

Chapter 2 - At First Sight

The woman on the phone sounded frustrated.

"They just don't seem to trust me." She was saying. "Even with this disguise on. I can't exactly take it off, can I?" she listened to the response. Someone on the other end sounded angry.

"What I do know is, someone with green hair was admitted to the Beautridge General Hospital last night." Another angry response. "I don't know, they didn't get a good look at him! It's all I've got." She sighed, admitting defeat. There was something she didn't want to do. "I'm going to need outside assistance on this. You'd better call him in, and be sure to tell them everything that I've told you. I'll need all the help I can get."

The trip from the College to the Hospital was an uneventful affair for Lance and Evelina. The flight from their native country of Svaltona to the Kingdom of Frittis took them about two and a half hours, and was a 2,000 kilometer flight.

The two of them were already used to travelling by dragon from continent to continent. especially when it crosses over into their line of work. More earthbound individuals often labelled people like them "dragon riders," either out of envy or loathing. The truth was, there was little actual riding involved. Instead, they entered a metal box, like a bus or train carriage, attached to the back of a massive mature aged dragon. It always excited him as a child, and even as an adult it still got his heart pounding a little bit. But in recent years, as his work and studies had grown more and more intense, it had almost become routine.

Evelina was a bit of a mystery to him. She seemed unphased at first, keeping to herself. But twenty minutes into getting airborne, she admitted to a terrible fear of heights. The flight lasted two more hours, in which time he kept her company and did his best to take her mind off it. He filled her head with a crash course in dragon biology, reading from an armful of textbooks he had brought with him, in the tentative hope that they would finally be useful for something. She always liked to tell him he'd make a great husband to someone, someday. He wondered if he'd ever get the chance to find out.

The nurse who had met with Blythe earlier that day, was waiting for the new arrivals in a nearby office. She had been instructed to work directly with them and assist them in treating the patient. She would defer to their medical expertise, and act as a liaison with the patient.

The door opened. It was Evelina and Lance.

"Nurse Evans?" Evelina asked. The two women shook hands.

"Yes, you must be Doctor Vitalia. It was good of you to come at such short notice."

"This is my... well, my associate." The doctor introduced her partner. "Doctor Lance Valentyne, a dragonologist."

"Nice to meet you." Lance gave a warm, friendly smile. "I'm just here on the off chance, I suppose."

"Well, about that..." the nurse began. "He's obviously a dragon hybrid of some sort. I can't think of a more apt description of him."

"How is he?" the doctor asked. Lance looked excited, but desperately holding back his enthusiasm.

"Resting for now. He's under observation, waiting for you to arrive, same as me." She turned to a drawer containing secret documents. From it she provided them a series of photocopied X-Rays of Cruise's broken leg. The two doctors studied them carefully. Lance was clearly fascinated by them.

"We've done what we can for him." The nurse continued. "It's in plaster for now, but we dare not treat it further."

"It's just a matter of promoting tissue growth." Doctor Vitalia replied, as she examined one of the X-Rays. "We just need to find the right drug, one that's compatible with his unique physiology."

"Dragons are highly resilient creatures." Lance pointed out. "So, with luck, he should make a full recovery in time. As long as nothing we give him interferes with that process."

"It all depends on how the two halves of his biology interact with one another. We don't want to upset that equilibrium." The doctor carried on the conversation. It was clear to Nurse Evans that they knew what they were talking about, even if it was an ad-hoc situation for them.

"Apparently, he's lactose intolerant." The nurse told them, in a tone that suggested she was aware she was passing on unreliable information.

"I should meet with the patient, introduce myself to him. Let him know what the situation is, and go from there." Vitalia decided.

"I should just warn you, it does seem as though he's been through an ordeal." Evans was sure of that.

"What makes you say that?"

"He shows all the signs. He's very shy, always distracted. He doesn't want anyone knowing he's here at the hospital, and he was reluctant in giving me his name. I don't think he really did, he just seemed to make it up on the spot. There's something going on, but he won't tell me. So, handle him with care."

"No, don't! I don't want to do it again!"

"We have to. You have what we need."

"But I can't-"

"It's for a good cause."

Blythe woke with a start. He'd been dreaming, but it hadn't been very pleasant. He wasn't sure if he was glad to be awake again or disappointed to be back in the square room, with no hope of escape.

Before he could catch his breath, there was a banging on the door. Suddenly he realised why he'd been woken up. The knocking stopped and a tall, dark woman with a horn on her head barged into the room. She stopped, staring at him for a moment, and closed the door quietly. He knew why. He wasn't used to being seen by outsiders very often, but when he did he was used to the attention.

"Hello. I hope you're feeling alright." she felt it was important to establish a sense of trustworthiness and personal care. "I'm Doctor Evelina Vitalia, I'm here to take a look at you and provide treatment."

"Blythe" sat up in bed, snapping to attention. The doctor had moved over to him and was examining the plaster leg. "Any discomfort?" she asked out of nowhere.

"No, not since this morning."

"Have you ever been in a situation like this before, a broken bone, a sprained ankle, that sort of thing?"

Blythe thought hard about it. "A few times, maybe."

"Can you be any more specific? What did they give you?" the question made him uncomfortable, dredging up memories he would rather were left alone. It wasn't like he was ever trusted with that sort of information.

"I-I can't think of anything specifically. Even if I could, I don't remember what I was given for it. Just tablets." he responded slowly.

"Have you eaten?" she changed the subject rather suddenly.

"Yes."

"Good. We need to do a blood test, and you'll need to fast for several hours beforehand. When was it you last ate?"

"Breakfast, I think. The nurse gave me bacon and eggs."

"That's good. It's five o'clock now, so in about an hour or so we could go and get the test done. If you're in agreement, that is."

"Sure." Blythe nodded. "Let's get it over with."

"That's the spirit. I'll come back for you in about an hour, you just need to not eat or drink until then."

A very intimidating figure entered the hospital. He was a tall, dark Fritish man in a sharp suit. "Fritish" was the name given to the half-vulpine people of the Kingdom of Frittas, the continent one which the hospital resided. He scoured through the hospital, making discreet enquiries, leading him to an isolation ward many floors above. His government access opened many doors that would otherwise be kept closed, and upon seeing his credentials, nobody dared question him further. This simple investigation was child's play to him.

The hour passed slowly for him. Alone in his bed, with nothing to do, all he could turn to was his own thoughts. After an hour of it, he was practically begging for something to do. Anything. Anything to take his mind off of it.

The door opened and Doctor Vitalia came in, pushing a wheelchair along with her.

"Hello! This will have to do, we can't risk letting you using that leg for the time being."

Blythe's face went red.

The doctor wheeled him all the way to the blood test. It was in a separate facility, a few floors down. She took great care to keep him out of populated areas. But he couldn't help noticing a very suspicious individual spot him down a hallway. It didn't take him long to recognise the face, and when he did he almost panicked. He made a feeble attempt to cover his face, but it was pointless. He'd already clocked him. And now he was coming to get him.

The man turned away, in search of a telephone. He had an urgent call to make.

"I'm willing to risk it." he declared. He was sitting on the bed, like it was a couch. He looked odd in the dressing gown he was wearing, now that he was out of bed. It offered no warmth, making him feel naked with it on. His dragon claws and tail protruded out conspicuously underneath.

"It's a little too early for that." the doctor advised him calmly. "Normal leg injuries of this kind should take weeks to heal. But in this case, we just don't know how long it'll take yet. Once we've examined your blood, we can determine what to do. In the meantime, just get some rest. The nurse will be back soon with dinner." she began helping him back into bed, lifting the covers and sliding him in like a mother tucking her child into bed.

"She'll give you plenty of proteins, that'll help to stimulate the tissue in your bones. I'll see you in the morning." she told him, before walking out, leaving him alone. He watched her leave, looking at her like she was abandoning him.

It didn't take long for the man to find him. Blythe watched with dread as the door opened, slowly, not making a sound.

"So, this is where they put you." he stated, almost robotically, no sign of emotion whatsoever. Total professionalism. It always made Blythe's blood run cold. He stepped forward, examining him.

"Superficial leg injury, can't be much more than a minor crack. A dragon's bones are like steel. You'll be back on your feet in a few days." He cupped his hands behind his back, staring at him. "You mustn't tell them that I've been here. Say nothing. We'll get you out of here." It wasn't a reassurance. It was a statement of fact. Whether he liked it or not. He turned and walked away, closing the door without another sound.

Blythe was hiding under the sheets, the pillow over his head. He was so scared, he began to whimper.

The next day, he was woken again by the chirpy voice of the nurse bringing breakfast. By then, Blythe had a plan, and only a few days in which to do it. His attempts to raise the issue of using a crutch took time to be heard. Eventually the doctor came back with a pack of pills for him to try, and the results were promising. When she thought he was ready, she helped him up out of bed, and guided him as best she could. When he took the crutch on his own and started using it, she was amazed by his fortitude. Part of her suspected he was hiding the pain, not wanting to appear weak. She decided to give him a little test, to see if her theory was true.

Guiding and holding him for support, she led him slowly out of the room and out of the isolation ward. She kept him balanced, stopping him from stumbling and held his hand as she walked with him. She was leading him into a small, secluded laboratory near to where he was staying. She had told him she wanted him to meet someone, and here he was. She knocked on the door of a private office, and it was answered by the most attractive man Blythe had ever met.

"Hello. You must be... Blythe?" the man looked a little befuddled. He was a tall, silver-haired unicorn with purple glasses obscuring his piercing green eyes. He wore a green jacket to match, and was impeccably well dressed and groomed. "My name is Lance. Lance Valentyne. It's good to finally meet you."

He extended his hand for Blythe to shake it. Blythe was blushing, and almost gasped. With a very shaky hand he held it, and Lance shook it vigorously. His enthusiasm was palpable. Blythe thought his arm was going to drop off until suddenly he let go.

"Lance is an expert on dragon biology. He teaches it at a College, where we're from." Doctor Vitalia chimed in.

"Yes, I'm what you might call a student of dragon lore. But I've never met someone like you before, a chimeric subspecies in modern times. I've been going over the blood sample you provided us, it's..." he sighed merrily, regaining his composure. "It's quite simply fascinating."

The doctor gave him a look of wanting to remind him not to ramble in front of the patient. Blythe was simply stunned, not knowing what to say.

"You must have a lot of questions for our patient." the doctor looked up at Lance.

"It can wait. For now, I'd just like to get to know you, if I may." he sounded sincere, almost pleading. Blythe nodded.

"Uh, s-sure." he squeaked. It was all he could manage. He wasn't sure he was ready for this, but here it was regardless. Part of him hoped that this man would be gone soon. It was the last thing he wanted to be thinking about, at a time like this. Another part was filled with hope. He was the light at the end of a long, dark tunnel.

When her patient was finally returned to his ward room, Doctor Vitalia returned to find Lance thinking alone to himself. He was sitting in her desk chair, ruminating.

"Well, it's good to see you making friends again. Seems you're well on the way to recovery yourself." She told him warmly. She knew it was a delicate subject, but she suspected he didn't give himself much chance to talk about it.

"You're right." Lance spoke softly. He rested his chin on his fist, his elbow on the desk. He was clearly thinking.

"Is that all? You're right, tra-la-la?" she gestured extravagantly with her arms. Her face was one of exasperation.

"It's okay. I know it's important to talk about it. I just can't seem to find the time." He smiled absently, then turned and looked her squarely in the eye. He was dead serious.

"Yes, I've lost someone recently. But I still have my work."

The next few days passed very slowly for them. Blythe insisted on practicing with the crutch as often as he could, and Doctor Vitalia insisted on helping him every step of the way. The highlight of each day was being aided towards Lance's office and laboratory, where he would talk endlessly about subjects he knew a great deal about. He was also incredibly curious about Blythe, asking him questions whenever he could, probing him for any information he could or was willing to give. He told him all that he could, he was enjoying the company too much to care about anything else.

On the third day, Blythe's condition continued to improve, until even Doctor Vitalia had stopped trying to control his movements to and from the ward. He hobbled along on his own, crutch in hand, still eager to be with Lance and find out more about him. He already knew the basics, about his position in a faraway College in Svaltona. Lance had even taught him how to pronounce it correctly.

When the third day drew to a close, Blythe started getting anxious. He was being quiet, even by his standards. They were in his laboratory at teatime, when Lance asked him if something was wrong.

"I... I.... I don't know." Was all he could muster. The words just weren't coming out of his mouth. He was afraid, afraid of the consequences if he spoke the truth. But what frightened him even more was the realisation that he may only have this one chance to tell somebody, anybody who might listen. Before he could continue, they were interrupted by Doctor Vitalia entering the laboratory.

Deep down he knew it was already too late.