

**Excerpt from *Mortimer*
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Published by DCB

Publication Date: September 2022

192 pages

\$13.95

Ages 9-12; Grades 4-7

Chapter 1: Watching AsCans

My life is pretty sweet, at least for my kind. As long as I'm careful, I can come and go as I please. Nobody is going to cut me open to peer at my insides. I have a roomy pad, regular food deliveries, and a journal to write in. The only experiments I take part in are tests to measure intelligence, like how fast I can get through a maze. Superfast, by the way.

All this leaves plenty of time for my hobby — observing AsCans. That's short for astronaut candidates — not what you might be thinking. I watch AsCans in Houston, at the Johnson Space Center. It's where astronauts train to go up in space. With more than two hundred buildings near the edge of Clear Lake, it sprawls like a city. There's always something going on, even if you're a *Rattus norvegicus*. If you don't know your Latin, that's the scientific name for lab rat, but most just call me Mortimer.

One morning, I put my eye to the peephole I gnawed through the drywall and crane my neck to see the AsCans staring at a picture of a spacecraft. A flutter trills through me. I love that humans want to go to Mars. It may take them years to figure out how to keep people alive on such a distant planet, but it's going to happen. We're going to Mars one day. I lean forward to hear the speaker. He jabs a remote control and bellows like a foghorn. "There are a lot of problems to solve before you AsCans get to the Red Planet. For starters, we need to find a way to ship two years of food without using too much fuel. Then we have to land it safely on the surface."

The next picture shows condiments. Dozens of them! Jars of everything, from garlic juice to screaming hot sauce, litter a table. "Taste buds don't work well in space." Foghorn licks his plump lips. "Lucky for you, food scientists work on ways to make meals taste

better up there.”

I shake my head. Imagine — scientists who specialize in food! The next shot shows unmentionable items of clothing. Are there underwear scientists too?

Foghorn wags the remote. “Don’t expect to wash your underthings in space. There’s not enough water. You’ll wear all your clothes ’til they reek, then you’ll throw them out.”

The AsCans begin to whisper. Are they upset about the waste? Last week’s speaker said it costs \$10,000 for every pound of supplies they ship into space. I lean an ear to the hole.

“Rats! This really sucks.”

“The same ratty underwear for a week, yuck!”

“This is not acceptable! Even in space, life’s a rat race.”

Why do they have to compare the bad things to rats? Humans can be nasty. I force out a breath and peer up at the next picture. It’s labeled “Sleep Station.” Foghorn blathers about how every astronaut will have a sleeping bag and a special spot to sleep. Each one will also have a net to hold earplugs, eye masks, headphones — all the things they might want nearby.

This time I forget to muffle my snort. “What do they need all that stuff for if they’re asleep?”

“No idea!”

I spin around. Celeste’s narrow face is inches from me. Her pellet breath fills my lungs. Celeste is my neighbor in the lab. Sometimes I read her bits from my journal, and sometimes, when the scientists spot a pen in my wood chips and take it back, she lets me borrow one from her collection.

Celeste puts her eye to the peephole. “They do seem to go overboard with the details,” she says.

“Rats are much more suited for colonizing Mars, don’t you think?”

“I’m sure we are,” says Celeste. Drywall dust trickles down her face, and she sticks her pink tongue out to taste it. “But I’m okay sticking to Earth. Everything I need is here.”

“Doesn’t it bug you that no one notices anything good about us? We’re intelligent and inquisitive. We adapt to new environments — no problem. Yet across the planet, humans ignore rats.”

Celeste nods, but her ears prick. I hear it too — pawsteps. It’s probably Romano, scavenging for stuff humans threw away.

I talk faster, and my tongue trips over itself. “Nobody even knows about our most famous rats! Is there a statue of the first one to step ashore from the ships that brought us here from Europe in 1775? What about rats in literature? Are there any cities named after Templeton in *Charlotte’s Web*? Any gardens named for Ratty in *The Wind in the Willows*?”

Our noses detect his musky odor at the same time. Romano is close.

My hind foot taps. “Do you know people even dress up like their heroes? I saw it on Halloween. Why isn’t anyone dressing up like Remy from *Ratatouille*?”

Celeste opens her mouth to answer just as Romano arrives. He’s what humans in the lab call an odd-eye — one is red, like a dark ruby, the other black. I step closer to Celeste so I can only see the black one. Romano is holding a cotton work glove.

“Are you looking for the other hand?” I waggle my ears. Romano is crazy about shredding cloth and building nests. He’s got hideouts everywhere.

“I’m looking for you two!” Romano flicks his tail at our noses. “Iceberg Hands left early for lunch.”

“She never goes early!” I jump back and jam a paw full of dry-wall dust into the peephole.

Celeste is already picking her way back through the wall. “Hur-

ry, or she'll know we can get out," she calls back, then turns to Romano. "Thanks for finding us," she says. "You're a real pal."

"Yeah, thanks." I pause to rub dust from my eyes. "Thanks a lot."

"I'll see you back there," says Romano. Rolling the glove into a ball, he jams it behind a board, then trots back the way he came.

"Wait!" I call. "What happened?"

"Her phone rang," says Romano. "Then she looked at her calendar and tore out of the lab."

Romano disappears, and I trot to catch up to Celeste. "The As-Cans were driving me crazy anyway. They worry about ketchup and clothes instead of focusing on the most important thing — how to stay alive on the thirty-four-million-mile trip to Mars."

Celeste glances around. "When that underwear slide went by, I thought your head was going to pop off your neck!"

"It's the way they talk." Catching up, I nearly step on Celeste's snaky pink tail. "You heard them. Every mean thing they say has 'rat' in it. Dirty rat. Ratfink. Looks like a drowned rat."

Celeste stops at a golf ball-size hole in the lab wall and waits for me.

"Rat on someone. Rug rat. Mall rat."

We peer into the lab. Romano gives us the *no humans* sign — forepaws together.

My limbs go limp with relief. I turn to Celeste. "Pack rat. I smell a rat. Rat race."

We bolt along the row of lab rat cages. Celeste chirps, "Like rats leaving a sinking ship!"

"That's what I thought you were doing." Gorgonzola curls his lip.

I bite mine. *Hello, least favorite neighbor. Glad to see you, too.*

Gorgonzola jumps to his exercise wheel. "Now that you're back, you can watch me ace the maze. Today's fastest speed wins a spot

on the International Space Station.”

Is he serious? A chance to visit the ISS? I don't answer, but that never stops Gorgonzola, even at a full gallop on a squeaking wheel.

“I'll be orbiting Earth, chowing down on space pellets. You'll be stuck here, spying and scribbling in your book. What a waste of time.” Jumping from the wheel, Gorgonzola runs his paw along the mesh like it's a piano keyboard. He knows I hate that sound.

My hind paw begins to tap. I should be the one to go to the ISS! The problem is, Gorgonzola is not lying. He's like lightning in the maze, but speed isn't everything. Halloumi, who can smell trails like a bloodhound, beats him on nose-power alone. The only time Halloumi loses is when his allergies flare. His sniffer is no good when it gets stuffed up.

Turning my back to him, I duck around my water dispenser to face Celeste. “Going to Mars is going to be a lot harder than going to the Moon. Don't you think humans spend too much time planning the perfect sleep station and all that cozy stuff?”

Celeste pauses mid-stretch and tilts her head. “You gotta remember, they don't have our intelligence.”

“I have no problem remembering that! But do you think it's possible to raise the image of the rat?”

“MM.” Celeste yawns and flops onto her stomach. MM means “Maybe, Mortimer.” It's part of our private code. She's using it because she's about to nap and wants me to wrap it up. Trust Celeste to find a nice way to say, “Shut up.”

“I just wonder what it would take,” I say.

Celeste's eyes are closing.

“MIWTYM.”

“What?”

“Maybe it will take you, Mortimer — MIWTYM.”

Crossing to the other side of her cage, Celeste curls into a ball.

I'm dismissed.

Gorgonzola snorts. Ignoring him, I rock on my paws. The space program could change everything for ratkind. We could go to Mars without fifteen different condiments to flavor our food. We wouldn't need an enormous supply of clothes to hide our private parts. We could get by without special places just to sleep.

Don't get me wrong. Humans still need to be part of the space program. After all, they're good at building things like rockets and satellites. They designed the International Space Station. They even got it zooming around the Earth at 17,150 miles per hour. Less work for me.

I burrow into my wood chips. The crisp scent of shredded aspen usually soothes me. This time, it doesn't stop the question in my mind: What will have to happen to make rats the chief species to colonize Mars?

A clicking sound distracts me. Peering out, I see an AsCan slide a computer mouse across a pad.

That's another thing. It should be called a computer rat.

Rolling to one side, I watch him tap out a tweet.

"Maybe I should use Twitter," I mutter. "It worked for Chris Hadfield. The whole world paid attention when he was in space."

Something in my stomach flips, and I jump up. Why not use scientific evidence to make my point? Living on the space station would be the perfect opportunity. I could run experiments to prove rats are better suited to colonizing the Red Planet and share my results with the world.

Or, as scientists like to say, I would "communicate my findings." They love to complicate things with fancy words. Twitter's not my style, but I could set up a YouTube channel. Maybe call it RatTV. I'll be Mortimer, Rat AsCan Extraordinaire. There's just one problem. How can I beat Gorgonzola in the maze?