

Episode 3: The Lost and the Found

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From set *Bloomburrow*

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Helga

Amid great fanfare, sorrowful farewells, and yet another speech by Oliver about heroes embarking on a brave mission, the party departed for Pondside.

Helga had slept poorly, desperate to return home and terrified about what she might find. *Would the villagers be combing through rubble, rebuilding homes, preparing communal meals from scavenged crops and fish? Had the destruction been less devastating than she imagined amid the confusion and terror of the Night Owl's attack?*

Would she be thanked for running to find help, or condemned for leaving?

The pleasant weather contrasted with her inner turmoil. Sunlight warmed Helga's dew-moistened skin, cotton-fluff clouds providing sporadic shade. Orderly fields of beets, carrots, mustard, and turnips yielded to wilder meadows of bluebell, cornflower, and kingcup. Long grasses arched overhead, wafting in the breeze, and dandelion seeds drifted on their own inscrutable errands.

Mabel plotted a creek-side path using a star charted map supplied by Zoraline, the dark-furred batfolk. Hugs, the badgerfolk with handsome white stripes, lumbered along with Zoraline hanging upside down from his back. Gev, the lizardfolk, scampered beside him, and Finneas, the sable rabbitfolk, brought up the rear, eyes bright with interest in his surroundings. Helga was the odd stranger, a role she didn't relish any more than being the awkward dreamer.

"So, Helga," Finneas asked, ambling up next to her. "What's your story?"

"About the Calamity Beast?" Helga asked.

"No, your life! Tell us about yourself, from root to fruit."

"Oh." Helga rubbed her arm. "I was born near Three Tree City, in a pond that dried up one summer, so my family moved near the Willow. My father's parents found it too crowded, so they went to Pondside. I followed them."

"Must have been quite a change. Did you miss everyone you left behind?"

"Yes," Helga replied, surprising herself. "But I loved living with my Granfer and Granmer. They encouraged my drawing and magical studies. The rest of my family ... I was tired of disappointing them."

"Can't please everyone. Some stems grow straight, some grow crooked, but they all taste fine in a stew." He chuckled at his own joke. "You studied weaving, you said? With King Glarb himself?"

"I did."

“Can you do the spell where you make a whirlwind of leaves and toss yourself into the air? Or open a pit in the ground that swallows a folk up and smooths the dirt back atop like it never left?”

“N-no, I can’t do any of that.” She’d mastered the most interesting cantrips, but more complicated weaving eluded her. Then, too, she was a little afraid of the stories about weavers corrupted by their magic and turned into mindless monsters. She didn’t want to become one of them, though the prospect seemed unlikely. Especially after the mistake that made King Glarb send her away.

“Stop interrogating her, Finneas,” Mabel said, her tone light. “Why not tell her about yourself?”

Finneas scoffed. “I’m just a simple farmer. My parents were farmers, and their parents, on and on back as far as anyone knows. Always lived in Goodhill—this is my first trip beyond the last farmstead. I’m boring aside from my bow skill.” He patted his weapon affectionately. “I almost didn’t volunteer, truth be told, but won’t this be a tale to tell my own children, and theirs? Mabel already has stories, and Hugs, though he won’t talk about his travels past the Outer Woods with Gev—”

“I’d be pleased to recount the adventures of the Striped RapsCALLIONS,” Gev said, appearing at Helga’s side. Mabel sighed.

“The Striped RapsCALLIONS?” Helga asked.

“Hugs and myself,” Gev explained. “We also traveled with a skunkfolk named Kiki, but she’s gone to her rest.”

“I’m so sorry. When did she ... pass on?”

“Oh, she’s not dead. Fell in love with a raccoonfolk and settled down to raise ladybugs.” Gev bobbed and weaved as he spoke, tail swaying. “There we were, walking through the Calamity Graveyard, when we found squirrelfolk gathering bones.”

“You’ve been to the Calamity Graveyard?” Helga croaked.

“Twice.” Gev’s chest fluttered. “Nasty place, not for sweet frogfolk. The squirrels thought we’d come to, how you say? Poach, so they weaved the bones into a terrifying monster taller than Hugs, with four clawed legs and six sharp-fanged heads on long necks. It moved like lightning bites, so fast. Cha!” He lunged at Helga, who yelped and stumbled.

“Gev,” Mabel chided.

Helga recovered, embarrassed. “How did you escape?”

“I breathed a jet of fire at the creature—a distraction, so Hugs could attack from behind.”

“And Kiki?”

“She chased the squirrelfolk, who ran as cowards do. Hugs lifted the monster by its tail and crack! Broke it apart, then threw the pieces away.”



Hugs, Grisly Guardian | Art by: Steve Prescott

“That’s incredible.” *Perhaps too incredible?* No one else seemed impressed; perhaps they’d heard the tale before?

“Gev, would you mind scouting ahead?” Mabel asked. “You’re the fastest, and the best climber.”

Nodding vigorously, Gev disappeared into the distant grass. Mabel slowed her pace until Helga caught up.

“Gev tells tales,” she said quietly. “He doesn’t mean anything by it.”

“Are you sure?” Helga asked. Having been accused of making things up many times, she was loath to assume the worst.

“Hugs says as much,” Mabel said. “Whatever really happened, I think it’s too painful for them to talk about. Hugs is more retiring by nature, but the stories are Gev’s way of coping.”

After her own near-death experience, Helga could understand the lizardfolk’s pain, if not his choice of managing it. It took effort to stay calm, to keep moving. She tried to observe her surroundings with an artist’s eye, to store up images for later drawings, when she’d have the energy to attempt them.

And to ward off the disturbing visions that made her heart all but leap from her chest and fly into the sun.

They reached what remained of Pondside before midday.

Helga fought to keep her last meal in her stomach as she surveyed the wreckage: charred wicker husks, soot-smearred piles of broken clay, teetering walls of splintered boards, crumbling brick chimneys. Someone's framed needlework lay dirt-stained in the street. A lone door creaked open and banged shut over and over, fraying Helga's nerves.

"You weren't kidding," Finneas said, hands on his hips.

"I'd hoped ..." A lump stuck in Helga's throat.

Gev climbed to the top of a windmill, its snapped blades lying on the ground.

"They went south," Hugs said, voice deep and gruff.

Mabel hunkered near him and studied tracks on the ground. "Haymeadow, likely. It's closer than Good-hill. Looks like they took carts and a cabbage construct."

Helga unearthed a jar from the remains of a house. Raspberry jam.

"Hsst!" Gev whispered behind her. Helga yelped and dropped the jar, which shattered into an ugly mess the color of fresh blood.

"What is it?" Mabel asked.

"Near the water," Gev replied. "Squirreldigging in the rubble."

"Squirreldigging?" Helga asked. "None live in Pondsides that I know of."

"Let's see for ourselves," Mabel said. "Follow me, slowly and quietly."

They crept along the path, avoiding debris and deep gouges in the earth left by the Night Owl's talons. Moisture settled on Helga's skin as they neared the pond, the scent of mud and vegetation strengthening. Her memories of passing time there, sketching or pondering her troubles, gained the same hazy quality as heat shimmer on the water's surface.

As Helga eased around a dislodged section of a flower petal roof, chattering voices rose. She couldn't understand them until she was close enough to see the squirreldigging, one slate gray and the other redder than Mabel. They both wore black clothing adorned with bones, one a hooded cape and a leaf skirt, the other a robe whose ragged hem swept the ground. Both dug through the remains of a frogfolk home—not Helga's, though. Oh, pond scum, had that been destroyed, too?

"The owl sure made a mess of this place," the hooded one said.

"Just like the last one," the other replied.

Helga's skin crawled. *The last one? So, her dream-vision was true? How many places had the owl attacked so far?*

"Why is Cruelclaw wasting our time with rubble combing?" Hood grumbled.

"Who knows. This whole job has been one problem after another."

Cruelclaw? Job?

Robe kicked a dented metal cup into a broken table. "Let's catch up with the others before they get to Three Trees City. Nothing worth taking here."

"Too right." Hood picked up a child's painting on cured bark and sent it spinning off into the water. The other squirreldigging laughed as the memento sank under the waves.

“Oy!” Helga shouted, stomach sick with rage. “How dare you! Stealing from villagers who’ve lost everything.”

Hood started in surprise, then sneered. “Leave off, bumpkin.”

“We should teach her not to bother her betters,” Robe added.

Mabel stepped forward, paw on the hilt of her sword. “Thieves are no better than worms.”

“Worms are good for the soil,” Finneas added. “Thieves are good for nothing.”

Gev hissed and twirled his maces. Hugs loomed behind him, Zoraline still asleep on his back.

“Two against six,” Hood mused. “Bad odds.”

“Good thing we brought reinforcements.” Robe raised his paws, palm up, and Hood followed suit. Magic grew from their fingertips like the stems of dead leaves, spreading eerie purple veins.

Around the party, a dry rustling arose. To Helga’s left, two points of purple light appeared, then two more. Within moments, dozens of gleaming eyes surrounded the Goodhill delegation. Creaking, crackling figures stepped into the sunlight, skeletal forms limned with the same leaf-figures conjured by the squirreelfolk.

“Necromancers,” Gev spat.

Zoraline sputtered awake. “What? Who?”

Helga’s blood chilled. Mabel slid in front of her, wielding her fang-sword and a small ironsap shield emblazoned with a five-petaled mallow flower. The necromancers flicked their paws at their opponents, and the skeletons scurried to obey. A ratfolk snapped yellowing, broken teeth at Helga as it advanced.

Mabel blurred to the left, her magic obscuring her movement. The rat skeleton’s jaws closed on empty air. Her sword slashed down, carving through bone with an orange flash. Before Helga could gasp, the ratfolk’s head lay on the ground, the purple light in its eyes fading.

Farther away, Finneas leaped into the air and twisted, loosing a pair of arrows at a birdfolk skeleton. One projectile bounced off and the other flew through the empty eye socket and out the other side.

Gev spun his fire maces in a dance like the one at Mabel’s party, flames painting the air. His tail lashed out, tripping one undead mousefolk as he knocked another away. Whirling back to the first, he smashed both maces down on its head with a sickening crunch.



Art by: Mark Zug

A snarl behind Helga made her duck and cover her head. Hugs lifted a skeletal otterfolk with both paws and ripped it in half. He dashed the top part against the ground and threw the rest into the pond. His heavy boot rose and fell, crushing the bones into dust.

A shadow passed above. Zoraline swooped down, caressing a necromancer's neck. His indigo magic stuttered, then flowed backward into the batfolk, suffusing her with an opalescent glow that lit her eyes and mouth from within. Gliding toward a cluster of skeletons, Zoraline keened a haunting prayer-song, releasing her stolen power in a wave. The undead shuddered, then collapsed to the ground.

More birdfolk skeletons appeared, pecking and clawing at Hugs, chasing Zoraline, and shrugging off attacks from an increasingly frustrated Finneas. His next arrow was tipped with an odd sack rather than an arrowhead. Just before it hit its target, he stamped his foot in a rapid pattern. The sack erupted into a tangle of vines, wrapping around the skeleton's torso and wings. The undead plummeted to the ground, where Hugs used his boots to make short work of it. Mabel darted about, a mouse-shaped blur cutting apart foes with deadly accuracy.

Helga rose from her crouch. She didn't know any useful cantrips, had never wielded a weapon in her life, but there must be something she could do to help.

The answer came to her in a flash, like an otterfolk's lightning. "Mabel," Helga shouted. "The birds!"

"They're a bit high for me, dear," Mabel replied.

"I can make steps. Look!" Helga reached out to the water, pulling a ball of liquid toward her and separating it into beads. These she flattened into a series of floating platforms that reached the skeletal fliers.

Mabel raced up the stairway of droplets, sword and shield ready. Helga tried to keep one eye on her and the other on the enemy, but it was tricky. Her focus was so split, she realized too late that she wasn't maintaining the spell, and halfway up, Mabel's boot sank into a water step.

"No!" Helga gasped. Her fear of failing—again—broke her concentration. With a sound like a bubble popping, the stairs fell to splatter the soil.

Mabel's reflexes saved her. She leaped at the nearest birdfolk skeleton, her shield catching its wing while her sword drove into a gap between ribs. The undead plummeted, scraping along the ground with Mabel clinging to its side. She wrenched her sword free and brought it down on the creature's spine. Her blade flared orange as it cut through bone like a knife through paper.

Quiet fell over the battlefield. Hugs rolled his shoulders and grunted. Zoraline landed beside him, folding her wings around her. Finneas kept two arrows nocked but pointed down. Gev slapped a skull with his tail, sending it tumbling toward the pond. Mabel turned in a full circle, first quickly, then more deliberately. Finally, she sheathed her sword and slid her shield onto a strap on her pack.

"Everyone hale?" Mabel asked.

Various noises of assent reached her, until Gev hissed.

"I tell you not to do this," Gev said, slapping Hugs's boot. "Look at all these splinters. I'll be forever taking them out again."

"Again?" Finneas sounded appalled.

"Boots do not sprout from bushes, and yet—"

"Does anyone see the necromancers?" Mabel interjected.

"They fled," Zoraline replied. "Toward the Long River."

Helga hunched in on herself, first in relief, then shame. She'd lost control of her spell. *Why could she never concentrate when it was most important?*

"I'm so sorry," she told Mabel. "My cantrip—"

"It's fine," Mabel said gently. "Mishaps happen." To the others, she said, "We need to decide our next course of action."

"We won't help the villagers?" Helga asked, startled.

"That's one possibility." Mabel dabbed a handkerchief on a cut weeping blood on her arm. "We might instead follow the squirreelfolk."

Helga started to protest but considered Mabel's suggestion. The necromancers seemed to know why Maha had attacked Pondside, had perhaps instigated the situation. What were they up to? She wanted answers. And yet, she worried about her neighbors.

"What enemies might we encounter if we follow those fellows?" Finneas asked. "Can we handle more skeletons, or worse?"

Gev, pulling bone shards from Hugs's paws and fur, said, "The Striped Rapsallions do not fear undead boot-wreckers."

"I cannot read the stars now," Zoraline said, yawning, "but their movements at dawn suggested more danger in our future."

More danger? Helga's stomach turned.

“Anyone from Pondside has probably made it to Haymeadow,” Mabel said. “It might be best to go to Three Trees City and try to discover more about this Cruelclaw and his plans.” She met each of their gazes, landing on Helga last. “What if another Calamity Beast disaster is looming and we could help prevent it?”

“Could we really?” Finneas asked.

“If not us, who?” Mabel replied, grasping her sword’s pommel. “Helga, it’s your village. What do you say?”

Helga hesitated, her veins filled with fire and ice. Some moments were a fulcrum on which life turned, and this felt like one.

“We follow the squirreldfolk,” she said. “To Three Trees.”

Mabel nodded, then began to issue orders. Finneas collected any arrows undamaged enough to reuse. Zoraline plotted a route along the Long River, then climbed onto Hugs’s back and succumbed to slumber. Gev had finished grooming Hugs and snacked on beetle crackers.

Helga, swallowing nerves, went to her grandparents’ house.

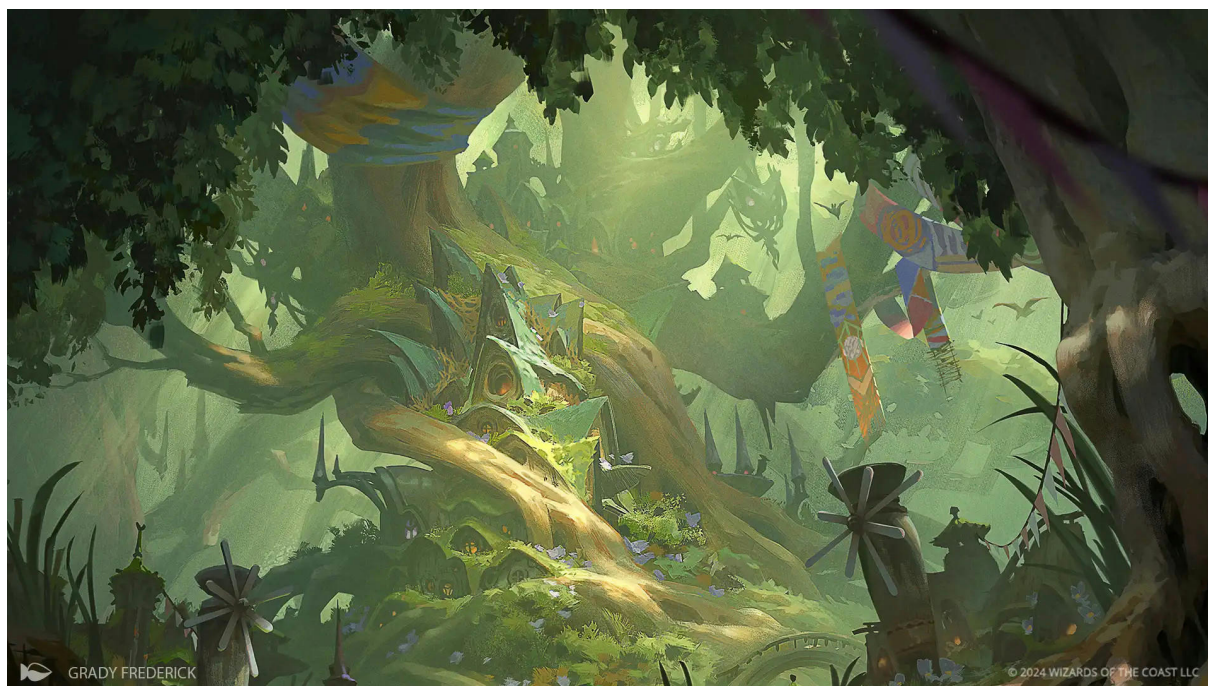
Its waxed paper dome had cracked on top like an eggshell. The broad leaves arcing over that side were partly sheared away, the cut portion wilting in the day’s heat. Sunlight angled through the broken roof, so the walls glowed from within as if the lamps inside were lit. Even so, the place felt cold and empty.

Helga forced herself to enter, to pack clean clothing and food that would travel well. She told herself she would be back; they were only going to Three Trees City, unless the trail of the squirreldfolk took them further. Why, then, did she reverently touch her grandmother’s collection of etched copper orbs, slipping her favorite into her pack? Why did she take her grandfather’s wand, set his wide-brimmed hat on her own head?

Mabel made no mention of Helga’s brief absence, and soon their steps turned northward. Finneas didn’t engage Helga in conversation again, not even when they camped at nightfall. Zoraline flew back to Goodhill to take the message of their discoveries and new destination, her robes like a swirl of stars vanishing into the darkness. Helga wondered if, somehow, she was disappearing, too.

Mabel

A kindly group of otterfolk sighted the party trudging beside the Long River and invited them to board two brightly painted, fish-shaped boats. Mabel and Finneas conversed with the crews, part of a larger family reuniting in Three Trees City for a wedding. Hugs stayed away from the water, a sleeping Zoraline on his back, while Gev’s breakfast made an unwelcome reappearance as he moaned in distress. Helga stared forlornly at the frothy wake with a pencil in one hand and her journal in the other.



Art by: Grady Frederick

The massive trees that gave Three Trees City its name rose in the distance, branches intertwined in places like lovers holding hands. How the oak, sycamore, and willow came to grow together along the banks of the Long River, no one knew. The animalfolk who built the city over generations began with the hope of harmony; in some places, that hope manifested as meticulous arrangements of graceful buildings and fungal paths nestled among the canopy, twined around the trunks or rising from arching roots. In other places, harmony was a cheerful patchwork of different styles jumbled together: carved wood mixed with painted clay, feathers with beads, embroidery with knotwork-tied sticks. Cities, like plants, often grew in unexpected ways.

They arrived at the Docklands beneath the drooping tendrils of the willow, their boats navigating the sprawling mass of rafts, wharves, and floating structures to tie up at a crowded pier. Chattering birdfolk couriers picked up small packages and mail for delivery; otterfolk handed cargo up to raccoonfolk, who easily shouldered large boxes and sacks; frogfolk played bubbleball in the shallows, or shared meals of delicious-smelling grilled minnows with minkfolk resting in the shade.

Once Mabel and the others thanked their hosts and disembarked, they found the foot traffic was as busy as the river. Finneas's twitching ears suggested the profusion of strangers overwhelmed him. Hugs stood like a boulder, the flow of bodies parting around him. Gev climbed past Zoraline up to his shoulder for a better view, and Helga stuck close to his side.

Somewhere in the Quilted District, Mabel's parents visited with friends, enjoying the raucous pleasures of the city's heart, beneath the vast quilted banner symbolizing the union of all animalfolk. Helga, too, had family in the city. Alas, there was no time to seek them out.

"Finneas," she said.

The rabbitfolk hopped nervously. "Yes?"

"Can you help me ask the locals whether they've seen our necromancer friends, or Cruelclaw? Hugs and the others can wait here."

“Right, yes,” Finneas replied. Having a task seemed to center him. Soon he chatted amiably with a group of frogfolk, while Mabel approached a pair of dockhands watching someone mutter a weaving over a tangle of nets.

After a dozen attempts each, neither Mabel nor Finneas had any luck. She was about to shift their party downriver, past warehouses and trading offices to where tarp-roofed inns flew bright red pennants, when an old frogfolk gave her pause.

“You’re the second stranger looking for someone today,” he grumbled.

“Is that so?” Mabel asked.

“Aye,” the elder continued. “That fella yonder’s nagged near everyone. Right odd, too. Keeps hitting folk with his tail like he forgets it’s his.” He pointed with his pearl-topped cane.

An otterfolk nearby argued with another of the same. His black fur was streaked with white, his posture stiff, and he wore a red sash and blue tunic, strange goggles perched on his head. A single copper bracer adorned his right arm, while a strip of white fabric was tied around his left wrist.

“I assure you,” he said, “this situation is infinitely more irritating to me than it is to you.”

“Is it now?” the other otterfolk replied. “You can’t even tell us what kind of animalfolk he is.”

“As I said, he may be wearing a blue cloak—”

“Maybe?” a weaselfolk repeated.

“—and he has distinctive tattoos—”

“Tattoos?” someone else chimed in. “What are those, then?”

The stranger sighed. “Fur patterns? Stripes? Two white lines, running from his mouth to his chin, and others on one side of his cheek ... face ... Would you just look at my drawing?” It must have been poorly rendered, because the others doubled over with laughter.

“Never mind,” he said. “Thank you so much for your utter lack of assistance.”

Rude, Mabel thought, an opinion that strengthened as he spun on his heel and slapped the weaselfolk with his tail. Worse, he nearly barreled into Helga. She held her journal in front of her like a shield, her green skin-tinged gray, nervous smile in place.

“S-stripes,” Helga stuttered.

The otterfolk paused. “That’s what I said, yes.”

Helga flipped through her book, nearly fumbling it. She stopped at a particular page and held it up. The stranger grabbed her arm and pulled her closer.

“Did Beleren pass through here?” he demanded. “How long ago? Was anyone with him?”

“Release her,” Mabel said, gripping the hilt of her sword, “or you’ll lose that fancy bracer along with the rest of your arm.”

A spark of lightning flashed across the otterfolk’s gray-blue eyes, but he released Helga and stepped away.

“Don’t tempt me,” he said. “I’ve been wandering this infernal place for days and your friend is my first lead.”

“Her name is Helga,” Mabel said coolly. “I’m Mabel. And you are?”

“Ral,” he replied. “Ral Zarek. I’m looking for someone named Jace Beleren.”

Mabel peeked at Helga’s journal. The frogfolk had drawn a face, a foxfolk. They did indeed have markings like the ones the stranger—Ral—described. On the same page, Helga had also sketched a cloak with an odd circular pattern.

“I’ve seen him in my dreams,” Helga whispered, her voice gradually strengthening. “He’s not alone. There’s a lizardfolk, with green and black scales, and yellow eyes. And another small creature who’s hard to see. A dark cloud follows them.” She looked up as if expecting a storm, but only blue sky peeked through the Willow’s curtain of leaves.

“You’re sure?” Ral asked.

Helga hesitated, then bobbed her head. Mabel wondered how many times her visions had been doubted, by Oliver and others, for her to be so shy about sharing them.

“What is he doing here?” Ral muttered. “A lizard ... Not a snake? Could it be ...?”

Mabel had no idea what he was on about, but it wasn’t Cruelclaw. She needed to move along before the trail grew colder.

“If you’ll excuse us,” Mabel said, “we’ll be on our way. Best of luck finding your friend.” She guided Helga toward the others.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Ral said, striding beside her. “You’re not going anywhere until the frog gives me answers.”

The nerve! “Helga has her own business to mind, thank you kindly—”

She was interrupted by Helga, who said, in a quiet voice: “You believe me?”

Ral rubbed his whiskers with one paw. “I believe the evidence of my own eyes. Right now, you’re my only link to Beleren, so I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

Before Mabel could reply, mussel alarms clattered upriver. Dockhands dropped their work and belowered commands at each other, rushing about, clearly agitated. Some produced ropes and tied down loose crates and barrels, securing them to rings embedded in the wooden floorboards or the decks of the boats. Others did the same for the boats themselves, lashing them to the piers or each other, like a raft of otterfolk holding paws.

“What’s happening?” Ral asked, sliding his goggles down over his eyes.

“I’m not sure.” Mabel tried to hail a raccoonfolk racing past, but they ignored her.

Finneas pointed. “My lands, look at the water.”

The river had risen well past the high tide marker on a nearby piling and continued to swell, quickly overflowing its banks. Waves crested over the quay, up through the cracks of the boardwalk, lapping first at Mabel’s boots, then her legs. The boats tied together strained and tugged at their moorings, while the unsecured ones spun away downriver. A few crashed into each other, hulls cracking like nuts.

“Something comes!” Gev shouted, balanced atop Hugs’s head.

A sinuous form moved below the water’s surface, silver scales glinting in the dappled sunlight. Unlike minnows and guppies, this fish was so long Mabel couldn’t see its tail, or even its dorsal fin. Magical markings glowed along its side, their rosy hue warped by the roiling currents. A huge wave lifted the

creature so it loomed above the Docklands. Baleful eyes burned with power, and a long mouth gaped to reveal rows of wickedly sharp teeth.



Art by: Samuele Bandini

“The Flood Gar!” Helga screamed.

A whip of water lashed out, sweeping a cluster of animalfolk into the river. Lightning crackling around his bracer, Ral raised his arm toward the Calamity Beast.

“No!” Mabel stood in front of him. “You’ll shock anyone in the water who isn’t otterfolk like you!”

“How do you normally handle these things?” he retorted.

“There’s nothing normal about this!”

Another water-whip struck, pushing Mabel and Ral into Hugs. The badgerfolk staggered but remained upright. Zoraline, still sleeping on his back, astonishingly didn’t wake.

A shimmering, blue-tinged shadow hovered over them: a wave as tall as an elderberry bush. It crashed down, engulfing Mabel and dragging her away from the dock. Fighting the Gar’s wild magic was a losing battle, but she persevered, kicking toward what she hoped was the surface as her lungs burned.

A strong paw pulled her up. Mabel sucked in a deep breath and clung to Hugs, Ral doing the same beside her, the others arrayed around or atop him like the children at her party. He struggled against the undertow pulling them to the center of the river, farther from safety.

“Can you bend the current to take us back to shore?” Mabel asked Ral, between being dunked and wave-tossed.

“Bend it?” Ral spluttered back. “I control rain, not rivers.”

An otterfolk who couldn’t manage currents? Odd , but Mabel hadn’t the energy to dwell on it. The water’s chill seeped into her bones as they were flung about like flotsam at the mercy of the river. Soon they’d gone well past Three Trees City, tumbling into a tributary that veered southwest. Where would

they finally manage to escape? Would they escape at all, or would their journey end at the bottom of the Long River?

No. Mabel refused to accept defeat. Even if she never found Cruelclaw and discovered what he was up to, she would survive. Clem and the littles waited for her, and she would never abandon them.

As if some tendril of the world's magic heard her oath, the river narrowed, the turbulent current slowing to a more sedate flow. Rocky outcroppings flanked the water, covered in sediment and clusters of mussels, gnarled roots thrusting from them like grasping hands. Empty snail shells and water-smoothed bones littered the shore, dark reminders of the fate that could have befallen them if Hugs hadn't kept everyone afloat.

The exhausted badgerfolk guided them to the muddy riverbank and collapsed in the muck next to a stagnant tide pool, sides heaving. Everyone slid or clambered off him; even Zoraline sputtered awake briefly, murmuring about wet fur. Mabel quickly assessed their surroundings: a marshy cave, moss-covered gaps in the stone above allowing shafts of filtered light to allay the gloom. Bugs crawled up the walls, disappearing into cracks and crevices, and the scent of sulfur and decay permeated the partly enclosed space.

"Is anyone injured?" Mabel asked.

"Only my pride," Ral said. A clam spat slurry at him before burrowing deeper into the sludge.

"I think I swallowed a barrel of water," Finneas groaned.

Gev's tail flared orange, and a subtle heat emanated from his body. He briskly rubbed up against Hugs to dry him, mud solidifying beneath his feet.

"Where are we?" Helga asked.

"I don't—" Mabel began, then halted, her ears turning toward a rustling from the cave entrance. Between blinks, dark shapes coalesced from the shadows. A mischief of ratfolk garbed in hooded cloaks surrounded the party, pointing wickedly curved daggers and bladed staves at them.

"Outsiders," a ratfolk hissed. "You are not welcome here. Leave, or face dire consequences."