

An Odd Setting

By Claire Evers, Ontario

Joan, a bark brown pullet with downward facing tail feathers, scratched in the dirt for bugs under the blueberry bush. Her neck was penciled with black, and her feet were adorned with slate blue scales, smooth and similar to a pinecone's closed pods. Suddenly, she stopped pecking when she heard Amy, a flighty pullet, chirp to her. "The rest of the flock are exploring the rocky hill, seeking to destroy slugs, and hornworms. I waited for you, to show you a place no bird has ever explored. "Want to come?" Joan nodded her head, then followed Amy as she flapped towards the shed, chirping to her all the while.

"Do you know that big hole, under the log?"

"Yes, I do." Joan replied. "Well, what if *we* explored the hole, and came back with an amazing story!" Joan figured that was a fun idea, so they slipped into the hole and found themselves in utter darkness. Joan couldn't see very well, but the dank, humid, earthy air made her wish to be back above ground, in the warm sunlit forest clearing that the flock inhabited.

The clearing had a few bushes, their branches sagging with the weight of rotund blueberries. There was a large amount of lush green grass, and the air was light. A sweet fragrance wafted from the blueberry patch which grew beside a squat, gnarly Crab apple tree with thick branches. The flock roosted on this tree and feasted on the rocky hill that teemed with greens and pests. A shallow stream trickled off to the clearing's left, providing the flock with spring-fed water.

Amy nudged Joan, snapping her out of her thoughts, and they continued down the tortuous tunnel that led into a badger's sett! The ceiling, floor and walls were woven with pond reeds, perhaps the ones that grew around the stream. The sett was warm, lined with black and white tufts of fur, while a pile of large grubs wiggled in a corner.

Joan and Amy each grabbed a grub, then climbed back out the tunnel. It was perfect timing because the flock was looking for them. Joan and Amy flew-ran towards the flock. Then, they told them about the grubs in the Badger's sett. Most of the pullets squawked joyfully at the thought of easy access to grubs. However, the hens and roosters on the Council of Elders all

disagreed. They shivered at the thought of what would happen if the badger came back while the chickens were in the sett.

Harriet, a pullet of the same feathering as Joan thought it was best to listen to the Council of Elders. Besides, Harriet had a queasy feeling, like she'd regret going down the tunnel. So, she informed Joan: "I've got a bad feeling about this, and I don't think we should go back there." All the pullets laughed at her.

"What could go wrong?" "All we want are plump, juicy grubs whenever we are hungry."

"What would happen if the badger came back while someone was in its sett?" Harriet asked. "We'd all be badly clawed?"

Marie answered. "Oui. Il y a toujours un risque avec les aventures".

"Speak English!" Amy scolded Marie, forgetting she was talking to the Head Hen of the Elder's Council.

"Mais, je suis venue de la France!" It was true, for years ago, Marie, a Bresse Gauloise chick, was imported from Normandy. At that time, the current eldest of elders had been chicks. They lived nearby, tended by a human living in a hut. The hut had burned to ashes and the chickens had to flee. Marie had discovered the two acre clearing with the Head Rooster where the flock now lives, wild and safe.

The next day, everyone woke up early, even before the roosters crowed. Amy and Joan begged and pleaded with the Elders to allow only four pullets to travel with them to the sett just one time. The Elders acquiesced, with the condition that they would chose the pullets. They chose Guillaume, Angelica, Frieda and Harriet. Harriet's peers laughed at the fact that Harriet didn't want to go down the hole.

"The elders even chose you, weirdo!" a plump pullet chirped, giving her a glare. Some of Harriet's peers encouraged her to come, telling her that this was the opportunity to enjoy "the experience of a lifetime". Others teased her

"Well, I guess when you get hungry, you'll have to find your own food".

In the end, Harriet came slowly, dragging her talons. The musty black tunnel to the sett twisted and turned. Every noise echoed through the tunnel, bouncing back to the pullets as a cavernous, ear-shattering bellow. Harriet shivered, closely following Amy and Joan. Finally, they reached the Badger's sett. Amy went into the sett to grab a grub, when a roar echoed through the tunnel.

A pair of sharp claws sliced through the air, missing Amy by a feather's breath. The badger bristled and bared his teeth. He growled threateningly and shot after the pullets. As he ran, the sounds of his paw steps vibrated the earth. The pullets immediately turned tail and flapped frantically back up the tortuous tunnel. They shook and squawked in a series of high pitched tones, discarding masses of feathers. This temporarily blinded the badger who continued to swipe at them with rage. Thankfully, the birds reached the opening of the sett and flew back to the clearing. At this point the badger, breathing heavily, retreated and lumbered back to its sett.

Some of the pullets remained uninjured but Joan, Amy, Harriet, and Guillaume suffered deep wounds and were missing large clumps of feathers.

One year later...

The crowd of brown chicks began to peep once Harriet finished her badger story. Citrus, the youngest, asked Harriet a question: "Was that just one of those *you* must obey your elders or else stories?" Harriet replied.

"I'm an elder, and I didn't make this up. See Guillaume? The claw scars on his leg are from that badger." Citrus was silent for a moment before peeping anxiously:

"Well, I hope nothing like that ever happens again."

"It most likely won't." Harriet assured him. "New members to the Elder's Council are carefully chosen by the wise Head Hen and Rooster. As the Head Hen, who was picked by the great Marie, I'll try my best."

THE END