



Are there still people out there, in the rest of the world? For decades there's been nothing. No ships, no messages, nothing but floating debris.

Fighting to survive in a future Aotearoa without internet or global communications, where books are rare treasures, twelve-year-old Herman's life is turned upside down when he's sent away to a fortress-like orphanage known as Castle Grim.

Stalked by kidnapers prowling a land lashed by savage seas patrolled by pirates, Herman and his daring new friend Polly scheme a clever and perilous plan of escape.

WINNER  
STORYLINES  
TOM FITZGIBBON  
AWARD

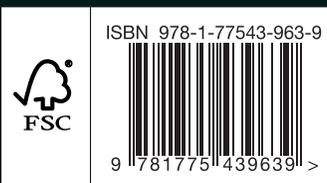
Castle Grim

SHAUN BARNETT

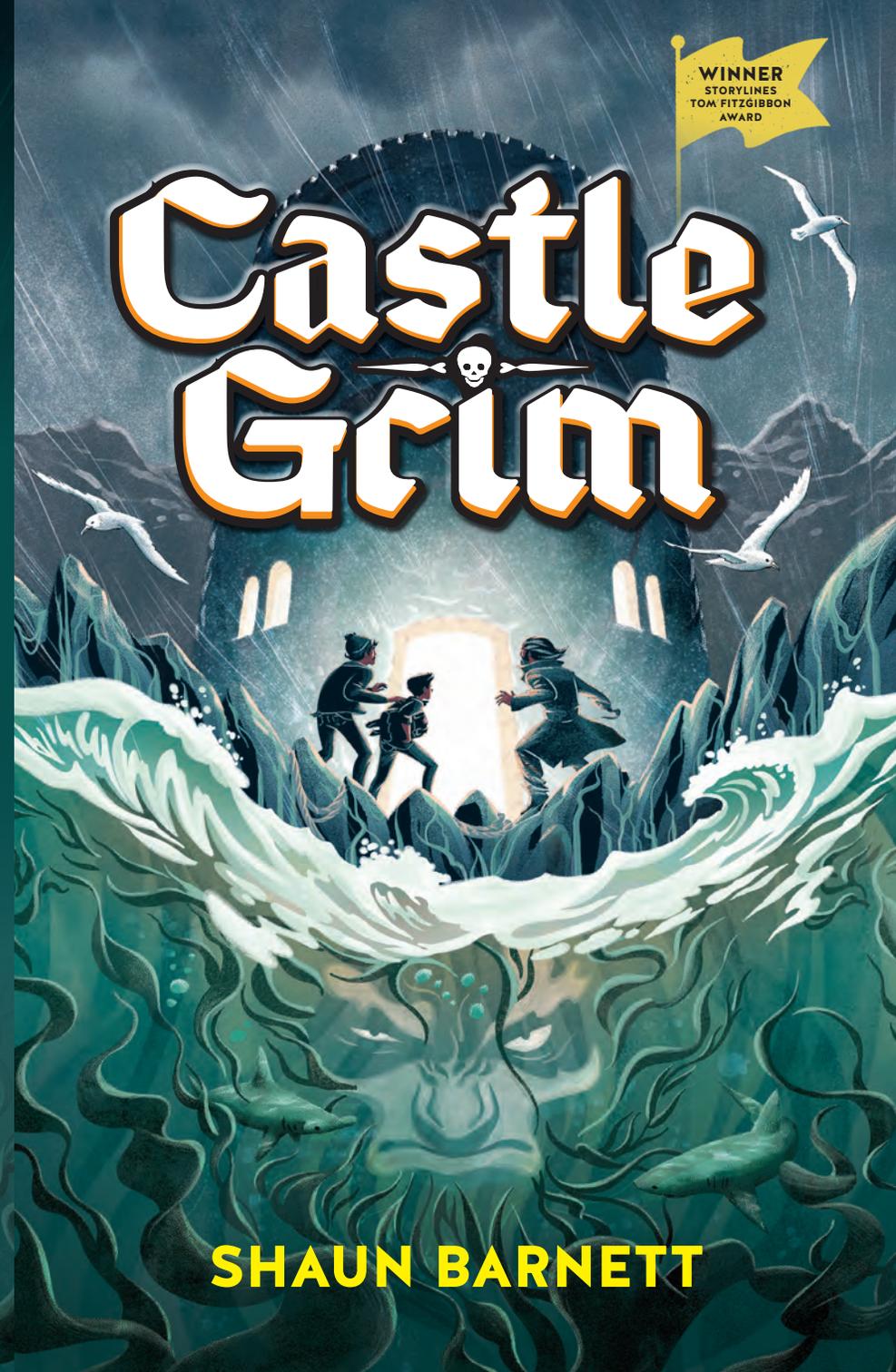


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WINNER  
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AWARD



# Castle Grim

SHAUN BARNETT



“What are you doing, boy? Watching for your uncle?

He’ll never return. Another week and we’ll have you  
officially declared an abandoned child.

Then the government can start paying us for  
your upkeep. Until then, you lazy little whippersnapper,  
work harder! Don’t let me catch you slacking again.”

**SHAUN BARNETT**

**Castle  
Garcia**

The title 'Castle Garcia' is rendered in a large, bubbly, 3D-style font. The word 'Castle' is on the top line and 'Garcia' is on the bottom line. A graphic element is integrated into the letter 'a' in 'Garcia', featuring a small skull with a crossbar and two horizontal wings extending outwards.

**SCHOLASTIC**

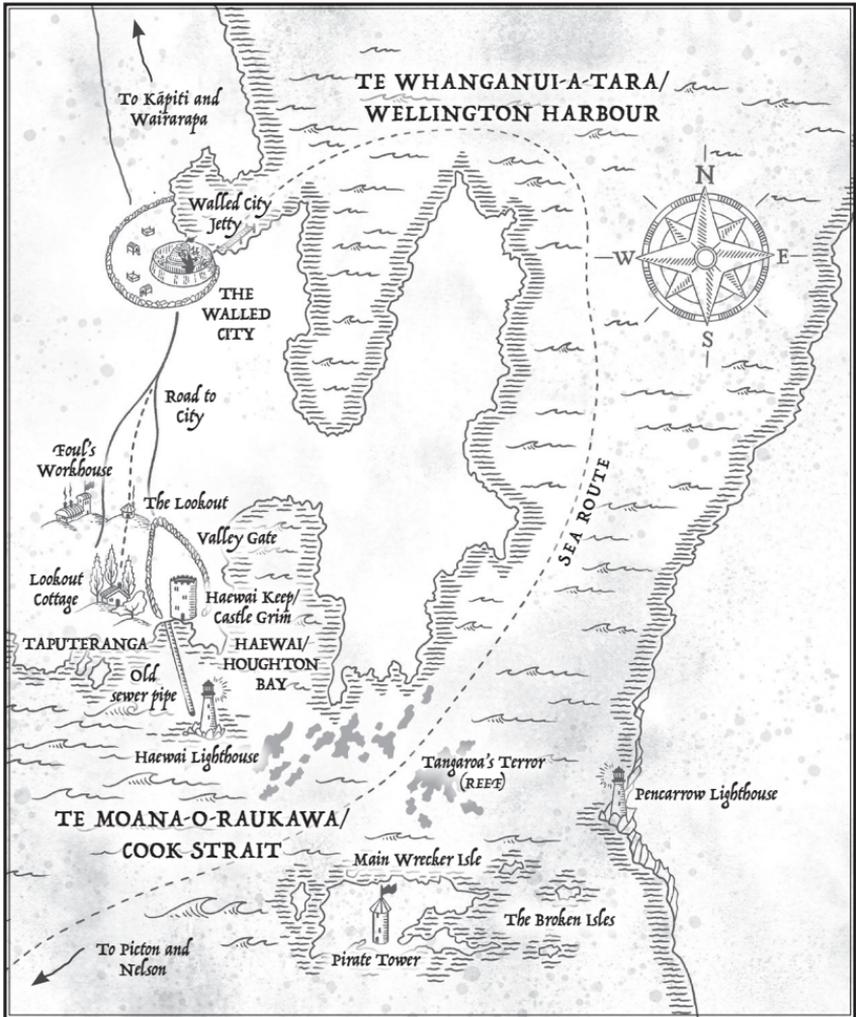
**SYDNEY AUCKLAND NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON MEXICO CITY  
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Official Sample Chapters

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# Clinging On

Herman Reed clung high on a rock pinnacle. His legs, skinny even for a twelve-year-old, shook uncontrollably and he was in danger of falling. He risked a panicked glance at the swirling sea beneath him and his mouth grew dry. The shore seemed so far below, and the drop was terrifying.

Not ten minutes ago, he had been safe and happy, standing on that pebbly shore with his uncle. From there, the pinnacle rising above him had seemed manageable and Herman had felt confident – sure that this time, at last, he would conquer the climb. But now, perched on the most precarious of footholds, the climbing had suddenly got hard. Too hard. The rope drew tight around his waist, which was somewhat reassuring, but he couldn't help glancing down.

“Don't look down,” warned his uncle, Charlie, belaying the rope at the base of the pinnacle. “You're doing well, Herman. Just remember to keep standing up with each step. Come on, you can do it!”

Herman forced himself to look up. Yesterday he had visualised himself climbing with the confidence and upright posture of an athlete, dancing up the rock. But as he clung, scared, hugging the rock, he realised that he probably looked more like a limpet.

He jabbed his shoe at the rock, seeking a better foothold, but

couldn't find one. His forearms burned. How much longer could he hang on?

"I should be able to do this," he muttered to himself. He'd read every book about climbing in the Golden Bookshop and understood the theory perfectly. Each one had the same advice: *Use your legs, not your arms – legs are much stronger and won't tire so quickly.* Climbing always made perfect sense in books, but perched on this sea pinnacle, Herman simply couldn't trust his feet. All the footholds seemed tiny.

"Move your foot into the crack on your right," Charlie called up.

"What crack?" Herman cried in panic.

"One foot-length to the right."

Herman scabbled right and the toe of his shoe found the crack ... but then his arms gave out. Suddenly, he jerked free of the rock. As he fell, he screamed, thinking he would surely smash into the rock face.

With a sudden jolt, the rope held him tight. His legs absorbed most of the impact and the stretch of the rope helped cushion the rest. He was dangling.

Disappointment swept through him. He had fallen. Again. He had failed, just like last time. And the time before that. Hardly the mettle needed to become one of Nelson's Mounted Police Force.

"I want to come down now," Herman shouted to his uncle.

"Sure you don't want to give it one more go?" called his uncle.

"You weren't far from the top."

"No ... I've had enough."

"Okay, Herman. Preparing to lower." Charlie began feeding the rope through his belay device.

Keeping his feet in a wide stance, Herman walked down the pinnacle, with the rope checking gravity. He quite enjoyed the descent. Coming down was something he was good at. Once you

had fallen and felt the rope arrest you, any fear of heights vanished. Soon enough, his feet hit the pebbly shore.

“Not a bad effort,” said his uncle, clapping him on the shoulder. “Next time, eh?”

“Yeah,” said Herman, without much heart. “Next time.”

He felt ashamed, as much for his uncle as for himself.

Charlie was tall, lean and weather-beaten. His dark hair, flecked with grey, curled up around the rim of his woollen beanie. He had a long nose with flared nostrils, and beneath it a truly unruly moustache, which sometimes twitched, almost like a separate creature. Herman thought of it as a squirrel.

One side of the hairy squirrel curled upwards now, in imitation of the lopsided grin below. “Let’s go back to the cottage and have some dinner,” Charlie said, walking ahead.

When Herman was younger, he’d asked his uncle, “Are you a pirate?” He had been reading *Treasure Island* at the time and, after all, Charlie seemed to have sea salt in his veins. Thinking back, Herman was embarrassed about asking such stupid questions. “Why don’t you have an eye patch?” he’d asked.

“Why not use both eyes?” Charlie had replied.

“Why don’t you have a parrot?”

“They poop everywhere.”

“Shouldn’t you have a wooden leg?”

“Damned inconvenient on a slippery deck!”

In reality, Charlie had been part of the Nelson Mounted Police Force – ‘Mounties’ for short – who patrolled the region’s borders. The roads further south through the mountains had fallen into disrepair long ago. Erosion, landslides and neglect had seen to that. Nelson’s fertile soils, numerous rivers and temperate climate meant it was the best place to live in Aotearoa, with plenty of food. Mostly. Often, that attracted trouble.

So the Nelson Mounted Police rode mountain horses, patrolling far and wide, living rough. The riders had to know how to find their own way, and as far as Herman knew, his uncle had never been lost.

“Tell me a story about your days with the Mounties,” pleaded Herman.

Charlie cocked a wry smile. “Haven’t you heard them all?”

“Not all of them, surely?”

Charlie glanced up at the westering sun. “Time’s disappearing on us, Herman – best we get back. Don’t want to keep your parents waiting.”

Herman sighed. Once again, he hadn’t been able to get any closer to the reason his uncle had left the Mounties. There was a black cloud over his sudden departure, and Charlie evaded all talk about it. So, as they walked back to the cottage, Herman changed tack.

“When did you join the Mounties, Uncle?”

“As soon as I could after leaving school.”

“Did Grandma and Grandad let you?”

“They didn’t have much say about it. At eighteen, you’re an adult and can make your own decisions. You know me. I wanted adventure. No reward without risk.”

“Did you join because of what happened to Uncle Christopher?”

Charlie’s face clouded, and he said nothing. But then his face gradually softened. “I wouldn’t have said so at the time, Herman, but in hindsight I think you’re right. After Christopher disappeared, I was angry and confused. We felt his loss deeply, as you know. He was my youngest brother, after all. Only fourteen. Just a boy. And I blamed myself. So I had to make amends somehow. At the time, I thought that joining the Mounties might be the answer.”

“A chance to escape the Velvet-lined Rut?” Herman asked.

“Aye, you’ve got it.”

‘Velvet-lined Rut’ was what Charlie called Nelson. The sunny town had survived the chaos left by the global pandemic much better than the other regions, and life there was quite comfortable for the Reeds, at least by modern standards.

“Is that why you live in Picton?” Herman asked.

“Picton suits me. Smaller town, flanked by hills and bush, a good place to moor the *Seeker*, and I can be out on Cook Strait in a few hours. I like it. You should visit more often!”

A horse and cart track linked Nelson and Picton through the forested hills inland from the Marlborough Sounds. Picton’s fisherfolk hooked cod and snapper out of the sheltered waters and traded with the people of Nelson for vegetables, meat and fruit.

When he wasn’t visiting his brother’s family in Nelson, Charlie lived at sea. He sailed his yacht, the *Seeker*, and traded. Without a family of his own, he helped others and sometimes gave away almost everything he found. Sourcing books for his brother was another way he helped. Although Charlie didn’t particularly approve of bookworms, he continued out of family loyalty.

“I’d like to come to Picton more often, but you know what Dad’s like.” He mimicked his father’s stern voice, “No place for a young lad like you, Herman.”

Charlie chuckled. “You sound just like him!”

By now they were around the shoreline, passing wooden cottages and headed towards the heart of town.

Herman turned the conversation towards his other favourite subject, the Walled City. “Any good finds from your recent trip to Wellington?”

“As a matter of fact, I picked up a good haul of books.”

“What sort of books?”

“Mostly history, non-fiction, that sort of thing. A few good

adventure stories too. There might be something for your next birthday.”

“How come Wellington still has books?” asked Herman. He already knew the answer, but he liked to hear his uncle talk about his journeys across the strait. Far from making it sound frightening, talk of the city fascinated Herman because he couldn’t imagine a place so different from Nelson. It seemed dark and mysterious, the sort of place where just walking down the road was an adventure.

“Wellington was our capital city before the Great Pandemic. It once had museums and libraries full of books. Many citizens were great collectors too. You know that the Great Quake destroyed a lot, but the ruins still hold surprises.” Charlie’s face lit up as he talked about his adventures in the Walled City. “I’ve seen old fire safes cracked open. Rooms that didn’t collapse discovered buried under rubble. Locked shipping containers where people had begun to store their precious things when the pandemic began to take hold.”

“Why do people sell their books?” Herman had always been puzzled by this. With none being printed now, second-hand books held their value. Without television or the internet, the world had shrunk, and books had become a valuable form of information and entertainment. In tough times, people needed stories. Books helped them forget their own worries.

“When you have nothing, Herman, you’d sell your last book to feed your family. Wellington folk live in a broken city. Few people outside of Nelson have spare money to spend on books.”

Herman thought of his own home’s shelves, crammed with books. Many of them old and battered, but a treasure trove nonetheless. He had grown up with his head full of worlds like Earthsea, Narnia, Middle Earth, Hogwarts, Panem, Dalemark and

Kirrin Island. There were true stories, too, of the world before the pandemic – a place that sounded so different to Herman that it was also some kind of fantasy land.

Herman waved to a man atop a horse-pulled cart filled with fresh produce. It was market day tomorrow, when Nelson folk bartered and traded the region’s bounty. That made Herman wonder what his father was cooking for dinner. Conrad Reed prided himself on his culinary skills, while Herman’s mother, Ivy du Bois, preferred gardening and her committee work. Recently she had been spending a lot of time in Picton, sometimes sailing with her brother-in-law, other times taking the wagon service along the old road.

They passed more cottages, most with neat, well-tended vegetable gardens and fruit trees. Almost everyone in the town grew their own food or at least some of it. ‘Self-sufficiency means survival’ was Nelson’s motto.

“Uncle Charlie,” queried Herman, deciding to try another risky subject, “speaking of Wellington, some of the kids I see at the park have been talking about pirates.”

“Have they now?” said his uncle, giving him a sideways glance.

“They say that pirates have been making raids in Wellington.”

Charlie chewed the ends of his moustache before responding. “Things are tough in Wellington, but I don’t think it’s completely fallen to piracy yet.”

“One of the Wellington refugee kids was talking about a pirate called Raider who’s got a base on the Wrecker Isles.”

Charlie turned suddenly and stared at Herman. Talk of Raider had clearly rattled his uncle. Charlie furrowed his brows and grew silent, making an awkward finish to the walk home.

Herman’s parents owned two cottages, side by side. They lived in one, while the other was their store – the Golden Bookshop.

The sign outside read:

BOOKS FOR ALL,  
BECAUSE STORIES MATTER

Charlie flung open the gate, strolled up the flower-fringed path and opened the front door of the cottage. “We’re back!”

Delicious smells greeted them, and Herman’s hunger pushed all thoughts of pirates out of his head.



# The Walled City

On the ramparts of the Walled City, Commander Jensen watched the line of carts arrive from the northern route. So few! The small cavalcade passed through the city gardens and towards the main gate.

In the middle of the Walled City was what remained of Wellington's commerce centre, government, and its police force, surrounded by a tall wooden wall. Throngs of people bustled about, sorting food and supplies. Outside this wall were vegetable gardens, hen houses, pigsties, and the large sheds where the region's harvested grain and crops were stored, protected by a lower outer wall. And beyond that sprawled rough wooden huts and tent camps where most of Wellington's citizens lived, ironically outside the walls. On the slopes behind rose green ridges, rough with scrubby forest, hiding ruins from the Great Quake.

Commander Jensen was a tall woman with sandy hair, cut short. She wore heavy boots and a long brown trench coat, with just one concession to colour: a small golden brooch in the shape of a book pinned to her lapel. It was a gift passed onto her from a Nelson woman. Jensen believed that the brooch represented hope for her embattled city. Wellington, once a proud capital, was now little more than a regional town, and a near ruined one at that. Some people called it 'the Broken City,' something that pained her greatly. Commander Jensen may have safeguarded many citizens

in the Walled City, for now, but she was losing her battle to keep the people of greater Wellington – outside the walls – fed and safe. Change was deepening and she feared for the city’s future. She’d worn the brooch for a year, but it was losing its shine.

The commander strode down the stone steps into the heart of the Walled City and people nodded to her as she swept past. Government officials were sorting supplies, making inventories, shifting goods about. Grain, fish, goat and possum meat, flax fibre, canola oil. The essentials of life, ready for distribution to the people. As Jensen approached the main courtyard, she saw the city gates were already open to admit the carts.

Captain Chan greeted her. “Commander,” she said. “The Wairarapa cavalcade is here.”

The carts were brought inside the city walls and the great gates were closed and heavily bolted behind them, a cumbersome and slow process. As the Wairarapa headman dismounted, Commander Jensen stepped forward to greet him. Her staff began unhitching the wagons and prepared to brush down the steaming horses. It was a long ride from the plains and hill country of the parched Wairarapa across the old route through the mountains. The tunnel had long since collapsed and the old railway had lain in ruins since the Great Quake. There was little chance it would ever operate again.

“Welcome, Garth,” said Jensen. “Please, come and eat.”

The Wairarapa headman glanced behind him, motioning with his hand. “You’ll be disappointed at just five carts of food,” he said. “I know that’s probably ten fewer than you’d hoped for, but the drought is deepening. We’ve had no rain for weeks and many of our crops have failed. But we’ve brought any surplus food we can spare. And some live goats too. They might breed, with any luck.”

“We’re grateful for anything you can provide,” said Jensen. “Did you strike any trouble?”

“Saw one band of brigands in the mountains, but your police escort saw to that. Any news from the Kāpiti Coast?”

“More trouble there too, I’m afraid. Dismal harvests. The sea eats away at the coast ever more, and the water tables get saltier every year. We’re in for a famine, I’m picking. Might be the worst we’ve faced yet.”

“Grim times,” agreed Garth. “What about Nelson? Have you progressed talks?”

Commander Jensen bristled. “We’ve made little progress with their government. I’ve sent emissaries, but so far the Nelson officials have rebuffed all our requests for help.”

“So the regions look after their own but no one else.”

“Not quite,” said Jensen. “There’s a committee of Nelson folk who have promised help. But if we don’t get it soon, we will have a famine. We need food, police and supplies by winter.” She toyed with the brooch on her lapel.

The headman sipped his drink. He would have asked more, but Captain Chan interrupted. “Sorry, Commander, there’s a fishing boat approaching. One of the Taputeranga fishermen, if I’m not mistaken. Could be important news.”

Jensen excused herself and hurried up several flights of wooden stairs to the top of the wall. A small fishing boat navigated its way through the entrance and between two parallel wooden wharves that jutted into the harbour. The tiny boat was dwarfed beside the fine form of the *Defender*, the government’s best ship, moored beside the wharf. By the time the fishing boat docked, Jensen could make out a yellow flag fluttering from its mast, bearing the symbol of a book. It was the fisherman Grip, the same man who had passed the brooch on to her. Let’s hope this is good news, she thought, but expected otherwise.

Docking officials checked the fisherman’s paperwork. No person

could enter the Walled City without the right documents. Satisfied, they signalled the police at the top of the wall who lowered a ladder and Grip began climbing the ramparts. As he climbed, a metallic chiming rang out, loud and slightly ominous. Commander Jensen saw the flash of his sharp hook as he swung it above the last rung.

She stepped forward to greet the man, instinctively reaching out her right hand out to shake his, then remembering that was the arm with the hook. Awkwardly, she quickly offered her other hand to clasp his left – and only – hand. “Grip, good to see you. Any news from Taputeranga?”

Taputeranga was the old fishing village on Wellington’s South Coast. Grip lived in a cottage beside the bay, among other fisherfolk, and supplied the government with fish he caught in Cook Strait. He also reported on any fresh trouble from the press gangs, which were the curse of local hills and bush, especially the one led by Benjamin Foul – the worst of the lot.

“Greetings, Commander. I see the Wairarapa cavalcade has arrived safely. That must be a welcome sight. But the news is bad, by Brunner’s dog. Another fishing boat disappeared in the last month. One boatload of folk drowned when they attempted to cross the strait. And yet more raids from Foul’s gang, damn him. They’ve got some hidden way of working, arriving out of nowhere and catching people off guard. We lost another child from Taputeranga last week. No doubt she’s slaving in a workhouse hidden somewhere in the western hills now.”

The commander looked grave. “I’ll have someone from the Wellington Guard posted at Taputeranga tomorrow.”

Grip stared at her. “Aye, Commander, that might help. But, by Grave’s beard, I’m more worried about the threat from the sea. Raider grows more daring. His boats have been intercepting our fishermen more and more often.”

Jensen looked drawn and tired. “We’ve arrested the old watcher. Another man gone corrupt. He was feeding information to Foul. So, I’ve got a new watcher above Taputeranga – Sam. She’s a good woman. We can trust her.”

“Aye,” agreed Grip. “You can trust Sam.”

“What about your Nelson connections?” Commander Jensen asked. “Any word from Charlie?”

“I’m expecting him any day,” said Grip. “He’s bringing what he can on the *Seeker*, and he should have news about what sort of help we can expect from the Nelson committee. They’re good folk who won’t turn a blind eye.”

“I hope you’re right, Grip,” the commander replied. “The Wairarapa and Kāpiti crops have mostly failed, worse this year than last. We’re staring down the barrel of our deepest famine yet.”

Grip frowned. The outlook was bleak. “You’re doing all you can, Commander. I understand how difficult it is.”

“Thank you, Grip. But enough talk. You must be tired. My officers will unload your fish. The stores officer can sort your share of grain and oil tomorrow. For tonight, there’s a bunk in the barracks on the docks for you.”

Grip slept well, but he woke with a headache and it took him a few groggy minutes to register some urgent activity outside the barracks. Pulling on his sea-boots and long woollen sea-coat, he dashed outside. Several sailors bustled about.

“What’s the hurry?” Grip asked one of the sailors.

“Commander’s orders. We’ve had a message come in on one of Sam’s pigeons from Lookout Cottage. The *Charger* has been seen off the Wellington heads not twenty minutes ago. We’re going after Raider.”

“Huey’s curse!” spluttered Grip. He raced up to the central

command and barged in on a conversation between Commander Jensen and Captain Chan.

Annoyed by the rude interruption, the captain scowled at Grip but had the courtesy not to say anything. Commander Jensen rose to her feet.

“You can’t send the *Defender* out alone,” Grip warned. “Raider is too cunning. You need to wait until we have word from Charlie. Nelson might offer reinforcements.”

But the commander remained resolute. “Grip, just yesterday you said yourself that Raider grows ever stronger. And my citizens are losing faith in me. Every month another fishing boat is lost, and you know what that means. Less food to feed people. We can’t wait any longer. This is at least a chance – we must challenge him. Show him the city has some strength!”

Grip persisted. “But the *Defender* is the government’s best ship. Lose her and you lose the sea!”

Commander Jensen raised her hand to silence him. “Enough!” She turned to the captain. “You have your orders. Don’t take unnecessary risks – but if you can capture the *Charger*, or destroy it, you’ll have my eternal gratitude.”

Jensen turned again to face Grip. “We must take the offensive now. I can’t wait any longer.” Then she turned to her captain. “May fortune smile on you and your crew, Captain Chan. Take care!”

“Hang on!” pleaded Grip. “If you’re sending your best ship, let me sail beside her. I know Cook Strait better than most, certainly better than any of your officers.” He glanced sideways at Chan. “No offence.”

The captain glowered but otherwise ignored the barb and looked at Jensen. “Commander?”

Jensen sighed wearily. “Let him go.”



## A Fresh Possibility

Ivy greeted her son with a warm hug. “How did your climbing go, love?”

“It was okay, Mum, but I didn’t get to the top...” said Herman glumly, “again.”

Charlie chipped in. “But he got higher than he has before. We’ll make a climber of him yet.”

Delicious smells swirled from the kitchen and Herman’s father poked his head out. “Glad to see you’ve brought my son back alive,” he said, with a smirk aimed at Charlie. Then he turned to Herman, “So, did it rock your world?”

Herman groaned. Another of his dad’s bad puns. Conrad liked nothing better than to toy with words, to play with double meanings, and he took great pleasure from the resulting groans.

“Uncle Charlie says some of the Mounties used to train on the same pinnacle,” said Herman.

“Oh, did they?” replied Conrad. He said no more and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Herman sighed. He knew that his father didn’t want him to join Nelson’s Mounted Police.

“How was the shop today, Mum?” Herman asked. It had been his mother’s turn in the Golden Bookshop. It sold all sorts of second-hand books: rare hardbacks, common paperbacks,

collectables and tomes signed by long-dead authors – almost all from before the Great Pandemic of 2060.

“Not bad,” Ivy said. “Most folk don’t have a lot of spare money, but people always want good stories.” She produced a book from her bag. “Look, I found you this. Thought you might enjoy it.”

“*First Man: A Life of Neil Armstrong*,” read Herman. “Wasn’t he the first person to walk on the moon?”

“That’s right,” said Charlie, glancing out the window to where the waning moon hung above the hills in the darkening sky. “To think in that one mission, they burned enough fuel to keep Nelson going for decades. A different world, really?”

“How long ago was that, Uncle?” Herman asked.

“1969 – more than a hundred and fifty years ago,” said Charlie. “It’s just unimaginable now. Then, they reached for the moon. Now, we guard our borders.”

Conrad appeared from the kitchen again. “Dinner won’t be long. We’re having ratatouille.”

Seeing his uncle and father together made Herman reflect on their similarities ... and their differences.

As the oldest of the Reed boys, Charlie had readily dragged his younger brothers Conrad and Christopher out into the bushy hills behind Nelson, and more than once got them all lost. Charlie was the adventurous one, with a wiry, upright physique that suggested confidence and ability.

Conrad was bookish and intellectual, the smartest of the three, but conservative and careful by nature. Apparently, he had been Nelson’s best sea swimmer, but Herman found that hard to believe as his father hardly did anything but splash in the shallows now. Conrad resembled his older brother Charlie in some ways. Same dark wavy hair and clear blue eyes, but a much finer nose and, with his hair kept shorter, he looked more serious. He had no

moustache either and his pale face suggested someone who spent most of his time indoors.

As for Christopher, Herman had never known him. He glanced up at the wall above the dining room table where some of Christopher's drawings hung. Pictures of mountains, coastlines and people. Simple line drawings, done in pencil, that showed a rare ability.

Christopher had shown great promise as a budding artist. Before he disappeared. Spurred on by their older brother, Conrad and Christopher had climbed some mountains together. But mostly it was their love of the sea that kept the three Reed boys occupied. They'd made rafts, and mucked around on Nelson's many estuaries, before becoming bolder and constructing their own wooden canoes, which allowed them to explore further and reach narrow sea caves and nooks along the convoluted coastline.

Caught up in the adventure of it all, they had sought bigger challenges, encouraged by Charlie, which inevitably led to making masts and sails for their canoes. With a following wind, the Reed brothers could venture out to sea, fish in deep water and enjoy a freedom that seemed unimaginable to Herman.

But one day, a sudden storm had overtaken the boys in their canoes. Conrad's boat had been swamped and sank, and he would have drowned had Charlie not hauled him aboard his own canoe, the biggest and most seaworthy of the three. It was all Charlie could do to get his brother back to the safety of Nelson Haven. But by then, Christopher's canoe had been swept out towards Cook Strait. The search for Christopher lasted for days. But no one ever found any sign of the youngest Reed boy. Not even his canoe had turned up.

After this tragedy, the Reed brothers had been banned from all sea adventures.

Herman's musing was interrupted by the thump of a bowl on the table, and a delicious aroma. Dinner was ready.

Conrad fussed about the table, spooning hearty servings of ratatouille into each bowl. The fire crackled in the grate and Herman's fluffy ginger cat, Honey, stretched out on the fireside rug.

"Any news from customers today, Ivy?" Charlie asked.

"A bit. The Mounties picked up two men trying to cross the mountains. Probably from Canterbury. They've been imprisoned. And a boatload of Wellington refugees arrived. Only five of those left aboard were still alive."

"Terrible." Charlie frowned. "That's the fourth boat this year." Recently, starving people from Wellington had been risking trips across the strait to get to Nelson, taking all manner of crude boats, even rafts made of driftwood. Many people had drowned trying to get across, and the few that had made it arrived ragged and thin. They'd told stories of conditions in the Broken City getting worse, of it being taken over by gangs and criminals.

Charlie eyed Conrad across the table. "And our government still refuses to help. Those of us who are better off should send food and supplies."

Herman's father sighed. "And what would that achieve? Send a ship or two, to be seized by the corrupt? It won't get to those in need. Commander Jensen has lost control of the city. Her government is weak and her police force even weaker. Even the Wellington Guards are too few to be effective."

"She's rallying," said Charlie. "But regardless, how many times can we ignore calls for help? It's immoral." His voice grew louder. "We just leave Wellington to the dogs, do we? Let it descend into chaos ... become some sort of wrecker's paradise? Why, just today, Herman told me he heard talk of pirates—"

"*Charlie!*" shouted Herman's father. "*Enough!*" Conrad turned

to Herman. “As soon as you’ve finished dinner, off to bed,” he said. “You’ve got schoolwork to do tomorrow, and this talk is not suitable for a young boy.”

“Conrad,” Ivy soothed, “Herman is twelve now. He needs to know more about what’s happening in the wider world. Let him listen.” She stood up. “You two could be better role models if you talked to each other respectfully,” she said.

“Bed, Herman,” Conrad demanded. “Now!”

Herman moseyed off to his room. He pulled an old Famous Five hardback off his bookshelf and read for a while, but not even that could distract him from his thoughts. Even after he turned off his solar-powered lamp, he couldn’t sleep, so he sneaked back down the hallway to listen behind the closed door and peeked through the old keyhole. To his surprise the conversation had now turned to him.

“The boy needs more exercise,” Charlie was insisting, “and fresh air. You’re stifling him. And he reads too much – he lives in a fantasy world. Let him stay with me in Picton for a while. He could be useful. I’m preparing some relief goods to take to Wellington. He could help pack the crates.”

Conrad tried to remain calm. “Charlie, it’s too dangerous for Herman. You know what a rough place the wider world is.” He toyed with the spoon in his empty bowl.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” said Charlie, exasperated. “I’m talking Picton here, not Wellington!”

“I’m making sure Herman has a safe and happy childhood. So many kids have awful lives. Think of those earthquake refugees and the orphans in Wellington. I don’t want Herman out there ... not even in Picton.”

“Well, what about you, Conrad?” Charlie carried on. “Come to Wellington! Listen, Nelson’s government is complacent. You need

to see what's really happening out there. Maybe then you'd want to help." Turning towards Ivy, he added, "Why doesn't he care?" Ivy didn't answer but gently shook her head.

Charlie got louder, ruder and more red-faced. "Conrad, you can't live your whole life through books. If Wellington worsens, there are people there who will look hungrily across the strait. What will you do then? Throw a copy of *The History of Nelson* at them? By Grave's beard," he spluttered, "I can't stand it."

Grave was an early explorer, the man Charlie most admired. He had been a bold mountaineer in faraway Fiordland, long ago. Herman knew things were serious when his uncle talked about William Grave's beard.

Herman's father was getting angry now, too, and yelled back at his brother. "Enough of that, Charlie! How dare you talk to me about risk! I know plenty enough about risk. I think of Christopher every day – lost and drowned. Because of *you!*"

For a moment there was a horrible silence. Herman held his breath.

After the pause, Conrad resumed his rebuke. "It was *you* who dismissed Christopher's fears. *You* who urged us on, even though we were afraid. Without *you*, Christopher would still be alive ... and for that fact, you have *never* taken responsibility!"

Suddenly, Herman's mother interjected. "Enough, you two!" she demanded. "The only way to honour Christopher is to live life well, and to look after your kin – not argue with them!"

When Charlie spoke again, he was calmer. "Conrad," he said, "you know I don't believe that Christopher is dead. And there's been a possible sighting of him in Wellington."

Conrad shook his head. "Not more false rumours ..."

Charlie threw up his hands in protest. "More than rumours this time, Conrad. Grip delivered supplies to Pencarrow Lighthouse

recently, and he reckons the keeper there is the spitting image of us. About the right age too.” He stared hard at his brother. “It could be Christopher!” he urged. “Come to Wellington with me and let’s find out.”

Conrad looked unmoved. “Surely Grip could’ve just asked him?”

“No,” Charlie shook his head. “The keeper just lowered a rope and hauled up the supplies. He couldn’t – or wouldn’t – say a word. Grip left none the wiser but thinks the man must be related to us somehow.”

“You really think it’s possible?”

“I do,” Charlie nodded. “I really do.”

Herman had to stifle his gasp. He’d never heard this sort of talk before ... that Uncle Christopher could still be alive?

He crept back to bed, his head whirling with the fresh possibility that Christopher *hadn’t* drowned.

The next morning, as Charlie prepared to leave, he hugged his sister-in-law, saying, “I’ll see you in Picton for the committee meeting, Ivy.” Then, grim-faced, he extended his hand to shake Conrad’s. “Why don’t you come to Picton with Ivy – and bring Herman? It will do everyone good to have a change of scenery.”

“Out of the question!” Conrad retorted.

“Why not? You really should know more about the committee’s work, don’t you think, Ivy?”

Ivy shot her brother-in-law a warning glance.

“Well, you may not be interested in the committee, Conrad, but what about your own brother?” said Charlie. “Sail to Wellington with me. Think of it ... seeing Christopher after twenty-five years ...”

A long pause followed, then Conrad nodded his head, slowly

and thoughtfully. If anything could drag Conrad out of the Velvet-lined Rut, it was a chance of finding Christopher. He'd ignored his older brother's wildest claims for years, but this one held a glimmer of possibility.

"All right, Charlie," he said, reluctantly. "I'll come. We'll all take the cart to Picton the day after tomorrow and Herman and Ivy can stay there until I return. Now, I've got to open the bookshop." He hurried away.

Ivy mussed Herman's hair. "That's exciting," she said. "A trip to Picton for the whole family!"

Herman's heart leapt at this miraculous news. He turned to Charlie. "Do you really think Uncle Christopher is alive?"

Charlie's squirrel twitched. "I'm certain of it," he said.

Herman couldn't contain his excitement. His long-lost uncle might be alive ... and he was going to Picton! He liked the bustling fishing village. Last time, there had been a troop of Mounties there, fresh from patrolling the southern border. High up on their horses, wearing their smart red uniforms, they had seemed heroic.

As he hugged his uncle goodbye, Herman began to make a plan. If he were to become a Mountie, he needed to prove that he was worthy. And now, it seemed, he had a golden opportunity. Every adventurous character in his books had taken up a golden opportunity ... so he would too.



## Lighthouses on the Strait

Out in Cook Strait, a tall man stood on the prow of the *Charger*. His black sea-coat billowed in the breeze and salt spray flecked his black beard. His feet, splayed wide in large sea-boots, braced against the moving deck while he surveyed the entrance to Wellington Harbour with a hand-held spyglass.

A short, blunt woman stood next to him, sporting an unforgettable face. One of her eyes was squinted, half squashed behind a brow that had been permanently crushed by a swinging boom in a storm long ago. Although both eyes worked, everyone knew her as Squint. Her remaining good eye seemed to bulge twice as large, giving her a half-mad look that few willingly faced. She was Raider's second in command, and she knew the sea almost as well as her captain.

"Any sign of the *Defender*?" she asked.

Raider shook his head. There was no indication yet if Commander Jensen had taken the bait.

A messy swell slopped through the narrow channel. Guarding the entrance to Wellington Harbour were two lighthouses. To his left, in the west, rose the white iron tower of Haewai Lighthouse. He smiled to himself. They had its keeper firmly in their pocket. But looking at the slim finger of Pencarrow Lighthouse rising on his right, he scowled.

Raider would dearly love to extinguish that lighthouse beam too, but so far the keeper had proved impossible to corrupt. Safe and high in his iron tower, the man had remained resolute, never taking any of the bribes Raider's men had offered. They had tried to entice the keeper many times, but the man remained mute; they had even tried to lure him out by posing as fishermen, offering to trade fish ... nothing had worked. It was infuriating.

So much for feeble little schemes, Raider thought. If you wanted results, you had to take risks.

He had never dared to nose the *Charger* so far into the harbour entrance but today would be the test. Using his ship like bait on a hook, he would entice Captain Chan out in the *Defender*, Wellington's strongest ship, and then retreat into Cook Strait.

Raider knew the South Coast reefs and rips of the strait better than any other person alive – save one. He could outmanoeuvre any ship at sea and, with a little luck, fool the *Defender* onto the rocks. His wreckers might not have Pencarrow Lighthouse under control but, if he could toy with the *Defender* for long enough, until dusk, then he might be able to drive her onto the dangerous reefs nearest Haewai Lighthouse.

Some of his men had bribed the Haewai keeper to extinguish the light just when the *Defender* needed it most. She would grind into the rocks; her wooden hull would break apart and her crew would drown.

Then, with the government fleet fatally weakened, Raider would be the master of Cook Strait, free to raid the trading ships and the fishing boats with little opposition. Winter was coming and Wellington's government had been stockpiling the limited autumn harvest for weeks. Raider knew another famine was imminent, but he was determined that *his* men would not starve. Not this time.

The last famine, five years ago, had almost wiped him out.

While he had rebuilt, establishing a bigger and better base for himself on the Broken Isles, the government had raised the Walled City, making a safehold for the region's supplies. And recently, Benjamin Foul had warned him that Commander Jensen was stationing more of the Wellington Guard around greater Wellington, outside the walls. Raider relied on Foul's workhouse for food and clothing, as well as news from the city. In return, he traded fish and supplies that he pirated from vulnerable boats. Raider could not have the Wellington Guard cutting off his supply of goods and information.

"One step at a time," he cautioned himself. "First, secure the sea, then we can deal with the city." Raider raised the scope to his eye again. "There she is!" he shouted. The *Defender* was headed straight towards them. It was a large, sturdy ship, with fine red sails.

"Come to us, minnow!" the big pirate mocked. Raider slapped Squint over the shoulder. "They're sniffing the bait!" he roared to his band of pirates and wreckers.

A rousing cheer came back.

Raider took one more glance through the scope. "Dammit!" he cursed. Behind the government ship was a small sailing boat with a fluttering yellow flag. "Grip!"

"Aye, dammit," cursed Squint. "Always a fishbone in your throat, that wretched man."

"No matter," said Raider, spitting over the side. "What's one poxy fishing boat going to do?"

With the *Defender* giving chase, Raider ordered the *Charger* about, and soon she was nosing back into the wider strait, past Pencarrow Lighthouse.

For a while, Raider toyed with the *Defender*, letting the bigger ship draw close, then pulling away. While the *Charger* was smaller,

she was more nimble, able to take advantage of the slighter winds. At first, Captain Chan played it safe and didn't risk closing in whenever the *Charger* strayed near reefs. But as the afternoon wore away, Raider could sense her frustration building. He'd never let the *Charger* get within reach of the government ship before, knowing that, if they could, they would send over their grappling hooks and board his ship. The Wellington Guard would overwhelm him with their superior numbers.

The *Defender* was the Wellington government's sole decent ship, and Captain Rachel Chan was an able sailor. But she wasn't a match for Raider. He lived on the sea, knew every reef, every islet, every fickle trick of the winds.

Squint stood at the helm, blinded by the low sun, which was westering across the South Coast's rugged shoreline. It wasn't long before dusk would fall and they could close the jaws of their trap. The *Defender* was big, but would snap like any wooden ship.

To the south lay the Broken Isles, where Raider's base was hidden among the trees. The Broken Isles had emerged out of the sea during the Great Quake almost twenty years ago. At first, Wellington's people had thought it was a gift of the ocean, some compensation for the devastation wrought by the earthquake. But the islands proved to be a dangerous place, with jagged reefs, a broken coastline and only one bay where anchorage was possible.

So people called them the Broken Isles, although now some were calling them the Wrecker Isles, as almost everyone believed it was where the Cook Strait pirates were based. Raider was pleased about that. Nothing like rumours and dark gossip to cause fear. Fear was his trade. Fear made people weak and compliant.

Raider knew that Captain Chan, standing at the helm of the *Defender*, feared something very much right now. She should fear the reefs, and the approaching darkness, and the fact that

the *Charger* was much more agile in these dangerous waters. But Raider also knew the one thing that Captain Chan feared even more – failure. Returning to Commander Jensen empty-handed. She feared losing her one chance to capture the *Charger*.

“Not long now,” gloated Squint. “It’ll be dark soon.”

Raider grinned, his white teeth glinting through his black beard. “When the light fails,” he smiled, “the dark falls.” And he snapped his jaws shut.

The two ships tacked and toyed with each other, a duelling dance over the harbour, with the light slowly fading. Captain Chan had, so far, avoided all attempts to lure her too close to the reefs. Raider grew frustrated.

“Damn woman!” Squint cursed, at the same time feeling a slight admiration for her fellow woman sailor. “She’s better than we thought.”

“Time,” said Raider. “All in good time. Wait until the darkness deepens.”

Looking back over his shoulder at the following *Defender*, Raider was too intent on his prey to notice the small fishing boat bearing straight for them.

“It’s Grip!” yelled Squint suddenly, and Raider turned to see the fishing boat skipping over the chop at an angle that made a collision seem inevitable. Grip stood at the stern, his hook curled over the tiller and a stony expression on his bearded face. Tiny though the fishing boat was in comparison to the *Charger*, a direct hit might hole her. Grip had iron sheathing on his prow, which, at speed, could deliver a damaging blow.

“He’s a madman!” said Squint. “A collision will kill him!”

“Hold your course!” said Raider. “He’s playing chicken against a hawk. He’ll deflect.”

But Grip did not deflect, and his fishing boat came on, her sail

full and the yellow flag fluttering in defiance. As his lantern swung, light flashed across Grip's face, illuminating a determined scowl.

"Hold!" demanded Raider, clenching his teeth. But Grip also held his course.

At the last possible moment, Raider ordered, "Go about!" and Squint spun the wheel.

While Raider's crew busied themselves with the sheets and sails, the *Charger* lurched, hung poised until the wind caught her newly aligned sails, then began ploughing through the water again.

Grip's iron prow missed the hull of the *Charger* by a mere metre or two, before the gap between the boats grew once again.

"Curse that urchin!" growled Raider.

"Rocks ahead!" yelled a man at the bow, and only then did Raider realise, too late, that Grip had not been playing chicken at all. He had lured the *Charger* towards a hidden reef. One that even Raider did not know about.

As they heard the crunch, the crew cried out, bracing themselves against the sudden jolt. A splintering sound came as the rocks carved a gash along the ship's hull.

"Reef the sails!" yelled Raider.

Quickly, the wreckers worked the sheets to bring the sails down. The *Charger* graunched against the hidden reef, rock against wood and iron.

"Squint! Into the hold!" cried Raider, taking the helm. "Check the damage!" He looked over his shoulder to see Grip's boat passing the *Defender*. Captain Chan would be coming for him now, and it seemed he was caught in his own trap, beaten at his own game.

As darkness fell, twin lights swept across the harbour entrance and over the sullen waters of Cook Strait. The first shone from Pencarrow Lighthouse, lighting the eastern shore and Barrett's Reef near the harbour mouth. And the second, in the west, shone from

Haewai Lighthouse. It illuminated the headlands, reefs and hidden islets along the South Coast, almost as far as the Broken Isles.

Squint appeared from the hold. “Superficial damage,” she reported. “The iron sheathing has deflected the worst of it. We’re not sinking, just stuck.”

Raider straightened, appearing taller than usual. “Then we have a chance. Prepare the crew!”

In the next beam of light, the pirates aboard the *Charger* could see the approaching *Defender*, with a row of Wellington guards lined up along the starboard side ready with their grappling hooks. They were even close enough to hear Captain Chan shouting orders.

“Steady, steady, wait until we draw alongside,” Chan commanded. “We’ve got them!”

“Ready, pirates!” shouted Raider. His crew drew their cutlasses. Given the choice, Raider would always prefer the sea to do his dirty work but, if it took the slash of his cutlass, so be it. He was as capable of swinging a blade as any pirate who had ever lived.

Just as the Haewai Lighthouse beam should have swept across the reef again, illuminating the pirates and glinting off their blades, it suddenly went out, plunging both ships and the coastline into darkness. And, by a fickle turn of fate, the rising tide lifted the *Charger* from the reef and the retreating swell pushed her clear.

Captain Chan shouted for more lanterns, but it was too late. Lantern light was far too feeble to reveal the submerged form of the reef below. In the darkness, Chan miscalculated the angle and, by then, there was no *Charger* to draw alongside.

Somehow, the *Charger* had vanished into the night, leaving just the exposed reef. Now it was the heavier *Defender’s* turn to grind into the rocks. Her deep hull was too far below the waterline to escape the reef, even in the higher tide.

“Brace yourselves,” yelled Captain Chan. Then came a great rending graunch. In the collision, dozens of the Wellington Guard were thrown overboard. Others had their limbs broken by the sudden impact.

While the *Charger* limped away, her hull holed but not fatally damaged, the trapped *Defender* snapped and splintered in the darkness. Struggling in the sea, sailors and guards alike cried out as they tried to shed heavy boots and coats. The *Defender* was doomed, and groaned as her timbers disintegrated and the water came gushing in.

“Abandon ship!” Captain Chan ordered.

By the time the Haewai Lighthouse beam began flashing again, bodies and debris from the ship’s smashed hull were already beginning to wash up along the South Coast. Wellington’s best ship was no more than matchwood. And almost half of the Wellington Guards had drowned.