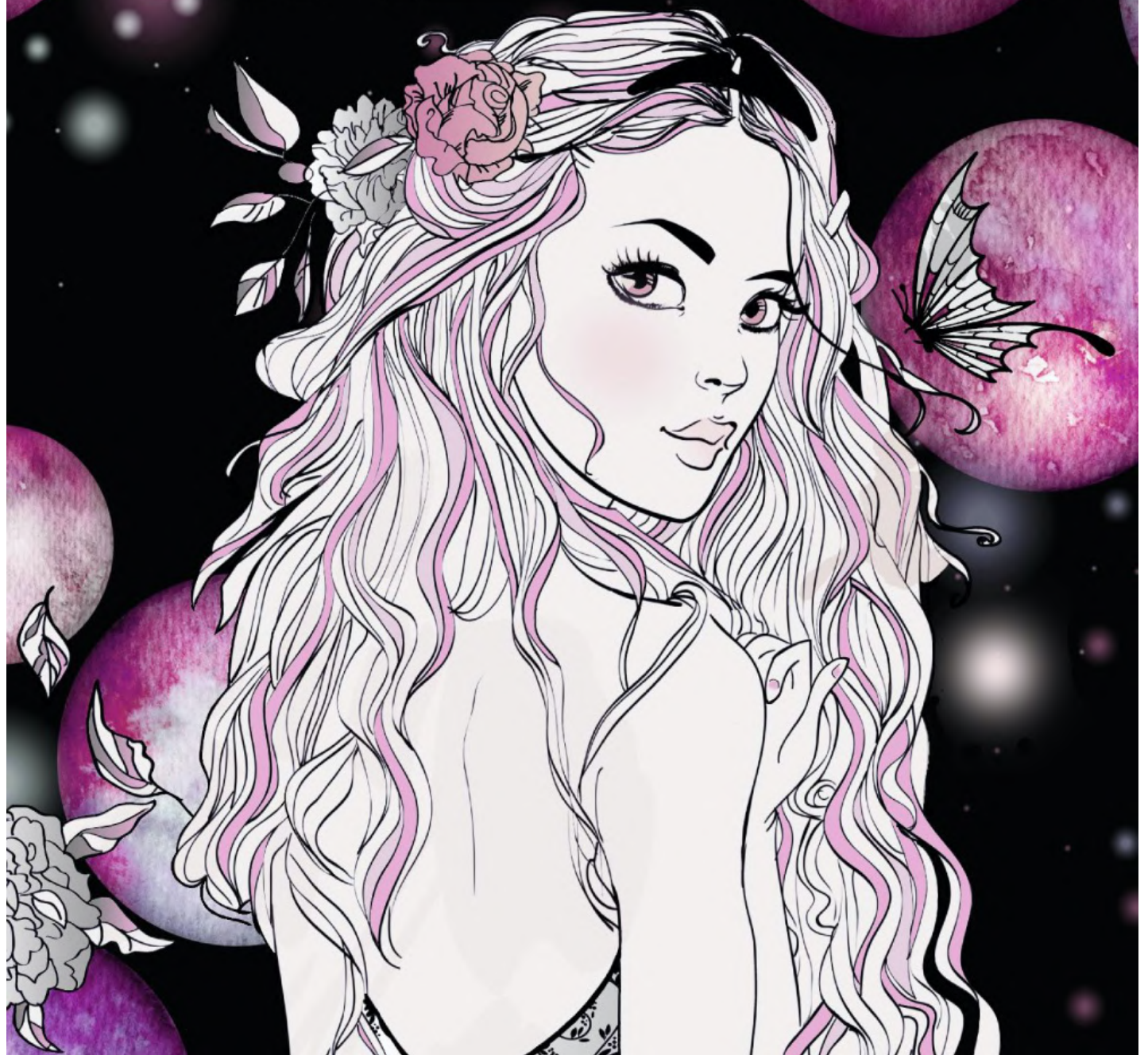


# OCTAVIA GIRL

Vol II

Stephanie  
Van Orman



# Octavia Girl

## Volume Two

By Stephanie Van Orman

Octavia Girl Vol. II by Stephanie Van Orman  
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# Chapter One

## Favel's Mansion

Everything that happened after Sardius' earpiece was destroyed in the prison riot was a blur to Jenna. Her escape pod was inserted in a room that had air, but no opaque walls. Peering into the mansion, it was clear that there was no privacy there. There were only transparent walls and it soon became clear why. Octavians spoke through gestures, so they needed big screens to show the full intent of the speaker instead of hearing their voice. Each of the transparent walls could become a screen.

Jenna spoke into the panel inside her pod that did voice-to-text and her words were translated into Octavian and displayed on the wall for Favel to read.

She hadn't gotten to the part where she explained that Sardius was gone before Favel was rushing to do damage control. She didn't know what he did or who he spoke to. She was told to stay in the bed/pod. She lowered the glass and breathed the briniest air she'd ever breathed, but she didn't slide off the bed.

The mattress hugged her as she played with her earpiece, hoping that Sardius would miraculously come back online.

He didn't.

In the next minute, Favel was sending questions to Jenna about Sardius. Since the Octavians had stopped recording him, they didn't know what had happened. They had to get the answers from Jenna.

She explained and Favel sent her a reassuring message that he would contact the prison.

Thirty tense minutes later, he poured himself into a halfway box. It was one of the things her grandfather had taught her about. Initially, the halfway box was filled with water. Favel got inside and closed the lid. Most of the water was then pumped out and replaced with air. When enough air had been added, Favel opened a hatch into Jenna's room. He spread out his tentacles, lowering himself gently onto the floor that was nothing but a grate over a shallow drain.

"What did the prison say?" Jenna asked hopefully.

"They didn't reply. However, the riot you mentioned was a catastrophe so serious that the women's prison next to Sardius' jail could tell me a few things. What happened was that the government Sardius opposed before his imprisonment lost the election. They lost big time!" Favel stretched out his tentacles, making himself into a huge pentagon (a few of his tentacles kept him in place before he continued). "When the new government was inaugurated, it meant that Sardius was no longer a criminal. In the past when he fought alongside them, they were the rebels. Now they're the ruling government of his system. In response to the change, the guards in charge of the prison began executing all the political prisoners. They had to stop the new government from getting any additional power, and the prisoners fought back. It seems order hasn't been restored yet."

Jenna wrung her hands painfully before getting off the bed and sitting on the grate beside Favel. "So you don't know if Sardius was killed by the guards?"



“No. We don’t know, but Sardius is a first-class killer, and he wasn’t bound inside his cell, so there’s a good chance he survived. I didn’t tell you half the things he was guilty of.” Favel paused and changed the subject. “We have good news from the Dahlia palace. None of your staff was hurt. Sardius got word to Smoothie fast enough that she was able to disarm the soldiers who entered the servants’ wing. She called the overland police and they just finished apprehending all six soldiers. They’ll be held in prison until they can be retrieved by the military. There is bad news though.”

“What’s that?”

“Not all the soldiers went to the servants’ wing. Some of them went to your room and they ripped the place apart looking for your unused crowns.” Favel showed her a view of her room from the palace’s security feed by projecting the video against the glass wall.

The room was a complete mess. They’d ripped the walls apart, tore her mattress to shreds, pulled up her carpet, and left the room in utter turmoil.

“Would you like to stay here tonight or would you like to join Excelyn in the Stone Palace? It’s quite late,” he said kindly.

“I feel sick, Favel. Sick!” she almost screamed. “This is worse than those damn liplo fruits squirming around inside me. This is worse than puking them up. I can’t stand this. Sardius protected me like a bulldog: all night and all day. He protected my whole staff. He was the one who chose Smoothie and Misha and Vash. And they’re great people. I was such an idiot. I completely took it for granted that he was safe in his maximum-security prison. You would not believe the unkind things I said to him when no one was around. I didn’t even tell him how much I... needed him,” she finished feebly.

Favel made a sound.

Jenna wasn’t sure what it meant. Her head shot up. “Are you laughing?”

He blinked. “No. I’m not. I’m sure Sardius knew you needed him. That was why he wanted the job. Sardius wasn’t the kind of guy who wanted to do an easy job. I think he was torn in half about you. One side of him wanted to protect you from anything awful that could happen and the other side wanted you to have it tough, so you could get stronger.”

Jenna wiped at her face. Whether her cheeks were wet from sweat or tears, she didn’t know.

“It’s certain he cared about you no matter what words you said to each other. He made sure I submitted the paperwork to register your marriage... Now if you want my opinion, I should escort you up to the Stone Palace.”

“Why can’t I stay down here? For now, I feel like I would be safer here. If I were someone looking to undermine me by stealing the crowns, I wouldn’t have only planned the one attack. I would have planned to hit the Stone Palace next, but I wouldn’t hit it until after I had joined Excelyn. I feel like everyone will be much safer if I stay down here tonight.”

Favel lowered his head. “All right. If you think that’s better.”

Jenna placed a kiss on his mantle, just above his eye. She pulled away and smiled at him.

His eyes cut to a spot to his right.

Jenna looked there too. A cluster of octopi had eyes pressed up against the glass.

“I think perhaps you are not used to living in a house with glass walls,” he said, making a heroic attempt to sound lighthearted.

Jenna sighed. “Sardius warned me about this. He was annoyed I poured water over you. You were looking so dry. That can’t be good for you.”

“He clearly didn’t warn you seriously enough,” Favel said dryly. Almost all the good nature had left his voice. He moved back to the halfway box. “With your permission, I’ll send your staff to prepare the Lotus Palace for you to use while the Dahlia Palace is being repaired. It’s on the tab of the AAMC, and they say they’re willing to pay. Don’t let them fix it with their contractors. Choose people yourself.”

“How can I do any of that without Sardius?” she asked limply.

“We’ll talk about it in the morning. Excelyn began a selection process only a day or two ago for a personal assistant and even if she did choose someone from the men’s prison, they can’t serve her now. I’m sure the two of you can work together to get decent personal assistants for yourselves from the women’s prison. In the meantime, use the screens in your pod.”

He was leaving in such a cold way, and Jenna couldn’t allow it. She jumped up and followed him to the halfway box. He got inside and was about to close the box when she grabbed it. “Favel, I see I shouldn’t have kissed you, but I don’t know what harm I’ve done. You have to tell me.”

He dropped his eyes. “It’s not that you have done anything wrong. It’s that you have raised the expectations of my people even further. Do you know how many Adamis diplomats have honored our traditions and actually married an Octavian for their second spouse?”

“No.”

“There hasn’t been one in eighty years. They take their third spouse and their first spouse, but they don’t form a tie with an Octavian. Watching us, all those members of my household think something is going on between us.”

“Not romance?” Jenna clarified.

“No, but they think a special sort of camaraderie has sprung up between us. It makes them so hopeful about you and what you’ll be able to do for our people if you love me so much.”

“They hope we’ll get married?”

“Yes,” Favel said gravely. “They know that unlike everyone else on the Octavian Council, I have only had seven spouses. That’s why I was chosen as chair and why you have had more to do with me than any other Octavian...”

“Everyone is hoping I’ll marry you. They planned it,” Jenna finished for him.

“The Adamis are not. They like it when their diplomats show unwavering support for their race. That was how Arvantis got that insane contract with Vinia. They made his contract legal in exchange for him signing papers declaring his intention to never form a tie with an Octavian.”

Jenna rubbed her eyes. She had no idea what time it was and what Favel said weighed heavily on her mind. She glanced back at the wall. Three times as many eyes were now staring at them.

“I’ll let you go,” Jenna said before removing her hand and letting him close the door to the halfway box.

She dried off her feet and got back into the bed. She found the controls and pushed the button that raised the walls. She did it to make herself feel like she had some privacy, but there were still so many eyes staring at her. She fiddled with the controls longer and found a setting that oxygenated and purified the air she breathed while inside. Then she found a control that shut out the light by turning the glass to opaque black. Then she found the nightlight inside and a stash of emergency food that had been stored.

Jenna chuckled. It wasn't really food. It was preserved meal replacements stored in bags with straws.

Alone with her thoughts and with herself, Jenna could have screamed. Naturally, she had been planning to marry Sardius *and* Favel. She needed allies. She had also checked out all the majors the AAMC had sent her to see if there was a decent first husband among them. The idea perished rather harshly as she was running out of options. She hadn't been given very many tools for forming alliances. The only thing she had absolutely been given was the ability to marry more than one man.

The thing about Sardius that Jenna had explained quietly to Favel at the dinner where she removed her earpiece and spoke to Favel without Sardius' approval, was that Sardius had the opportunity to be something different to her than any of her other alliances. He wasn't doing anything else. Her other husbands would leave her for other responsibilities. Not Sardius. He was there for her night and day. She found his voice to be dead-sexy and he was helpful every minute of every day. When she heard his voice, she felt something leap up in her chest because whatever he was about to say was a gift, a surprise.

Not only was he a constant source of joy to her, but he was in prison and she thought no one could ever hurt him there. No one could ever take him hostage and make her do what they wanted because she couldn't bear for Sardius to be hurt.

If her marriage to him somehow became public knowledge, it would be magnificent publicity for her. No man could satisfy her but a pirate and a terrorist. For her, it had to be a man so proven in battle that she didn't look like a pushover. She looked like his equal, cunning and ruthless.

Of Jenna's greatest fears, she feared being seen as easy. She wasn't easy! She was a monster and she needed a man who was a monster by her side, even if only the shadow of him could be there. At least, everyone would know he was in her ear, telling her how to break convictions and reorganize power.

And now she wasn't going to get him.

It was a loss on so many levels. It was the loss of every minute of every day. Forgetting all the other bonuses Sardius represented, it was the loss of the click of his tongue in her ear that undid her.

She cried in the darkness.



# Chapter Two

## Going to War

Jenna stood in her wrecked bedroom in the Dahlia Palace with Vash.

“What do you think?” he asked, his voice grating like rocks grinding against each other.

Jenna bit the side of her thumb and answered heartlessly, “Screw the Lotus Palace.”

“You haven’t even spent one night there,” her enormous butler said timidly.

“Yeah, but I’m not getting chased out of here like my home has ghosts. If I give up this palace, it will always be remembered that I was attacked here and I ran away like a little girl. What? Am I going to give this palace to one of the new diplomats I crown? What would I say to them? ‘I’m a big diaper baby and I couldn’t live here, but I’m sure you can?’ Smiles and hugs? Screw all that! It isn’t like there isn’t another room down the hall I could sleep in while this room is being repaired.”

“The AAMC has sent a list of building contractors they use. Even if you’re willing to move back in here after the renovations, I wouldn’t have thought that you’d want to stay here *during* the renovations,” Vash said.

“Throw that list in the garbage. I’m not getting anyone they recommend. They’ll wire in backdoors so they can access my security system.”

“Who’s going to do the renovations?” he asked, his little voice hiding the fact that he was a man almost seven feet tall.

Jenna straightened her back and cracked her neck. “I’ll do it. I was super interested in DIY stuff when I was back on Earth. I have stapled carpet, laid my own tile, painted, sanded, and one time, I even fixed a foundation.”

“It’s beneath you, Madam Diplomat,” Vash argued.

Jenna threw up her hands. “I don’t know who to trust. Sadius would have told me who I could hire that I could trust. He’s gone. Unless we find something major wrong when we’re cleaning up that needs a professional, then I’m going to do this myself.” Turning to Vash, she laughed a bit. “I know you won’t help me. You’ll say things like, ‘I don’t do grout. I don’t carry bricks. I don’t smile for the tourists.’”

Vash’s expression was downcast.

Jenna turned the tables on him. “Those guys didn’t lay a finger on you last night, did they?”

He shook his head. “Sadius warned me they were on their way over and I ducked into the hidden passage he told me about. They messed up my room though.”

“We should look into tightening security. Sadius told me he was vetting guards, but as far as I know, he hadn’t found a candidate that suited him. I need a new personal assistant. Excelyn is coming over later so we can go through some candidates...” Jenna trailed off. She had been about to add, ‘from another jail.’ Luckily, she stopped herself. She couldn’t be a diplomat with a loose tongue. “Have you had a chance to clean up your room?”

“Not yet.”

“Why don’t you go do that? When you’re finished, you can come back here and get rid of anything ruined or smashed. At least that’s within your job description.”

“Where are you going to sleep tonight? None of the guest bedrooms are ready. If I don’t prepare one now, it might not be ready by the time it’s time to sleep.”

“Don’t worry about that. There’s another room ready in the servants’ wing. I’ll sleep there. Sleeping near Smoothie will help me relax enough to sleep. I’d sleep under her bed if that wouldn’t weird her out.”

“But that room is not ready either.”

“I poked my head in earlier. It’s fine,” Jenna refuted.

“It’s a blanket and a pillow on a bare mattress,” Vash retorted.

“Yes, and that is good enough for me. Do you know where I slept last night?”

“Underwater?” he replied cautiously.

“Yes. Underwater. With twenty Octavians staring at me while I slept.”

“Was it unnerving?”

“No. It was fine. Favel’s mansion isn’t that deep below the surface. I didn’t have to worry about a significant difference in pressure.” The last thing Jenna wanted to admit was that yes, it had been very unnerving to have twenty Octavians stare at her. Twenty of anything staring at you was weird, whether it was twenty humans, twenty octopuses, or twenty goldfish.

Just then, there was an urgent beeping sound.

“What the crap is that?” Jenna wondered noisily.

“It’s the communicator,” Vash said, showing Jenna the display screen. “You just never saw this before because Sardius screened all your calls.”

Jenna missed Sardius for the two thousandth time that morning and looked at who was calling. It was Admiral Lou Denver.

“Shall we take the call?” Vash asked.

“Yep. Put him up.”

The army man’s face was even pinker than the profile picture of him Sardius had shown her.

“Good morning, Admiral,” she said stormily.

“Good afternoon, Your Excellency,” he greeted, his manner one hundred percent professional. “You must accept my apology for what happened last night.”

“I understand that you’re willing to pay for the damage caused by your officers?” she asked, getting down to business.

“Naturally.” A dismissive ‘boys will be boys’ grin across his piggy features.

Jenna gritted her teeth before snapping, “And what punishments will be enacted against them to be an example against those who try to attack a diplomat?”

“They did not actually attack you.”

Jenna’s eyes were steely. “Do you realize that the room we are standing in is my bedroom? Your officers entered my bedroom and caused this mayhem. You can see the damage for yourself. What would have happened to me if I had remained here? I expect all of them to be stripped of their rank and removed from the military. Anything less is completely unacceptable. Obviously, they came here to steal the crowns so they could crown whoever. And who do you think ordered them to do such a thing?”

“It could hardly have been someone in the military,” the Admiral tried to deflect.

“Your soldiers are so poorly trained that they take orders from people outside the military?”

“No. I-I...” he stuttered.

Jenna continued, "Do you have any idea who was behind the assassinations of the dead diplomats? I have a deep fear that I shall be buried next unless you can show me unbridled support by dismissing all six of those officers."

"Your Excellency," he said in an attempt to pacify Jenna. "None of that is necessary. They were just being rowdy boys."

"You promote 'rowdy boys' to the rank of major?" Jenna asked acidly. "I'll be dead by next week with the AAMC protecting me."

"All they were going to do was crown each other and get our agenda back on track. No one was going to hurt you. There were no orders issued. It was something they decided themselves and you would have loved it."

"With numbers like those, my opinion as a diplomat never would have mattered again because there has to be an even split of four against four to even have a debate. With six diplomats who always vote the same way, the AAMC's interests always would have been paramount. I would not have loved it. There are a lot of Adamis outside the military who deserve a voice, Admiral."

His face looked like someone was turning a screwdriver in his mouth. "You're such a pretty thing. Too bad you have to think that way."

Jenna had a moment when she wanted Sardiis more than she'd ever wanted anything in her entire life. She puffed her chest. "Do you want to go to war with me? I'm happy to go to war with you."

"Happy?"

"Yes. Joyful."

"But you have no army," he said slowly like he had found the chink in her armor. "You don't even have an Adamis husband to watch your back. You have nothing."

Jenna frowned bitterly. "You didn't have to do anything special to get along with me, Admiral. All you had to do was let me do my job. Since that is ruined, I will be placing your interests at the back of my queue. I have other groups to pull diplomats from and until every single one of those soldiers is discharged, I will not interview another member of the AAMC."

"You're being unreasonable," he gushed, flustered.

"Am I? Have you found the vessel that gunned down my ship? I almost died being flung out into outer space. It wasn't the Adamis that helped me. It was the Octavians. I got attacked in my own home by my own military and it wasn't the AAMC that came to my rescue, but the Octavians again. There have been multiple assassinations and no one is solving them."

"They were accidents," he obstinately rebutted.

"Right," Jenna agreed, but her tone said that she did not believe him.

The Admiral lost his patience. "Listen, you miserable little girl. The Octavians have us by the throats. They control almost all space travel. The treaties must be rewritten."

"I have nothing against that!"

"Then why are you fighting us?"

"Why are you trying to force me to do things your way instead of convincing me that your way is better?"

He cleared his throat and prepared to be patient. "You just got here. What do you know about the Adamis and our needs? Go to war with me if you like, little girl, but you'll lose."

"You mean, you'll have me murdered."

He loosened his collar and ended the transmission.

Jenna leaned toward Vash. "Was that recorded?"

"Yep."

"Good," she huffed, going out to meet Excelyn.

Too angry to think straight, Jenna showed the video footage of the call to Excelyn. They sat in the courtyard and watched the split screen of Jenna and the Admiral fighting.

Excelyn looked at the screen with a broken expression. "We're both going to die."

"Do you think any Adamis' news outlet would be sympathetic toward us?" Jenna asked, wondering if they could transmit the recording of the phone call on the news somewhere.

Excelyn got a look in her eye, a special little glint. Jenna had seen it before. It was the one she got when she offered Jenna the liplo fruit. "Have you ever thought about crowning a reporter?"

# Chapter Three

## Bones and Gold

The order of the day was recruitment.

Excelyn came over to the Dahlia Palace every day for a week and together, she and Jenna did nothing but go over resumes and personal backgrounds. They started with personal assistants. There was still no news from Sardius' prison, but more information about that prison became available to Jenna.

It turned out that his prison was in a different dimension. That was how he was able to keep in contact with her no matter where in the universe she went. From that dimension, they could do faster than light travel from tiny tears in the universe. Her earpiece held one of those tiny tears in space and time that allowed him to communicate with her anywhere. However, the tear could not be made large enough for a person to fit through. The hole was no bigger than the head of a pin. He could send his voice and other information through, but nothing physical.

It turned out that his prison was not the only prison in that dimension that allowed their prisoners to be outsourced as personal assistants. The women's prison Favel contacted for further information about the riot also lent out their prisoners.

"Why put prisoners in a different dimension? And if it's so convenient for space travel and communication, then why doesn't everyone slip in and out of that dimension instead of traversing the stars?" Jenna asked grouchy.

"Radiation," Excelyn answered without skipping a beat. As a scientist, she already knew about the other dimension, just not that prisons had been built there. "Spending time in the Xypher Zone is a sure way to cut fifty years off your life and provide a service to everyone else in the universe. One way is by acting as a PA to a diplomat. I wish you had more information about what kind of Adamis Sardius was... is," she stuttered, tripping over her words like she wasn't a doctor with a bedside manner using a single word to indicate that she thought Sardius was dead before correcting herself.

Jenna shrugged.

Excelyn was a doctor who treated Octavians. A bedside manner for an octopus was probably something else entirely from how humans wanted to be treated.

The doctor continued, "Some races of Adamis deal with that level of radiation better. The Crying Sun in the Xypher Zone is unholy. If I were placed there, I'd be dead in two years. For a lot of prisoners sent there, it's a death sentence. The Adamis authorities make no secret of how dangerous it is to be there. I've just learned they have prisoners who are scientists who have been asked to help with studying the Crying Sun and report back on how it works in that different dimension. Other scientists are not allowed there."

"I see," Jenna reflected. "Sardius wasn't a scientist, but he still wanted to do something important with the time he had left." She felt an aching throb in her heart.

Excelyn put her hand on Jenna's shoulder for exactly three seconds, as that was the extent she was able to comfort people. "Let's get on with choosing, shall we?"



Jenna began by talking to the warden of The Xypher Zone Prison for Persons with Double X Chromosomes—the women’s prison.

The warden agreed to make an announcement at the prison that if anyone was interested in taking a position as a personal assistant to Octavian/Adamis diplomats, they should apply. Otherwise, Jenna said she hoped to get eight assistants trained regardless of whether or not they had an immediate diplomat to be assigned to.

The warden snorted over the communicator when Jenna told her that number. “You’re going to be lucky to get the two you need right now.”

“Can’t we offer some kind of incentive?” Jenna questioned.

“No. You can’t offer a reduced jail time and that is the only thing any of them want.”

“Really? Then why are you there? You’re not a prisoner.”

“I’m a Boneman.”

“There’s no need for that language,” Excelyn interjected hotly. “Jenna, don’t repeat what she just said. Calling a Calcumicas a Boneman is unbearably rude though they do have the most bone mass of all the Adamis races. Their skeletons are different from yours and mine. They’ve got more bone mass through their whole body and their bones are different from ours. The radiation doesn’t affect them as strongly. Actually, nothing affects them as strongly. They’re almost indestructible.”

The warden’s voice sounded like she enjoyed the compliment when she spoke next. “I’ll see if I can offer them an incentive for you, but it won’t be much of anything. It’ll probably get you three instead of two.”

“We appreciate that,” Jenna said.

“Shall we meet again at the same time tomorrow? You can conduct the interviews then.” The warden snorted again before signing off.

Jenna and Excelyn looked at each other. “I liked her,” Jenna said. “Good job complimenting her.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” Excelyn grouched. “Her race is unique. Calcumicas look like they have beautiful muscle groupings when they don’t. Their bones are shaped like those muscles, so their bones cover their muscles with taut skin over the bones. It’s like how the bones in your face have shape, but they’re covered with skin. Their whole bodies are like that. It makes their muscle power a complete mystery to the casual observer. They might be a wuss or a hulk and you wouldn’t know the difference unless you poked the underside of their arm or inside their thigh.”

“That’s interesting.”

“There’s more, but there isn’t time for a biology lesson. Why didn’t Sardius hire a bodyguard for you?”

“He was going to. He just hadn’t found the right one yet.”

“I think we should hire one of those girls with poison in her fingers,” Excelyn suggested.

“What are they called? Oh yeah, Uklians. They scare everyone.”

“Want me to look for one?” Jenna offered when Vash entered the room.

The butler looked panicked and frightened. “Madam Diplomat. I need you to see something.”

Jenna glanced at Excelyn. She hadn’t exactly been keeping secrets from her. What had Vash seen that he felt ought to be kept secret? She had no idea.

Jenna stood up. “I’ll be back.”

She joined Vash as they walked the distance across the courtyard and to her bedroom.

Once inside, Jenna asked, "What's going on?"

Vash showed Jenna a pile of bricks. They were the ones the majors had broken out of her wall. Jenna had seen the broken wall and didn't understand what Vash was trying to show her. She'd seen broken white bricks before, so she didn't know why Vash was staring at the bricks so intently.

"Yes," she finally said. "We are looking at bricks."

Vash looked at her like she was stupid, bent down, picked up a brick, and showed it to her up close.

Each brick had eight hollowed-out tubes inside. Jenna had seen bricks like that on Earth. Then, she stopped. Vash was showing her something inside each of the cylindrical hollows. Jenna put her finger in and drew out a piece of plastic that had been rolled up and stuffed inside. When she unrolled it, everything written on it was unfamiliar to her, but it could only be one thing—money.

"What the?" Jenna put her fingers in more holes and brought out more money.

Soon she and Vash were on their hands and knees getting caked in brick dust as they pulled money out of every brick.

"How did the AAMC guys miss this?" Jenna gasped in wonder.

"I guess they were only looking for the crowns and they weren't thinking that your wall was full of money."

"How did you notice?"

"I picked one up wondering how I could dispose of it. We're very fussy about how we dispose of things on Octavia Prime. Everything has to be biodegradable, but the bricks are closer to rocks, which don't change. I was doing a sensor check on the composition of the brick so I could figure out where it could be properly disposed of and the sensor picked up on the plastic. I saw a glint and found it."

"How much have we got?"

"Some of these are fifty notes. Some are hundreds. Lots are doubled up. At a glance, I'd say we're looking at several thousand."

"What can you buy with that much money? I don't know much about your currency."

"These are Liri. At the least, we're looking at enough money to completely repair this room."

Jenna looked at the wall. "Is it worth more to us to rip the wall down entirely to see if there's more money in it, or to leave the wall as it is?"

"Rip it down," Vash said without hesitation.

"Wait," Jenna said, getting up and walking around the room. "This was Arvantis' palace before it was mine, wasn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"That means that Vinia lived here. Sardi said something about how interesting she was. Was she stashing money everywhere? Not just in the walls, but everywhere?"

Vash looked like he didn't know the answer, but he was also curious. Experimentally, he pulled a vase off a floating shelf. The vase had real flowers in it. It was a white and pink flower that resembled an orchid but was growing like bamboo, in glass beads with water surrounding it. Vash shook the roots loose and then dumped the beads out into a glass bowl that sat on a table

as a decoration. A plastic bag was discovered inside. He opened it and quickly counted the money.”

“It’s two thousand Liri.”

Jenna looked at Vash, who looked at her, before they both reached to shut the bedroom door.

“She probably hid money everywhere,” Vash said in excitement. “What should we do? Should we tell everyone what we found?”

“The bigger worry is where it came from. Vinia hid it,” Jenna explained.

“But where did she get it from? As Arvantis’ third wife, she wasn’t entitled to huge stashes of money. If any of this was legal, she would have taken it with her. The fact that she left it behind is worrisome,” Vash said hesitantly.

“I agree. I can only see one solution here.”

“What?” Vash asked nervously.

“You and I are going to need to learn how to lay bricks.”

“You want to put the money back into hiding?”

“No,” Jenna snapped in a hushed whisper. “We need to find all of it and put it somewhere that makes sense to us and if anyone comes looking for it, then we need to be able to return it to them without any fuss.”

“Why? Where are you thinking it came from?”

“I’m not sure,” Jenna admitted. “Perhaps it would be helpful to talk to Vinia and get her perspective on all this. Start taking the wall down. I have to get back to Excelyn. Until I say so, no one can know about this. I’ll cut surveillance of this room from the control panel.”

Vash nodded, and for once he didn’t seem concerned about doing a task that wasn’t in his job description.

Jenna stepped out and closed the door behind her.

The control panel was her new best friend since Sardius... disappeared. She couldn’t wrap her mind around everything that had happened. She couldn’t believe Sardius was dead, but nor could she believe that things would ever be the way they had been if he hadn’t even been in the same universe as her.

She went back to Excelyn. She and the doctor chose a reporter to come to Octavia Prime. Hours later, they were still haggling over the details. It was particularly taxing because if Sardius had been given the job, the whole thing would have been done without Jenna being involved. He would have managed all the arrangements and somehow made her feel like she had been the one to haggle the deal.

It was all bullshit as far as Jenna was concerned. She didn’t even want to be a diplomat without Sardius.

She wanted to go back to Earth.

# Chapter Four

## News Arrivals

Jenna cracked the knuckles of her right hand. Training her new personal assistant was going to take a lot of patience.

“Are you there, Ixy?” Jenna asked.

“I’m peeing,” Jenna’s new PA said crankily. “Can you give me a minute?”

Jenna bit her tongue.

She had no idea how many human rights violations she’d been guilty of when Sardius had been her personal assistant. She had never noticed when he went to the bathroom or if he ever did. She didn’t notice him sleeping. She didn’t notice him sipping water. She had worked him like a slave and she was still asking for more of him up until the very last moment.

Ixy and Ivy were the two assistants Jenna and Excelyn had managed to get from the Double X Chromosome Prison. Jenna got Ixy and Excelyn got Ivy. Between Jenna and the lamp post, she thought Excelyn got the better of the two girls. Jenna had managed to get five more on standby, and they were training another one named Conrad who was not a woman, but he was sentenced to a life sentence in the Xypher Zone and there was no other prison to put him in for the time being. The warden had asked them to take him on as his role as a personal assistant would keep him away from the other prisoners and stimulate his mind. He took over for Ixy and Ivy for the night shift so the girls could sleep and neither Jenna nor Excelyn needed much in the middle of the night. He was fine to look after both of them during that time period.

Ixy and Ivy were sisters the warden would allow to bunk together if they signed up to be Jenna and Excelyn’s personal assistants. The upswing was that they were very happy. The downswing was that they talked to each other a lot. As a consequence, Jenna didn’t leave the line open all the time. She only spoke to Ixy when she needed her.

Ixy and Ivy were in jail because they had tried to break a friend of theirs out of jail in the Xypher Zone. Needless to say, it didn’t work out. When they were caught, all their previous crimes came back to haunt them. For their crime spree, they liked to steal drugs and crash starships. The AAMC hated their guts because they didn’t steal the ships they crashed. They partied with pilots and then convinced their dates to let them take the wheel and then they’d steer it into the first thing they saw... usually the platform where the ship was docked—double damage. Sometimes triple damage if they crashed into another ship.

Jenna wished she didn’t think that was hilarious, but she did.

The girls were incredibly sober now, but in their hearts, they still wanted to do drugs and crash starships.

The first person Excelyn hired was a bodyguard for her and Jenna to share named Crimp. She was a poison-touch girl with a terrible resume, but Excelyn wanted her badly.

“It’s fine,” Excelyn said, reminding Jenna that everyone had a terrible reputation.

“What if she touches you?” Jenna wondered.

The doctor scoffed. "Do you have any idea how many poisonous Octavians I've treated? I'm immune. Besides, her poison doesn't kill many Adamis races. It just stuns them. Her skills are perfect for us."

When Crimp arrived at the Stone Palace, Jenna thought she was more interesting than when she had only seen her profile picture. She had short pink hair and experienced wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. When Excelyn talked about her, she made her sound like a baby. Well, she was a baby compared to Excelyn, who was in her eighties. Crimp was older than Jenna. She wore back caps on all her fingers that melded into vine tattoos that went up her hands and forearms.

Jenna welcomed her easily, putting out her hand to shake hers.

Crimp looked at her outstretched hand and huffed out a breath of air. "Don't shake hands with anyone," Crimp advised before walking past her to greet Excelyn, who would be her real employer.

Jenna glanced over her shoulder at the poisonous woman. She knew Sardius would have liked her. She could practically hear his phantom approval through her earpiece.

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Jenna had been ignoring the Octavian media circus that had been happening since she had kissed Favel. It was pretty easy to avoid as the Octavians were not loud people. No octopi were ranting on media outlets about how scandalous it was. What happened is that they would show the clip of Jenna kissing Favel (since it had been filmed), and then they would show an octopus couple reenacting the event as best they could. The Octavians could not get enough of these spectacles and Jenna saw one on a screen anytime she opened her control panel. The top video of the day would be showing and it was always that.

On the Adamis media outlets, commentators were crapping bricks. Whether they approved of what Jenna had done or not, they were all crapping bricks. They were all desperate to know what Jenna's motive had been. What were her plans? What was she thinking?

No one knew.

And that was how Jenna convinced a reporter to come to Octavia Prime to interview her.

Jenna had chosen the reporter with care. She needed someone specific. Jenna had made a list of qualities. They needed someone who got their job through nepotism. Their reporter needed to be the child of someone pretty important. They needed to be someone who was not taken seriously because they'd had their life handed to them. Someone with pride. Someone with skill who was not being acknowledged because they were so-and-so's kid. Someone who wanted to do something more... someone who would piss off an entire solar system if they were killed on the sly.

The perfect person was found in Celestina Rouge.

Celestina agreed to do the interview. She was surprised the Octavians were willing to charter a starship for her since Octavians did not like frivolous space travel. She was told she could stay in the Sun Palace, the most luxurious of all the palaces.

Jenna had to bite her lips together whenever the superiority of the Sun Palace was mentioned because Vash had now unearthed over a million Liri from her bedroom. Was that what Sardius had been thinking about when he made sure she got the Dahlia Palace? In any



case, all the palaces were close in value, but Jenna wondered if the money she found made her palace more expensive.

When Celestina alighted from the pod with a cameraman and a PA, Jenna greeted her with the supermodel act.

Celestina was equal to the situation and came forward with a smile. She was a stunning blonde with hair that brushed her shoulders in a straight sheath, creamy brown skin, and three diamonds in a triangle pattern in her teeth by her canine. She was dressed like a billionaire's daughter because she was one.

Jenna smiled too. "We are so excited to have you with us."

"I'm excited to be here too."

"Let me bring you to my courtyard and we'll have lunch."

Jenna needed a few minutes to steel herself for what she had to do. There was a stack of things that had to be accomplished during Celestina's visit. First, Jenna had to give Celestina an excellent interview that would make her want to cover stories about Jenna and the Octavian/Adamis Alliance. If she got that far, that would be amazing. Asking for the second half of her wish list felt like asking too much.

The two women surface-level chatted while they sipped meal replacement drinks. Apparently, Celestina was not allowed to eat either.

Finally, they sat down for the interview.

Celestina pointed herself toward her cameraman. "I'm sitting down with Octavian/Adamis Alliance diplomat, Jenna Fairchild. Jenna, how do you like it here on Octavia Prime? How does it compare with your home planet, Earth?"

Jenna smiled and put a hand to her chest. "Nothing can ever replace your home planet in your heart, but I've been so moved by the warm welcome the Octavians have given me."

"We understand that you're one of the rare people to receive the eight traditional gifts from the Octavians. What have they given you?"

As far as Jenna was concerned, the eight gifts had been a complete flop, but she would never admit that on Interstellar TV. "Wealth and riches may mean a lot to other people, but the greatest gift I've been given here on Octavia Prime is the friendship of the Octavian Council's chair, Favel. Getting to know him has been the highlight of this incredible change in my life."

Celestina listened intently before commenting. "There has been quite the stir speculating as to what your relationship with him might be. There has been far juicier footage of you with Favel than with your ex-husband, Armen."

Jenna nodded. "Yes. It was a shame that Armen and I could not have fallen in love, but since love turns in all sorts of ways, it was wonderful that his love turned toward Lucy."

That was the moment that Celestina turned into a vicious reporter on Jenna. "But how can you know for yourself whether or not their love is flourishing? You haven't been to Octavia Five to see for yourself, have you?"

Jenna was unphased. "I felt that visiting would be rather indelicate. Not only are they on their honeymoon, but Lucy is also expecting. I thought they would prefer to be alone during this time. They're busy and so am I. There are so many diplomats that need to be crowned and that is a responsibility I cannot neglect. It feels like bad timing all around."

"Information about the AAMC candidates that visited your home has been littered with gossip and conjecture," Celestina said crisply. "Can you tell us any details about that conflict?"

Jenna was ready to answer. "The AAMC majors who were here for interviews entered my palace armed without my permission and destroyed public and private property. I have received no apology from the AAMC and those majors have received no censure from the AAMC. I have informed Admiral Lou Denver that if they are not dismissed for disorderly conduct, I shall not entertain the idea of crowning a delegate from the AAMC."

"That behavior doesn't sound much like the AAMC officers I know. Care to elaborate?"

Jenna considered her words carefully. "Perhaps it would be better if I showed you footage taken by my security team of them entering my room and the damage they caused."

The clip Jenna allowed to be displayed had been doctored to hide the bits of money that were visible in the brick pile, but otherwise, it was factual.

"What a mess!" Celestina agreed. "But did you invite them inside your bedroom?"

"Certainly not."

"They're saying you did."

"Yet, I was not there when they entered," she said coolly. "Their story that I invited them inside does not explain why they tore up my carpet or broke holes in my walls. Also, it doesn't explain why my PA thought I was in danger and had me jettisoned from the palace. I'm sure it's well known that I spent that night in Favel's underwater mansion."

"Which is when this happened," Celestina said before turning to the camera and smiling. She stopped and turned to Jenna. "That's when we'll play the clip of you kissing Favel."

Jenna nodded.

Celestina raised her eyes from the tablet she was taking notes from. "You know, you're being pretty cool about all this," she said as an aside.

"Thank you."

"What were you thinking when you kissed Favel?" she asked without skipping a beat and Jenna knew the interview was back on.

She put her game face back on and answered. "It's difficult to explain that feeling of fear... when your own military turns against you. When you find yourself taking solace in a person you hardly know and witnessing their compassion toward you. Favel offered me comfort the night I had to flee my palace. His practical intervention on my behalf as well as his words comforted me. I haven't felt that kind of closeness with another person in the flesh since I left Earth."

That was true. She hadn't felt closer to anyone other than Favel in the flesh since she left Earth. She felt a fresh stab in her chest over the loss of Sardius.

"There's speculation that he'll ask you to marry him. Have you thought about whether or not you'd be willing to accept Favel as your second husband?" Celestina continued.

Jenna had coached herself, and she was prepared to answer this question with ease. "I know the word 'marry' leaves people confused about what the relationship between an Octavian and an Adamis could be when our bodies are so different. Marriage seems to imply a sexual relationship instead of just a friendship that has been sealed with legal agreements. Adamis don't usually make their friends sign agreements stating that they will always be friends and that their affection toward each other will not change, no matter what happens. However, the Octavians have a beautiful tradition of loving more than one person without precisely defining what relationship they have. If Favel were to ask me to be his best friend forever, I would accept because I want our relationship to be sealed in gold. I want it to be the kind of friendship that never tarnishes."

Jenna smiled at the camera before glancing back at Celestina.

“Josh, turn off the camera. I need to talk to Jenna privately,” the reporter said with a snap.

The cameraman flicked off his camera and went into the house so fast that Jenna wondered if he had to go to the bathroom.

“What the hell are you thinking?” Celestina asked, dropping her reporter demeanor. “You can’t marry an Octavian *before* you marry an Adamis. Marrying one at all risks alienating the Adamis from more sectors than just the AAMC. Why are you taking such a crazy risk?”

“Look, I didn’t scream it for the camera, but there isn’t any confusion about what the AAMC soldiers were doing in my bedroom. They broke in to steal the diplomatic crowns. I made the mistake of inviting six AAMC officers for interviews. They were going to crown all six of the officers attending themselves. There’s no magic or technology that says it has to be me who crowns the diplomats. If they had done so, every decision that came up would have been solved exactly the way the AAMC wants it because they would have had a three-fourths majority vote every single time.”

Celestina squared her shoulders. “And who are you to say that what the AAMC wants isn’t what’s right for all Adamis? You *just* got here!”

Jenna tightened her smile. Celestina had been taught Lou Denver’s line of debate, but she knew she could crush it with the right words.

“I had no problem crowning *some* of the AAMC guys,” Jenna shot back. “I had them over to interview them. I was more than happy to crown a few of them, but six? Don’t *you* want to see more points of view represented than just theirs?”

Celestina cleared her throat. “The AAMC represents more interests than just theirs.”

Jenna leaned forward. “Do they represent yours?”

“A little bit,” the reporter replied. “If it wasn’t for them, we’d never get reporters anywhere. They’re far easier to deal with than the Octavians.”

Jenna leaned further forward. “Are you sure you want the AAMC to be your middleman?”

“What do you mean by that?” Celestina asked cautiously.

Jenna chuckled. “We did not bring you here for you to interview me. I could have done an interview without you and I bet my people could make me look just as pretty for the camera as your boy, Josh, can.”

For the first time, Celestina started to squirm. “What do you want?”

Jenna leaned back comfortably. “We’ve been studying you. You are here for me to interview you.”

“For what?” Celestina gasped.

“For a diplomat position. I brought you here to see if you were interested in being crowned yourself.”

Celestina’s mouth fell open in complete shock. “Why?”

Jenna continued, “So, you were saying, the AAMC represents your interests? How easy are they to work with? What do they ask for in return? Is it easy to meet their needs so they can meet yours? Do your people like them? Think like them?”

Celestina couldn’t answer.

Jenna went on. “I want to do more for you than provide a direct link to the Octavians. I want to give you the Sun Palace and let you do broadcasts about yourself and whatever we’re working on as a committee.”

“Isn’t most of that supposed to be secret?”

Jenna shook her head. “No. Most of it isn’t. I’ve been asking questions on this topic as well. From what I’ve understood, it’s only confidential when we’re fleshing out the details of treaties, but they have to be public knowledge while they are being debated and signed. In the end, anyone who is interested should have access to pretty much everything we do. I think the public would like to hear about treaties and trade agreements from someone like you. Someone beautiful. Someone with a long family history of reporting the news and entertaining viewers. Not only that, but I’ve seen about a dozen interviews with you where you speak of how you long to be taken seriously. This is something you can do all on your own. It’s something you can just decide to do and then do without the backing of your family or anyone else. It would turn the tables.”

“You don’t sound like you’re interviewing me,” the reporter realized. “You sound like you’re offering me the job.”

Jenna smiled. “I *am* offering you the job.”

Celestina’s jaw moved like she wanted to talk, but for the first time in her life, she didn’t know what to say.

“Don’t answer right now,” Jenna amended. “Come with me. We’ll tour the Sun Palace and then I’ll take you over to the Stone Palace and you can meet Excelyn.”

The sun was just setting as they crossed the bridge that led to the Sun Palace. Palm trees in the distance made beautiful silhouettes near the blinding glint of the sun’s reflection off the water.

“Wait, Jenna,” Celestina stalled, putting up a hand in a question. “How did you leave everything on Earth when you became a diplomat? You must have left a lot?”

Jenna shrugged. “No. I didn’t, but they did offer me a really handsome man to get me off-world. It was such a shame that it didn’t work out for me. It wasn’t until I started doing this job that I realized how much meaning it had. You must believe me. I am trying to build a stable number of voters for the Alliance. I want different views. That is all. We’ll probably get an AAMC guy crowned at some point. Maybe more than one.”

“Can I recommend one?”

“Absolutely. If you know one who isn’t a rock or a piggy, I would be very interested in meeting them.”

# Chapter Five

## The Social Media Queen Gets Crowned

The rest of the week was a reality TV star's dream as Celestina wrote, directed, and starred in her own series about being crowned a diplomat. Jenna approved thoroughly, helping her in any way she could.

They filmed a scene where Jenna formally asked Celestina to be a diplomat. They filmed her getting the diamond shaved into the top of her hair and Jenna affixing the crown to her scalp. Then she had a stylist do her hair around the crown and later uncovered the results with a fantastically fashionable flourish.

The footage was great mostly because Josh was a better cameraman than Jenna had given him credit for. They filmed introducing Celestina to the Sun Palace like she'd never seen it before. They even filmed her choosing her staff.

That was another thing about Celestina that Jenna soon enjoyed. She declined the PA which meant that Jenna did not have to give her Conrad. Jenna and Excelyn did not tell her the dirty secret about how the personal assistants operated, and they didn't have to because Celestina didn't want one anyway. She had brought a PA with her who was skilled on her tablet and Celestina didn't seem to need more.

The next week, the stories aired on Interstellar TV, but it wasn't until the last day that they showed a re-shot version of Celestina's interview with Jenna. That was to be the crowning achievement of the week's worth of work. That was where Jenna admitted that if Favel asked her to marry him, she would accept.

Less than an hour after the airing, Favel threw a tentacle over the edge of Jenna's ocean entryway and came in with a wet slap on the marble. She had been sitting in the conservatory, enjoying something hot Smoothie made her when he rose out of the water.

Jenna considered herself very lucky that Celestina and Josh did not happen to be in the room with their microphones and cameras at that exact moment.

He folded two of his tentacles in half and rubbed the folds over his eyes. "Why did you do that?" he asked, sounding anguished. "I know you want a good relationship between our people and yours, but you're an Adamis and Adamis find us... repulsive."

Jenna set down her cup and dropped to her knees on the floor to be at eye level with him. "I don't find you repulsive," she said firmly.

"But you are in love with Sardius," he groaned.

That keen observation took her breath away. He had every reason to think that after all that had happened, but to have him tell her that in that blunt way made her feel like a tear had been opened fresh in her heart.

She swallowed the pain. "Favel, you are not repulsive and you know that this is not about that kind of love."

Favel fussed and pulled at his face with his suckers. "I know. I know. I know. This is about diplomacy, interracial relations, political backing, and paying your debts to those who have helped you. I know. I know. I know."



She asked quietly, "Have I made things hard for you? Do you not want to marry me?"

"Jenna..." he said slowly. "This situation is tight for you. Tighter for you than anyone else, and I know that marriage to me looks like a good method for easing a bit of that tension. I agree. It's a reasonable move, but once we've reaped the diplomatic rewards, I worry that you will not like how I feel about you sometimes or how all other Adamis will see you for having married an Octavian."

"How do you feel about me?" she questioned, suddenly very curious.

"I deliberately let myself go dry that day," he admitted, sidestepping her question. "I wanted to see if you would notice I was dry and care for me."

"That's okay," Jenna said. "I can be in charge of spooning water over you whenever you're in my palace if you'd like."

"That's very demeaning for an Adamis woman," he said gravely. "I wouldn't want anyone to think that you were less-than because you did aquarium duty."

Jenna rolled her eyes. "Is aquarium duty really dirty, gross, work then?"

He nodded pitifully.

"Like I care what anyone thinks," Jenna retorted angrily. "I'll pour water on you even if you don't marry me."

Favel gasped.

On her hands and knees, she went over to the gap in the floor that led to the ocean and put her hand in. Cupping some water, she poured it over Favel so the water covered his unblinking eyes and rolled down his tentacles.

He scrunched a little closer to the floor. "I'm uncomfortable with this. There's already too much pressure. My people want this too much."

"And you don't? You want to marry someone else as your eighth wife and all of us were wrong thinking you're available?"

"No. I'm available. I just don't like a lot of things about this. For one thing, I'm uncomfortable with the idea that I am your closest friend. We're not that close, Jenna. You need another husband. I'm willing to propose and delight my people with our engagement, but I can't marry you unless you get a real husband."

Jenna nodded curtly. "I'm happy with that. Let's go with that. Can we tell people that?"

"We *have* to tell people that," Favel said waspishly. "How could I face my people when you basically proposed to me on live television? We have to get engaged. My people watch Adamis TV. Everyone knows what you've done. But I absolutely can't marry you until we get you an Adamis man of your own. Somehow, we'll get you a mate. Hell's inferno!" he cursed as though he just remembered who Jenna was before she came to Octavia Prime. "It might take *years*! You're so picky," he moaned in oceanic agony.

Jenna agreed. She didn't think they'd be able to find another man who interested her.

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Celestina and Josh were thrilled to film the scene where Favel asked Jenna to marry him. It was a top-rated event on Interstellar TV the next week.

Naturally, it was scripted and not much like the scene where Favel pulled at his eyes and whined about all the stress he was under. But Jenna and Celestina wrote a script that Favel

read and where he presented her with a ring that was a pearl large enough for a hole to be drilled through it to fit Jenna's finger from knuckle to knuckle. He wore a tophat which delighted everyone who watched. Both Octavians and Adamis think an Octavian in a tophat is an adorable thing.

Jenna gushed when she opened the box containing the ring and when he put the ring on her finger, he cupped the back of her hand with one of his suckers in an Octavian kiss.

It felt exactly the way Sadius said it would and Jenna had a moment where she missed Sadius badly, though by that point, those moments were coming less and less often. Days on top of days meant that she was getting better at coping without him. Ixy wasn't half the PA Sadius was, but there were more people around to fill in the gaps. What stayed was a feeling that she wasn't safe when she tried to sleep. If it was day and she had her duties to fulfill, she was fine, but once night came, she found it difficult to relax. Sadius had made her feel so safe when he was watching over her.

Now there was nothing that really made her feel safe.

# Chapter Six

## Saying It's Sardi

It was a big surprise when Jenna was contacted by Sardi's prison, which Jenna now knew was called The Xypher Zone Prison for Persons with Y Chromosomes. Even though the prison had experienced a full-scale massacre, it hadn't been burnt to the ground and the clean-up crew informed her that Sardi was unaccounted for. The only people who had lived were prisoners who had been hiding in the walls before the chaos started. In the aftermath, there were large piles of body bits and the clean-up crew had tried to count the heads, but quite a lot of stuff was either burnt to ashes or jettisoned into outer space. They sent their condolences.

They told Jenna they had the marriage certificate ready. Sardi had authenticated it by contributing up a piece of his hair and then he signed it with his signature. At the wedding, the two of them were supposed to prick themselves and let their blood intermingle. The clean-up crew said they'd send her the certificate. Cloning techniques on Waltzer Prime were supposed to be top-notch, if she wanted to go that way to recreate him. In any case, the wedding certificate would take a few months to send. Did she want it as a memento?

Of course, she wanted it.

"You know," Crimp said in her slow grating voice. "If you didn't even know what he looked like, that studio on Waltzer Prime can figure it out for you without making a clone. If you want."

"I can't think about that now," Jenna said, brushing off the topic. "I've been waiting to hear back from Arvantis' widow, Vinia, and she's giving me the run-around."

"Why don't you just go see her?" Crimp suggested.

"Cause I'm terrified the AAMC will come after me, beat my head in, assassinate me... stuff like that," Jenna admitted. "I'm starting to think they are behind all the diplomats' deaths. The only way to change out diplomats is to kill the current ones. Yuck. I love reminding myself that my own army hates me."

"There's really no reason to fret about every little movement you make," the bodyguard explained. "It's not like they have instantaneous information about everything you do. This isn't their system. Heaven knows how that reporter girl gets her broadcasts out for everyone to see in such a timely fashion. But it's not like the AAMC can do anything about what happens around this star. Vinia is not on the other side of the universe. She's on Spikay Two, which is next to the Octavia system. It's a world that's half Adamis and a quarter Octavian. It's almost uninhabited. You could go there and be back before anyone at the AAMC even noticed."

"Do we have an address for her?"

Crimp gave Jenna an IDK look before turning back to the tablet she was scrolling on.

Jenna rolled her eyes. It wasn't Crimp's job to do that sort of thing. She was in charge of security in the Stone Palace and not a PA. She didn't have to look up anything.

Jenna went to the control panel and did a search much like a Google search back home, but way sketchier. She wished for the millionth time that Sardi was there to help her weed through the garbage. There was so much garbage. So many ads. So many people screaming for attention, like Twitter, Reddit, a Google search, and fifty other engines mashed up.

“Why don’t we have something like a voice-automated computer that does this sort of thing for us?” Jenna wondered aloud.

“Because the computers are too stupid,” Vash said, exiting Jenna’s bedroom and rubbing the crink in his neck.

“What?”

“Historically, we tried that, but it’s not as intuitive or as useful as a person. You can give voice commands to our control panel if you want to, but you’ll find out in under a minute that it sucks.”

“I can guess,” Jenna said hopelessly. “If it’s pulling information from the same places it’s displaying then we’re all screwed.”

Vash pursed his lips together. “We received a parcel today.”

“Have we ever received a parcel before?” Jenna wondered aloud.

Vash gave her a weird look. “We get them all the time. I just don’t talk to you about them because they’re addressed to Smoothie. They’re our food deliveries. They don’t need to be on your radar. Or sometimes they’re addressed to Misha because they’re your new clothes. This one was addressed to you. I decided to open it on your behalf because it looked so suspicious.”

“What was inside?” Jenna was suddenly curious as a beaver.

“It was two tickets to a boxing match on Spikay Two... from Sardius,” Vash announced.

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Jenna took in a sharp intake of breath. “From Sardius, you say?”

Vash flipped over the package and showed her the shipping label. “It being from him makes no sense, but it came with a note saying that he’d prepared a new earpiece for you and he had someone who would deliver it to you for him at that boxing match.”

“Show it to me.”

Vash brought out the envelope. It was black with two holographic tickets inside with a printed note included.”

Jenna agreed with Vash. “This looks so suspicious. Would it have looked less suspicious if the note was handwritten?”

“No,” Vash refuted. “It’s all suspicious. We don’t know Sardius’ handwriting from a hole in the wall.”

Jenna laughed. “His handwriting probably was a hole in the wall.”

“Is Sardius dead?” Vash asked in a hushed tone.

The butler had not been told the details of Sardius’ contract or situation. All he knew was that he had been Jenna’s personal assistant, but he was gone and Jenna had a new personal assistant who... she’d completely forgotten about when she went to look for Vinia’s address.

Jenna didn’t answer Vash, and instead, she clicked on her earpiece. “Ixy, I need you to find a current address for Arvantis’ third wife, Vinia.”

“One second,” Ixy called. “I am in the shower. Can I call you back in a few?”

“Yup.” Jenna refused to be annoyed with Ixy and she switched off her earpiece. Then she turned back to Crimp. Jenna presented the tickets to their only bodyguard as she lounged sideways in her chair. “What do you think of this?”

Crimp sat up straighter and looked at the tickets with interest. “I’d go with you to see this.”

“You would?” Jenna asked incredulously.

“Yeah. The fight is an ogre bare-knuckle boxing a Boneman. Yeah, I’d pay to see that, except it looks like these tickets are already paid for by this dude, Sardius. And if you want to go, you need a bodyguard, so... are we going?”

Jenna looked at her oddly. Had she not been listening to her conversation with Vash?

Jenna sighed like impressing her was impossible. “You think it’s safe to just accept random tickets? How can we verify that they came from who they say they come from?”

“Well, we can’t, but we can do a few other things,” she said, getting up from her chair and pacing the length of the room. “Who is Sardius?”

“He... was my personal assistant... sort of... we were very close,” Jenna admitted bashfully. “But we haven’t been in contact for months and everyone thinks he’s dead.”

“Ohhhh...” Crimp started laughing. “That’s awesome. I thought only Princess Celestina had a soap opera life. If everyone thinks he’s dead, then just coming to see you is probably completely out of the question. He has to initiate contact in this sideways manner. So, he’s offering you an earpiece to get back in touch with him.” The poison girl smacked her lips before approaching the problem from another angle. “Okay, let’s pretend for a minute that the tickets have come from someone who is not Sardius, but someone who is trying to lure you into a trap. Let’s look at the bait. Is the boxing match bait for you? Do you love watching guys beat the snot out of each other, Jenna?”

“Not really. I’m more of a kitten-in-an-oversized-goblet kind of girl,” Jenna admitted.

“Then that’s bad bait. What about the earpiece he’s offering? Do you want that?”

“So bad my mouth fills with saliva thinking of it,” she confessed without thinking of how it sounded.

Vash took a step away from Jenna.

“Okay... that’s dangerous because it’s good bait,” Crimp continued. “Did everyone know you and Sardius were involved, close, extra close, whatever? I mean, I’ve been following your moves on Interstellar TV and I’ve never heard of you having a love interest aside from Armen and Favel. Did people even know about it?”

“The members of the Octavian Council would have known I had designs on him. We had a conversation about it.”

“What about your staff?” Crimp asked.

“I thought he was just your PA,” Vash laughed with a snort.

“Aside from that, Misha and Smoothie might have guessed. Apparently, Vash had no idea. I guess it was a pretty big secret,” Jenna said, flicking him in the bicep.

At that moment, Ixy came back online and gave Jenna Vinia’s address, reminding them that Vinia lived on Spikay Two.

“Okay,” Crimp said with enthusiasm. “The boxing match is on the same moon I was going to take you to meet Vinia anyway. Let’s double up the activities. We can go to the boxing match and then go find Vinia.”

“Wait,” Jenna voiced. “I don’t think we’ve plugged all the holes. Someone else may have known about Sardius. If we go, you’re not concerned that this whole setup is a trap and someone will try to kill me?”

“Someone *may* try to kill you,” Crimp agreed, “but if they do, poison isn’t the only thing I do. You’ll be quite safe with me.”



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Before Jenna and Crimp boarded the pod to take them to Spikay Two, Favel came to introduce them to the pilot who would be flying them.

Favel came through the ocean entrance and dipped a tentacle back in the water to help the other Octavian out of the water. Jenna recognized him. He was blue like Favel, but he had large red rings on his tentacles. The new Octavian looked at Jenna and Crimp warily.

"This is my son, Temptic," Favel announced proudly. "I want to introduce you to more members of my family."

"Hello, Temptic."

He looked at her with overly large black eyes. "You're not my real mom," he said sourly.

After a moment of complete silence, Jenna, Crimp, and Temptic laughed together. Favel looked on with a disapproving stare and then an eye roll.

"You're cute," Jenna declared. "I'll try not to replace your real mom."

"He has to be hilarious. He's very poisonous," Favel said grimly. "Fatal to humans."

"Really?" Crimp said, coming closer and asking Temptic questions about how poisonous he was, how his poison worked, how long it took to kill someone, and more.

The blue and red Octavian was very suspicious of her until Jenna clarified. "This is Crimp. She's a bodyguard and she's also, quite literally, poisonous."

Temptic liked that and seated himself in a goblet where he talked to Crimp.

Once they were occupied, Jenna and Favel were more or less able to speak privately, Favel gave Jenna the details. "Temptic's mother passed away many years ago. She was a red-ringed Octavian named Mytic. She was my favorite wife. I miss her dearly."

"How did she die?" Jenna asked, trying to add a note of sympathy to her normally clipped tone.

"Her children ate her," he explained quietly. "But not Temptic. Temptic was from her first clutch of eggs. I was her mate for it and I stayed with her and cared for her during her hatching and fed the infants when they were born. The babies parted and went their own ways, except for Temptic, who stayed with me. Mytic died when I was off-world. She was hatching the offspring of her second husband, who wasn't able to take care of her."

"Aren't you angry with him for neglecting her?"

"He was dead," Favel explained. "I can't be angry at a dead octopus. Life comes and goes so furiously when you're an Octavian that there's no one to blame when things don't go your way. Life has to keep happening one way or another. Occasionally, I'll see a red-ringed octopus with yellow on the tips of their tentacles and I'll wonder if that octopus is Mytic and Ruin's child. Maybe it is, maybe it isn't."

"Don't you ever see a blue octopus with red rings and wonder if it's your child with her?"

Favel's eyes crinkled. "I tagged my babies when they were born. I know where each of them is."

"Do you feel like that's a violation of privacy?" Jenna asked, realizing a little unhappily that she was tagged herself because of her earpiece.

"No. In the ocean, we don't have murder. We eat what we can eat and if something else dies then so be it. I have killed more things than I can count. A great many things died for me to keep Mytic and my babies alive during that clutch's hatching. However, it's completely legal to tag a

baby if they're poisonous. If an Octavian's poison is being used inappropriately off-world, we need to know that. So all their poison is sampled, tagged, and stored. If an octopus has their poison taken from them, the government needs to know. It happens sometimes. You'll learn more about it when you start working on the treaties."

Jenna nodded.

"By the way," Favel continued. "I wanted to tell you that I am very pleased about your second appointment. Do you know how Octavia Prime and all her moons worship you? They love Celestina. They've never had a media personality as famous as her involved with their cause. They think she is the most adorable thing in the world, like you got a kitten to host the news."

"That would be a huge hit on Earth," Jenna conceded. "How outrageous was the reaction to our engagement? I've been so busy planning this trip off-world that I haven't looked at any of the news feeds."

Favel paused. "They love it... too much. I am under an incredible amount of pressure to marry you sooner rather than later. I've explained why I would like to wait, but my people are excited to the point of frenzy. Can we start a matchmaking process so we can get you a real man?"

"When so many people are trying to kill me or steal my crowns?" Jenna asked hesitantly. "It seems a little tough."

Favel returned her gaze, shifting some of the pressure that was on him onto her.

"If I'm still alive after this trip to Spikay Two, we'll talk about it," she relented.

"Good." He didn't smile because he couldn't, but he sounded like he smiled.

# Chapter Seven

## Boxing the Earpiece

Spikay Two was mostly undeveloped, except for a few cities. The city they were going to was called Vikla, and it looked like an industrial park, except for the market streets where people sold things outdoors. Which was weird because it didn't stop raining.

Jenna had arranged to be there the day before the boxing match. She and Crimp got a hotel room that surprised both of them when they entered because it was cleaner and nicer than the pictures Ixy had provided of the hotel. It was the nicest she could find in Vikla, but it was still aging. What was once white was now yellow and what was once yellow was now brown.

Jenna slept on the bed and Crimp slept on the couch. They didn't go out to eat. Smoothie had sent them with meal replacements and told them firmly that they were not to eat anything. Any foreign food would surely mess with their digestion. They'd be puking or crying on the toilet if they ate a single bite of anything.

When they woke up in the morning after their arrival, Jenna put on the brimmed knit hat Misha had given her to cover her crown and she and Crimp went to look at the market. Jenna bought a belt with a fabulous silver buckle at one of the stands right off the bat. It made her feel like a local, even though she didn't look anything like a local.

She and Crimp stood out like sore thumbs. Crimp had pink hair and Jenna had a streak of pink that had grown out so much since that fateful day when Excelyn had fed her the liplo fruit, it was visible even with a hat on.

At Jenna's insistence, Crimp bought a hat and covered her hair too. It instantly made them look more normal, though not completely. Everyone they saw looked like they were covered in dust, like everyone had been left on a shelf. Except that it rained constantly. It made no sense.

When night came, the hazy streets came alive with neon. There were neon signs of all colors advertising everything. Drinks this way. Sex that way. Entertainment up here. Drugs down there.

"This is kind of a low-brow place, eh?" Jenna commented.

"Where did you think we were going to watch bare-knuckle boxing? The really big casinos have fights in their arenas, but those are far from this system and the guys who fight are millionaires several times over. Besides, Sardius would be a fool to send you anywhere where you could be recognized. A dusty mothball like this place is perfect. Everyone thinks you're a whore anyway," Crimp sniffed.

"Do they?" Jenna asked in alarm.

"Oh, they think we're both whores. Don't let it get under your skin. It's better for them to think that than anything else. Though I am surprised no one has tried to hire you. They must think your rates are as high as lotto winnings."

Jenna nodded, eager to change the subject. "There's one thing I don't get. If Sardius could send me a package, why not include the earpiece in that package?"

"I think it's because he's going to be here and he wants to surprise you," Crimp replied.

Jenna looked around the street on the way to the boxing arena. She hadn't dared to hope for that. Slowly, quietly, she said to Crimp, "I don't know what he looks like."

Crimp's face became a mangled jungle of annoyed lines. "You might have mentioned that before. Let's see if we can figure out who he is by piecing together what you do know about him. What race is he?"

"I don't know."

"He was your personal assistant. Would you recognize his voice if you heard it?" Crimp asked, vexed to her collarbone.

"I'm not sure. Sometimes I wondered if he was using digital enhancements to make himself sound better. I don't know if I would recognize his voice."

Crimp stopped. "Wait. You don't know anything about him, do you?"

"Not really," Jenna said hopelessly.

Crimp didn't blame Jenna. Instead, she rolled her left shoulder like she needed a good stretch and said, "This match should be interesting. These people you work for are incredible. They set you up with someone who gets to keep all their info private when everything about you is public. We need to change the system, Jenna."

"I could have found out more about him if I hadn't been so busy... or self-obsessed," Jenna finished without Crimp needing to say it for her.

Crimp glanced at her. It was the perfect time to take a dig at her, but Crimp didn't. Instead, she moved them along and continued doing arm stretches all the way into the arena. They presented their tickets at the counter and got their hands stamped.

"Third row, numbers six and seven. Don't mess it up," the ticket master ordered.

They stepped in.

"This place is heckin' nasty," Crimp said with a huge grin plastered to her face. "I thought I'd never see another place like this in all my life. I love this. How did I land a job where I get to hang out with respectable beauty queens *and* come to places like this? I can't believe you're paying me."

Actually, both Excelyn and Jenna were paying her for her services for that trip.

Together, they found their seats and sat down.

"Did you read up on our fighters?" Crimp asked.

"Yeah. I didn't know there was such a thing as an ogre from outer space, but I mostly read about the other fighter, Ryatt," Jenna confessed.

"He's hot, eh?" Crimp said with a suggestive eyebrow waggle.

"Yeah, he is," Jenna confessed. "It's because he's a Calcumicas."

"Shh... don't say words like that here. They'll kill ya. They are not politically correct here. Say Boneman."

"Boneman," Jenna said obediently before whispering under her breath, "Excelyn told me it was the other way around."

"Officially, she's right, but it's fine. The tough types like it. Some races get offended by their snarky nickname, but the Bonemen like it. It turns them on... or something." Crimp offered a wicked little grin. "Why were you so interested in Ryatt, the Gambler?"

"I was sort of hoping that Sardius was the same race as him."

"Makes sense," Crimp said, really having to speak up to be heard over the rapidly increasing crowd. "Who wouldn't want a man with a body like that?"

Jenna could not tell Crimp that the reason she hoped Sardius was the same race had nothing to do with Ryatt's rampantly obvious sexual appeal. It was because the Bonemen, like

cockroaches and fruit flies, were less affected by radiation than other Adamis. Even if Sardius died in the prison riot, Jenna still hoped he was a Boneman because he would have been less sick during his time in the Xypher Zone. She had studied what happened to the people there from horrible chemical burns on their skin to their insides wanting to be on their outsides. Jenna didn't want any of that for Sardius. Maybe he was a Boneman so he didn't have those problems... or maybe he didn't complain.

The fight was about to start and the crowd was getting wilder. The MC appeared above the stage. Jenna had been expecting the MC to be a man in a cheap tux talking into a microphone. Instead, an Octavian was lowered in a fishbowl from the ceiling. He pulled himself out of the bowl and placed two of his tentacles like elbows over the edge of the bowl, he began his announcements.

"Tonight, two fierce fighters are going to take the ring. The Gypsy Ogre versus Ryatt, the Gambler. Our Gypsy has been all over the universe. He's never lost a match to anyone other than another ogre. He smashed the Hyper Bastion. He ate the Forton Battleship. He bit the head off the Mighty Rocket! Now..." the MC paused for emphasis. "What will he do to the Boneman, Ryatt, the Gambler?"

A curtain on the other side of the arena opened and the green-skinned ogre came out. He looked like the personification of the action figures Jenna had seen as a child. He had a large jaw and an underbite. His skin was slightly mottled, like the back of a frog, and he wore a pair of black briefs so shiny they looked like they were made of a black garbage bag. It was every bit as cheesy as Jenna remembered wrestling being when she was a kid and she watched whatever was on TV.

"Do you think this is choreographed?" Jenna hissed to Crimp.

"No. I think these boys are going to get bloodied up. That's why I'm here."

Jenna stared at her.

"Oh, and to protect you. I'm here to protect you," Crimp amended, but her eyes were already moving back to the stage as she finished her thought with the words, "or whatever."

Jenna scowled.

The MC continued. "Ryatt, the Gambler, really lives up to his name. Since his debut three months ago, he has fought Reptilemen and won. He's fought Scorpionmen and won. He's fought other Bonemen and won. Tonight he faces an opponent in a heavyweight class when he's only a mid-weight fighter. It's a gamble, but that's what HE DOES!"

The spotlight went up the aisle closest to Jenna and Crimp. Jenna could not believe what she was seeing. The ogre had come out of his side with a robe over his shoulders that he had promptly dropped to show his imposing physique. Ryatt came out like he was an ordinary guy, dressed for a night out. He wore a black collared shirt, a long tailored coat, black trousers, and heavy boots. The front of his hair was spiked and blond, while the back was cedar brown. That was how he had looked in his promotional pictures, but Jenna hadn't expected him to appear to fight dressed that way.

Besides, the way he dressed wasn't what made him so appealing.

With his hands in his pockets, he strolled down the aisle toward the ring, pausing here and there to allow photographs. The flashes that went off indicated there were quite a few people in the stands who wanted his photograph *before* he got bloodied up.

When he was a step closer to the ring than Jenna and Crimp, he stopped and looked right at Jenna.

Granted, Jenna had not had much experience facing down male sex icons, but she kept her head heroically by not allowing her stomach to flip or her face to show the slightest pleasure that he had singled her out for that moment.

He favored her with a twitch in his eye that was almost a wink but managed to be far sexier than a wink, before leaking an amused smile and finishing his descent to the ring.

Crimp clutched at Jenna's arm. "He looked right at you!"

Once in the ring, the guys in the crowd yelled some boos and insults that meant they had basically come to watch the ogre make a mess of his pretty face. Ryatt did not seem to mind in the least as he pressed a few buttons on a machine strapped to his wrist like a watch and his put-together outfit vanished, showing tight black track shorts that were one step off boxer briefs.

Crimp screamed with laughter. "He wasn't wearing clothes! Even his pants were holograms. Hilarious!"

That was when the perfectly fake physique of the Boneman was on full display. The bumps over his body were in the form of abs and pecs, biceps and triceps... they were all bones, grown to look that way. The muscles he had under those bones were a complete secret. That was what Excelyn had said.

It looked like the ogre was indeed strong enough that if he punched hard enough, he could break those thin curved bones as easily as a crab's shell, but that wasn't the only thing the Boneman's body had to offer. Their bones grew too long and protruded through various parts of their body. Ryatt had bones protruding from each of his knuckles, from the back of his elbow, hard round bones grew through his skin on his knees, and who knew where else? As it was bare-knuckle boxing, the ogre was going to get cut, and he might bleed badly if Ryatt got too many hits off him. Jenna hoped the ogre wasn't a bleeder.

In the ring, Ryatt called the MC down from the light fixture above the ring and whispered something to him.

The MC laughed and bounced back up in the air. "Our gambler says wants to make it more interesting. If he can make it through the fight without a cut on his mouth, he wants to kiss someone in the audience."

"Why don't you make it *really* interesting?" someone bellowed sardonically from the stands.

Ryatt smiled a grin like magic and laughed. "Ya gotta pay more for porn!" he shouted back.

The ogre came forward, but his voice was picked up by the MC's microphone when he spoke. "I wanna kiss someone too."

They agreed and with a little more fanfare, they began the first round. Ryatt bounced on his covered feet and evaded the first few swipes the ogre made at him.

Jenna knew Ryatt was going to have to cut the ogre in order for him to have a chance at victory, but when it happened, she was appalled. He didn't simply punch the ogre and pull his punch back. He punched him, twisting his hand so that the bones in his knuckles sunk into the ogre's skin and were ripped in a half-circle causing a cut for each of his four knuckles. It was a beautiful mark until the blood came.

The ogre didn't act like the wounds affected him much on the first three hits, even though blood was dripping, but when the fourth hit came in his lower back, he wailed in pain.



Ryatt avoided the ogre's strikes. Jenna understood that if he got hit, it probably wouldn't be a cut, but a broken bone, which was a serious injury in a different way.

The more times Ryatt hit the ogre, the madder he got, the heavier his strikes became, and when he finally landed one on Ryatt, it was bad. The strike landed on the Boneman's forearm leaving a web of internal bleeding under the skin, like glass had been broken, but not shattered.

Jenna gasped.

Ryatt looked right at her and the bell went off to signal the end of the first round. He turned to his corner.

"He looked at you again! He's lucky the ogre didn't clock him across the cheek right at that second. It might have killed him," Crimp burst, confused, and worked up.

In his corner, Ryatt didn't look anything like the boxers Jenna had seen before. He didn't have a manager stoking him or someone giving him advice about what he ought to do in the second round, though the ogre in the other corner had someone playing that role, spraying his injuries and stopping the bleeding. Instead, Ryatt sat with one foot out and the other crooked next to him and stared out at the ring like he was staring out across the ocean. He had a towel offered to him by the guy who had put the stool up for him to sit on. Ryatt took it, but like he was at the pool and he was dabbing at his face between laps.

That was the moment Jenna realized two things. The first thing was that even though the injury on his arm looked like something to her, it was nothing to him. The second thing was that he was playing with the ogre. He'd let him score that point off him to make the fight more interesting to the crowd. The fight had to look like a close call to entertain the spectators.

The problem Ryatt confronted as he stared out into nothing was that he had allowed himself to be distracted when Jenna gasped. The threat the ogre posed was not nothing. Crimp had been right when she said that he had left himself open for a second. Why should hearing Jenna gasp have that much of an effect on him?

He dropped the towel and went for round two.

Jenna bit her lips shut and didn't make another sound as he started taking swipes at the ogre's face. The boxing ring got wetter and redder with the ogre's blood.

By the third round, the ogre had given up trying to win and was solely concentrating on making Ryatt bleed from his mouth. He scored a few more hits, making another crack on Ryatt's pec over his heart and scraping the side of his head with a punch. Otherwise, it was a punishing fight for the ogre, who went down in the fifth round.

The MC lowered himself down to speak to Ryatt while the ogre was removed from the ring by stretcher and little Octavians cleaned up the blood. "I declare Ryatt, the Gambler, the winner!"

There were cheers and there were boos, but Ryatt put his arm up like he was delighted with his triumph.

"Who did you have your eye on for your victory kiss, Gambler?" the MC asked.

"That little wild girl with the pink streak in her hair."

Jenna looked down. "This was obviously planned."

"Right... Obviously planned. Go kiss your boy. That's why you came here," Crimp encouraged with a push.

Yet, with all of Jenna's heart and soul, she knew that this man was not Sardius. Though Sardius said he was a violent person, Jenna had never been given any evidence of it. Immediately, it was clear his voice was not Sardius'. Over the speaker, Sardius' voice has been



something that gave her a buzz and put her to sleep, not something that woke her adrenaline and opened her eyes to the size of the night moons. It was a dangerous attraction, not the safety of Sardiis.

Whatever this was, with this boxer, it was not her thing. She was just different from all the other women there because of her pink streak. If Crimp had not been covering every last strand of her hair, Ryatt would have seen the pink and chosen her instead.

All the same, the crowd was chanting that they wanted more entertainment in the form of Ryatt kissing her and since she couldn't remember the last time a man had kissed her, she found herself rising to her feet. She came to outer space to do wild things and she'd be damned if she wasn't going to take this chance whether it was a good idea or not.

The people in her row moved their feet for her and she made her way up to the ring. Ryatt parted the ropes and let down a hand to help her. Jenna noticed he had kindly wiped off the ogre's blood before helping her. He didn't wait for her to get both her feet on the ground before he was parting her lips with his and giving her the most fervent kiss she'd ever experienced. He tasted good, like the sea brine and the sea breeze at the same time and she went for it feeling more than a little buzzed.

He also completely grabbed her ass before letting her go. She had been about to slap him or scream at him, but her one hand was faster than her slapping hand or her scream. She touched the pocket in her pants and felt that he had jabbed something in her pocket. It was the exact size and shape of the earpiece she had in her ear that let her talk to Ixy.

"I'm glad I watched all that," Ixy said in her ear. "That guy is super hot. Snog him some more. I haven't seen a show like this in years."

"Do you have access to what he gave me?" Jenna questioned fervently.

"Maybe," Ixy replied.

"Hack it," Jenna instructed.

Ixy came back with an explanation. "It doesn't have that sort of information. It's not a storage device. It's a communication device."

Jenna let herself out of the ring while Ryatt swung from the ropes and accepted the love of his audience. When he turned around, she was giving him a flirty little wave from the aisles, waving for Crimp to join her and heading out. She blew him a kiss and he licked his upper lip in a straight vertical line, letting his gray/brown eyes linger on her.

In a different world, she would have gone back to him, wrapped her arms around him, and seen where the night led, but Jenna was accustomed to squashing any sexual impulse she had. From experience, she knew that five minutes of conversation with him would kill any attraction she felt for him.

Instead, she returned her attention to Ixy. "I want any metadata you can scrape from that device. Where has it been? How is it configured? Who is likely to be able to communicate with it and from where?"

"Sure," Ixy said, getting to work.

Crimp's satisfied smile as they headed back to their hotel room was entertainment on a whole other level for Jenna. Maybe it was the icing on the cake.

"That guy was a blessing from the creator. What did he taste like?" Crimp begged to know.

"It was better than dinner."

“Good, 'cause we’re having tasteless sludge for dessert,” Crimp said, giving Jenna a smack on the shoulder as they stepped out into the rain.

# Chapter Eight

## Her Master's Voice

Later that night, Crimp was asleep and Jenna was fumbling with the earpiece Ryatt had given her. The earpiece that spoke to Ixy was currently in stand-by mode in her left ear, though she didn't remove it. The earpiece Ryatt had put in her pocket was made for her right ear. Jenna slipped it in and turned it on, she heard the crackle of electricity click through it. If it worked, it was working now.

"Sardius?" she whispered.

There was nothing on the other end, but Jenna couldn't give up.

"Sardius?"

"Yeah?" his husky voice came through.

Jenna clutched her hand to her chest and tried not to do anything that might wake up Crimp. "Are you okay?" she whispered.

"Sure. Fine," he said.

"You were okay after the prison riot?" she hissed desperately.

He chuckled. "Yeah. I told you I was going to kill a lot of people and I did. It was good. I... um... I wanted to see you."

"Did you? Were you at the match tonight?"

"Sort of. I... I saw you and I didn't."

Suddenly, she colored and blustered, "Oh! Did you see Ryatt kiss me? Did it bother you?"

"Um... Jenna... I'm not worried about that stuff. I'm fine. He's that kind of guy, and I knew that when I asked him to help me. Sorry about the butt grab. He's a good guy, even if he is a little handsy. Tonight, the goal was simple. I wanted to tell you that I'm still doing my job."

"Really?" Jenna asked, incredulously. "After all you've been through... after you disappeared in a clank of metal and sudden screaming... I have lived in fear, not knowing if you were alive or dead... and you're still doing your job?"

"Yeah. I didn't offer Ryatt a job with you formally, but if you're still taking my recommendations, then I recommend hiring him as your chief bodyguard. Smoothie can still help a lot if things go badly, but I know it would put a lot of minds at rest if there was someone in your palace who was responsible for your safety."

"That's awfully considerate of you," she mumbled. "But... What about you? You're going to answer my question about how you are with a single word? Fine? Talk to me. Tell me what happened."

He hedged, his voice sounding clipped in the night air. "I can't really talk about any of that. The situation isn't what it was before when I was being recorded, but it's... uh... not a lot different now. I can't speak freely. The earpiece I sent you isn't encrypted the way I'd like. I can say a few things, but not everything, Not tonight. Maybe I'll be able to improve security on my end and we'll be able to have a proper heart-to-heart later. Suffice it to say, 'I'm fine'. Rest easy, Jenna."

"Wait. Are you saying goodbye?" she flustered.

“Yeah. You can try me again before you go to bed when you’re back on Octavia Prime. Right now isn’t great for me. I’ll be ready to take your call next time.”

“Okay,” Jenna agreed, feeling better that she’d be able to talk to Sardius again even if their conversation was cut short.

“Good night, Jenna. You look cute with that pink stripe in your hair,” he said, his voice exactly what it used to be. “I’m glad I got to see it before it grew out.”

“Are you here, on Spikay Two?” Jenna whispered urgently.

“I have to go,” he said huskily and the line went dead.

Jenna pulled the earpiece out and killed the power. She should have felt reassured that Sardius was safe, and she did, but she also didn’t. Their conversation hadn’t felt like the danger had passed. Instead, it felt like she was now in another kind of danger that she didn’t understand. Knowing he had survived was one thing. Knowing he was somewhere out of sight, but not knowing if he was safe was a new kind of stress. He didn’t sound safe, but she had to trust that he’d find a way to remove the threat and come to join her.

She hoped, but she didn’t sleep after she took the new earpiece out. She tossed and wished there was a way for her to find him.

# Chapter Nine

## Kissing Bones

"I got an address off the earpiece," Ixy declared the next day.

Jenna and Crimp sat in their hotel room. They had planned to go find Vinia first thing that day, but Ixy's news changed that.

"Where is it?"

"It's four blocks away. It's a men's boxing gym and club, meaning athletes stay there when they're training."

"Okay," Jenna said, putting the information together into something useful. "So Ryatt is staying there. If Sardius is staying with him, he'd certainly be able to transmit to the earpiece from there. So, let's hunt up Ryatt and see what he has to say."

Jenna said all that and she said it confidently, but she didn't really want to do any of that. Not only did she find Ryatt weirdly attractive, but all that had become more real to her since he'd kissed her. Sardius said he was just that kind of guy, implying it didn't mean anything, and she shouldn't get bent out of shape about it... but she'd really liked it. How long had it been since she'd made out with anyone? If she pushed away the cobwebs of her mind, she knew she'd made out with Armen right before she'd been stolen away, but she didn't remember it being that exciting. Her disgust with his behavior blackening any fun she'd had with him until it resembled mold. Thinking further back, she hadn't let herself enjoy the guys she dated back on Earth because she was afraid of complications with her crown. Now a strange, otherworldly boxer had set her on fire.

She liked it even more when she thought it over. He had won his fight, he'd called her out of everyone and handled her like she was his prize. She shouldn't have liked it. Well, even if she did, she was completely certain she didn't like the idea of spending the day going to look for him. Surely if she talked to Ryatt and he showed himself to be the same kind of creep Armen was, another fine memory would be ruined.

Except wasn't she looking for Sardius? Didn't she want to meet him more than anything? She buckled up, hoping that one thing might lead to another. Maybe Sardius was at the same gym Ryatt was staying at and he just didn't want to see her because he was insecure about his looks. He'd said as much over the earpiece when they'd talked about it.

She paused in her thinking. Sardius hadn't seemed bothered by Ryatt making moves on her. Just how insecure was he? Was he there? What if he wasn't there? What if he only acted like Ryatt kissing her didn't bother him? What if he was really bothered, but decided to allow it because he could never measure up to a man like Ryatt? Or what if it all meant that Sardius didn't really care for her romantically?

Jenna needed to calm down, breathe, and adopt an octopus state of mind... the one where you could be in love with eight people at once without jealousy.

Jenna let out her breath. She was a human and she didn't think it was possible for her to have an eight-sided heart.

She got dressed and looked as cute as a button, but her mind was a mess as she stood by the door.

She put on her hat.

Crimp put on her hat.

They were ready to go.

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The gym was called The Clube, like someone had decided that putting an unnecessary e on the end of the word made it better.

“Clube?” Jenna sampled the word. It made her mouth feel dirty like someone had tricked her into saying ‘lube’ for their entertainment.

Crimp giggled next to her. “I can’t believe you’re all paying me for this,” she chuckled as she opened the door for Jenna.

Inside, it was almost empty. Probably most of the athletes were sleeping off whatever partying they’d done the night before, but since there was no one at the reception desk, Jenna and Crimp wandered around. The majority of the main floor was dedicated to boxing training and they found six boxing rings set up with mats and punching bags leading the way to where a handful of guys were training in the back.

Ryatt was in the ring, but he wasn’t fighting. He was training someone younger with huge pads on his arms for the kid to hit.

“Looks like you’ve got company, Crabman,” someone shouted when the cluster recognized Jenna as the woman he kissed in the ring the night before.

Ryatt stopped the boy from hitting and pulled the straps off his arms. “That’s Boneman to you,” he called playfully to whoever was heckling him. He dropped himself out of the ring and came toward Jenna like she was his long-lost love. “I knew you couldn’t stay away,” he said before he pulled her into his arms for another kiss.

Jenna had not been prepared for a greeting like that, regardless of what Sardius had told her and he completely swept her away. Okay, she admitted within herself, love without touching was crap.

Jenna pulled him closer, breathing him in and feeling his warmth after the chill rain outside.

She didn’t regain her senses before Crimp had a poisoned finger to Ryatt’s throat. “You were cooler last night,” she said snarkily.

He let go of Jenna.

Her senses reeled. She straightened her clothes, fixed her hat, and corrected the expression on her face. It took her a whole thirty seconds for her to reclaim her senses. “I want to talk to you,” she said evenly when she was calm.

Crimp took her bare finger away from Ryatt’s neck and resumed her position beside Jenna, apparently satisfied that he’d received a proper warning.

Ryatt smiled at Jenna and turned to the guys with him, “Well, I’ll just take my lady friend to the back to ‘talk.’” He air-quoted the word. “Keep that kid punching while I’m gone.”

Crimp followed Jenna and Ryatt into the far back and kept her distance so they could hiss whatever conversation they needed to have in relative privacy and she could still make sure Jenna stayed safe.

“How do you know Sardius?” Jenna whispered urgently.

“We have a certain amount in common,” he answered evasively.

“Where is he?” she demanded, urgency in her voice.

Ryatt’s mouth hung open. “Uh... He’s around. He escaped the jail during the riot. He fought his way to the offices and took one of the dimensional portals that brought him this system.”

“Is he here?” Jenna demanded.

Ryatt leaned forward, taking a heavy hand in their conversation. “Look, I’m not his dad. All I know is that he asked me to deliver that earpiece to you and I invited you to my match because I wanted to meet you.” His gray/brown eyes were like twilight on the muddiest night of the year. Somehow, they still had stars.

Jenna felt her inner turmoil crash in her chest. How could this guy be so cute? “You signed his name for him when you sent me the invitations?”

“Yeah, well, you know him and you don’t know me. I know for a fact, he didn’t mind. He wanted me to get you the earpiece. He wasn’t overly concerned over *how*.”

Jenna huffed a breath of impatience. “Can you give me a ballpark direction where I could look for him?”

Ryatt clicked his tongue. “Pirates don’t advertise where they sail. At least one that wants to stay alive doesn’t.”

Jenna’s shoulders fell and her back curved like she was a little shrimp. “Is there nothing you can tell me?”

He put his hands in his pockets. “Nothing is coming to mind, but there’s something you could tell me.”

“What?”

“Sardius hinted you might have a job for me doing security. I was hoping you could thank me for delivering you the earpiece and perhaps you could offer me a job.”

Sardius had mentioned that the night before, but Jenna was still uncertain. She held back her reply while Ryatt continued.

“I mean, I get a few paid fights and I’m teaching kids so I get by, but working as your bodyguard would be a vastly superior gig. What does *she* get paid?” he asked, pointing to Crimp.

“You wanted to ask me for a job and you began all this by making out with me... twice?” Jenna asked in confusion.

He leaned his hips toward her in a boyish fashion. “I like to put on a good show.”

“That would work well for what went on in the ring last night. Likewise, kissing me like that in front of your friends probably makes you look like a stallion, but for a person on my level, given your intentions, that kind of thing is really unprofessional,” Jenna remarked, straightening her back and steeling herself against his charms.

“If you hire me, I’ll be professional,” he promised with a smile that lacked some of the bravado he’d already exhibited.

“Perhaps now would be a good time for you to tell me what information Sardius gave you about me,” Jenna prompted.

“Just that you’re Jenna Fairchild, Chair of the Octavian/Adamis Diplomatic Council,” Ryatt said evenly. “There wasn’t anything else he needed to tell me. You’re all over the news, on everyone’s lips, on everyone’s minds... everywhere. Sardius said he worked for you and he’d



put in a good word for me through the earpiece he prepared for you if I managed to get it to you.”

Ixy cut in over Jenna’s pearl earpiece. “I think you should hire him. I’ve been researching him. His background is very clean and if he’s making deliveries for Sardius then he has your precious lover boy’s swamp of approval... Stamp,” Ixy corrected. “I meant to say stamp. Besides, having another set of hands on the ground would be very helpful.”

Jenna looked at Crimp who could hear everything they were saying. She was leaning against a wall with a Cheshire Cat grin across her face.

Because of her conversation with Sardius the night before, Jenna had been aware that this was in the works, but she had planned to let his recommendation slide. If she were choosing staff herself (and she spent the majority of her time reviewing resumes) she would have chosen someone like Vash to be in charge of security.

Vash was enormous with rocky muscles everywhere. Even having him as a butler freaked most people out a little, which Jenna liked. Vash also had no romantic interest in her whatsoever. She knew he spent most of his free time working out or speaking to his relatives over the communicator. Though he didn’t look it, he was quite young and he hadn’t been away from home for very long. Either that or the hazing given him by the AAMC messed him up so bad that he relied on his family back home to help him feel normal, like what they did to him hadn’t happened.

He missed his family.

Ryatt didn’t look anywhere near as honorable and his physique didn’t look as threatening as Vash’s. He had fought in the mid-weight class and that seemed appropriate. He was taller than Jenna but not taller than Vash. He was a fighter, but his appearance was more debonair than menacing.

The problem was that if she gave him the job, Ryatt would be in her palace all the time. She didn’t know how that would work for her. Yes, kissing him had been a thrill, but what would he be like all the time? Would he be leering at her while he ‘protected’ her? Would he be the kind of skirt-chaser who caused more problems than he solved by hopping into every available bed? Would he have to prove that he was tougher than Vash and end up fighting him because he honestly could not think of any other way to fill the time other than boxing?

“Is there somewhere we could go to talk about this more?” Jenna asked quietly.

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Ryatt took Jenna and Crimp to a cafe down the street. They began with Crimp explaining her job in more detail. How she spent her time, how she treated sensitive information, what her duties were like when there were no other security officers on the three palaces, and what her time off was like.

As she explained it, Jenna was astonished by how crappy it sounded. Jenna didn’t understand the universal money system well enough to know if Crimp was being paid enough to make her job worth it. It sounded like maybe she wasn’t.

For starters, when they were on the palaces, most of the security work was done by Ivy, Ixy, and the security team in orbit. They also did all the technical security work, securing

communication channels for confidential conversations, and making sure the security cameras didn't get hacked.

Crimp said she ran daily maintenance checks on escape vehicles and checked multiple escape routes, so she always knew which ones would be the most effective. Sometimes, diving straight into the water was the best choice. Other times, sending Excelyn into orbit or speeding across the water to a cave or a hideout was better. She also had to keep tabs on people she considered to be cause for concern considering whatever Excelyn had been dealing with lately. It was a list of people she was likely to tick off.

None of those things took up much time and she spent most of her time on standby.

The big con to working on the palaces was that even if Crimp had the day off, she couldn't leave. She couldn't spend her nights partying with the doctors and nurses on the mainland because she couldn't be gone that long. She wanted Ryatt to be hired so she could at least turn things over to him so she could spend her day off shopping instead of being on standby.

"I don't own a single pair of socks without a hole in them," she confided.

"We went shopping yesterday," Jenna asked. "Why didn't you buy some then?"

"Yeah, I'm going to complete my whole shopping list while I'm supposed to be protecting you?" She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I'll just set my shopping bags down while I defend you against some whack-job? No. I have to do my job properly."

After hearing Crimp explain the situation, Jenna knew she would have to hire Ryatt. She couldn't make everyone else's lives tough because she had her concerns. She just needed to make it clear what was expected of him and give him a trial run.

"Okay, Ryatt," Jenna said, leaning forward. "Does that sound like it's within your skill set?"

He nodded. "It all sounds very straightforward."

"Good. Now, I have to tell you about my palace. I have three employees. Misha is my stylist, Smoothie is my cook, and Vash is my butler. It's nice when they only have to do their job and it would be nice if you only had to do your job, but there aren't enough people for you to be snobby. I've had Misha serving drinks when it was definitely not her job to do so. I've had Smoothie doing security in the absence of a security guard, and Vash has been doing construction work. If you're going to be fussy, this might not be a good job for you."

"No. I'm happy to help with anything," he said easily.

Jenna wanted to smack him. Anyone as accommodating as Ryatt was bound to be trouble.

"Do you get into fights easily?" Jenna asked sharply, poking him to find the chink in his armor.

He laughed. "No. I have to be paid to get into a fight. It makes no sense to give it away for free."

"Do you have problems with propriety?" Jenna continued her poking.

He looked at his ragged knuckles with the bones protruding. "I don't usually scrape people by accident if that's what you're wondering."

That wasn't what Jenna was wondering in the least. She rephrased her question. "Do you have workplace romances?" she asked directly.

"With whom? I'd love to have a workplace romance with you," he accented with a smile.

"I wasn't asking you to have a romance with me," she grumbled, rolling her eyes and literally holding her right hand under the table so she didn't smack him.

He laughed at her tight expression. "Relax. I'm only joking. I get what you're asking. You don't want me to make a mess by pairing up with someone who works on the floating palaces. It would bother you and disgrace you if I couldn't draw the line. It shouldn't be a problem."

Jenna started scratching the inside of the ear that had had Sardius' earpiece in it the night before. What had Sardius been thinking? His recommendation of this guy did not feel like any of his other choices for staff members.

She kept asking questions. "Do you have any other skills? Is there anything else you bring to the table besides being a top fighter?"

"Sure. I've had military-grade training in security. I have worked on Adamis starships and can double as a hacker. I'm good with machinery and can do repairs on tech, machinery, transports, and computers. I've also had quite a lot of experience working in public relations. I can promise you that I will never embarrass you." He nodded at Crimp because he was explaining all over again how perfect he was for the job.

Crimp was pursing and unpursing her lips like she was trying to stop herself from showing too much approval.

"If I hire you," Jenna finally said. "You must forget that you and I have ever locked lips. I'm a dignitary. I cannot have a member of my staff pinching my butt, blowing me kisses, or ruining my concentration with inappropriate advances like that comment you made a moment ago about being in a romance with me. The only reason we're having this interview is because Sardius recommended you and I think so highly of his advice."

Ryatt cleared his throat. "I didn't think it would come to this, but I prepared a present for you to help ease your mind. This," he said, producing a tiny flat rectangle like a memory card and placing it on the table between them. "Is the only recording of our kiss at the fight last night. And there aren't any cameras in the gym."

"Check it, Ixy," Jenna hissed to her PA.

"I can only check that there are no other existing recordings," Ixy reminded her in a tone of voice that reminded Jenna of a teenager popping bubblegum.

"That's what I want you to do."

"You have a PA?" Ryatt exclaimed. "That's really cool. I thought the thing in your ear was a fashion statement."

Jenna looked at him. For a moment, she was utterly transfixed by the expression on his face. He just seemed so curious, so excited, and so anxious to make a good impression that Jenna suddenly felt reasonably comfortable hiring him. What had Sardius seen in him? She wasn't sure, but she knew what she saw in him. Someone thirsty for new experiences. That was why she wanted to be a diplomat. Even if her experiences sucked, she still wanted to have them.

Jenna asked Ryatt an array of questions and he answered them as primly as any interviewee ought to answer. Forty minutes later, Jenna allowed herself to show that she felt good about offering him the position.

"We're going to visit someone this afternoon," Jenna said, finishing up. "Could we meet you outside your boxing club at seven tonight?"

"The Clube," he corrected, not stumbling over the horrid awkwardness of the word and making a sexual comment in a way she couldn't complain about.

"Yeah. Whatever," Jenna fumbled. "Bring everything you need. Who knows when you'll be back?"

Ryatt smiled and thanked them. He was the perfect amount of pleased.

# Chapter Ten

## Whipped Thief

Vinia's butler invited Jenna and Crimp into Vinia's expansive mansion. He led them through beautifully decorated corridors until he brought them into a conservatory with wild plants growing like they were part of the wallpaper. Rain pattered on the glass walls. Birds fluttered outside their cages and water sprang from fountains. The light that reflected around them was like the black and white checks on a chess board.

Vinia herself sat in the midst of the beauty as the crowning achievement of the room. Jenna had seen pictures of her, but she wasn't quite prepared to see the glory of the real woman. Vinia had straight black hair, pink lips, pink cheeks, and pink eyeshadow. Her eyes were black with wide-fanned eyelashes. She wore a white dress that draped over her shape like she was a Grecian goddess.

Crimp bowed and Jenna did a greeting with a hand signal she'd been taught by Excelyn that excused her from extending any further honor because Vinia was of a lower rank than Jenna.

"Shall we begin by signing a non-disclosure agreement?" Jenna asked with a smile.

Vinia grinned as if Jenna had just offered her a thousand dollars. "Please."

Ixy provided the agreements and the four of them (Jenna, Vinia, Crimp, and Vinia's butler), placed their thumbprints on the hologram indicating their consent to a private conversation.

Once they were finished, Jenna sat in the chair closest to Vinia and began. "I suppose you know that I took over the Dahlia palace after Arvantis?"

"I did hear that," Vinia said with a cloaked smile.

"Well, when the AAMC guys trashed my bedroom, we made a startling discovery," Jenna breathed.

"What was that?" Vinia asked, eyes wide like she had no idea what Jenna was about to reveal.

"I think you know. So far it's twenty million Liri," Jenna replied evenly.

Crimp choked, not having heard about it before.

"Is that so?" Vinia said with a sparkle in her eye.

"Where did that money come from?" Jenna asked. "And is someone going to want it back?"

Vinia groaned low in her throat. "I suppose Sardius told you that it was me that hid it."

"He hinted at it."

"Can I speak to him? Can you wire him through my house speakers and let me speak to him?" she asked, sounding more excited than anyone had been before and most people were a little awed by him.

"I can't," Jenna had to admit. "He's not with us anymore."

"Oh. What a shame. I suppose nothing stays the same forever," Vinia said reflectively. "I enjoyed him so much. He fiddled with the house security footage over and over again to hide what I was up to, but if you've found the money, then there's nothing much to hide anymore."

"Where did it come from?"

"Extortion."

“I thought Arvantis was a good diplomat, except in regards to how he treated you.”

“I don’t know if he was good or not. Maybe he was,” Vinia said with a downward shrug. “Otherwise, he was... um... horrible. His money had nothing to do with his role as a diplomat. He took payouts from his family because he was blackmailing them. He wanted to deplete his family’s fortune to nothing. It was his goal to take everything from his parents and siblings. He wanted to make sure that the grandkids got nothing for an inheritance. It was his way of killing his family traditions. He thought he was doing everyone in the universe a big favor.”

“Was he?” Jenna wondered.

“I don’t know. He was a terrible person, but I suspect a little of that terribleness came from them,” Vinia explained. “What I do know is that it was his family that killed him. I was at the crime scene minutes before and minutes after. It had been doctored to look like Octavians had done it. His uncle was the killer. That murderer believed that if all the evidence at the crime scene pointed to an Octavian then it wouldn’t matter what other evidence there was. It wouldn’t matter that he was at the palace or that I had seen him or anything.”

“What about the security footage?” Jenna asked.

“I don’t know how he did it, but there was no video footage and the first thing he did was pull Sardius from Arvantis’ ear and drop the piece in the ocean. When I went into the room afterward, I did everything I could to make it look like a human had killed him instead of an Octavian—wiping down suction cup shaped blood smears and such. I called the Adamis police force and they saw what I’d done. They knew I hadn’t killed him myself and they knew that I wasn’t covering for who did. They just didn’t have enough evidence to prove that it was Arvantis’ uncle and accusing someone that prominent without evidence is a huge mistake. We couldn’t even get footage of the man entering the palace.” She shook her head mournfully at the end of her tale. “Not even Sardius could salvage a single photo to point to the real killer. It was Arvantis’ fault Sardius couldn’t help. He had limited Sardius’ access to the palace so harshly, by the end Sardius was little more than an earpiece.”

“I see,” Jenna said.

Vinia went on. “I felt that the fiasco was a success. I was happy Arvantis was dead and no innocent Octavian went to jail for his murder. With regards to the money... I hated Arvantis. I stole from him constantly, but he didn’t know where I was stashing the money. He didn’t think like me and didn’t look in the places I hid it. He would never look in a vase full of water. He was always checking for leakage directly from his bank account. Long story short, I couldn’t take that money with me when I left. For one thing, the authorities didn’t let me go back to the palace after I was interviewed at the police station. All my personal possessions were packed up and sent to me here. This is Arvantis’ retirement home. I understand you have a similar one on Octavia Five?”

Jenna nodded. Though she did not admit that Vinia’s was a thousand times nicer than her grandfather’s old house.

“You need two houses when you’re a diplomat,” Vinia said thoughtfully.

“Do you think Arvantis’ family will come after the money you stole?” Jenna wondered.

Vinia giggled. “No. I think they want to distance themselves from Arvantis. His uncle is doing some big business now, and no one wants it to come out that he killed his nephew. Especially not that he did it personally. People that rich hire professionals. They don’t dirty their hands themselves. I got all the money Arvantis took from them when he died. Between us girls and a

non-disclosure agreement, it's a lot more than twenty million. They've never come asking for it. Their wealth has grown so much since Arvantis' death that what he took from them is pennies to them now."

"I guess the big question is whether or not you want the money you stashed? Legally, it's all yours if Arvantis left you everything."

Vinia stretched a strand of her hair between her fingers. "No thanks. I don't want it. Getting it would be a pain and I have already had my fun with it. Arvantis took so much from me, it was a pleasure to take something from him whenever the opportunity presented itself. Buy some pretty shoes for yourself with it. It's on me."

Jenna looked down at her shoes regretfully. They were very plain, but they were the best shoes she owned in a universe where footwear was meant for people with feet shaped differently than hers.

Vinia continued, "And if you ever speak to Sardius again, please tell him how much I have appreciated his friendship. I feel like he carried me through that extremely difficult time in my life."

"I will certainly do that," Jenna agreed, hoping she would be able to talk to him through the earpiece he sent her soon. Then she had an unrelated question. "However, I wanted to ask you if you know of anyone from when you were in the Dahlia palace who would make a good diplomat?"

Vinia huffed. "I wasn't introduced to anyone while I was there. Sardius really didn't tell you how I was treated, did he? What a sweetheart! I'm sorry I can't be of more help. I know that those talks are very important and I know you're in a rush to fill those seats, but I wasn't involved in any of that. I was practically a prisoner, whipped and thrashed for a deranged man's amusement."

Jenna had a crown in the pocket of her cargo pants. She had been thinking of crowning Vinia if the right moment came. Surely, Vinia knew a lot about the talks since she had been Arvantis' third wife for seven years before his death. But seeing her like this, Jenna knew she was going to have to leave empty-handed. Vinia needed space and time to heal.

Jenna stood up. "Thank you so much for meeting with us, for your gift, and for your candid talk. You are a true lady." Jenna gave her a quarter bow that was more than Excelyn said she should ever give anyone.

As they left Vinia's estate, Jenna said to Ixy through her earpiece, "Get Temptic on the line. Tell him we've decided to leave this evening. Have him send our pod to the roof of our hotel. I need to get off this moon now."



# Chapter Eleven

## A Man Around the Palace

Jenna thanked Temptic at least thirty times before she let him sign off when they got back to Octavia Prime. He was planning on staying at the space station with the orbital security team, so he was dropping their pod from orbit.

Back at home, Jenna started by introducing Ryatt to everyone on the floating palaces, starting in her palace and moving to Excelyn's and then Celestina's.

Excelyn looked at him and then Jenna pleasantly, but like nothing was outside the norm. She was pleased Crimp now had someone to trade off duties with.

Celestina looked him up and down like she was five seconds off slipping him some money to see what was under his shirt. She probably would have done so if Josh had not strolled by after a swim and diverted her attention with water rolling down his impressive physique.

Afterward, Jenna showed Ryatt the bedroom set aside for a bodyguard in the servants' wing of the Dahlia Palace that would be his room.

His posture and expression had changed to a more professional demeanor since he made his promise that he would control his rampant flirting. His movements had tightened up, and the slightly sleazy smile was off his face. Instead, he looked alert and composed. The very picture of someone Jenna could trust.

He walked around his new room, familiarizing himself with his surroundings.

Jenna leaned against the wall and examined him.

He touched the mattress made just for one before he said briskly, "Now that you've introduced me to everyone, shall we go have a look at your personal escape pod? Has anyone had a look at it since the night you were ejected inside it?"

Jenna shook her head in the negative and led Ryatt into her bedroom with the pocket door where the extra pod was stored. Sadius had not explained at the time, but a pod with a bed inside it was a luxury item. Neither Excelyn nor Celestina had one. He had spent a startling amount of his security budget on it. Jenna supposed he had no fear about spending money, even on stupid things like her barefoot sandals. Since he knew where Vinia had stashed hordes of money, he knew where they could get more if they ran low on capital.

Stepping inside the room, Ryatt saw that the whole place had been gutted. The walls were ripped apart, the furniture was wrecked and the bed and canopy were covered in plastic wrap.

"What happened here?" he asked seriously.

"Didn't you get the story from the news outlets? It's not classified information. The AAMC candidates did some damage before the police removed them from the palace."

"They did all this?" Ryatt asked with a sour expression.

"No. When we assessed the damage, we decided a larger renovation was in order. This has been Vash's latest project. I help too when I haven't got as much to do. I was hoping you could give him a hand when you're unoccupied."

Vash wasn't in the room at the moment. Jenna had introduced Vash to him in the dining room, but for the time being, Jenna and Ryatt were alone.

Jenna showed him the closet where her pod was stowed and he began opening the panels to make sure it was still in good working order.

He opened the panels starting at one side and making his way over to the others. Each panel had something different in it. One stored battery packs and another one stored electric oars as a backup system in case her rutter was shot off. There were several intended for cargo and emergency supplies. It was only a coincidence that he opened the panel where Misha had stored Jenna's stash of extra crowns first.

The crowns were not there anymore.

Ever since the night she'd been attacked by the AAMC, Jenna had thought it was best not to store all the crowns in the same place at once. Once someone was crowned, the only way to remove their right to work as a diplomat was to kill them. If the AAMC had been able to crown their own people, Jenna would not have been able to rescind the appointments. She kept only one crown with her. Otherwise, the rest were stored outside the palace. That way, even if someone stole the one she had on her, it only got them one vote. That was hardly the end of the world.

Besides, there were more than seven crowns in the box her grandmother had left her. There needed to be a minimum of eight diplomats for them to legally vote and only eight of them could reside in the palaces at once, but there could be more crowned. As a matter of fact, it would be safer for everyone if more were crowned. Such a thing would make the program sturdier if one of the working diplomats couldn't perform their duties for some reason.

Ryatt had looked in that compartment first, but he was looking in all the compartments. The order in which he looked probably didn't mean anything.

"If you don't mind me asking," Ryatt said as he tightened a few of the screws in the oar, "why is Vash doing this work instead of a contractor?"

"I didn't know who we could hire to do the job. I'm super suspicious of anyone associated with AAMC since the attack and humans need to do this job, not Octavians. That was the worst night of my life. I have never been so scared. I was hoping that I might be able to get you to help me feel less scared."

"How am I supposed to do that?" he asked curiously.

"Well, by doing guard duty when we have visitors and by helping Vash with the brickwork so I can return to my room sooner."

"Wait," he raised a hand. "You're obviously not sleeping here. Where are you sleeping?"

"I... uh... sleep in the servants' wing next to Smoothie."

"How did you manage the trip to Spikay Two if you're living this fearfully in your own home?" he asked incredulously.

"It might seem stupid to you, but I chased you down that rabbit hole thinking that I might meet Sardius if I did. The night the AAMC attacked me was the same night that Sardius went dark. At the last moment, he meant to cut our communications, but he didn't. He only muted me."

The blood ran out of Ryatt's face. "You heard the prison riot?"

"Hmm," Jenna hummed. "I was alone in the dark underwater listening to the screaming and the dying until his earpiece broke. You're the only person I've told that to. Most of the people here don't know or don't talk about the reality of PAs and they don't know where Sardius was, or why he's not still working here. You know Sardius when nobody else does, and I could really use someone to talk to."

Ryatt reached out a hand toward Jenna, but she moved out of his reach. “Later. We can talk about it later. You need to be measured for clothes with Misha. I’ll walk you over.”

He put his hands behind his head as he followed her. “You don’t like me wearing holograms?”

“I’m sure it’s very convenient for quick costume changes, or if you’re trying to blend into a crowd, but I’d prefer it if you didn’t wear them here. Sometimes the sunlight interrupts the hologram and a lot of your bare skin is visible. It’s not professional,” she said stiffly as she paused in front of Misha’s workroom.

What she said there was not even a tenth of what she thought. His bones held that perfect muscle look all the time. He didn’t need to flex. His muscles were under his bones. She already knew from the times he’d held her and kissed her that touching his arm was like touching another man’s jaw—all bone.

He looked at her gravely without commenting before calling to Misha and entering her workroom.

Jenna left them and made her way to the control panel.

“I don’t know why you have to ruin it for the rest of us,” Ixy whined in her ear. “If you don’t want to look at him, don’t look. When you were on Spikay Two, I could only see what I could see from your earpiece. Ever since you all got home and I got to see him through all the palace cameras, Ivy and I have been watching him everywhere. He’s magic. Why do you gotta ruin the fun?” Ixy exclaimed with mild emotional anguish.

“What fun?”

“I’ve been intentionally disrupting his holographs,” she admitted with a squeal.

“Why?”

“I’m in an all-women’s prison!” she snorted as though that was explanation enough.

“He’ll still shower,” Jenna replied snarkily.

“By the way, My Lady,” Ixy said, elevating her tone. “You’ve been doing much better with what we talked about.”

When Ixy and Conrad joined the team, Jenna needed to have a private conversation with Ixy about the showers. Jenna wanted to be able to shower without giving Conrad a peep show. Ixy had been coaching her as to where to stand in the room, where to hold towels, and how to manage her body so she didn’t have to worry about anyone getting a free show.

“I wanted to ask you,” Ixy sniggered. “How did you manage all that with Sardius?”

“I didn’t. At first, I didn’t know he could see me, and then he and I had a bonding experience where I was naked for days. He would have seen some pretty terrible things during that time. I had to crap completely naked while leaning against a palm tree and he had to talk me through it.”

“How, in the name of all that is holy, did that happen?” Ixy exclaimed.

“I was shipwrecked and I was saved by being placed buck naked in a reptile farm tank,” Jenna laughed at the absurdity. “After that, it didn’t seem to matter what he saw.”

“Okay, first thing, never tell anyone that story again... and I mean, like ever. You get me, Farm Girl?”

Jenna couldn’t stop laughing. “They tried to feed me worms.”

“I’ll feed you worms if you don’t wipe that story from your memory,” Ixy threatened. “You’re seriously telling that story after all your fine talk to Ryatt about being a dignitary? It’s a miracle you care if Conrad sees you naked.”

Jenna slowed her breathing and wiped a little moisture from her eye. "I like Conrad. I don't want to fill his brain with what I look like naked. I want him to think I'm respectable."

"How do you think I got so many guys to let me have the controls to their spaceships?" Ixy suddenly asked.

"How?"

"By looking like I deserve respect no matter what I'm wearing. Which means, you could still be respectable even if you are completely naked." Ixy let that sink in. Then she abruptly said, "Gotta go. Misha has Ryatt's shirt *and* pants off."

Jenna heard Ixy sign off.

She gave Ixy exactly four minutes to ogle Ryatt before interrupting. "Is he quite finished?"

"Yeah, Misha had some clothes she could tailor for him. He's back in his holograms for now, but he'll be dressed by tonight. Boo! There's really nothing like a proper Boneman to get ya going?"

"Are they popular?" Jenna wondered.

"I dunno," Ixy barked. "I just like him 'cause that's what I am. There's no place like home. That, and other types of men are weirdly squishy."

Jenna rolled her eyes at the camera pointed at her and said, "Aside from all that, I need to find a few very proper Adamis doctors in our system that are interested in becoming diplomats."

"How do you want to whittle them down?" Ixy asked, finally getting to work.

"We should start by finding ones that have been particularly noisy about Octavian rights and compare that list against the lists of doctors who have been nominated to be diplomats. See if they overlap. Once we have a list, we can send each of them an inquiry letter asking them if they're interested in being selected. Maybe we can get a few to interview."

Jenna's afternoon went on like that as she read articles about various doctors. When night came, she drank her dinner shake with Excelyn in the Stone Palace courtyard.

"Not eating dinner with your staff tonight? Seems a little negligent after hiring someone new. Shouldn't you be there to welcome Ryatt?"

"Honestly," Jenna said with a sigh. "Until he gets some real clothes, I can't stand to look at him."

Excelyn laughed. "He wasn't wearing real clothes? I guess that makes sense. His race is closer to an Octavian genetically than yours or mine. Clothes are probably a nuisance for him. I wanted to ask you. How did you feel comfortable enough to hire him? You've been on edge since the AAMC kerfuffle."

Jenna agreed. "Oh... A big fat collection of reasons. Sardius recommended him. Crimp needed someone to alternate with. I find him unspeakably attractive."

"What? You're just going to tack that on at the end?" Excelyn laughed.

"I hate it. I hate that feeling like a worm is flopping around in my belly. That feeling has never led to anything good," Jenna admitted huskily.

Excelyn looked Jenna up and down as if to compare her words to everything else the doctor knew about her. "You don't seem like the type of woman who's ever been broken-hearted. I'd peg you as the type who has had your romantic conquests but never found any one man who was enough to keep up with you. Have there been men in your past?"

Jenna shook her head. “Not anything serious, even though I have an ex-husband and a current fiancé. I guess for the most part, you’re right. I just don’t know where the lines are between workplace sexual misconduct and what is perfectly all right.”

“If you marry him, there’s no conflict. Your marriage to Sardius never went through. You could take Ryatt as your third husband.”

“I could *take* him?” Jenna responded incredulously. Then she huffed out a laugh. “On my planet, women don’t *take* men. We have to wait for them to decide something about us. Ask us to dance, ask us for our phone number, and finally, ask us to marry them.”

Excelyn yawned. “Your planet sounds stupid. I asked both my husbands to marry me. Not at the same time, because I only had one at a time. Most Adamis still do it that way—one at a time. It works better, but they’re not diplomats that can end up in strange places for years on end. When you’re separated by oceans of stars for eons, you live like an Octavian, in the arms of whoever you end up in the arms of.”

“Would you ever get remarried?” Jenna asked curiously.

“No. I don’t need a husband in the same way I don’t need one of my hands cut off. I’ve already been married twice and I feel good about not doing it again, but if I’d *never* done it, I’d find someone to pair up with.”

“What do you think of Ryatt? Your expression earlier was quite guarded.”

“I had Ivy give me all the information Ixy had on him and I agree that he’s a fine hire. We had to hire somebody and you hate the AAMC guys and exAAMC guys are almost all there is when it comes to bodyguards. Ryatt’s a prizefighter. It should be fine. Although I was thinking you should send him out to a firing range to see what his aim is like.”

“That sounds like a fun day,” Jenna agreed. “I’d like to shoot something too.”

“You should absolutely shoot something if that helps you relieve some tension. I hate seeing you like this. You were much calmer when Sardius was doing whatever he did to calm you down,” Excelyn said like a true friend.

“Sardius isn’t dead,” she finally worked up the nerve to say. “I spoke to him.”

“That’s great news,” Excelyn congratulated her. When she saw Jenna’s face, she recalculated and changed her tone to one of condolence. “I see. He couldn’t come with you.”

“I don’t even know why. He arranged for me to hear his voice, for him to tell me that he was alright, and that was it. He cut the comm and... I don’t know what he’s doing or why he can’t come back. I know he wants to work with me, I just don’t know why he can’t.”

“Just let it sit,” Excelyn advised sagely. “I’m sure it will all make sense, eventually.”

Jenna finished her drink and her talk with Excelyn before returning her cup to the kitchen, thanking Smoothie for the meal, and retiring to her room.

# Chapter Twelve

## Mattress Meeting

Jenna got ready for bed with her door bolted. She changed into a nightgown, braided her hair, sucked out her mouth instead of brushing her teeth, and then right before she got into her twin-sized bed, she opened the door. Ever since that terrible night, she couldn't sleep in her bedroom, and she had even lost her nerve for sleeping in a room with the door closed. She felt much safer if she could hear what was happening outside her bedroom more clearly. She got into bed, curled up into the little shrimp position she slept in, and closed her eyes.

She wasn't expecting it when Ryatt entered the room. "So this is the way her excellency sleeps? Alone in a twin bed in a sad little room in the servants' quarters."

"What were you imagining?" she said in a hostile tone.

"Honestly?" he said lightly. "I was expecting a grand room with a big bed where you were worshiped into ecstasy by more than one lover until sunup."

Jenna rolled onto her back and moaned. "No, you weren't! Besides, I wouldn't have even the slightest interest in that level of depravity. If there's one thing in this world a person deserves, it's for the person they're having sex with to be paying attention to only them. Anything less is sexual abuse."

"But that's what you diplomats are famous for with your authorization to have so many spouses," he reminded her with a peaked eyebrow.

"I have no husbands and zero lovers." Jenna's head clunked against her headboard as she reared her head in disgust. "Do you need something?" she asked as she rubbed the sore spot on her head.

"Yeah," Ryatt said, coming in and pulling at something under her mattress.

Jenna felt the whole mattress lift up and then drop a few inches. In a second, he had converted her twin bed into a double.

"I'm going to sleep here." He put a pillow down next to hers and covered himself with a separate blanket.

"I don't want you to sleep here," she said stiffly. "I gave you a room. It's nearby if anything happens in the night."

He stretched out next to her and ignored what she said completely. "I can't stop thinking about what you told me this afternoon. You heard the prison riot?"

"Yeah," she whispered back.

"I was there, you know. It was not like the boxing match the other night. That was a kill-or-be-killed night. It wasn't even like a battle. It was very vicious... traumatizing. I don't think I've been the same person since then. Guards were killing prisoners. Prisoners were killing guards. Prisoners were killing each other. Whenever I think back, there is only what happened before that night and what happened after. I know it's like that every day, but it's almost like I remember everything in color until that night and now I remember everything in black and white... even meeting you. I get how you feel having heard it better than I can explain."



Jenna turned over to face him, quite a lot of her annoyance had been drained from her. "That's nice of you to say, but I won't be able to sleep with you here no matter how understanding you are. We're not close enough for me to feel comfortable sleeping next to you."

"I have an idea. Let's not sleep. Let's just talk, talk straight through the night," he suggested playfully.

"Will you tell me about Sardius?" she asked cautiously.

He chuckled. "I suppose I will. Though I don't know what you want to know."

Jenna didn't hesitate as she rushed her words. "I want to know what he is like in person. I never got to meet him in person."

Something in Jenna's conversation caught in Ryatt's head. His eyes went glassy. "You and Sardius were in love?"

"What?" she blurted, almost sounding outraged.

"Or more correctly, you were in love with him?" Ryatt proceeded. "He wanted me to deliver the earpiece, but... if he had wanted me to keep my hands off you, I'm sure he would have made that clear. He's not the sort of man to be trifled with. He's a butcher."

Jenna was horrified by what Ryatt said about her and what he said about Sardius. She wasn't sure which thing bothered her more.

"In a good way," Ryatt amended quickly.

"He's a butcher in a good way?" Jenna reiterated drolly.

"If he wasn't," Ryatt continued, "I wouldn't have lived through the prison riot, but a man like that... in love? He could never love anyone. A person can only kill so many people before that part of them breaks."

Jenna shook her head, unable to believe him. "No. He had a sense of humor. Just because he didn't let you see that side of him, that doesn't mean he didn't have a lighter side that he saved just for me. Sardius became my PA because he wanted to protect me. You should have heard the fuss he made when my high heels tore up my ankles or a thousand other ways he guided me gently instead of being rough. He may not have been as crazy about me as I was about him. Maybe his feelings played to a different melody."

"What sort of melody?"

Jenna didn't like what she was about to say, but she said it anyway. "You know, maybe he wasn't in love with me the way I was in love with him, but he had to have felt *something*."

"Then why didn't he come?" Ryatt asked softly.

"Could he have come?" Jenna snapped back.

Ryatt floundered. "I have no idea. Terrorists don't generally tell their grunts all the details of their lives. I got off easy. I was given one job. Give you that earpiece, play my cards right, and get a job working for you. That was it. I never expect to see him again."

"Do you know where he was going?" Jenna asked desperately.

"I don't," he said firmly. "But I can tell you a theory. Could a man with that much blood on his hands walk in here without causing a big stink? Would the Octavians be comfortable? Would *you* be comfortable? Back in my system, he was famous for ripping off software, hardware, starships, money, medicine, supplies, and whatever else. His crimes were pardoned because all the infractions committed by revolutionaries were pardoned, but leaving that star system and coming to this one wasn't going to make him a different person, change his past, or make his



enemies cease to exist. Could a man like that leave his past behind, come here, put on a tie, and be... what? What did you want from him?"

"He was going to be my husband," Jenna admitted wearily.

Ryatt's eyes bugged out. "I don't understand. That doesn't make sense. Marrying the top OAC diplomat off to a terrorist pirate? I don't believe it. Did you and Sardius make plans together for him to come here to be with you?"

Jenna drooped. "No. I wanted to marry him, but I had no way to pull him from the prison. After we got married, he would still have been there."

Ryatt snorted a laugh. "What good was that going to do when he was in prison and you were here? How was he going to protect you? Satisfy you? Be your husband?"

"I liked the idea of no one being able to hurt him to get to me," she said quietly, knowing that all her past dreams were gone, like clouds that filled the whole sky, but had all been blown away. "No one would be able to kidnap him or hurt him in order to manipulate me if he was in jail in another dimension. It felt like if I put my highest romantic priority with him, my heart would be safe forever."

Ryatt frowned. "That sounds lonely, but not stupid. It would be better if you shot for something higher. Try to get together with a man who's tough enough to manage what you need. One who is present."

"At the time," Jenna grumbled, "working with Sardius as my PA felt like the safest thing in the world. It felt like he was all I would ever need. Since he's been gone, I feel worse than I did when I was shipwrecked."

"I'll help you to calm down," Ryatt offered soothingly.

"Oh yeah? You feel up to thrashing six AAMC majors?" she asked violently.

"Not to be too boastful," Ryatt began, "but if I wasn't able to do something that astounding, I never would have made it out of that prison, even with Sardius leading the way."

"You must fight dirty," Jenna commented.

"I'd fight like I was Sardius if it was for you," he said, a grin on his face that made his eyes seem warm.

"Huh?" Jenna said in snotty disbelief. It seemed like he was still trying to borrow Sardius' credibility with her and that annoyed her. To get back at him she moved the subject along. "Have you heard about me?" Jenna asked with a wicked giggle. "About how I'm the hardest woman in the universe to please with only eleven men in the whole sprawling cosmos who I could love?"

"That algorithm is stupid," Ryatt dismissed. "It doesn't include men in prison or men who have different skeletons than you."

"You mean that even if you and Sardius were not prisoners, neither of you would have been included because you're Bonemen?"

"Yeah. Your pickiness makes perfect sense to me." His posture indicated he thought he was the best the universe had to offer.

Jenna closed her mouth at how sensible she found him. She couldn't help agreeing.

Ryatt hovered over her. "I want to ask you something."

"What?"

"Do I look like I know how to do my job?"

Jenna clenched her jaw as she thought over Ryatt's question. Because she found him mouthwateringly attractive in one moment, it was hard to focus on how he did the maintenance work on her escape pod... or anything else he did.

"Yeah. I think you'll do fine," she hedged with an eye-roll as she twisted a lock of her hair between her fingers.

"You've calmed down," he observed before falling on his back.

Jenna's breath caught. He was right. She was calm.

He snapped his fingers and the little light that was in the room went out.

"What are you doing?" she breathed.

"Shut up and go to sleep." He lay next to her, though he did not touch her.

She closed her eyes, understanding that he only wanted her to feel safe. Somehow, that was enough for her.

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In the morning, Jenna felt like she had slept for years. Had she really been able to sleep next to Ryatt? It wasn't even so much that she'd slept. It was that she'd slept well. How much sleep had she caught up on? She sat up, scooted to the end of the bed, so she didn't disturb Ryatt, and went into the bathroom. In the mirror, she looked ten years younger.

"Ixy? Did Ryatt try anything after I fell asleep?" she mumbled into her earpiece.

"It's Conrad," the male voice on the other end said.

"How long have you been there?"

"Since eleven last night."

"Did he do anything to me after I fell asleep?"

"No, he didn't do anything. You, however, did something."

Jenna stuck out her tongue. "Tell me now. What embarrassing thing did I do?"

"Nothing. Normally when you sleep, you sleep rolled in this little ball with your knees almost touching your forehead. Last night, you uncoiled," Conrad informed her.

"Did I?" Jenna asked in astonishment.

"I don't think it meant anything specific, in case you're thinking of getting all emotional," he said in a deadpan PA voice. "Just that with Ryatt next to you, he was stretched out on his back and you did the same thing, like you were following his lead. I'd say it was an improvement."

"Tell me, Conrad. Do you recognize him? Is he a Boneman you recognize?"

"I'm not sure. However, I need to tell you that I got notice last night that the prison has got their act together enough to send you Sardius' half of your wedding contract."

"Is his half complete? Do I just need to sign it to be married to him?"

"Ha! No," Conrad said over the earpiece. "It means that a sample of Sardius' DNA is being sent to you as part of the marriage certificate you had the prison make. It's not a piece of paper. It's a device that holds his DNA. In order to enact the wedding, you have to provide a piece of your DNA (a hair). Once that's in place, the bride and groom prick their fingers with the needles provided. His blood hasn't been provided. They didn't get that far in the process. In order to make it legal, you would need him to provide his blood. Since we have no idea where Sardius is, the marriage certificate is just a memento at this point. Anyway, the package has just crossed

into your system. If it gets picked up by a decent courier service, it'll be in your hands in a few weeks."

"Thanks, Conrad."

Jenna cut her connection with him, retrieved the earpiece that Sardius had sent her, and put it in her ear. Power went on and she felt it connect. "Sardius?" she whispered. She had to talk to him about what she'd just learned.

"Hi," his beautiful voice drawled. "If I haven't answered, I'm at the farthest reaches of the universe beating the hell out of something that deserves it. Maybe we can talk some other night."

Jenna turned off the earpiece. He was serious when he said she had to contact him at night.

# Chapter Thirteen

## Two People Hiding in the Dark

After rigorously screening the doctor candidates, Jenna landed on someone she thought was the perfect candidate for the fourth crown. He was a traditionally practicing Octavaian doctor. His name was Dr. Philip Russell and he was all glitz and teeth. Glitz because he was young (only about forty) and a very pretty specimen of an Adamis man, with dark eyes, dark skin, and hair that curled in perfect waves behind his ears. Teeth because he was a fierce advocate in teaching Octavian first aid to Adamis and Octavians alike.

Jenna showed his profile to Excelyn and Celestina during one of their meetings.

Celestina grinned like a cat when she saw him. "I'm all aboard. Can you imagine the great footage we could get with that guy? It's obvious he's had a love affair with a camera and we need people who are pretty as much as we need... his other qualifications.."

"I was thinking the same thing," Jenna confessed, laughing quietly at Celestina's one-track mind.

Then she turned to gauge Excelyn's response. She knew Excelyn was unlikely to like him. He was on the other side of the medical spectrum, but his conventional wisdom would win points with many different groups throughout the galaxy.

"Does he look like the bogeyman to you?" Jenna asked the good doctor.

Excelyn's eyes were deadpan as she replied. "I know him."

"And?"

"And I was thinking that if you have your heart set on him, it might be a good idea for me to personally ask him if he is willing to do this," Excelyn volunteered.

"Why?" Jenna wondered. "Aren't you archenemies with traditionally practicing doctors?"

"Yes," she said lightly. "Even so, I don't disagree with his appointment. If you have to have a doctor like that, he's as good as any. He's well-meaning, well-groomed, well-educated... Everything you're looking for. I just think it would be better for all of us if I personally invited him to stay."

"In the Sand Palace?" Jenna prompted. That was the palace they always used for guests.

"No. He can stay with me in the Stone Palace," Excelyn corrected.

Jenna glanced at Celestina, who glanced back, but before any conclusion could be drawn by the two other diplomats, Excelyn continued. "Look, it's not just for me. Celestina has an entourage of filming people coming to stay... permanently—"

Celestina interrupted. "They're not going to be living in my palace. I bought a line of properties in a seaside villa. They are not going to be living with me."

"Will Josh stay with you?" Excelyn asked.

"Naturally. He's been my live-in lover for over five years and as soon as I nail down who I would like my first husband to be, I'll happily marry Josh as my third," she said with a lady-like wink. "Besides, if I have a say in it, Josh is never going anywhere. I'd have him here in this meeting if he didn't need a shower."

"Does he like that much togetherness?" Jenna questioned.

Celestina lolled her head back. "I only ever *ask* him to stay. It's not like I tie him down."

"In any case," Excelyn said, returning the conversation to the subject at hand. "Celestina will be busy getting them all settled and Jenna, you need to finish renovating your bedroom. If you won't hire contractors, can you please tie your hair up in a scarf and help Vash finish? Last I heard, you were sleeping in the servants' wing on a hide-a-bed. You need to get a grip and I can do this."

Jenna cringed at Excelyn's observations. "Fine. You want to get this guy? Go get him. Bring him back and say whatever you need to say to him. After I have a decent interview, I'll crown him."

"Can you imagine how great that black crown is going to look in his thick, dark hair? We really needed a win like that," the TV celebrity gushed.

Excelyn gave Celestina a stabbing glare, like it didn't matter how pretty his hair was, he was still a serpent and Celestina was a hundred years behind if she didn't see that.

Jenna went over the timeline with Excelyn before getting up and heading back across the bridge to her own palace.

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After the meeting, Jenna kept her promise. She tied her hair up, put on some of her old clothes that had been brought over from her old apartment on Earth, and went into her bedroom to mix mortar with Vash. Ryatt joined them. It turned out he was good at stirring stuff that was almost cement.

Jenna played music from her playlist, got creative with the way the brick was laid, worked until her back was sore, joked around with Vash and Ryatt, and basically had a day where she was almost a normal girl.

She was better than a normal girl. She was a popular girl.

Ryatt always treated her well. Vash was a different story. On that day, Vash treated her like her opinion was important and did everything she asked.

"Why are you being so good, Vash? I thought you didn't want to do things outside your job description."

"Don't get me wrong," he started, surprisingly discussing the chip on his shoulder. "I'm not praising you, but it was very cool of you not to insist that I make nice with the AAMC officers. The whole time they were with us, it wasn't your plan that I should confront them, but that I should run. The AAMC has such long arms, before that night, I always thought that I wasn't safe. Wherever I went, wherever I worked, they would find me. In my future, there would be another night of violence and hate like the one where my military career ended before it began. Even though I was the victim, I was still a disgrace. You know that's why they were coming to my room that night? To disgrace me and haze me all over again."

"When you ran," Jenna asked, "where did you hide?"

"I was in a secret passageway in complete darkness. There was a light above me, but I didn't dare turn it on because I was worried that light might shine around the door frame and they'd find me."

"Were you scared?"

“No!” Vash huffed with a smile on his face. “No. I was completely relieved. I was close enough that I could hear what was happening in the hallway even though I couldn’t get involved. Smoothie was kicking their asses with the butts of their own rifles. There was nothing to be afraid of.”

Hearing what Vash said sucked all the breath out of Jenna’s lungs. At the exact moment he described, she had also been in a dark space listening to a fight that she couldn’t engage in. What she experienced had traumatized her, made her bedfellow fear, and turned her world upside down. How could the same night have been so different for two allies?

Vash didn’t notice Jenna’s reaction and continued, “After I left the AAMC, I worked in hospitals because that’s what you do on Octavia Prime, the least AAMC-controlled planet in the universe. I knew they’d come to your palace at some point, which was why I gave you all those dumb rules during our interview. I took this job because, though I knew they’d be around, I thought they’d be at arm’s length. Jenna, you cannot believe how you set me free by being kind to me on that day. Ever since the incident, I feel like everything has changed. I didn’t get to rise in the ranks of the AAMC, but the ghost of that failure doesn’t haunt me anymore. What we’re doing here is good enough for me. Not only that,” he said, speaking quietly so Ryatt wouldn’t hear, “but finding Vinia’s secret fortune has been crazy. What an adventure! Am I right?”

Jenna nodded.

Ryatt had slowed his work as he listened to the parts of Vash’s story that were loud enough for him to hear.

After they finished the day’s work, Jenna had a shower, drank her dinner shake, and braided her hair so she’d have good waves in the morning.

She was about to get into bed when she decided to have a last-minute chat with her PA. It was late, and she didn’t usually check in with her PA late at night, but she wanted to make sure that everything was good before she tried to call Sardius.

“Ixy?”

“It’s Conrad,” came the down-tempo voice.

“I was just about to go to bed when I thought I should check in with you. Is there anything I should know about?”

“Well, Excelyn and Crimp kidnapped that doctor—Philip. They have him zip-tied to a chair in her living room.”

“What?” Jenna gawked in disbelief.

“That is what you get when you hire a PA who likes watching things crash. Ixy is watching Ivy’s feed and she’s laughing her face off. When you were doing your research on Philip, she held back half his personal info and you didn’t notice.”

“Why didn’t *you* tell me?” Jenna complained.

“I didn’t notice either until I saw what was so interesting to Ixy and Ivy just now. Besides, I’ve only been logged in for ten minutes and I wasn’t going to tell you when you were in the shower. What could you do before you got dressed?”

“Fine,” Jenna conceded. “What hilarious detail did she leave out?”

“Philip is Excelyn’s ex-husband.”

Jenna gawked. “How can that be? She’s over forty years older than him.”

“I’m not telling you why the universe is the way it is. I’m only telling you that she married him fifteen years ago and they were married for eleven years. He was her second husband and it

was she who dumped him. Apparently, he was a mess about it. He has only wanted to get back together with her. As part of their divorce settlement, he asked to have dinner with her once a year as his way of staying in her life. Their yearly date was tonight.”

“And she kidnapped him?” Jenna groaned. “Why did she have to kidnap him? It sounds like he would have come with her if she’d asked.” Jenna stopped, her mind whirring in all directions. “This must mean that their talks went badly.”

“Maybe.”

“Can you find out what’s going on inside Excelyn’s living room right now, little hacker?”

“Are you kidding me? Ixy and Ivy are on the other end of that and they’re enjoying themselves far too much. Nothing I try is going to work.”

“Is the bridge between our palaces still up?”

“Yup.”

“Well then.” Jenna jumped to her feet. “I think I’ve got a man or two hanging around that can handle this.”



# Chapter Fourteen

## Outskirt Love

Jenna changed her clothes. She was not going to kidnap an already kidnapped doctor in her jam jams. When she opened her door, Ryatt was standing outside it with a pillow and blanket in his arms.

"We're going to have to postpone the sleepover," she said, blowing past him and rushing to knock on Vash's door. "Wanna do crimes?" she called through his door.

"Coming!" Vash called.

Ryatt followed her and pouted, "I wanna do crimes too."

"Yes, you're coming too." She narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. "You're wearing clothes, right?"

"Yeah. Misha set me up."

"Cool. Out of curiosity, what was in your luggage if there weren't any clothes in there?"

"Weaponry," he replied without skipping a beat.

"Like guns?"

"No guns. Bombs are way more effective. Don't worry. They were not assembled. I'm a security officer. Taping a bomb under someone's chair is way more efficient than trying to shoot them *after* you've discovered they're a threat."

Jenna was mildly horrified, even though she saw his perspective. "What do you do if they sit in the wrong chair?"

"You put bombs under all the chairs, even your own," Ryatt explained without blinking.

She tilted her head back and looked him over. "You don't actually look that dangerous, yet you do stuff like that? How are you still alive?"

"It's not that complex. Another trick is to put pop rocks under your tongue right before you kiss someone," he said with an eyebrow wiggle.

"What is that going to accomplish?" she wondered snarkily.

"It's too hard for them to spit out in one gush and too interesting for them to want to. Excellent distraction."

"Those are not on the same level of badassery," Jenna observed.

"No, but I'm not letting you think that I've only got murder and mayhem behind my eyes. There's fun there too."

She was giving him a look when Vash came out of his bedroom. He was dressed like a cat burglar in a black turtleneck, toque, and liquid-tight black pants.

"Crimes, right?" he said brightly.

Jenna looked at him with a smile on her face. He'd come a long way from the guy she'd interviewed. "Yeah. You look perfect."

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The three of them hid behind a line of bushes in the Stone Palace's courtyard. There wasn't much light shining in Excelyn's living room, but no one had bothered to close the curtains. No one from the Dahlia or the Sun Palace could see into the living room anyway. There was nothing over there, except the courtyard, and the open ocean.

Inside, they could see Philip tied to a chair. He was bound and gagged, while Excelyn walked around him, lecturing him loudly. Jenna couldn't exactly hear what Excelyn was saying, but she saw her whack him up the backside of the head.

Jenna talked to Conrad, "Have you told Ixy and Ivy our plans?"

"Listen, they can see everything you're doing through the security camera feed, so I couldn't exactly keep it from them. They know. But they're also demons of chaos. They'd love to help you."

"Have they shared any information about what's going on in there?" Jenna hissed into her earpiece.

"No. They want you to meddle and cause a mess," Conrad warned her.

"If they're not sharing info, then how the crap are they helping us?" Jenna grouched.

"They're helping in spirit, I guess," Conrad said drolly.

"Who are you talking to?" Ryatt asked. "It doesn't sound like you're talking to Ixy. I thought she was your personal assistant."

"Later. I'll introduce you to Conrad later, Ryatt," Jenna said absently before she winced as Excelyn hit Philip again. "I've never seen her like this. Did you know she slapped people around?"

"I knew she cut people up," Vash interjected.

"Well, she's a surgeon. She's supposed to. This is different. I feel like this is too horrible for us to allow it to continue. How much of a mess do you think this might cause? What if she lets him go and he badmouths us? What if she feels like she has to kill him to keep him quiet? Are we seriously going to have an incident that involves the friggin' police? AGAIN? Aaaaah! I can't live like this!"

They heard an evil cackle from inside.

It was Crimp. She was rocking with laughter in an armchair.

"Am I seeing this correctly?" Jenna crowed. "Is Crimp holding her stomach and crying because she's laughing too hard? We've got to get closer."

The three of them kept close to the ground as they shuffled to a new position under a living room window. Even though they didn't dare peek over the sill into the window, they could hear what was being said more clearly.

"Have you had enough, you sick son of a bitch?" Excelyn hollered. "Don't you see how stupid all of this is? She's laughing."

There was a pause and the only sound was of Crimp smothering her hilarity.

"Fine! Whatever!" Excelyn fumed. "I'm taking a break. I'm getting a snack and a drink and since I can't stand to look at your sick face while I eat, I'll be back in a minute."

The lights went out.

Jenna, Vash, and Ryatt put their faces over the edge and peered into the room. Excelyn had flicked out the lights. She was calling Crimp to follow her and they were leaving Philip alone in the room with the lights out. It was the perfect opportunity.

"Let's snatch him," Jenna said.

As quietly as possible, the three of them entered Excelyn's living room. Ryatt cut the zip ties that tied Philip to the chair. That freed his feet, but his hands were still tied together. Without a word, Vash hefted Philip over his shoulder and made for the door like the dude weighed nothing. Jenna rushed after him, while Ryatt took up the rear.

They crossed the bridge, racing like bandits in the night. Once they crossed the line to their palace, Ryatt stopped and unlatched the floating palace. It separated the bridge so that Excelyn and Crimp would not be able to follow them without getting wet.

Once back inside, Vash placed Philip on a chair in the formal dining room and Ryatt cut the remainder of his zip ties, then very carefully, he removed the tape on his mouth.

Philip didn't make a sound, even after his gag was removed. He looked at them with big, curious eyes, like he had nothing in common with the pictures Jenna had seen of him.

She did a double take. "Are you Dr. Philip Russell?"

He nodded, rubbing his free wrists.

"I'm Jenna Fairchild and I want to apologize for whatever happened this evening. Excelyn was supposed to interview you as a potential diplomat, not strap you to a chair. I—"

"Should have minded your own business," he interrupted smoothly, regaining a little of the composure Jenna had seen him exhibit when he was interviewed on TV.

Surprised, she offered, "Shall we take you back?"

"Nah," he said, stretching out his arms over his head. "She was already finished."

Jenna sat down at the table. "What I saw looked like criminal activity. Care to explain what was going on? I would hate to be at the center of a scandal."

Philip huffed. He obviously didn't want to answer, but he also knew holding back wouldn't stop them from learning everything. "Excelyn and I were married," he began. "When she wanted to divorce me, I made it a condition that she had to have dinner with me once a year. What it really meant was that I wanted her to yell at me and tell me everything about me that she couldn't stand. She agreed because otherwise, the divorce settlement gave her everything she wanted and more."

"I'm not sure I understand," Jenna said slowly.

"Imagine a little boy who was always told he was perfect. Imagine a boy who was never scolded. Imagine a person who no one could refuse. Would that feel natural if it was happening to you?" His gaze challenged Jenna.

She crossed her arms. She had been scolded plenty. "I suppose not."

Phillip continued his story. "Inside myself, I knew I wasn't perfect. I knew I was just like everyone else. I was on a journey that was made of both winning and losing, but no one would acknowledge that. That was what my life was like before I met Excy."

Hearing Excelyn's name said that way warped Jenna's mind. It sounded like Exy, which sounded like Ixy... and like Excelyn had a whole side of her that was a rogue woman that caused trouble everywhere she went. All that had to be true. Did Jenna just not see all that because all she was seeing were Excelyn's wrinkles?

Phillip continued. "She was nothing like anyone I had ever met. I trained under her when I was training to be a doctor. She used to teach at the medical institute before she opened her own practice. When she was my teacher, she told me I was wrong all the time. She wasn't afraid of seeing my downcast eyes if she told me to redo something. She didn't mind humiliating me by telling me I was wrong in front of everyone. All my life, no one else would do that for me.

They'd baby me, tell me I was okay, and fix my mistakes behind my back. It felt disgusting. I was disgusted."

"That seems... understandable," Jenna said slowly.

"But I liked how Excelyn treated me. Skipping the details, I fell in love with her. We got married and I loved her more than I had ever loved anyone or anything. Our union made my family bananas. For once, I did something they didn't like and I heard about it. I finally felt like I had joined the land of the living. Except..." His expression fell. "We never stopped hearing about it. My family never accepted us. Eventually, Excy got tired of the constant grumbling. Do you know what happens when your mother-in-law is twenty years younger than you? It means you aren't waiting for her to die. She's waiting for you to die. It's backwards and Excelyn got fed up. That wasn't the only thing that was wrong. There were other things that were my fault too. I think everything would have been fine if I hadn't exhausted her."

"What did you do?"

"I wanted her to criticize me—always. It's not healthy in a marriage when one partner doesn't want the love of the other. They only want their scorn. So, she said she'd leave me, but give me her scorn once a year." He hesitated to go on, but finally acknowledged, "It was far better than nothing."

Philip didn't say anything more but became reflective like there was something more he wanted to say... not to Jenna exactly, but something he wanted to tell everyone about how his marriage went wrong.

After the moment had stretched long enough, Jenna asked, "Did she speak to you about becoming our fourth diplomat?"

"Yeah. I've agreed to do it. Excelyn and I came to an agreement."

"What's the agreement?"

"I agreed to have tonight be the last night she yells at me. Our divorce contract is nullified."

"Why would it be nullified?"

"Because as Octavian diplomats, Excelyn and I can get remarried, and if someone wants me to marry someone else, I can do that. I can please my family, take care of a cause I care about, and take the love of my life back. But make no mistake, Jenna Fairchild, this was not a bloodless war. Hearing Excelyn badmouth me was one of the greatest pleasures I've ever known. How will I get on without it?"

"No problem. We can all take turns roasting you," Jenna offered with a shockingly unhealthy smile.

Philip pushed a spare strand of hair away from his perfect forehead. "It's nice of you to offer, but you won't remember to do it. My perfection always undoes people's promises."

Jenna chuckled. "I think I'll remember. You look so plastic, it's hard to forget."

"Yeah," Ryatt cut in. "You look weak... like your delicate punches wouldn't hurt at all."

"I'm a surgeon. I don't need to punch," Philip said, getting more bent out of shape than his words suggested.

Vash leaned forward. "Well, I'll never forget how light you were when I carried you. I've had girlfriends that weigh more than you."

Jenna leaned far forward, putting her face in Philip's. "Don't worry. We won't forget and we'll be right next door."

# Chapter Fifteen

## Eight Legs with Fur All Over

At Jenna's next meeting with Excelyn and Celestina, there was a lot of laughing at Philip's expense because it was his first meeting. Celestina insisted that he be crowned with a camera pointed at him, and Jenna pushed the point home. The TV guru needed a few days to prepare, but she was very excited with all the content they were thinking up.

Their priority list went as follows:

Crowning Philip. They were going to show all the gory shots of him getting the top of his head shaved, the same way they had with Celestine. Then they'd film the crowning ceremony.

Afterward, they were planning a wedding special for Philip and Excelyn.

"I've had my secretary on the phone with Philip's family to see if they're willing to give interviews," Celestina explained.

"How did that go?" Excelyn asked caustically.

"A few of them were reluctant, but there's something about being interviewed for Interstellar TV that makes most people compliant. I had to promise to do a few of their interviews personally, but I'm into it. Besides, it's not like there's any diplomatic work to do with only three diplomats. Jenna, do you have anyone else on your mind?"

Jenna ground her teeth together unpleasantly. "I have just seen a news release that the six majors from the AAMC who ransacked my palace are being discharged from the military, as per my request."

"Did they admit to wrongdoing in their press release?" Excelyn asked in surprise.

"Yeah. The officers weren't put through a formal reprimand process when it first happened, so the higher-ups of the AAMC put them through one, found them guilty, and discharged all of them."

"Did any of them admit that they were ordered to steal the crowns?" Excelyn persisted.

"No. If I were to guess, they knew when they signed up that if the plan went sideways, they couldn't admit where the order came from. As it stands, Admiral Lou Denver has been in touch, telling me that they've met my demands and they want interviews to resume."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him that he could choose someone—a single person—to be interviewed and that person could come to my palace. I said I would consider crowning as many as three, but they had to be interviewed one at a time."

"Did they have anyone lined up?" Celestine asked, getting curious.

"No. They said they'd get back to me. I plan to be the biggest pain in the arse that I can be. I plan to interview at least five candidates before I'm willing to choose one to be crowned, even if the first person checks all my boxes. They need to have a few people come and go from here without incident if they want to get on my good side."

"Really?" Celestina was tapping her writing stylus against her lips. "I've had someone from the AAMC mentioned to me on several occasions. It seems the AAMC is pretty desperate to be included in these talks in any way that they can be."

“Why are they contacting you? I’m the one who makes the decision,” Jenna questioned.

“They’re not asking me to have their boy crowned. They’re asking me to take him as my first husband.”

Jenna was a bit stunned. “What are you going to do?”

“Nothing for now. The AAMC can’t offer me any political posturing that I’m interested in. I want to marry a corporate powerhouse who already has a mistress, but he’d like to talk business with me, therefore would be interested in the arranged marriage. I’ve had my eye on Linc Baldwin. Once things are a little more settled, I plan to invite him down.”

“It’s good to see you’re so proactive about selling out,” Jenna commented.

“No. No.” Celestina waved away the snarky praise. “It’s my pleasure. *Thank you* for being willing to outright marry an Octavian. It takes all the pressure off the rest of us. After all, only one of us has to do it. Speaking of it, once we’re finished with Excelyn and Phillip’s marriage, we need to do a photoshoot with you and Favel. Josh is really excited to do it.”

Jenna nodded and checked their meeting agenda.

Suddenly, Celestina chirped up. “You’re not appreciating how special that is.”

Jenna looked back at Celestina with big dumb eyes. “Josh always seems to enjoy his work.”

“Yes, he does,” Celestina agreed. “But this is different. He is going to be the first person in ages to photograph a couple with an Octavian groom. He’s delighted. He has a huge list of photo ops he’s dying to try. He’s contacted clothing designers... fabulous clothing designers, Jenna! And asked them to send him their best offerings for you to wear for the shots. One of the bathing suits came by courier last night. It’s ravishing. And Josh wouldn’t even let me try it on. He’s gone one thousand percent serious. He says he never did anything groundbreaking before, even though he has done tons of groundbreaking things. He’s blocked off an entire week.”

“Can I block off an entire week?” Jenna wondered aloud. She wasn’t even sure if her schedule was flexible enough to give him that much time.

“You’ll have to,” Celestina replied without humor. “I’ll take on a few of your tasks if that will help.”

Jenna did a double take. There was definitely something she hadn’t appreciated about Josh before and that thing was not how serious he was about photography. It was how completely he had Celestina wrapped around his little finger.

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Jenna walked through her newly renovated bedroom. The walls were repaired, new furniture gleamed in the sunlight, Misha had finished preparing Jenna’s closet, and the only thing left was for Jenna to sleep there.

Ryatt came in. He strolled over to the bed and tested the give in the mattress with his hands. “I’m sure this will be much more comfortable than the hide-a-bed in the servants’ quarters.” In the next second, he had splayed himself out on the bed. “I’ve got to give it a good test.”

Jenna leaned against the bedpost. “You’re not sleeping in here.”

“Why not? Honestly, I would be much more comfortable here than down the hall. Nothing dangerous could happen to you if I’m right here next to you. I like that.”

It was true that Jenna had let him sleep next to her for the first week. She liked it. Conrad was right. She did sleep better with Ryatt next to her, but she knew she couldn’t sleep next to



him another night without things getting a little rowdy and she wasn't sure if she was ready for that yet. Not only that but because Ryatt hadn't left her alone even one night, she had only got to talk to Sardius that one time on Spikay Two. She needed him to back off so she could have a private conversation with Sardius.

"I *need* a night alone," she said emphatically.

He looked at her and waited for a longer explanation.

She started lying. "I need to know if I'm feeling better. If I'm feeling safe enough to sleep on my own."

Ryatt opened his mouth to give his take on her excuse when Ixy interrupted. "Madam Diplomat, your fiance is here and he's brought you a present."

Jenna had not been expecting Favel. He'd been very busy with his own business since the announcement of their engagement. Happy to see him, she headed into the main lounge to find him sitting in a goblet. Next to him, on a chair, was a white cat.

Jenna smiled and rushed forward. "Is that Charm?"

But then the thing moved and Jenna saw at once that it wasn't Charm. Yes, it was white. Yes, it had fur, but when it moved, Jenna saw that it wasn't like anything she had any experience with.

She screamed!

"What's the matter, my love?" Favel fretted. "It's a furlee."

"It's an eight-legged furred thing?" she yelled her question.

"It's a spider," Ryatt said, lifting it up and cradling it in his arms.

It had eight black eyes, two larger than the others, and all of them staring at Jenna. She screamed again. "Kill it! Kill it with fire!"

"Calm down," Ryatt said smoothly and his voice instantly had a calming effect on her. For just a moment, his voice reminded her of something that calmed her very much. "Look, it's sort of like a cat. It has paws just like a cat."

Jenna was not convinced. "What you mean to say is that it has nine sharp ends instead of five!"

"I suppose so. Eight legs with five claws on each paw and a face for biting. I guess that is nine sharp ends. Well, it doesn't have a tail," Ryatt observed.

"Why the hell would that matter? A cat doesn't scratch you with its tail. I hate it! I hate it! I hate it! I bet it makes a huge mess when it spins its webs. What the hell is it going to catch in my house?"

The thing was huddling in Ryatt's arms like he was its mother. Ryatt crossed the room and bowed to Favel respectfully. "I'm Ryatt Prizen, Jenna's new chief of security. I've been really excited to meet you."

Favel nodded. "Ixy sent me your information packet. It's nice to meet you too." Then he turned to Jenna. "Pray, explain. What did spiders do on your planet that has made you so scared, Jenna? It's a furlee. That's the name of its species. It's a hunter when found in the wild, so it doesn't spin webs. It's actually very much like cats on Earth and humans love cats!"

Jenna squirmed and squealed uncomfortably.

Favel's eyes looked concerned. "I don't understand. Why are you so scared? I thought it was the perfect gift for you. It's like your world because it's furry and it's like my world because it has eight legs. I thought it would be something we could both enjoy," Favel said sadly.



It clicked inside Jenna that she was behaving badly on several levels. She tried to unknot her shoulders, but even looking at it gave her the jibblies.

“What’s its name?” Ryatt asked, behaving a hundred times better than Jenna.

“Moonbeam.”

“That’s adorable,” Ryatt praised. “Jenna, you need to see how much fun this little girl is. It is a girl, isn’t it?”

Favel nodded.

“I assume you brought some food with you.”

Favel pointed to a watertight box next to the ocean entrance with a limp tentacle.

Ryatt snapped the box open and pulled out a jar of what looked like tiny black sea urchins. “She’s a hunter. You can’t put her food in a bowl and let her eat it. You have to toss it to her. It’s kind of like playing fetch with a dog, but a trifle more violent.”

Ryatt closed the door to the ocean entrance by sliding the panel shut and doubled the floor space in a single gesture. He placed Moonbeam on the floor and cracked open the jar. Putting his hand inside, he pulled out a single urchin and tossed it to Moonbeam, who caught it in her mouth.

Jenna should have calmed down watching Ryatt play with Moonbeam. She should have seen that the furlee was a cute thing, because anything covered in fur was cute, right?

She had almost calmed herself down enough to put her feet back on the floor when Ixy started talking in her earpiece. “Speaking of pets and Charm, I have been meaning to tell you that your cousin Lucy sends me a message every single day asking if you’d like Charm to join you on Octavia Prime. I keep telling her that I’m relaying the messages to you, even though I’m not because I find her annoying, but the message she sent me today was a little more alarming than usual. I thought you might like to see it.”

“Put it on the screen,” Jenna said.

Jenna would have liked to laugh when she saw the camera view of her cousin, but it wasn’t particularly funny. Charm had scratched the hell out of her. She had three sets of claw marks on her face and a really bad one across her chest.

“Jenna, could you maybe consider taking Charm to live with you? I don’t want to say things like, ‘your cat is possessed’, ‘your cat is an actual demon’, or ‘I am planning to drown your cat’, but all those things are true.” Tears ran down her red face. “If you don’t take Charm away in the next seven days, I really will kill her and bury her in the root cellar!”

At that moment, Armen came in, saw the message she was recording, and tried to turn the camera off and delete the message, but Lucy was faster. She clicked *send* before he could stop her.

Jenna bit her lip. “Since I don’t want Lucy to kill Charm, I guess we’d better make arrangements to pick her up. Got any ideas on how to orchestrate that, Ixy?”

“Yeah, I already mentioned to Temptic that you might want something like that. He’s still in orbit, so he’s the closest person. I’ll send Armen the details, so he can get her on a pod and Temptic won’t have to go down to the surface.”

“That sounds great. Also, send an eviction notice to Armen and Lucy. Tell them to get out of my house if they aren’t going to take care of my cat.”

But Ixy kept talking like she hadn't heard the last part. "Has anyone ever told you how alike you and Lucy are? She's all 'Oh no! The cat scratched me! There's only one solution: we have to kill it!' And you're all 'Oh no! The furlee has four more legs than I'm used to. Kill it with fire!'"

"Ixy, I'd take that comparison on the chin if you hadn't just told me three minutes ago that you found Lucy super annoying," Jenna replied firmly.

Ixy hesitated and for once, Jenna was grateful that no one else could hear what her personal assistant could say. "You are super annoying," Ixy said like she had no filter.

"Am I?"

"Freedom is wasted on the free. Not only did you not crash Temptic's ship, even though you were aboard it twice, but you never do anything fun. It's like you want me to be bored watching you."

"Okay," Jenna said numbly. "Message received. Did you hear what I said earlier about sending Armen and Lucy an eviction notice? Please tell them they have three months to find another place to live. That is more than enough time and they should have been doing that anyway since they knew they didn't like taking care of my cat."

"You're going to evict them?" Ixy asked, having heard Jenna that time around.

"Yes. Send them that message and see if they still need Temptic to pick up Charm. Now, I'm going to go have some quiet time with Favel and talk about what will be happening with Moonbeam. I won't need you for a while."

"There's nothing fun to do in prison--"

"I'm not telling you to have free time. I told you to send those messages." Jen pulled out her earpiece with an angry flick and seeing that Ryatt was securely holding Moonbeam, Jenna scuttled over to the chair next to Favel.

She had to talk quietly if she was going to miss having her voice picked up by the palace's speaker/microphone system.

Favel turned his mantle, so he'd be able to hear her better.

"What are the consequences of getting rid of Ixy and Ivy?" she asked.

Favel minced no words. "You don't want to hear the potential backlash. It's a bad time every way you spin it."

Jenna pulled her head back and frowned.

"You two should know that there isn't a word that is spoken in this palace that Ixy can't hear if she wants to," Ryatt said, walking around like he hadn't heard what Jenna and Favel said. "As a security specialist, I have to tell you that trying to keep secrets from her is a mistake as well. She is your first level of defense against all threats. If she doesn't know what's going on, she can't protect you. Worse, if you offend her, she might *not* protect you."

"So, how do I handle conflict with her if she's being disrespectful or if she is flat-out not doing her job? I had no idea Lucy had been contacting me about Charm. That incident is only the tip of the iceberg of stuff Ixy doesn't do. I agree that I probably would have ignored Lucy too, but Ixy didn't give me the choice."

"You have all the power, Jenna," Ryatt patiently explained. "If you talk to her warden, and you *can* talk to the warden any time you want, you can punish her. You could get Ivy moved out of her room, you could get her put on limited rations, and you could get time added to her sentence. There aren't a lot of rewards that can be given, it's a prison, but there are a lot of punishments that can be given. It's a prison."

“How do you know all this?” Favel asked, tenting two tentacles in interest.

“I talk to Ixy sometimes,” he replied offhandedly.

Jenna knew it was a lie. He was a rotten liar. What was probably more true was that he had been a personal assistant himself when he had been in prison. Jenna wanted to ask him more about that, but it would have to wait.

Favel turned to Ryatt, “Would you mind taking Moonbeam to see the rest of the palace? She needs time to familiarize herself with her new surroundings.”

Ryatt glanced at Jenna as if to ask her for permission.

Jenna gave him a quizzical look and then dug her index finger into her temple. “He’s my fiance and he wants to talk to me. Shoo.”

Ryatt nodded and disappeared with the furlee down the hall.

Jenna put her head closer to Favel’s mantle. “What do you want to talk about?”

Favel put a sucker on her eyeball and pulled on it in a show of frustration. “Look, I brought Moonbeam here as an apology present. We agreed that we’d have a conversation about getting you an Adamis husband when you got back from Spikay Two. Well, I had my boys put out some feelers to see what quadrants might be interested in such a thing. I thought it would be a snap to find a few well-connected men for you to date.”

“It didn’t go well?” Jenna guessed.

Favel pulled on his eyeball again before letting his sucker go with a pop. “The situation is grim. There is no shortage of men who would be willing to get together with you, but none I would even allow to come here. The options are unthinkably poor because relations between the Adamis and the Octavians are strained and tight. I’m not going to be able to find you anyone with my resources. I’m so apologetic.”

Jenna rubbed her pearl engagement ring against her teeth to feel the grit of authenticity. “Don’t worry about it. Getting me a husband is not on my list of things to do today. I’m crowning diplomats.”

“Yes,” Favel agreed. “That’s another reason I’m so sorry, Philip was a surprising and excellent appointment. I feel like we’re not giving you enough.”

“If you want to do something to ease all this tension, choose a wedding date for us. It can be in the distant future if that makes it more comfortable for you, but it doesn’t make sense for us to wait until I have a husband.”

Favel responded by pulling his tentacles under him and making himself small. When he finally spoke, his voice was full of bubbles, “That isn’t a good idea. You have no idea what people will say, what they have already said of you, and of people who have been in your position in the past.”

Jenna shook her head. It did not occur to her to ask *what* people were saying. “Have it your way. I’m sure there will be plenty of opportunities to discuss this.”

“Indeed,” he said sheepishly and a little paler than when he arrived.

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Jenna was going to question Ryatt about his experiences as a personal assistant... that evening... after she had tried calling Sadius.

Finding herself alone in her recently renovated bedroom, she put Sardius' earpiece in and tried again. She got the answering service line again. Since she wasn't able to get in touch with him, yet again, she opened her bedroom door and waited for Ryatt to join her as he had every night for the past week. Granted, she'd told him that she wanted to sleep alone, but she didn't think anything she'd said to him had made an impact. She expected him at any moment.

However, in the meantime, she had something else to do.

"Ixy? Are you there?" Jenna asked as she sat cross-legged on her bed.

"Yeah. I'll turn things over to Conrad in a minute. I wanted to tell you that I got a reply."

"From Lucy?"

"No," the PA said sullenly. "I got a reply from one of the diplomats I had tried contacting. A while ago, you asked me to look into which diplomats served other nations and to poke around to see if any of them were interested in working for us. Though I didn't get anyone who worked on the Adamis/Sushfief Alliance, I got a reply from someone else."

"Today?"

"No. Yesterday. Listen, I overheard you talking to Ryatt and Favel about how you're finding it hard to work with me."

"You told me to my face I was annoying today," Jenna reminded her. "Who needs that kind of negativity from the voice inside their head, Ixy?"

"Everyone is annoying," Ixy pushed back. "Even you. Maybe even especially you because I miss freedom badly. But even though I have my panties in a twist about how my life has turned out, I don't want you to punish me. Ryatt was right, you could get my warden to punish me and how he was suggesting I get punished was not what would actually happen if you told my warden that I wasn't doing my job. If you're open to giving rewards for good behavior, that's one thing and that would be nice, but I need you to not punish me. I'll do better and I'll start by telling you about the diplomat who contacted me."

Jenna didn't like the fear in Ixy's voice. It set her on edge, but at the same time, she didn't know how to address it. She couldn't tell Ixy she'd never punish her. There were intergalactic issues at stake and if Ixy persisted in messing things up just for the sake of it, Jenna might be forced to. Instead of offering any reassurance, Jenna merely asked, "Who is it?"

"His name is Fallcet Rewell. He works as an intermediary between Magna Prime and the Adamis Alliance. It's diplomatic work as serious as what you do, though not on as large a scale. If he's looking to move up in the world, then a job change working with us is key. Needless to say, he's a pretty eager beaver."

"Well, if he's so brilliant, then why didn't you tell me immediately?" Jenna asked, feeling the burn of fresh frustration.

"I thought that if I held back a day or two, it wouldn't matter much for his application, but it would matter a lot for you and Ryatt," Ixy said, defending herself.

"Why would it matter to us?" Jenna asked, perplexed. She knew she'd told Excelyn that she was very attracted to Ryatt, and because she'd said it out loud, that meant that Ixy had heard her odd confession as well. All the same, Jenna was not going to pursue a relationship with Ryatt. She had already decided that she was doing quite well holding her position as a single woman.

"I think he's in love with you. Like L-O-V-E in big loopy letters. When you're sleeping, he looks at you like you're heaven. I've never seen anything like it. I didn't even know men had feelings

like that. I didn't know they were capable of adoring someone. All the men I've known will screw anything that moves like it doesn't matter who they're with as long as their crotch is satisfied. Ryatt does not want another woman. He never looks at Celestina and she's worth looking at. He wants you and I think he'd wait forever for you to make up your mind to trust him, but we don't have that kind of time."

"Why not?" Jenna asked patiently. For Jenna, she had never allowed a man inside her walls to crumble her castle. The closest she had ever felt to doing such a thing had been for Sadius and she did that knowing that he could never hold her in his arms and make her vulnerable in every sense of the word. The idea of doing that for Ryatt, or any other man, was not something that had occurred to Jenna. Sleeping next to him had been one thing, like a sleepover, like a summer camp, like having someone in the hospital bed next to you when you were afraid the night before an operation. It didn't feel like it had the possibility of becoming romantic love.

At other times, it felt like Ryatt was crawling under her skin. Unexpected times, when he stood a little too close to her she could smell him, see the cut of his jaw, and the surprising curve of his lips.

Okay... she liked him, but those castle walls were high and Jenna was good at controlling herself.

"Why didn't you want to tell me about Fallcet?" Jenna prompted. "We need to fill another four posts."

"Because," Ixy said, biting her words off like they were tough like jerky. "Meeting Fallcet is going to screw with your brain. I thought if I gave you a day or two more, you'd cave and start something with Ryatt. And screw me, I want Ryatt to win."

"Wait. Wait. Wait," Jenna said in a rush. "Why are you so convinced I'll fall for this Fallcet guy?"

"Because he's one of your eleven best matches according to the universal matching algorithm."

# Chapter Sixteen

## Heat comes in Many Forms

Jenna was really warm in her bed. She was so hot, she was pulling her limbs out from under the blankets. Sweat was collecting at her collarbone, and the back of her neck, and seeping into her hair. Disoriented, she had no idea where the heat was coming from. Something was on her stomach. She placed her hand on something furry.

She didn't understand. Charm wasn't on Octavia Prime.

Jenna forced herself into consciousness and realized with a sudden lurch of fear that Moonbeam was on her stomach. It was awful. She had four legs on one side of Jenna and four legs on the other, trapping her in a cage made of furry legs.

She tapped her earpiece. "Conrad, call Ryatt. I need him."

"I'm right here, Jenna," Ryatt said, approaching from the foot of the bed and pulling Moonbeam off her.

Jenna was confused. "You're not in bed with me?"

He petted Moonbeam's head and back before kissing her behind the eyes and addressing Jenna. "You told me you didn't want me to sleep with you."

"What were you doing instead?"

"I was sleeping in a chair over there."

"Why were you doing that?" she groaned.

He set Moonbeam in a bed prepared for her that was meant to look like an Octavian goblet chair, but it had no water in it. The furlee snuggled into the fur-lined folds.

Ryatt came back to the bed and crouched next to it, so he and Jenna's faces were close together. "This is tough," he said tightly, keeping a smile on his face. "I knew it would be, but still, I wasn't quite prepared."

"Look," she said, sitting up in bed and turning on a lamp so she could deal with their sleeping arrangement. "I know I asked you to help me feel safe in my own home because I wasn't feeling that way after the AAMC attack. But I feel like you've done that. Mission accomplished. I went to bed here tonight and I fell asleep quite quickly. I wasn't even jumpy. Moonbeam got on me and I didn't even notice. That's got to be a good sign."

Ryatt didn't seem like he was listening to her. He grabbed the bedsheet under her blanket and pulled it over her chest.

Jenna looked down. She had been displaying a shocking amount of bare skin even though her nightgown was only a long black T-shirt.

She smothered a chuckle. "Look, Dude, if you're going to have a hard time with this neckline, I promise you, most of my eveningwear is going to set you off."

He stroked his chin. "Sorry. I know you're dismissing me. I know it's unusual to have your bodyguard sleep in the same room as you when there is no immediate threat. I know it's even weirder for him to sleep alongside you in your bed. I know I'm supposed to go now, but I can't leave the room."



Jenna peered at him. She had no idea what he was saying. He couldn't say anything unprofessional. She'd made sure of that before they left Spikay Two.

"Have you been talking to Ixy?" Jenna suddenly asked him. "Did she tell you about the new diplomat we're inviting to be interviewed?"

"No," he said, his focus getting sharper. "Who is it?"

"Fallcet Rewell. He's a diplomat from Magna Prime."

Ryatt's expression fell. "I know who he is."

"Oh... Well, he's coming here for an interview before I start the AAMC interviews. He should be here the day after tomorrow."

"Was that Favel's doing?" Ryatt asked sharply.

"No. It was my doing."

The blood ran out of his face. "Are you interviewing him to be your first husband or a diplomat?"

"A diplomat. From what I understand of the situation, he has already rejected a match with me," Jenna laughed.

"You're laughing?" Ryatt inquired blankly.

"Yes. I'm laughing. It's hilarious. Tripping over love. That's my life. They ask Armen if he wants to marry me. He says yes. He cheats on me before he's even met me. I ask Sardius to marry me. He says yes, but the whole thing is thrown off by a prison riot. Then he's inexplicably in this system, but he won't come and see me. I haven't been able to contact him since I got back here. I think it's safe to say that he's called off our engagement. Favel and I get engaged, but he won't marry me until I get another husband. You make out with me but immediately become off-limits. It's different every time. I'm sure this will be similar. Something about Fallcet will be wrong. It won't work out. I'm not betting on a romantic match. If we're lucky, I'll be compatible enough with him that his diplomatic appointment will be a success."

"The universal matching algorithm doesn't just measure who is a perfect match for you. It also considers who is a perfect match for him," Ryatt pointed out crossly.

"Really? That has never been mentioned to me before." When put that way, it did seem more likely that there would be romantic sparks when Fallcet showed up, but Jenna had already seen a match that had been set up by the universal matching algorithm fall to crap, so her heart rate didn't pick up. "More importantly, did Sardius send you here to seduce me because he's never coming and he felt bad?" she asked, her voice a mixture of intrigue and disgust.

"What a ridiculous idea!" Ryatt blasted back. "Jenna, everyone wants to seduce you. EVERYONE! I know you only watch broadcasts prepared by Celestina because you have better things to do, but they can't stop talking about you on TV. Everyone likes you! Everyone wants you! Everyone is curious about what you look like in a bathing suit, in a ball gown, and completely naked. They want to hear what you say and see how you smile. I'm not unusual and I'm not the only one curious about you. I'm part of the horde. And I understand if I'm overstepping my bounds just by standing here, but I have to stay because I can't sleep tonight if you're not in the room. If something happened to you because I was passed out elsewhere, I'd die. Just die. On the spot."

"Then shut up and get into bed." She rolled onto her side away from him and tugged a chunk of blankets over herself disregarding how hot she felt.

Ryatt got into bed next to her.



Under his breath, she thought she heard him say, "Thank goodness. I thought you'd never tell me to shut up again."

When had she told him to shut up?

"Listen, this is not permanent," she huffed. "I'm setting up another sleeping spot in here tomorrow because I want you nearby when the AAMC guys are here. I'm not saying I'll marry you or something dumb like that, but I hired you to protect me and since I don't have a husband right now, you'll have to be my dummy husband and my bodyguard until Sardijs gets here."

"You're still thinking about that old space goat?" Ryatt fumed. "Jenna, one look at him and you'll wish you married me."

Jenna rebuked him crossly. "I told you to be professional."

"You just told me to get in bed with you. What's professional about that?" he snapped back.

"Then go sleep in the chair, if you *have to be in the same room as me!*"

He shook his head angrily before turning his fury on her. "Jenna, you're going to need to learn that our relationship isn't one-sided the way you think it is. I don't do everything for you because you're paying me or because you're giving me a job. I could get a job anywhere. You are the one who needs me, not the other way around."

She glared at him.

"I want to be here, but you are a fool if you think that I want to be here for the money or the title," he pressed. "I want to be with you. And as far as I'm concerned, Sardijs is not in competition with me for your attention. The only competition is the fake version of him you've made in your head. If I told you all about him, you'd jump down my pants. And you should, without me telling you all that's wrong with him." Ryatt got out of bed and stormed across the room.

Jenna's head was spinning. What was he saying? He couldn't be saying what she thought he was saying. That was utterly impossible.

"I don't even know what this fight is about," Jenna yelled at him.

He paused at the door. "Then I'll spell it out for you. I'm going to sleep in my designated bed and if something happens to you in the night, I'll just die... on the other side of the mansion. Sleep well, Jenna." He closed the door between them.

"You're acting like a drama queen," she yelled at the closed door.

Jenna could not let the fight end like that. She got out of bed, covered herself with a housecoat, and hurried after him.

She found him pacing like a maniac in the main sitting room. "What do you want from me?" she yelled with no care of who could hear her or what they might think.

"Nothing," he said, withdrawing himself from her and moving with a heavy stride toward the servant's wing.

"We're fighting about nothing?" she pestered, following him.

He paused and hissed at her. "Fine. We're not fighting about nothing. We're fighting about Sardijs and Fallcet. First thing, Sardijs is never coming back. Yes, he asked me to deliver the earpiece. I'm not sure that he had any plans to speak to you through it except to tell you that he was okay and to give you my recommendation. I'm sorry if he didn't explain that to you. It was probably too hard for him to say. Like ghosting you was his best option under the circumstances. I'm sorry. I realize that's a tough pill to swallow, but I also had no clue you were so hung up on the idea of him. It's so terrible to me because it's a crappy idea. He can't love you. I don't

believe he ever told you he loved you. Let the idea of him go. He's not here and he's never going to be."

"And Fallcet? He hasn't even come here yet."

"Yes. He hasn't come here yet, but he's an asshole. And I don't mean a little asshole. I mean a major asshole," Ryatt emphasized. "Wasn't Armen an asshole too? Do you know what Adamis men prize most of all?"

"What guy can be the biggest asshole?" Jenna supplied.

"Yeah. I'm super proud not to be very closely related to your subset," he pushed away from her and made it all the way to his bedroom before she caught up with him.

Jenna had made up her mind before she got there and confronted him in his bedroom.

"I'm going to sign the document that will make Sardius my third husband," she said when she got there.

He turned around to face her. "You are?"

"Yes. When it arrives, I'm going to clip my hair and drip my blood into the device that I'm told is a marriage certificate. If Sardius ever wants to take me up on it, he can come here and claim his rights. Which means," she said, straightening like a lady. "You have a choice to make. You can choose to stay here and accept that I may not fall in love with you the way you want. Even though I can have eight husbands, I might not choose to make you one of them. So you can choose to remain here and chase your unrequited love for me, or you can leave. I'm not as helpless as you say and I've been working on recruiting new security personnel. As it stands, I'm not willing to fall apart for you just because you say you want me."

Jenna expected her declaration to utterly wither Ryatt. She expected it to blow him apart. Instead, he met her stare with a look that was something like triumph and something like a thrill that rippled all through his body. He wasn't cowed in the least.

"Have you decided?" she prompted, still angry as a snake.

He nodded, giving her a smile that transformed his whole self from attractive to devastating. "I'll stay. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I wasn't here to give you a clear comparison between a proper man and an asshole."

The challenge on his tongue, the look in his eyes like sparks, made Jenna even angrier. He was enjoying himself. She was telling him off and he was enjoying himself. Jenna couldn't believe her eyes or her ears.

"Let's hope that goes the way you want," Jenna said crossly before she left his room.

# Chapter Seventeen

## Fall for Fallcet?

When Fallcet arrived, Jenna saw the problem Ixy identified as soon as she saw him. He was powerfully attractive, everything she'd trained herself to want in a man back when she still lived on Earth.

Somehow, he was the personification of something Jenna had always wanted but didn't know how to ask for. The best way to describe him was to compare him to Ryatt because he was standing next to him, and that was what Ryatt himself had suggested.

Ryatt's hair was an unnatural collection of colors. The front was dyed blond and the back was dark ash. Whether the back was dyed or not was a mystery. It was spiked in the front and mostly shaved in the back, but it worked on him. He looked the part for bare-knuckle boxing. The clothes Misha put him in were almost a military uniform. He wore a black coat with tungsten buttons, fitted trousers, and sixteen-hole black army boots. Most telling were the partial gloves he wore over the exposed bones on his knuckles. Everything about his face and the shape of his body spoke of sharpness. His muscles were hidden under his bones and he didn't have enough body fat to hide the shape of his bones. He was the very picture of a hard man.

When she looked at him like that, she felt her insides get dizzy. She'd crush the feeling instantly, but she'd still go for another look.

On the other hand, Fallcet looked very natural. His hair curved in chestnut curls that made little rings that just begged to have fingers slid into them while picnicking in the sunshine.

What the hell was she thinking about? Picnicking in the sunshine?

Jenna straightened, accepted Fallcet's handshake, and welcomed him to the Dahlia Palace. Once they were walking, her voice ran on autopilot as she explained different points of interest. While doing so, she found she was able to think more analytically.

Fallcet was wearing a light brown suit. It had a shorter leg length than the one Ryatt was wearing and a strip of his bare ankle was visible before his buff loafer began. He was not wearing socks, which was completely reasonable for where they were. Jenna was not even wearing shoes.

He wore no tie and his white shirt was open to expose his throat, which Jenna thought was unnecessarily provocative even though she wore a floral gown with a slit up to the thigh.

His reddish brown hair was tousled and long, an inch away from brushing his shoulder. And his dazzling white teeth allowed his smile to be of a higher wattage than anything Jenna had ever seen. His face was round everywhere Ryatt had angles. He had a round chin, round cheeks, and unless Jenna was completely crazy, they were a little rosy. He looked healthy.

In short, his charm was something completely different from Ryatt's. A man wearing Fallcet's suit would never get in a fistfight and if he did, he was going to lose. Not only that, but putting him in a ring with Ryatt would have been nothing shy of a blood bath, but then... Jenna thought Ryatt wouldn't lower himself to fight Fallcet. He didn't fight babies with big cheeks.

Jenna glanced over her shoulder. Ryatt looked overdressed. She was about to whisper something to him about how he could change into something less formal when she realized he'd dressed himself that morning. What he was wearing was his choice.

Inside, Jenna did not treat Fallcet to a full tour of the palaces. She showed him where they would be having dinner. "This is my formal dining hall. Tonight, you'll dine with two members of the Octavian council, Favel, Rossi, and me."

Fallcet tucked his curls behind an ear. "I was hoping we could have a private conversation before that."

"Oh? What about?" she asked, fingering the slit in her skirt to make sure the slit stayed shut.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Jenna put up a hand to silence him.

"Before you say anything I have to tell you that absolutely all audio is being recorded during your visit. If you sing in the shower, we'll get the transcript."

"Why so stiff?" he asked with a smooth chuckle. "We don't record everything on Magma Prime."

"It has become the standard policy since the AAMC attack on my palace that we record all verbalizations. You're being filmed as well, though we will not take any film of you that will be aired on any of Celestina's networks. Your visit will remain confidential, but not completely private. My bodyguard must remain in the room and a PA is monitoring you at all times."

Fallcet sniggered uncomfortably. "That seems like overkill."

"Your opinion is noted. Do you still wish to speak to me? As I said, it will be confidential though not completely private."

"Indeed," he said, pausing to clear his throat. "Could we sit down and make ourselves comfortable?"

Jenna nodded and put them in two chairs in a space that was useful in that the cameras pointed at them got great angles.

"I have to tell you at once that I'm here on false pretenses," Fallcet said, showering her in charm.

Jenna narrowed her eyes at him. Suddenly, he looked like a groomsman on the wedding day admitting he'd brought something foul for everyone to smoke before the ceremony. It didn't make him look charming, even though he hoped it did.

"Go on," she said, refraining from showing her annoyance.

Ryatt took a position one step behind her and towered over the two of them like a disapproving totem.

Fallcet glanced at the other man. He clearly did not like saying what he had to say in front of Ryatt, but Jenna enjoyed his discomfort as he threw out the script he had planned and rearranged his words into something he could say in front of Ryatt.

"I'm here to talk to you about your relationship with the AAMC," Fallcet admitted.

"It was noted in your file that you have close ties to them. Your father is a general and your uncle is an admiral?" Jenna said, proving she'd done her homework.

Fallcet looked like the last man to serve in the military, but his file wasn't lying about the pride his family had regarding their military service. Jenna suddenly thought Fallcet's clothes and appearance were carefully chosen to make him look soft. The whole thing was very effective. Under the buff suit, even if he was flabby, under his skin and bones, he was a hard man, like every other man he was related to.

“Yes,” he said brightly, dropping a hand briefly on Jenna’s knee in a motion that felt studied. How long had he been waiting to touch her?

“Please refrain from touching me. My bodyguard might get a little overzealous and none of us want that,” she said, brushing his fingers away before Ryatt got angry.

“Please excuse me,” Fallcet said as an apology. “I’m sorry, but I need to ask you how close you think the Octavians and Adamis are to starting a war.”

“A war with the Octavians would be a foolish thing indeed. They have ten ships for every Adamis piloted ship. Most Adamis people travel with Octavians whenever they traverse the stars.”

“Their fees are extortion,” Fallcet said tightly.

Jenna’s expression was tight right back at him. “Did you know that at least two Octavians stay awake during every voyage? They alternate, but depending on the length of the voyage, years are shaved off their lives. Just to pilot that ship. Just that one time. The Adamis passengers are all asleep, but the Octavians are not. Space travel should not be treated as a trivial matter. Because of the crew that remains awake, incidents are rare aboard their ships. I’m sure you know how often Adamis ships require rescue teams—which are most often piloted by Octavians. When my ship was shot down, I was rescued by Octavians, not the AAMC.”

“That was not their fault. They didn’t know you were traveling in a separate pod from your husband,” Fallcet interrupted.

“Regardless, they still haven’t hunted down the ship that shot mine down. That event seems like it was overlooked since they retrieved Lucy and Armen. It *seems* like the AAMC did everything right, but after the attack on my palace, I feel like the event ought to be revisited. Perhaps they did know who they were rescuing and it would have served their purposes better if I had died.”

Fallcet did not become flustered over Jenna’s accusations. Unlike Lou Denver, he kept his cool heroically and said, “It’s good that you didn’t die. Losing your beauty would have been like losing a star in the night sky.”

Jenna wanted to shoot him. He was an AAMC soldier in boho rags, and the way he spoke to her made her feel like he thought her only purpose was to be his eye candy. She wished she’d worn the female version of what Ryatt had on instead of flowers. She was sure she had something like that in her closet.

“I’m still not clear what you’re doing here if you’re not interested in a post as a diplomat,” Jenna said patiently. “I am working on my relationship with the AAMC. I begin interviewing their recommendations after you leave. I’m perfectly willing to crown a handful of them. Thus, I don’t see why I need you to help me with my relationship with them.”

“I’m here to ask you to marry me,” he said smoothly.

Her gaze became skeptical. “As we have only just met, you’ll do me the courtesy of not acting like you’re in love with me and explain what it is you hope to gain and what you plan to give me.” It was not a question. It was a command.

“We were matched by the universal matching algorithm,” Fallcet reminded her. “You must have felt something when we met out on the dock.”

Jenna gritted her teeth before snapping. “I’ll kick your ass myself if you try to pretend that your desires are not politically driven. Ixy, how many new ships have the AAMC commissioned in the last year?”

“Seventeen thousand, two hundred and forty-five,” Ixy said over the loudspeaker.

Jenna leveled her gaze at Fallcet. “Are they planning to go to war with the Octavians over shipping rights or travel contracts?”

“The AAMC wants to break their monopoly,” Fallcet explained, rushing over his words. “They need to ensure that the shift in the market is handled smoothly, so the Octavians expect the smaller workload and don’t see the expanding AAMC fleet as a hostile act.”

“Is it a hostile act?” Jenna asked firmly.

“It’s a shift in power that doesn’t need to lead to war,” Fallcet answered, trying to match Jenna’s intensity.

“Fine. If you’re so interested in maintaining peace, then why aren’t you interested in becoming a diplomat?”

“That isn’t the role I have decided to play,” he replied.

“A lifetime appointment with a black beak sticking out of your head isn’t high on your to-do list?” she asked coldly.

“Look, I think I could serve my people better by providing a bridge between you and the AAMC,” he replied defiantly.

“What’s different from last year?” Jenna asked abruptly.

He was confused. “What do you mean?”

“You were approached last year and offered the position of my husband which you rejected. What’s different?”

“Nothing is different. They offered me the position of your third husband, which no self-respecting man would take. I’m asking to be your first husband.”

“Hmm,” Jenna hummed. “All right. I appreciate your candidness. If you’ve nothing left to add, I’ll think it over.”

“There is something else I want to add,” he said, keeping his eyes off Ryatt and planting his gaze firmly on Jenna. “I wasn’t kidding about the sparks I felt when I saw you on the docks.”

Jenna put up a hand. “Please stop. Regardless of whether or not you’re telling the truth, I have a slow warm-up time. You’re going to need to prove yourself. I’m going to cancel our guests for dinner since you have no diplomatic ambitions. We’ll talk more then. For now, Vash will escort you to the Sand Palace where you can rest until dinner.”

Vash appeared at the door and led him out.

Jenna could only exhale a solid thirty seconds after she’d seen his back retreat through the front door.

Who had she been when she lived on Earth that both Armen and Fallcet were the men of her dreams?

“Is everything okay, Jenna?” Ryatt asked.

“I feel like I can’t even. Though I did not enjoy that meeting, he gave me an idea. Ixy, we need to get a few non-military pilots from the Adamis Alliance to interview for diplomatic positions, pronto. Get me a list of potentials. Maybe look among the disreputable ones particularly? See if you can find at least one person who was canned from their position as a pilot because they sided with an Octavian.”

“You’re getting juicy in your old age,” Ixy said over Jenna’s headset.

Jenna got up and as she did, a joiner from her barefoot sandals caught on the hem of her dress.



RIP!

Jenna sat back down and looked at the damage. Both were damaged. The hem of the dress was torn out and the links in the sandal were broken.

“What do you think?” Ryatt said, getting on one knee to look at the breakage.

“I bet Misha can fix the dress. She can probably fix the sandals too. I’d be able to fix them myself if I had a beading kit, which I have in my apartment... on Earth.” Jenna didn’t like to think about what had happened to her apartment on Earth and all the things she’d liked inside it. Suddenly, looking at the broken pieces of the sandal, she felt far worse about them than she did about the life she had left behind. She was wearing the expensive barefoot sandals that Sardius had chosen for her. She looked at the broken metal that spilled over her foot in all the wrong ways like a broken arm twisted the wrong way. “These were my favorite.”

“Why?” Ryatt asked, finding the clasp behind her ankle and pulling it loose before gently unhooking it from around her middle toe.

“It was the closest thing I ever got to a love gift.”

“What about Moonbeam?”

Jenna screwed up her face at him. “I still don’t understand why it has to sleep in my room.”

“It’s a gift from your fiance,” Ryatt replied patiently, as he moved to unclasp the other sandal. “It would please Favel to have Moonbeam in your room.”

The voice in Jenna’s ear asked, “How does his hand feel on your foot? Is it smooth or rough?”

“Shut up, lxy,” Jenna fumed.

Ryatt laughed under his breath.

“Thank you,” Jenna said, getting to her feet. “I have to change. I wasn’t planning on changing into a new outfit for Mr. Brown Suit, but I can’t wear a raggedy dress to dinner.”

Ryatt cupped the broken jewelry in his hand and followed Jenna down the hall. “What did you think of him?”

“He said the letters AAMC too many times for me to find him lovable,” Jenna replied callously.

Ryatt shut the bedroom door behind Jenna and followed her to her dressing room, where she stood in front of a rack of clothing, trying to decide what to wear instead.

“What are you doing in here?” she asked drolly.

“I’m waiting for you to take your dress off so I can take it and the broken sandal to Misha,” he explained.

“Do you have to watch me?”

“I’ll turn my back while you change, but I’m also here if you want to run your second choice of dress by me. What you wear could become a security hazard if it’s too racy,” he said with a knowing smile.

Jenna almost snorted. “Fine. For once, I agree. I shouldn’t wear anything too exciting. What would you choose for me to wear to dinner with Fallcet?”

Ryatt stood beside her and fingered through her dresses. Picking something black, he handed it to her. Jenna held the dress. It was sleeveless and had a neckline so high it touched her jaw. It was fitted until the waist, where it transformed into a magnificent skirt with wave upon midnight wave of black satin. It was especially impressive because it had a royal blue lining in the skirt. If any of the black fabric flipped up, there was a mass of blue.



Jenna realized in a flash that it was the feminine equivalent of what Ryatt was wearing, and exactly what she had longed to wear when she realized who she was dealing with when she had been speaking to Fallcet.

Her gray eyes darted upward to meet Ryatt's.

"I'm going to end up killing you. You know that right?" Jenna said, letting her voice sound like marbles banging into rocks.

He smiled back at her, his lips taking a shape that matched his cut jaw. "I look forward to the privilege," he said before he turned his back on her and left the dressing room.

# Chapter Eighteen

## Double Sided Heart

Jenna slid into the dress that Ryatt suggested and rolled around what had just happened in her head.

“Maybe I didn’t need to worry about Fallcet,” Ixy said in her ear. “And maybe you aren’t as boring as I thought you were. That fight you had with Ryatt the other night was super fun to watch. I’ve never told a man to his face that he was in love with me and he could never have me. Hey, Ivy! Did you ever have that kind of confidence?”

Jenna didn’t hear how Ivy replied.

“I thought you girls were asleep during that,” Jenna said heartlessly as she zipped up the zipper on her side.

“We’re recording everything these days and Conrad told us about the brouhaha in the morning. It seems he wants to be on good terms with us and he knows what we like. We watched the video footage this morning.”

“What’s happening to those recordings?” Jenna asked, focussing on the less juicy half of their conversation.

“Oh, we’re storing them. They aren’t going to the orbital security team. They do their thing, we do ours. They’re not allowed to store recordings of you, due to Favel’s instructions, but we are due to yours.”

“Well, the only reason we got footage of the AAMC majors violating my bedroom was that Sardius hit the record button at the right time,” Jenna reflected. “We don’t need to have an incident like that again and I guess my privacy can... I don’t know... go down the drain. Whatever, you guys have probably already counted all the moles on my back. What’s left for me to lose?”

“Your celibacy,” Ixy suggested with a muffled giggle.

Jenna rolled her eyes. “Yeah, well I’m not so cheap that I can be bought for the joy of crashing a trillion-dollar spaceship.”

Ixy giggled. “It was way more fun than you realize. The pilot is sometimes not as wasted as we hoped and he tries to stop us from leaving the ship after the crash. Sometimes it would get so crazy, escaping was half the fun. Sometimes we ended up crawling through air ducts, using escape pods, stealing emergency towing ships, sneaking out in space suits, and so much more. Oh, Ivy is reminding me of all the times we even just beat the hell out of the skeleton crew so we could crash the ship without bothering to party with the pilot. You’d have fun too if you let your hair down.”

“And how do you recommend I do that?” Jenna asked as she looked at herself in the mirror and proceeded to tie her hair up.

“Well, I’d love to give you advice on how to be less of a stick in the mud, Jenna. I might even do it if I thought you’d do what I recommend. As it is, you are too much of a homegrown human to ‘jump down the pants’ of a man who has exactly the opposite kind of skeleton.”

Jenna snarled. "Who cares about that? That's not the problem. I'm bad at trusting people. I have been taught all my life not to trust people. Without knowing it, Ryatt is a genius. At the boxing match, he said up front that if he got through the fight without splitting his lip, he wanted to kiss someone. He chose me. Nothing other than exactly what he said was going to happen happened in front of all those spectators. He took a gamble when he kissed me at the boxing gym," Jenna still couldn't say Clube, "but if all he wanted to do was kiss me one last time before the crap hit the fan, he chose a good time for it. Yes, it's clear that he wants to be with me. It was from the first minute. That's why he's a genius. He didn't wait for the *right* time. The right time was never going to come. Instead, he planted the idea that he was a good romantic partner in my head immediately."

"So, are you going to go for him?" Ixy asked excitedly. "Slip into the exciting world of inside the pants of a Boneman?"

Jenna huffed. "No! I trust him enough to let him work for me. I do not trust him enough to give him knowledge of what I'm like in bed, something he says everyone in the universe wants. How much could he sell that story for if he decided to turn on me? Good grief! He may need to hang out here for decades before he can crack me and heaven knows, he might never. I told him as much in our fight the other night."

"If you're going to be that much of a stick-in-the-wet-dirt, I have something to report. Your marriage certificate to Sardius just arrived," she said with a drawl that showed she had lost interest in their conversation.

"Where is it?" Jenna asked.

"Ryatt has it. He's scanning it like a good security drone on the front deck. I've been meaning to tell you, Jenna. You need to do some more renovations. The fact that you don't have a servants' entrance or a loading dock seems like a massive oversight. My last apartment had a much better service entrance than your palace."

"Draw me up a plan," she said absently as she rushed to the front deck.

Jenna met Ryatt at the front of the palace. He had a scanning gun in his hand and he was scanning the metal box on a stone bench.

"Is that a package for me?" Jenna asked, realizing that it would be completely crazy for packages to be sent in brown paper in outer space.

Ryatt looked at it, looked at her, gave a disgusted snort, and continued scanning it. Then he held up the screen and read the info regarding the sender, the recipient, and the contents. He glared at the information.

"What will happen to me if I dump this in the ocean?" he asked with an arch of his eyebrow.

She crossed her arms. "Nothing. I'll get the Octavians to fish it out of the ocean for me. It will, however, piss me off and set you back in my estimation."

Ryatt huffed his breath and started unbuckling the package. "Just so you know, my selfish desire is not the only reason why you should forget all about Sardius. There are stacks of reasons. He's a monster—"

"He's trouble," Jenna picked up his line of speech and started saying things she thought Ryatt would say to insult Sardius. "He's ninety years old. He's missing an eye. He smokes dusted rat cigars. He hates his mother and he weighs as much as a starship."

"The other things might be true, but he doesn't weigh as much as a starship. He was in top physical form," Ryatt informed her.

Jenna tucked in her chin and laughed. "That was him! He did not like anyone even hinting that he might not be as ripped as a tiger. You really did know him!"

"I said I did," Ryatt said gloomily. "Were you still doubting me?"

"Well," Jenna said, wiping away an imaginary tear of mirth. "It's hard for me to trust people and um... you haven't told me a lot of what I want to hear about him. You won't tell me what he looks like."

"What he looks like isn't important. People who do a lot of space travel have a lot of surgical augmentation. What he looks like has been changed forty times over. So what you said about having a false eye is completely possible."

Jenna leaned in and looked into Ryatt's eyes. "You lived like him, you're from the same solar system as him, you were in the same prison as him, worked the same kind of job as him, and I never heard him mention you."

Ryatt's jaw tightened and his lips pursed.

And Jenna looked at him much closer than she ever had before. "I see."

"What do you see?" he asked grouchy.

"One of your eyes is false," she said with a weird little smile.

"No. Both of them are false," he admitted as his shoulders sagged. "But one of them is a little more false than the other. I merely wear something over this eye, like a contact lens to make them look the same."

"What color is your eye under the lens?" Jenna asked.

"Red. The whole thing is red. It's left over from a bad chemical burn I had. I'm really lucky it wasn't worse."

Jenna looked in at him closer. "What color were they before that happened?"

"Blue and I could have had the same color again if I'd wanted. I didn't. I chose this color instead."

"Why?"

"Because my blue eyes were famous and I didn't want to be famous anymore."

"Ryatt, the Gambler, was famous?"

"Nah," he shrugged.

Jenna let the moment pass. "If you were choosing your eye color off a chart, what is the color of your eyes called?"

"Murky midnight."

She smiled. "That's enjoyable. Now, have I soothed your ego enough for you to finish opening my package without forcing me to become the kind of monster that bites men's heads off?"

He input the codes to unlock the security panel and finished undoing the buckles. "I don't know what you saw in this guy."

"I know you wish I wasn't doing this, but I am. I want him back. I've often thought about plastering the universe with wanted posters just to get him down here. You know, the kind with a big juicy reward attached to it."

Ryatt looked one thousand percent horrified as he stripped the marriage certificate device of the remaining packing materials.

"But I think I'd just get a bunch of randos who want to marry me," she finished vaguely as she took the device from Ryatt's hands.

“You’d get more than a bunch of randos. You’d get every single man in the known universe on your doorstep claiming he was Sardius Veritacalus.”

The marriage certificate device was a gold-plated box. It was wide, long, and thick. On the front, it had their names embossed in looping, spiraling letters.

“His last name was Veritacalus? Sardius Veritacalus? Sounds very grand,” Jenna said lovingly.

The box had two little glass-plated containers for the DNA contribution. Jenna saw Sardius had presented a lock of hair.

“He never said he was blond,” Jenna commented, wanting to crack it open so she could touch it. It curled in a soft golden loop, like a child’s hair that had been stuffed in an envelope.

Ryatt didn’t say anything until Jenna ironically let her hair down and started raking her fingers through it looking for loose strays.

“What are you doing?” Ryatt asked in mild alarm since she had ruined her hairstyle.

“I’m getting a hair,” she said, pulling several strands free and spooling them around her fingers “Ugh, I got more than one. That’s a little gross. His hair looks all pretty.”

“Your loyalty toward that terrorist is really astounding,” he said, his voice betraying none of his disgust. “You don’t need to do this right this minute. We can get Misha to cut a piece that looks just as nice as his.”

Jenna agreed and moved to drop her unneeded strands of hair into the ocean.

“Don’t do that,” Ryatt said, grasping her hand before she had let any of them drop. “I’ll dispose of them the way all your organic material is disposed of.”

“Are you worried someone might try to clone me?” she asked in astonishment.

“I’ve never heard of anyone successfully cloning a diplomat. I don’t think there’s any benefit to doing that because they don’t have the crown. At least, I hope there isn’t and I hope no one ever tries.” He stuffed her hair into his pocket.

Jenna was surprisingly moved. “That was really sweet,” she suddenly said. “Men on my planet don’t usually do that. They would let her hair fall wherever and not care what happened to it. We don’t have problems with cloning, but hair as long as mine makes a real mess in vacuum cleaners and drains. I like things tidy and I have never seen a man do something like that in all my life.”

He smiled in a rush. “If this is the sort of thing that turns you on, I’m sure I can...”

“Shut up, Ryatt,” she said, shutting him up and running her hand over Sardius’ name. “I love his name. Do you think he’ll come back here if I wait for him?”

“No. I think he could only be with you as your personal assistant. I bet he told you that.”

Jenna frowned. What Ryatt said was true. He had said that. “You sure know a lot about what he said. Were you one of the tools who was listening to his dialogue?”

Ryatt’s mouth fell open.

Jenna suddenly accused him. “Were you not a personal assistant at all and only a goon assigned to listen to him in the prison?”

Ryatt put his hands up. “You got me. Sorry, I guess I was never as interesting as Sardius.” He looked depressed as he strode back toward the palace. “Where do you want to store that thing anyway?”

“I’ve been thinking about what you suggested earlier and I think I’ll do exactly that,” she said, strolling after him and letting her skirt flare blue in the fading tropical light.

“What was my suggestion?” Ryatt asked with his hands behind his head.

“That I should drop it in the ocean,” Jenna replied with a grin.

“But I thought you didn’t want to get rid of it. I thought you were going to hang it over your bed and say your prayers to it every morning and every night,” he taunted.

She looked at him sideways. “You have a lot of weird ideas about me. It’s just that if I want to keep it safe, my palace isn’t the best place for it. You’ll see, the ocean is a locked vault.”

“If you say so,” he said as he held the palace door open for her.

# Chapter Nineteen

## The Rage Runs Deep

Instead of having Favel and Rossi as dinner guests for Fallcet's visit, Jenna decided to have Celestina and Josh. Josh was not normally a guest at dinners. He was usually either absent or circling the diners with a camera while they ate. Jenna wanted Josh there particularly because Celestina had already married him in a very private ceremony as soon as it became clear that no one cared if she took her third husband before she took her first. It was Jenna's understanding that Celestina wanted any man who married her to know that Josh was part of the package.

Jenna wanted Fallcet to meet Celestina especially because she was such a great cheerleader to advocate becoming a diplomat. Jenna still hoped to convince him to forget about her and take the crown.

Privately, Jenna found Fallcet loathsome, but she thought his background made him a good choice for a diplomatic position especially if he was able to smooth things over with the AAMC. She didn't like the idea of marrying him, but as she watched him arrive in the dining hall, watched him take his seat, and watched him give Vash instructions, she found herself questioning what the benefits of a marriage to her might be for him. Why did he want to marry her as her first husband rather than be a third husband or become a diplomat? What was in it for him?

Jenna got Celestina talking about her life and how it was improved by becoming a diplomat. She had always been a spoiled rich girl, but becoming a diplomat had been an excellent move that brought her into the limelight for something important that no one could joke about. She spoke eloquently as her charm lit up the dining hall like fairy lights.

Jenna listened with only half an ear as she pieced together Fallcet's intentions. It was clear as a bell once she had a minute to collect her thoughts. He was after the crowns on behalf of the AAMC, though not for himself. There were stacks of them and he thought if he could weasel into her good graces, get close to her as her husband, she'd tell him where she'd hid them. He'd betray her in a flash and send the AAMC the crowns with his compliments. With his job complete, he could make up some lame story about how their love hadn't worked out and Jenna had forced him out. He would ruin her reputation and steal all her authority.

Dinner arrived.

Since Jenna was still not eating food and sipping on an enormous milkshake was inappropriate for a formal dinner, Smoothie had made her something special.

It was bubbles of gelatin filled with a variety of nutritional supplements. They were all the colors of the rainbow, though not organized like a rainbow. They were eaten using a pipe-like object called a fluit. One put the empty fluit to their mouth, sucked the air out, and then stopped a valve in the pipe with a finger to prevent the air from refilling the space. Then one placed the thick end against one of the gelatin balls. The miniature vacuum inside the fluit sucked up the ball and a needle inside punctured it. Then the liquid inside came down the pipe and the person



could drink it. It was surprisingly elegant because it was only slightly busier than a woman smoking a long-stemmed cigarette. Each ball was approximately three sips.

“You don’t eat?” Fallcet asked as he cut into the thick mantle of a portobello mushroom

“How exactly did you order that?” Jenna asked, keeping the revulsion out of her voice. “We don’t serve mushrooms here.”

“I brought it with me. I’m a vegetarian,” he said righteously.

“You asked my cook to prepare that for you?” Jenna asked airily.

“Indeed, I did. She did wonderfully. I’d like to personally thank her afterward if I could.”

Jenna sucked on her fluit and gave herself a moment to think. He was casing her palace. It was entirely possible, from the records she’d seen regarding the night the AAMC stormed her palace, that the AAMC majors didn’t know who or what had attacked them that night. They had their suspicions—very reasonable suspicions—that the reason they’d failed was that Jenna had a Sushfief on staff. Fallcet had brought the mushroom to bait Jenna and confirm their suspicions.

“My PA says your kind regards have been received by the cook and she’s most delighted with your praise,” Jenna said with a smile, lying through her teeth.

“As long as she knows she’s appreciated.”

Jenna nodded. She hoped she’d given him nothing—not a single look to betray how much she wanted to splash water in his face.

“I missed hearing the answer to your question,” Fallcet said, leaning toward Jenna. “Don’t you eat?”

“No. I gave up eating.”

“But you have that delightful pink streak in your hair,” he observed playfully.

Jenna leaped to have a conversation with him about liplo fruit seeds and it was his turn to act like her wild behavior didn’t bother him. His act wasn’t very convincing. Apparently, Excelyn had been right and most Adamis people thought eating them was outside the lines for a proper lady. It made Jenna want to do it again next year to make her hair a warning of what she was willing to do. No one should mess with her.

“Hey, you there,” Fallcet asked, suddenly turning to Josh. “What’s your name again?”

“Josh,” he said, keeping his habit of only speaking in single syllables unless he was talking about filming or photography.

“You’re not wearing a crown. You’re not a diplomat?”

“No.”

“Then why are you here?” Fallcet asked, chewing noisily.

Josh refrained from answering while Celestina took the question. “Josh is my head cameraman. I’m sure you’ve seen the footage that my network plays of the palaces. He directs the camera work.”

“That makes him sound more like a director than a cameraman,” Fallcet said condescendingly.

But he was no match for Celestina who was used to people who would say or do anything in front of a camera. She was unflappable. “He’s very talented. He knows how to do everything and yes, up until now, he’s been a one-man media team, but now that everything has gone so well, he has a team working under him.”

“Quite the step up in the world,” Fallcet said in a quasi-flattering tone that seemed to hint that Josh ought to have aimed much higher than to be Celestine’s cameraman. Fallcet’s ambition was on full display. He thought everyone should seek as much power as possible.

“Aren’t you thinking of stepping up in the world by becoming an Octavian diplomat?” Celestina asked with a wicked little smile on her face. “Don’t you need to impress Jenna to accomplish that?”

Celestina wasn’t going to let anyone act like they did everything themselves. She had fifty people who worked for her and she wouldn’t even be a diplomat if it wasn’t for Jenna. The idea that a person did not need to be cordial to those above them and beneath them disgusted Celestina. The fairy lights around her were turning to lights glinting off dagger blades.

“I was hoping to marry Jenna. I came here saying I wanted to be a diplomat to get my foot in the door.” He was trying to be charming. It wasn’t working.

Celestina made a repulsed sound, halfway between a titter and a snort. Then she turned to Jenna and made a subtle cut sign across her neck.

Fallcet noticed. “What does that mean?”

“She wants to talk to me later,” Jenna said, sounding like the whole thing was tiresome. So tiresome in fact that she had lost interest in dinner all together. “Fallcet, I don’t mind telling you this in front of Celestina and Josh because we have no secrets here. We live in a tight community, and new people who do not carry their weight do not belong here. My focus is not to find a first husband. My relationship with the AAMC can be repaired only through their providing me with decent candidates that I can crown as diplomats. Having considered your proposal, I have to put your plan on pause. I cannot accept a first husband until my duty to the Octavian/Adamis Alliance has been discharged.”

“You have to crown four more diplomats before you can get married?” he asked in disbelief.

“Among other things. I will allow you to spend the night in the Sand Palace, but in the morning, I must ask you to return to Magma Prime. If you do not want to be a diplomat, then you are wasting my time. I will not allow you to stay here as I contemplate whether or not a union between the two of us would be beneficial. In the morning, you can tell me if you have changed your mind about becoming a diplomat. If you haven’t, I think it wise to refrain from having a formal engagement. We’ll speak of the marriage again when I’ve finished filling the seats.”

“I don’t like this decision,” he said in a way that suggested that people often cared whether he liked things or not.

“I’m not particularly interested in what you like,” Jenna said. “I was crowned as an infant. Your squeamishness regarding a diplomatic position strikes me as weak. You said you chose a different path. You thought you could serve others better. I think you seek power without seeking responsibility. That makes you completely different from me. It also makes you seem like you’d be better suited to being a third husband.”

“I won’t consent to that,” Fallcet said without hesitation.

Jenna shook her head wearily. “I didn’t ask you to. I already have a third husband in mind. For the time being, his support, along with Favel, is really all I need. Give it some thought. I’ll talk to you in the morning.” Jenna called Vash. “Please escort Fallcet to the Sand Palace after he finishes his meal. I’m tired. I’ll retire to bed early.”

Celestina and Josh rose from their places at the table.

“You’re all just going to leave me here alone before I’ve finished eating? That’s terrible manners.”

“I’m not going to leave you here alone. I’m going to sit here with you until you finish your food. However, it’s fine with me if Celestina and Josh leave early. They have a very full schedule. It’s a wonder they could join us for the half-hour they spent with us.”

Once Celestina and Josh were gone, Ryatt and Vash stood on either side of Jenna and watched Fallcet finish his dinner. Jenna didn’t look at either of them. She knew Ryatt was irritated because everything was irritating him lately and she could feel Vash’s sensitive heart bleed for Smoothie, who had to prepare a mushroom for dinner.

After Fallcet swallowed the last mouthful, he turned to Jenna. “I feel that I’ve been treated most unfairly. I feel like you’re not even listening to my proposal.”

“That’s funny. I feel that it’s unfair that you were dishonest with your purpose for coming here in the first place. I also feel that if the AAMC thought that I was a real threat to them, you would have become my third husband last year. Instead, I haven’t been as easy to work with as they’d hoped and so now you are here scratching at my door.” Jenna leaned forward and got his full attention. “Listen to me. All the AAMC has to do is provide me with decent candidates and they’ll get crowns. If they provide me with really good candidates, I’ll crown more of them. There is no reason for me to be their enemy.”

He ground his teeth together. “From what I’ve seen, there was nothing wrong with the six majors that came here before. You just didn’t give them a chance.”

Jenna smiled, enjoying herself in a twisted little way. “Because I wanted to talk to them for more than a few hours before giving them a permanent diplomatic appointment? I don’t know what you’ve been told about the incident, but they left the Sand Palace, entered the Dahlia Palace, and barged into my bedroom after they had been on Octavia Prime for less than a single day.”

“That can’t be true,” he spat back.

“It is. The truth is that I’m being more than reasonable. They’re such a large organization in the Adamis Alliance and their weight makes them worth listening to, which is why I allowed them to make amends. I’m still willing to, which is why I’m letting a candidate come for an interview next week, which I’m sure you’re aware of.”

“They need a stronger voice than one vote. One vote in a vote of eight does not signify power.”

Jenna smiled. “I only have one vote. Look at how much power I have.”

“But you’re choosing everyone!” he retorted hotly.

“I might have been willing to choose you as a diplomat, but that ship has unfortunately sailed. Look, your views and behavior have helped me to make up my mind early. There’s no point in letting you think that I’d be interested in a match with you in the future. I will never marry you. Instead, I think it might be better if you packed up your belongings and got on a pod tonight. I’m not interested in you as a husband or a diplomat.” Jenna got up to leave.

He stopped her with his words, “But I was one of the eleven.”

“Beg your pardon?” she asked over her shoulder.

“The universal matching algorithm. It gave me thousands of matches. It only gave you eleven. That test is flawless. I have fallen like a ton of bricks for every woman on my list. You must feel something for me.”

“How many of those thousands have you met?” she asked, giving into her morbid curiosity and refraining from giving him more of a cold shoulder.

“At least a hundred.”

“And how many wives have you had?” she asked, turning her body toward him.

He suddenly realized he had her attention in a way that he’d not had it before. He seemed like he wanted to hold out on the answer, but he would have also known that if he refused to answer, Jenna would simply ask her PA what information was on public record. “None,” he finally replied.

“So out of thousands of women who were listed as potentials, and the hundred you met in person, you didn’t see anyone who you wanted to pair up with?”

“I have to save that position for a political match,” he explained coldly.

“Ah... I see. You know, I think there’s a reason why so few men showed up on my list. At first, I thought it might be because I am dangerously unlovable, both that I can’t love and that others can’t love me.”

“Seems like a reasonable explanation to me,” Fallcet said almost under his breath.

“I don’t think that’s right,” Jenna said slowly, measuring her tone. “I think there’s another reason. I think the men I match up with best are mostly not allowed to take the test.”

Fallcet cocked his head. “Really?”

“Yeah.” She clicked her tongue against her front teeth. “So, it’s really no skin off my back if things don’t work out between us. It’s none off your back either because, apparently, you match well with thousands of women. I’m sure one of them has enough political clout to assuage your ego.”

Ixy’s voice sounded in Jenna’s earpiece. “If you’re through telling him off, Celestina and Josh have finished packing Fallcet’s things and they’re at the dock with a pod waiting.”

Jenna squashed a chuckle. Celestina and Josh had done that?

“It’s time for you to go,” Jenna said to Fallcet.

He glanced between Ryatt and Vash, both of them were larger men than him.

“Please escort Fallcet to the dock. His pod is all ready for him,” Jenna ordered.

To his credit, Fallcet did not say or do even one more thing. He stood up and allowed the two men to walk on either side of him as they escorted him out.

# Chapter Twenty

## A Shroom And A Sushfief

Once Fallcet was out of sight, Jenna rushed to the kitchen. There, she found Misha standing at the dishwasher, loading the counter tray.

"Where's Smoothie?" Jenna asked urgently.

"Oh, she went to her room when Ixy told her that Fallcet was coming to the kitchen. Ixy called me and I pretended to be the chef. It was easy. Smoothie had already made the bubbles for the fluits, so all I had to do was pretend to be the cook and cook his damn mushroom for him."

Jenna exhaled in relief. "You're a lifesaver. Thank you. Does Smoothie know he came in here with a mushroom?"

"I don't think we could have hidden it from her. She went upstairs because Sardijs told us ages ago that we had to keep her a secret and Ixy kept that up for us once she started, but I don't think we could hide what I had to do. I had to look like his request was normal...but it wasn't. It was really gross. Totally awful. Worse than I was expecting by a thousand percent. It looked just like Smoothie. It was like cooking her baby." Misha started crying and swearing violently under her breath.

Jenna rushed to her, put her arms around her, and patted her pink yarn head. "Shh... You did the right thing. It was hard, so hard to do. We all had to pretend it didn't bother us so we didn't give her away."

"That man is gross, Jenna. You weren't really thinking about marrying him, were you?"

Jenna stuck out her tongue. "No. Besides, he's gone. We kicked him off our planet."

"Yeah?" Misha stuck her tongue out too. "I bet he'll be back."

Jenna didn't think he could come back without her permission, but then she supposed anyone could come to Octavia Prime. It was just whether or not he could come to her palace. Jenna groaned. "We should have microchipped him before we released him back into the wild. That way we'd know if he was going to be anywhere near us and avoid him."

Misha looked at her funny. "That's completely illegal."

"Well, it shouldn't be. Do you want to come upstairs with me to talk to Smoothie? I bet she could use a few people in her corner."

Misha nodded and together they went up and knocked on Smoothie's door. "Can we come in? It's just me and Misha."

"Please wait while I confirm with Ixy," Smoothie's voice came from the other side of the door.

Once she'd confirmed, the door clicked open on its own.

Jenna rarely saw inside Smoothie's room, even though she had slept in the room next to hers for months. It looked like entering the inside of a child's tent. The walls had all been covered with fabric. The ceiling looked like a circus tent with the fabric bunched together in the center. It was all white with yellow lights. Little yellow mushrooms were everywhere. If Jenna flipped her thinking, it was like sitting in the middle of a mural of people, when you were the only person in the room. The decorating was intended to make someone feel less lonely, but paradoxically only made them more so.

Smoothie sat on a huge pillow in the center of the room.

"How are you doing?" Jenna asked, keeping her tone soft.

"I'm fine," Smoothie said stiffly, the place on her body where she spoke from was still a mystery. Jenna had never seen her mouth. "I'm completely fine," the Sushfief reiterated.

Jenna flared out her skirt and sat down cross-legged on the floor in front of her. "Not to doubt you, but if I said those words, it would be because I absolutely was not fine."

"No, I really am absolutely well. Ixy talked me through the first hour or so, and then she played a recording of one of my old conversations with Sardius for me. He and I were always close."

Jenna smiled wanly. She remembered how Sardius had said that he liked Smoothie and how he was the one who negotiated her high salary. "Did that make you feel better?"

"Oh, yes. It was much more comforting than talking to Ixy. No offense to Ixy. She's really nice to me, but there was something so calming about Sardius. Like he'd faced all the battles in the world and come off conqueror. I miss him."

"So do I," Jenna said.

"It's just lonely being a Sushfief here sometimes. There is fungus everywhere. Absolutely everywhere, Jenna. But most of them are not sentient. What you're doing is very important Jenna, but I wish there was someone as diligent as you to mediate between the Sushfiefs and... anyone."

Smoothie's thoughts were interrupted by Misha's fidgeting.

Misha had been lingering behind Jenna, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. When it seemed like they were finished talking, Misha got down on the floor and said to Jenna, "Can I talk to Smoothie alone, please?"

From the despondent look on her stylist's face, Jenna guessed that Misha needed to ask Smoothie to forgive her for what she'd done in cooking the mushroom for Fallcet. Misha looked seconds off of bursting into tears and if Misha wanted to do it privately, Jenna would give her all the space she needed.

Jenna nodded and got off the floor.

Stepping into the hallway, she closed the door behind her and went down the stairs into the main hall.

Ryatt was standing there. He was still wearing his army-like clothes, but the coat was undone, showing a layer of black undershirt, and his exposed throat. "I need to talk to you," he said. The look on his face was hard.

# Chapter Twenty One

## A Night that Lasts Forever

"I'm unhappy, Ryatt. Can it wait until morning?" Jenna asked, trying her hardest not to let her extreme frustration show on her face or in her voice.

"No. It's about tonight. I don't feel good about what just happened with the dinner, with Fallcet, with the way he was ejected, or anything else. I just disconnected the Sand Palace and gave instructions for it to be moved away from our main cluster. I'll go through it in the morning to make sure he didn't leave us any surprises."

"But if he was removed so forcefully, I'm sure he wouldn't have time..." Jenna trailed off while looking at Ryatt's expression. "Okay, you're right. I'm a baby and I was born yesterday. He could have planted all sorts of devices for disrupting signals, recording video and audio, and who knows what else? Since you're my babysitter, I'll let you decide what games we should play."

"Very good," He said sternly. "I'd like to continue the metaphor as it puts me in charge, but it tastes sour. I'm not your babysitter. I'm your Chief of Security, and I feel uncomfortable with you going to bed tonight on your own. If you want me to sleep on the floor, I'll sleep on the floor. If you want to sleep in my room, I'll stay there with you, and sleep on the floor. If you want to sleep in your pod, I'd support that, as long as you let me sleep on the floor next to you."

Jenna pulled her eyebrows together. "You're really worried."

"Yes. I am. That guy was absolutely cut from the same cloth as those dolts who messed you up that terrible night. I can't leave you alone. I know you don't want me in your room as part of the status quo, but tonight, my gut is a mess and I *have* to stay with you."

Jenna wasn't sure if Ryatt was using the incident with Fallcet to get his foot back in her bedroom door, but she felt uneasy too. "Come on. You don't have to sleep on the floor."

"I see," he said briskly, clearly not getting where she was going with her concession. "I didn't want it to come to this, but I'm going to have to play the Sardius card."

"The Sardius card?" Jenna laughed. "Is that the one where you say that Sardius would have wanted whatever bananas thing you're asking for and you just borrow his credibility like it's a shirt?"

He put an angry hand on his hip. "You must know I don't want to do this sort of thing. If I was going to use his name to get what I wanted, I could have already told you that he set us up."

Jenna's eyes went wide. "Did he?"

"No. Other than telling me where I could get a job, he didn't set us up."

"Are you saying he wouldn't be happy thinking of us lying in bed together?" Jenna asked, licking her bottom lip and getting interested.

Ryatt snuffed. "No man in the universe would be happy with the thought of you being in bed with another man. Everyone wants you for themselves. He's not special in that way, but if I didn't protect you with every bone in my body, he would rip out my nervous system to use as dental floss."

"I was just going to say that you don't have to sleep on the floor because I'll let you sleep on the bed... next to me," she said slowly, fixing the misunderstanding.



“Really? You’re going to be that easy?”

Jenna nodded like he was crazy. “Tonight I am. That guy, Fallcet, gave me the creeps. I’m not feeling so good either. I want you to go check on Smoothie while I get changed. If she’s okay, come join me. If she’s not, you have to find a way to make her comfortable, even if that means we all have a sleepover in her room. Let me know how it goes. I’m going to get changed.”

Jenna left Ryatt in the hall and went to her room by herself.

“Things are getting racy tonight,” Ixy sang in her earpiece. “If you wanted to reward me for good behavior, you could let me turn up the heat in the room hot enough so that Ryatt has to sleep with his shirt off.”

“Isn’t Conrad about to come on?” Jenna reminded her PA callously.

“I could have an hour or so to drool over Mr. Boneman before Conrad takes over,” Ixy pleaded.

Alone in her dressing room, Jenna started a different kind of conversation. “Ixy, I’ve been told that this palace is armed. Is that true?”

“Yeah, there’s a gun in each room that fires bullets or tranquilizer darts. Does my lady have a preference?”

“If I wanted to shoot someone, I would talk to you about firing those, wouldn’t I?” Jenna questioned. “Is that a Ryatt thing at all?”

“It’s a Ryatt thing in that he would need to reload the guns after their magazines have been discharged, but they’re all full. I suppose each one of them is due for a test fire. From what I’ve seen, they haven’t been fired since Sardius took a shot at Armen. Darn. I wish I’d been there for that.”

“We need to work out a code between us for when I want you to fire them,” Jenna said, prompting her PA to get back on track.

“Sure. One code for bullets and another code for tranquilizer darts.”

“What should our codes be?” Jenna asked. “They’ve got to be something that I wouldn’t normally say *and* something that wouldn’t give the person in the room the hint that they’re about to be fired at.”

“Hang on. Ivy is saying she worked out codes like this with Excelyn. The code for bullets is…” Ixy started laughing. “She tells the person who is about to be shot that she’s on her period, which is hilarious because Excelyn probably hasn’t had a period in thirty years.”

“Uh… I don’t think that will work for me. I still get periods,” Jenna admitted with a frown.

“No problem. Ask the person if they’ve ever painted an entire room red. It sounds natural for you to talk to someone about home decorating because you’ve had renovations done.”

“Yeah. That will work. What about the tranquilizer darts?”

“Ask them if they get woozy when they see a Boneman with his shirt off,” Ixy suggested. “You’d never say that normally.”

“And you’d be amused?”

“I would be. But I’m going to quiet down because Ryatt is on his way back. Smoothie and Misha talked it out and Smoothie has just gone to sleep, so he’s free to join you,” Ixy said with a subtle smirk.

“Thanks.” Jenna finished changing out of her dress and she slipped into her idea of the perfect pajama set. It was soft gray leggings that finished just after her knee. Then the top was

piles of light fabric that draped over her torso with so many natural waves that the locations of any lumps or curves underneath were completely secret. Her perfect pajama set.

She came out of the closet and saw Ryatt. He hadn't stopped by his room to pull out any nightwear. He was tugging on the remaining buttons of his coat and yawning like her bedroom was his bedroom and he merely needed to drop his clothes where he stood before getting into bed with her.

"Don't you want some sweatpants or something?" she asked, a little dazed at how good he looked exposing his neck and collarbone.

"Nah. I'm going to keep my boots on. I'll shed my coat because it's been too hot to wear it all day." He took it off and draped it over the edge of a nearby chair. Then he started pacing and snapping his fingers. "I still feel too antsy to sleep. Something is wrong. Getting rid of that guy was too easy. He just walked to the pod and got on? It doesn't make sense. With all his friends in the AAMC he was able to take a no from you and get on the pod that easily? Nah, something is wrong."

"Have you been talking to the orbital team?"

Ryatt snorted. "Those guys? Ixy says they improved dramatically after Temptic joined them. He's got strong reasons to stop his father's diplomat program from looking foolish. I'll get them on the line. Why don't you lie down and try to sleep? There's no point waiting for something that might not happen."

Jenna did. She felt a wave of disappointment come over her. Had she really wanted to go to bed with Ryatt? Or was she still unsettled by everything that happened? The idea that she needed Ryatt to comfort her made her sick of herself, so she covered herself with her blankets, dimmed the lights, and assumed the position she normally slept in.

"Good grief," Ryatt huffed in strong disapproval. "You're sleeping like a shrimp that has its whiskers handcuffed to its flippers. I thought I taught you to stop doing that."

She felt his hands on her through the blankets moving her limbs to stretch her out. She tried to obey him, but the moment he let go of her and left the room to check the control panel, she reverted back to the shrimp pose.

Jenna thought she fell asleep quite quickly. She tossed, turned, tried to stretch out, and crumpled back in on herself.

When she felt hands on her, she thought it was Ryatt trying to pull her skeleton into straight lines, but when she opened her eyes to look at him, she saw someone wearing a military helmet.

"I could die," she practically spat in disgust in the AAMC officer's face.

But she'd already had a tranquilizer discharged in the muscles of her arm. How much more security did she need?

# Chapter Twenty Two

## Almost a Cold Shower

Jenna woke up with a gush of water splashed in her face. Well, it wasn't splashed in her face as much as dumped on her from above.

She was in a tank again, except this time it was a fish tank, and it wasn't huge. The water in the face was horrible, but on the bright side, she was dressed. That was a grand improvement in situation from when she had been in the lizard tank. She was wearing what she had worn to bed the night before. Her perfect pajamas left everything to the imagination... when she was dry. She looked down and saw how the fabric clung to her body. She pushed a lock of wet hair out of her face and growled. Then she reminded herself that it really was better than being naked because she wasn't alone. She had a torturer. Someone was dropping water on her from above and unless she was super wrong, that person was Adamis.

Another bucket full of water came down on her.

Jenna coughed, wiped her eyes, and looked up.

Fallcet was above her. It looked like he was in charge of her interrogation, or her torture, or whatever reason they had for abducting her.

She stood up and looked into the open grate above her head. Fallcet was there, with his curls tied behind his head in a ponytail. The boho suit was gone and in its place was something very like a military uniform. No coat, but an army tank top, boots, and camo trousers.

"Hey, Baby!" Jenna called to him like he was there to rescue her instead of to terrorize her.

He squatted and spoke to her, matching her playful cadence. "Having fun?"

She giggled. "I like this. This is good. We're progressing."

He narrowed his eyes. "Are we?"

"Yup. Getting your opponent to kidnap you and torture you is clearly the best way to have a frank conversation. If you're going to go to this much trouble to talk to me, you're not going to beat around the bush. You're going to get right to it. What do you want?"

He didn't like her acting like she wasn't at a disadvantage. He had clearly looked forward to putting her in her place. He ground his teeth together before answering. "The crowns."

"Yeah, I don't have them," she answered, scraping her tongue across her canine.

"We found one in your room," he informed her.

"Yup. Yup," she agreed. "I have one, but I can't get more than one without the media circus that Celestina does for me. That's the rule. I sent all the crowns away for safekeeping, and I can only get one at a time."

"Where are they?" he asked menacingly.

She giggled again, giving a Sardius-style molar click of her tongue. "Aren't you going to pour more water on me? I think you should. You're mad at me for refusing you like a dog and hurling you off-world. I bet no one has ever done something like that to you before. You're pissed. I get it. Pour another bucket of water on me. I can take it."

Armen rolled his shoulders like he was refraining from doing a lot more to her than just pouring water on her. But he didn't point out the obvious and say that once the tank filled up with

water, she'd drown, or that he could easily extract her from the tank and have all her teeth yanked.

Seeing him hesitate, Jenna saw her opening. "You're such a coward. Like... if you'd just asked me for what you wanted when we were talking in my palace, I would have told you what I'm telling you now. I don't have them. I can only crown one person at a time. That was what I arranged after the AAMC guys attacked my palace."

He leaned down further and got his face within spitting distance away from hers. "You don't get it. I'm not the one who kidnapped you. I'm the one negotiating for your release."

"Aw! So you did come to rescue me, you big softy," she said in a pouty voice and put out her lower lip. "Except if you're here to save me, then why haven't I been saved? I'm still in a fish tank and you're up there staring down at me like I have literally become a fish in your barrel."

Above her, a man next to Fallcet was poised to pour another bucket of water on her, but Fallcet put up his hand to stop him. "I'm a negotiator. I'm here facilitating a negotiation. The location of these talks may be unusual, but Octavians usually have water all over them. Doesn't it suit you, little Octavian diplomat?" He said the words harshly and allowed another bucket of water to be poured on Jenna.

She smothered a laugh. He was trying to be cruel and if she didn't act like he was being cruel he might retaliate by upping the ante of her torture. She thought about pretending that he was hurting her so that he might have whatever satisfaction he was longing for. She had hurt his pride. There was no doubt he wanted to hurt her back.

She was about to fake it when she suddenly thought of Ryatt's false eyes. These AAMC guys didn't want to kill her and whatever they did to hurt her, she could get fixed, just like Ryatt. Suddenly she felt like she could handle anything they were willing to pour on her.

"Where are the crowns?" Fallcet demanded.

"They're in the ocean," she answered directly.

"The Octavians have them?"

"No. The ocean has many creatures who are not a part of these talks. Not only that, but the Octavians are not in charge of who is chosen to be a representative for the Adamis Alliance. The Octavians are not involved, but they did give me some options for protecting the crowns while I was still in the recruitment phase."

Fallcet looked like he was about to scream. "Are you telling me that you gave the crowns to a bunch of fish?"

"I did!" Jenna shouted in glee before her mouth was filled with a bucketful of seawater that came down on her from above.

"Who do you think you are, the frickin' little mermaid? Who the hell are you to make deals with fish?"

Jenna spat the water from her mouth, but couldn't stop chuckling.

Octavians did not believe in material wealth in the same way humans did. Favel had his own mansion, but it was a public place. Any Octavian could come and go if they desired. His mansion mostly housed family members, but it was usually an odd collection of them because the same relatives didn't always stay.

What the Octavians prized most was ideas, thus plans were kept secret. They built their own starships underwater, filled them with water, and shot the entire thing into outer space. The

Adamis ships were sometimes modeled after them, but they did not have the Octavian blueprints to work off of. Those were kept secret.

The way they kept their secrets secret was to store their ideas in memory drives that were then backed up by a fish network. There were few things weirder than that. Fish were notorious gossips, so certain rumors had to be checked and confirmed by vast quantities of fish before information could be retrieved. It was like having all four hundred of your friends on Facebook being willing to vouch for you at once if you wanted to open your deposit box at the bank. The tighter the security, the more fish had to confirm the rumor.

Thus, Jenna had to crown another diplomat herself on public TV networks in order for the fish to give her another crown.

“How many fish have to confirm you before you can get another crown?” Fallcet asked angrily.

She clicked her tongue. “A lot. Except, it doesn’t matter much. What does matter is that I don’t know where the crowns are and I can’t get them if I’m in this tank playing master and servant with you.”

Fallcet waved his hand to have another bucketful of water poured on her. The water was now up to her knees.

He was thinking harder as he stared down at her. “Can any of the other diplomats get the crowns?”

“You know,” Jenna said, figuratively sharpening her claws. “I don’t think I’m going to tell you anything more until you get out of here. This is seawater, which means that you could fill this tank up to the brim, drown me in seawater, and leave my body to sink or float in the ocean next to my palace. They’d put a Y incision in my chest and test the water they found in my lungs, only to find that it was exactly the same water that can be found near my palace. I’d be dead, not your problem anymore, and it would look like a perfect accident, because your boys haven’t left a mark on me, have they? The story will be that I fell into the water and drowned. No one was to blame.”

Fallcet leaned forward and said darkly, “If you recognize how much danger you’re in, are you willing to negotiate?”

“I was willing to negotiate before,” she called forcefully through the grate. “You just weren’t honest with me. Never in our conversations did you ask me where the crowns were and you didn’t offer me anything I wanted.”

He frowned deeply. He had offered her himself and she didn’t want him. He motioned for another bucket to be dumped on her.

More than likely, both the people above him and below him in the chain of command knew of his failure. Everyone knew he was going to propose to Jenna when he went to stay at her palace, and they knew she had utterly rejected him. The humiliation stung him in more places than one, and he had more water poured on her until it was up to her armpits.

He was hoping to humiliate her.

“Why isn’t she shivering?” Fallcet asked a second AAMC officer next to him. “I’ve interrogated tons of prisoners and by this point, she shouldn’t be able to talk. Her teeth should be chattering without a wetsuit.”

“Sir,” the second officer said in a voice he hoped was too low for Jenna to hear. “I don’t think we’ll be able to break her so that she’ll snivel, cry, beg, and promise you everything you want.”

“Why not?”

“She’s from a planet called Earth. The people there have been incredibly slow to develop on the galactic scale because their planet is always trying to kill them.”

Fallcet scrunched up his face. “What?”

“It’s true. Her planet is incredibly inhospitable. Only one-third of the planet meets the habitable living standards set forth in the Adamis Region Bill. Otherwise, it’s too cold and it’s too hot. Not only that, but Jenna is from a part of that planet that is particularly uninhabitable. Apparently, she’s what they call a Canadian.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that her country is one of the most unpleasant on the planet for cold weather. If we were to torture her with water, we would need to lower the temperature of this water by twenty-five degrees.”

“That would take it near the freezing point,” Fallcet recognized. “That would kill her and it would look very suspicious when the authorities found her body because a person can’t freeze to death anywhere on Octavia Prime.”

“Not only that,” the officer continued, “but, if we take this water three degrees colder without killing her, she’ll be able to charge us with war crimes because what we’ve done so far is technically a water fight, not torture.”

Jenna wanted to pipe up that she was pretty sure kidnapping was illegal but didn’t because she wanted them to say they were sorry and take her back to her palace. If anything, she wanted to use this whole incident as leverage to get them to play by her rules. However, even if they did everything she said, she’d continue to think they were morons. After all, they thought she couldn’t hear them talking when the sound echoed through her fish tank.

Fallcet cracked his knuckles and knelt by the grate to look down at her again. “I’m sure we can come to some sort of an arrangement.”

She smiled up at him. “I hope so.”

He slammed the lid on the tank shut and screwed it closed with a wheel turn. The lid was glass and Jenna saw the soldier tapping buttons on the controls behind him while Fallcet kept his eyes on Jenna.

She should have told him to try to take her crown off her, then she could have cut the hell out of his fingers and had that bloodstream that she had been so afraid of running between her eyes. The idea of his whole finger rolling down her face and plunking in the water was pretty appealing at that moment as she glared at Fallcet’s smug face. She hadn’t worried about any of that since she had left Earth.

The water level wasn’t rising or falling, but soon she smelled the gas. They were going to gas her.

Fallcet was trying to make her scared. He wanted her to shout, bang on the glass, and promise to work with him, but she wouldn’t. She recognized that he couldn’t pull her out of the water when she was conscious for a hundred reasons. He had to get her to take another tranquilizer before he and his goons could move her.

She tapped her nose and made a show of breathing in.

It was too much for her and she blacked out with her head falling below the waterline.

# Chapter Twenty Three

## His Voice Echoes

Jenna woke up with her whole skeleton aching to a melody she'd never felt before. Fallcet and AAMC guys had not roughed her up. She was so cold she ached because she was wet and on a steel floor. A towel had been thrown over her and she clutched it to her chest before she remembered the time she woke up in the lizard tank. She hadn't been cold then because Sardius had the Octavians strip her under the heat lamps. She realized it would be better for her if she used the towel to dry off her body rather than her clothes.

Besides, there was no one around to know what she was wearing.

Jenna didn't know where she was. The four walls around her were metal and painted green, as was the floor. The ceiling above her was a grate, and she could see a chain holding in the middle. There were no doors, and only one small window. It made sense that she had been dumped in a room that was probably a shipping container. She'd know what kind if she had more time to learn about the universe instead of always being pressed to do nothing but her job.

Her eyes hurt from the light and the effects of the tranquilizer weren't wearing off. She looked out the window, but the view was discouraging. The light above was harsh and her eyes were sore from the water fight. She needed time to adjust.

All she knew was that she was cold and the only thing that could do to help herself was to get out of her wet clothing and dry herself off.

It was slow going.

Every move she made was like wading through mud, but eventually, all her clothes were off her. She wrung them and stretched them out on the floor in the small space to dry. She peered above her with blurry eyes and wondered if Fallcet and his goons would pour more water on her from above.

She couldn't see what was past the grate, just that there was a roof above her and hard lights beaming down on her like she was in a Costco. She hoped there wasn't a camera.

She dried off, folded the towel into a pillow, and sat on it. Her wet hair dripped down her back. She crossed her arms and pulled her knees up to her chest.

Once she'd stilled her breathing a bit and recovered a bit more from the tranquilizer, she heard something.

Someone was humming.

She hummed something back.

The humming stopped and the person who had been humming a dull melody began whistling a cheerful tune. Jenna wasn't very good at whistling, but she tried to follow suit.

"Is there someone in a cell next to me?" she asked, calling through the window that wasn't even large enough for her to stick her head through.

"Are you alright?" a voice called back.

At first, Jenna didn't know what to do. That voice. She knew that voice. It was the sound of the one man she had longed to hear.

"Sardius!" she shouted back.



“Shut up, Jenna. We don’t need anyone hearing that name,” his voice came back sharply.

She plugged her mouth with her hands and for a moment she couldn’t hear anything except her blood pumping in her ears. It was him! It was him a thousand percent! It was just like him to be in a jail cell. He was the kind of man who had to be contained and all of a sudden, so was she. Her mind raced a mile a minute and she couldn’t do anything but hold her hand over her mouth and breathe through her nose.

It was him!

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Jenna was in the container, swinging from a chain that hung from the ceiling. She had a window she couldn’t see anything through, and she couldn’t fit through the window. Her clothes were drying on the floor and she had wrapped the towel around her after she discovered she was not alone.

Sardius was in one of the cells next to her. He had been humming, then whistling, but he had stopped doing either of those things after she had called out to him. Instead, he was breathing and the sound of air going in and out of his lungs was ragged. She wondered how that hadn’t been the first thing she noticed when she woke up. It was a sound she ached to hear.

She wanted to talk to him, but he’d told her to shut up. Sardius never told her to shut up. Because of that, she felt an urgency to obey him.

He had started moving around in his cell and she realized he wasn’t in the cell next to hers, dangling from the ceiling, but a few over.

Eventually, she heard the scrape of metal. Looking out her mini window, she saw that he had removed the grate above him and hoisted himself onto the ceiling of his cell. He was merely a shadow standing straight and tall and beautiful. His shadow was what she always imagined his body would be like. She saw him hold onto the chain and work out a path on the tops of other cells to get to hers.

“Jenna, put your hand up,” he hissed, just loud enough for her to hear.

“I’m not tall enough to reach,” she replied.

He saw her face in the window. Jenna could tell by the way he held his head, though he was still a silhouette with light and shadow coming in odd bursts in the prison or warehouse. Jenna was inclined to think they were in a warehouse. There wasn’t a toilet in her container and the whole place didn’t smell of urine. She felt certain she wasn’t in a holding cell that was accustomed to holding people.

As quietly as a cat, Sardius moved from container to container until he was next to hers. He started working on a part of the grate that was on the opposite side of where her window was, so she couldn’t peek out at him. She could only see his hands moving a miniature screwdriver around in circles to remove a section of the grate. His knuckles were the ragged bare bones of a Boneman.

She tightened the towel she had wrapped around herself. At the very least, she wanted to be dressed when they met for the first time.

“Jenna,” he said her name in a low whisper. “I’m going to drop myself into your cell and when I do, you must promise me to stay completely quiet. You’re not going to like what you see and

though you will be angry with me, you must stay quiet or we'll be caught and my escape plan will be shot to hell. Can you promise me that you will keep your voice down?"

"I promise," she whispered.

"Swear it," he insisted.

"I swear," she said, her heart thumping like a mad animal.

He dropped down into her cell, landing with his boots on her discarded wet shirt and the light came on him.

"Ryatt?" Jenna said, recognizing him immediately.

He shot her a look that was an 'I told you you'd be mad' look combined with an 'I can't help it if you're stupid.'

"I suppose this building is made similarly to my jail in the Xypher Zone. I suppose the way the sound echoes makes my voice sound the same here as when I was jailed. You recognized me immediately when you didn't before. I guess it all makes sense," he said contemplatively as he turned to face her.

So... Ryatt had been Sardius all along.

She smoothed out the wrinkles between her eyebrows and instructed him softly, "Say something. Anything. Say more."

"I'm not happy with this, Jenna." His voice was Sardius'. Exactly. Perfectly. The cadence, the spacing between the words, the accent, the tone, and everything else.

"Why are you going by the name Ryatt?" she interrogated, keeping her promise to keep her voice down.

"Why are you in a towel?" he retorted.

"They soaked me and dumped me in here with a towel. What was I supposed to do? Stay in my wet clothes?" It was barely a whisper, but the sound was traveling so well through the empty spaces that it was still too loud.

They looked at each other angrily and then stood way closer together... right up against each other.

"Where's your earpiece?" he asked, his lips in her empty ear.

"I don't know. I don't think it was with me when they soaked me in the fish tank," she replied, putting her face right up in his ear.

After only two lines, it was already the most romantic argument she'd ever had.

"Answer my question from before. Why are you going by the name of Ryatt?" she pressed.

He rolled his eyes, gripped the side of her head in one hand, and pulled her toward him so she could whisper directly into her ear. "When I woke up in this solar system after I escaped the Xypher Zone, I was so messed up that the people who rescued me could only get two words out of me. One was 'prison' and the other was 'riot'. I said them over and over again in no order because I was delirious. I'd had a few bad blows to the head. The nurses thought that I was saying my name and they interpreted my name to be Ryatt Prizen. When I was conscious enough to understand that was what had happened, I decided very deliberately to let them continue calling me that and to just let that become my name. You have to understand that even if the governments have shifted in my solar system, there are innumerable people who I have pissed off and if I gave up my name, I could be next to you without consequence. See? I did it to be with you. I thought that when I met you at the fight on Spikay Two, you'd hear me call for you from the ring when I won and you'd know me. I thought you did know me and that was why you

kissed me so hotly, but then you left the ring and blew me that flirty little kiss. You didn't know me." He pulled away and let her look into his eyes of mud and stars. "You know the rest of the story."

Jenna swallowed. If that was the whole story, she felt that if she had been in his shoes, she would have been very unhappy with that outcome. However, Jenna was about as sentimental as a rock. Pulling him toward her, she almost put her tongue in his ear. "I'm calling bull on that being the whole story because you could have told me the truth at any moment since you started working for me. However," she huffed before she conceded intelligently. "Maybe now isn't the best time for me to get the details."

"Whatever. Don't drop your towel," he bit back.

"I'm not warm enough to put those clothes on," she said practically. "How did you get out of your cell anyway?"

"I'm wearing my boots. There are tons of gadgets in the soles, including something as rudimentary as a screwdriver. However, I do not have a spare set of clothing stowed away inside them and we can't wait for your clothes to dry. It's a waste of time anyway. There's water everywhere. We're not getting out of here without getting wet."

"Bah," Jenna said, almost making too much noise. She snatched up her dripping panties and pulled them on under her towel with a series of wet slaps.

He turned his back.

"What's the point of that?" she hissed as she grabbed her bra. "It's not like you haven't seen everything I've got about a hundred times."

"Yeah, but not in person. It's totally different," he murmured over his shoulder.

Jenna sorted her bra out, knowing he absolutely wouldn't turn around, so she prioritized speed. "Whatever. Thank you," she said, gritting her teeth and putting the chilled undergarment back on. "How are we going to get out of here?"

"The floor is water. I'm not sure how deep it is, so we're going to walk on top of the containers until we get to the edge. Then I'll do some acrobatics on one of the chains and get you to the ground. From there, I'm not really sure. We're still on Octavia Prime, but beyond that, I have no idea where we are."

Jenna finished putting on her clothes. "How did we get snatched from my palace?"

He didn't answer immediately. "Are you dressed?"

"If you call this dressed, then yes."

He turned around and immediately saw what she meant. The clothes stuck to her like she had entered a wet T-shirt contest. He looked down at her body once and then focused his eyes on hers like he didn't see anything else.

"I'm just trying to piece together why they brought you along. They don't need you, do they?" Jenna whispered to him.

"Get on my shoulders," he said, crouching down. "I'll lift you up high enough that you should be able to get on top."

Jenna did as he said with her shins grinding into his shoulders and with some major effort on her part, she did as she was told and got on top of the container. Then he smoothly lifted himself up with no help from her.

“They didn’t want to take me along,” he said, returning to their previous conversation, as he pointed out the route he wanted her to take on top of the containers. The route led to a rectangular red light on the wall that was undoubtedly a lit-up exit sign.

Jenna stepped onto the next container easily, and it wasn’t so light that it moved a lot when she put her weight on it.

Her boy kept explaining in a soft voice as they walked. “I fought them in the palace. It wasn’t like the last time the AAMC came to call. There was a lot of confusion. They had a Sushfief, obviously meant to confuse and cancel out Smoothie. I don’t know how their fight went. I’m unhappy with that. I fought the Adamis in helmets and facemasks. I don’t even know who I fought, but I managed to hurl myself into the pod where they’d placed your body. I thought you were dead. It was a relief when you weren’t, but I couldn’t wake you. They flooded the chamber with gas and separated us. I woke up in my cell and I was convinced everything would be alright because they were too stupid to take my boots off.”

“Why didn’t they?” Jenna asked, taking his hand for support as she stepped onto another container.

“They probably weren’t smart enough to deal with my feet.”

Jenna paused and thought back. She was certain she’d seen his feet before, but she couldn’t recall what they looked like. As she filed further back in her memory, she realized she’d never seen him without socks, even though she’d seen him without shoes many times. “Huh. You’ll have to show them to me later.”

He gave her a wry grin. “We won’t be doing that. I have enough problems right now. Forget about my feet.”

She returned his grimace. “Like that’s going to happen, but now that I haven’t screamed or made an unruly fuss, perhaps now is an okay time for you to explain to me why you didn’t tell me you were Sardius when I arrived at Spikay Two.”

He frowned. “Do we have to talk about it now? I’d rather chew glass. And look, we’re almost at the exit.”

“But I’ve been such a good girl, not screaming,” she said, as they got on the very last container.

“Not now. I have to get us down from here.”

The distance between where they were and where they needed to be at the exit was impassable for Jenna as jumping that distance would break her legs if the fall didn’t kill her. Jumping into the water instead of onto the platform probably wasn’t any safer.

Sardius examined the chain on the container because there was no nice way to get to the ground from where they were. The exit sign seemed to have been put there merely because the warehouse was so large, they needed exit signs everywhere if only to let you know where the wall was. Once he figured out where the chain led, he clicked open his shoes and pulled out a pair of tools that were nothing more than a set of handles with hooks on them.

Jenna thought they looked useless and stupid until he started climbing the chain with them, driving the hooks into the links of the chain without having to touch them. He was very impressive, moving his body up like gravity didn’t exist, and gravity was heavy on Octavia Prime. Jenna was astounded. She wanted to shout a droll comment to him about what a stallion he was and how he should have opened with that instead of a fistfight when he got high enough to change to another chain.

She held her breath as he swung to the chain that would get him to the ground.

Once there, he climbed down in a shockingly short amount of time. Soon, he was on the floor in front of the exit. He found the correct chain for the container Jenna was on and lowered it by flipping a switch.

When their faces were almost level, he gave her a smug smile as their eyes met, and then helped her off the container.

“Why didn’t you tell me it was you?” she persisted quietly.

“We really don’t have time for this, Jenna. We have to get out of this building. Let’s get a move on.”

He took her hand and the first thing Jenna noticed was that he wasn’t wearing his gloves, which meant that his hand was not at all comfortable to hold.

He pushed the button to open the automatic door in front of them.

Naturally, it was locked and the doors didn’t budge.

He cursed and let go of her hand. “Obviously, the door is locked. Obviously, we’re not supposed to leave. Obviously. Obviously. Obviously.” He lifted his foot and pulled a small pack of tools from inside the sole. Then he pried open the control panel.

Jenna watched him.

Did he know he was a little weird, being a prizefighter and a computer boi at the same time? That was an unusual combination, but he seemed unaware as he yanked on cables, found the one he wanted, and went to snap it with his wire cutters.

Nothing happened. He couldn’t cut the wire.

He was muttering in irritation before, but when he couldn’t clamp the blades shut, he got quite impatient.

Jenna watched him, completely amused as he leveraged all his strength into the tiny handles of the wire cutters. They weren’t going to do the job.

He was back into his boots in the next second, producing a very unpleasant-looking knife with a serrated edge. Folding the wire around the edge, he brutally pulled on the edge.

Jenna thought he was getting somewhere with that because bits were flying, but when he took the knife away, the wire was intact and the knife was ruined.

Jenna crossed her arms and bit her lip on a giggle while Sardius stared at the problem in disbelief and confusion.

She would have to rescue him.

Jenna bent over and said softly, “If you say one word about what I’m about to do, it will piss me off in a way I won’t even be able to describe. Wire your jaw shut and do not say a single thing. No joke, no comment, no witty remark. Nothing.”

He refrained from saying anything as Jenna bent her head even further and caught the wire with the large sharp edge of her crown. It broke instantly and Jenna stood upright as the doors opened.

Sardius put a hand over his mouth and kept his face away from hers while he put his tools back into his boots.

Jenna didn’t need him to say anything. She could hear a thousand snarky comments playing in her head.

She was a can opener!

At least she was good for something!

Who knew tiaras had so many uses?

Interrupting her infernal monologue, Sardiuss stood up, took her hand again, and led her through the door.

Glancing at him, Jenna was curious as to whether or not he thought what had just happened was funny, but his face was steely like no muscle in his face would move if there was a nuclear explosion in front of him.

She nuzzled the side of his arm and almost took off her nose. Fetch, he was bony!

# Chapter Twenty Four

## Better than a Jelly Bean

Jenna and Sadius were in a hallway. The doors on both sides of the walls were closed and locked.

“What is this place?” Jenna asked, looking at the doors and feeling overwhelmed. “I don’t get this at all. If we’re in a warehouse, then what are all these rooms? They seem like they’re too far apart to be offices.”

“Why?”

“Well,” Jenna said, trying to think of how to explain. “In an office, you need a desk, a chair...”

“No,” Sadius said, laughing. “In an office, you need a bed and a chair. What do you need a desk for? You haven’t asked for a desk yet and you’ve been working out of your palace for ages now. Has it been a whole year?”

“I don’t even know how long a year is anymore,” she groaned. “So, you think these are private living spaces? We should be trying the doorknobs. I bet they have clothes that I could borrow that would help me fit in better and would have the advantage of being dry.”

Sadius sighed. “Let’s not try the doorknobs. If we do, we could alert someone to our presence more than just us walking down the hallway. Let’s try to find a door that is open already.”

“You think we’re likely to find something like that?” Jenna asked skeptically.

“There’s one right there,” he said, pointing.

Jenna didn’t believe him, but then he showed her the black crack that indicated that the room was not only open but also empty.

They went inside, locked the door, and turned on the lights.

The room was bathed in a soft pink glow. It was decorated nicely and it was honestly more Jenna’s idea of a futuristic sci-fi fantasy than anything that had happened to her in outer space thus far. Why did she dream of red sofas that looked like jelly beans? There was a screen and behind it, a bed with a soft comforter.

Jenna scoured the dresser and found all the drawers were empty, as was the closet. “Maybe no one is living here,” she concluded sadly.

“Do you want my clothes? They’re dry,” Sadius offered with a coy smile.

“Keep your clothes on. Is there anything else we could use in this room before we move on?”

“Maybe,” Sadius said, taking something like a remote control in his hand and, pointing it at a screen on the wall, began pressing buttons. “I want to find out where we are and how to get out of this building. I’m loath to leave without your earpiece, but getting you out safely is more important than the earpiece. Without a doubt, Ixy can tell whoever has the earpiece to go screw themselves on repeat until they’re tired of talking to her. Regardless, Ivy and Conrad are probably working on our rescue as we speak. Whoever kidnapped us hasn’t had us that long.”

“It’s no ‘whoever’. It’s Fallcet,” Jenna said dully.

Sadius rolled his eyes. “Excuse me while I vomit. There are weenies and then there are weenies.”



“Are you saying he’s a weenie?”

“I’m saying I stood behind you while he tried to poach you. It was gross and it was the most pathetic attempt at seduction I’ve ever seen in my life and believe me, I’ve seen some doozies. So, the wanker has already had a conversation with you since you got here?”

Jenna nodded. “Their plan hasn’t changed. They still want my crowns so they can crown whoever and take control. I had one crown in my room so now Fallcet has it.”

Sardius was briefed on the whereabouts of the other crowns when he was Ryatt, her Chief of Security, so he knew the stash was inaccessible. “So, he’s working for the AAMC without any masquerade?”

“He says he’s here to negotiate my release.”

“Is that what he says?” Sardius said, having been stopped in his hacking effort by a password screen. He tried a few things, taking a little of his irritation out on the buttons.

Jenna sat on the red jelly bean sofa and let the wetness of her clothes sink into the fabric. The truth was, she didn’t know what to say to him. She just wanted to look at him, see him work, and process the change in his identity.

Abruptly, he banged the remote against the floor. It came apart in pieces. He dropped to his knees and pulled something from the sole of his boot to pry the case open even further. He cursed softly. “I bet they’ve already chosen someone from among their ranks and crowned him. You know that, don’t you?”

“I didn’t know you cared that much about Adamis politics,” she said, having long since reconciled herself to the idea that an AAMC man would be crowned. She wouldn’t like him, but she would have to put up with someone because if she refused to crown one of them, she was going to have an even bigger problem on her hands than one AAMC diplomat.

“I don’t,” Sardius said sourly. “What I don’t like here is them taking control from you. Those guys just can’t stand being told how their war is going to unfold by a beautiful woman. Beautiful women belong in their beds, on their arms, on their payrolls, at the foot of their massage beds, and sweeping up the ashes they flick on the floors. They don’t belong in the most pivotal position in the universe. They hate you, but the lack of aggression here shows that they still want something more than the crowns from you. That’s what they’re saying, but there’s more to it. They don’t want to simply get rid of you because you’re too interesting.”

Jenna looked at him wide-eyed. “They have that many feelings toward me?”

“Grow up,” Sardius fumed. “They have those feelings and more. I keep telling you that you’re too busy to know what everyone is saying about you. There’s too much for you to even absorb. I haven’t tried to hide it from you because there’s no need. You’re too good a woman. You keep your eyes focused on your job, not the chemicals flowing through the heads and dicks of men billions of miles from you. But now they’re on our doorstep making a mess. Even so, we’re on Octavia Prime, and we still have the home advantage.”

“Sardius,” Jenna said softly. “You jumped into this with me on purpose... more than once.”

His eyes flicked up to meet hers. “I know.”

“Are you in love with me? You’ve never said such a thing, not when you were still only in my ear and not when you appeared in the flesh.”

Something in his throat tightened and he visibly swallowed to loosen it. “Jenna, I can’t ask you for anything. I... have no right... I... am a bigger louse than I look. You don’t know me. I haven’t shared myself with you. There’s a lot more to me than what you’ve seen.”

“But you want to protect me?” she asked stubbornly.

He swallowed again and looked away. “I would have thought that was obvious.”

“Then you have done all that you’ve done for me out of the goodness of your heart? There’s nothing in it for you? There’s nothing you want from me aside from your paycheck?” She got up off the couch and stepped closer to him.

He kept his chin pointed away from her. “I admire you,” he said grudgingly.

His ear was closer to her and she directed her whisper into his ear. “What if I told you that I want more from you?”

His head jolted up and a dangerous glint flicked across his eyes. “I’m here because I want to be here. You can’t order me around like I’m your slave.”

Jenna shrugged and turned away. She wasn’t having a romantic tug-o-war with him. “If you’re not interested, then you’re not interested. You can’t blame a girl for trying. I just didn’t think all that stuff mattered. If you were a terrorist, a pirate, a convict... You know all the stuff you did that they imprisoned you over. I just thought that old stuff was irrelevant if we kept things between ourselves.”

She had taken two steps away from him when his hand snapped out and he grabbed her elbow. “Gah! Where in the world can we keep things just between ourselves? In your palace, we’re always recorded. There are cameras and audio recording devices everywhere. Where are we going to have some privacy?”

“Here,” she answered simply.

He dropped everything in his hands and let the fallen pieces sit like sprinkled confetti. He pulled her toward him. The room they were in was bare as a cardboard box. It was a warehouse. There were no cameras and no audio equipment. There wasn’t even a sprinkler system over their heads.

He kissed her.

“Don’t fall in love with me,” he whispered between kisses.

“Shut up, Sardius. I’m a diplomat. I get to fall in love with everyone.” She pulled him toward her and brought him back into the kiss.

“You don’t know what you’re asking for,” he said, as she kissed the side of his face.

“Two more minutes,” she negotiated.

So, he gave up fighting her and kissed her with all his heart for two minutes.

Then she pulled off him, took a step back, turned her back on him, and said roughly. “Hack that thing already.”

Sardius panted a few times before smacking his lips and saying, “There isn’t any point in hacking that screen. I’ve figured it out. We’re at the Adamis Shipyard in Lemaid Harbor. I should have realized that before, but that’s really the only place they could have taken us that would get us out of sight fast enough for them to have kidnapped us in the first place without the Orbital Security Team having caught them. If I’m right, all we have to do is find an ocean entrance and drop down. We’ll be saved very quickly once you hit the water. News will travel faster in the ocean than if we set off a flare.” He selected his tool from the wreckage of the remote control and inserted it back into his boot.

“You thought of all that while we were kissing?” she questioned.

He didn’t answer her directly and instead said flatly, “We should go.”

Jenna hesitated, remembering the crown and her earpiece. “And they already crowned someone?” Jenna asked, thinking it over for a second time and thinking that it was a larger catastrophe than she originally thought.

“Undoubtedly,” he said as he got to his feet. He put out his hand. “Don’t think about it. We have to get you out of here.”

He took a moment to reassure her with his eyes, with his voice, and with a light touch on her cheek.

She smiled at him. “I’m glad you dived into the pod with me.”

Sardius’ face changed—went unreadable. He took a step closer to her. His lips parted on words she desperately wanted to hear.

“What are you two doing in my bedroom?”

Jenna and Sardius turned to see Fallcet standing in the doorway with a suitcase trailing behind him. The suitcase was the first most obvious thing about his appearance, but it shouldn’t have been. The first thing they should have noticed should have been the curved black crown on his head.

# Chapter Twenty Five

## Forking Fallcet

"You miserable piece of rotten garbage!" Jenna exclaimed, looking at the crown on Fallcet's head and unable to word anything more offensive in her near-blackout anger. "I fricking hate you. I would have crowned you ages ago if you'd been a little bit less of a fecking weenie!"

"You think I like this?" Fallcet yelled, fighting back. "I don't like this any more than you do. You think I wanted to become a diplomat to the *Octavians*?"

The way he said the word *Octavians* was so disdainful, so arrogant, and so wrecked that Jenna almost kicked him in the junk.

Sardius held her back. "They crowned him because he was the only person you interviewed, Jenna. He's the only one who could slide in without an uproar. They're still trying to keep this little kidnapping incident secret and on the down low. If that wasn't the case, I would have already shattered his skull. Fallcet," Sardius said, turning his focus back toward the diplomat. "Have you got Jenna's earpiece? Is Favel on his way here?"

"Not quite. We still have more to discuss."

Jenna made eye contact with Sardius, giving him the look that let him know that she was no longer in danger of beating Fallcet. When he let her go, she straightened herself. "All right, Fallcet. I know what you want. You want it to look like I crowned you. If you return my earpiece and return to the floating palaces with me at once, I may be able to work with what you've done."

"That was one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. I don't want to live on the floating palaces before you've crowned eight diplomats," he said.

"Kill him," Jenna ordered Sardius through clenched teeth. Jenna knew the reason Sardius held her back wasn't because he was opposed to Fallcet getting hurt, but because he didn't want Jenna to get hurt hurting him. If Sardius did it on her behalf, it was a whole different story.

Sardius didn't wait a moment and came forward. He didn't even crack his knuckles, but he open-palmed slapped Fallcet so hard he fell to the ground.

"Wait!" Fallcet screamed. "You'd kill me right here?"

"Obviously," Jenna said, standing over him and crossing her arms. "There is only one way to get a crown off a diplomat and that's to kill him. You know that. You know that's why so many diplomats to the *Octavians* die. Or didn't you think about that?"

Fallcet put his hand to his crown and Jenna got her wish. He cut himself on it. He jerked his hand away from the crown of his head and looked at the gash. He put his middle bleeding finger in his mouth. "I'll call for help!" he warned, speaking around the finger in his mouth like it was an extra tongue.

"Break his head open," Jenna ordered Sardius.

Sardius pulled his leg back in preparation to obey Jenna. "Are you sure you want to do that? His brains will be everywhere."

"I'll live on the palaces," Fallcet agreed in distress.

"And you'll get my earpiece? Now?" Jenna persisted.

“Yes. I’ll call for it.” He pulled on a button on his collar and started relaying instructions to whoever was on the other end of it.

When he was finished, Jenna reached down and pulled the communication button off him. “Who’s there?” she asked into the pin, but no sound came. She looked down at Fallcet. “Very wise to keep this isolated so I don’t know who you’re working with or who in the AAMC has these plans.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” Fallcet grunted, pulling himself into a sitting position. “I’m trying to help you. I know you don’t want to deal with the AAMC, but times are changing and someone needs to tell the Octavians what is happening.”

“That’s my job,” Jenna said briskly. “You guys just don’t want me to do my job. The AAMC is unwilling to share information with me and then they’re mad at me for not knowing their perspective. Your position in all of this is just fortifying their power grab. You know what?” Jenna said, crouching in front of Fallcet and looking him in the eye. “If the Octavians wanted to cause trouble within the Adamis ranks, they’ve chosen the perfect way to divide us. The high-ranking members of the AAMC can’t bear for anyone else to be in control, they fight me and we are divided amongst ourselves. The Octavians don’t have to fight us. We’ll fight ourselves like morons. And you are the biggest moron of them all because you fell for it. You fell for their little speech and you gave into their power lust, but their power isn’t for you. It’s only for them! You think you’re one of them because of your family ties, but really, you’re a little sacrificial lamb because as long as you’re on the floating palaces, you’re mine. You will do everything I say. You’re going to tell them you’re a little mole who will tell them everything. Leak information until you’re blue in the face. I’m not hiding anything.”

She stood up and glared at Fallcet who looked as cheap as a paper bag on the floor even though he had a crown on his head.

There was a knock at the door.

“That’s probably your earpiece,” Fallcet said huskily, trying to piece together his dignity.

Sardius opened the door, but the earpiece was merely abandoned on the carpet. Sardius looked both ways down the hallway, confirming that there was no one there. He bent, removed something from his shoe, and dropped the earpiece into a black bag.

“What’s he doing?” Fallcet asked, watching Sardius. “There’s nothing wrong with it. It’s not a bomb or anything. If we wanted to kill Jenna, we could have done so already. I could have done that at the Dahlia Palace when I first got there. Security isn’t that tight.”

Jenna slapped him up the backside of the head since Sardius wasn’t close enough to stop her. “You don’t get funding for a security detail once we’re back at the floating palaces. I *want* someone to kill you.”

“We need to talk,” Fallcet said, rubbing the back of his head.

“I need a change of clothes and something to eat. I’ve got low blood sugar,” she said, before slapping the back of his head again.

Sardius inspected the hallway and returned. “The way out is just a little further down the hall.”

He took Jenna under his arm and pulled her forward. Fallcet followed behind them with his suitcase trailing behind him.

Outside, an Octavian transport was pulling up to the dock. When Jenna saw Favel peering at them from behind the wheel of the hovercraft, she relaxed.

Then she kicked the back of Fallcet’s knees and he fell headfirst into the water.

Sardius kept his hands off her and put a reasonable distance between them, so they looked like a normal diplomat and her bodyguard. "This whole thing has messed everything up. Having that weenie on the palaces is a major breach of security. I don't know how we're going to manage it."

"We'll think of some way to keep him on a leash," Jenna said, wondering if their little kidnapping escapade had been all bad. After all, she had finally discovered what happened to Sardius. Having him turn out to be Ryatt really was the happiest ending she could have hoped for. She hadn't realized how her feelings for the two men had been pulling her apart. Now she was one person and whether he liked it or not, she was completely in love with him.

She looked at him, giving him a look like she would never tire of looking at him.

"The Octavians picked up Fallcet," he said conversationally, pointing at the drowned rat they pulled up from the water. Then he saw the expression on Jenna's face. "You really shouldn't look at me like that. I'm only going to disappoint you."

"Oh... I know. I'm disappointed right now. I expect I'll be disappointed a few minutes from now and then a few hours after that. It will just go on and on."

His eyebrows came together. "Don't be such a little minx. I'm still your bodyguard and I still have a job to do."

"Yeah. I need a good night's sleep tonight, so protect me all night, will you?" she said coyly.

He groaned and looked like he might say more, but Favel had brought the transport right up to the dock and was beckoning for Jenna and Sardius to get on board.

"We need to have a debriefing about what just happened," the blue Octavian said darkly, the words like shadow whispers sneaking out from between his tentacles.

"Of course," Jenna agreed. "We should poison that guy to death, or flood his room with gas, or drown him, or suffocate him with a pillow, or..."

"I can hear you!" Fallcet called in irritation from his seat on the deck where he was draped with an oversized towel provided by the Adamis members of the crew.

"I'm joking," she called to him. Then quieter, she said to Favel, "I'm so not joking. Let's kill him."

"Slowly and painfully?" Favel suggested, absolutely ready for whatever Jenna wanted.

"Maybe we can just scalp him. I want that crown back," she said darkly.

Sardius rubbed the back of his neck. "Don't pay too much attention to her, Favel. Jenna changes gears quickly. Just a moment ago she was thinking about something completely different."

Jenna pursed her lips. "It's true. I do change gears quickly. I want to go home."

Favel gave the order and they pulled away from the dock.

But Jenna didn't make it to her palace before she fell asleep with her head on Sardius' shoulder. He shielded her eyes from the light with the palm of his hand.

"I hate and love all of this," he whispered.

He thought that she couldn't hear him, but she did. She smiled and let herself fall the rest of the way asleep.

*The story continues in Octavia Girl Vol. III*

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