

Death of a Phoenix

by Kathryn Phillips, NSW

The bird lay in his flimsy nest of kindling, gazing out at the rocky steppes where he had made his home. For a century he had flown above the harsh, unyielding landscape as a symbol of might, elegance, and hope for the humans who called this land theirs, and they had worshipped him as if he were a deity. Maybe once he had believed them, thinking he possessed such power, but if they could see him now – his crimson plumage patchy and lustreless, he knew they would scarcely consider him more than an ill and dying creature. With milky-white eyes and body aching with age, he twisted his head to watch the animals gathering below. Despite the rapidly setting sun and biting wind that swept through the slopes, they stood firm, their heads lowered and bodies stiff against the elements. Young and old, bird and mammal, predator and prey, they had all stopped their relentless battles against one another for this single moment – for him.

After a hundred years, he was dying, and they had come to pay their final respects.

A solitary leopardess carefully clambered up the steep slope, eyes lowered as she made her way over to his pyre. Strong and self-assured, she made light work of the treacherous path few dared to tread. The bird dimly recalled how years prior she had been the sole survivor of her litter, kept warm under his own plumage as the blizzard's howls mingled with her mewling cries. How small and fragile she had been then, barely weaned from her mother's milk, but now she was a proud matriarch herself, and her children watched on as she padded over to him, stopping only a short distance from where he lay.

'My Lord, we have come to welcome you anew, as our ancestors have done before us.' Her voice rumbled, the edges of her breath stirring the down that peeked through his crumpled flight feathers. There was reverence in her words that the bird scarcely thought fit the occasion. He had no memories of any other time. They were not his to know, and this time was sure to be the same for his future selves.

He wasn't sure when the legends had started; claiming that a phoenix would be reborn from the ashes of their former self as a symbol of eternity and renewal. The tales and whispers had followed him since his own hatching, and for many decades he had seen this as a comfort – some assurance that even when his wings failed to carry him aloft that there would come a time when he would once again take to the skies in a new, stronger body. Yet as the years crept on and he began to feel age bite at his tail, doubt had begun to set in. Would he really be reborn? He had tried to recall memories from previous lives, desperately searching for knowledge beyond the veil all must eventually cross, yet each meditative attempt had yielded no success. Death was just as stubborn in protecting her secrets from him as she was with any other, and despite his earthly majesty, he wielded no authority over any ethereal power.

'A welcome...' he rasped, his breath staggering painfully in his chest, 'is inappropriate for the occasion.'

The leopardess glanced up momentarily, a flicker of confusion clouding her expression, before it passed as quickly as the spring rain, and reverence once again returned.

‘Yes my Lord,’ came her response as she obeyed him without question. His feathers ruffled slightly at the title.

‘Don’t call me that.’ His beak clacked weakly – a mockery of the echoing snap that once sent herds fleeing from his anger. ‘I am no lord – I have flown above all and yet at the end, it has left me with nothing. Respect and authority do not shelter me from what is to come.’

‘As you wish.’ She responded, simply acknowledging his words and refusing to push against his claim. Bowing once, she carefully placed her paws on the shallow ledges of the cliff face and turned, beginning to make her way back down towards the others.

The phoenix’s gaze watched her leave for a second longer before he looked down at the growing crowd. Everyone was so quick to accept his orders, and little had ever been said to counter them. Such power had gone to his head as a fledgeling, and he was sure he had created considerable strife for those who lived below him at that time. Now as they chose to kneel far below him, he regretted the distance his mandate had created. How he wished he could rest among them and draw comfort from their presence, but all he had left to shelter him from his oncoming fate was the jagged unmoving shale of the cliff face.

‘Wait-’ He croaked out, fear gripping his heart as his vision began to fade. The hoarse cry echoed slightly in the wind, amplifying its quiver and frailty. The leopardess stopped in her tracks. Looking back at him, her dazzling blue eyes met his own clouded ones and he tried to cling onto their strength.

‘My Lord?’ She questioned, before quickly apologising as she forgot his previous request. The bird didn’t respond - her voice seemed more distant than it should have been. His light was fading quickly, and he had little time to make his request. As the shadows reached his nest, a murmur rose up from the crowd of animals below. The glint of embers had begun to dance along the veins of his feathers, their light illuminating the rock behind him.

‘Please don’t go’ He whispered.

‘I don’t want to be alone.’

The admission of fear was as heavy as the ancient stone behind him. Silence stretched between the two on the cliff face, and the bird feared his voice had finally failed him – unable to reach her ears. Yet as his vision faded completely, he felt the careful nosing of the leopardess at his side.

‘As you wish.’ Her voice purred. ‘I will stay with you, as you stayed with me.’

The old bird gasped, a weight he had never noticed before lifting off his chest. The memory of the blizzard again returned to him, as he felt the gentle weight of a paw – despite the sparking persistence of his oncoming fate – settle against him. In the distance, he swore he could hear the faint call of the leopardess’ younger self as she sheltered him in the darkness.

‘If only I had been kinder....less distant...’ His regrets dripped off his tongue like the last droplets of a dried-up spring, only for the leopardess to nudge him as he trailed into silence.

‘You were never distant to us,’ she insisted. Looking down at the failing form of her saviour, her heart ached. She remembered how as a terrified cub the icy jaws of death had closed in on her until he had landed in a blaze of glory and took her under his wing. She owed

her life to him and would do whatever she could to ease his pain. ‘All who stand below are alive because of you.’

His beak opened slowly, each word an effort.

‘I don’t...remember...’ he finally admitted.

‘Then let me remind you,’ came her soft response.

As the night stretched on and the old being’s life drew ever closer to his end, the leopardess curled up closer around him, whispering tale after tale as a final comfort. The biting wind – once so deadly to her – now barely caused a shiver through her thick coat, as she recounted the phoenix’s life: how he had led the herds to water during droughts, used his wings to push the flames of wildfires back from the tinder-dry grasslands, and signalled light and hope in the harshest winters. With each story, the bird’s sorrow seemed to ease, and as she finished her final tale as the night reached its coldest, a single tear of gratitude slid off his face to sizzle on the stone below him.

‘Thank you...’ He forced the last vestiges of his energy to permit him to speak, and the leopardess’ own tears misted her vision as sparks turned to tongues of flame. Though their heat eventually forced her to retreat halfway down the cliff-face she gazed on; a silent witness in the midst of a cacophonous clash of mourning and jubilation as the being she had once loved and revered shed his mortal coil. When the fires finally died down in the first light of dawn, the crowd dispersed and she alone returned to the charred nest. As the legends had foretold, an egg sat there: sooty but already cracking with new life. Patiently and breathlessly she waited, bearing witness to the dawning of a new era, and as the first piece of shell fell, she bowed her head at the newborn chick, greeting them the only way she thought appropriate.

‘Welcome back, my friend.’