

The Biggest Bud in the Garden of Spurs

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Dawn did not signify the start of the day. For Duisa, it was the awakening of their collective consciousness that marked it. Before the sun could meet the horizon, Royo would have already blown the whistle. With a loud and crisp cock-a-doodle-doo, Duisa and the other hens emerged from the trees, primed their feathers, and started pecking away. Dawn did not signify the start of day for it was the birds themselves who were one with the earth. The dawn was merely a spectacle.

Every morning, Duisa would hop around, run about, and live in bliss. She was at the perfect age to enjoy her life—old enough to wander without her mother, yet young enough to not be burdened with motherhood itself. Her mornings had been routine but fulfilling, until one day, something rather unusual occurred.

While she was searching around for a morning snack, she came across a hen she had never seen before. She stopped in her tracks and stared, unsure if the chicken was out to harm her.

“Don’t look so scared, little hen,” the stranger said. “That’s how predators know you’re an easy meal.”

Duisa relaxed, then cocked her head inquisitively. “I’m bigger than any rat there is. What is there to worry about?”

“You haven’t seen everything yet.” She hopped over the fence, leaving Duisa to herself.

Later that day, Duisa told the other chickens about her encounter. Everyone her age and younger were amazed. They all clucked in delight, wondering amongst themselves what other flocks were like, what other adventures awaited them outside. The older chickens, who would occasionally also fly over the fence, only rolled their eyes. “There are hazards and poachers and giant metal beasts!” Royo exclaimed. “There is nothing interesting outside. Only dangers await you.”

The next day, the stranger returned. Duisa and the other chicks watched her in wonder. She did the same as she did yesterday, scratching the ground for the chance of a prize. But her hunt was cut short by the arrival of Mira, the fiercest hen in Duisa's flock. Mira clucked as she locked eyes with the outsider, feathers slowly rising. The trespasser mirrored her actions. Soon, they were circling each other slowly.

Duisa did not know who to root for. She was only amazed at how big the adults could make themselves look. Feathers puffed all around, the hens appeared to be flowers in bloom in a garden of spurs, and almost gigantic to the eyes of the young and small Duisa. She then glanced at her own feathers, wondering how fearsome she too would look once her feathers matured.

She practiced. First, by herself, in the shadowy grove of banana trees. She puffed herself out with the pretense of a sneeze. Then, she took it to a real fight. From Royo's perch, she descended upon a group of young chickens.

"Get out!" she said. And like she practiced, out were her feathers.

The chickens were definitely startled, but after making sense of the situation, they simply stared at Duisa. In reality, Duisa looked not like a giant flower in bloom, but like a wilted one with discordant missing petals. Of course, as an adolescent, Duisa was molting. This meant parts of her body were bare. She was a laughing stock, and she hid away in embarrassment.

And, as if the timing couldn't be worse, she bumped into Mira. The startled hen responded immediately with aggression. Duisa squeaked and scurried away. But then, realizing the opportunity that had been handed to her, she ran back towards Mira, who had also calmed down.

"Mira, you're a beast. When will I look as fearsome as you?" She wasted no time. Neither did Mira.

"You're tiny," she said. And that was it.

It would seem that Duisa would have to wait before her debut. Like a peacock, she would flaunt what she had and become some feared but respected figure. But Duisa's excitement had left her impatient. She may not have been ready to bloom just yet, but maybe she could learn how to command a fight.

The next day, again, the stranger returned. Quickly, Duisa took her chance before Mira could notice. She ambushed the hen with a surprise wing attack, but the hen was completely unfazed.

“Little hen, little hen,” she said, all amused. “What brought you to greet me in such a humorous way?”

Duisa was not to be embarrassed again. Bravely, she marched up to the hen and demanded, “Tell me why you’ve come to my home.”

“I need some grub,” the hen replied hastily, then turned away to peck at some grass.

Unsatisfied, Duisa marched to the front of the hen. “Why here?” she asked again, but this time driven by pure curiosity.

The stranger, however, seemed to be getting quite annoyed. “Why not?” she snapped back. “Where else would I go?”

“Does your owner not feed you?”

“I don’t have an owner.”

“Oh.”

“Well, not anymore.”

The stranger introduced herself as Apse. “I left when I was just about your age,” she said, which intrigued Duisa.

It was from this point on that Duisa’s daily routine would change. Every day she would meet Apse by the banana grove, hidden away from the angry Mira, and ask her about her otherworldly exploits.

She learned of many wonders previously unknown. For example, a cat acting as the hen for some chicks, a dog acting as a guide for his owner. There would be young chicks in rainbow colors, and a strange type of chicken that grew so fast that to let them live a long life was said to be cruel (Apse seemed to disagree with this though).

She also learned of cocks who lived and died in the name of fighting. For some reason, this was the story that fascinated Duisa the most. At night, she would imagine such elaborate cockfights. She wondered if they were similar to Apse and Mira’s duel. She reminisced in the action and adrenaline of that day. She wanted to be a part of that, and so she told her friend.

“Why are you so eager to fight?” Apse asked her. “Most creatures like to avoid danger.”

But Duisa was young and naïve and she would take on danger on any day. No one could best the will of a dream.

As she retold Apse’s stories to her friends before they slept, Duisa imagined herself as Apse, mighty as can be, hurling herself at the face of the unknown. Poachers and hazards and giant metal beasts would be no match for what she would become. And Apse would watch her as a proud mentor. Together, they would become the most fearsome pair of hens to travel the world together.

“We could even raid a cockfight someday,” she told Apse while puffing her feathers. “It would be the first time they’ll see a hen more beautiful than a rooster in battle. Do you think I’ll become a beautiful hen?”

She let her feathers relax before sneaking up on a dummy made of leaves. As she jumped at the dummy with a flutter and a poof, it rained leaves and downy feathers alike. Apse laughed at Duisa’s silliness. She could not believe she had become so enamored with a chick whom she used to be so cold to. “Yes,” she answered. “You will be a beautiful hen.”

Soon, the older chickens got word of Duisa’s plans. “Are you really going to leave?” Mira asked.

“Why not?” Duisa answered. “You and the other hens freely come and go.”

“But do you have plans of returning?”

Duisa became silent.

“There are hazards and poachers and giant metal beasts!” Royo repeated like a broken record. “And here you are safe and fed and loved.”

“And slaughtered!” Duisa bursted, but everyone laughed.

“Don’t let that rogue’s conspiracy theories get to your head,” Mira advised. Embarrassed and discouraged, Duisa fled to the banana grove.

Of course she believed Apse. But it did not matter whether Apse was right. She wanted to become a big and fearsome hen, and her modest little flock could not home someone like

that. She comforted herself with the promise of her dreams. Before long, she was once again lost in fantasies of valor.

But little did Duisa know that her grandiose daydreams would soon be put to the test. Because one day, Apse did not return.

“Maybe she got too annoyed with you,” one chicken said.

“I’m her friend!” Duisa cried, but the others couldn’t care less.

It had only been three days since Apse’s disappearance, but to a chicken it felt like eternity. Duisa was struck with grief. Suddenly, her dreams of traveling together were shattered. Without her guide and dearly missed friend, there was no point in pursuing the life she had planned.

Some of the chickens noticed and consoled her, but life went on, and Duisa returned to her dull and routine life.

After some time, Duisa grew into a decent young hen. Her downy feathers had all gone away and she would soon lay her first egg. The other young hens cluck about it excitedly. Even Mira was at a new phase of her life, walking around with a new set of chicks yet somehow becoming even fiercer than before. Royo disappeared and was replaced by a younger cock. Everything was different, but it was all just the same.

One day, one of Mira’s chicks lost his way and stumbled upon Duisa, who was scouring the area for food. Duisa was startled and, by instinct, puffed her feathers at the chick. The chick was terrified and ran away chirping. So did the others who were close enough to see.

But Duisa was the most surprised of them all. It would make sense that she could scare such little things away, but she had almost forgotten how much her younger self wanted this. It then dawned on her that she had indeed grown. She puffed her feathers again, just to get a feel of how big she had gotten, and even a hen her age who was nearby ran away.

It should be a coincidence that she was right next to the wall that caged her right at the moment her fantasies of becoming a fearsome fighting fowl returned. But perhaps it wasn’t. Perhaps it was a test from a friend she had almost forgotten.

If the outside world was truly as dangerous as they said, then readiness was a very much needed quality. Was she not ready before because of her age? Did the readiness of her will

need to be proven? Regardless, she was here now at the turning point of her life. Now that her friend had gone, she knew it was her turn to cross the wall and start her own adventure.

Duisa lowered her knees and flapped as hard as she could. She could only almost reach the top of the wall, but this did not discourage her. She climbed the nearest tree and hopped up its branches. After a wiggle and a shake at the tree's very edge, she gave it her all one last time.

Standing atop the wall that marked the borders of their home, this would be the last time in a long time that Duisa would see her family: the new rooster on his perch, Mira and her chicks, and all of her siblings, and the rest of the flock. But like a seed in the wind, she didn't look back. Visions of grand adventures and mighty fights filled her mind. And at the end of the road would be Apse waiting for her.

"I accept your challenge, Apse. Now wait for me there! By the time I come to get you, I will be the biggest, most terrifying hen you will ever see."

Equipped with nothing but her heart and the memory of her mentor, Duisa descended to the world outside.

