

Episode 1: Calamity Comes to Valley

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From set *Bloomburrow*

01. 07. 2024

Helga

Helga stared at the midmorning sunlight glinting on the rippling surface of the water, its patterns and portents as inscrutable as its darker depths. Cattails and long grasses swayed above her, and a bright dragonfly chased a cloud of gnats. Warm muck and growing things scented the air, comforting her uneasy heart. The pencil she gripped seemed to move of its own accord as her other hand balanced her leaf-bound journal on her lap.



Art by: Andrea Piparo

She'd come to the shore seeking clarity, quiet, and a brief escape from the worries that plagued her. From this angle, she couldn't see her own reflection, familiar and boring: one smallish frogfolk, green skin, amber eyes, and a perpetual nervous smile. Nothing special, now or ever.

Unless being especially useless could be considered remarkable.

Something shifted in the pond, or shimmered above it in a haze of heat. Helga squinted, leaning forward, wondering if she was about to have another vision—

A long-eared shadow fell over her from behind, and a hand touched her shoulder. With a yelp, Helga leaped into the air, high enough to bump her head on a cattail spike before landing gracelessly in a heap of long legs.

“Steady on, Helga, my girl,” said Nerys, the rabbitfolk’s nose twitching with humor or irritation. “There’s no call for dramatics.”

“Sorry,” Helga said, collecting her dropped journal. “You startled me is all.”

“And I wouldn’t be doing that if you were about something useful,” Nerys retorted, “instead of fishing for visions. Are your village chores finished?”

Helga winced. “Not exactly. I was in the still-room, tending the fire for a batch of witch hazel infusion, but ...”

“But?”

“But I didn’t. Tend it. Euan said the medicine was ruined, and not to darken his doorstep again until his temper cooled like the fire.” He’d used more colorful language, but Helga wasn’t about to repeat it.

“That’s just like you.” Nerys tipped her leaf-brimmed hat back so she could pin Helga with a red-eyed glare. “Your grandparents coddled you, bless their memories, but you can’t while away your life doodling.”

The reminder of her loss cut Helga more sharply than what Nerys had said, but the rabbitfolk wasn’t finished delivering her scold.

“And get your head out of yon scrying pool,” Nerys added with a jab of her paw. “You need to live in the here and now instead of trying to see what the future holds. None of that ever did anyone a lick of good.”

“Sometimes seeing possible futures can help folk make better choices in the present,” Helga said, her smile wavering.

“Be that as it may,” Nerys replied, “I’ve no time for philosophy when there are crops to harvest. I hope your future includes more work and less cloud spying.” With a flick of her fluffy tail, Nerys left Helga to her interrupted sketching.

Helga sighed. Nerys was only saying what so many folk in Pondside were thinking. In all her seasons living in the small village, Helga still hadn’t found her place, her calling. She began to despair that she ever would.

Around her, others went through the work of their day. Rabbitfolk with muddied feet cut and tied long stems of watercress for loading into wheelbarrows bound for the communal stores. Otterfolk ran nets through the shallow waters offshore, catching minnows and dumping them into wooden barrels. A frogfolk father passed a cluster of crested irises, carrying a water-filled container of his precious tadpoles on his back. Everyone was busy, at peace—joking with friends, splashing each other to cool the sun’s heat, or diligently focused on their labors.

Helga struggled to focus on any chores long enough to finish them. The stillroom incident was only one in a long list of similar problems. Burnt carrot muffins, half-planted pea shoots, quilt pieces forever waiting to be sewn together ... If she was interested enough in her task, she could lose hours and forget her surroundings completely; sadly, few activities inspired that sort of devotion.

Even learning to weave magic had ended poorly. Perhaps if she could have spent another few seasons in Fountainport, completed her training with King Glarb—but no, best not to dwell. She carried enough shame about her inadequacies to last through all the remaining seasons of her life.

At least she'd always have her art. She'd kept her journal closed during her conversation with Nerys, not wanting the rabbitfolk to see whatever she'd drawn. Sometimes it was mere whorls and waves that couldn't even rightly be called patterns. Sometimes she drew what she saw, studying brightly clad birdfolk in flight or barefoot mousefolk stomping juice from freshly picked blueberries. Sometimes a vision took over her hands, and she was left with a mystery—or, as others claimed, the products of an overactive imagination.

Helga opened the book and idly flipped to the page she'd been working on. The picture made her skin tighten and her mouth dry to sticky discomfort.

One of the tomes in King Glarb's library in Fountainport contained lavish, colorful illustrations of Calamity Beasts—the fearsome heralds of nature's changes, both seasonal and chaotic. Helga had never seen one herself, though their handiwork was in evidence whenever a blackberry harvest withered in a sudden drought or a spring rain turned to battering hail.

What she'd drawn most closely resembled the Sun Hawk, though her rendering was crude compared to the king's tome. A crest at the top of its head angled backward like the dorsal fin of some fish. The hooked beak lay open as if in mid-cry, flanked by strange whiskery protrusions, the thick tongue forked at the end like nothing she'd ever seen. Instead of two wings, it had four, the usual primary feathers at the wingtip replaced with fingers and membranes like a batfolk's. The talons, at least, seemed typical, though imagining herself at their mercy was enough to give her nightmares while wide awake. Her penciled lines conveyed power, ferocity, the shading behind the creature suggesting a thunderous storm rather than a bright, blazing sky.

Despite the day's warmth, Helga shivered. This had to be a vision. She would never think to draw such a terrifying thing herself. She needed to show it to Iver, the village's frogfolk augur. Except ... perhaps because she'd never completed her magical training, he always dismissed her visions as mere dreams or fancies. Cries for attention, even, in the wake of her grandparents' passing.

This time would be different. It had to be. If she were having a true seeing of a Calamity Beast, her village could be in grave danger.

Helga stowed her journal in her pack and headed for Iver's house. His neighbor Annik, in the middle of sweeping her porch, said Iver had gone to pick up some clothing that a mousefolk in the farther fields was mending for him. Helga trekked onward, down the single main road of what passed for the village proper, which led the few travelers from Haymeadow in the south straight through toward Dewrim, Mintvale, and other points north. She walked past mousefolk covering the roof of a weathered wood home with water lily petals, past rabbitfolk digging up plump red radishes with brilliant green leaves, past a gathering of elders sipping mugwort tea beneath the shade of a cluster of leafy bee balm that would bloom when summer arrived. She considered stopping and requesting a drink from them but decided it would be best to finish her errand before she talked herself out of it.

Thankfully, Helga was saved the trouble of further fretting by the sight of Iver ambling in her direction, his broad lily-pad hat shading his eyes. She would show him the drawing, hear what he had to say, and go back to ... What? She'd figure something out. Her grandparents' home, now hers, no doubt wanted cleaning. Lunch would come soon enough, then dinner, an endless procession of meals and days stretching into the future.

Nerys was right: contemplating such things helped no one, least of all herself.

A clanging rang out, echoing across the fields. Helga turned toward the source of the noise: a mousefolk atop a watch tower, frantically banging the village's warning bell. But why? She turned, following the direction of their gaze toward the sky.

High above, a huge shadow soared and circled in eerie silence. The creature was enormous, its wingspan as broad as the branches of an oak tree. Deep blue and violet on its belly, breast, and wings transitioned to black-striped primaries and tail feathers. Turquoise magic suffused its beautiful, terrible form, lit up its eyes and beak within the hollow of its face, limned its deadly talons. In its wake, velvety night followed, cutting across the bright blue like scissors through a cloth to reveal star-flecked darkness beneath.

Maha. The Night Owl.



Art by: Alessandra Pisano

Without warning, it swooped in a flurry of wings, skimming the tops of the fields before rising again, trailing twilight. Around Helga, animalfolk squealed or croaked in alarm. Some dropped to the ground, huddled in on themselves, while others froze in place, hoping not to attract the Calamity Beast's attention. Others ran for cover to their nearby homes and burrows or to the shelter of any tall plants that might hide them.

Helga fled back down the dirt road, toward the pond, through alternating patches of day and night, sun and gloaming. The owl flanked her on the left, demolishing the mousefolk house with its half-finished roof, sending splinters of wood and shredded white flowers flying. She veered away, and someone crashed into her, recovering and darting past her. As more folk realized the airborne danger, the scattering of scared villagers became a frantic rush.

Another dive, another building erupted. The beast's movements were completely quiet, its passing marked only by the ensuing destruction and the chill wind of its wings. Helga's heart tried to leap out of her chest even as she forced herself not to follow suit, lest she be snatched from the air.

Sparks from a cook fire joined the shower of debris, and soon flames and smoke heightened the chaos and confusion. The owl's attacks herded Helga and the other animalfolk first one way, then another, until she was completely turned around and unsure of where she'd ended up. She found herself back in the fields, lost in a maze of cabbage heads, running full speed despite the pain in her chest and legs. The world became a bewildering mosaic made from shards of daylight amid the deepening gloom, as if time itself had shattered and couldn't be reformed.

The ground fell out from under her as Helga careened over the edge of a muddy embankment. Down she tumbled until she landed in Pond Creek, the thin stream that fed the larger pond beyond. She lay on her side in the soft muck for a dozen ragged heartbeats and heaving breaths, stunned and dizzy.

Slowly she rolled to her back. The sky had succumbed to total darkness, moonless and awash with unfamiliar stars. Even the warm scents of mid-morning gave way to the brisk aromas of quiescent flora. She gazed up as if she were a batfolk versed in the necessary skills to read the movements of celestial objects, to divine what she should do now.

Helga forced herself to sit, then crouch. The sounds of chaos and destruction were muted by distance, but they continued, nonetheless. She could follow the creek bed to the pond, hoping to find safety with other villagers in the depths of the water and wait until the Night Owl finished its rampage.

Or she could head in the opposite direction, toward the nearest village. Warn them of the Calamity Beast's attack, maybe even bring back help. Pondside would need to be dug out of the wreckage left behind, rebuilt, and the folk ... No, she wouldn't think of the worst things, the hard things that would need to be done after such a tragedy. Focus on the immediate problem, the next step, not the ones that would come later.

Her throat tightened. What would Nerys say, to hear Helga finally living in the present like this? Nothing, likely; just a twitch of her nose and a shake of her head.

Get on with it, Helga told herself. *Don't stand still and wait for life to happen like you always do. Move.*

Heartsick and bruised, Helga clutched the satchel containing her journal and limped along the creek-bed toward the far-off promise of sunshine.

Mabel

The mousey mischief makers were at it again.

Mabel stood outside the round door to her home, stirring a bowl of batter as she watched her precious, darling, stubbornly independent children perched on each other's shoulders, wobbling precariously. Rosalyn, the eldest and largest, formed the base, with Foggy on top of her and Pip on top of him. Feet slipped, tails coiled around faces and necks, and high-pitched squeaks of annoyance punctuated every fresh indignity they visited on each other.

They were piled in front of the parlor window, trying to hang the banner they had spent hours meticulously painting. It read, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY MABEL"—well, technically it read, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY MAM MABEL" with the word "MAM" crossed out. Their father Clem had kindly noted that Mabel wasn't everyone's mother, the same way he wasn't everyone's papa, and thus the other townsfolk did not have the privilege of addressing her by anything but her given name. He punctuated this gentle

correction with kisses for all, including his amused wife, who had her own privileges of the sort that led to three children and general contentment.

Truly, her birthday was a beautiful one so far. Sunny without being overwarm, a light breeze ruffling her brown fur, as pleasant as any in late spring had ever been in Goodhill. The daisies and yarrow bloomed in bonny white and yellow clusters overhead, the bees buzzed industriously between their cups of nectar, and—oh, no. Oliver, the mayor, trundled straight toward her. His long ears moved constantly as he tried to eavesdrop on every conversation he passed, and he paused to chat with any of her neighbors lingering outside their woven grass houses, tidying up for the party or taking their afternoon tea.

Mabel searched for Clem's plump gray form, but alas, her beloved must still be out trading for the elderberry jam he needed to finish a batch of his famous cookies. Sighing, she donned the armor of a smile and resigned herself to a battle of politely intrusive small talk and good-natured prying.

"Mabel!" Oliver called with a wave. He was short, as local rabbitfolk went, with cinnamon-brown fur and a quilted vest in bright greens and yellows. "Happiest of birthdays to you, my dear. You're looking pretty as a portrait."

She looked like a tired mother in a flour-coated, jam-stained apron. "Thank you, Oliver," Mabel replied. "You're too kind." In her mind, they crossed swords.

His gaze shifted to her mixing bowl. "And what delectable delectations have you and your brilliantly gifted baker of a husband prepared for your party this evening?"

If she kept talking long enough, perhaps he wouldn't get the chance to ambush her with whatever he really wanted. She had a feeling she knew what it was.

"This will be a strawberry cake," Mabel said brightly, one eye still on her children, who had dropped the banner and were attempting to retrieve it while still atop each other. "First strawberries of the season are ripe now, and you know one strawberry will feed half the town. Clem is making elderberry jam thumbprint cookies to go with the strawberry tarts and muffins and crumble, and we've already frosted the carrot cake. Brynn is bringing her acorn scones, Niall promised us a dandelion and turnip green salad, Vann's making his chamomile fizzy drink, and—"

"Such a feast it will be!" Oliver exclaimed. "And a lovely opportunity for so many to gather together in celebration."

A deft parry. Foggy put his foot in Rosalyn's ear, which she tolerated with a wince. Pip, alas, then poked the tip of his tail into Foggy's eye, earning him a shrieked scold. Mabel paused her stirring, which was just as well, because the cake would be dense and chewy if she kept at it much longer.

"You know, Mabel," Oliver said, leaning closer and speaking in his version of a whisper, which birdfolk in the clouds could hear. "Silver the bard said he plans to share his Order of the Holly Leaf tale, seeing as how it's a special favorite around here. And, naturally, since it's your birthday, given your antecedents. Perhaps this would be an appropriate occasion to bring out that old relic you have tucked away in your attic, as a historical demonstration, as it were?"

Mabel would do nothing of the sort. She prepared her own parry and riposte. "I couldn't possibly distract from Silver's performance like that. Poor fellow, imagine me interrupting a perfectly pleasant story to wave around a family heirloom?"

"You could, ahem, wait until he finished?" Oliver ventured, his ears widening and angling back slightly.

“But then all his efforts would fly right up into the trees, wouldn’t they? Instead of everyone complimenting him on his fine work, they’d be attending me, and that would be simply too rude, birthday or not.” Mabel shook her head as if regretful. “No, best to leave it in the attic where it belongs and let Silver have his due. Along with some strawberry cake, of course.” Dare she hope she’d disarmed him with that one?

“Your point is taken,” Oliver said, a foot thump signaling he hadn’t accepted defeat. “But have you considered that Silver himself might be interested in seeing the relic, hmm?”

Not disarmed at all; instead, he renewed his assault. Mabel’s mother Iris, in all the seasons she’d been guardian of the artifact, had never brought it out for her neighbors to ogle as if it were a new bonnet or belt. If she were still in town, Oliver wouldn’t have dared make his request at all, because Iris would have blistered his ears until he turned tail. Or her father Elis would have spun a refusal so eloquent, Oliver would hardly have known he’d been turned away until he was back in his burrow.

Alas, Mabel’s parents were on a much-deserved vacation in the northern country, and thus, Mabel was left to fend for herself. She missed them, not only because she was having to manage Oliver, but because it was her birthday, and it would be only the second time in her life that they were separated for the occasion. There would be other birthdays, she had told them, and it was true, but even so.

Oliver was preparing another volley of protests when the tiny tower of mouse-children began to sway precariously. Mabel shoved her mixing bowl at Oliver and leaped past him. With one paw, she slung Pip onto her shoulder, and with the other, she pressed Foggy to her chest. Rosalyn landed on her rump, tail curved up over her back. The banner sank to the ground in a pile of fabric, its visible letters now proudly proclaiming “HAP DAY BEL” to all and sundry.

“You dropped it again!” Foggy shouted, twisting in Mabel’s arm to glare up at his brother.

“You made me drop it!” Pip replied, clinging to Mabel’s left ear and half her face.

“Did not!”

“Did so!”

Rosalyn simply sighed, stood, and brushed dirt off the seat of her pants.

“What’s all this fuss about, then?” Clem asked, his own arms laden with provisions and eyes bright with amusement. He might have bussed Mabel’s cheek, but it was currently full of sullen child.

“Mam saved me!” Pip announced in his sweet, high voice. “Foggy made me drop the banner—”

“I did not!”

“—and then he almost made me fall—”

“I never did!”

“—but Mam caught us both and now we’re saved and she’s a hero!”

Mabel exchanged a look with Clem that said they were both suppressing laughter.

“She’s always been my hero,” Clem said loyally. “Now, which of you heroes-in-training is going to help me bake some cookies?”

The mention of cookies got their attention, but they hesitated. “We have to finish putting up the banner,” Foggy whined.

“Why don’t Rosalyn and I do that while you wash up?” Clem suggested. “Have to carry all of this inside first, mind. Oh, hello, Oliver, didn’t see you there. Can’t chat. Much to do before the festivities commence. Mabel?”

Rosalyn extracted the jar of elderberry jam from under Clem’s arm, while Foggy and Pip fought over who would carry the sugar and who the primrose petals. Clem kept the sack of acorn flour, which was too heavy for the children to manage. Oliver watched it all, utterly bemused until Mabel took her mixing bowl back from him.

“Don’t let us keep you,” Mabel said. “I’m sure you’ve more rounds to make, ensuring Goodhill’s in fine fettle as you do.”

“Yes, of course,” Oliver said, ears resuming their usual outward-facing posture. If he noticed she had dodged further questions about her family heirloom, he didn’t say anything of it. The fencing was over for now.

Mabel was about to close the door behind her when the sound of rapid footsteps and labored breathing approaching from the road made her hesitate. Jenefer, one of the local weaselfolk, raced up to Oliver and gestured back in the direction she’d come from.

“Oliver, you must see this,” Jenefer said. “Lowenna’s on lookout, she says ...” She sucked in a breath. “There’s a stranger in Pond Creek, and she don’t look well at all.”

Mabel propped her bowl of batter on the table in the front hall, then grabbed her sheathed rapier from the wall.

“Clem!” she called. “Trouble at the creek. Be back in a trice.”

“Stay safe!” Clem replied. “I’ll mind the littles.”

Oliver and Jenefer had a head start, but Mabel quickly caught up, jogging past white-petal roofs and woven grass walls interspersed with the larger, painted clay burrows favored by rabbitfolk families, including the miller with her tall windmill. Colorful glass containers lined the cobbled street, waiting to collect rainwater from the next spring storm due to pass through any day now. Tidy gardens bloomed with foxglove, starflower, sweet alyssum—and of course, lily of the valley. Towering above it all, the wooden homes of batfolk stood atop long poles, windows dark as their denizens slept until dusk.

Curious onlookers paused in their own errands, pushing wheelbarrows, or carrying sacks of groceries, or they poked heads out their windows or stood in front of their cozy homes, asking Oliver what was happening. Mabel paid them no mind, concentrating on getting to the creek as fast as her small legs could carry her.

A growing crowd gathered around a young frogfolk collapsed between two waterside homes. The poor thing was caked in mud and clearly exhausted, her pale green skin tinged with gray, her eyes closed.

“Give her room,” Mabel ordered. The assembled townsfolk obligingly took a few steps backward.

“Room, yes,” Oliver repeated, panting up to stand beside her.

Mabel carefully rested a paw on the frogfolk’s head, and her lower eyelids opened, showing only thin crescents of amber beneath dark pupils.

“Help ... please ...” she croaked.

“Help with what, friend?” Mabel asked. “What happened to you?”

“Attack ... Calamity Beast ...” The frogfolk’s eyelids closed again and she went limp. Unconscious.

“Did she say Calamity Beast?” someone behind Mabel squeaked.

Murmurs rippled through the crowd like a stiff breeze on a turnip field. Soon, the rumor would sweep over all of Goodhill, and no doubt grow in the telling.

“You, and you,” Mabel said, pointing. “Fetch Delen and help bring a litter to carry her.” The healer was no doubt in the middle of her afternoon nap and wouldn’t appreciate the interruption, but needs must.

“To where?” Oliver asked.

“She can stay with me for now,” Mabel replied. “I’ll keep her safe.” And get the story out of the poor dear as soon as she woke up.

Where had the frogfolk come from? What dire fate might she have barely escaped with her life? Mabel gazed into the distance along the creek’s winding path, mentally mapping which villages lay in that direction. Then she raised her eyes to the horizon and the afternoon sky dotted with thin clouds, scanning for any sign that a Calamity Beast might turn its wild, destructive power on Goodhill next.

Delen arrived eventually, and Oliver wrung his hands as Mabel helped load the frogfolk into the litter. She led the way to her home, considering what she would tell Clem and the children as she clutched her rapier tightly with one hand.

Whatever else happens, Mabel thought grimly, my birthday party will have to wait.

Ral

Ever since he returned to Ravnica from Thunder Junction, a single thought popped up randomly in Ral’s mind like a storm in a clear sky, during guild meetings and baths and whenever his attention wandered:

Beleren is alive, and I’m going to kill him.

Assuming the damned mage could be killed. But after nearly two years of believing he was dead—lost in the Phyrexian invasion—finding out he’d instead been masquerading as the nightmarish Ashiok so he could steal some kind of weird animal? Well.

“I’m going to kill him,” Ral muttered, hands laced behind his head as he stared at the ceiling of his bedroom.

“Kill whom?” Tomik asked, voice thick with sleep.

“Beleren.”

Tomik raised his head from his pillow to blink at Ral. He was adorable without his glasses, brown hair mussed. “I thought you wanted to find him?”

“I do. So I can kill him.”

Tomik flopped back down. “You’re not going to kill him. He’s your friend.”

Was he? What kind of friend fought and fled without explanation?

“You want to know why he did what he did,” Tomik said, as if reading Ral’s mind. “You’ll never know if you kill him.”

“Stop being reasonable.” Ral pressed a kiss to his husband’s mouth to silence him.

It didn’t work. “Your plan?”

Ral traced Tomik's eyebrow with a finger. "I tried planeswalking to him. Ended up on some beach in Ixalan. But I know someone who might be able to track him."

Tomik's eyes scanned the dark room as he thought. "Will she help you?"

Ral loved having a brilliant husband who didn't need everything explained to him. "I don't see why not. She helped before."

"When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow."

"If you're leaving tomorrow ..." Tomik trailed off as his hands blazed their own trail elsewhere.

Yes, his husband was definitely brilliant. But then, Ral would never have settled for less.

"I cannot help you."

She stood on a bridge in a well-tended garden, white hair brushing her golden armor, face hidden by her wide-brimmed hat. A breeze shook the branches of a nearby tree, sending a shower of flower petals drifting through the sun-kissed air.

"Can't, or won't?" Ral asked.

"I can no longer walk the planes. My spark is gone."

Ral gritted his teeth in frustration. "You can't feel the Blind Eternities at all?"

"No." Her hand moved, whip-fast, snatching a petal in flight. "I'm finally at peace."

"Damnit. There must be a way."

"Planeswalkers leave aether trails that can be followed. Most of you do it intuitively."

"And you?"

She released the petal, which spun lazily toward a plot of raked sand. "I used to sense the trails, all the way to the sparks at the end of them."

"Sense how?"

She sighed. "How can I describe taste to a man with no tongue? Return to the last place you saw him and open your soul."

"Great. Thanks." Ral knew she hadn't earned his sarcasm, but he was too bitter to prevent it. He planeswalked away in a shower of sparks, leaving the Wanderer to her palace garden.

The place in Thunder Junction where he last saw Beleren was as empty as Ral had left it. Emptier, even; the vault itself was gone, leaving only the ruins of Tarnation. *No clues, nothing. What had the Wanderer said? Open his soul? Ridiculous.* But he didn't have other options.

"Okay, soul," Ral muttered. "Get to it."

He closed his eyes and listened. Silence. He sniffed the air. Dust and metal. He fantasized about further wrecking the wreckage with lightning, instinctively reaching out to the weather with his magic. Maybe a nice storm would cheer him up.

Wait. His power brushed something. A hint of green. It felt smudged, like a word partly erased from paper. Had Beleren somehow wiped away the memory of his aether trail? That conniving little ...

Ral focused on that trace with every part of himself. The sense of greenness bloomed like a flower. Closing his eyes, he followed it into the Blind Eternities—

And found himself in a field, surrounded by dandelions. They were taller than any he'd ever seen. So was the grass, and the distant trees. *What plane was this? Where was Beleren?*

He ran his hand over his face in disgust, then froze. *What happened to his face? Were those whiskers? Was he covered in fur? Was that ... a tail?*

"I'm going to kill him!" Ral shouted, his eyes filling with lightning as he shook his paw at the sky.