



**Lionsmate
Marteeka Karland**

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Lionsmate

Marteeka Karland

In the brutal future frozen Earth, humans are no longer dominant, but merely tolerated. One of them has caught the attention of a Lionsblood and he will stop at nothing to claim her as his own.

Dykstra can't move past the feisty little human. She's fragile, yet stronger than anyone he's ever known. When he sees the scar that marks her a Lionsmate, he knows the fates have brought him to her. Driven by an attraction bordering on insanity, he takes her from a human slave farm to his own colony deep beneath the Earth's surface.

Talia is fascinated with Dykstra, but even the mighty Lionsblood can't quell her spirit. He tantalizes her senses and gives her a taste of the most carnal of pleasures, but never more than a taste.

Unable to understand why Dykstra won't claim her, though she wants nothing more than to be claimed, Talia does her best to make a new home for herself in the Lionsmates' domain. But Dykstra might have waited too long, when the attentions of another man and the deadly demands of Dykstra's duties to his colony threaten to separate him from Talia forever.

Chapter One

Cold. It was always cold, no matter where on -- or in -- Earth one was. Talia stood in a claiming line just outside the inner door to the human farm where she lived, naked save a thin blanket, and concentrated on not shivering. The space between the inner living area and the barren, frozen earth outside offered little protection from the bitter cold, but it did shield them from the wind to a certain extent. Sometimes, there was no manmade structure that could keep out the howling storms.

It was ludicrous, really, to make them stand exposed to the elements with nothing of consequence to protect them, but the point was to show they were obedient, even if it meant their own lives. Though she knew better than to protest or look at anyone or anything while she stood there, she stared defiantly at her farm's owner. She'd undoubtedly pay for it later, but anger helped keep her warm. She followed instructions docilely enough but with as much an air of contempt as she could manage without actually becoming aggressive.

She knew it would mean being the last allowed back inside, but if the vile Wolfsblood halfbreed who was their keeper kept his attention on her, the younglings in the camp would be left alone. It meant that no one would buy her, but it was a small price to pay to make the lives of the young a little more comfortable in an otherwise miserable existence.

"These humans are best kept as servants. They're too young to make decent breeders, but if you see one you might like in a few years, we can hold him or her for you." Dragar was pitching them to his newest customer. Probably some wealthy *scabat* looking for a domestic servant. Or a fuck toy.

Talia sneered and kept her eyes on Dragar. Human farms were a way of life for anyone not of the Lionsblood or Wolfsblood clan. Vampires were in the mix, too, but

they were a law unto themselves. Either way, humans were at the bottom of a very long food chain. Some farms kept claimed or otherwise free humans safe from Earth's extreme temperatures. Hers kept slaves.

When Dragar halted his progress down the line, she couldn't help but look to see what he was up to, and her gaze collided with that of the buyer's. Her heart raced. *Lionsblood!* She could actually feel his penetrating gaze. She felt more exposed than she could ever remember feeling, as if all her secrets were laid bare before him. She narrowed her eyes. She would *not* let the filthy cat get the upper hand on her.

At first, she thought about simply lowering her gaze before the *Lionsblood* could take any more interest in her, but when Dragar started trying to point out the wonderfully submissive qualities of one of the younger girls, she snapped.

"What's the matter, big boy? Afraid I'm too much for you to handle?" Where the outburst had come from, she didn't know. She only knew her blood had boiled when the *Lionsblood* had moved on to another woman in line.

He turned to her, his features unreadable except for the one raised eyebrow. It was hard to say whether it was raised in annoyance or amusement. "Perhaps," he replied quietly. "Or perhaps I simply prefer a woman who knows how to keep her mouth shut -- unless it's around my cock -- and her opinions to herself."

Dragar, the great fool, bellowed a booming, mocking laugh. "I've tried for years to tame that waspish tongue of hers. Perhaps now is as good a time as any to cut it out." His evil sneer said he would enjoy this newest torture. Talia didn't care. She'd always known she wouldn't last long in this place. Her only regret was there would be no one to protect the young ones when she was gone.

The *Lionsblood* turned slightly and stepped closer to her until they were almost nose to nose. At least, they were once he bent down toward her. The man towered over her and everyone else there, including Dragar. He sniffed at her. Smelled her face, then her neck. The slow sniffing continued all the way down her body, and by the time he finished Talia barely noticed the cold. He seemed to take in her very essence, her unique

scent. It seemed a very personal, intimate gesture, and she closed her eyes tightly and tried not to focus on the sensations stirring inside her.

By the time he raised his head, his eyes gleaming faintly, Talia's lower body throbbed and tingled with an unexpected, unexplained lust. No man had ever had this effect on her. She wasn't sure it was a welcome feeling.

Squinting her eyes in what she hoped was angry defiance, she turned her back on him and took several steps away. A soft, deadly growl followed her, but she only turned to face him again when she was ready. To do otherwise would be to acknowledge his displeasure, and she didn't want to show weakness of any kind with this Lionsblood. Instinctively, she knew better.

"Never mind the wench," Dragar tried to soothe him. "I'll deal with her. Look at these girls. Surely they'll be much better suited to your many needs. Every one of them is as submissive as one could ask for. I've seen to their training personally."

"I have no need of a trained submissive. Any woman I buy will be --" He paused, making the next word sound sarcastic and mocking. "-- *trained* by me and me alone."

"You mean you'd beat them into submission, just like Dragar does." Talia's voice rang out in the exposed yard far louder than she expected, but she didn't care. "It takes a real man to beat an unarmed young woman, doesn't it, Lionsblood?" Her hands balled into fists, and her pitiful excuse for a blanket fell from her shoulders. "Why don't you try that with me?"

The sale yard grew deathly quiet. Talia wasn't sure why she'd opened her big mouth. It definitely wasn't the smartest thing she'd ever done, but something about the stranger's presence made her bold. She was annoyed with him for stripping her guard away so effortlessly and for making her want him in a way she'd never wanted any man. Besides, the thought that he'd take someone other than her made her furious beyond reason.

He raised an eyebrow. "You have a sharp tongue, wench. You should take care how you use it."

"Afraid of what I'd do with my mouth around your cock?" She couldn't help sneering and curling her lip.

They stared at each other a long time. The only sound in the yard was the wind as it blew snow and ice around them in stinging little shards. Dykstra was intrigued by her defiance. No one in this farm dared look at him, yet this woman mocked him. Fascinating.

"Forgive me, M'lord. She's a vile woman who should not have been brought to you. I'll have her killed immediately, if you so wish."

She stood before him naked and proud. Her nipples puckered tightly in the cold, but she seemed impervious to it. Long, dirty blonde hair whipped around her body in the chaotic wind, giving her the look of a snow goddess. Only the thin, neglected look of a slave belied that impression. This woman truly had the heart of a Lionsmate. He wasn't looking for one, but it looked as if she had found him, however unwittingly.

"I think I'll take her with me, trader."

Dragar started, but recovered smoothly. "Very well, sir. I'll have her transferred to the holding farm until she's been conditioned..."

"No. I want her now." He didn't take his eyes from her. She was beginning to succumb to the bitter cold around them now. She shivered despite obvious great effort not to, and her shoulders hunched against the wind. A brave woman, this one, but she'd reached the end of human endurance.

"She hasn't been fitted with an internal restraining device and she's far more trouble than she's worth. Are you sure this is the one you want?"

Dykstra worked to make his voice cold and unyielding. Merciless. He gave Dragar his deadliest look. "She goes with me now. I can control her, if need be, without the aid of anyone or anything. As to being more trouble than she's worth, I'll make that determination for myself." He watched as the self-important trader cringed. "Dress her."

Dragar threw her clothes at her, and the girl quickly slipped into them, though truly, the filthy, ragged pants and shirt weren't much better than the blanket alone. Still,

she donned them with the regal bearing of a Lioness. Dykstra's cock stirred at the thought. This was truly a woman to take notice of.

"Is that it? This is all she has?"

"Humans aren't allowed much, my lord. We take care of them as best --"

"Silence." The word was hissed. Deadly quiet.

She looked up when she'd finished dressing, her hands clutching the blanket in a white-knuckled grip. "I'll have your name, woman."

For a moment he wasn't sure she'd speak, but then she lowered her eyes and breathed, "Talía."

Talía wanted to look up at him, to read his expression, but she hesitated. He was as cold as the environment around her and she wasn't sure how much more she dared defy him. *Lionsblood*. He grunted approval of his granted request. "I'm Dykstra. You will address me as such."

A mane as tawny and wild as that of his line's namesake fluttered in the bitterly cold breeze. Fangs showed beneath his cat-like upper lip and slits of his pupils glittered. And he was tall. *Very* tall. He towered over everyone at the farm. Straight and tall he stood, seemingly unaffected by the icy wind. He was truly as fierce as the Lion.

He was dressed for the cold in a long black cloak that reached nearly to the ground. His thick-soled boots left deep imprints in the snow and reminded her of how cold her bare feet were.

As he sized her up, the pale burn scar on her forearm started to itch horribly. It started as a slight tickle, but rapidly grew to maddening proportions. The urge to scratch was almost overwhelming, but she gritted her teeth and steadfastly refused. The extra sensory stimulation stripped away all hopes she could make it the remaining time exposed to the cold as she was, and she started to shiver uncontrollably.

When he wrapped his heavy cloak around her shoulders, she was so startled she gasped and let her mask of anger slip as she looked up at him. A fierce expression met her, and she stumbled backward despite her resolve not to show weakness.

He reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her to him. She lost hold of the cloak and the front came open, exposing her breasts once again when he jerked her forward. She came into full contact with his hot body. She didn't know why she hadn't noticed before, but with his cloak gone, he was bare-chested. Her hands landed on the wide expanse of a lion's tawny mane covering him. His arms were heavily muscled and bare of fur, but his mane was silky soft -- just like a cat -- and covered the upper part of his chest narrowing to a wide stripe down the center of his belly to the waist of his pants. No wonder Lionsblood were among the hardiest creatures on the planet. This man seemed impervious to the cold even without his cloak. The heat radiating from his bare body was proof enough of that.

She remembered seeing Dragar cringe when the Lionsblood had looked at him with those merciless eyes. A fact that scared her more than freezing to death. If a man as mean and callous as Lord Dragar feared this Lionsblood, shouldn't she?

He pushed her out to arm's length and looked her up and down once more. "See to it my ship is stored with food enough for ten days. Hearty portions, mind you. I want to eat my fill every meal." He narrowed his eyes at Dragar. "You should know, half-breed, among my people, the women and children eat first. If you don't provide enough food for her, I will not eat. In which case I'll come back for you. I promise, you won't like it if I do." The threat was delivered in a growl. It was enough to make Talia take an involuntary step backward, which caused the Lionsblood to turn his head sharply to her, his eyes flashing in annoyance, and promptly pull her back to his side.

"Ten days? I can barely feed the miserable humans I have here. I can't spare that enormous quantity." Dragar sounded angry as hell, but Talia also noted the missing edge his voice normally had to it. He might protest, but the Lionsblood would get what he demanded.

"You'll find ten days of food for both of us, or you'll have a very large, very mean... very hungry Lionsblood hunting you, trader. Send the supplies as soon as you've readied them. Talia and I will go ahead. If we haven't seen you in a couple of hours, I'll be back. "

Dragar swallowed, his eyes widening, then gave the order to one of the many farm guards. Dykstra merely turned his head to look at Talia once more.

"Shall we go, then?" Without giving her a chance to say or do anything, he grabbed her hand and tugged her through the heavy metal door into the wasteland where his ship waited for them. She could barely see through the blowing snow, and her cold, numb feet refused to move. He looked at her in annoyance -- no doubt thinking it was an act of defiance -- and growled, scooping her up in his arms and heading swiftly to the sleek vessel a few yards away. When they reached the ship, Talia barely registered it being covered in a heavy, dusty layer of snow.

Exposure to the bitter cold had made her flesh sting when she'd first stepped outside the underground shelter, and her prolonged exposure when she was showing off for the Lionsblood had taken its toll. Now, she'd lost feeling in her hands, feet, and much of her face. She'd long ago stopped shivering, and now that she didn't have to force herself to stay standing, her body went blissfully numb, and sleepiness swamped her. Talia vaguely wondered if her new handler would bother with her if she succumbed to the cold. He might decide he didn't want a smart-mouthed human who didn't know when to shut up and leave her here. Dragar wouldn't have her back after having to stock such a vast amount of food for the Lionsblood. He'd probably toss her in the snow once he realized she was freezing to death.

Talia closed her eyes and snuggled her face into the warmth of her new handler's mane. It was funny. It felt right to take comfort from his strong presence. She'd never relied on another person since she'd been old enough to fend for herself. But this felt different. Appropriate somehow.

She shook herself, or tried to. She was too cold to move. She hated admitting she was dependent on this man -- no matter how extraordinary -- for her life. He was warm on the outside, but his eyes were as cold as the frigid plane of the Earth's surface.

Cold. Bitter cold.

Closing her eyes, she let his warmth seep into her where they touched, but she knew it wouldn't be enough for long. But it felt right. Good.

Sighing, she let blissful darkness close around her, and for the first time in living memory, she didn't have enough energy to fight.

Chapter Two

The woman weighed no more than a child. Dykstra knew she couldn't last long exposed to the harsh environment, so he used all his considerable speed as a Lionsblood to get them to his ship. Damn him for his weakness. She was the feistiest human he'd ever met, but she wasn't what he needed. He wasn't even sure why he'd asked to see any of the farm's females to begin with. He'd originally intended to find a strong male to help him in his mining business that partially funded his own colony. Now, he was stuck with a female not strong enough to mine, and no money to buy a second human.

There was just something about her...

The hatch lowered at his approach, and he stormed up the ramp, which started closing as soon as his foot touched it. The woman in his arms lay limply, but the shallow rise and fall of her chest told him she wasn't dead yet. Warming her quickly was a must. He looked down at her, her fingers clutching the mane across his chest. Her hands were as pale as porcelain, and her lips were blue with cold.

"Why the hell didn't I just come back here and get you suitable coverings?" he muttered to himself. She raised her head weakly and looked at him, obviously confused. Grime and dirt smudged her features, but she still took his breath when he looked at her. She wasn't beautiful in a conventional sense, but she was striking. Like the beauty of a wild animal. Perhaps that was what touched him. There was something inside her that was exactly like the animal inside him.

She opened her mouth, presumably to answer his rhetorical question, but seemed to lack the strength to speak and simply let her head rest more securely against his chest. Dykstra took her straight to his cabin and laid her on the bed. He paused there a moment to look at her. She seemed to want to move, but lacked the strength. No wonder. The bitter climate of Earth quickly zapped the strength of the hardiest human.

Dykstra draped a thick blanket over her and went to the washroom to start a bath. He hadn't been prepared for medical emergencies. He'd prepared for speed, wanting to get back to his home as quickly as he could. Because of this, he hadn't taken a transport with sophisticated medical equipment. He knew the little human would be OK until they got to his home -- two days away with his under-earth ship -- but he wanted her to be comfortable.

Talia was almost too cold and weak to move. All she wanted to do was stay there under that blanket and get warm. The bed she lay on was delightfully soft, nicer than anything she'd ever felt in her life. But Dykstra seemed oblivious to her wishes.

"You need to undress and get into the tub. The water will warm you." The voice of her new owner was rough, husky.

She wanted to reply, but the effort seemed too much. The blanket was so warm, and she just wanted to sleep. Unfortunately, when this man told her to do something, he meant it. She wasn't sure why this surprised her -- it was the way it had been her whole life. But the disappointment when he took her blanket away and made her get out of the warm nest almost pushed her to tears.

He pulled her to her feet and peeled the dirty rags that served as her clothes off her and picked her up. He carried her to the tub and lowered her into it. The gesture was so intimate, she blushed.

The water in the tub couldn't have been very hot because there was no steam rising from the surface. It was still considerably warmer than her skin, though, and after a few moments, the gradual feeling of a thousand pins pricking her skin took her breath. Still, she swallowed her gasp, refusing to allow him to see her discomfort.

He squatted down beside the tub, leaning his arms on its edge. "Rest here for a few minutes. Don't go to sleep or you might drown." She ground her teeth together to keep from crying out in pain but didn't take her eyes from him. "Is the feeling coming back?"

He had to be kidding. She was in agony with the returning sensations, but she simply nodded, not trusting herself to speak without shrieking. Now that she'd started

to warm, she shivered so violently she thought her bones would shatter. She hunkered deeper into the water. The pain was intense, especially in her feet and hands, but she would not cry out no matter how awful it was. Showing weakness in front of a Lionsblood was never a wise course of action.

She should have been scared, or at least embarrassed, sitting there in a pool of water without a stitch of clothing on while a man she didn't know stared at her, but she wasn't. Now that the pain was beginning to subside she felt strangely uninhibited. Maybe it was her contemplated mortality, or maybe it was the look he was giving her now -- heated and lust-filled, like she was a tasty morsel he wanted to eat -- but everything that was woman in her rose to the surface and screamed for release.

"It would be really nice if you'd join me, Lionsblood."

His eyes narrowed. She wasn't sure if it was in anger or surprise, but he made no move.

"It would be much easier to wash my hair with your help."

"What are you playing at?" His voice was harsh, husky. "You're human. I'm Lionsblood. You have no idea what sex with me means, do you? Do you *want* to be tied to me for life?"

"You *bought* me, Dykstra. That's about as permanent a relationship as I can think of." The strange part was, she meant it. She'd never felt a pull on her soul as strong as she felt this. He was a stranger, but she felt as if she'd been waiting for him -- or someone like him -- her whole life.

Swallowing visibly, Dykstra stood and shed his clothing. He'd transformed back into a more human form but was still very large. His mane was now nothing more than dark blond and brown chest hair. The hair on his head was still long, but not the shaggy mass that had warmed her as it flared down his shoulders to his chest when he'd carried her to his ship.

When he'd rid himself of his breeches, he stood before her gloriously naked, his skin gleaming in the dim light of the bath. He was really an impressive man. She'd seen men, of course, when there had been a mass sale and the males from a neighboring farm

had been paraded in the yards next to the females, or during the breeding time when owners of other farms joined with Dragar to breed their stock for a fee. She'd never been part of these -- she had been considered a problem slave and therefore not fit to breed -- but she'd seen enough to know that the male before her now was far superior to any of them.

His muscles were bulging yet sleek, rigid and sculpted. His stomach rippled with every movement, and his thighs bunched with every step. Vein-roped arms flexed as he clenched and unclenched his hands, obviously unsure of what he should do but wanting very much to do as she asked.

Talia's heart rate sped up. He was really going to join her. Really going to claim her as more than just his slave. Every fiber of her being said so. And more. The scar on her arm itched and burned like mad again. She couldn't help digging at it as he climbed into the tub and settled himself behind her.

Without a word, he picked up a wide, shallow bowl sitting on the edge and urged her to lean her head back. She rested against his chest so that she looked up at him as he scooped up a bowl full of water and drizzled it over her head. The ends of her hair floated between them as Dykstra worked water into the filthy, tangled mess.

Talia closed her eyes when he reached for a bottle of mint-scented shampoo and began massaging it into her hair, kneading her scalp soothingly. She was struck by the intimacy of it. This wasn't the gesture of a horny male wanting to rut -- this was that of one mate caring for the other.

She felt the heat rise to her face, all traces of cold gone from her body. She made eye contact with Dykstra as he worked the wonderfully smelling soapy concoction through her hair.

"You understand now." His words were not a question. She did. The meaning of it was coiling deep inside her. *Tied to him for life.* Lionsblood mated for life.

"You have a choice in this, too. If you don't want me around, why did you get in this tub with me?"

“My people do not question fate. I didn’t set off to find a female slave. I’d originally wanted a male partner to help me in my work. When I landed in Dragar’s farm and a human with the personality of a Lioness caught my attention, I didn’t doubt you were why I was brought there.”

He picked up the bowl again and began rinsing her hair, still kneading her skull, creating soothing sensations down her spine. Neither of them said anything when he gently nudged her into a sitting position and began working through the tangles. It took several minutes, and by the time he’d finished, Talia was dozing wearily until Dykstra fistfisted her hair and jerked her head backward. She almost screamed in startlement.

“Do not make the mistake of thinking I’m safe, Talia,” he hissed. “I want you. More than I’ve wanted any other woman I’ve ever met. I’ve always been able to resist if the time was inappropriate. With you, I’m liable to simply take what I want.”

His words seemed to come out of nowhere. His arousal when he’d climbed into the tub had been obvious, but now he seemed to pounce on her. His mouth found hers, and he plunged inside with his tongue. The wild, musky taste of him filled her mouth, and she turned in his arms to better bring herself into contact with him.

She’d never been with a man, but had seen enough to be curious, and had a normal, female sex drive. The need to procreate inherent to all species combined with forced celibacy created a very explosive situation, which now erupted.

She fitted herself between his spread thighs and wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing his cock between their bodies. It was hard and pulsed against her skin. One of his hands clutched her hair while the other snaked around her waist and held her close as they kissed. For her part, Talia clung to him for dear life, terribly afraid he’d stop. Afraid he wouldn’t. For all her bravado, she was more than a little frightened of the Lionsblood. Besides, she didn’t know what life as his mate truly meant.

When he plunged his tongue into her mouth and didn’t retreat for a long while, she decided she didn’t care what life would be like as long as he kept kissing her like this. Forever.

They stayed that way for a long time. The spicy, masculine scent of him filled her nostrils, and the slight taste of mint lingered on her tongue when he touched his to hers. Her body was a flame, and though she'd been close to frozen, she couldn't imagine ever being cold again as her smooth skin slid easily against his hair-roughened body in a most erotic abrasion. She seemed not to be able to get enough of him no matter how hard she tried to force her way closer. His thighs clamped around her hips in a steel grip, and every once in a while he gave a thrust, sliding his cock between their bodies, causing it to pulse with life.

Talia's pussy throbbed and burned in need. Her clit pulsed in time with her heartbeat, and she knew beyond a doubt she was drenched with her own juices as much as she was the water around her. Her stomach seemed to be in the middle of a wild dance she had no hope of stopping -- not that she wanted to. All she wanted at this moment was to climb on top of Dykstra and mount him whether he wanted her to or not. All thoughts of hesitancy about mating with him being a lifetime commitment seemed trivial. This was a man she knew she'd never have enough of.

Locked in a sexual haze and hungry beyond her wildest imagination, Talia felt her head spin as if she were drunk. Her limbs tingled and her lips, where they were fused to Dykstra's, felt swollen and puffy. It was like the strongest elixir she'd ever taken to forget her pain while on the farm, only this one magnified every sensation around her tenfold.

When Dykstra ended their kiss, it took her a moment to realize his mouth was no longer glued to hers. Slowly, with great effort, she opened her eyes. The lust and longing shining on Dykstra's face caused her to inhale sharply and her pussy to clench in anticipation.

This was it. He would take her now, and she'd be his forever. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she knew he could feel it.

Instead of the ravishing she'd been expecting -- craving -- Dykstra pushed her away slightly and hefted himself out of the tub. He kept his back to her as he grabbed a

towel and dried himself. Disappointment flooded through her as strongly as the pleasure had a few short moments ago. What the hell was going on?

"We need to talk." Dykstra's growl sent shivers through her skin even more than the cool air. His mood had turned positively foul if the look on his face was any indication. Why was he angry? She hadn't done anything he hadn't started.

Unsure what to say, she settled for, "I'm sorry to have offended you, my lord."

"Save it," he bit out. He hurried back into his clothes, then bent to scoop her out of the water, which sloshed everywhere. "There are a few things we need to get straightened out."

He seemed totally oblivious to the fact that she was naked. She, on the other hand, was acutely aware of it. Her nipples pebbled when the air kissed them -- the way she wanted him to -- and they now ached with every brush against his tunic as he marched them to his cabin.

Talia shivered and tried to ignore her body's response to the Lionsblood. He'd seemed to turn off his previous interest in her as quickly as it had appeared.

"I'm not going to fuck you, Talia."

Dykstra had practically dropped her to her feet and gripped her shoulders painfully. His gaze was piercing and magnetic. It was like he was staring into her soul, but she couldn't break eye contact. Considering his words, she wasn't entirely sure he couldn't read her mind.

She blinked. "OK."

"I'm not going to lie. I don't want our relationship to start out with untruths. I want you like I've never wanted another woman in my existence, but I'm *not* going to fuck you." His words were gruff, and she noticed the flush creeping up his neck.

Her stomach lurched. No one had ever accused a Lionsblood of being romantic, but the thought that this man wanted her like no other sent a thrill through her that was as good as if he'd imported her a rose from the Historic Gardens. This was difficult for him. He turned and paced away from her a few steps before turning back.

She took several deep breaths before responding. "I have no problem with that. I never confessed to wanting you to have sex with me."

Dykstra narrowed his eyes, as if she'd offended him, and inhaled deeply. "You don't have to. I can smell your need of me."

Talia narrowed her eyes. No matter how much she wanted this man, it irked her that he had the advantage of knowing exactly how he affected her. She opened her mouth to make up a reason for her reaction to him, but he cut her off with an upraised hand.

"As I told you before, sex with a Lionsblood is not a trivial matter. I have responsibilities that must be met at all cost. If that means losing my own future happiness, then I'm willing to sacrifice it. I don't expect you to have the same dedication to my causes as I do, but I do expect you to understand and support them and me."

"It would help me if I knew what they were." Bereft of Dykstra's warmth, Talia began to feel the lingering effects of the bone-deep cold once again. Still damp from the bath, she shivered.

Dykstra promptly ducked inside the bathroom again and brought back a towel, briskly rubbing her skin and drying the remaining water. "I'll explain later. Right now, you need to rest. We've got two days of travel before we get to my home." When he'd finished drying her, he gripped her shoulders and looked intently into her eyes. "I know you've led a hard life. I saw the farm and the conditions of the grounds as well as the slaves there. I'm not offering a life much easier by comparison. I promise you'll always be well fed and clothed, but you will have to work. Hard by most standards. If you're not willing to pull your share of the weight, tell me now. I'll see to it you're sold to a better farm, but I can't afford to lose all the money invested in you because you won't help me."

She smiled. "I've worked hard all my life. I can't imagine you could work me harder than Dragar."

He released her then and nodded once, curtly. Without another word, he spun on his heel and left the room.

Chapter Three

When the door to his cabin slid shut, Dykstra closed his eyes and leaned heavily against the door. Sweet Ones above. This woman would be the death of him. There was absolutely no way he'd be able to keep his word about not fucking her. There was nothing in the entire world he wanted more than to sink his cock balls-deep into what he knew would be a very wet and juicy cunt. She was as hot for him as he was for her. Which made keeping his dick to himself all the more difficult.

As he stalked down the corridor, he couldn't help but focus on one of the first things he'd noticed about her. The scar on her forearm wasn't unknown to him. She had been marked a Lionsmate from her birth, which meant one of her parents was a Lionsblood and the other human. Very few humans had such a brand, and none had ever been left in a place like the farm he'd found her in. That mark had been the reason he'd chosen her when he'd had no intention of bringing home anything but a strong, capable male. He'd been obligated to rescue her. The fates had guided him truly once again, but he couldn't help but begrudge their choice. She might have the mark, but she certainly didn't look like she bore the strength of a Lionsmate.

Shaking his head to clear it, Dykstra double-checked the stores of food he'd taken from the farm owner before starting his pre-launch checklists. Sure enough, there was plenty of food in his hold for both him and the girl for several days. They should make it safely back to his home in the underground cavern of the Mammoths. He didn't have a large dwelling there, but it was enough for them to live comfortably, and the vast networks of caves provided much-needed shelter from the harsh environment outside. It was still extremely cold outside his dwelling, but inside he kept it warm enough for the human woman to be comfortable.

Talia. Her name was Talia, he reminded himself. He hoped his purchase was a wise one because he couldn't afford another human. None of the men at the colony were hardy enough to work outside. He'd half hoped to find a hybrid of some kind, but he should have known none would be found. The fates had sent him on the journey for one reason and one reason only. To find Talia.

He needed help with his work just outside the vast cave network, but with Talia there to do some of the inside work, perhaps it would all turn out for the best. He could still get everything done he needed to and not risk a human getting caught in an unexpected freeze.

His earth ship ready, Dykstra started it and began the slow journey through the tunnels that mazed beneath the Earth's surface. They could handle many earth ships at a time, but these days, only a very few traveled more than very short distances. The risk of getting caught by a deep freeze in shallow earth was too great. Right now, though, speed was of the essence. He'd been away too long as it was.

Once his destination was plotted, he set the ship moving and engaged the auto drive. He needed rest, but he didn't dare go back to his cabin. Not yet. Not with the memory of her body pressed against his so fresh in his mind.

Straightening out his legs, Dykstra leaned his head back against the headrest of his chair and closed his eyes, knowing he wouldn't be able to sleep. His cock was painfully hard against his trousers, and everything that made him a Lionsblood roared at him to claim this woman as his mate.

There wasn't any special code or predestined declaration that made a couple mates. It was a simple matter of chemistry. If a couple thought enough of each other to consummate their relationship, they liked each other enough to mate. It was thought that when a Lionsblood found a woman he simply could not live without, he'd found his true mate. He needed to make sure Talia understood that sex with a Lionsblood wasn't simply sex. Also, in her case, she was marked as Lionsmate. She had the blood of a Lion running through her veins. That he'd found her among all the humans he'd had to choose from, and the almost overwhelming attraction he felt was reciprocated, were

two more reasons intimacy would strengthen their personal bond. Fate had brought them together, but he was willing to give her a choice because he respected the young woman because of all she'd obviously been through, and he was loath to start a relationship dishonestly.

His heart couldn't bear it if she loved him, then left him. She was the one for him. The only one. Dykstra scrubbed his face with his hands and combed his fingers through his shaggy hair.

Getting to know her would be a joyous time -- if his cock didn't explode -- but he was worried about how she'd find her new life. In many ways it would be just as hard as it had been on the farm. He hadn't bought her to give her a life of luxury. She'd have to work hard. His only hope was that she'd see what he was doing as good and decent.

They were about thirty-six hours out of the Mammoths if he kept using the more shallow routes. If they sunk to the deeper, safer means, they would be considerably slowed. It could take from two to four days longer, and he didn't want to take any longer than necessary. With winter fast approaching, he didn't like leaving the colony too long.

He had about twenty-four hours before they passed the last shaft down into deeper earth. He would use that time to decide what he should do. At some point, he knew he'd have to consult Talia. She was the one at greater risk if they got caught in a freeze. Dykstra would suffer, yes, but as long as he got to deeper earth within a reasonable amount of time, he'd be fine. Talia would have far less time. If they encountered a freeze and Dykstra couldn't get them to deeper earth, she would die. She had to know the risks and why Dykstra needed to get back to the Mammoths. He was loath to risk her life in any way, but the chance of a freeze this early in the winter was remote.

Sighing, he put his arms behind his head, propped his feet on the computer console, and closed his eyes, drifting off into a light sleep.

* * *

"If you're asleep, who's driving the damned ship?" Talia was cranky as hell. She had tossed and turned for a long time before finally falling into a fitful sleep filled with images of Dykstra doing all kinds of erotic things to her and her doing even more erotic things to him. She had to have him. *Had* to have him. Nothing in her world could have prepared her for the feelings she had about this man. She wasn't sure about the whole "mating" thing, but she had to have more of his kisses. More of his body.

She hadn't really expected to wake with him beside her, but she was damned annoyed that he hadn't been there, anyway. She'd found one of his shirts and, though it was way too big, she put it on. It beat the hell out of going naked. Wearing his pants was hopeless, but the shirt reached her knees so it didn't really matter.

Venturing out on her own to explore the small earth ship, she had found him in the cockpit, feet propped on the console and eyes shut. He made no indication he'd been aware of her approach. Even now, she wasn't sure he'd heard her.

There was a long pause, and Dykstra didn't move or even open his eyes. "I'm perfectly aware of the ship and where the auto pilot is taking us. I have everything under control."

"OK," she said, for some reason feeling less a slave and more an equal after their kiss. "Where *are* we going, or am I allowed to know?"

"You only have to ask, and I'll tell you anything. I have no reason to keep secrets from you." He opened his eyes lazily then and stretched in such a complete way it made Talia want to do the same. Muscles played across his chest and shoulders and made Talia itch to touch him.

Her pussy gave an interested throb, and she almost moaned. There wasn't anything about this man that didn't turn her on. Even not knowing anything about him other than that he'd bought a slave, she wanted him. It was as if all those years when she'd longed for the comfort of another human had built up inside her, and she was unable to resist the pull to Dykstra and the warmth of his touch.

She leaned against the doorway as casually as she could, hoping he didn't notice her arousal. "So, where are we going?"

"To my home. I have to warn you, though, you may not like it."

"It's a home, Dykstra. It's bound to be a sight better than where I came from."

They looked at each other a moment before Dykstra removed his feet from the console and stood slowly, lazily. He crossed the small space separating them until he stood so close to her, her breasts brushed his chest when she breathed.

"You're not going to have a pampered, easy life, Talia. I originally intended to purchase a male to help me with my work outside the colony I protect. I'll need you to take care of everything and everyone inside it now since I'll be doing all the outside work."

She blinked. "A human colony?"

"Yes," he said, and Talia thought he expected her disapproval, but she waited for him to continue. "I take in humans who need protection from the weather and are unwilling or unable to gain entrance to free farms. Mostly I get men and women with children wanting to make a permanent home for themselves. Every able person has to work to sustain the community. There are no free rides. I imagine it's not the life you were expecting."

"No, it's not." She crossed her arms under her breasts. "I expected much worse. What is it you expect me to do besides pitch in and help where needed?"

"It will be your job to oversee the day-to-day activities of the colony. Make sure the underground gardens and greenhouses are tended properly, and the food stores are sorted with the oldest harvest going out first. You'll also have to make sure any bad or moldy items are thrown out. We save as much as we can, but not at the expense of health. There's also sanitation to see to and enforce, as well as tending the sick and wounded. I'm afraid you've been drafted as chief administrator." His grin faded when she merely looked at him with narrowed eyes. Unless she was mistaken, she was drafted because he'd had his fill of it.

"Sounds like a thankless job, making people work when they'd rather be doing something else, and being the one everyone goes to when there's a problem." She rolled

her eyes when he tried to give her an innocent look. "I suspect you've grown tired of the whining and bickering."

He didn't even bother to deny it. "More or less. But mostly, I have work to do outside the cave, maintaining the seals on the man-made entries and ensuring the vents are free of snow and debris. I also own a small diamond mine in the area that brings in much-needed income." His closeness was starting to affect her in ways she didn't want him to know just yet. He didn't seem affected, and she didn't want to be, either.

But she *was*! Even now, discussing something not even remotely sexy, she was turned on. His voice oozed sex, his body screamed for her to reach out and touch him. Talia had to fist her hands into the too-long shirt she wore to keep them to herself. To distract herself, she focused on his words, the message he was trying to convey to her. It sounded too good to be true.

"No farm handler takes *that* good care of his charges. Even the free camps are no picnic. They sell troublemakers to the slave farms -- troublemaker equals anyone who complains about conditions."

He shrugged indifferently. "You'll just have to judge for yourself. You'll be in charge of the inner workings. Run it however you want. I'll show you what I've set in place, but you can change anything you deem unfair for the people living there."

For several breaths, there seemed to be nothing more to say, then Dykstra's gaze left her face to take in her attire. It seemed like he'd just noticed, but Talia would bet he'd been aware of that damned tunic from the moment he'd first looked at her.

"That shirt is not yours."

She involuntarily backed away from him a step, feeling stalked, hunted. "Well, I had nothing else. You expected me to walk around naked?"

"You had the clothes you came with. You could have put them on." There was a slight raise of one of his eyebrows as if challenging her to contradict him. Her clothes had been so torn and filthy, it seemed unthinkable to put them on her freshly washed body.

"You've *got* to be kidding."

"No, I'm not." He moved a step closer to her, putting her once again a mere breath away from touching him. "You said you didn't have anything else. I'm simply pointing out you did. You *chose* to take something of mine instead."

For the first time since their initial meeting, Talia was uncertain of herself. Had she committed an unpardonable crime by taking something of the Lionsblood? She blinked several times to try and regain her composure. Had she thought herself an equal only moments before?

"I -- I'm sorry if I offended you. It's just that I haven't been truly clean in a very long time, and I couldn't stand putting on those nasty things again."

He gave her a slow blink, but his gaze didn't waver. "You like being clean."

"It's less itchy," she replied.

"And less smelly."

"That, too."

And he was on her. Three clumsy steps backward, and she slammed into the bulkhead, not hard, but enough to rattle her bones. She didn't have time to register much else because his mouth descended on hers again, and she was lost. All she cared about just then was getting him naked and screwing his brains out.

She clawed at his back, wanting to mark him as hers in any way she could. Her hands found the waistband of his pants, and she fumbled with the fastenings, but he pushed her away.

"Not yet," he hissed, and whipped his shirt from her body in one sharp, upward motion. "Me first."

The skin of her neck and shoulder burned where his lips and tongue grazed. He nipped her here and there on his path to her breasts, marking her as she had him. When he fastened onto one aching nipple she couldn't stop her cries of pleasure.

She clutched at his shoulders for support lest she slide down the wall and away from his hot touch. His arms snaked around her waist to offer added support -- or to hold her to him -- and she quickly guided him to the other breast. Her body was on fire, yet little chill bumps formed over her skin.

Especially when he moved from her nipple to the underside of her breast, then lower. He dipped his tongue into her navel and blew gently before kissing the area just above her pubic hair. Her belly quivered with the unaccustomed touch, and she jumped a little.

"There's not a woman I've ever met who can compare to you, Talia." His words were barely above a whisper, as if he spoke more to himself than to her. "You will be mine, no question about it. But not now. Not yet. Only a taste this time."

He shouldered her legs apart then, and swiped a path from her wet and weeping entrance to her throbbing clit. Talia's cries turned to screams in an instant, and her knees gave way. She groped for anything to hold onto -- not that it would have done much good. Her muscles seemed to have been turned to water. The only part of her body that seemed to obey her command was the fingers that found their way into Dykstra's hair. They held onto him for dear life, keeping his mouth in contact with her pussy.

This was what she wanted. She only wished she had enough strength to make sure he completed the act, because his words seemed to indicate he had no plans to ease her discomfort.

* * *

Dykstra felt her start to slide to the floor before he could get a really good taste of her. Wanting her to be comfortable for this, he stood, scooped her up, and headed to his cabin and bed. In the small ship it took him maybe ten seconds to make that trek, and he tossed her lightly to the middle of the bed and followed her down.

Her pussy was wet in her excitement, and he knew without a doubt how much she wanted this. She was marking him even as he marked her. *Mine!* His heart and soul screamed at him to claim her, but he knew now was not the time.

Not yet. He had to know she could be the helpmate his life demanded. Lionsblood and their mates customarily worked hand-in-hand throughout their lives. His parents had. It made for a very contented life.

They'd talk more about this later. Now, he just wanted a taste. Just one taste. One night before they arrived at the Mammoths and she found out first-hand what life with him would be like.

Still in his pants, Dykstra lay on his belly, his face buried in Talia's cunt. One leg bent, his arms wrapped around her upper thighs, holding her open for his intimate invasion, he savored her. Craved even more of the delicious silken honey that was her wet sex.

Talia whimpered slightly and clung to his hair, pushing him tighter into her pussy, urging him to do more. True to the mark given her, she behaved as a Lionsmate might, unashamed of what she wanted, yet obviously untouched by any male. As he probed her with a long finger, he felt the proof of her innocence as he'd suspected.

He wanted to shrug out of his pants, crawl up her body, and plunge himself inside her already grasping pussy, but he restrained himself. Her. This was about her pleasure. He needed to show her he could pleasure her with little regard for himself. He needed to know she could accept him and want him as much as he wanted her. It was the way of his people when dealing with a potential mate when they knew little about each other. At the moment, everything he did was to prove to her he would be a good mate. He would not claim her until she knew she could spend the rest of her life with him.

His tongue found her clit effortlessly and flicked it once, twice. She shrieked with each touch and stimulation, her body jumping involuntarily. "Great One above! Don't you dare stop what you're doing, Dykstra. Not now."

He grinned even as his tongue licked out once more to the swelling bud. Her intimate fluid coated his chin and lower face. His fingers probed her gently, pushing just short of the thin barrier of her hymen. She arched her back to meet each of his thrusts with one of her own, her moans and shrieks gaining in volume with each passing second.

Finally, Dykstra fastened his lips around Talia's clit and sucked. She screamed and bucked so hard against Dykstra that he could barely keep his mouth on her. Sweat

broke out over her body and worked against his grip. She slid freely through his arms and hands until the spasms subsided and her body slowly stilled.

His cock was on the verge of exploding. It was going to happen whether he wanted it to or not. He hadn't planned this. Hadn't intended to mark her in any way other than his scratches and bites on her skin. Instead, he loosened his breeches, pulled out his cock, crawled up her body, and ground himself into the muscular flesh of her belly.

Covering her mouth with his, he plunged his tongue inside her, licking and nipping her lips. She whimpered and clung to him, her nails digging into his arms and back as she struggled to find a hold on him. Her legs snaked around his waist, her heels digging into his ass. He could take her so easily. She was begging him to.

With a supreme effort, Dykstra settled himself so that his cock slipped through her pussy lips and between their bellies instead of inside her. She was so wet, so hot. He could feel the beast within him roaring, insisting on claiming its mate, but he couldn't. Not now. Not yet.

It took only two strokes before he emptied himself between them. He stifled a groan into her mouth as he kissed her. Still she clung to him, slipping her sex over him as if to milk every drop from his cock.

His breath came as quickly as hers as he rolled them to their sides. He hooked her leg around his hip and gripped her ass to keep her close. For several moments, they simply looked at each other, neither speaking. Then Talia's eyelids drooped and she shook her head once as if trying to clear it.

"I -- I'm sleepy." Her voice shook, and she trembled slightly in his arms.

"Then sleep. I'll clean you up and watch over you tonight."

She opened her mouth to say more, but seemed to think better of it and simply nodded, closing her eyes. Her fingers didn't loosen voluntarily on him as he disengaged himself from her. It was as if she didn't want to let him go, but Dykstra knew better than to read more into her reaction than she told him outright. Unless he missed his

guess, she was confused. Unsure of herself and him. Unsure of what he wanted from her and what she wanted in return.

He retrieved a damp cloth and cleansed them both before settling himself beside her and pulling the covers around them both. She immediately reclaimed her hold on him and snuggled into his body as if she belonged there.

Which she did.

Dykstra's heart ached. If this didn't turn out the way he hoped, he was in for a major heartache. One from which he might never recover.

Chapter Four

Talia tried to claw her way out of sleep several times. Each time, she was lulled back into slumber by the comfortable, secure feeling of Dykstra's warm body snug against hers. She wanted desperately to wake and try to figure out what all this meant.

Never had she suspected such pleasures existed. He delivered them tenderly enough, but he'd stopped short of taking her. She knew there was a reason, but she couldn't seem to figure out why. It angered her that he'd held back from her when she'd given herself so freely to him.

Finally, she woke to find him gone from her, another thing that irked the hell out of her, until she looked at the clock. Fourteen hours? She'd slept fourteen hours! She groaned and stretched before she again donned one of his shirts and went looking for him. As expected, she found him in the control room, but awake and driving the ship instead of resting.

"Where are we?" she demanded, because she didn't think, "Why didn't you screw me last night?" was appropriate.

He turned his head slightly, but did not look at her. Was he already regretting what he'd done? Were all those pretty words just that? Only pretty words? "I'm waiting until sunrise to open the door to the Mammoths. It's a good thing you got the sleep you obviously needed because there will be a lot to do in a few minutes, though you won't officially start anything until tomorrow. We're home, Talia."

Home. She forgot her annoyance with him. Excitement bloomed inside her chest, and she almost jumped up and down with glee. She'd never had a place to call home. Even if it was just as filthy and awful as Dragar's farm, she wanted to try to make it the place she'd always dreamed "home" would be. Somehow, she knew Dykstra would allow her that.

She slid into the seat beside him and looked out the window. Before them was a huge rock face with a steel door fashioned into it, sealing it from the outside world.

"What is this place?" She couldn't seem to take her eyes off the barrier to the rest of her life.

"It's a cave system that stretches for miles in all directions. I secured it years ago and maintain the securities as well as safeties. Not only are we safe from predators, but the structure is perfectly sound. Made over millions of years by Mother Nature herself."

"What are we waiting for? Let's go."

"Sun up. The doors are programmed to close at sundown and stay closed, under any circumstances, until first light."

Talia looked at him incredulously. "But what if someone gets stuck out after sundown?"

He looked at her, his eyes as cold and unemotional as they had been when they'd first met. "Then they wait until the door opens at sun up. Everyone knows the rules and why they are the way they are. We must keep as much heat as possible in the cave at all times. The night zaps the warmth from everything."

As they spoke, the sun peeked over the horizon, casting lovely pink and red streaks through the clouds. The great door gave an awesome *clang* and started to slowly rise. Dykstra glanced at Talia before easing the vehicle forward.

The cavern they entered was so vast, three of Dykstra's cars could have fit side by side with room to spare, and the ceiling was so tall, she couldn't see the top. She craned her neck against the window, trying without success to see how far the lights shone.

"It's so big!" She breathed the sentence. This was nothing like the tiny caverns she'd lived in on the farm. "I doubt there is anything its equal on all of the Earth."

"There are others," Dykstra said simply. "Hidden deep within the earth. The deeper the better, in my opinion." He powered down his ship and stood. "We need to find proper dress for you. Give me a few minutes, and I'll return."

"You're leaving me here?"

"Unless you'd prefer to parade around the colony half naked, yes." He sounded annoyed, angry. His confrontational tone put her on edge. She didn't like him making decisions for her, even if they were the correct ones.

"I'd prefer to not be hidden like you're ashamed of me. Is it forbidden for a Lionsblood to pleasure and be pleased by a human?"

"I'd prefer --" He clenched his fists and his teeth, obviously angry now. "-- you not look as if you were inviting other men to do to you what I did."

"Why should it matter? You've made sure not to do anything that would bind us. You said you had to actually fuck me. You've been careful to do everything but. So, why do you care?"

He roared at her, waving his hand in the air in dismissal. "Do as you wish, human!" He turned his back on her, stomping out of the cockpit and to the gangway. He slammed his hand against the palmpad that released the ramp and it lowered slowly. Dykstra didn't look back or say another word to Talia as he left, and she wondered if he'd lock her in the ship if she stayed as he'd originally wished.

She had no shoes or pants. The cold from the cave as the frigid air entered the ship made her think twice about venturing out immediately. Chill bumps erupted over her arms and legs, and she called out to Dykstra, wanting to tell him she was sorry, that she'd wait for him. He either didn't hear her or simply ignored her.

And when a pretty, dark-haired woman flung herself into his arms and clung to him, she didn't care.

* * *

Dykstra was in no mood to endure the advances of the few women who thought to gain favors and free residence if he took them as a mate, especially now that the one he had chosen for himself was in his ship. Lola threw herself at him before he realized she was near, thanks to his preoccupation with Talia. Lola jumped away from him quickly enough when he snarled at her.

"Jazmeen," he addressed an elder woman on the colony council. "I have a human woman on my ship. She needs warm clothing and shoes and a place to stay. She will rest one day before she begins her duties."

"As you wish, Dykstra." The elder only raised an eyebrow at the day's reprieve from work. Everyone had to work there. The only exceptions had been if someone were sick or injured beyond the ability to do any sort of activity. It was the only way they all survived. "Did you have a job in mind for her?"

"I do. We'll discuss it later."

"What sort of job?" Lola laid a hand on his arm and pouted prettily. "I could take her under my wing, Dykstra. Show her around." Her smile told him exactly what the woman would do to Talia, having correctly perceived her as a threat. Lola had no reason to think she had a claim on him, but the woman continually warned other women off him every chance she got.

Dykstra looked at her a long while before raising his voice to be heard by everyone. "The woman is under my personal protection. Anyone doing her harm will answer to me."

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, Dykstra."

He sucked in a breath. Talia strolled down the ramp with an air of royalty. Her honey-gold hair hung in ringlets around her face and down her back. Had he thought she wasn't beautiful? When he looked at her now, she took his breath. Fair skin and a slender frame completed her look, and Dykstra wondered why he hadn't seen her beauty before. Of course, he'd thought she was pretty, but it took this display of feminine power for him to realize just how exquisite she was.

"I have no need to rest a day. I'd be happy to start whatever task needs doing immediately."

"You think to work half-dressed?" Lola sneered.

Talia merely raised an eyebrow. "I think to work any way I can where I can do the most good. I'm not looking for a free ride, or any special favors." She looked pointedly at Dykstra, and he only ground his teeth harder in frustration. "I have no

need to earn my keep on my back for anyone. I'm sure there is plenty enough to be done without that."

Dykstra felt the beast roaring to life. She was publicly announcing she wasn't his woman. How dare she? With a supreme effort, Dykstra managed only to growl as she walked by him, seemingly as comfortable as if she wore full outer cave gear. The stones didn't seem to bother her bare feet, nor did the cold. She didn't even look at him as she passed.

She addressed Jazmeen. "I would be ever grateful for some clothes and a place to sleep when the work's done, ma'am." Her respectful tone wasn't fabricated. Jazmeen smiled warmly at Talia, threw Dykstra a scathing look, and threw her own cloak around Talia's thin shoulders.

"You come with me, my dear. There's a dwelling next to mine I'd be glad to show you to. I have plenty of clothes to start you with until you make your own to suit you better. But I daresay Dykstra's right. You look exhausted. You can start your job tomorrow."

Dykstra growled once more when Lola approached him again. Everyone, including the persistent Lola, took it as a sign to leave him alone and moved deeper into the cave. He was left alone to secure the entrance and his vehicle and think about what had just happened.

Talia was angry with him. He couldn't blame her. He'd all but claimed her, yet held back without explaining why. She was punishing him, and he knew he deserved it.

Still, his reasons were valid. He had to know they could complement each other in both their personal and professional relationships. That was necessary to ensure both their happiness.

But damn if her punishment didn't hurt.

* * *

Talia held her head up the whole way to her dwelling. Jazmeen had given her three changes of clothes and left her to rest for the next day. Once safely inside by herself, Talia felt more alone than she ever had. She missed Dykstra's presence. She

hadn't been with him long, but she'd come to expect him to be near. It was lonely without him.

The dwelling looked as if it had been carved into the cave wall. Three small rooms formed a living room/kitchen combination, a bedroom, and a bathroom. There was running water, but it had to be heated if one wanted a warm bath. The sewage, as well, had to be removed after each use. Jazmeen had instructed her where to take the bucket each morning. It wasn't as fancy as Dykstra's ship had been, but it was comfortable, and more than what she'd ever had before. A dwelling of her own was something she'd never even dreamed of.

She sat on the small couch and stared at the door. Now what did she do?

Knowing she needed to rest for tomorrow, she stood and went to the bedroom. She stared at the bed, not wanting to lie on the small cot. It wouldn't have been so bad if Dykstra had been with her, but she'd burned that bridge when she'd lost her temper.

Now she was alone. Truly alone for the first time in her life. Dykstra was probably with the dark-haired woman. The thought made her blood boil, turned her stomach, and plunged her into despair all at the same time.

No. She would not let a man, no matter how much he meant to her, dictate her happiness. Not now. Not ever.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. Midday. There was still time to find something to do. Grabbing the jacket Jazmeen had given her, she headed out the door to find the older woman.

Chapter Five

Dykstra squatted beside the rushing underground river. Lighting throughout the cave was sparse. In the evening, everything would be extinguished but one glow stick every couple hundred feet. Then, the darkness would be almost total. Sometimes Dykstra preferred it that way. The darkness was his solitude.

Today, however, he needed the light. The underground river was rising, and he needed to know which areas to close off. The normally tinkling, flowing water was now white capped and roared through the lowest levels of the caverns, steadily rising. That wasn't unusual this time of year, but he always made sure he closed off the cave far enough away from the torrent the river became at times. Spring sometimes caused underground ice to thaw, and there were limited outlets. Any underground river was at risk for flooding.

Peering into the rushing water, he spotted eyeless fish swimming with the current. Hopefully, some of them would be caught for food before they passed the three trap areas the fishermen manned.

Satisfied all was in order, he started back to the main section the colony occupied. Two voices caught his attention before he could go far, however.

"You're not Dykstra's woman then?" He recognized the voice as that of Jakx Hargus. A good man, Jakx was the biggest, burliest human in the cave. One Dykstra counted as a friend.

"No. He has no claim on me other than actually owning me." Talia gave a mirthless laugh. "If he'd wished to claim me as anything other than property, he'd have done it on the way here."

"We're all under his protection, Miss, but I'd be honored to offer you mine. No strings, unless you want them."

Dykstra could practically see the older man blush. Jakx, while the secret object of many of the women's fantasies, wasn't what one would call a ladies' man. He was always nervous and dumbfounded around members of the opposite sex. That he'd managed to get this far with Talia surprised Dykstra. And angered him. Despite the strong urge to confront the man and rip his throat out, Dykstra stayed where he was, listening to Talia's response.

"Any help is always appreciated, Jakx. You're a generous man."

"But you want me to keep my hands to myself," Jakx murmured, downhearted.

"I didn't say that," Talia said gently. "I'm just not jumping into anything until I get my bearings here. I would definitely appreciate the company, though. I've never been so totally on my own, and I've found I don't like it much." There was a pause before she continued. "Thanks for sticking up for me back there. I thought that dark-headed witch was going to pluck out my eyelashes."

"Lola? Nah. She's just jealous." Jakx's voice was surer now. "She figures to have Dykstra for herself, but I think we all thought he'd chosen you as his mate."

"No. He most definitely has not."

"Well." Jakx cleared his throat. "We'd best be getting back. It's almost evening, and they'll be putting out the lights soon. Gets so dark when they do, we'd never find our way back."

Their talk ceased as Jakx led the way back to the colony housing, and Dykstra had to fight the urge to grab Talia up and run straight to his own dwelling. It was, after all, where she belonged.

He followed them silently until they reached Talia's dwelling and Jakx bent down clumsily to give her a kiss on the lips. Dykstra couldn't stop the growl.

Jakx pulled away from Talia and spun around in a battle stance, ready to defend her. He relaxed somewhat upon seeing Dykstra, but still gave the impression of readiness should the two of them be threatened.

"Fancy meeting you here," Jakx said softly, all traces of uncertainty gone when faced with something not so scary as female attraction.

Dykstra looked at Talia, who narrowed her eyes. She said, "Yes. Fancy that. I'd invite you inside, but Jakx has already promised to have a drink with me." She opened the door and beckoned to the large man. "Coming?"

Jakx's face flooded with a crimson stain starting from his throat and creeping its way up. His blond hair stood out starkly against his heated face. "I -- er, that is, yes. I thought I'd stay a while." His uncertainty returned, but he seemed to think Talia needed protecting.

"Wonderful." She beamed at Jakx, and Dykstra wanted to hit his friend. Talia grabbed Jakx's hand and dragged the big man inside her dwelling, shooting Dykstra a venomous look as she slammed the door in his face.

* * *

"What the hell are you doing?" Jakx hissed quietly when they were safely inside. "Dykstra is my best friend, and not someone I want for an enemy."

"I'm sorry." She frantically looked around for something to barricade the door, having an almost overwhelming feeling Dykstra would come through it at any minute. Judging by the look on his face as she'd shut herself and Jakx inside, he was ready to kill. "I'm so sorry I dragged you into this. I think maybe I *do* love him, impossible as it seems in such a short time, but I'm not going to sit here and wait for him to take interest in me again." She raised her chin in defiance and looked at Jakx. "I'm better than that."

All the annoyance and trepidation in the big man's face vanished, and he opened his arms for her. She gratefully slipped into them and let one little sob escape. Closing her eyes tightly against the unexpected tears threatening to spill, Talia clung to Jakx's shirtfront and used all her force of will not to cry.

After a few moments, Jakx gently held her at arm's length. "Did he disrespect you, Talia? Did he promise you something he has not fulfilled? Did he take from you without first asking?"

She silently shook her head, not trusting herself to speak. Apparently satisfied with her answer, Jakx scooped her up and sat on the couch with Talia resting

comfortably in his lap. She wound her arms around his neck and rested her head against his shoulder, thinking it was nice to take comfort in someone.

"We'll work this out," Jakx said with conviction. The man obviously meant it when he said he'd take her under his protection. Her personal feelings weren't his concern, but he was apparently willing to speak to his friend in some fashion. It touched her deeply, but she could handle this on her own.

She stiffened, pushed away from him, and stood, pacing the length of the small room. "It doesn't matter. I will *not* waste my time, or my love, on someone who does not want me."

"Oh, I doubt he doesn't want your love. He wouldn't be stalking you otherwise," Jakx murmured. "Well --" He crossed his legs and flung one well-muscled arm over the back of the couch. "-- since we've established where your heart lies, and that I have absolutely no chance with you, how are we going to get me out of here without my getting maimed by my own best friend?"

Before Talia could respond, the door to her dwelling splintered open. Dykstra looked wilder than Talia had seen him yet. Obviously enraged, he was fully transformed, as she'd seen him at the farm, but his fangs were long, and he roared much like his race's namesake.

"Mine!"

Jakx sprang to his feet and moved more swiftly than his size should have allowed to stand between Dykstra and Talia, shielding her from Dykstra's wrath.

"Now, hold on just a minute." Jakx raised a hand to Dykstra in a halting gesture. "You had the opportunity to stake your claim on her the moment you landed, but you didn't. All we saw was Lola throwing herself at you, then Talia exiting the ship half-dressed. You made no move to hide her or to clothe her. You didn't seem to care if she was there or not. You can't expect the men to ignore such an exquisite beauty."

"Best you leave now, Jakx." Dykstra's tone was cold. Deadly. "I have things to discuss with Talia, and I intend to do it alone."

"I can't do that." Jakx stood firmly, his head held high in the face of a lethally angry Lionsblood. "Talía is my friend, and I've given her my protection. That means I protect her from everyone and everything I possibly can. Even you, my friend."

"You would die for her?" Dykstra sneered, showing his teeth to full effect. Talía felt a shiver of something she couldn't name looking at him, and she wasn't altogether sure it was fear. This was a lion out of control. Hunting. Out for blood. Shouldn't she be afraid?

No! She was exhilarated!

"I would." Jakx didn't hesitate. "You know I would."

"She's not yours to protect." The words were barely above a whisper, but their menacing effect was more pronounced than if he'd yelled them.

"And you refuse to claim her as yours." Jakx stood his ground in a battle stance, ready for an attack. "So tell me, Lionsblood, why is it not my job to protect her?"

"That's none of your concern! You only need to know she's not your responsibility! *Now go!*" Dykstra looked increasingly agitated. This would end in bloodshed if it kept going.

"It's all right, Jakx. It's probably better if you go. I can look out for myself." Talía touched Jakx's arm, keeping her voice low, never taking her eyes off Dykstra.

"He'll harm you, Talía. I know he will."

"I've faced scarier men than him and won." She smiled when Jakx spared her an annoyed glance. "Go. I'll take care of this alley cat and find you later."

"Great One Above, Talía, do you have the slightest notion how dangerous he is right now?" Jakx had beads of sweat on his forehead and upper lip. "If I leave you, he could very well kill you."

"He paid too much for me." She smiled, looking at Dykstra now. "He can't afford to kill me."

"I don't think that matters at the moment."

"Go, Jakx. Stand outside the door, if it makes you feel better, but I'll talk to him alone." As Jakx made his way to the door, Talía raised a finger to Dykstra so she'd have

a witness in case she truly wanted nothing more to do with the Lionsblood. "But only this once. After this, I'll not do your bidding merely because you raise your hackles and snarl impressively."

Jakx paused at the door. "Maybe you're the one who needs to be careful, Dykstra." He raised an eyebrow. "I don't think she's as easily tamed as you think." And he slipped through the door and closed it behind him.

"Why were you following me?" Talia refused to be intimidated. She crossed her arms under her breasts.

"It doesn't matter why I'm following you," he snarled. "I own you. I can do what I damned well please with you."

"No." She rounded on him, advancing so fast he retreated in the face of her aggression. "You might have bought me, but you don't *own* me. Not the important parts, anyway." She stared at him a moment, making sure she got her message across, even through his anger. "I choose whatever friends I want. I choose where I live. I even choose what lovers to take, and there's not a damned thing you can do about it."

"Take care what you do, Talia."

"I always do."

"Then you'll do well to watch that part about taking lovers." He'd calmed down somewhat outwardly, but there was still a note of danger in his voice. "I'd hate to have to kill anyone."

She smirked. "You had your chance aboard your earth ship. You refused. As far as I'm concerned, I'm free to pursue more... satisfying company." She gave a significant glance at the door.

"And you think Jakx is the one to satisfy you?" Dykstra narrowed his eyes, obviously watching her carefully for a reaction.

Talia shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know. But if I take a notion, I'll find out."

Dykstra gave another roar and slammed his fist into the wall. Immediately, Jakx burst through what was left of the door leading into her dwelling, apparently not taking any chances.

"I told you he was dangerous!"

"Relax, Jakx," Talia soothed. "It was just the wall."

"It could have been your head, woman!"

"You of all people, Jakx, should know I'd never hurt her!" Dykstra thundered. "You know me better than anyone in the universe!"

"Exactly." Jakx nodded, placing himself once again between Talia and Dykstra. "I know you. I know what you're capable of. And I've *never* seen you so pissed off!"

"She thinks you can satisfy her where I cannot." Dykstra said the words with a deadly soft growl.

Talia wasn't sure exactly what reaction she'd expected from the big human, but what she got wasn't even close. He stood straighter, all pretense of guard gone, and smiled broadly. "She does?" He looked at Talia, and she could feel herself blushing fiercely. "You do?"

Her heart pounding, feeling as if she'd bitten off way more than she could handle but not daring to back down, she replied, "Yes. You want me. I have the feeling you're not the kind of man who would express that kind of interest in a woman and not really want to please her." She smiled and added softly, "You blush too easily to be out for a quick romp in the hay."

"More likely he blushes because he knows he can't please you as I can." Dykstra crossed his arms.

"Pleasure is a relative term. You pleased me before, but I need more. You know what I want."

"You won't get it from him." Dykstra gave her a look that promised he meant what he said.

"And I'm obviously not getting it from you."

They stared at each other for several moments before Dykstra moved, seemingly suddenly indifferent, to sit on the small couch. "Go ahead." He waved at Talia and Jakx. "Do whatever you want. Please her, Jakx. See if you can give her what she thinks she needs."

Jakx looked like he wanted to be anywhere but with the two of them. In fact, he started backing toward the door, but Talia wasn't about to let him get away. She was being challenged. She was never one to back down from a challenge.

Without another thought, she flung herself at Jakx and fused her mouth to his.

Chapter Six

Dykstra clenched his fists tightly. She was bluffing. She knew as well as he did she belonged to him. Dykstra resolved to sit there and watch her try and pretend otherwise no matter how much it irked him. The beast in him roared for freedom, wanted to claim his mate. The man in him knew they both deserved to be happy. The only way that would happen was if they both knew they could coexist together in harmony.

Unfortunately, harmony couldn't exist while she had her tongue down Jakx's throat. He hated Jakx for getting the attention of *his* woman.

At first, Jakx merely stood there, his hands on Talia's hips, pushing her away, but after a few of her insistent-looking kisses, it was a hopeless cause. Dykstra knew how he felt. She was intoxicating. So innocent, yet eager. Dykstra hadn't smelled another's mark on her, and it infuriated him that he was allowing his best friend to mark her now.

But he would not interfere. If this was what she wanted -- if Jakx was what she wanted -- then he wouldn't stand in her way. Except he didn't intend to let her do it easily. If she was going to screw another man, she'd have to do it with him watching.

Which, at the moment, it looked like she didn't have a problem doing, and neither did Jakx.

The two embraced and kissed as if their lives depended on it, as if they craved each other and no one else. Dykstra could feel the beast within him rising. It took great effort not to shift to lion form and destroy Jakx. Two things stopped him. Jakx was his best friend. If he killed the other man, Dykstra knew he'd never forgive himself. And, worse, Talia would forever see him as a monster.

So he watched. Their moans and grunts of passion echoed softly in the tiny room around them. Jakx had slipped his hand underneath Talia's shirt and had his hand on

her bare back. Talia's fingers were tangled in Jakx's short blond hair as she kissed him and dove her tongue into his mouth.

Dykstra remembered the feel of her silken tongue on his. Soft, yet demanding. Her kisses had intoxicated him as surely as they must be doing to Jakx.

Talia's hands left Jakx's hair and grabbed his shirttail. With one swift motion, she pulled it up and over his head. She snaked her hands up his hair-dusted chest and around his neck, pressing open-mouthed kisses to his lips once again before Jakx whipped her own shirt over her head. Her small, pert breasts pressed against Jakx as he pulled her back to his kisses once again and ran his hands up and down the silky expanse of her back.

Both of them were breathing hard now. Jakx's face and neck were flushed in his excitement, and Dykstra could see the bulge in his pants when he and Talia pulled away briefly. Talia's cheeks were slightly pink, but she wasn't making the noises she had when Dykstra had been in Jakx's position.

Dykstra narrowed his eyes. She wasn't enjoying this. Why was she doing it when she knew it infuriated him?

Carefully, so as not to startle either of them, he stood and removed his shirt. Dykstra came behind Talia and gently rested his hands on her hips, gradually moving closer until he was pressed against her back, and kissed the juncture of her neck and shoulder.

She gasped and broke away from Jakx, looking from him to Dykstra. He didn't take his lips from her neck, but looked at Jakx. He met lust, but also resignation, in the other man's eyes. He nodded at Dykstra, and they both returned their attention to the woman sandwiched between them.

Talia still had one arm around Jakx's neck, but the other now gripped Dykstra's ass, squeezing and kneading it almost convulsively. She gasped and whimpered with every movement against her body, coming beautifully, sexually alive.

Jakx dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around her waist, putting his mouth in perfect alignment with her breasts as he latched on to one. Talia let go a small

scream and tangled both hands back in Jakx's hair, leaning her head against Dykstra's chest.

Her hair felt like spun silk against his chest, and her cries were the loveliest music. She smelled of clean sweat and the soap she'd used to bathe. His mouth watered, wanting more of her, needing to take her for his own. He felt like a green cub. A boy who'd never experienced the pleasure a woman's touch could bring. True, a Lionsblood didn't actually have sex with a woman until he was ready to mate and produce cubs of his own, but there were many forms of the sexual act they did indulge in. At the moment, Dykstra felt like he'd never even touched a woman, much less sampled her pleasures. The time he'd already spent exploring Talia's body might never have happened at all.

Impatient now, Dykstra bent to pull Talia's pants down her hips to expose her long, seemingly never-ending legs. He nudged her leg so she stepped out of her pants smoothly.

Talia stood naked between them, her body responding to each touch, though Dykstra thought she reacted more freely since he'd joined her and Jakx. For his friend's part, Jakx was breathing hard, seemingly happy to share the woman as long as he got a taste. Dykstra suspected Jakx had known he wouldn't have Talia. Even now, the Lionsblood in Dykstra wanted to warn the man off, but it wasn't his choice. Talia was in control of this.

Completely and utterly.

* * *

There it was again. That feeling of euphoria she experienced every time Dykstra touched her. Jakx added to the wonderful feeling, but as much as she really liked the other man, her main concern was that Dykstra not leave her.

Dykstra ground his growing erection into the cheeks of her ass through his pants. She wanted to strip him naked as the men had stripped her. Jakx's touches, though not as enflaming as Dykstra's, were arousing, indeed, and she longed to return the favor. Even now he'd forsaken her breasts and continued venturing down her body.

Jakx shouldered his way between her legs and latched onto her pussy with a greedy mouth. He plunged his tongue inside her, and her knees failed. Dykstra supported her by gripping her breasts, his arms underneath hers. She clutched his wrists and leaned back against his body. Jakx then hooked her legs over his shoulders and stood, bridging her body between him and Dykstra.

She heard herself scream, though she was barely aware of it. She hooked her ankles around Jakx's head to hold him more securely to her. Her ass rested in his big hands, and she felt as stable as if she lay on her back on a bed.

Using Jakx's massive shoulders and back as leverage, she dug her heels in and rocked her hips so that her clit slid over Jakx's mouth, creating wonderful sensations that shot through her just like the cold had once done. The pleasure permeated her body until she tingled all over. She wanted to spread her legs and beg one of them to fill her, but the position didn't allow for it.

One of Jakx's hands left her butt, and one blunt-tipped finger slid into her cunt. Talia's world narrowed to that place. Her breath came in short gasps and she wanted to scream, but the ability seemed to elude her. All she could do was hang there between them and feel. The orgasm washed over her in a wave of pleasure. Her whole body pulsed and tingled in seemingly endless contractions.

When it finally subsided, Talia was lowered gently to the floor. Her knees were so weak she had to hold on to Dykstra to stay upright. She looked at Jakx and smiled, but couldn't form words. The pleasure she'd experienced with him was wonderful indeed, but she was sure it wouldn't have been as wonderful if Dykstra hadn't been there. Before he'd joined them, it had felt...

Different. Not necessarily bad or awkward, but not as important. Like part of her was missing from the scene. What Jakx did to her was wonderful, but not like the all-consuming pleasure she'd experienced with Dykstra. There was no way she could convey that to him without it sounding insulting, so she thanked him the only way she could. She sank to her knees, pulled his cock free of his pants, and took it between her lips.

"Sweet One Above!" Jakx gritted out, sounding strained.

"Suck him, Talia." Dykstra sounded as tense as Jakx. Talia looked out of the corner of her eye at the big Lionsblood. She didn't take Jakx out of her mouth, but eyed Dykstra as she slid up and down Jakx's shaft. "That's it." Dykstra stood so close to her she couldn't help but reach out and run her hand over the bulge in the front of his pants. "Suck him off."

She fumbled with Dykstra's breeches until she pulled his cock free. She dimly registered his grunt of approval before pulling him closer to her, turning her head and engulfing the large, purple head of his cock in her mouth.

From one to the other she went, sucking and slurping, unable to get enough of either of them. Vaguely, she thought to be embarrassed at what she was doing -- even isolated as she'd been, she knew it wasn't usual for a woman to have multiple partners in one session -- but she couldn't. One man she loved, the other she liked and respected even in the short time she'd known him. Jakx had put himself between her and Dykstra more than once, proving his character. Also, Dykstra called the other man "friend." She got the feeling he didn't do that often. He hadn't referred to anyone else in the colony as such.

Back and forth she went. From Jakx to Dykstra. Over and over, she did her best to please them both, using their grunts and sighs as encouragement. She'd never before done anything remotely like this, but she'd never been one to question herself. She knew the men would guide her, let her know what they liked.

Dykstra's breathing changed after a while, and when she turned to him this time, he gripped her hair tightly and wouldn't let her move back to Jakx.

"Oh, yeah, Talia. Oh, yeah!" He grunted in time with his thrusts, plunging deeper and deeper down her throat until Talia was afraid she couldn't take any more. With a loud roar, Dykstra exploded inside her mouth. Surprised, she almost gagged, but once she had control, she swallowed greedily. She *had* to take all of him. *Needed* it like she'd never needed anything in her life. She gripped his thighs as she swallowed and milked him with her mouth until his seed quit coming.

She looked up at Dykstra's face. His eyes were tightly closed, and sweat glistened over his chest. He looked supremely satisfied. She smiled and turned her attention back to Jakx.

And was very surprised when Dykstra knelt beside her in front of the other man.

* * *

"What?" Jakx pulled back slightly, his ears turning red now to go with his neck and face.

"You want to come?" Dykstra looked up at him, an intense look on his face.

"Are you kidding?" Jakx's eyebrows almost disappeared into his hairline, he raised them so high.

"Then you'll come in *my* mouth."

"Dykstra, I don't know about that." Jakx made no move to offer himself to Dykstra. "We're friends, but you know I'm straight as an arrow. I don't fancy men."

"Neither do I. But you're not marking my woman."

"So I'm 'marking' you?" Jakx suddenly broke into a cocky grin. "Does that mean I'm taking you as my mate?"

Dykstra snorted. "Hardly. Men cannot take men as mates among Lionsblood," he explained. "We've already got a strong, close relationship by choice. This will only strengthen it."

Dykstra had never offered this to another man. He tried to tell himself the only reason he did it now was to repay Jakx's kindness in not only offering to protect Talia, but for helping him get into this position to begin with. Dykstra had no doubt he would never have had the opportunity to touch Talia in any manner had Jakx not been caught up in this.

At first, Dykstra thought Jakx would refuse, but he looked at Talia, and something in her face must have changed his mind. Without a word, Jakx took a step forward and bounced his heavy cock on Dykstra's lips.

Dykstra opened his mouth to receive him, taking half his shaft down his throat in one easy slide. Closing his lips around it, he pulled hard on the backstroke. Jakx hissed and staggered forward once, bracing himself on Dykstra's shoulder.

Talia stood and wrapped her arms around Jakx's neck. When he turned to look at her helplessly, she kissed him passionately. His cock jumped in Dykstra's mouth, and Dykstra started sucking in earnest now.

Jakx couldn't last long. His cock was hard as the rock surrounding them. Dykstra felt Jakx swell slightly and braced himself. With a grunt and a jerk, Jakx shot his load into Dykstra's mouth. Dykstra swallowed almost convulsively, reveling in the pleasure he'd given his friend, proud of Talia for realizing what the other man needed. Hoping against hope she did it for that reason and not because she loved the man as Dykstra loved her.

Great Ones Above! This was complicated. His entire being screamed at him to claim her, but he couldn't. Not until he knew she would be the helpmate he needed. He simply couldn't leave these people he'd protected for so long because his chosen mate didn't like it here. He had to know she was as committed to them as he was.

Once Jakx had completely finished, he hugged Talia fiercely. "You'll always be special to me, woman. You may never be mine, but I'll never forget this or your part in it." He smiled at her and Dykstra as he fastened his breeches. "A truly unique experience, my friend."

"Truly."

With another nod to Talia, Jakx left them.

Neither spoke for several moments. When the silence was finally broken, it was Talia who did so.

"Why?" she asked, shrugging back into her clothes before curling her legs beneath her on the couch. "Why did all this happen?"

Dykstra sighed. "I need you, Talia."

She rolled her eyes. "I've been practically begging you to take me! What is it with you? Am I -- a human -- not good enough for you?"

He sat next to her and gripped her shoulders tightly. "You are a Lionsmate, Talia. Marked at birth. You should have been raised with the Pride, but something happened for you to end up in a slave camp. You're perfect for me, but it takes more than a pretty mark and the heart of a lion. I want not only a mother for my cubs, but someone who can work side by side with me. My goals and dreams don't necessarily have to be yours, but we both have to be able to respect the other and help when necessary. My life's work is this colony, Talia. Can you help me here?"

"Of course. I thought we'd already decided that."

"Yes, but it's not been put into action by either of us yet. And I have no idea what you want to do. Do you have something you need to work toward to make your life more important than simply existing?"

"You know where I came from, Dykstra. There are many things in a place like this I could find to keep me occupied."

"Then we'll start tomorrow." Dykstra gave her what he hoped was an encouraging smile. "Get some sleep."

She snorted. "Yeah. Sure. Whatever."

He started to question her, but she stood, turned her back on him and went to her bedroom. "You know the way out."

Dykstra shook his head slightly, saddened and frustrated, and more than a little afraid he was being too damned picky. She didn't deserve to be dangled on a chain like this. She needed to be loved. She'd obviously had a hard life, and he was adding to the misery.

Tomorrow. They'd start fresh tomorrow.

Chapter Seven

But tomorrow didn't bring anything close to a fresh start. Talia avoided him, busying herself with exploring the caverns. She had asked innumerable questions of everyone in the various sections. Asking what they were doing, why they were doing it, and if they were happy with what they did.

In the weeks that followed, she visited every person in the cave. Spoke with everyone -- even the children. She seemed to take special attention with the young, ensuring they had warm clothing and enough food as well as appropriate caregivers. The few children in the colony without parents or stable adult companions soon found their home with her. This fact, more than any other, intrigued Dykstra.

He should have expected this. She'd undoubtedly seen many horrible things happen to children at the grubby farm he'd bought her from. She was a true Lionsmate. She not only had the genetic background, but the mindset as well. She was intensely interested in the well-being of the cubs under her protection. Just as any good mother would be.

The realization of what he was witnessing hit him with the force of the most brutal freeze imaginable. She'd taken this colony under her protection. She might not lead it, she might not have authority as she or anyone else perceived it, but she'd effectively taken responsibility for the thing most important to her. The children.

It was what he'd been waiting for. She'd both taken control of her life and found something within herself, and her surroundings, that completed her.

Unfortunately, it might be too late for him. Talia hadn't spoken to him since the day he'd left her room after the explosive and sinfully erotic encounter with her and Jakx. On the other hand, she and his best friend had developed a close platonic relationship. That made his face twitch. He didn't like it, but realized it was inevitable

after that evening. Dykstra just wished she'd give him the same attention. Her shunning of him was so complete, he'd barely seen her. Others in the community had kept him informed -- almost gleefully -- of her friendship with his best friend.

Such was the nature of a Lionsblood. They were very much like the great cats they were named for, as temperamental as they were tactile. A Lionsmate, while not necessarily a Lionsblood, had many of those same characteristics. If angry at someone, she could either lash out or -- in Talia's case -- ignore them until sufficient penance had been paid. His job was to figure out what she wanted and how he would provide it.

This was something he'd spent many hours contemplating. He was on his way from his favorite place -- an area the ancients of Earth had called "Frozen Niagara" -- when he was met by an anxious looking party of five men.

"Dykstra! You must come quick!" one of them bellowed as he ran down the passageway. "There's no time to lose -- we can't delay!"

"What's happened?" Dykstra went with them without question as they turned and started back.

"We've spent too long already trying to find you. The boys may be dead already."

Dykstra's heart began to pound. There were many dangers inside the cavern, though he tried to minimize as many of them as he could. The worst was the cold. Just being outside the cave for an extended period of time could be lethal, even if the children didn't get caught in a freeze. With temperatures dropping to one hundred degrees below zero every night, it was next to impossible for anyone to survive outside for any length of time, especially if they weren't properly dressed. To think that a child might be outside was positively terrifying.

"Who is it? Which children?"

"It's Bryson and Gray. Bry ran off, and Gray went looking for him. Dreama went to her mother who came to us." The man who spoke was out of breath, as if he'd run a long way. Dykstra knew the three children well.

"Which exit?" Dykstra knew he needed to move fast.

"The southeast exit. It's been maybe thirty minutes since they left."

Too long. It was too long. The children could be frozen by now. Without another word, Dykstra changed into his alternate form and dashed off in the direction the men had indicated. Time was of the essence. If he failed to find them very quickly, both boys were dead.

* * *

Something was happening. Shouts grew louder outside her dwelling, and Talia knew she had to investigate. She opened the door just as Dykstra raced past, grabbing furs and thermal blankets as he went. He didn't say anything, neither answering nor acknowledging the many questions shouted his way. She wasn't exactly sure what was going on, but the one thing she did catch was that two of the colony's children were in danger.

She saw Jakx headed toward the massive door Dykstra had just disappeared through. On a whim, she snagged him when he would have run past her. "What's happening?"

Jakx looked startled at first, but quickly recovered and pried her hands gently from his arm. "Dykstra must find the two children who have wandered outside. He's the only one who can tolerate the cold."

"If no other adults can go with him, what makes any of you think the children have survived?" Her voice was louder than it needed to be for Jakx to hear her, but she intended for everyone to know the question.

Several people turned her way, but only one had the audacity to speak. "They can survive for a time, but we can't risk getting stuck in the cold. It would be very difficult to pass the night in such temperatures." Talia recognized the hydroponics gardener. He was a most influential member of the community. "Dykstra is much more suited to search for the children than one of us." He sounded so certain, so condescending and offended that she'd asked such a question, Talia would have let it drop except for one thing. These were *children*. The most vulnerable of any of them.

"So, you're willing to not only put Dykstra in danger, but leave your children on the surface longer than strictly necessary because you're *afraid*?" She knew her eyebrows were climbing higher into her hairline with each word, but she couldn't stop once she'd started. "Select the strongest among you. Pair up. *Everyone* search for the two, and you can find them much faster than if Dykstra goes alone."

"No. He's much more adept at hunting and able to survive in the cold for far longer than any of us. He will find the children." The same man spoke for the group, and it enraged Talia that no one contradicted him.

She looked to the small woman weeping in the corner, clutching a young girl. A man stood with them, trying to comfort them. He looked at Talia for a moment but said nothing. She seized the opportunity to take this farther.

"Are the boys yours?"

The woman nodded, and her mate nuzzled the top of her head with his chin.

"Wouldn't you rather be out there looking for them than relying on one man alone?" Talia's anger was mounting. She imagined her own children exposed on the surface and knew nothing short of violent physical restraint could keep her from combing the surface herself, as well as begging anyone and everyone to help as much as they could.

"Dykstra will find them," the man said as he kissed the top of his wife's head. "It is his duty."

"Maybe so, but he's only one man." Talia willed the man to understand what she meant. "He can't rescue both children by himself. Even a mighty Lionsblood would need to take one child at a time, should he find them."

"No. Dykstra will do it on his own. It's always been that way." This from the same farmer. It was painfully obvious no one had any intention of looking for the children outside the cave. They were fully content to leave it to Dykstra.

"You're risking the lives of the children." She was rapidly losing patience. "Afraid or not, this isn't a situation where one man alone can be successful. You must

form several search parties and spread out all around the area." How *dare* these people expect anyone, even a Lionsblood, to simply wave his hand and make everything OK?

The hydroponics farmer cut her off at this point. "We all work hard, newcomer! No one gets a free ride." He frowned now. "Dykstra sees to that. The least he can do is take care of the more dangerous aspects of this colony." There were several assents voiced, which only fueled Talia's anger.

"Why? Why should he have to take all the risks? Even to the point of saving the lives of anyone and everyone here with no one to help? That's more than any one person should have to bear. No wonder he bought me to help out. If you think what you do here is hard labor, you should try moving to one of the human farms. Even the free camps make this place look like a plush paradise. Here there's plenty of food, everyone has warm clothing, and even troublemakers are allowed to voice their opinions without being carted off to a slave farm."

"You have no idea what you're talking about." A woman in the crowd snorted. "We live here because no one knows how far the wasteland around the cave goes. Dykstra says it extends many days' ride underground, and we know no one would survive such a journey without his special earth ship, which, by the way, he won't let anyone borrow. If he dies, so be it." The woman's statement appeared to make several in the crowd uncomfortable because, though no one said anything, there were several people who shuffled their feet and looked anywhere but at Talia or the outspoken woman.

"And would you know how to operate it if he died?" There was silence as Talia looked around the small room. Time was pressing. She didn't have time to argue with people who obviously didn't want to listen. "Have any of you even asked him to take you somewhere else?"

Again, silence.

Talia nodded slowly. "That's what I thought." Turning on her heel, she poked her head inside her dwelling, grabbed a few fur layers, dressed, and headed in the direction Dykstra had gone. She wasn't the least bit surprised to find Jakx at her side.

“It’s safer to travel in pairs, as you said.” He smiled at her, pride on his face.
“Ready?”
“Lead the way.”

Chapter Eight

Snow and icy rain whipped around him, stinging his eyes and every bit of exposed flesh. Dykstra had found his young charges, but couldn't risk moving them in the storm. They had sought shelter in an overhanging rock cave that went into the earth only shallowly. With the weather changing rapidly, they were definitely in danger of getting caught in a freeze. If that happened, Dykstra would be lucky to get back to the cave alive, but the children would be dead in a matter of seconds.

He'd made a fire and wrapped them in the furs he'd taken with him, but they shivered almost uncontrollably. He needed desperately to get them back to the cave. It was only about a quarter of a mile away, but even that short distance was too far. He could possibly take one and come back for the other, but that scenario was totally unthinkable. He simply would not leave either one of them alone for any length of time.

The setting sun was almost totally obscured by the gathering clouds, but what light managed to penetrate the misty sky did so in great red-orange shafts. There were maybe an hour of daylight left. After that, the chances the boys would be alive in the morning dropped dramatically.

Despair weighed on his heart like an eight-ton ice boulder. He was going to lose them if he didn't act soon.

"We have to move." He finally broke the silence and turned to the children. "It will be hard to carry you both, but I don't feel there's much other choice. Do you think you can hang on to me?" He asked the question as gently as he could, trying not to alarm them.

"W-w-we'll t-t-try," the older Bryson managed through his chattering teeth. Gray only nodded. Dykstra was more concerned about the younger brother, but both were likely to perish before the night was out.

"Fifteen minutes, boys. Just hang on for fifteen minutes and we'll be back in the caves and all will be well." Both of them nodded, but neither attempted to speak. They were trembling violently now, and Dykstra knew they'd never be able to hold on to him. He closed his eyes and turned away, hiding his anguish as best he could.

When he opened his eyes, he thought he saw two figures moving toward him. His heart rate sped up and he clenched his fists, claws springing from his fingertips, readying him for battle if necessary. Who could be out in this kind of weather?

He recognized the figures of Jakx and Talia only seconds before they entered the rock cave and pulled their hoods from their heads. Jakx untied a rope from his waist and fastened it to one of the many stalagmites lining the rim of the rock cave. If possible, Dykstra's heart beat even harder.

Talia! What was she doing?

"Why have you brought her, Jakx?" He hissed at them both. "You've not only sealed your own fate, but hers as well." Dykstra tried to keep his voice down so the children wouldn't hear him.

Talia didn't stop when Jakx did, next to Dykstra, but went straight to the two boys huddled together by the fire and dropped to her knees, talking quietly to them. She shrugged out of one fur covering and put it around the two boys.

"Rub your chest," he heard her say to them in the warm, quiet voice she reserved only for talking to children in the caverns. "It's more important to keep the center of your body warm than your arms."

"It wasn't my idea," Jakx was saying. Dykstra had almost missed his friend's explanation, so intent was he on Talia. "You know I would have come by myself, but she beat me to it." Jakx looked out at the blowing snow. There was almost a whiteout now. They would have to move or risk being caught in the freeze that was sure to follow the storm. "And she definitely opened my eyes to the way things are, Dykstra." Jakx gripped Dykstra's arm in a warm, firm grip. "We expect too much from you, my friend, and that's something I intend to see changed."

Dykstra blinked and would have said something to his friend about it being his duty, but Talia had urged the children away from the fire and toward the entrance. She'd built the fire into a blazing beacon that would at least allow them to find their way back should they need to. The woman had more survival skills than he'd have thought possible in anyone other than a Lionsblood.

"We have to get going," she said, looking directly at him. "You carry Bryson -- Jakx and I can take turns carrying Gray. Go as fast as you can, Dykstra. We've marked the way with the rope. If you run beside it, it will lead you straight to the cave."

He raised his eyebrows. "I'm impressed."

Talia gave him an annoyed look. "Don't be impressed, be gone!" she snapped. "We don't have much time. Once you've gotten Bryson safely inside, come back along the rope for Gray."

"Sounds like a good plan." Dykstra almost smiled at the ease with which he took orders from someone not a Lionsblood. Sometimes, though, it was worse to argue with a Lionsmate than it was to argue with a full Lionsblood. Especially if the Lionsmate in question happened to be your own mate. He did have one question, though. "Shouldn't I take Gray first? He's smaller and likely to have a shorter amount of time than Bryson."

"No." Talia didn't bat an eyelash, but he noticed the edges of her mouth tighten as she pressed them together before she spoke again. "You can move swiftly with either boy, but Jakx and I must have the lighter load to make the best time. It will benefit both children, even if Bryson gets to safety first."

"Good point." Dykstra opened the front of his fur coat and did the same for Bryson. Putting the boy against his bared chest, with the help of both Talia and Jakx he wrapped the fur around both of them, making sure no part of the child's skin was exposed. "Keep your face close to my chest and hold me as tightly as you can, Bry." He tried to keep his voice as calm and reassuring as he could, but he was absolutely terrified of the boy freezing to death before he could reach the cave. When he felt Bryson nod, he gave Talia one last meaningful look. "When this is over, we need to talk."

She smiled at him for the first time since their argument, and he knew he could do this. He had to. For her as much as for Bryson. Talia had the utmost confidence in him, and he would not let her down.

"Yes," she said. "We do. We will. Now, get that child to safety."

"Ready?" Dykstra asked Bryson, who nodded once again. "Hang on tightly. Here we go." And he headed for the caves as fast as he could.

* * *

Talia bound Gray next to Jakx's skin the same way Dykstra had done with Bryson. The boy was pressed snugly against Jakx's chest and both of them were bound tightly together with the remaining fur. Talia had only one fur left for herself, but she was determined to struggle through. They would make it. They had to.

They set off at a much slower pace than Dykstra had, though pushing themselves as quickly as they could in the blinding snow, ice and frigid wind. As she'd feared, the whiteout was getting worse with each second, and if it hadn't been for the rope they'd strung behind them, there was no doubt they'd have been lost no more than twenty paces outside the rock cave.

On and on they pushed for what seemed like hours. In reality, Talia knew it couldn't have been nearly that long. Maybe half an hour. Still, in the extreme cold, every second was agonizing. The small amounts of exposed skin stung with cold. Her body ached. Gray whimpered every now and then, and she could hear Jakx speaking to him in his soothing voice, encouraging him to stay awake, asking questions the boy automatically answered.

Finally, like an avenging angel descending from heaven, Dykstra emerged from the snow and ice not five paces in front of them. Without a word, he scooped up Gray -- Jakx and all -- and sprinted faster than anyone carrying a full-grown man and a child had a right to. Within seconds, he was gone from sight. Talia cheered inside herself. Gray would make it. Both he and Jakx were safe.

All thanks to Dykstra. The man was truly miraculous.

She was almost to the entrance of the cave when Dykstra appeared again. When he would have scooped her up and made a run for it, she refused his help. Not because she didn't want it, but because it was important to her to enter that cave under her own power -- no matter how hard. She had to prove to the people there were humans who could indeed survive outside when necessary. Long enough to help one of their own.

They had almost reached the cave, were maybe one hundred yards out, when the storm hit in full fury. Talia heard herself scream as Dykstra pulled her against him and rolled them under a shallow rock hanging.

Deep freeze! The words kept echoing in her mind. They couldn't survive. Not out in the open. They'd be lucky to survive if they were in the shallow parts of the cave.

"I'm sorry," Dykstra whispered. She almost didn't hear him over the rising wind. "I can't get us inside."

"It's not your fault." She hid her face next to the warmth of his chest. "You shouldn't have tried to come after me, though. Your first priority is keeping the community safe. You can't do that if you're dead."

He growled slightly, something she felt more than heard. He fisted a hand in her hair and pulled her head back so she had to look at him. "Talia, my first priority has been, and always will be, you. You're my mate. Even if it turned out that you hated life here, that you hated me for being in a place so similar to the one you left, I'd still never find another woman I could love so completely as I do you."

The shock of his words sent tingles throughout her body and brought tears to her eyes she struggled to blink back. "This place is nothing like the farm you bought me from. You're too good to these people."

"In some ways, maybe. But it's not their fault they need help just to survive. I've tried to give them as much independence as possible."

"They've come to rely on it, rely on you to keep them safe, and don't even try to help themselves."

"They grow their own food. Distribute it themselves. They're fairly self-sufficient."

The wind was blowing so hard now, snow started to cover them. It bit into her flesh where the furs didn't cover her, and she buried her face against his chest again.

"I love you, Talia. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I'm sorry I didn't trust you enough to claim you in the way of my people."

"No!" Talia's heart raced. He was saying goodbye. "Not yet. You tell me after the storm is over and we get back to the cave. Not now."

"Talia, love, I'm not going to make it back. I'm too weak from the other two trips, and my lungs are partially frozen from the exertion. The weather is working against us. I could make it back myself, but you'll freeze, and I can't protect you out in the open."

"Then let's go." She was desperate to get him moving. The seemingly invincible Lionsblood was giving up, injured almost beyond being able to help himself. "I don't need protecting. We're not far from the cave. This rock formation is practically just outside the vent we attached the rope to. I can make it that far."

"Talia, I --"

"Here they are!" She didn't recognize the voice, but the intent was clear. Help had arrived. "They need the furs so we can get them inside before they freeze. Who has the heat compressor?"

A group of four men surrounded them, pulling them apart and wrapping them in furs lined with thin thermal generators. She craned her neck to look around and over the two men tending to her to see the other two strapping a large mask on Dykstra's face. He groaned and staggered forward, clutching his chest.

"Son of a bitch," he gasped, clawing at his face. "Get this bloody thing off!"

"It's warming your lungs. It hurts, but you'll breathe easier soon. Deep breaths."

"You're hurting him!" Talia screamed. "You'll fry his lungs!"

"Calm down, Talia." Jakx was at her side now, covering her face with an identical mask. "This method is tried and true. Dykstra has used it with us several times when we've been exposed too long to the cold air. He'll be fine."

She took a breath of the warm air and her lungs burned. Not with the heat, but with thawing. She felt like she'd run too far for too long. Her chest ached with the effort of breathing and she, too, tried to pull off the mask, but Jakx wouldn't let her.

"Just keep breathing deeply. The pain will subside soon. See? Dykstra is already recovering."

Indeed, the Lionsblood seemed to be in much less distress, but she could tell just by the way he stood that he was tired beyond endurance.

"We've got to get back to the cave, Jakx. He's pushed himself too hard. He won't make it long."

"We're leaving now. You first."

Talia started to protest, but Dykstra shook his head and pointed out into the snow. Knowing it was pointless to argue, she let Jakx lead the way. It had been almost unbearably cold before, but now it was positively miserable. Wind almost knocked her down, and she stumbled forward, head down. More than once, strong hands urged her to take the rope she and Jakx had so carefully added before they'd left to find Dykstra. Every step was impossible, but she did it. When she hesitated, she was pushed forward.

She desperately wanted to know where Dykstra was, and if he was making steady progress, but she couldn't turn her head. Every time she tried, the man behind her tapped the back of her head gently, just enough to let her know she needed to keep moving. *Don't look back.*

As if materializing from thin air, the vent leading to the cave appeared in front of her. Talia stumbled and fell against the heavy door. Immediately, it was pushed open by several people. She could hear voices, but couldn't make out what they said over the wind. Then she was pulled roughly inside, passed from hand to hand, person to person, until she sat with her back to a rock wall. Her furs were removed and replaced by a heated blanket. She tried to rise, but kept being pushed gently back.

Dykstra collapsed next to her before she even knew he had entered the cave. He turned his head when Jakx removed his mask.

"You OK?" She didn't even care she sounded so worried. She knew how close they both had come to death, especially Dykstra.

He nodded and reached for her. She allowed him to put his arm around her shoulders and pull her to him. Talia rested her head on his shoulder, needing to be close to him, yet not wanting to show such a private display of affection with so many eyes on them.

They got only a brief moment to enjoy each other's touch before they were both pulled to their feet and marched farther into the cavern. Dykstra grabbed her hand and refused to let go. Talia smiled. Once she was sure he had no lingering effects from his time outside, they had unfinished business.

People around them were chattering urgently, moving everyone to the living areas deep within the cave. When Talia tried to veer Dykstra toward the medical room, he growled and tugged her toward his dwelling.

"Later," he snapped.

"Dykstra, you're hurt. You need medical attention," Talia protested, but didn't pull against him.

"I said *later!* Inside." He threw open the door to his dwelling and practically slung Talia inside, retaining his death grip on her hand. He followed her, slammed the door shut, and threw her none too gently against it, pressing against her body. "This time, I'm not letting you go until you're mine." His growl sent a wicked thrill through her. This was it.

"Shut up and fuck me."

Chapter Nine

She gripped his hair and pulled his mouth to hers. They plunged their tongues into each other's mouths, and Talia fought him for dominance. She wanted to submit to him, do whatever he wanted her to do, but that just didn't seem right somehow. Instead, she dueled with him, fighting for supremacy.

Dykstra's roar filled the chamber and surely echoed off the cavern walls miles away. Talia's ears rang, and she gasped when he spun her around and clamped his teeth down hard at the juncture of her neck and shoulder. He ground his cock into her lower back and ass.

With several smooth motions, Dykstra ripped the coverings from her, then himself, and resumed his position, pressing into her from behind. The thick shaft sandwiched between them was warm and hard, and he slid it against her several times.

"You are mine, Talia. No others. I cannot promise you an easy life, but I pledge you my heart, my body, and my soul. Will you accept it?"

The words were painfully formal. Talia knew her answer would change her life forever, and she welcomed it. Still, she couldn't let him have her that easily.

"If I say yes, will you fuck me already?" She managed to sound more grouchy than she felt. She desperately wanted him inside her. Now. No matter the cost. But the truth was, she couldn't imagine her life without the big Lionsblood at her side. She'd have accepted him no matter what. They belonged together and she was tired of being apart from him.

"Most certainly," he replied mildly enough, but Talia heard an underlying edge. "Just know that I'll hold you to it, even if you don't mean it."

"Good," she growled. "Now get the fuck on with it already."

Dykstra angled his cock to slide between her spread legs to lubricate himself on the considerable moisture leaking from her cunt. Then, he glided back and forth several times. When he plunged himself inside her, they both screamed. It was the heaven he knew it would be. His cock drove deep inside Talia's pussy and she welcomed him, embraced him, drove him completely and utterly insane.

Insane. He was insane. That had to be it; otherwise, he'd never have chosen his first time with Talia to be standing with her mashed against the door to his dwelling. He'd have laid her gently on the bed and taken his time with her.

Yeah. Right.

This had been building since the second he saw her in that farm, waiting to be bought by any man willing to spend credits on her. Then there were the subsequent near misses, so to speak. It was inevitable their first mating be violent and hurried.

He slammed himself up and into her hard. Over and over he pumped his hips, gripping hers tightly. He bent his head once more to her shoulder and bit down, holding her still for his invasion.

For her part, Talia tried to move with him, to aid him any way she could, but he held her fast. All she could do was stand there and let him fuck her as he wished. He was a large man, in every way, and his cock burned slightly where it pushed into her virgin cunt. Strange -- it hadn't hurt much when he'd broken through her virgin's barrier. True, there had been a slight twinge of pain, but she'd attributed that to his size. She supposed she'd been wanting this for so long, and she was so aroused by their struggle for dominance, her body didn't care if it had just been invaded. She needed release, and this would give it to her.

Talia felt him swell inside her. His shaft was harder and thicker, and his movements sped up. Dykstra reached around her with one hand and found her clit already slick with their combined juices. He flicked it with one fingernail.

Talia screamed as her orgasm exploded over her. Stars floated through her vision, even when she shut her eyes, head thrown back against Dykstra's shoulder.

Dimly, she felt Dykstra's seed spilling into her grasping cunt and reveled at the hot feel of him, knowing there was at least a chance she'd conceive after this first union.

And still Dykstra didn't stop.

When Talia's legs quivered, he gripped both her thighs under her knees and lifted her into a sitting position so that she rested against his chest, his cock still buried snugly inside her.

Dykstra walked to the bed and set her down. Talia immediately got to her knees, Dykstra never leaving her cunt. He nudged her farther onto the bed and followed her, giving a little thrust of his hips every now and then.

When they were in the center of the bed -- Talia's ass in the air and her head resting on her crossed arms -- Dykstra began moving again. He gripped her waist as he plunged into her, their flesh slapping loudly in a staccato cadence. Dykstra's breathing came in grunts and moans, while Talia didn't even try to stifle her cries and screams. The room filled with the sounds of their lovemaking, and neither cared if anyone heard them.

Dykstra slapped her sharply on one ass cheek, and Talia gave a surprised yelp. "That's for leaving the cave earlier." He sounded strained and uncomfortable. He slapped her again in the same spot, her ass beginning to glow a vibrant pink. Talia's yelp was louder this time. "That's for insisting I leave you unprotected in the elements outside the cave." He spanked her ass a third time, much harder this time, and she cried out yet again. "And that is for making me wait so blasted long to fuck you. Do not deny me again."

Talia looked over her shoulder at him and hissed. "It was the other way around, you bastard. I've been begging you to fuck me since the first time you touched me, so don't give me that shit."

He slapped her ass again, and again, and again. Each time in the same spot and each time a little harder than the last. Talia's ass was now a bright red, and she actually arched into his swats. She was enjoying herself as much as he was.

"Shut up!" he barked at her. "Just fuck. That's all you need to do right now, Talia. Fuck."

He pushed her roughly away from him long enough to flip her to her back, cover her with his own larger body, and plunge himself back inside her pussy. He kissed her roughly then, nipping at her lips and fucking her mouth with his tongue. All the while his hips pumped against her with bruising force.

Talia wrapped her legs around his hips and met him thrust for thrust. She was getting sore, but the discomfort reminded her she was alive when she should probably be dead. All that mattered at that moment was giving and receiving pleasure from the body of this extraordinary man.

She felt him swelling inside her again as her own orgasm built and threatened to overtake her. Dykstra didn't slow his pace, but pulled back from her to look directly into her eyes.

"I love you, Talia. With all my heart, I love you."

She didn't hesitate this time, knowing the timing would never be better. "I love you, too. I love you, too," she breathed, almost chanting it, needing to repeat it over and over so he didn't mistake her.

His grunts and moans grew louder, as did her cries, until both built into screams and shouts loud and violent. Talia felt him spill his cum inside her once again, and she squeezed his hips tighter, but he forced her legs as far apart as they would go, grinding himself as deep as the position allowed. Nothing would part them now -- she knew he wouldn't let it.

When he lifted his head to look at her, she smiled as warmly as she could. "That was definitely worth the wait."

He chuckled and dipped his head to nuzzle her neck, sending shivers down her body. "I agree. That was my plan all along."

She pushed at him playfully, but he wouldn't budge. "I doubt that, but it definitely worked. Planned or not."

"Good. Because I don't think I can hold out to do it again." He chuckled as he rolled off her, slipping out of her but pulling her against him.

Talia pulled a fur blanket from the foot of the bed over them and laid her head on Dykstra's chest. "I don't want you to. I want to do this every day and every night and sometimes after lunch." She sighed, happier than she could ever remember being.

"I can't believe all you've accomplished since you came here, Talia." Dykstra kissed the top of her head and she smiled, contented.

"Oh really? What did I do?"

"You brought these people together into a community. Before you came, they'd have never risked their lives to rescue me or anyone else. You saw how they reacted when the children left the cave. They came to me for help and never even thought of getting a party together and doing it themselves. Not that I minded -- I expect them to come to me for the dangerous problems. Jakx told me how you gave them a lecture before the two of you left to help me get the children to safety."

Talia blushed. "He told you that?"

"Of course. We don't keep secrets from each other." He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "Just remember that if you decide you want to seduce him again."

She laughed. "Don't worry. I'd never do anything with him unless you were along and permitted it."

A slow grin spread across Dykstra's face. "Oh, really. I might have to think about that one."

Talia shivered at the sudden rush of lust that enveloped her at his sensual words. "You do that." Talia rolled on top of him, straddling him and rubbing her still-wet pussy over his rapidly stiffening cock. "In the meantime, I think I'll seduce you."

Dykstra shifted slightly, and when Talia glided down, she impaled herself on his dick. "Sounds like a plan to me."

So she did.

Marteeka Karland

Marteeka Karland is an ordinary woman with an overactive imagination. Thank God for a computer, or tape recorder, or pen and paper... whatever she can create a story with! Her husband sometimes thinks she's nuts and asks her every time she gets frustrated with her latest deadline, "Is it really worth all this?" And every time, she answers, "HELL YES!"

Apart from writing, Marteeka's alter ego has worked in the Emergency Room for more years than she'll admit. She has a loving husband, who still chuckles when he tells a buddy exactly what that Goddess of Water T-shirt is all about, and a son who is blissfully ignorant to anything other than he's not allowed to "push buttons" on Mommy's computer.

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