

# Loop World: Episode 1

Down on their luck and lost in the fog, their ship cut through the idle mists towards a last chance at hope. The pounding of the rain on deck had finally subsided by dawn, and the rising sun had conjured a thick fog under its rays. Caleb and Wooly squinted through that fog, trying to make out the route they had charted weeks ago. Geometric shapes of jagged rocky cliffs on either side of them taunted the increasingly fragile hull of the ship.

The *Badams* crept along the narrow alley of unfriendly stone daggers, guided under Caleb's assuring grip at the wheel. Whiskey stung his chapped lips as he swigged from his dwindling supply without taking his eye off the bow. The amber spirit's mellow burn did little to warm his cold fingers. The valley's wild alternation between the sweating humid mists and freezing rain had made for a miserably damp and uncomfortable few months.

Leaning rakishly behind them, an old cutlass slipped from its position against the helm railing and clattered on the wet wood of the deck's boards, giving their already tensed nerves a start. Today they would finally reach what promised to be an exit from this wet and grey hell.

The Captain who had once chartered them had plotted the original voyage, but they had since strayed from it hopelessly, after he passed months ago into death. Their trip had lengthened inexorably week by week as they gradually sank from the clouds and became mired in the grey cotton of the valley lows rather than soaring above. Eventually, they found a mountain peak above the fog, allowing them to plot a vague new path to follow blindly out of the valley.

Wooly replaced the cutlass of the now deceased Captain Tamerell back to its position. He ducked below into the small bay next to the helm that supported the engine. The arcane bolt fired with an exhausted and dull thump inside its cylinder, sparking purple arcs of untamed magic which threatened to leap out of the engine and make their day a terrible one.

Tapping at the dials in frustration and making sure that every valve and connector was secure, Wooly had done everything he could to brace the engine for what would be its final and most arduous trial. An engineer by trade, he had carefully seen to its every need at every hour, despite the mess made of his first expedition. It was by the little magic he possessed that he was able to power the engine himself and keep things floating along smoothly above the ground. Finally, there was nothing left to do but sip bitter black coffee from his personal travel mug and hope.

One of the dials' tiny arms scurried upwards into its yellow zone periodically, and the engine struggled to traverse over the increasingly roughening terrain. What little power the engine sputtered out was barely enough to push the ship along; conducted through the two, fold-out arcanium-steel legs at the bottom of the hull, which emitted an invisible foot-thick cushion above the stone laden grounds.

"She's struggling under the weight," Wooly remarked, tucking an errant strand of hair behind a pointed ear and furrowing his brow up towards Caleb, who leant buzzed against the *Badams'* wheel. Caleb removed his leather cowboy hat for a moment to let the rainwater slip off the brim and into his palm, to splash against his tired face. He shrugged at Wooly and the two of them turned back towards their third companion.

Brogo, merrily humming an old dreamcat hymn, adjusted the nob on the burner below his beloved bubbling pot as he worked under the canopy behind the helm. The final morsels of food left onboard had been carefully scraped together to concoct the specialty soup he had prided

himself for. As he noticed his companions gaze, he turned, itching absently at the ginger fur behind his ear. His fat jiggled into place a moment after his swift reaction, leaving his thick hide apron to swing into place as he did. He held up his paws in innocent denial.

“Can’t be me, must be Picklestock putting on extra pounds,” he excused. As if on cue, the small pet hedgehog popped out curiously from Brogo’s front pocket to survey surroundings before receding once more. Caleb and Wooly shook their heads, there was nothing to be done about it. The last of their supplies had emptied days ago and there was no ballast left to toss away.

“We’ll have to push through,” Caleb spoke out, his hungover cowboy drawl reduced to a croak of morning exhaustion, “just enough to get us over the ridge at the end of this pathway, hopefully that’ll be enough.”

“Today is the day to do or die,” Wooly spoke softly to the engine before standing up to his full height to rest his elbows and mug on the deck by the helm. *Or maybe ‘and die’*, he quietly added in his thoughts. Past the bow, they could only barely make out the vague shapes of the even narrower alleyway they would have to pass through before the ship would have to climb a steep slope up and out of the fog. They shared a few readying remarks. “This is it. Nearly out and free.”

“Everything strapped down back there? We’re sure to jostle things around some...” Caleb spoke over his shoulder.

“Everything is secure!” Brogo cheerfully replied.

Caleb adjusted his hat, taking a deep breath before gripping the wheel with both hands dramatically to point the bow at the last stretch of their journey. Unfortunately, he had adjusted the wheel slightly too late. The jagged and bouldery embrace greeted the *Badams* splinteringly, shaking their balance but not entirely stopping them. The starboard side ground against the cliff face with a rumble that made their teeth clench at the thought of the damage. Caleb’s shoulders tensed up in a shrug at the sound, shielding his face from Wooly, who’s annoyed gaze fixed and burrowed at the helmsman throughout the ordeal.

Behind them, Brogo’s voice rung out, “You’re spilling my soup!”

“Soup? Why are you making soup?” Wooly questioned.

Where did you find the ingredients, we’ve been starving!?” Caleb retorted.

“I’m using the last of your wine.” Brogo replied, his attention fixed on the soup which he gently stirred with the attention of a mother inspecting a child’s scrapped knee.

“What?” Caleb called out at the loss. He was ignored by Brogo, too busy whispering sweet nothings to the bubbling broth. Wooly turned to question the Catfolk chef but thought better of it. It might have been a little too hypocritical given that he had just been doing the same to the engine moments ago.

The ship’s bow crashed once more, this time against what seemed to be a stack of stones in the center of the pathway before the slope upwards. Wooly sharply inhaled and began formulating insults to spit at Caleb but sharply exhaled and downed the last of his coffee instead. Brogo had slipped nearly overboard at the sudden jolt, managing barely to save most of the soup which nearly sloshed overboard as well. Slumped over the railing, he held on to the pot when a small bag slipped from its unseen place on a shelf and smacked him in the back of the head.

Brogo retrieved the small baggie from where it had nestled amid the folds of his ginger fur-covered backfat. Examination revealed it to be filled with a couple handfuls of what seemed to

be greenish beans. Further examination via a minor detection spell revealed the beans to possess some natural magical property. He stuffed them beneath his apron, brimming with ideas as to magic bean-based dishes.

“Hold on!” Caleb called out. Everyone hastened to grab a hold of something: Caleb to the wheel, Wooly to the railing and Brogo to his pot. The bow began to rise ahead of them as the arcane nodes began crawling up the slope. The engine sputtered in protest of its task but continued to propel them forward. The deck tilted upwards until it assumed a forty-five-degree angle, causing their boots to lose traction and begin to slip on the rain-soaked boards of the deck.

Halfway up the slope now, they powered on. Wooly’s growing migraine throbbed harder as the firing interval of the cylinder grew wider with each spark. The angle grew steeper, tilting them further. Wooly nearly spilled out of the bucket of the engine bay, barely managing to grab to interior handles in time, as the ship climbed over a ridge of boulders. Brogo, deftly guarded the now enclosed pot, taking steps onto the creaking lower cabinet doors and standing at an uncanny angle in the kitchen under the canopy.

Caleb’s boots finally gave way and he dangled by his grip on the wheel, turning it ever so slightly portside, causing the *Badams* to falter left and begin to slip. Their wide eyes caught the bow beginning to inch degrees to the left, away from the hallowed precipice. They had just begun to rise above the fog, with the open and free blue of the sky just visible to them for the first time in ages. The engine, however, was slowing to its dying embers.

*Not like this*, Wooly thought to himself. He reached out and flipped the reserve lever, giving a final kick of power to the engine which roared triumphantly back to life. The *Badams* recovered momentarily, just enough for Caleb to regain his footing and redirect it towards the ridge. They couldn’t help but grin and bear victorious smiles as they finally rose wholly above the fog to feel the rays of sun once more. The ship climbed the final leg of the journey, its bow tipping forward and leveling out, revealing the vista ahead.

Before them, the downward slopes opened out to the land beyond the valley. A green forest ahead which had just begun to yellow. A beautiful and wide sapphire river bordered the trees, of which the very sight quenched the thirst of their souls to escape the grey pallet. Rolling hills of green stretched out to the horizon, speaking freedom to the heart under the open blue summer sky. Brogo and Caleb grinned and sighed relief at the sight of freedom. Wooly turned to take in the Western view. Beyond the forests, bordered by the wide river, a cheerful town churned out homely smokestacks. The first sight of civilization in half a year. But it was not the town which held Wooly’s attention, rather it was the far away hollow circle in the sky which hung above the Western horizon like a new ring-shaped celestial object.

Before he could point it out to his companions however, the engine chose that moment to finally die into a deafening silence. As it did, only the sound of the slight summer breeze sounded as it flapped against the *Badams’* canopy. The propelling force had given out, leaving the ship at a balanced wobble on the edge between two steep slopes.

“Nobody move!” Caleb shouted.

“Brogo!” Wooly called out, turning slowly to take account of their walking counterweight. Brogo had comically frozen in place, trying not to budge a whisker.

Caleb turned towards Brogo. Behind them, over the stern, the valley of the grey fogs stretched out behind them, with the wrecked ruins of the far away tower of the wizard Arsanus remaining stalwart above the grey. A shadow swept distantly through the fog. “You need to nudge the ship forward--” he began to suggest, interrupted by a hair-raising predatory avian screech.

Brogo acquiesced rather hastily, bolting forward with the enclosed pot between his paws. With each step thudding against the deck, the *Badams* began to tilt forward down the steep slope and slip down. Wooly was winded, thrown forward against the helm railing. Brogo had leapt forward and grasped the jibbon with his entire bulbous self, throwing the ship forward drastically.

Caleb stood heroically however, determined to keep his nerve in this time of stress; he gripped the wheel to guide the *Badams* as it dove down the slope, speeding along on its arcane nodes. The arcanium legs snapped suddenly, sheared off by boulders as the ship took air momentarily before crashing through a mountainside roadway. A couple of shocked dwarves waved angry fists at them from a wagon. A miniature avalanche crashed behind them, destroying the mountain pass, and causing the dwarves to flee their wagon which was rapidly crushed by boulders.

The hull smacked into the grassy hills below the pathway as it sledged down the green, crushing foliage, small trees, and unfortunate critters in its path. Ahead of them, through gritted teeth and white knuckles, Caleb could barely make out a peaceful glade through which ran a forest creek, but it was on the other side of some rather stately looking cedars. Instead, he opted to stop before the glade, reaching to pull at the brake lever.

A loud cracking sounded. "You've gotta be kidding me," Caleb muttered under his breath and swore.

"What was that?" Wooly peeked out of the engine bucket in which he had been bracing, greeted by the sight of a nervous Caleb with a broken brake lever in hand. He uttered a high-pitched sound in horror. "What've you done to my ship?"

Caleb adjusted his hat, which was endeavouring to leave his head and join the wind, hampered only by a leather cord. He grimaced, "Frankly, your ship is doing this to us!"

"Blamin' Bessie for your own mistakes!?" Wooly retorted, always quick to call out incompetency even where there was only bad luck.

"Blamin' her for breakin' down on us when we're doing this!" Caleb gripped the wheel once more to aim the bow with determination towards the thinnest arrangement of trees.

"Be careful! You're spilling the soup!" Called Brogo.

"Why are you still on about that!?" Caleb replied in exasperated annoyance.

"It takes a long time!" Brogo excused; his voice nearly lost in the clangor of the hillside destruction.

"That is not an appropriate answer!" Caleb retorted against the wind. He braced the wheel, hoping to the gods that they would survive as he turned the wheel finally to angle the ship at a gap between some solid looking tree trunks. The ensuing catastrophic collision mangled the hull, crashing amidst the trees raucously and shattering the deck. What remained of the *Badams* slid through the dirt, out into the open glade before collapsing into a heaped wreckage just before the banks of the creek.

As the dust settled in silence, Caleb's shaking hands still death-gripped the wheel. Wooly emerged from the engine compartment which had been ripped open, to survey their surroundings. Caleb swigged the last of a damaged wineskin as he nursed his bruises before handing it to Wooly to do the same. The creek babbled quietly. Not a single animal sounded in the vicinity, likely having had their afternoons ruined by the sudden apparition of the wooden behemoth. Brogo finally slipped off the jibbon and dropped to the ground, still clutching the pot, surprisingly having saved most of the soup within.