

Vera Buhl



**The Magical
Empire of Mumbas**

Vera Buhl - The Magical Empire of Mumbas

Buhl, Vera:

The Magical Empire of Mumbas

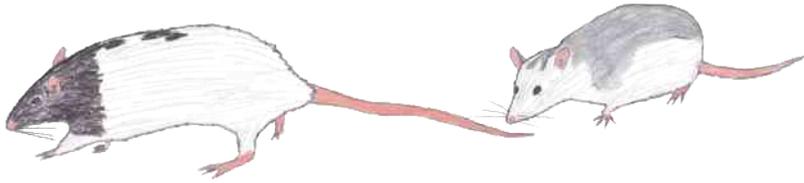
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Kiwi and Lychee are off on an adventure! Leaving behind their exercise wheel, they head off for the great outdoors. Kiwi's head is black and she has some black spots on her back. The rest of her body is white. Lychee has a grey back, and the rest of her body is also white. They are in high spirits as they stuff their backpacks full of grain, whistling happily to themselves.

Off they go, but just a few hours later, the straps of their backpacks cut deeply into their shoulders. They are too heavy! So Kiwi and Lychee eat up nearly all the grain, so they can fit everything into one backpack. They take it in turns to carry it, leaving the empty pack by the roadside. Now they can enjoy their walk again! Looking for food is no great chore, as at times their food walks right ahead of them.

The ☺ rats have been on the road for several days now – they've never been so far from home. They decide to stop in the next town they reach, and late that afternoon they arrive in Mumbas. The town looks strange - nobody seems to be living there!

After they have inspected several houses, Kiwi points her nose towards a black house, deciding: "This is where we must go." Lychee complies and obediently trails after her.

Off they go and, jumping and bouncing, they reach the

dark house in no time. To them, the mysterious building has a magnetic attraction. The jagged house has four triangular pointed blue gables, and the front of the house is black. The cloud-shaped windows and the only golden-framed door give it a pompous appearance. They call it “the jagged house”.

It is afternoon. Cheekily, the hoppers climb over the green-white metal lattice door and circle the building. Simple, square, grey concrete slabs surround the house. Before them is a small garden with ornamental plants. It is summer and the old hibiscus bushes are in full bloom – white, pink and blue blossoms. A garden hose is left to dry on one of the scrubs. Small details such as a bird bath and a windmill perfect the picture.

Here they are, in somebody else’s garden, looking around full of curiosity. They sample a few plants. Here and there, a lemon balm leaf, peppermint, parsley or bamboo. Right after their snack, their noses are down on the ground again, always sniffing for edibles. They need to be quick to catch the small insects. Spiders especially tend to run off awfully fast. Jumping for flies is basically useless, but it’s still fun. ☺ Sow bugs on the other hand are an easy prey.

They blow through their pointed noses into various cracks to flush out all kinds of creatures. Centipedes wiggle out quickly, not suspecting anything. The two chasers are clearly enjoying the treats. There is a bit of trouble when the two of them fight over a slug. First they roll the slug in the dust to remove the slime with their front paws. They squeak as they snatch the delicacy from one another. In the end both get a bite. A smile lights up their

eyes.

The uninvited guests pass green bushes and two blue water drums. They reach an area used for drying laundry. No laundry hangs here, but three flower baskets with lush vegetation swing in the wind - which at this moment is noticeably losing its breath. Quickly the two rascals get on to their hind paws, boldly peering upwards. Their heads swiftly turn left, and right, sniffing in all directions. Excitedly they squeak and click their tongues. Kiwi is triumphant: "Hey, look up. There are hanging strawberries. They look ripe. I'll try to climb up. Keep your fingers crossed for me." "I can't", Lychee laughs, "but I'll knock on wood for you." Kiwi, the courageous and athletic one of the two, hands the backpack to Lychee.

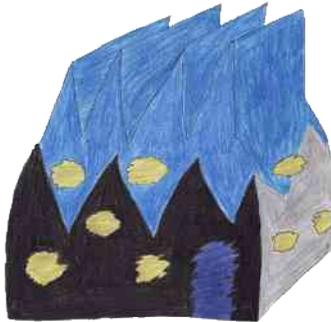
Kiwi uses her forelegs to cling to the smooth green metal pole with all her strength. She loses her grip several times and spirals back to the ground, clumsily landing on her backside. But she doesn't give up. Jauntily she pulls herself up inch by inch, moaning, "Pooh", her forehead wet with sweat. Once at the top, she balances past a fire plant ... and ... to the last flower basket, where she nibbles off two of the enticingly sweet-smelling fruits and lets them fall down. Lychee nimbly picks one slightly damaged fruit with her two front paws and, handling it carefully like a raw egg, she places it into the backpack. When Kiwi is back on the ground safe and sound, they gobble up the second strawberry together. Small joys sweeten one's life. The delicious meal is over quickly, and happily they lick their red mouths clean.



Lychee now scratches her ear with her right hind paw, pulls her whiskers through her front paws, yawns and stretches like a cat. “You’re not going to fall asleep now, are you,” Kiwi reproaches her. “No, no, I’ll be alright,” Lychee yawns. “Moving on will keep you awake,” Kiwi retorts.

Finally they reach a covered storage area. Here they find a shelf with small ceramic flower pots. On the walls, rakes, shovels, spades, brooms, pruners and a saw are hanging. The floor space is taken up by watering cans, buckets, rubbish bins and large plastic flower pots.

At the stairs down to the cellar there is a big aluminium ladder, but the cellar door is locked. So they jump back up and take a peek around the corner.



1. The Jagged House

This is getting exciting. Lychee is suddenly awake again, opening her eyes wide and shouting with excitement: “Look, look, one of the glass blocks is ajar!” They carefully climb through the opening into the cellar and look around. With a huge leap, they reach an open shelf with paints and cleansers. Nimble they climb over the tins to the lower shelf. A big jump, and they are on a workbench. Crrrashhh!!! A huge clutter fills the room as glass shatters on the floor. On the workbench are several empty bottles, and with her uncontrolled landing, Lychee’s backpack has swept one of them off the bench. Fearfully, the rats run to a corner and prick their ears, straining to hear whether something happens. It seems that nobody has heard the commotion. After a period of silence, Lychee whispers from the corner of her mouth: “Looks like nobody’s

home. Shall we move on?" "Yes, I think, the coast is clear," Kiwi breathes back.

From the workbench they have a good view. They take a good look to check out the situation. There are several more workbenches, a cupboard and a shelf with small transparent plastic drawers for nails, screws, nuts and bolts etc. Let's just say that there is nothing here which would be of real interest to them: a) nothing that smells interesting and b) nothing they can eat. So the two snoops continue their journey, jumping on the bottle crates – they soon regain their balance and reach the concrete floor. They avoid the sharp pieces of glass so as not to cut themselves.

At the passage way they prick their ears once again, but there is complete silence. So they're on their feet and off again.

In the next room there is an old carpet, nice and warm on their naked feet. But it smells very dusty. On the left there is a kitchen cabinet, above it an open shelf with supplies. "Not bad," says Lychee. On the right, there are a tall cupboard and a refrigerator, and straight ahead a shelf with old books. They inspect the room on the left. Kiwi is visibly disappointed, "Only files, a desk and cupboards." The next room looks better: a high shelf filled with preserved fruit, jam and wine. Beside it, an old wooden chair. They jump on to it and stroll along the board. The fruit in the glasses looks enticing, and they longingly eye the canned goods. But how can they get to the fruit? Unscrewing the metal lids is impossible, their limbs are simply not equipped for the task. Lychee has a flash of inspiration. "What about apricots today?" she asks and with her backside

pushes the apricot jar towards the edge. Another jolt and its contents are scattered on the floor. The sweet gooey sauce spreads on the floor. Eagerly the two rascals climb down, and smacking their lips, gobble down the soft, sweet fruits. What the sleepyheads need next is a quiet corner to doze off. Eating is exhausting, “uuuaah,” totally exhausting. After all they have been travelling all night. With their bellies full, the sleepy rodents get some paper from the office room, bite it into small pieces and use it to pad a cardboard tube they discovered on the floor. Lychee squeaks in grand style, “Would you be so kind, my dear, please take a seat.” Grinning, Kiwi pipes back, “Oh, thank you, thank you.” Lychee takes off the uncomfortable backpack and carefully places it next to their nest. “Your back is all red”, Kiwi says with a shock.” “Oh no, we forgot the strawberry”, Lychee replies, annoyed. She quickly opens the inner bag and scratches off the strawberry mush with her paws. They lick what’s left of the once juicy strawberry and put aside the backpack. The way it’s looking, they won’t be able to use it any longer. Time for their evening rituals! They scrub their faces, carefully lick their shoulders clean and pull their tails through their paws and mouth. Clean and content, they sprawl on their paper beds and roll up sideways, their naked tail curled around their body. They peacefully slumber head to head recharging their energy, until Lychee is awakened by Kiwi’s “atishoo!” However, she dozes off again right away.

It is afternoon, rats are nocturnal animals. Slowly they begin to stir. Kiwi wakes up and begins to prepare herself for the new day. She yawns heartily and stretches out her

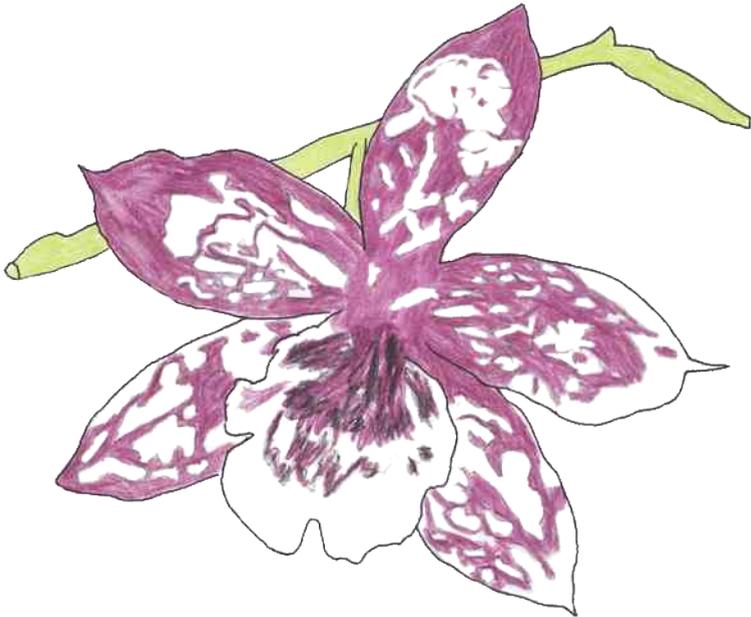
limbs. With her little legs, she goes over her ears, uses her tongue to clean her coat and once again gives her face and ears a good scrub. Lychee is awakened by the hubbub, she also gives herself a good lick from head to toes. Playfully, she snatches at the tip of her tail spinning around. "Looks like we're full of mischief today, aren't we?!" Kiwi says. "Yes we are," smiles Lychee.

The backpack is left behind. Happily they move on and continue to rummage. Through several cardboard boxes, they reach a small plywood cabinet, its door ajar. A bewitching smell flows out. "Dried sausages, mmmhh, fantastic," Kiwi beams. She is already chewing as she jumps down, pulling the sausage. Lychee runs after her. Swiftly Kiwi swallows big pieces. They start fighting over the sausage. "Up there you find more than enough. Why don't you get one for yourself?" Kiwi complains. "Come on, don't be grumpy," Lychee replies, annoyed. "Sharing has never been your strength. It's always mine, mine, mine." She's a bit peeved as she climbs up and in her anger takes a bite out of every single sausage. Kiwi is indignant: "What are you raving about? Who is the one who is always hiding goodies?" "Ha, ha, really funny. I believe in stocking up, you don't need to devour everything on the spot," Lychee sneers. After this high-fat meal they are ready for a new adventure. There must be more to this place than the cellar.

Up some stone stairs they hop to the ground floor. Scurrying past a vacuum cleaner, a laundry basket and full and empty beverage bottles, they reach a corridor with plastic flooring. They're all ears, inspecting their surroundings. Good - complete silence.

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To the left, a red runner with Greek pattern leads to the living room with its hard wooden floor. The ☺ Radishes jump on an old-fashioned easy chair and then on to the coffee table. Greedily they suck in the exotic smells and nibble on just about everything. This is how rats explore their new environment. Every newspaper, every magazine now bears the characteristic pattern of their teeth. They also leave their scent marks. “This is our territory. Everyone should know that we were here.”



Kiwi giggles, “Look here, there are orchids and a tin can. Let’s see what’s inside. Together they artfully open the lid with their strong teeth. “Munch, munch, biscuits.” They

quickly gobble down a few of the dry baked goods. To top it all, they treat themselves to an orchid blossom. “Well, you must say, this is excellent. Quite delicious, it meets my majestic standards,” Kiwi rejoices. “Cut the posh talk, nobody’s going to believe us anyway,” Lychee replies.

Grabbing hold of the fabric of the lounge suite, they climb up to the window sill. From there, they wander around the flower pots and reflectively look out the window. It is dusk, and there is still no one to be seen, which means there is no danger for them.

Swiftly they make their way to another corner of the room. They jump on the swivel chair, from there to the desk and finally reach a big wall unit with lots of books, vases, picture frames and postcards. “Paper and cardboard really taste nice ...” Lychee sniggers as she eats away, carefully grinding it all down between her molars. Now some of the books are thoroughly tattered. They pull out the pages and carry them under the cabinet. The cushion from the swivel chair also goes there. With great expertise it is hollowed out – the rustling nest is ready. They quickly test it out; what a shame, it could be a bit softer. Off they go again, looking for more materials. The “Better Sleeping” project is not yet over. “Come on, move a bit faster, I’m tired, I need to rest,” Kiwi says stretching herself. “What’s your problem? Don’t hassle me, at my age I can’t go any faster.” “At your age, you’re only a spring chicken,” Lychee retorts. The two girls go on teasing each other.

Next to the living room, there is a bedroom. Red flowered curtains decorate the window. Systematically, the two litt-

le detectives scan the room. A mirror, a picture on the wall, a bed, a wardrobe and two small chests of drawers. There - a thick feather pillow gets their attention. Jackpot! They rip open the cotton cover with their teeth and carry mouthfuls of the tender down feathers to their nest. Their night labour is accomplished. The living room, once spick and span, looks ravaged by now. Everything is topsy-turvy, the owners of the place will be delighted.

Kiwi and Lychee, the two rascals, are really into mischief. Now they also drag a few biscuits under the cabinet.

Time to go beddy-byes (to catch some z's). Fluff, lint and feathers fill the air as they jump into their inviting bed. For quite a while they restlessly shuffle around, till everything is in a comfortable position. Now and then you hear the rustle of paper. But finally they settle down. Cuddled up closely they are off to dreamland. At times Kiwi's curled up till her foot reaches the tip of her nose.

☺ If I were to sleep like that I'd have a back ache. Oh well, sweet dreams.



Today the rats sleep a bit longer and only wake up in the late evening.

Opposite the living room, there are a dining room and the bathroom. The tap at the sink is dripping continuously.

Here the two take a big sip of the cool, refreshing liquid.

The sightseeing tour continues. On the left they see the toilet, which the two cheeky monkeys don't intend to use.

They prefer to do their business in a corner.

They come to the kitchen. Cleverly they slide over the wintry white tiles, manoeuvring around the legs of table and chairs. There's only an apple and a banana on the

kitchen counter. What a treat. “Let’s not go bananas, but this would make a nice breakfast,” Lychee says taking a big bite of the fruit, after she had jumped from the chair to the table and finally to the top of the kitchen counter.

They can’t open the fridge. Kiwi muses, “Let’s just suppose, merely hypothetically, that we could somehow open it. What wonderful treats might be inside? Some delicious yoghurt?” In their heads, images of all kinds of treats appear. They imagine lots of goodies and start planning how to open the door. Their mouths are already watering. They look around for tools. To open the cutlery drawer is easy. Kiwi grabs hold of a long yoghurt spoon and tries to use it as a lever on the refrigerator door. Lychee helps her press. The door does not budge. Well, it was worth a try. “Forget it, we simply aren’t strong enough,” Kiwi decides. One needs to accept one’s physical limitations. Lychee agrees, “Let’s see what else we can find.”

To get stuck on something which leads to nothing is a waste of time. After all, you never know how much time you have.

Once again they stick their 😊 pointed snouts up in the air. A captivating smell flows from a cabinet with sliding doors. It won’t hurt to take a look, they wouldn’t want to miss out on anything. They squeeze in through a crack, but to their disappointment they find nothing but potatoes and onions. Not something they would like to taste – no way. Actually, their bellies are full, they feel as if they had swallowed a medicine ball. Or shall we just say: Physically they’re not at their best!

The two vagabonds run back into the corridor, to the stairs. Somewhat lazily they pull themselves up step by step, climbing the white wooden staircase covered with a turquoise-coloured runner. Lychee, the chubbier of the two, is beginning to moan, "With all those stairs, the muscles in my forelegs are starting to ache." "No bawling, please," Kiwi brushes her off. Done, they have reached the first floor. Curiously, they look about. On the left, they see a bedroom with a walk-in cupboard. An ironing machine and an ironing board are by the wall. Straight ahead is a small bedroom. At the right-hand side, a bathtub next to a toilet - and beside that an office with a computer, printer and photocopier.

2. The Trap Closes

The door is ajar. Together they press against it and squeeze through the opening. Their noses are again on the alert. The two gluttons can't smell anything edible, so for now they happily slide back and forth on the smooth laminated floor.

After that, they explore the room. On the left by the wall stands a desk with a computer and a swivel chair. Opposite is a large wastepaper basket. Running up to it enthusiastically, Kiwi takes a big leap and clutches on to its rim with her front paws. Casually she pulls herself up but suddenly slips down. Now she is stuck in the empty basket. Again and again, she tries to leap out, but she can't. Lychee is full of glee, "Serves you right, why are you always so curious? Now I have to figure out how to get you out again!" "Well, that wouldn't be bad," Kiwi replies

sheepishly. Lychee rushes back to the bathroom, she had seen something that might work. Oh yes, there is a towel. A few jumps later, she's managed to grip the towel with her teeth, and it quickly slips off the rail. She drags it along and hurls one end into the basket. The other one is firmly fixed between her teeth. Kiwi can now climb out without difficulty. "Thank you," Kiwi says humbly. "That's what friends are for," Lychee replies modestly.

Kiwi now heads directly to the right side of the room. Lychee stops suddenly, an uneasy feeling in her stomach. Her instincts tell her that something isn't quite right. Kiwi, the ever curious ringleader, cheers her on: "Come on, let's inspect this shelf with papers, files, disks and CDs. "I don't know, we shouldn't go there," Lychee hesitates. But Lychee cannot resist Kiwi's urging for long. After all, what could go wrong?

As they reach the shelf and keep trying to jump up, a duct opens in the floor with a loud creak. In the blink of an eye, they tumble down the slightly inclined tube. All efforts to grip on to the smooth plastic surface are in vain. They slide first towards the bathroom, then end up in the toilet drain, finally falling a number of feet down.

Their life flashes momentarily before their eyes. Is this it then? Do they not deserve to live? Was this one mistake too many? Have they somehow disturbed the balance of the universe?

3. An Ancient Sewage System

With a loud splash, the two rats land in stinky water.

Luckily the 😊 ratties are not hurt. What a relief!

They are somewhat shell-shocked. Quickly they swim to the edge and pull themselves up. Soaking wet, they

stand there, petrified, a look of horror on their rigid faces. Shaking themselves dry, they hug and kiss, grateful to be alive. They weep with relief, tears pouring down their faces.

Sniffing, Kiwi asks, “Are you okay?” Lychee looks herself over, “Yes, everything is still in place.” Kiwi hangs her head, “Okay, okay, I’ve screwed up. I brought us into a dangerous situation. How stupid can a rat be? Can you forgive me?” “Without you it would have been quite boring lately”, Lychee laughs.

Nobody is perfect – even if one hesitates to admit it. A truly cheerful person does not give up easily. But you should not bargain with the Grim Reaper. It could come to a bad end.

“Well, let’s try to make the most of it,” replies Kiwi. “Let’s see how we can get out of this mess.” Lychee has hit rock-bottom. “My brain can’t think right now, I need a reboot.” “Come on”, Kiwi nudges, “this ☺ peanut is hardly ever in use”. “My one and only brain cell needs a drip and a wheel chair, believe me,” Lychee replies, tired.

They need some time to reorder their thoughts.

Will they be able to use what they’ve learnt so far? Everything around them is suddenly completely different. They are in a grubby, bitter cold sewage system. They had just been in paradise, but where have they ended up now?

When they finally recover, they point their noses up and sniff in all directions, almost fainting. Their well developed sense of smell is overwhelmed by an awful stench that is enough to knock you down.

All around them, it's pitch-dark, cold, stuffy and damp. They are in an ancient sewage system. Next to the smelly stream is a narrow path scattered with stones, which seem to have been tossed about in a random manner and need to be bypassed. Sulphurous vapour rises from various cracks wafting over the ground.

J A bit of fresh air wouldn't be a bad idea.

“We had such a wonderful nest and an abundance of food,” Lychee grumbles. “Stop complaining,” Kiwi responds roughly. “At least we're still in one piece and we're together that's the most important.”

“By the way, do you have a plan B?” Lychee asks. Embarrassed, Kiwi shakes her head. Doubts fill her head, she is scared stiff. However, one thing is clear, giving up is not an option. They are ready for action, ready to face whatever comes. After all, they are fighters, not victims. No matter how tough it gets, they will do anything to get out of there again. With their ultimate instinct they will manage to get out of the abyss.



They have never been in such a hopeless situation, but you learn as you go, hopefully before you starve or suffocate.

Think about it, what would you do in such a situation? From one moment to the next you find yourself trapped. One moment of carelessness, and something goes terribly wrong. Not all mistakes can be put right again. So far, you are not quite sure whether you are awake or dreaming. You pinch yourself and you realize: This horrendous nightmare is reality – you are completely cut off from the outside world. Nobody knows where you are, not even you.

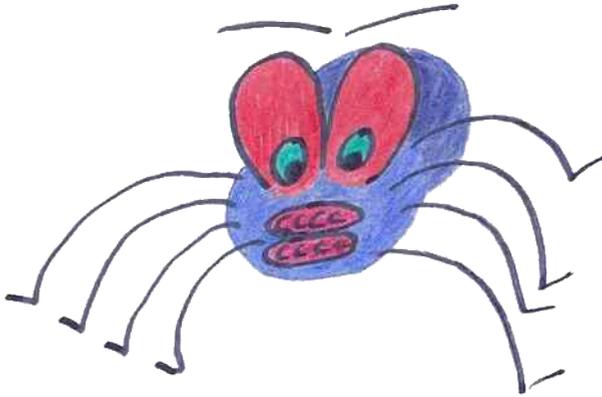
With a feeling of insecurity they set out to explore their new surroundings with their whiskers. They listen attentively to the strange noises around them. Moving forward bit by bit, they cautiously feel their way with their feet. There might be another pitfall after all. Beware! Care is needed, and there is no room for experiments! After some time, their black pupils get used to the dark, and they can make out the outlines of their dungeon. Many meandering paths have cut into the damp clay soil. The walls are supported by bricks. Only now they see where the stench comes from – waste and faeces float in the brew beside them. Kiwi wrinkles her nose, “Where have we ended up now!” Lychee begins to hop around in panic, “Wait, I am getting all worked up. How filthy, I need to get out of here as soon as possible!” Easier said than done, for now they are stuck here. Kiwi tries to calm her down, and a damp tongue pads Ly-

chee's fuzzy face. "Come on, we'll make it. After all we are flexible!" Lychee replies: "Don't you get it, we may never get out of here again; we might end up kicking the bucket in here!" Kiwi cuts Lychee off, "Time out. I know that too, I don't want to be dead as a doornail either. Don't be so pessimistic. You can't always look into the future and plan ahead. At times someone simply pulls the rug out from under you and you take a bad fall" Which is literally what happened to these two! "I am not sitting here and waiting to die. Come on, pick yourself up, we'll crawl on, inch by inch," Kiwi hammers into her friend. So the visibly tense creatures pull themselves together and choose a direction. Courageously they brave the elements. Their stomachs settle down only slowly as they get used to the stifling smell. Trip ... trap ... trip ... trap. Every single step echoes through the shaft, and the water gushes past them. Their legs are a bit shaky, but they steadily plod on, looking for an exit. Which way should they take as they come to each junction? So, was this the right decision or not? Will they ever find a way out? What dangers lurk here? There is a strange foreboding in the air. Everything around them tells them they should not be here. Absolutely not!

Still, there may be a good reason why they ended up here. We will see how the story develops. Now take a deep breath to get rid of that bad odour in your lungs. Or would you like to scratch the pungent taste from your tongue? Maybe you have to rearrange your bones, find a different posture, stretch and roll your head.

Hungry, thirsty, need the potty? Now's the time.

Nervously they find their way through huge amounts of cobwebs. Roots, lichens and other stuff brush against their heads. They pass slender, high stones and immense long-stemmed mushrooms. "That anything can grow down here," Kiwi muses. Lychee scratches her ear and shivers, saying, "Nature always finds it way. Perfect surroundings for mushrooms, disgustingly humid. Brrr, it sends a cold shiver down my spine."



As if on cue, a fat spider with lips like rubber boats lets himself down directly by their noses. Spider Spid brandishes his sticky lasso in their direction and puts on a big show, "Great! Two big, fat specimens. Enough food for the next few weeks." He rubs his front legs in anticipation.

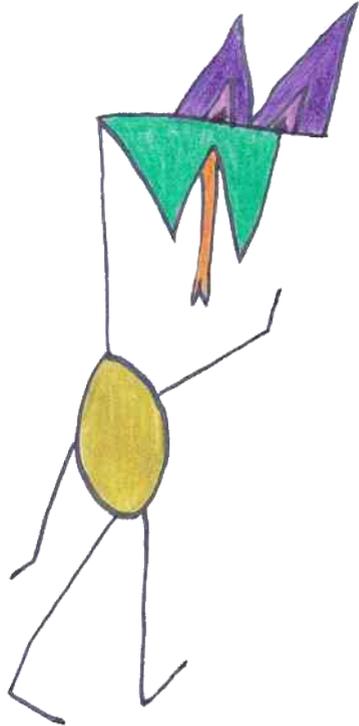
„Kiwi, go go go, or do you want to end up a spider mummy?” Lychee screeches with great foresight. Head over heels, the sewer rats rush off in the opposite direction. Hard on their heels, Spid comes after them. “Hey, where are you going?” Spid calls after them. The two wish they’d done more to keep fit, but in fact they are doing rather well. It is so scary, they find strength they didn’t even know they had. Laboriously they gain some ground on him. They still hear the lasso smack behind them, but it never gets anything more than air. Kiwi bickers at Sid, “Are you nuts? You’re not having us for lunch!” “We’ll see who runs out of steam first. After all I have eight legs, they only have four,” Spid thinks.

Well that is true, but it’s not about number but rather about strength and above all motivation. Survival is probably the strongest incentive there is. Well, a growling stomach shouldn’t be underestimated either. Let’s see who wins this cat-and-mouse game - or in this case spider-and-rat game.

After what seemed like an eternity they run full speed around a corner and finally they get rid of Spid. Not what the spider had expected, he was so sure of himself! This failure is hard to swallow, and he turns back sheepishly. The rats pant, tongues hanging to the ground, trying to catch their breath.

“Phew, that was close. Have you ever seen such a huge and fast spider before?” Lychee groans. Taking a few deep breaths, Kiwi answers, “No, if they have any more of these monsters here, we’re going to need a lot of luck!”

As soon as they turn the next corner, a creature stops them. Its purple triangular eyes are right above a jagged mouth. A narrow red tongue, covered with slimy blisters, sticks out from its narrow neck. Its big, round, yellow belly is in stark contrast to its thin arms and legs.



Longtongue stops them: “Stop! Danger! Life-threatening. No unauthorised access. The canal walls are crumbling, the old timber is completely rotten.”

“We want to get back to the surface,” Kiwi begs. Longtongue inclines its head, “Sorry, I have never been there, it’s not my area of responsibility. Off you go! Get lost!” Well, thanks a lot, I love you too, not very helpful. Great, here they are left completely on their own to solve their

problems. Lychee clears her throat, "I am beginning to feel that we are going in circles." The situation is getting worse and worse. They turn around on the spot and start walking the many miles back to where they came from. They take one different turn and stop in their tracks. Lychee shivers, „Oops, not this way either ...“Right on the path, there is a creature on the ground licking a stone with its star-shaped suction tongue. They keep coming up against barriers in this accursed canal, and there seems to be no end in sight. As soon as this "thing" has seen the two intruders, it – shall we call it Starcroc – gives them a stare. Respectfully, they withdraw a bit. How can they get past this demon unharmed? They offer it mushrooms and lichens. But Starcroc does not show any interest, it's probably into meat. Who is experimenting with whom here? Starcroc would only need to stretch out its tongue, and that's it – let's not even think of it. "If we're not careful we'll end up in its stomach," Lychee observes. With a stick and a long strand of algae they fabricate a whip. But the skin of Starcroc seems to be too tough to really be affected by its touch. Instead, after a few whips it simply lies down, closing its eyes. Kiwi is relieved, "Seems to like it. It's probably like a nice massage for him or her." In fact, quite soon the creature happily hums away and dozes off. Still brandishing the whip, they dare to get very close to their adversary. Lychee is annoyed, "This is bad, we probably have no choice but to climb over it."

They gently tap its tail with their mouths. No reaction. Courageously, but very carefully they climb over the strange creature, mostly walking on the balls of their feet

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in order not to scratch it with their sharp nails. Time stands still, nothing else is important any more, they are so focused on what they're doing. Without thinking where to step or grab hold; they climb over the body. They can feel the rising and sinking of its chest. The monster's breathing is still calm. On they move, higher up to its head. No problems at all. Great, they did it. Just as well it turned out this way, a failure wouldn't have surprised them.





As soon as they reach the other side, they take to their heels and run for all they're worth. They keep coming to junctions. They are not choosy but pick whichever way comes to mind. In no time they find themselves at a dead end.

Suddenly a swarm of thousands of sparkling, buzzing fireflies zips around their ears. The ratties feel as if they had ended up in a bag of candies, everything around them is so colourful. With their mouths wide open they stand in fascination. Liberated and overwhelmed, they experience the best moments of their life. With all their

senses they take in the atmosphere, not daring to budge or even move an eyelid – not wanting to miss out on even one second. Breathtaking! A view you'd want to remember forever. An exhilarating feeling - you want to shout "Yippee" but that would destroy the moment. Silence is the best way to savour the sight. There is only one thing they would like to do, to embrace the whole earth and protect it.

As unexpectedly as the swarm had appeared, it is gone again ... as if someone had switched off the light. Kiwi breathes excitedly, "No matter how you look at it, if we're honest it was worth coming here just for this, whether we wanted to or not." Lychee giggles, "Well, hello, we deserve a bit of happiness, don't we?"

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True: So far they have had to brave some perils. They did not blindly hit their heads against a brick wall, but analysed the dangers with flexibility and a clear mind and unerringly made the right decisions. It's all in the mix. A dose of well-reflected action plus luck. They are a great team, they complement and trust each other perfectly.

Without grumbling they analyse their situation point by point. Their only option right now is to take some rest to gather new strength to be able to march on. They hit the hay and sleep like logs, a long dreamless sleep. Waking up, up they first rub off the annoying pressure marks. How refreshing a quick bath in clean water would feel. But if at all possible they will not get into this stinky brew. The very thought that they might have to swim in it again, churns their stomach and makes them feel nauseous. They quickly push away this dark cloud and focus on the present. Turning their back on the dead end, they move on.

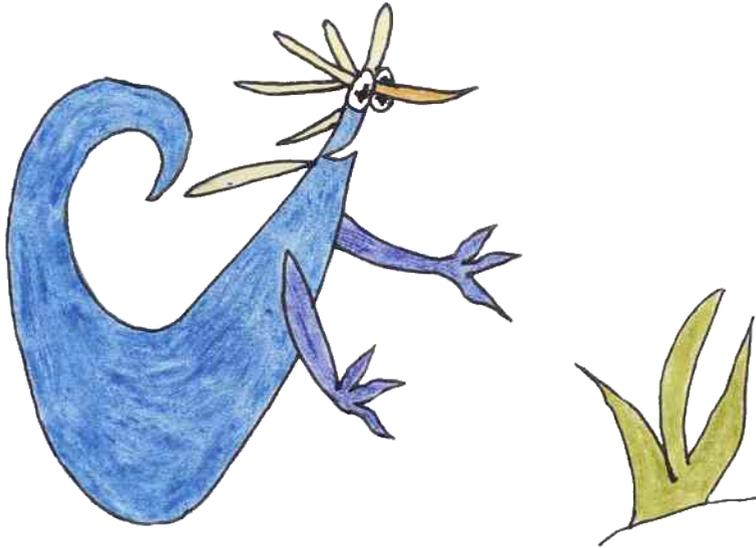
Meandering for a while they come to a promising section. As they turn the next corner, Lychee confidently picks the course, "My sense is this is where we need to go." Kiwi tugs along, "Okedoke, this time I won't throw your advice to the winds, so let's go." Why is the word "advice", does it have anything to do with "vice"?" "I don't have an answer to this, I hope not. Vices is the last thing we need right now," Kiwi helplessly replies.

In spite of all the movement they are still shivering with cold. Nevertheless, their ascent continues, they pass a long staircase, an empty store room, a corridor and a wooden ladder. They end up in a large room built from mud bricks. From there, many paths lead on, all hewn into the rock. Some shafts looks as if they collapsed decades ago. It is easy to get lost in this subterranean maze, but they are clearly getting nearer to the surface. A new tunnel, new luck. The evil-smelling waterway still accompanies them. There is a hissing sound like in a snake pit. Suddenly hands stretch from the water gra-

sping for lichen strands. Lychee moans with relief, “Good, it didn’t see us. I hope whatever there is in the water prefers a vegetarian diet.”

A ghostlike blue figure with a long red nose emerges. Setorion Wasi croaks, “Oh, hi there. I may not have seen you but I heard you, and yes I am a vegetarian.” Embarrassed and remorseful, Lychee ducks her head, “Oh sorry I didn’t mean to offend anybody. It just kind of looked funny when your hands suddenly popped up from the water.” Setorion waves its arms, “Since you are just standing there, can you help me pick some lichens? I have problems moving these days, my joints are aching. I need to save my energies,” So they give Setorion a hand and also sample some the lichens. Enough to survive on, but this green stuff is not going to be their favourite meal. In no time they have gathered enough lichens. The three sit together in close fellowship, eat lichens and chat. Not exactly a high tea.

Kiwi gives Setorion a gentle nudge, “Do you know the way to the surface?” Setorion scratches its head, deep in thought, “I haven’t been there for years. But you have to pass a big tree trunk. Unfortunately I can’t tell you the direction nor how far it is. But from there it is a piece of cake. Oh, well, with the exception of the code. You need to enter some kind of tune, but I don’t remember which one.”



Setorion Wasi

Well rested, they quicken their steps and soon they are out of view. Kiwi rejoices, “Finally somebody who likes us and appreciates our efforts. Everyone else seemed to think we are a nuisance.”

Anyone stuck in difficult circumstances is happy for a helping hand. Nothing happens without a reason, every encounter has its meaning, even if we often only see it in hindsight.

Looking back they continue on their way and suddenly

bump into something soft.

Right away a frosty wind grabs them, pressing into their chest as if a hulk had sat on them. There is a roar, and an enormous noise drifts to their ears. The noise expands in the whole canal system like a trumpet. There is only one thing to do: run. Terrified, they turn back and race into the unknown. They risk a quick glance over their shoulder. There is still a pair of glowing green eyes moving towards them. What have our two heroes startled this time? This place seems to teem with ill-tempered creatures. The way you approach somebody determines their reaction. However, so far they have not had much of a chance to lay on their charm. Mostly they were directly attacked and threatened. Their ears are still resounding with the noise. "Oh no, what is this?!?!" Lychee is grabbed by her neck and pulled up. The situation is dangerous. She bares her teeth, her hair stands on end, she is frightened to death. She struggles to turn from her back to her belly and with a well-directed bite she frees herself of the huge claw. Happily back on the ground she scrambles to get away at full speed.

Boom. Boom. Her heart is beating awfully fast, she runs for her life. Finally she manages to catch up with Kiwi, and together they come to a crossroads. Their pursuer charges past them, and they hear its steps trail off. They wheeze, completely out of breath.

After quite some time Lychee says with relief, "That was close; I'd like to know what it was."

"In any case it was huge, something you can not easily wrap around your little finger with flattery," Kiwi replies. Lychee retorts with a mischievous grin, "Why not, what

about it, you have beautiful glowing green eyes.” As soon as they’re out of danger, the two are bold as brass again. One more quick glance into the direction where the monster has disappeared and off they go again. Lychee says indignantly, “I don’t get it, why are there so many weird, nasty creatures in this dark canal? It makes my toes curl.” Kiwi shakes her head, “Yes, it’s all very strange. It seems we’ve stirred up a hornets’ nest.”

The crisis is over. Finally they can wind down and let go of all the tension. They end up snorting and shaking with laughter. Tears drip down from their eyes.

One would think it can only get better now. How many more trials do they need to master? What an ordeal, constantly on the run.

Step by step they move ahead. Absentmindedly, Lychee hums a lullaby. Kiwi shakes her head, “No time for a snooze now.” Somehow they need to overcome their need for sleep. It takes some effort to keep their eyes open. Ambitiously they trod forward. The path ahead is getting more and more difficult. Whole areas of brittle, loose debris need to be crossed. They try to tread as softly as possible in order not to cause a total collapse of the tunnel.

Finally it gets brighter. Veins of reddish-silvery ore sparkle in the rock.

A tree trunk is blocking their way. “Oh no, this is a dead end,” Kiwi raves. “No way, I can’t walk back the whole way again. I already have blisters on my feet,” Lychee laments. However, on closer inspection the trunk turns out

to be ...Kiwi utters a joyful, "Oh, it's a door! Hadn't Setorion mentioned a tree trunk? This must be it." They knock, nothing. They jump up to the door handle, grasp it with their front paws and press it down, but to no avail, they simply cannot open it. Well, this would have been too easy. They take a closer look at the obstacle. Next to the door frame, there is a number pad with the numbers 0 to 9. It seems they need to enter a tune here to unlock the door. Now it's all about getting their brains working. They jump up to one key after the other. Each time they hear a different note. "Listen attentively. This is the only way we can solve the riddle," Kiwi remarks. With full concentration they try out innumerable combinations, a large variety of songs – but nothing happens.

Sometimes it takes lot of effort to reach one's goal. But perseverance usually pays off in the end.

Kiwi groans, "With the way my brain is working right now we're not going to make it. My head is spinning, it's a crazy mess of numbers and tunes." Lychee breathes hard, "I can't think of anything more either." This riddle is a tough one. Kiwi ponders, "I'm wondering, have we tried the musical scale yet?" Lychee replies full of excitement, "Oh great if that's the solution, we can kick ourselves for hours." No sooner said than done, they jump up to reach the notes of the musical scale and lo and behold: Plop, Open Sesame! They should have thought of that first.

4. Created by Expert Hands – the Canal City

The appearance of the tunnel system has changed completely. It's a different world. A bit confused, they stare, eyes wide open, motionless, at what lies ahead. After what seems an eternity, they find their tongues again. Lychee is flabbergasted, "This is unbelievable." Kiwi's jaw drops, "I wonder who has created this?" There is no comparison to where they were a moment ago. It is ingenious, pleasant to the eye, executed by an artist. There isn't a lot of light, and they can only make out the closest buildings. There are fanciful cottages and towers in muted reds and yellows. Lots of bridges cross the multiple waterways. Some small white shining crystals mark the way through the streets of the city.

Here, there is not a single cobweb, no root stretches its naked feet from the ceiling. Everything is spick and span, flawless. The canal is made of metal. Ventilators provide fresh air. The ground is covered in tiles, their surface appears in the dim light as if they were coated with a film of water, as though they had just been mopped. Clean and clear, the water flows calmly by. As they take in their surroundings, euphoria grabs hold of them, they feel safe and protected. Everything around them is dazzling, as if they are in a bubble filled with an ideal world. Everything will work out, all evil is far away.

All tension leaves them in an instant, they feel reborn.

Full of excitement, they soak in their surroundings.

Kiwi has discovered something, "Look, over there!" Canal toads and tadpoles are gliding through the water.

Animated, the perky water rats jump into the welcoming

water and cheerfully do a crawl, racing the canal toads. Back on land they dry themselves, shaking their soaking wet fur. Thousands of tiny water drops spray in all directions.



There seems to be nobody around here either. Joyfully they skid along, looking at all the buildings in the dim light, and finally come to a harbour with a jetty. Kiwi points her nose to a house, "There's somebody over there." They quickly head towards the building. It's a large figure with grey fur, a cat face and a trunk-shaped nose. Ting Snufflecat is surprised, "Who are you? How did you get here?" Lychee peeps shyly from behind Kiwi's back. Kiwi, the courageous one, answers, "This is Lychee, I am Kiwi. We dropped down from a house into

an ancient canal system. We wandered about for several days and escaped a few monsters. Finally we reached the door to this city and after some time, we managed to open it.” Ting introduces himself, “I am Ting, the watchman of this subterranean city. Only some days ago all Nose Balloons were down here, as there was an attack of the Needle Army. Luckily everybody was able to escape and no one was lost. I flushed off the Needles with a strong jet of water, but they will be back. You probably have some stories to tell, the ancient sewage system is not exactly a snug place. Come, let me show you where I live. Hard to believe that you weren’t eaten alive down there.” Arriving at his red tower, he shakes his head, “So you were in the jagged house. Its inhabitants are the only ones who still have this outdated security system to get rid of small intruders. You must be hungry.” They both lick their lips and with their eyes wide open they say in unison, “Yup.”

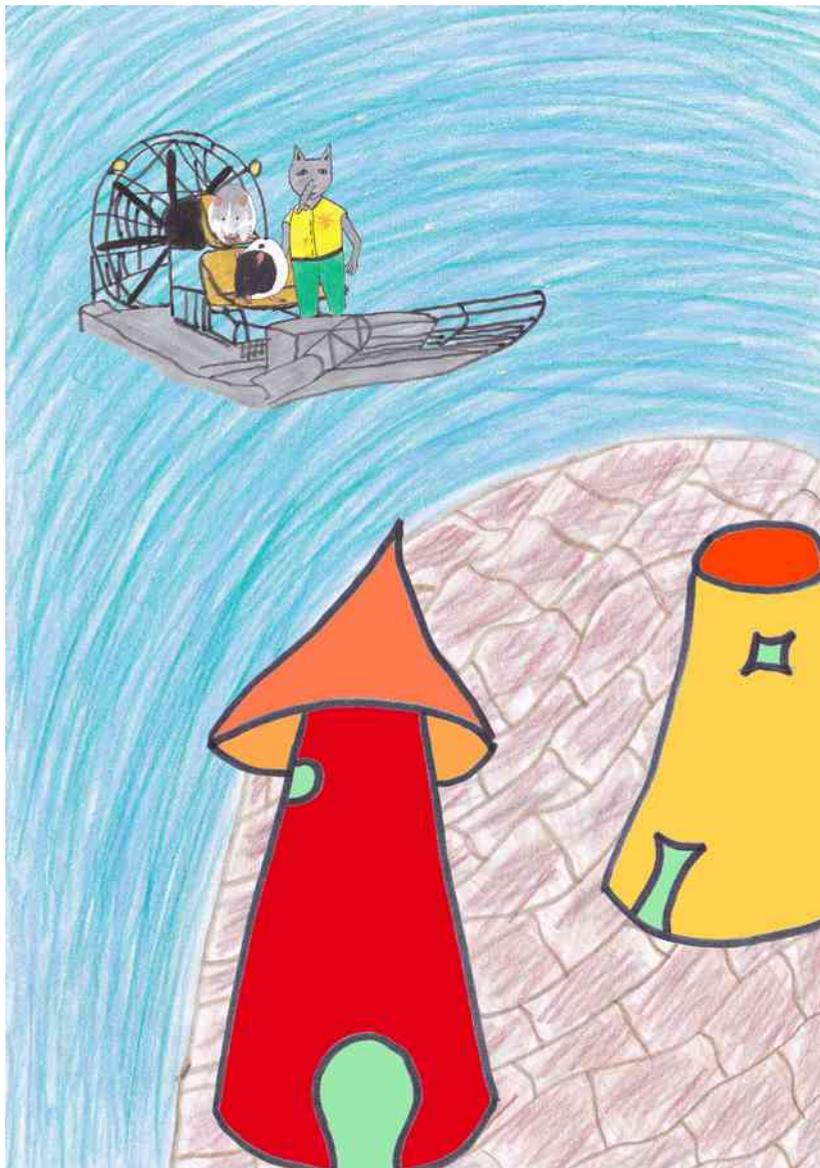


Tin, the trunk-nosed cat, gets a variety of dishes out of his fridge and places them on the floor. "Here, dig in." Kiwi and Lychee help themselves to some pork sausage, finally something other than tough lichens. Smacking their lips, they gobble up their food chatting. Afterwards Ting prepares a bed for them in a basket. They sleep like logs.

Several hours later, they emerge from their nest, all crumpled. Ting switches on the street lights. The two Nosey Parkers can finally admire this extraordinary, imaginative city in its full splendour. Numerous bridges cross the waterways. As they reach the harbour, Kiwi cries out excitedly, "Hey coool, a swamp boat. I've always wanted to ride one of these." Lychee is beside herself, "Far out!" Ting sprints off, "Wait a moment, I'll get the ignition key." So they take a nice spin and skid full tilt over the

sparkling water. They literally fly over the water. The wind sweeps over their fur. They quickly get acquainted with the waterways, after this ride they feel they know Canal City inside out. "Okay, that's it." Ting throttles the engine, steers towards the jetty and with a skilful left turn elegantly brings the boat to a stop. Kiwi rejoices, "What fun. What shall we do now?" "Didn't you want to get back to the surface?" Ting replies. Curiously, Lychee asks, "Is it far?" Ting points somewhere behind the rows of houses, "No, only a stone's throw from here." Kiwi reflects, rolls her eyes and says, "Good, we'd probably have to throw the stone a few times. Peanuts."

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After a short rest, Ting shows them the way up: A rope winch with a bucket. He opens the canal lid from below. They thank him effusively and jump into the bucket. Then they pull themselves up.

5. Return to the Surface

The two rats emerge close to a fountain. This time there's lots of hustle and bustle in the city. Blinded by the light, they withdraw to the shade of a palm tree and watch the action around them. "Ooh, a ☺ flutterby!" Kiwi gets her tongue in a twist. Lychee gives her a questioning look, "A what?" "Butterfly," Kiwi replies sheepishly.

After the dark dungeon, the landscape dazzles with a frenzy of colours, and they take in their surroundings with greater intensity than before. They can hardly get their eyes off the scenery.

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Here some Nose Balloons of Mumbas are gathered. There are: Nose Usti, Nose Trino, Nose Tedo, Nose Chippie, Nose Kibba, Chief Nose Gisto, Nose Griso, Nose Reba.



The locals adore sweets, but unfortunately they do not really agree with them, so they can only have them once in a while. Therefore their street signs all have sweet names such as Cinnamon Roll Alley, Waffles Boulevard, Jasmine Tea Street and Strawberry Cake Lane.

As soon as they read the names, the sweet Noses bask in sugary dreams.

6. The Empire in Danger

The Mumbasi only recently had to flee to Canal City to escape from the Needle Army. This time they made it in time, but how will it turn out next time?

The Needle Army envies the people of Mumbas. They would also like a piece of the cake. They want sufficient food, a nice roof over their heads and education.

The little pinheads do not have much brain and the only thing that comes to their mind is to prick all Nose Balloons and take over the empire.

Once the rats get acclimatised, they stroll around in the arcade, giving a friendly nod to everybody. However,

being the only rats in the city, they are eyed and examined sceptically by the inhabitants of Mumbas. A kick in their butt! The small rodents approach the locals openly, honestly and cordially and are only met by suspicion. It seems strangers are not welcome here.

They strike up a conversation with one passerby who turns out to be Gisto, the Chief Nose of Mumbas.

Gisto pats their heads, "Welcome to our city, please excuse the distrust of the inhabitants, but we are under threat. May I treat you to an ice cream?"

As they both have a sweet tooth, they certainly do not object. In no time, the ice cream is history, and only a few red marks around their mouths remain of the strawberry scoops. Lychee is happy, "Thank you, this was the best ice cream I have ever tasted."

After some small-talk, Gisto gets going unloading all his worries off his chest. He explains that last time it was only with the help of Ting Snufflecat that they managed to chase off the Needles, but that they will probably sneak up again. As Nose Balloons, they are powerless against the Needle Army, one prick and they run out of air. No one dares to fight them, all are scared stiff. He keeps trying to motivate his people but they prefer to run off. Gisto stands there, his fist clenched and tears in his eyes.

The situation in Mumbas is tough. Many sensitive souls are crushed by it. The pressure on individuals keeps growing, they wear one another down. These humiliations, wounds and kicks are, well, like pinpricks which altogether lead to total destruction. Their hearts are heavy. Each one tries to score off the other to look better himself. Money comes first. There are many lonely, sad and

unhappy Nose Balloons. They had wanted to create a better and simpler life with their technology, but this has gotten out of hand. The Nose Balloon kids have to learn more and more in an ever shorter period of time to find their way in the world and adapt to the latest technology. Many Nose Balloons feel very lost.

The rodents lovingly poke Mister Chief Nose with their damp mouths, commiserating him. "Well, let's face it, girls, moving mountains is a hard task. Can you help us?" Gisto laughs.

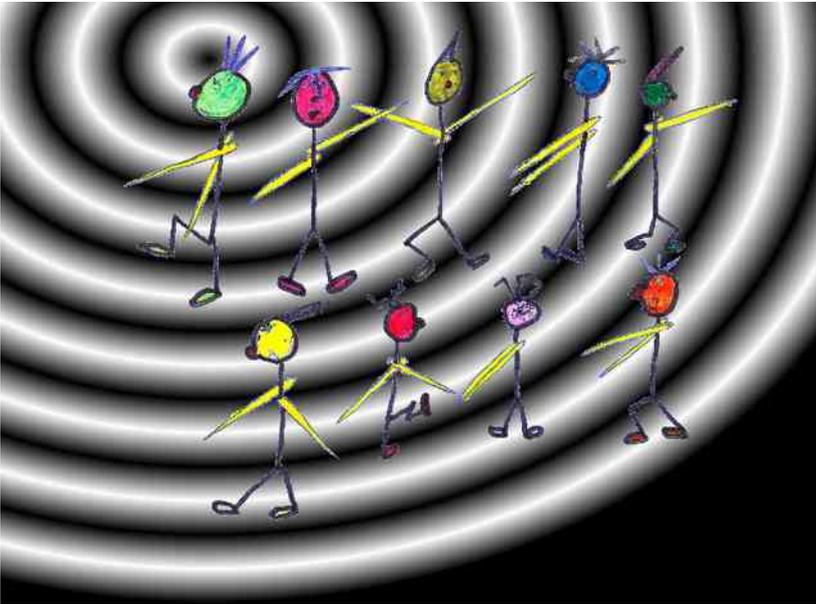
Now the savvy of the two small rodents is asked for. Their brains are in high gear. Their focus is on their breathing, their thoughts, while their surroundings are blocked out. They remember, focus and mentally get ready. Ly-chee moans, "I guess we have gotten ourselves into something. We two squirts need to be careful that we don't get fried."

After a brief creative period they conclude: All inhabitants need to inconspicuously leave the empire and hide in the forest. The army of the Needles will assume they all moved to the canal system, close to the castle. They have to take the entrance from the fountain, and hopefully we can close in on them. We'll be able to take a few pinpricks. But it's going to be no picnic. It would be good to get two knives as weapons.

Everyone is getting ready to evacuate. The inhabitants pack up their gear and disappear quietly into the forest. Using the rope winch and bucket, the fighters return to Canal City.

7. The Grim Battle

The Needle army has been secretly tipped off, so they are ready for battle and have moved to Canal City. Let's see whether the two rascals succeed in stemming the tide. This is their chance to prove what they're made of. They carry the knives between their teeth, ready for battle.



The Needles are already in battle formation in the tunnel system. The battle starts right away. Cling cling cling –the metallic clang of their blades. Kiwi and Lychee energetically charge towards the attackers. They return blow for blow. But the violent attack brings in more and more quick and aggressive Needles. The battle has developed

an unexpected momentum of its own. The ratties are attacked without ceasing. One thing leads to the next, it's as if they are on a gunpowder keg which is about to explode. The friends are facing vast hordes of attackers. "I think we've made a huge mistake, we need to come up with something different", Kiwi whispers to Lychee. "We are being pushed further and further back. I wish we could just disappear into some hole."

What can they do in a rush? They retreat into a corner and deliberate. Back down? Not an option! This is about plodding on, only perseverance will win the battle. But they need to think of something fast.

Kiwi grumbles impatiently, „What about Columbus' egg?" Lychee, who is always good for a joke, teases, "A boiled egg would not be bad right now." Kiwi gives her an angry stare, "No time for jokes right now – We need a quick solution. Get going!" Lychee is deep in thought. Then she silently mouths a word, "Magnet."

The rats jump into the canal. Kiwi and Lychee purposefully swim through the water maze, the surprised Needle Army running beside them on the road.

Needles would rather not go swimming,
they would rust too quickly.

The rodents move very quickly in the water, outdistancing the Needles who look for them in confusion, unable find their bearings in the strange city.

Meanwhile the two water rats have reached the rope wrench unchallenged. As a precaution, they had hidden the bucket well so that the Needle army wouldn't get

away unnoticed. Now they are the ones fleeing. Quickly the bucket is back in its place. They open the canal lid and pull themselves up. They seal off the exit with care. They run through the city and search the houses. Finally in a child's room they find what they need in a fishing game. They quickly bite the magnets off the fishing rods. Each of the rats grabs a horseshoe magnet with their teeth. They now look like wild boars with pointed tusks. Back in Canal City, they discover the Needle Army on a bridge. They approach the horde from both sides. The rat girls perform a regular up-and-down movement. Through this procedure, all Needles are quickly magnetised. The army still tries to flee, but now it's a breeze. They slowly collect the whole army of disgruntled, defeated Needles. The magnets in their mouths cause saliva to drip from the corner of their mouths. Nevertheless, they rush to the bucket with their prey and are back on the surface in no time.

Their chests swollen with pride, the heroes proceed to the forest and present the evil-doers to the Nose Balloons. Once the Needles agree to a reasonable discussion, they are freed from their sticky situation.

They finally come to an agreement they all can live with. The Nose Balloons promise to design and build a village according to the Needles' vision, and in turn they will never be attacked by the army.

Thus, the attackers disappear from the air-filled life of the Balloons - they will probably never be close friends but they accept each other.

In reparation, the Needles are sentenced to repair the Ancient Canal System, and they need to fish the rubbish

out of the water.

Everything runs like clockwork, Needle City is constructed in a short amount of time to the fullest satisfaction of its new inhabitants. And hats off to the Needles, they do a great job. Without complaining they have whipped the Ancient Canal System back into shape. The monsters are gone.

In the end, a Friendship Celebration takes place in Needle City. Gisto goes to the microphone, taps it and says, "Okay, let me get my brain from my pocket." As he says it he pulls out a piece of paper. Chief Nose Gisto gives a speech, "Thanks to Kiwi and Lychee we have finally obtained the desired peace after so many years. Needle City has turned out a remarkable place, our master builders have surpassed themselves. And due to the support of the hardworking Needles, the Ancient Sewage System is no longer giving us problems. Let's raise our glasses to our shared future. The banquet is open."



8. Mumbas Zoomed in Very Closely

The intelligent animals have developed an idea, and slowly understanding takes hold. The inhabitants reflect on their situation. They realise that their strength is in building community. Hatred, envy and distrust will only cause destruction. They understand that each one of them is precious, and they begin approaching each other with open arms and hearts. Bit by bit they pull each other out of life's dark places. A zest for life returns. As everyone begins to show more backbone, the streets are filled with laughter again. Finally some much needed warmth has returned to the world.

They become aware of how fragile and beautiful nature is. They aim to blend their technology with nature, to co-

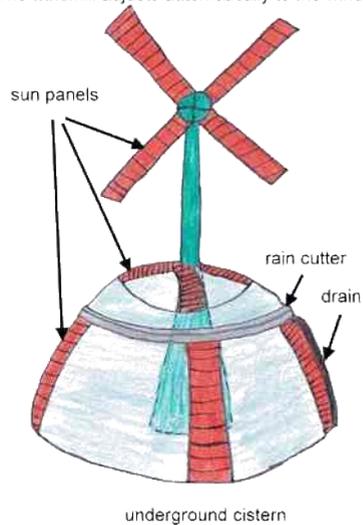
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operate with it and not harm nature. They desire to handle its resources in an economical, grateful and careful manner.

With lots of sweat and hard work a model society is created. They affirm each other, stick together and have faith in the future.

The whole energy demand is supplied by a type of igloo. Inside various plants are grown. These glass buildings operate with wind power, solar panels and geothermal energy. Rain water is collected via gutters into cisterns and is transported to the plants as needed. Geothermal energy is stored deep inside the earth and is brought to the igloo when it gets cold.

The windmill adjusts automatically to the wind



These buildings are a meeting point, a recreational paradise for young and old alike with a coffee shop and a playground, both for frolicking around and sitting down comfortably for a chat.

They have reached their goal, working hand in hand to-

wards a better future. They pull together to save their world.

☞ The food mentioned in this book is only partly suitable for your pet. Don't give biscuits, sausages etc. to animals.

This book can be seen as a path of life: Many people fall into black holes of fate without any fault of their own, and lose faith. They fight against various adversities, and find themselves at a dead end. Just before drowning they grasp for helping hands which are often missing. One may receive many small wounds just like pinpricks. Some give up. Those who are strong enough keep fighting. They struggle on, at times they are successful and finally they reach the surface. There they can have a breather before the next battle.

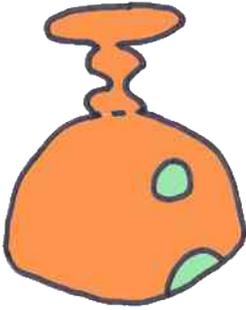
You learn how to walk, develop, fall down, get up again, gain knowledge.

If we stop dreaming, we are lost. There are many things we can improve in the world, and every small step counts.

The rats Kiwi and Lychee have left a deep imprint in my heart.

My Klaus brought me to the world of the Nose Balloons. He loves Nose Balloons. Since balloons never last long, I have shaped some from papier mache and ceramics and written little rhyming stories.

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Look at something from a different perspective and the world takes on a different look. To give an example: This house was designed on the basis of a wine glass. I have just turned it upside down in my mind.

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