

~ DOPAmine ~

CHAPTER 8

The sun was at its peak as the four friends waited by the river, checking their bags to make sure they weren't forgetting anything. Phineas, Sun, Chee, and Lukas stood in uneasy silence, each of them occupied with an unfamiliar task. The thrill of the upcoming adventure buzzed through them, making it impossible to sit still.

Sun adjusted her bag on her shoulder, her eyes drifting toward Phineas as if searching for unspoken reassurance. There was a little crease on his forehead and, now and then, his eyes darted toward the dragon village behind them. He stayed quiet, lost in his tasks, but the way his gaze kept lingering towards the empty road betrayed the growing weight of his thoughts.

As the minutes dragged into an hour, the weight of inaction settled over them, their preparations finally complete.

Chee was the one to break the silence: "They're not coming."

Phineas let out a slow sigh, his eyes fixed on the village, the faint sag of his shoulders betraying his disappointment. "Yeah, I don't think so." Hope

flickered like a dying ember, and with a solemn shake of his head, he let it fade to ash. Most people dream so big, but they live so small.

"There's no point stalling anymore. Let's go."

Sun nodded. She couldn't say she hadn't expected this outcome, but it was hard to watch Phineas' disappointed face. "C'mon, we have a long journey ahead."

"Hold up," Lukas said, stepping forward to stop them just as they were about to head out. "Before we do this..." He hesitated, his eyes betraying a sense of determination when he looked up. "I want to take the Oath."

Sun raised her eyebrows in surprise, but Phineas didn't seem as fazed. "Are you sure?" he questioned. "You know it's unnecessary for you to do that."

Lukas, however, was resolute. "I'm sure. I believe you won't abuse your power, and the Oath might offer better protection from Cadmus."

"That's true," Chee pondered aloud, playing with the hem of the hat covering his horns. "And it might also extend the protection to the rest of your clan."

Sun furrowed her brow. "What?"

"Well, think about it," Chee said. "Lukas is the next leader in their ranks, and in the past, they used

to make the leaders take the Oath. It will probably offer some protection to his clan by extension."

Lukas' mouth turned down at the corner. "They don't really recognize me as their leader, so it might not be like that."

Chee, however, countered optimistically: "It doesn't hurt to hope."

Phineas eyed Lukas with his lips pursed. "Do you know how to do it?"

Lukas nodded. "My mother taught me the words when I was young. We need to hold hands." Phineas raised an eyebrow and Lukas rolled his eyes. "Like this, you idiot."



Their hands locked at the forearm, a gesture that spoke of mutual trust and determination. Sun got closer to get a better view, and Chee did the same. Together, they gathered in a circle by the riverbank. Lukas took a deep breath and began reciting the Oath in the ancient language. The words

shimmered with an almost tangible energy, their cadence transforming the still air into a conduit for something timeless and profound.

With each word Lukas uttered, memories bloomed in Sun's mind like petals unfurling—scenes of a serene home untouched by war, her mother's voice a song of lessons, and the palace alive with the laughter of simpler times. It struck Sun that, like Lukas, she too had made irrevocable choices in the past. The weight of those decisions still pressed heavily on her chest, and she couldn't help but wonder how many of those choices had truly been her own. The sacredness of the moment wasn't lost on her, and a quiet pride stirred within as she saw Phineas standing with such composed strength. That boy she once knew had given way to a man of stature, his presence now carrying the quiet strength of a ruler in the making. A tinge of worry about what lay ahead at the Academy snuck in there too, yet they couldn't afford to hesitate now. Action was their only recourse.

As the echoes of the Oath faded, Phineas wore a grateful yet solemn expression. "Thank you, Lukas."

The boy nodded and dropped his hand but, before Sun could ask if they felt any difference, the sound of clapping broke the moment. Startled, they turned to find Claudia and Monika approaching.

Sun smiled. "Did you come to say goodbye?"

The two women exchanged a glance before Claudia answered, "No, we're going with you."

The group exchanged startled glances, and Phineas' bewildered expression made it clear he hadn't expected this. Sun's grip on her bag tightened instinctively. For a split second, she wondered if this was another test, a ploy to catch them off guard. The wariness in Phineas' eyes mirrored her own, a silent question passing between them.

"No, you're not," he stated simply.

Sun chuckled at the exasperated looks they shot him, secretly delighted that he was finally getting a taste of his own medicine after all his rule-breaking escapades. She would never say that to him, though.

Claudia raised an eyebrow at Phineas' attempt and said calmly, "There's nothing you can do to stop us, Phineas."

"We're more than capable of handling ourselves, son," Monika chimed in, though it seemed like she was enjoying this as much as Sun was.

Claudia continued, "Besides, it's been a while, but I can still turn into a dragon if need be."

With a subtle shimmer, Claudia transformed into a beautiful, light red dragon. The transformation was a mesmerizing display of scales

and wings, a show of the ancient power inherent in their bloodlines.



With a regal sweep of her wings, the dragon moved with an elegance that left her audience spellbound, the promise of flight radiating from every motion. Monika jumped on her back.

“If you don’t hurry, we’re going to leave you behind.”

Lukas grumbled something under his breath, but he quickly followed suit and transformed, too, lowering himself so the others could climb on.

“Guess we have little choice,” Chee shrugged, climbing on Lukas’ back.

“Ugh, fine. Let’s go.” Phineas jumped on and offered Sun a hand.

“I wish I could fly there, too,” she said, taking it. “But these two would leave me trailing far behind in no time.”

Claudia and Lukas spread their wings with a coordination that could only come from their shared minds. With a powerful sweep of their wings, they soared skyward, leaving the village far behind as they headed toward the Academy.



Claudia led them through the mountains, using paths that offered the most cover to shield the village from unwanted eyes.

As they soared through the skies, the wind whipping around them, Sun took the chance to admire the view from Lukas' back. Unconscious for her first experience, she now found it fascinating to notice just how distinct it was from the freedom of using her own wings. It felt like being tethered to another soul, a symphony of movement not entirely her own. Though the wind kissed her face the same, she missed the visceral connection to the air, the thrill of her own strength propelling her forward.

There was something deeply moving about their flight to the Academy, the way Claudia and Lukas seemed to communicate through their seamless, fluid movements. The wind rushed by, tugging at Sun's hair with a force and speed unlike anything she had felt before. Beneath them, the landscape unfolded like a living tapestry, a patchwork of fields, forests, and rivers bathed in the golden hues of the setting sun.

The dragons soared effortlessly, their scales catching the fading sunlight, creating a dazzling display of iridescent colors that painted the sky.

The calm expanse of the countryside gradually transformed into the clustered villages that loomed near the Academy, their presence a stark reminder of what lay ahead.

"I wonder if Dad is ok," Che muttered as they got close. Sun could tell he'd been worrying about that for a while, given the way he was biting his nails.

Phineas placed a hand on his shoulder. "We'll be there soon. Knowing the Director, I'm sure he came up with a contingency plan."

His voice trailed off as the Academy's somber silhouette loomed before them, a shadow of its former glory, leaving them breathless in shared disbelief.

They were still far, but there was no one in sight in the fields. The lively scenes of the past were

gone, replaced by an oppressive emptiness, the walls scarred and broken by Cadmus' relentless attack. Pillars of smoke rose like mournful echoes, marking the devastation below.



Sun covered her mouth with a hand. “No...”

“We need to go down before they spot us,” Phineas said, and Lukas nodded his scaly head. The dragons spiraled gracefully, descending to a landing that was as smooth as their ascent.

Before they could touch the ground, however, a blast of fire blocked their way. Lukas banked left as the air crackled with magic and deafening roars filled Sun's ears. When she looked up, she saw three dragons, all in shades of blue, circling around them.

“We were careless,” she cursed. “Phineas, we need to get out of here before they can alert the others!”

Spreading her wings, she jumped from Lukas' back to assess the situation. One of their enemies spit fire at Lukas again, but Chee was faster. With swift incantations, he erected protective barriers, deflecting the fiery onslaught. Phineas darted a glance at Sun, silently signaling her to draw one dragon away from the group. It was a maneuver they had practiced before, relying on Sun's agility to

isolate an opponent while the others focused on their attacks.

The smaller of the three dragons noticed Sun and their lips curled as though they thought she was easy prey. They flew head on in her direction, jaws open to snap her head off. Sun's fingers danced with magic, and in a swift motion, her attacker succumbed to an unnatural slumber, collapsing mid-flight.

The battlefield erupted with a clash of thunderous roars, the chaotic sounds amplifying the intensity of the fray. Monika and Chee had gotten to the ground safely, the first standing beside the Minotaur to protect him as he cast his protective barriers.

Meanwhile, Lukas and Claudia engaged the adversaries in a whirlwind of scales and claws. The sky became a battleground of clashes, shadows swirling against the purple twilight. Lukas roared, unleashing the full power of his flames, while Claudia twisted and turned with unmatched agility.

Amid the aerial spectacle, Phineas seized the opportunity to unleash his own unique brand of magic. He directed the ancient trees surrounding the battleground to respond to his Command: vines shot up from the forest floor, whipping through the air to grab at the attackers, like the woods themselves had joined the fight.

Sun watched in admiration. Her friends had it all figured out—strength, coordination, and plenty of power to spare. They didn't really need her help, and the blue dragons were already on the run.

A vicious blow from an opponent replaced Claudia's triumphant roar with a pained cry.

"No!" Sun screamed.

Claudia plummeted to the ground, her dragon form morphing into her human self. She clutched her injured arm, blood seeping through her fingers. The metallic tang of blood filled the air as crimson droplets splattered the ground. Claudia's breaths came in ragged gasps, her human form pale and trembling, a stark contrast to the commanding dragon she had been mere moments ago. Sun rushed to Claudia's side, terrified by the pained breaths coming out of the woman.

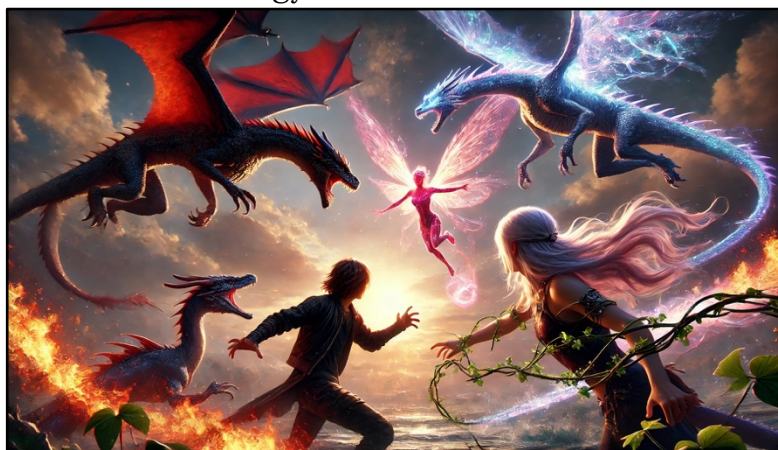
An angry bellow, filled with primal fury, shook the very ground beneath them. Determination blazed in Lukas' eyes as he ascended in a fast line, tackling the aggressor with unbridled wrath.

Monika rushed to Claudia as well. "We need to stop the bleeding," she declared, her hands moving with practiced precision as she quickly assessed the wound. The clash of combat raged on, its relentless noise a grim reminder of the danger surrounding their desperate efforts to help Claudia.

Sun turned to Phineas for help but found him surveying the chaotic scene. The odds seemed to have turned on them, as Lukas now battled two enemies, and Phineas' vines couldn't reach them.

The blue dragons split up to box Lukas in. Chee was struggling to put up enough barriers, and the attacks were coming faster and faster. She needed to help. Sun was about to take flight again when Phineas stood in front of them, raising a hand.

"Lay down!" He screamed, his voice so strong that it made Sun tremble and her body tingle all over. It wasn't pain, nor was it comfort—just a cascade of electric sparks, igniting every nerve with an unfamiliar energy.



As if tugged by an invisible string, the blue dragons fell to the ground, lying like repentant dogs.

Sun smiled brightly. "Phi, you did it!"

"Yeah..." He looked at her briefly, then glanced away. "We should hide before their friends find

them. And Claudia needs to recover. Let's get out of here.”

Lukas transformed back so they wouldn't attract unwanted attention, and Monika helped Claudia move. They made their way to one of the oldest villages, sneaking between houses until they found an abandoned cottage.

As they were going in to it, Monika glanced at Phineas. “Did you just use the Relic within Sun?”

Sun stopped short before she could step through the door. “What?”

Beside her, Phineas froze in place, his face pale.

Monika looked horrified. “You haven't told her yet?”

“I...I...” Phineas struggled with words as he looked at Sun pleadingly.

It then dawned on her. The reason Phineas had been acting so weird; his conversation with Chee; this was the thing he'd been hiding from her! Everything she believed came crashing down as she locked eyes with those deceitful golden irises. It wasn't just anger coursing through her veins—it was fear. Fear of what she had become, fear of what the Relic had already made her do without her knowledge. Was she even herself anymore, or just a vessel for a power she didn't understand?

“The Relic is inside me?” she asked. “Did you know about this?”

"Sun, I..."

"Did you know about this?!"

Her eyes lit up with anger and turned red as she stared him down, and the way he dropped his head told her everything she needed to know.

"You lied!" Sun's accusation echoed through the forest. The anguish in her voice struck Phineas like a physical blow, and he faltered.

"Sun, I was going to tell you, but it was never the right time."

"That wasn't for you to decide!" Sun's world shook as a new understanding dawned on her—the dreams, the struggles, the fiery bird... Every mystery, every shadow in her life pointed back to the Relic that had taken root inside her.

Sun felt the foundation of trust crumble beneath her. The questions piled up in her mind like a tempest, each one tearing at the tether that connected her to Phineas.

If there was a creature inside her, what did this make her? Was she merely a vessel for this ancient power, a pawn in a larger game she had no control over? The specter of the fiery bird from her dreams lingered, its presence casting a powerful shadow over her very identity.

She turned to leave.

Phineas, desperate to bridge the growing chasm between them, reached out. "Sun, wait!"

She felt a tug forcing her to stop and turned to glare at him. “What? Are you going to force me to stay with you, like a slave?”

Sun's words pierced the air, and Phineas stumbled as though someone had punched him. Unfazed, Sun turned away, unable to hold back tears or look at him any longer.

With each step, she felt her heart shatter, leaving behind fragments of trust and shared memories that were now forever tainted.

When the forest swallowed her, the fragile echoes of their shattered link hung in the air, fading into nothingness like a final goodbye...