

Loose Id

THE TIGER WITHIN

VIKI LYN



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About this Title

Genre: LGBT Historical Shape-Shifter Paranormal

Sentinel agent, Jack Hunter, is blessed...or cursed...with superhuman abilities. He's horrified by the unholy creatures he's been hired to kill: renegade vampires, werewolves, and other unworldly beings spawned from hell. But none of these creatures terrify him as much as Sentinel's top agent and shape-shifter, Le Tigre aka Antoine Fortescue...for Antoine knows his most shameful secret.

From an ancient lineage of shape-shifters, Antoine Fortescue is the last of his kind. He is careful when it comes to love, preferring short-term affairs that don't involve the heart. Until the day he meets the enhanced soldier, Jack Hunter. The man fascinates Antoine with his All-American good looks and arrogance, and it doesn't take long for Antoine to realize Jack is his *khalid*—his life mate.

A stolen kiss in an alley gives Antoine hope that eventually he'll win Jack's closed-up heart. But Jack Hunter despises Antoine for his openly gay manner and outrageous flirting. When they must work together on a case that's close to Antoine's heart, he's hunting not just a killer but his *khalid*. He *will* have his prey, his Jack, and unleash the tiger within.

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Male/male sexual practices.*

Dedication

For Kim, who is smiling down from the stars, his the brightest star of all.

Prologue

The scent punched his sensitive pink nose.

Congeaed blood. Rotten meat. Death.

The snap of a twig echoed through the trees. Le Tigre's fur ruffled along his spine. The full moon would make him vulnerable to sight, so he slinked into the blackness of the shadows dappled across the leafy ground. Slit pupils swept the scene, the foul smell making his mouth curl. Every muscle tensed; Le Tigre's whiskers extended, a low snarl forming in his throat.

A black streak whisked by his field of vision. Le Tigre whipped his head to follow the dark form through the chestnut trees. Assailing his senses was the smell of sulfur—and something else. His eyes zoomed in on the creature, and his heart began to hammer.

Impossible!

He had killed Le Bête centuries ago, had personally ridden to Paris to present the embalmed body to King Louis XV. How could it possibly be that this demonic beast was roaming these forests centuries later?

Le Bête abruptly stopped, digging its hooves into the dirt. From the trees, bright red eyes peered out at Le Tigre, a solid, thousand-pound, snow-white tiger with dark chocolate-colored stripes.

Le Bête lowered its head and pawed the dirt with its cloven hooves. It had a wolfish snout and a body the size of a horse but the shape of a hyena. Two curved fangs protruded from the sides of a foaming mouth. Its spiked tail snapped back and forth. This was a creature unlike any other in nature.

Le Tigre's ears lay flat, a growl rising from his chest. He dug his razor-sharp claws into the soft mounds of moldy leaves. Adrenaline shot through his body, tensing his flanks, pumping his blood fast and furious. His body stretched and grew, his rage fueling his transformation. Doubled in size, he outweighed the beast in muscle and strength. But a beast from hell had other gifts. So Le Tigre waited, keeping his sight on Le Bête.

The beast returned the tiger's stare, ensnarling Le Tigre in its hypnotic gaze. Le Tigre spat and snarled, his legs suddenly blocks of ice. He could do nothing, Le Bête rendering him frozen by its ugly red glare. Le Tigre roared in frustration, unable to fight the spell.

To die by a devil's beast, never!

Le Bête's guttural snort rose to a crescendo. Its breath caused hurricane winds that whipped the tree boughs above. Eddies of dust and leaves swept across the ground. The tremors shook Le Tigre's legs back to life but, unable to outrun the hurricane winds, he huddled under a bush. He closed his eyes against the flying debris, burying his head beneath his paws. The earth shook until he thought the ground would break apart.

Then, as suddenly as the gale began, it died, and the scent of Le Bête faded.

Surprised by the beast's retreat, Le Tigre shook his body to loosen up his muscles and calm his heated blood. There would be no fight tonight.

Le Tigre rose and flared his nostrils, turning his attention back to the trail of blood. Not the enticing odor that always aroused him, but something off-putting and yet strangely familiar. Following the scent, he prowled along the northern path toward the woods' edge. In a meadow where sheep grazed, he discovered a half-devoured body, facedown. Nuzzling its side, he flipped the body over and snarled. Most of the face had been eaten away, the arms and limbs torn off.

Now he understood why he was not aroused by the smell of the blood. The corpse's scent identified his friend, and a spasm of pain shook through to the

core of Le Tigre's heart. Sadness swept over him, and he mewed pitifully for the death of Rene.

The area reeked of Le Bête, leaving Le Tigre no doubt about what killed his friend. All that was left of Rene's face was a gaping mouth and empty eye sockets. The thick, foul air would haunt this meadow for centuries. No sheep would graze here again, as the violent, senseless death would anchor the ghost of his friend in this place, his soul forever caught between worlds.

An anguished roar tore through Le Tigre's throat as he paced. He had to stop this madness! This was his territory, and he had sworn to protect his people. A blue and white kerchief, stuck on a barb and fluttering in the breeze, caught Le Tigre's eye, and he tore it from its prison with his teeth. He dropped the cloth by his paws and sat back on his hind legs.

No matter if it meant his death, he would send Le Bête back through the gates of hell.

Chapter One

Jack Hunter stood in the center of the square room and inhaled the hint of sweet wine. An underground cellar of a New York restaurant, the area extended several rooms, partitioned by steel doors. Barriers to keep the creatures out and the Sentinel's secrets in. Oh yes, there were creatures more deadly than any Hitler—more cunning and more evil. In the four years since he had joined the Sentinel, Jack had seen his share of these cursed beings. What bothered Jack was the thin line that distinguished these creatures of the dark from the Sentinel agents, like himself.

No one suspected that this shadow organization had located its headquarters in the heart of Manhattan. No one suspected the owners of this restaurant were anything but normal citizens—citizens riding high on the optimism and abundant wealth of a postwar America. No one suspected, and that was the damn scary truth.

“Hey, Jack. Here's the dossier you asked for.”

Frank Spencer tossed the file through the air. Jack caught it with one hand, the end of his cigarette dangling from his pressed lips. He sneered at the label: *Antoine Fortescue*.

Frank grinned, his face glowing with humor. “You're on your own with Le Tigre. I got a pair of fangs to file down.” He touched his lips, as if checking to see if his own fangs were protruding. A renegade vampire, he was an asset to the organization, fighting his own kind.

Frank tilted his head, running his hands over his messy, rust-colored hair. Half the time it fell into his green eyes, but he refused to trim his bangs.

He liked to wear them long and shaggy. He once told Jack they shielded his intelligent eyes from his enemies.

"I wouldn't take the tiger by the tail, if I were you." Frank's raspy laugh sounded like a rush of tires over gravel.

Jack did not bother to reply to the innuendo. He had never worked with Le Tigre, and he stayed away from the agent whenever possible. Being in Fortescue's presence made him nervous. The shape-shifter was an outrageous and outspoken nelly, wearing frilly lace shirts and skintight pants. He did not hide his sexual orientation or his desire to fuck Jack silly. Antoine's advances did not go unnoticed by the other agents, and Jack winced at the thought of the ugly rumor bantered about that he too must be a homosexual, just by association.

Jack sat in a folding chair too small for comfort. He clamped his burning cigarette between his lips and opened the file. Stretching out his legs, he leaned back into a slouch. He would have preferred to dump the file into the wastebasket, but what good would that do? It would not change the fact he had to visit the pervert, and worse, work with him.

Jack rifled through the photographs, stopping at the last black-and-white, a photo of the latest victim. His stomach turned at the sight of the corpse's limbs torn from their sockets, but for some reason, the clumps of hair strewn along the grass bothered him the most.

He inhaled another deep drag from his cigarette, letting the thick smoke soothe his throat. The claw marks had ripped the victim's skin to ribbons, his throat a bloody mess. Jack shook his head. "You'd think I'd get used to this insanity."

Frank snorted but did not bother to look up from his desk. He had his own worries, having to track down a bloodsucking maniac loose in the city. But vampires had nothing to do with Jack's mission. These dead bodies were not killed by any vampire. Vampires were too clean and neat to make this type of kill.

Jack crossed his legs at the ankles, leaning back in the chair, wiggling his foot up and down. He moved the photos aside and skimmed the data sheet. Neatly typed in the top left corner was Antoine Fortescue's name. Listed below were Fortescue's history and his skills. Notably, Fortescue could shape-shift into a tiger, with all the animal's traits amplified: extrasharp hearing, sight, and smell, and exceptional endurance and strength. Rage fueled Le Tigre's transformation in size and power, and he had an incredible ability to self-heal, making him hard to kill, though there was one sure way.

Jack patted his sidearm and made a mental note to pick up those special bullets before leaving for France.

He continued reading. A Frenchman by birth, Fortescue's lineage remained obscure. The first written accounts of the family surname were found in legal documents dating to the thirteenth century. His shape-shifter parents were killed by Eidolon.

Eidolon, that bastard!

A shiver prickled Jack's spine. He clenched his fingers around the page, crinkling the edges. As he exhaled smoke through his nostrils, he forced his shoulders to relax. He tried to shut out the sounds of the upstairs diners celebrating Truman's upset win over Dewey. He did not get the chance to vote for his president because he had been officially pronounced dead by the U.S. Army. Now he would never get the chance to do a lot of things. All because of Eidolon.

Jack heaved a sigh. He needed to relax, focus, and forget. Forget his previous life, his family and friends. There was no point in losing himself in his past.

He closed his eyes, visualizing a green light moving from the soles of his feet up toward his head. Focusing on his heart chakra, he blocked out all sensations and thoughts. This technique, taught to him by monks living in Nepal, helped him to relax and clear his mind. He stayed this way for some time, but then opened his eyes, rubbing his throbbing temple.

No such luck. The icy sensation that crept under his skin refused to burn away.

Jack slapped the file shut. "I'm heading to France."

Frank looked up from a stack of papers and lazily smiled, the vampire agent flashing Jack his perfectly even white teeth.

"France, huh? Walking into the tiger's lair. I heard he asked for you specifically."

Jack snarled. "Yeah, I suspected it. I've never worked with the man."

"Oh, you're in for a treat. How did you ever catch the gay cat's attention?"

"Hell if I know." Jack's jaw twitched. The thought of spending time alone with Antoine scared the hell out of him. "I've only seen him once or twice."

"Yeah, I remember that night a bunch of us went to McSorley's." Frank bit the tip of his pencil. "Two years ago, wasn't it?" Frank wryly smiled at Jack. "Antoine practically carried you out of there. I'd never seen you that soused."

Jack's ears tipped red, and he turned away from Frank's honest gaze. His whole body flushed with warmth, and he touched his lips. Thank God no one knew what had happened after the party ended. Even the powerfully enhanced soldier, Jack Hunter, had an Achilles' heel. He suspected Antoine knew exactly how to exploit it.

Chapter Two

The gray sky refused to weep its tears on the French countryside. It was a chaotic landscape of stones scattered around woods, moors, and pastures, as if a giant had gathered pebbles in his broad hand and tossed them in the air with abandon. Jack had read that tigers needed to be near water, so he was not surprised to discover the sweet-smelling river cutting through the land.

The two-story house was nestled in a hidden, quiet world, away from civilization. The slivers of sunlight trying to peek through the clouds emphasized the wispy soft shadows painted on its granite walls. Yet the ravages of war had left their mark: faded green shutters needed to be repaired, and patches of burned fields dotted the landscape.

The cloud cover kept the temperature from being ungodly cold, but Jack felt the dampness in his bones. He pulled up his wool collar and straightened the knot of his tie, a striped blue that complemented his conservative navy suit. Adjusting the handle of his duffel bag, he took in a deep breath, wishing he were back home.

Jack pounded on the thick, massive door so hard, chips of paint snowed green flakes onto his shoes. He was more nervous than a soldier marching across a minefield. Getting blown to pieces would have suited him better than facing Antoine.

Before he could change his mind and walk away, a thin, wizened man, dressed in a worn but immaculate brown tweed suit, opened the door. One bushy gray brow lifted above his watery eyes.

“May I help you, sir?” he asked warily.

Jack could not blame the fellow for being suspicious. Jack's thick wool coat, silk tie, and new leather shoes screamed foreigner. No one in postwar Europe was this well dressed. His clothes were too expensive, too new, too American.

Jack smiled stiffly, knowing it was not a pleasant expression. "Jack Hunter to see Antoine Fortescue. He's expecting me."

The valet nodded and showed Jack into the hall. "Wait here, Monsieur Hunter."

Jack dropped his duffel bag. Taking in his surroundings in one turn, he was surprised by the simplicity of the interior. Whitewashed walls and wood-hewn ceilings set off austere old master paintings lining up the staircase. An antique side table was polished to a high sheen. The hallway led into several rooms along the right. Despite Fortescue's wealth, it seemed he lived a modest life. Either that or the war had encroached on his home despite his money. It seemed every city, town, and village across the continent had been bled dry by the war.

The valet reappeared and led Jack down the hall. He motioned for Jack to enter a room where the glow of a fire outlined its doorway. "Your luggage will be taken to the guest room upstairs. Monsieur Fortescue will meet with you in the library."

Jack stepped into the library, and the valet discreetly closed the door.

A fire sparked and crackled in the fireplace, casting a much-appreciated warmth over the room. Comfortable chairs and a sofa infused the space with a restful atmosphere. Floor-to-ceiling shelves bulged with leather-bound books gilded with gold lettering, a few of them quite old. Asian porcelain statues shared space with decorative plates and vases, a hodgepodge of ornamental knickknacks.

Jack walked over to the tall windows overlooking the gardens. The tarnished gold and red blooms reminded him of the waning autumn. Stiffly clutching the curtain, he saw Antoine's reflection in the windowpane. He had

not heard the door open, and his heart skipped a beat at the sight of the stunning man, a mesmerizing image seemingly etched into the glass.

“Come by the fire, my friend. It's been ages since we last met.” The silkiness of his voice jolted Jack's stomach, its honeyed cadence warm, seductive, hypnotizing. Noble birth bestowed Antoine the graceful accent common of people born to command.

Jack reluctantly made his way across the room. He stood near the fire, behind a chair, the backrest enough of a barrier between himself and the lordly aristocrat.

Antoine placed his hand on the mantel, his body relaxed. “I won't bite you.”

Jack tried to mentally block the power of the shape-shifter's voice from weaving its spell around his mind. He tugged at the gold locket around his neck, a reminder that nothing affected his heart. Nothing and no one.

Jack's breath stilled as Antoine glided toward him. Ridiculous bitter-chocolate curls flowed down Antoine's shoulders. Aristocratic cheekbones, hinting of Asian blood, were highlighted by almond-shaped silver eyes glazed with an icy shade of blue. Disturbing, animalistic eyes, not quite human.

Antoine's slim hands rested on his hips. Jack had no idea how a man could get away with such a getup. Antoine reminded him of an eighteenth-century musketeer, with his tight black pants and white shirt edged in delicate lace.

Jack relaxed in military rest, his arms behind his back. A good soldier knew how to keep his emotions in check. He gritted his teeth and ignored the furious buzz in his ears. Only in Antoine's company for a few minutes, and already a shiver of unease crawled up his spine.

“Darling, it's wonderful to see you.”

“Curb that devil voice of yours,” Jack barked, his American accent harsh.

Antoine sidetracked to a corner table, where he uncorked a bottle and poured red wine into two crystal goblets. Turning toward Jack, he smiled. "You look...good. Clean-cut. Very you."

Jack's wool coat wrapped him in stifling heat. He unbuttoned it and folded it neatly over the back of the chair.

Antoine stroked the stem of his glass. His full lips teased the rim of the goblet, and he smiled. Jack choked back his disgust but could not cast his eyes away from those slender fingers caressing the stem. He did not dare look at Antoine's mouth.

Antoine picked up the second glass and approached Jack. "You look like you need a drink. It's an excellent vintage," he said. "The Nazis were too stupid to find the best."

Antoine held out the wine and Jack took it, relieved he managed to avoid touching Antoine's hand. He had hoped for whiskey or bourbon, but this would do. As he knocked back the drink, the taste of tannin and a hint of bell pepper coated his tongue. Antoine had told the truth. The wine was one of the best he had ever tasted.

Jack scanned the room, noting the faded fabrics and wallpaper. "I thought you would have left France during the war."

"It's my home. I had to protect my people. I couldn't do that from a thousand miles away."

Jack did not miss the flash of sadness that dimmed Antoine's eyes. War had been hell, and the human race turned out to be as evil as the unholy creatures the Sentinel vowed to wipe from the earth. One visit to a concentration camp verified that sordid truth.

Antoine sat on the worn sofa and motioned for Jack to sit next to him. He sat away from Antoine, squashed into the corner of the armrest. He did not want to risk being taken in by Antoine's charms. He might be a freak, but he was no faggot.

Antoine picked at a hole in the sofa cushion. "Please excuse the condition of my home, but goods are scarce."

"Can't you just *take* what you need?"

Antoine shrugged, and his loose shirt fell slightly off his shoulder, revealing smooth, pale skin. Then hurt crossed his face. "I don't steal or cause harm to others if I can prevent it. I've taken the same oath as you. Why do you think the worst of me?"

Jack felt the annoying prickle of guilt and squirmed from the sting of those piercing catlike eyes staring at him. "What does it matter what I think?"

"It matters a great deal."

Jack placed his glass on the end table, avoiding Antoine's gaze. Hardening his heart, he hardened his voice. "Tell me what you know about the case. The faster we solve it, the faster I can go home."

Antoine sidled closer to him and rested his hand near Jack's thigh. Jack stiffened, knowing this lascivious man was purposely teasing him. His pulse quickened as he jumped up from the sofa. Staring down at Antoine, he snarled, "Don't even think of it. That time in New York left me cold."

Antoine tilted his head, curls rustling down one side of his chest. His eyes darkened to a steel-cold blue. "Really? So why bring it up?" he asked dryly.

"Your manipulations won't work on me," Jack replied, sounding more defensive than he wanted.

Shrugging back his shoulders, Antoine let out an exaggerated sigh. "Don't worry yourself. I called you here for your help, nothing more." He stared at Jack, his eyes not betraying his thoughts. "You look tired."

Jack sat back down, this time in a chair angled to the right of Antoine. A much safer distance from his adversary. He had to keep his wits sharp and clear, and yet his head felt as if it was stuffed with cotton. He reached over to retrieve his wine, needing another drink—or two or three—since leaving was

not an option. After knocking back the rest of it, he shoved his empty glass forward.

“Don't worry about me. Now pour me a refill.”

“My, how forceful you've become.” But Antoine took the glass and refilled it.

Jack picked up the goblet, almost knocking it over. He frowned as the glass shook in his hand. Quickly he drank back the wine, the robust taste lingering on his tongue.

Antoine rose and circled around Jack's chair, stopping to peer into Jack's eyes. He spoke just above a whisper. “I think it's best if we talk later. You need your rest.”

Jack's fingernails dug into the armrests, his defenses crumbling under those scrutinizing eyes. And that silky voice...so smooth, so warm, so comforting. His gaze latched on to those silvery blue orbs, which held such promise. Promise of everything Jack hated in himself. His vision blurred. A numbing sensation robbed the feeling in his hands and feet.

Shit. Something was not right. How idiotic, Jack chastised himself. The drink had been tampered with. And that cunning voice...

As Jack struggled to rise, Antoine clapped his hand on his shoulder. He leaned forward and, with his lips near Jack's ear, whispered again, “Sleep, my stoic soldier.”

Though Jack fought to stay awake, he barely had the strength to sit upright. A brushlike sensation swept over his legs, and his shoulders jerked as Antoine draped a quilt over him. Antoine smiled so sweetly, his mouth parted, the pink tip of his tongue curled. Tiger eyes stared through a human face. He hovered so near, Jack could smell the wine on his breath mingled with his clean, woody scent, like that of the aroma that lingered in the air after a rainstorm.

Eerily sexy, and eerily fascinating.

Antoine stepped toward the fire, the distance between them breaking the tension, but Jack remained wary.

Antoine picked up the poker and stabbed at the logs. "It's bitter cold these days. Maybe it's the remains of the dead not wanting us to forget." Sparks flew, and the fire blazed higher. "Rest now. I'll wake you in an hour."

It took all of Jack's strength to force his eyes to remain open until Antoine left the room. Then he slumped in his chair and let out a sigh of frustration. His cock was stiff and aching. Nerves buzzed beneath his skin. No matter how hard he tried, he could not erase the memories of Antoine's feral, exotic scent, how his voice and touch evoked illicit feelings. Feelings long put to rest that now rose like ghosts haunting the shadows of his mind.

Jack hated the man. He detested all that Antoine stood for, the self-centered, hedonistic, flaming pervert. Loving a man was not permitted; his religion forbade such sinful longings. He would not allow it—*could* not allow it and live with himself. Since his change, discipline was his mantra, his new way of life. His duty was clear, and so was his conscience. One slip did not make him a homosexual.

The memory of McSorley's flashed neon bright across his mind. The bar's motto was ALE, RAW ONIONS, NO LADIES. Lit by gas lamps and with sawdust on its floors, it was a no-nonsense bar open for one purpose—hard-hitting drinking. And that is what Jack did.

Frank had remembered correctly. Antoine had helped Jack out to the street, but he did not hail a cab. Instead, Jack found himself in an alley, his body pressed up against a brick wall, his lips locked most inappropriately in a passionate kiss with an utterly beautiful man, his hands groping all the wrong places. He had almost surrendered, almost let his body take over his mind—almost. The kiss ended, but not before it burned a lasting impression of Antoine's taste and smell into his brain.

I am not like Antoine. I am not!

Jack may have lost his wife and his humanity, but he still had his pride as a man.

* * * * *

Antoine stood over Jack sleeping peacefully. Usually Jack was wound tight, but in his sleep, he appeared innocent, setting Antoine's heart racing. How wonderful it would have been to have known Jack as a boy. Before the war, before the ravages to his body, before his life changed.

With his forefinger, he feathered Jack's square jaw and pressed the tip in the dimple edging the side of his broad mouth. Antoine smiled at the memory of those enticing lips and that hot, wily tongue. Their first and only sexual encounter was enough for him to realize the importance of Jack Hunter. All-American in looks: healthy complexion, robust physique, tall and commanding. Once Jack had given in to his desires, he did not disappoint. His American arrogance remained, demanding and powerful. That kiss in the alley two years ago might not have led to sex, but it told Antoine all he needed to know. Jack liked men.

For someone of Jack's disposition, being a sexual deviant was paramount to committing the most horrid of mortal sins. If he learned the reason behind Antoine's seduction, who knew how he would react?

Antoine smiled tenderly as he smoothed Jack's short cowlick. His once-military buzz cut had grown out, his hair now a rich mahogany cap. It was not easy to love this man, but he was worth the long chase. Never had Antoine been in love, not really, and this man was his equal. Equal in power, intelligence, and courage. And equal in the depth of his loneliness, which was evident from the sadness in Jack's eyes.

Antoine kissed the top of his *khalid*'s head, breathing in his scent, letting it seep into his being, exciting him. He knew he would settle for nothing less than love with his *khalid*, his life mate.

Jack groaned before his eyes fluttered open. Antoine stepped back from the awareness brightening the blue-green hue of Jack's eyes. He smelled Jack's irritation, tinged with fear.

Jack kicked off the quilt, stumbling from the chair. "What are you doing?"

Antoine picked up and folded the quilt, and laid it across the back of the chair, ignoring Jack's outburst. The man perfected crankiness. "You've been asleep for two hours. Dinner's prepared."

Jack's stomach gurgled, and he lowered his gaze, pressing his hand to his stomach. "It's been a while since my last meal."

Antoine smiled at the sound of Jack's hunger. He strolled toward the exit, expecting Jack to follow, and his smile widened at the heavy stomp of Jack's boots behind him.

The dining room was at the end of the hall, off the kitchen. Like the other parts of the house, the decorations were a mix of Asian and European antiques. Antoine had kept certain pieces handed down from his family, and especially loved the silver Louis XIV candlesticks now lit on the damask-covered table.

Jack sat across from Antoine. The formal dining table sat eight comfortably but was rarely used to its capacity. It had not been safe for friends to meet during the war. The Nazis had been suspicious of groups, and in particular, of Antoine's friends. Of course, they had reason to be.

Dinner was a simple affair of vegetable soup served with bread and butter. French country fare that suited Antoine. He had always been a man of the country rather than the city, preferring to live in near isolation to protect his secrets.

"We have our own garden," Antoine explained. "I'm afraid there's no meat." He had taken the last of his rabbits and chickens to feed the children in the nearby town. So much of the land had been scorched or deliberately burned by the retreating Germans. He could not bear to see the children suffer.

Jack picked up his glass of wine. "Is this drugged too?"

Antoine chuckled. "Drugs are so pedestrian. I used a voice spell."

Jack grunted. "Fucking pervert."

"You needed your rest," Antoine snapped.

Jack shook his head, warily taking a sip of wine and swishing it around in his mouth before swallowing. He scooped the soup with a thick slice of bread, muttering a compliment between bites. Antoine enjoyed Jack's enthusiasm as he attacked his meal. Everything about Jack fascinated him.

Antoine placed his elbows on the table and thought back to the first time they had met. He had heard the rumors of a soldier who had been enhanced by experimental drugs. He had expected to be disgusted, not entranced. When Jack walked into Sentinel's headquarters, something about those intense teal eyes, tinged with lost hope, struck at Antoine's heart. The intensity of the feeling shook Antoine to the core. Jack's scent, borne of the earth, captured his soul and his heart. He knew he had found his khalid.

Jack pushed his empty bowl aside, wiped his mouth with a napkin, and shoved it under the rim of his bowl. He leaned back in his chair, loosening the knot of his tie. "So talk to me about the murders."

"There have been three. All friends—" Antoine's voice broke. He dipped his spoon into the bowl of half-eaten soup, but now his appetite was shot. "All killed in the same manner."

"I saw the photos. They were torn beyond recognition. How did you ID them?"

Misery cut into Antoine's chest. "Their scent and blood."

Jack's nose wrinkled. "So you were in your *other* form."

"You don't have to look so disgusted," he said. "I patrol the woods once a week. It's also when I hunt." He shook his head, stray curls slipping down his forehead. "It's necessary for me to feed on animal flesh at least every few months."

"Only on animals?"

"I didn't kill my friends," he seethed. "You know me better than that."

"I don't know you at all."

"I failed to protect my friends and have enough self-contempt without you giving me a hard time."

Jack frowned, twirling an invisible ring on his left hand. "How did you know them?"

"The Resistance. It was from this region that we delayed German reinforcements during D day. They were good men, honest men. They didn't deserve this kind of death."

Jack stared at Antoine long and hard. His face remained passive, but Antoine detected a slight twitch in his jaw. "Are they being targeted?" Jack asked. "How many are in your group?"

"Fifteen, but seven died during the war. Believe me, I thought of this already. It doesn't make sense. The war's over. Who would bother to kill a group of Resistance fighters now? If anything, it's the French collaborators who need to watch their backs. And there's the beast to consider."

"So you're convinced it murdered these men because?"

"To get to me." Antoine's expression tightened at the mere thought of the beast. "Have you heard of Le Bête du Gévaudan?"

Jack set down his glass but kept hold of the stem. "Isn't that a myth?"

"I killed the myth in 1767. I'm an excellent marksman."

Pride flushed Antoine's cheeks. It had taken weeks to track the creature. When he and his men had Le Bête surrounded, he had shot its right eye, bringing it down after several shots to the head.

"Louis took a personal interest in Le Bête, as this area was always troublesome to the poor king. He paid me handsomely to bring him the corpse."

"What happened to it?"

"The king displayed it, then buried it."

"Are you sure it's the same beast?"

Antoine rubbed his arms. "I never forget a smell. Or those eyes. I saw it, and it saw me."

Jack raised an eyebrow at this but continued his questions. "Do you have any objects from the murder scenes? Maybe I can corroborate your theory, pick up on something."

Antoine regarded Jack with a steady look. The good soldier had an uncanny ability to sense images by merely touching an object. "Yes, a kerchief."

Jack clasped his hands, his eyes darkening. "That'll do." He poured himself another glass of wine from the decanter. "I still don't understand. Why waste its time killing these men? Why not just come after you?"

"You're not that naive, are you, darling? It lives to kill, to see the terror in its victims' eyes before it tears their throats out. It likes taunting me."

"Quit the 'darling.'" Jack took out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from his shirt pocket. He lit the cigarette, and its smoke curled seductively into slow-winding wisps in the air.

Antoine could not stop staring at Jack's square hands, remembering how those hands felt on his back. Desire flushed through his body, igniting his bloodlust. He pushed aside his bowl and rested one elbow on the table, the other hand stroking the tablecloth.

Jack's gaze fell to Antoine's hand caressing the cloth. He frowned as he fidgeted with his cigarette, nervously tapping the tip on the rim of the ashtray. "How in the hell could it resurrect itself?" Jack looked up at Antoine.

"I know of one man who can raise the dead." Antoine stood up, splaying his palms on the table to lean forward. "Eidolon." The man who had killed his parents, the man who had turned Jack Hunter into a killer of immense skill and strength.

Jack drained the rest of his wine and set the glass down with a forceful *clink*. His eyes narrowed, and his mouth took on a menacing sneer—signs that his dangerous side was beginning to emerge. That was the look Antoine was hoping to see—the hunger for revenge. A low growl bubbled in Antoine's throat. His upper lip curled back. Jack's bottled-up rage gave off a most seductive scent. It weaved around Antoine's sensitive nose, heating his blood, heating his groin. The first sensations of his tiger persona stirred close to the surface.

Jack stared at Antoine wide-eyed, as if he sensed the change. He crushed his cigarette butt in the ashtray.

Antoine's excitement edged into his voice. "This is our chance to kill him."

"That's why you asked for me. You knew who was responsible."

"I suspected. I'll need you to verify it." Antoine's lips then curved into a slow, sexy grin. "And I missed you. That kiss in the alley was a tease, darling. You were so forceful, magnificent. The feel of your arms around me, the taste of your lips..."

Jack gripped the edge of the table and stabbed a finger in the air. "That kiss meant nothing. You're a fool if you think I care one whit about you. I despise you, hate you for what you are—a flaming faggot."

Antoine struck a deliberate suggestive pose and kissed his fingers toward Jack. "Ah, but you kissed me back. Even now I smell your arousal from across the table. You want it, badly. And you want it from *me*."

Jack shoved his chair back so fast, it crashed to the floor. He leaned his muscular chest forward. A flash of silver, and Antoine found a pistol pointed at him. The air crackled with tension and unspoken emotion. Jack's forearms bulged, his finger poised on the trigger.

"I'll blow your fucking head off if you dare touch me, kiss me, breathe on me. This gun is loaded with special bullets made just for you."

“Cobalt-tipped? Those are rare, even for you, my hunter.” Antoine lifted his hands in a mock shrug. “You could have killed me the night I kissed you in the alley. Your threats, darling, aren't very believable.”

The bullet breezed past Antoine's ear, cleanly slicing off a curl. It drifted to the floor, a dark spot on the pale carpet. Antoine's eyes rounded in surprise, but he did not move a muscle.

“Ah, darling, it isn't wise to waste such a precious bullet. They're hard to come by.”

“I was a good boy for Christmas. I have more than one.” Jack holstered his pistol, a deep scowl marring his handsome face.

Antoine's hands shook, the bullet having passed dangerously close. Still, he could not help but smile at such a violent reaction. His keen scent had picked up Jack's arousal from across the table. The man could not hide it, but he would let him off the hook, for now. “Let me get you the kerchief. I'll meet you back in the library.”

Antoine left for his bedroom on the second floor. The kerchief was neatly folded in an airtight box kept on the dresser. He picked up the box and sat on the mattress, his hands still shaking. It had been a close call. A cobalt bullet through the heart would surely have killed him. The sobering thought caused another shiver to run from his head down to his toes.

Clutching the box, he inhaled deeply to steady his hands. In many ways, Jack was his equal, but Antoine had years of experience over the soldier. Risk taking was his way of life. He played the faggot to disarm his opponents, and with Jack, to tease, to poke at that stern exterior and break it apart. Maybe he had gone too far, but Jack provoked him with his ironfisted denial of the truth. That night in the alley, Jack *had* kissed him back.

“What's taking so long?” Jack stood in the doorway, his arms folded over his chest. “Where is that damn kerchief?” He entered the room and sat down on the far end of the bed, keeping a fair distance between himself and Antoine.

“Patience.” Antoine unlocked the silver box, then handed Jack a tissue-wrapped package.

Jack sat stiffly on the bed as he unwrapped the tissue. Antoine needed air, and he walked over to the window and opened it a crack. He kept his gaze on the twilight sky. Too many stars twinkling bright promises, promises not for him. Turning away, he intently watched Jack clutch the kerchief in his hand.

Jack was rocking slowly, his eyelids half-shut, his dimple pronounced. Low, gut-wrenching moans rose from his chest, his mouth grimaced in pain. No clue was worth seeing Jack suffer. Antoine snatched the cloth from Jack's fisted hand. Jack's eyes flashed open, unfocused and blank. It was as if he saw nothing but empty space in front of him.

Antoine massaged Jack's fingers, trying to bring him back to the present. Jack's hand felt hot and moist, and incredibly strong. Before he could rationalize why he should not, Antoine caressed Jack's cheek, amazed how a simple gesture brought forth a windstorm of desire. Without thinking, he kissed Jack, thrusting his tongue forward but meeting with a tightly seamed mouth. Jack began to struggle, but Antoine's vise grip on his shoulders was enough to hold down his prey. He went for Jack's neck and bit the tender skin, drawing a bead of blood. He licked it, the taste warm and metallic and exciting.

Jack's blood. Jack's scent. Le Tigre yearned to mate with his khalid. Bloodlust seared through his veins. But before he could kiss Jack again, he was thrown onto his back, his arms held above his head. Jack's powerful body smothered him, igniting an even-hotter blaze.

Jack fiercely snarled, “Don't mess with me.”

Antoine mocked, “I believe *you're* the hunted now.”

Close to a collision of might, Antoine fought back, his tiger soul emerging. Immense power surged through him. He flipped Jack over, bracing him with outstretched thighs across his waist. Jack's eyes widened at finding himself on his back.

A submissive Jack further excited Antoine.

Excited his hunger for the hunt. Excited his cock, which was pulsating with a pleasurable ache.

He could sense Jack's arousal, but whether it was borne of lust or fear was of no matter; it served to ignite Antoine's passions. He pressed the entire length of his body against Jack, holding him captive. Jack's hard, rippling muscles and alluring scent fueled his desire. Antoine cupped Jack's face in his hands. Such a striking color, those teal eyes.

Angry, defiant, beautiful.

He forced a kiss on Jack's mouth. How his prey fought bravely, but Antoine's ancient powers gave him the advantage. He was more powerful and more deadly, making him all the more seductive. Jack had no chance.

Meeting the warmth of Jack's mouth, his tongue licked and twirled as Jack grunted, struggling for escape. Fingernails clawed into Antoine's sides, but they were merely an annoyance, like a fly buzzing around his head. Nothing more.

A sharp bite into Antoine's shoulder made him howl, but he kept his steel grip on Jack. Pulling back, he snarled, his patience wearing. Jack punched, clawed, and slapped, but Antoine's strength amplified and grew as his body wavered between realities.

Too lost in his transformation, Le Tigre loosened his grasp. A mere second for Jack to escape. Now Le Tigre had a loaded pistol aimed straight at him.

A roar rushed from his throat, shaking the mattress and the bedposts, and rippling the wood floorboards. His human mind receded, and his animalistic nature took over completely. Poised for flight, his fur stood on end, his mouth pulled into a snarl.

Jack's fearsome expression belied his steady voice. "Antoine...listen to me. I never miss my target. Don't make me kill you."

Chapter Three

Jack stood mesmerized, but the coolness of gun metal quickly brought him back to reality. He raised his hand to the pinprick on his neck. A faint red streak smeared his fingers. Le Tigre presented a magnificent sight: half crouched on his flanks, his clothes ripped in shreds, and elegant brown-black stripes stretched across pure white fur. Jack never believed in things he could not see, but this...this was real. There in front of him was a white tiger of immense proportions, ready to leap across the room for his throat.

Jack did not dare move. He kept a featherlight touch on the trigger, his hand steady. A crack shot, he never missed his target, and surely a shot fired between the eyes would instantly kill Le Tigre.

This is what he dreamed of. The perfect situation. No one would question his actions. Here and now, he had a faultless excuse for killing the man who could expose him. Yet something inside of him balked at killing such a beautiful creature. His God forbade cold-blooded murder, and that should have been enough to make him to reconsider. But something else stopped him.

Jack did not want to see blood on that snowy white fur. Antoine was Le Tigre, part of the same soul. In truth, the thought of Antoine dead left him cold. But he did not want to think about why that was. All he could do now was pray that he would not have to shoot the deadly bullet into the tiger's brain.

The tiger stared at Jack as if waiting for his decision. The regal face showed no fear.

"I won't hurt you. Can you understand me?" If there was anything left of Antoine's humanity, Jack had to find it. And soon.

The tiger lifted his upper lip, revealing his impressive canines and sharp incisors. Teeth that could easily tear Jack apart. Jack scanned the room, measuring the number of strides to the window. He could clock speeds of over one hundred miles per hour; enough to get away, but only if he could escape from the room.

Le Tigre spat a low warning, his tongue licking his chops. Jack counted under his breath. *One, two, three...* He dropped his shoulders and head, tucked his pistol into his waistband, and somersaulted in the air, soaring through the windowpane. Glass shattered, prisms of light raining on the ground. Landing on his feet, Jack glanced up at the broken window. The tiger's face loomed in the shadow of the windowsill, and then Le Tigre leaped after him.

Jack scrambled backward, staying on his feet. The woods were straight ahead but would not give him enough room to run full throttle. The tiger landed on his feet and crouched, eyeing Jack hungrily.

Le Tigre's massive jaw snapped as he slinked toward his prey. His remarkable size was enough to send most men running in sheer terror. But Jack was not like most men.

In a split second, Jack holstered his pistol and took to the open road. He had no problem outrunning a tiger, even of Le Tigre's caliber. His enhanced speed was faster than any living creature on earth. The freedom of running at breakneck speed set his heart racing, but the feel of the wind on his face kept him cool. Jack only slowed down when he was satisfied that he had left Le Tigre far behind.

Not sure how much time had passed, Jack needed to rest. He could hear the throbbing of his own pulse. His chest felt like a pressure cooker, and a slow burn climbed up his calves. He came up to a village. A church marked the square, and he made his way toward its silhouette. At this late hour, no one wandered the cobblestone streets, no lights burned in the windows. Everything stood dark and silent.

Surely Le Tigre would not dare show himself in town. There had to be rumors about a tiger prowling the woods. Folks would be on the lookout, ready to take aim with their shotguns. He would not be surprised if the town folks believed Le Tigre had murdered those men.

Jack tried to open the massive church doors, but finding them locked, he sagged on the steps, the cold cement stiffening his joints. He rubbed his arms as he looked above him. A dark cross towered above the roofline. God was laughing.

He had questioned his religion after his first bombing mission. He and his crew had been sent over Germany to destroy an ammunitions factory, but that was not all that was blown apart. As the bombs exploded over the cursed land, his faith got covered in debris and civilians' ashes. Yet he could not give up his belief in a power beyond him, a power serving the good of man. If he did not believe, he had no purpose to fight against evil.

Jack grumbled under his breath. Now he was a human freak, like some damn comic-book hero. He did not choose this life, but Eidolon gave him no other option. He had pulled him from his B-17 as the rest of his crew lay dead. Eidolon then dragged him to his chamber of horrors, a place where Eidolon experimented on Hitler's degenerates as if they were lab rats. Jack had become his prized rat. The man had ruined his life by refusing to let him die in peace. Instead, he turned Jack into a superhuman soldier without a war to fight. Now he spent his life in a world of supernatural creatures and unspeakable evil, a world he did not want to know or understand.

Jack sat brooding, unaware of his legs and hands growing numb. It stunned him how easily Antoine had overtaken him. The realization speared his gut. Frankly, Antoine's dandified image no longer fit. His frills and lace disguised his true nature; the shape-shifter possessed a steel-strength power that surpassed even Jack's enhanced abilities.

But that was not all that bothered him. He had struggled beneath that rock-solid body and had smelled the sweat of his own fear, but he noticed

something else. He had become aroused. Aroused by a man overtaking him. Aroused by the seductive scent wafting from Antoine's skin. His rage had not been enough to stifle the maelstrom of sexual excitement within him. The mere seconds it had taken for Antoine to transform into his tiger persona were the only thing that saved Jack. Otherwise...

His brain shut down, refusing to think about it. He hugged his knees, and as the temperature cooled his skin, he drifted into an uneasy sleep. He was not sure how much time passed when the sound of a car motor rattled him awake. It approached, backfiring its way to the church. The Citroën's brakes squeaked as the car's motor rumbled to a stop. Antoine got out from the driver's side and waved to Jack, a coat draped over his arm. The tiger had transformed back into a man. Gone were the lethal fangs of an enemy, replaced by the charming smile of a friend.

A friend in sheep's clothing, no doubt.

Jack curled over and hugged his knees. Now aware of the frigid temperature, his whole body ached. He had been outside for too long, the drop in the temperature not being good for his health.

Wearing a cable-knit sweater, Antoine had tucked his hair halfway into a beret. After spreading the coat over Jack's shoulders, he sat next to him. Antoine removed a slim gold case from his pant pocket and took out two cigarettes. He lit one, handed it to Jack, then lit another for himself.

Jack was touched by Antoine's thoughtfulness. The coat, the cigarette, the worry lines wrinkling Antoine's smooth complexion—all for Jack. The last time someone cared for him this way had been aeons ago, in another time, in another life. But never in this one, not once since he had been altered into a human tank.

A sigh escaped Antoine's lips as his eyes flickered in the moonlight, an enigmatic shade of silver-blue. Smoke curled above his head as he broke the silence. "I'm sorry about what happened back there, but I wouldn't have killed you."

"I can't take your word for it." Jack stiffened, puffing on the cigarette. He slipped on the coat, buttoning it up to the collar. "I didn't want to stick around and possibly become your next meal."

Antoine's lips became thin. Hesitation hovered in his eyes for a few seconds, but then he became the self-assured nobleman once again. He took out a wrapped package from his other pocket. "I brought the kerchief. Do you want to try again?"

Jack held out his hand. "It's my job."

Antoine dropped the kerchief into Jack's upright palm.

Jack unfolded the thin fabric. The moment he touched the kerchief, his stomach clenched. He became dizzy and clutched Antoine's arm to keep from slumping over.

Antoine's voice sounded faraway. "Let's do this later, when you've rested."

"No, too late, too...ah..."

A sharp pain shot through Jack's skull. He clutched the kerchief in his fist, the images coming fast. *A circle of umbrella-shaped mushrooms. Mists, dull gray and cold. Low, melodic chanting.* His hand trembled, his skin peppered in goose bumps. *Red demon eyes turned on him, saliva dripping from a gaping mouth of razor-sharp teeth.* His arms flailed at the invisible demon. *Teeth bared, its stinking breath turning his stomach. Behind Le Bête stood a towering man.* Jack would recognize that shadow anywhere. That man. That monster. He could feel those coal black eyes burning a hole through him.

Fear swallowed Jack's chest, shutting down his lungs, shutting down his brain, shutting down his heart. No! This was a vision, not reality. But it hurt to breathe, every gasp becoming more and more painful.

Water, everywhere, surrounding him. He could not breathe, his lungs burned in agonizing pain. *A hand dipped below the water's surface. Jack grabbed the lifeline. Antoine pulled him out of the lake, onto an island...a place of terrifying evil.*

Antoine seized the kerchief from Jack's hand, tossing it aside.

"It's an illusion," Antoine assured him. "No one is here but you and me. There are no monsters here."

Jack could not look away while Antoine held him by the shoulders. His body was as limp as a worn-out rag. Tears moistened his lashes, a leak in his emotional dam. The familiar scent of Antoine's skin, the gentleness in his eyes, the half curl of his soft lips, all stripped Jack of his moral armor.

Jack wrapped his arms around Antoine's neck, resting his head on his shoulder, Antoine's silky curls teasing his cheek. At this moment, he felt loved and protected and safe. Antoine stroked his hair, and Jack fell deeper into a comfortable trance. He felt Antoine's lips touch his head, and an uncontrollable thrill tore through his body.

What the hell?

He quickly shoved Antoine away and swept the back of his hand across his moist eyes. A soldier had to be diligent. A soldier hid his weaknesses. And never, *ever* did a soldier cry.

He rubbed his hands together to warm them. "You were right. Eidolon's behind the killings."

"Do you always go through this when you...uh...do this kind of thing?"

Jack was genuinely touched. Antoine looked so...worried.

"Sometimes it can be painful."

"I'm sorry."

"It's what I do. It's part of my freakish nature." Jack laughed bitterly. It was always better to see the ironic amusement of his situation, or he would have committed suicide long ago. Not that he had not wished for death. He swung the locket back and forth on the chain he wore around his neck.

Antoine's eyes followed the movement. "You keep a picture of your wife in there, don't you?"

"It's none of your business."

"Have you ever gone home to see her?"

"Hell no," Jack snarled, his hackles rising. "What an asinine idea. What could I possibly say to explain what I've become? It's better that she think I'm dead."

"Do you have children?"

"No, thank God." Jack did not want to talk about Alice or his past. It was too painful, even if his happiness at being married and contentment with being normal was an illusion. "Let's discuss the case, but not out here. It's damn cold. Can you break into the church?"

Antoine grinned. "Child's play."

The shape-shifter was particularly adept at picking locks, and Jack returned the smile when he saw the jewel-encrusted stickpin in Antoine's sweater; the perfect lock pick.

A breeze sent a chill down his spine, and he shivered.

Antoine placed his hand on Jack's shoulder. "Why don't I take you home? We can talk more there, by the fire, where you'll be warmer."

"I'm not ready yet." The idea of a moment within the quiet sanctuary of the church called to him.

"Very well." Antoine jumped up, enthusiastic to show off his skill. Jack muttered an obscenity under his breath, but he had *asked* the thief to break in. Hardly a moment passed before the door lock clicked open. They walked inside and sat down in the back pew.

It was a plain village church made from the same gray stone as Antoine's home. The high ceiling nave sucked out the heat, but they were at least buffered from the wind. Heavy frankincense smothered the air, assaulting Jack's throat. Candles flickered flashes of light on life-size porcelain saints, and of course, the Mother Mary. Always the Mother looked down on her flock and eased their burden. But not Jack's. He had not been inside a Catholic church

since his capture. He made the sign of the cross, as if this could ward off the sinful thoughts he was having about Antoine.

Antoine leaned back and rested his hand on the bench, an inch from Jack's thigh. He could feel Antoine's heat and smell his wild, spicy scent. He wanted to run his finger down the slope of his patrician nose, trace the lines of his delicate cheekbones, touch every part of him.

Hell, I want to fuck him. And in a church, no less.

"What did you see when you held the kerchief?" Antoine kept his voice low.

Jack cleared his dry throat. "Le Bête. And you were correct. Standing behind it was Eidolon."

"My animal instincts are never wrong."

Did his animal instincts sense Jack's agitation? Jack squirmed a few inches away from the heat radiating off Antoine's virile body. "Do you know of an island near here?"

"Ile de Brume. It's in the center of Lac Brumeux. The locals believe it's haunted and tend to stay away."

"A perfect location for Eidolon, then." Jack massaged his jaw. Every inch of his body felt stretched to its limit. Using his powers always left him sexually aroused and frustrated, and he did not dare allow Antoine to touch him, lest he give in to his sinful, aberrant desires.

I want to fuck the bastard, devour him.

These wicked, unclean thoughts intruded his mind and threatened to veer him away from the task at hand. Clearing his throat once again, he tried to reel in his emotions. "Are there ruins?" he asked, keeping his gaze steady on Antoine, proving to himself he was beyond distraction.

"Ah, *oui*, the fairy ring." Antoine smiled. "Circled by mushrooms, it's an ancient site of worship."

"A site Eidolon could use to his advantage?"

Antoine tapped his fingernail on the pew armrest. "Certainly. It's alive with ancient magic. He has the power to draw down on the energy of such a place."

"You believe he can use any natural site for his own purpose?"

"I've seen him do it. A sacred place like a fairy ring emits a powerful energy field. He can feed on this energy, using it to help him sustain his forms. Think of these places as gas stations, where one goes to fill up when empty."

Jack was not sure he believed in such things, but he sensed Antoine did. Maybe there was some truth to it. Eidolon did have the unusual ability to shape-shift into any object he wished, even into another person. Now Jack knew how he could achieve such a feat: by draining the earth's natural energy fields.

"What about feeding on humans?" Jack shivered at the very idea of Eidolon sucking the life out of a person.

"I've never seen him do *that*, but as the centuries pass, his powers increase." Antoine shook his head. "Who knows what he really can do?"

Antoine placed his hand on Jack's shoulder, and a tremor penetrated through Jack's coat, radiating an incredible sensation of warmth. The gentle touch conjured up too many conflicting emotions, leaving Jack's stomach in knots at how much he wanted Antoine. He looked at the ghostly white hand on his shoulder and frowned. "Are you up for this? You seem so pale."

"Don't concern yourself with my health. I'm perfectly fine." Antoine gave a gentle squeeze to Jack's shoulder before slipping out of the pew. "We'll go tomorrow. Now it's late, and you need your sleep." Antoine peered down at Jack but didn't offer his hand. "Let's go home."

Jack was startled by a pang of disappointment, followed by the realization that he had actually toyed with the idea of having sex in a church.

May God protect me.

They drove home in silence, Antoine unusually reserved. He did not try to lure Jack into his bed once they returned to the house, nor did he make any

sexual innuendos or try to kiss him. Jack's disappointment was followed by a rash of self-criticism. Now he lay naked under the thick covers of his bed, eyes wide open, his body a live wire refusing to burn out. All he could think about was Antoine.

A fair complexion, tousled hair tumbling around a beautiful face. Too beautiful for a man. For God's sake, what man had such slender hips, a wisp-thin waist, and legs reaching to the heavens, and then became a powerful tiger of incredible strength? Snowy white fur, rich brown stripes, steely blue eyes, powerful flanks, and deadly claws. An animal you had to respect, or else you would find yourself ripped to pieces.

His loins burned from his lurid thoughts, the impulse to take his cock in his hand too strong to overcome. His fingers slid over his inflamed head and down the full length of his shaft. He knew how to give himself a handjob and ride the edge of an orgasm. Self-love he could handle, as well as being serviced by the prostitutes in backlit bars when his hand was not enough to ease his sexual frustration. Sex outside of marriage was a sin in the eyes of God, but one he could live with.

Circumcised at birth, his penis's head was sensitive to his touch. A thrill swelled in his groin as his fingers slipped along the rim of his glans, circling lightly in a teasing motion. Antoine would most likely be uncircumcised, being European and born in a different era. The thought further excited Jack, as he visualized pulling back the foreskin to lick the sensitive head. A powerful erotic sensation brought forth a low, hard moan from his throat. He let his moans wash over him. Being enveloped in darkness prevented the feeling of vulnerability. He was alone, and alone he would jerk off without the anxiety of getting caught.

Precum moistened his slit, the natural lubricant easing his strokes. Jack rubbed the sticky moisture in his hands, then wrapped his right hand around the base of his cock, stroking up the length and then slowly down. He began to pump faster, the tension drawing his balls up and tight to his groin. All the

skin-to-skin contact stimulated his nerves, and his fantasies, each one revolving around Antoine, naked, quivering with desire, begging to be fucked. He could not cleanse the vision from his mind. Brown curls and clear blue eyes, a slender, boyish frame perfected by a slim, curved cock. Sex with Antoine would be amazing. He had never allowed a man to jerk him off, to take him in the mouth, or to fuck him until his bones rattled. No woman had ever made him come alive either, not even Alice.

“Ah...oh... I'm going to hell...”

He panted between sharp, gasping moans, unable to smother his pleasure. With his free hand, he squeezed and pinched his left nipple, the pain adding an even-sharper thrill. He then moved on to his other nub, giving it attention. Back and forth, he tweaked and tugged his nipples until they were aching with pleasure. Then he moved his hand downward. He rolled his moistened cock across his belly with the palm of his hand, layering one new, intense sensation upon another. He reached behind his balls and slid his forefinger along the moist crack between his scrotum and asshole.

Jack's back arched at the intensity of sensations, and he rolled his penis harder, his climax flirting to the surface. Painfully aware of how close he was to coming, he pictured Antoine, naked, kneeling at his feet, his mouth deep throating his shaft in one swallow.

“Oh, Mother of God...” He thrashed and kicked, the covers slipping to the floor. His orgasm severed all ties to the world. Blinding in its exquisite, sweet pleasure, his body liquefying into oblivion.

The door creaked, too loud to be ignored. Jack yelped and sat up so fast, pillows toppled to the carpet. Antoine stood in the doorway, backlit by the hall light. Jack swallowed hard, his heartbeat loud in his ears, his body a mass of jelly. He could barely focus, let alone think.

“Ah, hell, how long have you been standing there?”

“I couldn't sleep.” Antoine slipped inside the room but kept the door ajar.

Jack's skin glistened with sweat. He cleared his throat as he pulled the blankets up from beside the bed to cover himself. He hid his sticky fingers too, but the odor of sex could not be masked. Antoine's sense of smell was too sharp.

Antoine prowled close to the bed. His eyes glimmered. Jack held his breath, hoping against hope Antoine would take pity. He was naked and too vulnerable.

"Stay where you are. Don't come any closer. Please." He flinched at the urgent sound of his plea.

Antoine smiled. Its gentleness struck Jack's heart as he held his breath, waiting. Antoine veered over to the window, keeping his back to Jack. He pulled open the curtain to allow the moonlight into the room.

"Open the window," Jack ordered, unable to cool down.

Antoine did as asked, then turned, leaning against the curtain, clenching the edge in his hand. "Do you ever wonder what it would be like to be free of immortality?"

"I'm not immortal, not like you."

"You might not live forever, but close to an eternity. You hardly age."

"My enemies will kill me first."

"It must be worse for you." Antoine released the curtain and sat on the sill. He wove his fingers together. "I've never been normal. I've never allowed myself to give in completely to love. It's too...painful. But, to always be alone..."

Jack squirmed, bringing a pillow to his chest for support. Antoine's baring of his soul made him nervous. He did not want to have this conversation, but he was too tired to argue or make snide remarks. He wished Antoine would leave, or shut up, or better yet, jump out the window. He turned to the clock on the nightstand. "It's three a.m."

Antoine laughed, light and breezy. "The witching hour, when the veils between the worlds disappear."

"Yeah, well, we know better. The veils won't stop Eidolon or the beast from murdering their next victim."

"That doesn't mean we don't try to stop them."

"You're right." Even Antoine could act with quiet dignity; it was almost nice. And at the church, Antoine had been civil. None of his faggish nonsense evident. "Get out of here. I need my beauty sleep."

"You're already too goddamn beautiful. I hate you for it."

Though Jack had already relieved his sexual tension, his cock stirred once again. "The hatred is mutual. Now go, before I toss a lethal pillow at you."

Antoine chuckled and bowed. He picked up a pillow from the floor and flung it toward Jack. "Very well, my soldier. Until tomorrow." He paused at the door, his hand seductively on his hip, his head half turned, his lips quirked in amusement. "Pleasant dreams. And next time, let me give you a hand."

Jack groaned, sinking under the covers. The door clicked shut, and now safe, he kicked off the blankets. Cool air from the window soothed the fire in his veins. He closed his eyes and drifted into a shallow sleep.

* * * * *

Piercing howls shattered the peace. Jack bounced up, disoriented, thinking the noise was a catfight. He rubbed his eyes to clear his vision, his body half-asleep. That sound had to be animals in excruciating pain. He jumped from the bed and hurried to the open window. Further baying convinced him it was not mere cats. Jack shuddered from the night's cool air. Leaning out the window, he searched the grounds and heard rustling and snorts. Then Le Tigre's agonizing roar echoed through the air, and his heart took a free fall.

Antoine! Did he go after the beast alone?

The fool.

Jack grabbed his robe from the back of the chair and threw it on. With a surge of adrenaline, he leaped out the window, landing gracefully on his feet.

Before he could reach for the gate, it flung open. A naked Antoine stumbled into the garden, blood streaming rivers of red down his face, his neck, and down his body. Crimson red, too bright on such pale skin. Jack skidded into a puddle of blood and flinched back.

"You fool, going out there alone!" Jack shouted. "Why in the hell did you ask me here if you don't let me help you! Such an idiot!" Anger propelled him forward, and he scooped Antoine into his arms. Surprised at the lightness of his load, he rushed through the front door and took the stairs two at a time. The valet stepped from his bedroom, tying his robe.

Jack pushed him aside. "Boil some water. Now! And bring me some clean rags." He brushed sweaty bangs from Antoine's forehead. He wanted to kiss him, tell him he would be all right, that he would not let him die. Instead, he scowled and said, "You're bleeding all over me, you pervert."

Antoine's eyes rolled back, his complexion waxen and smeared in sweat and blood. The fear of seeing Antoine in near collapse left Jack reeling, and he did not want to think beyond cleaning his wounds.

He lay his burden down on Antoine's bed, not caring that the blood would soil the pristine white bedcover. Antoine could burn it later, for all he cared. All his attention was focused on stopping the bleeding. If Antoine lost too much blood, he would be too weak to self-heal. He had heard of shape-shifters dying from blood loss, taking days, sometimes weeks, to die.

Jack strode to the doorway to yell for the valet. He needed clean hot water and rags, and soon. A strange sound made him turn sharply toward the bed. Convulsions were rippling through Antoine's body. His eyelids fluttered. His legs and arms thrashed about. Jack had seen similar spasms in wounded soldiers during the war; Antoine was going into shock. He ran to the nightstand and yanked out the drawer, dumping the contents onto the floor. Rummaging through the junk, he found a pen. Jack pried open Antoine's mouth, unfolded his tongue, and held it in place with the pen.

"Goddamn you, don't die on my watch!"

The valet hurried in, carrying a large silver pot of steaming water, and with strips of white cloth draped over his shoulder. He cast a worried frown at Antoine.

Jack swept his arm across the nightstand, clearing the surface.

The valet's brow arched, but he placed the pot on the cleared surface. His wrinkles were etched deep and severe with concern. "What else can I do to help, sir?"

"Hold his legs. We need to steady him. He's going into shock."

"He will die if—"

"Not if I have anything to do about it."

Jack and the valet cleaned and wrapped Antoine's wounds, stanching the flow of blood. Antoine's convulsions subsided, but he lay in a coma, his body cold and still. Though the bleeding stopped, his wounds were not healing.

Exhausted, Jack sank onto the edge of the bed, wiping the blood from his hands with a rag.

"What's your name?" he asked the valet, making conversation so he would not have to think of the consequences of being too late to save his...friend?

"Henri, sir."

"Thank you, Henri, for your help. How long have you been working for Antoine?"

"Centuries." Henri's grin showed a few missing teeth.

"Are you a shape-shifter?"

"No, sir, but I'm old. Antoine has extended my life by giving me his blood."

Jack hid his surprise, covering his gasp by a short cough. "So you're immortal?"

"No, no, but it slowed my aging. Yet"—he circled his face with his hand—"I still got old." Henri sadly chuckled. "Old age can't be stopped. Eventually, I'll die." His smile slipped away. "And then Antoine will be alone."

Such loyalty to Antoine. Did Henri love him so much that he had willingly borne the pain of longevity and old age?

"You seem dedicated to Antoine."

"I'm afraid he'll die if he doesn't get a blood transfusion. I haven't seen him this bad in years." Henri stood by Antoine and gently caressed the back of his hand. He stroked it as he continued. "May I ask you a question, sir?"

"Please. Shoot."

"What's your blood type?"

"O," Jack replied.

"A universal donor," murmured Henri. He patted Antoine's hand and walked to the doorway. When he turned to face Jack again, his forthright gaze made Jack uncomfortable. "Very well, sir, please come with me."

Jack frowned, not liking Henri's commanding tone. "What's this about?"

"Your blood can save him, sir."

Jack clutched his stomach as he looked over at Antoine. The beautiful man, now extremely pale and fragile beneath the covers, lay weak and dying before his eyes. He rubbed the inner part of his right arm. Needles scared the hell out of him. "You mean a transfusion?"

"Yes, sir. We have the equipment set up. We must hurry." Henri had already headed out the door.

Jack followed the valet down the stairs. A closet-size room was hidden behind a panel wall under the stairwell. Set up with a cot, a silver pole holding a clear plastic bag, a table with needles, and rubber tubes, the sight drained Jack's face of all color. He flexed his hands by his side, his shoulders squared off, his posture stiff. He looked away from the apparatus, focusing on a blank wall. He hated needles, feared them ever since his days imprisoned in Eidolon's lab. There, he was poked and pinched, with fluids flowing through his veins, his sanity on the verge of breaking apart.

"Sir, I'm gentle. You won't feel a thing."

But that was not the problem. He was immune to most pain; in fact, he welcomed it. It was the memories, and the sight of the needles, and the plastic tube to be used as a tourniquet around his arm, that made him feel light-headed. He reached for the cot, his knees buckling.

Henri held him steady, his eyes narrowing in concern. "If you're not able—"

"Shut up, and let's get on with it," Jack snarled, angry at himself for showing his weakness. He crawled onto the cot, and holding his arm out, he pumped his fist, biting down on his lower lip.

Henri didn't react to Jack's outburst but instead went about his business, whistling softly. Jack lay rigidly on his back, unable to relax. He shut his eyes, squeezed his lips together, squeezed his stomach to stop from vomiting, and squeezed out the memories until he passed out.

Chapter Four

A thrill of delight coursed through Antoine's body as Jack walked into his bedroom and took a seat in the chair near the windows. The morning sun streaked brightly through the sheer curtains, lighting up the white walls. Antoine smoothed the chenille bedcover as he observed Jack. Purple smudges under his eyes, a strained mouth, his posture not his military standard. It was no wonder he looked exhausted; he had stayed by Antoine's side the entire night.

Jack sat back and rested his elbows on the armrests. He cleared his throat. "You look better."

"Thanks to your blood." Antoine held up his hand before Jack could protest. "Henri told me. You saved my life. Thank you."

Jack's mouth relaxed into a slight smile. "Let's hope my blood doesn't contaminate you."

Antoine chuckled. "My, my, is that a joke? I don't think I've ever heard one escape from your lips. Anyway, I'm already beyond salvation in your eyes, so what should it matter."

"Idiot." Jack squared his shoulders, his smile slipping. "That was a stupid move, going out there alone."

"Le Bête caught me by surprise," Antoine said, lowering his gaze. A blush warmed his cheeks. "I had to let off some steam after..." His voice trailed off. Witnessing Jack's self-pleasuring had stirred Antoine's lust. He wanted desperately to be the one to make Jack feel that good.

A flock of blackbirds cawed loudly, and Jack turned his head toward the window. When he turned back, his mouth was a stern, hard line. "You should have let me know you were going hunting. I thought you brought me here to watch your back."

"Ah, you were rather occupied," Antoine replied, chuckling, unable to keep his smile from taking over. Jack's complexion reddened to the roots of his hair. "You're cute when you're embarrassed," Antoine continued, loving to tease the stoic soldier. "You don't show this softer side too often. I feel privileged."

Jack glowered, as he did so often. Antoine smothered the urge to laugh.

"When will you be strong enough to visit the island?" Jack asked, seeming determined to change the subject.

"I'm fine now, but Henri is such a mother hen. He insists I stay in bed one more day."

Jack stood up in military stance, with his feet apart and his hands behind his back. Antoine let out an exaggerated sigh. Even after what they had been through the night before, with Jack allowing his blood to be drawn and transfused into Antoine to save his life, he remained reserved. Rarely did the man let his guard slip. Antoine had hoped some headway had been made in their relationship. A crack of light shed on their mutual attraction, maybe even a move toward friendship—something.

"Please, don't leave. I'm so bored. Let's talk for a while." Antoine put on his most beatific smile, brushing his stray curls from his face, and tapped the side of the bed for Jack to join him. But his smile turned wicked at the sound of irritation in Jack's hitched breath, as if he had just asked the man to strip.

Jack sat down in the chair instead.

As if distance will keep him safe from my flirtatious innuendos.

"What do you want to talk about?" Jack's tone all but declaring he had nothing to say.

"Tell me about your wife."

"No!" Jack shot forward to the edge of the seat, his eyes full of fury. "Don't ever bring her up again."

"You hold her inside, but it's with pain, not love."

"You know nothing about it."

"I think I do." Antoine softened his voice. "It's difficult when you love someone but do not desire that person. But, I believe you love her very much."

Jack stared above Antoine's head.

"It'd be good for you to talk about her. I'm an excellent listener. Tell me about her." Antoine spoke with a hypnotic cadence. Its power carried across the air, the spell wrapping around Jack, lowering his defenses.

"I can't dwell on those memories."

Antoine smiled at Jack's stubborn resistance. But not even this enhanced soldier could escape his power. "But you do want to talk about her. You keep that locket around your neck, never taking it off. She's with you constantly, touching your skin, your heart, your mind."

Jack clenched his hands, knuckling them into the armrests. He inhaled so hard, Antoine heard the catch in his chest. Jack grabbed the pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket, his hand trembling as he lit the tip of one. He dropped the pack and lighter onto the carpet, then lifted his square chin and blew smoke rings into the air. When he finally spoke, he kept his voice low and even, as if every word caused him pain.

"Her name is Alice. We had known each other since we were kids," he said, melancholy lacing his words. "She always had this crazy way about her, clumsy but adorable. Always getting into scrapes with her brothers. Determined to not be left behind."

Antoine could picture a young Jack, gangly, maybe slightly awkward, like a colt, not yet fully grown into his now-strong, robust frame. "And you were there to rescue her from her unruly brothers. And she fell in love with you. Why wouldn't she, her knight in shining armor?"

"I loved her," Jack said, his declaration underscored by his grim scowl.

"But it wasn't enough, was it? To ignore those feelings? One of the brothers, perhaps?"

Antoine studied Jack, seeing the spark of truth in his eyes. So, one of Alice's brothers had caught the attention of young Jack. Jealousy soured Antoine's stomach, even though he knew the past no longer mattered.

"What about you and Henri?" asked Jack, changing the subject. "Did you prolong his life because he was your lover?"

"So, he told you." Antoine frowned, not sure how to explain his feelings for his valet. "He was my father's valet's son. We grew up together, became best friends. Eidolon killed his father, as well as my parents and my older brother and sister. I'm sure you read my file." Antoine sighed, rubbing a crick in his neck. "I take care of him, and he of me."

"It's not in the file why Eidolon murdered your family."

"Ah, yes, well, that's a story for another time. Our families have a complicated history, and not a nice one."

"So was Henri your lover?"

Antoine did not miss the hint of disgust in Jack's tone, but the man could not know of the haunting loneliness surrounding his small world. How he ached for a human connection without the prejudice of his race. To so many, he and Le Bête were in the same category: spawns of the devil.

"You see, I'm afraid of being alone," Antoine said. "Henri understands. We're close."

It was too hard to explain in a few simple words, a few simple feelings. He had a special place in his heart for Henri and held him in high regard. It was Henri who kept his distance, never crossing the line between master and servant. The thought of Henri dying horrified him, as if he would be left without air or water or sun. He would be alone, a hollow shell of a man, walking the empty halls of his ancient home.

Jack inhaled deeply before blowing out a stream of gray smoke. "So you made him age slowly, while you remain youthful, beautiful. It's cruel."

Antoine snapped, "And you shut everyone out, letting no one in. Don't talk to me about cruelty!"

Jack rose from his chair and strode over to the window, opening it and flicking out his cigarette. He slammed the pane shut and fiercely turned toward Antoine, running his fingers through his hair. "Christ, Antoine, what do you want from me?"

"Let me tear down your walls. I'll do it brick by brick, whatever it takes to reach that frosty heart of yours."

"These walls are up for a reason."

"Don't you see? We can help each other. Aren't you desperate for someone to touch you? To hold you?"

"I don't have human feelings. Not anymore. Eidolon took the last of my humanity. It's probably in some goddamn test tube."

Antoine laughed, shaking his head. "Let me love you, my hunter. You know you want me to."

And so do I, my khalid. But Antoine wanted Jack to approach him freely, without the influence of his persuasive voice or powers. Years of toying with men for pleasure left Antoine a virgin when it came to love. Love, attraction, lust—all these emotions were lodged in his heart for this soldier.

"What I want is irrelevant. You're wasting your time. I don't feel love."

"That's why you had to pleasure yourself," Antoine mocked. "Sexual feelings aroused by me. I sensed it, smelled it, saw it."

Jack stormed toward the bed. He grabbed Antoine by the hair, tugging his head back by his ponytail, forcing a moan from Antoine's parted mouth. Jack's heavy breathing misted on Antoine's face; he was so close, his lips so near. A growl rumbled from Jack's throat, his neck muscle taut, his eyes cold, cold passion.

Antoine shivered at the strength of those rough hands. "Violence is the other side of love, darling."

Jack answered with another tug of Antoine's ponytail, pulling his hair from the leather tie. Pain spread to the back of Antoine's skull, his heart beating faster and faster. Jack smelled of soap, sweat, and cigarettes, and his aroma made Antoine's blood boil with lust. Their mouths were separated by a mere breath, daring a kiss. Antoine moistened his lips, his tongue peeking out from parted lips. He leaned in slightly, keeping his eyes locked on Jack's face. Fire blazed in those blue-green eyes, and a callused hand cupped his nape.

Their lips met in a brutal kiss.

Jack fought Antoine with his tongue, and Antoine fought back. Swordplay in their mouths, hot and wet. He wove his fingers into Jack's hair, getting away with it, without being socked or slapped or shot at.

Jack's muscular arms held him in an iron grip, inflaming Antoine's groin. He held Antoine down with his steel-hard body, meeting Antoine's stirring cock. A perfect fit, their connection seemed beyond reason or sanity, or even reality. Jack disarmed him with his seductive touch. Antoine held back his strength, letting Jack play the aggressor this time.

"Let's fuck each other senseless," Antoine murmured, barely able to speak. He traced his khalid's love-bitten mouth. "Don't run away."

Jack smiled, one that crinkled his eyes and left Antoine breathless.

Antoine lifted the gold locket. "Take this off. I don't want her to come between us when we make love."

Jack arched his back, as if burned by Antoine's words. He didn't move. Confusion etched sharp lines across his forehead. "Fucking between two men isn't love. It's...it's a filthy sin."

Antoine's body went cold; then anger blasted through him. How dare he call their love a sin! He shoved Jack hard, sending him flying backward.

Finding himself sprawled on the floor, Jack slowly sat up, rubbing the side of his left arm. "What the hell was that for?"

"You're an ill-mannered ass."

Jack rose and tucked in his shirt, the intense heat just moments before now drained from his face. In its place was his mask of cool indifference. "This is my cue to exit."

Before Antoine could protest, Jack left the room, his footsteps heard all the way down the stairs. The front door shut loudly.

Antoine dropped his head, letting out a deep, throaty moan. Thank God he was wearing loose-fitting pajama bottoms. His cock burned, and his balls ached. But that was not all that ached. Jack had a way of breaking off chunks of his heart.

Did he really have a chance with Jack? He was still gripped by the memory of his old life, especially of being a normal man. And then there was his damn religion.

Jack's provocative scent had hooked Antoine, and he could not shake loose from its memory. A tiger's worth was measured by the accuracy of his nose. He could ignore Jack, deny the instinctive passion he felt for the reticent, enigmatic man, but he would suffer. Suffer as he did now.

He brushed his fingers lightly over his cock and winced, remembering Jack's release the night before—the sweet pleasure of listening in on such an intimate scene, and then the frustration of being shut out from Jack's heart.

Antoine flopped on his back and stuffed a pillow under his neck. He turned his head and stared out the window at the bright blue sky. A flock of geese flew in formation, breaking up the color. Tomorrow they would go to the island. What they would find disturbed him. He knew too well the horrors of Eidolon. A premonition of bad things to come crept into his thoughts. Closing his eyes, he drifted on to the edge of a nightmare.

* * * * *

That evening, Jack found Antoine sitting in the garden, drinking from a small glass. A decanter filled with red-black liquid and an empty aperitif glass were placed on the white metal table. The twilight was cool, the clouds sweeping in, swirling gray streaks across the sky. Antoine looked peaceful sitting with his legs propped up on the table edge, wearing a deep red shirt with long, billowy sleeves and comfortable drawstring pants. His unruly curls were loosely tied back with a red silk scarf. He reminded Jack of a Renaissance painting he had seen at the Met, only the man before him was more beautiful.

Jack had spent the day walking in the woods, talking himself out of the messy feelings he had for Antoine. No longer able to ignore them, these intense emotions taunted and teased him, much like Antoine did. A man so out of his league when it came to sexual experience. Jack could not deny how his body reacted whenever they touched. And his cock had responded with no shame when Antoine was beneath him. If Antoine had not pushed him off, what unthinkable acts might they have indulged in?

Jack carried a quilt and draped it over Antoine's shoulders. "The temperature's dropping. It's not good to sit here without a coat. You're still weak from your encounter with *Le Bête*."

Antoine looked up from his reverie and smiled. "Extreme temperatures don't bother me, but thank you." He rearranged the quilt into a cape. "Would you care to join me in a glass of port? It's from Portugal, a vintage bottle I've been saving for a special occasion."

Jack pulled out an iron grille chair and sat slightly hunched in his seat. He adjusted the collar of his wool shirt, glad Antoine was not still angry at him, and ignoring why it would have bothered him if he had been. "What's so special about this evening?"

"I'm alive, you're here." Antoine studied Jack from beneath his thick lashes. "Thank you for your concern." He pointed to the quilt.

"I want you to be a hundred percent tomorrow."

"Ah, so darling, you're worried I won't be able to perform?"

The innuendo was not lost on Jack. He should be used to Antoine's barbs by now, but being in the man's presence made him slow and stupid. He should not have come here. The desire for Antoine made it difficult to be around him. Every minute that ticked by was another minute toward breaking his vow to avoid temptation for men like Antoine.

He cleared his throat to clear his mind, then reached to pour himself a glass of port. The black currant flavor went far in soothing his jangled nerves. Sitting back, he relaxed his shoulders and tried to be civil.

"Tell me about the island," he said, ignoring Antoine's suggestive comment.

"As I've said, the locals believe it's haunted. Even the German swine stayed away."

"Is there truth to the rumor?"

"I haven't explored it in ages, but there's something lonely about the place. It's isolated, covered in mist year-round. And the ring adds to its mystery."

Jack shivered, as if already shrouded in a cocoon of moist, damp fog. "Don't tell me you believe in fairies?"

"Besides myself?" Antoine jested.

"You idiot."

"Why are you always so serious? You should take pleasure in life. When's the last time you did something for pure fun?"

Antoine's question felt like an accusation. Surely, he did have fun before the war: attending baseball games, going to the movies, taking Alice out for her favorite hot-fudge sundae, watching fireworks burst in the sky on the Fourth of July. He chuckled at the image of Antoine in ice-cream parlor.

"What's so amusing?" Antoine drawled.

"Picturing you eating ice cream in that getup. You'd never pass for an American."

Antoine sniffed, straightening his lacy cuffs. "Like I'd want to. You people have no sense of style."

Jack stared at Antoine, then burst out laughing, a low, rich baritone from deep within his chest. The image of Antoine in a pair of jeans and a plain T-shirt was ridiculous.

Antoine's eyes widened. "I'd like to hear *that* more often."

Jack smiled. It did feel good to laugh. It had been far too long since he allowed himself to relax with a friend. He glanced at Antoine. Yes, sitting like this, together, he actually could see Antoine as a friend.

Sipping the port, they sat in peaceful silence, watching the sun set. Golden light bathed the gardens. Jack turned to Antoine and caught his breath. The descending sun cast an aura around Antoine, making him appear devilishly angelic, beautiful but lethal. A mystical creature—surely, a dangerous creature—tempting Jack to throw away all he believed in.

He had a right to be frightened of this human-tiger. "The other night was the first time I've seen you as a tiger. Is it your true form?"

"I can't completely separate my two selves. It's very difficult to explain. It's as if my human nature remains as a bystander."

"An animal's instinct takes precedence over human logic, even human feelings. I saw what happens when the tiger in you is aroused. I couldn't take a chance. I had to draw my weapon."

"And what about today?" Antoine's brows arched, his eyes shining. "When you grabbed me in my bed? You weren't nervous that I'd turn into a raging tiger *then*." Antoine chuckled. "No denying your arousal. Part of your anatomy gave you away, I'm afraid."

Jack clamped his mouth shut, his cheeks burning with shame. He could not refute Antoine's claim. It was true. He had wanted Antoine, plain and simple.

Antoine laughed heartily, setting down his empty glass. He shoved back his chair, and the quilt slid to the ground. He kicked it aside and strode toward Jack. Leaning down, he gripped the armrests of the chair, and Jack felt trapped. His heart flipped wildly out of control. Part of him wanted to shove a fist into Antoine's jaw, the other half wanted to kiss him. Instead, he clenched his hands in his lap. He stared into Antoine's calculating eyes.

"Do you want to find out if I'm more tiger or man in bed?" Antoine purred, challenge in his voice.

Jack scrambled for something to say, for anything but what he really wanted to do. "I should snap your neck."

"You won't because you want it. You want *me*."

So sure of yourself, bastard, and so fucking right.

"I can't..." His voice faltered.

Antoine shook the armrests. "Because of your God? Your wife? What? Talk to me, Jack; tell me why."

"It's wrong for a man to love a—"

"Good Lord, why would God deny anyone from loving another, if it's in your heart?" Antoine's eyes were not mocking or even angry. Rather, they held such sweet compassion.

Every excuse Jack was about to spout sounded lame. He had been drawn to boys since the age of nine, and that attraction never left. He had no answers that made sense. But he had to try to reason, to make Antoine understand that his upbringing did not allow for this type of relationship.

"If I surrender to you, then everything I believe in will crumble around me. Who I am, my religion—"

"No, you'll be accepting who you truly are, and that can be quite liberating, my love."

Antoine had not moved, still clutching the armrests, leaning in close to Jack. From his pale throat, lovely enough to stroke, a growl emerged. Would

Jack experience a sense of freedom if he gave in? He longed to lose himself in Antoine's scent, caress his skin, tangle his fingers in those ridiculous curls, let himself be taken. Just this once, to love without guilt, without the pain of betrayal to his past. His body ached for human touch. He felt so alone.

Jack slid a finger down Antoine's graceful neck, feeling the soft ripple of its muscle. Unblemished ivory skin made his mouth water. Jack's lips parted, his tongue darting out for a lick of that luscious flesh. He kissed the elegant curve, letting Antoine's fragrance wash over him.

How can a man smell so delicious? Taste so delicious?

How can a simple kiss evoke paradise?

Antoine's hands skimmed over Jack's hair. Curls tickled and teased Jack's cheek, and a moist breath whispered the promise of blissful release. Just this one time, Jack wanted to give in, to forget and be carried away by his emotions.

Antoine nibbled on his earlobe as his finger traced the shell of Jack's ear. Deep, vibrant moans echoed across the garden, and Jack was shocked they were his own. He jerked his head back, only for his lips to be caught by Antoine's mouth. Antoine's tongue lashed in and out, leaving a smoky taste in the back of Jack's throat. He felt the raw power of their kiss. It was intoxicating, and no longer able to fight it, he opened his mouth in surrender.

Heat radiated from Antoine, his curls escaping from his scarf and plastering to his skin. Jack thought he never looked more beautiful in his passion, with his flushed skin, half-lidded eyes, quivering limbs, and roaming hands.

Antoine grabbed Jack's wrists and forced him up from his chair. Once Jack's hands found a place of comfort on his lover's hips, Antoine yanked out Jack's shirttail from the confines of his waistband.

"I want you, Jack Hunter."

"Damn you," Jack grunted, hardly able to speak, his throat too tight, his mouth too dry. He wanted to rip off their clothes, feel skin on skin. He grabbed at Antoine's drawstring, tugging it loose, the pants sliding down Antoine's legs, his cock springing free. Jack stared at the head peeking from the foreskin, hardening before his eyes. He almost came at the sight.

Antoine grabbed his hand, lowering it to his cock. "Touch me down there."

Clamping his hand around the silky muscle, Jack teased down the foreskin and ringed the head with his finger. Antoine groaned, swaying on his feet, but Jack held him in a powerful grip. He wondered if he would leave bruises on such delicate skin and found he liked the idea of marking Antoine as his.

Antoine tilted his head, sweeping aside his hair, giving Jack access to his succulent neck. Jack took advantage, nuzzling, nipping, and teasing. The sensations of kissing Antoine while rubbing his cock overwhelmed him. This far surpassed his fantasies. How easy it was to lose his inhibitions with a man. After the change, he had dallied in brief liaisons with women, but they were never like this. This...this ruined him for eternity.

Oh fuck.

Somehow, Antoine had unzipped Jack's fly without him knowing, and he now found his pants and boxers around his knees. His hand slipped from Antoine's erection as his clothes pooled around his ankles. Antoine's hands already claimed his inflamed cock, and his fingers massaged his aching balls while his other hand expertly worked his cock. Jack's insides were on fire, and he grasped onto Antoine's shoulders, clawing at the fabric, trying not to dissolve into an atomic meltdown.

Antoine broke their connection by stepping away to kick his pants to the side, the hem of his red shirt left draping his genitals. He knelt and removed Jack's pants and underwear over his shoes. Antoine peered up at Jack, running his hands slowly up Jack's legs, ending at the crease of Jack's ass. But Jack could not go there—not the ass. He knew enough about the reality of

two men fucking, but he could not wrap his brain around penetration. Before Antoine could go further, he lifted him by the forearms, attacking Antoine's mouth. He licked Antoine's upper lip, the tip of his tongue teasing the moist seam. But being a stubborn tease, Antoine kept his mouth tightly closed.

"Now who's fighting whom? Come on, let me in, Le Tigre," Jack purred from deep in this throat.

"You wouldn't let *me* in," Antoine replied with a pout, making his point by rubbing his finger along the crease of Jack's ass again.

Jack jumped at the intimate touch and swatted Antoine's hand. "My ass? Damn right!"

Antoine laughed. "My stubborn soldier. I'll make you feel so good." He skimmed his hand across an ass cheek.

Jack's rock-hard cock got even harder.

He lunged for Antoine's mouth, forcing his lips to accept his hungry tongue. The tastes of their tongues meshed, as did the full length of their bodies. Jack's hands roamed beneath Antoine's shirt and found his nipples. He pinched one nub and then the other, the shivers beneath his fingers telling of Antoine's pleasure. He broke off the kiss and gauged his lover's reaction. Antoine's eyelashes fluttered as his low, rumbling growls wafted over to Jack. He rubbed his palm over the other nipple and smiled at Antoine's eyes flying open, half-glazed. He then lifted the gaudy red shirt and sucked on one of the nubs. Its sandpaper texture tasted salty but clean. He skimmed his palm across the light sprinkle of downy chest hair.

He had never been so close to a man's body that he could trace the lines of muscles. He kissed the dark mole near Antoine's right nipple, breathing in the human-tiger's masculine smell. So different from a woman's soft curves and plump breasts. He could not deny that his excitement at touching a man surpassed any he experienced in his sexual encounters with women.

"You're killing me," Antoine cried, his hands kneading Jack's back, sending chills down Jack's spine.

Antoine arched his groin into Jack's. The friction of their cocks rubbing together was a tantalizing, electrifying sensation. He clung to Antoine's back, pulling him in closer, wondering if he would ever be able to let him go. It felt so right to be in a man's arms, and yet so terribly wrong.

A sinful act to fuck a man.

Stop! Stop! Stop!

But it was too late to stop, so instead, Jack shut down the rational side of his brain. These sensations were too new and too wonderful and too frightening. He refused to douse out the fire, for he loved how his body pleased Antoine.

Jack put his large, square hands to good use, fisting both their cocks and squeezing them together. Beads of precum bubbled from their heads, the moisture giving Jack faster speed of motion. A spark of lust shot through him at the seductive bump and grind of their balls.

His knees were weakening, but he held on, pumping hard. Antoine snaked his arms in a stranglehold around Jack's neck so that they were chest to chest, his lightweight shirt unable to hold in the heat of his body and the pounding of his heart.

Antoine stiffened, and a roar growled from his throat, growing louder until it hit the air with a vengeance. White ribbons of semen, sticky and warm, shot upward and over Jack's hand. Antoine's orgasm was enough to take Jack over the edge. He grunted as his insides rippled in one sensual explosion.

Antoine held Jack close, preventing him from slumping to the ground. As it was, they both fell to their knees, hanging on to each other, not wanting to break their connection.

"Good Lord, I knew you'd be powerful, but this..." Antoine whispered hoarsely, kissing Jack's cheeks, chin, and neck, his lips eagerly seeking every

inch of Jack's exposed skin. He brought Jack's hand to his lips and licked his fingers clean.

Jack's groin stirred at the sight, and he did not want to think too much about what just happened. Not yet. He closed his eyes briefly and took a deep, deep breath. He had just done what he told himself he would never do: give in to his sexual urges. These desires were sinful, but then, was he not already standing at the gates of hell?

Antoine stopped kissing Jack, pulling back but not letting him go. He ran his hand across Jack's hair. Antoine's smile gave Jack another opportunity to admire his lover's refined beauty, his hair a riot of curls framing an angelic face. But that was no angel looking at him with adoring eyes.

Jack sighed at the incredible relaxation that blanketed over him. He looked at Antoine's warm, beautiful body and reached to kiss his lover's willing mouth, taking in the aftertaste of bittersweet sex. He had done it. Given in. Now what? He still felt the same.

Confused. Ashamed. Excited.

"Let's go inside," Antoine suggested.

"This doesn't change anything between us." But in reality, it changed everything. Jack could never let Antoine know how right having sex with a man felt. But one time did not make Jack a homosexual. He would have to be more vigilant of these urges inside of him.

An elegant brow rose. Antoine's mouth wavered, a rush of hurt sweeping over his face, only to be replaced by indifference with a flutter of his eyelashes. He caressed Jack's cheek. "Why do you ask the impossible? Love can't be switched off like a light."

"It was sex, nothing more." The warm hand on his cheek slipped away, and Jack already missed Antoine's touch. Yet he could not ever consider a union with a man. "I can't get involved."

Antoine untangled himself from Jack and stood up, slipping on his pants. He peered down. "You're already involved. How long do you think you can lie to yourself? You can't change who you are, Jack, or stuff yourself back into the closet."

With that, Antoine walked away, leaving Jack speechless.

Chapter Five

The thick fog cloaked Ile de Brume in a mysterious lavender-gray light. Dried mulch crackled beneath Jack's footsteps. The chestnut trees stood ghostly in the mist, creating a foreboding atmosphere. He rubbed his arms, but it did not ease the tightening of his muscles.

So goddamn damp.

Winter was fast approaching on the heels of a tepid autumn. Jack sped up his stride, trying to ignore the cold seeping into his muscles.

They had hidden the raft under a pile of leaves. It had been an easy crossing, and Jack felt sure they were not detected. Antoine strode ahead of him, leading the way. A strange heat rose in the pit of Jack's stomach. Antoine was wearing tight pants that hugged his ass and sleek, muscular thighs. A navy wool sweater completed Antoine's attire, which was rugged compared to his usual dress. Still, his crazy mop of curls surrounded his head like tufts of cotton candy.

"Why don't you cut that mop of yours?" Jack grouched as he hurried his step to keep up with Antoine's pace.

Antoine turned slightly, primping his hair in an exaggerated way. "It's my best feature."

"Your eyes are your best feature."

Antoine's silvery blue best feature rounded in disbelief, and Jack cursed himself for being so stupid. One compliment, and Antoine would be all over him, wanting to kiss him, or do something else incredibly indecent. Indecent, illicit, and sure to arouse and force submission to sinful desires, again.

"I don't want to be anywhere near here when the sun sets," he barked, the sexual tension threatening to choke him.

Antoine raised his arms over his head and arched his back in a catlike stretch. Closing his eyes, he inhaled and stood still. When he opened them, they glistened with the same tiger spark as when he was in his animal form.

"I smell trouble. And this fog... There's always been a mist, but this..." Antoine frowned, tapping his lower lip with his finger. "It's too thick. I don't like it."

"*You* don't," Jack huffed, the icy thickness making him ill.

Antoine stepped next to Jack, placing his hand on his shoulder. "Will you be warm enough in that?" He pinched the thick khaki jacket, a leftover from Jack's military service.

Jack shrugged off Antoine's hand. "It's a matter of discipline."

Antoine adjusted the strap of his satchel. "Well, then, my stoic soldier, follow me."

Jack ground his teeth before he spat out another curse. He could move with surprising stealth for a tall man, but Antoine was a born natural. Even in his human form, Antoine glided with silent grace. Jack's eyes focused on Antoine's backside, and a hot wave of desire nearly overtook him. He had to stay focused on his duty. Last night, well...he did not want to dwell on what happened, or how Antoine's body felt deliciously slick and hot against him. Long, slender legs and firm, sleek muscles covered by soft, creamy skin... Antoine was all sizzling heat and dark, sinful pleasure.

They traveled through the grove of trees, Antoine barely whispering past the landscape. Jack's muscles cramped from the moisture, but he kept going, ignoring the shooting pain riding up his calves. The damp air had become an oppressive straitjacket, slowing him down. Ever since he was altered, dampness affected his skills. It was as if the moisture got into his bloodstream and began the process of shutting down his body.

Antoine suddenly stopped, his arm flying out to stop Jack from moving forward. "Over there, at two o'clock."

Jack stumbled to a halt, taken aback by the sight. He tapped his chest near his heart; it was still beating. He had seen plenty of strange things, but never a vile-looking creature such as the one before him. Reaching for the tree trunk, he tried to steady his legs.

Le Bête snarled from inside a cage set in the middle of the fairy ring, the mushrooms edging the circle shriveled and burned. The beast snorted and bit the rungs, falling back, yelping in frustration. Jack glanced at Antoine, amazed at the excitement in his eyes. The size and ferocity of the beast scared the shit out of him, and there Antoine stood, showing only desire in those cool blue eyes. Perhaps the desire for the kill? Jack shuddered. He closed his eyes so he could concentrate and focus on visualizing a white ray of light moving through his body, hoping that would control the effects of the cold wreaking havoc on his body.

Beyond the fairy ring, Jack heard light footsteps. His eyes flew open, and he grabbed Antoine's arm, dragging him behind a granite outcrop. Jack sensed Eidolon approaching.

He turned to whisper to Antoine and gasped. He was unbuttoning his shirt.

"What the hell? This is not the time or place!"

Antoine's feral smile should have given Jack fair warning. When Antoine unzipped his fly, Jack's hands fisted, ready to swing some sense into the idiot. Antoine easily sidestepped the punch, unfazed by Jack's reaction. He continued his striptease, neatly folding his clothes into the satchel. Naked, his sleek, toned muscles glistened, and he shot Jack a mocking, self-satisfied grin.

"Get dressed," Jack barked hoarsely, horrified his cock was reacting once again to Antoine's seductive beauty.

Then Antoine shimmered into wavy patterns of multiple colors. The wrinkle in time caused by Antoine's transformation from man to beast left Jack disoriented. He grasped on to a rock ledge to keep from bolting. Bold stripes crossed Antoine's body, and a tiger's face of smooth white fur emerged, wavering until Antoine had completely changed into a beautiful animal of powerful strength. Fully transformed, Le Tigre tilted his furry head, his upper lip lifted in a sly curl.

The tiger's massive paws flexed, and he tore at the dirt with his sharp claws. Then he stopped and turned his attention toward Jack. Every one of Jack's muscles flexed for flight, a natural instinct when close to a deadly animal. Le Tigre neared, and to Jack's astonishment, he nuzzled his furry head between the crook of his shoulder and neck. A rough-and-tumble grumble emanated from the tiger's throat. His fur was incredibly soft, similar to Antoine's skin, and smelled of heather, chestnuts, and soil. Then the tiger yawned, showing off his deadly canines, and a quiver of fear raced through Jack's stomach. Standing so close to a beast such as Le Tigre was unsettling, no matter how much Antoine insisted he would never hurt him.

Jack carefully scratched behind the tiger's ear, not sure about the wisdom of trying to pet a wild feline. Le Tigre tilted his head and licked his cheek. Jack winced from the wet, scratchy tongue, his fingers digging into the deep fur around Le Tigre's neck.

"I know you understand me," Jack said softly. "So back off."

The tiger blinked, recognition in his eyes. Le Tigre moved back, freeing Jack.

Jack pushed back on his legs, letting the heaviness in his chest ease. But he warily kept his eyes on Le Tigre and was relieved when the tiger slithered on his belly toward the edge of the rocks, staring intently at the beast inside the cage. Le Tigre's tail pounded the ground, sending up puffs of dirt.

Jack took a risk and grabbed the scruff of the tiger's neck, not wanting him to take off before he had a chance at Eidolon. Le Tigre snarled and snapped at Jack's hand without breaking skin.

"You're not going anywhere!" Jack ordered. "Not yet. Let's wait and see what Eidolon's up to." He removed his pistol from the holster and edged toward the rock clearing. He needed a clear shot, for he would have only one chance to kill the evil bastard.

Eidolon was an imposing figure, with sharp-angled features that gave his face a severe, gaunt appearance. Jack had never forgotten those deep-set eyes, framed by eerily white lashes. Eyes made more frightening by their sharp intelligence, which drew the courage right out of Jack.

For what purpose did Eidolon resurrect the beast? To lure him or Antoine out into the open? Maybe to finish the job he had begun centuries ago when he slaughtered Antoine's family? The man was not past doing something out of sheer spite.

Eidolon approached the beast without caution. He thrust a thin, knobby hand through the cage and stroked Le Bête's spiked fur. The beast stopped its frantic pacing and lowered onto its legs in a submissive pose. Then Eidolon turned around and saw Jack and the pistol. He raised his hands over his head in surrender, but his cunning smile infuriated Jack.

Jack aimed for his heart. Cobalt bullets were not just for his tiger.

But when he was about to pull the trigger, his fingers lost their strength.

Oh fuck! My hands!

"The prodigal son has returned," Eidolon taunted.

Jack's stomach heaved as he realized he and Antoine had walked into an elaborate trap: this island, the beast—all of it. Eidolon had manipulated both of them. Adrenaline pumped wildly through his body, and his arms and legs trembled. The pistol slipped from his hand, his fingers too numb to hold on to it any longer. Le Tigre paced behind him, snarling and ready for action.

Standing at the side of the cage, Eidolon released the latch. It clicked loudly in the thin air. Jack sensed Le Tigre was poised for attack.

“Keep that fucking beast occupied!” Jack commanded Le Tigre.

Released from its cage, Le Bête sped toward them. Jack rolled on the ground and out of its way, barely avoiding being sideswiped by Le Bête's snout. He spied his pistol and lunged forward, his fingers clawing at the cold metal. He yelped as the metal burned his fingers.

So cold.

Eidolon came after him with a force of rage. Jack scrambled to his knees to better defend himself, but Eidolon was too quick. Arms clenched Jack in a neck hold, raising him to his feet. He dangled in Eidolon's grasp, defenseless, powerless, ashamed. He had been duped.

“You underestimated me, and for that you'll suffer.” Eidolon squeezed Jack's chest as if he were nothing but a piece of soft fruit. Jack's lungs began to collapse, along with his vision.

Damn the cold. Eidolon had chosen Ile de Brume for the purpose of taking him out.

A needle was jabbed into his bicep. He flinched from the thrust, his heart sinking along with his awareness. From the edges of his mind, he heard the din of two beasts in battle to the death. His tiger was in trouble.

Antoine, I'm sorry. I'm sorry...

* * * * *

Le Tigre prowled in circles around Le Bête, his mouth an open snarl. Concentrating on his prey, nothing else mattered but the kill. Le Bête lowered its head and charged, knocking Le Tigre several feet. Every muscle burned upon impact. Le Tigre roared as he shook his head, dizzy from the powerful blow. Before he had a chance to stand, Le Bête swiftly attacked, using its whip-sharp tail to sideswipe Le Tigre's hindquarter. A thin line of blood seeped from the open wound.

Enraged, Le Tigre drew himself up, his body expanding.

Le Bête backed under a tree and let out a howl. The rumble shook the branches, splintered shards of wood piercing the ground. Le Tigre dodged the sharp debris, but the beast was not so lucky. Too slow and clumsy, several arrowlike projectiles hooked into Le Bête's thick skin, sending him flying across the glade.

The two beasts warily faced each other, pawing the earth, snorting and snarling. The other night, Le Bête had caught Le Tigre by surprise, but now he was prepared. Le Tigre sank into a crouch, whiskers standing straight out from his face, fur ruffled across his spine. His nostrils flared, saliva foaming around his mouth, deadly fury crossing his features.

Fueled by adrenaline, a thunderous roar burst from Le Tigre's throat, and Le Bête froze.

Le Tigre scrambled past the beast and scampered up a tree trunk, draping his body over a thick, sturdy branch. Le Bête rushed forward, clawing the trunk as it hopped on its hind legs, its massive jaws nipping at the tiger's dangling paws. Le Tigre peered down on his prey and licked his chops. He homed in on the beast's vulnerable throat. The scent of blood filling the air fed his hunger. He had killed Le Bête once before, and now he would put it to rest forever.

Le Tigre leaped. His enormous forepaws smashed into Le Bête's skull with a sickening crunch. Razor-sharp canines sliced into its leathery neck, claws dug into its hide. Le Bête squirmed and keened, a bloodcurdling howl that raised the hairs on Le Tigre's back.

Le Bête shook and bucked, but had no chance. Le Tigre ended its misery and snapped its neck.

The beast lay in silence.

Le Tigre's pounding heart slowed, but the loud and lonely sound of the cage door banging in the wind caught his attention. He swiftly sprinted to the

fairy ring and skidded to a stop. No one was there. He craned his neck upward and caught a faint whiff of Jack's scent. He sniffed the ground and sensed Jack's fear, along with something else. Regret? The stench of the mushrooms' charred stumps sickened him, the energy emanating from the sacred ground now sullied.

Le Tigre pushed his snout through the dirt, twigs, and leaves. Buried in a patch of grass, a needle pricked his nose. He pushed the syringe around with his paw, releasing the bitter scent of chemicals. Rage tore through his body as he realized Eidolon had taken Jack. His khalid was in serious trouble. Trouble so deep, Le Tigre did not know if he could save him. His instincts screamed to go after Jack, but first he had Le Bête to send back to the grave.

Once transformed back into his human form, Antoine dressed and quickly prepared for his task. From his satchel he took out the tools he had brought specifically to ensure Le Bête's death remained eternal: a jar of salt, heavy rope, a thick needle, thread, and a gold dagger.

Antoine turned the beast onto its back, its blood streaming down its hide. He had to hurry. A zombie needed to be killed twice, and the gold blade would ensure its death. First he tied the limbs; then he gripped the hilt of the dagger and plunged it into Le Bête's heart.

His task complete, Antoine removed the knife and wiped the blade in the grass. He pried open the stiff mouth, rigor mortis already setting in. From the jar, he scooped a handful of salt and poured it into the gaping mouth, avoiding the sharp, jagged teeth. Then he proceeded to sew the mouth shut.

He would not be able to burn the beast, as the ground and air were too damp. Instead, he would have to dump the creature into the lake. For that he would need his tiger's strength.

Undressed again, Antoine felt his muscles stretch and elongate as he shape-shifted into his tiger form. The more time he spent getting rid of Le Bête's carcass, the more likely he would lose Jack's trail, and any hope of finding him. Clamping his massive jaw down on one of its bound legs, Le Tigre

dragged the beast to the shore. With his flat face, he butted the beast into the water, satisfied as it sank.

Worried he would be too late, Le Tigre frantically sniffed the ground for signs of Jack. The scent disappeared into the opposite shoreline. He stared into the water, seeing his reflection, momentarily startled. Jack had asked who he truly was—human or tiger—and sadly, he had no answer.

When Jack had held his dead friend's kerchief, he had a vision of being underwater. Could it be that Eidolon's lair lay beneath the murky lake? Tigers had no fear of water, quite the opposite. Le Tigre waded into the lake and dived below the surface. His tiger blood gave him enormous muscle strength and lung capacity to swim against the water's force.

Keeping his eyes open, he swam along the shore, hoping to find a cave entrance. Nothing.

He swam outward, circling the island. It did not take him long to discover a strange outcropping below the surface of the water. Diving deeper, he came to a stone door with simple geometric shapes carved into recessed squares. He pushed at the symbols with his snout, but nothing happened.

The tiger snorted air out of his nose, bubbles frothing in his face. He swam up to the surface and treaded water. He had to get behind that door but had no idea how. He would have to bring in an expert.

He knew of one man smart enough to break the code. He was a math professor and symbolist, a German who escaped the Nuremberg trials by being recruited by the Sentinel. He had another, more dangerous specialty: explosives. Le Tigre hoped the German could swim.

Chapter Six

Jack struggled to wake from his semiconscious state. He licked his chapped lips, but his mouth was parched, and his thirst was made worse by the sound of dripping water pinging on the floor. Metal cuffs bit into his wrists and ankles, sending shocks of cold through his body. Bound by heavy chains, he lay spread-eagle on a hard board serving as a bed. Relieved he was clothed, he turned his head, and his stomach churned at the sight of a needle puncturing his upturned arm.

More drugs, more pain, more humiliation.

There was no point in struggling. He took in his surroundings. Three plain walls enclosed the narrow cell. His makeshift bed took up a third of the space. The rest of the real estate was occupied by a glass cabinet containing shelves of medicine bottles.

Jack's stomach cramped not only in hunger but also in fear...fear of being subjected to further experiments. The last thing he remembered was his fight with Eidolon and the roar of Le Tigre attacking Le Bête. A pang of regret penetrated deep into his core.

He should never have touched Antoine *that* way. Already he felt the ache of separation, the worry of not knowing if Antoine had survived the battle, and the terrifying realization that if he had not, he would be alone once again. But then, loneliness was his burden. That was the reason he never got involved with anyone once he had been altered, or let his heart brush with another's, for fear of losing it.

Letting out his anger, he jerked at his chains, but pain quickly shot up his arms and legs. His head felt stuffy, and he could not think straight. It must

have been the drug they were pumping into his bloodstream. Enough to keep him conscious but unable to break away. Eidolon had plans—sinister plans, for he had kept him alive. And Jack had no means of escape.

He closed his eyes and focused inward to calm his anxiety, which was beginning to feel like ants crawling over his skin. He hated being rendered weak and vulnerable, especially by the man who had destroyed his life.

Jack tried to relax. He had to think. Think clearly. Try to come up with a plan. He had to do something. Something clever. Anything.

A door *clicked* loudly, and his eyes flew open. It was awkward to raise his head, so he waited until the sound of footsteps neared his bed before turning to see who had entered the room. The hostile energy radiating from Eidolon's aura hit Jack full force. Eidolon had come in person to gloat. He was a spiteful, hateful man who enjoyed taunting his victims. Cunning, ruthless, and vicious in temperament.

“How long have I been here?” Jack demanded through clenched teeth, ignoring the arrows of pain piercing his skull.

White hair, white lashes and brows, and a ghostly white complexion—with the exception of his dark eyes, Eidolon's appearance resembled that of an albino. He had to bend slightly because of his impressive stature. His melodious voice belied the meaning behind his words. “A couple of days...more or less.”

Jack looked away from his jet-black eyes, which seemed all the more disturbing set in such a chalk white face. “What do you want with me?”

“I'm stealing back what is rightfully mine,” Eidolon replied with a twisted smile. “The Sentinel gave you a long leash. I will not be so generous.”

“You're delusional if you think I'll work for you.”

“And you're delusional if you think you have a choice.”

Eidolon walked over to the pole holding the bag of fluid being pumped into Jack's veins. “This renders your powers null and void. Tomorrow I'll perform

surgery.” He flexed his fingers. “I’m an excellent brain surgeon,” he added as an afterthought. “I never did tamper with your brain, but it’s high time I do.”

Jack strained against the chains that bound him, but not enough to matter. Eidolon stroked Jack’s cheek, his slithery touch repulsively cool.

Then he gripped Jack’s chin. “Did the little tiger finally fuck you?”

“You’re disgusting.” His neck flushed, and the heat spread along his shoulders. Eidolon’s fingernails pinched Jack’s chin, but he did not flinch.

“Your fatal flaw is that you’re a queer.” Eidolon let go of Jack’s face and straightened his back. “Did you know Hitler wanted to exterminate your kind? Doctors experimented with lobotomies on deviants like you, but most died in the camps.” His finger traced an invisible triangle over Jack’s heart. “Pansies such as yourself had to wear pink triangles.”

“Did you use them as guinea pigs, like you used me?” Jack spat out, the horror of the truth cramping his stomach.

Eidolon shrugged. “I wasn’t picky. I didn’t support the Nazi party, but they supported me. All these petty dictators fighting each other. Such children.”

“You care for nothing.”

“Not true.” Eidolon rubbed his thumb over his lower lip. His glare burned into Jack. “I don’t care who you sleep with, but Le Tigre, well, that’s different. You make the perfect bait. He’s the last of the Fortescues, and he’ll be the last to die.”

* * * * *

Antoine paced the patch of sand, waiting for Dr. Karl Beyer to emerge from the lake’s surface. He had been submerged for over an hour, and Antoine was getting impatient. Already two days had passed, and his instincts were urging him to hurry.

For two days he had suffered terrifying visions of Jack’s body being cut open and pumped with insidious drugs, or worse, tortured because Eidolon enjoyed violence.

For two days he could not sleep or eat, everything turning to ash in his mouth.

For two days, doubt and fear and regret chipped away at his heart.

A splash from the water caught his attention, and he stopped pacing long enough to take in a breath. Dr. Beyer cut an imposing figure as he rose from the water's surface onto the shore. He smelled of lake algae, and Antoine wrinkled his nose as he approached. The black wet suit outlined muscles primed for endurance. Blond hair, bluntly cut, gave the professor a no-nonsense air. Topaz-colored eyes showed a high intelligence, and his broad mouth offered only the truth. At least the truth according to Dr. Beyer.

He stomped toward Antoine with deliberate purpose. Antoine inwardly sighed. Germans had no idea how to walk with any elegance, let alone grace. Not his favorite race, this man was especially arrogant and curt. But he knew his business, and that was all Antoine cared about. He would put up with the Pope if it would save his khalid.

The professor removed his scuba mask, revealing eyes that shone with promise. Slipping off the bulky air tanks, he looked straight at Antoine. "The entrance code wasn't difficult to figure out. There are four primal symbols carved into recessed squares that release a spring when pushed a certain number of times. There's the circle, which represents heaven. The square, of course, is earth. Below them are the triangle and spiral. The triangle is the merging of heaven and earth, and the spiral, evolution and the cosmos."

"Thank you for the lesson in symbology," Antoine said dryly. "But how did you figure out the sequence?"

"We've established Eidolon is conceited."

It takes one to know one. But Antoine remained silent, nodding his agreement.

"I took the value of the letters of his name and figured out the most likely combinations. It has to do with numerology. I don't want to bore you with the details."

"Good Lord, just tell me the combination!"

Dr. Beyer's brows arched in obvious amusement. "Fine. First, push the spiral five times, then the circle five times, the triangle, three, and the square, five. Make sure it's in that order. Of course, if you're going in as a tiger, I'll be opening the door."

"And the explosives?"

"Inside I discovered a cave with an elaborate system of tunnels. Wasn't able to explore far, but it's all in place. The explosives will go off once we set the switch. It's placed in a niche near the entrance. The explosion should cause minimal damage to the island, but extensive damage to the tunnels."

"My first priority is to get Jack out of there."

"Our first priority is to destroy Eidolon and his men. All agents are expendable, even those of Jack's caliber." Dr. Beyer unzipped his wet suit. "Jack would be the first to agree."

The hairs on the back of Antoine's neck rose in ire, and his hands curled into fists. "*I* have the final word. You follow *my* orders!"

Dr. Beyer's eyelids twitched at his tone, but then he smiled as he complied. "Yes, sir." The professor tugged his wet suit off his shoulders and picked up a towel to dry off. He stopped, his head turned just enough to snag Antoine into his line of sight. "Are you going in as Le Tigre?"

Was that a sneer in the man's insufferable voice? Antoine turned away before he said something he would regret. He did need the man, after all. Forcing himself to relax, he uncurled his cramped fingers. "Yes, so follow my lead and do your job."

Dr. Beyer's eyes twinkled, the haughty turn of his mouth further tempting Antoine toward murder. Antoine did not care if Dr. Beyer saw his naked ass, so

he turned his back to the professor and undressed. He started to remove his pants, when a tap to his shoulder stopped him midway. Antoine turned around, met by that smug grin.

“Aren't you going to ask how to get out?” the professor asked coolly.

Good Lord, he felt like a fool.

“The same symbols are inscribed on the inside of the door. Use the reverse sequence. Can you remember that?”

“Of course! I'm not stupid!”

“No, I'm sure you're not.” But the professor's smile contradicted his words.

The half-draped wet suit folded over Dr. Beyer's hips, revealing a scarred chest. “Look, I can be as stealthy as a cat and kill as silently. I'm also useful with a knife.” And to make his point, Dr. Beyer pulled out a dagger from his belt. He lifted the blade to flash its bright gold metal in the sun. “You mentioned zombies...”

“I don't want any theatrics.” Although that was Antoine's forte, he did not trust the professor. He studied Dr. Beyer's face, looking for clues. The professor seemed sincere, but he would keep his eye on him.

Antoine shucked off his pants, but it was Le Tigre who dived into the frigid water. The temperature didn't affect him as he swam deeper into the murky green depths. The water swirled behind him as Dr. Beyer kept to his side.

The professor swam ahead as they approached the entrance of the cave. He pressed the symbols, and the door smoothly slid open, allowing them inside. Once they stepped past the threshold, the door slammed behind them. A shiver of excitement heated Le Tigre's blood. He inhaled. A myriad of smells invaded his sensitive nose. Rotting fish, men's sweat, algae, and faintly, Jack's unique scent.

The professor had removed his equipment and wet suit, under which he was wearing a one-piece catsuit with a utility belt around his waist. His fingers

teased the length of the dagger's hilt. He said nothing, but his face said everything.

Deep lines etched across his broad forehead, his eyes alert and his mouth pursed into a scowl. "I'm going to set the timer. We'll have thirty minutes before the explosives go off. Let's hope it's enough time."

Le Tigre nodded in approval. They had agreed to the timer setting before going in for the rescue. This ensured that the vile lab would be destroyed no matter the outcome of their mission.

Le Tigre stretched his elongated body to ease the kinks in his muscles. His nose twitched as he detected the odor of humans ahead. He snarled, letting this bloodlust soar through his veins. He nodded to the professor and took off at full speed on silent paws. The tunnels separated into several offshoots, and he let his nose lead him to the right path. Gracefully, he curved around the bends, his paws lightly touching the ground, until he reached the end of the tunnel that opened up into a plain room. Le Tigre slowed to a belly crawl. To the professor's credit, he had kept pace almost as silently and now knelt behind him.

Le Tigre slinked toward the room's entrance. Lit by electric torches, Le Tigre made out the barred cells lining the room. They were empty, but he wondered if this is where they kept Jack. An involuntary grumble erupted from his diaphragm. The professor put his hand on Le Tigre's rump. Le Tigre snorted, for the professor either had no fear, or was too much of a fool to be worried if he would get his hand bitten off.

Three men dressed in army fatigues sat playing cards around a square table. Plastic colored chips were stacked in front of each player, and all their attention focused on the cards being dealt. Submachine guns were looped onto the backs of their chairs.

Le Tigre's upper lip lifted, his teeth gleaming despite the dim light. He sprinted across the room, taking the closest man by the throat. The taste of

blood flooded his mouth, spurring him on. In his rage, his canines sank deeper into the soft flesh and ripped it apart.

Letting the body drop, he turned to see the professor slicing the throat of the man across from his victim. The body slumped to the ground.

The tiger leaped across the room toward the last man, who was reaching for his gun. A second later, all three men were dead. These men were not zombies, so they did not have to be killed twice or with special blades. Le Tigre licked the blood from his lips. The hot, sweet taste fed his hunter's instinct.

Jack's scent was stronger here, but Le Tigre also detected the faint odor of medicines. Anguish tore at his heart, pumping fury through his bloodstream. He sprinted past the carnage, noticing the professor had slung a submachine gun over his shoulder. Good. He sensed soldiers up ahead.

Once past the prison, they continued down a lit corridor, the tunnels giving way to man-made walls and plain, square rooms. They moved in complete silence, stopping at a doorway. Up ahead was a steel door, guarded by seven armed soldiers.

Le Tigre snorted. A soldier cried out as he spied Le Tigre and opened fire. Bullets ricocheted off the walls, but Le Tigre zigzagged across the room and tore out the throats of three soldiers before being hit. He whimpered, slumping to the floor, the painful noise of gunfire assaulting his ears. The din boomed and shook the ground. It went on and on, as if it would never stop.

But then, all grew quiet.

The professor knelt over Le Tigre, very much alive, while everyone else was very much dead. Dr. Beyer looked worried, his mouth white around the edges. Le Tigre licked the professor's hand to reassure him. He had been wounded, but not badly. Already the wounds were knitting together, the bullets lodged in his body dissolving.

Rising to his feet, Le Tigre steadied his legs. He eyed the door, taking a few steps back. With a grand leap, he twisted the side of his body and struck the

metal full force. Pain washed over his hindquarters, and he slumped to the floor in a crumpled heap.

Dr. Beyer rushed to his side. "*Dummkopf*, just because you're supersize doesn't mean you can break iron. Let me use the gun and blast the damn thing if I can't get it open." The professor was referring to the strange keypad beside the door. It shone green numbers lit from a rectangular panel.

A soft roar was all Le Tigre could manage. Dr. Beyer helped him to stand up on his wobbly legs. Le Tigre paced at the foot of the door. He sniffed and growled and pushed aside the professor, lifting his paws to the keypad. He clawed at the plate as dread filled his heart.

Dread of what he would find, dread of Jack's condition, dread of what Jack might have been changed into. He did not know what would be worse: Jack altered beyond saving, or Jack dead.

Dr. Beyer pushed Le Tigre's paws aside and went to work decoding the numerical keypad. Le Tigre had never seen such a device, a new technology the Sentinel did not have in its arsenal. It had to be Eidolon's creation and worth stealing the specs. He pushed the thought to the back of his mind; saving Jack came first.

All Le Tigre could do was pace and pace and pace some more, hoping that the professor could figure out the correct sequence of flashing numbers on the glowing screen. He pushed at the professor's leg with his paw and received a mere grunt.

A tiger did not live by hope but by action.

The professor's fingers flew over the keys. *Clink. Clink. Clink.* Numbers flashed bright green on the screen. Deep lines of concentration wrinkled the professor's forehead, his lips pursed in concentration. Le Tigre remained behind the man, but he began to feel suffocated inside the pocket-size room, his movements restricted. As he paced and waited, his human feelings took the forefront of his thoughts.

Jack could not die. Not after he had finally chipped away a piece of his wall. While it was not a major breach, he was quite certain Jack was smitten deep down. At the very least, their lovemaking in the garden proved Jack craved a connection with him.

Suddenly, the door slid open, revealing a descending staircase. Dr. Beyer looked smug, but he did deserve praise for cracking the code. Le Tigre's mouth parted, showing off his spectacular canines. He roared his approval as he flew down the stairs. The air reeked of medicine, blood, and sweat, and all of three people could be seen. Capture would have to be swift, before Eidolon had a chance to shape-shift. His adversary would also be waiting for his chance to kill him.

* * * * *

Jack could not move. Straps crossed his ankles, hips, and chest. He lay on a high surgical bed, the smells of antiseptic and medicines roiling his stomach with nausea. His throat felt grittier than a sandstorm. What he would give for a glass of water.

The bastard's nurse had shaved his head before strapping him down. Eidolon was serious; he was going to cut open his brain. Jack warily eyed the lethal, pencil-thin knives and dart gun on the tray. *A dart gun?* His head was too fuzzy to concentrate. The medication had depleted his strength. Life had become a private hell, but it would become an eternal nightmare if he did not escape from this lunatic.

Another wave of nausea rocked his stomach. He would be turned into Eidolon's puppet, a fate worse than being subjected to Antoine's love. *Love? Antoine?* Even in his miserable condition, an ache pierced his heart at the thought of that rascal.

What sentimental drivel. Regret, maybe, for not pursuing what possibly could have been. Sex, maybe. But could you call this burning desire love?

It was for the best. No good ever came of two men loving each other.

Cursing under his breath, he had to cease and desist all thoughts of Antoine. It was not fair to his memory of Alice. Alice, a beautiful, sweet girl who had loved him without reservation. Would she have left him if she had discovered his secret? Jack groaned, his head all mixed-up, his thoughts jumbled as if thrown into a junk drawer.

Eidolon turned Jack's head to the left and tightened a strap across his forehead. The redheaded nurse patted Eidolon's brow with a cloth. Dead white complexion and deep hollow eyes—Jack had not given much thought to the woman's looks until now. They had never spoken. She would come into his cell and change his IV. He had been too out of it to notice or care. Now that he took a good look at her, those dead eyes gave her away. Eidolon had turned her into a zombie for his own selfish use. The bastard had no conscience.

Jack glared at Eidolon, the lower half of his face covered by a surgical mask. His steady hand pressed down on Jack's shoulder. Not a reassuring gesture, but one of possession. Eidolon bent over his head, knife in hand. Jack's chest tightened in a moment of panic. He struggled to escape, but the straps held him tight. A slight burn began to spread across his scalp as the tip of the blade sliced into his skull.

Then all hell rained down from above.

The sound of gunfire dully popped in Jack's ears. The blade poised at his skull eased, uncertainty flickering in the Eidolon's eyes. Jack squirmed, but the straps would not give. Eidolon dropped the knife on the tray and grabbed the dart gun while pulling down his mask. Strained white lines curved at the sides of his mouth. He aimed the weapon over the bed toward the door.

Jack could not see what was behind him, but he sensed Le Tigre was close by. His heart rose to his throat, choking off his breath. This was his opportunity, and he had to do something. Anything. He squeezed his eyes shut and gathered his will. If he could just move the table, even a few inches...

That dart gun had to be for Le Tigre, and Jack was not about to let anything happen to his tiger. *Le Tigre belongs to me.* He would rather die a thousand times over than see his tiger maimed.

Jack struggled against his restraints as he visualized a pinpoint of light within his solar plexus, the chakra of willpower. If this worked, he would give a hefty donation to the monks. Hell, he would build them a new monastery!

Jack shifted his body, keeping his focus on his third chakra. Swaying back and forth as much as he could, he relaxed every muscle, letting go of force and concentrating on his energy, spreading it from his feet to his head.

The bed legs shook.

The eerie sensation of his spirit floating above his body came over him. When he opened his eyes, the room glowed an incredible pale yellow. He continued to rock back and forth. The bed legs began to rise from the floor in an up-and-down motion, shifting toward the enemy. A few more inches, and the bed would bump into Eidolon, hopefully throwing off his aim.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Jack leaned slightly to the left.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

A tiger's roar thundered through the room with a deafening crash.

Chapter Seven

The sight of Jack enshrouded by a white sheet, his face moist and pasty, shorn head bleeding, sent Le Tigre into a frenzy. He aimed for Eidolon's throat. A dart whizzed past and nicked the tip of his ear. Le Tigre was not fazed. Eidolon tossed the dart gun and shoved the bed into the tiger. It threw Le Tigre off balance, and he tumbled and rolled across Jack, hitting the ground. He turned his head to see the professor slashing the nurse's throat with the gold dagger, then slicing up her stomach cavity.

Dr. Beyer glared at Le Tigre. "She's a zombie, dammit. I had no choice."

Le Tigre snarled. Eidolon had already shifted form, blending in with his surroundings. But he could not hide his scent. Le Tigre sprinted toward the exit but clamped his fangs into thin air. Eidolon was no longer in the room.

Jack called out, "Cut me loose!"

Le Tigre jumped toward Jack and tore at the straps with his teeth, snapping them away from Jack's wrists, ankles, and chest. Dr. Beyer had already unfastened the head strap.

Freed, Jack tried to push the tiger's paws off him and met with a solid, unmoving mass. "Get off me, you big lump." Jack shoved again, but Le Tigre growled softly, burying his nose into the warmth of Jack's body.

Glancing quickly at his wristwatch, Dr. Beyer frowned. "We have fifteen minutes until this cave comes crashing down over our heads. Continue that later."

Jack's pale skin flushed to bright red, and Le Tigre curled his upper lip, licking a quick kiss before freeing his victim.

Jack rolled onto his side and groaned. His green hospital gown exposed his naked backside, but he did not seem to care. He motioned toward the door, his arm trembling. "I'm too weak. Go, leave me here. Get that bastard."

The tiger bumped his broad forehead into the professor's side, almost knocking him over. He had a way to save everyone, if Dr. Beyer would just take notice. Le Tigre kept tilting his head back, spitting out a series of low growls.

Dr. Beyer ran his hand through the Le Tigre's thick fur. "*Ja*, I got it."

The professor helped Jack sit up and wrapped a bandage around his head to stop the bleeding. The cut was not too deep, but Le Tigre was glad for the professor's insistence he come along. He proved beyond useful. Then the professor proved why he had an IQ over one hundred and forty.

Using what he could of the old restraints and bandages, he strapped Jack onto the tiger's back, placing Jack's arms around his thick, sturdy neck. Jack's cheek nestled upon the back of Le Tigre's head, and he passed out.

They sprinted up the stairs as Le Tigre led the way through several rooms and tunnels, making their way toward the exit. Once there, Dr. Beyer gathered his tanks, fins, and mask, and quickly secured his gear. He pressed in the sequence on the door. Nothing happened.

Le Tigre paced, growling loudly with impatience, but never quite reaching a roar. Dr. Beyer held up five fingers before going back to the door panel. Eidolon must have changed the sequence during his escape. They were not going to make it. Le Tigre shook his body, trying to free Jack.

"What the hell are you doing?" the professor grouched before turning back to the door. Minutes ticked by. Nothing.

Le Tigre kept shaking his body frantically, trying to loosen Jack from his back.

"Dammit, I need to concentrate!" Dr. Beyer turned and glared at Le Tigre.

Le Tigre's heart began to beat furiously, his anger rising at the idea of Eidolon winning. No! He refused to be buried within this hellhole. Le Tigre was

through with waiting. He puffed out his fur, his body expanding until he heard the snap of the bonds that held Jack. Slipping to the ground, Jack curled into a heap, not moving. Determined to save his khalid, Le Tigre circled Jack. He shoved his snout beneath his lover's body and pushed him toward the professor's feet. Certain he would be able to protect them both from the imminent blast, he stood up on his hind legs and stretched out his front paws onto the wall, trapping them within his embrace.

The roar of the blast engulfed Le Tigre's ears, numbing all sound around him. The wall and ground vibrated beneath the thick skin of his paws. Dust whirled around his head, blocking out light and sound. Chunks of rock tumbled down from the ceiling. They bounced off his body as if mere pebbles, but the gush of water breaking through the wall was too powerful, and a surge of cold, muddy liquid hurled Le Tigre into a wall.

Dr. Beyer grabbed for Jack's ankles but missed, and Jack went tumbling across the room, his face sinking in the rising water.

The walls buckled and cracked.

The professor lifted Jack, placing Jack's back against his own chest and wrapping one arm around Jack's waist. Le Tigre pushed into the cracked door with all his force, shattering it apart. Swept into the current, he twisted around to spy the professor behind him, Jack securely in his grip. The professor had placed the oxygen mask over Jack's face, alternating the air tank between them.

The explosion had churned the water currents, forcing Le Tigre off his course. He swam under Dr. Beyer and nudged him upward with his snout. They had to break the surface, and fast, or else the turbulence would smother them all in its suffocating embrace.

The water parted as they breached the lake's surface. As they swam toward the shoreline, the professor was the first to make it to the water's edge. Coughing up water, he rolled away from Jack and tore off his gear.

Le Tigre crawled onto the grassy shore. His fur was matted, bloody, and torn. Too exhausted to hold on to his form, he morphed back into Antoine, bloody, naked, and vulnerable, but relieved when he spied Jack on his knees, coughing up water.

Jack's hand rested against his bandaged skull; he looked dazed.

Dr. Beyer sat cross-legged and shook water out of his ears. "That was too close."

A hysterical laugh rose from Antoine's throat. "Good Lord, let's get off this fucking island."

Jack spoke, his voice hoarse. "What about Eidolon?"

"He's long gone," Antoine replied, Eidolon's scent all but a faint memory. "He knows when he's defeated."

"Temporarily," the professor quietly reminded them.

Antoine's laughter died. He lay back, letting his mind wander and his body heal. Spidery gray clouds whispered across the sky. Birds clustered in trees sang. Heather scented the air. It was as if the island had been washed clean.

"We somehow ended up on the other side of the island," the professor said, rising to his feet. "I'll go get the raft and your clothes."

Antoine heard Dr. Beyer's footsteps fade, and he was now alone with Jack.

"Thank God you have a raft. I don't care to take another swim."

Antoine was not fooled by Jack's attempt at humor. Jack's face had a defeated look, his ashen skin accentuated with purple shadows under his eyes. Jack sat back and circled his arms around his bent legs.

"Why didn't you tell me the cold affects your skills?" The heavy mist had lifted, allowing the sun to heat the ground, yet Jack looked miserable.

"I didn't think it would be as bad as it was. The dampness really shut me down. I put you in danger."

"Lie down and let the sun warm you. It seems when Eidolon left the island, the mist left with him. At least temporarily."

"He knew I'd come. Why else choose this place? It was an elaborate ruse to trap you. You were his target, and I was an added bonus."

"Maybe." Antoine scratched his chin.

Jack lay spread-eagle on his back, closing his eyes to the sunlight. Antoine could not help but stare at Jack's wrinkled hospital gown, the wet fabric contouring his muscular pecs and hardened nipples. Antoine's gaze wandered lower, and Jack turned his head, eyes opened, pitching him a dagger-sharp glare. Antoine swept over his own naked body and sighed. He was not any better off, his clothes on the other side of the island.

Jack touched his head, his voice quivering. "Hell, what did that bastard do to me?"

Antoine sat up and crossed his legs, aware he was exposing his groin. It could not be helped. He squeezed the water from his hair, feeling the whorls of tight curls spring up.

"Once I take you home, you need to rest before anything else. We'll go to headquarters together. See a doctor, do tests—"

"No more tests!" Jack's face was full of fury.

"Dr. Beyer is obligated to make a full report. You need to know if you were further altered, so you can deal with it. You can't hide behind your ignorance. You must face who you are, at all times. Know your strengths as well as your weaknesses."

Jack rearranged his gown to cover his thighs. He looked away, staring across the lake. "You should have left me down there. It'd have been more humane."

Antoine crawled to Jack's side, leaning back on his feet. He took Jack's face between his hands, the skin clammy. He caressed Jack's cheeks. Tears misted his eyes as he thought how he had almost lost his khalid.

"Don't ever ask that of me," he said, his voice low but firm.

Jack lowered his gaze, a rosy flush coloring his cheeks. Antoine looked down and smiled at where Jack's gaze rested, his cock reacting with a slight jump. Lust ran its invisible fingers along his thighs. Such a heated stare, teasing, taunting, tempting. Jack had no idea how he affected him.

Jack's chest rose and fell, and when he looked at Antoine, his eyes were not dazed, but clear. "I confess. I didn't want to die. I'm not really sure what keeps me tethered to this world."

"The hope of love?"

Then Antoine kissed Jack and was startled by his eager mouth parting, his tongue flicking across his upper lip. Its slick touch thrilled him. Their chests collided, and the wetness of Jack's gown sent a shiver through him. He did not care. He could not get enough of Jack.

Jack's rough hands spread fire across his back, fingertips prickling his skin. Antoine's erection burned from pent-up lust. His thick, engorged shaft bent toward his thigh and twitched for Jack's hands, mouth, or better, his hot ass. He guided Jack's hands to his cock, a slow groan vibrating from his throat.

"Ah, so the rumors are true about you, Jack," Dr. Beyer mused. "You're a *schwuchtel* as well."

Shit. Fuck. Hell.

Antoine jumped back. He knew the term for homosexual in every language.

He scooted away from Jack, awkwardly covering his erection with his hand. His skin flushed bright red, leaving no patch of his body unmarked. When he looked at Jack, his heart plunged. Jack looked thunderstruck; his piercing glare would melt a snowcap.

Sweater and pants sailed over Antoine's head. At least the professor had the sense to toss him his clothes. He grabbed for his pants, quickly pulling them on to hide his embarrassment.

First, Antoine had to cover up. Second, he had to defuse the situation. Third, he had to apologize to Jack for being so indiscreet, and hope that he would forgive him.

The best way to start was to make light of the situation and become the outrageous faggot everyone thought him to be. He turned around and placed one hand on his jutting hip. He pouted his lips at Dr. Beyer. "I'm the only fag here. If you doubt it, look at the man. I just scared him to death." He rubbed his jaw. "You've probably just saved me from a terrible sock to the face."

Jack sputtered but did not deny it. A pang of disappointment jabbed Antoine's heart, but what could he expect? By now, Jack had to hate his guts for putting him in such a compromising position. He did not think saving his life would stack up to exposing his darkest secret to a colleague.

"I don't care about your sexual orientation. You do your job well." Dr. Beyer twisted the raft's rope around his hand and pulled it into the water. "Now, let's get out of here."

Jack made his way to the raft, allowing Antoine to help him on. Dr. Beyer draped his jacket around Jack's shoulders and received a brisk nod of acknowledgment.

Antoine seated himself across from Jack and Dr. Beyer. Jack stared past his shoulder, his face shut down. By now, Antoine's cuts were healed. Jack's injuries would heal slowly with time. But would time heal Jack's hidden wounds?

Chapter Eight

Two days had passed since the island adventure, as they chose to call the incident. Dr. Beyer had said his brusque good-bye the day before, leaving for Hamburg by car. They had agreed to meet in New York for a debriefing within a week. Jack had been glad to see the professor go. After Dr. Beyer had witnessed the kiss, Jack had been barely civil to the man. Not only that, but the professor never left Antoine's side, always filling his drink, touching him lightly: a hand to the shoulder, a brush of his fingers across Antoine's back. That German's personality never thawed for Jack, even after a night of drinking a bottle of bourbon.

Jack knew he was a jealous coward. No matter how he turned over the kiss in his head, he had to admit he had kissed back. No longer could he blame that incorrigible queer for seducing him. He could no longer deny his tongue longed for the taste of Antoine. He ached to be held, and by a man, not a woman. And, especially after this recent incident with Eidolon, he desired a place of safety in the arms of Antoine.

He reached for the locket around his neck but instead found his bare collarbone. Eidolon had snatched the chain and tossed it aside, somewhere in the dank cell where he had been held prisoner. This last physical tie to his wife and his past was now broken.

Antoine stepped out into the garden and sauntered over to Jack. He pulled a chair from the patio table and sat down, gazing at Jack with arched brows. A curl hung over his right eye, and an urge welled up in Jack to brush it aside and stare into those wild blue eyes.

"Are you warm enough? You look like an Eskimo without the fur." Antoine chuckled. "No quilt? Do you want me to get you one?"

"Don't coddle me."

"You have no idea how I can coddle, if you'd let me."

Jack shivered despite his wearing a thick wool coat, muffler, and heavy boots. He had ventured outside prepared for the falling temperature. Antoine wore a long-sleeve, lightweight linen shirt and tan pants, a scarf tucked into his collar. The man was impervious to the cold.

"Did you hear anything on Eidolon?" Jack asked, fishing out a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket. He lit two and handed one to Antoine.

Antoine held the cigarette in his hand. The gray tendril of smoke curled seductively around his face. "Rumor has it that he's been spotted in Berlin."

Jack rubbed his head where the knife had cut into his skull, his scar puckered, rough, and numb. "He planned to make me his slave." Thinking about what could have happened curdled his stomach.

Antoine placed his hand on Jack's thigh. "But he didn't. You're too strong. He'll never control you."

Antoine's touch eased his fears. It felt good. A soft, pleasant awareness buzzed in Jack's consciousness. He realized he wanted what Antoine had to offer. Could he dare reach out for a shred of happiness, and with this human-tiger, no less?

Antoine scanned Jack's scar. "It didn't heal completely?"

"Some wounds leave their mark, and I don't heal as well as you do. Your skin's flawless, but mine carries all the marks of my past exploits."

"The kiss on the island... Sorry for putting you in that position."

"I was as much at fault as you. I kissed you back."

"You forgive me, then?"

"Antoine...you had my back. I trust you with my life. What the hell is there to forgive?"

Jack stared at Antoine's milky white fingers resting lazily on his thigh. He hesitated but then cupped his hand over Antoine's, letting the simple gesture convey his desire. Desire in having Antoine take him.

"I need..." Jack's voice cracked. He pulled his hand back, startled at how much he wanted this man.

Always so frightened of getting too close to someone, so much so, he risked being alone for the rest of his days. Could he reach out for once? Did he dare?

Antoine seemed to read his thoughts, for he leaned in close to Jack. "You're a soldier. Take a risk."

"A soldier first. Honor and duty must come before my personal feelings."

"Ah, I see the wrinkle." Antoine sat back and crossed his leg over his thigh. He rubbed his palm back and forth over his pant leg. "There's no room for love in your black-and-white world, oui?"

"It's how I cope." After being captured, drugged, and worked over, all Jack had left was his honor. Honor to fight against evil. Evil...an endless, vicious cycle.

But sadly, he was in danger of burying his heart, completely and forever.

Antoine held out his hand. "Put it all aside and come inside with me."

"Why choose me?" Exasperation edged into his voice. "You can have your pick of any man. Dr. Beyer seemed interested enough."

Antoine tossed back his hair and grinned, a thousand-watt smile that stole Jack's breath. Antoine did not play fair; never had, and never would. And the question was, how could he control such a free spirit? Well, he knew the answer: it would be impossible.

"Ah, the professor," Antoine purred a sensual growl. "He's handsome in a Teutonic sort of way. Oh, but you know, we French don't play well with Germans."

Jack fisted his hands, his neck sore with tension. He would never be able share Antoine with another man. Even thinking about Antoine fucking someone else made him tense. "So it's all play to you?"

Antoine frowned, his teasing manner vanished. "Not with you, Jack. Never with you."

"Why am I any different?"

A puff of air escaped Antoine's mouth, and he twirled a curl, peering at Jack through half-masked eyes. "How do I put this? Uh... You see, when we take a mate in human form, it's for eternity. The moment I met you, I sensed you were my life mate, my *khalid*."

Jack felt like he had been sucker punched. He crossed his arms, as if this would protect him from another blow. A mate, like two animals in heat? Is this how Antoine saw him? Unable to take it in, he stuttered, "You're...you're mad!"

"It's hard to explain, but I'll try. My lineage goes way back, before written history. I follow the ancient rules set by my tribe. We mate for life. If you choose to love me, I will never take another lover."

"I'm not a goddamn animal!" Jack jumped up and began to pace the small patch between the chair and table. Clenching and unclenching his hands, he did not want to grasp the truth of what Antoine said. Life mate? *Khalid*? It sounded close to blasphemy against the sacred rite of marriage.

Antoine grabbed Jack's pant leg. "Please, sit down. You're making me dizzy."

"And you're making my head spin." But Jack sat back down, crossing his arms and glaring.

"I'm not comparing you to an animal." Antoine leaned toward Jack, caressing his arm. "You are one hundred percent human. An enticing man who I can't get out of my head. Your smell drives me insane. Yes, I am mad. Mad about *you*."

Antoine stood and grabbed Jack's forearms, pulling him up into an embrace. With no chance of escape from the strength of Antoine's grip, Jack's body melted into the touch, and his eyelids lowered. He was afraid of what he would see in Antoine's eyes. Fingers pressed into his chin and moved across the line of his jaw, giving him one hell of a hard-on.

"Let's get out of the cold, darling."

"I... You're impossible..." Jack stammered, but without conviction. He had already made the decision to sleep with Antoine.

"Yes, impossible, but you love that about me."

Jack let himself be led inside and up the stairs to Antoine's bedroom. Once he removed his muffler and coat, he tossed them on the floor. He spied the double bed, and his heart flipped at the sight. Antoine tilted his head, and Jack nervously laughed. "So we're going to make love like a normal couple. Under the sheets, no lights on?"

"Is that another joke?"

Antoine's lighthearted laugh eased Jack's tension.

Antoine turned down the covers. He sat on the edge of the mattress and folded his hands in his lap. Jack stopped inches from where Antoine sat. He stroked his rich brown curls, amazed at how soft they were and how they sprang back into shape when released.

"It's silly to wear it so long, but I love your hair." He kissed the top of Antoine's head, loving the exotic, spicy smell of his hair. "Don't ever cut it."

Don't ever change. Don't ever stop pursuing me.

"Is that an order, my stoic soldier?"

"Like you'd ever obey me."

"I can be persuaded." Antoine captured Jack's hand, holding it to his cheek. He turned his head and kissed the palm. "Now let's start by taking off our shoes and socks."

Antoine remained seated on the bed as he heeled off his slip-on shoes and wiggled his toes for Jack to remove his socks. Jack scowled but pulled off the socks and rolled them up, tucking them inside Antoine's soft leather shoes. He then sat on the floor and unlaced his boots, setting them next to Antoine's shoes, before removing his own socks.

Jack crawled to his knees and faced Antoine, spreading his lover's thighs, pressing the length of his palm against Antoine's erection. His cock felt hot, hard, and ready. Ready for Jack to take it into his mouth. His body hummed at the mere thought of what he was about to do. He had been on the receiving end of a blowjob and knew what he liked. He hoped he would be able to satisfy Antoine. More than anything, he wanted to please him.

Jack unzipped Antoine's pants and shucked them off along with his cotton briefs, tossing them aside. The sight of Antoine genitals peeking out from the hem of his shirt shot fire through Jack's loins. His hands trembled, not from nerves, but from a desire so strong, it threatened to derail his mind and leave him with nothing but sensations. He licked his dried lips, his mouth parched.

The sight of Antoine's uncircumcised cock thrilled Jack. His hands twitched as he slowly peeled back the foreskin, revealing the sensitive head. He ran two fingers down the slender length of the organ, watching it quiver, its velvety skin enticing.

Antoine's back arched, his hands clutching the covers, a groan tearing from his throat.

Wrapping his hand around the base, Jack made sure his knuckles purposely brushed against the scrotum; Antoine's hips thrust forward.

"Good Lord, take me in your mouth." Antoine's glazed eyes focused on Jack's fisted hand.

"*Now* who's giving orders?" Jack smiled, cupping Antoine's balls, playing with him—payback for all the times he had been on the receiving end of Antoine's teasing.

Antoine groaned in frustration. "I'm on the verge of exploding. Do something...anything."

Jack gave a gentle squeeze to Antoine's balls as he tongued his foreskin, swirling and circling it with tempting short licks. A salty taste flavored his mouth. It was not bad, just different. He did not mind the taste. In fact, he liked it. All of it. He went for Antoine's balls. As soon as his tongue licked one, Antoine cried out. Jack went for the other and smiled as Antoine whimpered. He sucked one into his mouth, minding his teeth. He did not want to hurt Antoine by being clumsy. He never wanted to hurt Antoine. Or let someone else hurt his tiger...now that they were lovers.

Lovers. Oh God, he certainly was Antoine's now.

Being intimate with a man's private parts, smelling a man's wet arousal, teasing a man's cock and balls, Jack was discovering how much he enjoyed it. More than enjoyed it. He would probably go to hell for this sinfully delicious pleasure, but now that he had finally given in to his true desire, he could not give it up. He could not give Antoine up.

Jack lifted his head. His wanton lover smiled down, eyes flames of lust, mouth swollen, hair mussed. So beautiful. Jack wickedly returned his smile. He bowed his head, folded back the foreskin, and lowered his mouth over the weeping tip. The odor of musk and sex pushed away the rest of his inhibitions, and he engulfed the full length of Antoine's cock. He gagged as Antoine bucked his hips, but once he clamped them down, he sucked harder, establishing a sensual rhythm.

"Oh, my darling...ah..." Antoine became incoherent, words turning into moans. Frantic hands rubbed Jack's head. He was getting off on sucking Antoine's cock, the intimacy of the act thrilling.

Jack's cock burned from base to tip, moisture seeping through his boxers. Hands slipped away from his head, and Antoine's hips lifted despite Jack's viselike grip. A deep, shattering moan shook the bed as Antoine came in Jack's

mouth. He choked, forced to swallow some cum, but held on, suckling the softening cock until Antoine grew still.

Jack released Antoine's cock, cum running down his chin. Taking the edge of the bedcover, he wiped his face clean. He was overwhelmed, overstimulated, and oversexed, and damn, it felt good.

No one had ever shot him into the universe like that. Antoine had seen stars and galaxies and grasped the meaning of life in those sweet seconds of bliss. He laughed.

Jack smiled as he sat back, one knee up, the other leg tucked beneath him. "I had no idea you found me hilarious. You're always complaining I'm too serious."

Antoine leaned over and ran his hand over Jack's shaved head. "No, no, you've bowled me over. You're too good to be a virgin."

Jack shrugged without his gaze wavering. "I've had my share of girls."

Antoine wrinkled his nose. "Please, don't tell."

Antoine slid down to Jack's side and faced him. Twining their legs around each other's waists, they clasped hands, Antoine desperate for the connection, afraid this love would be fleeting if he did not hang on tight.

Jack stared at their intertwined fingers. "You have beautiful hands." A red sheen infused Jack's ears, his voice faltering. "Uh...it's... Mine are rather big, and—"

"Darling, thank you for the compliment." Antoine kissed Jack's mouth, coaxing it into a smile. He snaked his arms round Jack's neck, their chests touching. They stayed this way until Antoine felt Jack relax in his arms. He inched his hand between Jack's thighs, feeling his packed heat through the wool pants.

Antoine pulled back Jack's collar, stroking the hollow of his neck. "I'm sorry you lost your locket."

Pain brushed Jack's face. "Maybe it's for the best. I'm not the man Alice married. In truth, I never was."

Antoine could not help Jack resolve his feelings about his marriage or his love for Alice. All he could do was support Jack in whatever decisions he made concerning the past. He just wanted Jack to want this, their being together, and his love.

Jack captured Antoine's hand. "I took a walk around the back of the house. Past the gardens, near the edge of the woods, I discovered a group of headstones."

Antoine bit his lower lip, breathing away the chill that suddenly crept into his bones.

"They're your family, aren't they?" Jack wove his fingers through Antoine's hand. "It made me realize we're not so different after all. Both of us have lost our pasts to that bastard."

"We will get him someday."

"Or he'll get us." Jack's smile disappeared. "Promise me, if he ever takes me again and is successful with his plan, you'll kill me. It's the only way I can go on."

"Forget him." Antoine's stomach twisted at the thought of killing his khalid. Even if he became Eidolon's puppet.

Jack shook him by the shoulders. "Promise me!"

"Oui, yes, but it won't happen," Antoine cried. "I won't let it happen."

Antoine kissed Jack, wanting to banish all morbid thoughts from Jack's mind. Their mouths tangled in sweet bliss. It was a gentle kiss, soft and beautiful.

Antoine reluctantly pulled away from Jack's sexy mouth. "I want to explore every inch of your body. Come to my bed, darling."

Antoine disentangled their arms and stood up. He unbuttoned his shirt slowly and seductively and slipped one side off his shoulder. Jack rose into his

arms and bit the bare shoulder. He yanked the shirt off, tossing it aside. Antoine twisted toward the nightstand. "I need to get lotion."

He opened the nightstand drawer and felt for the lubricant. Shutting the drawer with his elbow, he returned his full attention back to Jack.

Jack frowned at the silver tube. "We're not..." His voice faded as a look of fear crossed his features.

Antoine teased his fingers up Jack's thigh and gave his balls a squeeze. "It's not what you're imagining. I'm not going to bugger you."

"Christ, no, that's sinful."

"No God of mine would call it a sin." Antoine sighed, brushing his hand along the side of Jack's face. So handsome and serious, his lover's expression stern. "Darling, this is supposed to be fun," he said with a chuckle, "not a military drill."

"It's all happening so fast."

"I've waited two years, and even for us, that's not fast. My serious soldier." Antoine kissed Jack, fingering the buttons of his thick shirt. One button, two buttons... Stripped out of his shirt, Jack's pants came off next. In an undershirt and boxers, he looked thinner, vulnerable. His poor cock was so stiff, it peeked through the opening of his underwear.

Antoine gathered the hem of Jack's undershirt and slipped it over his head. He let out a breath of delight; Jack's chest so broad and strong—and scarred. So it was true; Jack's wounds did not heal completely, unlike his own flawless skin.

"Crawl into bed. That's an order."

Jack shucked off his boxers and slipped under the sheets, folding them down around his waist. He fluffed two pillows and set one behind his back. Antoine joined him under the covers, gliding his arms around Jack's waist to pull him on his side so they could face each other. Teal eyes stared at him with

trepidation. Antoine stroked Jack's cheek, keeping the connection for fear that his lover would steal away behind his walls again.

"No penetration," Antoine assured him. "Not until you feel comfortable. And, you may never want that. There are many ways to make love."

"But you like it."

"I like you. Being like this." Antoine hugged Jack, then kissed him, holding nothing back; brief, feathery kisses along Jack's hairline, his dimpled cheek, his jaw. Then Antoine moved his lips slowly across Jack's collarbone. Jack tugged at Antoine's waist, pulling him closer. Antoine sank farther into his arms. He wanted to melt into Jack and become one. He did not want to think about the future. Not now, not until it was absolutely necessary.

Jack latched on to Antoine's mouth as his possessive hands rubbed his back. Desire swept over Antoine's sensitive skin. Already hard, their cocks met in frenzied heat. A promise made; no need for talk.

Epilogue

As soon as a person would walk into McSorley's Old Ale House, he would get a whiff of lager and sawdust with an overlay of lamp oil. The bar packed a diverse crowd, but none more so than the group sitting by the front window.

The Sentinel agents circled the wood table, several empty glasses littering the top. Jack sat between Antoine and Dr. Beyer, with Frank next to the professor. Jack was not about to let Dr. Beyer play footsies with Antoine under the table. Not that he had any cause to worry; the professor's stiff attitude was turned on full blast.

Jack had received a clean bill of health from the doctor, and Dr. Beyer, Antoine, and Jack's debriefing with the head of the Sentinel was over. While the chief was not pleased that Eidolon escaped, he was not surprised. The three were dismissed, given the day off, and told to let off some steam.

"Let me buy another round," Frank bellowed, slapping Dr. Beyer's back. "Admit it. It's not bad for an American beer."

Dr. Beyer exaggerated his stern frown. "*Nein*, it's drinkable, but why do you Americans serve this swill cold?"

"Damn hardheaded Germans," Frank muttered.

Jack stood up and grabbed his coat from the rack next to the table. "I'm calling it a night." He massaged his throbbing temple. "Have an early meeting."

Antoine smiled at him, making Jack's heart flip. He felt all eyes on him, and a flush of heat spread across his shoulders. He cleared his throat, ignoring Antoine's gaze.

Antoine rubbed his lower lip in a sensuous arc. "Oui, me as well. I have an early boarding call." Gracefully, he rose to his feet and slipped his sweater on.

Dr. Beyer snorted. "Why take an ocean liner when you can take a plane? Much more efficient than traveling by sea." He tapped the tabletop with a perfectly manicured fingernail. "I have a spare seat next to me. Why don't we travel together?"

Jack's shoulder blades tensed, his eyes narrowing. Antoine stepped over to Jack, the closeness causing Jack to inwardly groan. His lover's aroused scent radiated waves of lustful heat.

Antoine peered down at the professor, placing his hand on his shoulder. "I prefer the ocean air," Antoine's sultry voice purred. "But thank you."

Dr. Beyer's slight twist of the mouth formed a smile, and his gaze wandered where Antoine rested his hand. Jack wanted to yank Antoine away by the collar and carry him off. Instead, he said a brisk good-bye and headed for the exit.

He heard Antoine's light footsteps behind him and the familiar accent call out to him. "Let's share a taxi, my stoic soldier."

Jack gritted his teeth and continued his rapid stride. He pushed open the door of the bar with both hands and made it to the corner before Antoine yanked his arm, forcing him to stop.

"I was teasing you back there, darling. You know I only have eyes for you."

Jack scanned the street for pedestrians who might have overheard. "Quiet, someone might hear you."

"Oh, who would care? It's one in the morning, and anyone walking the streets either has the same idea as us or is too drunk to care."

Antoine pulled at Jack's arm, dragging him into the familiar alley. Jack began to protest, but no words came out. Pushed to the wall, he struggled, though not so hard, as his body was aching for Antoine's. Damn, he had it bad. His *cock* had it bad.

He was bad.

"You're too careless," Jack hissed. "This isn't your secluded hamlet, where it's safe."

Antoine answered by kissing Jack's soft spot below his ear. Jack shivered, an uncontrollable urge simmering beneath his skin. Any second he would give in, here, in a public place, dimly lit by the streetlamps. He had no willpower when it came to Antoine. All the more reason to stay away, but it was too late. Much too late. He had made his choice, in France, in Antoine's bed, willingly and without apology.

"I want you." Antoine's voice was barely a whisper.

It would be insane to risk being exposed. But was he not already insane for loving this man?

"You're not listening." Jack tried again for reason.

Antoine chuckled, his lips vibrating on Jack's skin. "Only when it's important."

Reason be damned!

Jack twisted Antoine's wrist, turning and pinning him to the wall. Antoine let out a gasp of surprise, and Jack smiled as Antoine's silvery blue eyes widened with delight...and desire.

Oh, how his tiger loved to play.

 THE END 

Viki Lyn

Viki Lyn is a successful writer of edgy, erotic, sexy man love. Sparked by a keen interest in yaoi, also known as Japanese Boys Love manga, she began her own love affair with male/male romance. After reading and collecting whatever she could get her hands on, she created the popular Yaoi Rose review site. Once she wrote her first man love romance, she was hooked. Inspired by the reality that romance between lovers is a hope more than a guarantee, Viki's characters are fiercely independent. Her stories are an eclectic mix, but it is always romance that drives the story to its final happily-ever-after.

A native of California, Viki travels the world in search of inspiration but calls Arizona home. She shares her beautiful adobe home with her wonderful husband and favorite man (fictional or real).