

~ Pixels of light ~

CHAPTER 5



The next morning, Phineas eased the door to Sun's room open, his heart caught between hope and fear. He clung to the hope, almost pleading with fate, to find her resting peacefully on the bed, maybe drowsy but on the mend, rather than in the lifeless state she had been in.

He wasn't sure what he would do if she were unconscious again. For the past two months, the uncertainty of not knowing what would happen to her had nearly killed him. And seeing her forest green eyes flutter open, dazed yet alive, had sparked a fragile ember of hope within him he was reluctant to let extinguish.

However, the bed was empty when he walked in. His heart seized as worst-case scenarios flooded his mind—had she wandered off alone, still weak? Had something gone wrong in the night? A wave of panic surged through him. Where was she? His eyes darted around the room until they settled on a slim figure standing by the window and gazing down at the river below.

“You’re up,” he exclaimed, surprise and relief flooding his voice.

At the sharp sound, she flinched, turning swiftly toward him, her movements almost reflexive.

Phineas stood silently. She had clearly searched the room, as she was already wearing her black dress and combat boots. Seeing her there gave the sensation of stepping into a dream, a surreal vision brought to life. Her presence seemed almost ethereal, as though the morning light itself had stitched her back together, brighter and stronger than she had any right to be after two months of stillness. The color had returned to her cheeks. Sun looked stronger than ever. Her pink hair, so pale and lifeless when she’d been bedridden, now looked healthier, shining wildly with the light streaming in from the window. Phineas got lost for a second in the pixels of light dancing across her face.

But then joy overwhelmed him; he barreled towards her, sweeping her up in a jubilant, bear hug.

“Did no one teach you to knock before entering a lady’s room?” Sun complained, though there was no actual annoyance in her tone as she hugged him back.

Phineas laughed and twirled with her in a circle. “Oh my God, you’re up! How do you feel? Does anything hurt? Are you okay?”

Sun blushed. “Phineas, I’m fine. You sound like a worried mother.”

“Well, what did you expect?” Phineas set her down, keeping his hands on her shoulders. “Why did you do that?” he asked. The hurt was palpable in his face. Phineas didn’t need to clarify what he was talking about, but he did. He was still angry at her for the stunt she’d pulled. “Why did you do something like that when you knew you could... you could’ve...” The words caught in his throat, choked by the weight of everything he couldn’t say. He wanted to tell her how many nights he had sat by her side, begging the gods—any gods—to bring her back.

“Died?” Sun finished, her tone impassive. Phineas flinched and her expression softened a little. She let out a small sigh. “Phi, if I hadn’t done that, would you have escaped?”

“Maybe I would have! We could have come up with something else. You didn’t know that we wouldn’t.” Phineas tried to defend himself, even

though deep down, he knew the odds had been against them. “Just, please, promise me that next time, we’ll try to find another way.”

She raised an eyebrow. “So you’re planning on running into danger again?”

“Well, you know how trouble likes to find me...”

That stole a laugh from her, and the sound was like music to Phineas’ ears. “Fine...” Sun shook her head. “I’ll be more careful from now on.” She glanced out the window again, then eyed him suspiciously. “So, what happened while I was out cold? You look... different.”

“Not much,” Phineas shrugged. “I’ve been doing everything I can—training, watching for signs of Cadmus—but it’s harder than I thought”

“How’s your Command coming along? Have there been any signs of progress?”

“Well, the other day I made Lukas jump in the river,” Phineas smirked, but Sun was not impressed.

“You’re avoiding the question.”

Phineas deflated. “I mean, yeah, I think I understand it a bit better now, but it’s still touch and go.”

Looking at her now, he wondered how much stronger the power would be if the relic activated when Sun was around. Would it be easier to use?

“You have that look on your face,” Sun cut through his thoughts. “What are you thinking?”

“What look?”

“That look you get when you are trying to figure something out.”

“I don’t have a look!”

Sun snorted. “Phi, I’ve been by your side from the beginning. I know your tells.”

Was he really that predictable? What else had she picked up on?



“I was just thinking about how to improve my skills, that’s all,” he said. Which wasn’t totally a lie.

“Hmm...” she mulled it over for a moment, lost in thought. “What happened with the relic? Did you really find out where it is, or was it all just a bluff for Cadmus?”

Phineas fumbled with his own breath, nearly choking, but he masked it with a casual cough.

“We know he doesn’t have it, and that’s all that matters now. A lot of it is still a mystery.” But even as the words left his mouth, he felt the lie curl

around his tongue. The relic was never far from his thoughts—it couldn't be, not with the shadow it cast over all their lives. Phineas combed through his thoughts, desperately seeking something more to add. "Lukas hasn't heard Cadmus' voice even one time since we got away, so we're pretty sure we're safe for now. He can transform with no need to worry about his mind being taken over, but he's still very careful about it."

Phineas continued sharing a little more about what had happened, mostly mundane details of everyday life since they'd gotten to the village - what it was like to fly on Lukas' back, the village's surroundings, Chee's improved mood, and anything random that came to his mind. Anything to steer Sun's mind away from the relic.

Now and then, Sun would ask a particular question, pressing for details with her typical relentless curiosity, as if searching for buried secrets he was hiding.

Phineas sensed suspicion in her eyes, but what was she waiting to hear? He offered vague answers, steering the conversation towards safer topics, like the river and how much she would enjoy it.

After he was done, Sun turned to him and bore her eyes into his. "Is there anything else I should know?"

"No. Nothing," Phineas replied instantly, though he felt her disappointment hanging in the air as she turned back to the window. He pondered what she might seek to uncover while she stared out into the distance.

"So, what exactly is this village?" Sun asked. Her eyes traced the glass, wide with curiosity as they absorbed the strange and beautiful sights outside.

Phineas took a steadying breath before responding, "It's a hidden place, protected by a barrier and most of the people here... well, they are dragon shifters."

"What?" Sun's eyes widened with surprise, looking at the sky as though she expected to see them flying around like when they were back at the castle. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"It's fine," Phineas smiled. "This is Lukas' house."

Sun's mouth hung open and Phineas laughed and then embarked on a lengthy explanation, detailing their current circumstances—the refuge they sought in the village, concealed from the threats that lingered outside. He delved into how Lukas had guided them here, introduced them to Claudia, and how much she'd helped them, especially with taking care of Sun and asking their scouts for intel.

“Breakfast should be almost ready now,” Phineas said at one point. “I can bring something up for you.”



Sun rolled her eyes. “Stop treating me like a frail baby,” she said, with a bit more bitterness in her tone than Phineas expected. Then she smiled and amended it by placing a warm hand on Phineas’ shoulder. “I don’t want to be cooped up here any longer. Promise I feel fine. I look fine, don’t I?”

She did. Remarkably well, in fact, for having spent two months in a coma. Even with the help of special medicine to keep her strength intact, her recovery seemed almost unreal. Despite her initial words upon waking, which still troubled Phineas, it was the melancholy resignation in her smile that haunted him more.

You’re not real.

Perhaps it had just been the shock of being awake again when she said it, but Phineas couldn’t stop thinking about it. What had happened to Sun during her slumber? What made her say those words?

As they made their way downstairs, the irresistible aroma of freshly baked treats wafted through the air, drawing them in with its pleasant, inviting embrace. The room exuded a snug warmth, blended with the familiar din of friends' playful disputes while they busied themselves setting up the table.

When Phineas and Sun walked in, Lukas and Chee looked up, both freezing for a moment, eyes widening in disbelief.

"Hi," Sun said, waving a shy hand.

Chee was the first to recover from his stupor. His face lit up, and he rushed forward, enveloping Sun in a tight, heartfelt hug. The embrace carried a sense of urgency, as if he needed reassurance that she was actually there with them, standing on her own two feet.

"Chee, you're crushing me," Sun laughed, her voice slightly strained.

"Just a few more seconds," Chee replied, hugging her tighter and making her laugh again. Phineas watched the scene with a smile on his face.

Lukas lingered nearby, his face caught in a mixture of surprise and awkwardness. His demeanor was more reserved. Sun, aware of his gaze, extricated herself from Chee's hug and approached him. There hung a momentary hesitation, an uncertainty about how to greet each

other. Lukas, too, seemed taken aback by her sudden appearance, and Phineas speculated whether they were both haunted by the same recollection of being seized by Cadmus, a shared trauma binding their thoughts.

It looked like Sun was thinking of hugging him too, or maybe shaking his hand. Lukas caught the subtle pause in her step, meeting her eyes with a knowing understanding and a half smile.

In the end, Sun gripped her hands behind her back and swung on the soles of her feet.

"It's good to see you too," she said after clearing her throat. Lukas nodded appreciatively, a faint smile playing on his lips. The room hummed with relief and quiet joy, a shared understanding of all they had endured and overcome together.

"Eat quickly before the food gets cold," Claudia announced in her usual calm demeanor, setting an extra plate of pancakes on the table, right in front of the chair that had always remained empty.

The awkwardness between the four friends broke, and Sun looked curiously at the older woman as she piled up more pancakes on the plates.

Phineas gestured toward her. "Sun, this is Claudia, Lukas' mom. The only rule she has is that we take our shoes off before coming inside."

"That is not the only rule, and you don't pay attention to that anyway," Claudia pointed out. Chee discreetly hung his head low and sat down.

"She is very strict, but she's been taking good care of us," Phineas whispered in Sun's ear. "Claudia, I know you've met her already, but please allow me to formally introduce you to Sun."

"Nice to see you up and running again, kid." Claudia's eyes sparkled with a smart curiosity as she took in every detail of Sun. "It's been a really long time since I last saw a fairy godmother."

Sun's response held a hint of humility. "I didn't finish my training, so I hardly deserve the title."

Phineas caught a glimpse of shame in her eyes, but Claudia interrupted the silence by placing a reassuring hand on Sun's shoulder.



"Given how you looked when they carried you in, I can see how much you fought to protect your

master," Claudia affirmed with a kind smile. "Don't sell yourself short."

Phineas winced at the term 'master,' disliking how it implied that Sun was his servant. Sun, however, seemed to draw strength from Claudia's words, a smile playing on her lips.

Biting his tongue, Phineas led Sun to her seat, where an array of mouthwatering delicacies had been artfully arranged. A palpable sense of togetherness filled the air as the others settled around the table too. Chee's eyes never strayed far from Sun, still seemingly unable to believe that she was really back among them. But as the laughter and conversation swirled around her, Sun couldn't shake the feeling of something unspoken hanging in the air, a fragile thread threatening to snap.

The room, now filled with the clinking of utensils and the sweet smells of fruit and honey, seemed different somehow. Phineas couldn't help but think that the mere fact that Sun was back with them made everything seem livelier.

Sun ate in thoughtful silence, her eyes drifting from one friend to another as their conversation ebbed and flowed, before wandering around the room and out to the distant landscape.

"This place is beautiful... so cozy. It reminds me of the farm," she added with a smile, looking towards

Phineas. Then she turned to Lukas, curiosity lighting up her eyes. "Why did you leave a place like this?"

Lukas took a moment before responding, his gaze distant. "I wanted to get revenge for my father and my people, and the Academy seemed like the best place to get stronger. I didn't want to hide any longer."

"And look where that got you," Claudia retorted with a huff.

Lukas scowled, his annoyance clear as he threw his fork down with a clatter. "I didn't make my choice on a whim. The Academy has the same barrier that the village has. Stronger even. Cadmus shouldn't have been able to get me there."

"The Academy has been there for centuries, and nothing like that has ever happened before," Chee nodded in agreement.

As the conversation unfolded and a new debate about how Cadmus had achieved that ensued, Phineas felt a growing unease settling in the pit of his stomach. What if Cadmus had found Lukas not because of Phineas' presence there, but because of the relic? The possibility gnawed at him, a troubling thought that he wasn't ready to share yet.

Sun noticed the change in Phineas' expression, though. "What's wrong?" she asked, concern creasing her brow.

Phineas hesitated, his mind wrestling with the implications. The thought of Cadmus exploiting Sun without her knowing made his stomach twist uncomfortably. But there was no proof, and so he needed to protect Sun from such a notion.

Instead of sharing his suspicions, he shook his head. "It's nothing. Just thinking about everything that's happened."

She didn't look convinced, but she didn't push him.

When they finished breakfast, Phineas did the dishes. He debated bringing it up with Chee later, when they could speak away from the others.

But that could wait for later. Right now, he just wanted to focus on Sun and make sure she was safe, happy, and on the mend. The sparkling water outside the window seemed to call for them, and looking at it, an idea formed in Phineas' head.

Turning around, he smiled at Sun. "Do you want to stretch your wings?"



She smiled and then laughed. As Sun's laughter echoed in response, Phineas' smile faltered for a fleeting moment. A thought haunted him quietly: how long could he protect her from knowing the truth?