

Chapter 5 – On The Fly

Riding Benjamin was a terrifying experience. It had been a long time since he had ridden anything, and never this high above the ground. Lance obviously had a rare knack with dragons, an ability to pilot them as if they were symbiotically linked. Cruise watched with exhilaration as the lights of the city grew further and further away, far below them. They flew up into the clouds, following the stars and illuminated by moonlight.

Cruise's fear quickly started to melt away, replaced by a sudden thrill rush. He had fantasised for years about flying, on a dragon or by growing wings of his own. At first he feared that he would panic, that the shock of turning fantasy into reality would be too much for him. He was afraid of falling off, plummeting to his death. But the higher they flew, the less his brain could comprehend the altitude, and the smaller that fear became. Even so, he still remained frozen in place, barely moving a muscle.

"It takes some getting used to, doesn't it?" Lance spoke up, out of the blue. His voice was raised slightly to talk over the gushing winds and the rushing of clouds around them. Cruise nodded in agreement. His attention was diverted by his own senses. He felt something, just like what he felt as he sensed Benjamin's presence the first time. Changes in air density, in temperature, wind that was not wind. And something else, an echo in his mind that called to his dragon blood. Blood sensing blood.

There was another dragon following them. Stalking them, watching them like a hawk studying its prey. It trailed behind, careful not to fly too close and alert them. It flew behind clouds, using them as cover. Cruise knew it was out there, but he didn't know where it was. It took all his courage to look behind him.

"I-I think we're being followed." He warned, stammering a little.

"Don't worry." Came the reply. Lance smiled at him to reassure him. "We're over the border, there's nothing anyone can do now. They wouldn't dare." Frittas had a complicated legal system, rife with bureaucracy. For once, that was working to their advantage.

Cruise simply watched the skies cautiously. His fear was greater than his fatigue. He began to wonder if someone was simply monitoring them, trying to determine their course. It wouldn't take them long to find out where he was going.

An hour passed, or at least it felt like an hour. The feeling of being followed had long since stopped, but it took time for Cruise to work up the nerve to speak.

"What happens to me now?" he said, as loudly and clearly as he could.

"Well... if we do this properly, it'll be better in the long run. So I'm taking you to an Airstables in Svaltona. Once we're there, you can claim asylum. If we're lucky, you might be able to come with me, back to the College. I have a dormitory there. It's... safe."

In truth, Lance was just as nervous. His greatest worry was of seeing Cruise be detained in some crowded facility. If he wasn't careful, or his luck ran out, he could end up making a bad situation worse by taking out of the safety of his home. But he was prepared to put his profession and his safe haven on the line to make sure that didn't happen. It was a big risk, but still a manageable one.

"I phoned ahead. So expect company when we get there." Lance told him.

The Airstables was a huge complex of buildings and facilities, like an airport. Like an airport, it was situated directly alongside a runway. But unlike an airport, it was built to house enormous scaly dragons which slept in giant hangars. There was an industrial crane system for putting long, metal compartments on the dragon's backs. They looked like buses, only with huge straps and safety harnesses instead of wheels.

It was already well into the small hours of the morning when Benjamin landed them on the firm tarmac. Rain cascaded down around them, messing up Lance's perfectly groomed hair. Cruise didn't seem to care. He liked standing out in the rain anyway.

There was a small veranda for Benjamin to land under, like a bus shelter. A sign labeled it as "Chartered Flight 3B." There was a long corridor next to it, leading into the main airport building. The lights inside it were blinding.

A man in a black uniform was waiting for them, surrounded by armed guards, all in black. His black cap set him apart from the rest, his ears poking out from either side. All equines and cervines with deer-like antlers. None of them had horns. Unicorns were a rare minority, even in the heart of Svaltona.

The name tag on his uniform said Eklund. He was clearly some kind of officer. Security, Border Patrol, Customs and Excise, it didn't really matter. He had his hands on his hips, looking directly at them. Though not in the least bit tired.

"You have a lot of explaining to do." He addressed Lance sternly.

Eklund escorted them to another room, under guard. The whole time, they didn't say a word. Lance looked at them, unimpressed. As though he had a lot to say, none of it nice.

They were taken to a large room, containing an office and various other facilities. There was a kitchen and a living room, even an old television. It was just enough to shelter someone and keep them safe for a day, or maybe overnight. But not to stay.

Lance took a deep breath. He put his hands in his pockets, brushing aside the sides of his black leather jacket like it was a long coat. He cleared his throat, taking on an air of authority.

Cruise looked up at him for a moment, He looked like he could protect him from anything. He was

certainly ready to try. In that moment, Cruise remembered why he was here.

"Well. Now that's over, I could do with a cup of tea. What about you?" Lance turned over and looked down at Cruise. Cruise nodded, accepting one to be polite more than anything. Lance went over to the small kitchen, finding the tea and putting the jug on. "Milk, sugar?"

"Just sugar."

When Lance returned, Elkund turned to him. His guards had been examining Cruise, trying to determine what was under the hood he wore over his head. It was a large hood, turning up at a point like there was a small hat on underneath.

"You say you have encountered a live Merdragon specimen." The officer talked about Cruise as if he wasn't even there. "Is this it, this... boy? We need to see." He needed to know, but more than that, he was also curious.

"Yes. He is." Lance knew what was coming next. He put his hands onto Cruise's shoulders protectively. Under the hood, Cruise's face was already scrunched up in anticipation.

They gathered around him as his coat was grabbed from him, revealing his green hair, horns and tail. Cruise gazed ruefully up at them, his cheeks red. He hated this sort of attention. He could see the fear in their eyes, and he knew what he was to them. A monster.

Under the bright lights, it was easier to see the contrast in their skin tones. Cruise's was slightly darker, almost a terracotta brown. Lance on the other hand had much lighter skin, making him look pale and pallid standing next to him.

There was a stunned silence as the group stared at him, until Lance decided he'd had enough. He cleared his throat assertively, gesturing to Elkund to give Cruise's trenchcoat back. He gave it to Lance, who quickly draped it onto Cruise's shoulders, looking back at the group indignantly. Cruise didn't bother putting it back on properly.

"His name is Cruise. He was a patient in a Fritish hospital. He comes from a broken home. The Fritish government have neglected him. He came to me asking for asylum." Lance's explanation left little room for questions. He looked at Cruise, with the words "Isn't that right?" written in his face.

"That's right." Cruise nodded in agreement. Something felt wrong about it, like he was intentionally lying. Like it left out something or exaggerated something. But it was the truth.

The jug went off, and after a few moments Lance brought back some hot tea.

"Does he have a valid visa, or a passport?" came the first, biggest question. The officer turned back to Lance, though it was difficult to divert his attention away.

"Yes. But it isn't meant to be used before a certain date." Cruise produced an envelope from within his vest. "It hasn't been activated yet." He handed it over, with whatever documents he thought might aid

him in this situation. He'd been very thorough, taking some of them out of his backpack.

"Well, we'll take it with us, and see what we can do in processing. We'll ask the Fritish government for permission to use it, if possible. But it's unlikely, so we may have to lodge your application and process it from scratch like any ordinary refugee."

"Regarding the housing question," Lance anticipated it. "I have a dormitory at the College which would do for the time being. If that's where he wants to go."

"Yeah. I mean, I'll go with him wherever he goes." Cruise was adamant.

"We'll keep your involvement classified, as long as we can." Eklund spoke directly to Lance. "However, this may take months to process. People are going to find out in a matter of days, and there's bound to be a media frenzy when that happens. You should come forward to your superiors as soon as possible and go from there."

When everything had been sorted out, Cruise was quickly escorted away, back to where Benjamin was waiting outside. Cruise wore his coat with the hood turned back up over his head, careful not to be conspicuous even when he knew nobody was watching.

The flight from the Airstables to the Leaxonia College took only a few minutes. They flew high into the sky, until they came to an enormous set of spires jutting out like teeth from the top of a mountain. From a distance it looked like a giant cathedral, with sharp spires and gothic windows lit up like festive decorations. Even in the dark, with the rays of the sun barely touching them, they were clear. Sunlight was just beginning to shine through gaps in the clouds, beyond the peaks and valleys far below.

As they flew closer, Cruise could see what it was. It wasn't just a building. It was a series of buildings interlocked together, all in gothic architecture. There was a maze of long halls within it, and between the halls were courtyards of varying sizes. The main one looked big enough to play football in it, if it weren't also populated by fountains, statues and gardens. It was, however, big enough to house a number of smaller buildings and gazebos inside it.

It was built like ten huge castles in one, stood proudly over the peak of a mountain. It could have been there in an unchanged state for centuries, or built up slowly over centuries. There was something terrifying, imposing and hauntingly beautiful about it. It filled Cruise with hope, tentative and flickering, slowly rising out of darkness like the dawn sun. It was home.

Cruise was escorted through hallways and stairwells. There wasn't time to admire the impressive sights around him, but it was immediately clear to him that he could get himself lost in this place and not be found for weeks. There was so much to explore, and he hoped to somehow see it all. But right now, he was too tired. He was so tired that walking up the stairs was almost an ordeal. He was tempted to ask if

he could be carried. He was tempted until they reached the top of the last flight of stairs, and his legs finally gave way. He was bending over double, on his hands and knees, panting. His blood was pumping, veins throbbing. He wanted to yawn through short breaths.

"I can't... go further." He gasped. "Too tired."

Lance stopped and knelt down beside him. "Want me to carry you?" he smirked, half-joking. But it didn't quite come as a surprise when Cruise nodded. He closed his eyes and let himself be picked up.

Lance strained to lift him, the weight of this seemingly small and fragile body catching him off guard. He carried Cruise in his arms, like he was a young girl swept off her feet in some romantic fantasy. It was slightly embarrassing for both of them, but also deeply sensual and loving. Cruise yawned and gripped him tightly, yielding to the embrace.

Lance chuckled nervously. "This is awkward." he blushed.

"Actually... it's kind of nice." Cruise muttered. He was too tired to care. At last he was at peace. Finally, he had a chance to sleep.

Alexia found her son in the deepest part of the Sanctuary. He'd run off into a darkened corridor, as close to the turbines as he was allowed to go. There were water, sewage and electricity pipes all through the walls and ceiling. He was sitting at the top of the stairs, hid head in his hands. She could hear him sobbing from several meters away. His long green tail was sat limp, devoid of life.

"Go away Mom." He muttered. He almost choked on the words. He didn't move a muscle.

"What's the matter? You can tell me." She stayed still, refusing to move.

"It... it's that word... I f-found out what it means." He finally turned to face her. Tears were streaking down his cheeks.

"What word?"

He took a deep breath to control his choking.

"Abomination." The word sounded strange in his thin, fragile voice. His mother was shocked, reacting as though he'd said a swear word. He said it, knowing how well it described him.

"It means freak. Monster. Something gross and unnatural."

"You've been reading a lot lately. Especially the religious stuff. Maybe you should take a break." She had only recently decided, upon his twelfth birthday, that he was ready to read such material. She was beginning to regret that decision. Perhaps he knew too much, more than was good for him. She sat down beside him, putting her arm around him. "What else did you find out?" She asked.

"A lot. It's not the books about religion that bother me so much. It's knowing where we came from."

"I know it's a lot to take in, but you'll get used to it." She petted his head. "We all do."

"I know the truth, Mom. I know that for every one of us that was made, two creatures had to die."

"That's one way of looking at it..." she began.

"What other way is there?" He looked at her pleadingly. He was beginning to tear up again. "It's not fair. Why do I deserve to live?"

"Perhaps they aren't dead." She kept her son close, reminding him of his education. "Y'know, the old Vulpine emperors believed they were two souls in one body. Well, it's just like that. Perhaps they live on, inside of you. They're a part of you." Her tone was soothing, comforting. But she wasn't sure it would be of any comfort to him.

"That's what I'm afraid of." he turned away, still looking miserable. His mother patted him, trying to soothe her troubled son.

"Don't cry, Cruisey. When you grow up, you'll be stronger than any of us."