

CHAPTER 1

Monday, 5th January 2015

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.

Phoenix drove through the entrance to the place he had called home since the first of July four and a half years ago. Stone pillars loomed up out of the mist like dark sentinels in a Hammer horror film. The magnificent grounds of Larcombe Manor stretched before him as he rattled across the cattle grid. Damp mist hugging the ground masked the familiar, welcoming sight of the old buildings and lights of home.

His wife Athena and their daughter Hope would be fast asleep. Friends and colleagues who lived on site were sleeping or hard at work in the underground facilities of the ice-house. Operations undertaken by the Olympus Project carried on twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week throughout the year. It was ever thus. Organised crime and terrorism never took a break. So, those who opposed them must remain vigilant.

Phoenix returned from yet another mission against the Grid. A fact-finding mission on this occasion. One which he carried out alone. Security for Olympus agents had been an issue in recent weeks and Phoenix was mindful of the need for extreme caution.

The headlights of the car fought a losing battle with a dense patch of mist. He slowed to a crawl. He negotiated this sweeping driveway so often that he couldn't believe he struggled to find his way home. Maybe nature was telling him troubled times lay ahead.

Phoenix shook his head. There was nothing new there. He couldn't recall an occasion in the past four and a half years without troubled times. Olympus could only hope they took two steps forward and one step back more often than the reverse. A tumultuous year just ended. What more evidence did they need than to consider how the final six weeks alone turned out?

In the last two weeks of November, Phoenix attended three ceremonies at Larcombe. Henry Case and Sarah married. So too did his best friend Rusty Scott and Artemis. Sarah Case blessed Giles Burke and Maria Elena's wedding after the official ceremony in Spain.

The old Georgian manor house filled with couples. Erebus would have loved that. At present, he and Athena were the only ones with a child. Could it be that they needed to convert one of the many rooms into a creche? If so, it promised to keep Maria Elena busy for ages.

Elsewhere, on the first day of December attention focussed on Westminster. A handful of MP's missed the vote on the motion of no confidence tabled ten days earlier. This followed two audacious robberies that shocked the British public. They were the work of the Grid. A network of organised crime gangs that held a stranglehold on every facet of the nation's illegal activities.

Police appeared helpless to prevent these robberies taking place, nor did they make progress in finding those responsible. Terror attacks across the country added to the unease felt by the public. Who ran this country? Who could guarantee the public's protection? What had happened to the rule of law? The nation looked to Westminster for answers.

In the days before the vote, both sides worked hard to secure success. Both expected their efforts to allow them to claim victory. Polls suggested there was a slight edge in favour of the

Government being defeated.

Public clamour for action against organised crime and the threat of terror attacks was undiminished. Riots and looting became less prevalent, but chatter on social media remained as vitriolic as ever. Commentators in the media set the scene for the millions waiting for the result on TV and radio. Wise heads counselled that whichever way the vote went it was likely to be just the start of the drama, not the end.

When they counted and recounted the votes late into the evening, the Government survived the no-confidence motion by a mere four votes. The Tory whips had reined in enough of their rebels to survive, for now.

On the second of December, the Government discussed its response to the severe criticism of their handling of the crisis. A series of riots broke out in Leeds, Liverpool, and Manchester. The Grid orchestrated these to encourage a response in other towns and cities. There was little damage, and casualties were few.

What caused this failure to ignite a nationwide fire of rebellion was unclear. Perhaps, it was apathy, or it may have been an acceptance that the margin of victory had been so narrow the Government had survived by a whisker.

Pundits predicted a General Election in the spring. When things got this bad for the ruling party nothing controversial was put before Parliament. They only hoped to limp along until their advisors assessed they at least stood half a chance of winning at the polls.

In Scotland, Sir James Grant-Nicholls languished in HMP Shotts alongside five hundred other criminals. The maximum-security facility had been rebuilt in 2012. After his arrest, Sir James was detained there while tests were carried out on the remains uncovered on his estate.

As Orion predicted, he had helped find Sir James's missing wife, Fiona. The tests also confirmed Sir James had murdered his wife. The happy occasion of the October wedding of Sir James to Elizabeth, the Duchess of Lochalsh was a distant memory. A joyful event enjoyed by the Olympus hierarchy, but which now had dealt a severe blow to the organisation.

The man Phoenix knew as Heracles was remanded in custody due to the serious nature of the case. There was no question of bail. Heracles would appear in court to face the Sheriff and a jury before the end of February. Olympus had been forced to accept the financial benefactor they welcomed among their number from the outset was not the man they thought.

Sir James's new wife, Aphrodite had started divorce proceedings. She was distraught, but her upper-class background provided her with a resilience to such setbacks. She would regroup and recover. Elizabeth's close family gathered to shield her from the gutter press foraging for a sensational story. Her wider Olympus family made her aware she was welcome to return to the fold whenever she felt able. Phoenix didn't expect to see her on Wednesday, at the next scheduled meeting, but he knew it wouldn't be long before she resurfaced.

In the first weeks of December, the hustle and bustle of furniture being delivered to various apartments meant the main corridors were never quiet for long. Athena and Phoenix were unaffected, but with Geoffrey's move complete it allowed them to concentrate on domestic matters. While Maria Elena Burke decorated her new home, Hope spent more time with her parents. When Giles Burke worked in the ice house on a day shift, the nanny took over. Athena and Phoenix made good use of the free time. Since Geoffrey moved from London to stay with them, their time alone suffered.

Geoffrey's absence eased matters somewhat in other areas too. They were free to discuss

Olympus business. Athena's father had a knack for appearing just as they talked of a proposed mission or debriefed a completed one.

A week before Christmas, they had returned from the bedroom for a late breakfast.

"If we can grab Henry later," said Athena, "we can get him to overhaul our security again. Instigate more frequent patrols of the estate perimeters. Beef up our cybersecurity and allow us to intercept overflying drones before they cross our boundaries."

"Good idea," Phoenix agreed.

A sharp crack interrupted Phoenix's memories as he manoeuvred the car past the walled entrance to the transport section. The mist had continued to confuse him, and the nearside wing mirror paid the penalty.

"Damn," said Phoenix, "oh well, there's a first time for everything."

He left a note of apology for the transport crew chief under the windscreen wiper and made his way back to the main house. He felt tired, cold and damp, and his bed awaited him. His thoughts of the past weeks needed to stop.

Athena stirred when he slipped into bed, but she didn't wake. Phoenix heard Hope snuffling in the nursery. Before he fell asleep, Phoenix wondered how old Sharron was before she could respond to being asked to blow her nose.

It was so long ago now he forgot. He had lost count of the number of times he and Karen wiped her nose with a tissue. He remembered using a wet flannel to remove dried snot smeared across Sharon's chubby cheeks, her eyes and even in her hair.

When Phoenix awoke, it was after eight. The silence told him both Athena and Hope were no longer in bed. He knew he should get up, but memories that seemed so important last night soon crowded into his head clamouring for attention.

Everyone gathered together at Larcombe on the Tuesday before Christmas for a party. The general mood typified many companies and organisations across the country when a holiday season approached.

Festivities began at six in the evening. A large bonfire was lit on the edge of the lawn. Guests watched from the dining room as it turned from a smoking pile, into a flourishing warmth-giving spectacle. After they ate, they walked outside onto the patio, and then took the steps onto the main lawns.

"The manor house is so beautiful, isn't it, darling?" said Athena.

Phoenix carried Hope on his shoulders. He turned to look at the building. The lighting installed by Erebus a decade ago cast a delicate blue light over the stonework from the ground floor to the rooftops. The more discreet lighting further up the gardens were there for security reasons. But it offered the guests a vast expanse of lawn, trees and bushes to admire.

"It's magical," he replied.

There was a loud bang. Hope, who faced the house too, screamed and cried.

"It's okay, poppet," said Athena, "it's only the fireworks."

The stewards had organised a brief display. Hope, now back on terra firma, hid behind her father's legs and peeked at the array of bright colours in the night sky. Someone should have warned me, she thought.

Sarah Case had found little spare time since the wedding. When she and Henry weren't furnishing their apartment, she carried out duties in her new parish on the other side of Bath. Sarah discovered a church choir with a healthy number of young choristers.

A final skyrocket that produced a thousand glittering crystals and a loud thunderclap signalled the end of the firework display. Hope was more prepared this time, and as the echo faded away the boys and girls launched into Christmas carols in the dining room.

The guests made their way back from the garden. The bonfire still burned well, but the chill of a December night took its toll. There were smiling faces of people happy to be in the warm. When the carols ended and Sarah had said a prayer it was time to enjoy the rest of the evening. Mulled wine for the grown-ups and hot mince-pies and squash for the young choristers.

Phoenix stood by the patio doors and took in the view.

"It doesn't get much better than this," he said aloud, "I wouldn't want to be anywhere else in the world right now."

"I know what you mean," said Rusty, who had spotted Phoenix and wandered over to join him. "When we're together, having fun, it's hard not to forget forces are at work who wish to tear all this away from us."

"While we have breath..." said Phoenix, as he saw Artemis heading their way.

"The fireworks are over, boys," she laughed, grabbing her husband's arm and dragging him towards the centre of the room. Rusty groaned as he realised Sarah was arranging party games until the parents arrived to collect the boys and girls of the choir.

Phoenix looked at the dying embers of the bonfire.

"If only," he thought.

"Time to say goodnight to a tired tot," said Athena. Hope was half asleep on her mother's shoulder, sucking a thumb.

"We should have invited Geoffrey over tonight," said Phoenix, "he would have enjoyed this."

"He's wrapped up warm indoors for the night," said Athena, "I called earlier to remind him we're collecting him tomorrow. I can't believe it's Christmas Eve."

They tucked Hope into bed and stood and watched from the nursery door as she settled.

"Forget Christmas Eve coming around so soon," whispered Phoenix, "New Year's Eve will be on us before we know it. A first birthday. Yet another celebration."

Athena kissed him on the cheek.

"Come on," she said, "let's get back to our guests. The youngsters from Sarah's parish will leave in a few minutes and we can relax in front of that big fireplace."

"Exactly," said Phoenix, "give it an hour, and we'll take it in turns to stifle a big yawn until they take the hint."

"What did you have in mind?" asked Athena.

"An early night," replied Phoenix.

Now, as he lay in bed, he smiled at the memory.

On Christmas Eve, the transport section sent a car to collect Geoffrey Fox from his seaside bungalow in Burnham. The family then spent a convivial time over the Christmas holidays. Geoffrey enjoyed watching Hope tear open presents, some were her own and others his or her parents, but it kept her amused. He smiled a lot too.

This was the first Christmas without his beloved Grace and Athena knew it important to keep him occupied and let him know how much he was loved. She knew the memories would return, but the less time her father had to think, the better. That night, she shed a tear as she

recalled happy Christmases they shared in London. Phoenix had gathered her in his arms. They needed no words.

Hope didn't give her grandfather much peace either when they returned to Burnham on Boxing Day. She wanted to walk around the bungalow and gardens, to make sure he was safe and sound. The family walked to the beach in the afternoon and let the fresh air buffet them from one end of the promenade to the other. It blew the cobwebs away from Christmas Day and sharpened the appetite for a meal out in town. In the early evening, they visited a restaurant that Geoffrey discovered on his occasional forays into Burnham.

When they said their goodbyes back at the bungalow, Athena drove back to Larcombe because Phoenix had joined his father-in-law in a large brandy.

"Only because it's Christmas, Phoenix," Geoffrey said, "It's rare I touch the stuff these days."

The wink he gave Phoenix when Athena wasn't watching said everything.

As they drew up by the main building at ten o'clock, they bumped into Henry and Sarah Case. While the two female university friends chatted over church services, soft furnishings and the weather, Phoenix took Henry to one side.

"Have you revisited the security protocols yet, Henry?" he asked.

"Already done, Phoenix," replied Henry, "we've had a wake-up call with these drones and that Gonzalez fellow. We reassessed every aspect of how we keep Larcombe safe. Giles and his crew are introducing technical innovations from tonight that will give us an early warning of any imminent incursions. The foot patrols will increase throughout the day and night."

"That's terrific, Henry. I can sleep easy tonight."

"More to the point, Phoenix, Athena can stop fretting."

Phoenix had smiled at that comment. Sarah and Athena's conversation ended.

"Everything OK?" asked Athena.

"Time will tell," said Henry.

Phoenix rolled over in bed and stared at the alarm clock. How did it get to be ten o'clock already? His reverie needed to stop. He got up, showered and made ready to face the day.

As he reached the door to the lounge, he heard Hope's laughter.

"That's what I like to hear," he said as he entered. He was surprised to see Giles Burke making his daughter giggle. Maria Elena was in the kitchen. Athena was absent.

"Hello, Giles," he said, "I didn't expect to see you. Hope seems to enjoy your company though?"

Maria Elena came through from the kitchen with a drink for Hope.

"Giles can pull funny faces," she said, raising her eyebrows, "at least, they're funny for a young child."

"Have you seen Athena?" asked Phoenix.

"You're not in her good books, Phoenix," said Giles, "she meant us to have a morning meeting. Athena told us you got back late, but she still expected you to be ready for nine o'clock, given events overnight."

"Ah, the broken wing mirror. I hit the wall in the fog last night. I took one of the best cars on my recce trip yesterday. We've had far too many reported sightings of dark blue or black vans with two agents on board. I reckoned we should vary our transport more."

Giles gave Phoenix a quizzical look.

“No, nothing like that. In fact, nobody knows about the wing mirror except the guys in the garage.”

“What was it then?” asked Phoenix.

“The increased foot patrols proved successful. Henry has a guest in an interrogation room in the ice house. They found evidence of his various hiding places from previous nights, but until last night he had always moved position when they tried to surprise him. His final spot was in the bell tower of the estate church. As the patrol passed by, an owl scooted away from the tower ledge. The lads must have spooked him. Our unwelcome visitor got a bigger shock as it must have flown past his face and he couldn’t stifle a string of swear words. The two agents lay in wait until he returned to ground level just before dawn and brought him in without a fuss.”

“I’d better get over there to see what Henry has learned.”

“Up to you, Phoenix, but Athena is watching proceedings from behind the one-way mirror.”

“Imagining me trussed up in the chair,” said Phoenix, “ah well, I’ve got to face the music sometime.”

As he turned to leave the room, he had a thought: -

“Is Artemis working in the ice house? As you’re here with Maria Elena?”

“No, she was with me when we pitched up to the meeting room. Her and Rusty disappeared after Athena cancelled the meeting.”

“I won’t disturb them then,” smiled Phoenix, “it will only upset me more if I interrupt them having fun. It might be the spare room for me tonight. I don’t need more grief.”

Hope giggled as he left the room.

No, thought Phoenix, it had to be Giles and another funny face. No way could she be finding my discomfort a laughing matter at her age.

Phoenix began the long walk along the corridors, down the elegant staircase to the ground floor and then outside to battle his way against the freshening winds. No chance of a repeat of a foggy night tonight.

He reminisced about the days following Boxing Day. Across the country, few families ever complained when Christmas Day fell on a Thursday. It meant a free weekend tacked onto the seasonal celebrations. The gap to New Year that followed was so brief that many had kept holiday entitlements in reserve to avoid returning to work until today.

Phoenix made his way along the path past the orangery and headed towards the stable block. He recalled reading reports supplied by Minos and Alastor on events around the country. The only people hard at work were the emergency services and the criminal fraternity.

When New Year’s Eve arrived, there was the usual anticipation of a fresh start. As if the time between eleven fifty-nine and midnight was more significant on the final day of the year than any other. Phoenix had suffered over forty-five disappointments in his lifetime. It was just another day; until last year when Athena went into labour earlier than predicted.

Phoenix had heard Hope’s first cry when the crowds in London counted from ten towards midnight. He first set eyes on Athena with their daughter in her arms as the chimes of Big Ben boomed out across the Thames and the firework display began.

Hope was unaware of last Wednesday night’s importance. As soon as she was born, Athena had told him she wanted to celebrate the birth of their daughter at the same time. First

thing Wednesday morning was wrong. As was first thing New Year's Day. Phoenix had been so keen to get to sleep after a week of night feeds he agreed without protest.

So, Maria Elena and Athena contrived to tinker with Hope's routine to have her bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in her party frock at eleven thirty at night. Hope attacked the wrapping paper on her presents with gusto. She devoured her jelly and ice-cream. Maria Elena carried the birthday cake and its one candle through from the kitchen and set it on the table in front of the birthday girl.

Rusty, Artemis, Henry, Sarah and Giles had joined the proud parents to celebrate both a birthday and another fresh start. Geoffrey Fox elected not to come. He was suffering from a heavy cold. One which he blamed on the Boxing Day walk along the promenade. Hope stopped looking at her presents when she heard her mother sing.

Everyone joined in with her singing 'Happy Birthday' and Maria Elena lit the candle. When they stopped, Hope clapped and then she paused. All eyes turned towards her wondering what she would do next.

Her nose twitched, and a tremendous sneeze extinguished the flaming candle.

"I think someone has caught Grandad's cold, don't you?" said Athena, as everyone collapsed in fits of laughter.

While Maria Elena cut the cake, Phoenix wiped Hope's nose and dabbed at her party dress. Athena switched on the television and the scenes from the Thames embankment and Trafalgar Square echoed the events of twelve months earlier. As Hope dug into her slice of cake, the others raised a glass to 2015.

The following four days had seen little activity in the UK, but at Larcombe Manor, there had been sleepless nights for Phoenix and Athena. Hope's cold saw to that. She was on the mend now, thank goodness, Phoenix thought as he reached the entrance to the ice house.

He descended to Level Three. Henry Case was in Interrogation Room Two. Phoenix entered the observation room next door. Athena sat in a chair, alone, her hands steeped under her chin as she rested on the window ledge. Their prisoner looked to be mid-twenties, possibly from a Mediterranean or South American origin.

"You got up at last then?" Athena asked.

"It was a tiring journey after a long day," Phoenix replied, taking a seat beside her, "who have we got here and what has he told Henry so far?"

"This is Miguel Fernando, twenty-five, currently living in London. He moved south from Sheffield."

"Have we learned anything important?"

Athena sat back in her chair.

"Henry has only just started, Phoenix, don't be so impatient. After our security patrol discovered him, they brought him below and left him in darkness for two hours. Henry treated him to occasional periods of your favourite music at excruciatingly high volume for an hour. Now, he's peeling back each layer of the onion. I'm needed in the administration offices. If you wish to stay here to watch, you can. I'll see you at lunchtime."

With that, Athena stood and headed for the door.

"I'm sorry," said Phoenix.

"I know you are," said Athena. She stepped away from the door and planted a kiss on her husband's forehead, "these first few days of 2015 have left us on edge. Something momentous

is looming on the horizon and I don't know whether Olympus can counter it.”

“We must take each day as it comes, Athena. Our cause is just. Our intentions are pure. Whatever the Grid throws at us we must respond to in equal measure for as long as we are able. If the terror threat grows, then that too will need us to oppose it with as much vigour as we can muster.”

The door closed behind his wife and in the next room, Henry Case continued to interrogate Miguel Fernando.

Phoenix wondered whether this young man was destined to be another resident in the pet cemetery.