

~ Tongue of Fire ~

CHAPTER 11



“Are we sure this is not a trap?”

“No, but do we have any other choice?” Phineas huffed as he arranged the strap of his bag, securing it over his shoulder.

In the dim light, they wandered through a concealed pathway, a

secretive route shared by Lukas. It was supposed to lead them to a secluded courtyard from which they could easily infiltrate the castle, one that they’d previously deemed too perilous to tread, because it was too dangerous. But, within the confines of the present predicament, it stood as the lone option, a singular path bridging the chasm that separated them from their friends. With time slipping through their fingers, there was no luxury to contemplate whether Cadmus had clandestinely relayed the information to Lukas.

Phineas and Chee walked for a long while, advancing with the quiet grace of predators, their presence barely a whisper in the stillness. But the moment they emerged from the passage, they were met with the unwelcome presence of five guards, standing sentinel as if expecting their arrival. They squared their arms, aligning the barrel of their weapons with unwavering determination, the ominous click signaling their intent. Phineas and Chee's gestures mirrored a synchronized dance of danger, but ultimately, there was nothing much they could do. They were quickly seized, then dragged through castle hallways to a big throne room.

Phineas watched everything. The place lay dormant in the vaults of his memory, an empty chamber untouched by the echoes of his past. He remembered nothing of this place. Not the patterns in the columns or the tall windows with stained glass behind the throne. He noticed there were no trees close by that he could connect with, and there were several guards at every door. Escaping this room would not be easy, but he was not leaving without Lukas and Sun.

The guards pushed them into the center of the room and retreated.

"Ah, Phineas. So nice of you to join us."

From the fiery shadows behind the throne, a tall figure emerged. Black armor glinted in the light

as he stepped forward, his metallic footsteps echoing off the high ceiling. Phineas had to squint for a moment against the glare. Then, upon the throne, a hand rested with possessive claws, its touch commanding and dominating. Cadmus was now there, looking down on him with a smug twist of his lips.

He was in his mid-fifties, his dark hair cut short and peppered with white strokes. His weathered face wore many battle scars, from the hard lines around his black left eye to the scar poking out around the patch covering his right eye.

A rage Phineas had never felt before consumed him, starting at his chest and spreading through his entire body. His legs were ready to jump, fists ready to tear this entire castle apart piece by piece just to find her.

“Where’s my Sun?” he barely recognized his own voice. It was rough, trembling at the edges.

Cadmus paused. “Now, that’s no way to greet the ruler of this land, is it?”

“You—” Phineas gritted out.

“Well, if not me, then who? Your father is not here anymore, is he?” Phineas stayed silent as Cadmus’ mouth stretched into a sarcastic grin that revealed rows of spiked teeth. It reminded Phineas of the smile he’d seen on Lukas when he was possessed. “You know, your father preferred to

destroy himself rather than let me get my hands on him. Took my eye,” Cadmus continued, making a gesture to his eye patch as he slithered past the throne, his strides echoing the weight of history, each step a departure from regal authority as he descended the staircase. He stopped right in front of them, but still a few steps above, so that Phineas had to crane his neck to stare directly at the shifter. “And yet here you are, the only remaining survivor of his lineage, coming to me so willingly.”



“If it’s me you want, why did you take Sun?”

“I don’t want you, boy. Just your *blood*.”

Phineas winced, as if the words struck him with the force of an unexpected blow,

leaving an unseen mark. An image flooded into his head, one of Sun’s worried look, telling him that people would stop at nothing to steal his magic, his blood. But, as usual, he’d been too stubborn to listen.

“I could have taken you any time I wanted,” Cadmus continued. “You made that fairly easy for me when you left the school’s protective barrier. But I needed you clueless, and I needed you close. I need that relic, and apparently, your friend knows where

it is.” Cadmus smiled at him. “She was more important than you and, from what I gathered inside Lukas’ thoughts, you seemed like the type to deliver yourself to me on a silver platter. And of course you did just that. Here you are.

“I must admit, I was hoping to have made some progress by now, but perhaps your presence here could be the missing piece of the puzzle, providing her with the proper motivation she’s been lacking.”

A chill, like an unwelcome visitor, coursed down his spine, leaving behind a trail of unease. “What do you mean? Where’s Sun?”

“And where is Lukas?” Chee added.

“Oh, right, where are my manners?” Cadmus gave them an apologetic look, though the glint in his eye said otherwise. He snapped his fingers and a door behind the throne opened and through it came...

“Lukas!”

“Sun!”

Phineas and Chee screamed when their friends appeared, but the relief Phineas felt seeing them safe and sound was short-lived.

They looked ok, but Lukas was pushing Sun forward as though she was his prisoner, pressing two clawed fingers to her throat.

“Phi, no!” she screamed as soon as she saw him, and Lukas’ grip tightened, a droplet of blood

emerging from his claws and running down her neck.

“Don’t you dare hurt her,” Phineas growled. His anger cut through the air, a frigid blade that chilled even his own senses. It was a tone so cold it seemed a stranger in his own throat.

“We won’t have to, if everyone here collaborates with me.” Cadmus stretched his arms in a welcoming gesture, and Phineas wished he could spit fire back to his face.

Lukas and Sun stopped directly behind Cadmus. Lukas’ eyes were blank, devoid of any thought or feeling. He was simply staring straight ahead, moving his body as though he were a mind-controlled puppet. It hurt to see him like that, but Phineas simply couldn’t take his eyes off Sun’s, which were wide with horror, jumping around the room to understand what was happening.

“You came here on your own?” she said. Despite the situation they were in, she glared at Phineas the same way she always did when she was scolding him. He half expected her to poke her tongue out, too. “Are you crazy? Have I taught you nothing at all?”

“Sun, it’s ok—”

“How is this ok? You shouldn’t be here. You shouldn’t be near *him*!”

“Tsk, that’s no way to talk, is it?” Cadmus tutted, and Lukas’ clench tightened.

Phineas took a step closer. “What do you want from me?”

“You’re a slow one, aren’t you?” Cadmus sighed. “Your blood. I need the Pethosyus’ blood in order to control the relic.”

“The relic belongs to the Pethosyus!” Sun yelled. “You can’t use it for your own wicked schemes.”

“Wicked schemes? Do you have any idea what that thing was created for?” Cadmus gritted his teeth as he turned to Phineas. “What your family has done with it?”

“My family did nothing to you,” Phineas said, though he didn’t sound as certain as he would have liked. After all, he’d only learned about his birth parents recently.

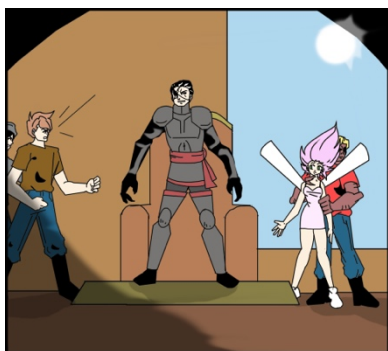
“Bullshit. Your family’s feared the dragon’s power ever since the rebellion. They created the relic after that incident to contain us.”

“Then how were you able to attack them?” Chee asked.

“They grew too confident after years of treating us like slaves, thought we couldn’t try anything. Only the leaders of each clan were put under the Oath, so when my father passed and I became the new boss, I attacked before they could

reapply their command on me. We will never be under anyone's control ever again."

"You're a hypocrite. If you did all this just to break free from their control, how can you do the same thing to your own kind?" Chee spit, gesturing at Lukas with a hand.



"He chose his own fate." He didn't even glance at Lukas, but he focused on Sun. His eyes glinted in anticipation. "Now, shall we start the questioning again, little

Miss? I hope you will cooperate more now that your Prince Charming is here."

Sun started shaking her head, attempting to back away, but Lukas held her arms in an ironclad grip.

"There's no need for that," Phineas said as calmly as he could, gripping the hem of his shirt to force himself to stay in place when all he wanted was to run to Sun's side.

"Oh, but there is. It's the very reason we're all here, is it not?" Cadmus turned to Sun, his sharp nails grazing her cheek. "Now, you—"

"I have the relic!" Phineas unleashed a primal scream, an outcry so fervent that it seemed to carry

the weight of a thousand unspoken sorrows. His face was red.

Cadmus' hand froze. Slowly, he looked at him over his shoulder. "What?"

"I found it. After you took her, I used the clues she gave me and I found it." Slipping his bag off his shoulder, Phineas held it in front of him for Cadmus to see. "If you let my friends go, I'll give it to you right now."

"No!" Sun started straining against Lukas' hold, her pink hair a mess that fell in her face. "Phineas, don't do it!"

His mother's words reverberated through his head: that he mustn't let Cadmus have this power, but he didn't want to make the same sacrifices they did. Not when the sacrifice was Sun.

"It's ok, Sun," Phineas reassured her, though he didn't take his eyes off Cadmus. "I know what I'm doing."

"No, you don't! You never listen, you thick-skulled knucklehead!"

A hint of a smile threatened to curl his lip up, but he fought it. He had to stay focused on the task at hand and then he could laugh with her. Just a little bit more...

"Oh?" Cadmus flexed his fingers, his focus sharpened to the bag in Phineas' hand. "And what makes you think I can't just take it from you?"

“This,” said Chee, extending both hands in front of him, fingers intertwined to form a symbol Phineas didn’t understand. A circle of runes appeared under the bag, glowing in the air with his magic. “Either you let them go, or we destroy it.”

Cadmus huffed a laugh. “It takes more than a simple spell to destroy a relic like that.”

“I’m the son of the Academy’s director.” Chee straightened his back, his tone impassive. “What makes you think I can’t do it?”

Something in Cadmus’ expression changed, a sliver of doubt sneaking in. Whatever he’d gleaned from Lukas’ thoughts, it was enough to make him consider the thought.

“Very well,” he said. “I’ll let them go...”

Phineas smiled, his muscles almost giving away in relief.

“... After you’ve shown me what’s inside the bag.”

Silence followed, punctuating the tension as Phineas and Chee confronted Cadmus’ challenge. They’d known this would probably happen, and Phineas glanced at Chee, who nodded firmly.

Carefully, Phineas opened the bag, watching as Cadmus shifted in his spot as if to peek inside. Instead of reaching in to retrieve the item, Phineas flipped the bag upside down, spilling a bunch of green leaves.

“What?” Cadmus screamed, half in anger and half in shock. “You little rascals!”

But it was already too late. The leaves fell through the rune circle and, as soon as they did, they grew twenty times their size.

“Now!” Phineas screamed, directing the leaves in different directions. A few went to block doors so no one could come in, others headed straight for Cadmus to hinder his movements. The rest went straight for Lukas, separating him from Sun instantly. The leaves were thicker and sharper, thanks to Chee’s magic, but they needed to be quick.

“Sun!” He reached out with his hand and Sun wasted no time running down the steps towards him.

The moment that her hand was in his, it felt like the missing piece of his universe had finally slotted into its rightful position, painting his world with a sense of harmony. For a split second, he wasn’t a long-lost Prince, but just a guy who was in love with his best friend.

He needed to tell her that.

“What are you doing?” Cadmus grunted, pointing at Lukas. “Get them!”



Lukas ran after Sun, but Chee intercepted him, fighting to keep him at bay. It was harder for Lukas to knock the Minotaur down when he didn't catch him off-

guard. Phineas and Sun helped keep Lukas at bay without hurting him, the fight taking them closer and closer to the window behind the throne.

"Enough!" Cadmus roared. He spread his wings so fast that the leaves went flying, breaking through the stained glass and leaving sizeable holes in it. "Get rid of him."

When all three friends stopped to take cover, Lukas had seized his chance to knock Chee on the floor and finish his own transformation into a dragon. A ball of fire started forming in his throat, as though he sought to unleash an inferno that would consume Chee completely. Phineas squeezed Sun's hand out of instinct.

"Lukas, snap out of it!"

The dragon froze. The flames dwindled to embers within his throat, their fervor fading into a smoldering glow. He looked disoriented, his eyes slowly coming back to life until his whole body shuddered and he lowered his head to catch his

breath. He was still transformed, but Phineas could finally recognize his friend in the look they shared.

“Thank you,” Lukas said. “For freeing me.”

“Impossible... How did...?” Cadmus murmured, bringing everyone’s attention back to him. The four friends straightened up, now presenting a united front. Cadmus shook his head. “Do you think I’ll let you go after that?”

He shifted into his dragon form too, a beast so big that it took up most of the dais. Next, reinforcements flooded past Phineas’ remaining leaves. It felt like the cruel twist of an already twisted plot, adding a fresh layer of complexity to an already dire circumstance. They streamed into the room like tributaries joining a river, encircling their targets from every conceivable angle.

“What now?” Chee asked.

“Lukas, get ready to fly,” someone commanded, but it wasn’t Phineas.

It was Sun. Her eyes scanned the enemies ahead. Phineas recognized the familiar glow emitting from her skin.

“Sun, don’t!” he yelled.

“It’s already happening, Phi.” There was a weird smile on her face, and she was looking at him as though she were memorizing each of his features. “Lukas, take them!”

The dragon spread his wings. Screams collided like crashing waves, filling the room with a deafening cacophony that reverberated off the walls. Phineas couldn't make out what they were saying. He barely heard Lukas screaming at them to get on.

He could only watch Sun's face, her peaceful smile, the glow that grew but didn't seem to harm him. Chee grabbed Phineas and forced him to get on Lukas' back.

"No!" Phineas trashed against his friend's hold, unable to break free. "Sun, come to me!"

The light intensified and Sun's eyes widened when her wings spread on their own and she flew right into Phineas' arms. Then the dragon was batting his wings, breaking what was left of the window as they sped through.

"I'm sorry, Phi," Sun whispered.

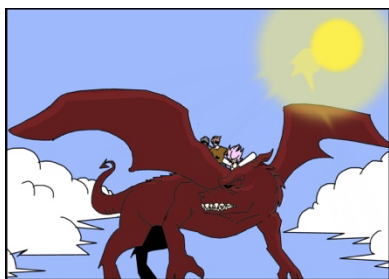
"Why?"

But she didn't get to say. Her light exploded just as the other dragons were about to close in on them. The dazzling eruption pushed back the approaching dragons with incredible force and sent them reeling. Lukas took the chance to put more distance between them and the castle, which grew smaller just as Sun's light grew dimmer. And when it was completely gone, she fell limp in Phineas' hug.

“Sun?” Something differed from last time. She was colder, her face paler. “Sun, not again, please!”

“I’ll find us a place to hide,” Lukas said over the roar of the wind. “I’m sure my mother will shelter us, and Sun will wake up by the time we get there.”

“Yeah.” Phineas tried to feel her pulse but couldn’t do it with his shaky hands, and he was too busy holding on to Lukas, anyway. He’d found what he was looking for. He’d grown stronger. Phineas saw the place of his birth with his own eyes and fought against Cadmus, but at what cost?



Phineas sighed. “I hope you’re right.”

Lukas flew as if chased by the very wind itself, his speed unmatched, his determination

unwavering and his destination clear.