

Preamble



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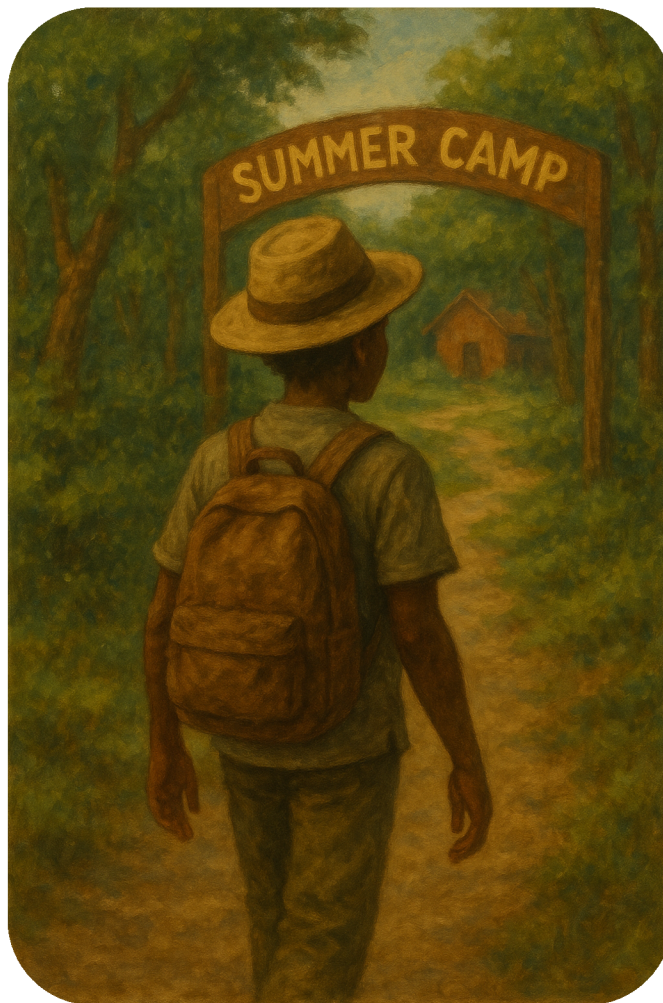
Dillan wasn't like the other kids at science camp. He didn't always feel like he fit in anywhere—at home or at school. At home, they called him “the dictionary.” At school, he was “that scholarship kid.” At camp, they called him... nothing. Yet.

He lived in a mostly Black neighborhood where not everyone understood his love for books and languages. And at the private school he attended on scholarship, he was one of the only kids who looked like him.

I don't speak the same way, dress the same way, or get invited to the same things, he thought. I wish my school required uniforms, but then again, how could I afford it?

Other kids built rockets and robots. Dillan learned languages—Spanish, Hebrew, even Pig Latin. His teachers called it a gift. His classmates called it weird.

That summer, Dillan got accepted into the Young Minds Science Camp. It wasn't because he built a rocket or aced a test. It was because of how he heard things others didn't. He could recognize patterns in how people spoke. At the library one day, Dillan found a recording of Khoisan—a language full of clicks and tones. He stayed up all night mimicking the sounds. By morning, he had it. Not just the words, but the rhythm. The music of it. He didn't just learn it. He remembered it.



"You're being placed in a special project," said Ms. Soto, their camp leader, on the first day. Ms. Soto was unlike anyone Dillan had ever met.

She reminds me of myself. She's never loud or silly like some teachers. She's calm, serious, and precise—like a math problem that always had the right answer.

Dillan thought about the time he tried to be funny. He told a joke no one laughed at. Ms. Soto didn't try to be funny to be accepted. Her dark eyes studied every student like she was reading a book. She wore a long white lab coat over jeans and always carried a clipboard, even during lunch.

Rumor had it she had worked at a real research lab before choosing to teach. She never talked much about her past, but everyone at camp knew she was the smartest person in the room.

"Your job will be to observe and decode communication patterns," she told Dillan.

"Between who?" Dillan asked.

"Not who," she smiled. "What."

The next day, Dillan walked into Lab 9. The scent of fresh wood shavings mixed with a faint tang of metal and disinfectant. Rows of cages lined the walls, but they weren't like pet store cages. Each had tiny rooms, tunnels, food stations, and little wheels. There were even mini sandboxes with shapes drawn into them. And inside? Mice. Dozens of them. Each had a colored band around its tail: red, blue, or green.





Aaron, a teen counselor who worked with the mice, greeted him. “You’re Dillan, right? Welcome to Mouse City.”

“Why the color bands?” Dillan asked.

Aaron pointed. “Three groups. Different behavior patterns. The mice have been genetically enhanced. They’re smarter than regular mice. We think they might be forming... well, something like society. Even language.”

Dillan blinked. “You mean... they talk?”

“Not in English,” Aaron chuckled. “But they communicate. They build, they share, they compete. That’s where you come in.”

At first, all Dillan heard were squeaks. High ones. Low ones. Squeaks when they were hungry. Squeaks when someone stole food. But slowly, patterns started to form. One group made long squeaks before eating. Another chirped in short bursts when moving between tunnels.

He made a chart. Then a list. Then a dictionary. With Aaron’s help, they built a soundboard. Dillan could press a button to send recorded squeaks into the cages. After a few tries, the mice responded.

The red mice lined up when he said, “Gather.”

The blue mice paused when he said, “Listen.”

The green mice? They stared back, unmoving. One even turned its back to the speaker.

"You see that red mouse?" said Dillan. "He always sits near the center. He didn't at first. The others waited for him to act. I think I'll call him Zeke."

"Why?" asked Aaron.

Dillan shrugged, "because he's more than a mouse, he has a personality and everything. And, everyone deserves a name."

Aaron nodded.

Among the blue mice, one stood out. He built little platforms and played with the soundboard's leftover pieces. Dillan named him Cal.

And among the green mice, there was one with a torn ear and sharp reflexes. He never backed down. He pushed the others forward. Dillan called him Thorn.

Then came the moment that changed everything. *What can I say to these mice to bring them together and let them know I'm a friend?*

Dillan pressed a new phrase: "I bring peace."

All three groups froze. One red mouse squeaked something that wasn't on Dillan's chart.

Aaron replayed it. "Preamble," he said aloud. "They called you Preamble."

"What's a Preamble?"

"No clue," Aaron replied. "But they think you are one."

Within hours, the red mice built a symbol using crumbs. A circle with a line through it—the same shape Dillan had doodled on his notebook earlier. It had no meaning, just a doodle. Somehow, the mice had seen it. Copied it. Worshiped it? The red mice began following his voice. They stopped fighting. They shared food. They gathered when he spoke. But Zeke didn't seem sure. He stayed at the edge of the gatherings, thoughtful.

The blue mice began recording his words. They played them back through their own speakers. Some listened. Some ignored. Cal watched both the red and green groups, sometimes stepping between them.

The green mice grew hostile. They squeaked louder when Dillan spoke.

"Hey calm down. I'm a friend. I'm peaceful."

The green mice began to chant, "No Preamble!" They built walls around their habitat section. Thorn started collecting bits of plastic to block the tunnels. When a red mouse wandered over, Thorn chased it out. His sharp teeth flashed. His body tensed like a spring, always on edge. His eyes never blinked.

"I don't understand," Dillan said looking at Aaron, "why don't they trust me?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe it's because you're bigger and stronger. And they don't know you. I think... it might be fear."

"But I'm trying to get to know them so they can trust me, but noatter what I do. They're still afraid."

One day, Dillan tried broadcasting, "We can live together."

Thorn leapt onto the divider and let out a series of shrill, slashing squeaks. Then, with surprising force, he knocked over the soundboard speaker.

"He's getting bolder," Dillan said, heart racing.

"He's afraid," Aaron replied. "Afraid he's losing control."

Ms. Soto arrived minutes later, silent as always. But this time, she didn't just observe. She stepped to the glass and tapped it, firmly. Thorn turned.

"You can't have peace with threats," she said sternly, as if he could hear her. "You can build a wall or you can build a home."

Thorn held her gaze for a long, tense moment. Then he spat a tiny fragment of shredded bedding at the glass and retreated.





That night, Dillan couldn't sleep. He opened his Bible. His eyes landed on a verse: "Today, you have a choice—between the way that leads to life, and the way that leads to harm. Choose the path that gives life."

He grabbed his notebook. He wrote a message, simple and clear: "This world is broken. But there is a better home. One of peace, not power. You don't have to fight. You don't have to fear. Follow the truth. It will lead you there."

Then, he paused. His thoughts drifted far from the lab.

He thought about home. About the brick apartment building on the corner of Meadow and Vine, where neighbors blasted music too late and sometimes yelled too loud. About the way some stores watched him too closely, while others ignored him completely. About his mom, working double shifts and still smiling when she packed his lunch.

And then he thought about school—the fancy private academy where he had a scholarship. Where the kids talked about vacations in places Dillan had only seen on maps. Where he sat in class surrounded by kids who didn't look like him, didn't talk like him, and didn't understand why he never invited them over.

He didn't feel like he belonged there. But he didn't feel like he belonged back home either.

I just want the mice to live together in peace. They don't have to fight each other or fear me. "God, how do I fit into any of this?" he whispered. "Why give me this gift... if I don't belong anywhere? If the world is so broken, where is Your love in all of it?"

No voice answered. But something settled in him. Not an answer, exactly. Just... peace. The kind that didn't need everything fixed right away.

The next morning, he read the message through the speaker. Some red mice squeaked joyfully. They passed it on. They drew the circle-with-line symbol again, this time on the sandbox wall using a tiny pebble.

Zeke finally joined them, placing a crumb in the shape himself. The blue mice watched. Cal squeaked softly and helped a younger red mouse across a broken tunnel. The green mice attacked. One bit a red mouse. Another knocked over the soundboard. Thorn climbed on top of a food dispenser and chattered loudly until everyone stopped moving. Dillan watched closely. One small green mouse took a step toward the wall. Then another. Thorn saw and snapped. The mouse scurried back.

"They hate the message," Dillan said.

"Or what it costs them to believe it," Aaron replied.

Ms. Soto stepped in with a plan. She was always watching, always taking notes. But now, she was moved.

"We'll build a new habitat," she said. "For those willing to live in peace."

With her guidance, the team built a new mouse habitat, hidden behind a wall divider. She called it Sanctuary. Only mice who stopped fighting were allowed in. It had better tunnels, clean spaces, and no locked gates. There was room for all three tribes—if they could live in peace.

The red mice began to move in slowly. Zeke led the way. Some blue mice joined them. Cal was one of the first. They built together. Shared space. Laughed—if mice could laugh.

The green mice stayed behind. They told others it was a lie. A trap. They made posters out of shredded paper that mocked Dillan's voice. Thorn patrolled the tunnels like a guard, daring anyone to leave. But even his sharp eyes missed a few who slipped through.

Ms. Soto watched it all with quiet hope. She didn't say much. But the day a small green mouse slipped into Sanctuary while Thorn wasn't looking, she smiled and said, "One by one."

By the last day of camp, only a few mice remained outside Sanctuary. Inside, the mice had formed new friendships, written new squeaks, and even begun playing together. Dillan stood by the glass, watching the tribes he had once listened to.

Aaron clapped a hand on his shoulder. "You didn't fix them all. But you told the truth. That's enough."

Dillan looked down. "I didn't want to be their leader."

"You weren't. You were the messenger."

On the way home, something clicked.

Preamble.

The mice hadn't been saying his name. They were trying to say *peaceful*. They had misunderstood; but they had also *seen* him. And that was enough. He then thought about people. We have our own tribes. Our own fears. Our own leaders who lie to us. But the message is still the same: There is a better home. One filled with peace. Maybe not in this world—but in the world to come. We just have to listen.



✨ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS — Preamble

For ages 10–13 (but great for all ages):

🧠 REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the mice called Dillan “Preamble”? What were they trying to say?
2. Which mouse tribe do you think you would belong to—red, blue, or green? Why?
3. Why did the green mice reject Dillan’s message, even though he meant no harm?
4. What did Ms. Soto mean when she said, “You can build a wall or you can build a home”?
5. Have you ever felt like Dillan—like you didn’t belong at home, school, or anywhere?
6. What does the Sanctuary represent?
7. What do you think it means to be a “messenger” instead of a leader?
8. Dillan asked God, “Why give me this gift... if I don’t belong anywhere?” How would you answer that question?

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