

~ 4th of July ~

CHAPTER 7



The fire sang a lively tune, its flames pirouetting in the crisp night air at the campsite. By now, they'd all calmed down. The silhouettes of trees cast by the orange light created an unsettling dance of shadows.

Phineas couldn't take his eyes off them, feeling as though someone was watching from the darkness. He did not know what had happened to Lukas that night, but one thing he was certain of - someone was after him.

Upon weathered stumps and timeworn logs, they all encircled the heart of the fire, basking in its radiant embrace. The tension between them still buzzing over their skin, they found no kinship amidst the forest's nocturnal serenade.

Sun wouldn't leave Chee's side, crowding over him like a worried mother hen, even though Chee insisted he was fine. Phineas wasn't sure he believed

him. Chee was rubbing his throat absentmindedly, the faint shade of a bruise appearing where Lukas' fingers had squeezed. There was something in his expression that had Phineas wondering. Maybe a hint of betrayal or disappointment?

A heavy blanket of stillness and speechlessness draped over them. In the hush of their shared silence, the night seemed to hold its breath, as if waiting for the next bombshell. Lukas, with an unwavering gaze, was entranced by the dance of flames before him. Now and then, though, the reflection tainted his eyes in red hues that pushed Phineas to the edge of his seat, wondering if the dragon shifter would suddenly attack them again. Nerves stretched thin, Phineas' demeanor resembled a drawn bow, poised but on the edge of release.

He didn't. Instead, Lukas glanced up and fixed his stare only on Phineas. "You know how you've never seen my dragon form at school?"

Phineas frowned as a wave of anger swept him away. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Everything," Lukas sighed. "Down to the very reason I was at the Academy."

Sun and Phineas exchanged a look, but they deferred to Lukas, allowing him time to arrange his thoughts. A muscle flickered over his jaw. Tension gripped him, a tautness that seemed to vibrate

through his very being, as if holding back a tempest. He didn't seem too thrilled to share this story with them. His mouth opened and closed a few times, then he shook his head.

"I can't believe I'm about to say this to you, of all people," he huffed, letting his head drop back. "No offense."

"None taken." He hadn't imagined forming this kind of bond with Lukas, either. If anyone would have told him that a few months ago, he would have told them they were crazy. But perhaps their unexpected friendship was exactly why Lukas was opening up to all of them now.

"The truth is... I can't do it."

For the first time since they'd sat there, Chee's eyes left the fire. He peered at Lukas, his expression unreadable. "What do you mean?"

"I can't shift. Not to my complete form, at least." He let out a bitter laugh. "Isn't that funny? A dragon shifter who can't transform."

"Is it you *can't* transform?" Chee asked in a hush. "Or that you won't?"

A small smile tugged at Lukas' lips. "Always so perceptive." Again, he started saying something, but then stopped with an exasperated sigh. Fingers threaded through his blonde hair, like a painter sculpting wisps of sunlight. "There's so much to tell. I don't even know how to explain everything."

“Why don’t you start from the beginning?” Phineas offered. “Why don’t you want to shift?”

“Right. Yeah.” Lukas ran his fingers through his hair again, messing it up so that every end was pointing in a different direction. “The beginning, yeah. Well, the dragon clans are like hives. Did you know that?”

The three friends shook their heads in unison. In hushed tones, Lukas unveiled the layers of his past.

“When we’re in our dragon form, we can hear each other’s thoughts; it’s how we communicate during battles and the reason we are so valuable in any army. We’re separated by clans, though. The leaders can hear each other, but they protect their own, acting as a barrier between our minds and the other dragons.” Stopping for a moment, he took a deep breath. “But if the leader is killed, then the whole clan becomes vulnerable, unless a new leader appears.”



The cogs in Phineas’ mind started turning, reeling with all this new information. The full mosaic of understanding eluded him, leaving scattered pieces waiting to form the bigger picture. He

remembered what the books said, how most of the dragons' clans had been decimated. Piece by piece, a story started coming together.

"The war..."

"Yeah," Lukas nodded. "During the war, the leader of the black dragons turned not only on the royal family, but on all the other shifters as well." A chill climbed over Phineas' back, and he rubbed the gooseflesh from his arms as Lukas continued. "Cadmus killed the leaders of every clan, leaving most of us defenseless. If another leader rose, Cadmus got rid of them, too, leaving the dragons in the clan with only two options: either join his side, or go into hiding and never transform again for fear of him getting into your head."

He paused, staring at his own hands in the fire's light, opening and closing them as if to make sure they were functioning properly. Phineas clung on to every word, listening closely to the story trembling on the edge of Lukas' lips.

"This is the first time I'm hearing about this," Sun said, a hint of skepticism clearly in her voice. "How come no one else knows?"

Lukas tilted his head, watching her. "It's been a well-kept secret for generations. Only the royal family knew about this."

Sun didn't look convinced. Phineas couldn't blame her. Being his fairy godmother, and based on

the stories she'd told him, she inhabited the inner sanctum of the royals, a confidante privy to the whispers of the throne. But they'd both been extremely young when the war started. How many lessons had they had to skip because of it? How many secrets, special training, and life experiences had been stolen from them?

"For centuries, the dragons were the protectors of this realm, its guardians," Lukas explained.

As he spoke, the wind rustled the surrounding leaves, as if the very forest was listening, absorbing the weight of his words. Phineas, Sun, and Chee sat in silence, trying to make sense of the revelation. Lukas recounted the story from a different angle, his perspective offering a new lens through which they could view the conflict. It was odd, considering there were barely any dragon shifters left who could tell the tale.

"But power corrupts, and one clan became obsessed with dominance," he continued, his voice gaining strength. "They turned their backs on everyone, on all of us. Now, people cower at the mention of dragon shifters, no matter which clan they belong to. Or belonged to," he corrected himself.

"Which clan did you come from?" Chee asked softly.

“The Red Dragon clan,” Lukas said without missing a beat. Inhaling sharply, he looked up at the stars. “My father was their leader.”

There was a moment of silence as the meaning of those words sank into their minds, and then into their hearts. Even Sun’s hard expression softened.

“I’m so sorry.” Phineas broke the silence, his words carrying a weight of sincerity that echoed through the night. Their situations were completely different, but this senseless war had taken both of their parents away from them. It was a pain he understood all too well. For the past few days, he’d been wondering if they should tell Lukas the truth, but the lie weighed heavier on his chest now.

“My father...” Lukas hesitated, his voice barely a whisper, “he was a powerful dragon shifter. One of the strongest. I remember little, but I heard stories. Apparently, Cadmus came for him first. I only survived because he bought enough time for my mother to take me away.”

Sun brought a hand to her mouth. “That’s awful.”

Lukas didn’t respond. Not knowing what else to do, with a deft maneuver of verbal origami, Phineas folded the discussion into a new shape. “So, he was the one controlling you tonight? How did he do that? Did you transform on your own?”

Lukas shook his head. “No. I didn’t shift and, even if I had, he shouldn’t have been able to take over my whole body like that.” A tremor traversed his frame, as if a gust of icy wind had found refuge within him. “He’s gotten more powerful, somehow. It’s not the first time he’s gotten into my head, but this was...”



“Wait, wait, wait,” Chee interrupted, raising both hands in front of him. “So, you’re telling me he’s done this before?”

“It’s the first time he’s gotten this far. I realized something was going on when I was still at the Academy,” Lukas admitted, then looked straight at Phineas. “Right after you came to school.”

“Me?”

Nodding, Lukas stared at him as though he were trying to solve a mystery that had been bothering him for quite a long time.

“My entire clan had either been killed or they’d scattered in the wind to protect themselves, and I was the heir, but a child with no genuine power. When I came of age, I thought hiding at the Academy would allow me to train and get stronger while being protected from Cadmus. As long as I didn’t

transform fully, he wouldn't be able to read my mind and I could bide my time in my search for revenge. The barrier added an extra layer of protection, and, at first, the plan worked.

"I couldn't trust anyone, so I thought it best to keep to myself, which was easy given how everyone already feared me because of what I was."

"What about your group of friends?" Phineas interrupted, remembering all those times when Lukas and his friends had tormented him.

"They weren't really my friends. Everyone there feared me, or they liked the idea of my power. They thought it gave them status."

"Is that why you behaved the way you did?" Chee asked.

"You mean like a gaping a-hole?" Phineas muttered under his breath.

To their surprise, Lukas let out a low chuckle. "Yeah, I guess. Headmaster Xhe was the only one to welcome me in with open arms. I'd be lying if I said the other kids' reactions didn't sting. But there was another reason, too." He bit his lip, watching Phineas closely. "One day, I was training, and I started... hearing this voice in my head. It was the same day you arrived at the Academy. At first, I thought I was imagining things, but then I started losing control over my transformations. It was nothing big or noticeable. A clawed hand out of

place, small stuff like that. But the voice got louder whenever I was close to you, and I thought perhaps you had something to do with it.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Sun wondered.

“Like what? That there was a voice in my head, whispering things? They would have thought I was crazy.” He shook his head. “No, I hid it, and I had it under control, mostly. Then the night you opened the barrier, the transformation got worse, and I heard it clearly—it was Cadmus’ voice. I fought against his hold on me and, before I knew it, I was out of the barrier and you three were there too, saying you were going to the Pethosyus Castle. I saw the opportunity to do *something meaningful*, to make a real difference. Unfortunately, I thought I was ready.” Lacing his hands between his knees, Lukas’ head hung low. “I didn’t want to hide anymore. I was tired of being scared.”

A log cracked under the pressure of the fire, sending a shower of sparks straight into the air. They drifted away lazily, lighting up like fireflies before slowly disappearing into the night.

Sun broke the silence. “You put Phineas in danger. You put all of us in danger.”

“Sun—” Phineas started.



“No, she’s right. I thought I could control it, at first, but the more we delve into these forests...” Lukas glanced at Chee, and their eyes locked for a second before Chee looked away. “You’ve asked before why I didn’t transform to fight, and

the truth is... I’m scared I might lose myself. He might take total control of me! I fear what he might make me do. As my fear deepened, I felt the weight of truth pressing against my lips, demanding release. And, since it’s gotten this bad now, I thought someone ought to know the truth. Sadly, I don’t trust my mind anymore.” His fingers flickered with anxiety, but his eyes never strayed from Chee’s face. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I never would have, I...”

He didn’t finish the sentence. His words hung in the air before they died out, like the embers floating in the breeze.

Then Chee cleared his throat. “You don’t have to worry about losing yourself, Lukas. We’re here for you. We’ll defeat Cadmus so you don’t have to worry about that crap anymore.”

Surprise painted itself vividly across Lukas' features, a sudden burst of realization flickering in his face, disbelief and something akin to hope glimmering in his eyes. It seemed he finally had friends, after all.

Phineas interjected. "You're not the only one who's been hiding stuff," he said.

"Phineas," Sun warned.

"There's a reason we left the Academy, something we haven't told you yet."

"Phineas..."

"We are on a mission," Phineas explained, his voice firm. "The same man who took your parents took mine, and I know the only place we will find answers lies in the Castle."

"I thought your parents lived on a farm," Lukas said, confusion knitting his brows together.

A pinprick of pain stabbed Phineas' heart, thinking of his years growing up on the farm. The happy memories were tainted now, not only by the lies but by the uncertainty of what his life could have been—no, *should* have been, if it weren't for Cadmus.

"My adoptive parents," Phineas clarified. "My biological parents died long ago. I'm—"

"Phi, I don't think you should."

With a small sigh, Phineas turned to Sun and smiled sadly. "Judging by the way Cadmus spoke to

me, he already knows who I am. There's no point hiding that fact anymore."

They held each other's stare for a moment, a silent conversation passing. Sun's eyes shone with worry. Phineas offered a barely perceptible nod, a miniature affirmation tethered to his quiet assurance, then focused on Lukas again, who was watching them with a raised eyebrow.

"My real name is Phineas Pethosyus," he blurted out.

Lukas' eyes widened, and he almost fell from his log. "You... you are... But I thought..." He ran both hands through his hair. Phineas had to fight back a smile. "Wait, that means you are... And you are going back to *him*? Are you nuts?"

Phineas hesitated. Even though he didn't think of Lukas as an enemy anymore, he wasn't sure about sharing intel on the relic, not until he knew exactly how this hive thing worked.

"I had to do something, just like you. I couldn't sit by after learning what he did and I.. I need to know what happened. There's only one way I'll get the answers I need and only one way I'll find out how to defeat Cadmus." Getting up, he walked over and offered a hand to Lukas. "Are you with us?"

The boy sat frozen for a few seconds, looking at Phineas as though he'd never seen him properly before. They had become fast friends. Then he

shook his head and stood up too, squaring his shoulders as he took Phineas' hand. "Yeah, I'll stand with you and fight alongside you. We'll make that bastard pay for what he did to our parents!"

In the moonlight's embrace, beneath the ancient canopy of the forest, their bond was forged, born from the sense of purpose that had brought them together. Far in the distance loomed a daunting trail, but their fusion of talents became a



compass, pointing towards triumph amidst the uncertainty. In their unity, they resembled a phalanx, shields interlocked against the challenge that lurked ahead, poised to march forward, undeterred.

No one knows what tomorrow brings, but together they were ready to face whatever Cadmus threw their way.