

~ 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 earthy 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.