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Opening extract from

Hero and The Sinking Ships

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Chapter One
The Morgan Street Rats



The Morgan Street Rats had never thought of themselves as unlucky. They lived in the attic of a crumbling Georgian house in a city thronging with gloriously filthy human beings. Downstairs there was a restaurant whose lazy chef left out their supper every night. Roast chicken, apple pie, even fancy French vol-au-vents were theirs for the taking. On top of this there was a dog in the restaurant, who terrified the neighbourhood cats but was far too grand to notice the rats, and let them scamper past his nose with barely a sniff.

So, in the beginning, the rats had a merry old time. They gorged on the food from the restaurant,

licked dirty plates at night, ransacked the rubbish, swam in the sink of dirty washing-up water and chewed old fish bones and chicken carcasses to their hearts' content. They liked to stretch out by the dying embers of the restaurant fire, when the diners had left, belching gently after a heavy plum pudding. They loved the fire, its warmth spreading through the bricks of the chimney all the way up the rickety house to their nests in the attic.

The owner of the restaurant, a Mr Tide, didn't care much about the rats. He was a slovenly, long-haired, unshaven man, who drank too much and wore an apron so caked in ancient food that mould grew upon it.

One day a party of lawyers came to lunch and stayed all afternoon celebrating the end of a long trial. They ate mussels and oysters and rabbit pie, followed by an old treacle sponge that the rats had failed to finish off the previous night. A few hours later the lawyers were monstrously sick. Two of them came gasping to the door of the restaurant, desperate with stomach aches and anger. They banged on the door, bellowing and groaning at the owner.

Then they saw the rats, scampering across the



tables, feasting on cheese and pie, gorging on left-over potato salad.

The lawyers' revenge was swift: the following day the restaurant was closed. Mr Tide was thrown in gaol (such is the power of lawyers), the dog was removed to the country, and a new owner arrived. The rats' luck had changed.

The new owner of the restaurant was called Mrs Spark. She wore a starched white apron and she cleaned the premises from top to bottom. She threw out the rotten furniture and scrubbed the floors. She knew there were rats in the attic, so she bought a cat. Not just any old cat – a hunter. A rat-catcher, the best in the business. He was as black as the night, with thin green eyes and claws like sharpened fish hooks. His name was Snarl.

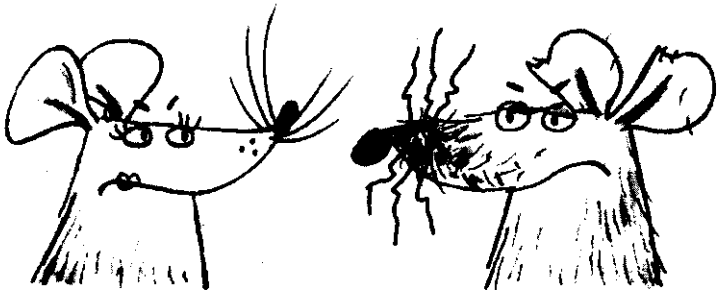
In no time Snarl had done his work. On his first night he lay in wait for the rats and pounced. He caught six and lined them up by the back door. The following night he caught another four. The rats knew it was time to move on. They no longer dared go down to the restaurant or sneak out to the rubbish bins.

Snarl waited for them around every corner, gloating on his success. He hissed into the rat run under

the floorboards and smacked his lips. He purred softly, threateningly, into the dark attic at night. His call found its way into the dreams of the rats and unsettled them. So the families of rats departed, frightened and hungry.

All except one. They were a new family and the babies were too young to move. Their eyes were still shut and they lay gulping air and drinking their mother's milk in a little nest under the floorboards of the attic. To keep away from Snarl, they had to move to the very corner of the eaves, to a nook by a wooden beam that was sticking out just under the roof. One side of the nest was actually in the open air next to a terrible three-storey drop to the street below. Pa rat had to use himself as a wall to stop the babies falling out. Wind and rain came in from the outside, while Snarl prowled the inside. It was no place to bring up a family, but Ma rat and Pa rat were stuck with it . . .

Chapter Two
The Nest in the Attic



'I'm cold,' complained Ma.

'*You're* cold,' said Pa.

'And I am damp.'

'*You* are damp,' repeated Pa. His eyes were closed. His back was curved next to the drop, holding in the babies and open to the wind and rain. He was colder and damper and more miserable than Ma would ever be. This nest was too small.

'And surely it is about to snow,' said Ma, with a sniff and a little cry.

Pa opened his tiny dark eyes. They glinted in the dull afternoon light, like black beads. His fur twitched around his snout. 'My whiskers are

frozen!' he moaned. 'Frozen stiff. Ow! And baby number one is giving me trouble.'

'Baby number four is giving me trouble,' said Ma. 'She has sharp claws.'

'Now number two is facing the wrong way,' said Pa, wriggling. '*I* have no milk,' he told the blind, snuffling little thing.

'But number three is perfect,' said Ma lovingly. 'Good rat! He has positioned himself just right and has sweet milky breath and adorable twitchy paws.'

Pa was quiet. He disapproved of soppiness. Once they were out of the nest, his children would have to deal with the hard knocks of life. The rough and the tumble. Cats and dogs and cockroaches. Not to mention humans. There was no time for soppiness. He nudged baby number two away and with his hind legs pushed number five back from the brink, where she was making a bid for freedom.

'When will these babies' eyes open?' Pa sighed. It was the umpteenth time he had asked the question.

'Soon,' Ma told him. 'It's three weeks tomorrow since they were born. Then they will be ready.'

Pa sighed again. 'If they get any bigger, they'll push me off this ledge. I shall fall to a terrible death in Morgan Street.'

'Don't,' said Ma kindly. 'We need you.'

A flurry of snow billowed in the street below them, blinding the men on the ground and sending a pigeon squawking over the rooftops. A dozen white flakes were suddenly posted like letters into the nest, and lay dissolving on the rats.

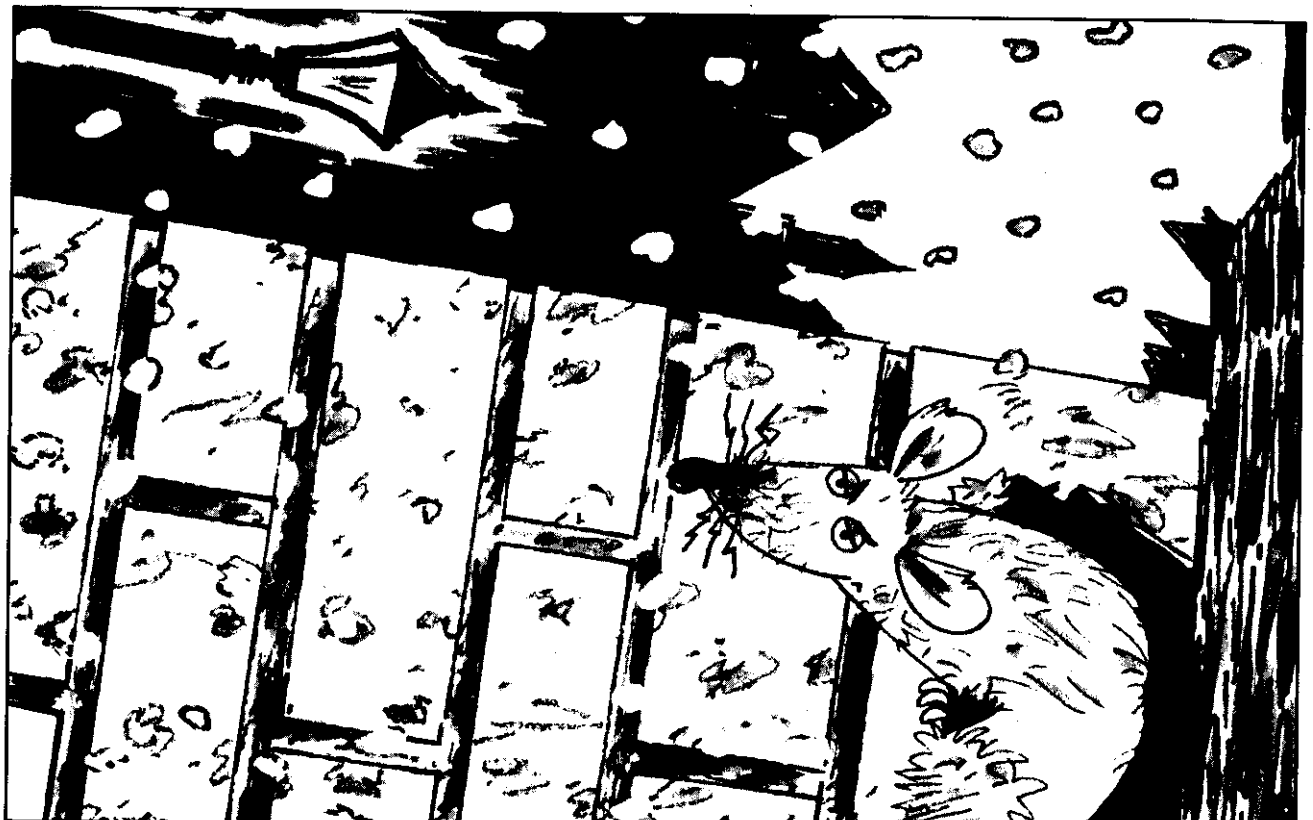
'Tsssssssssss,' came a silky hiss from inside the attic.

Ma and Pa looked up. Their fur bristled. It was Snarl. Up to his tricks again. He knew where they were and he enjoyed teasing them.

Scratch, scratch. Snarl was fishing. Scratching at the floorboard, trying to pull it away, trying to get his paw closer to the rats. If he was lucky he might snare one with his claws. He knew they were in there. He could smell them. It was driving him mad with hunger.

'Oh, this is awful,' Ma whimpered. She could hear Snarl's purr now, pulsing through the floorboards. Ma and Pa rat trembled. The bitter east wind whistled under the tiles. It cut through their fur and bone. They trembled with fear and they trembled with cold.

'I can't bear this country any more,' Ma wailed. 'I want to move. I want a new home. A home that is



warm, in a place that is safe.'

Pa blinked away a snowflake. He felt suddenly sad: he was failing his family. He should build a nest in a nice, cosy place. Not here on the edge of a cliff, with a hungry cat smacking his lips outside.

'As soon as the babies can travel,' he told Ma through chattering teeth, 'we shall move.'

'Where to?' asked Ma. 'Tell me.' She longed for Pa to give her hope.

'To somewhere warm. Somewhere where there is proper heat. We shall move . . . to the Tropics,' said Pa decisively. It was the warmest place he could think of.

'Tell me about the Tropics,' Ma asked dreamily.

Pa tried to paint a picture. It would have to be good. It would have to give Ma hope. 'In the Tropics there are warm sleepy lagoons, full of rotting vegetables. There is a delicious steamy heat, heavy with ripe smells. Fruit falls from the trees and rots on the ground. It never, ever snows.'

'Really?' said Ma, brightening.

'Really. Long ago, rats lived in the Tropics. That's where we came from. We came west on ships. West – to this bitter, frozen land. I think we must have come in summer, when it was warm, little knowing

the harsh winter that follows.'

'How far away are the Tropics?' asked Ma.

Pa thought. 'A few miles,' he said vaguely. He had a notion that it might be a little further – but he liked to be optimistic.

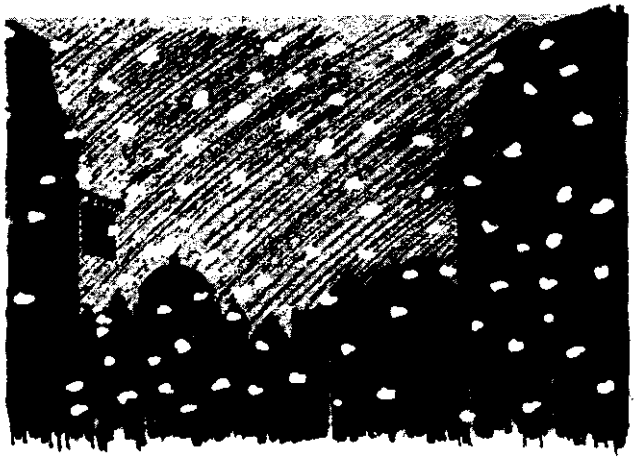
'Can we really go?' Ma asked.

'Of course! And if rats came from the Tropics in ships – we can go back . . . in ships!' Pa rat shivered off a mantle of snow and rose up suddenly. He would do this. He really would. 'The moment the babies' eyes open,' he declared solemnly, 'I promise that we shall go down to the docks and find a ship to the Tropics!'

Ma opened her eyes and looked lovingly at Pa. 'Yes. Oh yes, please,' she said, with longing. 'And then we can leave the cold and the snow and this beastly cat. Rufus – you are wonderful.'

'Thank you.' Pa smiled, showing his fine buck teeth.

Chapter Three
Snowbound



As soon as the babies' eyes opened, they became interested in the world. They found it a cold, wet frozen place – so they immediately hid from it. They preferred the hairy warmth of their parents' tummies.

Babies numbers one, three and four opened their eyes first, and Ma and Pa duly gave them their names. Number one was called Happy, because she smiled and gurgled in the nest. Baby four was called Scratcher, because her claws were sharp and busy. But they disagreed over baby number three's name.

'He is handsome. So let us call him Rufus.' That was Pa's name (and surprise: it was Pa's suggestion!).

'No, no. I will get terribly confused if you both have the same name,' said Ma. 'This rat has delicate features. He shall be Romeo.'

'Romeo? Too fancy. Too foppish,' Pa declared firmly. He looked into baby number three's eyes. They were lively and daring. They sparkled. 'He has spirit,' agreed Pa. 'He should have a strong name. Something heroic. Like . . . "Hero".'

'Ooooo. Hero. I like that.' Ma gazed at the little rat. 'My Hero,' she giggled.

A day later the other three babies opened their eyes. They were called Solo, Chewy and Morgan. Solo was making a break for freedom even with her eyes shut; Chewy had large early teeth; and Morgan, last to open his eyes, was named after the street.

Once the little rats could see him, Pa decided that he had to make the babies understand that he was their father and he was In Charge. The nest was bright with reflected light from the snow. They lay all together in the deep snow silence; it was a special moment: that of a family looking at each other for the first time.

'Children,' said Pa rat. 'Welcome to the world. Here is my thought for today: we share the world



with many animals, but particularly with our tall, smooth-skinned relatives – the humans. Humans think they rule the world, but they are mistaken. *Always remember: there are more rats than humans.* Now, we love human filth. We love their leftovers, and their rubbish and their houses and their ships. But we don't like *them*. They are bigger than us and they are mean to us – so be careful. They are jealous because *we* are the more successful species!' He laughed.

Blinking their tiny eyes, the rat babies gazed at their father in admiration. They were proud to be rats.

'*My* thought for the day,' said Ma, once the babies had digested Pa's stirring words, 'is, *Beware* of the perilous drop on the other side of your father – it's three floors down to the street and you won't survive. *Beware* of cats. In the room behind me there is a hungry cat called Snarl who likes nothing better than a baby rat for tea. *Beware* of eating anything too solid – like wood or bone or glass – it will give you a horrid tummy ache. And finally – don't worry about the cold, because your father and I have decided that soon we are moving to the Tropics, where the rubbish floats in tepid lagoons

and the air is moist and full of decay.'

'Hee hee, hee hee,' laughed the babies, all snuggling together.

The following night was bitterly cold and though the babies were safe and warm, by the morning Pa was half-dead with icicles hanging off his back. Snow was falling heavily, choking up the streets and alleys half as high as a horse. The baby rats hunkered down in the nest, drinking milk and growing stronger.

Three days later, in the evening, such a hunger seized Pa that he ventured out in search of food. The cat Snarl had been quiet for some time and Pa decided he must risk it, for the sake of Ma and the babies.

He left Ma lying in his place by the drop, keeping the children in the nest. He felt his way along the rat run under the floorboards with his whiskers and his nose. He sniffed. Cold north wind, the smell of snow. He listened. Silence. He peeped out – unfortunately he couldn't see much as he had terrible eyesight. There was a great deal of dark and gloom.

'Yioaw!!' snarled a cat suddenly and as Pa ducked

down, a paw caught him on the spine. Snarl! He had been hiding downwind, silent and still as a statue. Snarl had known that sooner or later the rats would have to come out. He flexed his paws and his sharp claws splayed into the rat's fur.

Pa quickly twisted round and bit the paw. He tasted the sweet blood as Snarl yelped and let go. Pa squirmed away, down under the floorboards, his heart pounding with shock and fear. The cat's head and sharp teeth came after him, hissing . . . but got caught in the hole, and yowled in frustration.

'Go and find a measly mouse for tea,' Pa growled, backing away from the cat's head. He scurried back thankfully to the safety of the nest, his tummy still rumbling with hunger.

Chapter Four
A Slip on the Edge



'Snarl is on the prowl,' he told Ma, when he returned to the nest and took his place by the eaves. They shuffled around each other. 'How are we *ever* going to get out of here?' Pa groaned. He stuck his back half out of the edge of the nest and relaxed.

But in his absence a slippery patch of ice had formed by the drop and Pa felt himself begin to slide. 'Woah!' he exclaimed in surprise. He was trying to wriggle back, when suddenly his hind legs slipped right out over the drop.

'Help!' He scrabbled desperately. 'I'm going – WHAA . . .!' Suddenly his whole body slipped out