

Chapter 1

A550

A few days passed before hunger forced Scorza back to the factory.

It wasn't the fall onto the conveyor belt that had frightened him, not that much, or even the wild dash through all the legs, to avoid getting trampled on by hooves.

What had really shaken him was the brilliant white splotch shining on the calf's forehead, the eyes aglow with curiosity, the kind, friendly voice. Images of them flashed before him every time he shut his eyes: the long nose approaching, the huge, wet nostrils, and just above them, the white splotch, like a bright light in the gloomy darkness of the factory.

He tried hunting for beetles and worms as they tended to venture out to slither through the tins at night, but visions of animal feed flowing out of the dispenser soon convinced him to go back.

When he got to the air vent, he recognized the smell of fodder and dung in the air.

Scorza climbed into the shaft, scrambled along it to the grating and poked his pointed nose through the rusty bars.

Everything seemed unchanged on the other side: the cows swayed slowly in time to the mechanical thrum shaking the pens, steam rose from their bodies, collecting into a thick, smoky mist in the air.

"All quiet," Whiskers chirped quietly. *"The coast is clear."*

Scorza darted through the grating and headed straight for the feed tube, scampering along the thick pipe that ran along the metal wall.

The cows were lined up below him, all the same, heads dipped into troughs immersed in shadows.

Scorza reached the feed pipe, glanced quickly behind him and waited.

It wasn't long before the feed began to pump down through the pipe, accompanied by the drone of the conveyor belt.

The rat grabbed some and tucked in voraciously. Then some more, and some more, until he felt full.

"That's better!" Whiskers said. *"The world is so much better on a full tummy."*

Running along the pipe on the way back, Scorza thought how stupid he'd been. There was no real reason to be afraid; the factory was always the same, it never changed. He even began to doubt his memory of it. Maybe it'd been some sort of weird hallucination, a surreal dream with his eyes open. The feed had knocked him over and he'd fallen onto the conveyor belt, that much he remembered; and yes, maybe one of the cows had skimmed him with its enormous nose, but the rest...maybe that had just been his imagination playing tricks. These creatures hardly knew how to speak and none of them could possibly have a white patch on its nose, a patch so white it radiated light through the smoky darkness of the factory, like a

"There you are! You came back, finally!"

Scorza jumped in surprise. Then he turned, slowly, to look at the pens.

The calf had its nose in the air and was staring at Scorza, keen face and wagging its large ears. The white splotch shone like a lantern.

"Don't stop!" Whiskers said. *"Get out of here, do as I say!"*

Scorza hesitated, as if an invisible force had seized his paws.

"Go, Scorza!" Whiskers insisted. *"Run to the grating, now!"*

But the rat looked confused, dazed even.

The funny creature staring out at him from the stall, curiosity twinkling in its eyes, was at least a thousand times bigger than him. Yet Scorza knew for certain it was a baby, a giant cow baby.

"What's your name?" he asked the calf, tilting his head delicately to one side.

"Run Scorza!" Whiskers urged as loudly as possible. *"Before it's too late!"*

The rat rattled its head, as if trying to shake out an unpleasant thought, looked away and went back to scampering along the pipe.

"No, wait!" the calf pleaded, stretching its neck over to the tube. "At least tell me your name before you go!"

At the sweet sound of the calf's voice, the rat seemed to shiver and hesitate again.

"No, don't stop!" Whiskers implored.

But even rats can do nothing in the face of the finger of fate.

"Scorza. The name's Scorza."

The calf jumped for joy in the stall, banged against the metal barrier.

"I'm A550," he gushed, big hazelnut eyes staring at the rat.

Scorza replied without bothering to turn around.

"Okay. Well, goodbye then, A550."

"Where are you going?" the calf asked.

"Away," replied the rat.

"Away?" Where?"

Scorza turned and hopped over to the pen.

A550's ears waved in joy.

"I'm leaving!" the rat barked. "Away. Back outside!"

"Outside?" the calf asked. "Where's outside?"

Scorza stared in silence.

The calf flapped its ears again and seemed to smile.

"I live here, in row 500 of the *Factory*," it said. "Inside this metal stall."

"The *Factory*?" the rat asked. "What on earth is the *Factory*?"

The calf looked at him, astonished. "This is the *Factory*," it said, looking around at the rows of metal pens, the metal walls, the metal beams supporting the roof. "The *Factory* is everything and we are The *Factory*."

The cow in the next pen lifted its head and echoed automatically, "The *Factory* is everything and we are the *Factory*." Then dipped its back into the feeding trough.

Scorza was shocked.

"He's A549," said A550, nodding over to the other animal. "He doesn't speak much; actually, he barely speaks at all. Whereas this guy," he nodded his head the other way, "is A551. He eats all day and never ever speaks."

"Do you mean he can't speak?"

"Oh no! Of course he can speak. He plays Chinese Whispers!"

“Chinese Whispers?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never played?”

The rat shook his head.

“Someone thinks of a word and whispers it to their neighbour: *Factory*, stall, forage...The neighbour listens then passes it on to their neighbour, and so on. Do you understand now?”

“Interesting!” Scorza remarked, sarcastically. “That must be lots of fun.”

“Uhm yeah...” A550 replied, not very convincingly.

“Good. Now, I really have to go,” the rat cut their exchange short and glanced back at the grating.

“Wait!” A550 tried to stop him. “I have so many things I want to ask you!”

“*I told you,*” Whiskers hissed.

“What do you want to know?!”

“I.. I..”

The calf seemed to have so many questions in its head and was scared the rat would get away before he could pick which one to ask.

“Where are you from?” he finally said.

Scorza harrumphed noisily as he tried to suppress a chuckle.

“From outside.”

“Where’s outside?” A550 asked again. “Down at the end of the row?”

The rat shook his head.

“On the other side, then? Are you from row 501, with the other cows?”

“No.”

“Where then?”

“Outside is outside!” Scorza replied.

The calf looked at him quizzically and Scorza realized that the word “outside” meant nothing to the calf.

“Outside means on the exterior of this building... in the external world.”

“Ah!” A550 exclaimed with a hint of a nod.

“The external world!” Scorza repeated, tapping the metal wall with his paw. “Do you understand?”

The calf stared unblinkingly at the rat, then shook its head.

“Crikey!” Scorza said between clenched teeth.

“Is it nice this place? The outside world?”

“It’s huge.”

“Bigger than sector 500?”

The rat couldn’t hold the laughter back this time.

“It’s very, very big.”

“Oh!” the calf said, eyes going wide. “It must have thousands of stalls!”

“Stalls? No, there aren’t any stalls or whatever it is you call them.”

A550 seemed puzzled.

“Really? Well, what is there, then?”

“Gee!” Scorza exclaimed, rolling his head. “There are fields and hills, the sky and clouds. It’s all very...open. There are no walls, do you understand?”

The calf hung on his every word.

“Fields?” he asked. “Hills? Clouds?”

“Listen, it doesn’t matter,” Scorza said, trying to extricate himself. “There’s no way you could ever, well, you know, you can’t...”

“What?”

The rat didn’t reply.

“Can we talk about the hills?” A550 insisted. “And the clouds, what are the clouds like?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t have time,” the rat replied. “I have to go.”

“You have to go to the outside world?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll come back, won’t you?”

Scorza hesitated a moment.

“Yes.”

Chapter 2

A light in the shadows

The calf with A550 on its ear tag had forced a chink in old Scorza’s solitary armour. Heeding Whiskers’s advice, the rat had tried to remove himself from the calf’s attention but there something convinced him to go back to A550, and even Scorza didn’t fully understand what it was.

Perhaps the solitude he normally adored was more wearing than he’d care to admit and the white splotch, which shone like a headlamp on the calf’s forehead, had brought a little light into the shadows of the rodent’s life.

“*You’ll regret it,*” Whiskers hissed.

But Scorza didn’t want to know.

“The clouds are huge clumps of vapour that are so dense, you’d think you can walk on them. They hang in the sky, like they’ve nothing to do all day, letting out some drops of rain every now and then which wet everything below them.”

Scorza had gotten into the habit, over the past few days, of stopping at A550’s stall when he visited the *Factory*, to tell him all about the world outside.

The calf would listen carefully, as if there was no end to the curiosity which shone in her hazelnut eyes.

“What’s a clump?”

“A clump is like...like a huge bundle of hair.”

“Ah!” A550 cried. “And what’s rain?”

Scorza racked his brain for the right words.

“Rain is like... drops of water which fall from the sky all at the same time, so many it’s impossible to count them. Here, there, everywhere.”

A drop fell from the metal ceiling and landed on the rat’s head.

“Drops like that?” the calf asked, with the hint of a smile.

“Yes, exactly,” Scorza replied, giving himself a shake and wiped his face with his paws. He looked up at the roof, ears wiggling.

“Can you hear that?”

The calf looked up, too.

Through the mooing of the cows and the banging of the *Factory*, a dull thrumming could be heard.

“Oh, yes! I hear it a lot,” A550 replied.

“It’s the rain on the *Factory* walls,” Scorza said. “Every now and then, a drop gets through the steel sheets.”

“Do you mean these drops come from the outside world?” asked A550.

“Yes, indeed.”

Another drop detached from the roof, fell through the smoky air inside the factory and landed on the calf’s nose.

“Oh!” squeaked A550, crinkling his eyes.

The drop dribbled down his huge nostrils, the calf sniffed, hoping to pick up the scent of the outside air.

“I can smell the clouds,” he said, excited.

The rat smiled.

“Can I come to the outside world, too, Scorza?” A550 asked, putting his hooves up against the metal stall. “I’d really like to see the clouds race across the sky. Is your pipe big enough for me as well?”

Scorza hesitated a long time.

"I told you so," Vibrissa hissed from the depths of Scorza's conscience.

"So, when can we go?"

"Some day," the rat replied.

"Tomorrow?" A550 asked, wriggling his ears.

"No..."

"When then?"

"Another day."

"The day after tomorrow?"

"No, I don't think so."

"When can we go, Scorza?"

"I don't know! Would you stop going on about it!"

"But... I don't want to grow too big for the pipe."

"Enough now!" the rat shouted. "I said 'someday, okay?'. Now stop it or I won't come back!"

A550 hung his head.

"Sorry, Scorza," he mumbled, lying down. "I didn't mean to make you angry."

"Bah!" said the rat, already sorry he'd lost his temper. "It doesn't matter. Now, have I told you about birds yet?"

"Birds?" asked A550. "No, never!"

"Good, now listen and I'll tell you!"

The calf lifted his ears and listened with bated breath.

"Birds are about as big as rats but instead of jumping around the ground or climbing up pipes, they race through the sky with the clouds."

"Oh!" A550 exclaimed, eyes flying open in amazement. "In the sky?! And they don't fall down like raindrops?"

“No,” Scorza replied. “This is the mind-boggling thing. Instead of front legs,” the rat explained, raising his own front legs as if about to lift into flight, “they have enormous wings which flap up and down.”

A550 laughed.

“What are wings?”

“Wings? I told you, they’re like legs but... a lot wider.”

“Wider?”

“Yes, because they’re covered in quills and feathers.”

“Quills?”

The rat gave a heavy sigh.

“Well, they’re a bit like....like your ears,” said Scorza, pointing to Scorza’s ears with his chin.

“Really?”

A550’s eyes darted left and right.

“Maybe I could fly too, then, Scorza?” he asked, flapping his ears vigorously.

The rat laughed out loud.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Pity,” the calf said, jumping up and down a couple of times. “I would love to race across the sky.”

“I bet...” Scorza murmured, becoming more serious. “I really have to go now.”

“Are you coming tomorrow?”

The rat nodded.

“For the first feed?”

“Yes, okay.”

“Goodnight, then, Scorza.”

“Goodnight, A550,” the rat said then scampered away along the pipe.

Chapter Four

A metal door

It had been a while since Scorza met A550 and their friendship had gone from strength to strength with every day.

Spending time with the calf had alleviated the rat's feelings of loneliness and apparently softened the rougher edges of his character.

Scorza went to the *Factory* every day, always at the same time, just before the feed pipe started up.

The calf could guess the exact time the rat would arrive and every day, at that time, would watch the shaft that ran along section 500, waiting for the tap tap of his friend's paws on the metal pipe.

Before long, it looked like they had come to rely on each other, which was unusual for a solitary old rat, and not without risk either.

"I'm nearly there!" Scorza gasped, pushing the object inside the shaft.

His claws screeched on the metal.

"Just one more push and ..."

The load slipped through his feet and rolled to the bottom, banging against the walls of the pipe on the way.

"Yikes!" he yelled hearing the echo come back up the pipe.

He descended to the mouth of the pipe for the third time, picked up the object and climbed back up again.

It took ages to reach the inside grating and more than once the load almost rolled away from him.

By the time he finally managed to push it through the opening, Scorza was tired and out of breath.

"Well, blow me!" he puffed, trying to catch his breath.

He scampered over to A550's stall.

"Here it is!" he said, laying his gift on the pipe.

The calf kept on eating, without raising his head.

"A550?" Scorza called out. "Look what I brought you!"

The calf didn't seem to hear. His head swayed from side to side over the trough, left then right, as if it were all he knew how to do.

"A550!" Scorza yelled in his loudest voice.

It was only then that the calf lifted its head and looked distractedly at the rodent on the pipe.

Scorza peered at him with his tiny short-sighted eyes and jumped back in surprise. The forehead was grey and dull.

There was no trace of the white splotch that shone out on A550's nose.

"Oh no!" the rat exclaimed, twisting his head this way and that. "A550? Where are you? Give me a shout!"

"I'm here!"

A550's kind voice rang out from the grim darkness of the *Factory*.

"Where?" Scorza cried, ears pricked.

"Where are you?"

"Here!" the voice replied.

The rat looked down the rows and saw a bright white splotch shining through the sooty steam.

"I'm here," A550 shouted again, not seeming in the least upset. "You're late again."

"But...but..." Scorza stammered, still short of breath.

"This isn't where you usually are."

"Indeed," A550 said. "We played skip-a-stall!"

"What?"

"Skip-a-stall!" the calf said again. "We moved."

"What do you mean, 'we moved'?"

"It happens. The barriers lift up and we all get to skip from one stall to the next."

"Really?"

"Yes. I think it ends when you get to the door."

“What door?”

“I don’t really know. Some say it’s a metal door, a bit rusty, at the end of everything.”

Scorza felt a prickle in his paws.

“At the end of everything?”

“At the end of each row,” the calf added.

“Oh, right...”

Scorza stared towards the end of the row, narrowing his tiny short-sighted eyes.

“Where are you going?” the calf asked.

“I’ll be right back.”

The rat hopped along the pipe, stopping to sniff every now and then, until he reached the last stall. In the smoky darkness, he could just about see the back of a brown bull with its head in the trough, eating.

On the wall in front of him was a guillotine door, covered with rust.

Scorza sniffed again, lifting his top lip to reveal two long teeth. Then he leapt onto the pipes coming out of the sheet metal and climbed along the wall. He made it to a window above the door and stuck his pointed nose through one of the holes in the grille to see what was on the other side.

“Oh!” He shivered and the hairs on his back stood on end.

On the other side there was a long steel chute, with shiny corners, which descended into the shadows.

“What on earth is that?”

Scorza sniffed the air coming up from the bowels of the *Factory*.

“What’s down there?” he wondered, trying to see through the darkness.

“*Nothing good,*” Vibrissa replied. “*I told you to let it go.*”

“Shut up!” Scorza snapped.

He went back along the pipe, past the large bull eating in the last stall, back to A550.

“Where did you go?” the calf asked.

Scorza tried to look calm.

"To the end of the row," he replied, nodding his head as he spoke.

"Did you see the door?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. There's no door," the rat lied.

"That's strange," A550 commented.

"Don't think about it," Scorza said, trying to change the subject. "Now, look what I found!"

He gathered up the object he'd lugged in from the outside world and showed it to the calf.

"Oh!" cried A550, stretching his neck over and eyes crossing.

"What is it?"

"It's a snail's shell," Scorza replied.

It was a perfect shell, smooth and shiny, covered in perfectly concentric spirals and light brown stripes.

"Wow!" the calf exclaimed.

"This looks even more exquisite than the raven's quill."

"It is!" the rat said. "I've never found one this big and this perfect before!"

"Really?"

"You bet!"

A550 was thrilled.

"Scorza...what's a snail?" he asked, not taking his eyes off the shell, head tilted slightly to the side.

"Eh, well, a snail is the animal that lives inside the shell."

"Is there an animal in there?!" A550 asked, sniffing the shell.

"No, no, but a snail is the animal that built this shell."

"Amazing... how?"

“Well, I don’t really know that. Snails don’t have feet, they’re always wet and slither along the ground, leaving a trail of shiny slime behind them. It has two long moving antennae on its head,” the rat explained, putting his paws up on his head, “and tiny eyes on top of the antennae.”

“Oh!” A550 said, looking at the rat pretending to be a snail.

“They carry the shell on their backs, like it’s their home, and when they’re in danger, they hide inside, antennae and all.”

“That’s incredible! But where did the snail go?” the calf asked, trying to peek inside the spirals. “Did it move house?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

A550’s head popped up and he looked Scorza straight in the eye.

“Did you eat it?”

“No, I didn’t, I swear! The shell was already empty when I found it.”

“It’s beautiful,” A550 remarked. “I’ll put it in my collection,” he lay the snail shell beside the raven’s quill.

Scorza looked at the calf and sighed.

“I have to go now,” he said.

“So soon?”

“Yes, but I have to ask you something first.”

“What?”

“Would you like to have a name?”

“A name? But I already have one. A550.”

“No, not that. A real name.”

“Like Scorza?”

“Yes, like that.”

“Oh!” the calf said. “I’ve never thought about it before.”

“Well, think about it now,” the rat said. “I have to go but we can talk about it next time.”

“Okay,” A550 whispered, mind already whirring into action. “A real name...”