

OCTAVIA GIRL

Vol III

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Octavia Girl

Volume III



By Stephanie Van Orman

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Chapter One

Alone with Favel

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

The blue Octavian sat next to her.

Both of them were uncomfortable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course you do," Favel groaned.

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

She didn't even try arguing.

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

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

It was a hilarious little show.

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

What was the next step?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Two

The First Night Back

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

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

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

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

She was well rewarded.

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

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

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

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

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

She looked at the screen.

She looked at her bed.

She looked back at the screen.

He was going to get caught.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He approached her. "What was your verdict?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ryatt chuckled.

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

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

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

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

Jenna softened. She saw where his argument was going.

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

Jenna winced.

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

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

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

"Favel would never!" Jenna retorted.

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

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

Jenna shuddered, but let Sardius continue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jenna breathed and breathed while she aligned herself with reality.

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

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

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

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

Jenna was figuratively scratching her head wondering how to proceed.

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

Jenna sat upright. "Smoothie is gone?"

Chapter Three

Lost More Than A Crown

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

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

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

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

Jenna nodded.

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

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

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

“Have you talked to her?” Jenna persisted.

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

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

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

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

“What?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jenna shook her head. "Tell me."

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

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

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

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

For now, he couldn't.

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

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

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

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

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

Sardius nodded.

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

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

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

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

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