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## MICE AT CENTRE GRID

by

Estelle Salata

### CHAPTER 1

#### THE SCIENCE FAIR

Benny the Bullet sat in the stands at the Forum. They were the best seats in the house. Row G, Centre. But what good did it do to have good seats, he thought. There hadn't been a hockey game in the Forum for over a week. Instead, the floor was crowded with people looking at new space toys and machines.

His two best friends Figaro the Flyer and Peppy la Pierre sat beside him. The noise was deafening, but not as loud as the crowd

that came to the hockey games.

"How long is the Science Fair going to be here, Captain?" asked Figaro. "We can't play hockey without any ice."

"And we can't watch any games either," added Peppy, his mouth full of candy floss. He pulled his black toque to the side of his head.

"This place is too crowded," complained Benny. "Just look at all those humans down below."

Large crowds of people jammed the floor. Kids gathered around the newest space toys and games. Their parents looked at the latest inventions. It was more like a circus than a Science Fair, thought Benny.

There was plenty of good food. Popcorn, peanuts, sour babies, chocolate bars, bubble gum. The food was just waiting for them to help themselves.

Peppy swallowed the last bit of pink candy floss he'd found near the snack bar.

"At least the food is better than usual." Peppy licked the pink fuzz from his mouth and patted his stomach. "Not gourmet, but it will do nicely."

Benny scowled at him.

"Is that all you ever think about?" he demanded, even though he'd

been thinking about the same thing himself. "Food?"

Peppy shrugged his shoulders.

"It helps to pass the time," he said.

"We play football in the parking lot every night," Benny reminded him. "It helps pass the time. We need to start up the football league again. Like the good old days. We have to do something to keep in shape for the hockey season."

He jumped up and paced back and forth across the seats and twirled a miniature brown leather football.

"It's not too exciting playing football by ourselves, Captain," said Figaro. He crossed his legs and sighed. "We need more players."

"And another team to play against. *Oui?*" Peppy added.

"Remember the stories they used to tell about the Cheese Bowl?" Benny sighed and looked at his team mates. "My grandfather was a great lineman. How I wish I could have played in one of *those* games." He tossed the football to Peppy who bobbled it in the air before he caught it.

"*Oui,*" said Peppy. "He was the greatest sports mouse who ever lived. Not counting yourself, of course."

He threw the ball to Figaro who picked it off without getting up.

"Of course," said Benny modestly. "Remember the old MFL?"

"The Mouse Football League," said Figaro. "Days of former glory. Perhaps even greater than the MHL. The Mouse Hockey League."

Benny nodded.

"The MFL was before our time, of course," he said. "But our grandfathers used to talk about it all the time."

He rummaged between the seats for the latest copy of the Mouse Gazette and opened the paper.

"Listen to this." He read aloud.

*The Good Old Days*

*by*

*Mizzy Mouse*

*Ninety years ago today the MFL played in the Super Bowl of Mousedom against the Rats. The famous Cheese Bowl game. In the fourth quarter, the Rats were leading 14-7. A notorious Rat named Boris Ringsky used the Cheese Wedge play to defeat the MFL. This villain was the ancestor of Big Boris who lives at the Forum.*

*In the last play, the Rats scored and beat the Mice by two touchdowns,*

*21-7. A sad day in the history of Mouse Football.*

*This reporter thinks it's time to bring back the old Mouse Football League. Benny the Bullet and his team are the Mice to do it."*

"Those Rats have been after us for as long as we can remember," said Figaro. He tweaked his black whiskers.

"They're making our lives *les miserables*," said Peppy.

Benny put the paper down.

"I think Mizzy is right," Benny said. "The MFL deserves another chance. We should defend the honour of our ancestors. The Rats didn't win the Cheese Bowl fair and square. It's up to us to even the score."

"Excellent idea, Captain," said Figaro. He handed the football off to Benny. "Let's see the paper for a minute." Benny gave it to him.

*"October 15, 2004," read Figaro aloud. "This week more than one hundred space exhibits may be seen at the Forum. See your hair stand on end in front of the giant generator. Try your talents running over mousical notes on the floor. Free Food! Swiss, cheddar, brie, edam - all gouda cheeses. The Forum closes at 10 p.m. Be here by midnight to catch all the mouse fun."*

Figaro closed the paper and gave it back. He sighed and pulled at his

moustache.

Benny tore out *The Good Old Days* article. He folded it carefully and put it in his pocket. He looked at his real leather football and spun it around. It had fallen off someone's key chain. Next to his gold safety pin skates, it was his most prized possession.

"It's getting late," said Figaro. "The Forum should be closing any minute."

Benny tucked the football under his arm. "Let's go outside and toss a few passes," he said.

The three Mice hurried down to the floor.

"I hope these people are going home soon," Peppy said. "They make me nervous."

"Heads up!" Benny warned.

Shoes, shoes, and more shoes stomped around them.

CLOMP! A pair of hiking boots crashed down on either side of Benny's head. SCRUNCH! Figaro dodged one red stiletto heel. CRUNCH! A pair of steel-toed construction boots just missed Peppy by a hair.

"Look out!" Benny cried. He saw the high pointy heel of a black suede boot headed straight for him.

"Run for your lives, team," he shouted.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE SPACE SHIP

The high pointy heel of the black suede boot caught Benny on his tail.

"She got me," he cried.

"*Mon ami*," said Peppy. "Do something, Figaro!"

Figaro darted out in the open. The woman with the black boot looked down and saw him.

"A mouse!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. She jumped back, falling into a display of coloured planets floating in the air. Some of the round globes fell to the ground. Others popped like balloons. The people ran in all directions, screaming and shouting at the same time.

That was all Benny needed.

"Run for it, team!" he ordered. "We're out of here."

The three Mice darted their way through a forest of big feet stomping

on the floor. Finally, Benny saw an opening. He raced to the platform at the end of the arena. He ran underneath and climbed into a large wooden box. Figaro and Peppy were right behind him.

When they were safely out of danger, they sat in a small circle waiting to catch their breath.

"That was too close for comfort," murmured Benny when he could finally speak.

He remembered how one of his aunts had gone to the Great Beyond. It had been a large basketball shoe. The thought of it made him shudder.

At last, the crowd began to thin out. When everyone had gone, someone switched off the bright lights. Now, only a few lights shone dimly in the dark arena.

"It's about time," said Benny, whose patience was about to run out. "Let's look at the space toys before we play football."

There were so many exciting things to see down on the floor they soon forgot their fear. Benny and Figaro ran over some music notes on the floor and played songs. Figaro played a few bars from *Phantom of the Opera* and sang along. Dum...dum dum dum dum dum. Dum dum dum dum dum.

"I could play the part if I had a black cloak," said Figaro. He pulled at

his whiskers and put his arm across his face. "Some day I'm going back to the old Opera House. I might even play the Phantom Mouse of the Opera."

Benny and Peppy agreed that he would make an excellent phantom. He had the right operatic voice and sophisticated air about him. Before he had come to the Forum, he had lived at the opera house.

Peppy ran across a computer keyboard. Lights blinked. Bells rang. Keys plinked. He jumped clear.

"*Mon ami*," he gasped, when he was back on the ground again. "You can't touch a thing around here."

They looked at the Space Toys. There were several teen-age dolls dressed in silver space suits. They wore hi-tech watches. Peppy picked up a watch. He held it to his ear.

"Hello, hello," he said. "Anybody there?" Nobody answered. "I thought it was a telephone watch. It looks like a good thing to have. You never know when you might need something like this, eh?" He put it on.

Benny stopped in front of a small space ship. He looked up at it. It was cone-shaped and made of hard white plastic with red, white and blue stripes painted on the nose. It was mounted on a high platform.

"Look, gang," shouted Benny. "A space craft with our colours on it."

"An omen?" said Figaro. "Let's not go any closer, Captain. Maybe it's dangerous. A trap."

"Dangerous, smangerous," Benny grunted. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

Benny climbed up onto the space platform. His two friends followed slowly. The ship was so smooth it looked as if it were all one piece.

"Come on," he cried. "Let's go inside and look around."

"Are you crazy, Benny?" asked Peppy. "I thought we were going to play football."

"We are," Benny told him. He patted the ball under his arm. "We'll just take a quick look first."

He felt around until he found a small circle with red, white and blue stripes on it. He passed his hand over it. The door slowly slid open.

"Must be a scanner," remarked Figaro.

Peppy crossed his heart.

"I don't like the looks of this, Benny," he said. "This machine might send us straight to the Great Beyond."

"No way," said Benny. "It's not real. It's just a toy." He was about to step into the shuttle when a deep voice boomed down below.

"What do you think you're doing, squirt?"

Benny's heart raced. It was Big Boris Ringsky, boss of the Rink Rats. Big Boris was the meanest Rat who lived at the Forum. He always tried to spoil their fun, thought Benny.

Once, Boris and his three sidekicks, Old Scarface, Sargent and Packer, had stolen the Cheddar Cup - symbol of Mouse Hockey - away from them. The Mice had challenged them to a hockey game to win it back. Now, the other Rats stood behind Big Boris, ready to carry out any orders he gave them. Their neon swords glowed green in the dark.

"Yeah," whined Packer. "We had our eye on this thing all day, didn't we, Boss?"

Big Boris nodded.

"You're trespassing," the Rat warned. "Scram!"

"Get a life," said Benny, stamping his foot. "Why do you have to do everything we do?"

He ran over to the edge of the platform and looked down at the Rats. "We found it first. It belongs to us."

"That's right," Peppy agreed. "And the Forum belongs to all of us."

"Who says so?" Boris started crawling up the scaffold towards the

spacecraft. "Get out of there or you're mouseburgers." The other Rats slowly crawled up behind him.

Big Boris was just below Benny now. He reached up and grabbed Benny's foot.

Desperately, Benny twisted and turned, trying to break free. It was no use. The Rat held on tightly.

The Rat's laugh echoed through the arena.

"I've got you now, you little squirt," cried Boris. "You're trapped. It's our space ship and you're outta here."

## CHAPTER 3

### SPACE MICE

Benny wiggled and squirmed. Big Boris had a firm grip on his foot. Figaro and Peppy ran to his side. They grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled and tugged as hard as they could. Finally, Benny felt his foot slowly begin to slip as Big Boris lost his hold. He summoned up one last burst of energy and closed his eyes with the effort. At the same time, his two friends pulled harder.

SHLOOP! He was free.

Benny didn't stop to think. He ignored the pain in his foot. He grabbed Figaro and Peppy and shoved them inside the space craft. Quickly, he stepped in after them and pushed a small glowing light in the door. "Try and get us now," shouted Benny. The Rats climbed up on the platform and rushed towards them. Boris grabbed at the sliding door. He howled as it almost shut on his arm.

"Yes-s-s!" cried Benny triumphantly, as the door slid shut in the Rat's face. "Good riddance to bad rubbish."

"The door!" cried Peppy. "It's automatic."

He pushed at it but it wouldn't budge. The mice looked at each other. They stood together inside the space ship.

"We're locked in, Captain," whispered Figaro.

"And the Rink Rats are outside waiting for us..."

"If we ever get out," moaned Peppy.

"Think positive," said Benny. "Let's look around. The Rink Rats can't wait forever. In the meantime, let's have some fun."

They hurried to one of the ports in the space ship. Dozens of lights flashed and shone on the control panel. Benny scrambled into the captain's chair and peered out through the viewer.

From there, he could see the Forum spread out below him. It was quiet and empty after the hundreds of people had gone home for the night. The Rink Rats ran around the space craft in circles trying to find a way in. Boris looked up. He spotted Benny and the others at the window. He shook his fist in the air. Benny couldn't hear a word he said. The only sound to be heard was a faint humming. It seemed to come from all around them.

Benny wondered how long they would have to hide out in the space ship before they could make their escape. At this rate, it didn't look as if

they'd be able to play football tonight.

"I wish I'd brought something to eat with me," moaned

Peppy. "We could be locked in here for days."

"And starve to death?" Figaro joked.

"Well, you never know when we'll see our next meal again," Peppy said in a worried voice.

"You can always eat the football, Peppy," said Benny angrily. "It wouldn't be the first time."

"You ate our black licorice stick," Figaro reminded him. "The one we played hockey with."

"It was an accident," Peppy explained. "I didn't eat it on purpose. Besides, how was I to remember it was supposed to be a puck?"

"And the bubble gum we used as a baseball," Benny added.

"Well," Peppy sniffed, "I may be hungry, but I don't eat leather footballs." He looked insulted. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

Benny looked out the window and saw the Rink Rats climb down from the shuttle. Their green neon swords flashed in the dark arena. Immediately, Benny's guard was up. It wasn't like Big Boris and his gang to just go away and leave them alone. Why were they leaving the platform and

giving up without a fight?

"What dirty tricks are they're planning now?" he asked.

"They never give up this easily, Captain," said Figaro. "They must have another scheme in mind."

Peppy crowded in as they watched the Rink Rats swagger across the floor. The Rats stopped in front of a large display. The sign in front of it read "Generator." They poked around and pushed at some buttons.

Big Boris looked up at the space ship and grinned.

"He's smiling," said Benny. "He *never* smiles unless he's got something up his sleeve."

The mice watched from the platform.

They saw Packer, the rat, reach out and push the black button in front of him. His body jerked from top to bottom. "Look, Captain," cried Figaro. "Packer's hair is standing straight up on end. Like he put his finger in a light socket."

Packer jiggled back and forth. He squirmed up and down. Then he screamed and jumped away. His spiky hair - what was left of it - poked out like a wire brush. The other Rats rolled on the floor and laughed, their

stomachs jiggling up and down.

"See," said Peppy. "Big Boris never laughs unless someone's in pain."

"Even his best friends," murmured Benny. "What a rat."

The mice watched the rats closely. They ran back and forth, punching buttons. Bright streaks of light criss-crossed in the air like neon swords. Red, yellow, green, and blue lights flashed and zagged back and forth.

"They're going to blow us up," cried Peppy.

"They're just laser beams," said Figaro, pulling at his whiskers.

"Nothing to be afraid of."

"I don't trust them," said Benny firmly. "Not for a second."

The rats braced their shoulders against a barrel and rolled it across the floor. The barrel rolled faster and faster until it hit a scaffold across from the mice. The scaffold began to topple. They watched in horror as it buckled in from the bottom and collapsed. It toppled sideways, heading straight for Benny and his team-mates.

"Look out, team!" cried Benny. "A direct hit."

The broken scaffold came crashing down towards the space launch platform. It landed on the platform, a bare mouse whisker

away from them.

"A close call, Captain," said Figaro with a sigh. "Those rats are trying to send us to the Great Beyond."

The platform rumbled and vibrated beneath them.

"Look over there!" cried Peppy, pointing out the viewer port. They stared as a bolt of energy streaked from the Generator. It ran down the scaffold and flashed on the space ship at the exact moment the laser beam touched the ship.

Benny's heart pounded furiously as the air cleared. Packer stood beside the generator. Half his matted hair was gone. He felt the top of his head and screamed. Smoke came out of his ears and nose.

Inside the ship, Benny felt funny. He waved his hand in the air and it passed right through Peppy. Figaro touched several different things but his hands went straight through them.

"I feel strange," Peppy said. "Very strange."

He looked at his radio watch. "The numbers are spinning backwards," he cried. "So is the time display on the digital clock. Look at the control panel!"

"Something weird is going on," Benny whispered. "The large green

light on the control panel is brighter than all the rest," observed Figaro. "It reads Generator. Captain, I think we've found the power source."

Benny pressed his nose against the shuttle port. The ship hovered above the science displays on the floor of the Forum. Then, it glided smoothly out through a small vent in the domed roof.

"Look outside!" Peppy cried. "The Forum has disappeared. The Rink Rats are gone."

Figaro joined them.

"Peppy's right," said Figaro. "Everything has disappeared, Captain."

Benny looked through the window at the dark space around them. There were millions of stars shining. Maybe billions, he thought. It didn't feel as if the shuttle were moving at all. But the strange humming noise convinced him they were.

"I don't how it happened," he said. "Or why. But I think we're headed for outer space."

"Are you sure it's not the Great Beyond?" asked Peppy.

The three Mice looked at one another. Then, Benny pulled himself up to his full height. He was their captain.

"Don't worry," he promised. "We're just going for a little ride. We'll

be back home soon. You'll see."

But deep in his heart, Benny wasn't so sure. He had never been so scared in his entire life.

The ship hummed through space. Soon the Forum was a small spot in the distance.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE STOWAWAY

The shuttle ship hummed and glowed. Benny felt as if they weren't moving at all. He stared out the viewer port and looked at the midnight blue sky. There were more stars twinkling in the sky than he had ever seen in his entire life. Far far below him a giant globe kept getting smaller and smaller.

"I think it's our planet." Figaro stifled a yawn. "Earth. It looks beautiful from up here, Captain."

Benny nodded.

"It's a long way down," he murmured. "I wonder what happened to the Rink Rats. If they could see us now, they'd be furious."

"What's so strange about that?" muttered Peppy, opening one eye and then closing it again quickly. "They're always in a bad mood."

"I'd still like to see their faces." Benny laughed.

He tried hard to keep his eyes open, but they kept closing. The stars looked so beautiful. Benny didn't want to miss a thing. A comet streaked through the sky like a silver rocket.

Benny soon fell fast asleep lulled by the soft hum and dim lights. He dreamt he was playing ball on a large football grid. Every time someone passed him the football, Big Boris came out of nowhere and knocked him down. No matter how hard Benny ran, he couldn't catch up with him. The rat kept grabbing the ball and running for a touchdown. Boris looked back at him and grinned his evil grin.

"I told you we could beat you little runts at any sport," he cried.

Benny woke up in a sweat. The dream about Big Boris seemed so real it took him a few minutes to remember where he was.

Something different was happening to the space shuttle. Benny

looked out the viewer port. The space ship hovered like a giant humming bird in the air.

\Down below, Benny saw a large grassy area. Hundreds of empty seats circled a stadium. Slowly, the space shuttle lowered until it was directly over a large field. It circled the field once. Then, it landed softly at the far end behind an open stand.

It slid silently beneath the seats and came to a complete stop beside a grey stone wall. The wall looked beautiful. It was covered in climbing green ivy. It grew out of the cracks and almost hid the stones.

"Hey, wake up, gang," Benny shouted. "We've landed."

Slowly, Peppy and Figaro opened their eyes and rubbed them.

"Where are we?" Figaro blinked. Slowly he came fully awake.

Peppy looked at the computer clock on the control panel.

"Look at that!" he cried. "It says 1904."

"Nonsense," Benny said. "We just read the Mouse Gazette. It's not 1904. It's 2004."

"Don't get excited," Figaro said. "I think we passed through a time warp."

"You mean the Good Old Days?" asked Peppy in a hushed voice.

Figaro nodded. Slowly, the door of the space shuttle opened.

"Come on," cried Peppy. "Let's get out of here before we're locked in again."

Benny went first, with Figaro and Peppy close behind.

KNOCK...KNOCK... KNOCK.

A funny sound came from the inside the space shuttle.

"*Mon ami*, it's going to blow up," cried Peppy, trembling.

Benny was frightened, too. SCREECH! The sound was accompanied by an eerie scream. Several more screams followed.

"Let's get out of here," begged Peppy. "It's one of those aliens from outer space."

"Nonsense," said Benny. "There's no such thing." Still he wasn't so sure.

"Sure there is!" cried Peppy. "I saw a picture of an alien once. A weird green man with an antennae coming out of his head. His skin was like a lizard's and he had large red lips and ugly yellow fangs."

Benny shuddered and felt a shiver run down his spine.

"Not so fast, my friends," said Figaro. "It doesn't sound like an alien to me."

"Sounds as if it's coming from another world," said Benny. "Let's just ignore it while we explore this place first."

"The scream sounds familiar, Captain," said Figaro. "I'd rather investigate first and explore later."

The three mice crept up to the space shuttle. Figaro put his ear against the side of the hold at the bottom of the ship.

"Bennee...Figaro...Peppee..." cried a voice. "Help me! Please help me!"

"Wait a minute," said Figaro slowly. "I told you the voice sounded familiar."

Benny turned a small clasp on the hatch. Slowly, the door opened.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE COLISEUM

Out of the hatch of the space ship tumbled Mizzy Mouse. "I was afraid you'd leave me," she cried, as soon as her feet touched the ground.

"I'm not ready for the Great Beyond yet."

"Mizzy!" they cried in unison. "What are you doing here?"

"How long have you been down in the hatch?" asked Peppy.

"And why didn't you let us know sooner?" added Figaro.

"I must have fallen asleep," confessed the white mouse. "It was such a smooth ride. After I talked to you at the Forum, I wanted to explore before I put next week's paper to bed. I was almost squashed by a cowboy boot. So I hid inside the space shuttle until the crowd went home. I couldn't open the door from the inside. I banged and screamed for hours before I fell asleep."

"Well, you're here now," said Peppy. "That's what counts."

"Let's hide the space shuttle," suggested Figaro. "We don't want anyone to find it. It's our only means of getting back home."

"Good thinking, Fig," said Benny. "Who knows how long we'll be locked in this time warp?"

They stood behind the space shuttle, two on each side at the back. They pushed it into its hiding place under the stands. It was hidden in a spot where it couldn't be seen. At least Benny hoped no one would find it.

The four Mice searched under the stands and around the trees. They gathered together as many leaves and twigs as they could find on the ground. They placed the leaves carefully over the shuttle and put sticks over the pile. Figaro and Peppy rolled some stones over to the pile. Carefully, they placed them on top to weigh it down.

"Looking good," said Peppy. "Nobody will ever guess what's hidden underneath."

"Remember where we've left the space ship," Benny warned. "What if we don't like it here? We may have to make a quick getaway."

They looked around. There was a giant SECTION TEN painted on the ivy covered stone wall behind the stands.

"This looks like a coliseum," Figaro reasoned. He tweaked his black

moustache. "The walls are the same. The Romans built their outdoor arenas just like this."

"It can't be Roman ruins," Peppy said. "The computer reads 1904. Look!" he said, pointing at his watch. "Now the watch reads 1904, too."

Benny looked up at the dark sky. Billions of stars twinkled above like a canopy. It reminded him of the Big M's cosy pad down at the dump. The Big M lived in a dump because he liked to eat fresh fruits and vegetables. He made bonfires and toasted marshmallows under the stars. Benny wished with all his heart that he were here now. It was better than being lost somewhere in time and space.

"Let's look around," he said bravely.

"Maybe we'll find some food," Peppy said, brightening.

"Or, maybe we'll find something we didn't bargain for," Figaro suggested. He pointed over to the far side of the stadium. "Look! Something's moving over there."

Benny led the way. He scrambled silently around the outside of the giant track. The others followed. As they neared the end of the field, they heard voices.

Cautiously, Benny and the others drew closer.

Benny's eyes widened. At the far end of the football field was a smaller playing field marked out with sticks and stones and chalk lines.

"HUT ONE...HUT TWO...HUT THREE." The ball was snapped. Mouse bodies hurtled through the air. They crashed to the ground. GRUNT! GROAN! A pile-up.

"Mice!" cried Benny joyously.

"Playing football, Captain," said Figaro. "If I'm not mistaken."

The football players jumped to their feet at the sound of Benny's voice. They wore black and yellow turtle neck sweaters and an assortment of funny looking gear. Cigar case and walnut shell helmets. Pieces of old football programs strapped to their arms, legs and chests. Their equipment looked a lot like their own uniforms at the Forum, thought Benny. But their uniforms were more modern than these old fashioned outfits.

One of the players came over to them. He had an air of authority.

Benny stared at the mouse.

"Who are you?" asked the football mouse. "And what do you want? This is our stadium."

Benny had a funny feeling that he had met this mouse somewhere before. But he couldn't remember where. Besides, it was impossible.

"I'm Benny the Bullet," he answered.

"The greatest hockey player who ever lived," Mizzy added.

The other mouse huffed. "*I'm* the greatest hockey player who ever lived," he said. "And the greatest football player who ever played in the MFL."

"My grandfather used to play in the Mouse Football League." Benny felt excited in spite of himself. "He used to talk about it all the time. Before he went to the Great Beyond."

All the Mice crossed their hearts reverently.

"I'm Benjamin," said the large mouse. "They call me the Ice Box. I'm a good blocker."

"There is a 350 lb. player in the NFL," said Benny. "Uh...National Football League. His nickname is the Refrigerator."

The mouse - surrounded by a raggle taggle group of tired football Mice - looked puzzled.

"Refrigerator?" he asked. "What's that?"

Benny thought for a moment, then shrugged.

"It's something like an ice box," he told him.

"Only it's electric," Mizzy added. "You plug it into a wall socket. It

stays cold all the time and you don't have to empty out the water."

The Ice Box stared at them carefully. Then he stamped his foot and waved his fist in the air.

"Get out of here," he yelled. "We've got enough trouble around here. We don't need any outsiders coming along stirring things up."

"Maybe you can help us," Figaro said. "We came on a long journey. I'm afraid we're lost."

"It was an accident," Peppy blurted out.

"And we want to get back as soon as possible," Mizzy continued.

"That's right," said Benny. He twirled his miniature football. "But we can't do much tonight after the long ride. We'd like to stay the night. Until we can figure something out."

The strange mice gathered around Benny and stared at the football.

"What's that?" they asked, interrupting each other.

They grabbed the football and tossed it back and forth. It kept falling and slipping out of their hands. "Our football is bigger and rounder. We've never seen a small ball like this before."

The Ice Box looked at it closely, then threw it over to the sidelines.

"We don't need this," he said. "We have our own ball."

He nodded to his team and motioned them to come closer. They gathered in a huddle, heads bent, speaking in loud whispers. A few minutes later, they sprang apart and formed a circle around Benny and his team.

"We were just going to have a scrimmage when you showed up," the Ice Box said. "So we had a conference. Would you like to play against us? Nothing at stake. But, we could use the practice."

"I don't know," said Benny. "We really want to get back home as soon as possible." He already missed the Forum. Although playing football with the strange mice might be fun, who knew how long they might be kept from going home?

Benny and his team went into their own huddle.

"These mice aren't too friendly, if you ask me," said Benny. "Do you think we can trust them?"

"Let's not be hasty, Captain," said Figaro reasonably. "We *were* going to start up the old Mouse Football League again. Remember?"

"This is our chance to play with the Old Timers," said Mizzy. "How often does a modern mouse get a chance to do that?"

"They don't look like Old Timers," said Peppy. He scratched his head. "They look just like us."

"That's the point, Peppy," said Figaro. "They're the same age as we are now because we've entered a time warp. Actually, they've all gone to the Great Beyond."

"*Mon ami*," said Peppy. "You mean they're ghosts!"

"No, Peppy," Benny explained. "These football mice lived a long long time ago. They could have known our ancestors. Or even *played* with them."

"Maybe they *are* our own great-great-great-great..."

"Grandfathers?" interrupted Mizzy. Figaro nodded.

Benny chewed on his lip, thinking.

"The Ice Box doesn't trust us," he said. "But he doesn't have a clue he might be our long lost ancestor."

"Shall we play with them?" asked Mizzy. "It might be fun."

"I say we give it a try," said Peppy. "They don't look too scary to me. At least, not now that I know who they are."

"This will give us a chance to get to know each other, Captain," said Figaro. "Although we must never tell them the truth about who we are."

"You're right, Fig," said Benny. "It will have to be our secret."

They came out of the huddle and went back to the Old Timers.

"We've decided to play," Benny said. "We'll stay until tomorrow night."

The next day, he and his team could climb on board the space shuttle and try to get back to their own time and place. If all went as planned, it would be as if they had never been away.

Benny began to breathe a little easier.

## CHAPTER 6

### A SCRIMMAGE

"Here, catch!" cried the Ice Box.

He tossed a big round ball to Benny. He caught it awkwardly. It felt heavy and as hard as a bullet. It was too large to handle easily.

"What's this?" he complained. "Doesn't look like a football to me."

"It's our football," the Ice Box grunted. "A jawbreaker. If it's good

enough for us, it's good enough for you."

"Why don't we use our ball?" asked Peppy. "It's a real leather football. This is just a piece of candy."

Benny glared at him. He remembered Peppy's bad habit of eating things he wasn't supposed to. Like the licorice puck and the bubble gum baseball. Peppy looked down at the ground and stubbed his foot in the dirt until Benny looked away.

"You're the visitors," said the Ice Box, ignoring the part about the football. "You can kick off."

The way they played back home was just the opposite. The visitors received and the home team kicked off. Or they tossed a coin to see who would receive the ball first. But tonight there was a strong wind, and if the Ice Box wanted the ball on the kick-off, he would have to play against the wind.

The way the Ice Box wanted to play didn't seem fair to Benny. But then things were seldom fair – especially when they played against the Rink Rats. These mice reminded Benny a lot of the rats.

"You can have a couple of our players," said the Ice Box.

Benny agreed, and two players crossed over to his side of the line.

The Ice Box set the jawbreaker down on the line of scrimmage. It was halfway between the tin can goalposts at each end of the playing field. The Old Timers had measured out 100 mouse yards and marked out the lines with chalk.

Benny and his team went into formation. Figaro held the ball in an upright position. Mizzy ran up to the jawbreaker and kicked it fifty mouse yards. A mouse grabbed the ball and carried it up the field. Figaro threw a flying tackle at the runner and brought him down.

The ball was placed on the ten yard line. After three running plays through the middle, the Old Timers had fourth down and had to kick.

Mizzy caught the ball and ran it back to mid-field. The team went into a huddle.

"Peppy, dive off tackle." said Benny. The team broke.

Figaro stood over the ball. Benny stood close behind him, calling out the signals.

"CHEESE 22! CHEESE 22!"

On the third CHEESE, the ball came out and Benny handed off to Peppy who ran for eight mouse yards.

"Way to go, team," shouted Benny. "Two yards to first down."

They went back into the huddle. Across from them, the other mice stood in a line, waiting for them. They were ready to block the first move they made.

"Let's try a fake," whispered Benny. "Mizzy, you take the Statue of Liberty on the second SWISS."

"They've probably seen that play before," said Peppy.

"No way," said Benny. "These Old Timers are living in the Dark Ages. This play hasn't been invented yet."

"Not in 1904, Captain," said Figaro. He stood over the ball as Benny called out the signals.

"SWISS 22! SWISS 22!"

The ball came out. Benny faked to Peppy who went over the centre. The other mice crashed into him, knocking him down. Benny held the ball over his shoulder and Mizzy, playing right end, ran around Benny, grabbed the ball, and scooted down the field for the opposite goal posts.

In the clear, she ran all the way for a touchdown.

"YES!" Benny cried. He jerked his arm in the air twice. "We deked them out."

"Touchdown!" cried Peppy and Figaro. They hugged each other and

jumped up and down. Mizzy did her special touchdown dance. Two steps to the right. Two steps to the left. A pirouette. And a flying jump in the air.

She kicked the convert.

The Ice Box and his team-mates ran over, out of breath.

"I've never seen that play before," the Ice Box said. "Are you sure it's fair play? I think it's against the rules."

"What rules?" demanded Benny. "I don't see any rule book around here. Do you?"

The Ice Box spluttered. He pulled at his striped turtle necked sweater.

"Well," he said, "there may not be a real rule book. But if there was one, it wouldn't have that play in it."

"Where we come from every player has a playbook," Benny muttered.

"We study the plays for hours between games.

He huddled the team together on their 35-yard line.

Peppy kicked-off to the Ice Box's forty-yard line. Benny's team raced down the field and smeared the ball carrier.

Slowly, the wobbly-legged ball carrier climbed to his feet.

"Hey, I thought this was just a practice," he grumbled.

Benny's team faced their opponents across the line of scrimmage.

Benny could feel the bad blood between the local mice. Even though the Ice Box had said they just wanted a practice, it looked as if he played each scrimmage like it was a grudge match.

The local mice took their positions at mid field and leaned forward, ready to advance.

The ball was snapped, the Ice Box tucked the ball into his body. Benny could read him like a book. He wasn't going to try anything fancy. These mice came from the old school. No creativity at all. He was going to plunge over centre. Motioning his team-mates to close the holes, Benny, Figaro, and Peppy were waiting for the Ice Box. They hit him high, they hit him low. The Ice Box went down with a thud for a two yard loss.

The playing field was brightly lit with a big Jack-o-Lantern moon shining overhead. It was strangely quiet, and Benny wondered if the football mice would start a fight.

There was something else in the air, too. Benny didn't know what it was. A sense that something wasn't quite right. He looked over his shoulder. The football mice shifted from one foot to the other nervously.

"What is it?" demanded Benny. It was so quiet, it was spooky.

"What's the matter with everyone? You all look like you've seen a ghost."

"Rats," said the Ice Box softly.

Rats! Benny's heart sank. There was no escaping them. Even if they went back a thousand years in time, Rats would be there to make life miserable.

"Rats live here, too?" asked Benny in a shocked voice.

The Ice Box nodded. "Here they come now across the park."

RATS!

## CHAPTER 7

Benny looked over to the far side of the grid. Four dark figures slouched along the outside track. They cut across the field, still under dark shadow.

They didn't come close enough for Benny to see their faces clearly. But from where he stood, the Rats looked a lot like Big Boris and his gang. Benny stepped back and stood beside the football mice, hoping the rats

wouldn't see him. He needed time to gather his thoughts together.

But the rat didn't look at him. He was more interested in the Ice Box, the captain of the football mice.

"Well, well," he sneered. He was the biggest rat of the four. "Look what we've got here! More mice."

"We've never seen them before tonight," said the Ice Box nervously. "They're just visitors."

The Ice Box didn't act like the same mouse, thought Benny. Instead of his bossy ways, he looked as if he was afraid of the big rat. Not that Benny blamed him. He would scare his own grandmother if he wanted to.

"Do you think you can get away with that?" asked the big rat.

"What?" said the Ice Box.

The rat poked the Ice Box hard in the chest. He almost shoved him backwards into a couple of his own team-mates.

"Do you think these little squirts are gonna play football?" he asked.

"Do you think they're gonna help you win the Cheese Bowl this year?"

The other rats laughed loudly. They poked each other in the ribs. The big rat leaned down and shoved his nose right up against nose of the Ice Box.

"Well," he stuttered, "we did ask them to practise with us tonight."

"And what about the Cheese Bowl?" asked the rat. "Did you ask them to play in the biggest game of the year, too?"

The Ice Box nodded.

"We didn't think you'd mind," he said firmly. "After all, they are our guests. Besides, they've never played *our* kind of football before. They don't even know the plays."

"You're so big and strong," said one of the football mice. "You don't have to be afraid of anyone or anything."

"You better know it!" he said. He rubbed his whiskers, in thought. He came to a decision. His mouth curled down at the sides.

"Seeing as they don't...uh...know all the rules. I guess the little squirts can play on your team. You need all the help you can get."

"Yeah," said one of the other rats in a familiar voice. "We're going to tackle, pound, thump, and grind you into the dirt."

"They haven't got a chance against us," said the rat. "The Cheese Bowl is as good as ours already."

The Ice Box shoved his shoulders back.

"It's not your Cheese Bowl," he said angrily. He pulled himself up

bravely and glared at the rat. "It belongs to the Mouse Football League. The Cheese Bowl is supposed to be played between us and mice from Outside. Not rats."

"Most of the mice from Outside are afraid to play," said a football mouse. "After last year."

"You're making me cry." The rat wiped away fake tears. "We challenged you to a game. And you're gonna play it."

"Yeah," whined one of his sidekicks. "And we're gonna win it, aint we, Boss?"

The big Rat nodded. "You can bet on it," he replied.

"But it's not fair," cried the Ice Box. "Rats are bigger than mice. Besides, we want our own game."

"Why don't you start your own league?" cried one of the football mice.

The big rat jabbed his finger at the mouse.

"Listen, you little trouble maker," he said, "and listen good. We don't *have* to play in any dumb football game to win the Cheese Bowl. We can just steal it any time we want."

"What's stopping you?" asked the Ice Box, stamping his foot.

"None of the other rats around here play football," explained the rat.

"If we want to play football we have to play against you pint-sized rodents. It's not that we like your league better. It's the *only* league. Ain't it, boys?"

The Rats snorted again, wrestling around, pushing and shoving each other.

"Besides," said a scrawny rat, "You have a big advantage. You also have a bowl made of cheddar cheese."

"What advantage do we have?" cried the Ice Box in an outraged voice.

"The best advantage you can give us is to stay away and let us play our own game."

"Without interference," said another mouse.

"I'm gonna give you pint-sized rodents a break," said the rat. "You're looking at our team now. Four rats against eleven mice. What could be more fair than that?"

"Nothing you ever do is fair," said the Ice Box angrily. The rat sneered down at him.

"Take it or leave it!" he said. "We're playing in the Cheese Bowl. And nobody's gonna stop us."

"The Bowl is as good as ours, aint it, Boss?"

Benny felt as if he were going to faint. He and his team-mates had watched with growing horror. He looked at Peppy, Figaro and Mizzy. They stood frozen, as if someone had turned them into statues. Nobody said a word.

The rat looked just like Big Boris Ringsky. And the other rats were dead ringers for Packer, Sargent and Scarface.

Where had they come from, Benny wondered. The rats had been left behind in the Forum when the space shuttle took off. He had seen them with his own eyes!

How come they knew the football mice? Had they followed Benny and his friends in another space shuttle? Why didn't Big Boris and the other rats recognize them?

Benny gulped and swallowed hard. There was something weird going on. Whatever it was, he intended to find out.

## CHAPTER 8

### THE FOOTBALL

Benny looked at Figaro. He shrugged. So far, Big Boris and the other rats hadn't recognized them. They were only interested in the Ice Box and *his* team.

"Are you Big Boris Ringsky?" Benny asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

The big rat spun around and looked him over.

"Who wants to know?" he asked. There was no sign of recognition in his eyes. It was if he had never seen Benny before in his entire life. Benny felt a chill go up his back.

"Benny the Bullet," he said. His words came out in a rush. "I just wondered what your name was. You look a lot like someone I know. But it couldn't be. That rat lives... somewhere else."

"This *is* Big Boris Ringsky," stammered the Ice Box. "How did you know? You must have heard about him somewhere. He lives at the coliseum with his *gang*. Packer, Sargent and Scarface."

"Big Boris?" cried Peppy. "Here? Impossible."

"He's back at the Forum," said Mizzy. "He tried to get on the space shuttle. We saw him."

"Shhhh," Figaro warned. "We'll talk about this later."

Boris grabbed Benny by the throat. He lifted him off the ground.

"So I'm Big Boris?" he asked. "What's it to you?"

"Oh, nothing," Benny said quickly. "I must have seen your picture somewhere. You look familiar, that's all."

Boris put Benny down and shoved out his chest. A crooked smile crossed his face.

"Mind your own beeswax," he said. "I'm famous, all right. My picture is plastered all over the place."

"On the *most wanted* list," Peppy mumbled half under his breath.

"What did you say?" Boris reeled around and grabbed Peppy.

"I believe he said you'd be most sorely missed," said Figaro. "If you decide not to play football, that is."

Boris let go of Peppy's shirt and smiled broadly.

"Don't worry! We'll be here tomorrow. Rain or shine."

Benny stood his ground.

"We've decided to stick around for the big game," he said bravely. "The Cheese Bowl classic."

"Yes!" agreed Mizzy. "We're going to help our new friends win."

The rats circled around Benny and his friends. They looked them over closely. They poked the mice all over, in their stomachs and on their chests. They felt their arms to see how strong they were.

"Stick around, shrimp," he said to Benny with a loud laugh. "We can beat eleven mice just as easily as seven. Right, boys?"

"Sure, boss," said Packer, the scrawny rat.

"We'll ride them over the rails," said Sargent.

"Yeah, boss," added Scarface. "We'll tie them up in knots. We'll tackle them to the ground. We'll kick them. I...mean...we'll kick the *ball*."

"That's what I like to hear," said Big Boris, his face twisted in a mean grin. "The fighting spirit. You've got the right attitude, team. Win at any cost."

Benny was still in shock. He couldn't believe this Big Boris –

whoever he was – was just as bad as the Big Boris they had left back at the Forum.

"See you tomorrow night at the big game," said Boris. "Be sure you show up on time. We'll show you how to play *real* football."

The rats turned and swaggered across the field, snapping their fingers and twitching their shoulders. They reached the far end and disappeared behind the stands.

The mice stood together. For the first time, Benny felt sorry for the football mice. They weren't the enemy. The football Mice needed help badly. And Benny and his team were just the ones to give it to them.

"Now you can see our problem," said the Ice Box. "Sorry I was rude when you first came. But you could have been a tough gang of mice from Outside. You could have been just as bad as the Rink Rats. How were we supposed to know you were sent here to help us win the Cheese Bowl?"

"Wait just a minute," said Benny. "We weren't *sent*. It was just an accident."

"A happy accident, I must say," said Figaro smoothly. "Who knows? Maybe we *were* sent here to help you."

"Our Guardian Angels," said one of the football mice with reverence.

"There's no other explanation."

"Well, actually there is," said Mizzy. "Another explanation, I mean."

"We don't have time to hear about it now," said the Ice Box,  
interrupting rudely.

The mice had dropped their equipment on the ground when the rats showed up. Now they picked up their gear and started putting on their walnut shell and cigar case helmets.

"We still have a few hours until morning," said the Ice Box. "We've got time for a scrimmage."

"Where's the ball?" asked one of the mice. "I thought it was here."

He bent over and began looking in the grass for the jawbreaker. Some of the others joined him.

"Come on, team," said Benny. "Let's look for the Old Timer's ball. Peppy?" He looked around for his friend and couldn't see him. "Where is he? He's disappeared."

Benny could feel his heart pounding. So many strange things had already happened that night. Now Peppy was gone.

"Peppy, Peppy," he cried.

"Where are you?" Figaro and Mizzy called out.

"Over here," called Peppy from the far side of the track. "I found some food."

Benny ran over to him. He had to admit he was beginning to feel a bit hungry himself. They had been so busy all night he'd forgotten all about eating.

"What kind of food?" he asked.

Peppy's voice sounded different, as if he couldn't talk straight.

"I'm not exactly sure what it is," Peppy said. His left cheek bulged.

"But it tastes good. I think it's candy. It's so hard I can't bite it."

He rolled a big, round ball around in his mouth. It looked like a huge pink and green marble.

The Ice Box came running over.

"Hey!" he cried angrily, stamping his foot. "He's eating our football."

"I am not," said Peppy. He sounded indignant. "This is just a big black ball I found in the ditch."

"Looks like a jawbreaker," Figaro said.

Benny was furious.

"Peppy, how could you?" he cried. "You know how important this football is to the Old Timers."

"But, Benny," Peppy protested, "I didn't know this was the football. I was just looking around in the grass for something to eat. And it was dark. I was so hungry I almost fainted. Then, I found this big candy."

He looked down at the ground.

"Cross my heart and hope to die," Peppy said. He crossed his heart.

"I swear I didn't know it was their football."

"Peppy," Benny explained patiently. "I thought I warned you about eating strange things. Especially if you don't know where they come from."

"You've lost us the Cheese Bowl," the Ice Box cried. "All the fancy plays in the world won't help us now. Not without our football."

Peppy spit the ball out and looked at it.

"It's not too late," he said. It was small and sticky. The colours had changed to green and purple. "We can still play with it."

"No, we can't," grumbled the Ice Box. "It's too small. Besides, it's green and purple. Who ever heard of a green and purple football? Forget about winning the Cheese Bowl this year. And perhaps forever."

## CHAPTER 9

### BENNY'S FOOTBALL

"Come on, Ice Box," said Benny. "We can use our football, can't we? Help us look for it. You threw it over here somewhere." He pointed to the other side of the track.

"Why would we want to use that puny little thing?" Ice Box asked. "We need a big ball. Something we can hold onto."

"Don't worry," said Figaro. "Now that we can't use your, uh, purple and green football, we have no choice. We have to find the real one. You'll get used to it."

Grudgingly, the Ice Box and the other Mice fanned out in the opposite direction. Benny searched around in the grass at the edge of the grid. Secretly, he was glad Peppy had eaten the Old Timer's football. It was far too big for the modern game. It had been all right for the ground game their

ancestors played. Passes hadn't been invented yet. All they ever did was tackle, drop kick and run with the ball.

The modern game was scientific. And Benny's football was perfect. Small and oval-shaped and made of real leather, it was a replica of the ball used in the big league.

His three friends joined in the search.

"We've got to find the football, Mizzy," Benny said. They kicked at the long grass.

"Benny?" asked Mizzy in a worried voice. "What's Big Boris doing here?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "And how come he didn't recognize us? He's just trying to pull one of his scams. He knows us *too* well, if you ask me. But he let on he'd never seen us before."

"Oui," said Peppy. "What a big lie. He sees us every day back at the Forum."

"Maybe he has never seen us before, Captain," said Figaro pulling at his moustache.

The four Mice scuffled through the grass looking for the football. Peppy flopped down on the ground and began to pull out the blades of grass



into outer space."

"But it was just like magic the way you found the scanner that opened the door, Benny," said Mizzy.

Peppy jumped to his feet and kicked at the pile of grass.

"Could that have been an accident too?" he asked.

"I think we're here for a reason," said Figaro.

"What kind of a reason?" asked Mizzy. "A secret mission of some kind?"

Benny's foot touched the football in the grass. He bent down and picked it up. He spun it around happily.

"I found the ball," he cried. "Maybe you're right. Our mission is to help the football mice win the Cheese Bowl."

Benny faded back for a pass.

"Heads up, team," he cried. "If we're going to beat those Old Timer rats, we should practice all night."

The ball zoomed through the air. Figaro, Peppy and Mizzy faded back to catch it. Peppy tackled Mizzy, as she made a finger tip catch.

"Way to go, Mizzy," cried Benny. "A few good plays like that and we'll win the Cheese Bowl for sure."



## CHAPTER 10

### SPACE TOY?

Benny and his friends spent the rest of the night practising with the football mice. The Ice Box kept fumbling the small ball, but finally got the hang of it.

In the morning, a big red sun rose over the coliseum. It spread rays of golden sunshine across the deserted field.

"Time for bed, everyone," said the Ice Box. "We've got a big game tonight. If we want to play our best, we need a good day's sleep."

"Where do you sleep?" asked Benny. "We sleep in the visiting team's locker room back home."

When he spoke of home, there was a tight feeling in his chest. He had only been gone one night and he was homesick already.

"We have quite comfortable quarters," said the Ice Box proudly. "Up in the broadcast booth. You're welcome to join us for the day."

"Lead the way," said Peppy, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"Thank you very much," said Benny. "We'll just find a spot under the bleachers. We'll be fine."

"Surely we can't be rude, Captain," said Figaro. "These fine football players have offered us a place to lay our heads. I think we should accept."

Benny was worried about the space shuttle. They hadn't checked it once all night long. What if it had disappeared? What if it wasn't there after the big Cheese Bowl game that night? Getting back home safe and sound was even more important than the Cheese Bowl.

"Thanks, Ice Box," said Benny. "We'll see you tonight. Right after the college bowl game in the coliseum is over. Right now, we have business to look after."

"What kind of business?" asked Peppy. He yawned loudly.

Benny gave the others a warning look.

"The subject is closed," he said. "Come on, team."

The football mice headed for the broadcast booth where they slept during the day. Benny led the way to SECTION TEN underneath the stadium.

"What's on your mind, Captain?" asked Figaro. "Why don't you want us to sleep up in the broadcast booth?"

Benny motioned his team to gather around.

"I want to check the space shuttle," he said. "We have plans to make."

We want to get back to the Forum as soon as the Cheese Bowl is over."

"You're right as usual, Captain," said Figaro. "We should check on the shuttle now."

Benny began to walk towards the ivy covered wall where they had left the shuttle.

"How are we going to get back to the Forum, Benny?" asked Peppy. He tugged at his hat, worried.

"We'll think of something," said Benny confidently.

"I hope you're right," said Mizzy. The others nodded in agreement.

Suddenly, Benny stopped short. He motioned for the others to be quiet.

"Shhh!" he whispered. He pointed to the spot where they had left the shuttle. "Don't even breathe. There's someone there!"

A boy dressed in funny clothes scuffed his heavy shoes through the dry leaves. He wore a pair of brown knickers with a dark blue and white football sweater. On his head was a cap with a brim.

The mice crept closer and crawled underneath the leaves. They peeked out at the strange looking boy.

"What if he breaks our space shuttle?" cried Peppy.

"If he finds it," said Benny.

"You mean *when* he finds it," said Mizzy.

The boy stopped suddenly and bent down in the grass.

"Do something!" cried Mizzy. "Look! He's found the shuttle."

Benny felt powerless as he watched the boy toss the sticks and stones off to the side. Then, he dug his hand under the big pile of leaves. A look of surprise came over his face. The mice watched in horror.

The boy pulled the space shuttle out of its hiding place. He held it up in the air above his head.

"What's this?" he said aloud. "Looks like a fancy top." He turned it over and over in his hands as if looking for something. "There's no string, so it can't be a top. Or a yo-yo. There's no key. So it's not a wind-up toy."

The boy stood up and started running around in circles. "ZOOM! ZOOM! ZOOM!" he cried. "BLURRR! BLURRR! BLURRR!" The space shuttle flew through the air in the boy's hand.

Benny's heart hammered in his chest. He could hardly breathe.

"He's playing with our space shuttle," he cried. "What if he decides to throw it like a paper airplane?"

Peppy crossed his heart. "Don't let him break it," he pleaded.

"We've got to do something, Captain," said Figaro. "If this kid destroys the shuttle, we'll be locked in a time warp forever. We'll never get back to the Forum."

"Quickly!" added Mizzy. "Somebody stop him."

Benny scratched his head. How could they stop the boy from doing anything he wanted with their shuttle? He didn't have a clue. For once Benny couldn't think of anything to do. Not anything at all.

## CHAPTER 11

### A CLOSE CALL

The mice huddled together behind a large rock. Benny wished he knew how they were going to get their space shuttle back.

"What if the boy steals the shuttle?" Peppy interrupted his thoughts.

"Then what?"

"Let's not cross our bridges yet," said Figaro. "One step at a time."

In the meantime, Benny's brain buzzed with ideas. Most of them wouldn't work, he thought with despair.

By now, the boy was running around in bigger and bigger circles. ZOOM! ZOOM! ZOOM! The space shuttle almost touched the ground several times. BRRRR! BRRRR! BRRRR! It went up and down in jerky starts and stops.

"Listen up, gang," he said. "I have a plan. It just might work."

"Is it dangerous?" asked Peppy.

Benny didn't answer.

"We have to get him to put the space ship down," said Benny. "I wouldn't want to part with it if I were a boy. And if I were a boy, what would I like even more than a toy?" Benny reasoned aloud.

"I don't know?" asked Peppy. "What?"

"I've got an idea," he said. "We've got to get the boy's attention. Get him to think of something else besides the shuttle."

"A difficult task, Captain," said Figaro.

"Not if we use a decoy," said Benny firmly.

"What kind of a decoy?" asked Mizzy.

"A mouse decoy," Benny told them. "We all know how much boys love pet mice. If the boy sees one of us he'll forget all about the space shuttle."

The others shuddered. It was an awful thought.

"And if he forgets about it, Captain," said Mizzy, "he might let it crash."

Figaro pulled nervously at his moustache.

"We have to try something," said Benny. "We can't just give up."

"I'll volunteer to be the decoy, Benny," said Mizzy quietly.

"I don't mind doing it, Mizzy," said Benny. "I'm the captain."

"You're both fine looking mice, Captain," said Figaro. "But if I had to choose, I'd say Mizzy has a slight edge."

"I think we should both try to deke him out," said Benny. "We'll get the boy to chase us. When he sees one of us, he'll put the space shuttle down. Figaro and Peppy can move it to a safer place and cover it up again."

"What if you both end up in the Great Beyond?" cried Peppy. "How will we get back without you?"

"If something happens to them, Peppy," said Figaro quietly, "I'm not so sure I want to go back."

"*Oui*," Peppy agreed. He wiped at his eyes.

"Shhh!" Benny cautioned. "He'll hear us."

The mice rustled under the leaves.

"Let's go!" whispered Mizzy. "I can't stand the suspense."

"Neither can I," said Benny. "I'll go to the left. When you see me out in the open, turn right and make a break for it."

"ZOOM! ZOOM! ZOOM!" cried the boy. He made a clicking noise with his tongue. The space shuttle came down, just skimming the ground.

"Let's go!" Benny cried.

He darted out into the open. The zooming noise stopped. A few feet away, Benny sat up, his nose quivering. The boy's eyes widened when he saw Benny. He stared straight at him.

The boy put the space shuttle gently down on the ground as if he didn't want to break it. That was a good sign.

Benny shouted, "Now, Mizzy."

He raced across the ground under the stadium. He stopped once and looked over his shoulder. His heart raced. The boy was almost on top of

him. Had he seen Mizzy yet?

"Benny!" screamed Mizzy from somewhere behind him. "Watch out!"

The boy made a flying tackle into the leaves. Benny spun around in a circle. What was the matter? His tail hurt. The boy had his thumb clamped down on the tip of Benny's tail and he couldn't move. He felt paralysed with fright.

"Mizzy, go back," he cried faintly. There was no use making two sacrifices for the team.

"No way, Captain," Mizzy cried. She ran over to him. "We'll get out of this. Together."

She jumped a few inches in front of the boy and stopped. She sat watching him. The boy's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Two Mice!" he cried. "One grey and one white. I can start a collection."

He picked Benny up and held him in the palm of his hand. Benny peered into the bluest eyes he had ever seen.

"I'll just put you in my pocket," said the boy.

"You'll be safe there until I can put you and your little friend in a cage."

A cage! Benny had never been more frightened in his life. He couldn't imagine living in a cage. He had been captured in a waste basket once. That was bad enough. But never to live in freedom again. He shuddered at the thought.

Before the boy had a chance to carry out his threat, Mizzy started to dance around in front of him.

"Oh no you don't," cried Mizzy. She did her football dance on top of the leaves. Two steps to the right. Two steps to the left. A pirouette. Then a back flip.

"A dancing mouse!" cried the boy. "What a find! I'll be rich."

What was Mizzy doing, thought Benny. Why didn't she run away before she got caught? The boy lunged forward from his position on the ground. His hand reached out to grab Mizzy. She danced away from him, always staying just out of reach.

The boy clutched Benny in his hot sticky hand. In the meantime, Benny felt warmer and warmer. He was suffocating to death. Sitting in a pocket would be better than this, he thought.

Benny squirmed and wiggled. He felt himself sliding just a little. His head poked out one end of the boy's closed fist. He tried harder and took

deep breaths. He scrunched himself into a ball and made himself smaller.

He

held his stomach in. Finally, he heard a loud "KERPLUNK" and he was loose! He rolled neatly down the boy's arm and tumbled onto the grass.

"Ahhh!" cried the boy. "Who needs a plain old grey mouse anyway? I'll take the dancing white mouse instead."

Benny raced over to Mizzy.

"Benny," she cried. "You're free."

"We're out of here," shouted Benny. "Come on. Hurry!"

They raced across the ground together. The boy took up the chase. He looked like a giant. Benny was surprised the boy was such a slow runner.

He and Mizzy hid behind a small bush and peered out from behind it. The space shuttle was nowhere to be seen. The big pile of leaves near the spot where it had been before was gone.

The boy scuffed through the leaves looking for the shuttle. They scattered in every direction underneath his heavy shoes.

"Jason!" called a voice.

The boy looked up and frowned.

"What do you want, Sis?" he asked. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Busy doing nothing as usual," answered the girl. "Mother wants you to come home and help get ready. Uncle George has his brand new car. He's going to take us for a long drive in the country."

The girl was wearing funny clothes just like the boy's, thought Benny. Black laced boots, long flowered dress and a woolen shawl. On her head she wore a black bonnet. Her fair hair hung down in ringlets around her face.

"You mean Uncle George got his new horseless carriage?" the boy shouted. "I'd rather go for a ride than chase mice any day. Let's go!"

"You were playing with mice?" asked the girl. "Ughh! I hope you didn't touch them. I'm telling mother."

From their hiding place, Benny and Mizzy watched them hurry out of the stadium. When they were gone, Benny relaxed. He and Mizzy had just been through a harrowing experience. The four mice hugged each other and jumped up and down for joy.

"We deked him out," cried Benny.

"A clever ruse, Captain," said Figaro. "We're proud of you both. Aren't we, Peppy?"

"*Tres Bien!*" he agreed. "You saved the day. We moved the space

shuttle to Section Nine. This time we hid it tres beans. Eh, Figaro?"

A pile of leaves beside the grey stone wall camouflaged the shuttle well, thought Benny.

"Good job, team. That should keep it safe until after the Cheese

Bowl." Benny yawned. "It's been a long night. Let's get a good day's sleep."

## CHAPTER 12

### SHOWDOWN

Benny and his team looked under the bleachers for somewhere to sleep during the day. They found an old orange crate. It was close enough to the space shuttle for them to hear or see anything suspicious. Benny slept with one eye open and one eye shut.

When the red sun began to sink behind the coliseum's stone walls, the four mice rubbed their eyes and came fully awake.

"What a bad sleep," grumbled Benny. "I could hardly close my eyes for worrying about the space shuttle."

"Neither could I," said Mizzy. "We had a rough day."

Figaro and Peppy nodded. Figaro hummed and sang softly to himself the way he usually did when he woke up. It sounded a lot like "*Rodent of the Opera*" to Benny. Figaro liked to make up his own words to famous

arias.

Peppy stood up and touched his toes. Then he did a few leg stretches and ran on the spot.

"What are you doing?" asked Benny, rubbing his eyes.

"My exercises," he explained, patting his round stomach. "I'm out of shape. I'm supposed to be on a diet, too."

"Some diet," Benny grunted. "Jawbreakers aren't exactly diet food."

"I found it in the grass," Peppy said in between deep knee bends.

"Isn't it diet food? How was I to know I'd found the football that belongs to the Ice Box? I thought it was a big piece of candy."

"Forget it," Benny said. "At least they have to use our football. No excuses."

Peppy stopped exercising and looked at Benny.

"Then, you're not still mad at me, Benny?"

"Nah," said Benny generously. "Forget it. Everything's going to work out for the best."

They checked the space shuttle again. It was all in one piece. No one else had discovered it and nothing had been broken. Benny and his team breathed a big sigh of relief. They headed for the playing field.

Although it was not quite dark, the Ice Box and the football mice were already waiting for them. The miniature field had been marked out with fresh chalk lines. A big bowl was drawn on the turf at mid field. CHEESE BOWL GAME was printed over it in large letters in white chalk. Two goalposts made of lollipop sticks guarded each end of the field.

Most wondrous of all was the real *CHEESE BOWL* sitting on the sidelines. It sat on a wooden block on top of a red and white polka-dot handkerchief. The bowl was made entirely of cheese and sealed in special wax. The mice had filled it with special cheeses. Benny's mouth watered just looking at the wonderful cheeses. French brie, camembert, cheddar, mozzarella, roquefort, baby gouda, swiss, and others Benny had never seen before.

The mouse fans crowded into the park. Entire families of mice came for the outing and to see a good football game. They waved pennants, ate peanuts and popcorn, and cheered loudly whenever the cheerleaders jumped up to lead them in a yell.

Several rat fans showed up, too. They sat on the other side of the stadium. But they were definitely outnumbered by the noisy mouse fans.

Benny counted seven football mice on the Ice Box's team. Counting

Benny and his team that made eleven players. A real team, and one that would have to play both ways.

One of the players looked familiar. He went over to a large mouse wearing glasses.

"The Big M?" he asked cautiously. "Is that you?"

The mouse stared at Benny. He was almost twice his size. The big mouse didn't recognize Benny, but he was a dead ringer for the Big M who lived down at the dump back home.

"Uh...that's my name," he said. He took off his glasses and blew through the empty frames.

"Yes," cried Benny. "I knew you were the Big M."

He always wore spectacles without glass in the frames because he thought they made him look more intelligent.

"How could you tell? Are you one of those space mice the Ice Box told us about?"

Benny nodded. Figaro came over and whispered in his ear.

"It looks like another one of our ancestors, Captain," he murmured.

"This must one of the Big M's great-great-great-great grandfathers."

"He doesn't recognize us either," said Benny. "It's incredible."

"Incredible but true, Captain," said Figaro.

The Ice Box walked over to them.

"You're small and wiry," he said to Benny. "And you did all right in last night's practice. You can be the captain. Do you want to play quarterback?"

"Thank you," said Benny. He felt honoured. "That's the position I play back home."

"Time to throw the ball around and loosen up." said the Ice Box. "The rats should be here any minute."

"Here's our ball," said Benny. He tossed it to the Big M who caught it with one hand.

He looked down at it and grinned.

"This should be a cinch," he said. "How come there was such a big stink about the football?"

"That's the whole point," Benny explained. "The footballs we use these days...I mean back home...are a lot smaller. They're easier to handle. Easier to throw forward passes with, too."

"Forward pass?" asked the Ice Box. "What's that?"

Benny groaned inwardly. Hadn't these Old Timers ever heard of a

forward pass before?

"You'll see," Peppy said.

"A pass is when you throw the ball in the air to a receiver," Mizzy told them. "It's easier to score touchdowns."

"What's a receiver?" The Big M looked puzzled.

Figaro explained as patiently as he could.

"Each team has four or five players who can catch the ball," he said.

He ticked them off. "The quarterback, the backfield, and the ends."

Benny knew the Old Timers favourite plays. Three bucks and a kick.

But, he reasoned, it would be easier to show them than to tell them.

"What about her?" asked the Ice Box, pointing at Mizzy as if he had just seen her for the first time.

"What about her?" Benny demanded.

"Well, she's a girl," said the Ice Box. "Girls don't play football."

"She's a great football player," insisted Figaro. "She's the fastest one on the field. We wouldn't know what to do without her."

"What position does she play?"

"Wide receiver. Mainly. But she can play almost any position."

"Well, I don't know," the Ice Box said, scratching his head. The other

football mice murmured amongst themselves.

The Big M stood between the two groups of mice.

"I guess I made a mistake," he said. "I think she should play. We need someone small and fast to run the ends. I won't let those rats get near her."

"You're very thoughtful, Big M," said Mizzy. "But I don't need any special treatment. I can take care of myself."

The Big M scratched his head again.

"Don't worry," cried Benny. "With the Ice Box at centre, we can run rings around Big Boris and his team."

The argument forgotten, the mice tossed the football back and forth. They did a few high stepping drills. Peppy did deep knee bends.

"I wish I had my play book with me," said Benny.

He scratched out several plays in the dirt with a stick. He was surprised he could remember so many good plays.

They held a scrimmage on one end of the field and brushed up some of their ground plays.

Benny wished the rats would hurry up and show before he lost his last ounce of nerve.

He didn't have long to wait. Eight rats swaggered onto the field. They wore ragged black and yellow striped sweaters like the Old Timers wore.

Great, thought Benny. Both teams were dressed in the same sweaters. You wouldn't know who was on your team half the time. Except the rats were bigger.

Benny was shocked. The rats had promised it would be four against 11. But now there were eight of them.

"Well, small fry," Big Boris said when he stood in front of them. "Time for the Cheese Bowl. We're taking it home with us this year."

"It's our Bowl," the Ice Box grunted. "You have no right to take it."

"We're gonna win it, aint we, boys?" The other rats sneered. "Fair and square."

"It better be fair and square," said the Ice Box. "Or else we'll..."

"Or else what?" Big Boris interrupted. "You'll take us to the cops? You'll chase us out of the park?" He threw his head back, laughing. He narrowed his beady little eyes at the Ice Box.

"Play it our way, you miserable excuse for a mouse. We *could* just take the Cheese Bowl." He frowned. "Instead, we'll play around a bit.

*Then, we'll take it home."*

"The Ice Box is right. It's our Cheese Bowl," Benny shouted, getting excited in spite of himself. "It doesn't belong to you."

Big Boris swung around in a full circle until he faced Benny. He grabbed his collar.

"Says who?" he asked.

"Benny the Bullet," said Benny furiously. "And take your grubby hands off my collar. *Now.*"

"What did you say?" asked the rat quietly.

It was so quiet in the park you could hear the blades of grass move.

"He paid you a compliment, my good rat," said Figaro smoothly. "I believe he said you have lovely bands on your collar."

Slowly, Big Boris released Benny as he puffed out his chest. He tugged at his turtle neck striped shirt, twisted around, and tried to look at it more closely.

"I'll keep my eye on you in the game," warned the rat. "We have a few surprises. If you're smart, you won't turn your backs."

"What else is new?" Benny muttered under his breath. Inside his heart of hearts, He was worried. But he had to put up a brave front for the sake of

his team. These rats were lean and mean. They were spoiling for a fight.

The game was about to begin.

## CHAPTER 13

### THE BIG GAME

At mid field, the teams faced each other. They tossed to see which

side would referee the game and the rats won.

Now, the rat referee held up a bottle cap.

"Visitors call the toss," said the referee. "Heads or tails?"

"Heads," said Big Boris quickly.

Benny watched the cap flip up in the air and land in the dirt. Some *visitors*, he thought.

"Heads!" cried the referee. "The rats have first choice."

"We'll receive the ball," said Big Boris. "The mice take the wind."

The whistle blew for the game to begin.

A football mouse named Gear kicked the ball to the rats 30 yard line.

Sargent picked up the ball and ran with it. Although he limped from an old football injury, he was still a fast runner. Six football mice swarmed him and brought him down on their own 45 yard line. A 15 yard gain and a first down!

"These rats will be tough to beat," muttered Benny.

Big Boris called a huddle.

"HIT 2! HIT 2!" he cried. The ball was snapped to Packer. The rat plunged over the centre. Ice Box and Big M stopped him. They settled for a gain of two yards.

"Way to go, team," cried Benny.

The rats went into a huddle and called another play.

"I'll take it myself," said Big Boris in a loud voice.

"He's going to carry the ball himself," Benny chuckled. "Doesn't he know you're not supposed to broadcast the plays?"

Big Boris was taken off tackle for another two yard gain. Third down and six yards to go. Boris handed off to Sargent. He dropped the ball and scrambled for it. He recovered it quickly.

"Fourth down," called the referee. Sargent sneered at the Ice Box.

"We'll get you next time," he warned. The rats went into kick formation. The ball was punted to the mouse 20 yard line. Peppy picked up the ball and dippy doodled down the sidelines for a good yard run back. It was a first down for the mice!

Benny and his team went into a huddle.

"Remember the End Around Play?" he asked. The Mice nodded.

"Mizzy, that's you."

They came out of the huddle.

"CHEESE 20! CHEESE 20!" called Benny. He shouted first to the left, then to the right. The team took up their positions.

Benny faked the ball to Figaro. Figaro ran through the middle.

Mizzy came in to take the ball from Benny. She ran around to the opposite side of the grid. A fake!

The rats thought Figaro had the ball. They pounced on him.

Meanwhile, Mizzy raced down the field with the Big M blocking for her.

"The fake, it worked!" cried Peppy as they watched Mizzy run for 50 mouse yards.

The mouse fans cheered. The rats in the stands booed loudly.

"Listen up, team," said Benny in the huddle. "The same play. Only this time I hand off to Figaro through the middle." They broke and ran to the line of scrimmage.

"SWISS 18! SWISS 18!"

Benny handed off to Figaro off tackle. Mizzy ran wide around the end. The rats thought she had the ball. They raced down the field after Mizzy.

"Get that little rodent!" screamed Sargent when he found out Figaro was the ball carrier. The rats crashed into each other and sprawled on the ground trying to change direction.

Scarface made a flying tackle at Figaro and brought him down on the

rat ten yard line.

"It's a cake walk," Benny said in the huddle. "They don't know beans about football."

"*Tres bien*," said Peppy. "Very good. Ten yards to go for a touchdown."

"CHEDDAR 16! CHEDDAR 16!" called Benny.

The ball came out on the second CHEDDAR. Benny stepped to the right and went off tackle. A quarterback sneak. For a minute, Benny thought it was going to work. The Big M and Ice Box held the line at centre. Directly in front of him, Benny saw Boris give the Ice Box a smashing block. Then, he headed for Benny like a runaway train.

Benny braced himself as Boris threw a knee-high tackle. Benny flew through the air. He came down on the ground head first. The ball flew out from under him.

"Loose ball!" cried the mouse linesman.

There was a huge pile-up as the mice and the rats scrambled for the ball. Scarface poked his head up through the mass of bodies. He jumped up and down with the ball.

"I've got it!" he shouted. "I've got it!"

"Fumble!" cried the rat referee. "The rats keep the ball on the ten yard line."

Benny was stunned. He lay on the grass looking up at the night sky. He saw stars and more stars. But the stars seemed blurry.

Peppy and Figaro ran to his side.

"Are you all right, Captain?" they cried. They helped him to his feet.

Benny shook his head. He felt groggy.

"I'll be fine in a minute," he assured them. Boris had knocked the wind out of him. It was hard to get his breath. "We have to get the turnover back."

"Time out!" cried the referee.

He ran over to Benny to check him out.

"You'll live."

The rats had the ball. They went into a huddle.

"SMASH 4! SMASH 4!" called Big Boris.

"I hope he doesn't mean four *Mice*," Benny said.

The ball was snapped to Scarface. He spotted a big hole open up in the mouse defence. The rat was in the clear! He ran 10 mouse yards with five mice chasing him.

Scarface began to slow down. He ran with a curious bow-legged gait. Benny gained on him. As the rat neared the goal-line, Benny could tell he was almost out of steam. He was close enough to touch Scarface.

Benny felt the hot onion breath of Boris on the back of his neck. There was no mistaking it. He was about to make a flying tackle at Scarface when Boris stuck his foot out and tripped him from behind. Benny sprawled on the grass.

He groaned as he watched Scarface cross the goal-line for a touchdown. The rat fans in the crowd stood up and cheered. The rats kicked for the convert.

The score was seven to zip for the rats.

The mice got ready for the rat kick-off. Benny looked at Ice Box who scowled back at him.

"The rats are winning," muttered the Ice Box.

"I know," said Benny. "I shouldn't have fumbled the ball."

Benny tried to think. They had to come up with a plan to beat the rats. But what? The rats were bigger and stronger than they were. The only thing the mice had going for them was brains and speed.

But was it enough to beat the notorious rats and win the Cheese Bowl?

He didn't know.

## CHAPTER 14

### THE CHEESE BOWL

During the first half, the play see-sawed back and forth. No matter how hard they tried, the mice couldn't get through the rats' defence. The rats plunged through and pounded at the mice, never letting up on their assault.

First the rats had the ball, and then the mice. Whenever the mice got the ball, the Ice Box insisted on the ground game. He was afraid to let the

Bullet try any new plays.

The mice had three first downs; the rats six.

"I don't know why the Ice Box told me to play quarterback," grumbled Benny to Figaro as they broke out of a huddle. "He's still calling all the plays.

"Just like we predicted, Captain," replied Figaro. "Three ground plays and a kick."

They ran to the line of scrimmage.

"Three plunges through the middle and a kick to the rats," Benny complained. "We'll never get anywhere."

The rats were drawn offside so often that Benny knew they didn't know the finer rules of football. They should have had one penalty after another. Tripping, clipping, and interference. The rat referee closed his eyes to the rats' dirty plays. The mouse linesman protested, but the referee shouted him down. He didn't call any penalties against the rats. The only penalties were against the mice.

Once, the Big M got so excited he ran offside before the ball was snapped. Another time, Peppy hung onto a rat lineman's shirt and wouldn't let go.

With only five minutes to go before half-time, the mice stood in punt formation. The rats lined up to receive. One of the mice ran out and kicked the ball. It was a mighty 40 yard spiral that went deep into rat territory.

Big Boris caught the ball. The other rats formed a Cheese Wedge around him. One rat ran ahead of Boris, throwing blocks and punches as he ran. The other rats formed a close V around their leader and ran in tight formation.

The mice gathered all their forces together to block the deadly rat machine advance down the field. But they scattered in every direction. Mice fell to the ground to the right and left of the wedge play. The Ice Box, Big M, Peppy and the other linemen couldn't stop them.

The rats ran all the way to the goal-line and Boris scored the touchdown. He hot dogged up and down the grid acting as if a swarm of bees was bugging him.

"That's not fair," Benny gasped when he climbed to his feet.

"The Flying Cheese Wedge is illegal," Figaro protested. "It was so brutal the league banned it years ago."

"No score, no score," cried the mouse linesman, running over. "The rats cheated."

He blew his tin whistle, but none of the rats paid any attention to him.

He was knocked to the ground as the rats jumped up and down, slapping each other on the back.

"Get over to the line of scrimmage, team," Big Boris shouted, ignoring the protest. "I'm gonna kick a convert."

The ball was placed, and Boris ran up to it. He brought his leg back and heaved a swift kick at the ball. The ball wobbled in the air, then sailed right past the goalpost missing it by inches.

"Bingo!" cried the rats. "A convert!"

Benny and the others came running over.

"That ball missed by a mile," Benny yelled.

"*Oui*," Peppy agreed. "It was nowhere near the goalposts."

The rats started yelling and pushing the mice around.

A shrill whistle sounded. The rat referee came running over.

"The little squirts are right," he said. "The ball was wide. No convert."

"Where's your loyalty?" growled Packer. "Don't you know you're a rat?"

The referee wouldn't listen, as he waved him away.

There was only time for one more play.

The score was 13 - 0 for the rats as the whistle blew to end the first half.

The mice were exhausted. They ran off the field to the home team locker room. The football mice muttered amongst themselves. Benny heard them complaining.

"The rats are too big. We don't have a chance."

"Let them have the Cheese Bowl."

"We tried and failed. What more can we do?"

"Why don't we just give up?"

Benny was shocked! 'Give up' wasn't in his vocabulary. He called the team together for a pep talk.

"We're not quitters, Ice Box," he said firmly. "We've been through a lot worse than this before. Haven't we, team?"

Peppy, Figaro and Mizzy nodded.

"Leave it to me. I know we can do it. We'll show these football rats a few trick plays or my name isn't Benny the Bullet."

He drew some 0's on the blackboard.

"Each 0 stands for one of our players," he told them. He scratched his

head, thinking. "Lucky I remember most of our best plays."

The mice studied the chalk board. Benny explained his plays for the second half. After nibbling on a couple of pieces of cheese, the teams' spirits revived.

Benny turned to the Ice Box.

"You said I could be quarterback," he told him. "But up until now you keep ordering the same old plays. You're the quarterback, not me."

Ice Box had the grace to turn a deep crimson.

"I...uh...didn't mean to take over, Benny," he apologized. "I guess I'm just used to running the team my way. But if you can win the Cheese Bowl for us, I'll button my lip from now on."

"Good," said Benny. "Let's go, gang." He led the team back to the grid.

By the end of the third quarter, the mice hadn't scored yet. But they held the rats from scoring, too.

"The score is still 13-0," the mice complained as they changed ends.

"Just don't lose your cool," said Benny.

"Cool what?" asked the Big M.

"It's just a saying," said Benny. "It means settle down. Remember.

The best defence is a good offence."

"Quit talking in riddles," muttered the Ice Box.

"We can't beat the rats on the ground," said Benny.

"So we have to beat them in the air."

"In the air?" cried the Ice Box. "Football has been a ground game ever since I can remember."

He sure forgets his promises in a hurry, thought Benny. He had just said he'd let Benny quarterback the game without any help. Yet, here he was giving advice. Benny decided to ignore him.

"Well," explained Peppy. "Times have changed since you were a young mouse."

The Ice Box stamped his foot.

"What's all this nonsense about when I was young?" he demanded.

"I'm the same age as you are."

Peppy's face turned red. He kept forgetting that these mice didn't know they were their great-great ancestors. And they certainly had never heard about time travel.

The rats didn't make the last down, so they kicked to the mice. They lined up to receive. Packer kicked a long ball to the 30 yard line.

Big M ran it back 10 yards.

In the huddle, Benny called the Statue of Liberty play.

"Ball is snapped on the third Cheese," he said. "That should catch them off guard."

They clapped and came out of the huddle. Ice Box crouched over the ball. Benny stood behind him and barked out the signals.

"CHEESE 15! CHEESE 15! CHEESE 15!"

On the third cheese, Benny took the ball. He faded back five steps and faked to Figaro. Then, he raised his arm to throw a pass. Mizzy swept around and grabbed the ball from Benny. She scooted around the end, and down the sidelines. One defensive back chased her but couldn't catch up. She was down the field for a touchdown.

The mouse fans went wild as Mizzy did her victory dance. Two steps to the right, two steps to the left. A pirouette. Then a back flip.

Gear kicked the convert. Three mice led the fans in a victory cheer:

"Zip Zap Zim Zam

Hoshalocka Bim Bam

MFL! MFL!

Rah! Rah! Rah!"

As they neared the end of the fourth quarter, the mice trailed by six points.

"One converted touchdown, Captain," shouted Figaro over the noise.

"And we've got them."

"We can do it," said Peppy.

"Let's see more of those fancy passes," shouted the Ice Box.

Benny smiled to himself. He was happy the Ice Box had come around to his way of thinking.

"We're going to give it all we've got," Benny cried.

## CHAPTER 15

### THE WINNERS!

With only five minutes to go in the last quarter, the score was 13 - 7 for the rats. The air was charged with tension.

The mice lined up for the kick. Scarface received the ball. The jagged red welt stood out on his face. The rats formed the wedge in front of them.

"They're going to try that illegal play again," shouted Benny. "The Cheese Wedge."

How were they going to stop the rats from scoring another touchdown?

Suddenly the crowd roared.

Benny glanced over to see what all the excitement was about.

"Look!" shouted Peppy happily. "Scarface is running the wrong

way." Benny couldn't believe his eyes. The old rat was running wide out of the wedge. He wasn't following his blockers. Ice Box and Big M deked around the rat defence. They brought Scarface down with a hard tackle.

Big Boris exploded. He stamped his feet and lifted Scarface up off the ground by his suspenders. He shook him back and forth.

"Why did you run out of the wedge?" he screamed. "We had those little rodents by the whiskers."

"I'll receive the kicks from now on," said Packer. "Scarface gets confused sometimes."

The mice were elated.

"They're fighting amongst themselves," Benny said. "And we stopped the Cheese Wedge. We've got a good chance of beating them now."

On the next play, the rats made a first down. Under five minutes to go! Benny knew they had to stop them. Somehow.

Slowly, the rats worked their way down the field. They made three first downs.

"The rats are close to scoring again," Benny said to his team. "Time is running out."

"We've got to hold that line," shouted the Big M.

When the goal-line was in sight, the rats came over the ball. Boris took the snap and hit the centre of the line. Ice Box hit him low. The ball flew up in the air.

"Loose ball!" shouted Figaro.

"A fumble!" cried Mizzy.

Peppy fell on the ball on the 20 yard line.

"Yes!" cried Benny, pumping his arm. "A turnover."

"First down and ten for the mice," called the Referee.

Benny gathered his team together in the huddle.

"Listen up!" he ordered. "We can't lose the ball."

"Oui!" agreed Peppy. "The rats can't score again. Or they'll win the game. And the Cheese Bowl."

Slowly but steadily, the mice worked the ball down the field. First through the middle. Around the right end. Around the left end. Three first downs in a row. The rats were drawn offside twice for five yard penalties.

The mice were on the rats 40 yard line. Time was running out.

"One minute left to go in the game," said Benny in the huddle. "It's the Flea Flicker. Now or never."

Peppy and Mizzy nodded. The Old Timer football mice looked confused.

"Right, Captain," said Figaro. "There's no use saving that play for next year."

"Flea Flicker?" asked the Ice Box with a scowl. "What's that?"

"Just make sure you get your block," said Benny. "I'm sure it will work. The rats won't know what hit them."

Ice Box looked puzzled but he took his position.

They clapped and broke the huddle.

The Ice Box stood over the ball and waited for the signal.

"CHEDDAR 30! CHEDDAR 30!" called Benny to the right and to the left. The ball came out.

Benny faded back to pass. He threw a beautiful spiral to Mizzy. She

made a leaping catch and spun around in a half circle. She spotted

Figaro running down the sidelines and flicked the ball back to him.

He caught it, dodged three rats, and raced down the field for a

touchdown. The team charged for the end zone and jumped on him.

They rolled on the grid, did handsprings and the splits. Then they

lifted him up on their shoulders to carry him off the field.

The mouse fans cheered wildly. The score was tied at 13 - all.

The teams lined up for the convert. The rats placed their biggest players in the middle.

"Block that kick! Block that kick!" screamed the rat fans.

Gear lined up to kick the most important point of his life. The Ice Box snapped the ball to Figaro. Figaro placed it. Gear booted the ball towards the goalposts. The ball rose in the air.

Boris jumped high and tipped the ball. Benny held his breath as he watched the ball waver slightly. There was just enough air under it to carry it through the goalposts. The whistle blew to end the game. The winning point!

The cheerleaders jumped up and led the fans in a wild chant.

"Mouskee Wee Wee

Mouskee Wah Wah

MFL! Eat 'em raw!"

The mice in the stands screamed, jumped up and down, and hugged one another. Mizzy did handsprings from one goalpost to the other. The crowd applauded wildly.

Two mice marched out on the field with a ribbon stretched between

their sticks.

It read, "Mice 14! RATS 13!"

"We won! We won!" shouted the mice. They banged heads and gave each other high fives. They lifted each other up in the air.

"We won the Cheese Bowl," cried Peppy.

The Ice Box pounded Benny on the back.

"What a play!" he shouted. "So that was the Flea Flicker? Where did you learn how to throw like that?"

"Uh...back home," said Benny. "That's how we play football where we come from."

"I have a feeling it will change the way football is played forever," said the Ice Box.

"It does," said Figaro. "I mean," he cleared his throat, "you may be right."

Meanwhile, the rats stumbled off the field.

"Boss, you shouldn't have missed the convert in the second quarter," whined Packer.

"Yeah," grumbled Scarface, scratching the welt on his cheek. The angrier he was, the redder it got. "We lost by one measly mouse point."

Sargent limped badly as he left the field.

"The Boss lost the game for us," he complained.

The other rats muttered, "It's all his fault. Big Boris is a bum."

They mumbled and grumbled amongst themselves. Boris turned back and shouted at Benny and the team.

"We'll win the Cheese Bowl next year. You can't throw the ball. It's against the rules."

"Look who's talking?" cried Peppy bravely. "It's all right for you to use the Cheese Wedge. But we're not supposed to throw passes."

Meanwhile, the rat fans pelted their stars with food. Peanut shells, popcorn, apple cores, and Crackerjacks.

"Rats don't know the meaning of a clean game of anything," said Benny angrily.

"He's right," agreed the Ice Box . "Even though they cheated and used the Cheese Wedge they couldn't win. Our new quarterback taught them a lesson or three."

The other rats pushed and shoved each other as they left the stadium.

"We'll be back next year," said Big Boris. "We'll clean your clocks. Just as soon as we try some of those new fangle dangle passes."

He looked around and saw the other rats leaving.

"Hey! Wait up!" he ordered. He turned on his heel and ran to catch up.

"Once a rat, always a rat," said Benny. "Even his own team turned on him for missing a convert. We all blow a play now and then."

"I feel sorry for the rats," said the Ice Box. "I'd like to invite them back for the party."

"It's your funeral," said Mizzy.

"Why not?" Benny agreed. "What have we got to lose?"

"Just the Cheese Bowl," said Peppy. "But go ahead."

Ice Box waved at the rats.

"Boris," he yelled. The rats stopped and looked back. "Why don't you join us? There's enough cheese for everyone."

The mice waited for the rats to make up their minds.

"Ah, forget the rats," said the Big M. "Let's celebrate."

Slowly, the rats began to file back towards mid field.

"Bring out the cheese," shouted Peppy.

Figaro sang loudly in his tenor voice.

"Parmesan and Mozzarella

Makes us all such happy fellas.”

“That’s from a famous mousical,” Figaro explained.

Several mice shoved the Cheese Bowl into their midst. Benny wanted to stay for the Cheese Bowl celebration just as badly as the others.

He was surprised that even the rats stayed. But he was beginning to worry.

Now, for the first time since the game had started, Benny remembered the space ship. He wondered if it would still be where they had left it? And if it was, would they be able to get back home safely?

## CHAPTER 16

### JOURNEY HOME

Peppy, Figaro and Mizzy became serious once Benny reminded them of the space ship. They knew they couldn't stick around to help the football mice celebrate the victory.

"You're right, Captain," said Figaro. "The energy is probably running low."

"We can't stay for the Cheese Bowl party, Ice Box," Benny told him. "We have to get back right away."

He hated to leave his new friends. They were his ancestors. He wished he'd had a chance to get to know them better. But he didn't want to live in the past with them forever. He wanted to get back home to the Forum. It was where he belonged, along with the rest of his team. Hockey season would be starting up soon.

"You're leaving?" asked the Ice Box. "But you just got here."

"I know," Benny apologized. "It can't be helped."

The football mice walked with them to Section Nine. Figaro and

Peppy showed the rest of the team where they had hidden the shuttle beneath the stands.

Benny breathed a sigh of relief when they saw it was ready for boarding.

The mice gathered around the ship.

"It's a beauty," said the Big M.

"How do you get on the thing?" asked Gear.

"You sure it's not locked?" asked another mouse.

"I hope not," said Benny. "If it is, we're doomed."

Gingerly, he approached the shuttle. He couldn't see a latch or a button anywhere. But he knew there was a scanner. They had found it when the rats were chasing them back at the Forum. He touched the smooth silver surface of the ship. He passed his hand over the red, white and blue patch. The team waited anxiously.

Slowly, the panel slid open.

"Hooray!" shouted Benny and his friends.

They shook hands with Benjamin the Ice Box, the Big M, Gear and the other mice. The Big M wiped his eyes and blew through his glasses.

Being sentimental must run in his family, thought Benny. He was exactly

like his namesake who lived at the dump near the Forum.

"It's been nice knowing you, Benny," said the Big M. "I hope we meet again some day. Sorry you didn't stay long enough to see my place down at the dump. I've got it fixed up real nice."

"I'm sure it's great, Big M." Benny put his arm around his shoulders. He thought about his trip to the dump in a garbage truck and how he had met the other Big M there. "I've got a feeling we *will* meet again. Perhaps in another time and place."

Benny took his prized football and handed it to Benjamin the Ice Box. "I want you to have this," he said. "Something to remember us by."

"Why thank you, Benny," he said. He turned the football around and around and looked at it fondly. "I have to admit, it worked a lot better than our old jawbreaker."

"It could help you beat the rats next year," Benny said.

The four mice climbed aboard the space shuttle. They waved goodbye as the door slid shut. They looked out the viewer port and waved again at the MFL players standing on the ground beneath them.

Benny wished he could have told the Ice Box he was a distant relative of his. One of his great-great-great grandsons, in fact. Benny didn't think

the Ice Box would believe him anyway. He was pretty stubborn.

The lights blinked on the control panel.

"The generator light is fading," Mizzy observed. "It's only half as bright as it was on our journey here."

"*Oui!*" said Peppy. "The light was green, not red. Remember?"

Figaro nodded and bent over the red glow from the generator.

"That's it," he said calmly. "We used half our energy going into the past. There should be just enough juice to take us back to the future."

He and Mizzy looked at the digital clock on the control panel. They touched and poked at the buttons and switches.

"If we could figure out how to change the clock..." Figaro mused, his voice trailing off.

"How about this green switch?" asked Mizzy. "Let's try it and see what happens."

"Don't break anything," Benny warned.

Figaro turned the green switch to the left.

**CLICK! CLICK! CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!**

A whirring noise filled the cabin. The digital clock spun forward. In a blur, the days and months clicked by like seconds.

"Look, Captain!" cried Peppy. "My watch is spinning ahead, too. Just like the clock."

The whirring noise grew louder and louder. Then, the space ship slowly began to rise.

"We did it!" shouted Peppy. "We're moving."

The mice were jubilant. They hugged each other and danced around the cabin.

Benny sat down in the captain's chair. He looked out the viewer. The football mice on the ground waved at them until they were tiny specks in the distance. The coliseum became smaller and smaller as the ship rose into the starry sky.

They were on their way. But could they be sure the space ship would take them home to their own time and place? Only time could tell.

## CHAPTER 17

### HOMeward BOUND

The ship travelled through space. It seemed to Benny as if they weren't moving at all. His body ached all over from the bashing and bruising he had taken from the rats in the football game.

Despite his aches and pains, Benny found himself drifting off to sleep. The others sprawled in their chairs and snored loudly. It had been a tough game, and everyone was tired. Benny yawned and closed his eyes.

Before he fell asleep, Benny thought of his warm hockey glove bed back at the Forum. He hoped they would be home soon.

He didn't know how long he slept. He awoke with a start. Someone was shaking him.

"Wake up! Wake up!" cried Mizzy.

"What is it?" asked Benny, rubbing his eyes. "Are we

going to crash?"

Figaro and Peppy woke up and crowded around the captain.

Mizzy smiled broadly at everyone.

"Look, everybody," she said, pointing out the viewer port. "Down below. Does it look familiar or what?"

They all looked down. There in all its glory stood the Forum. There was no mistaking it with its domed roof and twinkling lights.

"We're home," cried Benny. The mice were so excited, they could hardly wait for the ship to land.

The whirring noise softened to a hum as the space ship glided down to the roof. It slipped silently into the Forum through an air vent.

Slowly, the ship circled around the Forum, then came to rest on what was left of the launch platform.

"I knew it, team," cried Benny. He jumped up and down with joy.

"Me too," Mizzy said. "We were sent on a mission. We were sent back to help the football mice win the Cheese Bowl."

"Look at my watch," said Peppy. "It's October 15, 2004. The same day and time as the clock reading on the control panel."

Benny passed his hand over the scanner. The door slid open.

"Good work, team," he said, stretching his legs. "Now let's get out of here before the ship takes off again."

They scurried off the ship and stood on the broken platform. Peppy did a somersault. The Forum was silent. It appeared to be empty with only a few lights burning.

"What an adventure, Captain," said Figaro. "We time travelled ninety years into the past."

"And met our great-great-ancestors." They all talked at once, their words tumbling over one another.

"We helped them win the Cheese Bowl."

Benny felt in his pocket. He pulled out the crumpled piece of paper he had torn from the Mouse Gazette before they left home.

He opened the scrap of paper. His eyes widened in surprise.

"Listen up, team," he said. "I think Mizzy and Figaro were right. We *were* sent back to help the MFL beat the rats." The others listened as Benny read from the news clip.

*The Good Old Days*

*by*

*Mizzy Mouse*

*Ninety years ago today the MFL played in the Super Bowl of Mousedom against the rats. The famous Cheese Bowl Game. At half-time the mice were losing 13 - 0. A notorious rat named Boris Ringsky used the Cheese Wedge play. They were stopped by the faster, smarter mice. This villain was the ancestor of Big Boris who lives at the Forum.*

*Then, the MFL scored a converted touchdown making the score 13 - 7. In the last play, the mice used the Flea Flicker and beat the rats by one point, 14 - 13. The first forward pass ever used in the MFL! A great day in the history of Mouse Football.*

"Did you hear that? We changed the course of history forever."

Figaro pulled at his moustache, lost in thought. "That was our mission, Captain. We introduced the forward pass to football in 1904."

Benny felt the hackles on the back of his neck rise. It was the familiar feeling he got whenever the Rink Rats were nearby.

Down below them, Benny saw four dark shapes standing at the food booth.

"Let's get out of here, team," he said. "The rats are back."

"I've seen enough rats to last me a lifetime," said Peppy. "It's almost daylight. They should be hitting the sack soon."

The others nodded.

"So should we," said Benny.

The figures down below moved out into the open and looked up at them. Benny and the others froze, but it was too late. The rats had spotted them.

"So you brought the ship back?" shouted Big Boris. "Where did you go, rodent breath? To outer space?" He laughed loudly, slapping Packer on the back until he almost choked and fell over backwards.

Benny found his voice at last.

"How did you know?" he shouted back. "It was great."

"Too bad you missed the ride," yelled Peppy.

"Maybe next time we'll let you stow away," added Mizzy.

"You stole the ship from us," Boris sputtered. "We'll get you for that."

The rats began to run toward the space shuttle. Benny and his friends scrambled down the other side just as the Rink Rats reached the platform.

The chase was on.

Benny couldn't help thinking how great it was to be alive and well and back at the Forum.

The End

