

A Ministry of Peculiar Occurrences: Tale from the Archives

All That Glitters

by

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Characters created by Grant Stone
in the Tale from the Archives, "*A Ruby in Rain*".

Preservation Inlet, Fiordland, New Zealand

You can't get much closer to the end of the world without falling off the edge, Barry Ferguson thought, watching the mist that cloaked the fiords roll down from their dizzy heights. Off the steamer's port bow, the looming cliffs of Coal Island swelled up out of the Tasman Sea, obscuring the horizon, the sky bruised with the approach of foul weather. There would be more snow in those clouds. Invercargill had been blanketed in white when they had departed that morning. Ferguson jammed his hands deeper into his overcoat, stamped his feet, and watched his breath spool away like the ghosts that trailed behind the steamer.

"It's warmer below decks, you know."

Ferguson glanced over his shoulder at Lachlan King, huddled against the bulkhead. "And miss this amazing view? Surely you jest?"

"I have seen my fair share of gloomy cliffs and fog, I assure you," the older man replied.

Ferguson beamed, an infectious grin that lit up the winter darkness. "How high do you think they go?"

Lachlan stepped into the bracing wind to lean on the rail beside him. "Maybe," he said, gesturing at the dark rise and fall of the sea, "you should be asking how *deep* they go."

Ferguson stopped, his attention drawn from the heights to the depths. Perhaps it was the chill, but it seemed that a little of the colour drained from his face.

"Have you thought any more about the case?" Lachlan asked.

"I've been thinking about how much I'm looking forward to getting into that flooded mine. Can you imagine? It'll be like walking into the earth itself. Well, I guess it *will* be walking into the earth itself, won't it? And I can't wait to try out the rebreather. Tests in the local bathing pools are all good and well, but this will be a *real* test, to see how it *really* performs in the field."

"And if it fails?"

Ferguson was quiet for a moment. "The wings didn't fail did they? Well, not much, anyway. I got them sorted in the end."

"Indeed you did. So, aside from the impending excitement of testing your precious breather, have you taken any time to consider how a band of miners might have been swept away by a flash flood in a gold mine at the bottom of the South Island only to find themselves washed up in a mineshaft in the Coromandel, at the top of the North Island?"

Ferguson rubbed his chin and furrowed his brow. “Not so much, but won’t it be great to find out?”

The southern cold lanced through Lachlan, reminding him of another time, another place, far away, when he wore a younger man’s beard. He could not be much further from that place if he tried. “I trust you’re not of a mind to suffer the same fate. They were lucky to survive, you know.”

Ferguson shrugged. “‘Suffer’ isn’t exactly the word I’d use.”

“No, I don’t imagine you would.”

For a thoughtful spell, the pair watched the misty fiords slide by, the sky growing heavier above them.

“Bit late for the gold rush, aren’t you?”

Lachlan and Ferguson turned to see a young Chinese girl standing at the rail a short way down the deck. Ferguson could have sworn she had not been there a minute ago, but nor had he heard her approach. The rumble of the steamer and the keening of the wind in the rigging must have masked her footsteps on the slick deck. She turned something over in her fingers; a ticket, maybe, or a playing card.

“No-one ever comes to Cromarty except for the gold, and there isn’t much of that left except what the machines pull out of the mine. If you’re prospecting, I’d suggest you’re wasting your time.”

Lachlan frowned. The girl had no accent other than a hint of Scottish drawl suggestive of New Zealand’s deep south. “Our business is not in gold,” Lachlan replied carefully.

“But it is in the goldmine,” Ferguson said with a wink, then winced as Lachlan’s boot pressed down firmly on his toe. “In...a way,” he finished weakly.

“Yip,” the girl gave a sharp nod and stared across the rail, “go hunting around down there, it’s not gold you’ll find.”

“And what exactly, pray tell, do you think we *will* find?”

The steamer’s horn suddenly blasted a long, piercing note, causing both Lachlan and Ferguson to look around, startled. When Lachlan turned back, the girl was gone.

“Where did she...?” Stuck in the rail, snapping in the frigid wind was the bent piece of card. The wind caught it and whipped it away, a hint of green ink turning over as it vanished into the gloom.

“Hey, I can see the stamper lights!”

Puzzled, Lachlan turned to look where Ferguson was pointing. The sheer faces of the fiords seemed to glow with a flickering blue pulse from beyond the headland.

No roads led through the dense forest that covered the farthest reaches of the South Island. A few doughty souls had cut desperate trails through the bush as the promise of alluvial gold in the Otago river valleys had faded, but few had even survived the perilous expeditions, much less struck it rich. Preservation Inlet, at the very bottom of Fiordland, was so far from the goldfields as to make even the prospect of finding a hint of the metal there almost a dream, but someone had done it. Someone, Lachlan thought, who should, by now, be very, very rich; someone ambitious, crazy and greedy enough to have dared the uncharted fiords in search of gold.

There was very little in the world more dangerous than ambitious, crazy, greedy men grown fat with gold, Lachlan King well knew. It seemed little coincidence that where there was gold, there was mystery, for where there was mystery, no doubt there was mischief. And it was in these dark places at the far edges of the earth where mischief could mature, unseen, unfettered, until it burst out into the world of decent, reasonable folk who had no business dealing with mischief and mystery. And there was only so much you could wash away with Amnesic Darjeeling.

Coal Island receded and the steamer bore around the headland into Kisbee Bay, where lay the tiny mining town of Cromarty. Bright blue-white flashes rippled across the snow-dusted bush and turned the sky to glowering as arcs of electricity cascaded lazily down the huge copper-wound pillars that crowned the stamping battery. The grind of gears and the crush of disintegrating rock echoed around the fiord from the tin edifice, accompanied by the crackle of high voltage current.

“It’s still running,” Lachlan nodded towards the battery. “Surprising that they have any men left to work the operation, given how many have fled the place now that it’s considered haunted.”

“I’d still be working there if it was me,” Ferguson grinned. “What a beautiful thing it is.”

“Looks downright perilous,” Lachlan disagreed. “Most folk keep their electricity contained, you know.”

“But why? It’s so pretty.”

A single stevedore waited on the dock to receive the steamer, a Maori fellow in his later years, whistling softly to himself as the boat approached. As soon as they were roped up to the jetty, Lachlan and Ferguson made their way down the gangplank, Ferguson wheeling a barrow containing the agents’ belongings and equipment.

“*Kia ora*,” the stevedore tipped his flat cap to the two men as they stepped down. “I’m guessing you’re here in some kind of official capacity, then. Not many visitors coming this way lately.” His grin almost outshone the glare of crawling electricity, though the gaunt shadows played hard across his features.

Lachlan nodded his way. “Good evening, sir. Might you point us in the direction of lodgings for the evening?”

The man rubbed his hands together. “*Tai hoa*, soon as I’m done here I’ll rattle up the wagon and we’ll head into town. Name’s Whatu, pleased to meet you.”

“So, you’re the local wharfie, and the cabbie?”

“And the publican, mate, and the post-master general, and the resident bush lawyer. Give me a badge I’ll be the local copper too. No-one else left to do it, except old Ming, and he’s not good for much these days.”

Shortly thereafter, the three men—for no other passengers came off the boat, not even the young Chinese girl—were bouncing and bounding up the short steep hill towards the township nestled in the hollow of the cliffs. The wagon hissed and spat as the rickety steam engine on its tail thumped away, metal wheels sliding and scraping precariously through the slurry of mud and wet snow. Lachlan held on for dear life, while Ferguson seemed thrilled by the ride.

Once they had pulled up in front of the pub—the only building of any prominence in the town besides the battery—and their bags and cases were stowed in their room, they gathered in the public bar while their host scrounged them up a hot meal and a pot of tea. The place was otherwise empty.

“Business a bit slow, then?” Lachlan asked Whatu as he placed two plates of lamb stew and mashed potatoes on the table beside them, along with a handful of mismatched cutlery.

Whatu shrugged. “Hard to keep people around when you’ve got ghosts and nutters to compete with, eh?”

“Do tell.”

Whatu produced a schooner of beer and a plate for himself and took a seat. “I’m famished,” he said, forking stew and potato and washing it down with cold ale. “It’s hard work when you’re the only guy left in town. There’s a few still hanging around Chinatown, but they keep to themselves, mostly.”

“But the press is still running,” Ferguson said around a mouthful, “are there men working up there?”

Whatu shook his head. "It runs itself, all electric. The carts cycle through the shaft on electric rails, the battery runs off the electric motor in the press, and it's powered by a waterwheel sitting on a waterfall just up the gorge there. Old Ming, he only needs men to do the hard graft of cutting the quartz and shovelling it into the carts. The machines do the rest. But there's no one down the mine now. Apart from a few of the Chinese still tending their gardens at the far end of town, it's just me and Ming left, and you'd be lucky to get a straight sentence out of him."

Ferguson nodded sagely. "English not so good, eh?"

Whatu laughed. "He built this town, mate. His English is as good as any other, learned it up on the West Coast, but we don't hold that against him. Only he hasn't said a word since his little girl went down that mine and didn't come back out."

Lachlan and Ferguson looked at each other. It seemed that the room had turned just a bit colder.

"If he's not in the assay office, I don't know where he'll be," Whatu shouted over the clatter of the engine. The little truck slewed across mud, carving narrow tracks in the snow as they barrelled up the hill towards the stamper.

Whatu had told them that normally the battery was shut down after dark, but who knew what crazy old Ming was up to up there? The man was obsessed with finding his daughter, after all. Even after his mine had swallowed a dozen workers and the rest of the crew had taken ship back to Invercargill, he wouldn't rest.

Lachlan had told the publican about the men who had stumbled out of a mineshaft in the Coromandel, dripping wet and confused, claiming to the rather incredulous locals that they had been working in a mine a thousand miles to the south just minutes before. The men that Ming had lost in the mine had been found, apparently, but there was no report of a Chinese girl among them. Lachlan didn't mention the strange coincidence of the girl on the steamer the day before. The Chinese were as much a part of the South and the legacy of the gold rush days as were the many orphans that the mines created as they took their toll of lives. Lachlan, however, had seen too many strange things in his time to believe for very long in coincidences.

The rasp of raw electricity scythed across their ears as they pulled to a stop before the battery. For a long moment, Ferguson stared up in awe at the blinding arcs as they walked

their lazy course down the huge copper terminals. “Amazing,” he muttered, then stumbled forward as Lachlan nudged his back.

The three men swept the interior of the stamper. The massive rollers spooled through the building, empty, and the flywheel raced on, the pistons continuing to rise and fall, though no quartz rock tumbled under its slamming plates. Past the shifting layers of mineral filters which rattled dry across each other where water should have sluiced freely through the riffles, and through the shed housing the cyanide vats went the agents and their guide, but there was sign of Ming, nor anyone else for that matter.

Exiting the building, Whatu shrugged. “Guess he’s up at the mine, then.” He pointed up the incline, towards the spectres of fire-blackened pines that covered the hillside. “Straight up there. You can’t miss it.”

Lachlan raised an eyebrow as he hefted his satchel. “You’re not going to escort us?”

Whatu laughed. “I could lie to you, mate, and tell you I’ve got things to attend to, but the truth is I just don’t go near the mines. I’ll be spending plenty of time underground once I’m dead.”

Lachlan nodded. “Nor would you wish to anger Ruaumoko, I take it. Or step into a portal that may lead to the underworld?”

Whatu’s grin faded.

Lachlan started up the muddy trail alongside the bright iron rail tracks and the dry fluming, Ferguson falling in behind. “You know, sir,” Ferguson said, puffing slightly under the weight of the rebreather, “we all know you’re clever and well-informed and all of that. You needn’t use your cultural knowledge to scare the locals.”

“Do you think so, Mr. Ferguson? Do you not think it may be possible that by digging into the earth, people may have upset the native god of earthquakes?”

“And volcanoes, sir. Don’t forget the volcanoes.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“I don’t think that a volcano god has anything to do with a little girl going missing down a mineshaft, or a bunch of miners being transported from one end of the country to the other, is what I don’t think.”

“It’s all connected, Ferguson. One way or another, everything is connected.”

“If you say so, sir. Tell me, if the mine’s flooded, what do you think old Ming might be doing up there? Taking a bath?”

“I daresay that we’re bound to find out, and we may very well need your infernal contraption to do so.”

Ferguson shifted the rebreather on his back. “*Internal*, sir. It’s an internal breather, not infernal. I imagine an infernal breather would be somewhat hotter.”

Lachlan waved a hand. “Of course.”

They rounded a bend, and the earth yawned open before them. The drivetrain still clanked and groaned along the tracks, its teeth shining wet, but no carts clattered up or down the rails. Further up the gorge, a tumble of timber lay where the fluming had collapsed, perhaps in a downpour, perhaps due to bad engineering. Water poured freely off the collapsed edge, saturating the surrounding area. Detritus had been dragged away from the mine entrance, but it the water that had been diverted from the stream into the fluming was now flowing into the shaft, rather than down to the battery like it ought.

Ferguson swung the rebreather from his back and began to check the dials and gauges on the top while he unclipped a pair of flexing brass hoses attached to a faceplate of glass and leather, with valves on both sides. He detached a crank handle from the side of the device and inserted it into a receiver on the back, then set to winding with both hands. The rebreather began to tick and hiss gently.

While Ferguson primed the device, Lachlan approached the mineshaft. Something caught his eye, and he stopped to extract it from the mud. Closing his fingers around the folded card almost buried in the mud, he heard a hum rising from the cart tracks, a low buzz not unlike the constant tickle of sound that emanated from the electric terminals above the stamper battery. *It’s all electric*, Whatu had said. Lachlan knew enough about electricity to know that it did not mix well with water.

Standing, he slipped the card into his pocket.

“Best if you don’t touch the rails,” he said to Ferguson, “they’re still energised, so the water in the mine probably is too.”

Ferguson, struggling to hoist the breather back onto his shoulders, looked crestfallen. “You mean...?”

“Yes, it might kill you. But it didn’t kill those miners now, did it?” Lachlan frowned. “Cripes lad, you can barely stand in that thing. How on Earth do you think it’s not going to drag you to the bottom of whatever dark puddle you fall into?”

Ferguson managed a strained grin. “It’s full of air, see?” he said. “It floats.”

“So how is that better than just swimming?” Lachlan shook his head and turned toward the mine.

Behind him, Ferguson puffed as he tried to unhitch one of the weights from his belt. “Well, you see sir, there’s something of a science to it...” His voice was swallowed up in the

damp echoing blackness of the mineshaft, as the southern wind crooned mournfully through the stubblefield on the hillside.

“Please tell me that thing has a light on it, Ferguson.”

Treading carefully, the two agents descended into the gloom, lit only by the electric glow that spilled from the light-globe on the top of the rebreather. A string of gas lamps hung cold and dark along the tunnel wall. Their footsteps echoed in the darkness, and they listened to the sounds of their own breathing, the crackle of electricity, and the *plink* of water far below.

“Lot of water still pouring in here,” Lachlan said, gesturing at the steady stream that ran down the lower side of the shaft. “You’d think it would’ve flooded the place by now.”

“Must be seeping out somewhere,” Ferguson replied, “like the Coromandel.”

Lachlan shook his head. “Whatever caused such a thing could only have been momentary, surely. The energy required for such a translocation must have been immense.”

“So where’s the water going? And where’s our man Ming?”

“And the girl?”

“You think she’s gone too? You think Ming’s come down here looking for her, and now he’s gone? Can’t really blame him. The weather’s a lot better up north.”

“They said it was raining the day it happened,” Lachlan continued. “One of the worst storms they’ve seen in years, and some of them have been around long enough to have seen some wild weather. A few refused to work, but when Ming said he’d fire them, most came back. Did you see those trees on the hillside? Near the creek?”

Ferguson nodded. “You’re thinking there was a flash flood and a lightning strike, but you’re wondering what is it about this place that turned it from a simple death-trap into a portal through the earth.”

“Indeed.”

“And you’re thinking it’s something...peculiar.”

“I found this up there in the mud.” He handed Ferguson the dirty piece of folded card.

Ferguson turned it over in his hands, holding it up in the yellow light for a better look. Chinese writing covered it in blocks of green ink. “A pakapoo ticket?”

“Very popular game, apparently.”

“So is it a clue, or not?”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

They trudged on in silence for a time, until the sound of the echoes changed. They rounded a switchback bend and saw light. Ahead, the tunnel branched. The gaslights in the branch to the left were burning. The tunnel to the right lapped with water. A simple plate switching mechanism divided the tracks, while a complex nest of cogs and wheels sunk into the rock facilitated the operation of six separate drivetrains, one running in each direction up the main shaft and down the two branching shafts, all folding together in one smooth contrivance to allow for the carts to come and go as required. The pit was full of water under its metal grate, yet continued to spin on nonetheless.

“What are those?” Ferguson asked, pointing at the surface of the water. “More pakapoo cards?” He edged closer, careful not to step in the water as he tried to get a better look at the cards with their green printed Chinese script.

“Ming was a gambler,” Lachlan observed, “had to be to come all this way in the hope of finding gold.”

“But why come down the shaft, on his own, to play a card game?”

“It’s not a game so much as a lottery. Someone holds a master card. The player with the card that matches the master most closely wins. Say, Ferguson, is that what I think it is?”

Lachlan edged slowly down the left tunnel, where the gaslights threw hard, ruddy shadows across the scoured quartz vein.

Ferguson abandoned his study of the floating cards to follow Lachlan. “If you think that that’s dynamite, then yes, sir, it is. Not so unusual down a mine though, is it?”

“Perhaps not,” Lachlan said, edging closer, straining to see in the poor light, “but it’s not normally wired to detonate at the *top* end of a tunnel, is it?”

The two men peered at the bundle of explosives jammed into a crack in the tunnel wall, their eyes trailing the thin fuse wire that ran away from it, leading not up, to safety, but down, deeper into the mine.

“Sir,” Ferguson said, “I’ve got a very bad feeling about this.”

“Go hunting down there, it’s not gold you’ll find.”

Both men started, spinning around, seeing no one. The girl’s voice echoed strangely with the drip of running water, as if bubbling up from a dark depth and fading into silence. Ferguson ran the few steps uphill to the switchback, looking about, but could see nothing silhouetted against the distant square of daylight at the top of the shaft.

“Come on, Ferguson,” Lachlan called, his tone ringing with command, “we find Ming, and we get out of here. Follow me.”

The two agents broke into a run, following the tunnel down, deeper, noting a second, a third, and even more clusters of dynamite along the cavern walls, all spooling them down, ever down, into the shadows.

As they ran, they smelt the smoke. It filled the shaft like a thin haze, and stank of grease. The shaft curved away and then, around the bend, the rails came to an end. Beyond the bumper, where a lone cart clunked softly against the timber with the rhythm of the chain drive, a vast blackness stretched out. A dozen candles melted into pools of wax along the edges of the shaft, and the string of gaslights came to an end, their light barely penetrating past the cavernous throat.

“Well, well,” puffed Lachlan, slowing as he felt the ache of exertion in his bones, “what have we here?” Warily now, they walked past the line marked out by the candles, past the end of the track, where human endeavour ended and natural majesty took over. Piles of rubble and fallen rock revealed the cavern entrance. The ground began to slope steeply away, the water bubbling into a cackling brook as it ran down the shaft. The thread of fuse wire continued down into the darkness, and the smell of candles filled the air. Ferguson cranked the dynamo on the rebreather, winding more life into the small lamp, once again their only light as they made their way gingerly down the slick, rugged cavern.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got any ropes in that thing?” Lachlan grumped, slipping a little as he struggled to find his footing.

“I’m afraid not,” Ferguson apologised, “it would’ve made it rather heavy.”

“Don’t worry. Do you see that?”

Ferguson slid down the cavern floor to catch up with Lachlan, who was crouching now to peer into the shadows. Straight ahead, revealed to the agents as they dropped below the height of the cavern ceiling, was an odd, moving rectangle of light in a pool of blackness. A dozen candles turned slowly, as if sitting atop a gently spinning gimbal. In their centre, a figure was hunched over.

“Is that a rail cart?” Ferguson breathed, hardly daring to disturb the stillness of the cavern. “How is it moving like that?”

Lachlan spared him a resigned look. “It’s floating.”

As soon as Lachlan said it, Ferguson could make out the black line where the cavern became an underground lake. His mind raced as he thought about the flooded shaft at the tunnel junction, the dynamite jammed into the rock which held it back, how it could all come rushing down into this dark, eternal well if that dynamite was to go up. He remembered the fiords, how high they soared, how deep they might go. *Everything’s connected*, Lachlan had

said. As something of a clankerton in his spare time, Ferguson knew this to be true. Things only really worked when everything was connecting correctly, all the little gears and cogs and levers and pipes and valves singing the same song, ticking away together, making things happen. But when not all the parts were connecting, it either meant that things didn't happen at all, or worse, very bad things could happen. Ferguson wondered what might happen if all the gears and cogs and valves that drove the inner workings of the world got out of kilter, or those that kept a man's sanity intact.

Swinging his light around, Ferguson scoured the last few yards of rock that tumbled away to the water's edge. Near the shoreline, a stout pole was jammed in between a scabble of boulders, suspending the fuse wire and another drooping strand above the water. "Hang on," Ferguson said, "I think that's—"

"Down!" Lachlan hissed, dragging Ferguson over as the floating cart spun towards them, and the figure within arose, his long bleak face turned up to the smothering darkness above.

"Jing-Wei!" Ming's voice echoed around the cavern, the haunting, desperate wail of a father lost in his grief. "Jing-Wei!"

"Sir, that's—"

"His daughter, I know. Poor sod's mad with mourning."

"No, I was going to say—"

Ming stood suddenly, almost upsetting the floating cart. A candle toppled off the edge to hiss in the water. In one hand he held a small plunger connected to the fuse wire, in the other, the cable that Ferguson had spotted on the pole.

"It's a copper cable, sir; he must've connected it to the rail."

Lachlan's eyes went wide. "He's going to blow the tunnel, dumping all that water down the shaft, and when it hits he'll be holding a bolt of electricity in his hands!"

"He's trying to recreate what happened when the miners disappeared, with the flood and the lightning strike. He's hoping that wherever they disappeared to, so did Jing-Wei, and that he'll go there too."

Lachlan shook his head. "But Jing-Wei wasn't there."

"No," Ferguson agreed. "Jing-Wei is still here." *Still connected.*

Then he was up and running, stumbling, falling, sprinting, rocks sliding underneath him as he pelted towards the lake, hands fumbling to pull the mask over his face as he went.

"Ferguson!" Lachlan's shouts echoed in the cave but Ferguson didn't stop. *Go hunting down there, it's not gold you'll find.* He plunged into the lake, barely registering

Ming's startled face at the intrusion, slammed by the water's underground chill, stealing the breath from his lungs. Then air flowed into his mouth as he slapped a lever on the breather, and a pair of clockwork brass propellers at the base of the pack whizzed into life. Like a fish fleeing a net, Ferguson shot across the lake towards the cart.

Everything's connected, he repeated over and over in his head, suddenly more terrified of the idea than he ever had been. The bobbing candles tipped one by one into the water as Ming moved, scrambling in his panic, maybe thinking that a demon of the earth was coming upon him in its rage.

Then Ferguson saw her, and even the rebreather could not keep the breath in his lungs.

Lachlan scrambled down the bank, rushing as best as his aging bones could carry him towards the water's edge. His best chance, he knew, was to knock over the pole and drop the fuse wire in the lake, hoping that if it was wet it might not carry the charge to the waiting dynamite. He had no idea what cutting the wire might do, if that in itself might set off the explosives. The best he could hope for was to buy them some time for whatever insanity Ferguson hoped to achieve by dashing into the water where a man held a live electric cable.

Ming's voice was a shrill cry in the haunted air. "Ruaumoko! Why have you taken her! Take me instead!"

Lachlan turned his head in time to see Ming bring his fist down on the plunger, candles plopping into the water on all sides as the cart rocked from side to side, a wake of frothing water arrowing towards him as Ferguson closed the distance, too slow, too late.

The roar of erupting dynamite and exploding rock shattered the stillness and shook the earth. Lachlan lost his footing, flying forward into the pole and taking it down to the ground with him. He landed hard and rolled away, the cables tangling around his limbs. Rushing water and rock thundered down the tunnel towards them. Lachlan scrambled to free himself of the cables, gaining his feet and staggering up the slick cavern wall in a desperate attempt to climb above the wall of water and stone about to pour down on him and sweep him, battered and bloody, into the depths.

Ferguson barely heard the dull roar of the explosion, muffled by the water around him, but the sound hardly registered. He had snapped off the propulsion and now floated, his eyes locked with those of the girl who drifted, pale and terrible before him. Light shifted and faded above him as more of Ming's candles tipped into the lake and hissed into darkness, their dying rays casting eerie lines across the girl's sad features. Her mouth opened, but nothing emerged, not air, not sound. Instead, words cut into his mind like shafts of sunlight in an icy crevasse, bright, lancing, painful.

Did you find your gold? Are you satisfied now, father?

She reached a hand out towards him. The skin was pallid and soft, the white of blind underground worms, too long burrowing in the dark and the damp, sodden and rotten. Her fingers unfolded, revealing a glint of yellow, shining for just a moment in the last falling arcs of candlelight. In the other hand, a card, its green ink blurring into illegibility, all those characters and their unknown meanings running together, all *connecting*.

For a second, Ferguson forgot to breathe. He reached for her hand.

Then the candlelight was gone, the dark forever swallowing up her hands, her face, the shimmer of gold. The roar of the approaching tumult rumbled through the lake. Remembering suddenly what was at stake, Ferguson twisted in the water, looked up to see the dark outline of Ming's rail cart, and slammed another lever on the side of the rebreather. In an eruption of bubbles, he shot upward, arms outstretched, bracing for the impact as he slammed into the cart from below. Like a rock ejected from an erupting volcano the cart lifted off the surface of the lake and soared through the black, arcing towards the shore and the descending roar of water and broken rock.

Lachlan caught movement out of the corner of his eye and turned in time to see a square of black moving against the black of the cave, throwing himself to the ground in the same instant as it landed a few feet away, disintegrating and tossing two bodies askew with it. He regained his feet in time to see the tunnel mouth disappear, a frothing black beast bursting through to swallow him in its dark and savage maw.

"Mr. Lachlan, sir!"

Ferguson was already on his feet, Ming bundled under one arm, and he threw himself at the older man, wrapping him up in an awkward half-hug just seconds before the water

slammed into them, picking them up, knocking the air from them, and hurtling them into the drowning darkness.

Lachlan awoke to the familiar sound of cranking cogs. He was cold all over, and everything seemed to hurt, but he was alive, or at least, he presumed he was. Life, after all, was pain, was it not?

“Not far to go now, sir,” came Ferguson’s cheery voice from nearby. With an effort not far short of Herculean, Lachlan managed to pull himself into a sitting position. He was in a wooden box of some kind - a rail cart, perhaps? - and they were bobbing along as if in a swell. It took him only a few moments to determine that this was indeed the case; they were in a rail cart, on the sea, the stark fiords looming to the left. Jammed into the cart with them was Ming, still quite comatose but breathing, so that was something.

“Mind your balance,” Ferguson warned. “She’s not exactly designed to be seaworthy. One wrong move and I suspect we’ll just tip right over, and then we’ll be back to swimming, sir. I’m sure you don’t want that.”

Lachlan took a long, painful breath. What felt like broken ribs pushed against his lungs, and he winced. “I thought I saw the cart smash apart when you did...whatever you did...to make it leave the water like that. In the cave.” It all seemed like something of a blur.

“Reserve tank,” Ferguson said with a grin, “and emergency release valve. Used that to get out of the water. Luckily I still had the main tank, and I used that to keep all three of us breathing under the water, thought I must say, you weren’t most co-operative. Not scared of water, are you, sir? The cart was just luck—there was another one at the bottom of the tunnel, remember? It must’ve been picked up by the flood ahead of the rocks and got dropped in the water unharmed. I managed to get hold of it and get you gents both in before we tipped over the waterfall.”

“Waterfall?”

“It was great! So much fun. Shame you missed it, even though you were, you know, there. And here we are. The breather’s hooked on the back, taking us back around the fiords towards Cromarty. We’ll be back before you know it.”

Lachlan eased back, careful not to upset the cart’s tenuous balance. There was a chill in his bones that ran deeper than the mere cold of a winter sea. “So we weren’t transported anywhere...”

“No sir, on account of a couple things, in my estimation. First off, I don’t think the amount of voltage that Mr. Ming’s upstream generator produces could ever be as much as a lightning strike, so he was way off base on that, but what can you expect? He’s a miner, not an electrical clank. Also, I don’t think the cable was attached very well to the rail, and something might’ve dislodged it.”

“That,” Lachlan said, rubbing his shoulders, “I remember. And what of our poor chap here, then? I don’t suppose he’ll ever find his daughter now.”

Ferguson said nothing, but turned away a little, to face the sea.

Lachlan frowned. He considered for a moment letting the subject fall for the time being, but he was an investigator, after all. If Ferguson knew something, he would have it from him. “Ferguson? What do you know of the girl? What of Jing-Wei?”

When Ferguson glanced back at Lachlan, his usually bright countenance was shadowed. He reached into a pocket and pulled something out, passing it to Lachlan. “Do you know what the characters mean?”

Lachlan turned the pakapoo card over in his hand. It was a little damp, not saturated as everything else was, as anything that had come through the cave deluge should have been. On the card, several green characters had been outlined in bone-thin black lines. Lachlan shook his head. “Ming might be able to tell us.”

“Chinese children use it to learn to write,” Ferguson said, “it doesn’t mean much on its own, it’s just words about stuff.”

“Yes, so what of this one?”

“These are the words that Jing-Wei wants her father to read.”

Lachlan shivered. The tiny card seemed somehow heavy in his fingers, like a weight dragging between worlds, trying to drag him with it.

“Birds sing for the sun, snow falls on distant hills,” Ferguson recited, as if the words had been imprinted on his memory whether he had wanted them there or not, “pretty doves fly where gold glitters dark, gone into the night, my father’s eye.”

The two agents were silent for a time, as the breather clanked and the sea frothed behind them, the cold wind from the south cutting through their soaking coats, chilling them to the core.

As they rounded the headland and Cromarty came into view, a darkness lay over the town. The great pillars atop the battery stood cold and silent.

“Have we solved the case, sir?” Ferguson said at last, as he began to lean this way and that to steer the floating cart towards the dock.

“I’m not even sure we know what we came here to solve anymore, Ferguson. This town has its ghosts, and soon enough I suspect it will be a ghost itself.”

Ferguson nodded. “So we can forget it now. All of it?” His voice was almost pleading.

“I’m sure that the clankertons will want to hear how impressively your infernal breather performed. Put that in your report.”

Ferguson’s smile returned. “It was pretty great, wasn’t it? Saved us all, I daresay.”

“I daresay you’re right,” Lachlan agreed, glad to have moved his young charge on from whatever dark place he had sunk into, and doubting he would ever get the truth of it from him. *But what, he thought, did it cost you, my young friend?*

In the distance, the blast of a steamer whistle cut through the snow clouds, and the promise of a warm fire and the journey home carried them in to shore.