

Prologue

The wall that had stood around the mouse city for centuries was crumbling. The invading rats were strong enough to claw straight through the stone. Inside, they streamed past the little farms toward the center of the mouse city. They ransacked homes, dragging innocent residents into the streets. Somewhere, a pinkie mouse was crying.

The rats reached the elegant city square. Broad flagstones stretched toward a stone fountain. From high above, mice

watched in terror. The attackers spread, seizing torches from wall sconces. They smashed windows and threw the torches inside. Within moments, acrid smoke was curling angrily from the buildings.

At the edge of the square, a dappled mouse snuck out of a doorway, hood pulled down low. She held a scroll in one paw with a hastily scrawled warning to the other mouse cities. If she could escape unnoticed . . .

She tiptoed through the shadows, holding her breath, but a loose flagstone rattled beneath her paw. The sound was enough to attract the attention of the closest rat. He reached her with a single bound. She lashed out with her claws and he lashed back, throwing the mouse halfway across the square. She hit the side of the stone fountain and fell to the cobblestones.

“Find that needle!” screamed the rat leader, his fangs dripping with foam. “Find the mouse with the needle! For Midnight!”

The rats redoubled their attacks, tearing doors off hinges and ripping through walls. Screams echoed through the broad streets. No corner of the city was safe.

The mice could no longer defend their home. They turned tail and fled as the rats pursued them.

Next to the fountain at the center of the square, the dappled mouse lay crumpled against the rose vines that grew around the base. Two stone mice stood at the center of the fountain, gazing up at the golden spindle balanced between their paws.

A thin stream of shining water flowed down from the spindle like a silver thread. The dappled mouse’s eyes fluttered open. With great determination, she lifted her head to look up at the stone mice. “Arachne and Rhapso, watch over my city . . .,” she began, but her words came thick. She gasped and fell back to the ground.

The air around the two stone mice shimmered silver for a moment, then drifted onto the rose vines. The statues remained cold and solid. But the thorns of the rose vines were now silver.

The rats had torn apart the city and found nothing. They moved on, hunting for the mouse with the needle. They would not fail, no matter how many cities they had to destroy.

In the mouse city, the fires burned, staining the stone walls black with soot. Not until snow began to flutter downward did the flames succumb. Soon, the ruins of the silent city lay under a blanket of white. Only the figures of Arachne and Rhapsody remained, their stone eyes gazing into the distance.

The war had begun.

Chapter 1

“Cornichonne your face!” Delphine couldn’t help laughing at the sight of the cat standing in the snow. Frozen droplets hung from her friend’s short whiskers like tiny icicles. “Yesh. This always happens to me when it’s cold,” Cornichonne said in her gravelly voice. She exhaled and her moist breath escaped into the wintry air, where it formed another layer of frosty crystals on her flat face.

They were standing at the mouth of an abandoned badger

burrow, looking out at the forest. The sun was so weak that it barely managed to break through the tree branches. Delphine clutched her needle, running her paws along the engravings on the shining silver shaft. Somewhere out there lay the next step on the trail of her ancestor, and perhaps the key to Delphine’s true identity. But something else awaited her, too: King Midnight, the murderous rat who would stop at nothing to get his claws on Delphine’s magic needle.

“Alexander?” Delphine turned and glanced back into the burrow. “Are you ready?”

“Hmm?” Alexander emerged, swirling his creamy velvet cloak around him. It was already the worse for wear after a week of living inside the dusty hole in the ground. But he held his head high and managed a courtly grin. “My lady, I am as ready as the day I slew the hawkworms.”

Delphine smiled, despite her worries. The rats were still out there, searching the forests. Her mind jumped back to the terrible night they had fled Château Trois Arbres—how the rats had rampaged through the halls, taking down the mice who were there for the Winterberry Ball. Delphine had realized that the only way to protect everyone was to flee the château. She was the one the rats were after. But what had happened to Princess Petits-Oiseaux . . . and her pawmaids . . . and the footmice . . . and the princess’s pet bumblebee? Delphine could only hope that they had all made it to safety.

Now Delphine feared it wouldn’t be long before the rats tracked them down in the dim wood. “Then let’s get going. We’ve lost some time.”

Cornichonne’s golden eyes widened. “How long was I asleep?”

Delphine tried to remember. “Four days, I think? It’s fine. You needed to rest.” The cat had collapsed to the ground after they had escaped the rats, and no wonder: she had run straight through the night in order to save them.

“I do feel better,” Cornichonne said with a yawn. Drool dripped from her fang onto the snow and froze.

Delphine reached up and patted her friend’s tiny nose. “Good.”

They strapped their makeshift saddlebags to the cat, and Delphine gave yet another silent thank-you that the ballgown she’d been wearing when they escaped included so many petticoats. She had gladly sacrificed several of them to sew into saddlebags so they could carry the roots they had dug out of the walls of the burrow. They were withered but would serve as meager rations on the road.

Delphine shivered, her paws already half-frozen through her thin silk dancing slippers. She could see Alexander was trembling as well. “We need to find better clothing,” she said. Her stomach growled. “And more food. Not to mention shelter.”

“Just the basics in Mouselow’s Hierarchy of Needs,” Alexander replied, ever cheerful.

Delphine felt grateful for his positive outlook, especially when 9

things were dire. But she still couldn’t stop worrying. Why *had* she been entrusted with a needle of the Threaded? For years, it had hung above her bed at Château Desjardins, where she’d been found on the doorstep as a baby. Her maman (oh, how she missed Maman!) had kept it—as well as the cloth bundle in which she’d been wrapped—so Delphine would have mementos of her mysterious past. But until very recently, the needle had lain dormant.

Why could she now tap into the needle’s ancient magic? Was it her fault that the treaty with the rats had been broken, putting the entire kingdom of Peltinore in danger from King Midnight? And if so, what could she, a mere seamstress mouse, possibly do to stop him? Maman would say to solve any problem, one must start by finding the knot. The trouble was, everything felt so tangled. What Delphine wouldn’t do to be back at Château Desjardins, talking it all through with Maman over their Friday croissant crumbs and hot barley tea.

Sighing, Delphine settled herself on Cornichonne’s back and watched Alexander finish strapping his decorative scabbard around his waist. It was an elaborate affair, complete with the dress sword that had come with his ensemble for the Winterberry Ball. Luckily he also had the sharpened rat dagger he had snatched up as they fled, a dagger large enough to serve as a sword for a mouse. He tucked that one into the strap of his scabbard over the other hip, and bowed in her direction.

Delphine had to laugh. “Always perfectly dressed for the occasion!” she teased as he climbed up behind her. Cornichonne twitched one of her ears. “Which way?” “Let’s head north,”

Delphine replied after a moment. Cornichonne nodded and set off through the thick, dark forest. “Why north?” said Alexander, pressed up close behind her to keep them both warm.

“It’s the opposite direction from home. It’s the best I could think of for now.”

“Fair enough.”

The ancient trees hung heavy with frozen webs of moss. Delphine began to relax as Cornichonne padded along. The cat sang softly to herself.

*Pollywogs have froggy tails,
Slimier than curtain snails,
Over under over under,
Stop before you make a blunder,
Tie a tiny bow on top and go.
See a fish and make a wish,
Put it in a cooking dish,
Over under over under,
Listen for the coming thunder,
Tie a tiny bow on top and go.*

The song went on like this for some time, until Delphine had stopped wondering what it all meant and started wondering how in the world Cornichonne could remember so many verses. Just then, Alexander poked his nose into the top edge of her travel cloak. It felt like someone had pressed an icicle onto her neck.

“Alexander! Stop that!”

He pulled back sheepishly. “My nose is cold.”

“You need a nose like mine,” said Cornichonne. “Flat. It’s perfect.”

“Cornichonne has a nose?” Alexander stage-whispered. “I heard that,” said the cat with a snuffle.

At that moment, a growl sounded in the trees nearby. All three travelers stiffened.

“Wait—” Alexander’s nose twitched. The smells of roasting potatoes and wood smoke wafted toward them, along with more snorting sounds. They relaxed. The noises weren’t growls; they were *snores*. Someone was napping by a campfire.

Alexander slid down from Cornichonne's back and drew his rat-dagger sword. "Sounds like the owner of those potatoes isn't guarding them very well," he said in a low voice. "Anyone else fancy some lunch?"

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" whispered Delphine. "Only one way to find out." He flashed her an insouciant grin and disappeared between the trees.

Delphine hopped off Cornichonne. The cat immediately sat down and began to groom her paws. "Aren't *you* worried?" said Delphine.

"Whatever that creature is, it's asleep," pointed out Cornichonne. She licked another chunk of ice from between her toes. "Just don't wake it up."

Delphine pushed her way between the branches in the direction Alexander had gone, following the smell of roasted vegetables. She found him peeking between the fronds of a dead fern, blocking her view.

"What do you see?" she hissed, trying to see around him. His ears went pale. "Uh, Delfie," he whispered through clenched teeth, "I think we should go back now. No potato is worth that risk."

"Why?" She stood on tiptoe, finally managing to peer over his shoulder. A squeak of horror escaped her.

In a little clearing lay a rat next to a campfire. It was indeed asleep, its head thrown back with its mouth hanging open. As they watched, another bone-rattling snore escaped. The sight made Delphine's blood run as cold as Lucifer the cat always had back at Château Desjardins. She squeaked again.

Alexander's paw pressed against her mouth. "Shhh!" They retreated, one slow step at a time. They had almost reached Cornichonne when an unpleasant grumble erupted behind them. The rat was waking up.

"Go!" They abandoned stealth and scrambled back onto the cat's back. Cornichonne leapt forward and the rat sounds faded into the distance.

When they had gone far enough that the cat judged it safe to slow to a walk, Alexander began chortling.

Delphine turned on him. "What are you laughing at?" "Who knew rats liked potatoes?"

"It's not funny, Alexander," she said, crossing her arms, but even Cornichonne was snuffling in amusement. "All right, it was a little bit funny," she said, penitent. Then she remembered something. "Did you see what it was wearing?"

"Wearing?" Alexander sounded confused. "Tan breeches, I think? And a straw hat?"

“Exactly! Not the uniform of Midnight’s rats. I don’t think it was one of his troops.”

“A random rat, traveling through the forest in the dead of winter, like us?” She felt Alexander shrug behind her. “I suppose stranger things have happened.”

They rode for a while in silence, until Delphine started smiling again. “The look on your face was pretty funny.” Alexander chuckled, a cheerful sound in the gloomy murk. “It’ll be a good story.”



The forest was not only dark and murky, it was also far more overgrown and foreboding than anywhere they had yet been.

The craggy branches of the old trees hung low like fingertips, reaching for them as they passed.

Alexander leaned forward. “So what’s your plan, Delfie?” “I’m working on it.” She didn’t want to admit that she had no plan at all. Find King Midnight, somehow. Figure out how to stop him. All while not getting captured by his minions swarming the countryside. And if the sheer number of rats camped around Château Trois Arbres had been any indication, he had an enormous army.

He gave her a squeeze. “You’ll know what to do when the time is right.”

She wished she felt as confident as he did. She was about to say so, when a sharp crack echoed through the trees. Cornichonne froze. Delphine strained to see through the gloom.

Another *crack*, closer, as if someone had stepped on a brittle twig. Cornichonne’s head silently pivoted toward a clump of undergrowth nearby.

Now they could hear heavy steps approaching, and bizarrely, a thrumming buzz. Delphine spotted something large and round floating through the gray fog toward them. “What *is* that?” she blurted.

“Shhhhh!” Alexander hissed.

A narrow figure pushed through the branches behind the floating shape. Despite the fog, Delphine could make out a slim snout beneath a hood pulled down low.

The object was still floating straight toward them. The buzzing burned her ears, and she shook her head to try to clear it. Wind began to blow around the shape, wafting the fog away in sinuous strands of gray. She could see a blur like the beating of a beetle’s wings.

They *were* wings, Delphine realized. Moving so quickly they were causing the air to shimmer. The last webs of fog melted away, and they saw a bumblebee hovering in midair, its

faceted eyes like blocks of onyx staring at them. The aristocratic figure reached up to pull back her hood. Delphine gasped.

It was Ysabeau, Princess Petits-Oiseaux's pawmaid. With the princess's pet bee.