

~ 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.