

Chapter Six – Lost and Found

"You asked to see me."

The Vice-Chancellor's office was large, filled with books and artefacts. It was wide and spacious, but with little free space left on it. The walls were wood-paneled and ornate. Rain poured out of the gothic window to their right. His ultimate symbol of status and authority was the personal computer on his desk. Large, clunky and the latest model. It offset the archaic look and feel of the room. His name was labeled clearly at the front of his desk

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The Chancellor was an older man, with deer-like features. He was cervine in origin, one of Svaltona's native population. His hair was turning grey, losing colour at the tips. He had a long wispy beard of white hair, like the hair on a goat's chin. His formal attire looked old, and well worn.

Lance entered, putting on a brave face. It had the feel of being a kid sent to the principal's office. He reminded himself that they had gotten along well in the past, that the Chancellor would listen and respect his opinion. But it was his actions he would be more concerned about. He'd brought this situation upon him, by bringing a stranger into the College. He'd have to face the consequences, if not now then soon.

"Yes, it's urgent. I've just been with a hospital patient in Frittas. However, the situation there has just become... complicated." Lance chose his words carefully. "The patient has requested asylum in Svaltona, for reasons which are extremely sensitive."

"Go on." The Chancellor sat down at his desk. Lance pulled up a chair.

"Well, I've just been with him to the nearest Airstables to make a formal request. He's asked to stay with me in the interim."

"With you..." The Chancellor stood up, thinking. "Hmm..."

"That's not all." Lance continued. "This is where it gets complicated. He's not Frittish. He's part dragon."

"The first known case in five hundred years?" there was disbelief in his voice.

"That's right. You can see him if you like, but he is very shy."

There was a long pause while the Vice-Chancellor collected his thoughts. He never expected Lance, of all people to do something like this. He was aware of an incident that had occurred recently, the loss of a family member. He was still grieving, and perhaps that had made him lose objectivity.

"This isn't a refugee camp." He told him harshly. "We have to tread carefully, or else it will open the floodgates for more cases in the future." It wasn't a no. He wasn't telling him that Cruise couldn't stay. Lance was relieved.

"We can't just leave him in some government facility. That's the worst place for him right now. He just wouldn't be safe there. This is a special case." Lance argued, as calmly as he could.

"Alright, noted. But this isn't just some rare biological specimen you've discovered."

"Exactly. This is an intelligent, living, thinking individual. Old enough to make his own decisions. He has rights."

The Chancellor got up, pacing around the office for a moment, still thinking. He decided to change the subject to something else he needed to know.

"Is he the only half-dragon you encountered?"

"No, in fact I have reason to believe there's a community of them somewhere in Frittas. I was given government orders not to discuss it within their borders." It was a difficult admission for Lance. It troubled him, that they would both know what that meant in the long term.

"Then we could have an international incident on our hands."

"I'm aware of that." Lance replied, his voice like steel. It was time to discuss strategy. "If we keep this a secret long enough to put out an official statement, then the media will be reporting on that. We need to control the situation so it's us who come forward. It will also give both governments a chance to respond to this rationally."

"You've thought this through logically, I see." The Chancellor complemented him. Logic was always one of Lance's strengths. He finally surrendered to the logic of the situation. "Alright. But tell him not to get too comfortable here. If I'm ordered to hand him over to the government, I'll have to."

"I know." Lance was adamant, not to simply roll over and let that happen. Not without a fight. "Perhaps we should see this as research. Until we know more about this species, we don't know their specific physical or emotional needs. I can find out for you."

The Chancellor was looking out the window, at the rain and the peaks and valleys far, far below. He was looking to something much further away. An island nation Lance had just returned from. He feared that Lance had stirred the hornet's nest.

"If we're going to provide safe harbor to this creature, we need to make a strong case that he's been abused or neglected. I'll arrange to put him under psychiatric care for the time being."

"I know the counselors fairly well, I'll let them know the situation." Lance was telling the truth. He'd already become acquainted with them since the loss of his sister.

"Tell them we need a formal evaluation of his psychiatric state. I'll be acting on their recommendation."

"Alright." Lance got up to leave. "But I could tell you right now what they'll find."

"Then the two of you should have nothing to worry about." Was the Chancellor's response. It was cold, but not uncaring.

It was early in the morning when Evelina decided to leave the hospital. She had just packed her bags and collected her things from the office when there was a knock on the door. She opened, and to her surprise and slight horror, were the two agents standing impassively before her.

"Good morning." She addressed them warily.

"Mrs. Vitalia." Vinson said coldly.

"It's Miss, actually."

"Miss Vitalia. You were the last person to see the patient before he left. We were wondering if you could tell us anything that might indicate his whereabouts."

"He's missing?" she looked shocked, trying to be a good actress. "That's the first I heard of it."

"Did he say anything to you that might indicate where he would go?"

"No, nothing. Sorry. He did look rather upset to be going home again. That was the last time I saw him." She was telling the truth. For a lie to work, it had to be shrouded in facts. The two agents looked dissatisfied with her answers, and after a moment turned and walked away. She breathed a sigh of relief once they were down the corridor, and out of earshot. She slumped back into her chair, thinking of Lance and Cruise. She stared up at the plain white ceiling, as if they were somewhere just above the hospital itself.

"God speed, my good man... God speed." She muttered under her breath. It was time for her to leave.

Cruise woke up, half expecting to be back in his old bedroom. He half expected that night to have been a dream, even if it was an incredibly vivid one. When he realised it wasn't, he breathed a sigh of relief. But it felt premature. This was a totally unfamiliar environment, a bedroom he'd never been in before. It was wide and open, with the same archaic construction. The walls were adorned with bookshelves and the odd paintings of dragons flying across the sky. There was a desk with a computer and office supplies, and a small corridor leading into a kitchen and bathroom.

He lifted himself out of bed. He was in his purple t-shirt and matching purple jeans, bare-pawed, his hair a mess. His backpack and the rest of his clothes were in a nearby corner. He shambled over to the window. It was still raining outside. But more importantly than that, he could see things from it. A landscape. A sky. A whole world outside, filling him with wonder. He wasn't buried underground anymore. He was living the high life.

He went over to the bathroom to do something he'd always wanted to. He covered his hands in soap and washed the streak marks off of his face. Doing so revealed three permanent scars on the right-hand side of his face. Three scratch marks that never healed. He stared at them in the mirror. Part of him still believed it was *his* fault... But it didn't matter now. He couldn't hide them any longer. Doing so was a pretense that he kept up to make Lexi happy.

In the absence of anything better to do, he decided to have a shower. He wanted to get used to this place, in the hopes that he would be staying here as long as possible. It only occurred to him as he was getting undressed that he should have asked Lance permission first, but by then it was too late.

Come on, he told himself. *You have to do this sometime. I know it hurts, but you've still gotta have showers.*

As he started to wash his green-haired body, other thoughts started shoving their way into his mind. Memories of the past, of things that were best left forgotten. Showers he had with Lexi that he quickly regretted having. He tried to block them out, covering his face in a feeble effort to hold them at bay. He knew it would be like this, determined to go through it. But he couldn't stop thinking about it, fixating on it. He fell to the ground, curling into a ball of skin and fur, tail wrapped around him. Waiting for the thoughts to pass him by and leave him alone. Before he knew it, he was whimpering.

Once he was clean, he got dressed and returned to the bedroom to search through his belongings. He opened every pocket in his vest, and unzipped his backpack, gathering things together. It was a survival kit of sorts, a collection of irreplaceable things, things he believed would help him to love again. Cassettes, self-help books, and artifacts that meant something personally to him. It wasn't a lot, but it was enough. He'd left a lot of essentials behind, things like toothbrushes and tissues and spare clothing, those things meant nothing to him. He could get those anywhere. This was a collection of items he couldn't bare to leave behind, that made him who he was. Things of sentimental value. Things that said in no uncertain terms that he was not on holiday. He was never coming back home.

Lance dragged himself back to his dormitory room. He was escorted by a short, ruddy-faced deer woman in smart, bright clothing. She had short, brown hair tied into small braid that fell down her shoulder. Her antlers were short. Everything about her was short, impish and intending to be cute.

She was a counsellor, or at least training to be one. Lance had been her patient now for several weeks, since just after the incident with his sister. He had come to rely on her, but there were some things that needed doing rather than just simply talking about them. Lance had just spent the last few hours filling out paperwork, preparing the College for what was to come, and often taking brief naps in between. It only made things worse, and now he was dead tired. He had his hands in his pockets.

"You probably think I acted out of guilt." He was telling her, in-between yawns.

"Not necessarily. I mean, partially yes. But it sounds like you had a good reason for what you did. I hope he can stay here with us, as long as he needs to." She told him, hands by her back. Like anyone, she was

curious to meet this merdragon patient and honoured by the trust Lance had placed solely on her shoulders. But she reminded herself that this was just another patient at the end of the day, a person with their own thoughts and feelings. Not just an interesting laboratory specimen.

The two came to Lance's dormitory and she let him knock on the door. They thought they heard a squeaky voice on the other side.

"Uhm... come in!" it said.

The door opened and they found Cruise lying in bed reading a book from his backpack. He'd been waiting for Lance, and was somewhat taken aback to find another stranger coming to see him. He put the book down and sat up on the bed.

"You're back! Um... who-who's this?" he looked at her bashfully.

Lance looked back at the guest, remembering his manners.

"This is Annelie. She's a counsellor."

"Well, training to be." She interjected with modesty. As Cruise got up, they shook hands. "Call me Anne."

"Are you here to make an appointment?" Cruise asked. His sharpness took them by surprise.

"That's right. Any time you're free." She offered him, but it didn't look like he had much else to do in the meantime.

"Okay, well I'd like to go right now, if that's okay." He wanted it over and done with. He went over and put his trenchcoat on, ready to disguise his horns at a moment's notice.

"Okay. Great! I'll take you down to my office, it's not too far away." Annelie was eager as well. Lance watched them go, leaving him alone in the room. He had the bed all to himself, at least for a while. It was time to sleep. He didn't even bother to get undressed, only taking his jacket off. As he lay in bed, his mind turned to what he was doing and the doubts that were still ever present in his mind. Was he doing the right thing? Or would it all backfire horribly on him, on both of them? There was no way to know yet. Only time would tell.

"Did they do these things often?"

"Yes... at least once a week. Sometimes more... I don't know exactly." It simply wasn't the sort of thing one would want to keep track of.

Annelie looked at him, waiting for him to break down and be unable to reveal anything further. She couldn't help feeling incredibly sorry for this poor abused creature. It was as though an animal from a battery farm had been given the capacity to fully comprehend what was done to them, and a voice to speak about it. It was unnerving. It was barbaric. She wasn't sure if what he needed was a lawyer or an animal rights group.

"I-I thought..." he continued, on the verge of tears yet still determined to speak. "I could get used to it. Learn to enjoy it, y'know...." His eyes welled up. The look on his face made it clear, it was only now just dawning on him the sheer extent of what was done to him. "I was wrong." He barely managed to form the words when he broke down completely. It was an avalanche of emotion, held back for so long now that it threatened to bury him whole.

"I'm sorry!" he cried through muffled sobs. His apology sounded hollow, routine, like something he learned to say whenever he knew he was not at fault. But he said it anyway.

"Don't be." She said softly. "We're going to get through this, together." She reached for a tissue, handing it to him. The dragon boy simply wiped his eyes, now red raw around the edges.

For the first time, she felt completely and utterly out of her depth.

Cruise returned to the dormitory feeling completely drained. It was not an unfamiliar feeling, either physically or mentally. He opened the door and closed it behind him, without paying any attention to Lance. He was sitting up reading the book Cruise had brought, the one he had been reading before he left.

On the ceiling, where once there had been a smoke detector, there was now only a pair of wires hanging down. Cruise didn't notice, too busy looking downwards, feeling disconsolate.

"What's the book?" he asked Lance, ignorantly. He couldn't help admiring the way he looked, reading to himself in bed. He was such a bookworm.

"*Beauty and the Beast*. A classic." The reply made him blush, like Lance had been reading something personal, like a diary. That book was part of his Survival Kit. It made him wonder which of the two Lance thought he was, the Beauty or the Beast?

Lance put the book down, sitting up. He seemed to think carefully about what to say. Finally he decided upon, "How did it go?"

Cruise didn't know what to say, sitting on the bed beside him. "I don't know..." he searched his empty mind for remnants of the previous conversation. There was nothing. No sadness, no pain, no tears. He was numb. "I talked about it... I don't think I could talk any more."

"So, everything's alright? Are you feeling better?" Lance asked nervously.

"I dunno." Cruise didn't want to lie. He got up, pacing around, not knowing what to say. A tense silence filled the room.

"Are you okay?" Lance gave him a kind, caring expression. But on the inside, he was still nervous. He had no idea what to do. What happened next only cemented his anxieties.

"I'M FINE! OKAY!" Cruise blurted out, suddenly. His voice sounded strange at such a high volume. It was coarse, like sandpaper. He tried to stop it but it was too late. He said it. The force of it took him by surprise. Lance caught the heated breath right in his face, warming his skin. His expression was unchanged.

"I'm sorry!" he gasped, leaping back in shock. He looked at Lance like he was lucky not to have just doused him in flames. Lance looked at him, terribly concerned and more than a little guilty.

"It's okay." Lance sounded devastated by his mistake. "It's not your fault." He sat in silence for a few minutes, as Cruise started to wander around the place, looking for things to do. He examined every drawer and cupboard in the tiny corridor that served as a kitchen, checking the little mini-fridge, taking note of what was there. There was the clashing of pots and pans.

"What are you doing?" Lance was curious.

"I'm bored." Cruise admitted. "There must be something I can do around here."

"What d'you normally do?"

"Well, I can cook, clean... umm... burn your toast?" he eyed a toaster and some bread.

"You can cook? That's handy." Lance tried to sound impressed. Having someone to cook for him was an appealing thought. He chuckled modestly. "I can hardly cook a can of soup."

"What time is it?"

"About a quarter past five." Lance said as he looked at his watch.

"Oh, too late for toast then." Cruise was disappointed.

Some hours later, and the two of them had gone back to bed. It suddenly occurred to Cruise that it was their first proper night in together. He was anxious about it, not because he didn't find the idea of sleeping with him appealing. But that was precisely the problem. It was too intimate. Too tempting. He didn't want to get used to it and end up doing something he'd regret. What if it got Lance in trouble? Besides which, he wasn't really in the mood for that right now. It was all too soon. Things were changing so fast, that they had left him feeling cold.

He didn't say anything to him, but Lance could tell he was nervous about it. He promised Cruise that he wasn't looking to take advantage, but it wasn't that which worried him. Cruise was more concerned about his own desires, and the thoughts that plagued him at night.

"No... please, don't..." he muttered in his sleep. His body started to twist and squirm uncomfortably under the heavy sheets. "Don't touch me, not there... p-please... no..." the twitching stopped, and his upper body lunged violently out of bed. "NO!" he cried, gasping for air, his eyes wide open. He clutched his chest as if to try and slow his heart. He could almost hear it beating.

It was loud enough to wake Lance and jolt him out of sleep. He found Cruise sitting up, eyes wide open. His breathing was fast and shallow, smoke billowing from his lips. The heat in his belly was rising. His face was streaked with sweat, and his eyes were bloodshot. His cheeks blushed red, telling Lance all he needed to know. Cruise turned his head up to look at him with his wide purple eyes. It was a look of pure terror. A look that stopped Lance's heart cold.

"Lexi..." Cruise spluttered. It was the last word of a scenario that had played out in his head, in the dream. It was almost a question. His breath was visible in the dark, like smoke from a cigarette.

"It's alright." Lance put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "It was just a dream. Go back to sleep." He begged. He couldn't bear to see him like this.

Cruise's breath was still hot and heavy. The blush faded from his cheeks. Tears formed there. A small gout of flame threatened to escape from his mouth, until he gulped it back down. He choked back on his emotion, but it was too much. He broke down, sobbing quietly into Lance's bare chest. It wasn't the tears of a child, but of a young man who had been strong for too long.

"There there..." Lance cooed, petting his long green hair. It was all he could manage to say, as he began drifting back to sleep.