



PROLOGUE

“And now disaster is at hand...”

Gabriele de’ Mussis, lawyer, Italy, 1348

The rat dug a burrow in the most remote area of the Lower Tunnels that she could find. She dug feverishly, using tooth and claw, feeling as she did that eyes watched her from behind. Her baby was curled up, asleep—a blessing. Expecting at every moment to feel long, curved teeth sink into her shoulder, she shuddered, making her fur ripple up and down her back. Finally done, she climbed inside with her wisp-thin pup, pulling him close. Her tooth marks grooved the damp earthen chamber; dirt clung to her claws and trembled on the ends of her whiskers. The ever-present stink of the Lowers hovered in the air like a brown fog, but she didn’t care. Maybe here, at the end of nowhere, she and her baby could be safe.

The mother’s name was Nia.

She let out a breath that she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. Pulling her pup tight, Nia licked his head, his ears, his tiny pink paws.



“Pip,” she murmured. She’d named him Pip because he was as tiny as a seed. Seeds can grow into strong trees. “My sweet Pip,” she whispered in his ear.

Directly over her head, through thirty feet of dirt and rusting pipes, in the weak December sun, the harbour city’s popular market was bustling with people looking for last minute presents. Middle-Gate Market was festive with its potted evergreen trees and strands of blinking coloured lights. Shiny red balls trembled on the boughs of the tinsel-dressed pines as salt air gusted up the hill from the sea below and rattled the lights against the rafters where they were strung.

Watching over all of this, under the faux Gothic clock, stood Middle-Gate’s most famous tourist attraction: a brass statue modeled after the gargoyles of Paris’s Notre Dame cathedral. The monster stood on guard, a five-foot winged beast that stood meekly by while tourists thronged around it, snapped selfies, and rubbed the creature’s flared nostrils for luck.

That was the side of the market the tourists saw and the locals loved. They had no idea of the other side, the one that lay below. A distinct world, with its own ways, its own rules: a colony of rats.

Tunnels wound underneath the hill, tooth-carved thoroughfares, veiled from the eyes of humans. There were tunnels high up and tunnels below that snaked deep into the hill’s belly.

The Uppers were dug alongside the city’s swanky cafés and eateries, and food was never far away. But lower down the hill, below the heart of the market, it was different. Tangles of narrow tunnels limped through broken pipes, leaking sewers, and sodden earth, connecting scores of foul smelling, crumbling burrows.

No rat lived in the Lowers by choice. Except one, that is.

Nia had been staring, listening, for many beats of her heart. Nothing. Her son lay in the warm crook of her belly, snoring softly.

Nia's eyelids drifted closed. She shook them open. But the warmth of Pip against her, his sweet, newborn smell, made her sleepy. Her eyelids wavered. So sleepy...

Shhoosh.

Her eyes flew open.

A brush of sound came from the outside tunnel. Nia pushed her pup down and stood over him, scanning the air with her nose. Pip squirmed under her with a squeak of protest.

"Shh!" Nia lowered herself and pulled him close, hardly daring to breathe. Her abandoned burrow in the Uppers still held the bodies of her other pups. They lay scattered around like dried leaves. On each of their necks a single bite mark, a red half-moon. She had not been able to save them, but here, now, there was still hope.

She kept her eyes on Pip.

"Nia?" A voice broke the stillness.

She gasped and fumbled to hide Pip beneath her. "Go away!" she cried. Tears bunched behind her eyes, threatening to spring.

A shadow filled the entrance hole. "You're not still angry, are you? I had no choice!"

"No choice?" Nia laughed bitterly. "Yes, poor you. Poor *helpless* you!"

As she spoke, Pip wriggled out from under her. He sniffed the air like a





wobbly snake. She grabbed him and pushed him back down. But it was too late.

The shadow hissed. “You hid one from me? You deceitful, conniving—”

“You can’t have Pip!” said Nia through gritted teeth. Tears dripped onto Pip’s head and darkened his fur like a bloom of blood. “I will not let you!”

The voice roared with laughter. “You won’t *let* me? *You* have no choice.”

“No!” she screamed. Nia coiled her back legs and leaped, claws extended, teeth bared. The figure met her mid-air. She dug her claws into his back and tore at his thick, ropy neck with her teeth but was flung against the wall. Pain shot through her. “Run, Pip!” she screamed, even though her pup was too young to understand.

The voice laughed. “Yes, Pip. Run.”

They rolled over and over, ripping, scratching, biting. Shrieks echoed off the wall. There was scuffling, a squeal.

And then...silence.

Pip sniffed the air, his small, shell-like ears turning toward the sound. He was cold. Where was she, the one who was warm and smelled like milk? He nosed impatiently through the nesting and plopped out onto the dirt. He found her, and nuzzled against her paw, but it flopped back down. Warm, sticky fluid flowed from her and he wrinkled his nose and sneezed. He poked her again. *Wake up! Wake up!*

“Pip.” The voice behind him made him jerk his head around. Sharp teeth gripped his hind paw, yanked him across the floor. Pip squealed and scratched, but the cruel teeth bit through.

His tiny paw burst with pain, and he fell into darkness.