

A New Job

Brian surveyed the exterior of the small office building and checked the address again. The Star-Crossed sign gleamed in a neon pink above the doorway, but he saw no signs for other businesses on the building.

He stepped inside, but no one greeted him. Four empty desks, each with a powerful computer workstation and an extra chair, sat unattended. Unassembled office dividers leaned against one wall and a few boxes still sat on the floor, a testament to the business's newness. At the back of the room, a large door with an electronic security pad stood in the center of the wall. A smaller office door and a short hallway to a breakroom and restrooms flanked it, and a third door, currently open, led to a small consultation room.

"Hello? My name is Brian Perry. I'm here for a job interview."

The smaller office door opened, and a tall man emerged. He wore an elegant jacket and shirt in a Victorian style; despite its anachronistic design, he carried himself with elegance and confidence. A charismatic, almost supernatural aura surrounded him that commanded Brian's

immediate attention.

He spoke with a powerful baritone voice. “Welcome, Mister Perry. I am Darius Rathmore, the owner of Star-Crossed. Please have a seat.” He sat in one of the desk chairs, tapped the computer keypad, and stared at the screen for a moment before facing Brian again.

Brian took a seat across one desk from him. “Thank you for the opportunity, sir. I researched Star-Crossed, but I learned little about the company. I also downloaded your app and signed up.”

“Are you looking for companionship?” Darius asked.

“Not at the moment, but I wanted to learn about the company.”

“Star-Crossed, both the company and the application, help people find their ideal partner. It’s like other social applications, but we have several features that distinguish us from similar services.”

“I noticed the client profiles have no pictures.”

Darius nodded. “We don’t want people to judge based on appearances. I also know that clients of other sites alter or fabricate their images. Starting with dishonesty doesn’t bode well for a relationship’s future.”

“That makes sense. But I don’t see any developers here.”

“Our development staff works at another location. If you join us, you’d provide feedback to them so they can improve our services.”

Brian ran his hand through his dark hair. “Your job announcement also mentioned I’d be interacting with clients and doing light computer work. Can you tell me more?”

“Since Star-Crossed prohibits certain information in the app, such as personal contact

information, all clients' communications must pass through the application. But at a certain point, we hope clients will choose to meet in person. If so, we interview them to make sure they'd make a good match with their potential partner."

Brian leaned back in his seat. "You mean to prevent predators? Or to make sure they're not lying?"

Darius smiled. "Among other things. Your record suggests you have a good sense of character."

"I've worked in the H-R department of Bullbridge Networks for the past three years."

"Which means you also know how to keep secrets. Good." Darius's smile never wavered, and a mysterious twinkle appeared in his eyes. "If you join our company, you'd have access to our clients' entire profiles, including sensitive information."

"I have similar access at Bullbridge," Brian replied.

They chatted about job benefits and company policies for the next ten minutes, and Brian warmed to Darius. The idea of working for a small company where he believed he could make a difference also appealed to him. Finally, Darius presented him with an official offer letter.

Brian's eyes bulged. Darius had offered him twice his current salary.

"What do you think?" Darius asked.

"I'd have to be a fool to turn this down," Brian admitted.

But Darius withdrew the offer letter and replaced it with a non-disclosure agreement.

"Before you agree to join us, you need to learn the truth about Star-Crossed. If you sign this NDA, you'll be legally obligated not to reveal anything I tell you afterward."

Brian examined the document. It had the usual legal clauses about legal repercussions

and guidelines, though the wording in a few clauses differed from those he'd seen before. Still, the idea of working for a small company where he could help people appealed to Brian, and he'd grown to like Darius. He signed the document.

Darius smiled. "Excellent. Now, let me show you the true nature of Star-Crossed." He swiveled the computer display toward Brian. It showed four different profiles, each with names, jobs, personal interests, and similar information, including an image of each client.

Not one of the beings was human.

"What is this? Some sort of costume service?"

"No. Star-Crossed connects beings across dimensions." Darius rose. "Come with me."

Brian followed the taller man to the large door. Darius passed his hand over the security pad, and it opened with an emphatic click. The door swung open to reveal a short hallway ending in a similar door. Four other doors lined the hallway.

Darius glanced at his watch. "Doctor Thruku hasn't arrived yet, so we'll start with the portal room."

"The what?"

Rather than replying, Darius led him to the other large door, which opened as he approached.

What Brian saw through the doorway took his breath away.

#

Brian followed Darius into a larger room lined with technical devices. A stairway in the near corner led to a balcony above his head. Three small robots, each shaped like a cherub, darted around the room carrying electronic parts. But the glowing circular portal facing him

commanded his full attention.

Standing about twelve feet tall, the machine dominated the room. A solid loop of dark metal set in the opposite wall, the device was producing a faint glow in its center. Brian could see a small alcove behind the round aperture, illuminated by an overhead light. Cables and panels attached to the sides of the portal led to other devices in the room in a labyrinthine maze of gadgetry.

An attractive woman stood beside the portal, manipulating a panel attached to the tall circular device. Two great bat-like wings grew from her shoulders, and two small horns poked above her dark hair. She wore a lab coat that did little to hide her perfect figure. “I’ve stabilized the portal, and the language overlays have passed their tests,” the woman announced without glancing behind her. “We should have the portal transmitter ready in another two days.”

“Brian, this is Kylaris,” Darius announced, “Kylaris, this is Brian Perry. He may be joining us.”

The woman faced him, and Brian lost himself in her stunning gaze. “Pleased to meet you, Mister Perry.”

“Kylaris is our chief technician here at Star-Crossed,” Darius explained. “The portal behind her will open doorways to other dimensions and worlds.”

“Once it’s operational,” Kylaris added. “Is something wrong, Mister Perry?”

Brian closed his gaping mouth. “You’re not human,” he stammered, then realized how stupid he sounded. Embarrassed, he mumbled, “Sorry if I offended you.”

“Of course I’m not human,” Kylaris replied, approaching him. “If you join us, you’d be the first human employee of Star-Crossed.”

Darius isn't human either? Brian wondered. But he forced the thought from his mind, allowing curiosity to replace it. He examined the different machines that integrated into the portal—and stole furtive glances of Kylaris.

“So Star-Crossed helps aliens of different worlds and dimensions meet each other,” Brian summarized. When Darius nodded, he asked, “And there’s no risk in this service? What if one race believes his date would taste yummy?”

“Encountering other species always carries risk,” Darius replied. “We rate the compatibility of each species pairing, evaluating physical, mental, and cultural elements. Remember, even a relationship among your own species carries risks.”

“That’s true—I’ve had some nasty breakups,” Brian muttered.

“So, are you still interested in joining our company?” Darius asked.

Still gazing at the portal, Kylaris, and Darius, Brian contemplated the knowledge he’d already gained. *I’ll be working with aliens.*

Then he nodded. “This sounds like a fascinating opportunity. I’d be happy to work here.”

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A week later, Brian took a seat at his new desk. The partition walls now stood in their places, giving each worker a private space. The boxes on the floor had disappeared, though the walls of the office remained bare. One of the three robotic cherubs perched on the top of a low shelf—also still empty of books or decorations.

Darius had already stepped him through both the supervisory features of the Star-Crossed application and the client management system they used. He learned that the company had offices in hundreds of dimensions, and beings on each world fulfilled the same role he was

learning. He'd started reviewing the guidelines for introducing humans to other worlds, but the myriad cultures, biologies, and physical laws that differed across realities boggled his mind.

He stared at the image of a thin, hairless green-skinned woman with long pointed ears. Dark spots covered her shoulders, and she had oversized eyes, but her features otherwise resembled a human's face. The screen identified her as Myxna, his counterpart among her race known as Tilkads.

Can I really handle this job? What if I screw up?

"Would you like some coffee?" Darius asked as he stepped out of his office.

"Coffee?" Brian echoed.

"I purchased a coffeemaker for the break room, but I confess I haven't developed a taste for it myself."

"I can make myself a cup."

"No need." Darius glanced at the robotic cherub. "Cy-eel? One coffee, one Darjeeling tea."

The cherubot rose from the shelf. "Please specify additives, Brian," it requested in an artificial voice that sounded slightly feminine.

"Nothing in my coffee," Brian answered. "I like it black."

It floated back into the break room, returning a few minutes later carrying two steaming cups. With perfect precision, it placed one on Brian's desk.

"So why do we need to keep the aliens and the other tech here a secret from Earth?"

Brian asked, watching Cy-eel return to its perch. "I'd think that would attract more people to the service."

“It would, but those humans would seek novelty, not true companionship,” Darius replied. “And at best, your governments would subject us to far too many regulations and inspections for us to function. They’d worry about contamination, espionage, invasion, or other paranoid ideas.”

“You’re right. I’d bet the government would also seize the technology here,” Brian assumed.

“Star-Crossed uses technologies I’ve acquired from dozens of worlds.” Darius fell silent and stared at Brian’s computer screen.

“You mentioned I should see Doctor Thruku this morning?”

Darius’s expression morphed into his usual enigmatic smile. “Ah, yes. He arrived fifteen minutes ago, and he’ll be here until two o’clock this afternoon.”

“Only three hours?” Brian asked.

“He rotates through offices on twelve worlds during the week,” Darius replied. “He’s spending more time on Earth this week. Like you, he’s still setting up his office. We’ll plan “

Brian gulped and summoned his courage. “Well, no time like the present.” He walked to the large door and placed his palm over the lock. It rewarded him with a loud click.

I really am a part of this now, Brian realized.

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The small doctor’s office along the hallway, filled with medical instruments and displays, looked like many Brian had visited in his twenty-six years. The doctor did not.

While basically humanoid, Doctor Thruku had a large reptilian head that bifurcated near the back into two tapering cones. He had large reptilian eyes, no obvious nose, and scales

covered his hands.

The alien doctor sat up as Brian entered. “You must be Brian Perry.”

Brian extended his hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

Instead of shaking it, Thruku grasped Brian’s hand and examined it. “Typical of humans, decent musculature and blood flow.”

“Uh, thanks I guess.” *My first day at work and I’m talking to an alien doctor. What kind of tests will he subject me to?*

“Do not be nervous. I have studied human physiology for the past fifteen years.” Doctor Thruku gave him a routine physical with only a few extra steps—no invasive probing or bizarre concoctions, aside from three injections.

“So why does Star-Crossed keep a doctor on staff?” Brian asked once Thruku finished his exam.

“First, I help prevent diseases and viruses from spreading from other worlds,” the doctor replied. “The shots I gave you should help prevent you from picking up an infection from another world. I’d hate for an alien pathogen to escape into the human populace.”

“That makes sense,” Brian admitted.

“I also conduct toxicology tests on different species and their foodstuffs,” Thruku continued. “For instance, elements of your human blood would poison anyone from Vogantu, and your foods based on wheat would cause Khavaks severe gastric distress.”

“That happens to some humans too,” Brian remarked.

“I also assist when a couple wants to pursue a more physical relationship. Certain medications can facilitate the process.”

I'd never considered sex with an alien woman, Brian mused. "Is that possible?"

"Oh, yes, particularly for species with a high enough compatibility quotient," Thruku replied. "I've even helped deliver hybrid children." He rotated his head in a motion that would break a human's neck. "Do you plan to have children, Brian?"

"I haven't thought about kids, to be honest," Brian admitted. "I don't even have a steady girlfriend yet."

Thruku patted his hand. "I would be happy to assist when you and your mate are ready to proceed."

What kind of job have I gotten myself into?

#

Brian's perplexity hadn't lessened by the afternoon. After venturing to a nearby Asian fusion restaurant for a light lunch despite the chill of the spring day, he returned to the Star-Crossed office. Before Brian had even settled in his desk, Darius stepped out of his office.

"Ready for your first transit?" Darius asked.

"Not really," Brian admitted.

"Relax," his boss replied, opening the secure door that led to the rest of the facility. "We will only visit the Star-Crossed office on Taelna, so the beings you'll meet already know the secrets of this company. Kylaris has already prepared the portal."

Unlike Brian's first visit to the portal room, the mysterious machines glowed and hummed. A bright, whirling light filled the circular aperture. Nearby, Kylaris glanced up from the control station as he entered behind Darius..

The tantalizing woman stepped out from behind the console. "You may step through

whenever you're ready, Brian."

But Brian hesitated. "Are you sure this is safe?"

Kylaris nodded. "We've already tested it."

"Will I be able to understand the aliens?" Brian asked.

"The portal overlays the primary language of your destination in your mind," Kylaris replied. "It also adjusts for any differences in the laws of physics between dimensions."

"You'll understand the Taelnans without a problem," Darius added.

"Umm..." Brian stammered, "the briefing notes I read said you could project the portal anywhere on Earth?"

An amused smile appeared on Kylaris's face. "Yes, but we only use that feature once a couple has met each other."

Darius's firm hand clapped him on the shoulder. "I know you're nervous, Brian, but you have nothing to worry about. I'll accompany you."

Having exhausted his excuses, Brian summoned his courage and stepped through the interdimensional portal.

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The transit took only a second; a flash of multicolored light filled Brian's eyes, then the sensation vanished. *No pain or disorientation*, he thought. *Not nearly as weird as I thought it would be.*

The room where he appeared resembled the portal room on Earth. Another succubus-like woman with short green hair stood beside almost identical controls.

Then two beings, both humanoid, stepped into the room. "Welcome to Taelna," one called in a gravelly voice.

Brian hesitated, hoping Darius would say something. Fortunately, the suave company owner came to his rescue. “Thank you for letting us visit. Brian, this is Ihren and Hahrir.”

Brian inspected the two humanoids. One appeared to be male, the other female. Both had wide faces with black eyes and flat features, but neither had hair anywhere on their bodies. Their light grey-brown skin resembled stone, and both wore long skirts made from what appeared to be brightly colored plastic slats. Aside from the colorful skirts, each wore gaudy jewelry around their necks and little else.

“Thanks for letting me visit.” He stared at them for a moment, then glanced away. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to offend.”

Ihren, the woman, took his hand. “We understand your bewilderment, Brian. Please join us in our consultation room. I’m sure you have many questions.”

He tried to focus as the two Taelnans led him to a nearby room with five chairs in a circle, with small tables arranged among them. Unlike the office on Earth, the walls and furniture all resembled molded plastic. The pale teal walls complimented the brick red chairs and tables, but the vibrant color scheme did little to calm Brian’s nerves.

Three chairs had cushions, so Brian sat in one when Ihren offered it. “I don’t know where to begin,” he admitted.

“Perhaps these images of our happy couples might help you understand,” Hahrir suggested. He waved his hands over one wall, and the image of buttons and alien text appeared on the wall. After he tapped a few buttons, a cluster of images appeared on the wall. Each showed a Taelnan smiling with a member of a different race.

Brian stared at the images. In some, the couples stood outside, and he could see alien

landscapes behind them. One image showed a Taelnan woman sitting on a huge lizard-like beast, with a dragon-man standing beside her. Another showed a Taelnan man holding the tendrils of a plant-like being on the bridge of a spaceship. Still another showed a Taelnan woman apparently undergoing some ceremony with a black-furred man with six arms and seven eyes. In each image, the couple gleamed with happiness.

Happiness and love—I guess many species have these emotions, Brian realized. Maybe these beings aren't so different. Maybe I can do this job.

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Two weeks later, Brian eased into the chair in the small consultation room across from his client, Sophie Marshall. About thirty years old with mousy-brown hair, the woman wore a light blouse and minimal makeup. Her face showed a familiar expression of uncertainty mixed with hope.

Brian directed his own nervous energy by busying himself on his laptop and checking through the small stack of papers beside it. He hadn't conducted an in-person interview before. Recalling his own initial meeting with the company, he tried to project Darius Rathmore's casual confidence.

"Thank you for seeing me, Mister Perry. I have someone I want to meet in person, but I couldn't find his address or direct contact info on the app. And when I asked him about meeting him, he told me I had to talk to the Star-Crossed team first."

Brian nodded. "I assume you read the guidelines for in-person contact, Miss Marshall?"

"Yes, but most dating apps I've used don't require this much effort."

"Star-Crossed keeps its clients' personal information under strict control for a reason,

Miss Marshall. By proceeding, you'll learn more about our operation, and you cannot disclose anything we reveal. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Would you like some coffee?"

"Thank you. Cream, extra sugar."

"Cy-eel?" Brian called.

The small robotic cherub that had been sitting inert in one corner of the room awakened. It rose from its perch and drifted toward Brian. "Two coffees, one black, one with cream and extra sugar," Brian ordered.

Cy-eel bobbed, then drifted out of the room.

Sophie watched it with wide eyes. "I thought that was just a toy."

Brian scanned her profile on his laptop screen again. "Tell me what you know about the man you'd like to meet."

"His name is Algur Na-riss. We've had so many fascinating conversations. We both love stargazing, and he told me he works for a transport company." Sophie frowned. "I tried searching for his name online, but found nothing. And he never told me what company he works for."

"Before we proceed, I'll need you to sign a few legal documents—non-disclosure agreements, waivers, and so forth." He slid the paperwork toward her.

While Sophie read through and signed the assembled documents, the door opened. Cy-eel drifted back into the room, carrying two cups of coffee. The cherubot glided down to the table and placed each cup on the table without spilling a drop.

Before the door closed again, Darius strode into the room.

Brian stood. “Miss Marshall, this is Darius Rathmore, the founder of Star-Crossed.”

Sophie’s eyes locked onto Darius; she stood, but stumbled as she rose. “Pleased to meet you,” she stammered, covering her embarrassment.

Darius gave her a warm, welcoming smile that could thaw an iceberg. “Thank you for coming in, Miss Marshall. Has Brian explained the true nature of Star-Crossed?”

“I was about to, sir,” Brian replied. “She signed the agreements.”

“Please allow me.” Darius gestured to the chairs, and they all took a seat. “I founded Star-Crossed because I believe everyone can find a soulmate, even in the most unlikely places. Sometimes, we need to look beyond what we believe is normal. Your prospective partner, Algur Na-riss, isn’t human.”

“What?” Sophie gaped.

Brian swiveled his laptop so Sophie could see his full profile. “He’s an Olnir who works as a navigator on a star freighter.”

“An alien?” Sophie stared at the image. Algur resembled a lean, handsome man, but with four arms and bright orange skin. Scales of a keratin-like shell covered parts of his body, including the top of his head.

“He’s already learned about your nature, and still wishes to meet you,” Darius added. “If you still would like to proceed, we can arrange for you to meet him in a space station.”

Sophie reread Algur’s profile and touched the screen with a timid fingertip. As Brian watched, her curiosity overcame her trepidation. “Yes, please. I think I’d like that.”

#

Three days later, Brian stood in the portal room again with Darius. Sophie Marshall stood beside

them, trying to absorb the fascinating scene. As usual, Kylaris was adjusting the portal controls, and two cherubots waited nearby for her instructions.

“”So this will take me to another world?” Sophie was wearing an attractive blue dress, styled her hair, and had even applied a little more makeup. Her trembling hands clutched her small silver purse.

“Yes, it’s perfectly safe,” Brian assured her. “I’ve even used it myself.”

“I assume you’ve read the briefing on Olnir customs?” Darius asked.

“Yes, but I didn’t understand some of them,” Sophie replied. “Do I look okay?”

“You look lovely,” Brian replied with complete honesty.

“Portal opening,” Kylaris called.

The small glow at the center of the portal expanded to fill the entire circular opening. Sophie stepped toward it. “So do I just step through?”

“Algur will step through first to escort you,” Darius replied.

Moments later, Algur stepped through. The tall orange alien didn’t bother to scan the room and stepped toward Sophie. A smile spread across his face and some of his scales sparkled.

Sophie covered her mouth with one quivering hand. Then she offered Algur her other hand.

He took it, and they spoke in hushed tones for a few minutes, and the timidity on Sophie’s face vanished. Then the couple stepped through the portal.

“They look happy,” Brian remarked.

“Yes, I believe they’re a good match.” Darius clapped him on the shoulder again. “Good job. So how does it feel?”

The tension Brian had been holding vanished, and a sense of satisfaction replaced it.”
Helping a couple find happiness? It feels good.”

“Sophie is scheduled to return in four hours. In the meantime, we have other clients.”
Darius turned toward the exit. “And I expect things to get busier around here. Eventually, I’ll need to hire a few more people for this office.”

Brian savored the feeling of accomplishment as he followed his boss. Then an idea occurred to him. “Sir, my sister Nicole is graduating from college in a month. She’s looking for a job, so I’d like to recommend she join us here. She’d enjoy this work, too.”

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