

Heartfire  
B.J. McCall

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The universe is vast, but finding a dragon on the auction block isn't a usual occurrence for hunter Daecon Kreass. When the magnificent dragon shifts into a stunning woman she stirs his blood like never before, but Arara is Zyafayan aristocracy and Daecon must keep her at arm's length and return her safely to her royal family.

Arara has never forgotten the handsome vampire who saved her from captivity. Determined to find out if her feelings are true or that of a grateful victim, Arara changes her appearance and her name. She joins Vazan Shield and is partnered with Daecon in the new hostage rescue unit.

Despite her deception the flames of passion are quickly ignited. This time around she's determined to never let him go.

## Chapter One

Arara raised her head and opened her wings to the blustering wind. The ship's bow dipped into a trough, and heaved upward, cresting the oncoming swell. Salty spray splattered her neck, chest and back, glistening on iridescent scales. She swished her long tail, sending flashes of golden hues along its length.

"Arara!"

Folding her wings, Arara turned her broad head and looked down at her faithful servant.

Hands on her hips, Elsath shouted over the wind. "Your father has forbidden you to fly."

"We've been confined below for days. I need to spread my wings and feel the wind on my face."

A gust whipped Elsath's brown hair around her thin face. "It's too dangerous!"

"The storm has passed." Arara opened her wings with a snap, the thin membranes catching a strong blast. "A little wind won't harm me."

"Arara. Stop! The captain says the storm has forced us off course."

"I won't go far."

“Arara. No!”

Wings spread, Arara launched off the ship’s deck. Sweeping over and under her wings, the wailing wind lifted her skyward. Arara soared high, delighting in the swirling air currents.

She swept her wings high, then down in a power-stroke, pushing higher into the overcast sky. Whipping her long tail from side to side, Arara increased her air speed. Arching her back and slashing the air with her tail, she pointed her nose skyward and threw back her head, performing an aerial somersault. After three flips, she pulled up and straightened her course. Dipping one wing, Arara turned and headed back toward the ship.

A flash to her right alerted Arara, but the warning came too late. A thin, gossamer net fell over her, covering her back, catching on her clawed feet and snagging her wings. She flapped and fluttered her wings, but instead of shaking off the net she merely twisted and turned, caught in the crisscross of thin line. Dangerously ensnared, she tore with teeth and talons, but the net held.

She roared, blasting the net with her fiery breath. The line turned black, but didn’t burn or melt.

Sharp stings pierced her shoulder and chest, stealing the breath from her lungs. She gathered her ebbing strength and let loose a dragon cry, attacking the net once more with a sputtering flame.

Her wings useless, Arara fell, spiraling toward the waves below. Her fall ceased, so abruptly that her weight pressed hard into the net, ripping scales from her back. Then she recoiled, shooting back up into the sky. Gravity prevailed, the net halting her sudden ascent.

Tangled, helpless, and quickly losing consciousness, Arara hung in the net and looked up into the yawning belly of an airship. Then darkness claimed her.

\* \* \*

“Stand back, lest ye be burned!”

Daecon Kreass ignored the auctioneer and kept walking. Then a rumble more plaintive than fierce forced Daecon to slow his step. The sound tore at Daecon, drawing him to investigate despite the important task that had brought him to the planet of Pryidar. Unable to ignore an animal in distress, Daecon strode toward the crowd gathering around a flatbed vehicle. The market teemed with shoppers from all over the galaxy. On Pryidar, anything and everything was for sale, vehicles and weapons, even slaves. This section of the market dealt in exotic animals, additions for private zoos or pets for wealthy collectors.

A full head taller than the shoppers surrounding the stage, Daecon easily elbowed his way through the crowd. For three days, he’d searched this settlement common to criminals looking for a pirate called Roke. Renowned for its wealth of goods stolen from the far reaches of the galaxy, the Pryidar market was an excellent place for pirates, thieves and poachers to dispose of their spoils.

A man stood on the flatbed. His bare arms were covered in tattoos, and in his left hand he held a long pointed shaft.

“I’m Wart, your auctioneer.”

Wart had spoken in Arano, the intergalactic language commonly used for commercial and diplomatic purposes. The auctioneer shared the makeshift stage with a huge rectangular cage covered in a stained brown tarp, and a lanky youth with curly blond hair who held a long shaft. The youth stuck the shaft through a slit in the tarp and grinned when the animal inside the cage grumbled.

“What’s in the cage?” asked a man standing at the edge of the flatbed.

Wart’s gaze slid over the crowd, hesitating briefly on Daecon before he addressed the shoppers. “Something none of you have ever seen before.”

“Show us,” demanded another shopper.

Wart nodded, and the youth gave the animal another nasty jab. Pain etched the resulting growl and smoke poured from beneath the tarp, fluttering the edges. The excited crowd surged forward.

“Get your coin ready,” Wart said. “Rasel, help me with the cover.”

Wart and Rasel grabbed a corner of the tarp and flipped it back.

Gasps and cries skittered through the crowd. The shoppers stepped back in a wave, leaving space for Daecon and a few brave souls to approach the flatbed for a better look.

Crammed inside the cage was a sizable trussed dragon. Bind-lock, an exceptionally strong strap used to secure cargo, was wrapped around the dragon’s jaw, chest and feet, immobilizing the creature’s mouth, wings and talons. The confines of the cage restricted the dragon’s lethal tail. Beneath the bright Pryidar sun, its iridescent hide gleamed in shades of gold.

“Dragon for sale,” Wart bellowed. “Ready your coin. It isn’t every day a dragon is available.”

“Where was the creature captured?” Daecon asked, wondering how poachers had caught a dragon and brought it to Pryidar. He knew of only two places where dragons still existed, Alysalan, a primordial world in a nearby galaxy, and Zyafayan, the planet of shape-shifters. Throughout the universe the Zyafayan were highly respected, powerful shape-shifters capable of taking many forms, but only members of the ancient royal families had the capability of shifting into dragons.

Either option was unthinkable, but the creature in the cage looked like a dragon.

“I don’t catch them,” Wart said. “I just sell them.”

A woman at the back of the crowd called out, “Is it a real dragon?”

Wart sneered. “Come up and see for yourself, if you dare.”

Daecon jumped onto the flatbed. “I’d like to inspect the dragon.”

Wart tapped Daecon’s chest with the pointed shaft. “Only if you’re able to buy,” Wart said, giving Daecon a quick jab. “This isn’t a sideshow.”

In another setting the auctioneer’s action would be more than enough provocation for Daecon to teach him a painful lesson. Today, he simply bared his fangs.

Wart stepped back. "Suit yourself."

As Daecon approached the cage, the crowd quieted into a flurry of low murmurs. The dragon's eyes were closed, but the tip of its tail twitched. Heart hammering, Daecon knelt down and reached between the bars. The crowd fell silent. He touched the scaled head, and the dragon protested with a deep warning rumble.

"I'm Daecon, Daecon Kreass of Vazan," he said, speaking in Arano. "A friend."

He'd expected the dragon's hide to be rough, but the scales were smooth and warm beneath his fingers.

"I'm a bounty hunter. Perhaps you've heard of my employer, Vazan Shield?"

The dragon's tail twitched, but Daecon had no idea if the animal understood anything he'd said.

"I won't hurt you. I'll find a way to get you out of that cage and off this planet. If I succeed, I promise to take you home. If you understand me, blow smoke."

Nothing happened. Not a flicker of movement from the dragon.

"Tell me, what is a Zyafayan doing in a cage on Pryidar with the likes of these two fools?"

One eyelid popped open, revealing a golden eye with a dark slit. White smoke poured from the dragon's nostrils.

A woman in the crowd screamed.

"Settle down, folks," Wart said, but Daecon heard the waver in the auctioneer's voice.

The dragon's eyes opened, focusing on Daecon. A sentient being resided inside that scaled body.

"Nothing to worry about," Wart said, strutting around the makeshift stage. "The creature is heavily sedated."

*Not for long*, thought Daecon.

A sharp stab to his upper arm brought Daecon to his full height. He stepped between the cage and Wart. "Do that again and I'll break you in half."

A twitter of excitement snaked through the crowd and the dragon snorted smoke.

Wart's chin jutted out. "Either make an offer or get away from my dragon." The auctioneer addressed the crowd. "The bidding begins at three ureals of galactic credits. Delivery upon transfer of funds."

Clamoring in a dozen different languages, the shoppers contacted their patrons on com-links. Too steep a price. Several shoppers shook their heads and walked away making Daecon wonder if anyone in the crowd realized the prize offered for sale.

Obviously, Wart had no idea he was selling a shape-shifter or otherwise he wouldn't have placed the dragon into a barred cage. Once the dragon was capable of shifting form, it would escape and be hunted. Daecon had to make the deal now.

He motioned to the auctioneer. "A private word."

Wart stepped closer to the cage. "You making an offer?"

Daecon lowered his voice. "I'll give you a third of that amount in Vazan zirots."

Wart blinked. The Vazan coins were considered hard currency and easily exchanged throughout the inhabited universe while Galactic credits transferred through the intergalactic banking system were traceable by the Pryidar government. By the time the corrupt officials took their cut, Wart would be lucky to net a tenth of the selling price.

"A private transfer between us." Daecon dug into his pocket and pulled out a Vazan zirots. "My ship is docked at the transport station. You drive the dragon to the station, and we'll make the exchange."

Wart licked his lips.

Daecon took Wart's hand and slapped the coin into his palm. "Do we have a deal?"

Wart fingered the coin. "If you have the money, the dragon's yours. Balance due upon delivery."

A puff of smoke came from the dragon's nostrils, telling Daecon it understood.

## Chapter Two

Arara's spirit lifted as the flatbed began to move. She'd heard of Vazan, the vampire planet, but until today Arara had never seen a vampire in the flesh. Tall and well-muscled, Daecon was an impressive example of his species. His skin was pale, and his long black hair fell almost to his trim waist.

The vehicle lurched forward, picking up speed. Daecon peered between the flaps of tarp. He reached in and released the bind-lock wrapped around her jaw. "Don't speak. Otherwise someone might realize what you are."

Arara raised her head and faced him eye to eye. His features were rugged, his eyebrows dark dramatic slashes and his eyes a deep shade of blue.

"Wart is driving and Rasel is riding in the cab. They won't bother you."

Arara shook her head. The lethargic fog that had rendered her helpless was beginning to dissipate. She opened her mouth and worked her jaw.

Daecon smiled. "And I thought I had impressive fangs."

Struck by his humor in so serious a situation, Arara snorted smoke.

Ducking beneath the tarp, he crawled along the edge of the cage. "We'll arrive at the air transport station where my ship, the *Skyracer*, is docked. I have to retrieve the money to pay Wart so don't make a sound while I'm gone."

He reached in and released the straps on her chest. Arara took a deep breath, expanding her lungs and rolling her shoulders.

"I want to make sure Wart doesn't do anything stupid," Daecon said, releasing the strap around her feet. "Like thinking he can take the money and keep you."

If Wart or that blond fool touched her again, she'd fry them.

Arara wriggled her toes, her feet tingling as feeling returned. The cage's dimensions restricted the movement of her tail and wings. She puffed smoke, letting Daecon know she understood the situation.

Daecon adjusted the tarp, blocking her view. Within the dark cage, Arara continued to regain the feeling in her feet and wings.

The vehicle stopped and doors slammed.

"Time to pay up," Wart said. "I'll leave the boy here to guard the dragon."

Arara heard the scrape of Rasel's boots on the flatbed.

"Don't touch my dragon, Rasel," Daecon warned.

If Rasel jabbed her with his stick, she'd chew it up and spit out kindling at his feet. Time stretched as Arara waited for Daecon to return. She heard bits and pieces of conversations in unfamiliar languages as people passed by the flatbed. Shuffling his feet, Rasel continued to walk around her cage.

When he peeked beneath the cover, she growled, warning him away. Rasel dropped the tarp and retreated to the back of the flatbed.

"Rasel," Wart bellowed. "Help us unload the cage."

The vehicle's engine started, and a rumbling came from directly beneath her cage. The rear half of the flatbed began to tilt, rocking the cage. Arara hooked her claws on the bars as the cage slid down a short incline. Engine revving, the vehicle pulled away. The cage settled with a hard thud.

Daecon stuck his head beneath the tarp and smiled. His teeth were gleaming white and without a fang in sight. "They're gone," he said. "Are you well enough to shift?"

"Yes." It felt good to speak, but her voice sounded raspy.

"Your voice," he said. "It's softer than I expected."

"I can roar when necessary."

"What's your name?"

“Arara.”

He cleared his throat. “Wart gave me a security permit allowing me to take one unspecified animal off-planet. I fear a dragon would draw unwanted attention and my ship is too small to comfortably accommodate your size. I was thinking you might be able to shift into something smaller like a dog.”

*A dog?*

“I saw several of those black and white Siderian canines for sale in the market. The ones with the long, bushy tails.”

Arara refused to shift into a slobbering, tail-wagging dog.

Closing her eyes, she summoned her strength and shifted into a familiar form. As her form began to change, her cells heated. Muscles quivered and transformed. Wings retracted, reforming into legs. Scales altered and hair sprang forth, creating a rich, golden coat of fur. Feet shrank to paws and talons to claws.

Arara swished her new tail and looked at Daecon from the eyes of a Zyafayan mountain cat.

Hands fisted on the cage bars, he stared at her, eyes wide with astonishment, but he didn’t speak.

“I don’t like dogs,” she said, rising on all fours to stretch. “Ohhhhh. That feels good.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that.”

Arara licked her muzzle. “Open the cage.”

Daecon unlatched the locks and Arara stepped out of the cage that had been her prison for an untold number of hours. Days? Now that she was more alert, Arara let her gaze slide over Daecon. She’d experienced his compassion, and now she sensed his strength. The set of his shoulders and fluid movement of his honed body demonstrated confidence that fit with his profession. Arara had heard of Vazan Shield, a private corporation that specialized in security personnel, mercenaries for hire and bounty hunters. Despite his profession, she knew she was in good hands. “I’m thirsty.”

Daecon led her to a fountain. After drinking her fill, Arara raised her head and sniffed the air. The hot wind carried the stench of the animal market. “This is a bad place.”

“We should leave as quickly as possible.” He dug into a side pocket on his dark brown pants and removed a leash. Arara snarled as he looped the chain over her head. The restraint brought back the abject fear she’d experienced during her capture.

Daecon stroked her head, rubbing her between the ears. “Easy now. I apologize, Arara and I promise I’ll remove it the moment we board my ship. I can’t take you through the terminal without one. Just stick close to my side and act docile. The authorities won’t question a trained pet.”

Arara growled softly, but walked beside him, her head even with his hip.

“No growling, snarling or roaring, understood?”

“Understood,” she said.



When they entered the terminal, Daecon followed the signs to security. The interplanetary port teemed with travelers carrying covered cages, shopping bags and luggage. Docile slaves wearing zap-charge restraints on their neck and hands followed their masters. At the touch of a control held by the master a recalcitrant slave would receive a debilitating shock. Upon Arara's arrival on Pryidar, she'd begun to regain consciousness and had witnessed the brutal use of the zap-charge restraints on slaves disembarking from the same ship that had brought her to this horrible planet.

She wondered what had happen to those slaves. Her heart twisted at the thought of what might have befallen her if Daecon had not purchased her from Wart. Instead of heading for home, she'd be at best a confined pet, at worst an imprisoned attraction. Neither was acceptable.

Arara looked up at Daecon, struck again by his handsome profile and powerful body. She rubbed her flank against his leg. He reached down and stroked her head and neck. Arara inhaled, imprinting her sexy savior's scent into her memory.

The security check went without a hitch or so much as a raised eyebrow, making Arara wonder how many captured animals and enslaved people moved through this port. She decided then and there that once she was home she'd tell her father about the horror that existed on Pryidar. Her father had the ear of the Zyafayan representative to the Intergalactic Ministry. Only the ministry would have the authority to close down the Pryidar market.

Daecon moved quickly, guiding Arara to the elevator that would take them to level six where the *Skyracer* was docked. The ship was sleek, with a pointed nose and long fuselage and twin thrusters.

"She's built for speed rather than comfort," Daecon said.

Daecon sealed the *Skyracer*'s hatch, and removed the leash. A relieved Arara leaned against Daecon's leg. "Thank you for helping me."

She welcomed the feel of his big hands gently stroking her back. "Welcome aboard."

Arara followed Daecon forward to the cockpit. He settled into his pilot's chair and addressed the bank of controls before him. The automated voice of the ship's control response system was female and spoke in a language Arara didn't understand, but assumed was Vazana, Daecon's native tongue.

"Chose a spot and stay low," Daecon said. "As soon as the *Skyracer* is free of the docking port, we're launching into hyperspeed. You'll feel the drag of Pryidar's atmosphere."

Arara stretched out on the floor and laid her chin on her paws. The ship vibrated and the thrusters rumbled. Lying slightly behind and to the left of his pilot's seat, she watched Daecon's fingers fly over the nav screen.

Despite the obvious muscle in his shoulders and arms, his hands were agile and his fingers nimble. The hull shuddered violently as the *Skyracer* punched through the atmosphere. Then the flight smoothed out.

"We're clear of Pryidar's atmosphere."

Arara raised her head. "Where are we headed?"

"For Ministry-controlled space." He leaned down and stroked her head. "You must be exhausted."

Come with me.”

Arara rose and followed him around the ship. The *Skyracer* had two compact sleeping cabins, a small galley and a cleansing unit. Arara eyed the sonic cleansing tube. As soon as she caught a little shut-eye, she planned to rid her fur of the Pryidar stench.

He returned to the port cabin. “Your quarters.”

She stepped inside. He turned to leave, but Arara wasn’t ready to be alone. “Daecon, may I have something to drink?”

“I’ll bring water and nutrition squares.”

By the time he returned, Arara had stretched out on the bunk and tried to relax. The rational part of her mind told her she was safe, but the trauma of awakening in a cage remained.

Daecon offered Arara a choice of nutritional squares from the ship’s galley supply. The compact, easy-to-store squares provided maximum nutrition for travel. He also stored energy drinks and sealed containers of blood to maintain his strength and health.

Daecon watched as Arara munched on a nutritional square made of nuts and berries common to Vazan. He even held the bowl while she drank. When she finished, he stood. “Don’t leave,” she said.

He sat down on the edge of the bunk. “You’re safe.”

“Talk to me.”

“Where were you captured?”

“On Jamalde. We were at sea on my father’s vessel, the *Liraen*. A storm had forced us off course, into a group of islands where the condemned are placed. I wanted to fly, and I thought I was safe. I was captured in a net. The last thing I remember was seeing a large opening in the belly of a ship as I was winched up into the cargo bay. I recall several painful hits, sharp, piercing stings on my neck, shoulder and chest. Then I passed out and awoke on Pryidar. The first thing I saw was Wart’s ugly face staring at me through the bars of the cage.”

“You never saw the men who captured you?”

“No.”

“Don’t worry, Arara. I’ll send a message to my boss at Vazan Shield. Aser will contact your family and tell them you’re safe. He’ll make arrangements to get you home.”

Arara rubbed her cheek against his hip. Although she was formidable in her mountain cat form, she needed his warmth and strength. “Stay with me until I sleep.”

Daecon sat on the bunk. Curling up next to him, Arara laid her head on his lap and closed her eyes.

Calmed by the steady rhythm of his breathing and the gentle stroke of his hand along her neck, Arara ceased trembling. Purring, she fell asleep.

### Chapter Three

Daecon awoke in his own bunk and yawned. Warm, soft flesh pressed intimately against his chest and belly. His hand rested on a firm mound of silky skin.

Who, what, when and how flashed in his brain. Pryidar. Dragon. Cat.

Daecon's eyes opened wide. Thick, tawny hair obscured the face of the naked woman sprawled on top of him. Her arms were curled around his neck, her breasts were hot brands on his chest, her belly lay firmly against his erection and her legs were tangled with his.

Blood of the Ancestors! The golden mountain cat had transformed into a lovely woman with long graceful limbs, flawless skin and a magnificent ass.

Daecon recalled leaving a snoring mountain cat in the port cabin and returning to the cockpit. He'd sent a message to his boss at Vazan Shield's headquarters, giving Aser an update on his failed mission, his discovery of Arara and the amount of corporate funds he'd used to remove her from the auction block.

After sending the message, he'd taken a quick turn in the cleansing tube and crawled into his bunk satisfied that the ship's computer would monitor the *Skyracer's* course and alert him should any problems arise.

Having Arara naked in his bunk was a situation he hadn't anticipated. How long had she lain in his arms? Minutes? Hours?

Moving slowly, Daecon rolled Arara onto her back. He'd hoped not to awaken her, but her eyes were open and her gaze fixed on him.

Speechless, he stared at the beauty lying more beneath him than beside him. Her tawny hair complemented the color of her eyes. The shape was different, but her golden eyes bore an unmistakable similarity to her amazing cat eyes.

She smiled and bent her knee, rubbing her leg against his. "Daecon."

The skin-to-skin contact reminded Daecon that he was naked.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, trying to ignore how warm and soft her bare skin felt against his.

She reached up and cupped his cheek in her delicate hand. Her breasts brushed his arm. "I feel wonderful."

Although she wasn't the least bit alarmed by his nakedness, Daecon had no desire to take advantage of the intimate situation. Forcing his gaze to remain on her face, he started to climb out of the bunk.

She stretched, and Daecon's will wavered. Her long hair trailed over her shoulder and across her arm. His gaze slid over her exquisite body. Her breasts were firm, deliciously round and tipped with inviting pink nipples; her waist was trim and her belly flat. His gaze hesitated on the triangle of golden curls at the apex of her thighs.

His fangs tingled, his blood burned and his balls tightened.

"Daecon." She cupped the back of his neck and raised her head. "I'm so glad it was you who saved me."

Her lips met his. Soft, alluring lips that tempted him beyond reason. She snuggled closer, and her breasts brushed his chest. Instantly, his body responded. She rolled her hips, rubbing her belly against his erection and reminding him of how long it had been since he'd satisfied his sexual needs.

His blood pounding, he pulled away, swearing softly in his native tongue so he wouldn't offend her. "I can't. We can't."

"You don't want me?"

He wanted her. He trembled from wanting her. "Desire has nothing to do with it. You've been frightened and mistreated."

"I feared for my life, but you helped me. You saved me."

Daecon didn't want her to reward him with sex.

"I want to feel alive," she said. "I need to feel you, touch you, make love to you."

After a dangerous mission, he'd experienced a similar reaction. "A desire to make love after a life-threatening experience isn't an uncommon reaction. Once you're with your family, you'll feel safe and be in more control of your emotions."

"I want you, Daecon."

"Your feelings will change," he said.

"Never."

Logic told him Arara was reacting to the shock and the trauma, but Daecon still burned for her. "You're safe now. I'll keep you safe."

"I know you will." She took his hand and placed it over her heart. "I feel safe and my feelings for you won't change."

Filling his palm with her soft, warm flesh, Daecon felt the steady beat of her heart. The coursing of her blood was as erotic as touching her bare skin.

She slid her arms around his neck and drew his face close to hers. "Daecon, make love to me. I feel like I'm ready to burst and fly into a thousand pieces."

Lost in the scent and heat of her arousal, Daecon kissed her, deeply, soundly. Her tongue slid over the points of his fangs, fueling his primal vampire instinct to bite and to mate.

He raked his thumb over the hard point of her nipple. She arched her back, pressing her breast into his palm and her belly against his erection, signaling her desire.

His cock jerked.

Daecon trailed kisses along the column of her neck, aroused by the thrumming of her veins. He sought her breast, gently scraping a fang across her nipple before drawing the hard point into his mouth.

Moaning, she fisted his hair.

He caressed her between her legs, relishing the moisture and heat of her. Easing a finger inside, he teased her wet folds.

Daecon slid another finger inside her. Tighter than he expected, she trembled and thrust her hips to meet the push and drag of his fingers.

His cock strained and his balls ached. He pressed his thumb against her clit, rolling the bud beneath the pad. Her pussy convulsed, the slick walls grabbing at his fingers. Thrashing, she cried out, a keening animal sound that told him she'd climaxed.

He eased the rhythm of his fingers, and when her breathing slowed, withdrew them.

"That was amazing."

*That's good, Daecon thought. I'm just getting started .*

"I had no idea it could feel so very good."

"No idea?"

"Doing it myself just isn't the same."

A disturbing thought shot through Daecon's brain.

*Receiving high-priority message.* The computer's intrusion couldn't have come at a worse time -- or perhaps a better time. Daecon needed to extricate himself from this situation and think.

"I have to go," he said, climbing out of the bunk. Daecon grabbed his trousers off a hook and headed for the cockpit.

\* \* \*

Daecon read the communication from Aser telling him that contact had been made with the Zyafayan government and instructing him to proceed at full speed to rendezvous with a Zyafayan cruiser.

Daecon set the new course and leaned back in his seat. He was pleased Arara would soon be reunited with her family, but he wished he had more time with the fascinating shape-shifter.

"I hope you don't mind. This shirt was all I could find to wear."

Daecon swiveled around. Dressed in one of his shirts, Arara stood a few feet away.

Several sizes too big, his long-sleeve shirt hung loosely on her slender body. She'd rolled up the sleeves, and the shirttails hung mid-thigh. Knowing she was bare beneath the shirt sent his senses sizzling.

He tried to push away the tantalizing memory of her soft body and sweet lips. Every muscle in his body clenched and his blood heated. She walked toward him, moving sinuously and reminding Daecon of the sleek, golden cat. He half expected her to rub against him. If she did, would he be able to resist her?

Blood of the Ancestors! What was he thinking? She'd been victimized and terrorized. On top of that, he suspected she was still a virgin.

Ashamed of his thoughts, he asked, "How are you feeling?"

She stepped between his knees and slid her arms around his neck. "I had a terrible dream. I was in that awful cage, but I saw your face and knew I was safe."

He wrapped his arms around her, silently making a promise to his ancestors that he would give comfort and control his reaction. "You are safe. Nothing will happen to you as long as you're on the *Skyracer*."

"As long as I'm with you," she whispered, her warm breath feathering his neck.

When she climbed onto his lap, the shirt slipped up, revealing her bare hip. Blood of the Ancestors! Warm and soft, she nestled against him, pressing her breasts to his chest.

Her lips sought his, found them and settled. The kiss wasn't tentative, but sensually assertive. Her butt rested against his groin.

For a moment, Daecon gave into the temptation, kissing her back and relishing the feel of her in his arms. She'd intrigued him as a dragon, charmed him as a mountain cat and enticed him as a woman.

Then logic prevailed. Her reaction was nothing more than a natural response to a frightening and life-threatening situation. She'd likely feel beholden to anyone who had saved her from that cage.

She tapped into his protective instincts, brought out a compassionate side he had to suppress as a bounty hunter.

Daecon broke the kiss and pulled her arms from around his neck.

"Arara. You must be hungry."

Her golden eyes shimmering, she nodded her head.

He lifted her off his lap and set her on her feet. "My boss has contacted your government. We're on course to meet a Zyafayan cruiser."

Daecon offered Arara nutritional squares and an energy drink.

"Thank you. My last real meal was on my father's ship."

“Wart was too frightened of you to remove the bind-lock around your jaw. He would have let you starve.”

“If he had removed the lock, I would have fried him.”

To take her mind off the events on Pryidar, Daecon asked about her family.

She told him stories about her parents and sister. Daecon asked her how it felt to shape-shift.

“Just as we are taught to walk and talk, we’re taught to shift, to train our cells to take a different shape. My first form was that of a bird, to learn the dynamics of flight.”

She sipped her energy drink and licked a drop off her lower lip. The simple, yet sensual action made his fangs tingle.

“After that I tried various animals. Some forms are more comfortable than others. Each must find the forms that are natural. For me the mountain cat and the dragon were instinctive. I guess I take after my father. My sister and mother prefer the dragon and the wolf.”

Daecon listened to her stories, utterly fascinated by the beautiful young woman with a dragon’s appetite. When she’d had her fill, her eyes began to droop. Before long Arara was fast asleep, curled upon the galley bench. Daecon covered her with a blanket and returned to the cockpit.

When a message flashed on his com-link hours later, Daecon learned something Arara hadn’t told him. Her family was the Iaxas clan, an ancient, powerful noble family. Not only was she a shape-shifter, she was royalty.

Aser ordered Daecon to treat his passenger with great care and deliver her safely into the hands of the Zyafayan ambassador. The rescue mission had taken an abrupt political and diplomatic turn.

Although Daecon was completely entranced by Arara, he had to maintain a hands-off policy.

\* \* \*

When Arara slid into the copilot chair and asked for a demonstration on piloting the *Skyracer*, Daecon discovered she was an apt pupil. Proud of the ship, he taught her a few commands specific to his ship.

*Approaching wormhole. Request control.*

Daecon looked at Arara. “Would you like to pilot her through the wormhole?”

Arara nodded her head.

“Request denied,” Daecon said, answering the ship’s computer. “Manual control.”

Arara held on tight as the *Skyracer* blasted through the wormhole and shot into the Agis sector. After all she’d gone through, Daecon was pleased to see her happy.

“Oh my,” Arara said, her attention on the forward viewing screen.

Daecon pointed at a huge ball of light hanging in the dark void before them. "That's the Agis spaceport."

Her long hair brushed his arm, and Daecon turned. Her gaze met his, and a sizzle of sexual heat burned in his middle. Her golden eyes flared, and he understood she wanted him.

His heart and his body yearned for her, but logic and honor held him fast. Daecon lifted her delicate hand to his lips. He'd remember her for the rest of his life.

"It has been my pleasure to have you aboard, Arara."

"Are you taking me to Agis?"

"A Zyafayan cruiser is in this sector on a diplomatic voyage. The cruiser has a docking portal that will accommodate the *Skyracer*. Our courses will intersect shortly. You're going home."

"I will miss you, Daecon, and I will spend my life loving you."

Her softly spoken words twined around his heart, searing a connection between them. He'd never been in love, but the feelings, the burning in his chest were inexplicable, but undeniable. He dare not even think it.

Of all the things he'd experienced during his employment with Vazan Shield, this unexpected mission had touched him profoundly.

"Kiss me, Daecon."

He cupped her chin and looked into her shimmering eyes. "Just once to wish you a good and happy life."

Her lips were soft and yielding, the kiss gentle yet filled with longing. He slid his tongue between her parting lips, explored the warm recesses of her mouth.

He'd kissed others, but none had made him tremble and set his heart afire. Daecon understood their paths were unlikely to cross again.

By the time the kiss ended, Arara was trembling, too. She took his hand and placed it over her heart and spoke in her native language.

"I don't understand."

"You will always remain here, Daecon, my heartfire."

## Chapter Four

Three years later on Spaceport Argos



Daecon scanned the lengthy lines of passengers passing through Argos security, looking for a female with short dark hair. His new partner was a recent Vazan Shield hire, and the copy of her employee file he'd received from HQ gave him a brief profile of her qualifications along with a picture and physical description.

One woman carrying a bag slung over one shoulder caught Daecon's attention. Her outfit was similar to his, but beneath the black jacket, tan pants and boots was a figure that begged a vampire's gaze to linger.

She turned, giving the crowd waiting in the terminal the once-over before focusing on him. She smiled and raised her hand, acknowledging him. Daecon responded in kind.

The attractive woman passed through security and walked toward him. Instead of meeting her halfway, Daecon waited and observed. Her trousers clung to long, shapely legs and her stride was decisive, yet graceful. Daecon hoped she was as sharp and as quick a learner as she was attractive. According to his boss, Aser, Daecon's new partner was a gifted linguist and had scored well in her training courses, but she lacked field experience. It was Daecon's job to observe and report on her performance.

Depending on the mission, beauty could be an asset or a liability. Right now, his partner displayed an abundance of assets. Her trim waist accentuated firm breasts and rounded hips. She wore her hair in a short, practical style that complimented her refined features, especially her eyes. Framed by dark brows and long lashes, her eyes were light brown with amber flecks.

The closer she got, the better she looked.

"I'm Breta Galt," she said, dropping her bag on the floor and digging her employee identity card out of the pocket of her jacket. "Your new partner."

"I've been expecting you," Daecon said, answering her in Arano. He checked her identity card, handed it back and picked up her bag. "I'm Daecon Kreass."

"I can carry my luggage."

"Don't worry, when we're on a mission you'll be fully responsible for your weapons and gear. Let's go."

Daecon started walking, and Breta fell in step beside him.

"Now that you're here, I expect we'll be assigned soon. Right now, I think we should have a real meal and share a bottle of wine. Once we leave Argos it's nutrition squares and energy drinks."

"I don't eat animal meat."

"Good choice. On Argos the only food that's fresh is vegetables. There's a garden on level five. Everything else is imported and re-hydrated."

He guided her to a favorite restaurant and chose a table that afforded them a little privacy. They ordered a dish of spicy protein cubes and sautéed vegetables with wine common to Talus, the closest inhabited planet.

Daecon touched his wineglass to Breta's. "To a successful partnership."

She sipped her wine, licking a drop off her lower lip.

His fangs tingled, a problem that never occurred when working with a male partner. During the meal, Daecon's fangs began to throb, an undeniable indicator of physical attraction. "Tell me about yourself."

"I've studied language at the Talus Institute of Primary Tongues. I'm fluent in four and I've studied Vazana."

Primary tongues were the most common language to each inhabited planet. Daecon spoke Vazana and a smattering of Talusian. "I'm impressed. I only speak enough Talusian to order a meal and navigate my way around."

"I'd like to improve my Vazana. Perhaps we can help one another improve our skills between missions."

"I'd like that. I spend so much time off-planet that I miss speaking my native tongue."

Daecon saw a sudden golden flare in her eyes, but perhaps it was just the lighting.

"Do you miss Vazan?"

"At times. I visit my family as often as possible, but after a while I'm ready for the challenge of another mission. Why did you choose Vazan Shield? I have a friend in the business on Talus. Tanner Security is one of the best."

"Vazan Shield has a hostage rescue unit. That work is my passion."

To succeed in his unit, one needed dedication to the cause. Daecon's thoughts turned to Arara, his first rescue. With her ordeal in mind, he and Aser had created the hostage rescue unit. During the last two years, the unit had become his personal passion.

"For this work, you need passion," he said.

She ran a fingertip along the stem of glass. "I understand you created the unit."

Daecon noticed she had long, slender fingers. "The unit was my idea. We have two active teams, and if business continues to increase HQ will add a third."

"Your success rate is excellent."

"Rather than a direct confrontation that endangers the hostage, I prefer small teams and covert-style missions. You can't guarantee a hostage's safety if you go in with weapons blazing."

Breta raised her wineglass. "I'm committed to helping you to maintain that record."

Daecon settled the bill while Breta sipped the last of her wine. She thanked him for dinner.

"My pleasure. Have you visited Argos before?"

Breta shook her head.

“I’ll take you to the observation deck that wraps around level eight. You can see Talus and using a boost-scope, Vazan.”

Daecon carried her bag as they rode the elevator to level eight. They walked slowly along the enclosed bubble that ringed Argos. To provide maximum viewing of the cosmos, the only lighting was a thin blue line that ran along the floor.

He pointed to Talus, a blue and white ball resting in a black void.

Breta smiled. “It’s beautiful. I’d like to see Vazan.”

Daecon guided Breta farther along the deck to a boost-scope. He focused the scope then stepped back. In the near darkness she was a shadowed figure, but Daecon sensed her heat, an unmistakable scent of female arousal.

Daecon’s boss didn’t encourage sexual relationships between his employees, but Aser didn’t forbid them either. The mission was the priority. Daecon always put the mission first, and so far he’d never entered into a sexual relationship with a partner. But something about Breta stirred him on every level.

Breta looked through the boost-scope. Her hand groped for his arm and grasped it. “The reddish sun, is that the Vazan system?”

Her hand was warm and soft. “Yes.”

“You’re far from home.”

“Let’s keep walking.”

Daecon stopped when he saw the Zyafaya system, consisting of two inhabited planets, their moons and a golden sun. He thought of Arara, his dragon girl, and smiled. Glancing at Breta, he noticed she too was focused on Zyafaya.

Daecon had never brought anyone with him to the observation deck before. His visits and his viewing of Zyafaya were spiritual moments. Meeting Arara had focused his life. For him the rescue unit wasn’t about the money, but the victims.

He set her bag on the floor, and Breta moved closer, her arm brushing his. Although they’d just met, he had a good feeling about his new partner.

Visitors moved past them, leaving Daecon and Breta alone in the dark corridor. Time seemed to stop as they silently took in the amazing view of the cosmos.

“It’s breathtaking,” she said, standing on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

The contact was fleeting, but her heat seared him as her breasts brushed against his chest. Daecon’s fangs extended. His attraction to Breta was so immediate it stunned him.

He wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her tight against him, crushing her breasts against his chest. Desire pulsed in his veins, heating blood and muscle and making his fangs ache. Daecon deepened the

kiss, coaxing her tongue into his mouth and gently suckling.

When she guided his hand to her breast, his stomach muscles clenched. He palmed her firm flesh, squeezing and kneading through the fabric of her shirt. He raked his thumb over the hard point of her nipple.

She moaned deep in her throat.

Voices and soft footfalls brought him to reality. He released Breta, but the throbbing need remained.

Daecon picked up her bag and took her hand. "Let's go to the ship."

He didn't speak as the elevator moved to the docking level. Fortunately, he'd already obtained a permit for his new partner to enter the bays reserved for private craft. Daecon swiped both passes issued to Vazan Shield.

By the time they reached docking airlock, Daecon's fangs had receded, but his desire for Breta hadn't cooled. He punched in the security code and the airlock opened. He stepped inside and Breta joined him.

Daecon closed the airlock, sealing them inside. In the false atmosphere of the spaceport, they had to wait until the pressure stabilized before opening the airlock leading to the bay. He stepped inside and Breta followed.

"You have a new ship," she said. "What happened to the *Skyracer*?"

"I haven't piloted the *Skyracer* for a long time," Daecon said, giving Breta a quizzical look.

Her gaze swept over the ship. "She's beautiful."

"The *Heartfire* is mine," Daecon said, aware of the pride swelling in his chest. "She's fast, built for long range and room for a crew of four."

\* \* \*

Had she heard him correctly? Was it possible? Or had her heart played a horrible trick on her brain?

Arara stood frozen to the spot, unable to catch her breath.

Daecon opened the ship's starboard hatch, tossed her bag inside and climbed aboard. He turned and held out his hand. His gaze narrowed. "Breta?"

For a second she didn't respond to her assumed name.

If Arara had any choice, she wouldn't have deceived Daecon by altering her facial features, changing her hair color and creating a new identity. She wanted to tell him who she was, but deception was necessary. Arara had no idea how Daecon would react. She suspected he'd send her right back to her father.

Her father wanted her to marry her betrothed, a man he'd chosen. Arara didn't love her intended. She'd refused, telling her parents in order to come to terms with her ordeal, she needed to save others as she had been saved. She wanted a career in hostage rescue. Believing she'd change her mind, her parents

agreed to give her one year.

No one at Vazan Shield except Aser knew her true identity. As Breta Galt she'd applied for work with Vazan Shield, her goal to join Daecon's hostage rescue unit and discover if her love for her vampire savior was real or the sentiment of a grateful victim, an opinion she did not share with her parents. "Did you say *Heartfire*?"

"Yes," he said, assisting her through the hatch.

She slipped her arms around his neck. "Interesting name for a ship,"

He drew her close and touched his lips to hers.

She'd dreamed of this moment, of being in Daecon's arms and finishing what had begun long ago on the *Skyracer*. This time, she wouldn't be denied. Arara pressed her breasts to his chest. Shivers slid down her spine as his lips moved over hers, hot and demanding.

He clamped his hands on her ass and squeezed.

She fisted his hair and rubbed her belly against the hard ridge of his cock. She hadn't forgotten the sensual, masculine beauty of his muscled body, nor the thick erection that had made her pulse leap.

On fire, Arara feared she'd melt on the spot. Heat poured from his body, seeping through her clothes. She yanked his shirt out of his pants. "Take off your belt. I don't want to set off a flash-charge."

Belts with concealed weapons were standard issue for Vazan Shield security personnel. He removed his belt, let it slide from his fingers to the floor and then pushed it aside with his foot. "Your profile stated you were trained in weapons."

She slid her hand down the front of his trousers to the hard ridge of his erection and squeezed. "Uhmhhh. Another concealed weapon."

He grinned and she caught a glint of something she hadn't seen up close and personal in a very long time -- fangs.

Daecon ran his fingertips over his upper lip. "Do they frighten you? They extend when I'm aroused."

Gripping him by the hair, she pulled his face close to hers and kissed him, sliding her tongue slowly over the points of his fangs. "I'm not the least bit frightened."

She gave each fang another lick, then looked him in the eye. She didn't want to wait another second. Arara released the straps of her boots and toed them off.

She pushed up his shirt and planted kisses on his chest. His skin was hot and smooth. Desire coiled so tight in her belly, Arara thought she'd burst into flames.

He yanked his shirt off and tossed it aside and then removed hers in one swift motion. His gaze fastened on her breasts. "Blood of the Ancestors," he said, his words low and barely audible.

Her breath caught as he molded his big, callused hands to her breasts, rasping his thumbs back and forth over her nipples. Her pussy clenched at the delicious sensation. She raked his chest with her nails and

nipped his flat nipples. She trailed her nails down the center of chest to the waistband of his pants. Her lips followed the path of her fingers.

His stomach muscles tightened as her fingers slid beneath his waistband. She loved the feel of his honed, warrior body. Yanking open the front seal of his pants, Arara pulled his pants down, exposing his thick erection. Was it possible he was bigger than she remembered?

Just the thought of him inside made her hot and shivery. She swept her tongue over the length of him, delighting in the quick jerk of his cock. He grasped her by the hair and pulled her to her feet. "Breta. We're partners. This might get complicated."

She grabbed his cock, tugging possessively. "I can handle it, can you?"

He pushed her jacket off her shoulders and while she struggled out of it, he dragged her trousers off her hips. The stretchy fabric gave little resistance, sliding easily down her legs to her ankles. She kicked one foot free.

He grabbed her ass with both hands and lifted her off her feet and planted her back against the bulkhead. She grasped his shaft and guided him. When the broad head touched her entrance, Arara trembled, ached, anticipating the feel of his heat and size.

He thrust, plunging deep, hot and penetrating. She dug her nails into his shoulders and her heels into his pumping butt cheeks.

"Blood of the Ancestors! You're tight."

He thrust again and she cried out, swearing in Zyafrican. When he pulled back, Arara fisted a hank of his hair. She wanted him so much her heart banged against her chest wall.

Perspiration dewed his chest, slicking her breasts. He drove into her, again and again, filling her, making her mindless with pleasure. Wet and hot, she clenched him, felt him jerk and tremble, and then joined him in a climax that shook her to the core.

Arara clung to Daecon until their skin cooled and their breathing returned to normal. He smiled and kissed her slowly, languorously. Stepping back, he set her on her feet and pulled up his trousers. "Welcome aboard the *Heartfire*."

Arara started to pull on her pants, which were hanging around one ankle.

"Don't bother putting them on," he said, hunkering down. "I'd just be taking them off again." He removed her pants, and his gaze raked over her. "Blood of the Ancestors, you're beautiful."

\* \* \*

Daecon wasn't one for meaningless compliments. Breta's beauty stole his breath and stoked the embers of desire he'd thought long extinguished. No woman had touched him so deeply since his brief time with Arara. But that was past and not meant to be.

The fire between them was so hot Daecon needed to feel her searing heat.

He slid his hands up her long legs, memorizing the curve of her calf, the soft flesh at the back of her

knees, the shape of her thighs, the slope of her hips and the contour of her ass. Gripping those firm mounds, he drew her to him and licked the inviting slit, tasting the essence of their mutual pleasure and sensing the simmering heat of her arousal.

She quivered, her flesh fluttering against his tongue.

He grasped her by the knee and slid her leg over his shoulder.

With slow deliberation, Daecon explored her pussy with his tongue until she creamed. He sought out the taut bud tucked between her plump lips and suckled.

Her fingers bit into his shoulders. "Fuck me."

Although she'd said it in Talusian, Daecon understood and slid two fingers inside her wet pussy.

He pumped his hand, moving his fingers faster along her slick walls.

She fisted his hair, pulling and tugging in rhythm with the motion of his fingers and lips, keening as she climaxed.

He loved the way she trembled, her unrestrained eagerness and her uninhibited expression.

Her eyes fluttered open, and for a second her eyes went golden, a fleeting reminder of another extraordinary pair of eyes that had a profound effect on his life.

Smiling, she unwound his hair from her fingers. "You make me a wild woman."

Daecon stood. "I like untamed."

She stroked his cock, her fingers playing along his hard length before cupping his sac. Fire licked his balls.

Need thrummed deep, pulsing through muscle and bone. Daecon ran his tongue over his extended fangs.

He lifted her, tossing her over one shoulder and carrying her to his quarters.

Daecon dropped her onto his bunk and climbed between her legs. "You make me a wild vampire."

He thrust, sliding into her wet, welcoming pussy.

She murmured something in a language that Daecon didn't recognize, but her tone urged him to thrust deep and fast.

He pounded into her welcoming flesh. His brain barely acknowledged the digging of nails into his shoulder and burrowing of her heel into his ass. The heat, the need overwhelmed him, the pain adding to the pleasure.

The pressure built behind his balls, threatening to explode.

She clamped down on him, her pussy clenching and unclenching, her climax triggering his own. He spilled into her, hot thick spurts that left his muscles quivering and his heart drumming.

Daecon buried his face in the crook of her neck. Beneath his lips, her pulse fluttered. He raked his fangs along her jaw and neck, the thrumming of her blood an unintentional invitation to bite.

Resisting his vampire urge, Daecon rolled onto his back and stretched out beside her.

*Receiving message, Status Red.*

Daecon jumped off the bunk and opened a cupboard. He pulled a folded pair of pants from a shelf and put them on, then snatched a shirt from another shelf.

*Message received. Status Red.*

“Acknowledged, begin decryption,” Daecon said, pulling the shirt over his head.

Breta climbed out of his bunk. “We have a mission?”

“We do.” Status Red messages signaled a mission that required immediate action. By the time Daecon reached his pilot’s chair, Aser’s decrypted message appeared on the com-screen. He read the directives for the mission and entered a response. “Encrypt and transmit.”

Daecon ordered the computer to secure all hatches and inform the Argos Security Center of the *Heartfire*’s departure.

Breta dropped his boots beside his chair and slid into the co-pilot’s seat to his right. She’d pulled on her clothes. “Tell me about our mission.”

“Our destination is Pixtes. Lok Hausa, the owner of Hausa Shipping, was snatched by a criminal gang specializing in the abduction of wealthy executives for ransom. The corporation or the family pays and the hostage is usually left in a remote area.”

“And if they fail to pay?”

“Recently, the gang has murdered two executives. Instead of paying the ransom, Hausa’s son, Torg, has hired us to rescue his father.”

“Do we know how many are in the gang?”

“Five participated in Hausa’s abduction. Unknown to the abductors, Lok had a tracking device implanted months ago. Currently he’s in an area called Forsaken Canyons. Can you handle a propulsion air-bike?”

“I’m an experienced rider.”

“Excellent. The canyons are deep and narrow, requiring a vehicle both fast and highly maneuverable. Torg should have them ready upon arrival.”

Daecon had planned to give his new partner a detailed tour of the *Heartfire*, including communications, navigation and weapons systems, but that plan had vanished the moment she’d touched his cock. Now she would have to learn en route to Pixtes.



## Chapter Five

Torg Hausa was a short man with sparse blond hair that stood out from his skull in a spiky style. His nose was broad and flat, and the fear in his gray eyes appeared genuine to Arara.

Torg splayed his left, three-fingered hand over his chest and nodded his head, greeting them in the Pixtes tradition. After the introductions were made, Torg was all business. He escorted them to a hangar large enough to park four ships the size of the *Heartfire*.

“The equipment you’ve requested is ready,” Torg said.

The equipment consisted of two sleek black propulsion air-bikes, wind protection suits, gloves, helmets with face-shields and boots. The high-speed bikes had an elongated nose with a smooth, round tip, making them aerodynamic and capable of gliding over any terrain. Proper gear was required to keep the air from ripping clothing and skin to shreds. Both bikes were capable of carrying two passengers and one had a small luggage compartment.

Daecon inspected the vehicles.

“My security chief has tested the equipment,” Torg said. “The helmets will pick up my father’s emergency signal. You’ll be able to communicate with one another and the corporate security center. The helmets are equipped with terrain recognition and accurate positioning. An extra set of gear for my father is in the luggage compartment. My chief of security and I will monitor the operation.”

“Why didn’t you pay the ransom?” Arara asked.

“My father started out as a hand on a freighter. He built the company with his own sweat. He doesn’t believe in paying ransom and had placed Vazan Shield on retainer. In the event of his abduction, he wanted immediate action.”

When Torg splayed his hand over his chest, Daecon and Arara answered in kind.

“Good hunting. I’ll be in the security center, awaiting news of my father’s liberation.”

A vehicle glided up, and a door swung open. Torg climbed inside and was quietly whisked away.

Daecon and Arara stowed a variety of weapons in the nose of the bikes, including laser rifles, flash-charges and pulse pistols. Her heart rate jumped as the reality of the mission and being Daecon’s partner hit her.

Daecon was relying on her to perform without fear, a partner facing an unknown enemy. She dare not let him down. And Lok Hausa was depending on her to save his life.

“Breta. Ready to do this?”

“Yeah.”

“Suit up,” Daecon said, picking up a black wind protection suit.

The urge to tell him the truth came in a rush. She wanted to tell him how much she loved him, but now wasn't the time to unburden her heart. Mr. Hausa depended on her and Daecon to rescue him. She'd come clean after the mission.

Arara stepped into the protection suit and sealed the front seam. The fabric was lightweight and flexible, but exceptionally strong. Her boots fastened, she swung a leg over the bike and settled into the seat. Following Daecon's lead, she started the engine. Although the engine was silent, the power vibrated through her body. Once the bike was moving the vibration would smooth out.

She put on the helmet, and the visor shield slid into place. Her eyes adjusted to the change from normal vision to infrared. The helmets picked up anything emitting heat, whether human, animal or vehicle. Numbers appeared on objects, providing distance and position. Daecon's helmet appeared as a bright purple spot. As long as he kept his helmet on, Arara would be able to distinguish him from other heat-emitting bodies.

A terrain map appeared in the lower section of the visor, providing guidance. A red blip flashed steadily.

“Breta, are you receiving?” Daecon asked.

His voice was clear. “Affirmative,” Arara answered. “Guidance system and tracking light visible.”

He repeated the test with Hausa's security center.

“We have a long ride to the Forsaken Canyons. Once we're out of the city, we can increase our speed. There's a long, flat plain before we reach the canyons. We'll go full throttle across the plain.”

Arara fell in behind Daecon, following while she acclimated to the vehicle and the guidance systems. Once they entered the plain, they drove full out. Arara leaned forward, keeping her head down, her torso prone and her legs hugging the bike. At this speed, Arara found it easy to imagine how it felt riding inside a fierce whirlwind.

At the canyons, they decreased their speed. Again, Arara fell in behind Daecon letting him take the lead through the narrow winding canyon. Hausa's location transmitter flashed steadily.

When they were close enough to move on foot, Daecon and Arara stashed the bikes and put on weapons belts complete with pulse pistols and flash-charges. Armed with the laser rifles, Daecon and Arara hustled along the winding canyon floor. Steep walls bracketed them, blocking out the sunlight and leaving the depths of the canyon in near darkness. The helmets guided their path, illuminating the terrain in shades of green.

Since no authorities or private security had ever challenged the gang before, Arara and Daecon were counting on the element of surprise. Lok Hausa should be the only one expecting Vazan Shield.

The narrow canyon gave way to wider ground and eventually led to a broad, sandy valley dotted with low shrubs and boulders. A rocky outcropping stretched like a long finger from the canyon into the

valley.

Spotting a large heat source, Arara adjusted the helmet's telescopic lens. A double-thruster rover, engines hot, was parked on a landing platform. A single-story building, the only structure visible, was a short distance from the platform. According to the locator flash, Hausa was inside the building.

Using the outcropping as cover, Arara and Daecon approached the landing platform.

The heat sensors picked up three bodies in the building, two in the front and one to the rear, and two inside the rover. It appeared the captors inside the building were seated at a table, perhaps having a meal or plotting their next abduction.

"I'm counting five people," Arara said. Daecon confirmed her count.

"Stay down and don't move," Daecon warned as the rover began to rise.

Arara dropped down and hugged the shadows. The thrusters kicking up sand and rock, the rover took off and headed down the valley.

Picking their way from boulders to bushes, Arara and Daecon moved as close as possible to the building without being exposed. Arara scanned the area. The only yellow-orange outlines -- heat-emitting bodies -- were inside the building.

The lone person in the rear of the building would be Hausa.

"I'll cover the front door. Work your way around the back and find out if there's another entrance," Daecon said.

Keeping her head down, Arara darted from boulder to clumps of brush, anything to provide cover as she made a wide arc around the building. The structure sat on a slight rise and wasn't fortified. The scanner revealed several internal walls, sectioning the structure into one large area to the front and two smaller to the rear. There were three small windows and one door.

Arara scanned the structure, looking for cameras and sensors.

"Three windows, high and small, one door," Arara reported. "No sensors."

"Move in. We'll set blast-charges on the doors and blow them simultaneously. You go for Hausa and run for the canyon. I'll deal with the bad boys up front. Get Hausa out. Don't stop and don't wait for me. That's an order. We want to be gone when that rover returns."

Arara ran to the building and crouched at the back door. "In position."

Her mind was racing and her heart pounding as she retrieved a blast-charge from her belt. The charge had a short delay, demanding she act when Daecon gave the go-ahead.

"Set charge."

Arara attached the charge to the door and scrambled to the side, dropping to the ground. The dual blasts rattled the building and sent a shock wave through the ground. The door broke free of its hinges and fell inward, slamming onto the floor. Smoke billowed and debris swirled in the air.

Heart pounding, Arara jumped to her feet and raced into the building. Despite the red flashes toward the front of the building that told her Daecon had engaged the enemy, Arara focused on the victim in the room to her right. Forcing the door, Arara rushed into the room, initiating the helmet's exterior audio. "Breta Galt, Vazan Shield," she said, identifying herself in Arano to the man kneeling on the floor.

"Lok Hausa," the man said. "I've been waiting for you."

Hausa's hands and feet were bound, and a short rope tethered an ankle to the bunk.

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm good."

Using a laser knife, Arara disposed of the bindings and tether. "Can you run?"

Hausa shook his hands and stomped his feet. "I can run."

"Follow me and stay close."

Before stepping into the narrow hallway running between the front of the building and the rear doorway, Arara scanned for the distinctive yellow blobs and purple spot. The gang members were lying prone in the front of the building, but Daecon wasn't visible.

Fear shot through her, but Daecon's orders overrode her momentary panic. *Get Hausa out*. She headed for the door. Hausa was right on her heels.

At the doorway, she scanned the vicinity, looking for threats. Seeing all was clear, Arara stepped outside, grabbed Hausa by the hand, and ran for the closest boulder, moving as quickly as possible toward the rocky outcropping that led to the canyon.

"I'm right behind you. Step it up."

Arara's heart leaped at the sound of Daecon's voice in her audio unit. She squeezed Hausa's hand, urging him to move. Hausa managed to keep pace until they reached the canyon. Just as he was flagging, Daecon caught up.

Arara stood guard while Daecon hustled Hausa into the extra wind protection gear. Daecon and Hausa rode double and Arara followed. She gave a celebratory whoop when they reached the open plain.

\* \* \*

The moment the *Heartfire's* exterior hatch closed and Arara was alone with Daecon, she began to tremble, the exhilaration of the mission spinning her insides. Carrying her weapons, she followed him to the arsenal safe.

She wanted to throw her arms around Daecon and kiss him senseless. "That was exciting. I feel like I'm ready to explode."

"The first mission is always a rush. If it goes right, it's euphoric," he said, stowing their weapons. He pulled off his boots and placed them in a cupboard.

She pulled off her boots and handed them to him. "What about the second? Is it less of a rush?"

"It's always a rush. Experience allows you to control the edge, but success can bring complacency." He placed her boots on a shelf below his. "That's dangerous."

Her gaze slid over his broad back, his arms thick with muscle and the length of silky hair hanging halfway down his spine. Like her, Daecon wore a long-sleeve shirt and pants. Best for wearing beneath a body suit, the thin material clung like a second skin, leaving nothing to the imagination.

She ran her fingertips along the length of his back. "Does it make you hot?"

Daecon turned to face her. He didn't need to answer her question.. The evidence lay big and thick against his thigh. A delicious heat throbbed between her legs.

Daecon grabbed her by the waist, yanking her to him and pressing her breasts against his rock hard chest. "Not as hot as you make me."

The throb deepened. "Fuck me, Daecon. Hard and fast, before I disintegrate."

He thrust his hand in her hair and pulled her head back almost to the point of pain as his lips slammed down on hers.

Aroused to the point of bursting, Arara answered his hungry kiss, thrusting her tongue into his mouth to find those telltale fangs. Her blood raced, hot and furious and nothing existed except need, desire and love.

He palmed her ass with his big hands, kneading and caressing.

She rubbed her belly to his groin, grinding against the hard ridge of his cock.

A fiery river of clenching desire spread through artery and vein, heating muscle, bone and blood. Her skin burned, the sudden heat so intense Arara couldn't bear the thin layers of clothing separating them.

She clawed at his shirt, pushing it up to expose his pale skin. Heat poured off his flesh. She needed to touch him, to revel in his nakedness. Plunging her hand inside the expandable waistband of his pants, Arara grasped his length.

Uttering a guttural groan, he broke the kiss and yanked his head back. Stunned, she rocked back on her heels and released him.

"Your lip's bleeding. I'm sorry, my fangs are sharp."

Her lip stung. She hadn't noticed he'd cut her lip. A trickle of blood slid down her chin.

Daecon's eyes flashed red, then he licked the blood off her skin. "Blood of the Ancestors. The taste of you tempts me."

"Tempts you to take my blood?"

"Yes. To feast on you and satisfy my vampire lusts. I can't help what I am."

Arara had heard stories of the taking of blood by a vampire during sex, the ultimate thrill of the blood orgasm. "I love what you are. Take my blood."

He shook his head. "The blood orgasm is risky."

She'd also heard stories of the danger and the addiction the experience presented to non-vampire partners. She had no idea what effect it would have on her or if a Zyafayan had experienced a blood orgasm, but Arara wanted to experience it. She trusted Daecon implicitly. "Taste me."

"You have no idea what you do to me, do you?"

"I want to do everything to you and with you. I know you'll never harm me."

"You're a dangerous woman, Breta. You're coming off your first mission, and your heart rate is already running high. Now is not the time to push the limits and take your blood."

"But that time will come?"

He cupped her by the nape, rubbing his thumb on her neck. Beneath the pad of his thumb, her pulse throbbed. "Oh yes. The question is what shall we do until then?"

"I know something I've been wanting to do," she said, grasping the waistband of his pants and pulling down the silky fabric as she sank to her knees.

His cock sprang free, veins pulsing along its thick length. "If you so much as blow on it, I'll come."

She pursed her lips and blew gently. His cock jerked. Arara grasped the thick base of his cock and moved her hand up and down his length.

"Suck me."

Taking the broad tip into her mouth, she sucked hard while her fingers continued her lover's rhythm. Her lips followed her fingers, down to the base and back again. She licked and sucked, drawing on his hot flesh. Cupping his balls, she caressed the tight sacs and relished the strangled moans emanating from his throat. With each lick and suck, Arara ached with need.

"Faster."

She released his balls and grasped his cock, twisting her hand around the thick root as she sucked him deep. Hot and aroused, she wanted to strip off her clothes and feel Daecon's hands on her heated flesh.

Daecon grabbed her by the hair. His hips bucked, keeping pace with the pull and drag of her lips. His semen exploded upon her tongue, hot and salty. His thighs were slicked with perspiration, and his legs trembled.

She licked him clean. When she was done she let him slip from her mouth and gazed up at him. His eyes glittered, and his smile revealed his long white fangs.

Without a word, he cupped her face and drew her to her feet. "You do that very well."

“Shall we see what you do well?”

He licked a fang. “You’re a temptress, Breta Galt. If my pants weren’t around my knees, I’d carry you to my bed and make you come until you screamed for mercy.”

“So take off your pants.”

He yanked off his pants and shirt. “You’re my kind of woman,” he said, picking her up and tossing her over his shoulder.

She reached down, smacking him on the butt. “You’ll pay for that,” he said, giving her a quick slap on the ass. She slid a finger between his taut buttocks. “That too,” he warned. Then he dropped her onto his bunk and stripped off her shirt and pants.

His gaze raked over her naked body. “Where shall I begin?”

“Don’t torture me -- kiss me, touch me, bite me somewhere, anywhere.”

He stretched out next to her, rolled onto his side to face her and splayed a hand on her belly. “You’re as feisty as you are beautiful.”

Arara quivered as he moved his hand in slow circles, caressing her bare skin, brushing her breasts, sliding over her belly and furrowing his fingertips through the curls shielding her pussy. With each loop, his touch became more intimate and more sensual. Ripples of need followed the sweep of his hand.

Her heart swelled, her need, her want, her love for him consuming her. His fingertips raked over her nipples until they were hard and aching. With each pass his hot palm seared her pussy. He paused on one breast, cupping her flesh and pinching her nipple. Aroused, she rubbed her legs together. “Please, Daecon.”

“Please, what?”

She grabbed him by the hair and pulled his mouth to her breast. “Make me burn.”

He sucked her nipple into his mouth, drawing fiercely on her needy flesh. When his fang scraped over her sensitive flesh, Arara cried out. “Bite me.” Daecon suckled deeper, sensually, but his fang never pierced her skin. She grabbed his hand and placed it between her legs. “I’m on fire.”

Daecon released her swollen nipple. “Are you wet?”

“Lick me and find out.”

He rolled onto his back and patted his upper chest. “Come here,” he said, guiding her to straddle his face. “Let me taste you.” The anticipation of his mouth on her brought a rush of hot moisture. He cupped her ass in his big hands and gave her a slow lick. “Hot and dripping.”

The touch of his tongue sent streams of heat through her middle. He laved and plundered, licked and lapped, exploring her wet folds with intense attention to her pleasure and needs. Her hips undulated and swayed. His fangs skimmed her most sensitive of flesh while his fingers dug into her ass. The streams turned to fire.

Capturing her clit, he sucked hard. The streams formed into hot coils, drawing tighter and tighter. Mindless, she rocked against the erotic pressure of his lips, fangs and tongue. Arara exploded, drenching his tongue.

Arara swore she would die as a thousand tiny quakes shook her body. He pressed his lips to her swollen flesh, kissing her gently until the sweet throbbing eased. She smiled down at him and repositioned herself across his torso, wriggling her butt against his flat belly. "You do that very well."

His eyes flashed red. "I'm not done yet."

Arara noticed his fangs remained extended. "There's more?"

He lifted his hips, and the tip of his cock poked her in the right butt cheek. "Lots more." She reached back and let her fingers trail along his length. He was hard as stone. "Ride me," he said, grasping her by the waist.

Arara lifted her hips and palmed his cock, guiding the thick crown between her legs. He thrust upward, impaling her. She cried out as Daecon filled her, stretching her ready flesh. They moved together, their bodies creating a new rhythm as skin slid against skin and flesh glided against flesh. "I want to make love to you forever," he whispered.

Arara touched his chest. Beneath her palm his heart pounded. She ached to tell him she loved him, but when she uttered those words she wanted him to know her as Arara.

He cupped her breasts, teasing her nipples and caressing her flesh.

Arara rocked against him, lifting and dropping her hips, the pressure and pleasure building and intensifying. She loved him so much she trembled.

She picked up the pace, forcing the tempo, eager for the climax hovering just beyond her reach.

He squeezed her breasts and thrust up, pushing his cock deep. "Ride me hard."

She covered his hands with hers, anchoring them together. Pummeling his cock with her pussy, she rode him hard and fast, the hot friction bringing her closer to the explosive edge.

Skin slapped skin. Muscles tensed and burned. Heat flowed and pooled.

His grip on her breasts tightened, the pain-pleasure sensation firing. Daecon's throaty grunt of pleasure joined Arara's cry.

He released her breasts and drew her close, wrapping his arms around her. He held her tight until their hearts ceased to hammer and their skin cooled.

Daecon kissed her on the top of the head. "Rest. You need it."

Between the tension and stress of the mission and the excitement and the intensity of making love, Arara succumbed to the physical exhaustion. Stretched out on Daecon's solid chest, Arara closed her eyes and fell asleep with a satisfied smile on her lips.

\* \* \*



Arara awoke, aware of Daecon's breath feathering the back of her neck. Remembering she was in Daecon's bunk, she opened her eyes.

In the darkness she and Daecon lay on their sides, his powerful body spooned to hers, his arm wrapped around her waist and his erection pressing against her ass.

He planted a kiss on the nape of her neck. "Breta."

His husky whisper reminded Arara that the man she loved had no idea of her true identity. What would he do if she told him?

"Daecon."

He cupped her breast, kneading her flesh, and rocked his hips, nudging her with the hard ridge of his cock.

She reached back and grasped his muscled thigh. Arara loved the feel of his warrior's body, the strength and power of bone and muscle. "It's dark as deep space in here."

Daecon pressed his lips to her neck and ran his tongue along her pulsing vein. "You don't need to see -- just feel." The tip of his fang slid along the wet path he'd made with his tongue. "The dark heightens other senses."

He palmed her buttock, kneading and stroking. "Perfection."

His compliment pleased her. Although she'd changed her facial features, the arch of her brow and the shape of her nose and transformed her long blonde hair to a short dark style, Arara hadn't changed her body.

He cupped her breast, gently squeezing her flesh and teasing her nipple to a hard, aching point.

"I love the way you respond to my touch," he whispered. "I love the feel of your silky skin."

When Daecon touched her, she felt a link she hadn't experienced with anyone else. Perhaps the bond was formed when he'd reached between the bars to comfort her as a dragon.

"I love being with you." He slid his hand along her torso, pausing on her belly. He nipped her shoulder and then kissed the spot. "You're all I think about."

"The sex is wonderful."

"It's more than just the sex." He took her hand, their fingers entwined. "It's you. You make my heart hurt and my blood burn."

Since their parting three years ago, her love had remained a steady tightness in her chest. Now it gripped her heart.

"What are you saying, Daecon?"

His grip on her hand tightened. "My blood burns when I'm aroused, but this aching in my heart is

because of you.”

He kissed her neck, pressing his lips against her throbbing vein.

“And the sex is more than wonderful,” he said, releasing her hand and running his fingertips through the thatch of curls between her legs. “It’s amazing.” He stroked and explored until his fingers were slick and her clit throbbed with need.

She moaned, deep in her throat.

“You’re deliciously wet,” he said, rolling her clit with the pad of his finger.

She stroked his thigh, digging her fingers into his hard muscles.

He shifted his weight, rising to his knees. “I want to love you, fuck you, take you from behind,” he said, guiding her into position.

Arara hadn’t made love in this position, and her pussy pulsed in anticipation.

He slid his finger between the crease of her ass, the tip skating down to her damp pussy and dipping inside. His tongue followed the path of his finger, teasing her with slow, wet flicks. With each lush lick, he made her wetter and hotter.

Moaning, Arara rolled her hips.

He captured her clit, suckling gently.

Riding the edge of climax, Arara dug her fingers into the bedding.

When he lifted his head, she cried out, “Don’t stop.”

He caressed her ass, rubbing one spot before giving her a sharp slap on the right buttock. Then using lips and tongue, he concentrated on her pussy until she quivered on the edge and demanded his cock.

“Love me. Fuck me, Daecon.”

Anchoring her hip with his big hand, he probed her wet slit. On her knees with her ass high, her position guaranteed deep penetration. The image of his big cock thrusting in and out made Arara tremble. She rocked back, forcing the broad head inside.

“Hot and wet,” he said, thrusting deep.

Drenched with need, Arara welcomed his hard length.

Hips pumping, he fucked her hard, giving Arara exactly what she wanted and needed.

He thrust harder, deeper, filling her, fucking her until every cell burned, her blood ran hot and her heart threatened to leap out of her chest.

When she hovered on the razor’s edge of climax, Daecon leaned over her, pressing her down to the bunk. She stretched out beneath him, and his body covered hers. Still inside her, his cock pulsed, his hot

flesh rippling against her clenched walls.

He pulled her head back and his lips brushed her neck. "Mine," he whispered. Then he sank his fangs into her neck, piercing her vein, and drank.

She shuddered as he drew her life force and pumped his semen deep inside her. His climax triggered hers, bonding them in a sensual freefall. Her pussy convulsed, grabbing at his thick, pulsing flesh, the erotic rush like nothing she'd experienced. She gave into it, joining him in the plunge.

She felt her features blur, transforming, reshaping her face in her true image.

Shocked by the involuntary change caused by the blood orgasm, she opened her eyes. Her skin shimmered, golden and sparkling. Arara concentrated, focusing her energy to regain control. The shimmering ceased and her features returned to those she'd assumed as Breta.

Her heart thundered. The darkness had hidden her transformation, but had Daecon seen the golden sparkles?

He withdrew his fangs and licked the puncture wounds, sealing them with healing saliva.

"I should have warned you," he said, rolling off of her.

Arara turned over, and he drew her across his broad chest.

"The urge to taste you was irresistible."

"I experienced your climax as if it were my own. The rush was amazing."

Daecon cupped her face in his big hands. "I swear I saw the flashing of tiny lights. That's never happened before."

"Maybe it's because I'm not a vampire."

He kissed her, a tender meeting of their lips. "Maybe it's because we're so good together."

"I like being your partner, in every way."

Exhaling, Arara laid her head on his shoulder. The high she'd felt was ebbing.

Daecon slid his fingers through her hair, gently caressing. "Tired?"

"Happily exhausted."

"Sleep. Regain your strength. You never know when I'll feel like biting you again."

"You can bite me anytime," she said.

## Chapter Six

The *Heartfire* shot through a wormhole that emptied into the Eaxlar system. Daecon set course for Laloran, one of three inhabited planets and the site of their next assignment.

He glanced at Breta and his heart swelled. She sat next to him in the co-pilot's chair, studying the screen displaying Laloran. He'd lain awake long after she'd fallen asleep and assessed the euphoria from the blood orgasm. Taking blood added to the climax, but the high he'd experienced was new and completely unexpected.

The euphoria had a name. Love. He'd fallen in love and after the mission he intended to talk to Breta about making their partnership permanent, a bond of heart and blood.

"Have you worked on Laloran?" Breta asked, breaking into his thoughts of the future. Part of making a permanent partnership work was separating the mission from your personal life.

Daecon shook his head. "First time. HQ sent us a detailed file on the planet. Laloran is divided into a number of regions, each with its own government. We'll be landing in Usais, but the target is in Ojali. A long river serves as the border. The mouth of the river empties into the sea in Usais territory and access has been an ongoing dispute. Over the years a rebel group called the Guards has performed a number of terrorist acts against government facilities in Usais. This is the first time the Guards have taken a hostage."

"What do we know about the victim?"

"His name is Jori Abawi. He's seven years old and the son of the Usais Minister of Justice. He was abducted from his home in a commando-style raid."

Breta curled a lock of hair around her finger, a gesture he'd noticed she did while mulling over a mission. "They abducted the boy instead of his father? What are their demands?"

"The release of their members being held in Usais's central prison. The Usais Council has refused to comply. The Ojali Council has publicly demanded the boy be released, but the Guard has ignored them. The Guard members live among the river population and have local support. The area is ripe for civil war and neither government wants this situation to blow out of control. That's why we were hired. If we fail both governments can deny knowledge of our actions."

Daecon's gaze slid over the control panel, verifying speed and course. He glanced at Breta. She studied a map of the river bordering Usais and Ojali. By the time they reached Laloran, they'd have a plan of action.

"What kind of official help can we expect?" she asked.

"Communications between the rebels and the Usais government are being tracked by a drone that routinely scans the river. Recent images from the drone confirm that the boy is being held aboard an old supply freighter. It isn't a huge ship, but the heat-sensing imaging suggests the crew runs less than twenty."

“Where are we landing?”

“A military base. The government wants no official record of the *Heartfire* landing in Usais. We’ll be transported to the river and use a fishing boat as a cover to approach the freighter. I was thinking we should board the freighter during the night while the crew is sleeping. The trick is snatching the boy and getting him off the ship without alerting the crew. You don’t get seasick, do you?”

“I have good sea legs.”

Daecon’s gaze dropped. “You have amazing legs.”

Breta rose from the co-pilot’s chair and kissed him. “We got Hausa, we’ll get Jori.”

“The Hausa mission went well,” he said, thinking that the successful first mission had built Breta’s confidence.

She headed for the galley. “I’ll grab a couple of energy drinks and we’ll work out a plan.”

He was pleased that she was pumped and ready for action, but Daecon had hoped Breta would have several more successful missions under her belt before facing an organized paramilitary group like the Guard. Ideally he’d like a third team member for this mission and if time permitted he would have sent a request to HQ, but the Usais experts felt the quicker the strike, the better the chance of success. He and Breta were facing a huge challenge with a child’s life hanging in the balance, and mission failure wasn’t an option.

\* \* \*

Dressed in a black skinsuit, soft-soled slippers and night goggles, Arara reached out and grasped the metal ladder attached to the hull of the freighter. Following Daecon, she scrambled up the metal rungs to the deck. She wore a weapons belt around her waist and an air tank on her back. Daecon was similarly attired.

Before climbing onto the deck, Arara glanced down at the small fishing boat that had brought them across the river. The Usais operative piloting the boat was under orders to remain nearby and await Daecon’s signal for pickup.

To familiarize themselves with the freighter, Arara and Daecon had pored over the standard plans for the type of vessel. The tall pilothouse stood to the aft, leaving the wide top deck open for containers. Crew cabins and the galley were on the first level down.

Using night goggles, Arara scanned the top deck. She and Daecon took cover behind a stack of cargo boxes. Images from the drone had warned them to expect a sentinel making rounds during the night. The moment the sentry passed the stack of boxes, Daecon slipped away to complete the first part of their plan. When he returned a few minutes later, Arara knew Daecon had neutralized the sentry.

Laser weapons in hand and breathing devices covering their noses and mouths, Arara and Daecon crossed the deck and took the stairs down to the lower deck. They moved through the galley and entered a passageway lined with doors to the crew’s cabins. According to the drone’s heat-sensing images, a smaller heat-emitting body was being held in the port cabin near the bow.

Arara covered the cabins on the port side and Daecon took the starboard. Along the passageway, they

released canisters filled with a powerful gas. Within seconds anyone inhaling the gas would fall into a deep sleep for several hours.

While Arara covered the passageway, Daecon entered the suspicious cabin, leaving the door open and allowing the gas to spill inside. A couple minutes later he stepped into the passageway carrying a small figure.

During the mission planning they'd discussed the use of the gas to immobilize the crew. After confirming that the gas was safe for the child, they'd attached the canisters to their weapon belts. Asleep, the boy wouldn't be frightened and alert the crew. At all costs, they had to avoid a firefight that would endanger the boy.

Leading the way back to the galley, Arara scanned for potential threats. They moved quickly through the galley, up the stairs and across the top deck to the ladder.

Daecon removed his breathing device and signaled the fishing boat. "Where is the boat?" he whispered. He signaled again, but received no response.

Pulling off her breathing device, Arara scanned the water, but the fishing boat was nowhere in sight. Time was running out. Again, Daecon signaled.

"He's gone," Arara said. "Usais intelligence has a traitor working for them."

Daecon swore under his breath. "We may have to swim for it."

"We have to get across that river before sunrise," Arara said, removing the air tank from her back.

"You take care of the boy, and I'll steal a boat."

"Too risky."

"If you have a solution, I'm listening."

The mission was quickly unraveling, and Arara no longer trusted Usaisian intelligence. It was time to take action. Sooner or later she'd have to tell Daecon the truth. Arara took off her weapon belt and goggles and attached them to Daecon's belt. She removed her shoes and stripped off her skinsuit. "We're going to fly."

"Fly? How?"

Naked, she lifted her arms and shifted. Her skin rippled and scaled. In a golden flash her body swelled and her neck extended. Her spine reformed into a ridged column that ended in a long tail, and her legs changed into powerful appendages with pointed talons. She snapped her wings open to test the light breeze.

Daecon looked up at her. "Blood of the Ancestors, you're a dragon."

"Right now, I'm our transportation. Climb on my back and hang on."

He climbed on, securing the boy before him, and hooked his legs over her shoulders. Under other circumstances, Arara would have enjoyed giving Daecon the ride of his life.

Using her powerful legs, Arara pushed off the freighter's deck and flapped her expansive wings. The takeoff wasn't graceful, but another thrust of her wings and she was airborne.

The flash and zing of laser fire erupted from the freighter's pilothouse, streaking all around Arara. Pain stabbed her thigh. She'd been hit. *Zing! Zing!* Streaks of bright light flew past her head and wings.

Her left leg hung useless, interfering with the aerodynamics of flight. She dipped low, skimming the water. More laser fire rained down on them.

"Higher!" Daecon screamed.

Determined to save Jori and the vampire she loved, Arara pumped her broad wings and whipped her powerful tail. She pointed her head toward the open sky and soared high above the river and out of range of the laser fire.

Aware of the warm trickle of blood running down her wounded leg, Arara focused her energy and headed in the direction of the Usais military base where the boy's father awaited their return.

The first light of dawn was breaking and on the horizon the silhouette of the distinctive cone of an ancient volcano rose, a beacon guiding her course. The base lay at the foot of the volcanic peak.

Her strength ebbing, her wing beats slowed. Ahead was a pattern of familiar lights, the airstrip where the *Heartfire* had landed a few hours earlier.

Arara flew toward the lights until her wings refused to lift. Then she glided toward the flat surface of the airstrip, dipping one wing and then the other, spiraling down.

She landed hard. Her wounded leg buckled beneath her, forcing her right wing and chest into the hard surface. Skidding to an abrupt halt, she trembled from head to tail, and gold and red sparkles danced before her eyes. Her form shifted as waves of pain overtook her. Then everything went dark.

\* \* \*

"How's she doing?" Daecon asked the doctor. Unfamiliar with the regional languages, he spoke in Arano.

The military doctor was a tall woman with wide, almond-shaped eyes. "I've had no personal experience with Zyafayan shape-shifters, but I think she'll heal. I've repaired the damage to her leg and treated the abrasions on her arm and shoulder."

Zyafayan. He hadn't recovered from the shock of seeing Breta, the woman he'd come to love, transform into a dragon. Then the dragon had shifted and he'd looked upon a face he never thought to see again.

"Is she well enough to travel?"

"I'd prefer to consult with a Zyafayan medical team before I answer that question, but your mission is coded black."

Code black meant the mission didn't exist and the doctor was under orders not to contact anyone about

her patient. Now that the mission was completed, his and Arara's presence was a liability and the Usais Council was getting edgy. Arara needed proper medical care.

The best course of action was to depart the Eaxlar system and locate the closest planet or space station with the facilities and expertise to help her. "I have to take her now," Daecon said. "Give me your best advice."

"She's sedated and should sleep for several hours. I've done what I can. Thankfully, she transformed. Treating a dragon is beyond my medical experience. At the first opportunity you should contact a Zyafayan doctor." The doctor turned and pointed to her right. "She's in the second cubicle. I'll be right back with a gurney and we'll transport her to your ship."

"Thank you, doctor."

Daecon entered the cubicle and once again his breath caught.

Naked, Arara lay upon a bed. Her shoulder was scraped, the skin raw and red, but the doctor had sealed the wound on her leg. Above her was a long curved hood, bathing her in rays of healing light. Changing numbers and symbols, her vital signs, appeared on a large screen at the foot of the bed.

Her eyes were closed and her chest rose and fell in an easy rhythm.

Daecon picked up the long braid of blonde hair that lay over her shoulder, fingering the soft strands.

Why the deception?

Looking upon Arara, he noted the similarity of her features to Breta's. The nose was different, but the mouth was the same.

His emotions were in turmoil. He loved Breta, but he still had feelings for Arara. Now those feelings were tangled. Anger, guilt, desire and love all mixed together.

Daecon expelled a breath, and for a moment his broad shoulders drooped. He heard the doctor's voice in the corridor and straightened his spine. Now was not the time to wallow in emotion.

Breta or Arara, the name did not matter. She was his partner, and her commitment to saving hostages was evident in the execution of her duties. His duty was to get her proper medical attention as soon as possible.

Daecon stood aside while the doctor and an assistant moved Arara onto a gurney. He followed the gurney through a maze of corridors to a vehicle. Arara was placed in an air-cushion glide vehicle for the short trip to the airstrip.

After Arara was settled into Daecon's bunk aboard the *Heartfire*, he escorted the doctor to the hatch and thanked her.

The doctor reached out and touched Daecon's arm. "Thank you, both of you, for rescuing the boy. Soon all of Usais will be celebrating."

"Is he all right?"



“He’s fine,” the doctor said. “Have a safe journey and take care of my patient.”

Now that Arara was aboard ship, Daecon jumped into his pilot’s chair. The moment the *Heartfire* broke free of Laloran’s gravitational pull, Daecon set course, traversing the Eaxlar system to the wormhole.

He secured a sleeping Arara before entering the wormhole. The *Heartfire* shot through the galactic tunnel and dropped soundlessly into an open void. He sent a message to HQ requesting medical assistance for his partner.

When he received a response ordering him to set course for the Agis space station, Daecon had the horrible feeling that once again he’d deliver Arara into the arms of the Zyafayans and she’d be whisked away, this time forever.

The ship’s course was set, and he needed to sleep. Emotionally and physically exhausted, he rose from his pilot’s chair. He looked in on a sleeping Arara.

How had he been so easily duped? Although the question had been on his mind since he climbed onto the dragon’s back, Daecon still had no answer. He’d fallen in love with Breta and believed they would share more than a career. They’d build a life together.

His heart ached. Breta didn’t exist, and Arara remained the beautiful, but unobtainable royal. He reached out and traced her delicate jaw with a fingertip. His heart twisted. He’d kept a rein on his emotions and his desires the first time, but with Breta he’d felt no need to deny his feelings. Now he had to shut them out once again.

“Why, Arara?” he whispered. “Why the pretense?”

Did her family know? Aser had to know. HQ background checks were extensive and detailed. Why had Aser participated in the charade?

Although Aser had no idea of the depth of his feelings for Arara, his boss still owed him the truth about his partner. Trust was essential between partners and vital to the mission, yet he’d been kept in the dark.

Anger stirred with the disappointment, yet his heart ached. He pulled his hand away and curled it into a tight fist.

Arara’s eyes fluttered open. “Daecon?”

“I’m here.”

She looked around, recognition of the familiar surroundings of his quarters apparent in her golden eyes. No wonder he’d been duped -- it was her eyes that were different.

Using her uninjured arm, Arara adjusted her pillow. “I like sleeping in your bunk,” she said, rubbing her cheek against the pillow. “It has your scent.”

How many times had he and Breta made love in his bunk? The memories were like a fist in his chest.

Smiling, Arara met his gaze. Breta’s smile and Arara’s, those soft lips were one and the same. The fist tightened.

“We made it. Is Jori safe?”

He heard the weakness in her voice. She’d pushed herself to the limit to deliver the boy to safety.

“Jori is safe. We’re headed for Agis to get proper medical attention for your wound. The doctor in Usais had no experience with a Zyafayan. Are you in pain?”

“A little.” She lifted the blanket and looked at the wound on her thigh. “I have pain medication in my bag and a healing powder, inside a black box.”

Daecon retrieved her bag from the cupboard and removed the black box.

Arara lifted her good arm. “Help me sit up.”

He wrapped an arm around her waist and lifted her gently. She leaned back against the bulkhead and winced.

“Did I hurt you?”

“I’m sore. I’m sure this isn’t the first time a partner of yours has been injured. Open the box.”

She was right, he thought as he opened the box. It wasn’t the first time a partner, had been injured during a mission, but never had the experience threatened to rip his heart out.

Arara removed two cylinders, each a different size and marked with symbols. One held tiny yellow pills and she popped one in her mouth. She twisted the cap off the larger cylinder and sprinkled a silvery powder along the seam of the wound. She lifted her hand, revealing silvery sparkles that slowly sank into her skin.

“Helps the cells to regenerate,” she said, handing the cylinders back to Daecon. “Where are we?”

“On course for Agis. HQ is arranging for proper medical attention.” Daecon replaced the cylinders and set the box on a nearby table for easy access. “You should rest,” he said, starting to rise.

She reached out and grasped his hand. “I’m sorry, Daecon. I should have told you.”

Her hand was soft and familiar -- Breta’s hand. “Why didn’t you?”

“I wanted to earn your respect as a partner and as an equal.” Her fingers tightened around his. “I wanted to prove I was good enough for Vazan Shield. The persona of Breta Galt gave me that chance.”

“Your actions on both mission were exemplary. My reports to HQ reflect that observation. Did Aser know?”

“Yes. I wanted to work on the hostage rescue team. I wanted to give others what you had given me. Aser and my father worked out an agreement, but no one but Aser was to know my true identity.”

“So Breta Galt was created.”

Her grip tightened. “Breta is me without the royal trappings and obligations.”

When Daecon looked at Arara, he saw the royal beauty, not the female warrior who rode an air-bike and wielded weapons. Yet he'd seen Breta transform into a dragon and put herself at risk to save a boy. Arara was that dragon.

"I needed to find out something else," she said. "Something far more important to me. I needed to know my true feelings for you. And now I am certain. I love you, Daecon. I always have."

Her softly spoken words struck him with the force of a blow. He was still trying to absorb the idea that Breta had never existed.

*I always have.* Was it possible?

She touched her lips to his hand and looked him in the eye. "I was told that my feelings were those of a grateful victim, that it was adoration. That it would pass. It never passed, Daecon. My heart is yours."

He ached to draw her into his arms, but if he did, Daecon feared he'd never let go. He closed his eyes tight and pressed his forehead to their clasped hands. His heart hurt with the joy that she loved him, with the pain that Breta was forever lost and Arara was a dream impossible to hold onto.

"Daecon."

He lifted his head and saw the pain and fatigue in her eyes and the strain of her ordeal on her face. She kissed him, a soft brush of her lips to his, before falling against him as if all her strength had seeped out of her.

"Will you hold me until I fall asleep?"

Daecon drew her close, and while she slept and healed, he sifted through his memories of Breta and Arara and realized he loved the same woman.

## Chapter Seven

Arara awoke, instantly aware she was alone. She ordered the cabin lights on and blinked several times until her vision adjusted. She stretched her sore limbs, climbed out of the bunk and popped another pain pill. She went in search of Daecon and found him stretched out in another cabin, fast asleep.

After using the sonic shower, she limped to the cockpit and checked the *Heartfire*'s course. Agis space station was visible on the pilot's screen. Given their progress, she must have slept for more than a standard day cycle. By now HQ would have contacted the Zyafayan government to arrange for a medical team and the government would contact her family. Her mother would beg her to come home and her father would insist.

Despite her injury and the danger, Arara knew what she wanted in life. She wanted Daecon, she wanted

to be his partner and work in the hostage rescue unit of Vazan Shield.

She limped along the passageway to the cabin where he slept. She closed the door, plunging the cabin into darkness, and slipped into the bunk next to him. His skin was warm and smooth.

If he didn't love her, she'd learn to live with it. But he would have to get used to his partner shifting form.

She slid her hand over his flat belly to his cock, letting her fingertips play along its length. She grasped him, coaxing his flesh to its full length.

Straddling his hips, Arara guided him inside her.

He grasped her undulating hips, then grabbed the long braid hanging down her back.

"Arara."

"Make love to me, Daecon."

His groan rent the darkness.

"I'm not the girl you rescued. I've grown up, and I'm the woman who loves you. It's my body you made love to, the first time, every time. It was my breasts you caressed, my pussy you pleased with your mouth, hand and cock. I am Breta and Arara, one and the same."

"You drive me mad."

Beneath her, his body trembled. "Love me, Daecon."

"I do, but no sex." He lifted her up, withdrawing from her. "I'll hurt you."

"Never."

His hands shook as he gently moved her off of him. "Not until you're completely healed."

She reached out and touched his chest. He grasped her hand in his and brought it to his lips.

Then his words sank in. "You love me? Or you love Breta?"

"I love you both." His grasp tightened. "I had to deny my feelings three years ago. You were vulnerable, and to act upon my feelings would have taken advantage of your emotional state."

She reached out, finding his face in the dark and stroking his cheek. "I loved you, Daecon."

"I knew the moment I docked the *Skyracer* with the Zyafayan cruiser you would be lost to me. You're a royal. I had to let you go."

"I missed you, Daecon. A day didn't go by that I didn't think about you."

"I named the *Heartfire* for you."

Her fingers skated over his lips. "I was afraid you'd forgotten me."

“Never.”

“I was so happy. If you recall, I jumped your bones right after you told me.”

“That’s what I felt, a heartfire. It consumed me, and this time I won’t let you go.”

She ordered the cabin lights on and looked him in the eye. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m your partner, your lover and you are my heartfire.”

“Make our partnership permanent? Marry me, Arara?”

She lunged forward and threw her arms around him, wincing at the pain in her shoulder and thigh. “I do. I will,” she said, planting kisses on his face. “The moment we reach Agis.”

“We’ll marry, after we have your father’s approval.”

She threaded her fingers through his hair. “I don’t need my father’s permission.”

“I do. It’s a matter of respect.”

Was he serious? “No sex until I heal, and no wedding until my father approves?”

“That’s the mission.”

\* \* \*

Heart pounding, Arara stood before an Agis magistrate with Daecon at her side. A wreath of yellow flowers encircled her head, and lengths of yellow beads and ribbons were woven through her hair. She wore a full-length gown, the golden gossamer fabric held on by straps of the finest Zyafayan gems.

She stole a glance at her parents and sister, who had insisted on traveling to Agis for the wedding. Daecon and her father had communicated at length via a visual com-link before the date was set.

In fairness to family and friends, Arara and Daecon had chosen to marry on Agis. Daecon’s brother and ten employees of Vazan Shield were in attendance.

The magistrate turned to his right and nodded, acknowledging the royal Zyafayan family attending the ceremony. “We are gathered together to witness and celebrate the unification of Arara Iaxas and Daecon Kreass.”

After a brief discourse on the value and joy of sharing a life together, the magistrate instructed Arara and Daecon to join hands. Following the Zyafayan tradition, they crossed their forearms before clasping hands, the act symbolizing the infinity of the union.

“Stronger together than apart,” Arara said, giving the traditional Zyafayan vow.

Daecon repeated the vow.

“Joined by heart and blood,” Daecon intoned the traditional Vazan vow.

Following his lead, Arara turned her palms up, but kept her fingers entwined with his. Using his fang, Daecon cut first his palms, and then hers. The cuts were small, but Arara was too overwhelmed by the fact that she and Daecon were bonding to feel the pain.

Pressing their palms together, their blood mingled.

Arara made her pledge. "Joined by heart and blood."

The magistrate placed his hands over theirs. "Arara and Daecon, unified as one."

The audience applauded as Daecon brushed his lips to hers.

"I love you, dragon woman," he whispered.

"I love you, Daecon. You are my heartfire."

B.J. McCall

Born a coal miner's daughter, B.J. McCall makes her home on the beautiful California coast. A perfect day includes writing the final chapter of a book and spotting dolphins or whales playing offshore.

Multi-published in E-book and print, B.J. writes sensual romance in contemporary, futuristic, sci-fi and paranormal genres. The phrase "do what you love" applies to B.J. She loves to write and each story is special. She hopes her readers will enjoy each and every one of them.

Her website is: [www.bjmccall.com](http://www.bjmccall.com).