

~ love Is LOVE ~

CHAPTER 2



A quick, reflexive swipe of his hand whisked the sweat from his forehead, an insignificant victory in the battle against the sweltering day. Even though he was standing under the ever-cool shade of the woods, his skin was boiling. Either the sun had become a merciless inferno, or he had pushed himself to the brink of exhaustion. Phineas lifted his hands once more.

“Come on, just help me out here,” he muttered to the old oak tree in front of him.

“I bet my next meal on him failing.”

“Shut up, Lukas.” Chee threw a little pinecone at the blond’s head, but he dodged it skillfully and smiled back smugly. However, the smile turned sour when he realized Chee wasn’t paying attention to him and he instead was focused on Phineas’ training.

“Why can’t you shut up?” Phineas said through gritted teeth.

“Please forget about them,” Sun’s voice came from somewhere over his shoulder, so close to his ear that he could feel the warmth of her breath. The skin on his neck tingled. “It’s just you and the tree. If you want to improve, learn to do this with just a momentary thought.”

He drew out a deliberate sigh, letting it linger in the air before making another attempt. He’d been at it all morning, trying to get the stubborn tree to lower a branch for him to climb on, but with little success.

Sun dedicated herself to his training, a constant presence in the crucible of daily practice since they’d embarked on this adventure. Phineas’ results were a rollercoaster of failures and successes. Some things came a lot easier than others; talking with the trees, for example, was already second nature. Sometimes he would be talking tree language and only realize it when he saw his friend’s dumbfounded expressions. Other times, he would start answering a question he thought Chee had asked, but he realized the whispers he heard were the forest’s ancient voice, weaving secrets through the rustling leaves.

Amidst the delightful chaos of bewilderment, a guiding light emerged, offering a compass of immense help and assurance. Even though Phineas was an expert collector, there were a lot of plants

here he'd never seen before. He had good instincts for what was edible and what was not, but having an extra guide was a nice reassurance.

But other things were trickier to achieve. Ever since coming Outside, it had been harder to control leaves and branches the way he had at school. Part of it had to do with the solstice being over, and another part had to do with his emotions ebbing from the vibrant hues of a bustling university to the soothing palette of a secluded, serene countryside. It was easier to regulate his powers now that he was calmer, but it also made it harder to channel them. Chee and Lukas arguing around him every time he attempted to do something new definitely didn't help.

Undaunted, he now continued a series of attempts, each time persuading the branch to lower by the slightest of measures. With Sun's advice and supporting words, he eventually convinced the tree to lower a thick enough branch for him to stand on. With unbridled enthusiasm, he cheered aloud before climbing aboard, ignoring Lukas' complaints and Chee's threats to take his next meal.

Once the tree had finally listened to him, it was considerably easier to get it to raise the branch above the canopy to scout the area ahead. Sun had orchestrated the exercise with the singular intent of

reaching this vantage point. This was the skill Sun wanted him to learn.



As Phineas ascended, the branches gracefully parted, yielding to his presence like courtiers bowing to royalty. Soon, he broke through the last bit of greenery and emerged under the warm sun.

Phineas was awestruck by the breathtaking view. It was the first time he was getting a good look at the surrounding area, and the scenery was like something out of a painting. There was a sea of green surrounding him in every direction. It swayed in the wind like rolling waves of emerald leaves. But a few miles away, he could see a small lake, its waters reflecting the blue skies above. Nestled beside it, a quaint hamlet emerged, its clustered cottages cocooned within its modest boundaries, echoing stories in every cobblestone and chimney.

“Finally,” he let out a sigh of relief. After the storm that hit two days ago, they had been running awfully short on supplies. Not to mention, it would be a welcome reprieve to sleep on an actual bed again, even if just for a couple of nights.

In the distant background, majestic mountain peaks dominated the landscape, a magnificent deviation from the modest hills they had traversed up to now. They were huge, reach-the-clouds type of mountains. From what he'd read in the school's library, he knew the Castle was in a setting similar to that, and his imagination soared beyond the visible, contemplating if his origins lay just beyond the horizon, concealed in a realm veiled from his searching gaze.

A quiet buzzing sound, one he'd gotten more and more used to in the past few days, broke Phineas out of his reverie. A second later, Sun came flying and stopped right in front of his face.

"You did it, Phi!" she squealed, making a graceful turn in the air in her excitement. "See? I said you could do it. You just needed a bit more patience."

"Yes, yes, I know. I just need to listen to you all the time, right?"

"You're learning." Sun winked and her wings slowed down as she came to stand next to him on the branch, her combat boots landing soundlessly.

Phineas watched her and smirked. All of her movements were delicate, like a ballerina. He'd never really noticed that before, but now he realized Sun was always dancing, rather than just walking or flying. It was mesmerizing.

As she usually did when she was under direct daylight, she closed her eyes and tilted her face up. Rays of sun got caught on the pink tips of her hair, the light making the loose strands flowing in the wind appear gold. She looked like a sunset. Suddenly, the beauty of the scenery Phineas had just witnessed seconds ago paled in comparison.

"You've improved so much," Sun said, opening her eyes and turning to look at him. "You're getting a lot better."

Phineas hoped she hadn't realized he'd been staring. His cheeks tinged with crimson, a clear indicator of his embarrassment. He glanced at the village ahead. "Yeah, but not fast enough."

"There's no rush. We still have a long way to go." She looked at their feet contemplatively and then back at him. "Can you make us go higher?"

Phineas tried. He stood there for a good ten minutes, trying to make the branch move again, to have it exceed its limit a bit more, but to no avail. It was as though his power had run out.

Nimble fingers covered the back of his hand, and then Sun was there, supporting him as she'd always had. It took Phineas by surprise and a few leaves whooshed around them, making her laugh.

"Phi, don't be so tense. These are your friends, remember?" She raised their hands together as one. "You just need to ask them for what you want."

"Yeah. Friends," Phineas reminded himself. He tried to ignore the feeling of Sun's fingers over his and instead focused on channeling his power. Changing tactics, he attempted to lower the branch instead, but still nothing happened.



"Great. How am I supposed to get down now?" he groaned. Sun's laughter whisked through the air once more, and he smiled too. It was slow progress, but he was getting there, and every minor victory counted. Because Sun was there

with him, because Chee was there too, he was afraid of nothing. Tomorrow was not guaranteed. It might be a long journey, but he knew he was on the right track.

Still, though he felt more in control recently, there was now a gap in his power, a conspicuous absence that clamored for Phineas' attention, a call he couldn't ignore. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it was like something was missing.

"Can you teach me to use my father's magic?" he asked carefully.

Sun tensed up at once, moving away from him. "I'm not sure I'm qualified to do that," she said, averting her eyes the way she did when she was trying to hide something. "But even if I was, you're not ready." Phineas opened his mouth to protest, but Sun carried on, "You're not, Phi. Your father's magic is far more complex and more dangerous, too. You need to master your own magic first, and for that, you need a stronger body."

Phineas recalled something like that from one of his lessons. Ms. Harrowhold's voice echoed in his mind, stating the stronger the magic, the easier it was for it to hurt its owner's body or for it to go wayward. Just what kind of magic had his father had anyway that was so complex?

Inhaling deeply, she grimaced slightly, as if what she was about to say didn't sit well with her. "I think you should start training with Lukas."

"What?!" Phineas spun around so fast that his foot slipped. He waved his arms to try to regain his balance, but then there was nothing under him and he was falling.

Sun screamed his name. Fear gripped him, his stomach lurching as he went down, down, down. In his panic, Phineas reached out to the old oak and tried to visualize something that didn't involve his brain being splattered on the ground underneath. Smaller branches with many leaves gathered below

him to slow down his fall. At the last second, with a serpentine grace, a branch coiled around his waist, swooping in like a guardian, its embrace ensuring a safe descent to the ground.

Phineas' heart beat a thousand miles a second, feeling slightly dizzy but glad to have both feet safely on the ground. Sun hurtled in with the velocity of a shooting star, landing next to him in a whirlwind of energy but far less gracefully than before.

"Are you ok?" she asked, looking him up and down for any injuries.

"Are you crazy?" Phineas asked, taking a step back from her before she could touch him, ignoring the fall and returning to their conversation from above. "Why would I do that? Why would I even consider training with him? Are you not going to teach me anymore?"

"Glad to see you didn't hurt yourself," Sun said, poking her tongue out at him. Then she let out a sigh. "I'm still going to train with you, but he can teach you how to fight."

"I'm sure you can teach me that, too. In case you've forgotten, I've seen the way you throw trolls over your shoulder as though you're in a freaking bar brawl."

He raised an eyebrow, and Sun's cheeks turned pink. "He's a more skilled fighter than I am, Phi. It'll help you get stronger and learn how to defend

yourself. It's harder for me to help with that skill. My magic doesn't work that way."

That made Phineas stop short. How did Sun's magic work? He wasn't sure, but he couldn't bring himself to ask. There was still so much he didn't know about her, but he didn't want to burden her with more questions. He could see it took a toll on her when she spoke too much, could see that glassy look in her eyes when a memory became too vivid. She'd been so good to him, telling him everything he'd wanted to know, giving him the truth piece by piece. He wanted to give her some time with the harder parts.



"I don't think that's necessary," Phineas insisted. "I can train my body on my own."

Sun rolled her eyes. "Don't be such a baby."

Grabbing him by the wrist, she latched onto him and led him purposefully to where Lukas and Chee were speaking. They were standing next to a bush, bickering over something Lukas was holding.

"What was that commotion about?" Chee asked when he saw them. "Did you make a tree angry again?" Lukas and Chee both started laughing.

"That was not my fault!" Phineas protested, shuddering at the memory of vines holding him upside down by the ankles after one of his failed training sessions. "What are you two doing, anyway?"

"We came to gather some food, but this idiot was about to eat those instead of waiting for you." He pointed at Lukas' hand, and Phineas realized he was holding some wild berries.

"I just think it's stupid that we need to wait for him to approve everything," Lukas complained. "I've seen him do it before. It's not that hard."

Phineas narrowed his eyes, but before he could say anything, Sun took a step forward and clapped her hands. "Well, this is the perfect opportunity, then. How about you teach Phineas how to fight, and he'll teach you how to gather food?"

"I said I don't need to learn from him."

"What a waste of time."

As if choreographed, both boys had voiced their thoughts simultaneously. They then exchanged a knowing look of annoyance. Chee let out a long-suffering sigh, knowing a fight was about to break out when Phineas took three strides to stand right in front of Lukas.

"What do you mean, 'a waste of time'?"

"Exactly that." Lukas shrugged. "I have no desire to learn about your little hobby, and your

talents might be as handy as a paper umbrella in a hurricane in a real brawl.” He picked through the berries in his hand and inspected one that was a bright purple. “It would be a lame and pointless attempt.”

Phineas fisted his hands at his sides, his blood on fire. “Well, my *useless skills* are telling me you shouldn’t eat those berries unless you want a nasty rash on your ass.”

Lukas, who was just about to pop one of the small fruits into his mouth, dropped them with a yelp and started furiously cleaning his hands on his pants.

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?”

“I thought you said not that hard,” Phineas drawled.

Lukas’ mouth turned into a thin line. “Fine. You know what? I’ll take one for the team and teach you how to fight.” Taking a few steps back, he took a stance to start, muttering so low that Phineas wasn’t sure if he heard correctly, “It’ll give me an excuse to whoop your ass.”

Motivated by the need to assert himself, Phineas anchored himself firmly, his placement a deliberate act of asserting his presence with unwavering determination. He raised his hands, and Lukas let out his claws.

“No,” Sun stopped them. “No magic at first. You have to first learn the basics and make sure you don’t depend on your magic for everything. It makes you lazy.”



Both boys groaned, but they obeyed when Sun raised stern eyebrows at them. Lukas was true to his word and Phineas found himself sprawled

in the mud in a matter of seconds.

And so the next chapter of his training unfurled like a storm, fierce and unrelenting, challenging him in ways the prior phases hadn't dared. Surprisingly, Phineas found himself enjoying their time together. Although he would never admit it out loud, Lukas was good at what he did, and these skills could come in handy. He just wished Lukas wasn't such a prick about it.

Sun was right though. Each skill he gained became a weapon in his arsenal. He would need these skills if he wanted revenge, and he was determined to get revenge!