

OCTAVIA GIRL

Vol III

Stephanie
Van Orman



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Front cover image by Liia Chevnenko and Elena Barenbaum

Book design by Stephanie Van Orman

Author photograph by Alison Quist

<https://tigrix1.wixsite.com/stephanievanorman>

stephanievanorman.blogspot.com

tigrix@gmail.com

Octavia Girl

Volume III



By Stephanie Van Orman

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Chapter One

Alone with Favel

Jenna sat with her bum on the hard grate on the floor of Favel's underwater mansion. It felt like she was being poked in at least four places.

The blue Octavian sat next to her.

Both of them were uncomfortable.

Jenna licked her lips. "You know how much I enjoy your company, Favel, but I'm finding this situation a little awkward."

Favel could hardly ignore the fact that every available surface of the glass walls that made up the room was covered with gooey eyeballs pointed directly at them. There wasn't a single crack where an Octavian wasn't staring at them. Favel looked back at Jenna, the skin over his eyes looking more like unhappy eyebrows than usual.

"How many of them do you think there are?" she asked faintly.

Favel shrugged four of his tentacles like they were shoulders. "I don't know. I'd offer you a different room to meet in but all the other rooms in my mansion are full of water, and the walls are still made of glass."

"I'd invite you onto my pod and put up the black walls, but there's only a mattress in there and..."

Favel interrupted her by slapping himself in the face with a tentacle. "For pity's sake, Jenna. We don't need that kind of attention. Everyone knows what Adamis do on their mattresses."

Jenna clicked her tongue in response. "I was going to finish my thought by saying that I don't want you to get my bed wet. I wasn't even thinking as far as the media circus making crazy speculations."

She stared at the walls and tried to count the eyes, but it was tough. A lot of the Octavians had eyes on either side of their mantles, so they were only pressing one eye into the glass and giving their neighbor room to watch too. "Do they know they're discouraging us from doing anything cute because of this insane amount of attention?"

"They don't care," Favel bit the words between the jaws of his beak. "They just want to see us in person. They're even rotating, so as many of them can see us together as possible."

"That's very nice of them," Jenna said softly. "I actually need to talk to you."

"Of course you do," Favel groaned.

Jenna had fallen asleep on Sardius' shoulder when they left the warehouse Fallcet used to imprison them while he hijacked the only crown Jenna had on her. She had fallen asleep, but she was woken up when they arrived at her palace, only to be told that she was 'no way in hell' allowed back inside her own home until the place had undergone a thorough security sweep. Both Favel and Sardius were as tough as nails on the subject.

She didn't even try arguing.

Instead, Jenna allowed Sardius to be dropped off on the dock of the Dahlia palace where Crimp was waiting for him with an ugly expression on her face. Excelyn's security guard tried to give Sardius a fist bump, only to realize that was a terrible idea as his knuckles were like knives.

He then declined a high five from Crimp as she was a poison finger girl. She argued that she had caps on her individual fingers, but he still shook his head. He wasn't taking any chances.

It was a hilarious little show.

Fallcet was then taken to a holding tank where he would await the next step.

What was the next step?

Well, Jenna needed to have a word with him, but she didn't want to. She was completely happy to leave him in the holding tank until he turned purple. She hoped he would turn purple soon because she openly wished discomfort on him.

After that, Favel ordered Jenna's pod with a bed in it to be delivered to his mansion. The transport they were in was more like a bus than a cruise ship and he wanted somewhere comfortable for her to rest until the security sweeps were complete.

So Jenna sat on the floor in Favel's mansion where the grate bars under her butt were digging into her and she had the eyes of an unknown number of Octavians staring at her.

"We need to talk," Favel agreed, "but what are we supposed to do? Your palace is off limits while Ryatt and Crimp double-check the security of all the floating palaces."

That was right. Even though the mask was off and Jenna knew that Ryatt was Sardius—no one else knew, not even Favel.

Yes, Jenna needed to talk to Favel, but that wasn't one of the things she planned to tell him. Even when they finally had their private meeting, she had no plans to do *that* unveiling.

Favel continued, "I have half a mind to put you back aboard the transport and take you to a hotel."

"If we could get some privacy there, then what are we waiting for?" Jenna asked enthusiastically.

Favel hesitated. "I can't take my fiancée to just *any* hotel, Jenna. I would have to take you to a nice hotel, the nicest on the planet. I would have to take you to the Hotel de Twanikling. It roughly translates to the Hotel of the Twinkling Stars." He displayed a picture of the hotel on one of the screens.

It was an underwater hotel designed to be a vacation destination for doctors and other highly paid Adamis medical professionals. Favel showed her a digital tour. It was an underwater castle that shone white and gold.

"It's the coral that makes it shine in all those bright colors. However, the structure under it is as durable as a prison," Favel commented before he showed her the rooms inside. "I'd have to get you the fanciest room they have. It's the Paris room."

The Paris room would have been perfect for their discussions in that there was an enormous fountain in the center of the room and a big sofa that let Adamis admire the fountain. But unless her geography was way off, the Hotel of the Twinkling Stars was on the other side of the planet. Even if they shot themselves into orbit, it would take longer than a day to get there, and Jenna had work to do.

Jenna glanced at him. "You're just showing me this stuff to pass the time. We're not actually going to go, are we?"

Favel forced his expression to relax. "A little bit from column A and a little bit from column B. Right now, we're letting all these Octavians watch us plan a vacation. They're speculating that we're planning our honeymoon. They're entertained and it's making it look like nothing's wrong with us, thus hiding the kerfuffle Fallcet and the AAMC caused when they kidnapped you.

Letting everyone know about that makes us all look bad, so there is no upswing to letting the snail out of the shell. Also, I would be very much amiss if I didn't take you to this hotel at some point. I haven't taken you anywhere resembling a date."

"Do Octavians date?" Jenna wondered with her gaze taking in the collection of gooey eyes trained on her.

"No. If I can hide from her for half an hour, she's mine."

"Are your camo skills that fly?" Jenna asked with a wicked grin while she considered all the different colors and shapes an octopus could make.

"Of course," he boasted. "I'm the chair of the Octavian Council."

"Can you hide from me for half an hour?" she asked him.

Favel turned off the screen. "What you're suggesting is a game to humans, but a very serious mating ritual for Octavians. Are you sure that's something you want to do?"

"Well, surely we can't play hide-and-seek here. There is nowhere for you to hide."

He glared at her. "I accept your challenge. Close your eyes and keep them closed for one minute. Let's see if you can find me."

Jenna did as she was told. She heard a little slurping around and then nothing.

After she finished counting to fifty, she counted the last ten seconds out loud. "...Three, two, one! I'm opening my eyes."

Jenna didn't have high expectations for what Favel could do. It wasn't that she doubted his camouflage skills. It was that the room they were in was not particularly detailed. Looking around the room, there was her pod, and it pretty much filled the room. She didn't think Favel would get on the mattress since she had already mentioned that she wouldn't like that. Aside from her pod, the room had a grate floor that doubled as the door into the room since that was the best way to keep the air in the room when her pod was inserted into it. The halfway box that Favel used to enter the room was on one wall. There was no bathroom in the room. There was a place for Jenna to relieve herself in the pod, though she had never used it. She considered it a last resort. The last fixture in the room was a water fountain for drinking.

She looked there first, then she searched every surface of the outside of the pod. She didn't find him. She looked in the halfway box though that seemed like a childish place to hide and she doubted Favel would use it, but the truth was, there were just no options of where he could be hiding. The place was very empty. She began searching the grate and under the grate, sliding her fingers between the metal. Everything was a little wet, so she couldn't find a water trail to show where he had gone. She climbed the side of her pod to look at the roof. It was a waste of time. He wasn't up there either.

Soon, Jenna was scratching her head, confused and a little frustrated that such a simple game was so hard for her.

Then she looked at the Octavians with their eyes glued to the glass walls. Most of them were looking at her, but the rest of them were looking toward a single point. Jenna followed their eyes. At first, she didn't see anything, but slowly, she saw a glimmer of something.

He hadn't hidden at all. He was just against a wall. He was just so good at copying the shapes and colors of what was behind him that she hadn't been able to see him. She stopped and stared at him. He had copied the details of the eyeballs behind them, even making them look at her. It was truly astonishing.

She approached and put her hand on his mantle. "This wasn't fair for you. Your friends gave you away."

Favel melted into himself onto the floor. "Indeed. According to my timer, you searched for seventeen minutes. Next time, I'll get you to look for me for thirty."

Even though their game had been cut short, he seemed pleased by the outcome, like Jenna had proven she was as good as an Octavian female because she'd been able to spot him in under half an hour. Now he had to do more to be worthy of her. He couldn't smile, not even if he was happy, but his eyes crinkled pleasantly at the corners.

"I just got a message from Ryatt," Favel said with a relieved huff. "He says I can send you back to the surface now. He and Crimp are finished. He says he wants to keep Fallcet in the holding tank overnight and you can plan your meeting with him tonight and begin tomorrow morning."

Jenna rubbed her eyes. "That suits me. Thanks for keeping me company while I wasn't allowed to go home, Favel. You're a top-notch fiance."

Favel groaned. "Don't say that! Aside from giving you a ring, I have done nothing. There's still so much to do."

"Yes, I know. We have to get engagement pictures taken. Celestina has been after me about that. Let's just do that and then figure out what we have to do next. I'm about to be flooded with work because covering Fallcet's ass has always been my dream," she moaned sarcastically.

"I'm amazed you're still so composed about the whole thing," Favel said crossly.

"Oh no. I'm angry as a firecracker. The thing is... something else happened that has put me in a bit of a good mood," Jenna confessed with a sloppy grin.

"Did you and Ryatt bond at the warehouse?" Favel whispered.

Jenna nodded before putting a finger to her lips. "Don't tell anyone. It's better to keep it on the down low for now."

"Why?" Favel hissed back. "You need a third husband. Why not take him? He's very convenient."

Jenna bit her lips together. "All of this is a bit harder for me than just noticing a good opportunity and snatching at it. I need to take things slowly."

"Do you? You were quick enough with me when you told everyone on Interstellar television that you wanted to marry me," Favel said, showing how weird he thought everything was with a squawk of his parrot-like voice.

"Yes," Jenna agreed. "Warming up to you was easy because I knew that what you wanted from me was a lot different from what an Adamis man would want."

Favel looked at her strangely. It was obviously unnatural to him for someone to want to put off mating.

Jenna climbed up into her pod and settled herself on the mattress. "Thanks for everything. I'll see you later."

Favel waved a tentacle at her before sliding into the halfway box that separated the world of air and the world of water.

Chapter Two

The First Night Back

When Jenna arrived back at the Dahlia Palace, it was too late to hash everything out with Excelyn, Philip, and Celestina. She didn't even get to hash things out with Sardius as he was busy doing cyber detective work with Conrad.

One thing was obvious. They had a traitor on their security team. If they didn't, there was no way Fallcet and the AAMC guys could have approached her palace in the first place. Sardius thought it was someone on the orbital security team, though he wasn't excluding anyone from his questioning. However, he needed proof before he could accuse anyone. He opted to work with Conrad through the night as Conrad was the least suspicious in Sardius' mind and he was already on shift, so working with him to plug the security leak immediately made the most sense.

With all that going on, Jenna did not get to stretch out next to him in bed and figure out... all that needed to be figured out.

Instead, she found herself fiddling with the control panel in her room. Now that she had Sardius' full name, she decided to do a little snooping. Who was Sardius Veritacalus? Even though the search engines in outer space were like ten thousand flyers stuffed into your mailbox, she thought she might be able to find one picture of him.

She was well rewarded.

The first picture she found was a recruitment poster. They were openly advertising for people in their system to join their cause, become freedom fighters, and join Sardius Veritacalus in the cause for rights, justice, and the Boneman way of life.

Jenna stared at the picture and she suddenly understood why he opted to dismiss his blue eyes. His eyes had not been baby blue. They had been the deep blue of an autumn sky over marigold leaves. Jenna found herself staring into them like she was suddenly given the key to why people fell in love at first sight.

Other than his eyes, his face was a little different in the posters than the version she saw of him now. He had told her when he was still in prison that he was not pleased with his current appearance, but then he also mentioned that he had been in a hospital for a while after he escaped the prison and got to her corner of the universe.

The explanation seemed simple to her. He had been a dangerous heartthrob before he had been imprisoned, but when he was caught and put in prison, his face had been wrecked. His body seemed fine. Not only did he brag constantly about how fit he was, but he had been in good enough shape to fight his way out of the prison. Now that she knew there was no such person as Ryatt, she knew he had fought his way out alone. To Jenna, that meant that his face had been smashed in again and had only recently been reconstructed.

He looked the same, but different. The dark eyes changed his look considerably, but his jaw and nose bones had a slightly different set to them. If anything, he looked like a man who seriously resembled Sardius Veritacalus without actually *being* him.

She looked at the screen.

She looked at her bed.

She looked back at the screen.

He was going to get caught.

If she kept him on as her head bodyguard and people got used to seeing him in the position through the newsreels, someone was going to piece together who he really was. What would happen then?

Jenna went to a text search and started reading articles on Sardius' crimes: the rich he'd robbed, the palaces he'd bombed, the money he'd stolen, and the wide array of people he'd pissed off.

Favel was right to allow him to be her personal assistant. If he was still in the jail there could be no one finer for training her to protect herself on the larger universal scale. However, having him in person was problematic. Someone was going to show up for a slice of revenge. Mobsters? Arms dealers? Angry billionaires? Disgraced government officials? You name it, he'd turned all their cranks the wrong way, made them lose money, killed people close to them, and enraged countless dangerous people.

Jenna could not believe the gall of him. Wasn't he afraid of dying? Torture? Consequences?

It was at that moment when the man himself came into the room. "Why aren't you sleeping?" he asked softly as he approached the bed. Then he looked at the screen and the article about him that she was reading. "Wow, Jenna," he said coldly, as he proceeded to talk about himself like he wasn't there. "You were such a good girl for so long. Even when Sardius went missing you didn't read up on him. I checked the search history when I got here to see what you'd learned about him. Why didn't you look him up then? Why now?"

She sighed and prepared to do the same thing he was doing—talk about himself as though he wasn't there. She guessed he didn't want Conrad, or anyone else, to find out his true identity. "I didn't know his last name before the marriage certificate arrived. I wanted to see how much danger he was in, why he couldn't come, why he couldn't be in love with me, and all that stuff."

He approached her. "What was your verdict?"

"Okay," she said. "I think I underestimated how much danger he was in."

"Then you know why he shouldn't be here," he said softly.

It was at that second that Jenna got it. He wasn't planning on staying. He had never been planning on staying. He had come here to check on her. Once he confirmed that she was safe, he was leaving. But going where? Where could he go? What could he do? His war back home was already won.

She clicked her tongue and wondered how she could word her questions. When she found an angle, she started. "I want to marry Sardius. I have the marriage certificate and everything, but there seems to be a reason why he doesn't want to marry me. I think you know why."

"The third husband thing is awkward," he said slowly. "Fallcet isn't the only man in the universe who would find an offer like that insulting. Honestly, I found it insulting for Vinia when she married Arvantis. The position suggests that the person who takes that role has nothing to offer but a mad set of bedroom skills. Not only do very few people have those kinds of skills, but most people have so much more to offer."

"If it's so insulting, why was Josh willing to do it? And Philip?" Jenna demanded.

"Well," Sardius grinned. "Josh is the kind of man who is not bothered by the things that others say or think. His joy comes from his craft and Celestina is his greatest muse. He films her doing

everything. Give him any label, job, or title, it doesn't matter. He's an artist in his heart and nothing can touch that."

"Well, that's positively beautiful," Jenna said, trying not to let the color of a flush reach her face.

"And Philip wants to be a dog wearing a collar and licking Excelyn's leg. He's pleased he was able to find an avenue where they could be together. You must know that won't suit Sardius." He leaned nonchalantly against the bedpost, looking for all the world like what he was saying had nothing to do with him.

Jenna glared at him. "So, you're saying Sardius does love me, it's just that he can't discard what everyone says about him and love me as much as Josh loves Celestina? And unlike Philip, he can't let anyone think I'm his owner and he's my dog?"

Ryatt chuckled.

Jenna did not expect that and her face fell, losing her aggressive edge.

The chuckle continued, deep and throaty. "I'm not sure he would mind either one of those things. There is a chasm of difference between a man like Sardius and men like Josh and Philip. Have you ever heard the term 'what goes around comes around'?"

Jenna had to stifle a snort. "Of course."

"Josh takes pictures. If he pisses anyone off with what he does, their best revenge is pictures. Pictures are pictures, they are not bombs."

Jenna softened. She saw where his argument was going.

"Likewise, with Philip," he continued. "He's an Octavian doctor, meaning that even if he does harm in his field of work, he's done so much good that a score of powerful people will have his back." Sardius huffed a breath and sat in front of Jenna cross-legged. "The problem with Sardius is threefold. First, he was the poster child of rebellion. Lots of people don't know of the identities of any other rebels. He kept other people off the posters and used himself over and over again, so as not to involve other people. Second, he personally did a great number of the crimes he was charged with. He didn't order other people to blow things up, he rigged the building himself, pressed the button himself, and told everyone he did it on the news afterward."

Jenna winced.

"Third, he hasn't made any friends in this quadrant of the universe. If anyone with a grudge from Sardius' past life hears that he's the third wife of an Octavian diplomat—"

Jenna noticed his use of the word wife instead of the word husband and frowned.

He continued, "They'll think he's gone soft and become an easy target. They'd be here as soon as their ships could carry them here. Let's be honest, Jenna. The Octavians and the Adamis would not enjoy having to use their military resources to protect a man whose outer universe conflict has arrived on their doorstep. They would either hand him over to the mobsters who have come to collect him or they would discharge you of your diplomatic responsibilities and fork you over to the mobsters along with him."

"Favel would never!" Jenna retorted.

"Favel fetching would!" Sardius bit back. "Get a clue! Favel is very benevolent, it's true, but if you think he would put your safety ahead of that of his people, you are dead wrong. You are a diplomat. You exist to *provide* safety, not for things to be sacrificed for you. You're the sacrifice if you can't gain peace any other way. Not only that, but in the ocean, there is no such thing as murder. Your individual life doesn't matter if it's feeding something larger, stronger, or more

important than you. Favel has had dozens of his children die, his wife has died, and he kills things forty times a day. That's part of the reason he's less alarmed by the blood of my rebellion than other people. He cries about what he's lost, but it's very clear what he would do if faced with that problem. It's actually because of such rampant death among Octavians that they have the option of having eight spouses. At any given moment, you might learn that one or more of them has died!"

Jenna shuddered, but let Sardius continue.

"Favel would absolutely do what he had to do to keep the peace of his home planet and I don't know how many ships would arrive or how much danger they would pose. If Sardius' enemies kill you and cut the crown off your head, they would have no problem sending it back to the Octavians like a love letter. And the Octavians would receive it with that spirit." He slowed down and put his hand on Jenna's. "Do you understand now?"

Jenna nodded. She hadn't thought of any of that. She let go of his hand and flopped on the bed. "Sorry. I was being stupid and selfish. I was only thinking about how lonely I have always been, how yummy he is, and how I have been pining for him since I realized I was in love."

"Yummy? After all these years and all his broken noses, he's not as yummy as he used to be. However, Sardius is a responsible person and he would never tell you he loved you if he couldn't give you his love. He needs time to amass some of his previous strength before he comes to you."

The cryptic way they were talking was making it hard for Jenna to ask direct questions, but she managed to think of one Sardius could answer as Ryatt. "You want to go to him, don't you? But you can't because your job here is to make sure I'm safe, but I'm not safe."

"Exactly." He turned to the screen with the flashy picture of Sardius being displayed in ten thousand colors and instructed, "Close that up, and let's not look him up again."

Jenna blackened the screen, aware that she couldn't moon over Sardius' old pictures without someone noticing something. It was a good thing Ixy was asleep. That was the sort of thing she noticed.

She also understood what he was trying to tell her. He couldn't be anything more to her right now than Ryatt, her bodyguard. That was all he could offer her. He wouldn't touch her or love her or do anything to escalate their relationship, not as Sardius and not as Ryatt. He was putting a divide up between them and giving her ferocious reasons why the divide couldn't be crossed.

Jenna breathed and breathed while she aligned herself with reality.

It wasn't the lack of sex that bothered her. They had only kissed three times. Sex was a million miles away on her relationship roadmap. It was their emotional connection. As far as she was concerned, he'd already been inside her brain in a way no other person had ever been before. He'd seen her naked, chosen her clothing, and seen her at her most vulnerable. She wasn't sure what else she had to give him.

On the other side of that coin, what had he given her?

She hesitated. Her first impulse was to ask him to take off his clothes and give her a little show. He'd seen her undressed often enough that it was only fair, but the request turned to ashes on her tongue. It wasn't right to demand such things. He had never once demanded that she take off her clothes for his amusement or to deepen their intimacy.

She couldn't ask him personal questions either. He had already said everything he was willing to say. Not to mention that every time they spoke of Sardius they had to do so in a backward, third-person, way. It was confusing and it weakened their communication.

Jenna was figuratively scratching her head wondering how to proceed.

He interrupted. "Let's put Sardius aside and talk about how you got kidnapped and why Smoothie is gone."

Jenna sat upright. "Smoothie is gone?"

Chapter Three

Lost More Than A Crown

“Smoothie is gone?” Jenna asked in alarm. “I thought they told me that everyone was unharmed.”

“Everyone was unharmed.” Sardius crossed his arms. “Let me explain. When the AAMC broke into your palace the first time and Sardius sent you to Favel’s mansion during the prison riot, they didn’t need to hack anything. The soldiers were already aboard the palaces, and Sardius could have chosen to shoot them with the rail guns installed in the palace, but he did not because things would look a lot better for you if he didn’t. He had already arranged the removal of everything important and then he simply instructed Smoothie to beat the tar out of the guys in the servants’ wing. It went fine.”

“This time they weren’t already here though,” Jenna said, going through what she knew.

“Right. So, this time, the AAMC had to be more prepared to jump in with both feet. They secured a defector from the orbital security team to help them. The guns in your palace were offline because the rat opened a window in our online security. They hacked your system, took your guns offline, and severed Ixy’s connection to the Dahlia Palace, though not to you personally. Your earpiece still worked. Are you following me?” he asked gravely.

Jenna nodded.

“Good. Then they had to eliminate Smoothie. Fallcet teased that he would do so when he ate that mushroom in front of us, which was gross, clumsy, and telling. They didn’t hurt her. It was completely unnecessary to do so. They merely brought another Sushfief in and had him talk to Smoothie. She couldn’t move at all. Smoothie was lonely for her planet and her people. She couldn’t hurt the other Sushfief and he canceled out every move she tried to make.” Sardius rubbed the back of his ear. “She felt terrible about not protecting your palace, packed her bags, and left before Favel picked us up from the warehouse.”

Jenna sighed. “She must have needed money badly to stay here if it has been that lonely for her.”

“Yeah, that’s the situation. In any case, they didn’t hurt her. She’s fine. Conrad managed to get her on a communication line and she’s still leaving. She’s been traveling ship to ship to get back to her home world.”

“Have you talked to her?” Jenna persisted.

“Yeah. I got off the commlink with her about an hour ago.”

“And you couldn’t convince her to come back?” Jenna asked sadly.

He gave his head a micro shake. “Once she told me the whole story, which she readily spilled, I did ask her to come back. I said you were safe and that no one was angry with her. I said that you could handle yourself with Fallcet and there was nothing she had to apologize for. Then she cried a lot and said she needed time to think. I told her to take all the time she needs.”

“Do you believe that or was that just something you told her?”

“What?”

Jenna elaborated, “That I could handle myself with Fallcet?”

Sardius wasn't there when Fallcet interrogated her. He didn't know what she'd done or how she'd acted, not even that she kept laughing in Fallcet's face.

Sardius tweaked his nose. "Yes. Of course, you can handle Fallcet. I don't think there's anyone you can't handle. After all, you keep learning more and more about Sardius and nothing you learn about him seems to turn you off him. Personally, I find that unbelievable. Fallcet is a little fish and he's easy for you to handle because he's completely enamored with you."

Jenna snorted. "No, he isn't. A man like that could never love anyone but himself."

"Maybe so," Sardius agreed, "but you are so curiously blind to your own charm."

"What charm?" Jenna asked languidly, parting her lips on the question mark.

He inched closer to her on the bed. "You are very sexy on the outside, don't get me wrong, but if you weren't as hard as nails on the inside, all that soft sexiness would fall very flat. Do you know what is most valuable?"

Jenna shook her head. "Tell me."

"It's what is unattainable. That is what is most valuable. According to the laws of supply and demand, something that is in low supply is more valuable. It's valuable according to scarcity. According to that principle, the most valuable thing in the universe is a person. It's always a person, not a mineral or a piece of technology. It's a person. There will never be another person like that. They're one in a trillion. You come off like that. Like you're not easy to get and whoever does get you is the luckiest devil in the universe. Fallcet may have thousands of matches through the universal matching algorithm, and he may have thought that an offer to be a third husband was insulting, but he's eating it right now. He wishes he had said yes. If he said yes, he'd be here in your bed pleasuring himself with the most valuable woman in the universe instead of in a holding tank with an octopus beak stuck to his head."

Jenna chuckled. "And yet..." She looked Sardius over with eyes and spoke of their situation. He was sitting on the bed with her and nothing remotely racy was happening.

He gathered her meaning and fiddled with his collar. Then he said something that meant more to Jenna than anything else anyone had ever said before. "No one can come to you until they have as much to give you as what you can give them."

He had been thinking the same thing she had thought, that their relationship was off-balance because she had given more about herself to him than he had been able to give in return. When he said 'no one' he meant himself. In a perfect world, he would have said, "I can't come to you until I can bring you all that I am wrapped in a bow."

For now, he couldn't.

"However," Sardius continued. "I will tell you a story and put you to bed."

"You're going to tuck me into bed?" she exclaimed incredulously as he moved around the bed, getting her organized for sleep. He placed a glass of water next to her on the bed stand, pulled the blankets up for her, and pulled the bed curtains to shelter her from the lights that were left on all the time.

He got into bed next to her without any bravado and began his story. "Once upon a time, there was a little mushroom who lived at the queen's palace as a cook. The days passed quietly and almost happily. However, tragedy struck and she felt such sorrow that she had to run across the stars until she could calm the sound of her heart. Back at the palace, the rock the little mushroom left behind looked around and wondered why they needed a cook. Their queen did

not eat. She merely drank liquids, so the rock volunteered to make the queen's drinks until the little mushroom felt well enough to return."

Jenna laughed. "You're turning your nightly report into fairy tales? And Vash really agreed to take over Smoothie's kitchen duties indefinitely?"

Sardius nodded.

"I'm relieved. That is surprisingly generous of him. Did Smoothie leave a way for us to get in touch with her? I'd like to send her a note reiterating what you told her, so she can return if she wants to."

"Yeah. I'll hook you up." He gave her a charming grin before admitting, "I'd like to make the rest of what I have to say a fairytale to make it less jarring, but I'm afraid I'll make it sound more terrifying than it is if I do that. You see, Conrad and I found the breaches in the orbital security team's code. I think we've patched it and I've sent a request to Temptic to have the whole floor crew switched out, but that still may not be enough to restore your peace of mind. Conrad and I are going to keep working on it... mostly him. He has a better workspace in the prison than I have here. I'm going to interview the staff we're pulling to see if I can figure out who our rat is."

"Yeah, I can see why you'd want to tell it to me straight instead of weaving it into some sort of sci-fi fairy tale. Who does that anyway?" Jenna joked with a playful flick of her wrist.

"Yeah, I don't know why anyone would find that entertaining," Sardius agreed.

Chapter Four

Autocorrect Makes Fallcet Into Faucet (obviously because he's a drip)

Jenna had a conference room made up in the Sand Palace. The place was not decorated like the Dahlia Palace, which was all white and vibrant magenta. The Sand Palace boasted glittering walls that were actually covered in sand. One brush of her hand against the wall of the conference room left Jenna a little speechless. They had wallpapered the rooms with sandpaper—pretty sandpaper—but sandpaper nonetheless. She was so grateful she had not been given the Sand Palace. She would have filed her nails on the walls like she was part cat, hating herself all the while.

Putting those thoughts aside, Jenna met Fallcet at the conference table with Crimp and Sardijs on either side of him. The most delightful thing about the newly crowned diplomat was that he had Sardijs' handprint on his face in bright purple. Sardijs' slap the previous day had been so hard and so intense that it left that kind of a mark? She felt a fresh flush of love for Sardijs. He was too incredible.

"Jenna, was all this really necessary?" Fallcet asked darkly as he rattled his handcuffs. He was a mess. He needed to shave, shower, change his clothes, get some sleep, and maybe have something to eat.

"Have you had breakfast?" she asked from the head of the conference table. She was looking to solve only the most pressing of his problems.

He nodded.

"Then have a seat. Leave his handcuffs on. I don't want any sudden movements in this meeting."

Sardijs and Crimp placed him a few seats down from Jenna. Close enough so she could see the expressions on his face, but far enough away that he couldn't snatch at her if he wanted to.

She was about to start talking, about to begin the interview when she suddenly remembered that Sardijs had told her that it was his policy to put bombs under chairs... under *all the chairs* when he set up for a meeting. It was the first time she'd had a formal meeting in a conference room since she became a diplomat.

Adjusting her earpiece, she wondered if there was an indirect way she could ask Ixy if there was a bomb under her chair. Unable to think of a way to ask that didn't give it away, she turned back to Fallcet.

"I-is everything okay?" he asked, sputtering a little through his swollen lip.

"Yeah. Everything is great," she took a heavy breath in, centered her thoughts, and started her questioning. "I guess the biggest question on my mind is why you wanted to be a diplomat without living on the floating palaces with the rest of us? Are your boys at the AAMC planning on bombing the planet, killing all of the rest of the diplomats, and leaving you as the only living survivor?"

"How crude," Fallcet said drolly.

Jenna tapped her nails against the smooth tabletop. "You don't think they'd bomb Octavia Prime? The method of murder is unimportant, but was that their plan? If you were away, you'd be spared whatever gruesome fate they had in store for the rest of us?"

Fallcet stuck his chin out and looked away like he was bored.

Jenna considered his stance. "You do realize I'm going to have to keep you close as a response to your taking a crown, especially because it was without my consent."

"Does that mean I'll be sleeping in your bed? I don't know if there will be room for the three of us," he said, giving Sardius a dirty look.

Jenna was completely unrattled by his insult. "No," she said without skipping a beat. "It means that you are now under house arrest. You are not allowed to leave the floating palaces without the permission of every single diplomat. As for where you will sleep, you'll sleep here, in the Sand Palace. I've arranged for the master suite to be given to you."

"Pity," he said sadly.

Jenna leaned back in her chair. "What's your play here? I've already refused you romantically. What good is it going to do to sexually harass me now?"

"Nothing. It just drives you nuts because you clearly don't have much romantic experience. I know you're not shagging him," he said, pointing a thumb at Sardius. "He's just sleeping in your bed because you're too scared to sleep alone."

Jenna refused to let a look of annoyance cross her features. She didn't know who she should be cursing from the orbital security team who allowed their system to be hacked and, thus, video footage of her everyday life to be leaked. He was trying to freak her out and it was working though she hadn't yet let it show. She had to buckle down and kick him back.

"The algorithm matched us," he continued confidently. "Having me around will be like torture for you. You said you didn't want me before. Well, that was because of the mushroom I ate and the fact that you don't want to listen to the AAMC. By extension, you don't want to talk to me, but soon, you'll be crying into your meal replacement shake. You'll want me like I'm an itch under your skin that you can't scratch. I'll be here, but you won't be able to have me."

She groaned loudly. "You are so dumb!"

The sound caught him off-guard and he jumped a little in his seat.

"I am very romantically experienced," Jenna continued. "That's why I'm such an unpleasant person. It's because I don't fall for cheap lines or cheap men and you look super cheap to me. And you're extra dumb because you're trying to threaten the thing I hold dearest in the world. My duty."

"Your duty? You weren't even doing this job this time last year," he shot back.

Jenna smacked her lips with a condescending smile. Fallcet didn't understand what her grandfather had been like and what his effect on Jenna had been. Her grandfather had been everything she loved. He had been gentle, intelligent, and the person she wished she could be like most. He had taught her about her grandmother and he held Jenna up in the air like she was the most important child in the universe. Because of the dark hooked crown on her head that she couldn't take off, Jenna believed him completely.

She cleared her throat. "Fallcet, no matter what the matching algorithm said, I'm not attracted to you. I didn't fill out my side of the test. Someone else filled it out for me on my behalf. It's invalid. I'm not going to fall for you and the longer you keep spouting crap, the less we'll get done. The only path forward that doesn't involve me killing you is you allowing me to finish my

work the way I began—my way. I'm still willing to crown at least one more AAMC guy, but I'm not willing to give them all the votes they want."

"You have to," he insisted. "If you don't, they'll kill all your diplomats to get the majority they need."

"They wouldn't dare kill Celestina," Jenna shot back, thinking of the reporter's famous and fabulously rich media mogul family.

"Fine. That's true, but they'll kill Excelyn or Philip. Like you said, it's the only way to get the crowns off them. It doesn't matter who you crown at this point, if they aren't approved of by the AAMC, they'll kill them."

Jenna didn't worry about how the AAMC would kill them. They had proven that since they were able to kidnap Jenna there might not be any limits to what they could do, even on a planet like Octavia Prime. The Octavians just didn't operate in the same world as the Adamis since one was a land creature and the other a sea creature.

She glanced at Sardius. He was pulling his thumb across his throat in a lazy kill motion. Crimp was sticking her index finger in her ear and making her hand look like a gun that was going to blow her own head off.

Jenna felt her heartbeat relax a little as she saw their attitudes. They weren't scared. They knew talk was cheap.

"I'm not sure that will work, even if they kill me, Excelyn, and Philip," Jenna taunted. "I mean, someone managed to get rid of all the last round of diplomats, and look, the AAMC still isn't getting what they want."

Fallcet did not like being reminded of that fact.

Jenna cleared her throat. "I can't rescind your appointment now, but you know what I can do?"

"What?"

"I can give you a chance," she offered generously. She felt very generous as she said the words. "I think that after you spend some time with us, working with us, your opinion of me, and what I'm doing will change for the better."

He scoffed.

She ignored him and began by giving him some information that she hoped he would find valuable. "I have to tell you something because you don't seem to know how crowning works. I imagine the program hasn't been used to its full potential since my grandmother retired, but there are more than three more crowns left in my bag of tricks. There are not just eight to distribute. There are stacks of them. It's only that we need eight diplomats to vote on what treaties to present to the Octavians. There could be twenty diplomats. I was crowned for years before I was brought to serve."

"That's part of the problem," Fallcet rasped. "They needed you for years and you didn't come. We haven't had a full roster of diplomats in decades, and that is your fault."

Jenn laughed again. "It's impossible for you to make me feel bad about this. No one approached me and told me that they needed me on Octavia Prime. Everyone just half-assedly tried to abduct me with lame lines... and... shit," she said slowly, putting the pieces together in a new way in her mind. "It wasn't the Octavians who were trying to abduct me all those times. It was the Adamis. I didn't evade 212 abduction attempts. Your guys weren't trying to get me to come help. They were trying to leave me on Earth without bringing me to Octavia Prime and

covering it with half-hearted attempts to get my attention. Armen was an Octavian idea, not an Adamis idea. You guys would have left me on Earth forever.”

“Why are you attributing those actions to me?” Fallcet responded angrily. “None of that was *my* idea. It was not *my* idea. I am an Adamis, but those actions were not *my* idea. The only thing that is *my* idea is this.” He waved his hand around. “This is the best thing I can do.”

“This?” Jenna repeated, looking for clarity.

“Yes. This,” Fallcet spat. “I am a diplomat and a very good one too. There are some very trigger-happy people in the AAMC and they want to go to war with the Octavians. By the end of next year, they’ll have twice as many ships as the Octavians and though they have historically been less than capable when it comes to space travel, all of that is going to change.”

“Why?”

“Because some cute Adamis scientist figured out how to make a liquid that humans can breathe. Humans were not built to suck a liquid into their lungs and push it out again whether it has oxygen they can absorb in it or not, but with a few slight body modifications, the liquid can escape their body through tubes set between their ribs. All a person has to do is train their body to only breathe in and it works. Then, they can move around with almost as much control as an octopus in water. Granted, we don’t have as many appendages to work controls on a spacecraft, but they’re training people to work in teams to have better cooperation. It’s looking bad for the Octavians because so many powerful Adamis are pissed at them for what they perceive as overcharging. We need to get the AAMC voice straight through to the Octavians. They don’t have to kill anyone if you’re willing to vote along with the AAMC people and we can’t fucking wait for you to casually crown three more people you deem worthy on TV. People in high places are getting impatient, and I wouldn’t like the Octavians to get attacked with no warning because diplomatic talks are on hiatus eternally.”

Jenna clicked her tongue and snapped her fingers. “Now we’re getting somewhere. Good. This is good.”

Fallcet’s face contorted. His exact thoughts were a mystery to Jenna, but he refocused himself and continued, “What I’m saying is that I am trying to reestablish a line of communication between the Adamis and the Octavians. What you said about the Adamis’ half-hearted attempts to get you off-world are probably a hundred percent true and they change my perception of you. If what you said about that is true, then I’m sorry for what I said. You weren’t trying to evade your responsibility.”

“No. I wasn’t. I think I can help you, but I do need a few things from you, just to get started.”

“Tell me.” He looked quite desperate.

Jenna glanced over his head at Sardius and Crimp. The poison girl had crossed her arms and was looking at the back of Fallcet’s head like he had spilled the beans in a way she had never believed possible without a little well-planted toxicity.

The Boneman looked grouchy. “We’re going to have to let his bruises heal before we put him on TV,” he said simply before he leaned forward and unbuckled Fallcet’s cuffs. “Either that or cake him in makeup.”

Jenn smiled. “It’s fine with me if you beat his ribs a little.”

Chapter Five

Hang All the Moons

Jenna stood next to Sardius. He was grumbling with his teeth clenched and his annoyance visible.

"Try to keep the disgust off your face," Jenna said with a smile as they watched Celestina interview the newly crowned Fallcet on the deck of the Sun Palace.

She nudged him.

"I should be pleased," he conceded. "He's been very forthcoming with information. Aside from where the leak in the orbital team came from, everything he's said has been verified and the urgency to finish crowning eight diplomats is very real. The talks with him feel very different from when he was first here. Don't get me wrong though. If anything, I hate him more."

"Why? What's different?" Jenna wondered.

Sardius' expression went to a blank deadpan as he said, "Because he's completely in love with you. I knew he was feeling a little lovelorn before, but it's much worse now. He thinks you hung the moon, and not just one moon—all the moons. Now every time he looks at you, he looks at you like the world revolves only because you're on it. It's nauseating. It's also disgusting because he's found the way to your heart. You told him yourself that your core is your duty. Now, when he talks to you, he stretches the limits of what he should tell you in every conversation. He wants to impress you with his resourcefulness. Is it working, Madam Diplomat?"

Jenna shrugged. "I don't think I did anything, in particular, to make him fall in love with me. The only thing that makes sense is that he said he fell in love with all the women the algorithm matched him up with. He told me as much before. Doubtless, it will soon pass."

Sardius watched unblinkingly as Fallcet snuck a quick adoring glance at Jenna. "I don't know," the Boneman huffed.

"Look, I spent five days in conference with him. You were present for every conversation I had with him."

Sardius rubbed his eyes. "Those were the worst five days of my life."

Jenna shrugged. "I don't want to talk about him anymore." She didn't think anything of Fallcet. He was finally speaking her language, but that didn't make them besties.

Jenna and Sardius stood there in silence for a few minutes, watching the interview and Celestina's winning smiles.

Finally, Jenna said quietly. "I think I can manage everything here. If Fallcet can muzzle the AAMC on my behalf, I shouldn't have any further security breaches. You should go." She didn't mean to leave her to watch the rest of the interview alone, she meant for him to get off-world.

Their eyes met.

He blinked his gray/brown eyes at her and dismissed her idea. "That's a terrible plan, Jenna. We let the wolf into the hen house. He's got his own pen, but that doesn't mean you're safe. Sure, you can handle him, but he's not alone, even if he appears so. He's got a crowd of very impressive backers including his father and the rest of his militaristic family. What good is it

going to do to leave you to gather power just to return to find that you've been ravaged in the meantime? I can't leave. You need more power."

Jenna exhaled a hot breath. She wanted to ask him a million questions. If he planned to change his identity, then why didn't he have more cosmetic surgery done? She wouldn't have known any different when she met him. As it was, she couldn't ask anything. She slid her hand into his and laced their fingers. With her thumb, she touched the protruding bones on his knuckles. He never wore the padded hand covers now that Fallcet was there all the time.

"I'll let you have your way without complaint if you tell me you love me," she whispered, knowing full well that Ixy could hear her and was listening intently.

Without looking at her, he whispered in her ear. "I'm pleased you're trying to break me. I want you to break me. It's a thrilling idea, but," he said, his tone turning light, "you won't be able to."

"We'll see," she said, letting go of his hand and clapping at the end of Celestina's recording.

When she was finished on the stage, Celestina came over and hooked Jenna by the arm. "I'm taking you to see Excelyn and Philip. You missed their wedding."

"I was stuck in the conference room," Jenna said in her defense.

"Yeah, that's what I heard. Don't worry. Josh edited footage of you to make it look like you were there. You have to debrief us. I filmed Fallcet's interview like you said and explained away why he didn't have his crown put on in front of a universe-wide audience, so you could get another crown from the fish, but something is fishier than the way you're getting the sixth crown. Spill your guts, Jenna."

"Fine. Let's go."

They walked together to the Stone Palace, with Sardius trailing behind them to meet Excelyn and Philip in the courtyard.

"We were supposed to be taking pictures meant to promote your engagement to Favel," Celestina continued, talking to Jenna. "But you disappeared. You were lucky we had something else to give the audience."

Jenna turned to the happy couple. "Thank you, both of you, for getting married immediately on public TV to hide the fact that I was dealing with the aftermath of having been kidnapped for the second time in my life. To be honest, I still haven't gotten over the first time," she chuckled.

They smiled.

"It was horrible," Excelyn stated with a hollow look in her eyes. "All those cameras pointed at us. All those wedding planners Celestina brought in. How we had to film the same scenes over and over again so Josh could get the right angles. If I was in a marching band, there would have been less standing. Yet, even though it was exhausting, it was still so much better than our first wedding."

"It was," Philip agreed with a tense eyebrow twitch.

"That's a relief," Jenna said with a smile. "Congratulations Excelyn. And Philip," she said, turning her attention to him. "I promise I'll insult you later, but right now, I have so much to tell you both."

Celestina smiled the compulsory smile at Jenna before dropping it to say, "Now sit your butt down, Jenna. Why are we suddenly accepting the mushroom eater into our ranks?"

Jenna couldn't bear to tell them the whole truth, that the AAMC would kill them (aside from Celestina) if they didn't get the representation they wanted. Jenna was fine to explain the impending threat of war. That felt like reason enough. It was just that Fallcet had proven to her

when he kidnapped her that the AAMC could have killed her if they'd wanted to. They also could have easily killed Excelyn and Philip that night if they'd been determined. The diplomats were not safe on Octavia Prime and not even Sardius could protect them all by himself. They could all work better if they didn't know.

Jenna would have to work harder than ever to secure everyone's safety.

Sardius stood behind Jenna's deck chair and clasped his hands behind his back. The action was figurative and literal.

"To start with," Jenna began, "Fallcet has promised to never eat another mushroom as long as he lives. Actually, he's promised to stop eating altogether."

"We wouldn't want him to get pink streaks in his hair," Philip said, sending his wife a teasing smile.

"You're going to have to forget immediately that Fallcet kidnapped me, that he ate a mushroom, that he acted like an ass, and that he crowned himself on his own. He did it as an act of desperation because he doesn't want a war to break out and we're quite a bit closer to the edge of one than I realized. There are people in the AAMC as well as in the Adamis Alliance Government who are perfectly happy to let Adamis and Octavian relations fall to crap. Fallcet kidnapped me partially to speed the crowning of new diplomats. He wanted me to crown four diplomats of his choosing in order to get the right people talking to the Octavians."

"That sounds terrible," Excelyn grumbled.

"Oh, and it is," Jenna agreed.

"There are only three diplomatic positions open," Celestina commented. "Which one of us was supposed to bow out? Wait, we can't bow out, can we?"

"It's true. We can't," Jenna admitted. "Once we're crowned, we're crowned for life, but there are more crowns than just three. I have over twenty. Even before this happened, I had an idea swirling around in my head. What if... I gave up my seat?"

"Jenna, no," Celestina disagreed instantly.

"Hear me out, please. I wouldn't die or give up my crown. The reason this program got down to one Adamis diplomat is because people want this program to fail. That's why there were so many diplomats who were killed in accidents. But we don't have to let things grind to a halt if we stand together. To do that, we need to enlist many Adamis to stand up for this alliance. We need to crown more than eight diplomats. We need twenty, maybe thirty. We need enough that can make treaties that can be passed to the Octavians right away. They haven't been in talks in years because they can't get eight people in the chairs. We need people powerful enough that no one wants to assassinate them. We need backups for the diplomats living in the palaces and backups for the backups. I have to tell you all that I feel within myself that my role here was never to take a seat myself, but only to make sure that the seats stay full."

Excelyn and Philip reached for each other's hands and Celestina wrung hers together.

"You're saying you're going to do what Fallcet wants and you are essentially giving him your seat?"

"I'm not giving him my seat, but I have to give someone my seat if I'm going to continue recruitment."

"I hate this, Jenna," Celestina said.

"I'm sorry, girls, but I don't know what else to do to make sure this program keeps going or how to give the AAMC what they want without actually giving them what they want."

"Wait, are you including me with the girls?" Philip asked suspiciously.

"Yes," Jenna replied instantly. "Girls have been included with the word guys for ages. Suck it up."

He nodded while Excelyn laughed.

"So, you won't be gone?" Celestina asked nervously.

"Not for ages. There's so much work to do and since Philip is living with Excelyn in the Stone Palace, there is an extra Palace for me even after I have eight diplomats crowned. In any case," Jenna said, returning the meeting to the important part of the conversation. "I will be around. If I have to leave to go on recruitment missions, I'll return to Octavia Prime every single time I crown a new diplomat for the ceremony and to retrieve a new crown."

"That won't make good TV after a while," Celestina commented.

"No. It won't," Jenna agreed. "But we'll have to do it. If you'd like, we can shorten the interview and just show clips of the crowning. It doesn't matter to me as long as it's enough to get my fish network to fork over another crown."

"Fine. As long as you know I won't be able to peddle that to audiences forever. As long as we're talking about good TV, are you still going to have engagement pictures taken with Favel? I mean, is your engagement to him still important if you're not going to come to the treaty table?"

"Obviously, I need to speak to him and find out what he thinks and feels about all these changes. I've invited him to visit me tonight."

Once she'd said everything she'd planned to say, Jenna let silence move into their meeting. Excelyn and Philip held hands and looked at her sadly. Celestina twisted her hair around her finger like she couldn't stand to stop moving or meet Jenna's eyes.

"I know why you're doing this," Celestina said softly. "It's to protect all of us by strengthening the program. It's a very worthy thing you're doing. Are you going to have enough money? I understood that you left Earth with nothing except the clothes on your back."

"I have money," Jenna admitted.

Celestina pulled her finger out from inside her curl and stared at Jenna. "What do you plan to do once all the crowns have been given away and the program is secure? What then?"

"I'm not even thinking about it."

"Will you come back here and take a seat?" she asked forcefully.

Jenna smiled. "If I learn anything about being a diplomat, maybe I will."

Celestina did not look convinced or soothed, but she leaned back in her chair and said, "You've got to come back all the time and set things right if they go astray."

"If you put it that way," Jenna laughed. "I would be happy to return to kick some ass and hurl some insults. After all, I've been invited so kindly."

Only after hearing that did Celestina quiet down.

Chapter Six

When Everything is Blue

Favel arrived after the sun dipped behind the ocean line. He leaped up into his stemmed chair and put two tentacles together as if he were steeping his fingers. "All right. You were kidnapped, but you handled your captors so well that you have been returned home without a scratch on you and it's still business as usual. You live beyond my expectations continually."

Jenna tugged on her earring in agitation. She was coming to realize that the Octavians couldn't always protect her from her own people. It wasn't their job. Besides, she could hardly be an efficient diplomat if her own people wanted to kill her.

She inwardly groaned. She was in a tough position. Even if Favel couldn't always protect her, he was still her ally.

Jenna scratched behind her ear and took his compliment with a grain of salt. "Yeah, there is that, but we have to talk about the security breach. Ryatt and Conrad have confirmed that it was someone on the orbital security team who opened a virtual window for the AAMC hackers. They've replaced them and they've been talking to them about the possibility of a rat on board, but they're acting like it had nothing to do with them. I want you to talk to Temptic about it directly. I know he doesn't have an official position up there, but surely he can push some weight around."

Favel bobbed his head. "He surely can. With that out of the way, how is your staff holding up? I was concerned that they weren't doing a good enough job caring for you and when you went missing, my suspicions were verified."

"It wasn't their fault. A Sushfief held Smoothie down while the AAMC guys gassed me. It was so subtle, I didn't even hear them until I had a gun in my face."

Favel sat up. "I'm not blaming your staff if that's what you're worried about. There's no point in blaming people when the outcome wasn't terrible. You tamed the wild Fallcet and brought him here on a leash. You're looking much better, but it was obviously not him who worked out the kinks in your shoulders. Good work, Ryatt?" Favel probably didn't mean to phrase that as a question, but it came out as one.

When Sardius heard his fake name, he entered the room almost on cue. He had obviously been listening outside the door.

Favel leaned back in his goblet and stared at the Boneman who was now standing at attention behind Jenna.

"Yep, keep on rubbing her shoulders and we'll get along fine. I'd do it myself, except humans taste so weird," Favel said, looking at the suckers on his tentacles.

Sardius had never once rubbed her shoulders.

Pushing on, Jenna wasted no further time and told Favel her plan to protect the program rather than act as a diplomat herself. Which brought her number of immediately required recruits up to four instead of three.

The blue Octavian was stunned. He slumped in his goblet. "Well, this is a shock. I agree that this is absolutely what needs to happen, but I was loath to admit it myself or ask you to do it. Your greatness spins the world around."

"Thank you," she said, putting out a hand to touch the lip of his goblet chair like she was placing a hand on his arm had he been a human. "But how does this change things between us? Do you still want to marry me?"

"I do. Honestly, my people will approve of your sacrifice very much. But if you give up your palace to another diplomat, where will you live?"

Jenna reminded him of the facts: Excelyn and Philip could share a palace, she had the money she and Vash had uncovered in her bedroom, and the existence of the house she had on Octavia Five.

When she mentioned her grandfather's house on Octavia Five, Favel perked up. "I can't let you go there! Octavia Five is a vacation spot for Adamis who miss land. It isn't at the center of things at all. I'll arrange for you to have a house here. I can't let my eighth wife live in a guest house on Octavia Five! It's unheard of."

"I do admit that staying here would be easier," Jenna agreed. "We can use all the palace space we can get if I crown as many diplomats as I imagine so I'll accept your offer. Would it be at all possible for us to choose a place together rather than you choosing it without me?" Jenna had no idea how Octavians managed such things and she wanted to have a little input.

He tossed a tentacle like he was flicking his wrist. "Leave it to me," he said, vetoing her suggestion that she be consulted on the design. "I'll build you something from scratch. Don't get your hopes up though. It will be similar to what you have now. I'm not going to ask you to live in vastly different circumstances from the other diplomats. It will be a floating palace. I'll have it built underwater and pushed to the surface when it's ready. I have a few months, don't I? Before all your scheming comes to fruition and there's a line of eight people with crowns on their heads?"

"I think so," Jenna agreed. "I promised Fallcet that I'd speed the selection of the three AAMC diplomats I've promised to crown. On another note, Armen and Lucy will be arriving tomorrow. I've given them the Salt Palace for the time that they spend here, just because I don't want them near anyone. Lucy is very excited because she's coming to deliver my cat, Charm, to me. Once they arrive, she won't be their responsibility anymore."

"Ah, your cat? Out of pure interest, have you warmed up to Moonbeam at all? Josh was telling me that he wanted to get pictures of the two of us with her. If Charm is coming, perhaps she can also be part of the pictures?"

Jenna took a deep breath in. She couldn't tell Favel that she had not warmed up to Moonbeam at all and that the very site of the furlee made her want to drop-kick it into the ocean. It wasn't that creepy. It wasn't even that different from a cat. Its eyes weren't horrible to look at, but Jenna couldn't warm up at all. It was as if something in her very DNA told her to be afraid, told her to be on edge, and she couldn't reprogram herself.

Jenna sidestepped the question. "I'm very curious to see how Charm reacts to Moonbeam. She's getting kicked out of Lucy and Armen's for bad behavior. She's practically scratched a hole in my cousin. I hope she doesn't kill Moonbeam on sight." Even though the odds were very much in Moonbeam's favor just because of how many more claws she had, Jenna had seen Charm inflict serious damage on people, dogs, and other cats. It had even been suggested to

Jenna when she was back on Earth that Charm was too dangerous and ought to be put down. Jenna ignored them since her cat had never put a single scratch on her. All the same, she hoped Charm and Moonbeam scrapped too much to make living together a possibility.

She crossed her fingers.

"Moonbeam is a gentle creature," Favel said reflectively. "Ryatt, please watch over their meeting and make sure neither of them is hurt."

Sardius nodded, not a tenth as bloodthirsty as Jenna.

Suddenly the thought occurred to her that maybe she wasn't the right sort of person to even own a pet. "Favel, in the future, please do not give me any more pets."

He nodded his mantle. "I agree. I have been considering taking Moonbeam back before we take any pictures at all. Maybe the last thing we need is for everyone in the universe to take an interest in your pets. We'll see how it goes with Charm tomorrow."

A lull in the conversation appeared.

Favel lifted himself up briefly out of the sloshing water of his goblet. "It's getting late and I should really go. Take good care of my fiance, Ryatt. I'll bid you both a good night."

Jenna waved a quiet goodbye to Favel as he exited through the ocean exit. The door had just shut when Ixy sounded in Jenna's ear.

"I heard a rumor that you were going to turn me over to work for forking Fallcet. Is that true, Jenna?" she whined painfully.

"I'm going to need you to not make that sound again," Jenna insisted, having the hardest time not pulling the pearl earpiece out. "You're going to crush my eardrum. So far, I have no intention of assigning Fallcet a PA at all. Look, there's another reason I invited Lucy and Armen here. Apparently, no one took Armen's earpiece and he's been running around with a free personal assistant ever since I expelled him. I have to get that earpiece back from him."

"Does that mean you're going to give that PA to Fallcet?" Ixy asked, sounding relieved before Jenna had answered her question.

"I'm not giving Fallcet a PA at all, nor am I giving one to any of the AAMC diplomats we crown. I'm going to give the earpiece I get from Armen to Philip."

"What about me and Conrad?" Ixy whined again.

"I don't have any plans to change those personnel assignments," Jenna said, matching Ixy's whine.

"Okay. What are you going to do with Lucy here? Are they just popping by to drop off Charm and give you the earpiece?" Ixy asked sharply. "I can't imagine you entertaining them. Are you going to take them to the docks? Shuttle them around underwater to see the coral? Feed them juice through a fluit? Ha! You'd hate doing that. Lucy is like you, except *more* annoying!"

Jenna wasn't particularly interested in whether or not Ixy was respectful regarding Lucy, so she shrugged her shoulders. "Yeah, I don't think she crashes spaceships either."

Ixy chuckled airily. "I'm convinced Ivy and I could take down the new AAMC fleet. Just put Ivy and I in a bar with a few of their pilots and we'd crash their ships into the unpiloted ones. We'd cause so much damage--"

"They'd put you in jail," Jenna finished for her.

"Sure, but then if you and Ryatt sprung us, we could disguise ourselves and go do it again and again and again. Or you could get your old pal Sardius out of hiding to help us. Has he told you how many jails he's escaped from? He's a legend!" She sang the last words.

"Sign off, Ixy," Jenna said, sternly shutting her PA down.

Jenna waited for the click before strolling toward the bedroom with Sardius a step behind her.

"Well, I may not be Sardius," he lied, "but I know a few things about escaping from a prison." He sounded like the rogue who always got his way. He kicked the bedroom door shut and stepped smoothly toward Jenna. "The first thing you have to do when you're escaping from a prison is figure out where the soft spot is. Is it the jailer? Is it the material the jail is made of? Where is it soft?" His hands were all over her as if he were experimenting with where the softest place on her could be. In the next second, he was tickling her in her most sensitive place, right above her knee.

Jenna shrieked in shock. Had he really touched her like that?

"Is it here?" he asked playfully as he moved his hand up to pinch the ribs at her waist.

Jenna rushed her hands to the spot to protect herself.

He continued speaking like he had never touched her and put his hands behind his back. "The second thing is that you have to want it badly. You have to want it like you've never wanted anything before."

"Are you ticklish?" she demanded.

"No," he said with a click of his tongue. "Touch me anywhere. I won't flinch."

So Jenna grabbed his side and just like he said, he didn't budge. She grabbed at all the sensitive parts she knew, but touching him was nothing like touching a man from Earth.

"Fine, you're not sensitive anywhere," she said, striding away from him toward her closet.

"Well, that's not true."

She turned back and met his muddy gaze at the doorframe. "Are you going to tell me or make me guess?"

He rubbed a spot on his chest. "My heart is in the same place as yours."

Jenna stared at him, his hand, his chest, and the invisible thread that connected people in love. "We're not going to win this. Is that why you're acting like this? To give me one nice memory before everything goes down in flames?"

He rubbed his fingers together. "Not at all. I have lost a few battles, but I have won a war. I'm not worried. Just take a few deep breaths and I'll give you that shoulder rub Favel said I ought to give you. I just can't keep my hands off you completely. It's against my nature."

"So, just a little shoulder rub and that's it?" she asked suspiciously, but she couldn't stop herself from being hopeful that he had more in mind.

He yawned painfully. "It'll be my energy drink before I spend the night interrogating the old members of the orbital security team."

Jenna nodded. He had to find the leak like a hole in a boat or they would all sink.

No more falling asleep next to him. It was a real shame Ixy wasn't more trustworthy, or he could have done the interrogations during the day.

Jenna sat between Sardius' knees and tried to enjoy his hands moving over her muscles.

It would have been more relaxing if he hadn't kept chuckling, "Your body is so soft. You're like dandelion fluff."

Chapter Seven

One Cat Scratches Another

"You look adorable when you bleed," Sardius said to Jenna. With a mock flourish, he presented her with a pack of gauze to stop the bleeding.

"You're hilarious," she said, taking it and putting pressure on the cut on her collarbone.

"Who was it who told you that if you let Charm stay with Lucy and Armen, you might lose her affection?"

It was Sardius who had told her that, but she couldn't attribute the quote to him now since he wasn't answering to that name. "Shut up, Ryatt," she said, bored and rolling her eyes. "I didn't expect her to forget me so completely. My only comfort is that Arman also got the hell scratched out of him."

"Why is that a comfort?"

Jenna wobbled her hand and prepared to explain something confusing. "I'm not so cross with him over what happened when he was my designated husband that I want him scratched. I'm just glad Charm didn't fall in love with him and his being scratched is evidence that she didn't. It's much better to know that the object of your affection hates everyone and not just you."

"We'll get you cleaned up and then we'll introduce her to Moonbeam."

"Maybe that's a mistake," Jenna said as Sardius readied the cream to make her cut look healed, even if it wasn't.

"It's not a mistake. If I'm a betting man, and you have no idea what my gambler level is, I am going to bet that Charm is going to love Moonbeam."

"That can't happen if Charm hates everyone," Jenna said scornfully.

"Moonbeam has better manners than you and I think Charm will sense that immediately. I think they'll cozy up to each other. You just don't think that's possible because you are the sort of person who loves dangerous things and you want to see them scrap."

"I do not," Jenna denied emphatically. "I'm the sort of girl who likes a cup of tea and a good book."

"Yeah, a good book about butchering butterflies," Sardius intoned almost musically. "How self-deluded can you get? You have no idea who you're trying to shack up with, my dear," he said, turning the conversation to himself. "Sardius is a famous criminal, and you have never once asked me how many people he's killed. You don't seem to care."

She huffed. She had grown to hate talking about him in the third person. "Forget Sardius. What about you? I'm sure you have some gory stories up your sleeve. Go ahead. Take off all your clothes and tell me the story behind each one of your scars."

He looked at her like she was the devil. "Maybe later, when you're feeling less grouchy. It's not your fault. Misha and Josh made you start trying on outfits for the photoshoot with Favel and you had to go out to meet Lucy and Armen in that outfit." He looked down at her clothing and smothered a snicker.

It was a blue-scaled bodysuit with a white tutu. It was quite probable that both the bodysuit and the skirt were ruined since the blood splattered in an unfortunate pattern all the way to Jenna's knees.

"All part of my plan to get out of wearing this," she scoffed with her arms crossed.

"Whatever you say," he said blankly as he peered into the carrying case Charm was housed in after her attack on Jenna.

He stuck a finger between the bars, but the cat didn't swipe. She only hissed.

"Moonbeam is in the front hall, asleep in her tray. Maybe Charm won't even acknowledge her," he said hopefully.

Sardius finished treating Jenna's wound, helped her off the stool in the bathroom, picked up Charm's crate, and took them both to the hall. Just as he said, Moonbeam was asleep in a tray that had been covered in faux fur. Despite Jenna's complaints, he waved her away and set Charm's crate down a few feet away from Moonbeam. Then he quietly slid open the door.

What happened after that stunned Jenna.

Charm didn't come out of the crate immediately but poked her head out and looked around. When she was ready, a little white paw touched the tile. She didn't do much exploring, but instead, hurried to Moonbeam. She sniffed her, prowled around her curiously, and then put out a paw to place it inside the tray. Moonbeam opened her eyes and looked at Charm, but closed them again, like whatever Charm did was of no concern of hers.

Five minutes later, Charm was cuddled up next to Moonbeam and both of them were napping.

Jenna furrowed her brow. "How did you know that was going to happen?"

"Furlees are like capybaras. All the other animals love them. They're so chill. The exact opposite of you. But maybe this whole situation," he said, indicating the whole of the palace with a wave of his hand, "has made you more high-strung than you used to be on Earth."

Jenna shrugged. "Why is everyone getting after me about my stress levels lately? I'm not wound up that tight. I just have a lot on my shoulders. And to make matters worse, I have to go talk to Armen and Lucy. Do you want to walk to the Salt Palace with me?"

He nodded. "Why are you asking? I can't let you out of my sight."

The Dahlia Palace was anchored next to the Stone Palace on one side, so Jenna had to take an inner walkway attached to Excelyn's palace to get to the Salt Palace.

"Did you know that Fallcet heard the news of Favel building you a palace of your own and he's put in a request to take residence of the Dahlia palace after you leave?" Sardius asked.

"I hadn't heard that," she admitted, her skin crawling. "I imagine he thinks he'll get some prestige from having my palace after I leave like that means he'll take my position as chair of the committee once I've vacated. I guess he thinks it's tradition since Arvantis was the chair of the committee before me."

Sardius chuckled. "Please tell me you don't believe any of the crap that just came out of your mouth."

Jenna moaned. "I'd prefer to believe that instead of something weird like that he wants to sleep in my bed." She stopped and rubbed her eyes so hard, it looked like she was trying to gouge out her eyeballs. "I can't even think about him. He's not an issue. If he's not doing something that requires my immediate attention, I refuse to think about him. Back to our conversation about the palaces... Yes, Philip is going to live with Excelyn, but it would be better

to keep the Sand Palace empty so guests can stay there. We can't let anyone move in and frankly, after everything that has happened there since the very first guests came to stay, I don't want to use it for anything other than guests." She turned to him with red eyes. "Even if I don't serve as a diplomat, this is my circus and these are my monkeys, so I get to decide who lives where."

"And you'll let Fallcet take the Dahlia Palace?" Sadius persisted.

"I have no idea," Jenna deferred. "For now, I want him in the Sand Palace because I still don't think of his recruitment as permanent. I don't know why I think that. It's not like we can get the crown off his head. It's permanent, but... I want him here like he's a guest until my new palace is ready. By then, I will have assigned the other palaces to new diplomats, and the only palace that will be left will be the Dahlia Palace. It's just bad luck that it's mine." She huffed. "I really hope the palace Favel makes for me is as good as the Dahlia Palace. That place really grew on me."

Sadius put his hands behind his head as they walked together by the sea. "It was my favorite too."

Jenna cracked her neck as they climbed the stairs that led them to the Salt Palace. She couldn't stop things from changing. They were supposed to change.

The first sight they received was of Lucy sunning herself on the deck, her belly huge with a baby inside. Actually, her belly looked unnaturally big. Was she carrying twins, or triples, or an entire baseball team? Jenna shuddered at the sight of her. Lucy looked so uncomfortable, she was unbearable to look at. It should be mentioned that Jenna's reaction to Lucy was not her normal reaction to the sight of a pregnant woman. It was Lucy specifically that made her teeth ache. Her cousin looked terrible. She had acne all over her face, down her neck, and chest. Her face was swollen and so were her ankles. It also seemed that she was so sunburnt that her hair had turned a most unnatural shade of reddish blonde.

"Due soon, cuz?" Jenna said instead of saying hello. It was the most polite thing she could think of to say.

"I've been due every day for a week," Lucy confessed.

"You didn't need to come if you were this pregnant. Actually, you didn't need to send Armen if you needed him to help you with the baby. He could have come after you were settled. Besides, I don't need to talk to him for long. Only a minute or two. Would you like me to call a pod for you so you can give birth at home?"

Lucy rolled her eyes and put a pair of sunglasses over her eyes in a gesture of annoyance. "Jenna, you are such a snob. You walked up and you didn't thank me for looking after your cat or bringing her personally back to you."

Jenna bit her lip on a thousand things she wanted to say.

"I came with Armen on purpose at this time. I want to have my baby here," Lucy said grandly. "It's appropriate, don't you think?"

"Come again?" Jenna asked, hoping she had misheard something.

"When I have my baby, I want you to crown them," Lucy said distinctly so Jenna couldn't fail to understand her.

Jenna chose to focus on the least upsetting part of that sentence. "Them? Are you having more than one?"

"Just one," Lucy said irritably, running a hand over her bare belly.

"Do you not know if it's a boy or a girl?" Jenna asked, curious in a completely unhealthy way.

"We don't know yet. Armen is the kind of Adamis that is able to choose its own gender around the age of three. So, we don't know."

Jenna smiled. "Well, that's exciting. Though, I don't recommend having your baby in the Salt Palace. At the very least, we should choose a hospital for you to deliver here on Octavia Prime if you don't want to go back home to Octavia Five before the baby is born." Jenna tapped her earpiece, "Ixy, can you get me a list of hospitals where Lucy could have her baby?"

"No, Jenna!" Lucy squealed. "I'm having my baby right here. I don't want to leave and have you refuse to crown it."

Seeing Lucy's resolute face, Jenna pursed her lips and sat down in the shade of an umbrella next to Lucy's chair. "Lucy," she said patiently. "I can't crown your baby. It doesn't matter where it's born. Whether it is born on Octavia Five, at a hospital here, or in the Salt Palace. I need diplomats who are ready to serve and your baby will not be ready to serve for decades."

"You were crowned as a baby!" Lucy remarked loudly.

"Yes. And having experienced that, I wouldn't recommend it. I need adults. We can talk about it again later."

"You'll put me off again later," Lucy whined.

"Then get a clue," Jenna replied cruelly, losing her composure.

"You don't have to take it out on me that Armen liked me better," Lucy spat.

Looking at Lucy spread out the deck chair like chunky peanut butter someone couldn't get flat, Jenna couldn't imagine being jealous of Lucy for Armen's sake. Even if Jenna had liked him, being pregnant with his child looked like a horror movie.

Jenna sighed and then she prepared to say something that was a complete and utter lie. She glanced at Sardius and hoped that he knew she was lying. "You're right. I wish we could trade places. Why couldn't Armen have loved me? Then I'd be the one having his baby and not you! It's so unfair. There you are living peacefully in my grandfather's home playing house and I'm here, working my tail off?"

Lucy's mouth hung open. Clearly, that was the last thing she ever expected to hear Jenna say.

"Can't you have your baby somewhere else?" Jenna continued, unable to meet Sardius' gaze. "Somewhere where I can't see you and the happy little family you've become?"

Lucy sat up with great effort and, turning to face Jenna, she put her feet on the ground. "Jenna, I'm sorry things turned out the way they did, but I can't leave until you've crowned my baby. I couldn't face myself if I let the chance for my family to have a crown slip through my fingers again."

At first, Jenna didn't know what she was talking about. Then it clicked. Lucy thought that she would have been crowned as a diplomat if she hadn't gotten pregnant with Armen's child. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Jenna never would have crowned her no matter what happened. Putting aside every annoyance that had ever sprung up between them, Lucy was not the type who would make a good diplomat. She caved at every suggestion, changed her mind at every new piece of information, and deliberately went against Jenna just to be contrary. As for Armen, he never could have been crowned. He was Jenna's third husband and then he was exiled.

Jenna almost face-palmed herself.

"I have to take my place here," Lucy said sternly, sounding almost exactly the way Jenna sounded when she was stern, which made it extra gross.

"Let me see if I understand this correctly," Jenna said in a voice that was the very opposite of stern. It was fluid and giving, allowing Lucy to say whatever she wanted to say in return. "You're saying that you want to stay here until your baby is crowned, and when your baby is crowned you plan to stay in the Salt Palace?"

"I would have to stay here until my baby was ready to serve as a diplomat, wouldn't I? You would be the perfect auntie, helping me, and Armen raise the baby. Like a real family," Lucy said enthusiastically.

It was at that moment that Jenna realized that Lucy also wanted Jenna to babysit her baby. The horror washed over her like someone had just poured hot maple syrup all over her.

Ixy cut in. "I don't have immediate access to the rail guns in the Salt Palace, but if you say the word, Jenna, I'm sure I can get access."

Jenna didn't answer Ixy. "I'm not your baby's auntie," she said calmly to Lucy, still keeping her voice as soft as possible. "Through you, I'm their second cousin once removed. Through his father, your baby is my ex-husband's child."

"But you never had a real relationship with Armen," Lucy said hurriedly.

"Yeah... I didn't," Jenna agreed. "Look, Lucy. It's clear that you don't understand my circumstances. I can't be your baby's auntie. I have a job to do that has nothing to do with you."

"Armen and I could help you with your diplomatic work and wouldn't it be amazing for Celestina to do a show on your growing family?" Lucy said, offering everything she could think of.

"You want to be a reality TV star?" Jenna gasped. "That's the last thing in the world I need."

"You just aren't thinking about this," Lucy continued. "If you really considered how great it would be to have a child running around the palaces and all the unique footage Celestina could get, I'm sure you'd change your mind..."

Jenna had begun crying. If it appeared that she was crying because she was tortured at the thought of having Lucy and Armen's child running around all beautiful under her nose, then she was lucky. Instead, she was crying because if she didn't cry, she'd beat Lucy's head with the first rock she could grab. As it was, she was eyeing a particularly large hunk of pink salt that had a lamp inside it.

Lucy said more before she noticed Jenna's emotional state. "See?" Lucy said kindly. "You need us here. All this is too much for you."

Jenna stood up and looked down at Lucy. "I need you to leave. I am completely inflexible on the issue of crowning your unborn child. I won't do it. I need adult diplomats. Thank you for taking care of my cat. I wish you all the best in your delivery and your family in the future. I only need to talk to Armen for a moment and then I'll be off. We should say goodbye now."

Lucy stood up. "Surely, we need to talk about this more."

Jenna put her arms around her cousin for a microsecond. Lucy didn't even have time to return the hug.

Turning to Sadius, Jenna asked, "Where's Armen?"

"He's on the front deck, pacing."

"Goodbye," Jenna said to Lucy and walked away.

"Wait," Lucy said, waddling behind her. "I'm coming too."

Jenna did not wait for her. Instead, she pushed ahead, listening for the beat of Sardius' feet behind her.

When she came around the Salt Palace, she saw Armen and was in for an unexpected delight. Seeing Lucy looking so much worse for wear did not make Jenna happy. Seeing Armen look so much worse for wear made her very happy. An evil smile spread across her features and helped to dry her face. She hoped to pass the look off as welcoming. "Hello, Armen," she said in her perfectly professional tone.

He turned toward her. His tan was faded, he was thinner, and she spotted a whole patch of his hair had turned gray in the back. Did he know about it?

Armen put out his hand. "Nice to see you, Jenna."

She shook his hand and glanced at his ear. The PA's earpiece was still there.

"I suppose you know why I wanted to see you," she said brightly.

"No. I haven't the faintest clue," he said, trying to look like he honestly expected nothing.

Jenna knew he was lying. What he thought was written all over his face. He thought that he and Lucy were there because at least one of the three of them was going to be crowned.

Jenna wasn't cruel enough to make him wait to find out that his hopes were being dashed to pieces. "I came to ask you for your earpiece back."

"Oh," he said, touching it, but not immediately removing it. Armen dropped his hand. "Sorry. I just didn't expect to hear you say that. I was worried about what coming here would mean. If I'd be welcome or not. I wasn't sure. Was I only invited to return the earpiece?"

Jenna nodded. "Is it still working?"

"Yes. No one bothered to reassign him. If you remember, his name is Jisbet."

Jenna's eyebrow twitched. Armen's last sentence didn't make sense to her. "Really? May I speak to him? Ixy, can you patch me through?"

"No need," Ixy said with a giggle in Jenna's ear. "I know what's going through your mind, Madam Diplomat. You are curious about how his PA could be a man when hardly anyone lived through the prison riot over at the men's prison?"

"Exactly," Jenna said to Ixy, pleased Armen couldn't hear Ixy's half of the conversation. "What's the explanation?"

"His he is a she and her cell is above ours. She uses a voice-altering program. Armen thinks she's male and a tiny octopus in his ear. Jenna, if I have ever earned any favor in your sight, please do not tell him that Jisbet is a woman. It would ruin so many things."

Jenna rolled her eyes and turned back to Armen. He had no idea that he was being gawked at in his private moments by a cluster of women in a prison. "It's a relief that you've kept the earpiece in good condition," she said to Armen. "Can you please remove it for me?"

Armen kept his hands at his sides. "I'm afraid not. It's glued in."

Jenna nodded. "I see. Ryatt, would you do the honor?" She took a step back.

Sardius snapped open his boot and retrieved a cruel-looking instrument that had multiple pointy parts.

The day got more satisfying as Sardius loomed over Armen. Jenna hadn't realized that Armen was kind of a small guy before. His skin was too smooth too. He looked smaller and wussier than even Fallcet and that was saying something.

Armen squirmed while Sardius palmed his head and put the tool in his ear.

Lucy chose that exact moment to come around the corner. She screamed.

Armen turned his head.

The earpiece popped right out.

"Got it," Sardijs said pleasantly before he returned the tool to his boot.

Jenna let Armen explain to Lucy what they were doing.

When he was finished, Jenna waved a farewell wave to them. "Have a good trip back to Octavia Five. As a baby present, I've decided to give you my grandfather's house." Since the two of them had lived there, Jenna wasn't going to want to go there ever. It was all right. After all, it wasn't really her grandfather's house anymore.

"Wait!" Armen said, closing the distance between them. "Don't you care about the house itself? Isn't giving it up too much of a sacrifice?"

"Don't worry about a single thing. Take it with my compliments. I hope the three of you have a beautiful life together."

"Are you cutting us off?" Armen said, chasing after Jenna and Sardijs.

Lucy was following too, but at a much slower pace.

"Let's not call it that," Jenna said over her shoulder. "Just take care of your family, Armen. Ryatt, sever the connection to the Salt Palace and let it go adrift."

She turned back to Armen. She and Sardijs were on the dock of the Stone Palace and Armen and Lucy were on the dock of the Salt Palace. Sardijs had opened the locks and the Salt Palace was floating away.

"You shouldn't do this. Lucy will call all the news outlets. She'll say things you wouldn't even imagine," Armen shouted across the distance.

"And every time she does, I will say that I love her like a sister, no matter what she says about me. I wish you all the best. Say whatever pleases you. I'm too busy to watch the news. I have far too much work to do. A pod will arrive at your door within the hour. It will take you anywhere you want to go. You can decide when to take it, but my hospitality does not extend any further than the end of today. Goodbye." Jenna turned on her heel and walked away without a backward glance.

"You didn't owe Lucy that pack of assuaging lies," Sardijs said to Jenna, referring to what she said about being jealous of her pregnancy and of her marriage to Armen.

"Yeah... I did," she said wistfully as they walked back.

"Why?"

"Because I'm never giving her anything else. I don't care that she took Armen. She didn't exactly take him. He chose her over me and that's fine. I'm glad he did." Then she spoke to Ixy. "Please let me know when they've left."

"They're arguing. I'm listening through the microphones. Now, I like listening to people fight, but this is next level. Lucy is a piece of work. I've never heard you rage like that, Jenna."

"Stop listening to them, Ixy. Just let me know when they've left. I need to have them off my mind before the AAMC nominees get here."



Lucy and Armen left later that night when she went into labor. Naturally, Jenna did not hear if they had a boy or a girl.

Chapter Eight

AAMC Might Stand for Something Else

“Why did you bring us bastards, Fallcet?”

“I didn’t.”

“You did,” Jenna said coldly. “This has never been an issue before. Not everyone loved Excelyn but they understood her, understood the reasons for her. Celestina and Philip were popular choices. Everyone loved them, and even though it was a couple of ticks lower on the public approval scale, everyone loved you too. These guys have made Celestina’s comment board cry. Why do we have to make her comment board cry? This guy, Rennett, is famous for being the general who bombed thousands of Adamis settlements because they didn’t evacuate fast enough for him. He shouldn’t even have a rank in the army, let alone be offered a position as a diplomat. And this guy...”

“I told you before,” Fallcet interrupted. “I didn’t choose these guys from the AAMC. They were sent over by Lou Denver.”

“Has anyone told you that Lou Denver is a dick bag? Why else would he have sent us such incredibly ill-advised candidates?”

“He’s best friends with my uncle.”

“Uh-huh,” Jenna drawled. “If you ever thought your uncle was on our side, surely you must see now that he’s not. He’s trying to stall us so we can’t get a quorum of eight.”

“He was supposed to help us. Maybe he didn’t know,” Fallcet feigned.

“Shut your whore mouth,” Jenna snapped. “If he didn’t know, he *should* have known. What? He didn’t research the people he was sending over for such important appointments? I shouldn’t have let Celestina interview them on camera. I should have sent them home as soon as I met them. Sheesh... When she’s finished, I’m gassing them, podding them, and shooting them into the stratosphere.”

“Jenna,” Fallcet said, tugging at her elbow to stop her from storming out. “We have to crown one of them.”

“Why?”

“Because I said we would.”

Jenna shook off his elbow grab. “Let’s be real for a second,” she said like she hadn’t been real when she used the words dick bags. “Do you think your contacts at the AAMC would kill you if you didn’t follow their instructions to the letter?”

Fallcet swallowed, his Adam’s apple moving uncomfortably.

“You do,” she said when he refused to answer. “If that’s the case, we have no choice. We’re going to have to kill them all and make it look like an accident.”

“They’ll know it wasn’t an accident.”

“I think *you* were an accident,” she shot back. “And that’s what they plan to do to us if they don’t find our behavior satisfactory. Poetic, isn’t it?”

He rubbed his temples. "I get it. The other two guys aren't much better. Voguen de Masterton is a military defense attorney who has gotten scores of military criminals off the hook and Scion Xant is the son of an arms dealer. And everybody knows it."

"Aggression toward the Octavians is not what most Adamis want!" Jenna insisted. "Do you see that?"

"I'm a diplomat and I see it. I just don't want to piss off the organization with the biggest guns, if you get my meaning."

"Can you do a backdoor deal for me where you get AAMC people you would recommend to come instead?"

"I might be able to get some better choices for the next two, but in order to do that, we have to take one of these butchers or we're dead. Interview them yourself and see which one of them you like best," Fallcet offered weakly.

"For the record, I completely hate you," Jenna said before storming away as she'd planned to do before. "Ryatt!" she called as she stomped away from the scene. She stood in the great hall of her palace, tapping her toe like she was part jackhammer.

He arrived, striding into the room with a fluidity of muscle that provoked such confidence, and she dropped all her problems at his feet. She told him everything and buried her face into his chest. Even though it looked like she was crying to her daddy, it felt like she was crying into a brick wall.

Five minutes later, they were sitting on the sofa with her legs across his lap listening to her complaints.

When she was finished, Sadius said what he thought. "Let's think about this rationally. All the candidates seem like crap on a stick, but maybe one of them isn't. Maybe one of them would like to do something better than what they've done in the past. We should interview them softly and see how that goes, but I wouldn't bother with the lawyer if I were you. I'd put him on a pod immediately."

"You think?"

"Yeah. He's the type of person who has had ten thousand chances to do something different and hasn't. I'd put my money on the kid of the weapon dealer. He's young and he looks tractable. Even if he isn't on our side now, we might be able to win him over and make him look at things differently."

"Sadius, are you telling me to brainwash him?"

"Nah. I would never tell *you* to brainwash someone. I'll do it," he offered grandly.

Jenna smiled. "Just off the cuff like that?"

"Yes, I can do that off the cuff."

Jenna smiled. From what she read about him, he gathered an army to fight the government because of a single picture of him. Jenna was curious to see how he would turn a kid against his father.

"Though the general, Rennett, might be a worthy candidate too," Sadius continued. "He's an idiot. He knows he's an idiot. It may be that he would like to do something right to make up for some of the wrongs he's done."

"Ryatt, you're amazing. You see gold where I see filth."

He shook his head wearily and whispered in her ear, "I'm loath to use my talents for you or anyone. I have gotten an amazing number of people killed who believed in me... I'm very good at making people believe in me."

"Yes, you are," she said, leaning back comfortably and instructing him to rub her feet. At least that much seemed to be allowed.



Jenna said goodbye to Voguen de Masterton on the dock.

"Is this like a reality TV show where people get voted off the island?" he said snarkily as his luggage was being stored.

"Yes. It is literally that, except the stakes are much higher than a date or a million dollars," she said candidly.

"Before I go, can I tell you what I think of you?" he said, pulling his coat apart to show the smooth lines his abs cut in his vest.

"Sure, Voguen."

He took her hand in his and kissed her knuckles. "I think you are ravishing and I only came here for the opportunity to meet you. Heaven knows why you and the other diplomats chose those imbeciles instead of me, but if you ever want to hook up, you have my number." He touched her chin briefly.

Jenna looked at him. She did not find him attractive. To her, he resembled a rat, which wasn't appealing, but it was also his greasy aura that made her feel like burning part of her hand off after he kissed it.

He wasn't interested in her. He was doing the same thing Fallcet had done. If he could enter her palace as her first husband, he could keep an eye on her dealings, report back to the AAMC, influence her choices for future diplomats, and who knew what else?

"I'm flattered," she lied. "For my own part, I think you make a better lawyer. Maybe I'll need one one day. I hope you won't be too busy to take the case."

"There's nothing that I wouldn't drop for you," he said, as he stepped into the pod. It did seem to Jenna that he was talking about his pants, so he was greasy to the last moment.

Jenna waved to him while Ixy got recommendations from Vash on how to clean her hands.

Chapter Nine

Why Aren't We Drugging People All The Time?

It shouldn't have looked like a movie theater, but it did.

Jenna had Vash line up three couches in her living room and arranged a projector. It looked like a movie theater. Well, as much as it could in outer space. The reason for the impromptu movie theater was that they didn't have an interrogation room, so they did the next best thing. They arranged for Sardius to meet Rennett and Scion at separate times and in separate locations. They filmed it and showed it in real-time to the viewers in Jenna's living room by projecting it against the wall. Afterward, they'd take a vote.

"Are you still mad at me, Jenna?" Fallcet asked, taking a seat next to her.

"I would never want you to think that I *wasn't* mad at you," she replied smoothly.

"Isn't there anything I can do to ease your mind?" he asked, pouring on the charm like he had gallons of it behind his eyes.

"What did you say? I think I've still got water in my ear," Jenna said snottily and pretended to try to get the water he had poured on her when she was in the tank out of her ear. "I was wrong. It's gone. There's just the memory of it. I wonder when that will fade?"

"So you're never going to forgive me?" he said quietly, so the other diplomats couldn't hear. "I did the self-sacrificing thing. I became a diplomat to the Octavians when that was the last thing I wanted to do."

Jenna blew him off. "Let's not talk about it now. Ryatt is about to start his interviews."

"I don't think you should have Ryatt talk to either of these guys," Fallcet said doubtfully. "He's only a bodyguard."

"Let's just watch," she said, wishing she still ate popcorn.

Vash dimmed the lights and the Sardius on the screen got started. He met Rennett first. They sat at the bar in the Sand Palace. Sardius poured drinks and talked to him like he was a bartender instead of an interrogator.

"Who are you again?" Rennett asked dully. He seemed very tired from his interview with Celestina, who grilled him like he was a steak.

"I'm Jenna Fairchild's bodyguard. I'm just keeping you company tonight while the council is deliberating about you," he said in a soothing neutral tone.

"Oh... What do you think they'll decide?" the old general asked mournfully. "I hear Jenna is pretty hard to please."

"I think your chances are good since they already sent the lawyer home." Sardius flipped a glass and poured something green into it.

Rennett saw it and shook his head. "I don't want that. I've had enough to drink." He still had a little left in the glass in front of him.

"It's not for you," Sardius said with a disarming smile. "It's for me." He clinked glasses with Rennett and leaned away from the bar, giving him plenty of space.

A moment or two passed before Rennett, not wanting Sardius to get bored and leave, started talking. "So, you work for the little woman? Do you like it?"

"A job's a job," he answered noncommittally.

"I'd like to work for her," Rennett said vaguely.

"Why's that?"

"Because she's got no sense."

"Hasn't she?" Sadius replied.

"She's hard to guard, isn't she?" the general asked. "I bet she's incredibly hard to keep safe. She just does whatever she wants and you have to run after her, but it would never be boring. Tell you what, Boy. I have spent my whole career chasing after corpses. I'd like to spend the rest of my career chasing after her with that slit up her dress. Her leg is a lot better looking than a war... Which is what I've done until now."

Sadius didn't seem the least bit bothered by Rennett's mention of Jenna's leg. "You have that right. She's a vision of loveliness after a burn unit or a row of body bags."

Rennett sighed. "Maybe I don't know anything about women anymore. I only know what you see when you're raiding... or on leave. Brothels should be better than the front, but I don't think they are."

"They're not," Sadius said smoothly. "Jenna is stunning, but she can't be the best woman you've ever known. Want to tell me about the best one?"

Rennett did. He talked for twenty minutes about a woman he knew in the two years when he had a desk job on Tidus. It turned out that Rennett was a sad drunk and the next drink Sadius gave him was laced with a sedative. Sadius got him to his room with his shoes off before it took full effect.

When he was finished putting the old general to sleep he returned to the Dahlia Palace to give his thoughts to the assembled diplomats.

"What did you think?" Excelyn asked, a crook in her old eyebrow.

"They're going to kill him," Sadius explained. "If Jenna crowns him, the AAMC is going to kill him and blame us. It's a simple plan to discredit us and stall the program. I advised Jenna to get rid of Voguen, the lawyer, because I thought he'd poison your council with his rhetoric, but Rennett is a straight-up mess. The AAMC has used him as much as they can and now they're done with him. If we crown him, he'll be dead the night before you're set to crown the last diplomat. If they can't pin it on us, at the very least, it will stall us and that may be all they want."

Fallcet's jaw dropped and he was clearly so appalled by Sadius' assessment that he couldn't utter a word.

"You think the AAMC has a different plan for each of their offered candidates?" Philip asked, getting involved.

"Definitely," Sadius replied.

"What's the plan for Scion, do you think?" Jenna asked, her lips tight.

"As the child of an arms dealer, he's probably been taught that conflict is best solved with violence. Whoever has the biggest guns wins. When I speak to him, I'll only be trying to uncover how permanent that way of thinking is. I've already devised a way to draw him out of his room and get him to talk to me. I'll go now if you want. Change the camera to the one covering the courtyard of the Sand Palace." He turned to leave.

"Wait," Jenna called. "From what you know right now, which of them would you crown?"

"Both of them."

"Both?" Jenna exclaimed, with other shocked sounds coming from the other diplomats behind her.

"Yeah. You don't need to be a whiner about it. The AAMC is not going to be satisfied until they get their three members crowned. As I said before, they are trying to stall us, make it take as long as they can, or get a majority... Whatever they can accomplish. If you crown Scion, you're really going to make them feel like they're getting what they want. If you crown Rennett, you're going to need a backup diplomat, but the nice side of that is that after he's dead, you can crown whoever you want in his place. As I said, they'll kill him before you can achieve quorum. You could crown Rennett's backup on the same day as the last diplomat if you could get your fish in a row."

"You're talking about him like he's already dead," Celestina noticed uncomfortably, getting her sensitive back up.

"Sorry. I don't know if the camera was picking it up, but he was sweating a lot just lifting his glass to his mouth. If I were betting, I'd bet that he's likely to have a heart attack. He's probably had heart problems in the past. Who wants to bet against me that he doesn't have a pacemaker already?"

No one moved.

"I think he has one," Sardius continued. "The AAMC can just short out the circuit when they want him dead, and then say we overtaxed a sick person."

"What about Scion?"

"As I said, I'd take him just to give the AAMC what they want. He's just one vote and won't have that much power. You ladies can set him adrift if you don't like his palace attached to yours."

"Did you just include me with the ladies?" Fallcet asked defensively.

"Yes. Don't whine. They outnumber you and they've been doing this longer. I'm going to go talk to Scion. If you want to come, Fallcet, I could use a punching bag." Sardius threw the words over his shoulder as he headed toward the front door.

"What does that mean?" Fallcet asked Jenna.

"He probably meant it quite literally. If you feel like sparring with him, follow him," Jenna said stiffly. Half of her hoped Fallcet wasn't stupid enough to follow Sardius, but the other half of her wanted Sardius to have all the help he needed, so she hoped he'd go.

"I can't do that. I'm a diplomat," Fallcet huffed. "What good can I do with a black eye and a fat lip?"

It was on the tip of Jenna's tongue to say, 'You're no good either way', but she held it back. "I'll go if he needs something to hit," Jenna said, running after him.

"Jenna, wait!" Fallcet said, becoming the third person in a chase. "You can't be his punching bag!"

Jenna stopped and gave Fallcet a patient look. "Ryatt is not just my bodyguard. He's also my personal trainer. I work out with him all the time. It'll be fine." She patted him on the shoulder and ran after Sardius, leaving Fallcet behind.

She caught up with Sardius before he got to the bridge that led to the Sand Palace. "Wait," she called.

He turned around immediately at her call. "What are you doing here? Go back to the others. You're supposed to be deliberating."

"I know, but you said you needed someone to spar with?" Jenna panted.

"Yeah, I did. Crimp is going to meet me."

"Crimp?"

He smiled. "She has been begging to do a round with me since she saw me fight on Spikay Two. I've held out on her offer for just such an occasion as this. Go back and watch with the others."

Jenna grimaced.

He leaned in and said in an unmistakable tone, "This isn't the kind of workout you should have with me."

She turned a hot pink at the sexual innuendo.

"Go back inside," he said with a flourish.

Jenna did what she was told, but she had a terrible time turning away from him.

"I thought you told him not to sexually harass you," Ixy said in her ear. "Aren't you going to get mad?"

"I take it back. He can harass me all day every day."

"Atta girl," Ixy giggled.

Chapter Ten

Poison Versus Bone

Jenna slipped into the seat next to Fallcet in the makeshift movie theater in her living room.

"What? He didn't want you?" Fallcet said with an arrogant huff.

"I guess I'm a lady and a diplomat and I'm not supposed to be roughed up," she replied primly.

"I'll rough you up," he said in a playful way, trying something similar to Sardius.

Jenna groaned. "Look, I'm thinking of putting a Taser on you. You know, something like one of those collars they put around dogs so they get shocked if they bark. Just a pleasant reminder for you to keep a civil tongue in your head."

"I bet Philip has a collar like that you could borrow," Vash cut in. He didn't forget his promise to badmouth Philip at every opportunity.

Philip turned red and Jenna gave Vash a subtle thumbs up.

Excelyn interrupted them. "No need to go through my boy's belongings. Let's watch what Ryatt is doing."

Jenna turned back to look at the screen.

Sardius came into the courtyard. He started by doing some basic arm stretches, then worked on his calves until Crimp arrived.

"You know, I didn't think you were ever going to agree to this," she said, tossing her gear aside.

"Why?"

"You must know how much I want you," she said menacingly.

He ignored her. "Have you stretched?"

She nodded, pulling out her tape and taping her knuckles between her fingers. "I'm disappointed our fight has to have this stage. If I do well, will you let me have a real fight with you?"

"A real fight?" he echoed. "You want to fight in the ring, or in a cage, or maybe like they do in movies and video games? On a bridge or a cliffside?"

"Any of those places is fine with me," Crimp said as she finished up her taping. "Anywhere is fine as long as you'll go at me with all you have."

"I don't think you'd like me," he replied, tightening the half gloves he wore to protect Crimp from the sharp bones that protruded from his knuckles. "What you saw that night with the ogre was not what I'm really like in a fight. That was just a play fight for a bit of money and to get Jenna's attention."

She fitted a pair of liquid gloves over her hands. "You thought she'd enjoy watching you best a man twice your size? Ya know, I don't think it had quite the effect you hoped for."

"Perhaps not," he agreed, getting into a fighting stance, "but I'm here, aren't I?"

Crimp suddenly smiled and laughed. "I get it. I get IT!" she howled like she was a mastermind working at a puzzle and the last piece had finally come into place.

Sardius rolled his eyes. "You get what?"

"You weren't trying to look like a big stud when you fought the ogre. You were trying to look like a gentleman! That was why your fight was so tame and lasted so many rounds. Because above all things, you wanted to hide from Jenna who you really are."

He looked unphased. "Who am I really?"

"The man in the prison cell, locked away for all the wrong you did, all the hurt you caused, and all the people you killed," the poison girl said bitingly.

He sighed. "You're not going to rile me up. I know you're trying to provoke me so that I'll do more than just bounce around and evade your punches and sneak a random one in to stop our fight from lasting forever. It won't work. I don't lose my temper."

She stepped up to the mark and put up her fists. "Doesn't that make you worse? You don't kill people because of your bad temper. When you kill people, you do it deliberately."

"Well, I'll be sure not to kill you," he said before letting Crimp take the first swing.

He evaded it and blocked her second attempt with his forearm.

She pulled her punch back and shook her hand out after hitting his arm. "If I get boxing gloves now, will I seem like a wimp?"

Sardius nearly died of laughter on the spot after all her posturing that she deserved an all-out brawl. Crimp took her chance and got him twice in the face, but he still couldn't stop laughing. She dove in again, but he blocked her.

"What are you guys doing?" Scion asked from the sidelines.

Apparently, they had been successful at drawing him out. The man could smell fights.

Scion had changed his clothes. For his interview, he had worn a pinstripe suit that made him look like a mobster. Now he wore workout clothes that allowed him to show his muscles. Otherwise, he was a young man on the green side of twenty-five with a short goatee that made him look five years younger.

His entrance made Sardius stop laughing. Keeping his eyes on Scion, he took a swing at Crimp, which she dodged.

"We're sparring," he said with a grin.

"Here? In the middle of the night?" Scion asked.

"We're fighting and we're placing bets," Crimp explained. She wasn't looking at him, she was winding up to slug Sardius again.

"What sort of bets?" the young man asked as he edged closer.

"We're betting on you," she said, without reservation. "I bet that you will use your position as a diplomat on Octavia Prime to have shipments of weapons brought to the planet illegally. Then all the weapons the Adamis need to invade Octavia Prime will already be here. Ryatt disagrees. He thinks you're an assassin, trained by your daddy, meant to kill each one of the existing diplomats in order to replace them with your own people. Then the AAMC will always have the majority vote."

The kid's jaw hung open. "What?"

Sardius put Crimp in a headlock and brought her closer. "Come on, Scion. You must know that those are the sorts of things Jenna and the other diplomats are worried about. Otherwise, why wouldn't they want you? You're young and cute."

"You look great through a camera lens," Crimp added, even as she fought to free herself. "Agh, Ryatt, your arms are like the jaws of life."

He ignored her and kept talking to Scion. "You're well educated and you can speak to a crowd without getting ruffled or sweaty. They *should* want you... if they weren't terrified that you'd kill them all."

"That's what you'll do," Crimp squirmed. "Kill them all!"

Scion's brown eyes were wide with dread.

Watching him, Jenna licked her lips as the tension mounted.

"Hey, Crimp," Sardius said with a wicked smile. "Have you ever had a noogie from a Boneman before?"

"Uh, no! Do not jab your knuckles into my head! It'll be like scalping me!"

"Aw... But you wanted me to go hard on you. With everything I have? A noogie is light bullying compared to some of the things I can do with my knuckles."

"Shut up, you two!" Scion shouted.

Sardius and Crimp paused.

"Are you serious?" the young man continued. "That's what the diplomats think? That I'll cause a war rather than help stop one?"

Sardius eased Crimp out of the headlock and the three of them stood there awkwardly.

"Well, yeah," Crimp admitted sheepishly. "Can't you understand, considering who your father is? If the AAMC were to go to war against the Octavians, your father would be the one to provide them with the arms. If they want that, it's in their best interests to have you down here, helping to start one. Didn't they explain that to you?"

"No, that wasn't what my father said," Scion said, with a touch of defiance in his tone.

Sardius scoffed. "And you believed him? Out of morbid curiosity and because I still think I'm right, how did your father describe your position here? If you got it?"

"He just said that I should vote as a representative of the AAMC or I should not vote at all."

Sardius and Crimp nodded together.

"Very wise," Sardius said.

"Very wise," Crimp echoed.

Scion frowned. "You clearly think his instructions were the stupidest things in the world. Say what you think!"

"I think it was wise, don't you, Crimp?" Sardius replied, keeping his composure.

"Very wise," Crimp said again.

"If I was your dad, I'd be delighted," Sardius explained. "It would be like I got a vote on the council without any of the work. I wouldn't have to go to any of the meetings or live on Octavia Prime. I could trust that my little proxy would vote however I said."

Crimp chuckled. "And if I didn't want any of the votes to be passed or counted and I just wanted to gum up the bureaucracy as much as possible, I'd tell my little dummy not to vote."

"See? Very wise," Sardius said, crossing his arms.

"We're not going to see which one of us is right tonight, Ryatt," Crimp said, slapping Sardius on the back. "This little dummy will do whatever his daddy tells him to and so, maybe we're both right. Maybe he'll get a bottle of wine from his dad in the mail and he'll give it to Jenna, just like daddy told him to. She'll drink it, drop dead, and then you can say you were right. It was assassination after all."

"But then, he'll get asked if he can store some boxes at his palace," Sardius chortled in a way that was designed to get under someone's skin. "Don't look inside, Son. There's a completely

legitimate reason why you can't open them.' So, let's say he doesn't open them and they're still here when the army arrives. Then you're right, Crimp."

"Or let's say he grabs a brain, opens the crates," Crimp laughed almost hysterically, "and accidentally blows himself up! Kablooey!"

"Or maybe," Sardius said, abruptly stopping the laughter and Crimp stopped too as if on cue. "He doesn't get crowned. Instead, he gets shipped off Octavia Prime and Rennett gets crowned instead."

Scion had been looking at Sardius and Crimp like they were both morons, as that was his mask when he got bullied, but when Sardius brought up the possibility that he might not get crowned, his expression became more serious.

"You think they won't crown me?" he asked.

Sardius shrugged. "We're telling you their worries. Are you in the pocket of your daddy? Voting for AAMC interests is not a problem. You can vote for their interests until the cows come home and we're all fine with that. It's part of the plan for the AAMC to have a voice in these diplomatic proceedings. What isn't okay is that the last round of acting Adamis diplomats has already been wiped out with the exception of Jenna. Without solid proof, the best guess for who was responsible for those deaths is the AAMC. It's not unrealistic to think that exact thing could happen again. We're their bodyguards. We're thinking about threats."

"I wasn't sent here to kill anyone," Scion said sternly.

Sardius matched his tone and replied, "If I was going to send someone here to kill people or hide weapons, I would make sure they knew as little as possible about the operation. It would make them seem more trustworthy when questioned. Just because you don't know about it now doesn't mean that plans like those are not in the works over your head."

"I didn't have to come here," Scion said, planting his feet firmly on the ground.

"Then why did you?" Crimp asked with a searching look in her eye like she was really interested in the answer.

Scion's gaze traveled between Sardius and Crimp as he contemplated whether or not he could trust them.

"This conversation is confidential," Sardius reassured him, though he left out the part that Jenna usually added, that it wasn't private. After all, there were half a dozen people watching it unfold like it was a drama on the big screen.

Scion shook his head like he couldn't stand his position, but if he didn't explain, he'd get shuffled off into a pod at daybreak. "I came here because I wanted to get away from my father. He was displeased with me and gave me a collection of options that would prove to him I wasn't worthless."

"What were the other options?" Sardius asked curiously, breaking from Crimp and taking a seat on a nearby chair.

Scion and Crimp followed suit and sat down.

The young man began, "I could join the AAMC and be fast-tracked to be an officer. The benefits of that are few. Working in space your whole life, you lose your muscle mass. It's weird that the most violent people in the galaxy can't lift an empty bottle on my home planet. I don't want to live on a spacecraft because the Adamis are too greedy to accept help from the Octavians."

Jenna bit the side of her thumb and watched breathlessly. Was Scion saying what he thought they wanted to hear?

The boy continued, "The next thing I could do was work with the testers on my father's new line of lasers. The testing zone is in the middle of nowhere on an inhospitable planet because that's the best place to test new weapons. He's cracked entire planets in half and I have no taste for it. I am not a mass destruction kind of man. How will you know if you're doing what's right fighting if you shoot them from space? It's cowardly. It's ironic that he thinks I'm cowardly because I'd rather have fights face-to-face and women and things that make sense."

"So, what do you think of having eight wives?" Sardius asked curiously.

"That's why I'm here. If you guys send me away, I'll choose the laser testing thing because my muscles won't atrophy and there's a chance I'll be able to get out of it eventually, but I'd much rather stay here. What do you think my chances are?"

"Not great, especially if you plan to abstain from voting as a regular course of action. That will slow down talks between Adamis and Octavians and could lead to a war even if you aren't storing weapons or acting as an assassin."

"It can't be that big of a deal."

"Yes, it can," Crimp said. "Part of the reason everyone is so on edge now is that all diplomatic talks stopped after all the other diplomats were killed. Jenna needs to reach quorum as quickly as possible."

Jenna heaved a sigh in her seat in the living room. That was another reason the AAMC had sent her such undesirable candidates. They wanted her to send them back and have to go through the trouble of interviewing new ones. The AAMC probably had candidates she'd crown in a heartbeat, they just weren't sending them.

Jenna spoke into her earpiece, "Ixy, see if Ryatt thinks he can get any more out of this kid. I believe he's finished. I think I have a plan to promptly bring all this to a close. I need to talk to Vash, you, and then Ryatt. In that order."

Chapter Eleven

Why Do We Need So Many Doctors?

Philip groaned. "I am not an Adamis doctor. I'm an Octavian doctor, Jenna. There are Adamis doctors on this planet. Please, let me call one."

"What are you so afraid of?" Jenna asked recklessly. "It's not like you treated Rennett. You only examined him. You can't be guilty of any kind of malpractice. You didn't give him any drugs or perform any surgery on him."

"Exactly! He needs both drugs and surgery!" Philip said loudly.

"Oh. Well, why didn't you say so?" she asked, sounding remarkably reasonable, considering what she had put Philip through for the past few hours.

Jenna's first step had been to have Rennett looked at by a doctor. The closest one to Jenna at that exact moment had been Excelyn, who was sitting exactly behind Jenna when they watched Sardius interrogate Rennett and Scion. However, the pink-haired diplomat had immediately shoved the task off onto her new husband. He had resisted, but she promised she'd insult him just once as a way of showing her gratitude since she was an old woman and she was going to fall asleep in the next twenty minutes whether she liked it or not.

True to her word, she didn't make it to the end of the second interrogation.

In the present, Philip gave his recommendation. "Whatever you decide, Jenna, whether you crown him or not, you can't fire this man into space. The inertia will kill him. I think the AAMC was hoping you would kill him. He has to stay on Octavia Prime for the rest of his life. He'll never be well enough to leave."

"Okay. Get him a doctor as soon as possible," Jenna relented.

"I know someone good," Philip offered.

Jenna nodded and marched into the room where Philip had put Rennett down to rest. She sat next to his bed and stared at the old general until he woke up.

"Hi, Miss Fairchild," he said, still a little fuzzy after what Sardius fed him the night before.

Jenna smiled. "How are you feeling? Are you feeling well enough to have a conversation with me about what's going to happen next?"

An army man, he would have nodded if his head had been detached.

Jenna began and hoped that she sounded gentle. "Listen, the first thing you need to know is that no matter what happens, you can never leave Octavia Prime."

He jolted up but didn't get all the way up before something inside him cracked and Jenna had to ease him onto his back. "Why not?"

"I'm sorry. You aren't well enough for space travel and you're unlikely to be well enough again. Regardless, I'm willing to crown you if you can meet a few of my demands."

"What are they?"

"You didn't come off great in your interview with Celestina. There was a lot of negative talk over social media about your appointment. But I think I can raise your popularity if you let me control the narrative. I'm going to write something for you to read to the public that will change everyone's opinion of you. I'm going to write something very sentimental that will win over the

hearts and minds of everyone who watches TV. In exchange for my prettying up your image, you will never go on TV again without my permission. You'll never give a quote to a reporter or allow anyone to quote you for the rest of your life."

"That's a little harsh," he rasped, again trying to sit up in bed.

Jenna watched him struggle for a moment before offering him a hand, "It is the only thing of consequence I need from you. I won't try to control your voting. You can vote however you like. Satisfy your AAMC masters or don't. It will be none of my business. More importantly, I need to control the image of the diplomats that represent the Adamis to the Octavians. I will not have you undercutting my support for this program. If you decide to take me up on my proposal, you'll be given the Waterfall Palace with servants to see to your every need for the rest of your life."

He looked at Jenna and with that one look, she knew that he had never been offered anything close to that good from the AAMC.

"What happens if I refuse?"

"I'll enter into talks with the AAMC on your behalf because, as I said, you cannot be removed from this planet. Your heart won't take it. You came here on their orders, and I'll make sure they pay for your housing here on Octavia Prime, though I cannot promise to secure you luxury."

He frowned. "I need to talk to Admiral Denver before I can give you an answer."

"We'll arrange for that immediately. I don't know his schedule or how easy it will be to get in touch with him."

"I'll get him," Ixy said over the loudspeaker.

"I'll leave it to you." Jenna got up to leave, gave Rennett a solute that she hoped didn't come off as pretentious, and left the room.



"How's it going with Phane?" Jenna asked Ixy, as soon as she was certain she wouldn't be overheard. Phane was the pilot Ixy had found for Jenna to interview when she said she wanted someone who was an Adamis pilot who butted heads with the AAMC. It had taken the PA some time, but she'd finally found someone who checked all of Jenna's boxes.

"I love him," Ixy said like her mouth was watering. "He's the biggest pain in the ass I've ever met."

"He's crashed enough starships to meet your approval?" Jenna sniggered.

"No. His record shows that he's never crashed. He burns his ships out by running them too hard, but he's never crashed. He's the best of the worst of the Adamis pilots. Obviously, he's always in trouble with the AAMC even though they invite him to do freelance work whenever there's an emergency."

"Have you got a picture of him?"

Ixy cackled. "I would never get you a funny-looking guy, Jenna. I know how important appearances are for you when you put everything up in front of Josh's camera."

"Put the picture up in my bedroom," Jenna said, closing the door with a heavy click.

The picture came up.

He was less human-looking than most of the Adamis Jenna had met since coming to outer space. His eyes were too big. They were so big, the black surfaces reflected like twin mirrors.

The rest of his face was gaunt. His neck was so thin that his tendons and voice box were practically on display.

The very sight of him disturbed Jenna. She wanted to send money monthly so someone could improve the living conditions of his village. Except, he was a starship pilot, so he didn't have a village that needed a well.

"Is this just what space travel does to humans?" Jenna asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

"Yes. This is what Scion wants to avoid," Ixy replied.

"Is there a picture of Phane from before he spent all his time in space?"

"No. He's always lived in outer space."

Jenna rapidly snapped her fingers. "I have a question. If Octavian spaceships are filled with water, does that mean that they don't lose muscle mass as fast as humans do in outer space?"

"Yes. There is less pressure bearing down on the crew of a spacecraft than there is in the ocean because there's no gravity and the weight of the water is less. They have to push against the water in order to move around in the spaceship, so there's more friction. Their muscles stay in better shape. It saves a lot of trouble when the Octavians finish their tours and return to the surface."

Jenna remembered Fallcet telling her that the Adamis were changing the way they did space travel so that the Adamis pilots had to live in the water too. If the way the universe did business changed too quickly, what would happen to someone like Phane?

Just then, Jenna heard a sound behind her.

She pivoted to see Misha standing at the entrance to the closet. Her button-looking eyes were even larger than usual. "He's so beautiful," she said wistfully.

Jenna hid her annoyance and addressed Ixy. "Obviously, he can't come here as he is now. Is there any way to help him with his body here on the surface?"

"Oh, sure," Ixy said. "It all depends on how drastic you want to be. Of the cheap and temporary options, we can hook him up to an exoskeleton that will move his limbs for him. Though, he will have to be slightly hopped up on drugs to stop him from vomiting. When you're used to living in zero gravity, you get used to spinning around all the time. Staying relatively still on the surface of a planet makes you sick. He's sure to throw up a lot."

"How does the exoskeleton work?"

"Well, either he can control it with his eye movements and button pads he can wear on his palms, or they can put a needle in the back of his head into his brainstem and he can take control of the exoskeleton in the same way he would control his own body, by thinking of what he wants to do and then the machine providing the strength for the motion instead of his body."

"That sounds dangerous," Jenna said, turning to look at the star-struck Misha who was gazing at the screen without blinking.

Ixy answered, "It's dangerous to keep an implant like that in place for longer than two weeks. If it's for a shorter time period than that, it's completely within acceptable risk levels."

"What are the more expensive options?" Jenna asked.

"There's only one: a muscle transplant."

"That sounds horrible."

"Oh, it isn't," Ixy explained with a yawn. "They grow the muscles in labs. They're compatible with every kind of Adamis and every blood type. They're not even the expensive part. From a

money grubber perspective, it costs the same amount of capital to raise broccoli. The problem is the surgery. It's long and it has to be done in eight sessions. It's not painful. It's expensive. Doctors who can work that kind of witchcraft cost a fortune and the only doctor on Octavia Prime who can do it is... drum roll, please... Philip's mother, Brazel."

"Crap," Jenna mouthed almost soundlessly. "I pissed her off recently, didn't I?"

"Well, you were instrumental in her son remarrying her least favorite old bag. It's no secret where Philip gets his good looks. You are not going to be able to get along with her easily."

"Can we import another doctor?" Jenna asked, rubbing her nose bridge while Misha began drooling on the tiling.

"Not without Dr. Brazel approving their permit to perform that surgery on Octavia Prime," Ixy said with an unconcerned yawn.

"Have you spoken about this with Phane? Does he have an opinion?"

"He sure does. He says he was born in outer space, and raised on the space station Paramour. Just to bring you up to speed, that station has the lightest gravity in the cosmos. He says that if you can't find a way to make him comfortable on Octavia Prime, he doesn't want to sign up."

"So, he wants the surgery?"

"Yes, he wants the surgery because there is no other way to make him comfortable on the surface indefinitely. He wants to try living on the surface of a planet to see what all the fuss is about. What do you want to do?"

Jenna thought about it for a moment and then said, "Any chance we could romance Dr. Brazel?"

"I know exactly what you're thinking," Ixy said with a bored huff. "You want to invite her here, wine and dine her, show her the greatness of the program, and win her over. But with Smoothie gone, it's impossible."

"I think you should send her a present," Misha said suddenly, interrupting their conversation with her squeaky suggestion.

Jenna and Ixy were both taken aback.

"A present?" Jenna reiterated.

"Yes. I could make her a dress," Misha offered, her face flushed. "If we made her a really beautiful dress that fit her in all the right places, with your compliments, she might agree to do the surgery. My skills are the best on the planet and if my doing it brought that man to Octavia Prime, it would be my pleasure."

"Wait, Misha," Jenna said, rushing to her. "This man is part of a very secret plan. I may as well tell you that the pretense I'm using to bring him here is that I've proposed marriage to him."

"What?" she gasped. "But what about Ryatt? What about Sardius? What about Favel?"

Jenna facepalmed herself. "I have no intention of marrying Phane, even though that is what I am planning to tell everyone. I just can't bring him here saying that I'm going to crown him. He's on the other side of the universe and will have to pass many AAMC outposts to get here. If he says he's coming here to become a diplomat, that's going to cause a rash of complications. The AAMC guys will try to stop him, maybe even kill him. It's way easier to say he's going to become my husband while he travels. I can do whatever I want with him when he gets here, but until I work all that out, I can't have you developing feelings for him."

"Huh?" Misha mewed weakly, having fallen back into a daze staring at Phane's picture.

Jenna grabbed her stylist by the shoulders. "If you're infatuated with him, that might be very bad, not just for him but for you and me. I want us to stay friends and if you get too excited and gum things up, that will not look good for us. Making us look good is the whole point of your job."

"Not to mention that the eight surgeries will dramatically change how he looks, Misha," Ixy said over the loudspeaker. "He won't look like this when the doctor is finished with him."

Misha looked around like she was searching for someone to help her understand what was happening. The only other person in the room was Jenna. "How will he change?"

"I... I can't tell you. I don't know. The only thing I can tell you is that you cannot pursue him romantically. He's not for you. I'm bringing him here to fit him as a cog as part of my diplomatic plan. He's special because he's an Adamis pilot who has worked his whole career in space and he has been censored by the AAMC at least a dozen times. He's someone who will have an opposing opinion to the AAMC guys, and I need to hear what he has to say."

The stylist smiled. "That sounds really noble."

Jenna almost facepalmed herself again. "Did you hear what I just said? You can't like him. You can't get close to him. If you do anything to get near him before he's crowned, I will ship you off to Celestina's."

"That seems kind of drastic, but if you're only shipping me as far as Celestina's, does that mean you're planning on housing him here? In the Dahlia Palace?" Misha pieced together with a hand on her hip.

"I mean business. I'd love your help with the dress for Brazel, but if you even make goo-goo eyes at Phane (if I can even get him here), before I give you the green light, I won't look on that kindly. It could ruin my plan. I don't know how long I will have to pretend that he's my fiancee."

Misha moved her eyes between the picture of the man on the wall and Jenna. "I don't like the way you're talking. You talk to other people like this, Jenna, not to me."

Jenna's shoulders drooped. "I'd love to keep on talking sweetly to you, but if you mess up my diplomatic mission, you'll find out how nice I am being right now. This is deadly serious. Ixy, how much will his surgery cost if I can get the doctor to do it?"

Ixy said a number that was four times Misha's yearly salary. Both Jenna and Misha cringed.

"Look, I won't have another chance at this. I need this guy and I need you to promise me that you won't make a play for him until I give the word. You also need to understand that I may never give the word."

Misha stared. "This must be serious."

"He's very important," Jenna reiterated.

Misha groaned and then gave her promise.

Ixy found Brazel's measurements by capturing a recent picture of her and doing the math. Then the two of them went to Misha's workroom to figure out what kind of dress would make the doctor lose her mind. That meant Misha left the room alone while Ixy's voice changed speakers to keep up with the stylist as she walked.

Sardius came in after Misha left.

He smiled at Jenna. "What was Misha doing in here?"

"Trying to ruin everything," Jenna said with a sigh.

Chapter Twelve

Son of a Gun

Jenna sat in the dining room with Scion. She was having dinner alone with him. Well, not completely alone. Sardiuss stood like a totem pole behind her while she sipped on a line of multi-flavored shot glasses Vash had prepared for her. Scion had asked to have the same dinner as Jenna, but it was obvious he regretted his choice immediately.

"You can order something else from my chef after we've had our talk. By that point, you may or may not feel like eating," she said with an ironic little grin.

He nodded, more polite than anything as he downed a yellow drink that made his face twitch.

"I want to know your feelings," she said, leaning forward in her black and white dress. "Do you want to be a diplomat?"

Scion had a good face. He was too young, much younger than anyone else Jenna had crowned. He didn't seem anything like a crafty old goat when he spoke. "To be honest, I didn't realize what a big deal this was before I came here. I thought it was a simple assignment with simple rules. I didn't understand that my actions would have cosmic consequences."

"Does that scare you?" Jenna taunted.

Scion wouldn't be taunted. He flexed the muscle in his jaw and replied smoothly. "It doesn't scare me, but it does worry me. No matter what my father said, I can see that I'm a person you never would have chosen for the post due to the other people you have chosen. Two doctors, a TV personality, and a person who was already a diplomat. I'm from the opposite end of the spectrum. My family makes war, not peace. I have a suspicion that this is a farewell dinner."

"I didn't treat Voguen to a farewell dinner," Jenna pointed out. "I just put him on a pod. I am still open to the idea of crowning you, but we need to come to an agreement about a few things. Do you want to be a diplomat?"

Scion nodded and said, "Yes."

"Wonderful. Firstly, we need to control the media about you. So far, you're very unpopular. Did you see the stats from when Celestina aired your interview?"

He shook his head in the negative.

Jenna didn't pull any punches and explained. "You were unpopular, but you don't need to worry about that. Rennett and Voguen were unpopular too."

"Which one of us was the most unpopular?" he asked curiously.

"Rennett."

"Yet, you sent Voguen home first."

She took a swig from an orange shot glass. "Yes, well, my decision was not based entirely on what the popularity charts said. If I'm going to turn your image around, I need your cooperation. What I want from you is a particularly hilarious gag."

"You want me to humiliate myself in front of trillions of TV viewers?" Scion asked with narrowed eyes.

“Not at all,” she said, waving her hand and his suggestion away. “Here’s what I want from you. When we go on TV together, you can say whatever you want about whatever you want, but no matter what, you must also say how much you adore me.”

Scion’s eyes went wide. “Excuse me?”

“Yes. You must always say how much you respect me and value my opinion. In exchange for this, I will do the same. No matter what jacked up flat-out insane thing comes out of your mouth, I will repeatedly insist that we are the best of friends and we can always hang out, drink shots, tell each other what we think of each other and the night ends with us laughing. We must stress that we are besties. How does that sound?”

“It sounds crazy. No one will believe it.”

“Yes, they will,” Jenna affirmed. “We’ll make them believe it because we will never say anything else. You will say how welcoming I was to you and I will say how much I enjoy having you around. We will respect each other in public no matter what the other does. We will wear matching bracelets and pretend to kiss each other’s cheeks whenever we meet in public.”

“How does that work?” Scion asked, baffled. “I’ve never even seen that kind of a relationship in real life.”

“Air kisses. Mwa, mwa.” Jenna gave an example, kissing the air.

“No one will ever believe that came naturally to me,” he complained, touching the hair on his face like it had been there for less than twenty-four hours.

Jenna smiled at how wet he was. Maybe they could train him to do more than just give kisses. “Even if that seems like a reasonable answer to you, Ryatt assures me that no one will think it is unreasonable. Everyone who knows you will think it’s amazing that you get to be so close to me.”

Scion’s eyes almost reflected the scenario playing out in his mind. From the way the corners of his lips curled, Jenna thought she had him.

Jenna continued, “You don’t have to kiss me the way I just did it. You can do it your way. Maybe a hand kiss? You can also say that you changed when you met me because you’d never met anyone who lit a light inside you the way I did.”

“We don’t know each other,” he said, outlining the roadblocks that still existed in his head.

“We will never know each other if you can’t do as I instruct,” Jenna retorted. “Do you want to leave? If you say you’re opting out of the program and would rather not be an OA diplomat, I’m fine with that. Is that what you want?”

His face fell.

Jenna took that as continued assurance that he wanted to stay and went on. “You need the PR boost and I am the only diplomat willing to help you. If you can be grateful for what I’m willing to do for you, all of the good feelings we pretend to have in front of the cameras will one day become the truth.”

Scion leaned back in his chair and stared at her like she was a crazy woman. “You must need more from me than just that. What else?”

“You have to forgo having a personal assistant. For reasons that I can’t get into, personal assistants are incredibly hard to come by right now. I can’t get you one even if I trusted you with all the moons of Octavia. You have to agree to go without. In exchange, you may have an extra person on staff who will act as a personal assistant for you.”

Scion clearly didn't understand the difference in scope between a personal assistant who hung by your elbow with a tablet in their arms and someone like Ixy because he said immediately, "I can agree to that."

Jenna went on listing her conditions. "You will not be allowed to receive packages from outer space. If your mommy wants to send you cookies she has to send her order to a company here on Octavia Prime and have them deliver them to you. Any package sent from outer space will be confiscated by the Octavian police in orbit, threat assessed, and then disposed of. No matter what is sent, you'll never see it."

Scion's well-groomed eyebrows came together. "Does that mean they'll fire it back into outer space?"

"That's exactly what it means," Ixy said in Jenna's ear.

Jenna nodded for Scion's benefit. "The last thing you'll have to submit to is the recording of all your personal transmissions."

"That's insane!" Scion said, rising to his feet.

"Do calm yourself," Jenna said, rolling an empty shot glass around in her hand. "This precaution has nothing to do with you. When I first got here, all my conversations were recorded and transcribed. It's not about your allegiances. We want you to be here to represent your people, whether they are warmongers, or the AAMC, or whoever. That's all fine. The issue here is that we need to protect our diplomats and if I crown you, that will include you. Capish?"

Scion slowly sat back down. "You were recorded?"

"Yes. Every move I made was watched, even when I was naked. Try to understand, the diplomats are the most important thing here. We need to open a channel of communication with the Octavians and if you are going to be a hindrance, I can send you home now. What do you say?"

"Can I speak to my father before I agree?"

"Yes, just so long as you understand that the call will be recorded," she reminded him with a shot of red liquid.



Jenna watched the video of Scion's father speaking to him about whether or not he should agree to Jenna's terms. The most notable thing about the conversation was that the old arms dealer was floored that Jenna was even considering crowning his son.

He called her himself five minutes after his call with Scion ended.

"Hello," Scion's father said, looking at Jenna like she was a lounge singer in a 30s mob movie. It fit his look since he wore a suit like one of those old mobsters. It fit Jenna too since she was dolled up for her photoshoot with Favel. "My name is Rold Xant and I want to talk to you about my son."

Jenna smiled and prepared to be as accommodating as she could be. "Yes, I've been having meetings with your son for the past few days. Entrancing young man."

Rold took a cigar from a box and rolled it between his fingers before taking it between his teeth. "What's this I hear about him accepting a lifetime role as an Octavian diplomat? Have you read his resume?"

Jenna chuckled. "Have you read the resumes of the other candidates the AAMC has recommended? I agree Scion's resume is not great, but that doesn't concern me particularly. I was crowned when I was an infant when I had no talents or achievements to recommend me. I only had my grandmother and she was an incredibly exceptional person. Scion is in a similar situation."

Rold had not expected Jenna to flatter him so blatantly or so immediately and he drew his eyebrows together curiously in an expression Jenna had seen many times on Scion's face. "Do you know who I am?"

"I know you split planets apart on your testing stations. Are they like eggs? Do you need to break a few to make an omelet?" she asked coyly.

He took in a sharp intake of breath, as his eyes rested on her crown. "Who are you?"

Jenna shrugged and offered him a half-smile like she was a surprise made just for him. "I'm someone who gives people what they want. That's what diplomacy is all about. I find out what the two sides want and I give it to them. What do you want?"

Rold took his unlit cigar out of his mouth and tapped it on the knee of his burgundy suit. "I want my son to stay out of trouble."

"You don't think he'll be able to do that as a diplomat on Octavia Prime?" Jenna loved this moment. She felt like a leopard about to pounce. All of this sounded like they had sent Scion because they hadn't believed for one second that Jenna would crown him, so he made the perfect stalling device if they wanted to prevent Jenna from achieving quorum. It also sounded like having him there might make someone think twice about killing all the diplomats in one fell swoop. The idea of Scion being an inadvertent hostage made her want to keep him forever.

Rold lit his cigar. "I don't see how he could stay out of trouble with all you polyamorous freaks living around him. Aren't you marrying an octopus?"

Jenna laughed and threw her voluminous blonde curls over her shoulder and blew off his slander. "For the time being, it is not on our agenda to arrange a political marriage for Scion. As it stands, he is free to have as many lovers as he sees fit, but that was true before he came here. Nothing has changed. If you wish for a particular political ally for him, you are welcome to sort it out with him privately."

Rold was playing his cards badly. It was clear to Jenna that he didn't have a problem with the eight-spouse policy no matter what he said. His problem was that he had been told that his son would fail the interview process and would be sent home. The AAMC had been hunting for the most egregious candidates they could find when they chose him. Rold was trying to formulate a strategy to convince Jenna to send Scion home. He had made that comment about polyamory to try to piss her off. It hadn't worked.

All of which made Jenna want to crown Scion even more. She was starting to think of him as a hostage on Octavia Prime that might stop Rold from supplying arms to invaders.

"You must be so proud of your son," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "Would you like to be here for the crowning? I'm sure I could find a palace to put you up in. If you've never been to Octavia Prime before, we could arrange for you to see some of the planet while you're here."

Rold was an old lion, but he was not as stupid as Admiral Lou Denver, who flew into a rage when Jenna baited him. Instead, Rold sat there and contemplated Jenna like she was someone to be ravished or someone to be disassembled. He was struggling. She had been dolled up prettier for the pictures with Favel than she had ever been in her life before. It was having a

strong effect on Rold. He was the type of man who had women who looked like her on his arm, doing what he said, not the other way around. He was struggling with how he felt about the new position.

"How many marriage proposals have you had?" he suddenly asked. "I have heard rumors about your husbands."

"Doubtless, you'll hear more," she said with a click of her tongue.

"Do you charm everyone like this?"

"No. Only men who can do something extraordinary."

"Like split a world in half?" he asked gruffly.

She chuckled. "No, like give me their son so I can reach quorum."

Rold had a moment where he almost lost control of himself. "What the hell does that mean?"

Jenna looked into his eyes and gave him a straightforward answer, which was what he needed at that moment. "It means that I need eight Adamis diplomats to vote on treaties in order to pass them to the Octavian council. Without eight, I'm done for. I need your son to vote. Surely, you knew that."

He looked sour. He didn't like what was happening, but from what Jenna had observed, Scion wanted to stay. He wanted Jenna to get up in public and talk about how they were best friends. He wanted a beautiful and powerful woman to air kiss him in public and say how much she liked him. Jenna had not made that offer to anyone else. It made him feel special, but that wasn't the only thing he had on his mind. Scion wanted to have a lifelong appointment where no one could force him into outer space where his muscles would lose definition and atrophy. He told his father he would vote according to AAMC interests and that they could trust him to convey their wishes. He was going to do the job they asked him to do.

That wasn't what his father wanted at all. Rold was wondering if he had any method that would force Jenna to give up his son.

If Jenna was having a strong-arm match with Rold, she was winning. The thing was that Rold did not have a woman of Jenna's quality waiting in the wings for Scion. The friendship and constant approval she was offering would be the hottest aphrodisiac any man had ever known. Women cared a lot about each other's opinions and for Jenna to give it freely would be giving Scion a free pass to any woman he wanted in the universe.

"You asked me what I wanted a moment ago?" the arms dealer asked as he sucked on his cigar.

"Yes."

"I want you to promise me that you will not get involved with my son," Rold said stiffly.

Even though his words were ambiguous, his meaning was perfectly clear. He didn't want her sleeping with Scion. Jenna had either brought him to his knees so that he was willing to settle, or he had a completely different plan up his sleeve. Jenna was willing to bank on the first one. She bet he didn't have a non-warlike method of retrieving his son, and he had people on the other side of the camera who didn't want him to. They wanted Scion as their little mole on Octavia Prime even if it put him in danger.

Jenna had a sneaky little plan of her own.

Jenna had already sent a message to Admiral Lou Denver that he had been most pleased to receive. She had told him her plan to crown Rennett and Scion and asked him to send her one of the disgraced majors she'd had stripped of rank. She'd talked it over with Vash and he gave

his recommendations for which of the men he thought would be the least pig-headed. She gave the Admiral the name and promised to crown Iker Hu without an interview. Denver thought he was going to get enough AAMC members on the council to have a majority for most votes. Therefore, stalling Jenna was no longer important.

She smiled at Rold. "I can promise that. His crowning will be tomorrow evening. Will you be able to attend?"

"Nah," the old space lion said, blowing smoke instead of fire. "I'm halfway across the universe. I don't know when I'll be able to accept your offer of hospitality. Out of curiosity, do you always keep your promises, Jenna?"

"I'm a diplomat, so there are plans within plans within plans, but if you're concerned about me and your son, you may rest easy."

Rold heaved another huge puff of smoke into the air and when it had cleared, he was gone.

Ten minutes later, Jenna figured out the reason Rold Xant did not want her sleeping with his son. It was because he was planning on doing the honors himself. She was the kind of woman who belonged on his arm and he was going to find a way to put her there.

It was a dangerous game Jenna played.

She swallowed and returned to the photoshoot.

Chapter Thirteen

Eight Photo Ops

Jenna was quickly learning that the number eight had its uses in ways she'd never even thought of. When planning the photo shoot, Josh and Favel quickly came to the conclusion that they should do four photos in Jenna's mansion and four photos underwater.

As Jenna reviewed the pictures, she learned a few things she'd never known before. The first one was that she was really pretty and the second one was how much she wanted to do a romantic photoshoot with Sardius.

Photo with Favel #1

Jenna was dolled up like a red carpet queen and the photo was taken on the front walkway outside her palace.

Her dress was a slinky black thing that flashed pinpoints of light and hugged all her curves. At first glance, Jenna thought it was covered in sequins. On closer inspection, they were gemstones that had been sewn on. Josh informed her that the dress was worth a large fortune because each of the stones was a kind of black diamond that was rare even in a universe where diamonds were as common as dirt.

That was the dress she had been wearing when she had it out with Rold Xant.

Her hair was done up in a high bun and instead of wearing a necklace, she was informed she would be wearing a scarf. It was going to be a rare Octavian prize. She chuckled when it was revealed the scarf was going to be Favel, draped over her shoulders like he was a piece of clothing.

During the photoshoot, she had been totally unprepared for how light Favel was. Not only was he light, but he was very easy to carry. He attached his suction cups to her bare shoulders and back. As part of the aftermath, she had a collection of circle-shaped hickeys where Favel had held onto her during the shoot, but Misha came over and quickly covered them with the makeup they used to hide all injuries and no one could tell that she'd essentially had a wild make out session with an octopus. That was until she had a shower and cleaned off the makeup. Then the purple and green bruises were on display for everyone, including Sardius, to see.

He swallowed his laughter and told her under his breath that he was a careful lover and if she had been with him, she could count on none of her blood vessels breaking.

Ixy always listened to those tidbits with pleasure and giggled like a maniac in Jenna's ear when Sardius said things like that. Ixy was much happier in a world where the Boneman got to sexually harass her boss without reprimand. If Jenna was being honest, she enjoyed Ixy's laughter, though not as much as she enjoyed Sardius' continual sexual innuendo.

If Jenna was being honest, she recognized that her relationship with Sardius was almost exactly the same as it had been when he was in her ear. Now that he was with her in person, she got the benefit of the wild expressions on his face and the look of his cut figure, but some

things hadn't changed much. He rarely touched her. The most exciting thing that happened was that he whispered the occasional comment in her ear and the feeling of his breath against her skin sent her pulse racing, but otherwise, it was the same.

After they were separated by the prison riot, Jenna thought that the relationship they had was lost forever. It was an unusual realization that they were back where they had been in the old days, with a few little perks, but back where they were nonetheless.

Jenna huffed. She wanted more. She wanted to be out in the open with their love. She wanted marriage, sex, love, and to be partnered up with him in a way no one could break, but he was in a bad position... and he had such weird ideas about her. She'd heard of men putting women on pedestals, but what Sardius was doing was outrageous. How was she ever supposed to be the woman in his arms if kept her at a distance and idolized her?

Jenna huffed again. She didn't know the answer.

When Josh presented the final version of the picture of Favel on her shoulders, it was magnificent. Her makeup was flawless and her dark crimson lips were the stars of the show as she threw Favel's blue tentacle over her shoulder and turned toward her palace like the world was hers.

The best part of the photo was that Favel's mantle was scooped up against her cheek and the look of adoration in his eyes was as loud as a bell. Jenna had tilted her head toward him and smiled like she loved the attention.

It ended up being a very loving picture. Josh was pleased with it, which was why he opened the presentation with it.

Photo with Favel #2

The second photo was taken in Favel's underwater mansion. Jenna was wearing another dress that was too fine for her regular wardrobe, which was astonishing to her considering how much of a bump up she'd had in the world of fashion since she became a diplomat. She didn't know that the flashy dresses she wore every day were only a tiny bit better than a business suit according to aliens.

This dress was pale blue and like the ocean surf. Holding the waves of the blue frothy fabric together were tiny blue pearl buttons sewn all down her arms and in two lines where the darts of a dress were usually placed. Jenna loved the dress, but it was so delicate, she was terrified of wrecking it the way she had ruined the tulle skirt from before. She tried hard not to bleed, so she stayed away from her pets.

The picture was of her leaning against the glass wistfully with her hand up. Favel was on the other side of the glass with his tentacle against the glass in the same place. They looked at each other longingly, lamenting the fact that they lived in different worlds.

Photo with Favel #3

By this point in the photoshoot, Jenna was starting to realize how lucky it was for Favel to always have his picture taken while he was naked. No one buzzed over him patting him with makeup brushes, or cinched him into tight-fitting dresses that worked to make Jenna fifteen pounds thinner (which she thought was really unnecessary since she was Sardius' workout

slave five days out of eight). Favel just showed up, made whatever pose Josh asked him to, and slipped back into the water having done his whole duty. It was ridiculous compared to the fuss she endured.

The third picture was of Jenna in a gown so gorgeous, it would have made a lead actress on Earth cry blood at the unfairness of it all.

It was a picture of Favel loading Jenna's fluit with a ball of juice the color of champagne. The long stick jutted out of her mouth the way illegal drugs had been sucked back for thousands of years on Earth. It was just apple juice in the gelatin ball and Josh assured them that no one would think they were doing anything illegal, but that was what made the picture so fantastic. The look on both of their faces (Favel's face as much as he could manage since tentacles jetted out in the space between his eyes and his mouth), was one of annoyance at the interruption. They were caught drinking something as innocent as milk, but they hated anyone who interrupted them.

Photo with Favel #4

Josh said it was time for something simple, but he had still cracked out the bathing suits. Also, Josh would not listen to Jenna when she said which suits she liked. She tried on dozens of bathing suits with him staring at her and every time she came out of the dressing room saying she actually liked the one she had on, he scowled at her and told her to get out of it immediately.

It was really quite an odd day to be with Josh. He and Jenna were not alone as Sardius and Vash watched on. It came to Jenna over and over again that she had rarely heard Josh speak before and now he was yelling at her that she had no taste in clothing and that she looked bad in bathing suits. She wanted to scream that she had never been in better shape in her life.

Finally, he yelled at her, "I've made up my mind. If you come out here in anything other than a red bathing suit, I'm going to fire you from choosing any more clothes."

Jenna had been avoiding the red ones. They were way too bright and she didn't like herself in red. She got way too much attention from everyone when she wore red, even if she only wore a red top with her jeans. How could she wear a red bathing suit?

She stuck her head out of the dressing room. "What are you hoping for, Josh? You hate everything."

He raised an eyebrow. "I want the furthest thing from the color of the ocean, from the color of Favel's skin. I want contrast."

"Do I have to wear a bikini?"

"You have to wear something that cuts up your thigh, Jenna. Isn't that why you always wear that signature dress with the slit up the side of a flaring skirt? Because you know that your best feature is your thigh and your hip?"

Jenna went red. "You've seen my thigh, Josh?"

He swiveled in his chair and faced her. "You're being stupid, Jenna. The whole universe has seen your thigh. Ryatt," he commanded, suddenly turning to Sardius. "You're her workout buddy. You know what I want and why I want it. Go get her into it. She'll be more comfortable with you than me."

Sardius cracked his knuckles in preparation. "Plug your ears."

Jenna backed up in instant apprehension, but as soon as Sardius came into the dressing room, the only thing that happened was that he closed the door and started rummaging around in the boxes of bathing suits. "This," he said, tossing it to Jenna.

Jenna took it and spread it between her fingers. "This isn't red."

"It's scarlet, which is on the red spectrum. It's just a lot closer to orange than you were probably thinking," he yawned. "Josh will probably like it better because orange is the opposite of blue on the color wheel."

"Is it a bikini?" she whined.

"Sort of, but it isn't a low-cut bikini. The point is to make the part of your hip here visible," he said, sliding his fingers over a spot that was now being covered by her current bathing suit. "Josh wants to highlight that spot, not give the viewer a free show of everything you've got. He even chose that spot because you show that off all the time when your usual dress flares open."

"My dress does not flare open," she said hotly, clipping her words.

He smiled broadly. "Yes, it does. You've just never heard any complaints."

Jenna glared at him. "You might have said something."

"It would not have been in my best interests to have said anything, ever. Put that on."

Jenna looked at it more closely. He was right. It had a very modest top before going to gauze around her midriff and slowly transitioning back to opaque for the bottom part of the swimsuit.

"Fine," Jenna puffed unpleasantly before she slipped the strap of the old suit over her shoulder, giving Sardius barely enough time to exit the changing room before she got naked.

When she came out with the new suit, Josh clapped his hands. "Great! I should have started with that. I'll go get set up. Get Misha in here to do Jenna's makeup. Tell her I want a natural look and if she doesn't give it to me, I'll send you back until she does. No divas today!"

The picture came out brilliantly. The scarlet bathing suit made Jenna look like a lifeguard. She was lying on her side on a surfboard with Favel pretending to drown in the water in front of her. The bubbles made it extra hilarious.

Photo with Favel #5

The next one had Jenna in a raincoat while Favel perched on a prop that essentially looked like a plate on a stick. He got on it and Jenna held it in the air, he spread himself out and let his tentacles dangle over the edges essentially turning himself into an umbrella while Sardius and Vash sprinkled water on them.

Jenna looked like a fancy woman going for a stroll in Paris in a poke-a-dot dress with high heels. She had a red bow on her bag, another one in her hair, and a last one on the crook of her umbrella.

"Make your lips look like a bow," Josh instructed. "It's the theme of the shoot."

Jenna moved her mouth to obey, but she did a double-take. "How do I do that?"

"Pout, Honey, pout," Josh said, giving her a demo that made Jenna laugh out loud.

Then it was impossible for her to pout until Josh growled at her. It had been a grave miscalculation on her part to think that he had ever been playful. He was always all business.

She obediently pouted and Josh got the shot.

Favel was grouchy when he got down from the top of the umbrella shaft. “Nothing more like that, Josh. If I’m going to be dangling from that high up, I want to be in a spaceship. Good grief. I’m dizzy and not nearly wet enough.”

Jenna took hold of an extra watering can from the pile and poured water on him. He closed his eyes and enjoyed it like he was a man enjoying the sun on the beach.

Jenna didn’t know he was afraid of heights.

Photo with Favel #6

It was not very imaginative, but Josh said they had to do it or they would look like monsters. Jenna wore a wet suit and got in the water for a shot with her and Favel swimming. Josh followed them with a little water drone and took pictures whenever it occurred to him.

When Jenna saw the finished picture, it was delightful. It was a picture of Favel offering her a white water lily. Her hair was mostly tied up to stop it from swishing all over the place, but little bits of it crept around her in a charming way.

For the first time, Jenna could see what Josh was making for them. It should have occurred to her before, but it didn’t. Her head was so caught up in the politics of it all that she couldn’t see the story of a loving friendship that Josh was creating. If everyone saw it the way Josh imagined they would, the two of them might win over the entire galaxy with cuteness.

Photo with Favel #7

The last photo that was done above water was all about the engagement ring. Jenna was in a mermaid costume, which she thought was stupid until she saw that Josh had no intention of making her hop around like a monopod. Instead, she was dressed up, lying on her stomach next to one of the sea entrances to her palace. She was supposed to lean forward and drop one of her hands in the water. Favel was in the water and one of his tentacles held her other hand, where she wore her engagement ring.

The picture was crowned by a perfect lipstick set of lips on his mantle.

They had begun that operation by having Jenna put on as much lipstick as she could wear and then having her kiss Favel. Naturally, that initial lipstick smear had not looked photo-ready, so Misha got down on her hands and knees to dress it up. She outlined it, filled it in, and added red sparkles.

Then she redid Jenna’s lips and gave her red sparkles too.

This one ended up being the most difficult of the photos taken in Jenna’s palace. Josh was unhappy with everything and was not happy until Jenna’s hair was half undone, her feet were sticking out of her costume and Favel was oddly entwined in her legs.

“This looks too sexy,” Sardius had warned Josh as he stood behind the camera and looked at the shot Josh was getting.

“I’ve already taken tamer ones of this shot that we can use for the initial release,” Josh said coolly. “But we need stuff like this to exist so that it is clear to everyone that Jenna is not repulsed by Favel. There are huge factions who believe that their relationship is a hoax.”

“But all Jenna has ever claimed is that they are friends,” Sardius argued.

“Yes. And there are huge groups who believe that even their friendship is a lie.”

"If we swing too hard the other way, people will they're up to more than friendship," Sardius told him between tight lips.

"They're already getting married. What do you want people to believe? To many people, the word marriage only has one meaning. I'm not saying we release these pictures today or even tomorrow, but people may need to see proof that Jenna is not throwing up into her hands with Favel between her legs."

"Too sexy," Sardius complained again.

"You'd let a dog run between your legs and it would be nothing. You'd stroke a cat on your lap and it's nothing. You'd mount a horse. This is not necessarily different from those things. You'd be a fool to think that Favel views his relationship with Jenna as anything more complicated than a master/pet perspective. She's his cuttlefish."

Jenna looked at Favel for confirmation.

He looked back at her with huge black eyes and suddenly, he turned black all over.

Josh took about a hundred pictures before Favel settled down and went back to being blue.

"Do you think I'm like your pet?" Jenna whispered with red sparkly lips.

Favel looked down, which happened to be down into the water where he could be if he lowered himself a little further. "We're not the same species. I thought it was okay that I thought of you as my pet because deep down, you thought I was like a pet you'd keep in an aquarium on your home planet. That was okay with me because deep down, I think you looked like one of the animals my people ship in pods. I hoped that was all the feeling you'd want from me because I would never ask you to feel more than that for me."

Jenna nodded. "We talk to each other like equals. Can't we be equals in our relationship instead of you looking down on me and me looking down on you?"

Favel's eyes sparkled. "Of course."

Jenna understood what he was saying and what it meant. He did not care if everyone under the water or over the water thought of them as long as Jenna knew the color of his heart. He could never love her like a husband. All of this was just a public relations stunt to gain Octavian and Adamis support.

"I wish you had a real husband," he said softly through bubbles in the water.

Jenna gave him a half smile. "Public servants don't get everything they want, and that's okay."

Sardius chuckled from across the room. "I want a pet like Jenna. Where do I put in my order?"

"Just go to Earth and pick one up. I hear that's what Armen did," Jenna replied with a graceful shrug of her shoulder.

Sardius was trying to change the mood in the room. He was successful at getting them back on track and Josh finished taking the picture.

Photo with Favel #8

Jenna was back in a bathing suit. This time it was one that had been made by a very famous designer to look exactly like Favel's skin, so it was blue. Misha curled Jenna's hair and put a big blue flower in it to match the suit.

The plan was simple. She was to lie on a surfboard. It was black with blue wavy lines on it.

Sardius helped her onto it before Josh pushed her out to sea. Then he flew a drone over her. When Favel was given the signal, he and two of his closest, bluest friends, wrapped their tentacles around the surfboard like they were going to pull her under. Favel wasn't big enough on his own to show enough tentacles at once, so he got a couple of his friends to show their tentacles, though they were not allowed to touch Jenna. If they did, they'd taste Jenna, and it would have been extremely uncool of them to do so, so their tentacles touched only the surfboard. Favel wrapped one of his tentacles around Jenna's wrist.

Jenna's job was to wink and blow a kiss to the camera hovering above her like she was about to get dragged under the waves and she welcomed it.

The final result was just so perfect, Jenna was astonished. If Josh hadn't proven himself before, he did then.

Chapter Fourteen

People Who Don't Like Jenna

Jenna had to meet with the doctor who was treating Rennett. His name was Arc Lawson and he was the sort of person Jenna never got along with. Which meant, he talked a lot without a lot of meaningful communication in his dialogue. His intent while talking seemed to be to keep Jenna in the room for as long as he could without telling her what she had come to discover.

They were in the Waterfall Palace, where Jenna was allowing Rennett to live, even though he hadn't been crowned yet. She was trying to gauge whether or not it made sense to crown Rennett at all since his health was failing rapidly. How soon was he going to die?

Arc was not answering her questions quickly enough.

Finally, she'd had enough. "He was the candidate provided by the AAMC. Is his health good enough for me to crown him or will he not be able to perform any of his duties ever?"

"Well, it all depends on how well he takes care of himself. If he eats well..." the doctor hedged. It seemed he was going to continue explaining how to take care of a patient with poor heart health, but Jenna cut him off, hoping for a more direct answer.

"What is your medical opinion? Will he be well enough soon?"

The doctor pushed his glasses into his face so that the frames touched his eyebrows. "I can't really say what he's capable of."

"Let's get Admiral Lou Denver on the line and you can give him your professional opinion," Jenna volunteered, getting Ixy to make the call.

The Admiral was not delighted with the timing of Jenna's transmission and stared at the screen in a lesser version of his uniform. "Miss Fairchild," he said, unimpressed. "This better be important. I have other things to do rather than meet with you at your whim."

"Yes, I understand that. This is Doctor Arc Lawson. He's here to talk to you about the suitability of your candidate." She moved aside to give the doctor room on the screen.

"Uh..." the doctor said, getting more flustered by the second. "It's an honor to be talking to you in person."

Jenna glared at him. He'd obviously already spoken to the Admiral and the Admiral had already told the doctor what he wanted him to say... which was nothing. He was supposed to stall for as long as he could.

Jenna listened to them exchange more of what she'd already heard from Arc. That Rennett may or may not be a proper candidate. It all depended on how his rehabilitation went over the next few weeks.

Jenna scowled. Even though she had given in so much by allowing a crown to go to Iker (one of the terrible AAMC majors who had broken into her bedroom the night Sardius went dark), the Admiral was still going to do everything he could to stall the negotiations.

"Should I crown him or not?" she blurted in the middle of Arc's weak explanations.

The Admiral took on a patronizing demeanor that suited his pink face and encouraged her to be patient. "Just wait a few weeks and we'll see where he's at then."

"How many weeks?" she demanded.

“Three to six weeks,” the doctor replied.

She glared at both of them. “Thank you for your time and advice. I shall be sure to follow it to the letter,” she said to the Admiral before signing off.

Without saying anything further to the doctor, Jenna stormed out of the room. Footsteps assured her that he was following her.

“When can I schedule his next checkup?” he called in a voice that was almost mocking as Jenna left the palace and stood on the deck.

By then, the walk had helped Jenna regain some of her composure and blow off some of her adrenaline. To be more specific, she looked more calm on the outside but felt as frigid as Death himself on the inside. The doctor was still behind her and waiting for her reply.

Jenna turned to him, put an innocent look on her face, and prepared to be a thousand times eviler than the poor doctor expected. “Dear, Doctor Lawson, your care for him during this troubled time is so appreciated.”

The doctor launched into another lengthy narrative explaining things he had already said before, but Jenna refrained from telling him he had already said some things three times and this was the fourth. Instead, she looked up at him with her defenseless woman’s eyes.

Then she bit her lip and said gently. “You’re such a caring doctor. I want you to always have the ability to treat him. You live on the seaside, don’t you? Why don’t I move his palace so that it is docked outside your house?”

The doctor sputtered. That hadn’t been what his dialogue intended and he thought it would be convenient to come to the cluster of floating palaces whenever Rennett needed something. But he was the sort of man who didn’t realize that most women phrased commands as questions.

Jenna continued like she hadn’t heard him. “If he’s just outside your house, you’ll be able to keep a very vigilant eye on him at all times. Nothing will happen to your patient without your full knowledge. And all the responsibility for his care will rest squarely on your shoulders.” She patronized him further by looking at his shoulders like they were capable of far more than just managing Rennett’s care.

“B-but...” he stuttered.

“You were a doctor recommended by my colleague, Philip, but you obviously have the endorsement of the Admiral as well. From that conversation, he has all the confidence in the world in you. I’m sure you’ll be able to take care of everything to everyone’s satisfaction.”

The man looked horrified as Jenna patched him through to Ixy who explained that there was no reason to call for a transport. The Waterfall Palace would move by itself to take him home. Arc’s face grew paler with every added detail.

He said everything to stop their plan except the words, ‘I was asked to be a spy for the Admiral and if I have the patient at my home, I can’t spy on you!’

If he had said that, he would have gotten a lot further with Jenna. Instead, he said everything else, like a child stacking sand on a marble hoping that if he stacked enough sand on top, everyone would see the sand heap and no one would remember the marble under it. His excuses sounded infantile and Jenna had had enough of him.

Jenna stepped off the gangway of the Waterfall Palace and waved to him in a way that would have been pleasant and friendly if she hadn’t already proven herself to be the Devil. “Thank you for everything!”

“But, Madam Diplomat,’ he stuttered, trying to run after her, but now an ever-widening stretch of ocean was between them. He couldn’t chase her.

Dr. Arc Lawson definitely did not want General Rennett docked outside his home. He did not want to check up on him every hour of every day or have his health be his top priority.

Jenna was happy to toss everything in Arc’s lying, stalling, cheap, sell-out hands. Jenna herself didn’t know if Rennett was well enough to be crowned. At first, she thought it didn’t matter. Sardius said she should crown him whether he was well or not and if he died, she could just crown whoever she wanted afterward. It turned out that his living was the problem.

She was going to have to renege on her deal with Fallcet. She promised him three seats to the AAMC, but the AAMC was no longer sending her candidates and she couldn’t crown Rennett the way things were, especially when Admiral Denver had told her to wait and be patient.

She needed another candidate. To get eight, she needed to crown someone else rapidly, but crowning her next choice, Phane, posed all kinds of problems.

Looking around as she crossed a floating palace and came on board another, she reflected on how much had changed since she first came to Octavia Prime. She passed the Lotus Palace. That was where Scion lived. To Jenna’s surprise and relief, he had done everything they had agreed upon with flying colors. He redid his interviews with Celestina and brought his approval rating up, speaking up for the program and extolling the virtues of cooperation in the universe. He claimed he adored Jenna and did so so convincingly that she wasn’t sure if he was lying. He seemed legit, which worried her a little.

Rold, Scion’s father, had chosen a first wife for his son and she was being delivered in a few months. She was a daughter of an AAMC commander and the intention of the union was to strengthen his bond with the AAMC.

Scion’s face briefly twisted as he spoke of it as part of his interviews.

Jenna longed to ask him what that was about but refrained. That twist in his face meant something... Something no one had any business asking about.

Regardless of Jenna’s hesitation, Scion becoming a diplomat was to be publicly celebrated, and so Celestina had her hands full preparing for it. Scion had opened their filming to a whole new demographic of people who loved the AAMC and wanted to see what their next moves might be. That meant Celestina’s ratings were up.

The next palace Jenna passed was the Rainmaker Palace. She had given it to Iker. He had not arrived yet, but the palace had been docked next to Scion’s in preparation for his arrival. Jenna could see the temporary staff Sardius hired hard at work cleaning it.

Across the gap created by the removal of the Waterfall Palace, Jenna could see the Salt Palace (she was saving it for Phane). She had brought it back after Lucy and Armen departed. It was right beside the Stone Palace, where Excelyn and Philip lived.

Jenna stepped onto Celestina’s Sun Palace dock and moved to get to her own palace when she saw Sardius coming toward her.

“I don’t know how much longer I can live like this,” she confessed under her breath when he arrived. He looked so good with broad shoulders, his shirt hugging his torso, his stride thick with purpose. She licked her lips. He looked like chocolate on ice cream, with cherries, nuts, salted caramel, and shaved gold.

She was clearly going insane.

When he got closer, she said to him, "If you're in charge of security, can't you arrange for a place where you and I can be alone for a minute?"

He winked at her and matched her pace as they walked toward the Dahlia Palace. "I'd like that too, but I'd hate it if a fleet of angry aliens arrived to get revenge on me before you've reached quorum. That would be a shame."

Did that mean he was planning on leaving when she got her eight diplomats? She didn't dare ask him.

"Yes, it would be," she agreed, letting her gaze fall downward.

He shook his head. "No. You need to look available. Can't you see how many bonus boxes your availability is helping you open? You're not selling these guys diplomacy, you're selling them what you are. 'Hey, wanna be like me?'" he said, doing a mock impression of her.

Jenna stuck her nose in the air. "I'm not like that, but aside from Fallcet being stupid, none of these other guys are keen on me."

"It's not that they've got the hots for you. It's that they want to be like you. They want your shine and polish, and part of that is being in close enough proximity for you to sprinkle some of your glitter on them."

"Well, Rennett isn't going to get any of my polish. I just sent his ass...I mean... his palace away."

"Where did you send it?"

"Beside Dr. Arc Lawson's house."

Sardius stopped. "You're not going to crown him, are you?"

"Probably not. It's okay. I've got a few other options."

"If Iker can get here in a reasonable time," Sardius said.

Jenna agreed. "That reminds me. Where the hell is Iker? I thought he was supposed to be here already."

"He's supposed to be arriving the day after tomorrow. The AAMC swears up and down that his delay was not intentional, but just a sad collection of mismanagements."

Jenna ruffled her hair. "They just make themselves sound incompetent with excuses like that. It's particularly yucky because they're trying to gum us up. I take it you got him on board an Octavian ship?"

Sardius nodded. "Eventually. They're faster and less annoying. Temptic is monitoring it himself. Oh, and Jenna, there is one more tiny, crucial, thing," Sardius said, holding her back. "Dr. Brazel Russell is waiting for you in the great hall of the Dahlia Palace."

Jenna's face brightened. She needed Philip's mother, Brazel, to do the surgery on Phane so he could join them on Octavia Prime.

"Is she?" Jenna asked cheerfully. "Did you talk to her? Was she delighted with the gift?"

"I didn't see her. Vash invited her in, knowing that you wanted to see her whenever she showed up. I don't know if it went well. Vash told me she came bearing a large box with Misha's logo on it, so I'm thinking she didn't like the dress as much as we would have hoped. He thought she came to return it."

Jenna blew a bit of her hair out of her face and charged into her palace. With a swish of her skirt and a bob of her head, she entered the great hall. With a hundred-watt smile, she greeted Philip's mother.

“Good day, Dr. Russell. I’m so pleased you could visit me today. How was your journey to the floating palaces?”

“I hope I won’t be leaving with one of them,” she commented dryly.

Jenna dropped her smile 50 watts. “Did you see Dr. Lawson leaving via palace on your way in?”

“Yes,” the older woman said without elaboration.

Jenna had been taught what to expect when she met her. Brazel was a master cosmetic surgeon and even though she was 60, she looked like she was 30 without any of the hangups of too much plastic surgery. Her mouth wasn’t stretched too wide, the corners of her eyes didn’t tilt upwards, and every part of her face was mobile and not a little bit frozen.

Otherwise, she was Philip’s mother. She had pitch-black wavy hair, olive skin, and flashing green eyes. The dress Misha had made for her would have made her look ravishing. What had been the problem? But Jenna didn’t ask, even though she saw the box sitting on a table by the door.

“Might I invite you to sit down?” Jenna crossed the room and led the way to a cluster of chairs and sofas.

Brazel didn’t move. Instead, she had eyes only for Sardius, looking him up and down and then up and down again.

“Is my bodyguard of particular interest?” Jenna asked, feeling mildly territorial.

Sardius looked at the doctor while she looked back at him, not really looking at his face, but more at his neck. “I shouldn’t,” she muttered under her breath. “I really shouldn’t.” But in direct opposition to what she didn’t want to do, she stepped closer to him and looked at him even closer. “May I look at him?” she finally asked Jenna, even though it seemed like she was asking after the fact. Hadn’t she already looked at him?

Sardius lolled his head toward Jenna. “I know what she’s doing. I don’t mind if she does it.”

Brazel clicked open her handbag and pulled out a bottle of what looked like hand sanitizer, which she sprayed onto her palms before she worked it down to her fingers.

Jenna joined them by the front door. “What’s going on?”

“She’s looking at my cosmetic surgery scars,” he replied with an eyebrow waggle.

Brazel grabbed him by the chin and was openly looking at lines Jenna hadn’t even noticed.

“Yeah,” Sardius admitted as Brazel opened his mouth and started looking inside.

“He’s had more surgery on his face than anyone I’ve ever seen before. How many times have you had your face redone?” She let go of his chin so he could answer her.

“Maybe twelve?” he answered.

“More like sixteen. What have you been doing with your life that you needed that much surgery? How old are you? All your teeth have been traded out. How many times have you done that?”

Sardius bit down. “This is my third set of teeth.”

Jenna groaned. “Is that how many times you’ve had all your teeth knocked out?”

“Well, yeah,” he admitted. “At first, I lost too many because they were pulled out when I was being tortured. After that, the dentist thought I’d do better to have the rest pulled and have them replaced with implants. Those were broken out during fights. Not prize fighting, but revolutionary fighting. That was the first thing I paid for with my prize fighting money. I spent the rest on body enhancements.”

Jenna felt a little weird, but she refrained from saying anything.

"Mind if I see under your arms?" Brazel asked, pulling out a pair of glasses that looked more like twin magnifying glasses than reading glasses.

"It's only if Jenna says it's okay," he said, turning to Jenna for her guidance.

"Wait..." Jenna said. "Why do you want to look at him in the first place? He isn't the gentleman I want you to work on."

"I know. I apologize," the doctor hummed. "Lately, I have been studying the effects of multiple surgeries and their ramifications. I wouldn't have noticed how many surgeries this man has had, except that I was looking at case studies this morning. He's been cut open and replaced many, many times. I intended to come and tell you, Jenna Fairchild, that I do not approve of what you did to meddle in the life of my son. I did not open the gift you sent me. I don't want to help you with anything..." She trailed off and began looking at Sardius again. Forgetting herself completely, she took his hand in hers, flipped it over as if she were reading his palm, and began to trace invisible lines down his forearm.

"Maybe we could come to an arrangement," Jenna said slowly.

"How many times have you had your whole muscular system replaced?" she asked, staring up at him with a too-large gaze because of her glasses.

"Five times," he said.

"Have you had other things replaced as well besides your face, teeth, and muscle groupings?"

He nodded.

She took off her glasses. "Do you consider yourself to be still yourself since you've had so much of yourself replaced with other parts that are not you?"

"When I take other body parts, I claim them as mine while the parts of me that are discarded cease to be me once they're cut free," he explained rationally.

"Is that your real face?"

He chuckled. "Of course not!"

"All right. I phrased that badly. Is that what you looked like before you started getting banged up and having to have your face replaced?"

"Not exactly. It's what I should have looked like."

"How old are you?" she asked, firing questions off left and right.

"I don't remember," he said, matching her grit. "I've passed through too many star systems and lived in too many strange places to keep something that trivial straight. Without the teeth I was born with, it's really hard to tell."

"It wouldn't be if I had my tools to look properly in your eyes and ears..." she paused again. "Your eyes are false." She grabbed his cheek and pulled one of his eyes open wider than was natural.

Jenna saw the red edging he told her about. That was his real eye.

"Take out your lens," the doctor ordered thoughtlessly. She was completely and inappropriately in doctor mode.

Sardius pulled his face out of her grasp. "No. You didn't come here to give me a checkup."

Brazel took her glasses off. "Indeed. I came here to tell off Jenna Fairchild and I still haven't..." She suddenly grabbed Sardius' ear in an iron fist and looked directly into it with her

magnifying glasses hanging from her fingers. "You're young. You've just had the crap kicked out of you for decades."

"What's your definition of young?" he replied before pulling his head free.

"You're young enough to be my son," she replied. "If you were my son, I'd be sick right here and now. Because even though I have performed multiple surgeries on him to keep him looking slick and beautiful, I would never have allowed him to undergo this many. How many times have you had your face bashed in?"

"A fair few. I imagine there will be more."

"Are you looking for any improvements? You clearly had someone talented working on you, but I can see at a glance that I'm better. They cheaped out on your neck and... I still want to see under your arm."

"You can't work on him," Jenna interjected, putting her foot down.

"Why not?" Brazel asked with wide eyes.

Jenna crossed her arms. "Because he's mine and I'm not giving him to you without your help with my other man. I need you to do the surgery on him yourself or give another doctor authorization."

Brazel clicked her tongue ten times in rapid succession. "Tut, tut, tut. That man, Phane, has never been worked on. We'd be lucky if it ended up being only eight surgeries. He's not young and his skeleton is as brittle as tile. It's risky and I don't want to do you a favor. I want you to apologize to me for what you did to my son."

"I'm sorry. Did I make your son marry Excelyn the first time?" Jenna said without remorse. "Cause I know I didn't make him marry her the second time."

Philip's mother frowned and accused, "You provided the opportunity for them to reconcile."

"I did not. They were meeting that night anyway because of Philip's stipulation in their divorce. He wanted to see her once a year, every year, for the rest of their lives. I did not make them do that either. I did not play a meaningful role in their revived romance and I will not let you pin it on me. I haven't got the tiniest interest in playing matchmaker. All my work is diplomatic. Do you want Octavian and Adamis talks to be stalled?"

Brazel clenched her teeth and put her glasses back in her purse, but said nothing.

Jenna went on. "I don't need you to do the surgery on Phane personally. I just need you to sign a document permitting me to get another surgeon to do the work he needs in Octavian air space."

Ixy put a copy of the document up on the screen by the sofas.

Jenna pointed to it. "Unless you have a major objection to Octavian diplomacy, I suggest you sign it."

"What will you do to me if I don't?" Brazel asked with half a snort.

Jenna went through the options in her head, feeling that it was not a wise idea to say any of them. She could request to have Brazel's medical permit revoked. That was a terrible idea considering that she was an Adamis doctor. It seemed like an act of aggression against the Adamis medical personnel on Octavia Prime, which Jenna did not want to be the origin of.

There were plenty of other things Jenna could do that could sweep the rug out from under Brazel. She could have the law changed, so she didn't need Brazel's approval for the surgery. She could have her citizenship revoked. She could cook up a scandal about her and let it loose,

but none of those things would make Philip happy. By extension, none of those things would make Excelyn happy, even if she did not enjoy her mother-in-law one bit.

She resorted to returning to plan A.

Jenna crossed the room and picked up the parcel with Misha's seal on it. She pulled at the ribbon and opened the box. Inside, there was a dress the color of midnight navy. Jenna took it by the shoulders and lifted it out of the box. The shine of the luxurious material filled the room as Jenna held it up against herself.

"Well, whether you sign the permission form or not, you returned my gift," Jenna said, flaunting the fabric. "Ryatt, where could I wear a dress like this?"

Sardius cleared his throat. "A hospital fundraiser."

Jenna looked between him and his cut forearms and Brazel and her sudden interest. "That's what Misha thought when she made this dress for you, Brazel, but I understand if you don't want it. You're a doctor and rich as a witch. I understand if something like this is below your notice. It was only meant as a token of friendship and you've refused it. I suppose I could wear it to a hospital fundraiser. Do you think it would get people to come and open their wallets?"

"Put that dress back in the box," Brazel commanded.

Jenna smirked. She'd got her.

"Come and sit with me on the couch and tell me about Philip," the doctor said, taking a seat on the couch. "Were you really not involved?"

Jenna did as she was commanded because Brazel had that tone and she was old enough to be Jenna's mother. From the sofa, Jenna said, "I was not even aware that your son and Excelyn had been married. I was recruiting him regardless because of his personal excellence as a traditionally practicing doctor and I thought he would provide a different voice to balance Excelyn's."

Brazel nodded, but she did not believe Jenna until Ixy brought up the research material Jenna had analyzed before offering Philip a crown. Once she had seen everything Jenna had read (she went through it quickly because she was aware of what had been written about her son), she leaned forward and said without pretense, "Now, tell me about Phane. Who is he and why is he so important?"

Jenna sucked a breath in. "He's a starship pilot and the very opposite of an AAMC man."

"I see," the doctor said. "I've seen some of the footage Celestina has released lately and you have been forced to accommodate three of their goons."

"It's actually four. I have been forced to accommodate four of their goons. However, I might be able to squeeze this guy in if I can crown him before I have to crown General Rennett. It's on the rocks as to whether or not I'll be able to offer him a position as a diplomat. However, Captain Phane is vital to protecting Octavia against an Adamis invasion."

"You're going to put his life in danger. The AAMC men won't stand for a man like him making comments alongside theirs. They like to control the narrative, which is one of the reasons they don't like you."

"Yeah, well, I've had multiple meetings with him and I'm very fond of the perspective he brings. I want to crown him badly."

Brazel looked at Phane's medical charts. "If I did the surgery on him, it would be as though the god of gravity had touched him. I'm very skilled at what I do, but he might need longer to

recuperate than Rennett. I can't guarantee that he'll be ready to crown in time. You must be aware of this."

"I need to crown more than eight diplomats regardless of the timeline. Don't worry about when he's ready. Will you do it?"

Brezel nodded slowly. "But I have conditions."

"Name them."

"First, I want to be able to do the first four surgeries in orbit before we bring him down. I will need someone like Favel to arrange that for me. I don't have good enough connections, as that is not normally how it is done. Normally, the people we work on are people like your bodyguard who have spent time on the surface of a planet and then lost all their muscle mass traveling through space. They know what surface gravity is like and they just need their muscles to respond to it. Phane isn't like that. He's never lived on the surface of a world. He needs time to adjust."

"I'll see if I can accommodate you," Jenna said, loath not to give her consent immediately, but she really did need to see if that was plausible before agreeing.

"Secondly, I would like to work on your bodyguard. Ryatt? Is that his name? I'd like to work on him as part of the research I'm doing. Finding another person with as many scar lines as him is nearly impossible."

Jenna hesitated. She didn't like the idea of Sardius getting cut even one more time.

"I'll do it," he said easily. "I could probably use the tune-up anyway. And some feet."

"Shut up," Jenna said to him without ceremony before she turned back to Brazel. Then she did a double-take, having finally registered what he said. "Did you just say that you don't have feet?"

"Yeah, I lost my feet ages ago. That's why I almost always wear boots," he said, ruffling his own hair like he was a scampy kid who got caught with his hand in the cookie jar and not like he was an amputee.

Jenna stared at him. That was why the Fallcet's boys hadn't removed his super-all-utility boots. They couldn't get them off because they *were* his feet. Jenna stared at him a little longer. "Why didn't you tell me that?"

He crossed his arms. "No one cares if a man has feet or not, as long as he's got his—"

"Hush up!" Jenna hissed, interrupting what was surely going to be something she'd rather he didn't say in front of Brazel. She took a few cleansing breaths and was grateful that she'd cooked up something softer to say instead of 'shut up', especially since she's already said it. She turned back to Brazel, having regained her composure. "Do you have any other requests?"

"None," she said, stifling a smile.

"I'll have to take my time and consider your offer," Jenna said smoothly.

The doctor nodded. "Of course. I'll look forward to hearing from you about the orbital surgeries. Lastly, I'm taking that dress with me and I'm leaving now."

Jenna agreed.

Chapter Fifteen

Stitches

“Why have you had so much plastic surgery?” Jenna questioned, coming up behind Sardius and tapping him on the shoulder.

He swung around. “Does it make you feel like I’m less authentic because I’ve had my face and body worked on so often?”

She shrugged, trying to hide any discomfort she may, or may not, have been feeling. “I’m just trying to understand. I want to understand all the little parts of you.”

“Well, just as the doctor said, muscles get wrecked in zero gravity. The longer someone stays in zero gravity, the more their muscles lose density, reactivity, form, and obviously, strength. It is very common for thugs to wait around spaceports to rob travelers and army personnel who have been in deep space for too long. They’re easy marks. I had to have appointments to get new muscles put in before I went down to the surface. Don’t get the wrong idea. Nothing like that would happen in the Octavia system, but it would have happened where I come from.”

“And the work you had done on your face?”

“I had to have several operations before I could see you. I thought you knew that. My face was messed up before I went to prison. In the prison, I wasn’t roughed up until the night of the riot, and then, I was very roughed up. It wasn’t anything I couldn’t take, but I wasn’t cute anymore. When I came to this system, the people who found me booked me for facial reconstruction surgery before I was conscious. They knew no one wanted to go on looking like that. That first doctor did what he could, but mostly he just wanted to rebuild my nose so I would be able to breathe through it again.”

Jenna winced.

“Don’t cry for me,” Sardius said with a gasp as if Jenna’s discomfort was worse than the damage to his nose had been. “I’m okay. I’m used to being pragmatic about how I look and what constitutes me. It’s not a huge sacrifice to let Dr. Russell have a go at me. The thing that concerns me the most is that you will be without a bodyguard while she works on me. That’s worrying. I need to find someone to take care of you while I’m out of commission.”

“You don’t need to do anything special for me. I can go underwater and spend time with Favel in his mansion. He’s been hinting that construction on my palace is far enough along for me to go for a dive to see it for myself. I could do that. I’d be safe with the Octavians.”

He shook his head. “If I was convinced that the Octavians would care for you effectively in times of danger, I wouldn’t be here at all.”

“Hmm...” Jenna murmured. “Back to your face. You said that how you look now is sort of how you looked before all the surgery?”

“Try not to fret it, but I lied when I said that to Dr. Russell. She’ll probably be able to piece that together when she cuts me open, or maybe not. I just didn’t want her to get too curious about me. That’s the last thing we need. So, I said I’ve always looked sort of like this.”

“You didn’t?”

"I had a bad burn when I was a teenager. I had to choose a new face then. This face was the one I chose out of a data bank of faces the last doctor had on offer. Considering my existing facial structure, I could choose fifteen different combinations and this general shape was the one I decided on. It's interesting that I chose this facial shape as a teenager because it is the closest thing in appearance to your eleven matches through the universal matching algorithm... though you can tell by looking at me that even still, I'm not very close. I'd be closer if I was still looking the way I used to before I was sent to prison."

Jenna clucked her tongue. "That's funny because I find you more attractive than Armen or Fallcet. I guess you don't really know what you want until you see it."

"Too bad I'm only on loan," he said, keeping up his barriers to their intimacy before he continued. "The muscles are a different matter." He smiled and put up his bony bicep in a little show for her. He didn't seem to know what to do with compliments. "They don't make me feel weird about who I am or how I look. New muscle day is the best day. They train up faster and work better than real muscles. You'll hear different accounts from different boxers, fighters, and military yokels, but I enjoyed my first set more than I'd ever enjoyed my natural muscles. I wouldn't mind taking new ones from Dr. Russell if she wanted to swamp mine out."

Jenna tried not to let on how weird she found all that. Instead, she ran a hand along the bones in his back and tried not to think of all the crabs she'd eaten when she still lived in a city by the sea. How much were his insides like the inside of a crab? The guy in The Clube didn't call him Crabman for no reason.

She had to think of something else. She tapped her cheeks and asked him to help her out of her dress. She had been asking Misha for dresses with built-in corsets. Then she always had an excuse to have Sadius help her out of them.

As he worked with the laces, she asked him, "How did you get burned as a teenager?"

"Sorry. I can't tell you that kind of story. The only part of that story that matters is that I lost what I looked like and I had to make a large collection of choices too fast. I'm disappointed that Brazel thought I was young when she looked in my ear. I hoped that was over by now."

"Isn't there a place we can speak privately?" she said over her shoulder.

"I'm working on it," he whispered back. "I've almost got a place."

Chapter Sixteen

What if Iker Started with an F?

Two days later, Iker had not arrived. There was no explanation as to why his pod hadn't landed. There had been no news from his ship. When he first got on board, it moved on course, but after a few hours, it stopped and no transmission was received or sent out.

Temptic was concerned and sent a vessel to meet the ship in transit. They scanned the ship and found that Iker was not aboard and everyone else was dead.

As a consequence, Jenna was on the line with Lou Denver. He finally acted like the calm military leader as he said sternly, "I think it's clear to see that whoever did this, they are not a friend to the Octavian/Adamis Alliance."

"It's good to hear that you are not blaming the Octavians," Jenna said, relieved.

"Oh... I am," he said in a menacing tone that got under Jenna's skin. "They should have defended their ship better. The ship's log doesn't show that they put up much of a fight at all. A poison drone latched itself to the hull, drilled through to the water level, and let the poison loose in the water system. It killed all of them. Their water filtration system was not sophisticated enough to filter out the poison. One would think they'd be prepared for that eventuality."

"Has something like this happened before?" Jenna questioned keeping her voice neutral.

"I do not have time to give you a complete history of the uses of poison drones," Denver hedged gruffly. "Since the Octavians were unable to protect Iker, his entire pod was stolen and the only thing we know is that the ship that cut him loose did not approach The Sunflower. Once everyone on board was dead, they hacked the ship's computer system, killed the security in the pod, and set it adrift. After that, they calculated how it would fall through space and picked it up along its trajectory."

"This is a major loss for both of us," Jenna said remorsefully.

"Madam Diplomat, I hate you," Denver said without reservation.

Jenna's head perked up, though she didn't say anything. She had been feeling bad because it was the first time Octavians had died on her watch and she hated it. She didn't know what happened to Iker either and though she did not like him, she did want him to come to Octavia Prime and help her get her numbers up. She did not care one iota if Admiral Lou Denver liked her or not.

"I hate you completely," the Admiral went on. "You ruin the reputation of six of our finest officers only for you to toy with one of them, and lose him when he's on his way to you. It's damn sloppy, Jenna, and I'm blaming you entirely for it. I hope you can figure out a way to take responsibility."

"Don't be an ass," Jenna barked back.

"Ass?" he growled.

"Yeah. You don't want to go back to your superiors and explain that things went badly because that will make it look like you lost. If you lost then I must have won, but I haven't won and you damn well know it. You want me to take sole responsibility when we have BOTH lost? I wanted to crown your men when you sent them to me the first time. I don't know if it was you

who put the worm into their heads that they should attack me, but they did. You lose and I lose. You sent me three more men. I have already crowned Scion and I would have crowned Rennett, but you told me not to because of his health. I'm not even sure if that's been a legitimate story with that weird doctor working on him, but I'm taking it on the chin and moving on. I found Iker to be more palatable than Voguen, so I asked you for him instead, but he got attacked by someone unknown. That person could be just as much my enemy as yours. So, let's be real for one freaking second... You are obviously trying to stall me and stop me from achieving quorum. Why? I am an Adamis diplomat and if there is a good reason, then I am f—ing happy to be stalled."

Denver's eyes bugged out. His mouth hung open and he didn't say anything.

Jenna waited, clenching and unclenching her jaw while the moment hung in the air.

Ixy chimed in over the loudspeaker, sounding more like a professional PA than she ever had in her life. "Madam Diplomat, Captain Temptic is on the line. He has vital information about the whereabouts of Major Iker."

"I'll call you back," Jenna said to Denver, dismissing him.

He raised his hand to stop her, but Ixy had already cut the line.

Temptic's picture came up. It was really him, floating in the water of the space station, but he didn't speak. Instead, a line of text appeared under his video feed which was read aloud in an automated voice.

"We found the ship that stole Iker's pod. It's an Adamis ship used by a subspecies called Calcumicas. We got a transmission through to them and they responded with a message. They kidnapped Iker intentionally and they're holding him hostage."

Calcumicas? That was a Boneman ship.

"What do they want?" Jenna asked urgently.

Sardius laid a hand on her shoulder and said to her gently, "You know what they want."

She turned her head. Sardius had been in her meeting with Admiral Denver and she hadn't paid any attention to his being there. He was there the way the furniture was there, the way Ixy was speaking in her ear, and the way the air around her was there, but he was more important than any of those things.

Temptic displayed a picture of the red spacecraft. Jenna didn't have much experience with spaceships, but it was obviously not like the Octavian ships that carried pods. It was a ship filled with air and acted more like a submarine than a train with cars that could be added or subtracted, though it didn't look like one. If Jenna had to describe the design of it to someone back on Earth, she would have told them that it looked like a giant coral floating in space. It was beautiful and terrifying.

Temptic came back on, the typing coming in uncompromising lines of text. "Its captain is a man called Don Leo Quillio. He says he wants Ryatt... I mean Sardius and, if he goes by any other name, he wants that version of him too. He says he'll trade him for Iker."

Jenna balled her fists together, ignored Ixy's gasp of shock, and turned to her man. "Any idea why he's after you?"

Sardius' eyebrows went up. "Uh... yeah. He... uh... he was the first captain I ever worked under."

"So, this is about a personal grudge?"

"And much more," Sardius admitted. "I served under him, but he was the vilest sack of crap the universe has ever spewed out. He was a government official, but he tortured and butchered people all the time, and the higher-ups looked the other way. They wanted him to do such things if it yielded the results they needed. After working under him for three years, I endured a devastating injury. It was the thing I mentioned before about my face being burned. When I recovered, I deserted my post and joined the revolutionaries. Don Leo's complaints against me are expected because I became the face of his tormentors. I spent twelve years stealing his supplies, bombing his ships, and spreading very truthful rumors about his atrocities. During that time, the idea for drawing attention toward me was to make it look like there wasn't anyone else involved, thus fewer people would be punished by the government if the fist came down hard. At the time, I was fine with it. But times have changed. I'm the war hero now and he's the villain holding a diplomat hostage."

"If I fork you over, what do you think he'd do to you?" Jenna asked, rubbing her frozen fingers against her clammy palm.

"Eat me," Sardius said without hesitation. "He'd probably cut my right leg below the knee and have it cooked. He'd make me watch him eat it. He'd eat my thigh the next time he wanted to celebrate something. Then my arms. I'd make at least eight meals before he killed me."

"Shut up!" Jenna shrieked. "Do you think he'd do that to Iker if we don't make the trade?"

"I don't think Don Leo would get the same satisfaction out of eating Iker so that probably isn't what he'd do, but we can't let him keep him. Iker is valuable to the Octavian/Adamis Alliance. If we don't get him back, that could be the thing to start a war between the Octvians and the AAMC. The Adamis may be looking for an excuse to start one, so we have to do everything in our power to get him back for the sake of diplomacy."

Temptic spoke up. "Don Leo says Iker will be safe for 72 hours. He says that isn't enough time for them to make a fake you. It also isn't enough time to mobilize a force against him. It is only enough time for you to say goodbye and get on a pod."

Jenna felt like she was dying. "Isn't there anything we can do besides give you to him?"

"The problem is retrieving Iker," Sardius pointed out. "If all we wanted to do was blow them to smithereens, we could do that. Rold, Scion's father, has some incredible laser tech. After Scion mentioned it, I looked into it and it is awesome. We do not want that man involved in any military conflict against us. An amazing number of people will die."

"I don't want you to die!" Jenna screamed.

Temptic was speaking, but neither Jenna nor Sardius noticed until Jenna screamed. Luckily, his text was still displayed on the screen even after the electronic voice had finished saying it. "The problem with immobilizing the ship is that they will be wise to any tech designed to cripple them. Because of the way they took down The Sunflower, it's clear they are masters of those techniques. The Sunflower had multi-layered defense strategies. The fact they were able to beat them is proof of their superiority. If they notice any attempt on our part to mobilize, then they'll kill Iker."

"If they do that, what will stop us from blowing them to bits?" Jenna asked.

"They have a way of running away quickly," Sardius supplied.

"What?"

"They're Bonemen," Sardius said, continuing his explanation. "They're not worried about the radiation in the Xypher Zone. They just blast from here to there in a dimensional shift. The old

government would have given them tech to do those kinds of dimensional shifts that are not commonly available. The administration won't like that at the prison, but they won't be able to shoot them down before they've shifted to another galaxy. That's what they plan to do once I'm aboard their ship."

"So technically, they could disappear at any second?" she asked, feeling like her options were narrowing by the second.

"Yes."

Jenna turned to Sardius, a plan forming in her head. "How do I look? Sexy? Good?"

Sardius looked her up and down. "You look normal, which I think is sexy, but who do you have to talk to that you need to look sexy for?"

"Rold."

"He might... not... be the man you want to talk to," Sardius replied slowly.

"I might not have very many options," Jenna shot back. "But he's an arms expert. He might know of more solutions than us and I have something he wants."

Chapter Seventeen

Trading a Diamond for a Cat's Eye

Misha dolled up Jenna as hard as she could, given that Jenna only gave her half an hour. That meant that Jenna was caked in glitter, dripping with gemstones, and swathed in satin.

"I don't like this," Sardius complained as Jenna sat in a chair in front of the camera screen.

"I'm not showing any cleavage or selling myself at auction," she retorted.

"Really? You could have fooled me," he snorted.

"We don't have a lot of options. We need options."

"I think there's a very simple solution to this," he said steadily, putting his hands on his hips and placing himself between her and the camera.

Jenna couldn't bear to look at his hands resting on his hips. Every square inch of him was too precious to load into a pod only to be hacked apart and eaten as part of some powerplay. Jenna closed her eyes and pushed the idea from her mind. "What's your idea?"

"I could trade myself for Iker and kill all of them," he said simply.

Jenna sighed. "Really? That idea seems foolhardy... and crazy."

Sardius got right up in her face. "Yes. I told you, the way I fight was not well represented when you saw me box in the ring. I could kill everyone on board and whether they do a dimensional shift and take their ship to hell or heaven, it won't matter because they will have let the danger inside. I'm not the same boy he brought aboard and tortured for kicks because nothing else pleased him. I would enjoy killing him and everyone close to him, which, in a way, makes me worse than him."

"Let me ask you a question," Jenna said, licking her lips even though she wasn't supposed to do that after she had applied lipstick. "What do you think the worst thing Rold could ask of me?"

"Jenna, you misunderstand all of this," Sardius said with a fire in his eyes that Jenna had never seen before. "This is my past, my mess, my way of life, and my choices that have come back to haunt me. This is not something you have to clean up for me. I always knew that something like this could happen. I chose to come here to see you, to be with you, instead of dealing with my demons."

Jenna squirmed.

He took hold of her hand, knelt before her, and utterly discarded pretending he was not Sardius. "Do you remember that time you told Favel why you wanted to marry me? You took out your earpiece in an attempt to keep your words a secret from me? You told him that you wanted me as your husband because if I was in prison, no one could ever hurt me. No one could use me against you because what you were doing here was the most important thing. Guess what?"

"You could hear me?" she said, breathing hard through her nose to stop herself from crying and ruining her makeup.

"Yes, but what you said wasn't a betrayal of me and it wasn't selfish. I have to make something clear to you. You can't protect me from suffering." He said the words with such finality that all the air left Jenna's lungs. "That was never something that was in your power to do," he pressed, his eyes looking like muddy clouds covering a moon. "I control the suffering."

Jenna gasped in her breath. "I... I..."

"I know," he said, rising and holding her chin so she couldn't avert her gaze. "What you wanted that day made sense. How can you do your job here if you're worried about the person who's dearest to you being threatened? That would paralyze anyone and it was so far-sighted for you to have said that, I was stunned. And it melted my heart! You wanted to protect me? I was the poster boy for the resistance so that other people could scoot under the government's radar. I was lucky when I was caught and put in prison that they didn't do worse to me, but someone high up decided to use me as an example of the government's benevolence and I was not chopped to bits and fed to their warmonger generals. It could have gone a different way."

Jenna tried to turn away, but Sardius held her tightly and forced her to stay in the moment with him.

"Look," he said sternly, "if you're going to do your job here, you can't go groveling to an arms dealer to protect your bodyguard. That will undermine everything you're trying to do. I can't let you do it. You don't understand yourself. You don't know what you look like right now. You don't know how Rold Xant is going to see you or what payment he'll require. I told you before that I am fascinated by everything you do and I always want to see more of who you are, but I'm not special that way. Everyone wants you, including Rold. He'll want to know everything about you from the way you hold a fluit to how you scream during sex. He'll want to see you at your most vulnerable, at your most desperate. He'll love it. I can't let you go to him and offer him all the things you've kept private... or perhaps, saved for me. I can't. So, go take your makeup off and get me an appointment to see Brazel at the space station."

"Why do you need to see her?" Jenna asked, confused.

"Because I need to keep my promise to you and her before I go."

Jenna gasped. "Are you saying you're going to get more surgery? You can't be thinking about that. You're going to have surgery in your last moments to satisfy your promise to Brazel so she'll work on Phane? I can't let you do that. That's crazy!"

He nodded gravely, then smiled a disarming smile that made Jenna think for a moment that the situation wasn't as serious as she thought it was. "Don't get me wrong," he laughed. "It's selfish of me to ask, but I can get her to do a few things that will help me when I get aboard Don Leo's ship. Body modifications are all the rage."

"Get everyone out of here," Jenna commanded Ixy tightly.

Misha was the only person in the room, and she left quickly while Jenna pulled her earpiece out and threw it across the room. Her feelings were set to explode.

"I can't," she whispered, ruining her makeup and plunging her face into her hands. "I can't put you on a pod and send you to deal with this by yourself."

"You must," he insisted. "Nothing in the universe will make you more terrifying faster than doing this. You think you're going to have a problem negotiating with the AAMC after this? You won't. You sent your lover to retrieve a diplomat? It's a full-on move."

Jenna looked up and scowled at him. "Nothing will have changed for the AAMC. They won't view my sending you away as a power-play. They'll think I'm a scared little girl who sent her man to do the dirty work."

Sardius took her hands in his and steadied them. "You won't let them think that. Every single time they bully you, you'll behave like a bulldog and not let them have another word. Even today when you told Denver you'd be more than happy to stall your own program if he could give you

a good reason. He doesn't have one. He has a team of PR people constructing one as we speak. What I'm trying to say is that when I go away, it will change you. It will make you harder. Let it change you."

"And you really think you can kill everyone on board?" she asked, squirming between his hands.

"Of course, I can," he said with a smile that belonged to a player who could get any woman in the world to fall in love with him. "When I come back, I swear, we can be lovers openly. No more hiding. Everyone can know who I am and what I've done. I'll be prepared to give you everything that I am and you'll be able to keep the peace you've been dreaming about." He kissed the back of her hands. "Trust me."

Jenna did not want to trust him. She didn't want him to talk to Ixy over the loudspeaker and arrange for Brazel to meet him at the station in orbit. She didn't want him to leave her and call for a pod. She didn't want to admit to the throbbing headache she was experiencing or the way her tongue felt like cement.

Why couldn't she scream at him to stop? Why couldn't she order Vash to sit on him? Where was her spirit?

It had gone from her.

When she stood on the docks and Sadius kissed her out in the open, she could barely feel it, barely register what he was doing. He was kissing her forehead, then her cheek, then the palm of her hand, then the corner of her bare shoulder, then her mouth, his lips touching hers, and he promised that it wasn't for the last time.

"This is my mess. It's my job to clean it up," he whispered. "I always had to do this. It might as well be now."

Through a film of tears that covered her eyes, she saw him wave goodbye. His hand was like the hand of a god who had touched her and loved her. He smiled.

When the pod closed and shot away from the dock, Jenna fell to her knees. He had smiled at her. That was his final farewell. Then she fell on her face, dipping her arm in the water. Misha folded herself in half on the dock next to her pleading with Jenna to get up.

Jenna didn't answer and didn't move.

She thought about his farewell smile and wondered what it meant. There had been a light in his eyes and something about the way he smacked his tongue against his white teeth suggested playfulness. He did not look like a martyr going to his death. What did he look like? What did the expression on his face remind her of?

She rolled onto her back and saw the stars overhead. She would have had a perfect view if Misha had not blocked the tiny lights with her head.

"Go away," Jenna shrieked, the tears suddenly coming fast and hard.

In unspeakable torment, she screamed on the dock. She screamed and screamed.

Jenna didn't see the approaching forms in the water because of her pain. She didn't see the Octavian mantles rising out of the water. She didn't know they were there so she didn't bother to count them. With their weak hearing, they heard the only sound they were ever likely to hear, the cry of ultimate pain. The first time Jenna set foot on Octavia Prime, she was told to scream. That was the only way the Hipposyphus would stop rampaging. That night, she screamed harder than she did on that first day, and the Octavians heard her.

Favel was on the dock first. "What has happened?" he asked Misha and Vash.

Vash explained though he didn't exactly understand himself. His explanation went, "I guess Ryatt was actually Sardius and he had to trade himself for Iker. He just left."

Favel used one of his suckers to pull a wet tendril of Jenna's hair off her face. "I suppose when you only love one person, this is how it ends."

Misha had begun crying too.

"Vash," Favel commanded. "Get her off the dock. Take her to bed. I'll call Excelyn and Philip over. Doubtless, they have a few human drugs in their horde and they can calm her down with a tranquilizer. She can't stay like this."

In her room, Misha and Vash pulled the sequined dress off her. They got her into bed and pulled the covers over her, just in time for Favel to be wheeled in.

He put out two tentacles and cupped her hand between the two of them. "We'll pray for you," he said soothingly.

"You believe in prayer?" she asked numbly.

"I believe in something greater than myself that I can call upon when a miracle is necessary. Ixy gave me a better grasp of the situation. There's no point in worrying. I'll stay here with you until we see the handoff. Then we'll see what we can do."

Excelyn came in. "Open your mouth," she said before dropping two drops of something that tasted like oranges on Jenna's tongue. "You're going to feel better in the morning," the old doctor assured her.

If Excelyn said anything else after that, Jenna didn't hear it. She was already gone.

Chapter Eighteen

Octavian Love

The next morning, Jenna woke up to the news that Phane had arrived at the space station and Brazel would start on the plan for his surgeries as soon as she was adequately rested after working on Sardius the night before.

Jenna's head swam from the tranquilizer Excelyn had shot her up with the night before. "Can I speak to Brazel?" Jenna asked Ixy as Vash shoved a nutritional drink under her nose. "I want to know how the surgeries on Sardius went."

"You'll have to wait," Ixy replied shortly. "Temptic has been keeping me up to date on her movements. She was in surgery with Sardius until late last night after a very long day for her. She came out and went straight to sleep. She's not up yet."

Jenna put a concerned hand to her mouth. "What kind of surgery did she do? He said something about body augmentation, but I wasn't thinking straight enough to listen."

Ixy chuckled. "It's not at all surprising that Sardius has been up to that kind of BS. He'd be in a huge battle, disappear for a few weeks, everyone would think he was dead, and then he'd reappear without a scratch on him."

"That doesn't explain what Brazel did to him when she sliced him open," Jenna reminded Ixy.

"Okay, okay, okay. I've been watching, and I'd love to tell you, except Sardius pulled a neat little hacking trick when he had his conversation with Brazel. Meaning, he messed with the audio equipment as soon as she was alone in the room with him. I can show you the video from the space station if you're interested. The cameras in the surgery theater are also less than revealing."

Jenna pinched her nose bridge. She could have screamed. If he could manage to fandangle a private conversation with Brazel, why hadn't he pulled the same magic tricks with her so they could spend a few minutes alone?

The answer was as clear as a bell.

He didn't want to talk to Jenna alone. He didn't want to tell her his problems. He didn't want to find that moment where they could just be in love as themselves... or even just be honest with each other. He had been trying to shut her out.

Jenna swallowed.

She stuffed those thoughts down the garbage compactor of her mind. She wasn't going to think about it. The pain she felt was still raw in her chest as she registered that she'd lost him, not once, but twice.

She had to believe his last promise to her, that when he returned, they could be together.

Jenna circled her mind back to the last thing Ixy said and replied, "That's okay. Knowing Sardius, there wouldn't be anything useful in the video recordings. Where is he right now?"

"He's passed out in the recovery wing of the space station," Ixy answered primly.

"Will I be able to talk to him?"

"Temptic arranged it so that he won't be put to sleep when he gets in the pod for the transport to Don Leo's ship. He'll be awake and he'll be able to talk to you. I've blocked off that time in

your schedule. For now, do you have anything you need to get done before you have the twelve-hour pod trip with Sardius?"

"Twelve hours?" The emotion in Jenna's voice could not be interpreted.

The truth was that she didn't know how she felt about spending twelve hours on the phone with him. On one hand, every moment she could spend with Sardius was precious no matter how it was spent. On the other hand, it was going to be excruciating thinking about where he was going and what he was about to do.

"I don't think he should be kept awake for all that time," Jenna said, thinking that she needed to give him the biggest boost she could. "He needs to prepare for his encounter on the ship. He probably needs to rest more after his surgery. He should sleep for the time he's riding on the pod."

"We'll see what he says when he wakes up," Ixy said. "For now, do you want to talk to Phane?"

"Not yet. I'm still in my underwear. I'll talk to him when I'm dressed. If you would be so kind, could you please invite Celestina over to help me with my first talk with him? I'm not at my best and I don't know if I can do this by myself today."

Ixy said she would get Celestina and signed off.

Jenna moved to get out of bed, but her whole body was having trouble listening to what her brain was telling it. She thought back to when she had first woken up in the hospital on Octavia Three after Armen had kidnapped her. She hadn't been as shaky then. During that, the worst thing she did was cower in her palace closet for a few minutes. She had been strong. Nothing that happened then mattered much anymore. In retrospect, what happened with Armen had been nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Now, as each one of her toes was having a hard time listening to her brain's commands, it all came clear.

Everything she had ever hoped for had come true in Sardius. He had been everything. He had become the only man she had ever loved. Even if he hadn't always been honest with her, even if he had a well-deserved terrible reputation, and even if she'd been a fool for him. It was better to be a fool for him than anybody else.

She took a sip of her drink and almost gagged on it.

"Ixy?"

"Yup."

"Find out what Vash can cook for me in the kitchen. For the moment, I don't care if I gain a hundred pounds, lose all my muscle definition, or look like I've swallowed a baby whale. I need food."

Ixy was gone and back in a flash. "Vash says he's got nothing he can prepare quickly." She paused. "Ivy says Excelyn and Philip are having breakfast and it's basically a rice-filled omelet. Shall I ask them to make you one?"

The idea of eating anything Excelyn was eating made Jenna's insides turn over and throw up on themselves.

"No. That's okay. I'll just go have a shower now and think about food later."

"Is this because of the liplo fruit thing? What she's eating today is perfectly normal. Ivy says no one ever throws up after eating what they're having. Are you sure you don't want—"

"I'm sure," Jenna said, forcing herself to her feet.

"Shall I still ask Vash what he has to offer?"

"Nope. I'll see if I feel like eating anything after I've showered. I still have so much glitter caked in my hair, it'll take an hour to wash it all out."

A few minutes later, Jenna stood in the shower. She'd lost the ability to stand on her own, so she was leaning against the shower wall. It was a good five minutes before she remembered that she ought to be washing the glitter out of her hair. Even with intense scrubbing, it took her four rinse and repeat cycles to get her hair to feel normal.

When she got out of the shower, she wrapped herself in a bathrobe and was about to call for Misha to come style her, when she heard Vash moving around in the bedroom. She opened the door.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He looked bashful. "I was bringing you something to eat. I know you said you'd changed your mind about eating after all, but I managed to find something for you."

"He's not telling you the whole truth," Ixy said in Jenna's ear. "The Octavians are miserable outside the front docks. They are waiting for you to give them the story about what happened that you wept like the damned last night, but until they know... They've been bringing offerings to try to cheer you up. Vash has been taking them. There isn't room for any more fish in your aquariums. They're all filled to the brim with underwater flowers. Didn't you notice them when you woke up?"

Jenna looked around her room and finally took notice of the tanks. They were full of flowers, coral, and other beauties of the deep sea.

Jenna strolled around the room, looking at them. She tried to let the feelings of the Octavians who brought them sink into her sick heart.

Until Favel popped out of the water of one of the tanks and accidentally splashed her.

She screamed.

"You jump-scare too easily, Jenna," he commented, as he held onto the lip of the aquarium with suction cups.

Jenna held onto Vash's forearms as she tried to steady her breathing. "What are you doing in there?"

"I couldn't leave you last night after I heard what happened. You have to know that Sardius is the bravest man in the universe. I'd like to tell my people what happened, so they can all understand how great your pain is... and how your pain is for them because you are a diplomat."

"How can we do that, without exposing the truth about PAs? That is not our secret to tell."

Jenna tilted her head toward Vash. She was certain he didn't know exactly how it worked and he lived in her household.

Favel drooped until he slid back into the water.

Jenna wanted to go to him, but Ixy interrupted, "Lou Denver is on the line. You didn't call him back yesterday and he's getting testy."

"I haven't gotten dressed yet!" Jenna howled. "Tell him he'll have to wait. And I'm not meeting him in here. All these flowers will make him think..." Jenna stormed out of her bedroom with the idea of going to find Misha herself when she saw that her bedroom was not the only part of her palace that had been touched by Octavian love.

The halls, the entryways, the sitting rooms, the dining room, the deck, the entire place was festooned with flowers, cards, gelatin poofs, ribbon, and anything else someone would think to deliver to a person who wasn't feeling well.

Jenna stopped and stared.

Misha came up from behind the leaves of a tree that had not been there previously, but now its branches took up quite a lot of real estate on the floor and had a big white bow around its trunk. The stylist was pulling sweaty tendrils of yarn off her face. "There have been so many clothing deliveries, I haven't taken stock of all of it yet." She carried a makeup bag in her hand. "I'm sorry. There isn't enough room for me to do your hair and makeup in my studio. Is there room in your bathroom?"

"I don't understand," Jenna mumbled, ignoring Misha's question and looking at everything that surrounded her. "This is all from the Octavians?"

"Yes," Vash said, coming up behind her. "They started coming in about an hour after you went to bed last night. I've been up all night receiving their gifts. This isn't even all of it. There is a ton of stuff that we had to leave outside."

Jenna stared in wonder. "How am I going to reply to all this stuff? How can I say thank you? Do they have labels on them saying who they are from?"

"I didn't even see all the different Octavians who dropped each of them off. Quite a lot of what you're seeing was shoved up the underwater entrances. I closed the doors when their gifts became too many. Then they started leaving them on the deck and on the gangway. Then they started leaving them at the palaces beside yours, so there are quite a few things that were left at Celestina's and Excelyn's," Vash explained.

Jenna was so overwhelmed that she didn't know where to turn.

Vash put his hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry about this right now. Go with Misha to your bedroom and let her put something under your eyes. You look puffy."

Jenna saw at once that he was right. That was probably why no one told her anything about the gifts. She couldn't focus on them now. She had to get prettied up and talk to Admiral Denver and then talk to Phane.

Chapter Nineteen

An Admiral and a Captain

When Jenna was finally ready to talk to Admiral Denver, she looked collected, though she did not attempt to look terrifying or gorgeous with her clothes. She wore soft gray trousers and a white buttoned top. Her hair was braided in one tousled braid that fell elegantly down her shoulder. Her makeup was simple. Gray on her eyes and coral on her lips.

"All right," she said, looking at the Admiral's pink face, which looked a little pinker than usual if Jenna's impression was to be trusted when her pool of inner tranquility had been ravaged. "Good morning, Admiral. What intel have you received over the last twelve hours?"

"Nothing, except shots of you crying like a sprinkler system, which is not overly becoming for an Adamis diplomat. We can't have your position rescinded—"

Jenna interrupted. "If you could have done that, you would have done so before I was fetched from Earth. Am I right?" She shook her head, giving him only a minute to pick up the thread of the conversation. When he wasn't as quick as she would have liked, she went on. "I'm not particularly interested. So, nothing except footage of me crying on my dock?"

"And speculation as to why you would do that," he said between tight lips.

"All right. Well, in that case, I'll bring you up to speed. We discovered who took Iker." She explained about Don Leo. "He was holding Iker hostage and was willing to release him in exchange for a member of my staff. I sent that staff member to outer space to fulfill their demands. We should hear if the trade was successful in two days."

"There was footage of your bodyguard kissing you," Denver said gruffly.

"I'm pretty sure I'm allowed to do much worse than make out with my bodyguard without having to listen to something as stupid as your censure," Jenna snapped back.

"So, I'm just supposed to sit tight for two days?"

Jenna yawned, partly because she found him boring and partly because the tranquilizers hadn't completely worn off. "No. There's more. I'm going to crown Rennett in three days."

"I asked you not to do that. Can't you follow instructions?" Denver blustered, trying desperately to keep control of Jenna.

"No. Here's what happened. I asked you to send someone for me to crown. You did. I said I'd crown him and then there were all sorts of health concerns regarding whether or not he'd be able to do his job. I'm going to crown him whether he can do his job or not. The thing is, I don't care if he can do his job or not. I'm going to crown him. If he's incapable of giving you the representation you desire on the council, that's your problem. I promised Fallcet I'd crown three of your guys. I'll crown Iker on the same day when he arrives. Then I will have crowned three: Iker, Rennett, and Scion. Promise fulfilled. It's not my fault you sent someone incapable. I have another man lined up. I'll crown him and he can be the final member to make quorum. If Rennett can't fulfill his duty, I will reclaim my seat and vote myself."

"Madam Diplomat!" Denver shouted. "You promised to stall."

"I did no such thing. I gave you an opportunity to explain why you wanted me to stall. You said nothing. You have not provided me with a reason. Go ahead," she said, leaning forward. "Tell me why you need me to stall."

His face went even redder, but he didn't answer.

When Jenna had waited long enough, she made her eyes like daggers before making her voice as cold as ice, "I won't ask you again." She waited and when no answer came, she waved her hand for Ixy to cut the transmission with Jenna's last view of Admiral Lou Denver being one of him stuttering, but saying nothing.

Jenna took a couple of cleansing breaths while she waited for Ixy to get Phane up on the view screen. She hadn't talked to Phane extensively, and considering how much importance she had put on him, she was suddenly quite worried that she had put all her eggs in the wrong basket.

When he came on, she gave him the biggest smile she could summon on that day. "Good day, Captain Phane. How are things looking from orbit?"

"I deeply regret promising to marry you," he said, his gaunt cheek moving more than anyone's cheeks had ever moved before.

"It's okay. I think that diversion is off. The original goal was to get you crowned. I was just going to tell everyone you were in my house as my fiance to buy us time while you got your surgery anyway. I'm not concerned with that anymore. I just needed to summon the courage to tell Admiral Denver off, and I just did that. I was concerned about the AAMC guys being aware and unnecessarily violent if they knew that I had a new diplomat coming. However, that feeling has passed. I feel confident about giving you the Salt Palace and letting Rennett keep the Waterfall Palace. How does that sound to you?"

"This all feels a little unreal. The surgeon is here already?" he asked with a slightly bewildered look on his face.

"I'm sure Temptic explained why you haven't met her yet."

"He did," Phane said, his eyes looking enormous through the camera lens. "This is spookier than I expected. Is there that much opposition to diplomatic relations between Adamis and Octavians?"

Jenna waffled her hand. "There's more opposition than you'd expect, but the thing that happened to Iker was unrelated to the Octavians or the Adamis government or their military. Hopefully, we'll have that corrected and we will have reclaimed Iker in the next two days. In the meantime, can I administer your interview?"

Vash leaned in and whispered to Jenna, "Didn't you want to wait for Celestina to be in the room before you did that?"

"Is she on her way?" Jenna whispered back.

"She's a little hung up, but we could wait and do this interview some other time," Vash offered.

"Is this being recorded?" Jenna asked.

Vash nodded.

"Then it's fine. It's better for me to be doing this rather than nothing while I wait for Sardius to wake up."

"I'm here," Favel reminded them, lifting himself out of the water in the tank and gently lowering himself into the goblet waiting.

“There. Favel won’t let me go off the rails,” Jenna said cheerfully. “Phane, I’d like to introduce you to my fiance, Favel. He’s the chair of the Octavian council and a great support to all the diplomats living on Octavia Prime.”

Vash pushed Favel’s goblet forward and gave Jenna a tablet with a collection of interview questions.

She got started.

Chapter Twenty

Too Many Plants and Not Enough Men

Jenna stood in her living room. She and Josh were making a video of Jenna walking around all her gifts and showing her appreciation. There wasn't much talking since the Octavians liked to see gestures and expressions more than being left to interpret words. That was one of the reasons why Jenna had had such a huge outpouring of love from the Octavian people. The look on her face, when she said goodbye to Sardius, had been leaked on Octavian media as well as Adamis media and convinced them of her heartache as much as her wailing had done.

In the video she was making with Josh, she touched the leaves of the plants, breathed in the scent of the flowers, tossed things like balloons between her hands, and smiled for the camera. When her smile got too weak, Josh would pull his face away from the camera and give Jenna a look that was half disapproval and half compassion.

He was like an Octavian. He didn't have to talk to get the message across.

Jenna understood. She'd pat her cheeks, to give them color, take a few deep breaths, and do some more. Josh could edit out her sorrowful looks.

She and Josh weren't going to be able to show all of her gifts. There were too many and quite a few of them were in places no one wanted to show on film because they'd just been bunched up next to Celestina and Excelyn's palaces. Which provided all the more fuel to make the video with Josh. She had to release a statement that showed she was all right so the gifts would stop coming.

Jenna did what she needed to do, but she was restless and irritable. She had been told that Sardius had woken up in post-surgery. They'd put him on board the pod with a robot to wake him up when there was only one hour left of his journey because Jenna wanted to give him the best possible chance at victory. To do that, he couldn't be unconscious when Don Leo's crew opened the pod door and he couldn't chat on the communicator with Jenna for twelve hours.

As she waited for Sardius to wake up, time that used to tick softly had changed to angry footfalls on a tile floor. It didn't feel like Jenna would get to talk to him anytime soon or, perhaps worse, it would come too soon.

"That will do," Josh said, folding up his camera. "I'll send you a copy for approval before we send it to the Octavian news outlets."

"Wait," she said, stopping him from leaving. "What would you have done if you were me in this situation?"

He didn't clarify or ask her exactly what she meant. Instead, he said simply, "Exactly what you're doing. Being brave."

Then he walked out.

It was good he walked out. If he had stayed Jenna might have done something stupid, like cry on his shoulder.

"Do you need me to send another man in?" Ixy cut in. "There's a handful to choose from. I could send in Scion. He's young and fresh. Very eager."

Jenna stretched her arms. "Shut up, Ixy. I don't want Scion to comfort me."

“For your information,” Ixy said smugly, “I suggested Scion because I thought he was someone who’d bother you less than the man who’s waiting outside your palace asking for permission to see you.”

“Is Fallcet outside?” Jenna asked with an eye roll.

“Yeah. I’ve kept him away for as long as I could, telling him you were filming with Josh and he shouldn’t disturb you, but he saw Josh leaving and now he’s getting all impatient. Can I tell him he can come inside?”

“Tell him if he comes in here, I’m going to put him to work.”

“Doing what?”

“Helping me with all these presents. Obviously, they can’t stay here. Most of them are plants, so they need to be distributed to all the palaces. He can do some leg work while I wait for Sardius to call.”

Ixy took a wretched breath in.

“What is it?” Jenna questioned.

“Are you going to be okay if Sardius can’t get through to talk to you before he makes the trade? It’s not completely impossible that he might not be able to manage it.”

Jenna didn’t know how to answer. She fumbled to push a stray piece of her hair out of her face when Ixy suddenly piped up with different news.

“Dr. Brazel Russell is on the line for you.”

Incredibly relieved, Jenna turned toward the screen in the living room as Ixy brought up the transmission of the doctor.

“Good day, Madam Diplomat.”

Jenna noticed she’d stopped angrily referring to her by her full name.

“How are you faring today?”

Jenna shrugged. “Makeup hides a thousand flaws.”

“That it does,” the doctor said. “Phane is on his way to be prepped for surgery, so I have a few minutes while they do the initial work without me. I wanted to tell you that Ryatt’s surgery went well and he should be in tip-top condition by the time his pod arrives. Just in case I could ease your discomfort at all with the information.”

“Did Favel ask you to make this call?” Jenna wondered aloud.

“Well, yes,” Brazel rasped over the speaker. “It was interesting for me because I’ve never sent a soldier into battle. I’ve never actually treated a soldier afterward either. I have cleaned up after accidents, corrected deformities, and prettied up people who were pretty to begin with. What I saw when I cut him open was something else. I came to the space station with the intent to tell him that he didn’t have to do the surgery for me. I didn’t need to cut him open when he was about to leave your service, especially to defuse a hostage situation. He insisted I do the surgery. What he had in mind was different from anything I’ve done before. I’m very interested in the outcome.”

“So, you’re asking to be told what happens to him?” Jenna asked, settling her eyes on the doctor.

“I want to know if the augmentations were helpful for him,” she amended over the video feed. “I thought you’d find out, but it would be classified, so you wouldn’t share the information with me if you didn’t have to share it. In exchange for the information, I will provide you with three surgeries on demand without charge.”

That was quite a good offer. Jenna nodded and agreed.

"For the record," the doctor said. "If he comes back and is interested in more experimentation or augmentation, I would be very interested in pursuing that course. Please see that he gets that message." She paused. "Thank you, Jenna, for keeping your promises to me even when things are tight."

Jenna wished Brazel good luck with Phane's surgeries and they hung up.

The screen went blank.

Jenna hoped she was right.

"Can I let Fallcet in now? He's begun threatening me," Ixy whined.

"Sure. Send him in."

Jenna was on her face on the couch when Fallcet strolled into the living room. He was carrying a blanket and a pillow.

"What, exactly, is in your arms?" Jenna asked testily.

"I thought you might need someone to stay the night with you since Ryatt left. He was your bodyguard who stayed in your bedroom to watch over you while you slept, right? I notice you haven't hired anyone new and I thought you might prefer me to no one."

Fallcet was not the last man Jenna wanted with her in her room, but of the people on Octavia Prime, he was the lowest on the list.

"Don't take him!" Ixy suddenly squealed over the earpiece.

Jenna crushed her eyes shut, like moving her eyelids could block out the sound in her ears. "Ixy! Why the hell are you screaming like that? Please do not make sounds like that unless you are literally dying or at the very least someone is bludgeoning your brain out."

Ixy quieted down.

That dealt with, she turned to Fallcet and put a finger up as if she could put him on hold with the movement.

Back to Ixy, she asked, "Is Sardius ready to talk to me?"

Ixy didn't answer immediately. Jenna waited, wondering if Ixy was just having trouble connecting the call.

Fallcet tried to talk, but Jenna glared at him with her finger still in the air.

"Ixy? Are you there?" she tried again.

"I'm here!" Ixy said triumphantly. "Nothing on Sardius, but something wonderful has happened. Smoothie is in orbit. She's begging to come back to cook for you and watch over you at night. Her pod can't land at your palace without your permission."

"You're sure it's her?" Jenna asked anxiously.

"One hundred percent. She's been cleared by Temptic. Can you give her clearance?"

"Yes," Jenna said before turning to Fallcet. "My midnight problem has been solved. My beloved cook, who you drove away, who protected me after the AAMC's first attack, is coming back!"

Fallcet's shoulders fell, but he was clever enough to pick up on the most important part of her conversation with Ixy. "Who's Sardius? That isn't the name of your cook."

Jenna had made the mistake of saying his real name instead of the lame fake name he'd adopted when he arrived in their solar system. She shook her head and prepared to shrug it off. "He's nobody."

Fallcet wasn't having it. "That was not the way you say no one's name. That was the way you should say my name. Who is that person?"

Jenna frowned. "Fallcet, I'm never going to say your name with the least degree of pleasure. You are still lucky I haven't 'accidentally' killed you and ripped the crown off your head."

He thought she was joking. The expression on his face said as much without him saying a word.

"It's no wonder you think I sounded different. I actually have something like a relationship with a man, but it's not you, and it's none of your business. Here," Jenna said, pulling the bedding out of his arms and handing him a plant. "Take this to the Salt Palace. When you come back, I'll send you out with another plant. I need to get these presents put in places where they have a chance at living. The Octavians are not going to like it if I am so despondent that I let them all die. Help me like you're pretending you want to."

"I *do* want to," he stressed, taking the plant.

"Good. Then do," Jenna said before turning away from him and picking up another plant. "Oh, and Fallcet," she said over her shoulder. "If you want to have even the tiniest chance of being in my good graces, you'll apologize to my chef, Smoothie, when she arrives. If you're smart you'll never show your face to her. She's in a room, you leave. Understand?"

"How am I supposed to apologize to her if I can't show her my face?" he asked in a voice so devoid of attitude he had to have practiced it like he was learning a foreign language.

"Write her a note and enclose a bundle of cash," Jenna answered simply.

"Cash? Isn't that a bit crass?" he wondered.

"No. She's here because she's trying to make money to send back to her family. Giving her anything else would just be annoying. If I were you, I'd keep a little money on your body whenever you enter my palace in case you run into her. That way, when you see her, you can apologize again, slip her the money, and leave."

"Just the first time I run into her, or every time I run into her?"

Jenna was all about killing two birds with one stone. If he had to pay an admittance fee every time he came to her palace, maybe he'd stop by less often. That had a strong appeal to Jenna, so she didn't back down. "Every time, until she tells you she's forgiven you, and it's okay if you stop. If you think the money is awkward, I'll have a word with her to help her understand that I was the instigator."

"Do you think she'll ever be comfortable around me? Was what I did eating the mushroom here really that bad?" he asked skeptically.

"Do shut up, Fallcet. You did it because you knew it would be *that* offensive, and don't act like paying her is a burden for you. Don't you still have that huge suitcase full of cash cards that you couldn't use to bribe me and haven't been able to return? Isn't the person who gave you that getting what they want?"

He lowered her eyes. "I'll do what you say."

Jenna didn't like the way he said that. It sounded like he was promising to follow any instruction that came out of her mouth instead of agreeing with her on how to handle the matter with Smoothie.

It was a lie.

He served other masters, namely his father and his uncle, but he wanted Jenna to *think* she had cast some romantic spell over him that made him obey her. He was still trying to wheedle

his way into an intimate relationship with her and even she had to agree that it was a good time for it if the man she normally depended on was gone.

She handed Fallcet another plant in a pot that hid her from his sight once both his arms were full.

Through the leaves, she found his eyes and said, "That's wonderful, Fallcet. If you're doing everything I want, then take these plants to the Salt Palace. Then come back and get more."

He gave her a smile he'd obviously designed to make a woman's heart melt.

Jenna waited until he was out of earshot before she scoffed noisily.

Chapter Twenty One

If Bravery was a Melody

“Hey, Baby! How’s it going?” That was what Jenna said to Sardius when she finally got to speak to him over the communicator, but it felt off, strange, and slightly twisted. She didn’t know what she had to say to him or what he could have to say to her. She supposed it was just to ease her mind to know that he was awake before he was taken aboard Don Leo’s ship, but that thought felt hollow in its practicality.

When Sardius finally spoke, his voice sounded groggy on the other end of the line. “Oh, you know... I’m fantastic.”

“How are the surgical incisions?” Jenna asked.

“Oh, they’re nothing. Brazel is a good doctor. She could shove a sea monster through a puncture wound the size of a pencil’s eraser.”

“You have pencils in space?” Jenna said, happy there was something so lighthearted to talk about.

“We love pencils. Graphite forever, especially for deep space travel.”

“So the cuts are small,” Jenna pressed. “How many of them are there?”

His voice was dry. “Uh, I can’t remember and I can’t see any of them. She covered my wounds with that stuff that makes them invisible.”

Jenna couldn’t see him, but she could picture exactly how he would have to be sitting in order to sound like that. In the pod, he would have reclined his chair just enough so that his head would loll back. He didn’t like to lie on his side as that might give him fabric creases across his cheek or forehead. Obviously, waking up to suddenly fight off an invasion with fabric creases pressed into your face was uncool when you were a pirate and a revolutionary. Instead, he’d lie on his back and let his head fall to the side just a little bit. It was the way he stretched out to expose his Adam’s apple. His eyes would be closed and he’d be talking to her with the dry mouth of a man who had fallen asleep with his mouth open on accident. He had probably been too drugged to close it.

“Are the drugs wearing off?” she prompted.

“Yep. I’m coming around. Brazel left me with a small pharmacy.”

“Did she?”

“Yeah. They’re not the typical thing you’d leave a recovering patient. Just to be clear, I didn’t ask for them. She gave them to me as a mercy thing to ease her conscience.”

“Are you going to take them?”

“If I don’t perk up, I might try one or two. They might be the difference between life and death. As in, taking them might ruin my chances of winning. But not taking them might leave me in too much of a stupor to win anyway.”

“Why did you have to have surgery five minutes before you did this crazy thing?” Jenna rasped, fighting to keep the tears out of her head.

“Oh, the surgery is going to help me win in a big way. Even if I lose, I’ll win. I wouldn’t have it any other way. You should always have backup plans for your backup plans.”

"And you're not going to tell me what she did to you?"

He huffed out his breath. "There isn't much point. I'll save the gory details until I can share *all* the gory details." Jenna could practically see Sardius' wink.

She hesitated.

"I have an hour to wake up," Sardius reminded her. "There's plenty of time for us to say everything we have to say to each other."

"Like what?" she bit, working hard to keep her emotions from boiling over. "How I'm ripped asunder that you're doing this? How I deeply regret sending you away and how I have really come around to a place of tranquility on the idea of allowing Iker to die in your place?"

He chuckled. "If I don't show up, Don Leo will just find another way to come at me. Next time, he might take you, which is unacceptable. He's much more of a problem than an AAMC guy. This still might not go well for Iker. If we're talking about the things I feel good about, I still feel quite good about going in to have it out with Don Leo. The toad has been pissing in my direction for years. He was going to come back to bite me for everything I've done to him sooner or later. I'd rather settle the score now, and now is a great time to do it. My faction is in power. Anything I do to him will not be considered a crime, but a public service. I'd feel like a spy or a secret agent if I wasn't still so groggy. Come on, Jenna. Don't you trust me?"

Jenna looked up thoughtfully. There were fish swimming in a tank in front of her. Yellow neon fish darted between swaying plants, but Jenna had to work hard to see them. Calm was impossible for her. "I'm feeling a bit groggy myself. What am I supposed to trust here?"

"That I've been lying to you this whole time," he said simply.

"How have you been lying to me?"

"By acting like a gentleman instead of the rebel butcher I am on the inside. I'm not a common thief, though I have done plenty of that. I'll take anything. Do anything. To prove my point, I'm wearing a pair of your socks and one of your leather wrist cuffs."

Jenna did a double take. "I don't have any leather cuffs in my wardrobe."

She heard him scoff in her ear and it was incredibly nostalgic. "I took it from the stuff from your old apartment back on Earth."

"Oh?"

"It's more authentically you that way," he replied simply.

She couldn't stop smiling. In that desperate moment, she couldn't stop smiling. "Please tell me you're wearing your own underwear," she begged.

"Yeah, I'd tell you that... if I were wearing underwear," he replied with a chuckle.

At this point, she started to hear other sounds mixed into their conversation. The sound of a water bottle opening. The sound of velcro tearing apart. The sound of a ziplock coming open.

"By ripping off my stuff, you sound like a pickpocket and not like a daring thief who robs the biggest badasses in the universe."

"Huh," he said before he took a sip of water. "I'll have to work on how I present myself to you."

Jenna groaned.

He groaned to mimic her groan. "I know what you're thinking. Taking things from you is nothing. Your old stuff isn't even under lock and key, but to people watching you on Celestina's networks, those things are better than gold. They're things the beautiful Jenna Fairchild wore. They become indescribably valuable... and I'm the thief who stole them."

"But you're wearing them, you weirdo," she mumbled out of the side of her mouth, unable to answer his appraisal of her worth.

"I shouldn't wear a lady's leather cuff. It's made of soft tan leather and it has flowers embossed in it, but you should know, I love it when people gossip about me. Did you know that, Jenna?"

"Figures. That must be why you don't wear clothes unless you're forced to."

"I have to tell you," he breathed. "I enjoyed the time I spent with you so much. I liked the odd looks I got from your visitors. How Vash tried so hard not to be suspicious because that's the worst thing a butler can be. I loved people thinking *I was your* plaything and other people thinking *you were my* plaything. They couldn't stop wondering which one of us was in control. Slipping on little bits of your clothes confused them. I was wearing this cuff before I knew I was going to be shot into space. Normally I think clothes are clothes, but after *you've* worn something close to your skin, Jenna, it suddenly has a kind of appeal that I don't understand. I want you all over me... and I could only get tiny bits of you," his voice sounded as smooth as water spilling over marble, warm and caressing, covering all the empty bits of her with the idea of him.

Jenna couldn't talk, her insides making her outsides hot.

"I have this crazy idea that you'll like me more if I'm like you," he continued in deep mellow tones. "If I cut out the bad parts of myself and replaced them with the good parts of you, I'd be perfect."

Jenna sucked in her breath. "Don't say this to me. If this is what you've planned as the last words you and I exchange, I don't want to hear it."

"Jenna," he said quietly. "Of course, they're not the last words I'm going to say to you. I'm going to kill everyone. I always kill everyone. What I'm doing now is repenting for keeping you at bay and being your perfect little bodyguard. You could send Iker to die? Well, I wish I'd ravished you in the dark every night I was there. What the hell was I thinking working with Conrad on a leak in the orbital security team I couldn't plug?"

"So you love me?" she whispered.

His throaty chuckle was a miracle coming down the line. "I love you."

Jenna covered her mouth as the tears sprinkled on her lap. He said it. He finally said it.

"I don't love anything else in the universe except you and I will never love anything again," he said with a grit in his voice that was unfamiliar to her. "Except, I'm afraid, Jenna. Desperately afraid. You see, I haven't been honest with you. I've tried to be, but I haven't been. The me that you met over the earpiece. Yeah, that was me, but with so many parts of me hidden, you really couldn't see anything about me. You couldn't see me. And when I was playing Ryatt, I tried to warn you. I tried to pretend that I was him and the things I told you about myself were as Ryatt saw them. Ever since you found out that I am Sardius, I've tried to keep you as far away from me as possible. I can't risk you meeting the real me and not loving me as much as you do now. The idea fills me with a kind of fear I've never known."

"You can't talk like this!" Jenna heaved the words like stones. "You have to be invincible when they open the pod doors."

"Then swear to me that you will love me forever," he whispered.

"Will you swear the same?"

"I swear," he began. "I swear that I will love only you for the rest of my life."

Jenna bit her lips together. She wanted to say the same thing back to him. She needed to say the same thing back to him. "I swear I will—"

"Quiet darling, I can see Don Leo's ship. He's just attached an anchor to my pod. I'm going to be docked next to him in ten minutes. Maybe less. Hey, I was wondering if you'd do something for me."

"What?" she muttered as she chewed her bottom lip. "Don't you want the rest of my vow?"

"Not now. I need something to work toward and you're a diplomat who's supposed to take multiple husbands. Forget all that for now. I was wondering if you'd play some of your loudest music for me. Not at first. At first, I'll have to negotiate the release of Iker, but once his pod has been shot back to the space station and things get hairy, I'd really appreciate something with a beat."

"Any requests?" she asked, flipping through her playlist.

"Whatever you were playing when you dug up the crowns. I remember you being empowered by that music."

Jenna wrinkled her nose. What was he talking about? On that night, she'd pretty much wanted to kill everything that moved. Oh, that was why he wanted it.

She played a couple of samples for him, and he chose a few that he particularly liked. "Yeah, Babe, just play those ones on repeat."

"How much time do we have left?"

He was stretching, moving his neck from side to side. "Enough time for you to tell me how even though you aren't with me, you're fighting alongside me in spirit?"

"Do people say things like that?"

"Yeah. They usually say those sorts of things to people who are on suicide missions. It helps blur the lines between being alive and fighting and being dead and fighting. Every freedom fighter needs to believe that his cause is still his even after his heart has stopped. So, if you don't need to be present to fight. You don't even need to be alive. You fight on."

"I'll kill you if you keep talking about dying," she snarled. Jenna heard the clamps go down on his pod. Their time was almost done. "I'll love you forever."

"Shut up. I'm coming back to you. Seriously though, shut up. I'll tell you when to start the music."

Jenna heard the doors crack open.

"Keep your asses on that side of the red line," Sardius snarled. "I'm here, just like I said I'd be and I'll let you guys take me, but I am not letting you take anything without Iker. Where is the miserable snot bag?"

A pause. Jenna couldn't hear if the crew on Don Leo's ship were talking or not. Her earpiece only picked up Sardius' voice.

"You should have shown me the inside of his pod before you ejected it. I feel like that violates our bargain, don't you? I don't know if he's aboard that ship and you can't prove it to me now."

A second pause.

"Play the music," he said calmly.

Jenna hit the button.

It came on. It was her favorite, loud, banging, angry music that filled her body with energy and made her ready to draw blood. It was so loud, it was a completely different experience than when she heard the prison riot. She wasn't sure if the screams were part of the music or if they

were a person aboard Don Leo's ship. If it was Sardius or not, she didn't know. If he was screaming, hurting, she couldn't stop that music. It was music for him. She couldn't even stand for it to drop tempo the way it did at the end of a song. She scrolled through versions of the songs until she found mixes that didn't fade in, but drilled the melody like they were at a dance club.

Jenna sat there listening to the music until Ixy turned it off for her and said, "Don Leo's ship shifted dimensions. He can't hear your devil music anymore."

Jenna looked around her. Everything was the same. She was still in her bedroom. Sardius was still gone, but for some reason, she felt different. Like she had somehow been dancing with him. She'd been in his arms and they had been jumping up and down in a light-filled dancehall. Without a word, she was gone from that place. Out of his arms, out of his head, and back in her palace like they had never met.

"What do you think, Ixy?" Jenna asked, feeling like she just got off a tilt-a-whirl.

"We confirmed that Don Leo did eject Iker's pod. Temptic had his eyes on it from the space station. When he gets there, do you want Temptic to send him straight down?"

"No. I want them to perform a security sweep of his pod and switch him to a new one."

"Yes, ma'am."

Perhaps only one thing was clear to Jenna at that moment. She was no longer the woman who cried in the dark when she heard the sounds of a fight. She was slowly learning how to bring a fight herself.

Chapter Twenty Two

Diplocat

When the pod opened to allow Iker to step onto the dock in front of Jenna's palace, she had to fight a powerful urge not to cross the planks and slap him across the face. Instead, she stood clenching and unclenching her jaw, breathing hard like someone was whipping her back and she had to tolerate it.

Jenna looked at her new diplomat. He had a powerful build, like Vash. He was the same variant of Adamis, though Jenna still didn't know the history or characteristics of every type. He had to be a little different from Vash, because the whites of his eyes were black and his irises were a dirty yellow with vertical pupils, which made him look a little like a giant statue of a cat. It had a friendly effect... compared to the other AAMC boulders she had to choose from.

Jenna forced herself to remember that it wasn't his fault he'd be taken captive. It wasn't his fault that the AAMC had tried to steal the crowns from her. After all, he was only one head on a hydra. When she had chosen him out of the six AAMC majors, she asked Vash which of them was the best. He chose Iker immediately saying that he had not been involved in his hazing though he had been around at the time and on that fateful night at her palace he had not been outside his bedroom door waiting to haze him all over again. That meant, Iker had been one of the officers who went directly to Jenna's bedroom to try to steal the crowns. That didn't make him a good person. Maybe it was a coincidence, but Vash didn't think he was the sort of person who delighted in the unnecessary discomfort of another person.

Jenna believed her butler, so she said nothing as Fallcet stepped forward to welcome Iker.

Immediately, Jenna had to swallow another round of brain-breaking disgust. Fallcet was welcoming new diplomats to the floating palaces like it was his job. He was the host and Jenna and the others were merely a side note. Jenna balled up her fists, did the minimum required greeting, and swept her skirt in an arc on her way back into her palace.

If Fallcet was so happy with the current situation, Jenna was certain he could take care of the introduction and be a one-man welcome committee. All the same, she tapped her earpiece. "Hi, Ixy. Follow them around and make sure Fallcet doesn't say anything treasonous."

"You're worried he might?"

Jenna smirked. "I think he's a tad too happy. It's a little weird. Maybe he's doing his best to cover for me while I'm lacking, or maybe he wants the AAMC guys to think that he's one of them for 'very' good reasons. Follow him around and formulate an opinion. I mean, I find him grosser than a slug in my shoe, but that doesn't mean he's a bad diplomat."

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," Ixy said back. "Jisbet is right above me and, since Philip doesn't give her much to do, she has all the time in the world for stalking. Right now, she says Fallcet is just pleased that he's no longer sidelined. He was dying to be part of the intergalactic drama. If he does anything weird, you'll hear about it. Jisbet is very loud and now she's got stuff to talk about. If you're ever bored, she can give you a play-by-play of what it was like for her to live with Armen and Lucy."

Jenna swallowed her disgust. "I'd rather not hear any of that stuff. I can't be bothered about them anymore and with any luck, we won't have to deal with them again."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to see what they're talking about on the House and Home Network? Last I heard, the happy couple has been complaining to the news outlets about the poor condition of your grandfather's house. They're getting a home makeover."

Jenna snorted. "I really can't think about them. Unless there is something more serious than petty gossip surrounding them, please don't mention their doings to me again. Peek in on Fallcet and Iker the next chance you get. I also need you to arrange for Rennett's palace to be brought to the cluster for the crowning tomorrow."

"Will do," her personal assistant replied.

Jenna flung open the door to her bedroom and paced through the room a few times before stepping into her closet and removing her earrings. Keeping up appearances was all well and good, but painful hairdos and heavy earrings all night were asking a little much. She dropped the hoops into her jewelry tray and then pulled the pins out of her hair, letting it fall. Each pin made the sound of metal hitting glass as she got her act together.

"Ixy, can you play a playlist from my old phone?" Jenna asked as she bent to unclasp her barefoot sandals.

"Uh, Jenna. When you're right, you're right, and you are always right," Ixy said with a snort.

Jenna stuck out her tongue. "Fallcet botched it already, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did. Epically. Iker is on his way to your palace. Want me to lock the doors?"

"Nah, don't block him. You may as well tell him that I'm in here. Just close the curtains around my bed, so that at least that part of the room remains somewhat private. At least, you don't have to tell him how to get here. I'm sure he remembers where it is from the last time." Jenna got up and strolled back into the bedroom.

"Stop right there," she said to Iker as he stood outside her bedroom door in the hallway. "I would hate for you to come into my bedroom twice without asking for my permission."

Iker stopped where he was and kept his feet in the hallway. He didn't ask for permission to enter, he just spoke from his position outside her bedroom. "I've heard that Phane Mockving is in orbit and you have been speaking to him."

Jenna smiled and nodded. "May I offer you a drink?" she said, pouring herself a glass of water from a glass decanter.

He shook his head angrily.

"And you feel that Phane being in orbit is somehow your business?" she asked placidly. The few minutes she had spent undoing her hair had done wonders for her resilience.

"He's a traitor," Iker spat. He looked like a kitty statue stuck in a hissing pose.

Jenna chuckled, unaware that the sudden laughter made her more beautiful than anything.

"What's so funny?" Iker asked, his voice warbling.

Jenna put up a hand to stop herself from making inappropriate sounds. "I'm sorry," she said, straightening. "Nothing is funny. Tell me your objections to Phane."

"I was on a rescue mission once where a decision needed to be made. He *chose* Octavian lives over Adamis lives."

"I've heard this story," Jenna said. "He put the rescue of the fifty Adamis passengers on hold until he could rescue the 215 Octavian passengers. I read all about it. As far as he was concerned, it was a question of math. There were 215 Octavians aboard the *Winner's Cup* and

only fifty Adamis and six Octavians aboard the *Sunstreak*. Phane believes Octavians are people, so he put his efforts to the larger number. What's the problem?"

"The AAMC always prioritizes the needs of Adamis," Iker said. His shoulders were squared and his hands clasped in front of him, almost like he was standing at attention.

"Hmm," Jenna hummed. "That's the policy of the AAMC, huh? It doesn't matter what else goes down the tubes as long as Adamis interests are served?"

"Yes, ma'am," he practically barked.

She nodded patiently. "Are you aware that you aren't a member of the AAMC anymore?"

"Very aware. I have not been in the army since I was court-martialed and discharged for entering your bedroom," he said, standing in the doorway of that bedroom.

"Why are you representing the interests of an organization you're no longer a part of?" Jenna asked in a sly, but patient, voice.

Iker's shoulders fell, almost like he was a blowup man who was deflating. "I... I..."

"Are you here to tell the Octavians that if they don't do what the AAMC wants, the army will be here with ten thousand gunships to blow Octavia Prime to pieces?"

"No, ma'am," he said instantly, though his voice had lost quite a lot of its original volume.

"Listen, Iker. You are no longer part of the AAMC. You are no longer required to follow their orders. It may be the policy of the AAMC to strongarm any other nation into doing only what benefits Adamis civilization most. I know they're annoyed that the Octavians do not play to their benefit, but now is an opportunity for all of us to see exactly what deals are on the table and to try to negotiate something that promotes the interests of both instead of war. You now work as a representative for all Adamis people, and what they need is someone who is willing to stand up for cooperation. I'm sure we can find solutions."

"They told me," he said quietly. "They told me I was here to represent the AAMC."

"Yes. That's what they're hoping for. The man who is getting crowned tomorrow with you is still a member of the AAMC. His name is General Rennett. The other man the AAMC sent me was never even in the armed forces. Scion Xant is the son of an arms dealer. Your old masters want to represent more than just the formal interests of the AAMC. But *you* are no longer a member of the AAMC and you have very few ties back to their organization other than your own loyalty. And *I* asked for you to come here. I snatched you right out from under their noses."

Iker looked astonished, like a big astonished cat standing in her door frame. "You asked for me personally?"

"Didn't they tell you?" she asked, a welcoming smile warming her face.

"No," he breathed.

"I did. If they hadn't interfered, I probably would have chosen you to crown before everything went to crap and you were forced to leave in disgrace."

Ixy chirped up inside Jenna's ear. "Is that true, Jenna?"

Jenna ignored her PA.

Jenna took a step forward. "I'm not asking you to ignore your AAMC roots. I'm asking you to consider the idea that your loyalties have shifted a little. You have been given an opportunity to aid Adamis and Octavians alike. Take it slow. There will be plenty of time for you to read and learn what is right before you vote."

"I've been told to abstain if the voting doesn't seem to be going our way," he said.

"I know," she said, taking a few steps closer to him. She put out her hand and he went to shake hers. She clasped his one hand in her two and said in a voice as sweet and soft as cotton candy, "If you consistently refuse to vote, I'll have you shipped off-world and though I cannot remove your crown, you will not be included in the eight diplomats who live in the palaces. I'm allowing Rennett to stay because he'll die if I ship him off-world. I will have nothing like the same problem with you. I will replace you. Don't forget that I lived on a different planet with no diplomatic responsibilities and a big black crown on my head for decades. I can easily do the same to you."

She tried to release Iker's hand, but his other hand came around and padded hers in a meaty double handshake. "Aren't you afraid?" he asked.

"Of?" she questioned, clasping his hands tighter around his, even though she doubted he could feel the pressure.

"Me? Scion? Fallcet? The whole of the AAMC? They have forced you out of your home twice. What makes you think they couldn't do it again?"

Jenna laughed, a delightful musical sound. "Let them. It's fine."

His teeth glinted in the lamplight. It wasn't exactly threatening, more like a warning that needed to be given with toothy smiles instead of lippy ones. "Why doesn't that bother you?"

"I don't really have anything to give to this program that I haven't already given."

He cocked his head like a perplexed cat. She liked him better, but she had started from a place so very low, so it wasn't hard for her to like him better.

Fallcet chose that moment to come around the corner. He had obviously been listening and waiting for the correct part of the conversation to insert himself. He had chosen his moment well, and he took Iker by the elbow and started pointing him toward his new palace before Jenna's porcelain demeanor cracked.

When they were gone, Jenna closed the door and crossed the room to her bed.

"Jenna, I know you're full of crap, but was that true?" Ixy asked with a snap of her tongue.

"Was what true?"

"Would you have crowned Iker when he was here the first time if they hadn't broken into your bedroom? When you said that to him, he changed completely, from the way he was looking at you to the words that came out of his mouth. Was it true?"

"It probably was. I wasn't overly impressed with the candidates sent by the AAMC, but I would have asked Vash which of them he thought was the least objectionable and crowned him. I may have crowned more of them if they had been good, but I only needed one. Vash thought Iker was a good guy. Perhaps a little too good at following orders, obviously, but a good guy."

"It did him in. They don't have hotties like you ordering guys around in the higher ranks of the AAMC."

"Do they even have women in the AAMC?"

"They do, but it may not even matter that you're a woman. He might have been just as happy to follow you if you were a man. It's your charisma that gets them. Charisma."

"Yeah, I'm brimming with it tonight," she said, rubbing her shoulder that was feeling tight from strain.

"I'll let you know if His ship appears in the Xypher Zone." Ixy didn't need to say his name.

Him, He, His, would all only refer to Sardius. He had become a him with a capital H. The only man left in the universe. That's who he was to Jenna.

“Thanks, Ixy,” she whispered before she splashed the water in her glass into her face rather than drinking it.

Chapter Twenty Three

The Crescent Bell Palace

Jenna and Celestina were in the Dahlia Palace getting ready to dive. It was a beautiful sunny day on the Slipseed Sea with lazy clouds, like moving mountains, drifting across the sky.

"I've never done this," Celestina complained. "Aside from the spray from a sea rover or a quick dive in a pool, I have never done deep sea diving."

None of this was news to Jenna. Celestina had been saying these same things on repeat, either hoping that no one would require her to drop all the way down into the ocean, or that someone sweet would hold her hand for the transformation from landlubber to mermaid. She was such a beauty queen and so nervous about the whole thing that Jenna offered to braid her hair and let her come with her when Favel showed her the final stages of construction on the palace he'd promised her.

Jenna should have been more excited than Celestina, but she had a feeling that the emotions were switched. Celestina was having all the emotions at once over the idea of going under the surface to get a preview of Jenna's new palace.

"What was it like when you went to Favel's mansion?" she asked Jenna.

"It was dark."

"Hmm..." She was fluttering like a butterfly.

"Look, I did a lot of diving on my home planet," Jenna went on to explain. "This will be better than that. The water will be warmer, the water will be clearer, the sites will be more interesting, and not a single creature in the Slipseed Ocean wants you to drown. You'll be perfectly safe."

Celestina did not look convinced. "I know it's more dangerous to play around in outer space than to fall into the ocean, but I was honestly less uptight before I did a space walk than now. There was so much more gear to protect me. The space suit was like getting into a car that shrunk to fit me. What we're doing here feels like we'll be dropped into a hostile environment with only our bathing suits."

Jenna grabbed a hair brush and an elastic and stood behind Celestina. "We're not going far enough for the temperature of the water to change. Favel said my new palace is almost directly underneath where we are right now. So, we're just going to take facemasks and oxygen tanks. It will be a breeze and if you're uncomfortable, you can swim back up here."

Celestina was still not convinced when Jenna adjusted their facemasks and gave Celestina instructions on how to breathe once they were underwater.

Favel was waiting for them just under the water when they splashed in. The water was so blue, it was difficult to see him if he stayed still. He was almost invisible with the blue of his skin fading into the blue of the sea. He beckoned for them to follow him and went on ahead with a swirl of white suction cups.

Jenna held onto Celestina's hand to stop her from losing her nerve and together, they turned to follow Favel through the crystal clear water.

Jenna's first glance at the palace shocked her. All of the palaces had a theme and all of them kept to the theme rather nicely. The Dahlia Palace was like a terracotta planter on the outside

with beautiful dark pink dahlias growing all around it. In some places, the dahlias did not grow well and so there were representations of the flower in sculptures surrounding the building. Inside, the walls were painted that same vibrant magenta with all the moldings and pillars being a stark white. Jenna loved it in that it was feminine and she would never have had the courage to design an indoor concept that was that bold.

She had privately suffered quite a lot with the idea of giving it up to Fallcet. He would never appreciate the pink walls. He wanted it because he wanted it to seem like he was taking over from Jenna when she left the quorum and the other eight palaces. At least, when she suggested that that was the reason, he did not deny it. When she suggested that it might be because he was a little pervert who got his jollies sleeping in her bed after she left it, he denied it emphatically, though she didn't believe him. Truthfully, either reason was just as gross.

Favel had spoken modestly of the new palace he would build for her, so she believed that it would be fairly similar to the other palaces. After all, he said it would be. However, the Crescent Bell Palace was nothing like the other palaces. It was the softest gray color with a rainbow sheen like the whole thing had been built from mother of pearl. Though it was not vulgar in its size, it was clearly produced with greater care than the other palaces had been.

Favel led them down to the front entryway, which was a beautiful line of arches every guest would have to walk under in order to make their way to the front door. Jenna could envision ivy and roses growing over them, making the walkway like a fairytale.

As they swam, Ixy explained the signs Favel made so that Jenna understood the tour he was conducting.

He led them to the front door, which had not yet been added. Favel explained through Ixy that none of the doors or windows would be added until the palace was raised to the surface and had the opportunity to dry out.

They swam inside and Favel took them around to see the front halls designed for greeting guests, the dining room, council rooms, guest rooms, the kitchen, and the baths. Favel had added a much fancier room for bathing than anything that was in the eight palaces. The room was nothing short of a spa. He explained that if there wasn't a pool in the building, everyone would think that their relationship wasn't real. There had to be a place for him to be comfortable, like it was his home too.

Jenna loved the room, but since she couldn't say anything to Ixy with the oxygen tube in her mouth, she made a heart symbol with her fingers and placed it over her chest. It seemed that Favel understood and led her into her bedroom.

It was a far grander space than she had in the Dahlia Palace and she thought that had been opulent.

This was twice as large, with a bigger place for a bed up on a platform.

He motioned for her and Celestina to go over and hold onto the pillars that would surround the four poster bed. Ixy had to shout in Jenna's ear three times to get her arms and legs around the posts and Jenna couldn't question why. There were doorways that led to her dressing room and another bathroom and she wanted to see them. Why was she supposed to hang onto a pillar?

Celestina was faster on the uptake and held onto hers dutifully while Favel had to demonstrate how Jenna should hang onto it three times before she did as she was shown.

Once she held on appropriately, the whole palace started to move.

Finally, Jenna understood that Favel had brought them down to show her what it looked like underwater before it was brought surfside. The water slipped around them as the palace moved until it swished away from them like the sinking of the Titanic played backwards.

When enough of the water had gone that Jenna felt safe, she pulled her breathing apparatus out of her mouth. "This is beautiful, Favel. Why didn't you tell me today was moving day?"

"Today is not moving day," he said sternly. "Moving day is when you leave the Dahlia Palace and move into the Crescent Bell Palace. That's not today. There is so much left to do! As I said, we have to dry the place out, hook up the electricity, hang the doors, hook up the plumbing, and about a hundred other things. Didn't Ixy explain it all to you as I was motioning it?"

"Well, Ixy?" Jenna asked. She hadn't explained a tenth of that.

"I'm gonna be honest," the PA said coarsely in Jenna's ear. "My Octavian is not so good, and the program I'm using to translate his motions only got about half of them. He was so excited he moved around too fast for the program to see everything he was signing. It's like he's talking at fifty miles an hour and I'm only getting every other word."

For once, Jenna believed Ixy's explanation. Favel had been moving like a chattering sea-monkey. "That checks out," Jenna said, letting Ixy off the hook.

Except there was one thing Jenna didn't see about the palace when it was underwater. The whole place sparkled in the sunlight in a way none of the other palaces did.

"This is breathtaking, Favel," she said, plunking her bottom next to him on the stone tile.

"I was going to call it the Diamond Palace, but I was outvoted. We're supposed to avoid any mention or idea that this palace is superior to the others."

"Of course it is. The other palaces are the Stone Palace, the Salt Palace..."

Celestina interrupted. "Speak for yourselves. Mine is the Sun Palace and the walls are lined in real gold."

Jenna glanced at Favel for confirmation.

"I wasn't the only Octavian who married a human. The recipient of the Sun Palace was the last one."

"Yes," Celestina said. "Except it wasn't built for a woman. It was built for a man, because men are like the sun and women are like the moon."

Favel rolled his eyes. "Adamis men might be like the sun, shining all the time, while moons are more like women because of the thing that must not be named. But Octavians," Favel stressed, "are like wind. The color of whatever they touch."

Celestina flipped her wet braid. "You make me want to marry an Octavian."

He shook his mantle like he didn't believe her, but he said, "I'll set you up."

Chapter Twenty Four

The Dark Atmosphere of The Mercury Palace

The news crews that Celestina invited to Octavia Prime for the occasion of the final crownings had filled every hotel, every empty house, every empty space where an Adamis could be housed—they were all full. Jenna sat in her living room with Favel, Vash, Misha, and Smoothie, as they watched the aerial view of the eight palaces coming together into a perfect octagon.

The Dahlia palace didn't move. Everything was moving around Jenna and her palace. She wasn't the center of the octagon, but she might as well have been according to the Octavians. As far as they were concerned, everything depended on her. All the palaces together made the eight sides of the shape with a hole in the middle like an enormous geometric donut.

When the last palace slid into place and was locked down with the bridges, Favel clinked the goblet he was holding in his tentacle against the goblet he was sitting in. "Now comes the surprise," he said jubilantly.

Jenna had never seen it before, but several of the broadcasters had and they spoke of the last time the center of the eight palaces had been seen. The center palace was called the Mercury Palace. It was their diplomatic meeting room, a palace in its own right, built only for the purpose of allowing all eight diplomats a place of common ground where they could meet. It rose high, levels above the height of any of the other eight palaces, making the stuff of underwater fairytales suddenly very real. Apparently, it had been dropped into the ocean on the last day of a peace summit, before a recess began. During the break, enough diplomats died for it to have stayed under the waves for years.

Jenna didn't understand how she had never seen it when she swam so often. Where had they been storing it? What other secrets did the Octavians keep hidden?

She clucked her tongue and Favel took it as a sign that she was impressed.

Favel had told Jenna and the other diplomats to dress well for the day as it would be a historic one. Jenna hadn't understood the instructions. She was crowning Iker and Rennett that day, so she already knew she had to look good for the ceremonies. Celestina insisted upon it. Why was Favel involved?

When she saw the center palace, she understood. Jenna had performed the previous crownings in garden decks and in great halls. No longer. From now on, those ceremonies would take place in the Mercury Palace, on common ground. It would also be where Jenna and Favel would get married. From the slightly greedy look in her Octavian fiancé's black eyes, it was fairly obvious. The fame was getting to him.

Jenna clicked the two black crowns between her fingers, stood up, and went to the glass doors that led onto her deck. From there, she could see mechanical locks clicking into place.

"Don't go out yet, darling," Favel said. "It's not safe until they're finished."

Jenna rested her forehead against the glass and watched the clamps that looked like metal tentacles latch onto her floating palace.

She had brought all these people together. Everyone was here because of what she had done.

One part of her was pleased that she'd been able to do what she'd set out to do, but another part of her was scared stiff. How could she know if she was doing the right thing? The Mercury Palace looked like a dark version of the little mermaid's palace. It was foreboding. Yet, the Octavians lived under the sea. In their culture, it was beautiful. There were loads of cultures on Earth that gave Jenna the willies. That didn't mean those people did not deserve defending.

Jenna swallowed.

She wished Sardius had been there to reassure her that she was making all the right moves.

"Do you think He's killed Don Leo by now, Ixy?" Jenna whispered to her PA.

There was only one 'He'. Ixy knew who Jenna was talking about. "I think he's the son of a bitch who made it through the prison riot next door. If there was a prison riot in my jail, I'd die. I'd be one of the first to die. I don't even work out. I weigh 85 pounds and half of that is my hair."

"She's joking," Ivy said, having pulled Ixy's microphone away for a moment. "She wishes she weighed eight-five pounds."

"Give that back! Anyway, Jenna, it seems a little weak to assume that Sardius couldn't make it through whatever they put him through on board the ship. He was *all* confidence."

"But they knew he was coming," Jenna whimpered. "I heard them."

"And so did I," Ixy shot back. "No matter how gentle he appeared when he was with you, make no mistake, Sardius was a cold-blooded killer. And now he has something to fight for."

Jenna rubbed her fists into her cheeks and for a moment, she felt like a boxer about to strut into the ring. In a way, she was. The last of the clamps on the Mercury Palace locked into place and Favel had given her the tentacle up to tell her she could go out.

She saw the drones hovering over her deck as Ixy opened the doors for her. Jenna strutted out like she was better than a Hollywood movie star. When she got to the end of her deck she waved for the other diplomats to join her.

Excelyn came out first, looking like a country singer with tassels on her vest. She had Philip at her side. He didn't follow his wife's fashion. He wore a tuxedo and looked like an Italian supermodel who was about to shoot a cologne commercial.

Celestina came out after that. She looked like a CNN anchorwoman who had elevated her look by a couple ticks for a red-carpet event. The white dress was enough to blind the cameramen, which Celestina loved doing most.

Fallcet was next. He had ditched his boho beige suit and replaced it with a black one. If anything, the cut of it was reminiscent of the suits Misha had dressed Sardius in. Jenna did a double-take when she saw him. Her first impression was that he was trying to mimic Sardius, but when she looked the second time, she decided he wore what he wore to try to fit in with the aesthetic of the floating palaces. He was the kind of guy who made an effort to look the part.

Scion was next and he cut a better figure than Jenna had expected. It was because he was a young man who was used to showboating. He wore a gangster suit of royal blue.

Rennett and Iker came out together. Rennett could walk by himself, but it was slow going and it was good Iker was beside him since he could have carried three Rennetts on his back. They were getting crowned together, so it felt right for them to appear together.

They met, all with their own door, for there were far more than eight doors into the open space of the Mercery Palace. They paused for a moment to allow the drones to get the footage they needed for their newsreels.

When Jenna had had enough, she flicked her wrist and all of them entered the Mercury Palace together. Jenna turned at the door and invited the drones in with them.

The inside of the room was made of dark metal, like mercury. The ceiling spiked above them in a rugged cone shape. Chandeliers hung like brilliantly lit octopuses hanging in a circle near the doors. The table in front of them was large and cold and the seats were high-backed with thick upholstered cushions on them. The space felt grand beyond a cathedral because Jenna didn't know of spaces like it except in churches. Were they worshipping something she didn't understand?

And she was at the heart of it.

Glancing from face to form to an empty door to the view beyond and three moons of Octavia hovering over the horizon in the daylight, Jenna knew this was beyond what her grandfather expected or knew would happen. She thought of her grandmother, Letty, and what she knew that had been buried with her. What had she experienced? Why hadn't her grandparents told her more?

Suddenly, Jenna realized with an odd burst that her grandmother had not gone as far down the Octavian Road. Her grandmother had not orchestrated the crowning of an entire council of diplomats. Yes, she had been given a casket of crowns for safekeeping, but Jenna had never heard of Letty succeeding in crowning anyone other than herself. The differences grew deeper as Jenna thought. Her grandmother had not become engaged to an Octavian. Her grandfather had told her that he was the only man she ever married because she was picky. Well, it turned out that Jenna tried to be just as picky. It was necessary because she could find a husband lurking behind any invitation. The greatest difference of all was that in the end, Letty Osiris had found a way out. She had escaped her responsibilities early enough that she had been able to have children and grandchildren.

Jenna cracked her neck.

She would never have any of those things. She would die doing this.

Looking over her shoulder, she worried which direction the assassination attempt would come from. The drones buzzing around the room suddenly became terrible whether they had red or blue lights flashing on them. Looking at the chairs, she remembered Sardius' opinions on explosives and she suddenly became afraid that the chairs had bombs built into them. She half expected her chair to blow up when she sat down, so she didn't sit down.

It wasn't on the agenda for her to sit down immediately. Instead, she stayed standing as she went through the motions of crowning Rennett first. Shaving the top of his head didn't take much time. He didn't have much hair in the first place, so Jenna cut the three hairs in the way without any fuss at all. She removed the adhesive strip on the crown and stuck it down as she had practiced.

As good as the crown looked on Scion (with his waves of dark luscious hair), that was how bad it looked on Rennett. He looked like a grandpa wearing his goth granddaughter's headband.

Except for that unfortunate moment, everything else went perfectly.

When it came time to crown Iker, he stepped forward, looking like a rock man with the eyes of a cat. Jenna asked him to sit in the chair.

"The crown has to go on my head, yes?" Iker asked, hesitating.

"Do you see a crown on a different body part?" Jenna replied, motioning to all the other diplomats.

"Right," he said, still hesitating. "Um... you said I don't work for the AAMC anymore?" he whispered.

Jenna took a step closer to him and kept her voice down as well. "Yes. Is there a problem?"

"I... um... I... am safe here, aren't I?" he asked, the look in his eyes as feral as a cat who was about to pounce.

Jenna brought her eyebrows together and came even closer to Iker. "Are you worried about assassination right here and now?"

He shook his head. "Can you put the crown on my rock head here and then..." He trailed off. "Maybe I shouldn't have agreed to this."

"It would be better if you told me your problem." She looked into Iker's worried eyes. "Or just gave me a hint as to what direction it might be in. However, if you're worried that the AAMC might try to assassinate you, they haven't assassinated me yet. Being here might put you in the same danger, but that was always true."

He nodded, agreeing. "Yes. That was always true." He leaned in closer and whispered hotly in Jenna's ear. "Jenna, I was sent here to steal the crown and give it to someone else. I was meant to trick you into placing that crown on my head and escape. There's a pod waiting for me. However, I think I want to take the crown and be a diplomat. Would you support me doing that?"

Jenna met his eyes. "Yes," she replied firmly. She did love the idea of turning an AAMC guy into one of her guys instead.

Iker nodded thankfully and took a step back. Then, to everyone's astonishment, a spot between Iker's eyes began to move. Once the motion started, everything happened very quickly. The skin that made up his nose and his chin began to rip apart. Then his neck and his shoulders began to pull apart. With a sickening crack, his head opened.

Then, without any warning, an animal pounced out at them.

It took a moment for Jenna to understand what she had been seeing. Iker had been a mammoth of a man—absolutely huge. But that wasn't his real skin. He had been pretending to be the same race as Vash. He wasn't and his cat eyes should have given it away. Once Iker was freed of his mech suit designed to help a space soldier blend in on a planet, he was a Man Cat the color of a red fox. He stood half a head shorter than Jenna. He wore boots, black pants, and a black vest made of synthetic leather. His tail was fluffy and he had a beard that was almost a mane.

Jenna, a woman who had always loved cats, almost lost her mind. Instead of saying a word, she covered her mouth with her hands and refrained from screaming, 'I love you!'

Iker translated her silence as reluctance and dropped to one knee. "I know this form isn't what you were expecting, but I couldn't be more thankful for the trust you've shown me," he said loud enough for the drones to pick up on what he was saying. "Please accept me like this."

Jenna swept him up in her arms, unable to hold herself back another second. "Yes, Angel Puff! I'll crown you."

"Angel Puff?" he gasped, craning his neck to get more air. "What? I'm not asking to be your pet!"

"Of course not!" she agreed, putting him down. "I know. I know. I just..." her face was flushed with pleasure. "You are so adorable! Let's get the crown on you!"

She placed Iker in a chair and measured his head against the crown. Then she took the electric razor and did the best she could on such a different-shaped head.

"I think this is going to work out just fine," she said as she placed it down and it stayed. She shook his clawed hand in congratulations and then turned to everyone with a look of pure joy on her face.

Iker slumped in the chair. "My suit," he grumbled. "I need to get back in my suit. I'm not used to this kind of gravity."

Jenna was about to lift him back into his suit when Scion stepped forward. Proud of his muscles, he carefully picked up the Man Cat and helped him put his feet back into the leg holes of the AAMC suit.

Once inside, Iker thanked Scion and did up the chest. When he tried to put the helmet back in place, it wouldn't go. The crown on his head stopped it from being able to fit.

Jenna stepped forward. "Will you be okay without the helmet?"

"Let's hope," Iker said, tightening the neck.

"We'll work on this problem with you," Jenna reassured him.

He nodded gratefully.

Having achieved quorum, Jenna stood at the head of the table and set the first meeting for seven days from then, and without sitting down at all, the celebration began.

Adamis and Octavians came pouring into the Mercury Palace. Jenna hadn't been aware that the Octavians had planned the party for them. Food and flowers appeared out of nowhere. Jenna was astonished at the grandeur suddenly surrounding her, as if the Mercury Palace itself had not been grand enough, there was more.

In the next instant, Favel was at Jenna's elbow, pressing a suction cup against the back of her hand.

"You did it all," he said, by way of congratulating her.

"I couldn't have done this without your help," she replied, suddenly feeling stupid that she hadn't felt safe in the Mercury Palace. "This is where we are going to hold our wedding, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Their wedding was slated for the day after the next. When they were planning the wedding, Jenna had been confused about where the ceremony was going to take place, and Favel had been very mysterious about the location, but after seeing the Mercury Place, it all made sense.

"Jenna," he said seriously, raising himself up in his goblet and beckoning Jenna to lower her head so he could whisper in her ear "I didn't want to tell you before the ceremony, but this morning, Admiral Lou Denver was found dead outside his home."

Jenna's feeling of foreboding felt entirely justified as she knit her eyebrows together in concentration. "How did he die?"

"His garage door malfunctioned and cut him in half."

"What?" she exclaimed in bewildered shock.

"From the look on your face, I see I said that wrong. Let me try again. He was inside a personal transport pod, not unlike your bed, but arranged more like a regular transport pod with seating inside. Instead of bedding, it had wheels and hover capability. He was visiting his holiday home on a moon in the Umbria system that has no atmosphere. He had been joyriding

alone and when he returned home, the airlock door on his transport dock malfunctioned. It cut his pod in half with him inside.”

“How is that possible?”

“The doors are half as thick as the pod. Maybe it’s more accurate to say that he was crushed.”

“Don’t you mean assassinated?”

Favel wagged a tentacle. “Nothing can be proven from the report. There was an error log a mile long of that door malfunctioning before the accident. They’re calling it property neglect resulting in death.”

“Was he removed because he was so bad at managing me?”

“Not by the AAMC,” Favel said in a tone intended not to arouse notice by the partygoers around him. “If they were annoyed with him, they could have simply reassigned him. It means he was serving two masters and the other master had no other way of removing him. All of this may mean that the enemy of our program is not the AAMC, but someone else.”

“The people I can think of who have the most to gain from all this are the people who are investing in Adamis space transportation instead of Octavian. Either them or the arms dealers.”

Jenna and Favel both looked at Scion.

Across the room, he smiled and raised his glass to them.

They mimicked the action. Jenna smiled. Favel looked neutral, but Scion didn’t seem to mind that.

Jenna bent down to Favel’s level. “Let’s stop talking about this. It may not even matter who is behind all this. They may have killed him to cover their tracks so that he didn’t expose their part in the assassinations and not because he would ruin their future plans.”

“That’s some sparkling optimism, Jenna. They may have lost their interest in dismantling your program, but that doesn’t mean that killing the diplomats was the only road to their goal. They’ll find another way.”

“Tell me truthfully. How badly do your people want to keep their hold on space travel?”

“We have to have our own methods of transport because, in the past, Adamis ships have not accommodated Octavians. In all honesty, your people are easier to move than ours. I’m inclined to believe that none of this is actually about space travel. It’s about who has control of the universe. They want access to better resources. You can’t have good resources if you don’t have good space travel. I think most of what you diplomats will be arguing over is who gets control over which resource-rich planets. I can tell you for nothing that the Octavians will not be willing to share the planets that have already been claimed, and that’s going to lead to a conflict whether you do a good job or not.”

“You don’t think it’s about keeping Adamis money in Adamis hands?”

Favel inclined his mantle. “It’s probably that too, but if it is just about Adamis passengers paying Octavians then they’re stupid. The universe is full of wealth and the technology that can spring from it far surpasses the money we bring in with our travel industry.”

Jenna stood there with a pensive look on her face. That was it then, the Octavians had buckets of wealth and tech that surpassed the Adamis. Not only that, but she didn’t understand what they had and she had signed up to arbitrate between her people and the Octavians. Jenna felt a pinch in her neck from the weight of the stress she was experiencing.

“Oh, don’t look like that. Go mingle. Who knows what they’ll say about us in the news if we only talk to each other?” He waved Jenna away.

True to his word, the next day there was a very gushy news piece about how Jenna and Favel were so close it practically took a crowbar to separate them at the quorum celebration.

Chapter Twenty Five

A Gown for Every Mood

Jenna's gown for her wedding with Favel was extraordinary. Misha did not make it. It was a gift from Favel, stating that she and Misha couldn't possibly choose a dress that would make the Octavians as happy as he could.

When it was delivered the day before the wedding, Jenna couldn't believe it. When she opened the package, she thought it was a box full of smartwatches like the ones she had seen back on Earth. Favel wasn't there to explain the confusing dress. Perplexed, she tried to pick up one of the watches, but a bunch of them came up with the one she selected. Then she realized what was going on. It was not a pile of smartwatches, but tiny screens that had been linked together like chainmail. It was pretty heavy.

Misha helped her lift it out of the box.

"I wish Favel was here for the unboxing," Jenna complained morosely.

"He doesn't want to see the bride before the wedding because it's bad luck. He needs all the luck he can get," Misha said with a smirk.

Jenna acted like she was stupid. Behind her gray eyes, she knew why Favel needed luck. Marrying her was linking him to a potentially hazardous situation. It was one thing to be the chair of the Octavian Council. It was quite another to be married to an Adamis diplomat. They might stand together strong and beautiful, holding peace together... or he might get dragged into tragedy and disaster because his fate was tied to Jenna's.

Faking cheerfulness, Jenna continued like she didn't have a care in the world. "This has basically been a done deal since I suggested on TV that I'd marry him if he asked me. Besides, nothing about our relationship will change after we get married. We'll still be the same. Why go to all this trouble?"

"It's for him," Misha said simply.

Jenna wished she cared what she wore for her wedding, but she didn't. If Favel wanted her to wear a dress that made her look like an Octavian, then so be it, but she wasn't sure how the garment in front of her would accomplish that.

"Can you see how I'm supposed to get it on?" Jenna asked after turning parts of it over in her hands and not finding any break in the links.

"Yeah. It's just a tube. One end is a little tighter, so I'm guessing it's the bodice, though I would have preferred it if he had given us more time to fit it. How can they know if it's going to fit the way they want it to without trying it on you first?"

"If it's a disaster, I'll just have to wear a dress I already have. Is there a white or blue one I've never worn before?"

Misha was holding the wedding gown inside out. "We have to make this work. I can't tell if you're supposed to wear a bra with this or not. There are no straps, so how about we start with a strapless one?"

"I'll grab one. What color?"

"Flesh. I hate this, Jenna," the stylist moaned.

"How can you hate something you don't understand?" Jenna asked as she rooted around the underwear until she found the bra Misha wanted her to wear.

"I hate not understanding things," Misha answered, her little arms buckling under the weight of the dress in her hands. "It looks like there are sensors on the underside of each of the screens. I'm guessing they'll tighten or loosen the links between the screens once you've got it on."

Jenna put the new bra on and Misha put the gown on the floor and it fell in a circle. Jenna stepped inside the circle and the whole thing sprung up and took shape around her. It clasped her in and buckled her up without her having to do a thing.

"I know what it is!" Ixy suddenly announced over the room's speakers. "It's a mood dress!"

"Like a mood ring?" Jenna asked.

"I don't know what a mood ring is, but a mood dress is a joke," Misha declared.

"Favel wouldn't play a joke on me on our wedding day," Jenna contradicted.

Misha shook her head. "It's not that kind of joke. Octavians don't wear clothes. They have a color that their skin naturally takes on, but they can also change their skin colors to match the terrain around them or, in some cases, their mood. Most often it is unintentional. If they're surprised or shocked, they change colors and patterns to defend themselves. They joke that Octavians are always wearing mood dresses, the same way humans joke that they're wearing their birthday suits when they are buck naked."

"Oh," Jenna said, adding the term mood dresses to her internal dictionary.

Misha chuckled. "This is the most man-inspired wedding dress I have ever seen. He wants you to look like an Octavian, but obviously, he doesn't want to dress you in an octopus costume, and he has decided that this is the best way. So, more than the shape of an Octavian, with eight tentacles, he's going to make you show him your mood... and not just him, but all of the Octavian world. That's the thing about Octavians. They can't hide how they are feeling."

"This is a dangerous gift, Jenna," Ixy warned. "The dress isn't powered on now, so we can't practice how you need to feel during your wedding to get the best colors to show on the dress. What do you think all these little screens are going to show once he turns them on?"

Jenna felt her armpits get slick with sweat. "Okay, saying all that has made me nervous. Even if we can't practice with the dress, surely you can tell me what colors and patterns are bad so that I can school myself a bit and avoid them. Ixy, can you help out?"

"This is hilarious," the PA chortled over the room's speakers. "But I've been researching it while you two were working it out. Octavians primarily use the patterns on their skin to avoid detection and to frighten predators. So, if you notice yourself fading into the background, it will seem like you don't want to be seen with Favel, and that will look bad."

"Yes," Jenna agreed. "That's a good place to start."

"On the other hand, if you look like a checkerboard with black and white checks, that is an aggressive pattern. I think avoiding that look will be easy for you, Jenna. You don't usually want to kill people."

"Shut up, Ixy. I almost always want to kill someone," she refuted.

"But you don't usually do it, so that's something," Ixy said brightly. "All you need to do is to try to keep your killing rage down a few notches. The last piece of advice I can give you is to avoid being sexually aroused by anything. Many octopuses and squid turn a light pink to a dark red

when they're about to mate. It will make everything in your life less fun if you seem aroused by anything at your wedding with Favel."

Jenna tried to keep her face deadpan as she accepted that news. She was very good at keeping a feeling to herself until she had time to process it. She felt certain she could control herself, but still, broadcasting her every emotion to the whole universe seemed bananas.

"Do you think we could insert a needle into the back of all these screens before the wedding tomorrow?" Jenna asked, looking for loopholes.

Misha huffed. "You want to break the dress so no one can tell how you feel? What are you so worried about? No one is going to be there except you and Favel. Everyone else has been ordered to stay out of the Mercury Palace. Yes, there will be cameras, but the only person you could react to will be Favel."

"She's right," Ixy agreed noisily. "Favel's not dumb enough to include people who would set you off on your wedding day. He knows he's not a man and he isn't going to be your husband in every sense of the word. Besides, we haven't had a chance to experiment with the dress. Hopefully, he'll turn it on a few minutes before the ceremony so you can get the hang of it."

Jenna nodded and hoped they were right.



The next day, Jenna's hair was tied up in a bun, her makeup was done and the mood dress was slid on.

"Is it powering up?" Jenna asked Misha.

"No. I guess Favel's not going to start it until you're about to enter the Mercury Palace."

"Let's review," Ixy said, over the room's speakers. "If your dress is yellow, green, or blue, that is all good. If your dress is reflective or the color of the gray stone around you, you are hooped. Smarten up with a dash of confidence. Remember the mantra."

"I'm Jenna Fairchild and the Octavians love me," Jenna repeated the mantra smoothly.

"Good girl," Ixy continued while Misha fussed with her hair. "Now if your dress makes a black and white checked pattern? What do you say to yourself then?"

"I am floating on an island of good wishes," Jenna said in a dazed trance.

Ixy smacked her tongue ironically. "That wouldn't work for me, but you do you."

"Shut up!" Jenna snapped.

"Did that little show of aggression change her dress, Misha?"

"No. It's still not powered on, Ixy. Don't antagonize her intentionally until *after the wedding*," the stylist replied curtly.

"Last question before you head in," Ixy declared. "What do you do if you get even a hint of pink on your dress?"

Jenna didn't answer. She hadn't been able to think of anything clever to snap her out of any warm romantic feelings if she should experience any. She cracked her neck. "Look, if I turn pink, it's going to be because I'm naturally a little lovelorn since Sardius left. I'm not going to be able to help it. If it's that sensitive that it shows that... then..."

"Just try not to look aggressive," Misha encouraged, rerouting the direction of their conversation. "I think that emotion would look the worst."

Jenna agreed.

Misha called for Vash and he arrived with an umbrella with a veil around it. The veil surrounded Jenna as she got under the umbrella. It was intended to hide her from the view of the news drones as Vash walked her from the Dahlia Palace to the Mercury Palace. It was important to the Octavians that the news outlets didn't see the bride before Favel did. Vash walked next to her outside the umbrella as they made their way down the docks.

"Feel like you're giving me away?" Jenna asked cheekily as the drones noisily circled them.

"No. I think of you as more like my hot aunt than my daughter," he said pleasantly through the veil.

Jenna chuckled and wished the dress had been powered on so she could see what colors the dress made to represent that emotion. What was that emotion? Complemented? Pleased? Playful?

Jenna stepped into an antechamber with Vash and he closed the doors on them before he took the umbrella off her.

"Now I will go back to the Dahlia Palace and you will marry Favel." He rolled up the umbrella. "Can I wish you luck with a chaste kiss on the cheek?" he asked.

Jenna slowly shook her head in the negative. "I'll take a rain check on the cheek kiss. Right now, I'm scared of causing any kind of scandal. Today, I need to be yellow."

"Right. Like a yellow rose. Friendly," he said with a smile as he left the antechamber.

Compared to all the things Misha and Ixy had told her about controlling her emotions, what Vash said made more sense to her. Surely, when the dress was turned on it would work somewhat according to her wishes. She just had to wish to be friendly and the dress could interpret that feeling however it wanted to.

The door to the inner dome of the Mercury Palace opened. Jenna noticed at once how differently it was decorated from the first time she had been inside. That first time, it had been organized with a large conference table. For her wedding, it was arranged differently.

For the wedding, the table was gone. All that was there was a circular hole in the floor where the water lapped. Favel sat on the edge of the pool. Had he always been that large? Had he always had so many crinkles in his skin? Three of his tentacles fell into the ocean entrance while the other five fanned out around him.

Jenna stepped across the threshold into the inner dome and her dress lit up.

Bright yellow.

Favel's skin went smooth.

Whatever nervousness he had been experiencing clearly vanished as she approached. He offered her a tentacle and she sat next to him, letting her feet dangle in the water.

"How do Octavians get married?" she asked. "No one told me. I thought there'd be someone here to cut me so I could provide my DNA."

Favel pushed the forehead part of his mantle against Jenna's upper arm. "I'm here to cut you."

Jenna nodded. "That's right. With your beak. I've never seen your beak. You're very private about it."

"Not usually, but I am when I'm with you," he confessed.

Jenna rubbed her wet thumb across her dry fingers. "Do we just do it?"

"You have to get a hair first," he prompted.

Jenna reached behind her ear and pulled a stray that hadn't got worked up into her updo loose. "Will this do?"

He nodded.

"Where do I put it?" she asked, looking around cluelessly, her dress going creamy.

Immediately, Favel was patting her hand with a wet tentacle. "Just drop it into the ocean. If you think all these drones buzzing around us up here are a media circus, you should see what's happening underwater. Everyone below the surface wishes you were better at breathing water or that I was less good at breathing air, so they could get a better view."

Jenna dropped the hair. Tentacles under the water disturbed the surface, but Jenna didn't see the exact fate of something as small as one of her hairs.

"That was Temptic," Favel said.

"He's performing our wedding?"

"He is. A great honor."

Jenna looked at Favel with concern in her eyes. "You don't have any hair. What are you going to give them as a primary DNA sample?"

"It's okay," he said, lifting a tentacle, choosing a sucker, and pulling a tiny layer of film off the top of it. He dropped it into the water.

"That looked painless," she said happily, her dress returning to the yellow it had been before.

"It was. Now we say our vows."

Their vows were that they would be best friends forever, through sickness and health, through poverty and wealth, through war and peace, and anything else that life might throw at them. It made them swear to be military allies and to do all that they could to prevent war with each other's people, securing Favel as the kind of ally Jenna needed most.

There was only one thing that surprised her. Favel made her promise that if anything should happen to him she would marry Temptic. Jenna didn't appreciate having that dropped on her in that way, but she agreed.

Her dress showed her feelings by going yellow and gray checked for a few seconds before returning to full yellow. It was easy to get control of it. All she had to do was remind herself how much she liked Temptic, how much Crimp liked him (even though he was poisonous), how he was Favel's most beloved child (even though he was poisonous), and then take a deep breath.

When the time came to draw blood, Favel took Jenna's hand in his tentacle and guided it under his body. Jenna felt the slice in her finger.

Her dress turned orange for a moment. Orange was another aggressive color, but it was what she felt in the moment she felt pain. It could be explained away.

One calming breath brought her dress back to yellow as she thought of yellow roses and friendship.

Favel looked at her like he didn't understand what had just happened. He held her hand over the water and let the blood drip between the dipping arcs in the surface tension of the water.

"How am I supposed to cut you?" she asked.

"You're supposed to cut me with your crown," he offered quietly.

Jenna remembered the angry points on her head and took his tentacle in her hand. "I don't know if I'll be able to do it as elegantly as you," she admitted.

"I'll do it," he said, moving his whole body behind her. She couldn't exactly see him, but she could feel him climbing her as he moved to get close enough that he could see the cut he was going to make in his skin.

Jenna breathed and tried to keep her yellow bright.

Then it was over. Favel was allowing his blue blood to fall into the water.

When eight tentacle tips rose out of the water, Favel declared that the Octavians had finished their wedding ceremony and they were now friends and allies forever.

Jenna's dress turned light blue and she slid the rest of the way into the water. She needed to show the Octavians that she wasn't snooty about being underwater and blow kisses at them. Once under the water, she held her breath and opened her eyes. Looking around, she saw all the Octavian eyes staring at her. The dress started flipping out, showing all the colors at once and scaring everyone around her. She had been surrounded by hundreds of Octavians and she hadn't panicked, but the dress was zipping through all the colors like a kaleidoscope.

Jenna felt Favel's beak rip up the back of her dress. Only then did she realize how far she had sunk from the surface as the heavy dress pulled her down. He was rescuing her. The gown fell off her and she beat her legs to get to the surface.

Then she was breathing air again.

She rested her arms on the lip of the ocean entrance and gave the cameras filming her a thumbs up. Unfortunately, she did have to get out of the water with a dozen cameras trained on her while she was wearing nothing but her skin-colored bra and panty set. It was embarrassing even if Misha was there with a towel and a housecoat immediately.

Then there were a million interviews about the event, almost like a wedding reception, except less fun. Why had her dress malfunctioned? How did she feel when she saw all those Octavians staring at her under the water? Did she feel worse or better when Favel cut her dress off her? Was it exciting? How many other brides have had their husbands cut off their wedding dress before they'd even left the venue?

The Adamis reporters didn't ask, but later, when Jenna and Favel were alone in the pool of the Crescent Bell Palace for their wedding night, Jenna asked Favel, "Did my dress malfunction, or did I flip out?"

"You don't know?" he asked, confused.

"No. I was surprised, but I was not horrified. The dress seemed to be showing the hugest panic attack a person could have. I was really worried that I had offended your people with that reaction. Did I?"

"No," he said, grasping the edge of the pool and coming closer to talk to her. "That reaction was one baby octopuses have the first time they realize their mother is gone. I cut the dress off you because you have to be seen as an adult by my people, but I wonder if it worked. They might view you as a child, or they might see that moment as the moment you entered Octavian society. Like the moment you were born as an Octavian. Shall we look at the Octavian news reels?"

Jenna nodded and Ixy turned on the screen in the room. The top video was of two Octavians reenacting the scene. One wore a piece of clothing that looked like a zip-lock bag to Jenna. While the Octavian inside the bag changed all the colors in rapid succession, a blue Octavian playing Favel whipped the zip on the bag and it fell off her. Then she swam to the surface while the blue octopus went gray.

Jenna had not seen that side of the story, as she had been at the surface. “Were you embarrassed?”

“I was worried and I looked like it. My people are not a hive mind and I know there will be different interpretations of what they saw. We’ll just have to see how things shake out.”

All in all, the wedding had not been much like any wedding Jenna had ever been to before. There had been food for other people, she only got to sip her drink. There were flowers, but she didn’t get a bouquet. There were guests, but there wasn’t time for her to greet them or enjoy the party as she had to do interviews. There was a groom, but he wasn’t a man. There was a honeymoon, but there was no sex.

Jenna let herself float on the surface of the pool as she looked upward at the twinkling lights on the domed ceiling of the pool. It was beautiful.

“I should have at least insisted on chocolate-covered strawberries,” she moaned.

Favel giggled. “I’ll get them to make you a shake that takes like that.”

Jenna smiled, but she and Favel had their triumph tinged with worry. They didn’t know how anything would work out.

Luckily, Favel was the type of Octavian who did not leave things to fate and immediately started talking to Jenna about Iker, Rennett, Scion, Fallcet, and all the unknown variables of having four AAMC-appointed diplomats. Jenna listened carefully and didn’t think about Sardius at all.

Chapter Twenty Six

Enemy Glue

"Now, Misha," Jenna said, standing on the dock of the Sand Palace. "I don't want you to get your hopes up. I know you thought Phane was super dreamy when you saw that picture of him before he got his surgeries, but he's going to look completely different after what Brazel did to him. Try to keep your expectations low."

"Come on. A little muscle isn't going to change anything. It was love at first sight. How could something that happens so quickly be undone in only a moment? That makes no sense."

Jenna stared at her and wondered if Misha was listening to what she was saying. For something to be done in a moment and then undone in another moment made perfect sense to Jenna. Do. Undo. Do. Undo. It was the things that had been stewing for decades that were hard to undo.

"Okay," Jenna said patiently. "Just understand that whether you like him or not after he gets off the pod, you still volunteered to be one of his nurses while he recovers. Even if the sight of him makes you want to throw away your life with me, you can't make a move on him for the full six weeks you volunteered to care for him. Understand?"

Misha nodded enthusiastically.

"You shouldn't mix romance with nursing," the registered nurse on the dock pointed out in a nasal drawl. Her name was Antonetta and she didn't cut the romantic figure the name suggested. Instead, she came very highly recommended from Brazel's hospital and was only on loan for the first two weeks of the six because of her exceptionally high qualifications. She was so muscular that she eliminated the need for them to have a second nurse on staff.

Celestina stood next to her and she looked half the size of the registered nurse. Misha was more like a quarter of the powerhouse of a woman.

Jenna saw Antonetta as someone she wanted to have on call for a variety of reasons and went over to talk nicely with her before Phane's pod landed.

"Even though the cameras will get first whack at him before we have a chance to pretty him up," Celestina was saying to the huddle of women gathered on the dock, "the rest of us need to smile and be welcoming. Misha, please tell me your makeup bag has more inside it than a single chapstick. It looks pitifully small."

Misha clicked it open and revealed four levels of cosmetics.

"Master of lightning," Antonetta cursed when she saw it. "At least your patients will always *look* well."

Misha smiled like the creepy little yarn doll she resembled, and Antonetta held her ground heroically, although the corners of her mouth fell.

However, Jenna put a hand to her cheek contemplatively. Didn't Misha come from a morgue? That was right! Her last job was to make dead people *look* well.

Jenna smothered a laugh and looked upward.

Phane's pod arrived.

The door opened.

Nothing happened at first.

Celestina's drones zipped around even though Phane's crowning wasn't big enough news for the drones to be projecting a live feed. Celestina was just going to collect the footage and make a news package from it. When they saw inside the pod, it was obvious that they needed to make a new plan.

Phane lay limply across the seats. There was blood spilling from his temple and from his nose. The two spots were connected by a black line.

Antonetta stepped forward and started working on him as competently as any doctor. "He's been electrocuted and shot," she stated as she covered the area to get to him.

"Is he alive?" Jenna asked.

"Yeah. It looks like a part of the pod malfunctioned. The panel popped open and the charge was delivered." She picked him up like a broken doll and carried him out. "Better forget about the coronation today. We may even need to ship him to the hospital."

Misha ran in front of Antonetta to open the doors and give orders to the staff.

Jenna and Celestina hung back on the deck. "Ixy, get Crimp over to have a look at this pod. ASAP." In a quieter voice, she asked Celestina, "Did you turn off all your drones?"

"Do I look like I'm twelve to you?" Celestina hissed back with an edge to her voice. "If we have a scandal, another attack on a diplomat, we need to have as much proof of what is happening to us as possible. This was meant to look like an accident. From now on, Antonetta gets two drones accompanying her at all times. What do you want to do about the crowning?"

"We'll have to stall it until he's stable."

"You want to do it anyway?" Celestina pressed. "Those assassins might be thinking that you'll run out of diplomats before they run out of 'accidental' accidents."

"Feeling vulnerable?" Jenna jabbed.

"Me? No. They'll save you and me for last. We'll have a lot of warning before that."

"Why will we be last?" Jenna questioned, thinking that she would be first on the chopping block while Celestina was last.

"Because we have the best contacts. We can group Scion with that as well. They don't want Phane to have a voice in our negotiations, that's for sure."

"It makes me want him more," Jenna said savagely.

Celestina smiled. "You sure do know how to pick them."

Jenna wasn't sure if she *did* have the best contacts. So far in their partnership, Favel had been great for money and poor at defense.

If she really wanted a good contact for defense, Sardius had to come back, or she had to find someone else to fill that role.



Jenna sat on the edge of an armchair in Phane's room. He was asleep. He'd been asleep since they'd retrieved him from the pod. It was during a security crisis like this that she wanted to talk to Sardius most.

She tried to reason out what she should do about Phane and his 'accident'. She worried that it didn't matter what she did. If she crowned him, it would offer him no protection. Actually, she didn't have as much protection to offer him as she hoped.

She needed to talk to Favel. She knew the Octavians were trying to protect them. That was what the security team in orbit was trying to do. Regardless, Phane's pod had been hacked and the hardware inside had been turned into a weapon. That seemed like something the team in orbit should have been able to prevent. The only thing that made sense to her was that there was still someone on that team who was intentionally letting things slide. Sardius had not caught who was responsible for the last security breach (the one where she was kidnapped), and even though he had replaced the whole team, there was already a new leak. Perhaps, Jenna needed to put out that flame before she did another thing.

Pushing her hair out of her face, she decided to forgo talking to Favel and go straight to Fallcet. She bet he knew what was happening. He had been involved in her kidnapping. Undoubtedly, he knew the identity of the leak in the orbital team. It was dangerous to approach him and demand answers, but what other lead did she have?

Jenna rushed straight to the Dahlia Palace, which was in a state of transition. She hadn't quite finished moving out and Fallcet was in the process of moving in.

Once inside, she found him in her old bedroom. He wasn't moving her things or his. He was just walking around, touching things. When she entered the room, he directed a pleasant gaze toward her. "I hear you did a lot of the repairs in here yourself," he said, examining the paint job. "Nice work."

"How did your people bypass our orbital security when you kidnapped me?" Jenna asked without preface.

"I wondered when you were going to ask me," he said simply.

"I wasn't going to ask you, but things are getting tight. Did you know that someone was going to attack Phane today?"

He half nodded and half shook his head. It looked like he was drawing a circle with his chin. "I didn't know it would be today, but I knew it would be sometime soon."

"Why didn't you say anything?" she demanded.

"It's your own fault for trying to recruit someone so unsuitable. You need to see that the AAMC is serious. I tried to tell you. I tried to tell you many times."

"And you failed to tell me that I still hadn't brought you over to a place of neutrality," she observed dryly.

"Of course, you haven't. You're not sleeping with me. How could you have brought me over to your side without giving me what I want most? You think I want to be an Octavian diplomat? I like diplomacy. It's much less messy than the warfare, but I want you. I already said what I want and I don't care what else you have going on."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean that I didn't mind that you were screwing Ryatt, or Sardius, or whatever his name was. It wouldn't have bothered me, as long as you were doing whatever you were doing with him with me too. You still can... If he comes back."

Jenna felt sick, but she refrained from saying anything for a moment. She just stood there. The first thought that sprang to her mind was that Fallcet was the one who told Don Leo where

Sardius was. He did his research on the man he thought was her lover, found out who he was, who wanted him dead and just got rid of him.

That was the moment Jenna's true waspishness took form. She pulled her hand back to strike him but stopped short. Her hand fell as she stared at Fallcet. He had acted like a prick and he deserved a sharp little slap, but what Jenna saw was far better than if she had slapped him.

It was way better.

She gave Fallcet a look that stopped him in his tracks. "Do you ever get woozy when you see a Boneman with his shirt off?"

Fallcet gave her a funny look.

Ixy started screaming. "It's go time! Jenna just said the command that gives me permission to fire a tranquilizer dart at Fallcet! Where are the controls?"

While Ixy fumbled around, Fallcet took a step toward Jenna. "What are you implying? I'm not gay."

Jenna cocked her head to the side and looked at the place on the side of Fallcet's head where his crown had come loose. In all the years Jenna had worn her crown, it had never slipped. Even when the Hipposyphis pulled her head as hard as it could with its sucker, her crown had hung on. Fallcet's was slipping. Could he feel it?

"Well, have you ever seen a Boneman with his shirt off? How do you know you don't get woozy if you've never seen it?" Jenna asked playfully, stalling for time and at the same time, repeating her command.

Fallcet gave her a look like she was one hundred percent crazy and then fell on the floor.

Ixy had hit him in the back of the neck with a dart.

"Bull's eye!" she screamed through Jenna's earpiece. "I got him! One shot in a million. Am I right?" It sounded like she was turning on her swivel chair in celebration before she stopped her celebration and asked, "Why did you want me to shoot him?"

"Hang on a second," Jenna said, prodding him with her bare foot. "Any chance he's still awake?"

"Want me to shoot him again?" Ixy offered.

Jenna got braver and put her foot on his face, her toes making an imprint on his cheek. He didn't move as she gooshed it around a bit. "No. I think he's gone. He only needs to stay unconscious for a minute anyway." Jenna reached down and pulled the crown off his head.

Normally, when Jenna crowned a diplomat, there was nothing to be seen when she pulled the adhesive loose. There was just a lot of glue on the underside of the crown. What had happened with Fallcet was that the glue had stayed on his head and the crown had come off. When Jenna looked at the underside, she saw something that was a cross between electrical circuits, but also blood vessels.

Involuntarily, she touched the surface of her own crown. Was something like that inside her crown as well, or was what Fallcet was wearing a fake? Had he always been wearing a fake? Jenna didn't know.

She stormed out of the Dahlia Palace. "Ixy, can you lock that palace down so he can't leave?"

"Yeah. I'll do that now. Oooh, Jenna! You've hit the honey pot. Now you can get rid of Fallcet!" she sang over the earpiece.

Jenna was in a rage. She couldn't believe how stupid she'd been. She was so angry at herself that she could have screamed. She *would* have screamed if it wouldn't raise a million concerned Octavians from the ocean to comfort her.

"Get Favel to meet me at the Crescent Bell Palace. I need to speak to him right now!" she hissed so angrily she was spitting everywhere.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Blue Husband

Favel was waiting for Jenna in the pool of the Crescent Bell Palace when she arrived. He eyed her up and down a few times before his eyes locked on the thing Jenna was carrying in her hand. As coolly as possible, he said, "So, it's true. Fallcet was unable to keep his crown."

Jenna crossed the room and showed Favel the underside of the crown. "I don't understand what I'm looking at. What is inside Fallcet's crown? Is this normal or was it a fake?"

Favel looked at the underside. "I don't think it's a fake. Though that looks strange at first glance, it's not completely abnormal from what I know. I can have it checked if you'd like." He reached for the crown.

Jenna pulled it out of his grasp. "What's inside our crowns? I never questioned it before, but I also never saw any of this stuff. Please explain."

Jenna was not losing her temper. She was not stamping her foot. She hadn't even raised her voice. Still, she looked at Favel with an uncompromising eye.

He turned from blue to a little purple in places. "Ah, Jenna. You are such an excellent diplomat."

"I don't need praise. I need you to explain what I'm looking at."

He nodded and went back to being very blue. "Do you remember the Hipposyphis who went berserk on land and you needed to calm it when you first arrived?"

Jenna nodded.

"It's creepy, so we don't really talk about it," he explained, "but the crowns are made from the beaks of dead Hipposyphis fry. 'Fry' is what we call our offspring."

Jenna's face twisted at this revelation. "Yeah, that is a little gross."

Favel put his tentacles together in an arch and continued his explanation. "Hipposyphis babies have powerful mind-reading capabilities. A baby Hipposyphis will not stay attached to a hostile life form when it's maturing. They try to preserve themselves. With synthetic body augmentation, a beak can do it even after the baby Hipposyphis is dead. With that information, someone had the brilliant idea to use the beak as a crown in order to test the eligibility of other life forms for diplomatic positions. It tells us who to trust when we don't know other cultures, languages, and more. It's what we've done for thousands of years. However, this makes the Hipposyphis population crazy. They don't think their dead children's bodies should be used this way even when some other sea creature ate their baby. They can forgive the eating, but not the use of the only remaining body part. We haven't made any new crowns in hundreds of years, which is why your box of crowns is the only collection left."

"That does explain why the Hipposyphis went crazy the day I arrived. They don't want the remaining crowns to be misused," Jenna said quietly.

"They certainly do not," Favel agreed.

"So tell me," Jenna questioned. "What is the green circuit board inside?"

"It's part of ancient Hipposyphis body augmentation. It was a barbaric practice that expanded the use of their gray matter."

“So it made them super smart?”

“Something like that. I’ve had body augmentation too. My species of Octavian can breathe above water and talk, but not the way I can. Temptic has had the same procedure. Artificial lungs and superior vocal cords have been installed. If I wasn’t a little different, none of this would be possible,” he said, indicating their communication.

Favel looked unhappy making that concession and telling her about his surgery. He seemed like he felt like less of an Octavian for having done it.

Jenna remembered what Fallcet had told her about the body augmentations humans were having done to make it easier for them to breathe water instead of air. At some point, would she have to have something like that done? Her hand found the place on her side where her lungs were. She hoped not.

She did not voice her concerns. “Did all the baby Hipposyphis have this body augmentation? Does my crown have something similar inside it?”

Favel looked at her hesitantly. “The barcode on your crown suggests that yours is older. I don’t know if Letty chose it on purpose, but it’s not very much like the other crowns that were given to her. It may not have belonged to a Hipposyphis.”

“What does that mean?”

Favel didn’t have a throat to clear, but he made a similar sound. “It means it might have been the beak of a Reliovenix.”

When Favel did not continue, Jenna suffered, wondering if she should ask him another question or wait.

He didn’t say anything further, even though she waited.

“Well, moving on in life,” Favel said cheerfully, swimming away from her.

Jenna was about to jump into the water after him when Ixy chimed in her ear. “You don’t need to chase him. I have the information right here.”

“Okay,” Jenna chirped. “What does that mean?”

“The Reliovenix subspecies of Octavian is extinct. They were like the Hipposyphis in that they had psychic powers, but more advanced.”

“How did they die out? Did other Octavians kill them?” Jenna asked quietly, hoping Favel’s hearing was bad enough that he couldn’t hear her side of her conversation with Ixy.

“Uh... sort of. They killed themselves down to the last octopus. Apparently, knowing what your enemy is thinking is very bad. Hipposyphis grow out of their psychic powers. They only possess them until they are six months old. After that, they wane until they have disappeared completely when the octopus hits maturity. Apparently, it didn’t work that way with the Reliovenix.”

Jenna glanced out at Favel. He was under the water and he matched so well with his surroundings that he may as well have been made of water.

“What’s he so worried about? Why couldn’t he have told me that?” Jenna wondered noisily.

“There has to be more to it,” Ixy concluded with a snap of her fingers.

“Like what?”

“Have you had a scan of your head lately, Jenna?” Ixy asked in a weird oscillating voice. “How far into your head does your crown go? Does it touch your brain? Is it a form of mind control?”

Jenna rolled her eyes. Ixy was just trying to freak her out for her own entertainment.

“Look,” Jenna said, leaving those questions behind and thinking about Fallcet’s crown removal. “Ixy, tell Favel to stop being awkward and to come up here. I have something I need to discuss with him.”

Jenna waited, but Favel didn’t rise to the surface.

“What’s going on?” Jenna asked Ixy.

“He’s fighting with me. He says he needs some time to work out what to say to you. He’s the color of humiliation and he’s asked me to turn off the underwater cameras because he’s having trouble getting a grip on himself.”

“I guess he regrets telling me that stuff about the Reliovenix crown on my head. Well, it’s been on my head since I was a baby and it’s been fine, so I think whatever he’s worrying about is probably moot. Can you tell him I’ve moved on from that and I want to arrange for a Hipposyphis to come to the Mercury Palace to test my diplomats? I want to see if any of their crowns come off. We should use the Hipposyphis gifts to their fullest.”

Favel peeked his mantle above the water. “That is a very interesting idea,” he said with a mouth full of bubbles.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Suck On This!

Jenna got Vash and walked back to the Dahlia Palace where Fallcet was still unconscious on the floor. She put the crown back on his head and it stuck, even though it was a little wobbly. She imagined Fallcet knew about the wobble and knew what to do to steady it.

She had Vash pick him up and put him in her old bed. She settled herself like an old grandma in a rocking chair and mentally loaded her shotgun. She was going to get rid of him. No one would find the body... because it would be somewhere else... wandering around... whatever not dead people did after Jenna got rid of them.

That sounded more brutal than Jenna's plan. She actually had no intention of killing Fallcet, but she had every intention of disposing of him publicly. It was going to be beautiful.

Then she stayed in a chair beside him and polished her figurative rifle until he woke up.

"Welcome back," she said when he opened his eyes. She sounded like nothing was wrong.

"What happened?" he asked in a daze, rubbing his eyes.

"You passed out. See? You do get woozy when you even *think* of seeing a Boneman with his shirt off," she chuckled into her sleeve.

"I do not!" he croaked. His throat was too dry from his trip to nappy-nappy town for him to bark, so he croaked.

"How are you feeling? I can call for Rennett's doctor if you'd like," Jenna offered pleasantly.

Fallcet sat up and made a valiant attempt at spitting out his own tongue. "I feel awful. You fired a tranquilizer dart at me, didn't you?"

Jenna shrugged innocently. "Why would I have such a thing?"

"Obviously because I complained about your refusal to go to bed with me. You punished me."

Jenna kept her face as neutral as if she were playing poker. She had found his conversation offensive. However, she would not have sedated him over it. She was perfectly capable of standing up for herself. But just so long as he didn't know she'd discovered that his crown was slipping, she would agree to whatever explanation his brain fabricated.

"You don't have to be that mean, Jenna." He fell back on his pillows and narrowly missed hitting his head on the headboard. Then he rolled on his side to look at her. "I don't know how to get to you. I'm a diplomat. I know how to negotiate, but with you, it's like there's always no room for negotiation."

Jenna knew what he was doing. His last line was a play at manipulating her. He thought she wouldn't want to be seen as hard or uncompromising because diplomats have to be able to give as well as take. She was also a woman and what woman wanted to be thought of as an unyielding force?

She smiled at him as he launched into a rant about all the ways she'd shut him down, bypassing how he'd kidnapped her and nearly killed her in a fish tank. When she had listened to him for all of five and a half minutes, she stood up.

"If you don't want me to call for Dr. Lawson, then I'll be on my way. When you're ready to tell me who the leak in the orbital team is, I'd be happy to talk to you."

"That's it!" he suddenly shouted. He peeled the blanket off himself and tried to jump to his feet. "If I tell you who it is, will you sle— go on a date with me?"

It was a poor recovery. Jenna wasn't sure if the poor wording was due to the after-effects of the tranquilizer or if he was just generally as unskilled at romance as Sardius suggested he was.

Jenna knocked Fallcet back on the bed with two fingers to the breastbone.

"You're not feeling well," she reminded him firmly. "You need to rest. You can expect an invitation from me in the next day or two."

"For our date?"

"No," she said with a neck-slicing motion, implying he needed to cut it out. "I've been sitting here and I've had a lot on my mind. It will be an invitation for all the diplomats. Wait for it. It will be impossible to miss."

Fallcet obviously thought she was planning a party. He got back into the bed with a relaxed look on his face.

Jenna glanced back at him before she left. Getting rid of him would probably be less sweet than she imagined. However, imagining was pretty sweet all by itself.



Jenna had Ixy extend an invitation to the Mercury Palace to each diplomat. They were given a time and a place, a reminder that they might get wet, and to dress appropriately. For once, Jenna did not give Celestina permission to film the event. Jenna had her own drones from when Sardius used to film reels for her. Ixy would be in control of the filming and she was brimming with jubilation.

"Sorry, I said you were boring, Jenna," she clucked on the other end of the earpiece. "I couldn't be more excited."

Jenna sat in a wetsuit on the edge of the opening to the ocean in the Mercury Palace and dangled her legs in the water in the same way she had when she married Favel. She was expecting all seven of her diplomats in a moment.

Even Jenna had to admit, it was good to be able to share the event with someone like Ixy. It would have been better if Sardius could have been there, but no matter where he was, what battle he was fighting, or who he was killing, Jenna knew that he would be proud of her for what she was about to do. That was all the encouragement she needed.

Slowly, her diplomats came in. Jenna had them line up in order of when they had been crowned.

First was Jenna, clad in a wetsuit.

Second was Excelyn, who wore a wetsuit of the same make and cut as Jenna's, except Jenna's was black and Excelyn's was dark aqua.

Third was Celestina, who wore a white bathing suit that made her look so classy, the idea of getting her wet seemed a little thoughtless.

Fourth was Philip, who wore a black Speedo and showed muscle groupings that were so perfect that he looked a little fake. He probably was. His mommy was a very good surgeon.

Fifth was Fallcet, who was also wearing a black Speedo, except he didn't look as good in his as Philip and it appeared to be the only thing on his mind.

Sixth was Scion. He wore black trunks that appeared to have been made for boxing and not swimming, but at least he hadn't complained that he couldn't come to the meeting because he had nothing to wear. Jenna favored him with a smile.

Seventh was Rennett. He was still in a wheelchair, but he came wearing a white linen shirt and a pair of Bermuda shorts with palm trees on them.

Eighth was Iker. He had been put on a diet intended to help him cope with more gravity than he was used to. His body would rebuild itself with the nutritional supplements he had been given (Jenna had done the same thing), but if he struggled for too long, he was getting his muscles replaced. As it was, he was a Man Cat and the idea of getting wet wasn't high on his list of things to do, but he came in a wetsuit that had been outfitted with hardware to help him adjust. It was sort of like an exoskeleton though much less full-on than his last one.

Jenna was grateful she hadn't had to wear a similar exoskeleton when she had first arrived on Octavia Prime.

Jenna greeted them all with a smile on her face. "Welcome! Welcome!" She stood up. "Today, we're doing something a little different."

"Are we going underwater to visit Favel's mansion?" Scion asked.

The smile on Jenna's face fell. "Actually, no. Each of you is going to have a Hipposyphis try to suck the crown off your head. If it comes off, you lose your seat and you go home."

Everyone except Excelyn looked unhappy, expressions ranging from mildly uncomfortable to downright horrified.

"I'm sure you all saw the footage of me having my head almost sucked off on the beach when I first got here. It has lately come to my attention that none of you have had to endure the same trial." Jenna planted her feet firmly on the stone floor. "Before we start writing treaties, I think we should see if we're all authentic Octavian diplomats."

At that moment, the giant Hipposyphis tentacle rose from the ocean entrance in the floor. It was orange, mottled, angry-looking, and huge.

"We plan to skip the stare-down phase," Jenna explained brightly. "I thought we would go in order of when we were crowned, but if anyone would like to go first, they're welcome to volunteer."

Excelyn stepped forward immediately. She was first on the list. Not to mention, she was an Octavian doctor and nothing about the current situation freaked her out. She pulled a pair of goggles over her eyes and said, "I'll do it. I love this sort of thing. I've never seen a Hipposyphis up close. This is an excellent opportunity." She got on her hands and knees next to the water and put her face in the water to look at the Octavian.

While her head was underwater, Fallcet stepped forward. "May I go back to my palace? I left my facemask there. I want to see the Hipposyphis as well. Can I run back and get it?"

Jenna gave him a look.

Ixy heard him and slammed all the doors to the Mercury Palace down hard. Then she laughed maniacally in Jenna's ear.

Jenna tuned Ixy out and snarled at Fallcet, "This isn't a nature tour, despite what Excelyn is doing right now. This is serious. And it is mandatory. I won't make you go first, but there are only two ways out of this palace. Either you give me your crown back or you get tested."

"But it's a lifetime appointment," he argued.

"It might not be if you can't keep a crown on your head," she said crisply. "I endured the test when the only Octavian I had seen was Favel. All of you have had plenty of experience. You know what the Octavians are, who they are, what their planet is like, and you will do this right now."

Fallcet took a step backward, toward Excelyn and the hole in the floor.

Jenna crossed her arms. "Do you think you can get past Firth?" she asked irately as she indicated the enormous tentacle filling the Mercury Palace. "He's our Hipposyphus today and he knows someone might try to run for it."

"Jenna, please," Fallcet said, his eyes enormous.

Suddenly, Jenna realized why he had been such a successful diplomat. His big brown eyes and his charm had always won that day, but not for her.

"Shut up. You'll go after Excelyn."

"Did someone say my name?" Excelyn asked as she pulled her head out from under the water.

"I did," Jenna said, letting her rage chill a little. "Are you finished having your look? We need to get on with this."

Excelyn nodded and removed her goggles for fear of losing them or of confusing the Hipposyphus into thinking that he had pulled her crown off her head when he had only removed her goggles.

"Remind Firth to be as gentle as he can be," Jenna whispered to Ixy.

Excelyn stood next to the water entrance and the sucker came around her the same way it had around Jenna when she had done this. It was a lot less weird from where she was standing than it had been when she experienced it herself. Excelyn stood perfectly still and let the sucker close around her head and lift her.

When it was over, Excelyn smiled like a champ. "Nothing to it," she said to the remaining diplomats. "Just hold still and let him do the work. It's a piece of cake."

"And I really have to go next?" Fallcet said, taking the position Excelyn had just vacated.

Jenna nodded. "May as well. You're all doing this."

Fallcet did everything he could to mimic Excelyn, but that didn't keep his crown on. It came off easily. The Hipposyphus pulled the crown under the waves and left Fallcet gasping in his place. He seemed surprised.

Jenna bit on the side of her thumb with no expression of surprise on her face. "Sit over there until we're finished," she said, showing no emotion.

Fallcet wandered over and let his back fall against the wall. In all that he had tried to do, he had failed. Jenna wondered what fate awaited him back at home with his AAMC family, but if a dead Octavian baby couldn't trust him, how could she?

Celestina took his position without being asked. She got a few tips from Excelyn and when Firth's enormous tentacle came out of the water, she was ready for her test.

Celestina did the test perfectly and Excelyn gave her a high five when she joined her on Jenna's right hand.

Philip also did fine.

As far as Jenna was concerned, those test results had all been expected. It was the remaining three diplomats whose test results interested her most.

Scion stepped into position. He looked at Fallcet and then he looked at the crowd of diplomats who had passed the test. The dude looked like a mini mobster to Jenna, but he stood still and let the octopus put a suction cup on his head, tasting every hair on his head—including his goatee. His test was longer, like Firth was unconvinced of his worthiness and wanted to take his time, but Scion passed the test.

Jenna was thrilled. She gasped, put her hand to her mouth and almost cried when he finished, joining them triumphantly.

She gave him a fistbump. “That’s my buddy!” she sang noisily.

Celestina put her arm around Scion’s shoulders and pulled him into the group.

Rennett put his hands on his wheels and came toward Jenna. In doing so, he disregarded the electric controls and used his own strength to come forward. He didn’t go to the place where the others had proceeded with the test. Instead, he came all the way over to Jenna.

He clearly had something to say.

Jenna waited.

Then, he flicked his crown off and held it out to Jenna. “I never wanted to do this,” he said with a soft look in his eye. “I was ordered to come here and because I made so many mistakes in the past, I couldn’t argue with the orders I was given. But there’s no point in my taking this test. I haven’t been able to keep it on my head. It started falling off immediately after the ceremony.”

“Do you know why?” Jenna asked, not yet taking the crown from him.

He nodded. “I think Octavians are creepy. I’ve thought so all my life. I wouldn’t call it hostility, but it is disgust. I don’t want to be a diplomat. Somehow, the crown knows and it won’t stay on.”

Jenna closed her hand around Rennett’s with the crown between their palms. “Thank you for admitting it. Please return it to Firth, the Octavian behind you. I know he’s a Hipposyphis and scary, but if you can at least do that much, it would mean a lot to me.” She let go of his hand and gave him an encouraging look.

Jenna glanced at Fallcet. He looked like he was considering snatching the black crown out of the old man’s hand, but something like common sense held him back.

It took a great deal of courage for Rennett to approach the disembodied tentacle, but Ixy helped by telling Firth to turn his tentacle upside down so that the suction cups became like soft bowls and Rennett could merely drop the crown into one of them. Firth closed the single suction cup around the crown and the whole thing disappeared under the water.

Rennett wheeled himself over to Fallcet and sat next to him. “At least, you won’t be going home alone,” Rennett said with a wink.

“What? You think you’re leaving Octavia Prime with me? You can’t leave the planet. Your heart won’t withstand exiting the atmosphere. You’re stuck here.”

“Yes, I know,” Rennett said as he kept his lips a tight line. “I just meant that you will not be the only diplomat disgraced today. It will make you look better.”

Fallcet glared at him. “Like you could make anyone look better.”

Jenna turned her attention away from them. Iker heaved himself toward the place on the floor they’d all been using for the test.

“I’m sorry about this,” Jenna said consolingly. “If I didn’t have a good reason to do this now, today, I would have liked to give you more time to become accustomed to the planet’s gravity. As it stands, I don’t have any more time. Please excuse this massive intrusion.”

Iker flicked his whiskers at her in an unconcerned manner. "I'm a soldier. I can do this."
"Very well," she said, stepping back and giving Ixy the signal to invite Firth back up to the surface.

When the octopus suction cup touched Iker's Man Cat head, it withdrew quickly.

"What happened?" Jenna asked Ixy.

"Nothing," Ixy replied immediately. "His head is just gross to Firth. Don't get the wrong idea. You're all gross to Firth, but something about the way the Man Cat tastes is grossing our boy out. He's just taking a moment to get a grip."

"What's the problem?" Iker asked Jenna since she'd been talking to Ixy through her earpiece.

"Uh... You don't have a very good taste."

"Sorry," Iker said, smiling enough to show his fangs. "I didn't know I was supposed to taste good for this event. It wasn't in the invite." Then he added under his breath. "I think I taste fine." Then he licked his paw.

Jenna covered her mouth on a laugh. Iker licked himself. He was a space cat and he licked himself. She was about to lose control of that laugh when Firth got a grip on himself and put his suction cup all the way around Iker's head. He lifted the light cat off his feet. Jenna heard a snap.

She screamed. "What broke?" She couldn't tell if it was bone or metal or what.

"I don't know," Ixy replied.

Excelyn and Philip stepped forward as Firth lowered Iker back to the ground. His crown was still on. Excelyn and Philip checked Iker's body as he lay on the stone floor. Philip found the offending limb first.

"It's his back," the doctor said coolly. "His back brace broke."

"Does that mean his back broke?" Jenna asked in alarm.

"Uh. Not at all," Philip explained quickly. "He's just being dramatic. He's a cat, so his body is practically a liquid. He wouldn't have any problem with the gravity here if he would stop being so stubborn." Philip unhooked the exoskeleton and told Iker in a firm voice, "Stop trying to be a humanoid. Jenna will not look down on you for being exactly what you are. You passed the test, she's going to think you're a star."

Iker turned his head slowly and gave Philip a dirty look. "Fine." He jumped away from the scene on four feet and went to sit exactly like a lion statue next to Celestina and Scion.

He could choose whether or not to exist on two feet or four? Jenna hadn't known that and she was struggling hard with not running over to pet him. However, Philip caught her elbow and gave her a 'control yourself' glare before letting go of her and joining Excelyn with everyone else.

Jenna stood by the ocean entrance and took a moment to survey her work.

At that exact moment, Firth snapped several tentacles around her body and pulled her underwater with one heartstopping grab.



Under the water, Jenna couldn't tell what was happening. She opened her eyes, but she mostly just saw bubbles, tentacles, and the empty blue ocean. Her head was being clamped on

in the way it had been when she'd had her first Hipposyphus test, but she didn't understand why that couldn't have happened above water. She held her breath, but she was losing air quickly and her kicking and struggling wasn't helping.

However, when she was on the very edge of drowning, she was lifted back above the water and placed gently on the spot where she had been taken.

Soaking wet, she spat out the water in her mouth, making an arched stream in the air like a pathetic fountain.

"Okay," she said, like nothing had happened. "Crimp and Celestina's security team are going to escort Fallcet to a pod." She turned to him. "You'll be taken to the orbital station to await your luggage. From there, you can go anywhere you'd like. Thank you for offering to serve as a diplomat for the O/A Alliance. Your efforts have been most appreciated."

"Jenna, there's something on your head," Celestina said, interrupting.

"Yes, I know. I have a crown on my head. *Most* of us have crowns on our heads."

"No," Celestina said, coming closer. "Firth put something on your crown. It almost looks like a blue jewel hanging from the big beak in your crown, but not quite." She narrowed her eyes and looked at it more carefully. "What is that?"

Jenna put her hand on the top of her head and felt the curves of the black beak. She was careful not to cut herself as her fingers inched their way to the place Celestina mentioned. Yes, there was something there. It felt smooth like a drop pearl. She jiggled her head and the thing made a small tinkling sound like a bell.

"That's not going to get annoying," Jenna said aloud. "Let's just let that go for now. I'll talk to Favel about it later. First, we have to say farewell to these two gentlemen, and then..."

Jenna's brain went blank.

Really blank.

Her head hurt and without another bit of warning, her head became too heavy for her to hold it up. She fell forward and could not right herself. She lay there with her cheek on the smooth stone of the Mercury Palace floor.

THE END

The story continues in Octavia Girl Vol. IV

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