



The Erion Triad

Author: *Charmaine Ross*

Category: Romance, Fantasy, Science Fiction

Description: Lucie: Lucie Jackson thought she was living the life, but all is not what it seems. They say she is the saviour of the Erion Triad's Homeland, but so far she's only made things worse. If that wasn't bad enough, she has a secret that could kill not only the Erion Triad, but everyone on their Homeplanet. And she can't tell anyone what it is.

The Erion Triad: Their Lucie is haunted. Terrified. Something is stopping their mate-bond and they will do anything to save her. Lucie unwittingly unleashes an unknown enemy into their world seeking to destroy everything in its path. It's unstoppable, all-powerful and intent on complete annihilation not only of their one true fated-mate, but of their entire Homeplanet. The threat is at critical stage. Can three separate homelands, who have fought for centuries, finally come together to save their Homeplanet? Are three human females and their alien princes strong enough to endure, or will it mean the destruction of their entire universe?

Total Pages (Source): 59

Page 1

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

Chapter One

Lucie

Get the crystal. Don't let anyone see you. Get it and don't look back. Get the crystal. Get it now.

The voice reverberated around Lucie's head, knocking all thoughts out of its way. No matter how small. No matter if they were just the potential of a thought. It was too strong to ignore, and she didn't have the energy to fight it anymore.

It was just. So. Persistent.

She'd tried for weeks now. Weeks of ignoring. Of pretending. Of pleading it to go away. Of demanding it to shut up. Only now... it had worn her down. She just couldn't take it anymore.

Oh, she knew what she was going to do was wrong. So, so wrong. She would never be forgiven, not even by these men—aliens—who had claimed her as their exalted mate.

After all, the fate of their Homeland hinged on the crystal in the tower. Without the supernatural power of the crystal, Triad males could not find their female mate to form Quads. Without Quads connected through the mate-sync, there could be no children conceived. Their population has stagnated. A whole race of people would die out.

Her mates had returned the Erion crystal to the tower just after they'd landed on their Homeplanet. Their subjects had lined the streets, cheering, clapping, yelling, laughing. They were saved. They finally had hope for their future. People had come from all over to witness this momentous event. And it had been momentous. After ten years, their race had hope for survival. Only their tower had not lit up, even with the precious crystal put back into its place of honor.

The jubilations hadn't lasted long after that. No one could work out why the crystal had not powered the tower. Even their experts had come up short.

But she knew.

The demonic voice in her head that had tormented her since she'd escaped the Reptiles cages told her it wouldn't light up. Not without its specific authorization. There was a lock on it that only it could undo. It also told her not to say a thing.

That it would hurt her mates if she did.

Even though she was clearly insane, she listened to it.

She was too terrified not to.

The three men, who had saved her—treated her with absolute affection and caring—would be harmed because of her. She almost couldn't believe that total strangers could even act that way. She didn't believe it could possibly be real. How could it? They didn't know a thing about her and besides, she wasn't going to stay here for long. Three weeks, she had been here for, and while they were incredible men, catering to her every whim, this wasn't her planet, or her home. She wouldn't be sticking around. When she could, she would return to Earth.

Besides, relationships didn't work that way. Three men didn't just snap and fall in

love with a woman, driven by a mystical, supernatural connection. The idea was beyond absurd when she'd never had one person love her. There was no such thing as fate. There was only haphazard chance at best.

Even when you thought you knew a person, they'd surprise you. And not in a good way. She'd learned that little lesson in the most hurtful way possible.

It had ultimately been the hurt that had propelled her to grab her car keys and drive long and hard into the dead of night. Before she'd started to calm down and rationalize what she was doing, she was in the middle of nowhere, driving along the Nullarbor Plain. There had been a flash of blinding light and she'd woken up cold and naked in a cage too small to stand up in.

Then the nightmare had really started. Until Kyel, Zaen, and Juliran had rescued her—and promptly claimed her. Their hearts had recognized her. Or so they said. She didn't know how that could actually happen. She'd given up her heart long ago and it was long dead. From what she'd seen, it was a complete liability.

Still she didn't want them hurt, no matter how misdirected their intentions were. Or for anything to happen to them, come to that. The voice continually threatened to maim them, kill them, hurt these three men. It didn't stop, drilling over and over in her mind, filling it with terrifying images brought up from her worst nightmares.

Pain.

Suffering.

Torture.

The most horrible images she might ever imagine. She couldn't stand it anymore. It was driving her insane.

The voice also told her not to tell anyone about it.

So, she didn't.

She was too damned scared to utter a sound about it.

So, she'd fended off their attentions. Besides, sexy men were often the opposite on the inside. Good looks could hide a dark heart. She'd learned that lesson the hard way.

They'd been insistent though, luring her with an arsenal of kind words. Kissing. Touching. Caring. Thoughtfulness. They were almost too good to be true, making them impossible to trust.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

They'd very nearly succeeded in their campaign—the temptation to give in and just let someone love her was almost too much to bear. The only thing she couldn't work out was why they wanted her, besides this strange concept of the fated mate bond gifted by the Homeland crystal. She wasn't right for them. She would never fit in here. She was never going to take another chance with one man, let alone three.

There were beautiful women on this planet. And these men were royalty. Next in line to the throne. Apparently, she was now a princess. Laughable really, all things considered.

She wasn't going to admit, but being a princess wasn't a temptation. She didn't care about that status one bit. If they wanted to treat her as a princess, let her live in luxury and dote on her for the rest of the days, well, then, let them. But then reality would step in and stop that line of thought right in its tracks.

If relationships weren't founded on trust, then the whole thing was a house of cards waiting to crumble to the ground. She wasn't going to sit around and wait for that to happen again.

If it wasn't for that damned crystal, she wouldn't even be here. If only the stupid thing hadn't lit up like a Christmas tree when those hideous Reptiles had made her hold it. That's when the attention she didn't want started, along with the voice in her head. Whatever was meant to be so magical about it had made a mistake with her, which apparently had never happened before in the history of the planet and its civilization.

Well, there was always a first time.

There were three crystals, one for each Homeland on Negari. That was where she was, on a planet called Negari—a place she'd never heard of before—living with a race of people she never knew existed. She had been claimed as wife on first sight.

These crystals were somehow the life blood of the planet. The very future of the people living on it depended on them. A decade ago, they all had been stolen and no one knew who took them, or where they had gone.

The Ozar Triad had spent years tracking their crystal down, only to recover all three. It had united a planet where infighting mainly prevailed. The Ozar had returned their crystal to their tower and their mate Riley was pregnant. Everyone was in awe. Quads had even started to form again, the first pregnancies announced. The Ozar Homeland was thriving.

The Arabis Triad had also recovered their crystal and they'd found their mate in Evelyn, another of the abducted women Lucie had been caged with by the Reptiles. It seemed human women were their prize.

The Negarian Triads been able to track their crystals because of the unique energy field of the human body. It was extremely strong, particularly so for human women. It was why the crystals had been stolen by the Reptiles who were guided by a larger inter-dimensional entity from the beginning.

They had no idea that human females would initiate the mate-bond and that it would be so overpoweringly strong that it would power their lost crystals and renew their population. The Negarians had no idea that humans existed and inter-species bonding had never occurred before, however they wrote it off to the tremendous power and ultimate knowledge of their Fates rewarding them in the best possible way.

It was all completely amazing to them. Perhaps it was because they had never seen a human before. They certainly had no idea where Earth was. They had no idea if there

were any other human females who had been abducted, which was why Lucie was so desperate to talk to Evelyn. She needed a familiar face. A familiar human face.

Evelyn's mates had set up a comm-link from where they'd crash-landed on another planet. Lucie couldn't believe she'd seen her friend again. She would have given anything to hold Evelyn's hand and speak to her in private, but she was stranded until a rescue ship could pick them up and bring them back here. It would be weeks before Lucie could see her friend face to face again.

Evelyn had told her something about what had happened to her after they'd been saved, but the voice in her head had started up again and she'd missed most of what Evelyn had said.

She just had to get the voice to stop.

She would do anything.

Desperation led to stupid deeds, but she was worn down. The voice was relentless. She had to do what it told her to before she lost her mind, which was why she found herself hurrying down one of the palace corridors, trying to distance herself from the palace guards behind her without being too obvious.

She knew her mates had told them to keep an eye on her. They were worried about her and didn't know why she wasn't responding to their attentions. But she wasn't one of them. She was human. Humans didn't have mate-bonds, crystals or higher mystical powers to guide relationships. If they had, perhaps she could have saved herself a lot of pain, but they didn't, and she couldn't see how a crystal would ever work for her. She told them numerous times it didn't work that way, but they didn't believe her. They either didn't understand or didn't believe that she didn't feel the bond that they obviously did. Nor had they given up. It was an obsession she didn't have the headspace for.

She felt the guard's presence looming behind her, catching up.

Go turn in here. Now. She didn't resist the voice, merely followed its command and stepped into a darkened palace room. Go through that door and close it behind you. Quietly.

She darted through the shadows to the closed door at the back of the room and slipped through, closing it silently after her. Open the window and go out into the garden. Quickly, before the guards come.

Lucie hid behind the gauzy curtain and slid open the window. She swiveled on the sill and jumped the short distance to the grass below. Two moons hung heavy and bright in the sky, casting the garden in a silver glow.

The tower was a massive dark presence in the middle of the garden. It was the main garden in the palace and had been beautifully tended, the plants well maintained, the structure symmetrical and perfect. It reminded her of the gardens in old French palaces scattered around the French countryside. But there were differences. The plants weren't quite the same. The color of the trees too dark. The grass a little too blue. The leaves a little too bright. The moons—one too many.

She'd seen pictures of the garden in full glow along the palace walls. If they were glowing now, as they did when the tower was lit from the power of the crystal, then she wouldn't be hiding in shadows. She would be swathed in deep blue and aqua greens. Kira, the Princes' little sister, had told Lucie that there were flowers here that only opened when the tower glowed. They had been shut tight for ten years. They should be open now that the crystal was back. Only they weren't.

There was a noise in the room she'd just left. A voice called for her. "Lucie?"

Crap. It was Kyel. The guards must have alerted him. He was the last one she wanted

to be caught by. Nothing ever got past him. He'd known something was up with her—well, more up with her—and he hadn't let up asking her about it. The more he questioned her, the more the voice told her if she said anything, that it would hurt him. Kyel was overbearing and incredibly bossy, but he didn't deserve to get hurt. None of them did.

“Lucie. Come here.”

Double crap. That was Zaen. Where two went, there would be a third. Juliran was never far away. She'd come to call them the three musketeers. Her own voice in her head was louder this time. Only there were four musketeers, weren't there? They've accepted you as their fourth, haven't they? She didn't accept them back, though. She could never shut up that snarky little voice in her head either. Now she had two voices she was trying to ignore.

She continued speaking to herself. You must get away. Get back home. Get back to normal. Go and let them find their true mate. It isn't you. I'll make sure the tower is lit and then everything will be returned to the Homeland. The voice was very persuasive.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

An unexpected little pang jabbed her heart., but that was illogical. She'd argued with herself about going home. Back to Earth. She'd been arguing with all of them for weeks now, and for weeks they'd told her they'd never heard of Earth. They didn't even know where it might be. She didn't know whether to believe them or not. Then the voice had told her it knew where Earth was and could return her there.

She crouched low behind a shrub in the garden, waiting for the voice to tell her what to do. Hide behind that large tree and follow the path to the tower. Donotget caught.

She darted across the garden hunched over, making the cover of the tree just as Juliran stuck his head out the window. "Lucie?"

She held her breath, her heart skipping beats as she waited to see if he would go back inside or come out to find her. Her fingers dug into the bark, tension gripping her. The voice had told her not to get caught. There was no telling what it would do to them if she did.

Thankfully, Juliran disappeared back into the room. In front of her was a tree-lined graveled pathway. She stuck to the deep shadows at the side and crept along as quietly as she could.

Two shadows appeared— palace guards—walking along the path towards her. She jumped over the small hedgerow of spiky-leaved plants and curled into a ball behind the closest tree.

"Yes, sirs. I'll keep my eyes out for her." One of the guards spoke into a wrist comm as his shrewd eyes peered about. She knew that guard—nothing got past him. She

would have to be doubly careful.

Two sets of footfalls passed directly behind her, crunching in the gravel. She held her breath, not wanting the sound of breathing to alert them. She didn't move a muscle as they passed. When they rounded a bend, her breath whooshed out of her.

She dashed beneath the tree line, keeping to the deepest shadows as she made her way towards the tower. Distant voices became louder as more guards started to search for her.

Go to the side door.

She knew where it was. Kira had shown her one day. It was an entrance the Royals used when the crowds were too large on the public side of the tower. She darted between bushes and jumped over several hedgerows. Sticky sweat trickled along her spine, feeling like tiny insects walking over her skin.

Luckily, the door was well hidden between a line of carefully tended hedges that framed the back of the tower. A shout from nearby had her clinging to the trunk of the nearest tree.

They are getting closer. Donotwaste time.

Licking her dry lips, she darted through the slight gap between the shrubs, her trembling fingers finding the panel on the wall. She slammed her palm to it, guiltily thanking Kira for plugging in her handprint, and the door slid silently open. She slipped through into darkness.

Go up the stairs to the top room. You will touch the crystal.

Stumbling in the darkness, Lucie pictured the spiral staircase in her mind. She traced

her hand along the wall, taking shaky steps in the direction of the stairs. Her toes found the first step. She clutched the wall with one hand and the banister with the other and slowly made her way up the sharp incline. It was like climbing the stairs in a lighthouse. They were steep and went around in a tight spiral leading ever upwards.

The absolute dark gave way to grays as light filtered into the top room through magnificent floor-to-ceiling windows. In the pictures of the tower, the windows let the light of the now-dead crystal shine in all directions, like a massively powerful glow stick. No, however, the crystal remained dark in its cradle on a plinth in its holder in the middle of the circular room.

She crept up to the plinth. The holder the crystal rested in was a magnificent work of art. The design was intricate and made from a delicate filigree of shining gold. She thought she heard a whisper of a voice close by, but she wasn't sure if it was real or if it was the voice in her head. Sometimes she heard things that weren't there. Whispers in the dark she couldn't quite catch. Sounds and not words. She was slowly going crazy, if she wasn't there already.

Take the crystal in hand. Do it. Now!

The voice was sharper. Clearer. There was a heavy presence nearby and she cringed away.

I will hurt them if you do not take the crystal. I will not hesitate!

Dragging in a shaking breath, she undid the glass door to the crystal's encasement. It was right there. All she had to do was reach out and touch it and then everything would be better. She would get to go home. There would be no more voices. The brothers—her mates—would be free of her to find their true match. Someone good enough without all the excess baggage she came with. This was all for the best.

She reached forward, her fingers curving around the gem. The overhead lights blasted on, soaking the chamber in vivid harshness.

“Lucie! Don’t!”

Gasping, she spun to see Kyel, Zaen, and Juliran emerging from the hidden doorway into the room. Their three huge bodies filled the space. The air seemed to be sucked right out of her lungs. Heat prickled her skin as her heart pummeled empty veins.

She’d been found.

Chapter Two

Kyel

Lucie’s brown eyes widened in a face that seemed too small to hold them. A tremor ran through her too-thin body, her fingers twitching around the Erion crystal. They seemed to reach for it while she did her best to pull away.

He stepped forward. Another shudder worked through her body. She was like a skittish Standon, cornered and caught in the wild. That had been their Lucie since they’d first laid eyes on her. Even after weeks of trying to calm her, she was yet to tame. Something held her back. He was still waiting to discover what that was.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

She was still understandably traumatized from her abduction. Kyel knew it might yet be months, maybe years, before she would be rid of the daily nightmares, and yet there seemed to be something else terrorizing their sweet mate, besides her terrible experience at the hands of the scaled ones.

He'd meditated on their soul link. On the surface it was clear and connected, and yet there was something—other—about their link.

He was aware of what the Ozar and Arabis had faced. They all knew about this entity that was intent on using the power of the crystal to enter their dimension and control their planet, and he more than suspected that it was blocking their soul connection. They could feel her, but she had no way of feeling them.

If she had, they could have completed the mate-sync, and she would be happily in their arms during the day and in their bed at night. With the soul-to-soul connection, she would know beyond a doubt that they were made for each other. Their souls would recognize the strength of their love, even if her mind had yet to catch up. He sometimes worried she felt nothing because she was human, but the Fates wouldn't have gifted her to them in the first instance. In fact, if he studied the Ozar and Arabis Quads, theirs were the strongest mate-syncs he'd ever seen. He knew their bond was also strong, if it wasn't for the strange blockage.

His heart pounded at the mere sight of Lucie being so close to the crystal. It was powerful and there was no knowing what would happen if she touched it, however dormant it might look.

That was the other confusing thing. Returned to its cradle, set upon the strongest ley-

line of their Homeland, the crystal should have linked right back into the ground, but it had yet to light and restore health upon their land.

Without the power returning to the land, their people could not recognize their mates. Without the power of a Quad, of four souls coming together through the mate-sync bond, new souls blessed from the Fates could not come into existence onto their planet. It took the power—and the love—of four connected souls to bring new souls into physical existence, to give birth to a new Triad of males and then a precious female. Two pregnancies per Quad that ensured the continuation of their species. Their people, the land and their crystal were intimately linked.

He'd had their lead scientists on the job, looking into the problem. The trapped power inside the crystal was building and nobody knew if it was safe enough to touch—and their mate hovered too close to unknown, unbridled power.

Her eyes shone with unshed tears, her face tightened in anguish. "I... I must. It told me to do this."

His blood ran cold. If someone was threatening her, he would eviscerate them. "Who told you, Lucie?"

She shook her head, face twisted, clasping her forehead with the hand that wasn't reaching for the crystal, waging an internal war. His heart stuttered at her pain.

"You don't understand," she said, voice hoarse.

"Little mate, we can help you." Zaen stepped next to his shoulder.

Lucie shrank in on herself. "No one can help me. Don't you understand? You have to go away. It's the only way it'll stop. Please... I just want to go home." Her face contorted with anguish, tears leaking from her eyes, streaking down her cheeks.

“Lucie, please. You have to listen to us.” He shook with restraint. It took all his willpower to just stand there and watch his mate being tortured.

“I’m done with listening! It said... it will hurt you if you stop me. This is the only way!” She panted, fighting something only she could sense. A heart-wrenching groan ripped through her as she turned towards the crystal.

“Little mate. Don’t!” Juliran’s voice echoed around the chamber. He rushed towards her, but it was too late.

Her small fingers closed around the crystal. Her body went rigid as though bolts of electricity raced through her. Her head was thrown backwards, her long brown strands flowing down her back. Her eyes snapped wide open, seeing nothing. Pain was etched on every angle of her face and body.

The dead crystal in her hand came alive, glowing so bright that it washed her out with its intensity. Light streamed outwards, coating the landscape beyond with the bright blues and swirling greens of the Erion. It was alive, a swirling mass of living color. It reached the horizon and into the sky above, the brightest and strongest Kyel had ever seen.

A shriek pierced his ears. A sonic boom erupted throughout the chamber. The exterior glass exploded outwards, shards shattering through the air and shooting to the ground. Black clouds appeared out of thin air, swirling around the ceiling. Wind whipped their clothing, creating a stream of circular air with enough force to take them to the floor. Kyel braced against the wind, feet wide apart, hand against the wall at his back.

A face emerged from the swirling mass. Two holes for eyes. A gigantic mouth yawned open, lowering as though to swallow Lucie whole.

“No!” Juliran stepped towards her.

Shards of lightning flashed, leaving black score marks in the floor. Smoke rose from the mark, separating them from their mate. A clap of thunder rolled through the chamber, and the entire building shuddered. The mouth descended directly towards her.

“We have to save her,” Kyel yelled over the screech of the storm.

“Three of us. Together. Like we’re hunting Standon,” Zaen called. His tattoos flashed blue and green in his terror for Lucie. Kyel had never seen his brother so agitated.

Kyel nodded, the increasing noise of the storm making it too hard to speak. Juliran moved to the right, while Zaen moved to the left. Kyel waited until they were in position, all three surrounding her.

Lucie’s body glowed with the power of the crystal, blue and green light glowing from her open eyes. Light streamed from cracks that opened all over her skin.

Gods, she was being roasted alive. Her little body couldn’t take this sort of torture. Hadn’t she already gone through enough?

There was no time to dwell. He shoved aside those thoughts. The only thing that mattered was saving Lucie. He had to concentrate.

Kyel nodded at his brothers and they moved as one. There was a thunderous roar, and lightning cracked, lashing towards them. White hot pain streaked along his arm, but he launched through the air with a powerful leap.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

All three of them caught her at the same time. Juliran held her legs, Kyel caught her midsection, and Zaen banded an enormous arm about her shoulders. They all tumbled to the floor. The crystal fell from her hand, rolling across the floor with melodic tinkles.

Kyel came to his knees, grasping Lucie's shoulders. Her eyes closed. Her skin was pale, her body unmoving.

He gave her shoulders a little shake. "Lucie? Lucie!"

Her head rolled, but she was unresponsive. His heart pounded and a slick wash of sweat coated his skin. An ear-splitting screech filled the room. The face above them merged back into a mass of swirling black clouds. An opening emerged from within the center and the clouds fed inwards, sucked back through the hole.

Above them, the ceiling disintegrated, obliterating the top of the tower, opening to the night sky. The clouds expanded over the tower, growing so large that it wiped out the light from the stars and moons.

They hovered, writhing and billowing. Shards of lightning sparked within the mass like an ominous storm yet to descend. Whatever it was, it couldn't possibly be good.

"Gods. Her palm." Zaen opened the hand she'd used to grab the crystal. The skin was charred and blistered, the layers burnt away.

Juliran tapped her cheek, his palm swallowed the whole curve of her face. "Lucie, wake up."

Kyel cradled her unresponsive form into his lap. Her breathing was shallow and erratic, her pulse fluttering like a small bird. “We have to get her to the healer.”

“What has happened?” Juliran looked to the sky.

A darkness pressed within Kyel’s chest and dread was like a rock in the pit of his stomach. The clouds above circled ominously, as if they waited for a chance to descend on Lucie as though she was at the center of them.

“Nothing good,” he said. “I think that thing above us was inside our Lucie all this time.”

That would explain the torment in her face, the dark circles beneath her eyes through lack of sleep, the weight her frail body didn’t put on. What she must have endured. And she bore it all on her own. If only she’d reached out to them. They would have done anything to help her through this.

“We have failed her,” Zaen said.

“We’ll fail her now if we don’t get her the help she needs,” Kyel said, rising to his feet as he picked her up. Her body was too light, like holding a child. She might have lost even more weight from when they’d rescued her from the cages. Intolerable. He hadn’t known, because she barely let them, or anyone else, touch her.

He bolted down the steps, meeting their guards halfway down. The strained face of his Captain of the Guard, Tann, was barely visible in the gloom.

“Call Erix,” Kyel said. “Our mate is in mortal danger.”

With a clipped word, Tann had his men hurried down the stairs without delay. Behind him, Tann’s tense voice alerted Erix, their healer, using his wrist comm.

“I’ll be in the medi-bay. Bring her in as fast as you can. I’ll have everything ready.” Erix’s voice sounded from Tann’s wrist-comm, panting in his haste.

“Make no delay, Erix. This is an emergency,” Kyel yelled loud enough for Tann’s wrist comm.

“Understood.” Erix’s voice was grim. Kyel could trust Erix to understand the gravity of the situation.

The guards followed Kyel as he held Lucie tightly against his chest, Zaen, and Juliran to the palace making their way directly to the medi-bay. Servants and guards silently lined the walls as Kyel broke into the room. Erix indicated the open and ready medi-bed.

Kyel laid Lucie on the bed and cupped her cold cheek with his palm. She was so precious, yet she didn’t have a clue as to how much she meant to them.

“Please, Kyel. Let me get to her,” Erix said.

Kyel nodded and forced himself to step away as Erix shut the transparent panel around the medi-bed. The chamber filled with mist that would deliver the nutrients and medications Lucie needed.

“What’s happened?” Kira burst into the room, a gown hastily thrown over her nightdress. She ran to the medi-bed and gasped, her hand hovering over her mouth. “What happened to Lucie?”

Juliran put an arm around her shoulder. Kira turned into him, silent tears falling. “We’re trying to work that out, sister.”

“Is she... She isn’t... Oh, it’s too awful.” Kira’s voice caught. She shook her head

and buried it in Juliran's chest. Juliran wrapped his arms about their sister, his face drawn and tight.

Zaen rubbed Kira's shoulders. "Erix is the best. He'll know what to do."

Erix frowned, tapping on the hand-held device. Although Kyel wanted to ask questions, he knew to let the man work. He was the best healer in their Homeland. If anyone could work out exactly what was wrong with Lucie, it would be him.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

Kyel still had to do something about the abnormal clouds that had burst from nowhere and hovered over the tower. He called Tann over from where he stood just outside the door. Tann hurried over to him. The look on his face mirrored the horror he also felt. Tann wasn't just a guard, he was also a childhood friend. They spent many an hour in the training ground honing and bettering their craft.

“Gather your top guards and survey the clouds that hang over the tower,” Kyel said.

“Retrieve the crystal and take it to the laboratory. I want Erix to test it. Whatever you do, don't touch it.”

Tann's brows scrunched. “Don't touch it?”

Tann had personally put the crystal in its place in the Tower and knew it could be touched—under normal circumstances.

“It had some inner power that was unleashed the moment our mate touched it and we don't know why. It could hurt you too. At the moment, treat it as though it is dangerous.”

Tann turned a horrified look to Lucie's unmoving figure inside the chamber. “At once.”

He wasted no time and disappeared from the room, taking a contingent of trusted guards with him. As Tann left, their fathers and mother rushed into the room, clothes askew, hair ruffled, wearing expressions of concern. Their mother went directly to Kyel and his brothers. Her gaze landed on the mist-filled chamber and she halted,

visibly pale. Swallowing hard, she straightened her shoulders, looking about the room. “What happened?”

She was always calm against turmoil, displaying feminine strength that shone through again and again. Their fathers grouped around the mother, their keen eyes taking in everything.

“She touched the crystal, and this is what it did to her,” Kyel said.

His mother turned to Erix. “Do you have any idea what is wrong with my daughter?”

She had accepted Lucie the moment Kyel and his brothers had arrived from her rescue. Once they’d told her they’d found their mate, it was cause for celebration.

Lucie had no idea what that meant for their Homeland, underplaying the significance of it even through the public and private celebrations. She was shy, not used to attention. None of them had wanted to cause her more anguish than she’d already suffered and so hadn’t pushed her. Anger thrummed through his system. If he could have killed those scaled ones ten times over for her, he would.

Erix peered at her. His face was tight as he levelled a weighted look between all of them. “I’m afraid it’s not good.”

Chapter Three

Zaen

Zaen stood rooted to the spot as a wave of heat engulfed his body. “What do you mean ‘it’s not good’? Tell me exactly what is happening to her!”

His fist clenched, ready to hit something, but what could he lash out at that would

make an ounce of difference? Anger and helplessness were not a good combination.

Erix held his gaze. “Her body is shutting down.”

Kyel let out a roar that shook the walls. Kira gasped and Juliran ploughed the fingers of both hands through his hair.

“Scan her again. It has to be wrong,” Zaen said. His hands clenched into useless fists. He wanted to pound into... something, but that wouldn’t help Lucie at all. Being helpless didn’t sit well with him, but until they worked out what had happened, he just had to deal with it as best he could, which included keeping a tight rein on his reaction.

“I’ve done it five times already,” Erix said.

Once was enough. Their machines were the best and didn’t miss anything. That Erix had scanned her five times showed how worried he was.

Zaen clenched his teeth so tightly his jaw ached. They couldn’t lose Lucie now. Not when they’d just found her. She was the one person he never thought they would ever meet. They’d accepted their fate, knowing they would die old, unmated men when the miracle had happened. It couldn’t possibly be ripped away. Not now when they had so much to live for.

“There has to be a way,” he said.

Erix shook his head. His mouth tipped down at the edges. “There’s something blocking her mind. It’s leaching the energy from her body. There’s a whole lot of activity right in the center of her brain, but as we speak, the walls surrounding that energy are getting thicker. The thicker the walls get, the more her body will struggle. Eventually her heart will just... forget to beat.”

“If she hadn’t touched the crystal, she’d still be awake,” Juliran said.

Kyel stopped his pacing. “As soon as she touched that damned thing, it was like a light flicked off inside her. One moment she was there, and the next—gone.”

Zaen stopped pacing, deep in thought. The crystal had lit up again at the same time the clouds appeared from nowhere. “What was it the Ozar said? About an entity from another dimension trying to get into ours?”

Kyel’s stare was direct. “It feeds off the electro-magnetic power of the human female mind. Erix, take a reading of her brain.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

Erix worked the hand-screen over her head. The screen lit up with an activity of lights. “It’s off the charts.”

A sick feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. “It’s doing something to her. Feeding off her energy somehow. How can we stop it?”

“The crystal harnesses the same power. When she held it, it acted as a magnifier for that power,” Erix said.

“That’s how this entity is trying to gain entry into this dimension. The clouds. Didn’t Evelyn, the Arabis mate, say something about being held, imprisoned on a beach by black clouds? Riley, the Ozar mate, also said the same thing. It’s happening to our Lucie too,” Juliran said.

Erix’s fingers danced over the control panel next to the medi-bed as a list began to scroll one after the other. “Her body is starting to fail. She will die if I don’t put her in cryo.”

That was the last thing they wanted to do. She would be all but dead, her body in a suspended state, not dying, not waking, not living. Not anything.

“What?” Kyel roared.

“No!” Juliran said.

Kira gasped and fell into one of their fathers’, Emex’s, arms.

“What do you mean, Erix?” Emex said.

“It’s taking over faster than I thought possible. The only way to stop it is to stop Lucie. I’m... I’m sorry. It’s the only way to save her. If nothing is done, she will die.” Erix looked as distraught as all of them.

Kyel’s wrist comm pinged with an incoming message from Tann. “The clouds. They’re expanding and have covered more than half of the city. It seems to be drawing the energy from the crystal.”

This was bad. Very, very bad. It had escalated so quickly. Too quickly.

“Whatever it’s doing, it’s harnessing Lucie’s power to manifest,” Kyel said.

“If we don’t stop it, we’ll lose Lucie and that thing will be unleashed,” Juliran said.

There was a commotion in the background of Tann’s communication. He spoke quickly, his voice thick with tension. “Clouds have appeared over the Ozar Homeland. They started over the Ozar Tower and are drawing all the light-energy from their crystal. The Erion Homeland is also at risk with manifestations over their land.”

“Gods, this is an invasion, only we don’t know who or how!” Zaen paced, too wired to stand still. “Surely their Erion crystal will protect their Homeland?”

“The crystal is not in their tower. They are still stranded and not due back for weeks,” Tann said.

“Gods help us all if it can draw power from all three crystals once the Erion is here. Our planet will be at its mercy,” Kyel said.

Zaen stared at his wrist comm as though it would provide him with answers. “Send word to them, Tann. Keep them away.”

“Of course,” Tann said.

The crystal was not here to protect their Homeland, but that also meant the entity could not access its power as it wasn't in their tower. Hopefully. A tumult of emotion came crashing through him. He couldn't even name this enemy, and yet their planet was more at risk than it had ever been. In fact, he didn't rightfully know, but he had to do something. Anything to stop this thing, whatever it was, from gaining more power. This was all types of crazy and he lacked any experience dealing with such a thing. All he could do was make strategy up as he went.

He put a halt to the crashing thoughts that weren't getting him anywhere and applied the logic he knew so well. His mind clicked through scenario after scenario, coming to conclusions that made the most sense.

This hadn't started until Lucie had touched the crystal. Whatever was happening was linked to her. This entity needed her to manifest on their world. She was the lock as well as the key. Zaen placed his spread hands on top of the screen of the medi-bed.

“She is the catalyst,” Zaen said.

“What do you mean, brother?” Kyel asked. The muscle at his temple worked as he clenched his teeth.

“It's using Lucie's natural energy field to enter our dimension, like the scaled ones the Ozar interrogated said. The Erion's mate also said that it captured her in a wall of clouds. It can't be a coincidence. Only this time, it's gotten smarter. It's using Lucie and blocking us out so that it has full use of her energy,” Zaen said.

“How do we break back in?” Juliran said.

“We can’t see this enemy. The battlefield is in her mind. We can’t fight it here, but there is only one place where we can fight it at its own game. We enter Lucie’s mind. We attack from within,” Kyel said. It was the only option he could think of. The only thing that made sense.

He only hoped he was right.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

Juliran reared back, horror plain on his face. Kyel studied him with a stare that seemed to go right through him as he waited for them to catch up. They would do anything for Lucie, and he wouldn't suggest they do this unless his scientific mind had run through a million outcomes and spit out the best one. Juliran's hand hovered over the closed panel that contained their mate. Their only future.

"You know if what you're thinking doesn't work that Lucie will die?" Kyel said.

"If she goes into cryo, she might never wake up either and will be as good as dead. We have to fight, brothers," Zaen said.

"Of course, I will fight until my very last breath." Kyel levelled between the stares of Zaen and Juliran. "If we don't succeed, then we will all die."

"Life will not be worth living without our mate," Juliran said.

Kira sobbed against Emex's chest. Their mother went to Kira and Emex and wound her arms around them both. Their two other fathers huddled close, offering their support.

"What do you need, Zaen?" Nolan, their third father, asked.

Kyel slowly lifted his wrist-comm to his mouth. "Tann, have you retrieved the crystal yet?"

"We're taking it to the lab as we speak," Tann replied through Kyel's wrist comm.

“Can you bring it in here instead, please,” Kyel said.

There was a moment of stunned silence, before Tann answered. “Of course.”

Shocked silence reigned over the room as everyone grappled with their horror and the implications of what Zaen suggested.

“Are you absolutely sure this is going to work?” their mother asked, looking between Zaen and his brothers

Zaen squeezed their mother’s shoulder. “It is the only thing that might. If we try nothing, then Lucie is lost.” And with her all hope for themselves and their Homeland.

Unbearable tension filled the chamber as they waited for Tann to arrive. Erix kept his full attention on Lucie’s condition and keeping the meds in the chamber balanced just right. In the next few moments, Tann strode through the doorway with the crystal contained within the jaws of golden pincers.

Zaen turned to Erix and drew a deep lungful of air that bordered on painful. “Lower the panel, Erix. Tann, place the crystal in her hands.”

Erix’s mouth dropped. “But that... that might outright kill her. She is in a very delicate state.”

Zaen ignored the tense muscles straining along his shoulders. He knew there were risks, but there were also no options. This entity was too strong, too...unknown...to fight in a normal manner. “Shehasto touch the crystal. Weallmust touch the crystal to connect with it. You know I would not suggest this if there was any other way.”

Zaen levelled a stare between his brothers, reading their stunned expressions, hating what he was going to say, but knowing there was no other way. “We need to go

through the shell that is around her mind. All of us. Together. She can't defeat it on her own. Riley and Evelyn were trapped in the clouds and they were on their own, without the help of their mates to help them fight their way free. The only thing powerful enough to break this shell and the hold it has over Lucie is our mate bond. The four of us. Together. Using the power of the crystal."

"You're certain, brother?" Kyel said.

Zaen placed his hand on his brother's shoulder. "I wouldn't even suggest this if it wasn't the last thing we could possibly try. We must defeat this thing head on and putting Lucie into cryo will be more torture for her. I... I don't know how much more she can take."

"I'm with you a hundred percent, brother. We will save Lucie and expel this entity from her if it's the last thing we do," Juliran said, forever the optimistic one.

Zaen didn't want to voice his concerns. They were too numerous to list, and he was just going by his gut feeling. Not a good strategy, but it was their only one. He didn't want to even think it, but it just could possibly be the last thing they would ever do. "Be prepared for anything, brothers. I don't know what will happen once we all connect through the power of the crystal. Remember, she is trapped in her mind. Literally and figuratively. We will go wherever her mind is. Encounter her thoughts. Anything." He took a deep breath. "We must also be prepared not to return either."

The last statement brought a gasp to their mother's lips. She held a trembling hand in front of her mouth. Her mates, the kings, held her tight, offering her comfort as was their right.

"Are you sure there's no other way?" Kira spoke, her eyes gleaming with tears.

Zaen hugged their sister close. "There is a risk with anything, but we will find a way,

sister. We will save Lucie and we will save our homeland. I... I don't know how to fight this entity any other way."

Kira's arms tightened around his chest. He would do anything for her as well. She had yet to find her mates and form her Quad. Her future was so intricately tied to theirs.

Zaen stepped back and placed Kira into Emex's arms. "Father..."

Emex nodded, his face grave. "You are brave warriors. Do what must be done, sons."

Taking a deep breath, Zaen stepped next to the bed where their mate lay. His brothers joined him, taking their place over Lucie.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“It’s time, Erix,” he said. “As the panel retracts, Tann, I want you to place the crystal into our mate’s hands.”

“Then what?” Juliran said.

“Then we all touch it,” Zaen said. After which, he had no idea what would happen, exactly.

Erix pressed the command and the panel retracted into the edges of the bed. The healing mist cleared. Their mate lay too pale. Too still. She had never fully recovered from the torture she had endured at the hands of the scaled ones. Never flourished. She had suffered physical torture, but her mental anguish was wasting her, even though she had everything her body could need. She was already skin and bone, but now she almost looked like a corpse. Her soul was withering, an effect they hadn’t been able to heal, despite their best efforts.

But they would never give up. No matter what it took, they would prevail. She was worth everything, even if she didn’t believe them.

Juliran curled a limp strand of hair behind her ear, running his fingertips along her chin so gently, as though she was made of the finest china.

Kyel nodded at Tann. “Do it.”

Tann carefully placed the crystal into Lucie’s lifeless hands, his face a tense mask. Tann released the golden pincers as the crystal rested into Lucie’s limp hands.

The crystal glowed with the blues and greens of the Erion Homeland, growing brighter and brighter. The lights on Erix's panel danced. The data on the screen above her head jumped into hyperactivity. The crystal was having an effect, but so was the entity using it.

"Now, brothers," Zaen said. "There is no time to waste."

As one, they reached over their mate and curled their hands around the crystal.

Chapter Four

Lucie

Daylight slid over Lucie's closed lids. She groaned and turned to her side. It was daytime, and time to get out of bed. She was still so, so tired despite having slept. She could quite happily sleep the day away, and possibly tomorrow as well. The princes would probably let her if she wanted to. Truth be told, they didn't know exactly what to do for her lately, despite their best efforts to help her. She was beyond grateful, but she didn't even know how to save herself, let alone three of the hottest aliens she'd ever met.

And they were seriously hot. Their horns didn't detract at all, instead lending them a wild edge that made her wish she was actually their mate. That, and their tats that swirled over their chiseled muscles, and taut bodies honed to perfection with their taste for battle training had her staring at them all day, wondering what it would feel like to touch them. Silk over steel, probably. Soft skin over the surface of strength and hardness.

She'd spent many a midnight hour wondering what it would be like to be the center focus of all three of them. Nobody would bat an eye. In fact, it was their norm—three guys to one girl. She could imagine the way they would touch her, gentle and full of

reverence at first, and then when their patience was at an end, they would take her how they wanted. She would probably love every second of it. What girl wouldn't?

They were also incredibly intense, and when they set their entire focus on her, her brain shorted out. It was as though they could see to the center of her soul. They said it was the mate bond, but she hadn't felt anything except terror.

That was why she knew she really wasn't for them. That was how she knew she had to leave them so they could find their true mate. It was a special bond between Quads, unbreakable and precious. They only had one in a lifetime. It was the reason why she'd held herself back. Her heart thumped with the weight of a rock. She had to step aside so they could find their true mate. Even if it killed her, she would do that for them.

The warm embrace of sleep buried her beneath a seductive pull and a wall of white washed over her until there was nothing in her head except whiteness and the feeling of exhaustion. Why was she so tired? She thought for a moment, but it seemed too much trouble and she let herself drift in a sea of never-ending fog. She sank down, down, down.

"Out of bed, sleepyhead!"

Her eyes snapped open. A figure loomed in front of her. "Grant?"

Her boyfriend opened his palms in a placating gesture. He'd just gotten out of the shower. A white towel was wrapped around his trim waist, and his hair was wet and slicked back. A few ends dripped onto his shoulders. "Who else would it be?"

She yelped, bolting upright in bed, eyes darting everywhere. Sunlight filtered through her gauzy curtains, a breeze catching the seam in the middle that never closed just right. Her gaze flew over familiar, faded floral wallpaper on the walls, noting the hole

where the door handle had slammed into it one time. Her soft and lumpy bed beneath her. Her bedspread thin, but warmed from sleep over her legs, the familiar canary yellow of the cover singing a happiness she yearned for. It was familiar, yet her heart hammered like an anvil in her chest. She pressed her fingers to her temple. “I’m in my bedroom?”

Grant sat, making a dip in the bed, and put his hand on her knee. “Where else would you be?”

She eased her knee from beneath his touch.

He frowned at her movement, and then at her. “What’s going on, Luce? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

She tried to think, to work out why she was so confused, but her mind was filled with a blanket of white fog that blocked her thoughts. Even her dream of three sexy men became slippery and waned away. She tried to follow it but as soon as she started to dig too deep, she became stuck as though she waded through molasses. There was something important she had to remember, but as soon as the thought occurred to her, it sank into the molasses and she was unable to grab it.

“I...”

Grant chuckled, the sound grating. “Must have had too much to drink last night.”

“I did?”

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

His frown deepened. “Sure. We celebrated. Don’t you remember? I met with Donald Stephenson. About you. Luce, we’ve got a real chance. He asked me into his studio next week.”

Fuzzy memories surfaced, indistinct, yet there in a shadowy type of way. That had happened. Grant had secured a meeting with the most sought-after music producer in the country. She had a real chance of being heard, after all this time and all that work. It was finally paying off. She remembered now as everything snapped back into perfect clarity. Grant was helping her. He worked day and night to help her with her music career. Everything he did was for her.

“To hear my sample?”

He caught her chin between his thumb and knuckle. She tried not to flinch by his roughness. “Of course! What else would he want to hear from me about?”

“I... I don’t know.” And she didn’t. Everything was just so fuzzy. If she could just sleep some more, maybe she would wake up with a clear mind. Maybe she would be able to think. She reached for the sea of white so she could drift a little more.

“Hey, don’t close those eyes of yours. I thought I’d take you out for breakfast this morning.” Grant smiled, his teeth gleaming white in the filtered sunlight.

She used to think he was so handsome, only now his smile seemed a bit... smarmy. Other smiles—genuine smiles—circled in the back of her mind, but the molasses caught them and sank them below its opaque surface.

He took her hand and helped her to stand. “Take a shower and then we’ll go. My treat.”

He pulled her towards him so that she came up close to his hairless, bare chest. He spent hours in the gym, so it was sculpted in all the right places. Defined pecs. Six pack. Smooth skin. A line that ran down the center of his stomach to sink beneath the edge of the towel. It usually turned her on. A hidden part of her wondered why a guy like him could possibly be interested in a girl like her, but she never brought it out to examine too closely. She was just grateful that someone was in her life.

She held her arms in front of her so that only her forearms were pressed against his skin instead of her breasts. He wound his fingers around her upper arms, a faint frown playing on his forehead.

“You’re all stiff this morning. What’s wrong with you? Where’s my little Luce?” He grabbed her buttocks, squeezing her cheeks.

She swiped his hands away and stepped back, “Nothing’s wrong. I’m just tired.”

His face softened, the frown easing from his face. “Of course, you are. Holding three jobs has to take a toll. Well, at least you have the morning off. Let me take care of you.”

Her breath released and the tension in her shoulders eased. Three jobs. That was right. Working long hours had just caught up with her. That must be why she was so tired, why her mind was so fuzzy. She hoped she wasn’t coming down with the flu. If she didn’t work, she didn’t get paid.

“That... that sounds great.”

He snapped his fingers, “Before you shower, get my shirt for me, would you? The

one I asked you to dry clean during the week? I need it for this afternoon.”

“This afternoon? I thought... we were spending time together.”

A smile lit his handsome face. “We are. But you must work this afternoon, remember? I must go out and meet with some more people about you. You do your work, and I’ll do mine.” He must have seen something on her face because his expression turned sour. “I’m doing this for you, babe. Everything I do is for you. Then, when you’re selling records and gigs, that’s all you’ll have to do. That was the plan. Remember?”

The plan? Yes. It was. He was right. As usual. He was working hard to meet the right people, get her heard, promote her name. He was doing all this for her, but they had to live on something, of course, so she’d elected to work to fund their dreams.

“Yes. Yes, of course. How silly of me. I’ve just got... a bit of a headache.” She turned to go into the bathroom just off the bedroom.

“Babe?”

She turned. “Yes?”

“My shirt?”

The shirt. The silk one she’d had cleaned because it couldn’t be washed in the harsh washers in the Laundromat.

“The shirt. Of course.”

She couldn’t remember picking it up, but she was definitely not on top of things this morning. Her stomach growled. She was starving. A hangover and starving. No

wonder she was confusing things.

She opened the wardrobe doors, careful of the broken hinge. Hadn't Grant said he would fix that? Maybe not. She couldn't be sure. She rifled through the shirts she'd ironed and hung, finding the shirt he wanted still wrapped in the plastic wrap, and took it out, a frown pulling her forehead. She couldn't remember putting it in there, but she must have. Why else would it be in there?

"Here it is."

Grant's smile returned. "That's my girl."

When he went to kiss her, she turned her head. His lips were cool on her cheek.

She scurried into the bathroom without looking at him.

“I... won’t be long.” She closed the door and sank behind it.

What was wrong with her? Her blood usually heated the moment he looked at her. She couldn’t help thinking there was something she was missing—something very important—but her mind was slippery and the thought was elusive. Maybe she really was coming down with the flu. She made a mental note to stop at the drugstore and pick up some vitamins.

“Come on, Luce. I don’t have all day.” Grant called from behind the door.

She’d better be quick. He wasn’t the most patient man, and besides, he was only busy because of her. He was the one who was going to get her career off the ground. He was the one who would help her climb the ladder. He’d already met Donald Stephenson, and he was the person to get to know. If anyone could help her, it was Grant.

Trying to ignore the overwhelming need for sleep, she turned on the shower, only the water refused to warm up. She remembered Grant in the towel. He’d already showered, and the hot water tank wasn’t that big.

She stepped beneath the cool stream and made short work of washing her body and her hair. At least the cool water might help her wake up properly.

* * *

They drew up to Flips'n'Burgers. For a Sunday, the breakfast crowd was thick and steady.

She turned to Grant, squinting. "What are we doing here?"

Grant stunned her with his hundred-watt smile. "We're here for breakfast. Surprise!"

"But... but I work here." She wasn't due for three more hours. Her shift started at twelve until nine or ten that night. Depending on customers.

"Right. Now you won't have to drive here after breakfast—and I've secured you another couple of hours extra on top of your regular shift. Just for the extra cash."

He reached behind and grabbed something on the back seat, placing it on her lap. "See? I even brought your uniform so you won't have to go back to the apartment."

The uniform was retro red-and-white check to fit in with the fifties style burger diner popular with teens and families. She'd worked here for years. Why did she remember that, and everything else was white noise?

Before she could stutter a reply, Grant opened his door and stepped out. The silence in the car was stifling. He walked to the front of the restaurant, seemingly oblivious to the fact she was still in the car until just before he entered. He turned, sending her a 'what's up' gesture.

She shouldn't complain. He was taking her out for breakfast. She just should have asked about the location. Sighing, she grabbed the uniform and her bag, stepped out of the car, and followed him into the familiar restaurant.

Elvis warbled over the loudspeakers and she was enveloped in the aromas of fries and fat.

Grant sat in one of the stalls and before she could sit next to him, he said, “Grab me a coffee, babe? And while you’re up, might as well order something to eat. I’ll have the Beatle Burger and fries. And put me down for the Supremes apple pie. Love that pie.”

Lucie sighed and made her way to the counter.

Janie, her friend and fellow waitress, looked up, surprised, her smile welcoming, but confused. “Hey. You’re three hours early!”

“Hey, Luce!” Luke waved from inside the kitchen and sent her a friendly way.

Lucie smiled and waved back. This place might be hard on her feet, but the people she worked with more than made up for it.

“Oh, yeah, we’ve come for breakfast. Grant thought it would be handy if I came here and started early. Might as well, you know. Makes it easier to start my shift and I can earn an extra couple hours work,” she said.

Janie scowled, her eyes sliding to Grant slouched in the seat. “Could have taken you anywhere. Why not to the five-star place just down the road?”

“He just thought it would be easier for me, that’s all.” Lucie felt her face heating. It would have been nice to sit down and have someone else wait on her for a change, but she shouldn’t be angry. The extra pay would come in handy for the recording she was going to make later in the week. She remembered that now. “Professional recordings are expensive and I need the best choice we can make.”

Janie put her hand over Lucie’s and squeezed. “Yes, but—are you sure he’s making the best one for you?”

Lucie’s gaze shot to her friends. “Of course. Why wouldn’t he? It’s expensive to start

up and producers only want to hear professional recordings.”

Grant saw her talent. He’d been the only person to believe in her dream. The only person to actually take on her career and help her without wanting anything back.

“It’s just that...” Janie bit her lip.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“What?” Lucie’s tone flatlined. She mentally winced at the hardness in her voice.

What reason would Grant have to lie? He was the only one to have her back. Everyone else had turned theirs on her. Life was harsh, but that was just the way it was.

“Doesn’t there come a time in life when you’re due a little bit of happiness, Janie?” she continued. “You’ve got to grab it wherever it comes from.”

Janie smiled, though Lucie ignored the pity in her eyes. “Of course. You deserve all the happiness in the world, Lucie. You know that. Why don’t you sit down while you can and I’ll come over and wait on you? It’s Elvis’ birthday. The lunch crowd is going to be big today and I’ll bring over your favorite. Okay?”

Lucie nodded and quickly gave Grant’s order before turning back to the table and her waiting boyfriend. When she got there, he held up his phone, an excited look on his face.

She sank onto the seat next to him. “What?”

“Just got a call from Stephenson. Wants to meet with me in an hour!”

Lucie’s heart stuttered, excitement mixed with every heartbeat. This was finally it. Everything they’d worked for. “Does he want to meet me too?”

After all, she was the artist in the sample he had shown the man.

Grant's smile twisted. He slipped his phone into his front pocket. "That will come in time. At the moment, I'm working on the details. There's no use going down this path unless everything been signed, sealed, and delivered."

"But... why?" She couldn't understand why the producer didn't want to meet her. See her. Listen to her live.

"Let me handle things. I want the best for you and there's a procedure for doing this type of business. I know how to treat these people. Believe me, they like the mystery. Build it up and they'll snap you up like a shark on a hook." He leaned forward and gave her a peck on her mouth before sliding from the seat. "I'm only trying to get the best deal for you, Luce. You know that. I'll call you later. Tell you how it all goes. You never know, this might be the time, Luce."

He walked out of the door without a backward glance. Her little red car slid out of the carpark and into the flow of traffic. Belatedly she realized Grant had taken the car and she had no way to get back home after her shift.

The day seemed to be normal. Just another day out of her life, and yet there was a sticky white mass in her brain that made her mind foggy. She couldn't help but feel there was something she had to remember. Something important, but her mind was caught on a slippery slope.

She sighed, got up from the table and reached for her apron. Might as well help Janie set up before the lunch crowd came in. Lord knew, it was going to be busy enough today as it was. Maybe a day mindlessly taking orders would shake her brain back into gear and she'd remember what on earth she'd forgotten. She had a deep feeling that it was very, very important.

Chapter Five

Juliran

Blue green light surrounded himself and his brothers as he stood at Lucie's side, and then he was racing down a tunnel made of intense light. Two bright sparks sped next to him following the ever-changing twists and turns of the wormhole. There was one final twist and a white light enveloped him.

His feet hit hard ground. The light withdrew to reveal a city unlike any he'd seen before, steeped in nighttime shadows. A hard, black surface lay beneath his feet. Strange, cube-like vehicles on four wheels lined the path they stood on. Stretched on either side were buildings made from small, brown and tan bricks interspersed by small windows covered in sheer, shiny coverings. Overhead, lights shone from tall poles, illuminating spots of light beneath.

A sound blasted, and a vehicle hurtled towards them. Kyel grabbed his arm and propelled both himself and Zaen onto a grey sidewalk.

"It wasn't going to stop?" Juliran stared at the vehicle as it sped along the pathway, its engine spewing evil-smelling fumes. In their Homeland, pedestrians were always safe, their transport vehicles being restricted to air-space only unless disembarking.

"We're in Lucie's mind, remember? We are wherever she is," Kyel said.

Juliran glanced at the dark, depressing scene. It was a world so unlike their own, and his first impressions were unsettling. He didn't like the thought of their bright star in such darkness. "The quicker we can get her back to us, the better."

"I second that, brother." Zaen, twitched in his clothes, rolling his shoulders and grimacing as though not comfortable at all.

"If we're in her world, where is she?" Juliran said, spinning about. People in couples

or groups walked past, ignoring them. Some entered a vehicle and after a moment, two lights at the front end lit up and the boxy-looking machine rumbled along the wide, black surface past them before disappearing around a corner. Juliran coughed as acrid smoke stung his nostrils.

“At least we look the part,” Kyel said.

Juliran glanced at his clothing. Gone were his leathers, replaced by a thick, dark blue material that covered him from waist to ankle. An uncomfortable tin metal catch ran from his waistband to the bottom of his groin. His leathers were much softer on his cock.

He wore black boots on his feet, but they ended at the ankle. No calf protection at all. He would have to remember that if they were attacked. On his torso was a white shirt made from soft, light material. The sleeves ended mid-bicep. The cool of the night was ward off by a jacket with a fake-fur-lined collar. His brothers were dressed in similar styles, matched by the males that walked around them.

He peered closer at his brothers. Despite the shadowed light of the night, they looked different.

“Your skin has changed.” He glanced at his hands. They were a tan color, close to their Lucie’s skin. Gone was the blue hue known in their Homeland. However, their eyes had retained their glow. “Your horns are also missing.”

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

Instead of the familiar battle horns that grew in adolescence, their temples were now the smooth skin of children.

“We look ridiculous,” Juliran snorted.

“I guess we fit in like this. Sort of,” Zaen said, although he ran his fingertips along his smooth forehead with a frown on his face.

“Do you still have your markings, Zaen?” Juliran said.

Zaen lifted his top to reveal the black and blue swirls on his abdomen. Either one or all of any Trio were born with them, and Zaen was the only marked of his brothers. Instead of their usual shifting colors, the colors in the swirls didn’t change, but remained a static neon blue. Many a time, Juliran had teased his brother when he’d been unable to hide his emotions through the swirls and changing colors in his markings. It would seem they wouldn’t behave like that here. Zaen tucked his shirt into the waist of his pants.

“We fit in close enough not to draw attention, that’s the main thing. I suspect we will have to take Lucie’s world as we find it,” Kyel said.

“What do you mean?” Juliran said. “Can’t we just find her and bring her home?”

Kyel’s gaze gleamed in the low light. “Lucie has been tortured, brother. We don’t know in what state we’ll find her. She may not be able to withstand another shock if we try to pull her out of whatever we are in too quickly. It is up to us to soothe her. Calm her. Make her understand that her life is with us so she might feel our mate

bond. If the entity has brought her here, it must be for a reason. We need to watch out and make sure she is protected at all times.”

“I will do anything necessary,” Juliran said. He suppressed the feeling of helplessness that swamped him.

He knew there was something holding her back, but was unable to understand exactly what. Or how horrific it was.

She should be happy. Joyful. Secure in the knowledge of their love, but she had doubted all along. If anything, they had to get to the bottom of that before she had any chance of healing and fully accepting them.

Maybe that was the brunt of the matter. They hadn’t tried hard enough, hadn’t been able to break the shell surrounding her for her to feel secure. It was down to them to rectify many things.

Shouting, laughter and pumping music emanated from a building behind them. Juliran made out a tune with a steady beat.

Inside the building, many people sat next to windows, sharing meals. Females bustled around, all dressed in a similar fashion: a uniform of red and white checks with a frilly white apron tied around their waists. It seemed to be in a slightly different style to those sitting and eating.

A woman passed by a window, and his heart stopped. “Brothers, it’s Lucie! We’ve found her.”

He strode towards her, but a hand on his arm held him back. He turned to face Kyel.

“Remember, brother,” Kyel said. “We do not know what to expect. We will greet her,

but she is in a fragile state of mind. The laws of physics may not apply here. This is not a real world. This is her mind's construct. However she is, we will need to go with what she believes to be real. Work with her, not against her. I ought to suggest... her mind might have blocked us out altogether. We are not a part of the world she has regressed to. She may not even recognize us."

Juliran nodded. Trepidation washed over him as his brother's words sank in.

"Time is not on our side either," he said.

They had no idea how long it might take for the entity to drain her fully, or trap her mind in the shell it had created. Her body was on the brink of shutting down and she was already weakened. So many variables. Too many.

"Come. Let's see what we find," Zaen said.

They walked into the eating house, Juliran's heart thumping in anticipation. She might only have to see them, and they would be able to sweep her away and back into reality.

He peered through the crowd, his gaze bouncing off strangers, and then landed on her. "Lucie!"

She was talking to people seated at a table, writing on a pad of paper. She perked up and looked over in their direction. Juliran steeled himself for her reaction, but there was none.

She finished speaking to the people seated and then came towards them. She was... different. Her body was more filled out, not skin and bone as she was in reality, but still too thin. And she looked tired. Strands of hair had escaped a once-neat bun, and the bags beneath her eyes told of fatigue. Her steps were heavy, as though she had to

fight to take each one.

Her familiar scent washed over him and it took every ounce of willpower in him to force himself to remain standing where he was, to not gather her into his arms and hold her against his chest.

“Lucie. We’ve found you,” he said as his breath whooshed out of him.

He stepped towards her, but Kyel’s hand on his elbow held him back. He was confused for a moment, but Kyel’s steely gaze was trained on Lucie. “Easy, brother.”

Frowning, Juliran looked back at Lucie to see what had stopped Kyel. He thought he saw a spark of recognition in her eyes, then a second of confusion and she winced, putting a hand to her temple. She blinked a few times, shaking her head a little, as though trying to clear her mind. When she looked at them, her eyes were dazed and strangely blank. “How do you know my name?”

Juliran’s heart sunk into the pit of his stomach and his heart stuttered in his chest. Their mate didn’t recognize them! Although Kyel had warned him, he was still totally unprepared. All he wanted to do was wrap her in his arms, hold her and protect her like a mate should. The urge was overpowering.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“Your name is on your badge,” Kyel said.

Juliran spotted her name badge on her top covering. She placed a hand over it as relief washed over her face. “Yes. Of course. Silly me. Would you like a table?”

Kyel nodded. “That would be appropriate.”

Her full lips twisted in a smile. “Appropriate. That’s one word for it, I guess. Please follow me.”

She led them through the eating house, or restaurant as she called it. Loud music and talking filled the air, and staff hustled about, delivering food and cleaning tables. Neon signs and images of people dancing and holding instruments of various sorts lined the walls. The females that weren’t working as their Lucie was, wore clothing of full skirts while the males wore suits of some kind.

At the far end of the restaurant stood a darkened, empty stage. Instruments littered the stage floor. Above the stage was a sign—Live Band, Karaoke, Saturday Nights. He had no idea what that meant, but if it had materialized here in Lucie’s mind, then it must be important.

Families grouped around tables, eating and laughing, the children making a huge mess. He wondered briefly where all the members were. He only saw two parents, but then he remembered that Lucie had told them one time Quads were not formed on Earth. There was one male and one female parent between sometimes many children and he had wondered how only two parents coped looking after so many young.

The family groups looked no less loving, but this was certainly different than what he was used to. An errant thought occurred to him. Had Lucie felt the same way about their Homeland? What they took for granted was all new for her. It felt surreal for him to be here, even in this short time. Had she felt the same? The thought sat uncomfortably with him. He would need to speak to his brothers about it.

“Here you go.” She gestured to the empty table and waited for them to slide around the U-shaped seat that framed a central table that was far too snug for their large bodies. The males in the eating house weren’t as large as they were and fitted a lot better. His thighs scraped the bottom of the table and his spine was pushed right back into the seating cushion.

Condiments rested in the middle of the table, as did menus wrapped in a plastic material that had been outlawed on their Homeland due to its non-biodegradable properties. Species of animals had nearly become extinct due to their manufacturing stupidity before the Homelands woke up and manufactured similar, yet far better options that didn’t hurt the land or the animals.

“Oh, dear. Would you like me to find you another table?” She wrung her hands and her gaze bounced between them.

“There is no need, Lucie. We are fine here.” Zaen smiled up at her.

She faltered, a frown scrunched her forehead. She started at Zaen for a long moment. Juliran bent his fingers around the edge of the table, watching her closely, waiting for a hint of recognition. Anything.

She shook her head and she touched the tip of her writing device to the pad and Juliran sank back into his seat, shoulders slumping. “What would you like to order?”

“We are... new in town. What would you propose?” Kyel asked.

She blinked, her eyes glazed. “I... I’d start with the Bill Hayley Burgers with fries and the Perry Como Shake. That should fill anyone the size of you guys up.”

“Luce. Tables eight and twelve need to be cleared!” A harried-looking man covered in sweat called from the cooking area. He was the only person in there.

Lucie gave them a thin smile. “I’ll put your order in and be right back with some water.”

Juliran watched her tear off the docket she’d used to take their order, add it to a line of paper fluttering in front of the cook before turning back to the empty tables to clear the dishes piled on top.

“Miss?” Someone called from a nearby table, catching her attention. She went over.

There was too much work for her to do. Although she tried to hide it, Juliran saw her stretch her back. As she walked away from the people, there was a slosh and a cry, and a drink spilt across the floor.

“I’m so sorry. It just slipped from his fingers,” the young mother said.

“That’s all right. This is what I’m here for.” Lucie darted behind the counter and returned with a cloth, making quick work of cleaning up the spilt drink. “I’ll get another one for you.”

A bell sounded as the cook stacked up a line of plates. “Table fourteen ready.”

Lucie threw the cleaning cloth in a sink, stacked the dishes in her arms, and made her way to a rowdy table.

“She is working herself to death,” Kyel said, more than a touch of anger in his voice.

“Why is she doing this?” Zaen said.

Juliran eyed the tables yet to be cleared. She was just too busy to get to them. He glimpsed another waitress in the crowd but she was as busy as Lucie.

Working their females like this was untenable. He rose from the table and cleared their plates. Zaen and Kyel also picked up some of the stacks of dishes, following his lead.

“What are you doing! That’s my job. Here, let me take those and you go sit down.” Lucie rushed over to them, her eyes wide. She made to take the plates and he simply held them over his head out of her reach.

“Where do you take the used plates?”

Her gaze darted about. “You’ll get me fired if you do this, and believe me I need this job.”

“Why do you need this job so much, Lucie? Don’t you have someone who takes care of you?” Three mates who will cater to your every wish if you so desire. All you need to do is ask.

But she’d never asked them to do a thing. Not even to comfort her when she trembled alone in her bed at night. And he knew she did when he checked in on her, waiting for her to hold a hand out to him, but all she’d done was huddle beneath the blankets and pretend to sleep.

She blinked up at him, her eyes luminous and her mouth turned down. In that moment, she looked so small. So defeated. “I don’t need anyone to take care of me. I haven’t for a long time.”

Juliran felt a frown push his forehead. She didn’t remember them at all. Impossible hurt stabbed his heart, but he had to remember it wasn’t her. It was the entity clouding her thoughts. What she did remember was indelibly etched on her subconscious. Memories a malevolent entity from another dimension couldn’t erase. “Surely you have someone.” His voice cracked as he spoke. Surely, she would remember them. The bond was too strong.

Surely.

Her lips pursed and her eyes glazed. She came to a decision when she took a steeling breath and squared her shoulders. “You’d think so, but...” She shrugged, coming out of herself. “My parents died. My foster parents kicked me out when I turned eighteen. Government funding only goes so far and I was an extra mouth to feed. An unwanted expense. I’ve survived on my own for years now. I’m used to it. So now you can see, give me the dishes. I need this job more than you could possibly know.”

Her words punched him right in the gut. He had no idea of her past at all. She’d suffered greatly in her life on Earth and he hadn’t known any of it. She’d remembered her horrible past, and yet her mind was blank when it came to them.

If she didn’t remember them, how in the stars were they going to save her from the depths of her mind?

Chapter Six

Lucie

The hot big guy made the dirty dishes look like a child’s tea party in his massive hands. He had nice fingers though. Long, lean, and smooth. Callouses on his palms, so he was a hard worker of some sort. It was strange what she’d noticed about him.

Apart from being totally hot, with his muscular six-and-a-half-foot frame, and built like a linebacker, his hair was short and spiked on the top although longish strands fell over his eye. In the right light, it seemed to have blue streaks in the strands. Several times she’d had to blink twice only to find that her eyes had played tricks on her. He didn’t seem the kind to get color done from a hairdresser.

His friends were all tall, but she wasn’t put off by that. Quite the opposite. She felt safe. Protected. She knew men could use their height and bulk to their advantage. If they did anything, she wouldn’t be able to lift a finger, but somehow, she inherently

knew they would not hurt her. They were simply alpha, protective types that looked out for people not able to do it for themselves. A very rare breed.

They were all super-hot. Her type, now that she thought of it. One had tattoos curling up his neck in an intricate design she yearned to see more of, a startling blue instead of the normal black. He was a little broader than the one standing right in front of her, perching dishes in his hands, but no less intimidating. The other one had short hair and a trimmed beard. He also had that look about him that told her he was used to issuing orders and them being carried out. If there was a leader to their little group, he was it.

All had strong jawlines, straight shoulders, flat stomachs, and looked like they could take on an entire football team and win—and the way they wore those jeans was sinful. Way, way out of her league. One hundred percent certain.

Oh well, a girl could dream.

Besides, she had a boyfriend. She loved him.

She was sure of it.

Of course, she did. Grant had been her rock when she'd reached her lowest. Had brought her from the depths she'd sunk to. Without him, she would probably be dead by now. Nobody would have cared one way or the other. Just another Jane Doe. She had a lot to thank him for.

She could look at these super-hotties, but there would be no touching. Besides, she was too busy and too tired to do more than appreciate a handsome man—or three. One boyfriend was enough hard work. She held her hands out for the dishes, only he didn't seem to want to hand them over to her.

“Where is your manager?” His voice was a deep rumble and he had the unerring ability to look at her and make the rest of the world fade away.

“You’re not going to tell him off, are you?”

They’d been watching her as she’d darted from order to table to clean up but that was the job and it was a busy night tonight. She was run off her feet and she had no time to waste. She could just imagine him giving Luke a piece of his mind and her losing her job all in the one night. And then where would she be? Up shit creek without a paddle, that was where.

The one with the tattoos cleared the other table, balancing sturdy dishes that looked decidedly delicate in his hands. “You are understaffed. You need help and we need jobs.”

Her mouth fell open and she blinked at him, mute for a moment. “You. Want to workhere...?” She tried to work through the incredulity but failed. They were short staffed for the night. Sharon and Leanne hadn’t turned up for some reason, as though in direct relationship to her lack of energy. If she had felt drained at the start of the shift, she was positively exhausted now. She made a mental note to get some vitamins. That’d pep her back up from her underlying lethargy.

“Where else may we find employment?” The largest one approached, putting his hands on his hips. She belatedly realized the top of her head came to his shoulder.

What about within the glossy pages of a magazine? She licked her lips, thinking of all the hard labor jobs they must be used to with physiques like that. “I don’t know. A mechanic? Security guard? Basketballer?” Model. Male escort. She stifled her hysterical giggle.

The one with the tattoos frowned. “I don’t know what those jobs are but we are quite

capable of clearing tables, serving meals, and wiping up children's spillages.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“You’ll have to wash dishes as well.” She didn’t know why she said that, but her mind had gone blank. No one wanted to really work here. It was hard and tiring. Young families tended to make a terrible mess.

“We are skilled at washing dishes. If you point out the meal preparation area, I will wash while my brothers help you out here,” the alpha one said.

“Miss?” a voice called from a nearby table. “May we order dessert?”

She glanced at the tables yet to be served and the plates lining up to be delivered. Things were certainly heating up and Janie was running between tables as much as she was. It was much busier than normal. They were both overworked and if they didn’t get some help tonight, they weren’t going to keep up with the orders.

“Okay,” she said. “Let me speak to Luke.”

It was a short conversation. She’d expected more of a battle, but Luke was run off his feet as well. Any help was readily accepted.

“Just get one of them to help me in here,” he said. “We’ll pay them in cash at the end of the night.”

Turning, she walked into a large chest. She staggered back, and large hands settled on her upper arms. The tallest one of the three towered above her. Larger than life and yet his touch was warm and gentle. Almost familiar. His hands lingered on her shoulders and she couldn’t help the shiver that worked through her body when the pad of his thumb rubbed her skin. Familiar? More like wishful thinking.

It took effort to step back when her instinct was to seek shelter within the comfort of his body. She frowned, not understanding where that impulse came from. She didn't know them at all, and yet there was some sense of intimacy about them she couldn't put her finger on. White fog descended in her mind, erasing the feeling.

They were busy. She had to work.

“All right. If you're so interested in working here, the main tasks are taking meals to tables, picking up dirty dishes, cleaning up messes and basically keeping everyone fed and watered. It's hard work for not much pay.” When they didn't utter a word at the mention of hard work, she continued. “Since we're going to work together, I need to know your names.”

The large alpha man stepped up. He had the strangest color of eyes, a bright blue that could only be colored through contacts...Did they glow?

Contacts. That had to be it. Probably some strange body shaping fetish. Normally she didn't go for that type of thing, but on him, it was hot.

“I am Kyel.” Blue eyes pointed to the man next to him with the mouth-watering tattoos. “This is Zaen and our youngest brother, Juliran.”

“You're brothers?” She wasn't as surprised as she thought. It seemed natural. She noticed a familial similarity, the color blue seeming to bind them together. Blue eyes, blue tattoos, and blue hair.

She shouldn't be lusting after brothers. She usually had no desire for anyone else except Grant, albeit most of the time she was an exhausted heap just wanting to come home to sleep, but still, there was something about these brothers she couldn't quite put her finger on. A compulsion deep inside her that went beyond reasoning, beyond the sub-conscious, something that was inherent within her. And that, in itself, was

wrong on so many levels.

She couldn't imagine what they would think of her if they found out what was in her mind. She'd sunk to a new low. At least her thoughts were private, thank goodness.

"Miss?" A father from a nearby table called out.

She should be working, not feeling like she was on a date. She wasn't lying when she said she needed this job. Grant was relying on her to pay the bills while he worked on her career. In the long run, a little bit of exhaustion would be worth the effort.

"We'd better get back to work," she said. "These people won't get fed on their own."

Kyel inclined his head in a purely regal gesture. She could imagine him with a crown on his head. A strangely shaped crown to mold around horns.

Now shewasgoing crazy.

"As you wish. Brothers, it is time to help our ma..."

"Lucie. It is time to help, Lucie," Juliran said.

A faint smile curved Kyel's full lips. "Of course. Let us begin."

The rest of the night went past in a blur of clearing tables, serving burgers and generally making sure the customers were watered, fed, and happy. There were the regulars she genuinely liked and she spent a little extra time talking to them all in the name of good customer service.

She was aware of the brothers from the corner of her eye. It seemed several of the female customers also had noticed them, although the guys gave no indication they'd

seen the women flirting. She was surprised as a spike of jealousy stabbed her heart. She shouldn't be jealous at all. She had a boyfriend and these guys had just as much right to happiness as she did, although happiness was not what she'd call things of late. However, she was tired and being like this would color her emotions.

Mentally shaking her head, she steadily worked her way through the rest of the night, ignoring feet that hurt and legs that weighed a ton. She was more tired than usual, but she pushed through it. One thing for sure, she was looking forward to her bed tonight.

Another image of the brothers surrounding her in bed, tending to her every need, scorched her mind. They'd wanted to do everything to her and then do something that was so final even death would not undo it, although what that could possibly be, she had no idea. She took a moment to indulge the daydream this time, wiping the table in front of her with half a mind.

It wasn't a hard press of the imagination to picture what they would be like. Their bodies would be magnificent. Clothing couldn't hide perfection like that. Each of them was sculpted in similar ways, and yet their bodies were so different.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

Kyel with hard abs and a lean waist would be as bossy in bed as he was with his brothers. No, not bossy. More forthright. Assertive. The definition of alpha. He'd place her where he wanted her. On her back. Hands and knees. Bending over the back of a sofa. But he'd always make sure she found her pleasure before he released.

Zaen would be just as assertive, but he'd take his time a little more. Where Kyel was a little rougher, a little less able to rein in his desire—not that she would mind, not at all—Zaen would stroke her desire in ways that would leave her trembling in anticipation.

Juliran would be another thing altogether. He would be a slow burn through and through. Touching her, building the anticipation until she demanded his cock and then he would only give it to her after she'd found her climax—twice.

They looked a little different in her daydream, with an otherworldly blue tinge to their skin that only served to make them sexier. Where she'd plucked that particular idea from, she didn't know. She also didn't understand how it just felt... right. Yeah, it was right that they had blue skin. She chuckled to herself. She'd always did have a good imagination. Maybe she had a thing for aliens. Hot, sexy, well-defined, alpha aliens. Hmmm, truly droolworthy.

It was strange how she could see things so clearly in her mind. They would be as intense singularly or altogether. There was no jealousy between them at all. Only there seemed to be one way in which they weren't all together, hadn't joined as one.

It was important though, although she didn't understand why, and she didn't know how. There was a part of her that called out to do it, a deep part well past conscious

understanding, something that went beyond, but the haze descended and she was thrust back into the world of work and tables and sore feet and waitressing.

“Lucie?”

She blinked up into Juliran’s questioning cerulean eyes. She looked about. The restaurant had been cleared, chairs stacked on cleaned tables, the floor recently washed, dishes in their place. The room was quiet and calm and ready for the next shift. All that had happened and she hadn’t even realized. Where had the time gone?

She wiped her hands on her apron. “I’ll get your money and we can call it a night.”

She went to the till and sorted out the notes to pay them.

Luke approached from the kitchen. “You guys told Luce you’re looking for work?”

Kyel nodded. “We did.”

“Well, you did a great job tonight. If you’d like to turn up tomorrow night about four, I’d gladly like the help going forward.”

Zaen nodded, accepting the notes as though he didn’t know what they were. “Will Lucie also be here?”

“I’m here all the time.” Lucie took her apron off and threw it into the laundry basket in a corner of the kitchen. “Honestly, don’t let me stop you from taking shifts or not. I’m not going to stand in the way of anyone wanting work. But for now, I’m beat. I’m heading off home. I guess I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

“You will, Lucie.” Juliran was so serious when he spoke it almost made her laugh.

She looked up at all of them, illogically happy that she would get to see them again. It shouldn't matter if she saw them or not. It was none of her business, but as she grabbed her bag from her locker and made her way out of the front door her skin prickled as three sets of eyes were laser-focused right on her, sending out an aura of protective bodyguards.

She paused and gave them a small smile. She should have been uncomfortable beneath such scrutiny, or at the least it should have given her pause—it would have coming from anyone else—but, instead, a feeling of surprising calm washed through her as she stepped out into the cold night. Her mind wasn't as hazy as it had recently been, and yet, she still felt as though she was missing something. Something really important. Something life-and-death important. The feeling flittered though her stomach, leaving a hollow wake. She tried to rub it away, but the hollowness only became bigger and harder and colder. The more she struggled to grasp what it might be, the more elusive it became.

What was it? What was she missing?

Chapter Seven

Lucie

Cool night air closed around her. She glanced at the car park, remembering that Grant had taken their—her—car. She'd owned the car when they'd met, but had nowhere to live. It had only made sense to combine everything they both owned, but lately it seemed that she was stuck with the rent while Grant took everything that was hers and treated it as his own.

She needed that car to get to all three of her jobs. They lived near a train line. Surely he could take public transport occasionally, where she might be able to get home easily.

“Babe. Walking’s good for you,” he would say. “Think of your toned legs when you’re up on stage. That’s what people look at.”

Only now, with the moon high in the sky, shadows everywhere, and muscles that deeply ached from dashing to and from the kitchen all afternoon and night, she could have done with the car. She rotated her head to ease the kinks from her shoulders. She shouldn’t feel ungrateful. Grant was doing everything he could for her career. He was giving up everything to help her. He could quite easily get a good job. He’d told her on numerous occasions, but he’d made the decision that something worth doing on a big a scale as she was worth, needed someone to put the time in. She was better placed to pay the bills while he used his contacts. It would only be for a little time and then they could relax and enjoy the pay-off for their hard work.

She glanced at her feet and the pumps she wore instead of her sneakers. Not exactly the right shoes to wear for a busy Sunday night, but she hadn’t brought her comfy shoes when Grant told her they would be going out for breakfast. The thought of walking the three kilometers back home in them after working all night brought a groan to her lips.

Maybe she could ring Grant to come and pick her up. She tried his number, frowning when it went straight to voicemail. Maybe he was already home, tired after his meetings. He always met his contacts in unusual places. It seemed people in the music industry didn’t keep to business hours or office addresses, so Grant had said. He had to go meet them wherever they were, and not the other way around.

That made sense too. Music was entertainment, and people went out at night after their working day for their entertainment. When she got her break, she’d probably be working those hours as well. She placed a fist into the small of her back. She was already working those hours, just not doing the job she really wanted to do.

That night when Grant had first seen her sing had been purely by chance. She’d

wandered off the street and into the restaurant, looking for somewhere warm to stay for a few hours, and had indulged in Luke's karaoke. What a change one song had brought to her life.

Grant had seen her that night and he'd known she was a star, he said. He told her he'd take her on as her agent, get her more singing gigs. In the meantime, while he used his contacts and worked to get the right ears to hear her, he'd also arranged for her to have more shifts at Flips'n'Burgers. Not in the job she'd first thought, but artists had to do what artists had to do.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

She'd been grateful. Without that steady paycheck and someplace to stay, she was out in the cold. At eighteen and newly kicked out of foster home, she had needed all the help she could get.

She'd had state education, but nothing spectacular. She had no money to go to university, so she'd had to work at whatever she could get, but those jobs had fallen through. When she turned eighteen, award wages jumped and her employers didn't give her shifts, offering them to those younger and cheaper. She'd been out on her own. No savings. Fresh out of school and the foster system and nowhere to go.

However, all this reminiscing wasn't going to get her home, and bed was the only thing she wanted at the moment.

"May we assist you getting to your place of residence?" a voice asked from behind her.

"Huh?" She spun around, her gaze coming to rest on a wall of three, muscle-bound chests. "Oh. No. That's all right. I can get home myself."

Kyel narrowed his eyes and she became entangled in his gaze. He had the uncanny ability to make her feel stripped bare with just a glance. "It is late and you are alone. You should never have to walk by yourself."

She was suddenly aware of just how alone she actually was. Janie had already left. The car park was empty, as were the streets. Luke was still inside, doing his last minute checks. If she had to, she could possibly run back inside. Then she remembered that the door was locked.

She clutched her handbag to her chest and took a step back. What did she really know about these guys anyway? They'd only turned up tonight, seemingly out of thin air, and helped out during rush hour. They might have worked hard, but that didn't mean they were trustworthy.

They could overpower her so easily it was laughable. She didn't think they would, but life had taught her that looks were different to what was on the inside. Expect the worse, and then you weren't disappointed.

"That's all right. I'll be fine. I've walked home this time of night a hundred times before," she said.

Kyel uncrossed his arms, frowning. "This isn't the first time you've walked to your residence alone in the night?"

She swallowed an abrupt laugh that threatened to spill. "I've been walking home in the dark since I was a kid. I know how to look after myself."

Juliran blinked at her, incomprehension evident on his handsome face. "As a child? Where were your parents? That is no way to look after a youngling."

Youngling? These guys definitely weren't from around here. "No parents to talk of. I was lucky. Lots of foster parents." It seemed sarcasm was lost on them going by the confused looks on their faces.

She really needed to get home. Her feet were killing her and the longer it took, the less hours she'd get to sleep, which was what she really needed at the moment. Maybe the best thing to do was just walk away. "Well, nice to meet you and everything. I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

She turned and resolutely turned from them. It would actually be nice to see them

again tomorrow. She couldn't put her finger exactly on why, but there was just something about them. Even their overbearing attitudes were endearing in a way. They didn't do it to intimidate, but just to make her feel... safe.

She'd hadn't had that in a long time. Ever. It was nice, but she didn't really know what to do with that. Sure as hell, it was something she wasn't used to.

Even with Grant, she knew she wouldn't have that. From the beginning, there was an understanding that he needed space with his friends and she'd been taking up so much of his time, what with working on her career and everything. If he could just secure her a well-paying regular gig, things would get better. She'd earn more money and be able to give up her jobs. Then they'd have more time to spend together.

Footfalls behind her had her looking over her shoulder. The three of them were following her. She'd been so wrapped up in her thoughts, she hadn't even heard them. Her heart stuttered.

"Look. I'm fine," she called back to them. "I'm sure you have a place to go to."

Girlfriends to keep warm at night.

Funny how that sounded wrong. And who was she to feel jealous? Even a twinge. She had a boyfriend.

"We will escort you to your residence to make sure you are safe." Zaen looked more serious than normal. Even collecting dishes, he held an aura of intensity about him. An image of him walking next to her down a hallway made of white marble slipped into her mind. They'd stopped and he'd kissed her so gently, so irreverently, she'd been momentarily stunned.

She shook her head, the white mist helping to dislodge the image. She had no idea

where that had come from. Not that she wouldn't like to dream about something like that happening, but that wasn't reality. Besides, kissing like that could only happen in her dreams. Her very, very happy dreams. Dreams that would never come true.

"I'm never going to get rid of them," she muttered to herself, but obviously not quietly enough.

"Not while your safety is not ensured," Kyel, the bossy one, said.

She pressed her lips together, her cheeks heating. They were being nice. Nicer than rapists usually were. If they wanted to mug her, there were far richer people to target. The twenty in her purse wouldn't get them very far anyway. So, if they weren't going to rape or mug her, they probably were just doing the chivalrous thing and wanted to see her safely home. She just didn't recognize it, because things like that only happened in movies. Or the romance novels she used to ravenously read like manna before she only had time and energy for sleeping.

Kyel stepped close and it took her a frazzled moment to realize he clasped her chin with a knuckle and tilted her head back so that she looked right up into his face. He trailed his thumb along her bottom lip, and a tingle broke over her skin in its wake. "Do you know you always walk with your head down? Look up. You have a beautiful face. Show the world."

That was not what she was expecting. Her mouth opened and closed, words simply drying up along with her thoughts. He lifted his other hand to smooth a strand of hair that had fallen from the tight bun at her nape and tucked it behind her ear.

"Do I?" She internally winced. She sounded breathless. Needy. All the things she didn't want to feel.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

The straight line of his mouth broke with a smile and her breath caught. He was exceedingly handsome, but when he smiled, he was stunning.

“If I say you do, then you do. Do not question me. I only speak the truth, and as for ensuring your safety, it will be our absolute privilege. We expect no repayment, other than seeing your beautiful face, so please, hold it up high so we can find pleasure in looking at you.”

Juliran stepped towards her, as did Zaen. Familiar emotions washed through her as the three of them came close enough she was wrapped in body heat and mouth-watering, masculine scents. There was an urge to step into their arms just as strong as an urge to run. Something dark and sinister lashed at the edge of her mind, pulling her back. A warning. A note of danger. Not for her, but for them. A line she wasn't going to cross.

“Well then... thank you. My boyfriend once said I was pleasant to look upon.”

A look passed between them and as a cohesive unit, all three speared their eyes at her with a look of such intense possession that her heart leaped in her chest.

“You have a boyfriend?” Zaen spoke. He slid a gaze to Kyel. “She never said anything about a boyfriend.”

“It is true, but remember this is a construct of her mind. It may or may not be true,” Kyel murmured before turning back to gaze down at her.

“Wait. What? A construct of my mind? Am I somehow imagining all three of you

here?” Any warm thoughts she harbored shattered like brittle glass. They were nice—more than nice, actually—but they were also unstable.

It all made sense now. Why else would three virile men such as them be out of work and want to find it in a family diner of all things? Why would they offer to walk her home when Grant hadn’t thought twice about it, and he was meant to care about her the most? Why else would Kyel tell her was beautiful, if not for a mental condition? A possibly severe mental condition.

Why? Why? Why? She could find no other reason because there wasn’t one. She had nothing to give them. Nothing to offer. Why else would men like them even be around a woman like her? Things like that didn’t happen. Men like Grant happened to her. It was her place in the world and she’d long ago given up looking for anything better.

Juliran smiled. It was sad. “We are here. We are real. We are here for you. You have to believe us, Lucie.”

She hugged herself and stepped away from them. Her elbows dug into her palms. Cool, fresh air filled her lungs and made them clench with cold. “I know you’re real. What else could you be? Just... do me a favor and don’t walk me home again. Don’t tell me I’m beautiful. And don’t make me feel...” Her throat clenched and she couldn’t speak.

She looked up, surprised that she was in front of her apartment building. Safety was within reach. She dug out her pass-key and swiped the lock. The door click was welcome.

With trembling hands, she pushed open the door. “Just pretend we didn’t have this conversation. If you’re going to, turn up at work tomorrow and treat me like anyone else. I don’t think... I just can’t...”

She couldn't finish the words, and instead disappeared into the foyer. She wanted to tell them not to make her feel special. Not to look at her like she was the center of their universe. Not to set her up for disappointment and a fall she might never come back from.

She didn't look back when she stepped into the lift, trying to ignore the hole that opened on her chest.

Because she didn't want to feel anything. It was a full-time job protecting her heart and if she let even a slither of hope inside, she didn't think she would have the energy to want to keep going. It was easy with Grant. She never had to worry about protecting her heart at all. Maybe that was the reason why she was with him, but she didn't stop to analyze that thought. Basically, she didn't want to be lonely, and anyone was better than no one.

It never paid to pin your emotions of your heart on anyone. She'd done that before and it had always ended in heartache. No, she had to stop whatever was happening before anything could develop.

She ignored the fact that it was so hard to turn away from them. For some curious reason, she felt compelled to them on a level she never knew existed, but she shoved the ridiculous notion aside. She'd made a promise to herself years ago.

She'd never be that fool again.

Chapter Eight

Juliran

“Does she really live here?”

Juliran looked at the building and surroundings. It was dirty, ill-repaired, and smelled like dank rubbish that had never been collected. The door frame was chipped and needed a good coat of paint in the least, and a full replacement at the most. Dead bushes lined the ill-paved path leading up to the front doors. The entire building spoke of oppression. He had to hold himself back from kicking the door down and taking her out of this place.

“She is poor.” He was surprised. He’d had no idea of her past. She’d never spoken about it, and, he belatedly realized, he’d never asked. He rubbed his chest, knowing that he should have, had needed to do that, but he’d been so happy at finding their mate, that he had done none of those things. “Did she ever say anything to you two about how she lived on Earth?”

Zaen shook his head. “I was intent on making her feel safe and protected in our care.”

“She never said a word,” Kyel said.

Juliran knew that look on his brother’s face. The one that said he blamed himself for everything. “It’s not just your fault. I never asked her either.”

He wanted to punch something. Preferably the brick wall of the building, but when he launched his fist into the surface, it went right through. More carefully, he punched it again, and his hand sunk right through the wall as though it had no substance again. “What is this?”

“A construct of her mind. It seems when she is near, everything is solid. Her mind forms objects as she requires it, but when she is not around, then it returns to a thought state without any substance,” Zaen said.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“It makes sense, given that we should not be here in the first instance.” Juliran swiped the edge of the building. The bricks swished away, revealed black clouds before they settled back. “Black clouds. The same that came from the crystal.”

“The same keeping our world and our mate hostage,” Zaen said.

Juliran kicked a dead, broken bush. The twigs lost substance, swirling into wisps of smoke before reforming as though he hadn’t touched them. “How are we meant to get her out of here if everything is made from this?”

“You’re right, Juliran. Everything here is constructed from these clouds. They make this reality for her. She obviously thinks that this is all real and is accepting it. There can only be one reason for it. Deep down, she must know what has happened to her, but she’s so desperate to believe this is the truth, she’s deeply rooted to this reality,” Kyel said.

“She looked at us on a few occasions as though there was more, but then she became confused and lost her train of thought,” Zaen said.

“The entity is keeping her locked in her mind. I wonder how long she can keep it up before it all becomes too much for her. She looks exhausted,” Juliran said.

“She does,” Zaen said. “We’ve gone along with it so far, but it’s not getting us anywhere. She keeps on shutting down.”

Kyel turned and paced. He stopped, hanging his head. “We have not been good enough mates to her. We’ve not thought to give her what she so obviously needs. It’s

no wonder she shuts us out.”

Juliran’s stomach dropped with the sickening realization. He thought he had done everything possible, but the reality was the opposite.

“Then we have to be better mates,” Juliran said.

“And how do you propose we do that? I have done everything I can think of,” Kyel said.

“Not everything. Only what we wanted to do. Look at our parents as an example. They know everything there is to know about each other. Our mother knows what either of our fathers think before they open their mouths,” Juliran said.

To his surprise, Zaen chuckled, “Drives them up the wall.”

“But what do we know of Lucie? What have we asked her? What has she volunteered about herself?” Kyel said, eyes blazing. “We are all guilty. Me the most.”

Juliran rested his hand on Kyel’s shoulder, “How can you say that, brother? We were all caught up in the excitement of bringing hope back to our Homeland. We all made the mistake of thinking of her as just our mate, and not Lucie.”

“What do you suggest?” Zaen asked.

“That we get to know her. That we stop treating her as a mate, and treat her as, well... Lucie,” Juliran said. “If the mate bond is strong enough, it will take care of the rest.”

“And what of the entity that has her trapped here?” Zaen said. “It has a strong hold on her, using her energy field just as it tried with the other human females. We must find out how to end this. If we can’t stop its power in Lucie’s mind, what must it be doing

to our Homeland out there?”

Juliran shook his head. “I do not know, brother. But I suspect that if Lucie can beat it, then it will have no power at all. It lost all power when the other Triads’ mates managed to beat it.”

Kyel’s mouth downturned, his eyes tightening. “We don’t know how or why they did it, though. We just need to support Lucie for now. Rediscover her, knowing that if we do not do our jobs as mates, our Homeland is doomed.”

“We will have to change our approach. Show her what she means to us. Listen to her instead of trying to force a connection. Maybe if we’d done that from the start, we wouldn’t be here,” Juliran said.

Zaen ploughed his fingers through his hair. “We were desperate, brother. We weren’t thinking clearly. We acted as though she was a female Negarian mate, not a human, but now we have a clear direction. Not all is lost.”

“Let’s hope she doesn’t reject us here as she has in our reality,” Kyel growled.

Juliran didn’t answer him, but he had to believe Kyel was right. Everything else had failed. Lucie was loved—she just didn’t know it or even worse, didn’t return it. That thought left a hollow in his stomach he didn’t think would ever be filled.

Their surroundings blurred and began to disintegrate. Muted colors broke down to black clouds.

“What’s happening?” Juliran asked.

There was no time to answer before the world around them went black. There wasn’t even a jolt beneath his feet before the black surface reformed and they stood in front

of a line of merchant buildings. Night had given way to daylight in a cloudy, yet blue sky. The temperature was pleasant, but not as warm as he was used to. Vehicles traversed the black surface and again they had to run towards the lighter colored pathway to avoid being hit.

There was movement inside one of the buildings containing small, harmless looking furry creatures behind a transparent window. A shadow darted within the building. It was Lucie. Her pretty, yet tired and drawn face smiled at a furry animal with long ears. She picked it up, hugged it to her chest and petted its head before she placed it into a cage and started to clean the contents of the dirtied cage she'd taken it from.

“She can’t be working at another job. She has one already!” Zaen said.

“Yet, here she is,” Juliran said.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

She was working just as hard as she did during the night. A pang of guilt hit him. There were so many things he didn't know about her. The fact she worked herself to the bone at several jobs. The fact she liked small, furry creatures. The fact she lived in poverty. How many more things didn't they know about? She hadn't mentioned a word about herself, but he'd never asked. He thought of all the times he'd spoken about their lives and what they did and told her what he thought she would like without taking the time to learn about her. He made a promise to himself to rectify that once they were back in reality.

There was one glimmer of hope. She'd brought them back to her. They were at least in her subconsciousness if she had conjured them here.

Juliran smiled. "It seems she is at least thinking of us on some level. Come, brothers. It is time to make Lucie fall in love with us as a true mate should. We have a second chance. Now we have to use it."

* * *

Lucie

"Luce. You must get up. You'll be late." Grant shook her shoulder, a little rougher than was comfortable.

She'd already slept? It felt as though she'd just put her head down seconds before. Lucie forced open her eyes to see the muted pre-dawn grays seep into the room. A glance at the clock told her she'd been asleep for four hours.

She groaned, turning on her side. “I had this... dream. Nightmare, actually.” Her voice was gritty from sleep. She clung to the last vestiges of the dream, before waking would throw it off completely. A part of her realized this was important, even though her logical mind knew it couldn’t possibly be true. “It was awful. There were these... creatures. A cross between an iguana and a crocodile. They walked upright and had a poison stinger on their tails. I was locked in a cage so small I couldn’t stand up.” She shuddered. “They... did things to me. Tortured me. Hit me. Burned me. Nothing I did made them stop.”

She blinked back tears. Now that she started thinking about it, she couldn’t stop. She didn’t know how long she might have been in that cage. It could have been days. Weeks. It felt like years. A nightmare beyond her worst imaginings.

“They laughed at me. I think they enjoyed hurting us. There were other women there too. They took a bunch of us, but I don’t know what they wanted. I couldn’t understand them. Then they made me hold this crystal and it lit up with blue and green lights. I’ve never seen anything so beautiful...”

There was something else after that. Something really important. Shadowy figures hedged her consciousness. Men. Safety. There was a great pull towards them, but something held her back from seeing them clearly. Something stained and malevolent.

Grant flopped back onto his pillow next to her. “Lucie. It was just a dream. Let it go. You need to get up and go to work. I need your energy.”

“Huh?” The air became freezing cold in an instant and she was chilled from the inside out. He needed her energy? That sounded... odd.

She peered at him through slitted eyelids, checking to see that it was actually him. He sent her a lopsided smile. “I mean, you need to get to the pet shop. Remember, I just

got that extra shift for you? You don't want to be late."

She remembered now. She had to clean the cages of the animals before the Monday morning open hours. It wasn't the nicest job, but at least the owners paid her in cash when they came in the morning. And it dovetailed nicely into her shift at the diner. What else would she be doing with her Monday morning?

The extra money had come in handy. Grant had to dress a certain way. He couldn't do business if he looked scruffy. When he secured her gigs, then they could afford to work on her wardrobe.

Her gaze drifted down to Grant. He was dressed in the same clothes as yesterday. "You're just getting home now?"

Grant kicked off his shoes and fell onto the bed, groaning. "Don't complain. It's all for you. I'm exhausted."

Sympathy washed through her. She shouldn't complain. At least she'd gotten some sleep whereas he'd been awake all this time. She forced herself to sit, ignoring straining muscles. Maybe she should take a vitamin supplement to get her through the day. It was going to be a struggle. She was just so tired. More tired than usual.

She swung her legs to the floor making herself sit up so she wouldn't fall asleep again. "How did it go? Did you get a gig for me?"

Grant opened one blood-shot eye. "It takes time, Luce. There's a lot of competition out there, you know. I'm meeting with him again tonight so I need to sleep and be fresh. Did you do the laundry I asked you to do?"

She glanced at the full basket in the bathroom. Dirty clothes spilled out of the top. How had that gotten so full so fast? "I didn't get a chance."

“How do you expect me to look my best if I don’t have clean clothes?” Grant spoke into the pillow.

“I have to be at the pet shop in an hour. Perhaps you could put a load on?”

She swore black clouds swirled in his eyes before he blinked and they disappeared. His face stretched tight in a flash of anger before he schooled it into his usual charm. He sent her a tired smile.

“Luckily I woke you in time. Throw it on now, take a shower—you stink like burgers—and hang it out before you go. You’ll have heaps of time to get there. The cycle only takes forty minutes.” He threw the blankets over his head and turned on his side. Snoring wafted from beneath the covers.

It was amazing how fast he could fall asleep. He really was exhausted. She needed to rein in her frustration. Things like developing her career needed time. Business relationships needed time to develop. Trust took time and hard work. Grant had explained that to her once. Beyoncé didn’t just appear on the charts one day. It took years of hard work before people started to take notice of her, and look at her now. It had all paid off.

The morning flew past in a flurry of clothes washing, showering, ironing her work uniform, and slugging it to the pet shop. Luckily it was on the way to the diner, so she could walk there first, and then continue to the diner. Grant could take the car. He had much farther to go than she did.

She met the owner when she came in at nine. All the cages were cleaned and Lucie even had time to fill their feed bowls before the shop opened.

“Lucie. What a wonderful job as usual.” Margery frowned at Lucie, her eye filling with concern. “You look tired, dear. Are you sure you’re getting enough rest? You

know, you don't have to come in so early to clean the cages. You can come later. It won't matter to me."

Page 22

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

Lucie smiled as Margery took a note from the register and handed it to her. “I have to be at the diner in half an hour so this fits in really well. Thank you.”

“Just take care of yourself, dear.”

“I’m great. Don’t worry about me. I’ll see you next Monday morning.” Margery cleaned the cages during the week and only needed her on Monday. Lucie ignored Margery’s concerned look, grabbed her bag on the floor next to the front door, stepped outside and nearly face-planted into a broad muscular chest.

Chapter Nine

Lucie

The pet shop door closed behind her with the tinkling of bells. Lucie looked up at Zaen and narrowed her eyes. “What are you doing here?”

One chest was actually three. Three, massive, chiseled, panty-wetting chests. She dry-swallowed as she peered into three faces that she really didn’t want to see until she had to in the diner.

She’d basically wiped them off because of a compliment. Who in their right mind did that? And who would take it so seriously? She should have laughed it off, brushed it aside, read it for what it was—three concerned well-mannered men who didn’t want a woman walking home in the dark. They were nice guys. That was all. She should thank their mother for raising caring men. They’d make their wives happy one day. She’d just read too much into a simple compliment.

It was just that with them... for some unknown reason... it went deeper. As though they had told her what they thought and meant it. Really meant it.

She took a step back. "I thought after last night, you'd..."

Kyel reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She couldn't help the shiver that washed through her. A nervous ball roiled in her stomach and she took a resolute step back, securing the strand that always seemed to come loose back into her ponytail.

She had a boyfriend, for heaven's sake. A man that took good care of her and worked hard for her future. She wasn't going to throw that away on a stranger's thoughtfulness. She brushed her hand where Kyel had trailed his fingertip, her skin still tingling. She resisted the urge to lean into his touch.

"You can't keep doing that," she said.

Kyel's brows lowered over his eyes. He still looked hot when he was trying to be concerned. "Touching you?"

"Well. That too. But you can't compliment me again. I have a boyfriend. I told you that." The words felt like ash on her tongue.

"And does this preclude you for having others compliment and touch you? Like this?" Zaen wound his large, warm hand around the back of her neck and stepped close. His body warmth sank through her clothing, his unique scent filling her nostrils.

She nodded, the movement jerky, her eyes stuck to his. "Yes. That's exactly what it means." Her words lacked conviction.

“And do you allow this boyfriend to kiss you?” Juliran smoothed the back of his knuckle across her cheek, tingles scattering across her skin.

“Of... of course.” Did she say the words or merely breathe them?

“Does he kiss you often?” Zaen asked.

“He...” Did he? She couldn’t rightly say at that moment. Her thoughts were muddled. She anchored to Zaen’s heated touch at the back of her neck, strong fingers she could lean into, unable to process much more other than the unparalleled need to feel Zaen’s lips on her mouth. It was almost as though she knew what they would feel like, but then again how could she? He’d never kissed her before.

Hadn’t he?

Her gaze dropped to his lips. She swayed towards him as though on the end of an invisible rope. Standing here like this was so familiar, as though she’d actually done this before.

“Does he kiss you well?”

Funny how she couldn’t really remember how Grant kissed. It seemed to be such a long time since he’d kissed her. Zaen’s breath whispered over her face.

“He...”

“Show Zaen how he kisses you, Lucie. We want to know just how good this boyfriend shows you his affection. Does he compare to our brother? Tell us how different they are.” Kyel’s voice wove through her like magic—fantastical and yet not to be denied.

Zaen's fingers threaded into her hair, gently massaging her scalp. Her palms found the front of his chest, her fingers splayed out over the massive expanse. Heat infused her skin, his masculine scent surrounding her. He towered over her. The top of her head came to his shoulder, but it only served to make her feel feminine. Safe. Cared for. Emotions she hadn't felt in such a long time. Awareness rocketed as the world fell away, everything except for Zaen. Kyel, and Juliran.

Her mind should be screaming to her about how wrong it was to be kissing someone other than Grant, but her body reveled in the fact that it seemed so right. She didn't have the capacity to even want to draw away.

Something nudged her mind. Something familiar. As though Zaen had kissed her before, but that couldn't have been. Maybe in a dream. One of the nice ones she didn't want to wake from. Still, she stayed where she was, lacking the motivation to do anything but stare up at him, cling to his body, and draw in a shaky breath.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

Zaen's lids half closed as he leaned down and covered her mouth with his. His lips molded to hers as though they were a matching half. He captured her bottom lip before suckling it into the heat of his mouth.

A fission of shivers erupted throughout her body. Heat uncoiled between her legs as a sigh rippled through her mind. He captured her lips again, more urgently, before sliding his tongue into the well of her mouth.

She accepted him, letting her tongue skim against his. His flavor burst into her mouth, tasting as masculine as his scent. Her hands moved over the curve of his shoulders and she pressed her breasts against the hard plane of his chest.

Her nipples pebbled, sensitivity heightened. Tiny tingles pulsed with each pump of her heart to catch into the quickly building furnace inside her. She leaned more fully into him, needing contact from knee to mouth.

"How does he feel, Lucie? How does our brother taste? Do you like it?" Kyel whispered into her ear. His fingers skimmed her hair back behind her ear, fueling her desire.

The only answer she could give Kyel was a deep moan from the back of her throat as Zaen increased the intensity of their kiss. His arms tightened around her, locking her against him and keeping the world at bay. Her fingers slid into the soft silk of his hair. His arm braced around her waist, a steady band of steel that could fend off the weight of the world.

A warm, hard body came behind her, hands resting on her shoulders. She knew at

once it was Juliran, the gentlest of the three. How she knew this, she couldn't fathom. How she was kissing one brother amongst all of them she also couldn't understand except that it felt soright, as though the world had righted from its off-axis.

Juliran nuzzled behind her ear, a just-there nudge of his nose, the hint of his warm breath across the sensitive skin of her neck, the nip of firm lips along her hair line.

She shivered, as bone-deep heat stoked her fast-climbing arousal. She moved her hand from Zaen's shoulders back to cup the back of Juliran's neck.

"That's right, Lucie," he said, voice husky. "You can touch me. Press back into me. Let me show you what you do to me. What seeing you kiss my brother does to me."

His palms opened over her hips and he tugged her backside against his hardness. He groaned, nipping her earlobe as he pressed his cock into the crease of her cheeks. She should have been shocked. Outraged even, but she couldn't muster up those feelings at all.

Zaen pulled back, breaking their kiss. Confused, she stared at his lips that shone with their kiss. A palm turned her head and her half-lidded gaze fell on Kyel.

"I'm going to kiss you now, Lucie. I want to taste you so bad it's like an itch under my skin. I want to scratch it, but I never want it to go away. I just want to kiss your mouth right now. Can I do that, Lucie? Will you let me kiss your mouth after Zaen?"

A far part of her mind flickered with the thought that it was wrong. That she really shouldn't want this, but a closer part, the part that was more urgent and louder, made her trace Kyel's stubbled cheek with her hand before coaxing him close. With a slight flex of her fingers, he swooped down on her.

He kissed as aggressively as he spoke. Commandeering. Severe. Masterful. She

leaned against Juliran as Kyel controlled her mouth. His tongue dipped between her lips. His lips nibbled, nudged, and caressed and she let him do any damn thing he wanted to her.

Her nipples were pinched between a gentle, but firm thumb and forefinger before hot palms encased her breasts, massaging the sensitive mounds.

“I want to kiss your breasts just like I kissed your mouth. I want to lave your nipples and nibble them. I want to give you an edge of pain before I soothe it away with my tongue.” Zaen’s voice was as rough and needy as she felt.

She moaned into Kyel’s kiss as Juliran sucked her earlobe into his hot mouth. Zaen worshiped her breasts with both hands and she arched into his touch. Her clothing was too tight. Too restrictive. She needed the feel of hot skin over hard muscle surrounding her. Possessing her. Owning her.

She grew slick between her legs, her body heating with an untold urgency. She wanted. Needed. She groaned, this time with a throaty edge. She wanted them—all of them—with an urgency she couldn’t define.

The world tilted and spun. Black edged her vision. Their hands firmed on her body as she fell into a deep, dark hole. Spinning. Spinning. So dark she was momentarily blind. She reached for them, fingers sliding through empty air.

She tried to open her eyes, tried to scream, but the oxygen was sucked right out of the air. She choked, gasping, suffocating. She smacked into hard ground. It took her a moment to gather her wits enough to open her eyes.

Through bleary tears she saw the front door to the diner from outside on the curb, crumpled on the hard concrete. Grant strode towards her and knelt in front of her. “Lucie? Are you okay? You tripped?”

She came up on her hands, her arms shaking. She peered about, looking for the brothers, but they were nowhere to be seen. “Where are...?”

White fog descended, making thinking akin to walking through thick sludge.

“Who? Lucie, are you all right? You didn’t crack your head, did you?”

She pressed shaking fingers to her forehead. She couldn’t think. Why couldn’t she think? It was all too hard. “I... think so.”

“Come. Let me help you stand.” Grant cupped his hands beneath her elbows and steadied her as she regained her balance.

She’d been doing something tremendously important. Something that felt so right it seemed wrong not to be doing it. Hadn’t she just been speaking with the brothers? And why? She gasped, trying to shake the cobwebs free in her mind, but they stuck fast.

“Are you sure you’re all right, Luce?”

She squinted into Grant’s blurry face. His features lacked definition. His mouth was indistinct, his eyes not quite the right color, but the next time she blinked, her vision was sharper and she saw him frowning down at her.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

He still held her elbow, and a chill emanated from his touch. Her gut churned. Something was wrong.

She pulled out of his grasp. “What are you doing here?”

“Luke called me when you were late for your shift. He asked me where you were and I told him I had no idea. Where were you, Lucie? For a moment, I didn’t know.” His voice held a hard edge she’d never heard from him before.

She stepped back, clutching her fists to her chest. Hadn’t other hands been on her body? Large and hot, stoking desire she never knew existed. More fog filtered into her mind, so much she could barely think.

She was so tired. All she wanted to do was sleep. Her hands fell to her sides as her shoulders rounded in exhaustion.

“Well, that doesn’t matter,” Grant said. “All that matters is that you’re here now. And they’re really busy inside. They need your help, Lucie.”

With his hand on her elbow, he steered her inside. The door opened. Music, voices, and the smell of burgers and fries assaulted her. She didn’t want to be here. All she wanted to do was sleep.

“Can we just go home? Just this once?” Surely they had enough saved by now that she could just sit out one shift.

Janie rushed over to her and tied an apron around her hips. “Thank goodness you’re

here. I need you urgently. Tables five, eight, and eleven need to be wiped down and the family at fifteen wants to order.” She shoved the pen and order pad into her hands.

“It’s also your favorite night, Luce,” Grant said, gripping her shoulders from behind. “Karaoke. Remember the night we met? Once you get through the first dinner rush, you can sing. You like that, don’t you?”

She nodded. Singing was in her veins, but why did Grant need to ask if she liked it? She was born to be on stage singing. It was the only time the world fell away and she could go to her happy place. She’d recently found that happy place again. It wasn’t when she sang though. She couldn’t quite place her finger on exactly when, or how, but it was important. The meaning remained elusive, though. Why couldn’t she think?

Grant kissed her cheek. It took all her effort not to reel away. “You’re tired. Why don’t you bring some burgers home with you tonight? You know I don’t like to eat like that, but I’ll do it this time, just for you, so you don’t have to cook when you get home. See how I look after you? Now, they need your help, Luce. Off you go. I’ll see you when you get back home.”

A rock and roll tune blared out from the speakers. Grant shoved her in the small of her back towards a table filled with mess and children. She looked over her shoulder to see the door closing behind him as he strode outside.

All she wanted to do was sleep, but she couldn’t let Luke and Janie down so she forced one foot in front of the other, pasted a smile on her mouth, and jotted down the never-ending order, wondering if those brothers would come back again to help.

There was something about them.

A crash erupted to her right and the table next to her toppled over as a child overbalanced on the side. The patrons jumped from their chairs, the father snatching the child away before the child could be hurt. Food splattered over the floor and all thought fled as she worked to calm everyone down and clean the mess up.

Chapter Ten

Kyel

The world materialized around Kyel, merging into colors from indistinct shadows. In a moment, his brothers stood at his side. They were inside the diner. Music blared and children shouted. The aroma of the cooking food was pungent.

Lucie darted between tables, balancing meals loaded on a large tray to a table. She unloaded full plates then hurried to the next table to load the same tray to clear away dirty dishes from another table. Various customers hailed her for attention and she rushed from one thing to another.

How had she gotten here like this? One moment they'd been kissing her. Their connection had flared. He'd felt it, the familiar, electric thread that bound them. Lucie had been remembering them. Whatever cloud imprisoned her mind had been losing its hold, when darkness had descended in a blanket of chilled air to purge them out here.

"What happened?" Juliran asked.

"I do not know," Kyel said, glancing about at their new surroundings. His gut lurched with fury.

Lucie, dead on her feet, had come back to this place to work herself to death. This was her reality. Her life. What sort of a world had she lived in, or was it her

perspective that they saw? It didn't matter. Her days were appalling. She'd said she had a boyfriend. Kyel gritted his teeth so hard his head started to throb. No worthy male would allow their female to work like this.

"This is intolerable. We're taking her away from this right now, even if this is all in her mind." He strode towards her. The time for standing back was over. He was going to show her just how precious she was until she never doubted it.

The lights above the empty stage flashed, lighting the raised platform up. Patrons cheered as Luke stepped on stage, along with other humans, picking up various instruments discarded on the platform.

"Now it's time to do what you've all come here for, folks," Luke said to the patrons. "Time to sing and dance and have a good time. Give it up for our very own, Lucie Jackson."

Kyel peered about as people clapped and cheered, stopping dead in his tracks. Lucie offered a tired smile and rushed to deposit the tray of dirty dishes on a bench. She wiped her hands on her apron and made her way towards the stage. He had no idea what was going on.

Lucie stepped on stage. Her uniform was stained, her hair slightly out of its tight ponytail, her skin pale, her shoulders stooped but she was the most beautiful thing he had ever laid eyes on. She smiled at Luke and clasped the microphone.

She turned her attention to the patrons. "Thank you for such a warm welcome. I hope everyone is having a nice dinner!"

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

A hoot rose from the crowd. Some people stood from their seats and walked over to the cleared area of floor in front of the platform.

Kyel looked to his brothers. “You have any idea what’s going on?”

Zaen shook his head while Juliran had a goofy smile and a faraway look in his eyes while he gazed at Lucie. “No idea at all.”

Kyel kept in the sound of frustration at his brother’s response.

“Hey, can I order a Beetle Burger and Can’t Buy Me Love fries?” A man sitting at a table close by asked.

Kyel swung his gaze on the patron. “You would eat food made from insects?”

The man sank into his seat, his mouth going slack. His gaze flittered to his silent girlfriend sitting next to him. “What? No? I just want something to eat.”

Kyel strode over to the man and towered over him, anger heating his gaze. “Contain your stomach or get it yourself.” He went to turn, but stopped himself. “And do not ask our mate to get anything for you ever again. She is busy enough as it is.”

The man squirmed in his spot. “I... uh... okay...”

Kyel let full displeasure color his face before he turned away, satisfied when the man wilted. When their mate had done whatever she was doing, he was going to take her away from here. She would not be serving anyone again, apart from them, but in an

entirely mutually beneficial manner.

“You know I usually sing music from the fifties, but I thought I’d start with something a little more modern, if that’s all right with you.” She smiled when people clapped. A few whistled.

Curious. He had no idea what that meant. Something else to add to the list of things they didn’t know about their mate. The hot lash of shame boiled in the pit of his gut. He had failed her, an error he would fix until the end of his days.

She spoke momentarily with the band and offered a shy smile at the crowd as she waited for... something to happen. To his surprise, the people surrounding her played music. They held instruments! They were a far cry from the instruments of their Homeland. They sounded foreign, completely alien, yet no less musical. There was a booming beat of a bass instrument that was coordinated with stringed instruments that emitted a variation of harmonic notes. They combined into a pleasing background noise. People smiled, clapped, or tapped their feet to the beat.

Lucie stepped towards the microphone and started to sing.

He forgot to breathe.

She was heavenly. Her voice wove through him, touching a part of his soul he never knew existed. Her song was pure manna from the Heavens. Filled with light and shade, he was transfixed. Hypnotized.

Kyel managed to flick his attention to his brothers. Zaen’s eyes bulged and his mouth fell open while Juliran’s goofy grin had only intensified. Their entire attention was riveted on Lucie. Even the threat of treading in Drumas turds would not divide their attention. As was right.

Her song wove around him. Through him. Calling to him in primal waves and along with it his greatest shame. She no longer looked tired, or harried, or slightly lost and confused. She had stepped into her element and for the first time, Kyel had a glimpse of the true woman she had hidden from them.

She was utterly magnificent.

He'd had no idea she had a voice like this. It was a voice that would stop warring kingdoms as fast as it stopped him in his tracks.

Zaen stepped next to him.

"Did you have any idea she could sing like this?" His voice was hoarse, filled with wonder and regret. Kyel had no doubt Zaen felt as guilt-ridden as he did.

On the raised platform, Lucie had transformed. Gone was the timid female they had come to know. Gone was the exhausted servant that worked herself to the bone. In her place was a confident, beautiful star.

This was the true Lucie, this talented woman who held everyone present in the palm of her hand. She was transformed into something... other. Her talent was undeniable. He couldn't pull his eyes away from the woman on stage. He didn't want to.

Her voice rang true and clear. It touched his soul, but now as he stood before her true self, it was as though light poured inside him, illuminating the mating-link that bound them all. Juliran rubbed his chest, right over his heart while Zaen breathed out long and slow.

"Do you feel that, brothers?" Their bond was strong, but now there was an added dimension that wasn't there before. Something extra that was made from light. It wove around him and through him and as it did, emotions pressed in on him. Not his

emotions. Or his familiar brothers.

He looked back to their mate. Her eyes were closed as she sang about freedom and being a young child and that was all it needed. The notes swirled and built around him.

Connecting him to her.

The innate knowledge that she was theirs was an undeniable link that was forged by the strongest of soul connections. It clicked into place in high definition, as though what they had before was filled by white noise. Now it was perfectly clear.

“It’s her. I feel...her,” Zaen said, his face open in amazement.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“So much stronger than ever before. It’s like she’s in my mind. In my heart,” Juliran said.

As Lucie sang, all Kyel could do was bask in her music and feel the powerful connective surge roll through them all.

Lucie finished singing. There was a second before the crowd exploded in cheers, whistles, and clapping. Lucie grinned, her smile lighting every inch of her face. She was enjoying herself. Having fun. She had never smiled back at the Homeland. Not once.

Luke came onto the stage and spoke into the microphone. “Now let’s get on with the show. Who wants a little rock and roll?”

The crowd cheered and hollered around them. People called out names of songs. It seemed they had come here to hear Lucie sing. They had come for her.

“What about an oldie but a goodie? Rock around the clock. Grab your partners and get ready to dance,” Lucie said.

People poured onto the cleared area in front of the stage. The band began to play and Lucie sang an upbeat song about dancing around a timepiece. The music was a different in their Homeland, but people enjoyed themselves just the same way. Singing, music, and dancing seemed to be universal things. Lucie’s voice contained a joy all of its own.

“I had no idea. She’s an angel.” Juliran looked at them, his eyes blazing. “We should

have known this about her.”

Yes, they should have known she had this ability. A voice like hers came along once in a lifetime. They were so lucky to have her and yet she had not shown them this side of herself.

“Why would she had kept this from us? This is a huge part of her. Were we so ignorant, or...” Zaen trailed off, his gaze roaming over Lucie as she continued her song.

“What is on your mind, Zaen?” Kyel prompted.

“I’m just thinking that every time we started to get close to her, she shut down. Found something else to do. Ran off somewhere. I mean, she’s obviously influenced by our mating attraction, but she’s fought it off. She never told us anything about herself, really. Don’t you think that’s a bit strange? She is so different here than she was ever with us. It can’t be coincidental. It’s almost as though she was afraid,” Zaen said.

“Of us!” Juliran cast a horrified look between himself and Zaen.

Zaen shook his head. “I don’t think so, but there is a big reason for it. Now that I see the true Lucie, like this, with such talent and confidence, I know the side she showed us was not right. As though she was being held back.”

The muscles at Kyel’s jaw clenched as he mentally listed off time and time again where their Lucie had done just that. Run away. Shut down. She hadn’t revealed a thing about herself. In fact, the more he thought about her actions, the more he realized they weren’t avoidance, they were more because she was scared.

As much as the suggestion was abhorrent, it just might be true.

“The entity,” he said. “It could have been influencing her all along.”

“It may have stopped the mate-sync connection if it has,” Juliran said.

That was true. Although they’d kissed her, it was only on a superficial level. They’d kissed her to make her feel cherished and loved. It had been nowhere what they needed to do to complete the mate bond so they could mate-sync. They’d waited for Lucie’s consent, but it was now obvious that something bigger was holding her back. Holding them all back. The purpose of which he had no idea, but it was doing its best to separate their true bond.

“We missed it. We missed everything about it.” Zaen’s mouth thinned into a furious line. His biceps bulged as he clenched his fists.

His brother’s fury only matched Kyel’s own. This was going to be finished. They were going to fight this thing face to face.

“This will change right now. We are taking her away from this and claiming her. I cannot stand for her to spend another moment in this environment. It is time we really started to honor her,” Kyel said.

“And how do we intend to do that?” Juliran said, sidling up on his other side.

“Look at her, brothers. This is the true Lucie that has been hidden from us and while she is here, she will never be free. We have to get her out of here,” Kyel said, not withholding the sneer on his face at the crowd of people intent on working their Lucie to death, draining everything she had to give.

Lucie finished her song and smiled at the audience at her feet. Her gaze came their way and snagged onto them. Her eyes lit with recognition, and more than that—heat, longing, desire. Their connection pulsed like a live wire.

There would be no more waiting.

The entity would divide them no longer.

“She recognizes us,” Kyel said, determination driving each step.

People parted before them. He shoved others out of the way when they didn't move. Nothing was going to stand between them again. “We will take her away from this place. It is time to fight the hold the entity has on her and fully claim our mate.”

Chapter Eleven

Lucie

“You’re here.”

Lucie smiled up at the three brothers as she pushed her way through the dancing crowd. Anticipation made Lucie’s heart pound. The brothers were here. Her mates. The idea as well as the words so foreign, yet so right. All three brothers. Virile. Strong. Handsome as hell, but more than that—sheknewthem.

Not just as in how she might know a friend. There was a depth to the connection, an innate knowing of the type of men they were. Loyal. Tenacious. Honest.

Hers.

They looked so different than she was used to. Their skin wasn’t the right color. It should be blue. But how would she know that?

A superimposed image ran across her mind as they strode towards her. Kyel with his short hair, shirtless, chiseled to perfection, firm hands with callouses born from intense fighting training. She could see him, chest heaving, shining with sweat as he wielded a sword half as long as her.

Zaen with swirling tattoos that were as living as his body. They would mirror his moods, turning and rippling with color over his body in agitation and desire. In her mind, she could see her finger tracing a moving line filled with bright blues and greens trying to catch it, but before she could, he caught her wrist and held her to his chest so firmly she’d felt his heart beating.

Juliran. Caring. Quick with a smile. Hard body like a God. He always made sure she found satisfaction before he did. Always? She'd only kissed him once, hadn't she?

And horns. They should have horns.

There was something unfinished between them. Something they'd yet to do. Something really important. She didn't know what. Or why. But it was wholly compelling.

It was like being caught between two realities. Two dream worlds. One right in front of her eyes, and the other on another level. One overlapped the other and she was stuck in the middle, pulled in separate directions.

The brothers approached, stopping at the base of the stage. Coming for her. Waiting for her. A shiver worked through her veins. Her clothing was too heavy. Too constricting. The only thing she wanted to wear was them.

For once, she wasn't dogged by the strange tiredness that followed her every waking hour. Or the white fog that clouded her mind. There was no threatening voice.

For once, it was gone. Her mates were safe. The cloying confusion fell away as they approached. Her strength returned, little by little. For once—she could just think.

And she knew. She remembered everything.

The voice was gone. Her mates were safe. She could be where she wanted to be. Where her heart called for her to be. Where her soul knew she should be. Because that was right, wasn't it? They were all quarters of the same soul, woven together before they were born. Woven by fate.

They had explained it, but she'd never fully understood. Now that the fog and the

darkness and the voice were gone, she could finally feel their connection. She could finally act on it.

She reached out and took Kyel's hand without hesitation. She stepped down from the stage and threaded her fingers through his hair. Zaen and Juliran surrounded her. She was safe in the circle of her mates. Safe. Finally. The voice couldn't find her here. Her mind became quiet, replaced with a growing sense of what she had to do. The stress of her heart eased as desire blossomed.

She looked up into Kyel's face. He steadied her with a firm gaze and she fell into the protection he offered. His eyes glinted deep blue. As blue as the sky on a cloudless summer morning.

She smiled. "Kyel. There you are."

A hand firmed on her back, and another at her nape.

"You recognize us," Zaen said.

She placed her hand on Zaen's forearm, looked to Juliran. "Yes. I recognize you. But how are you even here? Why? It's where I used to work... but different." She took his hand in hers. "I don't know exactly, but this isn't right. It's not real. We must leave. There's... so much I have to tell you."

Now that she remembered—she remembered it all. Guilt pressed on her heart. She'd never told them about the voice in her head, guiding her and directing her to do what it wanted. It was only a miracle that it was silenced, but for how long? She needed to tell them. Everything.

"We're here for you, our mate," Zaen said.

She let a sad smile cross her mouth. They'd followed her to... wherever the hell they were. "I should have known that before. I'm so sorry. It's just that... it's all been so confusing. So exhausting."

Kyel tucked a finger beneath her chin and tipped her head to look at him. "You have nothing to be sorry about. It is us who have done you a disservice. You were in need and we should have helped you more."

Her heart trembled. Why hadn't she seen their thoughtfulness before? Their caring, their kindness, their love. Why had she not felt that? It was so intense it was like plunging into a vat of electricity—all charged and heated and intense. Why hadn't she done anything about it? Why had she let the voice overrule her common sense? The 'whys' thumped around in her head and a sick lump formed in her stomach. There would be time enough to heal those things, but now wasn't it.

She didn't know why the voice was silent, but one thing she did know—it would be back. She had to get away from here and tell her mates everything while she had her mind while she had the chance.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

She took Juliran and Zaen's hands and looked up at Kyel. She needed to touch them and anchor herself. Without them, she was lost. "We have to get out of here."

She headed towards the front of the diner, pushing through the crowds that used to come and see her sing, while she slaved away waiting tables for them. She hadn't realized what or why she'd been here, and now looking around at it, knew it wasn't the same.

The colors were slightly off. The diner was larger than she remembered. And there was no way she could be back on Earth and in her old life. Having her mates here was the only logical thing she could make sense of.

She needed to go somewhere safe. Somewhere she could think. A place where she could have some peace of mind. Where the voice wouldn't come back and torture her and keep her away from her mates.

A safe place.

She thrust out her hand, pushed the front door of the diner open, strode right into her bedroom, and stumbled on top of her bed. She turned to sit and leaned back on her hands. "What happened?"

Her mates clambered through the doorway after her, and the door clicked shut behind them. Kyel's sharp gaze scanned the room, while Zaen's muscles tensed, ready for an attack. Juliran re-opened the bedroom door to reveal the living area beyond. The diner had vanished. The bed felt real beneath her, the mattress as lumpy as she remembered, and bore the same faded cover and curtains.

“We’re in my apartment!”

“This is where you lived?” Juliran put his hands on his hips and looked about.

Every worn and torn surface seemed even more pronounced compared to the luxury of the palace. The palace! Why wasn’t she in the palace? Why was she even in the diner? How had she gotten here?

She hung her head in her hands and closed her eyes. “I’m so confused. I don’t know what’s happening.”

There was a dip next to her and Juliran slung his arm about her shoulders. “What’s the last thing that made sense to you?”

She slumped into his body, letting his warmth and hardness calm her. His thumb made distracting circles on her shoulder, but she didn’t want to stop him. Kyel knelt in front of her while Zaen stood behind him as though guarding them all. Forever protectors.

“Singing in the diner,” she said. “Luke always lets me sing when the band comes in.” It was the only time she felt truly alive. The only time she was able to reclaim her true identity and forget about the rubble of her life.

Kyel put his hands on her knees, his large palms searing her skin. “I didn’t know you could sing, Lucie. It was... angelic.”

Heat flooded her cheeks. Kyel was no nonsense and wasn’t prone to giving compliments away, so this coming from him was huge. Pride made her heart swell. “I like singing.”

“You’re not just good, Lucie. You’re talented. Really talented. I could have listened

to you all night,” Juliran said.

“As could I,” Zaen said, his eyes glinting.

“We will talk about talent and singing later, after we have helped Lucie escape,” Kyel said.

A trickle of fear slid down her spine. “How can we escape this?”

“Lucie, can you remember anything about the Erion crystal?” Kyel said.

Of course, she remembered the damn crystal. Right from the very start it had been the center of her troubles. “The reptile made me touch it and it started to glow. They were excited and then... you...”

Every time she remembered how they’d rescued her, she welled up.

Juliran let her slump more into his embrace, offering her the security she was searching for. “We know. It’s hard. Just take your time. This is important, Lucie. We need to know how much you remember. Can you tell us? Please?”

She wiped away tears she hadn’t realized had fallen, “They—thereptiles—took the crystal. Together, we chased them, shot their spaceship, and got the crystal back. Then you took me back to your planet.”

The more she remembered, the clearer her mind became. The brothers as well as herself had been welcomed with fanfares. They’d been met by their three fathers and mother, the kings and queen, and their sister where they’d landed. The guys’ family had treated her like a princess. They’d been kind to her. So kind.

It had helped with the distress and confusion of coming face to face with her new life.

The weeks of torture had gotten her over the first shock of realizing she wasn't on Earth and that there were in fact aliens. And they weren't nice. At least, none she had met until she was rescued by her mates. But knowing she would never get home was an ache that didn't go away, although they had done everything they could to ease her distress.

She was welcomed as a mate, the first for their homeland in decades. She'd felt like some kind of celebrity, but something dark had come back with her. Something insidious that lived inside of her and had grown stronger each and every day. There hadn't been a thing she could do about it to make it go away.

She clutched Juliran's shirt, peeking around the room. The voice never went far away. Just when she thought she might have a moment's peace, it would always return.

"Lucie." Kyel's strict voice brought her back and helped control her terror.

“Yes?” She licked dry lips.

“Tell me why you went to the tower. It’s important.” His gaze never left hers.

She nodded. “I had to get the crystal. It... was imperative that I went there. I got to the tower and I took it and then...”

“What do you remember after that, Lucie?”

She frowned, shaking her head. She had been at the tower. Kyel told her not to take the crystal, but the voice was insistent. She knew she shouldn’t have touched the crystal, knew it was wrong, but she’d done it anyway.

“I just wanted the voice to stop,” she said. “That’s all. It... it never let me be. It was always there, telling me what to do. What to say. It... it controlled me.”

The weather outside turned dark with a burgeoning storm. Daylight dimmed as black clouds rolled in from the distance. The warm air grew chilled as thunder boomed right outside the window. She jumped, and Juliran wrapped both arms about her. She soaked up the protection he offered, trying to stop trembling, but not quite managing it.

“Where did that storm come from?” Zaen said.

“I don’t think it’s a storm,” Kyel said. “What did you want stopped, Lucie? You can tell us. We’re your mates. We’re here to help you.”

“You... won’t be mad?” She’d be mad if someone had done what she had to them. The crystal was sacred to their people. It meant a return to fertility. People could find their own mates and have children. There had been no children born in years. Yet, she’d still touched it.

Zaen sat next to Lucie on her other side and threaded his fingers through hers. “We are your mates.”

His touch was like a balm, and she firmed her grip.

Kyel placed his palm over her cheek. She tilted her face into his touch. Outside the rain eased off and the thunder became a distant rumble.

“I will never be mad with you, Lucie,” he said.

She tested to see if the voice was there yelling in her mind and causing migraine after migraine to keep her silent. There’d been so many times she’d gone to tell them, and then it had started threatening them and her head had pounded. She had to keep them safe. They didn’t deserve anything bad happening to them.

“If I tell you, it will hurt you.” She put her hands over her mouth, scared that it might have heard her.

In the distance, thunder grumbled.

And yet, she wasn’t on their planet. She wasn’t subjected to the same rules as before. Possibly, if she didn’t tell them now, she would never get the chance again. She might never return from the trap of her mind. Her mates might be taken away from her forever and she would never see them again. For what it was worth, they had a right to know why she acted like she did. She owed them that, at least.

Yet the words died in her throat and she couldn't even force them out. Her breath chopped in and out of her lungs and a hot, slick sweat coated her skin. She bit her lip so hard she broke the skin and yet the words remained stuck. She was so scared if she said anything it would fulfil its threat. She'd learned to be terrified and it had taught her lessons very well.

"It won't hurt us because we will fight back. All of us together. You don't have to do this on your own anymore. Tell me, sweetheart. We're here for you," Kyel said, drawing a trail down her cheek with the tip of his finger.

The voice in her head remained blessedly silent. Perhaps it had finally gone? She didn't know. All she knew was that she was stronger with her mates. She needed to use that strength before it was too late.

The muscle ticked at Kyel's temple, his eyes slightly narrowed, but they weren't aimed at her. She knew that. He wanted to protect her. All the times she'd kept silent and didn't tell them about the voice didn't seem to be as important now. Looking at him, she should have known he would fight for her. That he was a hundred times more skilled than she was. It seemed so silly to have kept that all to herself, but the voice was just so persuasive—and terrifying.

She took a deep breath in and released it slowly. Do it, do it, do it. Just do it. Her throat eased enough to allow her to talk, and once she started, the words tumbled out, one tripping after the other.

"The voice. It started when the reptiles made me touch the crystal. It's been there all along. Telling me things. Making me do things. It said... said it would hurt you all if I didn't do them. I just wanted to keep you all safe. I didn't want you to get hurt." Her tears fell in earnest now, falling so fast and hard she had no hope of stopping them. "It said if I didn't touch the crystal, that it would kill all of you."

Kyel opened his mouth as if to respond.

Outside, there was a flash of light, and a thunderous crack. The window exploded into thousands of tiny shards.

Chapter Twelve

Zaen

Lucie screamed, but Juliran firmed his grasp over her shoulders and held her tiny, shaking form against the protection of his body. Zaen rushed to the window while Kyel checked her for any injuries.

A storm coiled in from a black horizon. Clouds billowed and rolled towards them, increasing in speed as they devoured city buildings. Wind whipped the curtains so hard that one side tore free, and the end flapped over Lucie's bed.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

These clouds were the same that had appeared when Lucie had touched the crystal. It could mean nothing good.

He spun towards his brothers. “We’ve got to get her out of here.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you.” Lucie trembled even more and tucked her head against Juliran’s chest.

“Let’s go,” Juliran said, his face tight and tense.

“No.” Kyel’s word was a whiplash.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Look at what’s coming in.” Zaen pointed to the window. If they didn’t get Lucie away, they didn’t stand a chance.

Kyel held Lucie’s chin, waiting for her eyes to find his. “It’s up to Lucie. Only she can stop it.”

“I... I don’t know how.” Her voice was no more than a whisper. Her skin had gone pale, her mouth stiff.

“What’s wrong with you, Kyel? Can’t you see she’s terrified?” Zaen said.

“The entity is stronger when she is scared. I think it’s kept her in a constant state of terror so it can feed on her energy. It’s some sort of energy vampire. But when she sang, the entity couldn’t get past that because she wasn’t scared. She was the opposite,” Kyel said.

Zaen regarded this brother. He had the same steely look on his face as when he was faced with an enemy and had just worked out how to take them out. Zaen should know. He'd been on the receiving end of that look many times and Kyel had never lost. It was some sort of innate knowledge in his brother. His gut. It had stood him in good stead throughout their lives. He trusted that. And he trusted his brother.

"She looks too afraid to sing now, brother," Zaen yelled, putting his arm about Lucie's shoulders.

Lucie trembled as another clap of thunder cracked just outside the building, the timing impeccable. She was hard pressed to even speak, let alone sing.

All Zaen could think about was punching the lights out of this entity that had tortured their mate. He definitely didn't have a clear head.

"Lucie, we will not let the entity get to you. You are safe with us. As long as we are together, it can't get close. Do you understand?" Kyel said, while Juliran tightened his arm about her shoulders.

She looked up, her face pale. She was so still, but then she nodded. It was only a slight movement.

"You need to trust us, Lucie. Do you trust your mates?" Kyel said, clasping her face between his palms.

She curled her fingers around his hands, her gaze focusing them in turn. "Of course."

"Good. Then I am going to kiss you, Lucie. I'm going to take your mouth and kiss you so thoroughly you won't be able to think of anything at all except for my lips and my tongue. Can I kiss you like that, Lucie? Will you allow me to?" Zaen trembled

with the need to kiss his mate. His entire body thrummed with white hot desire. He reined his urge under tight control. He would not frighten Lucie, no matter how he might feel. She deserved tenderness and gentleness now, and that was exactly what he would give her.

Thunder rumbled, a deep booming sound. The glass on the bedside table rattled. Her eyes slid to the glass.

“Look at me, Lucie.” Kyel used his voice that brooked no argument. The voice he used on his subordinates. The voice that no one dared deny.

Of course, being their mate, Lucie could do whatever she wanted to do, but for some unknown reason, Kyel was driven to kiss her. It was at the worst possible moment, but if he wanted to comfort her, then Zaen wouldn’t stand in his way. He would help in any way he could for Lucie’s sake.

She looked at Kyel with large, trusting eyes and Zaen’s heart swelled. She was so innocent. So lovely.

“I will kiss you now.” Kyel moved towards her. Her lips looked so soft and they pillowed as Kyel kissed her, lightly at first, nipping, teasing. She was still for a moment, before her lips parted and she met his movements.

With a groan, he rose and captured the back of her head with his hand. He took her mouth harder, working his lips over hers. His tongue thrust into her mouth and she tilted her head a little more so that he could deepen their kiss.

Zaen’s cock twitched as he watched his brother kissing their mate. The thunder became a distant rumble as he sank onto the bed next to Lucie. She wound a hand around Kyel’s shoulder and settled her palm behind her on his thigh. He put his hand over hers and she turned her palm to link their fingers.

Juliran ran his palm over her thigh, from her hip, down to her knee, and up again. Kyel rose above her, not breaking their kiss until she lay down, her knees still hanging off the edge of the bed.

Kyel planted his hands either side of her head and rose up onto the bed over her. Zaen couldn't contain himself. His skin itched, wanting to touch the smoothness of his mate.

His fingers hovered on the waist of her jeans, but the temptation was too great, and he slipped the tips of his fingers beneath the material of her t-shirt. Sweet heat enveloped his skin and he flattened his palm across her tiny waist.

Her scent washed over him. He needed to kiss her. Taste her. He flipped to his stomach and slid the hem of her top higher.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

He brushed his lips on her skin, her flesh dry and warm and immediately washed with goosebumps. She issued a shaky breath. That was all the invitation he needed. He planted an open-mouthed kiss on her side, laving her skin with his tongue and finished off with his teeth.

Her fingers threaded through his hair, just gently, but enough to let him know that she wanted him there. Beside him, Juliran slid his finger along the inner seam of her pants, seeking her inner heat. Her thighs fell apart and Juliran molded two fingers along her seam and slid them up and down.

Zaen kissed his way up her body, nudging at the material with his nose as he traveled over her ribcage to nuzzle beneath her breast, rubbing his nose along the underside against the material of the strange garment she wore to house them. Nothing should cover them as far as he was concerned.

Juliran worked the button of her pants open. The zipper loosening such an erotic sound. Zaen mouthed her breast over her garment, while Juliran worked the sides of her pants open, exposing her hips like a gift offering.

Her musky, feminine scent drifted from her clothing. His cock throbbed and pressed hard inside the restraints of his strange pants. He preferred his soft leathers. It went much easier on an erection, but he wasn't going to stop however uncomfortable he was. Splayed on her back like she was, he could be caged in metal and he wouldn't cease.

Kyel broke their kiss.

“Juliran is going to take your pants off, Lucie, and then Zaen will take your shirt off. We will also remove your undergarments so we can kiss you all over. Is that okay with you, Lucie? Will you let us undress you?” Kyel’s voice was thick and harsh like gravel, and as needy as Zaen felt.

“Yes. Yes, I want you to do that. Please.” Lucie’s voice was breathy, aching with the same desire shared between them all.

Juliran worked her pants down her legs, and then slipped his fingers into her tiny white panties and drew them down and off her body. The rain had stopped pounding on the window, but he didn’t pay it much attention. Juliran sank his fingers right into Lucie’s plump folds and she moaned, tossing back her head.

“That’s right, Lucie. Let me touch you here. Ride my fingers and let me bring you pleasure,” Juliran said.

He speared her entrance, and her body went stiff and her mouth fell open. She clutched Zaen’s wrist as her body tensed around Juliran’s movements.

“That’s it, sweetheart. Let Juliran finger you,” Kyel said.

Zaen was caught, entranced by the sight of his brother’s fingers sliding in and out of their mate’s intimate folds.

“Suck your fingers, brother. Tell us what she tastes like,” Zaen said.

They glistened with her honey as Juliran held them to his mouth and sucked them. His head rolled back, his eyes closing.

“Like ambrosia, brother,” Juliran moaned.

“Sit up, sweetheart, and we’ll help you out of your clothing,” Kyel said.

Lucie was limp as they all helped divest Lucie of her shirt. Kyel found the latch to the small garment she wore over her breasts and peeled it off and away. Her delicate pink-tipped nipples stood erect.

“Stunning,” Kyel murmured.

She whimpered as Zaen brushed his fingers over one breast and then the other.

“Absolutely beautiful,” he agreed.

Kyel moved to the side of the bed and allowed Lucie to lie back down. “Now we are going to bring you pleasure. My mouth is going to be on your mouth. Zaen is going to lick and suck your breasts and Juliran is going to tongue your pussy. We’re going to eat you up, mate. Are you ready for all of us?”

They had tried to do this before, but there had always been something holding Lucie back, and they’d never progressed far past kissing and petting. She had never been so languid, so dreamy-eyed as now. A soft smile curved her lips and she looked at all of them, her pupils dilated with erotic arousal.

She nodded, her hair brushing her shoulder. “Yes. I’d like that. All your mouths on me. Please, can you suck me all over? I… I like it when you do that.”

“Never feel shy around us, Lucie. We need to know what you like and then we are only too happy to do more. Do you understand?” Kyel said.

“Yes. Yes, I understand.”

“Tell us what you like, Lucie. Do you like Juliran’s hands on your pussy?”

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Tell us, Lucie,” Kyel ordered.

Her plump lip fell from her teeth, “Yes. I like your hands on my pussy. I like your mouths on my skin. I like you licking me everywhere. All over my body. I can’t get enough of your touch. Please. Please... I need more.”

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

His cock kicked against the zipper of his jeans. She had never talked dirty like this before, and those words falling from her sweet mouth lit a fire of yearning in his blood.

“Sweetheart, if you keep talking like that, you’ll be riding all our cocks before the night is out,” he hissed.

Her gaze flickered to him. “What’s to say that isn’t exactly what I want?”

“Oh, sweetheart. I’ll give you all the cock you want. You only need to ask.” Zaen came up over her and caught her mouth. The curtains swished against the flooring, calm and tranquil in a warm breeze.

Her mouth was hot and sweet, and Zaen wasn’t gentle. She didn’t want him to be if the kiss she returned was anything to go by. Her tongue stroked against his, and her hands fisted his hair. He wanted to keep on kissing her, but he also wanted a taste of her fine breasts.

He slid downwards, trailing a hot wake on her skin with the tip of his tongue. She tasted like all the Heavens combined, her skin smooth and silky. He reached the mound of her breast and gave her no reprieve as he devoured one breast and palmed the other.

He suckled the stiff peak into his mouth, using his tongue to swirl around her turgid nipple. Kyel began to kiss her, and Juliran bent to suckle between her legs. There was something elemental about all of them devouring their mate at the same time. She groaned long and low and loud.

The connection between them swelled. Her mounting urgency and desire pressed on him, and his cock throbbed painfully in its containment.

Unable to restrain himself, Zaen ripped his jeans open, tugged them down, and grabbed his cock. He fisted his rigid length, feeling the blood pounding into his member so that it twitched.

He fisted himself from root to tip and back down again, working himself while he devoured first one breast and then the other, leaving heated saliva coating her chest. He thrust into his hand, feeling the burn build right in the middle of his balls.

Lucie's dainty fingers curled around his thickness. She tugged him up once. Twice. It didn't take much. Just seeing her fingers around his shaft was enough to make him tip over the edge. He pressured her nipple between his lips so he wouldn't bite her. Pressure built, his balls rode up, he tensed, and he was forced from his brain as one of the most powerful orgasms ripped through his body.

He spilt over her hand, his hot seed coating the bedclothes. She tensed and screamed into Kyel's mouth while Juliran speared her with his tongue, sucking at her clit and pumping into her with his fingers and wrung her climax out until she wailed, her body bowed with pleasure. It was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard.

They had made a breakthrough, their bond fusing even more, yet they were still here in this construct. They still weren't safe. Not safe at all.

Chapter Thirteen

Lucie

"What the fuck, Lucie?" Grant stormed into their bedroom. The door crashed into the wall as he strode inside. His blazing eyes scoured over her, her men and their tangle

of limbs. Naked. Sated. Her mind was still hazy in her post-orgasmic bliss.

“Grant?” It looked like him, but there was something about him that was off. She hadn’t noticed it before. But then again, she’d been caught in her worst nightmare in an energy-sapping fog and hours and hours of unending work.

“Lucie. How could you! You know how much I do to help your career. And this is the way you thank me? By fucking three men! You’re nothing but a fucking slut.” His chest heaved.

She struggled onto her elbows, noticing the cool air over her nakedness. She looked down her body to see the marks of their lovemaking on her skin. Juliran was still between her parted thighs, between her legs glistening with her excitement. Kyel’s hot breath washed over her still-wet nipples. Her hand was coated with Zaen’s release. There was absolutely no doubt what they’d been doing.

She grabbed the bed covering and attempted to cover herself, shame burning deep. Her hands shook so much, she had difficulty effectively clutching the blanket. White fog descended in her mind.

“I wasn’t... I didn’t...” But she was and she had. She was the lowest form of scum. Self-condemnation crashed through her.

Her mind spiraled. How had it come to this? Things didn’t add up, and she was at a loss to work exactly how she’d ended up where she was.

Kyel growled low in his chest and stood to face Grant. Her breath stuck in her throat, her heart pounding. Kyel didn’t seem to notice her reaction at all as he stalked towards Grant like a lion hunting prey.

“Why are you even here? You should be at work,” Grant said, his black eyes focusing

on her. She hadn't noticed how depthless they actually were. Like twin black holes.

"Yes. Yes, that's exactly where I need to be." She struggled up from the bed, frantically searching for her uniform. She needed to get to work. She needed...

"Lucie. Come here. You don't have to be anywhere but with us." Juliran wound his arms around her waist. He grabbed a robe atop the bedroom chair, wrapped it around her and brought her tight against his chest. She sagged against him for a moment, taking comfort from the strength of his body. It felt so right, being here in the cage of his arms, but her mind clouded, the fog more solid than it had ever been.

She tried to pull away from his grasp, but it was similar to moving steel poles cemented into the ground. "I have to..."

Had to what? Work, yes that was what she had to do. Get up and go to work.

"I can't believe you would do this to me, Lucie. After all I've done for you," Grant said.

The white fog descended in her mind. Yes, that was right. There were bills that had to be paid. She was the wage earner while Grant helped work on her career. He did a lot for her and she should be grateful.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“Lucie, there is no work. He has done nothing for you.” Zaen moved into her line of vision and put his warm palms on her shoulders, staring down at her.

She peered up at him. “But I’ll be out on the street again if we can’t pay the rent. I’ll... I’ll have to live in my car. I’ve done it before and... I don’t... don’t want to do that again. If I don’t work, we can’t live here.”

She shuddered, remembering the nip of a cold winter night through car windows that offered no protection. Once it seeped into her bones, it took days for the chill to work out. She didn’t have a bathroom in a car. Or a kitchen. Nowhere to cook. The pain in her stomach was worse than the chill in her bones.

“That’s right, Lucie. Remember where you’d be if it wasn’t for me,” Grant said.

Kyel snarled. With a quick movement, he wrapped his hands around Grant’s neck. “Whatever it is you’re doing to our Lucie, you will stop.”

Grant smiled, despite the fingers locked around his throat. “I’m doing nothing other than what she already thinks of herself. You think she considers herself your mate? She doesn’t know how to let anyone close. In fact, she goes out of her way to keep people at arm’s distance. She’s nothing but a cold fish, incapable of loving anyone. You’ll never be able to mate-sync with someone like her.”

“Grant... how do you know about us being mates? How do you know about our mate bond?” Lucie asked. How could Grant really know about all those things? How could he even know who they were?

“You really are a stupid human,” Grant said. His lip curled as he sneered at her.

She blinked at him, uncomprehending. It was such a strange thing to say. People didn’t call themselves humans. No humans did, in any case.

“But... you’re human too,” she said.

Grant pushed Kyel’s hand off his throat. With no more than a twist of his fingers, he had Kyel on his knees, his wrist wrenched at an angle that bent his arm right around. Kyel’s face scrunched in agony. Juliran shouted and Zaen launched to his feet.

“No, you don’t. One move from me and I’ll take his hand right off. I can do it here. She expects it,” Grant said.

His eyes had changed. Instead of light blue, they were black. Not just black, but writhing with black clouds that seemed to go on and on forever.

She recoiled, fighting the whiteout in her brain. “Who...what are you?”

“You have the power to make me anything you want, human. You turned me into this boyfriend of yours, but you can make me more. So much more. If you help me, I’ll let go of this mate and let you go back to the palace. That’s what you want, isn’t it? To go back to their bed in the nice white palace, see their sister, their parents? It’s the family you’ve always wanted, isn’t it? Just let me out of here and I’ll take you there. I’ll take you all there.”

It was the voice! The same voice that had been in her head. It was still there. Only now, it wasn’t just a voice. It was Grant. And they weren’t in the palace. They were in her mind. Somehow, somehow it wasn’t just a voice anymore.

“Don’t listen to him, Lucie!” Zaen yelled, and Juliran tightened his hold on her.

“Let them go. Please. Use me, but don’t hurt them,” she pleaded.

A cruel smile twisted his lips. “I will use you alright, but only you can get rid of them, Lucie.”

She looked between her mates, the men that meant more to her than her own life. “How... how can I let them go?”

“Lucie! Don’t listen to him!” Kyel said.

Grant crunched his wrist and he yelled in pain. The sound went right through her.

“I... I have to. I... I’m not your mate. Not your true mate. I don’t... don’t feel anything.” She held her hand over her aching heart. “Not the thing you said I’d feel. It means I’m not the one for you. If I don’t let you go, you’ll never find her.”

White edged her vision, seducing her with a tempting pull. If she went into the white, she could let them go. They would be free.

“That’s right, Lucie. Let it take you,” Grant said.

“He’s tricking you, Lucie. We know you’re our mate. We’ve always known it to be true,” Juliran said.

“I... can’t feel it There’s... no connection.” Tears blurred her eyes. She wanted it to be true, but she had to face the harsh truth.

“We feel it, Lucie. Listen to us. Not him,” Zaen said.

She let her eyes run over their faces, committing everything to memory. “No...”

“You will listen to us, Lucie. We are your mates. We will never do you harm. Listen to us and trust us,” Kyel said through gritted teeth.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“But she doesn’t trust you because she doesn’t trust any men. Shall I show you why? In fact, I’ll let her show you. Then you’ll know she’ll never let you in. Not fully. You’ll never mate-sync and I will always be here in her mind. Show them, Lucie. Show them why you can never be their mate,” Grant said.

“No!” Juliran yelled, but there was truth in Grant’s words. She needed to show them, otherwise they would never believe she wasn’t their mate. They would never leave and they would never find the real mate.

She wanted them like she wanted her next breath. They were caring, sexy, and considerate and thought that they loved her, but she didn’t believe it was true. How could it, when they didn’t know her? The best way was to show them in every, technicolor, gory detail. Faced with the truth, they would finally understand.

“Take them on a journey, Lucie. Let them see. Show them how unworthy you are. Show them how unlovable you are. Show them why they would never want you,” Grant said.

Yes, that’s exactly what she needed to do. When they saw the facts, they would thank her for saving them.

“We feel you, Lucie. We already know what’s inside of you,” Kyel said.

“How could you? I’ve never told you. You don’t know. I’m going to show you and then you will know the truth,” Lucie said.

She closed her eyes and gave in. The fog gushed over her. She was caught in

complete whitewash and when it cleared, she stood, facing them three of them. Grant was nowhere to be seen, but between them was a scarred kitchen table and a dirty, cluttered kitchen.

A small girl sat at a chair that was too big. Her forehead came up to the rim of the table, but there was no booster seat for her to sit on. She tucked her legs under her and perched on her knees.

A man sat on the opposite chair, reading a paper. His clothing was dirty and crumpled, as was the dress of the woman cooking at the stove. Something sizzled in a pan, spitting drops of fat all over the floor. A skinny dog snuffled under her feet, licking up the drops of fat.

“My first foster parents. Or the first ones I can remember, anyway,” she said.

The woman rolled a couple of sausages on the man’s plate and then rolled one onto the plate of the little girl. She went to touch it, but was it too hot and the knife and fork too large for her. Then dog leapt up and grabbed it off her plate. Tears formed in the little girl’s eyes.

“That fuckin’ dog,” the woman growled, and then turned to the little girl. “Don’t think you’re getting another one. That’s all I have. Maybe next time you won’t let the dog take it so easily.”

“Or you’ll learn to live off scraps,” the man said.

“Scraps of food for scraps of girls,” the woman said, chuckling to herself. “I should be a poet!”

“Stick your poetry up your ass and shut up, would ya? I’m trying to eat,” the man said as he chomped through half of the sausage.

Kyel rammed his fist through the man's face, but it slipped through as though the man was a ghost. Juliran took a step towards the child Lucie, but he hit a barrier and couldn't get to her. Zaen's fists clenched and unclenched and his chest heaved as he looked about the sad little kitchen.

"He was right. But I didn't go hungry. Look," she said.

The little girl walked past the dog and went to its food bowl. She picked up a handful of pellets and shoved them in her mouth.

"Think you're a dog, do ya?" The man laughed.

"Woof, little puppy. Woof!" The woman shrieked with laughter and the little girl took another handful of kibble and walked out of the kitchen.

"Lucie, let us take care of you now," Zaen said.

They still wanted her, despite witnessing that. Sadness filled her heart. They could do so much better. Didn't they see?

"I'll show you more," she said.

White light obliterated the room, and then they found themselves beneath the bleachers of a high school football match. Kids above them yelled and screamed as they watched the game, but the girl and boy beneath the stand weren't interested in what was happening in the field. The boy was on top of the girl, who was half naked. The pants of the boy were around his knees as he pumped into her. His naked backside pumped up and down in the air as he slammed himself into the girl one last time before he slumped over her, panting.

It was moments before he lifted his head to look at her. "Why're you crying?"

The girl's soft sobbing couldn't be heard below the screams of the crowd above them. She wiped her hands on her cheeks, and then tried to push his much larger body off her.

"Don't tell me you didn't want it, you little slut," he said.

"I... only thought you wanted to... to kiss me," the girl managed to say between sobs.

"What? A girl like you? Only interested in kissing. You're nothing but a slut. Everyone knows it and now I'm gonna tell all my friends how you lured me down here and waited for me with no clothes on and your legs apart."

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

He withdrew from her quickly and she jerked in pain. Her legs closed as he stood and pulled his pants up. “I... I’m a virgin. I haven’t slept with anyone.”

“That’s not what I’m gonna say. Who are they going to believe anyway? You? You better understand there’s two types of people in this world, Lucie, people like me who have parents with connections, and people like you—the losers of society. The fodder. You’re nobody. Just a little slut and not even a good one at that.”

He stormed away, leaving the girl to tug on her pants. She flinched and put a hand over her abdomen when she did her button up. She wiped her face, the expression too old for a girl of fourteen, and finger combed the dried grass from her hair before gingerly walking away.

“Gods, Lucie...” Juliran’s voice broke.

He went to reach for her, but she turned away. She didn’t want to see the pity she knew would be there in their eyes.

“Adam told everyone at school that he slept with me and everyone believed his story. I was known as the slut of the school and they didn’t care that he was the only boy that I’d had sex with. The thing was, I liked him. I thought he was different, but he knew. He saw what I was, and he acted on it. I can’t really blame him. He was right, though. There are two types of people and I’m the loser type. The type you really shouldn’t associate with.”

“Lucie, listen to us...” Kyel said, but she didn’t need to hear anything he would say. He would learn and understand. She let the whitewash take her away to another

scene.

She was in her little red car turned house. She'd worked hard at a part-time job while she'd been at high school and had bought it before her eighteenth birthday. Just as well she did, because the day she'd turned eighteen, her foster parents had kicked her out. They didn't get any more money after kids came of age. She could understand that. She had no intentions of being a financial drain. They'd made it clear what would happen and she hadn't expected anything more.

She'd made friends with some of the people who lived on the street. She had it good. Not like some of them, the poor things. She had a car and some savings at least.

She sat in the back seat wrapped in a blanket she'd picked up at a secondhand store. Next to her was one of the street guys who had been nice to her. The snow had piled up on the windows. It was cold in the car, but she didn't have the gas to keep on turning it on. They sat next to each other for warmth and it had kept most of the coldness at bay.

They'd talked about their future. She had plans to get a job and rent a condo somewhere. She had some savings, which she had with her, that she'd use for a bond. She'd already started looking and had yet to hear back from some of the places she'd applied to.

They'd fallen asleep with her head on his shoulder and she'd woken up to a chill blast through the open door. Her friend was gone, along with her meagre savings. He'd found it in the unoriginal hiding place of her glove box and left her with nothing. Not even a dime.

"That night I found dinner in a dumpster when my stomach was turning itself inside out with hunger until I discovered the local soup kitchen," she said. "It was my own fault. I'd been told I was a loser, and I should have remembered."

She lifted her tired gaze to settle on their slack faces. “You want to know why I never told you anything about myself? I have nothing to tell except this, one horrible thing after another horrible thing. How can I possibly have anything in common with you? How can you understand? I’m beneath you. So far, far beneath you. Now you know the woman you think is your mate. Lucie the Loser. Do you want to see more? I can show you lots of times this happened to me.”

Juliran was speechless. Zaen was pale and Kyel’s eyes bored into her. He uttered the words she knew were going to come. She knew because she expected them. “No, Lucie. We don’t need to see anymore.”

Chapter Fourteen

Lucie

She knew what they would say. What those in her life who knew her invariably knew. A hard rock settled in her gut and began to tear it to shreds.

She’d hoped they might be different.

She’d been wrong in the past and she was wrong again. Perhaps if she could read people better, she wouldn’t get herself into these positions, but they weren’t people. They were aliens. Royalty. They had standards too.

She sighed and took one last look at the three men who she would be overjoyed to spend the rest of her life with and offered them a smile. A weak smile, but at least she tried.

Kyel’s eyes gleamed dark and she stifled a shiver. Even with a look, he was a force. “We don’t need to see more of how you were the victim of ignorant and despicable people.”

Lucie frowned at him. “I don’t think...”

“You will let me finish.” His expression turned dark and he aimed a look at her she felt right in the center of her heart.

Words dried before they’d even left her mind. Her mouth eased shut.

“Now you will let us show you how we see you. Let us show you how you really are,” Kyel said.

White mist descended and thinned out to reveal all three of them pounding down a sleek metal corridor. What was happening? Every muscle in her body locked up in terror.

“Ease, mate. This is our memory. It cannot hurt you,” Juliran said.

The real Kyel, Zaen and Juliran stood to the side as they watched themselves in the scene. The real her stood opposite, while the action played out between them.

She knew where they were now. Even though she’d been half out of her head with pain and deprivation, this memory was etched into her brain. She wondered why they had to show it to her. Was it to show her how pathetic she was? How revolting she was after weeks spent locked in a cage without sanitation or enough food or water to feed a rabbit.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“Watch, Lucie,” Zaen whispered. There was something in his tone that made her open eyes she hadn’t realized she’d closed.

Her limp body bounced over the shoulder of the Reptile that had snatched her from the cage. She’d been in such pain. She didn’t know which part of her body hurt the most. She was so floppy, it looked as though she’d passed out.

Kyel rose a pulser and shot the Reptile carrying her in the leg. It went down in a tumble of limbs and her body skidded along the corridor. Zaen shot the other Reptile that had also taken her square in the middle of his back. Juliran ran to her crumpled body, while Kyel strode to the Reptile’s prone form. His chest heaved with each deep breath he took and the pulser trembled in his tight grip. She’d never seen him so furious.

“You seek to harm precious females?” He kicked the Reptile in its side. The crack of ribs echoed off the walls of the corridor. It tried to scuttle backwards, but Kyel slammed his fist into its snout. Its head flew to the side. Teeth and a spray of green blood splattered across the wall.

Juliran hunched over her body, his hands fluttering as though he didn’t know where to touch her.

“Gods... what have they done to her?” His voice cracked.

She’d begun to think he didn’t know where to touch her because every inch of her body was covered with disgusting filth, but something in his tone stopped that thought before it had fully matured. She never heard him sound so anguished.

Zaen knelt next to his brother. “There’s not an inch of her that’s not been brutalized.”

Kyel kicked the Reptile again, this time in its other side. “Is the other one dead?”

Juliran peered at the unmoving Reptile Zaen had shot. Lucie saw the floor through the middle of the hole in its back. “Yes.”

“Pity.” He sounded so in control, so monotone, but she could see the fury beneath his carefully forced control. “I was looking forward to treating it to the same attention they did the human females.”

“Especially to our mate,” Juliran said.

“Yes. Especially for how they treated our mate.” He glared down at the Reptile. “Why did you do it? Tell me.”

The Reptile narrowed its eyes on Kyel and made a huffing sound, as though it was laughing at him. Kyel brought his foot down in the middle of the Reptile’s stomach. The Reptile doubled around Kyel’s massive leather boot.

“There can never be enough pain I can inflict on you for doing this to her,” he said.

There was an explosion and the corridor shook and tilted.

“Kyel, finish it off. We need to get off this craft,” Juliran said.

“Watch out, Kyel!” Zaen shouted.

The Reptile held a small device in its claws. So fast Lucie barely saw him aim, Kyel shot its wrist off. The device, still clutched in the Reptile’s claws, skidded to Juliran.

“A remote detonator,” Juliran said.

Kyel shot the Reptile’s head. Its skull disintegrated. A fine spray of green coated Kyel’s leathers but he didn’t seem to notice. “Bring our mate, brothers. She is in too much danger here.”

“But... I don’t want to hurt her any more than she already is,” Juliran said.

Kyel hunched behind his brothers. Lucie saw him flinch and moisture gather in his eyes when he looked at her crumpled body. She’d never seen him so shaken. He held out a hand towards her and a tremor worked through his limb. He clenched his fist and drew it back.

“Don’t worry, brother. We feel the same,” Zaen said.

There was another boom. The walls shook. Sparks danced from a rent in the ceiling. Juliran scooped her against his chest, bundling her so carefully she might be made from tissue paper. She groaned and her eyelids flickered open.

“I didn’t mean to jostle her, brothers,” Juliran said, sounding horrified.

“You didn’t, brother. You are being more careful than I ever could,” Zaen said.

“The others. Have to... help... the others.” Her voice was so quiet she didn’t think any of them heard.

“They are safe, mate. They are rescued,” Kyel said.

Her eyes fluttered closed before she went limp again. “Good.”

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“Gods. She’s in such pain and yet her first thought is of the other human females,” Juliran said.

“As well as being our mate, she is a rare gem,” Zaen said.

The muscle ticked at Kyel’s temple as they all stared at her cradled in Juliran’s arms. “I don’t know what we did to deserve the gods’ honor, but we are truly blessed, brothers.” An explosion made them all crouch over her, protecting her from the debris that fell from the ceiling. “Come, we need to get to our shuttle.”

As one, they pounded down the corridor and the scene washed away. Back in the bedroom, all three of them stood staring at her.

“Of course, I would be concerned for the others. Anyone would. We’d been caged for weeks with only ourselves for company. Terrible situations build close friendships,” she said.

“You were in terrible pain, Lucie. I’ve seen hardened soldiers mindless in similar situations, yet your first thought was for others,” Juliran said.

She shook her head. She thought she’d shown them who she was, and yet they still didn’t understand.

“She doesn’t believe us,” Zaen said.

“Then we will show her more,” Kyel said.

A garden unfolded around them. She was there, walking down one of the pathways in the palace's garden. She loved this part of the garden. It was secluded, the pathways filled with exotic flowers. They'd told her the flowers used to glow at night, infused with the Erion crystal's energy, but they hadn't for ten long years. Not since the crystal had been stolen.

They were disappointed, but she thought they were still lovely. After all, flowers on Earth didn't glow. They reminded her of home in a way. They were imbued with perfume and she'd always walked slower than everyone else to smell them.

This day, Juliran, Kyel, Zaen, and Kira had walked on ahead and she'd fallen behind inhaling the scent of the flowers. Kira saw her and trotted back down the pathway.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I guess I got side-tracked," Lucie said.

"That's okay. I'm afraid we're too fast for you." Kira smiled.

"You're a lot taller than me. You have longer legs," Lucie said.

"But the best things come in petite packages," Kira said. She touched the flower Lucie had been admiring. "These are my favorites as well. They also grow in blue, but the pink ones like this one are rarer. Geralt, our gardener, is talented."

"We say when you have a talent for gardening that you have a green thumb," Lucie said.

Kira laughed, the sound melodious. "But grass is blue!"

"It's green where I'm from," Lucie said.

"That's strange, but it would also be beautiful to see... Lucie, I'm so sad you can't

get back home. If only we knew where your planet was, my brothers would take you there.”

A strange expression stole over her face, seen from the perspective of her men, she guessed. At first, it was longing and then it turned into something pensive, then became harsh. She seemed as though she thought of something bad, and then it morphed into something more terrified. Only she knew the run of thoughts in that moment.

She’d thought of Earth, of going home, but then she’d thought of Grant and the way he had used her. How hard she had to work, hours upon hours, while he’d lied to her.

She’d known what he was doing all along. That he used her as his work horse. While he partied and slept around, she was the one who paid the bills and the rent and kept herself tied down, never to pursue her dream of one day becoming a performer. Singing was the only time she had any peace. The only time where she was free. Grant had known that and dangled it in front of her, the golden carrot in the form of his contacts in the music industry that he’d never once mentioned her to them about.

It was only when she’d come home from work early one day and caught him in bed with some stranger that she’d grabbed the keys to her little red car and driven and driven and driven to the middle of nowhere. She’d been abducted and tortured, but then her men had rescued her and despite everything that had happened, they were the bright spot. When they’d told her they were her mates, she’d been astounded, and when she got over the shock, the first strains of hope had woven into her heart.

Then she’d heard the voice in her head that told her she didn’t deserve them. That when they found out who she really was, they wouldn’t want her. That nobody else had wanted her and they wouldn’t be any different. And she’d listened to that voice because deep down inside, where it really counted, she knew it was right.

“Lucie? What’s wrong?” Kira said.

She shook herself and smiled, but the strain on her face was evident even though she thought she’d hidden it. “Nothing important. I’ll show you something we do on Earth.”

Lucie picked the flower Kira had admired and put it behind her head.

Kira laughed. “You wear flowers like this?”

“If I find something similar, I’ll show you how to make a daisy chain,” Lucie said.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“That sounds exotic,” Kira said.

Lucie glanced up as Kyel, Juliran, and Zaen approached her with flowers of their own. She ducked her head, but now that she was an observer, she’d missed the disappointment on their faces. They’d wanted to please her so badly and she’d shied away and missed their true intentions.

Maybe if she’d lifted her head, she would have seen their happy faces and it might have drowned out the voice. But in that moment the voice had stolen her entire attention and she’d retreated into herself, only offering a timid glance and tentative look before she’d walked away.

The scene faded. “See how thoughtful you are, Lucie. Even when you’re crying inside you made our sister smile and laugh.”

“That’s easy to do. Kira is a lovely woman, who smiles and laughs with everyone,” Lucie said.

“But her smiles and laughter as especially quick when you’re around,” Zaen said.

Lucie clenched her teeth hard enough to make her jaw hurt. “What you’re showing me is irrelevant. Please... just stop. You’re making this harder than it should be.”

“Anything worth it is hard. We can keep on showing you what we see in you. What we knew to be true. Watch,” Kyel said.

“It’s not going to make any difference. It won’t change anything...”

She knew where Kyel had taken her as soon as the white faded to reveal the medi-bay in their warship. That day would be etched in her mind until she died. She'd woken to a world of white mist trapped inside a coffin. She'd slapped her hands against a slippery surface that had immediately retracted.

The mist cleared and three concerned faces had stared down at her, blue skin that ranged in tone from light blue to midnight. Each had dark hair with green-blue highlights. One was short cropped all over. One had tight curls that clung to his scalp, and the last had short back and sides with a fringe that flopped over his right eye. All their eyes glowed with an unearthly inner green-blue light.

They had lips that looked soft and sensuous and entirely kissable, but their most prominent features were horns that emerged from their temples and curved around the sides of their heads. Crop hair had horns that tipped up at the ends. Tight curls' horns curved around the sides of his head, and fringe's horns had a kink that gave him a carefree air, if horns that grew from male heads could ever be described as carefree.

"Mate..." The being with tight curls spoke.

She touched her fingers to her ears. They hung there suspended for a moment, "I can... understand you?"

"Isn't the translator working?" Crop hair asked.

"I told you not to install it while she was healing," Fringe said.

"I only wanted to do it to save her pain. She's been through so much..." Tight curls gave her a look so mournful it brought tears to her eyes.

"Now you're making her cry," Fringe said.

“That’s it. Take it out and we’ll do it later, when she’s stronger. I don’t want to put her under any more stress than she’s already been through,” Crop said.

She held her hands out, palms towards them. “No! No, no, no. I... I’m not in any pain. In fact...” She catalogued her body. “I... I’m not in any pain. At all.” A look of wonder flickered across her face. She didn’t realize she was so expressive.

“That is good, mate,” Fringe said.

“Did you... did you heal me?” Her eyes grew large and round and began to fill with unshed tears.

“We did,” Crop said.

She curled her fingers around his wrist. His eyes widened and he went so still he might have been a statue. A tear streaked down the side of her face to disappear into her hairline and he moved so slowly and so tenderly to wipe it away.

“We will do everything in our power to make sure you never cry again,” he said.

Tight curls threaded a strand of hair from her face. “We only want to see tears of joy fall from your beautiful eyes.”

“For you, mate. We will do anything,” Fringe said.

She frowned. “Why do you keep on calling me that name? My name is Lucie.”

“Which name do you mean?” Crop said.

She still had her fingers curled around his wrist and he stroked her skin with the pad of his thumb, little concentric circles that she was finding harder and harder to ignore.

She didn't want to take her hand away. Didn't want him to stop. Didn't wonder why she felt an immediate attraction, an immediate connection to him.

To them. All of them.

She pressed her lips together, tilting on the edge of a precipice. She knew that even with the mention of such a small word, it would mean monumental changes to her life. These three men were the lynchpin to something great. Something her soul had been crying for all her life.

“Mate.” Her voice barely came out on a whisper.

All of them looked even more fierce, if that was at all possible.

Crop’s mouth firmed. “I am Kyel.” He indicated to tight curls. “This is my brother Zaen.” He capped Fringe on his shoulder. “This is my brother Juliran. You are our mate and we are yours.”

Her gaze darted between all of them, as though she couldn’t decide which face to rest on. Even though she was naked and vulnerable, and they were three hulking men with toned muscles and bodies honed for strength and power, she’d never felt so safe. “All three of you?”

Zaen nodded. “We are a Triad, and now we can form our Quad with you. The bond has opened and shown us our connection. We have waited our whole lives to meet you. We didn’t think... We never thought...”

To her surprise, his eyes teared up and he was unable to speak. Kyel put his arm about his brother in a tender display of affection.

“What my idiot brother means to say is that you are our precious fourth. Now that we have found you, our lives will be brighter. More purposeful. Our days will have meaning, and our nights filled with love. You are the missing piece of our souls that completes all of us, a bond formed and matched by the Fates long before we were even born. We are perfect for you and you are perfect for us. Sweet mate, you are everything to us. Precious beyond belief. Do not doubt the strength of our connection, or the blessings on us,” Kyel said, with a well of emotion that brought more tears.

“Do not cry, mate. Kyel didn’t meant to upset you,” Juliran said.

“No... it’s just that...” Nobody had ever told her she was precious, or cherished, or a missing part of a soul. She hadn’t wanted much in life, but hearing those words was one thing she’d yearned for, and yet, never thought would be said to her.

She cupped Kyel’s cheek, and then Zaen’s and Juliran’s. Looking down at herself, she hadn’t realized the expression on her face when they’d told her. How joyous she looked. How filled with happiness.

She hadn’t told them, but as Kyel had spoken, her heart had filled with the love he’d spoken about. The knowledge that they were meant for each other was undeniable. The truth behind his words so absolute that as unreal and hard to believe as they were, she knew that they were so right together.

And then, her soul had flared so bright and she’d felt so complete that there was no doubt in her mind. She’d smiled up at them, and one after the other, they had kissed her so reverently and so tenderly she had no words for it. Despite the horror of the circumstances, meeting them had been the most beautiful thing to happen in her life.

And then, just when she was going to ask them to make love to her, she saw her entire body stiffen and a look of stark horror wash over her face. Her gaze had turned from warmth and happiness to one of alarm and then sheer terror.

And then her terror had become theirs.

Chapter Fifteen

Lucie

“What happened in that moment, Lucie?” Kyel asked.

Between them, the scene faded, and they were held in a world so white there was no top or bottom, left or right. There was no more to see, but it was also the time for truth.

“That was when I first heard the voice,” she said.

“Lucie... why didn’t you tell us? We would have helped you,” Zaen said. He stepped towards her, but she held out her hand and he hit an invisible barrier.

“Let us come to you, Lucie.”

She shook her head and swallowed hard. “No. I... You have to stay there. The voice said if I told you, it would kill all of you in front of my eyes. It would take you away and then I would be that sad, lonely little girl I’d always been.”

She flickered her eyes up to look at them. Her gaze snagged and her heart lurched at the hurt and sadness evident on their faces. “You... you’re not mad?”

Juliran frowned. “How could we be mad at you, Lucie? We’re never mad at you. This isn’t your fault.”

“You forget, we recognize your soul. You wouldn’t be like this if not for this voice, telling you false things,” Zaen said.

“But it isn’t false. It’s trapped me and now it’s trapped you... wherever it is we are. It’s going to hurt you, and it’s all because me of,” Lucie said.

“It’s not because of you and we’re not going anywhere. As to where we are, this... this is all in your mind. I don’t begin to understand how or why, only that it has you trapped here because it needs you. And it needs to keep us apart. Look at the evidence. Everything it has done, it has done to separate us. To stop the natural progression of our bond. To stop the final mate-sync,” Kyel said.

Zaen frowned as he regarded Lucie, his eyes gleaming dark. “You’re right, brother. Everything it had done is to keep us apart.”

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“That means it fears our mate-sync. And it fears it for a reason,” Juliran said.

“It means our mate-sync is stronger than it is. An entity like this can only fear what is more powerful. Lucie, to save yourself, to save us, we need to complete our bond. We need to mate-sync,” Kyel said.

A slither of unease worked through her bones, “But... we can’t. I feel a bond, yes. But that is because all three of you are beautiful men, inside and out. Your soulssshine...” What she wanted to say brought a bitter taste to her mouth.

“But? Tell us, Lucie. So that we may help you,” Juliran said.

“Can’t you see? I’ve been telling the truth all along. I’m weak. I’ll only bring you down. Please... let me go. You’ll find another mate. One that is actually worthy of you.” Tears rolled down her cheeks, but they had to know. Had to understand. “I’m not capable of giving you what you need because I don’t even know myself. Have no idea how to be strong. No idea how to give, no idea how to love and you... all of you... deserve everything.’

“Oh, Lucie. You have given us those things all along, and you didn’t even know it. Look.” Kyel said.

Scenes rolled out around her, one after the other, all of her from their perspective. They’d noticed every little detail, everything she’d done. When she’d offered a tentative smile and had made their hearts bloom. When she’d helped a stranger carry a heavy bag. When she’d offered her night guard a hot drink and some food. When she’d fed the pets, and listened to Kira as she’d talk and talk and talk about finding

her own mates, all the while the voice was in her head telling her she wasn't worthy, that she was everything those selfish people in her life had told her she was. "It was lies, all of the things those people said to you. Lies because they were the lesser people. Because there was something in you, they were jealous of. Look, Lucie. Look at how strong you are. That despite being taken from your planet and tortured and then attacked by this voice, you were still kind and patient and loving. That despite everything dark in your life, you chose the light. You chose love and for that we will be forever thankful," Kyel said.

"If it wasn't for you having to go through all of that, we would never have met you. You sacrificed this for us," Zane said.

"There is a reason the Fates designed you and us. It is their perfect plan. You cannot doubt that. Never doubt yourself and never doubt us. We love you. We have always loved you. Denying you would be denying ourselves and we are selfish bastards. We are never going to deny ourselves," Juliran said.

"Are you looking, Lucie? See how we see you. There is nothing, nothing, but love," Kyel said.

The images continued to swirl around her, one after the other. She had never seen herself from the outside. All she knew was what was going on in her mind and in her heart.

"Don't deny us anymore, Lucie. Please, accept us. We're pleading with you. Please, open your heart and take us in," Kyel said.

Everything she'd denied herself, she'd also denied them. That was the ultimate selfish thing she could ever do. How could she deny these three beautiful men anything? They were the missing parts of her soul, and she was their missing part. To separate them all would be to never know fulfilment, never know ultimate love. That was

something she would never do to them.

The final wall that encased her heart shattered like a brittle shell, and as it did, the invisible barrier that held them from her disappeared.

As one, they strode over to her and gathered her in their arms, kissing her mouth, cheek, eyelids, forehead. Their hands were on her thigh, waist, arm, shoulder. They surrounded her, and a sigh rippled through her entire being.

“Yes. Yes, I take you. I... I love you. All of you. You are the three-quarters of my soul that I’ve been missing. I accept you. That’s if... you accept me.”

Kyel’s throaty chuckle sounded in her ear. “We accepted you the moment we laid eyes on you, our sweet mate. Our human female. Our beautiful Lucie.”

There was a clash of thunder and a freezing wind battered them from all sides. Wind whipped her hair into her eyes and icy shards sent white hot slices of pain where they cut her skin. The wind roared and howled, and thick darkness descended on them so fast it was as though a light was switched off. It was only her fingers tangled in her mates’ clothing that anchored her.

“Take us somewhere safe, Lucie. Take us out of here,” Kyel yelled over the cacophony of the storm.

She closed her eyes, seeking that warm place in her mind that all four of them could be together. Blackness descended and all images slipped through her mind as through there was no place to cling. She thought of her bedroom in the palace. The beautiful garden outside. The calming lounge area she’d spent many nights with their parents and sister. She couldn’t seem to hold the image in her mind.

“I... can’t. It’s not letting me. It’s too strong.” Lucie sobbed into Kyel’s broad chest.

Another clash of thunder boomed. The gale force wind sent them staggering. Kyel's strong arms wrapped around her when Juliran was ripped away from their huddled group, gripped by an invisible force. Kyel and Zaen fisted their hands in his shirt and drew him back to them. He wrapped his arms about Lucie and his brothers, clinging to them.

"Keep close, brother. It wants to separate us," Zaen said.

"It's fighting Lucie—fighting us—every step of the way," Zaen said, cupping the back of her head in his large palm.

"It wants to separate us," Zaen said.

"If it succeeds, we won't stand a chance," Juliran said.

"We have to mate-sync. Together we will be stronger," Kyel said.

"But how can we do that? This is not real. We're in Lucie's mind. We can only mate-sync in our physical bodies." Juliran flinched as the cyclonic wind smashed over a table and sent a lamp crashing to the floor.

"Lucie, you're in control. Imagine somewhere safe you can take us all to." Zaen tightened his hold around her.

The wind snatched her clothes and whipped her hair about her face. All she could do was cling to her mates and bury her head against Kyel's broad, warm chest. She was blinded. Confused. Terrified.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

She didn't know if she was crying, or if it was the icy rain on her face. She could never stand up against such force. She'd never even stood up against Grant. She'd only run away from him. She'd never stayed to fight against any of her perpetrators. She was weak. A coward. Prey.

She shook her head, trembling from head to toe. How could she stand up to such an evil force when all she was too scared to move? "I could show you memories, but I can't take four of us away from here. I... I'm not strong enough."

"Yes, you can, Lucie. We have complete faith in you," Juliran said.

Their faith was misplaced. She couldn't do this. They were going to die, and it was all her fault. Her hands began to shake with the force of holding on to them.

"I won't let you down. I will not give you up..."

Her eyes snapped open. "Wh... what?"

Was that Juliran... singing?

"All we have to do now, is take these lies and make them true..." Zaen spoke the words, but the tune was there in her head.

"You know this song? How?" They couldn't know it. She'd never sung to them. Not since she'd been abducted.

"You sang it, Lucie. We watched you on stage in the diner. Freedom. I won't let you

down. Freedom. I will not give you up.”

Her mind spun. She’d been so confused, but she knew she had been on stage. Whether that was in her mind hadn’t mattered. They’d watched and now they repeated every word back she’d sung. They’d listened. It was the only time where she felt like her true self, as though nothing in her life could touch her. That was why she loved singing so much. It took her away.

“Sing with us, Lucie. I would love to hear your voice again,” Kyel said.

They started to sing together, word for word. They’d not only listened to her. They’d heard her. They knew her. They understood her. They were all quarters of the same soul. How could they not?

And singing was the only thing that could make her forget about everything and had the power to take her away. Take them away.

More mouths formed the words as they quietly sang. A roll of thunder gathered in the distance and bore down towards them like a bomb waiting to explode. Ice hurled at them, cutting and blinding and ripping into them like skeletal fingers. A terrifying face made from the clouds itself raced towards them. It moved closer and larger and more terrifying with each passing second.

“We won the race. Got out of the place...”

She clung to them like a limpet in a storm. She was never going to let go. Never.

She sang with them, her voice getting louder and clearer. The wind gathered, bearing down on them, the bomb waiting to explode. She didn’t care if this was the last thing she would ever know. She was with her mates. She was singing. She’d found the kind of love she was seeking all her life. She’d discovered her place of peace that she only

had when she sang, and now that place included them.

She opened her heart, accepted them. The bond pulsed between them. White and gold threads of light wrapped around them all. The light thread swelled and expanded around them, meeting the oncoming rush of thunder and cyclonic wind.

A massive detonation exploded around them. Her body shook with the power of the blast. She closed her eyes and tucked her face into Kyel's chest. An intense white light encased them and then faded away.

The wind was gone. Her skin tingled with warmth. She could breathe again. Slowly, she opened her eyes. They stood in the middle of her bedroom in the palace. Curtains billowed at her open windows, letting in a warm breeze sweetened by the flowers of the garden outside. The chirps of small animals sounded in the background.

The entity was gone. They were safe.

"Have we... Are we...?" Lucie gasped.

"I don't believe we are really in your bedroom," Zaen said.

Lucie looked about. It seemed like they were. It seemed real enough. The floor was solid. The wind was soft. The smells were subtle. "Why?"

"Because in reality, we are standing over your body in the medi-bay and we are all holding the Erion crystal. If we were truly back, we would have woken there," Zaen said.

"Then... why are we here?" Lucie said.

"I believe we are still trapped, Lucie. We are still in your mind and while we are here,

the entity is stronger. It will never let us go,” Zaen said.

“Then how are we going to get out of here? How can we escape?” Lucie asked.

Kyel tucked his knuckle beneath her chin and lifted her head. His eyes glowed brighter. “We must become stronger than the entity. The only way we can escape is to mate-sync, to join with your mind, body, and soul. Our connected souls will be no match for something as evil as that. Will you take the final step and accept us, Lucie? Will you complete our bond so that together we can fight this entity and escape?”

Chapter Sixteen

Lucie

Would she take that final step and offer herself to these three men? Could she? Was she capable? Would they still accept her even though all her flaws had been laid bare?

She stepped away from them, distancing herself. She let her gaze flow over them, committing every little detail to memory. Juliran's eyes softened as he regarded her. A smile tugged at Zaen's mouth and Kyel traced his fingertip along the line of her jaw.

Together they were stronger. She'd learned never to rely on anyone, and yet how could she live without these men. Her mates. They'd rescued her from the torture of the reptiles. Been by her side everyday helping her to heal from her ordeal at the palace. They'd even followed her into the construct of her mind to help her.

Her men. Her mates. She could no more leave them, than she could her torrid past. While her past had shaped her, she looked at her future right in the eyes.

Hadn't she always wanted someone just to love her? Treat her with kindness? It had been why she'd opened her heart again and again, but she'd been looking in the wrong places. Now she didn't have to look any further.

These men were here for her. They weren't going to hurt her. They were going to love her. She hadn't paused to think about how she felt about them. The voice had

never given her the headspace to think about it, but now she didn't think she could live without them.

She didn't want to.

She clenched her fist over her heart as the brittle wall she'd built around it began to shatter. Hot tears blurred her vision and she untied the cord from her waist and let the robe fall to pool around her feet. The warm air whispered over her skin. Her nipples pebbled beneath the heated intensity in their eyes.

She stood wordlessly before them naked, body and soul. Offering herself. Waiting.

They stalked towards her as one. Kyel's fingers ploughed through her hair. He tilted her head back and his mouth descended. His kiss was brutal and inflamed her veins with heat. His tongue dove into her mouth without mercy. His lips took and his tongue lapped. He pressed the front of his body against hers and she felt the hard neediness of his erection as he ground it into her abdomen. Heat pooled between her thighs and liquid arousal coursed through her veins.

Kyel's hands slid down her shoulders and trailed down her arms to pin them behind her back, sending goosebumps scattering over her skin. She gasped, and then groaned as the position made her arch her back, her sensitive nipples brushing against the material of Kyel's T-Shirt.

He spun her around, keeping her hands locked together in the small of her back. Zaen and Juliran were only a hairsbreadth away. The heat from their bodies washed over her and a deep shiver worked through her. She wanted to touch them, for them to touch her, but Kyel held her back.

"Do you accept Zaen and Juliran as well as myself as your Quad? Do you accept the full consequences of the mate sync? Will you join with us now and forever and

complete us as no other can? Say the word, mate, and we will worship you as the goddess you are. Now and forever,” Kyel rasped.

Her mind was hazy with desire, her body so sensitive the air felt as though it stroked her skin. There was only one compounding thought in her mind, an insistent need that she'd fought against for too long, something she never should have had to fight against at all. “Yes. Please. I accept all of you. Please... please join with me and form our Quad. Please, Kyel. Zaen. Juliran. Accept me. Take my body, my mind, my soul. Make me yours and make you mine.”

“We love you, our mate. We always have. You will never be alone again. Through our bond you will only know happiness, tenderness and love. This is my promise to you.” Zaen fell upon her mouth. His tongue dove into her hot, wet heat, gliding against her tongue in a deep, languid sweep, while his hands covered her breasts. He rolled her nipples between his fingers, crushed the sensitive tissue in his large palms, stroked her flesh with a masterful touch.

Juliran fell to his knees. His hands splayed over her thighs, branding her with his touch. She felt his warm breath flare over her pussy. She widened her stance and parted her thighs before he leaned forward. He held her nether lips apart with his thumbs and planted his face between her thighs. His chin nudged her legs further apart. His tongue slid through her folds, licking, laving, savoring and his nose rubbed against her clit, edging her higher and higher.

He slid his tongue along her cleft, circled her clit with the tip around and around before taking it into his mouth and sucking. Hard.

Kyel nibbled her earlobe and trailed wet, light little kisses down her neck before opening his mouth and biting down on the part of her body where her neck met her shoulder.

She jolted and an electric sensation whipped through her body. Her orgasm burst through her like a tsunami of heat, and it felt like she blew apart and scattered to the ends of the universe before drifting back together once again.

“That’s it, Lucie. Let us care for you. Let us love you,” Kyel murmured onto her ear.

Her legs buckled and he easily caught her in his arms. He lifted her and deposited her onto the soft bed.

Zaen wrapped his hands around each ankle. His eyes glowed bright blue. She gasped when she felt the power of his gaze locking with her. “I need to taste you as well, mate. May I taste you? May I put my mouth on your pussy and lick you until you scream and eat you as you find your pleasure?”

All she could do was draw a shaky breath and nod. She wanted him there. She would open herself to him and let him taste her most intimate part of her body. She realized she would let him do anything he wanted to her because she knew he would never hurt her, or take her selfishly, or use her in any way. Her pleasure was his, and his was hers. He was Zaen, one of the most precious souls she’d ever known. His love pulsed around her. Through her. It was so pure, so strong and unending.

He kissed his way up her body and she eagerly parted her thighs. She was seared with his fingers, his tongue, his mouth. Her flesh quivered wherever he touched her. Her blood was on fire, needing him to kiss her there. Her body pulsed with an almost painful need.

Finally, he reached the juncture of her thighs. He lay on his stomach and sank his face into her pussy. She jerked with the first touch and would have slid away if hands hadn’t kept her in place.

As Zaen sank his tongue through her cleft and speared her, she looked up to see Kyel

over her. He was blessedly undressed, on his knees at her shoulders, and fisted his rock-solid cock. Zaen laved her and kissed her between her thighs, her blood screaming for more.

Kyel's hand circled the base of his cock and drew it up and down his shaft. His eyes were dark, and her gaze ran over his horns, down his face, over the swirling tattoos on his body and rock-hard pecs, and down to his cock. He owned a body for war, for fighting, for survival and god, if that didn't make her hotter.

She had to touch him. Had to taste him. Couldn't stand to lie there and merely watch him. She gripped the base of his cock. He shucked in a quick breath as she circled his width before sliding her hands along his hard length just as he'd done moments before. His hands fisted on his hips and he swayed as she worked him with her hand.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

But that wasn't enough. She gripped his base and tugged him to her mouth. He went easily with her. She opened, dragging her tongue along his slit. His tangy flavor burst over her tongue. She groaned and enveloped him with her mouth. He slid inside her, carefully, slowly until the tip reached the back of her throat before he withdrew.

He slid back and forth in her mouth. His hands threaded through her hair, locking her head in place as he fucked her mouth. She curled her palm over the back of his thigh, helping to guide him in with each smooth tilt of his hips.

"That's it, my beautiful mate. Take me into your mouth. Let me fuck you in that wet hole before I fuck you where Zaen's mouth now is."

She shuddered at his intentions. He'd spoken as though he knew her deepest thoughts.

"I'm going to suck your breasts. Take your nipples into my mouth and devour your sweet skin." Kyel's heated, gravelly voice made her shiver.

There was a flare of warm breath, before a searing heat caressed her breast as Juliran suckled first one nipple and then the other. Her body shuddered with the touch of three men devouring her, three intimate touches, all gentle, all loving, but slowly building up into something more piqued.

She slid her hands through Juliran's hair and latched onto his horn. She circled it as though it was his cock and slid her hand from base to tip. Up and down, she squeezed the velvety texture as she worked her hand. His mouth went lax on her breast and a deep shudder rocked his body.

“Mate... that is... indescribable.” His voice was hoarse and she realized their horns must be as sensitive as their cocks. He sucked her breast into his mouth, biting gently, and flicked her nipple with his tongue.

Then it was all too much. Sensation grew and grew. All she knew was mouths and hands touching her, cocks on her, in her, and a warm, loving, all-consuming connection stirring to life. Another climax burst through her. She jerked, her muscles locking as a blue-green light sparkled around her, like millions of glittering stars, or a thousand multi-faceted diamonds under the brightest light.

Kyel eased from her mouth. Zaen kissed her gently and Juliran lapped her breast. Kyel lay on his back as Zaen and Juliran picked up her body and lay her chest to chest on top of him.

Her legs fell astride his hips and his erection slid through her well-tended slit. She was so sensitive that the slightest touch made her gasp and shiver. Zaen slipped his hands through her cleft. He rubbed her clit before spearing her with first one, then two fingers. She shuddered as Kyel gently kissed her. She came up onto her knees, allowing Zaen to sweep his fingers beneath her and swirl around her rosebud, painting her with her own arousal.

His blunt fingertip nudged her back entrance. “Relax, mate. Let me pleasure you here.”

She did her best to let every muscle in her body relax, and as she did, Zaen pressed hard and his finger popped through her forbidden ring of muscle. He pushed in to his knuckle and then eased out, a fluid motion that set a fiery ring of sensation heating her whole abdomen.

“That’s it, Lucie. Feel me here. It’s now my fingers, but soon will be my cock.” He thrust two fingers into her, stretching her. Her groan was a deep throaty sound. The

flames Zaen was stoking lapped higher and turned her insides into a molten liquid mess.

Each slip and slide of his fingers made her shake and shudder until she was a panting mess. Her forehead fell to Kyel's shoulder and she drifted, for a moment lost with his gentle administrations, until Zaen placed one hand on the small of her back and played with her clit and her pussy and her rosebud, rubbing her slowly back and forth from one end to the other.

"Mate, are you ready to accept all of us into your body? I will take your sweet pussy. Zaen will use your rosebud and you will accept Juliran into your mouth. We will all fuck you and when our essences merge, we will be as one, unable to unjoin this most intimate of connections," Kyel said. His voice was so low and gravelly, just the sound made her shiver.

And she was ready. So ready. She could barely wait to accept them all into her body. Her mates. The men she loved more than anything else in the universe. "Yes, take me. All of you. Accept me as I accept you. Take me now."

Kyel grinned. "As you wish, mate."

Chapter Seventeen

Lucie

Kyel tilted his hips. His cock nudged her entrance. She was so wet and ready, she slid down his length until she bottomed out on his groin in one smooth movement. She threw her head back and moaned, her oversensitive body erupting in a mess of liquid sensation.

He pumped into her, steadily but surely, sliding his hot long length in and out of her

willing body. She rocked against his abdomen, rubbing her clit over his taut muscles, shuddering as sparks seemed to scatter over her body.

“You feel delicious, Lucie. I’m never going to get enough of being in your little body. You honor me.” Kyel’s voice was hot tar as it poured through her.

She opened her eyes to see the strain in his deep gaze. The love and tenderness that she’d always seen there now glowed as bright as his eyes.

“It is you, who honor me,” she said. They’d been beside her while in her darkest moments and hadn’t judged, only built her up so that she might rise above it. They had made her into the best version of herself. Given where only others had taken.

She reached to stroke his horns with both hands from base to tip. His cock deep inside her throbbed, and she gasped at the intimate feeling. She leaned forward to kiss him, stroking his cock with her body, his mouth with her lips and tongue, and his horn with her hands. She would use every part of his body to bring him pleasure. Not just that. She would do anything within her power to lift him as he had done for her.

He spread his palms over her thighs and stopped her from rocking. She panted, body notched with tension, and his cock throbbed inside her.

“Now, you take Zaen into your body, Lucie. Lean over me and open yourself for my brother, your mate.”

Lucie did as he asked. He stretched her thighs apart as she leaned over his muscled chest. The bed dipped as Zaen knelt on either side of Kyel’s legs and positioned himself behind her.

She peered over her shoulder to watch him palm himself and rub the head of his shaft over her sensitive back entrance. Every muscle on his broad chest and solid abdomen

rippled with tension.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

He planted his thumb pad over her rosebud. “I’m going to take you here now, Lucie. Relax, my mate, and let me fill you here.”

He took her with a kiss and when he speared her with his tongue, the head of his cock slid past her tight ring of muscle. She panted though the fiery burn and as he eased inside her bit by long bit, the fire turned into something darker. Deeper. Burning through her and turning her whole body into a vessel for pure sensation.

“Oh, my God... Zaen... that’s...” It was so intense she couldn’t think to finish her sentence, and then finally, finally he was seated as deeply inside her as Kyel was.

Two massive cocks stretched her, and she was so sensitized that she felt every pulse of their shafts that were lodged deep inside her. She gave an experimental tilt of her hips and they all groaned. As her body strummed into life, flickers of blue-green light edged her vision.

“Gods... Lucie... feel so good,” Kyel said.

And they felt too good within her. She couldn’t begin to find the words to describe being stretched by two of the men she loved the most in the world. She was imprisoned between her mates, their solid bodies so much larger and stronger than she was, but she’d never felt so safe. So protected and cherished. She looked to Juliran who was on his knees beside her. His cock throbbed in his hand, and as his gaze locked with hers, he pumped his heavy shaft until the head began to weep. For her.

She wanted to love the third man who had earned her heart. She wrapped her hands

over his and pumped his shaft with him. Her fingers threaded between his. She wondered at the feel of silky skin over searing hard muscle. His hand fell away. His head dropped back, and she kept on working his cock in her hand. His shaft pulsed and when his head tilted forward, his gaze glowed so bright that the light colored her skin blue. “Gods... Lucie...”

That was all he managed, but she knew what he meant to say. She felt the same way—so much emotion that words couldn’t possibly begin to describe the intensity of them. She decided then that she didn’t need words. She just wanted to show him.

She eased his hips forward. The first taste of the head of his cock on her tongue was ambrosia. The bittersweet flavor exploded on her tongue. She needed more. She opened her mouth and he eased inside. Wider she opened until she had taken him as far into her mouth as she could. She looked up his muscled abdomen and became lost in his gaze. Bright blues and greens danced around him, cascading down his body to jump over her, and then Zaen and then Kyel until they were all immersed in the sparkling lights.

“Now, brothers. Let us fulfil this bond. Let us become one,” Kyel said.

Juliran eased his hips back and forward. His cock slid from her mouth. She swirled her tongue along his length and then through his slit. She smiled as he flinched. She did it again, just to taste him.

His eyes danced as he scowled. “Think to tease me, do you, mate? You might live to regret your desires.”

A dark excitement filled her as he threaded the fingers of one hand behind her head, while he ringed the base of his cock with the other. He was the image of complete male mastery. She opened herself and let him take control.

This time, his movements were a little faster, a little harder. It was exactly what she needed, and she moaned around his sliding cock, urging him for more. He gave in to her wish and began to fuck her mouth. She breathed in through her nose, his male, musk scent filling her senses, her mind, her control.

“As one, brothers,” Kyel said.

Both men tensed as they slid out of her holes to ease back inside her. Again and again, they moved in one fluid motion. She was full, so gloriously full one moment, and bereft the next. She needed more. Her heart pounded and her body throbbed with a height she was desperate to climb.

She moaned around Juliran’s cock in her mouth. Kyel and Zaen slammed into her, filling her. Just what she needed. Her mind began to drift as pure sensation built a steady pulse through her.

The darkness in her mind grew brighter as the sparkling blues and greens filled her body and teased her soul into life. The men pounded into her as one, using her body to take her higher than she’d ever been before. Up and up she soared as sweet pressure built inside. She cried out for more. She cried out for release. She cried out for her mates. Her beautiful, glorious mates.

The pressure burst and she was catapulted upwards into a glittering world of sparking lights. She drifted, lost in the warmth and love and light, her soul nourished and complete.

There was a hand at her shoulder, another on her back, and another on her arm. Her three mates surrounded her, glowing with an aura of dancing light so beautiful it brought tears to her eyes.

“You’re here!” She was so overjoyed, she cupped Kyel’s cheek, and then Zaen before

kissing Juliran. “But...mwhere are we?”

“We have fulfilled the mate bond. We are mate-synced, my beautiful mate. Do you feel us?” Kyel spread his hand over her heart. “Do you feel us here?”

She concentrated. Their three presences closed around her. She felt their awe, their gratefulness, and their love. So intense and beautiful.

She looked up at them in wonder. “I do! I feel all of you!”

She could hardly believe this was real. That she’d be so lucky that something so glorious and wonderful would happen to a girl like her.

“Do not wonder, Lucie. You deserve everything,” Zaen said.

“You... felt that?” All the old doubts jumbled to the surface. All the long-held beliefs that stalled her into inaction crowded into her mind, just as they always had.

“You don’t need to feel those things anymore. We are here to show you that you are much better than those thoughts. You’re better than how others have treated you. They only did it to bring you down, because deep inside, they sensed your goodness. Your brightness. Their actions were more about them, than it was about you,” Juliran said.

He kissed her and the heat of love sank into her heart. She felt the sincerity of his words and she knew he told the truth.

How could she be so lucky?

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“It is us who are lucky to have found you,” Kyel said.

“Never doubt the fates for getting it right,” Zaen said.

She let their love wash through her and in return she opened her heart and let love flow from her soul. Gratefulness. Devotion. A love so vast and great it was immeasurable.

“See how lucky we are to have you?” Juliran said.

Zaen stroked her back. “Now, do you understand, Lucie?”

She did. How could she not? There was no place for lies or deceit. There was only pure truth. A wave of love pulsed through her. She gathered her mates around her and laid her cheek on Kyel’s chest. Zaen pressed on one side and Juliran the other. She was caged in protection and love. A deep, contented sigh rippled through her.

She was home. At last.

Kyel’s knuckle beneath her chin tilted her head back and she looked up.

His gaze was filled with regret. “We need to get back, Lucie.”

“Okay.” She could sleep now, safe in their arms and between their bodies.

“We can’t go back to your old bedroom on Earth. That isn’t real. We have to return to our real bodies,” Kyel said.

“Oh. Okay.” She guessed it was time to face reality. Her real body was weakened, tired, and abused.

“We can’t stay here,” Zaen said.

“Although you have freed us from your mind, the entity might still be using the power of the crystal and your body to manifest into our Homeworld,” Kyel said.

She would have to get used to this mate sync. They really did know everything she felt—which meant they would know the trepidation that coursed through her. She’d taken the crystal. She’d endangered everyone.

“You are not at fault, Lucie. You did it to protect us,” Juliran said.

“If that isn’t the actions of a true, brave mate, then we don’t know what is,” Zaen said.

Truth washed through her. They didn’t blame her, although there was a simmering anger at the entity that had tortured her for so long. Anger and an edge of desperation.

Everything was in danger and the longer they stayed here, the more dangerous it would be for everyone in their Homeland—Kira. Their parents.

She wasn’t going to let that happen.

There was no time to lose. She would live up to what her mates thought of her. It was time to stand up for herself and start fighting for what she cared about. She wasn’t going to let anything, or anyone take away her dreams anymore.

She straightened her shoulders. “What do I have to do?”

Kyel ran the pad of his thumb over her bottom lip. “Let the power of the crystal take us all back. Follow the blues and greens of the power of our Homeland. But, Lucie... be prepared...”

“We will be right by your side,” Zaen said.

“We will protect you.” Juliran slid his fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck.

“And I will protect you right back,” Lucie said.

Kyel chuckled. “Spoken like a true mate.”

She looked into his eyes, drawing from his strength, from Zaen’s unwavering certainty, and Juliran’s trust. She could do this.

She must.

She closed her eyes and let the glittering lights of the Erion crystal wash through her and guide her back to the heaviness in her body.

Chapter Eighteen

Lucie

She landed with a jolt. That was her first thought. Her second was that she was so heavy, her eyelids felt as though they had little weights attached to the ends. It took a few moments of concentration to batter them open, and when she did, she found herself prone on a bed. She clasped the Erion crystal in both hands to her chest and it glowed so bright that the room was washed with swirling blues and greens.

Being so close to the crystal, it was as though she looked into the eddying clouds of another galaxy within its structure. Tiny golden lights flickered with magentas that were interspersed with the bright blue-greens she knew as Erion.

She struggled onto her elbow. Her body was stiff, her muscles feeling as though she hadn't moved in a month. Her gaze landed on several prone figures on the floor. Kira. The kings, and Madlyn, her mate's mother.

She recognized the healer, Erix, crumpled in a heap on the floor. There were a couple of extra people dressed as nurses and two soldiers by the door. Closest to her was Kyel, Zaen, and Juliran.

"No!" She struggled to move her feet over the side of the bed, her legs feeling like heavy weights. How long had she been here for?

Before she could stand, the door burst open and Tann, the massive Captain of the Guard, bolted inside. His keen gaze took in the scene before he saw her awake and

sitting on the bed. “Lucie!”

She waved him off when he started towards her. “Don’t worry about me. Help me with everyone. Please.”

Tann dashed over to where her mates lay on the floor. Kyel stirred, groaned and sat up, putting a hand to his forehead.

“Kyel!” She launched off the bed and into his arms.

He tightened them around her, burying his head in her hair. “Mate. You brought us back.”

“Yes, of course I brought you back. There was no way I was going to leave you in the middle of wherever we were,” she said.

Zaen staggered to her side. He collected her in his arms and kissed her like he was dying. His real lips against hers were just as intense as the kisses they’d shared in her mind.

“Zaen. Oh, my God. I can’t... can’t believe it.”

“Nothing would make me lose you. Nothing ever,” Zaen rasped.

“Lucie!” Juliran lifted her out of Zaen’s arms and hugged her to his broad chest as though she weighed no more than paper. He caught her lips in his and kissed her, stirring the passion as high as they’d just experienced.

“Mate. Lucie. Thank the gods you’re safe.”

She ran her hands through his hair and kissed him.

She broke their kiss and peered up at him. “Hang on. How can you kiss and talk to me at the same time?” Her stomach sank and a heavy weight filled her chest. “We didn’t make it back, did we? We’re still trapped... there.”

Wherever the hell there was. If she didn’t know where it was, how the hell was she meant to work out how to get free? They could be trapped forever. And if reality looked like real life, then how was she ever going to know what was real and what wasn’t?

“Lucie. Stop thinking so fast. You’re giving me a headache.” Kyel came to his feet and winced.

“You...you’re talking in my head as well!”

Her gut wrenched. This wasn’t good. Not good at all.

“This is the best news we can ever get.” Juliran spoke. Lucie watched his mouth move this time.

“I don’t think not being able to tell reality from a hallucination is good at all.” Her gaze bounced between her mates, looking to see if they understood her. What she didn’t expect was their sparkling eyes and wide smiles. “Am I missing something?”

“You can hear us in your head because we are fully bonded. We are mate-synced,” Zaen said.

“We are linked,” Juliran said.

“Body. Soul. Mind.” Zaen tapped his temple.

“I think... I think...” This was a lot to take in. Nobody had told her about the mind

meld!

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

Confusion edged her consciousness and she was aware that all three of her mates wore frowns. If her heart wasn't beating like a rabbit, she might think it funny that three of the toughest and most intelligent warriors were so confused.

"She thinks we're tough and intelligent." Juliran grinned.

"What this mind-meld?" Kyel asked.

Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God. They really could hear her!

"You are broadcasting quite loudly," Zaen said with a lift of his brow.

There was a squeal and Kira pushed through her brothers and hugged Lucie. "Is it true? You're fully bonded... But how? Lucie has been here all the time."

"I think we'd all like to know what had happened." Madlyn said as the kings helped her to her feet.

Kira looked as lost as Lucy felt. She tapped her foot and her eyes narrowed as her gaze bounced between her brothers. "I think you need to tell me what's really going on."

"That's what I'd like to know, too," Lucie said, her voice weak, but then she was enveloped in a flood of humor and warmth and love and... desire and arousal.

Her skin prickled and her blood heated. She squeezed her thighs, trying to relieve the pressure the onslaught of emotions brought about in her. Kyel chuckled, and the

sound wove through her. Her own emotions spiked and spiraled in a cyclone of yearning and need.

Juliran groaned. “Lucie, I’m not going to be in control of my actions if you don’t stop that!”

A gentle, cool hand rested on her arm, and she looked at Madlyn.

Madlyn’s gaze locked on her. “It had to be true, my dear. You are finally mate-synced to my boys.” She smiled and it was like the sun coming out from behind clouds. “I can hardly believe that something so monumental has happened. You are a true miracle, Lucie.”

Lucie’s cheeks heated, embarrassment and desire warring for place of attention.

“There now, I’ve embarrassed you. It need not be this way. We have all experienced those first few weeks of the bond. I am only happy to see that the first Quad has formed in ten years, and honored that it has been my sons and you, my dear Lucie.” Madlyn smiled and her gaze ran over Lucie’s skin. “However, might anyone explain to me what has happened to Lucie’s skin?”

With a scowl, Lucie stood on her tiptoes to peer into the mirror on the far wall. “Oh, my God! What’s happened?”

She blinked and shook her head, but it made no difference. Her skin was imbued with little blue and green glittering stars that caught the light whenever she moved. It was like her skin was the shiniest sequined material.

“I… I’m shining!” She looked to Zaen. He always had the answers, with that brain of his. “Zaen?”

Zaen's lips fell open and his eyes grew wide. Her heart lurched at the panicked look on his face.

"I don't know, my Lucie. I can only assume that something happened to you at a molecular level. When you bonded with us, you also bonded with the crystal's energies. Because you are human, it has affected you differently than it would if you were from Negari." His fingertips skimmed along her arm, his gaze roaming her skin. "It is beautiful, Lucie. Stunning, in fact." His eyes were deep pools of emotion, when finally, he looked at her face. "You are special, Lucie. The crystal has bonded you in a way it has never bonded with any being before."

"But, that's not right," Lucie said.

"How so, my mate?" Kyel asked.

She thought of Evelyn and the magenta gem that grew from the middle of her forehead. She thought of Riley's golden eyes, whom she'd virtually met when they'd returned to the Erion Homeland. "Riley's eyes glimmer with golden light and Evelyn has a magenta crystal in the middle of her forehead, and I'm... glowingblue. All the crystals have bonded with us separately. I'm not the only one."

Zaen shook his head a little, planting his hands on his hips. "I never thought about that." He shook his head, a smile playing on his lips. "It's as amazing and our beautiful human mate."

Several guards bolted into the room. Sweat gleamed on the guard's skin. Another had splotches of blood over his uniform. Lucie's blood ran cold. They snapped to attention when they saw their Lucie, the Princes, and their family. The guard that had entered first, stepped forward and spoke in a rushed voice. "The clouds have descended and are destroying our city," he said. "We're fighting it, but... it's having no affect. Nothing is stopping them. We're at its mercy."

Chapter Nineteen

Zaen

Lucie was so frail, looking no more filled-out than a child in Juliran's arms. He'd become so used to how she looked in the reality from the depths of her mind, that it was almost painful to see how she'd become.

If only he'd known she was being mentally tortured like she had been. He would have done everything in his power for her not to have suffered like that. The one consolation was that it wasn't because of them. If she had, he didn't think he could have ever bonded with her. Better to let her leave and find someone who could love her, even if they never would find anyone else for the rest of their lives.

"No. It can't be!" Lucie wriggled from Juliran's arms and bolted to the door.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“Lucie. You can’t go out there. It’s too dangerous,” Kyel said. Just like Kyel to want to protect her from the world, but this was Lucie and she wasn’t someone to keep anywhere she didn’t want to be.

She spun, the expression on her face desperate. With her skin gleaming with a million tiny lights of the Erion colors, she looked ethereal.

“I have to see it.” She held a fist over her heart. “I feel... I can’t explain... but please. I have to see.”

A deep frown formed on Kyel’s forehead as he strode towards Lucie. Zaen tensed and was about to tell his brother to let Lucie do as she wanted when he said, “We will escort you. Guards, front and back. Let Lucie guide us.”

The Guards stepped into formation in front of and behind his brothers. “Tann, send in guards for the kings and queen and my sister. Keep them safe here.”

“As you wish.” Tann barked into his comm.

“My sons!” Madlyn came over.

Kyel held his mother’s hands. “It will be fine, mother.”

“We will come with you. I will not let my sons fight on their own,” Emex said. The other kings murmured, agreeing.

No, please stay and protect Kira. We’ve met this thing before, but I can’t stop to

explain. Remain safe here. Protect our mother and our sister and we will protect our mate and our city,” Kyel said.

“Spoken like a true Warrior Prince,” Nolan said, pride breaking through his concern.

Guards came into the room and secured the perimeter in well-trained formation.

Kira hugged her mates. “Stay safe.”

With a nod, Zaen hurried with his brothers and their mate from the medi-bay, surrounded by the best guards. As soon as he stepped out of the medi-bay, he knew something was wrong.

The overhead light flickered, strobing the corridor into darkness and back to brightness. The air was thick and stale, their footfalls falling with dead clicks in his ears. The guards shared a look, and two withdrew their swords, their bodies tense. That same tension washed through him and he noted his brothers as well.

Juliran’s gaze darted to and from Lucie, and Kyel’s jaw must have been creaking with the way it was locked tight. He held Lucie’s elbow, wanting to make sure she stayed upright. She was pale beneath her new, glittering skin and he had to remember the poor condition she was in before the crystal had put her in a coma.

The lights in the room flickered one last time before going out completely and plunging them into absolute darkness, except for the faint blue glow from the crystal Lucie still held. The glow brightened so much they could see to the end of the corridor.

“It’s as though it knew we needed light,” Juliran said.

“That’s strange. I just wished for more light and then it started to glow brighter,”

Lucy said.

“There’s no time to wonder about it. We need to see what’s happening to our city,” Kyel said, striding ahead.

Zaen followed him through the twists and turns of the corridor until they came to a familiar door. Outside of that door was a balcony that would let them see over the whole city. Kyel drew a deep breath and threw the door open to reveal Armageddon.

Lucie gasped, bringing her shaking hand to cover her mouth. Zaen tucked her against his side, fighting with his protective urge to take her back inside and lock her into the deepest room with the thickest walls in the palace. The landscape was unrecognizable.

Black clouds shrouded the sky, blotting out the suns entirely. There was only darkness and shadows as far as he could see. The clouds had descended and slithered along the ground, creating trails of dark mist.

In the gardens below, guards fought the mist, slashing with the swords, but it did nothing but slice through thin air. A terrible, pain-filled scream rent the air that was abruptly cut off. A guard fell to the ground. His sword clattered out of his dead hand, his face contorted in a rictus of agony.

There was another agonized scream, and another, and guards below them fell to the ground dead, one after the other.

The mist covered their bodies, devouring them like acid until it thinned out, leaving no trace of the body. The mist seemed to become fuller, more solid. Stronger.

“It’s eating them to come alive. That’s what it’s doing. It’s eating people so that it can live.” Lucie stammered. Zaen’s thoughts exactly, reinforced through their linked

minds.

Lucie tried desperately not to sob, but the small sound cut through his racing heart. The mist crept over trees and shrubs and everything else in its path, covering it all and hiding it away beneath its black, dense depths, leaving nothing but blackened earth and a few stumps after it passed.

The distant clouds began to descend, settling over rooftops. Faraway screams could be heard, echoing their agony over the charred and empty ground.

Above the tallest steeple in the distance, a face twisted from the clouds. Black, pitiless eyes formed within the billowing clouds and opened. A gaping mouth appeared, big and black and hollow, and descended over the city outskirts, bringing with it nothing but death and destruction.

Page 49

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“God. It’s... it’s not going to stop. It’s going to devour everything in its path. Everything on this planet will be destroyed,” Lucie said.

“But what can we do? It’s nothing but mist. Nothing can fight it,” Juliran said.

Kyel swore. Zaen had never seen him appear so lost.

Juliran couldn’t keep his eyes off Lucie. He looked at her as though he wanted her to be the last thing he would ever see.

Zaen’s gaze slid to his beloved also, regret taking place in his heart. The life he’d looked forward to since a child had been stolen away before it had even begun.

“We’ll still be together. In the afterlife. Now that we’ve bonded, we’ll have that. It cannot tear us apart,” Kyel said.

The screams of men merged with the screams of women and children. Kyel threw back his head and roared, giving voice to the same dread that coursed through Zaen’s veins. As though in agreement, the Erion crystal pulsed with light. The little tiny glittering stars in Lucie’s skin began to throb in time with the crystal.

Lucie sucked in a quick breath. Shock and clarity registered on her face before she pierced them with a sharp gaze. “We need to get the crystal back into the tower.”

“Lucie, we’re not going to put you into any danger,” Kyel said, turning towards her and cupping her cheeks within the span of his palms.

The expression on her beautiful face firmed. “If we don’t do anything, we’ll all be dead anyway.”

The guards shifted and darted a look between them, uneasy. He didn’t blame them. A sharp word from Tann had them square their shoulders and resume their position.

“How do you know, Lucie?” Juliran asked.

She frowned, her delicate brows pushing together. “It’s going to sound ridiculous...”

“Since when have recent events not been something none of us could ever have expected? And yet, I wouldn’t have changed it for anything,” Juliran said.

She offered him a relieved, nervous smile. “I think the crystal and I... well, something happened to join us. I can... almost hear it. Not like I can hear you guys now, in my head, which is weird enough, but it’s more...”

He wished he knew what she was describing. He was at a loss to understand what she meant.

Something pulsed in the middle of his chest, a tingling warmth that spread to his extremities. It vibrated with endless energy, and at the center of it, he felt an urgency to return to the tower. To be taken it where it could broadcast its energy and fill the land.

“I feel it!” He gasped, splaying a hand over his chest. Amazement and wonder raced through him. His gaze rushed over his brothers. His mate. His family. They were tied more than a normal mate bond. What they had was so much more. “You all should be able to feel it, too. Through Lucie. We need to get the crystal to the tower, and we need to get it there as fast as we can.”

“The tower is through the garden,” Juliran said, his voice flat. Zaen felt his concern for their safety, and fear for Lucie’s life washed against his own.

They peered below as the mist crept ever more towards them. The base of the palace was clear, and so was the path towards the tower, but it wouldn’t take long for the mist to cover that ground. Not with the number of people it was devouring.

There was no hesitation in Kyel’s words. His face was determined, steeled for the fight of their lives. “Then we need to move—now.”

Chapter Twenty

Kyel

Kyel took his mate’s hand and raced down the outside steps, along the side wall of the palace from the balcony to the ground. It wasn’t a place he wanted to be, not with those clouds cannibalizing everything in their path, but the cries and screams of his Homepeople were unbearable. He would not leave them to their fate without trying everything.

Until Lucie had spoken, he’d been out of ideas. If only he could stash her somewhere safe and save her from this trauma, he might breathe easier, but there was no time to dwell. Their sweet mate wouldn’t be happy hiding away. She might look fragile on the outside, but she was made from Negari steel on the inside, the toughest metal known to the galaxy.

She kept pace even though she was in poor physical condition. He would make it a point to see her health fully restored in the future.

Their future.

He would not let this thing take away the future he'd fought so hard for. He worked to stop the rush of anger, not wanting to distract anyone with his emotions. He'd never had to keep himself in check before. It was a new experience and something he welcomed.

"Turn left. Now!" Juliran pointed to a tendril of black mist that slithered along the ground.

Kyel wrapped his arm about Lucie's waist and bolted away from the mist. His brothers and the guards followed the change of direction. Lucie clung to him as they dashed through another section of the garden. He kept his eyes trained on the ground, thinking that any of the shadows might be mist.

“Turn right,” Tann yelled.

Kyel scooped Lucy beneath her knees and shoulders and hugged her tight to his chest. They could run faster this way. She wrapped her arms about his neck and clung to him so tightly he felt her racing heart beating against her ribcage.

“Highness. In front!” one of the guards called.

Kyel skidded to a stop, pivoted to change direction, and came up short as mist gathered into a solid wall to his left. His right. In front. “It’s surrounded us.”

One the guards bumped into him. Kyel swung around to see the circle of mist tightening. They were trapped. He spun, looking for a way through. Looking for anything. The wall was tight and thick and intelligent, though. It knew what it was doing.

“Put me down, Kyel,” Lucie said.

He clutched her tighter. “No, mate. I will run and you will be safe.”

“Kyel. You need to put me down. Now.” Blue light glowed from the thousands of little crystal shards in her skin. She glowed so brightly, even her eyes shone with something other. “It’s telling me what to do. Trust me. Please.”

He forced his hands to loosen, fighting against his first and utmost instinct to protect her at all costs. She slid down his body and he reluctantly let her go once her feet had reached the ground.

She turned and held the crystal above her head. The crystal burst into life and a blue-green glow encircled them. Her skin glowed brighter than the crystal, until he had to shade his eyes just to look at her.

The light extended to the edge of the mist and continued to expand. The mist sizzled and recoiled. The more the light from the crystal expanded, the more of the mist was pushed back.

“Gods! She’s...” one of the guards whispered. There was a tremor in his voice.

“She’s saving us.” Kyel growled and spun to catch the guard with a withering stare, but the guard watched Lucie in awe, and his anger faded.

“The crystal light is eating the mist away. Look at it! No wonder it wants to get to the tower. The light from the crystal will eat the clouds away from our entire Homeland,” Zaen said.

An unearthly moan trembled around them. The moan became louder and turned into a high-pitched scream made from a thousand voices. Vibrations quivered the air. A slight breeze became a gale that whipped his hair and his clothing. Leaves and debris blasted against him, picked up by the wind and hurtled everywhere.

The darkness surrounding them grew darker still, the black outside of their little glowing circle absolute. A yawning mouth formed in the solid wall of clouds. Unblinking eyes the size of dinner plates stared down at them. The air turned so frigid that Kyel’s breath condensed.

The wind buffeted them, as hard as a fist. Lucie stumbled and the scream increased in pitch, scouring his skull from the inside.

He caught her and brought her up against his chest again, where she belonged. She

was burning hot, almost too hot to touch, but she held the crystal high, her face a mask of concentration. Beads of perspiration pearled on her upper lip and forehead. A slight tremor worked through her body. The crystal was taking its toll.

“Kyel. Tower. Stay. Together,” Lucie panted, her face scrunched tight.

“Hurry,” Kyel barked, striding towards the tower.

Our mate is hanging on by a thread. If she falters...Kyel spoke through the bond.

We will take her there,Zaen spoke in his head.

Whatever it takes,Juliran mind-spoke.

The wind was cyclonic. Juliran braced himself on one side and Zaen the other, and together they stumbled against the battering, unending wind. Kyel slid backwards. There was a shoulder in his back, and Tann grunted as he pushed forwards. Then he felt the extra help of the soldiers behind his back as they linked arms and advanced. As one, they staggered against the force of the wind.

He glimpsed the wall of the tower against his watering vision. The secret door was within reach. Zaen planted his palm on the panel and the door slid open. They staggered inside and Juliran slapped his palm on the inside panel, closing the door.

Kyel’s skin stung with heated prickles in the absence of the freezing wind.

“Brother. Hurry,” Zaen said, and Kyel realized he’d been standing still.

“Lucie...” Kyel ground out.

“I’m fine. Just. Hurry.” In his arms, Lucie pressed her face against his chest. Her

delicate features were strained and pale, and the light faded before his eyes.

He scooped her up and bolted up the stairs, two at a time, holding Lucie tight against his chest. He reached the tower room. The windows had been repaired and the floor cleaned since they'd been here last. The door to the glass case the crystal rested on was open.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

He strode to the plinth and set Lucie on her feet. She licked her dry lips. With a deep breath, she settled the crystal on its golden stand.

The crystal ignited.

Blue green light streamed down the stand, down the plinth, across the floor, and lit the walls of the entire room. Beams blasted out from the top of the tower in all directions. The mist and clouds on the ground disintegrated from the onslaught of light-energy. The land was infused by the color of the Erion crystal.

The wind died to nothing. The cries of his people silenced. The clouds rolled to the heavens, and the land became clear.

“You’ve done it, Lucie. You’ve saved all of us.” Kyel caught her in a hug. He sank his face into her hair, breathing in her scent, absorbing her trembling form, lending her his strength.

Juliran and Zaen circled her, and together they embraced their mate as one. Relief. Happiness. Joy. Their emotions bounced through the mate bond clear and true and honest.

A terrible scream of a thousand voices echoed from thin air. Lucie clamped her hands over her ears, her face scrunched as though in pain.

Through the windows the sky grew dark again. The clouds formed into a face. Hollowed eyes, a gaping mouth, sleek curved horns and talloned fingers shaped from the clouds, becoming solid. The face hovered until its eyes found them.

Then it descended.

Lucie said the words that were only reflected in thought. “It wasn’t enough. The power of the crystal wasn’t enough.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Juliran

The miracle of Lucie was overshadowed by the nightmare in front of Juliran’s eyes. He would never have imagined anything like this to happen. His Homeland city devoured by this entity. He didn’t know what it was, only that it was evil and wasn’t going to stop until everything in its path was annihilated. And he was helpless, but to watch it happen.

“What can we do? There must be something,” Zaen said, but he was always full of action, while Juliran’s brain was caught in a mindless loop of horror.

How this happened he had no idea, only that Lucie was connected to the Erion crystal which was the most powerful thing in the universe. Until it had been stolen, it had powered and protected their Homeland for centuries. Something had changed it. Or it had grown somehow. He didn’t know, only that it had an unexplainable connection to Lucie. It was stronger when she held it. Strong enough so that the deadly mist could get nowhere close, but it was just not strong enough. Lucie needed more power. She needed... them and the strength of their bond.

“Lucie! Hold onto the crystal, but keep it in the stand where it is,” Juliran shouted.

“Why?” Zaen growled.

“It needs our connection combined. Lucie herself is not strong enough,” Juliran said.

“The last time she touched the crystal and it was in the holder and connected to the tower, it put her in a coma,” Kyel said.

Juliran licked his lips, hoping, praying that he was right. His gaze went from Zaen to Kyel, and then to Lucie. “But she’s a part of the crystal now. And because we are her bonded mates, so are we. Together, with the magnification of the tower, we might just be strong enough.”

Kyel growled, but he always growled. Zaen narrowed his eyes, and Juliran could practically see the gears turning in his head. “How do you know, Juliran? How can you know for sure?”

Juliran took a shuddering breath, “I don’t. If we don’t try something...”

“We’re all dead,” Lucie finished for him. Her eyes gleamed in the blue light, soft and yet so, so strong.

Juliran’s heart lurched into the pit of his stomach. He didn’t want to agree with his mate, wished that they weren’t in this situation, but that wouldn’t stop the reality of what was happening. Their planet and everyone on it were going to die if they did nothing.

He wished he wasn’t cheated from more time with her, especially since they’d hardly begun, but then he thought of all the bonded Quads formed before the theft of the crystal. All the Quads yet to form. Their parents. Their sister. They all would lose. They all would die. There was no sweet coating these circumstances.

He kissed the top of her head, breathed in her delicate scent of wildflowers as though it was his last breath, putting off the inevitable with everything he could, knowing she was right.

“This entity is using the power of the crystals and our planet to enter our dimension. Logic says the same power is the only thing great enough to send it back. We use our crystals against it, just like it’s using them against us,” Juliran said.

Kyel took a deep breath. “My family. This is up to all of us.”

Zaen nodded his head, his lips in a tight, straight line. “It’s our only hope.”

Lucie nodded also, a single tear traced down her cheek. “I’ll do it.”

Kyel gritted his teeth. “Then this is it.”

Lucie took Juliran’s hand, then placed Zaen’s and Kyel’s hands one above the other, stacked between her two hands, joining them all. She looked at all of them, filling their bond with the strength of her love. “Thank you. All of you. You have shown me what it means to live without fear. You have helped me escape the confines of my own mind—in more ways than one. Thank you for eternity. Know that whatever happens, I wouldn’t have my life any other way.”

“Nor I.” Kyel kissed her forehead.

“We are blessed. Always.” Zaen kissed her forehead too.

The hint of a smile curved her lips. “I only wish we could have mate bonded in real life, not just in my mind.”

Kyel growled. “Then let this work and we will have mate bond sex as many times as you like, mate. I will show you time and time again in as many ways possible how it can be done.”

Pink teased her cheeks, but her eyes gleamed in a way that went right down to his shaft. He shouldn’t be turned on right now, but that knowing gleam in her eyes was all it took. If they survived, he was going to live the rest of his life in a constant state of arousal, that was for sure. He could tell by the lingering look in his brother’s eyes, he wasn’t the only one. That was good. They would have good lives.

If they lived.

Wewilllive. Lucie spoke in his mind.

Juliran wasn't the only one not able to keep his broadcasting to himself.

Lucie firmed her shoulders and faced the open door to the crystal case. She took a steeling breath and held it as her fingers curved around the crystal. Motes of blue and green circled her skin and the inner glow of the crystal reached for her.

He tried to soothe her fear, her trepidation that washed over him, sending back warmth and love as best he could.

Slowly, slowly, she curled her fingers around the crystal. The room exploded in beams of light that radiated outwards from the tower in strobes of electric blue. They washed over the land, coating over everything like sunlight. The ground began to glow with the energy of the crystal. The grass, trees and shrubs illuminated with the colors of the crystal. The energy color bled into the buildings, changing sandstone to swirls of vibrant blues and greens. The entire land as far as he could see was washed in the stunning colors of the Erion crystal.

A screech blasted around them, and the glass in the tower rattled. Anger and rage made the cloud writhe and boil. The face turned and raced towards them, bearing down on them like an enraged beast.

"It's not working. I... need more." Lucie's voice was small and strained. This was killing their mate. That could not happen.

He wasn't going to stand by and let her die to save their land. If she died, he didn't want to go on. He wrapped his arms about her, giving her everything he had.

The light erupted with power. A blast hit the clouds and the face recoiled.

“Kyel. Zaen. Lend us your energy!” he yelled.

They were bonded mates; her energy was theirs. If she couldn’t do it on her own, then the four of them would blast that drumas turd out of the sky. Kyel and Zaen snapped to action and wrapped themselves around him and Lucie.

The ground trembled and the tower shook, not hard, but enough to feel the shift beneath his feet. They were lost in the blast of energetic light that seemed to wash through the very particles of reality.

When the light cleared, he blinked. And blinked again. “Do you...? Can you...?”

“I can... It’s...” Zaen said.

“As beautiful as our mate,” Kyel finished.

On the ground, crystals emerged from beneath the soil. Large and small shards reflecting the energetic light from the tower. The land and everything on it glowed with light from within. The very structure of the land was changing before his eyes.

Above, the mouth on the face gaped wide. It circled the tower, screeching, but couldn’t seem to get any closer. But while the land had changed and was keeping the face at bay, the sky was still blocked by the clouds of the entity.

“We’re keeping it away, but it’s still there,” Juliran said. They couldn’t stand like this forever. “We can’t chance taking our hands away while it’s there.”

“We need more juice,” Lucie said.

Kyel looked as confused as Juliran felt. “Are you thirsty, mate?” Kyel asked.

“What? No! I mean, we need more power. More people,” Lucie said.

“Tann, come and touch us,” Kyel said. If she needed people, he would get everyone in his Homeland to hold hands.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

The Captain of the Guard stepped towards them without hesitation.

“No! Thank you, Tann, but I don’t think that would work. Don’t harm yourself by touching us. We’re not bonded. The crystal is linked to me, but so is that thing out there,” Lucie said.

“What is it, mate?” Zaen said.

She licked her very kissable, plump lips. She flashed him a hesitant look before she said, “The other women, Riley and Evelyn, they’re also connected to their crystals. They have also mate-synced to their Triads, making them stronger. What if... what if all the crystals were interrelated and through the mate-sync we could share all our combined energy. Us humans, our Quads, the bonds and the crystals.”

“That would be a very strong power indeed. It might even be strong enough to blast that thing away from us,” Zane said.

“Strong enough to send it into oblivion and erase it from whatever existence it came from,” Kyel growled.

“Good to know you still don’t do things by halves.” Juliran grinned.

Kyel scowled. “Tann. Get the Arabis and Ozar on the comms.”

“At once, Highness.” Tann tapped his comm device.

Rujali, the Alpha prince of the Ozar Quad, appeared on screen. He wore a scowl to

rival Kyel's. "I don't have time. We're under attack. From... clouds. We think this is the entity launching its attack on Negari."

"It is! Rujali, get Riley! Fast as you can," Lucie shouted.

Rujali's golden gaze sharpened. "It that your human female?"

"No time for questions, just do as our mate asks. Let's not dwell on our history, or else we might not make a future. Time is of the essence. She thinks we can defeat this entity," Kyel spoke.

A tiny golden-eyed woman muscled past Rujali. Riley was one of the few females that might possibly move that great hulk of a male out of the way. "Lucie? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. For now. Look, there's no time to explain, but get to your tower. You need to touch the crystal whole it's in its holder in your tower, and then your mates need to connect with you," Lucie said.

"Did she say we need to have sex while holding the Ozar crystal?" Klaj's green face appeared on the screen. Juliran was sure it wasn't his imagination when he noted the anticipation on the male's face.

"Geez, isn't gettin' me pregnant enough? Lucie isn't a girl to ask another girl to get down and dirty. That isn't what she meant... is it?" Riley quirked her brows. Her expression was confused, but open.

"No. Just touching is sufficient. I think it will generate enough power to blast this entity back to where it came from. But, please, be quick."

"Got it. The mist is comin' down quick and fast around here. It'll be a battle, but I'm

up for a fight. Someone needs to kick that thing's ass. Going there now." The comm went blank.

"The Erion next," Kyel barked.

Tann tapped his screen. The inside of a craft appeared and a large male with long hair he wore in a messy bun at the back of his head and a trimmed beard came into view.

"I hear there's trouble on the Homeplanet." Paxt was right to the point.

"Yes, and I need Evelyn," Lucie said.

Evelyn scrambled in front of the screen. "Lucie! What's going on down there?" The small magenta crystal in the center of her forehead glowed and pulsed.

"Aren't you back yet?" Lucie said, her voice cracking.

"No. We're a week away. At least." Evelyn looked frantic. "What's happening down there?"

"The entity. It's broken through. But I think I know how to kill it... At least, I thought I did... but you're not here." Lucie's eyes filled with unshed tears. "Don't come back, Evelyn. The entity is invading and killing everyone on the planet. I think this is the end for us."

"Bullshit!" Evelyn shouted. Juliran liked her. "It's not over till it's over, and I'm sick of this thing trying to kill everyone. We've got to give this a go. I'll do anything. Tell me what you're thinking."

Lucie took a huge breath and nodded. She was shaking so much she could barely stand, and yet she held onto the crystal with a white-knuckled grip. Gods, he was

proud of his mate. “I think all of the crystals have linked to us girls. We feed it power and it feeds us. Combined with the strength of our mate-bonds, I think we can generate enough power between us to kick this thing into oblivion.”

Evelyn touched the little crystal embedded in her forehead. “It makes sense, Lucie. I’m connected to our crystal somehow. Why else would I have this little baby in my forehead? If I hold our crystal and concentrate, do you think that’s enough to connect even though I’m not on the planet?” Evelyn asked.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

Lucie shook her head, shoulders slumping. Her cheeks were pale and the soft skin beneath her eyes looked bruised. Little white tension lines bracketed her mouth. “I don’t know, Evelyn. I really don’t. But you’re connected to your mates and the crystal is connected to this planet. We must try something. If we don’t, then...” She drew a breath and firmed her shoulders. “We have to try anything we can and we’re out of options.”

“Oh, Lucie. I hope you’re right. We can’t have gone through everything we did just to die like this,” Evelyn said.

“Well, I for one, aren’t letting that happen. Almost there,” Riley shouted over the comms.

They had to be quick. He didn’t think Lucie was going to hold out that much longer. The entity had already taken its toll on their precious mate.

Coltan and Ashir appeared behind her and handed Evelyn the Arabis crystal. Juliran had never seen it before. In the past, each Homeland had secreted their crystals away, and because of their infighting, they’d never had cause to share. It was remarkably like their Erion crystal. Although the shape was a little different, it still shone with an inner light and the facets were sleek, smooth and shiny, as though they were related.

Mates. The understanding pulsed through him. Juliran reeled. Were they sentient? A faint feminine chuckle echoed in a distant part of his mind followed by the denser, more masculine energy.

Would this day never stop revealing its surprises?

“Let’s survive it first, brother,” Zaen thought.

“Okay. I’m going to let it think it’s in the tower. It’s the only way I think I can broadcast this thing,” Evelyn said.

“That’s all you can do, Evelyn,” Lucie said, hoping to hell it was right. She desperately hoped that two crystals in their towers, the combined energy field of their human bodies and the strength of the bonds with their mates would be enough to connect all three crystals.

“Riley? You in your tower yet?” Lucie called. A bead of sweat rolled off her forehead and into her eye, yet her grip on the Erion crystal didn’t falter.

There was a smash and Riley shouted over the comms. “Just got ’ere. Good to go, mate.”

“We’re also here,” Riley’s mates shouted.

“Evelyn?” Lucie called.

“We are ready, female,” Paxt said.

“Okay, everyone. Let’s do this. Girls, hold onto your crystals. Males, touch your mates.” Lucie gritted her teeth and closed her eyes.

Juliran sent a prayer to the universe. If there was ever a time for a deity to hear him, it was now. So many lives depended on this shaky little plan to work. It was their one, their only and their last chance. He tightened his hold, bringing his free hand to covers hers, lending them all every ounce of energy that he contained.

Energy thrummed through Juliran, and he threw his head back with the force of it.

His teeth clenched and the skin stood out along the stretched tendons of his neck. He arched up onto his toes as electricity scorched through his body, holding every bone, muscle and cell to the ransom of its power.

The solid, masculine energy of his brothers flowed through him, as did his mate's softer, feminine energy. His awareness expanded, as though every cell in his body flew in all directions. He came out of his body, his consciousness cresting the waves of power that radiated across his planet.

He could feel everything. Was one with everything. He was so much more than the mere consciousness that was contained in his body. He became a part of the blue-green energy of the Erion Homeland. He became a part of the trees, the leaves, the soil, the rocks and the newborn crystals that the ground had given birth to in the wake of the power that scoured over the land.

His consciousness raced across the surface of the ground, to the buildings, the towns, the people. He was filled with the terror, the grief for those lost, the anger that so many had died and the determination to fight this untouchable force. Every thought, action, and deed were soaked into the ground and now became a part of him as he flew.

He reached the distant shores, and then his mind entered the water. The cool liquid suffused through him. The creatures that lived in its liquid depths darted here and there. Even they hadn't been left untouched by the entity. There was the essence of fear, loss and emptiness.

Up he flew, into the stars and the vast, inky blackness of space, seeking, seeking, seeking until he latched onto the grounding energy of the Arabis crystal. His energy embraced, fused and pulled it back to the surface of the planet where the energy and his essence stretched to the neighboring shores, skimming over the lands of the Arabis and the Ozar, land not breached by Erion feet in centuries.

The Erion crystal's energy reached for the energy of her mates. Golden waves of the Ozar mixed with magentas of the Arabis and fused with the blue-green of the Erion in a fantastic, mystical spray of multi-color.

Crystals birthed through the soil, glowing and golden in the Ozar Homeland and magenta in the Arabis Homeland. Crystals erupted along the ocean floor, multi-hued with pinks, purples, green, blue, yellow, and orange.

Beyond the birth of multi-colored baby crystals that protected the land came the awareness of the other Quads. The Ozar energy flowed over him and merged with the Arabis, foreign, and yet so much the same. The need to protect their mate, the knowledge that their families were the most precious thing in the world, the love that radiated between them.

No, they were not that different at all, and now they were combined with the need to protect their planet. Protect their Quads. Protect their human mates.

"Look," Lucie whispered.

That softly spoken word was enough to bring him back to his body where he stood with his hands still linked with his brothers and his mates. He eased his eyes open. Golden waves flowed with magentas and blues around him and across the land. Then spikes of energy reached upwards, slicing through the black clouds and disintegrating them.

The entity howled, screamed, screeched, but it was no match against the combined energies of the Negari Homeworld and the power of love behind it.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

The clouds cleared and disappeared. The screaming faded. The sun shone down, chasing away the shadows and leaving the land shining and glowing—and alive.

“Oh my God. Did we just...? Lucie whispered.

Juliran picked her up and twirled her in his arms. “You did it. Lucie, you defeated it!”

Lucie threw her arms around his neck, tossed back her head and giggled. He kissed her plump lips, a peck that immediately became hotter and deeper and more intimate.

She laughed as Zaen took her from his arms and kissed her just as thoroughly. Finally, Kyel brought her into the cage of his arms and devoured her without letting her feet slip to the ground. Juliran’s cock strained against his leathers as he watched them kissing, their passion igniting his own.

They’d survived. Against the odds, they’d done it. Their mate was a miracle. A miracle he couldn’t wait to get naked with and renew their bond in the physical manner. Not that the bonding in their minds didn’t completely blow his, but he needed to see if it stood up to the reality.

I second you, brother. Right after we get her out of Kyel’s arms.

I’m never letting her go again. You’ll have to join us if you want her.

Lucie chuckled. There’s enough of me to go round. And if I don’t have all of you at least three times, you’ll hear about it. Now keep kissing me. We have a lot of time to make up.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lucie

After spending an enormous amount of time and energy seeing to the injured, understanding their losses, getting their parents and sister who were thankfully alive, and organizing an army to aid those that had suffered, they had all come back to Lucie's bedroom—her real bedroom and not the one she'd created in her mind.

All they'd done was collapse into bed and fallen asleep. She had no idea how long they'd slept for—it could have been a day or three, but when she woke up it was to find she was too hot because three large bodies were spooning her. Being naked exacerbated the heat problem, on her skin and in her blood. As did the hand stroking her breast.

Her nipple budded and she stirred as a tingle ran through her veins straight to her pussy. Her body woke fully with an insatiable need that only her mates would satisfy.

I hear you, mate, and I will do my best to provide for your need. Kyel rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. She sucked in a fast breath.

Next to her, Zaen stirred. She fell into the glowing pools of his eyes as he leaned forward and took her other breast in his mouth. She closed her eyes and sighed as they stroked and licked and sucked and built an insatiable internal flame.

She ploughed her fingers through Zaen's hair and then in Kyel's hair as his mouth replaced his hand.

You taste like Heaven, mate. Zaen's voice filtered in her mind.

Kyel licked his way up her chest, trailed a hot path over her chin, and claimed her

mouth. His tongue dipped inside, sliding against hers. She couldn't get enough of his taste. His heat. The need that coursed through him set her veins alive with unspent desire, and when she felt a hand slide up her leg and another mouth kissing across her thigh, she parted her thighs so that Juliran could nestle in the juncture of her body.

I want to see what our mate tastes like as well. Juliran planted his open mouth over her clit and sucked. Electric sensation erupted through her as she reached her pinnacle. She exploded into a glowing aura of blue-green light, and liquid pleasure coursed through her body.

I think she liked that, brother. She barely registered Kyel speaking as her body was washed with her orgasm.

I think she'll like this more. While he nuzzled her clit, Juliran slid his fingers through her slit, coating them with her release. Up and down he stroked before he dipped his fingers inside and suckled her at the same time.

Another orgasm crashed through her. She gasped as her muscles locked as she was lost to sweet pleasure again.

"Oh, my God, that's..." She couldn't think what it was. There were no words that could describe the bliss. The connection. The absolute closeness that was between them. Her pleasure was theirs. Their arousal heightened hers. It was an infinite circle built on the secrets of the fates that had brought them together.

"Yes, it is." Juliran licked a path up her body as he crawled to hover over her. The heated head of his cock nudged her wet entrance, throbbing with each beat of his heart. May I enter you with my cock, my sweet mate? May I take you there and bring you more pleasure?

She parted her thighs, opening her most intimate part of her body for him. The tip slid

inside her. Perspiration beaded on his forehead as he made himself still, his tense gaze holding hers. His body shook as he waited for her word.

She tilted her hips, swallowing more of his shaft inside her. “Please, Juliran. Please take me.”

He slid inside in a long, smooth stroke, pushing until the base connected with her pussy lips. He flattened out on her, hardened his abdomen, and rubbed her clit as his hips thrust into her.

She wrapped her legs around his lean hips, inviting him into her body, welcoming each lunge with the tilt of her hips, taking him as deep as she could. The pressure built inside. His lips crashed down on hers, his tongue fucking her mouth as his cock fucked her pussy.

She clung to him, every muscle locked as he pistoned harder and faster until she screamed into his mouth with the rush of her climax. He slammed into her. His body bowed, hips locking before he threw his head back and yelled through his own climax. Heat jetted, coating her on the inside. Her climax spiraled alongside his. Her body sang and her soul rejoiced.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

She sank back down to her body in the cage of Juliran's arms. His kissed her gently and rested his forehead against hers.

That was beautiful, Juliran. So beautiful. Thank you.

Thank you, my mate. I am truly blessed.

She kissed him as he withdrew from her body.

Zaen tucked his arm around her waist. His taut abs pressed against her back. Her buttocks locked against his hips and his erection slid between her cheeks. He tilted his hips. His shaft rubbed against her rosebud and she shuddered with the intimate contact.

She turned her head and accepted Zaen's heated kiss. His tongue slid into her mouth, his lips caressing hers, massaging, tasting, teasing. He tweaked her nipple between his long elegant fingers, sending sensation cascading through her body.

A delicious shiver stole through her, and as it did, Zaen lifted her thighs and settled his long, hard shaft at her entrance. His kiss stifled her cry and she was filled.

That's it, beautiful. Take me inside you.

He withdrew, sliding out of her body to the very tip, before slamming back inside her. She gasped, her mouth falling open. Kyel slipped his knuckle inside her mouth, keeping her lips parted.

He towered over her, one hand gripping her chin, while the other stroked his broad shaft in front of her face. She didn't hesitate. She wound a hand about his thick thigh, opened wide, and brought his hips to her mouth.

The head of his cock slid between her lips. His sharp musky-tang exploded on her tongue. As he eased inside, her tongue flattened out on the bottom to explore every veiny ridge. His taste was intoxicating, and she drank him in, suckling around his width and swirling her tongue over his skin.

"Gods, Lucie. Feels so good." Kyel's voice cracked so low it was no more than gravel.

Zaen gripped her hips, his fingers indenting into her supple flesh. His heated breath poured over the back of her neck as he worked himself in faster and faster with every pounding thrust.

He suddenly stiffened, grinding his hips against her bottom cheeks. Kyel removed himself from her mouth and kissed her as Zaen's cock throbbed as he came inside her. His jumbled thoughts, his excitement, and his release drove through her mind and her body exploded alongside his.

Zaen kissed the back of her neck and she shivered, no more than a sweaty mess. Zaen's strong hands firmed about her waist. She was lifted and positioned over Kyel's waiting form.

Juliran kissed her neck as Zaen rubbed her back. Kyel kissed her mouth as he moved her over his cock. Without preamble, the head of his cock slid inside her. He thrust upwards and she came down on his hips.

Her clit rubbed against the hard muscles of his abdomen, sending electric sparks of sensation rocketing through her body. Already sensitized, she felt every centimeter of

the long, hard length of him inside her.

Kyel gripped her hips, lifted her, and slammed her down again. She whimpered, a trembling, nerveless mess. All she could do was cling to his shoulders as he impaled her with his cock and ride his fierce thrusts. Hands caressed her body and mouths left warm kisses everywhere.

The pressure in her body built. Kyel smashed her down on his cock, tilted her hips, and crushed her clit against his body. Her climax ripped through her at the same time as Kyel roared through his release. Hot jets streaked inside her, erupting from his throbbing shaft.

Her release was intensified by his orgasm. Zaen palmed himself, stroking his hard cock while Juliran worked his shaft. Their climax triggered, intensified through the bond and imploded them all. Zaen yelled a hoarse cry, while Juliran groaned. Hot jets coated her back, her legs, her arms.

Her men were inside her. Outside. Everywhere. She flew up and up into a ball of glowing blue-green light, to the place where their souls had connected and merged before in their minds and hearts, and now so were their bodies. She felt her men alongside her. They caressed her, cradled her, embraced her. She was them and they were her. One and the same. So happy and content.

And the love she'd discovered between them. She couldn't forget that. The beautiful, joyous love. The kind of love that went beyond mere life and into the everlasting. The kind that lasted until the end of time.

She was truly blessed with not one, but three men who loved her without limit. And she loved them back just as much. Finally, she was whole. Healed and complete.

And free.

Epilogue

Lucie

“Lucie!” a familiar voice called. Evelyn stepped through a side-entrance into the waiting room where Lucie was waiting.

“Evelyn!” Lucie rose from her seat and bear-hugged Evelyn. She thought she’d be fine seeing her friend. They’d commed each other every day, but nothing made up for seeing her for the first time in person.

It was also the stress of being stuck in the small waiting area behind the closed doors that led to the huge ballroom of the Erion palace that held hundreds of people. She heard the roar of the mass of voices building, and it was killing her not knowing what was going on behind them. Her mates hadn’t told her a thing. Maybe Evelyn might know.

“Don’t make me cry, I’m going to mess up my make-up, and that took hours for the make-up girl to put on me,” Evelyn said, laughing as she gingerly wiped a tear from beneath her artfully made-up eyes.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

Lucie was just as dressed up, having spent the past several hours bathing, dressing, and similarly getting her hair and makeup done. The last she'd seen Evelyn in the flesh was that day when the Negari guards had forced their way onto the reptile craft and rescued them.

"You look..." She searched for the right word. Evelyn vibrated with health. They'd been starved, tortured, and left with no sanitation in those cages, where they'd been locked up for weeks.

Evelyn self-consciously touched the small magenta gem in the middle of her forehead. "Freaky?"

The gem glowed and made Evelyn look more ethereal than ever. Her white-blonde hair flowed down her back, thick and lustrous. Her skin was dewy and healthy, and she hadn't stopped smiling. She was luminous. It made Lucie happy.

"I was going to say beautiful. And well. And healthy. I'm not pointing a finger," Lucie said. She lifted her glowing blue arm. "I sparkle." The light struck the thousands of tiny crystals in her skin, making her glitter in the lighting.

"I guess the crystal affected us all differently. As if being human didn't make us stand out like sore thumbs to begin with," Evelyn said.

"I almost can't believe where we are now. What's happened. How it happened," Lucie said.

A smile crept to Evelyn's lips. "But I wouldn't change it for the world. Would you?"

You know, the three guys, one girl scenario.” She waggled her brows.

Lucie’s face heated. She could imagine her skin glittering like mad now. “Truthfully?”

“I’m being truthful when I say it wasn’t easy, but now... knowing them... feeling them... I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Evelyn said.

“Neither would I.”

“Well, that’s one way to bring a world together!” Riley’s voice had Lucie and Evelyn spinning to see Riley storm through the same side door Evelyn had just come through.

She was a force of nature even without the golden, glowing eyes. Lucie could easily see her as the tough soldier she’d been on earth with her swagger, shaved-on-the-sides haircut and no-nonsense air.

She didn’t stop walking until she caught Evelyn in a hug. Then she hugged Lucie. With her strappy gown, her muscled arms and toned shoulders were on display. The pressure stole the air from Lucie’s lungs.

There was fit, and then there was Riley.

Lucie could imagine her jogging across rugged terrain and climbing the tallest mountains, if not for the baby bump she also sported, highlighted by the tight golden gown.

“God, it’s good to see another human, no matter if we are a little bit changed,” Riley said.

Lucie blinked back more tears. It seemed nowadays she cried at the drop of a hat. Damned pregnancy hormones. It had been confirmed this morning and she'd spent the next two hours celebrating with her mates in the most beautiful love-making session ever. They'd told her over and over again how much they loved her, and then one thing had led to another and Zaen pointed out that she couldn't get more pregnant and what the heck, they might as well show her how much they loved her. Full of suggestions, that mate was. She didn't have it in her to argue with him. Not when she fully agreed.

"Do you know what our mates are doing out there?" Riley said.

"I thought you'd know," Evelyn said to Riley.

"And I thought you'd know," Lucie said to Evelyn.

"Huh. Looks like they've kept a secret." Riley put her hands on her hips, frowning, but her face danced with amusement.

"How did they manage to do that?" Evelyn said.

Lucie shook her head. "I don't know. It must have taken some coordination."

"You think? This mind-meld stuff does my head in sometimes. Can't even take a crap without someone knowing," Riley said.

"All I know is that there's a lot of people behind those doors from all of the Homelands waiting for us. The one thing my mates did tell me was that this is a monumental event and everyone from across all three Homelands want to thank us for bringing them all together," Lucie said. "It's a big thing."

"Kind of like the end of the cold war," Evelyn said.

“Well, you can’t have little baby crystals growing throughout the planet brought together by mama and papa crystals and not bring the people together as well.” Riley cocked her head. “That sounds so strange, but true.”

Lucie shook her head. “If we ever make it back home, I don’t think anyone is going to believe us.”

“Well, I think the little half alien inside of me is prohibitive to going back, but I don’t care. Nothing for me there anyway. I wouldn’t go back for the world,” Riley said, grinning from ear to ear.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:45 am

“You know, I don’t want to go back either even if I take my guys out of the picture, but there’s no way I’d go anywhere without them now that I’m with them,” Evelyn said.

“I feel the same,” Lucie said, quietly. A pulse of love so strong washed over her. Her guys. Her mates. Her eternally bonded. She sent them her love back through the bond. There was nowhere else she wanted to be. “I hope the other women have found what we’ve found.”

“What, insatiable mates with higher than normal sex drives?” Riley smirked.

“Love. I hope they’ve found love,” Lucie said. That was the least she hoped for the other caged women. Who knew how many more had also been abducted that she didn’t know about? Somehow, with the enormity and single-mindedness of the entity, she doubted it would have stopped at just them. It might have been going on before their abduction, too. The entity had planned this for a long time. Their crystals had been stolen ten years ago. There’d be a lot of abductions in that time.

“Me, too,” Evelyn said.

“Me three,” Riley said.

There was the sound of three melodic beeps. The huge doors swung open and Tann smiled at Lucie, his eyes twinkling. “They’re ready for you.”

Lucie’s nerves jumbled all over the place. Whatever it was had been a big secret, and now she knew the others knew as little as her, trepidation swamped her.

She was washed through with a soothing calm. It's alright, mate. Nothing to be fearful of.

That was Kyel, but he wasn't afraid of anything. She squared her shoulders. Whatever it was, her mates had organized it and she knew they only did good things for her.

"Thank you, Tann. Please lead the way," Lucie said.

Evelyn took her right hand while Riley took her left and together, they followed Tann down a short corridor. As they reached a set of double doors, guards opened them and the heralding sound of something like trumpets sounded their arrival.

They stepped to see a crowd of people swarming in the amphitheater, horned aliens glowing gold, magenta, and blue-green. The scene was awash with color—and happiness.

The crowd smiled and applauded.

She tightened her grip on her friends' hands. "They don't do anything by halves, do they?"

"Only Quads, it seems." Riley smirked.

"Come, your Quads await you at the other end," Tann said.

It was then Lucie saw her men. The three of them stood tall on a raised platform at the other end of the room, looking resplendent in their fighting leathers and tight black shirts. Even their horns gleamed as though they'd been buffed and polished.

The only buffing and polishing of our horns will be by your hand, mate. Now come to

us so our people can properly show their appreciation, Kyel thought.

Her eyes had only been for her mates, but Evelyn and Riley's mates stood next to hers on the platform. Royalty united. AHomeplanetunited. She couldn't stop the shiver of excitement and rightness at the thought.

Behind them were their parents, the kings and queen of each Homeland, looking as happy as she felt. It was quite the crowd waiting for them.

Tann stepped forward and together they followed him down a wide central aisle. People on either side of the row clapped and cheered, happiness found after the deaths of so many people. The effect was truly bittersweet.

Kyel held his hand to her while Paxt and Rujali held their hands to their respective mates. Lucie accepted Kyel's hand and at the same time as Evelyn and Riley, Lucie stepped onto the platform.

"Come, mate, the people have something to offer you," Kyel said.

Rujali, Klaj, and Setzan, all hulking, well-muscled males, bent to one knee in front of Riley. Rujali presented Riley with a golden, gleaming sword. It was a work of art. The hilt was embedded with golden crystals that glittered as bright as Lucie's skin in the light. A molten, flowing design framed the crystal as intricate and beautiful as the most complicated Celtic pattern.

His eyes glinted as he spoke. "Riley, our little warrior queen. Please accept this sword that represents your courage in the line of fire. Know that you are the bravest soldier, a true warrior, and a blessing to the planet of Negari."

"Geez, that's..." Riley began, but her voice cut off.

Lucie had never seen Riley short of words, but now she floundered. She took the sword as reverently as Rujali gave it to her and everyone exploded in a cacophony of applause.

Paxt, Coltan, and Ashir knelt before Evelyn. Paxt held a small bejeweled metallic box in his hands. “Evelyn, our beautiful and brave mate. Please accept this gift of thanks for your beauty and bravery. Without you, we would no longer have a Homeplanet to call ours.”

Evelyn trembled as she took the box. It was silver, with gems placed in a design that was both foreign and stunning. She opened the lid and gasped. Inside were a set of earrings and a necklace that would rival the crown jewels.

Source Creation Date: June 25, 2025, 8:46 am

Her mates stood, and Paxt took the necklace and put it around her neck. The magenta crystals in the pendant and along the chain glowed as did the gem in the middle of her forehead. She looked like an ethereal spirit—slender, silver, and achingly beautiful. Paxt gently took her lips with his, the action so intimate and tender even though it was in front of thousands. Evelyn didn't even try to speak. She merely brought all her mates to her and surrounded herself with them.

Kyel knelt in front of Lucie, as did Zaen and Juliran. They peered up at her with looks she couldn't quite define. That, and they weren't holding anything.

Kyel held his hand out and she took it. "Lucie, our most beautiful, kind, caring, and gentle mate. Your voice can sooth the ire of thousands. Without it, we would never have joined with our fellow Homelands and stopped fighting enough to become one whole Homeplanet. I ask this of you..."

Zaen and Juliran stood and uncovered a huge box at the side of the stage she hadn't noticed. When she recognized what it was, she gasped. "How did you...?"

"Well, we did know something of your gift," Riley said.

"We hope we got it right. I can only remember childhood music lessons from school," Evelyn said.

"And I sang so many songs, I hope they got the notes right, but I'm a bit tone deaf. We have to leave it to you," Riley said.

"We also had help from musicians and craftsmen who probably did a better job than

us at tuning it,” Evelyn said.

“I’m a hundred percentsurethe master craftsmen did a better job than us. At least they’re the ones who made it,” Riley said.

“You knew... They did... For me?” Lucie couldn’t seem to form a coherent sentence

“Let’s hope you can string some words together to play something for us,” Riley said.

Lucie’s gaze bounced from Riley to Evelyn to her mates.

Evelyn squeezed her hand. “Please, Lucie. I’d love to hear some Earth songs.”

“And we would love to hear your voice in this world,” Juliran said.

“I have dreamed of nothing else. Well, apart from my hands on your body,” Zaen said.

Kyel pulled out the stool and waited. She took a shaky step towards their gift and sat. It was perfect, albeit it with a few differences. While the white keys remained white, the black keys were a brilliant blue. The body of the instrument was finely crafted with deep blue wood and carved with flowing intricate designs. Inset in the design were gems the size of her fist.

A perfect, and very large, grand piano.

“Oh, my god, this is...” She felt the push of tears and somehow managed to stop them from falling. “This is too much.”

Her mates surrounded her. Kyel knelt next to her. “Nothing is ever too much. Without you, we would have nothing. We would be nothing. Our Lucie, with a voice that literally stops evil in its tracks, will you show us all what only we have been able

to hear? Bring your voice into our world.”

She kissed Kyel, and then Zaen, and then Juliran. “I love you so much. Do you know that?”

“We know this to be true. As we love you, Lucie of Earth, our precious human female,” Zaen said.

“Please, Lucie. Play us a song.” Juliran placed his hand on her shoulder.

Evelyn and Riley and their mates stood around the piano. She knew there was a crowd waiting for her to sing, too, but they blocked the view of the audience, making it all so much more intimate.

“What are you going to play, Lucie?” Evelyn said.

Lucie played her hands on the keys. “I have the perfect song.”

One time, Grant had told her she sounded too much like Alicia Keys, that she had to make herself different. But here and now, she knew she didn’t have to be anyone else but herself.

She began to play and the world dropped away, like it always did when she sang. The first few notes rang out in perfect harmony and the room became still and silent. She began to sing the first song that came to her mind. The most perfect song she could think of. When You Really Love Someone never sounded so true or so real.

The notes flowed around her, floating perfectly in tune. She sang, and the music wrapped around her and through her. Music usually took her to her happy place, but now she stayed in the moment. She didn’t need to go anywhere else.

She had everything she’d always wanted, and more, standing right next to her—the

only place in the universe she wanted to be.