

Chapter one

'Gabble.'

'Gabble!'

'Gabble, wake up.'

Gentle paws shook at Gabble's shoulders. He came awake in the homely gloom of the family burrow. No light ever reached this deep, but the quiet of the clan told him that it was early, that night had not yet come.

'Mothers?'

They did not answer, intent on rummaging in the dried grasses around him. He frowned and drew down their scent. It was almost the same as ever, as warm and familiar as the earth walls around him. But now it was laced with their concerns; Whisker's resignation and Bustle's worry. The rummaging stopped and Whisker straightened.

‘You’re right, he’s gone,’ she said. ‘Drat the rat, we just missed him.’

Gone? Gabble felt the chill at his side, the space in the nest where his brother should be. He groaned. *Oh no. Not Ash. Not again.*

‘Right, my boy,’ said Whisker to Gabble. ‘Where is he this time?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Gabble. ‘Sorry.’

‘It’s a name raid tonight,’ said Bustle, fretfully. ‘You know what he’s like.’

Yes, he knew what Ash was like. And if it was a name raid, and Ash was missing, there was only one place he would be found: right where he shouldn’t be, where the Mothers couldn’t go after him. Gabble staggered to his feet, brushing away the grasses that clung to him. ‘I’ll go and fetch him.’

‘I think you should,’ said Whisker. ‘Especially after last time.’

Gabble swallowed. Last time had not been fun. He took a step towards the tunnel, but Bustle stopped him, paws on his fur. Her whiskers tickled as she lowered her head to his. ‘Gabble, we know it’s hard for him. We do.’ She spoke quickly, anxiously. ‘But he has to wait. He must, especially now you’re so nearly ratlings, and our scent won’t protect you . . .’ She cleared her throat. ‘Look after him for us. Promise you will.’

Gabble placed his paw on the soft fur of her shoulder. 'I'll try, Mother.'

'Use your words,' she added. 'He listens to you.'

'Heh,' said Gabble. 'Not often, I think.'

'No, but still more than he listens to us,' said Whisker, drily. She led Bustle gently aside and turned to Gabble. 'Your brother is a rat born without sense, and despite our best efforts he's still a twit.' She sighed. 'Just try to stop him doing anything too stupid, eh?'


'I'll look after him. I promise.'

'Good,' said Whisker. 'Well, get on with you, then.'

And Gabble dashed from the nest, scampering up the tunnel to the common grounds. The walls lightened as he raced, revealing scuffs, roots, and claw-marks, and with the rising light came the ever-present clan chatter. A manic jumble of whistles, cries, squabbles, and chuckles echoed up from the tunnels and swirled around Gabble as he pitched out onto the hard earth of the high places, the common grounds. Scents assailed him: Bigrats, uncles, mothers, ratlings, flapfeet, and pups, all mingled but still distinct. But Gabble had no time for these. He was seeking the only rat who counted. He picked up a tendril of Ash's scent and ran, following as it twisted through the colony.

'Watch it, flapfoot!'

A group of ratlings barged into him, then past, laughing and jostling. Gabble barely spared them



a glance but ran on. There was no mistaking Ash's path now. Turn after turn led upward, to the raid chamber. Tunnels and branches tore past as Gabble weaved up, up through the fabric of the colony, making for the highest chamber of all. A curve, a bend, a corner—and daylight stung his eyes, bringing him to a halt.

He hesitated, one foot raised and breath coming fast. Two more steps would take him beyond where any flapfoot was allowed. They would take him into the raid chamber itself—on the night of a raid, when any who were not ratlings or Bigrats were forbidden. A breeze billowed in, cutting fresh through the burrow fug. But even so the scent of old raids was overwhelming. Acrid and musky, it sent a slow thrum of blood pulsing to Gabble's paws. He should not be here. Not this close to duskfall. He should stay away, out of respect for the Hunter, and for the raiders. But Ash's scent was strong, and from around the bend came the scamper of paws on earth, and a rat making enthusiastic 'Hah' noises. Gabble's jaw set. Oh yes, Ash was in there all right.

Gabble glanced longingly back at the darkness behind him. He wished he were almost anywhere else. He wished he had a normal brother. But he wasn't and didn't. And there was nothing else for him to do. So he raised his muzzle and walked around

the corner, narrowing his eyes as he stepped over the threshold.

Sunlight, low and red, flooded the chamber. It bathed some walls crimson but left others in shadow, all the deeper for its nearness to the light. And between the dark and the light ran Ash, now investigating a patch of fallen earth, now scenting at the air. He raced here and there in a frenzy of investigation, his eyes sparkling. The light cast his fur in different colours, frost-white in the shade, red in the dusklight, and black as he crossed the entrance.

Gabble watched Ash's enthusiastic antics from the tunnel mouth and sighed. *Why me?* Then he raised his voice. 'Whatzit, Ash,' he called, softly.

Ash, up on his haunches and paws on the wall, froze. Then he twisted around and his face split into a grin. 'Ah, whatzit, Gabbley! So you came. That's good.' He dropped down and bounded over to where Gabble stood. 'Are you going to raid with me?'

Gabbley. Heh. Ash knew he hated being called that, but did it anyway because he thought it was funny. Ash thought lots of things were funny that weren't. Gabble shook his head. 'Heh. I don't think so. We're not meant to be here.'

Ash's enthusiasm was undiminished. 'I am. I'm going raiding.'

‘You remember last time?’

The grin fell from Ash’s face. ‘It won’t be like last time.’ He turned to gaze out at the twilight. ‘This time I’ll do it.’

‘They won’t let you, I think. You’re a flapfoot.’ He gestured at Ash’s flank. ‘And you’re not marked.’

Ash’s smile returned. He waved a paw, dismissively. ‘Ack, that doesn’t matter.’

But Ash knew better than anyone that it *did* matter. If you weren’t marked with ‘respect’ by the other ratlings you would die a drudge before you could raid. Or, in Ash’s case, you would be dragged home to the Mothers—scuffed and battered but still defiant—by a furious Bigrat.

Gabble glanced nervously at the tunnel. ‘Stop mucking around and let’s get out of here.’

‘You go. I’m raiding.’ Ash laughed at Gabble’s expression. ‘Look, I have a plan, OK? All I need is one ratling to mark me.’

Gabble stared. ‘You have head problems, I think. None of them are going to—’

He broke off as large ratling pattered out of the tunnel and stopped dead at the sight of them. Gabble knew him: Hector, a decent sort who didn’t give the younger rats a hard time. But now Hector was gazing from Gabble to Ash, a deepening scowl on his face.

Gabble started talking. 'We're really sorry. Heh. We're not here. Well, we are, but we won't be soon. We're just going, aren't we, Ash?' Gabble made a grab for his brother, but Ash skipped out of reach.

'Not me, Gabbley.' He winked at Hector. 'I'm going raiding.'

Hector's ears went flat with outrage. The tunnel behind him echoed with scurrying, and more ratlings entered, filling the air with their odour. Gabble could smell their marks of respect, freshly granted. He burned with the urge to be anywhere else. A female, Groom, from a neighbouring burrow, shoved forwards.

'Flapfeet,' she said, disgusted. 'What are they doing here?'

Hector nodded at Ash. 'I know this one. He's the white rat. The one that causes the problems.'

And Ash's expression went hard. He put his head on one side and pattered forwards a step. He met Hector's gaze with a challenging stare. Gabble held his breath. The ratlings' favourite game was to tumble cheeky flapfeet and send them packing. But to Gabble's surprise Hector merely sighed.

'I don't want your trouble, flapfoot. Not before my name raid,' he said. He stepped aside. 'Go now, and we'll forget this.'

The other raiders exchanged glances but eased apart, opening a path back down to the burrow. No tunnel

in Gabble's entire life had ever looked more inviting.

'Ash,' he hissed, 'we need to go. Now.'

But Ash whirled to face him with a flash of anger. 'No. I told you. I'm going to raid.'

'But why?' Gabble was almost pleading. 'We'll be ratlings soon enough. Why not wait, heh? Then we can raid together.' He opened his paws. 'Please? For me?'

Ash's eyes widened, and he half lifted a paw. 'Gabble, I—'

'He's right, flapfoot,' said Hector, cutting him short. 'You should wait. You're too small to dance with the Taker. You will be dishonoured.'

And Ash's eyes went cold. They glittered as he stepped up, nose to nose with Hector.

'You think I fear to meet the Taker? You think I'd dishonour the raid?' Ash's voice was low, and held a strange, hard note. His frame seemed bigger, somehow, shining white. 'Well, you're wrong. I'm not afraid.' An odd smile twitched in Ash's whiskers and he blinked his red eyes. 'Can you say the same?' He fixed Hector, then each ratling in turn with his stare. He drew down their scents. 'Oh, I can smell you. You *do* fear his Land of Bones.'

And Hector could not meet Ash's eyes. The other ratlings shuffled uncomfortably.

'Thought so,' said Ash, quietly. 'But don't worry, he won't take you tonight.' He paused, still with that

smile on his lips. 'Because he won't want to meet a bunch of uglies like you any sooner than he has to.'

Ash burst out laughing, scampering backwards. Hector's face darkened and he sidled forwards, teeth bared. Gabble quickly stepped in front of him.

'Hector, please, you shouldn't, he's only—'

But Hector thrust him aside and lashed out, pummelling at Ash's flank. It was over in an instant, Hector turning coldly away, and Ash staggering back, face livid with excitement and triumph. Gabble ran to his brother and scented his flank. Where Hector's paws had touched Ash two smudges of scent clung to his coat. Gabble went cold.

'There,' rasped Hector. 'If you want to raid then there's your "respect". I hope it gives you what you want.'

Ash smiled, all trace of his anger gone. 'Oh, it has,' he said, happily. 'See, Gabble? Hector made me a raider!'

A mutter rose from among the ratlings. Hector crouched, tail writhing. Gabble braced, ready for more trouble. But then the chamber fell silent around them. The ratlings at the rear scurried aside to reveal an uncle, shouldering his way through. Hector spotted him and quickly straightened. But not before he had attracted the other's frown.

'Name raiding,' said the uncle, coming to a halt in the centre of the chamber, 'is no time for ratling play, Hector.'

‘No, Uncle,’ said Hector. ‘Sorry.’

The uncle nodded, then ran his eye over the assembled rats. ‘My name is Grist,’ he intoned, ‘But my true name is Ro’nar. It means “Bold One”, and I earned it in the raid. You, who tonight I guide, may know this.’ At the mention of his true name the ratlings went utterly still. A true name was a rat’s dearest gift, never to be carelessly spoken. ‘I am a Bigrat of the Greenhedge,’ Grist continued, ‘and I bring the Hunter’s blessing to your raid.’ Grist’s eye settled on Gabble and Ash and his frown deepened. ‘And you’re raiding, are you?’

‘No,’ said Gabble, quickly.

But Ash nodded. ‘That’s right.’

Grist regarded them for some moments. Then he bent down and scented Ash’s flank. He grunted. ‘You are small to name raid. You haven’t grown into your feet.’

‘Yes, Uncle,’ said Gabble. ‘We’re not yet ratlings.’

Ash glared at him, but Gabble didn’t care. Maybe everything could still be saved. Maybe Grist could stop Ash from raiding. But the Bigrat shook his head.

‘You are marked, and so you may raid.’ Grist turned to the entrance, drawing down the scents. ‘The sun sets. The wide world awaits.’ He walked to the threshold, followed by the ratlings. Ash trotted happily after them, and Gabble, not knowing what else to do, followed. He stopped next to Ash, his paws trembling with anger, or fear, or both.

Grist turned, raising his voice to fill the chamber. 'Tonight the clanlands are yours. Hunt bravely, venture far, but do not stray beyond them. You know well that the Damplands are forbidden.' He turned a stern look to the ratlings. 'Find your prize, earn your name. Live as true rats of the clan. Or die with honour, and the Taker will guide you through the Land of Bones.' The ratlings were motionless now, every eye on Grist. 'But return dishonoured and you will live as drudges, beneath the clan's notice.' Gabble shuddered. Grist's face was grave. 'Better never to return.' In the silence that followed Grist bowed to the raiders. 'So raid well, ratlings, and may the Hunter protect you.'

Gabble hung his head. He had hoped for a reprieve, but none had come. Ratling after ratling stepped up to the entrance, whiskers twitching. To each Grist whispered, 'May the Hunter guide you,' and they ran down the slope, picking their paths and disappearing into the dusk. When it came to his turn Ash paused, one paw over the threshold, and blinked his red eyes.

'The Hunter?' he said. 'No, not the Hunter. I'll run with the Taker. Keep old Boney where you can see him, I say.' He grinned up at Grist's shocked expression, then gestured at Gabble. 'Can my brother come too?'

Grist's eyes narrowed, but he scented Gabble's coat and nodded reluctantly. 'He's barely marked. But if he

wishes it, he may.' Gabble swallowed. It must have been scent from Hector, left during the fight.

Ash's eyes shone. 'Oh, that's great! We can go together, Gabbly. It'll be fun!' He turned a face full of hope to Gabble. 'You will come, won't you?'

Gabble could barely move. He stared at Ash.

'Oh, don't be such a scaredy rat,' Ash scoffed. He clapped Gabble on the shoulder. 'Come on, let's do it.'

And he raced out of the burrow, hooting with delight. Ash dashed away into the grasses, hurtling down the slope until his footfalls were swallowed by the dusk. Gabble drew an unhappy breath and made to step forward. But the big male put out a paw, halting him. Gabble saw the worry on Grist's face, smelled his concern.

'Listen, to me,' said Grist, his expression grave, 'you should return to your nest. There will be no dishonour, I give you my word.' He nodded down the path Ash had chosen. 'No rat should follow a fool. Understand?'

Gabble stared straight ahead out of the burrow, eyes narrowed against the dying sun. *I'll look after him, I promise.* That was what he had told the Mothers. He shook his head.

'He's my brother,' he said.

And he stepped into the world beyond.