

Episode 2: An Expected Party

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Helga

Sometimes Helga's dreams felt so real that crossing the boundary of sleep in either direction was like stepping through a door and suddenly arriving in a different place. This time, her disorientation was worse because she didn't remember lying down and didn't recognize the room in which she found herself. She blinked at wood beams arching gracefully above the bed, tightly woven walls, golden sunlight slanting through pretty patchwork curtains, and wondered if she was still asleep.

She'd been dreaming of the Night Owl. Destruction, fire and smoke, screaming—except the homes were unfamiliar, the terrain shifting from forest to field to pond, as if she were seeing many attacks strung together like beads on a necklace. In each place, her gaze was drawn to the blurred form of a weaselfolk in a red hood, a scar over one eye ... Who was he? Was this a vision and not a dream? If so, what did it mean?

Memories resurfaced, including her long trek along the creek-bed to—where? There had been sunlight, a mousefolk leaning over her, and then ... this room. In one door, out another, nothing between.

Voices and laughter outside drew her attention. Helga sat up too quickly; her head swam, her legs and back ached. She groaned, loud enough to be heard elsewhere in the house presumably, because soon a pair of mousefolk stepped through the doorway.

They were about the same height, one with auburn fur, the other silver. The former wore an orange dress with a bright red holly button at her throat, while the latter wiped his paws on a flour-streaked apron partly covering a green tunic.

"You're safe here," said the brown one, moving closer. "I'm Mabel, and this is my husband, Clem."

"Charmed, despite the circumstances," Clem said.

"My name's Helga," she said. "I came from Pondside. I was—"

Mabel held up a paw. "Before you tell us your tale, would you fetch Oliver, please, Clem? Saves having to repeat anything. And have Rosalyn brew up a pot of mint tea."

"Consider it done, love." Clem left.

Mabel sat on the edge of the bed. "I cleaned you and washed your clothes. The ones you're wearing are a gift from Reed, one of our frogfolk. The healer says your injuries aren't serious. You collapsed from exhaustion, so we brought you here to rest."

"Where is here?" Helga asked. Voices outside rose and fell, the name "Oliver" shouted more than once.

"Goodhill," Mabel replied. "We're a few hours' walk from Pondside by road. Sometimes otterfolk sail here, but the creek's too low now."

Helga hadn't noticed. She'd been fleeing through mud and vegetation and the occasional patch of bare soil, afraid the Night Owl might follow her.

“This way, Oliver,” Clem said, and within moments a small cinnamon-brown rabbit stood at the foot of the bed, wringing his paws.

“Welcome to Goodhill, my dear, welcome,” Oliver said, a little too heartily. “I have no doubt Mabel is taking the very best care of you, and if you need anything at all, as mayor of this fine town, it’s my duty to extend every hospitality to—”

“Thank you, Oliver,” Mabel interrupted. “Helga is no doubt still tired, so perhaps we should hear her story and then let her rest?”

Helga’s anxious smile widened. She’d known Mabel for only a few minutes, and she already had the sense that the mousefolk was a managing sort.

“Yes, of course, and I must return to the festivities,” Oliver’s ears shifted backward a fraction. “Tell us then, Helga, what brought you to our doorstep?”

“You said there was a Calamity Beast?” Mabel nudged. Oliver’s ears twitched farther back, and his fur rippled as if he were cold.

Helga nodded, her throat constricted like a rill choked with debris. Slowly, in croaked whispers, she told the story of Maha’s attack, the destruction of Pondside, the terrible darkness that erased the day like turpentine wiping away paint from a canvas.

And then, perhaps foolishly, she mentioned her dream that might have been a vision, and her drawings, including the one of the strange hawk. Mabel and Clem exchanged an unreadable look, the sort Helga’s grandparents had, in the silent language of the long married.

Oliver huffed out a laugh. “That is quite a story,” he said. “You’re certain you didn’t mistake the situation? Your imagination seems a touch overactive, which is to be expected of an artistic temperament. My own great-grandfather was a deft paw at whittling, and he once swore he saw—”

“Oliver,” Mabel said sharply.

Helga burst into wracking sobs. She couldn’t help it. All her fears as she ran for her life, her worries about her friends and neighbors, her frustrations at her visions being dismissed again—feelings overflowed like a cistern in a summer storm. She knew she needed to calm down, to explain, because if she didn’t then how would she bring help back to Pondside? The words wouldn’t come.

Oliver patted her arm. “Whatever happened, you’ve certainly had a long day, haven’t you? I thought you might join the party—it’s Mabel’s birthday, you know, and we’ve put a grand celebration together—but perhaps it would be best if you stayed here and had a good rest.”

Without further ado, he vacated the room, followed by Clem. Mabel took up her post on the bed again, sitting quietly. Through the wicker walls, Helga heard Oliver arrive outside, people calling his name and asking him about the poor little frogfolk.

“She’s resting comfortably,” Oliver assured them. “Mabel has things well in order, as she always does, and I’m sure she’ll be joining us shortly.”

“What’s all this about a Calamity Beast, then?” someone asked.

“No need to fret,” Oliver said. “The Spring Elk came through right when it should, didn’t it? And the Sun Hawk isn’t due for some while yet. The unpredictable ones, the Blight Snake and the Drought Cat and so on, don’t intrude on the affairs of us little folk in Valley. Not since the Battle of Kell’s Ridge, and before that, the time of the Order of the Holly Leaf. Now, enough of this grim talk. There’s strawberry cake that wants eating!”

A ragged cheer went up, followed by a song plucked out on a bow harp, accompanied by wood flute and drum. Helga listened to the cheerful music with an ache in her chest.

The mayor wasn't entirely wrong about the beasts. They were rare compared to the distant past, when weavers first taught themselves to use magic to protect all animalfolk from the predators who ravaged the land with torrential storms and blizzards and wildfires and plagues. Lily of the Valley, champion of holly, had wielded the burning might of the sword Cragflame to drive those Calamity Beasts far away.

Then that same magic drove some weavers mad, and the rest set aside the great weavings in favor of small ones anyone could manage. Valley, haven within the high hills, lived in peace, even if other parts of Bloomburrow still suffered the whims of the Calamity Beasts.

And yet, the Night Owl had attacked Pondside. If Helga's dream was indeed a vision, it might attack again—or it already had. Or both.

"I didn't imagine anything," Helga croaked, her throat raw. "Not the Night Owl, not my dreams, and not my drawings."

Mabel was saved from answering by the arrival of Rosalyn with a tea tray. The child had her father's coloring and her mother's nose, and she wore a vest and pants stitched in a vine pattern. She stood solemnly while Mabel poured a cup of fragrant mint tea and offered it to Helga.

"Drink up," Mabel said. "It will help settle your nerves."

Helga obeyed, hands trembling. Rosalyn left the tray on a side table and, after a nod from her mother, departed. They sipped their drinks in silence, until finally Helga spoke.

"I shouldn't have run," Helga said. "I should have stayed. I could have done ... something."

"Perhaps." Mabel stared into her cup as if the dregs held wisdom. "When my husband or children are ill, I don't want to leave their side, as if my presence alone will prevent them from worsening. Or if there's a bandit attack, surely my sword will mean the difference between victory and defeat. But I'm not the linchpin that keeps the wheel of the world from falling off, am I?"

"I suppose not." Helga knew this speech was meant to keep her from feeling guilty for her escape. It didn't. "It hurts not to know ..." She couldn't make herself finish the dark thought.

"You'll know soon enough," Mabel said, and from her it sounded like a promise. She placed Helga's empty cup on the tray. "My birthday party is underway. You're welcome to join us if you don't want to be alone with your thoughts. There's plenty to eat and drink, and it might ease your heart. Good to celebrate life in hard times." She picked up the tray and left, closing the door behind her.

The music continued, joined by more instruments and voices and the rhythmic stomping of feet. The thought of dancing made the mint tea she'd drunk want to come right back up. Still, Mabel wasn't wrong. It might do her some good not to pickle in her own troubles. She needed to eat something, despite her lack of appetite.

Were her visions true or not? Mabel hadn't said she believed Helga, but neither had she agreed with the mayor's assessment. She seemed to at least accept that the Night Owl had attacked Pondside. Any greater danger beyond that was uncertain, the only evidence the word of a single frogfolk who had never been trusted by anyone but her grandparents, may their spirits rest happily.

Oh, this was fruitless. Helga told herself she really should get up and go. Not just yet, though. Not yet.

Mabel

Mabel placed the tea tray on the table in the kitchen next to the last cooling batch of strawberry cookies. The smells of sugar and fruit and spices filled the room as they always did, warm and comforting. Clem slung a towel over his shoulder and drew Mabel in for a hug, nuzzling her cheek and tickling her with his whiskers.

“How’s our new friend?” Clem asked.

“Troubled,” Mabel replied. “Poor thing is wrung out and ready to bolt.”

“To be expected. Shall I ply her with sweets?”

“Soon.” Mabel gathered her thoughts like a dropped skein of yarn. “Oliver thinks she’s telling stories for attention, or some such nonsense.”

Clem leaned back but didn’t release her. “What do you think?”

“That she has visions, true visions, and isn’t exaggerating or inventing a single thing.”

Clem squeezed her gently and released her. “What are you planning?”

“Someone must travel to Pondside,” Mabel said. “More than one someone, for safety.”

“And you want to be one of those someones?”

Mabel nudged a cookie that was slightly out of place. “I don’t want to leave you and the children.”

“The banner is already hung, so I expect we’ll be fine for at least another few hours,” Clem joked. More seriously, he added, “The littles can be a pawful, but we can manage without you if needs must. Your family will come back from their trip, and mine never left. Even our neighbors will pitch in, you know. And I daresay I’m capable of keeping mouths fed and bums clean, even if they will outnumber me three to one.”

“You’re more than capable,” Mabel protested.

Clem playfully snapped the towel at her. “Even so, big problems are best solved together. And this promises to be a very big problem, love.”

“It does,” Mabel agreed. Calamity Beasts were not merely a nuisance, like plant-eating insects. They could change day to night, warmth to a bitter freeze, robust crops to withered vines. They could burn down all of Bloomburrow, leaving only ashes.

Mabel rapped the table with her knuckles and stepped away. “I’m going up to the attic.”

“You think it’s needed, then?” Clem asked.

“For a Calamity Beast?” Mabel shrugged. “If not now, when?”

The attic held an organized chaos of items used infrequently—holiday decorations, winter coats, future birthday presents hidden from prying child eyes. In one corner, furthest from the small window that illuminated the space, lay a bundle covered in a shamefully dusty sheet.

“It’s not precisely a secret,” Mabel’s mother Iris had said when she passed it on to her daughter. “My mother gave it to me, and you’ll give it to Rosalyn when you’re no longer fit to wield it. Or perhaps Foggy or Pip, if Rosalyn isn’t one to take up arms. No, not a secret, but a responsibility.”

Mabel pulled the sheet off. Beneath it, a sword rested on a wooden stand. Unlike her thistle-hilt rapier, forged from the metal sap of ironroot trees, this weapon was crafted from a massive tooth, honed down to a size manageable for little folk. The sigil-etched blade curved, sharpened on both the true and false

edges, tapering to a wicked point. The hilt was simple, cord-wrapped, while the pommel was carved into the shape of a dancing flame.

The sword once belonged to Lily of the Valley herself, so the story went, formed from the fang of the Wildfire Wolf that nearly destroyed Bloomburrow. Privately, Iris had expressed her doubts.

“Stories have power,” Iris had said. “A story doesn’t need to be true to be real, or perhaps the other way around? Whether the sword was Lily’s or not, whether Lily really was your many-greats-grandmother, folks believe in the story, and in the sword. And it does have power, make no mistake.”

Oliver had wanted to use Mabel’s birthday as an excuse to make a spectacle of the relic. It was one thing to hear the tale of the Order of the Holly Leaf, and quite another to admire the physical evidence of their brave deeds. Mabel had found the prospect distasteful, but now? It might be necessary.

Mabel lifted the weapon off its stand. Heavier than her rapier, but well balanced. A rush of magic flowed up her arm and through her body, from ear to tail. Warm, but not unpleasant, like stepping off a shaded porch into full sunshine. The sigils on the blade briefly gave off a faint reddish light, as if banked coals beneath the bone-white surface were stirred.

They’d never done that before. Mabel took it as an omen. Her mother had claimed the weapon’s enchanted flames could be called upon by its wielder in times of need, in defense of the innocent and vulnerable.

“Would someone try to steal it?” Mabel had asked. “To use it for their own selfish ends?”

Iris had laughed. “The sword doesn’t take kindly to such things. I’m told your great-great-grandmother, bless her spirit, found what was left of a thief who threatened to harm her son with it.”

“What was left?”

“Ashes, my heart. Only ashes.”

The party may have begun awkwardly, with concerns about strangers and Calamity Beasts overshadowing the festivities, but now it was lively and high-spirited. Tables laden with food clustered near Mabel’s house; tarts and muffins disappeared into appreciative mouths, the strawberry crumble was nothing but crumbs, and some elderberry jam thumbprint cookies were wrapped in napkins and tucked into pockets for a future treat. Vann had not only made his chamomile fizzy drink but also a blackberry punch with an enticing clove and cinnamon scent. Clem drank two cups and pronounced himself inspired to create a new cake in its honor.

Silver the bard and a few others sat or stood on a platform near a neighbor’s house, playing one merry tune after another as chipmunk danced with rabbit, vole with hedgehog, weasel with mouse—including Rosalyn, tail tucked close to her body, her eyes bright with pleasure. Gev, a lizardfolk notable for the handsome red circles around his eyes, wielded a pair of fire maces, swinging and spinning them in a dizzying display of grace and finesse, their flames leaving trails in the twilight.

Pip and Foggy, along with other neighborhood children, clambered over Hugs, a gruff old badger nearly three times Mabel’s height. He tolerated being used as a playground with good humor, sometimes rolling sideways or arching his broad back, or stretching his arms up so the squealing littles could climb to new heights.

In an open area between houses, someone had erected an archery butt and a contest was underway. A sable-furred rabbitfolk in a wide straw hat was judging—Finneas, who had won the spring and autumn archery competitions too many times and been subsequently banned from participating. Even so, by

request, he indulged in a few trick shots to impress the spectators. Mabel watched him loose three arrows at once, pinning the precise center of each leaf of a clover to the distant target.



Art by: Victor Adame Minguez

A few batfolk clerics joined the festivities as the sun dipped below the rooftops, fireflies casting their gentle glow on the crowded street. Porfirio wore his high-collared black robe with its silver hem, decorated with the phases of the moon, while Zoraline's gauzy pale-green dress fluttered around her, circles winking from its folds like the eyes in a luna moth's wings. While Porfirio spoke with Clem's parents, Zoraline seemed distant, distracted, her gaze fixed on the horizon as if she expected something to crest it. The moon, perhaps, though she was looking in the wrong direction if so.

"Cake?" Clem asked, startling Mabel from her perusal of the guests. Mabel smiled and took the offered confection. A huge slice of strawberry adorned the thick frosting, precisely how she liked it.

"If I eat much more, I'll be fit to burst," Mabel said, cutting herself a bite.

"I'll help, then," Clem said, and stole the piece off her spoon.

"Oy, that's mine!"

"It's better when it's yours, you know that." He swiped frosting from the plate with a claw and licked it, whiskers twitching mischievously.

Mabel chewed pensively, then swallowed. "Everything is so peaceful here, but it feels fragile. As if a storm is about to break."

"Because of Helga?" Clem asked. Mabel nodded, and he leaned against her. "If there's a storm, we'll weather it. As my mam says, 'Don't miss the morning sun waiting for evening rain.' It's a fine day,

you're among friends, and I've been told by trustworthy individuals that the cake isn't an utter disgrace."

"It must be delicious," Mabel teased, "or you wouldn't keep stealing it."

Helga appeared in the doorway, smiling nervously at no one in particular. She clasped her elbows as if unsure what to do with her hands, until someone approached and offered her a slice of carrot cake. She held the plate as if she'd forgotten how to eat.

"Here we go," Clem said, nudging Mabel.

She followed Clem's gaze. Oliver made his way to the platform where the musicians performed. Silver noticed and brought the song to a close, and everyone clapped and stomped appreciatively. Oliver raised his arms, and the clapping tapered into, if not silence, polite murmuring.

"Neighbors—nay, friends," Oliver began, "it's an honor and a pleasure to celebrate the birthday of our very own Mabel with you all this evening." He paused for a smattering of applause.

He gave nearly the same speech at every birthday party. Mabel nibbled her strawberry and resigned herself to paying attention, since she was the guest of honor. Oh, that was unworthy of her. Poor Oliver meant well.

"Mabel is a paragon of our community," Oliver continued. "In her youth, she joined a mousefolk band that traveled to the highest of hills in Valley, to scale the Cliff of Heroes as so many have before her."

"In your youth?" Clem whispered. "You're in your dotage now, are you?"

Mabel hushed him with a smile.

"She joined the local defenders when bandits attacked Goodhill, protecting the town and driving off the malicious miscreants."

A sorry skirmish that had been. She'd landed in a skunkfolk's stink spell and had to scrub her fur for an age.

"Most importantly," Oliver said, his nose twitching, "Mabel is a dedicated wife and mother, and her gardening and baking are the envy of us all. Truly, she exemplifies the bravery and loyalty to which everyone aspires."

"He needn't lay it on so thick," Mabel muttered.

"Oliver's always been more frosting than cake," Clem replied. "Speaking of cake, are you planning to finish yours?"

Mabel passed it to him, and he set to polishing it off. He offered her a bite, and she took it. He was right; it tasted better when shared. Love had ever been the most delicious spice.

Oliver chose that moment to hold an arm out to Mabel. "Let's hear a few words from our honoree! Come up here, Mabel, don't be shy." Cheers rose, and a few folk chuckled, no doubt at the thought of Mabel and shyness inhabiting the same shire.

Mabel swallowed as she climbed onto the platform next to Oliver. The crowd spread out in front of her, some listening intently, others engaged in their own quiet conversations. *What could she say to them? No, what did she need to say?* Her thoughts returned to her discussion with Clem and the sword she'd carefully rewrapped.

"Thank you all for coming," she began. "I hope you've had as lovely a time as I have, here among so many good friends."

"And good food!" someone yelled, followed by laughter and agreement.

Pip sat atop Rosalyn's shoulders and clutched her ears for balance, while Foggy jumped and waved to catch his mother's attention. Mabel smiled and waved back at him. Rosalyn herself simply watched, serious and somber as always.

How could Mabel think of leaving her family, even for a few days? She wasn't getting any younger, dotage jokes aside. Surely others would be willing to help Pondside. She searched for her husband in the forest of faces, finding him near their front door, a few steps from Helga. Clem raised his spoon to his forehead in salute, then stepped inside.

Helga seemed not to have noticed him. Neither was she listening to Mabel. Instead, she stared at the sky as if it might fall, her uneaten cake still clutched in a trembling hand. Mabel imagined herself—or worse, her children and Clem—in the same position. To feel alone amid so many people, to be afraid and uncertain when everyone around you danced and laughed, must be nearly intolerable.

Mabel's wavering resolve solidified. She knew what needed to be done, and she could do it, so she would. Simple as that.

"Thank you especially, Oliver, for the kind words about me," Mabel said. "I don't think of myself as more brave or loyal than anyone present. Bravery doesn't always mean climbing mountains or fighting bandits. All of us stand ready to help each other in times of hardship, and that may be the bravest thing I can imagine."

A chorus of assent rose from her audience, but she wasn't finished.

"We have among us someone else who was brave," Mabel gestured at Helga, who froze as eyes and ears swiveled in her direction. "Helga came all the way from Pondside to get help for her village, and to warn us of an attack from the Night Owl."



Art by: Sidharth Chaturvedi

Now the crowd turned anxious, the volume of murmurs louder. Oliver pinned his ears back but didn't contradict Mabel. Helga seemed to shrink in on herself like a new leaf in full sun.

"I haven't seen the destruction," Mabel said, raising her voice to be heard over the din. "But I have heard Helga's story. To disbelieve her is to risk suffering for ourselves and others, and I do not think that is very brave at all. Nor is it practical, and most of us are practical folk, aren't we?"

Reluctant agreement replied, nods and ear twitches and smoothed whiskers. Clem emerged from their home carrying a cloth-wrapped object and made his way toward her.

“The practical thing to do,” Mabel said, “is to go to Pondside, to check on the villagers and render aid. Goodhill may be safe now, but if there is a Calamity Beast at large, we may not remain safe for much longer. Maha could spread darkness across not only all of Valley, but the farthest reaches of Bloomburrow.”

Clem climbed up next to Mabel and passed her his bundle. Reverently, she unwrapped it to reveal the sword from her attic. As she held it aloft, a faint sheen of flame rippled along the carved tooth from hilt to tip. The crowd gasped, and Oliver no longer seemed quite so eager to see the relic.

“I intend to investigate the situation in Pondside,” Mabel said, lowering the sword. “If necessary, I will follow any trails I find there to wherever they might lead, to preserve our peace. Who will come with me?”

Some of her friends and neighbors shook their heads, others dropped their gazes or nervously glanced around. Mabel wondered if she would be traveling alone after all.

“I’ll go!” Finneas, the archer, raised his bow. His sisters protested, and they all began to quietly argue.

Hugs rose to his full height, towering over everyone else, and inclined his white-striped head at Mabel. Beside him, Gev hissed a sigh and blinked his third eyelid.

“If he’s going,” Gev said, “then I am also. I cannot permit him to get into trouble without me.”

That made four. *Would anyone else volunteer?*

To Mabel’s surprise, Zoraline wove through the crowd, wings closed around her like a cloak. “The alignment of the stars has unsettled me,” she said, her voice high and dreamy. “I believe Pondside is the lodestar that will guide me to where I am needed.”

Helga leaped down the path and stumbled to a stop near the platform. “You must take me, too,” she said breathlessly. “I know some cantrips. I studied weaving with King Glarb in Fountainport, as his apprentice. It’s my village. I want to help. I *need* to.”

“As you wish,” Mabel said. To the rest of the townsfolk, she said, “Thank you again for coming, everyone. Those of us traveling to Pondside must prepare to leave at first light.” She wrapped the fang-sword in its cloth again, a signal that the moment had passed and the future must begin in earnest.

Someone clapped slowly, the applause building to a flood of cheers and stomping. Neighbors hugged Mabel and wished her well as she walked back toward her home. Rosalyn, Foggy, and Pip joined her, and Clem waited for her at the front door. Together, they went inside to prepare for what was to come.

Helga assured Mabel she was thankful for her hospitality, but she would be fine at the town’s traveler lodgings for the night. Clem helped Mabel wrangle Foggy and Pip, who chattered incessantly while their parents bathed them and cajoled them into nightclothes. Rosalyn tidied the minimal mess in the kitchen; Mabel suspected her eldest didn’t want to remain idle when her thoughts and emotions were all awirl, a sentiment she shared. Now Clem was packing Mabel’s rucksack while she herded the littles to their beds and sent Rosalyn to finish her nightly scrub.

“I don’t want you to leave, Mama,” Pip cried, whiskers trembling.

“She’s going to be a hero, Pip,” Foggy said, bouncing on his bed. “She’s going to have an adventure and do swordfights and use magic and then come back and tell us all her stories!”

“I don’t care about stories,” Pip insisted. “She already tells us stories. Da’s are better anyway, because he does voices.”

“While I’m gone,” Mabel said patiently, “you must be good and kind and help him and Rosalyn, all right?”

“Yes, Mam,” they answered in unison.

Rosalyn arrived wearing her favorite quilted nightdress. “I’ll take care of them,” she said quietly. “And I’ll make sure Da can manage the baking.”

Mabel pulled all her children into a hug, squeezing them as tightly as she dared. “You are my sweet and brave little mouselings, and I will love you from spring to winter and back again.”

“Love you,” they replied dutifully. She tucked them in, nuzzled their faces, carefully shooed their firefly from the bedroom, and closed the door.

Clem leaned against the table in the kitchen, his apron hanging on its hook near the pots and pans. He opened his arms as she reached him so they could hold each other quietly. He smelled of sugar and acorn flour and spices and everything good in the world, and she missed him already as much as she missed her children trying to sleep in the next room.

“You’re doing the right thing,” Clem said, stroking Mabel’s back. “You’re probably the most capable person in Goodhill to help poor Helga. A paragon, I’ve heard, from our dear mayor.”

Mabel groaned, then laughed. “His speech will be twice as long next year because of this quest.”

“I’ll save honeycomb wax so we can fashion ear plugs.”

They embraced silently for a time, eventually allowing their tender feelings to encourage them in the direction of their own bed. What the next day and beyond would bring, neither could say, but they spent the night snuggled together, warm and cherished and safe—for now.