

Kingdom of Beauty Bonus Scene

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: During Chapter 26

Phillip

Phillip rubbed his hands together briskly, trying to coax some warmth into them. Night watch wasn't his favorite role at the best of times, but in the dead of winter, it was especially miserable.

At least it wasn't boring tonight, he thought grimly, his eyes fixed on the dragon still circling overhead. He'd barely taken his eyes from the beast for the last three hours, but he still had absolutely no idea what the dragon was doing sniffing around their castle. Attracted by the excess of magic, perhaps? But would that keep its interest for so long?

Phillip's muscles tensed as the dragon swooped slightly lower, and his hand flew to the hilt of his sword. Of course he knew perfectly well that if the creature decided to attack, there would be nothing he could do to prevent it, but he couldn't help the instinctive gesture. His thoughts flashed to the others, supposedly retreated to bed, but almost certainly lying awake, gripped by the same fear of the morning that seemed to lend an extra chill to the air Phillip was breathing.

Would this be his last night? If magically enhanced catapults really were wheeling their way toward the castle right now, it just might be.

One face in particular appeared in Phillip's mind, and he gnawed at his lip indecisively. The fear in Viola's eyes when they'd been told the news had been haunting him for hours. She'd already been subdued, ever since Miss Felicity left. Phillip had been amazed by how much he missed her bubbly laughter, and the discovery of the danger trundling steadily toward them had weighed twice as heavily on his mind at the realization of how it would affect Viola. He knew she'd been the most determined of them all to orchestrate a romance between the prince and Miss Felicity. And she was such a force to be reckoned with, he wouldn't be surprised if she'd achieved it. If only she'd had more time. Miss Felicity's sudden departure had taken them all completely by surprise.

Her too, if he was any judge of the matter.

He frowned to himself as he pictured Miss Felicity's face, when she'd been saying farewell to Prince Justin. She had seemed as reluctant to leave as the rest of them were to see her go. Phillip didn't know the circumstances that had led to her decision to leave the estate, and he couldn't begin to understand what had or hadn't happened between her and Prince Justin.

What he did know, however, was that Viola had been cast into flat despair by the loss of her mistress. And Phillip didn't like that state of affairs at all. Viola's face was made to smile. It had made him feel all wrong-footed these last days, watching her walk around with downcast eyes and nothing to say. She used to smile at him, every time they met. Lately she hadn't even acknowledged his presence.

It had been miserable.

His stomach did the strange flop it always did when he thought about Viola's smiles and—well, there was no other way to put it. Her flirtation. She'd been flirting with him for at least the last year, apparently undeterred by his lack of response.

He sighed. He'd been trying to do the right thing, the safe thing, in keeping her at arm's length all this time. But the fact that he'd missed her teasing as much as he had the last few days, proved that he hadn't been especially successful.

The dragon was in the process of completing a particularly large loop of the property, and Phillip's eyes followed it as it wheeled over the top of the castle and away toward a grove of trees nearby. From what he could tell in the darkness, it disappeared into the trees. He watched closely, but it didn't reemerge.

He waited for several tense, cold minutes, his hands gripping the stone of the turret, and his eyes fixed unavailingly on the darkness beyond the estate.

The dragon truly seemed to be gone. Phillip left his post, hurrying along the battlement toward the nearest exit. Once, leaving his station to speak to his superior would have been considered a gross offense. But then, it had been a little easier to pass messages in those days. With a grand total of three guards, they had to be a little more creative.

He slipped through a doorway, and quickly found the head guard, deep in conversation with the castle's housekeeper. They seemed to be talking about the underground storage cellars that had been cleared out for use as a shelter.

“Sir.”

The man turned from his conversation, nodding quickly for Phillip to continue.

“The dragon has flown away, Sir,” Phillip said. “It headed for the grove to the south west, and shows no sign of returning.”

“Any change in its activity before it left?” the head guard asked briskly.

Phillip shook his head. “No, Sir. It just continued to circle, right up until it flew over the boundary.”

The head guard gave a curt nod. “Thank you, Phillip. His Highness will wish to hear your report directly. After that, you can consider yourself relieved. Go and get some sleep if you possibly can.”

Phillip hesitated. “I would be happy to stay on, Sir, if I could be helpful.”

His superior gave him a rare smile. “You're a good lad, Phillip,” he said gruffly. “But you'll be more use tomorrow than tonight. Especially if you can get some rest.”

Phillip assented reluctantly, and took his leave. Prince Justin showed no visible emotion on receiving the report, but Phillip got the sense that he was as tightly wound as the rest of them.

Disheartened, he made his way down the corridor, away from the prince's suite. He wasn't especially interested in going to bed. He couldn't imagine he'd be able to sleep with dragons and armies almost at their doorstep, and the knowledge that he was powerless to protect any of the castle's inhabitants from either. And if there was a chance they were all going to die tomorrow, it seemed absurd to sleep away his last few hours.

But the head guard was right. He'd be more use to everyone if he had some rest before the morning.

Still, once he reached the servants' wing, he found his steps heading away from his own room. No one was moving about, and he hesitated halfway down his chosen corridor. Maybe this was a bad idea after all. What was he going to say? *Since we might die in a few hours, I've changed my mind. Can you flirt with me again so that I can respond the way I've been wanting to?*

Viola would probably take such a statement in stride, he thought with wry humor. But he couldn't claim as much as half of her natural boldness. Not even the potential of impending death could make him act so out of character. Just one of the many differences between them that had led him to chart the course he'd been traveling these last two years.

With all this in mind, he couldn't quite bring himself to knock on Viola's door, but a moment's reflection told him she probably wasn't there anyway. He redirected his steps, pausing outside a simple wooden door. He could hear the quiet murmur of voices on the other side. Emboldened, he drew a breath then gave it a few short raps.

"Enter," said the familiar voice of the castle's steward.

Phillip pushed the door open, but didn't enter. Stewart had clearly been in conversation with his wife, but he rose at the sight of Phillip hovering in the doorway, and came toward him.

"Am I needed?" he asked sharply.

Phillip shook his head, tearing his eyes from the third individual in the room. His instinct had been correct. Viola was curled up on a chair, with her feet tucked under her as she listened to her parents talking. Her face was unusually pale, and her eyes seemed larger than usual, somehow. She summoned the faintest of smiles for him, but it wasn't in the least convincing.

"No, Sir," Phillip said to Stewart. "I just thought you'd be interested to know that the dragon is gone now. There's nothing else to report at present."

"Oh," said Stewart. "Well, thank you." He looked a little bewildered by Phillip's unprecedented decision to share such an update with him, but he didn't comment on it.

Phillip acknowledged the thanks with a nod. His eyes were once again on Viola. She was looking at her hands, clasped together in her lap, but she seemed to feel his gaze. She looked up, meeting his eyes. He gave her a smile, wishing as always that he had the words to reassure her, or to express some measure of the warmth he felt for her. But he'd never been good at finding the right thing to say, so he just gave her a nod and withdrew from the room.

As he had predicted, he didn't get much sleep. There were so many things chasing one another around his mind, that he couldn't seem to quiet his thoughts enough for repose. But a few hours before dawn, he drifted into an uneasy slumber, plagued by all kinds of dreams. He was up with the sun, and wasted no time in reporting to the head guard. He was sent to help oversee the moving of a few more essential items into the cleared cellars. The mood was somber, and there was little conversation.

As he stowed the final barrel of apples in a corner, Phillip turned to find himself confronted with Viola. He jumped slightly, and cast a quick look around. They were alone.

"Are you all right?" The soft question drew him up in surprise. She was worried about him?

"Of course," he said gruffly. Then, on a sudden impulse, he added, "I'd be happier if I could actually *do* something. If I could protect y—everyone more effectively."

Viola nodded, casting a pained glance around the cellar. "I know what you mean. I'm no good at fighting or defending, but I did try to do my part. I really thought Miss Felicity was going to be the one to break the curse. I was worried about pushing too hard, but maybe I didn't push hard enough. I'm sure she liked him, and the prince lost his heart weeks ago, unless I'm much mistaken. I should've—"

"Viola." In an almost involuntary gesture, Phillip placed his hand on her shoulder, interrupting the flow of words. "Surely you can't think any of this is your fault?"

Viola gave a wry smile. "Well, no, of course not. But you don't think the attack on the castle is your fault, do you? And you still feel frustrated, like you should be doing more to stop it."

Phillip smiled in rueful acknowledgment of her point. "Yes, that's true."

Her eyes held a hint of their usual twinkle as she gazed up at him. "We're alike, it seems."

"We're not though, are we?" Her comment was so precisely on the point of Phillip's endless musings that the words slipped out before he could check them. "I mean," he stammered, hastening to make bad worse, "we're nothing at all alike. That's the problem, isn't it?"

"The...the problem?" Viola was making no attempt to hide her astonishment at his candid speech, and Phillip couldn't quite restrain a wince. What a mess he was making of it all.

“No, there’s no problem,” he said haltingly. “I just meant…”

“Well?” Viola prompted him, as he trailed off. Her gaze was uncomfortably shrewd. “What did you just mean?”

Phillip’s tongue seemed to tie itself in knots, and he could find no words to reply. The silence stretched awkwardly, and to his surprise, a flush spread slowly up Viola’s face.

“I suppose,” she said, her eyes on her feet, “I suppose I seem very young and foolish to you. You’re always so measured, and more often than not I let my tongue run away with me.”

“What?” Phillip protested, horrified. “No, Viola, that’s not what I..I wasn’t trying to criticize you. On the contrary.”

She raised her eyes at that, searching his face. “The contrary?”

She took a small step closer, and Phillip shifted backward involuntarily. Even after what was probably a wakeful night, she emanated that floral scent that seemed to always cling to her. She was vibrant down to her last ounce, and would be until her final moment, he was sure.

Not that her final moment would be today, he told himself firmly. He wasn’t going to let that happen. He’d shield her body with his own if it came to it. He realized all at once that she was still waiting for a response, and he was grateful when Mrs Winters bustled into the cellar behind Viola, barking an order to one of chamber maids, who scurried in behind her.

Viola stepped back—reluctantly, he thought—and the moment was lost. But he could feel her eyes following him as he made his way to the door. If they did all survive this, he was going to have some serious explaining to do.

He hurried up from the cellar, emerging into the open grounds in an attempt to clear his head. It seemed that he had timed his arrival for a moment when neither of the other guards were standing duty. Or so he assumed when he was met with the incredible sight of a dragon sitting alone and docile on the carriageway.

Phillip stopped still with a gasp, wondering if he should approach the creature. After a moment’s reflection, he abandoned any such thought and sprinted back into the building. He didn’t even look for the head guard, racing instead straight to the prince’s suite. Conveniently, the head guard was with Prince Justin. As he had expected, his message brought both of them hurrying out of the castle.

Phillip followed them, and stood by in unabashed fascination as the dragon relayed its message. When the creature announced casually that the magic that had kept them all imprisoned in the castle was broken, Phillip could hardly make sense of it. For a moment he was completely frozen, his mind running through all the implications. Almost immediately, his thoughts flew to

Viola. The change he had long foreseen was finally here. For her sake, he had to be glad. She wasn't made for isolation and restriction.

He realized all at once that the head guard was nodding to him, and he took off for the gate. He paused under the threshold, hardly daring to believe that it would be different from his previous attempts to leave, then he pushed the side gate wide. He stepped forward, and almost stumbled into the snow as nothing hindered his progress.

He hurried forward several steps, his mind in a whirl. Could this be real? Were they really free? He turned back toward the open gate, his mind full of one thought. He had to get Viola out, away from the castle which had become a target for Albury's own army.

Without a moment's hesitation, he ran back through the gate, passing the prince at a jog. Shivers of excitement were running over him as he gradually grasped the reality. They were free. They were all free.

He was sprinting by the time he reached the building, and he caught up to the other guard before they reached the rest of the servants, in the cellars. The head guard paused at the top of the stairs that led down into the room, ready to address the whole group. But Phillip pushed past him, his whole focus on one face only.

"We're free," he gasped, seizing one of her hands before he had time to think about it. "We can leave."

Viola blinked in confusion. Another flush reddened her cheeks, but she made no move to pull her hand free from his, and when he tugged her toward the door, she followed readily. The head guard was still speaking to the rest of the servants, but within moments everyone was surging for the exit.

Normally Phillip would have stood aside and allowed others to precede him, but not this time. This time he and Viola were connected, and his first priority was to get her safely outside the estate. He was at the front of the crush of people as they all hurried through the corridors, toward the entranceway.

He still gripped Viola's hand as they bobbed their heads vaguely toward the prince and made for the gate that Phillip had left open. They were the first to emerge into the frozen landscape, and Phillip couldn't help squeezing Viola's hand excitedly when he heard her gasp of amazed delight as she passed over the threshold.

She gave an incredulous shout, her eyes glowing. Before he knew what she was about, she had dropped onto her back in the snow, and was waving her arms and legs exuberantly, turning a fresh drift into a snow angel. Phillip couldn't help laughing himself, his heart lighter than it had been in years. Cost him what it might, he couldn't be sorry Viola was free.

When Viola grinned up at him, he offered her his hand, and pulled her up. She was still chuckling as she beat at the snow clinging to her gown. Phillip's eyes drank in the sight of her beaming smile, and he reveled in the bubbling laughter he'd missed so much the last few days.

The rest of the servants had emerged by now, and Phillip turned back, remembering his duty all of a sudden. He took a step toward the gate. Prince Justin was still inside the property, and he felt a momentary flash of shame. Truth be told, he had forgotten about the prince altogether. When Prince Justin stepped over the gateway, however, everyone's attention was on him in a moment. Phillip started forward, horrified at the prince's obvious agony. How was it possible? Surely if the curse was broken for the rest of them, it must be broken for the prince as well.

But he realized all at once how foolish that assumption had been. One glance at Prince Justin's beastly form was enough to remind him that the prince's curse was far from broken. Still, he'd never imagined such an eventuality—that they'd all be free, and Prince Justin would still be trapped. He threw only one brief, regretful glance at Viola's face before hurrying forward, fully intending to return to the castle.

But Prince Justin made it extremely clear that he wasn't going to allow any such sacrifice. When even the head guard accepted the prince's prohibition, Phillip abandoned any attempt to cross back into the estate. But he couldn't be easy in his mind.

After a brief conference between the head guard, Stewart, and Mrs Winters, it was decided that the group should make for the shelter of a nearby grove.

"Phillip," the head guard said curtly. "Stay with them, keep an eye on things."

"But what about the army?" Phillip pressed.

His superior nodded to the one other guard. "We'll go, try to convince them."

Part of Phillip wanted to protest the fact that he'd been chosen to sit out of the mission. But glancing at Viola again, he couldn't deny to himself that he wanted to stick around to ensure that the rest of the servants were safe. "Will they listen to you?" he asked the head guard anxiously. "The army, I mean?"

The man shrugged. "Only one way to find out." Without another word, he gave a curt nod to the third guard, and the two of them trekked away, through the snow.

Phillip turned back to the grove, where Mrs Winters was chivvying the rest of the servants. Phillip hung back, casting a sharp eye over their surroundings. Not seeing any immediate threats, he headed into the trees himself. He pushed past the main group, conducting a quick check of the immediate area.

“You’re staying with us, Phillip?” Viola’s quiet voice at his elbow made him jump. He hadn’t seen her approach—some sentry he was.

“That’s right,” he acknowledged. He couldn’t help shooting a glance in the direction they thought the army to be.

“I’m sure you want to be in the action,” said Viola perceptively. “But...” she cast down her eyes, “I’m glad you’re here.”

The unusual note of shyness in her voice made Phillip stop and really look at her. She sounded self-conscious, and her discomfort made him long to reassure her.

“Don’t be afraid, Viola,” he said softly. “You’ll be safe. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Her eyes flew up to his, her expression startled, and her cheeks flooding with color. “I’m not worried about something happening to me,” she said quickly. “I’m worried about something happening to *you*.”

“To me?” Phillip repeated, nonplussed. “What would happen to me?”

Viola rolled her eyes, some of her usual vivacity returning. “The other guards are off to confront an army, aren’t they?”

“Oh,” said Phillip, “that.” He shrugged. “It’s our job.”

She gave him a long look, a slight frown marring her normally cheerful features. “Aren’t you happy that we’re free?” she asked abruptly.

Phillip blinked. “Of course I am.”

Viola looked unconvinced. “I know we’re all a little anxious, but even before we knew His Highness was still stuck, so you seemed...I don’t know, subdued.”

Phillip was taken aback. He hadn’t intended to show any such feeling, and he was surprised by how well she had read him.

“Well, I am a little subdued by nature, aren’t I?” he rallied her with a smile. “Compared to you, at least.”

“It isn’t that.” Viola shook her head, fixing him with a stare he knew well. She wasn’t going to stop badgering him until she had an answer.

He sighed. “Fine. The truth is I’m not sure what the future holds now. Things were... simpler when we were trapped in the Summer Castle.” She raised an eyebrow, and he hastened to add, “But that’s just a small, foolish part of me talking. Obviously I’m mostly just glad that we’re free.”

“Why simpler?” she asked directly.

Phillip turned away from her, looking out into the snow-covered copse. “When the curse hit, I was just a junior guard, with no guarantee of advancement,” he said. “As you would remember, I didn’t come to the Summer Castle with the prince. I was stationed there as back up.” He gave a rueful smile. “That’s the bottom of the ladder in terms of guard appointments. And even with the royal delegation coming to the estate, I had no expectation of actually getting to personally guard the prince. I was almost certainly going to be in the background for the entire visit. But instead...”

“Instead you’ve spent the last two years as one of three personal guards closely serving the prince night and day,” Viola finished softly.

Phillip nodded. “Precisely. Prince Justin even knows my name. In the normal course of things, I would never have had such an opportunity. I’m not sure what my role will be once we properly rejoin the rest of the kingdom. I can’t assume that I’ll retain a position I did nothing to earn.”

“That’s not true,” said Viola quickly. “You did earn your position. You earned it by staying, when the rest of them fled.”

Phillip gave her a grateful smile. Although he remained silent, he acknowledged to himself that there was something in what she said. He didn’t exactly blame the courtiers for fleeing, even most of the servants. The prince had presented a truly terrifying sight in those first moments after the curse hit, before they’d been able to tell for sure whether he retained his own mind. But for guards, trained to fight, and tasked with the royal’s protection, to flee like frightened rabbits...He wasn’t normally one to think badly of people, but he had nothing but contempt for them.

“Of course, I can understand your uncertainty,” Viola continued seriously. “You’ve been used to only three of you, and there will be many more guards to choose from in the capital. But I’m sure your loyalty and devotion won’t be forgotten even among so many candidates.”

Phillip’s eyes searched her face, and he couldn’t quite keep the wistful note from his voice. “Do you think so?”

Something about his expression must have caught Viola’s attention, because she stilled, matching his searching look. “We’re talking about Prince Justin and his choice of personal guards, aren’t we?”

Phillip’s eyes widened. “Of course we are.”

Viola didn’t immediately respond. She took a step closer, and Phillip’s heart began to race double time.

“Well, then,” she said, with a deceptively casual air, “if you want *my* opinion, I would say that you have nothing to fear in being compared to a kingdom’s worth of...guards.”

There was something indescribable in her eyes that made Phillip raise an involuntary hand toward her. But he let it drop without touching her, still not sure if he was imagining the double meaning in her words.

“You think that’s your opinion,” he said, his voice whisper soft. “But you’ve been as isolated as His Highness. You have no basis for comparison.”

“Phillip, are you suggesting that I don’t know my own mind?” Viola asked impatiently. “That’s incredibly rude! I think I’m the best judge of my own opinions.” She met his gaze with a hard look, apparently deciding to throw off pretense. “Of my own heart. Now give me a straight answer for once in your life. Have you been all aloof and mysterious for the last two years because you’re not interested, or because you think I can’t trust my own preferences?”

When she had that stern look on her face, she bore a somewhat alarming resemblance to her father, the castle’s steward. Her habitual forthrightness would have made Phillip laugh if it wasn’t so personal on this occasion. For a long moment he could only blink. Then, in face of Viola’s continued glare, he decided he’d better do as he was told and give a straight answer.

“The second one.”

“Of all the overbearing...” Viola trailed off, her eyes narrowing suspiciously at Phillip’s twitching lips. He couldn’t help himself. There was something incredibly humorous about this fierce young firebrand calling him overbearing for having been withdrawn when she wanted him to be forward.

But a moment later reality came back, and he remembered that it wasn’t a laughing matter. Viola hadn’t exactly been backward about showing her interest in him, and he’d refrained from responding for a reason. She might think she liked him, but there was literally only one other man within the castle’s remaining staff who was even vaguely close to their age. And with the unsociable, surly assistant groom as his only competition, it was no wonder Phillip had caught Viola’s fancy. He hadn’t wanted to be drawn into a relationship that had no hope of surviving the lifting of the curse and the subsuming of their little community into the wider kingdom. The fact that they were now free made his reasons for keeping his distance stronger, not weaker.

The silence had stretched out long enough to be awkward now, and Phillip realized all at once that Viola’s flash of anger was a thin veil for her hurt. His heart twisted a little. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her.

“Viola,” he said slowly, putting a hand on her shoulder. She raised her eyes to his.

“What do you think of me, Phillip?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it again.

“I know it’s forward, and I shouldn’t ask you something like that. But if you think I’m too forward, well, then there’s your answer to my question. I’ve made it easy for you.”

Phillip was silent for a moment, his eyes on hers. “I don’t find you too forward,” he said Frankly. “I find you...” He swallowed. “I like you the way you are.”

Viola’s face gave little away in response to this pronouncement. “And if you could know for certain that my interest in you wasn’t going to be eclipsed by the flood of other men out there in the world?”

Phillip gave a little chuckle in spite of himself, but his answer was perfectly sincere. “I would find it almost impossible to believe my good fortune.”

Viola’s ready smile sprang to her lips, and color rushed into her cheeks. “Then stop being so difficult.”

Without warning, she pushed up onto her toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek. Phillip could only stare at her, the skin her lips had touched tingling in the frigid air. Viola seemed amused by his astonishment. She turned with a flounce, tossing her hair over her shoulder in order to call back to him.

“It’s not polite to keep a lady waiting, you know.”

Phillip watched silently as she continued without breaking stride. Within moments she had wended her way through the trees, and he was alone. He raised a hand to his cheek, pressing his fingers against the place where she’d kissed him.

A slow smile began to build. It seemed he was under orders—nothing new for a guard.

Not that he was going to race ahead too quickly. In fairness to Viola, he still felt compelled to give her the opportunity to get a sense of the other contenders who might be out there. His hand still lingered on his cheek. But if she was inclined to give him a head start, he’d be the biggest fool alive not to take it. He felt no compulsion to be fair to any rivals. His smile grew to a grin as he began moving at last, striding after Viola.

No compulsion at all. Everyone knew it...all was fair in love and war.