

Agnes looked up at Grandpa's lined, worn face. She wondered if her face would ever look like that, so old and tired. He smiled down at her, then lifted her up onto his lap. "Shouldn't you be helping your mother, sweetheart?"

She glanced out the window, at her mother gutting fish in the front garden. Agnes didn't like gutting fish. It smelled and she got slime on her hands. "Grandpa, tell me again about the chief."

Her grandfather's eyes grew distant. "All right, Agnes. It was a long time ago, in 1801. I was bosun on the HMS Fearless. We were crossing the South Pacific, on our way to India from South America. Did I ever tell you about India? It's an amazing place..."

"The chief, Grandpa."

"Oh, right, the chief. On our way across that immense ocean, we found a tiny island. We stopped there for fresh water and to stock up on coconuts. The people there welcomed us with open arms. They insisted on fishing for us and preparing a feast."

"What were they like, Grandpa?"

"They had dark skin and the broadest smiles you've ever seen. The sun shines there every day and so do the people."

"Then what happened?"

Her grandfather looked out the window, remembering. "The chief of the island left on the boats with all of the men to go fishing for us. His youngest son wanted to go, but the chief wouldn't let him. He sent the boy back to the women."

"Was he a big boy, Grandpa?"

Her grandfather shook his head. "He was six, Agnes, same as you now. Far too young to be out on the water fishing."

"He went anyway, though. Didn't he?"

"Yes. He waited until the rest of the men were far out to sea and then pushed out a little boat. He tried to paddle after them, but he wasn't strong enough. The boat got dragged towards the reef."

Agnes grabbed a handful of her grandfather's shirt. "What happened then?"

"I was on the Fearless, standing watch. The ship was anchored not far from the reef. I saw he was in trouble, so I launched a boat and rowed after him as quick as I could. Before I got there, his boat turned over and he fell into the sea. I jumped from my boat, swam through those waves and grabbed him by the waist. He was panicking, and I only had one arm to swim with now, but eventually I got him back to my boat and dragged him in."

"Was he all right, Grandpa?"

Her grandfather smiled. "He coughed up a lot of water, but he was fine. I rowed him back to shore and he ran off to his mother."

"Did the chief thank you?"

"Did he ever. He gave me the greatest gift he could."

"Was it gold? Or jewels?"

"No, sweetheart. He blessed us with fair winds and good fishing. He said he'd square it with his god."

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Agnes felt a sharp blow to the back of her head. She winced. The warm sitting room faded,

now only a memory, replaced by the cold, drab surroundings of the workhouse.

Supervisor Harris glared down at Agnes. "Stop daydreaming and get back to work, Weatherbow."

It had been two years since her grandfather last told the story. In that time, Agnes's whole world had crumbled and mould had grown in its place. Her parents had died and her grandfather a year later. With no-one to take care of her, she had been sent to the workhouse.

She picked up a piece of leather from the table and resumed stitching. She wished the chief on that island had given her grandfather gold and jewels. The blessing hadn't helped her mother and father survive a storm at sea.

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Lord Charles paced back and forth on a wooden platform, as much to hear his own footsteps as anything else. Pausing he gripped the railing and stared down at the mine. His mine. The one he'd discovered with his steam-powered digging machine.

This invention stood nearby, hissing out superheated steam and whirring as it idled. It looked like a steam train, but at the front there was a cone-shaped drill that dug through the earth. Behind the tender were two compartments for people.

He peered at the mine face below him. A ribbon of gold ran along it, gleaming in the light from the phlogiston lamps. Dozens of children hammered and dug at the mine face, freeing the gold and putting it into carts. Idly swinging their clubs, the day shift of ten strong men watched over the children.

Hearing a creak to his left, he turned to see Maligrew Smith, the leader of the day shift, climbing the steps to the platform. Maligrew was twisting his hat in his hands.

Lord Charles took out a silk handkerchief and mopped his brow. The heat was cloying this far below ground. "Smith, have you ever seen gold that pure? You barely need to smelt it."

"Yes, Lord Charles."

"How is the work progressing?"

"Well," Smith looked apologetic. "The children say they've heard scratching, Lord Charles."

Lord Charles span and stared at Smith. "Scratching? Don't be ridiculous, man. We're a half a mile underground. Exactly what could be scratching down here?"

"It might be exhaustion. The children are pretty much used up."

Lord Charles sighed. "Fine. Gather four men. I'll find us some replacements."

Smith put his fingers in his mouth and whistled. He beckoned to the closest men and pointed after Lord Charles.

Lord Charles walked to his digging machine and climbed inside. Walking to the driver's seat, he sat down and took hold of the control levers. The four men filed in behind him and began to shovel coal into the furnace.

He waited until the pressure built, then rotated the machine around on its tracks. Spinning up the drill he sent the machine burrowing back through the earth wall.

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Agnes dipped her spoon into the weak bowl of broth and sipped. She settled herself more

comfortably on the bench and considered the front yard of the workhouse. She liked lunchtime; it was the only time no-one shouted at her for daydreaming. On the other side of the yard, some boys were playing football with an inflated sheep's bladder. The other girls were playing with dolls they'd made out of spare scraps of cloth and leather. None of them would talk to Agnes. Ever since she'd joined the workhouse a year before, she'd been ostracised. She could never figure out why. Not that it really bothered her; she preferred to sit on her own anyway.

Agnes noticed a ripple in her bowl of broth. Then she felt something through the thin soles of her shoes. Putting down her bowl of broth, she got to her feet and cocked her head. She could definitely hear a rumbling noise. It seemed to be coming from the centre of the yard. She advanced tentatively.

The rumbling grew louder and with a crack, something burst out of the ground, cobblestones flying in every direction. Agnes stared at the roaring metal beast rolling to a stop in front of her. She couldn't move, transfixed by the machine. A door on the side of it swung open and four men ran out.

The men grabbed nearby children and carried them back to the machine. A fifth man, with a top hat and long, curly moustache, stepped from the machine and opened a second door, further back. Spotting Agnes, he walked towards her with a forced attempt at a smile. "Hello, little girl. Do you want to see something shiny?"

Agnes's feet finally responded and she backed away. "No."

She tried to run but went straight into the chest of one of the other men. Before she could untangle herself, he scooped her up with his right arm. Agnes realised he already had Ralph under his other arm. Struggling slightly under the weight, he lumbered toward the machine.

He made it a few steps before Ralph managed to kick him hard in the backside, making him let go. "Little demon," muttered the man, watching Ralph run off.

Agnes kicked as best she could, but her feet only waved in the air. Through the open door of the machine's rear compartment she could see children's scared faces staring out. The man shoved her in hard, then more children were pushed in after her, trapping her in the small, windowless box. The door slammed shut and they were in almost total darkness.

Agnes noticed a thin shaft of light jutting into the compartment. It was coming from a gap in the metal walls near the front. She worked her way forward and pressed her eye to the hole. Through it, she could see the front of the machine. The man in the top hat and the other four men climbed back into the machine and slammed the door behind them. Then the machine tipped forward and began to dig its way down. She could just about see the front window of the machine and through it, the earth beginning to rush past.

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Agnes stared down into the large grave. Big enough for two coffins, side-by-side. The two wooden boxes with her parents in them.

"Take a handful of earth and throw it on the coffins," her grandfather said.

She walked over to the mound of dirt and dug some out. Cupping it to her, she walked over to the open grave and threw it in. She couldn't help feeling that her parents would be scared when they heard the earth hit the lid of their coffins.

"Good girl," her grandfather said. Taking her hand, he led her from the graveyard.

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Agnes stared at the dirt rushing past the window of the machine, digging her deeper and deeper under the ground. Her breath caught in her lungs and her heart raced as panic filled her.

The machine broke out into air and wrenched to a stop.

The men got out and began pulling children from the compartment. No longer even trying to smile, the man in the top hat yanked her out by one arm and swung her towards the far wall. "Get to work."

Agnes looked around. She was in some sort of cavern. Children were digging at one wall with more burly men standing over them holding clubs. "I have to get out, I have to get out," she whispered.

The children at the mine-face turned to look at her as she stumbled close, hollow eyes staring out of blackened faces.

The man with the top hat pushed a pick into her hands. "Get to work, if you know what's good for you."

"I have to get out." Agnes swung wildly at the rock face. Muscles surging with terror, she hit as hard as she could, over and over again. On her third strike, a crack appeared in the wall. The next blow sent the crack running to the top of the face.

"Stop," someone called behind her.

Agnes didn't listen. The only thing that mattered was escaping the rock pressing down on her. She kept hitting the wall, creating more cracks. Finally it collapsed with a sound like thunder, enclosing her in a blinding cloud of dust.

Dropping the pick, Agnes stumbled forward. "I have to get out." She walked into the darkness, her feet catching on the rough stone floor.

"Come back," the children screamed behind her. "They'll get you."

Agnes looked back. She was only a dozen paces beyond the hole, but no-one seemed to want to follow her. Not even the men with clubs. A ring of faces stared through the hole. Then, as she waited for one of them to do something, she saw a flicker around the edges of the hole. She peered hard, but it had vanished before she could focus on it.

The man with the top hat appeared in the centre of the hole, looking furious. Picking up a nearby phlogiston lamp, he shoved it at a skinny boy. "Get in there and fetch her."

The boy took the lamp and sidled towards the hole with faltering steps. He glanced back at the man with the top hat, but seeing no reprieve, finally stepped through the hole.

As the light from the lamp hit the walls around the hole, Agnes saw what had been flickering. Enormous creatures crouched around the hole. Roughly the shape of spiders but with hairless grey bodies, and each at least half as big as Agnes.

"Look out," she shouted.

The boy turned to see the spiders jump down on him. His screams were cut off as the spiders fell on him, setting his lamp rolling toward Agnes. Beyond the roiling mass of spiders, the men turned and ran. Agnes heard the digging machine grind into life moments later, leaving the children behind to gaze in frozen terror at the beasts.

Agnes's gaze flicked back to the spiders. They had already finished with the boy and were crawling towards her.

However, when they got to the lamp they stopped and began pawing at it with their legs. The boy jumped to his feet and ran out through the hole, apparently unharmed. The other

children fled with him, leaving Agnes alone.

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Lord Charles pushed the lever as far forward as he could, sending his machine into a steep climb. The digging machine broke through the surface and landed, rocking, on its tracks. The men behind him threw open the door and tumbled out. Lord Charles helped the slowest of them with his boot.

Smith turned to look at Lord Charles. "What are we going to do, Your Lordship?"

"I'm going to do what I should have done a long time ago," Lord Charles said. "That mine is cursed. I'm going to put an end to it."

Lord Charles slammed the door shut. Walking to the controls, he turned the digging machine back underground.

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Agnes watched the spiders run and tumble around the light. They looked like they were having fun with the lamp. Maybe she could-

Her feet began to tingle. She cocked her head and listened. A familiar rumble grew louder, then the digging machine burst from the wall. She coughed as steam and dust flooded the tunnel.

The door of the machine swung open and the man with the top hat emerged. He had two large canisters on his back and what looked like a gun in his hands. Swinging the gun towards the spiders, he pulled the trigger. A warm, bright line of fire sprang from the end of the gun and fell on the spiders.

The spiders scattered, squealing up the walls and into holes there, vanishing from sight.

The flames died as he let go of the trigger. He looked at Agnes without emotion. "I'm sorry, I can't have any witnesses. I have my reputation to think of."

She watched the gun swing around to face her. A small flame danced at the end of the barrel. It seemed to bend back toward him, like a hell-hound wanting to lick its master's hand.

For a moment, all she could think of was the sizzling sound the spiders made when the flames hit them. Then she realised, if the flame was moving like that there had to be a draught behind her. She pointed over the man's shoulder and screamed, "Spiders."

He instinctively turned and fired, spewing flames on the blank wall. While he was distracted, she ran into the darkness, her hands held out in front of her.

"God damn it to hell, come back here," he shouted.

But she didn't listen. She just kept running. She wasn't sure if she was imaging it, but she thought she could smell sea air ahead of her.

Behind her, she heard a roar of the digging machine. She turned and saw it rumble back into the mine. After a moment, she glimpsed it smashing through the supports, then her view was blocked as the roof collapsed across the tunnel mouth.

Agnes kept running, sniffing the air for any sign of the ocean. She dashed into the darkness, staring ahead with wide eyes. With a start, she realised she could see her hands. There was weak light coming from somewhere.

Glancing up, Agnes saw a hole in the roof of the cave, far above her. The dim light was just enough to make out some of her surroundings. Maybe she could see a way up? Then

something hissed close by.

She peered into the shadows. A large spider was crouched on its web only a few metres to her right. Another hiss came from in front, then more from every side. Each way she looked, spiders were closing in on her. She backed away, then screamed as something bit into her left ankle.

Curling into a ball, she waited for the spider to strike again, but it didn't. Tentatively reaching out, she found a hook embedded in her ankle, with a long line leading from it. She pulled but the line was taut.

Agnes fumbled her way along the line, shoulders hunched, worrying that the spiders would strike at any moment. She reached a small hole in the wall of the cave. It was only just wide enough for her to squeeze into.

"Grandpa said we'd always have good fishing."

He must have been scared rescuing that boy, but he did it anyway. She began to crawl up a narrow damp tunnel, fishing her way upwards.

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