

Episode 4: Soothsaying and Stormcalling

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From set *Bloomburrow*

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Helga

Bruised and exhausted from being tossed about in the Long River, then crawling ashore to find a temporary refuge in a cavern full of bones, Helga could only stare blankly at the circle of weapons and ratfolk surrounding her and the others. She'd nearly died for the third time in as many days, and now she was being threatened yet again. Any spark of defiance or fear had been snuffed out, leaving only ashes.

"You may not have noticed," she said, "but we had little control over our arrival here, wherever we are."

"Irrelevant," the ratfolk snapped, brandishing his dagger. "You will leave, or your corpses will feed the beetles."

Hugs rolled to his feet with surprising grace, growling. Finneas tensed as if readying to leap away, while Gev's eyes flared orange.

"Let's not be hasty," Mabel said, holding up her empty paws.

"I'm prepared to engage in some targeted haste," Ral said, lightning twining around his bracer.

Shuffling footsteps approached from the mouth of the cavern. The ratfolk stepped backward, revealing a wizened figure in a shell-adorned cloak. His fur, if it had ever been darker, had faded to a pale gray, and he leaned on a snail-handled cane, moving slowly as if his bones ached. Mismatched eyes regarded Helga from beneath his hood, one black and the other red.

"These strangers are not like the others," he said, a slight wheeze in his soft voice. "The River brought them to us. We must offer them hospitality."

They sheathed their weapons, and one of the ratfolk offered Helga a paw to help her rise. She hesitated, then took it.

"Come," the elder said. "I am Coffey, and you must rest and eat before you proceed. Perhaps we might even assist in your quest. Yes?"

Mabel's whiskers twitched, but her posture relaxed. "We'd be most grateful."

Coffey gestured with his cane, and a ribbed mussel shell was shifted to the side, revealing the opening to a tunnel large enough for Hugs to fit inside without hunching. The scents of mildew and mushrooms emanated from the darkness; Helga reconsidered whether following these strangers might not be a grave mistake.

"Seriously?" Ral thumped his tail against the mud, then winced and glared at the appendage as if it had offended him. Still, he fell in behind Mabel.

Matching Coffey's pace, the ratfolk guided them through a maze of limestone, hints of shell patterns, curves and whorls sculpting grim histories on the pockmarked surface. The walls bore no obvious signs that the ratfolk had carved them, though the floors seemed worn smooth and slightly concave by the passage of countless feet over time. Enchanted lights in woven sconces brightened as they approached and faded as they passed, occasionally revealing side tunnels or unadorned rooms lined with bare beds.

"What is this place?" Ral asked.

"Our village," the elder said. "These were once ancient burrows, created by enormous insects from ages gone, now long forgotten. By all but us, of course."

Helga shivered, not merely because the air cooled as they descended deeper into the rock.

"What do you do here?" Mabel asked.

"We're lorekeepers," Coffey replied, breathing like a leaky bellows. "We preserve the history of Bloomburrow and Valley within it. Every tale we find, every scrap of legend that washes up on our shores, we store in our ossuary for generations to come. The past defines the present, and thus the future."

After enough turns that Helga had no notion how to get out, they reached a wooden door, which Coffey opened. He gestured everyone inside as their ratfolk escort silently returned to whatever hidey-holes they'd emerged from.

To Helga's surprise, the room was spacious yet homey. A light basket hung from the ceiling, filled with faintly glowing pearls. Comfortable-looking chairs sat near a wall entirely taken up with shelves, all the way to the ceiling, some accessible only by ascending a spiral staircase. Rows and stacks of books shared space with assorted knickknacks—iridescent blue beetle-shell sculptures, a box covered in mothwing scales, a painted driftwood half-mask. Rugs and pillows softened the stone floors, and an ironsap stove warmed the room, the peat inside apparently spelled to burn without smoke. Scents of seaweed and wet soil mingled with freshly steeped chamomile tea. An umber molefolk stood over the teapot, wearing a quilted jacket patched at the elbows, a pair of spectacles perched on his nose.

Coffey eased into one of the chairs, resting his cane nearby. A small pill bug uncurled itself from a basket in the corner and scuttled over to him, settling at his feet.

"Would anyone care for a drink?" Coffey asked.

"Yes, please," Mabel said. "For all of us, I think."

Coffey inclined his head at the molefolk. "Tucker, if you'd oblige us."

Tucker produced a motley collection of mugs and served the party, then set to slicing pieces of seed-cake. Helga gratefully sipped her tea, relaxing into the pillow she'd claimed. Her limbs ached from clinging to Hugs for so long, and she sported new bruises from detritus striking her in the tumultuous river. No doubt the others were in similar condition, with the badgerfolk likely feeling the worst of it. All of them sat, too, except for Ral, who perused book spines, occasionally pulling one out and peering at the contents.

"My apologies for the hostile greeting," Coffey said. "We have few visitors, and you're the second group of strangers to pass through in so many days. The first, alas, caused a stir, and our guard has been raised ever since."

"What strangers?" Mabel asked, leaning forward, her dark eyes keen as her blade.

"Mercenaries." He raised his cane and drew circles in the air, a spiral of blue-violet magic rising from the shell handle. At its center, a shimmering image took shape: a weaselfolk wearing a hooded red

tailcoat, one gloved paw brandishing a rapier. A wicked scar covered his right eye, three diagonal lines as if a claw had raked his face.

“This is Cruelclaw,” Coffey continued. “He led his band through the swamp, pilfering what supplies he pleased, the Night Owl wreaking havoc in his wake.”

“We’re looking for him, too!” Helga exclaimed, then covered her mouth with her hands. Outbursts weren’t polite, as her parents had often reminded her.

Mabel didn’t scold. “We found two of his necromancers in a village devastated by the Night Owl. They seemed to know something about the why of it, so we followed them, but lost their trail when the docklands of Three Tree City were set upon by the Flood Gar.”

“The Flood Gar?” Tucker squeaked, spilling his tea. Mabel rose and helped him sop it up with a cloth.

“Cruelclaw must be stopped,” Coffey intoned, “before more Calamity Beasts join this madness.”

“But how could he cause these attacks?” Helga asked, bewildered. “No one has power over the Calamity Beasts, not even the great weavers from the time of the Order of the Holly Leaf.”

“I believe Cruelclaw stole something that may give him, or whoever he’s working for, such power.” Coffey closed his eyes as if pained. “Our scouts reported that he had in his possession a Calamity Beast egg.”

Helga gasped, feeling as if all her blood had drained out like water from a cracked teapot.

“The egg is ... important?” Ral asked, his gray-blue eyes narrowed below the goggles perched on his forehead.

“From it,” Tucker said, “a new Calamity Beast will someday be born. Who knows what magical potential exists in such a thing?”

“Could be none at all,” Mabel mused, retrieving her tea and sitting. “The egg may only be valued for the creature that will come from it. We must find whoever is giving Cruelclaw his orders.”

“And if you do?” Coffey asked, his mismatched eyes like coals, one lit and one dark. “What then?”

Mabel’s voice was resolute. “Then we return the egg to its rightful place.”

Finneas leaped to his feet. “Mabel, no! What could you be thinking? I know Oliver went on about you being a hero and all, but this takes it a bit far. I’m just a farmer, and Zoraline is a local cleric, and who even knows about Gev and Hugs—”

“Excuse you?” Gev hissed, his tail brightening. “The Striped Rapsallions fear no mercenaries or Calamity Beasts.”

Ral choked on a laugh, and Mabel sent him a quelling look. Zoraline stirred, stretching her wings and peering around the room upside down.

“The theft of the egg has upset the balance of the world,” she said. “The music of the stars will remain discordant unless we can restore harmony.”

Helga wasn’t sure precisely what that meant, but she agreed that no one should be wandering about with a Calamity Beast egg. Especially not if it meant the Night Owl was chasing them, sowing chaos. But like Finneas, she wondered if she could really do anything to help.

“For what it’s worth,” Ral said, “I don’t know any of you, but so long as Helga is my only link to Beleren, I’ll be sure to keep you all alive. Even if that means fighting an owl or a giant fish or whatever.” He paused, then added as if to himself, “Maybe I’ll even set up a relay tower here.”

Helga wanted to protest that she knew no more than she'd already told him, but she held her peace.

Mabel put her mug down on the floor and stood. "Our knowledge of this problem makes it our responsibility. If we don't find the egg, who knows what harm might come to Valley? To our families and friends? To strangers who are themselves someone's family, someone's friend?" Her gaze swept the room, lighting on each of them in turn. "You're brave, and clever, and quick, and strong, and kind. We've come this far, worked together, fought together, and we can solve this problem together, too."

Helga thought of her failed cantrip, nearly spilling Mabel to the ground in the heat of battle. Huddling in a heap as everyone around her fought. She wasn't brave, or clever, or quick, or strong. *Was she kind?* She hoped so, *but what could kindness accomplish?*

"Even if we want to stop Cruelclaw," Finneas protested, "we have no notion of where he is, or where he's going. We can't foil him if we can't find him."

"Helga may be able to solve that problem," Mabel said.

"Me?" Helga pressed a hand to her chest. "What can I do?"

"Use your augury skills to find Cruelclaw."

Protests dying unspoken, Helga favored Mabel with a nervous smile. No one had ever asked her to do such a thing. Almost no one even believed she could. Her parents, her siblings, her neighbors ... only her grandparents had supported her, and she'd always suspected they were humoring her out of love.

Mabel trusted her, though. Mabel believed in her. And hadn't Ral, a complete stranger, seen enough truth in her drawings to pledge himself as her protector?

"I can try," Helga said slowly. "I'll need a large bowl filled with water."

Tucker produced a pitcher and basin formed from a polished snail's shell, resting it on the floor near Helga. He poured fresh water from the one into the other, spilling not a drop. Coffey gestured, and the light pearls in the basket dimmed, casting only the faintest glimmer across the basin's pale pink surface.

Helga opened her waterproof pack and pulled out her journal, relieved it hadn't been soaked to ruin by the Long River. She turned to the most recent drawing, of the strange Hawk, made just before the Night Owl's attack. *Were they connected somehow?*

"What is that?" Ral asked, peering over her shoulder.

"I'm not certain," she replied. "I've never seen anything like it."

"There's something familiar about the head and wings," he murmured. "It'll come to me. I suppose I should leave you to your business."

Helga found a blank page, set pencil to paper. A hush fell over the room, the loudest sound Coffey's gentle wheeze. She stared into the water, clear and still, and tried to calm her mind, to reach for the place within her whence visions sprung.

Nothing happened.

Distractions inundated her. The shelves thrown into shadow, the scents of peat and soggy clothing, the rustle of fabric, the twitch of ear or whisker. A headache formed behind her left eye as she pressed the point of her pencil into the page. She was trying too hard, she knew. She must relax. Only, this needed to work. So much depended on her seeing some clue to Cruelclaw's location or destination. If she failed again, they would all fail. *And then what? More Night Owl attacks? More villages destroyed? Something worse that she couldn't even imagine?* Her chest tightened and her breathing came in furtive sips, and still the water showed her nothing.

Zoraline startled her with a gentle touch. “The light is inside you,” the batfolk murmured. “You need not force it to glow; you need only uncover it.”

Helga almost reflexively dismissed the cryptic words, but instead she made herself consider them. Truly, her augury had never been something she could compel like other weavers did. She couldn’t control when her attention focused rather than scattered like dropped beads. What she could do was the same as she’d done that dark day at the side of the pond: sit with her journal and doodle.

With a deep, slow breath, she loosened her grip on her pencil. Drew an aimless spiral. Turned it into a snail’s shell. Slid her gaze back to the bowl. The color wasn’t uniform, nor was the surface perfectly smooth, but it had clearly been polished. She’d seen soapworts that pale, though they tended toward a darker pink. Had they started blooming yet? If not now, then soon ...

Time blurred like wet ink. Someone tugged Helga’s journal from her hand. She lifted her gaze to Mabel, who turned the book around to show everyone—what? Helga blinked, dazed, until she saw her own handiwork.

A massive, three-tiered fountain rose from a pond dotted in lily-pads, a graceful spire of water at its peak. Helga fancied herself a decent artist, but even if her hasty sketch had been less capably executed, anyone in Valley could easily recognize what she’d rendered.

“They’ve gone to Fountainport,” Helga whispered.

“And so shall we,” Mabel said. “Well done.”

Others echoed that sentiment. Helga only wished her flush of triumph wasn’t tainted by the knowledge that they would be returning to the domain of King Glarb and the site of her greatest failure.

Mabel

Having profusely thanked Coffey and Tucker for their hospitality, the party took their leave to resume their journey. Loath as Mabel was to continue rather than resting longer in the comfortable den, Cruelclaw and his mercenaries had not only a head start, but shoulders and chest.

“We wish you every success,” Coffey told her. “We had sent some of our own to tail your quarry. If you meet with them, perhaps you can assist each other.”

Mabel would welcome the help. She’d no notion of how many mercenaries were in Cruelclaw’s band, but the necromancers were an army unto themselves.

Tucker led them through a different set of tunnels, judging by the scents—more grass than silt—and eventually they emerged into late afternoon sunshine at the edge of the marshland. A forest of juniper and oak trees rose in the distance to the north and west, while to the east, craggy boulders loomed like discarded children’s toys, the gaps between them dotted with clusters of red ferns and firethorn.

“Which way is Fountainport?” Mabel asked.

“East-northeast,” Tucker replied, regarding her over the tops of his spectacles. “You could go north, then east, find some villages in the woods to shelter and provision you on the way. Only a few lizardfolk homes in the hills if you take that route, though the way is straighter as the birdfolk flies.”

Mabel scrutinized her star map. Once Zoraline awoke for the night, she could assist, but until then ...

“We know a shortcut,” Hugs rumbled.

“The dandelion field?” Gev asked. Hugs inclined his head, and the lizardfolk hissed a sigh.

“Is something amiss with this shortcut?” Mabel asked.

“Full of hedge parsley,” Gev said. “It takes an age to pick the so-sticky seeds off Hugs’s fur.”

Sticky seeds were a simple problem compared to what they’d faced thus far. Unfortunately, Tucker chimed in as well.

“That path could be dangerous at present,” the molefolk said. “A great storm some days past brought with it a terrible creature. Very dangerous.”

“What kind of creature?” Finneas asked, gripping his bow, ears angling backward.

Tucker adjusted his spectacles. “I haven’t seen it myself. I’m told it’s not a Calamity Beast, but it’s very like one. We have no record of anything similar in our histories.”

Helga croaked nervously.

“Perhaps it’s from another plane,” Ral muttered.

“Another what?” Finneas asked.

“Nothing.”

Mabel regarded the otterfolk curiously, but it wasn’t the time to pry. “If the field is faster, then the field it shall be. We can always hew east or north as necessary.”

Tucker stood at the entrance to the tunnels, receding behind them as they walked away. Helga waved one last time, and he returned the gesture solemnly.

The sun hadn’t moved substantially across the sky before they reached the dandelion field Hugs promised. He and Gev led the way, pushing between flower stalks interspersed with wiry grasses and the more delicate blossoms of the hedge parsley. Bright yellow petals nodded in the breeze, white puffs occasionally bursting from a stronger gust or the brush of Hugs’s shoulder, sending their seeds floating across the landscape. There was no sign of the mercenaries, nor of any storms, the only clouds wispy as candle smoke.

Eventually, the silence seemed to unnerve Finneas enough to outweigh his dismals. He began to loose questions like arrows at Ral, albeit with more forced cheer than he’d shown with Helga.

“May I ask where you hail from?” Finneas asked.

“Far away,” Ral replied.

“The Outer Woods?”

“Farther.”

Finneas skipped around a pebble. “Any family waiting for you back home?”

For some reason, that question gave Ral pause. “My husband, Tomik,” he said brusquely. He whacked a flower with his tail, seemingly on purpose rather than by accident, and whatever question Finneas might have aimed next stayed in his quiver. He sped up to walk just behind Hugs, while Ral lagged, putting distance between himself and the others.

Mabel matched her pace to Ral’s, rosettes of dandelion leaves rustling beneath their feet. A ladybug crawled up a stem of grass, then flew away in a hum of wings. A line of ants marched past a mound of earthworm castings, on their own inscrutable mission. Idly, Mabel pulled out the wedge of seedcake Tucker had pressed on her before they departed, breaking off a piece and tasting it. Delicious, with just the right amount of caraway. She offered some to Ral, whose nose wrinkled.

“It’s good,” Mabel said. “I would know. I’m a baker by trade.”

“Are you?” Ral asked incredulously, eyeing her sword. “What are you doing all the way out here, then, looking for trouble?”

“Why are you so far from home searching for your friend?”

“Touché.” Ral took the bit of seedcake and tossed it in his mouth.

“I miss my husband,” Mabel said. “And my littles. How they smell, their voices, their sweet hugs ...”

Ral was quiet for a time, then said, “I miss my husband, too.” He sounded almost surprised by the admission as he absently rubbed the white cloth tied to his wrist. “I’ve never really had anyone to miss before. And I’ve been so focused on finding Beleren that I’ve been able to ignore it.”

Mabel patted his arm. “I’m sure you’ll be back together in no time at all. You’ll appreciate him even more for the absence, and he you.”

“I wish I had your optimism,” Ral muttered. “Beleren is slippery as a damn eel, and I have no idea what he’s planning.” He struck a dandelion stem with his bracer, sending the seeds flying.

Mabel didn’t know what an eel was, and her fur briefly rose as she had the oddest sense of something immense and inscrutable beyond her ken, like the stars fixed in the firmament. *Should she be worried about this Beleren and his allies, or even Ral himself?*

Gev appeared between them as if he’d always been there. “I miss my long-ago home in the Valley’s rim. So warm, the stones there. Though not as warm as the Ever-Burning Oak.”

“You’ve been to the Ever-Burning Oak?” Helga asked.

“But of course,” Gev said, bobbing his head rapidly. “The Striped Rapsallions have roamed over all of Bloomburrow.”

Whatever else he might have said was lost as a vast shadow passed over them. Mabel’s sword was in her paw a heartbeat after as she scanned the sky. Beside her, Ral tensed, lightning sparking in his blue-gray eyes as he pulled down his goggles. The others, too, halted their procession.

“Whatever that was,” Ral said grimly, “it’s summoning a storm.”

True to his assertion, dark clouds massed above. Instead of rolling in like a plow crossing a field, they swirled like water circling a drain, their center difficult to discern. The wind picked up, blowing hard enough that the tops of the flowers bowed. With her line of sight less obstructed, Mabel finally saw the source of the wild magic.

A giant creature hovered in the air, purple lightning crackling across its body. It resembled the Sun Hawk in that both were birdlike. This monster, however, had four wings instead of two, the ends webbed like a batfolk’s, a crest on its head like some she’d seen on lizardfolk. The feathers on its back were mud-colored, as were its coverts, but the primaries and secondaries were white, the tail striped. Its sharp talons looked large enough to carry off even Hugs with little difficulty.



Art by: Victor Adame Minguez

“What is that thing?” Finneas whispered, his voice trembling as he hugged the ground.

“It’s a dragon,” Ral whispered back. “Animal-shifted, which I suppose is to be expected.”

“What are you talking about?” Helga asked.

“Hush and listen,” Ral replied, quiet but intense. “That creature is not from Bloomburrow. It’s extremely dangerous, like your Calamity Beasts. If we attract its attention, we’ll be in immense trouble.”

Of that, Mabel had no doubt. “We’ll continue, low and slow as poured treacle. Hide anything reflective. No talking. Gev, take the lead. Everyone else, stay close to Hugs. I’ll bring up the rear.”

Gev acknowledged the order with a blink of his inner eyelids, then vanished into the green. Hugs’s bulky form was harder to hide, but he proceeded at a pace that made snails seem quick. Mabel hoped that, from above, he resembled a small boulder or similar, nothing that would interest the dragon-hawk. Finneas crouched next to him, ears pinned back, and even Helga moved with surprising stealth. Ral kept his bracer tucked against his chest so it wouldn’t catch the light, and Mabel sheathed her sword.

Despite the care he took, Hugs struggled to remain unobtrusive. Some dandelion puffs, pressed sideways by every gust, struck him and burst, their seeds careening into the air and leaving a trail. Mabel hoped against hope it might provide cover for their movement rather than making their location more obvious to the creature, which continued to circle in the darkening sky.

A dandelion hit Hugs’s shoulder, the white tufts brushing Zoraline’s face. To Mabel’s horror, the sleeping batfolk sneezed awake, the sound jarringly loud amid the shushing of the wind-blown flowers and grass. Everyone froze. Zoraline rubbed her nose and stretched her wings, peering around in confusion.

“Where are we?” Zoraline asked. “Why is everyone so quiet?”

Gev slapped both hands over Zoraline’s mouth, but the damage was done.

The dragon-hawk’s cruelly curved beak opened, revealing a long, forked purple tongue. Lightning flashed and crackled in that cavernous maw. It screamed, surprisingly deep and harsh, more roar than shriek. It swooped toward the party, who alternately ducked or scattered. Talons sharp as death closed

over empty air just above Hugs, and the creature flew up and away for another pass. The coiling clouds of the storm thickened like gravy, obscuring the sun and stealing its warmth from the air.

Ral slid next to Mabel and bared his teeth. “Lucky for you, storms are my purview. Unfortunately, dragons aren’t, and I’m not sure how well my magic works here.”

“Any help you might provide would be welcome,” Mabel said. “For all our sakes.”

“I might not be able to kill it, but I think I can make it unhappy.” Ral tapped his bracer. “I need a lightning rod—something to conduct electricity.”

Finneas pulled an arrow from his satchel wound with copper wire. “I’ll give it something to chew on.”

Ral nodded. “Tell everyone to run on my signal.”

The dragon-hawk dove again, swerving away from Hugs as Finneas hit it in the mouth with the copper arrow. It veered up and away, snarling in annoyance—the arrow was stuck fast. Meanwhile, Mabel searched for a shelter that might protect them; the forest was well to the northwest, but the eastern hills remained near enough to reach with a long, hard run.

Another pass, and this time Zoraline vocalized a haunting glissando that seemed to scramble the creature’s senses. It reeled as if dizzy, climbing back into the air, the arrow still lodged next to that curving beak.

Ral’s blue-gray eyes crackled with power that rippled along the length of his black fur, collecting in his bracer. Up in the whirling clouds, a flash of light was chased by an ominous rumble.



Art by: Chris Seaman

“You like a little lightning, don’t you? Well, let’s check your battery capacity.” Ral raised his bracer-clad arm and shouted, “*Run!*”

“To me!” Mabel darted toward the boulders, ensuring the others followed. Gev quickly outpaced her, Finneas close behind. Hugs’s relative slowness, encumbered as he was by Zoraline, was mitigated by his longer stride. He kept close to Helga, who gripped a wand in one hand as if it were a protective talisman.

A barrage of lightning ripped through the blanket of gray above, so bright it might have been a second sun. Mabel resisted the urge to simply stand and watch in awe at the sheer power of Ral's magic. The wild, natural energy tore from the clouds, striking the head of the dragon-hawk before coalescing on the otterfolk. She wasn't certain, but she thought she heard Ral's laughter beneath the overwhelming drumbeats of thunder.

The dragon-hawk writhed and roared, eyes sparking wildly, a storm of energy under the surface of its skin—but it didn't fall. Mabel grimaced; *would it retaliate?*

No. Its four wings beat the air in a rush of purple-tinged power, and soon it disappeared into the bank of clouds that still lay thick across the once blue canvas of afternoon. Even so, Mabel continued to run, as fast as her weary legs could carry her, toward the boulders in the foothills.

After a handful of tense minutes that felt like an hour, everyone but Ral huddled beneath a vast stone tipped diagonally like a stray book on a shelf. The skies opened, scattering rain. Murmuring softly, Helga raised her wand, which glowed a faint blue at its beaded tip. The falling drops solidified into a thin barrier perpendicular to the rock, deflecting the worst of the wet. Mabel squinted in the direction from which they'd fled.

The curtain of water eventually parted to reveal Ral, trudging toward them. None of the fluid seemed to touch him, as if he, like Helga, could bend it away to keep himself dry.

Before he reached the shelter, he waved a paw at the sky as if brushing away gnats. The rain lessened from a steady rush to a light mist. Clouds thinned and parted, a shaft of sunlight stealing through. Of the dragon-hawk, no sign remained but the labored breathing of tired animalfolk.

"That sure was some fancy weaving," Finneas said, his ears slowly rising and angling forward.

Ral nodded at him. "Good shot, yourself."

Gev, clinging to the underside of the stone, licked his snout indignantly. "And where is my compliment for my so-excellent stealth and not attracting the monster's attention, hmm?"

"You did a wonderful job, Gev," Mabel said.

The lizardfolk raised his lower eyelids but seemed mollified. "It is as well, because now I have the job to remove the so-many stickers from the fur of my friend Hugs."

Hugs snorted, whether in amusement or derision, Mabel didn't know. A laugh swelled in her belly like a yeasted bun, sweet and light.

Soon, the rain subsided entirely, and Helga dismissed her cantrip like a popped bubble. The scent of petrichor permeated the landscape, soothing despite its promise of an impending trek across muddy earth. Still, they were alive and whole; any amount of accumulated muck paled in comparison to the dark depths of what might have been.

"On we go, then," Mabel said, brushing moisture from her cloak. "Fountainport awaits."

A faint whistling sound drew everyone's attention to Hugs's back. Zoraline snored softly, not a care in the world, a wispy dandelion seed stuck to the outside of her ear.