

# When Fools Prevail

*by*

R. MICHAL ODUM

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ISBN: 1508619433

ISBN-13: 978-1508619437

To my spectacular nephews, Seth and Levi, who have been two of my greatest supporters throughout the making of this book.



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first would like to thank the Lord Jesus Christ for blessing me so abundantly and giving me inspiration whenever I ask Him for it, which is just about any time I sit down to write.

I would also like to thank my amazing husband who has been instrumental in making this book even possible. Without him I would be lost.

My sister, Shaina, who spurred me into action with her "if you ever write your book" comment and other inspiring words of wisdom.

And last of all I would like to sincerely thank all of my friends and family who had a hand in critiquing, giving me valuable input during the process of this book's creation.

Many thanks to all and may God richly bless you!





## PROLOGUE

**T**HE SILENCE WAS DEAFENING. It made John Blackwing want to run out of the house and lose himself in the chaos of the capital and its evening celebration. Maybe then he could postpone facing the news that lurked behind every passing moment.

With his mind so filled with grief, he didn't hear the door open behind him until it clicked shut. He turned quickly and his eyes fell on the be-speckled doctor.

"He's in critical condition," the doctor said with deep concern. "I don't think he'll live through the night." Shaking his head sadly, he made his way through the front door, mumbling to himself. John hastily pushed open the door to his father's bedroom and stepped inside.

"Son," came a hoarse whisper, upsetting John further

and putting fear in the pit of his heart.

“Yes, Father.”

“Son, I want you to promise me something.” He groped for John’s wing and John leaned closer, holding his father’s wing tightly.

“Yes, Father, I’m right here.”

“Son, I want you to take care of our people,” his father said, his voice firm.

John grimaced in protest. “But Father—”

“The new king will be just like his father,” the shaky voice interrupted gently. “I’m afraid he will neglect the people. If that comes to pass you must intervene.” His grasp on John’s wing tightened.

“But Father, everyone has high hopes for this King Dude ever since he married the princess and declared his allegiance to the people. He is not like his father. He has promised much, and already on his first day on the throne he is fulfilling some of those promises.” John’s voice had become soft with hope.

His father’s face was filled with love as he gazed at his only son. “You’re too young to know hate and deception but I’m afraid you will learn quickly.” He turned his face sadly. “And I won’t be here to help you.”

John’s heart constricted. “Don’t speak like that, Father. Please don’t.”

“Promise me.”

John felt tortured in his soul. “I promise, Father.”

That night, while the rest of the city celebrated the reign of the new King Dude, one young rooster mourned the loss of a beloved friend and father.

# ONE

## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

**T**HE VILLAGE OF THE SPECKLED Hens was deserted and silent. The oncoming threat that was King Rip Van Winkel had caused the swift evacuation of all the inhabitants just hours before—all except one small cottage.

A young hen lay on a cot, the skin on her face dark red with fever, her eyes wild with despair.

“Please, Peg, save yourself!” Starburst begged.

An undersized young rooster pulled himself away from the window. He laboriously walked over to her prostrate form, dragging his gimpy leg beneath him.

“I will not leave you alone, as everyone else has, to defend yourself.”

Her eyes spilled over with tears. “So then we are both

condemned to death.”

Peg gave her a brave smile. “Not if I can help it.”

Starburst watched as her friend picked up a heavy sword, his face straining from the pain in his leg and body. He limped back over to the window pulling the sword behind him, unable to lift it higher than his torso.

They both heard the growling voices coming from the shadows.

Peg stood frozen in fear at their impending doom, for he knew that he could not hope to defend them. He turned to see his friend’s tragic eyes upon him and felt a fierce determination rise up within him.

“We will die with honor.”

The words had only just left his mouth when the door opened and shut swiftly. An amused voice said, “That’s always a good decision, but my clever plan is that we don’t die at all.”

Starburst gasped in surprise. Peg pulled the sword up with all the strength he could conjure.

“You are very courageous, boy, but now is not the time.” A cloaked figure walked into the room, a mask covering half of his face.

Peg’s voice filled with awed wonder. “Wing!”

A wry grin showed beneath the mask. “Yes, and if you’ll excuse me I think we’ll avoid the chitchat at the moment and be on our way.”

Peg smiled back, but growls outside the door filled his

face with swift terror.

“Well, this is most unfortunate,” the Wing sighed, giving Starburst a wink. She only stared back in wide-eyed fear. He gently pushed Peg behind him just as the door crashed open.

Two very large opossums rushed into the room, brandishing their weapons before them.

“Lookie here, Rumble. We got us a regular feast,” said the rather fat opossum to his companion. The opossum named Rumble laughed, his beady eyes turning dark with eagerness. His fat comrade continued in devilish delight. “It don’t even seem fair.”

Wing suddenly spoke. “It really isn’t fair, gentlemen, given that there are only two of you.”

At his words both opossums turned to gaze foolishly at him.

Wing took a leisurely step forward and pulled out his sword in such a way as to catch the opossum’s full attention at once. There was no mistaking the confidence in his stance, nor the evident familiarity with the sword he handled.

The intruders exchanged wary glances.

“An’ who do you think you are? The Wing?” asked the fat opossum scornfully.

At the word “Wing”, Rumble’s eyes widened and he gave a frightful snarl.

Wing gave an elegant bow. “At your service, you filthy

rodents.”

The room became suddenly alive with deadly action as both opossums rushed madly at the Wing, completely forgetting about the defenseless chickens in their haste to kill this enemy that had skillfully eluded them for so very long. Wing became a lethal shadow that could not be caught as he fought these two adversaries, and very soon there was a cry of rage and pain as the larger of the opossums fell to the ground dead.

Rumple staggered backwards, clutching a heavily bleeding side. He glared hatefully at the Wing. “One day, you’ll finally meet your demise, Wing, and my only regret is that I won’t be alive to witness it.”

Wing was momentarily surprised at the dignified culture in the voice of his wounded opponent. “What is your name?” he demanded, pressing his sword against Rumple’s throat viciously.

The opossum smiled sadistically. “I am Rumplestiltskin.”

Wing tried not to let the shock register on his face at this revelation. All of King Van Winkel’s sons were dead, by his own hand. He shoved the sword tighter against the opossum’s throat. “That is impossible.”

Rumple’s eyes widened with fear and rage. “You killed my brothers, and my mother! If I have to rise from the grave I will avenge them and see your blood spilt by my hand!”

The memory of that day burned like a brand inside the Wing's mind, and he felt mournful regret soften his heart.

"I did not mean for them to die."

Wing spoke with pity and this seemed to magnify Rumpel's fury. Despite the sword at his throat he pushed forward, causing Wing to take a step back in his attempt to preserve a life that he had already destroyed.

"You lie!" he growled. "Kill me now or you will live to regret it!"

Making a quick and surely rash decision, Wing pulled the sword swiftly from Rumpel's neck and struck him solidly on the head with the pommel of his sword. The opossum fell to the ground in an unconscious heap. He gestured to Peg and Starburst. "Very soon this Village will be swarming with rodents. Let's not be their welcoming party." He opened the door with a flourish. "Shall we?"

He led the way to a rabbit-drawn carriage and helped Starburst inside while giving Peg brief instructions. "Leave this place as fast as you can, but do not try to join your neighbors in their escape. Go straight to Feathered City." Peg started to protest, but Wing cut him off sharply. "If you wish to stay alive I suggest that you listen to me. Avoid all the main roads that you possibly can and do not stop, no matter what you may think or feel. You should reach the City in the morning." He pressed a small but heavy bag into Peg's wing. "Here is money for food



and lodging once you reach the City.” He slapped the large rabbit on the hindquarters and it raced forward with tremendous speed.

The Wing watched them go, his heart heavy. They would learn soon enough when they reached their destination that their neighbors and friends had been butchered while attempting to escape from King Van Winkel’s army.

\* \* \*

The occupants of Feathered City were in a strait. Their mortal enemy, the opossums, had declared war on the Feathered Kingdom to obtain possession of King Dude’s throne, but King Dude was seemingly oblivious to the threat of King Rip Van Winkel the Third’s advancing armies. While the second village burned to the ground, King Dude lived in the comfort and safety of his lavish castle.

“Where is my breakfast?” King Dude roared, sending dozens of attendants scurrying around the courtroom. King Dude continued, his voice bordering a whine. “I was forced out of my warm bed at this ungodly hour and you don’t even have my breakfast ready to console me.”

One attendant spoke fearfully. “The Queen requested that you dine with her and her sister this morning, oh merciful King.”

The king puffed out his white chest and pounded on the table in rage and impatience. “She can dine with the rats in the dungeons for all I care.” His puffy green narrowed with scorn. “All she does is peck at me about all those silly threats from that inept opossum who calls himself a king.” He laughed loudly. “Van Winkel will never invade my city.”

The attendants were silent, wondering about the crisis befalling, but too frightened to speak.

Suddenly, a knock sounded on the great oak door. The room was silent as they awaited the king’s order.

“Enter,” called King Dude tartly. When a black and white rooster entered, a smile lit his face. “Ah,” he said, his grin wicked, “my head counsellor and chief military adviser. John, how nice of you to grace us with your presence.” He gestured in front of him. “Come, come. I’m very curious to know what was so important that you felt it couldn’t wait until later in the day.” He glared at John, his eyes slits of coal. “I’m debating whether I should have the messenger beheaded or cast into a pit and burned.” He smiled wickedly again. “And all because I was deprived of my morning slumber.”

John’s face broke into a charming grin. “Well then, it’s a good thing I was the unfortunate messenger, for I am rather indispensable.”

“Yes,” King Dude sighed, “how fortunate for you.” He waved at his attendants. “All of you be gone. I will speak

with John alone.” When the room was empty, he turned to John, his voice bored. “Now tell me what this business is about.”

“I would like permission to take the Feathered Fleet and attack Van Winkel’s army,” John said seriously.

King Dude nearly choked on his drink. “Take the fleet!” he sputtered. “Then who would protect me?”

John’s eyes were unreadable as he said, “My Lord, King Van Winkel’s troops are advancing nearer and nearer to the capital. We need to beat them back and try to save as many villages as we can.”

The King’s voice became livid with anger. “I’m the king. Me! That sorry rodent will never have my throne!”

John was silent as he waited for the king’s anger to pass. He had been chief military advisor and head counsellor to the court for four years and had become used to the king’s tantrums and moods.

“Anything else?” the King asked through clenched teeth.

John didn’t hesitate. “I would like to create an alliance with the cats and let them enter the city under the strictest of rules.”

King Dude’s eyes bulged slightly out of their sockets. “First you want to take away my protection,” his voice raised an octave higher, “and now you want me to allow those feline scoundrels into my city?” He paused for dramatic affect. “Who do you think you are to come to me

in the wee hours of the morning and pester me with these horrible ideas?" John didn't answer. Still glaring, the King continued. "And what benefit would an alliance with the cats bring us?"

This question John answered confidently. "The cats have friends in high places."

\* \* \*

John was walking slowly down the great hall when he heard the light voice behind him.

"John, wait!"

He turned to see Princess Faith coming toward him, her pretty face alight with happiness. "Princess," he said, bowing meekly.

"Oh, John," Faith laughed. "Haven't we been friends long enough to discard formalities?"

John grinned. "You are a princess."

Faith's eyes narrowed in feigned anger. "And this princess was promised an escort into the city."

John frowned innocently. "With all of those suitors you've been seeing, I thought you would be busy."

She swatted him playfully on the wing. "You thought wrong." Then her eyes warmed with something more than friendship. "I always have time for you, John."

Footsteps behind them made them both turn. Queen Mercy walked toward them, her head high with authority.

Her manner suggested that she was used to her wishes and commands being obeyed at an instant's notice, and in her eyes sparked energy and fire. She nodded to Faith, then turned to John eagerly. "What did my husband say?"

"He said no to both of the requests, my lady."

The Queen stamped her foot angrily. "Why, that self-centered pig!"

Faith's eyes widened in alarm and she quickly glanced around the hall to see if anyone had heard. "Sister, you must be careful about what you say. You know what happens to subjects who speak against the king, even if you are the queen."

"I don't care!" Mercy growled. "I told Father that he was making a mistake by forcing me to marry that fat turkey, but he knew better." Her eyes filled with tears. "Now dear father is dead and our people suffer from the mistake he and I made."

Suddenly she turned to John, her eyes dry and steely. "You can't take the fleet without his knowing, but you might meet with the cats," she shivered, "and try to make peace with them."

Faith gasped in horror. "But Mercy, if John is caught he could be killed for treason!"

"Posh!" Mercy scoffed. "My husband is all talk and no action. John will be in more danger of the cats than that fat porker sitting on the throne." She gazed deeply into John's eyes. "Aside from you, my sister, there is no one I

trust more in this kingdom than John.”

John bowed, humbled by the queen’s faith in him, and started to leave when the princess said something that made him stop in his tracks.

“Maybe you could convince the Wing to go with you.” The twinkle in her eyes suggested that she was skirting a secret.

“That bandit?” Mercy burst out. “He wouldn’t help you. All he cares for are the poor and the helpless.” Her eyes again filled with sadness. “He despises the king—all royalty in fact. And he is right to hate us.”

Faith still gazed at John curiously, the twinkle still in her eyes. John avoided her gaze. “I don’t need any help, my Queen, and I promise that I’ll neither let you nor the kingdom down.” As he turned to leave he could still sense Faith’s eyes on him, and wondered in his heart.

\* \* \*

Faith watched John walk away, knowing the danger he treaded so frequently. She would never tell his secret, even on pain of death. She would also never make the mistake her sister, Mercy, had made, no matter how many young, eligible, rich roosters her brother-in-law introduced her to. There was but one she would marry, and he was walking away from her to possibly get himself killed.

Queen Mercy sighed loudly, drawing Faith back to the

present. “He is absolutely delightful,” she said mischievously, “and handsome, too, don’t you agree?”

“He is acceptable,” Faith said, turning quickly away.

Mercy followed. “Where are we going?”

“To talk some sense into *your* husband.”

Mercy’s voice was full of mirth. “Well then, you’re going the wrong way.” She laughed, and Faith felt her face heat with embarrassment. Mercy walked up beside her, smiling contentedly. “Do not worry, little sister, your secret is safe with me. I don’t blame you for liking him.

“As for *my* husband,” she stopped and frowned, “not even the Wing could beat some sense into him.”

Laughing, they turned around and, wing in wing, walked away from the courtroom, where new developments were taking place, and the already unstable political sands were shifting yet again.

\* \* \*

The streets of Catsville were quiet and tranquil considering that there was a war going on across the border that lay not half a day’s journey away.

John pulled his cloak tighter against his shoulders and checked his hood before stepping out of the darkness and into the street. He had been walking only a few minutes when he heard a purring voice.

“Kind of late to be travelin’, isn’t it?” He turned to see

a white cat leaning lazily against one of the buildings to the right of him. The cat looked tired and bored, but John knew just how quick he could be with one delicate paw resting on the hilt of his sword. John reached to grasp the hilt of his own sword. The cat continued, his face still in the shadows. “I’ve never seen you around these parts.”

“Probably because I haven’t been around these parts,” John said, pulling his hood down further. The cat took a step closer. “I’ve come to speak to the one in charge.” John’s voice was steady.

The strange cat’s voice was faintly entertained. “You have a lot of guts coming here alone.” Suddenly he laughed and walked up to John, holding out his paw. “I like that. I’m Joshua.”

“John.”

He didn’t take Joshua’s outstretched paw, and Joshua laughed again, showing gleaming white teeth.

“Careful, too; yes, I think we’ll be great friends.” He nodded toward a brightly lit building. “He’s in there. I’ll take you to him.”

When they walked into the building, John’s stomach jumped at the sight of all the cats milling about. Standing in one of the corners was a white cat with the same coloring as Joshua, but with a different body type. While Joshua was agile with delicate features and slightly smaller bones, this cat looked powerful and was larger, with a strong, well-defined face. While the new cat looked



intimidating, John could sense the cunning deadliness in Joshua.

“Amos,” Joshua called, drawing eyes from around the room. John glanced coolly around, keeping his face hidden. “Look what I found wandering around outside.”

Amos smiled in friendliness. “We welcome anyone into our humble city.”

“Even someone from the Feathered Kingdom?” As John spoke he pulled back his hood.

The atmosphere in the hall became hostile as the cats awaited Amos’s reaction.

Amos’s eyes were calmly speculating as he appraised John. Joshua faced John with an appreciatively cautious look as he pulled his sword out swiftly. The room stayed stilled until Amos lifted his hand and addressed John with an amused expression.

“What do you want from us, rooster?”

“My name is John,” he corrected, giving a slight bow. “And I am here to negotiate a truce between our fair kingdoms, and to invoke an open borders treaty. We want our Kingdom to be open to all who are honorable.” He paused to let his words take effect, then continued dramatically. “We have been enemies for far too long. We should unite now to fight the coming evil.

“The trade that an open borders treaty might promote would be incredibly beneficial for the growth and progress of your city. We could offer—”

“Those are all fine words, but what of your precious king?” Joshua interjected. “There are prices on our heads in the Feathered Kingdom.”

John nodded. “That is true, but I am close to the King and can convince—”

Joshua interrupted rudely. “Do you mean to say that you came here of your own accord, and not by your King’s approval?” He laughed without humor, and John was startled by the malice in his voice. “So we’re supposed to stake our lives on just your *word*, and expect your wretched King to honor it?”

“That is enough, brother,” Amos reproached gently. Joshua took a dutiful step back, but held onto his sword; his eyes held a disturbing gleam. Amos turned back to John. “You may live in a Kingdom, rooster, but we are just a city with a relatively small population. What you suggest sounds very appealing, but my brother is correct. We cannot afford to stake our lives on your word—not that we don’t trust your word, sir, but we must take precautions to protect our own.” His eyes became shadowed with a past regret, and his mouth pressed into a hard line of dismissal.

John felt the dismissal keenly and grasped at his last hope. “Would you accept the Wing’s word?”

At that Amos’s eyes narrowed. Joshua took a step forward, his eyes on fire with indignation. “You have nothing to do with him, you lackey of a coward.” John fought to keep back a smile as Joshua’s face became a

mask of admiration for the scalawag they knew as the Wing. It was obvious that Joshua held the Wing in the highest esteem.

Amos noticed John's delight at his brother's words. "We would very much like to know how you can procure the word of the Wing, considering we have been trying to discover him for years," he stated curiously.

"I am one of his close companions," John answered.

"Does the Wing keep company with villains now?" Joshua mocked while taking another step closer, practically daring John to challenge him.

John smiled. "Why, no, he keeps company with lackeys." He watched Joshua bare his teeth in fury. "Or isn't that what you called me?"

As John expected, Joshua's sword flew at him like lightning. Their swords connected harshly, sending sparks flying, and John jumped back, feeling the air move as Joshua's sword flashed past his face. His body warmed to the fight and he could feel the power building as he lunged at Joshua and disarmed him quickly and efficiently.

Joshua's face became a mask of shock. "How did you do that?" he accused, his now empty paws twitching nervously.

John shrugged his shoulders amiably as he sheathed his sword. He turned to see Amos observing quietly. "Would you watch your brother die so easily?" John asked.

"My brother can take care of himself," Amos

countered.

“Obviously,” John chuckled.

Amos smiled despite himself at Joshua’s annoyed grunt. “It is not often that my little brother gets bested, but the experience was long overdue. Besides, you do not dare kill him when you are here to gain peace.”

His meaning was clear. John, surrounded by potential enemies, could not make such a rash decision without expecting certain death.

John nodded in agreement, waiting for Amos’s next words. He knew that Amos was considering all that he had proposed and was making his decision.

Joshua carefully grasped his sword from the ground and stood regarding John with resentful admiration. “I think we should just kill him now and send back his head to that rubbish of a King,” he stated with an impish grin. “No offense.” He sent John an unapologetic look. “I just don’t like you.”

“That’s quite alright,” John responded with an answering grin that made Joshua growl in aggravation. “But I will say that the feeling is not mutual for I consider you an individual of extreme fascination.”

Joshua glared at him.

“As much as I am enjoying myself,” John said, directing his attention back to Amos, “I do need to return to the King with a reply.” He threw another roguish grin at Joshua. “And I would prefer to return with my head still

connected to my shoulders.”

Amos gazed at him, his face revealing nothing. “We will consider what you offer.”

“That is fair,” John agreed and turned to walk boldly through the doors leading out of the hall.

Amos stopped him. “How will we find you to give you our answer?”

John smiled and bowed. “I will send someone to receive your answer.”

“And we’ll consider sending him back unscathed,” Joshua retorted angrily.

“Oh, I have no fear of losing this messenger.” And, so saying, John disappeared through the doors to disintegrate into the shadows of the evening.

# TWO

## A DISTURBING CHARACTER APPEARS

**K**ING DUDE STRUGGLED LAZILY off of his throne to return to his chambers. After John's swift departure he'd had to endure a litany of complaints, most of them concerning the approaching opossum army.

He was startled by a servant's timid voice. "My King, there is someone here who has requested an audience with you, alone."

"Inform him that the King has important business to attend to," he growled, watching gleefully as the servant groveled before him in fear. "Tell him to go crawl back into the hole he came out of. I don't have the time or energy to see anyone."

The servant nodded but struggled for words as he

hesitated. “I informed him that you were busy, but he insisted.” He cringed in anticipation of the King’s wrath.

King Dude’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Did you not hear me? I’m the King, and right now I don’t want to see a living soul.” He flicked his wing at the horrified servant’s face. “Be gone before I have you beheaded.”

A voice suddenly sounded from the shadows. “It is such a pleasure to be in the Feathered Kingdom again.” The voice was high with a slightly nasal quality. “Your generous reception is always delightful.”

The King’s face blanched. “Leave us,” he commanded the servant. The immediacy of the command made the servant rush from the room in surprise rather than fright.

King Dude regarded the shadows with caution. “Oscar.”

There was movement as a shape formed. A sleek mallard duck stepped out of the shadows, a smirk on his flat bill. “Hmm... yes, very welcoming.” He leaned casually against a stone pillar, his eyes playfully dangerous.

“What do you want?” King Dude demanded. “I thought we agreed that you weren't to return for another week.”

Oscar’s eyes became dark. “You have been dishonest with us.”

King Dude sat down uncomfortably on his throne. Fear turned his stomach. “I have been nothing of the sort.”

Oscar’s voice was fierce as he stepped away from the

pillar. “You swore to us that you could control your people—that you could control your wife.”

“I am controlling my wife,” King Dude sputtered indignantly.

“Really?” Oscar laughed. “My sources tell me that she schemes behind your back, she and your adviser.” He paused in enjoyment, watching the King’s face turn an amusing green. He knew that the King hated being belittled. “You must keep a closer watch on her, and you mustn’t form an alliance with the cats. That would ruin all of our carefully laid plans, and also endanger your citizens, for we both know they are not to be trusted. The Land of Flight is counting on your continued cooperation.”

“Of course,” the King agreed, the skin on his face slowly regaining its normal color. “I will be more careful, but what shall I do about the cat situation?” He scowled. “Disgusting animals.”

Oscar’s voice was deliciously evil. “I will take care of that.” His eyes sparkled with anticipation. “By the time we’re done, those filths will never be trusted, and the very name will be spoken of once again with fear and hate.”

\* \* \*

Faith was reaching to grasp the door handle when she heard the voices.

“Disgusting animals.” She recognized her brother-in-



law's voice.

The disturbing quality of the voice she heard next sent a shiver down her back.

“We will take care of that. By the time we're done those filths will never be trusted, and the very name will be spoken of once again with fear and hate.”

“What ever could he be talking about?” Faith murmured to herself.

The voices continued.

“Unfortunately I must go and make arrangements, but we shall return soon as per our plan.”

Faith gasped and jumped around the corner, listening as the door opened and shut very quietly—almost too quietly. When she was convinced that she was alone she stepped out, only to find herself faced with a caped mallard duck. Her heart leapt into her throat for an instant before she could speak.

“Good morning, sir,” she said, fighting to keep her voice light.

The duck bowed elegantly. “Princess, how very good it is to finally meet you.” His eyes slyly appraised Faith's flustered appearance. “It seems you are every bit as enchanting in person as I have heard.”

Faith laughed delicately, careful to hide her trembling wings. “You are too kind, sir; but please, it is not fair that you know me when I am kept in the dark regarding your name.”

“Quite right, Princess,” the duck agreed. “I am Sir Oscar, a visitor to your fair Kingdom.”

“Well, Sir Oscar,” Faith said, giving him her most winning smile, “it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, but I must go or miss an engagement with my sister.” She bowed gracefully. “Good day, sir.”

“Good day, Princess,” he answered pleasantly.

Faith turned to leave but was stopped by his menacing voice. “In the future you should be more cautious about where you choose to spend your time. It wouldn’t do for you to hear something you shouldn’t.” His flat black eyes suddenly glared at her. “I wouldn’t want any harm to come to such beauty.”

Faith couldn’t breathe as she watched him disappear. She knew exactly what he was implying with his words, and wasn’t sure if she should feel fear or resentment at the thinly veiled threat.

One thing she was sure of. If he felt the need to threaten her into silence, not knowing exactly what she had heard, then there was something sinister going on between the King and this strange mallard called Oscar.

She needed to find her sister or John immediately.

\* \* \*

**M**ercy’s existence, as far back as she could remember, had been full of hard decisions and sacrifices, and it had not

grown easier as she grew older. Being the eldest daughter of a King who had no sons was a constant trial.

And now she feared for her life.

“What kind of schemes have you been conjuring, my dear wife?”

She laid her fork down and smiled at her husband sitting beside her. “You have caught me.” Calmly she took a sip of her water. Deciding that her safest route was playing innocent, she put a coy smile on her face. “I’ve been scheming all week long, in an attempt to get you to have a meal with me.”

King Dude’s face was skeptical. “Why?” he asked.

Mercy thought quickly. “I would like to speak with you concerning my sister, Faith,” she said, allowing her face to pucker in concern. She watched the King’s face turn instantly bored as he returned to his food. Relief swelled in her chest, but it was short lived.

“You and John have been seen together very often of late.”

Her heart stopped at that accusation, but her face remained a calm, still mask. “He has been discovering the safest passage for my sister’s journey through the Kingdom to our country estate, where she will be protected if this war goes ill for us.”

King Dude glared at her, not fully convinced, but unable to prove that she was lying. One of the first things he had admired about her was her inner strength—her

ability to remain calm under the most dire circumstances. Now it troubled him deeply, for her face was completely unreadable at the moment.

They were interrupted by Faith bursting breathlessly into the room.

“Mercy, I have been looking for you. I—” She stopped abruptly when she saw the King. “Oh, your majesty, I didn’t realize you were there.” She gave a hurried bob. “I apologize.”

He frowned distastefully at her. *What can she possibly desire now?* he thought. Long ago he had stopped hiding his dislike for the pretty princess, and the aversion had only grown with every suitor that she refused.

Mercy spoke quickly, before he could react. “Faith, dear, we were just discussing your journey. Why don’t you join us?”

At the prospect of Faith’s departure the King gave her a rare smile. “This shall be a great adventure for you, sister.” Throwing a pleased glance at Mercy, their fight all but forgotten, he didn’t notice the swift flash of anger that crossed Faith’s face. He gave a regretful sigh. “We shall miss you dearly.”

Faith bowed with subdued annoyance in her eyes. “As I shall grieve over the loss of your magnanimous presence.”

Mercy shot her a quick warning glance, but the King was oblivious to the sarcasm in Faith’s words. He smiled, his mind filled with his own self-importance and

brilliance.

“My dear, I’m so very sorry for your loss,” he said, and added generously, “If there were but one thing I could do for you to make the departure more bearable, I would.”

“Well, I’ve got a splendid idea then!” Faith said excitedly, with a mischievous gleam in her too innocent eyes. “Why don’t I just stay and dismiss the trip entirely?” She took an eager step forward, delighting in the sudden dread that covered the King’s face. “Then I could spend all of my time basking in your glorious presence.”

“That is out of the question!” the King huffed, all self-importance gone as he scrambled to his feet in disturbed anger.

He looked so alarmed that both Faith and Mercy fought desperately to hold back laughter.

“Regrettably, I have important business to attend to,” he said, attempting to regain his composure and dignity. He straightened with an offended pout on his face. “I will go and leave you to your conversation.”

Only when the door was safely shut behind him did Faith turn to Mercy anxiously. “Something very strange is going on with the King.”

“I’ve always suspected him of being more than a little strange,” Mercy said with a smile.

Faith’s eyes narrowed, not in the least amused. “Do you know of a mallard called Oscar?”

Mercy’s attention was caught at once. “Tell me.”

Faith recited her encounter with Oscar, leaving out no details.

Mercy's face grew gradually more and more apprehensive with each word spoken, and when Faith reached Oscar's death threat her breath caught fearfully. There was not a doubt in her mind that the unexpected dinner she had just been forced to endure with her husband had something to do with this visitor to the courts. But what, she could not begin to guess. "I think my husband may not be as innocently ignorant as I have previously believed. There is something sinister going on and he apparently has a hand in it." Faith nodded. "We must walk more carefully and make sure he has no excuse to be rid of us." She briefly wondered just how far she could carry the treachery—it being not only against her husband, but her King—that she hid so carefully deep within her mind. "If it takes my last breath I will not let him destroy our Kingdom."

Faith blinked in surprise, feeling her stomach instantly clench, as she thought of the ramifications of such a direction. "But sister, what do you mean to do? We are helpless. The people have gone unprotected for so long that they would not blink if Dude killed either one of us."

Mercy stood to her feet. "We must show them that we can still protect them."

"But how?" Faith cried in despair. "We don't control the fleet, or the palace guard."

How indeed, Mercy thought with a scowl. “I do not know yet, sister, but there is one thing that I am quite certain of: our next step must be considered very carefully. We do not control the fleet, but I believe that most of the officers would be loyal to us if we play this game correctly.” She briefly weighed their options and grimly decided that what she was to do next would be very hard, but necessary. “My dear sister, there is something that you can do for the people.”

Faith's eyes glowed with hope as she nodded eagerly. “Of course, you know I'll do anything!”

“I need you to disappear.” At those unexpected words Faith's enthusiasm was dashed. Mercy continued grimly. “I cannot do what needs to be done with you here. I will not have you harmed.”

Faith's eyes now sparked fire as she said with strong conviction. “And I cannot abandon my sister to a fate worse than death and my kingdom to the tyrant they call Rip Van Winkel.” She reached out and caught hold of Mercy's wings, holding them lovingly in her own. “I will do anything you ask, but please, please, do not ask this thing. I would rather die than be torn from you and our home.”

Mercy felt herself weaken at Faith's anguished plea, but fought it violently, knowing that above all else her sister must be kept safe. “We will let the King believe that you have gone to our summer home, but I have a secret

place chosen for you where you will be safe.”

Faith's head bowed as she succumbed to the pain those few words inflicted upon her. She felt tears instantly fill her eyes and could not stop them from falling as she answered. “As you wish, dear one.”

While Mercy quickly explained the details of Faith's disappearance from the capital, she couldn't ignore the foreboding that hovered in her mind. Surely this is the right thing to do, she berated herself.

The time would come when she would wish with all her might that she had heeded the silent warning that beckoned to her that day.



# THREE

## CHAOS ENSUES

**T**HE MORNING SHONE WITH BEAUTY and light as the street markets opened their windows and doors to the people of Feathered City. Market days were usually busy and bustling days, full of diverse types of chickens from the Feathered Kingdom. There were the heavy breeds, who always had an enormous assortment of items in their carts, for they were very large and needed the sustenance; the sleek sporting chickens, who often frequented the fighting pits in the city's underground; and the tiny bantams with their flamboyant plumage. (They were not liked in the market because more often than not they had a rather high opinion of themselves and therefore strutted about with their tiny beaks turned up in haughty pride.)

Today boded no different than any other day. A young mother bantam stalked down the paved street holding tightly to the hand of a young chick, her face tight with rage. “I knew your father should have come with us. His commanding presence would have put that young rooster in his place immediately.”

“But, mother, the fellow only asked us if we needed any assistance,” the young chick peeped, his innocent face red with embarrassment.

The hen only huffed louder. “And now my own children turn against me!”

Suddenly a voice sounded from the dark alleyway next to them as they hurried past. “Your husband really shouldn’t let you out. You are far too exquisite to be out with the common people.”

The young hen quivered with indignation. “How dare you speak to me in that manner, sir!”

A very large striped feline stepped out of the shadows, his sharp teeth glittering in the sun. “Oh, I dare.” And with that he reached out and snatched the little family into the darkness, causing chaos to ensue in the marketplace as feathers flew and terrified screams filled the air.

The young cat chuckled as the hen wiggled and screamed at his side. “You will not escape so you may as well stop fighting me.”

The young mother’s face was red with exertions as she spat out, “With my dying breath I will fight you,

despicable fiend.”

A lofty voice spoke behind them. “Your bravery speaks well of you, young hen. Would you care for some assistance?”

The cat jerked roughly around and glared at the intruder, but before either of the combatants had spoken, a muffled young voice cheeped, “Yes, please, Mr. Wing.”

The striped cat dropped his feathered loads and pulled out his sword in one fluid movement. “So you are the mighty Wing. I’ve been looking forward to this moment.” He lunged swiftly forward, only to find his sword blocked.

“Really? Amazingly enough I haven’t given you one thought.” With these words the sword fight commenced with a vengeance. Both fighters having a similar aptitude for swordplay, the fight required extreme physical and mental effort for both rooster and feline.

The cat fought with the natural agility and quick reflexes of his kind, in addition to a confident familiarity with swordplay and danger. To him, killing was a thing to be studied, practiced, and skillfully carried out.

The Wing, on the other hand, wielded the sword with a perfected efficiency and economy of movement. His fighting style could almost be considered matter-of-fact if the danger and brutality of a real fight did not prevent such a description. When fighting a skilled opponent, however, he had one particular gift which he had learned to highly value.

Patience.

Glimpsing a weakness in the cat's guard, Wing leaped forward, slicing the arm of his opponent. The cat fell back, hissing in pain, but, being a cautious individual, he did not jump back into the fight. He instead jumped onto a wooden ladder leading to the roof. "Until we meet again, Wing! And we will, for I intend to receive the reward for your death."

"Why wait?" Wing taunted.

"I'm not without patience and wisdom. I will have the upper hand soon and only then will I chance my life," the cat sneered, and with those words he disappeared.

As the Wing was leaving the hen and her chick at their spacious home, he realized that his opponent had been missing something very important. It could be a clue in guessing his antagonist's identity.

\* \* \*

The chaotic sound of many raised voices echoed behind the hard wooden door of the King's throne room. John hesitated as he reached for the handle, an uneasy feeling in his stomach. Instinct warned him that this was going to be a very difficult hour of his life. *I will have to face the lions soon enough*, he thought grimly. He pulled the door open, silently letting himself into the room.

"After all the years of peace, we shouldn't let one

disturbance cause a war between us and the cats.” John recognised the weary voice of his father’s old friend, Sir Rudolf.

“Disturbance? Our people were attacked! We must retaliate with force, to show them that we will not succumb to their terror!” One of the newest to join the court, a young bantam rooster, spoke with passionate anger. He was encouraged by clucks of agreement by his fellows and continued his loud tirade. “Furthermore, I believe we are sorely in need of a new leader in our ranks. A fellow who will take charge and lead the way to freedom from the murderous oppression of Catsville.”

Still unnoticed by the crowd, John finally spoke. “Am I to assume that you are speaking of yourself, young squire?”

The young rooster flushed when he heard John’s cool voice but turned confidently to face him, saying with an arrogant lift of his beak, “I am, sir.”

John strolled over to stand in front of the rooster, towering over the tiny bantam. “I find it highly ironic that you are now ready to massacre a generally peaceful city over one incident where no one was injured, but when the opossum army decimated entire villages of our countrymen you were strangely silent.” The squire’s face drained of color as the words left John’s mouth and suddenly there was an uncharacteristic silence that fell across the room. John’s voice was filled with disgust.

“Where were your flowery words then? Where was your righteous anger then?” He glanced around at the other white-faced individuals. “All of you were silent.”

Sir Rudolf quickly intervened. “Gentlemen, please. We must unite for the good of our fair country.” As he passed John he sent him a grin. “Bravo, my boy.” His quietly spoken words, mingled with joy and pride, caused the anger to evaporate from John’s heart. He watched his mentor address the group once again. “Let me remind you that John is the military advisor to the king and has also served in the Feathered Fleet, received honor for numerous heroic deeds done during his service for our country,” John’s grin deepened as the young bantam rooster’s face flushed, “and comes from a long line of military men serving the King. His father and grandfather before him served in this very room and also served in our military.

“I dare say he is more than equipped to inform us on what he believes should be our next action in this matter.” And with that he turned to John, inviting him to speak.

“As I’ve said from the beginning, I believe the real and very present danger is Van Winkel’s opossum army that is marching closer and closer to our very capital. As for the Cat situation, I think we need to, of course, protect our citizens. I do not see any need to attack Catsville.” He passed bound sheets of paper to Sir Rudolf. “I have written a report for the council members of what I think

should be done about the protection of Feathered City.” There were murmurs as the papers were passed. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, time is a very precious commodity and I will not waste it by staying to argue with you fine gentlemen. I will return when the King calls for me.”

He turned and swiftly left the room without another word.

He was followed out by Sir Rudolf, who clapped him on the back good-naturedly. “Don’t let that pack of turkeys anger you so easily, John. Most of them come from noble families that are very wealthy and would never dream of giving the common folk even an hour of their time. You know that I would not even be numbered among them if it had not been for your father and our great King before,” his voice became filled with the anguish of loss when he spoke of his King and best friend, “for I am neither noble nor rich.”

John once again felt anger sweep over him. “You are more honorable, more noble, than all of those roosters! I cannot for the life of me understand why our King would choose such spineless, ignorant individuals to give him counsel, when he has older, far more experienced roosters to guide him with wisdom.”

Rudolf’s old eyes regarded him with severity. “John, you must learn to bridle your tongue. These are perilous times, my young friend, and I would not like to see you beheaded for treason.” His voice lowered as he gave this

warning. “It is rumored that you have been conspiring against the King.”

John’s eyes quickly scanned the area where they were traveling. “I am a loyal servant to our King.” There was no alarm in his voice, but steely resolve. “But I will always be true to the promise that I made to my father at his death. I will always, to the best of my abilities, care for and protect my people.” He sent a humorless grin to Sir Rudolf. “My oath to the kingdom and my oath to my father often engage in bitter battles with one another.”

Rudolf was not amused. “If you wish to live through this war they must agree on a truce. The threat on your life is very real and I believe the rumors are being spread by your bantam rival.”

“Interesting,” John acknowledged. “I did notice that the young squire had a new coat and gold necklace, which is curious, considering that his family has come upon hard times.”

Rudolf nodded. “I noticed also. Who do you believe is padding his pockets?”

John’s mind raced with possibilities. “This calls for some investigating,” he said with another grin, this time genuine pleasure written across his face. “Since I know my ideas will most likely be rejected, I will have a generous amount of time on my hands, and will have ample opportunity to search for the culprit.”

“Please, be careful,” Rudolf warned. “You know that I



regard you as my own son, and would die for you if it would preserve your life.”

John took his wing warmly. “You have been a second father to me since my own father passed, and I do not take your warning lightly.”

“See that you don’t,” Rudolf admonished. His eyes suddenly twinkled merrily. “A certain young lady has been very interested in your whereabouts.” John’s eyes sparked with interest as he continued. “Not an hour goes by when she is not roaming the halls in search of you.”

“Then I should not disappoint her,” John said, his voice serious as he bowed and quickly took his leave.

Rudolf chuckled as he watched the swiftly retreating back. “No, you should not.”

\* \* \*

Faith felt her maids approach before she heard the soft voice.

“My lady, Sir John has returned to the palace. I have heard that he has already made an appearance with the nobles about the disaster in the city.”

Faith felt her stomach clench as her mind dwelt on the feline villain that had attacked her people. The feeling of helplessness that had fallen over her as she thought of the terror that must have overcome the young mother and her child threatened to once again overwhelm her with it’s

ferocity. She pushed those feelings immediately aside.

“I must speak with him.”

The young maid nodded. “I know, my lady. Perhaps he wishes to speak with you also.” And with those words she passed the princess a hastily written yet precise and legible note.

Princess Faith,

I have heard you have been looking for me. I will be in the garden awaiting your arrival.

“Not exactly a love note, but it will do, I suppose,” Faith muttered under her breath. She turned to her maid. “Stay here until I return. I will be back shortly.” Without waiting for an answer she hastily rushed out her door.

It did not take her long to reach the garden, but she was disappointed.

“Where is he?” she growled in frustration when she could not find him.

“Are you looking for someone, Princess?”

Faith felt her spine stiffen in alarm as she recognised the voice. “Sir Oscar, how nice to see you again,” she said, turning to give him a winning smile.

“Yes, it certainly is.” The mallard’s green feathers shined brightly in the late afternoon sun as he stood regarding her with suspicious eyes. “What a pity that we will all be robbed of your presence very soon.”

“Not very soon, Sir Oscar,” Faith corrected, anger sparking in her eyes at the very thought of her coming departure. She suddenly realized that this alarming stranger knew far more about her personal life than she was comfortable with. “May I ask how you have come to know this?”

“You may, your highness.” He smiled smugly at her. “The King has decided that I will be the one to escort you on your long, tedious journey.” Seeing the panic rise in Faith’s face he quickly reassured her. “You mustn’t worry about anything, Princess. I am more than qualified to lead and guide your party.”

Before Faith could reply, John’s voice spoke for her. “I will be the judge of who is qualified and who is not.” He walked over to stand by Faith’s side, silently reassuring her rapidly beating heart. “And since I have only just heard the news of your arrival, ambassador, you are absolutely not qualified to take the Princess anywhere.”

A dangerous light lit the small eyes of the duck. He smiled unpleasantly at John. “Unfortunately for you, Sir John, you have no say in the matter. The King has already decided and we shall leave within the week.” He bowed deeply to Faith. “Have a pleasant afternoon, Princess.”

After he had vanished, Faith asked, “Ambassador? He introduced himself to me as Sir Oscar just yesterday.” Seeing the apprehension on John’s face, she said sadly, “Has my dear brother-in-law yet again done something

detrimental to the continued prosperity of our realm?”

“It has yet to be seen,” John murmured, quietly guiding her to a more private area of the garden. “I have learned that Sir Oscar has been placed by the King as our ambassador from the Land of Flight.”

“Everyone knows you cannot trust them!” Faith cried mournfully.

John bade her to silence. “He has made this decision without any word of counsel from me or anyone else. Things seem to be quickly becoming dangerous for the Kingdom.”

They both knew how treacherous the birds from the Land of Flight were from the stories their fathers had told them—stories full of lies and double crosses—which was the reason no bird of Flight had ever been allowed as an ambassador to the courts. The very thought of one in close confidence with the King filled both of them with dread.

“What should we do?” Faith asked, her voice now quietly sorrowful.

“The Queen must know, but I cannot be seen with her at this time.” John began leading Faith out of the garden, still speaking quietly. “It seems that I’ve become a target for treason, and I’m afraid I will bring more suspicion upon her if we are seen together.”

Faith turned her sad eyes back to him. “I’m afraid you are too late, John. My sister believes she is already under suspicion by the King and this is her reason for expediting

my trip south.” She grabbed his wing fiercely. “How can she even think that I could leave her and my Kingdom, when we’re fighting a war within and without?”

“Your sister and your Kingdom need you protected,” John answered kindly, as Faith let go of his wing and tears pooled in her eyes. “She is right to send you where you will be safe from the coming storm.”

“I won’t be safe with Sir Oscar escorting me, of that I am sure,” Faith said, her voice fighting tears. She then recounted her first episode with the mallard to John, who’s face remained expressionless.

“Inform your sister of the new ambassadorial appointment,” John instructed, his voice calm, even as a feeling of doom began to settle over him. “And tell her she mustn’t do anything. I’ll try and reason with the King and make him see the folly in trusting this duck. If the Queen is already under suspicion then I don’t want to endanger her further.”

“You cannot do this alone, John!” Faith argued vehemently.

John gave her a characteristic grin. “And what makes you think I shall be alone?” he asked in his most charming voice. “I have allies that I am recruiting with all haste.”

“Surely you cannot mean the cats?” Faith whispered, shock reverberating in her voice. “Weren’t we just attacked by a feline scoundrel?”

“Yes, we were... and I do not believe it was a

coincidence that the attack was made mere days after my proposal was made to King.”

Fury arose in Faith’s chest as she considered the hidden meaning in John’s words. “Do you believe the King capable of such evil? To sacrifice his own people to fulfill his selfish agenda?”

John didn’t answer immediately, but carefully chose his next words. “I will believe my King to be honorable, until he proves otherwise.” He took Faith’s wing and bowed smoothly. “I must say goodbye now, Princess.”

Faith once again fought the tears that threatened to overwhelm her. “Goodbye, my dear friend,” were her whispered words in parting.

John watched her leave, his own heart heavy with grief.

\* \* \*

Neither of them could know that hidden behind some vibrant bushes was someone that burned with jealous anger over every touch, every kind look, and every word that was shared. He glared at John with small eyes gleaming with hatred as John exited the garden, and under his breath he promised revenge to the one that threatened to crush his happiness as the future husband to the damsel of his heart: Faith.

# FOUR

## AN AGREEMENT IS MADE

**T**HE NEWS OF THE ATTACK ON Feathered City left a bitter taste in Joshua's mouth as he wandered the streets of Catsville late that evening. He walked with his paw dangling close to his sword, an earlier argument with Amos weighing heavily on his mind.

*"You would not lie to me, would you, little brother?"*

*Joshua hated the distrust in his brother's voice. "I would never lie to you, Amos." He could not believe they were even having this conversation. "Beside which, I would never attack an unarmed civilian or child, even if they were from that detestable Kingdom."*

*The tension in Amos's eyes caused Joshua to cry out in*

*frustration. "It was not I!"*

Joshua still remembered the hurt look in his brother's eyes as he stormed furiously out of the room. The anger lingered in his mind as his thoughts roamed to the rooster that had recently visited them.

"Now that rooster I would gladly teach a lesson," he muttered, imagining the cocky black and white rooster begging for his life at the end of his sword.

Suddenly a dark figure swooped down in front of him and he pulled out his sword to fight for his life.

"That will not be necessary," the figure said, his voice cool as he took a step back, giving himself and Joshua's sword a generous amount of space.

Joshua waited, his sword poised for action. "I have been approached by far too many strangers in the dark of late and am losing my patience for peaceful friendliness."

The dark figure's voice was amused. "Then I hate to disappoint you. I have been sent by our mutual friend."

Joshua grinned wickedly. "You will be the one disappointed, for he was no friend of mine." And giving no warning he swiftly attacked, feeling the release of all his pent up emotions as he lunged toward his unknown opponent. "I will make certain you don't survive the night," he hissed.

The stranger was instantly ready with his sword as he parried and took a swipe at Joshua's torso with a theatrical



flourish. Joshua dodged back but kept his left foot planted; he then used it to launch himself at his foe with a flurry of thrusts and swipes.

“You will find that I am very hard to kill,” the dark stranger said, a familiar merriment filling his voice.

“We’ll see about that,” Joshua challenged, attacking him with passionate ferocity, his sword slicing dangerously close to the stranger’s caped shoulder.

During one of his enraged attacks he caught sight of the black wing of his adversary. “So you are from the Feathered Kingdom,” he growled, anger stirring him to greater fervor. “You are the enemy of my people.”

“Would it be presumptuous to ask—before you kill me, of course—why you hate me with such fervor?” The stranger did not seem at all perturbed by his impending demise.

“Your kind killed my family! All that remains is my brother and I!” Joshua’s voice was slightly winded as he said this, for he was starting to find that the rooster had been correct to discount Joshua’s earlier promise to kill him.

The stranger’s voice held regret. “I’m sorry about your family, but do you not find this hatred and bitterness for all feathered kind rather a burden?”

Joshua only grunted in reply, for he was not doing very well and found it hard to speak at the moment. The strange rooster seemed to be growing in strength as he

bore down on the lithe cat easily.

In a last-ditch effort to overcome his opponent's impeccable defense, Joshua made a low lunge, and at the same time reached down, raked up some dust into his paw, and flung it at the stranger's face. The swordsman struck his sword down and, shielding his eyes with his cape, jumped back. Joshua, not losing momentum, quickly leaped onto a nearby barrel and launched himself off, leaping over the rooster, intending to pounce upon his back.

The rooster dropped his sword and flung his cape at Joshua. As Joshua's sword came down through the cape the stranger twisted the material around it and Joshua's arm, deflecting the blade away from him. At the same time he pivoted, and, with both arms, used Joshua's momentum against him and slammed him against the alley wall.

Joshua's world shook and he momentarily blacked out. The next thing he knew he was lying on the ground, coughing and gasping, trying to get his breath back. Stunned, he shook his head, trying to remember when he had lost his sword.

The rooster chuckled amiably. "Didn't I tell you that I was hard to kill?"

Joshua looked up. The stranger stood with his sword ready to kill. His heart pounded with the exertion of the fight and the feeling of utter helplessness, and he pushed himself into a sitting position. Leaning against the wall, he

glared at the stranger with mingled appreciation and anger. “Go ahead and kill me. I’m not afraid of death.”

“I’m sure you aren’t, brother, but I will not see you die.” The deep voice of Amos spoke from behind the rooster.

The rooster did not act surprised in the least at the presence behind him, nor the sword that was very probably laid against his back. “It is most imperative that I speak with both of you privately.”

“I have been attempting to contact you for quite some time,” Amos agreed. He sheathed his sword and, pulling Joshua up, led the way down the street. The stranger fell quickly in step next to him. “You must forgive my volatile brother, he sometimes cannot control himself.”

“He seems a dangerous fellow for someone of average skills.”

Amos chuckled as his little brother hissed behind them. “I do not believe my brother will ever live this one down. Beaten twice in a week.”

Joshua ignored his brother, still stung by the insult to his “average” skills. “We’ll see who is of average skills next time,” he said as they walked leisurely to the brothers’ lodgings. It wasn’t until they reached the warm light of their dwelling that he finally received a full view of the mysterious rooster, and when he did he felt the air thrust from his lungs in one shocked word. “Wing!”

“At your service,” he said with a bow.

Joshua turned and caught a glimpse of Amos's smugly grinning face. "You knew this entire time!" Joshua accused.

"I wasn't positive," Amos disagreed, "but I did have my suspicions." He directed his next comment to the Wing, his blue, intelligent eyes inquisitive. "I've had my suspicions from the very first, in fact."

Wing decided to get right down to business. "Before we discuss the agreement between the Kingdoms, I need to know if you can identify a certain cat. A cat that I believe to be a paid bandit. I caught him attempting to kidnap a mother and child this morning in our village." He made sure he had their attention before saying, "He was an exceptionally large striped tabby—without a tail."

Amos and Joshua shared a long look as they digested what the Wing had just said. They obviously knew of whom he spoke.

"We haven't heard anything about him in a while," Joshua said, a bite in his words. "He is called the Minx. Very dangerous, and, as you've surmised, a paid assassin. Amos and I have been after him for years, but he is as hard to find as..." he sent the Wing a grin, "you."

Amos continued. "His father was a bobcat from the Deadlands, which explains his size. His mother was from the Tiger tribe. Don't let the name confuse you," he explained hastily when he saw the puzzled look on the Wing's face. "They're just cats, but the tribe leader tends

to be... adventurous. The Tiger tribe is known to roam into the borders of the Deadlands in search of better hunting.

“Last we heard, the Minx was rumored to be somewhere in the Land of Flight.”

“And the pieces come together,” the Wing remarked quietly, his mind now filled with even more questions. “Please tell me, for I must leave very soon: do you intend to enter into an agreement with the Feathered Kingdom? There are dangerous times ahead and we must know if we can trust you to aid us if we attack the opossum army.”

“We enjoy the thought of those overgrown rodents entering our fair city just as much as you do,” Amos answered.

“And we certainly would not run away from a good fight,” Joshua added with a roguish grin on his face.

Amos continued, “While relations with the Feathered Kingdom have been strained, I do not imagine that a opossum king would be interested in treaties and trade. Quite the opposite, in fact. The opportunity to unite against Van Winkel before he becomes more powerful is one which we should take now, or possibly regret not taking later.

“But tell me: has your king had a change of heart about us?”

The Wing thought carefully before answering. “There are many ranking officers in the Feathered Fleet who are

more loyal to the royal line than to the throne itself. The queen is of the royal line, and she is in full agreement with these negotiations.”

Amos pondered that, then finally nodded. “Much of our growth has been due to individuals who have grown weary of the nomadic ways of our kind. They move to our city to settle down with families or to follow pursuits that are ill-suited for constant travel.”

Joshua frowned. “Such as poetry. I’ll never understand —”

“The arts are one thing,” Amos interrupted, “but there are many others. Many are intrigued by the inventions coming from the Feathered Kingdom, and hope to kindle your ingenuity among our own people. More open trade would also benefit the tribes who use Catsville as a place to stay while they trade with your outlying towns.

“What I am trying to say is that a trade and mutual protection alliance with the Feathered Kingdom is likely to be of great value to the city of Catsville. It would allow us to care for our people in ways that are out of reach to us right now.”

The Wing turned swiftly to the door. “Then I will tell our friend, Sir John, that you will join our fight against this bloodthirsty army that is descending upon us.” He knew that his people would need all the help they could get.

“Only if we have your word that you will be fighting

with us.”

Wing turned to Amos and gave him his wing. “You have my word, my friend.”

Amos took his wing confidently. “And you have ours.”

The Wing swept quickly out of the room and into the dark street. Joshua moved to follow him but felt Amos’s paw restraining him. “You could have been killed, brother,” Amos cautioned, “I believe the prudent decision would be to leave the rooster alone.”

“When have I ever been wise or prudent?” Joshua argued, his head cocking quizzically at the mere suggestion.

Amos shrugged. “You do have a point.”

“Well then,” Joshua said, giving his brother a mischievous grin, “I shan't disappoint you by being anyone other than myself.” He made for the door, offering his brother a quick, “Do not wait up for me, mother!”

Amos watched his carefree, impetuous, brother leave with laughter in his eyes.

Joshua didn’t go far before realizing that he was too late. The dark phantom that was called the Wing had once again disappeared.

\* \* \*

Later that night, Mercy listened to her sister with growing apprehension. She couldn’t help the feeling of weariness

that settled over her as she considered all the new information. How her husband could be capable of such outrageous decisions was beyond her understanding.

“John has instructed us to do nothing until we receive word from him,” Faith finished nervously. She couldn’t keep the fear from her voice. “Sister, what shall we do? Every day brings the opossum army closer, with our sovereign doing absolutely nothing to prevent it, and now we have a duck ambassador! I feel as though I am in a living nightmare and it frightens me.” Her face dropped into her wings in despair. “I am not brave like you, sister.”

Mercy patted her on the back sympathetically. “Your country will have need of your bravery in the dark days to come, Faith.”

“What can I do?” Faith questioned, her face still hidden.

“You can live to inspire your people with hope.” Mercy felt that her own days were numbered, and felt it all the more as time progressed. She knew that her sister might be their people’s only hope. It was now even more imperative that she send Faith away, though the thought of Sir Oscar being her escort caused a halt in her plans; she could never in good faith send her sister with that shady character.

“I will speak to my husband about Sir Oscar,” Mercy decided with finality.

Faith gazed up at her in fearful dismay. “What will you



say?”

“I will only speak with him about your journey and my anxiety over someone that neither of us know accompanying you.” Her words did little to sooth Faith’s frazzled emotions. Nor her own, which were hidden deep behind a calm facade. “Perhaps I can reason with him and help him to see the folly of his ways.” She smiled a little bitterly at the thought of her prideful husband humbling himself and becoming the King that he had promised to be so long ago.

Faith watched her sister smile with ever growing dread in her heart. Mercy was always the strong, brave one—the one who fought all the battles for both of them. What would she do without her? “I cannot be brave without you.”

“You must,” Mercy said, slightly more sharply than she’d intended. Seeing the hurt look in Faith’s eyes, she amended, “I cannot carry the load by myself, Faith. You will need to bear some of the burden.”

“Of course,” Faith agreed, feeling the chastisement keenly. She forced a gallant smile onto her face. “I will do whatever I can to help, sister.”

“I’m sure you will,” Mercy acknowledged, giving her sister an encouraging smile in return. “For now we will settle this nonsense with Sir Oscar. Then we will be arranging your journey.” Seeing Faith’s eyes shadow again she reassured her. “Do not lose hope. Good will conquer

this evil that is storming into our lives.”

Faith said nothing, for her thoughts abruptly went to a note that burned in the pocket of her dress. A note that she had found pushed under her door before she had left her room.

It wasn't the first mysterious note that she had received from an unknown admirer, but it certainly was the most disturbing. Her intention had been to show it to her shrewd sister, hoping that she might decipher whether the note might be dangerous or not, but after her sister's reproof she decided to handle the matter herself. Surely she could handle something as simple as a bothersome crush.

“I will pray for you, my sister,” she promised, her voice ringing with sweet innocence.

Mercy took her wing lovingly. “I know you will, dear Faith.”

The rest of the evening found them quietly planning their next move, and, finally, Faith returned to her rooms with her heart light and her thoughts encouraged by her sister's brave spirit. She could never imagine what her future would soon hold.

\* \* \*

Dearest Love! The one who holds my heart in her delicate wings!

Queen of my heart, I once again send you a message declaring my ever passionate and ardent love for you. A love that will endure through any tribulation, any storm that may threaten to come between us! Not a moment goes by when you are not in my thoughts and my heart. How I long to unveil myself to you. Alas, I cannot!

But let me reassure you that you will not find my appearance lacking in strength, charm, and all other pleasing attributes that would tickle a young lady's fancy, such as yourself.

Be at peace, my love, in knowing that we will soon be together!

Yours very sincerely,  
One who will remain anonymous.

The writer sighed as he gazed down proudly at his articulately written message. How he wished that he could see her beautiful face as she beheld the words that flowed from this page. How could any young lady resist his affection?

His thoughts returned to the only one who stood between them. The detestable rooster with a high opinion of his position. The bane of his existence.

“Sir John will die before I let him stand between us, my

princess,” he muttered angrily. His feathers shook with fury at the very thought. “Nothing will stand between us!”

\* \* \*

No lamps lit the abandoned streets of the east district of the now quiet Feathered City, where a lone figure stood leaning against a dilapidated building. The figure’s generous cape wrapped snugly around him, and a wide-brimmed hat was pulled low over his face. Being that the area was rumored to be unsafe, he was understandably alone in the darkness. Suddenly, he was joined by another shadowy individual.

“You’re late,” the first figure said. His annoyed voice echoed in the quiet night. “And I remember informing you at the beginning of our transaction that I did not like waiting.”

“And I remember replying that I did not care what your preferences were,” Oscar retorted. He pulled a purse that bulged with coins from a front pocket on his coat. “Here’s your pay, Minx. Exactly what you were promised.”

The Minx’s striped paw snatched the proffered purse from the duck’s wing. His sharp, white teeth gleamed in the darkness as he suddenly seized Oscar’s neck and pulled him off the ground. His green eyes were piercing as he whispered in the mallard’s horrified face, “I will not be trifled with. Next time come on time or don’t come at all.”

The duck nodded eagerly and the Minx slowly let him go, his teeth still glinting wickedly. “I will receive my pay, if it’s gold or roasted duck.”

Oscar gulped in fear and tried to regain his dignity, to the enjoyment of the feline who stood watching him. “I have another job for you,” he finally gasped. The Minx waited eagerly. “There is someone close to the King that I need taken care of.”

The cat lifted his paw to pick his pointed teeth in boredom. “Just tell me his name and I will take care of him.”

“He’s the military advisor to the King.”

The cat’s eyes brightened with excitement. “Military advisor, eh? I may even enjoy this assignment. What is his name?”

“His name is John Blackwing.”

# FIVE

## A SHOCKING ALLIANCE WITH A SINISTER COUNTRY

**T**HE COURT ROOM WAS SILENT as King Dude lowered himself lazily onto his throne, his head tipped sideways in uninterested tedium. Enjoying all the eyes upon him he sent them a self-gratified smile.

“With the advice of my good friend, and the Feathered Kingdom’s newly appointed ambassador, Sir Oscar, I have made some necessary alterations to the plan that was so diligently put before me by our military adviser.” He nodded toward Oscar, who bowed humbly. The king continued, “I believe the modifications will be in the best interest of our people and for the crown, and expect my new plan to be carried out quickly.”

Dread halted any words from Sir Rudolf’s mouth as he

watched the new ambassador, a duck he distrusted with every fiber of his being, suddenly speak. His nasally voice was unpleasant.

“We from the Land of Flight only wish the best for this country, despite the misunderstandings of the past, and hope that we can be of service in any way possible.” He stopped for dramatic affect, letting his words sink in before continuing. “As for this army that threatens your existence, please do not fear for we have allied with you to fight this oncoming evil.”

“Where is your army?” John queried from the back of the room where he had once again quietly entered. “If you intend on joining our fight then I would expect to see evidence of your country’s promises.”

Oscar’s eyes became annoyed as he glowered at John. “We do not see the need at this time, for we are sure that this rodent army is quite harmless and unalarming.”

“I’m sure the villagers of the small town of the The Speckled Hens and other villages that have endured their attacks would agree with you,” John’s voice rang with anger, “if they had lived through the opossum’s ‘harmless’ and ‘unalarming’ attack.”

Sir Rudolf felt anger boiling up inside as he thought of his butchered countrymen. “Here here!” he cried, his voice sadly joined by only a pitiful few. He watched as the King’s face grew red from outrage.

King Dude stood to his feet. “You have no proof of

these supposed attacks, Sir John! And I will not have my court become a place of wild assumptions!”

Oscar’s self-satisfied smile was John’s undoing, but when he began to open his mouth Sir Rudolf spoke first, effectively taking the wrath that would rain down with the truth that he spoke.

“How can we prove things which only dead witnesses have seen? How can the silenced forever, speak against the injustice of their murders, by a foe that is being ignored by the very ones sworn to protect them?” His voice sadly accused the room. He could be silent no longer. “Their blood cries out for vengeance, and we sit here in our plush couches debating their existence.”

The King’s small eyes glared at Sir Rudolf in unadulterated fury. “Do you speak against me, Sir Rudolf?” he questioned softly, his voice brimming with deadly premonition.

Sir Rudolf bowed reverently. “No, my King, I only ask that we take action.”

“There will be no action, for I see no danger,” the King said with finality, quickly rising to his feet and leaving the room.

The court buzzed with discussion, but Rudolf stood silently waiting as John made his way to his side. John’s eyes fearfully appraised him.

“You have signed your death warrant, my friend,” he said sadly.



“I do not regret my words.” His only regret was not speaking his mind sooner, and thus deflecting more of the consequences to himself. “I have lived my life, John. I won’t see you lose yours so young.”

“According to my plans neither of us will forfeit our lives,” John declared quietly as they both made their way through the doors and away from their fellow council members. He spoke with passionate decisiveness, sending Sir Rudolf a reassuring grin.

Neither of them noticed that they were being watched with great distrust by a certain duck with beady green eyes. A sinister smile now decorated his features as he followed the King into his private sitting room. An evil scheme that would drastically change the lives of our heroes began forming in his dastardly mind.

When John and Sir Rudolf were safely through the doors, Rudolf turned to John and passed him a note with his name printed neatly. “This came for you while you were gone on one of your trips this afternoon.” He watched John open the letter, adding warningly, “I captured it as soon as it’s existence became known. Your enemies would very much like to have any correspondence that you might be having with the princess.”

“I’m sure they would, if this were from the princess,” John agreed, his face becoming a mask of dread as he glanced over the note.

Sir Rudolf watched his friend in consternation. “What

is wrong?"

John did not speak; he only passed the note to the older rooster. The words were written in bold but elegant type.

BE WARNED! We were informed by our runners early this evening that the opossum army is moving. It is our belief that they intend to attack a city close to us: Broilertown. Having the opossums this near to our borders will not be tolerated. The attack will be tonight. We are readying ourselves for battle. A.

Sir Rudolf's eyes were wide as he said sharply, "What are you involved in? Who is this A?"

"I cannot tell you all I know, for I cannot be sure that you won't be questioned." John's voice was pained as he attempted to explain all that he felt was safe. "I have made arrangements for the protection of our people, with the approval of the Queen."

"This is dangerous business, even with the approval of the Queen," Sir Rudolf whispered fearfully. "This could be considered treason."

"I do feel rather uneasy at times," John admitted, his voice ringing with giddy anticipation rather than fear.

Sir Rudolf gazed at him, his face still agitated.

"I must go." John spoke hurriedly, a sense of urgency abruptly coming over him. "If anyone searches for me, inform them that I had an evening engagement that will

no doubt keep me until morning.”

“I will.”

John quickly found himself leaving the castle, his heart pounding with excitement. Tonight he would fight for his country.

\* \* \*

Faith walked rapidly down the wide halls until she reached the large entryway to the throne room. She waited impatiently as the ambassadors and advisers poured through the doors, her eyes searching the faces keenly. She frowned in disappointment when she could not find John. “How oft he eludes me,” she grumbled to herself. Noticing Sir Rudolf standing alone she made her way to stand next to him.

“Have I missed John yet again, sir?” she inquired with a pretty smile.

Sir Rudolf gave her a swift bow. “Indeed you have, miss. Unfortunately he had an evening engagement that he absolutely could not miss.”

“That is unfortunate,” Faith said, her mind anxiously contemplating Mercy’s words from the night before. She knew John would want to know her sister’s thoughts. “Did he happen to give you a time when he would return?”

Sir Rudolf’s eyes were guarded as he answered. “He mentioned possibly returning in the morning.”

“Most unfortunate,” Faith sighed in dismay, as she glanced casually around them. She instantly noticed a bright red bantam rooster with shining green plumage decorating his tail staring boldly at her. She did not return his gaze but turned promptly, hoping to deter his attention. “Who is that individual that stares at me so intently?”

“He is one of our new advisers from a notable family in the south.” Sir Rudolf also noticed the almost possessive look this young bantam gave the princess. “He is only newly introduced to the court by our King.” He found the rooster’s regard for the princess curious and made a mental note to communicate this experience to John.

Faith could feel his eyes still upon her as she said with a frown, “I’m sure his wealth speaks well of him in our King’s eyes.”

Sir Rudolf gazed at the young lady with newfound respect. Perhaps she had received some of her sister’s shrewd intelligence after all. “No doubt you are correct, my lady.”

“Surely he isn’t another possible suitor that my brother-in-law will bring before me,” she mused in aggravation. Forgetting that Sir Rudolf was still listening she sent him an apologetic look. “Forgive my outspokenness, sir.”

“No apologies necessary, Princess.” Everyone in the palace knew that the King was eagerly attempting to

marry the young princess off. Seeing the troubled look cross her face he reassured her with a grin. “The Princess is of a much “higher” caliber than that young rooster, so I do not believe that you have anything to worry about.”

Faith struggled to control the swift laughter that threatened to overtake her as she avoided Sir Rudolf’s too innocent smile. The bantam was indeed much shorter than she.

Quite suddenly Oscar appeared, standing uncomfortably close to the princess.

“Perfect. Just the two people I was needing to speak with.”

Faith’s animated expression immediately changed at the sound of Oscar’s voice and she stepped discreetly away from him, letting her eyes drop fearfully to the ground. She could not explain why he frightened her so much.

A cocky smile decorated the duck’s face as he asked, “I need to speak with Sir John about the Princess’s departure. Do you know whether he will be available tomorrow afternoon?” His question was directed at Sir Rudolf and Faith breathed a silent sigh of relief as she watched the older gentleman answer.

“As far as I know, he will be available tomorrow.”

“I noticed that he seems to disappear quite often,” Sir Oscar reflected suspiciously.

Faith felt alarm quicken her heart as she listened to Sir Rudolf’s calm answer.

“He has many responsibilities that take him away from the capital.” Sir Rudolf didn’t let his features reveal anything, but kept his face open and genial. Nobody had to tell him that his friend was in grave danger. If certain of his actions were made known, John would be accused of treason and face certain death, and he was sure that this impostor would be more than happy to attend the execution.

“I see,” Sir Oscar muttered before turning to address Faith. “I wanted to once again communicate to you, princess, that you have positively nothing to be concerned with. It will be my pleasure to see to your safety on your trip.” His words were as warm as anyone had ever heard and Faith returned his smile, her own wobbling visibly. Oscar continued, oblivious to the princess’s terror. “I am also hoping that we will become better acquainted during the long hours of travel.”

Sir Rudolf’s face grew pale with anger as he listened to the mallard’s words. That the contemptible duck would even insinuate that he could be more than an acquaintance to the princess was an insult to the royal family. He couldn’t keep the emotion from his voice as he stated harshly, “You will never be more than an ambassador to our country, and any designs you may have with the princess will never, and I repeat, *never*, be allowed.”

“You overstep your bounds, Rudolf,” Oscar hissed before giving Faith a farewell bow.

Sir Rudolf watched him go and quickly turned to Faith, whose eyes were filled with shock. “Has he ever spoken to you like that before?”

“No!” replied Faith, her voice repulsed and panicked at the same time. “I never dreamed he thought—I mean, he has never said...” She searched for a chair, feeling her head begin to swim. “I think I might faint.”

She quickly sat down, feeling the comforting presence of Sir Rudolf above her.

“Prepare yourself, Princess.”

Sir Rudolf had only just spoken those words when the red bantam hurriedly shuffled over to them.

His concerned voice spoke close to her head. “Are you alright, Princess? Can I be of any assistance to you?”

In her head she cruelly decided that he could “assist” her most efficiently if he simply disappeared. “No.” Feeling remorse when she saw his downcast face she smiled generously at him. “Thank you, kind sir, but really, I am quite alright.”

“Perhaps a bowl of water would be appreciated,” Rudolf offered.

The young rooster nodded eagerly, his face brightening at the prospect of assisting the princess in any way that he could.

As soon as he had vanished Faith unsteadily rose to her feet. “I do not want to be here when he returns. If he wonders where I have gone, please tell him that I felt ill

and decided to retire to my rooms.” Indeed she did feel unwell.

Not feeling that there was any need to explain the princess’s departure to the young squire, Sir Rudolf swiftly left the hall, his mind anxiously considering what the ramifications would be if the mallard did obtain the hand of the princess. Such a thing had never been considered before, let alone achieved.

Noticing the sun dropping over the horizon he stepped out onto one of the many porches adorning the castle. His mind dwelt on his younger, harsher days when he had been a humble worker in the fields of his master before the great king had found him. He suddenly wished fiercely that he could be counted among the fighters that would be battling that very night.

\* \* \*

When Faith reached her rooms she let herself fall upon her couch. Despair clouded her vision as her mind recalled the scene from the hallway. “Oh, Father,” she whispered tearfully, “if only you were still alive none of this would be happening.”

Only when she once again stood to her feet did she notice a small note lying on her desk. She hesitantly reached for it, dreading what she would read on its white page.



# SIX

## PREPARE FOR BATTLE!

**A**MOS AND JOSHUA ENTERED Broilertown warily, their eyes busily scanning the dimly lit streets. Most of the large homes, and the equally large sheds connected to the homes, were dark, but in some of the windows were flickering lights.

“Looks like everybody’s gone to their roosts for the night,” Joshua declared, his eyes giving the empty streets a cursory glance.

Amos didn’t comment but cautiously advanced toward one of the homes with lights on. Before he reached the door a voice spoke from a darkened shed across the street.

“We don’t like strangers disrupting the peace in our town.” A massive white rooster stepped from the shadows. He easily towered over them in height and just as easily

humbled them in strength, his body a muscled mass. “And not everyone has gone to roost.”

It always took him a while to get used to the Broilertown chickens, and he was momentarily taken aback by the sheer size of the curious rooster. Amos suddenly remembered why they had come. “We have come to warn you that you are about to be attacked.”

The rooster let out a thundering laugh full of genuine humor. “By you two?” he roared.

“Two troops of opossums are coming, possibly entering the city even now.” The tension was thick in Amos’s voice. “You must gather your fellow citizens and escape!”

The expression changed on the rooster’s face to one of speculative reasoning. “Well now. That’s quite a bit different, isn’t it?”

Joshua could contain his frustration no longer. He jumped forward to stand in front of the rooster. “Did you not hear my brother? There are going to be rodents running through your city in hours... or less!”

The rooster gazed down at Joshua, a smile returning to his generously proportioned face. “I heard him alright, cat, but we’ll not run and leave everything to the opossum rabble.” And with that he walked over to a large bell that stood near his home and pulled the thickly corded rope attached. The deafening ring of the bell was so extremely intense that the brothers flinched as the sound bombarded their sensitive ears.

The rooster once again sent them a pleasant grin, evidently amused by the pinched expressions on their faces. “That should wake the residents,” he said.

“Or deafen them,” Amos quietly commented.

“Perhaps it already has,” Joshua grumbled, glaring at the offender of his ears.

The bell achieved startlingly quick results as the largest chickens the cats had ever seen came pouring from their homes. They surrounded the brothers, their expression wondering, seemingly not at all disturbed to have two cats in their village in the middle of the night.

One of the roosters called out to the one who had met them as they first entered the small town. “What is the matter, JoEllen?”

JoEllen spoke loudly, addressing the sizable group easily. “We have received news from our cat neighbors that we are about to be attacked by two troops of opossums.”

“Only two?” a voice yelled from the crowd.

“Will you leave any for us, JoEllen?” a female voice hollered, causing a roar of laughter in the crowd and a jolly smile from JoEllen.

Amos and Joshua exchanged quizzical looks. “I’m starting to think they do not require our aid,” Amos remarked quietly in surprise.

“I think we should hire them for the protection of our own city,” Joshua whispered seriously back.

They were startled when JoEllen turned, directing a question to them. “What is your plan, sirs?” He gestured toward the large group. “We are ready to fight.” Several in the crowd shouted in hearty agreement.

For the first time in his life, Amos was speechless. The situation was the opposite of everything he had imagined when he had originally planned the attack, and he was astonishingly without words.

Joshua, on the other hand, never knew a moment when he couldn't make a daring statement, and tonight, with the exciting anticipation of the battle upon him, was no different than any other day. He stepped forward, his paw resting eagerly on his sword.

“And our tribe is ready to fight with you!”

His words were met with earthshaking cheers and many raised wings. Joshua watched them all with a grin of camaraderie on his face, inwardly deciding that he would make an exception for these warrior chickens when it came to his hatred for all things feathered.

The roar from the generally quiet town was met with confused looks by the opossum army, who marched rapidly toward the village, a mere mile away.

The townsfolk immediately went into action. The small village quickly became illuminated as all the street lamps were lit and the town armory opened. Broadswords, deadly maces, and heavy round shields were passed from one anxious chicken to another as they reported to JoEllen and

Amos, who were the appointed leaders.

Joshua watched as one young rooster—who, though he was still a young chicken, towered over the cat—swung his thick broadsword into the empty air with evident delight on his face.

“How is it that you have all these weapons at your disposal?” Joshua asked, astonished at the size of the sword and the length of the spikes protruding from the lethal mace in the rooster’s other wing.

“We supply all the weapons for the Feathered Fleet, and the weapons for the use of personal protection in the city,” the young rooster answered without taking his eyes off of his dangerous weapon. “We have always kept these in reserve for our city’s protection in case of an attack of any kind.”

Joshua could not hide his appreciation as he continued to watch the fluid movements of all the chickens as they readied themselves for battle.

JoEllen startled Joshua by laying a wing on his shoulder. He met the rooster’s proud smile with a grin of his own. “Long have we prepared and waited for this moment,” JoEllen declared, his own heavy sword strapped to his side.

After hiding all of the very young and old in the meeting house, they then placed half of their fighters into groups of five, with an additional three cats to a unit. This force was then separated into its own company to meet the

opossums inside the city near the meeting house. The other half was to counterattack from the hilly country outside the city. The force as a whole consisted of nearly every able-bodied citizen.

When everyone was placed in their positions, all that was left was to wait for the army to arrive. They were not left waiting very long.

Growls and snarls began to fill the air as the opossums began their invasion. Little did they know that they were to be greeted by a ready and extremely able army of giants and lightning-quick terrors fighting side by side.

The opossums filtered into the city. Following their usual battle procedure, this was not their main fighting force, but just a sizable decoy force sent to scare off the residents while the rest of the army cut off the retreat. As such, they were not expecting a real fight, but did expect a tasty morsel now and then, and looting was par for the course.

Joshua watched from his place on top of a nearby two-story building. He did not attempt to conceal himself. He watched the opossums run in and out of buildings and slowly but surely make their way toward the center of town. He turned and drew his sword, raising it into the air.

“Fellow countrymen, friends newly acquainted, all drawing sword with me this day... let’s kill opossum!” he shouted. And with that, he dropped off the roof, slid down

the wall using his claw, and, before he reached the ground, leaped from the wall onto an unwitting opossum that turned the corner into view of the defending warriors. It fell without a sound to Joshua's sword. The defenders erupted into shouts of appreciation and eagerness and the ring of weapons being drawn.

Joshua sauntered over with a grin on his face to where Amos was standing. Amos rolled his eyes.

"Better get to your position, little brother."

"You're just jealous 'cause I got the first kill."

Amos's attention was caught by something beyond Joshua. He drew his own sword without a word. Joshua did not spend time looking behind him; he raced to his own position near the left flank.

Just as he reached the battle line several opossums raced toward them, their eyes bright with rage and hunger. Joshua met them with his sword ready and his face hardened into a mask of concentration.

The opossum soldiers were ferocious but careless, having been unprepared for real battle this day. Joshua easily sidestepped a lunge and plunged his sword in to the hilt. He watched a mace-wielding chicken launch another foe into the air; the rodent thudded into a building twenty feet away and bounced onto the ground, lying still. Next to Joshua his tribesman's jaw dropped as he turned his head from watching the spectacle to look at Joshua. Joshua grinned back.

“I think we’ve got a fighting chance. What do you think?”

The other cat looked at Joshua’s bloodied sword. He finally closed his jaw and his tail twitched. “Next time let me have one.”

Joshua’s grin faded as he watched more opossums race down the streets and alleyways toward them in growing numbers. “We’re all about to get our fair share, I think.”

\* \* \*

JoEllen heard the sudden screams of outrage and pain as the battle began. Watching from behind a hill outside of town, he could not see the fighting, but the distant clash of metal as his comrade’s swords met the swords of their enemies reached his ears. He looked back at his company. They were getting more restless as the fighting grew louder.

He was not afraid, but he was getting worried. The opposition outnumbered them by at least ten to one, and from where he was he could see the solemn reality of just how many of them there were.

\* \* \*

Rumplestiltskin, son of the opossum king, Rip Van Winkel, had backtracked out of the town when the sound



of full-scale battle reached him. He now faced his second-in-command with an ugly look on his face.

“It *was* Broilertown that we were told to attack, was it not?”

“Yessir. I dunno why there’s a fightin’ force here, but surely they aren’t enough to stop us.”

“Either way, someone will pay for this,” Rumble growled. “Give the command for an all-out charge on the city. Both troops.”

The officer turned to his drum team and bellowed, “Troop one, all charge!”

The drummers echoed the command down the ranks.

“Troop two, all charge!” came the second command.

It was not long before before both troops of hungry opossums were rushing madly at the city. Rumble and his command guard stopped about half a mile from the outskirts to wait for what they were sure was an inevitable outcome.

\* \* \*

Amos felt the sweat drip down his forehead as he leaped sideways, avoiding the sharp stab of the opossum sword that attacked on his right. The opossum in front of him gave a lecherous grin as he took advantage of Amos’s weakened condition. Feeling the searing pain of the opossum’s sword as it sliced into his left side, he hissed in

fury and gave a sharp thrust of his sword into the opossum's abdomen.

He had no time to check his wound. In one motion he ducked under a one-handed axe and stabbed upward, then parried an attack and stabbed two more rodents in the chest so fast and efficiently that he gained himself a few seconds to breath. Amos finally glanced down at his wound. There was bloody fur and a nice gash across his ribs, but not enough blood to make him overly concerned, yet.

The plan was to use the buildings to their advantage instead of meeting the opossum army in the open field. The industrious broiler chickens had managed their town well, and the houses and other buildings were constructed fairly close to each other in nice straight lines. Their front line force, therefore, was placed in such a way as to try to funnel the enemy down streets and alleyways. Another benefit of doing it this way was that they were able to keep more soldiers in reserve since the battle line was bolstered by the buildings in between each group.

Another snarling opossum stepped over the fallen bodies and engaged Amos, swinging his sword wildly. Amos easily deflected the sword and nicked his throat on the backslash. His foe dropped his sword and stumbled backward, clutching his throat, only to be replaced by another.

To Amos's left a giant of a chicken who had been

fighting valiantly with shield and sword took a quick frontal swing which two opossums ducked. They then jumped up and grabbed the top of his shield, dragging it to the ground. He stabbed his sword down into one, pinning it to the ground, and rammed his shield into the wall of the building beside him, knocking the other one loose and stunning him. Another opossum raced in before the chicken was able to recover and pounced on him, stabbing and biting his chest. He quickly released his hand from his shield and tore the opossum loose. Bleeding heavily, he let out a bellow and charged forward into the opossum troops who were rushing in to take advantage of what they thought would be an easy kill. After knocking opossum soldiers left and right, his sword connected with several more before he was brought to the ground, pounced upon by several fighters.

A young chicken wielding a mace and sword stepped in to take the place of his fallen countryman.

“Come on!” the chicken screamed, pounding his mace on the ground. “Come get a taste of fresh chicken!”

His size notwithstanding, the chicken’s youth came through in his voice. Amos would have told him to save his breath had he not himself been concentrating on saving his own.

\* \* \*

JoEllen knew that it was time. He soberly turned to his comrades and drew his sword. The others followed suit. Those who had been sitting or kneeling to pray stood to their feet. Everyone had fallen into their battle line by the time he reached them at the bottom of the hill.

“Chickens will march to the ridge, then charge on command. I do not expect our initial charge to sufficiently break up their ranks. There are too many.” He waited for that to sink in, noting proudly that, rather than putting fear on their faces, it made his countrymen square their shoulders and raise their heads with a fierce determination in their eyes. He had to clear the emotion from his throat before speaking again.

“Our feline friends should have time for at least three volleys of arrows; after that, draw sword and run to our aid.” He waited for the lead archer—a capable cat of few words named Ben—to nod, then said simply, “May the Great Caretaker watch over us to the end—whatever He wills that end to be.”

With that, he turned and strode up the hill to the ridge.

\* \* \*

Rumple stood watching the city with his arms crossed, almost bored. His second-in-command shifted his feet. One of his men stood picking his teeth with a chicken

bone. He sighed, his attention drifting to meal time.

Seeing his second's eyes widen, he looked quizzically in the direction of his gaze. What he saw made him straighten his back and narrow his own eyes.

A long line of the most enormous chickens he had ever seen had appeared on a ridge to the right of his army. It had grown dark, but the moon was bright, and its light glinted off of drawn weapons which looked fitted to the size of the feathered beasts.

The opossum army had failed to master complex maneuvers. Even if they were skilled enough to form a new battle line mid-march, they were in full charge mode, heedless of battle lines and no longer marching in rank. Rumple could only watch as one colossal chicken raised his sword and shouted, causing the entire line to race at great speed toward his careless troops.

"Look!" his second pointed, but he had already caught sight of... were those cats?!

"What are cats doing here?" he whispered angrily.

Rumple watched as they launched a volley of arrows into the air. They landed among the right flank of his force, killing and hampering the few soldiers who had actually turned to meet the advancing charge. The cats had another volley in the air almost before the arrows landed, then a third, and a fourth. Without waiting for the fifth and final volley to land, the cats discarded their bows and began racing forward, drawing their swords as they

ran.

The scene would forever be etched in Rumpel's memory: monstrous chickens racing toward a sea of opossum soldiers, cats with bared steel and teeth racing across the field behind them, and a rain of deadly arrows suspended above them all in the moonlight.

\* \* \*

JoEllen, gripping his huge sword by the handle and blade, slammed into the wall of opossums like a battering ram. Instead of meeting them head-on, many of the opossums were stumbling over themselves to get out of the way. Next to him, a chicken who was aptly nicknamed "Crusher" wielded a huge iron war club—half of it was a handle and the other half was taken up by a long, heavy, jagged club head. He was able to swing it quicker than seemed possible, and with each swing opossums went flying.

Up and down the line chickens cut through, rammed through, or leaped over the opossum troops. The ones they did not kill they trusted that the cats would finish off.

The charge could not last forever. Soon one chicken fell to a brave opossum sword, then another and another. The charge slowed, then stopped. JoEllen gripped the handle of his sword with both hands and began fighting for his life, trying to keep the opossums at bay without

letting too many get behind him. He found himself alone. Crusher had gotten further ahead and was surrounded.

“Crusher! To me!” he shouted.

Immediately Crusher swung around and began ramming his way back to JoEllen. JoEllen gave up trying to keep the opossums from surrounding him and he pushed toward Crusher. They reached each other in seconds and swung around, standing back to back, keeping the enemy at bay with their long weapons.

“Crusher, can you see any of our troops?” JoEllen hollered. “We need to group up and fall back.”

“It’s a bit difficult to see in this light, Jo,” Crusher said. “It’s a bit difficult to do any sightseeing when I’ve got opossums hissing at me, too.” One opossum snarled loudly and jumped forward. Crusher roared back and batted him into the air.

“You can’t see anyone at all?”

“Sorry, Jo,” Crusher replied. “Maybe we’re all that’s left.”

JoEllen’s heart fell. He squinted frantically through the dust, trying to spot someone, anyone.

Suddenly, three cats appeared, and JoEllen immediately recognized Ben among them. They were twisting and dodging through the opossum soldiers, all wielding a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other to deadly effect. With swift, sure movements they dodged through to where JoEllen and Crusher were, then quickly

took up positions on either side of them.

Ben, who was closest to JoEllen, spoke up over the din of battle. "We need to push that way." He pointed in Crusher's direction with his dagger. "Most of your left flank held and was able to form a circle."

"What of the right flank?" JoEllen asked, slicing his sword quickly at the opossums. They were getting over their shock and were beginning to press in.

"Fallen or falling," Ben yelled.

JoEllen knew that he did not have time to grieve, but he felt Ben's curtly spoken statement like a punch in the gut. Over half of his company? How many of his fellow townspeople would die today?

"We must go now!" Ben yelled urgently as he leaped forward to engage the circle of opossums who were slowly closing the noose.

JoEllen took a deep breath. "Point Crusher in the right direction," he shouted. "I'll guard the rear!"

\* \* \*

Amos grunted with exertion as he pushed a rodent carcass off of his sword. His thoughts turned angrily to the Wing. He would have some choice words for him if he ever saw the bandit again. A man was only as good as his word, and so far there was no sign of the Feathered Fleet.

Amos found himself struggling with an exceptionally



large opossum. With his right arm held at bay by the sword of his opponent, he slipped a curved dagger from his belt and jabbed it swiftly in and out of the opossum's side.

"They are quite relentless," Amos offered to the chicken still fighting beside him. The youth only grunted in response. He was breathing hard and his arms looked like they were getting heavy.

"If I may..." Amos began, catching a single-handed axe above his head with the hilts of his dagger and sword, "...offer some advice..." He swung his opponent's weapon around to the side. "...perhaps you should..." he continued swinging the axe down and around, and then used its momentum to buy him time to free his dagger and plunge it into his opponent's neck. "...drop one of your weapons!" he finished.

The young rooster hesitated, unsure about which weapon to drop.

"The sword! Drop the sword!" Amos shouted, still fighting. He knew that, while the mace was heavier, its brute force would probably be better for the rooster's present state of mind than the more precisely wielded blade.

He dropped the sword and gripped the mace with both hands. Following the instructions of a leader and combining what was left of the strength of both arms seemed to bolster his morale, and he started fighting again

with some of his former zeal, though this time he paced himself better.

Amos wondered how long the youth could last. He sent up a prayer for aid.

\* \* \*

Rumplestiltskin viewed the carnage with shock, not sure what to do.

*Are we really losing our first battle?* he thought.

The broiler charge had done an unbelievable amount of damage, penetrating deep into his mass of dumb, hungry troops. The cats had followed up with a precise drive toward the large circle of chickens that had formed. They had especially shown great gallantry in sending teams to the stragglers to bring them to the circle. Some of them had gone down along with the chickens they were trying to help, but more often than not they had accomplished their little rescue missions.

The circle itself, he had realized, was formidable. The combination of broiler strength and cat quickness was deadly. His opossum troops were hungry and ferocious, but did not know how to handle this new enemy.

His second-in-command spoke up in a nervous voice, "Want me to sound the retreat, cap'n?"

"I'm thinking!" Rump snapped.

A new voice spoke from behind him. "You really

shouldn't overtax your mind with such a troublesome task."

Rumple felt a coldness run down his body as he instantly recognised the smooth voice and felt the uncomfortable pressure of a sword at his back.

"Allow me to make the decision for you. Call the retreat." The sword bore deeper, causing him to flinch at the sudden burst of pain that tore through him. He realized fearfully that he would receive no mercy tonight from his mortal enemy. "Now."

Glaring at his second-in-command, who stood regarding him with wide, terrified eyes, he ordered, "You heard him! Call the retreat."

"Yessir." The fearful stammer in the opossum's voice caused Rumple to hiss in disdain as his second shouted, "Call the retreat!"

"I'm surrounded by imbeciles," he growled, in his mind planning recompense for the coward's fear. He listened, with an ugly scowl distorting his face, as the drummers beat the retreat and the opossums on the battlefield began running madly away.

The Wing chuckled behind him. "I certainly know that torment." And just like that the pressure of the sword was gone and they were once again left alone.

Rumple immediately turned furiously to the officers behind them, preparing to rail at them, but found that he could not, for their still corpses were all laid out across the

ground. He stepped slowly over to the closest body and checked his pulse with a trembling hand.

“Dead.”

\* \* \*

“Retreat! The Captain has signaled the retreat!”

The voice of JoEllen was heard bellowing fiercely. “Do not show mercy, for they would show us none! Let no one escape with their lives!” The roar of the triumphant voices that followed his statement caused many of the opossums to cry out in fear as they ran frantically from the city.

Amos was astonished at the amazing endurance of these ferocious hulking giants as they raced after the fleeing opossums with the zeal of freshened troops, while he stood panting in exhaustion.

“They are remarkable, aren’t they?”

Feeling a sudden burst of energy, fueled by his extreme anger no doubt, he swung around with his sword to face the one who he thought had abandoned them to their deaths.

“I risked the lives of my tribesmen, the courageous chickens of this village, and my only brother!” he shouted before swinging his sword furiously at Wing, not caring about the repercussions of an attack against an ally. “I did this, trusting that we would not be alone!” When his attack was blocked, instead of pressing forward and

continuing the fight he took a step back to rein in his raging emotions. "Where was the help you promised?"

Wing spoke with remorse. "At this time it was impossible. I did everything that I could."

"We were incredibly fortunate to find this town already well equipped with weapons and a fighting force, although next time it might not be so." He could feel the anger evaporating from him as the stress from the battle cooled and he became slightly more clear-headed.

Wing nodded, sheathing his sword smoothly. "I agree."

They were interrupted by the savage shouts of a group of giant chickens, running from the city to follow their comrades in chase of the fleeing opossum army.

Both of them watched in awe as they swept by, Wing once again voicing his amazement.

"Remarkable!"

\* \* \*

Joshua joined the chickens in their jubilant shouts, raising his sword as he turned to give chase to a fleeing opossum. Seeing that another chicken had caught the beast he eagerly searched the area for any others.

Coming near to one of the houses, he heard frightened voices within.

"I knew this was a bad idea, Billy."

"Oh, Tommy, don't be such a coward, you know this

was the only way to finally speak to them.”

“Did you not just hear that incredibly large chicken call for our deaths?”

“We shall have to convince them that we will serve them better alive than dead.”

“And how, may I ask, do you propose we do that?”

Joshua kicked the door to the house and the abrupt sound of the door smashing open effectively stopped the conversation of the two inside. When Joshua’s eyes quickly settled to the darkness he saw two opossums huddled fearfully near the back of the room, their eyes large with terror. Joshua surveyed them with savage energy, his sword still bloody from his last kill.

“Prepare to die, rodents.”

The smaller opossum suddenly sent a glare to the larger. “I told you this would happen!” he cried out angrily.

The other opossum sent him an annoyed glare back. “Why do you always insist on saying that! Does it really matter who’s right when we’re about to die?”

“Yes!”

The situation was suddenly so comical that Joshua halted his slaying to watch them in amusement.

Tommy turned and spoke matter-of-factly to Joshua. “I believe you were going to kill us?”

“What is wrong with you?” Billy growled in frustration. “I would prefer not to rush my death, please.”

“Well *I* would rather just get on with it and not wait.”

“Fine.” Billy’s voice was exasperated. “Kill him first,” he offered to Joshua with a shrug.

Tommy’s eyes grew wide again. “Eh, wait a minute. I do believe I’m having second thoughts.” He sent Joshua a wide grin. “You take as long as you like, cat.” Once again Billy groaned, this time laying his large head in his paws. They both waited, and that’s when Joshua noticed something odd about these two opossums.

“Your eyes are clearer than the others,” he said in surprise. “Why are you different?”

Tommy nodded his head in understanding and started to give an explanation, but Billy spoke first.

“That is because we are not starved. Most, if not all, of the opossums haven’t eaten in days and are extremely hungry.” He nodded for Tommy to continue, and he did happily.

“That is what drives them: their hunger.”

Joshua considered this, and once again gazed at them curiously. “That does not explain about yourselves.”

Billy sighed in relief, as he still retained his life, and quickly explained yet again. “We do not consider ourselves like them, for we decided at a young age to be vegetarians, which causes us to live a lifestyle different than our kind.”

“Vegans actually,” Tommy corrected. “I have never killed any living thing in my life.”

“You killed that cricket this morning.”

Tommy grimaced in embarrassment as he turned on his brother. “You know that was necessary! It was ruining my sleep!” His voice had raised an octave as he spoke. “And anyways, who cares about the population of the crickets in this world?”

Billy crossed his arms thoughtfully as Tommy’s tail twitched angrily beside him. “I’m sure there is someone —”

He was interrupted when Joshua loudly cleared his throat. They both turned to watch as he gestured toward the door. “You will come with me and explain yourselves to my brother.”



# SEVEN

## UNEXPECTED FRIENDS

**T**HE COST OF THE BATTLE FOR Broilertown was heavy, and the bodies of the dead were laid out respectfully, covered with blankets. The dead had been protected fiercely by the ones still fighting, so the majority of the remains—though not all—were unravaged by the opossum army.

Amos watched sadly as the bodies of his cat comrades and chickens alike were laid side by side on the outskirts of the town. The battle had truly been fierce.

“You might consider getting that cut on your side checked,” the voice of the Wing spoke behind him. When he didn’t respond, Wing made a second attempt. “You don’t want it to become infected.”

Amos finally responded, his voice full of emotion. “This

is a familiar scene for Joshua and I, watching the dead bodies of our loved ones being laid across the cold ground.”

The Wing waited in silence, hoping that his friend, which he certainly was now, would continue. This was a story he did not want to rush.

“I was one of many. Joshua was my younger brother and I often would take him with me when I left the tribe. We were a traveling band then and didn’t live in Catsville as we do now.”

Wing nodded. He knew Catsville was a relatively new village, and that they had begun building it shortly after King Dude had ascended to the throne.

Amos continued. “As you know, most cat tribes travel and don’t often stay in one single place for a long period of time. We were no different, but our father, who was head of our tribe, had decided to rest from traveling while our mother had her newest litter.” The pain of remembrance glittered in his eyes as he turned away from the scene of death. “I was going on a hunting trip and of course took Joshua with me while my sisters stayed with Mother and the younger ones. We returned to find all of them dead.”

“How did it happen?” Wing asked cautiously, remembering Joshua’s disdain of the Feathered Kingdom.

“We had received warnings from a fowl family that we had inadvertently camped near, to leave the premises or face the consequences. Our father sent messages and gifts,

hoping to convince them that we would not harm them. We were still across the border, therefore we considered our small band safe.” Amos flinched in a grimace of raw pain. “How wrong we were. We found out some time later that this family was related to the new King and had access to large amounts of money, which they frivolously spent on mercenaries to decimate our peaceful tribe.”

Wing suddenly felt a sick feeling come over him as he began to recognise the end of the story. How could anyone in the Feathered City not remember the ferocious band of cats that had allegedly attacked King Dude’s cousin on his country estate? The story had been passed throughout Feathered City, but the details had differed much from what he was hearing now. He remembered the harsh sentiments that had been expressed all over the city, and which still prevailed even now.

The remaining cats had had a difficult time living through the following harsh winter.

Amos turned to Wing, and seeing the realization come into his eyes, declared quietly, “Yes, that was us. Not only was most of our tribe killed, but a great part of our goods were stolen. With so few of us left we struggled that winter, and I cared for my younger brother, who was all that I had left. We had only just celebrated a wedding weeks before.”

“Whose wedding were you celebrating?” Wing asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

Amos's answer was quick. "My own."

Understanding dawned upon Wing as he realized why Joshua had so much awe and respect for him. Years ago, when he had heard of their fight to survive, the Wing had taken food to what was left of their pitiful band. He had done it secretly, not quite sure if the band was actually vicious or not. On one of his trips he had been caught by a juvenile cat whose wide blue eyes had watched him fearfully. After reassuring the young lad that he would not hurt him, he had left him a large purse filled with gold.

"It was Joshua, wasn't it? The one I met?"

Amos nodded with a small smile. "With the money you gave him we were able to found Catsville and begin again, starting our life over. Joshua has never forgotten your visit."

Wing had also been a young rooster, just starting his career as servant to the people.

They were both startled when the large pile of rodents became a mass of flames not far from where they were standing. Amidst the sound of the blazing fire they heard shouts from the surrounding chickens.

"Throw them on the pile!"

"Let the overgrown rats join their fellow rodents!"

Amos and Wing turned to see Joshua walking toward them with two obviously terrified opossums walking closely together in front of him. They both noticed how Joshua avoided looking toward the laid out bodies of the

deceased.

“I found these two hiding inside one of the empty houses,” Joshua said, prodding them closer to Amos with his sword.

The opossums, who had to pry their eyes away from the burning pile of fur, suddenly took in the Wing’s caped form in astonishment.

“You have no idea how long we have been trying to contact you, Sir Wing!” the larger opossum cried.

“I’m sure it’s been years!” the smaller stated, his mouth becoming a wide grin.

The larger opossum sent his smaller counterpart a glare of aggravation. “Please, Tommy, try and control yourself. We have only been fighting for a few weeks.”

“Well excuse me, Billy! I’m sure that you can agree that it has felt like years.”

Billy gave a sigh and turned to address the Wing once again. “You must forgive my brother. He is prone to extreme exaggeration. It has afflicted him since I have known him.”

“Need I remind you that I am first born?” huffed Tommy in an injured voice. “I believe that demands a little respect from a younger brother.”

Billy turned back to his brother angrily. “You were only first born by seconds! And I will not be constantly reminded of the fact!”

Before Tommy could open his mouth to retort they

were once again interrupted by Joshua. “These individuals say that they need to speak to you, Amos. They say that they have information that will be valuable to us.”

“By all means, speak,” Amos said encouragingly.

JoEllen, who had sauntered up unannounced, added, “And if the information is as valuable as you say then perhaps you shall keep your lives.”

Tommy swallowed loudly before speaking. “We intercepted a letter sent by carrier pigeon.”

“Inside the letter was information about your Kingdom and where the army would strike next,” Billy finished.

“And the letter told you to strike here?” JoEllen asked in surprise.

Billy met his gaze fearfully. “Actually not. The letter said to attack toward the south, in a city called LeBants.”

Wing and JoEllen exchanged incredulous looks. LeBants was the central city for most of the bantams in the land, and was a far cry from Broilertown. An attack on that city would have been absolutely catastrophic and would have brought the opossum army dangerously close to the capital.

“You changed the letter?” the Wing surmised, watching the opossums carefully.

Tommy nodded silently, letting Billy once again speak for both of them. “We were concerned that the army was gaining so much ground—”

“And killing so many!” Tommy interjected.

“We knew that the time had come for us to act, and we didn’t know what else to do.” Billy attempted a friendly smile toward the frowning JoEllen. “Do you still feel the need to kill us?”

Before JoEllen could answer, Wing spoke with a seriousness that caught all of their attention. “There’s only one country that uses carrier pigeons to send messages.” Anger welled up inside of him as he realized the ramifications of the news. “The Land of Flight.”

“The Land of Flight is feeding the opossum army information?” JoEllen’s face registered shock. “But how would they do that, when we haven’t had anything to do with them for years?”

Billy spoke nervously. “There have been other messages, but there’s never a name.”

“I repeat my question,” JoEllen cried out angrily, “how could they know anything about us when they are not allowed in our Kingdom?”

“I’m afraid that King Dude has abolished that law by allowing a duck ambassador,” the Wing answered, as JoEllen’s eyes widened in rage.

Joshua, who had suddenly noticed his brother’s torn and bleeding side, stated with quick concern, “You are going to have that taken care of, right?”

Feeling awkward to abruptly have all the attention on him, Amos answered shortly, “I will do what I feel is necessary.”

Joshua crossed his arms in irritation at Amos's brush off. "Oh, I see how it is. You are allowed to be overbearing and protective about anything that involves myself, but I better not think that I should have any say over you."

The voice of Tommy then burst into the conversation. "You two must be brothers!"

His observation was met with glares by the felines.

\* \* \*

Queen Mercy noticed right away that something was amiss by the nervously frightened servants that attended her with wide-eyed anxiety. She watched them for a few moments before asking kindly, "What troubles you so? I haven't seen you this way since..." She stopped before she mentioned anything about the opossum army, worried that a spy might have been planted among her staff. She knew her husband stubbornly insisted that the opossum army was harmless, though most of those who lived outside the city, and even some, although very few, in the city, knew the truth about the dangerous animals. She tried again, this time choosing her words more carefully. "Please tell me what troubles you?"

One of the newest maids, a hefty girl who towered over most in the room, answered without hesitation. "We've heard rumors that the cats have attacked again, my lady." By the tone of her voice Mercy knew there was something



else she wanted to say but withheld it.

“Where is it being said that they attacked?” Mercy asked.

Another maid, who sent a superior glare to her larger counterpart, spoke. “Catsville has finally attacked a defenseless city lying close to the border.”

“The vicious creatures have killed the helpless again and it’s only a matter of time before they gain the courage to declare war upon us!” elaborated another maid, her voice loud with fervor.

The first maid was silent, though the annoyance in her eyes spoke volumes.

Mercy watched them all cautiously. “I see,” she mused, deciding she would like to hear more. “I think I shall retire for the night, so you may all leave.” As all the maids turned to exit the room she gestured toward her giant maid. “I would like to move my desk, if you wouldn’t mind staying a bit longer.”

The maid nodded while the others hurried from the room, finding themselves fortunate not to be asked to lift heavy objects.

“Please move it under the wall lamp. I’ve been doing a lot of my writing at night, lately.” The queen motioned to the spot, and the maid promptly obeyed.

As the maid maneuvered the desk away from the window, Mercy shrewdly evaluated her. Mercy’s intuition, based on everything that she had observed about the girl,

told her that she had a chance here to enlist the help of more than an ordinary maid. She decided to be candid, even at the risk of her own life.

Once the maid was finished, Mercy began. "I am not one to believe over-dramatic propaganda that is spread to fulfill a dictator's agenda." She watched as the maid's eyes quickly filled with apprehension. She continued, "Now, please tell me what you know, that you would not say in front of the others."

The young hen glanced casually around the room. Her voice was quiet as she explained. "I moved here from my home in Broilertown to work in the palace, and have seen and been raised around cats my entire life. Often there are tribes that camp near our town while they wait for the blacksmiths to finish crafting their weapons. They have only ever shown us peace and even friendliness." The honesty that resonated from her voice also shown brightly in her eyes. "I cannot and will not believe in this nonsense that is being spread about them.

"And, furthermore, our city is neither defenseless nor helpless. Anyone attacking the chickens of that town would be met with serious opposition."

This information was indeed important, Mercy decided, her mind quickly working to decipher the facts she had just learned into what might have actually taken place.

"What do you believe truly happened?" she questioned.

“If they were attacked then it was not by the cats but by another foe, one far more dangerous than a small city sparsely populated.”

Mercy did not have to ask who she meant.

They suddenly heard hysterical screams and terrified shouts coming from outside the room. Mercy went quickly to her window and looked out into the moonlit night. Her eyes widened with dread as she saw the orange glow of what must have been a giant blaze in the distance.

Hearing the horrified gasp of her maid behind her, she turned to offer sympathy.

Before Mercy could speak, the hen declared, “We do not burn our dead.”

The queen hesitated. “I had assumed that it was the town burning.”

“Perhaps, but our homes are made of stone, which would not cause an inferno such as that,” she explained, her eyes filled with trepidation. “The only other alternative is the enemy dead.”

They both turned back to the window to watch as the smoke billowed high into the air. The bodies that would be needed to make a fire of that potency would be many. Mercy felt a shiver of fear crawl up her spine as she realized just how close the opossum army had been to reaching their city.

She knew, despite John’s warnings: it was time for her to act.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel is a musician and songwriter who sang and played guitar in a bluegrass band with her three sisters for several years. All that changed quickly when she got married and started a family of her own. She has always dreamed of two things: being a mom and writing books. It is difficult to do those two things at the same time, but with all the books on her to-write list, let's hope that she has the opportunity to delight many readers to come!

### MORE BOOKS COMING SOON

Rachel will be releasing lots of content in the future, including free episodic content featuring the Wing. [Sign up to the email list](#) to be informed whenever a new episode or book is released.

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