

Episode 5: Nightfall in Fountainport

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From set *Bloomburrow*

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Helga

Fountainport loomed over the largest pond in Valley. The graceful spire of water magically spouting from a carved lily above the throne room was visible long before Helga and the others reached the Tadpool Harbor District at the base. Each level was a work of art, three basins carved from soapstone and embellished with curved designs: flower petals, lapping waves, stylized frogfolk faces. Large portcullises beneath the city allowed animalfolk to stream into the docks, eager to join year-round celebrations encouraged or directly sponsored by King Glarb himself.



Art by: Leon Tukker

Thoughts of her former mentor seasoned Helga with a dash of anxiety and a heaping spoonful of shame. While her allies admired the floating market beneath the lowest tier of the city, eateries and shops stacked in a jumble of water-stained wood and round windows, she floundered in her mind's muck. While they stared at the blue light shimmering through the ceiling of water held aloft by powerful weaving, surrounded by glass bubbles as large as a house, she hunched as if waiting for a blow to fall.

"This place is incredible," Finneas said, awed. "Three Tree City might be bigger, but my head's about to twist clean off here from looking."

"I prefer less water," Gev griped. "After this, I will holiday at the Ever-Burning Oak."

"Work before sightseeing," Ral said.

Mabel sidestepped a blue-feathered birdfolk fleeing an otter with a broom. "I'm not certain where to begin. We can ask after Cruelclaw, but he may have allies hiding him."

Helga inhaled, held it, then forced herself to exhale. "Maybe, possibly, I could get us in to see King Glarb, and ask for his help?"

"Of course!" said Mabel. "You were his apprentice."

"Yes, but we ... didn't part on the best terms."

"Did he try to kill you?" Ral asked.

"Of course not!" Helga exclaimed.

"Did you steal anything from him?"

"I would never!"

Ral shrugged. "Then you're fine. How do we get in to see him?"

Helga hugged herself. "In theory, we ask his aides for an audience. He's usually busy, but under the circumstances, he would probably want to know what's happened."

"Lead the way," Mabel said.

Helga considered asking a frogfolk weaver to open a portal to the topmost level, but the long way was more scenic—and delayed the inevitable. She led them to the glass elevators at the center of the tier, resting atop pools of water, attended by frogfolk or otterfolk wearing silky blue uniforms with matching hats. When enough animalfolk crowded onto a platform, the attendant sent a flow of magic into the water, pushing the elevator up to the next level.

They climbed onto a disc, and with a gentle lurch, the elevator rose. Helga peered down through the blue-tinted glass. The boats drifting between docks and lily pads shrank, roofs receding, then obscured by the bubbles hovering beneath the ceiling. The enchanted water that separated the tiers parted, and they soon found themselves resting on a pool like the one on the level below.

"Going up or stopping?" the attendant asked.

"Up," Helga replied.

They continued, the view beneath them changing. Here, buildings in the preferred frogfolk style sat atop individual bowls, their domes tinted glass or porcelain-thin soapstone. The boats gliding between them were more elegant, intricately carved and decorated with rich embellishments. Some flaunted sails embroidered with silver thread, while others were propelled by water cantrips.

At last, they ascended to the top level. More weaving supplemented mundane construction methods: walls of shimmering, falling water instead of glass, colors shifting like rainbow hues in a bubble of soap. Small fountains imitated the massive one at the center, where King Glarb's throne room overlooked not only all of Fountainport, but the entire pond around it and beyond.

"The view is breathtaking," Mabel said as they stepped off the elevator.

"Wait until I tell my sisters," Finneas whispered. "They won't believe me."

Helga tried to appreciate the birdfolk's-eye view of far-off forests and mountains, plains spread like a quilt of flowers and crops. Instead, she trembled at their impending meeting. *Would King Glarb re-*

member her? Perhaps she'd be simply one face among many apprentices, her departure unremarked, her name faded into obscurity.

Or perhaps he would remember precisely why he'd banished her.

In the throne room's antechamber, animalfolk lounged on gilded lily pads and petal-upholstered divans or swam in the clear water. A king's aide, identifiable by his tall, creamy white hat and robes, approached and bowed politely.

"May I assist you folk with something?" the aide asked, his tone suggesting he most certainly could not.

Helga must have taken too long to respond because Mabel sniffed and elbowed her.

"We're here to see King Glarb, please?" Helga said, wishing she didn't sound so small and breathless.

The aide smiled. "His Moistness is indisposed today, and likely tomorrow, but next week—"

"Helga was his apprentice," Mabel interjected. "Perhaps the king might be amenable to seeing her sooner?"

"An apprentice?" The aide peered at Helga more pointedly. "I doubt it, but—wait, did you say Helga?"

Helga's stomach attempted to hide between her toe webbing.

"This is urgent," Mabel insisted. "We would prefer to discuss it with the king directly, to avoid a potential panic."

"Panic?"

"Relating to Calamity Beasts."

"Calamity Beasts?" The aide's eyes bulged, and his voice rose in pitch to a near-squeal. "I see. I'll return presently." He hopped toward the throne room.

"Helga," Mabel said, in the sort of parental voice that conveyed impending disappointment, "what precisely did you do to be released from your apprenticeship?"

Helga gripped her wand as if it could shield her from her own inadequacies. "There was ... an incident. It wasn't the first—I often struggled to stay attentive. But this one was worse."

"I can't imagine it was so bad," Finneas said encouragingly.

"We were practicing waterspout cantrips. King Glarb's aide released a swarm of gnats, and we were supposed to hit them with the spouts."

"You hit something else?" Ral asked.

Helga winced. "I hit King Glarb. Or rather, his staff. I was looking the wrong way, and—it doesn't matter. We were near the edge of the tier, and the staff fell."

"Oh no," Mabel said.

"I opened a portal under it, and another next to me, so it would fall into my hand." Helga closed her eyes. "Except the king was standing there, and he'd sent out a water whip to catch the staff—"

Ral made a choking sound.

"—so King Glarb hit himself with his own water whip through the portal. Then the staff fell on his head. It was falling so fast ..." Helga swallowed. "He spent days recovering from the concussion. And the staff broke."

"Oh, Helga." Mabel patted her arm. "You mustn't dwell on past embarrassments."

“How can I not?” Helga demanded. “I never do anything right. I nearly dropped you the last time I tried a spell.”

“Strictly speaking,” Gev said, blinking his third eyelid, “your last spell kept the rain off when we ran from the dragon-hawk.”

Helga opened her mouth to argue but closed it. He was right. She’d managed that cantrip fine. “Still, that was only the one time.”

“What about the augury?” Finneas asked. “That worked, too.”

“None of us is perfect,” Mabel said. “My first attempt at blurring? I ran straight into a thistle.”

“But now look at you! You’re amazing, and I’m still ... me.” Helga pressed her lips together, not wanting more sorrow or venom to fall out.

“You must forgive yourself, Helga,” Mabel said gently. “The past informs who we are, but it need not define us. Look into your future and see a brighter path.”

If only it were so easy, Helga thought miserably. *Perhaps it was like her water stair cantrip: if she took one step at a time, soon she’d be higher than she started. But she’d have farther to fall ...*

The aide returned and led them into the throne room, encased in pillars of water weaving that supported the soapstone flower and its liquid spire above. Lily-pads carpeted the basin, some rising to form pedestals that provided shade or perches. They bloomed in an array of colors, from creamy white to sunrise pink, bright yellow filaments at their cores like tiny suns. At the end of the room, on a massive throne of delicate floral tracery, the silk-robed king regarded Helga with open disdain.

“The prodigal apprentice returns,” King Glarb said, his voice deep and resonant. “I’m told you bring word of a Calamity Beast?”

“Yes,” Helga croaked, then cleared her throat. “Maha attacked my village, so I went for help, and we—”

“That is a shame,” King Glarb leaned his chin on his fist. “But such Calamities are unpredictable, or we wouldn’t need augurs.”

“It wasn’t only my village. The Night Owl destroyed others, and the Flood Gar drowned the Docklands in Three Tree City.”

“A weaselfolk called Cruelclaw stole a Calamity Beast egg,” Mabel explained. “We believe this is causing the attacks. We tracked him and his mercenaries here to Fountainport.”

If Helga hadn’t been staring at the king, she might not have noticed the shift in his gaze. She followed it to the left of the throne, where dim light emanated from behind an oddly placed leaf screen.

“You tracked him here?” King Glarb asked. “Does anyone else know of this?”

“A group of lorekeepers,” Mabel said. “Their own folk are looking for the egg as well.”

King Glarb steepled his fingers. “This does present a problem.”

Helga squinted at the partition, extending her senses toward it through the water beneath. Whatever was behind it felt powerful, magic pulsing from it like a heartbeat.

“If you can find the egg,” Mabel said, “we can return it to wherever it came from, and hopefully stop the attacks.”

“I have a rather ... different solution in mind. I don’t expect a simple mousefolk like yourself to understand, but sometimes sacrifices must be made for the greater good.”

“Sacrifices?” Finneas exclaimed.

“The greater good?” Mabel repeated slowly.

Dread flooded Helga’s limbs in a cold, burning rush. With a tendril of water, she pulled down the screen to reveal what it hid.

A massive egg sat within an ornate lattice nest, its velvety blue shell swirled with specks that glittered like stars.

“The Calamity Beast egg?” Helga reeled from shock. “*You* have it?”

“I should hope so,” King Glarb replied. “I paid Cruelclaw extremely well to bring it here.”

A red-coated weaselfolk emerged from behind the throne looking just as he had in Coffey’s spelled image, one eye scored by scars, a rapier hanging from his belt. “The Direshade Company fulfills its contracts,” Cruelclaw said, his voice rough as limestone.

“You see, little Helga,” the king continued, “with the right weaving, I can control the Calamity Beast within that egg. Imagine never again fretting about sudden changes in seasons, or drought, or plague. Our very own champion would defend all animalfolk in Valley, repelling the other Calamity Beasts by my command.”

Helga struggled to contain her anger. “You’ve caused so much destruction—not only my village, but others. Three Tree City flooded! The Calamity Beasts are too dangerous for anyone to control. Do you want to be like the weavers of old who became mindless monsters?”

“History will vindicate my actions,” King Glarb scoffed. “I will be remembered as a pragmatist—nay, a visionary, who ushered in a new era of peace and prosperity.”

“You’ve let your fears overcome your good sense,” Mabel said.

“The ends don’t always justify the means,” Ral added. “Believe me, I know.”

King Glarb waved dismissively. “Your opinions matter not; you won’t be alive for long to continue espousing them. Or I’ll seal you away in some deep hole, so you can repent when my plans come to fruition.”

“You’re welcome to try,” Mabel said, a hand on her sword hilt.

“Who are you to defy me?” King Glarb said. “A pack of farmers and a failed weaver? And ...” He peered at Ral. “Whatever is that contraption on your arm? Bah, it matters not.” His eyes glowed blue, like the depths of a pond, and water ropes wrapped around Helga and the others. “Cruelclaw, dispose of these pests.”

“Direshades, take them,” Cruelclaw ordered. A dozen armed mercenaries emerged from a side room. Helga struggled against the bonds, pliant yet unbreakable.

Zoraline awoke and tried to stretch. “Why am I tied up?”

“Can you free us with a spell, Helga?” Mabel asked.

King Glarb warbled a laugh. “You imagine Helga’s magic could surpass my own? Stuff and nonsense. She can barely manage simple cantrips. As weavers go, she’s an utter failure.”

Hearing the same words she’d told herself, spoken bluntly by her former mentor, struck Helga with the force of a blow. She sank to her knees, the water constricting her, mocking her shortcomings.

“Don’t listen to him, Helga,” Mabel insisted. “We wouldn’t be here without your augury. You’re only a failure if you give up!”

Helga stared into the obsidian eyes of the mousefolk who had trusted her from the beginning, who defended her against doubters and detractors, who always encouraged her to keep trying. It didn't matter what the voices in her mind said. It didn't matter that her family never supported her, or that King Glarb thought her a fool. Mabel believed in her. Mabel needed her help.

Helga only knew a few minor cantrips, but sometimes, small magic was big enough.

As Cruelclaw approached her, sword drawn, Helga focused on his feet. Beneath them, she weaved her water step spell. With a jerk of her chin, she sent him sliding toward King Glarb, who raised his hands to ward off the impact. His weaving failed, liquid bonds dissolving into the floor of the throne room.

Mabel drew her sword, which flared orange. Gev pulled out his fire maces, flames dancing along their heads. Finneas nocked three arrows, while Hugs stretched to his full height and cracked his neck. Even Zoraline spread her wings menacingly, snub nose tilted up in scorn.

"Come on, then." Helga formed a rotating shield of water around herself. "Let's show His Moistness what a pack of farmers can do."

Mabel

Much as she would have loved to dwell on her pride at Helga's bold pronouncement, Mabel stored that sentiment in her mental pantry and focused on the fight ahead. She needed to stop King Glarb's mad plan, protect her allies—no, her friends—and return to her family in Goodhill.

A rabbitfolk thrust his spear at her, taking advantage of his longer reach. Sidestepping, Mabel cut through the haft with her glowing blade, the spear's point splashing to the floor. She blurred out of the way of a volley of knives, then a staff swipe. Every enemy who sought to strike her found only empty air as her magic obscured her movements.

Even as she fought, Mabel watched the others. Hugs and Gev faced two snarling raccoonfolk, one punching with spiked knuckles, the other weaving a whirlwind of objects—teapots, sharpened mussel shells, smooth stones, and more. Hugs slapped the aerial detritus aside or caught it and threw it back. Gev leaped off Hugs's shoulder and swung his fiery maces in a deadly figure eight. The weaver's missiles burned to a crisp, or broke into smaller pieces with sharper edges.

Overhead, Zoraline engaged in aerial battle with a vicious songbird wielding a sword with two blades extending from a central haft. Zoraline evaded, twisting her wings backward on the upstroke to hover in place while the birdfolk swept past. With a keening cry, she unleashed a prayer-spell that blew her enemy past the edge of the basin.

A skunkfolk pursued Finneas, who zigzagged around her, too quick to catch. She unleashed a putrid spray spell, friend and foe alike staggering from the stench. Finneas leaped up and back, loosing his trio of arrows. The ends, tipped with spiked burrs, wedged in his opponent's furry backside, making her yelp in surprise and pain.

Gev spat flame at the stink cloud, which flared into a ball of fire before dissipating. "You give Striped Rapsallions everywhere a bad name," he hissed at the skunkfolk.

Ral sighed and sent a bolt of lightning arcing at a lizardfolk in mid-leap. She recoiled and landed awkwardly in the water, wisps of smoke emanating from her scaled armor. "Always with the fighting," Ral muttered.

King Glarb stood in front of the Calamity Beast egg as Cruelclaw advanced on Mabel, his gaze murderous.



Art by: Christina Kraus

“I know your type,” Cruelclaw rasped, cracking his neck. “You think because you helped fend off some starving bandits once, it makes you a hero. You’re not. I’m a professional, and you’re an amateur. I’m a fighter, and you’re a farmer. Leave with your life and make better choices.”

“I’m not a farmer,” Mabel replied, “I’m a baker.”

Cruelclaw thrust sharply with his rapier, a blow Mabel sidestepped. The next she parried with her shield; the thin sword glanced off, leaving an acrid green streak across the surface. Poison. If he hit her, the fight would end quickly, and not in her favor.

The weaselfolk bore down relentlessly, slashing and thrusting with pure malice. She dodged and blurred around him, hoping he would tire. Her sword, glowing dimly at first, brightened and trailed streaks of orange light, as if rending the air with fiery claws. Still Cruelclaw sliced and stabbed, his breath even, as if he could fight for hours.

Mabel stepped to her left ... but found herself back where she’d started. King Glarb had opened a portal, and she’d blundered into it. Cruelclaw’s blade fell toward her head, and she raised her sword and shield to block the strike. They landed in a bind, blade to blade, hilt to hilt. He pressed down, the poisoned edge of his weapon shifting closer to her face, her neck. In moments, he would end her.

She’s always been my hero. Clem spoke from the depths of her memory.

She’s going to be a hero, Pip, Foggy added. *She’s going to have an adventure and do swordfights and use magic and then come back and tell us all her stories!*

Her story couldn’t end now. King Glarb couldn’t succeed, for the sake of Valley and all of Bloomburrow beyond. Mabel could almost feel her family’s hands joining hers, their arms lending her strength.

Her blade burst into flame, bright as the heart of a bonfire. Cruelclaw gasped as the sword singed his fur, stumbling back. Fear glittered in his good eye. Mabel swung, sending an arc of fire toward him, driving him toward the edge of the basin. Soon he stood on the precipice of death by burn or a long fall. With a flick of her wrist, she disarmed him, his weapon tumbling toward the clear water far below.

Cruelclaw bared his teeth. “Do it, baker,” he snarled. “End this.”

The runes on her blade flashed. She could end him. *But should she? Was this the tale she wanted to tell her children? No.*

“Leave with your life,” Mabel said. “Make better choices. It’s never too late to do good instead of harm.”

Cruelclaw’s retort was lost as a croaky shout drew their attention. King Glarb’s hands formed complex patterns in the air, and before him Helga struggled vainly to free herself from a block of ice.



Art by: Johan Grenier

Righteous fury filled Mabel. She blurred toward the king, sword swinging, hoping its fire would distract him and break his weaving. Instead of a slice of flame, a huge blaze roared from the blade. It looked like a wolf in mid-leap, the form gone too quickly for her to be certain.

King Glarb flung his arms up with a shout of fear. Mabel reached Helga’s side in a few steps and jammed her flaming blade into the frozen block. It melted like sugar in hot water.

Shivering, Helga stood beside Mabel, who raised her shield. King Glarb, composure recovered, formed the liquid beneath his feet into a platform that lifted him into the air. He gestured to his right and left as if conducting an orchestra, streams of water arcing out and down from his pedestal like fishing line. Their ends curved into hooks, ready to snare Mabel and the others like minnows.

Above him, storm clouds gathered.

“If you only possessed some *true* vision,” King Glarb bellowed. “We could have celebrated the birth of a new Valley together.”

“A Valley of bones and ashes!” Helga screamed back. “Who would celebrate that?”

The clouds darkened, blotting out the sun. The wind shifted, from gentle breeze to frantic frenzy.

King Glarb’s hooked lines began to spin around his platform. “A failure like you cannot possibly understand my genius!”

Ral sidled up to Mabel. “We have a problem.”

“Only one?” Mabel retorted.

“A bigger one.”

“This ends now!” King Glarb shouted.

Lightning cracked the sky like a dropped plate. From between streaks of electricity, the Storm Hawk emerged with a deafening roar. Folding its four wings against its body, it plummeted toward the king like a lance.

King Glarb vanished into a portal as deadly claws raked the space where he’d stood. Individual fights ceased as animalfolk fled this new enemy. Mabel dragged Helga to the relative shelter of the vast covered throne, Ral close behind.

“Can you try the same spell as before?” Mabel asked him.

“Probably a bad idea,” Ral replied. “I zap that water spire, it could electrocute anyone touching water in Fountainport.”

“So could the Hawk.”

Ral peered at the sky. “I can try to calm the storm. Could be wasted energy if the dragon keeps stirring it up.”

“Do your best.” Mabel’s sword pulsed, heat surging up her arm and through her body. This was her fight. She needed to protect her friends, and the city.

Mabel charged out from beneath her cover. A roar split the air as the creature dove, barely missing a birdfolk who flung himself over the side of the basin. If she wanted to reach the dragon-hawk, she needed to get higher.

There. The stone lily.

“Helga!” Mabel called. “I need your step cantrip.”

She pointed with her sword; understanding dawned in Helga’s expression. Stairs of water slid out from one of the magical arches holding up the lily. Mabel blurred toward them and began to climb.

She reached the stone flower, droplets spraying her as the wind tugged her armor. Thunder boomed. Mabel raised her flaming blade, a beacon daring the Storm Hawk to attack her.

Eyes bright with lightning, it swooped, talons extended. Mabel prepared to mete out justice or meet her death.

A shriek rent the air as the dragon-bird tumbled sideways, struck by a new foe: Maha, the Night Owl, trailing a curtain of darkness.

Blue-black ribbons streaked with glittering stars split the gray clouds. The two enormous raptors appeared evenly matched, gliding through a lightning-wracked sky. However, the Calamity Beast seemed to predict the hawk’s movements, even guiding them with practiced maneuvers. Its glowing turquoise markings blurred into streaks of twilight, circling, chasing, vanishing like the moon behind clouds only to reappear in front of the dragon-bird.

Inexorably, foul weather gave way to clear night. The Night Owl’s talons closed on the Storm Hawk’s tail feathers, wrenching one free. The creature’s roar rose sharply in pitch, in surprise or pain. The dragon-bird beat its four massive wings and soared into the star-strewn sky. Soon, it disappeared, taking all remnants of foul weather with it.

The Night Owl didn’t give chase. It perched on the edge of the basin, the bright beams of its eyes gazing at Mabel expectantly.

In that moment, Mabel felt as if she understood precisely what had occurred, and how to make it right.

She scrambled down the water steps held in place by Helga's cantrip, racing toward the giant egg in its magic nest. Carrying it proved awkward; it was larger than her and surprisingly heavy. Cautiously, Mabel brought the precious cargo toward the unmoving, unblinking Night Owl.



Art by: Justin Gerard

Soon, Mabel stood close enough to the Calamity Beast that, if it so chose, it could grasp her in its terrifying talons or consume her in a single gulp. Her heart fluttered faster than a dragonfly's wings as she offered the egg to the creature.

"This is yours, isn't it?" Mabel murmured. "You must have been beside yourself with worry. I would be, too."

Could the creature understand her? Could a storm, or a wildfire? Mabel didn't know, but she hoped.

The Night Owl gingerly took the egg. Its fathomless eyes softened; its feathers relaxed. Still silent, it spread vast wings and took to the air on a gust of cool wind. The dark in its wake now felt peaceful rather than malevolent, the domain of batfolk and glowing insects and flowers that blessed the shadows with their sweet perfume.

"How did you know?" Ral asked.

"I didn't," Mabel replied. "But if I followed the egg all this way to protect my own family, why not the other way around?"

Ral's whiskers twitched. "That may be the most motherly thing you've said since I met you."

"I think I can do better than that." Mabel turned to her companions and the remnants of Cruelclaw's mercenary band, raising her voice to be heard throughout the throne room. "Come on, everyone, let's clean up this mess!"

King Glarb not only fled the immediate area, he left Fountainport entirely, his whereabouts unknown. Cruelclaw, too, escaped, and his minions surrendered or followed his example. City officials promised investigations and justice for the egg thieves, but Mabel considered her part in the story to have reached its conclusion with the threat of the Calamity Beast settled.

A cabbage transport was summoned to carry the group home—big enough to fit even Hugs comfortably. The construct bobbed less than an otterfolk's boat as it skittered on spiderlike legs along the main roads toward Goodhill. Ral, of all folk, found it unsettling, asking more than once if Mabel was quite sure they wouldn't be suffocated by moldering produce. She assured him they were safe.

"This was quite an adventure," Finneas said, scratching his ear, "but I'm happy to go home again."

"The Striped RapsCALLIONS add another accomplishment to a list already long," Gev said. "I did not even lose my tail, as I did when—"

Hugs interrupted with a low growl, and Gev's mouth clapped shut.

Zoraline yawned. "I can take word to the village tonight. Then everyone will know to expect us." Before Mabel could reply, the batfolk returned to sleep.

Helga stared pensively at the passing scenery. Mabel, loath to interrupt the frogfolk's melancholy musings, turned her attention to Ral.

"What of you?" Mabel asked him. "Your own quest remains incomplete."

"I'll see you home," Ral replied. "From there, I'm not sure. I have to tell people about that wayward dragon."

"Your husband?"

"Among others."

Mabel's heart ached on his behalf. "I hope you can return to him soon."

A spark lit Ral's eyes, but he said nothing.

The rest of the journey was spent in idle chatter and quiet contemplation, and the growing yearning for the road to reach its end.

And so it did, the outskirts of Goodhill coming into view near the second sunset, its verdant fields and windmills and bat towers a sweet, familiar sight. Even sweeter, folk lined the roads, waving, banging pots and pans, treating their arrival as an impromptu parade. Many gathered outside Mabel's home, raising a raucous cheer as she and the others climbed out of the transport. Pip and Foggy flung themselves at her as Clem and Rosalyn waited patiently at the front door. Above them, a sign read, "WELCOME BACK MAM" with "and everyone else" scrawled below as an afterthought.

"How I missed you all," Mabel said, voice raw as she drew her husband and daughter into the family hug.

"Nothing for it," Clem said. "We'll go with you next time, so we won't miss each other."

Mabel nuzzled his nose in reply.

"I helped hang the sign!" Pip shrieked.

"He poked my eye again," Foggy complained.

Rosalyn shook her head ruefully, and Clem squeezed Mabel, his eyes filled with laughter.

Finneas was passed around by his family, his sisters fussing over him mercilessly. Gev, perched atop Hugs's shoulder, told their story—with surprising accuracy—to an awestruck audience. Zoraline stood beside them, her diaphanous robes fluttering as she raised a wing to cover her yawn.

Oliver's reedy voice cut through the general din as he hopped to be seen, finally climbing onto a handy box. "Brave heroes, you have returned to us victorious!"

“Now you’ve done it,” Clem murmured. “Another speech for us all.”

Indeed, Oliver delivered an impassioned soliloquy, the details of their journey embellished by his imagination. Many listened with only half an ear because tables were being laid with food. Rosalyn brought out baskets of strawberry rhubarb muffins and sunflower seed scones with cherry jam, and all present filled plates and stomachs.

Helga stood apart, still a stranger to all but the folk she’d fought beside. Ral lurked nearby, another outsider, his expression irritated as he accidentally struck someone with his tail.

“Why don’t you two get some treats,” Mabel told Pip and Foggy, who were briefly torn before relinquishing her in favor of baked goods. She embraced Clem once more, then skirted scores of well-wishers to reach the awkward pair.

“You should eat,” Mabel said. “Troubles fade when the stomach is full, as my mother says.”

“She sounds wise,” Helga replied, anxious smile firmly in place.

“Will you return to your parents now, or to Pondside, or Haymeadow?”

Helga hesitated. “I thought maybe I could ... stay here? As a hedgewitch, to do weather auguries and cantrips. If it isn’t too much trouble. My family would have me, but ...”

“No need to justify it,” Mabel said gently. “I’m sure Oliver will be delighted to add another hero to the town roster.”

“Me, a hero?” Helga’s anxious expression shifted to a startled, genuine smile.

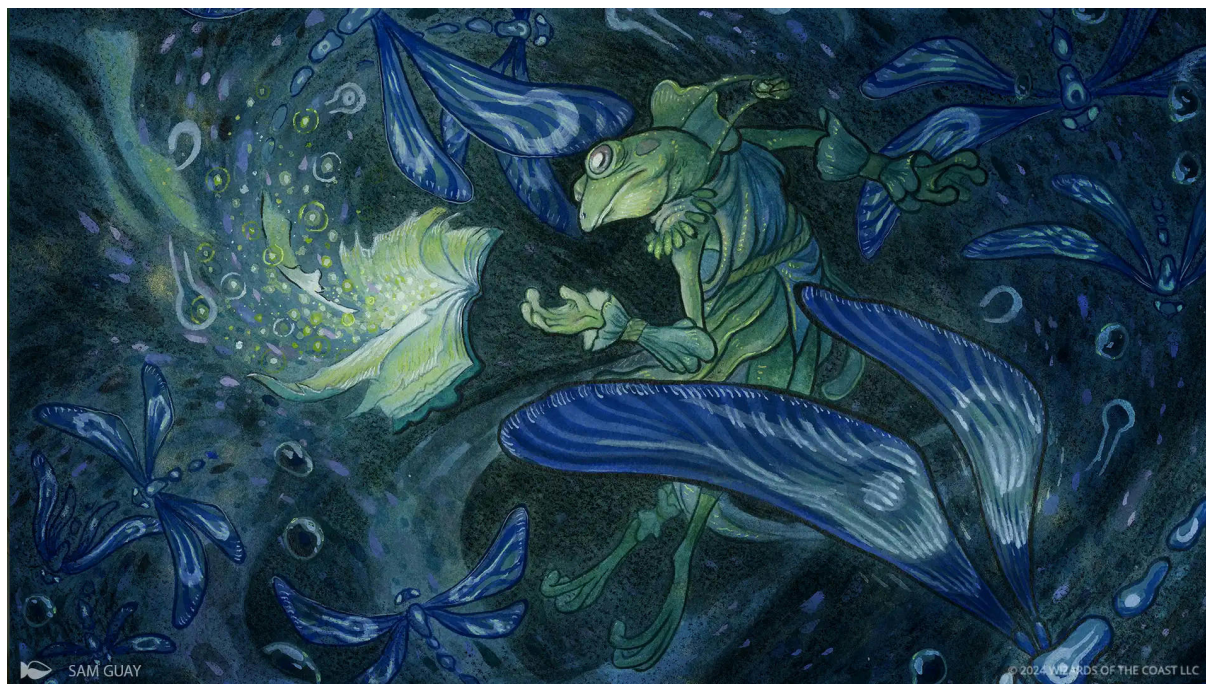
“You’ll have to become accustomed to hearing the moniker on your birthday.” Mabel turned a questioning gaze to Ral.

“I’m leaving,” he said brusquely. “Beleren clearly isn’t here, and it’s not like a clue is going to fall on my head while I eat a muffin.”

“Perhaps not,” Mabel said, “but then at least you’ll have a muffin.”

Before he could retort, Helga gasped, her eyes glowing like a mirror reflecting the sun. The voice that spilled from her mouth sounded distant, as if from the bottom of a pond.

“The kings in the dark will return,” she intoned. “The mage in blue will bring about the end.”



Art by: Sam Guay

The light left her eyes, and Helga blinked as if nothing untoward had occurred. “What kind of muffins?”

Ral huffed a laugh. “I stand corrected. And I wasn’t even eating.”

“The kings in the dark,” Mabel murmured, uneasy. “What does that mean?”

“It means I have a new question to answer. Throw it on top of the pile. Well, thanks for the tip, augur.” Ral began to walk away.

Mabel rested a hand on his arm. “Wait. I have something I want to give you before you leave.”

She raced past a curious Clem, into the house. Up to the attic, where she rummaged in a chest until she found what she sought. Down again, pleased Ral remained where she’d left him, posture tense with impatience.

“For you and your husband,” she said, offering him a pair of ironsap buttons embossed with holly leaves. She’d meant to work them into cloaks for herself and Clem, but never made the time. Ral took them with a curt nod, and she followed as he stalked between houses to a garden purpled by woolly thyme.

“You’ll always be welcome here,” Mabel told him, stroking the gray, fuzzy leaves. “Perhaps we’ll journey together again.”

“Stranger things have happened,” Ral replied. “Can’t say I’ve loved having a tail, though.”

What?

Mabel’s question went unvoiced as Ral vanished in an explosion of lightning sparks that lit the evening, quickly fading into afterimages.

A shriek behind her alerted Mabel to the presence of a pair of naughty mouselings, staring at the garden in shock.

“Did that otterfolk disappear?” Pip squeaked, grabbing Mabel’s leg.

“Folk can’t disappear,” Foggy said. “He must have made a portal.”

Mabel knew enough of portals to be sure he'd done something else entirely. Her children didn't need their peace ruffled, though.

"Come near to me, my little mischief makers," Mabel said, gathering her children close. "What precisely have you been about while I was off adventuring, hmm?"

Her littles began to talk over each other, eager to bask in the warmth of their mother's attention and affection. They rejoined Clem and Rosalyn, who snuggled up as well, tails tangling together as the party around them grew more cheerful and raucous. Soon the sun slept and the moon awoke to the deepening night, a shooting star blazing across the blackberry sky like a wish granted—which, considering Mabel was home safe and snug, it surely must be.