

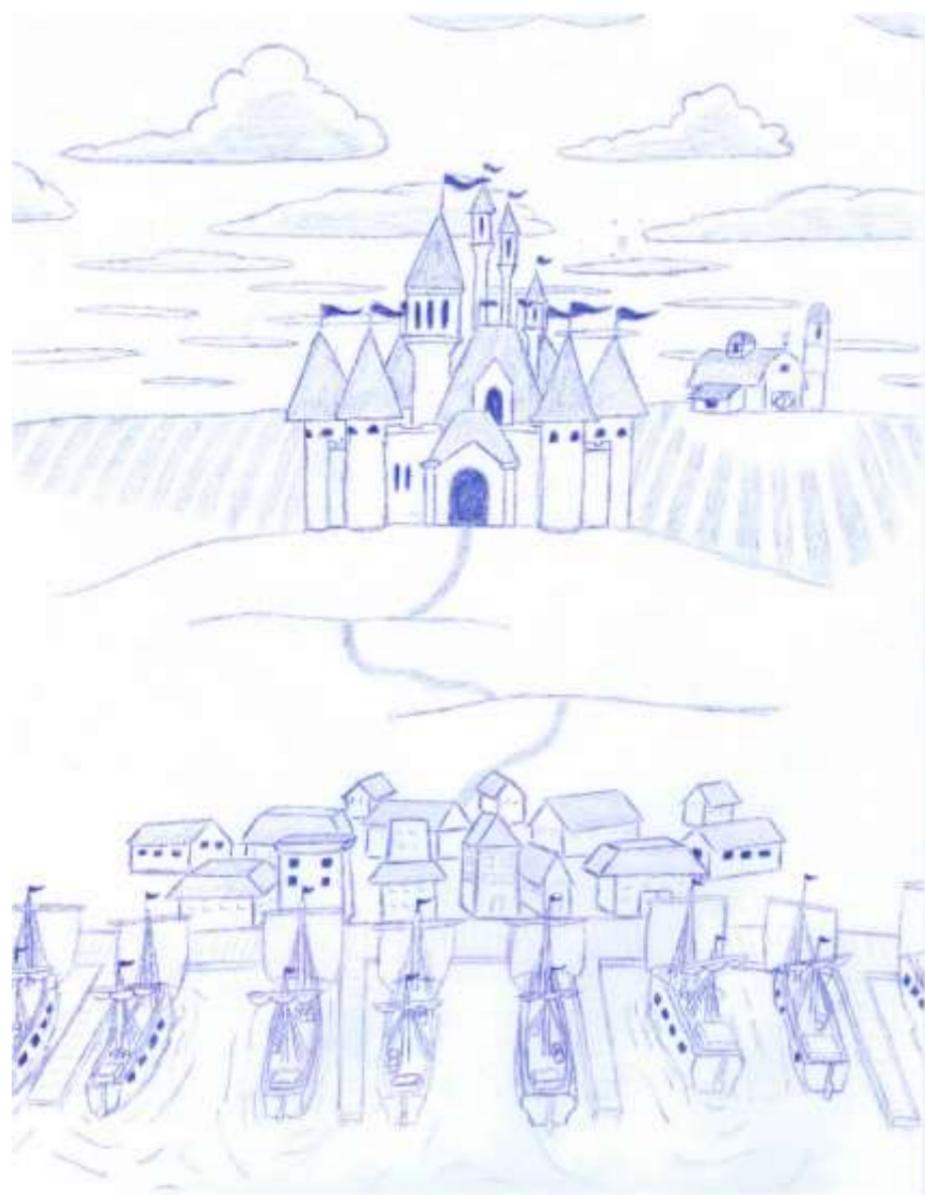
CHAPTER 1

In the faraway kingdom of Oro, high above the harbor stood a palace. Blue flags with tall red ships watched over the royal navy. One bright day in the grand banquet hall, King Manuel smiled at his son as he announced, “Leo, now that you’re ten, we will have your crowning ceremony. Soon you’ll take on your royal title as prince and begin your royal duties.”

Leo sulked as his younger sister, Nina, squealed in delight. “Do I get to dress up? Will Leo get to wear a crown? I can’t wait to wear my crown some day!”

“You can have my crown,” Leo barked.

Queen Elena scowled at her son while patting her daughter’s hand. “Of course, Dear! After all, a



crowning ceremony is a royal celebration. And Leo will also wear a special outfit.”

Nina bounced in her chair, “I want to wear a sparkly gold dress!”

“Gross,” Leo moaned. He didn’t want to be a prince, wear a special outfit or have royal duties. He stared at a plate piled high with his favorite breakfast food. Even the smell of bacon pie couldn’t wash away Leo’s misery.

Nina waved her arms above her head, she was so excited that her bracelet fell onto the floor. “My magic bracelet!”

Leo rolled his eyes, “It’s not magic, it’s just a dumb bracelet.”

“Mom!” Nina wailed as she hopped off her chair to get her bracelet.

“Leo, it is magic, it helps her sleep. Anything that helps Nina sleep at night is magic in my book,” the queen said.



After breakfast, Leo and his black lab, Shadow, climbed up to the highest tower. He threw open a tall

window. As far as he could see was his soon-to-be kingdom, a boring kingdom. Shortly he would reign over all the land: the farmer's fields, the cottages along the road to Silverdale, and even the harbor where the tall ships docked. All of his childhood playgrounds would soon be his to serve rather than his to enjoy.

He imagined his boring life to come. He didn't want to sit on the throne all day and listen to arguments. But what he dreaded most of all, was a life doomed to kissing the hands of visitors. Yuck! Leo stuck out his tongue. He would rather practice sword fighting with the crew of the royal navy. "Come on, Shadow. Let's go for a run to the harbor. That will cheer me up."

Shadow wagged his tail.

When Leo turned to leave, Nina was sitting at the top of the stairs. "What are you doing here?"

Nina twirled a lock of hair around her finger. "Just seeing what you're up to. That's all."

"Why are you always following me!?" Leo pushed past his sister and said, "Leave me alone, Ninny!" With Shadow at his heels, Leo rushed down the steps.

"Stop calling me Ninny!"



Outside the castle walls, Leo looked back at the flags high atop the tower. He imagined the ships on the flags taking him away on an adventure.

Leo and Shadow took off on their run. Soon they reached Silverdale. The townsfolk would recognize Leo, but he wasn't in the mood to greet anyone, so he cut through the alley beside the tavern.

At the end of the alley, something caught the sun's rays. Shadow ran ahead and picked up a spoon.

"No, Shadow," Leo scolded.

But his dog didn't listen. Shadow ran away and disappeared into the fields next to town. Leo wasn't worried. Shadow would return to the castle and bury his treasure like he did many times. Once, Leo found a silver bowl in his bed!

Leo slowly shuffled through the alley alone, not wanting to think about his crown or his royal duties. Since he was young, he'd dreamed of joining the royal navy and sailing away on adventures. But that was not to be.

When Leo turned toward the harbor, a hairy-tailed dragon sprite darted in front of him. The bright blue creature had a dragon's body with a hairy tail full of spikes and the face of an elf. Legend said that if someone grabbed a sprite by the tail, then that person will be granted a wish. *That's it! If I can catch it, he will grant my wish! Then I can have a final adventure before I have to wear that dumb crown.*

Leo chased the sprite down the stone street passing stores and merchants. The sprite was only half as tall as Leo, so its steps were shorter, but it was faster.

Leo wanted his wish so badly, he ran faster than he'd ever run to catch that tail. The sprite turned into a grassy field and Leo turned with him. He got within a step of the sprite and reached out to grasp the end of its tail, but fell flat on his face.

The sprite turned and laughed, "Thought ye'd get my tail, did ye? Not today, lad, not today." He tucked his head behind his back, like a bird cleaning himself.

The sprite must have an itch. This was Leo's opportunity. He jumped to his feet, surprising the sprite and chased him, this time getting closer than ever. He reached out to grab the tail, knowing the pain

to come. Spikes were hidden by all that blue hair, making it nearly impossible to grab. But grab Leo did and screamed in pain.

The sprite surrendered and laid down with his yellow belly showing. “You surprise me, lad, didn’t think ye had it in ye. Now what can I get ye for?”

Leo thought carefully about how to word his wish. He’d heard of people who asked for a ton of gold, and then they were buried by it. He didn’t want to make that mistake. “I wish for an exciting journey. Before I get my crown. I want to go on an adventure.” With his hands still stinging, he threw in, “With my hands healed!”

The sprite considered the request. “Let me be. I need to stand for this wish.”

Leo let go of his tail and the sprite jumped to his feet and waved his arms as if he was the conductor of a band.

Leo was skeptical. He wasn’t sure he would actually get his wish from this little guy.

“The journey of a lifetime is what ye seek. Careful what ye wish for, this could be bleak. Adventure could

be merry or could be scary when you're knocked off your feet."

Leo frowned. He didn't believe the sprite was doing anything to grant his wish. *This sprite makes no sense, he's not magical!*

"Your wish be granted."

Leo felt no different. "Well?"

"Well what, lad?"

"I'm still here. I haven't been sent on my exciting journey." Leo's shoulders drooped. He had heard of stories of people getting their wishes from sprites, but now he knew it was all hooey.

The sprite ran away and yelled over his shoulder, "Oh ye will. Ye will, so be on yer way."

Leo felt cheated and on top of that his hands stung. He rubbed them against his coat, while he continued on his journey to the harbor. Maybe some of the men of the royal navy had time to spar with him.



When Leo arrived, the crew of the tallest ship, The Wayward Crow's Nest, was busy loading boxes. He loved to travel with the crew. He would miss it when

he became a prince. As Leo boarded the ship, the captain was reading a list.

“How are you, young prince?” asked Captain Cruz.

“You heard the news of my crowning ceremony?” Leo sulked.

“Why so glum?” he rested his hand on Leo’s shoulder.

“Would you want to sit on a throne and listen to Farmer Jose and Farmer Winnie argue over whose cow is allowed to graze on what land? Or even worse, attend a royal ball?”

The captain had a large grin. He removed his hat and sat on a barrel. “Come sit, I think we should have a talk.”

Leo did as he was told and sat on a crate next to the captain.

“Leo, you are right. The prince has many royal duties that may be a bit...boring. And some may even be yucky. But for the most part, being royal is about serving your people.”

Leo hunched over. He'd heard this speech many times before by the king. He didn't buy it then, and he wasn't buying it now.

"Look at your father. He is a kind and fair ruler. And the peace that his kingdom enjoys is due to your father treating his people in a just manner."

Yeah, yeah.

"You know, there are other kingdoms far from here that do not have order among the people." The captain glanced toward the sea. "They are constantly at war. Have you heard of the battles caused by Malova?"

"Yeah, but that has nothing to do with us or me becoming a prince," Leo said.

"It most certainly does!" the captain said.

"How?" Leo looked up.

The captain laid a hand on Leo's shoulder. "You've learned from your father how to rule and keep this kingdom peaceful. And one day he'll need you to take over for him. To continue the reign of harmony among the people. Only you can do that. And that's a big job. The most important one in this kingdom."

Leo jumped up in protest. "I'd rather be in the royal navy. And sail away with your crew. Have

awesome adventures. See places I've never seen. I love sword fighting with them. That's one of my favorite things to do."

"Well, you just may get your wish one day. When you're a man, you may serve in the royal navy. But I can assure you; it's no fun to watch your crew be hurt in battle."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Leo said.

"But being a prince, now that does have some advantages."

"Like what?" Leo couldn't understand why everyone thought being a prince was so great.

"For one, some day you may appreciate some of those hands you'll be kissing."

"Gross!" Leo gagged as if he might throw up.

The captain chuckled. "And I have never seen a finer sword than that of a prince."

That got Leo excited. He knew that he would be presented his royal sword at his crowning ceremony. "True, and that's the only thing I look forward to."

The captain stood and placed his hat back on his head. "Yes, well, I need to get back to this cargo. We sail tonight and we have a lot to load."

“Need some help?” *May as well be useful.*

“Sure, there’s much work ahead of us. Take this last sack of flour to the cargo deck.”

Work was good for taking Leo’s mind off his troubles. He grabbed the sack and carried it down to the cargo deck. He swung it on top of the pile of flour sacks.

As the sack clumped, something squeaked behind a stack of crates. When Leo searched behind the crates, nothing was there. *Probably just a mouse.* A small but heavy crate that was stacked too high tumbled onto Leo’s head. He fell to the ground and was knocked out!

