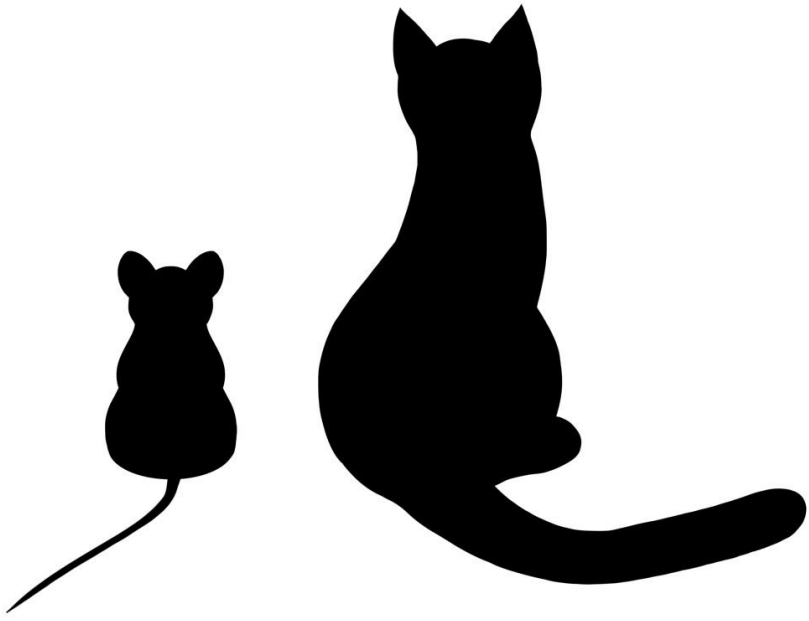
Mouse Mountain

Phil Brown

Other books in the Mouse Mountain series:

Mouse City

Weasopolis



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For Angela and Stanley

1

An Evil Plot

‘Dandelion! Can’t you go any faster?’

Dan looked up from the steep, rocky path under his paws and found Hawthorn glaring back at him. Stupid, skinny little mouse! It was all right for him, he wasn’t carrying anything. Dan had two heavy bags slung over his shoulders and he was sure their straps were rubbing bare patches into his fur.

He stopped and dropped the bags onto the path, sending up puffs of dust, then sat down on one of them.

The other mouse shook his head. ‘This is no time to rest, you know… we’re nearly there.’ And with that he turned away and went on scurrying on up the path.

Dan watched him go. He really should get up and follow. He was meant to do everything that Hawthorn told him to do, because Hawthorn was the senior apprentice and Dan was only the junior. But Dan wasn’t very good at doing what he was supposed to do.

Up ahead the other mouse was getting smaller in the

distance. Then he started clambering up a pile of rocks that blocked the path. A shout drifted back down to Dan. 'Aha!' And Hawthorn disappeared.

Maybe they really were there at last… wherever it was they were going.

Better get moving. Dan stood up and heaved the bags back onto his shoulders, then started forwards again, carefully placing one paw in front of the other. There were a lot of loose rocks, and he didn't want to stumble. The path was only narrow, and a huge river raged down on its righthand side. Dan didn't want to trip and fall in. He shivered at the thought. The churning water looking cold and dark and… hungry.

Trudge… trudge… trudge.

Why in the temple's name were they walking up here anyway? All temple mice could shift… just visualise where they wanted to go, then close their eyes, and… go there. But Hawthorn had insisted on walking the whole way – five days of trekking and sleeping out at night – and finally this slog up a mountain path.

Dan reached the pile of rocks. They completely blocked the path, and the whole thing looked unstable and dangerous. He glanced at the river, still raging by and swirling eddies around the edge of the rockslide where it had slumped into the water. He took a deep breath. If Hawthorn could get over it, he could do it too. He started picking his way to the top, each step sending skitters of rocks and stones down to splash into the

river.

He got to the top and was surprised to see that the path beyond widened into a wide, flat area, a beach of stones and small rocks that bordered the river. Hawthorn was on the far side of the beach, staring into a big, dark hole dug into the bottom of a grassy bank.

Dan skidded and slipped down the far side of the rockfall and called over. 'Where are we, Hawthorn?'

The other mouse snapped back impatiently. 'You don't need to know! Just wait here and don't do anything stupid.' And he disappeared into the blackness of the hole.

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An hour later Dan was sitting on a flat rock staring at the river. He'd already explored the whole of the small beach – and hadn't found anything remotely interesting. He'd also tried to skim stones on the fast waters of the river – which had turned out to be impossible. He'd even poked his head into the hole to see if he could see anything – which it turned out he couldn't.

And now he was bored.

He sighed to himself. What were they doing here anyway?

He was getting fed up with running around after Hawthorn. In fact, he was fed up with being an apprentice elder. Full stop.

The thought made his mind wander back to the ceremony in the temple last year – when he'd graduated. He and his friends had been so excited. Finally, the end of three years of

studying and training, and the end of being stuck in a temple on a mountainside in the middle of nowhere. They'd whispered and giggled while a lot of boring speeches had rolled on by. But then a big announcement had got their attention. Ragweed, the head elder, had stated grandly that for the first time in ten years a student had done well enough to become an apprentice elder! Dan had clapped and cheered with everyone else and looked around wondering who it was. Then Ragweed had called out Dan's name!

Some honour! It had turned out to be a load more work. And a load more time stuck in the temple while his friends went off to get on with their lives.

Should he give up the apprenticeship? He imagined the shocked faces of the elders if he did that. Had anyone ever dared do it before?

As he daydreamed, he stared into the river. It was wider here, but still deep, running fast with meltwater from the mountain peaks that loomed over the beach. His gaze moved to the far bank. It was made of smooth rock, with folds and hollows scoured by centuries of floodwater. He saw a pool of still water in one of the hollows. It looked cool and clear.

Dan's paws were sore from slogging up the rocky path. It would be good to dangle them in that pool. He shook his head at the idea. The river was too strong to cross.

But he could shift.

They'd walked all the way up here... but was there any

reason he couldn't shift over to the other side of the river?

That pool looked so good.

He focused on the smooth rock next to the pool… should he do this? Would Hawthorn be cross? Who cared? He willed himself to go there.

He started to shift the same as always, with everything going black and getting a feeling like he was floating, and he waited for the weirdness of suddenly appearing somewhere different. But long seconds ticked by, more than usual. Then something grabbed him, like a huge hand round his whole body. It squeezed him so he could hardly breathe, then threw him. Hard.

Light exploded and he had an instant to see the beach hurtling towards him – and then he was skidding along it, bouncing when he hit rocks and finally thudding into the bank next to the hole. He cried out as the wind was knocked out of him. 'Ooof!'

He lay there getting his breath back. Maybe he shouldn't have tried to shift. Was this why Hawthorn had insisted on walking up here?

He muttered to himself as he pushed himself back onto his paws. 'That was a bad idea.'

Everything hurt. But after a few limping steps the pain eased a bit. He decided nothing was broken.

He looked around the beach with fresh eyes. There was some serious magic going on here, stopping anyone shifting in

or out of this place. Back at the temple they had the same sort of magic that made shifting impossible, but it didn't try to kill you! His gaze ended up on the hole that Hawthorn had disappeared into. What lived in there? He edged towards it and peered inside. It was inky black.

Dan took one step into the hole. Then a second step. Then he paused to see if anything happened. Nothing did. So, in small steps, he edged his way further and further into the absolute darkness.

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Dan froze as his paw touched a loose rock and it clattered to the ground.

He'd been creeping forwards in the darkness for five minutes. A glow of light from somewhere up ahead had been slowly getting brighter – and a low murmuring rise and fall of voices had been getting louder.

But now the murmuring voices stopped suddenly.

He stood as still as he could – imagining ears up ahead listening for any slight sound. He held his breath and his nose felt like sneezing. The silence went on and on.

Until finally the voices started again.

Dan let out his breath slowly. What was he doing? If Hawthorn caught him he'd be furious. Dan started to turn to go back. But then five words sounded more loudly and clearly from the murmuring up ahead.

'.... temple will be completely destroyed!'

Dan froze again. Had he really heard that? Something about the temple being destroyed?

He started inching forwards again.

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The light ahead grew stronger and the voices grew louder. More and more words became clear.

'... mountain...'

'... eruption...'

Dan came to a corner. The light and the voices seemed to be coming from just around the other side of it.

He leaned forward and peeped around the corner. And saw that the hole opened up into a chamber – about twenty paces across. The light was coming from a globe that was hovering in mid-air. Two heads were close in conversation over a table under the light, their bodies lost in shadows but Dan guessed they were sitting on cushions.

Dan recognised Hawthorn's voice.

'What about the legend of the cat?'

A deeper voice replied – it didn't sound like a mouse.

'Hmmm, yes, the cat.'

'Do you think the cat really exists?'

'Yes... I know it does.'

At that Hawthorn's voice paused – and when it started again it sounded surprised.

'I thought that was just a carving on a temple wall.'

'I thought so too. But I don't like to leave things to chance

and so I spent a long time searching for that cat. And I found it. It's a long way from here – in a different world – I think it may have been hidden there on purpose.'

'There are different worlds?'

The deep voice chuckled.

'Many of them. You have a lot to learn. I'll show you – open your mind!'

The deep voice had such a note of command that Dan found himself obeying as well. As a student he'd learned how to open his mind to an elder – but this animal wasn't an elder! In his head a vision appeared of a track on a slope above a wide slow river. A grey cat was walking along the track. With the vision came a sense of place and time – of where that path was and when the cat would be on it. That place was so far away that he gasped.

The deep voice immediately shouted.

'Who is that?'

The vision was snatched back and the globe in the cavern flared with bright light. And Dan knew that he'd been caught!

***

Dan stepped out into the light.

'Dandelion!' Hawthorn exclaimed.

Dan knew he was in trouble now. Hawthorn glared at him.

'I told you to stay outside!'

Dan looked down. But then he looked up again and faced Hawthorn's stare – he was fed up with being ordered around

by the skinny mouse.

The deeper voice of the other creature cut in. It didn't sound cross – merely curious.

'So this is the new apprentice?'

Dan looked at the other creature. It was standing up now and was twice as tall as Hawthorn. As Dan had suspected, it wasn't a mouse. It was standing on its back legs, long and skinny. Too tall to be a rat either. Dan thought it was probably a Weasel, or a stoat – he'd heard of both, but never seen one before. He found himself asking.

'Are you a Weasel?'

The deep voice chuckled.

'You are a brave little mouse. Yes, I am a Weasel.'

'Oh.'

Dan wondered if he should be scared of a Weasel – it was very big. The Weasel spoke again – in a casual, dangerous sounding, voice.

'Do you know what Weasels eat?'

'Carrots?'

The Weasel chuckled again.

'Good try. But no, we eat rabbits, voles, birds, rats.... sometimes mice.'

Dan had expected a reply something like that. He wondered why Hawthorn had brought them to see such a dangerous creature.

The Weasel carried on speaking – he seemed to be enjoying

this.

'But I'm not hungry at the moment. So, little apprentice, please go back outside and wait for your master.'

There was a note of command in the Weasel's voice again that made Dan turn away and start to shuffle out. It took an effort of will to stop himself. He gathered his courage to speak again.

'Err… is the legend coming true… about the temple?'

The Weasel and Hawthorn both stared at him for long seconds. The Weasel licked his its lips.

Hawthorn waved at him to leave with one paw.

'Just go and wait outside. We'll discuss this later.'

This time Dan didn't hesitate. He was scared. He turned and scampered away down the tunnel away from the chamber.

***

When Dan was gone Hawthorn turned back to the Weasel.

'How much do you think he heard?'

'Enough to be a problem, I would say.'

'He will want to warn the others – he is close to the Queen.'

'We will have to make sure he doesn't.'

'How? Can you make him forget?'

'Oh yes – permanently I think – just give me a second.'

The Weasel closed his eyes and concentrated. Hawthorn was amazed – was it that easy to make someone forget something they'd overheard?

'There – that should solve the problem,' the Weasel opened

his eyes again.

'And now – there are still a few things to plan.'

They sat down at the table again.

***

Dan kept on banging his paws on rocks. The hole seemed even darker on the way out. And he was rushing because the Weasel had scared him – he could imagine it coming up behind him. His mind was buzzing. The temple might be destroyed! In his mind he remembered the walls of the great temple hall and the pictures carved onto them. Dan and his friends had spent a lot of time studying them when they were students. The best one showed the temple being blown up by the mountain erupting – they'd all loved that idea. There were pictures of lava and smoke and burning mice – it was great. But now Hawthorn and that Weasel thought it was really going to happen?

Finally he saw daylight ahead.

He came out onto the rocky beach blinking – and immediately stumbled to a halt. There were rats on the beach – ten of them at least. And they were all looking at him, as though they'd been waiting for him.

'Is that him, Mordred?' One rat said.

'Must be,' another rat replied. 'And call me 'sir''.

All the rats were bigger than Dan. But the one called Mordred was huge. He was nearly the size of a cat – it was unnatural.

‘All right all of you,’ the big rat ordered. ‘Don’t let him get away.’

The rats pulled out swords. They were rusty, dirty looking things. They started moving forwards. Mordred stayed at the back, watching.

Dan waited. There was no point trying to run – there were too many of them.

One of the rats was pushed forwards by the others.

‘Go on Ember!’ A voice from behind it hissed.

The rat hesitated for a second – it looked petrified. Then it ran at Dan with its sword raised high. It swung the sword with all its strength. And a moment later found itself flying head-first into the Weasel’s hole – without its sword.

Dan span back round to face the rest of the rats. He was now holding the small rat’s sword.

‘Oh and be careful,’ mentioned Mordred. ‘He’s a temple mouse.’

Two more rats leapt forward. Dan ran between them. Sparks flew as Dan deflected both of their blades. Dan didn’t stop – he kept on going into the middle of the group of rats – slashing with the rat sword as he went. Two rats fell down with cuts in their back legs – another squealed as its ear was chopped off. But then suddenly Mordred was in front of Dan and his great sword came down with a mighty swipe. Dan tried to stop the blow with his stolen rat sword but it shattered. Dan was lucky though. He had deflected Mordred’s

sword enough so that it didn't chop him in half – and only seared a long cut down his back. Dan dodged away and ran back the way he had come, his back hot with pain, expecting Mordred to follow – but the big rat didn't.

'Finish him off,' he heard Mordred say casually.

Dan was breathing heavily as he faced the rats again. He was back where he started with the Weasel's hole behind him. Except now he could feel blood dripping down his back. He started to feel dizzy – and wondered how bad his wound was.

He watched as the rats came forward again – more wary now – getting ready to rush him all at once. But they still hung back, and Hawthorn heard quiet footsteps behind him. The small rat again, he was sure, and the others were all waiting for him to jump on Dan from behind. The footsteps got closer and closer...

Now! He spun round and grabbed the small rat's outstretched paws, then ducked down used its own momentum to throw it over his head into the middle of the rats in front of him.

There was a moment of confusion as the flying rat bowled into the others and Dan used it to dodge between them and scamper sideways across beach. If he could just get to the path, he was sure he could outrun the rats.

But the big rat called Mordred was too fast again and appeared out of nowhere to trip him up and sending him sprawling face first onto the ground.

‘Not bad,’ the big rat rumbled.

A foot kicked him and Dan ended up on his back – with the rat standing over him.

‘If you want a job doing – you have to do it yourself,’ Mordred complained, and raised his huge sword to stab down at Dan’s chest.

Dan had one chance – one last thing he could do to save himself. He closed his eyes and shifted, thinking of the pool across the river again. It was the only way to avoid being skewered – even if he did get grabbed and thrown again.

Everything went black.

Like last time there were a few moments of darkness and then Dan felt himself grabbed and thrown – and an instant later it was light again and he was flying through the air. But this time in front of him, instead of the stony beach, was a huge hairy back.

Mordred’s sword clanged as it hit the stones where Dan had been lying, and he had just enough time to be surprised before being knocked flat on his face.

Smashing into Mordred slowed Dan down but he still found himself bouncing and skidding over the stones of the beach out of control. But this time, to his horror, he saw he was tumbling towards the river and wasn’t going to stop in time.

The sudden coldness of the river was a shock. Dan scrabbled with his paws but there was nothing to grab. He was surrounded by cold wetness and could feel the force of the

river dragging him along. For an instant his head came back above the water and he grabbed a breath of air. He just had time to see the rats watching him from the shore before he was dragged back under.

***

Mordred pushed himself up from the ground.

'What happened?' He said in a dazed voice. It felt like he'd been charged by a raging badger.

'That mouse hit you from behind,' one to the rats said.

Mordred shook his head. That was one tricky mouse, he thought.

'Where is he?'

All the rats pointed at the river. One replied.

'He fell in there.'

Mordred walked down to the edge of the water. He scanned the opposite bank, then peered downstream. There was no sign of the mouse. He could see the river was running fast and deep. He decided that there was no way it could survive in there. He put away his sword.

'All right, I suppose we got him, then.'

Then as he turned back to the rats on the beach he noticed something shining in amongst the rocks near the water's edge. He bent down and picked it up. Of all things – it was a small golden key!

He smiled. The mouse must have dropped it – and he had a good idea what it was. He put it into a pouch in the belts he

wore across his chest. Then he shouted to the rats.

'Okay you lot, line up and hold paws – let's get out of here!'

Injured rats were pulled up onto their paws and helped limping to the middle of the beach. Then all the rats stood in a line and held paws – three of them moaning in pain. Mordred took a black stone out of another pouch and stared at it for a moment. It was a gift from the Weasel. Cut in the shape of a diamond, it allowed him shift like the mice could do.

He didn't like it. He preferred to get about using his paws! But he was hundreds of miles from his army and this was the only quick way back. He grabbed the paw of the rat at the end of the line and then stared at the stone, concentrating hard on where he wanted to go.

For a moment the stone seemed to become even blacker, and Mordred felt the scary sensation of being sucked into it. An instant later the rats had disappeared, and the beach was empty again.

***

Hawthorn came out of the hole late in the afternoon expecting to find Dan, but there was no one there. He looked around and found the shattered remains of a nasty looking sword amongst the rocks on the beach – and also dried bloodstains, and something that looked like a rat's ear. He glanced fearfully back at the hole in the bank as the truth hit him. The Weasel hadn't used magic to make Dan forget what he'd heard – he'd summoned his rats to kill him.

Hawthorn was scared. He had a deal with the Weasel, but what had happened to Dan made him realise just how ruthless the Weasel was.

He looked at the two bags on the beach and let out a huff of annoyance. Now he'd have to carry his own bag back!

He picked his bag up and left Dan's behind, then headed across the beach to the rockfall and the path back down by the river. As he went, he started to worry about how he was going to explain Dan's disappearance when he got back to the temple.