

SOPHIE'S SOLSTICE



By

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SOPHIE'S SOLSTICE

CHAPTER 1

Sophie had never been afraid of the wolves as they passed through the barnyard while taking their morning and evening runs. For the most part they ignored her and the rest of the inhabitants. Vyushir, the wolf spirit, had instructed them that the animals in this place were not to be harmed, not that Sophie knew this. She had established her own rules concerning the inhabitants that shared her home. Occasionally, though, a young wolf would take an interest in one of the animals and start chasing it. As far as Sophie was concerned the behavior was unacceptable. She would immediately intervene by barking and nipping at its heels. Although small with delicate bones, her ferocity often drove the rambunctious wolf pup away. When that wasn't enough, she could always count on the two pack leaders to put the wayward adolescent in its place. Teekon and Nashoba normally let Sophie teach their offspring the valuable lesson of respecting the wolf spirit's orders, but didn't hesitate to step in if necessary.

The days were growing shorter. Winter was only a few weeks away. It would be Sophie's fifth. This year she felt the heavy weight of depression more than ever before as she watched the other animals wandering around. Several hens proudly strutted up and down with their chicks, daring

anyone or anything to come near. The geese's goslings still followed closely behind their parents, despite being practically grown. Even the turkeys and peafowls were surrounded by happy, excited children who were just beginning to display the snobbery their parents were so well known for.

Lying on her stomach with her head resting on her paws, Sophie's eyes shifted sadly from one group to another as she sighed. A small puff of dust rose into the air as she exhaled through her nostrils.

If only, she thought and closed her eyes in an attempt to block out the happy familial scene that surrounded her.

"Hey Soph!" Mother Superior called out. Her seven chicks were happily scratching and pecking at the ground a few feet away. They were at an age when everything looked edible. No pebble went untested. "I'm taking the kids for a stroll down to the pond. You want to come along?"

Sophie opened one eye and then closed it again.

"Not today. I think..." she said and sighed again. The crowing of a rooster interrupted her so she waited until it stopped. "The old man sounds like he's losing his voice. I hope the humans don't take him away like they did Finney."

"Not going to happen. I heard the Mistresses were very upset when they found out Finney had been. . . well, I don't even want to think about that, let alone discuss it while the chicks. . ."

"Think about what, mom?" a chick asked running up and jumping on Sophie's back. Squatting down, it pecked at what appeared to be a bug before continuing. "What don't you want to think about?."

"Mind your manners, Butterscotch. Sophie isn't a pile of hay. Besides chicks are to be seen, not heard. Now go back and play with your siblings."

"But mo...omm."

"No buts."

"Oh all right. Sorry Momma. Sorry Momma Sophie. I was only funnin'."

"That's okay. Maybe we'll play a little later," she replied, nuzzling the dark orange-blond feathers of the adolescent chick. Butterscotch was almost the same color as Sophie. The fuzzy top-knotch on her head was arranged in spikes, much like an old porcupine she had once seen. *She looks so much like me. . Well except for that hairstyle and small head. . . and that fat body. Her legs are a bit scrawny too, and her arms are useless for digging. Still, we're the same color. She could almost be mine.* Perhaps that was why she had a special fondness for the young chick. Orr maybe it was just because Butterscotch had always been mischievous. She loved playing tricks on Sophie. Even more, she never hesitated to jump on Sophie's back for a free ride.

"Bye," Butterscotch called over her shoulder, one wing waving goodbye as she dashed back to her brother and sisters, who were excitedly chasing a small yellow butterfly as it flitted just out of reach.

Mother Superior turned back to Sophie.

"You still feeling poorly because you don't have any babies?" she asked.

Golden brown eyes stared soulfully around the yard before turning to look at her best friend.

"It's not natural not having children. Something's wrong with me. . I mean none of the other animals here show any interest in me."

"Well, don't go blamin' yourself for other critters' stupidity. You're a fine looking girl. If I weren't such a slut I'd be chasin' you myself," Mother Superior teased.

"But we still couldn't make babies together. This is your third family. I don't have a purpose in life."

"Some things just aren't meant to be, Sophie." The hen moved closer and lowered her head to make better eye contact. "But you know all my chicks have always thought of you as their second mom. You've watched over them like your own. I'd have lost several babies if you hadn't been here. Heck, there's not an animal in the yard who hasn't had at least one child saved by you. Maybe that's your real purpose for being here. Come on, now. You know you always feel better when you're with the kids."

Reluctantly Sophie rose to her feet and stretched; first one rear leg, then the other.

"I guess you're right." She did love being with Mother Superior and the chicks, especially Butterscotch. Walking toward the noisy youngsters she perked up when the mischievous adolescent charged at her, leapt into the air and flew onto her back landing between her shoulders.

"Look at me!" the chick shouted and then began chirping happily as she flapped her wings wildly trying to get Sophie to run. "Faster, Momma Sophie, faster!"

* * *

"That's pitiful," Tonia turkey declared as she watched the dog loping off with the chick on her back. "She just doesn't get it, does she?"

Priscilla peafowl puffed her chest out and spread her tail feathers into a gorgeous brown fan. "It's disgraceful that Mother Superior lets those chicks act that way. Chickens have no dignity."

"Well, they're only chickens. It's not like they're very smart."

"That's still no excuse. We need to put a stop to this irresponsible behavior," Priscilla said.

"And how do we do that? Every turkey and peafowl, male and female, in the yard has said something to her about her disgraceful behavior. She almost scratched Tom's eyes out the last time. That old hen was born low-life and she'll be that way until she dies."

"Maybe we've been going about this the wrong way. Instead of wasting time on her, we should convince Sophie to stop acting like a simpleton."

Tonia stopped strutting and fluttered her wings. "You know, Prissy, that may just work. Let's call a quick meeting while they're down by the pond. You go get the geese. I'll gather the rest of the flocks together. We can meet at the far end of the barn."

Priscilla raised her head and called out proudly, her voice carrying across the yard like the scream of a wild animal. All the animals stopped what they were doing to look up. When a peafowl screeched, it couldn't be ignored.

CHAPTER 2

"Faster! Faster!" Butterscotch squawked digging her tiny nails into Sophie's back and flapping her wings as the dog ran around the other chicks. The siblings half-flew, half-ran toward the barnyard chirping happily. They knew they would win the race. Sophie always lost. It didn't matter that she circled around them multiple times all the way back from the pond. Mother Superior strolled casually behind stopping here and there to pick up a beetle or some other unfortunate insect if it happened to cross her path.

"I'm going as fast as I can," Sophie said. "Any faster and you'll fall off. . . or dig deeper into my back. Besides, you're getting a bit too big for me to be carrying you like this."

"Psshaw!" Butterscotch said. "You're strong enough to carry three of me, Momma Sophie. . . and why do you always let my brothers and sisters win? I'd like to win once," she complained.

"Nothing's stopping you except laziness. That's probably why you're so fat," Sophie teased.

"I'm not fat! Mom said I was pleasingly plump, and that all chickens were supposed to be that way. I'm going to be the plumpest chicken in the yard when I grow up."

"You're the plumpest now. If you get any bigger you're going to be fat. And I've heard humans love fat animals."

"They have to catch me first. Fat doesn't mean slow, you know. I'm actually quite good at running when I need to be. Here, let me show you." Butterscotch launched herself into the air and landed a few feet away from Sophie. Before the dog could stop, the chick was dashing away in pursuit of her siblings. She had gone only a few yards when she suddenly stopped. "See!" she huffed, panting heavily.

"Yeah, I see. You're fat!"

Butterscotch stretched to her full height, puffed her orange-colored chest out and stared indignantly at Sophie before strutting away. Seconds later she was distracted by a flying bug and forgot that she was supposed to be regal, like her mom.

* * *

"You know you really aren't setting a good example for Mother Superior's chicks," Priscilla said to Sophie as she slid under the rail of the wooden fence. "Adults are supposed to act dignified. Set an example. That's the only way they'll get respect from the young ones."

Sophie stopped to look up at the peafowl. She, the geese, other peafowls and the turkeys were standing in a cluster, seemingly waiting for her.

"Excuse me?"

"You play with those chicks like you were one of them. Those chicks will never respect you unless you act dignified. Children should be taught their place when they're young. Otherwise, they grow up acting like wild hooligans. We're a civil society here with the exception of the chickens. They have no

respect for anyone or anything and you've done nothing but encourage that behavior."

"But Mother Superior. . ."

"Mother Superior is a wonderful mother. At least as much as a hen can be but she doesn't have any class. Now, if her chicks grew up with class, chickens would get along a lot better with the rest of us."

"I didn't realize they didn't," Sophie said, resting her rump on the ground.

"Of course not, " Tonia chimed in. . "No one wants to embarrass her by pointing out her faults. That wouldn't be classy. Besides, she's too old to change her ways, but her babies aren't."

Sophie thought for a few moments about what the two birds were saying. It was true the other barnyard fowl hung together in isolated groups. The chickens, however, wandered wherever they wanted. She admired them for their independence but now wondered if she was a bit naïve.

"So, what am I supposed to do? I love playing with the chicks."

"Well, that has to stop. You're not their mother. You're an adult. Act like one."

"I'm not anyone's mother," Sophie growled dejectedly.

"That's your fault!" Priscilla replied, her voice somewhat harsh. "Obviously you haven't tried hard enough." The peafowl stretched her neck lifting her head high into the air. Raising her wings she spread her tail feathers and posed, looking quite regal.

"You need to lay a few eggs."

"I . . . I can't lay eggs," Sophie said sadly. "I don't know how."

"Then find one. I'll bet you can if you look hard enough."

The other birds made snickering sounds but were quickly silenced by Priscilla's warning glance.

"Look where? All the eggs around here belong to someone."

"Hmmm," Priscilla said, folding her wings against her sides. "You do have a point."

"Not all . . ." Tonia turkey interjected giving the peafowl a sly look, "Just this morning I saw an egg with no one around."

"Rea . . . ally." Priscilla seemed to over exaggerate the word as she stretched it out as long as she could. "Where?"

"Yes, where?" Sophie asked wagging her tail excitedly.

"Well, before I tell you we should make sure it doesn't have a mother. How about Priscilla and I check it out after dinner? If she still hasn't shown up we'll figure out a way to bring it to you. Of course you'll need to make a nice nest somewhere safe and warm. Why don't you go look for a place and let us know when you've found one."

"Yes, yes," Sophie said glancing around for a few ideas. "Thank you so much," she barked loudly as she headed toward the barn. "I'm going to be a mother, I'm going to be a mother," she barked joyously.

"She's so naïve," Tonia said, shaking her head.

"Yes, and once we give her her **egg** she won't have time to play with those chicks. Come on

everyone. Brilliant, Tonia. Let's go make Sophie a **mother**." All the participants in the cruel joke gobbled and cackled raucously as they strutted off toward the garden.

CHAPTER 3

Sophie circled the spot several times scratching small piles of straw into a bigger and bigger mound. When it was twice her size she stepped into the middle and lay down on her stomach, testing it for comfort.

Not too bad, she thought turning onto her side. *Maybe it should be a little bigger*. Standing, she pawed a few more clumps onto the bed.

"Whatcha doin'?" a voice called to her from above.

Looking up Sophie saw Lynne the Hen staring down at her from her perch on a rafter.

"Making a nest. I'm going to be a mother?"

"Oh! Congratulations! I didn't know you were pregnant," Lynne said. "When are you due?"

"Tonight," Sophie barked excitedly. "I'm getting an egg tonight."

Lynne's wide brown eyes blinked several times. "Tonight? An egg? Dogs don't lay eggs."

"I'm not laying an egg. Priscilla and Tonia are bringing me one. If I keep it warm it'll hatch and I'll be a mother."

Shaking her head, the hen flew from the perch landing next to Sophie.

"Most peculiar," she said. "Well, let me see what you've done so far." Strolling around the large mound of straw she scratched at a few stray strands and then nestled down in the center. "Not bad, not

bad at all for your first nest. I suggest you build it up a little more, though. You're awfully heavy and it'll get flattened quickly. Now once the egg arrives it's very important that you keep it warm. That means staying with it almost all the time. Bury it deep in the nest and it'll be less work. Night times are the worst. You'll have to stay with it day and night. Predators will try to steal it to eat. I have to say that chickens are the worst egg thieves, though. They'll take one in a hen's breath if it's left alone. Big broods make them appear fertile. That always attracts the roosters. You've seen how they like to strut around with their chests puffed out like some fat peafowl."

Strangely, the image made Sophie think of Priscilla rather than the half-dozen roosters living in the barnyard. She and Tonia were the most self-centered, pompous creatures Sophie had ever met... still, they were helping her.

"I think it's all for show, and, after all, they **are** bringing me an egg."

"Yes, very strange, very strange indeed. Well, I must go now. I feel a few eggs of my own coming on. Feel free to chat with me if you need advice."

Lynne the Hen flew back up to the rafter and then walked over to the loft where enormous bales of hay were stored. The area provided her a safe and quiet nesting site. Sophie had always thought Lynne a little odd, as did the rest of the inhabitants of the barnyard. She had never had any chicks of her own and didn't allow any of the roosters access to her... well, let's just say if a male showed the least bit of interest in her, Lynne quickly disillusioned him

about dreams of fathering chicks with her. She seemed quite content laying eggs, but THAT was it.

"Thank you," Sophie barked and then lay down to admire her work. "I'll let you know when the egg arrives." She heard Lynne's faint clucking acknowledgement of "Do that."

* * *

Seven little heads peaked around the corner of the door before striding proudly into the barn.

"Whatcha doing, Sophie?" Butterscotch asked jumping on Sophie's back and nestling down in the thick fur around her shoulders.

"Waiting for my egg," Sophie replied.

"Oh." The chicks looked at each other confused. "When's it supposed to get here?"

"Tonight, if I'm lucky."

"Who's bringing it?" Tiramisu, the littlest chick asked. She was gray and white mottled. No one was sure who her real parents were since she didn't match any of the roosters or hens' colors, not that it made any difference to Mother Superior or the siblings. The one thing the old hen believed in was raising babies, no matter who they originally belonged to. And she wasn't averse to stealing a few eggs if it increased her brood size. Presently, of her seven offsprings, two were black, one butterscotch orange, one gray, one white, and then there was Tiramisu. No one doubted that Mother Superior had filched eggs from the others but no one wanted to make an issue of it. Besides, it just gave the other hens an opportunity to lay more eggs and have more babies. Already the chickens outnumbered the rest

of the farm animals. There was power in numbers, especially when the competition was larger in size, not to mention too cocky for their own good.

"Priscilla and Tonia." Sophie's tail wagged enthusiastically.

Fluffybutt shook her head. "I don't like those two. They're mean to us. Always chasing us away from the good stuff to eat." Her siblings chirped in agreement.

"Maybe they've changed. It was their idea to find me an egg. I'll have my own little chick and you'll have someone else to play with when it's old enough."

"We don't need someone else," Butterscotch said. "We have you. Isn't that enough?"

Sophie wasn't sure what to say. She loved Butterscotch and all the others. Sadly her hesitation was misunderstood. Heads hung low as the chicks slowly walked away and disappeared into the outside.

"I really do love you," she called out, only to be answered by silence.

* * *

"Push," Priscilla ordered nudging Tom turkey forward with her beak.

"Would you stop poking me back there," he grumbled and then let out a squawk when she pecked his rear again.

"Push then. Why do I have to do all the work," Priscilla complained.

"You aren't doing any work. I'm the one shoving this thing around...and for what? To trick

some stupid old dog into thinking she's a chicken? Whoever heard of such a stupid thing?"

"Just shut up and push. You gobblers think you know everything but all you do is strut your stuff and puff your chest feathers out like some over-fluffed poppycock. You're worse than Stevie."

"Stevie! That little banty rooster who keeps trying to out crow me? He's nothing but a bully...always picking on those two old Reds. You'd think he never saw gay roosters before."

"Now you shush about Zoie and Big Red. It's not their fault they're...well...you know...different. With Zoie's feet all twisted and turned the way they are, he's lucky to even be alive, let alone find a partner, especially one so fine as Big Red."

"I thought you didn't like chickens," Tom said giving the round object another shove.

"Don't be silly. Of course I like chickens, as long as they remember their places. Speaking of which, just roll that over to the barn door and then leave. Tonia and I will present it to Sophie."

Tom gave a harrumph but did as he was told. Once the thing was by the door he walked away without a backward glance. He wanted nothing else to do with Priscilla. She was too much of a troublemaker as far as he was concerned. Not to mention, a peafowl. Peafowls were too flamboyant and lacked social graces and dignity. They were nothing but posers. Turkeys, especially him, knew what it took to impress animal and human alike. He had lived in the barnyard for seven years now. Each fall, when the mistresses came to choose one of his

kind for a special celebration, they always brushed his comb and stroked his waddle, telling him he was too beautiful to eat. Of course, they were joking. Only the wild animals living in the mountains ate turkeys. Tom shivered at the thought of being torn to pieces and swallowed.

* * *

"Your egg's here!" Priscilla called out as she peeked her head into the barn. "Sophie, you in here?" she squawked loudly, her voice cracking under the strain.

"Over here, Priscilla," Sophie called out. "I'm just finishing my nest. I've been working on it all day."

"Well, get over here and get this egg. It's too big for me to handle. Tom and I had to roll it all the way from the backfield."

With great anticipation Sophie dashed out the door skidding to a halt in front of Priscilla and the enormous orange-brown object.

"Wow," she said. "That's enormous. I expected something a lot smaller."

"You'd break anything smaller. a big girl like you needs a big egg. Now roll it inside into your nest. I'll show you what you need to do to keep it warm." Sophie carefully nudged the egg to the edge of the pile of straw. "Good. Scratch all the nesting stuff around it. It needs to be kept warm. Since you don't have wings you're going to have to lay beside it with your belly against it. During the day you can sit on it like we do, but gently. You wouldn't want to break it would you?"

Shaking her head, Sophie did as she was instructed. Within minutes the **egg** was surrounded with straw and Sophie climbed in and lay down, snuggling her stomach against it.

"Like that?" she asked looking expectantly at Priscilla.

Priscilla's eye glowed with smug humor.

"Oh that's perfect," she replied. "Perfectly priceless. I'll check on you in the morning. Now remember, no leaving except for eating and drinking."

Sophie frowned.

"Ummm, what if I have to...you know..." she asked looking at her tail and wagging it.

"Well, naturally you need to do that elsewhere. No dirtying the nest. Another thing. No one but you is allowed in the nest. You can't be a real mother if someone else sits on your egg. Also, keep a sharp eye out for egg thieves."

"Egg thieves?"

Priscilla nodded. "Yes. Especially chickens. They're notorious for stealing eggs. Even their chicks will take them...and," Priscilla looked around cautiously making sure no one would hear her. "If the egg gets cracked, they **eat** them." Sophie's mouth dropped open in horror. "I know it's hard to believe but it's true. They can't help themselves."

"That's awful," Sophie whispered. "I never knew that."

"Well, it's not something they're proud of so try to keep it a secret. But I've seen them." Shaking her head sadly, Priscilla sighed and fluttered her

feathers. "Don't tell anyone, please. The other animals here would be appalled and it would cause problems, I'm sure."

"I won't," Sophie promised.

"Good. Now I must be off. It's late. I'll see you in the morning." Spreading her wings and tail feathers Priscilla posed elegantly for a few seconds and then strutted away. Sophie eased closer to her egg and laid a paw on it. Glancing around the barn she searched for possible threats and saw none. Relaxing she closed her eyes, although her ears remained perked for signs of danger.

CHAPTER 4

"Did she fall for it?" Tonia asked, standing just outside the barn door.

"Oh yes. She's not very bright, you know. Too bad. Sophie's a nice enough dog. Certainly better than the others the Mistresses have left here in the past. If it wasn't for Mother Superior's influence..." Priscilla left the sentence hanging.

"I suppose it's our fault too," Tonia said. "We should have stepped in and trained her from the very beginning."

"Well, no use dwelling on the past. Better late than never. The chicks will quickly lose interest in her if she's too busy with her egg."

Tonia couldn't stop the cackle that rose in her throat.

"Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind," she said, proud of her own wisdom.

"True...so true. Come on. Let's go tell the others what they need to do." Strutting off Priscilla headed toward a small building on the other side of the yard. As always, she spread her tail feathers wide, displaying her gorgeous colors. After all, even turkeys needed to be reminded of her fantastic beauty.

* * *

Sophie stretched and yawned, looking around to make sure there were no threats to her egg. The barn was empty; or so she thought. a flapping sound overhead attracted her attention. Glancing up she saw

Lynne the Hen sitting on the rafter just to the left of Sophie's nest.

"Hi," Sophie said.

Lynne cocked her head sideways, eying Sophie with her left eye.

"What's that lying next to you?" she asked. Lynne the Hen was always very direct. She didn't suffer small talk or fools very well, and most of the animals in the barnyard were fools as far as she was concerned.

"My egg," Sophie exclaimed, standing and circling it proudly. "Priscilla brought it last night. I guess you were sleeping, huh?"

"Of course. That's what night is for." Lynne shuffled a few feet to her right and raised her tail in the air. a large greenish white glop fell to the dirt with a SPLAT!

"Be careful of my nest!" Sophie warned.

"I moved over didn't I?" the hen said indignantly. "I certainly wouldn't defecate on another animals nest, especially yours."

"Sorry," Sophie mumbled.

"Never mind," Lynne said. "I realize this is all new to you. Now, I'd like to look at that egg. It's very strange looking." Without waiting for Sophie to respond, the hen flew down landing next to the mound of straw. Turning her head left and then right she eyed the object. "Peculiar! Most peculiar," she said. That was her favorite phrase whenever she thought something was odd. Stepping close she leaned forward and tapped the shell with her beak. "I've never seen an **egg** like this. It looks more like those things the Mistresses grow in the fields. Where'd Priscilla get it?"

"I don't know," Sophie said. "But it's definitely an egg. I can hear something moving inside of it already."

The hen leaned her ear against the object and listened.

"I don't hear anything."

Sophie cocked her head sideways and listened. "I do. It sounds like a heartbeat."

"Well, if you say so," Lynne the Hen said skeptically. Before she could say another word, Mother Superior's chicks charged into the barn, skidding to a halt next to the nest.

"Is that the egg?" Butterscotch asked, hopping back and forth on each foot.

"Can we look?" Tiramisu piped in.

"I want to see," Baby Zelda said hopping up and down.

Lynne shook her head with annoyance. It wasn't that she didn't like chicks. She just had no patience for their youthful exuberance. "I'll talk to you later," she said, launching herself upward toward the rafter. "And you all behave," she squawked back. "Sophie's a mother now. She has responsibilities. The last thing she needs is a bunch of unruly chicks distracting her."

Sophie nodded. She was already worried one of the chicks might get too close and damage the shell. Eggs were fragile and known to break easily.

"I'm sorry," Sophie said. "Lynne's right. Maybe in a few days it'll be okay but not today. Now you chicks go out and play."

"Are you coming out later?" Butterscotch asked.

"No. I need to make sure my egg stays warm and safe. It'll probably be awhile before I can take time off."

"How long is awhile?"

"I don't know. I've never been a mother before. How long before Mother Superior let you out of her sight?"

"Oh, she still doesn't do that, except when we're with you."

"Yeah. That means it'll be a long time. We'll be all grown up before you can play with us again," Baby Zelda chirped.

Sophie walked over and nuzzled the dejected chick and then licked each of the others.

"I'm a real mother now," she said. "Things have changed."

All the chicks' heads dropped low and their bodies drooped.

"I wish you weren't," Fluffybutt muttered and then turned and walked slowly toward the door. The others followed; all but Butterscotch.

"Can we still come in and visit, if we're good?" she asked. "We promise not to get too close."

"Sure. I'd like that."

Butterscotch stretched her neck up taking one more look at the egg. "It's a pretty color. I like orange and green," she said. Her voice held a sadness Sophie had never heard before in the normally exuberant chick. Before she could reply, Butterscotch turned and dashed from the barn, her wings flapping wildly. For several seconds she was actually able to lift her body off the ground and fly.

She's growing up, Sophie thought, feeling almost lost. *They're all growing up*. Shaking her head and body, she stretched, first her right rear leg, then her left, and finally her front. *She's right, though. It's a beautiful egg*. Lying back down, she

pulled the egg next to her stomach and licked it several times. *Doesn't taste very good.*

* * *

Sophie was thirsty, and hungry, and desperately needed to empty her bladder and bowels. Her stomach growled loudly. a pain near her stomach was almost unbearable. She tucked her tail between her legs trying her best to keep from messing in the nest.

"Oh," she moaned again and again.

"What's wrong with you?" Lynne the Hen asked walking out onto the rafter to look down on the dog.

"I'm soo hungry and thirsty. . . and I have to go badly."

"Well, why don't you?"

"I can't leave my egg. Someone might steal it."

"Don't be silly. No one's going to take that thing. It's too large, and it's too peculiar. That's probably why Priscilla brought it here. I wouldn't be surprised if it was one of hers and she's too embarrassed to admit it. It's certainly not like any egg I've ever seen, and I've seen a lot."

"Ohhh," Sophie groaned again.

"Would you please stop making those awful noises? And listen to your stomach. You don't want whatever's inside your egg to hear you, do you?"

"No, but I hurt."

"Then go on. I'll watch the egg until you get back." Lynne wasn't very happy about egg-sitting but it was better than listening to Sophie groaning all day. Besides, if the dog dirtied her nest, the barn would stink for days.

"Would you? Oh thank you, thank you."

Without hesitation Sophie jumped to her feet and ran full speed out the door and into a field beyond the fence. She barely made it in time. Squatting she relieved herself and then breathed a sigh of relief.

Feeling better she trotted to her water dish and lapped at the cool liquid. Satiated she turned to her food bowl. Today, it tasted especially good.

* * *

Seeing Sophie outside the barn the chicks abandoned chasing bugs and flocked to her as fast as they could. Wings pumped frantically up and down.

"Hi Sophie. Is everything okay? Is your egg all right? Who's watching it? Can you play?" they all asked excitedly.

"Everything's fine," Sophie replied. "Can't talk now. Got to get back to my egg." Running off she disappeared into the barn.

Dejected the chicks walked away, kicking at the dirt. They showed no interest in anything around them. Even the flies were safe for the moment.

* * *

When Sophie dashed into the barn she skidded to a halt in front of her nest. Mother Superior was perched on the egg while Lynne the Hen squatted next to it.

"Is...every...thing..." Sophie stopped and for several seconds tried to catch her breath. "Is my egg all right?" she gasped.

"Of course," Mother Superior replied. "Lynne and I have lots of experience being mothers. Well, I do but she's a good protector"

"Sorry. I'm just afraid something will happen to it."

"As you should be," a voice said from behind her. Priscilla and Tonia strutted in from outside, followed by several other turkeys and peafowls. "Eggs are very fragile. Not to mention easily stolen. Your egg is so beautiful lots of animals will probably want it once they hear about it. Isn't that right, Tonia."

"Oh yes," Tonia agreed and then gobbled a few times to mask the smug laughter bubbling up her long neck.

"Do you have something stuck in your throat?" Lynne asked turning her head to examine Tonia with her right eye.

"Just a frog in it," Tonia said, faking a cough.

"You ate a frog?" Sophie asked in horror.

"It's just a figure of speech. She heard one of the Mistresses say that one day," Mother Superior explained. "So, Priscilla, you're the one who found the egg. Where did you get it?" Mother demanded. "It doesn't look like anything I've ever seen before."

Tonia looked at Priscilla nervously. Lynne the Hen and Mother Superior exchanged suspicious glances. The peafowl gave the hens an indignant look.

"Actually, Tonia found it!" she exclaimed. "We do Sophie a favor and you two start questioning us? Come on, Tonia, we don't have to put up with this from **chickens**." Turning she stalked away, her tail feathers spread wide. The turkey swallowed hard and loud before following closely behind.

"I don't trust those two," Lynne said. "They're up to something." Mother Superior nodded in agreement.

"I think you hurt their feelings. They really were doing me a favor."

Mother Superior and Lynne turned to look at Sophie. "Uh huh," Mother Superior said skeptically. "Something isn't right, but I don't know what...yet! Guess I'd better go check the chicks. They're probably getting into mischief. See you later." The hen left.

Lynne the Hen launched herself in the air and flew up onto her rafter. "Peculiar," she said. "Most peculiar!"

Finding herself alone, Sophie decided to neaten up her nest. Pawing the straw higher around the egg, she then circled it a few times and lay down next to it.

Birds can be so strange, Sophie thought.

* * *

"Do you think they know?" Tonia asked.

"Of course not," Priscilla replied. "Even if they did they can't prove anything."

"What happens when nothing happens? They'll know then."

"We'll simply tell Sophie she wasn't a good enough mother. By the time she gets over her depression all of Mother Superior's chicks will be grown. Any new chicks will just remind Sophie of her failings and she won't want to associate with them."

"That seems a bit cruel," Tonia said, feeling slightly uneasy. Sophie had always been nice to the

turkeys. If it wasn't for her association with the chickens, she and Tonia might have been friends...well, as much as a turkey and dog could be.

"You aren't having doubts, now, are you? This was your idea and for Sophie's own good. We all agreed on this."

"I know. You're right," Tonia said. "Hey!" she exclaimed craning her neck high and sideways to look around the peafowl. "The Mistresses are putting food out! Let's go get some!" Without waiting, the turkey charged past Priscilla toward two elderly women holding large buckets.

Disgraceful! Priscilla thought. *Have you no dignity?* Raising her head as high as possible she puffed her chest out, raised her wings and displayed her feathers proudly for all to see. Slowly, with as much dignity as she could muster she walked toward the two humans, knowing they would be impressed.

CHAPTER 5

Weeks passed without any change in Sophie's routine. Cold weather had arrived and with it the snow. Every day Sophie fretted over her egg, worried that something wasn't right. She no longer heard the heartbeat. The chicks eventually gave up visiting the barn, accepting they had lost their friend to the strange object she obsessed over. Priscilla and Tonia, as well as the other turkeys and peafowls, were satisfied they had accomplished their goal. Sophie and the chickens no longer associated with each other very much, although Mother Superior and Lynne the Hen continued to visit the dog on a regular basis each day.

"When are we going to tell Sophie the egg isn't any good?" Tonia asked. She and Priscilla were standing near a large stack of hay bales that was protecting them from the icy, snow-laden winds.

"I don't know," Priscilla said, annoyed because the turkey asked her the same question every day. "Maybe tomorrow."

"You said that yesterday."

"And I might say it tomorrow. What's the hurry?" Priscilla demanded in annoyance.

"I'm worried about her. She's lost a lot of weight. . . and she's so worried."

"It's good for her." Priscilla stomped off, disappearing into a large coop.

"Tell her what?" a voice asked, startling Tonia. Jumping, the turkey looked around but saw no one. "Tell her what?" the voice asked again.

"Who. . . who are you?"

"I am your conscience."

"How come you don't know what I was talking about if you're my conscience?"

"I know but I want to hear you say it?" came the crackling reply.

"Oh." Tonia gobbled nervously and swallowed. With the length of her neck it took a bit for the action to conclude at the base of her throat. "Um, well, you know, about the egg."

"What about the egg?"

Sighing Tonia scratched at the dry patch of dirt beneath her feet.

"It not being an egg. Are you satisfied now? I said it!"

"Not quite," her conscience replied. "Admit to yourself what it is and where it came from."

"This is ridiculous." Tonia again looked around, hoping to see someone. She didn't. "All right. It's a pumpkin. I found it but it was Priscilla and Tom who rolled it from the field. Sophie was spending too much time with the chicks so we needed to teach her a lesson." Silence. "Hello?" Silence. "Hell. . . oh. . . oh. Drat!" she exclaimed, deciding to join the other turkeys. This was too creepy.

When she disappeared into the coop, Mother Superior stepped from behind a bale of hay. Butterscotch and Fluffybutt followed closely behind.

"I knew something wasn't right," Mother Superior clucked.

"Poor Sophie," Butterscotch said. "She's going to be broken-hearted."

"We should have supported her more."
Fluffybutt shook her head sadly.

"It's too late for the **should haves**. We need a plan. Let's go find the other chickens and see if we can think of something quickly."

CHAPTER 6

Sophie lay listlessly next to her egg. Her Mistresses came in every day to check on her. It was obvious they were concerned about her. One even tried to remove her egg the day before but she kept nudging the hands away and whining.

"I don't know why she's so attached to that thing," the taller Mistress said, shaking her head. "She's got plenty of toys."

"Well, we're going to have to do something soon. It's beginning to rot."

"The cold weather will keep it a few more days. We'll check back on her tomorrow. Come on. Let's finish our chores. It looks like another storm's blowing in."

"Just what we need. More snow!" the shorter Mistress said "At least we'll have a white Solstice this year." Grabbing their buckets the two humans left the barn.

Sophie sighed. She didn't understand exactly what was being said but knew it had something to do with her and her egg. Nuzzling it with her nose, she cocked her head, listening for a heartbeat. Nothing!

* * *

The chickens were huddled at the far end of the barn well out of range of Sophie's hearing, although she could hear the cackling noises. Lynne the Hen

sat on the rafter, standing watch. She wasn't surprised with what Mother Superior told her, and in fact, had already figured out what had happened.

I knew it was most peculiar, she thought glancing down at the depressed dog. Even though she was on the older side of chicken years her hearing was still good. She listened to the discussion.

"We have to find Sophie a chick," Mother Superior iterated for the umpteenth time.

"Where?" Big Red, the rooster, asked, pressing up close to Zoie. "She'd recognize any of ours. I mean you hens', and there's too much snow outside for us to hunt elsewhere."

"Sophie's our friend," Baby Zelda said. "She's protected all of us when we needed her. We have to do something." Her siblings nodded and cackled in agreement.

"Think!" Mother Superior said. "Think! Come on, chickens. We only have a few days. The Mistresses will take her egg away soon."

"Who!"

All of the chickens looked around to see who had spoken.

"Who!" the voice said again, coming from a dark corner of the loft.

"Who what?"

"Who! Who!"

"Who, who, what?"

Wings flapped and a large bird stepped out of the shadows.

"IT'S AN OWL!" the chicks screamed in panic.
"RUN! HIDE!"

"I've already eaten," the owl said, gliding silently to the floor.

"Who are you asking who about?" Mother Superior asked.

"I'm not asking about anyone."

"You asked **who**."

The owl turned enormous round eyes toward the hen and blinked.

"No, I said **who**. That's what owls say."

"Oh."

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop but I heard what you were discussing. Perhaps I can help."

"Why would you do that?" Mother Superior demanded.

"Why wouldn't I? Sophie's a nice dog. She's never bothered me, although she has warned me not to eat any of you. Naturally, I never entertained such a thought. I prefer dining out."

"Naturally," Butterscotch interjected sarcastically, not believing the owl for one second.

Twisting its head, the owl eyed the young chicken for several moments as if sizing her up for a meal.

"Naturally," it repeated just as sarcastically.

"But now isn't the time for suspicion, is it? I'm here to offer my services and a suggestion."

"What can you do?"

"Put the word out that to look for an orphaned baby. I do have friends in high places, you know."

"In this weather?" Big Red asked.

The owl snapped its beak as it laughed.

"What's a little wind and snow? Weather doesn't affect me. . I'm an owl. Owls love weather like this. No one sees us coming."

"We'll remember that," Mother Superior said. "Can you do it tonight?"

"I'll leave immediately." Without further ado the owl flapped its wings lifting its great body into the air. It soon disappeared out the upper loft door."

"It's hard to believe all of our hopes depend on an owl," Butterscotch said, shaking her head.

"Better her than nothing. Still, we'll keep an eye out for something too."

The chickens dispersed to look around. Sophie, who had fallen asleep, lay still except for twitching front feet. Occasionally she would let out a whimper. Lynne the Hen, who stood watch from above returned to her nest.

"Peculiar," she said. "Most Peculiar."

CHAPTER 7

Who, as the chickens referred to her, flew all night spreading the word. Many of the animals knew Sophie or at least had heard about her. Unbelievably, by the next evening, another owl arrived carrying a small bundle in its claws. Calling to Who from the trees he waited impatiently for the barn owl to arrive.

"I found this one," he said holding up one leg to display the terrified animal clutched between long talons.

Who examined it, her enormous eyes staring unblinkingly at the creature.

"It's rather ugly, don't you think?"

"You didn't say it had to be pretty. Do you want it or not? I haven't eaten in two days."

"It'll do. Hold on to it until I come back. . . and keep it warm. It'll freeze to death in this weather."

"I'm not its mother," the owl protested.

"Well a lot of good it'll do to have it freeze to death. You might as well eat it if you aren't going to take care of it for a bit."

"Oh, all right. But don't take too long or I just might decide to make it my dinner." Tucking the baby under his wing, he hunkered down on the limb hoping he wouldn't be seen by anyone. It just wasn't right a male owl should nest on its food in such a manner.

Who flew off to tell the chickens.

* * *

"This is wonderful news," Mother Superior clucked. "What kind of baby is it?"

"Does it really matter?" Who asked. "Besides, we have a bigger problem. How do we get Sophie away from her egg? She never leaves it except to eat or poop. And **then** what do we do with that thing? It's in pretty bad shape, now."

The chickens grew quiet, causing the peafowls and turkeys at the far end of the coop to look at them. Chickens were always talking, much to the annoyance of the others.

"What's up?" Priscilla called out. "What are you chickens talking about and what's that owl doing in here?"

"None of your business," Butterscotch yelled back. "Come on," she told the other chickens and Who. "We don't need to associate with meanies." Cackling in agreement they marched past the other residents out into the cold evening air toward the barn. The wind, which had been blowing hard, calmed as they crossed the open yard. Even the snow let up so they didn't have to struggle to see the partially opened door. Who glided near Priscilla, her eyes narrowing ominously.

"I may have to break my word about eating here."

Priscilla took one step back and huffed indignantly.

Once inside the barn they noticed Sophie was sleeping by the egg. Her right cheek lay against it while her left paw draped across the top.

"Shhh," Butterscotch said, placing the tip of her left wing to her beak. "Over there." She motioned to the dark corner Who normally rested above. The owl, who was gliding in circles above them settled on the rafter next to Lynne the Hen. Because she was a loner she never went into the coop.

"What's up?" She asked.

"We found an orphan for Sophie but have to get her to leave for a while. Plus we have to figure out how to get rid of her egg," Who replied, her large round eyes staring intently at the the hen Lynne cocked her head slightly and turned her right eye to look at the owl.

"Why not just eat it?"

Who's eyes blinked rapidly.

"Eat it?"

"Of course. That's what chickens do best. Eat!"

"But, it's an egg! Sort of? Symbolically speaking."

"It's not an egg," the hen said.

"Well, that's true. Still, it's rotting."

Lynne the Hen cackled softly.

"And since when did that ever stop a chicken. We've eaten worse. Go tell the others."

Who shook her head. Eating rotting food. . . The owl shuddered. Chickens were very strange animals. She preferred her meals to be fresh.

"All right, but that doesn't solve our problem of getting Sophie to leave."

Shaking her head, the hen sighed.

"Doesn't anyone have an imagination?" Shifting closer to Who, she leaned in and whispered in her ear.

"Now why didn't I think of that?" the owl murmured and launched herself into the air. Minutes later she laid out the entire plan to the chickens. Their heads bobbed up and down enthusiastically and then they scurried from the barn, back to the coop.

* * *

Sophie lay dozing unaware of the activity around her. Her sleep was suddenly disturbed by a loud squawking noise coming from the outside. Within seconds, Zelda and Fluffybutt came charging into the barn, followed close behind by an owl darting back and forth, its beak snapping savagely at the chicks' tail feathers.

"Help! HELP!" the two chicks screamed. "It's going to eat us! Help us, Sophie."

Before she could do anything, they spun around and ran out the door, the owl in quick pursuit.

Sophie loved her egg but even that wasn't enough to stop her from jumping up to defend her friends. Without hesitation she dashed after them barking loudly.

"Leave them alone!" she called out. "No eating my friends."

The commotion brought the other barnyard animals out into the cold night. Two more owls circled overhead diving at anyone they could, sending all of the turkeys, peafowls and chickens scrambling. The pigs and goats merely watched, knowing they were too big to be bothered by a few owls. No one noticed a dozen chickens sneaking back into the barn through the partially opened door, nor them sneaking back out a while later.

* * *

I'm so stuffed. Butterscotch was barely able to contain a groan.

"We're done," she called up to Who, who had been watching from the loft door. Nodding, the owl stood and looked at the creature she had nestled under her wing trying to keep it warm.

"You're certainly an ugly thing," Who said. Grabbing the small bundle in her claws she flapped her mighty wings and launched her massive body into the air, careful not to crush the delicate baby. It took only seconds for her to deposit the baby in the center of Sophie's nest. The chickens had done an excellent job of cleaning up the mess, although they left a few pieces of the outer shell lying in the straw. It would be too suspicious looking if there weren't any egg fragments lying around. "Well, you're on your own." Surging upward, the owl disappeared into the darkness of the loft. She had done all she could. Now it was up to Sophie.

* * *

Exhausted Sophie sat down in the snow, trying to catch her breath. The owls had finally given up and flown away.

"You saved us," Fluffybutt exclaimed.

The other chickens cackled their agreement.

"I don't understand why they came here," Sophie said, squinting into the darkness to make sure the birds weren't coming back. "All the animals know the barnyard is out-of-bounds."

"Probably new to the area, or this years hatched," Mother Superior replied.

"Well, I'm going to talk to Who the next time I see her. She's going to have to let them know they can't eat any of you." All the chickens clucked in agreement. Bored, the other barnyard animals went back to their warm nests and beds.

"I need to get back to my egg," Sophie said pushing to her feet and running back into the barn.

The chickens looked at each other.

"We'll wait by the bales of hay," Mother Superior said and marched toward the large stack beneath the shed roof.

* * *

Sophie heard the small cries long before she made it to her nest. Skidding to a halt she stared incredulously at the small brown and white thing trying to crawl around on the loose straw.

My egg! It's hatched! Without thinking she ran back outside barking loudly.

"It hatched! My egg hatched! I'm a mother! Oh!" she exclaimed realizing she had just abandoned her chick. Panicking, she turned and dashed back inside, the chickens in pursuit. Climbing onto her nest, she nuzzled her chick and then looked at the chickens, proud of her newly hatched baby. "Isn't it beautiful?" she yelped.

"Oh my," Mother Superior said, turning her right eye toward the thing for closer examination. "It certainly. . ." She coughed a couple of times clearing her throat, "is."

"What is it?" Baby Zelda whispered to Butterscotch. Butterscotch just shrugged.

Tiramisu, who had been silently examining the unusual chick, turned back to Sophie.

"Is it a boy or girl?" she asked.

"I . . . I don't know. How can I tell?"

"It's really not important," Mother Superior said. "What's important is that you're a mother. I suggest you lay down next to it so it'll stay warm. It'll also help stimulate you to produce nourishment for it."

"Nourishment?"

"Yes. Not all chicks can eat bugs when they're born. This one is going to have to. . ." Mother Superior tried to think of the word she had heard her Mistresses use one time when they were guiding a newborn piglet to its mothers breast. "Look. I'll tell you all about it in the morning. Let's go everyone. Sophie needs time to adjust to her new responsibilities. You can look at the chick when you wake up. Right, Sophie?"

Sophie grinned happily, her tongue hanging out the left side of mouth. "Sure," she said moving carefully to lie down. She nudged the chick against her stomach and felt a tickle as it wiggled against the warmth. The small baby noises subsided as it nuzzled one of her teats. The sensation was quite pleasant. Her nipple began to swell.

I'm a mother, Sophie whispered, licking her baby gently. *I'm a mother*.

* * *

Lynne the Hen sat in her usual spot watching the scene below her. When Who side-stepped along the rafter to join her she turned to look at the owl. Eyes wide open, she met Lynne's gaze with her normal disconcerting unblinking stare.

"What is it?" Lynne asked. "It's certainly not very pretty."

"Does it really matter?" Who asked, once again displaying the wisdom of her species.

The hen turned back to look at Sophie and the baby.

"Not really, but I have to say___"

"I know," Who interrupted. "Peculiar. Most Peculiar."

The End