

Part 1: A Royal Encounter

"I'll call you Royboy," grinned the farmer. The rooster was strong with shiny blue 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 guard his 30 hens so he could sell eggs to his neighbors.

"Bring him back if he's not a good protector," waved the salesman at the Country Feed Store as the farmer drove off.

Horse heard the farm truck bumping up the driveway. He ran to meet him. "He's a beauty isn't he!" the farmer said as he lifted the cage out. Horse whinnied and followed them into the barn. He wanted to welcome the rooster to this friendly farm.

The farmer let the rooster out. "You'll sleep in this cozy barn at night and wander in a big field every day. You have 30 happy hens to protect. They'll think you're a handsome fellow!" He laughed as he drove off to deliver fresh eggs to the neighbors.

"Welcome to the chicken yard, Royboy," Horse said cheerfully. "I'll show you around." "You will call me *Royal* from now on and so will those puny hens," shouted the rooster. "And I can show myself around without your help." Horse nodded politely 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. "I think the farmer put this here just for me!" Royal spent the next 20 minutes looking at himself and combing his feathers. "I must be the best-looking rooster in the whole world!"

Horse could hardly believe what he was seeing. "This rooster has a lot to learn," he thought.

When Royal entered the chicken yard, every hen ran over to greet him.

"He IS a big, fine bird!" they said. "NO enemy will *ever* get past those claws and that beak!" They all chattered excitedly.

Except one.

Henrietta was very shy. "I don't know what to say to such a handsome bird. He wouldn't hear me anyway, I'm too small." So Henrietta hid.

"Move back, you white-legged hens!" yelled Royal. The chickens became very frightened by his harsh words. "Listen up! My name is Royal. I was hand-picked by the farmer to be in charge. So remember - *I* am now the boss here. *YOUR* job is to lay eggs. *MY* job is to make sure 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 were silent and shook with fear.

"Off with you!" screamed Royal. "Go eat, exercise, and lay big eggs in the morning!" He stormed back to his special table and spent the rest of the day looking at his beautiful self.

Part 2: Fright and Flight

The happy hens turned into a fearful flock. Royal the rooster had scared them all with his mean words. Before they went to bed, Royal made them line up like soldiers in front of his table (which he called his “throne”) and yelled. “You must lay a big, perfect egg before the sun comes up. Any egg that is not as big as an orange will be crushed by me. Do you understand?” The chickens shivered and nodded. “NOW GO!” he shouted.

The flock climbed the ramps to their nests. The farmer had built two long tables with straw nests for each bird. An aisle was between them. It was very cozy. Each morning the farmer walked down the aisle to collect the eggs.

But no chicken felt cozy tonight. Who could lay an egg as big as an orange? Henrietta worried so much that she pulled most of the feathers off her belly. “My eggs are already the smallest. What will Royal do to me?” She buried her head in the straw and cried.

Horse was very concerned. Every night he would sing happy songs to them as they fell asleep. But not tonight. “What can I do?” thought Horse. He decided to make up a poem to let them know how much the farmer loved them.

“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 is very pleased with you,” said Horse. “That’s all that matters.” Some of the flock fell asleep. But most were still afraid of what Royal would think - especially Henrietta.

“Cock-a-doodle-do!” crowed Royal. Every hen panicked. “Lay your eggs!” he commanded. Horse quietly sang his poem to encourage them as he strode down the aisle. Several hens did lay some big eggs. But most of the eggs were far too small.

“Get off your nests,” bellowed Royal, “I’m coming to look!” Each hen held her breath as Royal walked by. He said no kind words to those whose eggs were big. But he had plenty of nasty words for those who failed.

“HA! You call that an egg? It’s more like a gumball!” CRUSH!

“Clumsy white leg! There’s cracks on this one!” CRUSH!

Then he saw Henrietta.

“Well, bird-brain, where’s your egg?” “I...I couldn’t...” is all Henrietta could say. Royal was furious! His beak flashed. His eyes squinted. He aimed for Henrietta’s head! “SQUAAAAWK!” screamed Henrietta. But just before he pecked her, Horse thrust his nose between them. Henrietta flew outside, along with all the other terrified chickens.

Horse winced in pain. “It looks like you’re finished here,” he said softly. Royal was silent. 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 the next morning. "What has happened!" is all he could say. Spoiled eggs were everywhere, the chicken yard was full of frightened birds, and Horse had a big cut on his nose. Royal was standing on his table looking in the mirror, which *did* make the farmer laugh - but only for a second.

"A fox did this!" the farmer said to Horse as he cleaned his wound. "But how did they get in? My barn has no holes in it."

After helping Horse, he went out to feed the hens. Most of them were still too scared to eat. Henrietta sat hiding behind a bush, shaking. The farmer gently picked her up and held her close. "Poor little hen." He talked to her until she stopped shaking then put her down and headed toward the barn.

Royal was coming through the barn doors. "Royboy," said the farmer, "you must watch carefully for enemies and use your claws and beak to chase them away. Be a good protector!" Royal, however, didn't care about protecting. "My name is *Royal*!" he shouted, but the farmer only heard a long squawk. When Royal strutted into the chicken yard, the whole flock suddenly screeched and looked for places to hide. "How strange," said the farmer.

The next several days were very hard for the chickens. Royal lined them up each night and yelled at them before bedtime. He yelled at them again in the morning because they laid small eggs. Horse protected Henrietta from being pecked by him, but she cried every day.

Meanwhile, Royal loved being the boss. He created a pillow for his throne and looked at himself all day except when he needed food or water.

The chickens decided to make up a spying plan. One hen would be guard for the day and hide behind a bush. When she saw Royal come out of the barn, she must kick a pile of pebbles back to warn the others. The flock would scatter to safe places. If the guard didn't do her job, many hens would get pecked by his sharp beak.

Today was Henrietta's turn. "What if he sees me?" she whimpered. "I'll never escape. He'll attack me!" But everyone had to take a turn. "He can't see you behind the bush," they said, but she fretted nonetheless.

"I'm so bad at this," Henrietta thought. "Why did they pick a failure like me?"

Royal stepped out and noticed the flock eating peacefully. He started sneaking up on them, but Henrietta was too busy worrying to see him. When she spotted him, it was too late. She ran away, forgetting to warn the others. Royal charged at them! Everyone screeched and tried to escape. Horse came galloping across the pasture, but not soon enough. Royal had already injured three hens.

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

Part 4: One Is the Loneliest Number

Not one hen was happy anymore. Everyone was full of fear. Fear of laying small eggs. Fear of Royal's pecking attacks. Fear of the guard-hen not doing her job. Soon, the fearful chickens laid hardly any eggs.

Today the farmer collected only 10 eggs as he walked with Horse down the aisle. The hens were outside. "There aren't enough eggs here to sell to my neighbors. Unless my chickens start laying again, I'll have to send them all away." His looked very sad. Horse rubbed his soft nose against the farmer's shoulder, wishing he could help.

Royal was on his throne, looking in the mirror. When he heard the farmer's word, he let out a cackle of joy. "I would be the only one here!" he hissed. "No more useless, lazy hens to take care of!" He was jumping up and down with joy. Horse stared at him. He strode over until they were face-to-face. Royal became nervous. Horse's large nostrils flared open and Royal crouched down and covered his head. But Horse breathed out a warm breath on Royal that felt like a sunny day. "Without the hens, you have no reason to be here," he said quietly. "Selfish creatures end up alone." Royal felt embarrassed and turned away.

Horse entered the chicken yard. "Let's go to the creek today," he said to the hens. He wanted to cheer them up. "You can catch some juicy bugs in the tall grass." The hens happily ran behind Horse. He would not tell them the farmer might send them away. At least not yet.

Royal watched the whole flock chase merrily after Horse. It was quite a joyful brigade and Royal wished he were among them. As they disappeared over the hill, he flew up to his throne to look at himself. But that did not make him happy today. Then he grew angry. "OH...I'll show them! Tonight I'll tell them that if they don't lay eggs, the farmer will send them away! HA!"

The farmer had gone to the Country Feed Store to buy more chicken feed. "I think a fox has scared my hens," he told the man at the store. They aren't laying many eggs. I may have to send them all away." "Are you sure it is a fox?" asked the man. "What else could it be?" replied the famer. "Well, sometimes a rooster can stir up a lot of trouble. I'll come over and look around."

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 saw Royal glaring from his throne, they scattered in all directions. "Yep. Just as I thought," sighed the man. "They're afraid of Royboy. If I were you, I'd get rid of that rooster before you get rid of all the hens. 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 man. "It's as if he heard me say to get rid of him!" He said goodbye to the farmer. But the farmer didn't laugh. He loved Royboy just like he loved his chickens.

Horse came into the barn after settling the frightened hens. When he saw Royal on the ground, he bent over him. Just like before, he breathed out a long, warm breath that settled over the fainted rooster like a cloud. The farmer was amazed at how gentle Horse was. Royal's eyes began to twitch, then his body trembled slightly. He was dreaming.

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He stood on top of a chicken coop, tall as a water tower. Hundreds of chickens of all colors were swaying back and forth and chanting, "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 the whole world! I will be King Royal 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 going to die.

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It was at that moment Royal hit the barn floor. When he felt the warm breath of Horse, he tried to stand up. Immediately he wailed out a cry of pain. He had broken his leg. "Poor fellow," the farmer said sadly. "I'll have to take you to the animal doctor."

Royal was gone now. "Where is Royal?" chattered the chickens. "I don't know," said one, "I just hope he never comes back!"

As the days passed, the hens began to lay more eggs. The farmer was delighted, of course, and praised them for a job well done.

One morning, a van pulled up the driveway. "That must be the animal doctor!" The farmer ran to greet him. "I did the best I could to fix the leg," said the doctor. "It was broken in three places. He'll be in this splint for about three weeks." "Thank you so much, Doc," said the farmer. "I have never met a rooster that I've liked so much," said the doctor. "He's such a gentle fellow. I'll miss him," he sighed.

The farmer took Royal into his house and put him in a big cage. "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."

Every day now, the farmer collected 29 big eggs and one tiny one, the size of a walnut. "I'm a failure," thought Henrietta, "the worst hen ever."

Royal's leg finally healed. It was time to take him to the chicken yard. "I hope you and the hens can become friends," said the farmer. "Or else...I'll have to send you away."

"NO!" thought Royal.

Part 6: Royboy

Royal did not want to be sent away, but would the hens ever be friends with him after he had been so mean to them?

The farmer carried Royal under a blanket to the barn. The hens were out eating, but ran over to investigate. He set the bundle on the ground then lifted the blanket. "SQUAAAWK!" Half the flock scattered, but others stared curiously.

"Why doesn't he move?"

"He's dead."

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

Royal remained still as the hens talked. The chickens that left peeked through the door and window. But one ran far away.

Henrietta bolted to the creek as soon as she saw Royal. Scared and tired, she collapsed in the mud. No one noticed she was missing until evening. "Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine...where's thirty?" wondered the farmer as he was closing the doors for the night.

"She took off when she saw Royal," said one hen. "Scared to death."

"It's all my fault," sobbed Royal as he covered his face.

No one slept well that night. Horse promised to hunt for her in the morning. Royal was completely ignored.

At sunrise, Horse said he was going to look for Henrietta. "Wait!" called Royal. "Take me with you." "No," said Horse. "Henrietta wouldn't come near you." "But I think I know where she is," said Royal. Horse was doubtful but Royal explained, "I used to sit on that table watching the hens, looking for a chance to bother them. Henrietta always left the flock and walked down the same path. I bet that's where she went." Since Horse had no clues where to look, he took him.

Royal was right. They found her cold body by the creek. Horse immediately blew a large warm breath over her and Royal hugged her with his soft wings. After several minutes, she stirred. Royal pushed her onto Horse's neck and then climbed on and held her as Horse walked to the barn.

When Henrietta awoke, she found Horse lying next to her and Royal's wings covering her. But she was not afraid. She felt warm and safe next to Horse and Royal.

Royal was no longer a selfish, proud rooster. He asked to be called Royboy now and he watched over the hens like a father.

Henrietta, however, was still embarrassed about her tiny eggs. She hid them in the tall grass and sat on them so no one would see them. One day, she felt something moving under her. She stood up. "Oh my! I have babies! I can't believe it!" She was amazed!

Henrietta was an excellent mother. The farmer was so pleased that he made her a bigger nest. He soon had plenty of hens AND plenty of eggs to sell.

Every hen was happy again and Royboy was better than a dog at guarding them. He never sat on his throne or looked in the mirror again. He didn't need to. He was surrounded by friends.