

Chapter 11 – Breaking Out

Cruise woke slowly. It was Monday morning, but remembering that took him a few minutes. At first, he had to remember when and where he was, like he was returning to this reality after a long journey elsewhere. His whole body felt slow and sluggish, like he hadn't slept very well. But he knew that wasn't the case. Now that his memory returned, he could clearly remember what happened last night. He remembered his dreams, or some bits of them at least. But when did he fall asleep?

The clock said 9:30. As he got up, he realised that the dream about Lance at the hospital, was something more. That was the reason it stuck out in his mind, with a vivid clarity that wasn't common with dreams, or at least not with his. Groggily, he made his way to the kitchen in an awkward sprint. Walking on his strong dragon legs was always a bit odd in the morning, he didn't know his own agility, and would misjudge when to slow down. Sometimes he even walked into walls. Clumsily he found his footing just in time.

A few minutes later, and he had prepared a dish of raspberry jam on buttered toast, toasted in pairs of two so that one side, the side with butter and jam, was softer than the other side. He'd just sat down at Lance's work desk to eat, when he sensed movement outside. His heightened animal senses working overtime again. The sound and thumping of the floor were unmistakable, and closing in. It was Lance, he recognised him in the casual strides.

The clapping of his hooves stopped, and he opened the door. He was carrying breakfast.

"Good morning!" he set it down on the bed. "Good to see you up and awake."

"Oh, good morning!" Cruise bit into his toast. Lance held up a bottle of chilli sauce.

"I brought a bottle of chilli, you know... for emergencies."

Cruise looked at the bottle intently. *A masochistic solution for my problems*, he lamented. "I guess that's progress."

"What is?"

"Solving the flashbacks problem with chilli sauce. Replacing the old problems with new, less bad ones."

"Well, that's one way of looking at it, I suppose." Lance gave a wry smile, seemingly amused by that comment.

"Don't worry, I can handle it." Cruise spoke between bites of his toast. "I should probably have something spicy on me all the time just in case."

Lance kept that in mind as well. He waited until Cruise was finished to change the subject, eating part of his breakfast in the stony silence.

"I suppose I should ask you... how much do you remember from last night?"

Cruise opened his mouth to speak, but stopped and thought again.

"I remember what happened, and I remember the dream we shared. Some of it, anyway. I can't remember how I fell asleep. Did I pass out?"

"Yes, and when you were asleep I contacted you in a lucid dream. Do you remember any of it?"

"I remember..." Cruise thought hard, but by now the dream they had shared was starting to feel like just another dream. "I remember most of it." He smiled to himself.

Lance looked shy, and relieved at the same time. He didn't have to explain anything. Cruise found it deeply alluring. A few moments passed before he figured out what he wanted to say.

"I know what the dreams were about, and that you were in them. But it's almost like I was told about it. The parts with you in it are the most vivid though. It's funny... this last week, or two weeks, or however long it's been... it's been like..."

"Like a dream?" Lance finished the sentence, expecting to have gotten a step ahead. But he was wrong.

"Not a dream. More like I was dreaming my whole life, down there. With her..." Cruise grimaced at the thought. He turned back and looked at Lance with gratitude. "Then you came along, and woke me up from it. It's hard to believe that this is happening sometimes. It feels more real, somehow."

"It's about to become more real soon, I think." Lance told him. "There's going to be an assembly today, to address the students. Word is spreading fast, so by then everyone will know."

"That's good news." Cruise said softly. He sounded nervous, but felt hopeful. He was sick of feeling isolated. Lance was encouraged by the words, if not the way they sounded.

"I'm glad you think so." He said optimistically, glossing over Cruise's nervous tone of voice like he hadn't noticed it. "You won't have to hide anymore, at least not here at the College."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, well..." Lance began, but he was reluctant to broach the topic so suddenly. "The College is a big place, but Svaltona is even bigger. You may get the opportunity to explore, meet people. If you want to." He insisted, as if hurriedly clarifying that he didn't have to do anything, as if expecting him to be too afraid.

Cruise sat silently and thoughtfully. He was already considering it.

A few minutes later, and the two of them had finished breakfast and ended up killing time. Lance was back to his paperwork when Cruise came to him with a question he finally remembered to ask.

"Hey Lance... I've got to ask you something."

"What is it?" Lance turned to him and smiled, as if somewhat relieved to have his attention taken away from work.

"My clothes, I've been wearing them since..." Cruise tried to recount how many days had passed. "Since I got here. They haven't been washed, and they must smell bad by now."

"Oh!" Lance made a sound that was almost a gasp. "I hadn't thought of that. I can't say I've noticed any smell, but yes, you should look for new clothes soon. I'm sure we have something downstairs..." he tried to remember where. The College tailors could always fashion him a uniform, but that was only meant for students. "Unless... you want me to do something about it for you."

"Can you? It just needs a quick wash every now and then. I can have a shower while I wait." Cruise found himself saying, but he felt increasingly like he'd roped himself into an awkward situation he wasn't prepared for. He lifted his arm and gave it a sniff. His armpit was smelly, at least to his acute senses.

"If you'd like me to, of course I will." Lance offered. He imagined it being a nice long walk at least.

"I know it's risky..." Cruise blushed a little. "But I have to make a good impression before I go out there." He got up, heading in the direction of the shower cubicle. Lance followed him. "I've just got another appointment with Doctor..."

"Hirvo?"

"Yeah, him. The psychiatrist." Whatever his first name was, Cruise had forgotten. "I don't want to risk being smelly out there, and giving people a bad impression of me or my... my kind."

"Understandable." Lance said in agreement. "How will you get undressed?"

"I'll get in the shower and hand them to you overhead." Cruise reached for the top of the cubicle, barely reaching it with the tips of his fingers. "I think I can reach."

Lance watched him enter the shower and close the door quickly behind him. He wasn't sure he was ready for this, but if Cruise said so, then it had to be done. He tried his best not to observe him deliberately through the glass. He caught a few glimpses of a green and tan silhouette removing purple shapes from its body. Cruise's purple clothes appeared over the top of the shower cubicle. The purple t-shirt, followed by a purple tank top and purple jeans.

Finally, a pair of pink underpants was tossed over the side, and with a blush Lance caught them, landing on top of a pile of purple wool and denim. He realised what an awesome responsibility this was. Cruise was showing him a very deep level of trust, to put himself in this position.

"I've got them." Lance said, heading out the door as swiftly, but also as casually as he could. He didn't want to give himself the time to think about his feelings. Feelings that grew stronger by the day. And now he could smell Cruise's clothes, they actually were getting kind of whiffy.

“Thanks, Lance!” Cruise said, calling out as much as he could. His raspy little voice only carried so far. He heard the door close and just like that, he was left naked and alone. He blushed, but he wondered if this was as close as they would ever get.

His shower didn’t seem to last long enough. He tried to fill in the time by sitting around, resisting his own thoughts and desires. There were some moments when it felt like Lance was right there with him. And others where he felt alone. He felt closer and yet further apart at the same time.

When he was finally tired of this, he decided to get up and use the privacy of the room outside. He emerged from the shower wet and naked. The air was cold and sterile. He wasn’t being watched, but he didn’t want to stay naked anymore. He had to get his desires under control, even if all he could do was delay the inevitable. He found a towel in the bathroom and wrapped it around himself. Even with nobody around, he couldn’t stop blushing.

I’m twenty five, why can’t I be more mature about this? He wondered.

Lance returned to the dormitory with a neat pile of clean clothes. He found Cruise lying sideways in bed taking a nap, apparently naked. Instantly he started blushing, edging his way to the bed to set them down.

Cruise turned around, greeting him with a yawn. Lance kept his mouth shut, not willing to say just how adorable he found it.

“Hi Lance. Don’t worry, I’ve got a towel on.” He pulled over the sheets and sat up. Lance stepped back reservedly. “Ah, my clothes. Thanks!” He stood up. Lance almost thought he was going to get a kiss. Instead, he watched Cruise pick up the clothes and slink off to the bathroom with an effeminate, bouncy gait. As he watched, his sudden blushing disturbed him. He too felt closer and yet further apart at the same time.

There was a knock on the door. Cruise was sitting anxiously in anticipation, his ears pointed up stiffly. He’d been waiting for him, with his unnaturally strong Merdragon senses to tell him when he was coming. It was a little after eleven o’clock, and doctor Hirvo had finally arrived.

Cruise leapt up from the bed and opened the door. He was greeted by the psychiatrist, and a pair of College security guards. They were rather burly cervine men in blue uniforms. It took him by surprise, they intimidated him just a little.

“Hi Cruise. Are you ready to go yet?” he said cheerfully, as if oblivious to the escort he was under.

“Yes... um, just a minute.” Cruise left to grab his trenchcoat from the wardrobe. He returned with it on, hood raised over his head. He turned and looked back at Lance, busy with his paperwork. He smiled back at him, saying nothing.

"I'm ready." Cruise sighed. As they left, he looked at the two guards escorting them. Looking at them made him worry. Like there was something – or someone – that he needed protecting from.

Cruise was sitting with him in his office, telling him how he felt. He was doing the best he could with the words available to him. Words were insufficient, especially in his confused state. He remembered one word that stuck out. He felt guilty invoking it, even now.

"Violated?" the psychiatrist repeated back to him, as if asking for confirmation.

"I would never say that if I didn't really, really mean it. When you go to that dark place, when you've been there, nothing's ever the same again when you come back. I've been there. I know what it's like, I know why that word should never ever be used unless it deserves to be."

"Then it's true, in your heart it's true. You know what this is. You didn't enjoy it, you don't have to act like you did. Not to anybody. You must... try to own yourself."

Cruise was thinking about it on the way back from Doctor Hirvo's office. Every time he was escorted from one part of the building to another, he wanted to break away and explore for himself. He was sick and tired of being chaperoned around from place to place, and he'd finally worked up the nerve to do something about it.

He was being escorted by the same two College guards, until they came to a crowded hallway, overlooking an entrance to the building. There were two high columns of windows surrounding a pair of wooden doors. The hallway was like an overpass, a veranda that led from one wing of the building to the other. Now a crowd of people was gathering and entering a room in between. Cruise decided to indulge his curiosity, getting himself lost in the crowd on purpose. It helped that he was slightly shorter than the average student, most of them equine or cervine in nature.

There was a pair of small wooden doors. Cruise opened one and it led to a large row of seats at the top level of some kind of hall or amphitheatre. Realising what it was for, he decided to find a seat quietly and anonymously. He sat waiting at the front row, and as time passed, he noticed nobody was bothering to sit next to him. He wasn't accustomed to this sort of gathering, especially with a crowd of total strangers. The fact that everybody ignored him left him feeling strangely rejected.

"Anyone know what this is about?" One student was saying behind him. He focused his hearing on the voice. There was a lot of commotion about as people began speculating why they were there.

"No idea." Came another student's voice.

"I think there's been some sort of accident."

"I hope this isn't going to take long, I've got work to do."

Time passed, Cruise watched the stage below for signs of life. Someone finally entered the stage, an older cervine man in excessively formal clothing. He took the microphone at the small podium in the center of the stage, testing it with a couple of taps. Cruise noticed he was carrying some papers with him, which were laid on the podium for him to read from.

What surprised Cruise was how quickly the commotion died down. The students here were on their best behaviour, or so it seemed. He expected an unruly crowd of kids, like school students who needed to be told when to be quiet. Instead he was taken aback by their maturity and sense of discipline. In reality, most of them simply wanted this to be over and done with as soon as possible.

He noticed a few other figures enter the stage from behind, and in about a second recognised the familiar shape of Evelina. He wondered what she was doing there, would she be saying something? Was she there as a consultant, to simply answer questions?

He didn't have to wait long to find out.

"Ahem." The old man cleared his throat, right into the microphone. The sound was as loud and sharp as he could make it, catching the attention of the entire room. "I'm sure you're all wondering why we've called you here. We have a visitor. A refugee from another country has chosen to seek temporary asylum here in the College." There was a soft murmur around the room. From his vantage point above, Cruise could hear students whispering to themselves.

"According to international law, this refugee has the right to seek asylum, and be given temporary housing in a suitable location. Ordinarily, there would be much better housing facilities for him elsewhere." The word "him" seemed to come as something of a mild surprise. "However, this individual, who was previously living in the Kingdom of Frittas, is relatively unique. He is the first known case of a *hydra sapiens*, a bipedal dragon species in over five hundred years."

The murmurs continued, flowing around the room like rippling tides. Some were interested, others couldn't care less. Each revelation changed the flow of whispers like pebbles dropped in a lake. Cruise's hearing could place them all.

"His presence here has been a secret for the past few days, until the government can make an official response. This is a difficult diplomatic situation, as it has now brought to light the existence of beings the Frittish government intended to keep secret. To make matters worse, there has also been an attempt at kidnapping. However our understanding is that the Frittish government disavows this action and claims it to be a pair of rogue agents acting on their own."

Cruise watched and waited as another pause separated the old man's statements. People were taking the opportunity to whisper to each other again.

"Doctor Evelina Vitalia is a resident specialist in the treatment of rare and exotic species. She has been working closely with the refugee since he was discovered, and is in charge of his physical and mental wellbeing." The old man turned as Evelina walked up to the podium. "She will be answering your questions."

A number of hands were instantly raised in the air. Evelina pointed towards someone Cruise couldn't see, somewhere far below.

"Yes, you at the back!"

"What's his name?" came a young woman's voice. Cruise barely heard her, only by virtue of his acute hearing.

"His name's Cruise." She said simply. There was a brief tittering that spread around the room, and Cruise could hear someone close to him giggle. It was embarrassing, but he didn't know why. Why was it funny? Was it a silly name? He didn't understand.

"You there, third row." Evelina pointed to someone closer to her.

"What's going to happen to him if the government can't help him? Will the Fritish government be able to force him to return home?" a male voice bombarded her with two questions at once.

"We don't know what will happen, but we're certain that the Fritish government cannot extradite him by force. It's only one asylum seeker, they shouldn't deem it necessary. However it may open the floodgates for more cases in the future, to seek asylum elsewhere. This is big news, the whole world is talking about it, even in Fritas. It was kept a secret for many years, and now the secret is out. They won't have to hide anymore, or at least that is our hope."

She pointed to another raised hand.

"Why is he seeking asylum here? Was he being mistreated?" came a strangely-accented woman's voice. There was something forcefully self-righteous about it.

"We certainly think so. His physical and emotional state when he was found certainly bare this out. He claims he was abused, and we believe he has the scars to prove it. So when he asked for asylum, we couldn't in good conscience turn him down."

"What's going to happen to the two Fritish agents who tried to kidnap him?" another person asked. Cruise was on the edge of his seat, dying to know. He still cared about them.

"We don't know. They're currently detained by security pending a formal arrest. By the end of the day, they should be gone. But one of them is half dragon themselves, so things are going to be complicated. They may have to stay in the College as well for the time being. But as long as they're incarcerated they shouldn't pose a security risk."

Cruise left the hall in search of his escort, and found them waiting for him outside. He walked up to them with great purpose.

"I need to see her."

“Who?” One of them asked.

“You’ll know her as the orange one, the girl who looks like me but with orange hair.”

“Oh, her. She’s downstairs, being detained. Come this way.”

This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, to talk to Lexi while she was completely powerless. He had to see her now. He had to get one final word in and try to say all the things that needed to be said. Or else it would be too late, and he’d never get them off his chest. It was now or never.

The boy was bleeding when Lexi found him. He was kneeling in a pool of blood and sweat, three other boys circling him like vultures. They were bullying him because he was weak, because he wouldn’t fight back. And teaching him a painful lesson in self-defence.

“If you’d fight back, you wouldn’t be bleeding!” One of them, a blue-haired Merdragon was saying. He had the mean features of a school bully and the baggy clothes to match. He stood on his fluffy tail with all of his weight. His name was Zadok.

“Yeah, this is your fault!” Another bully, with more emerald-green hair was saying. His name was Jax. Another, more burly boy with purplish-grey hair said nothing. He was their muscle, and his name was Wymund. The boys were barely in their teens, but their victim was only eleven years old.

“Guys, stop!” Lexi shouted fiercely. The heat in her breath caught them by surprise. “He’s had enough!”

Wymund picked up the limp hand of his prey. He held him up and shoved him into Lexi’s arms. Blood stained her clothes and her hair. He held her tight, beginning to tear up.

“Fag.” Jax spat at him. “Getting a girl to stand up for you.” The three of them turned away in disgust. The corridor was long and dark, and before long they were lost in the gloom.

“Don’t worry about them, they’re boneheads.” Lexi was saying as she petted the boy’s minty green hair.

“I know.” The little boy sobbed, sniffing into her shoulder. He was short, but she was shorter.

“I’ll make you strong.” She said, promising him more than he knew.

It was the memory that Cruise couldn’t stop thinking about as he hurried in her direction. He couldn’t help wondering if this was it, this was the way it ends between them. Part of him already realised the implications of that. That all they went through, all they had together would end in vain, and he would lose her forever.

He told himself he should be angry, but he wasn’t. He should hate her and never want to see her again. But he couldn’t bring himself to. Not when they had been so close for so long. He didn’t have the energy

to hold a grudge. He'd lost her a long time ago, he'd been grieving longer than he realised. His friend who had done so much for him, had slipped away little by little until there was nothing left but the abusive beast within her. Perhaps it was only a shell, a ruse to gain his trust. Perhaps he didn't know her at all.

One way or another, this had to be goodbye.