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Opening extract from
Phoenix Rising

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PROLOGUE

The ship was empty; silent but for the creak of rigging, the ticking of the boiler and the hiss of the fire as it consumed the fuel Toby had fed it. Every other pirate was visiting the German port where they had docked – trading for supplies, swapping news and taking a day's break from the salt.

Toby glanced at the open porthole, which faced the poisonous sea. Outside, the dam was holding back an ocean of junk. Toby could see it pressing against the wall – a looming mass of old cars, vans, washing machines and prams, the litter of a civilization destroyed by human greed and the vengeance of Mother Nature.

“You won’t be able to see anything.” Polly glided from her perch and landed on his shoulder. “You may as well clean out the boiler.”

Toby turned from the window with a sigh. “Sometimes I dream of land.”

“That’s natural.” The parrot fluffed her feathers. “I’ve never seen a tree in my life, but sometimes, when my processor shuts down, I see leaves.”

Toby sighed again, then went over to the brushes. “I just wish they’d dock so my porthole faced the jetty.”

Polly tilted her head until she was looking into his eyes, her beak clacking as she hung almost upside down. “If you were spotted...”

“I know.” Toby shook his head. “And I’d probably hate land anyway. Crowded.”

“Dirty,” Polly agreed.

“Smelly.” Toby grinned. “Nothing like the *Phoenix*, then.”

Polly leaped from his shoulder and landed on the boiler’s control panel. “Let’s get this over with. I hate it when you clean the blowers out, the soot sticks to my feathers.”

“All right.” Toby was halfway up the ladder, his brush over his shoulder, when he stopped. “Did you hear that?” He frowned as he listened for the sound.

“It’s just junk knocking against the ship.” Polly’s plumage bobbed as she shuffled from foot to foot. “Ignore it.”

“There isn’t any junk here.” Toby climbed back down the ladder. “They have a dam.”

“It could be anything, Toby. It’s not our concern.”

“Listen.” Toby ran for the porthole and leaned out.

His eyes widened. Beneath him was a tiny raft, barely more than two planks wrapped with cord. On it was a red-haired man, his arms wrapped around the wood and his legs kicking weakly against the tide that tried to drag him back to shore. As Toby watched, the raft knocked against the side of the ship once more.

“Hey, down there!” Toby called and the man lifted his head. A violet bruise ringed his throat and his face was livid with broken blood vessels.

Toby gasped. “Polly, he’s been hanged!”

“Help me!” the man croaked.

“We have to get him out of the salt.” Toby spun round to Polly. “His skin’ll be burning off.”

“Stay out of it, Toby.”

“And leave him to die? I don’t think so.” Toby ran for the boiler-room door. “I’m going out.”

“No, you’re not.” Polly flew in front of his face. “The captain would skin me alive.”

“Then how do we help him? Just let me throw him a rope.”

“What if he’s a spy? What if he’s been sent to capture you and you help him climb on board the ship?”

“He’s not a spy, he’s injured, look at him.” Toby went to open the boiler-room door. “I’m not just going to let a man die, Polly. I’m going out.”

Polly caught Toby’s hair and flew backwards, but he

didn't even falter. Toby spun the wheel, opened the door and stepped into the passageway.

The passageways of the *Phoenix* were eerie; dripping with condensation and free of the rowdy men and women that usually filled them. Toby ran to the nearest ladder, shinned up it and hit the next level at a dead run.

Polly followed him, shouting as she went. "The captain will kill you and he'll put me in the fuel compressor! What happens if he's after you? How do I explain that to your father?"

Toby hesitated.

"Last chance, Toby. Turn around and pretend you didn't see anything."

Toby shook his head and opened the door as Polly continued to shriek, "It's too dangerous!"

Sunlight hit Toby like a hammer, making him blink in the fresh air. This close to land, the *Phoenix* was covered in gulls and, as Toby stepped out, they took flight with raucous caws.

Toby allowed himself a look at the dock and saw that it was busy with traders. He caught a glimpse of riotous colours and the scent of cooking reached him. To the right of the pier he spotted a gallows where three men swung, black crows weighing down their shoulders. One of the ropes hung empty and Toby could make out a

disturbance in the crowd – Greymen searching for the escaped convict.

Toby shuddered and ran for the port side of the ship. He leaned over the gunwale and looked for the tiny raft. The man wasn't moving.

“What if he's unconscious,” Toby wondered aloud.

“Then he'll drown,” Polly squawked unsympathetically.

“You're not usually this cruel.”

“And you're not usually this stubborn.” Polly nudged him with her wing. “I'm programmed to protect you, Toby, not some criminal. You don't know what he's done. He could be a murderer.”

Toby uncoiled a rope and tied it to the rail. Then he threw it over the side. It unwound as it fell and the end splashed into the water beside the man's outstretched arm. Toby winced as corrosive salt hissed on his shirt, but the man didn't move.

“I've thrown you a rope,” Toby yelled. “Grab hold and I'll pull you up.”

“He can't hear you –” Polly ruffled her feathers and looked around anxiously – “but other people might. You tried, now let's go back down.”

Toby grabbed the rope and wriggled it until the thick hemp knocked against the raft. He held his breath as the planks wobbled in the waves, then the man looked up

slowly. He saw the rope beside him and wrapped it around one arm.

Toby started to pull, his muscles popping beneath his threadbare shirt from the strain. “He’s heavy,” he groaned.

“Then let him go,” Polly snapped.

In answer, Toby braced his legs on the rail and heaved.

After a short while Toby could feel the rope move faster through his hands and realized that the man was trying to help by walking up the side of the ship. Toby renewed his efforts. His shoulders ached now but he distracted himself from the burn by focusing on the pictures the crew had scrawled on the deck and the gunwale. Mostly they were doodles imagining the island they were searching for. Each was a little prayer – a hope that next week, next month or even next year, they would find that island and make it their home.

Eventually the man’s hand appeared on the rail and Toby was able to release the rope, grip his wrist and pull him to safety.

The man sagged on to the deck. His legs twitched – he wasn’t going anywhere without Toby’s help. Toby wrapped the man’s arm around his shoulder and dragged him to the hatch. He pushed him down the ladder and winced as the man collapsed at the bottom.

“Sorry.”

Toby followed more carefully, slamming the hatch behind them, grateful for the sudden darkness that hid them from the crowd on the jetty. He watched as the man crawled to the wall and propped himself up. Toby sat opposite him in the narrow passageway. Polly placed herself between Toby's knees, glaring at the stranger, her claws glimmering in the dim light.

For a long moment there was silence.

"Thank you." The man hung his head and his bright red hair flopped into his eyes.

"They tried to hang you." Toby tilted his head. "It was a risk, going into the water."

The man nodded. "But you saved me."

"The captain could still throw you back in."

"I hope not." The man pushed his hair back from his face and Toby winced at the sight of his raw throat. "My name's Marcus."

"I'm Toby. This is Polly." He gestured and Polly squawked a warning. Toby's blue eyes crinkled. "You better not mess with her. Welcome to the *Phoenix*."

ONE

One year later

Waves crested and shattered over the broken plane.

The *Phoenix* was carving her way towards it, but her current course would churn the drowning aircraft into her wake along with the rusting engines, plyboard cupboards and thousands of cans that festooned the waves of the poisonous sea.

Toby clung to the crow's nest and leaned out as far as he could, watching Polly as she swooped towards the plane. The surf covered it before she could get there, and Toby held his breath. Would the current suck their prize out of reach? Then the plane's wing peeked through the masses of junk once more and Polly wheeled back towards Toby.

Too excited to wait for her return, he was shouting before the parrot could land. "She's worth salvaging, right? She is, isn't she?"

Polly thumped on to his shoulder and knocked Toby off balance. He scrambled with his feet for a firmer grip on the bolted jigsaw of car bonnets that made up the crow's nest and grabbed the railing, unwilling to take his eyes from the plane for more than a second. It was still in sight, surrounded now by a flotilla of shopping carts. "I was right, wasn't I?"

"It looks good." Polly ruffled her feathers. "But I wouldn't bet your life on it."

"If I call it wrong, the crew will eat me alive – remember how angry they were with Arnav last time." Toby wrapped his fingers around his binoculars. "But there could be fuel in there, and cargo – there might even be building materials, clothes, D-tabs ... tinned food."

"Or she might have been flying on fumes and carrying suitcases." The parrot's wings jerked up and down in her approximation of a shrug.

Toby stared hard at the wreckage as if he could force an answer. In the cockpit the pilot still gripped the throttle, trying to accelerate from beyond the grave. "What brought her down?"

Polly shuffled. "Hard to tell."

"She might've run out of fuel, then." Toby drummed his fingers on the rail.

"Might've," Polly echoed. Then she squawked, suddenly

agreeable. “More likely she’s a casualty of the wars.” She cocked her head, her plumage tickling Toby’s chin. “There’s damage consistent with small tactical munitions.”

“She’s been in the water a long time – anything could’ve done that.”

“No guarantees at sea, Toby. But the pattern of damage suggests a drone strike. It’ll be good salvage – if the hookmen can secure it.”

“They’ve salvaged bigger. Dee’s a pro.” Toby leaned over to spot the ship’s second in command. She was just coming out of the fibreglass bridge, dark curls flying beneath her red scarf as she walked next to Marcus. All the crew wore the red scarf – the closest thing they had to a uniform. Marcus usually wore his around his throat to cover the evidence of his brush with death; Toby also wrapped his around his neck, as added protection from Polly’s claws. Others covered their mouths, forearms or even their shins, depending on what jobs they had to do. Rita tied hers around her chest and Big Pad used his as a belt. The splashes of scarlet made Toby think of the sailors as the *Phoenix*’s very own flames.

Despite the additions to her deck – lean-tos made from lorries, sheds made from old fibreglass hulls and walkways under swinging canopies – the *Phoenix* herself was not

colourful. She had first sailed way back at the start of the millennium – a cargo ship. She would have seen the leaping dolphins, shoals of fish and basking sharks that were now long gone. She had sailed before the oil crisis, the economic collapse, the riots, the wars and finally the eruption of the supervolcano that had changed the earth forever. But once the seas were clogged with rubbish and turned into floating junkyards, she had been forgotten.

Barnaby Ford, whose talent lay in repurposing cast-offs from the old world, had discovered the *Phoenix* rusting in a dry dock. St George, the militocracy, had paid for the years he spent turning the ship from an oil guzzler into a sail-subsidized paddle steamer. Jobs that would once have taken a couple of hours with a blowtorch required weeks of work. Everything on the ship had been salvaged, including the crew.

Beyond the electrical pylon that housed the crow's nest, four further masts had once been telegraph poles. Ford's supervisor had somehow procured them during the Darkness, when almost all wood had become fuel. This made the masts, for a while, the most valuable items on the ship.

The silver sails had been stolen from a satellite and on each side a great paddle, ripped from a power station's cooling system, turned inside a razor-wire cage.