

## ~ 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!"

Chе 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..."

He 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 Phinea'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.

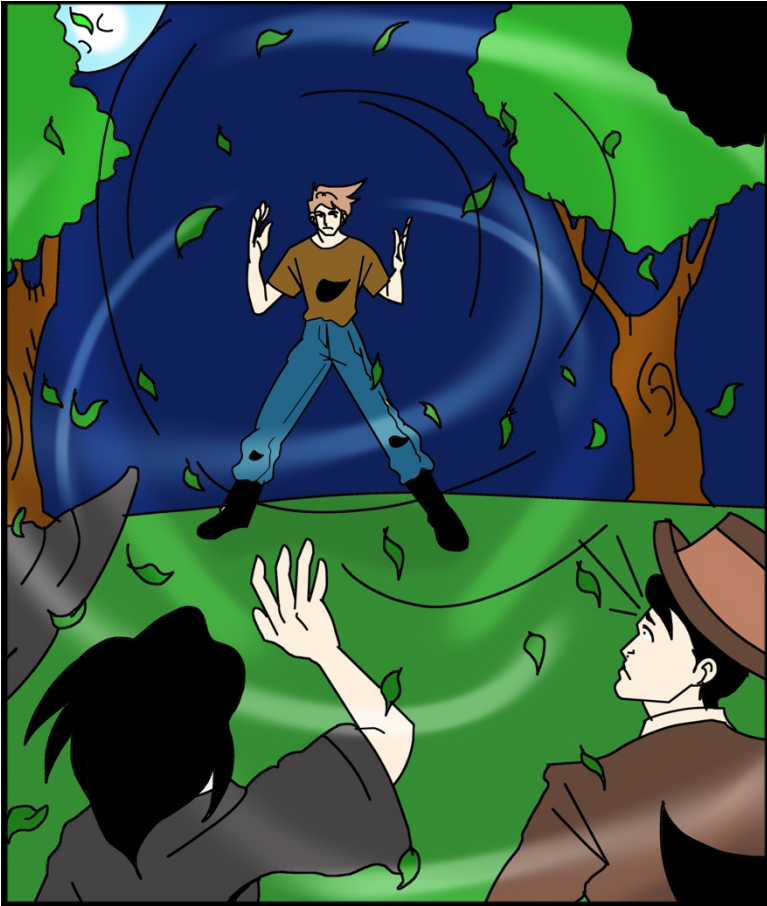
He heard them more clearly than ever. Phineas felt his own anger reflected in them, the anger that stirred within as he thought of the river of lies. And the burning sickness from the unnerving act of a best friend, the shattering of his confidence, a misplaced feeling of belonging in this world.

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 ever 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

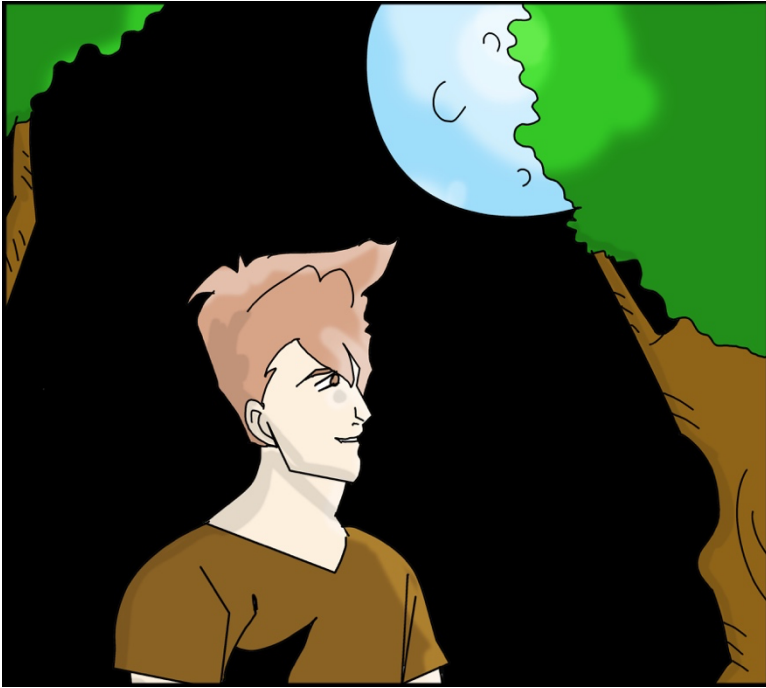
the same place my whole life, I don't feel like my roots are there.”

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.