

~NEVER trust A Happy Song~

CHAPTER 4



As the evening sun dipped below the horizon, Phineas and his friends went upstairs to settle into their cramped quarters. The bartender's pledge

of accommodations for four turned out to be more of a glorified broom closet, complete with bunk beds squeezed like sardines in a tin. The fee they'd dished out no longer felt like a like a fair transaction.

"That man is robbing us," Lukas complained.

Walking over to claim the bed at the bottom, Phineas unburdened himself, letting his bag fall with a thud that echoed the finality of claimed territory. "Still beats sleeping out in the open."

He wasn't all that happy about the situation either, but he was more disappointed about the food than the beds. He hadn't harbored dreams of a culinary masterpiece, but he'd at least wanted something better than the plain fruits and rabbit they'd been eating for days before coming here. But the gruel the bartender called stew was far from it.

Once they chose their beds, they all stood there awkwardly, not sure what to do. It was a bit early to call it a night. Having roamed freely under the open sky, the abrupt shift to close quarters made it seem like they were now breathing in each other's faces.

"Maybe we should go for a walk?" Sun suggested. "I don't think I can stay cooped up in here for anything other than sleeping."

Agreeing with her, they all ventured out for a stroll. Perhaps there was more information they could gain about the village's peculiar state, though Phineas wasn't sure if that would be of any help. Despite the enchanting evening, the streets wore a ghostly silence, as if the city itself was holding its breath in the twilight hush. The village was shrouded in an unnatural lull that left them with a feeling of unease.

How different it was from the University, Phineas thought, where students were usually out on campus, talking with their friends or even dueling for fun after dinner. Students loved to stretch the moment before curfew, when they could enjoy themselves and relax after a long day of studying. There was none of that here.

Their aimless wandering led them to a town square that had clearly seen better days. Moss and small weeds grew between the stones of the floor

and fountain walls, but there was a rustic charm to it that hinted at its former glory.

At the center of the square stood an ancient tree, its gnarled trunk thick and sturdy, with deep creases etched into its bark like the lines of an old man's face. Blackened, charred marks marred its surface, proof that this sentinel had also seen its fair share of history.

Phineas approached it, a deep sadness settling into the pit of his stomach when seeing one of his old friends hurt like this. Placing his hand gently on the dark wood, he felt the rough surface under his palm. The tree responded with a sigh of its leaves, like it'd been holding its breath and was relieved now that someone was there to soothe its pain. As he closed his eyes, Phineas whispered a word of greeting, invoking the power that flowed through his veins.

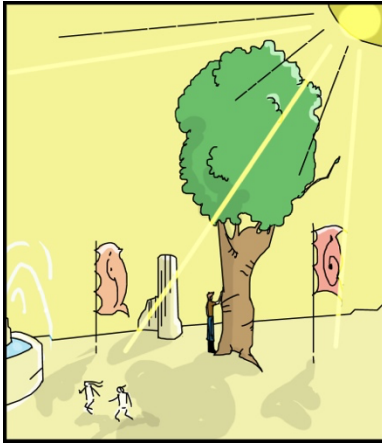
"It's been many years since I last spoke to one of your kind," the tree said, responding to his touch.

"What happened to you?" Phineas asked. A thin thread of melancholy pierced his chest, and Phineas felt the prick of tears behind his eyelids. *"And why are you so sad?"*

"I've lived many lives in human years, and I've watched so many people die..."

Phineas asked the tree to show him what he meant, to show him what had happened to the

people here. He felt a surge of energy as images flooded his mind and he was now a traveler



retracing the footsteps of history. He saw the same plaza they were in now, only in this image the square was brighter, bathed in warm sunlight. Banners of different colors decorated it and there were flowers in every pot and flowing water in

both fountains. It was a bustling, vibrant hub of activity where people laughed, children played freely on the streets, merchants offered their wares and travelers could rest their feet in peace.

But the idyllic scene quickly changed as a passing shadow covered the village, and then another, and another, until the sky darkened completely. People started screaming. Overhead, dragons unfurled colossal wings, casting ominous shadows as they descended upon the tranquil haven, their breaths igniting chaos below. Tongues of fire surged skyward from the earth and madness ensued as people tried to flee the tumultuous scene.

Amidst the fire and chaos, Phineas glimpsed a tall figure shrouded in flames, but he couldn't quite

make out the person's face. Even then, whether it was because of the tree's memories, or some long-lost knowledge in the back of his mind, Phineas knew this was the leader of the black dragons. There was a sinister aura about him that commanded attention. He walked with a supreme confidence among the wreckage and devastation that had once been the peaceful village.

Phineas wanted to see more of that man, but the images in his head kept moving forward until he was staring at the awful aftermath of the attack. The village lay in ruin. From the smoldering embers, survivors wove the threads of their new homes. Afterwards, everything was quiet for a long time as a sense of abandonment hung desperately in the air. It was as if the world had forgotten their plight or like no one cared, the village and its inhabitants cloaked in an atmosphere of forsakenness and sorrow.

As the tree fell silent again, Phineas' anger surged. His hands balled into white-knuckled fists. Fingers coiled into tight, determined knots. *Those dragons ruined everything! It was all their fault. Why did they have to come here and trample over something so beautiful? What reason could they have had to launch an attack like that on these helpless villagers? Why did the world care nothing about them?*

“What did it say?” Sun asked in a quiet voice, making Phineas’ eyes snap open.

He’d been so immersed in the vision that he’d forgotten they were standing next to him, unable to listen to the exchange. He turned to Sun. Phineas could see in her eyes she knew exactly what he’d seen. Chee took a step closer. Their collective focus sharpened as Phineas wove the narrative of what he had seen, unable to hide his anger and confusion why this had happened here.

When he was done, Sun and Chee looked down, their hearts echoing a mutual sorrow as they struggled to grasp the harrowing experiences that had befallen these innocent villagers. Their minds struggled to understand. With each word, Sun’s emotional landscape seemed to shift. Phineas wondered if maybe he should have kept the vision to himself.

Lukas, however, seemed distant, almost like he didn’t care. A pang of frustration made Phineas’ mouth press into a thin line, his golden eyes blazing.

“How can you act like that?” he finally confronted Lukas, poking him hard on the chest. “How can you be so indifferent about something *your kind* has done?”

“Phineas,” Chee said in an admonishing tone. Placing a hand on Phineas’ shoulder, he tried to get

in between the two boys and gave Phineas a look to back down.

“What?” Phineas shook his hand off and locked his gaze again onto Lukas. “It’s true, isn’t it? It was the dragons who started this war and brought so much pain and devastation to these people.”



Lukas’ eyes flared. Only because Phineas was already staring directly at him could he see that his pupils elongated slightly while the irises turned red around the edges.

“That’s easy for you to say, isn’t it? You think you’re so much better than everyone else, but you’ve only been a part of our world for a few months. You do not know what life here has been like, no idea why the University was even built.” Lukas closed the gap with a predatory grace, looming over him, his eyes piercing down like a vulture eyeing its prey. “You know *nothing*.”

Phineas gritted his teeth as his molars met in a forceful embrace, echoing the suppressed tension within him. He’d been repeatedly made aware of how little he knew about his own life. This was the thorn that pricked his conscience the sharpest.

Adrenaline pumped through Phineas’ veins, begging for release as the leaves on the floor started

revolving around his feet. Lukas was clearly on edge too; tendrils of smoke pouring out of his nose, so thin that the wind carried them away at once and Phineas wondered if he'd imagined it.

At the same time, and almost out of habit, both boys took up fighting stances. Chee and Sun looked like they were about to protest but, before either of them could utter a word, a haunting melody drifted through the air, interrupting the dispute.

The four of them turned to the street leading to the square, where two figures were approaching on unsteady feet. Their voices rose higher, harmonizing in an upbeat and joyful song. As soon as they realized they were just two people probably going back to their homes from the tavern, Phineas and Lukas resumed glaring at one another.

But the song kept getting louder. As if guided by an invisible thread, the duo closed in on their group with a synchronized march. The hair on the back of Phineas' neck stood on end. A rustling sound had him look over his shoulder. His gut was telling him not to trust this happy song. A third figure materialized from the shadows, strategically placing himself like a chess piece on the board, disrupting the trajectory of Phineas and his companions. He recognized the man from the inn, the same one who had eyed Sun with a predatory gaze.

“What is a group of kids doing out here on their own?” The man leaned one shoulder on a rusty lamppost, showing a weird sense of ease and smugness.

“That’s none of your business,” Phineas shouted, adjusting so that his body partially covered Sun from their view.

The two others on the opposite side felt like the closing act of a clandestine performance, sealing off their escape routes with calculated finesse. They were no longer singing or wobbling on their feet.

They were now surrounded.

“Bandits?” Chee whispered as they huddled closer. Lukas nodded.

“Now, now,” one of them started. “There’s no need to be so rude, is there?”

“Can you feel her magic? It’s been a while since I saw a fairy up close,” the black-haired one said, his voice carrying a sinister edge.

Sun’s eyes blazed with a mix of shock and sadness. Phineas would worry about that later but, right now, he was more focused on the anxious frenzy radiating off that nasty man.

A devilish grin played on his lips as he wet them with his tongue. “She would fetch a high price in the market.”

Already rattled by his own emotions, he was a bundle of nerves. Phineas lost it. His fury became a

whirlwind. He couldn't hold it back, attempting to use the combat skills he'd learned during his training just a few days ago. He threw a jab at the man and chased it up with a right hook, putting all the force of his body into it.

However, the bandit was quicker than him and saw right through it. Sidestepping, he dodged Phineas' blow and then threw a punch of his own, hitting Phineas square in the ribs.

He doubled over. All around him, sounds of struggle filled the night air. When Phineas stole a fleeting gaze upward at his friends, it was clear they weren't backing down, fighting tooth and nail. Amid the scuffle, Chee's hat fell off, revealing his horns.



“Aren’t you a group full of surprises?” one of the other men laughed. “We can take those too, though the rest of you have to stay here. We have no use for you. You’re not special enough.”

Phineas desperately wanted to intervene, to demand that they leave his friends alone, but suddenly, his breath was stolen from him. A choked sound escaped from his throat. His hands cupped his throat, fingers

tracing the contours, as if that could help the air flow in naturally.

What was happening?

He raised wide eyes at his friends, but their attention was monopolized as they repelled the onslaught of their adversaries. Turning, Phineas met the black-haired man's eyes. He saw a sly smirk there while the fist aimed at Phineas hinted at a storm brewing in the shadows like a coiled serpent. Clarity washed over Phineas as he realized this jerk was using wind magic to choke the air from his lungs.

He struggled in vain, tried to use his own magic to free himself, but his vision was darkening. Stability was slowly draining from his limbs. In a gradual surrender, his muscles ached as the last remnants of strength trickled away, like sand slipping through the grasp of time. The specter of his friends' pain because of his failure loomed large in his mind.

Panic clawed at him. Anger simmered under Phineas' skin when he imagined what these people wanted to do to Sun and Chee. With one last drop of willpower, he wheezed out a single word.

"Stop."

The bandit choking him froze, and the ground welcomed Phineas with open arms. Phineas was gasping for air, as if each breath were a lifeline to

stave off oblivion. The man remained still for a few seconds but, as soon as Phineas' focus broke, he blinked in disbelief.

“What did you just do?”

Phineas felt the gentle tendrils of his senses rekindling, but he was still in no position to reply, or even get up. The man's glare grew deeper, his face distorted by rage.

“I asked what in hell was that!”

He rushed at Phineas and aimed a kick at his stomach while he was still down. With a deep breath, Phineas steeled himself, praying he could weather the impending blow and then help his friends.

With eyes clenched, he waited for the pain that never arrived. When he squinted them open, he saw Lukas standing between him and the bandit, protecting him. The world around Phineas seemed to pause, and he stood frozen in the grip of surprise, taken aback by what he was seeing. But then he heard Chee grunting, and he snapped back to reality.

Rising against the odds, he wrestled with gravity's grip, determined to stand, and when he did, his gaze sought Sun's like a compass finding true north. They locked eyes. Hers were brimming with worry. He wanted to reassure her, but he could

barely hold himself up. Like this, he wouldn't be able to protect her.

Chee and Lukas were doing a pretty good job keeping their adversaries at bay, but these men were like titans, hulking with unmatched power. As the moments ticked by, the exhaustion was becoming clear in his friends' expressions. It was like these men were toying with them. They wouldn't last long.

"Run," he mouthed at Sun. They would find a way out of this, but he could never forgive himself if they took away his best friend.

But Sun, stubborn as she was, just shook her head. "I haven't been recharging all these days for nothing."

As if a switch had been flipped, her eyes underwent a metamorphosis, the gentleness replaced by a fierce determination that spoke volumes without uttering a word. Her chin raised and her demeanor morphed into something Phineas hadn't seen before. Swift as a fleeting shadow, she sidestepped her assailant, an ethereal dance unfolding, until she stood unseen behind him, her hands positioned with the precision of a master strategist at his temples. The man collapsed at once, put into a deep slumber.

One of the other men screamed his companion's name and cursed at Sun. Knocking

Chee out of the way, he transformed his hands into sledgehammers and geared up for an aggressive move, set to attack her. Lukas' opponent, seemingly also deciding on her as prey, turned to her too, hands ready to knock the air from her like he'd done with Phineas.

As if guided by an unseen breeze, Sun calmly shifted their focus and with ethereal poise, she embarked on a gentle ascent into the air, as if beckoned by the whispers of the wind. Her skin began to glow. A celestial flame flickered to life within her, a radiant core that bathed her in a bright white luminous glow. It was as if a dormant star had burst forth to illuminate her from within.

Phineas could only watch, mesmerized by the beauty of it. Stretching her arms wide, the light grew brighter and brighter until it exploded in a soundless wave that made their opponents scream and cover their eyes.



Oddly enough, Phineas was unaffected, which was why his eyes became witnesses to the exact heartbeat when their adversaries crumbled to the ground unconscious, like fallen stars. When the last of the assailants was on

the ground, Sun's eyes went blank and she too collapsed, her radiant glow gone, leaving behind only the stark stillness of a fallen star on the unforgiving ground.

She was not breathing.