

Chapter 8 - Downtime

The day carried on for the three of them in an awkward fashion. Cruise made sure to finish his sandwich, and Lance had a lecture to give in the afternoon. It gave them a few hours to kill, which they spent taking Cruise around the College, giving him a grand tour. Or as close to one as they could give him while his identity was being masked. Teachers and students passed them, regarding him strangely, as though Lance and Evelina had brought a child into the building. Being considerably shorter than either of them made for an embarrassing experience. But it wasn't that which bothered him. All the while, he was looking away, feeling guilty that he'd forced the two of them to witness the incident in the cafeteria. As though he had burdened them with his problems. Not only that, but he couldn't help sighing all day, and he wondered why.

With Lance finally gone, it gave Evelina a chance to talk with Cruise in private. So, without further ado, she took him back to her office. It was strangely barren; it had been tidied in a hurry and abandoned a week ago. As she stepped through the door, Evelina realised she barely spent any time there in the last week. There was sure to be a mountain of paperwork waiting for her.

Cruise sat on the chair opposite her desk, like he was her patient. He was starting to think that perhaps he should be. An expert on exotic creatures, a veterinarian, someone he trusted. It was only a matter of time before he needed her for something. But he was getting tired of thinking about his own needs. He sighed, wishing he could stop. Wishing he could think about...

"Cruise... mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"Hm?"

"You're in love, aren't you?" her forwardness made him blush.

"How did you know?" he admitted. *Was it really that obvious?*

"You've been sighing all day. You won't even look him in the eye, like you're ashamed to."

"I..." Cruise looked away. "I know... he's not supposed to flirt with me."

"Just be patient with him. Things will change before you know it."

"And then?"

"Then he'll come around on his own. He doesn't want to risk losing you right now."

"Sounds like you're speaking from experience." Cruise looked at her perceptively.

"Well, yes." She remembered their short-lived relationship. "I know when he's holding back."

"Why, what happened? Why didn't it work out?" Cruise wanted to know what he was up against, what

his odds were. The fact that Lance was so flexible about gender made him nervous, as though the chances jealousy were doubled.

"In a word, professionalism. We were classmates at the time, and eventually colleagues as well. He chose to put his career first, and I wanted more from him. There's a stigma attached to indiscretion, especially in his line of work." She smiled, remembering something fondly. "It's almost expected of him, so when it happens people come down on him hard. It makes him insecure."

Cruise thought about what she was saying, and what it implied for him. "You think he's being pressured to stay away?"

"It's possible. I've noticed how nervous he gets around you." She surprised him. Surely, he was the nervous one, not Lance.

"There's just one thing I don't understand." Cruise began. "Why did he do all of this? It's not something that a normal person would just do for no reason. Is there a reason behind it all?"

"You mean you didn't know?" She unexpectedly answered his question with another question. "That's alright, it's probably not something he would tell you straight away. You see, he lost someone a little while back. A sister. She was in this abusive relationship, you see. And she..." The word was on the tip of her tongue, but she hated to say it. They both knew what it was. "Well... I think he blames himself for what she did."

Cruise simply sat back in his chair, mortified. It was as if somebody had planned this. It was too great a coincidence to ignore. He suddenly felt a sharp pang of guilt.

Oh God, what have I done?

Finally, the time came for Cruise's next counselling session. As he was led away, he thought carefully about his position, and Lance's responsibilities. He wasn't willing to give up without a fight, not this time. He needed a plan. A way to show that Lance wasn't responsible for his feelings. He needed to be proactive, but only in the right way at the right time. He needed to be the one to do it, to absolve Lance of blame. But he wasn't the seductive type. He was too scared, especially now. He needed a plan.

"After what happened this morning..." Cruise began. "I felt so guilty."

"Why's that?" Annelie asked, quickly jotting down the highlights of their conversation.

"I don't know..." Cruise lied, as he tried to come up with the answer. "I was always taught to not be a burden to others. My problems are really stressing them out, I can tell. I could see how scared they were. I should have been able to stop it. I should have been stronger. I'm a burden..." he trailed off, his sharp teeth clenched. He was too angry at himself to continue.

"You're not burdening anyone." Annelie told him. "You couldn't help what happened, it was out of your control. They understand what you're going through, and they just want to help. You mustn't be afraid to reach out to them. I'm sure they'll be there for you whenever you need them."

Cruise looked back up at her, waiting for her to continue.

"This isn't going to get better overnight. They know that. If you're ever feeling ashamed about it, just remember that what happened wasn't your fault."

Later that afternoon, Annelie returned from her counselling session to report her progress to Vice Chancellor Palvina. She found him waiting for her in his office. He wasted no time in getting straight to the point.

"So, you've had two sessions with him in two days. What's your assessment?"

"Quite frankly... I'm a bit out of my depth here." She told him, her tone as grave as a cemetery. It wasn't a statement of emotion, but simply a fact. "This is not an easy fix."

"Explain."

"If his condition were physical, he'd be in Intensive Care. It wasn't just one incident that caused him all this trauma. He comes from a..." the word formed just in time to catch it. "A culture of abuse and exploitation. I don't know how he has survived it for so long." She was horrified. She doubted that she could have done so well. "It's actually kind of impressive. He's a survivor, but he's been on a razor edge for some time now."

"Is he at any risk of..." the Chancellor chose his words carefully, softening the blow. "Self-harm?"

"Not in the short term. But I wouldn't be surprised if it's how he got into this situation. Hope means a great deal to him. So long as we can offer him that, he has every reason to..." she thought about the most effective choice of words. "To soldier on."

The Chancellor furrowed his brow. He couldn't give this creature everything it wanted. "Your recommendation?"

"I only deal with students' problems." She knew he would appreciate how minor they were. "I don't have the expertise for this. I need help."

"We can't bring too many people into this. The less are involved, the better." He was thinking carefully about who the situation called for. He looked out from behind interlocked fingers, calculating.

"Then perhaps it's time to bring out the big guns." She suggested.

After the lecture, Lance decided to return to Evelina's office once again. There was something poetic about it, about retracing his steps taken a week ago. There was a certain symmetry to it. It let him reflect on how much his life had changed.

"Hard to believe, that it's just been a week." He was telling her.

"It sure is." She decided to remind him of something he was forgetting. "But these are still early days."

"I know..." Lance looked worried. "I'm just trying to take it a day at a time, for now at least."

"You seem worried." Evelina saw straight through him, like she always did. "But about him, or yourself?"

"Why not both?" Lance smiled, shrugging casually. He'd learned to hide his nerves, and it was kicking back in again. "I'm not sure I can do this. He needs a healer..." he thought back to the incident at breakfast. His fears cemented themselves, becoming clearer. "What if I make things worse?"

"When things are this bad, they're going to get worse before they get better." Evelina warned. "You just have to hold your nerve. Be patient with him. You got him this far, you've rescued him. He just needs time." Her advice was the same as it was to Cruise, for a reason. They both had a long journey ahead of them.

Cruise was tired of waiting around. Tired of being left out of the loop. He decided not to wait, and instead headed straight for Evelina's office under his usual disguise. He was quickly becoming a normal sight in the halls that separated them. When he finally reached the office, the door was closed. He gave a gentle knocking and was quickly greeted by their surprised faces.

"Cruise?" Lance let him in. Cruise made sure to close the door behind him.

"You found us." Evelina was impressed, though worried that all of this travel was making him more conspicuous.

"You're talking about me, aren't you?" Cruise guessed, hands in his pockets.

"Yes." Lance nodded. It was all he could say.

"So, what's your verdict?"

"We haven't decided yet." Evelina tried to offer him the truth. "But Lance is thinking of calling in outside help." She put him on the spot.

"Yes, well you see... I don't know if I can help you. I'm not a psychiatrist or a doctor. My people skills aren't even that great." Lance said openly. "I suppose... I'm just feeling a little overwhelmed."

"I believe in you." Cruise looked straight up at him, as though he could do no wrong. None of that mattered to him. "Both of you. I just want to stick together."

"You think you'd benefit more from our company?" Lance asked, though he was really just rephrasing the last statement.

"Of course. I don't need some stranger with years of training. I already know what I'm up against. I don't want to face that with anybody else." Cruise said adamantly, though his voice was still as soft and husky as ever. He was trying his best to speak more boldly. He meant every word.

"There are some things a professional can do for you, that we can't." Evelina interjected.

"That doesn't matter. There are things they can't offer me, like friendship, companionship, or..." Cruise didn't know if he should say it, but he was going to anyway. "Or love. Even platonic love." He looked at Lance, who looked back at him fearfully.

"You want a new family?" Lance realised. *No pressure there then*, he thought to himself.

"That's it exactly. I don't need another healer. I just need somewhere to belong." The truth was, he had little faith that a counsellor could do much for him, besides an excuse to talk about what he'd been through. He could talk to either of them about that, and it wasn't going to take his mind off it. He wanted more than that. There was a long silence, as nobody spoke. Lance and Evelina were gathering their thoughts.

"From what I gather," Lance began, breaking the silence. "You'll have to stay isolated over the weekend. After that the College is going to do something, so the students know you're here. I'm not sure what yet, but it'll probably be on Monday, fingers crossed."

"Well, we'd better find things to do together." Evelina decided. "I'm sure we can come up with a few ideas. What about... a slumber party?"

It was Friday night. Evelina and Lance lead him to a huge library complex. Cruise had been briefly introduced to it on an earlier tour, but wasn't given a proper chance to explore the whole area. The library was a vast, layered complex of bookshelves and study rooms in the heart of the College building. The area was so large that some parts of the upper floors were held up by vast pillars. Above them was a glass ceiling, with the darkening sky pouring through it. Lance and Evelina both followed behind him, carrying sleeping bags over their backs.

As Cruise entered its main hall of the library, he felt what almost resembled vertigo, only backwards. It was scary to look up at the stack of floors above him, all populated by bookshelves, all filled with books. His breath had started to grow short under the many floors of the library. It felt confining, and almost oppressive. It reminded him of being back home, deep under the ground.

"It takes some getting used to, doesn't it?" Lance whispered. He was doing his best not to speak up, knowing just how much noise he had to make to create an echo.

"Can we go to the top floor?" Cruise asked him, his normal tone almost echoing.

"Of course."

A short trip in the lift took them to the thirteenth floor of the library complex. There, they found the top floor arced around the main hall in a U shape, walled by glass windows. The walls were lined with chairs and desks around it, allowing people to sit and read while also enjoying the view in complete safety.

"You like it up here, don't you?" Evelina asked.

"Better than down there." Cruise admitted. "It's a bit..." the right word was hard to find. "Claustrophobic down there."

"If it's personal, it's okay. You don't have to explain." She offered him a chance to drop the subject, if he wanted to take it. But instead it felt like a dare, like he wasn't strong enough to discuss his feelings. He knew that wasn't what she meant by it, but he wanted to say something anyway.

"Well, actually... it's probably just claustrophobia. Being from an underground sanctuary, and all that."

"You prefer being up high?" Lance speculated.

"Yes, I suppose so. I'd like to think it means there's still flying in my blood, even though I don't have wings to fly with."

"Perhaps you should teach him to ride Benjamin sometime." Evelina offered, half-joking and half-serious.

A few hours later, and the three of them had finally decided to get some sleep. They picked a secluded spot between two rows of bookshelves. They still had a view of the night sky from the glass roof in the center of the room, but they were sheltered from the moonlight. Their sleeping bags were hunched up against the far walls, though Lance and Cruise were both lying next to each other, while Evelina lay somewhere slightly further away. She wanted to give them some privacy.

Lance and Evelina had gotten into their pyjamas. His were bright cobalt blue, to match the small glints of blue steel in his hair. Hers were pink. Cruise meanwhile was limited to his usual purple tank top and undershorts. The green fluff on his chest poked out from underneath, and he'd taken his socks and shoes off. His large dragon feet poked up into the air conspicuously, so he shuffled onto his side slightly to hide them.

First thing I'm going to do tomorrow is somehow get these clothes washed, he told himself. He was loathe to let them stink up the tiny dormitory, but he wondered if it meant he'd have to hide in there while he was naked. *Maybe it would be okay to let Lance see me like that...* But he didn't permit himself to think about it for long. He was getting uncomfortably hot under the sleeping bag. He blushed, trying to hide himself in it.

As he lay there, waiting for sleep, his mind turned to his regrets. He wished he could have said more,

done more. He wished he could be more engaged, just to let them know he cared, how much he appreciated them. It still wasn't quite sinking in, this sudden radical change in circumstances. Being there with the two of them was like a dream. Like he'd died and this was his heaven. It had been a long time coming.

Evelina was about to go to sleep, when she noticed the two of them lying together, eyes closed and leaning into one another. Cruise seemed to be leaning closer, like Lance exuded warmth. Lance was leaning down to himself, in his own little world, oblivious. In many ways it summed them both up.

Temptation overcame her and she crawled quietly over to them. She always liked catching Lance asleep like this. But she wasn't sure about Cruise yet. She patted Lance gingerly on the head, ruffling his silvery smooth hair a little. Seeing them together like this made her want desperately for things to work out between them. They were so peaceful, like being in each other's warm embrace here and now just melted all their troubles away. She chuckled quietly to herself.

Cruise flinched. He then mumbled something incoherently to himself, as if pretending he were still awake. His tail wrapped around him for security.

"Sorry. But you two are just too cute." She said, before getting back into her sleeping bag. She didn't want or need a camera. The image of them sleeping was already burned into her memory for good.

Cruise woke up the next morning in Lance's dormitory, alone. He'd been carried there, probably to keep his presence in the College undetected. Lance was nowhere to be seen, leaving him to wonder where that Unicorn got all his stamina and discipline from. He assumed he was off doing some important paperwork somewhere. When he got back, he was going to thank him for last night. And ask about getting his clothes cleaned while he was at it, though part of him was still deeply nervous.

It was all well and good, but he was starting to wonder why he was sweating so profusely. Why was it so hot in here, in the middle of Winter? Rather than putting on his normal clothes, he decided to remain in his tank top and shorts. The thought of being covered in any more clothing made him sweaty and uncomfortable.

Just when he was ready to do something, there was a knock on the door. Cautiously he opened it, and was greeted by a tall Cervine man with fair hair. His antlers were like a pair of dead trees on either side of his head, and he wore a smart but casual business suit, in black and white.

"Mister Firewind, I presume?" He pronounced the name strangely, clearly it was unfamiliar to him.

"Yes, that's me." Cruise nodded bashfully. He let him in, hoping nobody was watching, and promptly grabbed his coat. Had to be about something they wanted him to do elsewhere anyway.

"My name's Jusilla, Jusilla Hirvo. I've been assigned to be your psychiatrist. Like a therapist, but I'll also

be able to make a diagnosis and provide you with treatment.”

Cruise already had his coat on, ready to leave. He wasn’t sure if he should be annoyed at all this attention from strangers, or just be glad at having something to do. But talking about his problems wasn’t something he relished either way.

A few hours later, Cruise returned to find Lance working on his desk. He was caught in the throes of writing paperwork, looking gratefully up at him.

“I’m just catching up on some paperwork, I’ll be with you in a minute. Would you like to go somewhere for lunch?”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll wait.” Cruise took his coat off and sat down on the bed. He went through his things and found the novel he was reading. He’d almost forgotten about it. “Hey, Lance... is it just my imagination, or is it getting hot in here?”

Lance looked at him confused. He’d been wrapping up warm.

It wasn’t long before he was back in Evelina’s office, and she was taking his temperature.

“Well, it’s not a cold.” She concluded. “Is this normal for you?”

“It happens sometimes.” Cruise was struggling to find the right words. “It’s just a hot flush, it’s fairly common with...my kind.” He chose to say, lacking any better words for it.

“Any possible causes?”

“Well... um... i-i-it’s really kind of awkward...” Cruise blushed, starting to stammer. He wanted to talk about anything else, and he knew what telling the truth would mean. “It’s... it’s a medical condition.” He lied.

“Medical? So why is it awkward?”

“I’m sensitive to heat, and when I’m stressed, I tend to get a hot flush. It’s probably just from the stress of the last few days or so.”

“Hmm... what do you think?” She turned to Lance. He shrugged.

“It makes sense. Mammalian dragons are sensitive to heat, and naturally prefer the cold. Warm blood and the ability to breathe fire is a troublesome combination, at the best of times.”

“Yes, it is...” Cruise muttered. He knew more than he was saying.

Lance spent much of the following day at a meeting, discussing what the College planned to do, plotting their next move. He also spent a lot of time with Evelina going through medical records and information on Mammalian Dragons, for anything that might be useful.

He returned to the dormitory to find Cruise doing pushups. He was in his tank top once again, with a purple headband covering his forehead to stop the sweat. His green hair was tied back in a pigtail, which Lance thought made him look even cuter.

"18... 19... 20." He stopped and picked himself up. "Sorry, I didn't know you were coming back yet."

"Oh, don't mind me." Lance waved with his usual casual smile. "I didn't know you exercised."

"I've been a little bit lax lately." Cruise smiled back as he sat on the bed. "I'm glad you're here, I've gotta talk to you about something." He sounded a little nervous, which for him was hardly a rare sight. If anything, the smile was. He was putting on a brave face.

"Oh? Not bad, I hope."

"No, not bad... worse. I've just been with Doctor Hirvo today."

"The psychiatrist." Lance remembered him.

"He gave me my official diagnosis, and I asked him to give it to me in writing." He picked up a piece of paper on the bed, like a certificate with much more writing on it. He gave it to Lance, who read it all quickly.

Post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Social Anxiety Disorder.

That was the name they gave it. That was the name of the thing he would have to live with.

"I see." He didn't sound surprised at all. He looked back down at Cruise, sitting quietly to himself. He seemed to be deep in thought.

"I wanted to see it for myself, not just hear it." He looked sad. "But... I still can't believe it. It's still sinking in."

"At least..." Lance began, but the right words weren't coming to him. "Now it can." It was all he could say, all the comfort he could offer.

"I know, that's the worst thing about it. I couldn't have coped for so long without blocking it out of my mind. She took so much away from me, including my grip on reality." He looked up gratefully at Lance, as if to say that he'd done so much more than save him from his old life. He was keenly aware of how he felt, but he was tired of talking about it. He was broken, damaged, violated. Used and then tossed aside once he outlived his purpose.

"I wish I didn't have to force this on you." He allowed himself to sound guilty. But more than that, he wanted to make sure he didn't sound ungrateful.

"Nonsense, I'm glad to help." Was Lance's eager response.

"Why are you doing this?" Cruise decided to ask. He knew the answer, but in a slightly machiavellian way, he wanted to hear the answer directly from him.

"Well, it's a long story." Lance scratched the back of his neck nervously. "Let's just say that... I had the chance to do this for someone once. I didn't take it, and I regret it now."

"I know what it's like to lose someone." Cruise admitted. "Whatever happened, I'm sure it wasn't your fault."

Lance listened, surprised at his response. He wished he could believe that, but for now his guilt was a useful tool that he needed. He hadn't mentioned that he lost anyone. *Perhaps he already knows*, he thought. *Evelina probably told him.*

"It's alright." Lance assured him, but also himself. "I'm fine, I'd rather worry about your problems for the time being. Yours is the greater need."

There was a pause, neither of them knew how long it lasted. It could have been seconds or minutes. Eventually Cruise said something that was on his mind.

"You seem to know a lot of psychiatrists and doctors." He said. He was being perceptive, saying more than he intended to. "I find that interesting."

Lance said nothing. He didn't have to. He could tell that Cruise already sensed the truth.