

I ROWEN

Crouched on the corner of the roof, Rowen gripped the leather-wrapped handle of her sai, waiting for her mark. Even ten stories up, the sour scent of warm concrete and old rusted city steel filled the air. Smells she still hadn't gotten used to, but she wouldn't have to deal with for much longer.

The street rumbled as a bus drove by, sending a beige dust cloud over the sidewalk. She tensed as a man emerged through it. Too well dressed. Not the guy. Annoyed, she retrieved her cell phone from her pocket to check the time.

"Ten minutes late. Points off for tardiness." Before she put the phone back, the date caught her eye. 10/17, four months to the day since her uncle Colin's murder. Her chest burned with anger, but shame overshadowed it. She shouldn't have let him go alone. She should have followed him, monitored him from a distance, but her pride wouldn't let her. Pride that cost her the only family she had.

Sighing, she opened her saved messages, her thumb hovering over the play icon as the cruel things she said the last time she saw him echoed in her memory. She had to hear the forgiveness in his voice once more.

"Hey, Ro. I hoped you'd pick up this time, but ... I get it," he sighed. "When I come back, I'm gonna tell you everything. I know I said it was impossible, but ... we found a way to get home. You know I'm a man of my word, and I promise you, no more secrets. I'm gonna tell you everything. It's time, and you're ready."

He let out a sharp exhale, pausing. She flicked her eyes to movement below. Another man rounded the corner. Too old.

“You had every right to say what you said, kid. I’m not mad at you, and there’s nothing to forgive. I don’t blame you for a single second of your anger, and I know you’re not ready to hear my apology for keeping what you are from you, but I am sorry for the pain it caused. I wanted my niece alive, and safe. I made a promise to my sister to protect you at all costs, even if the price I paid was you resenting me for it. Okay... I’ll see you soon, and ... I love you.”

She slipped the phone back into her pocket, sniffing as grief stung her eyes. Colin’s forgiveness and rare declaration of love assuaged her guilt for a little while, but it always came back. What had he meant by ‘we found a way home?’ We? Who the hell had he told about where they came from when he hadn’t even told *her*?

Never having the chance to apologize or tell him she forgave him kept her awake every night, taking its toll in sleep currency. Since his death, finding and delivering his killer to justice became her sole purpose. And she would deliver it so soon, her body buzzed with impending relief.

Footfalls pulled her gaze back to the sidewalk. Still not the guy. As she stood, the wind altered its course; her billowing coat throwing her off balance. She gasped. Despite never having to fear heights, the human self-preservation instinct sometimes got her adrenaline pumping. She dispelled it in her exhale a moment before pain burned between her eyes.

“Shit, not again.” She clutched her forehead and knelt, bracing herself for the flood of images. “No, no, not now!” Her nails dug into the gritty concrete edge of the roof as the vision pulled her into a forest.

Behind the eyes of a man, sweating, heart racing, she gasped air into *his* lungs as he ran for his life. Shallow snow crunched beneath his feet as flashes of evergreens blew by. He glanced over both shoulders, spotting a black blur running almost alongside him in the distance. As the pursuer drew near, his heart pounded faster. Beneath his fear ran a deep betrayal—the last thing she felt before the vision faded away. He knew them.

Out of breath, her vision and hearing returned to her as another gust of wind cooled the back of her neck. “Fuck. Okay, this shit has to stop.” They came every few weeks after Colin died, with the burning, throbbing pain. The last one had only been three days earlier.

A foot splashed into a puddle of water below, breaking her reverie. She glanced at the man coming down the street, matching the description of her mark. In seconds, he’d round the corner of the alley. *No more wasting time.* She

stood to her full height on the edge, took a deep breath, and stepped off the roof.

Once her feet touched the ground, she sank into the shadows in time for the guy to walk by her within arm's reach. With a glance over both shoulders, he approached a rusted steel door below a flickering incandescent light. What or whoever was on the other side, she didn't care to find out. All these shady bastards were the same.

Though ten yards away, his gaze skimmed over her. Either she'd stepped up her ninja game without trying, or this asshole had the observational skills of an infant. She moved a little closer to the light; her hooded silhouette reflecting in the puddle at his feet. Time to mess with his mind.

His back to the door, he searched his pockets and fumbled a half-crushed pack of cigarettes into the puddle. "Fuck!" As he bent to pluck them from the water, he froze. "What the fuck?" He reached behind his back for the gun she'd slipped out of his waistband earlier. His back to her, he rifled through his coat pockets, his heart drumming fast in her ears. Bored, she tossed it into the puddle.

"Looking for that?"

Slack-jawed, he stared at the half-submerged gun missing its magazine; the slide fixed in the open position.

Rowen pocketed the bullets and slipped back into the shadows. Tossing it, the empty magazine clattered to the pavement at the other end of the alley. Heart pumping faster, his head snapped in that direction. She had to stifle a laugh. At least she got to beat the shit out of these horrible human beings. Besides, it served a dual purpose. Deliver marks for 'questioning,' reinforcing Balanov's misplaced trust in her, and remove scumbags from the streets of Bushwick. As a bonus, it was fun.

"Who the fuck are you? What do you want?" he asked, squinting at the surrounding darkness.

When she stepped closer to the light, he laughed and shook his head. *That's right, asshole. I'm just a woman.* Her oversized hood concealed her eyes, but she made damn sure he caught her smirk.

"My employer would like a word with you." She stepped closer. "It seems you've gotten yourself into some trouble."

"Oh yeah, who's that? Probably no one I should give a shit about since he sent a girl after me."

"Is that so? Does the name Jovan Balanov ring any bells in that minuscule brain of yours?"

His face fell. “Shit.”

She chuckled, twirling a sai. “Thought so.”

“I need more time,” he said, his voice cracking and trailing off as she melted into the shadows. He swallowed hard and tittered, scanning the dark. “Who the *fuck* are you?!”

His heart pounding faster, he grabbed the wet gun, slammed a clip from his pocket into the handle, and pointed it where he had last seen her. With a flick of her wrist, she shattered the lightbulb with a bullet, blanketing the entire alley in darkness. Before he pulled the trigger, she wrapped her hand around his throat and squeezed. He gasped and tried prying her fingers away from his trachea as she shoved him into the brick wall.

“I’m stronger than I look.” Taking advantage of his confusion, she grabbed and twisted his wrist until he dropped the gun. He hissed as she spun him around, further twisting his wrist; his pain bringing her so much joy. These criminals got off on hurting innocent people and deserved every second of the suffering she gave them.

He grunted as she slammed his chest and face against the gritty wall, zip-tying his wrists for compliance. Confident he’d try something stupid, she stepped back and waited. When he turned around, gasping for air, he leaned his back against the building and spat blood to the ground.

“You crazy bitch,” he said, coughing.

“So creative. Let’s go, asshole,” she said, motioning her head toward the darkest part of the alley.

“You—” he began. Before he called her whatever misogynistic insult that his tiny brain could come up with, she grabbed his shoulder and pushed him. He almost fell on his face but righted himself as a bright pair of headlights flicked on ten yards away. His eyes grew wide as he pivoted to make a run for it.

“Yeah, no. You’re not going anywhere.” She pulled out a sai from beneath her coat and struck him on the side of the head with the handle. His eyes rolled back as his body crumpled to the wet concrete. “Dumbass.”

She grabbed one of his ankles and dragged him toward the black car as the engine turned over. When she approached, the front passenger window slid down and a large, pale hand appeared.

“I got it,” she said, rolling her eyes. Balanov sending Pope meant he had an engagement he wanted her to attend with him—an intimidation tactic against his competitors. Thanks to Balanov flaunting her skills, her reputation preceded her.

She passed the window and opened the back passenger door, then shoved her mark into the backseat, closing the door behind him.

As she began walking away from the car, Pope's deep voice called to her. *Goddamn him.* "Get in."

"Tell him I'm busy," she said over her shoulder. Too tired to deal with Balanov's bullshit, her book and bed cried out for her.

"He insists."

She chuckled, anxiety and anger burning her throat. He always fucking insisted. Balanov wanted to use her skills in a more violent way, but she refused every offer of more money or power. She wanted nothing to do with torturing and killing people, even the shitty ones.

With a sigh, she turned back to the car, knowing Balanov would be pissed if she didn't go with Pope. Before taking a step forward, Pope looked away as Balanov said something incomprehensible into Pope's ear. God, she hated his voice.

"Understood," he said, nodding at the driver. Without another word, or even a glance, the car drove away.

The hell? "I guess I'll be on my way then," she said as the taillights vanished. She didn't know, or cared, what Balanov found more important than haranguing her to join his elite club of killers. It was bad enough she'd become his most dependable collector. Though he had been the hammer in Colin's death, someone else had done the swinging. And only Balanov knew who that was.



THE NEXT MORNING, she woke to a soft purr in her ear and the tickle of whiskers against her cheek. Eyes still closed, she scratched the scruff of his neck and pushed him away, but of course, he came back purring even louder. With a groan, she fought back a smile at his relentless pursuit for affection. "Go away, damn it," she chuckled.

An old blanket covering the ancient curtain rod above her bed kept the daylight out of her entire studio apartment. All one hundred and twenty square feet of it. But the glowing white digits of her alarm clock made up for it. Squinting, she glanced at it. 1:38 in the afternoon. *Shit. I shouldn't have read so many chapters last night.*

Rowen tore herself from her pillow and sat nestled in the blankets. The cat hopped onto her lap and pushed his forehead against her hand. As his

persistence knew no bounds, she scratched under his chin in surrender. Though she'd tried to evict him from the shitty studio apartment when she realized she hadn't been its only tenant, his tenacity and her weakness for animals made it impossible to turn him away. She'd tried, though.

Each day, she'd leave the window cracked open wide enough for him to slip in and out, and eventually she'd wake with him curled up in the bed next to her. Cuddles and head scratches became their morning ritual, and despite her best efforts to not get attached, she enjoyed his company. But she refused to give him a name. To name something meant to hold dominion over it, and she didn't want or need that kind of responsibility.

He closed his eyes and purred, licking her hand every so often in return. "Yeah, okay, I know. You love me. Probably because I feed you, shelter you, pet you when you're forceful about it," she said, smiling. "Listen, you have a job to do. Break time is over. Go earn your keep and hunt rodents. You cleaned up ours, but the other apartments could use the help." As though he understood, the cat sprang away and disappeared out the cracked window.

With a sigh, Rowen disconnected her phone from the charger and winced at the bright screen. Once she focused on the words, she rolled her eyes. Balanov's twelve missed calls confirmed her fears: he would not let her refusal go unpunished. He hated being humiliated when she refused to follow his orders in front of the others. "Damn it." The longer she blew him off, the worse it would be. *One more miserable day dealing with this asshole.*

An hour later, Rowen arrived at The Aura through the back doors. Anxiety burning in her chest forced her feet to move toward Balanov's office. She approached it with apprehension, bracing herself as she reached for the lever handle. A pungent cloud of cigarette smoke hit her nostrils as the door flew open, revealing Balanov's bulging forehead vein and aggressive eyebrow angles.

"Get in here," he said, his mild Russian accent commanding her as he clenched his teeth—a level of restraint he seldom expressed. He tended to be far more verbally contentious.

She pushed past him and stood in front of his metal desk from the mid-twentieth century. When he sat on the other side, he took a drag from his cigarette and stared at her. Creepy son of a bitch.

"I needed you last night," he grumbled.

"Yeah? Then why'd you tell Pope to leave without me? Not that I would have gone with him anyway."

He chortled, the embers of his cigarette suffocating against the glass

ashtray as he stubbed it out. “I’ve got another job for you. I need this guy by tonight,” he said, his last drag filtering out of his nostrils.

Incredulous, she laughed. “Tonight? Is that why you’re being so nice?”

“Your mark. Name and address.” He tossed a half-crumpled piece of yellow paper across the desk. “You’re to bring him to me by eight. Do you understand?” Rowen didn’t miss his scorn-laden tone. She picked up the piece of paper and glanced at the name—*Gabriel Tenshi*—before sticking it in her pocket. The name bore an odd familiarity.

“Why eight? And why can’t you send Olson?”

He glared at her. “Because I fucking said so.”

She hated it when he used that ridiculous, patronizing phrase. Gritting her teeth, she imagined the satisfaction she’d get by feeding him his testicles. “Is that all? No verbal whiplash for turning you down last night?”

“Just go.” Face flushed, his stupid bulging forehead vein returned. Satisfied she’d pissed him off enough to need his blood pressure medication, she turned toward the door, hiding her smirk. “And Rowen?” *Goddamn it.* She turned back to his glare. “This one is top priority. Don’t fuck this up.”

When she turned back to the door, she rolled her eyes. Hard. Being employed by this horrible human for the last two months tested the limits of her patience and determination. She’d retrieve this last miscreant, but afterward, she would get his ledger and learn who paid him to execute Colin.



AS SHE LEFT THE BUILDING, she read the name on the paper again. A strange familiarity flowed through her, but why? Unless compelled to be social out of obligation, she’d kept to herself. Few people knew her and vice versa. So why the hell did his name look familiar?

“Hey, Ro, wait!” a woman called. Three people in the entire world called her by that nickname. Téó jogged over, her hazel eyes full of unnecessary concern. “Hey, did you come in through the back or something?” she asked, smoothing her frizzy, tight curls into a ponytail.

“Yeah.”

She grimaced. “Avoiding Dex, are we?”

“Sure am.” A pang of guilt twisted her stomach for manipulating Dex into giving her Balanov’s safe code.

“Uh-oh. What happened?”

Rowen cringed at the memory of waking up in his bed the previous morning. “I fell asleep ... in this bed ... in his ... arms.”

Téo sucked the air through her teeth. “Oh shit. Bouncers,” she said, chuckling. “Tough on the outside, mushy on the inside. How did he take it when you broke his heart?”

“Way to assume, T.”

“Am I wrong?” She raised those perfectly shaped eyebrows of hers.

“Look, I made it crystal clear that I had no intentions of having a relationship. I was exhausted, and he was warm. It just *happened*.” Regardless of the circumstance, the sadness in Dex’s eyes as she left him made his crossing into relationship territory clear.

“I told you this would happen. Dex may be hot, and he may have slept with ... everyone, but the guy’s got a big heart, Ro. He probably thinks you’re *the one* or something.”

“He agreed this would be casual, though.” She enjoyed the sex, but couldn’t give him the emotional intimacy he wanted. Opening herself to a man would have disastrous consequences.

“Well, I’m sure I’ll hear all about it from him tonight when he asks me what he did wrong.” Though Téo tried hiding it with a half smile, Rowen didn’t miss the disappointment in her eyes.

“And I am sorry for that, but I don’t have time to talk to him about it, T. Balanov has me hunting someone down right now. ‘Top priority’,” she said, mocking him. She flashed the piece of paper and stuffed it into her coat pocket.

She chuckled. “Wow, you’re batting a thousand today. What’d you do this time?”

Téo had been the only woman she’d met in New York who hadn’t been threatened by her. Female patrons of The Aura often hung all over their men when she came near them. An irritating and unnecessary behavior she’d experienced almost every night. As Téo explained it, grinning, “*Your energy is a mixture of mysterious, lock-up-your-husbands hot, with a big dash of sexy and dangerous.*” A combination that didn’t lead to making friends. Not that she’d planned on making any. Rowen had done her best to keep her at a distance, but Téo saw right through her wall and wriggled her way in.

“I ignored his request for my presence last night.”

“Are you crazy? Girl, I know you can take care of yourself, but you get on his bad side, and he’ll have half the city looking for you. Remember what happened last time?”

Rowen bit back a laugh.

“It’s not funny, Rowen! Those guys could have killed you. Twelve against one? I mean, what the shit?” Téó stared at the ground as she recalled the insanity of that night. Numbers didn’t matter, Rowen kicked all of their asses, and Balanov learned how valuable and underutilized her skills were.

“It’s fine, Téó.”

“Like hell it is!” she argued, pulling Rowen to the side. “You’re not invincible, Ro. We’re all expendable in that man’s eyes. Please stop pushing him.” She gripped Rowen’s forearms, her eyes shining with concern.

“Fine. I’ll stop pushing.”

Téó loosened her grip, but judging by her narrowed eyes, she suspected they’d discuss this again. “Oh! I wanted to ask you if you saw the bag of books I brought in for you?”

“Books?”

“Yeah, my mom stopped by the library last week. They were giving away a bunch to make room for new inventory. She gave me a pile of them to give you.”

“You’ve talked to your mom about me?”

Téó laughed. “Of course! You’re my friend, why wouldn’t I talk about you?”

Rowen didn’t know how to respond. She’d lowered her guard a bit with Téó, but she didn’t think she’d lowered it *that* much. “You know I keep to myself.”

“I know,” she said, looking at the ground. “But it’s just my mom. I told her how much you love to read, and since I’m not into stuff like that, I think she feels a sort of kindred spirit with you even though you’ve never met.” Téó smiled. “I left the books behind the bar. Come get them tonight?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

“You bet,” she winked. “I’ve got to get back. Inventory day. Ro, please stay out of trouble, huh?” With a smile, Téó disappeared through the double-door entrance.

“No promises,” she said under her breath as she walked down the dusty sidewalk toward Gabriel Tenshi’s address.



AN HOUR LATER, Rowen ended up at the other end of a populated housing area called Ocean Hill. Many businesses occupied storefronts along the main

drag, the opposite of the dark, underpopulated, and sketchy area of Bushwick she lived in. Her neighborhood had a reputation for being full of pleasure seekers and dealers, not families trying to survive. An unusual area to find a mark.

Rowen pulled her hood over her eyes. As she walked through the bustling area, doing her best to avoid people, she realized how anxious crowded areas made her. Her childhood happened far from any towns. Colin instilled a deep wariness of people in her. Anyone could be an enemy.

She turned a corner and walked down an empty sidewalk, relieved her mark lived on a street away from the main drag. As she approached the address of the apartment building, she scanned the area for potential witnesses, be they human or technological. Breaking, entering, and kidnapping someone in an unfamiliar part of town called for discretion, especially in the middle of the day. But she wasn't alone.

A woman and a little girl walked towards her. No older than five, she held a bouquet of balloons in pearly pastels, beaming at her mother as she tugged on the strings. She giggled as they swayed and bounced, hitting Rowen's elbow as she passed. "Sorry about that," said the woman, smiling. Out of politeness, Rowen smirked and gave the mother a nod.

"Wow, mama, look! A real princess!"

Rowen's cheeks blazed. The mother placated her daughter with a kiss on her crown; a sweet mother-daughter moment to witness. Something she never had or would ever get to experience. As a girl, she'd read about mothers, and watched them in movies and television, longing to meet her own. Colin had done his best to nurture her, but, through no fault of his own, his version of nurturing differed from a mother's. To protect her sanity, she stopped hoping for the unattainable.

When she turned forward, she ran into a man at least six inches taller than her, that smelled like laundry detergent and a subtle, but sexy aftershave. Painless electricity, like nerves firing rapid signals, spread through her as she caught herself against his chest. At five-foot-nine, she wasn't used to feeling so small against anyone.

"Oh! I'm so sorry, love!" he said, his arms on hers, steadying them both. His English accent caught her off guard. She'd never met anyone from England before. "Are you okay?"

Confused by the sensation, she stared at the white badge between her hands before nodding and pulling away. He released her arms and muttered something incomprehensible before he left.

She wanted to see his face, but by the time she'd looked up, he'd already crossed the intersection; a black backpack with a chrome carabiner dangling from one of the straps over one shoulder. Across the street, his dark brown hair turned auburn in a ray of sunlight, and when he disappeared, a deep breath-stealing void replaced the electricity. *What the hell was that?*

A group of girls coming out of the building distracted her enough to pull her attention away from that feeling. And then it was gone. She pulled her hood down lower and stared at the area where she saw him last. The compulsion to follow came over her like no other urge before. *What the hell is wrong with me? I can't go after him.* Balanov made it clear he wanted this Tenshi guy as soon as possible.

If she followed that man, it would cost her time she didn't have. She sighed and bit her lip, glancing at the fourth-floor windows. Balanov and her curiosity for Gabriel Tenshi's name could wait a bit, she supposed. Besides, doing recon in broad daylight could compromise her collecting him later.

Would following this guy even tell her what the hell that feeling was? It would be a gamble, and gambling made her nervous. If she chose wrong, the fallout could mean never bringing the person responsible for her uncle's death to justice and never learning what she was. *Goddamn you, Balanov.*