



BOOK 1

**SOMETHIN' TO
BELIEVE
IN**

SARANTOS

Somethin' to Believe In

Sarantos

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Dedication

I want to start off by thanking God without whom nothing is possible.

Next, I want to thank all my family, friends, as well as anyone else I have ever had the privilege of meeting in my short time on this planet. In your own unique way, you have helped me to become the man I am today - both good and bad. So yes, I blame you for all my issues. But I still love you!

To all my readers who have embraced my words and allowed my stories to come to life in your heart and mind, thank you. Your unwavering support and encouragement have fueled my creative spirit. This book is dedicated to each and every one of you.

To my fans, family and to the entire world, I want to reassure you that I will continue this journey until the day I die. Why? Because it makes me happy.

I hope all of your dreams come true too!

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Introduction

Look at what we've done together!



Before you read my 10th book and start this new trilogy, I want to again thank you for being you, and of course, for being my fan. I have many people to thank - God, my parents, sister and so many family & friends who made this book possible. However, this intro is specifically for you, my diehard fan.

These fictional book pages are a direct reflection of my songs but also a real part of my life. I hope you enjoy diving into them. I want to make everyone on this planet happy hopefully thru my music, lyrics, songs, videos, poems and my books.

Being super busy, I know your most valued commodity is time. So, *the fact you are giving up your most valuable asset to me is humbling.* THANK YOU SO MUCH!

Work has never scared me. I got this from my dad who was the hardest worker I've ever known. I always bring him into the conversation because life is short. It's precious and fleeting. None of us know how much time we have left so please enjoy it. For me, that means working hard to pursue this dream. I'm honored to have you in my life. We are here together at this single moment in time. Thank you for supporting me and my journey. Every single penny that comes in gets poured right

back into my art because I'm not doing this to get rich. I just want my songs listened to, my videos watched, and my books read. I hope my art touches you, calms you, motivates you, consoles you, inspires you, as it has done for me. And please share it anywhere you want.

Join my exclusive fan email list on my website to get all the inside info first. I promise to only send one email a month. I will do everything I can to make my email something you look forward to opening every month.

I am not a man who speaks many words. I listen a lot. I let others talk most of the time. Now, though, my heart feels the need to once again thank you for your love and support. You are making my dream a reality. Without you, none of this would be possible.

Because of you, I'm never going to stop.

Sarantos

Chicago, IL 2023

~ Something to Believe In ~

CHAPTER 1



His thoughts were like puzzle pieces, scattered across the landscape of his mind, as he attempted to assemble the mosaic of his father's teachings. Trying to remember his father's exact words, Phineas ventured into the forest once more.

He'd been there plenty of times and, each time, played a game all by himself. He often let his imagination run wild, inventing worlds that weren't really there. In his mind, Phineas had chased small, stinky trolls through the woods, played hide and seek with naked nymphs at the glassy pond, and slept under weathered trees whose spirits talked back to him in the dark, telling him stories of what used to be.

"No more," he whispered as he followed a lightly marked trail that his own feet had made through the years. It was a part of the woods where

vegetation no longer grew as it used to, a thin strip of dirt, as thin as Phineas himself was.

He was a wisp of a boy, as delicate as the morning mist that vanishes at the touch of sunlight. And even though he was almost an adult now, and no longer a kid, he was still very slim. Only that now, he was so tall that he'd grown about a head taller than his own mom. And well, those fantasies and fairytales had to be left behind, along with all those clothes that no longer fit him.

"Life's an open road, every day a new adventure," his father always chorused. Phineas had tried to live by that mantra, even if his life felt like a nightmare sometimes. Even if he felt so lonely that during his entire childhood, his mind conjured up imaginary friends and creatures to keep him company.

"But I'm an adult now, so I'm not doing that anymore," he said aloud. "I will not imagine things that aren't there, and I'll concentrate my efforts on getting a scholarship to a good university."

Phineas kneeled on the mulch and picked a couple of mushrooms from the ground, putting them in a hand-woven basket his mother made when he was five years old. Foraging was something his mother had taught him. It was a very handy skill to have when one lived in the middle of nowhere—literally.

Nested in the wild with a forest behind it, the Hart farm was an enormous expanse of countryside where they raised cattle to the south. The sea crashed at their doorstep. It was a fantastical land, a place most people probably only dreamed of. The sun rose on top of the piercing blue water every morning, its light bathing the windows of the house and warming the kitchen floor. And every afternoon, the sun hid behind the tall trees of the forest, dressing the house with eerie shadows that, as a kid, Phineas had named demons.

Now, being almost nineteen and still living at home, Phineas dreamed daily of everything—everything but what he already had. His thoughts were like fireflies, illuminating the darkness with flickers of dreams, dancing in the depths of his



consciousness. He wanted to go to America, where there were as many Universities as anywhere else in the world. Or maybe to Europe, to a University in the middle of Scotland or maybe even

England? He had so many dreams of traveling to a world he knew nothing about, to meet new people,

people that weren't his parents. There was nothing wrong with Monika and Paul, but he daydreamed of so much more. Living nineteen years with the same two people would take a toll on anyone, or so he told himself.

"It's not that much to ask for, right?" Phineas wondered, gathering a few more mushrooms he knew were safe for consumption before turning around and heading back to the house. "I already stayed here a year more than I had to. Mom and Dad promised that if I stayed one more year to help with the farm while Dad's knee got better, then we could discuss plans for University. I mean, it's not like I don't already have a thousand ideas and plans..."

As Phineas kept talking, no one replied. The forest was quiet around him, with just a few birds chirping here and there. The hush of the forest enveloped him like a soft embrace, as if the ancient trees were holding their breath in his presence.

"Dad constantly says life is an adventure, and well... I already know what I want my next adventure to be. Why can't they just say yes and let me be?"

Huffing a sigh, Phineas got to the edge of the forest and looked backward, almost as if hopeful that the answer hid back there in the woods. Then, squaring his shoulders, he headed back into the farmhouse, entering through the tiny kitchen door

where he was immediately greeted by the smell of fresh strawberry jam being stirred on the stove.

His mother, Monika, greeted him from the stove. “How was the gathering, my boy?” She was a short and plump woman with tight curly hair that was a shade lighter than Phineas. While Phineas’ hair was orange, his mothers was almost strawberry blond. Monika usually kept it long, but it was now up in a messy bun as she cooked. She wore a light flowery dress. When her son approached and planted a kiss on her forehead, she smiled widely.

“Hi mom, it wasn’t bad. Mushrooms are in full bloom at the moment, so many of them are running around begging for attention.”

“You know mushrooms don’t bloom,” she replied in a teasing tone.

“I know, it was just a saying,” he replied.

Phineas went to the sink and started washing the mushrooms, his fingers dancing delicately over each mushroom, washing away the soil that clung to the tender caps. Then, he placed them on a board and started slicing them as thinly as he could. After a moment of silence, in which only the birds singing outside the window kept them entertained, Phineas turned to his mother, who was now pouring the jam into sterilized jars.

“Mom...”



“Yes?” Monika didn’t turn. She put one jar aside and moved on to the next.

“Why don’t you and dad want me to go to college?”

She must have sensed the nervous energy in the room, because she turned around fully, looked at him with eyes that knew too much and said too little. Eyes that Phineas knew well enough, eyes that he’d seen plenty throughout the years anytime he asked questions that his parents didn’t have straight answers to.

Questions like: *Why do we live so far away from everything? Why can’t we go into the city? Where exactly is the island located? Can you show it to me on a map?* Questions with answers he’d learn to interpret. His parents had never hid the outside world from him. He knew his geography and watched TV—prerecorded—like every other kid. He knew a bit about politics too. His parents had also told him plenty of stories about their lives when they used to live in Seattle, then Scotland, and then Costa Rica. Eventually, they’d decided they’d seen enough of the globe and went off the radar, off-grid. They loved life like this here. They’d never planned to

bring a kid into their world, but life invariably had its own ideas.

“Phineas,” his mother said slowly, snapping him out of his current daydream. “Phineas,” his mother said slowly, snapping him out of his current daydream. Her words were like butterflies, fluttering gently in the air, hoping to draw him closer without causing him to fly away in fear. With each sentence, she chose her words like a painter selecting colors for a masterpiece, aiming to create a portrait of warmth and invitation. “We’ve talked about this. It’s not that we don’t want you to go, it’s just that with your father’s injury last year, things got more complicated and we needed your help around the house. Now, well... Why don’t you wait until your father finishes work later and then speak to him about this?”

Phineas nodded, a little deflated but still hopeful. Maybe tonight would be the night his father said they were ready for him to go. Maybe he’d sit by the desk in his room, and together they could have a look at all the universities he’d researched while the satellite was on and he could connect to the Internet—which was a rare occurrence.

“Okay, mom, I will.”

Smiling, Monika reached out to him and planted a kiss on his right cheek. After that, he

helped his mother bottle up the leftover jam, and together, they got ready for dinner.

It was almost an hour later when they heard a noise outside prompting Phineas to look out the window. The outside world beckoned like a captivating stage, and Phineas couldn't resist the urge to draw back the curtains and become an audience to the theater of the night. In the distance, and coming from the opposite edge of the forest he'd been foraging, came his father. Paul was taller than he was, but more robust. His hair was the color of wet sand and his eyes were so dark that Phineas often wondered how it was possible that he had lighter eyes than both of his parents. While his mom had green-tinted, hazy brown eyes and his father had dark brown ones, Phineas' eyes were almost yellow, so light green that his eyes hurt if he looked directly at the sun or the day was too bright.

"He's coming," Phineas said.

"Perfect, I'll set up the table. Bring the food," his mom ordered.

While she put the plates on the table, Phineas got the sauteed vegetables and plated them along with some rice.

Through the window, he watched his tired father approach, the light of the shed no longer visible on the edge of the forest. During the day, his father was always at the shed, working with wood

and creating mesmerizing furniture that people all over the world purchased through a contact his father had on the outside. Since he was a kid, the workspace was the only place Phineas wasn't allowed to enter—it was too dangerous with all the tools when he was younger, and then, his father had gotten so used to working in the comfort of silence, that not even his mother dared to bother him when he was there. Some days, he finished earlier; some days, he finished later. Either way, neither of them ever went looking for him. Phineas had never questioned this. It was simply the way things were.

“Hello, my gorgeous family!” The deep voice reverberated like a powerful bass note, filling the small kitchen with its rich timbre. Monika turned with a polite smile, holding onto Paul in a tight embrace. “Missed me?” he whispered.



“Always,” his mother replied.

“Hey, boy!” His father went over to Phineas and rustled his ginger hair, which was growing longer than usual.

“Hi, dad, how was work today?”

“Exhausting.” he replied. “Things didn’t go as planned today, so I honestly can’t wait to go to bed and start again tomorrow.”

They sat down, food was served, and then small conversation permeated the room as they filled their bellies. Phineas looked at his mother a few times, but her eyes told him to wait—to at least give his father a quiet dinner before enquiring about college. And so Phineas waited until the food was eaten, the dishes were done, and all of them were ready for bed.

He was up in his room when his father came over to say good night. He knew it was now or never.

“Dad, can we talk?” Phineas asked.

“Can’t it be tomorrow?” his father replied, stifling a yawn. “I’m honestly exhausted.”

“Well, I... I’d prefer it if it was now... You know how I stayed here for a year longer to help,” he explained, talking faster than usual to get his point across before his father interrupted him. “Well, I know you always say there’s plenty of opportunities in life, and that we shouldn’t waste them, that there’s always something to do...” He took a deep breath, and let the rest of it out. “I know what I want to do. I want to go to college in a big city, see how things are in the outside world. It’s time.”

His father looked distraught as Phineas talked. In the depths of his father’s eyes, he sensed a storm

of emotions brewing, a tempest of concern and sorrow colliding with the unyielding walls of love. He could tell his father hated to see him like this, to see him struggle with his words and this decision. Slowly, Paul grabbed Phineas hands in his and simpered sadly.

“You’re right... I know you’ve been here all your life, so you do not know what the outside world is like. Your curiosity is understandable. I’ve just been wanting to protect you, I guess, for as long as I could. What about this: We’ll discuss your options tomorrow, when I’m back from working, okay? I’ll do my best to be back early.”

Not really able to believe what he was hearing, Phineas was delighted from ear to ear.

“Yes, sure! I can show you everything tomorrow. I’ve been looking through options and have so many...” His voice grew still when he noticed the dark circles under his father’s eyes, and feeling a pang of guilt, he shook his head. “It’s okay, dad, go to sleep. I can tell you all about it tomorrow.”

“Thank you. Have a good night, my boy.”

Even though he was nineteen, his father still kissed him goodnight, a quick peck to the top of his head before he headed out of the room. He closed the door behind him.

“Did you hear that? I’m going to college!” Phineas almost squealed, trying to contain the well

of emotions so his father wouldn't hear him. Looking over to his shoulder, he smiled at the small girl sitting there, beaming back at him with a bittersweet expression.

Phineas extended his neck to have a better look at her, and then placed his hand close to his shoulder like he'd done a thousand times before, waiting for her to climb over to his palm.

"What's wrong, Sun? Aren't you happy that my father agreed to allow me to finally go off to college?"

Sun climbed into his palm. Her ascent was like a dance of trust and intimacy, as she placed her trust in the sturdy foundation of his hand, knowing she was safe in his gentle grip. He placed his hand at eye level so he could have a better look at his friend. Sun was Phineas only real friend, if he could even



consider her real. She was two inches tall, with bright pink spiky hair and an upturned nose that made her look like the pixie she was.

Sun pouted her lips and then shrugged.

"Not very chatty today, I see. Oh well, we better get some sleep. It's going to be an exciting day tomorrow."

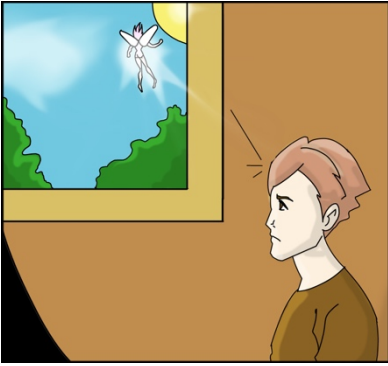
Phineas placed Sun in the matchbox on his night table. A small red cushion inside served as a bed. Then, he too laid down in bed. The open window to his right enabled the cool air of the night drift in at its leisure.

As he was about to fall asleep, a flash of light grabbed his attention. He half-opened his eyes, peeked through the window, and thought he saw some strange light coming from the shed. The next minute, a fresh stormy wind picked up, seemingly out of nowhere. He begrudgingly closed the window and threw the curtain closed—it was probably a summer storm coming their way.

Good. He hoped to wake up to a rainy landscape and lush, green forest. His dreams were waiting for him, like unopened letters, each envelope carrying the promise of adventures yet to be unfolded...

~ We FAILED until WE didn't ~

CHAPTER 2



The sun stretched its golden arms across the horizon, painting the sky with hues of pink and orange as if giving the world a gentle morning kiss. It was the battering of Sun's wings

that woke Phineas. It wasn't a loud noise, because she was pretty tiny, but it felt like a palpable buzz that vibrated on his chest every time she flew nearby. When he finally opened his eyes, he found her by the window.

"Sun, what's up?"

At the mention of her name, she quickly turned and hurried to his shoulder, sitting there as if nothing had happened.

Sometimes during the past years, Phineas had thought Sun was a creation of his imagination, like every other imaginary friend he'd had as a kid—he still did sometimes. More often than he could count, he thought he was going stark mad and hallucinating echoes of reflections that had no

reality of their own. But on mornings like this, when he knew she'd been the one to wake him, it was hard to deny her undeniable presence by his side his whole life. She was like a familiar fixture in the tapestry of his life, a constant presence woven into every thread of his memories. Honestly, Phineas couldn't remember a time Sun hadn't been around—even if his parents had never seen her or acknowledged her existence, even when he was a little boy openly talking to her in front of them. He obviously stopped doing that when he grew up. Though all his other imaginary friends had disappeared, Sun stayed.

“Sun, don't play the fool. I heard you flying all over the room. What's up?”

The little fairy shrugged and poked her tongue out at him, making him grunt in annoyance.

“You're insufferable.”

Sun laughed, again fully poking her tongue out at him. Each laugh was a burst of confetti, showering the moment with a shower of happiness and lifting spirits like colorful balloons into the sky. Through the years, they'd had plenty of fights. Sometimes, Sun had gone as far as disappearing for a while, but she eventually would always come back. Even when Phineas ignored her for many days at a time when he became a hormonal teenager, claiming that he couldn't see her—which had led to Sun pulling on his

hair constantly, until he'd finally admit she was there.

It'd been years since he heard her speak, though. He remembered her soft and squeaky voice from when he was a child, a voice that reassured him everything was going to be okay. That he wasn't weird. That she was a genuine friend. A voice that repeatedly calmed him and made him feel like he belonged, somehow, to someone. But at some point, she'd started talking less and less, until he didn't hear her anymore. It'd been at least a year or maybe more. He couldn't even remember.

"You shouldn't go," she annunciated clearly as the memory of her voice came flooding back to him. They were the same exact last words Sun had said to him before going quiet. He remembered the day vividly now. He'd been ready to head to University, and Sun didn't want him to leave. She said she couldn't follow him there, that she'd sit alone in the forest if he left. They had fought about it and the wave of memories came crashing back.

The next day, his father had a work accident in the shed and his leg had been healing for months. Phineas then stayed.

Still, he hadn't spoken to Sun for weeks afterwards and, when he finally did, she never replied.

Now, tired of her aggravation, he moved on. He got up, made his bed, opened the window a bit, and then remembered the light and the storm. The sky was as clear as could be, not a single cloud in sight. The grass across their property looked dry.

Odd.

After getting changed, Phineas left his room and went down the stairs. His feet glided down the stairs like whispered promises, leaving soft imprints



on the wooden surface as he made his descent. He found his mom in the kitchen, waffles and eggs already being plated.

“Morning, Phi,” his mother greeted him, using his childhood nickname.

“Morning, mom... Did it rain last night?” Phineas took a hand to the back of his neck, scratching away the weird sensation he felt.

His mother put a plate in front of him and took a seat across the table. “No, why do you ask?”

“Just thought I heard thunder last night... Well, no, actually... I saw lightning,” he corrected, realizing he’d never heard a thing.

His mom shrugged oddly, a motion that made her look a bit like his fairy friend. They started eating.

“Where’s dad?” he asked after two bites. It wasn’t usual for his father to be late for breakfast, but it wasn’t odd either. What was odd was that his plate wasn’t at the table, which took Phineas a moment to notice with how distracted he was by the morning’s events.

“Oh, he went to the shed early today and took breakfast out there with him. He said he had some things he needed to fix from yesterday.”

“Oh... Okay.” Trying not to be disappointed that he couldn’t at least have a word about University with his dad this morning, Phineas kept eating.

All day, Phineas waited. Time crawled. His heart became a pendulum, swinging between hope and uncertainty, as he clung to the belief that his father would soon appear. He waited and waited for his father to return from the shed while he did his morning chores, fed the chickens, and checked on the cattle. He waited as he got lunch ready while his mother fixed some woven baskets that had seen better days. Phineas then waited some more while the afternoon arrived and then the sun descended. He continued waiting while he tried to study for University and attempted to write an essay. By the time the sun was dipping into the horizon, he was still waiting.

“Mom, do you reckon dad is okay? It’s getting late. Should I... Should I go check on him?”

They were in the kitchen again, the place where the family spent most of their time. The oven was a patient guardian, holding the meal in its warm embrace until it was ready to be unveiled to eager diners.

“You know your father doesn't enjoy being bothered while he's working. Let's wait a bit more. Maybe you can finish that essay while we wait for him?”

Begrudgingly, Phineas went back to his room and sat on the office chair. His wooden desk was by the window that faced the shed. Sitting there, he could see a glimpse of the building through the trees. The shed loomed like a colossal titan, its towering walls reaching towards the heavens, as if daring to touch the sky. His father needed the space since he worked with wood he got from the forest, which he turned into all kinds of furniture. Phineas had never been inside, but he saw the finished pieces when the boats came to pick them up. Well, sometimes helicopters came. His father had a contact, Gus, who sold the furniture for him, so he didn't have to deal with customers himself. He only sent pictures of the finished pieces to Gus, who did everything else for him—for a cut, obviously. The things that came out of that shed were magical, just like every piece of wooden furniture inside their home.

Lost in thought, but with his eyes still on the shed, Phineas saw a flash of light again.

“What in Hell?”

Standing up, he leaned closer to the window, watching and waiting. Another flash.



Phineas was no fool, and he knew something was going on. Perched on the window, Sun shook her head sideways when he looked at her.

“What do you mean, ‘no’? I have to go see what’s going on, Sun. Dad’s been there since very early and said something went wrong yesterday. What if he needs help?”

Again Sun shook her head ‘no’ and crossed her arms over her chest, sitting down on the windowsill with attitude.

“I don’t care if you don’t come along. I’m going!”

For the first time in his life that he had to do something reckless, Phineas slid down the stairs on silent feet. Of course, Sun followed. She always said no, but still followed him into trouble each one of the few times he pushed on against the rules.

Going to the back porch, and staying as far away from the kitchen as he could, Phineas snuck out. Sun was now standing on his shoulder, gripping a longer strand of her hair with one hand and tugging on it as if to tell him to go back.

“Look, if you don’t want to go, you can stay. But I’m going to figure out what’s going on,” Phineas insisted.

He rushed to the tree line so his mom wouldn’t spot him if she was looking out the window, and then strolled towards the shed draped within the shelter of the forest. Lanky pine trees surrounded him and the mulch, which formed a thick carpet, muffling him and his steps. The sharp, sweet peppery and refreshing smell of the pine trees surrounded them. When he got closer to the shed, the two-story building seemed bigger than the last time he’d seen it. He didn’t go close that often and had forgotten the eerie feeling he consistently got when he was this close. As a kid, he’d snuck close a few times, drawn to the place like a moth to a flame, but always got caught receiving such a bad tell-off that he’d never dared to go close again. Until now.

“Okay, I’ll just get straight to the point... I’ll knock on the door and ask if everything is okay. Right?”

Phineas looked at Sun and she gave him such an annoyed look that he couldn’t help but laugh. Her

face clearly said, “I’ve told you I don’t want you to go, but you’re going to do whatever you wish anyway, so you might as well do it now.”

“I know. I love you, too,” he teased her.

Through the years, Phineas had learned to interpret every gesture and face Sun made. They could communicate, in a surreal way, without words. Even if her face was tiny, she was so full of facial expressions and raw emotions that it was impossible not to read her. For such a small thing, she had a huge personality.

With his heart as his shield and his determination as his sword, he mustered all his courage like a valiant knight preparing to face an unknown foe. Taking a big breath, Phineas proceeded towards the door. It couldn’t be that bad. His father wasn’t a person to get angry easily, so he’d just knock on the door and make sure everything was okay. As he got close to the door, which was a big sliding door that routinely remained closed, he thought he heard a radio inside—or voices talking back and forth? The lights were on. It was getting

dark fast, and a glint of light escaped through a small gap, drawing a line of brilliant white on the ground.

Phineas was about to knock when he heard his



father's voice and stopped, curiosity getting the best of him. Instead of knocking, he leaned closer to the doors, listening and expecting to catch his father singing along to the radio or something.

"I've told you everything I know," his father was saying.

Was he speaking on the satellite phone?

Then, a reply came back, "I think it's time to tell him what's happening. You can't keep him sheltered forever." The voice was deep and rumbling, and Phineas tried to peek through the small hole to see where it came from. There couldn't be anyone else on the island, as no vessels had arrived today, but he couldn't be hearing the answer so clearly if his father was on the phone or radio, either. It sounded like the other person was right there in the shed with his father.

"I'll walk you back. I need some papers from my office anyway," his father said.

Then Phineas saw something, catching a glint in his father's back, as he headed towards the right side of the shed. By his side, he thought he saw a taller figure, but they vanished quickly out of sight. He debated whether to knock, to go in, or simply go away. But the last option wasn't really an option. Phineas was tired of secrets and half-truths and he needed to know what was going on. As his hand closed around the handle of the sliding door, another flash of light blinded him.

Instinctively, he pulled the door open.

Nothing. The shed was empty, only a glimmer of light remained on the right side of the shed. It was quiet. The place was enormous, with long work benches and a few pieces of furniture scattered here and there being worked on. To the left, finished chairs and carefully wrapped tables and bookcases, ready to be shipped. And to the right... nothing.

"Dad?" Phineas whispered. "Dad?! Where are you?"

Only silence greeted him. Phineas started roaming the room, looking for a door that would lead to a new room. *Hadn't his father mentioned an office?* But the shed was one big warehouse of a room, and Phineas couldn't see his father or the other man anywhere. Almost on intuition, he went to the right wall. On his shoulder, Sun was getting pretty nervous, flying and landing on his shoulder in

quick succession, as if she couldn't stop moving. When they got closer to the wall, the buzzing of her wings got louder, overtaking any other sounds Phineas could pick up.

"What's going on?" he asked.

The wall at the end of the shed was made of stone on the inside, even though it was wooden on the outside. Phineas traced his hand over the boulders, some bigger and some smaller, until his eyes caught sight of a small marking on one of them. It looked like a circle with a triangle inside, and Phineas raised his hand, wanting to touch it.

"No!" The word seemed to echo inside his head as Sun grabbed a hold of his pinkie with both arms and legs and started yanking him backwards.

"Sun! What in the hell is going on? Chill! And did you just speak again? After all this time, are you really talking now?"

Phineas took half a step back, and Sun calmed a little, suddenly looking guilty. She looked down, flying in front of him and biting her bottom lip.

"Did you just speak?" he asked slowly, more calm than he was a minute before.

Without looking up, Sun nodded.

"I knew it! I'm not crazy! Why did you speak now? Why have you been quiet for so long? Do you know what this is?" Questions poured out of him as

Phineas pointed to the marking on the wall and Sun released a fat sigh.

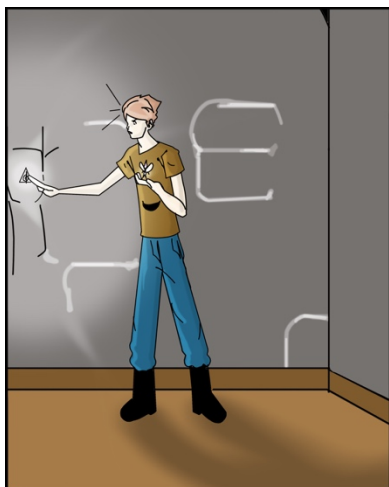
“You’re asking questions you don’t want answers to,” she said, her voice so small that he barely heard her.

“If I’m asking, it’s because I want to know,” he replied, trying to remain calm. “Sun, I have so many questions. My thoughts are like a puzzle, scattered with countless pieces of wonder, each question a missing fragment waiting to complete the picture. It seems questions are all I have, and no one is giving me any answers. Please, I’m begging you!” Phineas’ eyes threatened to fill with tears as he longed for the truth. Every day, he tried to be happy and live life as if it was an adventure, just like his father always told him. But, he often felt Sun was the only one that understood the thoughts that ran around his crazy head and was there for him—and she didn’t even talk back. It was nuts. He felt crazy. Delusional.

Sun made a cupping motion with her hands, so Phineas copied her, knowing she wanted a place to land. She stood on his palm, looking up at him and smiling sadly. “You know I care, okay? And believe me, it’s safer this way.”

“Safer? Everything I always hear is about being safe. I’m tired of ‘safe.’ I want the truth, Sun.” Without waiting for Sun to reply, Phineas pointed

his free hand to the marking, barely touching it.
“What’s this?”



Sun’s thoughts were dancing on the edge of her tongue, hesitant to take the leap into the open air of conversation. She couldn’t reply in time. The moment Phineas’ finger touched the symbol, a warm light invaded the room, seeming to come out of the rock itself. The symbol lit up and then the rock it was on started shining too. One by one, the surrounding rocks crumbled into light energy, a grand doorway opening up. It was pure light, warm and inviting, and Phineas watched it with his mouth hanging open.

“What in Hell...”

“We should go back, Phin,” Sun said, his name so soft and hypnotically from her lips that he almost thought about obeying for a moment.”

But he’d been waiting for too long. Waiting for answers he wasn’t getting.

So, feeling braver than ever, Phineas touched the wall of light. The moment he did, a flash of brightness took him in. He felt the light gently

pulling, his arm then being yanked as the light swallowed his body whole.

He heard Sun scream his name, and then it was all white and silent.

~ Another Surgery ~

CHAPTER 3



The light quickly dimmed and then Phineas' world came back to focus. It was as if he had crossed a threshold into a realm untouched by the modern world, a sacred realm where the spirits of the forest whispered

in the wind. He found himself in the woods—but it was clear as day that it wasn't the woods he was used to. Because, for one, it was daytime. His senses became attuned to the symphony of nature's melodies, the chorus of chirping birds, the soft whisper of the breeze, and the occasional distant call of woodland creatures.

“What in Hell is going on?” he said aloud, unable to keep his emotions bottled in. His mind felt busy and distracted.

His neck whipped one way then the other, quickly scanning what was in front of him: a forest not as dense as the one from his homeland, with a pale grayish green moss covering the trees and a

unique woody-earthly scent flooding the forest. There was a clearing up ahead, which was obvious from the amount of light coming from it.

But none of it mattered when his head turned and in the spot he usually found Sun hovering over his shoulder, he found... well, Sun.

The scream that came out of his lips wasn't something Phineas was proud of, and he scrambled back so fast that he tripped over a root and fell on his butt, looking at Sun from below for the first time in his life.

"Sun?" It was obvious. Yet, it wasn't.

Who he was used to seeing as a small two-inch pixie was now almost five feet tall. *Almost.*

"Hello, Phineas. This isn't how I wanted this to go, but, oh well. Hi." Sun waved a hand in the air as if dismissing her own thoughts. "I guess you never liked to listen to my advice. You always do what you bloody want to, anyway." As she said this, she crossed her arms over her chest, looking as miffed as he'd ever seen her.

Sun's hair was exactly the same, short and spiky and of a bright pink color that wasn't natural on humans. Her eyes were metallic green, something he'd never noticed before, and her wings—even though they were tucked close to her body—were still visible behind her back. And damn, now that she was talking, she wouldn't stop.

“I told you not to go. I told you no, but no, no, no, Phineas always does whatever the hell he feels like doing. Don’t listen to the pixie, not like she knows what she’s talking about.”

Phineas did not know how to avoid being trapped under the waterfall of her emotions.

She continued her frantic rant, ultimately executing her short fringe dance in the air. She’d done this so many times before so Phineas was used to the expression. Still, it was shocking to see it at human size. And almost comical, but he knew laughing wasn’t among his list of viable options if he wanted to keep his head attached to his body.

“And now you won’t speak, just perfect!” Sun grunted after a second of silence.

She looked right then left, as if assessing where they were, finally lending Phineas a hand so he could stand up. He did. Damn, holding her hands was as weird as expected. It was still small compared to his, but it was human size. It was...



“You’re real? Is this some kind of hallucination? Did I hit my head and I’m dead or dreaming?”

“Wish I’d been the one to hit you on the head, but no, you’re not dreaming,” Sun replied, her tone softening.

“Where are we, then? What happened?”

“What happened is that you didn’t listen. Come on, we should head back before we get in more trouble.”

Sun turned around and took a giant step forward, but Phineas didn’t move, crossing his arms over his chest instead. He knew he looked like a little kid throwing a tantrum, but he didn’t care. He wanted answers, and he was going to get them right now. Like a detective on a trail, he followed the breadcrumbs.

“No, no, no,” he said. “I’ve been talking alone for over a year, waiting for you to give me some answers, wondering if I lost my mind or if you’re fucking real, and now you want to go back!? What? So you can be a tiny pixie that doesn’t speak a word again? I’m not moving.” He spoke so fast that he almost resembled Sun.

“Don’t think I like that for a minute! I do it for you!” Sun interrupted, her cheeks going bright red.

“Yes, everybody is doing what’s best for me, right? But what would be best would be to know where in hell I am. The unknown is uncomfortable!”

Sun opened her mouth to reply, but a rustling sound behind Phineas made her stop. He turned, hearing someone coming, and when he looked back at Sun, the pixie was gone.

“What?”

Before he could call her over, the foliage burst open, revealing a person sprinting directly towards him. Well, maybe not a person. If it wasn't for Phineas spending all his childhood playing with imaginary trolls and dwarves and being very used to odd creatures showing up unannounced, he would have probably run. Because there, in front of him, was now a Minotaur. Even if his face was human-like, Phineas was sure that was what he was. He was almost eight feet tall, with hardy horns in his head and a hooped nose ring. He was wearing a white shirt and broad under the knee-shorts, but the rest of his legs were clearly animal-like. He was wearing no shoes. After all, it'd be pretty hard to put shoes on those hooves.

"Hi, are you lost? I don't think I know you," the man-bull said.

Phineas was so surprised by his gentle voice that for a second, he forgot how to speak.

"Um... No, well... I think so? I don't know where I am," he stammered.



The minotaur smiled broadly and acknowledged the woods with a wave of his arm. "Well, then let me welcome you to the Otherworld Academy.

I'm sure if you found yourself here, it's because this is the place for you. Fate never makes mistakes. I am Xhe, the headmaster of the school."

"School?"

His eyes were like a kaleidoscope, absorbing the colors and patterns of the world, creating a mesmerizing mosaic in his mind. Phineas looked around once again, as if wanting to check if he'd missed something, like a vast building, for instance—a welcoming school. But there was nothing. And then, as if on cue, an eerie wind picked up, and the trees unlocked around them, revealing an enormous castle in the distance.

"This is the Otherworld Academy, a University for gifted teenagers and all those that want to know the world around them better. Care to walk with me?"

Still at a loss for words, and not knowing where Sun ran off to, Phineas followed when Xhe started walking towards the immense building.

"University, you say?"

Like a celestial conductor orchestrating a symphony, the universe seemed to have played its magical notes, guiding him to this precise intersection of time and place.

Was it destiny that brought him here? And where was his father? Was he also in there? Would he run into him somewhere in this magical land?

Phineas had so many questions without answers that he didn't know where to begin.

When they were halfway to the building with only a few mostly human-looking people around the gardens, he heard a familiar buzz and looked over his shoulder. There, hiding behind him, was Sun in her small pixie form again. She made a sign that clearly meant: "You better come with me right now if you don't want to lose a limb," and then she disappeared back into the thick forest.

Scared to lose his only connection to what he'd known all his life, Phineas made a quick decision. He might come to regret it later, but everything around him was too much to take in.

"I'm so sorry, Xhe, but I have to go."

Without waiting for an answer, he bowed his head and ran back into the strange forest, following the sound of Sun's wings.

Before he was out of sight, though, he heard Xhe yelling back cheerfully, "We'll see each other again soon. Until next time."

Phineas ran through the forest. As he ran, the forest seemed to envelop him in a mystical embrace, guiding him along the hidden trails and secret passages known only to its inhabitants. His breath was a rhythm, syncopated with the beating of his heart, propelling him forward like a drum urging him to keep going. He ran until he spotted Sun (back in

human size) standing against a weathered tree with her arms crossed over her chest wearing a very irritated expression.



Still, she was gorgeous, like strawberry lemonade, part sweet, part tart. She had very delicate features and was still so small that she barely got up to Phineas' chest. He couldn't help but think of her as cute and adorable—something he

knew he'd lose a limb over if he admitted out loud.

"What was that about? Why did you hide?" Phineas asked.

"Phin, I get that you have a lot of questions, but this is not the time. If your father returns before you're back, everything will change forever. I don't think you're ready for that, are you? Everything your father has ever done was for you. To keep you safe. To help you. I need you to remember that. Now, let's go back and I promise I will answer some of your questions after dinner. Deal?"

Phineas bit his bottom lip, unsure of what to say—but it was hard to say no to Sun. He'd always struggled to go against her advice as a kid, and it was

even harder now that she was full-sized and he could clearly see her stern expression.

“Okay... But will you be able to talk if we go back? Isn’t this all a ruse?”

Sun smiled kindly for the first time since they’d crossed the portal. Her lips curved like the crescent moon, as if mirroring the sky’s embrace of the rising sun, a celestial dance of light and warmth. Like a shy star peeking through the veil of night, her eyes twinkled with a hint of bashful enchantment, like a secret she was finally ready to share. “Not a lot, but yes, I’ve recharged enough to speak for a while. Now, let’s go.”

Sun extended her palm and drew a circle with her wrist. With the other hand, she reached out, waiting for Phineas to grab her hand. The moment he did, a big circle of light opened up and swallowed them. Within a blink, they were back in his father’s warehouse.

And Sun was a small pixie again.

She went straight for the door and, this time, Phineas rushed after her without hesitation. If his father found him here, he would be in so much trouble.

After the adventure, Phineas excused himself to his room without dinner, claiming he was tired. In truth, he wasn't ready to face his father.

Sun excused herself too, promising she would be back shortly—it wasn't something she'd done often through the years. Leave him, but it wasn't the first time either.

So, Phineas lay in his bed, staring at the ceiling and thinking about everything that had happened so far. In the stillness of the room, his mind became a painter, splashing vibrant hues of imagination onto the blank canvas of the ceiling. It was hard for him to wrap his mind around the fact that there was, what? A portal in his father's warehouse? And one that led to a University, at that? All he'd wanted for so long was to go to school, and it almost seemed like a joke that there was one so close by. That's why he was sure it all had to be a hallucination. He was sliding again, descending into madness. Minotaurs, pixies that grew into full size, mystical portals... None of it could be real. Could it?

After reasoning back and forth about everything he had seen, Phineas resolved to do his best to forget about it. The next day, he'd go to his father again and ask to go to University in America. He'd get away from the woods that were driving him mad as fast as possible, and go get a normal education, like any other guy his age. That was it.

The harder you look, the more you see, so he vowed not to look any further tonight.

As the light outside dimmed and he fell asleep, he remembered what Sun had said: that his father had always done everything that was in his best interests. And he had, hadn't he? No matter how busy he was with orders and work, his father always made time for him. He was there to teach him how to identify poisonous plants, to show him how to shave, to listen to him when he had doubts. Both his parents had always done everything they could for him, and what did he do in exchange? Leave? Be ungrateful?

From now on, until he left for college, he'd be the perfect son. He'd repay their kindness and give them back everything they'd given him, show them he cared deeply for both of them. And he'd promise to come back, obviously.

Yet when Phineas finally fell asleep, it wasn't a peaceful slumber. No. Doubt and uncertainty tortured his dreams that night. The ice he stood on was cracking all around him. In his dreams, he was an angry young man. Fear but also despair, anxiety and a great sadness filled his heart with panic.



Next, his dreams were full of faces he didn't recognize, and a voice that talked to him so softly that he woke up shivering. In the cocoon of his blankets, he sought solace from the cold, like a bear curling up for

hibernation, seeking warmth in the midst of winter. Every shiver was a reminder of life's delicate balance.

It was as if a projector had been set in motion, casting images onto the screen of his consciousness, each frame a snapshot from his past. The sea of strangers stretched like an uncharted horizon, each face a mysterious island waiting to be explored, yet unfamiliar to his gaze.

~ I Got NO Money ~

CHAPTER 4



Phineas dreamed of a battle. The dreams were like a portal, transporting him to a realm where legends were born, and the echoes of battles fought long ago reverberated in his heart. He dreamed of

creatures he'd never seen before, all coming after him. He felt so small as he ran through tight corridors and hid underneath a small creaky bench, unsure of what he was hiding from.

When he awoke, he still felt scared, his heart drumming fast with nail marks in his palms from fisting his hands tightly. And when he looked at the night table, he found it empty. The clock marked three in the morning, so he went back to sleep, trying to forget about the off feeling.

When he slept again, he dreamed of a man that carried him in his arms, but it wasn't his father. He dreamed of a voice, soft and gentle, that sang him to sleep. But it wasn't his mother.

He woke up feeling sad and nostalgic, as if he'd lost something, like he missed a chapter of his life. His emotions were like a bittersweet symphony, each note a brushstroke of sadness and longing, painting the canvas of his soul in shades of wistfulness. He felt empty, with no love, no hope, no money, and no answers. And there, on the matchbox by the bed, was a pixie with pink hair looking straight at him with eyes more gentle than he'd ever seen.

"Are you real?" he asked, taking a hand to his hair to keep it off his face. His eyes were deeply sad. He thought his life was like a piece of a puzzle that has not yet fallen into place.

Sun jumped off the box and sat on the edge of the table, her feet dangling.

"As real as I can get," she replied, her voice low but powerful. "I know what you're thinking, but everything that happened last night... It was real. And I think it might be time for you to remember a bit more about your past, to know where you really come from."

Phineas sat on his bed without emotion, mimicking the pixie's posture while leaning on his knees to look into her soft eyes. Then his face got red.

"What are you talking about? Are you finally going to give me answers?"

In her smile, there was a story untold, a narrative of strength and fragility coexisting, like a tapestry woven with threads of both joy and sorrow. Sun's smile was so sad that Phineas wished she was bigger so he could hug her to make her feel better.

"No, Paul and Monika are."

Phineas had never heard her parent's names on Sun's lips. It felt wrong. He didn't shift. He stayed strong, looking at her, unsure of how to react. The last day had been so weird, and now this? He just couldn't process what was going on fast enough.

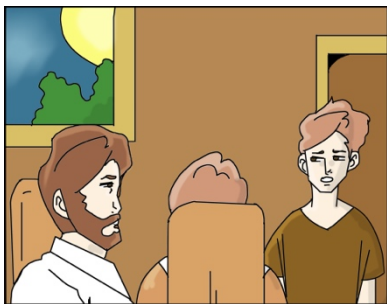
"Come on, get changed. I'll wait for you downstairs."

With that, Sun flew out of the room, leaving him alone with his thoughts. As loud and messy as they were, he tried to keep them quiet. To keep them contained. Scared of what was to come, he dressed slowly. He put on shorts and an old torn T-shirt. In the mirror's reflection, he saw a portrait of apprehension, as if the looking glass itself mirrored the trepidation in his eyes. He went to the bathroom upstairs and brushed his teeth nonchalantly. Why was he procrastinating? When there was nothing else left for him to do in the bathroom, he walked down the stairs.

Sun waited for him at the bottom and jumped on his shoulder the moment he was close enough.

“It’s okay, we’ve got this,” she murmured as Phineas walked into the kitchen like a bomb about to explode.

There, he found a room he was very familiar with but now somehow seemed different. A room where he’d had countless breakfasts with his parents. Only this time, no one was eating breakfast. The breakfast table stood like a deserted island amidst a sea of chairs, with plates of untouched food resembling unexplored landscapes waiting to be



discovered. His eyes swept the room. His parents were both sitting at the table, pancakes going cold on their plates and fruit turning yellow on the

edges.

“Morning,” he said, his voice small.

“Good morning, Phineas,” his father said.

“Morning, sweetheart.” His mother stood and planted a quick kiss on the top of his head when he sat down. “Feeling better?”

“Yeah... Kind of. I’m... confused.”

“I’m sure you are,” his father replied.

There was silence after that while all three Harts looked at each other, Phineas not knowing how to break the ice or what to say. Sun sat

strangely silent on his shoulder, until finally jumping onto the table, glaring at each of them in turns before speaking.

“If you don’t start speaking, maybe I will,” Sun said, directing the words at Phineas’ father.

To his surprise, his father’s eyes which had been locked onto the table peered directly to Sun.

And then he looked back up to him, “There are a few things we’d like to speak with you about,” his father started, and for a moment, he wasn’t sure if he’d seen Sun or he’d imagined him looking at her. “I’m sure you know everything we’ve ever done was done with your best interests at heart. But I believe you saw something yesterday that might have turned your world upside down.”

“You mean the portal?” Phineas blurted out.

His mother flinched at the mention, but his father remained steady.

“What did you see?” he asked.

“I... I thought I might be losing my mind—” he started.

“You’re not,” Sun whispered, back on his shoulder.

“I went to the warehouse. I’m sorry. I saw a light, and I was worried, and I... I touched a boulder on the back wall, and suddenly I was in a forest.” As the story spilled forth, Phineas talked faster and faster, wanting to get it over with. It scared him to

look at his parent's worried expressions, so he kept his eyes focused on the table instead. "I saw a man there, an actual Minotaur, and he told me there was a school, and Sun was there with me, but she was big, and I, I came back. I think I'm losing my mind." He shook his head, his words as messy as his feelings.

It was as if the world had held its breath, waiting with bated anticipation for the next verse of the symphony of life to begin. Phineas finally found the strength to look up. His parents were holding hands and facing him with such concerned eyes. Phineas' heart was working too hard. He was confused and tired.

"I..." His father took a deep breath and then tried again. "I'm sorry we kept this from you for so long."

Phineas' eyes opened up so wide that the light hurt.

"What? Are you telling me this is real? I'm not crazy?"

"You've never been crazy!" Sun interrupted again, sounding pissed off.

"Sun, please," Paul said.

And it was then that Phineas realized his father was actually looking straight at the pixie. And he'd just said her name. After years of ignoring her and... what? Pretending she wasn't there?

“You can see her?”

“Of course he can, they both can,” Sun replied again, not letting his parents answer.

His mother’s eyes filled with heavy tears as her son looked at her, unable to believe what he was hearing. With each tear that fell, she seemed to share a part of her soul, like a bridge connecting their hearts in a sacred embrace. Suddenly, Phineas started feeling hot inside, anger building up and bubbling as if he was a volcano about to erupt.

“You. Can. See. Her!” He said every word as if it was its own sentence. He said it as an affirmation, not a question anymore.

“Phineas, please...” His father reached out to him, but Phineas moved back.

“You’ve been lying to me? All this time?”

He had never felt so hurt in his life, so startled and enraged at the same time. So bewildered.

“I’m sorry, we did it to protect you,” his mother choked out.

“There’s a dangerous world out there, Phineas. And we didn’t want you involved in it,” his father added, as if trying to excuse the lies they’ve enlivened for years. A small part of him could almost understand. He wanted to understand. He really did.



And he had so many questions that he didn't know where to start.

"All those creatures I saw when I was a kid. Were they real?"

His father nodded.

"The dwarves?"

"They help me in the workshop. They work the wood."

"The nymphs?"

"They take care of the forest, provide for us," his mother replied.

"The trolls?"

They both nodded.

"Not the best thing to have around kids. So I asked them to stay away," his father explained, sounding as if he was giving him facts about the plants that grew in the forest rather than talking about any magical creatures. Creatures they'd repeatedly said were imaginary, until now.

It couldn't be true. None of it could be. Could it?

"Sun?" he asked a minute later, his voice so tiny he wasn't sure they heard him.

“She’s been with you since birth,” his mother replied in a tender and soothing voice. “It’s a long and complicated story.”

Sun placed a hand on his neck, like she used to do when he was a little boy and nervous. It used to pacify him, but now, the gesture almost annoyed him. Everything was wrong, so wrong.

“The portal?” he asked next, unable to put more than two words together.

His parents exchanged a look, and then his father finally spoke.

“The portal has been there for a very long time. I... I’m a Professor at the Otherworld Academy, and the portal is a gateway and how I get there for class. A mage friend of mine created it, and it’s activated by touch.”

It was so straightforward, yet so unbelievable. Phineas had known these things were real his entire life. Real magic existed all around him but he’d denied it for all those years.

“Why?” he asked, the word a broken whisper. “Why did you let me believe I was crazy?”

His mother was the one to reply now, a single tear running down her cheek. “We were so sure you thought they were imaginary friends from your childhood. We didn’t know it was still affecting you. And Sun, since you never spoke to her again, we

thought... We thought you couldn't see her anymore. It.. It can happen."

"What can happen?" He didn't mean to be rude, but he was so bitter and incensed that he had almost spat the words out.

"Some of us deny magic for long enough that we stop being able to see it," Monika explained. "We lose sight of it."

"Us?"

It was as if every door opened to a room of infinite corridors, each corridor leading to more doors yet to be opened. Every new revelation brought new questions, and Phineas kept asking question after question for so long that the sun was almost all the way up when he finally left the kitchen. He needed some air.

Magic was real after all. There was a whole other world out there he knew nothing about. His parents, as well as him, could see all of it because they had some sort of magic running through their veins. He hadn't even started asking what kind of magic it was. How many kinds of magic existed anyway? What creatures were real, and which were fantasy? It was all a lot to take in, so Phineas went to the forest to sit under the trees in silence, concentrating and meditating until they came back to life. He heard them murmuring again. For years, he had blocked out that odd sound, but he found it

almost soothing today. He felt like he belonged here. This felt like the center of everything. The stillness was no more.

The forest had always been his home. It filled the hole in his heart with love.

The forest had always listened.

The forest had always been there, never abandoning him.

Through the tapestry of trees, he wandered like a ghost, his footsteps whispering secrets to the soft moss beneath his feet. The forest cradled him like a loving mother, its ancient arms stretching wide to embrace him with the comforting scent of earth and pine. Amongst the trees, he found solace, a sanctuary from the hustle and bustle of the outside world, where time seemed to slow to the rhythm of nature's heartbeat.

It must have been hours that he simply sat there, breathing it all in, yet trying to make sense of it. Talking to the trees and listening to their whispered wisdom. A big burden had been lifted off his shoulders. He was suddenly surrounded by a world of possibilities.

And then, he finally had his answer—a resolution.

When he walked back into the house, he found his parents still in the kitchen, quietly drinking tea trying in vain to fight off exhaustion. As he walked

in, both of them left the cups on the table and looked up at him, expecting something, waiting patiently.

“I have decided,” he declared. “I want to enroll in that school, not asking for permission. I’m an adult now. And no matter what you say, you can’t change my mind. I will go to the Otherworld Academy.”

His mother turned white. His father looked crushed.

Still, after a long exhale, they shared a look and then both nodded slowly.

“If that’s your decision, then we will support it,” his father said, even if it sounded more like a lie than anything else.

It had been a full week since Phineas first put a foot on the ground at the Otherworld Academy. And let’s just say, it hadn’t been easy.

After his father agreed to let him go to University here, then came the rules—the compromises. He would get a full scholarship for being the son of a Professor, but his parents didn’t want him to go on full boarding. They wanted him to at least spend the weekends with them, or to sleep at the cottage a few nights a week. Begrudgingly, he agreed. He was still angry because of the river of lies, and it was hard spending time with his parents

now, knowing the truth, but he also knew it was the only way he'd get used to being himself around them again. And after all, he was only a portal away. He could always go back to school if he needed to get away from them.

At the Otherworld Academy, they had given him a room, which he shared with Chee, a wizard.

Yes, a wizard.



“Tell me again why we’re here and not at the library,” Phineas asked on his fifth day of school, when they were both studying in their dorm.

Phineas had been so eager to see everything, but Chee kept a bit to himself. They had a rough first few days, neither of them liking the idea of sharing a room or being friends with someone so different. Phineas had never shared his room with anyone else, and apparently, neither had Chee. It felt like they had nothing in common. Eventually though, things worked out between them. Slowly.

“Because they all go weird when the son of the headmaster is around,” Chee replied, looking at him over his book.

Chee was a whole character on his own—even after being Xhe’s son. He had been born and raised

in a world Phineas still knew almost nothing about, Leith. He was Xhe's son, which meant he had two small horns on his forehead that he often hid with beanies, even when it was too hot outside. His mother was a witch, which was where his magic came from—even if he wasn't too good at it yet. His skin was the darkest color Phineas had ever seen, even if that wasn't a lot to say from someone that was white as paper and had never met many people. Contrastingly, his hair was almost the color of fresh butter. His eyes were the closest he'd ever seen to his own: a green so light that it was almost yellow.

But, Phineas' eyes had changed and almost turned gold since he'd been here, something he was eager to ask Sun about.

Sun.

A knock at the door and Phineas was already rolling his eyes as Chee got up so fast that he knocked his book to the ground.

“Coming!”

As he opened the door, Sun strutted in without waiting for an invitation. She was wearing big combat boots and a black dress, a contrast to the green shoes and simple pants and T-shirt Phineas was used to. Since starting school, she had changed a bit, probably adapting again to her own style rather than trying to tone it down for Phineas. Honestly, he liked the new style; it suited her.

“This subject is so boring,” she said, slumping to the ground and sitting next to Phineas.

Sun had taken her role of being by Phineas’ side at all times very seriously and had enrolled in school with him. Except that she had wanted no one to know they knew each other previously, so she’d taken a couple of days to pretend to get to know him before becoming friends. She had approached Chee first, who now seemed to be smitten by the pixie.

“So good to have you here,” Chee said, sitting close by and looking like he’d forgotten everything about the book he was reading before she joined them.

“So, are we doing this group assignment or not?” Phineas interrupted, not wanting his new friend to make a fool of himself.

Both his friends nodded. They opened a few more books on the ground, and all three of them slid into the narrow space between the two beds. The books were like portals, each cover a door leading to a myriad of worlds waiting to be explored, beckoning them with whispered promises of wonder. The room wasn’t huge, but it was bigger than Phineas would have thought. There was plenty of room for the three of them to be comfortable, and Chee was so close to Sun that it was hard not to laugh.

“Why are you smirking?” Chee asked.

Phineas simply shook his head.

“Nothing, it’s nothing.”

He could get used to this. To life in the Academy. To accepting the reality of magic.

It hadn’t been easy, and he had a feeling things were only going to get harder before they got easier. But at least he still had Sun by his side. And he had his new friend, Chee.

And his father. Even if their relationship had been tense, he still saw him in the halls and they had tea in the afternoon twice a week. He’d also visited his mother often, who seemed weepy every time he was around.

But he was sure it was only a matter of time. She’d get used to it. It was just the way mothers are built, always worrying about their kids. Same with his father.

It wasn’t effortless, but Phineas was working towards forgiving his parents for the lies. He wanted to believe they’d done it for him. That they’d really thought it was what was best for him.

After all, that was what the magical barrier around the Academy was for: keeping danger out. Right?



He was inside, where it was safe. Same as the island. Safe. His parents had panicked. Their response seemed like an avalanche of emotions, cascading down the mountains of reason, burying any semblance of calm in its wake. They clearly overreacted for no reason but he could get over it with a little more time. He could forgive them. They could all move on and get used to this new fairy-tale life, to the magic and everything fantastical that came with it.

And finally, finally, Phineas was at a University. His dream had become a reality. Like a magical tale come to life, he had stepped into the pages of his own storybook, the protagonist of his grand adventure.

What could go wrong??

~ Baba Mama ~

CHAPTER 5

By the end of the second week, Phineas had completely forgiven his parents. The distance between his heart and theirs seemed to shrink, like a bridge built on the foundation of empathy and compassion, connecting them once more. It was hard to stay mad at them. Even if he knew they'd been lying to him his entire life, hiding the fact that magic was real and that his father worked at the Otherworld Academy, they were still his parents. They aimed him in the right direction. They were the ones that raised him, did everything and anything for him, and he couldn't stay mad at them — he didn't know how to.



It was now Saturday morning, and Phineas was on his way to the portal to have lunch with his family, when someone smacked his shoulder backwards as they knocked into him.

“Hey, watch where you’re going!” They yelled at him.

He was just outside the castle of the Otherworld Academy, strolling down a pristinely clean path imprinted in the perfectly kept grass. And, having just bumped him and glaring down at him as if he was a piece of forgotten gum stuck under his shoe, was his school nemesis, Lukas.

“You’re the one that wasn’t watching where you were going,” Phineas spat back. “So you should be the one apologizing.”

“Apologizing to an unclassified?” Lukas snorted. Phineas’ blood boiled.

“I don’t need to be classified to know I’m better than you, you filthy fire breather.”

The fist aimed at his face stopped short by only an inch when it collided against a dark palm instead of his nose.

“No fighting on school grounds, or my father will kick you out of here before you can sneeze fire,” Chee said, pushing the fist down.

Saved by his friend, once again. Their friendship was like a shield, protecting him from the arrows of misfortune, deflecting the blows of life’s challenges. For reasons unknown, Lukas had something against Phineas ever since he’d stepped into the Academy. Chee had already helped him a few times to avoid escalating situations such as this

one. This world was a weirdly complicated and confusing place.

Everything Phineas did was crap in Lukas' eyes. Like a jester in a court of cruelty, he wielded his words like a sword, cutting through the armor of vulnerability with laughter and scorn. He mocked him in class when he didn't know the answer, pushed him in the halls, called him names... He was *unclassified*, which was the derogatory term they used for those that didn't know what kind of magic they possessed. Phineas had no magic. He was simply a human, but they insisted on calling him unclassified, anyway. It pissed him off. Even when he closed the door to his room, the feeling of not belonging never went away. It was like a neverending wave of insecurity. How he wished he could conjure wind like Chee, or breathe underwater like the water nymphs, or shapeshift like Lukas. Even if he mocked Lukas for being a dragon-shifter, it impressed him. He hadn't seen Lukas in dragon form, but he'd seen him breathe fire in class and turn his fingers to claws. It was cool and outright impressive, even if he'd never admit it out loud to his nemesis.

"You wouldn't tell on me," Lukas pronounced after a moment of tense silence.

“The black eye would’ve done it for you,” Chee replied with a shrug.

Lukas grunted. He half turned to leave, but then gawked at Phineas again.



“I guess I’ll see you at the tournament. Be happy to kick your ass there,” Lukas said with a sly smile so brightly evil that it sent shivers down his spine. *What tournament?*

He didn’t want to sound like an unclassified earthy. So he didn’t let on that he had no clue. Instead, he lied.

“I’ll kick your ass anytime you have a free thirty seconds.” He didn’t always mean what he said.

“Can’t wait.” Lukas mockingly waved goodbye and headed back into the building. “Can’t wait to beat your ass like my father beat yours,” he added over his shoulder.

Phineas saw Chee looking at him with an eyebrow lifted so high that it disappeared beneath his purple beanie. He ignored that last comment to focus on his friend, who also looked a little distressed.

“What?”

“You’re signing up?” Chee asked, worry-wrinkling his forehead intensely.

“I guess I have to now,” he replied, walking towards the woods. “I’ve no idea what he was going on about, but I couldn’t let him know that.” He felt the blood rush to his heart.

He followed Chee, his steps rushing to keep pace with his long legs.

“Oh, for crying out loud, you’re an idiot!” Chee smacked him on the back of the head and Phineas grunted in pain.

“We all knew that, but why is he an idiot now?”

Sun had shown up out of thin air, as usual, and Chee blushed furiously before he could even respond to her question.

“Um, he’s signing up for the tournament to defeat Lukas.”

“You’re what?!” Sun slapped him on the back of the head too, which she had to jump to do. He groaned once more.

“Why are you two always hitting me?!”

“Because you keep making stupid choices! You’ll lose a finger or two at the tournament if you’re lucky.” Sun said, rolling her eyes back and groaning loudly. “Idiot,” she added under her breath.

“What?! Lose a finger?”

“Yes, but that’s only if you’re lucky,” Chee added. “You’ll lose your head if you’re not so lucky.”

As they walked into the thickest stretch of the forest, Sun guided them towards the spot where the portal was, which she could somehow sense.

“What is that tournament about, anyway? How can I lose my limbs?”

“You can ask your father,” Chee replied with a nonchalant shrug. “He was the best at it. Won every year he was a student, except his last, when Lukas’ father took the crown. He’s a legend around here.”

“Wait, there’s a crown involved? And my father studied at the Otherworld Academy?”

“Always focusing on the stupid details,” Sun mumbled under her breath as she opened the portal. “Yes, there’s a crown. Come on, or we’ll be late. Your mother made smashed potatoes with that dip you love and if they go cold, she’ll hurt you.”



Chee had taken two steps back, so he couldn’t hear them any longer over the humming of the portal. Phineas turned, waved, and then stepped over the portal.

Sun was already perched on his shoulder as soon as the door closed, a small two-inch fairy again with neon iridescent fluttering wings behind her.

“What excuse did you use with Chee? Why does he think you’re coming for lunch here?”

“Told him I’m failing your father’s class, and I wanted to sweet talk him. Also, that you’re being a good friend by allowing me passage.”

Phineas couldn’t help but laugh. Sun was good at the lying part. Fantastic at it. She’d made a whole life up whenever Chee asked questions, even if she tried not to reply to some of them, ignoring anything to do with her parents or where she’d grown up.

“You don’t even take my father’s class,” he commented as they walked out of the shed and into the forest that had always been his home.

“He doesn’t know that.” Trust is the most dangerous thing you can give away.

After that, Sun went quiet. She usually did when they were in his house, as her magic wasn’t as strong there, and it took a lot of her power to speak and project her voice loud enough for Phineas to hear her. This was why she’d been silent for so many years when he was growing up. He still didn’t fully understand how her magic worked. It made little sense to him, even after attending a few magic classes. Here, her powers felt like a trickling stream, struggling to find its course in the foreign landscape.

Soon, they were in the well-known kitchen and he was sitting at the small round table, his father on one side, and his mother on the other.

“How’s school going?” his mother asked.

“It’s good. I really like it there. I’m learning so many interesting things.”

“Happy to hear that. You were always so eager to learn,” his mother replied. She passed him the tray with the smashed potatoes and he loaded a few more onto his plate. They were crunchy on the outside, soft on the inside — perfection for his palate. “So, what’s your favorite subject so far?”

“I’m really enjoying herbology, of course,” he said. “Learned a lot about plants we don’t have here and about some that have magical properties, too. It’s been very intriguing. I also love Tree Language. It seems to be in my DNA.”

His mother’s face changed for a second. She almost looked bothered, but then she smiled like nothing had happened.

“You always loved going out to talk to the trees.”

He did. And he hadn’t even known he’d been speaking in a unique language to them. He guessed it was something he’d learned when he was young by speaking to them, the same way bilingual kids learn two languages at the same time. His Professor,

Mr. Bumputy, said he was a natural and always congratulated him on his perfect pronunciation.

“And... How are the magic classes going?” Monika seemed weary as she asked. Phineas felt Sun fluttering on his shoulder, but when he turned to her, she looked away, sitting down as if nothing significant had happened.



“I haven’t started those yet,” he lied. He didn’t want to admit that he’d taken his first class that week and had not only not understood a single thing that was going on around him, but it was also what had started his rivalry with Lukas. Phineas obviously had no magic, so he’d sucked at every single task the teacher assigned.

He hadn’t been able to light a candle without a match. Or been able to summon wind. He hadn’t been able to listen to anyone’s thoughts. He hadn’t been able to shift. And he hadn’t been able to make plants grow. Obviously, not all the students could do all of those things, most only mastered one, and that was how they then divided them into different subclasses according to their strengths and abilities. Because he had none, Phineas remained at the most

basic class, with the rest of the unclassified or non-magical students.

He could not admit out loud he was failing already. Not to his mama and papa.

Wanting to change the subject, he squeezed his brain to find something else to say, and remembered the last comment Lukas had made.

“So,” he said, looking at his father this time, “They told me in school that you used to be a student there. Why didn’t you tell me? Apparently you’re a legend.”

His eyes were so engaged on his father that Phineas didn’t notice at first how pale his mother got. Her complexion resembled the petals of a wilting flower, still beautiful in its fragility, but hinting at the passage of time. But then she swayed on her seat and grabbed the edge of the table. Paul jumped to her side, crouching next to her and holding her in place so she wouldn’t fall.

“Monika, are you okay?” he said, a bit of fear in his voice.

“Yes, yes, just a small fainting spell. I’m okay.” There was no happy vibe here.

It wasn’t the first time something like that happened, so Phineas knew exactly what to do. He rushed to the fridge, grabbed some ice water, filled her glass, then passed it over to her. Then, he grabbed an ice pack and wrapped it in a tea towel,

crouched on her other side and pressed the cold compress to his mother's neck.

"Now, now, don't fuss so much over me," Monika said, waving a dismissive hand and pushing both of them away, holding the ice pack herself. "Get back to the food, or it'll get cold." Sometimes people go their whole lives pretending things didn't happen.

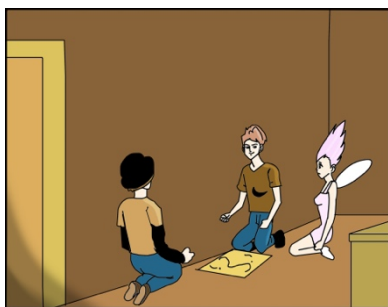
The two men of the family reluctantly did as she instructed. The rest of the meal was a bit more normal, but Phineas noticed his father occasionally glancing over at Monika, clearly looking distraught. *Had her fainting spells gotten worse without him knowing? Was it stress because he was away? Was she upset because he wasn't here? Or was the load of running the house too much for her now that he wasn't here to help her?*

Unsure of an answer to any of those questions, Phineas promised to come over more often before leaving that afternoon. Usually, he spent the night at his parent's home during the weekends, but they both insisted that he should go to the school and enjoy the party his father knew was taking place that night.

They didn't know Chee wasn't going, and that Phineas had no interest in parties either. He was enjoying his time at school, but being surrounded by too many people at the same time after living such a

quiet life still made him anxious. He didn't usually want to be stuck in a place that was crowded. If it didn't feel right, he didn't wanna do it.

Instead, he went back to his room as a tidal wave of mystery washed over him. He ended up spending a quiet evening with Chee and Sun, playing



board games. The game board was a magical realm, a landscape of possibilities where dice rolls and card draws determined the fate of the brave souls who

stepped into its domain. In the arena of conversation, they talked about the upcoming competition. They stayed up for hours as he asked all the burning questions his parents hadn't dared to give him an answer to.

Like a tapestry of ambition, their discussions wove a tale of dreams and aspirations, each thread representing a different aspect of their journey to come.

~ SunFLOWERS ~

CHAPTER 6



That night with Chee and Sun, Phineas learned the tournament was a talent show of sorts, followed by a couple of exotic tests. First, each contestant would have to go through the talent show, showing that they were worthy of participating. Afterwards, the actual competition would begin. The stuff that passed for entertainment would be revealed for what it was.

The problem was that Phineas wasn't sure he had any talent worth showing. And he had to worry about Lukas showing the entire school that he was indeed an unskilled, unclassified earthy, as he had accurately called him plenty of times in the last week. He was sure Lukas would show off his fire skills, probably going as far as putting together an elaborate fire-show to wow the audience. How could he dare to compete?

Phineas had gone to bed feeling a little deflated, even if his friends had promised they would help. Deeply conflicted and confused about

his desires, yet simultaneously craving the competition while also being seduced by his obvious earthly imperfections, Phineas was jittery. Like a marionette on strings, he couldn't help but fidget and twitch, his nerves pulling him in every direction like a puppet in the hands of an uncertain puppeteer. There would be no comfort in the cold shadow of Lukas.

There was a knock on the door the next morning, so early neither Phineas nor Chee were up yet. With each tap on the door, time seemed to awaken from its slumber, stretching and yawning as it prepared to greet the day. Phineas did not know what to expect - certainly not Sun standing at the door wearing tight leather pants, combat boots, and a mesh top—all in black—and staring at him with arms crossed. Her cute complexion and pink hair made her face glow in contrast with all the black boom, making Phineas' eyes lock on her gigantic green eyes and long eyelashes, which were deliciously dripping with mischief.

“Morning?” he asked dubiously, not having a clue why Sun was there that early — almost three hours before their first class.

“Get changed and meet me in the main hall. You’ve got five minutes.”

Sun turned around and walked away, leaving Phineas with his jaw hanging open, a reply forming on his lips. *Why? What's going on?*

Exactly four and a half minutes later, Phineas strutted into the main hall, finding Sun standing by a window, her wings fully extended as she bathed in sunlight, eyes closed, face stretched toward the early morning rays of the sun. Her entire essence glowed with the warmth of a thousand suns as her iridescent wings captured all of Phineas attention. He'd seen her fly countless times, but never in human size, so he'd never seen her wings in human size either — she'd kept them hidden till now. And damn, Phineas wished she wouldn't. As his eyes beheld the spectacle before him, his jaw dropped like an anchor. It was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen in his life. They looked like they were made of silk and spiderwebs, so ethereal and yet sturdy. They were almost see-through and transparent, but they somehow clutched all the colors of the universe in a free-flowing river of seduction.

Completely lost in them, Phineas didn't realize Sun had turned to him.

"My eyes are up here," she snapped her fingers and then pointed at her face.

"I—I'm sorry."

“Come on, no time to waste. Keep it in your pants.”



Sun walked out through the main gate, and Phineas ran after her.

“Where are we even going? What’s going on?”

Sun spoke as she walked, not stopping to wait for him, but it wasn’t too hard to keep up with a five foot tall fairy, even when she was walking fast.

“Training. No matter what I tried to say last night to convince you not to take part in the tournament, you’re still going to do it. I know how boys are. I can tell you’ve already decided. So might as well practice so you don’t make a complete fool out of yourself and so you don’t lose a finger or your head. Not fond of either, but, well...” She lowered her voice, almost as if she didn’t want Phineas hearing the end of it. “But I gotta do what I gotta do.”

He wasn’t sure what that meant, but he was glad she would help.

“Was it really necessary to be up this early?”

This time, Sun paused and peered over her shoulder. They were halfway from the castle to the woods, going in a different direction than they usually took to go to the portal and his home.

“Do you want to do this in front of everyone in school?”

Oh.

“No, of course not.”

“Then first thing in the morning, it is. Nighttime is no good for either of us.”

Phineas nodded and followed along like a lost puppy on a leash. He wasn't a morning person, but he guessed it made sense. It felt odd to roll out of bed straight into the cool and unwelcoming morning.

He didn't know much about Sun's origin or magic. She'd been evasive whenever Chee asked her about it, but after seeing her basking in the sun this morning, he reasoned she was a fire fairy or a light one. Still not versed in the fairies, he hoped to learn more details in class. There were fairies born of the elements: water, fire, earth, and air. But there were also lava fairies (which he was not fond of because they had red eyes), mountain fairies, light fairies, smoky ones, and a few more he didn't quite remember from classes.

Maybe today would be the day that he was brave enough to ask her. *But wasn't that like asking someone about their sexuality? Their gender? Were those questions he could simply ask? Or would he have to ask permission to ask first?* Phineas was so used to living almost alone and to having evasive

parents, that asking questions always made him skittish. It didn't help that Sun answered none of Chee's questions either, but he speculated that was mostly to keep the fact that they knew each other before the Academy a secret. Damn, there were so many questions he had no answers to. Like... Pretty much all of them.

Sun guided him into a hushed section of the woods he hadn't been to and then into a vast clearing. The sunlight partly illuminated it. Sun went over to the middle and sat down, legs crossed under her body.

"Light a fire," she said. Her aura was amazing. The training began.

After two hours, Phineas was tired, irritated, had a rash on his left hand from touching a plant he shouldn't have touched, and his legs were heavy from all the running. Sun insisted the torture was necessary to wake up any latent magic in his veins, but he was sure she did this just to laugh at him. When they were finally done, he felt more like going back to bed than going to class. But classes were about to start, so both Phineas and Sun returned to the main building, barely speaking out of exhaustion.

The next day, Sun woke him up again at the crack of dawn. And the next, too.

By the fifth morning, he was ready when she knocked at the door. In the dance of morning's embrace, the world seemed to hold its breath, savoring the fleeting beauty of dawn before it surrendered to the full blaze of daylight.

"What are we trying today?" he asked as they marched into the woods, strutting side by side. "Trying to light more fires? Or make the wind move? Maybe you could try to teach me how to grow wings and fly," he added in a mocking tone, nudging Sun with his shoulder.

"No, this time, we're concentrating on what you're good at."

"And what's that? I'm not good at anything magical," he complained. "Being human sucks."

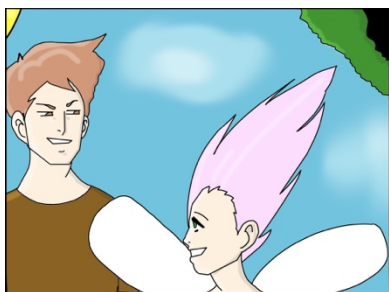
Sun gave him an odd look, but then she smirked with that twisted smile she got whenever she knew something he didn't.

"You can do everything you mentioned by knowing how to. No need to have wind magic to make things dance in the wind. You're good with plants," she said, waving a hand around encompassing the woods. "Your mother taught you everything about foraging, but that's not all. You hear the tree too and you talk to them. You might

not realize this yet. I'm gonna teach you how to take advantage of that."

Phineas was at a loss for words. It was true; he was still at the top of his Tree Language class and he could not only communicate with them, but also often resonated with the stories they told him. He liked the sage and wise energy of the trees. Phineas found peace when around them, a type of connection he'd never felt before. Trees keep secrets people cannot.

In the woods, he'd always felt like he belonged. Never scared. The trees knew him better than he knew himself.



They squatted in the clearing and Phineas crossed his legs under his body, placing his palms on the grass and listening while Sun stood over him. It was almost like he could feel roots growing out of his palms and digging into the earth, reaching out to the trees and listening.

"Hello, old friend," the trees whispered.

And Phineas felt it again, that sense of belonging. Just like a candle cannot burn without fire, he could not live without nature."

“Connect,” Sun was saying, guiding him into a meditative state. “I want you to make the leaves dance,” she instructed.

“What?”

Sun pointed to the yellowing leaves around the trees and to the ones still attached to the branches, browning. “Ask them to help you.”

Phineas wasn’t sure what she meant, but he tried to concentrate anyway on the idea of the leaves moving. After a few minutes, he opened his eyes.

Everything was still the same.

“You’re trying too hard to make them move yourself,” Sun said, her hand resting on his shoulder from behind. He could feel the warmth of her hand as she sat behind him leaving one hand on his shoulder and placing the other one on top of his right hand, which was still touching the grass.

“Breathe in, breathe out, and have fun. Imagine them dancing and ask for permission.”

Phineas did as he was told. He breathed in, inhaling the scent of pine trees and the sweet aroma of flowers oozing all around them. Then he breathed out, his lungs hollowing and his shoulders dropping — Sun’s hands never losing contact. Then, he asked the trees to let some leaves down, to have fun, to indulge him.

“Open your eyes,” Sun whispered. He never realized he’d closed them with the first breath in. He felt Sun’s toasty breath against his neck and it made him shiver. Still, he opened his eyes.

The trees were swaying.

Golden leaves were falling. And those on the ground were dancing across the grass, moving one way, then the other, as if the wind was taking them for a ride. Because of them, he was soaring like a bird with newfound wings. Their help was a treasure chest, unlocking the riches of their knowledge and experience, empowering him to conquer challenges that once seemed insurmountable.

“How?” he asked.

“The leaves are not dead. They still carry a part of the tree’s spirits. They can still command that part of themselves to move. The trees just usually choose not to, because those are the parts of themselves they’re trying to let go of. But, for a friend, they’ll do it if you ask nicely. They’ll dance. They’ll do anything for you.”

Phineas didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing. Sometimes you shouldn’t bother trying to explain the moment. The few minutes seemed to contain a lifetime of wonder, as if the universe had condensed its marvels into a capsule of time for him to cherish. Yellow, orange, and red leaves danced around them. They went up, as if caught in a small

breeze, and then glided down safely. Then up again. Leaves from the taller trees rained down in a synchronized dance, too, making it almost look as if it was snowing in colors as they fell slowly, graciously.

It was beautiful. A sun kissed breeze ran across his cheek.

Sun slowly took her hand away, leaving Phineas' hand instantly colder. He turned around, opening his mouth to say thank you.

Instead, he miscalculated how close Sun was. How bright her eyes looked and how, for the millisecond it took her to hide the expression, he caught her smiling proudly.

"You did good," she said, schooling her face into nonchalance and standing up. She offered a hand to help him up.

He took it, her palm warm and soft against his always callused and raw one. As soon as he stood, he was more than a head above her and had to look down, his neck complaining a bit, as he'd been doing that too often lately, spending so much time with Sun in human form.

"Thanks, that was stunning!"

"I did nothing," she replied with a shrug, turning around quickly. "Come on, let's go."

"Already? We haven't been out here that long." There was still another hour before class.

“I’ve got things to do. You can stay and practice some more. Try playing with the roots for your next lesson.”

She spoke with her back still to him and, before he could reply, Sun extended her wings and flew away — something he hadn’t seen her do since arriving at the Otherworld Academy. Maybe it meant her magic was getting stronger every day. He wondered if her not flying was a matter of choice or ability. Maybe she hadn’t been able to fly, and he’d been a shit friend for not noticing earlier.

Phineas promised he’d pay more attention and start doing his best to ask at least a question per day, trying to learn more about his close friend. Sun had always been there for him and knew everything about his life. He’d spoken to her for years, even when she couldn’t reply. Now that he could listen to her talk back, he needed to ask more questions. He wanted to be a better friend. They should celebrate each other like it was their first meeting or their last.

They had a break this weekend, which Phineas wanted to use to spend time with his parents, and then another week of training before the tournament. He’d be fine. Phineas was ready. He’d learned enough to wow the judges and surely get past the first round. And then... Then he’d win and show Lukas he was worthy of being at the Academy. That was what he felt he was fighting for. Validation.

He loved the Otherworld Academy, felt like he belonged there almost as much as he belonged in the woods. Almost.

On Monday, Phineas asked Sun his first question. He was in the middle of trying to make a cave out of roots, big enough for him to fit in but small enough not to be too obvious — a hiding spot of sorts — when he blurted it out.

“So, were you always able to fly, or is that something you need to be at full strength for?”

“Full strength,” she said nonchalantly, not even looking at him.

“And what do you prefer, flying or walking?”

This time, perched on top of a branch, she turned to stare down at him.

“What’s with the questions?”

“I just realized the other day that you know absolutely everything about me, but I don’t really know much about you. You know, because you weren’t able to speak before, so, you know... Maybe now you’d want to share.”

“I only listened because I had no way to tell you to shut up,” she said, but there was no bite to her words. He knew when she was furious, and this

wasn't it. She was pretending to be angry, testing him so he'd stop asking questions.

"So, which one is it?"

He was almost done, a few more roots making an arch and a couple more going in the opposite direction, weaving around them. Now he only needed to request some leaves to cover the holes between the roots, so it wouldn't be that visible from above. Maybe some moss to grow across, too.

"Flying," Sun said, her eyes drifting back to the sun above.

It didn't seem like she had to think hard for the answer. He'd pick flying too if he could.

During their training, Phineas felt hopeful. He was learning like a toddler. The trees were his friends and often did as he requested. During class, things were a little harder. There was still a lot he didn't understand, and being around so many smart students was overwhelming, which was why most nights he wandered out to the woods to speak to the trees. They were wise beyond their years. Most of them were hundreds of years old. They were kind, and caring. Phineas felt at home among them. They felt like home and the center of everything.



There was only one weekend separating him from the tournament, but he felt confident. On Monday, he'd go to the talent show, wow everyone that had doubted him and then he'd have another week to train for the competition.

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes of doubt, he embraced the flames of readiness, transforming them into the fire of unwavering belief. He was ready. He could do it.

~ Happy Axxidents ~

CHAPTER 7



During the weekend before the talent show, Phineas went for dinner with his family. As they shared stories and laughter, the dining room became a

theater of warmth and joy, with each member playing a unique role in the unfolding drama. Phineas was talking excitedly about what was to come and what he was planning on doing. He could not stop talking. His parents were not ready for him.

The show would take place in a ginormous stage that was already set on the grounds of the school. With each heartbeat, Phineas felt like a conductor, orchestrating the symphony of his desires, longing for the applause of his father's love. Phineas hoped his father would be there to watch him.

"You probably won't see me with how many people will be there, but I'll be around," his father said, sounding dismissive.

Both his parents were pretty distracted during dinner. Phineas kept looking their way, noticing how they weren't their usually cheerful selves. His dad was known for his wisdom, his mom for her fairness, and both of them for their charitable nature. They seemed different now. They hadn't kissed the entire time he'd been here, which was something they did often — despite how much he usually hated it. It made him think something was wrong. Maybe his parents were fighting again? It wasn't something that happened often, but he remembered a time when he was young, around the same time he'd started ignoring Sun, when his parents seemed very tense. Scared they were going to break up, he asked them about it.

"Parents aren't always happy," his mother had explained. "We have feelings too, but those feelings are wounds that can fester. We have to heal those wounds, and that can take time."

After some time, everything had all gone back to normal, and Phineas had been so excited that he'd run off to tell Sun he'd seen his parents kissing again. Today, he expected the same happy ending. He hoped they just needed some time alone without him around to heal.

"I'll do the dishes," Phineas said once the dinner was over as he jumped out of his chair.

“Thank you, darling.” His mother kissed his cheek and went to the adjacent room, where he saw her pick up her knitting — something she only did when stressed.

Sun hovered for a moment and then left the room too. Sadly, the timing wasn’t right. He was alone since his father had long left to go check on something in his study. Ignoring problems leads to bigger problems, but Phineas let the situation breathe a bit.

The wind was whistling outside when Phineas finished the dishes. After drying his hands on his mom’s favorite purple towel, he went looking for his father. The study was a small room on the ground floor where his father mostly kept idle paperwork. He was about to knock when he heard arguing inside. Instead of waiting, he leaned closer to eavesdrop. He grew tired of always being the last one to find things out.

“He can’t be in the tournament,” his father was explaining. He sounded agitated, but also commanding.



For a moment, he wondered if Principal Xhe could have entered the house without him noticing, but when the accomplice answered, his blood ran cold.

“You can’t keep protecting him his whole life.”

It was Sun, sounding annoyed.

“I can, and I will. Because that’s what I promised to do. Do I need to remind you that you made a promise, too? You can’t let him take part.”

There was silence for so long that Phineas worried Sun would barge out of the room. He was about to turn around and leave when he heard the small voice again.

“Okay. I’ll deal with it.”

His blood chilled, froze solid. His ears played a trick on him, as if they were mischievous jesters, whispering a distorted message that left him questioning reality. He couldn’t have heard that right, could he? Sun had been training him, helping him be good enough to excel in the tournament, to get past the talent contest and show Lukas that he was actually worthy of being at the Academy. Sun

was the only one that knew and understood how important all of this was for him. They hadn't openly talked about this, but he'd hinted at it, and he was sure Sun understood.

Until now.

Now he didn't know what to think or feel. Once, the world fascinated him and he longed to see more of it but now he wasn't sure. His heart was missing from his chest. He wasn't sure he could even trust Sun anymore. *How could he?* After everything they'd gone through this week, after how close they'd gotten, how could she do this? Phineas thought of Sun's hand on his shoulder, of her soft touch. Of how close they'd been. Of how he'd looked at her lips and almost...

No. This was Sun. It couldn't be possible. In the realm of possibilities, this notion seemed like a mirage, a shimmering oasis of hope in the desert of disbelief. He was sure he'd heard wrong and when he'd asked Sun, she'd explain. The world would make sense again. He would not give up hope. Phineas saw no reason to hide from reality.

Not wanting to get caught, especially after these thoughts, he hurried up to his room. He picked up a few things he wanted to take back to school and then went loudly down the stairs, taking the steps two at a time.

"Sun, I'm going back! Are you coming?"

Sun flew to him, her expression neutral, as if nothing weird had happened. She fluttered her wings and clapped her hands, a motion he knew meant “come on, hurry.”

And so they exited to the warehouse, where his father worked all his life, and went through the portal, hidden there all that time without Phineas knowing. He held his tongue until they crossed.

“Anything new?” he asked.

Sun shook her head. “No, about what?”

“I don’t know... Did you talk with mom or dad about anything?”

Sun shook her head again, looking down at the forest floor as they walked toward the school. She kept her eyes off him and since he was much taller, he could only see a curtain of the pink bob.



“Nah, didn’t talk much at all. I was tired.”

It was partly true, because she hadn’t said a single word at dinner. But it also wasn’t true, because he was sure of what he’d heard. Now one hundred percent sure it was her voice. And her denying it only proved to him he heard it right - that his father and best

friend were plotting against him. It stung. Reality doesn't leave a lot to the imagination, after all.

And it hurt. It hurt so much.

The rest of the weekend, the vibe between Phineas and Sun felt off, but he didn't know what to do about it. The anger kept him alive. She'd been his best friend since he had memories, always there for him. He didn't know how to live now that he couldn't trust her. Somehow, her lying almost felt like his fault. But he also had no tangible proof, so he tried to pretend he had heard nothing. He tried to carry on as normal — or as normal as he could, until the thought grew so big inside his head, it burst. Like petrol on a bonfire, there was nothing he could do to smother the uncontrollable rage of his emotions. He decided the only sane solution would be to just think about the talent show.

On Sunday, Sun, Chee and Phineas had dinner in the dorm, as they often did. When Sun fell asleep curled up at the foot of his bed like an angelic kitten, something he was growing used to, he just curled his legs up to give her more room even though he knew when he awoke, she'd be gone, just like every other morning...

It was time. As Phineas ascended the steps to the stage, his heart lunged into his chest, but he was ready. He'd been waiting for his turn since three in the afternoon. So far, there had been some skilled contestants, but he was supremely confident in his newly gained skills. He was ready.

It was almost five now, the sun slowly descending behind the massive building that was the Otherworld Academy. People and possibilities surrounded him. It was time to give them what they wanted.

Phineas took in his surroundings: the endless rows of seats filled with students, so many of them that their faces merged. The battle-tested building was in front of him, imposing as always. The thick forest behind him stretched from the edge of the school as far as he could see. All the trees whispered his name and reached out to him as much as he was reaching out to them.

This was it, his moment.

"And now," Principal Xhe said, "Phineas will showcase his abilities for the Exalted Board of Judges."

He'd known of the judges for over a week. Principal Xhe was one of them, then Mr. Bumpudy who was his Tree Language Professor, and lastly Ms. Harrowhold, whom he didn't know, because he wasn't part of her class.



He nodded his head at the two professors sitting down at the front. Then, he was alone on stage as Xhe joined them.

Phineas wasn't sure if he should say something and couldn't even remember if any of the other contestants had. *Had they said what they were going to do? What had they actually done?* When he tried to think of the previous contestants, he realized his mind seemed blurry, blank like an empty canvas. He lapsed into reactivity.

You're stressing, he told himself. Just concentrate on the trees and everything will be okay.

Then there was a calming voice in his mind, one he felt familiar with, and he let go of the stress by concentrating on the friendly trees. The air became still. He asked the trees to make the leaves dance, to come alive with everything that they were. The trees indulged him.

The leaves danced like never before. Yellow leaves immediately surrounded him and danced all around as Phineas guided them like a conductor with his flailing arms, savoring the moment and wearing a wide smile.

Cheers erupted. He tried to find Chee or Sun among the crowd. But again, faces blended one with the other and he couldn't focus on any of them.

Something was wrong.

He felt it in the pit of his stomach, like an odd feeling of something he'd experienced before. He couldn't fixate on faces, couldn't remember the participants before him, and if he thought about it... He couldn't even remember getting up out of bed that morning and getting ready for the talent show.

Something was *very* wrong.

A sense of unease settled over him like a heavy fog, shrouding his thoughts in a cloak of uncertainty. He struggled, fighting against the voice in his mind. There was a familiar voice telling him everything was okay, that the judges were clapping and congratulating him because he'd passed onto the next stage. Instead, he tried to think of the last genuine memory he possessed: falling asleep with Sun curled up by the feet of his bed. He envisioned the bed, the feel of it... And there it was. Phineas could feel it. He could feel his body stirring, his mind telling him it was all a dream and that if he opened his eyes, he'd find himself in his room again.

Open your eyes. Open your eyes.

He tried but failed. Phineas knew he had to. It was important. One last try, with all his might, and...

His room. The bed he'd fallen asleep on was rigid under his body. Phineas sat up groggily, his eyes focusing on everything around him a bit too slow.

"Sun?"

She was sitting at the foot of his bed, the same place she'd been curled up the night before. Only now, she was wide awake and looking at him with a shameful burden of guilt. The same one she'd had after pulling on his hair for weeks to make him realize she was real. It was as if a dark cloud loomed above her.

"Phi..."

Sun bit her bottom lip and stood, taking a step back.

"What in Hell is going on?"

They were alone in his room, no sight of Chee. Sun shook her head with remorseful eyes, but said nothing.

Then everything fell into place. The time of day, with the sun shining outside the window. The sound of people cheering that came in through the window, the clock on the wall marking the time. *Late. Too late.* And Sun, surrounded by an aura of magic, standing there, saying nothing. His mind flashed to the conversation with his father. The one they didn't mean for him to hear.

“Sun. What have you done? Why?” The words choked him, pain squeezing his chest and begging for it to be a misunderstanding.

If Sun explained herself, if she made sense of it, maybe... Maybe not that bad? Maybe she had a credible reason. Perhaps it wasn't what he thought. Maybe his only friend and the person he trusted the most in the world hadn't just betrayed him. Maybe not everyone was lying to him over and over, again and again? Like a home in the ocean, trust evaporated as the burden of lies led to a wave of destruction, once again.

Sun just stood there, looking at him, saying nothing.

“At least tell me why,” he muttered. Tears flowed like a river, carrying the weight of emotions that words could not express. Then, his eyes went down. A bitter taste of acid on the top of his tongue. He couldn't even look at her anymore, staring into the dark where everything was coming from.

Sun had been his everything. His only friend. The one he trusted the most. And lately, he'd allowed himself to even think of her as something more. As a potential partner, lover, for a lifetime of even greater things. Together, he thought they could do anything. Seeing Sun in human form, seeing her eye to eye, it had been refreshing. Like

knowing you're not crazy after doubting yourself for so long.

But now it was all broken. He was broken.

"Phineas, I'm sorry, I did a terrible thing, but I swear I'm not a terrible person. I..."

"If what comes out of your lips next isn't an explanation, I don't want to hear it," he snapped.

Like a weary traveler on an endless road, he had grown tired of the constant deception that had become a part of his journey. He was tired of being lied to. Tired of always being the one in the dark, the one people toyed with. He would not waste his days on people that weren't truthful to him anymore. Phineas would not spend the rest of his days wondering if people were speaking the truth or not. He'd find his own truth. Make it on his own as he moved on with his life.

He was done. Done with the lies and the hiding and people looking down at him.



Not wanting to hear any more of her lies, he stormed out of the room, pushing past Sun and ignoring her as she yelled apologetically while running after him.

He was done wasting his energy on people that didn't care for him. That couldn't even talk to him with honesty in their eyes.

Phineas rushed down the stairs and out into the grounds, hoping with everything that he was still on time, that he could make it. The clock marked that the show should be over, but he could still hear people cheering in the distance and believed in his heart he could make it. Hope was the only thing he had left, so he clung onto it.

As he burst out through the big double doors, he saw that it'd been raining, petrichor strong in the air. Looking up towards the stage, he saw a faint rainbow behind it; the sun shining down on the crowd. This was a good sign. It meant there was still hope. And hope was all he needed.

The future will take care of itself. Hope is powerful. In the theater of life, hope takes center stage.

~ CAN't Sleep ~

CHAPTER 8



As Phineas sprinted towards the stage, he sensed Sun behind him, the fluttering of her wings pulsing in his head. He ignored it. He couldn't look back. She'd lied to him, betrayed him. Her

lie cost him everything.

He wasn't even sure what magic Sun had used to create that dream, but he didn't want to dwell on it. Even momentarily thinking about it brought a frightening reflex to the pit of his soul, one that reminded him he knew less of her than he'd thought.

So he ran. He ran until he reached the front of the stage and found principal Xhe standing there, thanking the crowd for an amazing day together.

When Xhe moved to the three steps on the right side of the stage to come down, Phineas intercepted him.

"Principal!"

Ch stopped, smiled softly, like a father looking at his son. It was a look Phineas had received many times from him since his first day there. A lot of the students shared whispers in the halls of the tremendous respect and admiration everyone had for him.

“What’s happened, Phineas? I thought we’d see you perform out there today.”

“That’s the problem. They cheated me, leaving me stumbling in the shadows!”

Xhe ran his hoof on the ground like an angry bull and then raised his eyebrows.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I said,” he explained. “Only now I awakened from a magical spell, disbelieving I was here performing in front of all of you. They tricked me, so as not to be here today. I believe that’s completely unfair and I should be allowed to participate.”

“I’m sorry, young man, but the tournament is over...”

Xhe shook his head, sounding resolute, but then Chee showed up, panting too.

“Phineas! Where have you been? I know I didn’t want you to participate, but I thought you were doing it, anyway. You’ve been training so hard! I’ve been looking for you among the crowd all afternoon!”

“I know.” Phineas lifted his arms in annoyance. “Someone put me to sleep. I couldn’t come until now!”

Chee’s eyes opened up wide. “Like a sleeping potion, you mean?”

There was so much Phineas still didn’t know about this magical world, but he imagined there were plenty of ways to put someone to sleep.

“I don’t know, but all I know is that none of this is fair! You should still allow me in.”

The principal looked at his son and then at Phineas again. “There is one thing we could try.” He looked to the side and called over Ms. Harrowhold. “Dorothy, darling, do you reckon you could check if someone spelled Phineas over the last few hours?”

Phineas wasn’t sure what he was rambling on about, but considering she was the Head of the Enchantment Department at the School, it made sense that she’d be an expert in these sorts of things. Ms. Harrowhold nodded politely and put her hands on Phineas’s shoulder, closing her eyes.

She didn't utter a word. Her eyes turned milky white, lilac fumes swirling like a wild tornado.



Phineas was lost, the surrounding cosmos not mattering anymore.

And then, suddenly, her eyes turned back to normal and Phineas snapped out of it, staring at Chee with a confused expression. His friend lowered his chin, shaking his head as if

saying, "I'll tell you about it later." Ms. Harrowhold nodded towards Xhe.

"Well, it appears you're telling the truth," he said, as the woman walked back to her chair, still not muttering a single word. Odd.

"Of course I am."

"And," Xhe continued, ignoring his interruption, "because that's against the rules and the show only just finished, I'll allow you to participate."

Xhe clapped his hands loudly and jumped back onto the stage, his powerful legs carrying him in a single jump. The audience turned their attention to the stage once again, even though a few in the

crowd had scattered already. And his voice boomed over the school grounds.

“We have one last participant!”

Phineas caught sight of Sun in the back of the crowd. She was smiling.

Phineas stood on the stage, a feeling of *déjà vu*. But this time, it was real. This one would count.

He planted his feet onto the wooden planks of the stage and looked at the many faces below. No longer looking at the empty faces of students, this time he could see each one of them. As the sea of gazes spread out before him, making him feel like an explorer, he discovered the hidden depths of their souls through their eyes. Each set of eyes whispered its own secret to him. The ones that doubted him, ready to be disappointed or to laugh when he failed. The ones that were entertained by the idea of him being on stage, looking eager and leaning forward, waiting. And the few that were happy for him, among them Chee and Xhe. He couldn't see his father or Sun anymore. Phineas tried not to dwell on it.

Instead, he reached out to the trees.

And just like in his dream, the trees reached out to him too.

He heard them more clearly than ever. Phineas felt his own anger reflected in them, the anger that stirred within as he thought of the river of lies. And the burning sickness from the unnerving act of a best friend, the shattering of his confidence, a misplaced feeling of belonging in this world.

Every story has to start somewhere, but the avalanche of emotion would not stop. Phineas mistakenly thought things were finally good for him, when suddenly, he was nowhere again. Adrift in the forgotten corners of existence, he felt like a solitary cloud suspended in the the sky dancing on the edge of nothingness. He didn't know who he was anymore or where he belonged in either world. He didn't know why both worlds insisted on spewing lie after lie. Sometimes things just fall apart. And then he whispered into the void, a fleeting breath caught between both of his worlds.

The trees listened attentively, like a parent tending to their young. They hurt with him.

They vibrated first, then shook, creating a current of wind that swept away everyone's hair in all directions. Scarves and hats took to the sky, flying away. Leaves came from behind him to console him like a parent tending to their hurt child. Sometimes you can't reach someone who isn't listening. But sometimes you can, and it makes all the difference in the world.



Eyes closed,
Phineas let the
madness pass thru him
and then smiled gently.
He could never forget
what brought him here.
He pushed on,
envisioning the dream,
the feeling of
levelheaded leaves
flowing and dancing all

around him.

Phineas opened his eyes, witnessing a flurry of leaves around him. Students clutched the seats in front of them as the wind picked up so violently it became harder for them to stay put.

Was he the one doing this?

Doubt crept into his heart and in a heartbeat, it all stopped.

The leaves fell to the ground. The wind stopped. All the trees went quiet.

Everyone was still.

And then Chee stood and clapped and whooped so loud that Phineas laughed in relief. People in the crowd stood and clapped, too.

“Well,” Xhe said, standing up slowly as he, too, clapped. “I guess we’ve got ourselves a twelfth

student going into the trials. Congratulations, Phineas Hart.”

Wait what??

As the crowd came to life, Phineas spotted Lukas to the right, arms crossed over his chest with a wide smirk. He looked happy he had passed, like he was looking forward to going against him in the trials. But Phineas was ready, too. Ready to show the world that he deserved to be seen. That he deserved attention, that he deserved the truth. He was now a part of this community. It's amazing the path that destiny sometimes takes to reach its final destination.

For years, Phineas felt like his place in the world was feeble, like the forest was the only place where he really felt like himself. Growing up with only his parents as companions, he'd felt lonely, like a star in the night sky, shining alone in isolation. Most of his life, he felt like a lone wanderer in a desert of emotions, seeking an oasis of connection, but finding only mirage after mirage. But here, Phineas was finally finding his place, his truth, slowly but surely. He was finding a totality that was much larger than he could've ever imagined, and he was eager to see it all. Phineas longed to find his place among the stars. To show the world he belonged, so no one could never cast him out again.

If his parents and Sun would not be honest with him, then he'd find others that would be. He'd find a place to belong.

He'd find his own truth, no matter the cost.

"Are you really not talking to her again?" Chee asked as they walked from their tree language class to their history of magic class.

"Chee, I've answered you a thousand times. Stop asking!"

"Wow, okay, easy there, tiger. Just making sure."

Chee lifted his arms up to surrender as Phineas sighed. He was so tired and irritated lately, his patience playing hide and seek, constantly eluding his grasp. It was easy to make him snap.

It'd been three days since the show, three days of not sleeping. He just couldn't do it. Not after what had happened the last time.

It wasn't as if he was doing it on purpose, but whenever he sat in bed, he just feared not waking up. Fearful he wouldn't be able to trust what happened next if he closed his eyes – would that lead to more closed doors? So he simply lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, trying not to fall asleep and trying not to think about Sun.

He continued training all day with the determination of a relentless storm, determined to unleash his full potential for the upcoming challenge. Life offered him two ways to live - dream it or achieve it.

He studied all the time, trying to better understand the world around him. And he thought about everything. Thought about his dad lying to him his whole life. And thought about his mother, a silent observer and witness to the torrent of lies. Thought about Sun, who he'd always considered a loyal friend. He tried not to think about her often, as it hurt too much to do so. Sun still shared some classes with him. They didn't sit side by side anymore, which clearly annoyed Chee.

As they entered the classroom that morning, they found her already there, sitting by a window. The sun filtering through the glass made her skin glow and her brilliant pink hair seem brighter somehow.



Phineas immediately looked in the other direction. He grabbed a seat on the far side of the room, a couple of rows behind her.

Mr. Payn entered the room and started the lesson. They'd been learning about a war that had taken place a few years back, one where dark dragons had tried to wipe out all other races, including the rest of the dragons. Because, apparently, there were many types of dragons. That was why the school was in a secluded area protected by a powerful, mysterious barrier only accessed by portals. It was a safe space where dragons couldn't enter. They still lingered in some realms trying to conquer everything in sight.

"Royals were extinct during the war, all castles burned to ashes—"

"Royals?" Phineas asked Chee, leaning closer to him.

"Yes, until eighteen years ago, we were ruled by the Royal family. The Pethosyus. They all died during the war."

"Fairy godmothers went extinct during the war, too. Some think a few of them got away to look after the royal children, like Anastasia. But it's just wishful thinking of course." Mr. Payn chuckled, then moved on to teach about dragons and their types of powers.

Fairy godmothers were also real? Had he not been paying attention to class because of the tournament? Or had all of this come out of nowhere?

Probably the first. He'd been so distracted with Sun—his eyes went back to her—and everything else going on. Wait, Sun was crying. Not like full on crying, but he saw a single tear shining and trembling in the corner of her left eye. It tugged at his heartstrings. He wanted to call out to his friend and run to her. To ask her what was wrong. He'd never seen her this upset before. He'd never seen her shed a tear. Not once.

As if on cue, Sun turned to him. Their eyes connected for a moment, but then he glanced away. Phineas couldn't let his shattered heart fall for her. Couldn't. Shouldn't. He set his attention on the teacher and tried to listen to the rest of the lesson. His mind, however, couldn't stop thinking about that torturous tear trapped between her long lashes.

When the class ended, Phineas grabbed his things and rushed out of the classroom, not even saying goodbye to Chee.

He went to the forest instead, nested himself among the roots of a two hundred-year-old willow, and stayed there hoping to find comfort.

He was pushing Sun away and, in doing so, he was also pushing Chee away. Phineas was aware of it, but he also couldn't deal with being close to her. The weight of his agony became an ocean, threatening to drown him. It was as if a thousand needles were piercing his heart, each jab a reminder

of the lies. He couldn't handle the pain. It wasn't his fault. After all, he hadn't been the one to ruin everything, to lie like there was no tomorrow.

The afternoon light fell through the branches until it didn't, and day gave way to night. Phineas stayed among the roots, unmoving. He was awake, even if barely. When the stars came out, the willow moved its branches to allow him a view of the constellations and the milky way.

"What troubles you so much?" the willow asked after endless hours of contemplative silence.

There was so much troubling him, and he could've said as much. But when he opened his mouth, something else came out.

"I don't know where I belong," he said. He hadn't been thinking that, but the words rang true as he spoke them.

He'd never felt part of anything, always felt like something was off. And being here, now, he felt more at home than ever. He felt more supported by this tree than he had his whole life by anyone else. The tree had never lied to him.

"Oh, but boy, do any of us truly belong anywhere? Even us trees, rooted in place as we are, belong to the entire world. We belong to the winds and the currents, to the stars and the universe. We belong to no one but ourselves. But at the same time, we belong to everyone and everything."

Phineas was silent, looking at the lights twinkling above and the leaves innocently dancing in the soft breeze of the night. He felt a chill as the breeze blew and his hair stood up on his arms. He noticed the roots growing taller around him, keeping the breeze away from him and sheltering him. Words were not necessary. They knew what he needed.

“I feel rooted here,” he said without thinking. “But I’ve never had roots. Even though I’ve lived in the same place my whole life, I don’t feel like my roots are there.”

There was a pause, a feeling of warmth in his chest, and then the ancient voice spoke to him again.

“Not all of us have roots, some of us are airborne. Still, roots... roots don’t matter, my son. What matters is what you feel in your heart and where you feel you belong. Where do you have people you can count on that have been there for you no matter what? That’s where you belong.”

Phineas couldn’t help it. His mind went back to Sun repeatedly. His mind betrayed him, thinking of every time he’d cried as a kid, of how Sun had been there, holding his hand. How she gently held in his hand. Every time he’d been wounded, she’d be there to kiss his bruises and help them heal faster. How whenever he was angry, she was there to calm him.

Every day of his life, she was a soothing balm, helping him sort through his never-ending anxiety and erratic emotions, helping him grow up.

He looked at his wristwatch. It was three in the morning. Soon, three became four. Despite that, he sat there, unmoving. Unfeeling... But feeling it all.



He thought about his childhood again, about every single memory of Sun. Phineas thought about his memories in the forest, and how some of them seemed blurry, like his dream had been. He thought about playing in the forest with nymphs, struggling to remember the details.

And then, as four became five, the realization hit him like a hammer to the head.

Had Sun been hiding the truth from him all that time, too? Had she been manipulating him somehow to be unsure of the reality of this magical world? Was that why he thought all of it was imaginary?

The pain was a storm. It clouded his thoughts, rendering them lost in the chaos of his emotions. It hurt too much to think, so as four became five, tears rolled down his cheeks like never before. He let it all out.

The pain from the lies. And the pain from not knowing what was true and what was not. The pain of having lost the only friend he'd ever had.

As the sun rose again, he realized he'd been through another sleepless night.

~ Labor Day ~

CHAPTER 9



Like a sleepwalker, he retraced his steps back to the school, his mind adrift in a surreal haze. Phineas walked slowly, his brain foggy after another night, unable to sleep. The fear of waking up in an ambushed dream was still fresh, and he didn't know how to get rid of it. He didn't know if he'd ever have a restful night of sleep again. In the realm of slumber, he felt like an insomniac, wandering through the labyrinth of restless nights without a map to guide him.

The sun was already in full bloom when he got back, and a few students were walking around the gardens, enjoying nature's bright smile. The summer would soon end. It was as if the sun itself had become a timekeeper, casting long shadows that stretched with each passing day, signaling the approaching end of the season. A few students had blankets out on the lawn, the wonderful weather their playground, and they played with the

exuberance of carefree children. Phineas was jealous of how satisfied they all looked while he felt such misery sitting on his heart.

It wasn't fair. Not fair that he still didn't understand this world he was in; it wasn't fair that even after being there for weeks, he still felt like he didn't belong.

The fact was, he didn't belong anywhere. He didn't belong on the farm he'd called home his whole life. It was the only place he'd known, but one that now felt foreign, too. As foreign as this swarming school full of eager students from the many worlds he'd never even known existed was, the challenge now seemed stale.

It was frustrating.

"Hey Phineas," Che said, coming over to walk by his side.

Phineas looked at his friend, who was as cheerful as the rest of the students, and it bothered him even more. He grunted his annoyance, hating how tired he constantly felt. The air around Che seemed to buzz with energy, making his head hurt and his eyes sting.

"Hey," he said.

"Are you okay?" his friend asked, fixing his hat tighter around his head.

“What's going on?” Phineas looked around, wondering what he'd missed. Everyone was so oddly cheerful. “Why is everyone so happy today?”

Chee smiled at him widely. “It's the start of the week of the tournament, which also means it's officially the last week of summer! This week, we celebrate magic and everything we do to keep peace between the worlds. Even right now, we're still trying to get out of a war. It's a time to remind ourselves of everything that's good. The Professors also say it's the week when magic is at its strongest, which is why they hold the tournament next week - when every student will be at their finest.”

Wow, that was a lot of information for his sleepy brain.

Like a pause in a symphony, Phineas stopped walking and looked at his friend, as if the world around them had faded into the background, leaving only the two of them in focus. “Is that what you all do here? Keep peace?” he asked, annoyance stirring



within like a restless dragon, whose fiery breath was churning ripples of venom throughout his body. “Because I felt nothing

but real peace back at home until I came to this school,” he snapped.

Chee gave him an apologetical look, rubbing his foot on the ground.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I know your time here hasn’t been the easiest, but I want to remind you I’m on your side.” Hope sparkled in Chee’s eyes like a lighthouse standing tall in a storm, offering a guiding light amidst uncertainty. He reminded Phineas a lot of principal Xhe on his first day there, when he’d come to him with a positive spirit, in spite of how lost Phineas had felt. “I don’t know what really happened between you and Sun, because you don’t want to talk to me about it, but you know I’m your friend. I’ve been nothing but good to you since you came here.” Chee crossed his arms over his chest. He didn’t look angry, only annoyed that he was being closed off. “So I think it’s not fair that you’re taking it out on me, that you’re ignoring me. You didn’t even sleep in our room last night. Where were you?”

Phineas looked down at the grass, which felt like a carpet of resilience. He started walking again towards the main entrance, the sunlight like a spotlight on it today. Maybe it was welcoming him into its embrace while offering new possibilities?

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled. He knew he’d been a shitty friend to the only person who had been on his side from day one, but it was hard to feel cheerful when everything felt so out of place. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“Were you up all night again?” Chee asked.

“Doesn't matter,” Phineas replied, shrugging. “Let's get back inside and get ready for the day. I've got training to do if I want to excel at the tournament.” Time seemed to slip through his fingers like grains of sand, each passing moment a reminder of the urgency that hung in the air. There wasn't much time left, and he still did not know what to expect.

They walked into the school in silence, Phineas not really wanting to talk about anything anymore. He was tired of talking. He was tired of thinking. Phineas felt like all he did was talk. Yet, no one talked back. No one told him what was really going on. No one cared what he thought, what he knew, what he felt. And he felt like crap!

They walked down the hall towards their room. As Phineas turned the corner, mind lost in a world of thoughts, he smashed right into someone. The impact felt like a whirlwind, momentarily lifting them both off their feet, only to set them back down in a tangle of limbs. It was like a dance of chaos and awkwardness, their collision a symphony of surprise.

“Oh, shit, sorry,” he said before looking up.

When he looked, his stomach fell to the floor. Because in front of him, he found Sun.

The fairy looked up at him with a hurt expression.

Then she opened her mouth, probably ready to give him an explanation of what had happened, or maybe to ask for forgiveness. Or maybe she just wanted to pick a fight with him.

Phineas didn't care what she wanted. He was so angry that the moment she opened her mouth, he screamed at her.

"Don't! Just shut up!" He felt like a child again, taking his hands to his ears as he screamed, the sounds of the world around him too loud.

Sun's lips sealed, literally—like something out of a cartoon. One minute she was opening her mouth to say something, and the next, her lips were closed shut.

Had he done that? Could he even do that?

Chee looked at Sun and then back at Phineas, his expression as confused as Phineas felt. He didn't know what to think, too tired to even try. But, even if he wasn't looking for answers, Chee gave them to him, regardless.

"What in the Seven Hells, Phineas?" he asked. "I didn't know you had that kind of magic!"

Phineas blinked slowly, looking back and forth between his two friends. *Magic?!?* Sun didn't look scared or annoyed. She was just staring at him as if she'd expected all along for his magic to eventually

wake up. *But what type of magic was this?* Phineas didn't have any real magic! He was just a human, a normal, boring human being.

"I did nothing," he said, trying as hard as he could to explain what had just happened. Instead, he was entangled in a web of verbal acrobatics, his words like tightrope walkers attempting to bridge the gap between the improbable and the reasonable. Each sentence was a juggling act, attempting to balance the fragments of explanation in mid-air. "I just... just can't deal with this right now. I ... Everything's too loud," he said, covering his ears again. It was as if there was a loud buzz in the air, making his head hurt. Maybe the lack of sleep, he thought, but it was all too much. It was all too much, because who was he fooling? He'd just used some kind of magic against Sun.

Chee put a hand on his shoulder, as if trying to calm him down.

"It's okay," he said. "I'm sure we can reverse this, right?" He looked at Sun as if waiting for an answer, and Sun nodded politely, still calm.

She looked at him in a way that made his stomach twist. Not with anger, as she usually did, but almost with pity. And pity he couldn't take.



“I—I’m sorry,”
Phineas muttered. Then
he turned around,
overwhelmed by
emotions, and headed
to the only place he
knew he’d find answers.

Even if not
willingly.

Phineas didn’t
want to ask for answers.

He didn’t want to *have*
to ask for them. But he was determined, after
everything that had just happened, to get the
answers he deserved. To finally understand it all.

So Phineas walked back out of school, headed
to the woods, and found the portal that would take
him home.

It was time for the truth. Nothing but the truth
would do. His mind raced like a mathematician
solving an unsolvable equation, desperately seeking
patterns and connections that would make sense of
the chaos burning in his heart. Hell, he’d been trying
to deny it for so long, but after this overt display of
magic, he couldn’t deny it any longer. The fact was
he could talk to trees when normal humans couldn’t
do that. No matter how hard he pretended he was

normal, he knew he was not. He was different. And now, he'd also performed magic. Real magic.

Phineas was no idiot, even if he pretended to be. Even if he'd tried to ignore his own thoughts and hunches. He knew now that the lies his parents had told him were bigger than he could have ever imagined. It wasn't only that they hid an entire world from him; they had probably also lied about who he really was.

And if he had magic, did that mean his parents did too?

It was like standing in a dense fog of uncertainty, where every step forward seemed to lead to more questions, and clarity remained elusive, hidden in the mist. There were too many questions and not enough answers. This was the story of his life.

When Phineas stepped through the kitchen door, the aroma of love enveloped him like a warm embrace. The kitchen was a bustling theater of flavors, with pots and pans playing their roles like seasoned actors on a stage. The stove was a blazing spotlight, illuminating the dance of ingredients as they twirled and melded in harmonious choreography. Finally, the air was a symphony, a

tantalizing overture to the culinary masterpiece his mother was orchestrating.

His mom was standing by the stove, a board full of chopped vegetables next to her. She looked up and smiled warmly, probably surprised to see him there on a weekday, but then her smile dropped when she saw his expression.

“Honey, what's wrong?”

Phineas closed his hands into fists, almost shaking with contained rage.

“I want the truth,” he said. “*I need* the truth. And I think,” he added, trembling, “That I deserve the truth.”

Monica rushed to him, grabbing his shaking hands in hers. “What happened, darling? Please calm down. What are you talking about? What am I missing?”

Phineas shook his head, looking down. He didn't want to yell at his mother, for she had always been so kind, but he was on the verge of screaming, his chest hurting from so many pent-up emotions.

“Where is dad?” he asked. He tried to keep his voice calm, but was failing. His voice was gathering strength and intensity, like the tempest's rage about to be unleashed.

As if he was on the other side of the door, waiting for his cue, his father appeared from the

next room. He looked tired, almost as tired as Phineas felt.



“Hey, kiddo, what's going on?” his father asked charmingly.

“What's going on?” Phineas said. “Is that you've been lying to me?” Once the words started flowing, he

couldn't stop them. “And I've known this for a long time. I've known that a lot of things were missing, that a lot of information was lacking. But it's too much now. Too much. I'm done with this. Done with all your lies. I'm done with not asking questions. Not only is there an entire world out there that you hid from me, but you are still hiding the truth about who I am. I know that now. You made me believe you were humans. That I was human. That the school was only there... What? By chance? You wanted me not to ask questions, so I've been patient, tried to stay quiet. But no more. I've been denying my magic as much as I denied the magical world I saw for years, but I can't deny it any longer.” Phineas took a deep breath, trying to calm his tired heart. “I have magic,” he admitted, the words hard to pronounce. “Explain how this is possible,” he said before his voice broke, knees buckling as he fell to the floor.

There was silence. In that fleeting moment, the world seemed to hold its breath, and time stood still like a photograph paused in mid-air. Both of his parents looked at him, and then Monika took Paul's hand softly in hers.

"I think it's time we tell him the truth," his mother said, looking at Paul with teary eyes.

"It won't prevent what you saw, Monika," his father replied, voice not rough.

"But he deserves to know," she replied, still in the same soft voice she always used. "He's old enough to know. We promised to look after him, and telling him the truth now is looking after him in the best way possible," she said. "We've prolonged it as long as we could, but I don't think the truth can damage him more than these lies already have. It's not our choice anymore. Phineas has made up his own mind. He wants the truth, and he deserves it."

Phineas did not know what they were going on about, and he hated they were talking like he wasn't even in the room.

"I'm here too, you know!" his father snapped.

Monika turned to Phineas, eyes full of unshed tears.

"I'm sorry, baby. Sorry for keeping this from you, but know that we did so because we were trying to protect you. Because we promised to protect you."

“Promised who?” Phineas asked, still unsure of what she was going on about.

There was a pause as Paul looked at Monika. There was actual fear in his eyes. His eyes were like two mirrors reflecting the shadows of trepidation, each flicker of uncertainty captured in their depths. His pupils dilated like dark pools, absorbing the



weight of his unease and amplifying it with each passing moment. But then he nodded ever so slightly.

“Your birth parents,” Monika said.

And Phineas’ world shattered into a million pieces.

~ No One Promised You A Good Life ~

CHAPTER 10



Stumbling numbly back through the portal, Phineas ran. He didn't know where he was going, but he had to move, had to get away.

Away from the lies and the heartbreak, away from the pain and the look in Monika's eyes. He tasted bile, his legs protested each step, pulse raced, and he stumbled through the bushes tripping over roots and tangled foliage, trying to stay upright but failing.

It couldn't be. It couldn't be real.

He fell like a shooting star, crashing onto the ground with a sudden and impactful force, as if the earth itself had reached up to reclaim him. His knees hit the grass. Curling on the ground, he hugged his stomach, determined to vanquish the relentless pain that gnawed at his chest. He tried to breathe past it. His chest became a vice, squeezing with an unyielding grip, as if it were attempting to confine his breath within its steel embrace. His neck felt

tight, his mother's words repeating in his mind like a broken record.

I'm sorry, Phineas.

We promised to keep the secret.

It was safest that way.

I might not have given birth to you, but I'm still your mother.

Phineas, look at me. I love you, and I'd do anything for you.

A lie. His entire existence was a lie.

He hadn't been able to stay there, looking into the eyes of the people that had lied to him his whole life. They had called themselves his parents, but he no longer knew who they were. Who *he* was. So he ran. Until he couldn't.

Now, curled up in a ball and barely able to breathe, he wondered what he'd do next. He hated himself for not getting more answers before running away like the coward he was. Being alone with his thoughts now only made things more complicated.

"Phineas!"

Like a dreamy kiss, the wind graced his face, leaving behind the fleeting essence of freedom and the promise of adventure. The wind was like a messenger, carrying the scents and whispers of his past, delivering them to him with a touch that felt familiar. Phineas closed his eyes. He was not ready

for anyone. He didn't want to be seen like this. Didn't want to feel like he did. With each sigh, he sought refuge from the stormy waters of his own emotions. He closed in on himself, hoping the battered bushes would conceal him. Wishing he was invisible.

"Phineas!" that well-known voice said, getting closer. He heard the buzzing of the wings, felt it in his chest. She could speak again. Good, at least his previous blunder hadn't been irreversible. But this was. Like an open wound, this hurt was a reminder of his vulnerability.

He wished to be a ghost, a fleeting specter that dissolved into the shadows, leaving behind only a whisper of his existence. But even though he wanted to disappear, he couldn't hide anymore because breathing was hard and he needed her more than ever before. He needed her by his side. She had never promised him a good life, but she was all he really had.

"Sun," the words were a raspy whisper, but she materialized at his side in a heartbeat, as if she had mastered the art of teleportation just to save him.

Sun patted his cheek and the warmth of her essence seeped into him somehow, the air now flowing more freely into his lungs as if by a miracle—or magic?

“That’s it,” she said in a soft voice he’d never heard from her before. One that reminded him of his childhood, though. “Breathe, Phi, breathe.”

And so he did, tears now rolling down his cheeks like when he was a three-year-old child, two waterfalls without an end. All those times Sun had been tiny and had laid on his chest, comforting him with the melody of her wings, almost like the purring of a divine cat. The electricity of those memories bathed the air.

This time, though, she placed her bigger hand on his chest and the soothing sensation of a loved one anchored the storm of his thoughts. The touch of her skin was like a peaceful sunrise! Her skin was a canvas of warmth, radiating a gentle glow that seemed to kindle a fire within him. A hand over his heart on his chest would always calm him, no matter what. He remembered this now. Phineas felt that familiar glow that made everything easy. That helped him breathe again.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he sobbed. He couldn’t conceive of her not knowing, not after the whispers he’d heard around the house. Not after everything had fallen back into place and the picture had become clearer than ever. It hurt to think that she could know all this time. Like an exposed nerve, this thought sent jolts of discomfort through his consciousness, a reminder of the delicate nature of

trust. He wanted her to say she had no clue what he was talking about, but Sun sat politely by his side, cradling his hand.

“Did they finally tell you the truth?” she asked.

“They told me I’m not their son,” he affirmed, almost choking on the words. “How?!”

How could it be real?

Sun’s eyes held the weight of unspoken stories, each glance a chapter of longing and regret. As she looked at him, a window to her soul cracked open, revealing the depth of her emotions, a reflection of the turmoil she carried within. “I’m sorry for not telling you, but I was part of the promise they made. Your biological parent’s last wish was to protect you at all costs, and it’s not a promise easily broken. They didn’t want you to know your real identity, so you’d be safe.”



*Last wish? So...
They were dead. Gone.
Really gone. Memories
from the nightmare he’d
had a few days ago came
back. It was as if the
nightmare had left its
mark, like a scar on the
landscape of his mind,*

and now the memory of it resurfaced with an eerie persistence. Flashes mixed with the history of magic

lessons he'd been learning at school. They were recollections of agony and the smell of blood. Of creatures chasing him.

"What happened?" he asked, needing answers more than anything else. It was as if his mind had become a labyrinth, and the answers were the keys that would unlock the secrets hidden within its winding corridors. He was angry at Sun, angry at the lies, but the truth was more important right now and he needed to know.

"Your parents died during the war, Phi," Sun said softly. "Paul and Monika took on the responsibility of looking over you and moved to the farm to keep you safe."

Safe. There was that word again.

"Why? Safe from what?"

"Because... Because your dad was Paul's best friend. He was not only his friend and confidant but also his personal guard. He devoted his whole life to looking after your father, and you."

None of it made sense. The puzzle pieces didn't fit. Phineas finally sat down, taking one deep breath before turning to Sun again sitting right across from her. Finally, though, he was getting answers, so he would not waste another moment, no matter how much the truth would hurt. No matter how confused the answers would make him.

So he sat there, squared his shoulder, and asked Sun to tell him everything. He was fully engaged in this moment, ready to absorb the answers as if they were the most valuable lessons he could ever learn.

“I understand nothing that’s going on, so please, help me understand,” he said.

“I don’t think you’re ready for all of it,” Sun said. “And I don’t think you’ll ever forgive me if I tell you the truth.”

Phineas remained serious as he replied, “Let me be the judge of that. Haven’t you taken away enough?”

His whole life, he’d constantly had questions, and the answers were never there. They’d all taken away the truth, his identity, everything he was, and without his permission. He deserved better than that.

“Be stronger than your excuses,” Phineas added, “Tell me the truth. I deserve it. If you care about me, you’ll tell me. My mind’s struggling to cope.”

Sun sighed loudly, her wings extending behind her and covering some of the wind that had picked up. It looked like a storm was coming, but he didn’t care. He only cared about the truth. Sun sighed again. Her sigh was a gentle breeze through the

quiet forest, a subtle exhale that carried the weight of the world in its breath.

“All I’ve done my whole life was care for you, Phi,” she said. “Since my earliest memory, that’s all I’ve done. That’s the whole reason I’m alive.”

“What do you mean?”

And so, in the middle of the woods, the only place Phineas had ever felt like home, Sun told him the truth. She wove a tale as ancient as the first starlight, each word a thread connecting him to past generations. A story about a war between the magical realm and the fiery dragons. Sun told him a story about a castle, where twenty years ago, a young couple ruled in peace.

She told him a story about the Pethosyus, the royals. With each exhale, she felt like a storyteller releasing the tension of a well-told tale, a moment of closure after carrying the weight of the narrative.

“George Pethosyus was a great king,” she said. “A kind one.” She spoke with sorrow in her voice, the pain of the loss clear in her facial expression, too. “He was your father, Phi. Miranda was your mother, a woman so caring that her only dying wish was to see you safe. She protected you until the last minute, her magic flowing into you. Miranda was a woodland nymph...”

Phineas thought about his connection to the forest and how he’d always been able to speak to the

trees, almost as if he was one of them. And now, he found out his mother had almost been a part of the forest. A protector. The reason he could speak to the trees as easily as he could breathe was his mom.

“And my dad?” he asked. “What about him?”



“Your father was a mage, a powerful one. I think some of your magic comes from him, too. What I saw this morning felt a lot like him,” she added with a small smile, the first she’d given him since finding him in the woods. She looked

proud.

“What about Monika and Paul?” he asked next, pronouncing their names a harder task than he’d expected.

“Paul doesn’t have any magic,” Sun explained, “But he’s a great warrior. His parents were sorcerers, and he’s tried alchemy in the past, but he prefers to stay away from magic. After all, magic is the one thing that took his best friend away from him... He teaches here to stay connected to this world, and to help us as much as he can. But his

proper focus for the past eighteen years has been looking after you. And Monika... Monika is a seer."

Wow. Everything. Everything was a lie.

Phineas looked at her, taking in the pointy nose and the freckles, the gentle smile, and the pink and happy hair. Their eye contact was like a conversation, a dialogue of souls exchanging understanding and empathy without uttering a single syllable.

"And you?"

A part of him already knew the answer. A part of him already understood her avoidance when speaking about her family or her kind—the reason she never let him know the type of fairy she was. It made sense now. It did. But he needed to hear it from her.

"I need to hear it," he said when Sun stayed quiet, looking at him with pleading eyes.

"Please, don't hate me, Phi. Everything I've ever done was to protect you. I never wanted to hide anything from you, but I swore to. I swore to listen to Paul and Monika and do as they wished. I made a vow to your parents. Still, you've always been my priority."

"Why?"

"You know why..." Sun looked away, her cheeks flushed pink. He hated himself for pushing her, but he needed to hear it. He needed the whole truth.

“Sun...”

She turned to him and stood abruptly, her combat boots hitting the ground next to him and sending dirt flying.

“Because I’m your fairy godmother, Phi! I’m tied to you and everything I’ve ever done was to keep you safe! To keep the last of the royal family alive. And trust me, it’s been a hell of a ride and a hell of a task. I watched my whole damn family die, and I... I...”

Phineas stood, and without thinking, he pulled Sun into his chest, holding her close.

He had no memories of that time, no memories of what had happened. But Sun did. She probably remembered specific details of the battles, the whole war. He’d seen her cry in class when Mr. Payn talked about the godmother fairies being extinct, and now he understood her pain. Saw where it came from. And he hated himself for not knowing, for not realizing it earlier. For not being there for her when she’d always been there for him.

She’d sacrificed a lot for him, and as much as he wanted to be angry with her, he knew she’d always been there for him. She’d always held him when he needed it. Like a broken compass, he had lost his way, and the guilt of not being there for her weighed on him like an anchor. This was his chance to give that back.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through all of that to protect me,” he said.

Sun sobbed into his chest. It felt like a dam breaking, the floodgates of her feelings bursting open, unable to contain the weight of her agony any longer. She was confused, pushing him away a bit to dry her tears with the back of her hand, looking annoyed at herself, and then trying to put on a serious face. “I would do it again,” she said. “It’s an honor to be in my position, Phi, never doubt that.”

There was still one thing he didn’t understand. “Why all the secrecy, though? Why not tell me who I was from the beginning? Who even am I? Phineas Pethosyus?”

The last name felt foreign, but also familiar.



Sun nodded. “You’re the heir to the throne,” she whispered. “If the dragons are ever defeated, you could take back your rightful place on the throne. And your magic... It runs in your blood.” She shook her head, as if she’d said too much, but she had promised to at long last reveal the truth to him. She knew what she was doing. “The strength of your lineage is... I can’t even explain it. If anyone knew who you were, they’d try to steal your magic, to steal your blood even. It was too

dangerous, you were too vulnerable, just a child. It's still dangerous," she corrected.

His whole life, he'd been hiding. Hiding in a house in the middle of nowhere. Hiding from his parents when he was angry. Then, hiding from himself when he didn't know better. Even hiding in the woods when life got too hard. His whole life, he'd been running. He'd run from the battle, from the war. Next, he'd run away with his life intact when his whole family had been murdered. He'd run away from the pain. The scariest moment, it's always just before you jump.

Something had to give. Something had to change.

"Who killed them?" he asked, swallowing the lump in his throat. "What do you know about this war?"

Sun shook her head. "I think that's enough for today, Phineas. It's too much to take in at once, and your magic is very feeble at the moment. Your emotions rule your magic, and you're feeling too much, hurting too much. Take some time, and I promise you by my name that I will tell you everything you want to know. I will help you train your magic so you can take all of this in, and more."

"I can handle it!" he snapped.

Sun looked around them, pointing to the woods. "Can you?"

Phineas noticed the wind had picked up while Sun had been talking. She'd protected him with her wings before, but now that they were by her sides, their hair was billowing madly in the wind, strands of pink dancing all over them. *He'd thought a storm was coming, but was it not? Was that all him? Was that what Sun was telling him?*

She nodded, as if listening to his thoughts, "This is you, Phineas. Your magic is tightly wrapped with the one from this forest, with the trees. Let's go back to the farm. You can talk to your parents, hear them out. I'll be there with you. I'll always be with you."

Phineas shook his head. "Not yet. I'm not ready to face them after what happened." He didn't want to worry them, but he couldn't face them right now either. "Can you talk to them, please? Tell them I'll be around later? Maybe tomorrow? I need some time."

Sun nodded. "Do you want me to go now?" He nodded. "Okay, wait for me here, and I'll be back shortly... I'll walk back to the Academy with you, okay?"

Phineas nodded again and sat back down, feeling the grass under the palms of his hands, feeling the frisky wind on his face, and listening to Sun's steps retreating.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked the trees when he was finally alone.

“It wasn’t our story to tell,” they replied.

And it hurt. It hurt so much that he dug his fingers into the ground, blackness engulfing the surrounding area, plants receding and escaping his shadow.

He was like a shattered mirror, the fragments of his spirit reflecting a fragmented image, a mosaic of pain and pieces that no longer fit. Like a coiled spring, the injustices he perceived had wound him up, and now he was on the edge, ready to release that pent-up energy. He was mad.

He was blackened within; he was rotten to the core. No one had ever promised him life would be easy, but he never thought it’d be this hard. His birth parents had never promised him anything. His adopted parents never made things seem easier than they were going to be. They’d always been just. They’d let him find by himself that some plants would sting if he touched them, that the water was dangerous if he went too deep into the ocean. But he hadn’t thought life would be as difficult as it was.

Still, he could see now that they had sheltered him his whole life. He’d had no actual battles to fight. It seemed like life wanted him to fight, to fight back until he made things right. Until he found the truth.

And now that he had most of the truth, he would do it. He'd fight back. This was a fork in the road where every step would shape the narrative of his future. It was time.

He'd find out who had murdered his parents, what had happened eighteen years ago.

And he knew just where to start. If Sun would not give him all the answers just yet, he'd find them on his own.

Phineas stood up and started walking back to the Academy. *He'd promised to wait, but hadn't they promised him plenty of things they hadn't done? Hadn't they lied more than he had?* He'd head to the library and find the answers he was after. There had to be books about the war, and they would detail the answers among their pages.

He was done with it all. Done with the lies and the hurt. Done with being a puppet in someone else's game. As he walked, the trees called back to him, urging him to remain calm, to wait, but Phineas tuned them out, ignoring their pleas to go back to the forest and wait for Sun as he'd promised.



Like a roaring fire, he didn't need to be subdued; he would burn brightly, radiating the heat of his passion, lighting up the darkness around him. He didn't need to be calm.

He needed revenge.

~ i Thought ~

CHAPTER 11



Phineas had always been good at studying. Like a sponge, he absorbed knowledge effortlessly, soaking up facts and ideas with a thirst for understanding that couldn't be quenched. Living pretty much on his own all his life, he'd found both refuge and an escapism in books. He'd read more than he could remember, but remembered pretty much everything he read.

So, when Phineas got to the Academy's library, it was pretty easy to find the books he was after. Like a well-tuned compass, his instincts led him straight to the shelves where the books he desired sat patiently, as they now beckoned him with a whispered invitation. Once he had the books, it was easy enough to hide in a corner and read through all the relevant information so fast that he found himself back in his room an hour later—packing his bag.

The door opened without a knock. Phineas didn't even turn.

"Oh, wow, Phineas... What's going on?"

Chee stood at the door, slowly closing it behind him with the back of his heel as he looked at the mess in the room. Clothes were scattered on top of the bed, a few books laid open on the floor, and a big map was haphazardly folded on the desk, along with an old compass he'd found among the relics of the library, and a rustic water bottle.

Phineas rubbed the back of his neck, then put a few shirts into his backpack.

"I'm out of here," he said. There was no point in lying or denying what was going on. Chee and everybody else would probably soon find out he was gone. This could be the last turn of the screw.

He hadn't run into Sun yet, who was probably looking for him trapped in a landscape of concern after he'd ditched her in the woods. In the dormitory's maze, he was a fleeting figure, the timing of their paths narrowly misaligned, as if fate was teasing them with a dance of almost-meets. Phineas was sure she'd be back here any second. If Sun discovered his plan, she would certainly try to stop him. With each passing second, he felt the clock in his chest, its steady tick reminding him that every moment counted, and he couldn't afford to lose even one. He didn't have time to doubt himself

or to think twice. If he didn't go now, he'd be stuck in the same boring and purposeless life forever. He'd be without the answers he needed. All he wanted to do was rid his heart of emptiness.

If he wanted the whole truth, then he had to go now.

"Where are you going? Back home?" Chee asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

In a way, yes, he thought. And damn, that was so close to coming out of his mouth. So close. It hurt to hear the word. *Home*. No, he didn't have a home. Not anymore. It was as if he had a place in the tapestry of existence but had yet to weave the threads of permanence that would create a true home. And maybe he'd never had one to begin with?

"Something like that," he said, shaking his head.

Chee must have sensed his intentions. He came over, like a guardian angel, his presence a soothing balm, and he gently laid a comforting hand on his shoulder, as if to convey understanding without uttering a single word.

Phineas tried very hard not to shrug him off, because Chee had nothing to do with his moody annoyance. He knew nothing about who he was or what had happened, so he shouldn't blame him. Still, he recoiled back a bit, unable to control himself. Anxiety never rests.



“Phineas... I know that in standard time, we haven’t really known each other for that long... But living in the same room and sharing almost every class every

day, I think I know you pretty well by now. Enough to know something is very wrong with you, so please... Tell me, what’s going on?”

Phineas didn’t have any intention of speaking about what had happened and what he’d discovered, but he found that as soon as he opened his mouth to dismiss the question, the truth spilled out instead. He told Chee absolutely everything. He unfolded his soul like an intricate origami, sharing every crease and fold, every hidden corner of his thoughts and experiences, as if he were opening the book of his life for his friend to read. It was as if the information was pressing onto his chest, and letting it out felt freeing.

He told him about his true identity and about the lies his parents had told him. Phineas told him about Sun and how she’d always been there for him, but also about how they all lied to him about knowing each other. After blurting this all out, it dawned on Phineas that Chee would’ve figured out Sun was a fairy godmother, because it was the only

type of fairy that would've stuck with him his whole life. Phineas had done a ton of research on it at the library, too, and now all the signs were obvious. He was no longer a candle burning in an unlit room, casting a feeble glow amidst the enveloping shadows, yearning for the illumination of understanding. Now he knew.

"Sun is... your fairy godmother?" Chee repeated, his mouth hanging open.

"Yes, and I've known her all my life. She's always been there for me."

Chee looked around, as if she must be there now. But it was just the two of them in the room, which made Phineas feel heavier. Like a short-lived meteor falling across the night sky, he knew he had a limited window before she appeared, and he was racing against the inevitable collision..

He started moving, putting the few things remaining on top of the bed into his backpack and leaving everything else behind.

"Wait. So... Where are you going? Back to the farm?"

Phineas shook his head. He didn't think he'd ever be able to go back there.

Truth was, he didn't know where he was going. He was adrift in a sea of uncertainty, like a compass lost in a world without coordinates, each step taken to find direction amidst the chaos. Hell, he felt like

he couldn't even remember where he'd been. The place he was going was one he'd been to before. One he couldn't remember. One that hid in the deepest parts of his mind but recently came back as small flashbacks and nightmares. Phineas couldn't remember what he'd done with his life. It didn't feel like he'd even lived his life. He felt alone. He didn't know how much more he could take!

It was as if he had stepped into a novel without knowing the plot, a protagonist navigating the pages, eager to discover what lay beyond the next paragraph. He inhaled like a diver preparing to plunge into the darkest depths; the air filling his lungs like a reservoir of strength. A moment of pause before the next chapter began. Then he spoke confidently.

"I'm going to the Pethosyus Castle," he admitted.

"You, WHAT?!"

Phineas stopped fumbling with his clothes and looked straight at Chee, who was pale. His lips were almost paper white, a bare hint of pink in them..

"No, no, no," Chee said, snapping out of it. "You can't go there, Phineas! Don't you know what's there?!"

"The truth!" he snapped. The wind picked up outside, making the window in their room rattle. "My family died there, and anything that's left of

them will be there. The textbooks speak of relics and hidden passages only the royal family could access. Of magic trapped within that's so strong it could destroy the dragons. That's why the war started, that's why the first place they hit was the castle. So, I'm going to go there and understand it so I can get rid of all the dragons that killed my family."

Chee shook his head again, but there was no real determination there—his friend looked clearly defeated. It was like trying to halt an avalanche with a spoon, a futile endeavor. He knew he couldn't talk him out of this.

Phineas still expected him to keep arguing.

Instead, Chee turned to his side of the room and grabbed a pack from under his bed. Then he started grabbing clothes from the shelves and throwing them inside.

"What do you think you're doing?" Phineas asked, unable to believe what was going on.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Chee replied. "I know I can't convince you not to go, so I'm going with you."

"I can't let you do that," Phineas mumbled. "It'll be dangerous outside of the barrier."

He knew now that the barrier around the school was also a protection from the things that lurked outside—especially the dragons. Phineas had a map of the land and knew how he planned on

getting to the castle, but the journey would probably take weeks. He wouldn't drag Chee into that.

"I'm not asking for permission, just like you aren't waiting for anyone's approval to leave. I'm not letting you go out there alone. I might not be the best magician, but at least I know this land and its creatures. Trust me, you'll need me. You can thank me later."

"Thank you for what?" the soft voice came out of nowhere, as both Phineas and Chee jumped in the air, turning slowly towards the now open door.

Sun stood there pissed off, arms crossed over her chest and her pink hair looking rather messy.

"I..." Chee opened and closed his mouth, looking like a fish out of water.

"You can't convince me not to go," Phineas said, holding his pack to his chest.



"I'm not going to," Sun said, surprising him so much that he dropped the bag and took a couple of steps towards her.

"What? You're not going to stop me?"

Sun shook her head and walked in,

closing the door behind her.

“I kept my promise, and I’ll keep doing just that. I know you’re not a kid anymore. As much as I also know, I won’t be able to convince you to stay. So, if you’re going to go on this crazy and stupid adventure that will surely get you killed, the least I can do is tag along and make sure you have a slight chance of surviving. To make sure there’s someone there to continue to train you with your magic.”

With each second that passed, it was like acknowledging the dawn of a new era, the stepping stones of maturity paving the path forward, a tapestry of lessons woven into the fabric of their story.

Smiling, Phineas picked up the bag again and looked at both his friends standing by his side in the exact moment he needed them to be there. There were a lot of things he didn’t know, and a lot he wasn’t sure about, but with Chee and Sun next to him, he felt hope. He felt like answers were something he would find. And he felt like, he could probably survive this crazy adventure he’d planned for himself. It would be like navigating a turbulent river with nothing but a makeshift raft, holding on with white-knuckled determination as the currents of uncertainty and excitement propelled them forward on this wild expedition.

All his life, he hadn't known what to believe or when to believe it. He hadn't known if the creatures in his yard were real or part of his vivid imagination, or if he was certifiably crazy. But now that he knew everything was real, he finally had something tangible to believe in. He believed that he could make it. That, now with his friends by his side, he'd understand it all. In the theater of his life, he was the intrepid star, the leading role in a grand performance filled with drama that was about to unfold.

As the three friends walked out under the shelter of the night, heading towards the barrier, Phineas felt his palms sweating.

Of course, he wasn't entirely sure of what he was doing or exactly where he was going. But he wasn't stupid. He knew nothing about the world outside the barrier that surrounded the school, and he was barely just learning how to manage his powers. But he was determined. He was a lionheart, unwavering in his resolve, a force of nature with a steel determination that could move mountains and conquer any obstacle. So on they walked.

As he looked back over his shoulder, he watched the Academy's lights fade. He'd barely been

there a few months, but he had learned to love the palace—to love the people within and to love how much he was learning. His whole life had been planned around attending the University. He'd researched all the options, thought about the many majors, and looked forward to everything he was going to learn. But instead, he got this.

This was certainly not what he'd imagined doing when he finally left his parent's home. It was like stepping into an uncharted realm, a script rewritten by the whims of fate, a scene unfolding with unexpected twists and turns that veered far from the original storyboard he had envisioned when he first spread his wings and departed from the sheltered cocoon of his parent's home.

He never thought he'd find another world, that he'd find actual magic, and that all the creatures he thought lived within his overactive imagination would be real. He could never have imagined finding out his family wasn't really his family. Or fleeing every comfort he knew in the middle of the night to chase the unknown and navigate a dangerous trail.

Yet, here he was.

Finally, they got to the barrier, an almost invisible shimmering wall. All three of them stopped. It was like arriving at the edge of the known world, the point where their journey seemed to pause, inviting them to carefully contemplate the next step.

“Are you sure about this?” Chee asked nervously, looking over his shoulder back at the school.

“I’m sure,” Phineas replied with a blend of uncertainty and determination.

Chee shuddered and shook his head. “If I don’t die out there, I’m sure my father will kill me when he finds the note I left for him. He’ll hunt me down and rip off my skin until I’m only bones.”

“You can still turn around,” Phineas replied.

Chee shook his head again. “Nah, we’re in this together, mate.”

Sun looked back and forth between them and then held her hand out, touching the portal.

“You know there’s no way back, right?” she asked, her eyes a burning fire in the night’s darkness. “Once we step out, the decision is final, the danger is real.”

“I know.”

“Then let’s do this,” she replied, sounding as fierce as ever.

Phineas had been so sure Sun would stop him the minute she figured out his plan. He still didn’t understand why she hadn’t—why she hadn’t simply spelled him into forgetting or used some other magical enchantment. There was so much to her magic he didn’t know, and he was looking forward to learning more about it while they traveled.

As the portal twisted and then opened up for them, like plastic wrap burning up and creating an opening barely big enough for the three of them to get past, something else flashed behind them. It was a light so bright that they all squinted at it, and then they witnessed a blur of motion, a streak of velocity tearing through the air like a comet on a daring escapade, a sudden glimpse of something alive with urgency and purpose. Its hair was on fire as it flew past the opening and crashed against a nearby tree.



The three friends rushed through the opening, which promptly closed behind them.

Sun poked the fallen figure on the ground. “Is he dead?”

Phineas watched in horror as Lukas laid on the ground

unconscious, his hair smoking at the tips.

“What was he doing?” he asked.

“It looked like he had half-shifted... But it looked wrong somehow.”

“You look wrong, asshole,” a rumbling voice said from the ground. Lukas opened a single eye and tried to sit down, grumbling.

“What in Hell were you doing out?” Phineas asked.

“What did it look like I was doing?” he snapped back. “I was taking a leisure walk under the moonlight...” Lukas looked around, finally catching on to his surroundings. “Wait. Are we... Outside?”

Sun nodded, and Phineas crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for Lukas to snap at them again. He couldn’t wait to tell him to shut it.

But instead, Lukas smiled.

“Wicked,” he said.

“Excuse me?” Phineas couldn’t believe his eyes as Lukas stood and cracked his neck.

“Whereabouts are you headed?”

“Nowhere that matters to you,” Phineas replied.

But, Chee opened his big mouth, “The Pethosyus Castle.”

Phineas smacked him on the back of the head so hard that he expected him to spit out his brain. The impact landed like a sudden thunderclap, a swift reprimand that echoed through the night.

Sun chuckled, shaking her head in disbelief.

There was a moment of silence, in which they all stared at each other, and then Lukas smirked.

“Great, unless you want me to go over to the principal right now and rat you out, which means

you'll be busted within minutes, I suggest you gladly accept my invitation to tag along."

"No one invited you!" Phineas snapped, the wind picking up around them.

But Lukas was already walking ahead, as if he knew precisely where to go.

"I think you want me to tag along," he said as he ambled onward. "Because I know where the palace is. I know how to get there, and I know how to avoid the barriers so you can get in."

Phineas looked at Sun, who simply shrugged, and then at Chee, who had his jaw set hard but nodded after a moment as he realized they needed the help.

He was an unexpected guest at the table of his intentions, a surprise course in the banquet of his carefully laid-out strategy. But Phineas guessed it was like receiving a lifeline during a storm, a buoy to cling to amidst the turbulent waves of uncertainty, a signpost that whispered the promise of progress. So he reluctantly agreed, even though Lukas had been an ass to him at the school and he didn't know why he'd ever want to join them. It looked like they all had secrets of their own. Phineas could accept that.

In time, he'd find out everything. In time, there would be no more secrets.

But first, he had to go across these magical lands to find his way back to the place that had birthed him.

One adventure was over, but another one was just about to begin. He couldn't wait to see what would happen next. His heart was a drumbeat of excitement, like a child on the eve of an adventure, eyes wide open with wonder, eager to unwrap the gift of the unknown. So, Phineas embraced what would happen next. His destiny waited. His friends would stand beside him. Recently, Phineas thought he couldn't fight any longer, but he knew now he could and would.

The beauty of life lay not just in the destinations but in the journey, in the exhilaration



of not knowing precisely what waited around the corner. This was a precious gift. Their next adventure was a canvas awaiting the colors of his experiences to paint the chapters yet to be written...

stop them.

Nothing would

The End Has Arrived (but not in a bad way!)

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Somethin' to Believe In is the 1st book to another fiction fantasy trilogy by Sarantos. Mystery awaits as Phinea's journey will take the reader along for a ride they will never forget. This story will bring to life a universe filled with magical creatures only believed to be real in fairytales, and the reader will discover an enchanted world along with Phineas, a hard-headed but smart teenager who just wants to learn.

Read "*Somethin' to Believe In*" with your eyes and heart wide open. You'll feel the intrigue guide you as you leave behind this world and glide towards...

About the Author:



Who says nerds can't write a bestseller?

Sarantos is a Chicago based nerd and retired superhero who always has a story to tell. He is a DIY international award-winning solo music artist, Top 7 iTunes UK Charting Rock, Top 5 iTunes UK Charting Singer-Songwriter, Top 8 iTunes UK Charting Country, #1 iTunes South Africa Charting Folk & Country Artist, #1 iTunes UK Charting Christian, #1 iTunes UK Charting New Age, #2 iTunes UK World, proud nerd, multi-instrumentalist, book author, comic book nut, radio show host, poet and part time spy. His music is a cross between Justin Bieber, Queen, Journey & Ed Sheeran. It's hard to believe but Sarantos doesn't even use a professional studio to make any of his music! He's an alien who landed here to infect the human race and spread the disease of music. 2023 is Year #10 of his journey as he continues to release a new song, lyric video, music video, book chapter and poem every month bringing his music to life! In 9 years, he has released 18 albums with 226 original tracks as well as 9 fiction/fantasy books that parallel the songs!

"Sarantos is not your average songwriter and artist. In fact, he is a true musical powerhouse who embraces a keen DIY edit. He is deeply connected to his music, and there is quite nothing that strikes as deeply as an artist who seriously means what he focuses on with his music."

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"His music is often described a blend of Queen, Michael Jackson and Ed Sheeran."

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"Sarantos is an internationally acclaimed independent artist who has the determination of a gazelle to seek out each day with the strength of a lion to dominate the jungle."

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