

Seven

Effra walked quickly, trying to focus on her surroundings so she didn't have to think about what she was doing. Ever since she'd been a little girl, she had known where the province of the Rat Queen began. It was one of the first things any larker was taught. *Brush your teeth, wash your hands, stop when you get to Flock Bridge so the Rat Queen doesn't get you.* It was only a few hours downriver, but Effra felt such a fish out of water, it might as well have been a hundred. It would have been quicker to swim from the Shallows, but the rucksack was awkward. Besides, the Rat Queen would have known she was coming. Sentry rats were posted along the riverbank, skulking among the reeds.

Effra passed a grand government office, gazing up at the enormous building full of politicians and city folk with no idea about the underwater world so close by. 'Cor, imagine them not knowin'!' Fleet would say, eyes bright with being in on a secret. Her ears were ringing. *How could the lubbers bear the noise? The hum of mechanical clanging*

and bustling commuters. She felt scared by the way they looked at each other. It was as though they were larking, but for information you didn't want to give. Looking for cracks they could open, like gulls smashing crab shells to get to the meat.

Effra kept her face neutral, avoiding eye contact. She had soaked her neckerchief in the river before she left, but the stench of the city found its way through. Unused to walking for so long, her feet ached as they slapped against the pavement.

Effra tramped through the textile and weaving districts, before stopping in the cold shadow of an old power station. Industrial chimneys loomed like castle turrets announcing the start of the Rat Queen's kingdom. Clambering down to a secluded part of the riverbank, she came to a halt. This was it, Deep River. Her stomach flipped as she remembered snuggling up with Fleet, tucked cosily into their bunks. On nights when the north wind whistled down the river and hammered on the portholes. Then, despite her protests, Fleet would beg Boppa to tell them what lay beyond the Shallows.

'There are parts of the Yore flat an' black as an oil slick,' he'd say. *'Once you reach Deep River, there's critters lurkin' beneath. You'd know 'em by the sour smell, nestlin' in the mud banks, most of 'em so frightful they bin outta folklore half a millenia. Long forgotten critters, buried so*

deep in the mud no ordinary lubber knows they're there. Critters with flat grey skin, thick as leather, teeth as long as yer arm, ready to tear into a larker an' drag 'em down under the mud.'

Now she was here.

Effra clutched her rucksack so tightly her knuckles turned white. The water was murky. There was a rustle in the weeds and, from the corner of her eye, she glimpsed a long, thin tail disappearing into the undergrowth. She'd been spotted. Despite the setting sun she felt cold.

They're only rats, they're only rats, they're only rats...

Her body wasn't listening, though. Her hands were already trembling and her legs shook so badly she stumbled. Effra twisted her necklace between her fingers to calm her nerves. Birds chirped in the trees. Momentarily, the fear in her stomach dissolved. Fleet needed her to be brave. Clenching her jaw, she stepped into the river, walking forward until she was deep underwater.

There was no sound here, only muffled silence. Opening her gills, she inhaled. The water smelled different to home. Muddier. Brackish. The Rat Queen's sentries would be delivering news that there was an intruder. Effra's floating limbs felt heavy. This was her last chance to turn back.

Larker legend had it the Rat Queen herself couldn't breathe underwater. That she was an ordinary lubber once, like Bow, when she'd slipped through a drain gully into

the sewer. Lost in its labyrinth of tunnels as a young girl, she had twisted and turned there until the world above was lost to her for ever. *'Her mind cracked then,'* Boppa used to say, *'an' for all the work of her rat army, it ain't never bin put back together.'*

Effra looked around, eyes adjusting to the brown water. Ahead, centuries of deep mud had been excavated to create a narrow passage. The walls rose on either side, paw marks pitting the surface. It had been dug by thousands of sharp, scratching claws. Effra imagined a carpet of fur across the mud.

It was already gloomy this far beneath the river, but the passage was gloomier still. Effra's heart pounded, her gills tightened. At the end of the passage, far in the distance, a ring of stone was outlined. This was the mouth of the sewer, the entrance to the complex network of pipes and tunnels the Rat Queen had made her own.

Effra stared into the eye of the sewer. *You're only the dark. You can't hurt me.* Before she could change her mind, she swam straight into the passage. Immediately, the current altered. Her slipstream in the water deadened. Any scant light was blocked out entirely. Gills fluttering, Effra realised she was no longer alone.

She glanced back. Something was closing in on her heels. A seething mass of rats. Black. Sleek. They clawed and swam over each other in a focused battalion. She

sensed the weight of their bodies compressing the water. Rats swam above, beneath and behind her. A writhing tunnel within a tunnel, preventing any chance of exit. The sewer was the only possible destination as the rat army forced Effra on to meet their queen.

Driven by the rats, she reached the sewer. She burst out of the water, knees scraping across a cold, brick floor. The stench in the air – damp fur and rat urine – caught in her throat. Her eyes stung and her stomach retched. The rats slipped and squirmed across each other as they too reached the sewer floor.

Effra scrambled to her feet. The huge sewage pipe sloped up. The second half of the tunnel was above water level. A growing clamour of squeaking echoed and bounced off the walls as she stumbled along it. She forced her hands into her pockets to hide her trembling fingers as, from the shadows, a tall woman emerged. The Rat Queen.

‘Your...Your Majesty.’

Effra realised she didn’t know the etiquette for this rat court. *She could order my death before I even explain why I’m here.* The Rat Queen fixed her glittering eyes on Effra and stalked down the slope towards her. The monarch’s bare feet, Effra noticed with revulsion, had thick, hard-skinned soles and curled, yellow toenails, which tapped on the brick floor as she walked.

‘It is my g-g-great honour to be here in your kingdom.’ Effra bowed until her forehead touched the slimy floor. ‘To protect my brother, I humbly ask for safe passage, Queen of the Rats, that I may pass to the other side of your kingdom.’

The Rat Queen smiled. The murky light glistened on her brown teeth. Her hair hung in thick, knotted tails, dull as unwashed slate. Her face was thin, almost skeletal, though her torso was strangely wide and lumpy beneath her robes. She sucked air through her lips with a squeak, staring at Effra with unblinking eyes.

Effra glanced at the Rat Queen’s sleeve, which was convulsing. A wriggling lump travelled up beneath the fabric of her dress. She seemed oblivious, but Effra couldn’t tear her eyes away. Finally, the lump reached her neckline and a pointed, whiskered nose appeared, followed by a furry body. The rat bared its pointed incisors at Effra and sat on its haunches by the Rat Queen’s ear, looping its tail around a rope of her dishevelled hair.

‘Of course. All fine. Find your way.’

‘Really?’ Effra let out an immense sigh. ‘Thank you, Your Majesty. Thank you. You ain’t never goin’ to know how much this means to me.’

The Rat Queen tutted and emitted another high-pitched squeak. Her dress bulged and rippled in a several different places at once. Every bulge was moving upward – up, up,

up – and one by one rats emerged from her sleeves, her pockets, her collar. They ran up her arms and legs, settling on her hair, back and shoulders, until she wore a malignant cape of matted, grey fur.

A thousand rats stared at Effra. A thousand pairs of identical, menacing eyes.

Then the queen spoke again, in an ice-cold voice.

‘But there is a price to pay.’