

# 1.

## THE LIZARD KING'S JUDGEMENT

**I**t was called Freedom's Hope; a small port island, blessed with a deep and sheltered bay, solid earth for warehouses and docks, and a favourable position on the southward leg of the merchant circuit.

Populated by Toamlanders, Greshkin, Roddish, and all manner of other furred folk from far afield, yet entirely free of their home-country squabbles, it was—quite possibly—the nicest place in the world to live.

And it just so happened to be the place where death herself first emerged from the deep.



“You're holding it wrong. You'll fall it in the glass, you will!”

“I'll fall *you* in the glass, you grease-furred grabber! Hands off it—I know what I'm doing!”

“Then why're you holding it like *that*?”

Gerrick snatched at his brother's rod again, and nearly fell the pair of them off the jetty and into the glass.

Had he, they might have done better to catch their supper than they'd done so far today. But neither of them could swim, and truth be told, Gerrick and Yale were only fishing out here on the far side of the point

because the alternative was helping Father and Uncle Finnegan load another hold.

This would make it the third such ship in only two days. Each filled tooth to tail with everything from food to firearms, and bound noreast—for the broken crescent of islands where the Canny Sea met the ocean proper.

Something big was happening, but it was something far enough away that Gerrick wasn't much fussed to enquire about it. And whilst he wasn't much fussed to be fishing with Yale either, there was still a chance they might hook a jetty fish if his sprat of a brother stopped doing it all wrong.

"No, no Spratto! Hold the stick with your tail, and reel the line with your hand. See? Like so..." Gerrick tried again to help his little brother—this time standing behind the boy, guiding his motions even as Yale elbowed him in protest.

"Stop it, Yale! I'm trynna help, alright? 'That's it. Now just drop the line and—"

The whole rod hit the glass instead. And, had Gerrick not already been standing with his arms around him, Yale would've too.

But it was hardly his fault. The jetty fish scattered before the rod even broke the surface, and seabirds all around took to squawking and chattering flight, as the entire jetty lurched beneath the boys' feet.

"A quake! Hurry, Yale! Lie flat on the boards!"

Gerrick pulled his brother down to lie beside him and wait it out before they were flung from their perch.

Quakes usually didn't last long. But then again, they usually didn't come in short rhythmic pulses either.

"Look Gerry! What's that?" Yale pointed dead ahead—toward the deeper waters at the bay's edge. "Is a volcano erupting *right there?*"

It couldn't have been a volcano, even if they did sometimes erupt in the Canny Isles.

"I don't think so..." Gerrick said. "There's no steam coming off the glass. And it doesn't smell like Uncle Finnegan's farts. We'd have smelled *that* before we got shook off our paws, Spratto. 'Specially since the wind's blowing inland."

Yale giggled at that, and watched on, wide-eyed, whiskers twitching. Gerrick held him close, his mind racing with the possibilities.

Not a volcano. Maybe a fissure? Maybe some sort of really big fish coming up for air? Or was it whales that did that?

He'd no clue what, but *something* was definitely erupting from beneath the sea all the same. The glass frothed and seethed, and soon curved upward as that colossal something began to break the surface.

First came a shaft of jet black. Tall as any tree on the isle, but bare of any branches, it arced toward the sapphire heavens above. And then came a great crowned creature—a fearsome lizard king, wrought of wood and iron. In one clawed hand he held aloft a set of mighty scales, in the other, a vicious barbed spear.

The boys watched in silent awe as the king reared up to issue a challenge to the sun itself, and behind him rose the mightiest warship either one of them had ever seen.

The monstrous vessel burst from the glass, spewing water from the countless cannon that bristled along its flanks. Massive rectangle wings of black canvas each shrugged off a deluge, and were soon filled, rippling and roaring, by the oncoming wind—as though the behemoth had brought with it its own tempest. They strained against their own rigging, as they dragged the rest of the ship up with them, before the great wooden beast crashed back down upon the surface in an explosion of foam and fury.

The carved lizard at its fore pointed his brutal weapon directly at the boys, daring them to stand and face judgement.

So the pair of them did what any good Greshkin would do.

They ran away.



“Ship! Ship!” Gerrick cried out as he sprinted toward the docks, one hand clawing at the air before him, the other dragging Yale along behind, and his outstretched tail barely keeping the pair of them upright. “There’s a giant ship! Come from ’neath the glass!”

But the townsfolk couldn’t have possibly heard him over the ringing of bells and the shouting of sailors.

Freedom’s Hope was already alive with activity. They’d already spotted the warship.

Mothers stowed their kits in secret cribs, Fathers loaded long guns and strapped sabres to their belts. Two smaller gunships had weighed claws and were making to intercept the interloper before she made it round the point, and the men on the docks were hurrying to load the last of their cargo—lest this be some crew of corsairs come to claim it for themselves by blood and powder.

His pulse pounded in his ears as Gerrick reached the pier where Father and Finnegan oversaw the effort.

“Haul faster boys!” Uncle Finnegan shouted. “Whether this is the royal navy or marauders, then we’d best not be here when they reach this side of the isle. Load the last of this lot, and hang the rest. She’s coming round the point fast, lads. Wind’s with us if we cut afore it quick smart, but we’re right *skinned* if she turns t’whisker in the bay. She’ll have the advantage in momentum! Heave and make ready!”

Gerrick had no clue what Finnegan meant by any of it, but the crew of the R.S Kipper did, and they were already readying her to depart the moment the last of the cargo on the pier was aboard—even if the hold was only half-full.

The very moment the final crate touched the deck, however, a cannonball tore through the clocktower atop the town hall. The structure pitched over and collapsed, showering the cobblestones below with chunks of masonry and tile, and bringing the entire town hall down with it. Gerrick didn’t even hear the cannonfire.

But he heard each and every one of the fifteen shots in the broadside that followed it.

“They’re firing on port! To what end?” Father asked Finnegan.

“To give our lads an empty flank to approach, at least!” the captain replied, and were it not for the fear in his eyes, he almost looked relieved that the cannon fire was tearing the port town to pieces.

But Finnegan had spent a long life out on the glass. He’d fought in the king’s war—commanded a great armada of gunships once. Gerrick knew that the old man’s fear was likely born of experience.

Was it a trap? Did this monstrous ship hope to draw the two interceptors into range of some hidden weapon it bore?

As Father checked on Yale and he, then bid them hurry aboard after the cargo, Gerrick squinted at the black warship.

It had rounded the point, and now sat side-on to the port. But it wasn’t advancing to cut off their escape. Instead, it was slowly crossing the bay, rocking as it did. To and fro, side to side, it moved as though a toy held by an invisible child. And it wasn’t until he was aboard the Kipper, and afforded a clear view from her deck, that Gerrick understood why.

Massive chains, which ran from portholes along the warship’s length, were being released. They snaked out of the hull and dropped into the glass below it, and shook the mighty ship as they went. It was most unconventional indeed.

Why any vessel would have so many claws, and why any sailor would drop them instead of raising them weren’t Gerrick’s primary concern, however. Instead, he was far too busy trying to make room for the women

and their kits as a fair number of them soon scrambled aboard to make their escape too.

Father hauled Yale up and out of the way, placing him in a longboat that swung precariously from its winch over the side of the hull—having been freed its usual lashing on the deck in order to allow for more last-minute escapees.

“Stay here with your brother. Once we're away, you can help me, and help the crew,” he said, and patted Gerrick's shoulder. “You'll be fine... We'll be fine...”

Gerrick nodded, and squeezed Father's hand, before scrambling into the boat alongside Yale.

“You heard that, right Spratto?” he said, holding his brother close as the Kipper finally set sail, and half the port was levelled by another broadside behind her. “We'll be fine!”

Yale nodded.

“Uncle Finnegan's the best sailor about. I'm not worried,” he told Gerrick, though the quaking in his voice certainly belied that claim.

Gerrick glanced over at their uncle, who stood next to the ship's wheel, commanding his sailors in whatever language it was that sailors actually spoke. Uncle Finnegan looked stern and focused, but he looked hopeful at least.

“Turn her hard t'whisker!” he roared. “Full wings and we'll snare the wind! We're gaining glass. Nearly out of the bay—we'll make it free yet, lads!”

But the R.S Kipper didn't make it free at all.

She cried out in a great splintering groan as she was torn upward from the glass.

She came apart at the midship, her cargo spewing forth from her belly.

The longboat broke free from her, winch and all, and careened into the bay. And every soul aboard the R.S Kipper—the crew, the mothers, and their kits alike—all followed her into the ravenous maw of the colossal beast that lurked below.

The monster had been lashed to the belly of the black warship by those mighty chains, and set free to slip beneath the interceptors unseen.

But Gerrick and Yale both saw it. And they would see it in their nightmares for the rest of their lives. Gargantuan pale jaws and countless jagged teeth, bursting from the glass to devour their father, their uncle, and an entire ship—right before their eyes.

## 2.

### THE WIG-MAKER'S SON

**H**e actually did have a first name, but the old shipmaster didn't care. “Wiggy, me heart. Don't dally now,” Captain Archibald Flanderghast told him. “I am in rather a hurry today, lad.”

And since the good captain was in such a hurry, and was paying far more for his new hairpiece than anyone ever should have, ‘Wiggy’ would have to do. Besides, it was better than Wig-boy, or whatever else it had been before—mercifully, sailors simply couldn't help but shorten already short names.

Wiggy clambered down from the stepladder and brought with him the next selection of McDoll and Sons’ finest. He brushed the dust from the velveteed boxes, then held one wig in each hand, and another with his tail, and presented them to the captain for appraisal—the third set of three.

“Hmm... I believe that they wear them with curls back home. But white? Or...”

They were all white. And all curled, for that matter. Wiggy had never once seen a wig that wasn't. Still, he did his best not to show his frustration as the old man deliberated over the identical pieces.

“I bet, dear Wiggy, that you're wondering why one with such exquisitely lush and glossy fur as I would even *need* a wig, no?” Captain Flanderghast remarked, and Wiggy nodded politely, even though he'd actually been wondering whether he'd still have time to go fishing once the captain was done picking his wig.

“Well, you see, it is about status m'boy. One must always dress for the lot he wants in life, not the lot he has. Especially when he—”

Has a lot.

Flanderghast told him the same thing every time he visited the crooked little shop on Isla de Los Gatos, sat in the high-backed leather chair before the mirrors on the back wall, and went on at length about his exploits as an illustrious merchant captain. And eventually bought a new wig of course.

But that didn't actually explain why he wore them.

Despite his age—his greying whiskers, milky eyes, and so very many wrinkles on his hands and feet—the captain did have rather lush fur. Of all the maybe four customers that ever visited the shop, Captain Archibald Flanderghast was the least likely to actually need a wig.

In truth, however, if he didn't buy a new wig every few weeks, and insist on paying so much for them too, Wiggy would have probably sunk into starvation or servitude shortly after Mr. McDoll and his two sons disappeared at sea.

But the captain's charity had more than kept their tiny shop and equally tiny assistant afloat for nearly eight years now, and, if anything, Wiggy did rather like the old man.

“So, Captain. If I may, what is it that has you in a hurry today?” Wiggy asked whilst Flanderghast tried another identical wig for size and fit.

“Oh, it isn't all that much, really. I've just been asked to look over some reports up at the governor's, before I set sail for the Merchant Lords' plantations. It would appear that several of the local ports have been ransacked by pirates,” the captain said.

“Pirates?”

“So they reckon. Though with the Merchant Coalition's expansion, it really is hard to believe there are many operating in these parts. Especially not the types to sack port towns. But you know what I always say...”

“Better the shallows than the shore?”

“Well, yes me heart. I do say that a lot, don't I? But I meant—”

“Never turn your back on a Greshkin with a gun?”

“No, no. I—”

Wiggy pulled his notebook from his vest, and thumbed through the innumerable pages of sayings he'd jotted down.

“A shot to the mast is worth ten to the hull? Seagulls are only good eating if you pluck them first? Rum is just water for real men? Keep the change, dear Wiggy, I'll just pay the difference next time?”

“Knot me tail, lad! No!” Captain Flanderghast threw his gnarled hands up and shook his head. “I say, where there's plunder, there's a pirate!”

Wiggy wrote that one down too, as the good captain carried on comparing hairpieces.

Finally, he picked the one with white curls, so Wiggy set it in place atop the captain's crown, and pinned it to the thick fur between the old man's large, round, and really rather weatherbeaten ears.

Once the wig was secured and looking quite regal indeed, Captain Flanderghast stood and examined himself in the mirror. Entirely satisfied, he bowed to Wiggy in thanks, and took his mighty feathered hat from where it sat on a stand next to the counter.

From it, he conjured a swollen sack of coins and jewels—likely enough treasure to buy a lifetime's supply of far fancier wigs than any he'd ever bought too.

“Keep the change, dear Wiggy. I'll just pay the difference next time,” Captain Flanderghast said, and handed the lot over without a moment's pause.

Then, with another bow, and a little flourish too, the old captain donned his magnificent hat and strode towards the door.

Wiggy stuffed the sack into the safe beneath the floorboards at the back of the shop, alongside the mountain of wealth already stashed there. And as he did, he watched the overly-generous or perhaps just overly-forgetful captain leave.

Wiggy still couldn't believe his luck. He had a lot of change there, despite having done absolutely nothing to deserve it.

But then, as though the old man had read Wiggy's mind, he paused in the doorway. He wheeled around to face Wiggy, his eyes sparkling with a youth that shone through the clouds within them, rivalling any gemstone or jewel within the safe.

“Actually,” he said, wrinkling his pink nose, whiskers askew. “I have just had a thought, me heart... I think it might be time for that change.”

“All of the change, Captain?” Wiggy asked. “There's more here than'll fit in that hat of yours.”

“No no. Leave that there. I mean *a* change.”

“A change for whom, Captain Flanderghast, Sir? And of what?” Wiggy furrowed his brow and clocked his head, as the captain began to grin a most rakish grin.

“For you, my dear Wiggy!” Captain Flanderghast declared, “And of your lot in life, of course!”

“Well I appreciate the offer, Captain, but I've got to close up the shop. And I don't know that checking reports is quite the lot I long for...” Wiggy admitted. He really was hoping to catch a fish or two before sundown. But that wasn't what the good captain had in mind.

After all, and despite his ridiculously luscious fur, he was growing quite old indeed. And here was an honest and decent lad. Someone who took notes, saved his coin, and appreciated a good sailor's saying... or thirty.

“My dear Wiggy McDoll,” he said. “How would you like to earn yourself a fancy hat and a wig of your own? How would you like to leave this dull little island, and see more of the world? Lock up that safe, and nail the boards atop it. Then grab your things, and a spare wig or two. Once I've finished at the governor's, I'll be back to collect you. I'd like to take you to meet the Merchant Lords.”