



Alien Heir (Cosmic Mates #7)

Author: *Cara Bristol*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Marry a stranger to escape an arranged marriage? Sure, why not?

Prince Jaryk Rullok-Myka has a royal-sized problem. His parents are hell-bent on marrying him off to a noblewoman he's met exactly twice. But his evil-genius little brother finds a loophole: if Jaryk's already married, he's off the hook. Enter Cosmic Mates and one reluctant human bride.

Kismet Kennedy isn't here for love. She joined the galactic matchmaking service to avoid being separated from her twin sister—so of course she gets matched first. Her new husband? An alien “government official” from Kaldor with a killer jawline and way too many secrets. They'll stay married for a year, then go their separate ways. Easy.

Until royal drama, ex-lovers, scheming siblings, and inconvenient feelings turn their fake marriage into something dangerously real. Buckle up—it's going to be a bumpy ride to happily ever after.

Total Pages (Source): 21

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

Falkor entered the parlor and flopped into Jaryk's favorite chair like he belonged. "What's new?" he asked with exaggerated casualness.

"You heard." Jaryk raked his hands through his thick blue hair.

"Secrets are rare in the palace of Kaldor." Falkor grinned like an annoying idiot.

To be fair, his younger brother wasn't an idiot. He'd been gifted with crafty intelligence, but annoying? He was every bit of that. "Did you come to rub it in, or do you have a reason for being here?"

"I'm from the government. I'm here to help."

"Ha. Ha."

"Seriously. I have a solution to your dilemma."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

Their Majesties King Rullok and Queen Myka had spoken.

When their father and mother put their royal feet down, there was no circumventing the edict.

Nobody could help him, least of all his younger brother.

Any scheme Falkor would come up with would not be a good one.

Scandal dogged him like a shadow. His shenanigans had caused him more trouble than they'd ever gotten him out of.

Jaryk had not been granted the same indulgence.

He and his brother were only two years apart in age, but the difference in their fates was vast. Jaryk's future had been chiseled into the coronation stone at the moment of birth over thirty-four years ago.

His Royal Highness Crown Prince, heir to the throne of Kaldor, could not engage in frivolous pursuits.

He had to be cautious, dutiful, discreet.

Falkor, the royal spare, could do as he pleased—and did. “You’re not even going to hear me out?”

“I’m doomed. You can’t save me,” he said glumly.

“Well, not with that fatalistic attitude! You’re going to roll over and marry Princess Alia?” Falkor wrinkled his nose and shuddered.

“Why do you do that? It’s disrespectful. Alia would be a fine wife.” For someone else . “I met her twice. She’s quiet, pleasant, well-spoken.”

“Booorrring.” His brother faked a snore. “Besides, she’s not the one you want.” He gave him a sideways look.

“Charday is not a possibility.” It hurt to even speak her name. He’d held out until the end, hoping against hope his parents would relent and grant their permission, if not their blessing, for them to marry. But Charday had not passed the royal parental

vetting.

“She is unbefitting a crown prince. You are the future king! Your wife shall be queen,” their father had railed. Now, Jaryk approached his thirty-fifth birth year, the marriage deadline required by a centuries’ old royal decree.

“My duty is to the kingdom. I must marry a pedigreed woman and produce an heir,” he said.

“Duty-smooty. Mother and Father married for love.”

“They were fortunate enough to find love with each other. Their marriage was arranged.”

“So, when’s the unhappy occasion?”

“The wedding date hasn’t been set yet, but the engagement will be announced next month at the royal ball.”

“Then you don’t have any time to waste. We need to get you signed up immediately.”

He was almost afraid to ask. “Signed up for what?”

“Cosmic Mates.”

“What the heckel is Cosmic Mates?”

“It’s an interplanetary matchmaking service. It pairs Earth women with men needing wives. You can marry a human.”

“You’ve lost your mind. That’s the stupidest idea you’ve ever had. There are so many

flaws in that scheme, I can't begin to count them."

Falkor remained unfazed. "Hear me out."

Jaryk folded his arms across his chest. "Marrying a woman I don't love to avoid marrying another woman I don't love is not a solution!" He barked a sarcastic laugh.

"But—"

"No but. If Father and Mother were unwilling to accept Charday, a Kaldoran , they're not going to accept an alien woman from a Podunk planet on the outskirts of nowhere."

"That's the whole point!"

He wasn't making sense. " Regardless , they'd never give permission for me to marry."

"They don't have to. Cosmic Mates performs the marriage ceremony. The marriages are recognized as legal by every planet in the star alliance, of which Kaldor is a member. You will be married, and there will be nothing Father and Mother can do about it."

"Which would still leave me tied to a wife I don't want. I may as well marry Alia!"

Falkor's eyes gleamed with mischief. "Except Cosmic Mates marriages have an escape clause. You get to try out your spouse for a year. At the end of the trial period, either spouse can walk away. The union only becomes permanent if you stay together."

"And how would that help me? It would only delay the inevitable. If I annulled the

marriage at the end of a year, I'd still be facing marriage to Alia—not to mention Father's wrath. He would be apoplectic if I eloped."

"Or...it would buy you a reprieve! It would signal to Alia, you're not interested."

"It would also signal to Charday I'm not interested!"

He was already on shaky ground with her. Two months had passed since he'd seen her. Marriage, even a fake one, would permanently end the relationship. He didn't want to lose her!

"Not if you explained you were doing it for her."

"Yeah, because nothing says devotion like jilting the one you love for someone you don't."

"You're not jilting Charday. She dumped you."

"She didn't dump me; we agreed to take a break to reconsider our relationship." Charday had given him an ultimatum: marry her, or she was moving on. Unfortunately, marriage required permission from the king.

"Don't you understand this is your only chance to marry her?"

He shook his head. "Obviously, I'm not connecting the dots."

"Father will be so horrified by you marrying a human, Charday will become much more appealing by comparison. He'll welcome her into the family with open arms."

"He'd be more apt to kill me." Their father would never kill him, but he would saddle him with the most tedious royal duties he could devise.

“Gods of Kaldor, I hope not!” Falkor laughed. “If he executed you, I’d be on the hook to marry Alia.”

“Much as you being forced to take responsibility for once in your dissolute life would please me, I must reiterate that your solution will not work. And it wouldn’t be fair to use the human woman like that. Humans have feelings.” He assumed they did. He knew very little about Earthers.

“Everyone who signs up for Cosmic Mates is aware of the provisional terms of the marriages. Look, just give it a try. I’ll coordinate everything. I’ll let the human know what to expect. I have your best interests at heart. You’ll be in good hands. Trust me.”

“Trust you?” He roared with laughter.

“Your mockery wounds me.”

“It’s still a hard no. I’m not joining Cosmic Mates.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

“You got a hit, and I didn’t?” Her sister’s jaw dropped.

Didn’t see that one coming, huh? “I’m sorry?” Kismet hunched her shoulders. Joining Cosmic Mates had been Karma’s idea, not hers.

They both longed for true love, a happy marriage, and a couple of kids, but their prospects dimmed with every passing day.

Single men close to their age—thirty-two—were either gay or unmarried for very good reasons.

However, while the pool of marriageable men on Earth had dried up, marrying a stranger, an alien, still seemed too extreme a solution.

What if they both met mates, but the men lived on different planets? What then? She and her twin sister hadn’t spent more than a few days apart in their entire lives. They did everything together.

For that reason, she had been dead set against Cosmic Mates. But Karma had been so gung-ho, Kismet reluctantly joined, too, hoping they’d at least meet men who lived on the same planet.

“The universe has a plan. We have been led to Cosmic Mates. We need to put our request out there, and the universe will provide,” her sister had argued.

Which sounded like supernatural doubletalk.

If the universe already had a plan, what good would putting in a request do?

Pointing that out hadn't deterred her sister.

Karma took after their spiritual mother, Destiny, who'd cobbled a personal faith from a variety of sources: Buddhism, Christianity, Wicca, astrology—whatever lit her candle.

When Destiny sought answers to life's questions, she meditated, prayed to Jesus and the Triple Goddess, cast a spell for wisdom and deliverance, and consulted her horoscope. She left no crystal unturned.

Which also contributed to Kismet's reluctance to join Cosmic Mates—she might never see their beloved mother again.

"I'm happy for you, but I wonder why you got picked, and I didn't," Karma mused. "We look alike. Why you, and not me? Not that I'm not happy for you."

They looked enough alike to confuse people, but although genetically identical, they were mirror-image twins. Kismet was right-handed; her twin was a southpaw. Her smile skewed a little to the right, Karma's to the left.

"You sound a little jealous," Kismet said.

"I'll let you know if I'm jealous after I see the guy. Show me his picture!"

She woke up her multipurpose communication device with a tap. A somber alien man with a head of thick blue hair, pointed ears, and three blue stripes across his nose and cheeks appeared.

"Nope. Not jealous."

“What do you mean? He’s handsome!”

Her sister peered at the screen. “Jaryk Rullok-Myka of Kaldor doesn’t look happy. He’s not even smiling! He looks like a real wet blanket. Not fun at all. No, he’s not the one for you!” Karma dismissed him with a flip of her curly brunette hair.

“Why do you say that?” she asked, irked by the sudden judgment. “Because he’s not smiling? You didn’t read his profile.”

“I can tell. It’s a feeling.”

A feeling. One of those. She caught herself before she rolled her eyes.

“The universe—”

“Oh, the universe.” Her anything-goes twin was normally very open-minded, although she tended to rely on imaginary omens a wee bit too much.

“Okay, you want facts ? He’s too serious, too stern.”

“Those aren’t facts; they’re your opinion,” she retorted, although she’d gotten the same impression.

However, his solemnity appealed to her. Marriage, after all, was serious business and should be approached accordingly.

She much preferred someone thoughtful and reserved over a person who would join Cosmic Mates on a lark. “He’s very handsome,” she said again.

“Since when do looks matter to you?”

True, she cared more about a man's character, but it didn't hurt that he was drop-dead gorgeous.

"He's thirty-four. He's a government official with Kaldor," she read from his profile.

"It says his interests are horticulture, learning the ancient Kaldoran language, fostering interplanetary diplomacy, reading, journaling, and engaging in philosophical debate."

Karma fake-snored.

"What do you mean? I like to read, journal, and I've been learning Latin." She also enjoyed a rousing debate with people who made reasoned arguments. Their interests dovetailed rather nicely. She worked in government, too—albeit she was just a supervisor at the Department of Public Safety.

"Exactly! You need someone unlike you—someone fun and adventurous who will expand your world."

"I'll ignore the fact you just called me boring because sometimes your mouth runs ahead of your brain. But, for the sake of argument, wouldn't marrying an alien and moving to another planet open up my world?"

"Yes, if he's the right one for you. He's not. You'd better pass on this one."

This one? Like there'd been others. In the month since they'd joined Cosmic Mates, Jaryk was the only man who'd expressed an interest. They'd had the option of letting Cosmic Mates select a match for them, but they'd drawn a hard line at that.

They'd preferred to have some say-so as to who they married.

Not that she'd reached out to anybody herself. The truth was, she didn't want to do this, and she'd kind of counted on her fickle sister losing interest so they could unjoin and get on with their regularly scheduled lives.

Oddly, she'd started to feel a little hurt by the lack of interest until Cosmic Mates notified her she had a match.

"Besides," her sister continued, "if you move to Kaldor, I may never see you again."

"That just occurred to you now? It's been an issue from the beginning."

"It's no longer a hypothetical; it's real."

"Well, you're in luck." She grinned. "It says here I'm welcome to bring along my personal handmaid if I wish. You could be my servant. Do my hair, set out my clothes, pick up after me."

They both laughed. Karma hardly picked up after herself.

People called them the Odd Couple Twins; Kismet was a neat freak, while her twin could turn a room into a disaster zone in minutes. Out of economic necessity and sisterly love, they rented an apartment together. Karma tried to rein in her messiness, but mostly her untidiness drove Kismet nuts.

"Seriously, Kis. You ought to pass on this one. Trust me. He's not right for you. Give it some time. Don't do anything crazy, okay?"

Crazier than joining Cosmic Mates in the first place? Kismet rarely made a decision without a pro-and-con list. She lived by the motto, "Sleep on it."

Her sister regarded her with concern. "Please? I have a feeling about this."

She didn't give much credence to her sister's feelings . She had once analyzed her twin's intuitive hunches , keeping track of the premonitions and the outcomes over a span of several months. The predictions had a 50/50 accuracy rate. Flipping a coin would have worked just as well.

However, the love and concern for her welfare were genuine. "Don't worry. I won't do anything drastic."

"Phew!" Karma hugged her. "Don't worry. Prince Charming will come. I'm going to the store. Do you need anything?"

"Can't think of anything."

Alone, Kismet studied the alien's profile.

He is handsome. Those ears are so cute. So what if he didn't smile?

Maybe, like her, he was shy and reserved.

Some people went around grinning all the time; she didn't smile unless something pleased or amused her.

Besides—it could be a cultural thing. Maybe Kaldorans didn't smile for photos.

She toggled over to her account and clicked on the message icon to reread Jaryk's transmittal.

She'd intended to share the note with her sister, but the unexpected disapproval had floored her, and she'd forgotten about it.

If she was a gambler, she would have bet the house her sister would push her to

accept the marriage offer.

The fact she'd done the opposite had motivated Kismet to give it more consideration.

Greetings, Kismet Kennedy,

It would be my great pleasure to make your acquaintanceship and discuss marriage.

I confess I don't know how to introduce myself.

I've never contemplated anything as audacious as an arranged marriage through a matchmaking service, but I have been unable to achieve my heart's desire on my own.

I do not wish to settle for anything less than true love. Is it the same for you?

A provisional marriage through Cosmic Mates offers us a chance to shape our future and fates.

We already seem to enjoy similar interests, and your attractive appearance pleases me.

Many couples have married with less. Please view my profile.

If you are similarly pleased with me, perhaps we could wed.

Stranger things have happened than strangers becoming friends and then finding true love.

Ever hopeful,

Jaryk

He seemed to echo her own yearning for love. She'd been unable to achieve her heart's desire on her own. They shared common interests. And his appearance did indeed please her.

Before she lost her nerve, she replied.

Dear Jaryk,

I would be very happy to discuss next steps with you. I have noted we seem to share similar interests, despite coming from different planets. Your physical appearance is pleasing to me as well.

It seemed shallow to talk about appearance, but physical compatibility could not be taken for granted. She couldn't marry an alien who resembled a giant insect or a jellyfish. She'd seen several of them as she'd scrolled through the profiles.

Marriage is a bold step, but I am ready to take the leap. Please advise how you would wish to proceed. FYI, I am hoping I can convince my handmaid to accompany me.

Hopeful too,

Kismet

Hopefully , her sister wouldn't be too upset with her. She had promised not to do anything drastic. However, this wasn't drastic; she was following the plan—Karma's plan. This whole thing had been her idea.

While the twins looked alike, and they loved each other unconditionally, they were polar opposites in personality and likes and dislikes. Time after time, when Karma

hated something, Kismet loved it. So, if her twin deemed Jaryk a bad choice, then he must be a good one.

* * * *

She's going to accept him! Grinning, Karma leaned against the closed apartment door and polished her fingernails against her shirt. Worked like a charm! My work here is done.

She'd been monitoring her sister's Cosmic Mates profile, deleting the undesirables before her sister saw them. They'd both gotten a lot of proposals from incompatible aliens. She didn't want her reluctant, wary sister to become discouraged and cynical before the right offer came around.

The instant she'd seen Jaryk's profile, a zing of prescience had shot through her.

He's the one for Kismet. She'd never been more certain of anything in her life.

Feigning ignorance, she'd waited with bated breath for her sister to log on to the Cosmic Mates site and discover the match and then tell her about it!

She had to get her cautious, skeptical sister to take a leap of faith.

For at least a year, the universe had been signaling her twin would meet her soulmate. The instant Karma heard about Cosmic Mates, she knew that was the conduit to her sister's happiness. A reading of the tea leaves confirmed it. The universe helped those who took action!

But the only way to get her stubborn, pragmatic, uber-grounded twin to join the interplanetary matchmaking service was to do it with her.

Discouraged by her history of broken relationships, Karma had put her own search for love on hold, deleting her proposals without looking at them.

She had to settle herself and get grounded.

Dating too much, she'd been sending out a desperate vibe.

She had to fix herself before she could enter a relationship.

Her contrary twin, on the other hand, had the opposite problem.

Kismet rarely went out. She couldn't meet her soulmate if she holed up in the apartment like a hermit.

Her sister worked her dull government job all day then came home and studied a dead language online and read boring nonfiction to "improve herself." At the very least, she should have been reading a self-help book on how to get a man.

After a couple of blind double dates, Karma could see her introverted sister did not make a good first impression. When she opened up, her twin was a lovely, warm, caring, fun person. But if drastic changes weren't made, life and love would pass her by. Karma couldn't let that happen!

Despite her introverted nature, her twin could be stubborn. And pragmatic to a fault. She placed no credence in the energy of the universe or intuition.

Opposites attracted but likes endured. Her sister needed someone enough like her to make her comfortable so she would come out of her shell and reveal what a wonderful person she was. Then he would fall madly in love with her.

Jaryk was perfect for her. But if Karma had said so, Kismet would have rejected him

outright.

So, she'd discouraged the match. A little reverse psychology.

This alien was Kismet's Prince Charming. The universe had provided.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

Two weeks later

The intimidating opulent “reception room” rendered Kismet speechless.

The exterior of the palace had resembled a colony of sea urchins—spired interconnected domes.

The inside was pure opulence. Jewels gleamed in the floors, intricately woven fabrics dressed the windows, and murals adorned the glowing curved ceiling.

Rich tapestries and scenic paintings hung from the walls.

Golden sconces and floating chandeliers bathed the space in gentle light.

The furnishings appeared ancient and modern at the same time, like retro avant-garde art pieces intended to be viewed and not used.

She was afraid to sit on the sofa—was it even a sofa? It could be a priceless sculpture. “This is unexpected.” She placed her bulging tote carefully on the least decorative table.

The bag held her multipurpose comm device loaded with her travel documents and health certificate, her few pieces of nice jewelry, sentimental mementos, a snow globe gift for Jaryk, and an emergency change of clothing.

Karma plunked her bag next to Kismet’s. Her sisters can’t-risk-losing items included crystals, tarot cards, incense, runes, and loose tea for drinking and divining.

After disembarking the spaceship, their luggage had been loaded on a hovercart, floated to an air vehicle, and then whisked out of sight upon arrival at the palace. She had no idea where their suitcases were now. However, the location of their luggage was the least of her concerns.

I'm going to marry an alien. Who lives in a freaking palace. Not for the first time, she wondered what "government official" Jaryk did. Clearly, he was no ordinary civil servant. Perhaps an aide to a royal?

"We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto," Karma agreed. "How are you feeling?"

"Dizzy. Everything happened so fast." She felt lightheaded from nervousness.

After accepting the marriage proposal, the days had sped by at warp speed.

She'd had to quit her job, break the lease on the apartment, pack up, say goodbye to her mother and friends—all in two weeks.

Cosmic Mates had sent a ship for them, and a faster-than-light space flight had deposited them on planet Kaldor in less time than it took to fly around the world on Earth.

A liveried alien gentleman had met them at the spaceport and escorted them to the air vehicle that shot them at hypersonic speed to the sea urchin complex.

"Welcome to the Palace of Kaldor," he'd said as massive gilded double doors opened to a lavish foyer.

"W-w-wait. Palace?" she'd asked.

"Yes. Come this way." Giving her no chance to gawk, he'd marched them through a

confusing maze of corridors lined with imposing full-length portraits of somber-faced people.

I guess smiling isn't the norm for Kaldorans.

She wasn't sure if that made her feel more or less comfortable about her decision.

"I will inform His Highness of your arrival."

"His Highness?"

"Someone will be with you shortly." He backed out of the imposing room and closed the door.

"Are you having second thoughts?" Karma asked now.

"Dozens."

"It's not too late to change your mind."

"The marriage ceremony is tomorrow!"

"And this is today. If you don't want to go through with this, now is the time to say so. We can go home."

"How? You can work with Mom again at the Mystical Mage, but I quit my job. We let the apartment go. And, we'd have to pay for our passage.

I cannot imagine how much a space flight would cost." Or how to book one!

Cosmic Mates had gotten them to Kaldor, but, according to the rules, if she left

before the probationary year of marriage ended, she'd have to pay her own way back.

“Those are not insurmountable obstacles.”

Kismet shook her head. “No, I’m sticking to my decision. I haven’t even met Jaryk yet. I came all this way—he’s expecting me. I need to give it a chance.”

“That’s my sis!”

She bit her lip. “The man said he would inform His Highness we’re here. You don’t suppose he was referring to Jaryk, do you? That he’s His Highness? That sounds like...a prince or something.”

“Wouldn’t that be cool?” Karma grinned. “A literal Prince Charming! But no, I highly doubt it—pun intended. Remember, his profile said he was a government official. He’s probably an aide to the prince.

If he was royalty, I’m sure he would have said so.

Nobody would hide that. Nor would a prince join a matchmaking service to get a wife.

I’m pretty sure royal marriages are arranged to solidify alliances, expand the kingdom, produce heirs, blah, blah, blah. ”

“That’s a good point,” she said, relieved.

The door slid open, and a Kaldoran man strode in.

He wore simple blue-green leggings and a long-sleeve, mid-thigh-length tunic, but the quality of the fabric was obvious.

His attire probably cost more than her annual clothing budget.

Short blue hair had been styled into audacious, almost-rakish spikes.

The blue stripes across a rather patrician nose were not natural but cosmetic, and painted on with a reckless stroke.

She noted a resemblance to Jaryk. A relation?

Or could the similarity be due to the fact that they were both Kaldoran?

“You must be Kismet Kennedy.” He smiled, disabusing her assumption that Kaldorans didn’t smile. “My name is Falkor. I’ve been eagerly anticipating your arrival. My apologies for having brought you in through the servants’ entrance.”

That grand foyer with the soaring muraled ceiling and gilded floor was in the servants’ area?

“Government official” Jaryk must be a servant.

Guess I’m not marrying a prince, after all, she thought with wry humor and relief.

She desired no pomp or pageantry, just a simple life with a man who would maybe fall in love with her.

“No problem,” she said. “Uh, this is Karma.”

“The handmaid. Yes.” A dismissive gaze bounced off her face.

Karma stiffened, and Kismet could almost see the steam building. “My sister,” she quickly explained, and radioed a silent plea for restraint. Please. Let it pass. Don’t

cause a scene. For all that she claimed to be Zen, her twin had a short fuse.

Kismet had said she'd be bringing a "handmaid," but the dismissal surprised her, too.

He's not Jaryk, so he doesn't understand.

Clearly he'd been given some information, but not all.

She was sure she'd explained in a later communication that her "handmaid" was, in fact, her twin sister. Pretty sure, anyway.

Maybe?

But even if Karma had been a servant, that was no reason to be impolite.

"Are those your bags?" His gaze settled on the carryalls.

"Yes," Kismet said.

"The rest of the luggage has already been moved into your temporary quarters." He flicked a glance at Karma. "Bring those bags," he ordered.

Smiling at Kismet, he said, "Follow me, and I'll show you to the guest suite. It includes an attached servant's closet with a bed for your handmaid. After the ceremony, you'll move into Jaryk's—"

"Excuse me!" Karma interrupted.

Oh, crap. Here we go.

"You're putting me in a closet? I'm her sister ! Not a servant. But even if I was, that's

a horrible way to treat the hired help. Who do you think you are?”

His posture stiffened, affability vanishing, replaced by prim formality. “I am His Highness Prince Falkor Rullok-Myka of Kaldor.”

Kismet’s stomach tightened with dread. “So, Jaryk is—”

“ Crown Prince Jaryk Rullok-Myka of Kaldor, heir to the royal throne.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

“ You did what ?”

“You don’t need to yell,” Falkor said.

“I do need to yell because you didn’t hear me when I said no. I told you I did not wish to join Cosmic Mates.” Jaryk stomped around his sitting room, itching to punch something—like his brother. How could he have done this?

“What’s done is done.”

“Undo it. Send Kermit back to Earth.”

“Kismet.”

“What?”

“Her name is Kismet.”

“I don’t care what her name is. She shouldn’t be here. How could you have done such a thing without consulting me?”

“I did consult you. You said no. It’s for your own good. The royal ball is coming up. If you don’t act quickly, Father will announce your engagement to Alia. You are out of time.”

“Let me decide what’s for my own good.”

“You’re not making the right decisions!”

“Oh, that’s rich. You fraudulently misrepresented yourself by pretending to be me on a matchmaking site, extended an offer of marriage to a human woman, then brought her here under false pretenses.

” Kermit-Kismet expected to get married tomorrow.

“How will she feel when she finds out there’s no wedding?

” Not only had Falkor attempted to manipulate him, he’d given no concern to the other person involved.

“That won’t be an issue if you marry her.”

“No. Send her home with your deepest, most abject apologies.” Of all the impulsive, ill-thought-out stunts his brother had pulled, this had to be the worst. Because he’d involved him!

“The Cosmic Mates officiant will arrive in the morning.”

“Get rid of both of them.”

“I won’t. If you hate the idea so much, then you explain what happened, and you send them back to Earth.”

“You’re the one who caused this!”

“You’d rather marry Alia? Give up your chance for true love with Charday?”

“It is for the good of Kaldor. I don’t expect you to understand duty.” Expectations

were different for him. Unlikely to be king, second-born Falkor enjoyed far more leeway to do what he wished than Jaryk did and took full advantage of his freedom. Frequently abused his freedom.

“You’re less concerned with duty than you are with avoiding Father’s wrath.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.” His brother rarely concerned himself with either—he shirked his duty and almost seemed to enjoy provoking their father into apoplectic rages.

“Even Mother thinks so.”

“You’ve been discussing me with Mother?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then how do you know what she thinks?”

His brother shrugged. “I can tell. The point is, Father is more bark than bite. He shouts and threatens, but then the storm blows over.”

“You would know.” He used to think their father overreacted to Falkor’s shenanigans, but he’d revised his opinion.

“You claim to love Charday, but you’re not willing to fight for her. If you marry Kismet, at the end of a year, you’ll be free to marry Charday.”

“Father will never agree.”

“By then, he might . But rather than take the chance, you’d prefer to roll over and marry Alia and be miserable for the rest of your life. You will be king someday. How

are you going to stand up for our people if you won't stand up for yourself?"

Before Jaryk could react, Falkor beat a hasty retreat.

* * * *

Jaryk poised outside the human's suite, his brother's vile accusation ringing in his ears. If Falkor hadn't left when he did, he might have knocked his head off.

A king couldn't indulge his whims; he had to put his people first. A king sacrificed for the good of the realm, or there would be no kingdom left to rule.

He believed Charday would make a fine queen, but his father disagreed, and there was nothing Jaryk could do about that—nothing reasonable, anyway.

All his life, he'd been forced to suppress his desires and do the responsible thing.

His entire life had been one test after another to prove his fitness to be king.

His brother got to play, indulge his whims, defy authority, and create a wake of chaos, leaving others to clean up his messes. He'd been dubbed the Prince of Scandal.

Jaryk stood for duty and responsibility; Falkor avoided both.

He dreaded telling the human woman she'd been duped and had to go home. This would have to be a crushing disappointment to her. Afterward, he might hunt Falkor down and deliver the comeuppance his asshole brother deserved. Stand up for yourself. By acting like Falkor? That was no solution!

Taking a deep breath, he rang the chime. He'd never met a human before. He'd heard about them but had never seen one. Which made it all the crazier his brother had

chosen an Earther.

Several seconds later, the door opened.

She is not unattractive, he thought, surprised by his reaction.

Her light-brown hair, while nondescript in color and severely styled, gleamed under the lights.

Rather than pointed, her ears were curved, and the lobes were pierced with small studs.

She had large thick-lashed brown eyes, spaced with perfect symmetry in an exotic oval face.

An understated, elegant black belted tunic and form-fitting leggings showed off a slender figure with curves in all the right places.

Brown eyes widened, and pink lips parted. “Jar-Your Highness!” she pressed a slender hand to her throat.

“May I speak with you?”

“Come in.” She stepped aside so he could enter.

An identical woman rose from the sofa. Is she Kismet? He silently cursed his brother who’d failed to mention there were two women. His gaze shifted between them, and he realized they weren’t the same at all.

Both humans shared the same facial features, height, and build, but this one was flamboyant, almost gaudy.

She wore an ankle-skimming dress in rainbow colors, a billowy off-the-shoulder blouse, a multitude of arm bangles, and nearly as many rings—more, if you counted the ones on her toes, left bare by flat, ugly sandals.

Unruly hair, perhaps indicative of her nature, fell over one shoulder.

She looked like the sort who would eagerly abet his brother's mischief, exactly the sort who would appeal to his irresponsible, impulsive nature.

She was obviously Kismet.

“This is my sister, Karma,” said the pretty woman who'd opened the door.

“Greetings to you,” he said, a little dismayed to discover the flashy one was not the woman Falkor had chosen for him. It would be easier to reject her. She was so obviously inappropriate.

He turned to Kismet. “May we speak privately?”

Karma started to say something, but Kismet cut her off. “Yes.”

“Perhaps we could take a walk?” he suggested.

She nodded.

“We won't be long,” he said to mollify the sister. What he needed to say wouldn't take much time. The best way to extricate himself was to do it swiftly and decisively.

They left her suite. He had no destination in mind but headed down the corridor.

Servants who saw him would make themselves scarce to afford him privacy.

Swift and sure , he prompted himself and plunged in.

“I’m afraid there’s been a misunderstanding.

My brother took it upon himself to apply to Cosmic Mates under my name.

I have no need for a wife, as I am about to become engaged.

I’m sorry. I will, of course, pay for your passage home. ”

She let out a long sigh. “I began to suspect as much.”

“I’m sorry. You must be disappointed.”

“Well...” Her smile quirked to the right and dimpled her cheeks. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, Your Highness, but it comes as a bit of a relief.”

“Please call me Jaryk, and do tell me why it comes as a relief.” He was curious. Not hurt. Curious.

“Your brother omitted a key bit of information—that you are the crown prince. I know my limitations. I’m not suited for the royal life. I would be in over my head. I wouldn’t have the first clue what to do, how to act. It’s all very daunting.”

“I am sure you would have handled it capably,” he said politely. The sister, on the other hand... At least Falkor had some idea of what appealed to him. If he were to select a human bride, Kismet at least had the right deportment. “My brother tends to overstep his bounds.”

She laughed. “My sister is the same. I discovered after the fact she’d been screening all my Cosmic Mates proposals! Yours—your brother’s, I mean—was the only one I

got to see.”

So, he might not have even been her first choice. He wondered how many proposals she’d received.

“I had mixed emotions about signing up for Cosmic Mates, anyway. I prefer to marry for love. Not marry first and then pray love develops,” she said.

“I understand. I, too, wish to marry for love,” he said. “My parents, King Rullok and Queen Myka, have arranged a marriage for me. I do not love the woman, and the marriage is not my choice, but it’s not up to me.”

Her jaw dropped. “Why did Prince Falkor sign you up for Cosmic Mates if you weren’t free?”

“Because, despite his numerous faults, he is aware of my feelings. He loves me in his thoughtless but well-intentioned way. He thinks if I married through Cosmic Mates, it would buy me time. My father would be unable to force me to marry Alia.”

“But you would still be married to someone you don’t love.”

“Which was why I dismissed his idea.” His mouth quirked. “However, since Cosmic Mates marriages are provisional, he figured at the end of the year, I would be free again—and this time, my father might find my choice more acceptable.”

“Oh,” she said. “Prince Falkor intended it to be temporary from the start.”

“Let me guess—he didn’t mention that part?”

“No, he didn’t. I was aware of the probation period, but I assumed we’d give it a fair trial and see what developed.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said.

Misled, she’d traveled across the galaxy for nothing. He felt responsible for her. He discovered he liked her. She aroused his curiosity.

Their meandering stroll brought them to an atrium. “This is a garden. Would you care to see it?”

“I’d love to!”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

They exited into an open quad. Pavers engraved with the seal of Kaldor formed a walking path through low purple grasses.

Aromatic trees scented the air, and feathery flitteries chirped from the leafy branches.

Water blossoms floated in a small pond fed by an underground spring.

He'd chosen that particular species of water blossoms himself.

"It's beautiful!" Kismet exclaimed. "Absolutely stunning."

"Thank you," he said proudly. The palace gardens were one of his pet projects. He'd worked with the garden master to design its architecture. "The palace is rather sizable, and there are quite a few gardens, but this one is one of my favorites."

She inhaled, and he did also, taking in the fragrance of nature.

"I loved the arboretums and the public parks on Earth. So much of our planet has been consumed by cities. I lived in a high-rise apartment that faced another building. No view."

"Much of my planet is urban, too," he said. "But I've committed to reserving undeveloped space for Kaldorans to enjoy." He continued to sponsor the development of gardens all over the kingdom.

"I regret I won't be able to see more of your world.

This is my first time off Earth; I doubt I'll ever leave again.

Even though it's been short, this is the grandest adventure I've ever taken.

"She twisted her mouth. "My sister insists I need to stretch my wings. She thinks I'm in a rut, that I'm boring. "

"You are not boring. You are...enjoyable."

"You flatter me but thank you." She blushed.

"I mean it." She was both fascinating and easy to talk to.

There were no expectations, no demands, no protocols.

Ironically, the one person he could relax and be his true self with was his reprobate brother.

Even with Charday, he'd had to be circumspect, watch his words and behavior, ensure he didn't promise more than he could deliver.

"You and your sister are very different," he said.

She chuckled. "You think so? We are identical twins—mirror-image twins."

"I see the resemblance, but you are still very different. She is much more—" He stopped himself before he said something rude. First impressions were not always accurate.

"Colorful? Outrageous?" she suggested.

“I would never say that.” He’d thought it, but he’d never say it. “Those words, however, do describe my brother.”

She laughed. “I don’t think Karma and Prince Falkor like each other very much.”

“They are too much alike,” he commented. “What will you do upon your return to Earth?”

“Try to find a job and an apartment. I gave up both to come here.”

“I’m sorry.” He winced. “What kind of work did you do?”

“I worked for the Department of Public Safety, in the AIM division. We investigate artificial intelligence malfeasance, in which AI either abetted or perpetrated a crime. It can be challenging because AI is pretty good at covering up its activity.”

“I imagine so,” he said, intrigued.

“I loved my job,” she said wistfully. “I hope I can get it back.”

For her sake, he hoped so, too. Damn that Falkor.

“What about your sister? Did she give up a job? I confess, I’m not quite certain why she is here.”

“She’ll go back and work for our mom, who owns an alternative spiritual healing shop called the Mystical Mage.

” She laughed. “I had suggested she name it Hocus Pocus, but neither of them appreciated my idea. Our mother, Destiny, and Karma are like two peas in a pod. I’m the odd one in the family.

If Kar and I weren't identical twins, I would have sworn I was adopted.

"As for why she's here—I was told I could bring a handmaid. Karma hadn't received any proposals, so she figured she'd accompany me. I said I would be bringing my sister, but Prince Falkor still assumed she was my servant. It did not go over well." She chuckled.

He laughed, envisioning the clash. If Karma's dress served as an indication of her personality, she was rather tempestuous.

Despite his penchant for mayhem, his brother could be imperious, relishing his status as a royal—because he enjoyed the perks without the responsibility.

Sometimes Jaryk envied him. Other times, he could choke him.

"I love my sister. We might be different, but we're best friends. I probably wouldn't have accepted the proposal if I thought I'd never see her again. She does stupid stuff, but her intentions are good."

"My brother does stupid stuff, too. But I love him. He is my best friend." He had many, many acquaintances, but only one true friend and confidant. This latest scheme was Falkor's craziest yet. But he'd done it with Jaryk's best interests at heart.

What if he gambled Falkor was right? What if a Cosmic Mates marriage solved everything?

The king would be furious, but his royal hands would be tied—he could not undo the marriage.

Eventually, his temper would cool. And if everyone thought the marriage was real, Alia's parents would have no recourse but to arrange another match.

In the meantime, his father and mother might warm up to Charday.

They would see her at balls and other social engagements.

He meant no disrespect to Kismet, but his parents wouldn't be able to not compare her to Charday.

Wouldn't they much prefer any Kaldoran over a human?

He shook off a sting of guilt. Reality was what it was.

A faint breeze had released a few strands of hair to curl around her cheeks as her guileless, curious gaze drank in the garden. She was pleasing to the eye, easy to talk to.

If I did desire a temporary assignation, I wouldn't find a more compatible candidate.

What am I thinking? I cannot use her to achieve my own ends.

I am not Falkor. Mother and Father accept his shenanigans because they don't expect anything else from him.

Furthermore, if he did wed Kismet in hopes of achieving his aims, he would prevent her from finding true love. He could not be that selfish.

She should return to Earth, hopefully resume the job she enjoyed, and meet and marry a nice human man. Or at least a better Cosmic Mates match than him.

A fake loveless marriage would be no benefit to her.

"I'd better escort you to your suite now," he said.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

“Well? You were gone almost an hour and a half. It shouldn’t take that long to break off a fake engagement.” Her sister pounced as soon as Kismet entered their suite.

“We didn’t break it off. We’re getting married tomorrow morning as planned.

” She’d fully expected to return to Earth.

That’s what they’d decided—until they talked a little more, and they realized that Cosmic Mates might be the answer to his dilemma.

Why not help him out? When would she ever get a chance to see, let alone live on, an alien world again?

“What? You’re kidding!”

“Nope. How’d you like to be my maid of honor?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Okay, I thought I’d ask you first, but I’ll try to find someone else.”

“This is serious, and you’re making jokes.”

“And you’re making too much out of this.”

“Marrying Jaryk is a bad idea.”

“You’re giving me whiplash. This whole thing was your idea.”

“It wasn’t my best one,” Karma said.

Holding up her hand, Kismet inhaled a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Don’t say any more. I want to savor this moment of you admitting you were wrong about something.”

“I didn’t say I was wrong, I said joining Cosmic Mates wasn’t my best idea.”

“Now you’ve spoiled it,” she quipped, and then turned serious.

“You’ve always urged me to step out of my comfort zone.

Well, this is it! When will I have a chance to visit—let alone live on—an alien planet again?

Jaryk and I had a very nice conversation.

We have a lot in common.” Like annoying siblings.

“For an alien, he’s rather down-to-earth, excuse the pun. ”

She wouldn’t be marrying for love, but she would have friendship and respect, and a girl could hope, couldn’t she?

She liked the prince. He was engaging, well-spoken, handsome, and honest about his intentions and aspirations.

Her heart might get broken, but wasn’t that the risk in any relationship?

If she left at the end of a year, she'd at least have a fantastic story to tell her future grandchildren. Grandma once married an alien prince.

"His brother is a jerk!" Karma said.

"I'm not marrying the brother. If you want to go home, you can. Jaryk will arrange for it."

"And leave you here alone? No way!"

"I don't want you to stay just because of me."

"I'm not." Her twin sighed. "Seeing an alien world is the opportunity of a lifetime. You're right about that."

"What was that?"

"Visiting another planet—"

"No, about me being right."

"Ha-ha." Karma twisted her mouth.

Kismet grinned.

* * * *

"This is as good as it's going to get." She peered at herself in a three-way full-length mirror.

She wore the ivory dress she'd brought for the wedding—a tea-length skirt with a

fitted bodice and long sleeves.

The boat neck left most of her shoulders bare.

For the wedding, she'd kept her hair down but pinned to one side with a silver barrette.

"You look beautiful," Karma said. "Here, I got you something." She held out a light-pink pendant on a silver chain. "It's rose quartz—it opens the heart and brings love into your life."

"You're not flip-flopping on me again, are you? You're making me dizzy."

"You're my twin—the other half of the fertilized embryo. If you're determined to do this, then I'm going to support you all the way."

She held her hair up, and Karma put the necklace on her. Kismet turned around and hugged her. "I love you. Thank you for being with me."

"I love you, too. I wish Mom could have been here for your wedding."

"Me, too. But I'm sure she'll be at the next one.

" She had to remain realistic and not get caught up in the fantasy of marrying an alien prince.

This was no fairy tale. It was a temporary marriage of convenience, a fake relationship to help the prince avoid an unwanted match.

No hearts, no flowers, no romance. Friendship. Respect. Maybe a little adventure.

Karma blinked. “I bet most brides don’t say that.”

“You’re right,” Kismet said.

“What was that?” Her sister grinned.

“You heard me. I’m not going to repeat it.” She chuckled, regarding her twin with affection. “You look very nice. Almost sedate.”

“I didn’t want to outshine the bride.”

Karma wore a sleeveless periwinkle dress with a handkerchief hem. Instead of her usual Birkenstocks, she’d donned a pair of matching ballet slippers.

The chime rang.

“That must be our escort.” Her stomach fluttered with sudden nerves. I can do this.

The same liveried aide who’d picked them up at the spaceport was outside. “If you’re ready…” he said.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

The aide moved like a man on a mission, briskly weaving through the palace. The halls were so vacant and silent, she could hear her dress swish . Her heels clicked on the ornate floor, although she tried to step quietly.

“Where will the wedding be held?” she inquired.

“In one of the libraries,” he replied.

One? “How many libraries are there?”

“Five. The king has a personal library, and then there are four others.”

“I’m guessing the wedding isn’t in the king’s library.”

“That is correct.”

Jaryk had shared that the king and queen would not be informed of the marriage until it was a done deal. “I wish for you to be fully apprised of the situation,” he’d said. “I will be marrying against my father’s wishes. If he learns of the wedding beforehand, he will try to stop it.”

That had caused her no small bit of trepidation.

The king would be predisposed to dislike her before he even met her!

However, thwarting the monarch’s wishes was the whole point of the marriage—from Jaryk’s perspective, anyway.

He had assured her she would be unlikely to cross paths with either of his parents very often.

Given the enormity of the sprawling palace, she could see how that would be true.

Would she ever learn her way around? It would be easy to get lost. Like their escort seemed to be.

She wasn’t sure, but it felt like they were moving in circles, often reversing direction like their escort didn’t know his way around. She hoped she wouldn’t be late for her own wedding!

The halls were surprisingly vacant; they hadn't encountered any of the ubiquitous servants.

The aide turned down yet another corridor. Hadn't they gone down this one before? The artwork looked vaguely familiar. At the far end, two uniformed Kaldorans emerged from a room. The aide abruptly turned around, almost bumping into her. "My apologies. We can't go this way."

"Are you trying to avoid people?"

"My instructions were to get you to the library without being seen," he admitted.

"It's like you and the prince are eloping—you're sneaking off to get married," Kismet whispered.

That was exactly what it felt like.

Finally, they entered a wide majestic passage, and the aide headed for two towering, bejeweled doors. Her stomach clenched. This is it. The big moment. Would her groom be waiting? Or would she be the first to arrive?

The doors swung open. Jaryk stood there, handsome and regal in an embroidered bronze tunic complementing his blue hair. Lighter-blue cosmetic stripes accented his cheeks. Relief flashed in his eyes. "I began to worry you'd changed your mind."

"No," she said.

"My apologies, Your Highness. It took longer to get here than I anticipated," the escort explained.

He retreated from the room, and the doors closed. The "library" housed no bound

volumes. Instead, a bank of futuristic chairs sat in front of computer screens, and another set of chairs faced a hologram theater.

“Both principals are here; let us begin,” said a six-armed alien with a mass of writhing antennae atop its head.

To Jaryk’s left stood a stony-faced Falkor. What’s wrong with him? His expression hardened further when he flicked a glance at Karma.

Her sister compressed her lips like she tasted something sour.

Oh, for goodness’ sake! What is it with these two? They were acting like squabbling kids.

She rolled her eyes and met Jaryk’s amused expression. Her mouth quirked with answering humor, and her nervousness receded a tad. They were compatible and would be good for each other.

“Who stands in support of this couple?” asked the officiant. Kismet couldn’t begin to guess the gender but decided on female since the officiant bore a distinct resemblance to the female Medusa.

“Uh, me,” said Karma.

“I do,” answered Falkor.

“Marriage, even a civil, provisional one, is not a state to enter into lightly or thoughtlessly. You are cutting ties to the past and embarking on a new future, bound by your commitment to support and care for one another, to act as a unit, to merge your fates and fortunes, and to forsake all others.”

Jaryk gave a slight start. Her gaze shot to his face. His blank expression gave nothing away.

“Marriage can be the most rewarding time of your life or the most difficult—or both.” The officiant smiled, and she caught a glimpse of a forked tongue.

“Do you, Kismet Aurora Kennedy agree to enter into a legal union with Prince Jaryk as your husband for the term of one year to be extended indefinitely should you both concur?”

What was that little jerk about? Is he having second thoughts?

He was marrying to gain his freedom. Had he decided it wasn't worth it?

Did he object to the marriage in general, or did he have specific objections to her?

What had the officiant said? She couldn't remember.

Something about fates and fortunes. She had no interest in his money or his title.

No doubt the crown prince was extremely wealthy, but she would leave his planet only with what she came with—nothing.

Or had she imagined the little jerk?

Her sister nudged her. “Kismet?”

All eyes were on her. Her gaze met Jaryk's, and she spotted a reassuring trace of alarm at her hesitation. He's still in.

“I do,” she said strongly.

“Whew. You nearly gave me a heart attack,” Karma said.

“Me, too,” Jaryk said.

Everyone chuckled.

“Sorry.”

“Do you, Crown Prince Jaryk Rullok-Myka of Kaldor agree to enter into a legal union with Kismet as your wife for the term of one year to be extended indefinitely should you both concur?”

The double doors were flung open, and a regal-appearing Kaldoran who could only be the king stormed in. “Stop this wedding!” he thundered.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

Hekkel! The very situation he'd tried to avoid had happened.

His mother followed on the heels of his father, who was breathing smoke and fire.

Jaryk had never seen him so angry. The officiant looked concerned; all six writhing antennae periscoped on the king.

Falkor smirked like this was a grand lark but moved out of the way to observe from afar, and a wide-eyed Karma scurried over to stand beside him, leaving Jaryk, Kismet, and the officiant to face the king.

His bride trembled, and he shifted closer, forming a barrier between her and the king's wrath. How dare his father scare his soon-to-be wife this way? He would not let his father browbeat her the way he'd done to him. Paternal interference stopped now.

"I do," he stated loudly and clearly.

"Then, by the power vested in me by Cosmic Mates, LLC, I proclaim you legally bound in matrimony in accordance with the aforementioned provisions," the officiant said nervously.

"You will rescind that proclamation immediately!" the king bellowed.

"On what grounds, Your Majesty?"

"On the grounds I so order it."

“My humble apologies, but I must have a legal reason. Is one of the parties already married? Is one of them mentally infirm?”

“My son must be mentally compromised, or he wouldn’t be doing this.”

“Rullok...” His mother placed her hand on the king’s arm.

“You will invalidate this marriage!”

The officiant wavered. “Do you wish to reconsider?” He looked at Jaryk.

He clasped Kismet’s hand. “No.”

“N-no...” she replied in a shaky voice, and he squeezed her hand. He regretted she’d been subjected to this; it had to be daunting. His father’s ire was a force of nature.

He’d expected him to be furious, but not quite this enraged.

Of course, he hadn’t planned for him to find out until well after the ceremony at a time of Jaryk’s choosing when he could control the conversation.

He’d tried to keep the wedding secret, but an arrival of humans, followed by a Cosmic Mates officiant, would have been noted and reported.

His astute father would have made the connection.

“I am sorry, Your Majesty, but they are married. Cosmic Mates marriages are recognized as legal by all members of the planetary alliance.”

“I would expect something like this of you .” His father’s scowl wiped the amused smirk off Falkor’s face. “But not from you . You have greatly disappointed me.” He

glowered at Jaryk before stomping out of the library.

He faced his mother, who was shaking her head. “I thought, for sure, it couldn’t be, so when we heard, I told Rullok it was probably just a rumor. How long has this been going on?”

“Long enough for me to know that Kismet is the one I want.” He hated lying to his mother, but his parents had to believe the marriage was real, or they might merely postpone his engagement to Alia instead of canceling it. Or his father would continue to browbeat the officiant.

“This marriage affects the entire kingdom.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“As we arrived late to the wedding, perhaps you would care to introduce me to your wife.”

“Mother, this is Kismet Kennedy of Earth. Kismet, my mother, Her Majesty Queen Myka of Kaldor.” He released his new wife’s hand.

His mother offered a rueful smile. “No doubt this is not what you expected of your wedding. My apologies.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” she replied in a trembling voice.

“This is Kismet’s sister, Karma.” He extended a hand to where she stood next to Falkor.

His mother eyed their two siblings. “Is this a double wedding?”

Falkor choked.

“Oh, goddess no!” Karma exclaimed.

“Pity. My younger son could use a stabilizing influence. However, it is just as well. I doubt Rullok could handle another unexpected wedding. Karma, it is a pleasure to meet you.”

“You, as well, Your Majesty,” Karma replied.

His mother sighed and looked at Jaryk. “I recommend you give your father a few days to cool down before approaching him.”

“Thank you, Mother, I will.”

“Again, my apologies,” she said to Kismet. “The king’s objection is no reflection on you, but results from his frustration. He assumed he had a firm handle on what was going to happen, and he now feels blindsided.”

She was being politic and polite. The king’s anger went way deeper than that—and there was justification for it. A marriage to Alia would have solidified an alliance between two powerful families. But he didn’t regret his actions. The king could find another way to solidify the alliance.

The queen left. Everyone in the room relaxed.

“We must finalize the marriage. You both must sign.” The officiant produced a tablet from his bag.

“Wait—are you saying the marriage isn’t valid unless we sign?”

“Correct.”

“You didn’t tell my father that.”

“No, Your Highness.”

Apparently the officiant hadn’t been as cowed as he’d appeared. Jaryk laughed and signed his name with flourish. Kismet followed.

“Now, if there is nothing else you require, I shall take my leave.”

“Of course. I will have someone escort you out so you don’t get lost.” He rang for an aide, who appeared within seconds. The officiant departed.

Kismet pressed her lips together. “Your mother didn’t seem to have any objections to Falkor marrying a human. Why is it okay for him and not you?”

“Because he’s the heir, and I’m the spare. I only become important if something happens to him,” Falkor said flippantly.

“That’s not true,” he lied, reacting to the underlying hurt in his brother’s tone.

His parents loved them both, but it was true that Jaryk had greater political worth. He’d never considered the emotional impact on his brother. Was that why he got into so much trouble? To get the attention he lacked?

“Aren’t you going to kiss the bride?” Karma demanded.

“Kar, really?” Kismet tilted her head. “Maybe Kaldorans don’t kiss—”

“Is that something newlyweds do on Earth?” he asked. Kaldorans did kiss; he enjoyed

kissing very much—but it wasn't part of the marriage ritual.

“Yes, wedding vows are sealed with a kiss,” the sister said.

“Kar, I'm going to illkay ouyay .”

“I don't understand what that means.” His language implant didn't translate.

“That's because she's speaking pig Latin. It's not a real language,” the sister said.

Kismet's eyes shot sparks. “How about real Latin, then? Eo te occidere .”

He still didn't understand. However, the ceremony had been awkward enough with the king bursting in. If following an Earth tradition would make her feel more comfortable, then he would comply.

He stepped close to her and tilted her chin.

Her eyes widened with surprise then fluttered shut as he lowered his head.

He touched his mouth to hers, brushing her lips.

She exhaled a little sigh, and her sweet, exotic breath mingled with his.

His heart stuttered for a beat, and heat ignited low in his belly.

A little shocked, and a whole lot guilty, he pulled away.

His heart and fidelity belonged to Charday, even if they hadn't seen each other in months.

He hadn't expected to feel anything from a perfunctory, ceremonial gesture rubber-stamping a fake marriage.

But, in this moment, his marriage felt real.

"Um, I ordered a light meal to be prepared for us. Perhaps we should go?"

"Um, all right." She licked her lips. Heat flashed, and he felt an urge to kiss her again. This time for real.

He considered inviting their siblings as a buffer, but he had a hunch they would cause more awkwardness than they prevented. "You will be living in my suite. Your clothes have already been moved over," he said to Kismet.

To his brother, he said, "Show Kismet's sister to her suite, please."

"Suite?" Karma said. "A closet you mean."

He frowned. "Closet? I don't understand."

"Technically, she was given a servant's room," Kismet explained.

"I assumed she was the handmaid." Falkor shrugged.

"Get her other quarters!" He scowled. "She may take over Kismet's former suite or relocate to the family section."

"Family section," Karma said.

"I'll let you notify the appropriate staff and arrange that," he said to Falkor.

“Me? Why not you?”

“Because my bride and I are going to lunch.” He cupped his new wife’s elbow and ushered her out of the room.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

“Are you all right?” Jaryk asked on their way to his private suite.

“Yes, I think so.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that. I’d hoped to avoid that situation.”

“It would have happened sooner or later.”

“Yes, but not in front of you.”

“Better to know what I’m facing,” she said. An angry king.

Her legs wobbled like rubber. Jaryk’s father had intimidated the hell out of her. She’d hoped to make a good impression on her father-in-law—instead, she could have ended up in the dungeon. The king was not a man to be thwarted.

Except, Jaryk had. Her estimation of her new husband rose by another notch. She recalled how he’d put himself between her and the king.

“Your mother seemed more...measured.”

“Don’t underestimate her. She has a spine of steel. She has more finesse than my father, but she is just as formidable. Maybe more. I would rather cross him than her.”

“Oh great. Maybe, this wasn’t such a good idea.” She’d tried to make the best of things but found herself in the middle of a family drama and a delicate political situation.

He squeezed her shoulder. “Don’t worry. The wedding surprised them, that’s all. They’ll get over it. They’ve had plenty of practice adjusting to Falkor’s shenanigans. I give you my word, nothing bad will happen to you.”

It’s only for a year. I can handle a year. Could she?

“Here’s my suite. Our suite.”

They’d arrived much sooner than she’d expected. When they weren’t taking a circuitous route to avoid being seen, the palace didn’t seem quite so huge.

No, it’s huge— she revised her opinion again as soon as she entered a foyer larger than her apartment on Earth.

His suite has a fricking foyer! A mosaic of jewels formed the crest of Kaldor in the floor.

Overhead—way overhead—a mural adorned the soaring ceiling.

A dazzling chandelier floated in the space.

All this for a few bedrooms and bath? “How many rooms do you have?”

“Only fourteen,” he said. “Not counting the bathing chambers. There are four of those.”

“You need four bathrooms?”

“There are four bedrooms,” he said.

“But you live here alone?”

“Until now.” He grinned.

The sisters had shared a two-bedroom, one-bath unit—five rooms total if you included the small alcove off the parlor the landlord called a dining room.

The suite she’d been granted at the palace had three rooms—a large sitting area, a place to sleep, and Karma’s “closet,” which had been larger than her bedroom at home.

“I’ll give you a tour.”

“I think I might need a map,” she said.

He led her through his residence graced by tapestries, artwork, and murals. There were three separate sitting areas, one of which doubled as a “small” library. “I am studying ancient Kaldoran, and I like to practice in here so I can speak it privately. No one to notice my flubs,” he said.

“I remember your profile said you were studying the old language.”

“And you married me anyway,” he said with self-mocking humor. “Most people think it’s pretty boring.”

“Oh, no. I liked that. I’ve been learning Latin, an old Earth language that isn’t spoken anymore.”

“Is that the language you used when you spoke to your sister at the wedding?” he guessed.

“Yes.” Her mouth quirked. “Eo te occidere . I told her I was going to kill her.”

“Understandable. I have a sibling, too,” he said. “But why?”

“For making it awkward—insisting we kiss.”

“The kiss was awkward? My apologies. I’d gotten the impression that it was traditional in your culture, and I wished to make it less awkward.”

“No, the kiss was...nice.” His nearness and touch had caused her heart to flutter and her lips to tingle.

She’d had to restrain herself from leaning in, parting her lips, and...

“But we hadn’t talked about it, and I didn’t know if it would be uncomfortable for you.

Kissing to seal the vows is traditional but not required. ”

“Well, I didn’t mind. It was, as you say, nice.”

They passed a glassed-in atrium large enough to be considered an actual garden containing trees, flowers, grass, alien birds, a small pond, and benches for sitting.

“If you use the atrium, be sure to keep the door closed,” he said.

“I left it open once, and it took days to get the flitteries out of the suite.”

“Got it.” She smiled.

“This is where I sleep.” He stepped into a gigantic bedroom fit for a king. He strode to the enormous bed dressed in rich fabrics, pressed a button on an elaborate console, and retracted the ceiling, revealing a glass dome. “At night, you can see the stars.”

Was this where she would sleep? Sleeping arrangements hadn't been one of their prenuptial discussions. Didn't "marriage of convenience" equate to "no sex"?

If their marriage had been real, she would expect that they would become intimate—after they got to know each other.

But their marriage was temporary and fake.

The perfunctory wedding kiss had been purely ceremonial.

If her heart had raced a little, well, that was due to the awkwardness of the situation.

"Your room is over here," he said to her disappointment-tinged relief.

Did Kaldoran couples not share a room and bed, or had separate sleeping quarters been arranged because theirs wasn't a real marriage?

Was this his not-so-subtle way of avoiding the possibility of intimacy?

It would be problematic if he expected sex immediately, but that didn't mean she didn't want to be wanted.

She followed him through a door into an adjoining room equally spacious and opulent. "Your ceiling opens, too." He pressed a button on the bedside console to show her and then closed it again.

"Cool!" She looked forward to watching the stars at night. She figured the constellations must be different in this part of the galaxy.

"Bath is through there." He pointed.

She took a peek inside. The shower was as big as her entire apartment bathroom. “Three showerheads?” she asked.

“One for water, one for cleanser, one for moisturizing,” he explained.

“Okay...” She pictured herself going through a car wash.

“Your clothes have already been put away in the wardrobe.”

She wasn’t sure how she felt about servants handling her stuff. Not that she had anything to hide, but it was weird to be tended to. To have servants.

He opened a panel to reveal her clothing, neat and forlorn in the ginormous space. She’d worried she’d overpacked, but the closet made it look like she’d brought hardly anything.

“Good,” she said, at a loss for words. “What’s next?”

“Dining room. Lunch.” He shut the panel and left the bedroom, stepping into the outside hall. He pointed to a door at the end. “That leads to the servants’ quarters.”

“For the entire palace or just yours?”

“Just mine.”

“How many servants do you have?” She walked beside him.

“Four. Two housekeepers, a valet who helps me dress, and a butler who serves the meals I order from the palace kitchen and does a myriad of other tasks for me. I couldn’t get along without him.”

After what she'd observed so far, she imagined there were many tasks requiring the attention of a personal butler. And, for the size of his unit, two housekeepers seemed a little light. But a valet? "You get help getting dressed?"

"You think I'm a pampered little prince unable to do things for himself?"

"Uh, no, of course not!" Her face flamed.

"I'm teasing." A devastating grin transformed his face from handsome to knockout gorgeous.

He is so out of my league. And not because of his looks—although a man as handsome as him would never pick a woman of average looks whose smile was slightly right of center—but because he was a crown prince and loaded.

She was a penniless nobody. The class and culture differences seemed as vast as the universe.

"I do dress myself—it is one of my skills—except for ceremonial occasions, which require intricate special dress. I do need help with that."

The dining room shouldn't have surprised her, except it did.

A golden etched ceiling curved over a long table with seating for fourteen .

Clear stones sparkled like diamonds in the floating chandeliers.

Two place settings had been arranged, one at each end of the enormous table.

"This isn't the main dining hall, right? " she asked.

“No, this is my private one,” he replied.

Of course it is.

A uniformed alien stood at attention next to a trolley. The butler. she presumed.

“Good afternoon, Your Highness,” he said.

“Good afternoon, Lewen,” Jaryk said. “May I introduce my wife, Kismet Kennedy of Earth.”

Had the butler known of the marriage? He didn’t even blink an eye. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Kismet Kennedy.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, too.”

“I am here to serve you. Should you need anything, do not hesitate to call upon me.”

She couldn’t imagine what that would be. She didn’t need anything—and yet needed everything. She was a stranger in a strange land. “Thank you.”

Lewen pulled out her chair—a heavy gilded throne with ornate arms—before seating Jaryk at the other end of the table. Then he served the meal to the prince before traveling the length of the long table to serve her.

Savory aromas wafted up from the food. She hadn’t been at the palace long enough to have eaten many meals, but the food she’d tried had been delicious. Every meal was chef’s surprise. Nothing resembled anything she’d eaten on Earth.

“You may leave us and return for the trolley later, Lewen,” Jaryk said.

“As you wish. Enjoy your meal, Your Highness, Kismet Kennedy.”

“Please, call me Kismet,” she said.

“My apologies. I’m afraid I can’t do that,” he said and left them to their meal.

“Please, begin.” Jaryk picked up his fork.

The acoustics were great; she had no problem hearing him, but the distance was silly. She started to ask permission if she could join him at his end of the table and then stopped herself. Screw that. She was his wife in name only, but what the hell!

She picked up her plate and utensils, set them next to him, and sat down. “You don’t really eat dinner all by yourself at this big table, do you?”

“Quite often, I do. Sometimes my brother eats with me, or I go to his quarters. Maybe once a week, we join our parents in their apartment, and then there are banquets in the main dining hall I’m required to attend.”

“How many can be seated in the main dining hall?”

“A hundred and fifty maybe?”

“A hundred and fifty?” She gasped.

“More or less.”

“It must be a long room.”

“The table is an open rectangle with the family and any high-ranking guest at the head, and the other guests along the sides.”

“I assume staff organize those banquets.”

“Of course—but they consult with my mother on her wishes and the guest list. I suspect it is a lot of work for her.”

She suspected it was, too. Jaryk would be king someday, and banquet responsibility would fall to his wife, the future queen. Thankfully, she wouldn't be around for that. She felt in over her head without any responsibilities.

But loss and regret panged. One year from now, they'd part ways, and they'd never see each other again. Don't get attached. It's okay to like him, but don't fall in love.

“Again, I apologize for my father's behavior.”

“It's okay.”

“It's not, but that's the way he is. That's what I'm up against.” He paused. “He has his good moments, though. And he is a fair and just ruler. He cares for the people of Kaldor. He is 100 percent dedicated to them.”

Which is why arranging a political marriage is so important. No wonder he got so angry. And adding insult to injury, he was blindsided.

She had nothing to offer the people of Kaldor.

“For the good of the kingdom, I probably should have married Alia,” he said, echoing her thoughts. “And I'd intended to.”

“But you didn't.”

“My father and mother love each other deeply. They are devoted to each other. My

father would give up the kingdom for her. Though they don't realize it, they set an example. My brother and I desire what they have."

And I'm not it. She heard what he didn't say—she couldn't provide the love he sought but hopefully would clear the obstacles to him getting it. She'd agreed to the arrangement. But she felt like he'd stuck a knife between her ribs.

Although finding a love match through Cosmic Mates had been a gamble, it had been possible until she discovered she'd been misled about the true reason for the marriage.

Not to mention, Karma had deleted other potential candidates before she'd seen them.

What if one of them had been her soulmate?

The deck had been stacked against her. Like the king, she'd been blindsided.

She'd given up her chance for love to give Jaryk a chance with someone else.

Shouldn't altruism feel better than this?

At least it's only for a year. It's not a lifetime commitment.

But that didn't feel good either.

"There is a ball at the palace soon," Jaryk said. "We will be required to attend."

"Oh, okay." She was intimidated, imagining a grand, formal affair steeped in unfamiliar tradition and etiquette.

Not only would she not know how to behave, her clothing would be inadequate.

She fingered the skirt of her wedding dress.

The nicest garment she owned, it was far from formal. Not appropriate for a fancy ball.

Would there be dancing? Of course, there would—it was a ball . She doubted the Kaldorans waltzed or rhumbaed; she wouldn't know any of the dance moves.

“The ball was intended to announce my engagement to Alia, but now my parents will announce our marriage.”

Oh, my god. Can it get any worse? She rubbed her temple.

“Are you all right?”

Just a little terrified. “This is a bit more than I anticipated. I won't know how to act. What's appropriate, what's not. I won't know anybody.”

“I understand how you feel.”

She doubted he did. He'd been born into this.

“Since you're new to Kaldor and the royal lifestyle, you'll be tutored in expectations and etiquette.

I'm sure the ball will be addressed. I promise you won't be alone at the event.

I'll be by your side the whole time. Falkor will be there, too.

You won't have to do much except greet people and make small talk. ”

An introvert's nightmare.

"I don't have the right clothes..." She grasped at straws, trying to get out of this.

"Not a problem. Lewen will have the palace tailors take care of it."

"Great." She fake-smiled. What have I gotten myself into?

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

Hands behind his head, Jaryk lay staring at the stars, discontent and guilt gnawing at his brain. He felt like he hadn't been fair to Kismet, like he'd asked too much of her. She'd married him willingly—he hadn't forced her; she could have gone home. But what would she get out of the arrangement?

Nothing.

Even the wedding had ended on a sour note with his father storming in. The king could be quite frightening if one wasn't used to his bellicose ways—sometimes even if you were used to his blustery aggression.

Perhaps it would have been better if the king had prevented the wedding.

Better for Kismet.

Except, Jaryk liked her and enjoyed her congenial company and exotic beauty. Funny because he didn't consider Karma nearly as attractive even though they looked alike. He could stare at Kismet all day—and had to be careful he didn't.

As long as he looked and didn't touch, that would be okay, wouldn't it?

His duties put him into contact with many people, many of them beautiful women. Alia was quite comely—but objectively acknowledging her physical attributes had never made him feel disloyal to Charday.

His fake marriage, on the other hand, stirred niggling guilt even though he was doing this for her .

She'd insisted on a temporary separation, so he could "think about what was important," expecting him to come running with an offer of marriage.

She would not have foreseen him marrying someone else.

However, the harebrained scheme of Falkor's might offer their only chance to be together.

Judging from the king's reaction, it might work.

His father might decide he preferred Charday to a human and relent.

Which aroused more guilt because Kismet was a wonderful person.

Her being human didn't matter. She didn't deserve to be used.

But what really disturbed him?

The kiss. Brief. Perfunctory. Way too enjoyable.

If he were honest with himself, he would admit maybe he'd jumped at the chance to kiss her.

And almost followed up with another. He'd relived memories of the kiss throughout the rest of the afternoon and evening, during the tour of his suite—especially when he'd shown her the sleeping arrangements—and then through dinner.

His preoccupation was disloyal to Charday. There could be no more kisses. Their marriage would be platonic. But neither could he sneak away to see Charday. That would be disrespectful to Kismet. Instead, he would abstain from all sexual contact during the probationary year.

Perversely, that made him feel disloyal to his wife. She deserved a husband who desired her and could provide physical intimacy. Everything he did seemed wrong!

When Charday learned of the marriage, she would not be happy. She had quite the temper. While Kismet had been very accommodating, he couldn't imagine she'd be happy in a sterile, plastic marriage.

Caught in the middle, he couldn't be happy.

He never should have listened to Falkor. However, if he had to be stuck in a loveless marriage, he preferred Kismet over Alia. If Charday hadn't claimed his heart, he would have been very happy with Kismet and might even have fallen in love with her.

And that made him feel really disloyal. Because it still might be true.

* * * *

They waited in a VIP tent outside the museum. "Don't be nervous," Jaryk whispered.

"I can't help it," Kismet said. "There must be two hundred people out there."

He chuckled. "I don't think there are quite that many. Besides, they will all be very happy to meet you."

"Curious," she said. "They will be curious to see me. They will be happy to see you."

"You'll do fine. Just wave and smile."

He'd requested she accompany him to the dedication of the museum as a way to let

her dip her toe into the waters of public scrutiny before plunging into the full spectacle of the royal ball.

Meeting new people made his shy wife anxious, and she preferred one-on-one encounters to huge groups.

Hopefully, low-key events like this one would build her confidence and enable her to feel more comfortable because public appearances were a common, frequent aspect of royal life.

Plus, this low-key venue gave them some time together. Since the wedding three days ago, an abundance of royal duties had claimed his constant attention, causing him to miss the nightly dinners. He and Kismet had barely exchanged more than a dozen words in passing. He felt like he'd abandoned her.

"Do I look okay?" She smoothed her hands down the sides of her blue dress.

"You couldn't have chosen a better color. Kaldoran blue is perfect," he said. While the fabric and construction weren't as sumptuous as a royal would wear, the people would only notice the color.

"There's an official color?"

He nodded. "Yes. Have you met with the tailor yet?"

"Yes," she said. "She measured me from every angle. She said the first of the garments would be ready tomorrow. She hinted I'd be receiving quite a few articles. I thought I was getting a ball gown."

"You will need a few more clothes," he said. "For events like this. And for more formal occasions."

The museum director stepped out. “It’s about to begin,” Jaryk said. “The people will love you. Don’t worry.”

“As long as your father doesn’t show up.”

He chuckled. “No worries. This isn’t his thing. I doubt he even knows about it.”

“He wasn’t supposed to know about the wedding, either,” she pointed out.

He squeezed her shoulder. “It will be fine.”

The museum director began to speak. “Welcome honored guests to the special preview of the Museum of Alien Horticulture!”

The crowd whistled their appreciation.

“Tickets for the grand opening and for several days thereafter have sold out. You are fortunate we set aside a special preview or you’d never get in,” Urk Poth-Dox said with a chuckle to the assembled townspeople.

“Seriously, I’m sure the crowds will subside after a while, but MAH will continue to be an economic and cultural boon to our city and the planet by attracting more visitors— more tourist dollars —from around the galaxy.

Equally important, it will be a huge learning experience for our youth.

Already, many schools have booked field trips to see alien flora in their simulated habitats. ”

He paused while the crowd whistled.

“We never could have achieved this without the patronage of His Highness. When we started this venture, people dismissed it—‘Plants? Who cares about plants?’ But once the prince got involved and put his time—and funding—behind it, people took notice.

“So, without further ado, I’m pleased and honored to present His Royal Highness Crown Prince Jaryk Rullok-Myka—and his new wife, Kismet Kennedy of Earth.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then murmurs of, “Wife? The prince is married?” rippled through the crowd.

With Kismet at his side, her hand clasped in his to show unity, he stepped out onto the stage to the whistles and cheers of the crowd. Releasing her hand, he smiled and waved, and she did the same.

Pride and satisfaction surged through him.

It felt good to have a partner. For so long, he’d stood alone, no peers to support him in these projects so dear to his heart.

Exotic and unique, Kismet was the perfect ambassador for an alien botanical garden.

Maybe he would even rename the garden after her.

When the whistles of applause subsided, he addressed the crowd.

“Thank you all for coming today. I’m thrilled to introduce two grand new developments to you.

First, my wife. She’s human, as you can see, and hails all the way from Earth.

After a very short courtship, I knew immediately I wanted to marry her, and she said

yes.

We were wed a few days ago in a small, private ceremony.

” Technically, it was all true. A few hours of conversation could be considered a short courtship.

He withheld the whole truth because they might not accept her as his wife, but he couldn’t outright lie.

The crowd cheered their acceptance. Kismet waved and smiled.

“The second new development is, of course, the Museum of Alien Horticulture. It merges two interests of mine: horticulture and interplanetary relations. Each of the botanical habitat exhibits you will visit on your tour today authentically present the flora of the respective planet. Some fifty planets from across the galaxy are represented.” He glanced at Kismet.

“Earth is one of those.” He himself was eager to see the Earth exhibit.

He’d spearheaded the venture, but he’d only been to a few of the participating planets, and Terra wasn’t one of them.

“All plant species were donated by world rulers. The galaxy is vast, and it would be impossible for a single individual to visit all the habitable planets. So, this museum brings them to you.”

The people whistled.

He raised his hand to quiet the applause.

“The exhibit is not without risk to Kaldor, so I must issue a word of caution and ask for your cooperation. Stay on the paths . Do not take any organic material out of the museum—no seeds, no leaves, no flowers. We cannot risk accidentally transplanting alien plant life on Kaldor. We can enjoy this glimpse of other worlds, but we must ensure Kaldor stays looking like Kaldor. We can’t allow a potentially invasive species to leave the museum, take root, and spread.

So, remain on the paths. Don the protective footwear covers—and remove them before you leave. ”

Heads nodded.

“If everyone is ready, let’s go inside!”

He and Kismet formed a receiving line, greeting the people who offered congratulations as they filed into the museum. MAH staff handed out protective shoe covers as they entered.

“Whew!” Kismet said as the museum door closed behind the last of the guests. “I’m glad Kaldorans just nod and bow and don’t shake hands. That would be a lot of hands to shake.”

“Is that how humans greet each other, shaking their hands? Like this?” He waved his hands around.

She giggled. “No, like this.” She extended her right hand. “Clasp my hand with your right.” He did so. “Sometimes you just hold. Sometimes you pump, like this.” She demonstrated.

“What determines whether you pump or not? And how long do you hold it?” He still had her hand.

She shrugged. “We wing it.”

He couldn’t imagine winging anything. Rules, protocol, and formalities governed everything he did. Marrying Kismet had been the only time he’d bucked tradition.

The museum director approached. Kismet released his hand and added, “We shake hands in business and formal situations and with strangers. We say hello or hug with friends and family.”

“If Your Highness is ready, the line inside has cleared out enough if you care to tour the museum,” the director said.

“Yes, I would like that.” This would be his first time seeing it.

“Would you care for a guided tour, or do you wish to wander on your own?”

“On our own.”

“As you wish.”

A museum staff member handed them shoe cover-ups as they entered.

Habitats were separated into climate-controlled rooms to create the appropriate conditions for the vegetation and to avoid cross contamination and prevent one species from invading another’s space.

Some climates were warm and humid, others dry and hot.

Some were cold and windy. Outside each exhibit, screens flashed the warnings to stay on the paths and take nothing from the museum.

In one of the first botanical habitats they entered, tree branches drooped under the weight of razor-sharp metallic-appearing leaves.

Low-growing shrubs reminded him of fuzzy puff balls until he peered closer and saw tiny needles covering the plant.

“You don’t need to worry about anyone taking home anything from in here,” Kismet echoed his thoughts.

In another room, rainbow grasses waved in the breeze, created by hidden fans.

“The exhibits are like life-size dioramas!” she said. As they approached the next habitat, she wrinkled her nose. “It smells like something died.”

The door slid open, and the stench of decay hit them full force. “Oh, my god!” She covered her nose with her arm.

“Do you wish to go in?” he asked.

“No! No, thank you.”

He slipped an arm around her waist, ushering her away from the entrance so the door would close. A couple strolling by chuckled. “There are cadaver plants inside,” exclaimed the woman. “They look as ugly as they smell. It’s worth seeing, but the odor is awful.”

Kismet shuddered. “I’ll pass on that one.”

“Fantastic exhibit, Your Highness,” said the man.

“Wonderful,” the woman echoed. “And congratulations on your marriage.”

“Thank you,” he replied. “I’m glad you’re enjoying the museum.”

The couple left them, heading for the exit.

“This is like a zoo, but with plants!” Kismet commented. “It’s a Boo!”

“I don’t understand.”

“Zoo stands for zoological park. It’s filled with animals. This is a botanical garden so it’s a Boo. Or, Poo for plant park, which also describes the smell of the last exhibit.” She laughed.

“Next stop—planet Earth!” he said.

They entered the habitat, and she took a deep breath and exhaled. Her entire body seemed to relax, and her eyes misted up.

“Looks like home?”

“Yeah. Earth has many biomes—grasslands, different kinds of forests, deserts, aquatic areas, but the foliage you see here is very common.”

They strolled through, taking their time, Kismet pointing out familiar flora. “That’s an oak tree. Those are pines. That’s a maple. These are rose bushes. Lilies. Daisies. Irises. I may want to come back here a time or two.” She sighed.

“You’re homesick,” he said.

“A little,” she admitted. “I didn’t realize how much until I saw this.”

“It’s only for a year,” he said to comfort her, masking his dejection at her eventual

departure.

“Yeah,” she said, but didn’t sound cheered.

They lingered in the Earth zone until a family entered, and then they moved on to the next exhibit.

Huge stick-straight trees with a canopy of fronds dropped giant orange seed pods on a bed of sand in the dry, hot biome. “I hope the people obey the rules.” He eyed the pods. They were the sort of souvenir people might be tempted to take home. “We can’t allow these to germinate and take root.”

“I’m like the plants. An alien life-form you don’t wish to have take root,” Kismet said.

“No, you’re not!” Her analogy bothered him.

“The king doesn’t want me here.”

“But I do. The people do.”

“I’m a stopgap.”

He couldn’t refute her statement because it was true, but a part of him wished it wasn’t.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

The day after the museum dedication, normal business resumed, which meant royal duties claimed Jaryk's attention.

As per her routine, after morning department classes, Kismet and her sister went exploring—after several forays, they still hadn't seen the whole palace—and then ate lunch together.

Today, they were lunching in Karma's suite.

Much as she admired the grandeur of Jaryk's apartment, she preferred her sister's cozier but still elegant space.

It seemed silly and awkward for two people to sit at a table stretching the length of a humongous dining room.

A servant wheeled in a cart with their meal. "May I get you anything else?" she asked.

"No, thank you. This is great," Karma replied with a smile. The servant bowed and departed.

"I could get used to this." Her sister removed the cover from a dish and released delicious aromas into the air.

"The food is phenomenal," Kismet agreed. "I keep forgetting to ask the names of things. I want to request some of them again."

“True that, but I meant getting the royal treatment.”

“Oh, that.”

“You don’t enjoy it?” Karma looked at her.

“It’s nice, but I don’t need it—”

“Well, I don’t neeeed it—”

“And I didn’t earn it.”

“So, who did? Earth to Kismet, Jaryk and Falkor didn’t earn it. They were born into it. As were the king and queen, and the monarchs before them, and before them...”

They do earn it, though. The stability and protection the benevolent monarchs provided enabled people to thrive and achieve their goals, dreams, and wealth, albeit on a smaller scale.

They fostered many worthwhile projects—like the Museum of Alien Horticulture.

She’d overheard attendees talking—they loved Jaryk, and they raved about the exhibit.

His interest in horticulture had bloomed into a “boo” that would draw visitors from all over the globe and the galaxy, who would then spend money at hotels, eateries, shops.

Those business owners would benefit, and they would spread their money around to the benefit of other citizens.

Besides that, the museum served as a learning tool, feeding the quest for knowledge and fostering curiosity about other worlds. And that was just one “pet project.”

She’d been impressed by the whole exhibit and how much the people loved and respected Jaryk. Their regard enhanced her opinion of him. She would have been proud to have him as her husband—for real.

“And besides—” Her sister warmed up. “ You did kind of earn it. You are enabling Jaryk to escape a fate worse than death.”

“I don’t think he views the prospect of marriage to Alia as quite that,” she replied drily, but she got the same pang as when she’d had the epiphany that she could be considered an invasive species.

“Well, marriage to you is his path to freedom.”

He did desire freedom. So, it was pointless to wish for more, wasn’t it?

I need a chance. A fair chance. I don’t want to be discounted just because I’m human. I want him to be open to the idea of a real marriage.

“Just don’t fall in love with him.”

“Why would you say that?” Her cheeks heated as if her sister had caught her at something.

Karma’s eyes narrowed. “Because I know you.”

“You’re the one who falls in and out of love with the day of the week,” Kismet pointed out. “I’ve only had a couple of serious relationships.”

“Because you don’t put yourself out there—if you were less guarded, you would fall in love more. Mom says we have very tender hearts.”

“Oh, well, if the seer says it, it must be true.” She loved her mother, but she was a serious space cadet.

“What if he goes back to Alia?” Karma asked.

“He can’t go back to her—he’s never really been with her.”

“You know what I mean. Mom foresaw heartbreak and a love triangle in your future.”

“You should have told me that before I left Earth, not after I got here and got married,” she said wryly.

“Like you would have listened to me.”

Her sister had a point there.

Heartbreak was a risk in any relationship. Their mother got no points for that prognostication. The love triangle prediction seemed a little eerie—but she still gave her mother’s ESP no credence.

“If, at the end of a year, he decides to marry Alia for the good of the kingdom, then so be it. I knew when I married him it wasn’t going to be forever—that’s why I went through with it. Because there was an escape clause.”

* * * *

Upon returning to her apartment midafternoon, Lewen met her at the door. “Your

clothing has been delivered to your bedchamber, Ms. Kismet.” She’d tried to get the butler to call her by her first name, but he insisted on formality, so they compromised.

“Thank you, Lewen.” She hurried to her bedroom, eager to see the ball gown. She’d expected to see the dress draped across the bed, but it wasn’t, so she flung open the wardrobe doors.

“Oh, my god!” Clothing in every color for every occasion filled the closet. She’d been expecting one formal and a few other outfits for informal events—not an entire boutique of high-end alien designer couture. As for ball gowns, there were a dozen of those!

I won’t be here long enough to wear all of this.

The extravagance stirred her guilt, but it warred with excitement.

What girl didn’t appreciate beautiful new clothes?

She would never be a true princess, but she could dress like one.

She reminded herself she’d been transported to a different realm, planet, and way of life.

She grabbed her MCD and contacted her sister. “Come to my apartment, now! You have to see this!”

“What is it?”

“My ball gown came,” she said simply, not wishing to dilute the impact when her sister saw her closet.

“Ooh, yeah. Is it beautiful?”

“You have no idea!” Neither did she. She had no idea which of the formal gowns had been intended for the upcoming ball. She hadn’t examined them closely, but they were all beautiful.

“Be there in a flash. Assuming I don’t get lost,” Karma said.

She chuckled. The distance between their residences was a bit of a hike, and her sister had a poor sense of direction.

Kismet had navigated their explorations of the palace.

“Watch for the waterfall,” she said. There was a courtyard with a huge fountain midway between their residences.

“If you’re not here in half an hour, I’ll send out a search party,” she joked.

“I’m on my way!”

Kismet dove into the closet, eager to see what she had. This is like Christmas and my birthday all rolled into one.

The lavish overindulgence still bothered her middle-class frugality, but not enough to dampen her excitement. When her sister got here, they could play dress-up. There were enough clothes for both of them—and five other women. Karma had different tastes, but she would find something appealing.

She examined the breathtaking gowns first. A few had billowy skirts; others were sleek and slender. Some off the shoulder, others with full-length sleeves. Silk—did Kaldor have silkworms?—fabrics with net overlays seeded with crystals and jewels.

And the day wear, while much simpler, was just as luxurious.

Compared to these clothes, her own outfits appeared cheap. She squirmed at the sight of the blue dress she'd worn to the museum, cleaned, and rehung. Jaryk hadn't said the dress was nice—only that the color was appropriate. No wonder he had clothes made for me.

I'll wear one of the new outfits tonight at dinner—assuming he comes home.

She eyed a simple rose sheath dress. Or maybe this? She selected a lavender tunic with matching pantaloons. Deep in her closet, surrounded by clothes, she heard the butler speaking but couldn't quite make out the words.

“What?” she yelled.

“Ms. Kismet? You—Maj...visitor.”

Karma didn't get lost after all.

“Send her in, please, Lewen.”

“In your bedchamber ...”

“Yes!”

She studied several garments but kept returning to the lavender tunic-and-pantaloons set. Holding up the outfit, she exited the closet—just as the bedroom chamber door slid open. “I think I'm going to wear this for dinner tonight,” she announced to her sister.

“You will look lovely. I'm sure my son will appreciate it,” said Queen Myka.

“Your Majesty!” Kismet clutched the garment to her chest. “My apologies. I was expecting my sister. Uh, um, Jaryk’s not here.”

“I came to speak to you.”

“Me?” she squeaked.

“I apologize for dropping in unannounced, but I had some free time, and took a chance you would be here. I thought we should become better acquainted.”

Hurry, Karma, hurry. Pleeease, don’t get lost. She needed a buffer.

What if she said or did the wrong thing?

“Uh, sure. That would be great, Your Majesty. Perhaps we should move into the parlor. I can have Lewen bring some refreshments.” He would know what to serve the queen; she had no idea what would be appropriate.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’m fine right here. Would it be all right if I sit?”

“Please do.”

The queen sat in one of the tall-backed brocade chairs.

Kismet set the outfit on the bed and reluctantly took the seat next to her.

“So...” She slapped her hands on her knees, at a complete loss for words.

She couldn’t even start off with the weather because they were inside, and she had no idea what the weather was.

How about them Star Raiders? Do you think they'll win the championship?

"How have you been getting along at the palace?" the queen asked.

"Oh! Good. My sister and I explore a little each day—I hope that's okay."

"Of course, it is. The palace is your home now. What have you seen that you like the most?"

"It's all beautiful and grand, but I love the gardens," she admitted, and then winced. Maybe I should have said the architecture or the artwork.

The queen's mouth curved into a pleased smile. "Jaryk has been instrumental in the development of those. We've always had green space within the palace complex, but he has turned the gardens into works of art."

"I accompanied him to the preview of the Museum of Alien Horticulture," she volunteered.

The queen nodded. "One of his pet projects. He's been working on that for a long time. And what did you think?"

"I loved it. It was fascinating. And there was even an exhibit devoted to Earth."

"A little slice of home?"

"Yes."

"Leaving your planet, your people, and your family must be hard. I assume you have more family besides your sister?"

“Our mother.”

“You are close to her?”

“Yes.”

“She must miss you as much as I would miss my children if they were to move far away.”

Was that the queen’s way of saying she wished Kismet would go home?

She had no idea how to respond, but the mention of her mother caused a lump to form in her throat.

Although vastly different in personality and outlook, Destiny was her biggest supporter and cheerleader.

Maybe because Karma was tuned into their mother’s frequency, Destiny worried more about Kismet, often reading the tea leaves and tarot cards to check in on her. It was her way of showing she cared.

“I miss her, too,” she said.

“I know my son married you to avoid marrying Alia.”

She gulped at the queen’s unexpected outspokenness. Why did Jaryk have to be gone today? Why couldn’t Karma have found her bearings and not gotten lost just this once? Unable to come up with a response, she dropped her gaze to avoid staring like a deer in the headlights.

“You may have gotten the wrong impression,” the queen said.

Oh, I don't think so. "And what's that?"

"That I oppose your marriage to my son."

"You don't?"

The queen smiled. "No, I don't."

"But King Rullok..."

"Is concerned with the political ramifications. The merger between our family and Alia's would have benefitted the kingdom, but not necessarily Jaryk's happiness."

I know my son. He and Alia would have been a mismatch.

Neither she, nor the other—well, let's just say, I am glad my son took this bold step.

"My son is the future king. He must do what is right for Kaldor, but I want him to be happy, and my deepest hope is that he can achieve both. I confess I was shocked at first to discover the circumstances around your marriage, and that you are human, but from the little I've seen and the lot I've heard, you appear to be very good for Jaryk."

She'd heard a lot? Probably the staff kept her apprised. Although necessary for the queen to be informed, Kismet wasn't sure she liked servants reporting on her actions.

"In any case, I give you my personal blessing and support."

"I'm here! Show me the dress!" Karma burst into the room.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

“You look beautiful in those clothes,” Jaryk exclaimed upon entering the dining hall to find Kismet dressed like a Kaldoran. He winced. “That came out wrong. That’s not what I meant!”

Delicate eyebrows arched. “I don’t look beautiful?”

The hairs on his nape prickled with embarrassment. He was botching this. “You always look beautiful regardless of what you wear, but Kaldoran fashion suits you.” He hadn’t been this gauche since he was a youth.

His male eye couldn’t tell if she wore pants or a dress, but the blue-green garment flowed around her like water and clung in all the right places, arousing emotions he shouldn’t be having.

She probably had no idea she wore his favorite color.

He’d assumed theirs would be a dispassionate union, an amicable marriage of convenience, but how could he avoid noting his wife’s attractiveness? He was a man. As long as I don’t touch.

Her lips curved into a teasing smile. “I know what you meant. I was having a little fun. Yes, the clothing arrived today. Thank you. You were way too generous.”

“It was worth it.” Looking at her now, oh, yes. It was worth it. He extended his hand. “Shall we be seated?”

She took her place on his left. Lewen served them, and Jaryk dismissed him. “If we

desire seconds or need more spirits, we are capable of serving ourselves.”

“As you wish, Your Highness,” Lewen said, but Jaryk could tell the dismissal didn’t sit well with him.

“He takes his job very seriously,” Kismet commented. “All the servants do. They had my clothes put away before I even saw them. As I said, you were way too generous.”

“As I said, it was worth it. Kaldoran attire suits you. Especially that outfit.”

“Thank you. Your mother picked it out.”

“My mother? The queen?”

“Is there another?” She giggled. “She popped in for a visit today.”

“My mother came to see you?” He felt like a child’s talking toy, repeating everything said to it.

“What did she say?” He took a big gulp of spirits, hoping his mother hadn’t offended Kismet.

Not that that would be her style, but he’d blindsided both parents with a situation neither of them viewed as favorable.

“That she’s glad we got married.”

He swallowed hard and almost choked. “My mother said that?”

“Yep. Surprised the heck out of me.”

He was flabbergasted. “Did she mention my father?”

“He’s not on board yet.”

Not surprising. He doubted he would ever win his father’s approval. “What else did she say?”

She shrugged. “Not much. The rest was girl talk. Your mother is very nice, very down-to-earth—excuse the pun. Karma showed up, and we went through my clothes. Your mother is quite the fashion maven. She has a good eye for detail. She recommended this outfit for dinner tonight. We had a fun afternoon.”

Fun? He took another drink.

His mother could be fun—but few outside the immediate family got to see her softer, relaxed side.

With most people, she remained cordial, but cool and measured—even with Alia, whom he’d thought she’d favored.

She’d acted overly polite with Charday, whom she disliked.

This casual friendliness meant she must like his wife very much indeed—assuming the amity was genuine.

However, he’d never known his mother to fake fondness.

“I’m glad you had a nice visit,” he said, still astonished. The wheels in his brain spun, trying to make sense of it.

“How was your day?” she asked.

“Tedious.” He’d suffered a low-grade tension headache all day.

The king had dispatched him to meet with a coterie of royal advisors.

The mundanity of the trivia had nearly driven him insane.

Every single “issue” brought to his attention could have been handled by the advisor—or the advisor’s underling.

As the dinner hour approached, and the advisors continued to recite a litany of insignificant problems, he’d snapped at them to handle it and walked out.

He refused to miss dinner again—the time with Kismet provided the sole bright spot in days and nights of tedium, the museum dedication being the lone exception.

All week long, he’d been subjected to the worst sort of duties—the king’s passive-aggressive punishment for his disobedience.

Which made today’s visit by his mother rather interesting. He sipped his spirits.

Coincidence? Or parental divide and conquer mission? His father coming down hard on him, while his mother befriended his wife.

Any parent should be thrilled to have her as a daughter-in-law.

So, it wasn’t unlikely his mother would like her, except for the political considerations—the necessity to unite two previously feuding families and maintain the bloodline.

If future heirs were half human, Earth might one day claim right of rule over Kaldor.

What if his parents were trying to wear them down, break them up? I don't want Kismet to be hurt. She didn't deserve that. He enjoyed her company—limited though it had been. He went to take a drink and discovered an empty goblet. He picked up the carafe. "More spirits?" he asked.

"No, thank you. My glass is still full. One is my limit."

He nodded. "Wise. Our spirits are potent." He refilled his glass and took drink. "I have another public appearance you might be interesting in attending."

"Yes!"

He chuckled. "You don't know what it is yet."

"I'd still like to go. I like spending time with you, and it will give me a break from the etiquette classes."

"How are those going? Are you feeling more comfortable?"

"A little. Everything is so nuanced."

"It will get easier. Our culture and traditions will become second nature."

"If you say so," she said doubtfully.

He had faith in her. "I've been asked to speak at the dedication of a new hospital wing the day after tomorrow.

It won't be as fun as MAH, but afterward we can slip away, and I can show you some of Kaldor.

” The hospital wing dedication, like the MAH opening, had been scheduled long before his marriage, or his father would have squeezed in another punishment exercise.

Since the museum visit, the news of their marriage had begun to spread, but, after the ball, everyone would know. The more people saw them together, the greater the public speculation would be when their marriage dissolved.

However, not taking her out in public would invite rumors he was hiding her away because he was ashamed of her. Besides, everything a royal did fueled speculation. People would talk. Period. He walked a thin line, trying to avoid saying too much or too little, doing too much or doing not enough.

Tomorrow, he had to speak with Charday before she heard about the marriage.

Kaldor Celebrity News had been there. He couldn’t delay any longer.

He looked forward to telling Charday he’d gotten married about as much as he enjoyed his father’s assignments.

Oddly, he had difficulty picturing Charday’s face, but he remembered her temper. He took a big gulp of spirits.

He hadn’t seen her in a couple of months.

At her instigation, he’d agreed to a “separation” to “rethink” their relationship.

She’d given him an ultimatum—marry her or else.

He would have married her if he could. But his hands had been tied.

Despite having been in the outer circle of royal life, she'd refused to accept the crown prince required the king's permission to marry.

Cosmic Mates galactic marriages being a loophole.

Hekkel! Charday and I could have joined Cosmic Mates, picked each other, and we could have married. He jerked, almost knocking over his goblet of spirits.

"Is something wrong?" Kismet asked, concern written on her face.

"No...no." He took a big drink.

"You've hardly touched your meal."

"Not hungry, I guess." He picked at his food but didn't eat.

More startling, unsettling than missing an opportunity to marry Charday was the lack of regret for not having thought of it. Shouldn't he be hating himself? Instead, he felt...a little relieved ? He glanced at the woman he did marry. No regrets there at all.

He tried to envision eating a quiet, casual dinner with Charday, and he didn't see it.

She would attend a banquet or a ball every night if she could.

She would have been bored to death at the Museum of Alien Horticulture.

She wouldn't have cared about the hospital dedication either.

Nor would she have been understanding when his duties took him away for long stretches, leaving her to her own devices.

Yet, Kismet, a stranger to the planet and their ways, had coped.

I don't want to marry Charday! Maybe he never really did.

But Kismet? He would do it all over again.

"I am glad I m-married you." His words slurred a bit.

Her smile seemed to light up the room. His vision blurred from the spirits, but for the first time, he saw her with blinders off, unfettered from dysfunctional attachments. Somehow, he had stumbled into the right decision.

"I'm glad I married you, too," she said.

He regarded her with unsteady steadiness. How glad? Glad enough to go the distance? Maybe make it permanent? Did he want that?

Yes.

Or was this sudden attachment a result of the fermented spirits?

No. I am falling into...fondness with her.

Her eyebrows arched, and he realized he might be staring. He dropped his gaze to the table. Her plate was empty, her glass full—the opposite of his. "Did you get enough to eat?" he asked.

"More than enough."

He picked up his empty goblet. I should have eaten more, drunk less. "I overdid it a little," he admitted and set the goblet down.

“A little,” she agreed.

“I don’t normally overindulge. I ap-apologize.” He hiccupped.

“Apology accepted. Maybe you should retire to your room while you can still walk.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

“Walking is not the problem,” he said. His mouth would be the problem. He pushed away from the table, and, when he stood up, the room started to spin. He needed to leave before the delayed effects of the liquor kicked in and he said something he regretted.

Kaldoran spirits imbibed in large enough quantities acted like a truth serum. There was no telling what he might reveal. He shouldn’t have drunk so much, but he’d needed to blow off steam. He was fed up with his father controlling his life. Duty, duty, duty. What about his happiness...his heart?

“Stop interfering in my life!” he muttered.

“What?”

Hekkel! He’d said that aloud? That was exactly the sort of thing he was afraid of.

“Not you,” he said. “My father.” He paused.

“Again, I’m sorry for my behavior tonight.

” He listed toward the exit, disgusted with himself.

He’d been angry at his father for attempting to keep him and Kismet apart—and now he’d ruined their dinner by drinking too much.

“Let me help you.” She wrapped an arm around his waist.

He could still move under his own steam—not in a straight line, but he could get to his bedchamber. “You don’t need to do that. But I like—” Having you touch me. He slipped his arm around her waist, and they staggered down the hall.

Lewen appeared. “May I be of assistance?”

“No, thank you, Lewen. I’ve got it covered,” she answered before he could reply.

“I guess she’s got it covered.” He grinned at the butler.

“Very well, Your Highness.”

* * * *

Her mind awlirl, Kismet got Jaryk to his room.

Barely able to walk, he’d leaned on her heavily.

He’d seemed different at dinner—and not just because he’d gotten wasted.

He’d seemed less talkative, although more self-reflective.

He said he was glad he married her! She sensed a deeper message, like he’d wanted to say more.

Or was that her hopeful heart wishing for the moon?

But there’d been no mistaking the appreciative look in his eyes when he entered the dining room.

She guided him to the bed and wrestled his jacket off. “Let me pull back the—”

He collapsed.

“Covers,” she finished.

“The room is moving,” he said.

“I’m not surprised.” Even half of a tiny glass would get her drunk. He’d had a lot more. Luckily, he’d still been able to walk upright.

She slipped off his left shoe. “Put your foot on the floor.” She guided his lower leg off the bed.

“Oh, that’s better!”

“You never learned that little trick?” She removed his other shoe.

“What other tricks can you do?”

“Well, I guess I can charm your mother,” she joked, expecting him to chuckle.

The look in his eyes was dead serious. “And me. You charmed me.”

“Oh, um, thank you. I’ll uh, let you get some sleep.” She turned to leave.

He grabbed her wrist. “Don’t go.” He tugged, and she toppled over onto the bed. He rolled and bracketed his arms on either side of her.

His head dipped, and, for a heart-stopping moment, she thought he would kiss her, but he nuzzled her hair. “You smell good.”

What is he doing? “It’s the bath products...”

He shook his head. “No, it’s you.” His head dipped again, and, this time, he did kiss her, rubbing his lips against hers before lifting again. “I’ve wanted to do that since our wedding.”

Her heart fluttered like a trapped bird, except this bird enjoyed being trapped. But, what did his attention mean?

It means he’s drunk, idiot.

He kissed her again, this time with the gentle probe of his tongue against the seam of her lips. Unable to resist, she opened her mouth, and his tongue slid inside. Senses went wild. He tasted like spicy-sweet Kaldoran spirits and something masculine and heady, and oh, he smelled good , too.

His tongue coaxed hers, and she surrendered with full capitulation, kissing him like she’d been longing to do. She curled her hand around his nape and stroked his silky blue hair.

His sexy growl stirred her arousal.

She hugged his neck as they continued to kiss. When he lifted his head, the arousal in his gaze left no uncertainty as to his intentions. Her mouth dried with anticipation, but also wariness. What if this was the liquor talking? What if in the morning he regretted being with her?

However, sleeping together might draw them closer and cement their relationship. But it would also increase the likelihood she got her heart broken if they split up.

And what if it made day-to-day interactions awkward? She would hate to sacrifice their warmth and friendship for one night in the sack.

“Maybe this isn’t such a good idea,” she said.

“Why?” He nuzzled her hair. “You do smell good.”

Her stomach clenched with longing and desire. Be strong.

“It’s the liquor talking...”

“Really? I thought I was the one talking.” His lips brushed her neck, sending shivers down her spine.

She bit off a moan. “I don’t want you to have regrets.”

“I’ll regret it if I don’t,” he said and then lifted his head to scan her face.

“Perhaps it is you who will have regrets? Do you wish to stop?” His eyes were a little glassy, but there was no mistaking the desire, and she couldn’t help but respond to it.

Attraction had been simmering since the start.

Knowing he felt the same pull made it hard to resist. They were married .

They were expected to have sex. Maybe he didn’t love her, but wouldn’t a husband with benefits be the next best thing?

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “No, don’t stop.” She was drunk—drunk on him, on desire, on hope. There might be regrets, but she’d worry about them later.

He smiled then, a smile so sexy and engaging, doubt evaporated.

His head descended, and she gave herself up to his kiss, clinging to him and staking

her claim.

His mouth was soft, but hot and insistent, eliciting a powerful response from her.

He shifted so he didn't crush her to the mattress—or maybe so that he could stroke her breast. The sensation of his palm against her hard nipple stirred an ache for more intimate contact.

“We should take off—” She let out a moan and arched her neck as he kissed her throat. “Some clothes.”

“Um...yeah,” he agreed.

Her neck had always been sensitive, and when he buried his face against her throat and nuzzled her skin, the gentle nip of his teeth elicited a surge of wetness between her legs. He kissed away the sting, pressing his lips to her throat as he stroked her breast.

And then he went still, his body limp, lips still pressed to her throat.

What is he doing? “Jaryk?”

No answer.

She twisted and turned her head. Liquor-scented breath wafted across her face. His eyes were closed, not with ecstasy but...sleep.

He fell asleep? She didn't know whether to laugh or cry or pound the bed with frustration.

“Jaryk?” She shook his shoulder and got a snort for her trouble.

If so inebriated that he passed out in the middle of sex, sex probably wasn't a good idea. In the harsh light of day, he might feel she'd taken advantage of him. Given their relationship dynamic, if they did become intimate, it should be with a clear head. At least there won't be any regrets.

But he fell asleep in the middle of sex! Well, not quite the middle, more the start. I'm going to try not to feel insulted.

She was more amused than insulted. Sexually frustrated—but still amused.

She tried to wiggle out from under him, but his arm pressed on her chest, and one of his legs trapped hers.

And, maybe she didn't try too hard to wake him up.

It was pleasant, intimate in its own way, to lie with him, feeling the weight and warmth of his arm and leg, while listening to his gentle breathing.

She closed her eyes. Soon, she joined him in slumber.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

Jaryk awakened to dim morning light with a fuzzy mouth, a slightly aching head, and a throbbing conscience.

It had been years since he'd overindulged the way he had last night.

He truly hoped he hadn't behaved as boorishly as memory suggested he had.

He'd lost all inhibitions and caved to the temptation he'd been fighting.

It wasn't just the effects of the spirits.

His actions had been motivated by the combined effect of the epiphany he and Charday were a bad match—and the liquor.

But, in his heart of hearts, he didn't regret kissing Kismet—unless she regretted it, in which case, he did, too.

He would have to seek her out and find out. Apologize if need be.

He sighed and rolled over.

She's still here! She lay facing him, a hand under her cheek. She wore last night's clothing—as did he. She had looked stunning in Kaldoran attire, the native garments suiting her so well.

Like she suited him.

He touched her hair. Was her presence a positive sign? Or had she simply fallen asleep? He blew into his cupped hands. Ugh. His breath would shrivel the hardiest plants at the Museum of Horticulture. The scent of spirits was never better the second day.

Careful not to wake her, he slipped out of bed and padded into his bathing chamber, praying she wouldn't disappear in his absence.

After cleaning his teeth, he peeked into the other room.

Still sound asleep. Did he have time for a quick wash?

He didn't wish for her to wake and catch him in such a disreputable state.

He needed to improve upon his bad impression, not reinforce it.

He shed his wrinkled clothing and stepped into the cleansing unit, emerging fresh and dry. He donned a robe and returned to the bedchamber. Still here. He eased into bed and lay facing her, the better to study her.

Dark hair framed her face, calling attention to her delicate features—a pert little nose and a sexy mouth that quirked off center in an adorable way when she smiled. He knew she had pretty brown eyes that crinkled into half-moons with amusement.

He ogled her, noting a tiny twitch of her nose and the gentle rise and fall of her chest. Recalling the softness of her breasts, his cock began to harden.

He lifted his gaze to her face.

Her eyes were open. “What are you doing?”

“Watching you sleep?”

Her gaze took in his changed attire. “How long have you been awake?”

“Just a little while.”

“How are you feeling?”

“After my loss of self-control last night?” His mouth twisted. “Embarrassed, but physically fine.” His head ached a tad, but the shower had helped. “I’m sorry for getting drunk and passing out on you.” Literally on her—he had a vague recollection of collapsing on top of her.

“No harm done.”

“Do you, uh, have any regrets?” he asked.

“About kissing you?” She hesitated. “Not if you don’t.”

“If you don’t, then I don’t.” He paused. “I’ve been wanting to kiss you for a long time.”

“So, it wasn’t just the alcohol?”

“I’m 100 percent sober now.” He scooped her close and kissed her.

Part sigh, part moan, she released a sound of contentment and relaxed against him. He growled with satisfaction and relief, tangling his fingers in her hair, holding her even closer. He pressed soft kisses to her closed eyelids, her cute, alien shell ears, and her smooth creamy throat.

She slipped her hands inside his robe and splayed her palms across his chest. Nerve endings lit up at her touch against his naked skin. Heat sizzled, and he pressed his mouth to hers, his tongue dancing with hers. Her sensual alien scent filled his head, and he couldn't get enough of it.

He ached for her. "If you wish to leave, now would be a good time to do so." Don't go. Don't go.

"I want to stay."

Elation coiled with desire into an intense heat. This time, he would not fall asleep! He still couldn't believe he'd done that—but in a way, he figured it had worked out for the best, enabling him to be clearly present and alert during their first encounter.

She pushed his robe off his shoulders then rolled away and tugged at her tunic. He assisted with the removal, pulling it over her head and flinging the rumpled garment aside. Pants, underwear, and his robe were shed.

His erection felt hot and heavy. Being with her like this, her warm, womanly softness pressing against him, it amazed him he'd ever had any reservations.

Her hands were moving, igniting tingling heat.

She clasped his cock and caressed, causing him to shudder with need, but he reached out to her, cupping her breasts, stroking her hard nipples, smoothing over her stomach, and finally delving into the wet curls at the apex of her thighs.

Satisfaction filled him as she gasped and shuddered when he fondled her folds and clit.

Until this moment, he hadn't considered physical compatibility.

Of course, he'd entered into this marriage assuming they would not become intimate.

He'd appreciated her exotic beauty without thinking of her as different, yet he realized that had been a bit naïve.

With satisfaction and a small measure of relief, he noted her anatomy didn't differ greatly from female Kaldorans.

"Do I look the same as males from your planet?" he asked.

"Mm...better." She stroked his cock.

He chuckled and nuzzled her ear. "You do know how to stroke my ego."

"Is that what this is? Your ego?" She squeezed his erection.

Rising desire coursed through him, and he claimed her mouth while he caressed her clit, eliciting drenching wetness from her pussy.

Sweet nothings became gasps of desire and moans of encouragement when their bodies joined.

His balls drew tight, and his cock ached with intense pleasure as they found a timeless rhythm.

Mouths met in an open, wet kiss. Sensation coiled and centered in his throbbing erection as he plunged into her tight, contracting channel.

When she came, her pussy fluttered around his cock, and it ignited his own orgasm.

She dragged her fingertips along his spine, the slight scrape heightening his climax.

His body convulsed, and he released his seed in a shattering rapture.

Afterward, he panted while she lazily stroked his back, their bodies still joined, reluctant to part. He could stay like this forever. He lifted his head to seek her gaze. The satisfaction and tenderness in her smile brought an answering grin to his lips.

Smiles turned to chuckles. For him, it was the intimate joy of the moment, that something so unlikely—a Cosmic Mates marriage with an alien stranger—could turn out to be what he'd needed. Their laughter caused his softening cock to slip out of her, which caused them to shake with mirth even more.

He rolled to the side and pulled her into a fond embrace.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

“Your Highness, Ms. Kismet, your guests have arrived,” Lewen announced.

Wearing scowls, Karma and Falkor stomped into the dining room.

“Hey!” Kismet called out in a cheerful tone.

“Hi.” Karma squinted like she had a headache. “Why is he here?”

“You didn’t tell me she was invited,” Falkor said.

“Have a seat,” Jaryk said.

For tonight, Jaryk sat across from her at the short side of the table. Adjacent places had been set for their siblings so everybody could see each other and talk. Looking at their glowering expressions, she thought maybe she could have put one of them at the other end of the table.

Well, they’re just going to have to get along!

Yesterday and today, Kismet had attended functions with Jaryk, so there had been little chance to fill her sister in on the “new development,” that she and Jaryk had decided to make a go of their marriage.

Of Falkor, she’d seen nothing since the wedding, and she wished to get to know her brother-in-law better.

Their siblings had taken a dislike to each other, but they were all family now and

would have to learn how to get along.

She shot a resigned eye roll at Jaryk. His grin of amusement morphed to affection and appreciation. Warmth suffused her, and she lowered her lashes.

Falkor plunked into the chair next to Jaryk.

Karma sidled up to her and whispered in her ear, “Somebody did the horizontal tango.”

Her face heated further, this time from embarrassment. Kismet swatted at her. “Sit down.”

She laughed and took her seat. “When I’m right, I’m right.”

“What could you possibly be right about?” Falkor snapped.

“What a boorish prig you are,” Karma shot back.

“Could we make nice for one evening, please?” Kismet said.

“He started it!”

“Regardless of who started it, stop it, both of you,” Jaryk said. “Lewen, you may serve dinner.”

The butler dished out the food and set the plates in front of them. “Shall I remain, or shall I go, Your Highness?”

“We can handle it from here, thank you.”

The butler left. They picked up their utensils and started to eat.

“How have you been doing?” Jaryk asked Karma. “Have you been adjusting to palace life?”

“Pretty much. The palace is beautiful, and I’ve continued to explore—getting lost most of the time—I miss my navigator.” She glanced at Kismet.

“Sorry.” She hunched her shoulders. “I’ve been out with Jaryk.”

“No problem. You have responsibilities now.”

“We went to a hospital wing dedication today. The administrator gave us a tour, and I learned a lot about Kaldoran medicine. They have a holistic approach.”

“I would have enjoyed seeing that.” Karma sighed.

“My apologies,” Jaryk said. “I did not think to invite you. Would you care to attend some of these events?”

“Would that be all right?”

“It would be more than all right. There are far more requests for royal representation than we can fulfill.”

“She is not a royal,” Falkor said.

“She is the sister-in-law of a royal. And technically, neither is Kismet until the king deems it so.”

“Kismet is your wife!”

“And Karma is her sister—and you are being rude,” Jaryk said. He looked at Kismet. “I will inform the office of ceremonial events you are available. Initially, you can attend functions with me and Kismet, and when you feel confident, you may get some assignments of your own.”

“Great! Thank you.” She smiled happily then smirked at Falkor.

Kismet met her husband’s gaze. His eyes danced with amusement. Her lips twitched. If mediating the warfare between their siblings was the worst they faced, life would be smooth indeed.

She’d never been happier. At his invitation, she’d vacated her bedroom and moved into his. After just putting away her new wardrobe, the servants had transferred her clothing into Jaryk’s cavernous closet. She felt guilty for the double work, but they assured her it was no big deal.

She hadn’t gotten used to the royal treatment. She didn’t know if she would ever get comfortable with servants waiting on her and doing for her—wasn’t sure she wanted to get used to it.

But that didn’t impinge upon her happiness.

The last two days and nights had been magical.

As she’d hoped, the physical intimacy had fostered a deeper emotional closeness.

She might not be a royal, but Jaryk made her feel like a princess.

He was a considerate, hot lover and an attentive, doting husband.

She loved going with him to events and appreciated how he solicited her opinion and

listened intently to her.

He seemed fascinated by her life on Earth—just as his culture enthralled her.

Her life couldn't get any better.

Unless he loved me.

She was falling hard for him. The people obviously adored and respected him, which spoke to his character. She saw him through their eyes, and she respected him all the more. He treated her well. They had similar interests. He was handsome, easy to talk to, great in the sack. Amazingly humble.

He just hadn't uttered the three little words. Of course, she hadn't said them either, but she couldn't until she knew he felt the same way. Fondness and respect weren't the same as love.

I must be patient. Be there with him and for him and keep on keeping on.

And knock his socks off at the ball. She had her dress all picked out. The queen had offered the use of her hairdresser, so Kismet would be having her hair done by an expert. She wanted to be an irresistible vision.

"I'm looking forward to the ball," Karma said, as if she'd tapped into Kismet's wavelength.

"You are?" Falkor said.

"Uh-huh. The queen sent me a formal invitation," she replied smugly.

He looked like he'd swallowed something down the wrong pipe.

Jaryk held up his hand. “Whatever you’re going to say—don’t. The queen graciously included her, and we’re thrilled to have her attend.”

After choosing her gown, Kismet had given her twin her choice from the remainder. They wore the same size—if they often differed in fashion sense.

“You have a much better wardrobe to shop from now,” Karma had said. “I never liked any of your other clothes.”

“Don’t ruin it, okay?” Kismet had said.

She prayed their siblings would behave themselves at the ball and wouldn’t cause a scene.

Jaryk had regaled her with tales of his brother’s shenanigans.

His description of Falkor as impulsive and hotheaded could be applied to her sister, too.

And her sister had never been one to roll with the punches—or let a slight pass without retort.

“Why don’t we take our dessert into the library?” Jaryk suggested as dinner wound down. “There’s a new hologram game requiring four players I’ve been wanting to try.”

“You have video games?” Karma looked interested.

“Holographic characters. We each pick one.”

“Great idea!” Kismet seconded the motion. If their siblings were engaged in an

activity, they'd be less likely to fight—unless the game involved fighting, in which case Karma's character and Falkor's would try to kill each other.

They stood up, and Falkor said, "Jaryk, could I have a private word with you?"

"We'll meet you in the library. I'll bring the desserts!" Kismet took the tray from the serving cart, and she and her sister left for the library.

* * * *

Jaryk eyed his brother. "If this is about Karma..."

"It's not. People have been asking me about your marriage, so word has gotten out. Have you told Charday yet?"

"Yesterday." Jaryk nodded. "It went well."

"It did?"

In between yesterday's public events, Jaryk had sought out Charday.

He'd dreaded it, but he owed it to her to tell her face-to-face the relationship was permanently over.

He'd debated whether to tell Kismet about Charday but decided the past must remain in the past. The past relationship had no bearing on their marriage, and he wished to avoid giving his new wife any doubts about his commitment.

In truth, he was ashamed he'd married her just so he could marry somebody else.

"Remarkably well," Jaryk said.

Falkor cocked his head and frowned. “What did you say?”

“That I had gotten married, and I was happy with my new wife. I told Charday that while I had affection and respect for her, we weren’t compatible in the long run, that our personalities would not mesh well.” It surprised him he’d ever believed Charday would be a suitable wife.

“And she said...”

“She understood, and she’d begun having doubts about our suitability herself as well as the burden of responsibility of marriage to a royal.”

“That doesn’t sound like Charday.”

“I admit, I was surprised by how well she took the news, but we hadn’t seen each other in a couple of months, anyway. Absence doesn’t always make the heart grow fonder. I guess her interest in me cooled as mine did for her.”

Falkor crossed his arms. “If you say so. You know her better than I do.” Then he flashed a smug smile. “Marriage seems to be working out, huh? I guess my idea to sign you up for Cosmic Mates was a good one.”

“ One good idea is not much of a track record. But yes, marriage to Kismet has worked out better than I could have imagined.” Contentment brought a smile to his face.

He’d gone from counting the days until he could be free to envisioning a long, happy future.

“Mother likes her a lot. Father is the only holdout now.”

“I don’t think Father would like anybody he didn’t have a hand in picking. He won’t give up easily.”

“Neither will I.” Kismet was the wife he wanted.

“What about Alia?”

“She knows the engagement is off.” The queen had confirmed Alia and her family had been notified. He hadn’t contacted her personally because he hardly knew the woman. Their engagement had been a cut-and-dried political merger, not a love match or even a friendship.

“Will she be at the ball?”

“I highly doubt it.” He couldn’t imagine she would attend.

“She might be curious to see who you threw her over for.”

“I didn’t throw her over. I never agreed to marry her in the first place. And I don’t think she was keen on me either.”

“Kismet knows about Alia, right?”

“Yes.”

“What about Charday?”

“Charday is a woman in my past. I saw no reason to talk about a former lover with my wife. Speaking of which, I’ve left her alone too long. Let’s join the women.”

Falkor pulled a face.

“What is your problem with the sister?” Jaryk asked.

“She goes out of her way to annoy me.”

“And you haven’t been doing the same to her?”

“I’ve been my normal charming self.”

“You’d have to develop some charm first.”

Falkor palmed his chest. “You wound me, Brother.”

“You should be nicer to her. She’s family.”

“Is that an order, Your Highness?” He arched a brow.

As future king, Jaryk outranked his younger brother, but he’d never used his position to order him around. “A suggestion. You could take her to some of your charitable events and appearances.”

“I’d sooner stab myself in the heart.”

“You want to know what I think?”

“No, but you’re going to tell me anyway.”

“You protest too much. Your problem isn’t that she bugs you, but that she won’t give you the time of day. Probably you did try to charm her; you failed, and now your inflated ego is wounded.”

“I think you need to become a whole lot wiser before you become king.” Falkor

stalked off.

Jaryk followed him into the library and loaded the game into the console. Falkor flopped into an armchair.

“Everything okay?” Kismet whispered after he joined her on a settee.

“Fine.”

“Falkor doesn’t look happy.”

“I told him to be nicer to your sister.” He glanced at Karma seated on an adjacent settee. It suddenly struck him as odd that the two sisters weren’t seated together. “Everything okay between you two?”

“She gave me an earful on Falkor’s faults. I finally told her I didn’t want to hear any more. She’s sulking.”

So was Falkor. “Maybe this game will help. My brother is very competitive. The game involves teams. You and me against the two of them.”

“Maybe they’ll unite against a common opponent?”

“That’s the hope,” he said.

* * * *

“Thank the Gods of Kaldor they’re gone!” Jaryk exclaimed after their guests had left, and they retired to their bedchamber.

Kismet giggled. “Tell me again why we invited both of them to dinner at the same

time?” Their siblings had bickered throughout the entire game—yet still managed to win.

“We must have been crazy,” he replied, pulling her into his arms and kissing her. She hugged his neck, and he roved his hands down her backside as he inched them to the bed. “You feel good. You smell good.”

“You, too.” She kissed him, tugging at the fastening of his dinner jacket. “What did Falkor want to talk to you about when he pulled you aside after dinner?”

He’d been hoping she wouldn’t ask, but since she had, he needed to tell her the truth. “There is a woman I had a relationship with. Falkor wondered if she was aware I’d gotten married.”

“Someone other than Alia?”

“Yes. She needed to be informed I’d gotten married before the news came out publicly.”

“Wait...you were seeing her while you were engaged to Alia?” Kismet pulled away.

“The engagement hadn’t been formalized, and it was being arranged by the king and queen without my consent.”

“Why didn’t you marry this other woman?”

Hekkel! The conversation had veered into the direction he’d feared it would go.

He raked a hand through his hair. He’d come to realize he hadn’t loved Charday.

He’d lusted for her. He’d been fond of her, but if he was going to be ugly-honest, his

father's disapproval had enhanced her appeal.

My act of rebellion. I guess I'm not any different from Falkor.

"I'm a royal. It would have required the king's permission, and he refused to give it."

"But we got married through Cosmic Mates."

"A loophole."

"So, you would have married her instead of me if you could have? This was never about Alia, was it?"

"What matters is I married you. You're the one I want. The one I'm falling in love with. I'm not interested in Alia or Charday. I don't want anyone but you."

"How can I believe that? You lied to me."

"It's the truth. Nobody matters to me but you."

"Now—maybe." Her face froze. He could see another damning epiphany sweeping over her. "You said Falkor pulled you aside to find out if this—this—Charday—knew you'd gotten married. You admitted she needed to know you were no longer available. Does she now know?"

"Yes."

"When did she find out?"

"Yesterday," he said.

“So, when you excused yourself to take care of some boring business in between our events, you left me to go see her ?”

“To tell her we were done, and I’d gotten married.”

“You lied to me!”

“Kismet, please—it’s you I love and want.”

“Don’t you dare use that word with me!” She spun around and charged into her former bedroom. The door sealed behind her.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

“You look like hell.” Karma ushered Kismet into her suite.

“Thanks.” She’d cried for half the night in her lonely, too-large bed. She’d expected Jaryk to follow her after she stormed out, and, when he didn’t, she felt worse. Then she overslept. By the time she’d gotten up, he’d left for the day without her.

The gulf between them stretched as vast and wide as a river—and she didn’t know how to cross it. She sought out the one person she could confide in.

“Did something happen between dinner and this morning?” Her sister, still in her jammies, eyed Kismet’s jeans and sweatshirt—Earth attire.

She nodded.

“Would you like some bittersweet while you tell me about it?” Kaldor didn’t have coffee beans—but a native herb called bittersweet brewed a surprisingly coffee-like tea.

“A gallon of it, please. Thank you.” Her eyelids had swelled to balloons from weeping, and she felt hungover.

Her sister fixed a cup from a pot on a tray, handed it to her, then curled her legs under her on the sofa. She patted the seat. “Sit. Come tell me about it.” She picked up her own cup.

Kismet sank into the sofa and gratefully took a drink. “Jaryk has a girlfriend.”

“What?” Karma leaped to her feet, spilling bittersweet all over herself.

“Are you all right? Did you burn yourself?”

“I’m fine. It was barely warm.” She wiped at her chest. “You mean, he’s seeing Alia?”

“No. I guess I should say, he had a girlfriend he wished to marry. That’s the real reason he avoided marriage to Alia. But the king didn’t approve of Charday . I’m guessing he figured marriage to a human would make Charday acceptable.”

“What a dog!”

“Yesterday, when we returned to the palace, between public venues, he disappeared for a while. I thought he had other official business—but he’d snuck off to see Charday.”

“The pig!”

“He went to break off their relationship.” Supposedly. Or did he still intend to see her?

“Did he now?” Karma fumed on her behalf. “How did you find this out?”

“He told me.”

“If he was sneaking around, why would he bother to tell you?”

“Because, apparently, Falkor knew all about it.”

“The weasel! Of course, he did—but what difference did that make?”

“Remember when the men didn’t come to the library right away? Falkor had pulled him aside to ask about Charday. When we got to our suite, I asked him about it. I put him on the spot, and he broke down and told me the truth.”

“Stinking polecats!” Karma said.

“Polecats?”

“I’m running out of animals low enough to describe them.”

Despite her anguish, Kismet laughed.

“He said he loves me.” Those were the words she’d longed to hear—but not the way she had, not as an apology, an excuse, an attempt to smooth things over. How could she believe him now?

“Too little, too late. The jerk!”

Her sister’s words echoed her own feelings, but the vehemence caused her to wonder if maybe she judged him too harshly.

What if he had meant the I love you? He hadn’t seemed like the kind of man who would fling the L-word around as casually as he removed his socks.

He had said at the start he’d intended their marriage to be temporary and platonic—he just hadn’t offered up the whole story.

But, why would he? They’d been strangers set up by meddling siblings.

Then they’d gotten to know each other. She could tell he genuinely enjoyed her company. The relationship turned physical. Emotionally, they’d grown closer.

His recent behavior didn't seem to indicate he had feelings for another woman. What if he really does care for me? Maybe I shouldn't have rushed out last night. I should have let him explain. She wished she'd had a chance to talk to him before he left for the day. Why did I have to oversleep!

"I need to talk to Jaryk," Kismet said. "I may have leaped to the wrong conclusion."

"It won't do any good. We should go back to Earth," Karma said. "End the charade now."

"That's rather drastic, isn't it?" Her marriage was not a charade!

"Not if he's a pig-dog-polecat."

"He's not a pig-dog-polecat!"

"From what you've said, he seems to be."

"I overreacted. He and I need to talk this out." Her sister was always willing to listen, always sympathetic, but they didn't see eye to eye. She didn't know Jaryk the way she did. "Thanks for the ear and the bittersweet. I'm going to try to find Jaryk."

* * * *

As Kismet left the suite, Karma blew on her fingernails and polished them on her pajama top. "My work here is done."

Besotted, Jaryk had gazed at her twin like she owned the moon and the stars. No man had ever looked at either of them like that. The man was a keeper, and she refused to let her twin screw up a great thing.

Unfortunately, whatever she said, her twin would disagree with and do the opposite. If she'd defended him, Kismet would have been convinced marrying him had been a mistake. So, she'd dissed and criticized him. The reverse psychology had worked like a charm. It always did.

She couldn't guess at the whole story involving Charday and Alia, but she was a great judge of character. Jaryk was a prince in character as well as title.

Falkor, on the other hand, was a pig-dog-polecat. It was hard to believe two siblings could be such total opposites.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

Jaryk trudged through the palace halls, weighed by weariness and trepidation.

He'd hoped to talk to Kismet before now, but she'd been fast asleep when he'd gotten up yesterday morning.

He'd left her to slumber, unaware he'd be gone all day and overnight.

Unexpectedly, the king had dispatched him to the far ends of Kaldor to meet with a group of disgruntled nobles.

Then a violent electrical storm blew in, grounding his transport and knocking out communications.

Unable to contact Kismet and forced to spend the night, he feared she'd think he'd abandoned her because he'd gotten angry at her accusations.

He wasn't angry, but even if he was, he would not subject her to the silent treatment. He would address the problem openly and honestly. One day, she would discover that about him.

The trip couldn't have come at a worse time. It was like his father was deliberately trying to keep them apart. Divide and conquer. The king wouldn't be that diabolical, would he?

Jaryk had barely got back in time for the gala.

There would be little opportunity to have a heart-to-heart and clear the air before the

ball.

Kismet was the only woman for him. The realization he'd hurt her had reinforced how much he loved her.

He could kick himself for having told her of his feelings in the middle of a fight.

I botched that. Would she believe him now?

They didn't have history or longevity to bolster the veracity of his declaration.

He'd lusted for Charday—he hadn't loved her.

There'd been fire, but no warmth. With his wife, he had both.

He wished Charday well—as he would any old friend—but the flame had extinguished.

In fact, when he'd met with her to tell her he'd gotten married, he'd found it hard to believe he'd been attracted to her at all.

Kismet was his present and his future.

After the ball, he would take Kismet away from the palace, the machinations of the king, and the distractions.

Time alone together would give them space to focus on each other and their marriage.

He would prove to her how much he loved her.

Normally averse to requesting his mother's intercession, he'd ask her to keep the king

from intervening with another trivial public engagement.

“Good evening, Your Highness!” Lewen met him at the door. “There is no time to waste. Your valet is waiting to help you dress. You have just enough time to get ready for the ball.”

“Where is my wife?”

“Ms. Kismet has dressed and gone. She and Ms. Karma are meeting the protocol tutor to review the etiquette one last time.” The grand, formal event required specific behaviors from how to address the king and queen to how to greet the guests and where and how to stand during the announcement ceremony.

“How did she seem? In good spirits?” he asked then realized he should keep their private affairs private. “Not nervous, about the ball, I hope,” he amended.

“She was composed. And quite lovely. You are a fortunate man, Your Highness.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“May I speak freely, Your Highness?”

“Of course, Lewen.”

“Then, may I suggest you make haste and dress.”

He clapped his butler on the shoulder. “Thank goodness I have you to keep me on track. Would you please send a message to my wife and tell her I will meet her in the anterior reception area of the grand ballroom?” If he hurried, they might have time for a few words.

“Absolutely.”

He found his valet, a jittery little man named Cashon, pacing. His face lightened with relief at the sight of Jaryk.

“I need to clean up,” Jaryk said. “I will need fresh undergar—”

Cashon handed him a small pile of folded clothes.

“Ments,” Jaryk finished. “Thank you.”

“Do you have a preference of formal wear, Your Highness?”

“Just something appropriate. You pick. You have better fashion sense than I do.”

“Your Highness is a man of the world. You flatter me,” Cashon said, but his entire face lit up as if he’d received the ultimate compliment.

After emerging from the cleansing unit, Jaryk donned his clean underwear and reentered his bedchamber.

He stifled a groan at what Cashon had selected.

He found no fault with the pale-orange color of the two-piece suit, realizing his valet had chosen it because it would complement his blue hair.

But a row of at least a hundred tiny darker-orange button gems ran down each sleeve of the tunic from collar to cuff.

He couldn’t just pull it over his head and be done.

The garment required a special tool to pull the buttons through the tiny loops.

It would take forever to get dressed. I hate formalwear.

“I don’t have a lot of time,” he said.

“That’s why I’m here. I am very quick,” Cashon said.

Criticizing the selection would undermine his earlier compliment, so he said, “Fine. Good choice.”

Cashon beamed.

Jaryk donned the leggings then pulled on the tunic, the unfastened sleeves hanging like folded wings.

Beginning at the collar and working downward to the cuffs, Cashon nimbly pulled the jewels through the eyes, zipping up the garment.

The valet’s speed had been no boast; he got him dressed in less than a tenth of the time he’d expected.

Ankle boots completed the ensemble, then Cashon pinned the Crest of Kaldor to Jaryk’s chest and stood back to examine his handiwork. He nodded. “Now, your hair.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?” He’d combed it before leaving the cleansing chamber.

“It is not quite right.”

With a suffering sigh, he sat, and the valet combed his hair into perfect order,

trimming a little around his ears before spraying it into place with a light adhesive.

Jaryk preferred simple attire. A man should be able to dress himself with little time, effort, or fanfare.

His lips quirked as he envisioned the time Kismet must have spent getting ready—she probably had hours invested with the hairdresser alone.

He couldn't wait to see her—eager to put things right and just be with her.

After tonight, everyone would know she was his wife.

Lastly, Cashon picked up a brush and carefully added three stripes across Jaryk's nose and cheeks. He leaned back to take a look. "You are ready now, Your Highness."

"Excellent work, as usual." Jaryk dismissed him with a word of thanks.

"It is my pleasure." Cashon departed.

Jaryk ran his finger inside the too-tight collar of the tunic jacket. He could still breathe, so he supposed he could suffer it one evening.

He'd forgotten to eat, but he had little appetite anyway, and servers would be strolling the perimeter of the ballroom with trays of delicacies. He wouldn't starve.

With a spring in his step, he went to rendezvous with his wife.

* * * *

No fewer than a dozen people, mostly relatives, waylaid him, delaying him further.

Word of his marriage had spread, and they sought to offer their congratulations.

By the time he reached the anteroom, an hour had passed since his arrival at the palace, and the ball was already underway.

His tardiness didn't matter—he would be expected to make an entrance—but he'd hated to keep Kismet waiting.

She sat on a settee, clasping her hands. “Jaryk!” She got to her feet.

Her hair had been curled into ringlets and swept off her face, the better to view her eyes highlighted by a skillful application of color.

She wore an iridescent off-the-shoulder gown in Kaldor blue with sheer sleeves, a clinging but modest bodice, and a full skirt, its hem skimming the tops of her matching low-heeled slippers.

She looked stunning, amazing, beautiful.

His heart swelled with pride and longing. I must make things right between us. “I’m so sorry I kept you waiting.”

“I was afraid you weren’t coming.”

“Lewen didn’t deliver my message?”

“He did. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here. I meant earlier. You didn’t come home all night.”

He grimaced. “A freak storm grounded my transport and rendered communication systems inoperable. I only got back a short time ago.”

“I was afraid you were avoiding me.”

“I wouldn’t do that.” He glanced around in frustration.

They didn’t have much time, but he hated to leave her wondering.

Two guards serving as footmen stood at the ballroom door.

With so many people in attendance, security had been heightened.

“We need to talk. You deserve the whole truth. I owe you that. We shouldn’t have secrets—”

The door opened to admit Falkor. “There you are! Father is fit to be tied. He sent me to get you. Your absence has been noted.”

“Fine. We’re coming.” Jaryk waved at him to go away.

His brother bowed to Kismet. “You look beautiful.”

Jaryk could kick him and then kick himself for letting his brother beat him to the compliment.

She smiled. “Thank you.”

Finally, Falkor left.

“You do look amazing.”

She gave him a wooden smile and a muttered thanks, but when he offered his arm to escort her into the ballroom, she said, “You look very handsome. The color suits

you.”

“Thank you .”

“How did you get all those little jeweled buttons fastened?”

“Cashon, my valet, hooked them. Getting dressed is partly what took so long. That and having everybody and their cousin stop me to congratulate me. Again, I’m sorry I kept you waiting.”

Automatic doors had been switched to manual mode so comings and goings could be monitored. The guards swung the massive panels open, and Jaryk entered the ballroom with his wife.

* * * *

If Jaryk hadn’t had hold of her arm, Kismet might have fled. She’d never imagined , let alone seen , such intimidating grandeur. The closest she’d come to a royal ball had been her high school prom, and it was no contest.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:24 am

It was a toss-up as to which was more ornate and decorated—the massive ballroom or the guests. These were the nobles, the richest of the rich dressed in their most elegant finery, no doubt designed specifically for the ball. No off-the-rack purchases for this crowd!

The gentlemen wore breeches and jackets of the finest fabrics in a blaze of colors. Jewels sparkled in the ladies' brilliant gowns. Hairstyles were intricate creations of curls and braids. The vivid fashion created a vertigo-inducing kaleidoscope as dancing couples whirled on the dance floor.

Floating sparkling chandeliers moved with the elegantly clad guests as if they were works of art deserving of lighted display. Even the musicians and the servers passing around hors d'oeuvres and alcoholic beverages were dressed in formal wear.

She supposed her gown, created by the palace designer, was as stylish as the rest, but insecurity made her feel like a little kid playing dress-up. Everything she'd learned in her comportment and etiquette classes flew out of her head, leaving her woefully unprepared.

The changes in the ballroom astounded her.

She'd peeked at it during a tour of the palace.

It had been grand before, but now? The domed ceiling had somehow been gilded just for the event.

New artwork had been hung, including larger-than-life portraits of the king and

queen.

Stands of exotic flowers perfumed the perimeter and the entrances to alcoves where dancers could take a respite.

The monarchs appeared larger-than-life, as well, seated upon thrones on a dais overlooking the dancers. They were too far away to see their faces, but the king's posture suggested...smugness?

She smoothed a nervous hand over the skirt of her gown.

She'd feel more like she belonged if her marriage were more solid.

So much remained unsettled. Jaryk seeking out Charday without telling her still felt like a betrayal.

And his recent words about telling her everything, and "owing" her sounded ominous.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"No," she replied honestly, wishing they could have talked beforehand and cleared the air. Then I might be more equipped to deal with all of this.

Who am I kidding? I'll never be equipped for this. The simple, straightforward public events she'd attended had given her a false sense of confidence. I'm never going to measure up. I'm a fraud. An interloper. No wonder the king objects to our marriage.

A lump clogged her throat. "I don't fit in here."

"Yes, you do. You're with me, so you fit in."

He'd meant to be reassuring, but he'd proven her point. Because of him, people were forced to accept her—or act like they did. However, she would not be accepted on her own merits. She was a carp out of water. You can put a pretty dress on a fish, but it's still a fish.

She scanned the crowd for her sister, but she didn't see her. After Jaryk had failed to return to the palace, the sisters had arranged to go to the ball together, but when she'd gotten word she was supposed to meet Jaryk, she'd sent her sister on ahead without her.

“The king will announce our marriage midway through the evening, right?” she verified. That's what she'd been told in her classes.

“Yes. Until then, we meet and mingle. And dance—would you care to dance?”

“All right.” Now that the prince had arrived, everyone would take their cues from him. If the royals didn't dance, no one else would either.

He took her hand and led her onto the gleaming stone floor. If she'd hoped they could dissolve and disappear into the crowd, it wasn't meant to be. Dancers moved away, making them the center of attention. All eyes seemed to be on them as Jaryk led her into a dance.

Thank goodness for the classes—and for muscle memory. She managed not to flub up too noticeably, missing a step and stomping on his foot only once. “Sorry.”

“You're doing fine. You're a natural to pick it up so quickly.”

Natural disaster.

The scrutiny was palpable. Who is she? Why isn't he with Alia? She couldn't hear

what people were saying over the music, but her neck prickled from the speculation, and her imagination filled in the blanks.

The musicians struck up another tune, and he segued into a different dance. “You’re an excellent dancer,” she said. Where are we? Are we still good? You said you loved me, and then you disappeared overnight. Is it really over with Charday?

“Years of practice,” he said. “But thank you.”

At the end of the set, he would have continued the next one, but she said, “Maybe we could take a breather?”

“Certainly.” He led her out of the throng to the perimeter.

A waiter strolled by with a tray of delicacies. “Your Highness?”

“Kismet?” Jaryk said.

“No, thank you.” Anxiety churned her stomach so much, she didn’t dare consume anything.

Jaryk accepted a couple of tiny tarts and something that looked like caviar on a cracker but probably wasn’t. “I missed dinner.” He downed the tidbits.

“I didn’t eat either,” she replied.

“Be sure you eat before you drink,” he warned.

“I will.” She would not risk getting drunk and making a spectacle of herself.

“There you are!” Her face slightly flushed, Karma burst out of the crowd in a swirl of

magenta. “I was starting to think you had stood me up. Hello, Jaryk.”

“Hello, Karma. I’m the reason she’s late. I got delayed.”

Karma grabbed a spikey puff from a waiter’s tray and popped it into her mouth. Jaryk took one, but Kismet declined.

“This is the best party ever!” Karma gushed. “I hope I get a chance to thank the queen for the invite—if I don’t, please let her know how much I appreciate it.”

“I will,” Jaryk said.

“Have you been dancing much?” Kismet asked.

“Oh, my goddess! Yes! I can barely get a break. Being human, I’m a novelty. The men are lining up.” She grabbed a drink from a passing waiter and took a gulp.

Despite the emotional turmoil, she chuckled. “Kar—you were a novelty on Earth, too.”

“Don’t tell me—” Jaryk muttered.

“She’s right, I was,” Karma said.

He shook his head and looked at Kismet. “Will you be all right alone for a few minutes? I, uh, need to check on something.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll be right back, I promise.”

“I’ll stay with her,” Karma said.

“I don’t need a babysitter!” Sure, she’d felt a little uneasy, but she was a grown-ass woman. “I’ll be fine. Do what you need to do.”

He touched her shoulder and disappeared into the throng.

“I wonder what that’s all about,” Karma said.

“I guess I’ll find out when he returns.”

“Are you two okay, then? You made up?”

“We didn’t get to talk. He barely got back for the ball.”

“Did you find out why he was gone for so long?”

“A storm grounded his transport.”

“I knew it had to be something like that. The man loves you.”

Kismet looked at her in surprise. “You called him a pig-dog-polecat.”

“But he’s a devoted pig-dog-polecat,” she retorted and then narrowed her eyes.

“What is it? What are you looking at?”

“That woman keeps staring at us.”

“What woman?”

“The one about to pop out of her lavender dress.” She pointed surreptitiously with her pinky.

The deep V of the woman’s daring sleeveless gown exposed most of her ample breasts. Long blue hair was gathered over one shoulder, the better to display her bare skin. Flawless makeup enhanced regal features, but there was nothing majestic about her haughty, disapproving scowl.

Karma pointedly wrinkled her nose.

“Please, don’t do that,” Kismet said.

“Why not? She’s glowering at us .”

“One, we don’t know who she is. She could be someone important.” Probably everybody here was important. “Second, I’m married to the crown prince. We’re living among the royal family. We must practice a little decorum,” she chided.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I’ll try to rein in my worst impulses.”

“You can start now.”

“I said I was sorry—”

“Hello, ladies.” Falkor materialized out of the crowd.

Her sister turned and treated him to a syrupy smile. “Good evening, Your Highness,” she said with such exaggerated deference, she clearly meant the opposite.

“Good evening,” Kismet said. “Who is the woman in lavender?” But the woman had disappeared. She shrugged. “Never mind. She’s gone.”

“Where’s Jaryk?” Falkor frowned.

“He had something to attend to,” she replied.

A handsome man in a dark-green suit approached and bowed to Falkor. “Your Highness.” Then he looked at Karma. “Would you share this dance with me?”

She glanced at Kismet.

“Go. I’m fine.”

She beamed a bright smile. “I’d love to! Thank you.” She held out her hand; the man took it and led her onto the floor. The slow, graceful glide of moves had them circling each other while gradually closing in until they joined hands and twirled.

“Damn, she’s good!” Kismet observed. Her sister picked up dance steps even faster than she did.

Falkor glowered.

Karma happened to glance their way. Her gaze locked on the prince. Then she tilted her head and flashed a come-hither smile at her dance partner.

Falkor growled.

Kismet smothered a grin. Well, well, well.

The dance ended. Karma’s partner escorted her back and then kissed her knuckles. “We will dance again later?”

“I would like that.” She treated him to a sunny smile.

Falkor radiated animosity, and the man scurried away.

“That was a rather showy display.” Falkor’s lip curled.

“I’m here to dance, not sit on the sidelines.” She glanced at Kismet. “No offense.”

“I’ve already danced with Jaryk,” she replied. What is taking him so long? Should she stay? Or go and try to find him? “You two should dance,” she urged.

“I think not—” Karma said.

“She would not be a good partner.” Falkor sniffed.

“I would be an excellent partner. I’m a fine dancer!”

The musicians started up a faster number with a throbbing 4/4 accented rhythm.

Her twin and Jaryk’s brother moved onto the floor, neither able to resist a challenge.

They clasped hands and launched into the dance moves.

Their feet and bodies moved in perfect sync while their faces maintained a scowl.

The way they glared at each other reminded her of the animosity of the glowering woman in lavender.

Who was she, and why had she seemed so disapproving? She doesn’t even know me.

She happened to catch her sister’s eye and pantomimed she was going to look for Jaryk. Her sister flashed an okay sign and resumed scowling.

Kismet hugged the perimeter, avoiding the dancers. She accepted a couple of tidbits from a server and a goblet of spirits. She had no intention of drinking. Holding the glass made her feel less conspicuous, like she was doing something. My emotional-support goblet.

In the alcoves, couples and small groups sat, chatted, and nibbled in a more private setting.

Traversing the length of the ballroom, she saw no sign of Jaryk. Upon reaching the front, she hesitated to walk by the king and queen. Should she say hello? Normally, one would wait to be addressed.

Her question about what to do was settled when the queen beckoned her. “Are you enjoying the ball?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Not exactly.

“The marriage announcement will be made in about two hours.” The queen smiled benevolently.

That long? Two more hours? “Wonderful.”

“Are you looking for Jaryk?” the king asked.

“Actually, I am.”

He gestured with a desultory wave. “I spotted him on that side of the room a few moments ago.”

“That’s where I was headed. Thank you, Your Majesty.” She’d complete the circle of the ballroom, and, if she didn’t find him, she’d wait where he’d left her. Eventually,

he would have to surface.

She bowed and slipped past the dais. One-on-one, the queen was a lovely, warm person. The king? Not so much. Both rulers sitting on their throne at a royal ball? Intimidating as hell.

She peeked into alcoves as she passed. Where is he? She approached the last niche and looked inside. She couldn't believe her eyes.

A few moments before.

That can't be Charday. But there was no mistaking the woman in the strappy lavender gown. What the heckel is she doing here? Jaryk had assumed she'd accepted he'd moved on, and there could be no further contact between them. She said she felt the same—that they weren't a good fit.

He didn't wish to hurt her, but his loyalty belonged to his wife. What would she think if she discovered his former lover had come to their marriage announcement ball? She'd already had concerns about the past relationship—fearing it wasn't over. I have to get Charday out of here.

“Will you be all right alone for a few minutes? I, uh, need to check on something,” he excused himself.

“What is it?” Kismet furrowed her brow.

“I'll be right back, I promise.” He darted into the crowd. Dodging dancers, he swiveled his head. There had to be at least six hundred guests wearing their most colorful formal wear—and lavender was a trending color. Every time he thought he spotted her, it turned out to be someone else.

Maybe he was wrong? Maybe it wasn't Charday.

He almost collided with a couple. “Excuse me!”

“Our fault, Your Highness,” said the man.

I'm getting in the way. Darting out of the dancing fray, he found himself in front of the throne. The king's bland expression sent a chill down his spine. "Father, what did you do?" Jaryk demanded.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. What I did—well, what the queen and her staff did—was plan this elegant ball to announce your marriage to the human, which we'll do shortly."

"Rullok..." His mother's eyes narrowed on her husband. "Did you do something you shouldn't have?"

"No, sweetums, I did not."

"All right, then. My apologies, Father." He doubted the king would outright lie to the queen.

Must have been my imagination. He'd started to rejoin his wife when he caught a flash of lavender. Ignore it. It's not her.

But he would wonder all night long if he didn't check, and he wanted to give his bride his undivided attention.

He took off after the woman who skipped among the people, almost as if she was leading him on a chase.

He lost her once but then spotted a lavender skirt disappearing into an alcove at the far end of the ballroom.

He approached and took a peek inside.

Hekkel! The lavender gown dipped so low, it almost exposed the woman's buttocks.

He recognized that bare backside. “Charday, what are you doing here?”

She did a slow pivot. “Jaryk...I hoped we’d encounter each other.”

“Why are you here?”

“I couldn’t turn down an invitation from Their Majesties.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I got an invitation to the ball, so I assumed you’d changed your mind about us, and I accepted.”

Hekkel. The king had lied to his face! No doubt he’d invited her in a last-ditch effort to undermine Jaryk’s marriage.

Furious, he pressed his lips together. “I didn’t change my mind.”

“Are you sure?” Gaze sultry, Charday glided closer, her dress held together by a whisper and a prayer.

He wondered how she kept her breasts in her gown; she was more exposed than covered.

Her long blue hair cascaded over one shoulder, exposing a pointed ear adorned with golden rings from lobe to tip. Her beauty left him cold.

“My marriage to Kismet will be announced tonight. I love her. I’m committed to her,” he said and took a step back.

“We were good, you and me.” She advanced.

“It’s over. I fell in love.”

“With me!”

“With Kismet. My wife.” Why did Charday put him in the position where he had to forcefully reject her? “It’s over. It has to be over. You said you understood—you’d moved on, too. You shouldn’t be here. You should go.”

“I thought you needed time to mull things over. Realize how good we are together.” She slid her hands up his chest. He caught her wrists before she could wrap her arms around his neck.

She leaned in and stretched herself upward, trying to kiss him. “I love you. I know you love me. You’re stuck with the human for a year, but we can still see each other, can’t we?”

“No!” He shoved her away hard, and she stumbled.

He caught her before she fell. “Hekkel! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to happen, Charday.”

Her arms latched around his neck, and she planted her lips on his.

Behind him, he heard a gasp.

He untangled himself from Charday and whirled around in time to see a stricken Kismet dash away.

“Kismet! No! Wait!”

His head snapped around. Charday smirked.

“Get out of here. I don’t want to see you ever again.” He ran after his wife.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:50 am

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to happen, Charday,” Jaryk said and then kissed the woman in lavender.

Kismet gasped, her hopes and dreams crashing around her feet. I’m such a fool. Such a fool.

For a moment, she couldn’t even move, then she spun around and dove into the throng of whirling dancers, running for the exit.

Jaryk shouted at her, but she couldn’t face him and the humiliating betrayal.

He’s still with Charday. It’s her he wants.

Tears streamed down her face. People were staring, but she didn’t care.

“Goddess! What’s wrong?” A startled Karma stopped dancing to grab her arm.

“I can’t— I can’t—” She shook off her sister’s hold and zigzagged through the dancers.

The footmen swung the door open, and she burst into the wide corridor. Hiking up her skirts, she ran. At a T in the corridor, she spotted people to the right, so she veered left.

She stumbled, stepping out of a shoe. She kicked off the other one. Barefooted and sobbing, she ran until she couldn’t run anymore. Her pace slowed to a walk, but tears continued to fall.

Lies. Lies. Lies. He didn't come home because he was with Charday. How could he do that? He said he loved me.

They hadn't known each other for very long, but she'd never questioned his integrity. What an idiot I am! She'd never pegged him as a player or a womanizer, but obviously he intended to see Charday even though he was married.

She felt utterly humiliated. How many people were aware of Jaryk and Charday? Tongues would be wagging about her mad dash from the ball. The king and queen would be upset. Or maybe not. They can't announce the marriage now. The king might be thrilled.

My life is a debacle.

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand. Sniffling, she looked around. Where am I? In her pell-mell dash, she hadn't paid attention, and now she felt disoriented. Nothing looked familiar. But then, nothing would ever be the same again.

A servant can help me get to where I want to go. As soon as I figure it out.

The apartment would be the last place she'd go. Jaryk would eventually show up there. Nor did she wish to see her sister. Her twin would never outright say, "I told you so," but she didn't need to. Pig-dog-polecat indeed.

I just want to be alone.

She continued walking and sniffling until she reached an atrium—one of the many palace gardens.

The door opened, releasing the scent of greenery and flowers into the corridor.

A gardener pruning shrubs glanced at her before returning to his work.

Being among growing things normally brought her serenity, but the atrium oasis reminded her of the time at the horticulture museum.

She scooted away and let the door close.

In her mind, the day had been very special—they'd seemed to forge a connection. But it had been an illusion.

Her entire marriage was a sham. Jaryk had been biding his time until he could marry Charday.

The signs had been there—his refusal to marry Alia, a noblewoman of his own species.

Everyone said it would have been advantageous to Kaldor.

The king and queen had desired the union.

If Alia couldn't capture his heart, what hope do I have?

But he said he loved me.

Men say that all the time and don't mean it. They're pig-dog-polecats!

Jaryk hadn't seemed like the kind of man who would mislead someone, who would fake emotion. She would have sworn he'd been sincere.

She sank onto a gilded bench, leaned her head against the muraled wall, and closed her eyes.

Maybe there's an explanation. Maybe it's not what I think it is.

She choked off a tearful laugh. When will I wise up? He'd sneaked off to see Charday. He'd disappeared overnight—she had only his say-so there'd been a storm. The weather had been calm at the palace. Charday was at the ball! And the instant he spotted her, he'd taken off like a shot.

How many other people were aware of their tryst? Am I the last to know?

What do I do now?

* * * *

Jaryk dashed after Kismet, but so many people whirled around on the dance floor, he lost sight of her. "Let me pass. Get out of my way!" he ordered the startled guests. He was too anxious, too angry to be polite.

He ran into Falkor and Karma. "What did you do to my sister?" Karma blocked his path.

"You saw her? Which way did she go?" he demanded.

"What did you do?" she countered.

His brother pointed. "That way."

He dashed to the main doors. "Did my wife go through here?" he asked the footmen.

"Yes, Your Highness."

He bounded down the corridor. He could search the palace all day and never find her.

Would she have gone back to the apartment? He started to head that way, but, as he glanced to the left, he spotted something on the floor and jogged over to take a quick look.

Kismet's shoes! He picked them up and followed the twists and turns of the passage to an atrium. Kismet spent a lot of time in the palace gardens. She loved trees and flowers—one of the many things they had in common. One of his fondest memories was the afternoon at the horticulture museum.

He'd started to enter the atrium when he spotted a lone figure, her posture forlorn, sitting on a bench far down the passageway.

His heart leapt with relief, but his stomach clenched as he imagined the dire things she would be thinking.

How am I going to fix this? Would the truth be enough? What if she doesn't believe me?

Silently, he approached .

Her eyes were closed, but her face looked sad.

"Kismet," he said softly.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:50 am

At the sound of Jaryk's voice, Kismet's pulse leapt with anxiety. She didn't feel ready to face him. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes.

He held up her slippers. "You lost your shoes."

Keep them. When she left—hopefully sooner rather than later—it would only be with the clothing and articles she'd brought with her. She would take nothing from this marriage except a broken heart.

He knelt and slipped the shoes on her feet. His warm hands on her instep and ankles sent an ache coursing through her. He did not stand but remained kneeling. "It's not what you think," he said.

"Isn't it?" Didn't all unfaithful spouses say that when confronted with their infidelity? The lipstick on my shirt...the late nights...the receipts for hotels and restaurants...not what you think. Next, he would say, it didn't mean anything.

Human—alien—men were all the same. Pig-dog-polecats.

"She kissed me. I didn't kiss her."

"I don't see a lot of difference there."

"She threw herself at me. I didn't kiss her back."

Did he think she was stupid? "You took off after her as soon as you saw her." She'd realized he'd left her side because he'd spotted Charday in the crowd.

“To find out why she was at the ball—and to get rid of her.”

“And did you? Get rid of her?”

“I didn’t get a chance. You came, and I needed to see you.

” His gaze earnest, he looked deep into her eyes.

“We were set up.” He clasped her hands. “I didn’t invite her.

My father did to drive a wedge between us.

Please don’t let him succeed. I love you.

I haven’t said that enough or under the right circumstances, but I love you.

I only want you. I haven’t been unfaithful to you. ”

Her lip quivered. She ached to believe him, but wariness lingered. “You married me so you could wed her. To make her more acceptable to your father.”

“I was an idiot. I married you for all the wrong reasons, but I don’t regret marrying you.

I love you. You’re the woman I’m supposed to be with.

We had so much against us, yet against the odds, we ended up together—almost like it was kismet .

I should have realized I’d met my fate as soon as I heard your name. Don’t give up on me.”

Doubts melted away under his earnest, open gaze. “I love you, too.” She flung herself into his arms. Their mouths fused in a deep kiss.

“I will stand by you and with you. Always. You never have to doubt my love or my fidelity.” He brushed the tears from her cheeks. “Let’s get up so I can hug you better.” He nudged her upright and pulled her into a tight, secure embrace.

She rested her head against his shoulder, finally finding her place. “You never have to doubt me either.”

“I know that.” He kissed her gently. “Are you ready to go to the ball and announce our marriage?”

She’d pretty much made a spectacle of herself dashing from the ballroom, sobbing like a crazy woman. “I can’t imagine what people will be thinking.”

“They are thinking I chose the most incredible, beautiful woman. That I chose you over every other woman on the planet. But, we don’t have to go back if you don’t want to.

I’ll make excuses to my mother and father, but I hope you will.

I want to shout to the world that you’re my wife, and I love you. ”

“Is my face all puffy?”

“Your face is beautiful.” He hugged her and kissed her again.

The sound of a woman clearing her throat caused them to break apart.

“Mother!”

“Your Majesty!”

“We are ready to announce your marriage,” Queen Myka said. “It is past time. That’s why I came to find you. Is everything okay?”

“Yes.” Kismet looked at Jaryk. “It is now.”

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Ready!”

Her hand clasped in his, she walked beside him and the queen and went to announce to the world they’d fallen in love and gotten married. It hadn’t happened in that order, but it had happened.

Two people from different worlds millions of miles apart had found each other. Destiny had named her Kismet. Maybe her mother had a hint of prescience after all.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:50 am

Jaryk awakened to find his wife leaning over him, her hair attractively mussed from sleep and a night of hot loving, her gaze soft, her smile satisfied.

The sight of her got him hard. I'm a lucky man. "What are you doing?"

"Reveling in happiness," she replied.

"You, too?" He pulled her down and kissed her.

"I thought you'd never wake up." She smoothed her hands over his chest and lower to grasp his cock.

"Next time, wake me up." He whispered some naughty suggestions against her ear.

They proceeded to act out some of them, ending up gasping and replete in each other's arms.

"Thank you for being in my life—for giving me a chance to fix our marriage." He pressed his lips to her damp temple.

"You don't give up on the person who makes your heart sing."

"We should go away together."

"What do you mean?"

"We should get away from the palace for a few weeks. See more of Kaldor. Just the

two of us—plus the bodyguards, but they’ll maintain a discreet distance.”

“You mean like a honeymoon?”

“I’m not familiar with the word.”

“On Earth, couples typically take a vacation right after the marriage to bond and celebrate.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.”

“I would love that!”

“I’ll have it arranged. We’ll leave tomorrow.”

“Don’t you have public engagements scheduled?”

“My staff can reschedule, cancel, or get Falkor to fill in. I’m the prince,” he said in an imperious tone. “I can do that.”

“What if the king has something for you to do?”

“He will have to adjust.” His father’s latest stunt had been the wake-up call.

No more would he dance to his father’s tune.

He would continue to perform his duty to the kingdom with due diligence, but, going forward, he intended to take charge of his life.

He had a wife to consider now. His father might not like Kismet, but Jaryk would not allow him to disrespect her.

“Last night went better than I expected,” she said. “Everyone seemed happy for us.”

“They did,” he agreed. The king and queen had announced their marriage—of course, by then most people had already guessed—and then they spent hours accepting the congratulations and well wishes of the guests.

Charday had been gone when they returned to the ballroom. Falkor had whispered in his ear that he’d sent her packing—for which Jaryk was grateful. His younger brother could be a huge pain in the ass, but he always had his back. And, if not for him, he wouldn’t have met his cosmic mate .

“Even the king seemed...more...accepting,” she said.

“Resigned, anyway. Which reminds me, I intend to have a word with him this morning.”

“Don’t get yourself thrown into the dungeon.”

“I would gladly spend time in a dungeon for you—except we don’t have one. And he can’t punish me by dispatching me on a mind-numbingly boring assignment because I’ll be on my honeymoon with my beautiful wife.”

* * * *

“Relay to His Majesty that his son wishes to speak to him,” Jaryk told his father’s personal secretary.

“Do you have an appointment, Your Highness?”

“Just tell him.”

“I will see if he is receiving.” The secretary departed.

Jaryk paced the parlor where his parents received family members. The Kaldoran monarchy maintained a certain formality even with family. It didn't matter if you were the king's son—you still needed an appointment. If the king refused to see him, he would force the issue.

Several minutes later, the door opened, and his mother entered.

“I asked to see Father.”

“I figured you would confront him, and I needed to see you first.”

“This is between me and him. He crossed the line last night.”

“Do you love Kismet?”

“Of course, I love her! That's why I'm so furious.”

“Up until last night, you'd seemed rather ambivalent,” she said.

“Perhaps at first. But I quickly came to realize she is the love I've been seeking. I'm proud to claim her as my wife. I want the whole world to know of my devotion to her. I wish for there to be no rumors or speculation about my love for her.”

“Excellent. I'm very pleased. She's a lovely woman—much better suited to you than Alia or Charday. Her heart is honest and pure. She doesn't care about being royal—perhaps, she even wishes you weren't a prince.”

“You wanted me to marry a noblewoman.”

“A woman of class . I want you to be happy. We both wished for you to marry a woman of quality who will love you. You and Kismet are meant for each other.”

He arched his eyebrows. “How do you know that?”

“Mother’s intuition. I just needed you to realize it.”

“I do realize it.”

“Now you do. Before? I tried to open your eyes...so I invited Charday to the ball.”

His jaw dropped. “ You invited Charday?”

“Your father is quite angry with me. Despite what you think, how he has acted, he has come to realize that Kismet is perfect for you, and despite his goals for the kingdom, he wishes you to be happy.

“I figured if you saw Kismet and Charday together, you would recognize the gem from the fake.”

“I already knew!” He gaped at his mother. Who was this woman? What had happened to his rational, measured maternal parent? No wonder Falkor does stupid stuff. The nut doesn’t fall far from the tree.

“I’d hoped so, but I wasn’t sure.”

“You caused Kismet a lot of pain—and you used Charday.”

“I am truly sorry about the former. About the latter?” She shrugged.

“Charday never cared for you—she sought the title of princess and, later, queen. That was our primary objection. Everyone could see her true character except you, so we tried to arrange the marriage to Alia. It would have been advantageous to the kingdom, but we also wished to save you from your folly.”

He still didn't know quite what to say.

"Can you forgive me?"

"I guess I have to—you're my mother. Your intentions were good—I guess." He hugged her.

"I would like to apologize to Kismet."

"That's a good idea."

"You two will have dinner with your father and me tonight," she stated.

"I will ask my wife if she wishes to have dinner," he said. "Lewen will send our reply."

Jaryk left, shaking his head. Family! If he didn't love them, they'd probably drive him insane. Wait until Kismet hears about this.

* * * *

Queen Myka watched her son leave. Her little ploy had been risky, but it had achieved the desired effect. There was nothing quite like the right wife to turn a boy into a man.

She knew her sons, what they longed for, what motivated them, how much they loved each other.

Her sons still bickered like schoolboys, but those two would do anything for one another.

More than any of them, Falkor had not wanted Jaryk to marry Charday; he'd been the

first to see her for what she was—a title-seeker.

Myka had colluded with Falkor to get Jaryk to join Cosmic Mates. She only wished for her older son to know he had options.

The instant she'd met Kismet at the wedding ceremony, she'd been thrilled to recognize her son's soulmate.

But Jaryk had viewed the marriage as a stopgap.

So, she'd sent Charday an invitation to the ball.

Maybe it hadn't been necessary, but everyone had seen Jaryk's grand gesture—running after Kismet.

There would never be any conjecture about how much he loved his human wife.

One son married—one more to go.

Karma was perfect for Falkor. He just needed a little nudge to realize it.

* * * *

Thank you for reading Alien Heir (Cosmic Mates 7) .

Of course, Falkor and Karma are next! Get ready for Alien Spare (Cosmic Mates 8) .