

~ 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.”

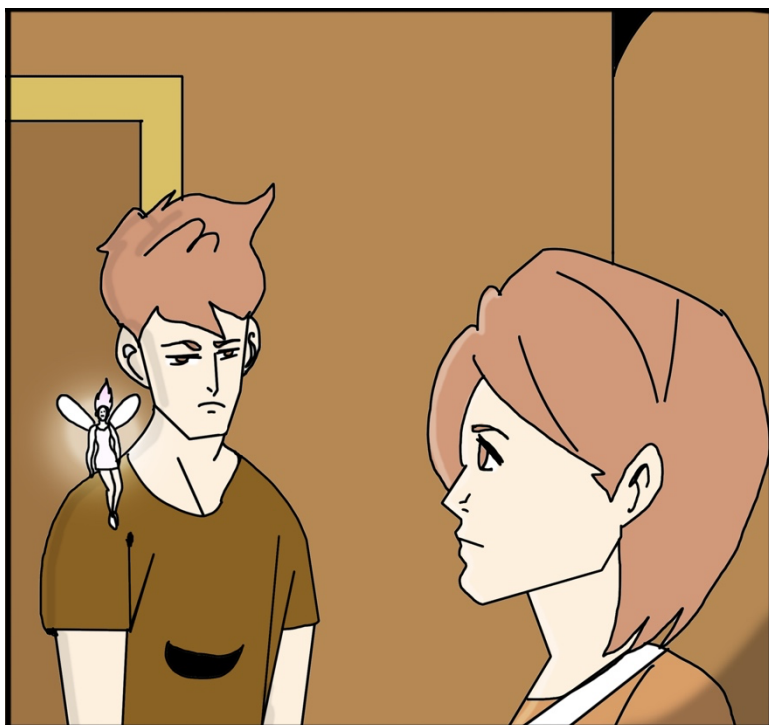
“Happy to hear that. You were always so eager to learn,” his mother replied. She passed him the tray with the smashed potatoes and he loaded a few more onto his plate. They were crunchy on the outside, soft on the inside — perfection for his palate. “So, what’s your favorite subject so far?”

“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. Bumpity, 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.