

~ You have YOU ~

CHAPTER 1



The grass under his feet crunched with each step. As his feet met the earth with force, a veil of dust billowed behind him. His legs screamed for mercy, but he pushed harder, fixing his gaze firmly on the path ahead. Phineas' lungs burned as he sprinted along the riverbank, his mind racing faster than his feet. The Silent River's roar couldn't drown out the echoes of his failures—the friends he'd failed to protect, the village left in ruins, and Sun's lifeless body in his arms. He wasn't just running; he was trying to outrun himself.

As he continued running, the undulating bends of the Silent River's bed infused the path with a sense of mystery and adventure, beckoning

travelers with its serpentine allure. Phineas traced every twist and turn of the river's course, the rushing water beside him a constant companion. Despite its name, the Silent River was indeed treacherous. In certain sections, tranquil pools of teal water gathered, creating serene havens where weary travelers could rest and bathe. Yet, as the land sloped downward, the currents surged with such force that the water transformed into frothy cascades of pure white.

Phineas loved it though. When he was running, he could focus on those sounds, on the crescendos and hushes of their lullaby and let them flood his head. It was the only time when he could stop hearing his own thoughts, the only moment his head was finally at peace.

Bent at the waist, hands resting on his knees, he paused to reclaim his breath, each inhalation a struggle against exhaustion. His chest rose and fell quickly. He felt the flush of heat in his cheeks, but took solace in the absence of a stabbing pain in his side.

Straightening up, he placed his hands on his lower back and pushed, tilting his head back and sticking out his chest. His muscles throbbed with soreness, but the effort was undeniably worth it, reflected in the significant boost to his endurance. As he stretched, he glanced at the sky above him.

Above, the heavens arched in an unbroken expanse of blue, devoid of even a whisper of cloud. The sun brushed his skin, keeping it warm. Phineas sealed his eyes shut, relishing the serenity of the moment. He remembered Sun's words from his childhood a long time ago. "You have you," she had told him, "no matter what. I will always be with you, but if I'm not, always remember you will always have you." He dwelled on thoughts of her for what felt like an eternity, lost in the labyrinth of his mind.

Suddenly, he heard something. "Is that him?" someone whispered close by. "Is it wise for all of them to be here? What if they drag us all into it?"

"Shh, he'll hear you!" another voice said.



Slowly blinking his eyes open, Phineas glimpsed sideways to find two teenagers, probably a few years younger than him, their words barely audible as they exchanged murmurs. As soon as they caught sight of being observed, they leapt up in a

sudden flurry, spinning around to shield themselves from view.

“Let’s get out of here,” the smaller one said, pulling on the sleeve of the other. In a matter of seconds, they were sprinting up the road, disappearing into the village ahead.

Phineas sighed. The scrutiny had become a familiar part of his reality, yet it still grated on his nerves. But lately, he found that one glance from him would send most onlookers running. He wasn’t sure how to feel about this.

Squinting up at the sun one last time, Phineas relaxed his posture and took an already familiar path through a colorful vegetable garden. Past all the tomatoes, carrots, and lettuce, there was a small house up on a hill nearby, built into the rock of a small outcrop by the river. The landscape was alive with color, with wildflowers bursting forth in a vibrant tapestry of hues everywhere around it, in sultry tones of yellow and pink. Phineas grabbed some and climbed up the steps to the front door.

Before going in, he dusted his shoes off by the entrance, then removed them and placed them carefully by the door.

Phineas shivered when the shade cooled him down. He closed the door without making a sound. The hallway was empty. Though there were murmurs of sound at the end of the hall, Phineas

headed straight for the staircase and ascended two flights to reach the second floor.

There was only one room there. The rest were on the first floor. Amongst the collection, it stood out with its expansive windows, inviting streams of sunlight to pour in, bathing the space in a radiant glow. Phineas entered and smiled.

“Hey, Sun.” He closed the door behind him gently and walked straight to her bedside table. “I brought you some flowers.”

The vase gracing the table cradled flowers that had wilted, their once vibrant petals now muted and lifeless, so Phineas took it to the bathroom and changed them for the new ones. Satisfied with his work, he then sat on the edge of her bed and brushed his fingers through Sun’s silky pink hair.

“I’ve never seen this kind around the farm, but I thought you would like them.” Tucking a strand behind Sun’s ear, he took a long look at her face.

She didn’t respond. Of course she wouldn’t. She’d been unconscious ever since they’d escaped the Pethosyus’ Castle. She was still so pale, even though Phineas had moved the bed right next to the window, hoping the sunlight would reach her as much as possible.

“I’ve been training hard, you know? Perhaps even more than before. My strength and endurance are better than ever, and I feel good. I feel stronger.”

He paused and watched her face, as unreadable as ever. But optimism always felt much better than anxiety, so he carried on. "My hair is longer now, too." He grabbed the end of his shoulder length ponytail between his fingers and chuckled. "I bet you'll hate it. So you have to wake up soon so you can nag me and tell me to cut it off, ok?"

She still didn't respond. A sharp pang pierced his chest as the silence stretched on, unbroken. Sun remained completely motionless. Her shallow breathing was almost imperceptible to him, a mere whisper amidst the stillness. It was heartbreaking to see her like this, with her spark gone. Phineas' throat closed up, and when he spoke next, it hurt to do so through the knot straining his voice. He took Sun's hand in his and squeezed.

"It's been two months already, Sun," Phineas whispered, gripping her hand like it was his only anchor. "Please come back to me. I don't think I can do this alone." He squeezed her hand one more time. "I can't do this without you."



He visited her every day, clinging to the hope that she might awaken at any moment, that perhaps his words were finding their way to her and would elicit a response. But today, like every other day, Sun stayed still like a statue.

With a heavy sigh, Phineas got up and exited the room. Back on the ground floor, he was about to head down the hall when he was almost run over by a fidgety Chee.

“Sorry, Phi!” he yelled as he skidded to a stop by the door and started jumping on one foot to get his shoes off.

Almost a full second later, he heard another scream coming from the kitchen.

“Who dirtied my floors again?! You better hope I don’t catch you or else-”

Phineas sent his friend a sympathetic smile and headed down to where the ruckus was coming from.

“Hey, Ms. Reynolds,” he greeted as he entered the room. The space wasn’t that big. There was a back door, a counter with bowls of fruit, a window that overlooked the river, and a small oven where a pot was boiling with the delicious aroma of stew.

At the heart of the room stood a small table, surrounded by five chairs, fostering a sense of intimacy and connection. A tall, slender woman, probably around Monica’s age, was standing in front of it, arms perched on her hips as her dirty blond hair was swishing on her back.

She leveled a penetrating stare at Phineas, who reacted by immediately lifting his hands in submission, revealing his sock-clad foot.

“Chee!” she yelled, stomping back towards the front entrance.

Phineas shook his head before striding over to where Lukas was setting the table. “How many times does this make?”

“Nineteen. You’d think he’d remember, after all this time. It’s a good thing Mom really likes him.” There was a smile playing on his lips as he sat down. Phineas followed suit and a moment later, Ms. Reynolds came back with a crestfallen Chee trudging behind her.

“Seriously, how many times?” she murmured under her breath as she went straight to the oven and started serving the stew in bowls. Chee grabbed

them from her and placed them neatly on the table. Then they all sat down to eat. The fifth seat remained empty, as usual.

“Do the scouts have any news, Ms. Reynolds?” Phineas asked carefully once he had some food in his belly.

The woman sighed. “I told you to call me Claudia. And I’m afraid not.”

Phineas felt deflated, his hand resting limp over his fork. From the moment they arrived at Lukas’ previous home, Phineas had been looking everywhere for information on how best to help Sun. However, he quickly discovered that the path ahead wouldn’t unfold as smoothly as he had hoped.

The hidden village where Ms. Reynolds lived was in a strategic spot, nestled between the mountains to avoid easy detection. Dragons from many clans lived there together peacefully, taking refuge from the rest of the world, but primarily from Cadmus’ forces.

Because of this, it was almost impossible for Phineas to come and go as he pleased. The secret routes to the village were meticulously protected, and it was easy to get lost. Only the village scouts could move freely.

“So, nothing new again, huh?” He tried not to sound disappointed, but it was hard to fake it.



“Not quite,” Ms. Reynolds clarified. “They actually haven’t been able to go out again. Some of Cadmus’ soldiers were recently spotted just past the mountains and the scouts were forced to come back early.”

Lukas and Chee froze. “Do they know where we are?” Lukas asked.

“No, the scouts have been monitoring any information regarding that old fool. It seems like it was just a coincidence. But there’s no harm in being extra cautious.”

Phineas closed his hands into fists. No matter how strong he got, he did not know how to heal her. He needed to find another solution. For the time being, his only option was to depend on the scouts to uncover information somewhere out there. It’d taken him a while to convince Claudia to ask them for the favor, and he’d had high hopes that something would turn up quickly. Despite their

efforts so far, they had yet to achieve even the slightest progress.

No one around here knew what had happened to Sun, or how to make her better. She wavered on the brink, clinging to a fragile thread of resilience, yet displaying a semblance of stability. It was like the time with those bandits when she'd been spent after using her power. Only this time, she pushed forward with an attack, despite her depleted reserves. Phineas had expected it might take her a little longer to wake up—but two months?

Chee and Lukas exchanged a look, their silent interaction betraying their shared understanding of his brooding thoughts. Phineas didn't want to seem ungrateful for the hospitality they had received after stumbling in here, the four of them battered and one of them unconscious, but something kept nagging at him.

“Why stay here?” he blurted out.

Ms. Reynolds' brow furrowed, but she kept eating calmly. “What do you mean?”

“Why are you hiding?” Phineas set down his fork, his voice hard. “Why not fight back?”

“Staying away from that man is our way of rebelling,” Claudia affirmed. “And the best option for the entire kingdom, too. If we were to fall under his control, we would be no better than mindless soldiers.”

Lukas turned his eyes away. Chee placed a hand on his shoulder. Ms. Reynolds didn't seem to notice. She finished her food and brought her plate to the sink to be washed. Upon their disheveled arrival at her doorstep that first day, they found themselves compelled to divulge every detail. They had revealed Phineas' true identity to her, accompanied by fervent pleas for her discretion.

"But you could find a way to suppress that mind control, or you could get help at the Academy!" Phineas said, then felt a kick under the table. He ignored Chee's warning and plunged deeper. "Why let the man who took so much from you dictate how you live?"

"With all due respect, your highness," Claudia said, her voice razor-sharp, "hiding here means my people aren't adding another name to Cadmus' list of casualties. You don't get to judge our choices from the outside." She was painfully honest. "I've seen the war firsthand. I've seen my own friends turn on their our people because of that wretched black dragon leader." Her eyes took on a red hue when she turned around from the dirty plates to look at him. "We may hide here, but we have a good life, and we're safe knowing we won't be the ones to hurt our loved ones or burn another innocent village to the ground."

Phineas' ears turned red. He couldn't fathom the origins of all this turmoil, but the sheer injustice of it all weighed heavily on him. He hated good people were forced to live in the shadows because of the lust of one man. It mirrored that village reduced to poverty, forced to distrust every traveler due to the devastation inflicted upon their homes.

"I didn't mean it like that, I know what Cadmus can do. I've witnessed a village standing at the intersection of fate, caught in the crosshairs of war's relentless advance." Images of the burning trees back at the merchant village flew through Phineas' brain, and the figure of the man walking among the flames burned brightest. "And I saw what Cadmus did to them, but you could--"

"And why do you think he attacked that village?" Claudia asked.

"Excuse me?"

"I know the place you are talking about. Why do you think he did it?"

"I... "Phineas looked at his friends, but neither of them seemed to know the answer. "I figured he just wanted to instill fear in everyone."

"Well, there's that," Claudia said, coming over to pick up the rest of the dishes. "But there's more. The only reason he was ever at that place was because he was there, specifically looking for you."

A sudden vacuum seemed to drain all the air from Phineas' chest, leaving him breathless, as though someone had just punched him in the gut. "What?"

Claudia paused, her gaze lingering on Phineas as she evaluated his expression. Her eyes softened a bit, and she sighed.

"He was aware that you had been taken from the castle, Phineas. Few people did, but your father had given instructions to some of us, told us places where you might be hidden and asked us to protect you. If Cadmus was there, then he was looking for you."

Phineas looked down at his hands without really seeing them. They felt dirty. He thought of the girl from the Inn, the bandits, the memories of destruction from the tree... and all the pain had all been just to find him? It was all his fault.

"Why did no one come to me then, if my father...?" he didn't finish the sentence.

"Some of us tried, but you were nowhere to be found. It was as if you fell off the face of the planet. Many thought you were dead."

Right, because Monica and Paul had done their best to keep him safe, keep him away from Cadmus and Phineas had thrown all of that sacrifice away by embarking on this silly quest. He remembered the kids talking by the river, scared of Phineas' mere

presence there. Perhaps they weren't so wrong to be scared of him. After all, he'd almost gotten all of his friends killed again and again.

Was he destined to bring chaos everywhere he went?

