

Chapter 3

They came under the cover of fog, when even the wind held its breath.

No banners, no sound, just footsteps pressed into the hush of midnight. The plan was simple, eliminate the guards without fuss, slip inside while the household slept, and move through the halls like a shadow. Room by room. Breath by breath. No time to scream. No chance to resist.

Then let the fire swallow the rest. An accident, twist of faith. A cruel joke from the above. The city would mourn but it would soon forget.

It was meant to be surgical, efficient and unseen.

It might have worked.

Should have worked.

If it wasn't for one man falling to his death with enough noise to raise the alarm.

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"Cate...get up!" Vi hissed, shaking Caitlyn's hip so hard she nearly launched off the bed. The other woman jolted upright, wide-eyed and disoriented.

"Haaa...Wha..?"

"Someone's in the house," Vi said, already yanking on her trousers. "I heard the noise"

"What?" Caitlyn blinked, rushing to the window.

"Cait...what the fuck!" Vi stumbled forward on one foot, grabbing her arm and dragging her back. "Why don't you just wave to them while you're at it?"

"Maybe it was just noise from the street?"

Vi shot her a look. "You wanna tuck yourself back in and test that theory?"

"Wha..."Caitlyn opened her mouth, then shut it with a huff. "That's not what I...", she muttered, grabbing her own trousers. "Nevermind"

They both moved as fast as they could. And then just as Caitlyn put her shoes on, the lights died.

All of them. Inside. Outside. Hallways. Grounds. Nothing but darkness.

Caitlyn's head whipped around toward the window. "Power's out across the whole estate."

"No shit Sheriff....Right....time to move Cupcake."

Vi tossed her a rifle and powered up her gauntlets, just in time for them to spark, whine, and slam deadweight into her arms, dropping her to one knee. "What the....?!"

"My rifle's not working either," Caitlyn called, fumbling with it.

"It's all bricked" Vi's eyes widened confused "Peachy..." she stood, jaw set. "Well...guess we're gonna have to do it the old fashion way....Come on...we need to move."

"Listen." Caitlyn grabbed her forearm. "There's a manual secondary backup system. If we bring back the power we will have tactical advantage."

"Where?"

"You know that painting where I'm seven?"

"Yeah the cute one"

"It's behind it."

"Couldn't it be upstairs?"

Caitlyn opened the wardrobe, hand reaching past coats until her fingers closed around polished wood. Her mother's rifle. Not as elaborate as her own weapon but reliable. For beat, here fingers brushed over the straight lines. Her breath caught in the back of her throat before she moved again, checked the chamber, loaded the rounds, and snapped it shut with a quiet click. She grabbed a spare, smaller gun and strapped it around her waist. Vi was already by the door, tension rolling off her in waves.

The hallway was swallowed in shadows, every creak underfoot magnified in the stillness. Air moved slowly through the winding corridors and sheer size of the house set Vi's nerves on edge.

No voices. No movement. Just the whisper of Caitlyn's pajama top brushing her arms and Vi's soft steps ahead.

They moved as one.

The mansion stretched ahead like something abandoned, dark and waiting. Vi led the way, eyes fixed ahead. Her destination, the main staircase where the manual backup switch was hidden behind the grand portrait all the way down underneath the veranda on the east side.

Halfway down the corridor, a shape lunged from the side passage.

Caitlyn spun, raising her rifle.

Vi leapt back, fists clenched. "Shit!"

"Whoa, whoa, friendly!" Gearhand hissed, hands half-raised. His undershirt sticking out of his trousers, boots unlaced.

Caitlyn exhaled hard, lowering her weapon.

"You scared the shit outta me," Vi muttered, rubbing her face.

"I saw them," Gearhand said quickly, voice low, barely a whisper "Three, maybe more. Went through kitchen entrance. They're armed."

"Where's the kid?" Vi asked.

"In the wardrobe. Under the coats. She knows not to move."

"Good," Caitlyn said curtly, checking her corners. "We need to get to the stairwell. To the manual power switch."

They started again, cautious now. Every board creaked like it might give them away. Then, a sound.

Movement. Distant but definite.

All three froze. Breath held. Listening.

Silence.

Vi raised two fingers...keep going.

When they reached the landing at the top of the grand staircase, Caitlyn dropped into a half-crouch behind the balustrade, rifle steady. She turned and pressed something into Gearhand's hand.

A smaller sidearm.

He stared at it, eyebrows lifting.

"Do try not to miss," she said, eyes already scanning the lower floor.

Vi moved quickly now, sliding over the rail like water. She gripped the underside and swung down one level, then dropped onto the main floor with barely a sound.

She crouched low near the bannister, eyes locking on the family portrait mounted across the entry hall. She looked up at Caitlyn for a split second before she moved.

But then, just as she was half way there, movement. Silent but noticeable.

Two, no, five figures slipping in from the west side. Faces covered with breathing apertures. Rifles slung low. Steps cautious, hunting. They didn't see her. Not yet.

Vi stilled.

She was in the open. Right in the centre of the gallery. No cover. Nowhere to move without drawing eyes.

From above, Caitlyn's grip tightened on her rifle.

She had the angle.

But not for long.

Vi's breath misted in the cold hallway air, her eyes locked on the portrait. Ten metres, maybe twelve. She could make it if she moves fast.

She shifted her weight forward, ready to move, giving a last glance towards the men.

"Wait..." Caitlyn whispered

She was already moving. Quiet. Controlled. Just a few strides from the wall. But then her forearm brushed something tall and narrow in the dark. A vase. Porcelain, gilded, and wobbling precariously on its pedestal.

Vi lunged. Both hands caught it mid-tip.

Too late.

The scrape of its base echoed like thunder in the hush shattering the silence. From the far hallway, movement snapped to attention.

"Shit," Vi muttered.

A flashlight beam swung around. Caitlyn's rifle followed.

Vi dove behind a heavy oak chest just as the first shot barked out, splintering the wall where her head had been.

Caitlyn squeezed her trigger. Her bullet clipped one attacker square in the shoulder, sending him sprawling back with a grunt.

But the others scattered, footsteps echoed, one of them barking an order. Two ducking low, one disappearing behind a column. Darkness and confusion swallowed the angles. Caitlyn's line of sight fractured.

Vi crouched, breathing hard behind the chest, bullets now peppering the wood just inches above her head.

"Could've just left the vase," she growled to herself.

Another volley hit the side. Dust puffed into her face.

Her jaw clenched, her eyes darting towards the painting "Fuck it."

She bolted upright.

Boots slammed the marble floor as she broke into a mad sprint, shoulder low, arms pumping.

A man stepped out to intercept her, Vi dropped, sliding under his reach, smacking her shoulder into his shins. He toppled.

Another shadow aimed at her.

From above, Caitlyn fired again, this time wide, just enough to make the man flinch and duck.

Vi didn't stop.

She hit the wall with both hands, ripping the portrait off its hinge in one wild tug. It crashed behind her, revealing the backup lever.

One breath. One grip. One pull.

Done.

The entire house shuddered as the manual system flared to life. Lights flickered. Then surged.

The hallway exploded back into colour.

And now, everyone saw everything.

The intruders hesitated. Their goggles flickered as light returned. Suddenly, the mansion wasn't a tomb anymore, it was a labyrinth. Windows, mirrors, chandeliers, all working against them.

Caitlyn moved with elegant precision. Another man emerged from the parlor, she fired. One shot in the thigh, a second in the chest as he crumpled. This time she didn't miss.

She took the stairs fast, but at the landing, another figure lunged from the shadows. She used the rifle to block, but he knocked it from her grip, kicked her leg out from under her. She hit the ground hard. The breath shot from her lungs from pain in one brutal rush. For a heartbeat, everything was ringing.

The attacker raised his weapon

But then suddenly Vi hit him from the side like a freight train, slamming him into the bannister. They both went down over the edge hitting the ground floor hard.

"You alright?" Caitlyn called.

“Peachy.” Vi nodded coming up on her feet. But then someone's fist landed to the side of her face.

Caitlyn flinched, her eyes widening.

Gearhand held his ground at the junction between wings. There was no finesse in his fighting. Just raw muscle, rage and one thing on his mind, to protect his daughter at all costs. He heard movement and fired.

A masked man fell.

Another came from the side, he didn't even shoot. He grabbed the guy and smashed his face into the wall with a raw roar of fury. The man slid to the floor unconscious. Gearhand exhaled sharply, adrenaline rushing.

Everything devolved. Smoke. Shots. Furniture splintered. The attackers, once organized, were now shooting in confusion.

It was supposed to be quiet.

It was supposed to be quick.

But this wasn't their ground. And they weren't ready for this fight.

One of servants walked in, woken by the noise in the main wing of the house. The woman was cut down by the shot coming from somewhere before she even entered the entrance parlour.

Elara, wide-eyed inside the wardrobe, covered her ears as someone screamed outside. She didn't move. Just like her father told her.

The polished floor was slick with broken glass, overturned furniture shattered in every corner. Vi stepped over a busted chair, chest heaving, when the air shifted behind her.

She barely ducked in time.

A massive arm swung past her head, missing by inches.

She spun but a boot slammed into her gut.

The impact launched her backward into a glass cabinet. It exploded on contact, shards tearing at her arms and shoulders. She hit the floor hard, breath knocked clean out of her.

The man coming at her was massive, freight train build, dark tactical gear. No mask. Just a shaved head, crooked nose, one fake eye and murder gleaming in the other. He reeked of gunpowder and something fouler.

He cracked his knuckles.

Vi pushed herself up, wiped blood from her lip.

Then he charged.

They collided like titans.

His punch was brutal. Vi blocked it, but the shock still rocked down her arm. She answered with a jab to the ribs. Nothing. He grunted, caught her arm, twisted, and slammed her into the nearest wall.

The hit rattled picture frames off the plaster maybe her brain, too.

She gasped, lungs empty.

Another punch came. She ducked under, grabbed his vest, and drove her knee into his gut. He staggered just a step.

Vi followed.

Two hits to the jaw. A third to the temple. Then she slammed his face into a support pillar.

He reeled but didn't stop.

His elbow came fast, cracked across her cheekbone.

He came again, full force.

Vi ducked, snatched a curtain rod off the floor, and smashed it across his jaw. He staggered, snarling.

"You don't quit, do you?" he spat.

Vi didn't answer. Too busy breathing through her teeth, limbs trembling. Sweat and blood streaked her neck. One leg nearly buckled, but she forced it steady. Spat blood on the floor.

Then..she smirked.

He rushed her.

She let him.

At the last second, she twisted, drove her elbow into the side of his skull. He reeled.

She dropped her weight, swept his leg out from under him.
He collapsed to one knee.

Vi lunged. Grabbed his head and brought her knee up into it. Hard.

He finally crumpled to the floor. Still.

Vi slumped back against the wall, chest rising like she'd sprinted the entire Undercity. She let her head rest against the paneling, blood drying at her lip.

A slow, crooked smile tugged at the corner.

"Nighty night."

Caitlyn, rifle raised, swept the landing, eyes scanning below. She spotted Vi slumped against the wall, then froze.

A glint from a far window. Upper gallery.

Sniper.

"No—!"

She didn't hesitate. The breath she took was sharp, shallow. Her hands were steady, but her mind screamed, *What if I miss?*

She exhaled, forced the panic down. Lined up the shot. "Please..."

She fired.

The sniper jerked back, neck snapped clean by the shot. His weapon clattered to the floor.

But the instant she fired, another muzzle flash lit the shadows.

The shot tore through her upper arm, searing. Caitlyn gasped, stumbling back against the banister. White-hot pain lanced through her arm like it had been set on fire. She barely noticed hitting the floor.

A shadow moved fast.

A boot slammed into Caitlyn's rifle, sending it skittering across the floorboards.

She barely had time to react before the man was on her. A vicious backhand cracked across her face, sending her sprawling to the ground. Blood filled her mouth, and stars burst behind her eyes.

She reached blindly, fingers scraping across splinters and grabbed a jagged piece of the broken railing.

Before she could lift it, the man's boot pinned her wrist to the floor.

"Cait!" Vi shouted, bolting upright

He raised his weapon. Calm. Point-blank. Caitlyn blinked, dazed, breath shallow. For one heartbeat too long she thought she was about to die.

Then a shot tore through the air.

But it never came from his gun.

It came from behind.

The man's chest burst open in a single, clean hit. He staggered once, twice, and collapsed onto her, lifeless.

Caitlyn shoved the weight off, gasping, stunned.

She looked down the hall, eyes searching, unbelieving.

Her father stood there.

Rifle steady.

For one surreal second, Caitlyn forgot the pain, forgot the blood, forgot the war crashing around them.

Her father. The man who'd never once held a weapon.

He said nothing, just gave her a stiff nod, reloading in silence.

"Dad" Caitlyn's lip trembled.

Then she pushed herself to her feet, gritting her teeth.

And then...

Silence.

A single picture frame fell off the wall, hitting the floor with a dull thunk.

Vi stood in the middle of the hall, panting, knees shaking. Her hands trembled, knuckles raw.

She dropped to her knees like the fight had just drained out of her bones. Behind her, Gearhand finally released the man he'd been choking, who hit the floor and didn't move again.

Caitlyn, smeared with blood and dirt, leaned on the banister darting around the house as she tried to process what was left of it.

No more movement.

No more gunfire.

Just the wreckage of a massacre meant to be silent... and three very stubborn survivors who refused to go down easy.

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The house had quieted. But nothing felt still.

Caitlyn turned, wincing at the burn in her arm, and saw her father stepping through the wreckage. His eyes were wide, glassy, searching. He reached for her wordlessly.

She didn't hesitate. She fell into his arms.

He held her tight, one hand cupping the back of her head, his other trembling against her spine. No words. Just the crushing relief of a father who nearly lost his child. He pressed a kiss to her temple, warm and lingering, before pulling back just enough to look at her.

Then Caitlyn looked past him and her heart jolted.

Vi was at the stairs, dragging herself upward, bloodied and stumbling, one hand gripping the railing like it was the only thing keeping her upright. Her chest heaved with each breath, hair wild, shirt torn and stained red.

“Vi!” Caitlyn broke away, half-running despite the pain screaming in her arm.

They crashed into each other halfway up the stairs.

Vi gave a breathless laugh, burying her face in Caitlyn’s neck. “You look like shit, Cupcake.”

Caitlyn gave a soft, choked laugh, half a sob pulling her into a kiss.

They sank together onto the step, arms wrapped tight, foreheads pressed, clinging like anchors in the storm’s aftermath.

And then.

“Daddy!” A small voice, tear-choked and raw, rang from the upper landing.

Elara stood at the top of the stairs, eyes shining, hands gripping the banister with white knuckles.

Gearhand turned instantly.

His daughter launched down the steps before anyone could stop her, flinging herself into his arms. He caught her easily, lifting her as if nothing hurt, folding her small body to his chest.

“I thought I told you not to move,” he whispered, voice cracking.

Her fingers tangled in his shirt, and he held her tighter, bruised hands stroking her hair. He kissed her forehead, again and again, like he couldn’t quite believe she was real.

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The halls of the Kiramman estate buzzed with footsteps, clipped orders, and the low murmur of Enforcers doing what they did best: arriving late and asking questions too slow.

Outside, the first blush of dawn threatened the horizon.

Inside, the bodies were being carried out, tagged and zip-tied, and those who'd survived the assault, bloodied, bruised, and no longer anonymous, were being cuffed and dragged away. Gearhand sat on one of the sofas in the corner. Elara fell asleep next to him, exhausted. His fingers ran absently through her hair.

Caitlyn's arm was bandaged up. The bullet grazed it badly, but thankfully no bigger damage was done. She stood still beside the narrow stretcher, the white sheet pulled halfway over the woman's body. A girl no older than Caitlyn herself. Dark hair spilled like ink against the white, tangled and matted at the edges where blood had dried. Her face was peaceful in that cruel way the dead sometimes looked, as though she might wake at any moment and blink the sleep from her eyes.

But she wouldn't.

With slow fingers, Caitlyn reached out and gently brushed a strand of hair from the girl's cheek. Her touch lingered a moment too long, her hand trembling.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

The words felt pitiful, useless. The kind of thing people said when there was nothing left to do.

She pulled the sheet the rest of the way up, sealing her away from the world that had failed her.

Her father had tended to her wound an hour ago, and now, he sat on the coffee table in front of Vi.

She looked like she'd gone a round with a freight train. Which, to be fair, she had.

A bruise was blooming purple across her jaw, and a split ran along her cheekbone. One eye was already beginning to swell so he put some drops in it. There was glass in her shoulder still.

But she sat still under his touch. Barely fidgeting.

He dabbed antiseptic on a cloth and wiped at a cut on her cheekbone. She suppressed the pain, but he could see it on her face.

"It hurts. You're not a baby for showing it" he murmured.

“Yeah,” Vi muttered. “But usually I’m not trying to impress anyone’s dad while I do it.”

Caitlyn gave a breathy laugh. “You are failing spectacularly.”

Vi cracked a grin, “Rude.”

A slight smile ghosted across his lips “You don’t need to.”

Vi blinked, caught off guard.

Something in his expression shifted. A softening. He glanced at Caitlyn, then back at Vi. “If she trusts you that’s good enough for me.”

Vi didn’t say anything for a second. Then she gave a small, crooked grin, “Guess that’s the closest thing to a blessing I’ll get, huh?”

“Don’t push it.” he tried not to laugh

He began stitching the wound with careful, precise movements. “You held your own,” he said after a long pause. “I’m impressed.”

Vi blinked. “...You too. Not bad for a Piltie with no sense of humour and a lot of expensive rugs.”

He smiled a little then finished the last stitch and looked her in the eye. “Next time, try not to bleed on them.”

“No promises.” she smirked, a little wobbly.

A shadow fell across Caitlyn’s shoulder.

She looked up, blinking slowly. One of the senior Enforcers had approached, helmet tucked under one arm, uniform jacket stained with something near the cuffs. His face was drawn, pale under the thin film of sweat.

“Excuse me,” he said quietly, nodding with professional restraint. “We’ve finished initial sweeps.”

She stood straighter in her seat, biting back the stiffness in her arm. “Go on.”

“Three household casualties confirmed. Two maids and a man from the kitchen staff.” He paused. “Four of our men, too. Ones stationed on the perimeter.”

Caitlyn didn’t speak. No words could express the turbulent array of emotions she felt anyway. So she just pursed her lips tight. The man continued.

“Five hostiles dead. Two arrested and secured. They’re being transported now.”

“Have they been questioned?” she asked.

“Not yet,” he replied. “But we’ll crack them. Their gear’s being catalogued. Some of it looks custom.”

He shifted awkwardly on his feet.

“We’ve reinforced the perimeter. Double patrols on all side gates. It won’t happen again.”

She was about to nod, about to offer the polite dismissal that officers expect when her eyes flicked past him to a wheeling stretcher toward the garden entrance. A white sheet. One of the maids. Her stomach twisted.

The Enforcer’s voice kept going, but the words fell flat, muffled by the noise rushing in Caitlyn’s ears like water.

She stared. Just stared.

“Ma’am?”

She jolted, breath catching.

“I’m sorry,” she said, shaking herself slightly. “Yes. That will be all.”

He hesitated for a beat. “You want the full report?”

“Arrr. .yes...first thing. On my desk.”

He nodded. “Understood”

Then he turned, disappearing back into the mess of the morning, his boots echoing against the tiles.

Caitlyn exhaled through her nose. Slow. Sharp.

She didn't look at Vi, or her father, or even the blood drying in the cracks of the parquet floor.

The last of the Enforcers moved out of view, and Caitlyn stood still for a long moment, arms crossed tight, her jaw clenched.

"We can't let this happen again," she said, low but firm. "We have to get ahead of them. Whatever they're planning, we have to stop it before more people..."

Vi cut in quietly, not unkindly. "Cait... it already got out of control."

Caitlyn turned her head, eyes flashing with something between anger and heartbreak. Her lips parted, but nothing came out.

Her father stood slowly. He wiped his hands on a towel and looked between them both.

"You've done enough for one night," he said gently. "All of you."

They looked at him.

He held their eyes, steady. "If you don't rest, you'll get yourselves killed."

No one spoke. Just the distant thud of boots outside. The low murmur of the city slowly waking to news of the chaos.

"...I'll make tea," he added, quieter now, already walking toward the kitchen.

Vi let out a slow breath and turned to Caitlyn. "Well. You heard the man."

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The water steamed against the tiled walls, hissing softly where it pooled over stone and blood.

Vi stood with both hands braced against the wall, head bowed, letting the hot water pour down her back. Her breath came slow, shallow from exertion and ache.

Her body was a map of bruises. Ribs sore. Shoulders scraped. A cut across her thigh stung beneath the heat, and a dozen tiny glass cuts on her arms prickled like fire ants.

But she didn't move. Not yet. She just let the water run, eyes closed, lips parted. As if maybe it could rinse away the night. As if maybe she could forget, just for a moment, how

close it all came to ending.

Behind her, Caitlyn stepped into the steam, arms rising slowly, fingertips brushing over Vi's shoulder blades, featherlight, tender. Her palms slid down the corded muscles of Vi's back, tracing the tension there, feeling every tremble held beneath the skin. Then further, to the curve of her waist before pressing a long, silent kiss to her shoulder.

Vi let out a breath that hitched, almost a sob. Then she turned slowly, like every movement had a cost.

Steam curled around her bruised frame, clinging to the edges of every shadow. Her eyes met Caitlyn's, no words passed between them, but there was something raw there. Something not yet spoken.

Without a word, she reached out, her fingers trailing down Caitlyn's bare arm until they found the bandaged wound, tracing the edge of the gauze with a featherlight touch, her thumb grazing skin just below it. The gesture was quiet, reverent, but carried the weight of something still coiled in her chest.

"I'm okay." Caitlyn whispered, her fingertips brushing the side of Vi's waist

Vi took a shaky breath, then gently cupped the back of Caitlyn's head, guiding her in until until her breath was warm against her collarbone. Then pulled her in tighter, her arms closing around her like a shield she couldn't be sure would hold.

Caitlyn folded into her, burying her face into the crook of Vi's neck, one palm sliding up her spine, holding, grounding.

Vi squeezed her tighter, jaw clenched against the swell rising in her throat. She closed her eyes.

But beneath the touch, the fear remained. Silent. Undeniable. She wouldn't say it. She couldn't.

But Caitlyn felt it in the way Vi's arms never loosened. In the way her body still trembled, even beneath the heat of the water. In the way she pressed her lips to her hairline like a prayer.

They stayed like that, no sound but water, no motion but breath, holding onto each other like the war might start all over again the moment they let go.

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The bedroom was quiet now, curtains drawn, the world outside reduced to streaks of gold and pale blue spilling across the floor.

Vi had fallen asleep the moment her head hit the pillow. She lay curled on her side, back turned toward the window, one arm tucked beneath her head, the other draped across Caitlyn's waist where it had drifted in sleep.

Caitlyn lay still, watching her in silence.

Even in the soft light, the bruises were clear, shadowed blooms along her ribs and shoulders, faint scrapes across her collarbone where glass had kissed the skin. But her face was peaceful. Mouth slack. Lashes fluttering. A calm that felt hard-won.

Caitlyn reached out, gently tucking a damp strand of pink hair behind Vi's ear.

Her fingers lingered. She watched the slow rise and fall of her chest, the tiny movements beneath closed lids, the quiet twitch of a dream. And for a breath, Caitlyn wondered

Where do you go, in your dreams?

Do you fight there too?

Or does it finally stop?

She didn't know. She wasn't sure she wanted to.

The bed was warm. The silence deep, like the hush after snowfall. But her mind wouldn't rest.

She shifted closer. Vi stirred, rolling onto her other side in her sleep, and Caitlyn tucked herself in behind her, pressing her face into the tangle of pink hair, breathing her in.

Vi murmured something unintelligible, barely awake, before drawing their joined hands to her chest, lacing their fingers tight. Then sleep took her again.

And, after a while, it took Caitlyn too.

Tired. Spent. She finally let go.

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The bed was warm but empty.

Vi groaned quietly, reaching out across the sheets with one arm before rolling onto her back. Her palm dragged down her face as she exhaled hard, eyes still closed, the weight of the last few days pressing deep into her bones.

She laid there a moment longer, then kicked off the covers and sat up with a sigh. Her muscles protested as she stood, every bruise announcing itself in turn. She stretched her back with a low wince and shuffled toward the door.

Caitlyn sat on the top step of the staircase, still in her wrinkled sleep clothes, arms resting on her knees, staring down at the chaos below. The worry in her eyes not matching the stillness of her posture.

"I wondered where you were," Vi said behind her, her voice low, rough-edged with sleep but already more awake than she looked.

Caitlyn turned over her shoulder. "Hi."

"You know... there's a really comfy bed upstairs." She smirked faintly.

But Caitlyn didn't smile. Her gaze stayed fixed on the wreckage. "Vi... how did they know where to go?"

Vi blinked. "What?"

"Those people... They didn't hesitate. They went through the kitchen, avoided all the side halls, and came straight for our rooms." She finally looked up at her. "Think about it.... How big is this place?"

Vi frowned and padded barefoot to sit next to her.

"Do you know how many guest rooms there are on the upper level alone? Seven. But they didn't even check. They went straight for us."

Vi leaned her elbows on her knees, brow furrowed. "Could've split up, covered ground fast."

"No," Caitlyn cut in gently, but firmly. "They knew the layout. They didn't waste time searching rooms or checking the west wing. They went where they needed to go."

Vi stared at her, the line between her brows deepening. "Are you saying they had floor plans?"

"I'm saying someone gave them one," Caitlyn said, standing now, pacing a short step before turning back. "Whoever helped them has been here. More than once."
"Or works here" Vi added

Caitlyn's jaw tightened.

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The Council chamber rose like a coliseum of judgment, marble columns, gold, and tall windows filtering late-afternoon light across the polished floor. The air held the scent of wood varnish, ink, and the faint ozone hum of Piltover's ever-buzzing lines.

Caitlyn stood at the center, alone among them. Her uniform was crisp, every line immaculate except for the purple bruise blooming down the left side of her face. Her jaw was set, expression unreadable, though her hands clenched behind her back.

Around her, the Council sat at their sweeping round table. Seven seats, only six filled today. One, forever empty, always caught her eye, the chair her mother once held.

Councilor Fye, gray and hawkish, leaned forward.

Caitlyn's voice cut cleanly through the air.

"The attack on Stillwater was coordinated. Timed. Precise," she said. "Same as the breach at my family's estate."

A low murmur rippled through the chamber. Even Councilor Rennel, normally unreadable behind his half-moon spectacles, blinked twice.

Councilor Sila spoke next, her voice sharp as a blade. "And who do you suspect is behind it?"

"We are pursuing several leads," Caitlyn replied, calm and measured. "Too early for conclusions. But the tactics suggest Zaunite origin. Not street-level gang work, something organized."

"You're implying rebellion?" Rennel snapped. "If this is another Silco, we need to act before it escalates."

Caitlyn met his gaze, steady. "I'm not implying anything. I'm here to report facts, not assumptions."

She let that sit before continuing.

"We are recovering forensic evidence from both scenes. So far, no signs of broader coordination beyond few incidents, two in Piltover, two in the Undercity. No manifestos. No demands. This may still be personal retaliation. Until proven otherwise, I see no cause for escalation."

"You don't see a reason?" Councilor Yannis scoffed, fingers drumming. "Two attacks. One on our prison. One on a noble house."

"They left a message," Caitlyn said. "The message was: *We can still reach you.*"

Silence followed, sharp, sudden.

Councilor Sila leaned in. "And who exactly is we in this scenario, Kiramman?"

Caitlyn didn't flinch. "I don't deal in guesses. When I know, this chamber will too. But I won't authorize overreach based on fear. I've made that mistake before. I won't repeat it."

A quiet beat passed. Some councilors exchanged looks uncertain whether to respect her restraint or accuse her of holding back too much.

Across the table, Sevika exhaled slowly, fingers tapping once against the polished wood.

"Kiramman isn't wrong to be cautious," she said. Her tone was even, her Zaunite accent

roughened but deliberate, not the brawler in the bar now, but the politician. The councilor.

Caitlyn turned slightly, surprised. Their eyes met, and held.

Sevika continued, “You want to start throwing around accusations without proof, fine. But you’ll drag this city into another war it won’t survive.”

Rennel scoffed. “And your great plan is to wait until they torch the rest of Piltover?”

“I’m saying don’t be the one who lights the match.”

Caitlyn stepped in again, voice level. “I’m leading the investigation. My team’s already sweeping Stillwater and tracking movements in the Undercity. Until we have more, I urge discretion. Panic helps no one.”

Rennel cleared his throat. “And the tech? Any weapons recovered?”

“Some. Improvised shimmer mods. Crude. Not the kind that point to a mass operation.”

Councilor Sila frowned. “You’re telling us not to panic?”

“I’m telling you to let me do my job. If there’s something deeper at play, I’ll bring it here myself.”

A pause. Rennel gave a tight nod. “Fine. But if this continues, we’ll be forced to act, with or without your report.”

The others didn’t speak, but their silence crackled with tension.

Caitlyn inclined her head, barely. “Understood.”

As the chamber began to stir, Sevika leaned back, arms folded, but her gaze flicked to Caitlyn as she passed.

“You know where to find me,” she said quietly. “If you need help.”

There was weight to the words, an olive branch, maybe. Or maybe not. Caitlyn wasn’t sure.

She gave the smallest nod, but didn’t speak.

....

Piltover Hexlab – Diagnostics Room

The light in the Hexlab was too clean, too sharp, all brass lines and arched glass, etched filigree and blue-lit conduits humming in quiet rhythm through the walls. Hextech-powered tools lined the tables, every surface polished to an obsessive gleam. On the far side of the

room, one of the crystals rotated slowly inside a suspended housing, throwing soft pulses of light across the ceiling like a heartbeat.

Vi sat on a reinforced stool that looked like it belonged in a museum instead of a lab. Her right leg bounced, heel tapping a restless rhythm against the tiled floor. She cracked her knuckles one by one, sharp pops echoing in the sterile space.

“Any day now,” she muttered.

A gangly, twitchy young lab tech entered, arms straining slightly under the weight of her gauntlets. He nearly dropped one, catching it just before it hit the floor, and hurried over to the bench in front of her.

He slammed them down, not violently, but with the kind of graceless clunk that made Vi wince. “Right. So. Good news first, nothing’s fried. Not properly.”

Vi raised an eyebrow.

The tech, in early twenties maybe, specs slipping down his nose, one sleeve half-rolled and the other still buttoned pushed his goggles up and tapped on the gauntlets. “It’s, uh, probably shimmer residue. Or arcane static interference. We had two spikes on the data logs. Brief but aggressive. Your gauntlets and the rifle, same sync signature, same failure point. Classic case of harmonics cross-interference.”

As he spoke, he was already fussing with Caitlyn’s rifle, eyes sparkling with barely restrained awe as he ran his fingers reverently along the length of the barrel. “This, this is gorgeous. Is this an original Talis stock? Did you do your own crystal housing alignment? The resonance signature is...gods. Beautiful work.”

“I’ll let her know,” Vi said dryly. “You wanna tell me why it jammed the moment things got real?”

He blinked. “Right. Yes. Uh... it’s the...well, we’re pretty sure it’s external. Nothing you did. Just unstable shimmer tech in the environment, likely unshielded. Your gauntlets are tuned to the same harmonic tier as the rifle, so they both got smacked by the same feedback burst.”

From the far side of the room, an older voice cut in.

“Ernest....”

The young tech jolted and turned. At a desk near the wall, a tall, grey-bearded man in a high-collared coat didn’t look up from the microscope he was working at. His voice was low and even.

“Don’t speculate when you’re not sure.”

“I wasn’t speculating, sir,” Ernest said nervously. “Just... uh, interpreting the logs.”

“There was no shimmer in the gauntlets’ housing. No core damage. The malfunction was due to a transient spike in field interference. It’s been corrected.”

Ernest turned back to Vi with an awkward smile, hands twitching at his sides. “So. You’re all set. No cause for concern. Bit of a fluke, really.”

Vi narrowed her eyes a little, glancing between him and the older man.

“That what you’re calling it...Ernie? A fluke?”

The senior scientist finally looked up from his microscope, calm and clinical. “You encountered a unique confluence of energy feedback. It’s not common, but it has precedent. We’ve adjusted the shielding on both devices. Shouldn’t happen again.”

Vi looked down at the gauntlets, then back at Ernest, who was now hovering too close to Caitlyn’s rifle again like he wanted to take it home and sleep with it.

“Hmmm,” she muttered, sliding the gauntlet off the table “Let’s hope you’re right.”

“Of course!” Ernest chirped, then hesitated. “I mean...yes. You’re good.”

Vi was already turning to leave when her eyes caught on something behind him, a small, strange disc-shaped object perched on a cluttered bench. It was hooked by delicate wires into a tube where a smooth metal sphere hovered mid-air, spinning slowly in suspension.

“What’s that?” she asked, nodding toward it.

Ernest turned and lit up immediately. “Oh! That’s... well, it’s a prototype. A spatial resonance beacon, basically, a short-range tracker calibrated to a specific signature. Still tweaking the energy tethering, but once it latches, it sticks. Think of it like... a ghost with a leash.”

Vi gave a low whistle, impressed despite herself. “Nice.”

“Oh, I know!” Ernest grinned, rocking slightly on his heels. “I’m submitting it to the next Innovation Panel... you know, for the City Advancement Expo? Hoping to get it registered with the patent office if I can convince the Council it’s not a weapon. Technically it’s a passive device, but, well, some of them get twitchy with the word ‘tracking,’ so I’ve been working on the phrasing. ‘Navigational assistance aid’ has a nicer ring, don’t you think?”

Vi smirked faintly and gave him a nod. “Sure, Ernie. Sounds... harmless.

.....

Caitlyn stood by the tall window at the end of the corridor, one shoulder leaning against the glass, arms crossed tightly over her chest. She needed a moment to gather her thoughts. She had just withheld vital information from the Council, a calculated risk, but a

risk nonetheless. Still, the weight of that choice pressed on her ribs like a vice.

The cool surface pressed against her coat, but she barely noticed. Below, Piltover stretched in perfect order, gold rails, white towers, the illusion of control wrapped in symmetry. From up here, everything looked manageable.

But she knew better.

The council chamber door creaked open. Footsteps echoed across the marble floor.

Caitlyn pushed off the glass briskly, her thoughts already racing ahead.

"Kiramman," Sevika's voice called after her.

Caitlyn stopped, but turned only after a beat.

Sevika caught up, expression dry but not hostile. "You didn't take the offer."

"I didn't reject it either," Caitlyn replied.

"You didn't have to give a speech in there," Sevika said. "They're jumpy. One word from you and they'd be cracking skulls in Zaun by morning."

"I'm not looking for blood," Caitlyn said, eyes forward. "I'm looking for the truth."

Sevika let out a soft snort. "Noble. But naïve."

Caitlyn's jaw tightened. "Did you come to insult me?"

"You're a right piece of work, aren't you?" Sevika rolled her eyes. "No... I came to offer you a hand."

Caitlyn hesitated. "If I need you... I'll ask," she said, not unkindly, but stiff. She turned to go.

"And if you don't, fuck you, I guess." Sevika shrugged.

Caitlyn paused, just briefly. Hesitating for a long moment before she turned back.

"There's more than what I said in there."

"Always is."

Caitlyn stepped closer, voice low. "People involved in this... they're being silenced. Their families too. Clean kills, no evidence, no signature. Same week as Stillwater and my estate. Someone's wiping them out. No witnesses left standing."

She hesitated, then added, quieter, "I can't afford another mistake."

Sevika frowned. "Shimmer's always messy. That doesn't sound like some cheap gang work."

"It's not," Caitlyn said. Her voice was clipped now, strained under the surface. "If you hear anything, quiet deaths, strange buyers, labs going dark... I need to know. We need eyes down there."

Sevika tilted her head, watching her. "Didn't think a Kiramman would ever ask me for help."

"I'm not asking you," Caitlyn replied, meeting her eyes. "I'm warning you. If this spreads, it won't stop in Piltover."

A beat passed.

"And if I do help?" Sevika asked.

Caitlyn drew a breath. "Then I'll owe you one."

That made Sevika smirk. "You better make it a good one, Kiramman." she said lighting up a cigarette.

....

The soft lamplight painted the walls gold, flickering gently against the polished brass mirror in front of them. Caitlyn stood still in her undershirt and trousers, her injured arm stiff as she fastened the buckle of her underbust holster.

Vi stepped in behind her, wordless, and gently brushed her hands aside. "Let me."

Caitlyn exhaled, not resistance, not quite surrender. Just letting Vi in. Vi's fingers were deft, practiced, years of lacing her own gear, but gentler now. She tightened the strap carefully, avoiding the worst of Caitlyn's bruised side, then leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to her shoulder.

"You sure about this?" Vi murmured, hands gliding down Caitlyn's arms before lacing their fingers together. She drew Caitlyn back against her chest, their joined hands resting over Caitlyn's waist. In the mirror, their eyes met.

"You don't have to come down there."

Caitlyn's jaw flexed, just slightly. "Yes, I do."

Vi didn't argue, not directly. Instead, she leaned her head against Caitlyn's. "Then stay close to me. Once we're below, I need to know you're at my side."

Caitlyn's lips curved, faint and dry. "I'm not a lost kitten, Vi."

“No,” Vi said, voice low. “You’re a lioness. But even lions get cornered.”

They stood like that for a moment, the city muffled beyond the windows, tension thick in the stillness between them.

“I don’t want you thinking about me if things go sideways,” Caitlyn said at last. “If we get into trouble, I need your head in the fight Violet. Not worrying whether I can hold my own.”

Vi didn’t move.

Caitlyn turned in her arms, facing her fully. “I’m not sitting behind a desk anymore. Not for this. It’s been a month since the council cleared me. Three months since I stopped being a field Enforcer. And if I don’t step up now...” she hesitated. “...then what the hell am I still doing here?”

Vi met her eyes. She could see the fire still burning there, the frustration, the pride. The need to be useful. To be respected.

Vi exhaled through her nose. “You’re not a burden.”

Caitlyn’s eyes flicked away. “Then don’t treat me like one.”

She stepped back to walk away, just a pace, but it was enough.

Vi’s hand shot out, fingers curling gently around Cait’s wrist.

“Hey...” Her voice dropped, softer now. Almost hesitant. “You know I’m not good at... saying things.”

Caitlyn stilled, eyes flicking back to her.

Vi continued, her grip loosening but not falling away. “You’re not just my partner out there. You’re the other half of me.”

Vi’s grip tightened just slightly. “You go down, I don’t know what’s left. I can take hits, I can lose fights, but not you. I can’t lose you.”

Silence fell. The kind that sits between two people when the world outside the door is about to get loud again.

For a second, Caitlyn didn’t move.

Then her breath caught, subtle but real, and she stepped forward again, closing that space between them. She draped her arms over Vi’s shoulders, holding her tight with quiet insistence. She felt Vi’s fingers at the back of her neck holding her tight.

Then slowly she pulled away just enough to curl her fingers under Vi’s chin as she lifted her gaze. Her thumb brushed gently across her cheek, soft, steady.

"You won't," she said quietly.

Her eyes didn't waver.

"Listen," she added, voice lower now, threaded with steel. "You might be rough edges and grit, but I never needed polish. You were never dirt under my nails, Vi."

She leaned in, just enough for Vi to feel the words like a heartbeat between them.

"You're the ground under my feet. You keep me steady. And I'm not going anywhere."

Vi swallowed hard and didn't say anything at first. She just stared, eyes a little wide, mouth parted like she'd been knocked sideways without a single punch thrown.

When she finally spoke, her voice cracked a little.

"I love you."

And then she kissed her, deep, slow, her hand sliding up to cup the back of Caitlyn's neck like she was afraid to let go. The kind of kiss you don't give when everything's alright. The kind you give before a war.

Caitlyn kissed her back just as fiercely, her fingers tightening at Vi's jaw, grounding both of them in that sliver of peace before everything outside shattered again.

When they finally pulled apart, Vi rested her forehead against Caitlyn's, breath shallow.

"Let's go," she whispered. "Before I change my mind and lock you in the bedroom instead." she said pulling away heading to the door.

Caitlyn smirked and gave Vi's backside a firm smack on the way out.

"You can try," she said over her shoulder.

Vi blinked, then grinned, all teeth and awe. "Might change my mind and stay in" and followed behind.

.....

The Undercity at night was alive in that strange, sideways way only Zaun could manage.

The streets pulsed under neon and grime, thick with the scent of spilled liquor, scorched metal, and whatever chemical brew had most recently leaked from a pipe above. Laughter echoed off crumbling brick and flickering signage, rough and rasping, chased by shouts and the occasional crash of a bottle breaking somewhere out of sight. Hooded figures made trades in low murmurs. The Undercity didn't sleep. It shifted, swayed, swallowed.

The two of them walked hand in hand. Caitlyn matched Vi's pace without a second glance

at the figures they passed.

She moved with ease through the murk, shoulders relaxed, chin high, eyes alert but calm.

It was a far cry from the first time she'd walked these streets, nerves flickering across her face with every breath she took. Now, she was comfortable. Not quite like she was home. But like she knew where she stood.

As they passed the mouth of an alley, Caitlyn's gaze snagged on a woman leaning against the wall. A corset laced between the blouse and the edge of High-waisted trousers cinched at the waist with a thick, battered belt. It hugged her like a dare. Her dark green hair fell in perfect waves over her shoulders, framing a sharp jaw and eyes like emeralds. Beautiful, dangerously so, and entirely unfazed as a dark-eyed man leaned in to light her cigarette with a match held in metal fingers. The flame flickered, caught the ink spilling over her collarbones and plunging down the delicate curve of her chest. She wore her edge like perfume. Not overwhelming. But impossible to ignore.

Just as Caitlyn passed, the girl's eyes lifted, slow, deliberate. The scent of expensive perfume hitting her face. Her eyes fell over the violet corset that caught the light first and the leather belt wrapped around her slim waist and the blue stands of Caitlyn's hair carried by breeze coming from the nearby vent.

Emerald eyes met sapphire for a breath too long. Not a challenge, not an invitation. Then the girl looked away, smoke curling from her lips like punctuation.

Vi gave her hand a little squeeze and Caitlyn looked away.

In front of them just far enough to avoid suspicion Gearhand kept to the shadows. His hood was up, shoulders broad and tense under worn fabric.

He led the way down a rusted stairwell, through a steel-plated door, and into something between a gambling den and a fever dream.

Lights pulsed in low amber and crimson, casting sharp shadows across cracked walls and bare skin. Music throbbed through the floor, fast, pulsing, relentless. The air was thick with heat and smoke, sharp with the sting of cheap liquor and old shimmer.

Card tables were scattered haphazardly across the main floor, crowded with hunched men and sharp voices. Coins clinked. Accusations flew. Someone slammed their fist down, and a dealer cursed under his breath.

To the right, a long bar glowed under shifting lights, aquamarine, magenta, acid green casting strange halos over bottles lined like trophies. Drinks were poured fast, in glasses that glittered like stained glass windows, neon-colored liquids sloshing over chipped rims.

A woman at the bar turned as they entered. She looked them over, gaze sweeping from Caitlyn's face all the way to Vi's boots, curious but detached, then she turned back to sip her drink, her painted lips leaving a red smudge on the rim.

The club didn't stop for anyone. It swallowed them whole.

In the corner, a man slumped into a worn leather couch, head tilted back as he dropped shimmer into his eye with a practiced flick. His whole body shivered, then slackened, jaw going slack as the high sank in. Next to him, a couple were practically devouring each other, the woman straddling his lap. Neither noticed or cared they were being watched.

Caitlyn's boots slowed.

Her eyes swept over the chaos, the smoke-thick air, the filthy floor, and the naked woman gyrating lazily on a raised stage, heel catching in the metal pole as she spun.

Caitlyn blinked.

Vi, a few steps ahead, noticed the slack in their joined hands and turned just in time to catch Caitlyn gawking. The woman tossed her hair back and gave a half-hearted twirl. Caitlyn's jaw actually dropped.

Vi backtracked and grabbed her hand again with a smirk. "Eyes front, Cupcake," she murmured, tugging her gently along. "Try to look like you've seen tits before."

Caitlyn flushed scarlet, falling into step but keeping her gaze still on the woman "Not with that much glitter."

Vi just snorted, her grin crooked as she leaned into her ear "We can always come back later."

"Absolutely not," she said, blinking and following Vi deeper into the haze.

....

They moved deeper into the club, the air thick with shimmer smoke and something that smelled faintly like burnt sugar and gun oil. The narrow hallway ahead was flanked by faded purple curtains and private booths, soft moans and muffled music bleeding through thin walls

Just before they reached the back, a wall of a man stepped in front of them, bald, tattooed head gleaming under the flickering light, ink crawling up his neck and over half his face. His chest was bare under a tactical vest, muscles like armour.

"Private area," he grunted, hand on his belt. Gearhand didn't miss a beat. He just grabbed the guy by the back of the skull and slammed his face sideways into the brick wall. The crack echoed. The man groaned, slid down the wall

Caitlyn blinked, completely nonplussed. "Oh."

Vi stepped over the the guy without pause.

They reached the last booth, all dark wood and purple velvet, a little throne of sleaze. Inside, a man lounged with a metal plate bolted to half his face, polished so bright the lights bounced off it. A woman was straddling his lap, hands tangled in his collar as she kissed up his neck, his own roaming down her back.

Gearhand pushed the curtain aside. "Party's over."

The woman startled, scrambled off the man so fast she nearly knocked over the table, and Caitlyn, who got clipped hard on the shoulder as she fled.

She blinked, muttered, "Ow. Rude."

The man looked up and froze. "...Gearhand?"

"Yeah...Go figure...Still fond of breathing," Gearhand said with a humourless grin, stepping into the booth.

The man's eyes flicked to Caitlyn and Vi, brows raised. "Who the hell are they?"

Vi slung an arm over Caitlyn's shoulder "Emotional support." she said deadpan,

Caitlyn blinked at her. "I am not...What?"

The man snorted. "What do you want?"

"Answers" Gearhand stepped forward, tone ice. " For starters, who killed my kid?"

The guy raised his palms. "How the fuck would I know?"

"You were running the parts," Gearhand said. "Where'd they go? Who did we work for?"

"Listen man. You fucked it up, got nicked." The man stood slowly, tugging his shirt back on like this was just another Tuesday "You know the rules. You do the job, you don't ask questions. Now get the fuck out."

Gearhand didn't like that answer. He grabbed the guy shoving him face-first into the low coffee table with a bang that made Caitlyn flinch.

"Whoa!!!" she turned to Vi. "Aren't you gonna... do something?"

Vi, now leaning lazily against the wall with her arms crossed, tilted her head. "Neah. He looks like he's got this."

Gearhand drove a knee into the man's back, pinning him flat, one hand on the back of his head.

"I told you...I don't know..."

CRACK.

The man howled as Gearhand yanked one of his fingers back hard enough to snap it. "I said I don't know anything!"

"Oh, but you see...I think you do," Gearhand growled. "So you're gonna talk...Or I'm gonna rip out every single one of your digits and spell my daughter's name with them."

CRACK. Another scream. Another finger.

Caitlyn looked mildly traumatised. "Vi?"

"...I like his style." Vi grinned.

.....

The hallway stank of sweat, steam, and whatever chemical cocktail had leaked from the walls last. Flickering neon lit the path in sickly pulses. Caitlyn exhaled, long and slow, and kept walking.

Vi walked a few steps ahead, hands tucked into her jacket pockets, expression unreadable.

"You realise we just... That was... torture." Finally, Caitlyn said,

"We? Oh no...Gearhand did all the heavy lifting. You and me were emotional support, remember?"

Caitlyn gave her a flat look. "I stood there while a man almost had his teeth pulled out with a belt buckle."

Vi turned, walking backward now. "To be fair, the guy kinda earned it. And Gearhand was surprisingly efficient."

"Efficient?" Caitlyn blinked at her "That's not funny."

"I didn't say it was. Just observant."

Caitlyn didn't respond right away. Her gaze dropped to her boots, scuffed with something she didn't want to think about. "I think I need a drink."

Vi grinned. "Now that I can help with."

But then three men appeared at the end of the corridor, blocking the exit. Grimy, broad shouldered Zaunite muscle, the kind bred on raw fumes and bad decisions. Their eyes gleamed in the low light.

One flicked open a wrist holster and dropped a spiked metal ball attached to a chain, letting it swing loose with a faint clink. The second rested a massive cleaver-like blade on his shoulder, the kind usually used on pigs or people. The third just smiled, his teeth jagged and golden.

Vi's eyes flicked up.

Caitlyn looked up and froze. "Fan-tastic...Why do I always listen to you?"

The one with the cleaver stepped forward grinning at Caitlyn "Hello, sweetheart. Shoulda stayed for the after party."

Vi cracked her knuckles, taking a step ahead of the others. "She didn't like the program." she bounced slightly on the balls of her feet.

"Could we not?" Caitlyn muttered

"Too late."

The one with the chain whipped it forward with a grunt, Vi ducked too late and caught it full across the shoulder. She stumbled back, hissed, and cracked her neck. "Okay. Fair enough."

The one with the blade came at Caitlyn, swinging wild and fast.

She ducked once, sidestepped twice just barely staying ahead of the steel. Losing her eye hadn't just wrecked her aim. It made close combat a nightmare. Every punch came from the wrong angle. Every shift in distance felt half a beat too slow.

But she didn't back down. She refused to.

On the third swing, she caught his wrist, twisted hard, and drove her good elbow into his jaw with a satisfying crack.

He barely flinched.

With a grunt, he slammed into her, all brute force and momentum. She staggered, boots scraping on the slick floor, but didn't fall.

He came at her again, blade raised.

She reacted on instinct, her boot snapped up, sharp and fast, and kicked the knife from his hand. It clattered across the ground, spinning away.

But then...

She saw the punch too late.

From the side she couldn't read properly, the blind side that always came too fast.

The back of his hand crashed across her face.

Her head snapped sideways. She slammed into the wall, hard, her bad shoulder taking the hit. Pain tore through her like fire, white-hot and instant.

"Shit..!" she hissed, more at herself than him. Anger surged up, bright and bitter.

Still, she stayed on her feet.

Barely.

She reached down, hand steady despite the shake in her limbs, and drew her knife. Close to her body. Guarded. Defensive. Exactly how Ambessa had drilled her.

Clean. Efficient. No flair.

She was bleeding. Bruised. Half-blind.

But she was still in this fight.

At the far end of the hallway, the third thug, taller, broader than the others went straight for Gearhand.

He landed the first hit, a brutal hook to Gearhand's jaw that echoed down the corridor like a gunshot. Gearhand's head snapped sideways, his body rocked, but he didn't fall. He just slowly turned back, blood at the corner of his mouth, eyes wild.

He caught the man's wrist mid-swing, twisted sharply and the bone broke clean,

Vi surged forward, fists flying. She got one good jab in, then the guy drove his fist straight into her stomach. She doubled over, coughing, then retaliated with a wicked hook that sent him sprawling into the opposite wall.

Caitlyn's blade slashed across the man's thigh quick, clean but he only winced, barely slowing. He surged forward with a grunt, grabbed her wrist in a crushing grip. Her knife hit the floor with a dull clatter just before his open palm crashed across her face.

The blow sent her flying. Her back slammed into the wall. She hit hard, breath torn from her lungs, and slid halfway down before catching herself on shaking legs.

"Cait!" Vi shouted, catching it out of the corner of her eye, but the moment of distraction cost her.

A fist smashed into her cheek, snapping her head sideways.

Cait was trying to rise, hand braced on the wall but her knees buckled. The man was already reaching for his knife on the floor.

Vi's eyes locked on him.

She didn't hesitate.

With a growl, she slammed her fist into her opponent's ribs, knocking the wind out of him, then drove her knee up into his chin.

As he dropped, she spun toward Caitlyn opponent and slammed her boot into the back of the man's knees, sending him down with a bark of pain.

Before he could recover, Vi grabbed his jacket between the shoulder blades and slammed him head-first into the wall. The sound was sickening. He dropped, motionless.

Caitlyn was upright now, barely, her body trembling, breath ragged.

Vi was already at her side, one hand cupping her jaw, the other steadying her waist.

"Hey...hey," she murmured, eyes scanning her face. "You with me?"

Caitlyn nodded, slow, blood on her lip, her temple still trickling red.

"Yeah," she rasped. "Just... give me a second."

Vi didn't let go. Her thumb brushed lightly across her cheek, just beneath the forming bruise. "You scared the shit outta me."

Caitlyn exhaled a shaky breath... then cracked a faint, crooked smile.

"Well... now we're even."

Gearhand stood in the middle of the carnage, panting, eyes wild, chain still wrapped around one wrist. "You okay?"

"I will be" Caitlyn said grabbing herself for Vi

"I'm hungry," he growled.

Caitlyn blinked. "Of course you are."

"Come on let's get out of here" Vi moved to her side slipping an arm around Caitlyn's waist, her other hand guiding Caitlyn's arm across her own shoulders. Caitlyn didn't resist, just leaned in, steadying herself against the familiar warmth.

Vi gave Gearhand a crooked grin. "Let's get dumplings."

....

The dumpling shack was little more than a crooked lean-to hammered onto the side of a rust-stained wall. But the food was hot, the benches dry (mostly), and the man behind the counter didn't ask questions.

Vi straddled the wooden bench, one leg on each side, while Caitlyn sat between them. Vi dabbed gently at the cut along Caitlyn's scalp with a clean scrap of cloth she'd soaked in warm water. The blood had mostly stopped, but the wound still looked angry under the overhead bulb's weak yellow glow.

"Hold still," Vi murmured.

"I am still," Caitlyn muttered, wincing slightly. "You're the one poking my skull like it insulted your mother."

Vi smirked, brushing her thumb just behind Caitlyn's ear. "Whoever insults my mother will need more than a washcloth."

Caitlyn couldn't help but chuckle.

Once satisfied the cut wasn't deep, Vi tossed the cloth onto the table and slid her arms around Caitlyn's waist. She rested her chin on Caitlyn's shoulder with a quiet exhale, breathing her in. The chaos, the grime, the fight, it was all still clinging to her skin. But this... this was the good bit.

Caitlyn reached down, grabbed a still-steaming dumpling from the paper carton, and popped it into Vi's mouth.

Across the table, Gearhand sat stiffly, tearing dumplings in half with his fingers and watching the steam rise. His hood was down now, revealing a mess of black curls, a bruised jaw, and the same unreadable stare.

"So," Caitlyn said, her voice shifting into business. "About the docks and this woman. What was her name again?"

"Charoite," Vi said.

"If the information is correct, and that's where the supply is moving through, we have to make a plan. Quiet. Organised."

Vi made a sound deep in her throat, something between a scoff and a laugh. "Babe... if you think that little dipshit isn't sprinting back to her already, you're adorable. Guy cracked like a

dropped egg. And now he's gonna try gluing it back together by selling us out."

Caitlyn blinked. "Wait... what? What are you talking about?"

Gearhand lit a cigarette, drew in a long drag, then exhaled through his nose like a furnace. "If you poke the hive, they lock it down."

Caitlyn's eyes narrowed. "So what... are you saying all of this was for nothing?"

Vi grinned and shook her head. "Not exactly."

She reached into her pocket, pulled out a smooth, disc-shaped object, and set it on the table with a gentle clink.

Caitlyn stared at it. "...What is that?"

Vi didn't even flinch. "Navigational assistance aid."

Caitlyn's brows drew together. "I beg your pardon?"

"Trademark pending." Vi flashed a grin. "Our buddy Ernie's trying to get the Council to approve it for the next innovation panel. It's all very... science-y. I thought we could... help each other out."

Caitlyn looked between her and the device, slowly. "Vi. Did you take unregistered, unapproved Hextech from the lab?"

Vi glanced at Gearhand. "See? This is why I don't overshare in my relationship."

Gearhand, completely deadpan, nodded.

Vi leaned forward and gestured at the disc. "Relax, Cupcake. It's barely a weapon. Just a short-range tracker, calibrated to a unique energy signature. Syncs with the other half and bounces signals. Think of it as... a fancy Pilty bloodhound. But quieter. And doesn't pee on things. Gearhand slipped it into our favourite runner boy's pocket while he was busy begging for his spleen."

Caitlyn gave her a sharp look. "It's still not approved."

Vi waved a hand. "See, now you're focusing on the wrong part of the story."

Caitlyn blinked. "I cannot believe you did that. If the Council finds out...."

"They're only gonna find out if you tell them." Vi leaned in, grinning. "Are you gonna tell them, Cupcake?"

"Of course not but..."

"Well then... we're fine. Chill out...He's gonna lead us straight to her. But for now...Let's just take a breath. Look how beautiful it is" Vi pressed a soft kiss to Caitlyn's shoulder, right where the torn fabric had split near the seam. She watched the string lights flickering above the tables and people moving around.

Caitlyn gave in to the closeness, her breath steadying, exhaustion tugging at her. The truth is, she had no strength to argue. So instead her fingers instinctively found Vi's, threading their hands together around her waist. The warmth grounded them both amid the grime and chaos.

The radio crackled somewhere in the distance, bleeding half a tune into the night air, low, warbled, and barely clinging to rhythm. Gearhand sat in silence, gaze distant, the cigarette between his fingers burning low as sipped his drink. Caitlyn leaned back into Vi's arms, her chest rising in time with Vi's slower breath behind her. She could feel the steady weight of her, chin resting lightly against her shoulder, as if it had always belonged there.

For all their arguments, the clashing instincts, and the chaos they waded through daily, this...this unspoken quiet was theirs. Vi wasn't perfect. Neither was she. But somehow, in moments like this, they fit. Like sharp edges turned just right.

Vi shifted slightly, her voice low and near Caitlyn's ear. "You still mad at me?"

"Not enough to move." she said smug but gave her hand a little squeeze.

Vi smiled into her shoulder. No more words. Just the sound of the street, the warmth between them, and the slow hum of whatever might come next.

And somewhere far above, in a city of brass and steam, light flickered behind thick glass. In a quiet Piltover lab, someone had just made a discovery.

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