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The Searcher Calls

When they reached the shop on Peculiar Hill, Uncle Bob was out in the street, pacing up and down. Peter was scared he was in for a telling off.

“I’m sorry I’m late, Uncle,” he said, handing the cookery book to Amanda who headed off up the street to her home at the Strange Hotel.

But Peter’s uncle didn’t seem to have noticed the boy was late. He was pacing up and down about something else.

“The angulator’s gone missing,” he said, “and we need it to do the work at the big old house.”

Peter asked him what an angulator was. Was it something for fighting bogeys, he wondered? Most of the things on Peculiar Hill that Peter had never seen before were for fighting the creatures that lived in the Vale of

Strange. They were things like unge and glop and unctuous splodger.

“Yes,” said Uncle Bob, “you can use it for fighting, all right, but it’s mainly used for locating strangeness. It measures the AOS, the angle of strangeness. That’s why it’s called an angulator. It’s one of the finest instruments ever developed in my opinion. And I should know. I invented it myself.”

“How does it work?” asked Peter, very impressed.

“I’ll explain later.” Uncle Bob nervously wiped away the sweat that coursed down his forehead. “The first thing to do is to find the blessed thing. The funny thing is the Searcher’s here and even he can’t find it.”

Peter gave a deep sigh. There were so many things he didn’t understand on Peculiar Hill.

“What’s a Searcher, Uncle?”

Uncle Bob looked surprised. “You don’t know what a Searcher is? He’s a man that comes and finds all the things you’ve lost down the side of the chair and under the carpet, that sort of thing. He comes round a few times a year. It’s a bit like having your chimney swept and your ears cleared out. Didn’t they have Searchers on Evil Island? How did

you manage?”

Peter replied that if you lost something on Evil Island, it ended up in a crocodile.

“Oh,” said Uncle Bob thoughtfully. “I suppose that keeps things simple then.”

“Mr. Arkenthrob,” came a voice from inside the shop.

“Ah, that’s the Searcher now,” said Uncle Bob, brightening. “Perhaps he’s found the angulator.”

He and Peter went into the shop and through to the parlour beyond. Peter almost jumped out of his sturdy boots when he saw the Searcher. The man was covered in an orange overall with a matching hood and a pair of enormous protruding glass eyes.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Arkenthrob,” said the Searcher. “I’ve not located the angulator. I’ve found the remains of twenty-three cheese and pickle sandwiches, five with extra mayonnaise, down the side of the armchair, but there’s no sign of your instrument, I’m afraid. The only place left to search now is the study.”

A new stream of perspiration gushed down Uncle Bob’s forehead and dripped off the end of his nose.

He didn’t like people going up in his study.

“Well,” he said, “I suppose, if there’s nowhere else left to look—”

“Mind you,” said the Searcher, “I’ve been in your study once before. I’ll have to charge you extra. It’s heavy duty.”

“Well,” said Uncle Bob, wiping the sweat with his handkerchief and wringing it out on the parlour carpet, “I suppose I can understand that. There’s a lot of stuff gets lost up there. I’ve never been known for my tidiness and I don’t suppose the strange vegetables help very much.”

“That’s very true, Mr. Arkenthrob,” said the Searcher. “Too much of that sort of stuff can set up a vortex of forgetfulness and then you’re really in trouble. It’s like watching water go down a plughole, only the plughole goes down the plughole as well if you see what I mean. But let’s hope it’s not as bad as that in your study, not if you’re hoping to find that angulator of yours. Now where did you hide your study again? Behind that bookcase, is it?”

As he climbed the stairs up to the study, the Searcher’s face was grim. Uncle Bob could scarcely bear to watch. He didn’t like people going up in his study at the best of times – and this was not the best of times.

“Why’s he look like that?” Peter whispered.

“Eh?” said Uncle Bob. “Look like what? The Searcher, you mean? They always look like that. That’s their uniform.”

“Why’s he got bulging eyes like a fly?”

“That’s what gives them x-ray vision,” said Uncle Bob, “so they can see things through things. That’s their special talent. They have to study for years to be able to do it. They can spot a packet of crisps under an elephant.”

“Oh, dearie me,” came the doleful voice of the Searcher. He had reached the top of the stairs now and was peering into the study. He didn’t like what he saw. He brought out a long pole which made a whooping sound. “It’s sounding a ten on the lost-ometer,” he told them. “This could take a while.”

Uncle Bob began to make nervous squeaking sounds.

“Is that those mice back again?” called Peter’s Aunt Maggie, who came running in with a frying pan at the ready and jumped up onto a chair. There she stood with her eyes closed and her knees shaking like jelly. She always looked rather thin and spindly and up there on the chair she looked like she might blow away in a breeze. “Tell me

where they are, Bob, and I’ll hit them,” she cried.

“There aren’t any mice,” Uncle Bob protested. “Don’t you turn a catastrophe into a crisis now.”

Then the clock chimed the half hour and Uncle Bob started to bounce up and down like an ornament on the end of a piece of string.

“I’m half an hour late now,” he cried. “I’m supposed to be up at the big old house to advise them about their swimming pool. I’d better get up there now or they’ll give me the sack and Mr. Grimble will get the job instead of me.”

“I thought you two were friends now,” said Aunt Maggie, cautiously opening half an eye and peering for signs of mice.

“We’re friends when it comes to vegetables,” Uncle Bob explained. “We’re going to compete together at Strange Show. But we’re still rivals as far as work is concerned. Last I heard, he’d invented an angulator of his own. I suspect he’s resorted to espionage and pinched the idea from me. There’s a strange-sensitive core, you see and —”

He was interrupted by a loud howl from the study.

“Have you found it?” called Uncle Bob expectantly.

“No,” came the voice of the Searcher. “No sign of it yet. That was the lost-ometer again. It’s up to eleven now.”

Uncle Bob looked crestfallen.

“I’d better be going,” he said as the howl came again. “They’ll be wondering where I am at the big old house.”

“Sounds like there’s wolves now as well,” said Aunt Maggie. “You’re always running off when there’s things to be dealt with, Bob.”

“That’s not wolves,” Uncle Bob protested, “it’s just the lost-ometer. Now then Peter,” he said, turning to his nephew, “I’m going up to the big old house to talk through the work that needs to be done. I’ll spin it out for as long as I can. From what I hear, they’ve hit a band of strangeness digging a swimming pool. I’ll talk about trigonometry. That should impress them. You bring the angulator up to the house as soon as the Searcher finds it. Is that all right?”

“But I don’t know where the house is,” Peter protested.

“Just ask anyone for the big old house,” Uncle Bob told him. “You’ll find it soon enough.”

Aunt Maggie snorted. “You’ll have the poor lad out there wandering the streets, and with wolves around and all.”

“There aren’t any wolves,” said Uncle Bob as he disappeared out of the door.

There was another howl from the lost-ometer. Peter was eager to see what the Searcher was up to and climbed up the stairs behind him.

“Don’t go up there,” Aunt Maggie warned him. “It sounds like that’s where the wolves are.”

The Searcher was shovelling old food wrappers, empty drink cartons, and half-eaten bread buns up with a large spade, then slinging them into a suitcase.

“Wouldn’t you like some black bags instead?” asked Peter. They always used black bags for rubbish on Evil Island, though they had to make them small enough so the crocodiles couldn’t hide inside them.

“If I’d known it was going to be like this, I’d have brought the bag with the black hole inside,” the Searcher told him. “We have to charge extra for that, but it does the job.”

“So you’re just using a suitcase instead?” asked Peter.

“An expanding suitcase,” the searcher replied. “The instructions say it will keep on expanding forever, but I’m not sure that’s going to be big enough.”

“Peter!” Aunt Maggie called. “Have you gone too? Have you left me here with the wolves?”

Peter joined her down in the hall.

“There aren’t any wolves,” he explained. “And there aren’t any mice either. There’s just lots of lost stuff.”

“Oh,” said Aunt Maggie, “I suppose that’s all right then.”

But then the lost-ometer sounded again. It sounded like one of those whooping wagons that chase after criminals.

“What? Is it burglars now?” asked Aunt Maggie.

“It’s a thirteen,” said the Searcher in a panic-stricken voice. “I’ve never had one of those before.”

“What does it mean?” asked Peter.

“I think it means the expanding suitcase has got too big to fit in the room. But it *is* in the room.” He stopped and scratched his head. “We seem to have a space-time anomaly here.”

“Isn’t that a kind of flower?” asked Aunt Maggie.

“I said an anomaly, not an anemone. It’s something that doesn’t add up. I think it might be best if we call for the fire brigade.”

“Are you sure?” asked Peter. “Wouldn’t we be better with someone who does arithmetic? They should be the people to ask about something that doesn’t add up.”

“It’s a bit late for that,” said the Searcher. “What we need now is subtraction. I need someone to get me out of here. I’ve never found more lost stuff than the size of a room before. I’m feeling a bit dizzy.”

Peter decided they should call for an ambulance as well but then he realised he didn’t know how to call for anything. They didn’t even seem to have telephones here on Peculiar Hill.

“Just release the canary,” Aunt Maggie advised.

“What good will that do?” asked Peter.

“It’s a homing canary,” Aunt Maggie explained. “When it flies back to the pet shop, they’ll know there’s something wrong and they’ll send the police.”

“But we want an ambulance,” said Peter.

“Or the fire brigade,” called the Searcher.

“Don’t stand there arguing,” Aunt Maggie insisted,

“just release the canary!”

“Help!” called the Searcher. He was starting to sound muffled, so Peter did as he had been told and opened the canary’s cage. The bird looked surprised for a moment or two, then gave a merry whistle, spread its wings and flew away out of the window.

Peter went to check on the Searcher and found him pinned against the wall by the rapidly expanding suitcase.

“You don’t look like the fire brigade,” he said.

“They’re on their way,” said Peter.

“They better be,” said the Searcher. “A few more mislaid buns and I’ll be finished!”

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Uncovered

By the time the emergency services came, there was an enormous bulge in the study wall that was shaped like the searcher, but the fire brigade managed to deflate the suitcase and set him free. The ambulance team examined him and found he had secondary squashing. It was nothing a little overnight stretching wouldn’t cure, they pronounced cheerily. The police had also arrived and were looking suspiciously at all the abandoned buns. Finally, Mr. Fetlock from the pet shop arrived to return the canary.

“I thought I’d better send all three emergency services,” he said. “You can’t be too careful, can you? I thought Bob might be doing his DIY again.”

Aunt Maggie assured him that it had not been that serious.

“It wasn’t really any bother,” she said, “except for the

wolves.”

“Wolves?” said the chief policeman, turning his attention away from the buns. “I’m not sure those are allowed without a licence.”

“I need my coat,” the Searcher called as the ambulance men carried him out on a stretcher. “I haven’t got my coat.”

“Where did you leave it?” Aunt Maggie asked.

“It’s over the coat stand,” he said.

“We haven’t got a coat stand,” said Aunt Maggie.

“There it is,” said Peter, pulling it down from something that looked like a coat stand in the hall.

“That’s not a coat stand,” said Aunt Maggie. “That’s a —”

“That’s an angulator,” said the chief policeman, reading the name on the side of the instrument. “That’s a coincidence. We’ve had one of those reported missing.”

“Of course you have,” said Aunt Maggie. “That’s the one that was missing. And all the time it’s been covered up by the Searcher’s coat.”

“So that’s that,” the policeman said. “I’m glad we found your angulator. Yet another case successfully

detected. All in a day’s work, thank you madam. Come along sergeant, we’d better get back to the station.”

But the sergeant was still not happy.

“I’d like to see the receipts for all those buns,” he said.

“There’s no receipts. I made them myself,” said Aunt Maggie, “though I won’t be making him any more when all he does is lose them. And you can tell him that when you see him, Peter, tell him that from me.”

“All right, Aunt Maggie,” said Peter, picking up the angulator. Now it was no longer covered by the Searcher’s coat, it didn’t look so much like a coat stand. It was about the same sort of height and had three legs like a coat stand but it was covered in dials and levers. Peter was looking forward to finding out more about it.

“I’d better take it to Uncle Bob,” he said, squeezing past the policemen who were arguing about the buns.

“Yes, you better,” said Aunt Maggie, “and tell him that losing all those buns has caused us a great deal of trouble.”

“I will, Aunt Maggie, and by the way, it’s safe to come down from the chair now.”

“Oh yes,” said Aunt Maggie, “I was forgetting.”