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The background of the book cover features a composite image. The upper portion shows a black panther with glowing green eyes, looking towards the left. The lower portion shows a close-up of a man's face, also with glowing green eyes, looking directly at the viewer. The background is a dark, moody blue with some light streaks.

# *A Panther's Flight*

**J. Hali Steele**

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Editor: Lee Morris

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## Dedication

This one is for my sisters without whom I'd have no heroines.  
And to my critters—thanks for making me better.

## Chapter One

"Are you certain you can handle that beauty?" Nikol asked. "She sure is a looker." His face was scored with anxiety.

"Yeah, she is a beauty. She handles real nice too," Fane said. He looked at Nikol and wondered what was up. He didn't look happy.

Fane Baron had brought the new bird in this morning. A sweet little business jet the Reign leader ordered was custom outfitted with all the bells and whistles. He kept busy going over the plane, a standard maintenance check before takeoff.

He ran his hand across the side of the jet. If Nikol had been in his normal frame of mind, he would have laughed at him for caressing the plane and Fane could sure use the laughter in his life right now. He couldn't stop thinking about Sans. No matter how one put it, he'd killed him. Even if Sans' actions begged for it, had all but signed his own death warrant, it was Fane who ended his life. The thought resided in his mind like a cancer, and every day it grew larger. One day it would eat him alive.

Fane was a black panther from the Kind species; big cats infected thousands of years ago with blood from the undead. He couldn't escape the terrible truth of what his people were.

Vampyres had sought to escape being hunted by human slayers and their own kind who turned rogue. They invaded dens in the Balkan Mountains the few remaining cave lions wintered in. Though they didn't kill the cats, the vampyres continued to exist because they used the lions' blood as sustenance and contaminated them with their deadly curse. The evil traveled rampant throughout the world to include tigers, panthers and jaguars—no cat was safe.

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They became known as the Kind.

One of a privileged few, Fane belonged to the Sovereign Kind, the warriors known as Reign, appointed by the council of Elders to protect his kind and humans. An appointment he took pride in until he brutally killed a transgressor: his best friend, Sans.

To defend against the onslaught of rogue vampyres and slayers, the Reign needed to be more like their creator. They inherited the ability to wield fire, enthrall the masses and dematerialize with just a thought. To use these powers, they needed human blood.

Some became addicted to the heady taste and emotions they felt when they fed. Their animal instincts took over and forced them to consume the flesh of the vamp's kill.

They were transgressors.

Laws existed for his people to abide by, rules that kept them safe from discovery. When they were broken, the Reign made a visit. It always ended in death. Sans broke the rules and he knew what the consequences would be.

This morning he was supposed to fly Sans' father, Thomas, and Patrik, the leader of the Reign, to the Arizona compound. They were both Elders and endowed with all of the Kind's greatest abilities.

"Patrik wanted me to let you know..."

Fane cut Nikol off. "I already know that Patrik and Thomas won't be flying with me. The desk got the call that Thomas's nephew, Eddie, will be going to Sedona to handle the deal." He didn't really want to have this conversation with Nikol, so he continued to walk around the plane and check off items from the maintenance list.

Nikol raised his hands and shook his head in confusion. "Who the hell is Eddie?"

"They changed the name on the flight plan and added Thomas' nephew. I haven't seen any of the family since that night." Fane tried to sound indifferent but it was too late. The floodgates opened and vivid memories he'd tried to suppress all morning rushed through. He still remembered the look of despair in his friend's eyes. And the hatred. Sans' beast had not wanted to give up its malevolent life. Everything Fane was told him that it wasn't Sans who looked back at him in those last seconds of life. But he couldn't forget it.

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The guilt that clawed its way up his gut at the mention of Sans' father owned a ring side seat in his life. A seat that he knew would be occupied forever.

Fane cleared his throat to hide his discomfort.

"I suppose his brother has a son now. Anyway he'll be here shortly." Avoiding eye contact with Nikol, he checked the last item and was ready to go. "It'll be okay. I'm sure Eddie knows about transgressors and will understand what happened. I had hoped to see Thomas though. It's been a long time and I thought maybe we could put this behind us." At least Fane had hoped so. He knew he couldn't hide from the family forever.

He missed Sans too. They often flew together on trips like this. He would have loved the new bird.

"You're not going to like who your passenger is. Thomas' brother does have a child but *her* name is Edith. Everyone calls her Edy. They must have written it wrong in the flight plan," Nikol informed him.

Fane lifted his eyes from the list and looked toward the clakety clak sound made by wheeled luggage as it bounced across the pavement. His face was set in a grimace as he asked, "What the hell, Nikol? A female?" His shoulders slumped. "Does she know about me?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Edy Adair's face lit with excitement as she hurried across the tarmac. This would be her first real estate deal. Uncle Thomas had called at the last minute to say she'd be making the trip alone and it took longer than they both expected to bring her up to speed. She added to that by taking extra time to assure her hair and makeup were perfect.

Her parents were concerned because her twenty-second birthday was the day after tomorrow, an important age for all Kind.

The plight of her people was attributed in part to the prophet Ezekiel and the angel Gabriel who, it was said, created vampyres. She had heard the stories as she grew up about scrolls written by the prophet that would free them from the vampyre curse. Ezekiel wrote this prophecy during his twenty-two years in Babylon. All Kind went through their first change at the age of twenty-two.

In just two days, she'd be panther for the first time and Edy couldn't wait. Pain would be involved but she was prepared, and her mate would help. Her cat paced inside of her. It knew freedom was near. Soon she'd crave release.

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She wasn't anxious to become a vampyre.

The Elders still searched for the hidden scrolls that they hoped would rid them of their blood-thirsty half. But for now it couldn't be avoided. It was part of who they were.

What kept her kind strong and gave them long life was blood taken in the way of the vampyre.

This made Edy think about her chosen mate. It would be his blood that sustained her. Her parents liked him and she was okay with their choice. She'd known him most of her life and they were good friends. She just wished he excited her more.

She knew she'd be back in plenty of time for the mating. She already felt the effects of being in heat. The fire that flared up inside of her was compounded by the fact that it settled right between her thighs.

It was an itch she couldn't scratch.

Edy focused on the two men by the plane. All thoughts of her mate slipped to the back of her mind. Her uncle told her to trust Fane, he'd take good care of her. She knew he was Reign and he would be her pilot for this trip. But her uncle didn't tell her how damned good looking he was.

She recognized the Kind prince, Nikolaus, so the magnificent creature beside him must be her pilot. Her inner cat started to purr like a motor. *Wow, this guy is hot!*

Close to six and a half feet tall with hair as black as a moonless sky, he wore it in a braided ponytail that hung down his back. The white shirt, partially open, clung to him in the heat and managed to accentuate a mat of dark hair on his broad chest.

Definitely panther.

The shirt couldn't mask the muscles bunched beneath it. His leather pants strained against thighs that belonged to an athlete. She wondered how much better he'd look if he didn't scowl.

Was she that late? She picked up her pace dragging both bags behind her. Edy was glad of the extra time spent on her appearance. She looked damned good in the dress she wore and hoped Fane would notice. Not quite normal business attire, it was one of her favorites. It gave her confidence and made her



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feel feminine. The discarded outfits littering her bedroom floor were a distant memory.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Damn, why didn't Patrik tell me this? A female. Hell, this is going to be a long trip." Fane's panther felt his distress and scratched at his insides for release.

"Everyone understood about Sans," Nikol replied. "He was a transgressor. You did what needed to be done. No one blames you. *You* need to stop blaming yourself. She's very young and probably won't know you. You were bound to run into the family sooner or later. Anyway, an hour in, let her do her thing, and an hour back. I'll probably see you on the compound tonight."

The likelihood of his name cropping up around the family dinner table was zero. The subject of transgressors had always been taboo. Even though it could happen to any one of them, the Kind avoided the topic like the plague. It was a weakness none of them wanted to acknowledge.

The time to let it go had long passed. But his fear of transgressing didn't relinquish its hold on him. He had stopped taking the blood as often as he should to maintain his powers and soon it would be evident.

"Yeah, you're right." Fane watched anxiously as Edy approached the plane. She was a knockout and he felt his panther change direction. It no longer prowled. It started to purr and the beast waited as she walked towards him.

When she got closer, he saw that kohl lined her sparkling green eyes and gave her an exotic look. Black as ink hair was worn tousled and short. It surrounded a face of stunning beauty. Her cheeks glowed with that just-made-love flush. Small, rounded breasts looked so right on her tall, slender body. Hips that curved sweetly above the longest legs he'd ever seen. They went on and on.

She exuded sex appeal like an expensive perfume.

And her short tight dress didn't hide a thing. Especially the hard nipples that strained against the fabric. It revealed a little too much for a business meeting, but what the hell did he care? His job was to get her there and back. Period. But one part of his body worked on another idea. The closer she came to him, the bigger his erection got. *Shit!*

"If either of you happen to be a gentleman, I could use a little help here," Edy faced them with a to-die-for smile.

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"What the heck you got there?" Nikol smiled. "You running away from home?"

"Shut up and give me a hand. I can't believe you didn't come and help me. This sh... stuff is heavy. I've got the whole presentation in here. And I know what you're thinking, but I only have one pair of jeans for the return flight."

"Edy, this is your pilot, Fane. He'll also be your guide in Arizona and anything else you need him to be on this trip." Fane's brow quirked up at the prince's humor.

"Hey, it's nice to meet you. Don't pay Nikol any mind. I won't need much except help with these dang heavy bags."

Fane picked up both bags like they were feathers and walked up the steps into the plane. He carried them to the baggage area behind the executive suite and secured them. When he came through the cabin, Edy and Nikol were in the lounge talking about the piece of property they wanted to develop in Sedona. She needed to get the property tied down and then meet with the developer.

"We need to get moving Nikol, so unless you plan on going with us, you need to disembark now." He knew he sounded short, but for some reason Fane didn't like him talking to her and holding them up. He wanted to get this over with.

"Sure thing, I'll get out of your way." Fane closed and secured the door after Nikol exited. He turned to Edy. "Can I get you anything before we take off?" He felt his cat pace across his insides.

"Like I said, I can take care of myself, just point out where everything is."

Edy was given a quick tour and shown what to do if she wanted to contact him. Fane went to the cockpit to prepare for takeoff. He ran through everything with the tower, received his clearance and was ready to go.

"You need to buckle in," Fane said through the intercom. "I'll let you know when it's safe to move around."

He taxied out to the runway and thought about Nikol standing around chatting Edy up. Why the hell did he care? It wasn't like she belonged to him.

Evidently his panther cared. His pants grew uncomfortable thinking about her. Shit, this is not what he needed on takeoff—a hard on. He wanted her. *Aww damn.*

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Fane monitored the gauges while the jet climbed into the atmosphere. He leveled off at twenty-thousand-feet and wished he could stand up to relieve the pressure that had built in his groin. His cat marched around inside of him like a goddamned school band. It wanted out.

Wondering what his passenger was doing, he reached for the mic.

"You can move about the cabin now if you'd like. We'll arrive in Sedona in one hour and thirty eight minutes."

"You don't have to be so professional. It's just us."

He swiveled the seat around to see Edy lounging at the cockpit door. When did she get there? He needed to pay less attention to his hard on and more attention to his passenger. He didn't have to tell his cock where she was. It knew already as evidenced by the bulge that grew even heavier.

"Uhh... sure, but you need to stay out of the cockpit. It's not allowed."

"Yes sir, captain, sir."

"Rules, you know." He looked her up and down. What a mistake that was. It made his condition worse.

"Sure, I'll go sit where I belong."

He knew she'd seen how tight the crotch of his pants were. Hell, there was nothing he could do about it now.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edy returned to the main cabin and climbed into one of the comfortable chairs.

Shit, her pilot had to be a damned professional. She reminded herself to watch her language. She didn't want Fane to think she had a foul mouth. Although she did. She worked hard at correcting that. Uncle Thomas constantly reminded her to watch her mouth in the office. She'd gotten much better. But dammit, she felt like she'd been sent to the back of the class.

What were the *rules* on helping your passenger with luggage, she wondered? She'd thought for a minute she was going to have to struggle it up the steps and stow it herself. That made her smile though as she remembered how she wished she had another bag, she would have followed that nice ass of his to the baggage area. *Whew*, she was definitely in heat. This trip could turn out to be pretty exciting.

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She thought about how unhappy he appeared when he came through the lounge while she discussed the Arizona deal with Nikol. Hell, he practically kicked the prince out. It was like he really wanted to get this over with. Edy didn't think it had to do with her because she'd seen the look Fane gave her in the cockpit.

Taking a pretty good look herself, she saw how tight his pants were too. She eyed that package real well. Her stomach did little flip-flops but she wasn't hungry. At least not for food. *Yeah, this could be a real interesting trip.*

She wanted this cat.

Edy settled in and gazed around the lounge. It was quite a show-piece. She took in the plush rose-colored carpet and the soft teakwood that lined the sides of the lounge area. The entertainment center was state of the art. The chrome that ran the length of the fully stocked bar twinkled in the light that came through the small windows. Smooth jazz played through the speakers. She wondered what the bedroom suite looked like and decided to check it out.

The carpet cushioned her steps as she entered the bedroom. The walls here were done in teakwood too. Soft lights cast a golden glow around the space. One wall held cabinets and the other side had a floor to ceiling mirror. Her imagination went wild. She grew wet as she envisioned them naked together in the bed.

Her fingers tingled with sensation as she thought of touching the dark hair that covered his chest. What would it feel like to run her hands over his body? Her tongue flicked out to moisten her dry lips. She wondered if Fane's skin would be as hot as hers felt right now. If she glanced in the mirror the telltale signs of heat would be embedded with color on her face.

Edy's eyes took in the pale taupe comforter decorated with gold and burgundy medallions. Puffy pillows with the same design were stacked against the headboard and invited her to lie down. She had only packed one extra pair of underwear and she needed them now. *I better get the hell out of here.*

She peeked into the bathroom and was surprised at the size of the shower. *Nice.*

Her uncle sure had the right friends.

She made her way to the main lounge. A little tired after all the hustle and bustle of last minute preparations for the trip, she decided to rest her eyes for a

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few minutes and think about her presentation. She snuggled her butt deeper into the soft seat but she hadn't rested long before she was thrown against her chair.

"What the hell...?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The plane hit an air pocket, which caused a sudden acceleration. Fane brought the jet under control and grabbed the microphone.

"I need you to buckle in. We've run into some turbulence. Relax, we'll be okay."

He made sure the bird was stabilized and contacted air traffic control. Given new coordinates, he took the jet down and leveled off. Air masses like the one he'd run into were impossible to detect. At the lower altitude there would be less chance of encountering another one.

He hoped she was all right. Who would know, or give a damn, if she sat in the co-pilot's seat? Was he looking for a reason just to see her? *Hell yeah you are, so get her ass up here already.* He'd known Edy less than an hour, but already he wanted this feline. His whole body told him that. He could still smell her sweet scent.

He grew hard again and his panther walked a tight rope inside of his body, ready to lose his balance. He couldn't let that happen.

He spoke into the intercom.

"Are you okay?" She was so quiet and that was a rough patch of air. He needed to get her up front. To make sure she was okay.

"I'm all right. It just scared the hell out of me." Edy stood in the cockpit doorway again. He didn't blame her for not wanting to stay in the cabin by herself.

"Why don't you sit over there?" Fane nodded to the seat across from him. "Buckle in, and don't touch anything." At least this way he could keep an eye on her. All of her. Now, he only needed to control his sex drive, which was no easy feat.

He enjoyed the view of those long legs. He wanted to run his hands up her thighs and see where they ended. His already hard length got harder thinking about it.

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*Damn*, he wondered again if she noticed the front of his pants. There was a party going on down there. He wondered if the mile high club had any vacancies. This was bad. He looked at her, only to catch her eyes devouring him.

"Thanks, I was lonesome."

Fane could tell she was glad to be up front from the way she sighed.

"It's so big, you could get lost back there. I started to hide under the bed but I was afraid you wouldn't find me." Edy looked at him with a glimmer in her eyes. He saw the smile tug at the corner of her mouth. Then she laughed. A captivating sound of pure joy. He didn't expect that. His body, which had been filled with tension, relaxed. Maybe he worried for no reason.

He found himself laughing at the picture she created of herself hidden beneath the bed. He also liked that she'd explored the bedroom suite.

"You ready for your presentation?" He asked, happy they were talking. He felt his panther settle down. The sound of her voice soothed his beast.

"Yes, this will be my first time alone, but I'm ready." He saw her get comfortable in her seat and stare out of the window.

The worst of the weather was past now and he watched the clouds rush to meet the nose of the jet.

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

The clouds outside the window seemed to envelope both of them. It felt so sensual.

"Yeah, it is. I never get tired of seeing it." He smiled at the wonder in her voice. It lifted his spirits even more. He loved to fly and he could tell she enjoyed it. When he turned to look at Edy, his eyes locked with hers. He was overcome with his cat's primitive need to feel her mouth under his.

Fane leaned over and kissed her. She didn't pull away and he deepened the kiss. His tongue searched out and tasted every corner of her mouth and he wished she would show him places he'd missed.

His hands tightened on the controls. He wanted to touch her. Bad. Her lips were so soft and warm. He pulled away just enough to suckle on her lower lip, drawing a moan from deep inside her.

The plane hit another rough pocket of air. She'd clutched her seat tight during their kiss but now her hands grabbed at his arm.

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"Shit, is this normal?" she gasped breathless from their kiss and a little shook up too.

"I've been through worse. Don't worry."

"It's just scary as hell. If anything happened, I wouldn't want my parents to blame my uncle for sending me on this trip in his place. I don't know if he could handle that. My aunt still hasn't gotten over the loss of my cousin, Sans." She still hugged his arm.

He inhaled sharply.

"You probably knew my cousin. He was Reign too until... he got killed."

"I knew Sans. He was my best friend." Fane's chest tightened.

"Really, my aunt... OH. MY. GOD! Wait, I knew your name was familiar... It... it was you." Edy yanked her seatbelt loose and stood up. "You bastard." She ran to the passenger's cabin.

## Chapter Two

What the hell, at least now she knew who he was. Should make this trip real quiet. But he didn't want quiet. He wanted Edy to understand about Sans. He needed her to know he hadn't had a choice. Fane wanted to taste her lips some more. He put the plane on autopilot and followed her to the cabin area.

She sat in a chair across from the bar with a shot of something in her glass. He saw the bottle of bourbon sitting out. Thank God that the Kind's metabolism helped to neutralize alcohol. They never got drunk.

"Edy, let me..."

"Let you what? Explain? How do you explain killing somebody? Go ahead, tell me?"

"It wasn't like that. Sans was my best friend."

"Well, that's great to know. Please, keep *me* off of your greeting card list. I would hate to be next."

He watched her go to the bar to pour another drink. There were tears in her eyes.

"He transgressed. You're Kind, you know what that means." He couldn't believe this was happening.

"Did you even give him a chance, Fane?" Edy's mouth was twisted in anger.

"Look, I can't leave the plane on autopilot long. Just let me explain." He couldn't let it go. He needed to make her understand. The kiss they shared had ignited a fire in him. It burned out of control. He wanted her now more than ever. His panther barely hung on as it growled inside of him.

"Go back to the cockpit. Drive the plane, pilot it... whatever it is you need to do. I don't want to see you, and there's nothing to say. I'm glad I know the truth now." Edy turned from him and went to her seat.

"Look, I could have lied or just kept quiet. I told you the truth." At least she couldn't hold that against him.



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"Thanks for that much. *After* you practically ravished me. Go away. Get me to this meeting and back in one piece. We never have to see each other again."

Fane stormed to the cockpit in disbelief. Females were protected and kept safe but she wasn't that sheltered. She was Kind and she knew what transgressors were. While they were running him down, did her parents tell her that Sans ripped two young cubs apart?

He thought about her father.

He didn't know Jason Adair very well but he remembered the time Sans *borrowed* his uncle's boat and they ran it into the dock at Lake Arrowhead. The paint got scraped a little. Shit, they were cubs and having fun. Jason had taken them both into the training arena and worked them until they couldn't stand up. That was long ago. It was one of the good times.

And if memory served him right, Edy hadn't minded the ravishing.

The rest of the flight seemed to take forever. All he could think about was how to make her understand. He wanted her to know there was no other way. He wanted her to like him. It shouldn't matter to him, but it did. He kept seeing the pained expression on her face, followed by a look of disgust.

He was glad this part of the trip was almost over. He'd get her to the meeting then he was going to head over to the Sedona compound where he could let his cat get lost for a few hours. His panther needed to run.

The Kind struggled to survive as cats all over the world. Housing developments, overpopulation and human hunters saw to that. They could only be free on their compounds, or in the dead of night—like their creators, the vampyres.

Ironical that the very same thing that created them also wanted to kill them. Vampyres considered them filthy beasts and they feared their creation—Kind could walk in the sunlight. For that reason alone, when they took the blood of humans, they were much stronger than their Balkan cousins. They were a vampyre who could live in daylight.

Unfortunately, the only way the Kind had continued to thrive was in their vampyre form.

Because then, they looked like men.

\* \* \* \* \*

Not wanting him to see her cry, after he left, Edy let the tears go. The tears weren't all for her cousin, they were for her too. It was hard to believe. She had started to like him. The laughter they shared made her feel closer to him and the smile she'd seen before he kissed her erased the scowl that had graced his face

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earlier. It surprised her how much it changed him. The absence of hardness made him even more handsome. She even thought... Well, it didn't matter now. Any thoughts about letting him touch her were gone.

Fane was a killer.

Edy couldn't wait for them to land. She had to get away from him. His scent was ingrained in her head. Maybe fresh air would help. To think she even thought about... *God!*

She still thought about it. She still wanted him. How could she entertain the idea of anything to do with the man who killed her cousin? The man who made her aunt's life miserable? What kind of person was she?

She heard the intercom crackle to life followed by his voice.

"Buckle your seatbelt, we'll be landing in a few minutes."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'll return in a couple of hours to pick you up." Fane said.

Warmth enveloped her like a cocoon. Just hearing his voice did that. The heat traveled right to the swollen part between her thighs. Edy couldn't tear her eyes from his mouth. Yet she had to.

In less than thirty minutes she had to pitch to a room full of human developers the idea of being partners in building a new convention center and office complex. One that would be set on Kind land and generate billions of dollars for her people.

Some of the Elders had managed to lead fairly normal lives off of the compounds. Using their vampyre abilities, they were able to blend in with the rest of the world. Edy's uncle was one of them and he'd put a lot of trust in her to make this deal happen. She couldn't fail him.

"Take your time." Edy, strictly the professional now, needed to concentrate on her presentation. She still noticed how wonderful he smelled, and she knew how good he tasted. Her cat, who had yet to see the light of day, clawed at her insides and reminded her how close her change was.

"Okay, later then," he said.

She watched him hesitate as though he didn't want to leave.

"Sure you don't need anything?" Fane sounded anxious.

Oh, she needed something but she couldn't tell him that. She didn't believe it herself. Her uncle, her parents, what would they all think of her if they knew how much she wanted this cat?

"Yes, I'm positive." Stay anyway she prayed. *Dammit, what's wrong with me?* One kiss shouldn't rattle her whole life this way.

"Okay."

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Edy jumped at the sound the door made as it closed loudly behind him.

She stared after him. She'd lived with her people her whole life and she knew sometimes it happened: Kind who transgressed and killed others. They drained them of their life's blood and gorged on their flesh. But why did *he* have to be the one to hunt Sans down? That's what she couldn't forgive.

How do you hunt down and kill your best friend? What kind of person did that?

\* \* \* \* \*

Fane let his panther run until the cat was exhausted.

He avoided any areas where there might be hunters who played the biggest part in the cats' dwindling numbers. Some had become aware of what the Kind were and they formed small fanatical groups that now had locations throughout the world—they were systematically trying to put an end to his species.

Kind who lived in Europe survived mostly as vampyres, hiding their cat. They did not follow the laws as closely and it was easier for them to mask their presence because they stayed strong from taking the blood regularly. They had to contend with the slayers and rogues. Many became addicted, transgressed and were hunted as animals.

Those safest were located on compounds that could be easily guarded by the Reign. They kept to themselves and obeyed the Kind laws.

He arrived at the Great Hall of the Sedona compound and found a few warriors to pass time with. They relaxed over drinks and talked about an incident with a recruit who was new to the rigor of patrols. It drew a lot of laughter from the Reign that the young cub expected to pull eight hours and then go home.

Fane went to the bar to refresh his bourbon and the last person he expected to hear was Sans' father, Thomas. He was supposed to be in California.

"It's been a long time. How are you, Fane?"

"Uhh... Thomas, it's good to see you." *Shit*. He thought he was ready for this. But he wasn't. Thomas hadn't changed much. Often in the public eye on business, he always wore a suit and tie. He was tall with broad shoulders padded by lean muscle. The only difference was a sprinkle of gray at the temples of his short dark brown hair. He still didn't look a day over forty. His green eyes pierced Fane.

"We need to talk," Thomas said.

"About...?" *Here it comes*.

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Everyone said they forgave him. They all said they knew if there was any other way to deal with Sans, he was the one who would have found it. His best friend killed and mutilated two of his own kind.

There was no way Fane could save him. Hell, he would have given his own life if it would have changed anything.

"My niece."

"What about her?"

"I want you to be her mate."

"WHAT?" That wasn't what Fane expected to hear. It shook him to his core.

"She will go through her change tomorrow. I want you to be her mate."

"If this is a joke...?" He still couldn't believe what he heard.

"No joke. I'll explain."

"I'm listening," Fane said. What else could he say? He owed this man a son.

"Sans loved you. You were best friends... like brothers. He would've done the same for you." His jaw tightened in a struggle to control his emotions. "I know you chose to hunt him so you could make sure he didn't suffer. Anyone else would have made him pay dearly, and painfully, for what he did." Thomas went on. "I needed to deal with my own suffering first, but the years since have given me peace."

"Thomas..."

"No, Fane, let me finish. I should have told you years ago. Thank you for giving my son peace. He wouldn't have wanted to go on as a transgressor. Each life he took would have been a scar on his soul."

Fane was sure Thomas saw the pain in his eyes.

"But that's not what I wanted to talk about. There's not much time left so I have to get to the point. I planned this because Edy needs a mate. She'll reach her twenty-second after midnight tomorrow. I don't like her parent's choice. He's weak. She's wild and strong willed and her panther will be also. She needs a mate who will be strong enough to handle her. Someone confident enough to allow her the freedom to grow." Thomas finished weakly. "She's like a daughter to me and I know you would be good for her."

*Am I hearing this right?* God knows Fane would love nothing better than being Edy's mate. Thinking about it sent the blood rushing to every part of his body. One in particular pulsed with need.

Could there be a chance?

## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

"She knows who I am. I don't think I'm her idea of a mate or anything else right now." He looked squarely at Thomas. "Maybe the *only* thing she'd like right now is for me to be dead." He could still taste her.

"I fear I'm partly to blame for that. We spent a lot of time together as she grew up and I may have made her *too* independent." Thomas' eyes lit up with pride as he smiled. "You've felt her bite already?"

"Sharply." He knew Thomas could see he was attracted to his niece. Even now Fane pondered all the places he'd like to feel her teeth. It had to be written on his face.

"So you would not be averse to being her mate?"

"Her parents won't like it."

"I can handle my brother, and he can handle his wife."

"And your wife?" Fane waited for this answer because it was the one that mattered. Sans' mother had been like a mother to him too.

"Maren never blamed you. My wife's been sad for quite some time. She's suffered the loss of two cubs."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"We live a long time and there is still hope. Fane, we both loved you as much as he did. You were like another son to us."

"Thank you, I needed to know that." He let out the breath he held. That answer was important to him.

He felt his panther stir deep inside his body. He wanted his mate. Could they possibly be *draga*—true mates? The incessant wanting... what else could explain it?

"We have a deal?" Thomas asked.

"I'd love nothing more, but who will make Edy want this?"

"That's your job. I've done all I can and now the rest is up to you."

"Patrik knew about this didn't he?" Fane knew the Reign leader had been concerned he'd carried the guilt for so many years. He worried about his ability to perform his duty as protector of his kind.

He should be angry the two of them planned this, but for some reason he wasn't. He wanted Edy. He wanted to be her mate, and would do whatever it took.

Fane felt the probe at his mind.

"I'm glad you feel that way," Thomas said.

Hell, he knew Thomas was an Elder with great powers, but he hadn't expected him to read his mind. Fane didn't want to think about the things he saw there about his niece. Shit, right now he couldn't care less.

## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

Edy was going to be his mate.

"Here's what you'll do..."

## Chapter Three

"Fasten your seatbelt, we're ready for takeoff." Fane was cleared by the tower and he began to taxi down the runway. As he pulled back on the controls, the jet started to climb.

Armed with Thomas' forgiveness, and his approval to court his niece, the guilt that had gripped his soul like a vise for so many years fell away with each mile he traveled up into the clouds. He looked forward to this adventure.

He smiled to himself as he remembered how her voice eased his cat. The sound of her laughter had filled both parts of him with joy. And she'd kissed him back.

His hard erection strained against his pants. All he could think about was getting Edy to himself. Sure he could make her accept him. He must because every part of him, including his panther, wanted her. It wasn't just the beast's primal need; the man wanted to hear her laugh again.

After reaching his altitude, he set the controls and went to see if she was okay. He knew her presentation had gone well and she probably looked forward to getting home. But that wasn't going to happen. At least not yet.

"Can I get you anything?"

Edy jumped at the sound of his voice.

"What are you doing here? Don't you need to fly the plane or something?"

"We have a clear flight path and we're on autopilot. Do you want anything?"

He inhaled her scent. Her desire lashed at him like a silken whip. He smelled it, could taste it.

"Nothing, thanks."

Suddenly, the jet shook violently. Timed even more perfectly than Fane could have planned it.

"Buckle in, stay here." He hurried to the cockpit, took over the controls and started a steep dive.

## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

He was good at his job, the best, and he knew just where he was headed. The Grand Canyon. One of the most deserted and beautiful parts of the canyon.

"I couldn't stay back there alone," she said as she came into the cockpit and took the seat beside him. Fane sensed her fear as she latched onto his arm.

"Sit down and buckle in. I have to take it down. I'm not sure what the problem is." He hoped she didn't know anything about airplanes or the control panel. Because she would certainly notice there were no warning lights flashing.

He should feel bad about what he was doing. He could see the fear on her face and he tried to soothe her as much as possible with words. He knew they would be absolutely safe.

"We'll be fine, honey. Relax, I know what I'm doing."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Can you land it safely?"

"We're going to find out." He could see the long flat area he planned to use as a runway coming up fast. He dropped the landing gear in place and kept his eyes on the control panel. He prepared to set the bird down. It bumped the ground so lightly he was pleased with himself.

"Thank God, we made it." Edy's knuckles were white and he heard her exhale slowly.

"I don't know if we'll have any communication. It'll take me a while to check things out. You want to get out while I look things over?" Fane needed some air. He unbuckled his seatbelt and reached over to undo Edy's. She stood and gripped his arm to steady herself before she took a step. He followed her out of the cockpit.

He felt a stab of guilt when he opened the door and lowered the steps, but it didn't last long. Not when she passed him to descend the stairs. Her fear had died down and he caught the remnants of her desire. It assailed his nostrils. He breathed her in deeply as he followed her out.

"Will someone find us?"

"I didn't have time to radio in." Damn, he hated to keep lying to her. But he wanted her so bad. *Christ, she's going to hate me for sure when she finds out about this.* But she won't find out. Her uncle would never tell her and Patrik, the only other person who knew, was in on it. He relaxed a little.

"Will we be safe out here until someone finds us?"

"Don't worry, everything was well stocked before we left. We'll have plenty to eat and drink until I can get us out of here. Do you want anything?"

"Yeah, a stiff drink."



## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

"One bourbon coming right up," Fane offered.

He went into the plane and poured them both a drink. He hoped she hadn't noticed his constant state of arousal in her presence. He had to get control of himself. He'd scare her off if this kept up. He wanted her to feel safe with him.

And he needed her to want him just as much as he desired her. He wanted to taste her lips again, taste her all over. If he wasn't careful she would smell him too.

He depleted all of his vampyre energy to mask his scent. He should have taken more human blood. He'd not taken the amount he should for years. Had he known what this trip was going to be like, he would have. He'd have to make do with animal blood.

He planned to let his panther loose to hunt as soon as he got her calmed down and settled in.

"Down boy. This is not the time for you to poke your big head up." He spoke out loud. "Shit, now I'm talking to my erection."

And it totally ignored him.

\* \* \* \* \*

She'd been so scared and glad to be with someone. Not just someone. She was with Fane. She calmed down a little. In fact she thought about being alone with him. Thought about all the things they could... *What in hell was wrong with her?* She couldn't think like this. She must be losing her mind.

*What if they had crashed?* Her body shuddered with fear. She was damned glad to feel the ground under her feet.

She heard a scurrying sound. When she looked--

"FANE, FANE HELP!"

She heard glass crash in the plane and knew he would come for her.

Edy stood on a boulder, fear raced up her spine. She saw his feet never touched the steps as he flew out of the door. He sniffed the air immediately and she could tell he smelled it—the rat. His head turned in the creature's direction.

"Edy?" She didn't understand the question in his voice. He must see it.

"Look, look over there!" She yelled as she pointed at it.

"Uhh... it's a mouse."

She saw the look of disbelief on his face and a glint of humor in his eyes.

"It's a *rat*... look how huge it is." Her eyes were stretched wide.

"Come on down from there before you fall and hurt yourself." He reached up to help her down.

"I'm not coming down until you kill that thing. I... I don't like rats." She was petrified. The only thing in the whole world she was afraid of. Rats.

## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

"Come down, I'll carry you inside. You need a drink."

"I'm afraid."

"You're a goddamned panther for crying out loud. Take my hand and come down from there. NOW."

How could she make him understand her fear? She felt kind of stupid. She could see his patience grow thin. Still, she didn't budge. She knew he'd had enough when Fane released his cat.

His clothes were gone in an instant. He folded his body. Thick, shiny black hair emerged from his skin, moved over his extremities and covered his torso.

His eyes became those of a predator. They were pulled up by ears that twitched as they searched for any sound. His long whiskers swept up as his mouth opened and his canines appeared, large and glistening. His big paws struck the ground like thunder as the panther sprang to life and his tail swished with agitation.

Edy watched as the beast roared in the direction of the rat, which turned tail and scampered into a hole. Probably the same one it came out of.

With lightening speed, she saw him draw his cat into his body and he used vampyre magic to clothe himself. She saw the darkness that settled in his emerald eyes when hers swept his body.

Edy liked what she saw. So much, she almost forgot the hideous creature that caused her to be up on the boulder in the first place.

"Now, will you come down?" His face held a crooked grin.

"I'm sorry, I don't like rats." Her cheeks were flushed pink and she knew why. *Damn, he looked good in the raw.* And his panther was magnificent. A shiver ran through her body as she thought about how he would feel stretched across her cat's back.

Her change couldn't come fast enough.

"It was a mou... Never mind. Come on, let's get you inside." He reached up and his hands encircled her waist. He lifted her down. Their eyes met as her body tilted into his and an electric current coursed between them. Edy closed her eyes to break the spell. He let her go and turned to lead the way to the plane. Close behind him, her eyes darted around the rocky area to make sure there were no more unpleasant visitors.

Edy rushed up the steps and headed straight to the lounge. Stepping over the two spilled glasses on the floor, she went right to the bar and poured a shot of bourbon. Of all the hideous creatures to turn up.

She was too embarrassed to tell him that at the age of three her parents bought her a hamster and it bit her. All rodents were associated with that

## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

incident. They were scary as hell. She swallowed her bourbon and poured another one.

"You stay here. There are some things I have to check out, okay?"

"I'm not going out there, that's all I know."

"Fine. I'm going to climb up one of the embankments. I'll see if we're close to any towns. You wait here."

"You can't leave me here alone!" Edy didn't want to go back out there but staying here by herself wasn't an option.

"I'll close the door. You'll be fine."

"No, I'll come with you."

"You sure you want to do that?"

She knew Fane probably wondered what would happen if they ran into a rattler or something even worse. Edy felt skittish as hell. It must be the heat or being *in* heat. She didn't want to be one of those cats that was scared of its own shadow.

"Yes. Let's go."

\* \* \* \* \*

Fane needed some air. Edy was in heat and the further away from her he got, the better. He didn't think she'd want to come along. If she hadn't come, he wouldn't have walked this far. Now that the lie was told, he had to continue with the act. He knew they would find no help out here.

He couldn't believe the thing with the mouse. Shit, when he heard her yell, he almost lost it. The last thing he needed was for any harm to come to her. He'd never be able to forgive himself. Her wellbeing had been entrusted to him.

He'd only been taking enough blood to get by. Fane knew Patrik suspected this.

Was it the human blood that caused their addiction or something else in their makeup? The council believed it was their vampyre blood. The same thing that caused vamps to go rogue. With the Kind, since their natural state was feline, when they transgressed, it was their beast that went bad. Transgressors always attacked with their cat. Never as vampyres.

It had to be the vampyre blood.

There had been talk that the council would relax the law and allow more to take the blood with the hopes that it would stabilize their numbers. The risk may be worth it. The added strength proved to be important in their constant battle with rogues and hunters.

As more of his kind moved away from the compounds and into society, the Elders needed to make a decision.

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Fane wasn't sure which side of this argument he fell on.

He'd become afraid of the blood of humans. He feared transgressing. He didn't want to be hunted down by the Reign the same way he'd pursued Sans.

They walked about a mile before they reached a plateau. He could have made the distance in no time as a cat. But Edy had to walk. He wondered why she hadn't told him that her change would happen tomorrow after midnight. He couldn't let her know he knew about it. He noticed her nails were longer—clawing, a sign her panther's appearance was imminent.

And her aroma. *Christ*. He didn't know how long he could take that. He could almost taste her. His penis was rigid and made it difficult to walk.

"What if there isn't a town close by?" Edy's eyes darted about.

*She's probably looking out for rats.* "We'll be okay. We've got enough to eat and drink. I could always hunt something for us if need be. If Patrik doesn't hear from me tonight, he'll be concerned. By morning he'll send someone to look for us." He knew that wasn't going to happen but he kept up the act. He hoped they took a long, long time. He could spend forever here with her.

They climbed to the top of the plateau to look around. Fane didn't expect to see anything. He knew exactly where they were. There wasn't a town within miles of them.

"There's nothing out there. What will we do now?"

He watched Edy shade her eyes against the sun and gaze at the horizon.

\* \* \* \* \*

She didn't know how long she could be alone with him. His scent made her crazy. She wanted to pounce on him and run her tongue... *Oh Hell!*

Her change. She forgot about her change.

"You've got to get me to California. You have to," Edy pleaded. She needed her mate with her to take the pain when her cat emerged for the first time. Or she could face death. She didn't want to think about that.

"I'm doing the best I can. You got an appointment you can't miss or what?"

She knew now was the time to tell him, but she couldn't. Why?

"No, I just want to get home."

She heard talk that the pain was unbearable if a female was alone when it happened. So bad, some females died. Her mother had warned her about it, tried to prepare her for what would happen.

A mate could enter her mind, and relieve her of the pain. Hers was in California. What was she going to do? She had about thirty hours left.

"I'll take care of you. You know that, right?"

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"Let's get to the plane. Maybe you can fix the radio or something." She knew she sounded nervous as hell. She took several deep breaths to calm herself. There was no need to worry; her uncle would send someone for her by tomorrow. She was sure of it.

Right now it didn't help her any to see that Fane sported an enormous erection.

"Sure. Let's go," he said.

He followed behind her and Edy knew he watched the sway of her hips. Fane's predicament was a long way from making her forget her own but she couldn't help the smile that rested on her mouth.

From the bulge at his crotch she knew he was caught between a rock and a hard place. Literally. A long, secret look told her his erection was caught between his pant leg and his hard thigh. She knew his following her only made it worse.

"She's got to change that damned dress," he whispered.

"What did you say?" She'd heard him.

"I said this has got to be a damned mess," he yelled.

"Oh." That wiped the smile from her face. Shit, a mess didn't even begin to explain her problem.

She thought about how she would handle telling him that her birthday was the day after tomorrow. If only he hadn't been the one to kill... *oh what the hell*. He was. Still, she'd rather have him than anyone else with her.

Edy couldn't get the kiss out of her mind.

She realized more and more she wasn't crazy about the cat her parents chose and didn't want him for a mate. Not now. She wanted Fane, dammit. How could she tell her parents that? Or her uncle, for that matter. Maybe if no one came to help them he would have to be the one. No one could blame her then. *What are you thinking?* She couldn't mate with her cousin's killer.

No matter what.

\* \* \* \* \*

They arrived at the plane without any further consequences.

"You hungry?"

"Sure." She had come into the galley and stood beside him peering into the empty refrigerator.

"We might have a small problem."

"I see that." Edy's stomach picked that precise moment to growl into life. She'd skipped breakfast and was too nervous to eat at the presentation.

He chuckled. She didn't think it was funny.

"Tell you what. I catch us something, you cook?"

## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

"Deal. I'm actually a damn good cook. Wish I could come with you but..."

"Once you're a panther, you'll be able to hunt."

"Yeah, right. Until that happens, you need to get cracking." She smiled at him. "I know you heard my stomach talking. It suggested I take a bite out of you."

Fane turned away to hide the intense look of hunger he was certain her remark brought to his eyes. He quickly left to hunt for their dinner.

Edy couldn't believe she told him she wanted to take a bite out of him. She didn't even know where the hell that came from. *Yes you do*. What she should have done was tell him about her change.

She needed to get control of herself. Fast. She did want to nibble on various parts of his body. There were things going on in her stomach that felt like butterflies. But they had nothing to do with food and everything to do with wanting him more than a meal.

The wetness between her thighs warred with the grumble in her belly. Edy knew which one she wanted to win the battle. And it didn't have anything to do with food either.

She was a cat in heat and she knew exactly what she wanted.

Fane.

## Chapter Four

Someone forgot to load the food supplies. It was the one thing he failed to check. *Could anything else go wrong?*

They were in a mess. Well, not *they*, him. It didn't matter. He *had* to get her out of that dress. She drove him and his panther crazy.

At least they had plenty of water and juice.

Fane needed to think about how he was going to gain her trust to help her become panther. *Why won't she tell me about the change?*

Panthers were damned good hunters but the earlier display of manliness to scare off a mouse had zapped a lot of energy. A great part of the trip was spent masking his scent. He couldn't let her know how much he wanted her.

His need for blood pressed on him.

His cat hunted down a coyote and buried its fangs deep in the vein of the animal. The vampyre cat took its fill of the cur's precious life force. He made sure death was swift and painless. The carrion was left to the vultures. They were scavengers and would appreciate the meal. Kind didn't waste by hunting prey for sport like humans did.

The panther then caught two rabbits. They hung from his mouth as he loped to the airplane. There weren't very many choices out here. He could have gone for another coyote, but he didn't think that would go over well. Once Edy went through her change, her diet would be different also.

She'd enjoy the kill as a panther, and she would savor the blood.

He envisioned Edy with her fangs piercing his chest... *enough of that*. It would look like hell if he changed with his hard cock waving like a flag between his legs. He pulled his panther into his body and clothed himself.

"Hope you like rabbit," he said as he entered the galley.

She had set the table in the lounge and every thing else was ready. Cooking would be quick. Kind ate everything rare when in their vampyre form.

"Uncle Thomas and my dad used to hunt rabbit all the time. It was Sans'..."

## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

"It was his favorite meat. I know. Did you know your cousin well?" Fane heard her hesitation but he was glad she broached the subject. Maybe now he could get her to understand why he needed to be the one to hunt Sans.

"He was kil... I mean he died before my birth."

He watched her begin to prepare the rabbit.

"So, you didn't know him at all?" He knew that she couldn't have known her cousin.

He looked for a way to make her bring up her age and the approaching change. To be able to take her pain, Edy would have to trust him with her heart, her very soul.

"Only what my family and Uncle Thomas told me."

He saw how efficient her movements in the galley were. She found where everything was and she didn't waste time. She knew her way around a kitchen. He liked that.

"He liked fishing too. We would sit on the dock by my folk's place and fish all day long." Fane remembered those days often. It helped him to forget the last time he saw his friend.

"Was he a good warrior?" She sounded intrigued.

"The best. I never patrolled with anyone else until..." He turned toward the windows. He didn't want her to see any weakness in him.

"You were very close weren't you?"

"We were more than best friends. He was like a brother to me." He didn't want to talk about this anymore. "When will those rabbits be done? I'm hungry."

"They're just about ready. Why don't you pour us some wine and I'll bring the rabbit right out."

Fane knew she probably heard the sadness in his voice and he appreciated that she gave him time to compose himself. Did she notice his eyes mist over? He hoped not.

"They smell delicious," he said after he gathered himself.

Glad the subject changed, he realized that she didn't seem quite as upset. Maybe they could talk about it later. He wanted to share with Edy all the wonderful things she should know about her cousin and his friend. He just wished she trusted him enough to tell him about her birthday. There wasn't much time.

"Told you I was a good cook."

"That could come in handy someday. Being a good cook I mean." He knew he treaded on shaky ground. She was independent and he could tell she



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enjoyed her freedom. She liked what she did. Would she want to be relegated to some cat's kitchen? Fane doubted it.

"Don't go getting any ideas about me being the good little woman staying at home and taking care of the house. I don't do windows." Edy smiled as she brought their meal to the table.

"Me? Never. I know a liberated woman when I see one." He smiled too. He enjoyed their banter. "Plus, I'm a pretty good cook myself you know."

"Good, the next meal is all yours if we don't get out of here." She started to eat.

"Whoa now. I cook, that means you hunt. Share and share alike." He waited to hear her response. He started to eat and kept his eyes glued on his plate. He could almost hear her thinking. What she said next made him look up at her in surprise.

"You wouldn't happen to have a shotgun anywhere in this baby would you? I'm one hell of a shot I'll have you know."

\* \* \* \* \*

Edy relished that she had surprised him. *Keep him on his toes.* The idea of being fit into some neat little package didn't suit her. But she did like where his thoughts were headed and wouldn't mind cooking more meals for him.

Her heart beat out a rhythm that told her she liked this. He did too because his scent changed. His desire was evident and it ignited her senses.

She'd felt his sadness earlier and heard it in his voice as he talked about Sans. He wouldn't want her to see any weakness in him. Could she be wrong about Fane? His eyes had misted over before he turned from her. Why did he have to be the one to hunt her cousin down? That part was hard to understand.

Edy knew enough about the Reign warriors to know that Fane could have let the others hunt him. That's what they were there for. They were the protectors of the Kind, and though they weren't obligated, they saw to the safety of humans as well. It's why they were allowed to take the blood of humans.

Would she ever understand any of this? She tried to think happier thoughts.

"I think I could rustle up a gun. You got a deal."

When he put his hand out to seal their deal, Edy placed hers in his. The electric jolt that shot up her arm sent her blood straight to the boiling point. She could tell it had the same effect on him.

"Deal, mister. You get to show me your stuff in the kitchen." *And the bedroom and the cockpit and the... Shit!* She got carried away. But she pictured him naked again. And she did want to have him every where she could.

## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

The way he cleaned his plate told her he enjoyed the meal. Edy was glad her mom had taught her how to cook.

"That was really good," Fane said.

She watched him take the last bite.

"I'm glad you're pleased." Edy glowed. *Thank you, Mom.*

"I'm going out to check a few things. I won't be long."

Edy thought about him as she cleared the table. God, she wanted that cat. Is this what being in heat would always be like? She wouldn't care if she was mated to someone like him. They'd take care of each other's needs. But damn, she was hot and bothered. She needed release in a bad way.

"What the hell?" Her head came up at the sound of a voice in the cockpit. She moved with caution toward the open door. She heard it again. *Damn!* The radio worked. She didn't want it to work. Maybe if she turned it off, he wouldn't know. What the hell did she have to lose? She looked around outside as far as she could see. There was no sign of Fane.

She reached for the button labeled radio and flipped the switch to off. *This is crazy.*

"I'm trying to keep us stranded," Edy whispered. "And I'm talking to myself." She knew she'd lost her mind. What if he found out? He would probably think he turned it off. Maybe she should turn it back on...

\* \* \* \* \*

Patrik had installed a safe that he kept a few guns in. Since it was early evening, he'd take her out and let her show off her skills. If she came up with anything, they could refrigerate it for tomorrow. He knew they'd be here for a while yet.

Fane needed to get some fresh air. His nostrils were full of her. She was hot and he wanted to be the one to cool her off. He wanted to take her in his arms and smother her with kisses, press her body close to his and let her feel how she affected him.

He walked around for a while to collect his thoughts. His time out hadn't helped at all. His shaft was still hard as hell and sat in front of him like it had paid for the seat.

When he reached the top of the steps and entered the plane, his body went limp. Every part of it. He was shocked by the sight of Edy in the cockpit.

"What are you doing?" Suspicious, Fane watched her from the doorway. *What was she doing?*

"I was... I wanted to see where you were."

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"Oh. Well, don't touch anything in there." He didn't want to sound pushy and make her think something wasn't right.

"Do you want to change before we go hunting?" he asked.

He really couldn't take her in that dress with a gun in her hands. He'd be all over her. A beautiful, sexy cat woman in heat with a gun. *Christ*. The thought of it and his cock sprang to life and pushed hard against the zipper of his pants. *This is fucking ridiculous*. She started past him but he grabbed her and pulled her against his body.

"Edy, I want you."

Fane's mouth found her sweet lips in one fluid move. His fangs dropped. He was hungry and wanted to taste her life. Shit, he envisioned his mouth all over her. His tongue found hers and she tasted even better than he remembered. So good. His hands brushed down the sides of her breasts and traveled to her butt. He brought her tighter against his body. Closer. He wanted to be inside of her.

When her arms came around his neck, he was lost. He held her so tight she couldn't have moved if she wanted to. His tongue delved for the secrets she kept hidden from him. She returned his kiss with just as much abandon and it let him know she wanted the same thing he did. He released his scent of desire. Hers curled up his nostrils like smoke from a fire.

"Fane?"

He ignored the question in her voice. His insistent mouth would tell her all she needed to know. Her ass clutched in his hands and her body pulled against his hardness should give her the knowledge she searched for.

With reluctance he pulled his lips from hers. His nose went up in the air, the scent unmistakable.

Mountain lion and it wasn't Kind.

There were still some cats that were not infected with the vampyre curse. He thought briefly how lucky they were. They would always be just that—cat.

"What is it?" He heard Edy sniff the air. She'd smell it now.

"Don't usually get them in this area, mountain lion. I'll take care of it. I don't want it around when I take you out."

Once panther, she would handle a cat this small with ease. Until then, Fane wasn't taking any chances.

He went outside and let his cat loose. This time he was quick.

The hair covered his body with speed and his eyes changed to those of a cat. He folded his body and heavy paws kicked up dust as they landed solidly on the ground. His ears, already in an alert position, picked up every sound in the

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vicinity. With his jaw hung open, saliva gathered on his fangs and dripped as the glands in his mouth tasted the air.

His panther showed signs of aggression, the hair around his neck stood up thickly and his tail swished back and forth. He loped toward the lion.

Fane gloried in the body he inhabited. His muscles quaked in expectation of the fight. Power coursed through him.

This was his natural state. Panther.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edy watched out the window of the cockpit. The lion looked their way. He saw them too. Fane's panther moved in the lion's direction. He was awesome in his cat. She hoped she would be that beautiful. There were no underlying spots on him like some panthers possessed. He was jet black.

She stared, fascinated by the way his muscles bunched as he loped forward. The smaller cat went down on its belly and submitted to the larger, more deadly panther.

The vibration of a low purr stirred inside. Edy's animal felt what she did and got excited by the sight of Fane's beast. It reminded her of the heated kiss they shared. It was imprinted in her mind. Hell, the taste of him lingered in her mouth. She knew how much he wanted her. The memory of his thick shaft pressed against her stomach was vivid. It had taken every ounce of strength she had not to reach into his pants.

Edy had to think about something else.

The thought about how close she'd come to being caught in the cockpit when she turned off the radio came uninvited. And she outright lied to him. A few moments more and she would have turned it back on and been out of there. Now what? Her cheeks flamed red at what she had done.

Maybe she could turn it on now before he returned.

Edy jumped at the sound of a vicious growl, her attention torn from the radio and to the scene unfolding out front. She looked just in time to see Fane's panther raise its large head and roar. The sound was unexpected as it ripped through the quiet desert air. Goose bumps traveled up her arms.

She'd waited twenty-two years to be what she really was—a cat. A panther to be exact. And after taking her mate's blood, she would be a vampyre. She wanted it so bad now, to be the female version of the glorious creature she watched with envy.

It surprised her to see Fane didn't attack the cat. She could tell he showed just enough force to make the lion submit and recognize the panther as his alpha and that this territory now belonged to him. He didn't want to hurt him.

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Tears clouded her eyes and something inside of her broke and sent a flood of sadness through her heart.

Fane was not a killer.

So why did he kill her cousin?

Edy watched the lion stand and sprint off in the opposite direction. Fane, still panther, turned and saw her watching him. He drew his cat into his vampyre's body and stood to his full height. He did not clothe himself. She knew he wanted her to see exactly what he was and how much he wanted her.

And she couldn't miss it. His arousal was enormous.

Her heart raced. She couldn't believe how beautiful he was as he stood out there naked. The sun brushed his body with light and cast shadows across the hard plains of muscle that glistened with sweat. It was a struggle not to go to him, feel his hard body press against hers. She wanted his arms around her and her skin to touch his.

Inflamed with desire, Edy couldn't move.

Could she trust him? She knew now that he wasn't a killer. She must tell him about her birthday or he'd never trust *her*. Did she have the right to put him in the position of mating if it wasn't what he wanted? How would her family feel?

What a cruel twist of fate that now her family was last on her list of worries. She thought about how deep her aunt's sadness was. It didn't help her refocus. Somehow Fane had taken first place in her heart and her life.

She'd known from the beginning that her panther wanted him. She had put that down to being in heat. An animalistic desire that was hard to ignore. Now all of her wanted to be with him. Always. What the hell was she going to do?

Though mates didn't have to bond, the male usually stayed with the female after they helped her to find her cat. Much older than her, Fane was unmated and free. If he'd wanted a mate, wouldn't he have one by this time?

Edy turned from the window and walked through the lounge to the suite. Tears stung her eyes and flowed down her cheeks.

## Chapter Five

He knew she watched him and he hoped she would come to him.  
She didn't.

Fane clothed himself and walked slowly to the plane. This woman had gotten under his skin. She'd crawled into his heart and he didn't want to let her go. In the beginning it might have been the base feelings of his beast. But that had changed,

He knew she desired him as much as he did her. Why did she hold back? After the kiss they shared, he thought...Well, it didn't matter now.

And she still didn't mention her birthday.

Fane stood at the bar holding a glass with a shot of bourbon when Edy appeared from the stateroom in a hot pink tee and the tightest blue jeans imaginable. She must have painted them on. Shit, they were worse than the dress for his peace of mind.

"Can I pour you one?" He saw the signs of her crying.

"No, I'm fine. Can we hunt now?"

"Sure. I'm ready." He lifted his shirt to show her the pistol he had placed in the waistband of his pants. "Sorry I don't have a shotgun for you but this is small caliber and should be fine. You can take some practice shots to get familiar with how it handles."

"No problem, let's go."

He followed Edy out.

He realized immediately he should have gone first. Seeing her from behind with the jeans hugging her tight ass was too much. He tried to look anywhere else, but his eyes, like another part of his body, totally disobeyed him and stayed glued to her backside. *I can't get a break today!*

There was a good bit of daylight left and they could hunt for a while yet. They walked a little bit before they came to an outcropping of rocks full of crevices, which hid small game. They both picked up the scent of wildlife.

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"Do you like your work?" He couldn't think of anything else to say. He was tired of the silence.

He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss the sad look from her face. What changed? She'd been so receptive to him earlier.

"It's okay. I like to meet people. Some of them are interesting." Edy stopped walking and leaned against the wall of rock. "I bet you meet a lot of characters flying Patrik around?"

"Yeah, I do." He fought going to her and putting his arms around her. He wanted to pick up where they left off, but he knew this wasn't the right time for that.

As she slid down to sit on the ground, he heard a flurry of noise come from one of the crevices. There were rabbits close by.

"You ready to catch our dinner, woman?" He tried to lighten the mood. By the far away look in her green eyes, he could tell that her thoughts weren't here.

Fane wished he had access to her mind.

That could only happen once she started her change. After a blood exchange, they'd know each other's every thought. He'd only shared blood with warriors, other panthers, when injured in battle. Since Kind law didn't allow cats to mix their blood, they fought in matched pairs. Sustenance given to brethren to sustain life was not considered a disregard for the sanctum of mating.

Edy was panther and he wanted to taste her blood now. He could hear her heart beat and it made his own blood run hotter.

"Sure." She said. "Where's the pistol?" She didn't move from her spot on the ground.

"Do you need some practice?" He could smell the prey closer now and didn't want to miss their chance. He masked his cat's odor. He knew they wouldn't be afraid to come out with Edy there. Although she was in heat, her cat would not pose a threat to them yet.

"You know what? It would probably be better for your cat to do this. Even though we're going to use it for food, I hate the idea of shooting something."

"Are you sure?" He smiled. "That means you're back in the kitchen."

"I'm okay with that. You can show off your cooking abilities another time."

Fane knew she was excited when her breathing changed. Now he understood. She *wanted* to see him in the raw again, see his cat hunt.

She was wet with desire for him. She exuded sex and her essence swirled around his head like a cloud.

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Why did she still fight it?

With a wish, his clothes were gone and he heard her gasp. His eyes never left hers. He knew the effect he had on her. Her scent, the sound of her blood as it pulsed through her veins, killed him. The hair started to run up his arms and down his legs as he folded his body and let his large panther paws hit the ground. He couldn't stop his beast from going to her. It nudged at her hand with its large head.

She put her hand into the rough of fur around his neck and tugged. He enjoyed the feel of her fingers as they moved over his cat's lean body. His muscles quivered and bunched under her touch. Edy rubbed her cheek against his panther's face as she stroked his back.

Fane couldn't stand anymore.

It took every ounce of strength he possessed to control his cat. He turned and loped around the outcropping. His nose told him where the game was and he needed to get his thoughts on something else. The beast had to be taken as far away from her as possible. And fast.

She made the panther crazier than the man. Fane trapped a large rabbit in his jaws almost immediately. He smothered the animal right away, not wanting to cause it any more pain than was necessary. The warm spicy taste of the blood suddenly made him remember how much he liked the charge he got from human blood.

Fane was long overdue and the blood lust that crept up on him now caught him by surprise.

He returned to the spot where he left Edy. Still in his cat, he sauntered past her carrying the rabbit in his mouth. He knew she would follow. He couldn't change and let her see his vampyre's eyes full of blood lust.

They reached the plane. Fane changed to his man form, and naked, he went up the steps with their dinner in hand. He put the rabbit in the galley and continued straight to the suite. He needed a cold shower. He didn't want her to see his fangs low and hungry.

And his cock stood at full mast.

Fane stayed in the shower a long time and let the cold water cascade over his body, he hoped it would wash away any thoughts of being inside of her.

It didn't work.

His vision was full of her sweet ass encased in the skin tight jeans, envious of how they hugged her hips and thighs. *I'm fucking jealous of a goddamned pair of jeans!* He'd make sure she never wore them when she was his.



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What the hell was he thinking? She wasn't acting like she wanted to be his. She still hadn't told him about her change yet, and what if she couldn't get over Sans? Christ, what a mess he was in.

And cold showers weren't worth a damn. Who ever said they helped never really sported a good hard on. He turned the water off.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edy rested outside and watched the sun set. The decision was made not to tell him about the radio. She'd go inside and sit at the bar, have a drink then take a shower and go to bed.

The change was so close, her cat stirred and moved. It was as though...

Air caught in Edy's throat. No way could she allow herself to entertain the idea that ran through her mind. It just could not be possible. She pushed it deep into a dark corner of her head, to a place safe where she wouldn't think about it again.

Would he be angry if he ended up stuck with her?

Edy still had over twenty-four hours to make a decision. She would think of something. She wanted to be with this man in a bad way.

As soon as she heard the shower stop, her heart-beat sped up. The thought of seeing him come through the door from the suite set her body on overdrive.

"You can have the room," he said as he entered the lounge. "I'll sleep out here."

"Thanks, I think I'll just grab a shower and turn in. It's late." Edy was glad to escape, unsure of what would happen if she stayed.

She took her shower and went straight to bed.

Lying there she thought about her aunt Maren. Most of the time she seemed so sad. She'd withdrawn from life and stayed to herself. There were times she appeared to be happy but she wasn't.

Because of her uncle's business, she was left alone a lot. Edy stayed with her when she didn't have to be in classes. Sometimes when their eyes met, she would see the pain of Sans' death there.

Last year she had a really bad time of it. Edy couldn't be there as much as she wanted to. It was her last semester and exams kept her tied up. It surprised her that Uncle Thomas took a few months off to spend with her aunt. They even went away together for a few weeks. She did seem better when they'd returned.

Edy drifted to sleep wondering how the hell she could ever explain her feelings for Fane to her aunt.

## Chapter Six

Fane punched at the hard pillows on the sofa. *Dammit*. He wasn't getting any sleep like this. He turned onto his back and closed his eyes and tried again to get her out of his mind. But it wasn't working. He'd cleared his head of every thought. Sleep still eluded him.

Suddenly he smelled her. It was like she was right beside him... *Shit!* Didn't he have enough problems?

A dream. He was in her dream. *Draga*. Once you met your true mate you could be with them in the dream realm. Taste, smell—it would all feel real.

Edy was his true mate.

He thought about waking himself up when he heard her whisper his name. Being Kind, she would understand what was happening to them, and what it meant.

*//Fane, don't wake up. Stay.//*

*//Are you sure?//*

*//I want you,//* she said. *//I don't think either of us can avoid it now. We are draga.//*

*//I know.//*

Unable to stop himself, his hand stroked over her bare hip. Fondled soft, warm skin. He could touch her forever. Wanted to. His animal instincts drove him on. The caress grew more insistent as his fingers brushed up and down her thigh. She shifted to lie on her back and give him better access. He took full advantage of the new position by sliding his fingers through her pussy's dampness. His engorged penis bumped her leg. A tremor of excitement glided down his spine.

He leaned over to press his lips to her shoulder. A light kiss. He continued to the column of her neck and flicked his tongue across her pulse. Blood pounded through the vein matching the beat of her heart. He went further down, took a hard nipple into his mouth and nursed on it. He sucked and nibbled,

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teased it with his teeth. He blazed a hot trail with his tongue between her breasts. Licked and tasted.

To better enjoy her, he rose to his knees. Edy's arms stretched above her head. Her eyes were closed tight. His traveled the length of her body, lit on every curve and rested briefly on the hair that peppered her mound. A pearl of liquid appeared on his cock's head.

The peaks of her breasts stood out, begged for attention. There was no denying them. A hand braced on her thigh, he bent to minister to both this time. Tugged one, then the other into the moist cavity of his mouth. He swirled his tongue around the buds, suckled until she moaned.

From this position he could tease between her legs. And he did. His hand pushed into the vee there. Mesmerized by the heat he felt, he wanted more. His panther spurred him on. Christ, he was getting lost in her and couldn't help himself.

A groan formed deep in his throat and came out in a low growl.

His tongue savored the salty taste of her satin skin. It slipped down her abdomen into her belly button. He grunted when his fingers penetrated her pussy. She bucked into his hand, taking him deeper. Air hissed through his teeth. He prodded her channel and felt it tighten. Liquid poured from her core. The heat of it washed over him. His cock had never been so hard and it jerked between his legs. His balls ached.

Fane wanted to be inside her. But he needed to taste her lips, feel them crushed beneath his.

His free hand plowed into her hair, yanked her to him. Her eyes opened and looked into his. The way she lovingly gazed at him snatched him back to reality.

What the hell was he doing? He had to stop this.

*//Fane?//*

He really didn't know what to say to the question in her voice. Things had gone much too far. At a loss for words, he pulled away and tried to gather himself. His erection hurt like hell but he ignored it. He couldn't do this. Not this way.

*//About Sans, I can explain.//*

*//Please don't,// she said, //I just know I want you.//*

*//I need you to understand.//*

*//Does it really matter now?//*

*//To me, yes.//*

*//I don't care anymore.//*

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*//I care.//* He woke up.

Fane came out of the dream cold and lonely as hell. He had a freaking hard on and his cat prowled and raged at him. Clawed for release.

His only thought was the need for her to understand. *He* needed her to know the truth. It was a broken record that played over and over in his mind. He wanted *her* forgiveness for what he'd done to her cousin. No one else's mattered. But Edy's did. He should have jumped at the chance of taking her, but he couldn't.

She had to know why he did it. He did not cold-bloodedly kill his best friend.

He wanted to tell her about the false mechanical problem. Everything.

He got up, left the plane and released his panther. His mind darted everywhere as his cat ran in the night.

Did transgression happen because of human blood, the thing that gave them their vampyre powers? Or was it the vamp blood. He boggled his mind with constant gnawing on this question. Why did Sans transgress and could it happen to him if he fed on humans again? Without sustenance, his vampyre would grow weaker.

Soon he would be unable to leave his panther, which would be weak also. Was that the answer? At least then he would be in his natural state. After all, isn't that what his people wanted? To be rid of the vampyre half and their cursed need for blood. That wasn't what he wanted.

He was Reign, a warrior who lived by a code of honor. He couldn't imagine a world where rogues and transgressors ran rampant with no one to control their bloodlust.

His cat skidded to a stop.

Fane raised his panther's head, and like a wolf, he cried at the moon.

The difference was it came out as a roar.

All the pain he'd carried for years leaked into the sound and blanched the quiet night air.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edy lay in the bed, her eyes open. She had been glad he came to her in a dream. She knew what it meant for them to be in the same dream, and she wanted it to be. The way he'd touched her body made her crazy. He'd left her aching for more. She had wanted to take him inside her. She wanted to love him.

She took out the idea she had hidden away in her mind and looked at it. She first felt it when she rested outside of the plane after his panther hunted.

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Then she didn't think it was possible, but now she knew for sure—they were true mates.

He was her *dragan*. Her flame. Her one true love.

She should have listened to him, let him tell her his story. But Edy was afraid of what he would say. She had felt him slip away from her dream and she wanted to cry, to beg him to stay.

She'd planned to tell him about her birthday. It was too late.

She heard the panther's roar and the eerie silence that followed. Every living thing in the canyon heard the pain in that mournful sound. So did she. Tears slid silently down her face and wet the pillow beneath her head. She wanted to take his pain away but knew she couldn't.

He was Reign. He lived with death every day. He had lived for years now with the horror of killing his best friend.

Edy felt like she'd let him down. She felt like she let herself down.

Now she understood why he loved to fly. It took him away from that part of his life.

If only for a little while.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fane was still gone when Edy got up.

She decided to take a walk around the canyon and explore for a while. She never spent time here, though she was often near other parts of the canyon when she visited the Arizona compound. She thought how her panther would love this place once she changed.

With age, and blood, her vampyre could soar over the craggy cliffs. Why did her kind reject that part of themselves? She would enjoy the immense freedom it would bring to her life. Of course, taking the blood of humans on a regular basis was another thing entirely. But she was female and she would only take the blood of her mate.

He would carry the burden of drinking from a human.

Her body enjoyed the physical activity of picking its way down the steep path that wound into the canyon and it kept her mind busy. Embarrassed to face him, Edy was glad Fane had been gone this morning. And she was angry. She offered herself to him and he refused her.

The earth beneath her feet suddenly shifted and gave way. She slid down the face of the rocks and landed on a craggy shelf fifteen-feet below. Edy bumped her head hard and passed out.

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When Edy came to, she was sprawled across the ledge and covered with scratches. After gingerly sitting up, an examination of her body proved there were no broken bones.

What the hell was she going to do now?

Calling out for help would do her no good. There was no one around. Her mind lit on the one thing she didn't want to think about—the mountain lion. She only had one choice. She'd have to stay here until Fane missed her long enough to come and look for her.

One thing for sure, he wouldn't have trouble following her.

Thank God she was in heat.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stones tumbled from above and bombarded Edy. She'd been in and out of consciousness, and though the worst of it had passed, she still felt a little disoriented from the bump on her head. She leaned out over the ledge to look up and see what caused the rocks to slide.

"Dammit," she whispered to herself.

It was a mountain lion.

Her ripped shirt had been used to clean the scratches and she threw it over the ledge so the scent of blood wouldn't be so strong. A hysterical snort escaped her lips as she remembered her joy at being in heat and how easy it'd be for Fane to find her.

Seems he was the only cat not looking for her. She scooted back as far as she could and hoped the lion didn't see her. She breathed deep to calm down and lower her pulse. The last thing she needed was for her body to give off the tangy scent of fear.

The cat's smell drifted down to her, it was the same one from the plane. She forced herself to remain calm. These cats were excellent climbers. She knew he could reach her if he wanted to.

The stones stopped falling. *Maybe it went away.* She lay down and closed her eyes.

She was so tired.

## Chapter Seven

Fane's panther had explored the canyon most of the night. He ended up sitting on a hill and watched the night turn into day. He realized how far he'd traveled when he started his return journey.

It was late afternoon when he arrived. He could tell Edy was nowhere around. She must have gone for a walk. He decided to fix lunch and surprise her.

After he prepared the rabbit, he grabbed a beer from the fridge and went into the lounge. He tried to relax while he waited for her to return. She probably just needed some time to herself.

He didn't know how things were going to turn out, but he'd decided to tell her the truth and let the blame fall on his shoulders. There was no need for her to know about Thomas and Patrik's involvement.

Once he got her home, she could be with the cat her parents picked as her mate. He didn't even want to think about his life without her. But if she couldn't understand about Sans... Well, none of it mattered now.

Fane was tired and he closed his eyes to rest for a bit.

He smelled Edy so clearly. He'd fallen asleep and was dreaming.

*//Thank God, Fane. I must have dozed off. I fell and I'm on a ledge. I can't climb up. The mountain lion... Shit. He's still mad and he's going to leave me here. You could at least talk to me.//*

His eyes snapped open. He bolted up and out of the plane at vampyre speed. He changed to his panther in midstride and immediately knew which direction she traveled. His cat ran flat out. He wished now he'd taken more blood because then he could have dematerialized and been at her side. He vowed to himself to take sustenance again as soon as this was over.

Fane's panther followed her scent for miles. If anything happened to her, he'd die himself. Unless Thomas killed him first. He had entrusted Edy to his care.

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When he reached the ledge, he skidded to a stop. He couldn't see the lion but he smelled him. He pulled his cat into his body and moved closer to the edge.

"Edy, I'm here, baby. Are you okay?" He needed to hear her voice. The lion was climbing down.

"God, please hurry, it's almost here. Look to your left." She sounded so happy.

Fane would not let her be hurt.

"You're safe now. Stay calm and get back as far as you can." Panther's were excellent climbers too. "I'll be right down."

He released his cat and began the steep climb down the treacherous face of the cliff. Stone tumbled down to the ledge where Edy sat hidden. The lion was almost there. He had to get to her first.

He jumped the last ten feet and landed beside her. She hugged him around the neck. He pulled from the circle of her arms and bared his teeth at the lion as he approached their position. Fane's beast roared so loud, more stones crumbled from above and pelted down on him. The lion leaped the remaining distance to the ledge and knocked the panther down. His cat saw Edy ball her body up as tight as she could to stay out of the fray.

The panther regained his footing and swiped the smaller lion with a huge paw. He roared in pain and as he pulled his head up, the panther lunged for its throat and sank its teeth deep into the smaller cat's neck. Fane held on and shook the mountain lion until it no longer moved. When he was sure it was dead, he pushed it over the edge.

He panted with exertion.

Edy moved out of the corner she huddled in and her arms again encircled his neck. He felt her joy at seeing his cat and let his panther lay in her arms. It felt so good; he didn't want to move. If he stayed this way everything would be okay. Soon it grew dark and he couldn't stay panther in her arms forever.

Fane assumed his vampyre's body.

She still held him tight. Vampyre or beast, he felt she wasn't going to let him go. Not now. He knew if he didn't talk to her, there was only one way he was going to get her up the cliff side—by dragging her ass to the top, and Fane knew his little wildcat wouldn't go quietly.

"Are you hurt?" He felt her eyes roam his body looking for any injuries. She wouldn't find any.



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Fane lay naked and happy in her arms. This woman tamed him totally. His *dragana*, the flame he was not afraid to touch. His true love. He'd almost lost her.

She would have to listen to him now, too, because she couldn't make the climb up the steep overhang without his help. He decided then what he would do.

He meant to keep her here until her change.

"I'm fine, *draga moja*, my own. I thought I wouldn't get here in time. I was so afraid."

He pulled Edy down and kissed her deeply. His fang nipped her lower lip and drew blood. It was intoxicating. He ran his tongue over her lip and pulled it into his mouth. He sucked it gently, then harder. He wanted more of her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edy's blood sang through her veins. She couldn't move. His mouth was so hot, so good. His desire mingled with the scent of her blood. He broke their kiss after a while and sat up with his back against the cliff wall. He still did not clothe himself. He seemed perfectly at ease naked in front of her.

He was cat through and through.

She knew the vampyre side of him would have preferred clothing, but he ignored that half right now. He pulled her into his arms and situated himself so that her back was pressed against his chest. He held her with his hands laced under her breast. He started to talk.

"Sans and I grew up together."

"You don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do. I am not a cold-blooded killer. I loved him like a brother." He went on. "We were inseparable. Our parents knew if they found one of us, the other was close by. We were a handful and always up to some mischief."

Fane stopped for a moment and she knew he needed to gather himself. Edy felt the memories wash over him. His body trembled in her arms. There were tears in his voice and she knew they'd be in his eyes, but he didn't seem to care.

"He was always the fastest and the strongest. He had to be the best at everything. And if he wasn't, he worked harder at it. When we hunted transgressors, he'd be the first one there." He struggled to continue with his story.

Her back was to him, but she knew the pain that would be visible on his strong face. She sensed it. She reached for his hands and held them firmly in her own. He went on, his voice more under control.

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"The last time we hunted was for a tiger we both grew up and trained with. We were all friends. By the time we reached him, two other tigers surrounded him. Cain and Abel are twins, and they were brutal when they hunted together. Especially Abel."

Edy knew what they did was necessary and Fane didn't want her to think bad about the Reign. He swallowed and continued.

"Abel was a little hard around the edges, but a good cat to have on your side in a fight. He held the transgressor on the ground with his throat partially torn out. They didn't kill him right away. Cain recited the Reign death chant." He hesitated again. She could tell Fane was overcome with the memory.

"What happened?" Edy wanted to hear everything. He didn't want to tell her all of the gruesome details, but this was his life and she needed to feel every bit of what he felt.

"He was still alive. Abel could have ended it. He didn't have to wait for Cain to finish the chant. But he did. He roared and paced back and forth around the dying tiger. When we saw what was happening, Sans lunged forward and disemboweled the tiger and killed him immediately. That is how we kill transgressors."

"Oh Fane." Tears streamed unchecked down her face. Now she understood what he lived with everyday when he thought about her cousin.

"We went out for a drink later just to unwind. Cain and Abel walked in and sat at a table near us. Sans heard them laugh and joke like nothing happened.

He looked at me so strangely, Edy, and he made me promise..." His voice choked up. "Sans made me promise that if he ever transgressed, I would be the one to kill him. He told me not to let him suffer. It was almost as if he knew he would transgress."

Fane didn't say anymore.

"Oh God, baby, I'm sorry. It must have been horrible having to..." Edy couldn't believe it. She couldn't put it in words.

"I'd do it all over again. I would not let him suffer like that tiger did. Sans deserved better than that."

"Do Uncle Thomas and Aunt Maren know about the promise?" She couldn't believe they'd hold it against him if they knew. But she understood why they would still be sad at the painful way their son died.

"They know. It just took them a while to get over the pain of losing a son. And since your aunt has lost two cubs..."

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"WHAT!" Edy twisted in his arms to look at him. Her eyes were stretched wide in surprise.

"You didn't know? I'm sorry, I thought you knew." Edy could see Fane didn't like being the bearer of this news. They hadn't told her.

Tears glistened in her eyes as they softened to sadness.

"No one told me. I thought she was still sad because... Sans... Oh God, Fane, I'm so sorry. I hated you for so long because I thought..." She choked back tears.

"Shh, honey, it's okay. I hated myself because I thought they still blamed me."

"But all this time, I've fought so hard not to want you. I should have let you tell me in our dream." Edy's sobs were uncontrollable.

"It's alright, I understand."

All these years had been a misunderstanding. She wished they'd told her the truth. But her aunt was always so thoughtful of those around her and probably just didn't want to worry Edy.

Her heart soared. Now she was free to be with Fane. First she would have to tell him the truth about what she'd done.

## Chapter Eight

Now was the time for Fane to tell her about the plane, but before he could, she hissed and cried out. Her body lifted from his arms as a violent spasm of pain tore through her body.

It was after midnight and Edy's change had started.

"Baby." Fane turned her so she lay in his arms. "It's okay *draga moja*, I'm here." He held her tight.

"It hurts. Please, take the pain. Don't let me hurt," she cried and he felt her brace herself for another onslaught.

This was what a mate did. Fane had been ready. He would take her pain. If she trusted him, he'd be able to reach into her mind.

"Shh... let it go. Let me take your pain. Let me in, honey."

The pain started to slip into his body as he entered her mind. He hissed in a stream of air and continued to coax her to let go. She must trust him with her soul.

Her body bowed out of his arms with another sharp pang. He knew she felt him move into her mind and she began to let go. She needed to let him all the way in.

Let him possess her.

"Oh... hurts, please, help me!" Edy's face was twisted in agony.

"I've got you. Breathe and picture the panther, baby. Picture it in your mind. I'll take the pain away. And I'll show you your cat." He knew the moment she let it all go. It slammed into him like a hurricane. White, hot pain seared his soul. He would not let her feel how much it hurt. No mate would do that. He labored through the agony, and all the while he talked to her, coaxing her panther into the light.

"It's okay. See your panther, Edy. See it." His cat could see its mate and it roared inside of him and clawed to be released. It pulled its mate closer to the surface, wanting her as much as Fane wanted Edy.

## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

He felt the heat build in her body as her cat responded and started to emerge. Black, shiny fur began to cover her arms. He stiffened as another jolt of anguish shot through his own body. But he held her close and soothed her with his voice.

"There baby. That's it." The fur now covered her whole body.

Edy was panther.

And she looked extraordinary. There was never another cat so beautiful to him. *She's mine!*

*//Fane?//* Edy was in his head. He could hear her surprise and he felt her cat flinch at the torment he bore for her. Her pain was now his.

*//Don't worry honey, it's almost over.//* He pulled air into his lungs knowing the misery wouldn't last much longer. He didn't care if it lasted forever. *You are so beautiful.* He looked into her green eyes as her panther lay stretched out. He released his own cat and lay beside her.

*//I love you, draga moja.//* He knew now he would not have been able to let her go. He would kill anyone who tried to take her from him.

*//I'm panther.//* He heard her smile. *//I want to change back.//*

*//Just picture yourself in your body. It's easy, baby.//* He struggled briefly with his own cat. It wanted to stay out. He watched as she became vampyre. She licked her lips as her fangs emerged for the first time.

*//I love you.//* she said and Fane knew Edy meant every word. He pulled her into his arms and cradled her naked body across his lap. She had to feel his erection pressed against her butt.

Still in her mind, he knew exactly what she wanted. To feel him inside of her. And that's where he wanted to be.

"You smell so good. I want to taste you, baby."

"I want that too. Don't make me wait." She ran her fingertips over his chest. His muscles jumped under her hands.

His mouth crushed to hers in a searing kiss. He explored the warm dark cavity with his tongue. Sucked and fought with hers. She grasped a handful of his hair, brought him even closer as she kissed him back with fire. His heart thudded. She must know how she affected him? He didn't want to stop but he needed to explore every part of her. His mouth lifted from hers and he scalded her with a heated green stare. Her eyes, filled with lust, bore into him.

He bent his head and took a nipple in his mouth and sucked hard. His teeth nibbled on it then he ran his tongue around the hard nub. He loved the way she moaned. It told him how much she liked what he did to her. He found the other nipple and treated it the same way.

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Fane knew he drove her crazy with his mouth. She wouldn't stand his ministrations for long without being able to give him something back.

He moved a hand down to the soft dark hair that rested above her moist folds. His fingers continued to trace through the hair to the wetness that now dampened her thighs. She was so hot he couldn't take it. Her scent pushed him over the edge. He brought his fingertips to his lips and tasted her sweetness. His hardness jumped and pushed against her ass.

Lifting her from his lap, he flipped her to the ground. He rose to his knees and gazed at her. Let his eyes absorb her like a cool drink. His desire was to take her right then and there. Shove his penis inside her. But he wanted more, wanted to give her so much more.

He straddled her, his tight balls nestled in her belly button. The mushroom head of his cock leaked a drop that slid onto her smooth skin. The sight of it glistened and teased him. She was trapped beneath him where he intended to keep her.

His hands encased her full breasts, massaged them until her nipples were rigid, flushed peaks. Fane plucked and pinched each one making her moan. Her breath came in hitches through her kiss-swollen lips. Damn, she looked so good. His fingers moved to her mouth and he filled it with a thumb. Her gentle pull on it made his erection jerk up. The sight of her tongue swirl around the tip drew a shudder from him.

"You're a wild cat," he told her. When his body had vibrated on top of hers, she'd taken his finger further in her mouth and bit down hard.

"Two can play at your game," she teased.

He withdrew from her mouth and stroked her neck, her cheeks with his fingers. Bending, over, he took her bottom lip between his teeth and bit down. Edy writhed under him and pushed her hips up. His tongue slipped in and assaulted her mouth again.

He planted his hands beside her and levered himself up. He stretched his legs down, and wedging one between her knees, he parted hers.

"I still need to taste you." His tongue drew a damp trail down her stomach and stopped short of her pussy. Using his hands under her thighs, he lifted them until the soles of her feet touched the ground. He spread her legs wide and gazed at the delicious view in front of him. Her odor called to his beast, made his cat purr.

"Christ, Edy," he breathed, on the verge of losing control. His head dipped toward her nether lips. His tongue tentative in its quest, flicked her bump. Laved her clit with long, slow strokes. She lifted her ass from the ground

## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

and he speared her hole. In and out, he delved. Her core dripped juice and he scoured it from her folds.

"God, Fane. Please." She pleaded, her voice cracked with need as he continued to penetrate and taste her. He'd waited so long for this, he wanted to stay between her legs. But he couldn't fight it anymore. One last slip of his tongue through the wet, hot feast in front of him and he was done. He came to his knees.

"Honey, I want you so bad." He rose up and brought her with him. Twisting around, he sat with her straddling his lap. He wanted to look at her, see her eyes when she came. "You're so wet. I know you're ready for me, baby."

"I've been ready for two days. I thought this would never happen."

She lowered her mouth to his and kissed him hard. Her tongue searched out all the sweetness in his mouth and tasted his musky desire for her, absorbing it. Edy would always smell like him now.

Fane lowered her onto his erection and allowed her time to grow used to the size of it. He wanted to savor every moment with her. He wanted it to last forever.

"Easy baby, it's going to stay right there for you. Take as much as you want."

"I want it all." Edy pushed down onto his length and inhaled in a hiss as his shaft stretched her passage to fit him. "Yes, that's what I want. All of you buried deep inside me."

They started to move to the same rhythm. As he pumped his cock into her, she took it all. And he knew she wanted more. He didn't disappoint her. He gave her every inch of what she wanted.

He tried to stroke the depths of her soul. He pushed all the way into her, and pulled out with a teasing slowness. He did it again and again and she begged for more.

When he felt her sheath quiver around his thickness, he knew she was ready to come.

"Fane," Edy cried as she crested the wave she rode with such force he felt it crash inside of her. Her juices washed over him and pulled him along in her wake.

"Oh, honey, I'm coming... yeah," he groaned. He filled her with his seed and pumped inside of her until he was empty.

She collapsed in his arms, satiated.

## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

I want to taste your life, *draga*." Fane ran his tongue across her collarbone and savored the taste of her skin. His mouth collected the moisture there and drew it into his body.

He would carry her aura with him always now.

He found the pulse in her neck and swirled his tongue over it. His shaft still throbbed deep inside of her as he bit into her vein. He tasted such sweetness he didn't know if he could take anymore. He pulled on her vein until he was full of her.

Edy gasped and tightened her sheath even more around his hardness.

Fane took his fill of her blood and closed her wound with his healing saliva.

"You are so damn sweet. Like honey," he whispered.

His mate would want to share his life also. Edy leaned into him and suckled on the nipple over his heart. Her tongue licked up his chest until her mouth rested right where she wanted it. His heart stood still.

Her fangs bit into him and his penis jumped to life inside of her. She took what she needed of his blood and closed the wound. Her head fell against his chest and Fane knew she listened to the beat of his heart.

"I want you again," Fane growled.

\* \* \* \* \*

When they woke on the ledge, Edy lay wrapped in his arms.

"We need to return," he said. Now was the time to tell her.

They both spoke at once.

"Fane..."

"Edy..."

"You go first." He wasn't in any hurry to tell her what he'd done.

"It's about my change. I'm sorry. I should have told you. I mean..."

"It doesn't matter. We were supposed to be together, *draga moja*, you are my life. It was Fate." He smiled with the knowledge she would be his flame forever.

Now, about the plane.

"The minute my lips touched yours, I knew I wanted you." He tried to figure out how to say it. "I... there... look, Edy, there's nothing wrong with the plane. I planned this to get you to myself. I'm not sorry. I wanted you. I would do it all over again."

He refused to involve her uncle. He'd take all the blame. Nothing mattered now that she was his.

She started to laugh uncontrollably.



## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

He watched as tears formed in her eyes.

"What's so funny?"

"The radio..." Edy laughed so hard.

"What about the radio?" Fane couldn't understand what she tried to say. Their shared blood now gave him the ability to read her. He entered her mind and saw it.

She'd heard the radio and turned it off. The little minx. She wanted him all this time.

"I can see I'm going to have my hands full with you." He hugged her tight to him. "Let's get out of here."

"Whoa, you're going to have to help me," Edy said still laughing.

"You're a panther. A magnificent looking beast too. Change and get your sweet little ass up the cliff, babe." Fane laughed now. He'd never dreamed their trip together would end in such a wonderful way. He was so damned happy.

"Yeah, I can do it myself, can't I? Race you." She shot off like a rocket. He watched her climb the stone face like a pro. He took off behind her and when he reached the top he saw her streak across the ground toward the plane. He had some catching up to do. She was fast.

He caught up to her when they got close.

Fane skidded to a stop at the sight of a Range Rover parked near the jet. She stopped right behind him.

*Change*, he told Edy. *Let me go first.*

He didn't know who could be out this far and he wasn't taking any chances. He quickly changed, clothed himself, and since she was new to vampyre magic, he sent her a mental image of how to clothe herself.

The closer he got, he smelled Thomas and Patrik. *Shit!* Edy would know shortly and follow behind him.

"What are you guys doing here?" Fane asked as he entered the lounge. The men were relaxed and each held a drink. They smiled at him.

They'd know he and Edy had mated.

"Just checking on you. Radio broke?" Patrik's brow rose in question.

He was right, Edy had smelled them too. She entered the lounge and saw her uncle and Patrik. Fane could tell she wasn't sure what to say.

"Uncle Thomas..."

"Before you say a word... I'm very happy for you. You're like a daughter to me and I don't think you could ever find a better mate. Sans would be happy also. He loved Fane like a brother." Thomas stood and opened his arms to his niece.

## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

\* \* \* \* \*

Fane felt Thomas and Patrik in his mind. He let them know Edy was unaware of their part in this ruse. He knew that made Thomas happy. It would be their secret forever.

"Now that we have that settled," Patrik said, "You did such a good job yesterday, Edy, that the developers want to start right away. Thomas and I will handle it and you two can stay here and enjoy yourselves for the day. The Rover is full of everything you'll need. Now get out. Go."

"Patrik, you haven't flown in a long time," Fane said, concerned.

"I haven't forgotten how. I want to see how this baby handles. We'll see you in Sedona tomorrow." Patrik went to the cockpit.

"Uncle Thomas, tell Aunt Maren I love her, and mother and father..."

"Will be happy for you once they see the glow on your face. None of us blamed Fane, Edy. He needed to come to that himself and let his guilt go. We are Kind and we understand why he did what he did. Now you two go and have some fun. Patrik and I need to get out of here."

\* \* \* \* \*

Fane's panther was joyous at the sight of his mate running with him. For so many years it'd prowled inside of him, patient and waiting. It'd waited for the glorious beast that ran beside him.

All the pain, all the guilt had finally left him.

He knew that Patrick and Thomas would be looking down on the two black cats as they streaked across the landscape.

Fane was right. The last words he heard in his mind came from Thomas.

*//My son is at peace now.//*

\*\* THE END \*\*

## A PANTHER'S FLIGHT

### Author's Biography

J. Hali Steele currently lives in Southeastern Pennsylvania but her dream is to return to the high desert of California. She shares space with four furfriends (cats) and enjoys spending time with family and friends. Her passion has always been reading romance novels, especially those with vampyres and happy endings. When she's not writing, she can be found snuggled in front of the TV with a good book, a cat in her lap and a cup of coffee.

*Growl and roar—it's okay to let the beast out. J. Hali Steele*

Website: [www.sovereignkind.com](http://www.sovereignkind.com)

MySpace: [www.myspace.com/sovereignkind](http://www.myspace.com/sovereignkind)

Facebook: J. Hali

E-mail this author through the link on her website.