



NOT FOR SALE

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Hunter's Pride

By

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The Other Side of the Moon

Thomas Hunter pushed his jaguar deep and sheathed his claws. It was hard enough adjusting to finding his mate, but dealing with a stray, predatory cat, that had discovered the rare talents of Misery Hess, and was now an unexpected rival totally disrupted his plans.

Thomas had sensed the witch/healer all the way from the Mapuera Waiwai River, and had worked his way through the desert and mountains between them, always following her allusive scent.

He was embarrassed to have been ambushed and taken down before he'd ever reached the woman. *But when she saved me, I marked her, and I'll be damned if another man claims her before I can.*

He grinned to himself at the insubstantial protection she believed she had discovered to keep him out. The truth was, Olaf Bannister needed to be dealt with before any further courting and declarations took place.

Thomas left the trail, shimmered into cat form and stalked after the black jaguar that had raced away earlier.

Misery—he stopped on that thought—a less miserable woman he'd never seen. *Missy*, with her long red hair and wild green eyes, was cat nip for his soul. He'd lived too long alone, waiting for the promise of his mate. He roared his claim into the silence of the morning.

The jaguar, that was sometimes Thomas Hunter, breathed deep and chuffed. Even this distance from his mate, he could scent her. He focused on the trail, determined to discover Olaf Bannister's purpose in colluding with rustlers. Thomas was sure that he and Missy had stumbled into a much bigger scheme than a local bandit operation.

The viciousness of Bannister's attacks confirmed that something, much more complicated than humans stealing from each other, was afoot. It was a crime beneath a shifter, who had little need for money. And cat shifters, unlike their wolf and coyote counterparts, might not be pack animal, but they didn't hunt and kill other cats outside their pride either.

The jaguar dropped to his belly, almost invisible to the naked eye as he crawled through underbrush and neared the place to which Bannister's scent had led him.

Healing Spirit Claims Savage Soul

If he'd been in top form and not mooning over his reluctant mate, he'd have heard the approach—as it was, he was caught and pinned, jaws clamped tight around his neck, threatening to squeeze and break.

Thomas gathered his muscles, prepared for the battle, blood lust flooding him with adrenaline. The weight of the other cat bore down on him.

And then she began to purr...cat and man alike shivered with hunger—lust, much different from moments before, washed over him. The female jaguar covered him, bite turning to nuzzles as she blanketed his body with her own.

He rolled, flipping her on her back under him, beast and man alike uncontrollable. *Change* he commanded her, roaring the order into her brain. As he shimmered into man, she changed into his Missy, wild fey creature that she was, staring from green eyes of passion.

He didn't give her a chance to speak or dissent, but took advantage of her sprawled moment of shifting confusion to gather her naked hips and make her his own. Not a sound emerged from her, but she stiffened and arched her back to meet his long slow thrust.

He held her, and poured two hundred years of longing and lonely want, into the power of his claim. He growled his intentions into her ear, "Mine, Misery Hess, forever mine."

When she sank her teeth into his shoulder, and wrapped her legs around his waist, he felt her magic surround them. The essence of her healing spirit, merged with the savage beast that had owned his soul.

Mine, Mister Cat—Mine Thomas Hunter--forever mine...

Earth, Wind and Fire...

"*Te ha buscado muchos anos'*—I have hunted you through many lives," Thomas murmured against her neck. He buried his face, inhaling the scent of her, their coupling, and the sweet smell of sage and jasmine.

Thomas had stalked the world alone for two hundred years, pride leader and enforcer of all law. But, the godlike reverence of his people separated him more than a prison. He grunted in satisfaction. Now, Misery Hess was his.

He gathered her closer, melding flesh into flesh, drinking her essence into his being. But, he quickly learned that his magic didn't dominate hers. Joy filled his heart. Missy was his without chicanery or spell.

Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled above the thick black, velvet of the desert at night. As he plumbed the depths of her body, Misery captured his spirit, her magic pulling them above the entwined humans coupling on the ground.

She pulled the man named Thomas Hunter from his cat and joined her spirit to his, hovering in the air in a sensuous dance. From that moment on, he would never be alone. She burned her brand on his heart claiming him in a way that he had not known possible.

Rain poured over them, but still, their bodies writhed together, as spirits tasted, learned, reveled in new powers. Finally, they ignited in an orgasmic show of light that rivaled the lightning flashes in the sky.

And once again, they were two people, sliding on the earth that was quickly becoming mud, as the rain poured over their sweat drenched skin.

Thomas ran his hand over her hip, slid it up to cup her breast and squeeze, and then

further explored, until he hugged all of her against his frame in an exuberant display.

“I found you,” he growled down at her. The rain had flattened her usually wild red hair, but her green eyes flashed brighter than ever.

“I think I found you,” she imitated his growl, nipping his jaw, as she wiggled free of his arms.

And then she was jaguar, tumbling away from him, shaking her fur free of rain drops as she waited for him to join her.

What Are Mate's For?

Cat and woman sat preening, watching the mate she had claimed. The cool drops of rain were welcome balm to the heat that still sizzled along nerves and sinew.

She could barely remember the life she had lived the days before now. It was as though, for the woman who shared her soul, time had just begun.

Misery, embraced the wild animal she had become. Her golden gaze traveled over the landscape. The mountains called to her, inviting her to run, to stretch her new muscles, to taste the wind, to live the rest of her days a jaguar—free.

You are free Missy. Her mate invaded her mind, reminding her that he was part of her life. *We have rustlers to catch and another shifter to discover.*

His thoughts came to her clearly. *There is more to be discovered here, than a few head of stolen cattle.*

Her cat snarled at him. *Humans*—she was indifferent to their crimes or trespasses. Her gaze turned to the far off peaks.

Why would Olaf Bannister steal cattle? She ignored the call of the wild landscape, and turned her head so that she looked fully at the male jaguar.

Always she had been alone, waiting, watching. Now her mate refused to allow her solitude. Her thoughts were no longer her own.

His gaze locked on hers, demanding that she...Misery felt herself shift into control of her cat. *Ahhhhh...to be so much more—cat and woman...*

And mate—Thomas finished her thought. When Mister Cat had bitten her, Misery's life

had changed to include a shape-shifting jaguar.

She licked her coat, a satisfied purr rumbling from her throat. Her cat smiled when Thomas padded over to where she sat, and rubbed his head against her shoulder.

Back to Tracking Rustlers

Thomas wanted to forget the queries and investigations that had prompted this night's hunt in the rain. After many mortal lifetimes, he'd tracked and claimed his mate. Even now, satiated as he was, satisfied that both cat and woman were bound to him, he watched her with a jealous eye.

I eliminated the possibility of her mating the other cat. He grabbed the thought, but not before Misery caught it too. He would have to work on his shielding.

How could you think I would mate with that awful man?" Misery's protest filled his mind.

If we don't find the cat that's causing so much trouble in this territory, all of our kind, risk exposure. I've tracked the shape-shifter and he's left a trail of bodies behind—half-eaten bodies. Already, two of my pride, have been sent after this one, and both died without success.

They were lucky they hadn't been caught cavorting in the rain. Thomas was stunned at how close he and Misery were to their prey. He'd been careless with her safety, but, Misery was like a giant snort of cat nip that went straight to his brain and other regions farther south.

The sound of bawling cattle interrupted their mental sparring. The downpour was steady, and Thomas was glad Misery wore the skin of her cat. Water beaded and rolled away, and she shook her coat before dropping to her belly as he did.

They crawled through underbrush, soundlessly inching closer to the herd until they lay on the outskirts, watching the restless movements. When Missy's tail, twitched he cautioned her. *Be still. Control your cat. We hunt the shape-shifter named Olaf Bannister, not these corralled cows.*

The two cats worked their way around the edge of the clearing, until they were within jaws reach of two of the rustlers.

Both men crouched around a fire that sputtered and tried to go out. "Jesus, this is going to get us killed. We're supposed to have these brands changed by the time the boss gets here. I can't even keep the damned fire going."

A second man grunted and pulled the blanket that he held, up to cover his head. "Rory damned near broke his leg, wrestling the last steer in the mud. I say we get the hell out of here before the boss gets here. Remember what he did to Pete...?"

Misery Resurfaces

Well, it wasn't easy wrestling control of both my inner cat and Thomas, but I found the way to his inner beast...catnip in the form of me....purrrrrrrr.

I was satisfied in a way that I had not known possible, but it felt right. I wasn't about to question tranquility, after a lifetime of jangling discord that made every day a time of-- *what's happening and why am I this way?*

I didn't need to question Thomas Hunter to know that I'd been claimed, transformed, and made whole. My entire life, I had always felt that I was an unfinished puzzle. No more.

Instead, crouching in the mud and rain next to the big male jaguar, I wanted to purrrrr and rumble and scream with joy. When Thomas nudged me with his shoulder, I stilled.

Forgive me, I thought at him sarcastically, *I'm new at this*.

He didn't even waste a glance my way, so I refocused on the men crouched around the campfire.

"Yea, there wasn't enough left of Pete after the boss got through with him to bury." The man poking at the fire in a desultory fashion, only needed an excuse to quit.

The second man's words were muffled by the blanket he huddled under, but the fear in his voice couldn't be missed. "I tell you, it scares me to work for a man who changes into a cat. If'n he killed one of us that easy, he won't think nothin' of slaughterin' all, when the job's done."

I think the men are getting spooked. Let's chase them on out of here. Thomas set action to thought and let fly a blood curdling scream that filled the night. I almost laughed, and

then remembered I couldn't, because I was in jaguar form.

Stay here, he ordered me. Yes, you heard me, Thomas ordered me--Misery Hess--hah! As soon as he padded away, I dropped closer to the ground, and crawled in the opposite direction.

Fear had been uncorked around the flickering campfire. The fire-tender threw his stick on the dying embers and stood. "Shit, I'm out of here. The pay ain't that good."

Healer or Killer

What little sputter and sizzle left in the fire was drowned by the deluge that suddenly blanketed the area with a driving rain.

"Come on, let's get out of here," one of the outlaws suddenly decided he'd had enough and threw the blanket to the ground, bolting away through the torrential downpour.

I was close enough to the remaining man to see that he was little more than a boy. His chest heaved with fear and as if sensing me, he peered through the thick rain and began backing in the opposite direction.

Thomas let another cat scream fill the night, and the lad was off and running. My muscles tensed as I prepared to spring and...a red haze of blood lust rolled through my mind as I crouched, ready to leap on the fleeing figure and have a meal. Thomas grabbed my mind. *Control your cat, Missy.*

Shivering and ashamed that I had been seconds away from killing, I dropped to the ground and changed. Just like that I was Misery Hess, the healer who would rather die than kill anything. *Change*, Thomas roared in my mind.

No. I gathered my dignity, what was left of it, and stumbled naked through the rain toward home.

I would have killed that boy had I not been interrupted. I reviled the cat that I had so enthusiastically embraced moments before.

"Missy," I looked over at the man who now kept pace with me. He caught me in his arms and sheltered me from the elements.

Before I could protest, he lifted me effortlessly and began to run toward my house on the

outskirts of town. I laid my head against his chest and let him carry me, surrendering myself to his care.

The thump of his heart beat beneath my cheek and I turned my face to press my lips against the spot.

You'll learn to control your cat, Missy. Until then, I'll help you. The voice in my mind was a purred promise as I let go of the final threads of yesterday.

What A Strange Creature I've Become

Thomas set me on the chair and crossed to the floor to poke and stir the banked embers of fire in the stove. I went to the corner where I'd left my clothes, and dressed. My hair seemed longer, thicker, and wilder as I blotted its red length.

Dressed, I should have been composed, ready to talk. But when his amber gaze swung my way, I felt fingers stroking my skin, though he stood eight feet from me, and across the room. My cat awakened and stretched, beginning to purr under his silent stare.

"Stop that," I protested tartly. His answer was to tweak my nipples. I swear to you, from across the room I felt his fingers capture my nubs and twist. My breath wooshed out, and I fought for control.

I looked at the wall and concentrated, using that picture to stack a barrier in my mind. The buzzing invasion diminished, stopped. His grunt sounded pleased. He crossed his ankles and leaned against the dry-sink. "Good," he praised me.

I did not need to ask *what ?* to know it pleased him that I could shut my mind and keep him from my thoughts.

Or I thought I could. Too smug in my accomplishment, I relaxed into a self-satisfied smirk, and he tore away the barrier, once again invading my mind.

"You let your thoughts stray, and I took them."

I felt my face flush with embarrassment. Who was he to criticize my untried new powers? "You want me to focus, so be it." My gaze caught his, my mind thought, *UP*, and he lifted from the floor. The threads of my magic reached out, and I blew a gust of air--
phttt!

Thomas slammed back against the wall, shaking the rickety structure of my house with the force of the shove.

He laughed. "So the witch in hiding comes out."

Again, I'd been outsmarted. The witch and I did not agree on most things, but one was the eternal vigil we maintained on my powers.

I could have incinerated Thomas had I decided to toast him for dinner. My mate was too nosey, seeking to understand things about me I'd never shared with anyone.

Thomas, You Came from Where?

"Tell me why you are here." I wasn't asking my mate for answers. I was demanding them. I think if your life is disrupted, your internal organs remodeled, and your heart stolen by another, you have the right to know why.

Thomas didn't pretend to misunderstand. He pulled a chair from the table, sat me down on it, and leaned once again, against the counter. "I'm here for you. My primary interest and concern the moment I saw you, was claiming you as my mate."

His voice had a possessively satisfied note in it, and I frowned. "You did not come all the way from," I paused realizing I had no idea where he had come from. I certainly had not seen the likes of his cat in these parts before.

He didn't answer directly but said, "I come from a land of mountains, lakes, and green trees far south of here." He looked at the night sky through the window, wistfully.

"Someday we will return to my home and you and I will explore the mountains together. But from now on, where you are, so am I."

It was a good answer, if a little vague. "How did you know I'd be driving Clarence down that rode the night I healed your cat?"

The way he smiled at me, made me nervous. He began to rumble in his throat, a sound that brought a flush of heat to my skin and an excited flutter in my belly. "I followed your scent."

Oh, I didn't want to hear that. What a decadent thing for him to say, like we are animals. My head came up on that thought. "I was not cat yet, how could you scent me before?"

"Misery Hess, my woman," his voice was filled with a tenderness that brought an ache to

my throat. I tried to ignore it. Emotions were not something I indulged.

His eyes held my gaze and he finished his explanation. "You have always been cat. You were a flower in the desert, waiting to be discovered and when I crossed the big river coming north, your essence filled my lungs, bringing me to you."

You Are More Exquisite Than the Rising Sun

I'd already noticed that Thomas had a tendency to use flamboyant language, describing me in exotic ways. It was certainly a different perception than most of the people I dealt with on an infrequent basis.

"Will Olaf Bannister return? Was he a cat always? Why is he trying to kill you?" My questions tumbled out, my curiosity not to be denied.

Instead of being offended, Thomas tilted his head to the side and rumbled, "Come over here and I'll answer all of your questions in good time."

He patted his thigh; coaxing me like I was his pet and he wanted to play. I know a trap when I see one. If I crossed the room and settled myself in Thomas's lap, I'd get more than my questions answered.

It was my turn to tease him. A purr vibrated through my chest, my cat reaching for his, regardless of what Misery Hess intended.

"Come," he growled the command.

"Answers are the catnip that lures the curious." I remained across the room, but my purring continued, in spite of my attempts to hush.

Thomas sighed, "Woman, you are supposed to obey your man."

Well that certainly ended the romance of the moment. "I'll have you know Thomas Hunter that I don't obey you or any man."

I retreated farther from him. "Come to think of it, I'm my own boss. I don't know what you did for a minute to make me forget that, but your spell is broken."

Instead of arguing, Thomas threw back his head and laughed...laughed at me, Misery Hess, like I'd just said something to entertain him.

When he saw my fury, his laughter ended. "Come to me my lovely bride. You are more exquisite than the sun rising in the morning. More precious than the crystal streams that flow from the mountains. My life has been an empty vessel that your essence has now filled with the promise of tomorrow."

Well, heck. Thomas was a little more flowery than I considered seemly, but when a handsome man is courting you with words of love...I walked across the room and curled into his lap, sliding my arms around his neck.

"Just checking to make sure we still have our connection," I murmured against his skin as I nibbled a spot just below his ear.

Back to Business

Thomas loved looking at his beloved. She was so exquisite he could not believe that he had been given this gift. He had felt a strange pull on his heart--no, his soul--when he'd crossed the Brazos River. It had been fifty years since he'd ventured farther north than the edge of his pride's territory.

But the renegade shifters were creating problems for all. He looked at the unexpected bonus he had reaped on this trip and immediately thought of making love to her again.

"Olaf Bannister?" Missy squirmed on his lap, her enticing rump, massaging his already swollen sex. He tried to focus on his answer instead of the ache in his groin.

"Olaf Bannister is only one of the shape-shifter of my pride who have left our territory. It is not unusual for a full grown, unmated male, to wander far before returning. We have lost four of our males, recently. Like, Olaf, they refused to obey clan rules, and left rather than fight a Pride Challenge.

"What exactly is a Pride Challenge?" Missy sat up on his lap, paying close attention to his answer.

He pulled her closer. "Hunter's Pride is my family clan. We live in the jungles and mountains far to the south. My brothers and I have a ranch that we own, and all of the members of our pride, one way or another, work on the land."

As usual, Missy didn't overlook his vague description. "You were telling me about the Pride Challenge," she reminded.

"When one of the males in a clan decides he wants to be boss, there's a fight. Winner takes over managing the pride."

"What happens to the loser?" Missy shivered and hugged him, snuggling into his arms.

"The loser gets dead," he told her flatly.

Cierro mis ojos y te imagino junto a mi...

"You're the leader of Hunter's Pride?" Misery asked, but she already knew the answer. Of course he was. The very way Thomas entered a room, or prowled in jaguar form, signaled control and dominance.

Her mate's purr became more pronounced at the same time the ridge of his arousal nudged her aggressively.

"I, and my brothers, manage the land, and see to the needs of my people." The words were mumbled as he nuzzled Misery's neck and then licked her, stopping to taste and sample as he worked his way inside the collar of her dress.

It was hard to escape the magnetism of his scent and the sound of his hypnotic purr. Misery stretched and wrapped her arms around his neck, inviting his attentions.

Then, she felt the need to sample his skin, tentatively running her tongue along his jaw, before stopping to suck on his earlobe. She smiled around her prize, when Thomas shivered and groaned at her attentions.

"Eres mi alma gemela," Thomas growled the words that she needed no translator to understand. In his mind she heard them—*You are my soul mate*.

"Is that what we are?" she asked, stopping her attentions to quiz him, "soul mates?" For someone who had been alone too long, the thought of having a mate who cared about her and cherished her, was intoxicating, and powerful.

"Of course, *mi amor*, I never thought to find you. I have walked in solitude so long, needing my mate, that when your essence came to me, the force of your allure challenged my control." He rubbed his head against her ruefully, like a child seeking forgiveness.

“The man you know as Olaf Bannister, and two other shifters, waited along the trail I followed—your scent had replaced any thought of pursuing the renegade pride members.”

“They ambushed you!” Well, of course. No other way could the strength and power of Thomas's cat been defeated. “I was a distraction that could have gotten you killed.” Misery couldn't keep the horror from her voice.

“It was the promise of you, my love that enabled me to live. Each time my will faltered,” his arms tightened around her and he murmured, “Cierro mis ojos y te imagino junto a mi.” His words, *I close my eyes and imagine you are with me*, filled her mind, easing her guilt at unknowingly causing him harm.

A Sparrow Rescues Me

I wanted to accept the bounty of his love. It did seem sudden and very intense to feel so strongly about someone I had just met. But I could believe his extravagant words, because my heart belonged to him as well.

"Some people believe that I carry bad luck with me, like a curse," I warned him. It was a heavy burden to be named Misery. My life had been marked from birth by my mother, as if she wanted a label to remind her of a particular misdeed.

"Ha, a curse you call it?" Thomas cupped my face in his hands. "I call it the luck of the gods that at last I have found you. I would have died by the trail had you cared less."

He pinched my chin between thumb and finger and spoke to me sternly, "If you believe that I am worth saving, then you cannot doubt your own goodness, or purpose."

His eyes turned cat and his jaguar demanded that I respect myself and the cat that he had mated. In both forms, Thomas Hunter was a delight to my senses. I would have sat wrapped in his arms the whole day if we had not been interrupted.

The sound of riders approaching reached both of us at the same time. The hair on my arms moved and alarm raced through me.

"You must go," I warned him. I didn't question my knowing, nor did he. As soon as I left the comfort of his lap, he stood, his form wavering until only a speck remained floating in the air. Then, the dust particle flickered and became a sparrow that flew to the rafters of my home.

I admired the skill and smoothness with which my mate controlled his shift. But I couldn't take the time to fully appreciate his magic, because the renegade, shape-shifting jaguar, in Sheriff Olaf Bannister's form, rode into my yard, surrounded by a posse.

I Am Accused of Theft and Murder

I knew that Olaf Bannister in any form spelled trouble. For the shape-shifter to brazenly bring a posse to my home, signaled his determination to cause trouble. But what did he want and why?

As far as I could tell, Bannister was motivated by more than self-preservation or greed. It seemed to me that he had a hate on for Thomas that was extremely personal.

When I stepped onto the porch to face the riders, the man in charge was the one who had most recently been a cat stalking Thomas. He nodded at his companions.

"Like I said," he spoke to them, ignoring me. "The witch is hiding our man. He's been seen coming and going from this place, and Misery Hess taking up with a cattle rustler and horse thief shouldn't surprise anyone." Olaf Bannister turned his yellow gaze on me and bared his teeth in a malevolent smile.

"Misery Hess, you're under arrest for rustling, horse thieving, and the murder of Sid Hawkins."

I couldn't take him seriously. "Who?" I didn't know any Sid Hawkins.

"You probably don't know the name of the poor sonovabitch you killed. Sid Hawkins was the cowpuncher riding herd on the last cattle you and your boyfriend stole."

Bannister's accusations were so absurd, I remained silent.

Help came from an unexpected source. "That can't be so Sheriff. Hawkins was killed last full moon. Misery couldn't have been part of that. She was delivering Myrtle's baby." I was astonished to see Paddy riding with the posse, and more amazed to hear him defend me.

A Sparrow Told Me So

Suddenly, the posse mounts were nervous, stomping and snorting as though deadly predators were about. Paddy's horse whirled and buck-jumped, loosening the big man's grip, and sending him flying.

Shield him, the words rushed through my head as other horses bunched and kicked, being herded, it seemed, toward the big Irishman on the ground. A sparrow circled the melee, hovering above Paddy.

I stepped from my porch, and walked among the animals, placing my hand against the big roan's flank, then the withers of the sorrel, next a stroke on the neck of the surly black.

At last I stood before Olaf Bannister's horse and cupped its head, scratching it under the chin as all flight and terror left its mind.

"Get away from my animal, witch," the sheriff-shifter snarled. I stared at him, capturing his gaze until the rage on his face diminished. I could feel our forces clash as he struggled against my magic.

It did not matter. My touch flowed from me powerful and sure. "You need to go back to town now sheriff. I am no murderer, rustler, or horse thief. Remember that when you get back to your office."

His eyes lost their amber glow, changing to a muddy brown. I moved from him; sweeping away chaos, fear, and frenzy; calming the animals' minds; and filling all with tranquil harmony.

By the time I reached the once fearful Paddy, where he lay sprawled on the ground, he was smiling.

"It's like me Myrtle says, Missy," his voice held a whispered Irish lilt, "ye be a good witch."

As I grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet, his smile turned to terror.

"Jazus," he stumbled back from me and for a minute my feelings were hurt until I realized he stared at something over my shoulder.

How Does One Stop Magic? With Magic

I whirled around in time to see two huge male jaguars coming toward Paddy who stood frozen, mouth agape, unable to back away.

I hesitated, unable to shift into jaguar form without revealing the existence of shape-shifters. Somehow, I didn't think that the town was ready to accept that from its resident witch.

My mate settled on my shoulder. The sparrow perched confidently, grasping me with talons as he held on. His strength flowed into me and I lifted my hands, palms outward, collecting my power. The jaguars snarled and sank to their bellies, claws unfurled, ready to pounce but suddenly not so eager.

I summoned the wind and it flowed through me and allowed me to channel its force, directing it toward the jaguar in front that even now tried to inch toward me, hissing a challenge.

The wind blasted over him in a violent burst and lifted him in the air carrying him away, leaving only the sound of the cat's fearful screams as his body was tossed high and thrown toward the distant sky.

All in the clearing stared at the second jaguar. One of the posse members had his gun drawn and now took aim.

"No," I forbade him.

I turned my gaze back to the jaguar pinned to the ground by my spell. My hands began to heat, and my body to vibrate, as I hurled raw power at the cat.

His body tensed, his claws raked the ground as if grasping the earth to fight the wind.

But it was not wind I sent this time. He began sliding backward, but he could not escape my magic and began to shrink before the frightened men who watched.

When he was no bigger than a common house cat, I released him to run away from the clearing and the men who would kill him without hesitation.

Things Change

The cat hissed and screamed its fear as it ran from the clearing. The quiet that followed its passing settled over me as I faced the group of townsmen.

Thomas, releasing his talons that had gripped my shoulder, flew above their heads and then away.

I felt the loss immediately when my mate withdrew his support. Our combined magic had been at work, but I could see that I would get all the credit or blame for this day's events.

The men from town who had made up the posse, stared at me fearfully, not sure what I might do to them now that the jaguars were vanquished.

Paddy interrupted the somber quiet. "Will ye look at this, boyos?"

He stood over a pile of shredded clothes that had once been worn by Sheriff Olaf Bannister. The tin star he'd pinned to his vest, caught the morning light, shining dully.

"I think we'll be needing a new sheriff. The cats got the old one before he could get one of them."

For a group of men who had followed Bannister, willing to arrest me under accusation of murder, no one seemed too upset by the sheriff's loss.

Paddy took it upon himself to urge the townsmen toward their mounts. "We need to get on back to our own business, now."

He mounted his old swayback dunn and tipped his hat at me. "Reckon it's been a trying morning for ye Missy. We'll leave ye to yerself now."

It was evidence of their confusion that the men allowed a poor Irish mick to order them about. But they looked gratefully at Paddy for direction.

"I expect Myrtle would be pleased if ye'd visit for supper, Missy. She's been wanting to show off our laddie to ye. Can I tell her ye'll be visiting tomorrow evening?"

It was a first. I had never been invited for supper, dinner, or breakfast with anyone before. Saving for Thomas and his surprise baskets of food, I had eaten solitary meals all of my life.

I knew that it was more than food that Paddy offered. "I would be pleased to take my evening meal with you Mr. Patrick. Tell Myrtle I'll bring a cake for dessert."

Paddy waited until the other men had ridden toward town before he took up reins to start for home.

As he left, he winked and said, "A good witch, ye be, Missy. I'm well pleased to call ye friend. Myrtle and me will be waiting for that cake."

I was still staring after him when Thomas slid an arm around my waist and reminded me that I had a mate and would never be alone again.

Eres mi alma gemela~

"*Eres mi alma gemela*. You are my soul mate." Thomas hugged me close, turning me so that I stood, enclosed in his arms. "*Te quiero con toda mi alma*." He rubbed his hand up and down my back slowly in time with his words, "I love you with all my soul."

I leaned into his strength, amazed at the way my essence seemed wrapped up in his. I wanted to please him. I wanted to give him beautiful words that would make him purr as his made me. I wanted to say *I love you, Thomas*.

The thought floated through my head before I caught it and buried it deep.

He pulled me closer and rubbed his body against mine. "Some day, *mi amor*, you will not hide the words from me." And he purred louder, smug in his knowledge of how I felt.

This whole sharing *thoughts-manifestation* was something I needed to control.

Again he caught my thought and replied, "You will my love, you are untrained, but so strong."

Thomas turned with me still in his arms, pointing at where the two jaguar shifters had stood.

"So fierce, rrrrawwww," he mocked them and made the sound of the jaguar snarling.

"My woman says, *be still, go away, be a tame cat*." His words were accompanied by grand, sweeping, gestures and genuine merriment.

"I could only do those things because of you," I admitted. But I smiled remembering the small cat that had once been Olaf Bannister.

"Will he be able to reverse the spell? Will he return?" I wasn't worried, now sure that we could handle anything that the renegade shape-shifter tried.

"The man you know as Olaf Bannister will spend the rest of his short life, in the body of a very small cat, remembering the power he once had. It is sad, but it is the punishment he has earned." My mate's voice reverberated with genuine sorrow. Members of his pride had been lost.

Now that danger was past, I was filled with adrenaline and happiness. My body sizzled with excess power that I needed to somehow expend. Try as I might, I couldn't control the direction of my thoughts.

"Oh, I have use for all that energy, my love," Thomas promised. "We will soar the earth as one."

He turned me toward my house, walking me slowly up the steps, while one hand brushed the side of my breast, persuading where persuasion was unnecessary.

You Are More Exquisite than the Sun Rising in the Morning...

I'd already noticed that Thomas had a tendency to use flamboyant language, describing me in exotic ways. It was certainly a different perception than most of the people I dealt with on an infrequent basis.

"Will Olaf Bannister return? Was he a cat always? Why is he trying to kill you?" My questions tumbled out, my curiosity not to be denied.

Instead of being offended, Thomas tilted his head to the side and rumbled, "Come over here and I'll answer all of your questions in good time."

He patted his thigh; coaxing me like I was his pet and he wanted to play. I know a trap when I see one. If I crossed the room and settled myself in Thomas's lap, I'd get more than my questions answered.

It was my turn to tease him. A purr vibrated through my chest, my cat reaching for his, regardless of what Misery Hess intended.

"Come," he growled the command.

"Answers are the catnip that lures the curious." I remained across the room, but my purring continued, in spite of my attempts to hush.

Thomas sighed, "Woman, you are supposed to obey your man."

Well that certainly ended the romance of the moment. "I'll have you know Thomas Hunter that I don't obey you or any man."

I retreated farther from him. "Come to think of it, I'm my own boss. I don't know what you did for a minute to make me forget that, but your spell is broken."

Instead of arguing, Thomas threw back his head and laughed...laughed at me, Misery Hess, like I'd just said something to entertain him.

When he saw my fury, his laughter ended. "Come to me my lovely bride. You are more exquisite than the sun rising in the morning. More precious than the crystal streams that flow from the mountains. My life has been an empty vessel that your essence has now filled with the promise of tomorrow."

Well, heck. Thomas was a little more flowery than I considered seemly, but when a handsome man is courting you with words of love...I walked across the room and curled into his lap, sliding my arms around his neck.

"Just checking to make sure we still have our connection," I murmured against his skin as I nibbled a spot just below his ear.

Thomas, You Came From Where?

"Tell me why you are here." I wasn't asking my mate for answers. I was demanding them. I think if your life is disrupted, your internal organs remodeled, and your heart stolen by another, you have the right to know why.

Thomas didn't pretend to misunderstand. He pulled a chair from the table, sat me down on it, and leaned once again, against the counter. "I'm here for you. My primary interest and concern the moment I saw you, was claiming you as my mate."

His voice had a possessively satisfied note in it, and I frowned. "You did not come all the way from," I paused realizing I had no idea where he had come from. I certainly had not seen the likes of his cat in these parts before.

He didn't answer directly but said, "I come from a land of mountains, lakes, and green trees far south of here." He looked at the night sky through the window, wistfully.

"Someday we will return to my home and you and I will explore the mountains together. But from now on, where you are, so am I."

It was a good answer, if a little vague. "How did you know I'd be driving Clarence down that rode the night I healed your cat?"

The way he smiled at me, made me nervous. He began to rumble in his throat, a sound that brought a flush of heat to my skin and an excited flutter in my belly. "I followed your scent."

Oh, I didn't want to hear that. What a decadent thing for him to say, like we are animals. My head came up on that thought. "I was not cat yet, how could you scent me before?"

"Misery Hess, my woman," his voice was filled with a tenderness that brought an ache to

my throat. I tried to ignore it. Emotions were not something I indulged.

His eyes held my gaze and he finished his explanation. "You have always been cat. You were a flower in the desert, waiting to be discovered and when I crossed the big river coming north, your essence filled my lungs, bringing me to you."

"Well," I said dryly, "You almost got yourself killed following flower smells and not paying attention to business."

Keeping Secrets

Every time Thomas Hunter looked at his mate he smiled--and Thomas hadn't smiled in almost a century so that was a significant event.

He was accustomed to his stark, violent life, so finding the piquant healer who had more powers undiscovered inside of her than most of his shape-shifting pride put together, awed him.

He would proudly take her back to his home as the alpha mate of his heart. That thought brought a frown to Thomas's face. He had to return to his land and people. He knew that the gods had sent him on the trail of the renegades, knowing that his destiny waited to claim him.

His frown changed to a smile remembering their first blending. Misery Hess had followed him and put her mark on him without question. He didn't doubt her love(although she tried to keep the words hidden).

"What troubles you, Thomas?" Missy asked. He refused to call her Misery because she was the light in his day and the joy in his world...misery would never be her name.

"Have I told you how much I adore you, my lovely?" Thomas felt his jaguar purr as he scented the fragrance of woman, cat, and him, blended in an exquisite bouquet that tickled all of his senses.

"Yes," she said dryly, "several times. Quit stalling. Something has you upset. Thomas, are you keeping secrets from me?"

"I must go back to my pride," he didn't want to tell her, already suspecting that Missy wouldn't want to leave this godforsaken parched land.

Her swift frown confirmed his fear. Yes, he was keeping secrets and would continue to do so for a while. His eternal mate would be returning with him to walk the jungles and mountains of his home land, and if he had to, he would use magic to make it so.

Her quick intake of shock alerted him. *Ah, my kitten steals softly into my thoughts and then disappears without my knowing. Hmmmmm, how long has this been going on?*

"Keeping secrets my love? How can I when my mate is so gifted?" His growled inquiry couldn't disguise his delight in her ability.

It was clear that Missy had mind-walked and discovered his plan. Now what to do?

Love is the Wind

Thomas was restless. I couldn't blame him. Sometimes at night the new cat inside of me clawed to get out, demanding that I let her roam freely through the mountains.

On nights like those, I clung especially close to my lover, knowing that he held my heart and anchored my soul.

But who anchored his? I worried when we shifted to jaguar and roamed together.

I followed him into the mountains, exploring farther each night, always, scenting the southern breeze before he turned homeward.

Sometimes we didn't return to my shack until dawn, but it didn't matter.

Word had spread, thanks to the Patricks, that Misery Hess was a good witch.

Suddenly, there was an endless stream of patients, some real, some love-sick girls or men, who wanted a potent to *make him love her*, a remedy to *make her go away*.

If I was impatient with my daily work, then surely Thomas was desperate to be gone.

We finished the roast beef that had been left in payment. "For the witch," the farmer had stumbled backward and then run to his horse.

If it was a little more rare than most people enjoyed, Thomas and I shared a similar taste for undercooked beef.

I waited until Thomas finished, then washed the dishes, stacked them carefully in the cupboard, and folded the towel.

"Do I need to bring anything along?"

He looked up from his pacing, "What is it you ask?"

He cocked his head listening as if to draw the right words from me.

I smiled. "I wondered if you've grown tired of this place yet?"

It was almost a cruel question, because Thomas so longed to be away.

"I've been practicing something to tell you." I had practiced the words he gave me in his thoughts when he looked at me.

I loved the way the sun, just dropping from the sky outlined his lithe figure.

He and his jaguar stretched, muscles rippling, longing to run.

"These people don't need me anymore. I've decided that I'm moving on," I told him as I untied my apron and hung it on its hook.

I had his attention at last. "What is it you say, mi corazón?"

Right before I shifted I said, "Quiero estar contigo para siempre."

I will love you forever.

My last thought as I raced to freedom in jaguar form was~

Thomas, let's go home...

To continue the story of Misery Hess, read Part III~ Kenaima`

A Note from the Author

The Saga of Misery Hess is an experimental work I have written playing with different styles and story -telling methods. Although Misery's POV changes are not commonly practiced in modern literature, I have intentionally switched from first person narrative, to third person limited when I felt the story called for it.

Please feel free to share your thoughts on style and content. If you wish to critique the story, leave a comment in the appropriate box. I read messages daily and respond when appropriate.

Gem Sivad writes western romance. For her available and coming soon books, visit
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