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FRANCESCO RAMILLI

The Mystery of NETTLE HILL

Illustrated by Rachele Aragno

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Chapter One

Climb the tallest oak tree in the woods. Jump from branch to branch – watch out for any rotten ones! – until you reach the top. Push aside the leaves and look closely...

The woods open onto a clearing. Quite a large one, truth be told – large enough to house a hill surrounded by a wall overrun with nettles.

Sure, it's not that high of a wall, and it's quite old: bricks have crumbled here and there, showing glimpses of what is hidden beyond. But from that treetop you can easily spy what lies on the other side.

The wall encloses a vast lawn with well-tended grass and fragrant flower-beds. The scent of nettle leaves wafts through the air, and arches of white roses line a path leading to the top of the hill. Two stilts emerge from the rushes by a small pond. A burrow surrounded by a white



fence lies hidden among the roots of a tree. Scattered here and there, charming little houses peep out of the bright green grass, but none can compare to the large building on top of the hill.

It's an ancient building made of old, faded bricks; the only trace of whoever once lived there. Now all that's left are a few beams and walls sprouting from the ground like a crown atop the head of a queen. The only turret still standing houses an ivy-clad telescope. Rain and storms have blown off most of the roof, with debris and tiles cascading onto the ground all around like a raging river.

The stone floor is still strewn with shreds of old and costly rugs covered in rubble, debris and wooden boards. Scratched ancient candlesticks, faded paintings, pieces of furniture and shards of glass create a rough, rusty territory that no inhabitant of the little world outside is bold enough to explore. And no one would dare venture towards the stairs in the corner of the ruins – dark, crumbling steps leading into the bowels of the hill...

But look, the day has just dawned: it's time for the inhabitants of Nettle Hill to come out.





Chapter Two

Franklin the fox walked over the little stone bridge with his snout in the air.

He liked emerging from the wall early in the morning, to venture among the trees on the edge of the clearing. He loved wandering about with the undergrowth still sparkling with dew – a trick of the light which, along with the fresh, moss-scented air – filled his mind with sweet verses for his poems. As well as seeking inspiration, Franklin had picked some delicious berries that morning. The yearly Nettle Festival was just a day away, and he certainly didn't want to show up empty-pawed.

He carried a bouncing sack filled with blueberries over his shoulder and his trusty double-barrelled gun under his arm. Though a dreamer by trade, Franklin was still a wary old fox.

Pulling a large pocket watch out of his tweed waistcoat,



Franklin decided to take a few more minutes to write a poem. He didn't really have any other plans for the day, but he loved his pocket watch and was always looking for an excuse to admire it.

Franklin sat with his legs dangling from the edge of the little bridge and let the brook flowing below inspire him.

*The green morning air
makes us linger here and there,
but the hours fly by as one
and to return the time has come*

Franklin was very proud of his compositions, and wrote them down in an elegant leather-bound notebook that had been a present from his aunt and uncle. He enjoyed writing at odd times during the day, which he usually spent reading exciting books in the shade of the almond tree, wandering about the clearing and chatting to his fellow citizens of Nettle Hill.

Up ahead, the town walls were silhouetted against the bent trees of the forest. The spring sunlight shone down on the hill, creating a warm, nostalgic atmosphere. There would be a few last rainstorms before summer, but looking at that scene you would think that the hot weather had already arrived, bearing all its gifts!



A rustling noise from the leafy branches behind him roused him from his daydreaming. Franklin was often lost in thought. Turning to stare at Shadowood, he pricked up his ears. He was sure the rustling noise was coming from the far-off depths of those trees that let no glimmer

of light shine through. Without delay,

he pulled out his double-barrelled gun and fired two shots towards the bushes. You couldn't be too cautious, outside the walls.

Isolating the other sounds, Franklin noticed that the rustling had disappeared.

He nodded in satisfaction and hoisted his gun onto his shoulder. Whether seeking blueberries or inspiration, he never wandered much further than the little stone bridge: partly because he was scared stiff of the darkness among those branches that grew thicker and thicker, and partly because the Nettle Hill Council advised against it.



It was always best to obey the Council.

Looking around warily, Franklin returned to the path. He had read about great adventures in the books he kept in his library with loving care. He dreamed of one day visiting unfamiliar places, finding buried treasure, fighting duels with pistols and saving beautiful damsels in distress. But even he knew that Shadowood was a whole different story. There were no treasures, damsels or scoundrels in the woods.

There were things that bit in there. Things that scratched.

Franklin pulled on a pair of sturdy gloves to pick the juiciest nettles that grew along the path. When he was still a cub, his aunt had told him that even though nettles were a cruel, stinging plant that hid among the others to sting you unexpectedly, they were an excellent ingredient if cooked properly to remove their stinging chemicals. Franklin's nettle cake, made with blueberries and other berries, was famous all over the village, and the old fox was sure his fellow citizens couldn't wait to taste that year's version.

He reached the Nettle Hill gate: an old door made of thick, dark wood, with a solid, wrought-iron frame inlaid with tiny plants featuring pointed leaves and curling, sinuous stems. The door was bolted so as to discourage

anyone from crossing that threshold, which Franklin did only too often. He lifted the bolt and hastily closed and locked the door behind him.

The town was teeming with life at that sunny hour, a scene that filled his heart with joy.

«Sturdy walls and safe days to all! How did your berry picking go?» asked Theodore the toad, as he crossed the cobblestone path. «Haven't those blueberries learned to hide from you?»

«Sturdy walls and safe days to all, Theodore!» The old fox doffed his cap. «They're good at hiding, but they haven't learned to run yet! This year's Nettle Festival won't go without its cake.»

Theodore rubbed his wide belly in anticipation of the delicious treat.

«I'll bring the hors d'oeuvres; I've already started baking the bread for my canapés!»

Theodore the toad was famous for the creative combination of ingredients that made his canapés a treat for the taste buds and the eyes. Franklin licked his snout.

«I can't wait» he said, retreating politely. Theodore doffed his bowler hat just as politely and went on his way.

The day promised to be a hot one, so Franklin decided to leave his haul in a jar in his cellar before going off to the pond for some fresh air with a good book and his

trusty notebook. He took off his tweed waistcoat, slipped into a more comfortable one and bundled up his things along with a picnic lunch.

The hypnotic circles made by the water lilies were growing bigger and bigger. Franklin sat next to the rushes by the water's edge, not far from one of the stilts hidden among the bushes. Untying the bundle, he pulled out a sandwich, then dipped his hind paws in the cool water and opened his book.

Nearby, someone was watching his every move closely, but the old fox was already half-asleep, lost in his imaginary world.





Chapter Three

«Oh, gosh!» explained Debby the duck, covering her beak with her wing.

«Mama, you shouldn't say bad words!» scolded Danny the duckling.

«I'm sorry, Danny, I got carried away.»

Debby didn't like it when someone got too close to her cottage... and to her ducklings.

Danny, Davy and Doug had already been sent to hide behind the sofa, and were looking around in bewilderment. Debby peeped out of the window, holding the curtain open with her wing.

«It's that old fox again. Why can't he have his picnics on the other side of the pond?»

«Mama, Mr Franklin is a nice old fox!» Doug, the youngest duckling, tried to reassure her. «He always gives us candied limes when we run into him at the market.»

«Since when do you accept candied fruit from strangers? And since when do you go to the market without my permission?»

Danny and Davy glared at Doug.

«It's about time I had a chat with him» said Debby, letting the subject drop in the face of greater danger.

Danny and Davy stopped glaring at Doug.

Debby let the curtain fall and tied a kerchief around her head, then picked up her trusty hamper so the old fox wouldn't think she was there to chase him away.

«Don't go outside and don't leave the sofa. And if you hear me squawk, run away and take your father's portrait with you.»

«Nothing bad has ever happened on Nettle Hill, Mama!» added Danny.

«Yeah, it's so boring here!» complained Davy.



Mike the mallard had been the best husband a duck could wish for. His bright emerald-green plumage had made him the catch of Nettle Hill, but he'd had eyes only for Debby. A loving husband and father, he'd always been there for his wife and children, except for when the cold weather forced him to travel into the forest in search of firewood.

The first winter without Mike had been hard, and Debby still felt cold inside. Luckily she had her children to keep her going: they were the best ducklings in the world, despite their occasional pranks. She was a lucky mama, but you can never be too careful with a stranger at your door.

«Sturdy walls and safety to all, Mr Fox.»

But Franklin, deep in his afternoon nap, didn't answer.

«Mr – Mr Fox? Franklin?» Debby tried again.

Still no answer, so the duck grabbed a large rock and threw it into the pond with a splash that made the sleepy-head jump.

«Eh? The monsters from Shadowood!»

«Oh, sturdy walls and safety to all!» Debby greeted him again, her wings behind her back as she pretended to be surprised.

Pulling himself together, Franklin smoothed down his waistcoat with his paws.

«Forgive me, I must have dozed off.»



«That's all right; I hope I didn't wake you» said the mistress of the house. «I'm Debby the duck, do you remember me?»

«Why, of course! You're the mother of those nice little ducklings!»

Debby studied him from the white tip of his tail to his whiskers. Franklin was still too dazed to realise he'd just been thoroughly inspected.

«Lovely day, isn't it?» the old fox asked, to fill the silence. He loved talking about the weather; it was one of his favourite subjects, along with village festivals and good things to eat.

«Absolutely! Perfect weather for sunbathing» Debby answered.

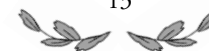
«Spring came late this year, but it's finally nice and warm out!»

«You know, I think you'd enjoy the sunlight more on the other side of the pond. If you stay under the rushes, you'll end up with a striped tan.»

«Oh, don't worry. My fur coat protects me quite well, and I actually prefer staying cool today. I haven't shed my winter coat yet!»

They both laughed politely.

«Seriously, though, it might be best if you moved to the other side of the pond» interrupted the duck.





Franklin kept smiling, but Debby's gaze seemed to urge him to leave. Franklin decided not to object; at that hour, the almond tree under which he liked to read his books would be pleasantly shaded.

«You're right; I was actually just about to leave.»

The two said goodbye and went their separate ways.

Franklin didn't mind the duck; everyone knew each other on Nettle Hill. He knew all about the sad story of Mike the mallard, not to mention Debby's difficult character.

The duck was the biggest coward in town. Maybe even more than Richard the rabbit!



Chapter Four

*As I walk through town
there is laughter all around
our festival draws near
everybody give a cheer!*

This one had come out nicely, thought Franklin the fox.

It was one of his best poems yet; the Council was sure to like it. Franklin's aunt and uncle had been good friends with the president, Molly the marten, so Franklin's poems were recited every year to kick off the Nettle Festival.

Preparations were in full swing in every corner, neighbourhood and burrow. Peeping into the windows, you could see entire families busy preparing special dishes: little ones peeling vegetables, mothers stirring large clay pots and fathers frying leaves and plants. Delicious

scents wafted through the air, making everyone's stomach rumble.

Like every year, the feast would take place almost on top of the hill, near the Observatory. No one would dare get too close to the old ruins, but the Council regarded the Observatory as a safe place. The building was still standing, a high turret spanned by a staircase leading to a telescope pointed at the sky. Both the building and the telescope were covered in ivy, and offered few glimpses of what they had once been.

As the sound of pounding hammers punctuated the hours left until the start of the Festival, excitement kept growing and growing.

The Council and some volunteers were setting up the long table, the lighting and banners; Molly the marten, as sweet and maternal as ever, was supervising the works.

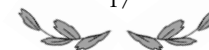
Boris the boar was lifting wooden beams and boards with no need of assistance.

Bonnie the buzzard and Walter the weasel were holding the curtains off the scaffolding.

Ernest the ermine was painting the gazebo white.

Cornelius the cat was arranging the lanterns.

All the inhabitants of Nettle Hill were contributing to the great Festival however they could... and with huge smiles on their faces!





Well, not *all* of them.

While Debby and her ducklings were arranging flowers to decorate the table and Franklin was baking his cake, someone was watching the scene with an empty, impassive gaze.

Oscar the owl was examining Nettle Hill from on top of the turret with the telescope.

Having seen what he wanted to see, he retreated from the edge of the parapet to disappear among the ivy leaves.

Everyone knows that owls are silent watchers of everything that happens. Whether it's something good or something scary, they're always there. No one knows what or how much they really know behind those big round eyes.



Chapter Five

Not many remembered the first Nettle Festival. Most of them hadn't even been born at the time. The only one who might be able to remember it and tell the tale was Oscar the owl, but no one had seen him around lately.

But everyone remembered the most fun years, like when Polly the porcupine had sneezed and the fruit had been conveniently served on skewers.

Or when Mark the mouse had drunk a little too much mead and no one had been able to tell the squeaks from the hiccups.

Everyone would laugh remembering how Walter the weasel had greeted Glenda the goose and her mushroom soup: "Thanks, Glenda, you look delicious! And so does the soup" he had said, with a deep bow.

Well, everyone except for Glenda the goose, who had

seemed troubled by Walter the weasel's dazzling smile. But then they had all drunk a toast and laughed at Mark the mouse's amusing verses.

It was true, nothing exciting ever happened on Nettle Hill; that's why everyone awaited the Festival so eagerly and loved remembering all the fun they'd had in previous years. Fun memories that mingled with the scents and colours of the newly blossomed spring.

A sparkling dew had settled on everything during the night, but the weather was so mild that luckily no harm had come to the table, which had already been set.

The volunteers had climbed the hill early in the morning to see to the last details. The Council had arrived rather late, after what must have been a long, relaxing sleep. All throughout the afternoon, the chairs had slowly started to fill up.

This year's festival was sure to be unforgettable!



Chapter Six

By five o' clock, almost all the seats at the table had been taken. Only a few Nettle Hill inhabitants were missing, and stomachs were already rumbling.

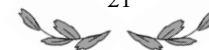
«Has anyone seen Theodore the toad?» asked William the woodpecker.

«I bet he's still holed up making his hors d'oeuvres!» answered Thomas the thrush. «They'll be worth the wait!»

«We can't start the feast without his delicacies!» added Debby the duck, who had just arrived to take her place. She'd left Danny, Davy and Doug to play with the other young ones, but kept glancing over to make sure everything was all right.

«I can't wait for something funny to happen» said Glenda the goose, from the other end of the table. «We laugh more at the Nettle Festival than the rest of the year!»

Debby smiled ruefully, and Glenda, who had known



her for ages, immediately realised what was upsetting her.

«Oh, my dear Debby, we all miss Mike. It's so strange to think that last year he was here celebrating with us.»

«His emerald-green plumage was so bright.» Debby tried to cheer herself up.

«The fact that he's no longer with us doesn't cancel the past.»

«I know» sighed the duck. «I always told him to stay out of Shadowood.»

«You did what you could, my dear. I guess it's impossible to keep an adventurous soul from wanting to explore the unknown.»

Debby wasn't sure that wanting to chop wood outside the walls made for an adventurous soul, but Glenda was doing her best to console her.

«You may be right. But let's not be sad; let's enjoy the party and all this good food!» she exclaimed, forcing a smile.

Meanwhile, Franklin the fox, assisted by Roger the rooster, was carrying his cake on a large tray. The green base made of butter and nettle leaves contrasted with the brightly-coloured berries on top. Once they reached the table, they set the cake at the centre, before dozens of admiring gazes and watering mouths eager to gobble it up.

«Sturdy walls and safety to all!» Franklin greeted his



friends. After thanking Roger politely for his help, he handed his poem, written on a rolled paper scroll tied with a ribbon, to Molly the marten.

«Here you are, Molly. It came out quite nicely this year!»

«No one ever doubted your writing, dear Franklin.»

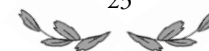
The head of the Nettle Hill Council, Molly the marten was quite elderly but still spry, hiding the signs of age with her youthful taste in clothing.

«Oho! Thank you, Molly» said Franklin, gallantly kissing her hand. «I don't know what I'd do all day without the Council to sponsor my poems!»

«Don't be silly, Franklin. And you know we can't wait for you to join the Council.»

«I'm not old or wise enough to join you» said the fox, with a modest smile.

«You may not be as old as we are, but you *are* just as wise! No one has a library like yours.»



«Oh, I inherited that from my aunt and uncle. I think all the books come from the old ruins up there; they salvaged them when they were young and adventurous. I'd like to add to their collection one of these days; there must be some bookcases left to paw through in the underground cellars!»

Molly the marten looked serious all of a sudden.

«It's best to stay away from the ruins, you know that. Times have changed, and you shouldn't joke about such things, Franklin! Safety above all.»

The old fox decided to let the subject drop; he didn't like being scolded like a schoolboy.

«Of course! It was just one of the many ideas that cross my mind» he chuckled.

«You also know that the Council worries whenever you wander out there... After what happened to Mike the mallard, you're the only one who still dares to pass through that gate.»

«Sometimes I feel the walls closing in on me, and my writing suffers. If I didn't escape every now and then, this evening we wouldn't have our inaugural poem or even our favourite dessert!»

The marten's usual sunny smile reappeared.

«Ha, ha! You're never at a loss for an answer, dear Franklin!» she exclaimed. «Take a seat, we don't want to

keep our friends waiting! They look so hungry I half expect them to fling themselves at the cake.»

The sun had set in the meantime, giving way to pale moonlight. Darkness had fallen all around, but the brightly-lit decorations and lanterns made the gazebo stand out like a beacon in the night.

Franklin went to sit next to Lisa the lizard, but the seat on his left was empty. It was Theodore the toad's seat; along the table, just a few empty seats were left for the latecomers. The buzz of conversation died down when Molly the marten clinked a fork against her glass.

«The Council welcomes you to this year's Nettle Festival.»

Boris the boar, Bonnie the buzzard, Walter the weasel, Ernest the ermine and Cornelius the cat stood up, straight and proud.

«We thank you all for the food you've offered from your provisions and cooked and baked with love. It will definitely be put to good use!»

Laughter broke out at the table.

«We're very happy to see you all here. It looks like dear Oscar the owl won't be joining us this year either, but we're sure he's absent for a good reason. Oh, well, he'll miss out on all this good food!» The marten smiled, then became serious again. «But before tucking in, we'd also like to say how pleased we are that Shadowood has caused





so few casualties this year. You've followed the Council's advice and you're all still here. Let's raise our glasses in memory of those who were not so lucky.»

Glasses were raised all along the table; Debby participated half-heartedly in the toast.

«Never forget that there are monsters who bite and scratch hiding in the darkness out there. The wall is the only thing protecting us, saving us from their brutality. Sturdy walls and safety to all!»

«Sturdy walls and safety to all!» chorused the citizens of Nettle Hill.

«And now, before our feast gets underway, tradition calls for a poem to be read.»

Everyone cheered, eager to hear the exhilarating sound of Franklin's rhymes.

Molly untied the ribbon, unfolded the scroll of paper and cleared her throat.

The old fox was smiling; he was just as eager for everyone to hear his words.

*As I walk through town
there is laughter all around
our festival draws...*

Just then, Molly was interrupted by a bloodcurdling



scream. Unsure whether to be scared or just annoyed at the interruption, Franklin followed everyone else's gazes.

Emerging out of the darkness, Harold the hedgehog made mad dash for the table. His trembling arms held two empty pitchers that must have contained his offering for the feast, but terror had overcome him and the liquid was trickling down at his feet, leaving the thinnest of trails behind.

«Poor Theodore the toad.»

Those were his last words between he fell down in a dead faint.



Chapter Seven

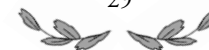
Poor Theodore the toad, indeed.

The trail left on the grass by Harold's pitchers had led them to a small bushy hollow near the wall.

A large group had gathered around the body. The darkness made it hard to see what was left, but the lanterns gave off some light.

It's a terrible thing when life ceases to inhabit a body. The day before, Theodore the toad was walking, talking, breathing... now he looked like a mannequin.

The wall's large stone blocks should have protected him from danger, yet there he was, with hardly any fabric left to cover the bite and scratch marks all over his body. Scraps of torn clothing could be seen here and there, on the ground and in the bushes. The bowler hat he always wore was not far off, covered in dark stains. The tragedy must have happened the night before, as there was no trace of trays or canapés.



The fainter of heart backed away, paws over their mouths, while others were unable to hold back their tears. Debby drew her ducklings close, covering their eyes with her wings, while they struggled to peek out.

Still confused, Franklin tried to make his way through the crowd to see what was going on.

The Council was on the front line. Boris the boar, Cornelius the cat and Ernest the ermine were trying to shoo the crowd away while Molly studied the tragic scene.

Then the marten turned to Bonnie the buzzard and Walter the weasel. The three of them conferred together before whispering a few words in the ears of the other three council members.

Afterwards, Boris the boar took the floor.

«The Council has decided to call an emergency meeting; participation is mandatory. We expect to see you all at the foot of the Observatory in an hour.»

No one said a word. No one objected.

It was late, but no one would sleep a wink that night.



Chapter Eight

«The situation is serious. Indeed, it has never been so serious» announced Molly the marten, somberly. Boris the boar had helped her climb onto the long table, still set for the feast no one had enjoyed. The citizens of Nettle Hill were all standing before the council, listening to Molly with bated breath.

«We've studied the body carefully, and our greatest fear has come to pass. There's no doubt that Theodore the toad was brutally killed by one of the monsters from Shadowood.»

Shock and dismay appeared on everyone's faces; you could almost smell the fear in the air. Muffled cries and sobs acted as a backdrop, like the sound of wind during a storm.

«The monsters hiding out there have managed to sneak into our village and threaten us with their savage nature.





Evil has always lurked out there, but until now we've lived safe in the knowledge that it would never reach us. But not anymore.»

«Wh-what do we do now?» whimpered Richard the rabbit.

«The main thing is to keep calm and listen to the Council» Cornelius the cat asserted.

«You must listen to our instructions and follow them to the letter» boomed Boris the boar.

«This is a real emergency» reiterated Bonnie the buzzard. Confused, frenzied shouts broke out among the crowd.

«Calm down! We need you to keep calm!» yelled Walter the weasel.

A voice rose above the others. It was Thomas the thrush.

«The monsters from Shadowood might come back! One victim won't be enough for them, now that they know we're defenceless!»

«Don't be ridiculous! That's not going to happen» snapped Molly the marten. «Letting them have their way means losing the battle against chaos. No, what we must do is obey the intelligence we've been given and go about our daily lives. As long as you follow the Council's orders.»

A shout came from the back. «But if we don't do anything, it might happen again!»

«This is not the time to quarrel among ourselves. We must stick together, now more than ever!» retorted Ernest the ermine.

«Someone has to investigate! We need to find out what happened, who did it and why...» shouted someone else in the thick of the crowd.

«There is no reason why! We're dealing with a savage force that doesn't think like us! It doesn't see things like we do, or talk like us!» exclaimed Molly, by now beside herself.

But she wasn't able to calm the protests.

«We have to investigate!»

«*Someone* has to get to the bottom of this!»

«We have to *do* something!»

«We need some volunteers!»

The Council members tried to calm the riot that was rising like a tide, until Molly suddenly exploded.

«All right, then! Volunteers, please come forward! Your job will be to shed



light on this situation, which has already taken up too much of our time!»

The crowd fell silent, eyes wide in shock. No one had ever seen Molly so worked up. Even the other members of the Council stared at her in shock, as she caught her breath.

«Who wants to volunteer? Come forward!»

Not one citizen met her eyes – some looked down at the tips of their paws, some cast furtive glances at each other. No one came forward.

«Just as I thought. In the face of danger, it's easier to talk than to act» snapped the marten. Then she smiled complacently at her fellow council members. «That's why we have a Council.»

«I-I volunteer.»

The boar, weasel, buzzard, ermine, cat and marten froze.

The stunned crowd opened to let Debby the duck through. As soon as she saw everyone looking at her, she put down her raised wing, but continued to hold her head high.

The duck had just won Franklin the fox's respect. She was definitely not the biggest coward in town!

«I volunteer as well» he found himself saying.

When would he get another chance like this? The best

adventures are the most unexpected, the ones you dive into blindly. That's what his books had taught him.

Molly couldn't believe her eyes.

«Very well, my dears. Perhaps I was wrong» she said, suddenly recovering her maternal air. «Congratulations, you've just been elected the defenders of Nettle Hill. The mystery is in your paws now, and I'm sure you'll solve it brilliantly.»

Meanwhile, thick clouds began gathering above their heads, hiding the moon up in the sky.



