

Chapter Seven – Secret Dreams and Forbidden Fire

Lance wasn't sure where he was going, but he was getting there awfully fast. He galloped on all fours through the fresh grass, under a moonlit sky. The stars guided his way home. He remembered that he was being chased and could hear the barking of wolves behind him. He could have sworn he used to have only two legs and wear clothes, but it didn't matter. He kept galloping until he hit a rock in the grass, forcing him to tumble to the ground, legs splayed and rolling onto his side. He couldn't move any further, he was too weak.

In the sky he spotted something long and lithe, like a flying ferret covered in green fur. Its floppy frame was turning and swirling majestically in the air, before swooping down towards him. He could see its horns, its pointed ears and its long flowing mane, that travelled all the way down to the tip of its tail. It was a dragon, but not just any dragon. This was a rare and special kind of dragon. One that brought good fortune. It was green, the colour of good luck. It was doubly lucky.

The mighty green dragon seemed to call out to him, as though they were connected, on the same wavelength. It landed around him, circling its body around him protectively and baring its fangs. Lance could see the wolves approach, but as they grew closer, he could see that they weren't wolves at all. They were hairy dragons as well, in a multitude of exotic colours. Lance watched helplessly as the dragons entered into a feral standoff, their haunches raised, growling, snarling and hissing smoke from their nostrils. He then noticed that the green dragon was bigger than the rest and poised ready to strike. The others backed off, frightened away by it. Its nostrils billowed with smoke, threatening to douse them with flame as they took off.

With them gone, it turned its attention back to Lance. He looked up in awe at his mighty green savior, who looked at him with a much gentler look in its eyes. It was protecting him. It wrapped its fuzzy green body around him, letting him rest in its embrace. He felt its snout nuzzle up against his long equine face. Their horns locked together as one. He was safe.

"What is your name?" he called out to his new guardian. He wanted so desperately to know. But then in a moment he realised that he already knew it.

Cruise rushed through the crowd. There was a smell of mixed perfumes and the jangle of jewelry. He was in a large white dance hall, but all he could see was the guests, dancing in pairs, surrounding him like a forest. They all wore classical costumes, with frilly shirts and blouses, tall boots, top hats, cravats, frocks and frock coats. He was in a sea of velvet and silk. It was something he recognised from watching a great many MTV videos, something he knew was called "New Romantic." He had always been a fan. He had always hoped to try their costumes on for himself someday.

He then looked down at himself, and realised he was wearing one as well. A frilly shirt, a cravat, a velvet smoking jacket in dark magenta, a green satin vest. He couldn't remember putting these clothes on or

where they came from, but he liked the way they felt on him. He blended in perfectly with the crowd, although most were wearing browns, blacks and whites. He also noticed that he was the only one not wearing some kind of ornate mask. Most depicted some kind of snarling dragon face, but others were much more horse-like, with the telltale long pointy horn of a Unicorn. These people were masquerading. It was a masquerade ball... that he couldn't remember being invited to.

And then he saw him. A tall, green figure standing out from the crowd. The dancers started spinning away like parting currents of ocean. He could see him clearly now. He was a tall, silver-haired Unicorn, with no mask to be seen. He wore a long green velvet coat, a frilly shirt, and the smart clothes of an old Fritish gentleman. His metallic purple glasses were small and oval-shaped. He took them off, stashing them under his coat, and held out a hand. Cruise took it gingerly.

Cruise gasped. There were butterflies in his stomach. He wondered what cruel god had put such tender dreams, such a tender heart into a male body. *The same cruel god that made you the last hope of a dying race*, he thought.

"Like it?" Lance suddenly asked, as they slowly began dancing together. "I created this scenario for you."

"It's amazing... it reminds me of my wedding, only much better." Cruise remembered. His marriage to Lexi, the things they said and did, the way it felt... so long ago now. Such different people. It was like it happened to two strangers, oblivious to the ways time and love would change them.

What he felt reminded him of that night, the night they danced together. Only where that had felt awkward and stilted, like hugging and dancing with his mother, this felt different. Somehow it felt more right, in a way that only being with a taller man could.

"How are you doing this...?" Cruise was totally blown away. It just occurred to him how vivid it all was. "Am I dreaming?"

"Yes. And no. It's more than just a dream. You're in a lucid dream, I created for the two of us." Was the explanation. "Think of it like a storeroom in our minds. So that you always have a sanctuary, something better than reality to escape to."

"Why, why did you do all this for me?" Cruise asked, unsure what he had done to deserve such an incredible gift. Lance seemed to give the answer some thought.

"Because you're still hurting. I know that reality can only offer so much comfort."

Cruise blushed. It was all so caring of him. And it hinted at a secret pain of his own, hidden from Cruise's perception.

"I remember..." Cruise realised, thinking back. "I was flying, and then there was this unicorn... that was you." He looked up at him as though he had just been told something, or just learned something. Something that meant a great deal, especially to him. Lance immediately changed the subject.

"The best part is, your body is still asleep. You'll wake feeling just as rested."

The morning came as if it were any other regular morning. As though they had always been sleeping together. Cruise woke first, at just past half-past six. When Lance woke about an hour later, he found him clinging tightly to his chest, asleep again.

“Hey... wakey wakey!” he patted Cruise’s head, stroking his long green hair and wishing that they could stay like this for as long as they possibly could. Then his discipline kicked in, sparked by the ringing of an alarm clock. It was 7:30.

Cruise woke with a start, gasping for air. When he realised what position he had fallen asleep in, he blushed profusely. “I-I’m sorry!” he stammered, clutching his chest. He then got out of bed awkwardly, when he realised he was on top of him. “I didn’t mean to do that!”

“It’s okay.” Lance yawned. Truth be told he rather liked it, but he thought better of encouraging it just yet. He stared up at the ceiling, wondering when Cruise would notice the missing smoke detector.

Cruise went to the bathroom to get changed into the clothes he had brought with him. He had to stay in his regular attire of purple jeans and t-shirt with a green vest over the top. He returned to the main dorm room, passing through the small corridor that contained the kitchen. He failed to find anything to eat for breakfast there. Daylight shone through the window ahead, but it wasn’t enough to be glaring. It was foggy outside.

He found Lance in an odd-looking outfit consisting of plain shirt, green bowtie, cardigan and grey checkered slacks. The pants exposed his ample equine thighs rather awkwardly. The cardigan had a green and purple diamond pattern. He wore green spats over his hooves with the usual green horseshoes under them. He was still in shirtsleeves, his jacket was hanging in the closet beside the bed. It was more formal, more eccentric, and more professorial. He was dressed for something academic.

“What’s the plan for today?” Cruise asked him tentatively. Part of him was afraid he simply would be told to hide in the dorm room all day, to wait for more counsellors to see him and do nothing else.

“You must be hungry. I know where to go for breakfast.”

Cruise’s fuzzy green ears propped up at the prospect of food. “I sure am.” he nodded, raring to go.

Lance took him several floors down, this time via a lift. They passed a long narrow corridor, with offices and classrooms on the left hand side, and frosted windows to the right. Cruise enjoyed these trips around the College. It gave him a chance to take in more of the scenery, and the impressive building he found himself in. A few people saw them, some in passing, some observing from inside their rooms. Most of them were teachers. The majority of students were still in bed. None confronted them or spoke to them. But Cruise could see the concern and curiosity in their faces.

Finally, Lance lead him to a doorway at the end of a long hall. There was a window in front of them, indicating they were at the end of a particular wing of the building. The doors were closed with a "Closed for cleaning" sign hanging over the doorknobs.

"Don't worry, that's just there to give us some privacy." Lance had told him as he opened the door. "Well, privacy apart from one other person. Once they were inside, Cruise lifted his hood and took his coat off, revealing himself to anyone who was watching. There, waiting for them was Evelina in similarly smart clothes.

The room was a massive space like an auditorium. One end of the room was dominated by windows and glass doors, leading to the College grounds outside. There was frost on them. There were countless empty tables and chairs, all wooden. Checkered cloth covered the tables.

"Good morning!" She said cheerfully, though careful not to speak too loudly. The room had an strong echo, and she didn't want to attract unwanted attention.

"Good morning." Cruise shook her hand politely, hanging his coat over the chair and sitting down. Lance put his green jacket over the chair opposite.

"Well, long time no see. Good to see you made it safe and sound." She smiled, looking relieved to see him again.

"It's... quiet in here." Cruise noted.

"Yes, well..." Lance began, scratching his scalp. "We have to keep a low profile for now. Just a day or two, until the College has put out an official statement."

"I understand." Cruise said, but he sounded unhappy about it.

"You're the first Merdragon anyone has seen in a long time." Lance told him. "It can't stay a secret for long."

"And then, I suppose it'll be hard to get any privacy at all, won't it?" Somehow Cruise thought that would be the least of his concerns. In fact, his worries were legion, and were growing by the day.

"Yes, I suppose this is the calm before the storm, in a way. It's best we make the most of it." Lance straightened his silly purple glasses. Evelina gave him a look of "There's no need to spoil the mood."

"Well, who's hungry?" she changed the subject. "I can cook anything you want, any breakfast you desire!"

"Um, it's okay. I can cook for myself." Cruise piped up.

"Don't worry. You take it easy, okay hun?" She insisted as she got up. This was her treat. Cruise simply nodded.

"Oh, okay. Thank you miss."

“So, what’ll it be?”

“A... BLT sandwich.” The most appetizing thing he could think of. “And... orange juice.”

Evelina then turned to Lance’s end of the table. “And for you?”

“Honey on toast, please. And to drink... oh, apple juice.”

“Thank you sirs.” She bowed gracefully. “I’ll be back soon with your order.” Then turned and headed for the Cafeteria kitchen to rustle it up for them, leaving them alone together. Cruise was watching her trotting away, and once she was gone started looking around awkwardly. Lance was looking peacefully at him. It was hard to hold his gaze.

“Does... does she do that often?” he finally asked.

“No, not really. She worked as a waitress for a few years. She just wants to make you feel at home here.” He smiled. Cruise mustered the courage to look him in the eye, and started to smile too. In fact, he caught himself chuckling softly to himself. It was the first time in quite a while.

“What is it?” Lance chuckled back, the mirth becoming contagious.

“Oh, nothing...!” The world’s first Merdragon looked shyly away, as if dreading what he was about to say but enjoying his own fear all the same. “It’s just... all this, taking me out for breakfast...” he gulped. “I-is this a date? Did she set us up for this?”

Lance tilted his head curiously, making an expression that Cruise couldn’t help finding irresistibly cute. He then blushed and turned away.

“Well, um... no, not exactly.” He looked straight back at him with a strength Cruise deeply envied. “That was my idea. She just likes to take care of things herself.” He took his glasses off, looking serious. “So... you do feel that way, about me?” He made it sound like Cruise had done something wrong, but that wasn’t his intention.

“I-I can’t help it, I’m sorry.” Cruise apologised, though he didn’t know why. He’d been trained to be sorry for things.

“What about your wife?” Lance asked, trying to sound more detached, and less like he was judging him for anything. “Did you love her?”

“No. I don’t love Lexi...” Cruise began, before correcting himself. “I mean, I do. But not in that way. I can’t...” he started to sound guilty.

“Does she know...?”

“I think...” He collected his thoughts. “She lives in denial. She’s more like a sister to me, anyway. And... as far as I’m concerned, we’re through. I want to divorce her, somehow. My people wouldn’t let me though.”

"I see..." Lance began, his hands now interlocked together like a villain in deep contemplation. "I don't want you to get the wrong impression of me, Cruise. I care deeply about you, and I wish I could return your feelings, but..."

Cruise looked shocked, like he knew what he was about to say. Like his heart had already been shattered into a million pieces. There was a silence that seemed to last forever.

"It's too... awkward... at the moment." Lance finally said, choosing his words carefully. *At the moment, he said*, Cruise realised. *Yes, I heard it the first time*. Another silence reigned.

"Things are moving so fast. And if I'm caught fraternising with you, I could risk everything. And then... well, I wouldn't be able to help you." He explained, but he knew what it sounded like. Excuses.

"I understand..." Cruise began. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want to dissuade you, Cruise." Lance put a hand on his thoughtfully. "It's a grand dream, a lovely dream. And it could work out. But... well, the time will come. And I think we'll both know when that is when we get there."

What Cruise felt was a kaleidoscope of mixing, swirling feelings, transmuting together and bouncing off each other. If someone took a picture of what was inside his brains, he felt sure it would look totally trippy. He wanted to laugh, cry, and curse his own stupid weird body, all in an instant. It was a thunderstorm, and he was right in the center of it. But amidst all that raging emotion was the bright spark of hope that Lance had given him.

It only felt like a few moments later when Evelina returned with her breakfast. She carried it on a steel tray, keenly utilising her skills as a waitress.

"For you, one BLT sandwich and OJ." She landed them on the table before him, before doing the same for Lance. "And for you, honey on toast and apple juice." Once she was done, she left to return the tray, coming back with breakfast of her own. Cruise had already started to munch into his sandwich. Lance was just about to start eating when she returned.

"What are you having?" he asked her casually.

"My favourite, Museli with plenty of seeds in it, and a good old fashioned glass of milk." She sat down with them cheerfully. "I just love seeds in the morning."

"Sounds very nutritious." Lance kept up the small talk, trying to look cheerful as well. He then noticed that Cruise had stopped eating suddenly. He swallowed the last bite and looked at them as if they'd just said something terrible.

"Uhm... excuse me, I need to go to the bathroom!" he squeaked, getting out of his chair in a hurry. His heart was pounding in his chest, he didn't want to think about it. *Not here, not now*. But he couldn't stop it. He made it as far as the door when he bent over, hand against the wall to support himself. He spluttered, gasping for air. His heart thickened, his mouth turned dry and the taste of his saliva turned

into something unpleasant. His thoughts were polluted. He could feel the heat in his belly rising, his breath turning to steam like he'd been left out in the cold.

Lance and Evelina had already raced out of their seats to surround him.

"What's the matter?" Lance was shocked, desperate to help him.

"F-flash...backs..." he wheezed, turning back to face them. He didn't want to, but his mind was already comparing it to another time, when he was forced into a position he really didn't want to be in.

"He's having a panic attack!" he heard Lance say. "What should we do?"

Cruise turned and slid down the wall, until he was sitting with his back to it. His tail wrapped closely around him for comfort as he continued to hyperventilate, struggling to suppress his poisoned thoughts.

"Try to relax... take deep breaths." Evelina told him before turning back to Lance. "Get him something to drink, water, orange juice. Anything that'll calm him down."

"Chilli..." Cruise gasped, looking up at them. They didn't seem to hear him properly. "Have you got any chilli?"

"I'll see what I can do." Lance rushed off to the kitchen. Meanwhile, Evelina was knelt down beside Cruise, muttering an apology.

"I'm sorry, Cruise. I said something bad, didn't I? I'm sorry... try to stay calm." She urged. She could feel the heat of his breath beginning to grow hotter.

Lance returned with a glass of chilled water in one hand, and a squeeze bottle containing crushed chilli sauce in the other.

"Chilli..." he gasped, looking up at Lance as if to beg. Lance handed it to him and he brandished it like a baby's milk bottle. He opened it, trying to squeeze it out only to find it wasn't working. Unscrewing the lid revealed a thin foil covering stopping it. The bottle had never been used before. *Don't you just hate that?* was what Cruise wanted to say but couldn't. It wasn't long before the problem was solved, and Cruise was chugging down chilli sauce as fast as he could. When he could fit no more of it in his mouth, he swallowed.

"Water!" he exclaimed, and Lance immediately offered him water. Smoke was beginning to pour through his nostrils as he drank. Finally, he exhaled again. This time his breathing had returned to normal. The heat that it carried had subsided. He seemed calm, at peace once again. Though it was hardly a normal state of affairs.

"How did you do that?" Evelina was amazed.

"Of course. Chillies are a dragon delicacy." Lance explained, realising what Cruise was about to say.

“Yes, they... cool the breath. Suppress certain... urges...” Cruise tried his best to explain. “I-It’s... it’s a way of breathing fire, without breathing fire... if you know what I mean.”

“Doesn’t it hurt?” Evelina asked. Cruise simply nodded. What he did was like pinching yourself to wake yourself up. Painful, but effective.

“That’s what the water’s for.”