

Chapter 1

Over the Edge

Cruise was over the edge. As he felt his body falling, he wondered if he would suddenly grow a pair of wings and start flying away. But he knew better. His lungs had closed, taking his breath away as if anticipating that he would no longer need it. It wasn't long before he hit the ground.

Pain bludgeoned him as he slammed into the asphalt. It crushed his leg, bending it out of shape. He wanted to fall asleep and never wake up, but the pain wasn't letting him go that easily. He woke with a frightened gasp. One thought occupied his mind through it all. He had to get away...

He picked himself up, forcing himself to stand upright, but when he tried to run the pain in his leg made him fall to the ground again. Again, he tried to move, putting all his weight on the good leg and letting the bad one hang limp. Gradually he hopped away. As he did he realised that he had been seeing people in the corner of his eye, running away as if afraid of him. In the distance he could hear a blaring noise coming closer. The sound was getting closer, and he started to suspect it was chasing him through the blackness of night.

He hopped as far as he could, until his remaining leg gave out and he couldn't stand. He couldn't run, he couldn't walk, and he couldn't limp. The only thing left to do was to crawl on his hands and knees. He was broken, bruised and bloodied, but somehow despite his own natural timidity he was undeterred. He was desperate. The only thing greater than the pain was his fear, and that fear drove him on. For once in his life, the pain of turning back was worse than that of driving forward. He had run for so long, he'd run so far. He couldn't stop now. He couldn't let them...

The blaring noise caught up with him as he blacked out. It was an ambulance.

A crowd of students rushed into the room. Though there were boys and girls in the class, they all wore matching uniforms, in shirts, ties and blazers. Though they were all human-like in appearance, the vast majority of them had equine ears and a signature Unicorn's horn protruding from their foreheads. The rest were a smattering of other hybrid races. Canines, felines, other equines and species, with varying hair and skin tones. Although most of the students appeared to be equine in appearance, it was clear that this school's prestige was so great that people came from all over the world to study there. The door closed with the arrival of the last student, who sheepishly made their way to their seat in full view of their more punctual classmates. There was a name on the door.

Dr. Lance Valentyne

Professor of Dragon Studies and Zoology

Lance Valentyne was a tall, silver-haired Unicorn hybrid, dressed in a deep green suit and purple tie. He

carried a wooden stick, for pointing at things on the blackboard. His albino hair shined with a slight blue tint, making it look metallic, even slightly pearlescent. His piercing seagreen eyes were the focal point of his angular, romantic features. He was a scholar, an academic, although he barely looked any more than thirty years old. His eyes had read countless books in that time, that they had become the oldest part of him.

The room was a large, circular auditorium. The seats were raised in levels around the blackboard in the center of the room, with small desks for the students to take out their textbooks, though it was barely enough room to write anything down comfortably. As the commotion died down and the students settled into their seats, there was the clearing of a throat as the lecture began.

"There are two main categories of dragon species," he began. On the blackboard were diagrams of dragons. "The reptilian, and the mammal. Everybody knows the more common, garden variety of dragon, the reptilian species *draconis majoris*. But what you may not know is that there are other varieties that most people never come into contact with. As a natural historian on the subject of dragon species, it's my job to study the biology of these incredible species."

The lecture continued on like this, with Lance explaining in great detail the main difference between different dragon species. There was great passion in his seagreen eyes. Eventually, a point came where a student brought up a question in regards to dragon species.

"Sir. Has there ever been a case of dragons breeding with other species, to create a hybrid?"

"There have been, some animals have been combined with dragons to create what is called a chimera." Lance responded. "Chimeras are a part of the course, something we will cover on in the weeks to come. But, one thing at a time."

"But, has anyone attempted to combine them with sentient beings, to create a new race?"

Lance looked like he was enjoying this. His eyes lit up. This was a subject that fascinated him more than most.

"Well, that is a very interesting question. The short answer is yes, but I'm afraid the long answer is that nobody has reported seeing one in some time. We know they exist, or at least that they have existed. But, such cases have been very rare throughout history. To some, they're practically a myth. But I do believe, that they are still out there, to this very day."

"Reptilian or mammal dragons?" another student piped up.

"Mammal, of course. It's basic biology. We, as warm blooded bipeds, are descended from a single, original race. That biology simply isn't compatible with reptiles, but it is compatible with other mammals. The trouble is, one is far more common than the other. So the genetic material is harder to come by."

There was a collective murmur as students made remarks to themselves.

"They must be very secretive," Lance continued. "With the way that dragons are treated in some societies, I wouldn't be surprised."

After the lecture had finished, Lance was clearing up the diagrams on the blackboard, lost in thought. There was something he could do. Someone who might lead him to the answers he was seeking. As soon as he was ready to leave, he made his way to see her right away.

In another wing of the vast College building, Lance found a familiar door to a familiar office. The sign on the door read: Dr. Evelina Vitalia. He knocked on the door, and was greeted by a familiar voice telling him to enter.

Inside was a Equine woman with brown skin and long, wavy hair that was of a deeper brown. She had the delicate, caring features of a physician, with open eyes and a warm smile. She projected an aura of trustworthiness, that held her in good stead as a doctor.

She had been waiting at her desk, filling out forms, going over the letter she had just recieved that morning. She was waiting for him.

"Good afternoon." she greeted him politely.

"Good afternoon."

"And what can I do for you?" she asked him, when she already knew the answer."

"That hospital patient in Frittis, the one you've been asked to see. I've decided to come with you."

"That's great." she knew he was going to say that. "I could certainly use your help, if this patient really is..."

"Half-draconic?" Lance finished her sentence abruptly. She nodded, though not with certainty.

"Like I said, he's not been formally identified. But it sounds like it to me. Could be just the break you need. I've been requested as a specialist, but you know more about dragons than anybody I know, even here."

Lance sighed and mopped his brow, containing the tentative joy on his face.

"My research project's been going nowhere. I need a new lead. This could finally prove that they still exist, somewhere." he admitted. He was more than a little exited at the prospect. There simply wasn't a world in which he would have said no.

"I've been in touch with the hospital. His leg's injured but stable. It's possible that be broke it somehow."

It was only in the small hours of the morning that she finally decided to give up. Her long and exhausting

search ended with the discovery of a public telephone in the middle of an empty street. Though she had been walking, it felt as though she had walked from one end of the city to the other. The phone simply offered a chance at catching her breath.

Stealthily, she dashed through the pouring rain to her destination, emerging from the shadows as if trying not to be seen. Her silhouette was covered by a long cream-colored trenchcoat and floppy brimmed hat. They were deliberately oversized to obscure most of her appearance, making her appear deeply suspicious and intimidating.

The dull light of the streetlights was obscured by the public telephone booth, which kept her face in the shadows. Light barely caught her luminous orange hair and exotic features. She did her best to keep them covered as she turned the numbers on the dial. She made an effort to be as quiet as possible, manipulating the archaic machine slowly with her long, sharply pointed fingernails. She didn't know it had worked until she heard a familiar voice say hello.

"Lexi here." she exhaled. "I've been everywhere, but I'm afraid I just can't find him."

A matter of seconds passed in silence, as she listened to whoever was speaking on the other end.

"Cruise is my responsibility. It's my fault, I should have been looking after him." Another pause, before she opened her mouth again.

"I'll find him. I haven't tried the hospital yet, if he's injured, that's where he'll be."

In the dream, Cruise was flying. His body soared into the indigo haze of the night sky, far from the light and noise and cares of the waking world. Away from all his problems. The feeling of escape was exhilarating, the freedom liberating. Flying meant so much to him, returning him to his true nature. His nature to fly, and to fight, and never to be caged again.

Although he was naked in the dream, he was covered in turquoise-green fur from the waistline down, making him look like he was wearing strange pyjamas. He had double-jointed furred legs and a long tail, both covered in green fur. In place of hooves, paws or feet were large claws, with glossy nails that had been filed down to a rectangular shape. This gave him an almost canine look.

The rest of his body was fairly human in appearance, with tanned skin and the hair on his head the in same minty green. It was long and messy, hanging down below his shoulders. Two green furred, pointed ears perked up and tilted down depending on his mood. On top of his head were two sharp horns. Around his neck and chest was a mane of green hair, forming a V shape around his breast.

His ruddy face betrayed his age, making him look younger and more innocent than he was. The cheeks were decorated with two sets of triple tribal markings, three black gashes that could just as easily have been covering up scars.

His eyes were the strangest thing about him, inviting but inhuman. Thin black strips within pinkish

purple irises, both looked out through saddened eyes.

He was part dragon, or a merdragon as it was sometimes called. Part of his body was human, and part of it was a hot-blooded, mammalian dragon. At heart, he was a dragon. Nothing more, and nothing less. But without wings to fly, he was incomplete.

He always looked at flying animals with great envy, wishing more than anything, that he could grow a pair of wings and escape to somewhere up high, someplace far away from everything. Alone and untouched.

When he woke, he found that he was lying in bed, but it wasn't his. He looked around at the room, sparse and beige. There was a wash basin and toilet facilities, things that meant he could be locked away in here for as long as they thought he needed to be.

The last thing he remembered was being carted around a hospital, before he blacked out. Since then, they had put him in a private ward away from prying eyes and covered his bad leg in something. His broken right leg had been encased in a hard, crusty material he didn't recognise. He wanted to reach out an exploratory hand to touch it, but his whole body was stiff. He felt sore and groggy, drained of energy. Not to be deterred, he practiced flexing the toes in his good claw and stretching his arms.

After what felt like hours of practice stretching and staring up at the ceiling, there was a knock on the door. It was opened by a slightly burly nurse, a perky half-fox lady with a spiked bouffant of hair. She was pushing a trolley with what he hoped would be dinner, or more likely breakfast considering how long he must have slept for.

"Good morning!" she greeted him, hoping he spoke the same language and would understand. "I've got breakfast for you right here." she wheeled the cart over to him. "How are you feeling, a bit groggy?"

"Y-yes." he stammered. His little voice was thin and husky, unused to speaking his mind.

"How's the leg, not bothering you I hope."

A quiet "No" came from him as she handed out a plastic tray of hospital food. It was hot porridge, orange juice and crumpets.

"I-I'm... I'm allergic to... mmm..." he tried to speak the words clearly, but they came out as a mumble.

"I'm allergic to milk." he tried again. Was it a lie? He wasn't sure. It didn't really matter now, it was an excuse.

"Oh, well in that case, I'll give you..." she took the porridge away and took out something from her trolley in another bowl. "Bacon and eggs?" she queried. Cruise nodded. As he nibbled on breakfast, the nurse examined his plaster leg.

"Any problems with the leg? Any discomfort?"

"No."

"Is it numb?"

"Just a little."

As soon as his breakfast was finished, the nurse produced a sheet of paper on a clipboard, handing it to him with a pen. He was dreading this. He had to fill out contact details. He stopped, trying to think what to say or do, wishing he didn't have to do this.

"What's wrong?" asked the nurse. He realised suddenly that he'd been quiet for at least a minute.

"I'm not... I don't know if I should give you my name."

"Don't worry, it's all confidential." she assured him. "If you need to, you can always use an alias. If you're in the witness protection scheme, we can withhold your medical records so that noone will know you were here. But before we can treat you further, we do need some details from you first."

As he listened to her talking, he thought of something and wrote it down. Now his name was going to be Blythe Hawkwind. The rest of the details were filled out in quick succession.

"Can you just promise me... you won't tell anybody I'm here?"

"What about your family, your friends?"

"No.. n-nobody." He stammered.

"Well, I'll see what I can do." She looked pensive, unsure of what else to say. He couldn't stay there forever. Once he was fully recovered, they had to give him back to somebody, or at least know that he had a home to go to. And if he didn't, she didn't even want to contemplate it. An unusual creature like him, in full view of everyone. A loner, a freak, an outcast. Alone, picked on and bullied. Getting sent from one homeless shelter to another, being passed around like candy...

"What happens to me now?" he looked up to ask her, as he handed back his detailed, if slightly misleading information. The nurse thanked him courteously.

"You're a... unique patient here, but we're already in the process of calling in a specialist. They'll be coming in to see you sometime today." she carried her trolley away as she began to leave the room. "So, sit back, relax, and get some rest. We'll have news for you very soon, okay? Okay." she said comfortingly, closing the door behind her. "Blythe" was left wondering if calling a vet would have been more appropriate.