

The Little Potato



Hob hadn't felt like himself since getting drafted into Her Majesty's Army. He was a farmer, not a fighter. His transfer into the Aeronauts Corps suited him better, but he just wished he hadn't had to get there by way of stepping on a land mine. Most men who get blown sky-high don't end up in the galley, though, so he was lucky.

Hob tightened the straps on his prosthetic potato peeler, substituting it for the cloth-wrapped claw he usually used. His crewmates had made many such devices aboard the slow-moving airship "HMA Bartholomew."



They were delivering supplies to the front lines. "An army flew on its stomach," so some say. Hob himself had come from those front lines not too long ago. The purple heart on his uniform sleeve had only cost him an arm and a leg.

BY NICK TANTILLO

He carefully rotated the potato against the serrated edge, cutting away any green spots. "You need to keep your eyes peeled," he chuckled. The clean white flesh was gradually revealed, and the dirty bits rinsed away. It reminded him of the fall harvest festival back home. His mind conjured the feeling of scrunching toes in the loam as he dug out carrots, potatoes, and turnips. Now all he felt under his one remaining foot was the hole in his boot and the splintered boards beneath.



Humming an aero-shanty, Hob scuttled over to the larder and leaned on his single crutch. The men in the galley moved like clockwork, partly because

many of them were.

Sweeney the butcherbot sat idle in front of an enormous cutting board. Hob pulled the ornate brass



key from behind his ear and inserted it into the automaton's keyhole. The robot jolted into motion, steel flashing in the startup routine, oiled gears silently whirring from deep within.



Moving to the cool dark larder belowdecks, he tripped on something at the bottom of the steps, grabbing the nearest thing he could. The slab of meat hanging from a hook on the ceiling couldn't support him and tore free, falling with a thump and a whimper. The pages of his aeronaval cookbook-in-progress lay scattered.



“Stumbled over your own words, ye dummy. But what was that noise?”



As he heaved aside the shoulder of pork, he heard a gasp. A dirty little urchin boy choked to life, sputtering. From the look of the boy, Hob had gotten that slab off his chest just in time.





Tears were running down the boy's cheeks, revealing the pale skin beneath all the layers of soot and grime. Hob reached out with his peeler hand to comfort him, stopping just short as he remembered. The boy's eyes widened in alarm, but Hob awkwardly got to a standing position and offered him his good hand instead.

"The menu says harvest stew, and I could use a kitchen boy. A'course I should just throw a stowaway overboard. What say ye, little Spud?"

About a year later, the war ended and Hob returned to his farm. In the early morning sunshine, he walked to his fallow field and took off his boot, enjoying the feel of the cold earth between his toes. Spud put a hand on Hob's shoulder, removing his shoes as well.

"Hob and Son, Purveyors," had already been painted on the side of his



steam wagon, a parting gift from the military. Sweeney clanked along happily in the back, quartering potatoes for planting. For the first time in a long time, Hob felt complete.



“I’m mostly glad I didn’t thow ye overboard, Spud.” Hob tussled the boy’s hair. They were nearly the same height now.

“You might say you gave me the cold shoulder at first and I had to get a little something off my chest, eh?” Spud grinned.

“A boy after me own heart.” They walked off into the field, burying potato pieces with their toes. They had to prepare for the harvest festival, after all.

