

The Tale of Despereaux



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATE DICAMILLO

DiCamillo was born in Pennsylvania, but due to her childhood chronic pneumonia, she moved to Florida with her mother and older brother when she was four years old. Her father, an orthodontist, didn't follow the family. She studied English at the University of Florida, graduated in 1987, and moved to Minneapolis in 1994. While working at a book warehouse in Minneapolis, DiCamillo became interested in children's fiction and published *Because of Winn-Dixie*, her first book, in 2000. Since then, DiCamillo has written and published prolifically, publishing other children's novels, chapter books for beginning readers, and picture books, as well as contributing short stories for various collections. *The Tale of Despereaux* and DiCamillo's novel *Flora and Ulysses* were honored with Newbery Medals. From 2014 to 2015, she was the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. *Despereaux* was inspired by her best friend's son asking her to tell a story about an unlikely hero with big ears.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Tale of Despereaux takes place in an entirely fictional world, but the story draws heavily on the idealized "knight in shining armor" trope and more generally on medieval imagery. It's worth noting that Despereaux's conception of the knight in shining armor is rooted in 19th century Romantic ideas about what medieval knights were and how they behaved toward women—real medieval knights certainly wore armor, but they were often frightening figures known for looting cities and raping women. The vision of the chivalrous knight riding around to defend damsels in distress emerged as part of the medieval European literary tradition and was later amplified and popularized by writers and artists during the Romantic era. Soup, meanwhile, has been around for millennia—scientists have found clay vessels capable of holding soup that they've dated to as early as 20,000 B.C.E. (prior to developing the techniques for making watertight vessels, soup simply wasn't possible to make). Soup's cultural status as something healing and restorative has its roots in 16th century France. At that point, soup—which was referred to as "restaurant," meaning "something restoring"—was sold by street vendors as the cure for exhaustion. This is where the modern definition of the word "restaurant" comes from.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Despereaux is one of many children's books featuring mice as

protagonists. Popular novels like *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* by Robert C. O'Brien, *Stuart Little* by E. B. White, *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* by Beverly Cleary, and *Poppy* by Avi are all about mice—often mice dealing with the same things as Despereaux does, such as being a tiny being in a huge, dangerous, and powerful world. In her 1975 book *Animal Land: The Creatures of Children's Fiction*, Margaret Joan Blount suggests that mice are popular subjects in children's literature because like kids, mice are small, can be secretive, and have comparatively less power in the world than adults or, say, owls—so it's naturally pleasing to see such unlikely heroes triumph. Despereaux-esque unlikely heroes show up often in children's literature, often not as mice. In books like Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman, and Lois Lowry's *The Giver Quartet*, young children are able to outsmart big, powerful adults to save themselves and their communities. Another novel in which characters are inspired by medieval knights (in this case, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table) is Rodman Philbrick's *Freak the Mighty*. DiCamillo has written a number of novels for young and middle-grade readers, including *Because of Winn-Dixie*, *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, *The Beatryce Prophecy*, and *The Magician's Elephant*. Many of her novels contain a fairy tale quality similar to *Despereaux's*, or feature children navigating growing up without a mother like the Princess Pea and Miggery Sow.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Tale of Despereaux: Being the Story of a Mouse, a Princess, Some Soup, and a Spool of Thread*
- **When Written:** 2002
- **Where Written:** Minneapolis, Minnesota
- **When Published:** 2003
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fantasy; Fairy Tale; Children's Novel
- **Setting:** A castle in the fictional Kingdom of Dor
- **Climax:** When Miggery Sow discovers that Roscuro has no intention of helping her become a princess, Princess Pea asks Mig what she wants—and Mig shouts that she wants her mother.
- **Antagonist:** Chiaroscuro (Roscuro) and Botticelli Remorso—though Roscuro isn't as clear-cut of an antagonist
- **Point of View:** Third Person Omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Honors. Kate DiCamillo is one of only six authors who have won the Newbery Award twice; *The Tale of Despereaux* and *Flora and Ulysses* won and earned her this distinction. Other authors

who have won twice include Lois Lowry (for [Number the Stars](#) and [The Giver](#)), E. L. Konigsberg (for [From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler](#) and [The View from Saturday](#)), and Katherine Paterson (for [Bridge to Terabithia](#) and [Jacob Have I Loved](#)).

Chiaroscuro. In art, chiaroscuro refers to the relationship between light and dark in a drawing, print, or painting. The chiaroscuro drawing style was developed during the Renaissance; it initially referred to drawing with charcoal and white chalk on colored paper. The artist Sandro Botticelli—for whom the rat Botticelli Remorso in the novel is named—is often held up as a prime example of a Renaissance painter who utilized chiaroscuro techniques in his work.



PLOT SUMMARY

The mouse Despereaux is born in a castle under unusual circumstances: his ears are very large, and unlike normal baby mice, he's born with his eyes wide open. His parents, Antoinette and Lester, are sure he'll die like the other mice in his litter—but though Despereaux is sickly, he lives. His siblings Furlough and Merlot try to teach Despereaux how to be a proper mouse, but Despereaux isn't interested in being a proper mouse. Instead, he enjoys music, pretty **light**, and reading a book in the library about a **knight** rescuing a beautiful maiden.

One day, Despereaux is so desperate to hear the human King Phillip play and sing a song for his daughter, the Princess Pea, that he leaves his hole and sits at the king's feet. The princess touches his head—and at this moment, Furlough sees what's happening and runs to tell Lester. So he doesn't see the Pea pick Despereaux up, or see Despereaux fall in love with the princess. The king yells at Despereaux to go away, so Despereaux breaks the most important mouse rule and speaks to the Pea. He tells her he honors her, just like the knight says in the library book.

Lester summons the Mouse Council and shares what Furlough saw, and the Mouse Council calls for Despereaux. For his crimes, Despereaux is sent to the dungeon and to the rats, with a red thread tied around his neck by the threadmaster to indicate his criminality. Furlough is the mouse to kick Despereaux down the stairs into the dungeon, where Despereaux tries to comfort himself by telling himself a story. The human jailer, Gregory, picks Despereaux up and agrees to save Despereaux's life in exchange for a story.

Stepping back in time a few years, a rat named Chiaroscuro and nicknamed Roscuro is born in the dungeons. Unlike most rats, which love darkness and suffering, Roscuro becomes obsessed with light. Though his mentor, Botticelli Remorso, tries to convince Roscuro to be a good rat and torture a new prisoner, Roscuro discovers after stealing the prisoner's red tablecloth

that he doesn't like torturing people. He wants light. To satisfy his craving, he goes upstairs and invites himself to a party that the king and queen are throwing. But the Princess Pea sees Roscuro hanging from a chandelier. She shouts that there's a rat, and hearing the word "rat" causes Roscuro to feel intense self-loathing. He falls into the queen's **soup**, causing her to die of surprise, and then leaves the room. But as he does, he looks back—and the angry look on the Pea's face causes Roscuro's heart to break and heal incorrectly. He steals the queen's spoon on his way out and vows to get revenge on the princess. The king, meanwhile, outlaws rats, soup, and all soup-making and soup-eating implements after his wife's death.

The story steps back in time again, to when a poor girl named Miggery Sow is six years old. Nobody cares what Mig wants, so after her mother dies, her father sells her to a man called Uncle for a red tablecloth, a hen, and cigarettes. Uncle hits Mig's ears so hard she eventually becomes deaf, and her ears resemble cauliflower. When Mig is seven years old, she witnesses the royal family riding past Uncle's sheep field and begins to hope that one day she can be a princess, just like the glittering Princess Pea.

When Mig is 12, a soldier comes to Uncle's house to confiscate his soup supplies, as the queen has just died. When he learns that Uncle owns Mig, he insists on taking her as well—slavery is illegal in the Kingdom of Dor. Mig becomes a paid servant at the castle, meets the princess, and fails at most jobs assigned to her.

The three storylines converge on the day that Cook tasks Mig with taking Gregory the jailer's meal to him. On the way down to the dungeon, Mig sings a song about wanting to be a princess. After eating, Gregory sneezes into his napkin, surreptitiously hiding Despereaux in it. Roscuro, having heard Mig's song, hatches a plan to get revenge on the princess by manipulating Mig—and on the way back upstairs with the supposedly empty tray, he invites Mig to work with him. Despereaux hears Roscuro describe his plan.

Back in the kitchen, Cook reaches for the napkin on Mig's empty tray—and Despereaux falls into a cup of oil. Mig fishes him out and attempts to cut his head off with a knife, but instead, she just cuts his tail off. Despereaux flees to the pantry, where he sleeps on a bag of flour and dreams about the knight in shining armor. But the suit of armor in the dream is empty, and Despereaux cries.

Despereaux sleeps for a full 24 hours and while he's asleep, Roscuro puts his plan into action. After chewing the rope Gregory uses to keep from getting lost in the maze-like dungeon (which leads to Gregory's death), he and Mig go to the Pea's room at night with a kitchen knife. They tell the princess that they're going to the dungeon. There, Mig explains, the two girls will switch places so Mig can be a princess and the Pea can be a servant. Seeing no choice but to give in, Pea puts on the glittery dress Roscuro asks her to and follows Mig to the

dungeon—but she empathizes with Mig, who clearly wants to be a princess more than anything. Once they're in the dungeon, however, Roscuro reveals that he won't let either girl return upstairs; Mig will never be a princess. The Pea, seeing how devastated Mig is, asks what Mig wants. This is the first time anyone has ever asked Mig this, and Mig shouts that she just wants her mother. The Pea also wants her mother, so the girls refuse to work against each other anymore. They sit with Roscuro for a day and a night.

The king sends men to the dungeon to look for the Pea, but they only discover Gregory's body. At this point, Despereaux wakes up after overhearing Cook and another servant talking about what's happened, and he realizes he's too late. While wandering the castle in search of the king, Despereaux walks in on the Mouse Council. Lester begs Despereaux to forgive him for his role in sending Despereaux to the dungeon—and Despereaux does. Despereaux then attempts to tell the king where the Pea is, but the king refuses to listen to a rodent. Despereaux realizes that he can be the knight in shining armor himself.

Despereaux seeks out the threadmaster, who agrees to give Despereaux a spool of red thread (so Despereaux can find his way through the dungeon) and a needle to use as a sword. It takes Despereaux hours to roll the spool through the castle, and he reaches the kitchen at midnight. There, he finds Cook illegally making soup—and she sees Despereaux. But rather than kill him, she gives him a saucer of the soup and opens the dungeon door for him.

As Despereaux makes his way down the dungeon stairs with the spool, the spool rolls away from him. At the bottom of the stairs, Botticelli Remorso meets Despereaux and agrees to lead him to the princess; secretly, he plans to eat Despereaux once they reach the princess. But as Despereaux runs for the Pea, Roscuro gets in his way—and to save Despereaux, Mig tries to kill Roscuro but ends up cutting his tail off. Despereaux considers killing Roscuro, but realizes doing so won't fix anything. And smelling the soup on Despereaux's whiskers, Roscuro admits that he just wants some light for himself. The Pea forgives Roscuro and invites him upstairs to eat soup.

After this, the Pea gives Roscuro access to the castle's main floors, and seeking to atone for his misdeeds, Roscuro reunites Mig with her father—the prisoner he tortured. Despereaux and the Pea don't get married, but they do become friends.

and he's born with his eyes open (normally, mice are born blind). With his open eyes, Despereaux can see a spot of **light** from Antoinette's mirror reflected on the ceiling—and this begins Despereaux's obsession with light and beauty. As Despereaux grows, he remains small and sickly, and he also struggles to fit into mouse society. Rather than expressing interest in crumbs, scurrying, or nibbling paper, Despereaux becomes enchanted by the light coming through stained-glass windows, reading a story about a **knight** who rescues a beautiful maiden, and music. His love of music in particular leads him to break several rules of mouse conduct when, in order to listen to the human King Phillip playing the guitar and singing for his daughter the Princess Pea, Despereaux shows himself to humans. When Despereaux allows the Princess Pea to touch him, he falls deeply in love with her and breaks the most important mouse rule forbidding mice from speaking to humans. For this, Despereaux is banished to the dungeon, where the rats are guaranteed to eat him. This causes Despereaux to question everything he knows, specifically whether "happily ever after," like in the story he loves, actually exists. The jailer Gregory helps rescue Despereaux from the dungeon. In the 24 hours after returning upstairs, the serving girl Mig cuts Despereaux's tail off, and she and the rat Roscuro kidnap the Pea and imprison her in the dungeon. Though Despereaux searches for a knight to rescue the princess, he ultimately decides that he must be brave and be a knight himself. With the threadmaster's gift of a spool of thread and a needle, as well as some nourishing **soup** from Cook, Despereaux returns willingly to the dungeon. The story ends with Despereaux and the Pea as friends—and Despereaux seemingly living happily alongside her, rather than with the other castle mice.

Chiaroscuro "Roscuro" – Arguably one of the novel's antagonists, Chiaroscuro (or Roscuro) is a rat who lives in the castle dungeons. Unlike most rats, which love pain, suffering, and darkness, Roscuro discovers early on that he craves **light** and beauty. Though his mentor Botticelli Remorso tries to encourage Roscuro to be a good rat and make people suffer, Roscuro ultimately finds that being cruel to prisoners doesn't bring him joy—so he decides to go upstairs. Initially, while wandering the castle, Roscuro feels right at home and in awe of the beauty around him. But when the Princess Pea notices him hanging from a chandelier and calls him a rat, Roscuro realizes how ugly a word "rat" is—and he decides he doesn't want to be one anymore. The shock of this realization causes Roscuro to fall into the queen's **soup** bowl, and the queen dies moments later of shock. Roscuro's heart breaks and heals "crookedly" after this, as he looks back while fleeing the party and sees the princess giving him a dirty, angry look. Following this, Roscuro becomes obsessed with revenge. Several months later, he hatches a plan to manipulate a serving girl, Mig, into kidnapping the princess; he plans to imprison the bright, shining princess in the dungeon forever so he can have some light for himself. However, when Despereaux arrives and when Mig cuts



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Despereaux Tilling – The protagonist of the novel, Despereaux is a tiny mouse who lives in a castle. From the moment he's born, Despereaux doesn't fit in with his fellow mice: he's the only baby in his litter to survive, he has unusually large ears,

Roscuoro's tail off, Roscuoro admits that he just wants some light. The Princess Pea forgives Roscuoro, invites him to eat soup with her, and ultimately gives him free run of the castle's upstairs floors. To try to atone for his misdeeds, Roscuoro also reunites Mig with her father, who was imprisoned in the dungeons and whom Roscuoro tormented. In art, chiaroscuro refers to the play of lights and darks in a painting or drawing to create form and drama. In Roscuoro's case, his name's meaning embodies the novel's insistence that life, and people, are made up of both light and dark elements, and that this is what makes life interesting.

Miggery Sow "Mig" – Miggery Sow is a young girl who eventually becomes a castle servant and helps Roscuoro carry out his plan to exact revenge on the Princess Pea. She's not very intelligent, and for most of the novel, nobody cares what Mig wants. When Mig is a young child, her mother dies and her father (who named her after his favorite sow) sells her to a man for a tablecloth, a hen, and some cigarettes. The man who purchases Mig makes him call her Uncle; he regularly hits her ears. This causes Mig to become deaf. Things begin to look up for Mig when, on her seventh birthday, she witnesses the royal family riding near Uncle's house and begins to hope that she could one day become a princess, like the Pea. Her hope and her admiration for the princess sustain her for the next five years, until a soldier arrives to confiscate Uncle's soup-making supplies and Mig as well (slavery is illegal in the Kingdom of Dor). Mig is brought to the castle to work as a paid servant. When Mig is sent to take Gregory the jailer his meal in the dungeon, Mig sings a song about wanting to be the Princess Pea—something that piques the rat Roscuoro's interest. Roscuoro decides to manipulate Mig to bring the Pea to the dungeon. Mig is led to believe that she and the princess will then switch places, so Mig is distraught when Roscuoro reveals that he won't let either girl leave the dungeon. But when the Pea asks Mig what she really wants, Mig shouts that she wants her mother. This leads Mig and the Pea to form an alliance against Roscuoro. Once they leave the dungeon, Roscuoro, seeking forgiveness, reunites Mig with her father, who was imprisoned in the dungeon. Mig's father treats her like a princess for the rest of her life to atone for selling her.

The Princess Pea – The princess of Dor is King Phillip and Queen Rosemary's daughter. She's a beautiful girl who seems to radiate **light**, and this effect is amplified by the fact that she often wears glittery or sequined dresses. The Pea is the only one to notice Roscuoro hanging from the chandelier at a banquet, and she shouts that there's a rat in her mother's **soup**—which ultimately leads to the queen dying of surprise. The look that the Pea gives Roscuoro as he leaves the banquet—one that says clearly that he belongs in the dungeon—is what causes Roscuoro's heart to break and to heal crookedly. The Pea, however, is unaware of the effect she had on him until much later. In the months after her mother's death,

the Pea befriends Despereaux—and days after they meet for the first time, Roscuoro manipulates Mig into kidnapping the Pea. While the Pea is frightened and angry at Roscuoro, the narrator also insists that Pea is extremely empathetic. So, she feels great sympathy for Mig, who wants to be a princess so badly that she's susceptible to Roscuoro's manipulation. Her empathy is why, once Roscuoro reveals what his true plan is, the Pea asks an angry, confused Mig what she really wants. The girls connect over the fact that they've both lost their mothers, and they refuse to work against each other after this. Once Despereaux arrives to rescue the Pea, the Pea agrees to forgive Roscuoro for kidnapping her and for his role in the queen's death. She invites him upstairs to eat soup and after this, she gives him permission to come upstairs to the castle's light, bright main floors whenever he wants.

King Phillip – The king of Dor is the Princess Pea's father and Queen Rosemary's husband. Though he's nearsighted and not the most intelligent ruler, his greatest quality is that he loves with all his heart. However, this leads to some interesting consequences when the king experiences loss. Being a king, he can make whatever ridiculous rules he wants—so after the queen dies while eating **soup**, King Phillip outlaws soup and all soup-making and soup-eating implements, as well as rats (the rat Chiaroscuro fell in the queen's soup, frightening her to death). The narrator notes that this does practically nothing except make life difficult for people who once relied on soup for nourishment, but it allows the king to show his love for the queen. Later, when the Pea vanishes, the king refuses to listen to Despereaux when Despereaux attempts to share where she went. The King, like Lester Tilling, has a very specific idea of how things should go—and he's unwilling to associate with any rodents, let alone listen to one. So while the king is irrational and sometimes wields his power in strange ways, he remains motivated by love and grief first and foremost.

Queen Rosemary – Queen Rosemary was King Phillip's wife and the Princess Pea's mother until her death not long before Despereaux's birth. She was a straightforward woman who loved her family most of all—and after that, she loved **soup**. Because of this, Cook served soup for every meal and elevated her soup recipes to the level of art. The queen died when the rat Roscuoro fell into her soup, startling her to death. Following her death, King Phillip outlaws soup, soup-making, and soup-eating implements in the Kingdom of Dor.

Lester Tilling – Lester is Despereaux's father and Antoinette's husband. He's also a member of the Mouse Council, and he's very concerned with ceremony, tradition, and making sure that all mice follow the rules of proper mouse conduct. This is why, when he hears that Despereaux has shown himself to the Princess Pea and allowed her to touch him, he calls the Mouse Council and votes to send Despereaux to the dungeon—following the rules matters more to him than protecting his own son. However, Lester cries as he does so and

later, he comes to regret his role in sending Despereaux to the dungeon. When Despereaux returns from the dungeon alive, Lester begs his son for forgiveness. Though the narrator explains that Despereaux forgives his father to save his *own* heart (rather than to benefit Lester), Lester is blown away by the gesture. To the end of the novel, he remains in awe that he was granted forgiveness.

Antoinette Tilling – The French mouse Antoinette is Despereaux’s mother and Lester’s wife. She’s vain, dramatic, and the word “disappointing” is one of her favorite words. When Despereaux is the only living baby of his litter, she declares that she won’t have any more babies—they ruin her looks. Antoinette takes a dim view of her husband’s involvement with the Mouse Council, but she also refuses to stand up for Despereaux when the Mouse Council banishes him to die in the dungeon.

Furlough Tilling – Furlough is one of Despereaux’s older brothers. Like his father, Lester, Furlough is very interested in following the rules that guide mouse behavior. When Despereaux is little, this leads to Furlough going out of his way to teach Despereaux to scurry properly. But later, this takes a sinister turn when Furlough sees Despereaux allowing the Princess Pea to touch him—and alerts their father to this crime. Furlough is one of the hooded mouse guards who escort Despereaux to the dungeon. He refuses to protect his brother from certain death, and he’s the one to shove Despereaux down the dungeon stairs.

Merlot Tilling – Merlot is one of Despereaux’s older sisters. When Despereaux is little, she attempts to teach him how to nibble paper in the library. But like Lester and Furlough, Merlot believes that mice should act in very specific ways—so she’s aghast when Despereaux seems to be speaking to the paper and refuses to eat it (unlike most mice, Despereaux can read the story in the book he’s supposed to be eating). This leads her to believe that Despereaux is mentally unwell.

The Most Very Honored Head Mouse – The Most Very Honored Head Mouse is the head of the Mouse Council. He’s an old mouse whose job it is to make sure that all mice who live in the castle are following the rules of mouse conduct exactly. The Head Mouse is unwilling to see nuance or consider anything that isn’t black and white, so when Despereaux is brought before the Mouse Council, it doesn’t matter to the Head Mouse that Despereaux broke the rules for good, noble reasons.

The Threadmaster/Hovis – The threadmaster, a mouse named Hovis, is the castle mouse with the ceremonial role of protecting the supposedly sacred spool of red thread and fastening red thread around condemned mice’s necks before they’re sent to the dungeon. Hovis acts like he takes his job seriously, but he’s the only mouse who gives Despereaux any hope that things might turn out okay when Despereaux is

banished to the dungeon. He tells Despereaux to be brave for the Princess Pea, and later, he agrees to help Despereaux in his quest to return to the dungeon and rescue the princess.

Gregory – Gregory is the jailer in the castle dungeon—though he’s also a prisoner there. An old man who keeps himself from getting lost in the maze-like dungeon thanks to a rope tied around his ankle, Gregory has a tenuous truce with the rats (they mostly agree to not chew on his rope). When he hears Despereaux telling himself a story, Gregory picks Despereaux up and agrees to save him in return for Despereaux sharing his story. Stories, Gregory says, are **light**—they can give people hope and purpose. Just after Gregory saves Despereaux, though, Roscuro chews through Gregory’s rope, causing the old man to die. This way, Gregory can’t thwart Roscuro’s plan to imprison the Princess Pea in the dungeon.

Botticelli Remorso – One of the novel’s main antagonists, Botticelli is an elderly rat who lives in the dungeon; he’s Roscuro’s best friend and mentor. He always carries a locket stolen from a prisoner, hung on a rope made of mouse whiskers. Botticelli tries very hard to get Roscuro to behave as rats should—he tries to convince Roscuro that Roscuro doesn’t care about **light** and beauty, and instead that Roscuro should focus on causing people pain, fear, and suffering. Hope and love, in Botticelli’s opinion, are only useful in that they sometimes give his mouse victims better flavor—mice who die hopeful and in love, he suggests, taste better. Ultimately, Botticelli is unsuccessful in getting Roscuro to be a proper rat, and he loses interest in eating Despereaux after witnessing “too much forgiveness,” which ruins a mouse’s flavor.

The Prisoner/Mig’s Father – Mig’s father sells her to a man called Uncle when Mig is only six years old; in exchange he gets a red tablecloth, a hen, and some cigarettes. Years later, he’s imprisoned in the castle dungeons for stealing six cows—and Roscuro steals his red tablecloth, which he still has and which reminds him of his betrayal of Mig. By this point, Mig’s father deeply regrets his actions. At the end of the novel, the Pea has Mig’s father released from the dungeon, and Roscuro reunites him with Mig. Mig’s father treats her like a princess for the rest of his life to make up for betraying her.

Cook – The head chef at the castle, Cook is a strict, difficult woman who’s known for her amazing **soup** recipes and her hatred of mice. She believes firmly in the healing and community-building power of soup, so she’s devastated when King Phillip outlaws soup following Queen Rosemary’s death. When it comes to those working under her, Cook demands perfection and obedience—and she’s willing to hit her subordinates if they can’t perform. When the Princess Pea goes missing, Cook defies the law and makes soup to comfort herself. She also rethinks her hatred of mice and shares some of her soup with Despereaux.

Uncle – Uncle is the man who purchases Mig from her father.

He's not her uncle, but he insists she call him "Uncle." Uncle tasks Mig with cooking, cleaning, and looking after his sheep, and he regularly gives Mig "a good clout to the ear" for various, often invented reasons. This causes Mig to eventually lose her hearing. When the soldier arrives to confiscate Uncle's **soup**-making implements and share the news that soup has been made illegal, he takes Mig from Uncle and informs Uncle that slavery is illegal in the Kingdom of Dor.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Aunt Florence – One of Despereaux's aunts, Florence is insistent throughout the novel that Despereaux is an aberration. She's convinced he'll die when he's a sickly youngster, and she speaks out against his actions when it's revealed that he allowed the Princess Pea to touch him.

Uncle Alfred – Despereaux's Uncle Alfred looks down on his nephew, whom he sees as strange and mentally and physically unwell.

Louise – Louise is the head of the servants in King Phillip's castle.

The Soldier – The soldier is in King Phillip's employ; he takes **soup**-making implements and Mig away from Uncle and delivers Mig to the castle.

banished to the dungeon. And more broadly, the novel suggests that while it is of course nice when good triumphs and happy things occur, life is only interesting because there's a constant interplay between light and dark, good and evil. Just as a visually interesting dark shadow is only possible thanks to the light of a candle, the narrator makes it clear that the story they tell in *The Tale of Despereaux* only happens because dark and evil forces like fear, intolerance, and sadness exist alongside joy, empathy, and love.



LOVE, FORGIVENESS, AND ABSURDITY

At its heart, *The Tale of Despereaux* is a love story: that of the love that the mouse Despereaux feels for the human Princess Pea, and the lengths

Despereaux's love causes him to go to when the rat Chiaroscuro (Roscuro) imprisons the Pea in the dungeon. Love, the narrator says, is extremely powerful, if a bit absurd—it's ridiculous that a mouse falls in love with a human princess, but that love causes Despereaux to believe he's actually capable of rescuing his love from the dungeon. The narrator characterizes forgiveness similarly: it's absurd, the narrator suggests, to think that Despereaux could forgive his own father for voting to banish him to the dungeon early in the novel, where Despereaux is guaranteed to be eaten by rats. But the novel suggests that despite the absurdity, love and forgiveness are absolutely necessary if people (or mice) mean to hold onto their humanity and not fall prey to evil. Roscuro, for instance, turns to evil (in the form of kidnapping the princess) because he's led to believe that things like love, beauty, and forgiveness will never be available to him. And as they forgive those who have harmed them, both the Pea and Despereaux realize that being willing to forgive is the only way to avoid ending up miserable like Roscuro. Forgiveness, in other words, benefits the person being forgiven as much as it benefits the person forgiving.



THEMES

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GOOD VS. EVIL

In *The Tale of Despereaux*, the titular protagonist—a small mouse who lives in a castle—falls in love with the human Princess Pea, and Despereaux

eventually takes on the monumental task of rescuing the princess from the dungeon after the evil rat Chiaroscuro kidnaps her. On the surface, *The Tale of Despereaux* is a simple story about good triumphing over evil, but the novel's message is far more complex. It proposes that good and evil (symbolized by sources of **light** like candles and stained-glass windows, and dark places like the dungeon) are both necessary to give the world and the story depth and meaning, and that good and evil coexist inside all people. For instance, throughout the novel, the narrator details the contents of each character's heart, pointing out the parts that are light, bright, and good—such as the Pea's kindness and her capacity to feel empathy—and the parts that are sad, or angry, or hateful, as when it describes the heart of Lester, Despereaux's father, as he condemns his son to being



PRINCIPLES, COURAGE, AND GROWING UP

In many ways, *The Tale of Despereaux* details the titular mouse protagonist's process of growing up and learning to stand up for what he believes is right. Despereaux doesn't fit in with other mice, but this is largely because he believes in things that he suggests are far more meaningful and important than what most mice value: he values love and honor, rather than eating and being afraid. His values lead him not only to speak to and fall in love with the human Princess Pea, but to survive banishment to the dungeon—and to later return to the dungeon to rescue the princess when the rat Chiaroscuro kidnaps her and hides her in the dungeon's darkness. Despereaux's principles, the novel suggests, motivate him to become far more mature and far more moral than his fellow mice are.

Part of Despereaux's maturation, though, is connected to his realization that good won't happen in the world if he and his fellow mice only sit around and *wait* for it to happen—he must act on his principles, even if doing so is frightening. Despereaux makes this realization as he dreams that the **knight in shining armor** from a story he loves to read is actually just an empty suit of armor, and as he then realizes that perhaps it's empty so that he can wear it and be a knight himself. Essentially, as Despereaux loses his innocent and youthful belief that good things will just happen in the world, he gains the armor—or the courage—he needs to be a force for good in his own right.



CONFORMITY

The narrator of *The Tale of Despereaux* remarks at one point that “an interesting fate [...] awaits almost everyone, mouse or man, who does not conform.”

The mouse Despereaux, for his part, is thrown in the **dark**, rat-infested dungeon as punishment for his failure to conform to mouse rules of behavior—his love of the human Princess Pea and his love of music prove too strong for him to want to stay hidden, afraid of humans, and interested only in feeding himself. But while Despereaux's nonconformity helps him feel brave and ultimately triumph over his circumstances to later rescue the Pea from her imprisonment in the dungeon, other characters' nonconformity leads them down far darker paths. The rat Chiaroscuro, for instance, is unusual for a rat in that he's extremely interested in the light, rather than rejecting it entirely and embracing the darkness of the dungeon where he lives. But he becomes so disillusioned and full of self-hatred after his single disastrous trip upstairs to the castle's light, bright main floor that his nonconformity leads him instead to carry out monstrous actions—kidnapping the Princess Pea and imprisoning her in the dungeon so he alone can possess her radiance—rather than making him noble and good. The novel shows how mice, rats, and people alike experience major pressure to conform to whatever their society deems is appropriate. The consequences for not conforming, Despereaux's story shows, can be grave and even deadly—but they can also create situations where unsuspecting heroes, like Despereaux, can triumph.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOR

The knight in shining armor symbolizes Despereaux's coming of age. When Despereaux first encounters the story in a library book about a brave knight who rescues a beautiful maiden, he believes wholeheartedly in

the fairytale's happily-ever-after ending. The knight, he believes, is capable of any good deed—and happy endings are all but guaranteed. Furthermore, the story leads Despereaux to believe that other people will always be there to help those in need. This naïve outlook symbolizes Despereaux's youthful innocence, and it provides a starting point from which he can mature.

Despereaux begins to question the concept of “happily ever after” and the knight's power when the Mouse Council banishes him to the dungeon, where Despereaux will be eaten by rats. But even after Despereaux is rescued from the dungeon and returns upstairs, he continues to feel hopeless because he learns that Chiaroscuro has kidnapped the Princess Pea and imprisoned her in the dungeon. At this time, Despereaux also dreams about the knight, but the suit of armor in his dream turns out to be empty. Despereaux takes this to mean that the knight and the principles he stands for aren't real or powerful. However, as Despereaux tries and fails to find someone to help him rescue the Pea, he eventually comes to the realization that perhaps the suit of armor is empty so that Despereaux *himself* can wear it and be a knight himself. This gives Despereaux the confidence he needs to return to the dungeon to rescue the Pea, and as Despereaux bravely faces his fears, he comes of age. The suit of armor, then, shows Despereaux that he cannot naively wait around for other people—or knights—to do things for him and to spread good in the world. Rather, he must be willing to take action himself.



SOUP

Soup represents love, comfort, and community. It's Queen Rosemary's favorite food, and when she dies while eating it, King Phillip bans soup (as well as soup-making implements like kettles and soup-eating implements like spoons and bowls) for everyone in the kingdom. Because he lost the person he loved most, he tries to express his love and his grief for her by taking soup away from everyone—everyone will then have to share in his loss and hopefully understand the depth of his grief. As the narrator notes, the king's action is absurd, but this only reinforces the narrator's assertion that love itself is absurd.

However, making soup illegal doesn't stop soup from being a positive thing capable of bringing people (and mice and rats) together. After the Princess Pea goes missing, Cook sneakily makes soup late at night. When Despereaux comes upon her stirring the soup, the soup pot's steam seems to create a halo around Cook's head, suggesting that the soup can make even a hard, violent woman like Cook seem helpful and angelic. And Cook then goes on to set aside her hatred of mice to give Despereaux some soup, thereby giving him the physical and emotional strength he needs to brave the dungeon and rescue the princess. Soup creates an improbable alliance between

Cook and Despereaux, highlighting its ability to bridge divides. Later, in the dungeon, Roscuro finally reveals his true plan and his true desires (he wants to possess **light** for himself) once he smells the soup on Despereaux's whiskers—it leads him to essentially confess his sins and ask for help, and it stops him from continuing down his evil path. And when the Pea forgives Roscuro for his actions, it's significant that she invites him upstairs to eat soup together. The novel's final chapter details a meal of soup shared by the king, the princess, Mig, Roscuro, and Despereaux. The soup itself—and the love and forgiveness it represents—brings several unlikely friends together around the same table, highlighting again its ability to create community.



LIGHT AND DARK

Light represents good things (such as hope, love, kindness, and beauty) while dark things and places represent evil. The narrator aligns Despereaux, the novel's protagonist, with light and goodness the moment he's born—he's born with his eyes open, and he watches a patch of light on the ceiling. From this moment on, Despereaux is transfixed by things like stained-glass windows, candles, and the Princess Pea, who herself seems to radiate light. And the Kingdom of Dor's name is a play on the French word for "golden," suggesting that the kingdom itself is aligned with bright things and goodness.

However, the kingdom's association with good and hope doesn't mean it doesn't also have dark, evil elements or places—such as the dungeon, which the narrator describes as a place of hopelessness, fear, and torment. There, where there is no light, rats (which the narrator also suggests are the embodiment of evil) rule and make every prisoner's life miserable. And most rats, like Botticelli Remorso, want to live their lives in darkness and in evil. Botticelli, for his part, implies that he speaks for all rats when he insists that the meaning of life is causing suffering.

But the relationship between light and dark in the Kingdom of Dor isn't as simple as good things happening where it's light and bright, and bad things happening in the darkness of the dungeon. Chiaroscuro himself—a rat who, unlike most rats, longs for light and beauty—embodies the idea that light and dark aren't actually just opposites but work together to create places, people, and scenes that are rich and complex. In art, chiaroscuro refers to the relationship between light and dark areas on a drawing or painting; the lights and darks create the impression that a form is rounded, for instance. Roscuro, as a rat who longs for the light, has both light and dark elements within him—just like the Kingdom of Dor, and just like every person or mouse in it. With this idea, the novel shows how good can only exist if evil also exists to create contrast, and vice versa.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Candlewick Press edition of *The Tale of Despereaux* published in 2015.

Chapter 1 Quotes

●● While Antoinette touched up her eye makeup, the mouse father put Despereaux down on a bed made of blanket scraps. The April sun, weak but determined, shone through a castle window and from there squeezed itself through a small hole in the wall and placed one golden finger on the little mouse.

Related Characters: Despereaux Tilling, Antoinette Tilling, Lester Tilling

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Despereaux has just been born, the only living baby mouse in his litter. In this passage, the novel anthropomorphizes (ascribes human characteristics to) the sunlight by describing how the light "squeezed itself" through the wall and then touched a finger to tiny Despereaux. Giving the light human characteristics like this helps to associate it with the knight in shining armor, which later comes to represent goodness and righteousness to Despereaux as well. That the light touches Despereaux now, when he's a tiny baby, seems prophetic: Despereaux is going to be interested in the light as an older mouse, and he's going to be interested in all the things it stands for (goodness, beauty, principles, et cetera). Already, though, it's possible to see that Despereaux's interests don't align with those of his parents: while Despereaux is busy with the finger of light, his mother focuses on her own appearance, and Lester's behavior throughout this passage is dismissive of his new son. So, from the very beginning, Despereaux is set apart from his family because of his association with the light.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ He was staring at the light pouring in through the stained-glass windows of the castle. He stood on his hind legs and held his handkerchief over his heart and stared up, up, up into the brilliant light.


“Furlough,” he said, “what is this thing? What are all these colors? Are we in heaven?”

“Cripes!” shouted Furlough from a far corner. “Don’t stand there in the middle of the floor talking about heaven. Move! You’re a mouse, not a man. You’ve got to scurry.”

“What?” said Despereaux, still staring at the light.

Related Characters: Despereaux Tilling, Furlough Tilling (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 20-21


Explanation and Analysis

Despereaux’s older brother, Furlough, is attempting to teach him to scurry—and it’s not going well, as Despereaux is more interested in admiring the beautiful stained-glass windows than in scurrying. Despereaux’s interest in the light isn’t anything new; immediately after he was born, he became transfixed by a spot of light on the ceiling. So to readers, whom the narrator has guided to pay attention to Despereaux’s interest in light, it’s perhaps not surprising that Despereaux is still focused on light and beauty. But to Furlough, the light doesn’t matter—what matters is that Despereaux is putting himself in danger by standing in the middle of a hallway, where people could see him. His shouts to Despereaux to scurry and get out of the way are shouts for Despereaux to conform and be a good, proper mouse. However, pointing out that Despereaux is a mouse rather than a man makes an interesting point: Despereaux is more interested in things the novel associates with humans, like beauty, than he is in things that mice like. In terms of Despereaux’s interests and his dreams, then, he is somewhat human—and this is part of the reason why he doesn’t fit in well with his fellow mice.

☞ Reader, you must know that an interesting fate (sometimes involving rats, sometimes not) awaits almost everyone, mouse or man, who does not conform.

Related Characters: Despereaux Tilling, Chiaroscuro

“Roscuero”, The Princess Pea

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Young Despereaux has failed all of the lessons his siblings have given him on how to be a proper mouse. Unlike them, Despereaux is interested in light, beauty, love, and stories—rather than scurrying, being afraid, and feeding himself. So even from this young age, Despereaux doesn’t fit in well in his family and in the wider castle mouse community. It’s his inability to conform, the narrator suggests here, that leads to Despereaux’s adventures over the rest of the novel—he suffers because he doesn’t fit in, but he also experiences immense joy because he doesn’t fit in (as when he falls madly in love with the Princess Pea, for instance).

The rat Chiaroscuro is another character who doesn’t conform to established standards of his species’ behavior. Roscuero, unlike most rats, is intrigued by the light and doesn’t find darkness and suffering fulfilling. This leads him to go to the castle’s upper floors to experience light and beauty for himself—ultimately bringing him and Despereaux together much later, as they fight for the Pea.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ Reader, you may ask this question; in fact, you *must* ask this question: Is it ridiculous for a very small, sickly, big-eared mouse to fall in love with a beautiful human princess named Pea?

The answer is ... yes. Of course, it’s ridiculous.

Love is ridiculous.

But love is also wonderful. And powerful. And Despereaux’s love for the Princess Pea would prove, in time, to be all of these things: Powerful, wonderful, and ridiculous.

Related Characters: Despereaux Tilling, The Princess Pea

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Despereaux has just fallen madly in love with the Princess Pea. The fact that a mouse has fallen in love with a human, though, isn’t any more ridiculous than love is to begin with, according to the narrator. But the fact that love is absurd,

the narrator proposes, is part of what makes it so “wonderful” and “powerful.”

Despereaux’s love for the Pea, for instance, is what gives him the courage to return from the dungeon when he’s banished there—and then go on to return to the dungeon to rescue the Pea when she’s kidnapped and held in its depths. It’s this kind of power and absurdity, the narrator proposes, that’s even more ridiculous than the fact that Despereaux is a “small, sickly, big-eared mouse” who’s fallen in love with a person.

Additionally, it’s the absurdity of Despereaux’s love for the Pea that makes *The Tale of Despereaux* such a compelling story. As the narrator encourages readers to understand a bit later, life is funny—so it’s okay to acknowledge that a romance between a tiny mouse and a human princess is both funny and absurd. It’s this kind of absurdity, after all, that makes the story fun to read.



Chapter 7 Quotes

☞☞ “Do not speak to her!” thundered the king.

Despereaux dropped his handkerchief. He backed away from the king.

“Rodents do not speak to princesses. We will not have this becoming a topsy-turvy, wrong-headed world. There are rules. Scat. Get lost, before my common sense returns and I have you killed.”

Related Characters: King Phillip (speaker), Despereaux Tilling, The Princess Pea, Queen Rosemary, Chiaroscuro “Roscurio”

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Though the Princess Pea convinced her father to play music for Despereaux when Despereaux came out of his hole to listen (and then fell in love with the Pea), King Phillip has had enough now that Despereaux has spoken to his daughter. King Phillip is very set in his ways. He believes there’s only one right way for things to happen, and what’s happening at the moment isn’t correct. He implies that if things proceed in this incorrect way, things will never be the same—it’ll be a “topsy-turvy, wrong-headed world” where anything goes. It’s important to note that King Phillip is so intent on keeping Despereaux, a rodent, from speaking to the Pea in part because a rodent—Roscurio—inadvertently killed the queen. In order for King Phillip to feel like he’s avenging his

wife’s death, it’s essential that he refuse rodents any dignity. What’s most interesting here, however, is that King Phillip’s insistence that he can’t let the world get out of hand mirrors almost exactly what mice have told Despereaux. All of them believe that each species should act in a certain way and should only engage with other species under very specific circumstances, following well-established rules. Both groups, in other words, value conformity over everything else—they’re unmoved that Despereaux has fallen madly in love with the Pea here, for instance.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☞☞ “Did you break them?”

“Yes, sir,” said Despereaux. He raised his voice. “But...I broke the rules for good reasons. Because of music. And because of love.”

“Love!” said the Head Mouse.

“Oh cripes,” said Furlough. “Here we go.”

“I love her, sir,” said Despereaux.

“We are not here to talk about love. This trial is not about love. This trial is about you being a mouse,” shouted the Most Very Honored Head Mouse from high atop the bricks, “and *not acting like one!!!*”

Related Characters: Despereaux Tilling, The Most Very Honored Head Mouse, Furlough Tilling (speaker), Lester Tilling, The Princess Pea, King Phillip

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Despereaux is currently on trial with the Mouse Council for breaking mouse rules; he revealed himself to humans, allowed the Princess Pea to touch him, and he spoke to her. He’s trying to argue that he had good reasons to break those rules, which does nothing to convince the Head Mouse. Despereaux, for his part, is a very principled mouse; he values things like love and honor, so he believes that if he does something that furthers his values, then he should be just fine. The Mouse Council, however, sees things differently. They look at the world in terms of black and white, right and wrong—and all they see is that Despereaux broke the rules and so should be punished. His reasons don’t matter to them at all. This shows how much Despereaux has diverged from his fellow mice in terms of what he values and how he wants to live his life. As the Head Mouse shouts here, Despereaux isn’t acting like a mouse

should—he’s acting how Despereaux, an individual mouse who sees the world very differently, thinks he should. Interestingly, what the Head Mouse says here about how things should be mirrors what King Phillip said to Despereaux earlier: that mice must follow the rules, or the world will turn upside-down. So, though the Mouse Council and King Phillip are, in theory, opposed to each other, they both see the world in very similar ways.


Chapter 11 Quotes

☛ How, he wondered, had things gone so terribly wrong? Wasn’t it a good thing to love? In the story in the book, love was a very good thing. Because the knight loved the fair maiden, he was able to rescue her. They lived happily ever after. It said so. In the book. They were the last words on the page. *Happily ever after*. Despereaux was certain that he had read exactly those words time and time again.

Lying on the floor with the drum beating and the mice shouting and the threadmaster calling out, “Make way, make way,” Despereaux had a sudden, chilling thought: Had some other mouse eaten the words that spoke the truth? Did the knight and the fair maiden really *not* live happily ever after?

Related Characters: Despereaux Tilling, The Princess Pea, The Most Very Honored Head Mouse, The Threadmaster/Hovis

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 57-58

Explanation and Analysis

The Mouse Council has condemned Despereaux to die in the dungeon, and Despereaux is trying to figure out where he got off course. His view here is, the novel suggests, a product of his youth and his innocence. He’s not very critical as he thinks about how the book says that the knight and the fair maiden live happily ever after; it’s in the book, so obviously, he reasons at first, it must be true. Despereaux begins to let go of this naïve understanding when he wonders if, perhaps, another mouse ate the real ending of the story (one that, this passage suggests, isn’t at all happy). Essentially, what Despereaux is starting to think about here is the difference between real life and fiction. In real life, for instance, the story about the maiden and the knight doesn’t actually end for some time—they have a life to live after the end of the book, and there’s no telling if that life is happy or

not. So, Despereaux begins to suspect that fiction doesn’t faithfully reflect real life.


He also has to confront the fact that his fellow mice don’t think so highly of love as he does. In Despereaux’s understanding, it was fine to speak to the princess because he loves her—but the mice only focus on the fact that he spoke to a person, something that mouse law forbids. As he thinks through these things, he gathers even more evidence that he doesn’t fit in with these mice.


Chapter 15 Quotes

☛ “Why would you save me, then?”

“Because you, mouse, can tell Gregory a story. Stories are light. Light is precious in a world so dark. Begin at the beginning. Tell Gregory a story. Make some light.”

Related Characters: Despereaux Tilling, Gregory (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Gregory the jailer has picked Despereaux up off the dungeon floor. He offers to save Despereaux in exchange for a story.



Though he’s the person in charge of managing the dungeon, Gregory is a prisoner there himself. It’s important to keep this in mind, as it implies that Gregory doesn’t want to be living exclusively in the dark, scary dungeon—he, like Despereaux, craves light. This is why he wants Despereaux to tell him a story: it’s one of seemingly few times in Gregory’s life when he gets to experience some symbolic light.


In a broader sense, Gregory positions stories as an essential weapon with which to combat darkness, fear, and evil. Stories can give people hope and courage; just before this and then again later in the novel, Despereaux tells himself a story to help himself feel brave as he enters the dungeon. And the narrator encourages readers to see the book on the whole as a way to “make some light” in the world. In the coda, the narrator asks readers to think of them as a mouse whispering a story—light—into the reader’s ear. The book, the narrator hopes, will be enjoyable for readers. It can, perhaps, help readers escape from the dark parts of their own lives.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☞ Reader, do you know the definition of the word “chiaroscuro”? If you look in your dictionary, you will find that it means the arrangement of light and dark, darkness and light together. Rats do not care for light. Roscuro’s parents were having a bit of fun when they named their son. Rats have a sense of humor. Rats, in fact, think that life is very funny. And they are right, reader. They are right.

Related Characters: Chiaroscuro “Roscuro”

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 85-86

Explanation and Analysis

As they introduce the rat Chiaroscuro to the reader, the narrator explains what his name means. Chiaroscuro’s name highlights the novel’s suggestion that light and dark must coexist to have any meaning—that is, it’s impossible to have something that’s only good or only bad. The art definition of chiaroscuro makes this clear, as it refers to how an artist uses light and dark tones in order to make a drawing look three-dimensional. This is achieved by creating shadows with dark tones and highlights with white or light tones—it takes both the lights and the darks to give the image in the drawing any meaning. The narrator essentially asks readers to consider that everything, from drawings to stories to people, have (and require) both light and dark in order to exist. This story, for instance, wouldn’t exist without Roscuro later going on to play the villain. Furthermore, this also gives some reason for why Roscuro loves light so much when, as a rat, he’s not supposed to. It’s literally in his name that he has both light and dark within him.


Then, the novel also essentially gives readers permission to laugh at what they read. The novel is fantastical, but it portrays an exaggerated version of the fight between light and dark, which it suggests is occurring all the time in books and in real life. It’s okay, and perhaps even necessary, the narrator suggests, to be willing to laugh when things are difficult.


Chapter 17 Quotes

☞ “A rat is a rat is a rat. End of story. World without end. Amen.”

“Yes,” said Roscuro. “Amen, I am a rat.” He closed his eyes. He saw, again, the red cloth spinning against the backdrop of gold. And he told himself, reader, that it was the cloth that he desired and not the light.

Related Characters: Botticelli Remorso, Chiaroscuro “Roscuro” (speaker), The Prisoner/Mig’s Father

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 92-93

Explanation and Analysis

When the prisoner is brought into the dungeon, Roscuro is awed by the light that streams into the dungeon through the open door. Botticelli is now trying to convince Roscuro to let go of his dreams of seeing more of the light, and to focus on stealing the prisoner’s red cloth (which the guard threw down and is “the red cloth spinning against the backdrop of gold” that the narrator mentions here).

Botticelli’s insistence that “A rat is a rat is a rat” is, essentially, a proposal that rats can’t change. They are exactly what they are, and it’s impossible for them to be anything more. The novel insists that overwhelmingly, rats are evil creatures that thrive in darkness and live to torment people. So, in essence, Botticelli is trying to convince Roscuro to forget the light and to focus instead on dark, evil things and activities, such as torturing this prisoner and taking the man’s red cloth.



This isn’t such an easy thing for Roscuro to accept and believe, however, no matter how faithfully he repeats Botticelli’s words. He’s willing to say the right things to make Botticelli think that he’s on board, but really, Roscuro is focused on the “backdrop of gold” and the beautiful upper castle floors that make up that tableau. For now, Roscuro is going to try to follow Botticelli’s advice and take the red cloth, but the tone of this passage makes it clear that Roscuro is suppressing what he actually wants in order to do this.


Chapter 19 Quotes

☞☞ And the little princess! How lovely she was! How much like light itself. Her gown was covered in sequins that winked and glimmered at the rat. And when she laughed, and she laughed often, everything around her seemed to glow brighter.

“Oh, really,” said Roscuro, “this is too extraordinary. This is too wonderful. I must tell Botticelli that he was wrong. Suffering is not the answer. *Light* is the answer.”

Related Characters: Chiaroscuro “Roscuro” (speaker), The Princess Pea, Botticelli Remorso, King Phillip, Queen Rosemary

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

Roscuro has ventured up to the castle’s main floors for the first time, and he comes upon the royal family having a party. He’s struck by the happy people, and he’s especially taken with the beautiful, shining Princess Pea.

The description of the Princess Pea, particularly describing her as being “much like light itself,” solidifies her association with light and goodness. She is almost the physical embodiment of light, as her dress not only causes her to shine visually, but her kind and happy behavior toward others seems to brighten the room.

As the narrator noted previously, Roscuro has never seen happy people—he’s only ever seen sad, frightened people, so witnessing this party is a huge turning point for him. It causes him to decide for sure that he loves light, happiness, and goodness, rather than loving the dark and evilly torturing people. This is what he’s referring to when he says that Botticelli is wrong; Botticelli Remorso has insisted to Roscuro many times over that suffering is the meaning of life. That Roscuro is so willing to reject Botticelli’s beliefs here highlights how poorly Roscuro fits in with the other rats. Unlike them, he’s interested in happiness and beauty—and, perhaps, even befriending beautiful people like the Pea.

Chapter 20 Quotes


☞☞ *Rat.*


In the middle of all that beauty, it immediately became clear that it was an extremely distasteful syllable.

Rat.

A curse, an insult, a word totally without light. And not until he heard it from the mouth of the princess did Roscuro realize that he did not like being a rat, that he did not want to be a rat.

Related Characters: Chiaroscuro “Roscuro”, The Princess Pea

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Roscuro is hanging from the chandelier above a party that the royal family and other important attendants are enjoying. The Pea sights him and shouts that there’s a rat on the chandelier, forcing Roscuro to think for the first time about how dirty the word “rat” is.

What stands out most in this passage is Roscuro’s realization that he doesn’t want to be a rat. This highlights to what extent Roscuro doesn’t fit in with other rats—after all, he doesn’t even want to *be* one of them. Instead, he wants to live in the Princess Pea’s world, enjoying the light, bright upper floors of the castle and the beauty they offer. But hearing how insulting the word “rat” is shows Roscuro that he probably won’t fit in up here either, if people think this way about him. So, Roscuro doesn’t fit in with the rats in the dungeon, nor does he fit in with the people and the mice in the main floors of the castle. Not fitting in either place is ultimately what leads Roscuro to evil—this is why he kidnaps the princess, so he can try to have some beautiful light without having to live outside of the dark dungeon.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☝☝ “Go back to the dungeon” was what the look she gave him said. “Go back into the darkness where you belong.”



This look, reader, broke Roscuro’s heart.



Did you think that rats do not have hearts? Wrong. All living things have a heart. And the heart of any living thing can be broken.

If the rat had not looked over his shoulder, perhaps his heart would not have broken. And it is possible, then, that I would not have a story to tell.

But, reader, he did look.

Related Characters: The Princess Pea, Queen Rosemary, The Prisoner/Mig’s Father, Chiaroscuro “Roscuro”

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

Roscuro has just fallen into Queen Rosemary’s soup, causing her to die of shock. He’s leaving the party now, and he looks back to see the Princess Pea giving him a cruel look.

It’s important to note, first of all, that Roscuro’s intentions through his entire trip upstairs were good ones. He didn’t go into this planning to kill the queen, and he looks back to see the Princess Pea right now because he remembers the prisoner saying that he regrets not looking back at his daughter as he left her. Roscuro is trying to do the right thing here—things just aren’t working out in his favor. This is why the narrator assures readers that Roscuro (and rats on the whole) are just like any other being, with a heart that can be broken. Essentially, the narrator is encouraging readers to have empathy for Roscuro: in some ways, he’s not so different from readers.

Then, the Pea’s look highlights how many people in the novel view rats: as dirty, nasty creatures who belong in the dark dungeon, rather than upstairs in the light. Essentially, Roscuro takes the Pea’s glare to mean that he’s never going to be anything more than an evil rat whose job it is to torture people. This shatters Roscuro’s dreams, in addition to his heart: he came upstairs so he could experience light and beauty, and this moment solidifies his understanding that he’ll never be able to enjoy these things.


Finally, the narrator notes again how necessary terrible moments like this are to creating a story with interest and

drama. It’s essential, the narrator suggests, for Roscuro’s heart to break—otherwise the story would be boring, and it wouldn’t be worth telling at all. Roscuro’s heart must break so the narrator has a reason to keep going and tell readers what happens next.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☝☝ But, reader, we must not forget that King Phillip loved the queen and that without her, he was lost. This is the danger of loving: No matter how powerful you are, no matter how many kingdoms you rule, you cannot stop those you love from dying. Making soup illegal, outlawing rats, these things soothed the poor king’s heart. And so we must forgive him.

Related Characters: King Phillip, Queen Rosemary, Chiaroscuro “Roscuro”

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is explaining how, in the aftermath of Queen Rosemary’s death, King Phillip outlaws soup (the queen’s favorite food, and what she was eating when she died) and rats. In this passage, the narrator encourages readers to not scoff at the king, or look down on him for taking actions that are so ridiculous. He outlaws soup and rats because he’s so motivated by love, the narrator insists, and so it’s essential that readers take this into account as they judge the king’s character. The narrator proposes that when people do things out of love, it’s not a good idea to condemn them—people do all sorts of things to try to make themselves feel better, the narrator shows. Those things aren’t always good (the novel highlights some of the negative consequences of outlawing soup and rats, such as the king’s men dying in the dungeon while searching for rats, or that most poor people in the kingdom can’t afford to eat anything but soup). More broadly speaking, the narrator suggests that love makes people do things that are objectively absurd—and it doesn’t matter how powerful a person is, love can still cause them to act out of character.

Chapter 26 Quotes



Looking at the royal family had awakened some deep and slumbering need in her; it was if a small candle had been lit in her interior, sparked to life by the brilliance of the king and the queen and the princess.


For the first time in her life, reader, Mig hoped.

And hope is like love...a ridiculous, wonderful, powerful thing.

Mig tried to name this strange emotion; she put a hand up to touch one of her aching ears, and she realized that the feeling she was experiencing, the hope blooming inside of her, felt exactly the opposite of a good clout.

Related Characters: The Princess Pea, King Phillip, Queen Rosemary, Uncle, Chiaroscuro "Roscuero", Miggery Sow "Mig"

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

When six-year-old Mig sees the royal family riding past Uncle's sheep fields, she begins to hope that one day, she could be like the princess: light, bright, and beautiful.

This passage suggests that hope, like love and soup, is healing and absolutely necessary to a person's wellbeing. Characterizing hope as a need (rather than as a want, or as something that's just nice to have) highlights the necessity of hope: it's what keeps Mig moving forward for the next six years, until she's taken to the palace. It keeps her grounded and looking to the future, even as she endures Uncle's physical abuse day in and day out.


However, this passage also highlights how emotionally uneducated Mig is when she struggles to name what she's feeling. If hope actually is a necessity, as this passage suggests, Mig should know what it is—but she doesn't. So she's left to parse out what she's feeling all on her own, and all she can come up with is that unlike the constant pain she feels in her ears, it's good, comforting, and feels pleasant. In part, it's the fact that Mig is so in the dark when it comes to positive emotions that later makes her susceptible to Roscuero's manipulation: he gives her a roadmap for how to make her dream a reality, and because she's emotionally immature, she's unable to see how ridiculous his plan is.

Chapter 32 Quotes

"Most foolish," muttered Gregory as he lifted the cover off the plate, "too foolish to be borne, a world without soup."

Related Characters: Gregory (speaker), Queen Rosemary, King Phillip, Uncle, Miggery Sow "Mig"

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

Mig has just brought Gregory the jailer his lunch in the dungeon and confirms for him that once again, there's no soup on his tray.

The novel characterizes soup as something that's capable of bringing people together, providing warmth and comfort, and giving people strength. As far as Gregory is concerned, it's absurd to outlaw soup, given how helpful it is—and how much harm *not* having it is doing to King Phillip's subjects. Readers already know, for instance, that poor people like Uncle rely on soup; when the king's soldier confiscated Uncle's soup supplies and suggested Uncle eat cake, Uncle made it clear that the only food he can afford is soup.

But Gregory, the sage voice of reason in the novel, seems to be objecting to soup's illegality mostly on the grounds that it's just ridiculous to ban something that makes people feel so happy and fulfilled. Of *course* silly, absurd, bad things happen, he might suggest, if nobody can recharge with a warming, comforting bowl of soup—so in a way, he suggests that events like those in the novel were, perhaps, bound to happen in such a world.



Chapter 35 Quotes

He dreamt of the stained-glass windows and the dark of the dungeon. In Despereaux's dream, the light came to life, brilliant and glorious, in the shape of a knight swinging a sword. The knight fought the dark.

And the dark took many shapes. First the dark was his mother, uttering phrases in French. And then the dark became his father beating the drum. The dark was Furlough wearing a black hood and shaking his head no. And the dark became a huge rat smiling a smile that was evil and sharp.

Related Characters: Despereaux Tilling, Antoinette Tilling, Lester Tilling, Furlough Tilling, Chiaroscuro "Roscuero"

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

After Despereaux escapes the dungeon, Mig cuts his tail off and Despereaux takes refuge in the pantry, where he sleeps and has this dream. Despereaux's dream first draws out the symbolism of light and dark by portraying light (goodness) and dark (evil) in a literal battle with each other. The light transforms into a knight in shining armor (that is, a knight in bright, almost glittery dress), whose entire job it is to fight back evil. Interestingly, Despereaux characterizes goodness as something (or someone) that's more of an idea than an actual person. The image therefore suggests that this idea of perfect good doesn't exist—it's an ideal, rather than reality.


Then, the forms the dark takes suggest that darkness exists everywhere, in everyone, to some degree. Despereaux loves his mother, for instance—the narrator said outright at various points earlier in the novel that Despereaux didn't want to disappoint her. But here, his beloved mother isn't good: she's someone bad, whom the knight is trying to vanquish. Despereaux's father and Furlough, whom Despereaux has had more fraught relationships with, are more clear-cut antagonists. But still, the fact that the dark forms into Despereaux's family members shows that darkness, evil, and the capacity for cruelty exist within most people, if not all of them—even one's beloved family members.


The huge rat is, perhaps, Chiaroscuro, and he's a much more obvious form for the dark to take (Despereaux has recently heard of his plan to kidnap the princess). But still, the novel has shown that Roscuro isn't wholly dark, as he appears in Despereaux's dream. His name itself suggests his love and desire for light and goodness, but at this point, Despereaux is unaware that Roscuro is anything but an evil villain.

Chapter 36 Quotes

☛☛ And while the mouse slept, Roscuro put his terrible plan into effect. Would you like to hear, reader, how it all unfolded? The story is not a pretty one. There is violence in it. And cruelty. But stories that are not pretty have a certain value too, I suppose. Everything, as you well know (having lived in this world long enough to have figured out a thing or two for yourself), cannot always be sweetness and light.

Related Characters: Chiaroscuro "Roscuro", The Princess Pea, Despereaux Tilling, Miggery Sow "Mig"

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

Once Despereaux falls asleep in the pantry, the narrator begins to describe how Roscuro and Mig kidnap the princess; before they begin, they give the reader this warning that the story isn't a nice one.

This warning highlights one of the novel's main ideas: that darkness (by which the novel means evil, cruelty, violence, fear, and other negative emotions and qualities) still has value. In the case of this novel, it's the dark elements that give the story its drama, its tension, and ultimately, it's those elements that give Despereaux and the other good characters something to fight against. And by extension, the novel shows that characters cannot really be seen as good unless there's darkness around—it's the contrast between dark and light that makes a hero like Despereaux look like a hero, and a villain like Roscuro look like a villain. By noting that readers are surely aware that "Everything [...] cannot always be sweetness and light," the narrator suggests that this is just a fact of life. It's impossible to live in a world where only good things happen. Beyond being impossible, those good things won't seem nearly as good without some bad things to provide contrast.

Chapter 38 Quotes


☛☛ And what of the light in the princess's heart? Reader, I am pleased to tell you that the Pea was a kind person, and perhaps more important, she was empathetic. Do you know what it means to be empathetic?

I will tell you: it means that when you are being forcibly taken to a dungeon, when you have a large knife pointed at your back, when you are trying to be brave, you are able, still, to think for a moment of the person who is holding that knife.

You are able to think: "Oh, poor Mig, she wants to be a princess so badly and she thinks that this is the way. Poor, poor Mig. What must it be like to want something that desperately?"

Related Characters: The Princess Pea, Chiaroscuro "Roscuro", Miggery Sow "Mig"

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

As Mig and Roscuro usher the princess to the dungeon at knifepoint, the narrator takes a moment to describe the contents of the Pea's heart, and to specifically focus on how empathetic the princess is. That the Pea is so kind and empathetic is part of the reason why she's portrayed as the physical embodiment of light and goodness. Much of what makes the Pea so good, this passage suggests, is that she's able to think compassionately and empathetically about people who, by all accounts, are her enemies. And she's able to look at them with kindness, rather than just with fear and anger, or with selfishness. This is, ultimately, why the Pea is eventually able to make up with Mig: she focuses on understanding her supposed enemy and being sympathetic, rather than reducing Mig to a one-dimensional villain.

Subtly, this passage also encourages readers to look at Mig with the same kind of empathy. Mig, the novel suggests, isn't really a villain. She's a person who, for her whole life, has been told that nobody cares about her and that what she wants doesn't matter to anyone. Experiencing 12 years of this has made Mig extremely vulnerable to Roscuro's manipulation, which is the whole reason why she currently has a knife to the princess's back: she truly believes Roscuro when he claims that, once they get to the dungeon, she and the Pea can trade places and Mig will get to be a princess herself. The narrator has coached readers to understand that under no circumstances is that going to happen—but Mig doesn't understand that, and so it's essential to show her pity, compassion, and as much understanding as the Pea or the reader can muster.

Chapter 39 Quotes

☝☝ "It will be all right," said Louise.

Cook brought the hem of her apron up to wipe at her tears. "It won't," she said. "It won't be all right ever again. They've taken our little darling away. There ain't nothing left to live for without the princess."

Despereaux was amazed to have exactly what was in his heart spoken aloud by such a ferocious, mouse-hating woman as Cook.

Related Characters: Louise, Cook (speaker), Despereaux Tilling, The Princess Pea, Chiaroscuro "Roscuro"

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 202

Explanation and Analysis

Despereaux has just woken up; he slept through Roscuro kidnapping the Princess Pea. Now, he's listening to Cook and Louise discuss her disappearance. As Despereaux listens, he learns to be more open and curious about people—they may be more sympathetic, or have more in common with him, than he originally thought. For instance, Despereaux sees Cook as "a ferocious, mouse-hating woman," and in his understanding, this means she hates everyone. But actually, as Cook makes it clear here, she loves the princess just as much as Despereaux does and feels a similar kind of despair as he does. In short, she's not so different from Despereaux. Learning to see people this way, the novel suggests, isn't just part of learning to be a kind, generous person. It's also part of coming of age.

Additionally, overhearing this conversation sets up Cook to be an ally for Despereaux later, as she feeds him soup on his way through the kitchen. Their shared love for the Pea turns them into unlikely allies.

Chapter 41 Quotes

☝☝ He put a nervous paw up to his neck and pulled at the red thread, and suddenly his dream came flooding back to him...the dark and the light and the knight swinging his sword and the terrible moment when he had realized that the suit of armor was empty.

And then, reader, as he stood before the king, a wonderful, amazing thought occurred to the mouse. What if the suit of armor had been empty for a reason? What if it had been empty because it was waiting?

For him.

Related Characters: Despereaux Tilling, King Phillip, The Princess Pea

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 214-15

Explanation and Analysis

Despereaux sought out the king to tell him where Chiaroscuro has imprisoned the Princess Pea, but the king refuses to listen to anything to do with the rats. So,

remembering his dream, Despereaux decides to be the knight in shining armor himself and rescue the Pea.


Being confronted with the sobbing king who's unwilling to listen to him is extremely unsettling for Despereaux. The shock at having the king ignore him is partially why Despereaux is able to have the thought he does here: just as it was a shock when the knight in Despereaux's dream turned out to just be an empty suit of armor, he now realizes that an actual living adult with power is just as ineffective as that suit of armor. Put another way, Despereaux is discovering that he can't rely on real or imaginary authority figures to just swoop in and fix things. This is a huge part of Despereaux's process of coming of age. As he grows, he gradually stops automatically trusting and relying on authority figures like this and becomes an authority figure (or, more accurately, a hero) in his own right.


Essentially, Despereaux reasons that if there's no one else around to listen to him and go rescue the Pea, he should probably just do it himself. As he makes this choice, Despereaux develops self-confidence and completes his coming-of-age process. Now, he realizes that he must take action if he wants things to change, rather than waiting for others to do it—an understanding that the novel characterizes as mature and adult.

Chapter 45 Quotes

☝☝ Cook smiled. "See?" she said. "There ain't a body, be it mouse or man, that ain't made better by a little soup."

Related Characters: Cook (speaker), Despereaux Tilling, The Princess Pea, Chiaroscuro "Rosкуро"

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

When Despereaux, on his way to rescue the princess, tries to pass through the kitchen and catches Cook making soup, Cook uncharacteristically decides not to kill Despereaux. Instead, she offers him a saucer of soup.

The novel characterizes soup as something almost magical. It can bring people together, make people who eat it feel warm and connected, and it can soothe emotional pain. In this specific instance, Despereaux discovers that the soup is helping Cook deal with intense hopelessness and sadness after the Princess Pea was kidnapped. Cook feels like

there's nothing to live for anymore, and the only fix, she believes, is to make some warming, soothing soup—and ideally, to share it with someone. Despereaux is the only being around who might like some soup (and who won't report Cook for illegally cooking soup), so this causes Cook to decide to set aside her vendetta against rodents for the time being.

Then, what Cook says here reinforces the idea that soup itself is healing and fortifying. Indeed, as Despereaux ventures into the dungeons in the following chapters, the narrator makes numerous references to the soup in his belly and to the smell of the soup wafting down the dungeon stairs. The soup gives Despereaux the strength he needs to keep going, and its smell ultimately causes Rosкуро to reveal his evil plan. Soup, in other words, brings all the characters together in a much happier way than they've ever been before.

Chapter 49 Quotes

☝☝ "What do you want, Miggery Sow?!" the princess shouted.

"Don't ask her that," said Rosкуро. "Shut up. Shut up."

But it was too late. The words had been said; the question, at last, had been asked. The world stopped spinning and all of creation held its breath, waiting to hear what it was that Miggery Sow wanted.

"I want..." said Mig.

"Yes?" shouted the Pea.



"I want my ma!" cried Mig, into the silent, waiting world. "*I want my ma!*"

"Oh," said the princess. She held out her hand to Mig.

Mig took hold of it.

"I want my mother, too," said the princess softly. And she squeezed Mig's hand.

Related Characters: The Princess Pea, Chiaroscuro "Rosкуро", Miggery Sow "Mig" (speaker), Queen Rosemary

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

Mig is distraught when Rosкуро reveals that she and the Princess Pea aren't actually going to switch places; Mig is never going to be a princess. In response to Mig's emotional outburst, the Pea asks Mig what she wants. This is the first time in Mig's life that anyone has expressed interest in what



she wants—her mother, her father, Uncle, the soldier who brought her to the castle, and even the other castle servants don't care at all. So even though Mig ultimately says she wants her mother, it's also possible to read this scene as suggesting that what Mig really wants is for someone to care about her (and it is, perhaps, made even better by the fact that Mig loves and admires the princess). The princess's act of kindness leads both girls to turn away from Roscuro and ally themselves against him. Roscuro, this shows, preyed heavily on the fact that Mig was alone and that nobody cared what she wanted. This state made her vulnerable to his manipulation, as he claimed to offer her a path to becoming a princess. But as both Mig and the princess admit that they miss their mothers, it offers hope that they can form a relationship with each other—and in doing so, help each other to heal from their grief.

Chapter 51 Quotes

☛☛ Despereaux held his trembling needle against Roscuro's heart. The mouse knew that as a knight, it was his duty to protect the princess. But would killing the rat make the darkness go away?

Related Characters: Despereaux Tilling, Chiaroscuro "Roscuro", The Princess Pea

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 262

Explanation and Analysis

In the dungeon, Despereaux is attempting to save the Princess Pea from Roscuro; he plans to stab the rat with a sewing needle, which he's using as a sword.

Despereaux is caught between two warring thought processes here. On one hand, Despereaux has stepped into the role of a knight in shining armor. Based on what he's read in a book in the library, he knows that knights are supposed to kill their enemies to protect those they love. So it follows that Despereaux should kill Roscuro; this is the only way, the logic goes, that he can truly be a knight.

On the other hand, Despereaux is beginning to suspect that killing a villain like Roscuro isn't going to accomplish much. Practically speaking, in the current situation, killing Roscuro simply means that the rat will be dead—but there's no way for Despereaux, the Pea, and Miggery Sow to get back out

of the maze-like dungeon without him (the other rats, presumably, aren't going to help). In a broader sense, though, the novel has said time and again that darkness and light, good and evil, always coexist, even in places where it seems like there's only good or only bad. This suggests that even if Despereaux *does* kill Roscuro, there may well be another evil being to take Roscuro's place. So, in the long run, it won't do anything.

☛☛ And the smell of soup crashed through his soul like a great wave, bringing with it the memory of light, the chandelier, the music, the laughter, everything, all the things that were not, would never, could never be available to him as a rat.


"Soup," moaned Roscuro.



And he began to cry.

[...]

"Kill me," said Roscuro. He fell down before Despereaux. "It will never work. All I wanted was some light. This is why I brought the princess here, really, just for some beauty...some light of my own."

Related Characters: Chiaroscuro "Roscuro" (speaker), Despereaux Tilling, The Princess Pea, Botticelli Remorso

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 262-63

Explanation and Analysis

Despereaux has his needle to Roscuro's heart, and Roscuro has caught a whiff of the soup on Despereaux's whiskers. Smelling the soup causes him to remember all he's lost and admit his plan to kidnap the princess.

When Roscuro confesses—and specifically, when he thinks of all the things he believes he can't have—Roscuro becomes a far more sympathetic character. Up to this point, Roscuro has seemed pretty evil; at least, everyone from Despereaux and the Pea to the king and the rat Botticelli Remorso have thought of Roscuro as the epitome of pure evil. But really, Roscuro reveals here that he's just grieving. He believes he's never going to have access to light, bright, beautiful things, things that will make him feel happy and free. And his desire for those things (in the form of the princess) was so crushing that he was led to evil to try to fill the gaps left in his heart.



In this way, Roscuro isn't so different from King Phillip. Like the king, Roscuro takes ridiculous and far-reaching action when the thing he wants and loves most is taken from him. Just as the king outlawed soup after the queen's death, Roscuro attempts to kidnap the princess after realizing that everyone believes he's wholly evil. He wants to transcend this characterization, but he just doesn't know how.


●● I think, reader, that she was feeling the same thing that Despereaux had felt when he was faced with his father begging him for forgiveness. That is, Pea was aware suddenly of how fragile her heart was, how much darkness was inside it, fighting, always, with the light. She did not like the rat. She would never like the rat, but she knew what she must do to save her own heart.

And so, here are the words that the princess spoke to her enemy.

She said, "Roscuro, would you like some soup?"

Related Characters: The Princess Pea (speaker), Chiaroscuro "Roscuro", Despereaux Tilling, Lester Tilling

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 264

Explanation and Analysis

Having admitted to his plan to keep the Princess Pea in the

dungeon so he alone can possess her light and beauty, Roscuro has begged Despereaux to kill him. But the Pea steps in, tells Despereaux not to, and after taking stock, forgives Roscuro for kidnapping her.

What the narrator essentially suggests here is that forgiving someone benefits the person doing the forgiving as much as it benefits the person being forgiven. In the Princess Pea's case, she realizes that there's a lot of darkness (by which the novel means sadness, anger, and fear), and that's always fighting with more positive emotions like happiness, and other positive qualities like her empathy and kindness. And in order to make sure that the light in her heart remains dominant, the Pea must do something that the novel characterizes as good: forgive Roscuro for his crimes and move on. It won't help, the novel suggests, to dwell on what Roscuro did forever, as this will just make the Pea bitter and angry. It won't help *anyone*, the Pea or Roscuro. Forgiving him is the only way that they can both move forward. Despereaux discovered much the same thing when he forgave Lester for sending him to the dungeon. Despereaux's heart is now predominantly light, and both he and his father are in a better place since Despereaux decided to forgive.

That Pea forgives Roscuro by offering Roscuro soup (which is still, at this point, illegal) shows that the Pea is also ready to move on from her father's silly policy of outlawing soup. Soup, in the novel, symbolizes goodness, warmth, and community. Bad things have happened since soup was outlawed—and the only way to improve things is by bringing it back, and allowing it to work its magic.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

This story begins in a castle when a small mouse is born. He's his parents' last baby, and he's the only one in the litter who's born alive. When the father mouse tells the mother the sad news, the mother laments that she did so much work for nothing—this is such a disappointment. She's French, and “disappointment” is one of her favorite words. The mother, Antoinette, sighs that she'll name the baby Despereaux, though she's certain he'll die like the others in the litter. She then asks for her mirror.

One of Antoinette's sons fetches his mother's makeup bag while the father puts Despereaux down on a makeshift bed. The older mouse children gather around their new brother. Merlot, a sister, says his ears are too big, and a brother named Furlough says that Despereaux's eyes are open when they shouldn't be. This, the narrator says, is true: Despereaux's eyes *shouldn't* be open, but he is staring at the sun reflecting off his mother's mirror onto the ceiling. The father tells the children to leave Despereaux alone as Antoinette announces that she won't have any more babies. Babies are just disappointing and ruin her beauty. The father sighs that Despereaux will be dead soon, but the narrator assures readers that Despereaux will live. “This is his story.”

The circumstances surrounding Despereaux's birth are sad—but the way that Antoinette talks about it is absurd to the point of humor. She reads as selfish and vain, and as though her children don't matter much to her. She frames them as burdens more than anything else. That she clearly doesn't believe in her son's ability to live, let alone thrive, positions Despereaux as an unlikely hero.



From the beginning, Despereaux doesn't fit in. His body isn't what a mouse's body should be, and he's oddly interested in the light reflected on the ceiling. This aligns Despereaux with light, something that symbolizes goodness, beauty, and love throughout the novel. The omniscient narrator helps readers understand that they shouldn't take Despereaux's parents seriously when they speak ill of him, or suggest he'll die. Readers can, and should, root for this tiny mouse who, from birth, doesn't fit in.



CHAPTER 2

Despereaux Tilling survives, but everyone in the mouse community thinks he's odd. His aunt Florence tells Despereaux one day that he's so small it's “ridiculous,” and his uncle Alfred adds that Despereaux's ears are as big as donkeys' ears. Alfred then whispers that Despereaux was born with his eyes open, which Aunt Florence says is impossible. Despereaux doesn't defend himself, as everything his aunt and uncle say is true. He's tiny, with big ears. He was born with his eyes open, and he's sickly and a fainter. Worst of all, though, he's not interested in normal mouse things, like food. Instead, while his siblings eat, he stands and listens to a sound that's sweet like honey. He dutifully searches for crumbs when Antoinette asks, but he's not sniffing: he's listening to something that none of the other mice can hear.

The narrator continues to establish how Despereaux doesn't fit in with other mice—and, in fact, is looked down upon by his family members. Some of this has to do with his size and his poor health, things that he notably can't change. But he also seems to have different concerns than most other mice, such as whatever this sweet sound is. He is, perhaps, more enlightened than his family members—rather than focusing just on getting his basic needs met (by searching for crumbs), he's more concerned with pleasure, beauty, and thinking critically about the world around him.



CHAPTER 3

Furlough tries to teach Despereaux “the art of scurrying.” He demonstrates how a mouse should move side to side, always checking over his shoulder. But Despereaux isn’t listening; he’s staring at the **light** coming through the stained glass windows. He asks Furlough if they’re in heaven, but Furlough shouts for his brother to move—they’re mice, not men, and they must scurry. Despereaux continues to stare at the light while Furlough disappears into a hole.

Next, Merlot takes Despereaux into the castle library. **Light** streams in through the tall windows, but Merlot ignores it. She invites Despereaux to come learn how to nibble paper and leads him onto a table with a big book on it. Despereaux dutifully follows his sister and listens as she describes how tasty the glue and the paper are. She nibbles a bit and then asks him to try the “squiggles,” which are delicious. But as Despereaux turns to the squiggles, they become words: “Once upon a time.” Despereaux reads the words aloud, confusing Merlot. She tells him to eat, but Despereaux says he can’t—it would ruin the story.

Merlot is shocked and confused. She says their father is right, and Despereaux isn’t well. Once she scurries angrily away, Despereaux reaches out and touches the words in the book. He then reads the story about a beautiful princess and a **knight** who “serves and honors her.” At this point, Despereaux doesn’t know that he’ll need to be brave soon, as below the castle there’s a dungeon filled with big, mean rats. Despereaux is going to meet them, as anyone who doesn’t conform—mouse or man—is destined to meet an “interesting fate.”

CHAPTER 4

It doesn’t take long for Despereaux’s siblings to give up on educating him, which gives Despereaux the freedom to do what he wants. He stares at the **light** coming through windows and reads the story in the library many times. He also finally discovers what the “honey-sweet sound” is: music, and specifically, King Phillip playing his guitar and singing to the Princess Pea every night. Despereaux hides in a hole in the Pea’s bedroom, listening to the music. It makes his soul “grow large and light inside of him,” and it sounds like heaven.

Attempting to educate Despereaux is really an attempt to get Despereaux to fit in with the other mice. But already, Furlough starts to suggest that Despereaux fits in more with humans than with mice—it’s a human concern, Furlough suggests, to be interested in the light and in heaven. Despereaux’s interest in beauty and light, however, also continues to associate him with goodness.



Merlot is continuing Furlough’s monumental task of trying to make Despereaux into a good, proper mouse. However, Merlot unwittingly introduces Despereaux to reading and stories—something she seems to have no concept of herself. Referring to the text in the book as “squiggles” makes it clear that she can’t read the words; they have no meaning for her beyond tasting different than the rest of the paper.



Merlot’s implication is that Despereaux is mentally unwell—because she sees the text as “squiggles,” it seems like Despereaux is just making stuff up and talking to an inanimate object. But Despereaux is actually learning more about the world around him, and he’s also learning to become more sympathetic to humans (the characters in the story he’s reading are, presumably, people). The narrator clues readers into the fact that all of this sets Despereaux apart from his fellow mice, and that his un-mouse-like interests will have frightening consequences.



As far as Despereaux is concerned, his siblings giving up on him is a gift: now, he can dedicate his time to admiring beauty in the castle, wherever he finds it. And when Despereaux discovers that it’s the human King Phillip making the music, he becomes increasingly sympathetic to people, something Furlough warned him not to do. The novel associates music with light and goodness as it describes Despereaux’s soul growing.



Despereaux sticks an ear out of the hole to hear better, and soon he's all the way out of the hole. Despereaux might not follow most mouse rules, but he does follow the most important one: to never show oneself in front of a human. The music, however, causes Despereaux to ignore his mouse instincts, and soon the Princess Pea notices Despereaux and points him out to King Phillip. Phillip, however, is very nearsighted, so he insists the creature is a bug. As they argue, Despereaux trembles with fear. The Pea asks her father to keep playing to make Despereaux feel better, but Phillip suggests it'd upset the world order if a king played music for a bug. Finally, he agrees to play. Despereaux forgets his fear and creeps all the way to the king's feet.

The novel continues to associate music with humanity. And as Despereaux overrides his mouse instincts to pursue the music, he, too, becomes more human. The Princess Pea seems to point Despereaux out in a purely neutral, if not positive, manner—that is, she's not concerned at all about a mouse listening. This suggests that she's open to new experiences and interested in being kind to others. King Phillip, on the other hand, shows that he's closed off and unwilling to step outside what he believes is good and correct (like that kings shouldn't play for bugs, or likely mice either).



CHAPTER 5

The Princess Pea looks down at Despereaux and smiles as King Phillip plays a song about purple night falling over a garden. The Pea reaches out and touches Despereaux's head. Despereaux decides she looks just like the maiden in the library book, and mouse and girl smile at each other. Something amazing happens next: Despereaux falls in love. The narrator notes that readers would be correct to think love between a mouse and a princess is ridiculous—but then again, love is ridiculous. It's also wonderful and powerful. The Princess Pea tells Despereaux he's sweet, just as Furlough scurries past the princess's room. He sees Despereaux sitting at the king's feet and the princess touching Despereaux's head. Furlough scurries away to tell their father, Lester Tilling, the horrible news.

Things fall into place for Despereaux as he allows the Pea to touch him and falls in love with her. However, this doesn't mean that everyone sees his love for the princess as a good thing: Furlough's choice to immediately go alert Lester suggests that falling in love with the Pea is the reason why Despereaux will meet the rats soon. As the narrator describes love, though, they suggest that perhaps love is the thing that will help Despereaux get through the ordeal to come. It might be ridiculous that he feels romantic love for a person, but love's power may also make him feel strong and purposeful.



CHAPTER 6

Lester tells Antoinette that Despereaux definitely can't be his son—this must all be Antoinette's fault, since she's French. Antoinette rolls her eyes and says it's not a big deal; how much trouble can a tiny mouse get into, anyway? But pulling a whisker out and waving it at her, Lester says mice must act like mice, and so he has to call a special meeting of the Mouse Council. Despereaux will be punished. Lester digs out a thimble with leather stretched over the open end. Antoinette covers her ears as Lester holds the drum above his head, faces each cardinal direction in turn, and then begins to beat a rhythm with his paws and his tail. The rhythm lets the councilmembers know that they'll have to make a serious decision that will affect all mice.

When Lester accuses Antoinette of causing Despereaux to not fit in because she's French, he implies that Antoinette perhaps doesn't fit in well in mouse society either. Her particular brand of not fitting in, though, seems far more acceptable to other mice than Despereaux's does. As Lester picks up the drum to summon the Mouse Council, the ceremony and the ominous nature suggests that bad things are coming—and that Lester cares far more about mouse culture as a whole than he does about protecting or supporting his son.



CHAPTER 7

Furlough misses the worst of Despereaux's behavior. While the mouse council drumbeat sounds through the castle walls and as King Phillip continues to play and sing, the Princess Pea reaches out and gently picks Despereaux up. She compliments his small, velvety ears, and Despereaux feels ready to faint—nobody has ever complimented his ears. To steady himself, he puts his tail against the Pea's wrist. He can feel her pulse, and moments later, his heart starts beating in rhythm with hers.

When King Phillip is done playing music, the Princess Pea announces that she's going to keep Despereaux as a friend. The king, however, says that Despereaux is a rodent and tells his daughter to put "it" down. They argue until the king reminds the Pea of her mother, the queen. Mice, he says, are rodents and so are related to rats—and the Pea must never forget the family's "dark history with rats." It's essential, he continues, for royalty to not get involved with one's enemies' distant relatives. The princess puts Despereaux down, and the king tells Despereaux to go away. This makes the Princess Pea cry. Her tears move Despereaux to break the final mouse rule.

Despereaux begs the Princess Pea to not cry and offers her his handkerchief. King Phillip shouts at Despereaux to not speak to his daughter, as rodents don't speak to princesses in a normal world. The king stomps his foot and, terrified, Despereaux races for the hole in the wall. Before he enters it, he shouts at the Pea that his name is Despereaux, and that he honors her. This is what the knight says to the maiden in the library book. The king shouts that rodents don't know anything about honor, but Despereaux stops just inside the hole and looks back at the princess. She's holding his handkerchief and seems to stare right into his soul. Despereaux says again that he honors her, and then he bows low. He's deeply in love.

CHAPTER 8

The Mouse Council—which is made up of 13 mice and a Most Very Honored Head Mouse—gather at the sound of Lester's drum. They meet in a hole off of King Phillip's throne room, and they sit around a makeshift table and listen to Lester detail what Furlough saw. The Mouse Council listens openmouthed as Lester describes Despereaux letting the Princess Pea touch him. When Lester is done, the Most Very Honored Head Mouse says Despereaux isn't well—in fact, he's disturbed and is putting all mice in danger with his behavior. The Head Mouse continues that any mouse willing to get so close to humans is untrustworthy. Hopefully Despereaux hasn't spoken to a human, but they can't assume anything. Instead, they must act.

The Princess Pea looks at Despereaux with a perspective he's not used to. As a human who's much bigger than he is, she thinks every part of him looks small and cute—even the parts of him that seem large to other mice. Being seen with the Pea's fresh eyes causes Despereaux to fall more deeply in love with her, and to trust her even more.



Despereaux's love for the Pea seems somewhat one-sided; she sees him as a friend, rather than a romantic interest. But regardless, the Pea is still willing to step outside of what her father suggests is the normal, accepted way that their family does things to try to befriend him. The king, on the other hand, is more like Despereaux's father in that he insists he and the Pea should adhere to established codes of conduct. This is why he calls Despereaux an "it," rather than a being—he doesn't see rodents as friends due to whatever event he alludes to when he mentions rats.



As King Phillip loses his temper with Despereaux, he again demonstrates how intent he is on upholding the status quo. In his mind, there's no room to step outside of established codes of conduct and allow a mouse and a person to speak. But this just motivates Despereaux even more, especially as he relates his love for the Pea to the love the knight in the story feels for the maiden. Despereaux is following the knight's example and is standing up for what he believes in: love, even if his love isn't conventional or accepted.



According to the Mouse Council, a mouse who refuses to conform to norms is not just unwell, but dangerous. Difference isn't celebrated here—indeed, it seems likely to be punished. That Lester gives his son over to the Mouse Council without expressing any emotion about it highlights just how fully he believes in making sure that all mice fit in, and going to perhaps extreme lengths to do this. However, recall Antoinette's annoyed reaction when Lester first brought up the Mouse Council. She implied it was something silly, which offers hope that the Mouse Council isn't as powerful in actuality as it seems to be here.



The Head Mouse says Despereaux needs to go to the dungeon and to the rats. He announces a vote and asks the Mouse Council to say “aye” if they’re in favor. Everyone says “aye” rather than “nay,” and in the silence after the vote, the only sound is Lester crying. The narrator asks the reader if they can imagine their father saying nothing in their defense in a situation like this. Lester continues to sob as the Head Mouse announces that Despereaux will appear before the community, have the opportunity to renounce his sins, and then be sent to the dungeon. The narrator acknowledges that at least Lester is decent enough to weep at his act of “perfidy.” They ask if the reader knows what perfidy means—though its meaning should be clear after this episode, readers should also look it up to be totally sure.

Finally, Lester does exhibit some emotion about his role in condemning Despereaux to the dungeon. Asking the reader to imagine how they might feel if their father did something like this, and then asking the reader to look up perfidy, demonstrates how to express and feel empathy. It aligns readers with Despereaux (as they’re imagining themselves in a similar position), and it may also teach them a new word. Perfidy refers to being deceitful and betraying someone, which Lester has done by giving his son up to the Mouse Council.



CHAPTER 9

The Mouse Council sends Furlough to fetch Despereaux. Furlough finds Despereaux reading the huge book in the library aloud to himself. He desperately wants to hear the last words of the story, “Happily ever after.” Mostly, Despereaux wants to know that his love for the Princess Pea will lead to good things—so reading the story feels like reading a magic spell that will make good things happen. From a little ways away, Furlough says to himself that this is exactly what he and the Mouse Council are concerned about—Despereaux is talking to the paper, which is just wrong.

For now, the story in the book gives Despereaux hope. He’s taking it as an example of what might happen—but notice at this point, he seems to be simply waiting and hoping for good things to happen, rather than actively working for what he wants. This seems to leave him vulnerable to Furlough and the other mice, who are willing to take action and punish Despereaux for stepping so far outside of mouse norms.



Furlough finally calls for Despereaux. When Despereaux comes out of his trance enough to notice his brother, he says he’s busy and goes back to reading. Furlough shakes his head; clearly, he was right to turn Despereaux in. He crawls up next to his brother and says the Mouse Council wants Despereaux now, and Despereaux has no choice but to obey. Despereaux just asks if Furlough knows what love is. Furlough says love doesn’t matter at the moment, but Despereaux says that he loves someone and she loves him—that’s all that matters. That person is the Princess Pea. Furlough snaps that Despereaux is missing the whole point of being a mouse, and he must come. Sighing, Despereaux traces the words with a paw, whispers “I honor you” to the maiden in the book, and follows Furlough.

As far as Furlough is concerned, Despereaux is totally missing the point. He’s not being a proper mouse and is potentially putting all other mice in danger—and so it doesn’t matter that he’s in love, something that in other circumstances might be seen as a good thing. Despereaux naively seems unaware of how much danger he might be in. This may simply reflect his youth and his innocence, but it also likely shows that he trusts Furlough and doesn’t expect his brother (to say nothing of his father) to go out of his way to put him in danger or punish him.



CHAPTER 10

The entire mouse community gathers behind the castle ballroom. The Mouse Council sits on top of three stacked bricks, and they all wait for Despereaux. Finally, Furlough shouts that he has Despereaux. He pushes through the crowd, and a few mice reach out to touch Despereaux, whispering about the tiny mouse's crimes. At the front of the room, Furlough announces Despereaux to the council and then snaps at Despereaux to let go of his tail. Despereaux looks up at the Mouse Council and meets Lester's gaze for a moment, but Lester looks away.

Someone in the crowd shouts that Despereaux should be sent immediately to the dungeon, but the Most Very Honored Head Mouse calls for order. He asks Despereaux to look at him and explains that they'll first give Despereaux a chance to defend himself. He asks if Despereaux sat at King Phillip's feet. Despereaux admits he did—but he was listening to the king playing and singing. The Head Mouse shakes his head and says Despereaux's reasoning doesn't matter. He then asks if Despereaux let the princess touch him. Despereaux says the princess's name is Pea—he did let her touch him, and it felt good. In the crowd, Antoinette calls for God and says it was no big deal, but Aunt Florence shouts that mice don't do that.

The Head Mouse calls for silence and then asks if Despereaux broke the rules of mouse conduct. Despereaux says he did—but he did it for love and for music, which are good reasons. The Head Mouse shouts that this is *not* about love; it's about Despereaux not acting like the mouse he is. Because Despereaux doesn't deny the charges, he'll be punished by going to the dungeon and to the rats. Despereaux's heart sinks: there's no **light** in the dungeons, let alone stories or the Princess Pea.

The Most Very Honored Head Mouse says that Despereaux will have the option to renounce and repent, or say he's sorry for his actions. Antoinette shouts for Despereaux to repent, but Despereaux refuses. He announces that he loves the princess and isn't sorry. The mice bellow with rage and chant, "to the dungeon." The Head Mouse says that in this case, Despereaux will die. He calls for the threadmaster just as Despereaux faints.

Finally, Despereaux seems a bit more aware of what's going on. That Furlough brings him to the Mouse Council, and that Lester is sitting with the council, shows Despereaux that he's totally alone—he has no one to advocate for him. Meeting Lester's eyes, though, is a bit confrontational. It forces Lester to think about what he's doing and about what the consequences might be for turning his son in.



The Head Mouse is only concerned with facts that are black and white, like did Despereaux sit in front of the king and allow the princess to touch him. He leaves no room for nuance and refuses to let this be anything more than a yes or no question. Despereaux seeks to add some nuance by implying that being able to listen to music is worth putting oneself in danger, and by more generally explaining that it was enjoyable for him to be in people's company. He's standing up for what he believes is right—and that doesn't line up with what most mice believe, putting him in danger.



The Head Mouse insists essentially that reasons don't matter: this is just a question of what Despereaux did or did not do. Note, though, that as Despereaux considers the dungeons, he says nothing about being sad about leaving his family. His loyalty is to beauty, light, music, and the princess, not mouse culture as a whole. And noting that the dungeon is entirely dark situates it as the opposite of the castle's upper floors—it's someplace evil.



Since Despereaux isn't sorry, repenting isn't going to do anything for him. Repenting would mostly make other mice, particularly Antoinette, feel better—it would show them that their disciplinary methods work and turn Despereaux into a better example of what happens to mice who step out of line.



CHAPTER 11

As Despereaux comes to, he can hear Lester beating an ominous rhythm on the drum. Mice continue to chant that Despereaux belongs in the dungeon as a mouse pushing a spool of red thread shouts for people to move out of the way. Still on his back, Despereaux wonders where this all went wrong. In the book, love was good—love was why the **knight** saved the fair maiden. They lived happily ever after. But did another mouse perhaps eat the real ending of the story? Is there such thing as a happy ending?

Despereaux whispers “happily ever after” to himself as the threadmaster and his spool of red thread reach him. The threadmaster asks Despereaux to stand, and then he loops a length of red thread around Despereaux’s neck. As the threadmaster leans in close to secure the thread, he quietly asks if she—the Princess Pea—is beautiful. Despereaux says she’s lovely. The threadmaster pulls back and says the Pea is lovely, just like in a fairy tale—and Despereaux loves her just like a **knight**. Despereaux asks how he knows about fairy tales, but the threadmaster shushes him. He leans in close again and tells Despereaux to be brave for the princess. As the crowd of mice cheers, Despereaux vows to be brave for the princess—even if happily ever after doesn’t exist.

Now that Despereaux is being punished essentially just for falling in love, he’s questioning everything. As he does this, he starts to come of age—part of growing up entails thinking critically about things like this. He’s realizing that the story is fictional, and that life isn’t guaranteed to turn out well just because someone falls in love.



Despereaux may have more friends in mouse society than he realized; the threadmaster seems sympathetic toward, if not supportive of, Despereaux’s unconventional choices. The threadmaster also seems to propose that even though things seem guaranteed to go badly right now, it’s still important that Despereaux not give up and just let himself die. Rather, he should use his love for the Pea to motivate himself to live. Moreover, the threadmaster subtly implies that Despereaux himself might be more powerful than he thinks—he himself could be a knight of sorts, if he remains hopeful.



CHAPTER 12

The beat that Lester beats on the drum becomes even more ominous as the threadmaster leaves the gathered mice. Everyone falls silent as two big mice with cloth covering their heads approach Despereaux. They’ll take him to the dungeon. Just then, Antoinette calls for Despereaux. She’s easy to spot in the crowd (she put on a lot of makeup for this momentous occasion), and she begs for a final word with Despereaux. Despereaux tries not to tremble, as he doesn’t want to disappoint his mother. She asks what will happen to him, and grudgingly, one of the burly mice explains that the rats will eat Despereaux. Despereaux feels ready to faint, but Antoinette beats him to it.

Muttering, the burly mice lead Despereaux over Antoinette’s unconscious body. The crowd chants, the drum beats, and just as Despereaux is led from the room, Antoinette wakes up and shouts, “Adieu.” *Adieu*, the narrator explains, means “farewell” in French, and it’s not what anyone wants to hear their mother saying as they’re led to their death. A person would much rather hear their mother offer to go in their place, since that would be comforting. “Farewell” isn’t comforting in any language.

That Lester is still beating the drum—that is, actively participating in sending his son to the dungeon—highlights that he prioritizes conformity over supporting his own family members. Antoinette seems marginally more interested in trying to support and advocate for Despereaux. However, her excessive makeup and dramatic swoon suggest that she thinks this is more about her than about her son, so she’s still behaving selfishly.



When it comes down to it, Antoinette—just like Lester and Furlough—refuses to defend her youngest son. She simply accepts that he’s going to die. The narrator makes it clear that this causes Despereaux to feel totally alone and unsupported. Now, he must turn to people outside his family—like the threadmaster, and perhaps the Pea—to find support.



CHAPTER 13

Despereaux and his guards travel down through the castle. When Despereaux tugs on the tight red thread knotted around his neck, the guards bark at him to not touch it. As they walk, Despereaux admires this upstairs world: Princess Pea's world, one that's full of music. Suddenly realizing the Pea won't know where he is, Despereaux asks if he could have a final word with her. Frustrated, one of the mice in hoods stamps his foot and says Despereaux doesn't learn—and Despereaux recognizes Furlough's voice. Despereaux's heart shrinks for a moment but then grows as Despereaux starts to hope. He asks Furlough to let him go since they're brothers, but Furlough refuses.

The narrator asks if readers remember what the word “perfidy” means. It's certainly becoming an increasingly appropriate word as the story progresses, and it's on Despereaux's mind as he and the guards stand at the top of the dungeon stairs. Furlough puts a hand over his heart and announces that today, he's delivering a mouse who deserves punishment to the dungeon. That mouse wears “the red thread of death.” Despereaux shudders, but he doesn't have time to think before the hooded mice push him. Despereaux flies down the stairs, thinking of two words: Perfidy and Pea.

Again, Despereaux's innocence shines through, as does his honor. He doesn't seem to fully grasp the seriousness of the situation, or how much the mice disapprove of his romance with the Pea. But in his mind, his request to speak to her again is just the right thing to do so she doesn't worry. Learning that Furlough is one of the mice to deliver Despereaux to the dungeon highlights how much Furlough agrees with Lester: he values conformity. And he feels no loyalty to his brother, if his brother won't play by the same rules.



The narrator encourages readers to see Furlough's choices to escort Despereaux to the dungeon (and push him!) not as upstanding ones, but as cruel, disloyal ones that hurt someone whom the narrator implies Furlough should protect. As Despereaux falls down the stairs, the two words in his mind suggest that he's focused on how alone he is in mouse society, and on his love for the Pea. Love may, perhaps, fill the gaps left by his disloyal family—if Despereaux survives.



CHAPTER 14

At the bottom of the dungeon stairs, Despereaux discovers that none of his bones are broken. As he gets to his feet, though, he notices a horrible smell. The dungeon smells of “despair and suffering of hopelessness,” which is the smell of rats. Also, the **darkness** is so thick that it's almost its own creature. Despereaux can't even see his own paw in front of his face. He exclaims aloud, and then just to hear his voice again (so he can be sure he still exists), he says, “Perfidy.” Despereaux shivers and grabs his tail, just for something to hold onto. He considers fainting, but he remembers the threadmaster's advice to be brave.

Despereaux decides to be a **knight** in shining armor for the Princess Pea. He decides the best way to be brave is to tell his story, so he clears his throat and says, “Once upon a time.” He feels a bit better as he recites the next line about the knight's shining armor, but then, Despereaux hears a booming voice in the darkness asking what a mouse knows about once upon a time and knights. Assuming the voice belongs to a massive rat, Despereaux faints.

In comparison to the light, bright, beautiful upper floors of the castle (which the narrator associates with goodness), the dark dungeon that smells of suffering is wholly evil. And the rats that live there, the novel suggests, are a living embodiment of cruelty and evil. At first, Despereaux focuses on how his family has betrayed him (by repeating “Perfidy”). But he then recalls that he has more people to rely on than just his family—such as the threadmaster, and even himself.



It takes courage, the novel suggests, for Despereaux to face the dark dungeon and tell his story to it. But doing so allows Despereaux to experiment with stepping into the role of a brave rescuer himself—though when he faints of fear, it suggests he needs some practice in this area.



CHAPTER 15

Despereaux wakes up in a big, calloused human hand, staring at a big human eye that reflects the **light** of a single match. The voice—Gregory—says that Despereaux is a mouse with red thread, and he knows what that means. He points to his own “thread” as he lights a candle, and he explain that his rope saves him. Despereaux’s rope, on the other hand, will bring about Despereaux’s death. Gregory blows the candle out and grabs Despereaux even tighter. In a whisper, Despereaux asks who Gregory is. Gregory says he’s the jailer—he’s been keeping watch over this dungeon for forever. And ironically, he’s also a prisoner.

Despereaux asks if he might get down. Gregory says that Despereaux doesn’t *want* to get down. This dungeon is “the treacherous heart of the world,” and only Gregory and the rats know how to navigate this place. The rats know how to get around because the dungeon mirrors their “**dark** hearts”; Gregory navigates thanks to the rope tied to his ankle. Gregory warns Despereaux that the rats are already coming for him; if Despereaux listens, he can hear their tails dragging and their sharp nails and teeth getting sharper. After a moment, Despereaux can indeed hear these things. Gregory explains that the rats will eat everything but the red thread and Despereaux’s bones.

Despereaux protests that he can’t die—he must live. Gregory deems that a lovely sentiment and asks why Despereaux can’t die. Despereaux explains that he’s in love and must serve his love. At this, Gregory lights a match. The **light** illuminates a towering pile of spoons, kettles, and **soup** bowls—a “monument to the foolishness of love.” Despereaux doesn’t understand, so Gregory says this is evidence of how painful it is to love: the king loved the queen and she died, and this pile of stuff is the result. Gregory says Despereaux will only understand when he loses what he loves.

Gregory says that instead of love, they should talk about Despereaux’s life, and how Gregory might save it. Despereaux asks how Gregory could save him, and if Gregory has saved other mice. Gregory explains that he hasn’t saved other mice, but he’ll save Despereaux because Despereaux can tell him a story. Stories, Gregory says, *are light*. So Despereaux, desperate to live, starts his story again. This is how he becomes the only mouse sent to the dungeon whom the rats don’t destroy instantly. The narrator says that for now, we’ll leave Despereaux here with Gregory. It’s time to talk about rats.

Though he’s a human, Gregory seems well aware that a mouse with red thread around its neck means the mouse will die. But thread (whether that’s actual sewing thread or a rope) can serve many purposes: as Gregory explains, his rope keeps him from getting lost. By sharing this, he encourages Despereaux to expand his perspective and, in doing so, helps Despereaux start to come of age.



Referring to the dungeon as “the treacherous heart of the world” is an interesting turn of phrase, as it suggests that the proverbial heart of the world is a dark and evil one—much like the rats’ hearts. Evil, this implies, is the natural state of being, rather than goodness. But Gregory also suggests that this doesn’t mean goodness can’t still prevail. He, after all, is keeping Despereaux safe at the moment, an arguably good thing—Despereaux won’t be eaten by the rats, it seems, unless Gregory puts him down.



At this point, the pile of spoons, bowls, and kettles is just as confusing to readers as it is to Despereaux. But this odd detail suggests that love isn’t always easy or logical, since the connection between the king’s love for the queen and this pile of stuff isn’t obvious. Gregory may be trying to tell Despereaux that even Despereaux’s love for the Pea might not be as simple as Despereaux thinks.



Despereaux had already started to understand what Gregory says here when he said “once upon a time” on the dungeon stairs and felt braver as a result. Stories, this suggests, can give people hope and show them what’s possible—especially what good things are possible. Note, too, that Despereaux isn’t like the other mice who have been banished to the dungeon. While he was banished in the first place because he didn’t fit in with the other mice, here, the fact that he doesn’t conform saves him.



CHAPTER 16

The narrator steps backward in time several years to the day that a rat named Chiaroscuro, nicknamed Roscuro, is born in the **dark** dungeon. Despereaux will be born upstairs in the light in a few years. Chiaroscuro, the narrator explains, refers to how lights and darks are arranged together in art. Rats, however, don't like light—Roscuro's parents were being funny when they named him. Rats generally have a good sense of humor and think life is funny (and they're right). But in Roscuro's case, his name is a bit prophetic.

One day, Roscuro discovers a length of rope on the dungeon floor and begins to nibble it. A booming voice tells Roscuro to stop, and a huge hand reaches out to pick Roscuro up by the tail. Gregory asks who is chewing on his rope. Roscuro refuses to answer, so Gregory says he'll teach Roscuro a lesson. He **lights** a match and holds it up to Roscuro's face, and though Roscuro pulls away, the bright flame seems to explode inside him and dance. Gregory says it's the rule that rats can't chew on his rope, and he asks Roscuro to apologize. Roscuro refuses, so Gregory moves the match close to Roscuro's face—so close that he burns off some of Roscuro's whiskers. He then flings the rat away and says that Roscuro will be sorry if he chews on the rope again.

As Roscuro sits and calms his beating heart, he can still see the flame dancing before his eyes and he repeats one word to himself: **light**. After this, Roscuro becomes abnormally interested in light. He longs for light deep in his soul, and he starts to think it's what gives life its meaning. But when Roscuro tells his elderly rat friend Botticelli Remorso this, Botticelli says the meaning of life is suffering. He insists that making prisoners cry and wail gives life meaning. As he speaks, Botticelli begins to swing a heart-shaped locket (which he stole from a prisoner) back and forth on its string.

Roscuro follows the swinging locket back and forth as Botticelli details how to torture a prisoner. First, a rat must befriend the prisoner, then get the prisoner to confess their sins. They promise a prisoner friendship and forgiveness, and it's a great joke, since the rat will grant neither. Botticelli starts laughing so hard that he has to sit down. He says at this point, the rat turns back into what it's always been: a rat. Then, the rat should run across the prisoner's feet to terrify them. It's a lovely game.

Immediately upon introducing Chiaroscuro, the narrator sets Roscuro up as Despereaux's opposite. He's born in the dark dungeon and is therefore associated with evil, unlike Despereaux, who was born upstairs and is the epitome of good. However, the narrator immediately complicates this by explaining the meaning of Roscuro's name. Essentially, he has both light and dark elements within him—despite his wholly dark outward appearance.



Gregory and the rats seem to have a tenuous and almost adversarial relationship, given this interaction between Gregory and Roscuro. The implication here is that Gregory intends to terrify or offend Roscuro by lighting the match in his face—recall that rats like the dark. But instead, just as Despereaux's soul grows and lights up when he hears music, Roscuro's soul transforms when he sees light for the first time. But when the light burns off his whiskers, it also suggests that life as a light-loving rat might be dangerous for Roscuro.



Like Despereaux, young Roscuro doesn't initially see any need to hide that he's interested in things that are unusual for rats to like. And just like in Despereaux's case, an older mentor steps in to try to steer their young mentee toward what's considered an acceptable path, and toward acceptable interests. That Botticelli swings a heart-shaped locket—a common symbol for love—suggests that he and the rats seek to corrupt things that are good and fulfilling, like love.



Botticelli makes it clear that rats are cruel, evil creatures who are willing to betray people's trust in order to torture them. He also implies that rats can't be anything more than cruel and evil when he says rats turn back into what they've always been—rats—at the moment they reveal that they're manipulating prisoners.



Roscuero says he'd like to make someone suffer, and Botticelli says that when a new prisoner arrives, Roscuero will have his own prisoner. Then he'll be a real rat who isn't concerned with the **light**. Still swinging the locket, Botticelli tells Roscuero that he'll be a real, evil rat who can cause suffering. It's such a lovely world.

Unlike Despereaux, Roscuero is willing to let his mentor sway him and try to change him. But the implication is still that Botticelli hasn't actually changed Roscuero's mind; he's just convinced Roscuero to try out the rat equivalent of nibbling paper or scurrying (in this case, torturing a prisoner).



CHAPTER 17

Soon after, a new prisoner arrives in the dungeon. Roscuero and Botticelli watch him come in, and Roscuero vows to make this man suffer. However, as the door to the dungeon flies open and lets in bright afternoon **sunlight**, Botticelli covers his eyes, and Roscuero stares right into the light and gasps with wonder. The soldier at the top of the stairs tosses down the prisoner's red cloth, which Gregory hands to the man. Once the door is closed again, Roscuero asks Botticelli if he saw "that." Botticelli grouches that the light was inappropriate and ugly, but Roscuero sighs that it was beautiful. He must go upstairs and see more of it. At this, Botticelli reminds Roscuero that they're rats: they love darkness and suffering.

At first, it seems like Botticelli is making headway in getting Roscuero to conform to standard rat behavior. But Roscuero can't ignore his interest in light, bright, beautiful things—things that are the exact opposite of the dark dungeon, where nothing but suffering occurs. Note too that Roscuero is ready to leave the dungeon altogether at this point, if it means he can pursue his interests. Put another way, he might not be as connected to his fellow rats as one might expect, if he's willing to leave them all behind.



When Roscuero continues to argue, Botticelli reminds him that mice live upstairs. He pulls out his locket, the rope of which is made of mouse whiskers. Mice, Botticelli spits, are despicable, terrified, and live upstairs—and rats do not want to live in the mice's world. Roscuero continues to stare at the sliver of **light** under the door as Botticelli tells him to torture the prisoner and take the man's red cloth. As Botticelli swings his locket, he makes Roscuero repeat that he's a rat. Roscuero closes his eyes. In his mind, he sees the prisoner's red cloth being tossed down, against a backdrop of light. He tells himself he wants the cloth, not the light.

Botticelli's reasoning for why Roscuero can't go upstairs is complex: it's not just that the light upper floors of the castle are good (rather than evil and dark like the dungeon). Rather, they also contain beings that rats want nothing to do with—and judging by Botticelli's mouse-whisker rope, beings that rats usually dominate. Put another way, the dungeon is where rats are the supreme beings, rather than either mice or people. They have power there. But Roscuero, as a rat interested in more than darkness and suffering, has less power than his fellow rats.



CHAPTER 18

Following Botticelli's instructions, Roscuero goes to take the red cloth from the new prisoner. Roscuero slips through the cell bars and welcomes the man to the dungeons. The prisoner tells Roscuero to go away; he's just a rat, and the man doesn't need a rat's company. But Roscuero persists, and encourages the man to forget he's a rat and confess his sins. Sighing, the prisoner agrees, but only because there's no point in keeping secrets from a rat. The prisoner says he's here because he stole six cows, but he committed a worse crime many years ago and nobody knows about it. He sold his daughter for his red tablecloth, a hen, and some cigarettes.

The prisoner underestimates Roscuero and all rats—the way he justifies confessing his sins to Roscuero suggests he sees rats as insignificant and powerless. Given what readers have already seen of what the rats do, this seems unwise. The prisoner's confession, meanwhile, shows that people commit all manner of crimes—and while some crimes can land a person in legal trouble, there are others that weigh on a person's conscience. He implies, for instance, that he's thinking mostly about selling his daughter now that he's imprisoned, rather than about stealing the cows.



Roscuero isn't alarmed by this confession. Rat parents, after all, don't care much for their kids, and Roscuero's parents would've sold him had the opportunity presented itself. And Roscuero has heard Botticelli's stories of prisoners' confessions—humans are capable of so much evil. The prisoner continues that the worst part was that he didn't even look back as his daughter cried for him. He sniffs. Roscuero has by now crept right to the man's side. He asks if the cloth comforts the man, and if it reminds him of his sin. The prisoner sniffs that it does. Roscuero says he'll ease the man's burden, and he rips the cloth off the man's shoulders and scurries away with it.

Ignoring the prisoner's protests, Roscuero drags the red cloth to his nest. Upon closer inspection, the cloth is disappointing. Roscuero knows now that he needs the **light**, not the cloth—and he knows that to get the light, he needs to go upstairs.

Roscuero is already well aware of what people are capable of, and what they're willing to do to each other—which suggests that Roscuero likely sees people mostly as evil. The prisoner's continued confession confirms that what haunts him is indeed betraying his daughter, in much the same way that Lester, for instance, betrayed Despereaux. When Roscuero steals the cloth, he steals the one thing that connects the man to his daughter—something he knows instinctively the man doesn't want to lose.



While Roscuero is disappointed with the cloth, he doesn't feel bad about stealing from the prisoner—he may be interested in, and even capable of good, but he doesn't seem to have much of a moral compass yet.



CHAPTER 19

The narrator asks the reader to imagine spending one's whole life in a **dark** dungeon and then stepping out one spring day into a world that's bright, with sparkling suits of armor and bright copper pots. Readers should also imagine that just as Chiaroscuro steps into the light, Despereaux is born. The two will meet much later. For now, Roscuero is just delighted to be in so much light. He decides he'll never return to the dungeon or torture another prisoner. He belongs up here.

Roscuero wanders from room to room until he gets to the banquet hall, where King Phillip, Queen Rosemary, the Princess Pea, and some nobles are dining. Roscuero has never seen happy people, and he's enchanted. The princess especially is beautiful; her sequined gown glitters, and her laugh seems to make things glow. Roscuero is certain now that **light**, not suffering, is the answer to everything. He invites himself to the party.

Again, the narrator encourages readers to feel empathy for Roscuero—the change he's making as he leaves the dungeon is huge, and the narrator suggests it's transformative. For now, Roscuero feels like the light, bright upstairs is where he belongs. In this way, he's not acting or thinking like a true rat (per Botticelli), which suggests he may not find what he's looking for upstairs.



The Princess Pea herself is almost a literal beacon of light and goodness, given how glittery her gown is and how good and kind she is. That even Roscuero recognizes how good the Pea is—and admires her for it—shows that he has something in common with Despereaux, a mouse whom Botticelli suggested Roscuero should scorn.



CHAPTER 20

There is a beautiful, glittering chandelier in the middle of the banquet hall. It's the perfect place from which to observe the party, so Roscuro climbs onto the table and leaps to the chandelier unnoticed. He swings back and forth, admiring the music, the smell of the good food, and the bright, beautiful **light**. But not even the loud party can hide Roscuro forever—the Princess Pea spots him and shouts that there's a rat on the chandelier. Nobody hears her except for Roscuro, and he suddenly realizes how ugly the word “rat” is. The word is an insult; it's totally dark. Roscuro suddenly realizes he doesn't like being a rat. He doesn't want to be one anymore. This realization is so huge that Roscuro lets go of the chandelier and falls into the queen's **soup** bowl.

Roscuro's fall from the chandelier is highly symbolic. He falls from a literal light source—and a glittery, beautiful one at that. More than just being a physical fall, then, the novel implies that Roscuro is also falling away from the light (and away from beauty and goodness) and toward darkness, since he falls as he realizes how terrible the word “rat” is. Though this foreshadows Roscuro's turn to evil, it's also significant that Roscuro doesn't want to be a rat. He recognizes he doesn't fit in up in the castle's main floors—but he also doesn't fit in in the dungeon.



CHAPTER 21

The queen loves **soup** more than anything, aside from the Princess Pea and King Phillip. For this reason, Cook serves soup at every meal and goes to great lengths to craft soups that are art. On this day, the soup is particularly amazing. Roscuro takes a few sips as he comes to the surface of the queen's soup bowl, and even he thinks it's lovely. The Pea, though, shouts again that the rat is now in her mother's soup. Everyone stops what they're doing and stares at Roscuro. The narrator has to be honest at this point: rats aren't beautiful or cute. They're nasty, especially if they're in one's soup bowl.

Soup represents comfort, community, and love. Finding a rat in her soup—a being the novel associates with darkness and evil—essentially poisons the soup and deprives it of its healing and restorative qualities. But even so, Roscuro finds the soup tasty. He's not immune to the power of soup when he eats it himself, but he does cause soup to seem unappetizing when he's swimming in the queen's soup.



After a long silence, Roscuro says, “I beg your pardon” to the queen. The queen flings her spoon, lets loose a horrible scream, and then observes aloud that there's a rat in her **soup**. These are her last words—she falls over backwards, dead. The king's men all try to save the queen as Roscuro, deciding it's best to leave, starts to crawl away. But he remembers the prisoner's regret that he didn't look back at his daughter, so Roscuro looks back. He sees the Princess Pea glaring at him with a look that tells him to go back to the **dark** dungeon, where he belongs. This look breaks Roscuro's heart—yes, even rats have hearts, like all other living things. Perhaps if Roscuro hadn't looked over his shoulder, his heart would not have broken, and we wouldn't be hearing this story.

The queen's death is both tragic and absurd, and Roscuro recognizes it as such. The fact that Roscuro's surprise appearance kills the queen reinforces rats' association with evil and suffering. However, this doesn't mean that rats are all-powerful and can make others suffer willy-nilly; that the Pea can break Roscuro's heart shows that in this instance, she has more power than he does. The narrator also encourages readers to realize that in order for this story to be interesting, bad and sad things have to happen—the story needs a conflict, or it'd be boring and simply not worth telling.



CHAPTER 22

As Roscuro scuttles out of the banquet hall, he tells himself that he's a rat, and that there's no **light** for rats—there's no light for him. Suddenly, Roscuro reaches the queen's **soup** spoon. He says aloud that he might be a rat, but he'll have a beautiful crown of his own. At this, he picks up the spoon and puts it on his head. Then, he says he'll also get revenge someday.

It seems like all Roscuro wants is some beauty in his life; this is, perhaps, why he steals the soup spoon. And his desire for revenge suggests that he blames the Princess Pea and her scathing look for his broken heart, setting up a battle between light and good (the Pea) and darkness and evil (Roscuro).



The narrator notes that some hearts never heal when they're broken. Or if they do, they heal "in a crooked and lopsided way." This is what happens to Chiaroscuro. Taking the spoon and deciding to get revenge helps Roscuro put his heart back together, but these actions cause it to heal incorrectly. As King Phillip shouts for his men to find the rat, Roscuro mutters that he'll be in the **dark** dungeon.

Interestingly, the narrator implies that Roscuro's heart—even though it wasn't a normal rat heart—was whole and perfectly fine before it broke, when he innocently just wanted light in his life. Now that his heart has been broken, he's turned toward evil and suffering, which the narrator frames as a sign of his pain.



CHAPTER 23

Roscuro's behavior has dire consequences—every action, for that matter, has a consequence. This is why when young Roscuro nibbled on Gregory's rope, Gregory lit a match in Roscuro's face. This match caused Roscuro's soul to be set on fire. Because of his burning soul, Roscuro went upstairs. Because he went upstairs, the Princess Pea saw him and called him a rat. Hearing that word caused Roscuro to fall into the queen's **soup** bowl, causing her to die. If the narrator might continue this exercise, because the queen died while eating soup, the king outlaws soup, soup spoons, bowls, and kettles. All soup-making implements are then piled in the dungeon. Finally, since a rat caused the queen's death, the king orders that every rat in the Kingdom of Dor be killed.

This exercise of laying out cause and effect allows readers to understand that while many elements of this story might be absurd, there are clear, understandable reasons why everything happens. The narrator also finally shares why the pile of spoons, bowls, and kettles is in the dungeon—recall that Gregory called the pile a "monument to love." The king essentially doesn't want anyone to enjoy something his wife loved, now that he can't enjoy her company himself. In this way, though, he's much like Roscuro: Roscuro aims to seek revenge on those who live upstairs and deprive them of their light and their beauty, all because it's inaccessible to him.



The issue, of course, is that a person who wants to kill a rat must first find one. So, when the king's men bravely go into the dungeon, they find no rats, and many get lost and die there. Faced with this setback, the king just declares that all rats are illegal. This is ridiculous, since rats are outlaws anyway, but King Phillip is the king and kings get to make ridiculous laws if they want to. But it's important to remember that King Phillip loved the queen, and that he's lost without her. Even the most powerful people can't stop their loved ones from dying. It soothes the king's heart to outlaw **soup** and rats, so readers must forgive him.

Again, the narrator makes it clear that readers should feel empathy for King Phillip: he's doing the best he can, and his best just happens to be a bit nonsensical. Unlike Roscuro though, the king is motivated by love, rather than revenge, which may be why the narrator suggests empathizing with him (conspicuously, the narrator has made no such suggestion that readers empathize with Roscuro at this point).



Chiaroscuro sits in his nest in the dungeon, his spoon on his head. He creates a cape out of the prisoner's tablecloth, and Botticelli sits beside him, asking if Roscuro has learned his lesson about what happens when rats go upstairs. Roscuro's job, Botticelli says, is to make people suffer. Roscuro agrees—he's going to make the Princess Pea suffer for what she did. As Roscuro plans down below, upstairs Despereaux hears music for the first time. The music will lead him to the princess, and he'll fall in love with her. On this same evening, "more consequences dr[a]w near." A king's soldier drives a wagon to the castle. The wagon is filled with bowls, spoons, and kettles, and it also carries a girl named Miggery Sow. Her ears look like cauliflower, and she doesn't yet know that she'll help Roscuro exact revenge.

Botticelli proposes that refusing to conform leads to heartbreak. In some ways, he seems correct: Despereaux is heartbroken to be in the dungeon in his storyline, and he's in the dungeon due to refusing to conform. Roscuro looks increasingly evil as he pushes aside his desire for light and goodness and focuses on revenge. The narrator lets readers know that Roscuro will get revenge as they introduce Miggery Sow, his future helper. Like Roscuro and Despereaux, Miggery Sow seems not to fit in—her cauliflower-shaped ears set her apart.



CHAPTER 24

Once again, the story must move backward before it can go forward. Miggery Sow is born years before either Chiaroscuro or Despereaux. She's born far away from the castle and is named after her father's favorite prizewinning pig. When she's six years old, Mig's mother dies. Though Mig asks her mother to stay, her mother says that it doesn't matter what Mig wants, and she promptly dies. Soon after, Mig's father sells her into service for a red tablecloth, a hen, and cigarettes. He didn't look back when she said she didn't want to go with the man—he just said nobody asked her what she wants and walks away. As readers already know, he didn't look back.

The narrator asks readers to imagine themselves in Mig's position, being sold by their fathers—hopefully the thought makes the hairs on the back of the reader's neck stand up. What will happen to Mig? It's the reader's duty to keep reading and find out.

From the very beginning, Mig has no power to dictate what she wants—and she has nobody to care for her. The implication here is that the prisoner Roscuro tortured is her father. It creates some dramatic irony that readers know that, in the novel's present, he regrets not looking back at his daughter—but this information, which could be comforting, is totally inaccessible to Mig. That Mig has lost her mother also shows that she has something in common with the Pea, despite their very different statuses.



This exercise suggests that Mig is someone worthy of empathy; she's worth caring about and investing in emotionally. Continuing to read and, hopefully, discovering what happens to her is a way for readers to show this character respect.



CHAPTER 25

The man who purchases Miggery Sow insists she calls him Uncle. Mig must care for his sheep, cook his food, and scrub his dishes—all without praise. Uncle is fond of giving Mig “a good clout to the ear.” He always asks her if she wants one, to his credit, and Mig always says no. But he doesn't care what she wants, so he hits her hard on both ears. Eventually, her ears start to resemble cauliflower, and she becomes mostly deaf. As she loses her hearing and understands less and less, she makes more mistakes, so Uncle hits her more and more. Nobody wants to be in the middle of a vicious circle like this, but almost no one cares what Mig wants.

Once again, though Mig does say explicitly what she wants (to not be hit), the adults in charge don't care at all what Mig wants. Hitting her is a way for Uncle to get Mig to conform to his ideal image of a serving girl. But perhaps unwittingly, forcing Mig to conform like this actually makes her an even worse serving girl, as her hearing loss means she struggles to accomplish any tasks without struggling or making mistakes.



CHAPTER 26

On Mig's seventh birthday, she announces to Uncle that it's her birthday. He threatens to hit her, does so, and sends Mig to the field with the sheep. A few hours later, Mig sees something glittering on the horizon. It's not the sun, since the sun is setting behind Mig. Soon, the glittering thing gets close enough, and Mig sees that it's King Phillip, Queen Rosemary, and little Princess Pea. They're surrounded by **knights** and horses, all in shining armor, and each royal wears a gold crown. The Princess Pea is on a white horse that picks its legs up high. She sees Mig and waves hello to her. Mig, though, doesn't wave. She just stares.

Notably, Mig's experience of seeing the royal family mirrors both Despereaux's and Roscuro's first experiences seeing the light—all three of these characters, this suggests, are similarly drawn to light, goodness, and beauty. In particular, that Mig notices the knights in their shining armor aligns her with Despereaux; like the mouse, she admires these men who stand up for what's good and right. And in theory, they protect maidens—like Mig.



The Princess Pea asks King Phillip why Mig isn't waving—Pea is a princess, and Mig should wave back. Mig, though, continues to stare. Something stirs inside her, and for the first time in a long time, Mig feels hope. Like love, hope is “a ridiculous, wonderful, powerful thing.” The feeling in Mig's chest, which she can't name, feels like the opposite of a clout in the ear. Finally, Mig waves to the princess and shouts that today is her birthday. But the royal family is too far away to hear.

Mig isn't described as being especially beautiful, and she's never experienced kindness. So, the Pea's willingness to wave at Mig represents a departure from Mig's usual dark, sad life—and it causes Mig to believe that, perhaps, things could get better. Mig, of course, has no idea that the Pea is a bit annoyed with her for not waving back, so she idealizes the princess rather than seeing her as a complex person.



CHAPTER 27

Later that night, Mig tries to tell Uncle what she saw earlier. She describes the “human stars” that were “glittering and glowing.” Mig shouts about the princess, the king, and the queen, and she says shyly that she'd like to be a princess. Uncle laughs—Mig is too “ugly” and “dumb” to be a princess. He wishes he still had the hen and the tablecloth instead of her. When Mig says again she wants to wear a crown, Uncle laughs, puts the kettle on his head, and says he's a king now because he wants to be. He dances and laughs for a while, and then asks Mig if she wants a clout to the ear for spewing nonsense. Mig doesn't, but Uncle hits her anyway. He forbids her then from speaking of princesses and reminds Mig that nobody cares about what she wants.

The language Mig uses to describe the royal family is telling. She doesn't have the language to describe them in a more straightforward manner—in part, perhaps, because Uncle and her father haven't taught her any language to describe good, beautiful things. All Uncle hears, in fact, is that Mig wants power—and he mocks her for this. Keeping her hopeless and making her feel small, after all, is how he maintains his power over her. Hitting her for bringing up the royal family casts hope and beauty as dangerous things for Mig; they put her physical safety at risk.



CHAPTER 28

Years pass. Mig spends her days cleaning, tending the sheep, and enduring clouts to the ear, and her evenings standing in the fields hoping to see the royal family again. The hope that she'll see the princess one day sits in Mig's heart, right next to the hope that Mig herself will one day be a princess. In a roundabout way, Mig gets her first wish when King Phillip outlaws **soup**. When the king's soldier knocks on Uncle's door one day and announces that soup is now against the law, Uncle is flabbergasted. The soldier suggests that since Uncle can no longer legally eat soup, he can eat cake. Uncle grouses that that would be wonderful if he could afford cake.

The queen's death inadvertently causes one of Mig's dreams to come true—again, the novel shows how a person's perspective colors how they see the world. Notice, for instance, that this passage doesn't mention that the queen's death is why soup is illegal; that tragic occurrence is beside the point for Mig, if she's even aware of it. The soldier drives home how ridiculous King Phillip's law is when he tells Uncle to eat cake. Cake is costly, especially compared to soup. King Phillip, in trying to soothe his own grief, is just making life much harder and more expensive for his subjects.



Losing his temper, Uncle shouts that the king will want his only possessions, his sheep and his girl, next. When the soldier confirms that Uncle indeed owns a girl, a fellow human, he informs Uncle that this is against the law. He asks for Uncle's **soup**-making and soup-eating supplies, as well as Miggery Sow. Since the alternative is imprisonment in the dungeon, Uncle agrees.

While it's arguably a good thing that Mig is being freed from Uncle, it's not guaranteed, given how poorly Mig's life has gone thus far, that things will actually get better for her. As Roscuro noted, people are capable of being extremely cruel to each other—Uncle certainly isn't the only person in the novel who can hurt Mig.



Miggery Sow rides to the castle with the soldier, in the wagon filled with “**soup**-related items.” He asks if she has parents in a shout, and Mig shouts back that her mother is dead and her father is missing. The soldier says he’ll take her to the castle. When Mig confirms that the princess lives there, she says she’s happy to go. The soldier says it doesn’t matter to anyone but Mig whether she’s happy or not, so she might as well be happy. At the castle, she’ll be a paid servant rather than enslaved.

The soldier, perhaps, doesn’t realize how low Mig’s standards are—simply being in the princess’s vicinity, she believes, will improve her life a lot and will make her happy. He also expresses how alone and unloved Mig is when he suggests that Mig herself is the only one who will care about her happiness. Roscuro and Despereaux’s friends and family, on the other hand, have tried to teach them how to be happy, though their views on what makes a rat or a mouse happy have been too narrow to fit.



By now, Mig is 12 years old. Her mother is dead, her father sold her, Uncle has hit her until she’s almost deaf, and more than anything she wants to be a princess with a crown and a white horse. The narrator asks if readers believe it’s awful to hope when there’s no reason to. Or do readers agree with the soldier, that it’s fine to be happy and hopeful, since it only matters to you?

The narrator suggests that Mig is essentially at rock bottom: it can’t get much worse, and she doesn’t really see how things could get incrementally better. Instead, her dreams are impossible—this is why the narrator suggests she has no reason to hope. But it’s left up to the reader to decide exactly how to feel about Mig, and exactly how to sympathize with her.



CHAPTER 29

On Mig’s first day as a castle servant, the head of the serving staff, Louise, sends her to deliver a spool of red thread to the princess. Louise reminds Mig to curtsy to the princess in a shout. All the way up the stairs, Mig talks to herself and decides she must “curtsy” to the princess first, and then hand over the thread. She knocks on the princess’s door, but she doesn’t hear the Princess Pea respond. Finally, the Pea flings her door open wide and asks if Mig has her thread. In a shout, Mig says she must “curtsy” first. She picks up her skirts, drops the thread, steps on the spool, and after a minute of wobbling, falls. The Pea laughs and shouts that it’s the spirit that counts.

Already, it’s becoming clear that Mig will struggle as a servant: her hearing means that she annoys people like the princess, and she’s also clumsy. However, the Pea shows how generous and sympathetic she is when she doesn’t get upset with Mig for falling in her curtsy. The Pea’s kindness toward Mig mirrors the kindness she showed Despereaux. She’s willing and able to treat those with much less power than she has with respect, generosity, and good humor.



Mig stands, searches the floor for the thread, and gives it to the Pea. The Pea thanks Mig—she can never keep track of her red thread. She then shows Mig what she’s making: a tapestry depicting her history. She points out King Phillip playing the guitar and the queen eating **soup**. Mig observes that soup is against the law, and the Pea says this is because her mother died while eating soup a month ago. Mig shares that her mother is dead too. The girls introduce themselves. Mig shares that she met the princess once before, but she only waved once the princess was past. When she shares she’s going to be a princess one day, Pea gives Mig a meaningful look.

Readers may infer that the Pea keeps losing her red thread because the mice keep stealing it—but as a person who has little or nothing to do with the mice, the Pea doesn’t know this. The Pea and Mig, meanwhile, realize that despite their many differences, they have a lot in common. They’ve both lost their mothers, and this seems to cause the Pea, at least, to feel empathy for Mig. She also doesn’t crush Mig’s dream of being a princess outright, something that allows Mig to keep dreaming—and keep feeling happy.



Back in the servants' quarters, Louise tells Mig it took her too long to deliver the thread. She hits Mig in the ear and says Mig won't be a great servant. Mig responds that that's fine, because she's going to be a princess.

Again, the Pea's kindness has a huge effect on Mig. Mig wants to be wealthy and beautiful, but after seeing how nice the princess is, being a princess also starts to mean that Mig would be able to escape cruelty and violence.



CHAPTER 30

At the castle, Mig has enough to eat for the first time in her life. She soon grows very round. The narrator is also obligated to note the unfortunate truth that Mig is a bit lazy and is also not especially intelligent. Because of these faults, Louise struggles to find appropriate work for Mig. Mig fails at being a lady in waiting, at sewing, and at being a chambermaid (she's clumsy and too in awe of the fine clothes and furnishings to work). While Mig is failing at her work, down in the dungeons Chiaroscuro is plotting his revenge, and upstairs Despereaux is falling in love with the Princess Pea. There will absolutely be consequences.

Mig might not be the best employee, but life still seems to be looking up for her—having enough food seems like it's far preferable to suffering physical violence and hunger while working for Uncle. And now, the three storylines begin to converge, which creates tension and excitement—especially since readers are alerted that there will be “consequences.” That Mig is failing so badly in the castle's main floors (and being hit for it) also subtly shows that the light upper floors—which are associated with goodness—aren't all good. They can be violent, too.



As a consequence for Mig's inability to perform any task to Louise's satisfaction, Louise sends Mig to work for Cook in the kitchen. Mig makes horrible mistakes there too, such as scrubbing the floor with oil and sneezing on the king's food right before it's served. Cook finally becomes so exasperated with Mig that she shouts there's only one place for Mig: the dungeon. It's her job now to take the jailer his lunch.

Taking Gregory his food is framed as being the absolute worst job for someone employed in the kitchen. However, note that Mig has a lot more privilege here than, say, Despereaux: in theory, at least, she can leave the dungeon without issue.



Readers already know that mice fear the dungeon, and it should go without saying that the humans in the castle are also afraid. They can never not think about it, as its stench permeates the castle in the summer. In the winter, howls from deep within the dungeon make it seem like the castle is crying. Many serving girls have been tasked with taking the jailer's meal to the dungeon, and most return weeping and refuse to go back. Others take the jailer his meal and never return. Might this happen to Mig? Hopefully not, since this won't be a good story without her.

This description of the dungeon highlights the novel's insistence that darkness, and even evil, are everywhere—even someplace supposedly good, like the light and bright castle. And again, the narrator also draws attention to the idea that bad things must happen in an otherwise good story to make it fun and interesting. Readers should of course hope that Mig emerges alive and well, but the possibility that she might not creates tension, while the tone invites humor.



Shouting, Cook gives Mig her instructions: take the tray to the dungeon, wait for the old man to eat, and bring the tray back. Mig says she understands and doesn't hear Cook mutter that Mig will certainly find a way to mess this up. Cook watches Mig go down the dungeon stairs—the same stairs Despereaux fell down yesterday. Mig has a candle on her tray, and she smiles back at Cook. Cook is shocked. Who smiles as they go into the dungeon?

Mig, perhaps, simply doesn't understand that the dungeon itself is an embodiment of evil, fear, and suffering. She's already suffered so much that it's possible even more suffering doesn't quite register with her. Cook's exasperated tone, meanwhile, highlights that Mig might not be enslaved anymore, but this doesn't mean she's not still being treated poorly by those in charge of caring for her.



CHAPTER 31

When Uncle used to hit Mig, he always aimed for the ears—but sometimes he missed and hit her nose. This happened enough that Mig now can't smell well, so she totally misses that the dungeon smells like evil, despair, and hopelessness. She's happy as she continues down the stairs, telling herself that she'd be glittery and full of **light** if she was a princess. She even sings a song about becoming the Princess Pea one day. Mig isn't a great singer, but Chiaroscuro, in his red cape and spoon crown, hears exactly what he wants to hear in her song. He follows her down.

At the bottom of the stairs, Mig bellows into the dungeon that the jailer's food is ready. The dungeon doesn't respond; in fact, it's "quiet in an ominous way." Water drips, someone moans, and one can hear the rats moving through the blood and muck. The reader would certainly hear all this if they were standing where Mig is, as would the narrator. But Mig hears nothing, so she isn't afraid. Rather, she lifts her candle higher and it illuminates the tower of kettles, spoons, and bowls. She says aloud that she never imagined there were so many spoons in the world. A booming voice in the **dark** says there's more to the world than anyone can imagine—and next to Mig, Roscuro says Gregory is right.

CHAPTER 32

Finally, Mig's candle reveals Gregory walking toward her, with a big rope tied around his ankle. He takes the tray and sits on an overturned kettle. Studying his meal, he asks if there's no **soup** again. He has to shout for Mig to hear, and Mig shouts back that soup is illegal. Gregory grouses that that's foolish as he eats a drumstick, bones and all. This deeply impresses Mig, who says Gregory is ferocious. Suddenly, she decides to tell Gregory her deepest wish and says she will be a princess one day. Roscuro is elated when he hears this—he dances a happy dance, and the candle casts a terrifying shadow as he does. Gregory tells Roscuro he can see him, so Roscuro hurries to Mig's skirts and hides.

In a way, Mig does exactly what Despereaux does as she makes her way down the stairs. Her hope of becoming a princess is its own sort of story, and it helps her stay light, bright, hopeful, and unafraid. But Chiaroscuro instantly plans to corrupt this; readers can assume that Roscuro isn't interested in the innocent hope Mig is nursing, as he's focused on revenge and on evil.



In this passage, the dungeon is described almost as an animate creature—it has the choice to respond, it seems, but it doesn't. The narrator insists that someone with a normal ability to hear and smell would pick up on this instantly, but Mig doesn't. As she notices the tower of soup supplies, what's shocking for her is just how big the world is. This reflects how sheltered and poor she is. Gregory, presumably the voice in the dark, insists that the true extent of what's in the world is unknowable to pretty much everyone—whether they can hear perfectly or not.



Gregory alone seems willing to say that King Phillip was being ridiculous when he outlawed soup. But he may feel safe doing this because his job and his life can't get much worse—he's a prisoner, after all. That Gregory seems so self-assured and unafraid makes Mig believe that he's trustworthy, offering hope that Mig might be able to connect with one kind person in the castle. Roscuro's shadow happy dance makes the novel's point again: that darkness, like a shadow, only exists because the light creates it. It's essential to have both darkness and light to make life interesting.



Gregory says that everyone has a “foolish dream”: he dreams of **soup**, and Roscuro no doubt dreams of something silly. Roscuro whispers a response, and Mig shouts, “What?” Gregory doesn’t respond. Instead, he picks up his napkin and sneezes into it three times. He balls it up, puts it on the tray, and gives the tray back to Mig. Mig says she must now take the tray back upstairs to Cook and repeats all her instructions to Gregory. Gregory asks if Cook warned her to beware of the rats. Cook didn’t, so Gregory tells Mig to beware. Hidden in Mig’s skirts, Roscuro says Gregory can warn Mig all he wants. But the time has come: Gregory’s rope is going to be chewed in two, and Roscuro is going to get revenge.

Gregory doesn’t elaborate, but he seems to suggest that a person’s “foolish dream” doesn’t actually matter. This counteracts what the narrator suggested earlier, that Mig’s dream of becoming a princess, for instance, made her happy and so was a net positive. Things then take a turn toward the sinister as readers hear Gregory warn Mig about the rats—when Mig has no idea that Roscuro is planning to use her and manipulate her. That Roscuro also plans to essentially kill Gregory highlights how tenuous Gregory’s truce was with the rats up to this point.



CHAPTER 33

Just as Mig prepares to open the door into the kitchen, Roscuro asks if they could speak for a moment. He directs her attention to the floor, where he’s standing. Confused, Mig asks if Gregory didn’t just warn her about the rats, but Roscuro says there’s no need to panic. He lifts his spoon off his head, much like one would tip their hat to a lady. This awes Mig. She observes that her father used to have cloth like Roscuro’s cape; he traded her for it. Smiling a knowing smile, Roscuro deems this a tragic story.

The only people who have shown Mig even an ounce of respect are the king’s soldier and the Princess Pea. Mig isn’t used to being treated respectfully, like she matters—so she’s especially vulnerable to Roscuro’s flattery. Roscuro puts together the fact that the prisoner he tortured is Mig’s father. That Roscuro’s costume is made up entirely of stolen items highlights how morally corrupt he is, now that he believes light, bright, good things are inaccessible to him.



The narrator must interject for a moment, as it’s essential that readers understand the most unusual thing going on here: that Roscuro’s voice is pitched just right for Mig to be able to hear it, without him yelling. She hears everything he says.

This aside is, of course, silly and absurd—but it’s also chilling, as being able to hear Roscuro perfectly makes Mig vulnerable.



Roscuro says that Mig’s life has been tragic, but that it’s time for her to “make the acquaintance of triumph and glory.” He introduces himself and says he knows most people call Mig by a nickname, but her full name is Miggery Sow. She shouts that it’s amazing—the rat knows her name. Ignoring this, Roscuro asks if it’s correct that Mig has aspirations, such as wanting to be a princess. He also tells her that she doesn’t need to shout. Mig agrees that she does want to be a princess. Roscuro says he can help Mig become the Princess Pea, and he begins to tell Mig his plan. Mig listens so intently that neither she nor Roscuro notice the napkin on the tray moving—or the angry noises coming from the napkin.

Roscuro might not know a lot about Mig’s life, but he does know for sure that Mig’s father sold her when she was little. This, combined with knowing that Mig wants to be a princess, is enough for Roscuro to draw her in and get her to agree to help him. That Mig is so vulnerable to his flattery, though, continues to highlight how much she craves kind treatment—this desire overrides her earlier understanding that she should believe Gregory and beware of the rats. The noise in the napkin is, presumably, Despereaux—it appears Gregory made good on his promise to save him.



CHAPTER 34

When Gregory wrapped Despereaux in his napkin and placed him on Mig's tray, he whispered, "back to the **light**." Now, Mig enters the kitchen with the tray and loudly announces to Cook that she's back from the dungeons. Cook shouts that Mig must clear the tray, and to show her how, she reaches over herself and picks up the napkin. Despereaux tumbles out and into a cup of oil. Cook tells Mig to kill the mouse, so Mig fishes Despereaux out of the oil by his tail and then goes to find a kitchen knife. But Despereaux's tail is slippery, and Mig drops him. She observes that this probably killed him, but Cook says her policy about mice is to kill them, even if they're already dead—the only good mouse is a dead one.

Despereaux picks his head up and admires how beautiful the **light** streaming in through the windows is. Mig puts her face down close to his and asks if he's going to run away. They stare into each other's eyes for a moment before Mig brings the knife down and cuts off Despereaux's tail. Despereaux races away from the pain, scurrying just like a mouse should. Cook scolds Mig for just getting the tail and approaches the girl, prepared to hit her.

CHAPTER 35

Despereaux is sitting on a bag of flour in the pantry, wondering what he's going to do without his tail. He's crying because of the pain, but also because he's happy he escaped the dungeon. Now, he has a chance to save the Princess Pea from Chiaroscuro's terrible plan. Despereaux is so exhausted and full of emotions that he sobs for a while and then falls fast asleep.

The sun sets, and Despereaux dreams about stained-glass windows and the dungeon. The **light** suddenly comes to life and becomes the **knight**, which fights with the dark. The dark takes many forms, including Antoinette, Lester, Furlough, and Roscuro. Despereaux tosses in his sleep, asks the knight who he is, and asks if the knight will save Despereaux. The knight says that Despereaux knows him and removes his helmet. There's nobody inside; the armor is empty. In his sleep, Despereaux sobs that there's no knight in shining armor. It's all pretend, just like "happily ever after."

Leaving the dungeon doesn't just represent escaping certain death for Despereaux. It also represents returning to the part of the castle where goodness and beauty are the dominant forces. However, Despereaux discovers immediately that this isn't necessarily true everywhere in the castle's main floors—there are still people like Cook who want to do away with mice like him. This impresses upon Despereaux that even though he doesn't have to confront the rats upstairs, danger lurks everywhere.



Actually escaping the dungeon, and finding himself back upstairs against all odds, is such a shock to Despereaux that he's not fully aware of what's going on until Mig cuts his tail off. Mig, for her part, seems more than capable of being kind and compassionate to beings with less power—she seems willing to let Despereaux go, even if it means putting herself in danger of Cook's violence.



Just as goodness and evil coexist most places in the castle, Despereaux is experiencing a flood of positive and negative emotions all at once. This is overwhelming, but he remains somewhat focused because now he knows he has a purpose: saving the Pea from Roscuro.



Despereaux's dream crystallizes many of the novel's main ideas—light and dark, good and evil, are constantly in conflict. And even people whom one loves, such as one's parents, can be good and supportive as well as cruel. Then, this dream also leads Despereaux to become disillusioned. Learning that the armor is empty suggests there is no great force for good, fighting back evil—it's naïve, Despereaux starts to believe, that he can count on such a thing.



CHAPTER 36

While Despereaux sleeps, Roscuro puts his plan into action. It's not a pretty story, as there's violence and cruelty in it. But ugly stories have value too, and readers are surely aware that life "cannot always be sweetness and **light**." First, Roscuro chews through Gregory's rope, causing Gregory to get lost in the dungeon. Then, late at night, Roscuro hides in Miggery Sow's pocket as she carries a kitchen knife in her other pocket and a candle in her hand. In a shout, Mig remarks on the darkness and starts to say what she'll do when she's a princess, but Roscuro implores her to whisper. He asks if she remembers the plan.

Mig repeats the plan: they'll sneak into the Princess Pea's room when she's asleep, wake her up and show her the knife, and they'll tell her to come with them. They won't hurt her, because the Princess Pea is going to be Mig's lady in waiting when she's the princess. Then, they'll invite the princess to come with them on a "little journey" to the dungeon, where the Pea will get lessons in being a servant and Mig will get a lesson in how to be a princess. They'll then switch places.

The narrator acknowledges that Roscuro's plan is ridiculous. Nobody will ever mistake the Princess Pea for Mig, or vice versa—but Mig isn't the most intelligent, and she desperately wants to be a princess. Because of these things, she wholeheartedly believes in Roscuro's plan. Roscuro's real plan is simpler than the one he shared with Mig. He's going to take the princess to the darkest part of the dungeon, have Mig chain the princess up, and keep the glittering princess imprisoned in the **dark** forever.

CHAPTER 37

The Princess Pea is asleep and dreaming that the queen is holding a spoonful of **soup** out for the Pea to taste. The Pea declares that the soup is the best she's ever had and asks for more, but the queen says the Pea just got a small taste so she'll remember. When the Pea says she wants more, the queen, the bowl, and the spoon all disappear. The Pea hears her name and thinks it's her mother, but she wakes up to Miggery Sow standing over her with a knife. At Roscuro's prodding, Mig says the Pea must come with her unless she wants to get hurt. The Pea is annoyed, since she's not used to taking orders. But Mig shouts that in the "deep downs," they're both going to take some lessons and then they can switch places.

Here, the narrator gets a little more overt about supporting the novel's insistence that good and evil coexist and are always in conflict. This story is what it is, the narrator suggests, because there are passages that are dark, violent, and cruel—they make the happier passages feel all the happier because of the contrast. Similarly, this suggests that Gregory's tragic death is necessary to the story—and hopefully, something happier will come of it.



Roscuro is still preying on Mig's desire for power, kindness, and beauty: he's promised her all of these things in exchange for helping him lure the princess to the dungeon. Interestingly, Roscuro seems to desire the same things as Mig, but while she seems innocent to how horrible kidnapping the princess is, Roscuro certainly knows that what he's doing is evil.



Recall that the princess is often described as being almost a living embodiment of light and goodness. Roscuro essentially wants to keep a person who represents light, beauty, and goodness trapped in the dungeon for himself, where only he can enjoy her light and her beauty. The novel also highlights how powerful hope and longing are, as it's these emotions that make Mig believe in Roscuro's plan.



In the Pea's mind, calming, healing soup is connected to her mother. This dream can be read as a warning that the Pea shouldn't forget how good and powerful soup is, even if the king has outlawed it—in other words, King Phillip wasn't necessarily right to do what he did. But when the Pea wakes up to Mig and Roscuro with a knife, it suggests that in the Pea's current world (without soup), things are dangerous. Life is also turning upside-down; the Pea isn't in her usual position of power, while powerless Mig is suddenly in charge. Though King Phillip tried to maintain order (as when he wouldn't let Despereaux speak to the Pea), he hasn't been effective.



Roscuero shouts that Mig is doing it wrong and emerges from her pocket. He crawls onto Mig's shoulder and addressing the Pea himself, he tips his spoon crown to her and suggests that he follow Mig. Mig has a knife, after all. The Pea says she's a princess and nobody can threaten her, but Roscuero points out that knives are capable of making even royalty bleed. The Pea looks to Mig pleadingly, but Roscuero says Mig is dangerous and "easily led." She says she thought she and Mig were friends, but Roscuero says that's not true—and he's in charge, so the princess should speak to him.

The Princess Pea looks straight at Roscuero, and her heart skips several beats. Roscuero asks if she knows him. She says she doesn't, but in truth, she recognizes him as the rat who fell in the queen's **soup**, because it's her mother's soup spoon on Roscuero's head. The Pea looks down, enraged. Roscuero asks if it "pain[s] her royal sensibilities" to look at a rat, but the Pea maintains she doesn't know Roscuero. At this, Roscuero says they're going on a journey, and he'd like the Pea to wear the gown she wore at the banquet. Mig adds that the Pea must also wear her crown.

As she dresses, the Pea asks if Mig will do up her buttons for her. Roscuero says Mig will not put her knife down; *he'll* do the buttons. As he crawls over the Pea's back, the Pea licks her lips and thinks of the **soup** in her dream. She whispers that she hasn't forgotten her mother the queen—or soup.

CHAPTER 38

As Mig and the Pea make their way to the dungeon, with Roscuero hiding in Mig's pocket, the rest of the castle sleeps. King Phillip dreams that the queen is a bird who keeps calling his name, while Cook dreams that she lost the recipe for the queen's favorite **soup**. Despereaux is asleep not far away from Cook, in the pantry, dreaming of **knights**, **darkness**, and light. Mig's candle is the only light in the whole castle.

Now, it's time to talk about the Princess Pea's heart, since the narrator has described the hearts of all the other characters. The Pea's heart is complicated, like most hearts are. There are **dark** parts: she hates Roscuero for killing her mother, and there's a huge dark spot of sadness for the queen. But Pea is also good, kind and empathetic. To be empathetic means that as the Pea is forced to the dungeon at knifepoint, she can still feel sorry for Mig and how badly Mig must want to be a princess. This is what the princess's heart looks like as she finally enters the dungeon, just before sunrise.

That Roscuero is willing to shout at Mig (recall that he doesn't have to shout to be heard) should tip Mig off to the fact that she shouldn't trust him—he's only pretending to show her respect. As the Pea confronts that Mig, someone she liked and respected, has turned on her, she gets a small taste of the constant, life-changing betrayals that Mig has suffered her whole life.



The Pea has to accept that in some ways, Roscuero is right: he's the powerful one in this situation, and if the Pea wants to survive this, she must give in and go with him. It's telling, though, that even the Pea feels such strong anger toward a rat. As a character, she's overwhelmingly good and kind. But yet, she's still just as capable as anyone else of feeling destructive negative emotions.



The memory of the soup gives the Pea the strength to keep going. This offers hope that something, perhaps even soup, might be able to stop Roscuero and bring Mig and the Pea back together as friends.



The Pea, in her glittering party dress, is a beacon of goodness and light in the dark, troubled castle. Cook's dream speaks to how anxiety-inducing it is for everyone in the castle to no longer be able to make or eat soup: Cook knows the queen would likely have been happy if soup were still legal, but Cook can't honor the queen's memory by making soup.



Just because the Pea is so good, kind, and empathetic doesn't mean that she doesn't still have a "complicated" heart that feels dark, difficult emotions. Broadly speaking, this makes the point that a person who is mostly good (or for that matter, mostly bad) is still a complex person with the capacity to be bad (or good). This suggests that Roscuero—a character who is, at this point, mostly evil—may still be able to somehow redeem himself.



CHAPTER 39

The sun rises, “shed[ding] **light** on what Roscuro and Miggery Sow had done.” Despereaux wakes up to hear Louise and Cook shouting: they don’t know what happened to “her,” and Gregory is dead. Despereaux peeks around the pantry door to see Cook wringing her hands. Louise continues that the king’s men went to the dungeon looking for “her” and came back with Gregory’s body. Mig is also missing. Despereaux knows he’s too late: the princess is gone. Sobbing, Cook asks what kind of a world it is where princesses disappear and queens drop dead, and they can’t even have **soup**. Louise begs Cook to stay quiet, but Cook shouts “Soup!” several times.

Louise reaches out to comfort Cook, but Cook slaps her hand away and says nothing will ever be right again. There’s nothing to live for without the princess, she says. Despereaux is shocked, as he never expected to hear someone like Cook speak what’s in his own heart. Finally, Cook allows Louise to comfort her, and Despereaux knows what he must do: he has to speak to the king. He heard Roscuro’s plan and knows the Pea is in the dungeon. He’s also brighter than Mig, so he understands that Mig will never be a princess and that Roscuro will never let the Pea go. Despereaux, covered in oil and flour and without a tail, sneaks past the women to find the king.

CHAPTER 40

Despereaux checks the throne room first and then, on his way to the Pea’s room, he comes upon the Mouse Council deep in conversation. He stops and the Most Very Honored Head Mouse sees him. The Head Mouse says Despereaux’s name and then shakily points and says it’s a ghost. Due to the flour, Despereaux is white now, but the thread around his neck is red like blood.

Lester seems to have aged years since Despereaux went to the dungeon, though it’s only been a few days. He calls for the ghost of his son, and he says that it was wrong to send Despereaux to his death. As the Head Mouse protests, Lester says he destroyed the Mouse Council drum and asks for forgiveness. Despereaux stares at his father, who looks small and sad, and it feels like Despereaux’s heart is breaking.

Louise and Cook are shouting about the princess (she’s the “her” they’re talking about); Mig, as a serving girl, is just an afterthought. This is devastating for Despereaux to hear, especially as he learns too that Gregory is dead. It seems, to him, that all good in the world is being taken away. Cook echoes this idea when she starts shouting about soup, a good thing that she doesn’t have legal access to anymore. Her willingness to say the word, though, offers hope that King Phillip might still be able to heal and change his mind about soup, since others in the castle won’t let him forget that soup is good and tasty.



As far as Despereaux is concerned, Cook isn’t a nice person. She tried to kill him, after all. So, it’s a shock to hear that she’s grieving the princess’s loss just as much as he is—and, perhaps, Cook might be an ally later on. Despereaux’s youth shines through as he decides to seek out the king for help. Doing this shows that Despereaux trusts authority figures to step in when bad events happen—and, in turn, he doesn’t necessarily see himself as capable of fixing things yet himself.



The description of Despereaux certainly paints a chilling picture. However, that the Head Mouse immediately jumps to thinking Despereaux is a ghost speaks to how fully this mouse believes that condemned mice don’t emerge from the dungeon alive. He believes Despereaux must be dead, so he’s unwilling to consider that he’s looking at flesh-and-blood Despereaux, just covered in flour.



As the narrator describes Despereaux’s breaking heart, the novel shows that Lester’s betrayal hurts both him and his son. This isn’t just because Despereaux could’ve died—it’s also because now, Despereaux doesn’t trust his father, and it’s painful to see Lester in such a sad, penitent state.



The narrator notes that forgiveness is like hope and love, in that it's powerful and great but also ridiculous. How could anyone think that a son could forgive his father for sending him to his death? But Despereaux tells Lester that he forgives him. He does this because he realizes that this is the only way to keep his own heart from breaking—it helps Despereaux save himself. Then, Despereaux tells the whole Mouse Council that they were wrong. Now, they must renounce their misdeeds and repent. The Head Mouse refuses.

Despereaux realizes he's a different mouse than he was the last time he stood in front of the Mouse Council. He knows things that they'll never know—and what they think of him doesn't matter. So, Despereaux leaves the room. The Head Mouse shakily says that a ghost has visited them, and he holds a vote to decide that this event never happened. Everyone says "aye," except for Lester. Lester looks away and cries because Despereaux forgave him.

CHAPTER 41

Despereaux finds King Phillip in the Pea's room, sobbing and holding the tapestry of her life to his chest. He's crying so hard that there's a puddle of tears at his feet. The narrator notes that it's terrifying when powerful people, like the king, are revealed to be weak and human. Despereaux is frightened, but he addresses the king anyway. The king doesn't hear Despereaux—instead, he drops the tapestry, removes his crown, and beats his chest with it. As the narrator has already explained, the king has several faults, one of them being that (like Mig) he's not the most intelligent. But his best quality is that he's willing and able to love with his whole heart. He loved the queen and his daughter deeply, and now the Pea is gone.

Despereaux tries again to get the king's attention. He doesn't know how to address a king, so he calls King Phillip "Most Very Honored Head Person." When the king discovers he's speaking to a mouse, he bellows that mice are almost rats—but Despereaux says he knows where the Pea is. The king leans close, and two of his tears land on Despereaux, leaving two stripes of clean brown fur. Despereaux says the Pea is in the dungeon, but the king says this can't be true, since his men have searched. Despereaux says the rats are the only ones who know the dungeons, and they could keep the Pea hidden from the king's men.

The narrator encourages readers to understand again that just because something is ridiculous doesn't mean it's not powerful. They also propose the idea that on the whole, forgiveness isn't something a person grants just to make the person being forgiven feel better. Instead, it's beneficial for both parties. In Despereaux's case, forgiving his father (rather than holding a grudge and, perhaps, ending up like Roscuro), allows Despereaux to remain a good character, the novel's hero, and someone who can help others (like the Mouse Council) become better.



Despereaux finds he has even more courage now to stand up for what he believes is good and right. These older mice, he realizes, are sheltered and live in a world that's black and white. Despereaux, on the other hand—and now, perhaps, Lester too—lives in a world that's far more nuanced. In Despereaux's world, standing up for one's beliefs is more important than following rules that exist due to fear and prejudice.



Describing the king like this, and making note specifically of how overwhelmed with love and grief the king is, highlights the power differential between him and Despereaux. Despereaux is upset too about the princess's disappearance, but he's keeping it together—and he's also a tiny fraction of the king's size and has nowhere close to as much power. He's clearly set up as an unlikely hero confronting the very person who should be able to help. But note that rather than trying to figure things out, as Despereaux is doing, the king is wallowing in his emotions.



Readers, of course, know that Despereaux is telling the truth. But the king is far too caught up in his vendetta against rats to consider a new perspective, especially when it comes from someone the king despises. The two stripes of clean fur that the king's tears leave on Despereaux suggest that as Despereaux stands up to this powerful figure, he starts to step into his own and become his true self: someone who's brave and willing to stand up for those he loves.



At the mention of the rats, the king covers his ears, says that rats are illegal, and that they don't exist in his kingdom. Despereaux tries to tell the king about Roscuro, but the king hums and says that since Despereaux is a rodent, he's lying. There are magicians on the way, and they'll tell the king where the Pea is. The king refuses to listen. Despereaux sits back, pulls at the thread still around his neck, and remembers his dream about the **knight** and the empty armor. Despereaux wonders if perhaps the armor was empty because it was waiting for him. Despereaux tells himself *he'll* be the knight in shining armor, and he leaves to find the threadmaster.

Note that the king sounds an awful lot like the Mouse Council members, as well as like Lester. He believes something is true (such as that rats don't exist in the kingdom), and he's not about to listen to anything that contradicts this belief. This is a shock for Despereaux, as he thought the king would be able to use his power to step in and make things right. But the king's unwillingness to do so gives Despereaux the opportunity to come of age and realize that if he wants things to change, he must be the one to make the change happen. He's small, but he's not powerless.



CHAPTER 42

Despereaux finds the threadmaster sitting on his spool of thread, eating celery. When he notices Despereaux, he says the old threadmaster would say he hasn't done his job right because Despereaux is alive—but he did exactly what he was supposed to, because the thread is still around Despereaux's neck. Despereaux says he needs the rest of the thread. The threadmaster says he can't just give it away. "They" say that red thread is sacred, but he knows what it actually is. When Despereaux asks what that is, the threadmaster says it's just thread—but he pretends.

The threadmaster is a bit subtle, but he implies that many mice (including the old threadmaster) believe the red thread is the very thing that causes mice to die in the dungeon; it has an almost supernatural power to do so. But the threadmaster insists that this isn't necessarily true—rather, what causes mice to die in the dungeons are the rats, not the thread. The thread is just ceremonial.



The threadmaster asks what Despereaux is going to do with the thread. Despereaux says he needs it to save the princess; he's the only one who can. He needs the thread so he can navigate the dungeon and get back to the entrance. Gregory the jailer, Despereaux explains, had a rope that kept him from getting lost. The threadmaster nods and says that Despereaux is on a quest. Despereaux doesn't know what this means, but the threadmaster says it doesn't matter what it means—Despereaux just has to feel like he must do "the impossible, important task at hand." Standing up, the threadmaster says he can't stand in the way of a quest. Despereaux can have the thread.

Despereaux wants to use the thread—the very thing that marked him as a criminal sentenced to death—to save him. This shows how Despereaux is now able to think more critically; he can wrap his head around repurposing an item that once signified death. That the threadmaster is so willing to help once he hears Despereaux's reasoning suggests that, like Despereaux, this mouse has principles and values that differ from those of the Mouse Council. And unlike the Mouse Council, he's willing to bend the rules if it means furthering his principles.



Despereaux thanks the threadmaster, touches the spool, and then asks the threadmaster for his name. The threadmaster introduces himself as Hovis, and he goes to get what goes with the thread: a needle. Despereaux says it's like a sword; he can protect himself with it, like a **knight**. Hovis ties the needle around Despereaux's waist. As Despereaux starts to move away, Hovis asks him to wait. He puts his paws on Despereaux's shoulders and leans in close to gnaw the thread off of Despereaux's neck. Hovis says Despereaux is free now, so he's going into the dungeon because he chooses to. Despereaux adds that he's going because he's on a quest, enjoying the sound of the word. The narrator acknowledges that "quest" is a wonderful word, full of hope and wonder. Hovis bids Despereaux goodbye and calls him a "mouse among mice."

The thought of a tiny mouse with only a needle with which to defend himself is absurd—Despereaux is dealing with bloodthirsty rats that far outweigh him. But his belief in his righteousness gives him the courage to move forward with his quest. The word "quest" helps Despereaux in this regard; it gives him a name for what he's doing, and as the narrator acknowledges, the word itself connotes other positive feelings (like hope and wonder). Calling Despereaux a "mouse among mice" is a play on the phrase "a man among men," which refers to a person who embodies good qualities and who should be seen as an example. In this case, the phrase also implies that Hovis believes mouse culture should change to value mice more like Despereaux.



CHAPTER 43

As Despereaux rolls his thread through the castle, the narrator asks readers to think about the fact that Despereaux is small for a mouse. He weighs about two ounces, half what a normal mouse weighs. The thread weighs about as much as he does, and because of this, his chances of succeeding on his quest are pretty much nothing. But the narrator also notes that when calculating Despereaux's odds, it's essential to add in his love for the princess, since love is so powerful. But still, rolling the spool is hard work. When Despereaux reaches the kitchen at midnight, he's shaking and his tail stub is throbbing. He still has a long way to go to get to the dungeon, and despair fills him.

What the narrator is essentially getting at here is that Despereaux, due to his size and his species, is a very unlikely hero. But his love for the Pea is, hopefully, powerful enough to help him be successful on his quest. Already, it's possible to see how motivating his love for the Pea is, since he's gotten through so much hard work by pushing the spool through the castle. That it's now midnight—the middle of the dark night—underscores the idea that Despereaux is a beacon of light and goodness in a dark world, just like the princess he's trying to save.



Despereaux rests his head against the spool of thread, smelling Hovis's celery smell. Hovis believes in him, so Despereaux continues on and notices too late that there's a **light** in the kitchen. Cook is there, stirring **soup** on the stove. She's smiling, and the steam in the candlelight creates a halo around her head. Despereaux knows he's in danger, because he knows how Cook feels about mice. But he has to cross the kitchen. Working up his courage, Despereaux rolls the spool across the floor. Cook turns around, looking terrified, and asks who's there.

That the light in the soup's steam gives Cook a halo—something that makes her look angelic—speaks to what the novel suggests is the power of soup. It can transform someone dangerous, like Cook, into an angel. For now, though, Cook still seems like an antagonist to Despereaux, since she doesn't tolerate mice in her kitchen. Her halo simply suggests that there's hope that she could transcend this characterization and allow Despereaux to pass.



CHAPTER 44

Cook asks who's there again, but Despereaux stays quiet. To herself, Cook says she's just afraid of being caught making **soup**. Relieved, Despereaux leans against the spool of thread, and a breeze blows the smell of the soup toward him. It smells better than anything he's ever smelled. Cook tries a spoonful of the soup and declares it's missing something. As she salts the soup, Despereaux feels braver and continues to push the spool across the floor.

Cook is in a vulnerable position right now, since she could be in big trouble if anyone catches her making soup. But the soup, Despereaux discovers, is good—even if all he can do is smell it. It seems to give him the courage to keep going, if only because it's keeping Cook occupied for now.



Again, Cook whirls around and asks who's there. Despereaux hides behind the spool of thread as Cook lifts her candle, approaches, and asks whose ears are behind the spool. The **light** from the candle illuminates Despereaux's face, and Despereaux prepares for his death. But instead of killing him, Cook laughs—a mouse won't throw her in the dungeon for making **soup**. She laughs more, because Despereaux has no tail and has a needle around his waist. Calming down, Cook says that since these are “extraordinary” times, she'll allow Despereaux to pass if he keeps quiet about her making soup. She returns to her soup pot.

Despereaux is so afraid that he can't move. He sits on the kitchen floor and cries. He expected Cook to kill him, but instead, she laughed—and it's surprising how much that hurts.

CHAPTER 45

After stirring the **soup**, Cook turns back to Despereaux and tells him this is the only time he'll pass through her kitchen unharmed. The soup smell wafts toward Despereaux again, and he sniffs the air. Cook says that the princess is missing and times are terrible, and the only answer is soup. Despereaux agrees. Cook laments that soup is pointless unless there's someone else to eat it, so she offers Despereaux some soup. Without waiting for an answer, she spoons a bit into a saucer and puts it on the floor. Cautiously, Despereaux creeps forward and into the saucer. He sips the broth, which is wonderful. This is the same soup Cook made on the day the queen died.

Cook asks how the **soup** is, and Despereaux says it's perfect. Smiling, Cook says that soup can make anyone, mouse or man, better. Despereaux noisily finishes the saucer of soup and Cook says he must want more. But Despereaux says he's headed to the dungeon to save the princess. This makes Cook laugh, but she says she won't stand in Despereaux's way. She holds the dungeon door open for him and wishes him good luck. Once Despereaux is through the door, Cook closes it and leans against it. She observes that this is such a strange day.

Given how dangerous making soup is right now, finding a mouse in her kitchen is pretty much the best outcome for Cook. But she also severely underestimates Despereaux and what he plans to do when she laughs at him—it's inconceivable to her that such a tiny mouse could be on such an important quest. This is why she laughs, and it's also why she turns away and ignores him. He's basically nothing to her except a laugh.



Despereaux might not have expected wholehearted support from Cook, but he didn't expect her to find him funny. Her behavior damages his confidence.



As Cook talks about soup, she frames it as something that's almost magical in terms of how it can make people feel better. She's making it now to try to soothe her own heart, which is broken because the Pea is gone. But soup, she acknowledges, is something that creates community—and since Despereaux is the only being around, she uncharacteristically makes an overture to him. In this tense moment, Cook and Despereaux are momentarily allies, bound together by her soup and their shared love for the Pea.



The nourishing, tasty soup makes Despereaux feel like it's okay to break the mouse rules and speak to Cook, especially if he's just answering her questions. And his choice to talk means that Cook becomes even more of an ally, offering him more soup and then even helping him accomplish a task that would be impossible for a tiny mouse on his own: opening the dungeon door.



CHAPTER 46

At the top of the dungeon stairs, Despereaux peers down into the **darkness**. He'd already forgotten how dark the dungeon is, and the terrible smell of rats and suffering. But Despereaux feels strong, since his heart is filled with love for the Pea and his stomach is full of Cook's **soup**. So, he begins to work the spool of thread down the stairs. To "make some light" for himself, Despereaux decides to tell himself a story. He says that once upon a time, there was a small mouse and a beautiful princess named Pea. The mouse was selected by fate to serve the princess and save her from a dark dungeon.

The story works to lift Despereaux's spirits, and his eyes soon adjust to the **dark**. He works his way down the stairs, whispering a story to himself about a rat, a serving girl, a princess, a mouse, **soup**, and red thread—much like the story the reader is enjoying. It makes Despereaux strong, and he pushes the spool with a bit too much vigor. It rolls away from him and down the stairs, where it stops right in front of a rat's paw. The rat, Botticelli Remorso, observes that this is *red* thread. This means one thing to rats. He puts his head up and sniffs. He smells soup—which is odd—and tears, which are delightful. He can also smell flour and oil, and under it all, mouse blood. Life just keeps getting better.

CHAPTER 47

Still on the steps, Despereaux trembles. His thread is gone, and he realizes he's in grave danger. He's a tiny mouse, alone in a dungeon full of rats. He has only a needle to defend himself, and he has to both find and rescue the princess. To himself, Despereaux says it's impossible, and he should go back. But then, he says he has no choice and keeps moving down the stairs.

At the bottom, Botticelli steps out to meet Despereaux and says he's been waiting for the mouse. Despereaux puts his hand on his needle, and Botticelli puts his hands up—he surrenders. This confuses Despereaux, but then, Botticelli pulls out his locket and begins to swing it. Despereaux says he means no harm, but he has to get past. He's on a quest to save the princess. Botticelli says everyone wants the princess; the king's men were down here earlier and didn't find her. Botticelli sarcastically says that Despereaux is inspiring, but he steps in Despereaux's way when Despereaux tries to pass him.

Together, Despereaux's love for the princess and the nourishing soup in his belly give him the strength and the confidence he needs to face the dungeon's darkness again. Deciding to "make some light" by telling himself a story shows that Despereaux has internalized Gregory's earlier insistence that stories are light—they brighten up an otherwise dark world. Telling what sounds like his own story helps Despereaux make sense of what's happening, and it helps him believe he might get a happy ending, too.



That the story makes Despereaux feel strong and capable confirms Gregory's insistence that stories are important—it seems like an essential element to Despereaux's success, provided he goes on to be successful in rescuing the princess. Botticelli, meanwhile, humorously smells what's essentially fried mouse alongside soup and sadness, a combination that he finds wonderful. This is humorous, and it highlights the narrator's earlier insistence that life is funny, even when it's also dark and scary.



Without his thread, Despereaux has no way to navigate the dungeon and make it back to the beginning. He realizes, in effect, that he's going to fail. But what's most important, he seems to decide, is that he try to rescue the Pea—and so he keeps going.



When Botticelli has swung his locket in front of Roscuro, it's had an almost hypnotic effect on the younger rat. Despereaux, however, doesn't seem nearly as affected by the locket, suggesting he may remain in control of his faculties. Like Cook, Botticelli severely underestimates Despereaux and implies that the mouse won't be successful. It's worth noting, though, that Despereaux loves the princess, while the king's men don't have the same relationship to her—his odds may be better.



Botticelli confirms that in order to save the princess, Despereaux must first find her. He asks what would happen if he showed Despereaux exactly where the princess is. Despereaux asks why Botticelli would help. Botticelli grandly says he just wants to be of service, despite being a rat. Clearly, he says, Despereaux has heard the “greatly exaggerated rumors” of how evil rats are, since he’s trembling. But Botticelli says that if Despereaux lets him help, Despereaux will be doing him a big favor. It will allow Botticelli to improve rats’ reputation, and he asks Despereaux if he can help. The narrator tells readers that this is *definitely* a trick.

Readers should already know that Botticelli wants others to suffer, and he especially wants Despereaux to suffer. He plans to do this by taking Despereaux right to the princess, and then killing Despereaux—the hope and love Despereaux will feel will make him even tastier. Botticelli introduces himself, asks Despereaux for his name, and offers his tail for Despereaux to grab onto. He promises to take Despereaux right to the princess. Of course, his promise is meaningless—but Despereaux has nothing else to hold onto. So, he reaches out and takes Botticelli’s tail.

CHAPTER 48

The narrator asks readers if they’ve ever held a rat’s tail. Rat tails are unpleasant at best; they’re like little snakes. But at worst, when one depends on a rat for survival, and when one is sure they’re headed to their death, it’s awful to have only a rat tail to hold. But Despereaux holds onto Botticelli’s tail, and soon, his eyes adjust to the dungeon’s **dark**. It’d be better if they hadn’t, because Despereaux can see that the dungeon floor is littered with bits of mouse fur, mouse bones, and red thread. There are human bones too. It doesn’t help when Despereaux closes his eyes. Botticelli just laughs and exclaims, “exactly.”

What’s behind Despereaux is even worse. The dungeon’s rats form a “happy, hungry, vengeful parade” that follows Despereaux and Botticelli. The rats remark that they smell a mouse, **soup**, and blood. Botticelli tells the other rats that this mouse is his as Despereaux starts to cry. Despereaux begs Botticelli to take him to the princess as the rats gleefully say that they smell tears. Botticelli stops and tells Despereaux that he made a promise. He asks Despereaux to open his eyes and say what he sees. Despereaux does: he sees **light** ahead.

The narrator makes sure that readers know where all the characters stand: Despereaux shouldn’t trust Botticelli, and Botticelli actually has no interest in improving rats’ reputations. Indeed, Botticelli is doing exactly what he told Roscuro to do to prisoners: make them think he’s a friend, and then turn back into a rat (by which he means an untrustworthy betrayer). However, Botticelli can, perhaps, tell Despereaux where the Pea is—so Despereaux may feel like he has no choice but to trust.



Botticelli may want Despereaux to suffer, but by letting readers know what his plan is, the narrator makes an important point: Botticelli does plan to take Despereaux to the Pea. Getting within reach of the princess, his love, may give Despereaux the strength he needs to use his needle and fight back, for himself and for the princess.



Asking the reader to imagine what it’s like to have nothing to hang onto but a rat tail is another moment where the narrator helps readers develop empathy, this time for Despereaux. Despereaux’s nightmare gets even worse when he finds he can see all the bones that cover the dungeon’s floor. It makes it all the more apparent that Despereaux was an anomaly, in that he emerged from the dungeon alive earlier—and hopefully, he can do so again.



The rat parade adds an even more sinister feel to this passage: the sheer number of mouse-hungry rats makes Despereaux feel increasingly vulnerable, and their glee when they smell tears is intended to be shocking. This offers more insight into what Botticelli insists rats are: creatures that enjoy others’ suffering, and who go out of their way to make others feel awful to make themselves feel better.



CHAPTER 49

The narrator says that once again, before the story can move forward, it has to go backwards a little bit to what happened when Roscuro, the Pea, and Mig arrived in the dungeon. Roscuro leads the girls to a hidden chamber and instructs Mig to put the princess in chains. Mig argues that the princess will struggle in her lessons in chains, but Roscuro tells her to do what he says. Mig suggests that she and the Pea could change outfits first, so Roscuro tells the princess to hand over her crown. The Pea does as she's told.

The crown is too big for Mig, so it slides down and rests painfully on top of her cauliflower ears. She asks Roscuro how she looks. He says she looks "laughable" and will never look like a princess whether she's in a crown or not. Mig blinks back tears as Roscuro tells her to tie up the princess. Then, he turns to the Pea and says that he's going to keep her here in the dungeon for the rest of her life. At this, Mig looks up and asks if the Pea isn't going to be a maid, and if she's not actually going to be a princess. Roscuro says neither of those things will happen.

Mig says she wants to be a princess, but Roscuro says that nobody cares what she wants. Mig has heard this many times over the course of her life, but in this moment, it hits her hard. Nobody cares about her, and perhaps nobody ever will. Crying, Mig says, "I want!" The Pea makes soothing noises while Roscuro tells Mig to be quiet. As Mig repeats that phrase, the Pea asks what Mig wants. Roscuro tells the Pea to be quiet, but it's too late—finally, someone has asked Mig what she wants. Sobbing, Mig says she wants her mother.

The Pea gently takes Mig's hands and says she wants her mother, too. Roscuro tells the girls to stop and shouts for Mig to tie up the princess, but Mig says she won't. She reminds Roscuro that she has the knife. Roscuro says that he recommends Mig not use the knife on him. After all, he's the only way Mig will ever make it out of the dungeon alive. Mig threatens to chop Roscuro up if he doesn't lead them out, but Roscuro refuses. The princess says they're stuck here unless Roscuro has a change of heart. Roscuro insists this won't happen, so the three of them sit together for an entire day, as one candle burns out and they have to **light** another. They might still be there, if a mouse hadn't shown up.

Roscuro seems very frustrated with Mig; recall that he never intended for the girls to switch places, so he's really just trying to appease her enough to get her to do what he says. Crowns are often symbols of royalty, so Mig getting the crown symbolically allows her to experiment with being a princess. Roscuro seems to hope that this will be enough to please her.



That the crown doesn't fit Mig speaks to the fact that she's not royalty, and likely never will be—the persona doesn't fit. However, Roscuro is cruel about it, which only contributes to Mig's pain and feelings that she's been betrayed. Roscuro finally stops pretending that he's ever going to give Mig what he wants, and he reveals his master plan. Now, Mig knows she can't trust Roscuro—nobody, least of all him, can grant her wish to be a princess.



Roscuro has spent a lot of time building Mig up and letting her believe that she'll be a princess when all is said and done. Her disappointment is why it's so hard to hear that he doesn't care what she wants. But Roscuro also knows that for his plan to work, it's essential that Mig remain emotional and vulnerable. When the Pea asks Mig what she wants, she shows Mig respect and gives Mig back some of her humanity. For the first time, Mig feels like someone cares about her—and when someone cares for Mig, Mig is able to voice that she really just wants the one person who was supposed to care about her: her mother.



The Pea and Mig connect over the fact that they're both missing their mothers. Their loss, in other words, binds them together. This makes things difficult for Roscuro; his success rested on the girls seeing each other as enemies. During the stalemate, it creates tension as the narrator describes the candles burning out one by one. When the last candle goes out, the novel implies, all hope will go out as well. But fortunately, a mouse (presumably Despereaux) will appear to make things right.



CHAPTER 50

Despereaux shouts for the Princess Pea that he's come to save her. The Pea looks up and shouts Despereaux's name. This is the sweetest sound in the world: the sound of Despereaux's love calling his name. It makes the whole trip into the dungeon, and Despereaux's lost tail, worth it. As he runs toward the princess, Roscuro blocks Despereaux's way. The Pea begs Roscuro to not hurt Despereaux, and Mig says she'll save the mouse. She aims to chop off Roscuro's head, but she misses.

The narrator reinforces how powerful love is when they insist that hearing the Pea call Despereaux's name makes this whole trip to the dungeon worth it. Given Mig's track record of trying to kill rodents with kitchen knives, it seems questionable whether she'll achieve her goal here. However, perhaps more significant is Mig's willingness to step in and defend the Pea's ally—this highlights her loyalty to the princess.



CHAPTER 51

Roscuro howls in pain and turns to look at where his tail once was. As he does, Despereaux puts the needle point to Roscuro's heart and threatens to kill him. Amused, Botticelli howls with laughter—he loves when mice come to the dungeon and spice things up. The other rats crowd around to watch the show. Despereaux knows that since he's a **knight**, he must protect the princess, but he's not sure killing Roscuro will “make the **darkness** go away.” He bows his head, which causes his whiskers to brush Roscuro's nose. Roscuro asks what he's smelling. The gathered rats say it's mouse tears and blood, but Roscuro realizes he's smelling **soup**.

As a rat who finds humor in everything, Botticelli thinks what's happening is hilarious—and on some level, two tailless rodents facing off is funny. But on a more serious note, Despereaux is beginning to suspect that banishing one evil being, like Roscuro, isn't going to do anything—there is, after all, an entire crowd of evil rats waiting to devour him once watching him argue with Roscuro is no longer interesting. Darkness and evil, this suggests, will continue to crop up, no matter how many efforts one makes to squash them.



Suddenly, Roscuro is back in his memory of the chandelier, the music, and the happy laughing people—all things he'll never be able to enjoy, since he's a rat. He begins to sob, and the other rats hiss at him. Roscuro begs Despereaux to kill him and says he just wanted some **light**. He kidnapped the princess because he wanted some beauty and some light for himself. Botticelli shouts that Despereaux should kill Roscuro, who's a “miserable excuse for a rat.” But the princess asks Despereaux to not kill Roscuro. Mig waves her knife and offers to kill Roscuro herself.

Suddenly, Roscuro is overcome with what seems like grief. He's grieving everything he thinks he'll never be able to have and enjoy, such as light and beauty. Botticelli mocks Roscuro because Roscuro admits, once again, that he doesn't fit in with the other rats—and for that matter, he'd possibly rather be dead than continue to live as a rat when he doesn't find the rat identity fulfilling.



Turning to the sobbing Roscuro, the princess puts a hand on her heart. She's likely feeling the same thing Despereaux did when Lester asked him for forgiveness. That is to say, the Pea realizes how much **darkness** there is in her heart, and she realizes it's always fighting with the light in her heart. She doesn't like Roscuro, but she knows what she has to do for her own heart's sake. She asks Roscuro if he'd like some **soup**. The Pea promises that if he leads them out of the dungeon, she'll ask Cook to make soup and Roscuro can eat it in the banquet hall.

The Pea realizes, in essence, that she can't go on hating Roscuro for kidnapping her or for killing her mother. She must forgive him, or the darkness that already lurks in her heart will take over. By suggesting they eat soup, the Pea reinforces Cook's characterization of soup as something healing and that builds community. The soup, she suggests, will make them all feel better—and help them all move on.



The gathered rats say they still want to eat Despereaux, but Botticelli says the flavor is already ruined—there’s been too much forgiveness, and that’s disgusting. Roscuro asks the Pea if she’s serious, and she says she is. Mig notes that **soup** is illegal, but Despereaux says soup is still good. Crouching down, the Pea tells Despereaux that he’s her **knight**, and she’s glad he found her. She suggests they all go upstairs to eat soup, and this is exactly what they do.

Most rats, Botticelli suggests, will never understand the power of forgiveness, as it’s abhorrent to them. This reinforces that in this world, rats are overwhelmingly dark and evil. When Despereaux notes that soup is good despite being illegal, he acknowledges that laws don’t always make sense—something being illegal doesn’t make it bad, it just makes it illegal. This is a more mature way of looking at the world, and it implies that Despereaux has grown up.



CHAPTER 52

Readers must be curious whether everyone lives happily ever after. The answer is complicated. The Pea gives Roscuro free access to the castle’s main floors, and he moves back and forth between the dungeons and upstairs. He never really fits in either place, though, which is what happens to people whose hearts mend crookedly. But since Roscuro seeks forgiveness, he’s able to bring happiness to another person’s life. He tells the princess about the prisoner with the tablecloth, and the Pea has the prisoner released. Roscuro leads the man to Mig, his daughter. Mig doesn’t get to be a princess, but her father treats her like a princess to try to make up for what he did to her.

The story’s ending contains elements that are good and bad, reinforcing the idea that good and evil, light and dark, must coexist in order to make sense. But Roscuro goes out of his way to redeem himself and specifically, to try to make Mig feel better after manipulating her so cruelly. He might not get the happiest of happy ever afters, but the narrator implies he feels some satisfaction after reuniting Mig with her father. And importantly, the narrator makes it clear that despite Roscuro’s crooked heart, he can still seek forgiveness and do nice things for others.



Despereaux doesn’t marry the princess, so that version of happily ever after doesn’t come to pass (this world isn’t *that* strange). But they do become friends, and they go on many adventures that the narrator can’t describe in this story. Before this story ends, the narrator asks the reader to imagine a king and a princess, a serving girl wearing a crown, and a rat wearing a spoon on his head, all sitting around a table in a banquet hall. There’s a huge kettle of **soup** in the middle of the table, and a mouse with big ears is sitting right next to the princess. From behind a curtain, four other mice watch the scene. Antoinette observes that Despereaux looks happy. Lester whispers that he’s been forgiven, and Furlough says it’s unbelievable. But Hovis smiles and says, “just so.”

The scene the narrator paints here is a happy one, and it’s presumably what happens after everyone emerges from the dungeon and after the Pea reconnects with her father. Everyone, this shows, makes up in the end: the king decides to accept rodents at his table (and allows soup), Mig and the Pea remain friendly, and it doesn’t seem to be a problem that Roscuro is wearing Queen Rosemary’s soup spoon still. But while mice like Antoinette and Lester seem to have changed similarly for the better, Furlough remains set in his ways—suggesting that the dark, and intolerance specifically, will continue to battle goodness and compassion, long after the novel ends.



CODA

The narrator asks if readers remember when Despereaux was in Gregory’s hand and whispering a story in Gregory’s ear. The narrator would love it if the reader thought of them as a mouse telling a story to save their life from the **darkness**—and to save the reader from the darkness too. Gregory said to Despereaux that “stories are light,” and the narrator hopes the reader has found some light.

Light, in the coda, seems to refer to joy and fulfillment. Hopefully, the narrator suggests, the reader was able to find some refuge from whatever darkness might be plaguing their lives. This is, according to the narrator, the power of stories: they can teach, but they can also provide an escape.





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