

The Phoenix Enigma
Prequel

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Archives 10

The events in this archive-section take place two years before the main story and reveal what happened to Bel, Kit and Greg in the early years of their training with the rangers.

1

Bel turned her horse south, taking a narrow forest trail away from the overgrown road. Five weeks to midsummer and even in the dense shade of the western forest, it was hot. Tempting though it was to take off her shadowy flak jacket, she knew it was a bad idea. She needed the camouflage and protection if the next few minutes saw her patrol run into the raider gang they had been tracking for the last two days.

Given how fresh these tracks are, it could be any time now.

Greg caught up with her, urging his bay gelding to walk alongside her mare.

“Bel? You ready for this confrontation?”

“Of course. Can’t wait.”

He frowned. “Not really what I wanted to hear. When the gang split up you assured me you could work out a strategy to deal with it if our lot split up as well. With only two of us we have to rely on stealth if we’re up against automatic weapons. Which we almost certainly will be. So put this revenge mission of yours well out of the way and tell me what you plan to do.”

Bel gave a huff of impatience. She had a brother to avenge, killed by the city F2 gangs—and her one-woman efforts against them and the oppressive Avarit regime that seemed to tolerate them was what had brought her to the Resistance in the first place. Then she had made her way into the Western forest to train with the outlawed rangers, these murderous F2 gangs

operating outside the perimeter fence finally in her sights—and her trainers were insisting that she had to focus on strategy over satisfaction.

“Okay. We go in slowly, watching out for the first sign of trouble. Capture if possible, kill only in self-defense.”

He watched her warily, but seemed satisfied.

“Fine. I’ll lead.” He eased the horse ahead of her, maintaining a slow pace.

Bel had grown used to his technique of switching his team from following orders to making decisions, and then back again. It was the only way recruits like herself could get the kind of experience they would need if a team leader was killed and they suddenly had to take over.

Bel shivered at the thought. She seldom felt afraid for herself when on these bandit patrols, but losing someone close had become her deepest fear.

If anything happens to Greg on this mission...

And she was doing a brilliant job of messing him around in a way he did not deserve. She pushed the mare to close the gap between them.

“Greg, I’m sorry about yesterday...”

It was probably not the best time for this kind of conversation but her previous apology had been left too late and the hurt she had inflicted had gone on for far too long.

He turned to her, guiding the horse easily with one hand, his boyish face reflecting his pain and confusion.

“Bel, I am trying to understand what is going on with you. I guess it’s just awkward that fate decreed we would both be on the same Outland patrol the next day. I know neither of us planned it that way.”

“I think the decree came from the boss rather than fate.”

Bel knew that Raine would not have sent them both in the same team if he had known what was happening between them. A relief in a way as she tried to keep her relationship with Greg out of public view, not wanting her erratic temperament to reflect badly on someone in such a key position.

She had to admit her instinct to keep herself separate was not just about wanting to protect Greg. She was trying to keep her main focus on work. For weeks now, Raine had been watching several of the most promising rangers with a view to selecting two of them for leader training. This was something she wanted. In her mind it was the only thing that might finally make sense of the way she had abandoned her quest for revenge against the system that destroyed her family.

Becoming part of a Resistance pledged to achieve regime change without a bloody full-scale war had felt incomplete. But becoming leader of the forest rangers, the frontline against the Avarit regime's repression of the Outland farmers—well, that could bring both strands of her motivation together.

Bel had noticed that Raine was uncannily perceptive. She knew he had spotted her bloodlust and was waiting for her to get it under control. Which meant that she would have to give it up or else lose her chance at leader training. Or somehow manage to fool Raine into believing she had given it up—which seemed unlikely.

Greg had been silent and thoughtful for several minutes. She glanced anxiously in his direction. Maybe he had not forgiven her this time.

He relaxed into his habitual wry grin.

“It's okay. I know where it's coming from. Partly my fault. I can almost tell by now when I'm starting to get too intense, involved, and you're going to panic and refuse to have anything to do with me for a while.” He waved an impatient

hand at the trail ahead. “Now, can we focus on catching up with these bandits?”

“Sure.” Bel eased the mare into step behind him, wondering how in all the hells he managed to be so pragmatic in the face of her uncertainty. She wiped beads of sweat from her face, glad she had cut off her long braid now the heat of summer was on them. It had been getting in the way during fight training and although she had felt naked without it for the first few days, she had to admit it was cooler with cropped hair.

She tried to push distractions aside. They rode in silence until they crossed the crumbling, moss-covered remains of a tarmac road. Most of the houses had been reclaimed by forest since the population crash sixty years before but there were enough clumsy road repairs here to indicate the presence of inhabited holdings nearby.

And farmhouses with food and weapons to steal meant they might catch up with two heavily armed raiders at any minute.

She needed to concentrate.

2

The fresh hoofprints turned off the road onto a contouring trail. After a mile of gradual descent Bel noticed dense thickets of impassable brambles on either side. This kind of wilderness was common in the empty reaches of the western forest but it was unusual to see it so close to what looked like a well-used track.

Then she noticed the tiny motion-sensor camera half-concealed on an overhanging branch.

“Greg, look.” She pointed. “Seems like the Outlanders here know what they’re doing. Corralling visitors onto the approach track where the camera can pick them up. Maybe that’s why we don’t hear so much about raids in the southern catchments?”

He glanced up. “Well spotted. Let’s hope they’ve been lending their know-how to the other farmers around here.”

“*Outlanders*, please!” Even after several months with the rangers, some of her city habits were not going to disappear any time soon. Just because there was less surveillance out here in the forest did not mean it was a good idea to use labels that could cause problems. The Avarit-controlled government issued Outlander-permits to shift the burden of work and expense of road repairs onto the local residents who needed to use what remained of the crumbling highway system.

Permits were issued on strict condition that recipients who moved out of the city would continue to commute in for registered work, even though driving these potholed roads was painfully slow.

Breaking the law by producing their own food infringed Avarit profits in a world where crops often failed in the disrupted weather patterns. Food was currency. Which meant that Outlanders had to keep their illicit food production well out of sight. The camera-tech perched on that branch was not only to warn these farmers of approaching predatory bandits.

The heavily-armed land-sanitizer patrols sent by the government were an even greater threat.

Greg reined in at a sharp bend in the trail, the final two switchbacks of the descent half-concealed by the trees below them. They were above the farm buildings now, looking down on a wide clearing in front of the house and barns, shaded by a sturdy oak.

A white-haired elderly man was heaving a heavy table over onto its side, facing the approach track. He turned and grabbed the solid-looking hunting rifle from his middle-aged companion and dropped to one knee behind the barrier.

Bel watched as he wedged the barrel of the rifle into a narrow slot cut into one side of the table, waving his companion to move behind the shelter of the broad oak trunk. It looked like the old guy was the one in charge here, his movements decisive and agile in spite of his age.

She dismounted, tethered her horse and stepped into the shadows as she clipped her folding bow into the handgrip, adjusting the torque to compensate for the extra distance to the yard.

“I’m guessing their warning system has flagged up something. The paramilitaries could be here any minute.”

Greg laid a steady hand on her arm. “This guy seems to know what he’s doing. Did you notice the way he moved? I would say a military background, even though it might have been a while ago.”

“So we just let him deal with it?”

He eased his lanky frame into the cover of a tree and clipped his own bow for use.

“Wait and watch in case he needs backup. I don’t want to undermine whatever plan he might already have worked out.”

Two riders came into view on the approach, each armed with a bulky handgun. Bel let out a slow breath of relief to see that they were not packing anything heavier. The white-haired Outlander might have a rifle but his friend lurking behind the tree had nothing but the usual yew bow that most of the locals used for illicitly hunting game.

The old man yelled at the raiders to get out or get shot.

The lead rider gave an arrogant laugh and fired off a half-dozen bullets, sending a few splinters of table flying.

Bel hastily nocked an arrow. Something was off here. Bandits usually held back from killing Outland farmers who could produce more food for them to steal on their next raid. Beatings and threats to murder their children were the usual weapons of intimidation and extortion. Threats that usually worked.

She felt Greg tense at her side. His first arrow was in his hand now.

“Bel, stay alert. These thugs aren’t always logical. Some of them just like the exercise of bullying people.”

“They may be in for a nasty surprise.” Bel had noticed that the surface of the table had not sustained much damage apart from a few embedded bullets in the five-inch thick hardwood. And the old man had not even twitched.

“That table was designed far more for protection than just eating a few al fresco breakfasts. These guys really do know what they’re doing—”

The single rifle shot split the brittle silence, over-loud in the space beneath the trees. The lead bandit toppled off his horse and lay writhing and screaming on the ground, clutching a bloody arm crooked at an unnatural angle.

His companion’s erratic movements revealed his thoughts all too clearly, torn between firing his weapon at the impenetrable barrier, retrieving the casualty, or simply making his own escape. A second rifle bullet sprayed dust in front of the riderless horse, sending it into a panicked gallop back the way it had come.

“Last warning! Both of you, out!” The old man’s shout echoed sharp and fierce across the clearing.

The bandit hastily dismounted, hanging onto the reins of his own horse with one hand and grabbing his companion’s good arm with the other. It took a deal of heaving and pushing and screaming before they were both on the horse and heading out, away from the farm.

Bel looked back, curious as to why these Outlanders seemed so well prepared compared to those further north, nearer to the ranger base at the Warren.

Perhaps the northerners have become too reliant on having us to protect them?

A girl was running out of the farmhouse, ignoring the old man’s frantic wave telling her to get back inside. She crossed the open space to join the dark-haired man behind the broad tree trunk, peering out at the retreating paramilitaries.

Then she turned and looked straight in Bel’s direction.

Bel resisted the urge to move, knowing it would only make her more visible. They had to catch up with the fugitives quickly but she waited until the girl turned away.

“Greg? Did you see that? It was weird. She’s just a kid, but it felt like she knew exactly where we were—and I know we weren’t visible.” She hurried back into the shadows to fetch her horse.

Greg kept pace at her side.

“Don’t be misled by appearances. She may be small and slightly built, but I’m guessing she’s at least sixteen. But you’re right. I think she... didn’t exactly see us, but had a sense that we were there. Remember, rangers don’t have a monopoly on that kind of intuition. We just work on developing it further than most people can.”

Bel smiled. She found this aspect of the training as exciting as the advanced combat skills she was learning so quickly.

“Point. I guess I’m still so overwhelmed by all the new possibilities, I still forget it’s something I already had, but I didn’t know it—”

Another gunshot echoed through the trees ahead of them and they quickened their pace, leading the horses.

“*Hells!*” Bel stopped, looking up at the overhanging branch. “The thug must have figured there had been a warning system and was keeping a better lookout on the way back. He just wrecked the motion sensor. Maybe because he’s planning to come back for another raid in a few days. That tech is going to be hard for the Outlanders to replace.”

“I might be able to do something.” Greg handed her his reins and scrambled up the tree, inching his way along the branch until he could pull the device free and stuff it into his

pocket. Back on the ground he took it out for a closer inspection.

“Hmm. It’s beyond repair and we don’t have anything like these components back at the Warren.” He left the mangled pieces at the base of the tree trunk. “Priority now is to round up these two raiders before they can cause more trouble.” He urged his horse to a gallop, following the line of an overgrown road between tangles of undergrowth.

3

Bel took the lead again, checking for marks on the trees at the point where they had separated from the others in their forest patrol. The other three rangers had done a good job of leaving a clear route to follow but it was another hour before there was any sign of them.

Then everything started to happen at once. Gunshots ahead, and from the sound of it there were at least six people using automatic weapons—against their three friends with arrows and no more than two handguns captured from bandit gangs. Gangs whose members had in turn captured them from ambushed enforcer patrols.

With odds like that, backup from Greg and herself could not come too soon. They were close enough now to be back within short-range coms, with minimal risk of the signal being tracked by an Avarit patrol equipped with signal-scanners. Bel adjusted her fine-wire headset and keyed in.

“Brad! Where are you?”

Brad’s deep voice was barely audible against the static.

“Straight ahead, assuming you followed our trail. We ran into five of them a couple of hours ago—”

Bel heard another burst of automatic fire and the connection went down. She dismounted, pulled the mare into a patch of dense underbrush and tethered the animal to a sturdy tree.

“Greg, according to Brad, they’re straight ahead of us and they’ve been in a fight with five bandits for a couple of hours, which means the two they were following must have met up with reinforcements. Not clear if the two we’re following have caught up with them yet.”

“They probably heard the fight and are skulking around trying to ambush our people from behind. We go in together until we see where the hostiles are, then we’ll probably have to split up.”

They worked their way around the fight on foot, staying in the shadows and navigating from the sound of gunshots. Reluctantly, Bel pulled on her fine-wire headset. She preferred using mental connection but at the same time she knew that under pressure from the fight, it would take her too long to find the link with the rest of the group. The headsets were a demonstration of their techs’ ingenuity— all constructed from components salvaged out of the overflowing refuse tips left behind after the crash—but they could be erratic.

Once she had mastered the intense ranger training in the subtle lieth mind-signals, Bel usually found them more reliable when working together in crisis situations like this. Rangers generally could get little detail beyond warning each other with *direction*, *safe*, *threat*, but it was instant and instinctive and somehow carried better if they were facing a barrage of loud gunfire. Like the backdrop they had now.

Greg gave the signal that he was about to move off to the right, leaving her to continue straight on. Bel knew that once they confronted the gang they would have to make up their moves as they went along. She just hoped their coms equipment would not let them down as it had during a fight a couple of weeks ago.

She ran toward the sound of gunfire, trying to block the interference with one hand over her headset.

“Brad? What’s happening? I should be closing in on you now, following your trail.”

Nothing. She gave a huff of exasperation. Another reminder that tech had more than one problem. Great when it worked, but then you would start to rely on it.

She kept going through the trees until she could see a dilapidated farmhouse ahead. A flash of automatic fire came from one of the broken downstairs windows, suggesting that this abandoned building had been taken over by the raiders and was being used for storing their loot.

Still nothing on the com. Bel tore off the headset and shoved it in her pocket, focusing on her awareness of the others. She could sense Greg somewhere in the shadows nearby, approaching the building. She knew she would need more time to focus before she could pick up on Brad and the others.

Two more bulky figures ran across the open space in front of the farmhouse and took shelter inside before she could draw her bow. She guessed that up to now, the battle had in fact been a running retreat and the bandits had planned all along to fight back from within the safety of the stone walls.

Seven with heavy weapons and stone shielding against five out in the open with only arrows and a couple of handguns. Not good.

She was already reaching into her pack for her stash of smoke pellets as she worked out the best route to gain access to the roof—and in particular the part of the roof that housed the stone chimney. It was a gamble that there would be an open fireplace at the bottom instead of an enclosed stove, but this place had the look of a building that had been long derelict.

That usually meant anything useful like a stove would have been stripped out long ago.

Over to her left, a slight movement revealed her friend Kit as he edged closer to the farmhouse, in time to bring down one of the approaching bandits with a well-placed arrow. Bel took advantage of the distraction and sprinted behind a couple of sheds to reach one of the barns, heading around to the far side, out of sightline from any house windows.

As she had hoped, the crumbling mortar of the barn wall had left big enough gaps between the stones to give her good handholds and she made it to the edge of the roof in less than a minute. Getting over the lip was more difficult as the wooden beams were partly rotted away and she had to scrape away the detritus in order to grab handholds in the solid stone of the gable end. Then it was a case of working her way silently along the ridge, testing each move forward and easing her body across the rotten sections that sagged alarmingly under her weight.

The gap between the barn and the main house was less than ten feet. Not too far to throw her grenade accurately—but she could not afford to miss and provide the enemy with a convenient smoke screen just outside the walls. She tested the weight of the lumpy device in her hand, then paused to check whether she could sense any of the others coming within range.

Yes!

Greg and Tessa had moved closer to the building and were approaching Kit's position. The only presence she could not pick up was Brad, and her need for silence precluded another attempt to use coms.

Then all her careful planning had to be instantly readjusted as she spotted a dark shape under the trees, approaching Kit from behind. The mass of leaves would have made it hard to tell friend from foe if a brief flash of sunlight

had not reflected on the steel of a heavy assault rifle being raised to fire.

Bel shoved the smoke grenade back in her pocket, grabbed her bow and planted an arrow in the attacker. Evidently not a lethal hit, as he went down screaming, creating another distraction from the main fight. She took advantage of it, standing up and bracing one foot either side of the ridge, perfectly balanced as she lobbed the smoke grenade across the gap and watched it disappear down the chimney.

A few seconds later a dull whoomph sounded from inside the house, the last few window panes blew out and thick black smoke billowed out of the dark openings. Angry yells came from inside and then the door was kicked open to let the armed occupants out, coughing and gasping, into the overgrown courtyard.

From her perfect vantage point, Bel dropped two of them with neatly-aimed arrows before the survivors figured out where the threat was coming from and turned around to spray the roof with bullets. She dropped flat against the far slope of the tiles, forgetting in her haste that the timbers were badly rotted.

The dull crunch of cracking beams came a fraction of a second before she felt the ominous movement of the collapsing supports underneath her starting to sag. She grabbed at the edge of the slowly widening crater only to find the whole side of the barn roof collapsing in on itself. In the few seconds that remained she just had time to readjust her priorities, accept the inevitable, and concentrate on trying to land feet first.

Then her lungs were filled with dust and bat guano as she fell through.

Her feet hit something uneven and she pitched sideways to fall a few feet further onto a hard floor. A sharp roof tile caught her forehead and the light inside the barn faded to black.

4

A dull, thudding pain was pulsing across the side of Bel's head. Someone was squeezing her hand.

"Bel? Can you hear me?" Kit was kneeling beside her, cautiously testing her arms and ribs for fractures. "Is your back okay?"

Bel opened her eyes, squinting through the dust on her eyelashes. She wiggled her toes, and then slowly lifted each leg in turn.

"It all seems to work just fine." She gripped Kit's hand tighter and pulled until he helped her sit up. "Is everyone else okay?"

"Tessa caught a bullet in her arm and Greg is patching it right now. He and Brad will take the two surviving bandits and dump them at the city checkpoint while you and I ride with Tess straight back to the Warren." Kit scrambled to his feet. "Can you stand now?"

She pulled on his hand again, glad of his firm grip as a wave of dizziness swept over her the instant she was on her feet.

"Yeah, give me a minute to remember which way up I'm supposed to be."

Kit grinned in evident relief. "You look fine. A little dusty, but fine. And thanks for saving my life. That was an impressive shot from the top of the roof."

Greg appeared in the doorway. “Kit? Is Bel fit to move now? We have everything under control outside and we need to alert the Outlanders to come and redistribute all the stolen food the raiders had stashed here.”

“I’m fit to ride, if that’s what you mean.” Bel headed for the door, to find Brad already waiting with her horse.

How long was I unconscious?

But there were higher-priority things for Bel to think about as she rode back to the Warren with Kit and Tess. She tried to turn her focus onto what she should do next, preparing a self-training program to present to Raine when he asked for her patrol report. If she could give each minor mistake a careful analysis and her ideas on how to improve, it might help her chances of being accepted for leader training.

It was hard to concentrate. The aftermath of several hours of adrenaline and action had triggered the usual flood of endorphins that could easily have her falling asleep and off the horse. The only solution was to go with it and use this relaxed mind-state to gain better perceptions into the day’s sequence of lieth-connection. An opportunity to explore the different shades and sensations that distinguished one mind-presence from another.

While the others were not actively trying to maintain lieth-contact, even Bel’s heightened awareness could only reveal a fraction more than the sense of different personalities she had always felt, back in city life before she started ranger training. Before she had even known that this kind of enhanced connection might be possible.

Riding together in silence like this she could sense just enough to know who was there with her, with less intrusion into her mind than an overloud conversation would bring.

Tessa's thoughts were turned inward, stoically focusing on getting home in order to blot out the pain of her damaged shoulder. And Kit...

Not for the first time, Bel noticed how easy she felt around Kit. His presence was steady, concerned, courageous... and for some unexplained reason it seemed a rich honey-gold. Maybe she felt good because he had such an uncomplicated outlook on life, a focus on maintaining integrity, following orders, doing the right thing. He was never judgmental, never made her feel awkward or guilty. Sometimes he felt like a mirror calmly reflecting her own anger and desire for revenge back at her—and somehow that reminder of self-awareness encouraged her efforts to overcome her bloodlust more powerfully than the warnings from either Greg or Raine.

Or maybe her feelings about Kit were influenced by the fact that he was tall, athletic and unbelievably good-looking?

Bel tried to ignore the compelling attraction. When she had initially started training in the rangers' close communication techniques, this sensuous and unexpected side-effect had taken her by surprise. Most new recruits learned to deal with it after the first few weeks, even if those early weeks were fairly chaotic and often involved rather more wild liaisons than was probably advisable.

She smiled at the reminder. It was how she and Greg had ended up together—and then discovered that what they had went deeper than just the glowing, alluring sensations of close-contact that sparked with everyone in their training group.

And look how you screwed it up with Greg! Don't start over with someone else who doesn't deserve to get messed around like that.

5

The last few moonlit miles of the trail followed the narrow strip of land squeezed between the river and the foot of the tall cliff that protected the Warren from intruders. The narrow stone bridge across the gorge was the only vehicle access to the farm complex, hidden in a remote part of the western forest. The river was flooding again, roaring its way through the narrow arch above the water.

Now they were back in safe coms range, Bel could hear Kit calling in to say that they were just starting to climb the final switchbacks. She stayed behind Tess, keeping a watchful eye on her wounded companion. Only another ten minutes. It would be a relief to stop riding, grab a shower and maybe even catch up on sleep.

The long low sprawl of the Warren farm buildings appeared ahead of her at the end of the track. Raine was outside waiting for them. He waved Kit to take Tessa inside to the clinic and turned to face Bel.

Guessing that he was waiting for her to report back immediately, she dismounted and walked over to him, her mind hurriedly working on a narrative that showed how well-planned and precise her combat-approach had been.

“Do you want me to start going over our strategy from when we first caught up with the raiders?”

He was watching her closely.

“Not particularly. I was hoping you could recall how far you were able to keep your reactions under control.”

She stopped, staring at him. The ranger commander was the most perceptive person she knew besides their enigmatic chief medic, but few people could read her as instantly as that. She wondered how he did it.

He was only a couple of years older than she was, but the responsibility for more than a hundred souls on risky assignments had left its mark. His presence had a gravitas even when he was making an effort to sound light-hearted and encouraging. The reason the rangers found him so inspiring was as much due to this as to the impressive fight-skills he demonstrated in training.

His searching brown eyes were still fixed on her. Bel knew instinctively that she had to respond honestly or her last chance at leader training would be over. Permanently.

“It’s getting better. At least I notice when any thoughts of revenge start piling up.”

He smiled. “That’s the kind of answer I hoped to hear. Awareness, not cover-up. Essential for someone almost ready for leader-training.”

“You mean...?”

Is this the news I’ve been waiting for?

He steered her toward the farmhouse.

“Bel, what you need to know is that at some point you’ll have to go through the second level of lieth-training. That kind of intense, focused mind-discipline leaves most people sensitive for several weeks afterwards, open to every aspect of other people’s feelings and pain. You need to be prepared for that.”

He paused to let her take it in. “But if you’ve been in the habit of closing off feelings of connection in order to justify a violent, vengeful way of doing things, then the sudden reversal

can hit you really hard. I don't want to risk putting you in that situation."

All the strands finally fell into place. Mindless violence suddenly revealed its real nature as the coward's way. The flaws that had been holding her back from leader-training had turned out to be subtly different from anything she had expected.

Epilogue

Bel watched the angle of sunlight move slowly across the surface of the water. She had been waiting for almost half an hour now and it was unlike Greg to be late. The pool below her was deep enough to dive from the flat rock where she lay. Natural rock walls formed a perfect swimming hole in the stream, augmented by the rock-dam crafted by enthusiastic rangers over the years.

Bel tried to calm her anxiety, gazing down into the rippling green and silver shadows of fish finning lazily beneath the surface. In the three weeks since the fight with the raiders, she had only been paired with Greg on two patrols and she was aware of his caution in getting too intense or involved in their relationship in case she broke things off yet again.

Has he finally decided to end things, to save all the hassle and heartbreak?

On patrol, Greg had deferred leadership to her both times, saying he was preoccupied with a backlog of intel he was busy sifting through in the rangers' intelligence section.

Bel sensed that the weight of responsibility was something she would also have to face before long. Every conversation with Raine had brought a deep sense of just how painful and difficult he found this aspect of leadership, even after his three years in

command of the Warren. She was not sure if she would ever get used to sending others into the firing line.

Be careful what you wish for.

How many times had that saying come back to haunt her? She still wanted the training but the burden of learning to command was revealing itself to be far more complex and challenging than simply giving orders, heading into the fray and expecting your team to blindly follow you. Raine had told her she would spend several months as patrol leader before starting full leader-training and this balance was something he would be looking for in her technique.

Greg's birdcall for *friend approaching* echoed hauntingly through the space between the trees. He always added a mischievous chirp at the end when he needed to make clear it was a social warning and not the middle of a serious patrol.

Bel rolled over and sat up, scanning the trail, her heart thumping with excitement and anticipation until he appeared, striding decisively around the corner of the trail.

Followed by Kit.

And Kit was looking decidedly awkward, staring at the ground as he walked, his hands shoved in his pockets.

Bel scrambled to her feet, wondering what had happened to the romantic swimming date Greg had proposed. Those endless minutes of thinking she had lost him after she had been too distant with him...

And now he's late and bringing a friend with him?

"Hey, Bel." He planted a kiss on her forehead. "I can't make the swim today, I have some extra work to get through with the next political-reform vid we're producing. Can you make it tomorrow instead?"

"Um, sure. Same time?"

“Same time is fine. But I didn’t want to leave you on your own today. Kit is free this afternoon, and when I mentioned swimming he seemed quite keen.” Greg waved as he walked away, calling back over his shoulder. “See you tomorrow.”

He left a long silence behind him, broken only by the faint ripple of the water in the pool below and the rustle of leaves overhead. Bel stood unmoving, watching Kit and trying to sense what in all the hells was going on. His presence felt closed in, guarded... and utterly confused.

He’s not the only one!

This was becoming way too awkward. She sat down, dangling her bare feet over the edge of the perched rock. Kit shuffled across to sit at her side.

“Um, sorry to crash your date.”

“I don’t think it’s actually crashing if you’re here by invitation. Does Greg really have a load of work to do?”

“No.”

“Didn’t think so.”

Is this Greg’s way of dumping me politely? I damn well deserve it, the way I’ve been messing him around.

If she had hoped that naming her fear would ease the pain of rejection stabbing inside her, she was disappointed. It just made it seem more real. And more justified.

In the long silence that followed, her mind started weaving ever more complex threads of possibilities that refused to resolve.

At last Kit broke the silence, speaking slowly, still awkward. “Greg is logical to a fault. He knows *why* you’re afraid of commitment. And... I’ve been trying to hide the way I feel about you but he’s not blind. He figured it out.”

“So he *is* dumping me! And then telling you it’s okay, you can come here and take over?” The flash of confusion was mixed with anger. “He should have talked to me about it, not...”

“I’m sorry. I’m really messing this up. I’ll go.” Kit scrambled to his feet.

She reached up and grabbed his wrist.

“Don’t. I... just need time to make sense of this.”

He knelt beside her again. “Bel, I got the feeling that he knows you better than you think. And he meant it when he said he wanted to see you tomorrow.”

The anger faded as quickly as it had come, the threads finally forming a pattern. Greg had already sensed her attraction for Kit. And rather than ask her to make a choice, he had figured that maybe together they could give her the reassurance she needed.

Would it really make me feel less nervous about being in a relationship?

“I seriously have a long way to go before I’m any use at *any* kind of friendship, relationship, whatever, never mind being a leader!”

Kit laughed and she sensed him finally starting to relax.

“Bel, I’ve been accepted. Raine told me yesterday that I’ve passed my six months’ recruit training. I was surprised how few make the grade. So I won’t be getting sent off to the Ice Islands with the others to join all the pioneer families hunting rabbits in the snow. I think that’s what Greg was waiting for. Then Raine told me that the real learning is just starting, and it’s going to be more demanding than anything I’ve ever experienced. Which I guess means we’re both in the same situation—and will be for some time now we’re in leader training together. If we survive the next few patrols, that is.”

Bel finally dared to look round at him. Open, honest, maybe not yet a strategic planner, but determined to make the best of whatever life threw at him. And unbelievably attractive.

Hells. Maybe he's seeing this more clearly than I am.

Life was too precarious right now to over-think things. Maybe the answer was to just go with what felt right.

Meanwhile the air was warm and the water was still sparkling its cool invitation.

Bel stood up and peeled off her clothes.

“Have you tried diving from this ledge? It’s the best one.” She flipped her body in a graceful arc and felt the cold sting of the pool engulf her, her skin tingling with the icy caress.

She surfaced, tossing glistening droplets from her hair as a wave of water hit her in the face. By the time she had figured it was the wash from Kit’s dive, he had appeared beside her, gasping in a lungful of air.

“No, I hadn’t tried it and you’re right, it’s the best one.” He struck out with powerful strokes for the side, heaved himself onto a half-submerged rock ledge and turned to face her, his body glistening wet in the sunlight, his hazel eyes focused on her.

“Bel, I think we can make this work.”

She looked up, sensing the hope and optimism in him and knew this was what she wanted too.

“Like Raine said in the last training session, you, me and Greg work well together.” She laughed as she reached up for a kiss, feeling freer than she had in a long time. “I know he only meant out on patrol, but what the hell, we’re supposed to use our initiative and improvise aren’t we?”

Afterword

The complete series of The Phoenix Enigma plus the two Trilogy box-set versions are available on all stores worldwide.

If you enjoyed any of these books, please do leave a review!

maps and other details on www.jayaspenn.com

Author's note:

The Phoenix Enigma series was partly inspired by the unsung heroes of Médecins Sans Frontières, but I also wondered how the future would look without either exponential tech progress or blasted wasteland. If today's threats destroy much that we take for granted, but self-interest forces those in power to maintain control in order to stay at the top—before the wasteland gets too savage to recover? (bearing in mind that leaving it to people who want to be at the top brings the sort of problems described here...)

After that, I freely confess to taking plenty of liberties with the actual science! Psychoneuroimmunology is in its early stages and shows great promise, although it hasn't reached the mind-levels the main characters have achieved. Science predicts that when sea-levels have drowned coastal cities, conditions on land really will be 'blasted wasteland' and food production would be even more precarious than in the story.

And while scientists haven't predicted the jetstream winds would change and form a barrier between the "Ice Islands" and the rest of the country, well, they didn't predict the current polar vortices either! But if you've been high in the Himalaya when the jetstream intensifies in winter, and experienced those seething winds first hand...

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deems too convoluted, Roger, cyber-guru who patiently extricated me from numerous IT pickles, and Christopher, tech-guru who educated me on the strange possibilities that might be achieved in a world of re-use-and-manage.

Thanks also to supportive beta-readers Simon, Rufus, Kevin, Laura, Janet & Richard—and last but not least, Paul, who provided invaluable feedback on the TV script version of Phoenix.

Maps

The Phoenix Enigma is based on the usual sci-fi mix of science and speculation. The revised coastline of the UK is currently as accurate as calibrated predictions of sea level rise allow. And while the destabilizing of the jetstream has happened (and wasn't accurately predicted) the idea of it becoming fixed in one place is pure imagination... unless it's another of those unexpected effects of complex systems...

Map of Future Britain



the Warren



the City



Take a look on www.jayaspenn.com/maps

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The Phoenix Enigma Prequel is a work of fiction.

Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

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