

~ Beauty is a Knife ~

CHAPTER 7

"How is that possible?" Claudia finally broke the silence that had fallen over them. Monika, who was biting her lip as if wondering where to start, met Claudia's gaze. The air in the room felt thick, each breath heavier than the last, as if the weight of unanswered questions pressed down on everyone.

The room buzzed with unspoken tension as Claudia's question lingered in the air. Shock rooted Phineas to the spot, his limbs heavy and unresponsive. He glanced at Sun, and the panic in her emerald gaze only deepened the dread curling in his stomach.

Chee and Lukas stood silently to one side, looking from Monika to Phineas while trying to understand what was going on. In any other situation, Phineas would have laughed at how their expressions were so in sync.



Even with her body betraying her exhaustion, his mother gathered her strength and attempted to stand, her resolve unshaken. Her knees buckled

slightly, her frame teetering precariously as though she might collapse at any moment. Phineas rushed to her side, offering support and steadying her with a firm grip. For so long, he'd seen her as unshakable—a quiet pillar of strength. Seeing her falter now sent a pang of guilt through him.

"You need to rest," he urged, worry etched on his face.

Monika, however, shook her head defiantly. "No, I'm fine."

"Don't be stubborn," Claudia admonished in a stern, yet caring tone. "Sit down. I'll get you some food, and you can tell us everything over dinner and a full stomach. There's nothing we'll be able to do differently in the time you get some nourishment."

One scout, who had been quiet until then, cleared his throat. "Claudia, the others are on their way. Word about our guest spread quickly, and they insist on addressing the matter now."

Claudia nodded, her attention shifting between the unexpected reunion and her weak friend. "Fine. Gather everyone in the living room once they get here. Monika, you'll join them after you've had some food. We'll discuss the situation further when the others arrive for the meeting."

With a tired but understanding nod, Monika conceded, aware that regaining her strength was necessary before she could share her story.

As Claudia ushered her friend toward the door, she turned around and glared over her shoulder. "And make sure they take their shoes off before coming in!"

Lukas smirked at Chee, and the boy punched him on the shoulder. Phineas wasn't sure how to feel. He was happy to see Monika again, but the unfolding crisis had his nerves on edge. Their brief glance revealed a shared sorrow, her conflicted eyes reflecting the weight of the months that had passed since they'd last felt the peace of the farm.

Once Claudia and Monika left the room, the atmosphere shifted from stunned silence to a subdued buzz of speculation. Chee, always perceptive, approached Phineas with a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

"We're with you, whatever happens," he said, his steady presence offering some comfort.

Lukas, though less expressive, nodded in agreement. "We've come this far, haven't we?"

A grateful smile played on his face as he considered the countless ways his friends had shaped the path that had brought him here.

"Yeah, we have," he said. "But we still have so much left to resolve."

He ran a hand through his hair, pulling some strands from the ponytail. While the meeting offered the hope of clarity, it also carried the weight

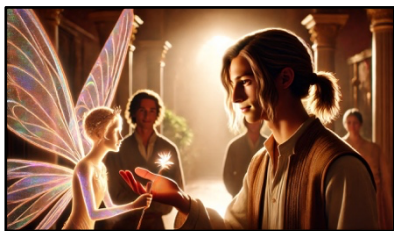
of more hurdles, a reminder that their journey was far from over.

"Maybe you should go with your mom," Chee suggested, breaking the contemplative silence. "The rest of us can stay here. Give you two a moment alone."

Phineas wrestled with the surge of emotions her arrival had unleashed—fear clashing with an aching sense of yearning he couldn't ignore.

"You should go," Sun said too, smiling at him. "Have a brief family reunion before everyone else shows up."

She was about to go into the living room with the scouts, but Phineas extended his hand toward her. "Come with me," he whispered, an unmovable sureness flashing in his eyes. "You're family, too." His words caught her off guard, and her breath faltered as a tender warmth blossomed in her chest, delicate and unfamiliar after so many weeks of cold resolve. She nodded, squeezing his hand.



Sun's eyes softened, and she hesitated for a mere second before she took his hand, her fingers intertwining with his. They stepped out of the room, leaving Chee, Lukas, and the scouts behind to

contend with the rising tension and the arguments already beginning to simmer.

The walk to the kitchen felt like a journey into uncharted territory for Phineas. He wasn't sure how to behave around Monika, not after the way they'd parted. Phineas had run away as soon as Monika had told him she wasn't his genuine mother... How deeply had his abandonment cut her, and had it left scars that even time couldn't erase? Was she mad at him? Would she scold him for being so reckless?

He took a moment to collect himself, and Sun squeezed his hand, offering silent encouragement as he pushed open the door. Claudia was in the middle of serving a plate of stew in front of a seated Monika and, as they entered, their hushed whispers ceased abruptly.

Phineas, hoping to lighten the mood, quipped, "Gossiping already?" His attempt at humor, however, failed to ease the tension in his stomach. If it tightened more, the swirl of emotions would have him throwing up on the kitchen floor.

Monika rose from her seat, and a wave of uncertainty washed over Phineas. "Phineas," she said, her voice giving away nothing. He flinched, bracing himself for what might follow. But then Monika closed the distance between them, her expression softening as she reached out to touch Phineas' cheek.

"I'm so glad you're safe," she said, her words carrying genuine warmth. "I was so worried about you."

The tension in Phineas' shoulders eased, but the flood of conflicting emotions kept on swirling within. Learning the truth about Monika and Paul had fractured his sense of identity, leaving him adrift. But now, as he looked at her, he understood that his love for Monika had never wavered.

It was as if time had rewound, and he was a child again, cocooned in the comfort of her worried gaze, a reminder of the care that had once shielded him from the world. Monika's eyes held a mother's concern. It was a familiar gaze that used to bring him joy, as she'd always celebrated his happiness with him, and comforted him in moments of sorrow. Though Monika wasn't his mother by blood, she was the one who had given him a home, raising him as if he were her own flesh and blood.

"I'm sorry I ran from you," Phineas blurted, breaking the momentary silence. "I was just so angry that you lied to me."

"We thought we were protecting you," Monika replied. Guilt simmered within Phineas as he recognized the irony—he was now doing the same thing with Sun, convinced that the greater danger justified the omission.

Biting his lip, Phineas glanced at Sun, who was standing next to them with a soft smile. Was he wrong to hide things from her?

Monika's gaze shifted toward Sun as well, and her eyes filled with unspoken gratitude. "You did a great job keeping him safe," she said, a genuine smile softening her features.

Sun blushed, and for a moment, Phineas found himself momentarily distracted by the delicate hue coloring her cheeks. His mother observed the exchange, saying nothing and betraying no emotion, before she wordlessly turned and sat down at the table again. The sudden absence of her touch jarred him from his thoughts, the shift stark and unsettling as reality came rushing back.

He wasn't sure if it was her retreating form or the absence of her touch on his cheek, but a memory came to the forefront of his mind. "I saw you in a dream," he said, surprised by his own words as he and Sun went to sit at the table too.

Claudia raised an eyebrow from her place by the stove.

"In a dream?" Sun asked, looking from him to Monika, who took the chance to take a small bite from her plate.

"Yeah... I don't exactly remember what it was about, but... you were trying to warn me." Understanding dawned on him as he looked at Sun.

His hand closed into a fist. "Right before we sneaked into the Castle."

Monika nodded. "I tried to send you messages more times than I can count, but that was the only moment I could break through. You were really blocking me hard."

There was no malice in the way she said it, but Phineas still felt shame washing over him. "If I'd listened to you, Sun wouldn't have had to step in for me."



"This again?" Sun rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Yes!" Phineas threw his hands up. "If it wasn't for me..." He trailed off, the unspoken words carrying a weight that neither of them could ignore.

Taking another bite of her food, Monika hummed before setting her fork down. "My visions aren't fixed. They don't always happen the way I see them. But one thing was for sure: you were going to

fight Cadmus one day.” She gave him a sad smile. “I tried to prevent that for years. I was so worried about you. But I’m glad you had your friends with you when it happened. You must have shown incredible bravery to return safely, and I’m so grateful for the teamwork that brought you through it.” Reaching out, she squeezed his hand. “You all did good.”

Phineas wasn’t sure if he felt the same way, but hearing his mother say that eased his troubled heart a little.

The knock at the door broke the moment, drawing every gaze to the door as Lukas appeared, his face shadowed with intensity. “The other scouts are here.”

“Then let’s not keep them waiting,” Monika said, standing up.

Phineas watched her, worried she might lose her strength again. “Are you sure you’re ok?”

“Are we reversing roles now?” she joked, but then sighed. “Yeah, they need to know this.”

As they made their way to the living room, the gravity of the situation was palpable, intensified by the watchful gazes of the ten dragon shifters gathered inside.

Despite the cramped space, the room seemed to hold its breath as Monika moved to the forefront, all eyes quietly following her. Phineas instinctively

stayed close to her, seeking the reassurance her presence offered. The air grew heavy with anticipation as Monika addressed the room.

"Cadmus attacked the Academy with a bunch of other dragons," she began, and a collective hush fell over the room. "We don't know exactly how he brought the barrier down, but there must have been a vulnerable point he exploited."

A knot tightened in Phineas' stomach as he posed the inevitable question, his voice laced with anxiety. "What about Dad?"

Monika's head shook in response. Her eyes fell to the ground, and when she finally spoke, her tone was thick with whatever weighed on her mind. "He came through the portal to warn me about what was happening, but said he had to go back and help. Said I should stay at the farm. I stubbornly followed him, and what I saw there..." Her words faltered, and a visible shiver coursed through her as if the memory itself had chilled her. She continued, her voice trembling, "Smoke choked the halls, and the air was alive with panicked screams echoing in every direction. It was pure chaos—flames consumed everything, and dark figures moved through the smoke like predators."

Phineas' brow furrowed. "What, what did you see? What does Cadmus want?"



He knew the answer, but he needed to hear it from her. His friends and the dragon shifters watched in silence, absorbing every word.

"There was a fight, but the teachers weren't ready for such a fight." Monika hesitated, her reluctance clear, before sighing. She didn't look at Phineas when she said, "He was looking for you."

Phineas dropped his eyes to his hands, and an almost unbearable heaviness sank into his shoulders, a reflection of the sorrow he couldn't escape. Yet again, innocent lives were at risk, the delicate thread tangled irrevocably with the undeniable truth of his presence in this world. Perhaps Monika and Paul had been right to keep him away. He was their prince. He was meant to protect his people, yet here he was, hiding in a secluded village, far removed from the chaos unfolding in the rest of the world.

Just like he had his entire childhood.

How many more lives would have to be lost before Cadmus's relentless thirst for power was finally satiated? The weight of his role pressed upon him, and Phineas couldn't escape the realization that, as their supposed protector, he had failed them all, again and again.

The dragon shifters were whispering among themselves now, casting curious glances at Phineas. They probably wondered what Cadmus could want from a simple boy like him.

"Is there anything more?" Chee asked.

"I..." Monika hesitated again. "I lost all contact with Paul after he urged me to flee. Cadmus' watchdogs heavily guarded the road to the portal, and I knew I had to find you before they do." When she saw Phineas' horrified expression, she shook her head. "They can't go through the portal without authorization. That's ancient magic—old and deeply rooted, the kind that commands immense power."

That was at least some momentary good news; but the fact that they'd lost all contact with Paul worried Phineas. He stood at the center of the gathering, feeling a lot like he was in the eye of the storm. The stillness was deceptive; for now, the calm lingered, but he could feel the storm building, ready to pull him under when it hit.

The murmurs among the dragon shifters swelled, their voices growing sharp and urgent as tension thickened in the air.

“What is happening?” Chee asked.

The room fell silent as the dragon shifters turned their piercing gazes onto Phineas and his companions, their judgment palpable. The tension reached a breaking point when one of them stood.

“I think we need to reevaluate our decision to let him stay here,” he said, pointing at Phineas.

Indignant sounds erupted from his friends and Monika. Sun immediately seized Phineas' hand, her stance showing she would fight anyone who would dare touch him. However, what surprised Phineas the most was Claudia's disgusted expression at the dragon shifter's words.

“What are you even—” she started, but Phineas stopped her.

“It's fine. I don't plan on staying, anyway.”

A few surprised ‘what’ echoed around the room, and Claudia watched him with an incredulous face.

“Are you crazy?” she exclaimed. “This is clearly a trap to lure you out of hiding. You can't just go there.”

“I can't allow my people to suffer any longer because of me!” Phineas exploded. His words

echoed in the room and the dragons recoiled at this revelation, stunned into silence.

The room felt suffocating suddenly, every stare making the air harder to breathe. But when Phineas looked up, Chee and Lukas were by his side, and Sun gave him a reassuring nod. He took a deep breath and looked at the dragons one by one.

“My full name is Phineas Pethosyus.” Gasps rippled through the room, and someone let out a derisive scoff, but Phineas pressed on, undeterred. “I refuse to let Cadmus run rampant and keep doing as he pleases.” Phineas stood tall, his voice firm and unyielding, his gaze sweeping across the room like a challenge to their doubts. “I have to go and fight him; there’s no other way. But I know if we face him together, we can defeat him! Please, come with us.”

There was a moment of hopeful silence as the room held its collective breath. Then, one dragon, a man older than Claudia, rose from his seat.

“No.”

Phineas stumbled at the harsh word. “W-what?”

“You heard me. We have a good thing going on here. We have peace and our minds are intact. Why would we leave? We’ve rebuilt our lives here,” another shifter interjected, his voice tinged with fear. “Following you means risking everything we’ve worked so hard to rebuild and protect here.”

"What makes you so sure he won't come here to destroy your homes, too?" Lukas questioned.



"It's better to take that chance than risk our lives for a prince that has been absent for the last 20 years," the old man said, and the others nodded in agreement.

It stung. Phineas knew he was asking too much of them, but he also knew they needed to work together. "Do you think he's the type of man to give up halfway?" he pressed on. "Are you just going to sit here and wait for him to come to you and destroy it all? To come burn down your homes again?"

Silence hung in the room until Lukas stepped forward. "I'll fight for you and with you," he said firmly.

Chee followed, and then Sun. "We'll fight, too." The four of them stood together, their shared determination radiating like a shield, unspoken loyalty tying them together as one.

Monika and Claudia shared a look of concern, but there was a spark of pride in their eyes as they saw the steadfast unity of the four friends. She offered Phineas a warm smile, which he mirrored before turning to face the dragons, whose expressions remained skeptical.

“We won’t, of course, force you to come with us. I’m not like that. I’m not like Cadmus. But if any of you change your mind, we’re leaving tomorrow morning.”

The four friends stepped out together, leaving a room steeped in silence and disbelief as they braced themselves for what lay ahead, focused on gearing up for the fight of their lives. As Phineas stepped into the cool night air, the weight of the coming battle settled over him like a cloak. Tomorrow, their resolve would be tested—and the world would feel the ripple of their choice.