



THE PHOENIX

Robin Click

Thousands of moons before the very first person was born,
Cold sent its wind soldiers to claim the forest.
They flew in chariots of snow and stole many animals hiding in nests above and burrows below.

Then came spring, as it always does, and the snow melted away.
As slowly as the trees budded, so did the stories of the Cold.

And as each bud turned into a flower, so did each tale grow into a legend.
But not all stories were ready to be told.
Some were only beginning.

Wilde was a black cat with a pink nose. When he woke up, only his whiskers were peeking out from underneath his mother. He slowly crawled out of her embrace, yawning and stretching as cats must do after a good nap. Wilde was careful not to wake her, but the spring air was calling him outside. Lovingly, he licked her nose to ask for permission to go play. Suddenly, fear seized his bones. She was hard and cold like a bronze statue. Her body kept him warm the whole winter, but there was no one there to shelter her from the frost. Wilde was too young to understand what had happened. All he could hear was his mom's voice telling him that cats can lick away any pain. So he sat down next to her and licked and licked and licked, until the moon gave way to the sun once, then twice, then thrice.

Luna was a pink pig with a black nose. When she woke up, no one was around. Last thing she could remember was her mother hiding her from the Cold underneath the tree roots that were almost too small even for a little pig. Just like Wilde, Luna was far too young to understand what had happened. More than anything, she wanted to find her mother and ask her why she left Luna behind. But all she could hear was her mom's voice telling her that birds were the guides of the forest and that they could lead all pigs to where they needed to go. With a heavy heart, Luna crawled out from under the tree and started listening to the songbirds until the moon gave way to the sun once, then twice, then thrice.

It was on that very important third day that Wilde and Luna left their distant corners of the forest, not knowing where they were going or what they were leaving behind. Soon their paths crossed in a big, open field of dandelions.

"Where are you going?" Luna asked.

"Where Cold can't reach me," the brave cat circled around Luna as brave cats tend to do.

"You think there is such a place?" Luna plopped down into the flowers to keep herself from getting dizzy.

"The Sun is so warm. Where it travels, Cold is certain not to follow," Wilde sat down next to the gentle pig, shoulder to shoulder, looking into the distance, somewhere far, far away.

"So I'm going to follow the sun," he wrapped his tail around himself with great certainty.

Luna let out an approving snort and smiled. Just like so, they sat there together, gazing in wonder at the setting sun.

"It would be nice to have company," Wilde broke the silence as the tip of his tail could no longer keep still. "That is if you don't mind traveling with a black cat by your side."

Luna nudged Wilde's ear with her snout, "Only if you don't mind a pink pig by yours."



On the first day of their journey, the road took them to the home of the unicorns. It was the most ornate house they have ever seen, veiled with rainbows and filled with lilacs.

“Does Cold reach your home?” Luna asked once everyone settled down for a cup of milk.

“How could it, silly piggy? How could frost overpower rainbows?”

Wilde and Luna were overjoyed and longingly asked if they had to be unicorns to live in the safety of rainbows and lilacs.

“Indeed. Only unicorns can stay here,” was the heartbreaking reply, “but if you do as we do, if you think as we think, then it will be only a matter of time until you become unicorns too.”

Late that night, when everyone was sound asleep, Wilde was up playing with his shadow, as all great cats do when the moon smiles wide. Leaping through the air, he accidentally unlatched the door that led to the unicorns’ bedchamber. He did not want to disturb the kind hosts, so he rushed to close it, but as he was reaching for the handle of the delicate door, he noticed unicorns’ horns unfastened from their foreheads and left resting on their nightstands.

“They are not unicorns? Just horses? Only pretending to be magical?”

Wilde slowly sat down to think, tucking his paws under his chest. That was when he saw something else, something under their beds. He crawled over to look, unafraid, as his padded paws were perfect for just such adventures. Underneath every bed were winter furs, meticulously folded and stored away for the cold season.

“They lied,” his claws came out. “We have to leave before we become like them.”

On the second day of their journey, the road brought them to the home of the dragons. There was a colossal castle, with giant gargoyles at each window, and every door fortified with iron gates.

“Are you real dragons?” Wilde asked as they sat down for a pint of fire water.

“We are now. But we were not always so,” one of the dragons took a big sip of his sizzling drink. “We were once dinosaurs, until the archer god who plays the lyre and loves the arts lost interest in our savage ways. Once he stopped riding his sun chariot over our skies, Cold took over. The few who survived had to learn to provide their own source of heat. Some learned to swim in the darkness of the sea, close to where the fire of the Underworld still burned hot. Others learned to breathe fire instead.”

“So Cold can no longer hurt you?”

“We alone survive the frost,” the dragon looked into his empty mug. “But if they would just learn to breathe fire and be like dragons, then they too would be safe. It’s just a habit really, like any other.”

When all the dragons went to sleep, Luna made herself comfortable in front of the fireplace, while Wilde took higher ground on the mantle. Reluctant to just believe, they wanted to think everything through this time around.

“We could be very comfortable and safe here,” Wilde purred as sleep overcame him.

The thought of fire coming out of her mouth, however, kept Luna wide awake. It sounded like a really bad case of indigestion, which is not something to be trifled with given the diet of a

pig. She would have to give up her favorite meals. More importantly, she would have to give up being a pig, and her friend would never be the same as well.

“Wilde!” Luna was determined. “Wilde, wake up! If you were no longer a cat, you might lose your nine lives. What would happen to you then if you were to fall off a roof again while chasing your shadow? Even worse, what if you lose interest in chasing your shadow all together? I’m not sure I would like you very much then.”

Wilde stretched his back and hopped off the mantle. “And I suppose nine lives are too many to spend as a dragon.”

“Let’s go then,” Luna led the way.

On the third day of their journey, Wilde and Luna reached the end of the forest. The last tree that grew there, right where the land met the sea, was both unlike any they have ever seen and just like all of them in some way. The texture of the trunk looked familiar, but not the color. The shape of the branches was unique, but not their reach. The leaves were two different colors that Wilde and Luna had seen many times before, but never near each other and certainly never on the same tree.

The most curious part of this tree, however, was its occupant. On one of the highest branches sat a bird as big as a lion, the deepest shade of gold, with feathers shaped like flames of a dancing fire.

“Who are you?” Luna murmured.

“I am the Phoenix,” smiled the giant and then humbly added, “a bird.”

“So you could guide us with your song?” Luna’s heart started pounding in her chest.

“Perhaps,” the Phoenix came down a branch, “where is it that you want to go?”

“We want to go where Cold cannot reach us.”

“Why would you want to go there?” The Phoenix came one branch closer. “From what other birds have told me, if not for the Cold, you would not have found each other, nor would you have come this far.”

“What of it?” Wilde protested. “We have only come far enough to find disappointment. Just horses who pretended to be unicorns and dinosaurs who decided to become dragons.”

“The horses gave you nothing then?” The Phoenix flew down yet another branch.

“Only lies. Beautiful, fragrant lies, but lies all the same,” anger ran through Wilde’s eyes.

“And the dragons?”

“Only the burden of choosing between struggling as yourself or surviving as a monster,” Luna’s face cringed with sadness.

“Is that why you left them?” The Phoenix was now sitting on the lowest branch.

“No. Wilde wanted to leave because he did not want us turning into liars. And I wanted to leave because I wanted Wilde to keep chasing his shadow and, well, there was an issue of heartburn.”

“Ah. I see,” the Phoenix was now on the ground next to our young travelers. “Well, you are welcome to stay here with me and see if this tree suits you better than unicorns and dragons.”

Just like so, Wilde and Luna stayed with the old Phoenix. Luna found a wonderful spot under the roots of the tree. From there, she could see the earth and all who lived in it. Wilde was happy in the hollow that he found half way up the trunk. From there, he could see the ocean and all who lived in it. Meanwhile, the Phoenix continued to gaze at the skies from her nest in the tree's tallest branches.

Every new moon, the old Phoenix would fly them on her back to distant parts of the forest in search of wonderful and terrible adventures. Every full moon, she would bring them back home so that they may rest in their tree and smile back at that moon.

It was during the fullest of moons that a smile grew so wide on Wilde's face that his whiskers almost touched his ears.

"This tree is where Cold cannot reach us," he purred. "Luna's roots, my trunk, and your branches, they will always keep us warm."

"It must be because it is our home," Luna snorted.

That very moment, the wings of the old Phoenix began to glow. They got brighter and brighter until they burst into the flames they always resembled. Just as the legend has it.

In the morning, a tiny beak poked out of the nest,
followed by ruffled feathers covered in ash.
The young Phoenix spread his wings and flew
awkwardly to the ground towards Wilde and Luna,
who were smiling at the golden bird of fire,
waiting to show him their earth, ocean, and sky.

