

## CHAPTER 8



Phineas walked through a familiar path, his hands constantly brushing against the low shrubs as he followed behind a pair of nymphs guiding the way. The rustling leaves of the forest were a soothing lullaby, and the scent of the earth was familiar and comforting. He found himself transported back to a simpler time, a time when he was just a young boy, playing near the farm and hiding with his imaginary friends. It felt like it'd been ages since he'd last visited here. The place served as an oasis, where the burdens of his world were swept away by the gentle currents of serenity, leaving only the calm ripples of peace.

The trees thickened the further he wandered, heading towards his safe space. But when he got there, what he saw was not what he'd been expecting.

Monika was there, standing among the trees and bathed in the soft, dappled light that filtered through the leaves. Her presence was surreal, yet soothing. An unexpected surge of conflicting emotions washed over Phineas, mingling with warmth and betrayal, freezing him in place mid-step.

"What are you doing here?"

"Phineas, you need to go back home," she said, her voice pleasant yet imploring.

Phineas tilted his head, confusion etched across his face. "I can't. There's something I need to do. Something important."

"I know what you're trying to do. I've seen it. But you're only 14." Monika's expression held a mixture of sadness and worry as she reached out to touch his shoulder. "Phineas, it's too dangerous. You don't need to do this. Come back so we can talk about it."

Phineas pulled away from her, a defiant expression planted on his face. "No, I need to find answers, and I can't be busy living in my fears. I know how to make things right. I can't just ignore everything, pretending it's all okay, like you did."

Monika recoiled, as if the air itself had delivered an unexpected blow, her reaction a physical testament to the impact of the moment. She looked hurt, her eyes drowning in the pain of a

past she couldn't change. "Phineas, please. You have your whole life ahead of you. I know what it's like to take things for granted. I know what it's like to lose your home and I'm telling you, this is not the way."

Phineas furrowed his brow, annoyance welling up within him. "You don't understand! Nobody understands what I'm going through, especially not you. You do not know what it's like to learn your whole life was a lie, to know that—" With a frustrated grunt, he shook his head and moved to the right. "It doesn't matter. You can't stop me."

The edges of his vision faded, the forest slowly disappearing. Monika tried to reach him again, but it was as though she was getting further and further away from him, her voice growing distant. "Don't do it! Please, be careful, Phineas, you—"

Phineas woke up with a startle, his heart pounding loudly in his chest as the remnants of his dream faded. His thoughts danced on the periphery of remembrance, teasing him like a distant melody as he struggled to hum. The tighter he clenched, the more elusive it became, slipping through his fingers like sand in an hourglass. He felt like an archeologist excavating buried relics, seeking to unearth the buried treasure of forgotten recollections. All that remained, though, was an unsettling feeling in the pit of his stomach.

The sun was already high in the sky. Golden rays filtered through the ancient crevices of the cave, casting a gentle glow upon the weary travelers. Pushing himself up from the rocky ground, he slowly made his way outside to clear his head.

But when he placed a hand at the entrance of the cave and looked out, the view in front of him did nothing to ease the heavy feeling in his chest. They'd finally made it to the outskirts of the castle, but the sight unfolding before him stretched beyond the boundaries of his imagination, an unforeseen tableau that seemed to have been painted by a mischievous muse.



Down the hill where the cave was, the village Sun had spoken of, the one his parents had once ruled over, was now a haunting echo of its former self. Instead of the thriving markets, stores that sold magical artifacts and throngs of happy citizens he'd expected, there were troops everywhere. Their presence dominated the streets. The atmosphere was cold and unwelcoming, a stark contrast to the vibrant tales Sun had shared.

While patches of the village bore the marks of reconstruction, remnants of the devastating fire

lingered like ghostly echoes in the shadows. It was a somber place. The once lush canopy of trees had dwindled, leaving gaps in the verdant tapestry. Their leaves whispered tales of loss and change, like a mourning choir.

A loud roar cut through the sky and Phineas looked up just as a shadowy form darted past him, joining the fleet of other shapes soaring above the village in a synchronized dance through the open sky. He ducked for cover, but the dragon passed by without looking back. The distant ringing of dragons patrolling the skies stirred a sense of both awe and anger within Phineas. He watched them in flight, their massive wings slicing through the air with little effort. It was a breathtaking sight, marred by the knowledge that these once-peaceful creatures were the reason that his kingdom had fallen into such a pitiful state.

Following their path, Phineas' eyes gravitated toward the castle, standing regally like a forgotten monarch overlooking the quaint village below. His throat closed up. He thought it'd be black, for some silly reason. Thought it would be a burnt crisp that advertised what the power of fire could do. Instead, they rebuilt the castle. It soared skyward in an opulent display of magnificence, with its imposing towers reaching for the sky like a dragon about to take flight. There was no sign of the war on its

pristine walls, and that was the worst thing imaginable. It was as if the war had never happened.

Phineas wanted to run in there and kick up a storm, but he knew he still had a lot of work to do. Over the past few days, his training had intensified. He practiced with Lukas every day. They'd moved on from only fighting with their fists. Now, Phineas could use his magic as well, honing his skills to work in harmony with the natural world. Lukas defended himself without relying on his dragon transformation, hoping that would prevent Cadmus from taking over his body once again.

It was weird. After the incident, Phineas felt more at ease with Lukas than he ever had. Perhaps it was because they now shared a common goal, or because of their similar experiences. He wasn't sure.

Lukas confessed that sharing his entire narrative felt less daunting with Phineas present, as if the mere proximity of his friend provided a beacon of courage in the darkness.

"Why?" Phineas had asked, frowning.

"Because you've always expected the worst from me. So, you're probably the one I disappointed the least." He'd shrugged, then cast a fleeting glance at Chee as a wave of emotion flickered in his eyes. "It's the first time I've ever had a genuine connection with anyone, you know? Chee's behavior was

consistent right from the beginning. He saw me for who I was. He didn't just see a dragon shifter."

Phineas' gaze intersected with Chee's and Sun's, forging a momentary nexus of connection between the three. "I don't think he's disappointed, you know."

Lukas scoffed. "Sure."

"Mate, you almost choked him. Ok no, not you," Phineas had corrected after Lukas' glare. "He's probably just shaken. Give him some time."

Lukas muttered something, and they went back to training. Turns out, Chee needed more than some time. Things were better between him and Lukas, but Phineas could tell there was still some doubt there with Chee.

Lukas wasn't the only one having trouble, though. After the almost-kiss by the river, things between Phineas and Sun had taken an awkward turn. Phineas could understand why she was cautious around Lukas, with the image of him holding Chee by the neck still fresh in her mind. It made sense for her to act weird with him. He'd thought things would be different when he and Sun were alone, but they weren't. She faded like an echo in a vast canyon, distant and faint. Sun barely looked him in the eye. She didn't approach him like she used to, and even though they had finally started talking

about his father's magic, her lessons were more guarded, void of the usual warmth.

"It's called Command," Sun had explained one day, her voice reverberating with a distant sarcasm. "I didn't have enough time to learn everything about it, but I've seen it in action a few times. It's something only the descendants of the Pethosyus lineage possess."



"Sun, about the other day..." Phineas started. "Perhaps we should talk about it?"

"There's no time. You need to learn this. And fast."

Her sense of urgency always put a damper on Phineas' attempts to talk. He didn't understand it. Was it just her worry that pushed her to do everything to protect him? Or had he simply misunderstood everything? Perhaps the breach between them was all his fault??

His curiosity remained a caged bird, fluttering against the bars of uncertainty. Yet, he couldn't bring himself to set it free. His mind was pretty occupied anyway, trying to comprehend what little Sun could tell him about the magic lying dormant



within him. Still, the question lingered on the tip of his tongue every time she looked his way.

He often wondered what his father had been like. How was it that generations of his family had wielded a power like this? He remembered how it felt back at the Academy, when he'd accidentally sealed Sun's lips for almost a full day. He'd been so impatient to learn about his father's magic but, after what had happened with Lukas, the thought of being able to command others terrified him. It was an immense power, with unbelievable consequences. He wasn't sure he was ready to wield it.

"Ready to train, sleepyhead?"

Footsteps grew louder. Phineas turned to face Sun, coming towards him alone.

"Where are Lukas and Chee?" he asked, hoping to steer the conversation away from the topic without her noticing his apprehension.

"They're exploring that path Lukas found," Sun replied, her eyes scanning the village below. "The one that's supposed to let us slip by undetected. I thought the two of them could use some time alone. They need to stop being so awkward around each other."

"Right," Phineas frowned, thinking that was rich coming from her and sensing a possible hidden layer of meaning in her words.

He was about to ask if there was more to it, but then she turned, hands on her hips. "I'm still not sure about this plan."

Phineas sighed. "We've been over this, Sun. I'm not strong enough to take on Cadmus directly. I'm not stupid enough to believe that I can, either."

"Thank the Heavens," she muttered, playing with a lock of pink hair. Phineas ignored the need to place it behind her ear.

"We need to work together for this to succeed," he continued. "Lukas knows how we can travel throughout this land undetected by dragon patrols. Somewhere within your thoughts lives a faint trail, a breadcrumb that could lead us toward the elusive location of the relic. If we focus on those two things, we can find the relic, get in and out quickly, and then learn how to use it before Cadmus even knows what's happened. This is the best plan we have."

Sun crossed her arms over her chest. "How do we know he doesn't know we're here already?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if he's read Lukas' mind recently?"

Phineas pulled back. "Is that the reason you sent Chee with Lukas? To keep an eye on him?"

"No. Well, yeah." Closing her eyes, she rubbed a hand to her temples. "It was both things, ok?"

"Lukas won't betray us. He doesn't like the black dragons any more than we do."



"I know he won't, but we don't know what Cadmus is capable of. It's Cadmus that scares me, not Lukas."

"He hasn't heard Cadmus again in his head since that night.

Lukas says he feels stronger each day now that he's consciously training to avoid him taking over his body and mind. As long as he doesn't transform, we'll be fine, I think."

Sun hesitated, her gaze distant. "I know, Phineas. It's just... something doesn't feel right." A bright sheen covered her eyes. "This whole place, it's all wrong. There's no life to it."

Phineas wanted to reach out to her, to offer reassurance, but he held back. He glimpsed into the abyss of her reactions. There was a chasm of unpredictability that made him hesitant to take the leap, especially with the current space between them. Before he could find the right words, Sun turned away, her hands resting on her hips in a stance of determination.

"We need to train more," she said, her voice firm. "Your control over your magic is essential, especially if we're adamant about polishing this

flawed gem of an idea. This plan is stupid. We can't afford any missteps."

Phineas hesitated, his discomfort palpable. "I've tried, Sun, but the power doesn't come to me easily. My connection with the trees is strong, but this... this Command power is different. It's elusive."

Sun's expression softened, a mixture of sympathy and determination in her eyes. "We'll figure it out together, Phineas. You're not alone anymore."

Just as Phineas was about to reply, Lukas and Chee came running back to the cave, their expressions a mix of exhaustion and excitement. Phineas immediately sensed something significant had happened.

"What's going on?" Phineas asked, concern furrowing his brow.

"We found it," Chee exclaimed, his eyes alight with triumph.

Phineas' heart skipped a beat. "Found what?"

Lukas grinned, a rare sight. "The relic. We found the artifact we've been searching for."

A surge of hope and determination welled up within Phineas. This was it—the key to their fight against Cadmus. The relic was now within their grasp, a glimmer of light amid endless darkness.

As they prepared to embark on the next phase of their journey, Phineas felt a newfound sense of

purpose finally settling within him. With the relic in their possession, they had a real chance—a chance to change the course of everyone’s destiny, to challenge the oppressive forces that had cast a shadow over their lives. He felt like the luckiest person on the planet.

At the entrance of a cave that had turned into a refuge and amidst the whispers of the trees and the distant roars of dragons, Phineas stood defiantly with his friends. The weight of their shared mission hung in the air, but so did the promise of a better future, a future they would fight for with all their strength. Their determination was an unbreakable fortress.

And so, with the relic awaiting them and their resolve unyielding, they set forth, ready to face the obstacles ahead. Little did they know their journey would lead them to the heart of a battle that would test not only their abilities but also the depths of their friendships and the strength of their convictions.



The journey remained an open road, each step a new verse in the ballad of their ongoing adventure. And so they began. They marched forward, their footsteps echoing, the beating of their unified hearts, each step bringing them closer to the ultimate confrontation that would decide the fate of their world.