Who cares about the stars?" the goose boy spat. "It's the sun and moon that's important."

The little girl's grandfather said nothing.

And so she waited.

The clouds that did not look like clouds were gone in the morning, and the sun rose as usual. See, everyone said, it was fine. No need to worry.

But the stars did not come out again that night.

"I hope the clouds bring rain," the farmer said, not looking at the sky.

"My master says it's nothing extraordinary," said the rich man's maid. "And he's a learned man, so he ought to know."

"So it's a little darker than usual, it doesn't matter," maintained the goose boy.

"Normal folk are in bed at night anyway."

The grandfather still said nothing.

The little girl waited outside even longer this time, but the sky remained dark save the sliver of the moon.

When the third night came with no stars, no one said anything.

Except for the old grandfather.

"Something has happened to the Star Keeper," he whispered.

"I know," said the little girl. "That's why I'm going to go find him."

The old grandfather was silent for some time, then he nodded.

The little girl put a loaf of bread and a little comb in her pocket, and took a soft blue ribbon to keep her hair from her eyes. She put a blanket around her shoulders to use when the night was cold, slid a little bronze ring that had belonged to her mother onto her finger, and placed a red cap that had belonged to her father on her head. Her grandfather whittled down his walking stick so it was her height, and she set out on her journey.

"Does your grandfather know you are wandering about?" asked the milk maid.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" asked the parson.

"I always knew you were odd," said the goose boy, who watched her wistfully as she left the borders of their little village.

The little girl traveled into the woods, keeping to the path. Along the way she met a little red dwarf, who had his long beard stuck in a bush.

"Let me help," said the little girl, and she soon managed to free the dwarf, though a good deal of his beard was left behind.

When the dwarf sputtered in anger at the state of his beard, the girl gave him her little comb, apologizing for his beard and assuring him it still looked quite nice.

The dwarf looked at her suspiciously, but once he has combed his beard with the little comb and eyed it harshly, declared that it looked almost good as new, and as it was combed with the comb she had given in kindness it would grow back to normal by that night.

"I expect you want some sort of treasure in return," the dwarf said sourly.

But the little girl shook her head. "I would like to know the way to the Star Keeper, please. I am searching for him."

The dwarf looked surprised, but information was cheaper than gold, so he did not complain. "I do not know where he is," he said, "but the old woman in the wood might." He wished her luck and gave her a ball of yarn that when she threw it out in front of her, unrolled itself to lead the way.

She soon found the old woman's house. The old woman was surprised to see her, and even more surprised when she heard her request.

"If anyone knows where the Star Keeper is," the old woman said, "it would be the Sun Keeper." She told the girl to keep walking until she found the East Wind, and he would take her to him.

The little girl thanked her, and gave her the blue hair ribbon in gratitude. The old woman wept, which puzzled the girl, but the old woman thanked her, so the little girl knew it was alright. The old woman wished her luck, looking up sadly at the dark sky.

She kept walking until it grew cold, and she had to keep a hand on top of her little red cap to keep it from blowing away. She wrapped the blanket tight around herself to stay warm.

"Is that you, East Wind?" the girl asked, wishing her toes would warm up.

The East Wind appeared, looking puzzled. "Is it you who seeks for me?" he asked. "What is it you would ask?"

"Would you bring me to see the Sun Keeper please?" the girl asked politely. "I'm looking for the Star Keeper, and the old woman in the wood told me the Sun Keeper might know."

"Of course," said the East Wind. "Just get on my back." The East Wind brought her up into the skies, and it was even colder there. The girl shivered.

But it started to warm as they grew closer to the sun. Soon, it was so hot that the little girl started to pant like a deer thirsting for a stream.

The Sun Keeper was beautiful and proud, and he looked down at the little girl with disdain. "What do you want?" he asked.

"I am looking for the Star Keeper, please," the little girl said. "I was told by the old woman in the wood that you might know where he is."

"The *Star Keeper*?" the Sun Keeper scoffed. "Why would I care to know a thing like that? I bring sunlight to the world, the most important kind of light. I light the way for the farmer's plow, I light the pages that the scholar reads. I light the day for man and woman, rich and poor, parent and child. What care I for stars?" And he sneered so frightfully at the little girl, that she thanked him quickly and asked the East Wind to take her away.

The East Wind set her back on the ground, apologizing that she had not been able to get the information she sought. Perhaps, he told her, the West Wind could bring her to the Moon Keeper. Perhaps he would know. He wished her the best of luck, for the skies were dark and lonely without the stars.

The little girl thanked him, and before she turned to leave, she gave the East Wind her little red cap. "It is awfully cold where you go," she said. "This will keep your ears warm."

The East Wind was so overwhelmed with gratitude that he blew the little girl all the way over to the West Wind, and when she tumbled to a stop, the West Wind looked confused until the girl explained where she was trying to go.

The West Wind was nearly as cold as the East Wind had been, and this time they grew no warmer the closer they got to the moon.

The Moon Keeper was beautiful and bitter, and he looked down at the little girl with contempt. "What do you want?" he asked sharply. "I am busy."

"I am looking for the Star Keeper please," the little girl said.

"The *Star Keeper*?" the Moon Keeper shrieked. "That lazy good for nothing who left me with the job to light the entire night sky by myself? Why would I know where he is? *I* never leave my post. *I* never stop my job. After all, *I* am the brighter light at night." And the Moon Keeper scowled so frightfully that the little girl thanked him quickly, and asked the West Wind to take her back.

The West Wind also apologized for being unable to help, and he had no further suggestions, though he hoped she could find him.

"It's alright," said the little girl, "I'll find my way." And she thanked him and gave him her blanket, that he might wrap it around his nose and mouth when he got cold.

The West Wind was so grateful that he blew the little girl deep into the forest.

The little girl no longer knew where she was, but she reasoned she might as well keep going forward. She plodded along, humming to herself. She sat down on a log to eat half of her loaf of bread, when three ravens flew out of the trees.

"Please, miss," they croaked. "Give us some crumbs."

They looked so hungry that the little girl gave them the second half of her bread, which they soon devoured.

"Thank you," chirped one raven.

"In gratitude," the second croaked, "we will answer one question that you ask."

"Make it a good one," the third added.

The girl was very happy. "Where is the Star Keeper?" she asked.

"We will take you to him," the first raven said.

"As far as we can go," added the second.

"Keep up!" said the third.

They led her to the stairs that lead to heaven, and the third raven gave her a little golden key, and they all wished her godspeed. The little girl thanked the ravens, and started the long climb up the stairs. It was very far, and halfway up, her poor walking stick broke. She was very tired when she reached the top, but she was glad to have made it. She looked around for the Star Keeper.

All of the stars sat in their little glass cases, twinkling dimly on their velvet pillows. They were beautiful, and the girl wished she could hold them. But she knew better than to touch, and she wandered the halls until she came to a little room. The door was locked, but she used the little gold key, and she looked inside the room.

The room was dark, with no windows and only the one door. A dully glowing boy sat in the middle of the floor, and the little girl walked up to him. "Hello," she said politely. "Are you the Star Keeper?"

The boy seemed surprised to see her, and even more when she asked who he was. He hesitated before answering, "I *was* the Star Keeper. But I am not as important as the Sun or Moon Keepers. No one even noticed I was gone."

"I noticed," the little girl said. "I came looking all this way to find you."

The boy looked surprised. "Why?"

"Because I miss the stars," she said. "Lots of people do."

"They do?" the boy asked, glowing a little brighter.

"Of course!" the little girl said. "The stars make the night beautiful. They make the night bearable. The stars remind us that even when all is black, there is still light. But now there's just black," she added sadly.

The boy looked even more surprised. "Really? I make things beautiful?" He glowed even brighter.

"Yes!" said the little girl. "We need you."

The boy glowed until he could glow no brighter, and he smiled so brightly that it almost outshone his glow. "Will you help me hang them back out?" he asked.

The little girl was delighted. Together they hung out the stars in their places, creating the vast beauties of the galaxies, the shimmering brilliance of the cosmos, the simple radiance of the stars.

"Thank you for finding me," the Star Keeper told the little girl. "I didn't know anyone cared."

"I'm glad I met you," the little girl said. And then she gave him her little bronze ring, so he would always remember he was not alone.

In return, the boy gave her a little star of her own to keep around her neck so she would always be able to see the way in front of her.

She started home, and she passed the rejoicing ravens, who gave her a feather to pin in her hair. She met the West Wind, who gave her his breath at her back to speed her way home. She met the East Wind who gave her the grace of a windwalker. The Sun and Moon Keepers did not notice her.

The old woman in the wood gave her a hug in gratitude, a new staff and a warm meal. The dwarf gave her a bag of gold.

And by the time she reached home again, she was no longer a little girl, but a grown woman. Having been with the stars, she shone like one. The people had quite forgotten about the little girl, so they were very confused who she must be.

"She must be a foreign princess," said the master's son, primping himself up.

"She must be an angel," said the old parson, dusting off his best coat.

"Will you marry me?" asked the goose boy.

But she only smiled at them and paid them no heed. She returned to her grandfather who was overjoyed and who understood.

As time passed, the people forgot the odd girl who lived alone with her grandfather. When her grandfather slept eternally, the girl lived on her own, but she often visited her friends in the wood. She treasured the star hanging around her neck, and wished she could see the Star Keeper again, but she soon discovered that that journey was better suited for younger feet.

When she too slept eternally, no one in the village missed her.

But the girl woke up in the sky. She looked around in confusion, and she saw the Ancient One smiling down at her. The Ancient One brought her to the Star Keeper, who smiled at her also.

“Hello,” said the Star Keeper.

“Hello,” said the girl.

“Will you stay with me?” asked the Star Keeper. “Forever?”

The girl accepted, and together they cared for the stars forevermore.

Finalist - Chelsea Beason

Dead Girl Walking

#

Done and clear.

That was how Brax liked to describe the end of a job. I'd only heard him say it a couple hundred times, but now I felt the full weight of those two words. The cold angular seat of the shuttle made no difference to me, I sank back into it with a worn out smile and ran a hand through my hair. The strawberry blonde wing slipped off and let my natural curls unfurl. It felt like the first time in months any bit of me had a chance to breathe.

"Jemma? You still there?" The voice whispered in over my earpiece and banished any bit of relaxation with a rush of

adrenaline.

"Pix? What happened? I was right behind you."

"Oh, yeah. I'm home. It's all good."

My sigh was heavy with exasperation. That kid had a knack for knowing exactly when someone was trying to have a moment to themselves, even from a distance. I stuffed my wig into my case - half a mind to put away my earpiece too - and kicked it back under the seat.

"It's just kinda lonely, you know, after everything..."

"Pixie, hun, these aren't for personal calls, remember?"

"Well yeah, but Brax said you guys were using your share to move up."

"Brax doesn't get to say anything until I get home." There was a loving strain in my voice. Typical Pixie. Typical Brax. It wouldn't be my crew without the bickering.

"Look, Pix-" I started, ready to banish any of the girl's nervousness like I had so many times before, but a reflection in the curved glass of the shuttle caught my eye.

Time is relative when not even a drop of sunlight can reach you, but I had left at this god forsaken hour for the express purpose of being alone. He appears inconsequential enough, dressed casually, not even carrying anything... But he sat in my row.

"We'll talk more later." I slipped the earpiece out, Pixie's worried grabble going dead with the push of a button.

The gap between us closed by three more seats. As if there were a way to make that subtle.

"Just cut to the chase, alright?" I watched his reflection as he finally took the seat next to mine.

"You're Jemma, aren't you? With the Threshers?" He looked on ahead too, at my own reflection or the the dark ink of the deep waters outside.

As eager as I'd been to get rid of it, perhaps I should have suffered the wig a bit longer. "What's it to you?"

"My employer has an offer, he--"

I shook my head and raised a hand to stop him. "You wanna talk about jobs, you talk to Brax. But I can save you the trouble, we're on holiday." I couldn't help the nasty grin that came after. I had been so ready for everything to go off without a hitch.

"He worried you would refuse." The knowingness in the stranger's expression worried me. "Does the name Rosalind Callin mean anything to you?"

If my breath caught, I hoped it had been subtle.

Rosalind Callin was as good as dead. Her father had practically funded the entire city, surely he would have paid

just a little something to see his only daughter again. She should have been the easiest of scores. Sweet little thing, like a priceless porcelain doll. She went from priceless to worthless in one curt phone call.

So why did I have someone asking on behalf of another man about a life I hadn't lived in twenty years?

"Then you'll meet with him Thursday, at The Vortex. 11:00 AM."

"That's tomorrow."

The man chuckled. "You're a hard woman to find, and Mr. Callin's a busy man."

"Mr. Callin?" It couldn't have been him. Rosalind's father had left her to die.

He answered me by slipping a card out from the breast pocket of his coat and offering it over to me.

I took it. The gold embossed letters felt like something out of a dream.

Auriel Callin. Rosalind's brother.

#

The crackling melody of the radio greeted me before I even opened our apartment door. I winced, my hand hesitating above the doorknob.

It should have been a happy occasion. Brax had waited up

for me, that was sweet of him. He would be over joyed the job was over. Done and clear. I should have been too. I was, but the ghost of Rosalind hung over me with a sheet of questions I'd never dared to ask.

What if Rosalind Callin had never been left to die?

What if she wasn't so useless after all?

Where would I be then?

My fist closed around the card as my other opened the door. Pixie's candy pink hair stood out like like a beacon, especially in the dim light. Sleep seemed to be the only time the girl could hold still and by the looks of it she'd crashed hard on our couch. After what we'd pulled, I couldn't blame her.

"Hey." Brax shifted in the arm chair, like I'd caught him sleeping too. The lopsided grin said it all. It had taken years to get here; him and I, our own crew, the big payout. I had been so ready to be happy with him. Now my smile felt hollow.

He nodded towards Pixie and rolled his eyes. As if we both didn't know just how fond of the kid he had become. "She can't believe we're not all gonna split now."

Any other night I would have teased him right back. Tonight, Pixie and Rosalind had too much in common. She knew. Once you outlived your usefulness and you might as well be dead. Pixie wasn't even her real name. The hair, the childish

persona... I wonder what it had buried.

I stalked over to the kitchen and plucked a glass from the cupboard. "Stop letting her think we might."

"Aw, she knows better than that." Brax followed. "It'd just be a little vacation." It made sense for him to want more, better, bigger. Brax had grown up down here in the deep waters, the clear blues above us had only ever been a blip in the radar for him. Rosalind's entire life had been there, and look where it had ended.

I felt him coming up behind, trying to embrace me, but I shut off the sink and side stepped out of the way.

He leaned back on the counter, taking a moment to study me like a puzzle. "What's with you?"

"It's been a long job, Brax. That's the biggest thing we've ever pulled."

"Yeah, but we did it. Done and clear." There was a question in his look. Of course he knew something was up. Brax and I might've been doing this for years, but marriage made conning each other almost impossible.

I sat myself up on the opposite counter and set the glass down beside me. My other hand went back to the card, pulled it out of my pocket.

"Someone asked about Rosalind, on the way home."

"She's dead." In a sense, Brax had helped me bury her. He'd been there the moment Rosalind died and Jemma crawled out of her grave.

"Said Auriel hired him... To find me. Said he wants to meet with me." I tossed him the card. The wait form him to straighten it out took forever.

Brax said nothing. Maybe he wondered the same things I did.

"Would you want me to?"

He took a moment to think, speaking slowly when he did.

"Rosalind's dead. And I don't know what business Jemma Allard would have with a Callin."

#

Thursday, at 11:15AM, I stood outside The Vortex.

I'd never lied to Brax before. Not telling him something felt near enough to that. Maybe I didn't always do what he'd wanted, but he'd always known loud and clear before I did it. I'd slipped out that morning without so much as waking him or Pixie.

Somewhere in the midst of guilt and apprehension I allowed myself to go inside.

In the very center of the dimly lit room sat a bright blue column teaming with sea life that had no business being this far down. The juxtaposition of it all made me smirk despite myself.

The club itself was practically empty. It wasn't even noon after all. For a moment I think I even hoped I'd missed him. I could return home, make my apologies, and Rosalind Callin could cross back over to the land of the dead.

A low whistle drew my attention to one of the tall tables around the tank. I turned to face it in a jerking motion before it felt like everything stopped.

Auriel.

He wasn't hard to recognize. The features he'd had as a young man now blended with that of our father's.

"Rosie?"

I gave no indication I'd even understood him, but my face must have said it all. I wondered if he was thinking the same about me; Comparing me with memories.

"You look good. I mean, I'd heard, but..." He trailed off as he gestured for me to sit.

I wasn't sure I could move at all. The time it took me to take a seat felt too long. My tongue felt too heavy. What did I say?

"It's Jemma now."

"Right. Of course. Who would have thought, huh?" He smiled. Out of pride, or amusement, or something else I couldn't tell.

"The Thrashers run the deep waters ragged and you're their top

dog. With all the stuff you've pulled off you're probably better off than me now."

Something in me bristled at the thought. Is that what my success meant? I'd turned out alright, so what did it matter that 'Rosie' had died along the way?

"We get by." Is that what he wanted to talk about? We were just supposed to catch up like a pair of siblings who'd simply grown too busy in their adult lives?

"Is that thing for real?" He looked down at the ring on her finger. "Whenever I hear about you it's always Jemma and Brax, Brax and Jemma. Just made sense, huh?"

I placed my other hand over the ring, instinct telling me to keep Brax out of it. Our marriage was the best thing to ever happen to me. I didn't want it spun into some justification for what had happened to me.

"Why didn't he pay?" The question left me before I could get a rein on it. But why would he have done all this, if not for some kind of closure?

"Father... Took a calculated risk. He couldn't have anyone thinking he could be so easily swayed."

I knew that. Everyone had known that. Somehow hearing it from him, someone who had been there, was supposed to have made it better. But it didn't.

"I am so sorry, Rose- Jemma. But it turned out alright, didn't it? Even better, I'm the one coming to you for help now."

I looked him in the eye again and felt a chill wash over me as it all clicked into place there in his eyes. Cold and calculating. Like father's. The ghost of Rosalind Callin was a means to an end, just like she had been in life.

"There's a rat in my mines. Some crew's got a direct line to coracite, maybe you've seen. And Callins do so hate competition. I need them gone. Quick and quiet."

I shook my head. "We don't mess with that." No one would. Not if they didn't want to get crossed in an even worse way.

He smiled at me like he was dealing with a child. "What, honor among thieves? This could just be the beginning for you, I've seen the jobs you're taking. Bigger and better pay outs, what do you think I won't pay?"

Rosalind's ransom, for one.

My head kept shaking and I pushed back from the table. This had been a mistake. "Brax handles whatever we do or don't do, I can't-"

Auriel sprung up and grabbed me by the wrist. "I'm not asking Brax, I'm asking you. I'm doing this for you. Help me, and I can help you come home."

"Rosalind's dead."

He laughed and the grip around my wrist tightened. "It was an awful pain to track you down, but I've done it. You think I couldn't do the same thing to Brax? Or that geeky kid of yours?"

The fact that he knew Pixie well enough to call her that made my blood run cold. What had I done?

Auriel let go. His point more than made. "You have my number. You call me when you're ready, Jemma."

#

I let Brax book us a place up in the clear blues of the city. It only seemed fair, after what I'd done. One last good thing while I tried to find a way to tell him I'd ruined everything. And for what? Rosalind Callin was dead and I should have let her lie.

He must have known. Everything was too perfect. Maybe it wasn't retirement money, but it was a taste of what could have been. What I'd ruined.

Seeing Auriel's card flutter out from amongst my things and fall there at my feet broke me. My knees gave out from under me. I was on floor, a hand on my heaving chest like that was going to keep it all from bursting while I tried to remember how to breathe.

We'd have to die. Jemma, Brax, Pixie, everything we'd done... Maybe for good.

Brax walked in a moment later, I couldn't even remember where he'd been, but he was at my side even quicker.

"Jem," He hushed and pulled me close. "If you think you need to speak with him then-"

"I did though. I played right into his hands. He was just using Rosalind as bait."

"For what?"

"Us. Either he gets to use us for whatever he wants, or..." I shook my head. I'd already thought too hard about what would happen then.

"What's he want?"

"I guess Ruven's gotten a little sloppy. Auriel thinks we're his muscle to flex down there." Of course we knew exactly what was going on in the mines. Like I'd said, we didn't touch it. "You were right. Jemma Allard had no business with a Callin."

Brax stayed silent. When I shifted to look at him it was obvious his wheels had been turning. He smiled. I couldn't imagine what for. "Doesn't one of Ruven's guys have a thing for Pixie?"

We had a plan by morning.

#

Auriel met me at the mine entrance, weeks later but on a

Thursday, 11:15PM. I had to wonder if he'd done it on purpose. But then wondering after Auriel was what got me here in the first place.

He smiled as he approached, arms out stretched like he planned to hug me. My face remained stone cold, arms at my side. I think it just made him laugh more.

"Yeah, yeah, you're a big tough con. I'm still the one who has to come and do the dirty work." He brushed his coat out of the way to reveal a metallic black handle at his side.

Gun. He wasn't supposed to have that. Bullets and glass domes millions of miles under water were a disaster waiting to happen, but beside that it was my crew down there.

I made sure to tap my earpiece before speaking. This had to go off without a hitch, especially now.

"That's not what we agreed on." But why should I have expected a Callin to keep a promise?

Auriel said nothing. Just kept pace beside me as we descended into the black depths.

Pixie's voice hissed in over the earpiece, almost startling me enough to flinch. No one could hear her, that would defeat the purpose, but I still gave Auriel a sidelong glance.

"Brax used real cuffs on Fennin." She whined. Like this was a normal job.

"Shut up, Pix." There was an edge to Brax's voice I hoped meant he understood.

I turned us in to a cavern on our right. It had looked like we'd complied. Ruven and his lacky, Fennin, sat in the center of the cavern, tied. Pixie and Brax stood on either side, Pixie still done up in coveralls and grease. She'd dyed her hair a simple brown for this. I hated to see it any color other than her bright pink. It made me wonder what else she'd change if this didn't work. If Auriel even gave her that chance.

Auriel stepped into the room ahead of me. He would be excited now, of course.

I caught Brax's eyes with mine, pointing with my gaze at Auriel, trying to warn him without saying anything.

Auriel had begun what must have been a prepared speech on how stupid Ruven had been, how much smarter Auriel was. He flicked back his coat the same as he had above.

Panic spread across the two's faces. We hadn't warned them about this. There had been little danger in them actually dying before.

They moved too quickly in their panic. Auriel wasn't near enough yet. Neither would be able to reach him without incident.

And Pixie was too close.

Auriel grabbed and spun in the same motion, revealing to me

Pixie with the cold metal against her temple.

Everything froze. I wondered if it really had with how still and tense everything had gotten.

"This isn't what we agreed on." It was all I could think of. Over and over again. This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

"Neither was that." He jerked his chin towards Ruven, standing to the side just as helpless as Brax or I.

"You can still get what you want." I couldn't fix this. Maybe after it happened and we were dealing with the aftermath I would think differently, but we'd still have Pixie.

"Can I? I'm starting to think I don't have as much leverage over you as I'd hoped, Jemma."

I looked past Auriel, to Brax. He couldn't do anything more than I could.

"Don't you make eyes at him." He turned, just a little, to gesture at Brax.

That was when I moved.

And when Auriel shot.

My head rung. I staggered up to my feet, heaving and looking down at my hands. The gun was there. I caught Pixie crawling away in the corner of my eye. Brax was at her side before I could blink.

And Auriel still lay in front of me. His eyes wide, mouth

already stammering for some way out of this.

Ruven moves in before words can be made and hauls him to his knees.

I think that was when I remembered to breathe.

"What do you think this is going to accomplish?" Auriel finally found his tongue. "You can't just kill me down here and not expect consequences. I'm Auriel Collin!"

I couldn't help the nasty grin. I should have. Maybe after this was all done and clear I would think differently, but...

"Kill you? No. But don't worry, I'm sure someone'll pay a hefty sum to get you back."

I watched it all click together in his eyes. I wondered if mine looked the same as his had, cold and calculating. "Rosie, please. Y-you don't want to be like dad, do you?"

"Rosalind Callin is dead."