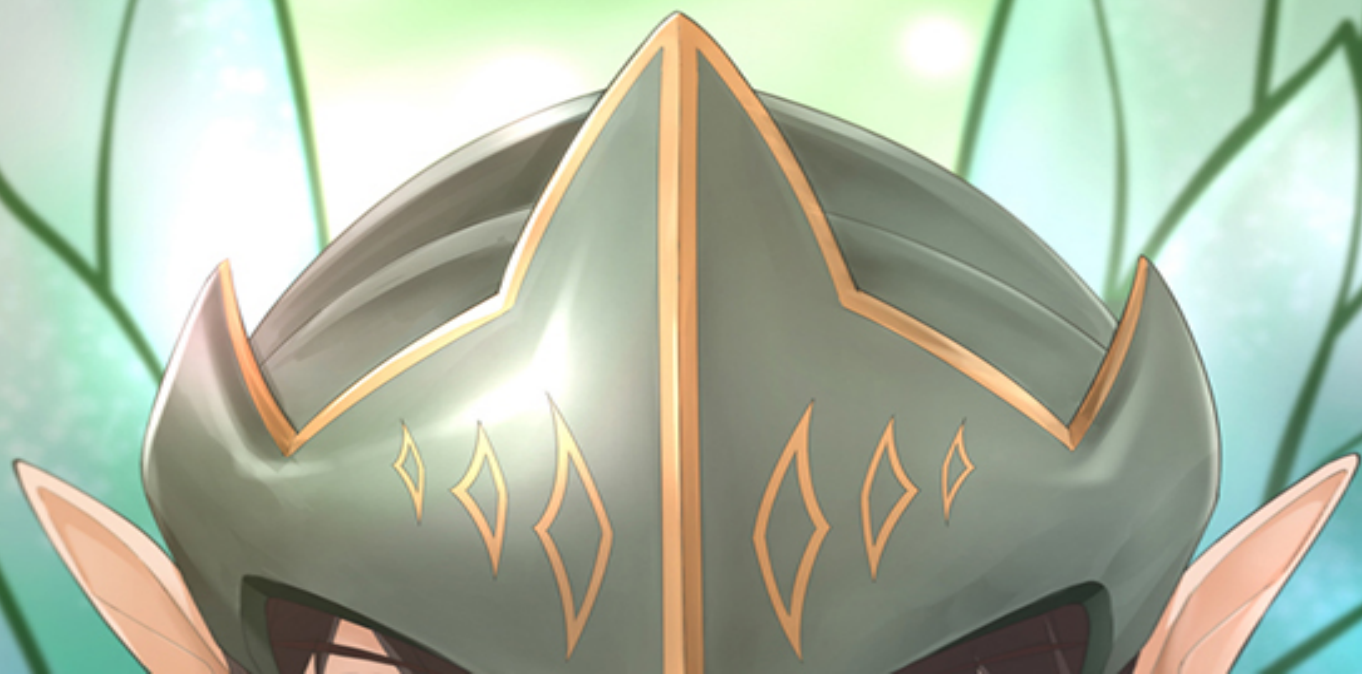


RavensDagger

A Wholesome LitRPG

Cinnamon Bun

Volume 4



Cinnamon Bun

· Volume 4 ·

RavensDagger



To Dada,

A great artist, and a wonderful father.

I wish we had time for one more adventure.

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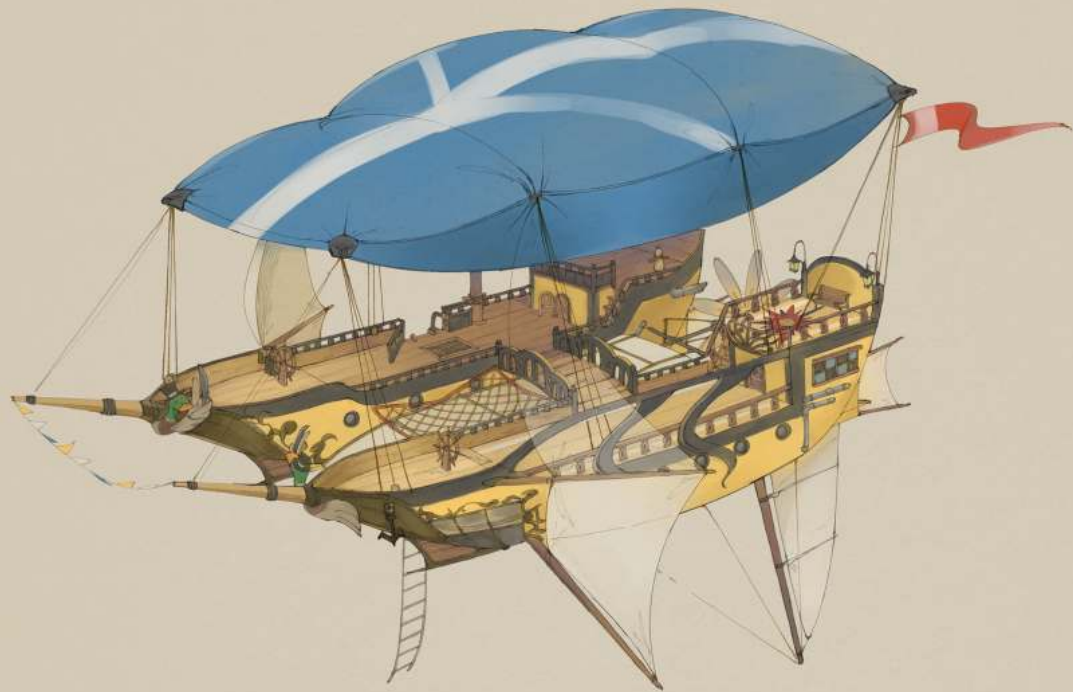
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The Beaver Cleaver

Allen



The Lonely Island

Census conducted on the orders
of High Paladin Black, for His Majesty
King Silverwing of Sylphfree



Old Docks

Old landing location
currently in a state
of disrepair

Gallows

A large wooden structure, seemingly
built for hangings of both bipedal
and quadrupedal beings.

Mistrust

A small settlement. Mixed races. Sylph observed
as well as cervid. Seemingly peaceful.

Monocorn Dunes

This location has several single-horned
equine creatures. They are exceptionally
territorial



Crystal Oasis

A single large tower
next to an oasis.
Local material bricks.
Unknown purpose.

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• Chapter One •

Home Again, Home Again

The *Beaver Cleaver's* bright balloon hovering over the little town was the first sign I saw that we were nearing Hopsalot.

We huffed and puffed our way up a final hill, and as we crested it we got to see the whole town ahead of us: tree-house homes and burrows, open fields where neat little gardens were soaking up morning sunshine, and the gurgling river that swished and swashed through the village, never going in a straight line when it could instead meander around hills and under arched stone bridges with trellis-covered sides.

I raised a hand and cupped it over my forehead to shield my eyes from the sun. I could make out buns, most with bright white shirts and adorable overalls on, some caring for their gardens while the little ones ran around and chased each other over hills, their long bunny ears bouncing with every step. The older buns were usually sitting on the porches before their burrow homes, rocking on finely crafted chairs and smoking from reed pipes.

“We’re here!” I called back to the others.

Behind me were my best friends. Awen still had bandages around her waist from where she’d gotten hurt the night before, and Amaryllis looked miffed at having to walk through the forest so much. The branches and leaves tended to get caught in her feathers, much to her very loud annoyance. Bastion came up behind them, looking like a very small knight in shining armor. He smiled at me, relaxed as a sylph paladin could be. His wings fluttered behind him as he stepped off a boulder.

Then there were the buns. Momma in her half-plate and Carrot, who'd removed her gauntlets and had them tied by her waist so that they clanged and banged with every step. Buster took up the very rear of the group, the huge bun stomping along with his big hammer slung onto his shoulder. Peter was ... somewhere. He was the sneaky sort, so it wasn't too surprising that I couldn't spot him. I was sure that he'd show up if anything needed our attention.

Carrot bounced to a stop at the top of the hill, right next to me. Her ears wiggled with poorly suppressed excitement, and her grin was as wide as a grin could be. "Home!" she declared.

"Home!" I said right back.

Hopsalot wasn't my home, of course, but the *Beaver* certainly was. I could just barely make out a few figures on the airship's deck, some of them with long bun-ears.

Momma caught up to us with the others and took a deep breath. "Ah, there was a time, once, where I would leave for months on end. Wanderlust dragging me this way and that. Now I can hardly leave for more than a day or two without fearing that everything will crumble apart without me there."

I giggled. "I'm sure it's not so bad."

Some of the buns in Hopsalot spotted our party, and within moments a whole crowd of little buns had gathered by the edge of the village. They stared at us, some of them holding up their ears away from their eyes, while others hesitated and only peeked our way from behind bushes and picket fences. When we came over, their hesitation broke, and soon we were swarmed by a whole gaggle of buns.

Carrot darted ahead, picked one little bun up by the armpits, and spun her around a couple of times before squeezing her tight. "I'm back!" she said while the little bun tried really hard to return the hug, even though her arms were too short to wrap around Carrot's sides.

I felt Awen and Amaryllis shuffle up behind me, using me as a barricade against all the bouncing and smiling buns. "Hello!" I said.

Their reply was a cacophony of questions that I couldn't possibly answer all at once. From asking if we'd fought big monsters, to wondering if they

could visit the airship again, to very generous offers to join them in playing extreme hopscotch.

“Ah, I’m sorry, everybun. But my friends and I need to follow Momma! We’ll have some time to play after that, I’m sure!”

Momma was kneeling down, hugging buns that needed hugs, patting buns that needed pats, and sometimes pinching fat, chubby cheeks, much to the dismay of the buns whose faces she pinched.

It took a bit for the tide of little buns to recede and for us to be able to head deeper into the town. Buster was entirely covered in buns, who seemed to have confused the big man for a jungle gym. Peter, of course, was nowhere to be seen. He didn’t seem the sort to take kindly to being pestered by little buns.

Momma shooed some of them along, and Carrot saved the day by sacrificing herself with a declaration of, “Who wants to play tag?” The screaming horde bounced after Carrot, a whole bunch of ears wobbling as they chased her.

“Aww,” I said.

“Thank the World,” Amaryllis said. “I can’t handle one child. That many is just a disaster in the making.”

“Oh, we have little disasters all the time,” Momma said. “Buns who get caught between pickets, buns who get into fights over favorite dolls. Buns who discover some interesting insect, name it, start treating it as a favored pet, and are then devastated when the insect passes away ... usually on the same day they found it.”

“Oh no,” I said. “That happened to me once. I had a pet praying mantis, but I didn’t tell my mom that little Mem was a pet, and she smacked it with a flyswatter. I was devastated.”

“Awa, I never had a pet before,” Awen said.

“I’ve always wanted a cat,” Amaryllis added. “They have very agreeable personalities.”

“Is that why you get along so well with Orange?” I asked.

“I suppose so. The spirit cat is obviously a grand and noble creature. I see a lot of myself in her.”

Snorting, I turned to Awen. “What about you? We could probably get you a pet, if you wanted. Like a dog? Airships can have dogs, right?”

“I don’t think that’s a great idea,” Awen said. “Dogs need room to move, and the *Beaver* is a little small for that.”

I pouted. My plan, newly created, to use Awen as an excuse to get a dog had been foiled. “Well, all right. Maybe a parrot—we are pirates after all.”

“I would like to log my protest,” Bastion said. “I am not a pirate. Nor, for that matter, are any of you.”

“Sky pirate, sorry,” I said.

“No,” he said, with obvious exasperation. It turned into contrite resignation when I giggled. He had a knack for making strange faces whenever I caught him flat-footed.

I was expecting Momma to lead us to her home, but instead she moved toward the hill where the *Beaver* had set down his anchor. “I genuinely wish we could have you stay, if only for a little longer, but if my suspicions are correct, then the Insmouth dungeon is in as great a risk as the Newbining dungeon was.”

“We need to head over there and fix it as soon as we can, then?” I asked.

Momma nodded. “I’m confident you can manage. In either case, I’ll send some of my better buns over—including Carrot and, perhaps, Peter—to see if they need assistance in a day’s time.”

“They could come with us,” I offered.

Momma shook her head. “They need time with their families. And you need a break, too, I imagine. Still, the World doesn’t always have as much concern for us as we’d wish.”

I sighed. “Okay. We should probably get Awen back to bed anyway.”

“Awa? I’m better now,” Awen said. She reached over and touched her side. “There’s just some scabbing now. I took potions.”

“I’m still worried.”

“You were impaled once, and we didn’t do this much for you,” Awen said. “Remember? In that glass dungeon?”

“Well, yeah, I was fine,” I said.

Awen crossed her arms and leveled a very un-Awen look at me. “Don’t be a hypocrite, Broc. I can deal with a bit of pain.”

Momma laughed, and Amaryllis seemed very proud of Awen while I pouted. “Fine, fine.”

We arrived in the shadow cast by the *Beaver*, and I saw Oda and Sally, the Scallywags, looking over the rails at us. A couple of the older little buns were with them, those who were around the Scallywags’ own ages. I waved, and they waved back.

“Do you need anything for your return trip?” Momma asked.

I considered it. “I don’t think so? Some supplies wouldn’t go amiss. Our voyage has already gone on for a lot longer than we expected.”

“We didn’t get as much fuel in Needleford as we could have,” Awen said. “But I don’t think we can get any here.”

“I’m afraid that Hopsalot doesn’t have much use for it,” Momma agreed. “What about food?”

“We’re fine there,” Amaryllis said. “Thank you.”

Bastion bowed at the waist. “I wish to thank you as well, ma’am,” he said. “Your hospitality has been wonderful, and your prompt action has likely done much to keep your town safe.”

“That’s just a mother’s job,” Momma said. “Come, I’ll give you all a quick hug for the trip back.”

I crashed into Momma because, really, her hugs were the best. Then it was the others’ turn, though Bastion politely declined, and Amaryllis made noises as if she wanted to decline while eagerly accepting the hug.

“I’m going to miss Hopsalot,” I said. “And I was only here for less than a day.” I let my shoulders droop, and my gaze wandered over the town. It was just so chaotically peaceful. The big homes built into trees, the doors stuck into the sides of hills, the little streets, paved in carefully laid cobbles. The river sang a gurgling song, accompanied by the wind whispering over grassy hills.

Then a whole bunch of little ones appeared, all of them scrambling over Carrot, who took a tumble and rolled down a hill to the tune of merry screams.

“I would offer to let you stay,” Momma said when she looked away from the spectacle. None of the little buns looked to be hurt from the flop down the hill. “But I suspect you’re at that point in your life where adventure has

its hooks in you, and you want nothing more than to meddle. It might be best for everyone here if you only came back when you're older and calmer."

"I'm not a meddler," I defended myself.

Amaryllis snorted.

"Is this Mock Broccoli Day?" I asked.

"It's always Mock Broccoli Day," Amaryllis said. She nodded to Momma. "We'll probably fly back over here again, on the way north."

"Then stop by for tea," Momma said, "no matter the hour."

Amaryllis nodded, then moved over to a ladder that someone had left dangling off the *Beaver's* side. "Come on, Broccoli, you're holding us back!"

"Oh, right, okay," I said. I jumped to Momma, gave her a last hug, got my head rubbed for my troubles, then darted back to the *Beaver*.

When we climbed aboard, we found a few curious buns on deck, with Clive sitting on one of the steps leading to the aft castle and explaining things. Howard the fishman was nearby, too, wringing his webbed fingers as he approached.

"I'll make sure we don't have any uninvited guests aboard," Amaryllis said. "You deal with Howard here."

I nodded and skipped over to the fishman. "Heya."

"Hello, Captain Bunch," he said. "How did it go?"

"It went well enough," I said. "We know how to fix your dungeon now, but I think we ought to hurry back. It gets harder and harder to fix things as time goes on. We don't want to be too late."

Howard's shoulders loosened and he gave me a fishy smile. "Oh, thank the fathomless depths."

"Don't worry, Howard, my friends and I will have everything back to how it ought to be in a jiffy!"

· Chapter Two ·

Reciprocation

It would take, winds willing, a few hours to get back to Insmouth. By the time we arrived, I guesstimated that it would be an hour or two past noon. That meant we'd need to have lunch aboard the *Beaver Cleaver*.

I left Clive, the harpies, and the Scallywags to do the complicated work of flying the airship while I headed down and into the kitchen to prepare lunch. The only hands that were free were Awen's and Amaryllis's, and ... neither were all that good at the whole cooking thing.

I was humming while inspecting the ingredients we had available when Amaryllis came out of her room to stand nearby. She leaned against the frame of the archway leading into the kitchen. "Do you need help?"

I tapped my chin. "I could use a bit of help, sure," I said. "I think I'll be making a big lunch. We might need leftovers for later. A nice veggie salad, some fried fish, maybe some porridge?"

"That sounds like a big meal," Amaryllis said as she stood straighter and walked over. "How can I help?"

I eyed her up and down. "You really want to help? With the cooking?"

"What's wrong with me wanting to help?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just, well, didn't figure you for the cooking sort."

She huffed. "I can learn, can't I?"

"Yup! You sure can." I nodded. "Do you want to start by chopping the veggies? I'll need them cut up into little cubes to start with."

"Humph, fine."

I opened a sack of potatoes and another of turnips and then grabbed some purple-skinned carrots and set them all on the table where we could start cutting. A big cauldron came next so that we had a place to toss all the cut veggies. I hummed as I found a pair of knives and started working.

“How are you?” Amaryllis asked. The question sounded strained.

I blinked and looked up to her. “I’m all right?” I tried.

She glared at me, huffed a huff that I wasn’t familiar with, and went back to chopping up potatoes in ... vaguely cube-like shapes. She was trying her best, so I wouldn’t complain. They’d all be mashed up anyway.

“You... Ugh, this isn’t something I’m good at,” Amaryllis whined.

“You’ll get better.”

“I’m not talking about the cooking, you dolt.”

I tilted my head to the side. “Then what are you talking about?”

Amaryllis continued to chop her veggies. She was quiet, but it felt like she was working up to something, so I didn’t interrupt her silence. “Broccoli,” she began, “you’ve been through a lot.”

“Well, yeah, I guess.”

“And yet you’re still smiling, and you’re still worried for everyone, and you’re still doing your best,” she continued.

“Uh, yeah, that’s what a good friend does.”

“Even when I constantly call you an idiot? And when Awen constantly depends on you to be her ... pillar, I suppose?”

I blinked. I didn’t know exactly where she was going with all that. “Yes?”

She huffed, and this time it was a very plain, very frustrated huff. “You’re a ... you’re a pain to deal with sometimes, Broccoli Bunch,” she said. “Most people wouldn’t weather all the stuff you’ve been through as well as you have.”

“Thanks!” I said.

“No,” Amaryllis said. “It wasn’t a compliment. Well, I do suppose you could take it as one. What I mean is ...” She paused, then rubbed a wing under her nose. “You know, I was not always as confident as I am now.”

I felt like she was trying to say something important without saying it, and in moments like that the best thing a good friend could do was listen. Still, I continued working on our lunch, not that it took much attention.

“When I was younger I was the most timid of my sisters. Clementine can be incredible, but she casts a long shadow, and Rosaline has always been Rosaline. Loud and confident and always getting herself into trouble, then flying out of it with a wink and a smile. So ... I was the timid one. That changed as I got a little older, as I tired of my role in the family and started to ...” She squirmed. “... dream. As I started to dream of a future where I was my own harpy. School helped—it gave me an environment out of my sisters’ shadows. It gave me harpies from other clans to bicker and fight with, and it allowed me to spread my wings a little. I don’t remember any instantaneous change, no stark turning point ... but bit by bit, I must have been changing. Little victories, building on each other, until without quite realizing it, I’d become more ... me. I left the family, took a class that I appreciated more, and set off for adventure.”

“That’s when we met?”

She nodded. “Yes. That was an experience.”

“A good one,” I replied.

She huffed, a very ambivalent, sarcastic huff. “Let’s go with that. My point with that rather trite story is to say that I understand if you’re having difficulty acting as confident as you have been.”

“Uh,” I said. I don’t think I had any trouble being confident or anything. Still, Amaryllis seemed worried, which was weird. There wasn’t anything to worry about. Sure, the last dungeon had been tough, and we were all tired by the end, but we had won, hadn’t we? “Did you want me to tell a story about when I was young too? To make us even.”

“My goal wasn’t to make us even or anything.”

“You once said that you could tell someone something private and then expect them to return the favor. Remember? You called it reciprocation.”

Amaryllis blinked. “You remember that?”

“Of course I do,” I said. “Um, well, I remember you telling it to me. The details are a bit vague now. It was a while ago.”

The floor creaked, and when I looked over, it was to find Awen stepping in. She had her hands folded over her tummy and was looking bashful. “Awa, sorry, I kind of ... kind of had my room’s door open and I, ah, might have ... overheard. A little.”

“That’s okay,” I said.

Amaryllis harrumphed. “I suppose.”

“Do you need help? Or I could go, if you two are having a, ah, moment,” Awen offered.

I glanced at Amaryllis. Were we having a moment? Weren’t we always having moments?

“We weren’t,” Amaryllis said. “Now come over here with those stupid human hands of yours and chop these. This knife is not made for a proper taloned hand. I’m going to develop a crick in my wrist at this rate.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize you were having a hard time. I thought you were just really bad.”

Amaryllis’s feathers poofed with indignation. “Not just dumb, but rude too,” she said. “Now get on with the story. I’m going to fill the pot with water.”

“About a quarter full,” I said. “As for stories ... I don’t know what to tell? My life was very boring, you know?”

“I doubt that,” Amaryllis said.

“I can tell one,” Awen said. “While you think, if you want.”

“I’d love that!” I cheered.

Awen smiled as she took her place at the table alongside me and started working. “I don’t have very interesting stories. Uncle Abraham’s visits were always the most exciting thing. Otherwise I’d spend the day with lessons or practicing. I liked playing with different instruments—it was one of the only parts of being a lady that was nice. Not that I could just play anything.”

“Why not?”

“Some instruments aren’t ladylike.” Awen said. “A flute is, a piano is, but a lute or a banjo is not. They leave you with unseemly calluses, and things like a cello require that the lady put herself in a compromising position to play.”

“Huh? That’s stupid.”

Awen giggled. “Yes, a little,” she agreed. “But that’s how it is. When I became a mechanic, my parents were very disappointed, but I was a little too sickly to bring to a dungeon to change my class. All the good, ladylike classes are in dungeons that are somewhat dangerous now, most of them

near the capital, and, well, whenever I heard them talking of moving me over, I'd play sick."

Amaryllis snorted. "Well done, there."

Awen looked down. "Ah, thanks. I always wanted to practice my mechanical skills, but it's hard to do that when you're not allowed. So I tended to be very clumsy. I'd break things, then put them back together. Some of the maids and servants were very helpful! They'd bring me tools and sometimes give me things that needed to be fixed. Like mechanical clocks and some devices in the kitchens. That's why I was able to keep up a little, and I was always a bit better the next time Uncle Abraham would come around."

I placed my knife on the table, stepped toward Awen, and engulfed her in a big, rib-creaking hug.

"Awa?"

"You can do as much mechanical stuff as you want when you're with us. Or none. Or if you get some other hobby, you can do that as much as you want, all right?"

Awen laughed and returned the hug with a good squeeze. "You're being silly, Broc. I know all that."

"Oh," I said as I loosened the hug. "Well good." I nodded. "My turn?"

"Certainly," Amaryllis said. "Do we put any spices in this?"

"No, but put it on the stove. We need to set it to a boil so the veggies get mushy. Here, let's put the rest in too."

While the veggies boiled, I prepared a salad for the side. Nothing much. Tiny tomatoes, some leafy greens, a few slices of carrot, and some oil that I mixed with a few spices and herbs we had drying on a rack in the little pantry.

"I think ... so, you girls know I like adventure, right?"

"We noticed," Amaryllis said. She was sitting up on a bench built into the wall under one of the portholes, a bird enjoying the sun.

"Right, well I wasn't always a huge fantasy fan. When I was really young, my parents moved often. I don't really remember all the places I've lived in. Sometimes we were only in a town for half a year, other times it was longer."

“Were your parents traders?” Awen asked. “We had a lot of people like that in Greenshade.”

“Nah, my dad couldn’t keep a job, nor could my mom, and they both liked moving a lot. We lived in mobile homes and apartments and all sorts of places. We’d change provinces every so often too. Anyway, when I was ... Ah, I think I was in seventh grade? So I must have been about fourteen, or maybe I was still thirteen? Around that age.”

“A teenager, barely a juvenile, but not quite,” Amaryllis said. “Old enough to lay eggs.”

“Uh,” I said. I shook my head. “Something like that. So, I’d just moved to this new school. First year of secondary school, so all the students were new, too, even though I’d come in halfway into the year. It wasn’t so bad. At least, I’d hoped.”

“Did you make lots of friends?” Awen asked.

“Nope. Just one. It was this boy who didn’t have any friends. He had a stutter and wasn’t good at sports and stuff. We were in the same classes, and he always sat by the front, which is where I like to sit. We talked a bit and became buddies.”

“Your first friend?” Amaryllis asked.

“One of them. He really, really liked books. Fantasy stories, with magic and wizards and all sorts of cool stuff. So I read those, too, and we always had something to talk about.” I felt a little sad as I set the salad aside. “We should start on the fish. Awen, can you mash the veggies for me?”

“Ah, sure.”

I got a pan out and oiled it, then fetched the fish from a rune-powered fridge. “Anyway, we moved again that summer. Never saw him again. But I still remember some of those stories. They kept me company for a long time. I guess I learned that from him.”

I hummed as the fish fizzled on the snapping and crackling oil.

“Is ... that the whole story?” Amaryllis asked.

“I guess so?”

Amaryllis stood up and walked right up next to me. “I’m going to hug you now. Don’t go thinking anything about it. This is your one hug this week, so enjoy it.”

“Huh?”

But then my protests were drowned in a fluffy, feathery hug.

• Chapter Three •

Dine Hard

Dig in!” I cheered.

Most of the crew, minus Steve and Oda, were spread out around the dining room table with their share of supper before them. We didn’t do anything special before eating, but somehow—without ever actually talking about it—we tended to wait until everyone had food on their plate first.

There were some nice noises of agreement from the others as they tucked in. The porridge seemed like a good place to start, and some were already cutting into their slices of grilled fish. “I need to thank Amaryllis and Awen—they helped a lot,” I said.

Everyone but the two girls slowed down and hesitated to continue eating.

“Aww, don’t be like that,” I said. “They’re getting better. I bet they might even get a cooking skill one of these days.”

“Oh, please, no,” Amaryllis said. “That would be such a waste of a general skill slot.”

“Really? I wouldn’t mind it too much,” I said. “It’s not something too awesome, but it’s very practical. I still have a couple of general skill slots to fill, you know?”

“I do have some unused slots,” Amaryllis allowed as she picked at her fish. There were still bones in it, which made it tricky to eat. “I’m not sure if I should focus on more exploration-related skills, or some that would be more practical in the day-to-day.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Most people,” Bastion replied, “will have to make a choice between obtaining skills to help them do the things they do every day or skills that assist them with their work. Something like Sword Fighting Proficiency is a wonderful skill for a paladin like myself, but it would be wasted on a farmer. Likewise, I wouldn’t have much use for a Planting skill. But in both cases we’re assuming that a person is heavily specialized. If you’re not, then it makes sense to invest in skills that make your everyday life easier.”

“It’s a trade off, then,” I said.

Bastion nodded. “That’s it. The best people in their field are almost always those who have invested everything into being the best. Every class and every skill. They will be impressively good at the one thing they focused on, whatever that may be.”

I nodded along while I considered that. “I don’t know what I want to be,” I said. “I know what I want, but I’m not sure if I need any classes or anything to do that, just hard work.”

“I know that your answer is going to be some sickeningly sweet, idiotic tripe, but I find myself compelled to ask anyway,” Amaryllis said. “What’s your goal?”

“To make the best friends, and to make sure they’re as happy as can be.”

Amaryllis rolled her eyes and Awen giggled. A few others at the table laughed, but I didn’t mind. It was a good laugh.

“I recall you mentioning wanting to be strong,” Amaryllis said.

“That too,” I agreed. “But I don’t need to be crazy strong, just tough enough that people will hesitate to hurt my friends.”

Bastion hummed, then gestured to me with his fork. “Perhaps focus on skills that will help your role as a captain, then. Leadership skills do help in a tight spot, and they’d assist you in your current role as captain, obviously.”

“Awa, maybe you should just accept the skill you get naturally? That’s what Uncle does. He says that if you’re getting skills because you’re doing something you like, then those skills are the ones the World thinks you’ll enjoy best.”

“Huh. I guess that makes sense. It also means I don’t need to worry about it!”

“Moron,” Amaryllis said.

We continued eating, our constant yammering slowing us down. At the far end of the table, Howard and Clive were having an in-depth discussion about, of all things, fishing, and Sally and Joe were talking to Gordon about different ports the harpy had visited.

I enjoyed the babble of conversation. It made the *Beaver* sound like a wonderfully happy place. Orange strutted down, walking on air as only a spirit cat could, and sat herself on Amaryllis’s lap, purring up a storm.

“I suspect that we ought to plan our next steps,” Bastion said as he set his fork down. He always ate quickly, as if his meal might slip away at a moment’s notice.

“Do you mean the next part of the trip, or the next adventure?” I asked.

“I mean the Insmouth dungeon,” Bastion said. Howard looked over at that, and Bastion caught his eye. “Can you tell us more about it?”

Howard nodded before pulling a pipe from his old coat. Clive already had his pipe out and was carefully pushing some stuff in it from a little tin jar on the table. “Our dungeon’s fairly old, but it was never one to grow fast. Three floors for the longest time. Four now. Not too many monsters, but plenty of tricks.”

“I see,” Bastion said. “What are the floors like?”

“Hmm,” Howard paused as he lit his pipe and took a pull while flicking out a match. It left the room smelling kind of smoky and fruity. Not the worst smell, but not the best. I let my Cleaning aura expand to remove the smell. “The floors are all connected by this long, narrow cave. You can skip a floor, but it’s mighty dangerous.”

“Monster types?” Amaryllis asked.

“Large fishlike creatures, things with tentacles, and the mist. You can’t really fight the last.” He puffed a perfect ring into the air. “Your worst enemy is yourself and your friends. The dungeon will always try to challenge your bonds.”

“That’s awful,” I said.

“How many do you usually go in with?” Bastion asked.

“Just myself and the person needing the class,” Howard said. He pulled his pipe out and traced a circle in the air with the mouthpiece. “More’s fine if

they trust each other, but the more folk go down, the harder it gets, unless you *really* trust each other. Still, more people often means moving along faster too. So it's a balancing act, in the grand scheme of things."

"We're not going down with just one of us," I said. "That's way too dangerous."

"Up to you folk," Howard said.

"Right. So the plan's pretty simple, I guess. We arrive in town, anchor the *Beaver*, then head over to the dungeon right away. The longer we wait, the worse it'll be. We don't want to go too fast, because that's dangerous, so we want to start as soon as we can. Maybe we bring some supplies to last a day or so."

"Only takes an afternoon to clear it," Howard said.

"It might take longer now," I said. "We don't know that yet, so it's best to overprepare."

There were nods all around.

"I think it'll be ... um, I need to be there for the Cleaning magic. Amaryllis should be there to lightning things, Awen to mechanic things, and Bastion because he's fun. And Howard, of course, to act as a guide and local expert." I nodded, very much pleased with my leadership abilities when it came to picking out a good team.

"You idiot, you just want us to be there because you think this is some big adventure," Amaryllis said.

"Isn't it?"

Awen nodded. "It is."

"Humph," Amaryllis humphed. "Well, whatever. As long as we get this over with. We're a few days behind. We were supposed to arrive in Sylphfree the day after tomorrow. A quick glance at any map will reveal that we're some three days away now, if we fly straight over right away."

"Ah, but we were going to be a week early, right?"

"Yes, and that's not worth anything if we arrive a week late," Amaryllis snapped.

I shrugged. "All right. So, who wants to help me with the dishes?"

The room cleared pretty quickly after that, only Awen staying behind to help me pick up. I, of course, cheated with Cleaning magic, because doing

the dishes wasn't actually fun at all unless you were doing them with someone.

"Ah, I think I should run back to do some work," Awen said. "My crossbow needs some maintenance. I had some ideas for it, but we won't have time for that before we arrive in Insmouth."

"Anything I can help with?"

Awen shook her head. "No, it's fine. I might look around town to buy some supplies. We have some here, but I'd feel safer with more, in case the *Beaver* needs repairs." She blinked, then looked my way. "Is there anything you need, Broc? I can tinker now. Sometimes I just don't know what to make, though."

"Hmm," I said. I didn't want to say "Nothing." That wouldn't be too nice, not when Awen seemed so eager to actually put her skills to some use. But I didn't actually need too much, not for adventuring. Maybe for my role as captain? "Oh! I need a cool telescope."

"A telescope? Like, to see things?"

"Yup. All good captains have one. It's a staple, right up there with a cool pet. Usually, that's a parrot or a monkey, but I think Orange fits there."

The cat in question glanced my way from her spot on my seat at the head of the table. I think she was just there because it was warm.

Once everything was tucked away, Awen said she'd be heading to her workshop, so I gave her a quick hug—for skill practice and because hugs—then I checked my collection of teas before picking a couple and setting them aside. Then it was back onto deck.

I jumped to, helping the others when I saw that Clive was pulling the *Beaver* around a rather tight turn. It only took a glance toward Insmouth to the north to see why. We hadn't overshot the village, exactly, but it was a near thing.

Sails snapped, the propeller hissed, and the engine rumbled below deck while the Scallywags and the harpies and I ran around getting everything in order to aim back toward the town. Soon enough, we were stowing the sails, slowing down as best we could to coast in over the settlement.

It was past midday, and out in the bay little fishing boats were bobbing along, a few of them already heading back into the docks with their day's

catch. The people of Insmouth must have been expecting to see the *Beaver*, because we barely warranted more than a glance as we came to a stop over a nearby clearing and dropped anchor.

The airship tugged at the anchor chain and bobbed about until it settled down. The engines idled and Clive ordered the crew to run a quick inspection of the lines and sails.

“An inspection?” I asked.

“Aye,” the old harpy said. “If we’re going to be sitting here for the evening, might as well ensure that everything’s in working order. Can’t do that well while we’re in full flight.”

“Right,” I said. One of these days I’d get the hang of it. For now, though, I had more pressing things to look forward to.

My friends came up, one at a time, and soon all of us were gathered on deck, backpacks on and equipment ready for another adventure. It was time to do our part to save ... maybe not the world ... but at least this little corner of it!