

## Part 1: A Royal Encounter

"I'll call you Royboy," grinned the farmer as he placed the cage in the back of his truck. The rooster was strong and a brilliant sapphire blue with feathers that glistened in the sun. The tall comb at the top of his head was fire-engine red and he stood above the farmer's knee. His beak was sharp and sunny yellow. Royboy would complete the farmer's newly-acquired flock of white leghorn chickens. One rooster to guard his 30 egg-laying hens should help guarantee a successful start to his small business of selling fresh farm eggs to the growing rural community he lived in.

"If you have any doubts about keeping him, you can always bring him back for a full refund," waved the salesman at the Country Feed Store as he drove off.

Horse heard the farm truck bumping up the driveway, leaving a dust cloud in its trail. He ran to meet him at the barn gate, whinnying when he caught sight of the colorful newcomer. "He's a beauty isn't he!" the farmer said as he lifted the cage out. Horse followed them into the barn, watching the expressions on the rooster's face, trying to assure him that this was a friendly place.

"Well, Royboy. What do think of your new home?" The farmer opened the cage and let the rooster out. "You'll sleep in this cozy barn at night and have that nice big yard over there to roam in every day. And you've got 30 happy, egg-laying hens to protect who will no doubt think you a fine gentleman." He laughed as he hurried back to the house to gather up the cartons of eggs ready to be delivered to the neighbors.

"Welcome to the chicken yard, Royboy," Horse said cheerfully. "We're glad to have you as part of the flock. I'll show you around."

"I will be addressed as *Royal* from now on by you AND those white legs," scoffed the rooster while he puffed up his brilliant blue feathers. "And I can show myself around without any help." Horse nodded courteously and stepped back.

Strutting past Horse, Royal noticed a shining object leaning against the wall of the barn on top of a table. He flew up to find a mirror. "Why, how nice of the farmer to give me my very own preening spot!" Royal spent the next 20 minutes fluffing, combing, and strutting before the mirror. Horse could hardly believe what he was seeing. "These puffy types usually end up eating dirt," he thought.

With head tilted toward the sky, Royal entered the chicken yard. As expected, every last leghorn ran over to greet the newest member.

"He IS a fine looking bird!"

"OH - how his feathers gleam!"

"He's a giant!"

"NO enemy will ever get past those claws and that beak!"

The yard was all atwitter with glowing comments as the flock gathered to introduce themselves.

Except one.

Henrietta was far too shy to say a word. "I don't know what to say to such a handsome bird. He wouldn't hear me anyway, I'm so small. And why bother. I'll just stutter and say something terribly embarrassing." So Henrietta kept to the back of the flock.

"Move back, you white legs!" commanded Royal. "Give me some space!" The chickens were stunned and more than a little frightened by his harsh words.

"Now, listen up! I will be addressed as Royal. I was hand-picked by the farmer himself to be in charge and expect you to respect my position as boss. *YOUR* job is to lay eggs. *MY* job is to see to it that you *DO* your job. The farmer has given me a special place in the barn and that is where I will be. Don't bother me unless it's important."

The chickens stared in wide-eyed silence. Their slight bodies trembled.

"Off with you! Go eat, exercise, and lay big eggs in the morning!" He stormed back to his royal table where he looked at his royal self and groomed his royal feathers.

Horse was watching from the pasture.

## Part 2: Fright and Flight

The happy, peaceful flock had been transformed into a fearful, tense brood of chickens overnight. Royal the rooster had unnerved every last hen in the chicken yard with his harsh demands. Before the hens could settle down for the night, he had them line up in rows of five and stand facing his “throne” (the table with the mirror on it). He made clear his expectations of each hen.

“You will lay your egg no later than 6:40 each morning. They must be large, without a crack, and perfectly oval. I will begin inspections at promptly 6:45 a.m. Any egg that is not up to par will be pecked open and left for the farmer to discard. Do I make myself clear?” The chickens shivered and nodded. “DISMISSED!” shouted Royal.

The flock climbed the ramps that led to their sleeping areas. The farmer had created two elevated platforms, one on the right and one on the left, with an aisle in between so he could easily collect the eggs. Each platform was three feet high and padded with lots of straw. He had even built nesting boxes, one for each hen in which to lay her eggs; fifteen on one side and fifteen on the other. It was very cozy.

But no chicken felt cozy last night. They quivered and quaked, fretting over the egg they were commanded to lay. Henrietta worried to the point of plucking numerous feathers from her underside. “I’ll be the worst egg-layer here. My eggs are already small and now everyone will make fun of me. I’ll probably step on it! What will Royal do to me?” She buried her head in the straw and cried.

Horse was very concerned. He had always taken a few minutes each evening to settle the hens with a story or song. He understood that they were nervous creatures and did his best to help them relax. Last night he encouraged them by reminding them of the farmer’s approval of their work. He repeated a poem he made up until they calmed down somewhat.

“The eggs you laid this morning, made the farmer smile.  
Remember what he spoke while he strutted down the aisle?  
‘Such a lovely flock of chickens! I could find no better!  
Your eggs are almost perfect and I’m happier than ever!’

“The farmer has been very pleased with you and that’s all that matters,” said Horse, “doing your best for *him*.” Some of the flock did fall asleep. Others stopped their quaking and quieted down. But many were still very worried about what Royal would think - especially Henrietta.

Royal crowed just before the sun peeked over the horizon. Every hen grew stiff with fear. “Inspections begin in 45 minutes!” squawked the newcomer.

Horse repeated his poem and softly whickered as he strode up and down the aisle reminding them of all the beautiful eggs they had produced for the farmer. His large presence and gentle encouragement were reassuring, and it did help many hens to relax enough to lay some fine eggs. But it was obvious that their nerves had taken a toll on their ability to produce.

At 6:45 Royal climbed the ramp. “Move to the side of your eggs for inspections!” he bellowed. Each hen held her breath, hoping that he would approve though it was no use for those who had imperfect eggs. He said no kind words to those whose eggs were acceptable. But he had plenty to say to those who failed.

“HA! You call that an egg? It’s more like a gumball!” Peck, peck went his sharp beak.

“Clumsy white leg! There’s cracks all over this one!” Peck, peck.

And then he saw Henrietta.

“Well, bird-brain, where’s your egg?”

“I...I couldn’t...please...” is all Henrietta could get out before Royal took aim. His beak flashed. His eyes squinted. His target was Henrietta’s head. He arched his neck back to deliver a deadly blow, but just before he struck her, Horse thrust his nose between them. Henrietta squawked and took flight, along with all the other terrified hens, into the chicken yard.

Horse winced in pain. “It looks like your inspections are over,” he said softly. Royal glared at him in amazement. He returned to his throne, but not without first glancing back to see Horse’s tears.

## Part 3: Spoiled Eggs and Spies

The farmer was stunned. "Well, I never..." is all he could say as he stared at a dozen spoiled eggs and a number of empty nests. The chicken yard was full of frightened birds scattering in mass confusion. Horse was dipping his nose in the water bucket and only after several minutes did he notice the puncture wound he had received. Royal was standing on his table preening in front of the mirror, which did make the farmer laugh - but only for a second.

"An intruder," the farmer said to Horse as he examined his wound. "But how did they get in? Everything is varmint-proof. And what varmint would leave a hole in your nose like this?" He was completely baffled.

After treating Horse, he strolled through the chicken yard throwing out feed to them. Only a few hens were calm enough to eat. The others kept glancing backward as though they were being pursued by some vicious enemy. Henrietta sat cowering behind a bush. The farmer walked slowly toward her and gently picked her up, holding her to his chest. "What has spooked you so badly, little girl?" He stroked her trembling body until she relaxed then stooped down and set her among the others. They gathered round him and as he hand-fed them, they mellowed. Horse emerged from the barn, ambled over, and lowered his head, lending his comforting whickers to the circle.

The farmer stood to go examine the outside walls of the barn. Royal was about to strutt through the doors. "Royboy, you'll need to keep alert and fend off whatever it is that's terrifying my hens. Surely that beak and those claws of yours can do some serious damage to an intruder!" Royal was furious that his real name had been mentioned and he threw his head upward. "Cocky fellow he is," remarked the farmer with a grin. Royal continued into the chicken yard and within seconds, the whole flock was once again in disarray; running, squawking, and looking for places to hide. The farmer took note.

The next several days were extremely stressful as the chickens tried to adhere to Royal's demands. They lined up dutifully each night and received a lecture regarding their poor performance and threats of being pecked. Egg-laying became a chore rather than a delight, and only a dozen were laid each day. Henrietta had stopped laying altogether. Each morning before inspections, Horse protected her. She climbed onto his neck and waited until after Royal sneered at her empty nest and stalked off.

Royal, however, relished his high position as boss. He created a pillow for his throne from the best straw available. He only ventured out for food or water.

While Royal sat on his throne, the chickens devised a spying plan. One hen was given watch duty and had to warn the others to scatter by tossing back a pile of pebbles when Royal appeared. Not to do so would result in one or more of them being pecked with his arrow-sharp beak which often left them hobbling for days. Today was Henrietta's turn. "What if he sees me?" she whimpered. "I'll never escape! I'm so small compared to him and he'll trample me! No one will come to help me!" But everyone had to do their part and although the hens tried to assure her that he cannot see her behind the bush, she fretted nonetheless.

Henrietta imagined herself being chased. She pictured Royal as twice his size and his beak as a spear. She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she didn't see Royal step out of the barn. He noticed the flock eating peacefully and began to strutt toward them. At that moment all Henrietta thought about was running - which she did, leaving all the others to fend for themselves. Royal charged at them. Feathers flew and screeches

were heard that reached Horse's ears. He came galloping across the pasture, but not soon enough. Royal had already injured three hens, leaving them with painful wounds.

Henrietta hid behind the barn, ashamed to show her face.

### Part 4: One Is the Loneliest Number

The once happy hen yard was now only a memory. Fear enslaved every chicken's heart every day. Fear of laying imperfect eggs. Fear of Royal's pecking attacks. Fear of the watch-hen not doing her duty. Fear was like a wicked king who reigned over them. And fearful, nervous chickens do not lay many eggs.

Today the farmer collected only 10 eggs. The hens had already fled into the yard and Horse was walking beside him. "I really wanted this business to be successful," the farmer murmured. "I have so many neighbors who want eggs, several who cannot make it to town very often. I hate to close down, but unless production picks up, I'll have to call the butcher." His voice trailed off. Horse tried to comfort him. He rubbed his soft muzzle against his master's shoulder, wishing he could be of more help.

Royal was on his throne, preening as usual. He too had heard the farmer's words. Unlike Horse, he let out a cackle of joy. "I would be the only one here!" he hissed. "No more ignorant hens to take care of!" He was flapping his wings and nodding his head in delight. Horse fixed his eyes upon him and strode over until they were face-to-face. Royal tensed up. Horse's large nostrils flared open and Royal shrank down expecting the worst. But Horse breathed out a warmth that wrapped around the rooster like the sun on a spring day. "Without others, you have no reason to be here," he uttered gently but soberly. "Selfish creatures end up alone." Royal quickly turned away, stunned by Horse's response.

Horse entered the chicken yard. The stressed birds gathered round him. Having Horse near made them feel safe. Royal knew better than to chase or peck them while he was present. One kick from his back leg would be the end of him. He only harassed them when Horse was far away. "Let's go to the creek today," he said. "The farmer doesn't need my help and you can catch some juicy bugs near the mosses." With Horse in the lead, the hens happily trailed along, looking forward to the special day. He had no intention of mentioning the butcher, at least not yet. He would first try to find a way to improve their egg-laying.

Royal watched through the barn door. He heard cheerful chortles as the whole flock chased merrily after Horse, trying their best to keep pace with him. It was quite a joyful brigade and Royal surprisingly found himself wishing he were among them. As they disappeared over the hill, he flew up to his throne to admire his royal self. But he didn't find much satisfaction in that today. He tried to empty his mind of the gleeful scene. "OH...I'll show them! Tonight I'll remind them they have a job to do - and if they don't...it's the butcher!"

"You say the hens seem nervous and aren't laying anymore?" asked the salesman at the Country Feed Store. The farmer had gone to pick up more feed and got to chatting with the salesman. "Yes. Something has spooked them - an intruder of some kind. Even my horse had a wound on his nose a few weeks back when it all began." "It would be a shame to butcher them all," replied the man. "I hate to say this, but I think it may be that rooster I sold you. Occasionally, a rooster can stir up a whole mess of trouble. I'll come by and take a look at your setup."

As the man looked over the farmer's barn and yard, the perky parade of hens returned from the creek. Horse led them toward the barn, but as soon as they glimpsed Royal glaring from his throne, they scattered in all directions. "Yep. Just as I thought," sighed the man. "Their fear is of that Royboy of yours. If I were you, I'd butcher that rooster before you take out the whole flock. One rooster is not that important."

Royal fainted.





### Part 5: Where's Royal?

Royal fell from his throne like a 20 pound rock. "Well, would you look at that," laughed the salesman. "It's as if he were listening to our conversation!" He said goodbye to the farmer. But the farmer didn't think it so funny. He loved Royboy just as he loved his chickens.

Horse came into the barn after settling the hens and quickly assessed the situation. The farmer bent down to examine the unconscious rooster. "I hope he's still alive," he muttered. Before he could scoop him up, Horse gently nudged Royal with his nose. He immediately sensed there was still life in him, something that humans aren't quite so skilled at. Just like before, he breathed out a loong, warm breath that settled over the rooster's limp body like a cloud. The farmer watched amazed, impressed with the kindness Horse exhibited toward his fellow barnyard member. Royal's eyes began to twitch, then his body trembled slightly. He was dreaming.

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He had flown to the top of a chicken coop, tall as a water tower, where he stood with head held high. He looked out for miles over his kingdom, filled with thousands of obedient hens of all colors and sizes. They were swaying back and forth and chanting, "ROY-AL! ROY-AL! ROY-AL!" "Look what I have created!" he was saying to no one but himself. "I have become the most important rooster in all the kingdom! I will live in splendor and ease forev....!" But before he could finish the last word, a giant gust of wind blew him off the tower. He screamed as he realized he was plunging to his death.

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It was at that moment Royal hit the barn floor. He couldn't breathe. His beak lay in the dirt. Suddenly, he felt a warm cushion of air surround his body. He relaxed enough to open one eye. The large head of Horse and the concerned face of the farmer staring at him caused him to jerk. Immediately he wailed out a cry of pain. A mangled leg became exposed. "Poor fellow," the farmer lamented.

Royal was gone. It had been three days and he was nowhere in sight. The hens chattered excitedly.

"I wonder what happened?"

"I don't care what happened. I hope he never comes back!"

"I keep thinking he's going to appear around a corner and attack. Will I ever get over that fear?"

As the week passed, the hens began to settle comfortably into their previous laying habits. Egg production picked up a bit. Each morning the farmer collected another egg or two. He was delighted, of course, and praised his hens for a job well done.

One morning as Horse was being hitched to a wagon for some farm work, a van pulled up the driveway. "That must be the vet!" The farmer ran to greet him. Horse stood a short distance away as the van door opened. "I did the best I could to repair the leg," said the vet. "It was broken in three places. He'll be in this splint for about three weeks, and if all goes well, he should be back to his good ol' self after that." "Thank you so much, Doc," said the farmer as the doctor handed over Royal. "You know," remarked the vet, "I've treated a lot of hens and roosters in my day, but this one is special. Something different about him. Such a gentle fellow. I'll miss the big guy," he sighed.

The farmer took Royal into his house. He made a large cage for him in the kitchen and fed him the finest grain. "You're staying with me for awhile, Royboy. And then I'll need to keep a close eye on what my hens do when they see you."

Daily the farmer was collecting 29 big, beautiful eggs and one the size of a walnut. "I'm a disgrace," thought Henrietta, "a useless failure."

Royal finally recovered. It was time to reintroduce him to the chicken yard. "Well, today's the big day, Royboy!" said the farmer. "It's time to face the flock. Let's hope for the best. I sure don't want to lose any of you. But, if need be....." He pushed aside the thought of a trip to the butcher.

Royal shuddered, but he was determined to stay alive.

## Part 6: Royboy

Royal was nervous. Would it be possible to become accepted by those whom he had treated so brutally? He remembered his first introduction with his proud speech and harsh voice. This time would be different.

Horse pulled a cart into the barn. The hens were out feeding, but ran over to investigate. They couldn't see Royal, only a cage. Royal had pulled his wings tight against his body and made himself as small as possible, tucking his head underneath. The farmer set the cage on the ground without a word. Half the flock immediately scattered, but others stared curiously.

"Why doesn't he move?"

"He's dead."

"No, he's just pretending. Beware!"

Royal remained motionless as the conversation continued. Those who had fled became curious when the others did not come out of the barn. Some peeked through the door. Others pressed their faces to the window. One ran away.

Henrietta had bolted when she saw Royal and never stopped running until she reached the creek. Exhausted and frightened, she passed out and collapsed in the mud. No one noticed her absence until much later.

"Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine...where's thirty?" asked the farmer as he was closing everyone in for the night. Huddled together, near enough for Royal to hear, the hens babbled.

"She ran out when she saw Royal."

"I don't blame her, poor thing."

"What if... a hawk got her!"

"It's my fault," sobbed an unfamiliar voice. All turned to see Royal's head hanging down, eyes filled with tears.

No one slept well that night. Horse promised to go hunt for her, but he had no idea where to start. Royal was completely ignored amidst the heavy sadness which hung in the barn.

The farmer came before sunrise. He needed Horse to pull the cart out so he could hitch it to his truck to haul to town. He would search for his lost hen later.

At dawn, Horse headed toward the door. "Wait!" called Royal. "Take me with you." "That would only complicate things," said Horse. "Henrietta wouldn't come near you even if we did find her." "I know where she is. At least I know the path she took," replied the rooster. Horse was doubtful. Royal explained, "I used to sit on that table watching the hens, looking for a chance to torment them. Henrietta always strayed from the flock down the same path. I bet that's where she ran." Horse had no clues where to look, so he let Royal out and they started off.

Royal was right. They found her by the creek. Horse had almost stepped on her. Her body was cold and she was barely breathing. Horse immediately blew a large warm breath over her and Royal enveloped her in his

downy feathers. After several minutes, she stirred. Though dizzy and weak, Royal was able to push her onto Horse's neck. He climbed on and held her tight as Horse walked to the barn.

For the next several hours, Royal cradled her in his wings. When Henrietta awoke, she found Horse laying next to her and Royal's wings covering her. Oddly, she felt no fear, only a sense of relief at being back home.

The change in Royal was obvious. He insisted on being called Royboy now. His *Royal* days were over. Every night he crowed out funny songs as he walked the aisle with Horse. He watched over the hens like a father, alerting them to any danger. He shared his grain when the pickings were slim.

In spite of this, the farmer had not collected a single egg from Henrietta since her return. She had hidden them in the tall grass and sat on them so no one would see how tiny they were. One day, she felt a stirring under her. When she stood up, she was astonished. A tiny, wet chick was peeking from an egg! Soon a dozen of them were pecking themselves out. "Did *I* do this?" asked Henrietta. She looked around. "There's no one else here. It *must* have been me! I can't believe it!" She shouted to the others, "Hurry! Come see!" Royal was there in a flash, then all the others gathered round. Joyful cackles erupted.

The farmer built Henrietta a larger nest in which to raise her young. He was delighted with her motherly abilities and his business soon flourished. Every hen was content and Royboy proved to be better than a dog at guarding them. He never again sat upon that throne or looked in the mirror. He had no need to. He was surrounded by friends.