

Chapter 2

The wind tugged at Caitlyn's hair as she stood at the edge of the overlook, staring down at the sprawl of the Undercity below. Same drop. Same tight gap between buildings. Same rusted ladders and crumbling brick.

But everything else was different.

Beside her, Vi stretched her arms behind her back, twisting until her spine cracked. "Alright Cupcake...You sure you're ready?"

Caitlyn smirked. "Absolutely"

Cate was dressed down today, well, Piltover's version of dressed down. Sleek navy trousers with reinforced knees, high-collared training jacket, her hair tied back in a neat, high tail. She looked like she was about to run an elite military obstacle course.

And Vi, well, she was just Vi, in casual tank top and her trusty old worn out boots she refused to throw away. She bounced on the balls of her feet, eyeing the edge like it was calling her name.

"Alright," Caitlyn smiled "We start on three."

Vi turned toward her, all smirk and mischief. "One... two..." And then with a wink she was gone.

"That's cheating, Violet!" Caitlyn yelled into the abyss of the city below

Vi's laughter echoed off the rooftops as she slid down a pipe, vaulted a rooftop fan, and disappeared over the edge.

Caitlyn huffed and threw herself after her with practiced grace, catching the edge of the wall and dropping into a roll. Her boots hit solid metal, then brick, then she was up and running, weaving her way after that pink blur in the distance.

They moved like mirror images down different paths. Vi vaulting fences and skimming across rusted gutters, Caitlyn taking ladders and tighter ledges with sniper precision. When Vi swung down to a lower landing, Caitlyn took a running leap over the gap between buildings and cleared it, cleaner and faster than even Vi expected.

Vi glanced back mid-run, eyes wide. "Fuck. Those long legs do come in handy."

"In many different ways," Caitlyn shot back a cheeky grin as she landed beside her.

The two of them hit the last stretch, Vi dropping into a final slide down a tilted awning while Caitlyn grabbed a bar and jumped off the edge of a balcony. Dust kicked up from their boots as they hit street level.

Caitlyn landed first, upright, smug, barely winded.

Vi landed half a second later, one knee down and one hand braced on the cracked concrete.

"I was faster" Caitlyn smuged

Vi looked up, eyes squinting. "You beat me by half a second!"

"Enough to matter." She arched a brow

Vi gave a breathless laugh and rose to her feet. "I create a monster, and this is how I'm repaid."

"You just made me better." she smirked.

"Yeah, well." she leaned in, bumping her shoulder "You were already annoyingly perfect." she rolled her eyes passing next to her

"Is that a confession?" She rushed after her

"You wish" Vi shook her head smiling

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A little while later, they sat side by side on the edge of a crumbling rooftop, boots dangling above the neon haze of Zaun's lower quarter. The skyline shimmered in oily pinks and greens, and the scent of frying oil and spice curled up from the vendors far below.

Between them sat a warm, grease-spotted paper bag, half-emptied, the edges soaked just enough to make it dangerous if you weren't careful.

Caitlyn took another bite of crispy battered fish, the steam curling out as she hummed around it. "This is incredible."

"You say that like you haven't walked past this cart twenty times." Vi chuckled, pulling off a piece for herself.

"I have. I just...well, I didn't think street fish was a smart idea."

Vi gave her a look. "You were such Topsider back then."

"And now look at me." she smirked through a mouthful "Corrupted by back-alley cuisine."

Vi grinned, nudging her shoulder. "Took you, what...a month? Maybe two?"

"I was cautious!"

"You were a snob."

"I was discerning."

"You called it 'questionable protein in dirty oil.'"

Caitlyn bit back a laugh. "And I still stand by that claim. It just tastes so nice." she hummed into another bite.

Vi leaned back on her hands, just watching her. Her smile was easy, soft. "Worth it, though. Watching you make love to fried fish."

"Shut up," she wiped a bit of grease from the corner of her mouth giving a small, playful scoff. But didn't deny it, just plucked another flaky piece from the bag.

Vi shook her head, laughing.

The wind had picked up, tugging Caitlyn's hair as they sat in quiet, watching the glow of the Undercity flicker beneath them. The bag of fish lay empty between them now, the last few crumbs forgotten.

Vi shifted slightly, brushing her thumb along Caitlyn's knuckles. "I gotta head off soon. Shift's coming up."

The other woman nodded, not moving to let go of her hand. She sighed, not disapproving, just acknowledging time as the unwelcome guest it always was. "I'm going to the shooting range for a bit."

Vi glanced sideways, then gently laced their fingers together, her grip warm and familiar. She didn't look at her when she spoke, just let the question fall out soft, like it had been waiting there for a while.

"You think you'll head back on a patrol anytime soon?"

She didn't answer right away. Her thumb rubbed along Vi's in a slow, absent motion. "I don't know yet."

Vi gave a small nod. No pressure. No need to fill the silence.

Caitlyn leaned on her shoulder, stretching her legs out in front of her. "So," she said, casually, "how's your investigation going?"

"Still tracking that lead." she let out a small breath through her nose. "We've got a lab set for a raid today. In the Sump near Graver's Cross."

Caitlyn turned her head to glance at her. "The tip you shook down last week?"

"Yeah." she nodded "Took some convincing, but he talked. Said it's big. Real setup, not just kids cooking shimmer in a pipe drain."

"You're going in armed?" she gave a small hum, thoughtful.

"Always," she side-eyed her with a little grin. "It's me, not you. I don't finesse my way in with forms and Council clearance."

"Excuse you." she narrowed her eyes, amused. "I do things properly, thank you very much."

"Yeah, yeah." she gave her a teasing elbow. "Sheriff Formal."

"Officer Smartmouth."

They shared a grin, familiar, easy.

Then Caitlyn added more seriously, "Do you want backup from my side? Or are you keeping this low-profile?"

She shook her head. "We've got a tight unit going in. If it blows out of control, I'll yell."

"Politely, I hope," she arched a brow. "Not like last time, when you triggered a high-alert protocol"

"It got your attention, didn't it?" she grinned

"It also locked half the district gates."

Vi just smirked. "Worked, didn't it?"

"And gave that poor new boy a nosebleed from panic"

"He'll live," she shrugged, smirking.

Caitlyn smiled fondly, rolling her eyes.

"Just promise to be careful Violet." she said more seriously, leaning into her. "I need you in one piece." she murmured, her shoulder brushing against Vi's, the warmth of her close enough to feel through the fabric. And for a moment, just a flicker, Caitlyn let herself sink into it. Into her.

The city felt far away up here. The world felt... quieter.

She hated feeling this exposed, still raw from everything they'd been through, but Vi's presence always made it bearable. Steadying her like gravity.

She didn't like needing anyone.

But she needed her. Needed this. Just to stay a little longer in the quiet. No strategy. No council.

And Vi, solid and warm and unshakably hers, was always there.

"I'll be fine, Cupcake." she murmured pressing the gentlest kiss into her hair.

Caitlyn exhaled, slow and almost soundless. She looked up, just enough to find her eyes.

Vi met her gaze with that quiet, knowing softness only she ever got to see. Her hand rose, fingers sliding gently around the back of Caitlyn's neck, thumb brushing soothingly against the skin as she pressed her lips against hers

The kiss was soft. Unhurried. Like a breath shared between them.

Caitlyn smiled faintly against her lips then tucked herself into her again, pressing close, her forehead resting in the hollow of Vi's shoulder.

She closed her eyes, breathed her in.

That familiar scent, sandalwood and smoke, a touch of something sweet, and underneath it all, that faint metallic trace of heat and leather and movement...Vi.

Not perfume. Not anything bought.

Just Violet.

And somehow, it always calmed the storm inside her, more than anything else ever had.

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The door went down in thunder of splintered metal and rusted hinges.

Vi burst in first boot meeting floor with a heavy thud, her badge gleaming in the low light. The stench of burnt sugar, metal, and shimmer slapped her in the face. It was a lab, small, makeshift. But dangerous.

Two Enforcers spilled in behind her, fanning out, weapons raised. Beakers steamed. Tubes gurgled. A younger man slim like a stick, twitchy, locked eyes with Vi then moved quickly.

He grabbed a small vial off the table and shoved it into his coat. In the same motion, he reached for a metal lever bolted to the wall and yanked it down with a brutal clank.

Steam hissed through the room. Pipes above began to rattle violently.

"We got a runner!" one Enforcer shouted as the guy bolted for the window.

But Vi didn't move.

Her eyes shot to the ceiling.

A thick chemical sludge was pumping through the pipes, green, unstable, too fast.

"Shit, it's gonna blow!" Vi yelled. "Out! Now!"

She launched herself through the same window the runner used, boots crunching into the steel roofing outside. Behind her, the Enforcers scrambled, running for the door.

The moment her foot hit the rooftop, a violent explosion split the air, fire bursting through the windows as pipes shot out like spears. One slammed into the spot she'd just vacated, missing her by inches. Shockwaves tore through the metal beneath her, launching the two Enforcers through the air, their bodies slamming into one of the walls with enough force to give you a concussion, she slipped, hit the sloped roof hard, sliding down with a scrape against rust.

She landed hard in a crouch on the next roof down, wind knocked from her lungs. The pain of impact surging through her whole body.

Smoke billowed. Heat rippled.

Vi coughed, spit grit, and spun around, the roof behind her now a crater of flame and shredded pipework. But she was relieved when she spotted two of the Enforcers stumbling out into the alley, coughing but alive.

"You're welcome!" she muttered, getting to her feet.

And then she saw him.

The runner, weaving down the catwalk two rooftops over, coat flapping behind him.

Vi growled low. "Not today, you little shit."

She launched.

The city blurred.

She leapt roof to roof, footsteps pounding across cracked steel, ducking between cables and vents. The runner jumped a chasm between buildings barely made it. Vi flew after him, teeth gritted, fists tight.

He was fast, spooked rat fast, ducking through wires, using every shortcut he knew.

But she knew them better.

Ladders, old scaffolding, thin pipes barely wide enough for footing, she didn't care. Her boots slammed down, the metal shuddering beneath her soles, ringing through the alley like a starting bell. Her hands caught rough steel, cold and sharp with rust, scraping her knuckles as she swung herself around a corner support. The sting lit up her nerves, but she didn't slow down.

Every muscle in her body screamed with the effort, calves burning, shoulder sore from the bad landing three jumps back, but her focus was razor-thin, locked on the dark figure darting ahead.

A jagged pipe caught her side as she squeezed through a too-narrow gap. She hissed under her breath. The pain flared hot and sharp, but it only made her push harder.

The bastard was fast. But she was faster.
And she wasn't losing him now.

Then...dead end. A brick wall where a bridge used to be. The guy skidded to a halt, cursed, turned.

"Give it up," she called out, chest heaving, brows low. "End of the line."

"Go to hell!" he yelled

"Been there, it's boring" she said getting closer

He reached into his coat and threw something.

Vi's instincts screamed, she flinched back.

A metal canister clattered onto the ground ahead, then burst with a sharp, hollow pop.

The gas hit her like a punch in the face.

Vi reeled back, her first breath dragging in hot, chemical-choked air. It scalded her throat on the way down, sharp as broken glass, and she doubled over coughing, eyes instantly flooding with tears.

"Son of a bitch..." Her voice cracked apart, raw and useless.

The gas coiled around her, thick and gritty, clinging to her skin like wet ash soaked in acid. Her lungs screamed with each breath. Her chest locked tight, instinct fighting the urge to inhale again.

She dropped to her knees, sleeve pressed hard against her mouth, trying to filter the air, but it was no good. Her vision swam. Her muscles twitched like they wanted to run but there was nowhere to go. Just grey, swallowing everything.

Somewhere ahead, boots were running.

Vi forced herself to move.

Through the haze she saw him climbing, grabbing a rusted pipe and pulling himself up the wall.

"Fuck!" She grunted through cough

But then a small glass vial fell out of his coat as he claimed. It fell on the ground and rolled right in front of her.

Still coughing, she reached for it with shaking fingers. Picked it up. Turned it slowly in her hand.

Through the sting in her eyes, she saw thick, syrupy liquid inside. Glowing mercury silver.

Not like anything she'd ever seen before.

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The crack of a rifle echoed through the glass and steel chamber like thunder in a storm.

Piltover's shooting range was polished brass rails and blue steel casings. Sleek automatons and flying targets lined the sides, each one springing to life with mechanical clicks and hums. Simulations of alleyways, rooftops, speeding transport. The perfect conditions to sharpen an Enforcer's aim or expose their weakness.

Caitlyn stood in the center of the range, feet set, shoulder squared. Her new scope gleamed cold under the skylight. She was poised. She looked ready.

A target burst to her left, she turned fast, fired. Miss.

Another appeared above, she pivoted, pulled the trigger.

Miss, gain.

Mechanical drones flew around her and above her. Shots ricocheted off the outer rings. Some hit too high, others grazed just outside center. None were perfect. Not like before.

The chamber hissed as it cooled.

Caitlyn lowered the rifle, jaw clenched. Her chest rose and fell as silence swallowed the space. She slumped her shoulders in defeat and walked away, disappointed, angry.

With a sharp clatter, she slammed her rifle down onto the steel rack. The sound echoed across the chamber.

"Damn it!"

Her voice was low, cracking under pressure. Her one good eye narrowed.

She stared at the missed marks glowing in accusatory red paint. Once, every shot would've been dead center. Once, she'd been the best.

Now...

She stepped back walking away. Shoulders tight.

Behind her, another rifle snapped into its holster. Footsteps approached, calm, deliberate.

Caitlyn didn't turn. She knew who it was, Sergeant Elvira Vance, a veteran Enforcer with iron-grey hair coiled into a tight braid and eyes that had seen every kind of war Piltover refused to acknowledge.

She stepped up beside her. She said nothing for a moment, then gently rested a hand on Caitlyn's shoulder.

Caitlyn tensed under the touch.

"It's not easy with one eye," she said. "Depth perception's shot. You're seeing the world in a line instead of a sphere now. Every shot has to be guessed, not felt."

"Then maybe I'm no good as an Enforcer anymore." Her voice cracked a bit. Tears threatening to escape.

A pause. The woman didn't argue. Instead, she reached down, picked up Caitlyn's rifle with practiced ease.

"You're right," she said simply as she loaded the rifle. "You're not the same shooter. But that doesn't mean you have to give up."

She turned Caitlyn gently back toward the range.

"You just have to learn a new way."

Caitlyn's throat bobbed.

Her hands, clenched tight at her sides, slowly lifted, hovering near the rifle. She took it, wordlessly.

Elvira stepped behind her, adjusting Caitlyn's stance slightly. Lowered her elbow. Adjusted the tilt of her jaw. All with a quiet, steady patience that carried no pity, just experience.

"You used to aim with your eye. Now you have to aim with your instincts," she said softly. "With your breath. Feel the rhythm, not the sightlines."

Caitlyn blinked hard. Her vision blurred. A tear threatened, stung at the corner of her good eye.

But she didn't let it fall.

Instead, she gritted her teeth. She locked it down. Pushed it inward, where all her sorrow turned to steel.

Click. The rifle loaded.

A new target snapped to life.

This time, Caitlyn breathed, deep, steady. The shot cracked.

Still a miss, but closer.

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The joint's sign Chogg's hung crooked over the rust-bitten doorway, the flickering neon C long dead, making it read like some forgotten curse word. Inside, the air was thick with a stew of engine oil, fermented spices, and something pickled that probably shouldn't be. Rust peeling off the walls. Ventilation is a theory, not a fact.

Vi sat at a warped metal table, one leg propped lazily on the rung, chopsticks in one hand. Steam curled from her bowl of... something. It slithered when she stirred it. She slurped loudly, lips stained with a slick red sauce that gleamed under the sickly light.

Across from her, two freshly minted Enforcers, Lance and Derrin were staring down at their bowls like they're being punished.

"Is that thing... blinking at me?" Lance muttered, nudging the edge of a gelatinous lump.

Derrin didn't look up. "Mine squeaked."

Vi grinned around her chopsticks. "Means it's fresh. Eat up."

Behind the rust-streaked counter, Chogg, the owner, chef, bouncer, and probably ex-felon, stirred a cauldron of broth with what looked suspiciously like a plumbing wrench. His frame was massive and drooping, ears long and leathery, his belly cinched by three uneven belts. One eye was dull and mechanical, set in a brassy socket that clicked in the wrong direction every few seconds. The other eye glared at nothing in particular.

"This sauce's better than I remember," Vi called out, slapping the table appreciatively. "You do somethin' new?"

"Eel grease," Chogg grunted without turning.

Vi paused, then gave an approving nod. "Nice. Adds character."

Derrin, in the meantime, attempted to get a grip on some quivering mass in his bowl. He poked. It squelched. Then, like a living marble, the thing slipped, bounced once on the table, and plopped straight into the lap of a man next to him.

The man stiffened. Long coat, high collar, hollow cheekbones and a nasty scar slicing from cheek to ear.

"You throwin' things at me, pretty boy?" he growled, standing up slowly. His hand was already twitching toward his holster.

Derrin froze eyes wide like a startled rabbit. His helmet felt too big, his voice too small. His lips moved uselessly before any sound came out.

“N-no! I... I didn’t mean...I mean, it just...” His voice cracked mid-sentence, betraying every ounce of baby-faced panic written across him.

Vi groaned. She was already on her feet, slipping between them before the tension snapped. She held her hands up, voice calm but laced with bite.

“Alright, alright, everyone relax. Nobody’s throwin’ nothin’ but bad aim and worse appetites.”

The man’s stare didn’t waver. “He made a mess on me.”

“Yeah? You look like someone who did that few times,” Vi said, leaning in with a conspiratorial smirk. “Just not during lunch.”

Behind the counter, Chogg raised his voice. “Oi! If y’wanna bleed, do it outside! This place has a health code!”

Vi blinked. “...You have a health code?”

A beat passed. The man looked at Vi again, something assessing behind his narrowed eyes. Then he snorted, brushed the blob from his coat with two fingers, and dropped back into his seat with a grunt.

Vi turned, brushing invisible dust off his shoulder. “Now that’s customer politeness.”

She passed next to Derrin tapping him on a shoulder “Next time sit a bit further away”

Derrin slouched back into his chair moving it a safe distance from the guy, red to his ears. “That thing’s still twitching on his boot.”

Lance hadn’t touched his chopsticks. He stared bleakly at his bowl. “I think I’m a vegetarian now.”

Vi slurped again, completely unfazed. “More for me, then.”

The door creaked open again, letting in the evening air and the heavy steps of a man coming in for takeaway. He nodded at Chogg, who was still wiping down the counter.

“How’s it looking out there?” Chogg asked.

The man sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “They pulled one body from the rubble. Gearhand’s daughter. The older one, Mireen.”

"Oh man...Not the kid." he slammed the kitchen cloth on the bar "I hate this fucking place."

Vi didn't react right away. The name buzzed in her skull, something half-remembered, and then it click.

"Wait," she said, sitting up straighter. "Borsen Gearhand?"

"Yeah," the man replied. "That's him."

Vi's pulse skipped. "There were two girls," she said quickly. "Younger one was quiet. Tiny thing."

"Elara," The man shook his head. "Haven't found her."

Vi stared at him, like maybe if she looked hard enough, he'd change the answer. He didn't.

Chogg raised a brow. "You know the family?"

Vi exhaled sharply through her nose. "I booked the guy yesterday. During the raid. Some woman took the kids."

"Silya" the man said "She's dead too, scorched to the bone"

She ran a hand over her mouth. Her food sat at the back of her throat like she swallowed a bunch of stones.

"What happened?" she asked, voice tight.

"House collapsed," the man said. "Report says structural damage. But folks say they heard something last night. Like a blast."

Vi didn't speak right away. Her chest felt like it was caving in on itself. She clenched her jaw, trying to push back the rising guilt.

She pushed back from the bar so fast, her chair scraped loud against the floor then reached into her pocket, threw a few coins on the bar for Chogg without looking.

"We're leaving," she snapped to the two enforcers still nursing their meals.

"What...now?" Derrin asked, brow furrowing. "Where are we going?"

But Vi was already halfway to the door. The other two scrambled to their feet, grabbing their gear and rushing after her.

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The street was cordoned off when they arrived. Tape fluttered in the wind, and the house, if it could still be called that, stood like a broken ribcage, splintered beams jutting from the rubble. One side had collapsed entirely. The other leaned dangerously, groaning in the breeze like it knew its time was nearly up.

Vi stepped past the tape, boots crunching on shattered glass and plaster. The smell hit her first, burned wood, scorched metal, something darker underneath. Ash still hung in the air like fog.

She crouched beside a fallen support beam, running her fingers over the scorched edges.

Charred scorch marks spidered out from what looked like the center of the collapse, blackened timber peeled back like flower petals under pressure.

A pair of workers were hauling something out on a stretcher, moving slow and careful. A dark, crumpled shape lay beneath a soot-streaked sheet. Only the wrist showed, ashen, curled tight and on it, a scorched metal bangle barely clung to the bone.

Vi's breath caught.

Silya. She remembered her face now, stern, silent, doing what she had to. That bangle had glinted on her wrist when she'd reached for the girl's wrist.

Another groan echoed from the house. Vi snapped out. A wall gave way with a sharp, splintering shriek and crashed down in a storm of dust and debris.

"Everyone out!" a man barked. "That's it, we're done! Too unstable!"

"No," Vi growled, stepping forward. "What about the kid?"

"Lady," the man said, turning to her, "there's no kid. They're dead. All of 'em. I'm not sending anyone in there to get flattened looking for a ghost."

Vi grabbed him by the arm, hard enough to make him flinch. "You saw a body? You know she's dead?"

He hesitated. "No. But the chances..."

"Screw the chances," she snapped, letting go and already moving forward.

"You're gonna get yourself killed" Lance started to protest, but she didn't hear him.

She climbed over the rubble, boots crunching over broken plaster, scorched timber, and shards of what used to be someone's life. Dust swirled with every step, the acrid stench of smoke thick in her lungs. Her hands scraped against jagged stone as she moved, dragging herself up over the mound that had once been the living room ceiling.

She didn't even know what she was looking for.

A shoe. A voice. A damn miracle.

Everything was blackened, collapsed or teetering on the edge of falling apart. Her will drove her forward, but the scale of destruction threatened to swallow her whole.

Behind her, the worker she'd grabbed earlier called up. "We searched most of the ground floor already. Nothing under the south beam or kitchen zone. But we couldn't reach that upper bedroom."

Vi turned. "Where did you find the sister?"

He pointed to a mangled stretch of what might've been stairs, barely still standing. "Up there. What was left of northeast corner."

Vi followed the angle. Her eyes traced the remnants of the staircase, wooden steps hanging off the wall like broken teeth. Above, the floor sagged.

She steeled herself. No time to think.

Vi grabbed onto a support beam and started climbing. The wood creaked beneath her weight. Halfway up, one step gave way with a loud crack, and she slipped, one foot plunging into open air. Her body lurched sideways, only her grip on the railing saved her.

A gasp rose from the crowd below.

"Shit!" someone hissed.

"Vi!" Darren called out already strapping on a mask, cursed under his breath. "Fuck it," he muttered, and started climbing after her.

His partner hung back, wide-eyed. "You're insane."

"Maybe," he said, vanishing into the rubble above.

Vi hauled herself up, scraping her knuckles raw, breath heavy as she stepped onto the remains of the upper floor.

It was a half-collapsed ruin.

One wall was completely blown out, the remains of wallpaper fluttering like tattered flags. What was left of the ceiling above creaked dangerously, a patchwork of blackened joists and soot-streaked laths. Cold air blew in from the open side, carrying ash and silence.

The floor was warped, boards buckled from heat. A dark stain spread across the charred wood, blood. Soaked in, seared to the surface.

Vi crouched beside it, brows knitting. Her gaze swept the ruined space, then drifted across to where they'd said the sister's body was found, staircase on the far side of the room, against the collapsed frame of the outer wall.

She frowned, running her fingers near the edge of the stain, the texture tacky, fused with the grain from heat and time. There was too much of it. It wasn't a splatter from impact. It pooled. It lingered.

"She was bleeding before she was thrown," Vi muttered to herself.

Vi stared, throat tight, but didn't linger.

Her eyes scanned the room, and then she saw it.

A vent.

Low, near the corner of the floor, leading away from the room into a solid rock wall on the opposite side. A maintenance duct, maybe. Just wide enough.

She dropped to her knees and crawled to it. Pressed her mouth to the opening.

"Hello!" Her voice echoed into the dark. "Hello...are you there?"

Nothing.

She banged her palm on the metal. "Little one, you in there?"

A pause. Then...a sound.

A sob. Quiet. So faint she almost doubted herself.

Her heart leapt. "I hear you!" Her voice cracked, hope catching in her throat. "I'm coming!" she yelled

And then it just burst out of her, like it had been waiting for this whole time.

"I'm coming, Powder!"

The name slipped before her brain caught up. She didn't even notice.

"Hang in there! I'm gonna get you out!"

Vi gripped the edges of the grid, fingers curling around the warped metal. It was still hot, twisted, partially melted into the frame. She yanked hard, nothing. The damn thing didn't even creak.

With a sharp breath, she planted one boot against the wall, bracing herself, muscles flexing. "Arrrrh...Come on...you fucking piece of shit!" she muttered through gritted teeth. She heaved with everything she had, her arms straining, shoulders trembling, a guttural grunt escaping her throat.

Still, it held.

She let out a frustrated snarl, repositioned her foot higher, and pulled again, veins standing out on her arms, sweat slipping down her temple. The metal groaned faintly, mocking her. One bent screw popped out. Her fingers slipped, scraping skin, but she didn't stop. She couldn't.

"Don't you dare quit on me now!" she barked—not at the grid, but at herself.

And yet, the damn thing wouldn't budge.

Behind her, footsteps thudded against the ruined floorboards. Her fellow appeared, covered in ash, eyes wide as he took in the scene.

Without a word, he dropped beside her.

Together, they grabbed the frame, braced their boots against the wall, and pulled.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the metal groaned, bent, and finally tore free with a clatter.

The vent yawned open before them, darkness stretching beyond.

Vi leaned in, heart hammering. "We're coming!" she called, softer now.

A whimper answered.

She turned to her colleague, eyes blazing.

"Get some help. NOW!"

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The clock on the wall ticked past midnight, its steady rhythm a quiet reminder of the hour. Caitlyn sat in the study, surrounded by open files and paperwork, incident reports, requisition forms, and correspondence from the Council. It was the usual late-night mess that came with the job, but tonight she was half present.

She kept glancing at the time. Then the window. Then the door. Kept telling herself not to worry. But the knot in her stomach was pulling tighter with every passing minute.

Then the front door creaked open, and she was on her feet in a heartbeat, the chair scraping behind her. She hurried through the hall and reached the top of the stairs just as Vi stepped inside.

Her breath caught.

Vi stood in the doorway, filthy and exhausted, cradling a small girl in her arms. The child was covered in dust and ash, eyes half-lidded, clinging to Vi with the last of her strength. One arm draped over Vi's shoulder holding dirty stuffed toy.

Caitlyn blinked, stunned. "Violet?"

"Call the doctor," Vi said, her voice raw and urgent.

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Metal groaned softly in the rafters. Steam hissed somewhere unseen. The walls were stained with old chemical runoff, a sheen of greenish residue climbing between the bolts. Pale overhead lamps flickered now and then, some with a stutter, some permanently dead. Months burning themselves on them. Everything smelled like burnt ozone, rust, and something sweet gone rotten.

High above the factory floor, a windowed office overlooked the space like a watchtower, a glass-walled sanctuary suspended above rot and rust. Inside, the light was warm but dim, filtered through amber-tinted sconces bolted into aged brass fixtures. It glowed against dark wood panels and smoke-stained ceiling tiles, casting long shadows across the room.

A mahogany desk, polished to a mirror sheen, a leather armchair, high-backed and studded with brass rivets, a brass-shaded banker's lamp whose soft light bathed the paperwork in a sepia haze. An old phonograph sat in the corner, its speaker warped but functional, from it, a slow jazzy tune trickled out, warped by static.

The air smelled of expensive cigar smoke and oiled steel. A crystal decanter of dark liquor rested on a sideboard next to three mismatched glasses, only one of them ever used. A pair of framed sketches hung on the back wall, abstract lines like circuitry or veins, and something about them felt uncomfortably precise.

The chemist stumbled as he was shoved forward, boots skidding on the tiled floor. He barely caught himself before crashing into the metal chair.

Two men stood behind him. One was missing a few teeth, the other had knuckled gloves stained with something too dark to be oil.

They said nothing.

He swallowed hard. His hands wouldn't stop shaking.

From behind the desk, a figure sat motionless, mostly in shadow. The glow of a thick cigar pulsed like a warning light, its embers flaring and fading in rhythm with steady inhales.

Behind the boss, floor-to-ceiling windows gave a full view of the floor below. Guttured machines, workbenches, crates. Everything old, repurposed, half-functional but still turning. Still producing.

Still hiding secrets.

A voice came from the dark. Calm. Smooth.

"Tell me again what you lost."

The chemist flinched. "I... uh...one vial of Nullblight. I was...someone was chasing me, I..."

The boss exhaled, smoke curling up into the beam of the overhead lamp.

"Who?"

"I don't...I didn't get a look. She was fast. Pink hair. Big arms. Enforcer, kinda. Not full gear but..."

That was all it took.

The boss shifted slightly. The light caught part of his face, just a sliver of his jaw, the hard set of it, and the gleam of gold at his wrist.

He didn't speak again right away.

Someone else did.

The only woman in the room.

She lounged on the edge of a table, one leg crossed over the other, poised like a knife set on velvet. Her outfit was a masterpiece of dark elegance, a tailored coat cinched at the waist with buckled leather straps, high collar flared dramatically, and sleeves flaring just enough to show glimpses of deep, purple-threaded lining. Black trousers tucked into knee-

high, laced boots with copper accents. Her corset was angular, sharp-stitched, more armor than a fashion statement, and glinted under the lamplight with intricate metallic inlay.

Makeup precise, heavy liner ringing her eyes in razor curves, deep plum lipstick that caught the light like wet paint. Her short hair was slicked back into sharp waves, the color somewhere between deep purple and midnight.

She cradled a long cigarette holder in one hand. A violet halo of smoke spiraled from her lips as she took a long drag.

Her name.

Charoite.

Of many talents, navigating the underworld with a finesse that belies her sharp-edged style. She's was known in the darkened alleyways and shadowy docks as an enigmatic and resourceful figure, a veritable ghost in the machinery of lawlessness.

Her services came at a premium, not just because of her unwavering discretion but also due to the efficiency and flair with which she conducted her operations.

With her authoritative presence and reputation, one might think twice before crossing her, and even the most daring rogues knew better than to challenge her dominion over the smuggling routes.

"That's Vi," she said, her voice rich with venom and warning. "Vanders daughter, now Sheriff's pet bruiser. If she's sniffing around, it's already bad."

She turned, smoke curling from her nostrils like a warning flare.

"She pulled the girl from the rubble today," she said. "The younger one. Alive apparently" she leaned over the table closer to the man in the shadow ".... You said this was airtight. But your people keep leaking... and ours keep bleeding."

A low hum of agreement came from the man beside her.

Caelum Vertech, better known as Mixmaster, the Alchemist Virtuoso.

He stood tall and composed, a figure that commanded silence without asking for it. Dressed like he'd walked out of a Piltover ballroom and into a Zaun slaughterhouse, every line of his tailored coat was deliberate. The red scarf knotted at his throat gleamed faintly in the light, almost like fresh arterial blood.

Two of his fingers, on his dominant hand, were crafted from a smooth, unidentifiable metal, joints whisper-silent as he tapped them thoughtfully against the side of a glass. A chemist of impossible talent, his name was spoken in the alleys of Zaun and whispered in the houses of Piltover with sheer dread.

He was elegance soaked in danger. A mind sharp enough to make anything, poison, cure, or worse and ruthless enough to sell it to the highest bidder.

And right now, even he looked displeased. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to. His words cut clean.

"Your man put the sample in the hands of a chem-slinger with the nerves of a sewer rat."

He tapped two metal fingers against the glass in his other hand, soft, deliberate clicks like the ticking of a bomb.

"I handed over a sealed dose, one batch only, for controlled exposure. You turned it into a street chase. Also, the Enforcer...."

The boss didn't move yet. He turned toward Caelum, voice cool and precise.

"It will be delt with. How long until it's ready?"

The man dipped his head slightly, drawing a slim folder from under his coat and offering it forward with those gleaming metal fingers. "Progress is steady. Formula's still volatile in open air. But under pressure and temperature controls, we're seeing signs of stable suppression fields."

He smiled faintly. "Give us time."

Charoite exhaled a stream of purple smoke toward the ceiling, clearly unimpressed. "Time's the one thing we don't have, darling." She flicked ash off her cigarette with a sharp tap. "Piltover's stepping up patrols. Another raid, another rookie squealing on the wrong corner, and the whole thing implodes before we even uncork the bottle."

She turned her gaze at the boss. "I'll have transport routes and handlers in place within the week. But we need the Nullblight. Or all we've done is fund a funeral."

The boss regarded them both in silence, then finally rose from his chair.

He moved with unhurried grace. No sudden motion, no wasted breath. The cigar burned low in his fingers as he walked toward the door, his shadow long and slow across the floor.

He stopped as he passed the chemist.

"You lost the compound," he said quietly. "You let yourself be followed. And now a child we meant to disappear is recovering in the Sheriff's mansion."

The chemist tried to speak. "I... I didn't mean..."

The boss didn't look at him.

"Clean up the mess," he said to the other two men in the room. His voice didn't rise. "All of

it.”

Then, with the faintest pause, he added

“And clean him up too. We can’t afford liabilities.”

....

The room was dimly lit, quiet except for the soft ticking of the clock beside the bed. The little girl lay still beneath the covers, her face pale, one small arm tucked close to her chest, the other with a thin drip taped to her skin. Her chest rose and fell steadily now, but her lashes still fluttered faintly, like she was fighting something in her sleep.

Vi sat slouched forward in the armchair by the bed, elbows on her knees, knuckles cracking one after the other, slow, rhythmic, the only sound she made. Her eyes hadn’t left the girl in almost an hour, jaw tight, brow creased, mind still turning over every minute of that day. Every wrong turn. Every consequence.

The door creaked open gently.

Caitlyn stepped inside her footsteps soft across the floor. She didn’t speak right away, just looked at Vi for a moment, the way her whole body was coiled like a wire about to snap.

She stepped closer. Her hand rose and moved with slow intention, tracing a gentle line down the length of Vi’s shoulder blades, feeling the rigid tension locked beneath the skin. Then upward, brushing along the curve of her neck, pausing at the base of her skull where muscle met bone, tight as coiled rope.

“The doctor said she’s going to be fine,” she said quietly. “She inhaled a lot of smoke, badly dehydrated... but nothing permanent.”

Vi finally looked up, the tension in her shoulders dipping just a little.

She rose to her feet and crossed the room, each step quiet against the thick carpet, though the heaviness in the air trailed her like a shadow. At the bedside, she reached out with a tenderness that betrayed the storm inside her, gently sweeping a few blonde curls from the child’s face. The messy strands clung softly to pale cheeks, and for a moment, all the weight she carried stilled in her chest.

Caitlyn met her halfway and reached for her hand gently, fingers brushing Vi’s knuckles before folding around them. She gave a small squeeze, wordless, but grounding.

Vi let herself be led, her fingers tightening slightly around Caitlyn’s as they slipped through the doorway into the quiet of the hallway. The door clicked shut behind them.

They stopped under the warm glow of a wall lamp, neither of them speaking for a moment.

Then Vi exhaled slowly, her voice low, rough.

"We need to talk."

....

The study was quiet, lit only by the warm glow of a single lamp near the desk. Caitlyn stood beneath it, holding a small vial between her fingers. The silver liquid inside shimmered faintly as she tilted it under the light, expression sharp with concentration.

"You've never seen this before?" she asked

Vi, standing a few steps away with arms folded tight across her chest, shook her head. "No. Never."

Caitlyn frowned, still studying the vial. "We should give it to a chemist. Someone I trust."

"Anyone pops in your mind?"

"Yes..." she turned "Professor Lystra Morane. She's known for her work in metallurgical alchemy and volatile compounds. Doesn't work well with people but knows her way around strange liquids. She might actually know what this is"

Vi nodded once, jaw working. "There's more."

She stepped forward and leaned her weight on the edge of the desk. "The house didn't just collapse, Cait. It was leveled. Controlled. The scorch marks were wrong, and the sister, she was already bleeding before the blast hit. I think they were all killed first, then the place was blown to cover it up."

Caitlyn exhaled through her nose and looked away, as if trying to ground herself. "Vi... you've had a hard day. You pulled a child out of a collapsing building. Maybe...maybe take a breath."

Vi's jaw tightened. "I can't just take a breath, Cait. Not when this stinks like a setup."

She pushed off the desk, pacing. "Gearhand's kids go underground the same day he's thrown into Stillwater? Silya takes them in, and now both her and the other kid are burned corpses under a pile of rubble?"

She turned back, eyes sharp. "That's not a string of bad luck. That's someone cleaning house."

Caitlyn stayed quiet, watching her.

"Don't you see? It was the same leak, Cait. Both places, Gearhand's house and the lab we raided today," her voice softened slightly. "What if it's connected to Gearhand's work? Maybe he was into something deep. Maybe this Silya knew too much about it, or kids saw

something, someone. And what the hell is this?" She pointed at the vial

She paused, then added quietly, "If they're willing to torch a house with two kids inside to cover their tracks... we're already behind."

"I'm not saying you're wrong Violet." Caitlyn said

Vi looked at her, surprised.

"I'm saying you're running on fumes. You've got blood on your boots and smoke still in your lungs." Her gaze softened. "Sleep. Clear your head. We'll look at everything again in the morning, with both eyes open."

Vi hesitated. "And if by morning they've buried whatever this is?"

Caitlyn gave a small, tired smile. "Then we'll dig it back up.... Together."

Vi turned away, pressing her forearm against the windowpane as she let out a long, quiet breath. It ghosted across the glass, fading fast, like something she couldn't hold onto.

Behind her, Caitlyn pushed herself off the table. She didn't rush. Just stepped forward, slow and certain, and let her hands find Vi's waist, a gentle glide down tense muscle, a grounding touch. She leaned in, lips brushing Vi's shoulder, soft as a secret.

Vi didn't speak. Just caught Caitlyn's arms and pulled them in, folding them around herself like armor she didn't know she needed. Her breath, sharp at first, came slower now. Heavier. Then steadier.

"You're right," she said quietly. "It's just that..." Her eyes fell shut for a moment. "I feel like I'm drowning sometimes... like I can't breathe."

Caitlyn turned her gently, steady hands guiding her, gaze full of quiet concern. One hand rose, fingers cradling Vi's jaw, thumb brushing tenderly beneath her eye. Vi leaned into the touch, eyes closing for just a second, clinging to the warmth.

"You don't have to keep treading water," Caitlyn whispered. "I'll breathe for you until you can again... You just need to let me."

Vi swallowed hard. Then leaned in.

The kiss was slow. Intentional. A question asked between mouths. She deepened it with a low, aching sound in her throat, arms sliding around Caitlyn's waist, fingers brushing along the soft line where the blouse met skin heat and heartbeat under her hands.

Caitlyn's fingers threaded through Vi's hair, curling gently. She gave a soft tug, and her breath hitched, just barely, just enough to tremble against her lips.

That was all the invitation Vi needed.

She moved with instinct, backing Caitlyn slowly toward the desk, blind to anything but the feeling of her. The heat. The scent of jasmine clinging to her skin, subtle, familiar, anchoring. A thread pulling her in.

The desk caught the backs of Caitlyn's thighs. She gasped, a sharp inhale at the sudden cool of polished wood against flushed skin. Her head tipped back, exposing her neck as Vi's mouth found the soft place just beneath her jaw where her pulse beat quick and sure.

Buttons gave under Vi's fingers, clumsy at first, then urgent until fabric slipped from Caitlyn's shoulders, revealing pale skin, warm to the touch.

A sigh escaped her lips. Soft. Real.

It made Vi's chest tighten, made her knees feel weak.

Caitlyn pulled her in again, one hand sliding up the back of Vi's neck, her fingers curling tight. The kiss turned deeper, hungrier, not rushed, but needed. Her other arm looped around Vi's shoulders, steadying them both as Vi lifted her onto the desk in one easy motion.

Then a sudden yelp broke the moment.

Vi froze, blinking. "What?"

Caitlyn burst into laughter, cheeks flushed as she reached under her thigh and pulled out a small letter knife tossing it on the floor.

Vi stared for a beat, then laughed, nose brushing Caitlyn's. "You came armed?"

"Always," Caitlyn murmured, tugging her back in by the collar with a smirk. Her legs slipped around Vi's hips like muscle memory, like they were always meant to fit there.

Vi exhaled shakily, drawn into her all over again. The scent of her skin curled into Vi's lungs like comfort. Her hands slid along Caitlyn's thighs, bare now beneath the bunched-up fabric of her skirt.

She shivered, arched into her, surrendering to the weight of Vi's body and the press of her mouth at her throat. Every thought that wasn't this, fell away like the world outside, the room had simply ceased to matter.

Caitlyn pulled her in again, harder this time a kiss messier, hotter, mouth opening beneath Vi's like it was instinct. Her hands moved with practiced urgency, fingers at Vi's waistband, tugging at the buckle with a metallic clink that echoed between their breaths.

She curled her fingers into the belt loops and yanked her forward, rough, deliberate and cheeky. Vi stumbled, caught herself with a breathless laugh that broke against Caitlyn's lips.

Then her hands slipped past the back edge of Vi's trousers, fingers finding her behind squeezing with a heat that made Vi's whole body tighten. She moaned low in her throat, hips shifting into the pressure, drawn like a tide, kissing her back as if oxygen lived in her mouth and nowhere else.

Everything blurred.

Caitlyn's hair tumbled loose, falling into her flushed face as Vi caught her jaw, guiding her back into another kiss, fierce and consuming.

She needed this. So did Caitlyn.

Clothes shifted between them, bunched, pulled aside, discarded in pieces like distractions they no longer had patience for. Heat rose fast, coiled tight between them. Every shift of hips, every gasp, every low, trembling moan swallowed into the other's mouth, urgent, wordless declarations.

Then something stilled between them, like shift in a wild water when the winds subside.

Vi kissed her again, but slower this time, unhurried, reverent. Her hand moved between them with the same careful patience, warm fingers tracing Caitlyn's stomach before slipping lower, deliberate and sure.

The other arm hooked gently beneath Caitlyn's thigh, guiding her closer, anchoring her so there was no space left between them, only heat, breath and skin.

Their foreheads pressed together. A hush settled over them, thick with something fragile and sacred. Every breath they shared felt louder in the stillness, their pulses echoing in unison, fast, fluttering.

Caitlyn's eyes fluttered shut, her chest rising with a sharp, quiet inhale as Vi's fingers found her. Just the lightest touch, grazing where she ached for her most. Her whole body softened in surrender melting into the moment, into Vi.

Vi stilled. Just for a breath. Her lips brushed against the tip of Caitlyn's nose a barely-there kiss, impossibly gentle.

Then she eased her fingers inside, slow and steady, her gaze never leaving Caitlyn's face. Watching every flicker, every catch of breath like it was something precious.

She let out a sound, soft, broken, more breath than voice, her fingers curling around Vi's wrist, not to stop her, but to hold on.

Neither rushed.

They savored.

Because in that moment, it wasn't about urgency or hunger.

It was about being fully, undeniably together.

Her fingers slid from Vi's wrist to lace with hers, anchoring them both. Her breath trembled on the exhale, lips parting slightly as her head tipped forward, their foreheads still touching. Her other hand curled around Vi's shoulder, holding her close, grounding herself in the warmth of her.

Vi kissed the corner of her mouth, slow and soft. Her fingers moved with the same care, attentive like she was something rare.

The softest sounds escaped Caitlyn's throat, breathy, helpless things she didn't try to hide. Her legs shifted, wrapping around Vi's hips, drawing her deeper in every sense. Her nails grazed lightly along her back, not to urge her faster, but simply to feel more.

She leaned her cheek to Vi's, skin flushed, breath catching as her body began to climb. The warmth between them deepened, slow and steady like a tide rising. She trembled from the weight of being known so completely.

Vi shifted, just enough to keep them close, her other hand moving to cradle the back of Caitlyn's head, her fingers threading into her hair. Caitlyn's face turned, seeking her mouth, and Vi gave it, not frantic, but deep, anchoring, the kind of kiss that pulled her back from the edge and pushed her toward it all at once.

Caitlyn broke the kiss only to gasp, a shuddered breath that shook through her limbs. Her body arched against Vi's, pressing into every place where they touched. Her arm tightened around Vi's shoulders as she whispered her name barely audible, but thick with meaning.

And Vi held her. Gently. Completely, until she shattered, soft and breathless, her body curling in as she let go.

Vi caught her, like she always would, steady, strong, hers.

She rested her lips against Caitlyn's temple, kissed her there once, then again

"Breathe Cupcake" she whispered with a soft smile

.....

Stillwater Hold – 5 am

The overnight shift was quiet.

Two guards lounged outside the restricted cellblock, chairs tilted back, cups of something stale in hand, mid-conversation, half-watching the corridor with the dull focus of men used to nothing happening.

"...so I told her, you try finding eggs that aren't powdered down here."

The other snorted. "You need to stop flirting with the kitchen staff."

A low flicker passed through the ceiling light. A hum, then silence.

A flicker ran through the overhead lamps.

Then...blackout.

The corridor lights fizzled out with a low hum, swallowed by the dark. A heartbeat later, the emergency strips kicked in, thin lines of red along the ceiling, barely enough to see by.

The guards straightened. "Backup lights just tripped. Could be..."

"Psst."

A soft, silenced shot cracked through the dark. He dropped without a sound.

The second turned, hand reaching for his weapon

Too late. Another whisper of steel and fire, and he collapsed next to his partner.

Silence returned.

Three figures emerged from the shadows, dressed in Enforcer uniforms, almost.

Their boots were scuffed. Telling signs of intrusion.

One checked inmate list. The others moved ahead towards the cells.

Inside, the inmates stirred. All Zaunites. Small-time runners. One with a burning spanner tattooed on his forearm.

"Hey, what's..."

One shot.

Clean. Fast.

Each cell, the same.

No warning. No mercy.

....

The sofa in Caitlyn's office wasn't made for two, but they made it work. Limbs entangled, bodies bare beneath a soft blue blanket that smelled faintly of parchment and lavender, the scent of late night breeze coming through the open window mixed with scent of old books,

comfort layered in familiarity.

Caitlyn's head rested on Vi's shoulder, her breath slow, steady, the rise and fall of her chest a quiet rhythm against Vi's side. One leg was tangled between Vi's, her body folded into her like she belonged there.

Her fingers traced lazy paths along the lines of Vi's collarbone, featherlight and slow, like she had all the time in the world to learn her. Vi's hand moved in kind, running long, unhurried strokes down the length of Caitlyn's spine, grounding herself in the shape of her.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Then Caitlyn laced their fingers together, slowly, thoughtfully. She lifted their joined hands, brushing her thumb across Vi's knuckles, almost absentminded, but not quite. Her voice was soft, low. "Tomorrow, you should go to Stillwater. Talk to Gearhand ... see if any of the others booked that day give up anything useful."

Vi hummed, not arguing. "And what about you?"

"I'm going to see the chemist," Caitlyn said, her voice quiet against Vi's shoulder. "Then... I want to cross-check everything. Every raid, every arrest, every tip we've had since the Hexgates shut down."

Vi's eyes flicked down to her, half-lidded but alert. "You're hunting a thread."

Caitlyn nodded faintly. "If you are right, and this is something bigger, then it's been in motion for weeks. Maybe even longer. Right under our noses."

Vi exhaled slowly. "That silver crap? It's not street brew. Stuff like that doesn't just show up on the street over night."

Caitlyn's fingers slowed where they were tracing idle patterns along Vi's ribs "Could be some new drug."

"Maybe... I don't know," she murmured, "Could be some freaky lab experiment that slipped the leash."

Caitlyn shifted, propping herself on her elbow so she could see her better. "Could be a new variant of shimmer."

Vi met her eyes, her fingertips warm as they swept a strand of hair from Caitlyn's forehead. "I hope not," she said, brows knitting. "I've seen shimmer twist people six ways from hell. The last thing we need is more advanced form. I just know this wasn't cooked up in someone's kitchen for extra coin."

Caitlyn's hand had slowed where it was tracing along Vi's ribs, "I keep worrying I'm going to miss it. That I'll look in the wrong direction and by the time I figure it out..." her voice dipped, faltering just slightly, ".... it'll be too late."

Vi didn't answer right away. She just pulled her a little closer, brushing her lips against Caitlyn's forehead soft, grounding.

"You won't," she said, voice steady. "You're too damn stubborn."

Caitlyn closed her eyes at the touch, like the simple gesture could chase the fear out of her bones.

The quiet settled again. Not heavy, just full.

....

Morning light spilled into the dining room, soft and golden, catching on the polished surfaces and old family portraits that lined the walls. It was quiet, too quiet for a house that big.

Elara sat stiffly at the table, her legs dangling just above the floor. The dress she wore was one of Caitlyn's, pale blue, delicately embroidered, clearly well-kept despite its age.

Her hair had been combed and pinned back with a matching ribbon, her face freshly washed. But none of it touched the heaviness in her eyes. She sat silently, clutching the simple bracelet Vi had taken from her sister's wrist. Her thumb rubbed the beads over and over.

Caitlyn set down a plate in front of her with quiet care. Toast, eggs and some vegetables, all arranged into a smiling face. A small gesture, meant to comfort. But Elara pushed the plate away.

She flinched caught off guard glancing at Vi. Her eyes uncertain, as if she wasn't sure what to do or say.

Vi watched her for a long moment, then scraped a chair across the floor with a low, lazy drag. She spun it around, straddled it backwards, and leaned in, arms folded over the top rail, chin resting easily. Her voice came quiet, steady, but firm.

"You've got to eat, kid. Trust me, skipping meals won't make it hurt less."

Elara looked up, frowning. Her eyes narrowing, defiant. "What would a Piltie know about that?" she muttered

Vi didn't miss a beat. "Quite a bit, actually... 'Cause I'm not a Topsider. I grew up on the same streets you did."

Elara looked down, small fingers fiddling with the bracelet "You're lying." she said under her chin

Vi smirked, raising a brow. "Oh yeah? You think you know the Lanes better than me?" She

said smug

The girl raised her eyes just for a second

"Alright then... Let's see how much you know. Bet you've never heard of the steam vents behind Trenchway Market... Or how the lights on the Bridge flicker twice before the surge hits...Ooor that there's a guy near the mines who fixes boots for free if you ask him about his wife. Or that the best place to hide from Enforcers is behind the tar vats near Drover's Row."

Elara blinked up at her. Her lips parted just slightly.

Vi smirked. "Didn't expect that from the Topsider did you?"

The girl now stared at her surprised.

"Listen kid...I grew up with walls cracking around me, steam leaks in the pipes, and more rats than floorboards. Used to think those big, rusted signs were treasure maps. Turns out they were just hazard warnings. I spent seven years in Stillwater, eating dirt and taking beatings like they were breakfast... and when I was a kid.... I lost more people than I knew how to count."

Her voice stayed even, but something flickered in her eyes just for a second. Then she stood, turning away like it cost her too much to say even that.

"But hey... don't wanna talk, I respect that. That's fine," she said, waving a hand in casual dismissal.

Caitlyn stayed silent, barely even breathing. She didn't dare speak. Her eyes met Vi's across the room. Vi gave her a small, reassuring wink reaching for the bottle on the table.

Elara's chin trembled. She gripped the bracelet tight, her small hand shaking, and then like a dam giving way, she began to cry. No sound at first, just tears running hot and fast down her cheeks. Her shoulders hitched with each breath the grief too big for her to hold in.

Vi had only just raised the bottle to her lips when the girl sprang from her chair. She threw herself at Vi's back, arms locking around her as though afraid she'd vanish, and buried her face against her waist, sobbing in great, gasping waves.

Vi stilled, the bottle paused mid-air, then quietly set it down. Her hand slid back, fingers wrapping gently around Elara's shoulders, steady, grounding. "It's alright kid," she murmured, voice low. "Let it all out," she whispered, glancing across the room at Caitlyn with quiet certainty."

Eventually, the sobs began to fade, each one softer than the last until they melted into shaky breaths. When the girl finally loosened her grip, Vi shifted slightly, just enough to glance back at her with a small, reassuring smile.

"Hey," she said gently. "You know... you don't have to be scared of Cait."

Elara peeked up, eyes red and swollen, her lashes still wet.

"She might be a Sheriff, yeah," Vi went on, voice low and coaxing, "but I promise, she's one of the good ones."

She tilted her head, adding with a smirk, "Bit of a pain sometimes...kind of bossy, gets this weird look when she's thinking too hard..."

"Excuse me?" Caitlyn shot her a look, arms folding across her chest.

Vi grinned, tossing her a wink. "See? Difficult. But trustworthy."

A tiny sound escaped Elara, half-laugh, half-sniffle, and she rubbed at her face with the back of her hand. Her gaze flicked to Caitlyn, studying her cautiously.

"I want my dad," she murmured.

Vi's smile faded a touch, meeting the girl's eyes with quiet seriousness.

"I know, kid," she said softly palming her hair gently. "I know. We're working on it, alright? It's just... not that simple right now."

The moment was interrupted by a sharp, urgent banging on the front door.

Both women stilled. Vi's eyes flicking to Caitlyn who shrugged confused.

A beat later, one of the house staff stepped into the kitchen, breath slightly short.

"Apologies, Miss Kiramman," she said gently. "There's an Enforcer at the front. He's asking for you. Says it's urgent."

"Great...I was worried we'd get through a whole meal" Vi grumbled

"Stay with the child please," Caitlyn instructed the servant with a nod toward Elara, who looked up with wide eyes.

Then she and Vi slipped out quickly, tension already rising in their steps.

The young Enforcer waiting in her office straightened at their approach. He was polite, composed, but clearly uneasy. He greeted Caitlyn first with a respectful nod, then glanced to Vi and added a second one, almost sheepish.

"Apologies for the intrusion," he said. "I know it's early, but... this couldn't wait."

Caitlyn nodded, cool but attentive. "What's going on?"

The Enforcer stepped forward and handed her a small pneumatic canister, official seal from Stillwater stamped along the top.

Caitlyn broke it open, eyes scanning the note inside. Her breath caught.

"Stillwater was breached?" she asked, voice sharp, eyes flashing up.

"At approximately 0500 this morning," the Enforcer confirmed grimly. "Three individuals, disguised as Enforcers. Two guards dead, several others wounded, five prisoners killed. Clean, surgical hits. It wasn't random"

Vi took a step forward, her whole posture tightening. "Who?"

"All from your rade" Caitlyn said horrified, her eyes locking with Vi's

The man hesitated. "Five of them. Executed in their cells. All Zaunites."

Vi felt like someone had punched her. Her breath stalled in her chest. "Gearhand?" she whispered.

The Enforcer winced. "Oh...Actually...he had a fight with another inmate so they transferred him an hour before the attack. Different block. Different floor. He's alive."

Vi slumped onto the armrest, rubbing the bridge of her nose, jaw clenched.

"They got the wrong guy?" she muttered.

Caitlyn reached out, resting a hand lightly against Vi's shoulder, grounding her. Her brain working behind her skull.

"He was lucky," the Enforcer offered with an awkward attempt at relief.

Vi shot the Enforcer a look, disbelief laced with exhaustion. "Yeah? Tell that to the other guy."

She paused, then looked up sharply. "Cait." It was a warning. A call. And for a second, they simply looked at each other, no words needed.

Caitlyn's breath caught, a flicker of realization flashing in her eyes. Her posture shifted, spine straightening, and just like that, she moved. Sharp. Collected.

She turned to the Enforcer, her tone razor clear. "I want every detail you've got," she said, voice sharp and precise now. "Every step, every name. I want to speak with whoever ordered the transfer. And I want a full report on how anyone got that deep into Stillwater wearing our uniforms."

"Yes, Sheriff," he said, already nodding.

Caitlyn held up the cylinder, her gaze cold steel. "This stays quiet. No Council. No press. No one breathes a word until I say so."

Another nod. "Understood."

But she wasn't done. She turned fully now, "I want two full units stationed at this estate. Effective immediately. Every gate, every entrance locked down. Nothing in or out unless it comes through me or officer Vi."

The Enforcer blinked, hesitating confused. "Ma'am?"

Caitlyn didn't flinch. "There's a child in this house. She's a key witness in this investigation. I want her treated as such, protected at all costs."

Another pause. The Enforcer nodded again, more firmly this time.

Caitlyn's voice cracked through the air, sharp and commanding.

"NOW!" she yelled

The man jolted like she'd slapped him and turned on his heel without another word, boots echoing down the hallway.

As the door shut behind him, silence rushed in to fill the space.

Vi pushed herself off the armrest, already pacing. Caitlyn was already at her desk, a pen flying across paper, her face tight.

"You know he's got a target on his back now," Vi said, not quite snapping but close. "You can't expect me to just sit on my hands while they line up to finish the job."

There was no response. Just the scratch of Caitlyn's pen.

"Cait? Are you listening to me?" Vi's jaw tensed. Voice rising, defensive. "Great. We're doing this again!" she said, throwing her arms up. "Knew you weren't gonna see eye to eye with me on this."

Caitlyn didn't look up. The scratch of her pen was the only reply.

Vi scoffed. "You know what? Forget it."

She turned on her heel, frustration spilling out of her in a bitter breath. "I'm fucking doing this my way."

"Violet!" shouted, her voice cut across the room finally looking up

Vi stopped mid-step.

“Shut up!”

Vi blinked. Stunned. Her mouth opened slightly, but no words came out.

Caitlyn stepped around the desk and pressed a folded document into her chest. “This is all I can do for now.”

Vi stared at her, then unfolded the paper.

It was an official designation, Gearhand marked as a vital source for an active investigation. Transferred under protective custody, name sealed, location restricted even within the Enforcer system.

Vi looked up for a short beat before grabbing the back of Caitlyn’s neck pulling her into a short kiss and darted out of the room.

“You can thank me later!” Caitlyn yelled after her shaking her head with a fond smile.

....

The gates of Stillwater loomed ahead, jagged and gray against the morning haze, a gaping wound carved into the cliffside.

Vi stood a moment longer than she meant to, fists clenched tight as she looked up. The sea wind bit at her collar, but it wasn’t the cold that made her stomach knot.

It was this place.

Seven years behind those walls. Seven years of iron and silence and rage. Now, she was back, wearing the badge that once hunted her, walking through the same gates she’d been dragged through in chains. It didn’t matter that she wasn’t here to stay. Stillwater didn’t care who you were now. It remembered you.

As she stepped through the outer checkpoint, the scent hit her first, metallic salt, sweat soaked into stone, and something fouler underneath, like rot sealed in the cracks. It made her gag, just a little, just for a second. Memories came too fast.

The gate rolled on rusted wheels, shrieking like an injured beast, and slammed behind her.

Her pulse spiked. For a second, she wasn’t Enforcer Vi. She was inmate 516. Small boots. Bruised wrists. Fury in her blood and no one looking out for her but her own fists.

She kept walking.

Through another hall, the familiar echo of footfalls bouncing off low ceilings. Harsh lighting flickered overhead, just as it always had. The guards didn't even glance at her twice. The uniform did that. The one she still wasn't sure fit.

Another gate. Another clank. Another reminder she'd once belonged to this cage.

Her jaw tightened.

The deeper she walked, the heavier the air felt. The corridor narrowed, walls pressing in like they remembered her shoulders. The stone was always damp, always cold, always whispering with distant voices, screams, fights, prayers, things you swore you'd never say out loud.

By the time she reached the final turn, she could feel sweat between her shoulder blades. Not from fear. From something worse. Memory.

And rage.

She reached the cell.

Gearhand was inside, barely standing. One eye swollen shut, a crust of blood down his jaw. He looked worse than she remembered.

He stiffened as soon as he saw her. "Well, look who crawled in," he sneered. "The lapdog."

Vi didn't flinch.

He stepped closer, lip curled. "Took the uniform. Sold out your blood for a shiny badge. Tell me, how's the view from up top?"

Vi pulled the keys from her belt and slid one into the lock.

"We need to talk."

"Fuck you." He didn't wait for more, just drew back and spat. It landed wet and stringy on her boot.

Vi looked down. Then back up at him.

She stepped inside. The door clanged shut behind her, loud enough to make the silence shiver.

He lunged for her without a pause.

Vi moved fast. Too fast for him.

She ducked the swing, sidestepped, and caught his arm mid-strike using his momentum to slam him face-first against the stone wall. The impact cracked loud. She twisted his arm up behind his back, locking it there with one knee between his legs.

He growled, straining against her grip.

"You're slow," she muttered near his ear.

"Traitor!"

Vi didn't move. Didn't blink.

"Your daughter's alive," she said.

That stopped him.

Silence pressed in, heavy.

She loosened her grip just enough for her voice to cut clean through. "Can we talk now?"

.....

They sat on the cold stone floor, backs against the wall, the weight of Stillwater pressing down from every side.

Gearhand held the piece of paper. White, clean, smooth. The kind that came from Piltover and is only seen in Zaun when you'd done something wrong or owed someone something. On it. His daughters drawing in bright colored pencils. The three of them, smiling.

Underneath, a simple message written in wonky letters *'I love you daddy'*

His thumb brushed the creased edge. His eyes scanned it for the tenth time, then he let out a shaky breath and dragged a palm over his face, smearing away the tears before they could fall too far.

"Where is she?" he asked, voice rasped.

"Safe," Vi said simply.

He eyed her, still guarded. "So now what? You came all the way down here to blackmail me?"

"I came because your kid's still breathing, and I'd like to keep it that way."

He scoffed and looked away. "Forget it. I'm not putting a target on my back for you. I'm all she's got now."

Vi leaned forward, elbows on her knees. "You already have one. And now she does too. And I hate to spring it on you, but you're kinda useless to her behind the bars."

He said nothing, jaw tightening.

"I wanna help" she said quietly

"Don't tell me. Turned Topsider and now you're here for redemption arc."

"No. I just stopped pretending it's a badge of honour to stay piss poor and broken."

That landed.

His gaze flicked to her, guarded but searching.

"Talk to me," she continued, "Give me names, give me something useful, and I'll make sure I get you out of this shithole."

"Sure you will." he scoffed

She stood, slow and steady. Looked down at him.

"Do it for her or rot in here alone. I don't fucking care."

The silence stretched between them like wire pulled too tight.

Then, at last, grudgingly, quietly.

"What do you wanna know?"

.....

The parlor of Councilman Aleric Vandergale's estate was a museum of excess. Walls lined in gold-threaded wallpaper shimmered beneath crystal chandeliers. Books bound in leather and dust stood untouched behind glass. A servant in spotless ivory poured brandy into tulip glasses, the scent of sandalwood and old money thick in the air. A quartet murmured from a corner, strings soft enough not to intrude on the conversation.

Aleric leaned back in a velvet armchair near the hearth, one leg crossed over the other, swirling his brandy as though it were more interesting than the company he kept.

"I'll say it plainly," he drawled, voice honeyed and sharp. "Sevika has no place in the Council chamber. It's a disgrace."

Lady Thaliana from one of the most prestigious houses in Piltover, known for their unmatched craftsmanship and innovations, tilted her glass. "You object to a former gang leader having a seat at the table or is it simply that she smells of soot and iron instead of rose oil?"

Aleric chuckled. "Both."

A few polite laughs bubbled around the room.

"They call it progress," muttered an older gentleman near the fireplace, adjusting a gold clasp at his collar. "But you can't polish rust. Zaun breeds criminals. Always has. Always will."

"And what of the trade accords?" asked Thaliana, arching a brow. "Innovation from the Undercity. Chemtech. Potential alliances. Investments."

"Cheap toys and street weapons," Aleric countered, eyes glinting. "They're leeching off our ingenuity. Stealing Hextech scraps and reselling them in the alleys. Give them a seat, and soon they'll want the whole table."

A gentleman with a red sash, swirled his wine. "They already have half the under-market trade. And now we're giving them legitimacy?"

Aleric stood slowly, walking toward the window that overlooked his manicured gardens lit by golden lanterns.

"Zaun doesn't want unity. It wants leverage. I keep saying this but nobody seems to listen."

This entire arrangement? A Council seat? It's a Trojan horse. And if we don't act..." He turned to face the room. "...we'll wake up to find Piltover answering to them."

"So what would you propose?" Thaliana asked quietly.

He smiled thinly. "Containment. Strategic funding cuts. Delay their projects. Keep their so-called scientists chasing our shadows. And most of all... ensure our own superiority remains unquestioned."

There was a hum of agreement. No raised voices. No outrage. Just the quiet murmur of power shielding itself.

Then, a butler stepped into the room and whispered something into Aleric's ear.

His smile faltered. Just slightly.

"Excuse me," he said smoothly, rising from his seat and brushing invisible dust from his cuff. "Business never sleeps, unfortunately."

He left without another word, the click of his shoes fading down the hall until the door to his private office swung open with a soft creak.

There, in his own leather chair, like she owned the place, Charoite. Legs crossed, posture casual but commanding, a cigarette burning lazily between her fingers. Smoke curled toward the ceiling in slow, deliberate spirals.

"Nice place," she said, not looking up. "Bit too clean, if you ask me."

"What are doing here?"

She finally lifted her eyes to meet his, cool and sharp as cut glass.

"We need to talk."

Aleric shut the door behind him, slow and careful.

.....

The lab sat nestled in a narrow side street off Academy, tucked behind the façade of an old bookbinder's shop. Only those who knew where to knock would ever find it.

Caitlyn stepped through the tall steel-framed door, instantly struck by the scent of heated copper, ink, and lavender oil. A curious mix, like everything about Lystra Morane.

The chemist was bent over her workstation, hunched beneath a halo of magnifying lenses and lamplight. Coils of tubing and glassware cluttered the bench, humming with quiet alchemical life.

Lystra didn't look up. "You're late."

"You're lucky I came at all," Caitlyn replied dryly, stepping inside. "You're not exactly easy to find these days."

"Good." Lystra finally straightened and turned, tugging her gloves off with an audible snap. She had short white-blond hair, streaked at the tips with ink-black dye, and a pair of modified goggles pushed up on her head like a crown.

"I assume you didn't drag yourself all the way down here just for a chat?"

Caitlyn pulled the small glass vial from her pocket. The silver liquid inside shimmered faintly under the lights.

"I need you to tell me what this is," she said, holding it out.

Lystra took it, frowning. Turned it gently between two fingers.

"Looks like purified mercury," she murmured. "But it's not. Viscosity's off. It's got luminescence. And this..." She held it to the light. "...refracts too cleanly. Like it wants to vanish."

"You've never seen anything like it?" Caitlyn asked.

"No." Lystra's tone was clipped, eyes sharp behind her lenses now. "And that worries me."

She slid the vial into a steel holder and began prepping equipment. "Where did you get this?"

Caitlyn didn't answer.

Lystra glanced up. "Ah. One of those jobs."

"Just keep this between us," Caitlyn said. "No records. No lab assistants. I need you to treat

this like it's classified.”

“You want fast or thorough?”

“Both.”

Lystra gave a humorless smile. “Of course you do.”

She turned back to her instruments, already moving with clinical precision. “I’ll start with molecular decomposition. See what’s in its guts.”

“Will it give us a lead?”

“If it’s synthetic, yes. Which probably is by the first look. Looks ominous”

Caitlyn’s voice dropped. “It might be more than ominous.”

Lystra nodded slowly. “Then let’s find out what the hell it’s made of.”

.....

They sat side by side on the cold concrete floor, backs to the wall, the silence between them heavy but no longer hostile. The little folded note lay between them, its edges curled slightly from Gearhand’s grip. Elara’s uneven scrawl stared back at him, proof of life, not that he didn’t believe her, it was just something tangible he could hold on to. And in his eyes, a glimmer of something he thought he lost...reason for living.

Vi watched him with a quiet patience. Not pushing. Just giving him time to breathe again.

Finally, he spoke. Voice low, cracked. “You came here for answers.”

“I came here cause your kid doesn’t deserve a target on her back,” Vi said. “Neither do you. So, talk to me.”

“You think she's the target?” he asked, hoarse.

“I don’t know. That’s what I’m trying to find out.” Vi said. “Could’ve been Silya. Could’ve been all of you. But someone made damn sure there were no survivors. Except now there is. And if that’s the case they won’t stop. What’s going on? What were you working on?”

He wiped a hand over his face, like he could rub the shame away. "I don't know what it was. Not really. Just said it paid well. Components," he said. "Small parts. Nothing that'd raise eyebrows on their own."

Vi frowned. "Components for what?"

"No idea. We never saw the whole thing. That was the point. Everyone did one part, passed it on. Assembly lines across the city. Quiet. Spread out. No paper trail."

"And that silver shit?"

He hesitated, glanced at the note again. "Wasn't ours. That was someone else's shift. But I'd seen it once. They kept it locked up tight. The others joked it was some kind of fuel...but no one really knew. You don't ask. You ask, you disappear."

Vi leaned forward, arms braced on her knees. "Who's hiring?"

He gave a sharp laugh with no humor in it. "No names. Never is. I got picked up at one of the gambling joints in the Clefts. I was working behind the bar. Guy sits down, buys you a drink, knows your name, your history, everything you've tried to bury. Says there's a job if you're still good with your hands."

Vi's brow furrowed. "So it's not random."

He shook his head. "Not even close. The crew, we weren't street scum. We were all good once. Engineers. Tinkers. Medics. All of us with ... stories. Accidents. Scandals. Skeletons."

Vi's jaw clenched. She recognised the pattern. Not just criminal, but tactical. Precise. "What did you do before this?"

He looked at her then, eyes tired. "Tech engineer. Mining rigs. Used to work the big drills. Then one day, the stabilizers failed. Eighty men buried alive. They said it was operator error." His voice cracked. "I wasn't even there that day."

Vi didn't speak. Just nodded, slow and deliberate.

He let out a breath. "After that, no one touched me. So when a man offers good coin and says keep your head down, you don't argue."

Vi's voice was quiet. "You think your girls got caught in the crossfire... or was someone trying to erase you?"

He didn't answer right away.

Then, just whispered "I don't know. I just know my kid is dead!" he said grabbing the tray with food he didn't touch slamming it into the wall.

Vi stood, brushing her hand down her thigh. "Maybe I can find out."

He looked up. "And what, I trust you now?"

Vi met his eyes. "No. But you've got nothing left to lose if you do."

She turned toward the door, then paused. "You coming or this place grew on you?"

He blinked looking up.

Vi smirked waving release papers in her hand

"You played me," Gearhand muttered as they stepped out, tugging up his hood. "Got me talking like some rookie."

Vi shot him a sidelong smirk. "Had to make sure you weren't part of the mess. Can't be too careful these days."

"And? That little act convinced you I'm clean?"

She leaned in, voice low, teasing. "No." Then, with a casual slap to his shoulder: "But if you're not, don't worry. I'll be the one to put you down."

Gearhand let out a dry chuckle. "Real warm, aren't you?"

"That's me," Vi grinned. "Just a big ol' ray of sunshine."

....

As they approached the estate, Gearhand gave a low whistle, dragging a hand across his jaw. "Damn," he muttered. "Didn't realize we were walkin' into a palace."

Two Enforcers stood at the outer gate, alert and armed. More were visible along the perimeter. Gearhand snorted. "Course the Sheriff's gotta have guards. Gotta protect all that polished silver and fine china."

Vi glanced back over her shoulder as she reached for the front door. "They're here for your daughter." she said coolly, pushing the door open.

He stopped cold. Blinked.

But Vi had already stepped inside. "Hoooney, I'm hooome!" she shouted through the entry hall, her voice bouncing off the high ceilings.

A quiet beat passed, then, from behind one of the doors, a small head peeked out. Big eyes blinked, searching.

"DADDY!" the little voice broke

The little girl flew from the doorway, her feet padding hard against the polished floor.

Gearhand barely had time to drop the hoodie from his head before she crashed into him. He caught her mid-air, his arms locking tight around her tiny frame, one big hand cradling the back of her head. She wrapped around him instantly, legs and arms clinging like she was afraid to let go again.

"Hey bug," he choked, voice cracking. "I got you, baby girl."

He held her there, tucked against his shoulder, eyes clenched shut like maybe the world would disappear if he didn't.

Vi stood by the door, watching them quietly. Her smirk had vanished as her eyes filled with tears she was holding in.

....

The Kiramman estate had fallen into a rare silence, the hush of evening settling heavy over its grand halls. In the study, only a single lamp cast a soft amber glow across the room. Shadows clung to the corners, flickering slightly as the flame wavered. On the table, a chaotic sprawl of notes, maps, and folders testified to hours of meticulous digging.

Caitlyn stood at the head of the table, tall and composed, a pencil tapping idly against her palm. Vi was beside her, arms crossed, watching the scene with a scowl that had grown deeper the longer they worked. Across from them, Gearhand leaned forward with his hand on the wood, eyes sharp beneath the low light.

"I went back through every raid since the Hexgates closed," Caitlyn said, her voice calm and measured. She gestured to a paper splayed out before her. "Evidence logs, storage transfers, post-action reports. There are gaps. Crates marked as seized go missing in transit. A chemical batch disappears in one location, then shows up weeks later in another bust, repackaged." she leaned in, brow furrowing. "Someone is moving products through the system."

"Or laundering it," Vi replied crisply, "Rebranding contraband and feeding it back into the Undercity, under our noses."

"Also...Caitlyn continued "I noticed a pattern of gaps in patrol coverage, routes altered last-minute on the same nights. The streets were clear not by chance, but because someone made sure they would be. And the person who signed it off?" She tapped the name at the bottom of the log. "Doesn't even come up on Enforcer records."

Vi let out a low whistle. "Great. So we're dealing with a ghost pencil-pusher with a talent for fraud. Love that."

Without waiting, Vi grabbed a pencil and began tracing a path on the map. "Alright...I suggest we head to Dustmere Alley tomorrow. There's a chem cook down there who owes me. Well, let's just say he's not thrilled to see me, but he talks when encouraged. If this silver crap is being moved around, he'll probably know about it."

Gearhand arched an eyebrow. "And you're dragging Her Ladyship into Dustmere with you?"

"She insisted," Vi replied without missing a beat.

"I can handle myself, thank you very much" Caitlyn replied smug

"She can" Vi winked her way

Gearhand gave her a look, dry and skeptical. "You two strut through the Undercity together, you'll light up like flare beacons. You'll be tailed before you get off the lift."

Vi smirked. "We're not showing up with Council pins. Relax."

But Caitlyn's next words were more serious. "He's right. If they're watching movements, and I believe they are, you being seen with either of us could compromise you."

"I'm not sitting around sipping tea with Topsiders while my kid lies in the ground," Gearhand

snapped, cutting her off. "You want answers. So do I."

"He's got a point" Vi said

Gearhand straightened, jaw tightening. "I know a guy, a runner. Worked pickups on jobs I didn't ask too many questions about it then. Parts. Bits assembled by my team and elsewhere. If I shake him, maybe he spills where they were going."

Vi's eyes narrowed. "You sure he'll talk?"

"If I lean hard enough."

Caitlyn's voice was smooth but carried weight. "You must be careful. If they so much as suspect you're cooperating."

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Vi nodded, voice low. "Alright. I got an idea. Take the steps here. Keep your head down. No contact with us until it's done. We'll be around just in the shadows"

"Deal" he nodded

....

The bedroom was quiet, bathed in moonlight. A soft breeze drifted through the cracked-open window, stirring the curtains just enough to whisper across the floor. Crickets hummed outside, distant and steady.

Caitlyn shifted in her sleep, brows knitting as she rolled over. Her arm flopped across the bed landing square across Vi's face.

Vi twitched groaning "Oh for fu..." she mumbled, voice muffled and peeled the offending limb off like it weighed a ton shoving it back toward Caitlyn's side. But instead of moving away, she rolled herself closer, face smushed against Caitlyn's chest.

"You're lucky I love you," she grumbled, voice thick with sleep. "You hit like a librarian."

Still dead asleep, Caitlyn instinctively wrapped that same traitorous arm around her, pulling her in tight like a body pillow.

Vi gave a little huff snuggling closer, but didn't move again.

In the other room, Elara slept curled into the crook of her father's arms. His large frame wrapped protectively around her, one calloused hand resting atop her shoulder, their breathing slow and synced. For the first time in days, she looked completely at peace.

Outside, by the gates, two Enforcers sat hunched over a board game lit by a low lamp.

"Alright, I'm goin' for the win," one said, shaking the dice with dramatic flair.

The other rolled his eyes. "You said that last round."

The dice clattered across the board then stopped mid-turn as rustling came from the hedges.

Both men stood instantly, weapons raised, eyes scanning the dark.

A pause.

Then...mrowww! A cat darted out, streaking into the night.

The first man exhaled hard, lowering his gun. "Just a bloody cat," he muttered, smacking his partner's shoulder. "You're jumpier than a new recruit."

But the second man's eyes widened. "Wait...what's that smell?"

Thick, green smoke crept low along the ground like spilled fog, quickly surrounding them both. By the time either man reacted. Two suppressed shots. Clean, fatal. They both dropped.

Simultaneously, at the far end of the estate and along the southern entrance, the pattern repeated. Men falling before they even shouted, cut down in eerie coordination.

At the kitchen entrance, a guard collapsed sideways onto the rubbish bins with a metallic crash, knocking the lids and contents loudly to the ground.

Upstairs, Vi's eyes snapped open.

Her instincts lit up like a wire.

She bolted upright, heart hammering.

Beside her, Caitlyn stirred with a groggy sound.

Vi shoved her hip. "Get up."

Caitlyn grumbled, half-asleep. "Wha...?"

Vi didn't wait. She grabbed her again, shaking her rougher this time.

"CAIT. NOW!!"

.....