

Chapter 3 - Cruise Control

"Hello. My name is Agent Vinson, and this is Agent Simeon. We are here to collect the patient you have in Isolation Ward A-34."

The two agents stood coldly in the doorway to Vitalia's temporary office. They wore matching black suits with sunglasses and microphones that they never removed. The sunglasses seemed to Vitalia like a feeble attempt at masking their identities. Lance stood behind them, caught by surprise.

"Alright. Well, if you'd like me to show you to him..."

"We will return within the hour." Vinson interrupted her. "The patient's next of kin has requested to be present at the time of collection."

"How did you know to come today?" Lance enquired, staring at them curiously. "We were just going to discharge him."

"We have reason to believe that the leg injury has had sufficient time to heal. Your assistance is no longer required." Simeon informed him. Their voices were almost identical, with ever-present gruff tones that issued forth orders and instructions.

Lance was amazed, but not surprised at Blythe's powers of recovery. The fact that bipedal dragons existed and were equally as resilient, had implications he couldn't even guess at. If they were allowed to exist without being exploited in any way for their abilities, it must be a closely guarded secret. It explained so much, but he was now afraid he would never get to tell anyone.

"Due to the sensitive nature of this incident, you are hereby ordered to classify all data and interaction with the patient. His presence at this hospital is now a state secret." Vinson provided an official document and handed it to Vitalia. She had been to Frittis many times before to treat patients with unusual needs. But she had never been issued a government writ like this before. It ordered her to destroy all documents and evidence of Blythe's existence where possible and collect the rest for the two government agents to take with them. Presumably they would file them away in some dusty dungeon of bureaucracy, somewhere out of sight and out of mind.

The two agents eased up, their posture loosening as they walked out. They didn't say another word. Lance watched them leave, not daring to speak until they were well out of earshot. Vitalia breathed a sigh of relief.

"What is it, Eve?" he looked back at her.

"That was all too close for comfort, don't you think?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you find it odd that they didn't show up, until the day that he was healed?"

Lexi Firewind entered the hospital under guard. She was an orange haired Merdragon, similar to Cruise in size and height. She had the same ears, horns and tail. She wore a long coat to cover her identity and

heritage. The tip of her tail was poking through the bottom of her coat. The fur fades from orange to bright yellow at the tip, making it look like a big flame. Her hair parted in two long bangs down the sides of her face.

Her eyes were bright yellow, and almost snake-like. But there was something cold and dead about them. Whatever her mood, they looked out distantly, as though she never really cared about anything. As though she had grown permanently tired, and life no longer held any surprises for her. Something behind those eyes had long since surrendered.

She always wore a long cream-coloured trenchcoat when going out. But she wore little else underneath besides a bra and underpants, making her look like an exotic flasher. But instead of making her more open with her sexuality, it had left her cold and jaded. It was a statement of power, not of perversion. It was less about courage and more about simply not fearing anyone. She refused to apologise for how she looked, if anyone did notice anything strange about her it was not her problem.

The two agents escorted her through the least populated of paths, to the Isolation wards. They lead her to room A-34. Agent Vinson was carrying a plastic bag over his shoulder.

The door opened. "Blythe" was lying in bed, waiting for them.

"There you are! I was so worried about you. Did they hurt you?"

"No, they didn't." he was certain, but afraid to show it. As he got out of bed, Lexi grabbed the bag which Vinson was holding and tipped the contents onto the bed. It was his clothes.

"It's time to go, Cruise." She stated. She sounded terribly disappointed in him. The two agents left the room, leaving them both together.

"Have you ever heard of the Florence Nightingale Effect?" Eve brought up a familiar question. "Where physicians fall in love with their patients?"

"Of course." Lance nodded. "But why are you telling me this?"

"Because I've noticed that the two of you have spent a lot of time together in the last few days. You've certainly struck up a fast friendship." Her hands were on her hips, thinking she'd caught him out. Lance thought carefully about it before he answered.

"I'm not sure. I'm just interested in him, that's all."

"Well, if it's not you, then it's him. He's always shy, but around you, he's completely flustered."

Lance looked concerned, not knowing what to do.

"I've waited for this opportunity for such a long time. A perfect fusion of dragon and biped, it's my dream to study a subject like that."

"Well, you're going to have to set your notes on fire. This is now a state secret." She held up the writ.

"Yes, quite..." Lance only kept looking more and more disturbed. Then Vitalia dropped a bombshell on him.

"You want to know what Evans told me? She said that Blythe didn't want anybody finding out he was here. Not even his family." She crossed her arms. "Something tells me these people aren't looking after him very well. He's in pain, and he's reaching out to you."

Lance was shocked. That was the last thing he wanted to hear. This was his dream, but now it was turning into a nightmare.

Things turned from bad to worse when they reached the Isolation ward. The two Merdragons were standing outside the door to A-34. "Blythe" was looking terribly despondent. All hope had left his purple eyes. His clothes were purple to match, a t-shirt and purple jeans, with a green parka vest over the top. He wore strange black boots that were large, but covered his claws. Over these was a cream-colored trenchcoat to mask his identity.

"Hello there! My name's Lexi, and I'm a Merdragon! I'm his wife. His real name's not Blythe, it's Cruise." The orange merdragon blurted out. She looked chipper, but Vitalia sensed it was a façade.

"His wife? How old are you?" She asked.

"I'm 25. He's 24. We've been married for six years." Was the response. Lexi's toothy smile revealed her sharp fangs. The two unicorns were put off by Cruise's youthful appearance, expecting him to be eighteen at the most. Lance almost breathed a sigh of relief, only to think better of doing it in public. Instead he decided to do all his breathing mentally. Lexi could see the odd look of shock and amazement on his face.

"Are you okay?" she almost felt like poking him.

"Yes, of course." He smiled, absently. "I'm just surprised to see that you're real after all."

Lexi disregarded him with prejudice. She knew she was never going to see eye to eye with a man like this. So she decided to ignore the remark, turning her attention back to her estranged husband.

"Come on Cruise." She grabbed him by the arm, leading him out. The two agents followed closely behind, there was no way he could escape them now.

Lance's face fell sharply. He was watching them drag him out with growing horror. In his mind's eye, he could see her again. He could see the pleading face of his sister, after she had begged him not to let her go. She was being walked down the aisle of a hospital by the man who put her there in the first place. He was frozen, unable to move or speak, or do anything but watch them leave. Watch her go back to the life she couldn't keep on living. And when all the dust had finally settled, he could find nobody to blame but himself.

No, he declared. No more. Not again. The line has to be drawn somewhere.

“Not again.” He muttered as he watched them leave. Nobody heard it, but Vitalia could see that he wasn’t happy. He wasn’t even angry. He was incandescent.

It wasn’t until later in the evening, that Vitalia found him again. He had called in his own personal pet Dragon, all the way from Svaltona. Unlike his much larger cousins, Benjamin was a moderately sized dragon, of a breed that could be trained and ridden on like a horse. Benjamin was a loyal friend to him, and the fastest and most cunning of flyers. Lance had come to regard him as his personal chaperone, and something far more noble than a mere beast of burden. He had come to rely on him in times of crisis, and this was no exception.

Benjamin had landed in a secluded, private landing zone on the hospital roof. It wasn’t the very top of the hospital, instead jutting out from its main tower, casting them in the artificial light of many lit rooms. The dragon’s bottle green scales glistened slightly. He was a dark, almost black colour, which served to camouflage him in the night sky. His sharp, jagged appearance betrayed his highly affectionate personality, much like that of a Golden Retriever. Benjamin, of “Benji” as he was often called, always liked to lick his master with his pointed, slobbery tongue. Especially when his master needed him the most. Lance caressed his scaly forehead in the evening air. It was cold to the touch, but that never bothered him.

Dr. Evelina Vitalia caught him in the act, walking out into the flight platform in her warmest clothes. She had always hated the cold more than him.

“Going out for a stroll?” She inquired, with an accusatory tone.

“Of course not.” Lance replied. “You know what I’m doing, why I’ve called Benji here.”

“And why is that?”

“I can’t just do nothing. I can’t-” he choked on the words, losing his composure. It was extremely rare and embarrassing for him, and it caught her off guard. “I can’t.”

“I suppose this is goodbye.” She said to him, as he grabbed hold of the reins and pulled himself up onto Benjamin’s back. “If I do see you again, it’ll mean...”

“I know.” He stopped her. He sighed, looking relieved. He’d crossed the line, now there was no deliberating, no agonising over the decision once made. It felt liberating. He felt strangely calm and sanguine, with his decision. Like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. This path hadn’t been chosen; it had chosen him. He relished the sudden lack of responsibility that it presented him, as though things were just falling into place.

“I’m not turning back.” He said calmly. It was a promise, or perhaps reassurance.

“I can only wish you good luck, and a safe journey. Your secret’s safe with me.”

Lance nodded, then turned to Benjamin, pulling the reins and gesturing him to take off. The dragon’s wings unfurled and spread outward, blowing up a strong current of wind about them as they took off into the darkening sky. Lance was on a mission, and this time, there *was* no turning back.

Cruise had been brought home in short order. However, home for him meant an underground network of rooms and tunnels, like a massive military bunker complex converted into a home. It had been deemed the safest way to preserve their secrecy and rebuild their race without causing conflict on the world above. It meant that to the rest of the world, they quite literally never existed. For the first few years, promises were abound that it was a temporary measure, until the day that Merdragons were prepared to claim a community of their own in a safe space, somewhere in the country. But for many reasons, those promises were yet to be fulfilled.

The rooms were drab, sparsely decorated places. It was difficult for a race that had come into being in such an abrupt way to have any culture of its own in such a short time. So the decorations were generally Frittish in origin, with basic furniture and fittings. Paintings of open skies, rolling hills and sunsets adorned the walls. There was an obsession with the open sky that was a common link among them. It represented a burning desire that fueled their quest to earn that freedom. It didn’t matter what stood in the way, that goal occupied their every decision. Great emphasis was placed on food stocks and hydroponic bays, as well as nurseries and unpopulated habitation areas. It was a vast underground city of small rooms and corridors, but it was underpopulated.

It was an oppressive world that Cruise lived in. Every day was a reminder of the fact that he was as far from the open sky as he was ever going to get. In the last few years, he had slowly given in to despair. The long years of punishments and apologies had made him small and fragile. His was a face that might, when he was younger, have been adorable. But pain and stress had molded it into something else. He was being lectured and looking terribly guilty.

“How dare you get yourself hurt like that! We were worried sick! Have you any idea what might have happened to you?”

The firm voice of concern was of his mother. Another short, green-haired Merdragon, an almost spitting image of her son. His father, taller and leaner, with darker hair, looked on in disdain.

“I’m sorry... I didn’t know...” Cruise bowed his head, intoning all the right things to pacify them. It was impossible to reason with parents, to them he would always be their child. He didn’t even have the nerve to try, even if he wanted to.

“If you can’t look after yourself out there, we’ll just have to make sure we don’t let you out of our sight.” His father warned. His mother butted in with her usual neuroses.

"There's people out there who would do anything to find someone like us. If you'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time, they'd have kidnapped you and done experiments on you. You put us all in jeopardy!" She was on the verge of tears. Cruise could only listen.

"I don't understand the point of these trips Lexi insists on taking. It's too dangerous, even at night."

"She wants..." Cruise began, barely plucking up the courage to speak. "She wants to understand the world outside."

"It's a bit presumptuous." His mother started. "We haven't even been given the all clear yet. When we do, we'll have a place to live, somewhere safe. There's no need to worry about it until then."

"Well, if you want to get out of here, you know what you should do. They still need your help." His father reminded him.

"Y-yes Dad." Cruise stuttered. That motivation was failing him.

At the first opportunity, Cruise made his way away from his parents' suite. Their old rooms reminded him too much of better days, of years gone by before the responsibilities of adulthood had taken so much from him. He avoided it as much as he could, but there were already enough miseries for him in the present.

The evening was long and awkward for him, once he had returned to his waiting wife's arms. She was happy to see him, yet still showed a sign of disappointment. She wondered if she had pulled the reins tightly enough on him, if perhaps what happened was her fault as much as his. When the time came to retire to bed, she was ready and willing.

"Cruuuuise!" Lexi cooed. She was in the dark, but her orange hair and body fur made her stand out like neon. She was lying naked on the bed, face down but looking over at him seductively. Her tail danced and weaved about in midair. Her golden eyes pierced into his heart. She had a toxic charm about her.

There was a leash on the table by the bed. She picked it up and played with it, as she sauntered up to him. She liked to tease him, play with their toys before playing with him. By rights, she thought any man should find it a turn on. Cruise wasn't that sort of man. His heart was beating out of his chest, but he wasn't excited. He was petrified.

"You're not getting away this time." She told him, narrowing her eyes. Her eyelashes flickered. She stopped playing with the collar, gently wrapping it around his neck and fastening it tight. It chafed his skin, barely letting him breathe. She let go, she didn't need to force him anymore. Obediently, he followed her to bed. He knew he didn't have a choice anyway.