

# ~ STARTing Over ~

## CHAPTER 3



Lukas was walking ahead of them as he guided them through the forest. Phineas rotated his shoulder, wincing slightly when a sharp pain shot through it. There was a nasty bruise there, a deep purple blotch he'd discovered after his last

training session. His stare pierced through the woods, fixating on Lukas' back, his eyes brimming with an unspoken challenge beneath the forest's canopy.

Lukas remained true to his word, dedicating the past four days to sculpting Phineas into a fledgling warrior, each lesson a brushstroke on the canvas of combat. He'd also been accurate about whooping his ass and went all out despite the obvious difference in skill between them.

Practicing tree magic was still a big part of Phineas' preparation, and Sun was a much nicer

teacher than Lukas could ever hope to be. In the daylight's embrace, they carved out moments for combat training. Sometimes, Chee would join them too, especially when Phineas was too tired and needed a break.

The wizard was actually not bad. Surprisingly, he turned up the heat on Lukas, compelling him to delve into his reserves, each drop of sweat a difficult. Phineas still hadn't won a single combat. He'd landed a few hits—something that had seemed impossible the first time they'd fought—but he was far, *far* from being a match for Lukas.

Magic remained an unopened book, its pages yet untouched by his hands. At this rate, it felt like they might never get to that point. Lukas was always quick to remind Phineas of this, riling him up every chance he got, and seemed to treasure, making Phineas feel miserable.

“Phi!” A hand on his shoulder brought Phineas out of his pessimistic musings. He winced again. It wasn't Sun's fault that her hand had landed right on top of the bruise; she didn't know it was there.

“Hey.”

Like a magician, Phineas pulled a grin from his emotional hat, concealing the rabbit hole of his pain. He didn't want her to know, didn't want her to see the true state of his body. His pride had already taken a beating along with his muscles during Lukas'

lessons. *What would she think of him if she were to find out? Would she think this had all been a mistake?*

His training advanced at a slow pace, like the stroll of an afternoon cloud, unhurried and serene across the sky. Seeds of self-doubt sprouted in his mind. He questioned his worthiness. Each step in his training felt like a reluctant crawl. Maybe he wasn't strong enough to wield his father's power?

Sun gifted him a smile. "We're almost there!" Her voice was a symphony of enthusiasm, each note played with the vigor of a rising crescendo. There was now a spring to her step, and suddenly Phineas forgot all about Lukas and the parts of his body that hurt, which were almost all of them.

When he'd told Chee about the village he and Sun had seen atop the tree, they'd all headed there to replenish their supplies and a chance to trade the monotonous cadence for a new tempo. Their clothes were in a really sorry state, covered in dirt that didn't come off anymore, and Chee's even had some holes in them from tripping over his own feet. Sun was the only one who didn't seem to have a speck of dust on her. Only the heavens knew how she'd achieved that. Yet, the fatigue etched on her face hinted at the invisible toll it had taken. They could all use a bit of civilization.

More than that, though, Phineas was just impatient to see what the place would be like up

close. The village's cobblestone streets were like the pages of a new book, waiting for him to leaf through and discover its tales. In this new village, he was a stranger to every soul. Before this adventure, he'd spent all his life at the farm, being sheltered from the real world, or perhaps he should say *worlds*. It was only by chance he'd ended up at the University learning about magic, and now suddenly, here he was.

*Wasn't this precisely what he'd always wanted to do? To see the world with his own eyes, to taste the kaleidoscope of experiences, and savor life's every flavor to the fullest?* He was buzzing with so much energy that the surrounding shrubs seemed to vibrate as he walked by.



As they pushed on down the road, his thoughts detoured to the farm, each marker triggering a vivid montage of cherished moments. Phineas wondered how his parents could have kept him locked up for so long. *How could they ever think that was for the best?* After everything Sun

had told him, he could understand why they wanted to keep him safe... To some extent. But not really.

He understood they were trying to protect a Prince, even if the idea that *he* was said Prince still felt ridiculous to even think about. The lies had formed an insurmountable chasm between them, making forgiveness seem like an impossible bridge to build. They should have said something sooner! They should have tried to explain. *Did they think he was still a little kid?* They had no right to hide his truth from him, to betray his trust repeatedly. It was like trying to swallow a stone, a hard and unyielding reality that lodged in his throat. No relief in sight.

That didn't mean he didn't worry about them, though. He was constantly trying to avoid thinking about their reaction when they found out he had left the University—because they *had* to know by now. *The possibility of Monika succumbing to another bout of anxiety hung over him like a heavy cloud, darkening his thoughts. Would his actions unwittingly fan the flames of her anxiety, igniting another turbulent episode? Or what if they were angry about what he'd done? About him running away?*

Phineas shook his head. This was his choice. It was something he needed to do. He was old enough to decide which path he wanted to take. Guilt would find no foothold within him for this.

After a few more hours of trekking, they climbed a short hill and, after breaking through the tree line, they finally stood on the lake's shore. They refilled their bottles. Phineas admired the view of the lake up close. The sun above shimmered over its blue surface like the fairy dust he'd studied in class.

His excitement grew the closer they got to the village's border as the sounds of nature were gradually replaced by those of carriages pulled by horses and people going about their day.

The small town was not like anything Phineas had seen on TV or any of the books he had read back home. As they trod forward, the muddy path metamorphosed beneath their steps, evolving into a brick-laden thoroughfare flanked by a skyline of ascending houses. They were crafted from gnarled tree trunks, their roofs covered in tapestries of colorful flowers and moss. Crystal-clear streams meandered through cobblestone pathways, and small bridges connected the quaint cottages. Phineas' mouth fell open at such beauty, hidden so deep within the stoic mountains. His eyes became sponges, eagerly absorbing every nuance of the surrounding nature.

There was a similar feeling at the school, the feeling of magic in the air. Phineas could almost taste it on the tip of his tongue. He turned to ask Sun

if that was even possible, but the look on her face made him hesitate.

“What is it?” he asked.

Sun shook her head. “Something’s off.”

Beside her, Chee nodded in agreement. Even though Lukas said nothing, he kept looking around as though he expected to be attacked at any moment.

Confused, Phineas paid closer attention to his surroundings. Few people bustled about the village and Phineas realized that what he’d thought were shy glances were wariness. The villagers watched them with closed-off expressions; some even moved out of their way, suspicion and fear dancing on the edge of their eyes.

A subtle shift in their dressing had Phineas' attention. The garments were now adorned with an unfamiliar language, expressing nuances that went beyond mere aesthetics. They wore tattered, mismatched clothes. Their faces bore the signs of hardship. As their group approached, a few children kept playing in the distance, their laughter echoing through the tranquil air, but it was only a brief respite from the uneasy atmosphere.

“What’s going on?” Phineas asked aloud.

“Let’s just find a place to stay,” Lukas grumbled. He strutted ahead of them as Phineas raised an eyebrow.

“What’s gotten into him now?”

Both Chee and Sun shrugged, but the three friends followed closely behind. The group's unanimous craving was a hungry beast, growling in their stomachs and guiding them to the promise of sustenance.

It didn't take Lukas long to find an inn, but things only got weirder when they went inside and grabbed a table. There were only two other tables occupied, and the chatter was a low hum, but it stopped with the scrape of their chairs.

“Is it just me, or do people lack manners around here?” Sun asked, crossing her arms over her chest.



Phineas followed her gaze to one table, where a group of three men were eyeing them and whispering among themselves. There was one in particular, a black-haired one, that wouldn't take his eyes off Sun. Phineas' hand closed into a tight fist.

Before he could reply, a man came from behind the bar, drying his hands on a dirty apron.

“What do you want?”



Phineas blinked, perplexed. *Was this how people served their customers around here?* Judging by the looks on his friend's faces, that seemed unlikely.

"We're looking for a meal and a place to stay the night," Chee said, smiling at the frowning man.

"Are you travelers?" he asked. They all nodded. "Where did you come from?"

Lukas started tapping his fingers on the table. "Are you going to keep questioning us, or are you going to serve us some food?"

The bartender's scowl deepened. Chee kicked Lukas under the table. "We are just travelers that came from the West and exhausted from a long journey. We don't want any trouble." The last words came paired with a hard glance at Lukas, who rolled his eyes.

"I have a room for four left. Five pieces of gold for the night and supper."

"That's a steal—" Lukas said, but Chee pinched his arm.

"We'll take it."

The bartender left, throwing another suspicious look their way and grumbling something under his breath that didn't sound too kind.

"Why is everyone so on edge around here?" Phineas whispered.

“I’m not sure...” Sun glanced at Lukas, and Phineas found Chee already in his direction as well.

Lukas folded his arms in what Phineas thought was a defensive stance. “Why are you all staring at me like that? I know only what you do.”

“Just thought you might have an idea,” Sun said carefully. “You know, since you’re our guide and all.”

“Well, I don’t.”

Phineas would have slapped him across the head for speaking to Sun like that if a waitress hadn’t approached with their food on a tray.

“Welcome!” She offered them a small smile. The wariness was woven into the very fibers of her voice, each sentence laced with the same guarded tones they had encountered from everyone else. The girl couldn’t be much older than them, and perhaps that was the only reason she didn’t seem as hostile. Still, as soon as she set their food and drinks on the table, she turned to leave.

“Excuse me?” Sun started before the girl could disappear.

Freezing for a moment, she let out a small sigh before turning, holding the tray in front of her stomach like a shield.

“Yes?”

Sun flashed her most charming smile. “I don’t want to keep you from your work, but may I ask...

Why is everyone so guarded? Did we do something wrong?"

The girl glanced down at Sun, her eyes clouded with suspicion. "You said you are travelers, right?" They nodded. "We see little of those around here."

"Well," Chee started, shifting on his chair, "I guess that makes sense, since you are kind of in the middle of nowhere."

Her gaze flitted from one person to the next, like a curious sparrow hopping from branch to branch. She must have decided they weren't so bad, because her posture relaxed an inch. "From what I hear, this used to be a big trading spot back in the day, even though it's nestled between the mountains. Merchants came from all over the kingdom, given our closeness to the road that connects all the major cities. Now, though..." Her eyes drifted to the window where she watched the world outside, a silent observer of the passing scenery. Then she let out a weary sigh. "Now, no one wants to come here. It's not worth the risk."

"But this place is so beautiful!" Phineas exclaimed, surprising the girl. "Why wouldn't people want to come here?"

She looked at him like she hadn't seen him properly before, or like she couldn't believe he genuinely liked this town. "Beauty can deceive," she whispered.

Sun tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

A nostalgic sadness passed through the girl's eyes as her shoulders hunched over. "This village used to be beautiful, and some of that remains in the buildings and nature around us. But the people..." She shook her head. "Nothing was the same after the war." Lukas' hand twitched where it was resting over the table, but he said nothing. The girl continued. "People stopped coming because it was too dangerous. Getting supplies became increasingly harder, poverty levels increased along with crime... You get the picture."

Silence overtook the table as they all processed what the girl was saying and what it meant for the people who lived there.

"Is this the justification for being treated like garbage?" Phineas asked before he could stop himself.

"Don't take it personally." The waitress looked over her shoulder at the table with the black-haired guy's crew. "That group came around two days ago, and everyone acted the same way towards them, too." It was an odd occurrence indeed, an unusual synchronicity, as if the universe had orchestrated their arrivals to create a moment of shared significance. Probably why everyone was even more suspicious. She smiled and, this time, it was a bit more genuine. "They'll come around, eventually."

The bartender screamed for her to get moving and the girl waved goodbye before hurrying back to her post.

The silence that enveloped them was thick with unspoken words, a thick tapestry of contemplation woven between bites. Phineas retraced their steps from the moment they'd entered the village, pondering on the details he hadn't stopped to think about: the uneven cobblestones that hadn't been redone in years, the unkempt state of some buildings, the eerie silence that covered them like a blanket. In his excitement to see something new, he'd glossed over those things and had only seen the surface of what this place offered.

*Was there anything he could do now?* These people had been through a lot, and he wanted to help them. His curiosity was a time-traveler's itch, itching to journey back to the peak days of this place's grandeur, yearning for a glimpse into the past. Were there smiling faces on the street? He wondered how things had gotten so out of hand, and why no one had done anything about it.

It wasn't hard to figure out why the villagers had trust issues. The war had raged. They were unburdened by supervision. In their hands, the keys glittered with promise, yet destiny's path unfolded as a winding journey, strewn with unforeseen

obstacles. These people were too busy living their fears. They needed to learn how to breathe again. Starting over is tough. But starting over is not the end.

The ruins whispered tales of resurrection, with every broken stone and weathered facade holding the potential for a phoenix-like ascent. He saw the potential. Phineas wished he could make his vision come true, give these people a chance to start over. He wanted to fill this place with life and happiness.



His shoulder throbbed, bringing him back to reality.

He was just a boy who still couldn't use his own powers properly. *What could he ever hope to give these people when he couldn't even help himself? Not every day leads to a rainbow...*