

First Autumn

by Daniel Asher Resnick

Long ago, when the earth was young and dull, two manners of being surpassed all others in their beauty: the phoenix and the trees. For years, they didn't know of each other, and all was well (save for the anguish of those who had to put up with the boasting).

But there came a day when, during one of his many treks across the sky, the phoenix spied a group of plants he had never seen before congregating below him.

Curious, he descended, and heard these strange plants boasting of their splendour to an irked gazelle.

"Ha!" said the phoenix, as he landed in their midst (at which point the gazelle took the opportunity to escape). "Do you still think yourselves so magnificent, now that you have had the chance to gaze upon myself?"

The trees (for that is what the plants were) gathered round, craning their trunks to see what manner of being might think to challenge them.

"Of course we do! You are but a bird. We are the trees! Can't you tell from our glorious green coats that we are the grandest?"

"You call that a colourful coat?" scoffed the phoenix. "Cast a glance at my plumage, and tell me it doesn't dazzle you!"

"The land around this forest is the most beautiful anywhere, and we are its heart and cause. Can you transform the landscape into a wonderland?"

"Do *you* have wings that create rainbows when the sun strikes them?"

The trees grumbled for a bit, not knowing how to respond, until a youngster among them spoke up. "Perhaps what you say is true, and you are somewhat glorious. But you are one; how could you hope to compete against the combined glory of all of us?"

At this, the phoenix grew angry. "You want glory? I'll show you glory!"

He took off, soaring nearly straight upwards, higher and higher, until he was no more than a dot in the sky. Then he dropped. He fell all the way down without flapping his wings once, until he crashed into the ground. His neck was broken.

"What a foolish - " was all the trees had time to say before the corpse caught fire. And what a fire it was! No fire since has been as beautiful.

The trees, having never seen fire before, drew closer. And when they did, the flames leapt on to the nearest of them.

At first, the trees reveled in this new sensation. It was exhilarating. And it made them even more beautiful than ever before! Glorious blazing coats, that swayed with their every movement. The sight of a forest set alight by phoenix fire is truly a sight to behold.

But the smallest among them soon began to realize that this exhilarating feeling was actually quite painful. It wasn't too long after that the entire forest was shrieking in agony.

Eventually the screams died down, and the flames soon after. What was once a forest surrounding a dead phoenix was now just a heap of ashes, which was scattered in the wind.

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Where the ashes landed, seeds sprouted, and new trees grew. The trees were no longer all the same. Different species arose, each reflecting the way their parents had burned.

And they were no longer quite immortal, for the phoenix's soul had been split among them. Now, once a year, nearly all the trees die in a blaze of colour, only to be reborn from their charred husks a few months later. And while this rebirth is in fact quite pretty, it is nothing in comparison to the yearly inferno, which is in itself nothing in comparison to that First Autumn, all those years ago.