

Chapter One

Pot Boy Be Gone

Once upon a time, across an unsailable sea—but *not the unpassable chasm*, there was a kingdom. It was by no means “*the*” Kingdom, but it was a kingdom none the less, with a real king and everything. But don’t think too much of him, he was just a man after all; and besides, he did plenty of that all on his own. Within and without of the king’s court there were two wizards, and while they were both wizened, wise and powerful, don’t make too much of them either, for they too were just men. And of course there was the boy. No one paid much mind to him, but you should, because much depended on him, and because of course, he was a child, with a child’s faith, though in the beginning he hardly had any good place to put it. Speaking of beginnings—not “*The Beginning*” of course, or even the boy’s beginning—but we’ll get to that eventually, if you’ll be patient; *a beginning* occurred the day the boy finally learned to hear instead of just listening.

“Potboy...!” he heard his ‘*first name*’ come echoing down the great wide stone corridor leading to the royal chambers and turned immediately from what he *was* doing to what he *should* have been doing. The race was on, and it was a very long corridor. If the king had to repeat himself, *Potboy* would have no lunch...or dinner; and what was worse, King Pryhde would replace *those* with something else, and there was no predicting what that might be. Pryhde prided himself on his ‘*creative disciplines*’. The worst had been the time he’d had to clean all of the queen’s mirrors to spotless perfection, and Queen Vhanity had a *lot* of mirrors. If Potboy knew how to count he still might not have been able to count them all.

“You’re late,” King Pryhde observed as Potboy levered open the massive and ornately carved wooden door to slip into the royal chambers.

It wasn’t a question so Potboy didn’t respond, other than to hurry over to pick up the royal chamber pot from where it rested at the foot of the monstrous canopied bed the king was sitting upon. King Pryhde was already dressed so he only had three attendants hovering around him at the moment. The Royal Steward, the Royal Treasurer and the Royal Chancellor didn’t even look his way, but then Potboy had never been given any indication that the three men knew he existed, despite the fact that he emptied their chamber pots each morning too.

“What kept you?”

Potboy froze midway through hoisting the gilded chamber pot off the floor and felt his knees begin to shake. While the pot *was* heavy, that wasn’t the problem. Potboy liked talking with people, on the rare occasions when he got to—sometimes too much, which had led to the whole mirror polishing fiasco. But you didn’t just *talk* with the king. Every form of interacting with King Pride had to conform to protocol...precise and professional protocol. Potboy hated all three of those “P’s” and with very good reason. Failing to do them properly could cost you more than receiving one of King Pryhde’s creative disciplines—it could cost you your life; just ask the last Royal Steward who’d made the mistake of lifting his chin on high when it should have been bowing low. And if there was one thing Potboy *didn’t* excel at, it was the three “P’s”. Setting down the royal chamber pot to take his life in his hands, Potboy scurried over to drop to one knee before the king—the right one to be exact—and it *did* matter, and bowed his head low enough to touch his forehead to the kneecap of the other. That was the easy part—though it really wasn’t, telling right from left had never come naturally to him. But next he had to speak, and *that* never went well.

“I...” and that’s where he got stuck. It should have been an easy question to answer, except there were soooooooo many different things that might be said. The sky was blue, I love the woods, I’ve never caught a fish without using a hook, and...well, the list was nearly endless. The morning had started out like so many others, though the sky *did* seemed especially blue, and it promised to be sunny and warm all day long. With winter threatening to peak its icy gaze around the corner that was not something to be taken for granted, so he didn’t. He hurried about his chore—not chores, he had only one; emptying chamber pots wasn’t just his job, it had come to define who he was. The woods were waiting and if he lived to be a hundred, he doubted he’d be able to fully explore them. And of course there was the moat. Most people avoided it because of the wogan, but he’d begun to think the wogan might not swallow him whole and spend the next year digesting him after all. All it ever did was watch him with its two giant eyes poking up above the slime covered waterline. Granted, sometimes when he looked away while chasing after a bug, snake, lizard or frog, then looked back again, the wogan *did* seem closer, but it hadn’t ever gotten *that* close. Any and all of those things could have been his answer, but they really, when it came down to it, only one thing had truly kept him from being late. “...I was looking at the lizard on the wall.”

Since Potboy’s head was bowed, he didn’t see the king blanch. King Pryhde had an irrational dread of lizards. Irrational only because they were so rare in his kingdom after he’d ordered them all exterminated, down to their last scaly tail—not because he had nothing to fear from them.

“A lizard...on the wall?” the words came out so choked with emotion that it was hard to tell if it was a question or not. The next one wasn’t so hard to ignore. “*Where?* And look up at me...I need to see that you’re not lying to me.”

That was pure foolishness. Potboy never lied, though he wasn’t about to point that out to the king. The last time he’d told a lie was one of his earliest memories. He’d been in the Royal Wizard’s chamber—probably changing a pot, but maybe not since if he recalled correctly he’d had to stand on tiptoe to take Ohrder’s quill pen off his desk. The wizard had his back turned at the time, and by the time he looked around, Potboy—though he was just ‘boy’ at that point, had the feathered treasure hidden behind his own back.

“Did you take my pen?” Ohrder’s wrinkled eyes had turned to stab at him after searching his desktop for his missing implement.

“No!” Potboy told him breathlessly, wishing he’d have ran from the room the moment he had the pen in hand.

Ohrder had frowned a frown much deeper than usual and reached out one of his gnarled old hands to wiggle its fingers in Potboy’s face. “There, I’ve turned your tongue to stone for the day. The next time you lie to me...or anyone else, I’ll turn *the rest* of you to stone and leave your tongue alone so you can tell everyone how much you wished you’d have told the truth.”

Not only can’t you talk with a stone tongue, but even swallowing water is a tricky matter. Basically, what you have to do is look up in the air and pour water in your mouth, then just let it run down your throat on its own—oh, and make sure you don’t breathe when you do that. Potboy had never even considered lying after that little lesson on morality. And while the wizard hadn’t said anything about stealing, he’d sworn off of that too.

“Where...? He...he was beside the suit of armor...above the wooden bench no one ever sits on,” it was such an odd question he wasn’t sure how else to answer it. The king had lived in the castle his entire life, surly he knew where to find the lizard.

The tapestry? You’re talking about the tapestry?” King Pryhde spoke in a tone that made Potboy fear the next words out of his mouth would be, “Off with head!”

He wanted to say, “yes”, but having no idea whatsoever of just what a tapestry might be, all he could do was kneel there with any words his might speak trapped in his throat and tears welling up in his eyes. Plus, he suddenly, very badly, needed to find a chamber pot of his own.

“Answer me,” King Pryhde demanded. He was still angry, but seeing Potboy’s cowering placated him somewhat. While he looked on the weakness of others with disdain, knowing that he was the cause of it stroked his ego.

“I don’t know what a t-ab-bur-stry is,” Potboy confessed, just barely managing to hold back the sob that wanted to precede it.

The steward gave a snicker and the treasurer got a superior smile too, while the Royal Chancellor just shook his head. King Pryhde was too concerned with the matter of hand to do any of those things. Instead, he impatiently explained, “It’s like a heavy blanket that hangs on a wall with pictures like you’d see in a book woven into it.”

Potboy had never seen a picture in a book—the only books he’d ever come in contact with belonged to Ohrder, and he wasn’t allowed to touch those, but he got the gist of what the king was saying and nodded his head with relief, “Yes, that’s where I saw the lizard.”

“Well, you needed worry about it,” the king told him, sounding every bit as relieved as the boy crouched before him. “It’s just a mythical creature...I’ve taken great pains to ensure it stays that way.”

Potboy wasn’t sure what “mythical” meant, but he was able to figure out something else. Even though the king had insisted the lizard wasn’t to be worried about—Pryhde the Sixth, the Sovereign of Ehlsewhere, and Lord of the Realm, *was* worried, and not just a little bit either. That was the moment Potboy discovered that sometimes what someone said was not what they really meant. It wasn’t quite lying, even if Pryhde wasn’t the king, Potboy doubted Ohrder would have turned his tongue to stone. Potboy wasn’t sure what it was, but he made up his mind that from that point on he’d stop just listening to the words people spoke and try to hear what they were actually saying. That didn’t just change his little world—it changed *everything!*

He ignored the lizard on his way to empty the royal chamber pot, but as often happened of late, the *tapestry* seemed to reach out and grab him on his way back. He found himself standing before it once more, looking at the green reptile, that if it was real, would have stood as tall as a two story house. And it was standing too, which was odd from what he understood of the nature of lizards. Potboy had never seen a *real* lizard, they’d been hunted to extinction before he was born, but he had seen their likenesses on the “Wanted Posters” that were still circulated each year at the spring festival promising a reward of a full gold crown to anyone that killed on and turned it into the Royal Steward. The picture on the tapestry resembled the ones on the posters enough for Potboy to recognize it as a lizard even if it wasn’t crawling on its belly—and of course the one hanging on the wall had huge blood red wings as well. And from what Potboy had heard, the majority of the kingdom’s lizards had been hunted down by boys using hollow reeds that they’d blow through, shooting out dried peas that supposedly killed or incapacitated the hapless reptiles with a single hit. Meanwhile, the lizard on the wall was clutching a young woman in one mighty claw as it fended off a man wearing a suit of armor and wielding a sword and shield with the other. The tapestry lizard didn’t look something you’d go chasing after with a peashooter; the fellow encased in metal armor and gripping a blade almost as long as he was tall hardly seemed up to the task. But, since the lizard on the tapestry was just ‘*mythical*’; which Potboy had decided meant either not real, or at least not real anymore, then why did the suit of armor standing beside the wall-hanging match the one woven into its fabric so perfectly? And stranger

still, why was it that each day that went by found him standing longer and longer in front of the cloth lizard looking into its eyes that even though they were nothing made up of simple yellow thread, somehow seemed to glow. And there was the other thing too. The suit of armor was intact and kept as polished and shiny new as the day it was forged...but of the sword and shield, there was nothing to be found. For some reason *that* bothered him more than all the rest of it put together.

Replacing the royal chamber pot was supposed to be his last stop before abandoning the cold stone castle in favor of the airy freedom the royal woods had to offer. Yet, as occasionally happened—usually on rainy days, but more often of late, Begone—his ‘*second name*’, and the one he much preferred, found himself creeping up to the wizard’s chambers and slowly cracking open the door to peek inside. Ohrder was hunched over at his desk with his back turned; not that it mattered. Begone was convinced that the old wizard had hundreds, or even thousands, of invisible eyes roaming about every square foot of the castle that kept him apprised of every single thing that was said or done within its walls. Why bother turning your head when you had that going for you? Ohrder didn’t and Begone slipped into the room moved to his favor spot; a fluffy black and white striped hide from some animal that the boy had never seen a living version of that was situated in front of one of the two large bookcases that dominated the room—or at least they would have if not for the wizard himself. Begone dropped down upon the soft hide and crossed his legs, letting out just the slightest contented sigh. Sometimes he barely made it past the doorframe before the wizard spoke his name, exiling him once again from the mysterious magical sanctuary where Ohrder made his dwelling. There was no telling how long it would last, but Begone cherished every moment he got to stay inside the one room in the whole castle—make that the entire world, where at least upon occasion, he got to be a boy instead of just an object to be ordered around or ignored. Not that the wizard was above ordering *or* ignoring—but unlike everyone else, that wasn’t always the case.

“You’re not a coward just because you’re afraid,” Begone had been sitting quietly staring at the bookshelf beside him for at least five minutes when the words sprang into the air without warning. Even after all their time together, the power of the voice that emanated from such a wizened and frail looking body was a little shocking. If the old man was a bit chattier maybe that wouldn’t have been the case. “What you do when you *are* afraid...*that’s* the determining factor.”

Since Begone had been busy pondering what kind of pictures might be hiding within the covers of the many books within easy reach of his hungry fingers, the question caught him off guard. But then the wizard’s statements and questions usually did. He thought back to the last time he’d been afraid, not so many minutes earlier, kneeling before the king, and wondered if he’d acted cowardly. Well, he certainly hadn’t done anything you could consider brave, so he guessed there was his answer. And just like that, the elation he’d felt at making it out of the royal chambers with his head still attached shriveled up and blew away like last season’s dandelion caught by a stiff autumn breeze. So much for any notion he might have of someday fighting giant lizards when he was barely able to speak to the king without wetting himself. He wanted to ask Ohrder if there was some way he might stop being a coward, but of course that would have taken courage too. Instead, he sat on his fur rug and wallowed in his misery—but only for a moment. Then the wizard spoke his name.

“Be gone,” the command came with the barest flick of a skeletal wrist, and the wispy white-haired head never looked up from the book it was hunched over. The boy wanted to protest, to plead for a few more minutes just to sit and not be alone. He didn’t. Experience had taught him

the futility of that. And though he wouldn't lose his head, doing so might very well bring consequences that were fearful enough on their own. But even his slight hesitation was enough to draw another bark from the wizard. "I won't repeat myself."

Begone climbed to his feet with a sigh and started shuffling toward door. If only the new thing he'd discovered about hearing what was really being said applied to the wizard. But Ohrder was always perfectly ordered. There was never a word wasted or misplaced any more than you'd find one of his books out of alignment on its shelf or a quill laying on the top of his desk instead of neatly placed back into its holder. If he said, "*Be gone*", then Begone would go...which he did. But the moment he stepped across the threshold into the dimly lit corridor beyond the doorway, he remembered the wizard's other statement, "*I won't repeat myself.*"

For the second time that day—*that hour*, he felt fear clutch his heart in its icy embrace. The last time, with the king, he'd responded by doing only what he'd been told to do. This time he drew in a deep breath and followed his heart.

The wizard actually looked up and around when he reentered the room. Begone forced himself to meet the ancient gaze as he walked purposefully over to his spot by the bookcase and sat back down. Somehow he managed to do all of that without stumbling or breaking down and begging the wizard not to turn him into a rock or some kind of woodland creature. Seconds that seemed like hours passed, but true to his word, the wizard didn't repeat himself. He turned back to his book and began scratching away with his quill, while Begone sat on his rug and did nothing—but it was a very good nothing.