

One

Of Rats and Men

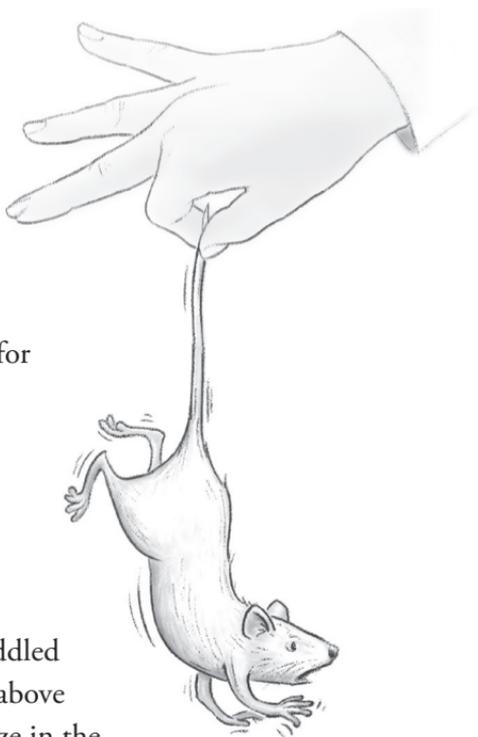
A WHITECOAT PULLED back the sky, reached down, and picked him up by the tail. Even as he hung there upside down, he could tell she was pretty.

“What’s your name?” she asked, smiling.

Terrified and reaching with all four feet for something to grab onto, the little rat squeaked, “Legion, for we are many!”

As if satisfied with his response, the young scientist lowered him back into the cage and snapped the hole-riddled cover into place far above him. Rattled, he froze in the familiar safety of the cedar shavings.

From that moment forward, the young rat’s life would be profoundly different.



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The scent from the cedar comforted Legion. The floor of his world, a cage four feet long and two feet wide, was blanketed with it, save one small corner where the elder rats would gather to discuss religious and scientific truths.

Daybreak in the cage occurred at eight each morning, when the Whitecoats turned on the fluorescent sunshine of the laboratory lights. Legion would play all day with his brothers and sisters. At night, he would listen to the elders recount the heroic exploits of disease-curing or Nobel Prize-winning rats. He slept next to his brother Argyle, who was by far the furriest of the rats, and they would dream grand dreams of adventures beyond the cage. Legion was happy.

And healthy.

A huge wheel, wrought by the Whitecoat, had been placed in the cage some generations before. The original intention was to test the population's affinity for exercise, but as far as anyone knew, Legion was the only rat to have ever used it with any regularity. It was just an eyesore, really, used occasionally by the young rats as a kind of ill-suited jungle gym. But Legion enjoyed exercising, and though young, he was especially well muscled because of it. The older rats admired his strength and resolve, and had long considered him special even before the Whitecoat snatched him up that day.

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Now when the elders of the cage saw that the Whitecoat had chosen Legion from among the many, they took it as a sign and began to talk among themselves. The whispering continued into the night when they called young Legion to the floor-bare corner of the cage where no youngsters could overhear. After encircling him, the elders began to speak.

“Legion, you have heard the legendary tales of the cage, of the great rats who have come before you,” said Pinkeye, the eldest of the rats. “Truly I say, yours is a higher purpose than any of these, for you have been chosen from among the many. For what purpose we are as of yet unsure, but it must surely be divine, since hitherto no rat taken by the hand of the Whitecoat has ever returned from the sky.”

Upon hearing this, Legion was deeply troubled. He considered himself no different than any of his brothers, with their long pink tails and fine white hair. *For what divine fate could my life possibly be intended?* He found himself searching for something to say when Old Prat, another of the elders, spoke up.

“Take heed, young Legion, for what I am about to tell you is of dire importance,” he said in a voice so loud it caused the sleeping rats to stir. “Ours is a cage of temptation from which there is only one escape—and that is death. With cunning and craft the Whitecoat will tempt you to

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do that which you know you should not. Do not be fooled! For following after man's lustful desires yields only sorrow and despair, but doing what is right yields strong character. And it is that character that even the Whitecoat cannot put asunder—and in the end can never be taken away from you!”

“Quiet blasphemer!” Pinkeye angrily retorted. “Know you not that the Whitecoat controls everything in this world, and may be listening even now? Who gives us our daily food if not he? Or water? Who makes the light to shine in the day and the darkness to come at night? Do not tempt his hand, lest he bring sickness among us, or pestilence, or plague!”

At this, the eldest drew Legion close to him and squeaked softly, “That which Old Prat says is true, though his words are ill-chosen. Your choices are your own, so choose wisely that your countenance may be strong when your calling is made known to you. Now go and return to your brothers before they awake. You will need your rest.”

And it was with these messages, cryptic though they were to him, that Legion lay back in the cedar that night. And sleep would not come to him.

Thinking Spot

1. Do you ever feel as if you are in a cage and not in control of your life?
2. From the moment Legion was singled out by the Whitecoat, “the young rat’s life would be profoundly different.” Describe one of the defining moments in your life.
3. Legion and his brother dreamed “grand dreams of adventures beyond the cage.” What are you dreaming of beyond your cage?
4. Legion wondered, “*For what divine fate could my life possibly be intended?*” How would you answer that question?
5. Old Prat contrasts following lustful desires with doing what is right. What lustful desires are hard for you to resist?