

Chapter Five: Raptor Rapture

Our National Seal is a fixture on the podium the President uses to deliver his important messages. We've all seen it so often we take it for granted, the great red Phoenix with his gold-edged wings and tail, rising triumphant from the bonfire against a backdrop of deep blue. Legend has it the original Phoenix lived five hundred years before she burnt herself out in a glorious burst of flame, only to emerge again from her own ashes. Some say that will be the Republic itself some day, flaming out, and then reviving, even more glorious than before. Some, of course, say otherwise.

The Eagle had not read the great works on the Phoenix. Not the classic hero story, not anything beyond childhood comic books. He didn't know the story behind the National Seal and it never had occurred to him to ask anyone what it meant. Since the bird on the seal had a hooked beak and big talons, he assumed it was an Eagle like him. Like his father and grandfather before him. Just another Eagle. Though, as he had said often enough, "a right swanky one."

In order to appear as swanky as the Phoenix on the seal, the Eagle always wore his red and gold sash at ceremonial occasions. His press people told him he should do that, and whenever possible they arranged for a flock of other birds to stand behind him, all wearing dark blue. They were known, among White Nest insiders, as the Bluebirds of Happiness.

By contrast, the Eagle's official attendants – "my keepers," he joked – were all highly trained and humorless black-shouldered kites. As one kite pinned on the military sash, another passed the Eagle a cut and lit cigar. The press people wouldn't let him smoke in public, but the Eagle made time for a few puffs before any public appearance. A good cigar in the beak gives a bird courage, his father always said. *Mucho machismo*. The Eagle carefully rotated the imported cigar so that it would burn evenly. He shut his eyes and let out an audible sigh. *God bless the NRA!* he thought. The National Rollers Association was one of his biggest contributors, and they sent him a humidor full of the best wing-rolled *presidentes* on the fifteenth of every month. In a kind of raptor rapture, he was about to sigh again when he heard someone say, "Give 'em hell, Mr. President."

The Eagle opened his sharp yellow eyes to see the Bluebirds of Happiness filing into the press room. Their job was to demonstrate unqualified approval of his every word. Bill Kingbird was giving a wink as he strutted past, so perhaps that Give-em-hell encouragement had been his. Good old reliable Bill had served his father as Secretary of Education, so anytime the Eagle wanted to learn anything about learning, he called on Kingbird. Or maybe the give-em-hell had come from Senator J. Lester Spoonbill, bringing up the rear of the Bluebirds today. Les had pushed the NoBLO legislation through his Education Committee, which had pretty much guaranteed its success on the floor. The Eagle prided himself on getting support from a prominent opposition leader like Spoonbill. His advisors knew – though they knew better than to let the Eagle know – that Senator Spoonbill regretted his decision to support NoBLO. In fact, he considered it the biggest mistake of his long and distinguished political career.

"We're ready, Sir."

The Eagle took a final beakful of tobacco and reluctantly passed the cigar back to the kite. "You can finish it later, Charlie," he said. Then, screwing his beak into the sneer that passed for a broad smile among members of his clan, the Eagle strode into the Press Room, shaking wings and patting backs as he went, calling reporters by name and greeting some of the country's leading educators as though they might be old friends. This was remarkable, considering that the Eagle had flapped his way through law school without several of his professors ever laying eyes on him.

Taking his place behind the Phoenix seal, the Eagle raised his wings to quiet the room. "My fellow birds, Wings and Webs, ladies 'n' ge'min." He held for the last ounce of applause. "As you know, we are here at this point in time, gathered in the capital of the greatest nation on the greatest planet in God's great universe, for me to present my first annual President's Award for the, um, er, Teacher of the Year, and..." After pretending not to expect more applause, the Eagle paused for it. He turned one of his two good sides toward the network correspondent he found especially fetching, showing her camera the dramatic overbite that made him irresistibly attractive to women.

"Teachers are what, um, er, makes this country so daggone great." The teachers in the room applauded vigorously. "They are the drunk, that is, the trunk of the tree and we are its branches. I remember a... And twigs. I remember a teacher I had once... And leaves. A teacher that told me this story. I must have been in the first year of, um, middle school, and boy, I was having a rough time with math. I just couldn't get it straight, you know? I mean, if I had to count them worms or divide 'em up. Henh-henh. She told me this story, this teacher, about a little worm that was caught in a, like a, you know, trap. And what would happen is, every time this worm would try to move, the little sucker'd be cut in half. Henh-henh."

The Bluebirds of Happiness chorused his chuckle. Others in the room squirmed, almost like the unfortunate nematode of the Eagle's tale.

"But that daggone little worm, he didn't give up. Nossir. He made the best of his situation, just kept on dividin', and 'fore long there was enough worms in that trap to break out of it." The Eagle paused for laughter, but heard the merest chuckle. *Who wrote this speech?* "Of course, that didn't help yours truly. 'Cause all I wanted to know was could I trade in those worms for some fish. Henh-henh."

"But, um, that story helped to teach me that we all have our talons. Uh, er, *talents*. An' that every bird can all succeed if they just try hard, and be smart enough to see there's more than one way to skin a catfish, so to speak. So, um, my Teacher of the Year Award is to say thanks to all those teachers, like my old teacher, who every day, can be found out there on the front lines, in the trenches of battle, teaching kids not to give up, not to give in to the pull of bein' lazy, to keep squeezin' the lemon of life till they got a lifetime of lemonade."

The Senator led the applause, wanting it all to be over with. As he grew older, his flat feet were less tolerant of rhetoric.

"Our inner-city schools, there's some problems there for sure. Our rural schools got their challenges too. And I want to applaud all of the teachers who work in these

schools, day in and day out in the trenches. They have one of the toughest jobs in the country maybe. Except for the President of God's own Republic!" Everyone applauded.

"And before we meet our prize teacher, let me talk at you a minute about their new weapon in this fight to teach all our fledglings: No Bird Left Out. What this mandates, what this does, I mean, is that every fledgling, whether they be a hawk or a duck or a pigeon or a chicken, graduates from public school ... or a jay or a sparrow...with the basics they need to survive out there in the real world. How to fly, and how to swim. Just the basics, every kid the same. And more than that – NoBLO holds these schools and those teachers accountable for these kids' success. If a school teaches all its birds, then they'll get more federal money. We'll feather their nest. It's a reward system. Sort of like a carrot.

"On the other wing, we got a stick, too. Say a school doesn't get its act together, say they don't show improvement in drilling these basics into every young bird, then they got a problem. Then they aren't gonna get the money. That's why we're measuring what I call Annual Yearly Progress or AYP. You probably heard me say, 'No AYP, no P-A-Y.' I'd like to make that the official chant of education in this ever-lovin' country: No AYP, no P-A-Y. And the parents? Well, they can move their fledglings somewhere else, where they can learn the basics. We are giving these young birds the tools for their future. D'ya hear what I'm saying?"

At the back of the room, a young television correspondent heard what the Eagle was saying and wondered why he was saying it yet again. He'd sung this song ad nauseam. The reporter, a ruffous-sided towhee named Whitaker, looked over at his camerabird, her eye dutifully glued to the viewfinder, and he wondered what was going on that tape that he might be able to make into a story for the evening news. Where were the twenty-second soundbites for which the Eagle was famous? Everyone had heard all this No-AYP-no-P-A-Y stuff at least half a dozen times. Was there anything that would make people sit up in their recliners and pay attention?

"I am proud to be the first President who has been able to see the Big Picture, who has been able to, um, enact such sweeping legislation – supported, as you know, by Wings and Webs on both sides of the aisle. They have given me, this country, all our fledglings, this tool to make sure that every bird graduates from the public school system with the tools they need to be successful in life."

Applause filled the room. The same young reporter in the back wondered, not for the first time, how swimming and flying were going to ensure success in life. Neither one had anything to do with his job. Nor the Eagle's, truth be told.



