

Pirats

A Tale of Mutiny on the High Seas

Rat Tales, Part Two

By Rhian Waller

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Finally, to the ratties themselves. Without you, Leeloo, Priss and Ripley, these books would not exist. Just stop chewing holes in my rough drafts!

Characters

Rats

Rip: The main character. Older sister to Lu and Preen. She is a very ordinary brown rat and does not trust humans. She dislikes fighting but will do battle when necessary.

Lu: A daft white rat. She is friendly and clumsy.

Preen: The third rat sister. Grey, pretty and shy.

Pew: Skip of the rats. He is old and creaky but leads with cunning and wisdom.

Patch: A young orphaned Pirat. He has a marking over one eye. He is cheeky and likes to play.

Peg: Brother to Patch. He is missing half a leg but this does not slow him down. Also cheeky.

Spite: A rat who comes aboard from a slave ship. She has seen the worst of humanity and it has left her with a fear of rules. She wants to have no master. She has a gang which includes **Stink**, **Sharp** and **Twitch**.

Gold: A handsome blond rat from the slave ship. He takes a liking to Rip.

Bigs

Runa: A Swedish girl who is on her way home from Jamaica. She has bonded with **Lu** the rat.

Abel: Cabin boy on the *Liberté*. He appears to have lost the power of speech. He is terrified of rats.

Blanche Fleur: A Haitian woman dressed in white. She is rescued from a sinking ship. She has a talent for navigation.

Rouge Fleur: The woman in red, also rescued. She and Blanche are so close they choose to share a last name.

The Captain: A Dutch man who is in charge of the *Hydromyst*, at least for now...

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Author's Note

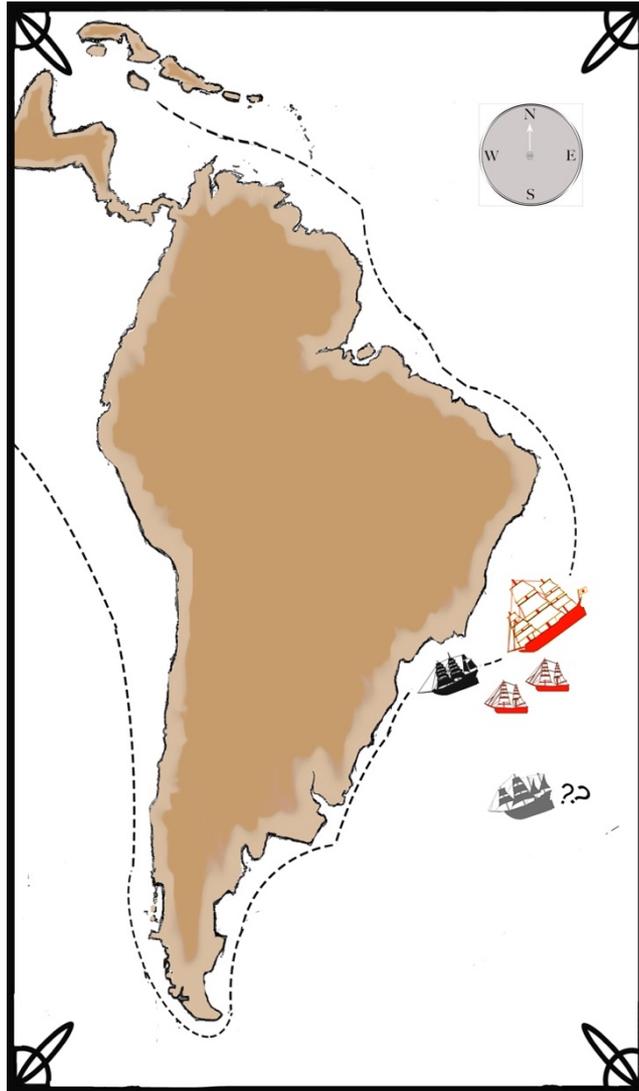
Welcome to the second book in the *Rat Tales Trilogy*, dear reader!

As in the first book, *Ship Rats*, these events are rewritten from the notes of an eminent naturalist who had the opportunity to spend time with these rodents in the late 18th Century.

For those who have just joined us, these are the adventures of Lu, Rip and Preen, three rat sisters, and a Swedish stowaway.

During their voyage to Jamaica, the three young rats had to undertake a series of challenges set by Black Spot, the terrifying skipper of the rats. Through a mixture of cunning and bravery, they managed to survive these dangerous tasks, but Black Spot was not about to let them stay aboard.

He was furious that Lu made friends with a Big girl (rats call us 'Bigs' because of our gigantic size). A great storm struck the *Hydromyst*, their ship. Lu had to use all her wits to escape Black Spot and save the ship. They arrived safely in Jamaica, but the story did not end there...



The re-named *Hydromyst* and *Liberté* flee down the coast of the New World.

Chapter 1: Going home?

Lu was missing.

Rip crouched at the fore of the ship. Her nose twitched. She could smell salt, fish and clean air. Her whiskers told her something was going to happen. Every man aboard was busy, loading crates or checking that the craft was shipshape. They were docked at the port of Golunda in the warm Caribbean islands and now it was time to sail.

Rip was a rat. She was only three months old but she was larger than little Lu and their sister, shy Preen.

Lu had explored the port town but Rip stayed aboard. She worried that her sister would be left behind on land.

The brown rat scurried along the handrail and looked out over the dock. She sniffed as hard as she could. Yes, there was Lu. Rip still couldn't see her.

'Hurry up, Lu,' she said.

The little white rat was snoozing in a special purse bought just for her. This purse hung from the shoulder of a young girl, Runa, who was eleven. Runa argued with the tall man walking her to the gangplank. Rip sat and listened, though the words meant nothing to her.

'I don't want to go,' said the girl. 'I want to stay here with you, Pappa.'

'Runa, I love you very much and soon I will be home but until then you must continue with your schooling. I would be far happier if I knew you were safe in our house with your friend Astrid rather than here.' Runa's

Pappa waved back at the town, which was full of rum and rambunctious sailors. 'I will send word you are to have a new teacher.'

'Can I learn the natural sciences, about animals and things?' said Runa.

'No, Runa,' her father laughed. 'You will learn needlework and deportment. And of course you will continue with your French and German.'

Runa pushed her chin out and her lips went thin.

'Pappa, I –'

'Don't turn our farewell into an argument,' said Pappa, and then he used his special name for her. 'Little Love, we can talk about this when I come home. I know you are not an ordinary child, my daughter. An ordinary child would not have tried to post herself to Jamaica in a box, or made friends with a white rat. Go home Runa, and perhaps when I return we will find you a tutor who can teach you these things.'

Then he kissed her on the cheek and she hugged him hard, careful not to squish her rat purse.

'Thank you, Pappa,' said Runa. Then she ran up the gangplank and turned to wave.

Rip did not come too close. She was not a fan of humans – which she thought of as *Bigs*. Even Runa, who was not all that huge, was a great, giant clomping thing to a ship rat.

Rip could not understand why Lu liked the company of *Bigs*, but then Lu had always been silly.

Rip trailed Runa, who walked across the deck to her cabin. The brown rat dashed through the door and shot

under the bed. Preen was waiting there. The grey rat had an excellent instinct for finding food and she knew Runa was good at giving out treats.

'Hi, Rip!' said Preen.

'Lu is back. She is up there with the Big.'

'Oh, that's good,' said Preen. 'I'm glad.' She paused to wash her face.

Runa tipped the purse up and Rip heard a little *plop* as Lu fell onto the mattress. Rip pushed her claws into the bedframe and climbed up.

'Lu!' she said, hopping across the lumpy mattress.

'Oh, Rip,' said Lu, blinking sleepily. 'Hi.'

They sniffed nose-to-nose, which is the rat way of shaking hands.

Rip jumped when Runa sat beside them.

'Well, ratties,' said the girl. 'It seems I am to become a lady. I'm not sure I want to learn how to recite poetry and sew. Are you two hungry? Wait there and I will fetch you a good breakfast.'

Lu and Preen pranced about, hoping for food. Rip stayed dignified.

'Here we go!' boomed Runa as she returned from a hamper with an armful of snacks. 'I brought plenty for all of us. Help yourselves. Make the most of it, we'll be back to salt meat and biscuit soon enough.'

She cut up the vegetables and fruit with a little knife and laid the slices on the bed. Preen soon had bits of banana on her whiskers but Rip hung back.

'Eat, Rip,' said Lu.

'No,' said Rip. 'I don't trust Bigs. I don't need a Big to find me food.'

Runa noticed Rip backing away. She squatted down and offered her a scrap of meat.

'Here you go, brown ratty,' said Runa.

Rip accepted the gift and nibbled it watchfully, but when Runa pushed a finger to rub the rat's nose, Rip dropped what she was chewing and nipped the girl's hand. At the same time, she squeaked: 'No.'

It wasn't a hard bite. It didn't break the skin, but Runa still gasped.

'Ow!'

Preen and Rip scattered at the sound. Lu followed.

'Don't hurt my Big,' said Lu. Rip felt bad.

'I can't let her touch me,' she said. 'I don't like it, but how can I tell her to stop? Bigs don't speak. They just make that long, loud noise that hurts my ears.'

'Well I want to eat more food,' said Lu, and she returned to the feast.

Preen nibbled her fur nervously, but whatever she was going to say was lost when both rats felt a shudder run through the ship.

'We are on the move,' said Rip.

Sure enough, the *Hydromyst* made its way toward the open sea. Soon, it turned and started making headway toward the rising sun.

Rip heard the familiar sounds of creaking wood and waves, but it didn't comfort her. She was in disgrace. She wandered off alone, down to the deck that the rats used as a playground and meeting place. The sailors

used this space to store rope so it wasn't as busy as other parts of the ship.

Pew, the skipper of the rats, sat in a nest he'd made among the ropes.

He was old and smelly, but everyone liked him being in charge because he didn't boss them around or steal their food like the last skip. He was wily, and other rats came to him for advice.

'Yarr, Rip,' he said. 'How are ye?'

They sniff-sniffed a hello.

'I bit a Big,' said Rip. 'Now I feel bad.'

'Who cares?' said Pew. 'A Big is a Big.'

'I don't care about the bite, but now I think Lu and Preen are cross with me.'

Pew sneezed.

'Go be a ship rat,' he said. 'Eat good food, run and play, have fun. Time will heal this.'

'Yes,' said Rip. 'But how do you have fun?'

Pew just gave her a strange look.

The truth was, Rip was happy the ship set sail. Lu enjoyed exploring Jamaica, sniffing the fragrant flowers, digging in soil and chasing the chickens while Preen spent a lot of time remembering Mum Rat and pining for home. But something about the salty sea breeze and the motion of the waves felt right to Rip. She enjoyed being on the ocean. Once she got home, she might miss being on a ship.

She made her way to the front of the *Hydromyst*, bouncing up the stairs and scrabbling on to the stem that jutted out over the waves. She sat like a little

brown figurehead, enjoying her own company and watching the horizon rise and fall. At sundown, the Bosun brought her a snack of ship's biscuit and a lick of stew in a bowl. He thought the rats were good luck.

'I don't need Bigs,' Rip told herself, 'but I will eat this.'

The *Hydromyst* was well away from the island when dusk fell. Rip liked the twilight, but to her the world was a blur of blue. Her nose was sharper. The breeze brought her a strange new smell from another ship. It set her fur on edge. It was a blend of sailing scents – wood, canvas, tar and rope, but it was mixed in with sweat, fear and human muck. Rip shivered. Whatever this new ship carried, Rip wanted to be far, far away from it.

A few moments later the wind blew from another direction and Rip tasted clean air. The strange, frightening ship sailed away into the night.

Chapter 2: Save Our Souls

The next morning, they came across another ship. This time, the sailors got very excited. Rip was hiding in the cargo hold. She still hadn't apologised to Lu or Runa.

'Rip? Rip?' a rat called. It was her friend, Sleek. 'Where are you?'

Rip dropped to the ground, scampered out from under a crate and ran upstairs. The deck was a forest of legs and the air was full of shouts.

'They are in distress,' said the First Mate. 'Ready the jollyboat.'

The Bosun and Captain were at the handrail on the port side of the ship, swapping an eyeglass back and forth. Rip crept over to a scupper, a gap in the side of the ship where deck water drained off. It made a perfect window for a curious rat. She smelled other Bigs, lots of them, men and women. Her nose sensed excitement, gunpowder and metal.

'It's a barque. There are ladies on board,' said the First Mate. 'I can make out their skirts. They are waving hankies.'

'Yes,' said the gallant Captain. 'We must attempt a rescue. Bring the ship around and launch the jollyboat when we are close.'

'Aye sir.'

'Can you see what is amiss?' said the Captain.

'She's low in the water, sir,' said the First Mate. 'She could be wallowing.'

Rip stayed hidden as the sailors trimmed the sails, bringing the *Hydromyst* closer to the stricken vessel. The new ship was smaller. Rip looked down on the deck where a dozen Bigs shouted, waved and beckoned.

'Oh, oh,' she heard one of the Big women wail. 'Help us good sirs!'

She spoke in French, which was as meaningless to Rip as the Dutch spoken on the *Hydromyst*, but the Captain, who was a cultured man, understood.

He cupped his hands around his mouth to shout back, deafening poor Rip.

'Keep calm. We are launching a small boat to ferry you to us. Where is your skipper?'

The woman was slight and had powder on her face and chest. Her hair was done up in neat curls beneath a wide hat and she wore a fine white frock. Rats have no interest in clothes, but Rip thought the long skirts and ruffles would make a good hiding place. She hid her face in gloved hands.

'Alas, our good captain went overboard along with many of the crew,' the woman in red mourned. Though she leaned on a walking stick, she smelled young and healthy to Rip. 'There are thirty souls on board.'

Rip heard the jollyboat land with a splash. Four sailors strained at the oars. Still, the *Hydromyst* edged nearer. Rip didn't like how close they had come to the sinking ship.

The woman in white allowed a sailor to help her down a ladder and into the boat. Another woman, dressed in

red and clutching an umbrella, found a seat. Oars plish-plashed as they scooped through the water.

'Thank you,' said the tearful woman in white as the sailors of the *Hydromyst* helped her aboard. She swooned. The First Mate went to comfort her.

The jollyboat ferried over twice more. Turning to the woman in red, who clung to his arm, the Captain asked, 'How many are there?'

'Enough,' she said. She let go of his arm and grabbed her stick, pulling it in half. There was a click, a scrape, and suddenly the Captain had a blade at his throat. The woman in white, meanwhile, recovered from her fainting fit and pulled the cloth from her parasol. A sharp tip glinted as it pressed against the First Mate's belly. Now that they were close, it was clear her skin was far darker than the makeup that covered it.

'Cannon ready!' the woman in white shouted loudly enough for her voice to carry over the water.

Rip heard a clatter of wood and a rumble as the shutters on the port side of the barque flew open. Iron muzzles appeared in the square frames.

'Pirates!' shouted the Bosun, but it was far too late. The sailors of the *Hydromyst* had expected a rescue, not an attack. One had the sense to ring the deck bell until a pirate pulled out a flintlock pistol and pointed it at him.

Some of the sailors had swords, though, and they surrounded the newcomers. Others swarmed up from the lower decks, armed with anything they could find. The cook carried a cleaver.

'Release the Captain,' said the Bosun.

'Not a chance,' said the woman in red. She spat on the deck. 'Throw down your weapons.'

'You're outnumbered,' said the Captain. His Adam's apple bobbed against the blade.

'And you're outgunned,' said his captor. 'You ain't got a cannon, not a single one. We'll blow this fat pig of a ship to splinters.'

'With you on board, ladies?'

'Aye, with us aboard,' said the woman in white.

'You seem like a reasonable gent,' said the red woman. 'But we ain't ladies and we ain't reasonable.'

There was a long moment where all Rip could hear was the wind, the waves and the sound of dozens of human hearts beating too fast. She made herself small. This wasn't the way rats did it, but she recognised a fight when she saw one.

'Stand down, men,' the Captain said at last. 'We're merchantmen, not fighters.'

'Good choice,' said the woman in red. 'Drop 'em.'

Rip flinched as steel hit the floor.

'Abel, be a dove and pick up the gents' razors, butter knives and marlinspikes,' said the woman in white.

A small Big started to put the improvised weapons in a sack. He smelled nervous.

Just as Rip was wondering if she should make a dash for the cabin and find her friends, a new scent came to her. She sniff-snuffed deeply. There were strange rats!

A blur of movement caught her eye. Something small dropped from the woman in white's shoulder. A brown

shape swaggered over to Rip. She instantly forgot all about the Bigs and their strange drama.

It was a young buck. He had light brown fur with a darker blotch over one eye.

'Nice to be on our new ship,' he said.

'Who's this?' said a second rat. He moved with a limp. One of his legs was a stump, but he was quick despite the missing paw.

'A girl!' said the first rat. His whiskers danced.

Rip was not impressed.

'Get out of my face.'

'That's rude,' said the stumpy rat.

'You can't be rude to us on our own ship,' said the eye patch rat.

'This is not your ship!' said Rip.

'It is now,' said the stumpy rat. 'We took it.'

Rip bristled.

'Oooh, oooh, she wants to fight us!' said the eye patch rat.

Rip forced herself to settle down. She willed her fur flat. She'd only fought once before and it hadn't been fun. She didn't like the hollow feeling of rage and how it left her shaky afterwards. She remembered fur flying and teeth flashing and gnashing. She did not want to do it again, no matter how cheeky these young rats were.

The strangers puffed themselves up. They danced, walking sideways with stiff legs. This was a sign they planned to attack.

Meanwhile, the Bigs were having their own row.

The two women had stretched a rope across the deck.

‘Alright, sailor-boys,’ said the one in white. ‘My name is Blanche Fleur. My good friend in red is Rouge Fleur. We offer you a choice.’

‘That side, you end up in the brig and we put you off at the first port we land in. Step this side and join us. We don’t want our nice new deck messed up with blood.’

‘Don’t step over the line,’ the Captain roared. ‘This ship needs at least fifteen men to crew it. They won’t be able to run both ships by themselves.’

‘That won’t bother us,’ said Blanche. ‘If no one crosses the line we’ll just put a hole in the hull and let you sink.’

She gestured to the cannons gaping from the gun deck.

Two men stepped over the line. Rip recognised them as sailors who had caused a lot of trouble on the way to Jamaica. One was a drunken sailor, the other used to be the Second Mate before he was demoted.

‘Good men,’ said the pirate lady. Slowly, two other sailors crossed over, then another and then two more. The Captain was left with his First Mate, the Bosun and a handful of loyal men. Not one of them budged an inch. The Captain folded his arms and looked stern.

‘Lock ‘em up,’ said Rouge. Two of the pirates bound the loyal sailors’ hands.

‘Traitors,’ said the Bosun.

‘I’m sorry, Skipper,’ said one of the free sailors, shamefaced. ‘I have a girlfriend in every port. What’ll they do if I get offed by a pirate?’

‘I’ll take you, you, you and you over to my ship,’ said Blanche, pointing to the newly recruited pirates. ‘Five of my best men will stay here, with Rouge as your captain.’

'A woman?' whispered one of the *Hydromyst* sailors. He was quiet, but not quiet enough. A burly pirate slapped him across the ear.

'Not a woman, a *captain*,' said Blanche.

The crew split, with varying amounts of regret. The red lady, meanwhile, set her own men to task.

'Search the ship,' said Blanche. 'Someone pick up the rats.'

One of the pirates looked around.

Rip and the two boy rats were still sizing each other up. She was bigger, but there were two of them and one of her.

She puffed up her fur. They fluffed theirs out too.

She turned sideways and stood on her tip-toes. They did the same.

A thin hiss slid from between Rip's teeth like the sound of escaping steam.

This was a stalemate.

All three of them froze as two leather boots slammed down on each side of the trio.

'Which ones, Ma'am?' the Big pirate said.

'All of them!' Blanche shouted.

'Aye.'

Suddenly, Rip found herself in the dark. She was caught in a cloth prison. She squeaked and struggled as the walls pinched together, squishing her up to the two strange rats.

'What's this? What's this?!' Rip raged. Paws pressed into her side. She could feel her tail kink up. Her nose poked into a soft belly. The world lurched and

everything turned over and opened out. She saw sky again. The pirate had scooped her up in a tricorn hat and was carrying the three rats across the deck.

'I will bite you,' Rip shouted. 'I will!'

The Big didn't understand or care.

'Calm down,' said the rat with three legs. He seemed quite relaxed as the pirate climbed one-handed down a cargo net and into the jollyboat. The pirate flexed his muscles and started to row to the new ship. The waves rocked them up and down.

'Put me back, Big!' Rip squeaked. Her wedge-shaped head looked in every direction but she couldn't see an escape route.

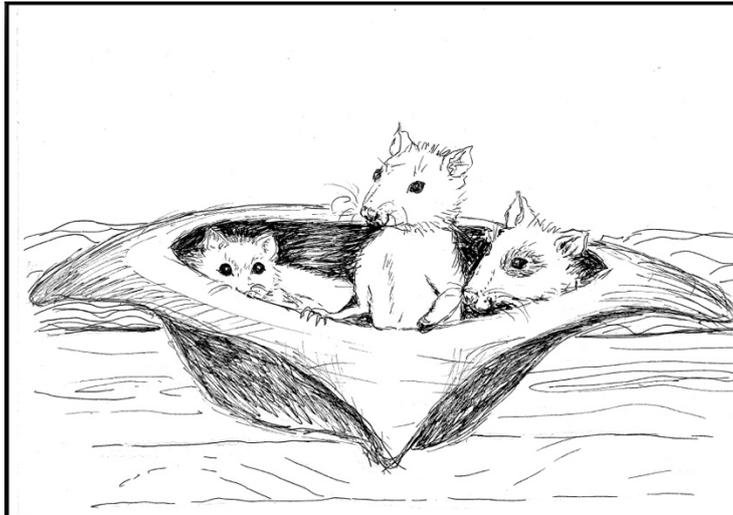
The pirate had placed his hat on one of the seat-planks. He rowed hard. The only others in the boat were the woman in white and the small Big who smelled of fear. The little Big sat as far from the hat full of rats as the small boat would allow.

'Don't be afraid of them,' said Blanche.

The boy nodded but said nothing.

'Yo ho and home we go,' said one of the strange rats.

Rip, though, had never felt so far from home.



Chapter 3: Aboard the Liberté

The new ship was a confusion of sights and smells. The sharp tang of chemicals and the blunt, bloody smell of iron were everywhere. The vessel was overloaded with cannons.

The hat full of rats was lifted up and passed into a waiting pair of hands. Rip felt helpless as she peered over the rim. She looked into a Big's face. It was the woman in white. Her nose and eyes filled the world. Her breath flattened Rip's fur.

'You picked up three for the price of two here,' she laughed. 'I have an extra rat!'

She reached out. Rip saw the approaching fingers come into focus.

'NO!' she said. 'Don't touch me. Don't!'

The finger snapped back.

'She's a bit of a madam, boys,' said the Big to the two other rats who wrinkled their noses as they listened. 'I hope you get on with each other.'

The pirate lady tipped the hat out and Rip landed with all four paws on the deck. As soon as she touched solid wood, she dashed away. The other rats followed.

'Hey, grump rat,' said the one with a missing leg. 'Slow down.'

Rip did not slow down. She was cross, she was scared and she did not like this strange new place.

She shot across the deck and slipped into the first patch of shadow she found. It was under a swivel gun.

'Oi, new rat,' said the three-legged stranger. 'Phew, you move fast!'

He stood in the light, quite fearless.

'Leave me be,' said Rip. She had trouble catching her breath. Her sides heaved. Where was she? How could she get back to her sisters? She crouched, ready for battle.

'We don't want to fight,' said the second rat, the one with a blotch over one side of his face.

Rip looked at him with wide eyes.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'Kree?' said Rip.

'Eh?' said the first rat.

'That might be her name,' said the second rat. 'Is it your name?'

'No. I'm called Rip,' she said. Her ears went down and she relaxed. 'Don't you know what *kree* means?'

'No. I am Peg and this is Patch,' said the three-legged rat.

'*Kree* means peace,' said Rip. 'It means a few more things, too.'

'Like what?' said Patch.

'Did your mum rat not teach you these things?'

'We don't have a mum rat,' said Peg.

Rip looked at him, perplexed.

'Is it a kind of pi-rat?' said Patch.

'I don't know what that is,' said Rip.

'We are pi-rats,' said Peg, proudly. 'We are free! We roam the seas. We take what we want. We do as we please.'

It all made sense to Rip now. No one had taught her new friends how to behave. They were fearless because they'd never learned to be afraid.

'That sounds good,' said Rip, 'but I must get back to my sis Lu and sis Preen. They are my best friends.'

'Like me and Patch,' said Peg.

'But they are over there,' said Rip. 'The sea is in the way.'

'What can you do?' said Patch.

Rip settled onto her stomach.

'I don't know,' she said. Her whiskers drooped.

Rip had never been without her sisters. One or the other had been close to her since they were tiny. She missed them, badly.

‘Don’t be sad,’ said Peg. ‘Join us. Drink, eat, sleep and have fun.’

Part of Rip thought that was a very bad idea. She was a serious, steady rat. Then again, she was tired of being sensible all the time.

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘Show me how.’

‘Great!’ said Patch.

The brothers were as good as their word. They showed Rip the whole of the barque. It didn’t take long as the ship was smaller than the *Hydromyst*. It was also much narrower as it was built for speed rather than cargo.

The biggest difference between the two ships was that this one had a gun deck. At first, Rip stayed away as there were Big pirates all over it, moving cannons around, lifting iron and picking up barrels of gunpowder. They did this last thing very, very carefully.

The pirates had rigged up a winch on the *Hydromyst* and were lifting some of the heavy weapons over from the barque. Eventually, all the heaving, clanking and cursing stopped and Patch led Rip in to look.

The three rats climbed all over the pyramids made of cannon balls. One rolled out of place, narrowly missing Peg’s front paw.

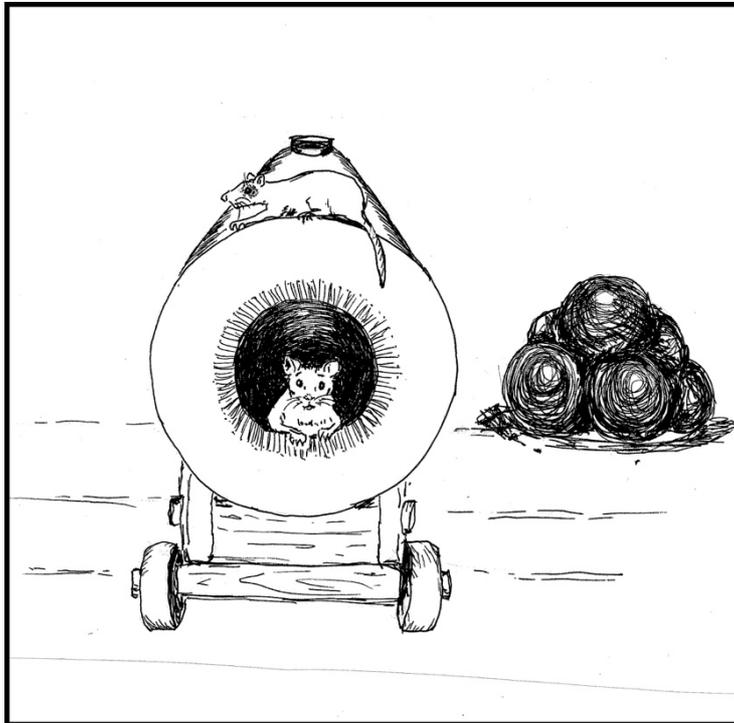
‘Oops,’ he said, with a jaunty flick of his ears. ‘Not this time.’

The merriness of the two brothers, who played hide and seek and touch-my-tail, began to make Rip feel a bit better. She watched them pounce and bounce about.

‘Come and play!’ said Peg.

‘I’m not good at play time,’ said Rip. ‘I like to stay still.’

'Oh, come on,' said Patch. 'Chase me!'
He ran up the rounded spine of a cannon and paused
at the top to make a rude noise.
Rip sprinted after him.
'Whee!' He jumped off and skittered away.



Rip reached the muzzle of the cannon. Instead of jumping, she clambered into the tube. The metal walls were slightly warm from the sun. She snuffled her way down to the bottom, turned awkwardly and climbed

back out. Her fur acted like a duster. She emerged covered in soot and oil.

'Swift!' she sneezed.

Peg laughed. 'You are a mess.' It was his turn to run away. After teasing Rip for a while, the brothers decided it was time for dinner.

'This way,' said Peg. He showed her to a cabin. It had a rich, soft rug on the floor and it smelled of lily perfume. There was a vanity table with a mirror and a wardrobe stocked with mothballs.

'Here,' said Patch. He swaggered over to a plate in the corner. It held a meal of boiled potatoes and chicken. The rats devoured it then drank from a bowl of water.

Round-tummied, Rip felt sleepy. She went to digest beneath the bunk bed.

Blanche walked into the cabin, her heels clicking against the planks. The lady pirate sighed and sat down at the dressing table. She used a damp cloth to take off her makeup, removed her wig and shook her hair free. It hung down her back in a long tangle. She stood to change her clothing.

Rip stayed hidden but Peg and Patch ran around in the pile of cloth.

'Hello, boys,' said the Big. 'Oh, it's wonderful to get that dress off.'

Rip flattened herself. Peg and Patch obviously thought they were safe because they tumbled over Blanche's feet. She spoke to them.

'Have you had your dinner? Good lads.'

She shrugged them gently off her feet and put on a loose blouse and breeches. Patch swarmed up her leg, up her shirt and tugged on her collar.

'And a good day to you, too!' said Blanche. She offered a flat palm to the rat, who stepped onto it. She put him on her shoulder, where other pirates might let a parrot perch.

Rip watched nervously. There was a knock at the door. 'Yes?'

'There's someone from our new ship here to see you,' said the pirate outside.

'Come in,' said Blanche.

Rip stepped back, retreating further into the shadows. She liked having something solid over her head.

But the Big who came through the door was familiar. It was Runa. Rip's nose quivered. The girl smelled of fear but there was a current of determination running like cool water through warm.

'*Bonjour, madam Fleur,*' said Runa, and Blanche nodded.

'Good day,' she replied, also in French. 'What brings you over to the *Liberté*?''

'I want to be a pirate,' said Runa. 'I saw Abel. He's the same age as me. If he can do it so can I. I'm a girl, but so are you.'

'Abel is part of our crew because he has nowhere else to go, my pretty. Is it the same for you?'

'No,' said Runa. 'I was on my way home when you captured my ship. I won't see my father for months.'

That's why I need to talk to you. I want to be a pirate but only for a short time, please.'

Blanche was amused.

'Is your father rich, little girl?'

Actually, Runa's father was very well off but Runa had the good sense to say, 'No.'

'Then you are no use to us as a ransom,' said Blanche.

'And yet, I wonder if you truly know what you are asking. Do you understand what pirates are?'

'You are bloodthirsty killers,' said Runa, enthusiastically. 'You are the scourge of the sea. You take what you want and answer to no man.'

Blanche threw her head back and laughed.

Runa became thoughtful.

'I don't want to kill anyone,' she said. 'Not if you let me be a short-term pirate. Though I would like to learn how to use a sword and how to swash and buckle.'

Blanche patted Runa's shoulder.

'Girl, I will tell you what we truly are. We are hunted. We are hated. We are feared. If ever we were caught by the navy of any country they would hang us at once. How old are you?'

'I am eleven, almost twelve.'

'That's an awful lot of life to lose out on if something goes wrong.'

'But you won't get caught, though,' said Runa. 'And if you do, I will pretend I was your prisoner.'

Blanche laughed again.

'There may be a bit of buccaneer in you after all,' she said, reaching up to tickle Patch.

'I like your rat,' said Runa. 'That's how I knew you weren't one of the really bad pirates.'

'Oh? You aren't scared?'

'No,' said Runa. 'I have my own ratty.'

'These boys are special to me,' said Blanche, scratching Patch between the ears. 'When I came to this ship they were the only two left. They were tiny. I fed them by hand. They are misunderstood.'

'I agree,' said Runa, eagerly. 'Will my ratty be safe on the other ship without me?'

'My beloved Rouge is a Benin warrior-woman. She taught me everything I know about sailing and I taught her everything I know about navigation. She is a good captain. Your rat friends will be fine.'

'Phew,' said Runa.

'Very well. You are a hostage here, but you can have the run of the ship and you will be part of my crew except in name. That way, if we are captured, you will not be hanged as a pirate. But you must not get in the way of the senior pirates and you obey any orders. Follow Abel and he will show you your duties.'

'Aye-aye,' said Runa.

'Dismissed.'

Runa went to the door and paused. She turned back. Rip poked her nose out from under the bed.

'Captain Blanche,' the girl said. 'You won't hurt the old Captain and the Bosun, will you? They were good to me.'

Blanche's face went grim. Runa fled.

Chapter 4: How to be a Pirat

That night, the pirates had a party. One had an accordion, another a violin, and a third beat out a rhythm on a drum. They toasted the beginning of their pirate fleet. They renamed the *Hydromyst*. From now on it would be called the *Black Caesar*. Both ships floated side-by-side – close enough for Rip to smell her friends, but much too far for her to leap across.

It was a merry evening. The men danced, looping their arms to turn and leap about while Rouge and Blanche danced together. Runa joined in but Abel sat alone at the edge of the lamplight. When the stars came out, he disappeared.

Rip also stayed away. Patch and Peg danced on their back legs for scraps but she didn't like the crowded deck.

She found a ratline and clambered up the rigging. Rip rose past the fighting top and the sails until she came to the high lookout basket at the top of the mast.

Abel was already up there, sitting quietly on his knees, looking out over the sea. The water behind the barque shone a magical blue-green as the hull tickled a bloom of algae so it glowed. Starlight glimmered on the edges of the waves.

The young Big was so still and silent Rip knew he hadn't seen her.

She didn't disturb him. She just sat on the edge of the basket, equally as quiet and thoughtful.

After a while, Abel started singing. It was very different from the shanties Rip heard from below. This was a song of sorrow and the boy kept his voice low and gentle. It was not a bad sound. For some reason, it made Rip think of her home nest, which lay on the other side of the ocean.

When the song ended, Abel sighed and turned around to climb down.

He saw Rip.

Rip froze.

The Big froze, too.

They stayed, still and staring at each other, for a long time. Then Rip sneezed. She flung her legs out and went: '*Swiff! Swiff!*'

Abel scrambled back so fast he almost fell out of the basket. He put his legs over the side and dropped out of view.

Rip sat, quivering from nose to tail. The Big had been *terrified* of her.

This was very strange. He was easily a hundred times bigger than Rip.

All wild rats learn to be wary of humans, though some were like Lu, who was a mixture of brave and daft, or Peg and Patch, who didn't know better. Rip was used to the idea Bigs hated rats, but she'd never seen a human run from a rat before.

Rip felt strong and scary all of a sudden.

The party calmed down. One by one, the pirates and their new crew members went below-decks. The musicians packed up.

Rip climbed down to the weather deck. Peg and Patch, unlike the pirates, were still wide-awake and bright-eyed.

'Hey, rat boys,' said Rip. She had an idea.

'Hi, Rip.'

'Who is the skip of this ship?' said Rip.

'What is a skip?' said Peg.

'The rat in charge, the one who says what to do and when it should be done.'

Peg looked at Patch uncertainly.

'Our Big?' he said.

Rip hissed quietly.

'What do Bigs know about rat life? You don't even know *kree*.'

'Teach us,' said Patch.

So Rip told them:

*You must know the rules of kree,
If you want to live with me.
You should sniff-sniff to say hi,
Bear no grudges if you fight,
Always look out for your friends,
Keep your word, as is right.
Now you know the rules of kree,
So we can live well, you and me.*

'You have been on your own too long,' said Rip. 'You need to learn how to be a wild rat.'

'Fine,' said Peg. 'Let's make it fair. If you teach us what you know, we will show you how to be a pi-rat.'

'Done,' said Rip. 'Now, for the first thing, where do pi-rats nap?'

'We'll show you,' said Patch.

The boys led her to the corner of the cabin where someone had nailed pieces of cloth to the walls to make little hammocks. Peg climbed in first by standing on Patch's shoulders. Rip jumped in and wobbled as the hammock swayed.

'This is the best thing I have seen in my whole life,' she declared as she curled up cosy. 'I love it.'

Over the next few days, Rip showed the boys all the skills a wild rat needs. She showed them how to steal, sneak, climb up high and swim in a bucket full of water. They became so skilled they could pinch a biscuit from under the nose of a ruthless pirate. The only thing she didn't do was show them how to fight.

They still went back to their bowl of food because no self-respecting rat would turn their nose up at an easy meal. They got a lot of exercise thieving and trespassing.

It still felt strange to have the whole ship to themselves. Rip sometimes caught old scent trails left by the rats that had once been there. They were very faint.

By the end of this, Rip felt like a big sister once more. It didn't make up for missing Lu and Preen, but she felt a little better.

In return, Peg and Patch showed Rip the life of a pi-rat. They rampaged around the *Liberté*, climbing and wrestling. They took Rip to every nook and cranny of

the barque and showed her all the best places to gnaw and nibble. They shared all the games they knew, like race-to-the-scuppers, play dead and sniff-chase. Rip, who used to think games were a waste of time, found herself getting quite good at them.

Sometimes Rip saw Runa working alongside Abel, scrubbing the deck or splicing ropes. The girl smelled hearty and fit. She chatted happily to Abel and didn't seem to mind that the boy never replied.

Rip did not go near them. She stayed hidden when the pirates gathered on deck to listen to their captain. The woman in white stood on the top deck, her hair blowing in the wind.

'Friends,' she called. 'We have a choice. We can stay around the Indies or we can sail south to safety.'

'Times have changed,' said one pirate. 'There are fewer sea rovers and more naval ships in these waters.'

'But the hunting is better in these parts,' said another.

In the end, they cast a vote and decided to stay for one more raid before turning to the open sea.

'To freedom!' said Captain Blanche.

'To freedom!' roared her crew.

They sailed on, the *Liberté* stalking the sea lanes for victims, the *Hydromyst* ploughing on behind her, slower but steady. It only had four cannons and Captain Rouge had no intention of taking her into battle.

Then someone spotted a ship on the horizon and everything changed.

Chapter 5: Hunting

'Ready the crew,' Captain Blanche said to her First Mate.

'Aye Captain.'

The sails dropped and canvas bulged and snapped as it filled with wind. The pirates turned the wheel and carved out a new path with the rudder.

Rip, Peg and Patch, lying in their hammocks, lifted their heads. They sensed the ship change direction and pick up speed.

'Get off me,' said Peg, who was using his brother as a duvet. 'There will be a Big fight. Let's go and watch.'

The rats tumbled out of their beds. Rip scampered along with the brothers.

The pirates were scrambling into position.

This time, the distressed damsel trick would not work. The other ship was sailing away from them and showed no signs of wanting to get close. The *Liberté's* only option was a swift attack.

The crew of the other ship spotted the pirates coming. Rip could hear the faint cries of officers giving orders.

'It's a race,' said Peg.

The *Liberté* skimmed the waves. The wind was on their side. Captain Blanche set a course to meet the other ship at an angle.

The fleeing captain realised this. Rip and the two boy-rats squinted to see, but the other vessel was too far away.

It was thrilling for Rip to take part in a hunt. She could hear, smell and feel the excitement.

'Go fast, go fast!' chittered Peg.

'Catch them, catch them!' said Patch. He ground his teeth with impatience.

The prey moved off course. The enemy ship angled itself and trimmed its sails to take advantage of the same wind that pushed the *Liberté* along. Now they were closer, it was clear this was a massive, full-rigged ship with four masts. Now it ran directly ahead of them. The *Liberté* was lighter and smaller so it needed less wind, but this new ship had a huge spread of canvas. Perhaps it could outrun them.

Rip put her paws against the wood and stretched up to look out. The ship was a growing blur to her. They were catching up.

'She has no cannon, Cap'n,' said the pirate first mate.

'We'll show them ours then,' said Captain Blanche. 'Go broadside.'

The *Liberté* was right on the heels of the other ship. This close, the pirates were taking the wind out of its sails. The *Liberté* swung round and Rip heard the crack-slam of the gun ports as they were flung open.

Captain Blanche hailed the other skipper in French.

'Ahoy!' she shouted. 'Will you let us board or shall we cripple you first?'

The new ship, which was called the *Amitié*, was within range.

'Go and drink bilge-water, pirate scum!' shouted their captain.

'I think that meant no,' said the first mate.
'In that case, fire,' said Captain Blanche, very calmly.
'Fire!' shouted the first mate.
'Fire!' shouted the second mate down on the gun deck.
Half-a-dozen flames touched a half-a-dozen fuses. Five muzzles flashed as five iron balls flew through the air.
'Bum,' said one pirate. 'Sorry, one moment...'
By then, the first thunderblast had died away. Two of the cannonballs splashed into the sea but three struck home. They slammed into the side of the *Amitié*. One smashed into the rigging, snapping spars and ropes.
Rip thought the whole world had exploded. Her brain felt as though it had been squashed flat by the noise. Her nose burned with sharp-smelling smoke.
'Do you surrender?' said Captain Blanche.
'No! May your scurvy bones end up as fish-food, unnatural female!
'Are you sure?'
'I will see you hang, Haitian demon-woman!'
'Very well,' said Captain Blanche. 'Reload and prepare to...'
Just then, the last cannon went off. The ball sailed through the air, crashed through the deck and buried itself in the bowels of the *Amitié*. The hole it left stopped less than a metre from the captain's feet. The breeze from its passing ruffled his wig.
'Oops,' said a voice from the gun deck.
'We surrender,' said the other captain, very quickly.
'Grappling hooks,' said Blanche. Her first mate nodded. Suddenly, the deck swarmed with pirates.

Rip watched them throw ropes with hooks on the end across the gap between the ships. Some of them caught on the railings and the pirates started to haul the lines.

'Heave,' shouted Captain Blanche.

'Ho,' shouted her men.

'Meep,' said Rip as the ship shuddered. It swung closer to the captured vessel.

'Come on, Rip,' said Patch. 'Now we board the ship!'

The gap closed. The *Amitié* was taller than the *Liberté*, so it was a risky business for the pirates to climb aboard. For the rats, though, it was easy. No one noticed Patch, Peg and Rip fling themselves onto the strange deck.

The pirates tied up the merchant crew. Blanche had no intention of taking the ship, which was far too large to crew. Instead, she raided it.

Peg tripped over to a hatch and slithered through the grating.

The pirates were looking for gold, velvets and other treasures but the rats were after a different kind of booty.

'I smell something sweet,' said Rip. 'It's fruit.'

She followed her nose to the captain's cabin. She jumped onto the desk, kicked over a crystal ink pot and sent a silver letter-opener spinning. She left footprints all over the expensive carpet and stopped for a wee on one of the captain's posh, pink-powdered wigs.

Finally, she found what she was looking for: a box of cake. She sniffed carefully and then dived in. Patch joined in.

Soon the rats had eaten so much that Rip felt as though there was a cannonball in her belly. They staggered off to find Peg.

He was in the hold and he had an audience.

Strange rats milled around, scattering when a pirate stamped his way to the cargo.

'We are on a raid,' said Peg. 'Give us all your stuff!'

He was bouncing on his three legs, his eyes flashing.

Rip was not so happy. She sniffed. There was a smell in the hold. It filled her nostrils, rank, thick and nasty. It scared her but she also wanted to find out what it was.

'Get off our ship,' said a tan-furred buck rat. 'My stuff is my stuff. Go and get your own.'

'*You* go and get stuff for me!' said Peg, stubbornly.

Rip took the opportunity to sneak off. She tiptoed past crates and stacks of goods. The smell grew stronger. It was made up of bitter sweat and bad feelings. It came from a group of Bigs in a caged-off section of the hold. A single lantern cast shadows that spread and shrank as it swung overhead.

There was a mixture of women, men and children. They weren't wearing very much. This did not strike Rip as odd as she thought the Big habit of dressing in cloth was strange. They did, though, all have metal things around their necks. Rip's nose twitched. She thought they smelled wrong; not ill, nor drunk like a sailor, this was something worse.

They had not been allowed to eat, clean themselves, breathe good air or see sunlight for far too long. It

reminded her of the strange, hulking ship she had sniffed several nights ago.

Suddenly, a Big swept over Rip, her trousered legs stretching up like vast columns. It was Captain Blanche.

'More tobacco,' she boomed, annoyed. 'And cotton. We can't sell it to the English mills. Nor will there be much point in trading it back to the United States. It would be like selling cider to an apple-grower. What's through here?'

The rat crouched beside the pirate, whisking her whiskers.

Captain Blanche suddenly went very quiet and still.

'Fetch the captain,' she said.

To be continued....