

Chapter 9 – Resuscitation

Her silhouette stood out from under the streetlights as she walked up the stone path. All around her were a cluster of old stone buildings, like cottages in a sleepy town. The long, winding road was paved with stone, leading up a hill to a massive gate. Around them were tall pine trees, towering over them and blocking the moonlight. It was an ancient village built into the side of a mountain, in the middle of a forest. The Leaxonia College of Science and Magicianship dominated the landscape ahead, a massive castle complex built into the mountain's very peak. These houses were just a part of the College's network of accommodations, a village where students lived and studied.

She was in her usual trenchcoat once again, but had decided to finally lower her hood, exposing her unmistakable orange hair. Up ahead was another payphone. She hoped the Agent's information was correct. This was going to be a delicate operation. But getting him out of there was worth any cost.

The phone rang loudly, almost catching Cruise off guard. He knew there was something bad about it, he just had a bad feeling. Who ever called Lance in his dorm room? It could only mean something serious.

Lance picked it up with an equal sense of apprehension.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Lance Valentyne is it? It's Lexi here, Lexi Firewind. We've already met."

"Oh." Lance gulped, not knowing how to address this person. "What can I do for you?"

"I rather think it's what I can do for you." She sounded unnervingly sure of herself. "I know you're looking after a friend of mine. And I know you're having trouble with his medical needs."

"That's right." Lance was cautious. He didn't like how she was able to be so detached.

"I know the sort of things he's been saying about me, and I know what you must think of me." She made a feeble effort to drive a wedge between them. It failed. "I know you don't want to see me, but I do care about what happens to him. I'll tell you anything you need to know and give you his prescription. All you need to do is meet me outside for a few minutes."

Lance put the phone down, looking back anxiously at Cruise. He could see that he knew something was up.

"It's Lexi, isn't it?" he asked. Lance nodded.

"She wants me to see her outside, says she knows what's the matter with you."

"You don't really trust her, do you?" Cruise was afraid that he did. He didn't know what they had to lose,

but he didn't want to risk it.

"No, but... what if she's telling the truth?" Lance spoke softly, leaving the phone behind. "I don't know what I'm doing."

"Just be careful, okay." Cruise begged him. Lance nodded in understanding, before he picked up the phone.

"Are you there?" He asked, hearing her confirmation a second later. It was so brief he wasn't even sure what she said. "Where do you want to meet me?"

"There's a security gate on the northwest side, leads out to the accommodation precinct. Do you know it?"

"Yes, of course. I should be there in about twenty minutes." Lance put the phone down swiftly. He put his warmest coat on, grabbing his keys. He seemed terribly worried.

"Don't worry about me, I'm not going anywhere." Cruise reassured him.

"Don't open the door for anyone. I'll be back as soon as I can." Lance told him as he walked out, shutting the door behind him. It was locked.

Cruise opened the curtains and looked out the window. It was frosted over. He wasn't sure where north-west was from where he was, wishing he could just see them from the safety of the bedroom. He didn't know what to do, so he decided to sit down and try to have a nap on the desk.

He didn't hear the bathroom door open behind him, or see the tall black figure creeping up behind him. It was a man, sneaking up to wrap their arms around him in a pincer movement, with chloroform in one hand and a ball of cotton wool in the other.

Lance closed his coat as he walked, wrapping it tightly around him. It was freezing outside. There was a cold breeze chilling him to the bone. There was a massive archway, a tall pair of doors like the entrance to a castle. Opening them let in a lot of drafty air, so he closed them as swiftly as their massive weight allowed. There was a long pathway leading out to a more modern, steel gate. Next to it was a security building containing an office, and a tiny guard post. He could almost make out a short orange figure standing in the gloom on the other side of the gate.

It was dark, the room was cold and empty. But Cruise could see light pouring in from all directions, from the streetlamps outside. He'd woken up to find himself lying on a hard concrete floor. Lack of energy prevented him from moving. He could hear footsteps, and realised with cold dread that he wasn't alone. Agent Vinson was watching him, clad in an entirely black suit. He stood over him with a predatory look.

Cruise wanted to cry out, but his mouth was sealed by tape. He tried to struggle, to get up and run

away. But his arms and legs were tied up in rope. His body was numb, he hadn't even noticed. As blood flowed back down to his hands and feet he could feel the ropes chafing him. His heart started racing, he struggled to control his breathing. Outside he could see Lexi and Lance talking, just far away enough for there to be no sound.

In his panic, he tried to wriggle away, to bang on the glass, to make a noise. Anything that would alert Lance to where he was. But it was hopeless. Agent Vinson held him by the tail, his grip so strong and tight that it seemed to cut off circulation. He dragged him away from the window by the tail with an unfathomable strength. Cruise could only make a muffled scream.

"You're not going anywhere, not this time." The agent growled at him. This time it wasn't just a statement, it was a threat. He placed Cruise on a security guard's chair, trapping the end of his tail under its wheels. He made another muffled scream, equal parts pain and terror.

"So what has he been telling you?" Lexi put the question to him as he turned and walked away. She knew he couldn't help but answer it in some way. She held him back, restrained by words. He turned and faced her directly, looking coldly into her eyes. He didn't like what he saw in them.

"He doesn't need to tell me anything. I already know what he's going through, I don't need to hear about it from you."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" She put her hands on her hips quizzically.

"I saved his life." He declared. "I've seen it before. I know what happens when you force somebody to live like that. I lost someone to it before, I won't let it happen again."

"You really think he'd kill himself?" She questioned his narrative. "What a typical male reaction." She muttered, waving aside his concerns dismissively as if they were paranoid delusion. *Time to switch tactics,* she thought. "You don't know him like I do, you know. He'll do anything to leave home. His only interest is himself."

Lance looked ticked off by that remark. He wanted to say so much to rebut it, but wondered if her obsessively gendered mind would be able to process it. *She probably has all the arguments prepared,* he thought.

"Are you so blind to the feelings of others, you cannot see his pain? What he endures would bring anyone to their knees. You did that to him, you're responsible. Not him. I don't even know if he will ever recover." He spoke as calmly as he could. He knew it was more calmly than most people could, using that to his advantage.

"So what? A man gets treated like a woman for once. And all of you, rushing to his defense, just goes to show how much luckier he is." She blurted it all out, her bitterness and resentment laid bare for him to see. He sighed, saddened by what she was saying. She was at war with the world, and she blamed men

for her problems. Problems that to her were more important than anything in the world. And poor Cruise, he was just a weak man caught in the crossfire.

Lance decided he'd heard enough, turned and walked away. He walked a few paces before he thought of something to say, to have what he hoped was the last word.

"Actually, the person I lost was my sister." He told her and walked away, hoping it was the last time they would ever see each other.

He wished he could do something about her problems as well, without her pinning him with accusations of having a saviour complex. *Maybe there's a grain of truth to that,* he considered. But for now, he had to focus on someone who was more deserving. He wondered if he was really any better than her. Arbitrarily deciding who lives and who dies.

No, of course not, he reminded himself. *If you can save one person's life in this world, it has to be him. It has to be Cruise.*

Cruise watched him turn and leave, with no idea where he was. That seemed to be the point, to be cruel. To make him watch helplessly as his hope slipped away. After what had felt like hours of waiting, he heard the door open slowly and stealthily. Lexi entered quietly, making sure she wasn't seen doing so. She found Cruise tied and gagged, looking at him with lust in her eyes. He looked so cute when he was scared. Now here he was, more afraid than she'd ever seen him.

"Can't get away from us that easily." She taunted him. It sounded like this was just fun and games to her, like they were playing hide-and-seek. This time, there was no running away. She looked down at him, leaning in close to him like they were about to kiss. He could feel her warm breath on his cheeks. "The things I'm gonna do when we get home..." she threatened him seductively.

Cruise jolted back in his seat, recoiling out of instinct. He noticed a smoke detector on the ceiling, looking quickly back down. He knew what he had to do, but he wasn't sure he had the strength to do it. He was already in fight-or-flight mode, he just had to make sure his body chose to fight, at all costs. He had to think of the things she'd do to him, all the ways she'd punish him and indulge herself. Think about it, feel it, remember it. Like she was about to do them right here and now.

The feeling grew in his chest, a heat that grew in size and intensity, travelling up his esophagus. He wanted to retch, like he was going to be sick. He took a deep breath, letting it flow freely out his mouth. It burned through the tape, and before he knew it flames filled the air in front of him. Lexi jumped away just in time, shocked. In an instant the fire alarm went off, screaming and blaring electronically. A sprinkler system activated and doused the room in water.

Cruise's head slammed into the table, held down from behind by Vinson's iron grip. His teeth clenched, he looked up at Lexi angrily, ready to let another burst of flame catch her this time. Pain and fear wasn't going to stop him, now that he'd finally been pushed too far.

“Well, what have we here? Think you’re so tough, huh?” She taunted, this time with a mocking anger in her voice. “What do you think Vinson? You hold him down, I’ll clip off an ear. That’ll teach him a lesson.”

Cruise gulped. His anger had gone. He didn’t know what to do, he was out of ideas. He’d burn them if he could, but once again he was pinned, unable to move. His mind already anticipated her threat, imagining her taking out a pair of shears and painfully tearing a part of his body away. His breathing stopped; his eyes dilated. If he wasn’t careful, he was going to vomit flames all over the desk and burn himself.

Lance heard the alarm go off and ran back in the direction of the security office. He was suspicious from the start, but this had to be a new low for somebody to stoop. He could already see her threatening Cruise with one of the agents in tow. He had to act fast if he was going to make a difference. He had to do something that was forbidden, something that offended his own sense of ethics. He had to throw those misgivings away, if only for a moment. He had no other choice.

The door burst open and he found Cruise being held down. He looked back at him as though he only just remembered who he was.

“Why?” Lance demanded, looking sternly at them. “Why are you doing this?”

“He’s my only ticket to freedom. Why can’t you mind your own business?” Lexi looked contemptuously at him. “Or do you wanna get burned?”

“You force me to do something I really don’t want to do.” Lance decided, as his horn started to glow blue. As the flame built up in Lexi’s throat, she felt it lock up tight. Her whole body stopped, every muscle freezing in place. Vinson’s body did the same. The two of them were statues. They couldn’t move or even twitch.

Lance quickly grabbed Cruise, picking him up. The wheels of the swivel chair trampled his tail one more time, but he was free. Lance carried him away in his arms, backing away slowly. His eyes remained transfixed on Lexi and the sinister Fritish agent. As long as he held their gaze, they couldn’t move, and nobody had to get hurt. He closed the door on them, locking it. Cruise crumpled to the stone ground, and Lance picked him up, holding him under the arm as they ran away.

They came to a huge archway, like a wooden portcullis. It was an old, archaic doorway that lead back into the College. Lance fumbled for the keys quickly, and with all his strength pulled one of the great doors open. He could see Lexi and the agent bursting out and running towards them, enraged. He pulled Cruise through and closed the door, locking it behind him just in the nick of time. He slid down the door, sitting on the floor with his back resting against it. He never felt so glad to be indoors, even during the worst thunderstorms. At last they could catch their breath.

On the other side, Lexi banged on the wooden frame of the door.

“Give him back you kidnapping son of a bitch!” she snapped, screaming into the doorway. She banged

on it again for dramatic effect, but it was pointless.

"Behind you." Vinson tapped her on the shoulder. She turned around to see a group of equine and cervine security guards surrounding them. They could see them clearly in the streetlights, though from a distance her reddish-orange hair made her look as Frittish as Vinson was. She put her hands up sheepishly.

Lance was catching his breath, when he finally turned to see Cruise hyperventilating. He struggled for air, like something was choking him. His breath smelled like smoke. Lance got up and tried to comfort him, holding him by the shoulders.

"It's over." He told him through his own labored breaths. "You're safe. Try to breathe."

Cruise was a complete mess. His whole body seemed to shake. His nerves were fried. His heart was pounding. His breath hurt. His forehead was burning. He was starting to get light-headed. He could feel his legs turning to jelly, unable to support the weight of his body. All he wanted was to be held in Lance's embrace. A few moments passed until finally everything gave out, everything overloaded, and everything shut down. He fell to the floor unconscious.

Cruise woke up in bed. His eyes opened to see the bedroom of the isolation ward he had been in last week. Was it last week, or last month? The things that happened in his old life now felt like a lifetime ago. He was a new person now, reborn in a new world. As he sat up, he was afraid that he was really back in Frittis again. Did Lexi really kidnap him, and take him back to the hospital again? *Why would she do that?* He questioned himself. *Why take that risk, why not bring me straight back to the Sanctuary?*

The more he thought about it rationally, the more he realised that this didn't feel like reality at all. It felt more like he was dreaming. He got up, discovering he was in his usual purple tank top and purple jeans, but he couldn't feel them on his body, he felt naked. He didn't mind the feeling, but it was odd. It didn't feel right. He wondered why that was.

He ran out into the hallway outside. It was cold, empty, and as silent as the grave. He stopped, noticing that there was no sound, no evidence that there was anybody else in the building. It had to be very late at night, or early in the morning. It was starting to feel like a nightmare scenario, an empty hospital, abandoned, without a sound to be heard. As he wandered down the hall he was beginning to feel like he was being followed.

He decided to retrace his steps from the isolation ward to the laboratory where he first met Lance. He held out hope that he would be found there, that perhaps he was waiting for him there. He realised that traversing these steps was a symbolic act, that meant little besides a way for his mind to reach out to Lance's. He hoped he was going to be asleep at the same time. But if he wasn't, he knew where to wait for him.

He entered the laboratory, only to find it empty. Disappointed, he turned around to check outside. Lance was already standing in the doorway. He'd been following him.

"No luck out there then." Lance said casually, almost startling him out of the dream they were in.

"Lance!" Cruise sighed with relief. "I knew this couldn't be real. It's kind of a spooky environment for a lucid dream state, don't you think?"

"I suppose it is. It wasn't me who chose it though."

As he heard him say those words, Cruise realised why they were here. The hospital represented a place of healing, a neutral space where they could catch their breath and lick their wounds. This place was a way of calming their nerves.

Cruise sensed a lingering anxiety that wasn't his, coming from Lance. Somehow it comforted him greatly to know he wasn't the only one who was still in shock. Just then, Lance grabbed a white sheet and draped it over his head.

"Ooo! I'm a ghost!" he waved his arms playfully, pretending to be menacing. He stumbled like a zombie. He was trying to lighten the mood. Cruise couldn't help but giggle. When Lance took off the sheet, he stopped and looked frightened. Like he'd seen a ghost. Cruise turned around to see it as well.

Lexi had suddenly appeared, standing with her back to them. She wore nothing but her trenchcoat, a large butchering knife in one hand. She turned slowly to face them, pointing it at them.

"Come to mommy!" She chirped, her tone playful and threatening. It almost didn't sound like her, it certainly didn't seem like reality. But it scared them both anyway.

"Where did she come from?" Lance tried to suppress the fear in his voice.

"I think my mind wandered..." Cruise admitted. "Let's get out of here." He turned and headed out the door.

"I'm right behind you." Lance decided to hold up the rear heroically. He started walking backwards out the door, not turning his back to her until the last possible moment. As he closed the door, he could swear he saw her change in somebody else, someone with green fur. At first he thought it was a copy of Cruise, but as he turned and ran, he thought about it and wasn't at all sure. Whoever it was, it was female.

They ran out of the room, into the halls and as far from Lexi as they could get, until they couldn't even see her following them. Lance took the lead, taking Cruise to a doorway leading outside. They opened it and found themselves on a large platform on the Hospital roof, with the upper floors of the building towering over them. It was the same place Lance had called Benjamin to when he last left the hospital, the night he broke Cruise out of his prison. Only this time it was starting to snow. The night sky was foggy and overcast, like the inside of a snowglobe.

Lance and Cruise both closed the doors shut and caught their breath outside. Their breath was visible like steam from their mouths, yet neither of them felt particularly cold. It felt more like the memory of what it was like outside on a winter's night, than anything visceral or real.

"I know she's your wife..." Lance began, speaking between breaths. "But I don't think I like her very much, real or not."

"I don't blame you." Cruise said sadly. "I just wish I knew why she was here."

"Don't worry about it, your mind just wandered."

Cruise stood out in the cold midnight air, yet his body was hot, sweating. He wanted to take off all his clothes, if he felt like he was wearing any to begin with. He decided the only way to cool himself off was to confront the problem head-on.

"Lance... I need to tell you something. It's about these hot flushes I've been getting."

Lance's ears perked up with interest. He was listening intently.

"It's not just a stress thing." He began nervously. Like what he was saying was about to get him in trouble. He put his hands together, pressing his fingers together in the way he often did when he was nervous.

"Oh? What is it then?"

"When a Merdragon gets these hot flushes around somebody, it's because... well, you see... the truth is..." Cruise started stammering. He didn't know if he could say it, even here. He knew he wasn't really saying anything, that he was just thinking it. But it didn't seem to matter. He looked up at Lance, who was waiting patiently, knowing what he was about to say.

"I-I... I love you Lance." He pushed the words out upon heated breath. "I've been attracted to you since the moment we met." He leaned in and hugged Lance tightly. "But now... after everything that's happened... I just can't help it." He looked down, burying his head in Lance's chest. He was on the verge of tears, his heart was being pulled in two directions. He didn't want to be selfish, to put Lance's career in possible jeopardy over it. But he couldn't keep silent about it either.

"I understand. I'm sorry..." Lance wasn't sure what else to say. He knew it was coming but he didn't have any other way of responding. He decided that maybe he didn't really need to say anything right now.

"Even if... you don't feel that way about me..." Cruise looked up at him tearfully. "I really need you right now."

"I'm sorry." Lance apologised again, uselessly. "It must feel like I'm leading you on." It felt like guesswork. He didn't really know how he felt at all.

"At least give me something here. Please." Cruise begged him, eyes welling with tears. "Even if it doesn't mean anything to you. Who's going to find out? I can't get through this without-"

He was cut off by Lance leaning in to kiss him delicately on the lips. Lance wasn't sure if it would mean anything to him until he did it, and now it meant everything.

Several seconds passed. For Cruise it felt like a lifetime. When it finally stopped, Lance simply held him, stroking his face, caressing his back. Cruise simply looked up at him with sore eyes, red from the tears which had stopped long ago.

“Must be very handy.” Lance finally said it out of nowhere.

“Handy?”

“Well, it doesn’t take long to figure out who has a crush on who.”

Cruise looked down, bearing an unpleasant memory. Rather than share it however, he simply waited in silence for Lance to say something. He just wanted to stay here in his arms forever. He was warm in a way he couldn’t have gotten from anything else. He didn’t care if it was a dream or reality.

“Listen... let’s just... take things one step at a time for now, okay?” Lance was gentle, like it was a suggestion. Cruise simply nodded resolutely, and Lance continued. “If we’re patient, things will work out fine. You just need to hang in there.”

“I will, I promise.” Cruise assured him. He held him tightly and buried himself in his chest. He couldn’t help it. “Oh Lance... I love you so.” He whimpered.