

Crested Tit and the Cat

“A great battle is about to begin in the garden, Robin. Crow is always seeking to destroy as many of My followers as he can,” said The Eagle.

“Why is he doing it now?” asked Robin.

“He fears and resents the authority I share with those who belong to Me, and he knows that time is short.”

“What is going to happen?” Robin peered downwards. There, prowling through the dry grass was the cat, her stripy paws placed perfectly and precisely. He could see her shoulder blades grinding behind defiant, green eyes.

“Look over there,” whispered The Eagle. Robin then saw the crooked outline of Crow, lurking in the shadows behind the apple tree. He seemed to be saying something to the cat. Not only that, but swarms of iridescent flies – much larger than the few which had just been defeated – were irritating her, the sheen of their bodies like oily water.

“So, the *cat* isn’t our real enemy then. But, couldn’t you just do something to stop it, Lord?” Robin recalled, even as he put the question, revelation The Eagle had given him before.

“*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me,*” He said. “I am King of Kings and Lord of Lords. I have absolute power. But it is not always right that I use it in the way you think I should. I will *let* Crow prevail at certain times, and allow some of his schemes, to the degree that I can use them for My purposes. Remember, Robin, My ultimate goal for you in this life is not your comfort or protection, but your character and likeness to Me. For you to be a conqueror, there must be real dangers and real trials to overcome. *Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*”

When they had finished talking, Robin flew down to the garden to warn his friends. He found Sparrow, Blue Tit, Cuckoo, Wren, and Blackbird, together with the young greenfinch fledglings, perched edgily on top of the crumbling stone wall immediately behind the cherry tree. Since the cat was washing itself over by the shed, this provided a good vantage point. When Robin pointed out Crow's cadaverous figure, still lurking behind the apple tree, and the unusually large swarm of flies near the cat, they all agreed about The Eagle's warning. Wren confirmed Robin's words with revelation of her own as well. But very few of the other birds, mostly non-believers, seemed able to perceive anything out of the ordinary, though Cuckoo called to them with sharp notes. They could see the cat, they said, but wasn't that normal by now? And they had certainly never seen a *crow* in their garden.

One of the birds who refused to listen to the urgency of the believers was Crested Tit, hopping nonchalantly amongst the fallen cherries at the foot of the wall. Robin had heard about him from Sparrow, as a bird greatly respected by others in the garden - partly because of his being nearly *six* years old, and partly because of his being a so-called 'inspiration' for believers. His colouring was striking in its contrasts, with competing blacks, whites, and toffee-browns; the large, raised crest on his head – almost as big as the head itself – was painted with tiny, monochrome checks and waves. Crested Tit was unique amongst the garden birds in having such unusual head plumage, and it was a reputation Robin suspected he enjoyed. He looked up now at the group on the wall, shaking himself slightly so that his crest rippled in the sunlight. Then, seeing the attention he was attracting, he threw them a jerky smile as crimson juice ran down his beak.

"Crested Tit," called Sparrow, "why don't you come and join us? It isn't safe down there."

“That’s right,” chirped Robin. “We believe The Eagle has warned us that Crow means to attack this very day ...” He added with a loud whisper, “... by provoking the C-A-T.”

“Thank you,” replied Crested Tit politely. “But, if The Eagle needed to warn me, He would surely do so *Himself*, since I have heard His voice clearly for many years. What is more, I have had my nest in this tree since I first came to this garden, long before any of you were hatched. I have never been forced from my territory by anyone, and I’m not about to start now.”

“It would only be for a little while, until the threat is over,” ventured Wren.

“Madam, you need have no fear. I certainly do not. The Eagle has taught me that I should never live ensnared by fear.”

“But surely, my friend, there is a time to be undaunted, and there is a time for caution,” said Sparrow. Robin could hear a note of irritation in his voice.

It seemed to Sparrow, who had known Crested Tit for a long time, that he was enjoying his superiority in being set apart from the others, whom he judged as too easily intimidated. Sparrow guessed that Crested Tit would rather their positions reversed - with *him* on the wall and *them* on the ground - in order that he might be able to look *down* on them as he offered his instruction, instead of being forced to look *up*. “I do not remain here,” Crested Tit called, “because of my ignorance of the cat. I remain here because ...”

“You want to show everyone you’re better than us?” Sparrow overheard one of the greenfinch fledglings whisper, with rude yet unnerving accuracy. Crested Tit appeared not to have heard him, however, and his monologue continued.

“Faith, friends. Faith is the reason I remain. The Eagle is quite able to defend me. Let my steadfastness be an encouragement to you, since I’ve known The Eagle that much longer. I wouldn’t have been as successful, or lived as long as I have, if I hadn’t learnt the secret of

The Eagle's favour. I have always taught and done His will, and so I can always rest secure in His protection. Trust me when I say that if you have faith as I do, you have nothing to fear from that cat." Some of the other birds started to applaud, but Sparrow felt cold as he watched the cat stalking toward the cherry tree.

"That is religious pride, and faith only in his own merit," said Cuckoo softly. But even if her words could have reached Crested Tit's ears, thought Sparrow, it was too late for them to reach his heart. Crested Tit – his head now bent downwards, pecking at cherries - continued talking to the group on the wall, whom he clearly assumed still to be listening. He seemed as oblivious to the mounting tension, as he was to the pair of malicious, green eyes now fixed on his back. Some of the other birds began to lift into the air, but Sparrow and the believers stayed put.

Robin suddenly noticed one of the greenfinch fledglings, fascinated by Crested Tit's claims, stray nearer and nearer to the edge of their perch. Suddenly she fell, her small wings flapping ineffectually, and was unable to recover before she hit the grass with a soft thud. Horrified, Robin gave a piercing alarm call. But Crested Tit, evidently encouraged by his new pupil's eagerness, continued to address her even as she struggled to her feet.

"Quick!" cried Wren, her tiny wings waving frantically. "You must get out of there!" Blackbird too was bouncing distractedly back and forth along the wall, as if one of her own chicks were under attack.

"Now, sweetheart," Robin heard her say in soothing tones, "everything is going to be alright. But we do need you to make a really special effort to fly as quickly as you are able. Can you do that for us?" Robin gazed with despair as the ginger-brown paws continued to advance. He could see that the young greenfinch's view of the cat was at first obscured by Crested Tit's large head. But then, as two pink, triangular ears loomed behind it, he watched

her eyes widen with terror and her body petrify. Crested Tit, he noticed, appeared to mistake her trance as a further compliment to his teaching, and *still* kept talking.

Robin's prayers became desperate. "Come on, my love," cajoled Blackbird. "I'm quite sure you can do this." The little greenfinch flapped with all her might to take off, but was not helped by the mulchy, flat ground beneath her. Robin realised she had probably only learned to take off from harder, higher places. She screamed for help.

Just then, the cat sprang.