

THE PITCH WHISPERER

A Middle Grade Novella

Bill Baynes

He cut a dashing figure with his bulging backpack and his backward cap that made him look like he was always going forward. Tuckster fancied himself an explorer, a modern Marco Polo, opening up new territories to mousedom.

It was the only thing more important to him than baseball.

He re-checked his supplies: tiny lights, batteries, hooks, food and water. He settled the roll of string a little lower, right above his tail, and then clambered into the crevice in the corner of the storage room.

The roll around his middle forced him to keep to the center as he first set out, but it would get easier to move as soon as he trailed some of the string behind him. He never got lost.

He detoured around a nest of crawlies, staying well away from their creepy, sticky feelers. He could hear fluid sloshing through the pipes, as he crawled beneath them.

His mission was to find quicker ways to get from the colony living quarters under AT&T Park up to the stands, where the mice gathered food dropped by fans during San Francisco Giants games. The regular season started in just a week.

Hundreds of fissures honeycombed the stadium. When the huge structure settled, cracks appeared in the tunnels, the rooms and the utilities -- the air conditioning, the plumbing, the electricity. Many became channels the mice could use. If you were little and squeezed real small, you could go almost anywhere.

Tuckster searched for a new route, a shortcut, a crossing of vent and conduit that could save a few seconds. Faster passage meant the squads could move more food.

He flattened against the wall to avoid a filmy spider cartwheeling down the channel. He wiped webby stuff off his head and shoulders.

He was running short of string. He must have come farther than he thought. He was panting and his back was sore.

He stopped to catch his breath. Everyone thought there was nothing to being an explorer. What did they know? Sometimes it was freezing up in the cracks. Sometimes moisture made it miserable. Today it was the heat.

It was never easy, but Tuckster didn't mind. That was part of the fun to him.

He pushed on for a few more minutes. As he ducked under some humming wires, he felt the last bit of string unwind. He grabbed it, just as his lights blinked once, twice and went dark.

Really dark.

He reached into his pack and took out his last set of batteries. He should turn back. Not much success today. Not exactly a breakthrough expedition.

He concentrated on fixing the lights by feel, staring into the utter blackness while his hands did the work. He noticed a slight brightening ahead.

He put down his gear and stared. There was nothing there. Probably just getting tired.

But he wasn't sure. It seemed ... it could be ...

He couldn't ignore it. He turned the lights on and marched forward again, leaving the end of the string on the floor of the passage.

A hundred paces, he told himself. A hundred steps and I can't see anything, I'll head home.

97, 98, 99, 100 ...

He clicked off the lamp. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust.

Was it as dark? He couldn't be sure. And was he imagining a scent of ... cheese?

He picked up his pace and soon he stepped into a place no mouse had ever been before. It was moments like this that made all the work worthwhile.

He found himself beneath a green wooden bench. There was that unusual odor. Not quite cheese. Tuckster's nose twitched.

He could see gigantic human toes with big yellowish nails – that was it. The smell got stronger as they got closer. Ankles towered out of sight. He saw overlarge leathery shoes with metal posts on the bottom. He'd stumbled into the Giants locker room.

He realized there were several humans. His friend Snug had taught him to understand them. Turned out it was the same language that the mice spoke, but the humans spoke in extreme slow-motion.

The men were talking about baseball.

“Did you see that catch?” one guy asked.

“Outrageous,” another answered. “He robbed you.”

To Tuckster, it sounded like “outraaageous” and “roobbbed youuuu.”

“What was it?” the first man asked.

“A slider, I'm pretty sure,” a different human said.

The humans were players. What a lucky find.

Tuckster settled in to listen and learn, but it had been a long journey through the walls and the words took so long to say that he may have dropped off for a few minutes because the next thing he knew ...

“WHOOPS!!”

He was yanked by his tail high into the air. His backpack spilled. He put his hand on his upside-down head and held on to his hat.

He was face-to-face with a human, wrong side up with big, wide eyes at the bottom of his face. He seemed almost as bewildered as Tuck was.

“You . . . you’re wearing a Giants hat,” the man said slowly.

“Yessir,” the mouse said.

“Sir?” A young man, the player wasn’t used to being called that.

“Put me down, sir,” Tuckster said, trying to stretch out his words so the human could understand him. “Please.”

“You can understand me? I can understand you?”

“Sir? Please?”

“Oh.”

The human put Tuckster down and squatted down himself. They craned their necks at each other, one up and the other down.

They both began at once.

“You can talk to me . . .” The human said in wonderment.

“You talk to mice . . .” Tuckster said in wonderment.

They both stopped.

“You first,” Tuckster said.

“I’ve always talked to critters,” the human said. “Done it since I was little. But none ever talked back before. How’d you learn?”

“Broadcasts of Giants games,” Tuckster answered.

“You ... you follow baseball?” the human asked.

“Are ... aren’t you Chad Whipple?” Tuckster asked. “You’re the Giants best pitcher.”

“Well ...” the human looked away modestly.

“I totally covet your curveball,” the mouse said.