

## Chapter One

The fox crept through the woods, attempting to conceal herself from her stalker, but the Huntress had her scent. Soft padded feet tiptoed with a slow, measured gait, carefully lowering her weight onto the damp fallen leaves and rich loamy soil. Red fur did its best to blend in against the brown shades of tree bark as the hunted vixen sought to evade her predator.

She never saw it coming. Like countless prey before her, she was largely focused on threats coming from the four cardinal directions. It hadn't occurred to her to look up, or down. The fox looked over her shoulder to check if her trail was being followed, then ahead to see if she'd been cut off – then gave a single short yelp as a much larger, stronger, and deadlier creature came down from above, leaving its perch in the branches of the closest tree to seize the fox with two powerful limbs. The predator's jaws parted wide, then clamped down onto the captured vixen's throat.

The fox gasped, stiffened as if paralyzed, feeling the predator's teeth through her fur. Then she practically melted, leaning back into her attacker's chest with a submissive mewling. "Ahh... you got me..." Jenny moaned, one hand sliding over one of her captor's powerful limbs in a tender caress.

Lisa declined to answer, at least with words, as she continued to nibble and nuzzle at the Furcadian's throat. Jenny began to undulate, her shapely transhuman body slowly writhing against her amazonian friend, while she began to make soft growling noises of utter delight.

Finally Lisa came up for air, murmuring softly, "You did a little better this time." She relaxed her hold enough for Jenny to pull free or turn to face her if she so chose.

Jenny opted to do neither, instead continuing to grind her soft furred tail and buttocks against Lisa as if performing a lap dance, despite standing upright. "I still don't get it," she whined, her tone an exaggerated pout to further titillate her friend. "How do you keep finding me?"

Lisa grinned as she teased the vixen. "You haven't figured it out yet?" she purred, her deep, husky voice taking on a suggestive quality that would have shocked those who had only met her in a professional capacity.

"Tell me," Jenny whined, pouting like a spoiled little girl even as she ground herself against her muscular playmate.

Lisa chuckled, unable to resist. "It's your perfume, silly," she pointed out. "The whole *point* of perfume is to attract with your scent. It's not exactly something you want to wear if you're trying to avoid getting caught."

Jenny made a face, her long muzzled features twisting with self-disgust at the belated realization. "Oh, nuts." Nonetheless she continued to grind against her companion, almost unconsciously maintaining the seductive behavior. "I didn't even think I'd put that much on," she grouched.

"For most people, maybe," Lisa conceded, before nuzzling at Jenny's throat again. She inhaled, taking a long, deep whiff of the scent arising from fur on the fox's neck, before shuddering with a sensuous thrill. "Mmmm... but I'm Gaian. My nose is more sensitive than most people's. Even a Furry's."

Jenny moaned more heatedly, her hands coming up to grip at Lisa's forearms. She didn't appear to be able to tell the difference between the organic limb and the prosthetic by touch alone. Then again, Lisa's cybernetic limb was covered in synthetic flesh and certainly looked like a mirror image of its counterpart to a casual glance. "I suppose your eyes are better than mine, too?" the vixen playfully pouted.

"Not really," Lisa confessed. "Gaian eyes are adapted for low light and close range..." She hesitated, biting her lip before admitting the truth. "The fact is, I'm considered nearsighted by most people's standards. I can see really well up close, but... well, my helmet's got custom visual compensation software."

Jenny sniffed, dropping the pretense of a bratty pout. "And here I thought you were more evolved, what with the forced natural selection and all," she ruminated.

"Evolution just means adaptation to conditions," her taller, muscular, fur-less friend pointed out. "Gaians are adapted to surviving in a big, dark forest." She kissed Jenny's throat again, before adding, "besides, you're Furcadian. You guys left natural selection behind when you colonized this planet."

Jenny giggled and squirmed, finally twisting around to face Lisa. "Why settle for natural when you can be perfection?" she crooned coyly, as her hands began to slide over the taller woman's powerful torso.

"Mmm. Fair point," Lisa agreed, her broad grin causing her face to begin to ache slightly. *I never smiled this much in my life, before I came here.* Her arms tightened their hold, pulling Jenny closer. "Anyway, I caught you again. We agreed, best two out of three."

Jenny tilted her head in, planting a soft smooch against Lisa's chest, before pulling back to ask, "seriously, though. How am I supposed to avoid you tracking my scent, next time?"

Lisa shrugged slightly; the movement caused Jenny to be pulled in closer yet, and the vixen wriggled appreciatively against that hefty bosom. "You just have to keep downwind," Lisa answered.

"Yeah?" Jenny gave that chest another kiss, her hands doing interesting things to a pair of buttocks thick and rounded with muscle beneath the fabric of Lisa's pants. "What does that even mean? Downwind, upwind, I don't get it."

Lisa sighed heavily as she considered how to explain it. "When the wind travels from one place to another," she replied slowly, attempting to coach it in terms that her decidedly urban friend would understand, "it carries scent along with it. So it's like... a river. Being upstream or downstream. If you're downwind, the wind carries my scent to you, but your scent gets carried further down."

Jenny harrumphed, before asking the obvious question. "So what happens if the wind changes?"

Lisa shrugged. "It happens. You can't stop it, you just try to deal with it." She sighed again, this time from pleasure at Jenny's exquisite caresses. "Sometimes hunting – or escaping the hunter – is luck as much as skill."

Jenny made a grumbling noise, then sighed. "Right. Well, a deal's a deal. Though I'm telling you, it's not going to be that hard."

“You know how I feel about... well...” Lisa released Jenny, taking a step backwards and waving her hand at herself. A broad gesture to indicate the entirety of her appearance. “...This.”

“You know how the rest of us feel about it,” Jenny countered, reaching out to seize that hand in her own. “Just leave yourself in my oh so capable paws,” she grinned, her fangs gleaming as she began to walk towards the edge of the orchard, “and I’ll have every stud, buck, and bull drooling and fighting over you.”

Lisa felt her cheeks flush crimson as she gulped, but nodded silently and allowed the shorter, slimmer, far more socially adept woman to lead her by the hand. But internally she felt her self-loathing once again beginning to uncoil and slither about, spreading rancid slime through her thoughts with whispered little suggestions and toxic innuendo. *Bull. Including one particular bull.*

Lisa had been adjusting rather nicely to Furcadian culture, once she’d gotten past the initial shock that came from being confronted with their polyamorous lifestyles and casual approach to sexuality. She had allowed herself to enjoy not one, but two – *two!* – lovers. Harvey was a diminutive sex machine that left her purring contentedly and feeling almost meek whenever he turned his bucktoothed grin upon her, while Jenny was a sensual sapphic thrill who had proven herself capable of achieving the seemingly impossible: making Lisa (occasionally) forget to feel like a hulking, hideously deformed freak covered in scars and with a missing limb. Every now and then Jenny succeeded in making her feel like the gorgeous statuesque goddess her friends all insisted that she was, pushing the impostor syndrome at bay for tantalizingly brief moments.

But someone else wanted to be her third pleasure partner while she remained on this planet, and Lisa hated herself for having not dared to take the first step yet. All the more so because Brutus was her masculine counterpart; one of the few people Lisa knew who stood taller than she did, yet oh so gentle, even shy. He’d told her pointedly that he would wait for her to make the first move, to put her at her ease. No pressure. *All the pressure.* Damn it. *Why can’t I just let myself enjoy myself with my friends?*

Lisa did her level best to maintain her cheerful disposition for the benefit of her sweet vulpine friend, even as her self-loathing continued to spread its pollution over her internal thoughts. *Just like usual.*

## Chapter Two

Lisa frowned thoughtfully as she regarded the image before her. On the one hand, an objective critique of her appearance, within this particular setting, seemed entirely appropriate. The shorts hugging her rear and the tops of her thighs were as appropriate for the exercise room as the midriff baring top. In such a setting her bared skin – and with it the scars showing as lighter colored streaks and slight ridges of tissue over the thick musculature of her limbs – shouldn’t make her feel embarrassed. Particularly given her awareness that the figure stepping into the room on cloven hooves the size of dinner plates was thoroughly captivated by her appearance.

At least, if he were telling the truth about his attraction to her.

*Stop that. He’s honest and I know it.* “Good afternoon, Brutus,” she murmured without so much as turning her head.

Brutus' bovine features split in an amused grin. "You know, that always seems impressive to new students," he reflected, glancing from her to the mirror running the length of the wall. And two other walls for good measure.

"I guess that's why they put mirrored walls in training halls," she suggested, and her shoulders bunched up until they seemed like a pair of boulders with her shrug. Beneath them, a pair of similarly sized mounds jiggled; Lisa tried to suppress the embarrassment. But the mirrors were making it nigh impossible to escape her own appearance.

"I think it's more about letting the teacher see what every student's doing," Brutus murmured in a gentle tone. As always, his massive size – even larger than her own! – belied his gentle, charitable nature. "And so students can see themselves from multiple angles," he added.

"Don't I know it," Lisa muttered, glancing to the side. With three walls embossed with mirrors, she could not only behold her garishly over-muscled chest and arms, but also a rump that could only be described as amazonian. The afternoon sunlight shining through the full length windows of the fourth wall provided ample illumination for such inspection.

*Stop it. He likes how my butt looks.* She took a deep breath, then turned to face him. *Deep breaths.* "So why don't they just use cameras?" she wondered, lifting up her hands to inspect the thickly padded gloves she'd donned in preparation for their workout.

"Low tech's cheaper," Brutus replied, lifting his own gloved hands to clasp before him in a respectful salute, before sinking into a fighting stance.

Well, there was no arguing with that. Particularly not when their workout session was about to begin. Brutus' desire to train against her was practically masochistic; for her part the prospect of working with a larger sparring partner was too rare and valuable an opportunity to pass up. She shifted into her own stance and began to flow towards him like a river unleashed from a broken dam.

Brutus was large, strong, and well trained in basic techniques for his own fighting style, but Lisa had been helping him to improve in the one area where he lacked. Namely, his hesitancy. Like most people, the brutish bovine possessed an instinctive reluctance to inflict pain and harm upon other living things, and overcoming that reluctance was as much a part of the mental training as overcoming the fear that inevitably accompanied mortal danger.

Granted, learning to overcome both required near-traumatic levels of conditioning, of repeated exposure to stressful situations until one became comfortable with functioning through pants-wetting terror. Until one became comfortable with performing the physical actions necessary to harm another. Was it merely a desire to sacrifice of oneself for the sake of protecting others that drove a person to learn such things?

Not even remotely.

*There it is.* Lisa felt it beginning inside of her, that sensation that was still one of her favorite things in life. The adrenaline was coursing through her body, endorphins were flowing, as she achieved her fight-or-flight mode – and with it, the unmistakable high that was one of the highlights of her life as a professional dealer in violence. Even though they'd agreed to limit themselves to light contact – at her insistence – every blow that landed left a painful sting, or worse. Each painful impact followed by a

euphoric wave, as she gave to, and received from, her sparring partner. Her *partner*. Her collaborator and teammate in this act of mutual self-improvement.

Brutus was definitely receiving the worst of it, though his improvement was unmistakable. The first time they'd sparred he had braced himself before each heavy swing of his limbs, his body tense and slowed by his nervous hesitancy. But that had been months ago, and he'd learned to relax his muscles, to flow more smoothly and deliver combinations rather than brief little spurts of one or two strikes at a time. He was as gentle and compassionate as ever, but he was learning to subconsciously steel himself when necessary.

But as much as Brutus had improved, Lisa still had far more practical experience with far more stressful situations than a bout of light sparring. Her next combination began with a lead hand punch to his midsection, followed by a lunging, diving, open handed punch aimed *behind* his lead foot. *Hoof. Whatever.* The bull gave a startled grunt as he found himself on the receiving end of a single leg takedown, before landing heavily on his back.

Before he could think to react, Lisa had swarmed over him with that same liquid flow to her movements, straddling her fallen partner. Normally she didn't bother with groundwork; she was accustomed to fighting in armor, while wielding weapons capable of unleashing death and devastation from a distance, and under such conditions anyone on the ground was as good as dead. But grappling on the ground still had its uses, under certain limited conditions, and she wasn't completely unfamiliar with it.

Her attempts to achieve a stranglehold were complicated by her wariness of his horns. One of the reasons why ground based grappling was generally regarded as an esoteric area with limited applications was the prevalence of weaponry. Simply put, sharp and pointy things (such as the two sharp pointy things jutting out of Brutus' skull, just above his temples) made sport-viable techniques extremely ill-advised, under non-sport conditions. Lisa was forced to lean back repeatedly, sinking her weight backwards onto her rear as she sought to avoid the tips of those horns.

Then her movements slowed to a halt.

Brutus also ceased his struggles, as he stared up at her with a somewhat chagrined expression plastered across his bestial features. Her own cheeks flushed scarlet as she returned his gaze.

She bit her lip, felt her blush deepen and spread. A physiological response not unlike the one she was reacting to. Brutus looked utterly mortified, like a child (or a calf) who had been caught with a hand (or a hoof) in the cookie jar.

Then she flinched and yelped, "is it still growing?"

Brutus winced, but managed to groan a mortified response. "I *am* a bull, you know," he pointed out, despite his embarrassment.

Lisa stared down at him for a few moments longer. Long enough to confirm that yes, he did indeed still have further to go before achieving full tumescence. At which point she leapt off him, scrambling to her feet and turning away to stare at the floor. She could feel her limbs shaking, and not from the adrenaline surge they'd been enjoying prior to his physical reaction.

She heard him grunting as he rolled over and struggle to a standing position, saw his movements in the mirror. She did not look at him, as her personal discomfort and her guilt flowed and surged and coiled together inside of her. *Damn it. I made everything worse.*

Then Brutus said the worst possible thing he could have, under the circumstances. “I’m sorry,” he rumbled softly, sounding utterly ashamed of himself.

Lisa felt her hands clenching into fists, until the knuckles of her organic limb began to pop, until she feared her prosthetic limb’s fingers might be damaged by the strain. “Don’t!” she snapped viciously, before hastily amending it. “Don’t... apologize. That makes it worse.”

“I’m so- I mean, if I upset you...” Brutus stammered, looming behind her, his hands held out in a supplicating gesture.

“I’m upsetting myself,” she seethed, through clenched teeth. “You’re not doing anything wrong. I’m the one upsetting myself.”

Brutus shut his mouth and said nothing, waiting on her to say more.

*Deep breaths.* She gulped once, twice, three times, exhaling each lungful of air with a heavy rush. Then she reiterated, “I’m upsetting myself.” Another deep breath, and she forced herself to articulate the truth. “I’m upset... because... I really, really like you,” she groaned, shutting her eyes tightly and shaking her head. “But I’m having trouble getting past my... my issues.”

Lisa took another deep breath. Then another, as she tried to slow her pulse and calm herself. She could feel Brutus watching her. She could hear him clear his throat, before making another tentative venture. “Nobody owes anyone else sexual favors,” he murmured to her. “It’s okay if you’re not attracted to me.”

She flinched, her body shuddering violently as she made a vicious little screaming noise through her teeth. “That’s just it!” she snapped. “I *am* attracted to you! But... you’re just too big!”

Brutus said nothing, though she knew her words must have hurt him terribly. She knew she wasn’t the only one who felt self-conscious about their size. “You’re big and you’re handsome... I mean, you’re really... but you’re taller than I am, and it makes me think about... when I was...”

“Yeah. I get it.” The bull’s voice was gentle, filled with compassionate understanding. *And with his own pain.* She’d told him about her past trauma, about what had happened to her to leave such extensive scarring upon her psyche and her sexuality. But he didn’t deserve to be compared to her abuser, and being so understanding only made him even less deserving of such treatment.

Lisa felt wretched. *This isn’t fair. It isn’t fair to him. It isn’t fair to me. I shouldn’t be letting **him** win again.*

Harvey had been her first consensual masculine partner, in no small part – *bad pun, that* – because he was both physically diminutive, yet also possessed of a social confidence that had allowed him to take the initiative. Gently yet daringly seducing her with an adroit awareness of her emotions, skillfully managing her personal baggage until he had her where he wanted her, with thighs spread and making eager, encouraging noises for him.

But Brutus was not Harvey, and his reluctance to make a clumsy, awkward overture was too reminiscent of... *myself*.

The thought of Brutus being made to feel as unattractive, as *unwanted*, as she so often did, proved to be the final straw. *No. Not him. He doesn't get to feel this. He's too wonderful to feel this.* It was bad enough that a long dead pirate was still reaping posthumous victories over her, casting shadows over her life. She couldn't let Brutus fall victim to the same dead monster. That vile abuser killed so long ago, by...

*By the most wonderful man in the universe.*

Lisa opened her eyes and turned to face Brutus. And tried not to flinch at the lonely resignation she saw in his face. "Hugging always makes me remember nice things," she declared, spreading her arms and encouraging her friend to come closer.

"Nice things, huh?" Brutus mused, as he took a step closer.

"The nicest," she agreed. There was one man who would never harm her. One man who would do anything to protect her, to make it better for her. And if there was one thing she associated with Brock, it was comforting hugs.

Brutus came within arm's reach, and then she was hugging him. Hugging him the way she hugged Brock. The way she used to hug the adults in her tribe, before... *before*. It felt good to hug him. There was nothing to associate the physical act with the abuse of her childhood. There was no triggering. Just the comforting intimacy with someone she cared for.

*So what else can we do?* What next? What acts had she not been forced to perform during her enslavement and torture? What could she do with Brutus, that could provide mutual pleasure and joy?

*They never kissed me.* Her first real kiss had been with a woman, many years later, when she was already an adult. That made sense. Kissing was too humanizing an act for the pirates to have enjoyed under any circumstances, let alone with their little "plaything." Tilting her head back to gaze up into Brutus' eyes, she curtly instructed him, "kiss me."

He did, without hesitation. There was no doubting now that he had been desiring her; his passion was undeniable. The kiss deepened, and soon their tongues were swirling... and then she realized Brutus hadn't been the one to extend a tongue and advance things further. She had. She was enjoying this. Tremendously.

Finally they came up for air, and as their heads pulled away, as they gazed into each other's eyes, Lisa felt another realization washing over her. And with it, a growing feeling of triumph.

*I'm getting turned on. I'm getting **really** turned on!*

Was it because she had become increasingly conditioned to Furrries? Did his inhuman appearance circumvent her emotional triggers? Or was it simply because he was her friend, and she truly did adore him?

*You know what? It doesn't matter.*

Her next kiss was more aggressive, one hand reaching up to grip a horn like a handle, as she moaned into his mouth. Brutus was all but melting into her embrace, as she savored the taste of him. Until finally she pulled back, feeling a sense of elation at the awareness of her sexual arousal. Her desire for Brutus was practically a need, as if for food. It felt like a victory for her. A victory over her trauma.

Finally she pulled back, still holding his horn like a handle. "We're heading to my room," she declared, not even noticing the authoritative tone in her own voice.

Not that Brutus seemed to mind. "Yes, ma'am," he husked, looking visibly thrilled at the prospect.

### Chapter Three

Lisa could only hope that nobody she knew could see her in her current state. The fact that she had been a guest at the palace for several weeks, and thus was well known to most of the staff, was irrelevant as far as her hopes were concerned. Furcadians might be as casual with sexuality as Gaians were about butchering animal carcasses, but Lisa was still decidedly the latter. Her subconscious was still wary of being teased for having obviously had sexual relations, and she was hoping to eat breakfast in peace.

The waving of hands dashed her hopes to pieces. The tall, smooth skinned figure was easily recognized from across even as large a room as what everyone insisted upon calling the cafeteria (and what Lisa insisted on calling a *royal dining hall*, at least in her own head). To make matters worse, she had caught *royal* attention. The Queen herself was waving Lisa over, and after a momentary pause to swear in the privacy of her own head, the vacationing bounty hunter limped towards Queen Bambi's table.

"This is the hero I was telling you about," the rabbit-eared, feline-fanged hybrid positively squealed to her dining companions. "The one who saved us from the BEMs, and meted out justice upon that... scurrilous pair."

"The Huntress," purred the dark furred feline woman seated between the Queen and a warmly smiling Jenny. "An honor to make your acquaintance." Lisa felt her cheeks flushing under the intent stare, as if she were a mouse cornered by a more feral – and quadrupedal – feline. "I'm Keiko," the feline added, introducing herself while staring so directly at the offworlder.

"And I'm Sally," chimed in the rabbit sitting on the other side of the Queen. Her expression seemed less predatory than that of the actual predator, but no less direct. "Why don't you join us? You look like you could stand to sit down for a bit," Sally added, with all the discretion of a hyperactive toddler on a sugar rush.

"Thanks," Lisa grumbled, sitting next to her vulpine featured friend as the usual discomfort at unexpected social interactions slithered about inside her skull. Not to mention the physical discomfort she was feeling. *Please don't let her mention it.*

Sally did not mention it. "You look like you had fun with a bull," Keiko opined, before Sally could say a word about the way the tall offworlder was moving with obvious discomfort.



*Crap.*

Lisa's cheeks went scarlet as she braced for the inevitable teasing. Then she paled, as Jenny squealed and reached out to grab her hand for an affectionate squeeze. "You finally did it!" Jenny enthused, her expression radiating empathetic joy. "I'm so glad for you. And for Brutus!"

Lisa struggled to keep her expression steady, as she reminded herself that this was after all Furcadia. They did things differently here. *And more often. And with more people.*

"Who is Brutus?" Sally inquired, looking politely intrigued.

"He's one of the palace custodians," the Queen interjected, providing Lisa a respite from having to answer the question. "Such a dear. Big, strong, and oh so sweet."

"Oh." Sally nodded at this description, then aimed a friendly smile in Lisa's direction. "Would you recommend him, Huntress?"

Lisa blinked and frowned in confusion at the odd question. "For what?"

Sally smiled more brightly, her expression radiating a sweet warmth as she clarified. "For what you just had!"

*This is Furcadia. This is how Furrries behave.* Lisa had had weeks now to get accustomed to them, yet they continued to trip her up. It was one thing to be told that their culture regarded jealousy and sexual possessiveness as atavisms their society had left behind when colonizing this planet. It was another to have it casually rubbed in her face like this. *Recommend Brutus? As if he were a piece of meat! Well, a slab of beef.* She kept her mouth shut and nodded silently, as if to affirm that yes, Brutus was indeed worth recommending for erotic recreation.

"Hmm. Perhaps I'll look him up, while I'm here," Sally mused. Lisa suppressed the urge to snarl a possessive retort. *She's a Furry. They're Furrries. Brutus would take it as a compliment.* After all, she'd been denying him her own intimacy until yesterday. Interfering with his opportunity with this rabbit would just be... *a shitty thing to do to a friend.*

Lisa was feeling herself growing increasingly introspective, losing herself in her unhappy internal musings. But weeks in this safe environment had done little to dull her paranoia, her constant, low level urge to flee or attack, and she saw the blue scaled hand before anyone else did. The waiter's reptilian lips curved in a professionally courteous smile as he set the steaming hot mug before the Queen, even as his immense round eyes aimed at Lisa like a pair of searchlights. "Would you care for your usual breakfast?" he inquired in a soft, deferential voice.

"Yes, please," Lisa agreed, grateful for the interruption from her negative internal train of thought. "Thanks, Kho."

Kho merely nodded, the nictating membranes sliding over his eyes in a lazy blink as he turned to fetch her meal. Which left Lisa on her own with two strangers as dining companions, and only one and a half friends (Lisa still had difficulty believing that a planetary leader considered her a friend, Bambi's reassurances notwithstanding) to support her through yet another social interaction.

Keiko opened the verbal interactions, sending shivers of awkward trepidation down Lisa's spine by ascribing to the common courtesy of deliberately drawing the new person into the conversation. "So, what adventures have you been having on our world, Huntress?"

*Again with the lack of an honorific.* They weren't addressing her as Ms Huntress, or even by her first name as they did each other. They kept addressing her as if her surname were a title. *Well, isn't it? Kind of?* "I've mostly been recovering from my last adventure," Lisa managed to stammer out. "Your world is... good for that."

"Oh, my," Keiko murmured appreciatively, leaning forward slightly with obvious interest. "What sort of heroics did you perform this time?"

A flash of appendages and spattered blood drifted past Lisa's eyes for a moment. Nor were her sensory flashbacks limited to the visual; the remembered smell of dried blood and the rancid stench of organic tissues beginning to decay and rot made her nostrils wrinkle. "I'm... not comfortable thinking about it," she mumbled, glancing down at the table.

Keiko made a soft little noise that might have been sympathy, or perhaps her own social discomfiture. Clearly she'd misstepped, though she didn't appear to understand how or why.

Jenny piped up, coming to the rescue. "So tell me again what it is you do, Keiko?" she asked politely, even as her paw slid over Lisa's hand under the table, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"Oh," Keiko blinked, sending one more quizzical glance in Lisa's direction. "I'm the deputy administrator for Socal province," she said.

"Oh." Lisa gulped, suddenly reminded that she was, after all, sitting at the table with a planetary leader. *Of course she would be accustomed to dining with other powerful individuals.* "And... yourself?" she asked, looking over at Sally on the other side of the Queen.

Sally's sweet lapine face beamed with pride. "I'm the Sanitation Commissioner," she declared with the proud tones of someone who had earned an important position, tasked with heavy responsibilities and rewarded with lofty prestige.

"Oh," Lisa gulped. "Have I interrupted... I mean, were you were discussing business?"

Bambi interjected with a warm smile. "Remember what I told you about my royal duties?" She winked suggestively at her offworlder guest.

She did. Lisa most certainly did remember that particular conversation, when Bambi had cheerfully proclaimed herself to be a figurehead... or perhaps mediator was a better word for what she did. Managing the egos of bureaucrats, keeping them on friendly terms with each other. Preventing injured pride from causing difficulties for the rest of her society. An official charged with the overall administration of a province could have had all manner of disagreements with the person charged with the processing of waste products. Had she disturbed Bambi's deft handling of a sensitive situation, by joining them at the table?

Jenny gave her hand another gentle squeeze, then leaned in to nuzzle at her throat. Lisa shivered slightly, the embarrassment of receiving a public display of affection disrupting her train of thought.

But then, Jenny worked in the palace gardens, and not as a department head. She was a gardener, one of the rank and file. Yet she was eating with the Queen?

*Has Bambi been using Jenny to keep tabs on me?* Lisa was uncertain how to feel about that. Was Jenny serving as a spy for the planetary leader? Not that a bounty hunter and freelance operative was a particularly valuable target, as far as Lisa could tell. Or was Bambi's interest purely affectionate? Was she truly keeping tabs on Lisa out of a sense of friendship?

*Unless I'm just being paranoid.* Of course, that possibility presented its own set of negative contemplations. It reaffirmed that she was beneath the notice of a Queen. Bambi had plenty of other things to concern herself with. Such as her upcoming reelection bid, which was presumably drawing near.

Lisa's mind was a whirlwind of doubts, self-recriminations, and paranoid thoughts sabotaging the very roots of her relationships. The stress of sitting with these high powered individuals was an accelerant acting upon the self-destructive process, and she didn't know how to stop it. Normally she'd attempt to politely withdraw, but that didn't seem to be an option.

Then Kho set her favorite breakfast before her, and the scent of freshly cooked animal proteins commanded her full attention. Her hands snatched up the knife and fork from her place setting, and she barely remembered to murmur a grateful noise that might have been a slurred "thank you" as she began to cut at the first of her fried eggs. Its eleven siblings glistened with a sheen of the fat they'd been fried in, the salt and spices a matte dusting atop the gloss.

Both Keiko and Sally stared, their eyes widening as they watched the Huntress greedily feasting upon a dozen eggs fried to the point of crisp crusts over their gelatinous interiors. Next to them, what appeared to be a full kilogram of sizzling hot steak awaited its turn.

"She's got large appetites," Jenny joked, grinning impishly as she lent a hint of innuendo to her words.

"No kidding," Keiko murmured, watching with awe. Sally wriggled slightly, looking almost aroused by the voracious display.

Lisa barely even noticed, as she cut away a chunk of the steak and ran it over the yolk and butter residue on the plate before popping it in her mouth. Breakfast was before her, and as preoccupied as she was with her meal she had completely forgotten her social discomfiture.

## Chapter Four

It was good to have friends. Especially a friend of similar gender, someone who could serve as a guide through the world of the feminine. What little Lisa remembered of the adult women of her tribe had involved education in hunting, dressing carcasses, mathematics, science, and the history of how they had come to live in the forests of Gaia. Brock had furthered her education, teaching her the ways of technology, of maintenance and repair of ship and armor and weaponry. Tools that not only kept her alive in the harshest of environments, but also served as force multipliers for plying her trade. But Lisa had never had anyone to teach her about fashion, or flirting, or any of the nuances of courtship rituals on a Federation, planetary, or even local level.

But now she had Jenny, and Jenny was more than happy to help Lisa learn to be more alluring to those she yearned to lure. “Not that you need to,” the vixen pointed out, even as she arranged yet another set of clothing upon the bed for Lisa to try on. “He’s horny for you when you’re wearing gym clothes and sweat.” After a moment’s pause, her honest nature forced her to add, “so am I.”

Lisa blushed in response, but continued to follow Jenny’s directives. Off came another dress, cascading down into a puddle at her feet. Apparently “loose and flowing” was insufficiently flattering. Lisa was still trying to understand what was considered flattering, but apparently she had some good qualities that needed to be emphasized. But – supposedly – that didn’t mean she had bad qualities to be ashamed of, either. It simply meant that some clothing would either conceal her good qualities, create an impression that her body was less attractive than it was, or both.

Having still failed to internalize the belief that she had *any* good qualities to be emphasized, Lisa simply trusted in Jenny’s judgment. Even if the next dress looked to have been sized for Jenny and not herself. It barely covered a rear that Lisa felt certain ought to be covered, and provided a similar lack of coverage for her chest. “Are you sure you got the size right?” she blurted, crossing her arms to cover the cleavage that the dress flaunted so brazenly.

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Jenny murmured, reaching up to gently grip Lisa’s wrists and pull her arms away to her sides. She leaned in, pressing her cool wet nose against Lisa’s chest, nuzzling at the smooth, furless skin. “You know how all the boys love these things,” she crooned, before extending her tongue to provide a slow, languorous lick.