

Chapter 4 - The Pit

Dreams often came to Cruise after painful things. Strange dreams. It was a way to cleanse himself, to perform a ritual of mental disinfectant. It helped him to recover, to focus on something other than what he was feeling. The less he thought about that, the less it gouged into his soul. But not thinking about it was more difficult than it had ever been.

This dream was about someone. Someone he'd met before. It was about a man, searching for him in the world above. He rode a giant dragon in the open blackness of the night sky. He could feel the exhilarating freedom, and it seemed just like any other dream. But there was another feeling there too. There was desperation, possibly panic. The man was lost, or he'd lost someone, and he didn't know where to go. Cruise's interpretation was fuzzy, but he could see the man looking through every phonebook he could find, and in every suburb of the city. He could see the glare of the streetlights as clear as day.

The man decided to do something or try something that he was afraid of doing. And it was then that Cruise woke up. Only it was different, not how he expected to wake up. He wasn't in a hospital bed or a bedroom this time. He was lying naked on a floor, soft but flat. It was white. All was white, and empty. It was a void.

As he started to sit up, he saw the man with a couple of armchairs, a table and a pot of tea. He now recognised the man in his dream. It was Lance, dressed in his usual green attire. He was pouring a cup of tea, trying not to stare. He was blushing, but he then hid it with a caring smile.

The collar jangled about his chest hairs as he got up. It was the only thing he was wearing, but it didn't phase him. It was humiliating, but it was a humiliation he had learned to endure. He was used to it, and still held doubts that this was reality. But it was something more visceral, more real. It was too lucid to be any normal dream. It felt like his brain was wired up to someone else's.

"Tea?" Lance asked him. He smiled. He seemed relieved to see him.

"Are you real?" He asked, wanting to touch Lance in some way to confirm it, but keeping his arms at his chest defensively.

"Ah, that's a bit personal, isn't it?" came the reply. It was odd, lacking in eccentricity. It sounded rehearsed, like he was quoting something. "I'm real enough." He offered Cruise a cup, and he took it. He blew on it, waiting to see what would happen next.

Now that contact had been made, there was definitely something in Cruise's mind he was suppressing. There were images, like memories, that were horribly real. They invaded both their minds at once, like shellshock. It was as real as the smell of the tea. Lance was frightened by it. He already knew what it was, he could sense it. It had happened quite recently, too.

"It's very calming, and you look like you could do with a cup." Lance sipped his. It helped to calm his own nerves as well. It was a common practice, using the memory of his favorite blend of tea to ease the linkage between their minds. And as a bonus, it suppressed his own feelings.

"I'll get right down to business." Lance began. "I'm here because I'm not entirely sure you're happy where you are."

This caught Cruise by surprise. He was still blowing on his tea, smelling its unique fragrance, of herbs and flavors he didn't recognise. He'd never actually smelled anything like it before, it was too new of an experience to be anything but reality. He thought about his response.

"Well... no, but where else would I go?"

"What if..." Lance put down his tea and looked him in the eye. "I could take you away from all this? Grant you asylum in another country, outside the government's reach and that of your family?"

"Yes!" Cruise squeaked. He didn't care if it was real or not anymore. "But how?"

"I've created this space so we can talk in private. Telepathy's one of my abilities, though most Unicorns are ignorant of them. Some of us have learned to master them."

"So it is real." Cruise realised, smelling the tea again. He sipped it, hoping for a real taste.

"In a way, yes. But it also means we can communicate without anyone overhearing. I can't find your house, you see. If I knew where you were..."

"That's... difficult. I'm underground." Cruise revealed. "In an old bunker complex in Shoreside. The way in's hidden."

"Can you show me? Just concentrate on the place, and it'll appear."

Cruise tried. He recalled the route he and Lexi took out of the bunker, emerging from a secret entrance inside an old shed. There was a lock on the door, the key was with Lexi's things somewhere. The shed was in a run-down part of town, near a railway bridge. Cruise had wandered up there and attempted to jump off some nights ago, leading to his stay in the hospital.

"What are the street names? Can you remember any of them?"

Cruise thought back. The names were familiar, painful. They acted as a clue.

"Chai... and... Blythe...." He uttered. "It's on the corner of Chai and Blythe street, in downtown Shoreside."

"Those names..." Lance stopped him. "Are they important to you?" Emotional transference had taken effect, but the reason remained hidden.

“They...” Cruise began but couldn’t answer. The lump in his throat blocked the words from forming on his tongue. “They’re....”

“It doesn’t matter. If you can find the key, I’ll come find you.”

“How?”

“I have a dragon, I’ll land it somewhere out of the way.” Lance and the dream world began to fade, their vision was being eaten up by blackness. “I’ll find you.”

Cruise woke from the dream, and for the first time in as long as he could remember, he felt something different. Hope had blossomed.

He rose carefully from the bed, where Lexi was still fast asleep. Without making a sound, he gathered some clothes and got dressed in another room. He couldn’t afford to wake her up. He kept quiet as if his life depended on it. Everything had to be done away from the bedroom to make as little noise as possible. His preparations to venture outside were well practiced.

Once dressed, he gathered a few choice items, slipping them into the pockets in his green fishing vest. Under it he wore a purple jumper, with a shirt and t-shirt underneath. It was as many layers as he could wear. If he was lucky, he would never be coming back, so he took whatever he could carry, whatever was important to him. His long green hair was tied back in a ponytail and tucked under his clothes.

Silently, he found a pen and paper in the living room and began writing. Something for Lexi to find when she woke up, something that might begin to explain. Once that was done, he ferried things from the bedroom, packing them into a small backpack. He found the keys in Lexi’s chest of drawers, removing them stealthily. He didn’t intend to give them back, and if it meant the way was open for others to escape or outsiders to get into the complex, he no longer cared.

He opened a cupboard, taking out the long cream-coloured coat and putting it on over his clothes. It fit him perfectly, as it was made to measure. Then his backpack went over that. With everything he could wear or carry with him, it was time to go.

He passed many concrete halls, following the metal pipes in the ceiling towards his destination. As he got closer, he could hear the hissing of steam, and the humming of great engines that powered the facility. It was always strangely comforting to him, as it broke up the constant silence, and the stillness that was in the musty air. It also meant that his freedom was only a short distance away. The closer he got, the more his heart started beating. He was shaky and restless, and afraid that he was being followed. As he reached the door to the hatchway, he looked back around him one last time. Then, jangling the keys, he opened the door and shut it behind him.

It was just then that Lexi woke up. Sensing something was wrong, he turned to find the bed empty apart from her. Whipping off the sheets, she immediately began looking for him to no avail. He couldn't have gotten far, and she couldn't start looking for him without first putting some clothes on.

Past the doorway, and down a short corridor he came to a long shaft with a ladder. Taking in a deep breath, he began climbing until he got to the heavy metal hatch at the top, and turned the crank. The hatch creaked as it lifted upwards, revealing a small dark room with a corrugated steel roof. He climbed out and closed the hatch, turning the crank to seal it again. It wouldn't buy much time, but it was better than nothing.

The door to the room had a two-way lock, and was opened easily when he found the right key. He ventured out, closing and locking the door again. His hands were trembling, and he nearly dropped the keys in sheer terror.

The shed was old, and without any light it would have been impossible to see. Cruise's vision however was much better suited to the dark, allowing him to make out grey shapes and the dull light from outside. It was enough, and he didn't want to risk using a torch. Once he escaped from the shed, he found himself in the inner corner of a lifeless city street, surrounded by empty, run down industrial looking buildings. It was an even harsher sight than down below. Most of the buildings had been caked in rust and corrosion, many of the windows were smashed or missing. Ghetto fences separated them from the pavement. A handful of streetlights lit his way like beacons.

Cruise heard a strange clopping sound in the dark, and panicked. It sounded like a man on horseback was entering the street in front of him. Quickly he hid in an alcove between buildings, curling up beside the rusty steel wall. A bright light emanated from down the street, waving around. Eventually the light found him.

"Cruise!" It was his voice. Lance was standing before him, dressed in black, holding a flashlight. His blue-tinted silver horn glowed eerily in the dark, like a glowstick. It lit up his face. The torch on the other hand, was many magnitudes brighter. He was difficult to make out in the dark, as his black clothing camouflaged most of his body.

Cruise got up, and without thinking or saying a word, hugged him. He had never been so afraid as he was now that freedom was so close. The fear of failure, of defeat and capture was overwhelming. He was hyperventilating.

"Hey... deep breaths." He heard Lance say from deep in his chest. "Everything's going to be fine."

Cruise gulped for air, until after a few deep breaths his broken heart finally slowed down. He looked up at his rescuer through teary eyes. There was just one thing he wanted to know.

"I don't understand. Why? Why are you doing this?"

"I want to help." Lance said simply. He was still taken aback at his emotional fragility, like a young girl trying to be cute. He wondered what it must have taken to drive a young man to such vulnerability. Or was he like this naturally?

Lexi stood in the living room, wearing only her aubergine dressing gown. Having searched around, she was beginning to get frustrated. There was no sign of him. He'd left her once again. She decided it was time to get dressed, look outside the apartment for him. She thought she'd probably find him moping under a power turbine again, or wandering the halls trying to get lost. She was tired of his endless whining, his childish insecurities. It was time to really whip him into shape, for his own good. As soon as she found him...

It was then that she found the note. It was dark, making her pass by a couple of times already before she saw it. When she picked it up, she understood everything. She dashed out of the room.

Lance was holding his hand as they walked. Cruise was wearing his hood, his head bowed. That changed when he sensed something familiar coming up ahead. There was something in his blood. It called to him, seducing him. It told him there was another dragon nearby. A much purer kind than he had ever seen in a long time. He couldn't see or hear it, but it was there.

"Who is it?" he gasped, his head raised. Lance looked at him strangely, so he continued. "Is it your dragon?"

"Yes. Benjamin's his name." Lance smiled down at him. "You can sense him." He realised. Of course he could, their blood called out to each other.

"Why call him that?"

"I don't know... I suppose it sounded posh."

It wasn't long before they reached Benjamin. He was well hidden in the dark, but his green scales glinted in the dull light of streetlamps. He was resting in an open park.

Cruise's heart skipped a beat at the sight. It was a thrill to have the opportunity to ride what he considered a "real" dragon. But far more excited to have some means of flying. He'd dreamed about it for so long. It took his breath away. It finally dawned on him what he was doing. From now on, and for probably the rest of his life, he was on the run.

Lexi had burst into the Hawkwind family's domicile so suddenly it woke them up. It wasn't long before they were up and dressed. They rarely had visitors, least of all at such an ungodly hour. They were nervous, they knew it couldn't be good news.

“Troy, Alexia. You’d better sit down. I have bad news.” Lexi stated. Cruise’s parents sat down.

“It’s about our son.” Alexia already knew it was. Lexi nodded.

“He’s left a note. I can’t find him, and my keys to the surface are gone. He’s up there. He could be in Shoreside by now.”

Lexi handed them the note. She wondered if they would understand it any better than she could. It made her angry, and she hoped it would make them angry too. But it didn’t seem to. Instead, they both looked terribly sad.

Dearest Lexi,

I’m sorry to have to do this to you. But I have to leave now. To live like this another day is asking more of me than I would ever ask of you. That’s why I’m willing to take my chances, even if I don’t make it. There must be something better, somewhere I can belong. And if there isn’t, at least I will have my dignity.

Please understand that I don’t do this because I don’t love you, in my way. But it is not the way you wanted, and there’s nothing I can do to change that. I’ve tried very hard for six years now. I’ve given you all I have, and I have nothing left to give. I would never dream of breaking your heart if I could help it.

To you, and my parents, I can only say I’m sorry. I have failed you. I hope that someday you will understand, and someday you will all find your freedom. Perhaps then you will realise why I must search for mine.

Cruise.