

# OCTAVIA GIRL

Vol. I

Stephanie  
Van Orman



# Octavia Girl

## Volume I



By Stephanie Van Orman

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# Introduction

Sardius was alone in the interview room as bright lights shone in his eyes and voices rang out from behind the blinding rays. No one was there. The voices from the panel of interviewers rang through a speaker system. He couldn't see them, but there were cameras pointed at him like guns.

If he thought they really were guns, he'd perform much better. He always did better when he thought it was a live-or-die situation.

The reality of the speaker and camera placement meant that the interviewers could see him while he couldn't see them. That made him uneasy. He didn't look good, but he had to believe that none of the other candidates looked much better than he did. Besides, the job did not require him to be at his best visually.

The first grating automated voice began. "Sardius, have you been informed of the committee's decision regarding the deceased diplomat, Arvantis?"

Sardius made his face impassive, even with the lights shining in his eyes. "I haven't heard."  
"You were cleared of all suspicion," the voice informed him.

Sardius tried to make his exhale shallow so that he didn't look too relieved. If he had been blamed for what happened to Arvantis, he would have broken every camera and light in the room. It wouldn't have been out of rage exactly, but more like popping balloons early at a birthday party that isn't for you... on your birthday. He had such high hopes for the program and being blamed, even partially, for Arvantis' death was the last thing he needed. If he got kicked out... he hated to think of it.

He paused before meekly asking, "If this meeting isn't about Arvantis, does that mean Jenna Fairchild has been brought in?"

"Not exactly," another voice piped up.

Sardius recognized that voice as belonging to the chair of the Octavian Council. His name was Favel and his voice wasn't automated like the others were.

"I was just thinking," Favel said, even though he gave no face for Sardius to see. "That you have studied Jenna more than anyone else on our side. You requested to be her personal assistant before you were assigned to Arvantis. The AAMC is still having a horrific time bringing her in and I was wondering if their tactics are off. Do you have any insights on her recruitment? After all, you were famous for convincing half a solar system to change allegiances."

Sardius beamed. He shouldn't have. He didn't mean to, but he did have his private ambitions and Favel was leading him toward his favorite one. "Well," Sardius began, attempting to sound casual, even if it was a little late. "She'd probably be more willing to go to outer space if there was someone special to escort her."

"Of course!" Favel exclaimed in his odd parrot-like voice.

Sardius was pleased with himself and Favel's reaction had been just what he hoped.

Favel went on. "Of course, she's reluctant to come into outer space! She doesn't know anyone here. Should we send a welcoming committee or a clutch of..."

“Slow down,” Sardius interrupted. “Don’t send a clutch of anything. She doesn’t need a welcoming committee. She needs one person she trusts, admires, and loves to guide her. In short, she needs a—”

“Mate!” Favel shouted, interrupting Sardius.

“Jenna doesn’t have a mate?” an automated voice cracked.

“Isn’t she an adult? I thought she was an adult?” another voice asked.

“She *is* an adult,” Favel said with as much authority as his nasal voice would allow.

“Why doesn’t she have a mate?”

“I have a mate.”

“You have six mates.”

“I’ve had twelve.”

Sardius refrained from laughing at the committee members’ outbursts. His suggestion was being accepted. He just needed to carry it through to the end. All he wanted was to be taken to Earth to escort Jenna to Octavia Prime. He’d go all the way to Earth for her. Sure, he’d have to make a few *adjustments* if he was going to go to a place like Earth. He currently looked like a soot stain, but for Jenna Fairchild... he was willing to do just about anything.

Besides, romancing Jenna would be a breeze. Those idiots the AAMC had been sending to pick her up were too stupid to be understood. That was why they couldn’t get her aboard a pod.

Now, if Sardius was the one to go get her... he knew exactly what to say to her that would make her fall in love with a perfect stranger and also make her willing to join him in outer space.

“We should run her information through the universal matching algorithm,” Favel announced.

*Wait! No!* If she was run through that system, Sardius had no chance of being chosen as the perfect man for her.

The other committee members were voicing their agreement.

Sardius had to stop their scheming immediately. “Wait. Boys, aren’t you jumping the gun? If you think about it, getting a candidate from the universal matching pool is hardly an intelligent way to go about this.”

“Hardly intelligent? They use 850,000 different character markers to test compatibility,” a faceless committee member pointed out.

Sardius paused in his tracks, momentarily quieted by such sound reasoning. However, he was nothing if not full of crap. “Yeah, I realize that *sounds* good, but I think you already have a perfect candidate for the job.”

“Who?”

“Look, Sardius,” Favel interjected. “If we had a decent man among our ranks to send on this side of the universe, I think the AAMC already would have sent him. They’ve already sent over two hundred candidates to try to recruit her. They must not have seen that pursuing this from a romantic angle, though underhanded, may be the only way to secure her cooperation.”

Sardius tried to speak up, but Favel talked over him.

His parrot voice pounded into Sardius’ ears like a bird squawking at twice the regular volume. “The universal matching algorithm will provide us with hundreds of thousands of candidates. Maybe millions. There’s no need for us to take a chance on something that *might* work when we only need to get her up in the air. Thank you for your cooperation and your suggestion. The equipment you had when you worked for Arvantis will work just fine for Jenna.”

All the time Favel had been speaking, Sardius had been saying the same thing over and over though the committee chair wasn't listening and Sardius wasn't even sure if he had his volume on. Favel might not have heard a word Sardius said.

If Favel had been listening, he would have heard Sardius say over and over, "No! Don't send someone else. Send me! Send me! Send me!"

The automated voices cut along with Favel's birdlike voice. It was quiet in the room, except for Sardius' howls.

"Send me," he said hopelessly one last time.

No one answered. The communication lines had been cut.

Sardius exhaled heavily before he knocked over his chair. "Gah!"

# Chapter One

## Catastrophe has Perfect Eyes

“Have you seen a golden retriever off his leash?”

Jenna smiled. Not to brag or anything, but men loved her. They were always stopping her and asking her for the time, for the bus schedule, for recommendations for the best restaurants, or literally any question they could think of to engage her in conversation.

She had been sitting on a bench in the park for under three minutes, enjoying a tea and a bagel, when a reasonably attractive man approached her and asked her if she had seen the golden retriever.

She cast her gray eyes up at him and her cheeks went round and rosy. “I’m sorry. I haven’t.”

He looked around him for the dog, distraught written all over his face. “You don’t suppose,” he said, looking helpless and confused, “that you might be able to spare a few minutes to help me look for him?”

Jenna’s face changed. The smile was gone and instead, her face twitched in the spot just below her eye in sharp irritation. Then she warped her mouth into a deeply unimpressed frown and said, “No. I couldn’t.”

The man turned to her with agony and pleading in his eyes. “He hasn’t been missing for very long. He might just be past those trees.” The man pointed.

Jenna snorted. “Then go look for him just past those trees.”

He looked at her as though she was the reason he couldn’t find his dog, if only she’d be merciful and walk with him a few steps.

“Do you have a picture of the dog?” she asked, patience fleeing from her voice as she started gulping her too-hot tea in large swallows.

“No. He *just* got away from me.”

“I meant on your phone.”

“My phone?” he asked, looking around him like he didn’t understand how that word worked in the sentence she’d just constructed.

“You don’t have a picture of your dog on your phone?” she questioned as she shoved a quarter of a sliced bagel in her mouth.

“W-well, it’s not my dog! I never said he was my dog,” the man insisted, quite passionately.

“Fine then,” Jenna said, washing the remains of her bagel down with the last of her tea. “So it’s not your dog.”

“It’s a friend’s dog.”

“Then you’d better hurry up and find him,” she said, crumpling up the paper her bagel had been served in and shoving it in her empty disposable tea cup. She tossed them in the garbage bin next to the bench and stood up.

“You’re sure you can’t help me?” the man pleaded a second time.



"I think you should call your friend, or literally any other human being you know, and ask them for their help," she said in a snarky tone and stepped away from him.

As she walked away, she glanced over her shoulder three times. Twice as she looked both ways before crossing the street, and once when she was a little further down the block. The man was standing exactly where she'd left him. At least, he wasn't following her.

She shook her head. She shouldn't have been so nice to him. She should have told him exactly what she thought, that the line about the missing dog was a cliché line child molesters used to bait children into their vehicles. It was not a reasonable pickup line, but maybe he'd have a debriefing with a friend who could explain how epically he had failed. Hopefully, that would not happen to her or any other woman again, ever.



Jenna Fairchild looked very normal. As a matter of fact, she was better than normal. She had blondish hair, gray eyes, a sunny smile, and an open disposition. Not only that, but she took pride in herself and her appearance, which meant she knew how to sculpt her eyebrows properly, and how to do her hair, which was almost always done up in a high messy bun. If she wore her hair down, a hat usually crowned the top of her head. Her favorite hat was a man's fedora that had belonged to her grandfather that he had worn after the second world war. When her hair hung loose, it was almost down to her waist and fell in the kind of curls messy buns created.

The styles she adopted were important because Jenna always had to have something covering the crown of her head. She had a terrible secret under the curls of her messy bun, a mass that was always a little too close to her forehead to be really fashionable. Jenna only got away with it because she was so stylish otherwise with dangling earrings and a perfectly matched scarf. She was also terrifically grouchy when questioned about her bun. No one was going to ask her to change her style twice.

When she wore a hat, flirtatious men would often try to tip it. Even women would try to steal it to try it on, but Jenna had sorted out that problem long ago and wore a hat pin. A pair of holes had to be pierced into the precious fedora in order to accomplish it, but it was well worth it. It had been her grandfather himself who punctured the stiff felt, gifting her a hat pin that had belonged to her grandmother.

Because her grandfather, the last of her relatives as far as she was concerned, had known her terrible secret. He had been in on it.

She had to hide the black onyx tiara that was permanently affixed to the top of her head. It was unlike any tiara any woman wore because it had no gems, and symmetry that belonged in higher-level math classes than just a collection of intricately placed triangles. It was shaped like a large black wave moving to oppose a smaller one. They seemed like they were moving toward each other, like a black beak about to snap shut, but they never moved.

When Jenna was little, she wore a headband to cover it—always in the wrong place—always too high off her head.

And she could never take it off.

Jenna had never had a real boyfriend. If she had someone that close to her, they would expect the kind of intimacy where she would have to be bareheaded. And she couldn't be. The waves that made up the tiara were sharp on the underside. It wasn't completely unfathomable that a man could tangle his hand in her hair and cut himself in the process. Any time a man got anywhere near such a thing, images of his blood running down her forehead and between her eyes flooded her mind. In bad, accidental fantasies, he cut his finger clean off.

Jenna could not allow that, so anytime a man showed interest in her, she blew him off.

Though if she was being honest, she wasn't overly tempted by the men that came her way. What was wrong with them was a little difficult to place. Was it that they weren't good-looking enough? Yes, but if they had been more interesting to her, their looks would have mattered less. Whatever was wrong with the men wasn't obvious. Jenna admitted she was picky, which was why none of her blind dates turned into anything more, and why she never met a man who made her want to let her hair down.

Waiting for the perfect man never got boring to Jenna.

In the meantime, she led a well-organized, perfectly pleasing life. She had a great apartment, cool friends, vacations, an excellent job, and a cat if that counted for anything. Everyone she knew reassured her that it didn't. She disagreed.

Her cat's name was Charm. She was a white long-haired fuzzy thing with deep blue eyes. People who visited Jenna's apartment loved Charm until they tried to touch her and then the furry little monster would try to claw their faces off. Charm did not like anyone but Jenna, which made her feel like her cat's undying love for her ought to have meant more in the estimation of others.

Besides, the cat was excellent company while she waited for the unthinkable to happen.



Jenna had always believed that office romances were completely out of line. Couldn't you find anyone to date besides the guys you worked with? Sheesh! Take up a hobby! She had never seen a man who was worth breaking her rules over until Armen Tagart started doing a radio show.

She heard him talking over the radio before she saw him. What was that accent? Where did he come from? Intrigued, she left her cubicle in the advertising department and hurried over to the sound booths.

Behind glass, there he was.

He was so attractive to her that even though they hadn't yet spoken, she felt as if she were in danger. He was brown. His hair was brown like coffee beans. His eyes were brown like dark chocolate, and his skin was slightly avocado in its brownness. Altogether, he looked sweet, bitter, and healthy. The bone structure and muscle groups under all that brown didn't disappoint.

She felt undone just looking at him, just listening to him. Like her carefully plotted life would shortly be ruined.

He glanced up from the white paper page he had been reading from and looked directly at her. His voice didn't miss a beat in the announcement he was cheerfully making, but his eyes

and his hand acknowledged her. He searched her eyes as he let his fingers slide down the length of a pencil only to flip it upside down and slide his fingers down it again. More than anything, it was a gesture showing impatience. It was the fidgety way a person moves when they're on an important phone call, but can't wait for it to end.

Jenna smiled.

He had white teeth. He had shaved that morning. His hands were clean and looked very much like any woman in the world wouldn't have minded him placing one of them on the small of her back to guide her into a room.

He looked like a man who had been made just for her.

She went back to her desk with the little smile still on her face.

# Chapter Two

## Calamity Looks like Kismet

The scene where Jenna was introduced to Armen was the opposite of a meet-cute. All that happened was that he was ushered into the bullpen and everyone stood up while the boss yelled all their names at him, finishing with, "Armen, this is everyone."

Never in a hurry to rush anything, Jenna sat back down without stepping forward with her coworkers to make a more positive first impression. Besides, she had never had to pursue a man in her life. Even if they worked together, why would she need to do anything differently?

Contrary to what was best for Jenna's personal development, Armen approached her the next day at the office fridge and introduced himself again.

"Yeah. I met you yesterday," she drawled as she hunted through a basket for a pack of artificial sugar.

"Well, it's good to meet you," he said in deep mellow tones. "You're famous."

He was about to retreat to the sound booths when Jenna spun around to face him. "What do you mean, I'm famous?"

"Oh, you know," he said after he cleared his throat. "I've been told so much about you."

Jenna was annoyed and looked it. "What could anyone around here have told you about me?"

He looked amused instead of embarrassed, which inflamed Jenna's annoyance into peevishness. "Oh, you know, just that you're perfect," he said, giving her a studying glance that suggested she was far from it.

"Who, may I ask, gossips about perfection?" she questioned in a clipped tone.

"Who doesn't?" Armen asked with a wicked smirk.

It was on the tip of her tongue to say something about how he could use some work himself, but when she looked for something about him to use as a barb, she couldn't find anything. Everything about the way he was groomed and styled was above average. Another person might have made something up to twit him about, but Jenna was not a liar or a bully.

Instead, all the irritation and upheaval left her features. A corner of her mouth made a jump toward the ceiling, "Maybe you could teach me how to be perfect sometime."

"You'll accomplish it better if you smile," he said, with a charming grin of his own before leaving her gawking in front of the microwave.



It was then that Armen did something no other man had ever done to Jenna. He left her alone. She had assumed that his leaving the kitchen was only a temporary retreat, and he would be back to invite her out for lunch or a drink.

A week later, he was still behind glass, doing his radio show without taking more than a professional interest in her, or anyone. He was one of those men who came to work, and then, just worked? Was he married? Did he already have someone special in his life? Was that the reason he was so aloof? Jenna did not have the pluck to ask her coworkers questions about him. She simply kept her ears open and waited for the information to trickle in.

It soon did.

No girlfriend. No wife. No significant other. Not even a roommate.

Apparently, he lived on a boat he kept in the bay and was particularly fond of stargazing. It had been his idea to incorporate information about what celestial activities were happening on clear nights along with the weather forecast.

Other than that, no more information about him was forthcoming. Jenna waited, but three weeks went by with nothing new surfacing.

She was on the verge of forgetting all about him when she once again met him in front of the microwave.

He kept looking in the fridge and closing it again.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"My lunch is gone," he admitted sourly.

"Someone took it?"

"Maybe 'gone' is the wrong word. My lunch is not in the fridge and instead, it's on the counter... back at my place."

"There's a really nice Asian fusion restaurant around the corner if you have time to nip out."

"I don't," he admitted, even more sourly.

"Are you dying? Do you want me to fetch something for you?" Jenna offered when she wouldn't normally. Skipping a meal was not one of the things Jenna would normally have classified as a hardship. It was just that he looked so dismayed, so she wondered if he had missed breakfast, and what if that was compounded by having missed dinner the night before? She found herself suddenly worried sick that he was wasting away in front of her.

"Would you?" he asked with the most beautiful smile following the words. "I have to do a segment with Miles in ten minutes, but I should be finished with that in about an hour."

"Fine. I'll get you something. I assume you like noodles," she said dryly.

"I love them," Armen said, just as Miles stuck his head around the corner and waved him back.

Jenna went to her desk and phoned the Asian fusion place. She was about to order noodles for both of them, but then backtracked and canceled the meal for her. She had not forgotten her lunch that morning. Besides, he didn't want to eat with her. He just needed to eat something. It was a humanitarian mission, not a date.

Forty minutes after their conversation, Jenna popped down to the restaurant and picked up the Vietnamese noodles. Traversing through the office, she set the foam container along with the chopsticks on Armen's desk. The first time she placed them, she had stuck the receipt



between the lid and the chopsticks, hoping that he would realize it would be good manners to pay her back, but then suddenly, she didn't want to be paid back.

She pocketed the receipt and returned to her desk, where she reluctantly gnawed on a carrot she had not cut into sticks before including it in her lunch. Now she understood why Bugs Bunny always had half a carrot. It was the food accessory that never went away.

She was awakened from her stupor by Armen as he wheeled an office chair into her cubicle. He had his noodles in hand. "I see you haven't finished eating," he commented. "Mind if I join you?"

She nodded to him and he took his seat.

"Thank you for this," he said as he opened the lid.

She smiled. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a man eat like he enjoyed it. Most of the men she went out with were so afraid of making a mistake that they made *all* the mistakes. Armen obviously didn't care if he had a noodle trailing from his mouth and ate like he meant it.

"Are you just eating that little carrot?" he asked when his mouth was empty.

It was so big around that she could just barely touch her middle finger and thumb around the circumference when she held it. "Little?" she replied.

"Okay, it could obviously feed a starving village. Why are you eating that instead of this?"

"I didn't forget my lunch. Besides, I have other things," she conceded and showed him the lunch box she had brought with her. It had tiny little compartments with fruit, meat, cheese, and crackers.

"So again, what's with the carrot?"

She dropped it on her desk. "I'm trying to lose weight, so carrot first, lunch afterward."

"If you can eat anything after that carrot!" he laughed.

"That's sort of the point."

"I think leaving the carrot on the desk is a mistake. I think you should stuff it in your bun. I bet you could hide all kinds of stuff in there and no one would be the wiser. It's so big, you could have a black hole hidden in there."

Normally, a comment like that would have thrown Jenna into a rage. She did not enjoy it when thoughtless men made jokes about her bun. Surprisingly, a rage did not seem to be on the menu. Armen had not meant anything by it. He was merely flirting with her and looking for a logical opening. Five seconds ago, he had been talking about the carrot.

"I hide stuff in there all the time," she laughed back.

"Like what?"

"All my secrets," she said evasively.

"I'd love to know all your secrets. They sound as inviting as a trail of gummy bears in the woods," he commented pleasantly. He cleared his throat and continued, "I want to repay you for this food. You didn't have to do this for me. I was dying and I want to show my appreciation. What sorts of favors, gifts, or shameless plugs on the radio tug at your heartstrings?"

"You don't have to do anything," she scoffed.

"Let me give you a list of things I can do. I'm good at getting new bands on the radio," he said with an eyebrow wriggle.

She laughed. "I don't have a band."

"Then, your little sister's band."

"I'm an only child."

"Okay, that's out. I could take you stargazing on my boat."

She looked around the office blankly, looking for somewhere to hide her discomfort. She was so shaken that for the first time since she started working at that office, she did not notice the discoloration on the ceiling which always irked her perfectionist leanings. Was there a reason to say no?

They did not work in the same department. Check.

Neither one of them had authority over the other. Check.

There couldn't be any of the normal office romance objections. Check.

Besides, it was just stargazing in the bay, not sex in the sound booth. She added a check after that one for good measure.

"I guess we could do that," she said slowly after she checked all the boxes in her head.

"Then, tomorrow at nine. I'll take you out on the ocean. You'll look perfect, and I'll try my best to keep up," he said cheerfully.

He tossed his empty container in the garbage, saluted, and wheeled his chair back to his corner.

Jenna was breathless as he disappeared from view. The fluttering in her heart surprised her. Who knew what other surprises were waiting for her?



Jenna went home that night and went through her clothes. She was not the kind of girl who needed to go shopping because she had just been asked on a date by the man of her dreams. All of Jenna's clothes were already awesome. It came from meticulous planning all year round. She put together an outfit from her closet with accessories and shoes. Then she put them together in a garment bag and hung them on a hook for her date with Armen.

Armen asked her to meet him at a cafe near the bay. He said he would meet her there and walk down to the boat with her. He didn't want her to get lost, so he would escort her, saying marinas could be hard to navigate if you weren't used to them.

The outfit came out of the closet. It was a pink and white horizontal striped shirt with a gather above one shoulder. It had the added benefit of doubling as a dress due to its length, so she paired charcoal leggings with it. She wore light brown boots that looked pink, only because there was pink near them. She wore a blush-pink ribbon in her bun, which was a slightly more extravagant design than the usual messy bun she wore. This one incorporated a thick braid.

She went to meet him and her breath caught when she saw him on the other side of the glass through the coffee shop window. Without a doubt, he was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen and when she stepped through that door to join him, her life would be forever changed. He was the exact person to make her throw everything out the window.

Armen got to his feet when Jenna entered.

"I already ordered for you," he said with a sly grin. "We've got a lot of sailing to do if we're going to make it to the right place by the time the sun sets."

Jenna smiled. "What did you order for me?"

"Apple cider."

"Sounds perfect."

"It's going to be more perfect once we're out on the water. Even in the summer, it can get chilly." He placed the warm cup in her hand and offered her his arm.

With a blush as golden as the sunset, she took it.

Together, they left the cafe and walked the tree-lined sidewalk until the ocean came into view.

"Where did you learn how to sail?" she asked.

"It's not a sailboat," he replied.

"You said 'sailing' earlier."

"I probably did. It has a better sound to it than boating. The thing is, I'm not good at everything I try to do, and learning how to manage all those knots and pulleys was not happening on such short notice, so I got a boat with a motor instead. The ocean can be really unpredictable and sailing against ocean tides or being pushed along by them is too much for me. I need to be where I'm supposed to be when I'm supposed to be there."

She was about to ask him a question about that when he continued.

"Do you see that boat with the blue stripe down the side?" he asked, pointing.

Yes, she could see it. It was one of the larger boats parked there. It was no small wonder he could live there. It looked perfectly comfortable and she felt this sensation of luxury pass over her. Like she was being treated better by Armen than she had been by any other man. He was taking her on a sunset cruise to watch starlight. Suddenly she felt like she'd never seen either of those things before.

He jumped onto the boat first and delicately lifted her aboard to join him. Efficiently, he moved around the vessel, untying ropes and taking his place behind the wheel in a way that struck her as a hundred times more masterful than the way a man looked when he drove a car.

She was about to do something daring. Daring for her. She was about to come up behind him and rest her elbow on his shoulder when he turned around and took her out of the cabin and onto the deck.

"The real show is out here," he said, seating her in the front and covering her lap with a blanket.

He left her and a minute later the engine was running and they were fast leaving land behind them.

Soon they were out of the bay with the mountains surrounding them and onto the fiery mirror of the ocean. Jenna sipped her cider and watched the changing colors of the tilting light reflecting on the clouds, the emerging stars, and an inexplicable feeling of wonder and adventure enveloped her. It suddenly occurred to her that she had not experienced a feeling like she was exactly where she needed to be in a very long time.

She glanced back at Armen with the sun making half his face bright and half his face dark. He looked very confident in the way he piloted the ship. Trustworthy even.

Then he cut the engine, grabbed a blanket of his own, and joined her in the front of the boat.

"Are you having a good time?" he asked as he sat next to her with his blanket folded on his lap.

She nodded comfortably. "This is already such a good date, but I can't help but wonder if you have anything else planned."

"Of course I do," he said pleasantly.

"Like what?"

"Anything you want."

That comment made Jenna suspicious. He sounded like the man who was looking for the missing dog in the park—like he would have said anything to get Jenna to go with him. She pushed off the thought. She was being paranoid and it had to stop. But when she saw Armen's face, looking unexpectedly anxious to please, she had the feeling again. To cover it, she asked, "Why don't you tell me more about yourself? How long have you lived on a boat?"

"About three weeks. I started living aboard *The Windstorm* when I came to Victoria," he explained.

Jenna squinted. Had that been the name on the side of the boat? She felt like it wasn't. Hadn't it had a woman's name like *The Lucia*? Or *The Margaret*? It was too late for Jenna to check then. She couldn't very well swing her whole body over the edge to see what was written on the side of the boat. Nor could she challenge him on the name of his own boat.

"Why did you buy it?" she asked, keeping to her line of questioning.

He didn't answer but looked her up and down. "It's getting darker," he said cryptically. "Tell me something. Are you as attracted to me as I am to you?"

Her heart hit a hitch, but she managed to nod.

"Are you aware that I can't place a finger on you until you place a finger on me?" he challenged.

She wrinkled her nose. What was he saying?

"I can't do more than offer you my arm. If you want to get involved with me, you have to make the first move," he said, tilting his nose to the side and offering her his lips.

Jenna placed one arm over her stomach, scratched her ear with her opposite hand, and took a cleansing breath. She hesitated, waiting to answer, toying with her options. "So you are giving me all the power on this date?"

"All of it!" he confirmed. "I can't bring you to this remote location and let you think that I'm not making any moves on you because I don't want to. I'm being courteous."

She stifled a laugh. Though it was not a kind laugh. It was an annoyed laugh. He wanted her to make the first move and he asked for it using those words? She laughed to prevent herself from rolling her eyes.

He made amends with the smile he gave her that was without question the most adorable one she had ever seen in her life. He was using his eyes to persuade her to kiss him and it was a far better tactic than using his words.

Jenna burst out laughing. She wasn't sure if she even remembered the last time she had made out with a guy. She was always thinking about bloody fingers and severed tendons.

Well, not tonight, even if he was acting like he deserved her affection just because he had taken her out. It was presumptuous, but... she was in the right place at the right time.

She kissed him, and his kiss was so warm that it made her forget her fears, who she was, and how to stay seated.

They fell on the floor.

She would have gone on kissing him if an alarm on his phone hadn't gone off. It was the worst sound she'd ever heard and she practically jumped off him in her hurry to escape the blaring noise.

He retrieved his phone from his back pocket and silenced it.

"What was that?" she gasped.

"My virgin alert," he replied. "Good thing I shut it off," he said, reaching for her.

"Don't joke. I need an explanation as to why your phone, or anyone's phone, would ever make that sound. No one ignores their phone enough to warrant *that* sound."

"It was to remind me of a celestial event that is going to take place in a minute," he said, looking up at the near-black sky. "It would be a pity if we sailed all the way out here only to miss it."

"Okay," Jenna said, steadying her breath before wrapping herself up in the blanket and looking up at the sky. "What are we looking for?"

He settled as close to her as was humanly possible and pointed up. "We should see color."

At that exact moment, Jenna did see something. It was like the twinkle of a satellite, a slightly off-color point of light moving across the sky quickly when it suddenly turned and fell toward them. It got larger and larger like a crimson comet descending with a sparkling tail behind it. As it got closer it stopped looking like a comet. The shape and style were more like fireworks.

"Did you do this?" she asked, feeling like she'd never seen anything more beautiful.

He didn't reply. He just looked up into the sky with a look that could only be described as the opposite of wonder. His expression caught her attention more than what was happening in the air above them. When his eyes met hers, it was obvious that he knew a lot more about what was happening than she did, and he did not savor the phenomenon.

When she looked up again, she saw other lights—white lights. The thing had a shape and control over its movement. It was hovering.

She felt the prick of a needle in her arm.

Armen caught her as she fell forward.

Her last thought was that whatever was above them... it did not look like a flying saucer.



# Chapter Three

## Doom has Eight Legs

When Jenna awoke, she had the worst headache. The place it hurt was the spot just above her right eyebrow. It pulsed. Her throat felt raw as if she had slept while breathing through her mouth, something she rarely did. She smacked her lips together and swallowed, trying to encourage her saliva glands.

"She's awake," she heard a voice say. It wasn't a normal voice, like a human's. As a matter of fact, it sounded more like a parrot.

"Well, get out," she heard Armen respond to the voice. "She's not ready to see you."

"Can I record your conversation?" the bird voice asked hopefully.

"No."

"It's for posterity," the first voice begged.

"That's exactly why you can't record it," Armen sighed. "You must know she's not going to like any of this."

"Who's fault is that?" the bird voice asked, putting all the blame squarely on Armen.

"Shh... She's waking up."

Jenna's eyelids fluttered, hoping to sneak a peek at the first speaker before they departed, but the lights in the room were bright and her eyes were unaccustomed to it, so she kept blinking, trying to push away the sleep.

"Get going," Armen said firmly, though not unkindly.

She heard the door close on the first speaker and then Armen's footsteps toward her.

She forced herself up, even though she couldn't yet open her eyes all the way. "What did you give me?" she rasped, rubbing the painful spot above her eye.

"A sleeping agent, and a good one too."

Her hand reached unconsciously up to her hair coiled on the top of her head. Was it still intact? She sighed, relieved to feel that it was.

"What are you hiding in your bun, Jenna?" Armen asked, losing the fine edges his voice had when he hosted on the radio.

She deliberately ignored his question and rubbed her eyes instead. "Am I ever going to be able to see again?"

"In a minute. Just be patient."

"Where am I?"

"You're in an observation room in Saint Augusta Hospital," he replied softly.

"Where?" Jenna asked, her voice rasping. "I've never heard of that hospital. Is it up by Sidney?"

"It's in the city of Daavin, on Octavia Three. I'm sure you've heard of the Octavia system even if you haven't heard of the city or the hospital before."

His voice was so calm and assured that it was at complete odds with how Jenna felt at that moment. She did know that word—Octavia. She breathed in, unable to think of a bad enough word to call him. If she could have seen him, she would have kicked him, bruised him, or at least thrown a pillow at him. The phenomenon her grandfather had predicted had finally happened, except it hadn't happened on her terms. She had been fooled. She had been fooled by Armen's pretty hair, unique voice, perfect tan, and everything else that went into making Mr. Wonderful. She could have slapped herself and him—both of them. She almost did.

"Why did you do this to me?" was all she was able to whisper.

"You wouldn't go with any of their agents," he said simply. "They said you'd go anywhere with me if I asked you."

"And why would I do that?" Jenna hissed bitterly. Her vision finally came into focus and she saw him sitting next to her. He looked exactly the same, glamorous and exotic. "Is that even what you really look like?"

"It is. Let me tell you what the Octavians told me when they recruited me."

"Great. Let's hear your side of the story," she huffed.

"A few months ago, my boss allowed me to be interviewed for a promotion. I'm a diplomat, and I was invited to interview for a position working for the Adamis Division that liaisons with the Octavian government. They had been trying to keep it as confidential as possible, but the Adamis diplomats assigned to the Octavians were dropping off in not-so-freak accidents. They were searching the universe for reserve diplomats. Keeping up?"

She said nothing but glared at him through her haze.

"The situation on Octavia Prime was worsening every day. They were desperate to find another diplomat to ease tension, but they could only find evidence of one reserve diplomat left. It was a woman from Earth, who had been approached by no fewer than two hundred and twelve agents. It didn't matter how they approached her, she shut everyone down."

Jenna ground her teeth. Had there really been that many of them? There had been hundreds of attempts to abduct her? She had only counted maybe twenty and she hadn't been positive they weren't just sickos from Earth. Had every random person who had ever spoken to her been an alien in disguise?

Armen continued, "Since they were failing, they started studying you and decided that the only way they could get you to go anywhere would be to find someone you would actually want to go on a date with—your perfect man."

She huffed.

He continued like she hadn't. "In case you wondered if your tastes are hard to appease, after doing an exhaustive search of the available men on Earth, they discovered that there were no men on the whole planet that would satisfy you."

Jenna gawked. "Are you serious? They sifted through all the men on the planet and they found absolutely none that would suit me?"

He nodded. "Exactly."

She leaned back into the pillows on her bed. She knew she was picky, but she hadn't thought she was *that* picky.

Armen continued. "They ended up feeding your information into a matching program called the universal matching algorithm which included all Adamis men in the known universe. You had only eleven matches. Four were married. Six refused to help, and I accepted."

"So, you agreed to help them kidnap me?" she accused.

"No. They would never have abducted you. I did that myself. The situation is critical. For your first day as a diplomat, you don't even have to do that much. Just show up, smile, and show the people your crown, and you're done. You will cause a stalemate in their conflict and save hundreds of lives that otherwise would be lost in one day, and every day thereafter." He took a deep breath while looking searchingly into Jenna's bloodshot eyes. "You were told about this day. You were told what was going to happen. We'll work it out so that you are paid well for the sacrifice of being here." He sounded desperate.

Jenna liked that sound of weakness in his voice as he pleaded with her. She smiled a different smile than before. "I'm not agreeing to anything yet. Who were you talking to when I was sleeping?"

"Favel. He's the Octavian contact you would work closest with in an official capacity," Armen explained.

She chuckled, remembering all the bonkers things her grandfather had told her. "Are you saying he's a talking octopus?"

Armen nodded.

She stopped laughing. "You can't be serious."

"Oh, I am. Not everything in the universe is Adamis, Jenna. Your family would have told you that. We're weird to the Octavians too. They think we're like half a person wandering around with only half our limbs. We freak them out as much as they freak us out."

"I want to see the talking octopus," she said flatly, thinking that there was no way he could produce one. She was still hoping that somehow he had found out about the crown that was hidden in her bun, somehow connected it with the right story, and that everything she was seeing and hearing was a prank on his part and they were still in Victoria five minutes away from where she went to work. The room they were in was not strange. It was ordinary. It could just be that he was spinning a wild story, not that a wild story was not actually unfolding.

Armen called for Favel to enter the room, and in the second before she saw their guest, she remembered the pink lights she saw hovering in the sky.

She turned her head and realized promptly that everything that was happening was all too real.

# Chapter Four

## Pranks and Predestination

Jenna had been a little girl. She lived in a wood, near a beach, by the ocean. She lived with her grandfather, who had been the most magical person she had ever known. He had been old when she was born and he got older while she grew, but he never looked bad. Wrinkles didn't make him ugly or make his gray eyes any less bright. Even when he lay dead in front of her, he still didn't look faded or tired. Even his dead body was completely lovable to her.

Her memories of him were like polished brass, beautiful and clear. When he slid his fedora onto her little-girl head, she knew that he was the person who loved her best in the whole world. When he looked at her, he saw a star. When he picked her up and tossed her in the air, she was better than an eclipse, because she threw more than just his line of sight into shadow.

His eyes looked at her differently than anyone else's because he *knew*. He knew what she was and what she might someday have to do. He told her mad stories that she never doubted because the black crown she kept secret from everyone was on her mind constantly. It wasn't normal and it meant something. She had to look like everyone else and fit in with them. Anything that didn't fit the definition of normal had to be cut out. Grandpa helped. He helped until three years ago. He was in his nineties, and she was in her twenties. Her parents had been unhealthy and passed away when she was young. Her grandpa had outlived them until he couldn't live anymore either.

Everyone closely related to her was gone.

Now Jenna was gone too.



"She wasn't ready to meet me," the parrot-like voice agreed sadly.

"She had to see you sometime. She was never going to be ready. They don't have people like you on Earth yet," Armen explained.

"I'm okay," Jenna said, rubbing a new painful place on the side of her head where she had fallen when she saw Favel.

He wasn't weird, she reminded herself. He was an octopus, but he was the most beautiful octopus she had ever seen. The thing that made her fall over was not the sight of him itself, it had been what he did with his whole skin four seconds after she saw him. When he came in, he had smooth blue skin, and his eight tentacles were strong and firm like he was as good at holding himself up out of the water as he was in the water. His eyes were completely black and were placed closer together on his body than other octopuses who had a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree line of sight. His eyes were binocular, which made them more

like a human's in their placement. His mouth was under his tentacles, so she couldn't see it. She spasmed in terror when his skin suddenly changed texture and color all at once. He had been smooth but suddenly became rough all over. He had been blue but became black and white. It was like she had been looking at an octopus and then was looking at an angry demon.

She hit her head on a light fixture just above the headboard.

"I'm so sorry, Madam Diplomat," he said, the sound of his voice coming from under his tentacles. "I didn't mean to surprise you. I stepped in something gritty and it gave me the willies." He was trembling slightly at the idea. "I reacted badly."

"You're speaking English?" she asked.

"Favel is special. He has lungs as well as siphons, so he is able to speak our language. Most Octavians can't."

"But how are either of you speaking English?" Jenna asked Armen pointedly.

"English is a language Adamis leaders plant on planets when their development passes a certain point. It makes communication much smoother when they're finally ready to join the land of the living skies. English people in England didn't think of it, they just slowly accepted it, pulling words from other languages. They think they're so clever. There's a whole team orchestrating it from Mars."

"Oh," she said. "Nice to meet you, Favel. Do you shake hands?"

Armen facepalmed himself.

"Don't be so skittish, Armen," Favel said, with an inflection in his voice Jenna didn't understand. "I'll explain myself to her and she will be a lady of the court in no time." He turned to Jenna. "I have what you call taste buds on the suction cups on my tentacles. I taste everything: the floor, doorknobs, electronic devices, and everything else I touch. That was why the thing on the floor disgusted me so much, but I think you'd prefer it if I didn't taste you."

She nodded, in complete agreement.

"I appreciate that all of this is very strange, which is why I've brought you a gift." One of his back tentacles brought a little black velvet jewelry box forward and presented it to Jenna.

She stared at the box, unable to lift a hand to take it.

Favel snapped it open and she saw the largest and most beautiful pearl she had ever seen.

Jenna glanced between the octopus in front of her to the contents of the velvet box. "No, I will not marry you," Jenna said with an air of finality.

"It's not a ring!" Favel rushed to explain. "It's not a ring! Giving this to you is not a marriage proposal! It's an earpiece!"

"Calm down, both of you," Armen said, coming forward and snatching the device from the box. "He's just trying to dress it up."

Armen sat down on the bed and pointed to his own ear. He had a solid metal ball in the crevice of his ear. It filled the first two chambers of his ear like an earbud, but it fit so much better.

"I have one too. It's connected to a personal assistant. You can ask him questions about anything and he'll provide you with as much or as little information as you want. He's here to help you become accustomed to this place. Well, not just this place, but everything, including your role here. Once you get used to him, you'll love him. Yours is called Sardius. Mine is called Jisbet. Would you like to try it?"



Jenna looked at it, smacked her lips unpleasantly, and realized that her bun felt abnormally heavy. "Is it a real pearl?" she asked.

"Yes! It is a pearl pulled from the bottom of the Boratic Ocean on Octavia Prime. A rare treasure to be given to an Adamis woman," Favel said.

"I thought it would be a diamond," she said, taking it.

"Would you rather have a diamond?" Favel squeaked.

Armen leaned in. "Diamonds are rocks on Octavian worlds. There are entire beaches made up of them. On Octavia, you want pearls. They are much less common. Put it in your ear. We'll just have you try it out for today. If it goes well, we'll glue it in your ear tomorrow."

"Glue it?" she asked distastefully. It looked like an enormous pearl with a shiny earplug attached to it. Looking closer, she spotted a few metal knobs protruding from the pearl in a circle around the earplug part.

"Trust me. You do not want it falling out. When I activate it, try talking to Sardius. He's one of their best." Armen slid it in her ear.

Jenna had to adjust it several times to get the fit she wanted. Armen turned it on and she waited.

"Good morning, Jenna," came a smooth voice in her ear. "Welcome to Octavia Three, the moon of many lakes. I am Sardius, your assistant. May I say what an honor it is to be present for the first contact between you and the illustrious people of Octavia?"

"It is an honor to meet you too," Jenna said mechanically. Then she thought to ask a question about her grandmother, the source of all this kerfuffle. "Did Letty Osirus wear an earpiece like this?"

"Letty Osirus wore five assistants over the course of her service," Jenna heard Sardius say privately through her new earpiece. "Would you like a brief history of them?"

"Yes." She didn't care if she made Armen wait.

"The first one was Harvek. He was lost over the desert sands of Octavia Eight in the battle of Hitcom 64. He fell out of Letty's ear when she was hanging over the edge of a sky ranger 54 meters a minute from full speed. His unit was cracked and he was cooked in his own device."

"So, he was with her?" Jenna asked.

"Naturally."

"The second one was Ustus. He was released from service after eight years, as is Octavian tradition. The third was Vlax, who passed away in an accident that remains somewhat mysterious to this day."

Jenna felt a little strange listening to the narrative while Armen and Favel watched her, but she was *supposed* to acquaint herself with Sardius so she let him continue.

"The fourth was Sopex 1 who served another eight years before retiring. The last was Jix who accompanied Letty to Earth and continued with her until the device was sadly destroyed."

"When will I get to meet you?" Jenna asked after she had been brought up to speed.

"We have already met," Sardius explained patiently.

Jenna rolled her eyes. "I haven't seen you. Have you seen me?"

"I can see the inside of your ear in order to monitor your ear health, so I can recommend ear treatments whenever you should require one. I can also see a hundred and fifty degrees in all

directions outside your ear. I can also see you whenever I can access or hack a camera that is pointed at you. I can also find you via satellite when you are outside.”

Jenna looked at Armen, who was looking slightly uncomfortable. “Where are you right now, Sardius?”

“I’m in your ear,” he replied. “Was that not explained to you?”

“No. It wasn’t,” she said, immediately pulling the earpiece from her head. “Care to explain this?” she asked Armen, who had been pacing.

“Sardius is a very small octopus. So small that what you are holding is his house, his place of business, and where he will live his entire life. We can’t really take a picture of him because his house is sealed. He has everything he will need in it until he dies. He could take a picture of himself and send it to you if you’re very interested, but...” Armen took his phone out of his pocket and scrolled briefly until he found a picture. “His species looks like this.”

Jenna looked at it. He looked like a transparent octopus with no obvious eyes and only a black beak floating in the middle of an empty-looking body.

She rubbed her eyes. “That’s not Sardius though?”

“No. Just an octopus of the same species. Jenna, I don’t understand. Weren’t you taught about all this by your family on Earth?”

She rolled the pearl earpiece around in her palm. “I was taught some things, like that I was going to need to have a strong stomach in case anything like this ever happened. I hoped it wouldn’t. I never knew my grandmother, Letty Osirus. My father was supposed to be like her, but the... thing... the crown... didn’t work on him. My dad only let them try it on me because he didn’t think it would work.”

“I wonder why it wouldn’t attach to your father,” Armen said reflectively. “I’ve never heard of someone who couldn’t be crowned before. I wonder if it was because they already had eight diplomats in place and so the system wouldn’t let them crown a ninth diplomat. These people are obsessed with the number eight, the way humans are obsessed with the number ten.”

“Ten? How are humans obsessed with the number ten?”

“Because Adamis have ten fingers and ten toes they’re obsessed with the number ten. Their whole numeric system is based on it. The Octavians are obsessed with the number eight because they have eight tentacles. Are you going to put the earpiece back in?”

She looked at it. “Please tell me exactly what is expected of me today and I’ll tell you what I can do and what I can’t. Pretend I don’t know anything. Pretend my family didn’t teach me to be part octopus and that I’m a complete newbie.”

Armen nodded, his expression obviously divided and experiencing conflicting emotions. Half of him was delighted to be the one to know everything and explain everything. The other half of him was pitifully disappointed Jenna wasn’t more knowledgeable. It meant there was so much more work for everyone to do.

# Chapter Five

## Hold the Gifts, Send Cash

Jenna slid the earpiece back into her ear. “How can I hear everything else that is happening around me through this thing?”

“It’s making adjustments for the sounds it blocks and broadcasting them through its speaker at exactly the right pitch, frequency, and time,” Armen explained. “You’ll hear better through it than you will through your other ear.”

Jenna nodded.

“Look, we didn’t bring you here with no comforts available. We brought you eight gifts from Earth to comfort you.”

“Obsessed with eight?” she asked.

“Very obsessed,” Armen agreed. “The first one is your cat, Charm.” Armen tugged on the collar of his shirt, exposing his collarbone and shoulder where there ran two sets of very unhappy claw marks.

“You should really get some antiseptic on those,” Jenna commented dully. Charm always made a mess of everyone.

“Yes, but later. The second thing we brought was all your clothes, including a fedora hat with a pin. Your furniture can be replaced, but people like their own clothes to make themselves more comfortable.”

“Unbelievable nuisances, clothes,” Favel said under his breath.

“The third thing is your grandfather’s house,” Armen continued.

“My grandfather’s house?” Jenna burst.

“Yes. The whole thing has been placed on an island on Octavia Five as a summer retreat for you when the Adamis Council is in recess. Apparently, it withstood the stress of the transport very well.”

“What about the people who were living in it?” Jenna piped up. “That house didn’t belong to my family anymore.”

Armen looked around shiftily. He clearly had no idea. “Maybe we’ll need to make some modifications in order to make it more suitable. Jisbet, make a note of that. The fourth thing is your phone. It won’t work the same way here, but it has photos on it and other personal mementos, so we’ve prepared a way to charge it and for Sardius to access it, though you will not be able to contact anyone through it. From now on, your phone has been replaced by Sardius.”

“That’s not as good,” Jenna grieved. “There’s no screen to watch things on or play games on. Not to mention how uncomfortable it is going to be to listen to music through only one ear.”

“You liked your earphones, did you?” Armen asked like he knew why she liked them, for the headband that helped cover her crown.

As far as Jenna was concerned, he could go to hell. Yes, she liked her earphones. She liked headbands, hats, and anything else she could put on her head to hide what her grandparents had put there when she was a baby. His intonation made his thoughts clear. He thought her concerns had been stupid, like hiding how she was different had been futile and wasteful. It made her want to slap him when she couldn't go to a hairdresser, couldn't let a man run his fingers through her hair, and flat out could not let anyone see the top of her head.

As a matter of fact, she was so angry, she couldn't think of a single thing to say to him and just gawked at him as he continued telling her about the gifts the Octavians had given her.

"The fifth gift is a lifetime supply of potato chips. We don't have them here, and it's the thing the internet claims everyone misses the most about Canada."

"Of all the stupid things..." Jenna scowled. She wasn't allowed to eat them on her diet. "You really didn't think to consult me? You could have asked me what I wanted if an alien race was offering me gifts. I certainly would not have chosen potato chips."

"I had to choose them before I brought you here," he explained weakly. "The sixth thing is a reproduction of every piece of clothing you ever pinned on Pinterest."

Jenna's skepticism melted and her expression softened. That was actually a really good present.

"You'll get new pieces at your residence on Octavia Prime as they're completed. The seventh gift is your second cousin, Lucy."

"My second cousin, Lucy!" Jenna almost screamed in sudden outrage. "Why would you bring her here?"

"Everyone was concerned you wouldn't be happy here without any friends or family. We didn't abduct her. We *invited* her! She was more than willing."

Jenna gasped. It was a moment before she flared, "I wouldn't have invited her inside my apartment and you invited her to come with me to outer space?"

Armen rolled his eyes. "We didn't invite her thoughtlessly."

"It sounds like you did."

"She didn't have a boyfriend or children. Like you, she's an only child. She was the only person we found who you were close to who could make this sort of a trip without disintegrating a social construct."

Jenna bit both of her lips together to help her clamp them shut. She had to keep her deeper thoughts to herself. The reason Lucy didn't have any friends or family was that she was a garbage human being. It didn't occur to Jenna that she also did not have any friends or family, but Jenna did not think of herself as garbage. She thought of it as a consequence of having two opposing claws on her head in the shape of a crown.

"She's about your age. You need family," Armen said softly.

Jenna was about to comment about how most of their presents sucked when she noticed a note of discomfort in his voice. He had been reading from a screen in his palm, like a smartphone, until then. When he finished telling her about Lucy, he turned off the screen and pocketed it.

"What's the eighth thing?" she asked skeptically.

"An eighth thing?" he asked, swallowing a lump in his throat.

“Yes. Obsessed with eight. You said eight. These haven’t been spectacular presents so far and the fact that you’ve brought Lucy along with us basically spoils everything else you’ve given me. Go on, impress me. What’s the eighth thing?”

He opened his mouth to speak, twitched, and closed it again.

“What’s the matter?” Jenna asked.

“It’s him,” Sardius said in her ear. “They’re giving you him.”

Her eyes searched the room in disbelief. “Why?”

It seemed both Armen and Favel knew very well the body language of a person who was speaking to their assistant and neither of them answered her but waited for her to get her answer from Sardius.

“It’s because you didn’t like any of the men on Earth. They’re giving you one of the eleven men you had a possibility of having a romantic connection with out of all the men in the entire universe. It’s the one thing you couldn’t get on Earth that you can get in space and just now, on Octavia.” He cleared his throat. “They’re quite desperate.”

“How are you clearing your throat?” she suddenly asked her PA. “Do you have a throat?”

He chuckled and made a sound like he was clicking his tongue against his molars, but he couldn’t possibly be doing that. He was an octopus the size of an amoeba. “I’m not making any sounds at all. I’m sending commands through a computer program, it is turning my written language into sounds you can interpret. That aside, he’s the final gift. Are you impressed?”

Jenna glared at Armen across the room. “Not at all. The Pinterest thing was pretty cool, but the rest were sort of blah.”

“Come on,” Sardius interjected. “You’re happy to have your cat, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, except I feel like I’m being manipulated by my cat and my grandfather’s house. I don’t like that.”

Sardius continued, “It wasn’t included as one of your gifts, but your residence on Octavia Prime is exquisite. You might find that your job is palatable as well. For now, you just have to show the Octavian population proof that you exist and that will be enough to establish you as a credible diplomat. All the other diplomats are dead. That’s why they need you so desperately. Today, your existence is a public relations stunt. Think about it, Jenna. Imagine shaking your hair out and having your little secret avert an interplanetary incident. Doesn’t that have some appeal to you?”

“Can I return some of those gifts and get new ones?”

“We will be in a much better position for negotiating for changes if you do well today,” he said in her ear.

“‘We’?” she asked him.

“I’m yours and I’m not a diplomat. My job is to keep you informed, healthy, and unharmed. ‘We’ are a thing now.”

She chuckled. He sounded cute.

Jenna looked across the room at Armen and Favel. She had never hated anyone more than she hated Armen. She felt like everything she valued was being used against her and what on earth was she going to do with a man she hated? He was hers? She couldn’t think of anything to make him do except get out of her face.



"This feels weird, to have a man given to me in this way. What am I supposed to do with him?" she asked Sardius.

"Nothing. He'll tell you what to do half the time. He feels strange explaining his role since it is something you have to establish between the two of you. It will take time and patience. I'm detecting a conflicting set of emotions from him regarding you. Just ask him for help when I can't help you. He's got hands," Sardius reminded her, sounding like he did not think that fact made Armen the least bit superior. "They chose him because of your grandmother, Letty. She was even pickier than you. Did you know that out of the whole universe, she could only find one man who could romance her?"

Jenna thought about her grandfather: his sparkling gray eyes like sunlight off the water, his gentle way of touching people, his confidence in others, and the generous way he had of exposing his heart. *Yeah*, Jenna thought. *He was a man who could be the only man in the universe.*

She dropped her hand from the earpiece and prepared herself for the least exciting bit of the day. "Where's Lucy?"

# Chapter Six

## Star Backwards Spells Rats

Apparently, there was no such thing as artificial gravity in space travel. The truth was that creatures that lived their whole lives in water were the ones best suited to space travel, which meant that people like the Octavians were very important to the proper working of the entire universe. They piloted the majority of the spaceships and laughed at how humans, who thrived on land and had the misfortune to breathe air, sucked at pretty much everything else they had to do in outer space.

A spaceship piloted by an Octavian was filled to the brim with water. There was still a quality of weightlessness without the weight of an entire ocean bearing down on the crew, but otherwise, they managed much better than humans did. The water behaved almost the same way in space as it did on a planet. Meaning, you weren't just floating like an idiot with nothing to grab onto or push against. The water provided friction so someone could move around as easily in space as in the sea. Well, it did, provided your technology didn't need to be dry and provided you didn't need to breathe air.

There were human space crafts with air in them, but there were unfortunate consequences for human astronauts in space. They had to train for longer and work in space for less time if they wanted to maintain their muscle mass. They weren't as good at thinking about what was around them in every direction, or in every dimension. Most of the time, it was just something simple, like that they had fewer brains and less gray matter in their bodies than an Octavian. Also, they were more afraid. Humans had finicky self-preservation instincts compared to an Octavian. Octavians were not afraid of losing huge chunks of their bodies. Octavians had four times as many arms and were less afraid to lose one than a human who only had two. Because of their fearlessness, they just made better crews for spaceships. A job that would take four men and a ton of tethers could be done by one Octavian with no tethers.

When humans, or Adamis as Armen called them, traveled in space, they were mostly sealed in and put to sleep. It was hard to give them a good time or turn a space journey into a pleasure cruise. It didn't matter that the ship passed ringed planets, vibrantly colored nebulae, and so many moons they looked like broken stars... the humans couldn't watch. The Octavians made movies of what they had seen and made a highlight reel to give to their passengers on arrival.

By that point in Sardius's lecture, Jenna was starting to wonder why the Octavians needed to have a relationship with the Adamis at all.

"They're customers," Sardius explained cheerfully.

"Really? And what do we give you that makes any of this worthwhile?"

"Healthcare," Sardius answered. "I don't know if you know this, but it is really hard to treat wounds underwater compared to out of the water. We can't do that for ourselves. We need air breathers to care for us. We give them space travel. They save our lives. Like this hospital that we're walking through now. Ninety-six percent of the patients here are Octavians."

Jenna nodded. That explained why they were in a hospital at first. Sardius explained that there actually wasn't much land on the moon of Octavia Three and almost all of it was used for healthcare facilities.

They walked slowly down the hall to Lucy's room. Jenna was having a hard time walking since her space travel experience and the difference in the gravity on Octavia three, but she refused to be wheeled into her cousin's room. She was trying to figure out how to handle everything that had happened, everything that needed to happen, and her place in the middle.

"So, Sardius, after this meeting, we're going down to Octavia Prime?" she asked.

"As soon as you're well enough to travel. The leaders have been notified of your retrieval and are pleased you've made the choice to act as an intercessor. However, they want to confirm your identity by meeting you in person. A few fake diplomats have been uncovered while we waited for your..." he paused, obviously uncertain how to discuss her unwillingness and their continual efforts to secure her participation.

"I want to see my cat," she huffed as she struggled after Armen, holding tightly onto the rails that lined the walls.

Armen paused to wait for her.

"Is the gravity stronger here than on Earth?" she huffed.

"Yes, and the air is thinner," Armen said.

"What about on Octavia Prime?"

"The gravity is stronger and the air is thicker. You'll like breathing there even if it is a struggle to move."

"Will I get used to it?"

"Yes. Earth is actually very light. When I was there, I felt like I was walking on a cloud," Armen said breezily.

"That's because you were meeting me and it was magical for you," she wheezed with a sour expression.

He looked unconvinced but he took her arm. "Let me help you."

She shook him off angrily. "Can't we just get Charm and leave Lucy here?"

"She's your only Earthly companion and you want to leave her behind?" he asked behind a ridge of very firm eyebrows.

"It's going to be your funeral," Jenna cautioned. "Wait. Have you met my cousin yet?"

"I haven't. She was recruited by one of the two hundred and twelve people you avoided, blocked, and refused to hear out."

"I would like to point out that they all seemed to be men who had creepy intentions toward me. You were far better at not creeping me out than they were. Besides, how do you know I wasn't approached by men so shifty that you wouldn't have gone with them if you were flooded out and they were the only people in the world with a lifeboat?"

Armen rolled his eyes and collected his patience. "I appreciate what you're saying, but a lot of the people who approached you were in disguise so they could fit into what is normal on Earth. I'm Adamis, but what I look like and what I am is not the norm in outer space. Most Adamis out here do not have the same proportions as Earthlings or possess the kind of coloring that is natural on Earth. They are sort of like you, but couldn't pass for humans. You'll see what I mean."

Armen swung open the door just in time for them to see Charm seriously wound Lucy. The claw marks across the girl's neck let loose a slasher movie amount of blood. Armen called for the nurse while Jenna caught the cat up in her arms.

"Hello, baby," she said, not paying the least amount of attention to her cousin's distress.

Armen tore a roll of gauze from a nearby shelf and immediately put pressure on Lucy's gashes.

Lucy looked up at him like she wasn't even hurt and said to him with an unconcerned smile, "Hello, pretty eyes."

Her cousin's weirdness had arrived on schedule and Armen averted his gaze.

Jenna leaned over the bed. "What were you doing with Charm? You know she hates everyone but me."

"I know, but I thought she might be feeling lonely or scared, and she might rather have me hold her than nothing."

"Well, I suppose you learned a lesson today," Jenna said without remorse.

"Who's Mr. Pretty?" Lucy asked.

"He's mine," Jenna said without an iota of pleasure.

"Can I borrow him?"

"No," Jenna said firmly.

The nurse came into the room and relieved Armen, waving him away and assessing the injury. At a glance, Jenna could see exactly what Armen meant about Adamis not looking the same. The nurse did not look human. Her head and eyes were too big, but otherwise, she was obviously a close relative genetically. She was like a fire ant, while the rest of them were black ants.

Jenna and Armen stepped back and let her take over.

Jenna watched the medical treatment with fascination. Again, it was almost the way a patient would have been treated on Earth. Antiseptic drops on the wounds, gauze on top.

It was the patient under that gauze that was the biggest problem.

Lucy was the opposite of Jenna. Lucy was the girl who ran off with every single man who asked her. She would have hopped behind the tree line with the man who had been looking for the golden retriever and any other alien who asked her. Lucy didn't need a man who was one in a squillion. She was fine with the guy who was in the room, whatever he was doing, wherever he was going, whatever he thought, whoever he was.

The thing that was the strangest of everything was that Jenna and Lucy looked more like sisters than cousins. Their differences were few but poignant.

Jenna was like a heart, sharp with round edges. Meaning, that something about her was inviting. An undefinable part of her was begging to be loved, though it wasn't in her voice, which often sounded critical. It wasn't in her eyes, which were often looking for the thing to criticize. No, it was somewhere else.

Lucy was like a sun, she gave an excellent first impression. She seemed sunny and warm. On closer inspection, Lucy had no rough edges, she was round and cheerful. Unlike a real sun, she was blown about by every wind, taken to every place for a little while before moving on. It was no wonder she'd ended up in outer space. She always had a new job, a new apartment,

and a new boyfriend with not a care in the world as to what happened to the last one. No one in the world, besides Jenna, had had very many experiences with Lucy. No one knew her.

As for their appearances, Lucy's hair was closer to red, while Jenna's hair was a lighter shade of ash blonde. They both had gray eyes and pointed noses and chins.

Armen looked at the two of them and it was clear he thought they had done very well to take both of them.

The nurse finished treating Lucy, meaning she had stopped the blood, and then coated each of the incisions in a clear gel. Apparently, it was a piece of technology designed to mimic the pigment cells on an octopus' skin that allowed it to change color. The gel was designed to mimic the unbroken skin. Altogether, it meant that Lucy was not mended yet, but to anyone who looked at her, the lesions were incredibly difficult to notice.

"Can I get some of that?" Jenna asked the nurse, noting its effectiveness.

The nurse said it was in every first aid kit and Jenna could help herself.

"I thought you said Charm didn't scratch you," Lucy said grouchy. "So why would you need to cover cat scratches?"

Jenna ignored her cousin. "Has Lucy already met Favel?" she asked when she realized the blue octopus had not accompanied them into the hospital room.

"We thought we'd let you introduce him," Armen explained.

Jenna frowned sourly at Lucy. "I hear you let them abduct you. Why on earth did you go with them willingly?"

"Our grandmothers were both from space, Jenna," Lucy said, matching her cousin's tone. "Yes, your grandmother was the famous diplomat with only one man in the universe who could match her. Yes. All that is true." She narrowed her eyes and continued, "But our grandmothers were sisters. Marta should have been a diplomat too. They say there's a shortage of diplomats and I'm going to be one too, Jenna."

Jenna glanced at Armen to confirm if her cousin was telling the truth.

He nodded.

"Then she was not brought here for my pleasure, but for your purposes?" Jenna said sharply.

"I wouldn't say it like that..."

"I would," she interrupted. "That means that I was given seven presents and not eight."

"You are one of her presents too," Armen said firmly.

"Does she get a man of her very own too?" Jenna asked coldly.

"Yes, but she's clearly not as picky as you. She will have the opportunity to choose someone."

"From a lineup?" Jenna snorted. "That does seem very appropriate," Jenna said, thinking of Lucy choosing a man from a line of suspects in a police station.

"What are you getting so snotty for?" Lucy interjected. "You don't even want to be here, do you? Do you know what else they told me? That my coming will make it so you don't have to stay. They say that if they can get me and seven other diplomats in place, you can return to Earth. You can retire, just like Letty did. Isn't that what you really want?"

Jenna stared at her, unable to speak.

"Don't you want to go home and not do any of this? I'm your key to getting out of here."

Jenna knew exactly how much it pleased Lucy to say those words. She believed that Jenna thought she was superior to her because she had been the one who was crowned, but that was not the case at all. If Jenna could have given Lucy her crown, she would have done so years ago. Lucy had never even seen it. She didn't know what she was asking for, and actually, Jenna didn't know what it all meant either. The only thing that was motivating her cousin now was the belief that she was just as good as Jenna, their grandmothers had been sisters and been just as good as each other. It was just that one of them had to be the diplomat and the other one had to be supportive instead of authoritative.

Jenna swallowed. "Ask Favel to come in," she instructed Armen in a quiet voice.

He went out to get him.

When Favel entered, he did not step on anything slippery on the floor. He didn't say anything either, speaking out of his beak at the bottom of his body, and Lucy still fainted dead away at the sight of him.

They had to call the nurse back in.



# Chapter Seven

## The Sound of a Pearl

“In the hierarchy of Octavian society, there are eight special groups of octopuses.”

“Of course, there are,” Jenna said to Sardius as she threw an octopus-shaped stress ball at the wall and caught it like she was in prison, and throwing the ball was her only comfort.

“You cannot pronounce the names of any of them,” Sardius informed her dully.

“Figures.”

They were still on Octavia Three. Lucy was unfit to travel, and everyone thought it better to give her a good night’s sleep and to try to leave in the morning. Of course, the night was not the same number of hours as it had been on Earth. Octavia Three was tidally locked with Octavia Prime, and it would be eighteen hours before daylight came.

Jenna waited in her room. Charm was under the bed, obviously wondering what she had done to deserve a hospital room on Octavia Three. It was the smell, the unfamiliarity, the lack of a litter box, and the noticeable absence of her chicken dinner. It was going to be fish from then on out and Charm did not particularly care for fish.

Jenna tried to pay attention to Sardius so she could acclimatize to her surroundings as quickly as possible. The only thing she was able to absorb was about one species of octopus that was three times larger than the others and if they didn’t get what they wanted when they wanted it, they had a tendency to go Godzilla on a human-run hospital. Sardius tried to make the rest of the information package interesting, but Jenna couldn’t listen.

“I’m too distracted,” she muttered.

“Would you like to go to sleep, Madam Diplomat?” Sardius’s smooth voice asked.

Jenna started speaking slowly, “That program you use is something else. I’m finding it really hard to believe that you’re a tiny octopus in my ear. Sometimes I think I can hear you breathing. If you were a computer program, why would they add breathing?”

“Don’t you find it comforting for me to sound like a man?” his tenor voice prompted.

“‘Like a man’,” she repeated slowly, tossing the ball between her palms. “Why would a man’s voice be particularly comforting to me?”

“If it isn’t, would you like me to switch to a female voice?” he asked, sounding amused. “There’s a setting that allows me to do that.”

Urgently, she stopped him. “No. No. I’m good. I just feel weird here. I hate Armen. He’s supposed to be the man of my dreams according to their little study? He looks like he should be, but I just hate him. Why did none of those two hundred and twelve people talk to me about what was going on? Why didn’t one of them take me aside and say, ‘I need to talk to you about the thing you’re hiding in your hair’?”

“Try not to think about their mistakes now. After you make your appearance on Octavia Prime, I’ll help negotiate a new deal for you. What Lucy said was true. If you can establish stability, you can retire and go back to Earth if you want to.”

Jenna dropped the ball in her hand. "I don't think I want to do that."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not completely convinced that their little study wasn't bang on," she admitted mournfully.

"You think there isn't a man for you on Earth?"

"I never met one I wanted very much when I lived there."

"And you want *someone*?" his voice drawled saying the word 'someone' with all the intonation of unattainable romantic love.

"I'm starting to think there isn't anyone for me if Armen is the man they produced for me out of the whole universe. I hate him."

"Maybe you just like him so much you..."

"Shut your mouth, Sardius," she said like she'd been telling him off for years and it wasn't the very first time. "I'm not a teenager with conflicting emotions boiling so hotly that I can't tell the difference between love and hate. If I can't love him, and I really can't, then I'm left to conclude that I can't love anyone."

"Hmm... that's fine. It makes you better at getting important things done. Focus on what you need to do and do those things with precision. You'll be exceptional. Just wait and see."

She hesitated to give her reply. "I was expecting you to resist my way of thinking more. You know, I still think it's really hard to believe you're a little octopus talking inside my ear using a computer program to sound like that. You sound so amazing, I keep thinking you're a man."

"It's the program," he said firmly.

"Is it?" she questioned. To her ears, his voice was so full of emotion, amusement, and a layer of understanding that almost went straight through her. "If I ask, can I change your personality so you pander to my every whim?"

"No. This is my personality. I am not a computer. The program does its best to interpret my communication to the closest human equivalent. I assure you, I'm an octopus. I can't speak. Most octopuses can't. I'm clucking away at a keyboard with my suckers," he scoffed. "I don't know why my computer-generated voice sounds so pleasant to you, but we're both lucky that it does."

"And you're going to live and die in my ear?" she asked disbelievingly.

"After a fashion," he replied.

"What do you mean, after a fashion? What's it like in there?"

He hesitated. "My last diplomat did not ask me questions about my home."

"How did he treat you?"

"He didn't trust me."

"Why?"

"He was afraid he would die. He thought if he confided in me, someone would hear him talking and it would hasten his death."

Jenna huffed. "He did die, didn't he?"

"Yes," Sardius confirmed. "His name was Arvantis. He tried to use me as little as possible before the assassinations started. He didn't want to have an octopus in his ear or in his brain. He took me out every time he got the chance. He wouldn't sleep with me inside his ear, and my

home was not inside a pearl back then. It was inside malachite. Jisbet has the same model in Armen's ear."

"Do you like the pearl better?" Jenna asked.

"Yes. It's a promotion. Not only is it more beautiful on the inside, but it's safer, and you are a more important diplomat."

"Should I sleep with you in?" she asked.

"Yes. You should do more than get me glued in your ear. You should get the magnetic connectors installed in your ear so that it's not possible for me to fall out without your permission. It also makes it easier on treatment day when you get your ear cleaned."

"Magnetic connectors?" Jenna was aghast as she asked the question.

"I've been told it's not more upsetting than having one ear pierced in two places at once and it will make everything about our jobs easier."

Jenna thought about it. It did make sense for him to not want to fall on the floor should she get bumped or something. He would die the way Letty's assistant died.

Suddenly Sardius said something she did not expect. "You should not be afraid that I'll die if I fall out of your ear. What's more important is that I can give you information that will protect you. That's why you don't want me to fall out. I may not be able to protect you in a moment of urgency like a knight in shining armor, but I'm a good hacker and in this situation, that's probably better."

"What?" She asked, suddenly lost for breath. "Aren't you worried about yourself?"

"This job is dangerous," he continued, "but you should worry about yourself first. An octopus or an Adamis could assassinate you because they don't want you to do your job. The diplomats deposed before you have their graves in a line. You're going to find this is a much more precarious job than the one you used to have on Earth."

"Do you know about the job I used to have?" she whispered.

"Of course, I do. You worked in advertising. It's prepared you for this more than you know. All you're going to do in intergalactic relations is sell Octavians to Adamis and Adamis to Octavians. The other diplomats were killed and their deaths were made to look like accidents. I don't want you to get the magnets because I'm afraid for myself. If I fall out, I won't be able to help you. That is unacceptable."

Jenna sighed and put her forehead on her folded arms. Sardius sounded so comforting, like someone strong with muscles like pythons and confidence like a fighter pilot. There was even a sliver of him that sounded like her grandfather speaking gently in her ear without being him at all. "It's very hard to believe you are a microscopic octopus in my ear."

"Perhaps it would help you if you just thought of me as a man who's far away, talking to you on the phone?" he suggested.

Jenna bit her lip. "I'd like that."

A knock came at the door.

"It's Armen," Sardius informed her. "Shall I let him in?"

"Yes."

# Chapter Eight

## Don't Hate Me Cause I'm Handsome

Armen came in, looking as sultry, attractive, and sexy as Jenna remembered, but she felt mildly bored looking at him. She let her head loll back as she waited for him to speak.

"You're not sleeping?" Armen noticed. His breathing was heavy like he had jogged to her room.

"What's going on?" she prompted.

"There's been an attack on a hospital on Octavia Prime. The Adamis Prime Minister is demanding you go down to the surface to calm the Hipposyphus causing this."

"How come he can say the name of the enormous octopus?" she complained.

"He's butchering it," Sardius put in.

"We can't wait for Lucy to be ready to go down to the surface. You're ready, and they need *you* now," Armen said urgently.

Jenna rose to her feet. "Like I need Lucy to go with us. I wasn't the one who wanted her in the first place. If I was the only one that mattered we could have left last night. Whose fault is it that we didn't? Lead the way."

Armen bit his tongue on whatever retort he had on the ready and led Jenna out of the room. They met Favel in the hallway and hoofed it down to what Jenna thought was an elevator. Well, Favel didn't hoof it. He slooshed it, mushing his body forward on the ground, but also attaching his suction cups onto the walls to propel himself forward like a lazy Spiderman. Honestly, he made a very good distraction from Armen as his every movement fascinated her. Armen kept propelling her forward whenever she stopped to watch Favel.

"He'll catch up," Armen pointed out as he hurried her along.

Inside the lift, Jenna soon realized it wasn't an elevator in the way she was familiar with. It was something else. It had seats, and each of them took one. Just as the doors closed, she had an impulse to tell them to stop and wait for Sardius to join them. In the nick of time, she remembered that was crazy. He was in her ear.

"How are we going to get to Octavia Prime?" Jenna asked.

"This vehicle," Armen said, indicating the tiny room that was now descending at a measured pace downward, "will be carried on tracks to a sky launch platform. In the Octavia system, we don't have personal vehicles. A vehicle like this one can ride tracks in all directions. Meaning, it can scale the side of any building and let you off at the correct floor, as well as taxi you to the sky launch platform, like the airport on Earth. It's a nuisance to wait for an elevator, wait for a taxi, and wait for your plane to take off. Here, the elevator becomes the taxi and the taxi is loaded onto the rocket, which will shoot us out into space, take us between the moons, and drop us as pleasantly as possible onto the surface of Octavia Prime. Once we're on the rocket, Favel will leave us because it's uncomfortable for him to always be out of the water, so he'll join the other Octavians in the spacecraft."

"I know this seems odd to you," Favel said, raising a tentacle the way a person would raise a finger. "Because you would never consider an elevator in the same realm of technology as a rocket ship. These pods can withstand the differences in pressure whether they are underwater or breaching an atmosphere and that's necessary for us because of the nature of our worlds."

"Sounds efficient," Jenna said as she looked out the window at the vast oceans and horizons of Octavia Three.

The star their solar system used as a sun had set long ago, and instead of seeing it, she saw four other moons of Octavia Prime hanging in the air. The star patterns in the sky were different and vast. Jenna whispered, "Are any of these stars the sun of my world?"

"Of Earth? Yes."

"Yes."

Sardius and Armen had answered at the same time.

"I'm sorry, Armen. I was actually talking to Sardius." She clenched her jaw, kept her gaze focused out the window, and tried to listen to the explanation Sardius gave about how solar systems span around each other, but she found it impossible to pay attention.

Instead, she was completely aware of Armen. What had been mouth-watering about him had become loathsome. She kept her gaze out the window because that was all she could do to stop herself from screaming and kicking him in the shins.

"Madam Diplomat?" Sardius prompted and she heard that.

"Yes, Sardius, I see," she said snottily for the benefit of all in the room.

Slowly, he said, "I understand. I'll stop blabbing in your ear and let you absorb what's around you."

He didn't say another word as the craft jolted mildly as it stopped descending and moved forward on a new track that ran along the ground. The grass under them disappeared and the track went across water as it neared an island that had a rocket launcher on it.

"All this technology and infrastructure will be gone in the next twelve years," Favel said conversationally. "On Octavia prime, we have no need for tracks like the ones on the ground here. There, a pod can ascend and descend without tracks. Once you're in space, you can get picked up by a ship and taken wherever you want to go."

"That sounds really exciting," she agreed, not wanting to offend Favel.

He continued, "As it is, this rocket will take us to space. I'll get us deposited in the correct vessel and once all its passengers have disembarked to other crafts, the rocket will fall back to the surface and be prepared for another launch from Octavia Three while we continue on to the planet."

"Are we going to have to wait for many passengers to get on before we can start traveling?"

Favel looked mildly excited with the blue flaps over his eyes raising slightly like eyebrows.

"There are no other passengers. We are the only ones going."

"They chartered a spaceship for us?" Jenna asked in disbelief.

Favel put out two tentacles and made a heart shape out of them. "Yes."

Armen snorted through his handsome nose. "A lot more than this has already been done for you, Jenna. So much money, so many resources, and so much time has been put forth to bring you here. You might not appreciate it, but you should at least understand it."

Jenna turned away from him and watched the view change as they took a turn that moved them upward into the rocket that would carry them into outer space. She watched as they loaded their pod into the side of the rocket, almost exactly the same way a cassette tape was loaded into a player.

"You stay conscious until we're locked onto the spaceship. You won't get to enjoy the scenery on the way to the planet, but you'll be able to enjoy the view for a few more minutes," Favel explained kindly.

"What happens when we're loaded into the spaceship?" she asked.

"I'll leave out the bottom. When the hatch is locked, this pod will fill with gas and both of you will be unconscious in ten minutes."

"Will you go to sleep for the journey as well?" she asked him.

"No," Favel said and it almost sounded like he was laughing. "I'll pilot the ship to Octavia Prime. Do you think I would trust you to the yahoos they get piloting these simple routes? I'm taking you myself." He nodded reassuringly. He pointed out the window with the tip of his tentacle. "Watch. This is a miraculous sight."

Jenna turned her head in time to see the central star's light break out over the crest of the Octavia Three. She caught her breath.

"Do you see why it's important for you to be here?" Armen asked peevishly.

"Armen, please stop talking to me if you don't have anything important to say," Jenna snapped back. "I'm very displeased with the way you handled me. The dishonesty is what is bothering me the most. I may not have been given all the details, but my family believed in this program enough to attach the heirloom to my head when I was a baby. I knew this was coming. Please be quiet and give me some time to adjust."

Jenna had been staring out the window, watching their journey up through the stratosphere, and higher when she heard something like muffled speech on the other side of the pod. She glanced over to see Favel with a tentacle suction cupped over Armen's mouth.

"I'm sorry, Favel. He must taste disgusting," Jenna said with a wry smile.

Favel glanced between them. His thoughts were unreadable to Jenna. She didn't know what octopus expressions meant.



# Chapter Nine

## The Black Crown of the Octavian Diplomat

Sunlight spangled through heart-shaped leaves as Jenna lay on her back. The sky over her head was enormous and she felt small. With her head uncovered and her hair lying free without being pinned up to hide her secret, everything was out in the open. It was annoying to cover it all the time.

Her grandfather came up to her and plopped his fedora on her face.

It was a dream.

He wasn't really there.

When she moved the hat and looked for him, he was wading through the stream near his house in his bare feet.

Jenna knew all about dreams. If she dreamed of someone who was dead, she had to hide that she knew they were dead. She had to act like it was a normal day. She wasn't really in a dream. She was really there. Her grandfather was walking into the water and he was laughing at how cold the water was, but he didn't say anything specific. Jenna had trained herself to never speak to him in a dream. If she said nothing, if she just looked at him, she could look at him longer. For that brief moment, she was home with him.

Bliss.

He turned to her with a twinkle in his eye. "This is it, princess," he said.

"Don't go."

He was gone.

The pod rumbled under Jenna as they entered the atmosphere of Octavia Prime. She glanced at Armen. He was unconscious.

With no one else to ask, she said to her earpiece, "Sardius, is everything okay?"

"Yes. We'll land in six minutes, and when I say 'land' I mean, we'll plunge into the ocean."

"Why haven't I got any safety restraints on? Why isn't there a seatbelt in this thing?"

"Adamis hate seatbelts a lot. They squash their digestive tracts and reproductive organs. There are other safety measures taken. Take a good breath in."

Jenna did as she was told as the cabin abruptly changed and something like an airbag squashed her into her seat... and all the other seats. She couldn't move at all with the giant balloon pinning her down, and for a few minutes, breathing was tricky, though not impossible. When the time of impact came, she felt a tremor through the craft. It was much worse than an airplane landing and her ears popped so badly, she thought they were bleeding.

Then the whole ship, not just her pod, felt like it was bobbing in the ocean current. At almost exactly the same time, the balloon deflated and returned to its compartment above the seats.

"Sardius, that landing hurt my ears. Talk to me."

She heard something, but not words.

"I can't hear."

A second later, she felt a prick in the ear with Sardius' pearl. "Is that better?"

"Yeah. Can you get my other ear too?"

"Sadly no, but you'll be able to hear everything you need to hear through this ear. Favel is coming."

The floor opened and using his tentacles, Favel heaved himself out of the water beneath and into the pod. "Why is Armen still asleep?"

"He had a mild allergic reaction to the sleeping agent," Sardius explained, making use of a speaker in the pod. "Don't worry, Jenna. When I realized what was happening, I got the pod to change the dosage and inject him with a tiny antihistamine. He'll be fine... when he wakes up in a few hours."

The idea of going through the next few hours without Armen was a massive relief. She smiled and breathed like there was a weight off her chest.

"Jenna, don't forget to tell me how much you love me," Sardius smirked.

"It's got to go without saying," she said with a wide grin plastered to her face.

Favel could not hide his disappointment. He slumped, then groaned a tinny sort of groan. "I don't like this. Armen was supposed to be there with you for your first contact with the Octavians on Octavia Prime. He was supposed to be there to hold your hand when you went out to make your grand entrance and confront the berzerk Hipposyphis. Having you go all alone when you've never seen a Hipposyphis seems like a disaster in the making. I don't like this." He turned to her. "Jenna, you can't cry and run away. You have to confront it. Show it your head and let it examine you, no matter how scary and strange it seems to you."

"Can *you* go out with me?" she asked levelly.

"Me?" Favel balked with his black eyes wide. "You want *me* to go out with you?"

"Yeah. I'd rather have you than Armen."



The truth was that Jenna didn't need anyone to explain to her what she had to face. Favel piloted the pod to the place where the Hipposyphis was ripping apart an Adamis settlement by the edge of the ocean. He put it down on the rocky beach, briefly checked on Armen, and opened the airlock. The wind hit them in a hot burst.

"I know you're going to taste me and that's weird for you, but would you hold my hand?" Jenna asked Favel.

He wrapped his tentacle around her hand twice and slid his whole body out of the pod onto the rocks. Jenna fumbled to follow him and managed not to fall on her face as Favel led her to the water's edge. Together, they made their way through the surf.

Bits of debris were falling from the air as the enormous orange octopus ripped apart skyscrapers and let pieces of them fall like confetti around them.

"The people have been evacuated from the building, but he's still destroying it because he's enraged. It's terrible when a powerful individual like him can't think straight."

"What do we do?"

"Scream," Sardius said.

“You should scream,” Favel advised, unwittingly echoing Sardius. “He’ll hear you better than the octopi you have on Earth. You don’t have to use words. He wouldn’t be able to understand them anyway. Just scream and when he looks at you, pull your hair out of that bun and show him the top of your head.”

Jenna took a deep breath. She hadn’t known she would get to scream. It had felt like she would go her whole life not being able to let anything out. She took a deep breath in and prepared to let it all go.

She screamed and the sound was frightening at first.

She remembered how difficult it had been to hide what she hadn’t been able to share with anyone. How she had been different from everyone around her. How Lucy had been jealous and how futile that had always felt. Jenna couldn’t change a thing.

The skin on the Hipposyphis went from smooth to millions of tiny ridges in the blink of an eye. It was more horrifying than when Favel pulled the same trick back at the hospital. Luckily, Jenna was supposed to scream so her terrified change in pitch didn’t alert anyone. She was still doing what she was supposed to do.

The Hipposyphis turned an enormous eye toward Jenna.

“Ruin your bun,” Sardius wailed into her ear over her screaming. “Now!”

She pulled it free and felt the loose tendrils of her hair fall around her. The Hipposyphis was moving quickly as it hurried to the beach. It climbed over buildings like that was what they were made for and dove into the ocean with all its tentacles behind it like eight tails on a shooting star.

Her voice lost intensity as it wasn’t possible for her to scream endlessly.

“Breathe,” Favel encouraged her. “He can’t hear you underwater anyway.”

She pulled a choking breath in as the orange skin of the Hipposyphis appeared over the edge of the water.

It turned toward her and its enormous eye was watching her.

Jenna screamed again once she thought it could hear her. Once the Hipposyphis’ eyes were both pointed at her, she dropped Favel’s hand, put out her arms, and stepped into the water to meet the Octavian in its ocean. It rushed to her, creating waves that threatened to suck her under the water. Her scream heightened in pitch. She should have been scared as it manipulated the water between them. The dark waves covered her up to her waist and then enveloped her up to her chin.

The Hipposyphis got close and put its eye close to her as it examined it. Jenna stopped screaming. Instead, stood with her eyes wide until she started crying involuntarily. She didn’t run. She couldn’t run. She just let the tears fall down her cheeks and refused to blink on the closeup eye that was part of a creature she had to express benevolence toward even though she didn’t understand it. She had to trust something right now that she didn’t know, that she’d never seen before. Everything depended on it.

In the next second, a suction cup was over her head. The octopus didn’t need to say what it wanted. That much was clear. The Hipposyphis wasn’t sure if her crown was real.

It was going to find out.

In truth, the black crown was formed to look like an octopus’ beak. Like a crushed circle, with a point on each side, it sat on the top of her head.

In the next second, the suction cup came down on Jenna's head and she was lifted off her feet as the Hipposyphis tried to detach it. She had expected something like this. Half of her wanted it to come off. The other half wanted something she couldn't yet identify.

It shook her mildly and Jenna hoped it wouldn't pull harder. Just because it didn't have a spine, that didn't mean she didn't have one, and hers could snap with one wrong jolt.

Finally, the Octavian was satisfied that her crown wouldn't come off and it let her go. It set her down.

She fell backward into the water on her butt and palms, but she was able to hold her head above water.

Then she felt something on her chin. Something soft and warm and wet pushed her chin upward. She opened her eyes. The Hipposyphis was wordlessly pleading for her to look it in the eyes.

She held its gaze for what felt like forever. It had weird eyes—huge eyes. Jenna tried to put the right expression on her face... whatever that was.

Finally, the Hipposyphis was finished and slid back into the water.

Favel joined Jenna in the lapping tide and drones circled them, clicking off photos and filming Jenna as she fell back into the water. She was relieved, but she needed to hide her face. She had been naive enough to think that the three of them were completely alone until that moment.

# Chapter Ten

## The Wrong Man Showed Up

Jenna was given a floating palace on the other side of Octavia Prime. It was built on a slab of enormous pool noodles... or at least that was how it looked to Jenna. Aside from the unusual foundation, it was built with all the best materials. Marble floors, delicately carved walls, elegant archways, soft textiles, and entryways into the ocean in the floor in all three of the sitting rooms. Most of the time, they were blocked off to keep the water out.

Jenna had been taken to the palace after her meeting with the Hipposyphis. She felt grateful that the people she was with hadn't lied to her. Even Armen, as annoying as he was, hadn't lied. All she had to do that day was show everyone there was one Adamis diplomat who wasn't dead.

Now she lay sprawled across a bed that was much too large for her, holding her bathrobe and shucking the towel from her head. Armen sat in a chair at the foot of her bed.

"Remind me why you're in my bedroom again," she said coldly.

"I need to talk to you about our next step," he replied just as coldly, looking at a screen in his palm.

"Yes, I agree we should have that conversation, but why does it have to be in my bedroom, and why right now? I need to rest."

"You do not need to rest. You slept in the pod on the way here. You needed a shower after your meeting with the Hipposyphis, but you've had it and now we need to talk about the next step."

"No," Jenna said quickly. "I'm hungry and I may not need sleep according to you, but I require solitude so I can process what has happened and reconcile myself to these life-altering changes. I have lived alone as an adult for seven years. I am used to alone time and I do not feel like allowing you to barge into my bedroom like this. Who let you in? Sardius, can you explain this to me?"

"The doors have not yet been programmed to keep anyone out. We've been here for a little under an hour," Sardius replied.

"Program the doors to my bedroom to not allow anyone besides you and me inside for the time being."

"You don't have to have separate permission for Sardius. He's considered part of you," Armen piped up.

Sitting in the chair, Armen looked so perfect. If someone were to come in and take a picture of him sitting in her fuchsia and white bedroom, they would have thought he belonged there, that he was helping to advertise her furnishings. Or, perhaps, that he was there to promote her.

It induced the sickest feeling to roll around in her gut. Someone had said to him, 'Do you want to seduce a powerful woman and win enough leverage over her that she'll do whatever

you want? You're gorgeous! Just her type. You'll be the brains and she'll be the face. She'll do anything you say.' And he had said yes.

Jenna couldn't stand it.

"Where do you live, Armen?" she asked briskly. Regardless of her unwanted underlying attraction to him, she had to distance herself from him as soon as possible. She was humiliated by the way she'd been tricked into thinking for one moment that she was falling in love with him.

Love was not on the menu and she did not want to be manipulated a second time.

"I'll repeat myself. Where do you live?"

"Here," he said blankly.

"Here? Oh. Because you're one of my presents. How sweet. Do you need me to assign you a room? Is that why you're here?"

"No. You're not listening to me. We need to go back to Earth to find your grandmother's stash of unused crowns. We shouldn't even be here right now. We should go back before too much time has passed on Earth. We should have done it before we came here, but the Head of Adamis Relations believed that there were three other stashes in more accessible locations. Unfortunately, they didn't find anything. Your grandmother's stash is imperative. We need to find it before you can crown any other diplomats."

"If we rush back to Earth, can we leave Lucy there?" she asked bitinglly.

"What?" he asked, quite distracted by the screen in his hand.

Jenna proceeded heartlessly. "I didn't ask for her to be one of my gifts. If she's my possession, I choose to take her back to Earth and leave her there."

"That isn't a good idea," Armen said hastily. "What if something happens to you? She's a gift not just because she's good company for you, but also because she's a possible backup person, should anything happen to you. She may not have a crown, but she has strong ties to you and the diplomatic program."

"Leaving her on Earth isn't a death sentence," Jenna snapped back. "She can be used as a backup for me whether she's on Earth or whether she's in the room next to me. I don't want her around. She's a nuisance. I have decided to play this role as a diplomat and from what I know about my family, I think they probably tried to crown her when she was a baby as well and it was unsuccessful."

"You sound like you're not sure," Armen asked, actually having shifted to the edge of his seat while he waited for her answer.

"I'm not positive, but I know they tried to crown my father and Lucy's mother (because she was Marta's daughter) and both attempts failed. I never asked and was never told about whether or not they tried with Lucy, but if she can't be crowned anyway, then there's little use for her as a backup."

"If we're desperate, we could dress her up like you and use her as a body double."

"If you believe in a god, you'd be better off praying that no harm comes to me than fine tooling a cock-eyed plan like that," Jenna exclaimed hotly.

"Yes, of course, that's what we want most," he said, but it sounded like little more than lip service to Jenna. "We just need to be prepared for anything."

Jenna got up off the bed and made her way to the dressing room, which was a paradise she couldn't have designed or decorated better if she'd done it herself. There wasn't much on the



shelves or hanging from the racks yet, but there would be. She took a raspberry wrap dress off the rod and held it up against herself in front of a mirror. It was a reproduction of a dress she'd admired on Pinterest.

This was part of her prize for holding it together as the Hipposyphus suction cupped her head and let her body dangle over the water. She had been terrified and it was a great secret she had to hold within herself that she was very grateful they had let her scream and cry, and they praised her for not running away, when actually... she couldn't have run away if she wanted to. Her legs had stopped working just then. Besides, she knew that running away would not have changed a thing.

Even if she ran away on an interplanetary scale, there were still assassins trying to hunt her and every octopus in the galaxy would be on the lookout for her. She'd make more enemies than ever that way.

Her grandfather had taught her that if it came to this, she had to do what was necessary and it would be frightening, but it would also be rewarding... like stopping Hitler in 1938 by shooting him in the head before anything terrible happened.

Her reward for doing what they needed was this dress she held in front of her. It may have been made more carefully than the one she saw on Pinterest.

Methodically, she put the dress back on the closet rod and scoured a cabinet of tiny drawers for underwear.

If it was a perfect exchange, she wouldn't just have a beautiful house and beautiful clothes, but she'd also have a lover waiting for her in the bedroom. He wouldn't be sitting in a chair. He'd be slipping out of his clothes, racing to join her in the shower, helping her choose clothes in the dressing room, or helping her out of her clothes wherever she was.

She stopped to study Armen through a gap in the door. He was engrossed by the screen in his palm.

Crushing her pretty new underwear in her hands Jenna sat on the floor next to a very beautiful pink rose chair. Leaning against the wall, she felt her feelings bubble up. Looking at Armen hurt her terribly.

Had she secretly been waiting for a man from outer space to come and take her away? Was that why she had turned down every man on Earth? Was she hoping that her dream man would be so out-of-this-world that she had to be as perfect as possible to be able to deserve him? Was that why she had lived so meticulously? Because she wanted to do everything she could do to bring herself up to a standard where she was worthy of such a man?

If that man was Armen... her dreams were shattered.

"Jenna," Sardius breathed like a whisper in her ear. "I don't want to bother you, but you seem almost on the verge of tears. Do you need to cry? Should I leave you alone or would you like to talk through it with me?"

Jenna had forgotten she wasn't completely alone. "Sorry, Sardius. I... um... can we work out some sort of code that I can say that will let you know I need a few minutes alone?"

"Of course. I can back off for as long as you want, but I have to ask you to please not remove the earpiece just because you're feeling low."

She thought of what he'd told her regarding the last person he'd been assigned to assist—Arvantis. He died and maybe that was partially because he had been afraid of what Sadius would learn about him. That he'd be his Achilles' heel.

"Sadius," she suddenly said. "What if I've changed my mind? What if I don't want a code word for when I want to be alone? I've been alone a lot, and I don't know that being alone or working through things alone has ever helped me. What if, instead of that, I told you how I was feeling? Would you keep my secrets?"

"I would keep all your secrets," he said earnestly.

"Forever?" she asked, wondering if he could clear her hurdle.

"Forever," he replied. "That's what I'm here for."

She chuckled. "This is going to be weird. I normally keep everything bottled up. And what about you? Will you tell me everything about you?"

"No," he replied simply.

She gawked. "Why not?"

"The terms of my employment state that I'm not allowed to," he said with a sigh. "I'm allowed to tell you about myself only in the narrowest scope. Your speech isn't recorded, but mine is. If I say certain words, there are consequences."

"What sorts of words?" Jenna gawked in disbelief.

"I'm not allowed to say them."

"How much longer are you going to be in there changing your clothes?" Armen called noisily from the bedroom.

Jenna stood up, dropped her robe, and pulled on her panties. "I hate that guy. Any ideas on how I could get rid of him?"

"It's only temporary, but there was nothing wrong with your earlier suggestion that he go pick up Lucy and take her back to Earth. Everything you suggested was in your purview. If you go back into the bedroom and phrase it as a command, he has to comply. He's refusing to obey because he doesn't agree with you and he's trying to take advantage of your newness."

"Do you think I should get rid of Lucy?" Jenna asked curiously.

"I have no opinion."

"Because of the words you can't say?"

"Nah. I can give you my opinion on whatever is currently happening, but I have no opinion on Lucy. You know her. If you want to get rid of her in a non-criminal way, that's up to you."

"What if I wanted to get rid of her in a criminal way?" Jenna asked through the side of her mouth. "Would you help me?"

"Maybe," Sadius drawled. "If she was enough of a problem? Sure."

Jenna laughed, completely uncertain as to how serious he was. "Okay, let's send Armen to Octavia Three."

# Chapter Eleven

## Like Naked Fish

Jenna woke up experiencing a number of sensations at once. The first one was that she couldn't breathe. She was coughing and sputtering. The second thing she felt was a feeling like she was lying naked on a slightly coarse beach with her feet in the water and when she opened her eyes, nothing she saw made sense to her.

Above her was a black sky, but light was shining all around her. It was lower. The light was lower, in all four directions, and white. Was she inside? But her feet were splashing in water and she was on a beach.

Then she realized that the feeling that she was lying on a beach, completely naked, was exactly what was going on.

"Jenna," Sardius said in her ear. "Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you," she said, putting her hand to her ear. "What's going on?"

"On our way back to Earth, we crashed on Magatidus. It was lucky."

Jenna knew what had happened... sort of. She had sent Armen to Octavia Three to pick up Lucy. Once Lucy was fit to travel, Jenna got on a pod of her own and though she was traveling in a different pod apart from Armen and Lucy, they were all still going to Earth on the same spacecraft. Jenna had been put to sleep in the pod for the journey the same way she had been before and that was the last thing she could remember.

"Could we skip to the part where you explain exactly where I am, right now?" she asked waspishly as she covered her breasts with her arms and crushed her legs together.

"You're in a lizard tank. It's normally used as a breeding ground for edible lizards as part of the food supply for the Octavia population of Magatidus. This looks to be a new one, but there's a problem. The lizards that are normally kept in a tank like this require a lot less oxygen than you. There isn't strong enough air circulation in here to even let you breathe all the oxygen that's in here. You need more. Over to your left, against the tank wall, there are three tubes. The one that has no markings on it is the oxygen. You need to go there, sit next to it, and make a fuss. If you look like you're distressed, they'll turn up the oxygen."

"They're going to see me?" Jenna squeaked.

"They're Octavians. Not as developed as Favel, but they're not Adamis. They're only as curious about your anatomy as you'd be over the anatomy of a baby octopus. Besides, octopuses don't wear clothes. There's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"Why am I naked in the first place?" she asked, as she tried to spot the tubes in the wall Sardius mentioned.

"As I said, you crashed. Magatidus is ninety-three percent ocean. Your pod did well in the crash and it didn't break, but you didn't wake up. I sent out distress calls, but the signals were lost in the storms. You floated on the surface for three days before an electrical current hit your pod and fried the electrical components. The floatation devices detached and you fell. The pod

filled with water and you would have died if the Octavians here hadn't rescued you. Considering the storms on this planet, we're extremely lucky they were able to find you at all."

"Lucky," she said quietly as she looked around for something to wrap around herself, but there were only big flat rocks and hollow logs.

"They took your clothes off because I asked them to," Sadius said like he wished he didn't have to admit it.

"What? Why?" she hollered.

"Your body temperature was dangerously low after being in that icy water. If they hadn't cut your clothes off and put you under these heat lamps, you would have died."

Jenna groaned and pulled her knees up to her chest.

"Look, Jenna, I know this is really difficult for you because Adamis are so incredibly modest about certain parts of their bodies being seen, but there's really nothing for you to be shy about. There isn't another Adamis on this planet. Think about all the times you've stood in front of a fish tank and watched a bunch of naked fish swim around."

"Naked fish?" she wheezed.

"Most organisms in the universe do not wear clothing. You guys are the weird ones. Back on Earth, how many times were you self-conscious about taking your clothes off in front of your cat? This is like that."

"Ugh."

"Jenna! Focus. I need you to stand on your own two feet and walk over to that oxygen hose. I have sent them three messages that the oxygen in this tank is not sufficient for you, but my signals keep being interrupted. The storms here are that serious and I can't be manually linked to their system without leaving your ear. You can do this. Get up!"

She didn't want to, but the sound of Sadius' voice was grounding and he was right. Each breath in was not enough.

"You're sure no one is going to see me?" she said, putting a hand between her legs and keeping the other arm pinned to her chest.

"To be clear, we want the octopi taking care of you to see you. They don't think anything is weird about this."

As Jenna got closer to the tank wall, she saw that the surface of the wall was like a dark mirror. "And you?" she asked softly. "Can you see me?"

Sadius snorted pleasantly. "You can relax. Not only am I a microscopic octopus riding around in your ear, but I've also seen you naked already."

"When?" she exclaimed.

"I'm keeping track by scratching little notches in my wall. We're already past ten," he joked.

"Is all this that amusing for you?" she asked, finding the oxygen tube he was talking about and leaning against the wall of the tank next to it.

"It's a little amusing," he chuckled before his voice changed intonation. "Frankly, I'm pleased you're breathing. It was a close one. This was a good planet for us to crash onto because it was inhabited, but it was also a difficult one for a hundred reasons."

"If I'd died, would you have been able to jettison out of your pearl and have a new life as a microscopic octopus on Magatidus?"

"No," he said slowly.

"Are you saying you would have died with me?"

"No. I would have gone on living the rest of my life. Alone. Without you."

The mood had darkened, and Jenna, who just a few minutes before had been so concerned about being seen naked, was suddenly humbled by what could have happened if Sardius had not been there.

She wanted to thank him for saving her life, but when she opened her mouth, she couldn't bear to say something that hinted that the two of them could die together. Instead, she rambled the question, "So, when did you see me naked?"

"Oh, absolutely any time you take your clothes off. You're changing your outfit? I see everything. You're showering? Everything. You don't have to be shy, I'm an octopi."

She chuckled at his rhyme. "Are there that many mirrors in my rooms?"

"I don't see you through mirrors most of the time. Most of the time, I'm using a password that overrides the security system in your palace."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I'm blocking both the Adamis and the Octavians from seeing you through the room cameras in your more private moments. You deserve some privacy when you shove that sperm-shaped piece of cotton up your--"

"It's a tampon," she interrupted.

"Oh, is that what it's called? Hold on... an Octavian is paying attention to you. Put your face closer to the tube."

Jenna did and a flush of pure air hit her in the face. "We did it."

"*You* did it," he said. His voice sounded calm and mellow.

Jenna closed her eyes and let the air flow over her. "Are you sure you're a baby-sized octopus? Sometimes, you really sound like a man."

"If I were a man, would I be relaxed about seeing you naked?"

She laughed. "No."

"How would I act?"

"We're really going for that, huh? Pretending you're a man all the way?" she asked with a dash of wit.

"I don't know how long it will be until you're rescued. It might be a while. I need to entertain you. Besides, there are three tubes next to you. One is for oxygen. The other two are for food and water. The food is likely to be less than ideal."

Jenna saw the water flowing down, but the last tube had nothing coming from it and nothing happening around it.

"What kind of food are they going to give me?" she asked hopefully.

All at once, a pile of wet, slithering worms fell through the tube and landed on the sand. Jenna screamed.

Sardius was immediately in her ear. "It's okay. Back away from them. It will work in the same way it did with the oxygen. I'll keep sending them messages about what a woman like you would like to eat, but there is a good chance they won't have anything to feed you that you will think is an acceptable meal, but they might. In the meantime, you just need to get away from the worms and act like you'd never eat them."

Jenna scrambled to a hollow log and got inside. Lucky for her, it was large enough that she could sit inside and lean against the wall.

Thinking rapidly, she said to Sardius. "If no one comes to rescue us, and they don't have better food than that, I really will have to eat those worms, won't I?"

"For now, do what you're comfortable with. I won't let you die, so my advice will prioritize your comfort and then your survival. Ultimately, it may come down to that. Try not to be flustered. Eating a worm may not be that bad. The reason worms came down the meal slot is that's what the lizards who are normally housed in pens like this eat."

"What were you saying before about entertaining me?" she said, rubbing her arms and brushing off sand.

"Oh, I have a variety of entertainments I can perform if you desire it. Music? Novels? Jokes? Riddles? Puzzles? I can read or play anything I have in my data banks to help us pass the time. I have sent a distress call to Octavia Prime, though there is a good chance they already know what happened when the ship went down. Congratulations on surviving the first attempt on your life, but it may be some time before anyone comes to rescue us."

"As long as you're here, I'm sure it will be fine," she said stubbornly.

"How would you like me to entertain you?"

She hesitated. "I'm not sure."



"Sardius, I want you to tell me why there were only eleven men in the whole universe who would suit me," Jenna asked, mostly buried in sand, because that was almost like wearing clothes and it was cooler than getting burnt by the heat lamps.

"It's probably because their system for choosing lovers is flawed, broken, and excludes men who don't qualify for the test."

"Really? Tell me more," she encouraged.

"I know for a fact that it doesn't include men old enough to be your father or young enough to be your son. Considering the different rates some Adamis races mature, the loophole is unforgivable. It will also exclude men who are too far away from you on the Adamis genetic spectrum, such as guys who have extra limbs or body parts that are incompatible for mating with you. Clearly, it doesn't include any Octavians. If all that wasn't enough, it would also exclude men who didn't fit your physical preferences. Which is why Armen looks the way he does. Doesn't he make your tongue sweat?"

Jenna smirked. "He did when I first saw him, but he's pretty much a dick, so no."

"Hilariously," Sardius continued, "according to the test, even though you only prefer zero point one to the trillionth power of men in the universe, you are actually most men's type. Most men find you attractive as a mate. Many other personal assistants are not given access to diplomatic officials when they shower. I get access because I can't touch you and Favel is terrified that naked pictures of you will be leaked by the Adamis members of our orbital security team."

Jenna scoffed. "I can't imagine anyone being interested in such a thing."



“Why?” Sardius asked curiously. “I just told you that most men in the universe would find you an attractive mate, so why do you think no one would be interested in pictures of you? I thought you knew your value when you exiled Lucy because you don’t want a spare.”

“I dunno,” Jenna muttered. “On Earth, I was probably only a couple of ticks above average.”

“You’re far above average.”

Now it was Jenna’s turn to ask curiously, “Why?”

“Shall we go down the list of attributes that are valued highest by Adamis men across the known universe?”

Jenna stifled her chuckle. Why had she doubted him? Sardius was very amusing. She didn’t think she’d ever talked to a person over the phone who was as much fun as him. “Go on.”

“Firstly, you are not gullible. Instead, you lean toward being wary. On Earth, two hundred and twelve attempts were made to kidnap you, and all of them failed. The only reason Armen succeeded was because of your desire to mate with a worthy male. Any man in the universe would be very impressed by that.”

“Armen wasn’t impressed by me. If anything, he seems more impressed by Lucy.”

“No, but Armen’s a dick.”

“You’re only saying that because I said that,” Jenna sang in a singsong voice.

“No, I’m not. I’m saying it because he’s a dick. I asked them not to hire him when they consulted me, but I was overruled.”

“Why didn’t they listen to you?”

Sardius sucked in his breath in a way that made Jenna forget she was talking to a tiny octopus in her ear. “I’ve had too much experience in combat, not diplomacy. I’m apparently very well suited to keeping you safe, but I’m not the voice the Octavians want to hear when they were choosing who to give you as a companion. They kept insisting that you needed someone who was an experienced diplomat as well as someone who matched your personal preferences. They thought Armen was a real find, practically God’s gift. I did ask them not to use the universal marching algorithm and, instead, to choose someone based on my recommendation, but it was not to be.”

“You sound unpopular. It almost sounds like you would have had a hard time getting the job you have now if no one wants to listen to you. Was that a struggle?” Jenna asked.

“A bit, but I convinced them. I displayed pictures of the other diplomats who had suffered bloody ends and asked them if they thought someone else could do a better job protecting you. I told them everything about your situation was risky and they’d be fools to rely on diplomacy alone. They needed at least one soldier by your side, but it is arguable that one in your head is better.”

“Why did you even want the job if they’re so hard to get along with?”

“Because I really wanted to be assigned to you. Also, I had to prove myself by being assigned to Arvantis before you.”

“Why go to all that trouble?” Jenna wondered, a little lost.

He sighed. “A thousand and one reasons. For one, I am very attracted to you.”

“What did you just say?” Jenna asked in shock.

“Uh... Did I say the wrong thing? My translator must be malfunctioning. I meant to say that I think you’re adorable.”

Jenna was dying with mirth as he picked at his words. "I think you still may not have landed on what you're trying to say. Want to try again?"

"I thought you were a dazzling blonde and that your job was vitally important. If I'm stuck here, and I am, whether I work for you or not, then I want to be one of your servants." He took a deep breath. "Was that the right thing to say?"

"Sorry for embarrassing you. There's bound to be a few miscommunications when we're using software," Jenna said, letting him off the hook.

"Thank you for being so understanding. I must change the subject. They have released a different kind of food from the food slot."

Jenna covered her face with her hand. "What is it?"

"I don't know. You'll have to go over and check it."

Jenna got up. With all the grace of a princess, she dropped her hands from her vital bits and strode across the tank to see what the new food was.

There were three round fruits lying next to the place where the worms were.

"Hooray!" Jenna sang.

"Take a bite before you get too excited. I'd also recommend washing it off in the tap water before you eat any. The content of the water our hosts are living in is probably of a much lower quality than what they have offered you to drink."

Jenna dropped to her knees and washed the fruit in the newest water being deposited in the tank. Without waiting another second, she bit into it.

"What do you think?"

"It tastes fine to me. Kind of like a plum and a pineapple combined," Jenna said between mouthfuls. "Except, I can't eat this only. It'll give me the runs." Looking around, Jenna thought of something else. "What happened to the worms that were in a pile here?"

"They slithered away. The Octavians won't be concerned about that. It will entertain the lizards to hunt for them after we've gone."

"Sardius," Jenna suddenly whined. "I'm going to have to pee and poop in front of these guys, aren't I?"

"Like most animals in a tank, yes."

# Chapter Twelve

## Eight Jobs

"Can you ask them to turn down the lights while I sleep?" Jenna asked Sardius.

"No. They aren't the brightest octopi in the garden and I would rather not ask them for something that finicky. What if they screwed it up and they couldn't get the lights back on? Better not risk it."

She groaned. "I don't know if I can sleep buck-naked in this coarse sand with all this light shining on me. Even in a log, it's too bright. I never sleep naked and I never sleep without a blanket."

"If you get tired enough, you'll probably sleep," he replied.

"With this much interference, are you sure you can't say some of those words you're not allowed to say?" she asked tantalizingly. "I'm sure it would help us pass the time."

Sardius sighed. "You're that curious about me?"

"I'm very curious about you."

"Why?"

"Because I like you and I think you're lying to me."

He gawked. "In what way?"

"I don't think you're a little octopus living inside the pearl in my ear. I think that if I broke it open, I'd find nothing but tech parts. You're a real man, transmitting your info somehow."

"How could I do that with all this interference? There are constant storms on the surface" he asked.

"I don't know, but if we're able to have a private conversation, I want to have it."

"We're not," he said smoothly. "All my dialogue is recorded. And if you are too curious about me, they may change their minds about not recording you and begin. It isn't safe."

"Why can't you just tell me if you're a man or an octopus? You could just answer yes or no."

"I'm an octopus," he said firmly.

She huffed and said in a mooney voice, "I thought we were pretending you were a man."

"Oh! Sorry. I didn't realize that was part of our game," he almost blustered, but something about his voice was too steady for him to do that. He still sounded remarkably self-contained.

"Forget it, Sardius," she retracted. "I'm just getting carried away. You're the only guy friend I've ever had. I'm bored and feeling frisky because I'm naked. I don't really have an outlet for those kinds of feelings and you're here. Sorry. I'm being a jerk."

"Good news," he said like he hadn't heard the last thing Jenna said. "Favel is in orbit above our heads. He transmitted that he was dropping his ship to the surface half an hour ago. I didn't get his message until now. The distance to the surface can be covered in twenty-one minutes. He's probably already here."

"Did he bring me clothes?"

"I asked him to."

“Excellent.”



It was several hours before a pod was lowered into the tank Jenna was housed in. The mechanical transport was streaming with water that drained off into the sand. The door popped open and there was a bag inside that was filled with the clothes she needed. She whipped on the black trousers and turtleneck sweater Favel had brought her. No underwear, but Jenna was not in the mood to complain.

Before Jenna closed the door to the pod for the last time she paused and asked Sardius, “Is there anything we can do to show these Octavians how much we have appreciated their help?”

“Blow a few kisses at the walls of the tank in all directions and you should be good.”

“I shouldn’t bow? I should blow kisses?” she asked skeptically.

“Blowing kisses is a closer action to using an underwater siphon than bowing or waving. They’d like it better.”

“Right then,” Jenna said before she blew each wall three kisses. She hoped they saw her as she waved and got aboard the pod. She was too human to leave without waving.

Once aboard with the door closed, Sardius said, “Favel wants to talk to you. He’s underwater negotiating with the Octavians, so he’s sending the transmission through me. It will be like I’m reading you his text messages.”

“Kay,” Jenna said as she settled into her seat.

“He says he’s very happy that you are alive and unhurt. The pod Armen and Lucy were in also went down, though they were thrown into a different solar system and landed on a different planet. An Adamis crew went to collect them as their retrieval is considerably more complex than yours.”

“Why?”

“The ship that attacked ours thought Lucy was you because she was with Armen. They thought you were the worthless cousin and let your pod go. Armen and Lucy landed on a planet, but they’re being hunted. The Adamis government sent a few military units to retrieve them, but Favel insisted on coming for you personally, which they allowed because the AAMC also think Lucy is you. With any luck, they’ll provide enough of a distraction for us to get to Earth and get your grandmother’s crowns with as little mess as possible.”

When he said the word ‘mess’, something inside Jenna clicked. “Sardius, did Favel use that word or did you?”

“What word?”

“Mess.”

“Favel used an Octavian tentacle gesture that means ink in the water, so I guess I’m the one who said mess. Does that word bother you?”

“No. I have just lived my whole life trying to make as little mess as possible. I’m totally on board. I’m not sure where my grandmother would have left the crowns, but we can try.”

“You should know that Favel is deeply impressed with your plan and your willingness to send Armen with Lucy.”

"It's not impressive," Jenna scoffed. "You know I didn't orchestrate it this way because I was trying to use her as my body double. I just can't stand either of them, but I wasn't thinking of sending them to die. I was only thinking of putting them in the car ahead of me so I didn't have to listen to them breathe. Not that I want them to stop breathing. I hope they're okay."

"I wouldn't worry too much. Partly because worrying is a waste of time and partly because two Adamis military units would scare the hell out of any backdoor assassins. One unit would have been overkill. When the assassins see those units, they'll wet themselves and hide in an asteroid belt. Those AAMC guys sleep with their fingers on their triggers."

"How much longer do you think Favel is going to be?"

"Don't even think about rushing him. He's doing eight jobs right now."

"Really? Eight? How so?" Jenna asked, looking out the window of the pod at Favel, who was blue like a jewel compared to the muddy-looking Octavians next to him.

"He's talking to me. He's talking to them. He's talking to his people back on Octavia Prime. He's talking to his ship. He's talking to the Adamis military to ensure that he stays out of their way. He's talking to the Space Navigators about which routes to Earth will be most efficient and making arrangements to stay out of space that's reserved. He's talking to the people of the Cloaking Agency so that we can reserve equipment to hide our vessel when we're in Earth's space. He's thinking about you and arranging for you to have a car when you arrive on Earth, but quite a few of those jobs aren't going well because of the storms on the surface."

Jenna had been counting the jobs on her fingers. "That's only seven."

"Yeah. Well, I didn't want to mention the eighth. He's had to pee for a few hours now, but his mind has been so occupied that it hasn't occurred to him until now."

"How can you tell?"

"His posture. The Octavians around him have probably noticed it too. If anything, that will be what gets us off this planet the quickest. He doesn't want to pee on their world. It would be in really bad taste, so he's going to have to head back to our ship."

"Are you saying that Octavian pilots pee in the water everyone on the ship swims through?"

"They filter it."

There was a moment of silence before Sardius said, "Shall I mention a few human equivalents?"

Jenna pinched her nose. "I don't need to hear them."

"All the same," Sardius continued, "he's been very worried about you if he's forgetting to pee. As you noticed, he can do it anywhere, so for him to have been that preoccupied, he must care a lot."

Jenna watched Favel as he wrapped up offering his thanks to the Octavians who rescued her. He swam up to the side of the tank and looked at her through the multiple panes of glass. He touched the glass with a suction-cupped tentacle. Jenna touched the spot with her fingers. He squinted his eyes in a gesture that reminded her of a cat kiss and swam to the ship's gate of entry.

"Yeah, he's pretty sweet," Jenna conceded.

# Chapter Thirteen

## Grandmother's Crowns

Sardius's mellow words came through Jenna's earpiece. "They went through your grandfather's house when they removed it, looking for the crowns, but they didn't find anything."

Jenna squashed her annoyance that they took her grandfather's house. Like it was the house itself that had mattered to her! However, she had been the one to clean it when her grandfather died and a pile of crowns like the one permanently affixed to her skull would have stood out.

"How did they search the house?" she questioned, feeling snotty.

"They scanned it. The crowns would have pinged hard."

"Really? Why didn't they do that on Earth? They could scan the area."

"We may have to, but it would be better if we didn't have to call in that crew. Scanning a huge area instead of a house will be time-consuming and invite too many cooks into the kitchen. Do you have any ideas about where the crowns could be?"

"I have three ideas," Jenna said. "They all suck. My grandmother had a plane called *The Spirit of Ink* that she used to fly more than she drove a car. It was eventually grounded, and I don't know what happened to it."

"That's more than enough information for me to find it," Sardius proclaimed happily.

"The second place was a houseboat she and my grandfather used to bob around the island in. He still used it long after she was gone."

"Name?"

"*The Hole in the Log*," she replied.

"You sound sad, Jenna. Is everything okay?"

"It's not okay. The only other place I can think of to look is upsetting."

Sardius waited a moment before he said as tactfully as he could, "If it's upsetting you, then that's probably where it is."

"It's her grave," Jenna admitted. "She was buried in a graveyard outside a church, but if I go there I'll have to dig up her grave. No one will give me permission to do that."

"After a quick look at your country's laws regarding that, I have to say it would take an ice age to get their permission. We don't have that kind of time. Have you ever thought that it would be cool to achieve the title of 'grave robber'?"

"It would be cooler if I were digging someone else up," she replied crossly.

"Agreed," he said through her earpiece. "Let's start with the airplane and the boat. I already have information on the airplane. It's at an aircraft museum. It's not on display yet, as they are still restoring it. If you have anything among your possessions that would help you gain access to the back of the museum, that would be the best. For instance, is there a picture of you and your grandmother in front of the airplane? Preferably with the call sign visible on it?"

"No. My grandmother died before I was five."

"Do you have a picture of her in front of the aircraft?" Sardius persisted.

"There was one in my grandfather's house."

"Great. I'll get someone into the house to get me a copy of the picture this morning. What room was it in?"

"Have you forgotten? That house belonged to someone else. Everything in that house belonged to other people. That house was where I was raised, but it has been repainted and remodeled since my grandfather sold it. I was there a couple of years ago and they painted his brown house red. The nostalgia value is low since everything has already been changed, and there's not going to be anything there. The picture is in my apartment. I haven't been through what the Octavians saved from the apartment yet. Armen was in such a freakin' hurry... Bah! Was it among what they took or do we need to go to my apartment?"

"Good call. I'll talk to the boys who packed up your stuff. In the meantime, can I take you out for breakfast?"

Jenna looked around at the empty space surrounding her. She was back in Victoria, but it didn't feel like home. It felt like nothing. Had she really lived there for her whole adult life? It felt like a life someone else had lived. Even what she was doing now, standing outside a car rental place, leaning against her rental car, and pretending to talk on the phone through her headphones seemed stupid.

She should have been with Sardijs. He should be a real man. He should be next to her. She should be resting her head on his shoulder while he did whatever internet searches he did on his phone next to her. He should be showing her the screen from time to time when he found something interesting. He should be her partner in crime.

She indulged in the fantasy for a moment, trying to envision what his face should look like, what his body would look like. Imagining his body was easy. He was lean and brown. His fingers were long and bony. He was tall with muscle patterns that made her mentally ill. But no matter how much she played in the theater of her mind, she couldn't figure out what his face should look like. What was his mouth like? She envisioned something sharp about his mouth because he minced his words. Maybe big incisors. Maybe a gap between his two front teeth. Maybe his teeth were very white like a ceramic knife in someone's mouth.

She didn't get further than that.

"Jenna? Breakfast?" his voice sounded in her ear. "Your blood sugar is low."

He smashed her fantasy.

"Yeah, let's get breakfast."



Armed with a reproduction of the photograph of her grandmother in front of her plane, Jenna entered the museum and spoke to a tour guide, then a manager, and finally, the man restoring the plane before she got into the hangar where *The Spirit of Ink* was being kept.

It was yellow with great indigo stripes painted along the sides. Jenna had only seen it when she was a very little girl, but the memory burned bright as she looked around.

"Can we make a copy of this picture?" Harold, the mechanic asked.



"You can keep that copy," Jenna said, thinking at once that there was no way her grandmother or grandfather had been so careless that they had left a box of crowns in this airplane before parting with it, but she had to ask anyway. "Did you see anything strange when you were restoring it?"

"Like what?"

Jenna prepared herself to ask the question she had to ask with as little fanfare as possible. "When pulling this plane apart, did you find a cash of black octopus beaks?"

"No. That would have been something!" the man laughed, slapping his thigh.

"Thank you. I've been trying to find my grandmother's collection for another museum," she lied. "Thank you very much for your help." She shook hands with him and left the museum.

Once she was back in the car, she said to Sardius, "I told you. This is a wild goose chase. We'll just have to wait until it gets dark and go to the graveyard."

"I like a girl who doesn't mind digging up dead people."

"So go dig up your old lady!" she bit impatiently.

Jenna clenched her teeth and drummed her fingers against her bicep, trying to recall exactly where her grandmother, Letty, had been buried.

"Jenna," Sardius suddenly said. "You know..." he hesitated. "What I really wanted to say before... about why I wanted to be your personal assistant... It's because I know how to turn you into someone they can't push around. Neither of them! Not the Octavians and not the Adamis. I appreciate that this is an unpleasant task for a woman of your sensitivity and style... Even if you had to order other people to do this for you, it would be hard for a feminine woman, full of pounding feelings, to do. To go be the grave digger personally is another level. Take it. Be the woman of sensitivity and style with far-extending limits that no one can see."

Jenna's breath caught.

She had been trying to propel herself forward on the idea of preventing mess, clearing mess... Maybe she needed to be the one to make a mess.

"Sardius... I... I..." she couldn't explain how he'd moved her. Jenna covered her mouth on a whimper or a choke. When she could talk again, she snapped, "Shut up, Sardius."

# Chapter Fourteen

## The Thundering Inside Your Skull

Jenna pushed her sticky hair off her forehead. She was in a graveyard. It was two in the morning and she'd been digging for an hour. The ground was so hard that she didn't think there was a snowball's chance in hell that she'd get the six feet down she needed in order to reach her grandmother's casket. Would she even be able to clear the dirt enough to open the coffin and what if they'd poured cement over the whole thing? Then she wouldn't be able to check for the crowns herself. She'd need an alien intervention. That was if she was lucky enough not to get caught while she was digging. Someone was going to see her, call the cops, and there would be a whole new mess to deal with.

She hated the whole ordeal, so she was pissed off.

And Sardius wasn't helping her.

He'd told her a couple of techniques for digging that she hadn't known, but he was no help because he wasn't there. After a while, she turned on her headphones and listened to some brain-breaking death metal/electro-fusion, though it didn't help much with her wretchedness.

She had a light that was supposed to attach to her forehead but was hanging around her neck since she had to look down, and another sitting like a lamp next to the hole, but the light was scattered and sketchy.

When there was a break in the song, Sardius' voice came through her earpiece that her headphones fit over. "Are you finished with your tantrum?"

Jenna whipped her headphones off and threw them next to the hole. "I am not having a tantrum."

"You listen to music that sounds like that normally? Octopi don't have great hearing, so you're not punishing me... if you thought you were. I can also shut you off and just read a transcription of your text, so you're not hurting me if that's your goal."

Jenna cracked her neck. "I'm not trying to punish you with my angry music. I'm not happy with this situation. I don't want to dig up my grandmother's grave. I'm unimpressed that there isn't a better way to do this. Can't Favel use some tech on his ship to scan the area to make sure I'm not wasting my time? Like what you mentioned before when they scanned my grandfather's house? Surely a few more cooks in the kitchen couldn't hurt."

"If such a thing were advisable, I would have already recommended it, and it would have already been done. If it's any fuel for your motivation, Lucy and Armen have been recovered and if the Adamis military has seen the inside of her ears, then they already know she isn't you."

"Charming," Jenna laughed sadistically. "You know what I think?"

"What, sweetpea?" Sardius asked in a sexy drawl.

"Oh, I hate you," Jenna complained tersely. "Why are you rubbing this in my face, at this moment? Shut up!"

"Rubbing what in your face?" he asked in a fake innocent voice.

"Don't play stupid," she barked, heaving out a shovelful of dirt. "You know I'm pissed off."

"Yes, but I don't know what I have to do with it. I didn't make any of this happen."

Jenna forced the tears back by screaming. "On top of everything, I was waiting for *him!*"

"Who?"

"Damn Armen. I was waiting for a man just like that. Apparently, I had turned down hundreds of other men, waiting for a man like that! I could scream. Did you know that I loved screaming at the Hipposyphus? I loved it! You know how I've felt about this? Armen was a fucking disappointment. And if you ask me, I shouldn't have sent him off with Lucy."

"Why? Everyone thinks you were brilliant to do that," Sardius interrupted.

"You don't get it! Armen didn't fall in love with me. He faked interest in me. Think of how he treated me, how I treated him. How he didn't forgive me for being cross. How he treated me like I was an asset... like I was his lame responsibility!" She hacked at the dirt. "I don't trust easily. You said most men would like that in a woman. Armen didn't. We didn't see eye-to-eye, but you know who sees eye-to-eye with everybody? Lucy! If they spent any time together at all, I bet they got along together just swimmingly. He probably dropped his pants for her and I've never known if Lucy was good at keeping her legs together."

"I thought you hated him. Why would you care?"

"I do hate him. He sucks," Jenna said weakly as she spun the shovel handle between her fingers. "It's that damn thing about eleven guys in the universe. There are only five left and they all found me so bloody unappealing that they refused even if they could prevent a war. I feel so sickeningly sorry for myself, I could puke and die."

Jenna waited for Sardius to offer a smart remark. Maybe he would say something funny that would bring her out of her head, or something serious that helped her reconsider her position, or even some news from the outer rims of the universe to redirect her focus.

She kept digging.

After a bit of progress had been made, she reached for her headphones.

"Jenna," Sardius said before she could turn them on. "The boat your grandfather used to own has been scrapped. This is the last place to look."

"Thanks for doing your job," she replied before she dug further.

*Whack!*

Her shovel hit something. "That wasn't a rock," she announced.

"Excellent. Dig it up."

"Thanks, Captain Obvious," she said snarkily as she dropped to her knees and pawed around the object.

"Jenna, you don't have to take this out on me."

"Talk to me in a sexy voice again and I'll take whatever I want out on you! I don't need you rubbing my romantic failures in my face," she growled before she cleared off the top of the box and loosened the dirt around it until she could pull it free. It was wooden and heavy, but she managed to get it onto the grass beside her. It was locked with a heavy-duty padlock. "How do I get it open?"

"We'll have to take it back to the ship and get Favel to work on it."

"Underwater?" Jenna asked doubtfully.

"He can drain a workshop for you to work in. He's a versatile Octavian, so he can come in and help you."

"Isn't there anyone else aboard his ship?"

"I don't know that there is. I've been operating on the assumption that he's alone. Favel is a level eight pilot in his own right. If you're an Octavian, eight is always the highest level. Who is he going to bring with him? If the ship goes down, it's easier to save everyone in the pods if you're the only pilot."

"Let's go," she said, lugging the dirty box to the car.

"Don't you need to replace the dirt?" Sardius wondered.

"No. If we don't get out of here quickly, we'll have a harder time getting back. I don't want to get caught by the cops because I was sentimental. If we're unlucky, these are her ashes and instead of grave robbers, we're body thieves."

"I thought you were expecting a coffin?"

"I was, but who knows what happens when you're five and no one will let you go to a funeral?"

"Run, then!"

Janna saw three sets of headlights coming toward her and killed all her lamps.

They passed her in a heart-stopping moment where even breathing hurt.

"I hate it here," she muttered. Pocketing her stuff, she blew a kiss at her grandmother Letty's tombstone. "Love you, Granny."

At that moment, the light of the moon shone on her grandfather's tombstone and illuminated his name.

"Grandpa," she said softly. "I'm going to do everything you always wanted me to do. Please watch over me and if it's at all possible, help me find that one man in the whole universe who was made just for me."

She blew him a kiss too and laid her hand on the wet grass that covered his resting place.

"I may not be back. Guide me through the stars, Granddaddy."

She gathered her things and Sardius shut up.

# Chapter Fifteen

## Strangulation Works Better

Favel got a blow torch out in the workshop and superheated the lock on the wooden box Jenna unearthed at the graveyard until it fell off. Carefully, he opened the lid. Inside, the chest was filled with the black crowns they were looking for. Jenna started counting them and got to thirty-six before she quit.

"That's a lot," she said in wonder.

"It is," Favel agreed. "I wonder if Letty had *all* the crown stashes, but I'm not sure how many there were in the first place. Regardless, you're a star diplomat, Jenna," Favel bubbled in his excitement. "Is there anything else you need to do on Earth before we go?"

"No," she said, thinking of all the loose ends she'd tied up. "Let's go now. I'll get in my pod."

"Wait," Favel called to her before she stepped outside. "I have to tell you some unfortunate news."

Jenna leaned her elbow against the frame of the door. "I already know you didn't give me any underwear when you dropped that bag in the tank. I bought several sets on the credit card number you gave me already. I hope that's okay," she said easily because she didn't care if it was okay or not.

"No. It's um... about Armen and Lucy."

"Are they okay?" Jenna asked, masking her actual emotions with a look of concern that showed on her face.

"Yeah, they're okay. They landed on a planet that was more land than water, and they escaped their pod and found a place to hide until the Adamis military found them."

"That's great," she said enthusiastically, appearing to hide her emotions effortlessly.

"Yeah... it is great, except I heard something troubling over the communications feed and I wasn't sure if you wanted to hear it, but there are some concerns about their conduct."

"Oh, did they accidentally kill a member of the militia?" Jenna asked, trying to make light of the situation.

Favel back peddled. "No. Never mind. I need to talk to Armen about the report when we return to Octavia Prime and get the real story from him."

"That sounds like a wise idea," Jenna said pleasantly. "Can I head over to my pod now?"

"Of course."

She paused at the doorway. "You're a great pilot, Favel. Thanks for coming to rescue me, bringing me here, and staying awake while we travel home."

Favel did not have lips, but something under his eyes trembled with emotion. "You just called it home."

"Of course, I did. It's home. I'll see you on Octavia Prime." She swung out of the workshop and onto the grass.

As soon as she was out of earshot of Favel, she muttered, "That sack of lying, gutless, stupid bag of dicks."

"Armen?" Sardius asked, obviously putting some effort into not sounding sexy.

"Yep. Who else? I guess we'll get the full B.S. spin when we get back to my palace."

"You like the sounds of those words, don't you? Your palace?"

"Yep. I do, and I'm going to need to feel that way if I'm going to do this." She smacked her hands on her pants as if to wash them off and bounded into the pod.



Back at her palace on Octavia Prime, Jenna had never seen an octopus attack a human before, but it was soon high on her list of guilty pleasures. Favel had stopped making sense, the words that snuck between his tentacles didn't sound like words. He had hoisted himself up on Armen's shoulders. Octopi didn't fight like humans and he didn't slap him around. Instead, he covered Armen's mouth with one of his larger suction cups and seemed intent on smothering him. Armen had stopped making any sound with his mouth at all. Instead, he kicked with his legs and used his hands to try to pry Favel off his face.

Jenna was spellbound. She had never seen anything so excellent.

"What's going on?" she muttered, only loud enough for Sardius to hear.

"Favel is furious."

"I can see that."

"No. He's really furious. Faval does not get furious." Sardius fought to stop himself from laughing.

"Could Armen die?"

"I don't know. If Favel doesn't let go, he will."

Favel dropped off him and screamed some directions at Armen that didn't sound like anything to Jenna. Armen dropped to his knees and seemed to be apologizing to the octopus in some archaic way that was too ancient for Jenna to understand precisely.

Favel pointed a tentacle at Jenna. Armen pointed himself toward Jenna before Favel lost his mind a second time and jumped on his back to strangle him.

Finally, Jenna decided it was time to interrupt. "I'm sure you don't want to kill him, Favel."

"I really do," Favel said, clearing the foam from his mouth and falling off him. "I really do. But I won't. I'm going to cool off. Sardius," Favel called into the communications system Sardius was connected to, "make sure Armen explains himself thoroughly before you let Jenna dismiss him. She won't want to listen to his excuses, but make sure she does." Favel opened a gateway in the floor to the ocean behind him with a lever and dropped himself into the water, careful to close the door behind him.

After Favel was gone, Jenna didn't wait for Armen to finish coughing on the floor before she said, "So, you slept with Lucy and you need to explain it to me. Why?"

"It's worse than that," Sardius whispered.

"I lied to you," Armen said after he finished coughing, but before his face returned to a natural color. "I told you I hadn't met Lucy before the three of us met on Octavia Three. The truth was

that I went to recruit her before I went to recruit you. I thought she would be an easier target and she was. She was on the boat when I took you out stargazing.”

Jenna was disgusted and it took her a moment to reply. “Fascinating. What does this have to do with me?”

“When I signed the contract to work for the Octavia/Adamis Alliance, I signed contracts that made me your third husband,” he admitted as though he was about to choke on his own tongue.

“My third husband? I didn’t know I had a first or a second husband.”

“Octavians allow themselves to have eight partners,” Sardius explained over the loudspeaker. “They don’t live like humans, always in the same place and they allow themselves to form bonds, move to a new place, and form new bonds. They love each other no matter what other bonds they’ve created. Because they have eight tentacles, they decided that should be the number of spouses they can have. Obviously, it doesn’t work well for humans, who tend to be unhappy if they even have a double-sided heart. Diplomats to Octavia start out with three spouses. The first one is their own race and it is a prominent, politically driven position. The second husband is an Octavian, showing how much they love Octavian culture. Neither of these relationships is intended to be sexual. They are political alliances that show love and ties to both nations.”

“And the third husband?”

“He’s for funsies. That relationship is intended to be very sexual. It’s a supportive role, with no political advantages. Your third husband is supposed to offer himself completely to you and no political group. He’s supposed to be a joyful servant. That was the role Armen agreed to when he signed on.”

Jenna looked at Armen, soaking wet and gasping. “So, you were sleeping with Lucy before you approached me?”

He nodded.

“That explains your little speech on the boat about how you couldn’t make a move on me before I made a move on you. You had already romanced Lucy, and made some lovey little promises between you... including that even though you were my husband you would not kiss me unless I kissed you. You kept your promise to her by telling me immediately how to sidestep it? That’s classy,” Jenna said with a sarcastic edge. “That also explains why Favel is furious and why you were in my bedroom after my ordeal with the Hipposyphis ordering me around like you were in charge. It was never your job to order me around. You were supposed to be acting as my lover. Everyone outside my room thought that was what you were doing when actually, you were just being bossy and making me feel small. Can I get a divorce, Sardius?”

“It’s already been done. The request was processed fifteen minutes ago.”

“Lovely. Can I return Lucy to Earth now? I suppose we can drop Armen off with her if they’re so keen to be together.”

“No!” Armen yelled.

“I’m afraid he’s quite right,” Sardius continued for Jenna and Armen to hear. “Lucy is pregnant. We can’t let her go back to Earth until she’s delivered her baby and they’re sure her child won’t make a mess in Earth’s gene pool. They need a place to crash for the rest of her pregnancy.”

“Do I need to supply them with somewhere to live? Is that why he’s still here?”



"It would be very cool of you to offer," Armen said with water dripping off his chin. "I gave up everything I had when I signed the papers that made me your third husband: my job, my house, and my ties on my home planet of Fracios. You have that nice house on Octavia Five..."

"Which you suggested should be one of my gifts," Jenna said coldly. "Is there anything else he needs to explain, Sardius?"

"Not that I know of."

"Are you finished?" Jenna asked Armen.

"Can we use that house?" he persisted.

"Sure, as long as you're not here," she said, walking over to the ocean entrance Favel had used and flipping the switch to open the door in the floor.

"Are you going to throw me in the ocean?" Armen asked cautiously.

"Why the hell would I do that?" she asked coldly. "Get out of my sight. Get Lucy. Go to Octavia Five. Whatever. I never want to see either one of you again. You can tell Lucy that as long as I'm alive, she will never have a crown. Get out!"

Armen fumbled to his feet. He was saying things, but Jenna wasn't listening to him as she stood over the rippling water peaking through the ocean entrance at her feet.

He wasn't leaving the room fast enough. Instead, he was talking. He was explaining what he'd done.

Finally, she understood that he was pleading for her to not make that promise. Both he and Lucy still wanted to be diplomats. They thought they were going to be. Lucy was going to get the crown she'd always wanted and he was going to continue on as a diplomat, but with a much better job. He'd promised her they both would. That was their dream together.

Except Jenna was realizing how they intended to use her to accomplish their dream. Armen was supposed to be her husband, but he was never going to give her his whole heart. Just like he said on the boat. He was never going to touch her first. He was never going to kiss her first. Even though the paperwork he'd signed was his oath to love only her, he had broken it before he met her and gone to recruit her cousin before her because she was easier. He hadn't even tried.

Jenna stared at him. She couldn't believe he had the gall to tell her the things that were coming out of his mouth. As she listened to him, her eyebrows pulled together like storm clouds and her mouth became an ugly line.

"Jenna," Sardius interrupted, his voice coming from her earpiece. "This house is equipped with rail guns as well as surveillance equipment. Would you like me to shoot at him?"

"Yes," she said, her expression stiff.

Pew!

The shot was fired on the floor four feet in front of Armen, but he got the message and scuttled out, asking her in his last moments to think about what he'd told her.

When he was gone, Jenna dropped to the floor where she stood and let her legs hang in the water. "We need to do something to punish them as well as cut ties with them," she said numbly.

"You need better gifts," Sardius put forward.

"Will you help me negotiate for something better?"

"Of course. This has been a debacle from the beginning. What's most confusing is that the Adamis boys who tried to recruit you on Earth couldn't make the situation clear to you. Surely,

they could have done something to let you know the severity of the issue without abducting you.” Sardius found something in that line hilarious in the last line he spoke, but Jenna wasn’t in the mood to untangle it.

“Did you see the scratch marks Charm left on Armen and Lucy? I should make them take care of her as a way for them to pay rent while they live in my house.”

“If you like,” Sardius said, his tongue clicking against his front teeth... if he had front teeth, but Jenna struggled to listen.

She was so angry, her brain wasn’t responding.

Trying to rewire herself, she untied the wrap dress she was wearing and tossed it on a nearby chair. She stood in her underwear, pulled a hair tie from her wrist, and tied her hair back. “I want to talk to Favel.”

“If you’re diving in that water, grab an air tank,” Sardius said urgently. “There’s a bunch ready to go on the wall to your right. Are you really just going to dive into the ocean in your underwear?”

“I have lived near the ocean all my life. I know how to scuba dive and who’s going to see me except a bunch of naked fish..” She grabbed the air tank and put it on perfectly.

Then she dropped herself into the water and swam through the darkness while Sardius chuckled.

# Chapter Sixteen

## Exchanging Gifts

As part of the process of correcting the damage Armen had done to the eight gifts the Octavians had attempted to bestow upon her, Jenna had to meet with a council of eight Octavians. The entire council came to Jenna's palace to talk it over. She had a hall to accommodate them. Favel was chair of the council and he sat at the other end of a long table. The eight Octavians sat in elegant pools of water that for all the world looked like oversized crystal liquor goblets.

"Let's begin by talking about Armen," Favel said reasonably. "He was one in zero point zero to the trillionth power. We will never be able to recruit another man like him. Jenna, would you like to take the compatibility test yourself to see if we might be able to broaden our search and find you another husband?"

"We can skip all that," Jenna brushed her hair off her forehead like she was brushing off Favel's suggestion. "I'm not interested in finding a husband. I have something in mind I'd like to replace the gift of Armen."

"Excellent. What?"

"Not a what. A who. I want Sardius."

If they had been humans, Jenna would have been able to read their reactions, but as all their mouths were underwater, there was no sound. There was no movement that Jenna understood.

Favel answered her first. "I'm afraid I don't understand your request. Sardius has already been given to you as your personal assistant. We can't give him to you more than we already have."

Jenna cleared her throat. "I disagree. I have been denied a possible partner because of the unfortunate circumstances with Armen. As has been pointed out by your compatibility test, it is unlikely that I'll match with another human."

"The tests we ran weren't meant to discourage you," Favel said in a very sympathetic tone. "It was just that you had no partner on Earth—"

"Exactly," Jenna interrupted. "Because of the crown on my head, I have been discouraged since birth to let anyone get close to me. On Earth, other people wouldn't understand a crown like this. People might think I ought to have it removed. They might pressure me to have it removed and my grandfather warned me most sternly that it could not be and no attempt should be made."

"Very wise," Favel agreed.

"The point is that I have not been raised to give in to pressure and I do not feel prepared to accept any person as a husband in my life, regardless of how much all of you feel that is something I need."

The octopuses around the table made nodding motions. Jenna wasn't sure if they agreed with her, but at the very least, she felt that they understood what she said.

Jenna continued, "I want you to stop recording Sardius so he can say whatever he wants. During this new chapter of my life, he has been my greatest comfort, my greatest ally, and I get the feeling that there is a lot he could tell me if he wasn't concerned about reprobation if he says the wrong thing. I want him to be able to tell me anything."

"I want to hear more about this," a red Octavian named Yardling said, rising up from the water and making a sound that couldn't be interpreted as anything other than a chuckle. "It sounds like you're asking if you can marry him. But that couldn't be it."

Jenna thought about that. Octavians often had many spouses. Maybe that was how she needed to frame her request if she was serious about getting what she wanted.

"We can't give her Sardius as a husband, can we?" an electronic voice sounded from a goblet with a yellow and white Octavian inside.

Jenna stood up. "Why don't we go around the table and all of you can tell me about your spouses, how you met, how you fell in love, and how your marriages were approved? Maybe then we can discover how alien my request is to you. Besides, I did not ask to be married to him. I asked to have his surveillance halted. It's not the same thing."

"Ah," Favel said, raising a tentacle as if to silence her. "As far as they are concerned, we would need to regard him as such. If we removed the surveillance, it would need to be for similar reasons as why we only let him monitor you when you're in the shower or changing your clothes."

Jenna smiled sharply. "It sounds like you're already giving him husbandly perks without my consent."

That made millions of bubbles spill over the edges of the council's goblets into the grates below. Undoubtedly, they all thought her comment was hilarious... or maybe they were outraged by her accusation.

Jenna sat back down and sighed. "I understand. Octopuses see each other naked constantly, but humans don't feel the same about all their skin being visible to anyone. You all know this and understand or else you wouldn't bother to be so strict in your protection of my modesty."

The bubbles slowly died down.

"What about work companions who are not lovers? Is there any precedent for that?" she pressed.

"That's still marriage," one of the other Octavians shouted.

"So what if she can never meet Sardius?" another Octavian interjected. "Who, among us, hasn't had a lover who was in deep space for an indeterminate length of time?"

"I imagine all your lovers would want to be in deep space," the weathered octopus next to him mouthed, but honestly, from their tones of voice, Jenna couldn't figure out which of them was male and which of them was female. The insult caused a slight uproar with more bubbles escaping to the grates below.

Jenna had a soft voice she could use on command. She always felt like it sounded like B.S. when she used it, but it felt like the perfect way to frame her words when speaking to the council. "All right then. You can all agree that I need a partner and none of you think that my

having a partner who isn't physically present is not an obstacle to my partnering up with Sardius. You tried so hard to make me happy with Armen. I appreciate it. However, he may not have been what I want despite the matching test he passed. Maybe what I want is something else. In all my life, I never had anyone I could rely on the way I have been relying on Sardius. I want him to be free to speak to me without anyone listening to him."

The Octavians were uncomfortable. They were twitching in their goblets. A few of them were flicking water on the Octavians next to them, which Jenna thought was a hostile action, but the way the Octavian getting flicked reacted did not make it seem so. Instead, it seemed like the equivalent of placing a hand supportively on a colleague's shoulder.

Flick.

Flick.

Flick.

She was getting wet too.

Over Jenna's earpiece, Sardius didn't say a word, but she thought she could hear his ragged breathing because he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"If we were to grant such an outrageous request, Jenna would need a higher level of security clearance than she currently has," a gray council member said.

"Could I be given that security clearance to replace the other failed gift—Lucy?" Jenna suggested. "Honestly, I never would have brought her along. That was Armen's disgusting little idea. Bringing her never felt like an act of friendship from you, but a punishment."

The gray council member conceded, "Leaving the choosing of the gifts in Armen's hands was a most regretful decision on our part. Making it up to you will be difficult. First, the request to make Sardius your husband is a very different request than asking for his monitoring to stop. For starters, he would have to be labeled as your third husband—a husband intended for your amusement, but since he is so far away... that seems peculiar. Before we decide on that, we need to discuss how we are going to publicly dissolve your marriage to Armen. Everyone in the universe is going to know that you and Armen are divorced. You'll have to answer interview questions about it."

"I'm willing to make up a reasonable story about that, saying how Armen and Lucy fell in love and it's nobody's fault. I can be stubborn and stick to that story publicly no matter what anyone asks me for a hundred years," Jenna volunteered.

"That's very generous of you," a mottled Octavian muttered.

"Jenna," Favel broke out. He had clearly been speaking to the other council members from a control panel in his goblet and was now prepared to speak for the whole table. "From our perspective, allowing you the security clearance necessary for Sardius to be able to speak freely is dangerous and inadvisable at this stage, but it is doable."

"What do you mean?"

"The security measures are in place to protect you... from Sardius."

Jenna snorted. In a different sort of council meeting, it would have been unacceptable, rude, and a slight that would be remembered for years, but among octopus delegates, a snort was meaningless. Jenna scanned the members for evidence they were annoyed. Seeing none, she continued, "You sound like you don't trust him. Why give him a position of such trust if you think he's unreliable?"

“We hope he’s our friend,” Favel replied. “He’s signed agreements stating that he’s on our side, but all of that may be a ruse.”

Jenna cocked her head. “You’re aware he can hear you?”

Favel nodded his mantle and dipped underwater to refresh his skin. When he came up, he said, “We’re not keeping secrets from him. We’re just keeping an eye on him. He knows why he’s being watched. He’s agreed to it. Unfortunately, we can’t tell you why those security measures are in place without you already having the security clearance.”

“So, can I have the security clearance?” Jenna persisted.

“We will need to take a vote as to whether or not you shall receive it under the terms that it is your gift to replace Lucy,” Favel stated.

“Wait,” Jenna interrupted, looking at the council members. “How can you have a vote? There is an even number of voters. What happens if it is four against four?”

“If it is a perfect split, each member will state their reasons for the vote. After the explanations, we’ll vote again. There’s a good chance that an individual council member’s reasoning will convince another council member to change their vote. It often happens that way. Sometimes, we listen to the reasoning anyway. It provides interesting discussions.”

They voted, with four out of eight voting in favor of giving Jenna the security clearance and four voting against it.

Favel raised himself out of the water. “We’ll now hear the reasoning from both sides. Rossi, you begin.”

# Chapter Seventeen

## I Vote With The Gray Matter in My Gut

The council meeting continued.

Rossi, a cherry red Octavian, rose up in her glass and said, "Jenna will require this level of clearance at some point. Is there really any purpose in refusing to give it to her now? If we give it to her now, we have essentially satisfied her request for a new gift without expending any additional resources. When she's interviewed by the media, she can continue to act as though she is perfectly happy with her gift of Lucy. I see no negatives."

Rossi lowered herself into the water without making a single ripple.

"Would anyone else on the yea side like to speak?"

The other Octavians who had voted yea, including Favel, hit buttons on the table saying they passed.

"Barker, would you speak on the nay side?" Favel invited.

A black Octavian rose up in the water. "I'm not opposed to Jenna eventually receiving this security clearance. As Rossi said, and I agree with her, Jenna would require this level of security clearance eventually, but I feel that it is jumping the gun to allow it now. According to the audio reels collected, Sardius has not asked for this in an official way. He has told her he is not allowed to answer certain questions and cited the reason why as this security function. His language is only mildly alarming and he requires no formal censure. What worries me is the intent to increase Jenna's intimacy with Sardius on the level of a third husband. If he's already the voice inside her head, who else is she listening to? A diplomat is supposed to have a collection of ties. Giving someone as dangerous as Sardius unguarded access to our *only* diplomat seems too reckless to be imagined. Perhaps we could put this decision off until a few more diplomats have been crowned. Otherwise, I see no problem with giving her the security clearance without marking it as one of her gifts. As Rossi said, we would have to give her this level of security clearance anyway."

He lowered himself into the water.

Jenna leaned over the table and Favel noticed her. "Is there something you'd like to say?"

"I think I might be willing to go along with that decision myself," she said, thinking she might want the extra gift for something else in the future. "It would help me if you could explain why Sardius is so dangerous."

Favel nodded, though reluctantly. "In order to avoid a security conflict, I can tell you a few things about him, as he is unable to tell you anything about his past or his current situation. However, as you can guess, I'll be cherry-picking the information shared. Do you want our pruned version of the truth that can't help but be a little skewed?"

Jenna nodded.

"As you have already guessed," Favel began. "Sardius is not a microscopic octopus living in the pearl inside your ear. We use that lie to explain why it is possible for him to do what he does."



I'm sure you've noticed inconsistencies in communication in outer space and how he doesn't have them. It's almost as if he's with you all the time. Many people have lived their entire lives with personal assistants in their ears without questioning it as much as you have."

"What's the reality? If he's not a tiny octopus, then what is he?"

"I can't tell you. What I can tell you is that you can never meet him in person. He's a prisoner. He's the highest-level prisoner ever used as a personal assistant."

"You're saying he's a criminal? Why are you using criminals as personal assistants?" Jenna demanded.

"In Sardius' case, it's because he's a very intelligent criminal. He's a revolutionary, a terrorist, a pirate, a mass murderer, an arsonist, and anything else you can think of. He has no limits to what he can do. Frankly, when you go over his credentials, you don't know if he's a criminal because if he was working as an army officer during the mayhem he's created, he'd be considered a hero. Already you know what he's like when you talk to him. He's charming, trustworthy, resourceful, entertaining, and frankly... calming when things are going very badly. However, from our perspective, he feels problematic because we didn't scout him. He applied to work for you. That's why he's being watched so carefully. No one is certain why he wanted to work for you so desperately. A lot of very reasonable explanations were offered, and he swore so convincingly that he would go to hell for you." Favel paused. "I was convinced. Nonetheless, we didn't give him to you before he was tried as a personal assistant for another diplomat. He worked for Arvantis, but Arvantis was afraid of him, and afraid of what trusting the wrong person could do."

"And he died," Jenna finished for Favel.

"Yes. When we went through all the footage and reels taken, we determined that it was not Sardius' fault that happened. He tried his best to give good advice, to help, but Arvantis wouldn't listen to him. Often he did the opposite thing just to spit in Sardius' face. It was a shame. Let me make this last bit clear, as I think this is what Sardius would like you to know. His application was always to work for *you*. We gave him to someone else because you weren't accepting the invitations issued on Earth. It was a good way for him to prove himself. He wouldn't have stayed assigned to Arvantis after you joined us."

"Why would he want to work for me? How did he even know about me?"

"You know you have been on our watchlist since you were crowned as a baby. Getting personal assistants for Adamis diplomats is not easy. Information about you would have been available to him as soon as he applied to work for the program, though the information would have been vague. It would have been nothing more than your name. After working for Arvantis, he would have had more information on you. Arvantis was supposed to go to Earth to collect you himself, but he put that aspect of his work in the hands of some of his connections with the Adamis Alliance and we did not go to scout you personally before he passed away." Favel paused. "As for Sardius, he was completely aware of the efforts to recruit you, even before we took over. On his application, he wrote that you were, and I quote 'the sort of woman who should never be left alone... and you were in so much danger, he wouldn't leave you alone.' Sardius wanted to protect you. However, I should tell you that after listening to Barker's argument, I agree that giving Sardius full access to say whatever he wants to you might be an invitation for him to pour poison in your ear. I appreciate that you're feeling all alone after what

happened with Armen and Lucy. I wish there was something specific we could do to replace Armen and give you what you should have had.”

Jenna leaned back in her chair and kept a pensive look on her face, though that was not an accurate depiction of her emotions at all. She had got them to give her almost everything she desired during the meeting. More than anything, she had wanted them to unroll the lie they had told her about Sardius’ situation. She was happy she hadn’t believed the microscopic octopus story. Favel had not told her that Sardius was a man, but Jenna didn’t need him to. Aside from Sardius verbally assuring her that he was indeed a tiny octopus, nothing else in his speech indicated that was true. The Octavians just didn’t understand the subtler points of human communication.

Sardius was a man.

Maybe not a man exactly the way she was used to on Earth, but a man as far as she was concerned. He had hinted at it himself when he spoke about the compatibility test and its flaws. He hadn’t been one of the men included in the test as a possibility. He had suggested that he could have been a twelfth candidate if he had been included.

She decided this was the best way to hold leverage over the council and dove into it. “You’re saying you’d prefer it if I didn’t take Sardius to be my third husband and you’d rather I dated in order to find someone to partner up with who represents any other faction, but there are no other men according to your compatibility test.”

“Jenna, we have over seventy thousand people who have applied to be crowned as diplomats, maybe you could screen for a third husband at the same time,” Favel recommended, sounding as though the words were hard for him to say.

Jenna held back a smirk. “You haven’t convinced me. I’m pretty sure I don’t need to ask you who I can have as my third husband. You know what I think? I think you married me to Armen so that you could have an extra person on your side. The position of a third husband is not supposed to be a politically driven one and if you got me to have a third husband who was someone entirely of your choosing when I first got here, you would have my ear more than anyone else. Who’s trying to put poison in whose ear?”

The council looked bothered and the water they sat in bubbled so hard, it looked like it was boiling.

“That’s not the case at all,” Favel said with what appeared to be an easy chuckle. His water didn’t bubble. “We simply wanted you to feel as though this place could be your home. Having the support of a husband was naturally a part of that. We tried to find someone who would please you.”

“There was no need to find a husband for me in the first place. Romance in this situation is distasteful,” Jenna said scathingly. “You provided me with someone with an intense amount of practical military experience, Sardius, and I appreciate it. I plan to take no partner at all. Sardius is all I need. And I would like him to be able to speak to me frankly instead of some unseen person screening my conversations with my PA. It feels like a disgusting breach of my privacy for him or me to be recorded. This is what I want, and I’m not budging.”

Jenna couldn’t tell by their reactions to that assertion if she was successful or not. There were rapid glances exchanges among the council members, more bubbling, water splashing, and a siphon or two blowing water across the table. Favel’s eyes had taken on unusual corners.

“Jenna,” Sardius’ voice came low in her ear. “You are scaring the hell out of them. Ease up.”

She blew out a little air, trying to mimic the council members blowing water as best she could. “In any case, I will do as you request. I’ll hold off on begging for that security clearance until I have crowned three new diplomats. Will that do?”

Favel thanked her for being so reasonable and Jenna opened a bag of potato chips as an offering to the council members. None of them ate one. They just rubbed the suction cups of their tentacles against them.

“Are these supposed to be salty?” a little spotted one giggled. She lived in salt water. To her, the chips were bland.

Jenna smiled and shrugged. “They’re salty to my people.”

“And you liked this gift?” the spotted octopus asked.

Jenna shrugged again. “Not really. I’m not really allowed to eat these, but I liked the chips better than I liked Lucy.”

# Chapter Eighteen

## From One Sucker to Another

"That was a bold move," Sardius said in Jenna's ear as she entered her closet after the meeting. "You're more of a bad girl than I thought."

Jenna pulled her sweater over her head and folded it on a glass table in the middle of the room. "Let's not talk about that. You're still being recorded."

"Yes, wife, I'll can it," he drawled.

The corner of Jenna's mouth pulled. She had not meant to ask the council if she could marry Sardius. A romantic attachment to him had not entered her head as she had already accepted that she would never be able to meet him. What she wanted was something else. How could she frame it? She honestly couldn't explain it to anyone else until she had worked it all out inside herself.

Armen had left a bad taste in her mouth. Actually, she couldn't swear that any of her past love interests had left a good taste in her mouth.

When she thought of people who had been good to her, people she wanted in her life, she wanted her grandfather. Without him, she wanted someone to guide her along. She couldn't do what she had to do with no one backing her. And she felt that if Sardius was her family...like her grandfather... unlike Lucy... that somehow that would be enough to carry her through what she had to do. It wasn't romantic.

She swore to herself that it wasn't romantic.

Sardius was annoying. Sometimes, he was funny. Yes, sometimes he was hilariously sexy, but mostly he was a bug in her ear who didn't know when to shut up.

Then she remembered him telling her that there wasn't enough oxygen when she was stranded in the tank. She took a deep breath.

He *could* be all that she needed.

"I just want to know one thing," Sardius asked, interrupting her thoughts. "Will you be able to trust me after what you've learned about me?"

"Well, they didn't really explain anything. They danced around the important bits. You're a prisoner?" she said, moving around the closet and taking an inventory of the clothes provided for her.

"Yep," he said sourly.

"Can you tell me about your prison?"

"There's not much to tell. I'm in a room. There are four walls. There's a lot of stuff carved into and written on the walls. It was all here when they threw me in here. It's probably not that different than if I actually was living in your ear, just on a larger scale."

"Do they feed you?"

"No. They give us a shot once every four days that replaces all the nourishment our bodies need. We drink water. I haven't eaten in years."

"If you do a good job working for me, will you be able to eat again?"

Sardius clicked his tongue. "No. I'm serving seventeen life sentences. I know other prisoners can get a reduced sentence for working a job like this, but not me. I'm too dangerous for them to ever let me out. They don't even want to pretend that if I do this I'll get out. Seventeen life sentences are not something that can be worked off. That's not why I'm helping you. Working for you is the only fun I'm ever going to get. There's no reward, except joining in whatever trouble you get into."

"That sounds dangerous. Even if you do a good job, you get nothing? If I were an assassin trying to find a way to kill me, I'd consider you the weakest link because of the lack of remuneration. For instance, would you sell me out for the promise of three square meals a day?"

He chuckled. "I wouldn't know the first thing about how to go about eating something. I hadn't eaten anything for years *before* I went to jail. You can't do the things I have done if you're obsessed with food. Deep space travel does not make for great dining. Besides, real food makes you fat and poor. I am poor because I've had all my assets stripped more times than I can count, but I am not fat."

"Have you been dying to tell me that?" Jenna asked, bemused.

"A little bit, yeah," he confessed.

"I hope it was satisfying for you."

"You should know you're not marrying a whale," he said smugly.

Jenna chuckled. "What do you know? I'll probably end up marrying an octopus. They recommend that, don't they?"

"You'd do that?" he gasped.

"I have no idea what I wouldn't do."

"No idea?" he asked, his voice tantalizing.

Dressed for bed, she threw herself backward onto her bed. "That's already what I like about you. I have no idea what your limits are. Hearing that you've already crossed so many lines should scare me, but it makes me feel like you would make a horrible snap decision in my favor if something terrible went down. I like it. It makes me feel safer with you than anybody else."

"Jenna, I don't mean to alarm you, but when you talk like that, it makes it sound like you actually do want to marry me," he said with a pompous little snicker.

She scratched her scalp under her hair. "Maybe that's what I want. What do soldiers do, terrorists, and others to make sure they're all on the same side before they do something crazy? What kinds of oaths do they swear?"

"Huh..." he said slowly. "Now that you mention it, we have ceremonies. We do things to welcome new people to our ranks. When you're a revolutionary, you can't always pay your soldiers. If you've done a good job with them, they'll be with you through sickness and health, through want and wealth, through victory and death. You're right. We may not frame it exactly the same way, but it is more like a marriage ceremony than I originally thought. What do you think, Jenna, should we get married?"

At that moment, Sardius' voice was cut. Jenna tapped on her earpiece twice with her finger. She had never had any technical difficulties with the pearl communicator in her ear. It didn't have any buttons on it at all.

“Sorry,” he said after a moment. “That was the orbital security team. Apparently, I am not allowed to ask you to marry me. I have been warned, though not punished.”

“It’s okay,” Jenna said, relieved that there was nothing wrong with her earpiece. “We can work out the details later. Otherwise, I hate that I can’t talk to one friggin person without someone listening.”

“It’s for your safety,” he reminded her.

“I still don’t feel like I’m free to chat. I don’t feel like I can tell you what I thought of that meeting, what I thought of the councilors, our arrangement, or anything at all. Bah! Tell me what’s on the schedule for tomorrow.”

“As you wish. Tomorrow morning, you are scheduled to meet your three servants. Vash will be your butler. He will act as a housekeeper, maid, and waiter. He’ll also do the upkeep of the sixteen palace fish tanks. You should know that he used to be a nurse who worked at one of the hospitals. He was fired for misconduct leading to death.”

“Why am I getting a toilet scrubber who messed up so bad that someone died?” Jenna complained.

“Almost everyone on the planet who isn’t working in healthcare is someone who lost their position under similar circumstances. Vash’s list of crimes is tiny. We were lucky to get someone with such a relatively clean history to do housekeeping for us.”

“Go on,” Jenna encouraged.

“Misha is your stylist,” Sardius said, carrying on. “Normally, diplomats on other Adamis planets do not need a full-time stylist, but here on Octavia, you do. It’s because you have to switch between wet and dry looks and neither the Adamis nor the Octavians thought you had the slightest clue as to how to pull off a wet look. Not only that, but you’re entirely too important to look like a pauper.”

Jenna rolled her eyes. “Is Misha also a screwup from the hospital?”

“Nah,” Sardius laughed. “She’s a screwup from the morgue.”

“Fabulous,” Jenna said dryly.

“The last member of staff is Smoothie. She’s your cook. You’ll be delighted to know that at least the person who will be feeding you has no priors. Her last job was at a hospital, but it was a five-star hospital and I headhunted her. She’s never even put a toe out of line, mostly because she doesn’t have any toes.”

Jenna wanted to ask about Smoothie’s anatomy but was too nervous. If Sardius had headhunted her, there wasn’t likely to be an improvement available, even if the person was weird to Jenna.

“Where do these servants live? Do they commute?” Jenna asked hesitantly when the introductions were finished.

“They live in your palace. There’s a servants’ wing. You can have up to five servants comfortably.”

“What other servants could I possibly need?”

“Bodyguards,” Sardius answered quickly. “I’ve been vetting them in my spare time, but I haven’t found one who is suitable. Right now, your palace is floating in a remote part of the Slipseed Ocean and no one besides the Octavian Council has any reason to be out here. For

now, that's the best protection we can give you, as you can easily be protected from orbit, but eventually, we'll need to move you closer to shore and allow bodyguards inside and outside."

"Any other business we need to address tonight?" she asked, getting under her covers and cuddling a pillow.

"We need to make arrangements to collect Charm from Octavia Three."

Jenna scoffed. "I already told you that I want her sent to Octavia Five. Tell Armen and Lucy that they have to take care of her as part of their tenancy."

Sardius hesitated. "Didn't she almost rip Lucy's head clean off?"

"Yeah," Jenna said, remembering the bloody gashes with a dreamlike reminiscence. "Charm hates everyone but me."

"Aren't you worried your cat will fall in love with Armen and Lucy and the next time you see her, she won't even know you?"

Jenna sighed. "That is a risk, but it would also be terrible if she scratched a visiting Octavian diplomat. As much as I love her, she's not well enough behaved to be here just yet. Plus, there's real work for her demon claws living with Armen and Lucy."

"So, you would not like me to look into getting you another pet?"

"No. If I die out here, then I die out here alone."

"I don't blame you for being worried about the assassins, but you do realize you're turning down the gifts Armen gave you on behalf of the Octavian council one by one?"

"Yeah. I know. I can't really help it if they gave me terrible gifts."

"If you could have anything, what would you have?"

"I'd have a man I like kissing me feverishly in the dark, but since that hasn't happened for me thus far, it seems unlikely it will happen in the future. I'm over the disappointment."

"Are you?" he asked, his voice clipped in the night's silence.

"Yeah. Why shouldn't I be over it? It's not like I'm a maid of sixteen with stars in her eyes and passionate hopes knotted in her throat. I'm just a person. I've suspected you were a man for ages and I just kept whipping my shirt over my head."

"I've appreciated it," he said in a tone Jenna couldn't quite identify.

"I hope you enjoy the one perk your job has," Jenna said. She turned to the camera and blew it a kiss she hoped Sardius could see. "I wish our situation was fair and we both got perks."

He whistled softly in her ear. "Are you saying your job has no perks?"

"It feels that way tonight. Potato chips? A scrappy cat I can't have? Please."

"More importantly, are you saying you'd consider it a perk if you got to see me naked?"

Jenna traced the magenta pattern on her pillow with the tip of her finger. "I think I'm saying that you and I are a couple of suckers."

Sardius said nothing like the line on the phone was dead.

She didn't wait for him to reply and the lights dimmed automatically as she relaxed in bed. The mattress was plush and the sheets were silky. She rubbed her eyes and touched the piece in her ear as if to say goodnight.

"I certainly feel like a sucker tonight," he conceded as the rest of the lights went out. "Though not the kind you mistake me for."

Jenna didn't answer him, but let her breathing regulate until she fell asleep with Sardius on her mind and resting like a pearl in the shell of her ear.



# Chapter Nineteen

## Fooling Around First Thing

Jenna woke up.

There was music playing in her ear. She knew at once that Sardius was playing it for her in lieu of the buzzing of an alarm clock. The sound was much nicer than any of the ringtones she remembered from her phone. It was energy music.

"I'm awake," she said.

"Are you ready?" he asked like a TV sports show host.

Jenna paled. "Ready for what?"

"This is my first morning waking up with you when I'm in charge of your schedule," he burst like he could give her some of his energy with the very timber of his voice. "I've been waiting for this. I would have gotten started sooner, but the right morning hadn't come yet. Now we're here and the time is right. You should know right now that one of the reasons I wanted to be your PA was because I wanted to be your trainer."

Jenna coughed. "My trainer?"

"Yeah. You're soft, which is very appealing in its own way, but you don't need to be that soft."

"Wait a second! Are you talking about putting me on an exercise program?" Jenna asked in alarm.

"Yeah, but it's not just working out. There's machinery you're going to need to learn to operate and tools you need to learn how to use. Yes, you're going to work out, but so much more."

"Uh... That's all well and good, but I'm the kind of girl who can get killed on the track. I'm not athletic. I'm not coordinated. I'm the sort of woman who knits mittens and lets my cat play with the unused yarn. I watched dramas and ate noodles. I had a lovely time, but I only did yoga, not cardio, not weights, and not anything intense," she sputtered.

"Intense?" he drawled. "You don't want to do anything *intense*?"

"Hey! I didn't choose any of this for myself and I'm scared you'll drop me straight in the deep end without being sensitive to my place on the fitness scale. Do you even know the exact anatomy of my body and where my tolerance thresholds are likely to be? Human girls are frail."

He chuckled. "Darling, I know the gravity on this planet is making you feel like you're weighed down and you'll never float like a butterfly or sting like a bee, but if you don't push yourself to get stronger, you could die here. I'm not going to make you do more than you can tolerate safely."

"That's not the only thing that's worrying me!" Jenna squeaked.

Sardius waited for her to continue, but she didn't answer. Uncomfortable sweat pooled in unexpected places on Jenna's body.

Sardius made a sound like he was clicking his tongue. "Would it be at all possible for you to drop your inhibitions and just come right out and tell me your concerns?"

Jenna breathed hard. "I'm just a little worried that you'll make fun of me for... my... my..."

“Softness?” he supplied for her.

“Yeah. I had my laughs on you last night when I teased you about the only perk of your job being that you get to see me naked. Then today, you get to tease me by saying that actually, I’m not that thrilling because I need to get in shape.”

“Oh...” he said slowly. “I’m going to need you to relax, Jenna. This would all have been easier if I hadn’t let it slip that I’m not a mini octopus whispering instructions in your ear. Now that you know I’m Adamis, you’re getting a little hung up on my voice and treating me like I’m a person who has something in common with you.”

“You’re saying you don’t?”

“Ah... I’m a person. But the Octavians, whose anatomy has nothing in common with yours, are people. Except, I’ll never meet you in person. I’m in prison. Our relationship can never be more than me supplying you with information and watching out for you from afar. As much as I enjoyed you teasing me that you’d like to see me naked, because I really did enjoy that, you should know that at this moment, I am not teasing you or sexualizing you.”

“What do you mean?” she asked hesitantly.

“This isn’t about that,” he said plainly. “This is about you, Octavia Prime’s gravity, and your job as a diplomat. You cannot turn into a hunchback because you refuse to stand up straight to withstand the gravitational burden that has suddenly been placed on you. And if you don’t do these exercises, that is exactly what will happen. It is easier for other types of Adamis to withstand this level of gravity. Some of them were born on planets as large as Octavia Prime. Some of them have naturally better body arrangements to help them cope. You are vulnerable to becoming someone who eventually needs to be carted around in a wheelchair if you don’t submit to me and do the training package I’ve made for you. Do you understand?”

The way Sardius said, ‘Do you understand?’ was halfway between a drill sergeant on the verge of calling her a maggot, and her grandfather telling her that she had to be brave right before he went into the hospital for the last time. It set the hair on the back of Jenna’s neck upright.

Jenna got out of bed. “What should I wear for these exercises?”

“Nothing,” Sardius answered with a flick of his tongue.

“W-what?” she sputtered incredulously.

He huffed a laugh. “I mean, I’d have a better time if you didn’t wear anything, but ya know. Wear what you like.”

“You switch gears awfully quickly,” she said, popping into her closet, her face aflame. She chose a sports bra and a pair of boy shorts. They weren’t workout clothes exactly, but they were the closest thing she had until more clothes could be ordered for her. She didn’t attempt to cover herself but instead stuck her tongue out at the camera closest to her. It wasn’t like he could do anything to her from that distance anyway.

She returned to the bedroom.

His voice sounded over her earpiece. “If you used to do yoga, can you do an inversion?”

Jenna chose an empty wall, dropped a pillow on the floor next to it, and tried to flip herself onto her head. She had been fairly good at them on Earth, and though her first three attempts were embarrassing, on the fourth try, she got herself up and felt the wall against her heels over her head.

“See how long you can hold it.” Slowly, he began to say more. “You should know that when I see you undress, the camera angles and mirror angles are not what you imagine. The views I get of you are not like a well-directed movie. They’re not like what a skilled photographer would get if he were hiding in the walls. I’m getting security footage. It’s not the same.” He paused, breathing like it was hard to say what he needed to say. “I like that the Octavians have given me this security feature. I want to protect you and not because of those stolen glimpses I get. If anything, those moments are precious because I can block out the orbital security team from getting shots of you. Like Favel, I’m also worried about pictures or footage of you being leaked. I’m also blocking the orbital team from getting pictures of you working out if that helps you to be less self-conscious. If you do what I say, I’ll make you as toned and muscular as a leopard.”

“The gravity here is a total bitch,” Jenna said, feeling so much blood in her head that she had to drop down. Had he really said what she thought he did? Once she regained her senses, she replied to him by saying, “You’re a bigger person than I imagined. But, if you’re so great, why are you a mass-murdering terrorist?”

He smacked his lips. “I can’t talk about that stuff. Even if I wasn’t being recorded, I wouldn’t want to talk about the stuff I’ve done. It’s all out of my head.”

“I’ve got so much blood in my head, I can barely hear you. Could you repeat everything you said while I was upside down?” Jenna said, trying to contain her laughter.

“No. You heard me,” Sardius said, flatly refusing. “The gravity will feel lighter if you work out with me every morning. I’ll get you some supplements better than anything they’ve ever had on Earth to help combat your nutritional deficits. Have you ever considered giving up eating?”

# Chapter Twenty

## Yarn Hair and Button Eyes

Misha stood in front of Jenna holding a tool that looked very much like a hole punch. “I know we just met, but I’m going to need you to let me put two holes in your head.”

Sardius had already told Jenna all the reasons why she needed to have a magnetic clip put in her ear. Misha was talking about ear piercings. In order to hold Jenna’s earpiece in, she needed to pierce her tragus and daith. Which meant that she needed to pierce the lump of cartilage next to her ear canal and the first wrinkle in the curve upward. The earpiece she wore filled the whole bowl of her ear.

Jenna had never bothered to have her ears pierced on Earth. Jumping to piercing those heavy clumps of cartilage seemed like a leap tantamount to surgery.

If that had been the only leap Jenna had to make that day, everything probably would have been fine, but the person in front of Jenna caused a host of worries all by herself. Misha’s hair looked like it was made out of pink yarn. It did not look like a wig. From the hair growing from her temples to the ringlets that snuck out of her bun and hung at the base of her skull, it looked like pink yarn. Misha was small and very thin, like a doll someone was trying to make out of as little material as possible. On her face, all the emphasis was put on her eyes and mouth, like she didn’t have a nose. Both her eyes and lips were decorated with gold sparkles. Whatever color her eyes were, Jenna guessed she was wearing something like contacts to hide what her real eyes were like. The contact lenses that covered them were the closest approximation to black buttons.

This woman had been fired from a funeral parlor? Big surprise.

“Did someone like Sardius convince you to stop eating?” Jenna asked deliberately, pretending her filter was broken.

Misha waved a hand at her, gushing. “Oh, stop! You don’t have to butter me up. I’m already working for you.”

“Misha is overweight for her race,” Sardius whispered. “The racist term for her people is Stick. It’s short for The Stick Figures of the Universe. They’re actually called Galverns. Don’t mess it up.”

“Which ear do you want to pierce?” Misha asked.

“The left since I’m right-handed,” Jenna answered, her hand hovering over the earpiece like a child who did not want to remove her pacifier.

“Take out your earpiece, Jenna,” Sardius encouraged. “I’ll broadcast my voice over the loudspeaker.”

Jenna reluctantly pulled it out and handed it to Misha, who got to work cleaning it.

“Don’t forget to clean the inside of her ear, Misha,” Sardius said through a speaker hidden somewhere in my dressing room.

Misha got excited like someone had just announced that a rock star was on the phone. "Is this your personal assistant?"

"Haven't you met him? His name is Sardius," Jenna said, a little astounded by Misha's reaction. "He'll give you instructions from time to time," Jenna continued, while Misha went about the final preparations.

At the last moment, she paused and asked Jenna with narrowed eyes. "Are you hardcore?"

Before Jenna could answer, Sardius answered for her. "Yes, she's hardcore."

"Great." Misha started marking out Jenna's ear to help her get the right spot with the gun.

"Wait. When you asked me if I was hardcore, were you actually offering me painkillers and did Sardius refuse them for me?" Jenna questioned with narrowed eyes.

"Yes," Misha confirmed.

"I want painkillers. The piercing in the daith looks particularly painful."

"You don't want painkillers, Jenna," Sardius' voice filled the room. "It will hurt, but for the time being, I don't want you taking any drugs. I'd stop you from eating food if I could."

"You sounded really credible until the last line about food, and then you blew it. It's crazy that you're asking me to give up eating. As if I haven't already given up a ton of things. Misha, what are the painkillers like?"

"They're awesome," she said with a slightly dazed look on her face. What did she have over her eyes? Either way, mentioning the drugs made her look like a stoner.

Jenna nodded slowly. "I changed my mind. I'll be hardcore."

# Chapter Twenty One

## Vash, the Complainer

Vash, the butler, was a different story.

He was built like a brick wall with the biggest hands Jenna had ever seen on a person. He could have palmed her head and crushed it with one hand.

"I don't do laundry," he said in a voice closely resembling a British accent.

"What? Why?" Jenna asked curiously.

"It's your stylist's job to take care of your wardrobe," he continued. "I don't give massages."

Jenna looked at his meaty hands and thought that request probably came up quite frequently. She imagined just one of his fingers was a good deal more effective than the mechanical fingers inside a massage chair.

"I don't help anyone in or out of the bath," he continued.

Jenna imagined that had probably come up before as well and nodded.

"I don't accept visitors in my bedroom."

"That's a given," Jenna replied.

"I don't clean up messes in the middle of the night," he pressed.

Jenna nodded, the skepticism inside her was beginning to simmer.

He went on. "I don't do maintenance work. I will not flush out your plumbing. I will not fix the hot water tanks. I will not be on call to fix appliances in the kitchen. I will not go up on the roof to realign solar cells, correct wiring, or repair wireless devices. I will not work on preassigned days off. I will not whip something up in the kitchen. I will not do outdoor landscaping. And I am not your answering service."

Jenna put her hand up to stop the rant. "Given your job description, most of what you're saying is completely reasonable, but if you want to say you are not my answering service, that's going too far. I appreciate that you've been imposed upon and asked to complete tasks that were not in your job description in the past. I'm willing to allow you to only do your job and no one else's, but if you can't pass on simple messages... Well, that's unacceptable."

"I can walk out of here right now," Vash threatened without flinching.

"Yeah. You can. If this job is beneath you or you feel you haven't been heard, you can walk."

"Jenna," Sardius chirped up, back in his old perch of her ear. "We might not be able to get anyone who can replace him. He's enormous. I chose him because I was hoping he could double as a bodyguard."

Jenna didn't amend her stance and instead met Vash's gaze steadily.

Finally, he broke eye contact and put his nose up in the air. "There is no reason for me to be responsible for your messages when you have a personal assistant like Sardius."

"In that case, I'll ask that you only pass on messages when Sardius is unable to," Jenna amended.

Vash favored her with a particularly sour stare. "He'll always be available. Considering your level of experience with having your own staff, I suppose I'll give you a trial period. I'll give you three months."

Jenna glanced at his contract that was displayed on the enormous wall screen. It already stated that he was being hired for a three-month trial period. She smirked. "I'm happy to give you a try too, but I should warn you, if you prove to be antagonistic or particularly unhelpful, I'll fire you. I need a support team in my home who believes in our mission. I need you to work with me and the other members of the household happily. Will you be able to do that?" she asked, softening her tone on the last words.

"I will not dance with my shirt off!" he shouted like he had to get his whole list off his chest. No pun intended. "I will not rip my pants off!"

"Great. No one wants to see you with your shirt or pants off, dude," Jenna replied before she could help it.

Vash snorted. "You'll see. You'll see how much fun this all is once Adamis military officers get here and start wanting the royal treatment."

"Really?" Jenna asked, curious and leaning forward. "Those guys are the AAMC? Have you had experiences with them? What can you tell me about them?"

Jenna listened while Vash shouted out six second-hand accounts of things that had happened when Arvantis was living in her palace, though he had not worked for Arvantis. Some of them turned out to be third-hand accounts. Jenna wasn't sure if she believed them, but Vash seemed satisfied that she was willing to listen to him. It went all the better because she didn't try to cut him off again. When he had said everything he needed to say, he went up to his room to unpack.

"Was there any truth in that, Sardius?" Jenna whispered. "You were Arvantis' assistant."

"I never once said Arvantis was a good person. I said I did my job concerning him. As for the stories Vash told, the only ones that had any merit were the ones that spoke of how Arvantis treated his lover, Vinia. They sound a bit made up and they have been embellished, but he really didn't treat her well behind closed doors. I would have liked to have done something to stand up for her, except for two things."

"Which were?"

"She had signed warped agreements with him that made him able to abuse her legally. If I'd reported him to a disciplinary authority, they wouldn't have been able to charge him. She'd signed papers stating it was okay for him to hit her, shoot her up with drugs, yell at her, subject her to humiliation, and more. I had access to their agreements and video footage of her in negotiations. She thought it would be fun, but he turned out to be worse than she expected."

"What was the second reason?" Jenna pressed.

"Vinia was incredibly interesting. After she got all the jollies she could have by getting swatted across the face, she got interesting, and I found her fascinating to watch."

"What happened to her?"

"Arvantis died, the police carted Vinia off as a suspect, then she was downgraded to a witness, and after the investigation, she was never allowed to return to the palace. I supervised the moving company that packed her things, but I haven't spoken to her since."

"What did she do that you found so fascinating?"



“It’ll come up.”

Jenna frowned. “What do you mean, ‘it will come up’?”

“Exactly that. It will come up and when it does, you’ll be glad I watched her so carefully. At the very least, we can talk about it later. Smoothie, the new cook, is waiting to meet you.”

## Chapter Twenty Two

### Smoothie Makes Drinks She Doesn't Call Smoothies

Sardius stopped Jenna before she entered the kitchen. "Hold up. I have to tell you before you go in that Smoothie is not like your other servants."

"How so?" Jenna asked suspiciously. She recalled him mentioning something about Smoothie not having toes.

He started his explanation. "Your other servants are very clearly Adamis, though not human the way you're used to. Smoothie is a Sushfief, which means she is not actually Adamis. Her people managed to achieve a political alliance that had them categorized as such even though biologically, no, they're not very human."

"So you're giving me a head's up?"

"Exactly. I should have shown you a picture before I introduced you. Can I persuade you to go back to the bedroom so I can use your screen?"

"I'm starving and it can't be that shocking. Just tell me what she's like right now," Jenna said, crossing her arms across her chest and leaning against the wall.

Sardius sucked in his breath. "It's because her species resembles something on Earth, so it might be extra hard for you to accept her... or easier for you to accept her."

"She's not a giant chicken, is she? 'Cause that would be hard for me."

"No. She's a giant mushroom," he admitted.

"A mushroom?" Jenna gaped. "That's not weird. I mean, I have eaten a lot of mushrooms in my day and if she's going to be cooking for me, then it is probably safe to assume I will not be eating any more of them, but mushrooms have a fairly pleasing shape. They're not weird." She turned to enter the kitchen.

"Wait!" Sardius tried to interject, but it was too late.

Jenna had already gone into the kitchen. She stood transfixed by what was in front of her. Smoothie was a mushroom. Jenna had been told that and yet Jenna didn't know exactly what she had expected her mushroom chef to look like, but she had still not been prepared for an actual mushroom.

In the middle of the kitchen was a huge mushroom sitting on a large pink cushion. Smoothie was the color of mushroom mousse, a delightful creamy shade of off-white that made Jenna think of the broth of cream of mushroom soup. Smoothie had no arms and no legs as far as Jenna could see. The only thing about her that seemed different than an actual mushroom was two long slits on the dome of her head.

However, the sight of Smoothie's body was not the most fascinating thing Jenna saw. Smoothie was cooking, but she was not touching anything. Around her flew ingredients. Some were being washed, others cooked, and finished dishes were being plated. Like a Zen master, she was at one with the flow of the universe, and the result was beautiful food.

“Are you sure you don’t want to return to your bedroom for the anatomy lesson?” Sardius offered.

“Tell me now,” Jenna said, refusing to retreat.

“She has no arms or legs. The slits you are seeing in her mantle are her eyes. Most of the time, she will only open them about an inch wide. They will appear to be black as very little light will reflect off her iris. Her eyes are enormous and make up sixty percent of her skull. It’s unusual that her species evolved to have such large eyes because it’s dangerous to have large eyes. Stuff can fly in them, they can get wounded easily, they accept too much light, and can give the Sushfief unbearable headaches. It is very dark on her planet and very safe since peaceful Sushfiefs control every object with their minds, so they evolved to have enormous eyes. Anyway, in a place like this, Smoothie would never open them fully, but leave them mostly closed as often as possible for her safety.”

Jenna nodded like an idiot and continued to watch the precise storm of kitchen knives flying.

“The fact that she never touches the food means that the way she cooks is about a million times more sanitary than other cooks. She is a prize and honestly, she is getting paid three times what your other servants are being paid.”

“What does she do with her wages?”

“The money? That’s her business. Be sensitive if you decide to ask her. The accordion-like folds under her dome act as a single ear that stretches all the way around her body. She doesn’t need to see everything that is happening around her, because she can hear as well as if she had no eyes at all. That’s not what every Sushfief is like, it’s what she’s like because she’s a master chef. Her mouth is under her dome too, though it is difficult to see unless she deliberately wants to show you. I’ve watched a Sushfief eat before and it’s baffling. It looks like they’re eating under a mask.”

Jenna nodded and moved to say hello.

“One more thing!” Sardius called out noisily. “Do not offend her. She’s a sweet creature and we are lucky to have her. Do not trouble her with dumb questions about how she goes to the bathroom or how she mates. You see those knives flying? She can double as a guard in a pinch, and what’s more... I like her.”

“You do?”

“Yes. She’s reasonable, ambitious, interested in the work we’re doing, and interesting to talk to. You’ll like her too. Don’t screw it up.”

“Okay,” Jenna said.

With that, Jenna took that final step to make Smoothie aware that she’d entered the room. The kitchen work did not stop, though Smoothie turned on her axis and pointed herself toward Jenna.

“Thank you for visiting the kitchen today, Mistress Jenna.” Though Jenna couldn’t see where the sound was coming from, Smoothie’s voice was gentle and controlled.

“Thank you for working so diligently, Chef Smoothie,” Jenna replied.

“Ask her what she’s making,” Sardius suggested.

“What is on the menu today?” she asked.

“Mushroom soup,” Smoothie answered.

Jenna balked. How could she answer? She wasn’t supposed to offend her. Was it a test?

Sardius' voice came through her earpiece with a gusty laugh. "She's joking, but don't laugh. Think of something cute to say."

"Will that be followed by roasted humans?" Jenna attempted to quip back after an uncomfortable pause.

Smoothie opened her eyes the promised inch, revealing two long lines of iris that eagerly inspected Jenna. "Good thing I also prepared a salad and sandwich with neither mushrooms... nor humans. Where would Madam Diplomat prefer to have her meal served?"

Sardius answered her over the loudspeaker that Jenna would like to stay in the kitchen and chat with Smoothie. Jenna took a bar seat by the counter and allowed her meal to be served to her there.

# Chapter Twenty Three

## Figments of Flirtation

“Let’s begin by reviewing all the Octavians you met at the council meeting the other night,” Sardijs said, displaying a photo of Favel on the screen in Jenna’s bedroom.

Jenna lounged on a magenta velvet divan with one foot on the seat, one foot on the floor, and a stress ball in her hand. It was the same one she’d been throwing against the wall of the hospital when she first arrived in the Octavia system. She squashed it between her palms and then hucked it against the wall before catching it perfectly.

“You’re really going to do this? You’re going to start with Favel?” she asked with a snark in her voice.

“Yes, really. That way you’ll feel smart,” he said condescendingly.

“Shut up. Get to the next picture,” Jenna said crossly.

“As you wish, my lady,” Sardijs said in a voice that was half mocking and half gracious.

Jenna rolled her eyes and looked at the next photo on the screen. It was of a red Octavian. Sardijs was waiting for Jenna to say which council member it was, but the truth was that these octopuses could change their color, texture, and their very shape.

Jenna groaned.

“Don’t tell me you’re hung up already,” Sardijs teased.

“I think that one was called Yardling, but there was another red one at the table called Rossi. They look so similar. How am I supposed to tell them apart?”

“Yardling weighs four kilograms more than Rossi. Does that help?”

Jenna nodded. “Yeah, it does help... if I see them side by side. How am I supposed to identify them if they just swim up to the palace on their lonesome?”

“Well,” Sardijs began. “They wouldn’t be allowed to see you without making arrangements through me. I’ll always tell you who is entering your palace. It’s not like whoever can just wander in here even if they are part of the Octavian’s diplomatic council.”

“That’s a comfort,” Jenna said, still squashing her stress ball like Sardijs wasn’t alleviating her stress in the least.

“If it is of any further help, Yardling tends to be more of a tomato red while Rossi is more of a cherry red.” Sardijs flipped between the profile pictures of Yardling and Rossi.

“Yeah, except I’m concerned that they won’t always keep those colors. Octopuses have such changeable skin.”

“Please relax, Jenna. I’m here to walk you through this. If you can remember the names of the red ones, that’s enough for today. You’ll meet these delegates a lot in the future and when you’re there, you won’t even believe that there was a time when you struggled to tell them apart.”

“I hope so,” Jenna said as he pulled up the next picture.

It was a tiny gray one called Ulie.

Then a mottled one called Olina.

Then a yellow and white one that looked sick called Flourite.

Jenna knew the next one. It was a black one called Barker. He had been the one to vote against giving her the security clearance.

The last one was a weathered gray and green one called Mundo.

"That's all eight," Sardius declared. "The Octavian Council is the group you will meet with to discuss and draft treaties with when you're finished crowning seven other diplomats. Are you clear on their role?"

Jenna said yes.

Sardius moved on. "Now that we've done that, let's talk about where you are right now."

"This palace?" Jenna asked.

"You need to know that it is a piece of a larger construct. There are eight floating palaces and when they are all joined together, they make an octagon with a hole in the middle. Your palace is called the Dahlia Palace. There is also the Sand Palace, the Stone Palace, the Sun Palace, the Salt Palace, the Waterfall Palace, the Lotus Palace, and the Rainmaker Palace."

"Those should be easy to remember," Jenna yawned.

"As you've been told, much more of Octavia Prime is ocean than on Earth," Sardius continued. "We've been anchored above Favel's mansion underwater, so he can offer you the support of the Octavian Council since he's chair. You are the chair of the Adamis Council... at least you will be once you crown a few more diplomats."

"Provided I don't get killed by assassins," Jenna said coldly.

"Just look at the map," Sardius replied in a tone that was neither dismissive nor comforting.

Jenna did as she was told and looked at a map of Octavia Prime that Sardius had thoughtfully put on the screen in front of her. She studied it, noting the names of the cities on the land and the cities below the land. Jenna noticed that what was underwater was not marked in the same detailed fashion as what was on the land. "Is there another map that shows the underwater areas with more labels?"

"No. This is all the Octavians have provided us with," Sardius said with a yawn. "Their society isn't like yours. It's not like they put everything down on a grid with addresses and have everyone's name in the phone book. They don't track their citizens that way. One day, an Octavian's address is a hole in the rock, and the next, they're freeloading off one of their relatives in a colony, the day after that, they're in space. There aren't that many Octavians who have their own home the way Favel does. He's a big shot among them, but the reason he has a home like that is for the same reason you have this palace—for political convenience."

"Okay," Jenna said, dismissing her concerns.

"The next group of people we need to talk about is the Adamis Alliance," Sardius continued. "They're humans. They're a bunch of different races of humans who banded together. Historically, they weren't going to, but once they realized that a) Octavians had solved a lot of their space travel issues with technology that kicked the crap out of what they'd managed to put together, b) they had a lot more to fear from the Octavians outpacing them than they did from other factions of humanity, c) they were gravely outnumbered by the Octavians who aren't as fussy about racial differences... stuff like that. The Adamis realized that if they didn't unite in some way or another, they were going to end up like some of the other bits of intelligent life in

the universe... marginalized and obscure. Adamis pride simply cannot allow that. They figured out how to do something for the Octavians that they couldn't do for themselves."

"Right, healthcare," Jenna interjected.

"Good. You've been listening," Sardius praised.

Jenna felt a little proud of herself. She didn't have time to realize that it was like congratulating a child on remembering where they'd visited a few weeks ago, as she had originally awoken in a hospital. Instead, she just felt a happy little glow, like she was getting the hang of things.

"Now memorize all of this." Sardius pulled up a huge diagram of the Adamis Alliance. It showed its structure and all the offshoots. It was, honest to goodness, thousands of times more complex than if every piece of information about Earth's politics were suddenly displayed at once with layers and layers of diagrams exactly like the one on the top. Jenna didn't know how many layers there were.

"I'll kill you," she said bluntly. "Can't you break this down? Obviously, I'm not going to be able to memorize that, and nor should I. What's the important part?"

"Fine," Sardius said, pulling the diagram apart to focus on one department. "The group you need to be the most aware of is their military. The Adamis Alliance Military Conglomerate—The AAMC for short."

"So, the Adamis have a military," Jenna said, looking at the names and the divisions and she was honest enough with herself to know that she wasn't going to remember a word of it. "Who do they fight?"

Sardius was slow to answer. "Ah... Sometimes, they put down rebellions. Sometimes, they fight civil wars. Sometimes, they fight with the Octavians over mining disputes. Sometimes, they fight with smaller races. There's a lot. You only have to be concerned over their fighting with Octavians, which I think is mostly being put on hold, but who knows how long they can stay on hold."

"Are these the guys Vash was talking about when he mentioned dancing with his shirt off?"

"I believe so."

Jenna huffed a breath out. "This is one of those moments where you're not allowed to tell me what you really think, isn't it?"

"Indeed, it is, Madam Diplomat," he said, sounding falsely positive.

Jenna felt annoyed. Who was recording him? Was it the Adamis, who didn't want their military condemned for warmongering? Was it the Octavians, who didn't want Jenna to have any idea of her people's military might? The only clear thing was that she wasn't going to get any significant information from Sardius that night.

"Is there anything else we need to go over before we begin trimming down seventy thousand applications for potential diplomats?"

Sardius snorted. "Seventy thousand should be pretty easy to weed through, right?"

Jenna laughed and leaned back on her pillow divan. "I'm not nervous."

"Why not?"

She stretched out her arms and made a heart symbol with her fingers. She looked through it, at the camera beyond like the heart was a spyglass. "Because I couldn't find a single man I

liked out of four billion on Earth, and the algorithm they ran for me only found eleven men in the whole universe. I think my pickiness will cut things down to size pretty quick.”

“You make it sound like dismissing people is a virtue,” he said flatly.

“You may not think so today,” Jenna replied with a grin. “But after tomorrow, you might think differently.” She blew him a kiss.



# Chapter Twenty Four

## Everyone Has a Bad Reputation

“How do you want to narrow this down?” Sardiuss asked Jenna as she paced back and forth in front of the huge screen in her bedroom that she learned could become twenty mini-screens at the drop of a hat.

“Let’s see if we can begin by choosing someone locally. How many of the nominees live on Octavia Prime right now?”

“Three hundred and seventeen.”

“See? I’m crazy good at this. Seventy thousand to three hundred. Can you prioritize them by how many times they have been nominated? Most to least?”

Sardiuss merged all the fields and displayed the picture of one woman. She was very much like a human, except her frizzy hair was horizontally striped. It went from pink to white to pink to white. She also appeared to be in her mid-seventies, if she wasn’t even older than that.

“Who is this?”

“This is Dr. Excelyn Factic. She has been nominated for the position of an Octavian diplomat every single time a position was open for the last thirty years and she’s always ended up refusing. By now, the number of times she has been nominated is in the hundreds,” Sardiuss explained.

“Why does she refuse?”

“She’s an Octavian doctor and an environmentalist. She lives in a cave off the shore of Pinprick Cove where she treats wounded Octavians using a natural methodology they refuse to administer at other hospitals. She has a very poor reputation because patients die in her care more often than they live, though the survival rate often rides the 50/50 line. Whenever she comes close to accepting the nomination, there are protests and she ends up withdrawing.”

“Does everyone on this planet have a bad reputation?” Jenna moaned.

“Yes,” Sardiuss shot back. “Everyone has a bad reputation. The reason her patients die is because *all* of them *would* have died if not for her treatment. The vast majority of her patients are octopuses that were either refused treatment at the large hospitals or left the hospital because they were given a death sentence whether they stayed or not. All the individuals who have nominated her have been Octavians, not Adamis.”

Jenna’s eyes stayed deadpan as she looked at the screen. “Show me the next candidate.”

Jenna didn’t care to show her feelings on her face, but she had actually taken a very strong liking to Dr. Factic. While Sardiuss had been ranting, she had been reading facts about the doctor that were displayed on the side. The person with the next most nominations only had thirty-one nominations (hundreds fewer than Excelyn), and to be truthful, Jenna felt like taking that person and crowning them too, but she insisted internally that she needed to be careful and not jump to offer someone a life-long appointment. Not only that but there were only two possible candidates out of the hundreds Sardiuss said were available on Octavia Prime. The next most

nominated person only had twelve nominations and most of those had come in in the last week. Jenna was going to have to find another pool to pull from.

After looking at the third candidate Jenna said coldly, "Toss the rest. Show me the candidates on the moons. Are there a lot?"

"There are four hundred on the moons. Would you like me to arrange them according to the number of nominations as well?"

"Please do."

Jenna sorted out five people from the moons and said, "That's it. Let's send invitations to candidates two and three from Octavia Prime and this pile of five candidates from the moons. I want to invite them for interviews."

"You're not going to invite Excelyn?"

"Not with the same batch," Jenna explained briefly. "Hey, do we have a villa or a hotel the interviewees could stay at?"

"There's a second floating palace nearby. It's the Sand Palace. Shall I bring it closer for us to use as accommodations for the nominees?"

"We can order the palaces to bridge without getting anyone else involved?"

"Affirmative," Sardius replied.

"Marvelous. I only want to use it for the time being. Eventually, it needs to be given to our final diplomat. Until then, I want it used to house our interviewees. Can you arrange for housekeepers and chefs and whatever we need to keep the candidates comfortable for a whole weekend?"

"Smoothie and Vash are more than capable of managing them. You are just one person and your needs scarcely keep them busy. Octavians don't have weeks or weekends. How much time do you need for interviews?"

"I want half a day, two whole days, and another half day before we send them home."

"Why so long? We could interview them all over the loudspeaker here without going through any of the trouble of bringing them here. It would be cheaper and probably more effective. I'm not sure I like the way you sorted these candidates."

Jenna straightened her back and cleared her throat. "Sardius, I cannot disregard nominations. If they were nominated, I have a responsibility to offer them an interview. I don't have to crown them, but I have to look at them. It's the only thing that makes sense. I can't show up here with no information, no connections, no friends, and start randomly choosing people. I have to start with people who came with recommendations. And I *want* them to come here," she emphasized.

"Why?"

"I have a variety of reasons. There is a possibility I will not choose any of them. I know I should feel a crushing pressure to get a few diplomats crowned as quickly as possible, both for the Octavians/Adamis Council and for my own sake, because of the threat of instant death, but I don't. I want to do this right, not quickly. Bring them. I want to see them and get a sense of what I'm up against. If they're all lovely, we can crown them all and the council can get down to business. Can you come up with a list of three hundred to four hundred interview questions, Sardius?"

"You're going to ask them four hundred questions? That's completely unnecessary. Most questions we have about them can be answered without bothering to speak to them. Most indiscretions and mistakes are on public record."

"I know. Everyone has a bad reputation," she chuckled. "Just make a list of questions. The more the better. I also want to put a thirty-second forced time gap after each question, so they have to wait before answering the next question."

"That sounds more like an interrogation than an interview," Sardius remarked.

Jenna smirked. "Yeah, like sitting through diplomatic meetings isn't torture. Look, we're finding out more about them than what we'd learn from the answers to their questions."

"It will also make the test take over three hours at a minimum."

"Yes. I don't want them breezing through it like idiots. Let's get some questions."

TWO HOURS LATER...

"All your interview questions suck, Sardius. Where's the heart? Where's the soul? Where's the love for a little lost octopus who has lost his mother?"

Sardius was palpably strained as he answered. "A lot of octopus mothers starve themselves when they are looking after their eggs. By the time the babies are born, the mother is dead."

"Exactly! And who is going to care for those babies?"

Jenna could almost hear Sardius' eyebrow twitch over the speaker. "Octavians are not much like humans."

"Fine, but these questions have no heart. They're cold, sterile, and dead. Write me new ones. I want those nominees crying into a pancake by the end of their interviews."

Sardius laughed. "Let's try something different, Jenna. Let me try asking you some interview questions and see what you think of them. You seem like you want to know every last detail of their lives, so let's hear you spill every last detail of your life."

Jenna looked directly into the camera and gave it a flirty smile. "Go ahead and try."

"Why do you want to be a diplomat for the Octavians?"

"The perks," Jenna replied without hesitation. "I mean, I had friends and relatives try to set me up on dates when I was on Earth, but I never had them sort through trillions of men to find the perfect man. Even I have to admit, Armen should have been great. There's more too. The palace, the food... Smoothie is a great cook, and I got something even better than a lover. I got you. I'm doing all this because if I quit, they'll take you away from me," she said, pouting her lower lip and fluttering her eyelashes at the camera lens. "I can't have that."

"What are you doing?" he asked, his voice stern.

"Answering your questions. What are you waiting for? Ask me another one."

He said something, but it was blocked out by whatever censure was listening to him.

Jenna tapped her earpiece. Nothing happened. Since he had been blocked before, she just sat and waited for it to pass.

When he was back he said, "I should have sexually harassed you more."

"Congratulations, you just constructed a completely new sentence. No one has ever said that before. Aren't men supposed to say the other thing? That they should have stopped sexually harassing their boss?"

Sardius hesitated. "Uh... We were interrupted because everything we just said was very interesting... to everyone... all of them..."

"And what do they think?"

"You're too flippant. I'm too flippant. They have left the peace of their lands and oceans in the hands of morons," he explained.

Jenna considered the ceiling. "Morons? Is that what they said? And who was it that said that?"

Sardius blanked out a second time.

When he came back, Jenna thought she could hear him leaning back in his chair with a squeak. "Jenna, the Octavians are all over me. They want me to discourage you from having any kind of a relationship with me. The one I report to is called Blackroom and he's in charge of the orbital security team that monitors you. He's relaying instructions that I need to be less friendly with you. That I need to talk like I'm a computer and not a real person because... you see... the council wants you to get together with a real man. They don't want me to be your husband and they think that's what you want after the council meeting the other night. They can't imagine why you'd care if my side of the dialogue is monitored because it's part of your security detail. They're wildly opposed to me. They want to know why I'm not talking to you the same way I spoke to Arvantis. They've already started making a second list of men for you to choose from. I've seen some of their profiles. Some of them are really good. They don't have a sordid history or..."

"A soft spot for a beautiful blonde in danger," Jenna finished, defining in one line the most threatening thing about her connection to Sardius. "They're angry that we have any kind of rapport? Get Favel on the line. This is ridiculous. How am I supposed to enjoy my work if I can't even have a little friendly banter with you?" Jenna stood up. "Give a person permission to marry eight people, and suddenly, not having a significant other is eight times the insult it was when you were single and only allowed one person. Do these people have any sense of how their gift insulted me, when I was raised in partial isolation, just so I could help them in an uncertain future? I didn't know if they would ever need me. So they did, but I never asked them for a husband. And now they're crawling down my throat because you're flirting with me a little. It's the rudest—"

"I'm so sorry!" a parrot voice squeaked.

"Oh... you got him on the line that quickly," Jenna said with mild annoyance. "Thanks for coming so fast, Favel. I didn't think you were on the line and I was blowing off some steam. You weren't meant to hear that."

"I'm glad I did hear it," Favel said. "And normally, you would have been right. I wouldn't have been able to attend a vocal conversation so quickly, but I expected you to be in touch."

"Why? Is something going on?" Jenna asked cautiously.

"No. There's no emergency. It's just that you're new and I thought you'd need more support. You should know that a lot of what has been communicated to Sardius about the way he's talking to you originated from me."

"So, you're the one who doesn't like our friendship?" she asked brittlely.

"When he was given to you, he was not given to you with the intention that he would have a relationship with you. He has a job to do, which is to keep you informed."

“Do you have any complaints about the information he’s feeding me? You guys are monitoring him, recording him, keeping tabs on him. Is there anything wrong with the information he’s giving me or is it just the tone in which he’s using that’s annoying you?” Jenna wanted to know.

“It’s the tone, some of the words... it doesn’t feel professional,” Favel said with a hiss.

Jenna took a deep breath and then a few maddened steps around the room before she answered in a fit of wrath, “I love it. Back off. Surely if he and I are alone in a conference, we can say whatever we’d like to say to each other without having our work interrupted over his bloody tone. If he speaks to anyone else and his tone is off, feel free to censure him, but if I’m alone with him, I’d like him all to myself. We’re getting work done, making plans that are not even a little bit stupid, and he’s not reading me a novel while I lounge around in the bathtub. Could we set some boundaries that make sense? You guys let Arvantis beat his wife, but I’m getting attitude about a little flirting?” Jenna stopped her rant, wishing immediately that she had not mentioned Arvantis.

Favel waited a moment also, obviously thinking before he replied. “This is why the council interpreted your request to have him go unrecorded as a request to make Sardius your third husband. Only someone who has signed personal contracts with you can overwrite the contracts he already has with you as a political figure. If you want us to stop recording him, you’re going to have to overwrite his contracts with a marriage contract.”

“What about the security clearance? Didn’t we agree at the meeting that if I got a few more diplomats, you’d remove the recording devices?” Jenna asked.

“I’m afraid you’re going to need both if you want Sardius’ record feed to stop, but there is one thing I can do for you today. We can refrain from interfering in your meeting over something as minor as tone. If his speech crosses the line, we will talk to you about it during a scheduled meeting unless there is a security breach.”

“That sounds reasonable. Thank you.”

Favel hesitated to say goodbye. “I have to tell you one more time that I don’t like this.”

Jenna did not share his concern. “Thank you for that. I’ll give it some more thought. There’s plenty of time to make a decision.”

# Chapter Twenty Five

## Pleasant Cuts

When the day came for the diplomatic candidates to arrive, Jenna's plan was set. The first thing she had to do was greet them. Working with Misha, she decided to go all out welcoming them. She even allowed a collection of news outlets to show footage of her meeting them. Naturally, the news outlets were not allowed to have people there, or even their own equipment. Instead, Sardius took video footage of the event with a fleet of drones and sent the footage out as part of a press package he created.

The nominees were brought off their pods and gathered at the entrance of the Dahlia Palace where they stood with their luggage looking like tourists who felt very entitled to whatever accommodations and services they were about to receive.

Jenna didn't like the look of any of them as she watched them from the window.

"Am I ready?" she asked Misha.

Misha snapped a loose thread on Jenna's shoulder with her teeth. "Rock it."

The double doors to the palace swung open and Jenna stepped through them like a model on the runway. Her dress was a grand thing of blue and green turquoise: skirt everywhere, slit up the side, high heels with heels sharp enough to stab someone and toes sharp enough to carve a hole in them. Her hair was a tangled mass of waves. The humidity in the palace was enough that no one was getting smooth hair unless water was currently being poured over them.

The pinnacle of the look was the smooth black crown on her head. It was more than the crown she couldn't help wearing constantly. It was tall and curved like a raptor beak with an opposing spike in the back that symbolized the lower jaw. It was huge and it weighed a ton, but on this occasion, a garish display was completely necessary. Jenna was not going to act like she was a nothing—a nobody. If she had ever been forced to hide herself to fit in, this moment was her revenge. Finally, everyone could see her crown and for once, the truth didn't make her crazy or weird. Now, she was the most important person in the room.

"Welcome," she said in a low tone when she reached the applicants huddled in a hot mess.

Vash stepped forward and acted as butler and coordinator. On Earth, his job would usually have been held by a pretty little woman who could pacify any unhappy guest with her cheerfulness and sweetness. Vash had neither of those qualities, but Jenna was not running a spa resort, even though the people standing on the dock seemed to think that was what was happening. Instead, Vash stood a head taller than the tallest man and seemed more like a bouncer than a coordinator. Jenna liked him a lot.

She greeted each of the applicants by name while Vash handed them a welcome package that included everything they would need to participate in the screening process. He took them to get settled in their rooms in the Sand Palace before they had dinner with everyone in the Dahlia Palace.

Back inside, Jenna fell on the first chair she came to. She had only walked a few meters in her shoes, but they had already cut the flesh of her right heel. She was bleeding and the blood had stained her shoes.

In her ear, Sardijs was saying, "I begin to see what you meant by bringing these people here. Their rooms are tapped and they're so stupid about it, they're saying whatever they want. One of the men thinks you spent too much on your dress when you should have spent the money to make sure he was more comfortable. He thinks you should have met them with an air-conditioned tent and a buffet with drinks and fruit." Sardijs stopped his ranting. "Jenna, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. My shoes don't fit very well and I'm bleeding. Can you call Misha to bring me a bandage?"

A second later he said, "I've called her, but why wasn't the fit of your shoes checked before you went out wearing them?"

"I didn't think it was very important. Other than trying them on with the dress, this is the first time I've worn them."

Misha came around the corner with a first aid kit and began working on Jenna's heel. "I'm sorry, Madam."

"Don't worry about it. This sort of thing happens all the time. Tape the other heel too and then I can keep wearing the shoes."

Sardijs sputtered in Jenna's ear, "What did you just say? This happens all the time? And you're just going to keep wearing them?"

"Haven't you ever heard the expression 'beauty is pain', Sardijs?"

"Yeah. The slogan was etched into the side of my laser gun when I was a pirate, but it was a joke. I have never worn anything for five minutes that cut me."

Jenna groaned. "You're hilarious. Listen, women have lived by that saying for centuries. It's not an empty sacrifice. What we did just now was a power move and a necessary one. That monkey you mentioned who was complaining earlier probably can't bear for anyone to be more important than him. He'd be the worst in negotiations. Everything would always be about showing how awesome he is. We can't have him. Really, this was a small price to pay to weed out the unqualified."

"Want me to send him home?" Sardijs offered.

"It's more than likely we're going to have to send all of them home," she replied blandly.



Jenna had dinner with the seven candidates. From the way they acted, she discounted three of them as impossible, but she gave no indication that any of them were out of her favor, smiling and enjoying the food with them.

After dinner, Favel and two other members of the Octavian Council came to talk to the candidates about the importance of their work maintaining peace.

One of the candidates was so drunk, he didn't hear a word.

Afterward, Jenna got up, thanked everyone in attendance, and told them all about the interview process that would take place over the next two days. She told them that they would each take an electronic test on the tablets that they had been provided, but only two people would be able to take the test at a time. They had to watch their tablets and begin the test when they received their invitation. Meals would be served in the Sand Palace. On the second day, they'd have a round of guest speakers and workshops on cooperating with Octavians. Jenna would see them at dinner on the second day.

Favel lingered after everyone had gone. "I've got to say," he said in a confidential tone, "I don't think much of your candidates."

"Me neither," she replied breezily.

"Then why are you bothering to interview them?"

"This is the first place we need to pull a diplomat from. Here, this planetary system. Afterward, we're going to need to get a collection of candidates from the Adamis Alliance Military Conglomerate."

"The AAMC?" Favel asked in grave tones. "Getting a reasonable candidate from there will perhaps be harder than what you've gathered here."

"It doesn't matter if it's easy or hard. I have to interview them until I find someone I like. If I don't pull at least one diplomat from there, it will cause an incident. Sardius is already working them into the schedule, but I wanted to start with this group. I had to tell the AAMC that I started with the people who had been nominated here because we need new diplomats now, and it was more convenient."

"I see. Listen, I stayed back because I wanted to ask you a question. I heard that Excelyn Factic was not invited to this selection process. Why not?"

"Because I'm ditching these nuts to go recruit her personally tomorrow."

"You are?"

"That was always the plan. I'm taking a crown with me and I'm not leaving her place until she has it suctioned to her head."

Favel made a sound like laughing. "I've met her a few times. She's tough, but she's also sensitive to social media explosions and she's been at the center of many. Recruiting her may not be easy."

"Yeah? Well, I'm going to get her even if I have to shave her head myself." Jenna didn't make empty threats.

Favel lifted a tentacle almost like he was going to touch Jenna, but then held back.

Jenna looked at him sideways, a smile stretching across her lips. "I thought you didn't like to touch Adamis since anything you touch, you also taste."

Favel glanced at Jenna. "Goodnight," he said as he disappeared into an entrance to the ocean in the floor with a slither that didn't cause a splash.

Jenna leaned over the water and waved goodbye.

"He was trying to kiss you," Sardius said in her ear when Favel was gone.

"What? No. No, he wasn't."

"Yes, he was," Sardius repeated, with no humor in his voice.

Jenna paused and thought. "Why would he want to do that?"



"You are insanely popular among the Octavians. They love you. From what I've seen, Favel loves you personally. Not like a lover or anything like that. The only equivalent feeling I can think of is the way a human feels about a dog who is so clever. You are his puppy. He has been supporting Excelyn's nomination for decades and if you're going to get her, he loves you. If you succeed, you might not be able to do wrong in his eyes."

"What would have happened if he did kiss me?" Jenna wondered, hoping Sardius would know the answer.

"It would have been a gentle cupping of one of his suckers on the back of your hand. Probably pleasant... ish, as long as you aren't disgusted by Octavians. As I said, it wouldn't have been romantic any more than kissing a dog on the nose is romantic."

"I see," Jenna said, dropping to a nearby settee and removing her high heel. She looked down at the bandage Misha had put on her. It was thrashed. It had been worn through and the injury on her heel had worsened. Her other heel had been damaged through the tape.

"I'm calling Misha," Sardius said darkly.

"Why haven't you guys improved bandage technology?"

"We have," Sardius grumbled. "You saw what they did to Lucy when your cat scratched her. There's just no point to doing that here if you're just going to allow your ankle to get sliced up again."

Misha came running, but she said something different than what Jenna expected her to say. "Jenna, this is harassment! Can you please get Sardius to back off? I said I'd deal with the problem, but his holograms are like harpies and they won't leave me alone."

"What are you talking about? Didn't he just call for you to help me with my bandage?"

"Yes, he did, but that's not all he's doing." She glared at one of the camera lenses mounted near the ceiling.

Jenna stopped and listened to her earpiece. Sardius was completely quiet in her ear. Turning her attention back to Misha, she continued, "Can you get me the first aid kit? I'll just keep it with me and take care of this myself. But first, what is Sardius doing?"

"He made holographic copies of your feet and he's been trying them on all the shoes I've acquired for you. He says that 87% of them don't fit you and need to be returned. He doesn't understand. Your feet are weird. I got the closest approximations. I know they're not perfect, but you asked to wear shoes that match your dresses. I got them for you. He's being crazy unreasonable. He's put huge holographic red xs on the shoes that don't fit that blink and make a buzzing sound I can hear outside your costume wardrobe. Can you please make him stop?"

"Yes. Sardius, please stop the noise. There's no need to torture my stylist."

He grunted, disapprovingly. "Would you like me to get the knife? We could cut off your toes and your heels if you'd like to wear those shoes. They would fit much better with chunks of your feet gone."

"Stop making empty threats," Jenna replied calmly. "Sardius, do I own a pair of water shoes that are not part of that 87% that don't fit me?"

"Yes."

"Then we have everything we need for tomorrow. Misha, make up a look for me for their final dinner that is based around the nicest shoes I have that are in the pile of shoes Sardius has not vetoed. Everyone satisfied?"

Misha nodded and hurried to get the first aid kit.

Sardius didn't say anything for a full minute and neither did Jenna.

Finally, he said, "If I was in charge of your shoes, and I could be with a single word from you, that would never happen again."

Jenna looked up at the camera and made a bunch of snap hearts with her fingers. "You can't be in charge of everything. You'll wear yourself out. You hired Misha. Let her do her job. Whatever you do, you can't act like a computer that doesn't need to rest. There are more important things for you to worry about than whether or not my shoes fit."

Sardius blew out dissatisfied chunks of air and the sound was picked up by his microphone.

Jenna pulled the oversized crown off her head.

Neither one of them said anything.

Finally, Jenna asked, "What are the nominees up to now that they're supposed to be tucked in bed?"

He smirked. "Nothing good."

# Chapter Twenty Six

## Deal with the Doctor

The next day, Jenna got dressed up in aquawear and mounted a piece of marine transportation that very much resembled a Seadoo called a sea rover. The inner layer of her clothing was to protect her from rapid changes in temperature, and the outer layer was to stop her from drowning, though she couldn't wear a helmet because it didn't fit over her crown. Instead, she opted for a visor that kept the sun off her face. Otherwise, she went alone. The satellites above her were her security detail.

"If I get shot or something else equally stupid, I'm blaming you, Sardius."

"Don't fall off," he shot back at her.

They had had arguments, and foul fights before she got on the back of the sea rover. Sardius thought she needed to practice handling the rover before she attempted a journey over the open ocean and she would have to go far to get to Excelyn's hospital in a cave. Jenna rolled her eyes and replied over and over again that she had lived by the ocean all her life and she knew what she was doing. The only problems she would have were if there was a sudden storm. As storms were unlikely at that time of year on the Slipseed Ocean, Sardius was put down over and over again.

Besides, it wasn't as if Sardius could *make* Jenna do anything. She was in the driver's seat, literally and figuratively.

She put a pair of sunglasses over her eyes and said cheekily. "Watch me go."

She jetted away from the dock into the cool, salty air.

"Look at that. You didn't fall off," he commented dryly.

"Shut up and play me some music," she replied.

She could practically hear him shake his head before he turned on a playlist he had copied from her phone. It had been so long since she had listened to her own music that she felt unusually happy as she skimmed across the surface of the peacock-blue water. It wasn't that she felt at home. It was that she was home wherever she was as long as she didn't have to cover her crown.

Besides, there was nothing to worry about. There was a navigation screen between her handlebars that helped her avoid any unfavorable ocean currents. Therefore, she did not go in anything like a straight line across the water. However, it was hours before she reached the shore. Even then, there was quite a distance to cover to get to Excelyn's cave.

When she pulled up to a cave mouth, Sardius turned off the music and said, "This isn't it. Keep going."

It ended up being a running gag. Every time she saw a cave mouth, she pulled up to it and slowed her engine and every time Sardius would chirp in her ear, "Not this one. Keep going."

Soon, she stopped slowing. She'd just look at the different cave mouths and ask, "Is it this one?"

“No.”

“This one?”

“No. Jenna, you’ll know it when you see it.”

It turned out that the one she was looking for had a sign with an enormous H with an octopus icon beside it.

“Where do all those other caves go?” she wondered out loud.

“They’re not inhabited by Adamis above the water. They’re inhabited by creatures under the water. Hence, there are no addresses. Besides, an Adamis that lives on Octavia Prime would be smart enough not to disturb the peaceful coral life below with the noisy flutterings of an engine.”

“I’m dumb. I know,” Jenna admitted with a sorry-not-sorry tone. “Do I need to knock or ring a bell?”

“The sound of you entering the cave with that engine will wake the dead,” Sardius moaned. “When Octavians come here, even if they have to be brought here by underwater transport, they don’t make as much noise as your sea rover makes. They don’t hear well and they speak with gestures. The Adamis here will notice you without a bell. Don’t worry, it’s fine. There’s no other way to get in.”

Jenna maneuvered her craft into the cave. Once her eyes adjusted to the low light, she saw places to dock and in a flash, she had her transport chained to the dock and made her way down the gangway.

Inside the cave, no effort had been made to make it look less like a cave. The walls and ceiling were bare rock. Long tube lights hung from the ceiling and lit the space with enough light to see a reception desk and a door that led deeper into the hospital.

A metal cube sat on the reception desk. Jenna had been about to blow right by it, but Sardius stopped her.

“You have to announce yourself.”

“To what?”

“Hello. How can we help you today?” a voice rang out from inside the cube.

Jenna felt completely stupid. It wasn’t that different from the home automation devices tons of people had on Earth now. It wasn’t even futuristic.

“I’m Jenna Fairchild. I’m here to speak to Dr. Excelyn Factic.”

“One moment, please,” the thing chimed.

Jenna waited a minute or two, wandering around the space. Before she went back to the cube and had the same conversation over again.

“Hello. How can we help you today?”

“I’m Jenna. I’m here to see Dr. Excelyn Factic.”

“One moment, please.”

After the third run of the same conversation, Jenna gave up talking to the cube and started talking to Sardius. “Do you think it’s broken?”

“I think the doctor is probably in surgery and it doesn’t matter how many times this little trinket tells her someone is waiting. We’ll have to wait until she finishes.”

“But there’s not even a chair out here. How am I supposed to wait?”

“You could go back to your transport and sit on that,” Sardius offered.

“My butt hurts from sitting on that... and I’m hungry,” she complained.

“Sorry, Jenna. It’s hard to remember to feed you when I don’t eat anything myself. I should have thought of food when you were getting on the sea rover, against my wishes, in the first place. It would have made my argument much stronger if I’d reminded you that the trip was five hours long at the least, and you’d be eating your own arm by midday if you didn’t pack some food.”

Jenna laughed.

Sardius went on, “I just keep forgetting how hungry you’ll be because you should already have stopped eating.”

“I love eating,” she replied with a pout. “I really don’t see why I should give it up.”

“There’s bottled water in the trunk of your sea rover,” he offered.

Jenna was thirsty and got it immediately. Then, without invitation, she strolled past the reception cube and entered the hospital. Except it wasn’t at all what she expected. She had just stepped into Excelyn’s kitchen.

“Fantastic,” Jenna breathed.

“You shouldn’t be back here,” Sardius warned.

“Don’t care. This is obviously a place where someone could comfortably wait for the doctor to finish her surgery. I’m not going to eat anything, even though there is food everywhere.”

Jenna did not exaggerate. There was food everywhere. There were great bowls of food in a line. Mostly, it was a fruit Jenna didn’t recognize, but there were also tanks of live seafood. It wasn’t like Octavians were vegetarians.

In the middle of the room were four booths set up so that they opened to a central place where food could be laid out buffet style. There were food warmers and rectangular tables hanging from an iron grid that was chained to the ceiling.

“I wonder if this place used to be a restaurant. It looks a little like that.”

Jenna stretched out in the padded booth closest to her and cracked open the lid of her water bottle. It felt amazing to recline after she’d spent hours leaning forward on the handlebars of her sea rover.

In two shakes of a lamb’s tail, she was asleep.



“Wake up,” Sardius’ voice buzzed in Jenna’s ear. “She’s here.”

Jenna opened her eyes to see Excelyn Factic staring down at her with an odd expression on her face. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

Jenna sat up and looked at the woman.

Excelyn was at least seventy years old. Her hair was curly and frizzy at the same time. Her hair was also white and pink at the same time. The lines of pink were so odd that Jenna didn’t know what to make of them. It was like someone had repeatedly dyed her roots pink, then let them grow out to white, left a hefty chunk of white, before dying the roots pink again. She couldn’t figure out why anyone would bother to do that. It didn’t exactly look pretty.

Aside from that, the doctor’s eyes were blue. She was practically skeletal in her appearance with crepe-thin folds in her neck. She wore clothes that reminded Jenna of hippies who had

survived the sixties only to never give up wearing psychedelic cowboy prints. She wore no makeup and very comfortable-looking rubber shoes.

"I'm Jenna Fairchild, and I've come to crown you a diplomat on behalf of the Octavian/Adamis Alliance."

Excelyn laughed, showing she was missing a few teeth further back in her mouth. "Really?" She waved her hand and a TV screen flicked on. "What about that?"

The screen showed footage Sardius had given the news outlets from the night before.

Jenna smirked. "That's not a live stream. It's from last night. That's me in my glorious evening wear. Do you like it?"

"You look like you're going to eat your candidates," Excelyn observed. "I had been thinking that something was wrong if no one was coming here and asking me if I liked the idea of dying for the Octavian/Adamis Alliance. Maybe someone like you thought I was too old to die." She looked at Jenna disapprovingly. "It turns out everything is exactly the way it has always been."

"You're thinking about the assassinations?"

"Aren't you?"

Jenna shrugged. "I could throw crowns on every one of those go-getters back at the Sand Palace if I wanted to test if the assassins are still out there, but if I did that... I bet not one of them would be assassinated."

Excelyn crossed her arms. "Why is that?"

"Because all those twerps are undoubtedly very easy to bribe. I'm trying it right now. I'm not running tests to see if they'd break under torture. I'm seeing if they'd break under bribery. So far, things are not looking good. They drink too much. They're loose with their thoughts. Already it's obvious how greedy they are. It's a disaster. No one would need to kill any of them to get what they want. They could bribe them with a compliment and a drink."

"Are you saying you need to crown diplomats the assassins would *want* to kill?" Excelyn sputtered.

Jenna gave a weak smile. "Sadly, I don't think they have much information on how those killings were accomplished. I've looked at the cases. A few of them may have been accidental... or not. They happened on Adamis planets and the only one that took place on Octavia Prime... may not have had much to do with his position as a diplomat."

"You're talking about Arvantis and Vinia?" Excelyn perceived. "Everyone thinks she killed him and got off the hook for it because there was no proof. She's not in jail. They couldn't pin her with anything."

"That's something I'm interested in exploring in further detail," Jenna agreed, "but I've got something more pressing on my hands. Right now, all diplomacy is locked because I haven't got enough diplomats to agree on policies and agreements. I'm up to my neck in unresolved paperwork, and I don't have the authority to sign off on any of it. I can't show the Octavians the rank treaties developed by the Adamis and I can't take the demands of the Octavians back to the Adamis. I'd start a war. Not to mention, I'm not allowed. These agreements need to be handled with sensitivity and the approval of at least five diplomats with eight in council. I've got nothing. You are my only option right now."

Excelyn put her hands on her hips. "How so?"

"Looking at your file, you should have been crowned twenty years ago. You were just always robbed on nomination day because the Adamis don't think they can trust you. You go behind their backs and operate a hospital that spits in their faces when their only money-maker is healthcare. You are wildly unpopular, but that doesn't stop you from being very popular with the other side."

"The Octavians," the doctor supplied.

"If you take this job, I'm not telling you that you have to shut down your hospital. Heck, I'll let you use your floating palace any way you like. Turn it into a hospital if you want to. Don't bother with staff meant to serve you and use your whole budget for nurses as far as I care. What I need is a person in that slot with your uncompromising attitude toward what is right for the Octavians without letting all the Adamis hangups go to your head. Yeah, you'll be rich. Yeah, you'll be famous. Maybe there's more you can do from the position of diplomat than you could do here. Maybe you could train other doctors, and popularize your methods."

"Of course, I'd be able to do more from the position of diplomat," Excelyn agreed. "The problem has always been that the person in your position wouldn't back me up as a nominee when the complaints started coming in. They *asked* me to withdraw."

"I'll back you up," Jenna promised.

"I-I'm also worried about the assassinations," she admitted with a stutter.

Jenna nodded. "Well, I can't offer you much except that I'll give you a personal assistant, like the one I have, and they can watch over you from space as well as in every room of your palace."

"Sardius didn't save Arvantis," she said sourly.

Sardius held his tongue and Jenna appreciated it. Without pausing, she said, "Shall I give you my business card and leave then? Let you think it over?"

"Hang on. I don't like being pushed. Don't you have more time to talk this over with me?"

"I have all the time in the world, as long as I'm not wasting my time," Jenna challenged as she leaned forward in her seat.

Excelyn sat down in the booth across from Jenna. "Fine. Do you think the last diplomat, Arvantis, was crooked? Do you think someone was bribing him?"

"I haven't looked into it. There are a lot of reasons why he would make a good target. At that point, he was the only one left, and taking down one diplomat was going to be easy. It would be completely worth it if it toppled the alliance. If I hadn't been crowned already, the system would have been toppled."

"Aren't you curious about who is behind these assassinations?" Excelyn asked cagily.

"I really have to leave that to someone else," Jenna admitted with a shrug. "I have too many other things on my mind and that's not my job. My job is to refill the roster. See how hard I'm trying to do it?"

"And you'll back me up?" the doctor asked.

Jenna laughed. "I'll back you up so hard you'll forget I'm not your mother."

The crone laughed. "And I'll get a personal assistant like Sardius?"

Jenna had been about to answer when Sardius chimed in using the outer speaker in Jenna's earpiece so Excelyn could hear. "You'll get a personal assistant, but whoever you get will not be like me. However, we can include you in the interview process and get someone who suits you."

The doctor seemed all but convinced. At that moment, she looked around the room like each piece of furniture represented a reason for her to say no. Finally, her eyes fell on a bowl of fruit. Then her eyes cut back to Jenna. "Everything you've said thus far fits what I wanted to hear from you too much. I don't know you. As far as I know, you might have studied me so hard that you planned exactly what you needed to say in order to make the best impression possible. I do that myself when I'm fundraising for my hospital. I need you to prove your conviction."

Jenna leaned further forward, crossing her arms on the table. "How can I do that?"

"Have lunch with me," the old woman said easily.

"Is that all? I'm starving. Of course, I'll have lunch with you."

"As long as you're alright with eating liplo fruit seeds for lunch." The doctor got up and carted an enormous platter of seeds back to the table for Jenna to see.

Jenna was confused. They didn't really look like seeds since they were the size of grapefruits. They looked like oversized pillbugs. They had a hard shell that surrounded them like a pillbug that was hiding in a ball.

"These are seeds?" Jenna questioned.

"Yes, but here they are a taboo food for most Adamis."

"Why?"

"It turns your hair pink when you eat them." The doctor flipped her hair. Eating the seeds had apparently dyed her hair in such an odd pattern. "Have you ever heard of food that turns your hair pink before, little girl from Earth?"

"Of course, I have," Jenna retorted. "Flamingos aren't naturally pink. They're only pink because of what they eat."

"I have no idea what a flamingo is, but it sounds like you're on board with the concept. Good," Excelyn said, returning the bowl to the kitchen area across the open room.

In her ear, Sardius hissed, "You shouldn't eat--"

"You never want me to eat anything," Jenna interrupted. "Are they poisonous?"

"No," Sardius squeaked, "but they're..."

"Are they not plants, like she said?" Jenna asked him.

"They're plants."

"Then kindly, shut up. I came here to crown her today and I've almost got her."

She heard some heavy breathing on his side, but he didn't say anything more.

In the kitchen, Excelyn had begun cooking them. It looked like she was boiling them in broth. It smelled fantastic and Jenna was so hungry her stomach felt like it was going to start digesting itself.

When Excelyn presented the food on the table, it was like everything Jenna had been familiar with all her life, a huge amount of boiled seafood with herb, garlic, and lemon butter on the side for dunking. The liplo fruit looked exactly like deveined shrimp once it was cracked out of its shell and when Jenna put the first bite in her mouth, it tasted like lobster.

"Good, huh?" Excelyn said as she cracked open a bottle of fizzy lemonade and passed it to Jenna.

"Yeah. Why don't people want to eat this?"



“They don’t want to have hair like this,” she said pointing to her horizontal stripes. “They probably wouldn’t mind if they could eat this all year and keep their hair pink, but they can’t. There’s only one harvest a year, so you get stripes.”

Jenna realized that if she kept eating, she too would have a stripe of pink in her hair. Looking at the doctor’s hair, Jenna didn’t want to emulate her style, but she was sure something could be done later to fix the stripe. Hair dye on Earth was amazing, so hair dye in outer space was probably cosmic.

No problem.

“Where do these plants grow?” Jenna asked, interested to learn all about her new planet.

“Underwater. These were harvested from under the hospital. The Octavians who pass by do the grooming for me so I don’t have to go down. I’m not as spry as I used to be and I get lightheaded using a breathing apparatus down there.”

“You don’t take your own tank of oxygen?”

“I’m only 87, not 104,” she replied.

“We’ll get you using a breathing apparatus too,” Sardius said in Jenna’s ear. “There’s just been a lot to do.”

That wasn’t the part of Excelyn’s conversation that stood out to Jenna. Excelyn was 87? Jenna wanted to ask questions about Excelyn’s likely lifespan, but she quickly bit it back. Excelyn had said she wasn’t 104, so Jenna could assume she could get at least fifteen years of service out of Excelyn. That gave her until she was 102. Of course, that was only if nothing tragic befell her earlier than that.

Jenna grimaced.

She had to stop thinking like that.

After eating three of the liplo fruit seeds, Jenna put a hand up and said she’d had enough.

“Are you sure?” the doctor asked. “These are about to go bad.”

Jenna shook her head peaceably and thought of how her own grandmother (if she were alive), would probably shove food close to its expiry date down her throat. It was kind of gross, but also a little endearing at the same time.

She put her hand in the cargo pocket of her wetsuit shorts. That was where the crown she intended to use on Excelyn was hidden. The procedure for attaching it to an adult’s head was that first, you had to make sure the head was shaved where the crown was going to go down. Jenna had practiced on wigs on dummy heads back at her palace. She had done it five times and learned how to shave a perfect diamond shape exactly on the crown of the head. She had a razor in her pocket as well.

“Have I satisfied you? Can I crown you already?” Jenna asked.

“You’re going to do that here without consulting anyone else or involving the media?”

“Absolutely,” Jenna said confidently. “I don’t have time for the stupid media circus that is on the horizon that will happen whether we do this now or later. I’d rather that we asked for forgiveness rather than permission. Like I said, I’ll back you. You might not even need to say a word.”

Excelyn nodded. “What’s the first thing we have to do?”

Jenna took the razor from her pocket. “I have to shave your...” Jenna felt an odd lurching in her gut. She dropped the razor. “Did you just feel something?”

"Yeah," Excelyn said slowly as she glanced at the uneaten seeds on the table and then at the uncooked ones still in the kitchen.

They were moving.

"What's happening?" Jenna asked, feeling a squirming feeling in her innards she'd never felt before.

"Some people have a strong aversion toward their food moving. Either they don't like the food moving in their mouths or they don't like the feeling of their food moving around in their guts. I guess you're one of the people who don't like it moving around in their guts."

"But it was a plant. Why is it moving at all?"

"These plants," Excelyn explained, "are delicious. But once it's time for them to plant, their insides push against their outsides like muscles. They do this on a microscopic level, so even if you chew them to bits, they still move around in your stomach. Sometimes, they can still move even after they've been digested."

Jenna clutched at her solar plexus. It felt like the liplo seeds in her stomach were trying to climb up her esophagus. Jenna couldn't hold it in another second. She folded herself in half and hurled in gagging fits creating a pink pile on the floor.

Even though she and Excelyn had eaten the same thing, the old woman was much more accustomed to the wiggling inside her. Unbothered, she snapped up the razor Jenna had dropped and without waiting for help, she began shaving the top of her head. "You're being really brave now," she praised as strands of her hair fell to the floor. "Not many people would eat what they're given, especially when their personal assistant has forbidden it. I'm very convinced by your sincerity."

Jenna could see what Excelyn was doing with the razor and that she was doing it all wrong, but Jenna couldn't stop her. It felt like her stomach was full of minnows swimming to freedom in her guts, making her insides curdle. She kept hurling on repeat.

Sardius was completely quiet in her ear. He couldn't have sounded more superior to Jenna if he'd actually said, "I told you so."

When she had thoroughly finished vomiting. She took a dishcloth from the kitchen counter and dabbed at her mouth and chin. Then she took a sip from her water bottle and swished out her mouth three times before spitting it out into the sink.

A sideways glance at the floor showed her vomit oozing its way toward the entrance to the ocean in the cave entrance. The larger uneaten seeds had escaped their bowls and rolled along the floor much faster. She could hear them plopping into the water like coconuts in the next room.

Excelyn showed Jenna the top of her head, the hair was cut in uneven hacks.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I think you missed a spot," Jenna said as she took the razor from her and made a few necessary places a bit balder. "After this, hair won't grow where I put the crown." Without waiting for permission, Jenna pulled the crown out of her cargo pants, ripped off the strip that stopped the adhesive from sticking to everything, and stuck it firmly to Excelyn's head. "There, all done."

Excelyn went to look at herself in the mirror.

Jenna watched from a distance, then whispered, "Sardius, tell Misha to gather up the wigs that I cut when I was practicing shaving the crown shapes. I'm going to need her to send them over here."

"Weren't you just going to put the good doctor on the back of your sea rover and head back?"

"If she hadn't messed up her hair and my guts, I would have. As it is, I want a full Octavian transport. Ask Favel if he's available to come get us, but don't forget to ask him to make a quick stop at my palace to get the wigs from Misha. We have to make Excelyn look like a lady."

"Will do."

Jenna turned to her new diplomat. "Excelyn, the Octavian Council is sending someone to pick us up. We need to make an announcement. After that, you're on your own for a bit. You're free to come at your leisure between here and your palace. I've decided to assign you the Stone Palace, but if you have an objection, you may say so now."

"No. I like the Stone Palace," Excelyn said. Clearly, she was familiar with the whole outfit of palaces since she's almost been crowned so many times.

"Great. Why don't you go get changed into something more formal, if you have anything? Sardius will create news footage of us and it will be seen by so many people that you'll want to look presentable."

"Do you need a bathroom to freshen up in?" Excelyn offered.

"I've got something in the trunk of my transport," Jenna replied.

Jenna left the kitchen and returned to the cave entrance, just in time to walk alongside her vomit that still hadn't quite made it to the water. When she got to the side of her sea rover, she got down on all fours and threw up directly into the water.

# Chapter Twenty Seven

## Signing Up To Be A Badass

The announcement that Jenna had crowned a new diplomat was very well received. She had a killer speech prepared where she explained to the Octavians and the Adamis that choosing Excelyn was the absolute best solution for desperate times. It struck a chord with everyone who wanted the two groups to resolve their differences and work together for a better future for everyone.

Once everything was done and everyone was gone, Jenna was finally alone. She had a shower to relax her nerves, but afterward, she still felt like crap. She hadn't been able to throw up all the liplo fruit and she could still feel fragments of it rolling around in her belly and intestines.

"Are you okay?" Sadius asked her quietly as she towel-dried her hair.

"I'm pissed off, now that you mention it."

"You hid it from the camera quite well. The footage was beautiful. No one saw the horrific shave job Excelyn did on herself, and yet you pushed all her pink hair forward so everyone knew who she was. The smile you had glued to your face was angelic. Everyone would have thought you were thoroughly pleased with the assignment."

"I am, but I'm still pissed off," Jenna said with a crack in her voice. "These things feel disgusting in my stomach, but who's to blame? Her, for playing a terrible trick on me? Me, for not listening to you? You, for not insisting and screaming at me about the real consequences when I wouldn't listen?"

"I wouldn't blame myself," he said, cocky and self-satisfied.

"Honestly, I would have slapped her and walked out except for two things. For one thing, she'd already started shaving her head. Where I come from, a woman does not abruptly start shaving her head without some real intention behind it. How could I refuse someone so hardcore? Secondly, Favel was going to be so ridiculously pleased. Besides, it sounds like there is no harm done, but I am starting to see what you mean about not eating. I'm going to give that a try."

"You want to make Favel happy?" Sadius inquired, doubling back on their conversation. "Why?"

"You heard what we all agreed to during that meeting with the Octavian council. If I crown three diplomats, they'll remove your recording device. Right now, I'm not sure what I would give to have a real conversation with you. Of course, I want to make him happy."

"Huh..." Sadius said, not saying what he was thinking.



The next day, the candidates were in the Sand Palace speaking with Octavian delegates. Jenna sat in her room and looked over the results of the tests from the day before.

"The only one who is remotely decent is this one, Binarian Whistle. She didn't act ridiculous with the food or drink. She hasn't said anything stupid in our hearing and she answered the questions sensibly. Can you think of anything else, Sardius?"

"At the moment, she's talking to an octopus named Gussy who doesn't think she's at all stupid."

"I don't even remember her from when we greeted the candidates. What does she look like?"

Sardius brought up a picture on Jenna's screen. "You probably didn't notice her because she's a hundred and twenty centimeters tall."

"If we take her, no one can accuse us of not being diverse," Jenna commented wryly.

"Are you going to crown her?"

"No. I'm going to put her on a second-round list, meaning that I'll invite her back after I've got a few more reasonable candidates. Though, I won't have her back when we have the next batch since they're all going to be soldiers from the AAMC. Who's our contact for that?"

"Admiral Lou Denver." Sardius brought up a picture of him.

Lou Denver's face was shaved so closely, it was the first thing Jenna noticed about him. He must have shaved his face and head five minutes before having his picture taken. As it was, his military pose in the photograph showed no compromise. He was a military man through and through. He'd obviously been in the armed forces for years as he looked to be at least fifty years old.

"Is he supposed to be pink?" Jenna asked.

"Yes. His race of Adamis is pink."

"It looks really good with his navy uniform," Jenna replied.

"Yeah... don't tell him he's pink. Those guys get really touchy about it. It isn't just on Earth that pink has been feminized. Pink is a girl color throughout the whole universe."

"What do they call themselves?" Jenna asked.

"Lekkea."

"Do you think it caused him any grief being pink and an officer of the AAMC?" Jenna wondered.

"I don't really know the complete dynamic. Lekkea make up the majority of the officers in the AAMC. Maybe it's because they promote themselves when they can. Maybe it's because they fight harder and work longer than the other officers because they have something to prove because they're pink. I really don't know. I fought hand-to-hand with one before and he wasn't a push-over."

Whenever Sardius gave a hint about himself, Jenna jumped on it. "You fight? What kind of fighting do you do?"

"All of the fighting. I've done all of it. That's why I'm in jail with no hope of getting out."

Jenna thought of how fit he must be if that much fighting hadn't killed him. Then she thought of how unusual it was that a man like that had made himself her personal trainer. "Thanks for not making me do the training regime this morning when I wasn't feeling well."

He clucked his tongue against his front teeth. "Yeah, well, you would have had abdominal cramps if I had pushed you. You're off the hook until you've finished expelling the liplo fruit."

"Do you think I ate enough of it to turn my hair pink?"

"Yup. A single mouthful run through your digestive tract is enough to give you a stripe of pink."

"Misha can probably get rid of it for me with a carefully chosen hair treatment."

"You shouldn't do that," Sardius advised. "You should show it like a badge of honor."

Jenna scoffed. "What are you talking about? What honor? I ate something against your advice and puked a lot. What's honorable about that?"

"It makes you look unpredictable, like your limits are in places other people can only dream about. It might make an assassin think twice before engaging you. It might make prospective diplomats willing to sign with you, even though there is a terrible risk tagged to the job. I'd leave it."

Jenna touched the roots of her hair growing beside her black crown. "I suppose it will look okay for a while around the crown."

Sardius suddenly chirped up. "Misha is outside the door. She wants to speak to you, but it's marked on your information panel that you are literally in bed. Want to get out of bed and speak to her or do you want to allow your servants to talk to you when you're in bed? Now is the time to set a precedent."

Jenna got out of bed and pulled a filmy silk robe over her shoulders. "Let her in. It's not like Misha hasn't seen me in my undies already."

"My lady diplomat," she said, dropping her eyes and doing ten percent of a bow.

The first time Jenna met her, she thought she looked like a doll. Now she looked more like a little girl. Jenna instantly realized she looked more normal because she was not wearing the black contact lenses. Instead, she was wearing thick-rimmed glasses that showed violet eyes that looked more human than the jet black that covered too much of the whites of her eyes. Her hair was tied up in a messy bun and Jenna realized that Misha liked playing dress-up herself as much as she liked styling other people. How had she messed up at the morgue?

"I just received a purchase order from Sardius that he hopes will fix the problems with your footwear," she declared.

"Busy little bee, aren't you?" Jenna whispered huskily to her personal assistant.

Instead of answering, he threw the purchase order up on the screen along with pictures of the products he was proposing.

"These aren't shoes," Jenna noted.

"They are called barefoot sandals," Misha explained. "They're like sandals, in that they have all the beauty of straps without the bottoms. Obviously, if you wore nothing on your feet, you'd look like a country bumpkin, and considering the unusual shape of your feet, I don't believe that sandals would provide you with the comfort Sardius is aiming for. These have the advantage of being very flashy and expensive as they are mostly constructed from valuable heavy metals and rare gemstones. They are also quiet because you would be walking on the pads of your feet. There wouldn't be any thwapping of a sandal against the bottom of your foot or the clanking of your high heels on tile."

Jenna looked at Misha curiously. "What do you think?"

"I think that as long as you are on Octavia Prime, meeting people here in the palace, they provide a very reasonable solution to the shoe problem. Otherwise, I'm going to need to have your shoes custom-made, which will not be a quick solution, but these don't need to fit you any more than a necklace needs to fit you."

"You're satisfied?"

"Not entirely," she said hesitantly. "The pieces Sardius wants to order for you would obliterate your style budget. If only you'd saved more shoes on your Pinterest boards. Then we would have been able to get the Octavians to pay for them instead of us."

"I wasn't expecting you to buy all of them," Sardius cut in. "Only a few. I'm not the stylist."

Jenna took hold of Misha's shoulder and led her to a chair. "Sit down. We'll get a few of them. Surely we can choose some that will go with more than one dress. Besides, I'm not a movie star. I can wear the same ones more than once."

"Once you've worn an item three times in front of a camera, it will be auctioned off for charity."

"Even shoes and jewelry?"

"Yes," Misha confirmed. "You can keep special favorites, but you stand to do a lot of good by allowing the auctions. Your clothes will be worth a lot of money in the future."

Suddenly Jenna understood why celebrities back on Earth sometimes made unusual style choices. They couldn't keep their own clothes... and neither could she.

Jenna needed more money.

Putting that aside, she decided to deal with the barefoot sandals first.

# Chapter Twenty Eight

## Whisper in an Octopus's... Ear?

That evening, Jenna had dinner with the candidates. More of them were drunk than on the first night.

The best part of the evening was that Favel had opted to join them and sitting next to him was more pleasant than speaking to the Adamis nominees who were embarrassments to themselves.

Favel had a little to drink, but it didn't turn him into an idiot. It just made him chattier than he would otherwise have been. "Jenna," he said, letting a sucker on a tentacle cling to the table enough to let it make a sound when he let go. "It's a terrible idea for you to be a diplomat with no companion of your own. My seven wives have been such a comfort to me. I don't think I would have made it this far without them. I'd find you a husband myself if I had any idea what humans like in a mate."

"What are your wives like?" Jenna asked, getting interested.

"Well, they are quiet. None of them can speak. Do you know how many arguments you get into with someone who doesn't talk? Like none. I'd just show my wife I was unhappy by throwing a few shells and rocks and she'd wrap me up like a present. In a moment like that, I knew the work I was doing was important because I was protecting someone so perfect who couldn't speak to defend herself. How could you be happy with a person who does nothing but talk? No offense to you, Sardius," he said to the air surrounding him since Sardius could hear him over the speakers/microphones that were installed all over the palace.

Jenna wanted to reply, but the ruckus being made by a few of the candidates was making intimate conversation difficult.

"Sardius, get Vash to take Mr. Butric and Mr. Cimphis back to their rooms. He doesn't have to do anything but get them in the room and lock the door. The one is catatonic and the other is very loud."

Once a few of them were removed, a few others got the idea that the party was over and returned to their rooms. As the room cleared, Jenna felt more and more comfortable talking to Favel, hearing about his life under the water and in the stars as a pilot.

Finally, when they were alone and very comfortable with one another, she pulled out Sardius' earpiece, leaned forward and so quietly, only Favel could hear, she told him how she felt about Sardius.

Favel's face was not overly expressive, but his eyes took a startled shape as he slumped back in his goblet chair. "I didn't think of that," he admitted morosely.

Jenna clicked the earpiece back into place.

"I can't believe you just did that after all the times I told you not to do that," Sardius said in shock on the other end of the line. She couldn't see him, but she knew he had fallen back in his chair and he was shaking his head in horrified disbelief.



She'd hear more out of him on the subject later.

"Sorry," she mouthed, glancing at a camera.

"There's nothing for you to be sorry for." Favel was so caught up in her revelation that he hadn't realized she was talking to Sardius and replied as though she was talking to him. "I'll call the council tomorrow and explain the situation and make arrangements for your marriage to him immediately. It will take some time because of the nature of space travel and where the prison is, but I looked into it already and it is possible. The prison is willing to supply Sardius' DNA and they'll include a blood sample as part of the marriage certificate. If I request it tomorrow, I don't know how long it will take, but when it gets here we can prick your finger and make it official. I am more sorry than I can say. We really didn't think it through when we tried to set you up with Armen. If Sardius is happy to marry you, we can get that sorted as soon as possible."

"When can I expect the recordings to stop?" Jenna asked seriously as that was the most crucial aspect of her plan.

"Tomorrow night at the earliest. I imagine the council will not want to hold you up any further. You did such a good job with Excelyn. I spoke to her earlier today. She's like a spry sixty-year-old again. All thanks to you. I'd hate for you to not have the support you need. Sardius," Favel said, leaning back even further and shouting at the speaker above his head. "Do you want to marry her?"

Sardius' voice came over the loudspeaker. "I'm a little windblown by all this, but I don't feel like I can refuse."

Jenna rubbed the spot between her eyebrows in frustration at his lukewarm answer. "He's mad at me for taking out my earpiece."

"Jenna is a talented negotiator. That's all she did. Are you going to hold it against her? Do you want to marry her?" Favel persisted.

"I'm not going to be told what she told you?" he fumed in irritation.

"No," Jenna said firmly. "That's why I took out my earpiece."

There was no sound from Sardius.

Favel made one of his tentacles a spiral, held it for a few seconds, and then released the hold. "I guess he doesn't."

"Well, I can't force him," Jenna said, getting up from her chair. "I'm sure he'll let you know if he changes his mind."

Favel glared at the nearest camera before turning back to Jenna. "I'll see what I can do about the recordings regardless."

"Thank you," Jenna said with a serene smile. "Occasionally, I feel like he's close to telling me something invaluable, but he can't because of that stupid feature of his employment."

"As you wish, Lady," he said before slipping out of his goblet and sliding across the floor to the ocean entrance he used.

Jenna waved at him over the surface of the water as was her custom when bidding goodbye to her underwater guests before straightening and returning to her bedroom.

It was quiet over her earpiece as she removed her jewelry in great snaps from around her wrists and throat.

"I know you didn't appreciate that and I'm sorry," she said, looking at herself in the mirror and talking to Sardius.

"Better to ask for forgiveness than permission, eh?" he said, his tone low and sardonic.

"I know you feel betrayed because you want us to be the closest of conspirators, the type who tell each other everything, but if I didn't do that, I wasn't going to get what I want. I have been very clear about *what* I want."

"But not why you want it," he objected.

"You don't need to know why. What I told Favel tonight, I'm never telling another person. If anyone asks me, I will say I have no idea what they're talking about. Tonight, I exchanged my most vulnerable parts for you. You're mad because it wasn't for *your* sake. It was for *my* sake. Our marriage can't mean to you what it can mean to me. If you didn't want me to use you, then why did you sign up for this? I'm using you, thoroughly. If you don't like it, say you want out and go do whatever else there is to do in your prison."

He was quiet.

She undid the back of her dress. What was happening now was not a strip tease. How she removed her clothing had nothing to do with stripping for the viewing pleasure of another person. She stripped down to her bra and panties and threw her dress across the room in a heap. She cracked her neck, tossed a shapeless nightgown over her head, pulled her bra through her sleeve, added it to her pile of discarded clothing, and went to the bathroom to have the fun of peeing and pooping out what remained of the liplo fruit. In a lot of ways, that was the worst part of the whole ordeal, as it wiggled its way out of her.

When she was finished, she washed her hands, splashed water on her face, and suctioned out her mouth instead of brushing her teeth since they didn't do that on Octavia Prime.

She got into bed and closed her eyes.

"They've stopped recording me," Sardius whispered.

"Just now?" Jenna asked in surprise.

"Yes."

"That's a relief. Please let me know if you ever suspect someone is recording you."

"Jenna, that was unbelievably fast. They were going to get me to sign all sorts of new agreements with you. They didn't do it. What did you say to him?"

"I didn't say anything to him," she denied with a voice so steady, it sounded like she was telling the truth.

It was quiet for a minute before Sardius said humbly, "I want to make up with you."

She opened her eyes. "Are you going to let me use you?"

"Since I have no cards in my hand, I'll wait until they approach me for the DNA sample."

"Could you please inform Favel of your decision?" she said stiffly.

"You're being pretty cold, Jenna. Aren't you asking me to marry you?" he complained.

She rubbed her eyes. "You know very well that our union has nothing to do with the reasons Octavians marry or humans marry. You're not going to be able to offer me political connections like husbands one and two are supposed to. You're not going to be able to be my love slave like husband number three. I don't even know what slots four through eight are for. It seems like they're there 'just in case'. What's happening between you and me is different. You know I'm not an Octavian. I'm not really an Adamis either, not politically, and yet I have to be at the center of their negotiations. Neither one of those groups necessarily has my back and if the Octavians are monitoring you that carefully, you can't do your job of protecting me, informing me, and giving

me an unbiased perspective on what I'm supposed to do. Even if they were only recording you, and not me, they were still violating the freedom I need to do my job. They had to get out of your face if you were going to help me at all. I said what I had to say to get what I wanted. Have you got a problem with that?"

"No," Sardius said and, for the first time, the military man in him shone through in his voice.

"You must know by now that I am not a supremely pleasant person. I apologize that I can't frame all of this in a nicer way for you. I was taught as a little girl to be cold, to keep people away, and to protect my secrets. In those cases, it was all about the crown on my head that wouldn't come off. Now it feels like I have to be that way to do this job. It's just not all sunshine and roses. It was never going to be. I know a part of you understands." Jenna rubbed her head under her scalp and thought of an example. "Cats have the personality of their owners. You remember what Charm was like, right?"

"She scratched that girl's skin off," he said, half-amused.

"Yeah. That's my baby. We have the same personality. Give me what I want over and over again and maybe I won't scratch."

He chuckled, having gotten on board, and not the least bit phased by the comparison. "I'll see what I can do. Go to sleep. You have to send those drunkards off in the morning."

# Chapter Twenty Nine

## Working Wonderland

In the morning, Jenna met with all of the candidates in the dining room of the Dahlia Palace.

She stood up in her finery and began her farewell address. "First, I'd like to thank you all for coming and being a part of this selection process. I truly enjoyed the opportunity to meet you all. Now, I know you're very interested in hearing who has been selected to be crowned, and I must begin by informing you that none of you passed the selection process with a high enough score to be crowned today."

There were several shocked sounds from the seven candidates. A few of them were too hungover to be very polite that early in the morning.

"However, Binarian Whistle has been selected as a second-tier candidate. She will be invited back at a future date for another round of interviews."

"This whole thing has been massively unfair," Ian Cimphis declared. He was one of the men Jenna had Vash escort to his room early the night before.

"Has it been?" Jenna asked civilly.

"You didn't interview us or even speak to us beyond those two dinners. Who was here to decide whether or not we should be crowned?"

"I reviewed your test scores. I spoke to your Octavian tutors from yesterday's workshops. What more would you have liked?"

"I would have liked," he said, standing up straighter than Jenna thought possible considering how much he'd had to drink the night before. "To have talked to you personally about the direction the OA Alliance should take."

Jenna understood immediately. It was well known that her marriage to Armen had ended. His plan was to charm her. He had no idea how difficult it was to compliment her, seduce her, or win her over.

Jenna lowered her eyes. "It's important to see multiple angles of any situation. You see, all of you were being filmed the entire time you have been here. Transcripts were made of everything you said. Your alcohol tabs were scored. We need diplomats who can keep their heads on straight, moderate in their words, behavior, and overall conduct. We need our representatives to be of the highest quality. You, Mr. Cimphis, complained as soon as you arrived that my dress was too expensive and that the money ought to have been spent on your comfort."

Sardius played the clip of his words over the loudspeaker.

His face turned red as he dropped back to his seat.

"Mr. Cimphis, you should know that you personally consumed three times the cost of my dress in alcohol in the three days you were here." Jenna raised her voice. "There will be no talk of the fairness or unfairness of this selection process after you return home. If there is a word spoken about it, tapes shall be leaked, audio recordings shared, and test results publicized. You will leave here with a paragraph that has been written for you and no matter what reporter asks

you a question, you shall answer with that paragraph or the words *no comment*. I hope all of you understand that this was never a joke or a vacation. You were each posed a very serious question about your worthiness to represent the Adamis in these talks. If you have an interest in taking part, I recommend improving yourselves. We will surely keep tabs on you as we have six more slots to fill.”

“Don’t you mean seven?” someone asked.

“No. Six. I crowned Dr. Excelyn Factic the day before yesterday. She’s here to bid you farewell.”

Excelyn entered and Jenna thanked her lucky stars that Misha had put a wig on her head before she came in.

Binarian, the little girl candidate Jenna *almost* approved of, stood up and clapped for Excelyn, giving her a few more points in Jenna’s book. The others followed her lead, but the overall sound of applause was quite lacking.

These people were so stiff and selfish, they couldn’t be happy for anyone.

Half an hour later, Jenna and Excelyn watched the disappointed candidates board their pods.

“Don’t you feel a little sorry for them?” Excelyn asked.

“No. I’m getting six more candidates from the AAMC in three days. They’re bound to be army meatheads, and I’m not sure how to sift through them.”

“It’ll be weird for them,” Excelyn pointed out. “Not many of them have had much to do with Octavians close up.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Adamis and Octavians don’t share the same living space,” Excelyn went on to explain. “Adamis are on the land and Octavians are under the water, even if they share a planet. It’s the same on space crafts. The Octavians are in the pilot’s cabin and the Adamis are asleep in the pods. Unless the Adamis work in healthcare, they never see them. It’s really hard to breed sympathy between two groups of people who never see each other.”

“Underwater tour?” Jenna suggested.

“Have you had a chance to do that since you got here?” Excelyn asked with one eyebrow up.

“Not exactly. I’ve been too busy,” Jenna admitted.

Excelyn smiled. “You must have been raised from birth for this job. I’d like to help you with the meatheads, but I’ll be too busy myself. I have to interview nurses and get a personal assistant. Sardius has given me a list of recently fired nurses.”

“Yeah, he can’t find people with good reputations.”

“And neither will you.”

“Can I just find someone who isn’t a cheap drunk?”

Excelyn slapped Jenna on the back. “Get Sardius to make up a job posting advertising for exactly that. The most expensive drunk in the universe.”

“Done,” Sardius said.

“What? You’ve already done it?”

“Well, yeah. It was a good idea. We could get an interesting wild card that way.”

Jenna rolled her eyes and decided to let it slide. “Can you keep your palace docked to mine for the next three days, Excelyn? I’d like to have a meeting with you each day to discuss your progress.”

"We'll do yoga together in the morning," Excelyn suggested. "I have the best courtyard for it. But wait. You want me elsewhere when your meatheads get here?"

"I have to choose someone from the AAMC ranks, but you're unlikely to get along with them. You represent one faction and they represent another. We need both of you to vote."

"I see. It would be easier if you selected people who all had a similar view on how things ought to be handled. Bringing in a person with fundamentally opposing views will..."

"Make all of us more credible," Jenna finished for her. "Not to mention that it will open up the army's resources for us and win us support from powerful sectors. I may even decide to crown two."

Excelyn's face fell. "Yeah, exactly like you were raised to do this."

Jenna knew Excelyn was disappointed because she wanted to push her own ideas all the way down the pipe, but the Octavians had their own council and group of diplomats to represent them. Jenna didn't even want to guess how Excelyn would react when she crowned a doctor from one of the conventional hospitals. She had already got Sardius to start screening them.



That night when Jenna was getting ready for bed, Sardius asked her in a smooth dreamy tone, "Would you like to try sleeping somewhere different tonight?"

"Hmm? Like where?" Jenna wondered, confused. "Underwater?"

"I'm sure at some point you'll have to do that, both in and out of a wetsuit, but for now, I want you to try this therapy bed I've been programming for you."

A side of the wall clicked open.

Jenna gasped. "What's that? I have a secret door in my room?"

Sardius cleared his throat. "There are three secret passages in the Dahlia Palace. This is the first one."

"Where are the other two?"

"They're not overly exciting. One is meant as an escape route from the great hall to the servants' quarters and the other one is meant as a bomb shelter."

Jenna approached the hidden door in the wall and saw that it was a pocket door and slid into the wall. Inside was a thing that looked very much like a canopy bed except that you weren't raised up on a mattress, but dropped down onto a mattress.

"How is this a therapy bed?" Jenna questioned.

"Get inside and I'll show you," Sardius instructed, his voice low like they were in a spa or a library.

Jenna obeyed.

The mattress was so soft, Jenna got sucked into it. Once she was lying down, the mattress firmed up and seemed to hug her body. She tried to move around, but the bed defied her movements, keeping her somewhat still.

"It's a therapy bed because it is completely soundproof," Sardius explained as he raised glass walls from inside the bed that attached themselves to the top of the canopy. "The bed is meant

to hug you, but you can ask it to let you move around if that's more comfortable for you, but after you haven't moved for a few minutes, it will revert back to hug mode and continue to hug you."

"I like this," she said, snuggling in deeper.

"I'm seeing if I can program it to make a version of me to lie next to you. I'll try sending the mattress my measurements. That way I can give you a hug."

"Really? How would that work?"

Sardius explained. "It would be a back hug with my hands around your waist, or I could program it so you're lying between my legs. Anything more complicated than those two commands would be more challenging to the physical interface."

Jenna waited, but nothing happened.

"Sorry. Why don't you try to go to sleep while I keep working on it?"

"I need a blanket. I can't sleep with nothing covering me."

Sardius lowered the glass for her and she scooped up a throw blanket from the back of a chair.

"You should leave that blanket in here all the time," Sardius advised. "There are stacks of blankets in the closet down the hall."

She got back in and snuggled in with the fur-lined blanket. Surprisingly comfortable, she fell asleep before he'd worked out how to give her a hug.



# Chapter Thirty

## AAMC (Adamis Alliance Military Conglomerate)

Jenna looked over the candidates provided by Admiral Lou Denver as they lined up on the dock outside her palace. All of them were male, which was fine by Jenna. They were all head and shoulders taller than her, even in her heels. She had deliberately worn heels in order to look bigger, but it had been a waste of time. Standing beside them, she looked like a sapling in an old-growth forest.

She hadn't done the power walk when she met them. They had doubtless seen better power walks than hers. Maybe they even had better power walks than hers themselves. Instead, she had been waiting for them when their pod touched down. Vash was beside her, which she felt gave her more credibility as his body was just as massive as theirs. However, his distaste for them was more than evident, and Jenna realized that she was not going to be able to use him to care for these guests as much as she had for the last set.

She welcomed them, had Vash show them their quarters, and invited them to the courtyard of the Dahlia Palace for lunch.

Each of them introduced themselves with a deafening shout before taking their seats.

"Major Yago Radcliff." He resembled a boulder, the kind that crushed you in a rock slide.

"Major Martin Vector." He resembled a troll, the kind that turned to stone at sunrise.

"Major Killner Soldier." He looked like a rock man who never gave good advice.

"Major Vance Yisling." He was more like a gargoyle in that the look on his face was so unpleasant and his back was so lumpy, he could have been hiding anything under his shirt.

"Major Iker Hu." He looked the most like Vash, but his existence made Vash look more like a rock man than he had looked before.

"Major Starling Ocher." The last man looked like you would mistake him for a statue, you'd turn your back on him and he'd bludgeon you in the back of the head. He wouldn't do it that way because he *needed* the element of surprise, but because he *liked* the element of surprise. Except, it was a waste of time. If he moved around, everyone expected him to bludgeon them to death.

It seemed the AAMC was unwilling to part with an officer of a higher rank than a major and... they were only willing to part with their calcium-heavy boys.

"I am Jenna Fairchild, and I'm sure you've all read the information page about me. Have any of you spoken to an Octavian before?"

They looked between the candidates. Finally, Major Yisling said, "I've dealt with them many times, but the ones I have worked with haven't been able to talk. You couldn't really have a conversation with them."

"I've texted with them," Major Hu offered. "They couldn't talk either, but they could type. The way they think is really different from us."



"I see," Jenna said when no one else had anything else to say. "In that case, I'd like to introduce you to the chair of the Octavian Council, Favel."

Vash pushed the blue Octavian in, already in his goblet chair. He placed the chair next to Jenna and edged out of the room without looking at the military men.

Favel raised himself up out of the water and said, "Hello. I look forward to speaking with all of you."

Jenna looked over the room at the responses from the majors. None of them looked enthusiastic. However, they managed to dodge looking rude. Still, something was wrong.

Jenna put her mouth in her palm to whisper to Sardius. "Is there something I'm missing? Why do they all look like that?"

"I'm confused too," Sardius admitted.

Jenna removed her hand from her mouth. "Please begin eating," Jenna said to the group. "After lunch, we'll have a round table discussion."

"Excuse me, ma'am, why aren't you eating?" Major Radcliff asked her.

Jenna looked at her empty plate and the purple drink Sardius had recommended for her to replace her meal. So far, the only thing Jenna was missing about food was the taste. Otherwise, Sardius' shake made her feel full, but light at the same time.

"My personal assistant, Sardius, recommended that I try not eating for a while. He says that this is what people do during deep space travel and to achieve their fitness goals."

"I haven't eaten in years," the soldier replied. "And I'd very much like to try the supplement your assistant has prepared for you."

Others were nodding.

Jenna smiled. "I'll get my cook to prepare identical shakes for you."

Upon hearing this, Sardius whispered, "Smoothie says she has enough ready to serve the group now. She was making a batch that she planned to preserve, but if they want some, they can be passed around immediately."

"Can Vash serve them?" Jenna asked, hiding her tension behind a calm smile.

"He's in a very foul mood. He's asking if Misha can do the serving for him," Sardius replied.

"Does he have a good reason?"

Jenna waited while Sardius worked out the kinks on the other end. "He says he knows some of the soldiers from when he was in basic training. He doesn't know if they've recognized him yet, but he really doesn't want to hover over them as a server."

"Can't Smoothie just float them in with her mind?" Jenna asked between the set teeth of her smile.

"No. She can't," Sardius said firmly. "It's a secret that I have her working here and I'd like to keep it that way. If you think the soldiers were racist toward Favel, you'll see something completely different if they see you have a Sushfief working for you."

"Why? I thought they were allies."

"I told you," Sardius ventured. "They can move things with their minds. One Sushfief can take out an entire unit of Adamis without breaking a sweat. The Adamis didn't want to recognize them as equals and welcome them to the Adamis Alliance, but that was much better than the way any of their other conflicts have ended."

"Can we get one *of their* diplomats over here?" was the first thing Jenna thought upon hearing that tidbit.

"One of the Sushfiefs' or one of the Adamis'?"

"Both! We're only as picky as we have to be," she blustered, still trying to keep their conversation private.

"I'll look into it. Vash is in Misha's workshop begging her to do the serving for him. She's taking him for all he's worth. Here's the audio."

Jenna heard Misha's voice, high and mighty, say, "And I'm going to need a massage."

"Of course!" Vash squealed.

"One for every meal I serve them."

"That's twelve massages!" Vash complained.

"Take it or leave it."

"Fine."

"If I'm going to cover for your duties, I'm going to need you to help me with a few of mine from time to time. You know, the ones involving heavy lifting," she taunted with a satisfied squeak.

"Fine. Just get out there."

Jenna scratched behind her ear while Sardius cut out the audio.

"Everything all right, Jenna?" Favel asked, drumming his suckers against the side of his plate.

"Do I look nonplussed?" she replied with an easy smile.

"No. You look perfect. If even one of these guys were half as perfect as you, we'd be winning."

Jenna glanced at his uneaten food. "Don't you eat either?"

"Oh, I love to eat, but I have misgivings about eating here. You saw their faces. If I started pulling food into the water and chowing down, they'd be horrified. Octavians do not have table manners like Adamis. Have you ever seen an Octavian dine, My Lady?"

"Not really. I always thought octopuses had very private feeding habits since their mouths are so hidden. It's us that have to make ourselves look more polite with our pretty polished forks and tidily folded napkins."

Jenna looked back at Favel's plate. Half the fruit was gone and one of the shellfish had disappeared.

"Did you just?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes. I just ate half of what was on my plate, and you didn't notice at all." He scooped up his napkin and dabbed at a spot under his eyes where his mouth would have been if he had been human, but was nowhere near his actual mouth. He chuckled, making bubbles in the water.

"You are very cute," Jenna praised.

Just then, Misha came into the room with a mighty platter of meal supplements. Her pink hair was everywhere. Her outfit consisting of a corset and ruffles made her look like the equivalent of a medieval barmaid. The soldiers loved it. One of them even hooted.

"Is it okay for them to hoot at her?" Favel whispered.

"I don't know. I wouldn't have thought so," Jenna said, putting her hand in Favel's goblet, cupping her hand, and pouring the water over his mantle.

"Jenna," Sardius whispered roughly. "Why did you do that?"

"I was worried he'd dry out. He was looking dry. I saw the other Octavian council members shoot water at each other during our last meeting. I thought it was a socially acceptable thing to do," she murmured into her left hand as she bent it to provide passage for the sound to travel through to her ear.

"Octavians are all about gestures because most of them can't speak. What you just did was far more than if Favel had placed a sucker on your hand the other night."

Jenna looked out at the candidates wondering if any of them had noticed what she had done.

One of them was staring at her. It was the candidate with the last name of Soldier. He was looking at her most distastefully.

Jenna met his disdain with a smile and raised her glass to him.

He raised his glass back at her, but the look on his face did not suggest he approved of her.

After lunch, they spent the rest of the day talking to the candidates as a group. Favel talked to them. Jenna talked to them. Sardius talked to them.

Before dinner, they gave them a full tour of the Sand Palace, saying they would be required to live in such a space for most of the year if they were crowned. Then they gave the AAMC candidates a break, letting them lounge around before they were served the exact same supplement they had been served for lunch. They seemed to like that.

Jenna watched them.

She wasn't sure what she thought of them, but she felt certain that they had thoughts about her. She was willing to bet her crown Vash knew more about the way they thought that she did. She had to talk to him.



Jenna met Vash in her bedroom. It wasn't the first time she'd been in her bedroom at the same time as him. He cleaned her bedroom, watered her plants, and tended her fish. But the room always felt too small when she was inside it with him. Both of them tried not to be in the room at the same time, but it felt stupid for Jenna to meet him anywhere else since she wanted to have a private conversation with him. It didn't feel safe to talk anywhere the AAMC majors had been. They were trained to leave bugs and other audio recording devices all over. Her security footage and Sardius confirmed that none of them had been in her bedroom. Sardius was scanning the other rooms in the palace, but he wasn't finished yet.

"Care to tell me what happened today?" she asked her butler kindly.

"It was unacceptable for me to refuse to fulfill my duties in that manner," Vash said, standing like a soldier.

"I'm not sure I'm bothered by how you behaved today if you can tell me what incited it."

"I was in the military once," he said slowly, like admitting anything to Jenna hurt his pride terribly. "It wasn't for very long. The hazing hospitalized me." He didn't say anything more but stood still like a stone.

Jenna picked up the conversation. "One of the men who hazed you is out there?"

"Major Soldier and perhaps a few of the others."

"Has he said anything to you since he got here?"

"No. He just looked at me."

"He looked at me too," Jenna said.

Vash's gaze flicked uncomfortably around the room. "I knew they were coming. I thought I could stand it when I took this position, but when I saw him in your dining room, I knew I couldn't. I was expecting AAMC personnel. I was not expecting him to be here."

"I understand. That would unsettle anyone. Sardius, show Vash the escape routes in the palace. I want him to be able to make quick getaways should he feel unsafe."

"Certainly," Sardius agreed on the loudspeaker.

Looking at Vash, Jenna knew he was finished talking. He did not want to go over what happened, either the night of his hazing or what happened to his life as a consequence of leaving the military. He wanted everything to be over.

"Why don't you two have that meeting in Vash's room?" she added. Looking at Vash, he couldn't stand for her to look at him any longer. "Vash, if you remain deeply uncomfortable after tonight, I'll give you a sea rover and you can go help out at the Stone Palace for the remainder of their stay."

His eyes brightened at the idea.

"Or we can just plan for you to do that in the morning," she offered.

Vash nodded.

"Sardius, invite Misha in here," Jenna said after her butler had gone. "We need to change the schedule."

# Chapter Thirty One

## Disaster, AAMC Style

That night, Jenna was asleep in her normal bed when a beeping sound blasted in her ear.

"That's got to stop," Jenna complained. "What happened to the sweet music you used to wake me up with?"

"It isn't morning," Sardius informed her.

"What is going on then?" Jenna asked cautiously.

"I got the thing in the therapy bed to work. Remember? So I can give you a hug?"

Jenna was surprised by the urgency in his voice. Then she realized that he could see her all the time. Maybe he was just excited to show her a little bit of himself. Without a word, she got up and moved to the other bed.

"Bring your blanket," Sardius instructed. "I think you'll need two."

Obediently, Jenna grabbed it and slid down into the other bed.

"Get in the middle and I'll activate the program."

She did so and the bed hugged her curves the way it had before.

The glass went up which was normal and then the pocket door to her bedroom closed with a snap, which was *not* normal. Jenna was thrown into unbroken darkness.

"What's going on?" she rasped.

"I lied to you," Sardius said. "This bed doesn't give hugs more than what you've already experienced. It's a function used to comfort people in distress. I used it as an excuse to lure you in here, so you wouldn't try to deal with the problem yourself."

Jenna's eyebrows went together in a furious line. "What problem?" she snapped.

"A few of those army guys went after Vash. You can't get involved in that. Sadly, we didn't search the majors for guns or weapons when they got here. We scanned them thinking that if they had any weapons on them that they would come up in the scans. Not only that, but we (and when I say we, I mean me and the orbital security team) thought that the AAMC would consider this a peaceful affair and not arm their boys to the teeth in rubber firearms."

"Why are they armed?" Jenna asked in alarm.

"I think they may have been sent here, not to kill you, but to take control of your crowns. I had Misha put the box of crowns in a locker under this bed earlier this afternoon. And now I have to admit the other thing. This was never a therapy bed. It's a pod, meant to give you an escape route should anything terrible happen... and something terrible has happened. I think the soldiers went after Vash first because they thought he posed the largest threat. They would want to immobilize your staff before coming in here. Now I'm going to drop you through the floor."

Jenna heard the floor panels under her move. She heard locks unbuckle. She heard things clicking and moving around her, but she also heard something else. It sounded like something

was happening in Sardius' prison cell. There was a banging sound that was coming through her earpiece.

"What was that?" she asked urgently. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said through clenched teeth.

"You're fine? You don't sound fine."

"Nah, it's fine. Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to drop you through the floor and have your pod take a transport route that will lead you to Favel's underwater mansion. He has places for humans to stay without too much fuss. I sent the necessary information to Smoothie, who is more than capable of containing the situation in the palace, and I..." he hesitated. "I'm going to have to cancel our transmissions in a few minutes."

"Why?" Jenna panicked.

He smacked his lips. "Have you ever heard of a prison riot?"

She swallowed, hard. "Is something like that happening?"

"Yes."

Jenna's pod was dropped into the water with a splash. Sardius kept the inside of her pod in darkness and the water around her was black as if she'd been dropped in an inkwell. It was worse than getting dropped into outer space. There was nothing to hear now as the pod was completely soundproof. The only sound Jenna could hear was the ominous clanging that was happening inside Sardius' prison. It was rhythmic, metal against metal.

BOOM.

BOOM.

BOOM.

She heard bones crack. Was it the sound of Sardius cracking his neck?

"The Prison doors will open in five..." an automated voice said in the prison cell loud enough for Jenna to hear.

"Wait! What's going to happen?"

"I'm going to kill a lot of people, and you will be safe. All the info has already been transmitted. You'll make it to Favel's for sure."

"Four."

"But... I didn't... get to tell you..." she simpered, trying to find the words.

"None of that matters now," he interrupted. "Either I'll be back soon, or I won't be."

"But I..."

"Three."

"Wait. I can't stand this," Jenna breathed in a painful rasp. There was too much between them. There was too much they understood about each other without seeing each other, without touching, and without breathing the same air. Those things were luxuries they hadn't shared, yet they shared a part of themselves that was deeper than all of that. She had to tell him what he meant to her. "What's going to happen if I don't tell you I love you?" she questioned urgently, sounding like a whipped dog.

"It's too bad we could never meet," he said, his voice light and confident. "If we had... I bet we could have had something really special."

"Two," the automated voice in Sardius' cell sounded.

They were running out of time.

“Tell me you love me, you moron!” Jenna snarled.

There was a horrific sound of metal bending and breaking. Then again. And again. If Sardius answered her, she couldn’t hear him over the sounds of the metal screaming as it twisted.

“One,” the computer voice said calmly like the end of the world was not about to happen.

Then there was a beep so loud it felt like it would break the inside of Jenna’s ear.

“Goodbye,” Sardius said. Of all the words Jenna had heard Sardius say, his ‘goodbye’ was the most jagged, sick sound she had ever heard him say. It was almost like he was not talking to her at all, but talking to whoever had just come through his cell door.

There was a click.

Jenna thought she wouldn’t hear another thing. She thought he’d cut the connection. Her breath came in horrified gasps as sweat pooled on her face and burned her lips like salt in cuts.

Completely alone she muttered with a wet face. “What the hell? What the hell? You were supposed to be safe. You were supposed to be the one person—”

At that exact moment, she realized that Sardius had hit the wrong button. He had meant to sever their connection, but instead, he had only muted her.

“Who’s cell is this?” a distant unfamiliar voice said.

Sardius didn’t answer. There were crashing sounds like a baseball bat hitting bone, sickening thuds, guttural screams, and the sound of heavy footfalls. For Jenna, it was like listening to a war movie with no musical track to soften the sounds of artillery, begging, and a strange slippery sound that happened in the breaks.

An unknown cry was pinched off like a candle being blown out.

Then the real ruckus started.

Jenna didn’t know what she was hearing. Was she listening to the sound of Sardius keeping his promise to her by killing a lot of people? Or was he on the floor with the cacophony clashing around him? Or had he discarded his earpiece and it was still picking up the sounds of the riot?

She clenched her fist to her mouth and rocked back and forth in the bed waiting for a sound that meant that the violence was over, that Sardius had survived, and that he would be back in her ear soon.

After a sound like a pinched crack, the noise stopped completely. That could only mean that his earpiece was broken. That might have meant anything or it might have meant nothing.

Jenna sat there, terrified in the dark for almost an hour before she saw a light in front of her. It was blue light shining from amid a massive underworld of coral and lit-up glass. The light showed the ridges in the terrain around her. The transparent route she was riding took her all the way to the light, where her pod entered Favel’s mansion.

The story continues in Octavia Girl Vol. II

# A Note from the Author

Hi Ink Drinkers,

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed the novel, please consider leaving a [star rating and feedback on Obooko](#). I hope you enjoy many more of my books.

Love,

Stephanie Van Orman  
Novelist