



Henri's
Bar

by Cooper West

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CHAPTER ONE

Two Years Ago, in the cosmopolitan city of Marigolt in the formerly free country of Bedawn

Duncan curled up under Mark, wrapping his arms tightly around his torso to pull him down closer. Mark smiled but held himself up on his hands, resisting.

"Mark, c'mon..." Duncan, who was a little smaller than Mark but hardly a delicate flower, tugged at him again. He threw in a few coquettish looks, batting his lashes, and Mark had to admit Duncan looked delicious when he did that. He pushed his hips down, rotating so that their cocks pressed and rubbed together. Duncan whined. "Ngggghhhh!"

"Wait for it." Mark grinned. He loved driving Duncan on like this, watching him fall apart. They had only been together three months and Mark knew they were still in the "honeymoon" stage, so he planned on enjoying it for every second. Duncan, skinny but strong, wore the military buzz cut he came out of the service with and had the vibrant, on-edge energy of a soldier, even in bed. With the war raging outside their door, it was too easy to remember the hell that might wait for them. It wouldn't take more than a telegraph message for Duncan to be recalled by his country's government, even with the disruptions that the nascent war already had on the wires. With that threat hanging over them, Mark felt compelled to give everything to the younger man, his heart and his soul and all the joy he could dredge up out of the hard, vicious times they lived in.

Below his apartment, Mark's nightclub was shut up tight despite the fact it was early evening. The compulsory curfew ruined businesses all over the city, and Mark's was just another casualty. He did not know exactly what the next few weeks would bring, but for now, he was content to make Duncan laugh and smile.

"What do you want? Mmmm?" Mark teased with his hips again.

"Oh, man, come on! You know what!" Duncan tugged at him again, but it was halfhearted. Mark was a solidly built man who took care of himself and stayed in shape, but if Duncan really wanted to take him down he probably could. Or, at least, start one hell of a wrestling match, which Mark thought might be fun in its own right. For the moment, he kept himself in place.

"I like it here. I can watch you."

Duncan smacked his chest. "Bastard. Get down here. Kiss me. Fuck me."

Mark lowered himself until they were laughing into each other's mouths, grinding together slowly. The radio was set on a mellow station playing instrumental, jazzy tunes by local musicians, setting the atmosphere for a long, lazy night of lovemaking. They finished their wine a while ago, although there was plenty to drink because Mark couldn't even sell his stock given the messed up economy; the buyer he got for the bar wasn't interested in selling booze, hoping to turn the place into a restaurant to serve their imminent occupiers, which left Mark a large liquor inventory with no place to go. Mark planned on drinking it down while wrapping up his business deals then getting on a train with Duncan heading south, to the Margin, where with some luck and a lot of hustling he could score passage overseas for both them.

Duncan's hands drifted down to Mark's ass, kneading and massaging and teasing. Mark mouthed at Duncan's neck. "That what you want?"

"Stop being pushy. I'm just playing around," Duncan complained, stretching out to tilt his head back, offering himself up. Mark didn't care who did what, but Duncan tended to like bottoming so it was always a surprise and a little hot when he wanted to take control.

They both froze when the emergency signal blasted through the radio. It blared for a few seconds while Mark cursed. "Can't they leave off the fucking drama for a few hours?"

"Shhh." Duncan rested his fingers over Mark's lips. "Could be important."

It wasn't, not that Mark could tell: the city had surrendered a week ago, long before the main advance of the Monarchy's armies, so there wasn't much for anyone to say other than that the occupation force was getting closer every day. The surrender was a desperate attempt by the city council to keep the place from being leveled, because the Monarchy was on a blood march for territory and revenge after all the diplomatic insults the Republic had thrown up in its face. At least, that was the King's excuse. There really did not seem to be a good reason for the war, not that Mark could tell, but everyone was hot for it, or at least the leaders of the respective governments were. Most businessmen like Mark thought it was a waste of both money and soldiers which would bankrupt everyone involved, but no one listened to them. Mark was not the kind of man who hoped for the worst, he just expected it.

The radio droned on and on about the approach, and advised "true citizens" on how to behave, urging people not to make a mass exodus. It was a joke, because half the population had been streaming out of the city for days by train. Mark intended that he and Duncan would join

the diaspora as soon as possible.

Dismissing the report from his mind even as the news announcer pitched her voice for maximum drama, he settled down on Duncan, rubbing against him a little. Duncan, more invested in the war than Mark, was tense. He told Mark he had been discharged a year before, when war did not look imminent to the Republic, and had decided to tour the world before going to trade school, which was how he ended up in Mark's bar and Mark's bed. But Duncan said more than once that there was a chance he might be called up again, even from a distance, now that battles were starting to actually engage. Mark fully intended never to let that happen, hoping that going the neutral group of oversea countries that made up the Eastern Conference would pull them out of the whole mess. Together.

When the mind-numbing update was over, Duncan seemed to collapse under him, listless.

"Hey, hey, c'mon. Don't let it get to you." Mark gently cradled Duncan's cheek with one hand, rubbing his thumb over Duncan's lips.

"Were you even listening to that?"

"Hell no. Same shit: Monarchy propaganda, curfew reminders, rules for being a 'good citizen.' Nothing we haven't heard before."

Duncan nodded, but Mark could tell something was wrong. Mark kissed him, hard and demanding, which got the reaction he was hoping for: Duncan surged up, opening his mouth and gasping in pleasure as they began rocking together again. It was an epic kiss, and Mark was feeling smug with himself when they finally broke off to breathe. He nibbled at Duncan's ear.

"Just forget about it. We're gone in a few days; I've got buyer for the club. I'm getting us train tickets to the Margin, and we're leaving, just you and me," he whispered, putting everything he had into his words.

The words, which Mark hoped would calm and soothe the nerves of his high-strung lover, were more like a lightning strike between them. Duncan rolled backwards, hauling Mark with him until Mark was crouched over him, his semi-hard cock hanging down and brushing against Duncan's firm stomach. Mark looked down at Duncan, trying to read him, but it was impossible. Duncan's eyes were glittering with a kind of desperate determination that scared Mark. Mark wanted to ask, he wanted to beg for an explanation because even when the city surrendered two weeks before, Duncan had not seemed to care. Something about the radio announcements had set him off, Mark figured out that much, but he had not paid attention. He kissed Duncan again,

determined to fix whatever was wrong later and simply give Duncan whatever he needed right then. He'd do anything for Duncan, and he intended to prove that to him.

Duncan's hands roamed over Mark's body in fast, skittering motions, as if he was trying to map Mark's skin as fast as he could. Mark slowed down his kiss, pushing his tongue languidly into Duncan's mouth, until Duncan sighed and relaxed. Earlier Mark had looked forward to being energetically fucked but his plans changed. Pulling back a little, he gently ran one hand over Duncan's face. Duncan turned to the touch, opening his mouth to tease Mark's thumb with his tongue, the calm of his face betrayed by his body thrumming with tension under Mark.

"Let me in," Mark whispered. Duncan's eyes flashed to him, the enigma of Duncan's emotions still well concealed, but he nodded. Mark shifted up and they maneuvered until he was settled in between Duncan's legs. As if afraid to be in any way removed from Mark, Duncan wrapped his legs around Mark's waist instead of spreading them wide on the bed as he usually did. Mark reached for the slick they used, an old-fashioned jar of cream, taking a big dollop onto his fingers. Opening Duncan up was not difficult, they had sex often enough that Duncan knew how to relax his muscles easily, but Mark wanted to this to be more than a casual evening fuck. Something told him that whatever was happening right then between them was important. He did not know why, but he knew that much.

By the time he was up to three fingers in Duncan's ass, Duncan was squirming, making impatient, demanding noises that were just short of begging, something Duncan never did. Mark felt like his own heart was breaking as he lined himself up. Duncan gasped, arching his back, as the head of Mark's cock pressed in. He wasn't talking, another difference from their usual routine that bothered Mark, but he was reacting with his whole body.

Mark entered him slowly, pinning Duncan to the bed by his upper arms. Duncan thrashed, moaning wordlessly, trying to impale himself on Mark's cock. It was a strange reverse to be the one holding back, trying to slow things down when usually it was Duncan forcing him to make things last longer, but Duncan needed this. Mark knew that, with every ounce of his soul. Duncan was throwing himself down before Mark, trusting him to hold them both together. When he finally made it all the way in, Duncan froze for a second, looking up at Mark, desperation wrapped about him like shroud.

"Please."

Mark nodded in response, willing to do anything Duncan asked. He began long, hard thrusts

with his hips, building up the tempo to a breaking point. He thought his own heart might break first, the pace and strength demanding more from him than he normally gave as he pounded down into Duncan with all the power he could draw up.

"Mark! Please, oh please, I love you—" Duncan gasped and stalled, his eyes wide in surprise as he came, spurting come all over his chest and stomach. Drenched with sweat and panting like a racing dog, Mark finally gave himself over to it and came with a harsh shudder.

Duncan was still gasping as Mark pulled out. He sat back on his heels, keeping his hands on Duncan's thighs, grinning in sated pleasure until he saw the expression on Duncan's face, a hard and worried look that had nothing to do with making love. Frowning, Mark reached out and traced Duncan's jaw with his fingers. "I love you, too. You know that?"

Duncan's expression broke, but he was soundless as he curled up, yanking Mark towards him. Startled by the sudden, desperate move and still coming down from his orgasm, Mark fell backwards onto his ass. It worked well enough to stabilize them as Duncan tried to burrow into Mark's chest.

He could not imagine his brave, flippant lover, a soldier trained for battle and who willingly waded into bar fights to break them up, was scared of going to war, but it was possible. Duncan was only human. He was certainly human enough in Mark's arms, holding on as if his life depended on it. Mark stroked his back and murmured soothing nonsense and tried to keep his curiosity in check. Duncan was breathing heavily, with Mark wrapped around him, binding them tightly together. Mark waited for tears that did not come.

"I hate this, I don't want to do this," Duncan said angrily, not moving from Mark's shell of protection. Mark wanted to know what the hell was going on, but he knew that Duncan kept to his own counsel—Mark knew a few things about his past, but there were enough unanswered questions to fill a book—and would not answer any question Mark asked. He had no idea what to say in response to Duncan's statement, knowing that if the soldier in Duncan demanded that he take up arms against his country's opponent, he would. The thought of losing Duncan to war sent chills down Mark's spine. He held Duncan until they both started dozing where they were. After stretching out and cleaning up, it remained a worried, restless night for both of them.

The next day, Mark pulled in every favor owed to him to get train tickets, and he was smugly pleased with himself that the only pair he could secure was for a departing train that very night, no matter how expensive they had been in the end. Whatever was haunting Duncan was tied to

Marigolt, so Mark wanted him out of the city as quickly as possible, before he did something stupid. He sent a message to the office where Duncan had found a temporary job just a few weeks before, telling him to pack what he needed, to be ready, to meet him at the station. Back at his apartment, Mark quickly filled a bag with his most durable clothes, his travel kit, and the framed photo of him and Duncan taken on their first date to the beer gardens. He considered not taking the picture but his sentimental nature convinced him to pack it with a wash of memory of how happy they had been that day.

He waited until the last minute, until far past the last minute, for Duncan to show. He waited long after the message boy shoved into Mark's hand the note Duncan sent to the station that said simply, "Mark, I love you. Please forgive me." He stood on the platform with the note in his hand until he had to make a run for the train as it pulled out, his only escape after spending nearly all of his money on a pair of tickets others would kill for, and that Duncan was never going to use.

Two years later all he had left of Duncan was that note, and the photograph of them he had almost left behind.

CHAPTER TWO

Present day, in a nameless city-state in the free territory known as the Margin

"Don't force my hand, Mark."

"Arjan, I wouldn't dream of it," Mark smirked, leaning against the bar. Arjan was irredeemably corrupt, a true man of the Margin, an official with no official title who drifted from petty crime to state politics as if neither mattered to him at all. Mark didn't like him and didn't trust him, but pandering to Arjan's fancies was a crucial part of Mark's business operations.

"The war has cost all of us, people and money, and it keeps bleeding us dry. I know you came in from Marigolt, I know you have connections, but don't take the easy money. At least this one time. Steer clear of Doctor Henri and his entourage."

"I don't give a fuck about Henri, his entourage, or his politics." Mark straightened up, letting his annoyance show.

Arjan was imperturbable. "Yes, but you might give a fuck about his money. I know you did not buy this night club with your supposed inheritance, in fact I know a lot about your finances and just how questionable they are."

"I'm a solid businessman."

"Yes, of course you are. You fit well here in the Margin." Arjan's smile was shark-like. "But I also know easy pickings when I see them, and Henri is desperate to find a way to the Republic."

"I'd figure he wants to go overseas."

Arjan waved a hand around dismissively. "Who is interested in neutral parties these days? Overseas, they are too removed from the war to care about it."

"Sounds good to me." Mark smirked again.

Arjan eyed him critically. "Yet, here you are. And don't play pauper with me, remember, I keep a close eye on your money. At least, the money you trade legally. So I know you could have bought passage for yourself any time this past year."

"And leave all this behind?" Mark gave the club a presentation wave, sweeping his arm to indicate the expensive chandeliers and the inlaid tile floor and the dozens of people dancing, gambling, and drinking. Arjan rolled his eyes.

"Such as it is, Dr. Henri is not an official guest of any government here, and the Republic's boarders remained closed." Arjan tried to sound stern and forbidding.

"If he wants to come into this bar and buy a few drinks, I'm not stopping him." Mark crossed his arms over his chest, tired of the discussion.

"I'm sure he will. It's my understanding that he travels with particular companion upon whom he dotes."

"Again, not my concern. What's eating you about this, Arjan? You don't normally wave your *badge* around." Mark gave Arjan' crotch a suggestive look.

Arjan snorted in amusement, adjusting himself in his pants ostentatiously. Arjan preferred women, but he flirted shamelessly with everyone whether they liked it or not.

"Let's just say I have patrons who are interested in the outcome, or rather I should say, the stalling, of Henri's progress."

"Good enough for me. Now, are we drinking or what?"

Arjan nodded pleasantly as Mark waved the barman over.

Of course, he should have *known*. He should have tapped his informants the second Arjan started making an issue about Henri, he should have figured out what the situation really was behind all the headlines and he should have braced for the worst. He hadn't done a damn thing, so Mark stood in mute, furious shock as Dr. Alistair Henri walked through the club with Duncan at his side.

"Ah, the companion. Not as young as I was expecting, and a little too male for my tastes, but objectively quite beautiful. Hmmm." Arjan commented. They stood near the private staircase at the back of the club, hidden in shadows but able to take in the whole club at a glance. Mark tried to shake Arjan earlier, but the man was the human equivalent of a leech crossed with an eel, and had refused to leave Mark's side all evening.

Henri sat down at an empty table, smiling up at Duncan with a broad grin. It was a look of pleasure between lovers, which Duncan returned in kind.

"I hear they've been together for five years, even during the time Henri disappeared and was presumed dead. He reappeared in Marigolt about two years ago...about when you left, I believe." Arjan sipped his drink, completely unaware of Mark's vibrating anger next to him. "Took him this long just to get out of the damn city from under the Monarchy's nose. They don't want to kill

him and make him into a martyr, but it's my understanding that his escape to the Margin is making the King reconsider that. I seriously doubt he'll get out of the Margin alive. I'll be surprised if he even stays alive for much longer."

"And the boy?"

Arjan finally looked at him. "What?" He asked, startled.

"The boy. His companion." Mark ground out the words through clenched teeth.

"Good grief, I've never seen this out of you." Arjan grinned. "Taken a shine, eh? Well I'd hardly call him a boy, but he's got the look of a well-bred courtesan. Hmm. I can certainly pull a few strings and find out something about him—"

"His name is Duncan St. Quire." Mark shoved himself off the wall, leaving Arjan to stew in his surprise. He stalked over to the table where Duncan sat looking beautiful and well-kept with the famous revolutionary.

"Dr. Henri."

Henri looked up at him pleasantly, completely at ease with a stranger introducing himself. "Yes? May I help you?"

Mark deliberately kept his gaze focused on Henri, ignoring the startled gasp from Duncan.

"Marcus Secundi. This is my place."

Henri smiled. "And such a fine club it is. Everyone told me to make sure and visit Seconds when I got to the Margin, and I must say I can see why." He was an older man, in his fifties, graying in the distinguished way of the nobility. Once a baron of the Monarchy, he threw over his inheritance and privilege to work against his own government several years before the war started, in an attempt to shove the Monarchy out and usher a revolution in. That much Mark knew, and respected. Henri looked the part, with his flashing blue eyes and impeccable posture.

Mark turned slowly to Duncan. "Duncan."

"Marcus." Duncan's face was shuttered, his dark eyes giving nothing away. In that moment, he looked more like Henri's bodyguard than his companion.

Henri picked up on the obvious tension. "Oh? You two know each other? Duncan, you didn't say."

"Back in Marigolt. Duncan was a regular at my bar there."

"Oh! You're *that* Mark!"

Mark startled, his gaze returning to Henri.

"Yes, Duncan...told me about you," Henri said, his expression knowing but not angry.

"He did."

Henri nodded. "Yes. Please, sit down, share a drink with us."

Mark rallied himself, pulling on reserves of etiquette his mother would have been shocked to observe. "Thank you, but I don't drink with patrons. I simply wanted to introduce myself. Doctor. Duncan." Mark gave them a polite half bow and walked away.

CHAPTER THREE

One thing Mark could count on was that Arjan was a lying bastard, and not above using any means to get what he wanted. Mark knew that he was on Arjan's short list of "reliable" stooges, someone Arjan had enough blackmail on to manipulate as he saw fit. Mark didn't like it, but it was part of the cost of doing business anywhere in the Margin.

So, he took Arjan's studied disinterest in Dr. Henri skeptically. Henri was important, the flashpoint for a revolution that was slowly growing in size and power within the borders of the Monarchy as the war ground on, eating people and money and hope indiscriminately. If the King had finally reached the point where a dead Henri was less dangerous than a living one, then Mark knew Henri's days were numbered. What Mark did not know was how much Arjan really knew about it, or even cared. The more Arjan pretended not to be interested in Henri's activities at all, though, the more Mark grew to believe that Arjan was in it up to his neck.

Henri, meanwhile, played the part of vacationing playboy to perfection, avoiding the seedier quarters of the city, enjoying genteel sports at the beachside resorts, and living in a small bungalow donated for his unlimited use by a rich businessman who was thumbing his nose at the Monarchy from a distance. Mark's list of contacts in the city was nearly as extensive as Arjan's and probably overlapped, and they all told him the same thing: Henri was as politically active as any nobleman on holiday, which was to say, not at all. Duncan was with him all the time. The two were reportedly the love birds of the city, and if Duncan was usually armed with a shoulder holster, then the explanation was simply that Henri had the good sense to bed his bodyguard from the start.

What was crystal clear to Mark, from the bits and pieces of the stories he got from various sources, was that the tale Duncan had told him of being in Marigolt as part of a world tour after his discharge was a complete fabrication. The true story, as dramatically and romantically related to him by his overly sentimental barman Josephiah, was that Duncan was a member of the military attaché to the Republic's embassy in the Royal City, where Henri visited often as a close friend of the Republic's lead diplomat. The romance bloomed, Henri became a revolutionary, and Duncan either defected from the Republic or was assigned to "assist" Henri's revolution. The fact that the Republic did not have a price on Duncan's head as a traitor indicated the latter, to the relief of Duncan's many admirers.

Mark tried not to be one of them.

It was hard, though, because Henri took a shine to Seconds and was there nearly every night, charming everyone around him with his educated wit and seemingly endless luck at the gambling tables. Mark checked with his games handler, but Henri played on the up-and-up, he was just as advertised: lucky. Given the way Duncan hovered around the older man, Mark had to concede that was true.

"I thought he was dead," Duncan said, stopping to stand at the bar next to him. Mark, who had not seen him approach, could not think of anything to say to that. Duncan took his silence as an opening to continue. "We made it out of the Royal City easily, but it was three months of walking to get to the border. His health went, and..." Duncan looked up at Josephiah, who was staring at him with blatant interest in the story.

"Josie, move the hell on," Mark rumbled. Josephiah lit out with a look of horror on his cherubic face, disappearing into the store room.

Duncan looked at his hands on the counter for a few moments before continuing. "We had lots of help along the way, but when a border unit found us there wasn't much to do but go with them. They separated us, I escaped, and word got to me through some of our comrades that Henri had been killed. We all kept that out of the news, knowing what a blow it would be to the revolution, but secretly we were all convinced he was gone—"

"Not sure why you think I give a fuck," Mark said pleasantly, sipping at his drink and staring straight ahead.

Duncan straightened up, his military posture coming through. He opened his mouth, but Mark wasn't interested.

"You lied to me about everything, who you were and why you were in Marigolt. You never mentioned Henri. You never said fuck-all about a revolution."

Duncan bristled. "I was protecting friends, I did not really even know you—"

"Yeah, you did, and you played me. Got you a room and hot water to last until Henri showed up again to sweep you off his feet. Smart kid."

"Fuck you, if you think that's what—"

"Shut up, St. Quire." Mark turned on him, feeling his rage boiling at the edges of control. "You did what you did. The end."

Duncan was vibrating with fury, but he nodded at Mark with a snap of his head. "Right. The

end." He spun with precision and marched off to where Henri was watching with worried eyes.

Mark managed to spare the glassware in the bar, but in the privacy of his own flat he took a chair to the living room and broke every damn thing in it.

He was not there when it started, and by the time Mark got to where Duncan had overturned one of the gambling tables, it was far too late to keep a lid on it. Seconds' security force—one very large bruiser named Locci—got there before Mark, but instinctively knew better than to try and take on Duncan, who was wiry but who had morphed from handsome companion to lethally trained soldier in the span of a second. Instead, Locci angled himself between Duncan and Henri, confirming for Mark who was involved.

"Doctor?" Mark asked, unable to keep the amusement out of his voice. He remembered Duncan's sharp temper all too well, and didn't envy Henri for it, even if a petty part of his brain found the situation entertaining.

Henri looked guilty but gave Mark a gracious nod of acknowledgement. Mark turned to Duncan, who only had angry eyes for Henri.

"I gave up everything for you." Duncan's voice was cold. Henri, who had remained seated even when Duncan tossed the table (and Mark was reluctant to admit to himself that he admired that nerve), finally stood up.

"Let's not air our dirty laundry like..." He trailed off self-consciously. Duncan snarled.

"Like peasants?"

Henri shrugged with a meek smile. Duncan was having none of it. Mark motioned for Locci to move back, not wanting the bar brawl that would happen if anyone tried to manhandle Duncan at that point.

"You need to take this home," Mark said loudly, trying to redirect both parties. It worked on one; Duncan turned his fury directly to him.

"I don't have a home. I haven't had one since I met him!" Duncan spat.

"Not my problem, St. Quire. You're causing a scene in my bar, and I need you gone." Mark jerked a thumb toward the main door. He noticed Arjan hanging back, watching with an expression that was more than curiosity.

"I'm leaving." Henri surprised everyone with his announcement. He glanced at Duncan, who shook his head once.

"I know where I'm not wanted."

The statement surprised Mark, but it gutted Henri. The anguish on his face lasted a short moment before his breathing and station shut him down. Giving a stiff, polite nod to Mark and nothing to Duncan, he walked out, people parting before him like a wave.

Mark signaled the bar-back over to fix the mess and mop up, then turned to Duncan with every intention of throwing him out.

"Buy me a drink," Duncan snapped, walking away toward the bar before Mark could say anything. Mark smiled reassuringly at the patrons who were still staring before he slowly meandered to where Duncan was vibrating at the bar. Josephiah was already pouring them drinks, to Mark's chagrin. He gave the bartender a hard glare, sending him skittering away to other customers.

"What the hell was that, St. Quire?"

Duncan slammed his drink before answering. "Doesn't matter."

"It matters when it's got you trashing my place."

Duncan grinned at him, but it was an empty, dangerous smile. "Been a while, I guess?"

Mark downed his own drink. The last time Duncan hurled tables around, it was to break up a fight in Mark's bar back in Marigolt, and by the end of it they were both bloody and sweaty and fucking on the bar after literally throwing everyone out.

Josephiah furtively refilled their glasses then dashed away again.

"Finish that then go home."

Duncan stopped with the glass halfway to his mouth. Lowering the glass without drinking, he stared at the bar. "Not tonight."

A chill went down Mark's spine, spurred by lust and regret. Steeling himself, he sipped at his own drink. "Go home, Duncan."

Duncan closed his eyes, pressing his hands down on the bar. "No."

"You can't stay here," Mark said, his eyes straying to look for Arjan. He didn't find him, which was neither comforting nor worrying. It was hard to tell, with Arjan; either way it was probably a bad sign.

"Then I'll sleep on the streets. I'm not worried about it."

Mark sighed. "Lover's spat? Not your style."

Surprisingly, Duncan shuffled closer and leaned in, talking quietly. "He wants me to go to

the Eastern Conference."

"Overseas? I thought he was headed to the Republic," Mark replied just as softly.

"He is. He wants *me* to go overseas."

"And you won't leave him."

Duncan glared fiercely at his drink, looking rebellious. "I might. This time, I just might."

"No. I'm the one you leave behind." Mark sounded even bitterer than he expected. Duncan was pressed up against him, hot and strong, bringing back all the memories of Marigolt that Mark tried for two years to forget.

Duncan leaned in further to whisper in his ear. "I didn't want to. I—" He broke off, stepping away and turning his back to the bar, staring out over the crowded club. "It hasn't been the same since he showed up in Marigolt. We're not...it's five years later, I'm not the twenty-three year old romantic I used to be." He was still talking softly so only Mark could hear him, but his posture was lazy and indifferent.

"Not much of a romantic at all, that I can tell," Mark snapped, still facing the bar.

Duncan fiddled with his empty glass. "You really hate me."

Mark leaned down on his elbows, rubbing his temples with his fingers. "No. That's the fucking problem."

Duncan spun around. "Let's take this somewhere else."

"Go home."

Duncan eyed him, then walked off straight for the private entrance to the stairwell that led up to Mark's flat over the club. He stood by the locked door expectantly until Mark followed. "You're causing a damn scene."

Duncan closed the door behind them as they started up the stairs. "Everyone knows I'm Henri's fuck toy, I'm just giving them gossip. It's all they care about anyway."

Mark walked into his living room, which was a lot more sparsely decorated than it had been a few days before, but at least the cleaning crew he hired had fixed up the damage. The replacement sofa and chairs were bought used by Josephiah, so at least they looked lived in. Duncan fell onto the couch, sprawling out.

"You do this a lot? Fuck around?" Mark asked.

"Who says we're going to fuck?" Duncan grinned as if he knew Mark was a sure thing.

Mark came to a stop in the middle of the room, crossing his arms. "What are you doing,

Duncan? Because I don't need games from you."

Duncan's grin faded. "No, I don't fuck around. Ever." He rubbed the back of his neck, looking at the carpet. "I was in love with Henri for a long time, and then when I wasn't, I had expectations to live up to. Fucking around would have hurt the cause, given the Monarchy bad press to throw at us. Then Henri disappeared, I thought he was dead, and I met you. A lot... a lot has happened. We're lovers but it's more like a business arrangement, something we do for the sake of the revolution."

"Sex for the masses?" Mark snorted.

"Not like that; just, everyone thinks I'm Henri's, that I belong to him. We're a set pair, we go together. We lead the revolution together. It's all Henri, but I'm expected to be there." Duncan rubbed his face. "Henri loves me, that's never changed for him."

"But it has for you."

Duncan looked at him, his expression broken and sad. "Yes."

Mark gave up on his promises to himself to stay away, instead sitting down next to Duncan. "This won't change anything. You'll go back to him tomorrow."

Duncan did not reply, remaining absolutely still, giving Mark no answer to his statement.

"He loves you, so he wants you to be safe. That doesn't make him a bastard." Mark figured Henri knew he had a price on his head, or would soon, and wanted Duncan gone before the hit happened. Mark couldn't blame the guy for that.

"I'll go back to him, but not because I love him. He is the revolution; without him it could fall apart so easily. As long as I'm with him, he'll keep fighting. If I leave, they'll take him out."

Mark narrowed his eyes. "You're not the one stopping them from assassinating him."

"Maybe I am." Duncan stuck his jaw out, looking young and stubborn. It was all Mark could do not to laugh.

"If they want him dead, he's as good as in his grave. They'll just go through you to do it, if they have to. You know that, don't play at being naïve and innocent, it's not a good look for you."

"Then we'll both be martyrs for the cause," Duncan snarled, not sounding like it would be much of an honor.

"What good would that do? Hell, maybe Henri's trying to make sure someone is left alive to lead the revolution. I don't like him but I respect him; you don't get out of the Monarchy's clutches by being stupid."

Duncan turned towards him. "Why do you keep arguing his side?"

"Because I've got nothing to lose. You walked out on me two years ago, and maybe it was for a good reason. You believe in the revolution, and you know Henri is important. You made your choice then, and that doesn't change anything for me now."

Duncan stared at him for a long, quiet moment, twisting around so he was backwards on the couch. He scooted up then leaned forward, resting against Mark's chest, his head on his shoulder. Mark kept his arms up and out of the way, settling them to rest on the back of the couch, refusing to hold on to Duncan even as he wrapped himself around Mark. They sat like that for long minutes, until Duncan shifted to press himself closer.

"You weren't even listening to the announcements that night. On the radio." Duncan spoke into Mark's shirt.

"What?"

"The announcements. That night, in Marigolt, before you left. They reported that Henri had been found alive; nothing more than that, but I knew I had to go back to him. For the sake of the revolution, for him, for me...I had to go back."

"No you didn't. You could've told me, I'd—"

"You'd what? Help him? Fight for the revolution? You're not a fighter, Mark, not like that." Duncan laughed caustically, but tightened his hold. "The first time I gave up everything for him didn't bother me. Back in Marigolt, it was different."

"Why?"

Duncan shrugged. "You."

Mark's resolve broke, and he moved to hold Duncan in his arms. If he only ever got that much, at least it was more than what he had been left with at the train station in Marigolt.

They sat like that for a while, breathing against each other, comfortable in ways that made Mark's heart ache. He was not going to ask for more, uncomfortable with the idea of Henri between them, yet that did not stop him from imagining different circumstances. He began tracing lazy circles on Duncan's back as they relaxed into the familiarity of the touch.

Duncan pulled himself up without warning and kissed him. It was exactly what Mark didn't want and everything he needed, so he returned the kiss hesitantly. Duncan was not in a hurry, pressing his lips against Mark's softly, his tongue flicking out shyly to taste Mark's skin. Persistently, Duncan would pause, breathe, then kiss him again, over and over, gentle and slow

kisses that finally melted Mark into the couch, Duncan pressing him down. He wanted to be more comfortable than that, but he thought breaking them apart to move to the bedroom would send Duncan scurrying back from touching him.

"Duncan, I—"

"Shhh, shhh. Let me fix this," Duncan whispered. Mark nodded with a jerk, letting Duncan take the lead, relaxing under him. Duncan grinned when he felt Mark's acquiescence. He pulled Mark closer by grabbing his shirt and gave him a deep, dirty kiss. "Bed?"

Mark closed his eyes and nodded.

Duncan stopped halfway to getting up. "We don't have to."

"Yes, we do."

Duncan reached out and cupped his jaw. "Yes, we do." He leaned down and kissed him again, then pulled him up off the couch without breaking the kiss. They meandered across the room to the doorway of the bedroom, where Mark pushed Duncan against the door jam and finally let himself go, let himself take what he wanted. He shoved up against Duncan, pressing them together as he kissed on the attack, trying his best to tongue fuck Duncan's mouth. Duncan rolled his hips and started laughing. Mark pulled off with a glare.

"Nice way to set the mood, kid."

Duncan's eyes narrowed, twinkling with delight as his grin turned feral. He grabbed Mark's jacket and before Mark could figure out what was next, Duncan spun them around and tossed Mark on the bed with the momentum. Mark laughed.

"Get undressed," Duncan pointed at him. Mark rolled his eyes and sat up to take off his jacket, but as it hit the floor he froze, his entire span of attention snatched away. Duncan stood next to the bed, slowly dropping his own jacket off of his shoulders to puddle on the ground at his feet. He pulled his shoulder holster off, respectfully placing it on the chest of drawers near him before starting to unbutton his shirt. His fingers trailed over his chest as he undid each button in turn, working down until he had to pull the shirt tails out of his pants to finish. With a flick of his hands he unbuttoned the wrists and the shirt followed the jacket to the floor. Mark braced himself on his elbows, watching the striptease. Duncan pulled his undershirt off, then nimbly unbuckled his belt.

"Duncan, for fuck's sake," Mark stuttered, eyeing the bulge in Duncan's trousers.

"Get your clothes off, Mark." Duncan's voice was low and raw, yanking Mark back to the

project he had abandoned in lieu of staring at Duncan. As the faint light from the windows splashed over Duncan's body, Mark saw a few new scars, including one that had to come from a bullet wound high on Duncan's shoulders. It marked Duncan as being a different man than the one Mark bedded two years before, and Mark hated that.

"Mark. Mark!" Duncan crawled on the bed, touching Mark's face again to bring him back to the moment. "You slowing in your old age?"

Duncan's taunt did the trick, and Mark worked to get out of his shirts and undo his own trousers. He watched peripherally as Duncan stripped off his pants and tossed them off the bed. Then Duncan's hands were pulling Mark's trousers off his legs. Mark waited for the feel of Duncan on top of him, but Duncan sat on his heels and ran his hands over Mark's torso and hips, down his thighs and back up.

"I missed you," Duncan said, the words rough.

"I waited for you. I was running to catch the damn train, I waited for you so long, even after I got that fucking note. I knew you'd show. I knew it." He left unsaid the final phrase, *until you didn't*.

Duncan shook his head, his touch turning firm, just short of massaging. "I was going to," he sighed. Mark snorted in disbelief. "That day, when I got your message, I decided to just let Henri know I was leaving. I figured he made it that far without me, he didn't need me. Until I saw him. He was hurt, just short of dead. Pneumonia, on top of everything else. Our comrades were in a disorganized panic. The Monarchy's army was days away."

Mark listened to the unspoken words: that Duncan felt responsible for Henri's condition, that he was obligated to take up the void in leadership in the revolution's moment of crisis. For the first time, Mark saw that day in a different light, less as a betrayal and more as tragedy. It still hurt, but instead of being something that was Mark's private pain, he sensed the despair that Duncan must have felt that day.

"What's done is done. We both made our choices," Mark said quietly. Duncan took it like a blow, curling over Mark, placing sucking kisses on his chest. Mark was comfortable letting Duncan have this between them, and waited for Duncan to make the next move, rubbing his hand over Duncan's still-short hair as he all but worshipped his body. After a few moments, Duncan looked up at him.

"I want to blow you, then fuck you. I want to mark you," Duncan said hoarsely. Mark

nodded, his words gone.

Duncan practically oozed down the bed, kissing as he went, until his mouth reached Mark's cock. He gave the tip a little lick, tasting the precum that had welled up. Mark gasped. Smiling, Duncan wrapped his lips around the head, sucking lightly. Mark's body arced like a strung bow, the sensation of Duncan's mouth on him too intense for him to stay still. Duncan slowly moved his head down, taking Mark in until he reached his limit then pulled back up. He wrapped one hand around the base and squeezed.

"Fuck, Duncan! Just—fuck!" Mark scrambled at the sheets and Duncan laughed at him again. He moved over Mark's legs, shoving them apart with his knees while he kept at a steady, rhythmic pumping of Mark's dick. He gave Mark a cocky grin before sinking back down to take him into his mouth. Mark was gone, lost to the sensations and to the feel of Duncan between his legs. He put one hand on Duncan's head, unable to stop himself from pushing down as his hips went up. Duncan rode it, sucking and licking with his mouth while he kept at the leisurely stroking with his hand, and Mark felt the tension building too soon.

"Stop, stop, I'm going to come," Mark pleaded, but Duncan resisted, his hot, wet mouth working Mark hard until there was no return. Mark pushed himself up onto his hands, half-sitting, as his orgasm hit him like a tidal wave dragging him away. "Duncan! Oh!" He managed to gasp out while his body stuttered. Duncan mouthed him until Mark was shoving him off, swallowing everything and laving his softening cock with a blissed out look on his face. "Well, fuck, I hoped to go longer than that," Mark gasped, falling back down on the bed.

"No, you were perfect." Duncan sat up and scooted in, pressing Mark's legs further apart. Feeling sated and lazy, Mark just smiled up at him. Duncan looked around. "Ah—"

"In the drawer," Mark said, flopping his hand toward the nightstand. Duncan looked at it, his expression changing.

"You kept it."

Mark squinted, trying to figure out what the hell he meant, because he certainly had not kept their old jar of cream, he had bought a new one for his own personal ministrations a while ago. Then he looked over, and realized that Duncan was staring at the photo of them Mark had taken with him out of Marigolt. He shrugged, because it was pretty damning evidence that Mark had never gotten over Duncan, and with his legs splayed out in the bed it was pointless to deny it anyway.

Duncan leaned over and kissed him, deep and angry. Mark wrapped his arms and legs around him, holding him close. The kiss went on until Mark was dizzy. Duncan finally let him breathe but only long enough to gasp for air as Duncan sucked on a spot of skin right above his collarbone. He nibbled at it and sucked it for what finally forever, and in between the pain and the pleasure, Mark realized that it was a mark he would be wearing for weeks. Finally Duncan sat back again. He reached for the drawer, pulling out the cream, and without much foreplay started prepping Mark, who nearly shot out of bed as the first finger breached him. Duncan looked at him in surprise.

"Been a while?"

"I don't let strangers fuck me," Mark snarled. Duncan stilled.

"Oh." He returned to fingering Mark, but with a bit more finesse and patience. Mark did not want to admit how grateful he was for that.

Duncan worked at him with a focused intensity that Mark could not break, and didn't want to try. He knew Duncan wanted this, and maybe fucking was something Henri never let Duncan do or maybe it was just because Duncan wanted to be the one controlling their encounter. Mark was past caring as Duncan pulled his fingers out, lined himself up, and pushed in. Mark groaned at the intrusion, his legs shaking and his body bucking, even as he wallowed in the feeling of fullness inside of him.

Duncan's strength came through in the way he pushed Mark down on the bed by his shoulders, leveraging his position and power to pin Mark down. Mark grabbed his own half-hard cock with one hand and put the other against Duncan's chest, just to connect with him. Duncan gasped, wordless and already covered with a light sheen of sweat as he held himself still and fully seated inside of Mark.

"Do it, come on, I want to feel you," Mark urged, and it was all Duncan needed by way of encouragement. He started thrusting slowly but built up speed quickly until he was pounding into Mark with wordless grunts. He never closed his eyes, staring at Mark's face and sometimes glancing down between them to where they were joined. Too soon, Duncan's movements became erratic and he started making the familiar little gasps that signaled he was close. Mark reached up and grabbed the nape of Duncan's neck and yanked him down into a kiss just as Duncan came, powering into Mark's body with one long push.

Duncan shuddered helplessly in Mark's arms as he unwound, lying flat out on top of Mark

like a dead weight. Mark rolled them to the side, Duncan's cock slipping out of him wetly as they settled into a loose-limbed cuddle.

"I don't want to leave you again," Duncan said, his face pressed into Mark's shoulder, his arms like arm bands around him.

"Shh. We'll deal with that later," Mark said, knowing that every second he could keep Duncan in his bed was a gift. He had more than he did when he left Marigolt, but he was certain that this time, when Duncan left, it would be forever. Duncan fell asleep murmuring unintelligible promises, leaving Mark to drift slowly in his thoughts and regrets until the dark of night finally took him.

Just as he predicted, Duncan was gone by the time the sun rose, and there was nothing there to say that he had shared Mark's bed other than the smell of him on the pillows and Mark's evening suit strewn across the floor. It wasn't until Mark was getting dressed that he realized the photograph was missing from his bedside table. He sat down and stared at the empty space until Josephiah rung him up an hour later to pester him about inventory.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mark hated doing the books, especially since in the Margin that also included "cooking the books" to account for various bribes, payoffs, and suspicious inventory. The bar was open, but everyone in the city knew that Mark worked on the books at the booth in the furthest back corner of the bar on the afternoon of the third day of the week, so the place was quiet as a grave. As quiet as it could be while Mark cursed loudly at his abacus, his pencil, and his profit margin. Josephiah brought him watered down drinks and sugared-up coffee, so Mark did not even look up when the shadow fell across the table.

"Mr. Secundi."

Mark glared up at Henri, then took the pencil out of his mouth. He glanced around for Duncan.

Henri shook his head. "He was invited by Lady Karstairs to tour her winery. I told him I was staying in to read a book."

Mark nodded.

"May I sit?"

Holding back a groan, Mark nodded again and waved at the chair at the end of the booth. Henri took it comfortably, but did not relax. "I'm here about Duncan."

"What about him?" Mark sat back, crossing his arms.

"What I'm not here to do is play games." Henri folded his hands on the table. "I love him."

"Good for you."

"I suspect you love him too."

"Not your problem, even if it was true."

Henri shook his head. "Not my problem, true; but my concern, yes. I think we both know my chances of remaining alive much longer are slim."

Mark knew. Just that morning Josephiah had told him of gossip about new reports out of the Monarchy that Henri's presence in the Margin was viewed as too dangerous to be allowed to continue. "True. Although word is you're more valuable to them alive."

"Yes, they wish to cart me back and make an example of me. Not my fondest wish; in any case, Duncan would die to protect me, and I'd rather he not."

"He's your bodyguard, unofficially or not."

"Yes, and he has been for years. That's...why did you send him back to me?"

"I didn't, but believe me I tried. He returned to you on his own; he believes in your revolution, he believes in you." Mark tried to hold the bitterness out of his voice, but from the look on Henri's face he suspected that he failed.

"I staged that whole situation so he would go to you, and stay there. Sending him back complicates things."

Mark frowned. "You think that will keep him from dying for you?"

Henri looked at his hands thoughtfully, pausing for a while before speaking. "I love him. We loved each other, once. He was so young and innocent, and he fell in love with me because I represented change, and adventure. I was authority and rebellion all in one; he adored me."

"Still does," Mark snapped.

"Mmmm. No. I lost him to the revolution, I think. And, then, to you." Henri looked up. "I know he cares for me, and believes in me, but he has shared my bed these past two years out of duty, not love."

Mark's heart clinched in warring factions of hope and fury. "Perks of nobility."

Henri's eyes darkened. "Yes, I suppose so. Old habits die hard?" His laugh was bitter and cold. "I do know that when I die, if Duncan does not die with me, he will continue to fight for the revolution in the Monarchy. Even as a former citizen of the Republic—who are very unofficial in their support of Duncan's activities—he believes in what we are doing. The politician in me knows that for this movement to succeed, it needs Duncan. It needs Duncan more than it needs me, in fact. He doesn't see it, but it is true." Henri sighed. "The romantic in me simply wants the man I love to live a long life. A happy life. Chances are slim, but with you by his side...well, I believe the odds would be better."

"Of living or of being happy?" Mark stared directly at him.

"Both? A man can dream." Henri smiled, an open and honest expression that caught Mark off guard.

"I'm not the guy for that."

Henri waved a hand dismissively, and Mark thought that indeed, old habits die hard. Henri looked like a lord in cabinet, hushing one of his secretaries. "I have arranged for a boat to take us out of the Margin. It leaves the night after tomorrow. It's taking us to a secret location, but

suffice to say it is hardly neutral territory."

"Not overseas then."

"The Eastern Conference will not be able to stay out of this much longer, but yes, for now. Not overseas."

"So? Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you and Duncan will be on that boat together. I will not be leaving; it is my destiny to die here in the Margin, I've known that for a while now. I'll be shot before I can step foot on that boat, in fact by not going I will probably extend my life by several weeks, if not months. But Duncan won't go without me, I'm sure of that. You have to make sure he gets on that damn boat!" Henri broke, his frustration coming out in his words even if he was still speaking softly.

Mark leaned back. "What's in it for me?"

Henri calmed quickly, giving him a shrewd look. "Duncan isn't payment enough?"

"No. He'll hate me for making him leave you behind. He'll never forgive me for that, so don't think you're giving him to me like a fucking prize. I can do it, I'll get him away to where you want him to go, but I'll be lucky if he doesn't shoot me himself."

The bastard chuckled. "You might be right at that. How about, as a businessman understanding your need to, ah, depart quickly, I buy Seconds?"

Mark blinked. "You don't have money to buy my bar. Not that kind of money."

"Oh, I certainly do. It's such a pleasure to know that even now, people underestimate me." He chuckled again. "Name your price. I'll even try to bargain you down, if that will make you feel better about it."

Mark wrote an outrageous number on a scrap of paper, just to chase Henri off the crazy idea. Henri took the paper, gazed at the number without reaction, then nodded. "Cash, I assume?"

Mark blinked, trying not to betray his shock. "Yeah. Cash."

"Will have to be large bills, or it would fill several suitcases. They'll be unmarked. Or would you prefer Teton Bonds?"

Untraceable, universal, and unquestionable. Teton Bonds were the ultimate currency: good anywhere, valuable everywhere. "Half and half."

Henri nodded, still unfazed. "Smart man. I see why you do so well here. So, I'll arrange everything, send a messenger to let you know where to be and when."

"What about Duncan?"

"Oh, let me handle Duncan for now. He has to believe we're leaving together, or he'll sabotage the whole thing, the smart boy that he is. If he talks to you, inquires about anything, brush him off."

"What if he just...visits?" Mark threw it out there, to see Henri's colors. They were green, envious and angry, but his expression closed up fast.

"I still love him. At least respect me that much."

"You know what we did when he stayed here the other night."

"I *suspect*. Duncan has not discussed it with me, and I'm happy with that arrangement for now. You'll get him for the rest of his life, Secundus, allow me the next two days for my goodbye."

Mark was laying odds that Duncan would shoot him between the eyes when he found out that he'd been played by both him and Henri, but for now it would be a petty victory to deny Henri's heartfelt request. "Unless he comes here on his own; otherwise I'll stay clear until it's time to put this plan in motion."

CHAPTER FIVE

Mark didn't see either man the following two days. The rumor mill was that they were holed up together having lots of make-up sex after their very public falling out. Arjan was going around looking smug, as if Henri was playing into his hands with the whole situation. Mark suspected Henri was doing just that, only Arjan was outclassed and didn't know it. Henri only played into the hands of those he was already using for his own agenda, and while Mark was curious about specifically what Henri thought he was going to pull off, he figured he'd live longer if he didn't know. It would be a tight window of opportunity for him to get Duncan out alive in any case, even without the complications of Henri and Arjan' unknown machinations.

It was impossible to warn his staff about the upcoming change in ownership without giving everything away, but that was the only regret he had. The bar was nice, his employees were good people, and his regulars reliable; but there was nothing holding him to the place. He started the business knowing that it was temporary for him, and nothing had changed two years later.

When Henri's message came, it was late afternoon and Mark was already in his evening suit, welcoming the early birds to the bar. The kid who delivered the folded piece of paper—unsealed, uncoded—probably couldn't read, but it did not matter. The note simply said "23, 9:30" as if Mark would understand. He did, of course, but he appreciated Henri's confidence in Mark's intelligence.

At nine, he excused himself from the club inconspicuously under the ruse of a headache. He suffered from headaches enough that no one questioned it as he retreated to his upstairs suite. Not bothering to change, he grabbed the duffel he packed just a few hours before along with his old but serviceable pistol then snuck out the back window.

Mark was slightly unnerved by Arjan's absence from the bar that whole evening, and part of his brain was screaming at him to expect the worst, but by the time he got to warehouse 23 on the docks he was too focused on what he'd need to do to get Duncan on the boat to spare Arjan much thought. The door to the warehouse was open, Henri lounging easily against a table under the single work light that was on. The rest of the space was thrown in shadows, giving the place an eerie, dangerous atmosphere, although Henri looked immune to that. He was dressed in sporting clothes, trousers and linen shirt and vest, as if waiting for a game of tennis to start.

"Where's Duncan?" Mark dropped his duffle bag as he walked up to Henri.

"Finishing some business. Necessary business, either way; it's no fool's errand." Henri stood up straight, stretching as if he had been waiting hours for Mark to show up. "Your money is on the boat. You'll have to trust me on that."

Mark shrugged, unwilling to admit even to himself that he would do this whether he was paid for it or not. "You have any plans for getting him on the boat without you?" Mark asked caustically, because as much as he had been trying to figure out a plan, he was still drawing a blank.

"Hmmm? Oh, yes. You tell him I paid you to arrange us passage, and that I'm already on the boat. He trusts you, so he'll follow you onboard as you explain the 'plan.' By the time he realizes he's been set up, the boat will be well into the harbor." Henri shrugged.

"I'll still have to muscle him to keep him from going overboard," Mark snarled, unhappy with the thought.

"I'm sure you will. By the time he overpowers you, and he will, the boat will be out of swimming distance. The captain is under instructions to move swiftly. He knows what's at stake."

Mark cocked his head, thinking. "One of your 'comrades'?"

Henri shrugged again, his smile his only answer.

"Best plan we've got, then." Mark rubbed his hands together. "You ever run a bar before?"

"No." Henri laughed, his manner careless and casual, as if nothing of importance was happening that night.

"You don't need to. Josephiah knows everything, no matter what he tells you. Give him a raise, and—"

"Good evening, gentlemen." Arjan materialized out of the back of the warehouse, holding his gun on them. It was a small pistol, but Mark knew that Arjan was a crack shot and would not miss hitting what he aimed at.

For the first time since Mark met him, Henri looked startled. "I thought I lost you."

"Hardly." Arjan's eyes gleamed with triumph. "You think you could just run away? I don't know how you dragged Marcus into this, but it doesn't matter. I'll kill you both."

Mark looked at him, suspicious. "If you were going to do that, we'd be dead already."

Arjan glared at him.

"You don't want us dead. Or, you don't want Henri dead. The Monarchy wants him alive after all, don't they? More money for you." Mark snapped, the pieces fitting together. "But you need control of the situation when Duncan shows up, or he'll kill you outright."

Arjan was still frowning, but shrugged. "The price on Henri's head is much greater if he's alive, true."

"Then let's go now," Henri looked around nervously. Mark realized that he was expecting Duncan to show up at any moment, and was trying to get out of there quickly.

"No, St. Quire needs to die. Else he'll hunt me down."

"Secundus is taking him away. The boat is for them. Let them go, take me out of here now, and I'll go quietly."

"No!" Duncan shouted from the door, his own gun pointed at Arjan. "Put it down!"

"I'll kill him, St. Quire, and it will all be for nothing!" Arjan snapped. At the two faced off, Mark shifted slowly. Grabbing his gun from its holster would draw attention to him, but with enough of a lead he might drop, pull and fire before Arjan could aim. Or Duncan might take Arjan out first.

"Duncan, put it down. Go with Secundus," Henri ordered loudly.

"Like hell. I'm not letting you do this!" Duncan snarled, his gun firmly pointed at Arjan, while Arjan's never wavered from Henri.

"It's time, Duncan. We've talked about this. We knew at some point I would not be leading the revolution anymore."

"This isn't *my* revolution!"

Henri looked over at Duncan, his expression heartbroken. "Yes, it is, and you know it."

Mark went for his gun as Henri stepped in front of Arjan, blocking Duncan's line of fire as he reached into his jacket. Arjan pulled the trigger instinctively, expecting Henri to draw on him, and Mark fired off two rounds into Arjan as Henri dropped.

Duncan stood in the quiet aftermath, his unfired gun still pointing at where Arjan had been standing, looking shocked that it had all happened without him. In the next second, he ran to Henri. Mark looked around expecting someone to have heard the shots, but the only sound was the boat idling in the foggy night, its crew completely uncaring about the gunfire. Standard business in the Margin, Mark mused as he turned back to where Duncan sat on the ground, cradling Henri's body, the dead man's head lolling against Duncan's bloodied chest. Mark looked

down the dockside to where their boat waited, knowing it would not wait too much longer. At his own feet, Arjan' body cooled.

"Duncan." Mark's voice was scratchy and harsh even to his own ears. Henri had been that rarest of all creatures, a good man fighting a just cause, and he deserved better than to be rolled off into dark waters and forgotten.

Duncan looked up, surprising Mark by the fact that he was not crying. His face was dry, his eyes hard and angry. "This doesn't end here."

"No, I suppose it doesn't." Feeling more comfortable with Duncan's fury than his grief, Mark felt himself shift into pragmatism. "We need to go." He wiped his gun down with a handkerchief, just in case, and dropped onto Arjan' chest like a marker.

Duncan nodded. He gave Henri one last, hard squeeze, kissing his temple. Slowly, he lowered Henri's body to the ground as he stood up. Mark studied him, then grabbed Henri's long coat from where he had thrown it over the back of a chair at some point.

"Put this on. You're a sight, and we don't have time for you to change. Let's not scare the boat crew until we have to." He passed the coat to Duncan, who put it on slowly, carefully buttoning it up over his blood-covered clothes. Mark wondered if Duncan was in shock. "You going to be okay with this?"

Duncan looked directly at him. "I loved him once, a long time ago." He closed his angry eyes, taking a deep breath. "No, I'm not okay with this. Those bastards will pay. I will spend the rest of my life fighting for what Henri believed in. What he *died* for." He opened his eyes, his whole body vibrating with determination. Mark thought he was beautiful.

"I figured as much."

They walked carefully from the bodies and out the door, heading towards the boat. "You don't have to fight alongside me, Mark," Duncan said, hunching down in the oversized coat, hands in his pocket.

"I won't. Not my battle."

Duncan nodded, looking even more defeated. Mark stepped closer and put his arm around him. "As you pointed out, I'm not a fighter; but I'm willing to spend the rest of my life helping *you* fight Henri's war."

END

