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Chicken Mission: Danger in the Deep Dark Woods

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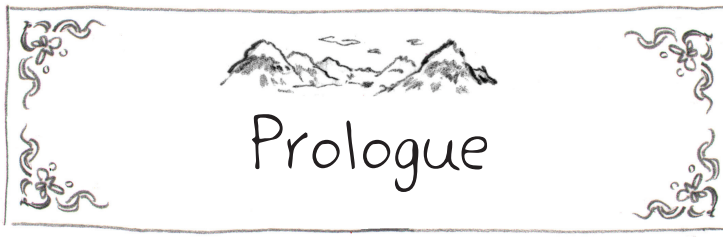
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Prologue

High in the mountains of Tibet, far away from the hustle and bustle of humans, lies an abandoned monastery. It is populated by birds; poultry, to be precise. Poultry have many enemies and it is here, to the International School of Kung Fu for Poultry, that they flock from around the world to learn the art of battle.

On this particular day in the depths of a biting winter, a magnificent black cockerel with shiny green tail feathers and a scarlet comb sat in a mahogany wing chair beside a roaring log fire, reading from a folder. Opposite him an ancient emu with a black silk scarf tied around its head stood on one leg. Its eyes were closed. Its breath whistled in and out of its beak.

The cockerel, whose name was Professor Emeritus Rooster, looked up from the folder. 'Are you sure you can do it?' he asked the emu. 'I mean three young

chickens with no previous martial arts experience don't make the most obvious crack team of warriors.'

Another much younger emu – this time with a red scarf wrapped around its head – poured some green tea into a china cup that stood on a table beside the professor. 'Do not disturb the great Shigong Egg,' he whispered. 'The Ouj-jay leg-neck knot requires great concentration. Only he can achieve it without falling over.'

Professor Rooster put down the folder. He sipped his tea and glanced out of the window. The monastery was perched on a rock. Outside in the snow-covered yard, rows of birds in silk pyjamas were being put through judo moves by two black-belted swans. There was nowhere better than the International School of Kung Fu for Poultry for three young chickens to learn combat. And no one better than Shigong Egg, the Highest Bird of Martial Arts, to teach them.

Even so, it was a risk.

Shigong Egg's breathing became heavier. Slowly the ancient bird opened one wing, then the other.

Then he gradually lifted the raised leg and twisted it around his neck until his foot met his knee joint. He tied the leg in an elegant knot around his long scrawny neck. The emu's eyes opened. 'Ah,' he said, 'Professor Rooster. Forgive me. That is the most difficult part of the posture. What were you saying?'

'I . . . er . . .' Professor Rooster gave a little cough. He didn't want to be the one who disturbed the great Shigong Egg's concentration. If he fell over like that, he could strangle himself. 'Wouldn't you rather sit down?' he suggested.

Shigong Egg shook his head slowly. 'It is kind of you, Professor. But for Shigong Egg, the Ou-jay leg-neck knot is the most comfortable position for contemplation. Please continue.'

Professor Rooster decided to come straight to the point. 'Shouldn't I just hire a professional fighter?' he said. 'I mean what's the use of three kid chickens against one of the world's most devious villains?'

'Young minds are more ingenious than old.' Shigong Egg bent forward towards the floor. 'Have confidence, Professor. The young chickens I have

selected for your mission each have a special skill. One has courage. One has intelligence. The other has perseverance. Together they will make the greatest elite chicken combat force the world has ever known.'

Professor Rooster glanced at the folder. It contained the profiles of the three chickens Shigong Egg had chosen for the mission. 'But none of them knows anything about martial arts,' he said doubtfully. 'And only one shows any interest in fighting.'

'We will teach them.' Shigong Egg raised his wings and placed them behind his back. 'Do not fear, Professor Rooster. Fighting is not the only skill required for combat. We shall make warriors of them all.'

'So you really think you can do it?' Professor Rooster repeated the question.

'Of course.' Shigong Egg's head met the floor. Slowly he raised his other foot off the ground so he was doing a perfect headstand.

'Very well.' Professor Rooster rose stiffly from his chair. He limped towards the door.

‘Remember, Professor,’ Shigong Egg called after him. ‘Your faith will be rewarded. This elite combat squad will be capable of any mission you choose to send it on once I have finished with it. The chickens will prevail against your enemies.’

Professor Rooster bowed. ‘Then I request that you send for them at once,’ he said.





Chapter One

'Who are you calling fat, goose-face?'

At Perrin's Farm a fluffy-looking chicken with puffs of grey feathers around its tummy, a small head and very red cheeks was circling a large goose.

'Forget it, Amy,' another chicken called. 'He's not worth it. Come and play in the barn with us.'

'Yeah,' the goose taunted. 'You heard what your friend said. Now beak it.'

Amy held her ground. 'No one calls me fat and gets away with it,' she hissed.

'All right,' the goose honked, looking down at her. 'Let's say you're tubby instead.'

'They're just feathers!' Amy ruffled her tummy fluff. Her cheeks glowed. 'I'm not tubby. And even if I was, there's no reason to be rude about it. Now apologise, or else.'

'I'm not apologising to some kid chicken,' the goose sneered.

'Fine,' Amy muttered. 'Don't say I didn't warn you.' She glanced at the barn floor. It was filthy. Perfect for what she had in mind. She squatted down, gave a little wriggle, then launched herself at the goose and knocked him to the ground. The goose lay on his back, his legs in the air. Amy leaped on top of him with a cry and rubbed her tummy in the goose's face.

'What move do you call that, Amy?' one of the other chickens shouted.

'The feather dusty!' Amy shouted back.

'Amy!' It was her mother. She sounded cross.

Amy sighed. She scrambled away from the goose. 'See you later, guys.' She waved goodbye to her friends and trailed after her mother into the coop. She was surprised to see her father was there too. He was normally out practising his crowing at this time in the afternoon.

'She was wrestling,' her mother said. 'Again! With a goose this time.'

'That's the third time this month you've got into a fight,' her father commented.

'It wasn't my fault!' Amy protested. 'He called me tubby! I asked him to apologise and he wouldn't.'

Her parents glanced at one another.

'Amy,' her mother said, 'your father and I had a letter this morning by pigeon post.' She paused. 'About you.'

'Me?' Amy said in astonishment.

'Here.' Her father held it out to her. 'I think you should read it.'

Amy took the envelope. It bore a strange postmark with a picture of mountains on it. She pulled out the letter.



Amy turned the letter over. On the reverse side were instructions about how to get there by albatross.

There was silence for a moment.

'Seeing how it's nearly time for you to fly the coop . . .' her mother began.

'And how much you like wrestling . . .' her father added.

'We think it would be a good idea . . .' her mother continued.

'To accept,' her father finished.

'You mean I can go?' Amy could hardly contain her excitement. This was the sort of adventure she craved. She'd been praying for this all her young chicken life.

'If it's what you want.' Her mother gave her a hug.

'Of course it is!'

'We'd better be quick,' her father smiled. 'The flight leaves tonight.'

