



Three Skeleton Key

BASED ON THE STORY BY
George G. Toudouze

YOU NEED TO KNOW

The title of this story is the name of a key, or low-lying island. This island is located off the coast of French Guiana (gee AHN eh) in South America.

1 **W**hat was my most terrifying experience? Well, working
in a lighthouse is mostly quite boring. You have to keep the
light in order and write reports. However, in my thirty-five
years of service, I certainly had a few frightening
5 experiences.

When I was young, I took a job in a newly built
lighthouse off the coast of Guiana. The lighthouse was very
isolated. It was about twenty miles from land. The pay was
high, though, and I wanted to save money before I married.

0 The lighthouse stood on a small rock named Three
Skeleton Key. It had earned its name from the story of three
men who had escaped from prison in a stolen canoe. Their
canoe wrecked on the rock, and the men eventually died of
hunger and thirst. When the men were discovered, nothing
5 remained but three heaps of bones. The story was that the
three skeletons danced over the small rock, screaming. . . .

Three Skeleton Key was an island of black rock. It was
about one hundred fifty feet long, perhaps forty feet wide.
The rocks were dangerously smooth. One wrong step, and
0 you'd fall into the sea. The sea was full of sharks.

Still, it was a nice life there. During the day, we would
clean the rooms and the light itself. At night, we would sit on
the balcony and watch the strong white bar of light shine
over the sea. My fellow keepers were named Le Gleo and
5 Itchoua. We liked our life on the key.

"Three Skeleton Key" by George G. Toudouze adapted from *Esquire*, January 1937.
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One night, Itchoua called Le Gleo and me from our rooms.
We climbed to the balcony and stood beside him.

Itchoua pointed out to the sea. There we saw a big ship heading straight toward us. It was an odd course, we thought.

30 Ships were a rare sight in our waters. Our lighthouse existed to warn ships away from the rocks, so most ships steered clear of us.

Le Gleo cried out, "What's wrong with the ship's crew? Are they all drunk or insane? Can't they see us?"

35 Itchoua looked at us sharply and said, "See us? I'm sure they do—if there *is* a crew aboard!"

Then we understood the ship's odd behavior. For some reason, the ship's crew had abandoned it. Then, the ship had sailed by itself, guided by the wind.

40 We kept watching as the ship sailed on. In the light of our lantern, the ship seemed strong. Itchoua cried out, "Why was the ship abandoned? Nothing is smashed. There's no sign of fire. And, it doesn't look like it's sinking."

For the next four hours, the ship played around us. It
45 zigzagged, stopped, and then suddenly sailed forward.

When dawn broke, we got out our binoculars to inspect the ship.

Just then, the wind rose, and the ship changed course. It headed straight for us again. This time, it came very close.

50 We knew it could not turn in time.

All this time, we kept our binoculars aimed at the ship. We suddenly cried out together, "The rats!"

Now we knew why the ship was sailing without a crew. The crew had been driven out by rats. The rats of the sea are
55 large, strong, intelligent, and brave. If you harm one, his sharp cry will bring crowds of his fellows to tear your flesh. They will not stop until nothing is left of you but bones.

At times, the rats will attack a ship's crew. They either drive them from the ship or eat them alive. Studying the ship,

60 I turned sick. Its lifeboats were all in place. Its crew had not abandoned ship.

The ship came for us at full speed. It crashed on a sharp point of rock and then split in two. It sank like a stone.

65 But the rats did not drown. They sprang along the masts and onto the rocks right before the ship sank. Then they noticed us—fresh meat.

We barely had time to jump back. We closed the door leading to the balcony, and we went down the stairs. We shut every window tightly. It didn't take long for the horrible
70 group of rats to run up the tower. They scratched at the glass. There were so many rats that it seemed as if a fur coat covered the tower. Just a few millimeters of glass separated our faces from their beady eyes, sharp claws, and teeth. We were sealed alive in our own lighthouse. We were prisoners
75 of a horde of starving rats.

When night came, we lit the light. As the light turned, it blinded thousands of rats crowded against the glass. Their cries were so loud we had to shout to hear one another. We couldn't sleep all night.

80 The next day, we were calmer. We had fun by teasing the rats. We would place our faces against the glass. The rats couldn't understand the invisible barrier that separated us from them. But, the day after that, we realized how serious our position was. The air in the lighthouse smelled of rats. Of
85 course, we couldn't open the windows to get fresh air.

The morning of the fourth day, I saw that the wooden frame of my window had been eaten away from the outside. I called Le Gleo and Itchoua. They helped me seal the window over with a sheet of tin. When we finished, Itchoua pointed

90 at the tin plate. "If that gives way," he said, "they can change
the name of the place to Six Skeleton Key."

The next six days and seven nights, we had nothing to do but watch clusters of rats fall from the rock. The rats would fall a hundred and twenty feet into the water. There the
95 sharks could eat them. It didn't seem to matter, though. There were still so many rats left.

We thought often of those three prisoners who had died on the rock. We imagined our bones joining theirs. The darkness of our prison increased our gloom. We had to seal
100 every window with tin. The only light came in through the lantern room at the very top of the tower.

Le Gleo had nightmares where he saw the three skeletons of the prisoners dancing around him. His crazy descriptions were so clear that Itchoua and I began to see the three
105 skeletons, too.

There was only one thing left to do. We decided not to light the lantern on the ninth night. This is never done unless the lighthouse keepers are dead. The light is necessary to warn ships away from the rock. But that night, Three
110 Skeleton Key was dark.

At two in the morning, the sheet of metal sealing Itchoua's window gave way. Itchoua just had time to leap to his feet and cry for help. The three of us fought the maddened rats that flowed through the open window.

115 They bit. We struck them down with our knives. Then, we went back up the stairs, fighting off the rats that leaped on us. We found ourselves on the floor of the lantern room. We had no food or drink. We were bleeding all over. Our clothes were shredded.

120 Le Gleo stared at Itchoua and me. Then he looked at the rats and began laughing horribly, "Hee! Hee! The Three Skeletons! Hee! Hee! The Three Skeletons are now *six* skeletons! *Six* skeletons!"

He threw his head back and laughed. I did the only thing
25 I could—I swung the back of my hand across his face. His
laughing stopped. Then, he began to cry like a child.

As morning arrived, the patrol came to find out why our
lighthouse was dark. Through my binoculars, I could see the
horrified faces of the patrol officers and crew. I learned later
30 that they thought we had been eaten alive.

The crew were about to leave when Itchoua managed to
signal them. They signaled back.

The patrol boat came back at noon, along with a supply
ship, two small coast-guard boats, and a fireboat.

35 The fireboat's powerful jet of water knocked many rats
from the tower into the sea. There the sharks gulped them
down. Yet more rats swam out to the fireboat. The men were
forced to fight the rats with their bare hands. At last, all but
one of the boats left. All that night, Le Gleo raved about
40 skeletons, while Itchoua and I burned with fever.

The next afternoon, I saw a tugboat towing a huge barge
filled with meat. The tugboat dragged the barge close to the
island. The rats swam out and boarded it. The tug dragged
the barge about a mile from shore. There, the barge was
15 soaked in gasoline and set on fire.

As the barge burned, the rats tried to escape. A patrol boat
bombed them. The sharks finished off the rest.

A small boat from the patrol boat took us off to the
hospital. Le Gleo's mind had cracked; he went completely
10 crazy. He was locked up in an insane asylum, the poor man!
Itchoua's bites were infected; he died within a week.

As for me—when they aired out the lighthouse and
repaired the damage done by the rats, I returned to Three
Skeleton Key. Why not? I liked the place. To be honest, it was
5 the most pleasant job I ever had.