

It came as no surprise to Bram when he found someone in his rooms. What was surprising was that she had all her clothes on.

"I'm sorry for keeping you waiting," said Bram and bowed his head. The door of his apartment slid shut behind him. "You should have made yourself comfortable."

She sat on the counter with the hood of her cloak pulled up, obscuring the details of her face.

"Oh, I did," said the woman and lifted the glass in her hand. "The city air always makes me so thirsty."

Bram didn't recognize her voice; it lilted on an angle. He searched for details that might identify her, but could only see the line of her shoulders and the backs of her hands.

"Good," he replied, then frowned when he noticed the work boots on her feet. "But I meant..." He stopped, jaw tight as he searched for his words. "You could have removed your cloak at the very least."

"I didn't want to be presumptuous. You weren't expecting me."

Bram extended his arm in the direction of his bed. "That's very kind. I won't keep you waiting any longer."

She turned her head in the direction he had indicated then directed her attention immediately back to him.

Bram's stomach fell when he glanced over his shoulder and saw the still-tangled sheets from his last visitor. He shifted on his feet, squaring his shoulders and reaching up to pull back his hood, then crossed three paces to recline on the mattress.

The woman put her glass down on the counter. "Do you know why I'm here?"

"Father Jonathan sent you." With a practiced motion, Bram undid the clasp at his neck, and the folds of his cloak fell open around him. He propped himself up on his elbows and splayed his bent leg to the side in invitation.

"That's good. It's always easier when the other person is prepared."

Bram's chest tightened but he forced himself to smile and nod towards the vial of oil that sat unstoppered on the bedside table, waiting. "I'm always prepared."

"Well, then," the woman said and reached up to uncover her head.

Bram sucked in a quick breath, his eyes wide.

"I'm Lena," she said.

"You're lovely," he gasped.

Lena cocked her head to the side, a faint smile growing on her lips. "So are you."

He pushed himself upright and reached to pull the thick fabric of his cloak back around him. "How are you alive?"

She sighed, one of her eyebrows raising. "Really? And how about you?"

"With a face like that you should have been killed years ago."

"You're twice as pretty as I am."

"And I've been alone for eighteen years. I thought I was the only one. The Ministers told me that themselves." He heard his voice rising, heard it shaking, but found there was nothing he could do to make it stop. His chest ached at the sight of her. Never did he think it might be possible to find a counterpart to himself.

"Now you have me," said Lena.

Bram jumped to his feet, one hand knotting in his thick curls as he paced a bed's length of the stone floor. "You said that Father Jonathan sent you. You..." He trailed off and stopped to watch as Lena bent down and pulled a small knife from her boot. A plait of dark hair slipped out from her collar. She deftly twisted it back over her shoulder as she straightened. "He did."

Bram pressed his eyes shut, gathering his scattered thoughts. Her face, her story, her knife. His hands fisted, and his voice lowered, "Do you work for him? Do you work for Father Jonathan too?"

Lena frowned but didn't bother looking up from the knife tip she ran under her black-lined nails. "I would call it more of a mutual agreement."

The cloak dropped from Bram's hands and he fell back onto the bed, the room spinning around him. "For how long?"

She slipped the knife back into her boot, took a sip from her water and swallowed before answering. "About eight years now."

He saw the slight slump to her shoulders then, the purple smudges under her eyes, a bruise on her wrist. The next question whispered out: "How do you stand it?"

"I have to."

He nodded once and shifted his gaze to the worn wooden floorboards. "There's no choice."

Lena's face fell as as she turned to look out the window of the Nave. The city outside was still shadowed. The sun not high enough in the sky yet to peak over the wall. "Listen, I need to get going, so I'm going to cut right to it. I have a proposition for you."

Bram frowned. "Why me?"

Her eyes were hard when they came back to him. "Your age, your body, your mouth? Take your pick. Jonathan knows my time is limited now. You should feel lucky he made you a priority."

"I have lived with Father Jonathan for eleven years, I am very well aware of his priorities," Bram snarled.

"So you'll come with me then?"

"Where?"

"Outside."

"I can't leave the Nave."

"Which is exactly why I am here. You're really not getting this, are you? I thought you said you knew who I was."

"I was wrong, obviously."

Lena rolled her eyes. "I am here to take you out of the city."

"Out of Megiddo?" Bram repeated, sure he must have misheard her.

"That or death."

*This or death*, Bram echoed silently. How many time had he thought those very words to himself? He had never considered an alternative.

He swallowed. "Why now? You said that your time is limited. Does that mean that your bargain has run out? Eight years is a long time."

"Something like that."

“Then I can only guess how much longer mine will last,” he rubbed the back of his neck. “Have you figured out how it will work? Are you sure it’s worth it? Surely an injection is an easier death.”

“An injection would lead to a certain death.”

“Everyone knows that there is nothing outside the walls. It’s all wasteland.”

Lena huffed out a breath. “Have you ever seen the outside?”

“Of course not.”

“Then how can you be so sure?”

“Because it was destroyed.”

“A whole forest can grow in fifty years.”

The great clock rang in the tower above them, eight resonant booms that shook the stone walls. Lena jumped off the counter. “I need to go.”

Bram stood too and took a half step towards her. “Don’t.”

She gave him a sad smile and pulled the cloak of her hood back up. “I have to. I’ll be back in five days, probably. You have until then to decide.”

Lena moved towards the door.

“I’ll come now,” he found himself saying, and took another after her.

She kept her back turned as she answered. “You can’t, not yet, but I promise I’ll be back.”