

Ship Rats

Rat Tales, Part One

By Rhian Waller

Characters

Rats

Lu: a friendly, trusting white rat. She is just over one month old when her adventure starts

Rip: Lu's calm, collected older sister

Preen: The middle sister. She frets a lot and likes to be tidy

Pew: A smelly but cunning old rat

Sleek: A messenger-rat for Black Spot

Black Spot: The Skipper of the rats. He hates and fears humans

Thug: A very large, strong rat who lives on the *Hydromyst*

Bigs

Runa: A young Swedish girl who is determined to find her Pa

The Captain: A Dutch man. He is in charge of the ship and all of the crew. He keeps his jacket buttons shiny

The Bosun: The officer in charge of anchors, sails, ropes and rigging. He is jolly

The First Mate: The second in command after the Captain. He is trustworthy and true

The Second Mate: The third in command. He likes a stiff drink

Chapter 1: Home nest

From the moment they were born, the three sisters were bound to have exciting lives. Rats are animals prone to adventure because they are brave and bright. They are also small enough to pick up in one hand. When you are that size, even crossing a room can be a challenge because of cats, people and other hazards.

There were eight babies to begin with. When their mother realised they were about to be born, she retreated to her safe nest in the wall of the Customs building in the Dutch port of Vernaya. The nest was a soft place to give birth as it was lined with yellow paper stolen from the clerk's desks and stuffing nibbled free from the chair in the boss' office.

The baby rats lay in the paper, all cuddled up and warm. They looked like pink jellybeans. Five of them were boys and three were girls.

Mum Rat named her girl rittens Rip, Preen and Lu. They had to be short names because rats speak in squeaks, when they speak at all.

Their eyes opened when they were two weeks old and then Mum Rat had a job on her paws because they started to explore. Their world broadened from warm, milky softness to something larger.

Rip, who was the biggest rat, had fur that was a rich brown. She was calm and did not enjoy playing or fighting. Preen, who was the middle rat, had grey fur that ran from her face right over her back to her tail. She was pretty and spent a lot of time washing. Lu, the smallest sister, was almost pure white except for when her fur was a bit scruffy. She was the friendliest but also rather silly.

Their brothers were lazy and happy to sleep. Their names were Stretch, Snore, Snooze, Snug and Kip.

Lu was the first to waddle out of the nest on unsteady paws and find the gap in the wall while Mum Rat was busy grooming Rip. Lu stuck her nose out.

There were all sorts of interesting smells in the Customs Office. This was where sailors and their passengers declared their cargo. Sometimes they had to present the things they carried across the sea in their ships and boats. They brought in samples of tobacco, exotic drinks, whiffy cheeses, animal skins and plants from the other side of the world. Lu could also smell ink, paper and people. She could see the dim outlines of furniture.

She wanted to explore.

Rats speak to each other in lots of ways. They use quiet sounds, too high-pitched for a human to hear, and they also talk through their

whiskers, twitching ears and through touch. They only squeak loudly when they are scared, angry or want to get attention. So Lu jumped when she heard her name.

"Lu!" It was her mother. "No. Stop."

Mum Rat used her body to push Lu back to the nest.

"What's out there?" said Preen, later, when Mum Rat had gone in search of food and the rittens were too sleepy and full of milk to think about running off.

"Strange things," said Lu.

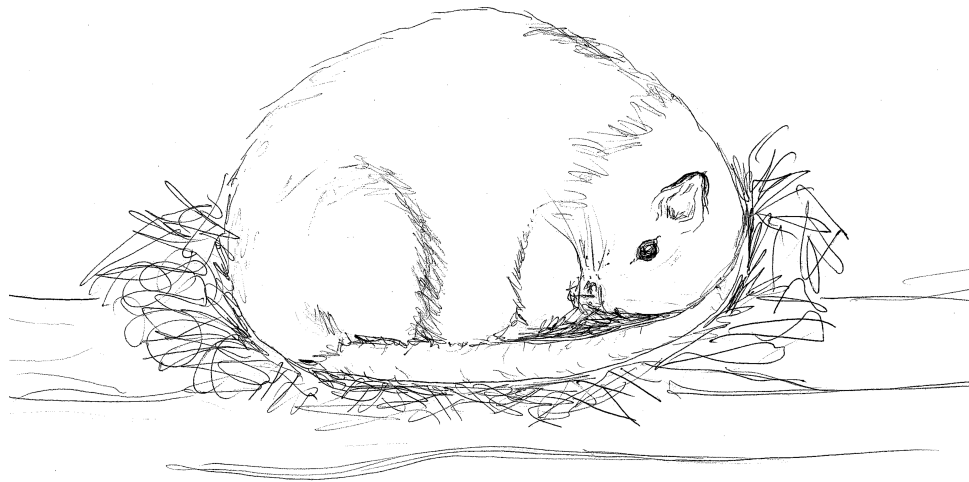
"Good things?" said Preen.

"No," said Rip, who listened to Mum Rat. "Bad things. Risk. Fear. There are Bigs out there."

To rats, humans are giants. That's why they call us "Bigs".

Lu wasn't so sure the world outside was bad. It was broad and busy but it was also interesting.

"Go to sleep," said Mum Rat, so Lu curled up and tried to do as she was told. But she could not sleep; she was too busy wondering about the world.



Rittens grow up fast and Lu got bigger. Her curiosity grew too.

Mum Rat kept all eight of her children close. She taught them the three things all rittens should know. These were rules which, all together, were known as *kree*. They were there to make sure that rats, who can live in huge colonies, knew how to get along.

The first rule was that, no matter how bitter the argument or how vicious the fight, rats will forgive each other swiftly.

The second rule was that rats look out for each other. They might squabble over food, but they also help clean each other and stay together. If a rat is caught in a cage her friends will help her get out if they can.

The third rule was manners. Rats should always politely sniff-sniff on meeting to learn about each other.

Of course, rats don't use human words. All of the rat conversations have been changed so you can understand them.

The lesson sounded like this: "*Peep, peep, wuppa-wuppa meep woop peep!*", which obviously doesn't make much sense to us.

Lu understood her mother, but she wanted to know about outside as well.

"You should stay here," said Mum Rat, who worried about Lu the most. The little ritten had ruby red eyes. Sometimes she swayed her head from side to side to see better, which made it look like she was disagreeing about something, even though she was the friendliest baby Mum Rat had ever had. Her poor eyesight made it even more dangerous out in the wide world; white rats did not often last long without becoming dinner for a cat or another kind of hunter.

"But I don't want to stay!" said Lu. "I want to be out there."

"Stay with me," said Mum Rat. "You will be safe."

"What is safe?" said Rip.

"Safe is when you don't get hurt," said Mum Rat. "You are safe with me, which is good. Keep away from things that are not safe, like Bigs."

"What is a Big?" said Preen.

"Bigs are the things with two legs that move out there in the day. They are loud and tall," said Rip, who was wiser than her sisters.

"What if we won't stay safe?" said Lu, who was not afraid of Bigs.

"Dad Rat did not stay safe," said Mum Rat. "That is why a Cat got him. I do not want the Cat to get you."

"What is a Cat?" said Preen. She shivered. Only frightening or important things were spoken about in capital letters.

"A Cat is a beast with sharp teeth and claws. Cats eat us," said Mum Rat. But Lu saw no sign of a cat outside.

One day, when she was about a month and a half old, she could not wait any longer. Lu was ready to run. She sneaked out of the nest and scurried through the hole. Rip watched her go.

"Lu is daft," she yawned.

Preen stood up.

"I want to see where she goes," she said.

"Stay. It's time to wash," said Rip.

"But I want to see."

Rip made a chirp of annoyance. As the biggest and oldest ritten by a whole five minutes she thought it was her job to look after her sisters. She got up and followed Lu and Preen. Their brothers just lazed and rolled over into the warm space. That was what kept them safe on that fateful night and is why this book is not about them. Don't worry though; they would have their own adventures one day.

Lu, meanwhile, was finding things out.

She kept low and close to the wall. It was night and the Customs Office was empty.

Lu's eyes were not strong but her nose, ears and nerves were alert.

Everything was so huge! She hadn't known anything could be as wide as this. The walls went up forever. The desks were mountains and the floor was a vast field made of planks.

Nothing bad happened. No cats or owls grabbed Lu. There were no loud noises or flashes of light. She grew braver.

Lu climbed up a desk. She found a piece of paper. It was an important document but Lu didn't know that. She grabbed it in her teeth, fell off the desk and ran across the floor, giggling. Once there she was so excited she went in circles, still holding the paper so it covered her body. If a Big had seen it they might have thought the room was haunted.

Then Lu got bored and dropped the paper because she smelled crumbs. A worker had eaten a sandwich and left some on the floor. Lu found it and ate it fast. Preen joined her and they squabbled over the bread.

"Shh," said Rip. "You make too much noise."

But Preen and Lu were having fun. They pretended to fight. Lu climbed up a cabinet to escape and knocked some books on the floor. They fell with a clatter. The rats froze.

Nothing happened for a very long time from Lu's point of view. Rats live fast. Their hearts beat ten times quicker than a human's.

Lu started to relax. Then the rats heard a key in the lock.

The door opened.

There was noise and light.

A guard came in.

Lu looked far up into a huge face. It hung like a moon.

The Big walked into the office. His footsteps were thunder. He lifted the lantern in his hand, dazzling the rats. He went past them. Now he was between them and the hole that led back to the nest.

"The Big will find us!" squeaked Preen.

"This way!" said Lu.

"No, go back!" said Rip, who wanted to get home.

"No time!" said Lu and just then the Big shone his light on the three scampering sisters. He made a loud noise.

Lu dashed away. She ran to the open door.

She could feel cold against her fur. She smelled salt, water and space. It was too late to stop. She hurtled out of the Customs Office and found herself running over smooth flagstones. She was outside!

Chapter 2: The Outside

Lu pressed against the wall and stopped running. The air was different. It moved more. Wood creaked and water slapped against stone. There were other Bigs moving around but they were quite far away. She panted.

Where were Preen and Rip?

Lu realised she was alone. Her tail drooped and she made herself small. She was afraid. She had never been alone before. It's easier to be brave when you have someone beside you.

She made a sad little "meep".

"Shush!"

Lu jumped. The wind was blowing so she hadn't heard or smelled the new rat.

He was big and brown with holes in his ears. One of his eyes was closed. He was also very, very ancient.

Lu sniffed his nose to say hello. He smelled at least three years old.

She was still scared but even a strange rat was better than being alone. He seemed trustworthy, in a musty, ripe way.

"Yarr," he said. His teeth were yellow and stumpy.

There was a bang behind them. The Big guard had not found anything suspicious in the Customs Office. Rats were common at the harbour. He shut and locked the door.

"I want to go home," said Lu.

"It be too late," said the old rat. "There ain't no way back now. Not through that door."

Actually, there were holes and cracks in many of the buildings but Lu did not know where they were. Nor, it turned out, did the old rat. He wasn't from the harbour.

"Cheer up," he said, trying to be kind.

Lu could not be happy. Too much had happened too fast. She was lost. But she was a bold little rat and she pulled herself together to think.

"Who are you?"

"I be Pew," said the old rat. "Why did ye run here?"

"A Big shone a light on me and made noise."

Pew made a rat snigger.

"The Bigs be slow. There is no need to fear. Be fleet and smart and they can't catch ye. I live with Bigs," he said airily. "They don't know I be there."

"Oh?"

"Aye. I be slow now, but still smart." He gave her a beady stare with his one good eye. "Are ye a pet?"

"No," said Lu. "Are you?"

Pew sneezed in horror.

"No! I be wild." He said the last word with pride.

"So am I," said Lu who wasn't sure what wild was, but it sounded good.

"So, what now? I don't like this."

She meant the harbour with its open space and activity. Even in the dark it was far too wide. Lu felt very tiny and very exposed.

"Come to me ship," said Pew.

"Ship?"

"It's a big home which moves with the waves."

Lu would have asked what waves were but being snug and safe was more important.

"Is there a nest?"

"Lots of nests," coughed Pew. "Lots of rats as well."

Now, it really isn't a good idea for young Bigs to run off with strangers, day or night. It isn't wise for rittens to go off with strange rats, either. In fact Lu would have been better off waiting where she was for help. But there are no such things as rat police, rat teachers, rat bus drivers or anyone else who looks after youngsters and makes sure they get home. So Lu had to make the best of it. Now she was calm she had time to notice that Pew not only couldn't see very well, he was also fat and slow. As he scuttled back to the ship he moved with a limp. Lu, who was slim and speedy, thought she could run if things went wrong.

Pew slunk his way across the harbour.

Mysterious sounds and smells came to Lu; salt and spices, wet wood, meat, fish, bananas and Bigs who shouted and clanked things and dragged heavy boxes along the ground. The stone underfoot was slippy and covered in green slime. She went up and down steps, climbed through metal rungs, slipped under gangplanks and ran-ran-ran whenever there was nowhere to hide. Pew was easy to follow because of his smell.

He climbed onto a mooring bollard which had a thick rope wrapped around it.

"Up here," he said and waddled up the rope.

It stretched over a dark space. Lu could hear and smell the water beneath. It was deep. She used the rope like a bridge, holding on with her clever little fingers and toes. Her tail stuck out to keep her steady but she still wobbled.

The rope curved up and soon Lu was using her claws to climb. Then she found wood. It was the hull of the ship; it was smooth and the planks were tightly fixed together. Pew disappeared through a scupper (a drainage gap) and she followed.

The old rat led her across the deck and down a hole. Lu relaxed. Her whiskers told her she was somewhere tight and sheltered. It was very dark as well, which she liked.

"This is me ship," said Pew proudly.

"It does move!" said Lu who felt the slow rocking in her whole body.

Lu suddenly realised how sleepy she felt. It was almost dawn and she had been up all night. She yawned. Outside things were getting louder. The Bigs were working faster. There was more thumping and shouting outside.

A Big shouted, "The wind is good. Sail off!"

Neither of the rats could understand Big speak. They ignored it.

"Me ship be a great ship," said Pew, once the booming died away. "I will show ye all of her."

But Lu wasn't listening. She sniff-sniffed. There was a familiar smell.

"Rip?" she said as a brown face looked down through the hole in the deck. "Rip!"

"I came for you. Oof!" Rip said as Preen pushed her own pointed nose through the narrow gap.

"Me too!" she said. "We found a way out of our home. We followed your scent. We can take you back to the nest. I was scared but Rip was brave. She made me come."

"Move quick," said Rip. "Go, go! The Bigs are here, lots of them."

"Thank you!" said Lu. "Thank you, thank you!"

She reached up to the hole, stretching her body long and thin. A bell was ringing and dozens of giant feet paced across the deck and pier. The Bigs were busy and full of purpose. They called to each other as they unwound ropes and flung them from shore to ship.

A Big shouted: "Anchor up!"

On a lower deck, a group were bent over long poles that stuck out from a great wheel called a capstan. They pushed, the wheel turned and drew a chain out from the water.

Lu was on the weather deck. She scurried to where the long rope had been before but it was gone.

A Big shouted, "Cast off!"

The sails came down and pulled tight. The ship started to move away from the landing.

"Where do we go?" squeaked Preen.

"Down!" said Rip. Her claws scabbled at the wooden planks but the bowed sides of the ship were too difficult to descend. The gap between land and ship grew every second. To the rats, with their poor eyesight, the drop seemed to go on forever. They balanced on the edge, heads bobbing up and down.

"Jump!" said Lu. She tensed and gathered her strength.

If she had made the leap, her sisters might have followed and their story would have been very different. But instead... she felt something grab her tail.

"No!"

It was Pew. He held on with both paws.

"Let go!" said Lu.

"Don't leave," he said. "Ye be me new friend. I need a friend."

"Get off!" Lu pulled and her tail slipped loose.

It was too late. The ship was leaving the harbour, its tall masts creaking and the sails full of wind.

Lu turned on Pew.

"You mean rat!" she squeaked. "You tricked me!"

"No," he cringed. "I want to help ye."

"You bad rat! I will bite you hard!"

"Don't bite me!"

"Please don't bite him," said Rip. "You could get ill."

Preen gazed forlornly at the shore.

"That was our last chance," she said. "What will we do now?"

Lu looked at Rip but she had no answer.

"What will Mum Rat think?" was all she said. "She won't know where we are."



Chapter 3: *All at Sea*

Rats are practical creatures. A young human might spend days, weeks or even years feeling homesick and missing their parents. In fact, there was a little girl on the ship doing just that at the same time the sisters were trying to work out what to do next. But rats do not have the luxury of time to mourn. And though Lu missed her Mum Rat and her brothers, at least she had her sisters – and a new "friend".

"I has things to do," said Pew. "Then it be time for sleep."

"I know," said Lu, who yawned.

"Can I stay with ye when I be done?"

"No," said Rip. "Leave us."

Pew wilted.

"I will find ye soon," said Pew. Then he was gone.

The three rittens were tired from the fright and the running. They snuggled up together. Lu put her forehead against the floor, curled her tail around herself and fell asleep. Rip rested her chin on Lu's back and Preen snuggled under Rip's leg.

Pew came back at sundown. Like all rats, he was most active at dawn and dusk. He woke Lu by walking over her back.

"Hey!" Lu squeaked.

"Oops," said Pew. "Good day. I told the ship rats ye be here. Come and meet them."

"First you tell us how to get home," said Rip.

"Or we will scratch you," said Preen.

"Please don't scratch me!" Pew said, miserably.

"We won't scratch him," said Rip.

"We might," muttered Lu.

"The ship goes back," said Pew. "It moves on the sea from place to place but it will go back to yer port."

"When?" said Rip.

Pew made a rat shrug which is done with the toss of the head.

"Some day."

"Till then, this is home," said Lu. "*Kree*?"

"*Kree*," said the other rats. And with that, all blame was put aside. Neither Rip nor Preen condemned Lu for the situation. They didn't forgive her because they didn't have to. And Lu did not feel angry or bitter at Pew.

Pew cheered up.

"Come meet the rats on me ship. This way."

He guided the sisters through the hidden parts of the vessel. There was room between the decks, little rat runs, forgotten spaces and hidey-places running from the bilge at the bottom of the ship to the quarter deck at the top. Pew knew them all.

He took them to the orlop. This was the heart of the rat's floating home, below the level of the sea. It was a shallow deck above the hold where the sailors stored their ropes. Bigs didn't use it very often.

Lu and her sisters wriggled their way over and around the coiled lines. They were wary. They could smell other rats.

"Who goes there?"

The question came from a very large rat who squatted on the tallest coil of rope.

"Arr, it be Pew and me three friends, sir."

"You don't have any friends, Pew," said the big rat. "Who are these new rats and where are they from?"

"Land, sir."

"And why are they here?"

Lu did not want to sniff-sniff this new rat, even though it was impolite to refuse. He was big but in a totally different way to Pew who was baggy and soft. This rat was tough and made of muscle. Lu could tell from his smell he was dangerous. She flicked her ears. Dozens of other rats surrounded them, their noses twitching. She made herself small.

Pew went to sniff-sniff the big buck but the new rat put a pink paw on Pew's face and pushed him away, which was as rude as barging past a gentleman who has offered to shake hands.

"I led them to me ship, sir," said Pew.

"It is not your ship," said the big rat. "It is my ship. I am the Skip."

"I was Skip once," muttered Pew.

"Not now, though. You do not have the Curl. You are just old and fat and you stink."

"Who are you?" asked Lu, bravely.

"I am Black Spot. I am the Skip of this ship. This is the Curl which proves it."

Black Spot gestured to a scrap of cloth next to him. It was a piece of gold brocade bent into a loop.

"To be Skip you must be the strongest rat. I beat Pew. I even beat the Bigs. This is my proof. I was in the den of the Big Skip. I saw this shine. I stole it. It is mine now and so is the ship. You see?"

"Yes," said Preen.

"You say 'yes, *sir*'," said Black Spot, showing his long, strong yellow teeth.

"What is a Skip?" Lu said quietly.

"Don't ask daft things," said Rip. "Skip means he's boss rat. He's in charge."

"Who am I?" said Black Spot.

"You are the Skip, sir," said all three sisters.

"Come close, let me see you."

Lu, Preen and Rip climbed the coil of rope. Black Spot checked them from nose to tail. Lu quivered as he inspected her.

"Pew, you fool," said Black Spot. "You brought pets here!"

The circle of black and brown rats all flinched at his anger.

"You smell of Bigs."

This was because of the stuffing Mum Rat had pulled loose from a chair to use in their home nest. It came from a seat cushion which was so old and well used it had begun to take on the shape of the office manager's bum.

"Pets spend time with Bigs. They do what Bigs want. Pets are not real rats. They are not like us," said Black Spot. "They are soft and they like Bigs. We all know Bigs are bad, so we can't trust pets, too."

"We are not like that," Lu insisted.

Black Spot's whiskers bristled.

"Pew, do you not see what you have done? No, of course not. You only have one eye," he said, spitefully. "They are pets. This one is too pale. No wild rat looks like this."

"My Mum Rat is told us not to go near Bigs," said Lu. She missed her mother with a hard, sudden pain.

"Your Dad must have been a pet then," said Black Spot.

"So what if he was?" said Rip. She ground her teeth.

"So you have no place here," said Black Spot. "A ship can hold some rats but not all of us. We need food and nests to hide in. There is no room for lots of us. There is no room for weak pets who will get caught and cause us strife."

"There is no place for us to go," said Preen.

"No," said Black Spot. "There is not. We will throw you off the ship. You will fall in the sea and drown. Catch them!" he ordered the watching circle of rats. The ship rats leaped at the land rats. Suddenly there were teeth and claws everywhere. Preen squealed.

"Don't tear my fur!"

Rip went to her rescue.

Lu fought, kicking and scratching. She bit a strange rat and he shrieked. She wriggled out from the pile of struggling rodents.

"Skip, sir!" she said, thinking quickly. "Stop! We know you are the boss rat because you have the Curl as proof. What proof would we need to show we are wild, not pets?"

Black Spot, who hadn't moved during the flurry, sniffed once. Everyone stopped fighting.

"Ah," he said. "Proof. I could set you a test. You will try and I will watch. You will fail and I will laugh. Why not?"

Lu sensed a trap.

"What test?"

"A test of things a wild rat is and things wild rats must do. Wild rats can sneak, steal, scrap, swim and scale. You must show me you can do these things. Then you can stay."

"Swim where?" said Preen who was a bit scared of water and wanted to keep her fur just so.

"Fight who?" said Rip who was too peaceful to enjoy battle.

"Sneak where? Steal what?" sneered Black Spot. "I choose your test. There will be one each day for five days. If you fail you go in the sea. Do you say yes?"

"Don't," warned Rip, who did not trust Black Spot.

But Lu had a plan. It relied on *kree*, on rat honour. Rats cheat and thief, sometimes even from each other, but they are social animals and have to live together, whatever their argument. So they agree to forgive and forget as long as they survive the dispute. And they tend to keep their word. Lu hoped the other ship rats would remember *kree* even if Black Spot did not.

"If we show you we three can sneak, steal, scrap, swim and scale you will see we are wild?" said Lu, carefully. "Sir?"

"Yes."

"*Kree*?"

"*Kree*, pet."

"Done," said Lu. She sniffed noses with Black Spot to seal the deal. Preen and Rip chattered with nerves.

"Leave," said Black Spot.

"Come on Pew," said Lu. "Show us where to make a nest."

Pew sneezed.

"This is not good," said Rip as they left the orlop and dropped into the hold. Pew showed them a place between two packing crates. The sisters squeezed in. They found something even better than a hidden place

between two boxes: one of the crates had holes drilled in it. They were just big enough for the rittens to pass through.

"I can't come in!" said Pew when he tried to follow.

"Good," said Preen who, unlike Lu, was not sure she forgave the old rat just yet.

"Oh," said Pew. "You are mean to me." Then he excused himself and went elsewhere.

The sisters found themselves in a big box full of straw. There was a soft cloth under their feet that covered something lumpy and warm. This was a luxurious place to snooze. They started cleaning themselves, brushing their paws over their ears. Lu found washing helped her think.

"We can't do all these tests!" said Preen. "We are small. This is our first time out of our home."

"We don't all have to do the tests," said Lu, cunningly. "Black Spot did not say we *each* should do five tests. He said we *three* should do five tests. I could sneak, you could steal, and Rip could climb. You see?"

"I do see," said Rip. "We do what we do best. That's smart."

"What does scale mean?" said Lu.

"It means climb," said Rip.

"Oh," said Lu, who knew she was rather clumsy.

The sisters piled on top of each other and went to sleep.