

Excerpt from
THE BOOK OF THE DUN COW

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Chapter One

How Mundo Cani came to live with Chauntecleer

In the middle of the night somebody began to cry outside of Chauntecleer's Coop. If it had been but a few sprinkled tears with nothing more than a moan or two, Chauntecleer would probably not have minded. But this crying was more than a gentle moan. By each dark hour of the night it grew. It became a decided wail, and after that it became a definite howl. And howling—particularly at the door of his Coop, and in the middle of the night—howling Chauntecleer minded very much.

Chauntecleer the Rooster had trouble sleeping anyway, though this was no one's fault but his own. He snored. Well, Chauntecleer called it a snore, and everybody else who lived in his Coop called it a snore, too. But everybody else knew secretly that it was a positive crow.

This is the way that it went: As dusk fell, the whole company of the Coop would take to their roosts, tuck their heads deep into their neck and shoulder feathers, ruffle, cluck, and fall asleep—Chauntecleer among them. For the space of several hours, silence and contentment would fill the Coop, and sleep was good. But then Chauntecleer would begin to dream; and with his dream he would set up such a sudden, loud, and raucous snoring that every living soul in the neighborhood of the Coop would wake up. Immediately they all had a job to do. They had to pretend that they were still asleep, because it was Chauntecleer's snore, after all.

When his snores came close to the sound of thunder, then Chauntecleer woke up too. With a headache. And he wouldn't pretend: He was awake, and he was angry about it. He'd cock his eye angrily at this creature and that looking for guilt, waiting until one poor soul couldn't stand it any longer—and moved!

"You!" Chauntecleer would cry, and the Hen would wilt, moving very much all of a sudden. "Ah-ha-ha! You!" The Rooster's comb would stand up like a fan on the top of his head. He would flut down and strut up to the sad Hen and fix her with a one-eyed stare from the side of his rooster head.

"You! You! You! Sleep on my straw. Eat my grain! Hide from the wind, and dry from the rain. And how do you repay my great goodness to you? YOU WOKE ME! How do you like that? And what's more, you woke me UP!"

Then Chauntecleer would make a noise which he considered to be something better than a snore. It was a true crow; and it entered the shivering Hen's ear with such a force that she wouldn't sleep for the rest of the night. Back to his perch the Rooster would grump, twisting and turning and mumbling his perturbation: He did most certainly despise to be awakened from his dreams. But finally he would nod and dream again.

It was more than a fact that Chauntecleer the Rooster had trouble sleeping. It was also a well-known fact. All the Coop had a healthy fear of awakening his feathered thunder. Therefore, when someone began to weep outside of his coop one night, everybody heard it, but nobody moved. And when weeping became wailing, they pretended with a skill both admirable and desperate. And when wailing developed into pure howling, why, every last Chicken turned into a stone.

Oh, their hearts were moved. Who wouldn't be moved to pity by that sad, sad voice? Who wouldn't let a tear roll down her beak to hear of the grief which this voice had to tell? All the world seemed a lonely place at the sound of this voice, it wept so pitifully. This voice could make even the stones to cry—which became a particular problem for some thirty Chickens who were trying hard to be stones.

"Marooned," he cried, whoever he was out there. "Maroooooned," he wailed. Three stones sniffed, and sixty eyes shot frightened glances at Chauntecleer; but the Rooster slept on.

The voice sounded like ancient shoe leather.

"Don't listen to me," he cried out. "Every good heart should sleep on. No one should be troubled with the burdens which it is given me to bear. Sleep!" he sighed. "Sleep on, peaceful souls!" he wailed. And then he howled: "Maroooooooooned!"

A little dribble hung down from Chauntecleer's beak, a wet string which went from the tip of his beak to the bottom of his wattle. This was a good sign. It meant that he was sleeping very deeply, and perhaps the Chickens would be safe. Yet no sign was absolute; and this was a most unusual occurrence, this voice abroad; so the Chickens continued to pretend and to fear.

The voice sounded like a mud slide.

"Ah, me! What I could have been in a better place. Such a wonderful somebody I should have been," he wept, "that it would have been a pleasure to look at. But this is the place, and this is the me. Look at me, and be sad. See me and be sorrowful. No!" he wailed suddenly. "No, don't look! No one should be burdened with such a sight—a walking sin. But sleep," he wailed. "Sleep and be what I can never be. It does my soul good to know that someone is at peace. Sleep." And then he howled like the north wind: "Maroooooooooned!"

Chauntecleer stirred. He pulled one claw off the perch. Two Chickens fainted; but it was just motion in his sleep. Restless sleep, now; but sleep all the same.

"And what about this nose?" cried the voice outside, wounded deeply by this new sorrow. "All of you, count yourselves blessed. Go home and call yourselves fortunate before the mirror! For if you wish, you can turn your eyes and look away from this monster of a nose. But me?"

"You," said Chauntecleer in his sleep. Another Chicken passed out.

"Ah, Master of the Universe—me!"

"You," drooled Chauntecleer.

"I have to look at this nose all the time, for here it sits between my eyes. Between my eyes, like a boot all the day long. Every time I look at anything, there is my nose underneath it. Ah, me, me! But you—sleep on forever. Sleep! Sleep!" Then came the cry like a gunshot: "Sleep!"

Chauntecleer woke up so fast that he swallowed his spit and gagged.

"Hear it," howled the voice outside at the top of his lungs. "I am a walking sorrow. To look at me is to break your heart; but here is my nose and I can look on nothing else but me. Marooned! Marooned in this sad excuse of a body. Maroooooooooned!"

That did it.

Chauntecleer had been snapping his head left and right to prove to himself that there really was a sound about. For a moment he had been so astonished by the noise that he thought it a leftover dream. Who would be such a fool as to make such a noise? Yet there was that word coming down out of the air like an avalanche: "Marooned!" as real as his headache. That's what did it.

Chauntecleer the Rooster began to beat his wings. "Cock-a, cock-a," he started to say, but that wasn't loud enough, not nearly furious enough. He threw out his chest; his neck feathers bristled: "Cock-a-doodle, cock-a-doodle," and still that wasn't what he wanted. It should have some cursing in it.

He jiggled up and down on the perch, bent his head so far backward that it touched his tail feathers, and cried: Cock-a-MAMIE! Cock-a-cock-a-BULL,! COCK-A-DOO-DLE-DOO!"

That was what he wanted.

But it was almost as if the voice outside were happy to hear what Chauntecleer had to say, for the word came back with something like a note of conversational cheer in it: "MAROOONED!"

Chauntecleer was stunned. Seven Chickens fainted dead away. But Chauntecleer didn't notice the bodies falling off their perches. He did something else.

It must be understood that Chauntecleer, though he was able, seldom flew. It was his custom to strut. Strutting permitted pride and a certain show of authority, whereas flying looked mostly foolish in a Rooster: lumpish, graceless, and altogether unnecessary. Wings on a Rooster, so Chauntecleer thought, were not for flying. They were for doing absolutely nothing with; for it is a mark of superiority

when part of the body does nothing at all. But sometimes Chauntecleer forgot his opinions.

In a white rage he leaped from his perch and beat the air. He flew straight out of the Coop, through the door, and over a Dog.

He saw the Dog as he passed over it. That glance fouled up his landing. He thumped like baggage to the ground and rolled over twice. Feathers exploded.

While Chauntecleer scrambled to stand up amid the feathers, the Dog walked up to him and shed tears on his wing.

"Feathers," wept the Dog. "Soft, wonderful feathers," he said miserably, "which sprout the same as hair. Ah, me," he wept, "mine is only hide. Hide itches at noontime." He laid a sad paw on Chauntecleer's wing.

Chauntecleer hopped backward from this apparition, staring at him, offended and confounded at once. But the Rooster considered himself equal to any occasion. Therefore he split the night air with a ringing crow aimed directly into the Dog's enormous nose. Immediately the Dog fell down in a heap and rolled over on his back.

For a fleeting moment Chauntecleer was satisfied.

"Hear it," the Dog wept from the bottom of his soul, shaking uncontrollably. "Master of the Universe, listen to this. To one you give such sweet melody; to another you give a growl." His nose ran like a river. "Marooned," he blubbered.

Chauntecleer did something like a sneeze, but not a sneeze at all. It was anger choking in his throat.

Well, if the first one didn't work, then he thought to try another crow, more commanding even than the last, as powerful as a thunderclap, and so full of purple cursing that this boxcar would get up and gallop away. So he leaped up onto the very chest of the Dog, breathed deeply, and opened his beak next to the flap which he took for an ear.

"COCK-A-BLOODY-IMBECILE!" The crow was tormenting and wonderful. The forest whispered its fear. The leaves shivered.

But the Dog on his back looked up and kissed Chauntecleer on his beak.

"Accept my thanks, thou great heart," he wept softly. "More you have done for me with this one song than my mother in all other sorrowful life."

Chauntecleer's head snapped back like the cock on a pistol. He was silent for one deadly minute, standing on a roost which was the chest of a Dog. Then the words burst out of him like bullets.

"I have a perch," he cried. "It's warm because I was sleeping on it. I have a Coop. It was quiet for my sleep. A warm perch!" He scratched the Dog's chest with his right claw, as if scratching dirt. "A quiet Coop!" He scratched with the left. "But you, you rug! You sack! YOU WOKE ME UP!"

"Excuse me," whispered the Dog, "for speaking at a time like this, but be kind to yourself as you have been to me—and look in another place."

Chauntecleer lost his speech. Beak open, eye smoking, he stared at the Dog. "Look at the skies," whispered the Dog kindly. "Look at the trees where God

made beauty. But it is only a sorrow to look on me where God planted ugliness. Ah," sighed the Dog, "such a fine small beak you have."

Not his most piercing, his most murderous crow could move this remarkable rag. Not the words of his anger could send this Dog away. Chauntecleer shuddered with rage. His wattles trembled. His feathers stood out and shivered. And seeing that there was nothing else to do, he bit the dog savagely on the nose.

"Amen! I agree with you," the Dog wailed with fresh sorrow. "It is my lasting grief; and I should be grateful if you would bite it off altogether."

"Cock, cock, cock," Chauntecleer choked; and he set to pecking the great nose in front of him as if it were a piano, ripping up hair and taking away bits of skin.

With every peck the Dog said, "Thanks." With every other peck he wept, "But it won't work." And with every third peck he wailed, "Yet thou art more than a friend to me."

There came the time, finally, when Chauntecleer the Rooster himself broke down. After the Dog had begun to croon, "My friend is a surgeon, a doctor sent from heaven with healing in his beak," it happened that Chauntecleer himself began to cry. He slid down to the ground and lay on his back with his two claws pointing up to heaven and gurgled a broken crow. He wept.

And, of course, side by side, each on his back, they made a chorus; for the Dog wept with him.

"It is," said the Dog in commiseration, "a convincing argument, this body. Mountains last forever, though it was a worthy effort, good friend. But mountains last forever, and many a worthy spirit breaks upon them." He sighed, and then wept quietly and almost peacefully.

Suddenly the Rooster said, "Headache. Headache" he snapped. And then he didn't strut. He stumbled into the Coop.

The Dog rolled his eyes without rolling his body from its back. "A doctor sent from heaven," he said.

In the morning Chauntecleer the Rooster stepped out of his Coop to crow at the sun and to rouse up all of his Chickens. When he was done, on this particular morning, he coughed hoarsely; and then he noticed that he was standing on something warm. He looked down and saw a Dog smiling up at him. The Dog was shaking his head. There were tears in his eyes.

"Such a voice in such a fine small beak," he said.

"Such a headache," said the Rooster, "from such a rug."

Humbly the Dog lowered his head. "Thank you. Doctor," he said.

The Rooster hopped down and strutted away. His tail feathers were flags behind him. "The name is Chauntecleer," he said, "you doormat."

"It's a little thing; a nothing, really," called the Dog behind him, "but there is a name for me, too. Of course there is no beauty in it. If the Doctor wants to call me Doormat instead of Mundo Cani Dog, this Dog will be happy."

From that day forward, Mundo Cani Dog would feel sad if Chauntecleer crowed to the rising sun from anywhere else but from his own sad and lumpy back.

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