

The book cover features a woman with long, dark, curly hair lying on her back on a grey, textured surface. She is wearing a dark, corset-style top with lacing across the back and light blue, curved, horn-like accessories on her shoulders. Her arms are raised, and she is holding a dark object in her right hand. A man with long dark hair and a beard is positioned behind her, looking over her shoulder. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Changeling Press

# Lionsbane

MAR TEEKA KARLAND

**Lionsbane**  
**Marteeka Karland**

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## Lionsbane Marteeka Karland

In a world where humans are one of the last links in the food chain, they depend on other races and breeds to protect them. But what happens when humans are left on their own?

Jayla's entire family was murdered when she was ten. Now, eight years later, she's on the hunt for the Lionsblood she believes is responsible. Avoiding the farms that "protect" most of the planet's five hundred thousand human inhabitants, Jayla has taught herself to hunt and kill as efficiently as any human possibly could. What she lacks in acute senses, she makes up for in cunning, fearlessness, and keen intelligence.

Kane has followed and protected Jayla since the day she lost her parents and siblings. He knows she believes him responsible, and though he arrived too late to help her family, he was the one who fought off the rogue clan before they killed her, too. Not intending ever to reveal himself to her, Kane suddenly finds himself in need of her help.

It's up to her now. Will Jayla save his life, or live up to the name she has given herself? This is her one chance to truly become the *Lionsbane*.

## Chapter One

Icy wind sliced through Jayla like a Tyberian laser blade. It chilled her bones, but she didn't move. She crouched, perfectly still and downwind, watching the pack of Lionsblood feasting on their latest victim. She'd tracked this pack for the better part of eight years, though admittedly she was only now ready to face them.

Her legs were cramped, the frigid air stung her eyes, and she had to clamp her jaws together to keep her teeth from chattering. Her heated respirator was the only thing keeping her lungs from freezing in the cold. Still, she waited in total silence. Not moving. Hardly daring to breathe. She waited for them to finish gorging. They'd be the most vulnerable then. Full and sleepy. Might seem unfair, but there were four of them, one of her, and she was human. She had to have as much of an advantage as she possibly could.

Sure enough, once their meal was done, the pack moved deeper into the cave for the night. Carefully, Jayla moved to the mouth of the cave and waited until she heard their soft snores. One of them would remain on the watch. He was the one she had to eliminate first.

Knife in hand, Jayla spotted her prey and circled behind him. The Lionsblood was in man form, but he was absolutely huge. Luck was with her and he crouched near the cave opening. Jayla lunged high, gripping his hair and pulling his head back. With one vicious swipe, her blade bit deep and cut both trachea and spinal cord. Her prey didn't make a sound, but the others would smell blood, know something was wrong, and attack.

A deafening roar from behind her signaled the others were on her. Jayla whipped a second knife from her belt and flipped it around so the blade pointed back at her as she gripped the handle. In that position, it would act as an extension of her

forearm. With her weaker left hand she slashed with the inverted blade while she stabbed with her right. Two quick blossoms of blood spurted from the second Lionsblood's throat, and her stab went through muscle, scraped rib bone, and punctured his heart. Her knife stuck on a rib, but she didn't waste time trying to free it. She moved on to the third Lionsblood.

A look of pure rage dominated his features. Though Jayla needed to concentrate on him, her gaze darted around trying to find the fourth. Lionsblood were lightning quick, and Jayla almost lost her head because of her divided attention. The bastard lunged with a vicious swipe, his claws missing her by mere inches. She thought he had her but instead of the bite of his claws, she felt the wind from his hand.

Fortunately, he thought he had her, too, because he over-rotated his swing. As his back turned to her for a moment, Jayla stabbed him once, neatly between his ribs. Her blade withdrew smoothly, and she sank it in again, this time with more precise results. Just left of his spine. Lumbar region. The abdominal aorta was in the same place in Lionsblood as it was for any other humanoid. When she withdrew her blade, blood pulsed out of the wound, quickly leaving a puddle.

The Lionsblood staggered forward, blood streaming from his back. He was dead -- his body just hadn't figured it out yet.

Jayla looked for the fourth foe but didn't see him immediately. She backed up slightly and scanned the area. In the darkest corner, she saw a shadow crumple to the floor. A second shadow moved toward her into the dim lighting, his hands outstretched. His features were concealed underneath a black cloak, his hood pulled securely over his head so that his face was deep inside. He wore dark gloves to cover his hands, and dark sleeves hugged his forearms. She could see nothing of him. It was almost as if he were some kind of apparition.

"I'm not a threat." His low, raspy voice carried no warmth to it. Just like the whole of the land, he was cold and calculating. Jayla could tell that from the casual way he'd let the fourth Lionsblood drop to the floor. That, and she had a feeling this man was as dangerous as any Lionsblood.

"The hell you're not." She raised her blood-coated weapon and crouched, ready to spring if necessary.

"Not to you." He didn't seem to be a man of wasted words.

"Where did you come from? Were you their captive?" Lionsblood generally killed quickly and didn't play with their food, but it wasn't unheard of for them to take multiple captives if they were pressed for food.

"I followed you."

That surprised her. She hadn't been aware of anyone following her, and she found it difficult to believe any human could completely slip her notice.

"I doubt that. I may not have the instincts and senses of Lionsblood or vampires, but I've been out here for three days tracking these four. I'm sure I would have noticed a shadow."

"You've followed them for three days, but you spent two days before that at Shiffly's Bar, and got into a heated argument with another human at the Mammoths a week before that some fifty clicks to the north."

Jayla blinked. He could have killed her at any time, and she'd never have known he was around until it was too late. "Why?"

"You needed help." His voice was less raspy now. It seemed to gain strength the more he spoke, as if he hadn't used it in a very long time. Still, he didn't offer much information.

"How would you know what I needed? I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"Of that, I have no doubt." He broke in when she would have continued, though her rant had more to do with her being human rather than the more obvious conclusion of her being female. "Not just any human could have taken on four Lionsblood and come out of the encounter alive, let alone been victorious. You are truly an accomplished warrior, human or Lionsblood." He let his hood fall back. "Man or woman."

His dark hair was shaggy and shot through with gray and silver. His eyes were dual emerald and gold, and the longer Jayla looked at him, the more she had trouble deciding if he was human or...

Comprehension and dread filled Jayla. "Lionsblood," she whispered.

She raised her knife and lunged. As if he were fending off a child, he caught her wrist before she could make contact with him. Other than that, he didn't move.

"I am no threat to you, Jayla," he said again, not taking his eyes from her. Slowly, deliberately, he turned her hand over -- not trying to remove the knife from her hand -- and Jayla looked at her forearm. A long, deep gash sliced her skin. She hadn't even realized she'd been wounded. It was deep, and now that he'd pointed it out, it began to sting.

She'd just registered the pain when he bent to her, never taking his eyes from hers, and made a slow, careful swipe with his tongue along the laceration. It felt like he had spilled salt into her broken flesh and was grinding it into the open wound, but he gripped her wrist firmly and would not let her pull away.

Jayla gasped. Her arm burned now, almost unbearably so. She had to grit her teeth together to keep from crying out. As soon as he raised his head from her arm, the pain eased. She jerked away, confused. What had just happened? She looked at her arm. It was still red and angry-looking and stung slightly, but the wound was closed.

The Lionsblood staggered backward a couple of steps and fell to one knee. Jayla glanced over his body until she spotted the dripping blood on his raised inner thigh.

"How badly?" She pointed at his leg when she spoke and immediately dropped her hand. He was the enemy. Why did she care?

"Are you injured anywhere else?" He'd simply ignored her question. Normally, it would have irritated her, but all she saw was genuine concern when she looked into his eyes. She bit back the sharp reply that tried to form automatically.

"I'm fine. Please tell me how badly you're injured." No matter her best efforts, irritation laced her words and she knew it. But she wasn't sorry.



“Bad enough.” He pressed his hand over the wound to stem the flow, but seconds later blood seeped between his fingers.

She wanted to just leave, but he’d helped her. Probably saved her life, and she was woman enough to admit it. It was only fair she helped him. She’d keep her guard up, though. If she had to kill him later, she wouldn’t lose a moment’s rest.

Taking a strip from the lining of her cloak and a thick piece of the lining from his cloak, Jayla pressed the bulky pad against the general area where the blood flowed. Normally, she’d want to actually see his wound, but night was setting, and it would soon be too cold for them to survive this close to the surface with their coverings intact, let alone with a big gaping hole in the leg of his pants. He’d freeze to death. Working quickly, she took the strip of her own cloak and tied the makeshift bandage down as tightly as she could.

“I can use the handle of my knife to crank it down in a tourniquet and tie it in place, but if I do, you’ll likely lose your leg.”

“Do it. My anatomy can compensate longer than a human’s. This cavern intersects the Mammoths. If we hurry, we can make it there before any permanent damage occurs.”

Jayla hesitated a moment before removing her blade from the handle. She ripped another strip of cloth from her cloak and tied it a couple of inches above his wound. Sticking the knife handle underneath the new bandage, she twisted the knife. He winced at the first twist. Undoubtedly, it hurt cranking down the strip of cloth to tighten it around his thigh. The more she twisted, the tighter it got. Jayla took it slowly, watching the flow of blood carefully. She didn’t want to make it tighter than strictly necessary. The more blood flow was restricted, the more likely he was to lose his leg.

When the blood flow began to slow, she stopped. As she was tying the knife handle securely to his thigh, she sighed and did something she knew she shouldn’t do. She made it personal.

“What’s your name, Lionsblood?”

He looked at her for a long moment, and Jayla thought maybe he wouldn't answer. Then he shrugged and spoke. "Kane. I am a Lionsblood Protector."

"And why are you following me?" She finished up and sat back, looking at him. He'd no doubt lie, but she had to know why he was tailing her. She could very well be in danger.

Instead of answering her, he pointed to her injured arm. "How long have you borne that scar?"

Jayla resisted the urge to rub her arm where the burn scar on her forearm now tingled and itched. Though it was very close to her recent injury, she was sure it was the scar burning now, not her wound. "As long as I can remember. My mother said she'd accidentally burned me when I was a baby, but she never talked about it, even when I asked her."

Kane looked at her a long while, and Jayla fidgeted under his intense gaze. "We should go. Though we are in a cave system within the Mammoths, we are still far away from human civilization. If I am to continue to follow you, I must have use of both my legs." Despite his injury, his lips twitched, his words apparently an attempt at humor.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't simply leave you here to die." Jayla was starting to feel trapped. There was something more here than she could see, and she didn't like being in the dark, especially when she got the feeling this man was the key to her future. With any other Lionsblood, she'd never even have asked the question. She'd simply leave and not look back. But this one...

"Because --" his voice was strained as he tried to stand, bracing one hand on the cave wall, "-- you need to help me as much as I've needed to help you. You are a Lionsmate, Jayla, and I intend to make you mine."

## Chapter Two

"That's a filthy *lie!*" Jayla backed away from him until she hit the wall. She wanted to attack, beat him into submission -- in his weakened condition she could probably do it, too. "Look around you! I'm no Lionsmate." She spat the hated word as viciously as she could. "I am a *Lionsbane!*"

"Of that, there can be no doubt, but the mark on your arm names you a Lionsmate." Kane's voice was weak, and Jayla knew, despite his strength and resilience, his body could only compensate for the blood loss for so long. If he was to live, he needed help soon.

And she'd be damned if she knew why she cared.

She shook herself, trying to bring her focus back to the task at hand. He'd helped her. For that she'd help him. She'd take him to someone who could heal him, then she'd leave. He'd be alive. For now. If she ever met him again, she'd kill him.

"Come on," she said. She had to resist the urge to extend her hand and help him to his feet. She wouldn't touch him voluntarily. "You won't last the hour if we don't get going. Night will be here soon, and we must get deeper into the caves."

He grunted his assent and struggled to his feet. Even in his weakened state, he towered over her and was obviously the most powerful creature she'd ever seen. Even the other Lionsblood she'd faced couldn't compare to him. It sent a shiver of fear down her spine. He could easily crush her. Could have many times over the weeks he'd followed her. Did he truly think she'd fall willingly into his bed just because he said she should?

Lionsmate, indeed.

They moved deeper and deeper into the caves, the only protection they had other than their coverings. About forty-five minutes into their trek, Kane collapsed.

"Get your ass up, Lionsblood. We're not ready to stop." Jayla knew he was most likely weak from blood loss but she refused to think he couldn't go on. And she refused to support his weight. That would put her in physical contact with him and make her vulnerable to physical attack.

He didn't answer her but did struggle to his feet, bracing his hands on the cave wall. Two steps later, he was back on his knees. The look he gave her was one of a man who knew he was dying.

"What do I do?" Jayla wanted to leave him. Only the strong survived the frozen earth. If Kane couldn't make it, she wasn't obligated to help. But something in her wouldn't let her give up that easily. She tried to convince herself it was in repayment of her debt to him so she'd be free of him.

"Whatever you need to." His eyes closed, and he sighed. "Get yourself to safety."

"I can't leave you."

He opened his eyes, and their dual-colored gaze pierced her soul. "Only an hour ago you would have."

"I owe you a debt."

"And I owe you my life. If you leave me, I die and we're even."

"You're not making any sense. You're delusional from shock." She grabbed him under his shoulders and tried to lift him, but he was dead weight, and she couldn't budge him.

"Jayla --" He gripped her hand weakly. "-- I was there when your family was slaughtered. As a protector, I was sent to kill the rogue Lionsblood before they harmed more humans. I didn't get there in time, and you were the only one I was able to save. I failed. For that, my life is yours to do with as you please."

He was giving her his last confession. This was too much. Too much for Jayla to contemplate. She'd spent so many years of her life believing in what she'd seen. She'd actually *seen* Lionsblood kill her mother. Beyond that, the rest of the scene was a blur, but she'd never questioned that Lionsblood were her enemy. All of them. This one included.

She shook herself. Later. She'd work it out later. It was too much to think about right now. She had to get him help. Once she knew Kane was being cared for, she'd leave, and this time she'd make sure he couldn't follow.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?" Jayla didn't know what else to say.

"I have no wish to die. I only want you to be safe, and you won't be until you get deeper into the cave. We're still too close to the surface." Was he for real? Jayla had never met anyone who was truly as selfless as this Lionsblood seemed to be. There had to be a hidden agenda.

"Well, I can't leave you here. I worked too hard to keep you from bleeding to death to leave you here and exposed to the elements. So, unless you want me to freeze to death with you, you're going to have to tell me what to do to help you. If I support you, can you walk?"

"As a Lionsmate you have the ability to close my wound, but I fear the wound is too deep and the damage too great for you to do much good."

"Just fucking tell me, Lionsblood! You're wasting precious time." Jayla was beyond niceties. If they didn't hurry, there was a very real possibility they'd die in a few short hours.

"Your saliva. Just as mine closed your wound. Lionsblood have healing saliva. You're not a full Lionsblood, but there should be enough of our blood in your veins to do the job."

His words were starting to slur now, and his eyelids were drooping. He was rambling, and she knew it. Most likely, he didn't know what he was saying. Still, she didn't see what it could hurt. He'd be dead soon anyway.

Carefully, she removed the bandage over his wound and tried to wipe as much of the drying blood away as she could. The gaping flesh made her wince, and once again there was that pang of something soft toward this Lionsblood. She hated these new feelings. They made her nervous, and she didn't trust them. She'd always relied on her gut, and this was seriously screwing with her judgment.

No way she was licking this nasty mess like he'd done to her. Jayla might feel she owed a debt to Kane, but there was only so much she was willing to do.

Pulling open the wound as much as she dared, she spat into it and immediately cringed. It just didn't seem sanitary, and every time she probed his wound, Kane groaned softly. Trying not to think about it too much, she spat once more into the opened wound as precisely as she could. This time, when her saliva hit a spot deep into the open flesh, it bubbled and foamed. At first she was alarmed. She tried to put the bandage back over it, but Kane stayed her hand.

"No. Your saliva is doing what it's supposed to. Once more, and I won't ask anything else of you."

"You do realize this is the weirdest thing I've ever done."

He smiled weakly. "You're saving my life. Given all you've been through and all you've ever believed about my people, I think that is probably stranger than you spitting on my wounds."

Despite her misgivings, Jayla grinned. "You're right. Don't get used to it though. It won't happen again."

He didn't say anything, only nodded. His breathing was rapid and shallow, and the pulse at his throat looked weak and thready. Jayla wondered how long he had before he passed out.

She spat once more, and his wound was covered with the frothy foam. Looking at him questioningly she asked, "How come my cut didn't foam like that when you licked my arm?"

"Because --" He seemed to be struggling to speak. "-- yours wasn't as deep or --" He took another breath. "-- as poisoned as mine."

Jayla's eyes snapped to Kane's. "Poisoned?"

"His blade."

"Why the hell didn't you say so before, you stupid man! I thought he'd gotten you with his claws." Jayla dug in her pocket and pulled out a tiny capsule. Once she'd broken it, she sprinkled the sand-colored powder inside and over his wound before

undoing her pants and digging into them for the water pouch strapped to her inner thigh against her skin. She waited until Kane's sharp intake of air before she dribbled the water over the powder, then covered it with the bandage.

"What did you do?" Kane gasped out his question. Jayla knew from experience how excruciating the antidote was.

"Hurts like a son of a bitch, huh?" She tied down the bandage tightly, then helped him to his feet. He was weak and almost dead weight. It took all her strength, but she finally got him going. She practically dragged him deeper into the cave. Neither of them wasted energy on conversation, and Jayla concentrated on the sound of Kane's breathing. She was close to the lower occupation of the Mammoths. If she was lucky, she'd find someone who didn't hate her.

She noticed the shift in Kane's body movement a moment before he completely collapsed. Unprepared, she fell under his weight. She grunted as his big body covered her smaller one. For a moment, she lay there in shock. He was pale and covered in sweat. Jayla pushed him with all her might and rolled them over so he lay on his back and she was beside him.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I'm dizzy."

"You've lost a lot of blood, and that antidote was a general remedy. It works on most any poison, but we need to make sure you get rid of all of it or you could lose your leg." She took the opportunity to check his wound while they weren't moving. It hadn't closed, but it was no longer bleeding and actually looked a few days old instead of fresh.

Knowing she needed to remove the tourniquet as soon as possible, she loosened it carefully. When no blood flowed, she continued to loosen it until it was off.

"There," she breathed. "We'll have to keep a close eye on it but the bleeding has stopped for now and the wound looks good. Can you continue?"

"Just give me a minute." He was breathing hard, but he looked much better. Jayla knew it was most likely the change in body position. He'd lost too much blood to keep going for long. If they didn't find someone soon, he would be unable to continue.

She had to give it to him, though, he didn't give up. There was a time when she thought he might lie there and die, but when she'd made the decision not to leave him, he'd gone with her. What had changed him?

"Can you continue?"

He looked at her then. There was a wildness in his eyes that sent shivers down her spine and did funny things to her insides. Wounded he might be, but this was still a man who took what he wanted.

"For you, I can do anything."

That caught her off guard. It also did all kinds of horrible things to her stomach. She got that "uh oh" feeling she always got when she knew she was in trouble.

"Oh, no, big boy. You do it for yourself. Once I get you cared for, I'm gone. Besides --" She turned and headed back down the cave. "-- they hate me here. And the feeling's mutual."

"They only hate you because you tried to kill their protector." She glanced back. He was standing now. Leaning against the cave wall, but standing. "One day you'll realize not all Lionsblood are evil." He walked to her, a lion on the prowl. "One day very soon."

Jayla wanted to reply, but the words stuck in her throat. He loomed over her, a powerful creature instead of a wounded beast. All she could do was back away -- which she hated. It was an act of self-preservation, pure and simple. For a brief moment, she could actually see herself locked in a viciously erotic embrace with the Lionsblood, Kane.

Lust swamped her for the first time in her life, and she didn't know what to do. She was frozen, looking at Kane and imagining what it would be like if he simply took her and fucked her silly. Made her his.

"Ah, I see you feel it, too." His voice was a mere whisper, but it seemed to echo loudly in the vast emptiness of the huge cavern. "You want me as much as I want you. Don't you?"



She wanted to answer in the negative, wanted to slap him or, worse, finish the job the poisonous blade hadn't. But she couldn't. Instead she found herself nodding.

Neither of them moved for several seconds, each sizing the other up.

"You're still the enemy, Kane. I might be attracted to you, but I won't give in." Jayla sounded desperate even to herself, and her voice shook. But she meant it.

"No, I'm not." He smiled. "And yes, you will."

## Chapter Three

Kane was sick. Sick and hurt. This was worse than any injury he'd ever had, and it should have done him in. He had actually been ready to die, but she wouldn't let him. That was when he realized he might just have a chance to claim Jayla as he'd longed to do for a very long time. He hadn't known she was a Lionsmate, but it made sense.

He'd actually thought she might have been a child her parents had taken in and adopted. Her father had been a Lionsblood, but he'd been under the impression her mother was, too. He'd always wondered why they lived separate from the nearest Lionsblood clan. If her mother had been human, that would actually explain why. His own clan always kept an eye out for loners. Generally, they were apart because one mate was not a Lionsblood, and they were afraid the clan collective wouldn't accept them. When that happened, there was generally good reason, and Kane had suspected fanatics from the nearby clan were responsible for the death of Jayla's family.

She snarled at him and stomped off deeper into the cave, not looking back to see if he followed. Every step pained him terribly, but he put one foot in front of the other for her.

She needed him. Even if she didn't want to admit it. He could see the conflict on her face, not just about her obvious lust for him, either. She'd pushed him to get up and go on. She hadn't given up even when she had to have known it was next to hopeless. He'd probably be dead now if she hadn't had that antidote.

The thought sobered him. She'd obviously run into Lionsblood using poisoned blades before. It boiled his blood to think that Jayla had put herself in such danger. She was a warrior to be sure, but she was also a special woman.

Kane had thought her beautiful the moment he'd seen her, but over the weeks and months he'd followed her closely, he'd learned about the woman underneath her

beauty. She was driven, but lonely. Her sleek, finely tuned body hid a wealth of pain he should never have allowed to happen. For that, he would likely never forgive himself.

Jayla kept the pace just beyond what he was able to match, and he was sure she did it on purpose. She was keeping her distance, a sign he was getting to her. He smiled. Too damned bad he wasn't in any shape to follow her more closely. He'd love to see how far he could push her today. He needed her to start thinking about him as a man and not the Lionsblood who hadn't been strong enough to save her family.

Kane could easily imagine her in the throes of passion. Her dark hair would be unbound and free, her dark eyes wide in her passion. He wondered if she'd want to be on top and control their lovemaking, or on the bottom, letting him pleasure her as he willed.

She was definitely a top.

"Stop looking at me like that!" Jayla had stopped to wait for him to catch up and had obviously caught him leering at her ass.

"Like what?" He was trying to put on a good front, but he was getting weaker by the minute.

Jayla turned away again. "You're thinking about things that *will* get you killed, Lionsblood."

Kane couldn't help the slight grin. "Maybe. Then again, maybe I'm the better warrior."

She rounded on him then, poking him in the chest with her finger as they stood mere inches apart. "You have absolutely no idea what I'm capable of when pushed. Besides, in the state you're in, a child could defeat you."

"I know exactly what you're capable of, Jayla. You have been my entire world since the day your family was murdered. I know you are a very formidable warrior." He grinned and leaned close to her. "But even weak as I am, I'm better."

Jayla snarled at him and lunged low. Kane had been expecting the move and sidestepped her. He grabbed her wrist as she plowed forward and spun her around. She landed with her arm pulled firmly across her body and her back flush with Kane's

chest. His other arm closed around her chest, pinning her arms in place. "I'm a Lionsblood, Jayla. I protect what's mine. To the death."

She stilled then. Her breathing came in little rapid gasps and Kane smelled her combined fear and arousal. Her trembling gave away her inability to adapt to this new situation. She had gone into this expecting to hate him, but Kane knew she was finding a connection.

It was inevitable. She was a Lionsmate, and her blood called out to his. Maybe they belonged together, maybe they didn't, but she needed to be with her own kind. The brand on her arm meant that one of her parents was a Lionsblood. Kane remembered fighting beside her father for a brief moment before the older man had been taken down. The two of them had fought for Jayla. And when they had failed, Kane had sworn his life and his services as protector to keep Jayla safe.

At first, he'd made sure she was placed in a free human farm while he licked his wounds and tried to find a place for her to be truly safe. Then she'd left and gone out on her own. He'd shadowed her ever since, leaving her alone for only brief periods of time when he knew she could take care of herself with reasonable certainty.

As the years wore on, he'd come to think of Jayla as his. Seeing that mark on her forearm, he now knew why. The fates had seen to it they were brought together. Who was he to question what was set in front of him?

"Let me go." Her voice was quiet, and she tried to make it deadly, but it came out shaky, and Kane knew she'd need her space. She needed to think about what he'd said and what she'd felt. Kane knew her like he knew himself. He hadn't been lying when he'd said his world had revolved around her. He'd studied her. Learned her patterns. At times, he could even tell what she was planning on doing just by the way she held her body.

"For now," he said as he released her. "But accept the fact you will return to me, and when that happens, I'll make you mine."

Kane had been feeling stronger, though he still needed a healer. It wouldn't be long before he couldn't continue, and his little show of strength with Jayla had severely

decreased the chances he had of making it all the way to the main community of the Mammoths. Dykstra was their protector. He and his Lionsmate, Talia. It was Talia whom Jayla had argued with, and it had been exceedingly heated. Of course, Kane couldn't blame the Lionsmate. Jayla had attacked Dykstra. Kane had missed the first part of that little tiff, but a catfight had almost ensued.

She stayed ahead of him after their encounter. She never went far, but she made sure to stay well out of reach. It wasn't long before he heard Jayla. "He's just behind me. He's full of bravado, but I don't think he can go on much farther. Will you help him?"

Kane could hear the edge in Jayla's voice. He could tell she didn't like asking for help. Probably something to do with the aforementioned catfight.

"Of course." The timber was masculine. Deep. He recognized the second voice as Dykstra's. Despite his injuries and weakness, Kane's territorial instincts rose to the surface and almost overwhelmed him. He partially shifted into his Lionsblood form before he could stop himself. The energy used in the change left him weakened almost beyond endurance, and he fell to one knee again. It didn't matter that he knew the man Jayla spoke to. His woman was getting help from another man. Help for him. Shame and self-loathing swamped him. He wasn't starting off very well with her.

Before Kane could regain his feet, Dykstra approached him, followed closely by Jayla. Thank the gods it was Dykstra. They had been friends as cubs and had seen each other through some tough times. It was still hard to accept help from another man while struggling with a way to claim the woman he knew in his bones was meant for him.

"Kane!" Jayla pushed past Dykstra and to his side. She gripped his upper arm and tried to pull him to his feet. Kane tried to follow her lead, but this time, his body simply wasn't able. Still, the worry on her face made his heart swell. She didn't even realize she was worried about him.

"I'm OK." He gripped the hand she had on his arm. "Just give me a minute."

"OK, hell! You're weak as a newborn baby. Dykstra." She raised her head, and Kane cringed at the look she gave his Lionsblood brother. "Help him stand."

Dykstra merely raised an eyebrow before approaching Kane slowly. No doubt he took exception to the high-handed way Jayla ordered him around. "You realize," Dykstra said to Kane, "my woman won't be happy to see this one."

"Yeah." Kane looked at him and grinned. "But what can you do? She's only here because I forced her. If I hadn't been injured, we'd be in a private little cove doing..." He winked at Jayla. "Doing other things."

"Not bloody likely," Jayla spat. Then she turned and stomped up the darkened passage toward the settlement Dykstra protected.

"I saw her mark when she attacked me on her last visit. Have you claimed her?" Dykstra spoke in a low voice, thankfully. The last thing Kane wanted to do was force the issue on Jayla.

Kane shook his head. "I'll be lucky if she ever gets to where she can accept my friendship. Her hatred of the Lionsblood runs deep. I'm hoping my injury will give her a chance to see how close you and Talia are and how the members of your community rely on the two of you. That is, if she doesn't leave first."

"She can't leave." Dykstra hefted him to his feet, and Kane groaned. The wound on his thigh burned and throbbed with maddening intensity. "That pack the two of you killed is just one group. There are at least three more I suspect of picking off my people. No one is allowed to wander the outer caverns alone. It's too dangerous. Besides, there's a storm raging now the likes of which I've never seen. Shiff says the radar shows no signs of it letting up, either." He urged Kane to walk. "Even if you had managed to get your hellcat into a cave for some loving, you'd likely have frozen to death."

Every step was a struggle for Kane. He wanted to banter with his long-time friend if for no other reason than to relieve some of the worry he saw in the other man's face, but he didn't have the strength. It took everything he had to put one foot in front of the other. No doubt Dykstra had reason for his worry.

After a while Kane managed to speak, and his words were as heavy as his heart. "It would be cruel for the Fates to lead me to my Lionsmate only to let me die the same eve."

"You're not going to die," Dykstra growled. "You're too stubborn for that."

"Maybe it's no less than I deserve. It is because I failed in my task that she hates me, anyway."

"You're still holding on to an impossible mission, Kane. The council knew you couldn't do it by yourself. They told you as much before you left. There were simply too many of them and too few protectors. You were lucky to come out of it alive, let alone save any of the humans."

Kane focused on the back of the woman he loved. Regret and pain filled him. When he spoke next, it was more to himself than to Dykstra. "Tell that to Jayla."

\* \* \*

She walked through the cave, not really paying attention to where she was going. Jayla had a horrible time coming to terms with this new Lionsblood. She couldn't say she was drawn unnaturally to Kane -- she'd have been attracted to him no matter what species he was -- but she didn't trust her attraction. It was hard to tell if it was because he was a Lionsblood or because she didn't really trust anyone.

Kane was everything she loved in a man. Powerful, thoughtful, and intelligent, he called to everything feminine inside her. She also knew he was deadly. Admittedly, her encounters with Lionsblood had been limited. Yes, she'd sought them out, but the only major encounters she'd had were with the pack that had killed her family, the four she'd faced today, and Kane. Shiffley, the owner of the bar Kane had seen her in, was a halfbreed, though he retained many properties of his Lionsblood heritage, so she supposed she should try to factor his kindness to humans into her equation. Still, she'd thought of Lionsblood as her enemy for so long, it was hard to change. Given the colony here in the Mammoths protected by Dykstra, Shiffley's kindness, and Kane's persistence in "helping" her, she had a lot to think about.

Jayla was so deep in thought, she didn't realize she'd wandered into the edge of the little colony inside the Mammoths until a rock hit her in the shoulder with a painful thud.

"What the --?" Immediately, she snapped her attention back to where it belonged and discovered several children looking at her with equal expressions of dislike and distrust, each carrying a small rock in hand.

"What are you doing back here?" A male child of no more than six stood a few feet away. His look was positively venomous. The others stood farther back, but there was no doubt they were ready to mob her should it be necessary.

"I --" Jayla was at a loss. This was the child she'd thought to save from the Lionsblood, Dykstra, before she'd realize Dykstra was only wrestling with the boy. "I brought you another Lionsblood, though he's hurt and needs help. I thought you might have use of him as a sparring partner when he's healed."

The boy, Galen, looked past her, then locked gazes with her again. "I don't see no Lionsblood. I just see you."

"Easy, Galen." Dykstra entered the passageway supporting -- dragging, rather -- a very weak, very pale Kane. "She's not here to hurt anyone."

"You want me to kick her butt, Dykstra? 'Cause I can."

"I know you can, big guy." Dykstra flashed the kid a smile but gave Jayla a look that wasn't so encouraging. "We need to get him to medical. I have some fairly advanced equipment down here, and I think we're going to need everything I've got."

Jayla immediately slung Kane's other arm over her shoulder and around her neck. "That, and a fair amount of luck. He's pale as the snow."

"Quickly. Down the passage. We're almost there." Dykstra sounded almost frantic. No doubt he was struggling as well. Even the mighty Lionsblood could only do so much. Dykstra had practically carried Kane most of the twenty-five clicks they'd come. Knowing how weak Kane was, she regretted leaving him to Dykstra alone.

"I'm sorry, Dykstra," she whispered. "I've let my pride override my good sense and my compassion." She looked at Kane's nearly lifeless form. He made eye contact with her and gave her a faint smile before his head fell down again. "If he dies, it's my fault."



"Just help me get him to medical. He's a Lionsblood and strong. With his Lionsmate this close, he'll pull through."

Jayla stiffened. "I'm not --"

"Yes, Jayla," Dykstra interjected emphatically, "you are. That mark on your arm names you as such. Given that you witnessed your entire family slaughtered by Lionsblood, and that you've made up your mind every Lionsblood is your enemy, I find it damned telling that you're helping Kane now."

Jayla had nothing to say to him. He was right.

Fifteen minutes later they stumbled into one of the best medical bays Jayla had ever seen. Even the vampire cities didn't have some of this kind of equipment.

When she gave Dykstra a quizzical look he grinned proudly. "I have a good income in the diamond mines. Most of the money goes here and for food stocks." He hefted Kane a few more steps inside. "Help me get him into the hyperlab. The virtual doctor can take it from there."

It took a few minutes to get him on the exam table and close the dome around his body from throat to knees. Dykstra pressed a few buttons, and lights came on around the dome showing every injury Kane had.

Kane opened his eyes and looked at Jayla. "Do not leave this cavern. It's too dangerous."

"I can take care of myself, Kane." She fidgeted a little as she tried to hold his gaze and couldn't. When her gaze dropped, she stared at her hand grasping his firmly. She knew she'd stay until Kane was better, but he didn't need to know that.

His eyes drooped shut, but he managed to speak one more time before he went into forced hibernation to heal. "Please, Jayla. Besides. I'd find you, and we'd just have to start over." His hand relaxed in hers but she still gripped his.

"I don't know what to do." She knew her whisper didn't reach him. He was already asleep. Still, she meant it. Jayla had never been more confused in her life. She'd always had this "thing" to do. Now she'd done it. And it wasn't what she'd thought it

would be. There was still this big gaping hole in her heart and she didn't know how to stop the pain.

She looked at Kane. His silver and black hair framed his face wildly. He was Lionsblood. Everything she thought she hated. With Kane, though, she'd found nothing but honor and a loyalty she didn't understand. He'd turned on his own kind to save her. It went against everything she'd ever believed. So did Dykstra.

In her experience, no one looked after humans unless they were getting something out of the deal. From what she'd seen in her earlier visit, neither of these men got anything except headaches. Dykstra had to deal with the day-to-day running of a colony of humans who expected him to fix all their problems -- which he usually did -- and Kane had almost given his life to save a woman who wanted him dead.

How screwed up was that?

Knowing it would be a while before Kane woke, Jayla headed out and into the main cavern area. Maybe she could find something to do while Kane healed. Maybe she could do some healing herself.

## Chapter Four

"Were it not for the fact that my Dykstra has taken you under his protection until your own mate awakens, I'd kill you." Dykstra's mate, Talia, leaned casually against the stone wall, her arms crossed. The woman was slight, but she had an air about her. She might not be a "leader," but there was no doubt she could command when necessary.

"Kane is not my mate, but I thank you for your restraint." Jayla had killed three Lionsblood only a few hours before, so she wasn't afraid of this woman, but she felt she owed her for attacking Dykstra the last time they met. "We didn't get to speak much... before."

"I had no interest in speaking to you, and I seriously doubt you felt any differently." Talia approached her then. Sizing her up.

"Probably not, but I didn't attack your mate randomly. I thought he was hurting the boy."

Talia blinked, seeming surprised. "Why on earth would you think that? Dykstra loves the children. He'd never hurt them."

"I didn't know that. All I knew was there was a Lionsblood baring his fangs and coming at a little boy looking as scary as almost anything I'd ever seen."

"They like to wrestle." Talia smiled. "They even get upset when Dykstra doesn't look the part. I suppose it's me who owes you the apology."

"Why not just call us even and start over?" Jayla stuck out her hand and prayed the other woman would accept it. It struck Jayla it truly mattered to her for Talia to put the past behind them. Was she going soft?

They stared at each other for a moment before Talia smiled and took her hand. "Well, I can't honestly say I haven't wanted to thump his skull a time or two. How could I blame you for wanting to?"

"I'm glad to see you two getting along." Dykstra entered the room and put his arms around Talia. She looked back and up at him, and her whole face lit up. What would it be like to have that much love for someone? Jayla's life had been painfully devoid of love since her parents and brother and sister had been killed so many years ago. She'd cut herself off from anyone and anything that might penetrate her heart after that. Now she wondered if it had been a wise idea.

Jayla turned away from their tender moment. It actually hurt to watch. Damn Kane to hell. Somehow, this had to be his fault. Why did he make her have these tender feelings? She'd protected herself for so long, not letting anyone inside. Now, she ached to have what Dykstra and Talia had.

She waited a few moments before asking, "Is there a place I can stay until the storm passes? I'm glad to help out while I'm here."

"Certainly. I'll take you." Talia gave her mate a final lingering kiss that promised more later before leading the way down the cavern.

The room she took Jayla to wasn't large or fancy -- in fact, it was positively tiny -- but it was private. More than anything, Jayla needed to be alone for a little while. Talia left her, saying she would find Jayla in the morning, and assign her a duty to perform until she deemed it necessary to leave.

"I'm good to start now. I know I'll have a place I can collect my thoughts later. That's all I need." Jayla raised her chin, not wanting to appear as if she was trying to get free passage.

"I won't hear of it," Talia said, shaking her head emphatically. "You've been through a lot today, and I can see the weariness in your face. You look like you have a lot to deal with tonight." She smiled warmly. "There are hot stones in the great room. Use the bucket by your fire pit. It won't make it terribly warm, but it will keep you more comfortable than if you had nothing. I hope you find some peace, Jayla." Talia smiled before leaving, closing the door softly behind her.

And Jayla was alone.

She walked over to the small bed in the corner of the room and collapsed on it. She was tired. More tired than she could ever remember being. She needed to do as Talia suggested, but she was so weary. Unbidden, her thoughts turned to Kane.

What would it be like to have him ravage her like his lust-filled gaze had promised he'd do? She shivered at the thought. He'd be an aggressive lover, to be sure. Her breasts were full and heavy as she lay there, and she couldn't help but knead them. Her nipples stabbed her palms, and her pussy clenched at the sexual touch of her own making.

Her breath came in little gasps, and her heart rate increased. Sweat covered her skin in a fine layer, giving her a little chill. Before she could think about what she was doing, she stuck one hand inside her pants, parted her lips and found her clit. She was wet and slick. Her fingers glided easily through her labia to find the opening of her cunt. Two fingers found their way inside her and she grazed her clit with her thumb.

Jayla couldn't help the cry that escaped. What would it feel like to have Kane's mouth on her? What would his tongue feel like dancing around her clit?

With that thought came the most intense orgasm of her life. She sucked in a breath, but couldn't scream, it was so powerful. Her muscles seemed to have seized as the spasms washed over her in wave after wonderful, glorious wave.

For a while, she lay there, her eyes wide and her mouth gaping. Nothing had ever affected her like this Lionsblood did. He had wrapped himself around her insides, and she seemed unable to get him out of her mind.

Or her heart.

Despite the earlier carnal feelings and emotions, she ground her teeth in determination. Two things concerned her at the moment. Who had made him her "protector," and how did she get rid of him? Did she really *want* rid of him?

He'd named her a Lionsmate, and perhaps she was. She'd vehemently denied it at first, but something inside her had awakened when he'd called her that.

*Lionsmate.*

The one person Jayla could talk to she was on uncertain footing with. Talia was nice enough, but it just didn't feel right. Besides, she got the feeling this was something she needed to figure out on her own. It was way too personal a topic to discuss with a stranger. She didn't want this. She just wanted to...

What?

She had no idea what she wanted. She'd dreamt about the demise of the ones who had massacred her family for so long, she'd never given any thought to what came next.

Jayla's chest tightened, and tears threatened to overflow her eyes. She hadn't cried in a very long time. Tears made her look weak, and weakness was something she absolutely could not afford. Enemies of her own making surrounded her. They may not be deadly, but they had the power to expel her from this haven, and during a surface storm that would be just as deadly as if they'd slit her throat. She had to be strong and stop wallowing in self-pity.

Well, she could start by getting the hot stones Talia mentioned. She located the fire pit carved shallowly into the floor and lined by a metal grate a few steps from her bed. Next to it was a bucket insulated with layers of thick, quilted cloth. She picked it up by the handle and headed out the door.

In the great room, a huge fire burned, vented up an old shaft that, presumably, rose all the way to the surface. Several men tended the fire, moving the stones on grates just above the base of the blaze. They situated them to distribute the heat evenly and to get the maximum use from them.

The men gave her a snort and a sneer, but gave her a few rocks. For the first time since she'd chosen the path of revenge, Jayla was unsure of herself. She knew she'd made a mistake with Dykstra, but she'd had a valid reason at the time. Apparently, seeing someone who'd once considered herself so very high and mighty brought to her knees by the very people she'd scorned pleased them on some level. Maybe it should.

She took the bucket of hot rocks with a muted “Thank you,” and hurried back to her room. After dumping them in the pit as carefully as possible to keep them close together, she curled up on her bed and stared at the faintly glowing granite.

“I take it you had a less than glorious evening after you accomplished your life’s mission.”

The gruff, raspy voice could only belong to Kane. Jayla’s heart rate quickened. She hadn’t expected to see him for several days at least.

“Why are you here? You should be in medical.” She started to sit up, but he sat next to her and stayed her with a hand on her shoulder.

“You wouldn’t promise to stay put, so I left as soon as my injuries became less than life threatening.” Not taking his eyes from her, he gently took the hand she’d pleased herself with earlier and slid two of her fingers into his mouth. His gaze was hot, but she could see the weariness there also.

Kane was here because he wanted her. He wanted her. As she looked at him, this time tears did fall from her eyes. “I hate you, Kane.” Her voice was shaky but she couldn’t find the energy to care. She was emotionally drained, physically exhausted. “I really hate you.”

“I know.” He grazed her cheek with the backs of his fingers. “But we’ll both get over it.”

He crawled behind her so that he spooned her body into his. She lay between him and their heat source but she could have sworn he was the source. His body was hot where he pressed against her, his arms the haven she’d never thought to find. When he pulled up the thick blankets and quilts to cover them both, Jayla finally let loose all the emotion she’d been holding back for years.

Kane held her while she sobbed. There was nothing else he could do. She had so much pain and heartache inside her it had to be released or it would destroy her. He said nothing, only stroked her hair and held her. If they were going to have any kind of a chance, she had to get this out.

After a while her crying quieted, and only the occasional snuffle moved her body. Kane kissed the back of her head. "Sleep now, sweetheart. Let me watch over you. Just this once."

"Don't leave me." Her whisper was broken and made Kane's chest hurt for her pain. "Please."

"I'll never leave you. Sleep. I'll be here when you wake."

Almost immediately, she stilled. Kane sighed and wrapped his arms more securely around her. She hadn't yet given herself to him wholly, but she'd willingly put her life in his hands, and that was good enough for him. In that moment, Kane gave his heart and life to Jayla. He had no doubt his body would belong to her soon, but he was willing to wait as long as it took. He'd waited this long. A few more days wouldn't hurt.

She was definitely worth the wait.



## Chapter Five

“You’re mine, Jayla. Never forget that.”

Kane urged her to lift her leg as he guided his cock into her pussy from behind. Jayla’s cunt throbbed and itched with the need for release as he slid easily inside her. He hooked her leg over his arm so she was completely open to his invading cock. Jayla wished she cared, but the pleasure was so intense she couldn’t muster the energy to do anything other than reach for her orgasm.

He moved swift and sure, wrapping his free hand around her, letting her head rest on his arm while he gripped her breast. He kneaded the fleshy globe and pinched the nipple none too gently.

Jayla gasped and tensed up. Kane growled and began fucking her in earnest then. She couldn’t move. Could barely breathe. She wanted to push him away, tell him to stop, but the pleasure was so overwhelming, all she could do was lay there with her eyes open and feel.

He let go of her leg and roughly turned her head to him. “Mine!” He shouted the word. “You’re mine, Jayla! Your pussy. Your heart. Your soul. You’re mine to pleasure. Mine to take my own pleasure. You will never deny me and you will come to me with all the passion and lust you’re feeling right now.”

His kiss wasn’t gentle. Neither was his lovemaking. With one mighty thrust, he let loose a deafening roar just as Jayla’s own orgasm crested...

And she awoke with her face nestled snugly into Kane’s neck. Her body was wrapped around his like a blanket, and he lay with one arm behind his head, the other around her. When she moved, he nuzzled her head with his chin, but otherwise did nothing.

"I didn't really expect you to still be here, you know." Remembering her breakdown the previous night, Jayla wouldn't blame Kane if he never wanted to see her again. Lionsblood males would want strong females...

She gave herself a mental shake. What was she thinking? She had no tie to him.

"You told me not to leave." Kane rolled over so that he lay above her, half covering her body with his. "How could I not be here?" His fingers played in her hair and stroked her scalp every now and then.

"Why?" She was still off balance. Nothing seemed to make sense to her anymore. In her world, the one where all Lionsblood were her enemy, she knew where she stood. In this world, where she'd judged an entire race by the actions of a few, she was lost.

"Because you need me," he said simply. "Nothing has changed except your expected actions. I no longer know what you intend to do, but you still need me. As I need you. It is the way it is with mates." His look was serious, intense. As if he willed her to understand exactly what he meant and why he had stood by her and would stand by her no matter what. It scared Jayla.

"Are you saying I have no choice in a union between us?"

"Absolutely not." Kane shook his head emphatically and the ends of his silky hair brushed her face. She shivered, but tried to hold her emotions in check. She didn't want to be affected by him, and if she was, she damned sure didn't want him to know it.

"We both have choices," Kane continued. "You're marked a Lionsmate. That simply means you're born of a Lionsblood and a human. Your outward appearance is human, but your genetics are those of a Lionsblood. You're strong, hardy, and vicious when you need to be. You have all the best traits of both species, Jayla." He smiled at her and brushed her lips with his fingertips. "It doesn't mean you have to mate with a Lionsblood. It just places you under the protection of the nearest Lionsblood until you choose a mate. The few Lionsmates who choose to wander and explore are assigned a protector by the nearest clan. In your case, I was chosen by my clan to shadow you and watch over you. Somewhere along the way, I fell in love with you." He shrugged as if

his last statement were simply a matter of fact. "I'll be with you in heart and soul until the end of my days."

For the second time in less than a day, tears welled in Jayla's eyes. Before a single sob could escape this time, however, Kane's face descended to hers and their lips met.

Instead of the ferocious Lionsblood she expected, Kane was gentle and giving. He didn't try to take anything from her, but gave her the careful, tender intimacy she craved. How he knew exactly what she needed, Jayla didn't know, nor did she care. She simply closed her eyes and let him kiss her.

His mouth molded to hers, and his tongue lapped at her lips slowly and carefully. It was an experimental kiss. Nothing too pressing. Nothing too passionate. It was simply meant to show her this was real. *He* was real. He kissed her almost as if he did this every morning. There was a familiarity to the act that shouldn't be there, but instead of being bizarre, it was...

Comforting.

Jayla could have lain there all day and just let him kiss her. Nothing mattered as long as he simply let her take pleasure in his mouth pressed against hers.

But she couldn't. If it continued, she'd want more, and now wasn't the time for it. Not yet. If she decided she could put aside her bigotry and hatred for the love of a man, she'd do it as a strong-willed, self-assured woman. Not as the lost girl desperately seeking a way to reclaim her life.

With a frantic shove, she pushed him off her and rolled off the bed. Her feet landed solidly on the floor but she felt anything but balanced and sure. She expected him to be angry, or at least annoyed. Instead, he simply stretched and folded both arms behind his head and grinned at her. "That was delicious."

Jayla felt the flush creep up her neck and face and knew without looking her skin was blotchy and red with embarrassment. "Look, that can't happen again."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why not? I enjoyed it, and I think you did, too. There's no reason we can't delight in each other as often as we wish."

"Wait a minute. I thought Lionsblood mated for life. If we... you know... have sex, won't that tie you to me? As in, I'll never be rid of you?"

Kane laughed. "I suppose you could put it that way. Of course, I've already pledged my life to you. You'll never be rid of me no matter what. Even if you take another as your mate, I'll likely still be around."

This was unexpected. "You'd do that? Just let me be with another man? Have his babies? And you'd do nothing but protect us?"

He shook his head, slinging his hair around his face like a great cat shaking his mane. "Not 'us.' You and any offspring you have I'll protect with my life. Your man is on his own." It might sound innocent, but Jayla heard the underlying growl when he said the words "your man."

"You have no intention of letting me take another mate, do you?"

Kane didn't even have the good graces to lie. "No. But if you meet someone who means as much to you as you mean to me, I'd not interfere. I wouldn't leave you, though. I can never do that."

There was no regret in his eyes. Nothing in his words, tone, or body language threatened her if she didn't love him as much as he loved her. Jayla saw only his need to see to her happiness and fought the urge to run to him. Cling to him. He was, for all intents and purposes, a complete stranger, but their shared life-and-death struggle had bound them in a way few things could. Their struggles might have been separate at times, but they had come together in the end and helped each other.

"I --" She needed to think. This was all happening too fast. "I need to go, Kane. I've got to get my head straight and I can't do that here with you or even here alone. I need to *do something*."

He sat up. "I understand. Let me take you to the community center. There are plenty of things to be done to occupy your time. Think all you need to. If you need me, I'll be with Dykstra."

At once, the fine hairs on the back of Jayla's neck stood up. She was missing something, but she couldn't bring herself to care just now. Her world had ended, and it was time to start a new one.

\* \* \*

Jayla was his. She just hadn't admitted it yet. Kane watched her all day as she worked beside the humans dwelling in the Mammoths. She endured more than she should have and never said a word. Instead, she ignored her tormentors and simply did her job. It wasn't long before they began to rely on her.

He was proud of himself, too. Instead of growling and scaring the pants off anyone who harassed her, he made his presence known in a more subtle fashion. Occasionally, a man would find himself alone in a darkened part of the cave and Kane would "talk" with him about how they were treating Jayla. Gradually, her tormenting stopped, and the humans began to see her as a valuable part of the community.

Even more. Knowing she was a Lionsmate, they eventually afforded her the same respect they did Dykstra and Talia. They also began to look up to her to help with more difficult tasks. Like a true Lionsmate, Jayla jumped into her duties with gusto. Nothing was too big or difficult.

That is, until the day Talia set her to babysitting. Kane would have laughed if he hadn't been afraid of hurting her feelings. She had this panicked look on her face and for the better part of the first week, the kids ate her alive. The older ones pranked her, while the younger ones demanded her immediate and undivided attention. It wasn't until she set her foot down -- gently but firmly like any mama lion would -- that they eased up.

Once she'd found an understanding with the fifteen children she took care of and taught necessary skills to, Kane joined her. Together, they became the primary source of childcare in the colony.

One day, before he left, one of the boys came up to her and gave her a measuring look. "You know, you're not as bad as I first thought." The boy grinned and ran to his mother, who promptly hugged him and waved at Jayla. The child was the reason she'd

fought with Dykstra. That was a lifetime ago. It struck Jayla how far she'd come and how much these people meant to her.

Jayla couldn't help herself. She smiled. Then laughed. For the first time since the death of her family, she was happy. Truly happy.

She had one child who hadn't been picked up yet. Jayla held him and looked around the community she had worked so hard to fit into. It hadn't been that long ago, all she'd really wanted was to get the hell out of there. Had it not been for the storm, she would have, too. She doubted very much that even Kane's magnetic pull could have made her stay that first night had it not been impossible for her to leave.

Now, Kane stood beside her, tall and proud. A Lionsblood beside his chosen mate. She smiled at him, and he returned it warmly, placing an arm around her shoulder. Once Baalen's mother came for the boy, she and Kane needed to talk.

Unfortunately, Baalen's mother didn't come for him that night. The common room lights were dimmed and most of the lights in the adjoining caverns were extinguished, and she was nowhere to be found.

"I'll be back, Jayla. Dykstra and I will see what we can find. Perhaps she didn't feel well, took a nap, and overslept." Jayla loved the way he tried to calm her fears, but she wasn't fooled. He was worried as well.

"Do what you can, but don't go off alone. If Dykstra is right, there could be enemies in the darkness." They stared at each other a long time before she spoke again. "Kane, we need to talk."

He smiled. "Really? I don't think there's much to discuss. We both want the same thing."

"Maybe, but we still need to talk about it. It's kind of one of those things women require."

He chuckled, and not only did it warm her heart, but it did funny things to her insides. It was the "uh oh" feeling turned into a good thing. "When I get back, we'll talk all you want. After I claim you, of course."

"And what, exactly, does that involve?" All kinds of naughty images floated through her mind and set her stomach to fluttering.

"Lots and lots of pleasure, sweetheart. Lots and lots of pleasure." He kissed her gently, then walked away.

There was nothing else for Jayla to do. She took little Baalen to the room she shared with Kane and waited. She hated not going with him and Dykstra, but there was nothing for it. Her responsibility was Baalen, and she would not leave him in the care of anyone else to go hunting with the men.

The toddler in her arms squirmed and whined. He missed his mother. Jayla stroked his hair and cradled him as best she could. She sat on the couch and covered him with a blanket, singing softly to him. She gently grazed a finger over his face and eyebrows, causing him to close his eyes as she sang. Eventually, they didn't open, and he slept.

Jayla smiled as she laid him on the bed and covered him snugly. As much as she longed to lay down with the child and rest herself, she couldn't. Knowing Kane was out there searching for the missing woman, and that he and Dykstra could quite possibly be putting themselves in danger, worried her.

So she waited. If they hadn't returned in a couple of hours, she'd find Talia. Perhaps the Lionsmate would have an idea.

## Chapter Six

"I found blood down the cavern. Lots of it," Jakx, the human who had been bound to Talia and Dykstra, informed the two Lionsblood. Jakx's relationship with the couple was close to that of a mate, but less permanent. It was, however, no less fierce. "It looks like a recent kill, though I can't say if it's human or animal blood. I'm sure there were several creatures who took refuge from the storm. It may not be her."

"Are you sure it was Lionsblood that made the kill?" Dykstra always accepted reality, but he never jumped to conclusions. Preparing for one enemy when you should have been concerned about another was never wise.

Jakx gave him a level look. "I found a blade laced with the same poison we've seen in the last few months. Given the nature of Kane's injuries, I think we can safely assume whatever made this kill was a Lionsblood."

That was all Kane really needed to know. "How many separate groups of these rogues do you think you've got in the shallows, Dykstra?"

The other Lionsblood gave him a level look. "At least three, not counting the one you and Jayla eliminated."

"When did they first appear?"

"The same day Jayla left us the first time."

The two men stared at each other as the implication sank in. These new Lionsblood were looking for Jayla.

"I've got to get back to Jayla. I don't want to give up looking for Baalen's mother, but I can't leave my mate this open to attack. If they know both of us are gone, they'll strike. The woman's disappearance may even have been designed to lure us away."

"Go, Kane." Jakx gripped his shoulder. "We can follow any trail they left back there to see if there's any hope, then we'll follow."



“Check in on Talia, too. Keep them together, and if they attack, you’ve got a better chance of killing the bastards.” Kane could tell by his growls and guttural language that Dykstra didn’t like not heading back to the colony at once, but they couldn’t just abandon the human.

“I’ll protect your mate as you protected mine, my brother.” With one last look at both Dykstra and Jakx, Kane shifted into his Lionsblood form and sprinted back up the cave.

He was headed into danger, of that much he was certain. He was so focused on reaching Jayla that he didn’t see the two Lionsblood hanging from the stalactites in the ceiling until they fell on top of him.

One of them roared and slashed at Kane with claws and a blade. Kane had learned his lesson before and took the claws deep in his abdomen in order to avoid the blade that might have only grazed his arm. Lionsblood came at him from different directions but he managed to avoid their poisoned blades. Some slashes he deflected with the bracers on his forearms, others he danced around. But against two very capable Lionsblood, he knew he could only last a short time.

He had just missed one particularly vicious slash with a blade when a war cry echoed throughout the cavern. The screech was terrible. He’d have covered his ears if he’d dared, but he was afraid it might mean his doom. At first, he thought it meant more of the rogue clan had joined them. Then the attacker burst in from above them.

Jayla landed on the shoulders of one Lionsblood with a knife in her right hand. The look on her face was fierce enough to quell even the stoutest of hearts. Kane didn’t waste time seeing what she’d do, but launched himself at the remaining enemy with a battle roar. He needed to kill this one quickly so he could help Jayla if needed.

Sinking the claws of one hand into the throat of his enemy, he ripped. Blood spurted everywhere, covering his hand and forearm. The Lionsblood gurgled his death throes before his body relaxed. Lifeless.

Kane spun to help Jayla only to find her equally covered in blood and headed in his direction.

"Where's Dykstra?" she asked, breathing hard.

"With Jakx in the cave. We found a bloody mess we think might have been where Baalen's mother was killed, but no sign of her body. We think they're looking for you, Jayla."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Me? Why me? What makes you think that?"

"They arrived right after your fight with Talia. Just after you left."

"Why does that make it me, Kane?"

He shrugged, though he was getting an awful feeling in the pit of his stomach. "You were the only thing different in the equation."

"Really. Are you sure?"

"Well, what else could it be?"

"What about Talia? We've talked since then. Our fight was the first and only time she'd ever been physical with anyone. What if these guys are after a Lionsmate. Me, Talia, whoever they're able to find."

Kane turned his head slightly, still looking at her, trying to piece it all together. "Why would that matter? Lionsmates are the offspring of Lionsbloods and humans. Hybrids."

"This cavern is the perfect place, Kane. If they were rid of Dykstra, they'd pretty much be able to get rid of the rest of the humans at will and have control of one of the best natural defenses against the elements in the world."

That sickening feeling in Kane's stomach suddenly got worse. "Dykstra and Jakx are on their own with no clue they're being hunted."

"And Talia is alone and unprotected with little knowledge of how to defend herself."

"The greater danger is with Dykstra. I'll go to them." Kane started to turn, but Jayla stayed him.

"No! You go to Talia. She has no protection at all, and I left Baalen with her. Dykstra and Jakx have each other. I'm faster. You're stronger."

Kane snagged her arm when she would have started off down the cavern. "You be careful, Jayla. I don't like this."

She cupped his cheek with her hand before pulling him to her for one hot, lingering kiss. "I will. Take care of yourself, Kane. And please don't let anything happen to Baalen. I shouldn't have left them alone."

"You did what you had to do, Jayla. You left Baalen in the most capable hands you could find and you did what you knew you had to do." She nodded once. Kane could still see worry in her face. "We still have unfinished business, you know. Find Dykstra and Jakx. Get back to the colony. I'll take care of Talia and Baalen and this will be over and done with soon." They looked at each other a heartbeat before Kane spoke again. "I love you, Jayla."

Jayla smiled. "I know. You've proven that time and time again, Kane." Then she turned and sprinted off.

The cavern she needed to follow was straight and long with no branches. She should have no problems finding them before they reached the Hub. That room branched off into at least six other caverns. It was at least two clicks down, though. She should still have plenty of time to get to them before they reached that point.

Turning, Kane ran as fast as he could in the opposite direction. He hoped Jayla was wrong, but he was terribly afraid she was all too right.

\* \* \*

Jayla found Dykstra and Jakx just after they'd dealt with four more Lionsblood. They turned on her, and Jayla prepared to defend herself. Fortunately, it wasn't necessary.

"Jayla?" Dykstra had shifted and was quite a bit larger than normal. His normally shaggy head of tawny hair very closely resembled a lion's mane. His voice was gruff, and his eyes shifted to the corridor behind her while Jakx moved behind him to keep an eye on the opposite direction. "What the hell are you doing here? Where's Kane?"

"On his way back to the colony. You've got to get back. We think these rogue clans are trying to eliminate any Lionsblood protecting the colony so they can have these caverns for themselves. They're setting you up."

"So it would seem." Dykstra sniffed the air, taking a deep breath. He closed his eyes as if concentrating. "I can't smell any others nearby."

"I've got a bad feeling, Dykstra," Jakx mumbled. "If these guys were only expecting one warrior, they may well have sent others to the colony. If their intent is to take this haven, they'd have sent the majority of their numbers there. They thought four Lionsblood would be enough to take you."

Jayla didn't wait a moment longer. She'd found Dykstra and warned him. She had to get back to Kane. Her mate.

*Her mate!* It wasn't a conscious decision on her part, but at some point during her stay in the colony, she'd begun to think of Kane as hers. Truth be known, she should have admitted it weeks ago. Now, it might be too late.

Heart pounding, breaths coming in painful pulls, she raced back to him. She would not let anyone take him from her. If she had to kill hundreds of Lionsblood to get to him, so be it.

As she neared the populated caverns, she heard sounds of a struggle. Screams and terrified cries reached her. The children were being forced farther underground. It was the first thing that would happen if they were attacked. She'd been part of the drills during her weeks here and knew exactly where they would be and exactly what routes led to the safe rooms.

She whipped out two knives and ran even faster, ducking to avoid the low ceiling in parts of the tunnel-like corridor. Normally, the room would be completely sealed by an iron door, but they hadn't yet activated it. She flung open the tiny wooden door and burst into the room through the back. Terror-filled screams from some of the children greeted her until they recognized her. Jayla moving through them until she found the child she was looking for.

"Daren! Tell me. What happened?" Daren was a boy of eleven, but he was amazingly levelheaded and had the most analytical mind she'd ever encountered. In another life, he'd have been an important leader, or scientist, or anything other than a human child trying to survive in a world that didn't tolerate humans.

"We were attacked by Lionsblood. I counted eight before Mom and Dad shoved me in here with everyone else. I think that was it, though." His eyes were wide with fear. He pulled her down and whispered into her ear, probably so he didn't frighten the other children. "They're killing everyone."

Jayla's stomach lurched. "Did you see Kane or Talia?"

"Kane was fighting in the common room when my parents grabbed me. I didn't see Talia."

She wanted to run to Kane's side as quickly as possible, but she took time to hug the child. "You're so brave, Daren. You're a great asset to this community."

He clung to her, and she could feel the slight tremble in his body. "Be careful, Jayla. I'm scared."

"I know. Me, too." She squeezed him once, then pushed him away to arm's length. "I need you to be brave right now, Daren. You've got to keep everyone safe. If you think they're about to break in here, or if no one comes for you before all the food and water is gone, it's up to you to get everyone out of here and to Shiffley's bar. Do you remember the way?"

He nodded, wide eyed. "I remember the drills."

"Good. Shiff will help you. Don't go unless you have no other choice, though. Once you leave this room, you're vulnerable."

"I understand." The young man straightened and raised his chin a notch. "You can count on me, Jayla."

She smiled. "I know I can." Giving the other children a long look, she opened the door she'd entered through before returning her attention back to Daren. "Lock this door and shut the blast door here and at the front door."

"But, what if there are more out there needing in? I'll be locking them out."

Her heart ached, but she shook her head firmly. "Everyone knows the drill, Daren. They have ten minutes to get everyone in here, then the doors are shut. I know it's hard, but you have to. Promise me you will."

He looked so downhearted, she wanted to hug him again. When she started to move toward him, he turned and pressed the button that lowered the back outer door. Tears swam in his eyes, but his gaze didn't falter. "I've got it covered, Jayla." A few seconds later, she heard the blast door clank shut, then the faint thud of the heavy steel door at the other end of the cavern as it sealed.

Not wanting to use any more time, though she really hated leaving the children, she headed down the cavern. They had food and water for three days in that room. They'd be all right. She had to believe that.

Making her way around the safe room and back to the colony, Jayla kept her weapons at the ready. If she was ambushed, she'd be better able to fend them off until she got a better advantage for attack. Screams and battle cries echoed in the cavern's vast interior, and she knew she was getting close to the great common room.

When she reached the last stretch leading to the colony, she crouched between the stalagmites and waited. She needed to know what she was getting into. Below her, in the common room, she saw numerous humans converging on a couple of Lionsblood caught without the strength of the rest of their pack. Several humans dropped, but it wasn't long before both Lionsblood did also. Once they fell, they had no chance. Men and women beat and stabbed with anything they had on hand.

Jayla moved carefully between stalagmites and rocks until the mayhem paused. She stepped out from the shadows, knives in hand, and approached the two fallen Lionsblood. Without thinking about it, she cut the throat of one, then the other. The first one didn't move -- already dead -- but the second one gurgled and struggled slightly. She stabbed her knife into the side of his neck and sliced from one side to the other until she'd made the complete cut.

Everyone in the group stared at her as if she'd gone mad, and she looked down at her hands. Not only was she covered with blood from this kill, but from the previous one she'd helped Kane with.

"Always finish the job. If you don't, there's a chance of it biting you in the ass later."

One of the men nodded his head, though she could tell he still found the whole ordeal distasteful. "Kane could use your help. He was fighting them off outside Talia's door a few minutes ago. I think they're after her."

Jayla didn't waste time talking. She ran to Talia and Dykstra's room. Sure enough, Kane was there, holding his ground, fighting six Lionsblood at Talia's door. Two of them had already fallen. The narrow hall provided limited space, and the enemy couldn't take advantage of their superior numbers. Kane had limited range of movement, but he was doing very well thus far.

More importantly, there was no way for her to help him where she was.

Jayla turned and ran back the way she came until she got to the natural bridge that hung over the common room across from Talia's residence. The only thing that separated her from Kane now was twenty feet of open space and two feet of solid rock.

Getting desperate, Jayla scanned the area until she saw the opening she needed. There was a two-foot window in the wall used by inhabitants in the upper section to raise and lower hot rocks for heat. It would be tight, and if she missed, she'd fall thirty feet, to splatter on the rocks below.

But how was she going to get across the twelve-foot chasm? She climbed up onto the side of the bridge and was about to just launch herself at the narrow window when men and women from below saw her plight and recognized what she was trying to do. They moved a rope they used for hefting up the rocks toward her until she was able to grab it. She'd have one shot. If the fates were kind, she could get close enough to the window to grab hold and slide in. Then she could come up behind the attacking Lionsblood, and she and Kane could fight their way together.

Mentally calculating the distance versus the length of the rope and the height of the window, she finally just closed her eyes and jumped. For a split second, she thought she hadn't grabbed the rope high enough and she was going to hit the wall too low, then she started her upswing and Jayla realized she'd hit it just right. Instead of grabbing the edge and pulling herself up and through the opening, she shifted her feet and kicked through it. She slid through without so much as grazing the rock and landed on her feet maybe fifty yards behind the attacking Lionsblood.

Without making a sound, Jayla crouched and crept up behind the four remaining attackers. As she did, the front one fell. She used that opportunity to launch herself at the one in the back of the pack. She didn't say a word. Didn't make a sound, and didn't give him an opportunity to make a sound either. In one swift move, she wrapped her legs around his torso, placing her hand over his mouth. She maneuvered his head into her armpit and pushed down so his head was forced back, exposing his neck. With his mouth covered by the thick layer of clothing under her arm, she used her other hand and crossed her blade around the front of his neck. As before, she stabbed her blade into one side, and jerked it around to the other, severing everything in his neck with one vicious swipe.

He fell backward, and Jayla landed on her feet as he fell. Even though she was almost absolutely silent, she got the attention of the remaining two Lionsblood.

Kane gave a deafening roar and flew through the air, looking for all the world like a great lion pouncing on his prey. Which, for all intents and purposes, he was. He brought down both men. Jayla dove on top of one, narrowly avoiding both his claws and poisoned blade. With one swift thrust of her knife, she slid the blade between his ribs, piercing his heart. Kane killed his target with less finesse, but no less deadliness. He tore the bastard apart. The only thing left of his torso was a bloody mess. Blood was everywhere.

"That's eight here," Jayla counted. "Plus the two we dealt with earlier, plus the four Jakx and Dykstra killed after that. Is fourteen enough or do you think there are more?" Jayla had her back to Kane. When she turned around, he had his eyes on her.



In his Lionsblood form he looked almost scary. Covered in blood after a fresh kill, he was positively terrifying. They stared at each other until the door to Talia's residence opened.

"Sweet and Holy God," she whispered, holding Baalen to her chest tightly. She looked around, obviously expecting Dykstra and Jakx.

"They're making one last look around for Baalen's mother then heading back." Jayla spoke to Talia, but kept her eyes on Kane. She didn't know what was going on, but she needed to get him back to their residence. "They think she's dead, but didn't want to take any chances."

"She is dead."

"Dykstra! Thank God!" Talia stepped into the passageway and hugged her mate fiercely with her free arm, all the while looking around until she spotted Jakx as well.

Jayla felt like an intruder to their reunion, but she had to ask a few questions before she left them. "Is that all of them? Did we get them all?"

"Not likely. I'm not assuming we did, anyway. We'll set up extra precautions and section off part of the cave with those iron doors we used for the children's safe room. It might not stop them entirely, but at least they won't be able to sneak up on us from behind again." He paused for a moment, looking Kane up and down. "Jayla, I think you'd better get Kane back to your residence. Don't come out until you've settled a few things between you."

"Is there anything I should know about a Lionsblood who's blood drunk? Like, will I need to defend myself? He looks pretty scary to me." Her attempt at humor was lost on Kane.

"I'd hoped --" Kane ground out, his voice even more gruff than usual, "-- that you'd have figured out by now that I'd never hurt you, Jayla."

Without waiting for her answer, he gripped her upper arm and dragged her down the corridor, down two levels, and to their shared room. He practically tossed her inside, and Jayla was sure he intended to throw her down and claim her right then.

"Whoa, slow down there, big guy." When he advanced on her, she held him back with a palm in the middle of his chest. "I know the relationship between sex and violence, but I'm absolutely not doing this covered in blood. I want to be clean before we get all dirty again."

Kane took two deep breaths and shook his head. "The sexual response to violence for a Lionsblood is ten times that of a human. You realize this is sexual torture."

"So, let's clean up and I'll slap you around to get you back in the mood." She raised her eyebrow.

For a moment Kane just stood there, then he started to chuckle, and finally, he laughed until great tears rolled from his eyes down his cheeks. "You're simply priceless, Jayla." He pulled her to him and kissed her lightly on the lips before hugging her to him. "You know, I thought that last attacker had you. After you dropped his comrade and he turned around, I thought he'd get to you before I could take him down."

"I'm fully capable of taking care of myself, Kane. I know you're my protector, but maybe we could agree to change that role. We work together. As a team. You've got my back, I've got yours."

"Agreed. Though, at the moment, it's your *backside* I'm interested in. I never told you, but those pants you wear conceal too much."

Jayla chuckled. "Well, I didn't wear them with sex in mind. They're supposed to protect me out in the elements."

"We're not out in the elements now. Take them off." He pushed her toward the bed but, again, Jayla stood her ground.

"Not until we're clean, big guy. I want you as much as you want me, but I'm not fucking you covered in blood and gore. Get some hot stones. See if Dykstra will approve a few extra and some hot water. We'll clean up, then I'm going to fuck you to within an inch of your life."

## Chapter Seven

Dykstra did indeed approve extra hot stones and the hot water for their bath. In fact, the colonists delivered everything they asked for to their room with many and sincere thanks. Jayla personally checked on every single child to make sure they were all accounted for. She also made sure little Baalen was taken care of.

"His mother, Shaza, had no one other than herself. Now that she's gone, Baalen is alone." The woman was one of the colony elders. She was very kind, and knew everything there was to know about every colonist. At the moment, she held Baalen as he slept and looked down at him with sad eyes. "We'll need to find someone willing to look after him."

Jayla didn't even think about her words. "That won't be necessary. I'll take him. I'd only ask that you give me one night. Kane and I have unfinished business to discuss and I don't think it appropriate to have a child near. Sleeping or not."

The old woman chuckled. "I imagine not. Go. Take care of your Lionsblood. I'll tend little Baalen this night and any night after this you need. You need children of your own, after all."

Jayla smiled. "Thank you. I intend to have children, but Baalen will always be my first. He might not be a child of my womb, but he has been a child of my heart since the first day I cared for him. He's truly a special child."

"And you're a special mother. What you've lacked in parental love in your own life, I know you'll make up for with love for any children within your care."

Jayla smiled and wanted terribly to hug her, but she was a mess and wouldn't soil this wonderful woman with the nastiness she'd been involved in. "Thank you. Thank you for being able to see inside of me when I didn't want anyone to. I understand now why you're so respected."

"Tame your Lionsblood. That will be thanks enough. You both deserve happiness. Go find it in each other."

Kane met Jayla as she headed back to their room. He fell into step easily beside her and put his arm around her waist. Neither said a word as they entered their residence and undressed. Jayla noticed a few new wounds on Kane and was sure she had a few herself, but neither of them had anything life threatening. They were extremely lucky.

Whoever had brought their bath water had placed a few heated stones underneath the stone basin that served as a tub, and the water was still nice and hot. Perfect for soothing tired, aching muscles.

"We were both marked from this encounter. I should be marked, Jayla. Not you. Not like this."

They sat opposite each other. Kane's legs framed her bottom and hers wrapped around his waist. They washed the blood from each other's bodies carefully, tenderly, as if their gentleness with each other could counterbalance the violence that had soiled them. Occasionally, one of them dropped a sweet, lingering kiss on the other's lips, but mostly, they took this time to assess the damage done.

"I sacrificed my body for something worth fighting for, Kane. You. The people around us. Not for vengeance, this time. I have to say, it was a thousand times more satisfying, and more rewarding, than the kills we made at the cave entrance a lifetime ago. For these people, for you, I'd do it again. Being willing to die to protect someone you love makes more sense than giving your life for someone who's already dead. Killing the killers didn't bring my family back. Killing to save this colony and protect the home of everyone here actually accomplished something."

Kane looked at her a long time. She continued to wash him, but he only stared at her. He'd never thought Jayla would fit in so completely here, especially the way things got started off. Looking back, he should have known. She'd attacked Dykstra because she thought he was attacking a child, not because she wanted to kill a Lionsblood.

"You're truly a remarkable woman, Jayla." He grinned then. "You're also clean. Disposing of the bath water can wait until tomorrow. Right now, there are other things we need to tend to."

She raised an eyebrow. "You've got that right. Take me to bed, my dear Lionsblood."

With a growl, Kane stood, bringing her with him. She tightened her grip on his waist with her legs, but he had her ass securely in his hands. She doubted she could have gotten down if she'd tried.

Kane grabbed a towel on his way to the bed. He stood her beside the rock pit and dried them both before scooping her up and tossing her gently onto the bed. When he followed her, wiggling between her legs, she slapped him. Hard.

He was shocked for a moment, then he caught the wildness in her eyes. He growled at her, and she slapped him again.

"You're playing with fire, woman."

"I promised I'd slap you around before we fucked." She smacked his ass this time and gripped the cheek tightly, pulling him to her. "I'm just following through. Besides, I think you liked it."

"Damned straight."

His mouth found hers then, and he did his best to devour her. They dueled for dominance. Jayla didn't really want control, but she needed him to wrest it from her. When they did this, she wanted him wild. Something inside her knew that he needed to dominate her this first time, needed to take her with all the passion he was capable of.

Several times, their teeth clicked. Their tongues dueled, and Kane's growls and grunts were music to her ears. She loved the taste of him. His kisses were filled with the unique, wild, and spicy flavor that she was growing addicted to. Kane moved against her lips with liquid smoothness, yet with raw punishment. Punishment for all the years he'd had to endure without her, punishment for all the men she'd taken when he wanted nothing more than to be the one she went to for her relief.

His kisses promised her more than simple relief. They promised her pleasure. When he finally -- *finally* -- took her, the pleasure would be almost unimaginable. Jayla knew this without a doubt. Once he took her, she accepted it was forever. She wanted it to be forever. Kane was the most remarkable man she'd ever met. He was loyal, reliable, and devoted. There was a nobleness about him that went beyond the ordinary man. He'd shadowed her for years and instead of pushing her, or simply taking what he wanted, he'd waited. He'd done nothing but protect her and make sure she was as safe as she could be. No matter how pumped she got him, no matter how out of control he seemed to be, Jayla knew he would always have her pleasure, her well-being in mind.

Sweat coated their bodies in a fine sheen, making them glide together easily. Jayla tunneled her fingers through his silky hair and pulled him away from her. Just for a moment. She wanted to look at his face. Lust was there, to be sure, but something else as well.

He bared his teeth, hissing before he spoke. "If you wanted me tame, I'm afraid it's too late."

She caressed the side of his face with her hand and smiled. "I want you the way you are, Kane. I just wanted to see into your eyes a moment."

The wildness in his face did something wonderful to her insides. He was wild, on the verge of being blood drunk. The battles they'd shared had bonded them together in a way only time could compete with. He'd confessed to being in love with her for a while before their fight at the back entrance to the cave, but for Jayla it was a much newer emotion. She had grown close to him over the days they'd spent in the Mammoths, but nothing had endeared her to him like fighting side by side with him, knowing her life might depend on his next move.

"What do you see?" His breath seemed to catch as he asked her the question. It was like he expected her to find him lacking in some essential way.

"Love."

It was a simple answer, yet extravagant in its complexities. For Jayla it was the security and warmth she'd lost all those years ago.

For Kane, it was one incredible woman willing to put her life on the line without asking anything in return. The only thing she expected of him was that he let her be his partner in every way. They complemented each other perfectly.

He buried his face in the valley between her breasts lest she see the tears forming in his eyes. He kissed her, licked her skin, nipped her flesh lightly from breast to breast, licking his tears from her so she wouldn't see his weakness. When he had better control of himself, he started an assault on her body in earnest.

With an almost savage growl, he latched on to one nipple and pulled until she whimpered. Then he moved to the other one. She held him to her this time, not letting him leave her breast until he'd satisfied whatever craving she had.

He moved his way methodically down her body, kissing every inch of her flesh he could, especially the cuts and bruises and abrasions. He could probably help her heal, but, for him, it would never be enough. He never wanted injury to mar her lovely, creamy flesh ever again.

When he reached her navel, he dipped his tongue inside until she squealed, then moved lower. The nest of dark hair that surrounded her sex beckoned him. He moved his body lower so he could properly enjoy Jayla. Her legs were spread wide, and her fingers tangled in Kane's hair.

Kane inhaled deeply, and her musky scent filled him to overflowing. He never wanted to forget this. This first time with Jayla had his insides tied in knots. He was on the verge of losing control, and he was afraid he'd scare her off.

Finally, he couldn't keep from tasting her. He knew he'd be lost with the first swipe of his tongue, and he'd been right. Her whimpers turned into cries, and when he brushed her clit she screamed and arched off the bed. "Sweet Sun above!" she screamed. "Kane, if you stop, I swear I'll kill you!"

Instead of answering, he growled and dove in. The folds of her cunt were silky smooth and deliciously wet against his mouth. Her intimate moisture coated his lower face and chin, and he loved it. It was her mark on him, her scent.

Jayla laced her fingers through Kane's hair and pulled him up. His big body covered her smaller one, and he swiped his fingers through her pussy once, coating his fingers with her wetness. He smeared it on his cock and pumped it a couple of times before guiding it to the opening of her cunt.

For a moment, he lay there, readying himself for the next step. He wanted her with a passion that bordered on insanity. He knew she wasn't a virgin, but the last thing he wanted to do was hurt her because he was impatient.

"Do it, Kane," Jayla panted. She wiggled enticingly until the head of his cock penetrated her. "Fuck me, baby. Fuck me now!"

Sweat coated his skin despite the slight chill in the air. Finally, with a roar to do any Lionsblood proud, he slid home in one swift thrust.

Home! There'd never been anything in his whole life that felt this good and right. It was as if all his solitude and sacrifice had been about this moment. This woman. Sweet One Above, he loved her! Fiercely!

It was heaven being inside her. He surged harder and faster. The friction was delicious in its intensity, and Kane knew that, had he not been determined like never before to see to her pleasure before his own, he'd likely explode in seconds. Instead, he held off. It was a special kind of hell, but one he'd endure gladly every day for the rest of his life.

He wrapped his arms around her and held on tightly as he fucked her. Over and over he thrust into her, as if his very life depended on his next move. He couldn't stop. Didn't want to stop. And he couldn't even bring himself to care that he was panting and whimpering like an excited man cub with his first woman.

"Sweet One Above, you feel good, Jayla." His voice was punctuated with each thrust. "I freely join my life to yours. All that I have, all that I am, is yours, Jayla. Never to stray."

Jayla clung to Kane, wanting nothing more than for this to go on forever and ever. She wrapped her legs around his waist, dug her heels into his ass, and used the



leverage to meet him thrust for thrust. His big, hair-dusted body abraded hers erotically, emphasizing her femininity with his masculine shape and texture.

"I love you, Kane," she whispered. "I don't know how it happened, but I do. You've brought love and hope back into my life. You've given me a sense of purpose that's not toxic." She guided his face to hers with one hand and looked him in the eyes. She could see the struggle in his face to hold back, and was sure he was doing it for her, to make sure she got as much pleasure as he did. "All I want, all I need in my life right now, is you."

"I love you, too. I love you, too." Kane chanted his words in a whispered mantra.

"Oh, my! Kane, I'm coming. Oh, God, I'm coming, I'm coming!"

She clamped down on him, pushing through her orgasm with all her might. She thrust up in erratic movements, trying to get as much of Kane's cock inside her as possible. His member throbbed, and she knew he had to be on the verge of his own climax.

"Come for me, Kane," she cried. "Please! Come inside me and mark me as yours."

With a cry that sounded pained, Kane did exactly what she asked. His seed spilled inside her in warm spurts, and Jayla's stomach clenched with a second wave of pleasure. She knew this was it. He had tied himself to her for as long as he lived. He would never take another mate. Jayla knew it was the same with her. Not because she couldn't, but because she couldn't imagine doing what she'd just done with anyone else. Sex had always been about immediate gratification before. Now, it was the only way she could think of to show him how much he had come to mean to her, how much she had grown to love him.

They lay there a moment, both of them breathing hard. Kane rolled over before his weight got to be too much for her. He kept his arm around her though, holding her close to him. Neither of them said anything for a long time. They just enjoyed holding on to each other as if it were the only moment they'd ever have. In Jayla's experience, it

was a brutal reality. You never knew which moment with your family would be the last you ever had. She never wanted to lose Kane the way she'd lost her parents.

"You're right, you know." Kane kissed her temple. His deep, gruff voice rumbled her insides and did wonderful things to her pussy.

"About what?" Jayla couldn't seem to stop touching him. His hair-roughened chest and abdomen beckoned her. She loved the way he felt against her palm.

"You really are a Lionsbane."

That startled Jayla. She rose and propped herself up on her forearm. "Kane, that was a lifetime ago. I hope you know --"

He placed a finger over her lips, effectively silencing her. "You've taken my ideal of a Lionsblood and destroyed it. A Lionsblood isn't solely a warrior. First and foremost, he's a protector and a lover. All I'd ever done before I met you was hunt and kill." He smiled and pulled her to him for a soft kiss filled with more love than Jayla would have ever thought possible to convey with just a simple kiss. "I've found that a Lionsblood loves even more fiercely than he fights." He grinned again. "Well, at least I do."

Jayla couldn't help herself. Damn her female weakness, but she found she didn't feel the shame she might once have. Tears sprung from her eyes and ran freely down her cheeks. "I love you, Kane. It took me a while to actually say it out loud, but I do." She snorted a laugh as she wiped the moisture from her face. "And to think I had planned on leaving you here."

"Yes. You did. Just never doubt I'd have found you again. I may have formally taken you as my mate tonight, but I gave you my heart a long time ago."

Jayla's smile faded as she remembered the battle that had brought them to this point. "Do you think this place will ever be safe again? I mean, do you think there are more people out there who aren't content to live in peace together here? This should be a haven for anyone willing to contribute. It shouldn't matter if they're Lionsblood, human, vampire or anything else."

Kane sighed and rubbed her face with his own. His uniquely masculine scent of earth and spice tickled Jayla's nose, and she was eager to explore his body once more before she brought Baalen home.

"I think that Dykstra, Talia, Jakx, and you and I will do everything we can to protect these people. Beyond that, who can say?"

Jayla supposed it would have to be enough. It was strange how she felt responsible for these people. Not so much that it was her job and hers alone, but like she was part of the greater community and she was one of the few people here who was capable of protecting them. Not only that, she wanted to, if for no other reason than for the children she'd seen huddling so frightened in that safe room. If she had her way, it would never get that far again.

She rolled over him and straddled his hips. His cock brushed erotically against her sex, throbbing and pulsing as his arousal grew. Kane rested his hands lightly on her thighs and enjoyed the beautiful sight before him.

"You are everything I knew you would be, Jayla," he breathed. "More even." With a little tilt of his hips, he entered her. Jayla's head fell back slightly and she shut her eyes in ecstasy. "Beautiful," Kane whispered. "So fucking beautiful."

A smile played at her lips, and she soon picked up his rhythm. She rose and fell at his leisurely pace. There seemed no reason to hurry. Jayla enjoyed his soft stroking of her body, his urging her to pleasure his body. For once, it was good to let someone else call the shots. Especially this. It just seemed right that the mighty Lionsblood take control.

They looked into each other's eyes, each watching the other for the least sign of need. Jayla wanted desperately to know she'd fulfilled all his desires. If there was something he wanted, she wanted to make damned sure she gave it to him. It was less than he deserved for everything he'd done for her, but it was all she could do.

"Relax, Jayla." He smiled and reached up to caress her face. "We've got a lifetime to love each other. This won't be the last time we make love to each other, you know."

"I was just thinking how someone as loving and kind as you deserved to be loved back just as much. I swear to you, what I lack in finesse, I'll make up for in enthusiasm." She was deadly serious, but Kane only chuckled and pulled her down for a long, lingering kiss.

"Oh, my love. Sex between two people who love each other doesn't have to be perfect. You don't have to be a courtesan to please me. The selfless way you've given your body to me, the way you trust me to see to your pleasure... it's better than anything I could have possibly imagined. I love you, Jayla. Love me back just as much and we'll both learn how to please each other."

"I never thought I'd be here." She smiled at him and licked a slow swipe across his mouth. He captured her tongue with his lips.

"In these caves?" He picked up her gentle teasing and blazed a trail across her face, up her neck, and to her ear, nibbling on the lobe.

"Yes," she gasped when he wiggled his tongue in her ear once. "In the Mammoths. But most of all, with you. Only a few short weeks ago, I'd as soon have stabbed you as anything else. Making love wasn't even in the back of my mind."

He chuckled as he continued his assault, this time nibbling on her neck. Jayla gasped as he flexed his hips upward, surging into her lazily. "Well, I don't know about that."

She squealed when Kane flipped her over -- still buried deep inside her -- and covered her with his big body. The raw power he possessed never ceased to thrill her. It was something that called to her from the very beginning.

He winked at her before covering her mouth with his again and starting to move inside her at a more regular pace now. "I think you wanted me from that first second. I think you even wanted me when you knew I was a Lionsblood. You just didn't want to admit it."

Jayla wanted to deny it, just for the sake of argument, but why bother? They both knew it was true. Instead she just smiled and held on to him tighter. "I know. I'm

admitting it now though." She found his mouth again and swiped it with her tongue. "Now shut up and fuck me, Lionsblood."

Surge after surge took Jayla's breath as Kane plunged into her. The pleasure almost made her weep. All she could do was wrap her legs around him, dig her nails into his back, and hang on for dear life. His grunts and pants were echoed by her own. She hoped no one else could hear them, but there was no way she could have stopped the moans, shrieks, and screams she made even if her life depended on it. His cock filled her perfectly. Pleasure surrounded her clit and spread throughout her body in wave after wave of her orgasm.

Without breaking his stride, Kane lifted himself away from her slightly. "Look at me, Jayla." His voice was broken and strained. His face was beaded with sweat and he looked almost in pain. "Look at me when you come. I've waited too long to miss this. I want to see into your eyes and know it's me you're thinking of."

She obeyed without hesitation. "You, Kane." She smiled as another orgasm started. "There's only you from now until forever."

Her pussy milked Kane of everything he had to give her. With a roar, Kane emptied his cock inside Jayla. His hot come bathed her womb, yet he stayed inside her. Jayla couldn't blame him. She didn't want to let him go, either. She felt like it was all a dream, and she'd wake up any second only to find all her newfound happiness evaporating with the morning sun.

Kane rolled them to their sides -- his cock still inside her -- and pulled the blanket over them. For several minutes, they lay there in each other's arms in silence.

"I love you, Jayla. I know I've already said it, but I find I need to tell you again."

Jayla smiled. He was totally different than she expected a Lionsblood to be. He was kind, considerate, and very loving. He'd fought beside her in a battle to the death and never batted an eyelash. Jayla knew he'd always be there for her -- and anyone else who came along -- no matter what the circumstances. She'd finally found the peace she had craved for so very long.

"I love you, too. Tell me as often as you want. I'll never grow tired of hearing it."

“Good.”

“Yes. It’s all good now.”

And it was. Jayla knew in her heart nothing could ever keep them apart. She had everything she’d ever longed for, and it had indeed been worth the wait.

## **Marteeka Karland**

Erotic romance author by night, emergency room tech/clerk by day, Marteeka Karland works really hard to drive everyone in her life completely and totally nuts. She has been creating stories from her warped imagination since she was in the third grade. Her love of writing blossomed throughout her teenage years until it developed into the totally unorthodox and irreverent style her English teachers tried hard to rid her of.

Want to see what's up with Marteeka? Check out her website at [www.marteeekakarland.com](http://www.marteeekakarland.com) or join her Yahoo! group at [marteeekakarland-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:marteeekakarland-subscribe@yahoogroups.com). Marteeka always welcomes e-mail from her readers. You can reach her at [mkarland@gmail.com](mailto:mkarland@gmail.com).