

The book cover features a romantic scene between a man and a woman. The man is lying down, looking up at the woman who is leaning over him. They are both unclothed. The background shows a window with a view of a snowy mountain range under a blue sky. The publisher's name, 'Changeling Press', is at the top in a stylized font. The title 'Lionsheart' and the author's name 'Marteeka Karland' are at the bottom in large, stylized fonts.

Changeling Press

# Lionsheart

*Marteeka Karland*

# **Lionsheart**

## **Marteeka Karland**

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## **Lionsheart**

### **Marteeka Karland**

**Darian Amos Shiffley is on the hunt. His protégé, Gretta, has gotten herself arrested and detained in Dead Man's Keep, a supermax underground prison of the worst sort. He intends on freeing not only her, but himself as well. For too long, Shiffley has hidden his feelings for Gretta. No more. He's out to show his little Lionsheart how much she truly means to him.**

**Imagine his surprise when he discovers his secret was never really a secret to begin with.**

## Chapter One

Getting inside the compound hadn't been that hard. But Darian Amos Shiffley would have done it no matter what. This pen had something he wanted, and Shiffley wasn't a man who allowed anyone to keep something of his. How Gretta had gotten herself thrown in this hellhole was beyond him. The woman was a thorn in his side, but he'd invested too much time in her training to let her rot in prison.

It had taken little time to find her. Once he had, he'd sat back in his hiding place to watch. He needed as much information as he could about her movements, the others around her, and the routine of the guards before he could get her out.

The beauty of these supermax prisons in Frozen Earth was the way the prisoners were housed. They basically roamed freely within the inner walls. There were thirty clicks of the worst frozen terrain imaginable on the coldest part of the planet surrounding them.

Most creatures couldn't last thirty minutes in that wasteland, Lionsblood included. Other than that, the only rules were to do what you could to stay alive. Food was rationed to make prisoners fight to eat, and the weaker ones had to either "sell" themselves to stronger men and women or starve. It pitted inmates against each other and gave them something to worry about other than breaking out.

Gretta wasn't a weak prisoner. At least not in the sense she couldn't take care of herself. If she had any flaws, it was trying to "mother" the ones who were weak.

Shiffley snarled. Here, it definitely put her at a disadvantage. He'd taught her better than that. Looking at her now, he saw that all the undesirables were flocking around her as she fought for their survival. Gretta looked tired. Worn. Definitely not

strong enough to take on the three Lionsblood she faced now with nothing but her bare hands.

They surrounded her, but she was holding her own. One went down when she delivered a kick to his groin so hard it made Shiffley wince. The spike on her heel didn't help matters for her opponent when she spun a back kick to the same area. The large man crumpled to the ground, covering his bloody crotch with his hands.

Unfortunately, the extra move to eliminate one man gave the other two an opening. One snaked his arm around her neck and squeezed. Gretta instinctively gripped his arm before releasing him and doing what he'd taught her.

Her attacker was taller than Gretta. She dropped straight down, intending to throw her attacker off balance and slide to the ground, but she was too small, and he was way too damned big. Gretta's feet were off the ground, but she didn't slide out of the big Lionsblood's grip even an inch.

The third one shook his head -- from a blow she'd delivered earlier -- and advanced, murder in his eyes. No doubt, Gretta was looking at her last moments alive. Of course, neither Lionsblood knew Shiffley was there.

"You're dead, human!" The Lionsblood advanced on her, saliva dripping from his mouth. Blood trickled from his nose, and one eye was nearly swollen shut. The one who held her in the chokehold didn't look much better, and both men were breathing hard from their effort with Gretta.

"Maybe," she answered. Her voice was husky and strangled, but she managed to get the word out with a defiant tone. "But everyone in this Sun forsaken place knows it took three of you to take me down. Somehow, I'm thinking this victory is really more a defeat."

Shiffley knew she was right, but did she have to point it out now? She had to know it would only hasten her demise. He narrowed his eyes as he looked at her. Really looked at her. Shiffley shifted his position and scrambled out of hiding. That was exactly what she was hoping for. If she was going to die, she wanted it to happen fast.

No one was paying him any attention. Every eye was focused on the fight. Which spoke volumes to Greta's abilities. Instead of just another fight, it was the main event even though there was food to be had. No one saw him as he approached the circle of people.

"Looks to me like she kicked your asses." He tried to sound amused. Inside, he was seething. They dared to try and take what was his! "If she can do it, it should be no problem for me to put you out of your misery."

Shiffley clenched his fists and walked deliberately toward the two Lionsblood who thought to take Greta from him for good. He didn't concern himself with anyone else. No one would interfere. Those siding with Greta were too cowardly to help, and everyone else was simply waiting to see what would happen. Basically, there was no sense making trouble when trouble didn't yet exist for them.

"One more step, and I'll break her neck." The growled threat meant little to Shiffley. He knew Greta had all the distraction she needed.

No sooner had he thought it than Greta swung a sharp kick to her captor's knee and threw her weight forward, putting her captor off balance and her feet on the ground. Again, she used the concealed spike built into her boot heel to rip through his groin.

Another trick he'd taught her. Always have a weapon. Even a homemade one. If one was clever enough, no one would know until it was too late. Shiffley was all over the second guy, though it wasn't really necessary. The other Lionsblood just stood there as if he knew fighting was futile. His end was swift.

Shiffley turned to see Greta freeing herself. Apparently, she'd fallen when her captor slumped to the ground. She scrambled to her feet. Two of her three attackers lay holding their privates amid growing pools of blood. The third -- dead.

"Bastard," Greta muttered. "That'll teach you."

"What are you waiting for? Finish him." Shiffley spoke quietly, but the two Lionsblood knew an order when they heard one. Both held up a hand and shook their heads.

Gretta was breathing hard, but she shook her head once. Her eyes shifted everywhere, looking for would-be attackers. "I have no problem killing, Shiff. You know that. But I won't kill a man like this."

Shiffley didn't really expect her to kill either man in cold blood, but it really would have been the smart thing to do. He was in full protection mode. He would have stopped her had she made a move to actually kill the disabled men, but it didn't stop him from lashing out at her for not doing so.

He had almost lost her, and rational thinking seemed to be beyond him at the moment. "You're a fool!" He had no problem being harsh with her. Life was harsh. He'd taught her how to survive, and it did not involve letting enemies who had tried to kill her live. "They'll only hunt you down later and finish what they started. They're dead, anyway. No one here will think twice about challenging them for food knowing it took three of them to take down one human."

"You think so little of my abilities as to consider me a mere human?" Gretta growled at him. Had she been a Lionsblood in full Lion form, her hackles would be raised and her claws extended and ready.

"You *are* human. Just because I taught you a few things doesn't make you a Vampire, or even a Lionsblood." At the mention of the word "vampire," the crowd scattered. Shiffley couldn't help the twitch of his lip. It was amusing, sometimes, to let people think the worst of him.

He wasn't a full-blooded Vampire, but he was a Lionsblood/Vampire hybrid. In his view, that made him more deadly than either because he'd been genetically enhanced to retain the best of both races. Had these people known, they might have run from him screaming instead of merely muttering.

He and Gretta were alone now. The two disabled men had been dragged away with the rest of the crowd, leaving the body of the last one crumpled on the floor in a pool of blood.

"Real subtle, Shiff. Nice going." Gretta picked up her discarded fur and slung it around her shoulders. "You know they'll go straight to the guards. Congratulations,



smarty. Now you're stuck in here with me. Assuming they don't just shoot you or expel you. You'll be hard for them to contain, and they don't like troublemakers."

Shiff lunged and grabbed Gretta's arm, dragging her behind him. "I don't plan on hanging out that long." He didn't wait for her response, but pulled her into the tunnel he'd dug over the past few days and set a charge behind him to seal it. "Run, girl!"

Gretta had known Shiff long enough to know when she could argue and when it was time to shut her mouth and simply do what he told her. This was the latter. She ran blindly down the tunnel, crouched so she didn't hit her head. It wasn't strictly necessary, but she wasn't taking any chances.

The only light came from glow sticks he'd placed at various lengths down the corridor. It wasn't long before a muffled explosion signaled the prison end of the tunnel had been sealed by the charges Shiffley had set.

When she reached a solid wall, she looked around for which way to go, but found nothing. Now what?

"Up with you." Shiffley dropped to one knee and motioned her to climb on his raised leg. She did, and he put one hand on her ass, the other on her thigh, and shoved her upward as he stood.

She managed to get one foot on his shoulder and his hand left her ass to find that foot and continue to push her out of the hole in the earth. Her fingers found the icy edge, and she scrambled to pull herself up and out. Frigid wind blasted her face as she came out of the underground prison, and her nose instantly became numb.

Shiffley pulled himself up almost immediately after her. A bag he'd obviously stashed earlier was tied to his waist. Without saying a word, he pulled out full land gear and tucked her into the thick, bulky clothing. She was covered from head to toe, and still the biting cold sunk into her bones.

Knowing she had to get moving, she started hopping from foot to foot. Shiffley brought out two body warmers and tucked them into her coat. They were on top of the

bottom-most layer of clothing on her back and chest, keeping her core as warm as they could.

Next came the heated oxygen to protect her lungs. Even so, with thirty clicks to the nearest underground outpost, Gretta knew she'd never make it. She'd freeze to death long before then.

Shiffley kept wrapping layers around her, though he did it quickly. Within two minutes, he pronounced her ready. She looked over the terrain, and her heart sank. It might be flat, but it was littered with ice traps. If they fell, the fall would likely be miles deep.

"Follow me exactly. Every step, Gretta. Now, move!"

Shiffley sped off, and Gretta did her best to watch where he put his feet. She didn't look up, only to the snow-covered ground at his footprints. She never thought to see how far ahead he was. Shiffley would never leave her far behind, no matter how bad the need for swiftness.

It wasn't long before Gretta's lungs began to burn, even through the heated oxygen mask. She kept her pace, though, determined to prove to Shiffley she wasn't a liability. She'd already let him down by ending up in Dead Man's Keep to begin with. No way she'd let him down twice.

Except she did. The arctic wind and the extremely low surface temperature took its toll long before she was ready to give up. As always, Shiffley was there. He scooped her up across his shoulders and continued on even quicker than before. That was when Gretta realized she'd never be a match for him. Not physically, at least. He carried her like she weighed nothing and never slowed his pace no matter where he had to jump or swerve to keep them on safe ground.

Unfortunately, now that she wasn't moving, the cold started to overcome her quicker than before. She dozed lightly from time to time, and each time she did, Shiffley swatted her ass. Hard. "Stay awake! Talk to me, sing, scream, whatever. Just don't go to sleep."

Gretta wanted to reply, but she couldn't. It was in that moment she realized perhaps Shiffley couldn't make everything all right this time. She'd depended on him far too long, come to depend on him too much, and this time she'd killed them both. "I'm sorry, Shiff. So sorry."

"Be sorry later." He stopped and set her on her feet. With a mighty roar, he stomped the ground near them once, twice. On the third time, the ice splintered. The fourth time, it fractured, and great shards fell through the hole. "Down, Gretta. Climb the ladder down the hole. Now!"

Shiffley's command was undeniable. Even though her legs didn't want to work, she forced herself to follow his instructions. She made it halfway before she missed a step and slid several feet before she caught herself again. Her scream echoed around her, but she didn't stop. She kept moving until her feet were on the floor. Once there, she collapsed in a heap.

Shiffley wasn't far behind. He pulled Gretta to her feet and shoved her forward. "Keep moving. My earth ship is only a few hundred yards away. I'll get you warmed up there. Move."

Contrary to what she thought herself capable of, Gretta kept moving. The cold, while not as harsh, was still bone chilling. Her toes had long since gone numb, as well as her fingers and cheeks and nose. If she didn't have frostbite, it would be a damned miracle.

True to his word, it wasn't long before she saw Shiffley's ride. It was illuminated faintly by green glow sticks and orange backup lights. The hatch opened at their approach and Gretta ducked inside. Shiffley was right on her heels.

He shoved her into the copilot's seat and powered up, running checks quickly but thoroughly. Gradually, the temperature began to climb until Gretta thought she might not die from exposure after all. She wasn't warm by any means, but at least she was starting to get some sensation back in her extremities. Even her nose started to sting and burn a little.

Shiffley didn't say anything or even look at her. Judging from the way he tried to mask his expression, he was good and pissed. He always tried to hide his emotions from her, especially when he was angry, but the tightness of his lips and the slight crinkle of his eyes gave him away.

No one else would notice. But Gretta did. She always knew how he felt, even sometimes what he was thinking, and right now he was thinking she was in trouble.

Big trouble.

## Chapter Two

Shiffley powered up the vehicle and started it moving. Once he passed through the tunnel he'd made especially for this trip and into the safer, permanent tunnels, Shiffley set the autopilot and turned to Gretta. He was livid.

And scared shitless. His hands actually shook, and he fisted them to keep the trembling at bay as best he could.

"You could have been killed, Gretta. Should have been killed. What the fuck were you thinking? And what did you do to end up in Dead Man's Keep?"

She shrugged. Gretta knew there was no use keeping anything from him. He always found out. "Killed a guard outside Aristar Farm."

"Great, woman. Just fucking great."

"He was expelling a teenager! The poor kid was terrified. All he'd done was raid the food stash. He was hungry, Shiff. And for that they were going to expel him to the surface."

"And did you accomplish anything by killing the guard?"

"No. The boy died before the guard hit the ground." Her breathing changed slightly, and Shiffley didn't miss the little shiver.

"So you risked your life -- and mine -- for nothing?"

"I didn't ask you to come after me, Shiff. I would have fought my way out eventually."

"And gone where? You couldn't even make it the few clicks it took to get outside the ice fields."

"I would have figured something out. I'm nothing if not resourceful."

They looked at each other for a moment. Neither speaking. Neither backing down.

"I don't intimidate you in the least, do I?" Shiffley knew he gave her pause, but he'd never had a bluff on her. Like a child pushing a parent, she knew he'd always be there for her.

"Of course you do, Shiff." She gave him a wicked smile.

Too bad she was still suffering effects from the cold. She'd have looked too damned sexy for her own good. "When you're good and pissed, it's like looking Death in the face and daring to smile at him." Gretta shrugged. "I imagine I'd get the same eerie thrill if I did actually stare down Death."

Shiffley snarled and grabbed Gretta by the front of her coat. "Get up. You need to be warmed up, and I need to see what other damage was done to you."

He didn't give her time to protest, but dragged her stumbling after him to the back of the ship and his sleep room. Once there, he shoved her onto the bed. She landed on her bottom and didn't move, only looked at him as if waiting for him to tell her what to do next. Shiffley fancied that perhaps he'd finally made the right impression on her, that she finally realized he meant business. The slight tilt of her head, though, indicated she was more curious than frightened.

With brisk, swift movements, Shiffley pulled off every layer of Gretta's clothing until she was nude and shivering. There were bruises and partially healed lacerations on her body that should never have been there. Every one of them she'd picked up in Dead Man's Keep. She must have fought every single day she'd been there. No wonder she looked so haggard.

"Son of a bitch," he breathed and scrubbed a hand over his face. "What the fuck were you thinking, Gretta?"

Gretta had never heard that tone of voice from Shiffley. He sounded almost... concerned. Shiffley had always been there for her. He had taken her in when she was a mere girl of twelve, and she'd been in his care ever since. In all that time, though, he'd never once been "nice" to her or given any clue he worried about her.

He'd gotten her out of trouble, taught her how to get herself out of trouble, and left her to her own devices most of the time. But she knew better. It was about time he stopped acting like she meant nothing to him when it was obvious to everyone -- even her -- that she meant everything.

"I was trying to do the right thing, Shiff. They shouldn't kill anyone for trying to find something to eat."

"I know, Greta, but you can't save the world." He bit out his words angrily and took a deep breath before he spoke again. When he did, he fixed her with an icy gaze colder than the surface above them. "What, exactly, do you suppose would have happened to you had I not been there?"

His soft-spoken question grated on Greta's nerves. Did he have to be so smug about it? Shiffley always used that tone when she'd done something particularly stupid. Like she didn't already know. "You don't have to rub it in, Shiff. I knew I was a goner."

"I know that too," he answered quickly and moved closer to her so they were practically nose to nose. "You deliberately provoked that Lionsblood hoping for a swift death. Don't you care if you live or die?"

Something in his eyes clued her in. Had she been anyone else, she'd have missed it, but Greta knew Shiffley. Quite possibly better than anyone else. "Maybe. Maybe not." She was still cold, but he'd apparently turned up the heat in this smaller part of the ship. The vent above her now blew out warm air right where he'd pushed her down on the bed. "But I'm betting you do. Probably more than you want to admit."

"I practically raised you, girl. Of course I care." He'd taken a step backward, a sure sign she'd put him on the defensive.

"I was grown when you found me, Shiff." She leaned back on the bed, her hands behind her supporting her weight. She was acutely aware her position thrust her breasts up at him. "Don't make the mistake of thinking I see you as a father figure. I don't now, and I never did. You taught me how to live, but you didn't raise me."

Despite how uncomfortable she was, something inside her compelled her to do this. It just felt right.

His face hardened, and his gaze roamed her body, chasing away all lingering effects of the cold. A flush crept up her neck and suffused her face. Instead of cold, she was hot. Burning. It was an unfamiliar sensation, but one she gave free rein. But only for Shiff.

"I know that." He lunged for her, and forced her to scoot back on the bed. Still fully clothed, Shiffley covered her nude body with his much larger one. "I just wanted to make sure you did." And he claimed her mouth with his.

\* \* \*

It was about damned time! Shiff wasn't exactly sure when he'd first realized he loved the little minx, but he was damned sure he did. She was his. She had always been his. It was why he'd taught her to defend herself, and why he'd risked everything and took so many chances to rescue her this time.

Her surrender was sweet, though he was hard pressed to be sure she was the one surrendering. He'd fought his attraction long and hard, so he didn't push her too quickly. Shiffley was a formidable enemy, but Gretta scared him shitless.

"You're in more trouble than you've ever been in your life, Gretta. I hope you realize that." Shiff didn't release his hold on her, nor did he stop his kisses. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, as he longed to do with his cock into her pussy. "If anything had happened to you, I'd have killed everyone in the compound."

He'd hoped to impress upon her the seriousness of the situation, but Gretta actually smiled as he continued to kiss her. "Ah, Shiff," she sang as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him even deeper. "You say the sweetest things."

Shiff groaned. "Damned woman. You'll be the death of me one day."

Gretta held him close for one more, hard kiss, then pushed him off her and got to her knees. "I certainly hope not. But I may kill you myself if you don't get your damned clothes off and let me see that hard body of yours."

She had never been shy about letting him know what she wanted. It was the main reason he'd held back from her and tried not to let his lust show.



Gretta didn't wait for him to undress. She reached for his outer fur lining and worked her way inside. When she peeled his inner shirt from his skin, her eyes widened, and she actually licked her lips. Shiff had the sudden urge to cover himself in the face of her unabashed lust. He had never been this open about what he wanted from her. At the same time, he wanted to puff out his chest and flex. It was totally ridiculous.

Without asking, or giving any other warning of what she was going to do, Gretta dipped her head to his chest and licked his left nipple with a wet, hot flick of her tongue. "Mmmm. I like." Her husky purr went straight to his dick, and he couldn't help the groan that escaped him. He was the big bad Vampire/Lionsblood. He had the best both races could offer in the way of physical and mental strength. Yet here Gretta was. In just a few swift moments, she had gone from the weaker of them to the aggressor.

"Sweet Sun, Gretta. Slow down!" With anyone else, he'd have despised himself for his weakness, but with Gretta all he felt was relief. She was part of him, and he had only begun to realize just how much. In fact, it wasn't until he faced the possibility of life without her that he'd finally admitted how much he needed her.

"What? You always told me to seize what I wanted." She gave his nipple a sharp little nip, and he sucked in a breath. "Well, I want you, Shiff. Only you. Always you."

"I know," he growled and pulled her away from his chest and back to his mouth. He kissed her deeply before pushing her away and back onto the bed. He slipped to the floor to rid himself of his boots and pants to stand before her naked and unashamed of his desire for her. "I've always known. I only wanted to make sure you knew as well. But, by the Sun, Gretta, I'm so fucking hard I'm about to explode. If you make me embarrass myself this first time, I'll never let you forget it."

She laughed, pure joy and excitement in her face. "I'll never let you forget it either, Shiff. Now get that big cock over here and fuck me with it. If you're coming, I'm coming with you."

Who was he to disappoint his woman?

Shiffley didn't immediately pounce on her and fuck her silly, as they both wanted. Not yet anyway. He wanted to taste her. Her scent had often tantalized him

beyond endurance, and he had to sample what his nose told him would be a fine meal. Spreading Gretta's legs, he licked her from cunt to clit in one long, slow stroke. Gretta squealed and gripped his hair, pulling him to her.

"Fuck, yeah, Shiff! Sweet Sun, I love that!"

Was this his sweet little Gretta?

She writhed beneath him, grinding her pelvis so hard that her clit scraped against his upper lip and the stubble he knew abraded her sensitive flesh. She wasn't an innocent girl, but a woman grown. A woman who knew what she wanted and seized it with both hands. This was a woman who wouldn't take "no" for an answer, and he had no intention of denying her anything.

Shiffley lapped at her cunt, sticking his tongue where his dick would be soon and coaxing every drop of moisture from her he could. He loved that she creamed so plentifully for him, and that she embraced his need of her and her need of him.

The slightly musky sweet smell of her intoxicated him almost as much as the way she freely gave her body to him. But she was no passive lover. Even as he lost himself in the taste and silky feel of her cunt, her passionate cries and screams surrounded him like rich, beautiful music.

But it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. His body cried out for hers as surely as she screamed his name as he brought her to the brink of orgasm only to let her slide back down without reaching the ultimate pleasure.

It wasn't long before Gretta, too, had had enough. After he pulled back from what was probably the promise of a very strong orgasm, Gretta shrieked at him and pounded his shoulder with her fist.

"If you do that again, you swine, I'll give you a taste of what I dished out earlier to those Lionsblood."

Shiffley chuckled. "I wouldn't dream of it. It's time for both of us to get some relief." He kissed his way up her body, stopping to delve his tongue into her navel, then to wrap his tongue around both nipples. Once he found her mouth again, he settled his

body on top of hers. He didn't need to urge her to wrap her legs around his waist. Gretta did so and ground her clit against his painfully engorged cock.

"Look at me, Gretta." He tangled his fingers in her dark mass of curly hair. She met his gaze without hesitation, her eyes bright with lust and love. Slowly, carefully, Shiffley entered her. He met her virgin barrier with a slight shock, and her eyes widened slightly when he pressed against it.

"This is unexpected," he murmured. "Did you plan on telling me, or did you think I'd simply plunge into you without thought?"

"Neither," she shrugged and smiled. "I didn't think it was necessary. You'd know if another man had touched me, and there's no way you'd take a chance on hurting me during an act like this. You're not the kind of man to blindly take his pleasure with someone he loves without ensuring her pleasure and comfort."

He sighed and lowered his forehead to hers in mock weariness. "Is nothing about me secret from you? Can you at least pretend to be impressed by me? I am, after all, one of the deadliest men in the world."

Gretta's chuckle warmed his heart. "Absolutely not. Someone has to make sure your ego doesn't build out of proportion. I'm very glad it's me."

"Me, too," Shiffley breathed before plunging into her as he nipped her bottom lip.

## Chapter Three

The pain was slight, but even if it had been horrible, it was worth the pleasure that almost immediately replaced it. Gretta had known for a very long time that sex with Shiffley would be nothing if not pleasurable.

Over the years, she'd watched him. He kept himself apart from everyone but her. Even the occasional woman in his life had never known the real Shiff. Sure, he was one of the most dangerous beings on the planet, but he was really a gentle man. No one saw that in him.

But her.

Gretta had watched him with his woman of the month on more than one occasion. It had always been rough. Hard and fast. Gretta could tell by his body language and his expressions all the roughness and seeming disregard for his partner wasn't what he really liked. He gave each woman what she wanted and expected, but he had never enjoyed it.

For the longest time, Gretta had considered herself a freak for being a peeping tom, but when she realized one day she knew exactly what Shiffley wanted, she could have cared less if playing the voyeur was wrong. Shiff needed a woman with every bit as much strength as he had. A woman who could challenge him at every turn. A woman who knew exactly what she wanted and grabbed it with both hands.

Even now, Gretta dug her nails into Shiffley's back and held on for dear life. No way she was letting him pull away from her now.

"Oh, no, Gretta. I'm not going anywhere." Shiffley laved the small hurt to her lip and plunged his tongue into her mouth once again, this time starting to move inside her with slow, exquisite strokes.

"Of course you're not," she sighed in between wet, delicious kisses. "I'm not letting you." Shiff chuckled, but made no move to prove her wrong. He hooked one of Gretta's legs over his forearm and began to move faster.

"Mine," he growled, shifting a little, penetrating her deeper.

"'Bout damned time, too."

"Later, Gretta. We'll talk about that later." Shiff's voice was rough and breathy. Gretta would have smiled if she hadn't been overwhelmed with wonderful sensations.

Shiff latched onto the side of her neck and pulled. Gretta knew he'd marked her, but she didn't care. She'd marked him, and they could continue marking each other the rest of the night for all she cared. As long as he kept doing this to her, as long as they kept taking pleasure in each other, she didn't care. She was his. Had been for a very long time. It was a relief to finally celebrate it.

The place where their bodies joined burned with sensation. Her clit tingled and throbbed, and she spread her legs as far as she could in her current position. Gretta desperately needed all the friction Shiffley could give her.

"No, Gretta," Shiff growled at her. "Come for me now."

As if she'd been waiting for his command, Gretta's body erupted in tingles centered at her clit and radiating outward. Her muscles seized, and she barely recognized her own cries of pleasure.

"Shiff!" She clawed at him, holding him to her and wrapping her free leg around him. Shiff plunged into her and held her as tightly as she held him. He grunted and growled his pleasure until, finally, his member pulsed and throbbed inside Gretta as he came. Sweat erupted over his body.

"Sweet Sun," Shiff whispered as he kissed and laved Gretta's neck where he'd sucked and marked her flesh.

"Yeah." Gretta giggled. Shiff let her leg down. Gretta sighed, pushing Shiffley over to his back and straddling him. "My turn now."

Nothing could have prepared Shiffley for the feel of her silky hair caressing him as she planted kisses over his chest. Feathery strands of the copper mass tickled and

titillated with every shake of her head. Goose bumps rose over his skin when her tongue found one nipple and licked a wet circle. She was slowly and surely driving him mad, and he could care less.

Shiff jumped a little when she nipped his skin just beneath his belly button, and Gretta giggled. "What's wrong? It was only a little love bite."

"Witch," he hissed. Then he lost all ability to do anything but feel.

Gretta looked him dead in the eye and slowly lowered her mouth around his throbbing cock. It was pure heaven! Surely if he died this very second, even the gods couldn't offer such paradise. Humming Gretta closed her lips around the head and sucked.

"Mmmm..."

Shiff groaned and closed his eyes before Gretta could see them cross. She already had him tangled in a sensual web like none other he'd ever experienced, but she didn't have to know how badly she'd affected him.

Her mouth left him in one hard pull. "Oh, no, Shiff. I want you to watch while I suck you. You're not holding anything back from me or I swear I'll figure out a way to get off world and I'll never come back."

So much for being one of the most deadly beings on the planet. Right now, Shiff was nothing more than a lovesick pup just cutting his fangs. This one extraordinary woman had him tied up in knots just from her touch. It was a new experience for Shiff, and he couldn't have been happier.

"I'd find you, Gretta, and drag you home." His voice was strangled and weak, but he didn't care. She had stripped every defense he had away. Funny that he didn't really care.

"Good." She smiled then, showing a cute little dimple in her left cheek. "But as far as I'm concerned, 'home' is wherever you are, Shiff."

Before he could respond, Gretta took about half his shaft down her throat. Shiff couldn't have looked away if he'd wanted to. He didn't want to.

"That's it, Gretta. Take all of me. Suck it."

Her humming and licking and that little thing she did with the back of her throat when she took him deep had his cock hard as granite again. He fisted his hands in her hair, not to hold her to him or force her to do more than she was comfortable with, but to anchor himself. It was all so wonderful, he was afraid it was nothing more than a dream.

She let his cock go with a little *pop* and ran her tongue the length of it from base to tip, never taking her eyes from his. Finally, she went lower and took one testicle in her mouth and rolled her tongue around it. His cock jumped.

"Enough!" He pulled her away from him. Not that Gretta had done anything wrong, but no way was he losing it before he was buried inside her again. "Turn the fuck over."

Instead of waiting for her to comply, he flipped her onto her belly. Gretta giggled and got to her knees, raising her ass high in the air. "My, my, but you're impatient."

Wasn't it the truth? Shiff was shaking, he was so wound up. Hadn't he just come inside her a few minutes before? He swiped two fingers through her pussy to make sure she was ready for him, then aimed and plunged home.

They both cried out. Gretta arched her back and pushed back against him, urging him deeper, which he happily obliged. Shiff gripped her hips and pulled her to him with every thrust. Gretta dropped to her forearms and looked back at him, turning her upper body slightly.

She smiled, a wild, lust-filled look in her eyes. As long as she was having as much fun as he was, Shiff didn't worry about any rough handling. He normally wasn't into that kind of thing, but he didn't seem to be able to help himself. Everything about Gretta enflamed him beyond reason, and her willingness to let him explore her body in any way he wanted only endeared her to him more.

Gretta shifted her position slightly. Without letting Shiff's cock slip from her body, she let her knees slide to one side so she lay on her hip with one arm supporting her head, the other bent and resting on the opposite hip. She grinned back at Shiff. Daring him. Tempting him.

It was too much for his already frazzled senses. Shiff gripped her waist and leg and pounded into her. Sweat dotted his skin as he thrust. Where he was or whatever else was going on didn't matter to him. He was with the woman he desperately loved, and she was inviting him to take whatever he needed.

"Mine!" He roared the word rather than spoke it. It seemed to be all he was capable of. There was a need deep inside him to claim her, to make damned sure the whole world knew exactly whose she was.

"That's right, Shiff. And I'm not going anywhere."

Over and over he surged inside her. She was heaven. He never knew physical pleasure could be so fulfilling, so right. Everything centered on her and where their bodies joined. She continued to smile at him, her arm cocked on her hip, and he was helpless. Lost in her eyes. In her body.

Finally, she raised a hand and pushed back against him. She turned over onto her back and spread her thighs.

"Come here, Shiff."

She didn't have to tell him twice. He practically pounced on her and wrapped his arms around her. He was about to slide back inside her, where he belonged, when she wedged an arm between them and pushed slightly on his chest with her hand.

"Slow down, Shiff."

"I don't want to," he growled and thrust his hips at her. The head slipped inside her, but she pushed again, and he stopped.

"I know," she smiled. "I don't want you to, but there's something I need to say."

"Now?" Shiff raised his eyebrows. "Can't it wait until we've fucked each other into oblivion?" He wanted to laugh, but with such a bad case of blue balls he couldn't manage it.

"Yes, Shiff, now." She did manage a small smile, though looking in her eyes told him she was as uncomfortable as he was. "I need to say I'm sorry."

Shiffley stilled. "Sorry? What the hell for?"



She sighed and slid her arms around his neck. Shiff knew she needed to say whatever it was she had on her mind, but he took the opportunity she gave him and slid completely inside her. They both groaned. Holding himself still took a huge effort on his part, but Gretta was worth any amount of discomfort. She was everything to him, and he would do whatever it took to keep her safe and at his side.

## Chapter Four

Gretta took a couple breaths. "I'm sorry about being stupid and getting myself stuck in Dead Man's Keep. Truth is, I knew you'd be there for me and I knew the consequences. I just chose to ignore them." She closed her eyes and turned her head away, obviously in distress and hurting. "I put your life in as much danger as I did my own and I'm sorry, Shiff. If anything ever happened to you..."

"Gretta, look at me." He didn't give her a chance to obey. Instead he gently turned her face to him. "You know me better than anyone else. Do you honestly think I was ever in any danger in that place?"

"Of course! We both were. The guards shoot to kill, the prisoners are all out to make a name for themselves. Killing someone who'd practically named himself a Vampire would ensure as much food as they wanted forever. You were probably in more danger than I was. To say nothing of the very real danger of freezing to death."

"I suppose it's my turn to ask if you consider me a mere Lionsblood, or even a mere Vampire." He couldn't help his smile, or the flex of his hips. "I think you knew there was no real danger to me. Rescuing you was difficult, yes, but never dangerous to me. There was no one there -- human or Lionsblood -- who could have bested me."

"Arrogance can get you killed. You taught me that."

"I also taught you the difference between arrogance and confidence. I never underestimate an opponent. I simply study and act accordingly. What you did, you did because you believed it the right thing to do. No matter what I said to you, you did the right thing. I just did my job."

It was her turn to raise her eyebrows and look incredulous. "Your job is to get me out of sticky situations?"

Shiff smiled. "If that's what you need. Gretta, you have the heart of a Lioness. I accepted that years ago, probably from the first moment I met you. If that means you get yourself in trouble because you do things your body can't defend, then I'll be an extension of your wrath. The force behind the will, so to speak. I always knew you were meant to be a Lionsblood. I even came up with a special name for you." He dipped his head for a lingering kiss. "You're a Lionsheart, sweetheart. My Lionsheart."

She smiled and pulled him down for another kiss. "I love you, you know. I've always loved you."

"Me, too, Gretta. I knew it, but was afraid of it at the same time. You were too young when fate brought us together. I was afraid you saw me as a parent more than a man."

"Uh, that'd be just gross, Shiff." She giggled. "Now, if you're done with all the jabbering, can we get on with the fucking business? I want to come."

"When we're finished here, remind me to teach you how to speak your mind. You're too repressed."

Shiff shifted his position a little bit to bring her more securely against his body, then started moving again. He went slowly at first, letting the sensations build gradually. Gretta's sighs moved him like nothing else could. He hoped he could always keep her so contented. Her fingers danced across his back and arms as he continued his leisurely movement within her.

Gretta arched her back, offering her breasts to him, and there was simply no way he could refuse. Dipping his head, he took one ripe peak between his lips and pulled gently. He laved the tense nub once before moving to the other, never ceasing the movement of his hips.

When Gretta's hands slid down his back to his ass, Shiffley let her nipple go and began fucking her in earnest. Instead of her breasts, Shiff latched onto her neck, licking and swirling his tongue. His fangs lengthened at the temptation of the blood vessel he knew lay just beneath her skin, but he refused to give in. If he hurt her, he'd never forgive himself.

"Fuck, Shiff! Sweet Sun, fuck me!" She gripped the cheeks of his butt, urging him to move faster, harder. Gretta thrust her hips at him, meeting him thrust for thrust. She screamed his name and writhed beneath him. As much as he wanted it to last this time, as much as he really wanted to ensure her pleasure, Shiff knew it wouldn't be long before he lost the battle against his orgasm. He just hoped he could make her come before he did.

With a cry, Gretta arched her neck, exposing more of her flesh to his hungry mouth. His teeth scraped her skin unintentionally, but Gretta shuddered and panted.

"Ohmigod! Yes, Shiff! Do it! Don't hold back! Don't hold back!"

Unable to refuse even if his life depended on it, Shiffley groaned and sank his teeth deep. Gretta's pussy contracted around his cock. She kept throwing her hips at him and clawing at his backside, pulling him closer as he drank from her. Her legs tightened around him, and she dug her heels into his thighs, her whole body stiffening. With one ragged inward breath, Gretta screamed.

Shiff sealed the wounds he'd made with a swipe of his tongue. Though Vampires often killed those they fed from, they also drank during sex, which gave them the ability to seal any wounds they made with their saliva. Thank goodness.

"Dear God, please tell me you're OK, Gretta!" This was why he'd waited so long to claim her.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

He blinked, searching her face for signs of repulsion, though he wasn't sure if he could take it if he actually saw disgust in her eyes. "I -- I thought... I thought you wanted..."

She shrieked and pounded his shoulder with one tiny fist. "Of course I 'wanted!' Why the fuck did you stop?"

Thank goodness he knew how to recover quickly. "Well, in that case..."

He didn't bite her again -- he'd do it again another time. After she'd had time to recover. Right now, he'd fuck her until they were both giddy with pleasure. Then he'd do it all over again.

He surged into her, angling his thrusts so he put the maximum amount of friction on her clit. He followed her body movements, giving her what she needed. Within minutes, she began to pant and claw at him once again.

"Oh, yeah, Shiff. That's it," she whimpered. "Please don't stop. I need to come again."

"Then let go, Gretta. Give it to me. Give me all of you."

She smiled and nodded her head. "OK." It was a simple statement, but one Shiffley intended to hold her to.

With one deep breath, Gretta closed her eyes, threw her head back, and screamed like a Lioness in heat. Her body shuddered around him and sweat slickened her skin. This time, she latched onto his shoulder and bit. Hard. Her show of ownership made his heart swell. And his cock.

Just as her spasms eased, Shiff's own began. For the second time, he emptied himself inside Gretta. He couldn't contain his shout of pleasure. He'd never known such wonderful sensations could exist, and for him to have experienced it more than once was unimaginable. Why the hell had he waited so long to claim Gretta? She had been his from the beginning. Would always be his so long as he took care of her.

When the last shudder left his body, he rolled them to their sides and held Gretta close. He didn't want to let her go. It felt good to simply hold her.

"I owe you an apology, Gretta." Shiff kissed her forehead and nuzzled her hair with his nose. He loved the smell of her and couldn't help inhaling deeply. Sun willing, her scent would never leave him.

"An apology?" She pulled back slightly to look at him, confusion evident on her lovely face. "Whatever for?"

"For waiting so long to tell you I love you."

She rolled her eyes. "Is that all? Shiff, I've known you loved me since I was old enough to know what love was. The lust thing is a bit new, but I knew that, too."

He laughed. "Is there anything about me you don't know?"

She looked at him for a moment as if contemplating his question. "Nope. I think I have you down."

He rolled over to his back, pulling her with him so she lay on top of him. "Not then, but you do now. Question is, what will you do with me?"

"Oh, I'm sure I can think of something."

## **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).