

Chapter 1

"Piltover stands. Bent, but not broken."

That's what the papers said. The headlines ran proud through the city, like banners in a parade, brushed clean, optimistic, carefully worded by hands that hadn't dirtied themselves with rubble.

The Hexgates were gone, twisted into memory, dust, and a crater the size of an ego. But Piltover endured. It always had.

Cranes dotted the skyline now like steel birds, lifting beams and hope in equal measure. Reconstruction had become the new faith. The Council had reshaped itself, bringing in representatives from the Undercity for the first time in history. Not everyone liked it, but everyone applauded. That was how progress worked here, first through discomfort, then decorum, and finally, denial.

Money moved faster than ideas. Trade was slower without the gates, but not dead. Piltover adapted. It rebranded. It reached for diplomacy with one hand and tightened regulations with the other.

Caitlyn Kiramman sat at the edge of it all, not a council member but no longer just an Enforcer, now something more. Something careful. Something compromised. Her voice mattered in the Council chambers, but so did her silence.

Zaun, by contrast, had no name for what it was doing. It didn't rebuild so much as it patched. Scarred, but breathing. The Undercity wasn't engineered into progress, it survived it.

The flow of shimmer slowed. Some said that was a mercy. Others, a death sentence. The chem-barons were quieter now, less visible. Some vanished altogether in the wake of it all, whether by accident or design, no one could say. A few new faces rose in their place, younger, slicker, better dressed, but no less dangerous.

And yet, for the first time in living memory, Zaun had a voice at the table. An official representative on the Council, though many whispered they'd been chosen not by the people, but by Piltover itself.

The pipes still leaked. The air still choked. But murals of Jinx appeared on brick walls, ghost-paintings of a girl turned myth. Some worshipped her. Others cursed her. Most just remembered her.

In the alleys, kids still played with junk tech. In the labs, tinkerers continued to do what Piltover no longer could, innovate without fear, without permits, without waiting for the future to arrive clean and safe.

Zaun never stopped being hungry. But now it was also watching. Listening. Waiting.

Because progress, they'd learned, had a cost.

It was called a "clean-out". In the early meetings, though the word never made it into the official records. The Council preferred phrases like restructuring or integrative reform. But at its core, it was a bargain. A patch to keep both cities from tearing apart at the seams.

Piltover would shut down what remained of the Hexgate project, publicly, at least. The Council voted to suspend all research into teleportation technology indefinitely. In return, Zaun would receive a Council seat, new infrastructure funding, and limited self-governance over certain sectors below the river canal. It was historic. It was fragile.

A special committee was formed to oversee "rogue technologies." Anything Hextech-adjacent, shimmer-enhanced, or chem-run without regulation was to be collected, deconstructed, and either secured or destroyed. The language was deliberately vague, which gave Piltover wide leeway and Zaun a thousand new reasons to mistrust them.

An amnesty was declared for minor tech crimes, but only for a ninety-day period, and only if the devices in question were surrendered. Some did. Most didn't. Underground markets adapted. Enforcement grew sharper.

Caitlyn had fought for Zaun's voice at the table. But she also signed off on the wording that allowed raids under the pretext of "containment." Her pen had become her weapon now. And it weighed more than her rifle ever had.

For a while, both cities played along. Peace, after all, had momentum, until someone decided to stop moving.

But Zaun had a long memory. And Piltover had a short fuse.

And Vi... Vi drifted.

No city felt like home. She stayed in Caitlyn's house but lived somewhere else entirely,

somewhere between the last moment she saw her sister and the first morning she woke up without her.

People were rebuilding around her. Smiling again. Shaking hands over blueprints. But Vi couldn't bring herself to touch the plans. Not yet.

Not when every polished surface still reflected the ashes.

.....

The bedroom was quiet except for the soft hum of the city beyond the glass. Piltover always buzzed, even at this hour, but the tall windows of Caitlyn's room muffled it into a distant lull, like a tide that never came in.

She shifted beneath the sheets, eyes still closed, arm reaching across the mattress in half-sleep. Her hand found only cold linen.

Again.

She sighed, softly at first. Then, heavier, like something trying to escape her lungs. She rolled onto her back, pillow crumpling beneath her neck. After a moment, she turned again, toward Vi's empty side, fingers absently tracing the place where a shoulder used to be.

She adjusted the pillow once. Then again. Then, with a sharp, frustrated grunt, she smacked it flat and lay still, staring at the ceiling.

Sleep didn't come.

She closed her eyes anyway.

.....

Sweat, smoke, and shouting. That was the real anthem of the Undercity.

A bar tucked into the bones of a collapsed chem-rail tunnel pulsed with sound and heat. A ring of bodies circled two fighters in the center, cheering, jeering, throwing bets like candy.

Vi grinned through blood in her teeth.

Her opponent was easily twice her size, all muscle and rusted plating, probably enhanced

on something he'd regret tomorrow. But he was slow. Sloppy. Desperate.

She dodged a wide hook, drove her fist into his ribs, and when he doubled over, she slammed her elbow into the back of his neck. He crumpled to the floor.

The crowd erupted.

Cash passed between hands. Some shouted her name. Some shouted insults. Vi didn't care.

She stepped over the unconscious brute and shook the sweat from her hair, snatching the money tossed her way. Her knuckles stung. Her jaw ached. Her heart, for once, felt quiet.

She slid into a booth in the corner, scooping the money into a ragged bag. A few familiar faces greeted her with cheers and cheap liquor. She raised a bottle half-heartedly before tipping it back.

They laughed. She smiled. But her eyes never stayed on one face for too long. Not tonight.

The bottle was half-empty now, warm from being passed around the table. The glowsticks overhead flickered violet and green, casting everyone in chemical bruises.

Vi leaned back in the booth, legs stretched out, eyes following the movement in the crowd, but not really seeing it. Her friends were mid-argument, voices rising, throwing blame like darts.

"—what I'm saying is, they've got those things scanning Alley Twelve for scrap now. Scrap. That's not cleanup, it's confiscation."

"You think they're just gonna give back what they take? Piltover doesn't return tech, they repurpose it."

"You're acting like this wasn't the plan," Vi cut in, not harsh, but loud enough to cut the noise. "Council said rogue tech's off the streets on both sides. Doesn't matter if it's shimmer-powered or sun-powered. No more homemade bombs, no more unstable crap blowing kids' arms off in back alleys."

A guy across from her, Ryn, thin, twitchy, always angry at something, snorted. "Yeah? And what do they give up, huh? Their labs are still running. Their guards still storm our blocks. You really think they're disarming, or just calling it something nicer?"

Vi took a slow sip from the bottle before answering.

“I’m not saying it’s perfect,” she said. “But it’s something. You want a war again? You want more names sprayed on the wall next week? ‘Cause I’m telling you, if this peace holds, even halfway, it’s worth fighting for.”

That got a few grumbles. Someone rolled their eyes. Ryn leaned forward.

“You still sound like them,” he said, not cruel, but cold. “Like someone who sleeps with clean sheets and eats food that ain’t grey.”

Vi met his stare. Didn’t blink.

“You think I forgot what this place is?” she asked, voice low now. Not angry. Just tired. “I bled on every corner of it. I buried people under this city. My sister died for it.”

That shut them up, for a second.

But then a woman, Tess, older, missing two fingers, used to run weapons during the riots, shook her head slowly.

“You don’t live here anymore, Vi. That’s the truth. You’re Council-adjacent now. You walk around with their badge in your pocket, even if you don’t wear it. You don’t get to tell us what this peace feels like.”

Vi didn’t argue. Just leaned back again, jaw tight, tapping her knuckles on the table.

The crowd around them kept cheering, fighting, forgetting. The world moved on.

Vi sat in the middle of it, home, but not really home. Loyal, but not really trusted.

She’d won her fight tonight. But not this one.

.....

The front door clicked shut with careful quiet. No footsteps followed, just the soft rustle of fabric, the weight of a paper bag landing on the chest of drawers by the hallway mirror. The smell, greasy, fried, slightly questionable lingered in the air.

Vi peeled off her jacket, wincing as dried sweat and smoke clung to her skin. The house

was still. Dim lamplight spilled from a crack in the bedroom door.

She slipped through like a ghost.

The shower hissed on. Steam rose. For a few minutes, the world shrank to hot water and the dull ache in her hands. She scrubbed her knuckles clean, blood, someone else's maybe, maybe not, and let the heat sting the places she'd pretended didn't hurt.

Later she tiptoed back into the bedroom.

Caitlyn stirred under the blankets as the mattress dipped.

"Mm...you reek of drink," she mumbled without looking, voice soft but unmistakably disapproving.

Vi smiled against the crown of her head as she kissed it.

"Missed you too, Cupcake."

Caitlyn blinked up at her, bleary and suspicious. She glanced down to Vi's hands.

Sigh. "Not again."

Vi rolled to face her, slipping an arm under the sheets and pulling Caitlyn close.

"Hey, relax," she murmured, pressing a kiss to her jaw, then the curve of her neck. "I made rent tonight. Kinda heroic if you ask me."

"You're not a mercenary," Caitlyn whispered, half protesting, even as her hand found Vi's waist.

Vi kissed her again, soft, coaxing, relentless. "No," she said into her skin. "I'm just a humble brawler with good intentions and excellent taste in women."

Caitlyn huffed, half a laugh, half frustration. "Vi..."

"You're gonna say something serious again, aren't you?" Vi teased, grinning.

Caitlyn pulled back just enough to look her in the eyes. "I just want to know where your home is."

That landed like a pin in a bell jar.

Vi blinked. For a moment, the grin faltered.

Then, “Wherever you are, Cupcake,” she said breezily, brushing it off like dust on a sleeve. “Don’t make me get poetic. I’m not dressed for it.”

"You're not dressed at all" Caitlyn chuckled

She kissed her again, deeper this time. Caitlyn melted, as she always did, and Vi guided her down into the sheets with hands that knew how to distract, to charm, to make silence out of discomfort.

.....

Caitlyn slept soundly, curled against her like gravity couldn’t let go.

Vi stared at the ceiling.

The rhythm of Caitlyn’s breath rose and fell with the tides of sleep, warm and close. A hand rested lightly on Vi’s ribs.

But Vi’s eyes were wide open.

I just want to know where your home is.

The words lingered like smoke in a room with no windows. She didn’t have an answer.

Not one that wouldn't hurt.

She turned her head slightly, brushing Caitlyn’s hair back. The peace here was so fragile. Softer than clouds. Cleaner. But harder to hold on to.

In the dark, her jaw clenched. Her fists curled gently on top of the sheets.

Tomorrow, she’d pretend again. She was good at that.

.....

The morning sun poured through the high diamond windows, gilding the marble floor in threads of gold. The air in the chamber was crisp, almost too clean, like a museum no one

was allowed to touch. Every sound, footsteps, papers shuffling, the clink of metal on wood, was swallowed into decorum.

Caitlyn sat straight-backed in her seat, wearing her formal uniform. Blue and white. Tailored. Impeccable. Her hair tied back into a severe twist that didn't suit her softness, but did suit the role.

Around the cog-shaped table, the council gathered. Each seat carved from dark wood, each face carved from older lines of power. Some familiar, some new.

Zaun had a seat now. That had been the loudest part of the accord, louder even than the Hexgate shutdown.

The woman occupying that seat, Councilor Sevika, sat like the table owed her a drink. Her metal arm thunked against the polished surface as she leaned back, not bothering to hide her boredom. She wore no robe, no uniform. Just Zaunite greens, oil-smudged leathers, and her permanent look of contempt.

"We're two months into this cooperation," Sevika said, drumming her metal fingers against the table, "and I still can't move supplies without five sign-offs and a lecture about 'safety.'"

"Safety," interrupted another Councilor, a pale, silver-mustached man from the Trade Guild, "is precisely the point. You want support? Follow the rules. That's how Piltover functions."

Sevika rolled her eyes. "Your rules aren't our rules. Never have been."

Caitlyn spoke before it spiraled. "The protocols are temporary. Oversight ensures accountability. It's not about control, it's about stability."

Sevika gave her a long, slow look. "And who decides what 'stability' looks like? You?"

A few seats away, Mel watched in silence. She wore her hair braided close to the scalp, eyes sharp as glass. If she had thoughts, she kept them folded under her tongue.

Caitlyn exhaled. "We're trying to rebuild. The Hexgates are gone, but trade is moving. Cooperation is our only way forward."

Sevika's mouth twisted. "You're not cooperating. You're managing. There's a difference."

Another councilor, a woman in rich navy robes, glanced between them. "Let's not forget, we're here to prevent further escalation, not provoke it. The accords were built on fragile

trust.”

“Exactly,” Caitlyn said, her voice clipped now. “Which is why we need to act like partners, not adversaries.”

“Then start treating us like partners,” Sevika muttered. “Not like criminals with a seat at your table.”

Silence lingered. A tension hung, invisible but present.

The meeting moved on to sanitation projects, tech reclamation plans, border patrols, shipments. But the damage had been done. The room had divided itself without anyone needing to say so.

Caitlyn took notes, lips a thin line.

When the session ended, the hall emptied slowly. Sevika passed by her on the way out.

“You can’t keep one foot in both worlds forever, Kiramman,” she said, voice low. “Sooner or later, you’ll have to choose.”

Caitlyn didn’t reply.

But her hand lingered on the edge of the table long after she left.

....

The stink hit first. Rotting metal, spoiled oil, and fear. Vi moved with practiced ease through the twisted corridor of the safehouse, pulse steady, fists loose. Behind her, boots clattered, voices low and clipped. Another cleanup. Another hit on a list longer than anyone wanted to admit.

The intel had been clear, illegal shimmer scraps, dismantled chemtech, a crew known for running parts to the highest bidder.

Still, something felt off.

Vi pushed the door open with her gauntlet, metal shrieking against rusted hinges. Inside, a dozen heads snapped up, rough, patched, scarred. A deal mid-handoff. One man stepped forward with his hands raised slowly.

"Look, we're not running shimmer, alright? Just salvage..."

"Save it," barked Althorin, the rookie beside her. Young, eager, a little too wired for this job. "Down on your knees. Hands where I can see them!"

The man obeyed, muttering under his breath. But another shifted, pulling a weapon and suddenly a fight sparked, bottles flying, someone lunged, fists met flesh. It exploded fast.

Vi dove into it, ducking under a swing, catching a man by the wrist and twisting him down. A crack of a stun rod. Screaming. Smoke. Chaos.

Across the room, Althorin had a guy on the ground, too hard, too fast. Beating him with the butt of his weapon, over and over. Blood splattered across the floor.

"Hey!" Vi stormed over, grabbed him by the collar and ripped him back, slamming him into the wall.

"What the hell are you doing?!"

"He reached for something!"

"He's half-dead!" Vi growled, eyes burning. "This isn't justice, it's payback."

"You forget whose side you're on, V?" he spat pushing her hard enough she stumbled

Vi's fist met his jaw before she could stop herself. He hit the ground hard, dazed.

She didn't feel better.

Before anyone could react, the floor under them gave a low creak, then a snap. Both crashed through the rotted boards, tumbling into a lower level in a cloud of dust and shattered wood.

Silence.

Vi groaned, rolling off him. She sat up and froze.

In the shadows, two small figures huddled near the wall. One tall for her age, arm outstretched protectively. The other tiny, with wide, terrified eyes.

They didn't speak. They didn't run. They just stared, trembling.

Vi's stomach dropped.

She saw herself. She saw Powder.

Her gauntlets hissed as she powered them down. Slowly, she raised her hands, empty, open.

"We're not gonna hurt you," she said, her voice suddenly hoarse.

But her badge glinted in the dim light, and it didn't matter what she said. The older girl shifted to shield the little one, lips pressed tight.

Footsteps above. Backup incoming. Orders barked.

The man Althorin had beaten was dragged down, bloodied, barely conscious. Vi turned to the girls.

"Do you live here?" she asked, gently.

The older girl gave a tight nod.

Before Vi could say anything more, a woman slipped from behind a pile of broken furniture. Durt on her hands, panic on her face. She grabbed both children, whispering fast.

"Don't talk to them."

Vi blinked. Swallowed hard. She didn't stop them, she couldn't.

She just watched as they slipped into the dark, swallowed by a side tunnel that no one above would know to check.

When the squad found her again, Vi was standing alone, fists clenched. Althorin passed out next to her, she didn't care.

"You good?" someone asked.

She didn't answer.

Later, when the noise faded and the paperwork waited, Vi stood in the ruins of the

safehouse. She stared at the wall the girls had disappeared through, then punched it, hard.

It cracked. She didn't.

She leaned her forehead against it, exhaling like she wanted to crawl out of her own skin.

This job wasn't saving anything.

And she didn't know which side she belonged to anymore.

.....

PEB – Piltover Enforcement Bureau – Records Department

The hum of overhead lights was the only sound. Sterile. Quiet. A silence that judged.

Vi sat at a narrow desk in a glass-walled cubicle, the kind designed to keep conversations short and facts clean. Her gauntlets sat beside her, deactivated, impersonal, heavy as guilt.

A single form sat in a desk in front of her
Operation #791-B: Safehouse Sweep. Sector 6.

She cracked her knuckles. Rubbed at a bruise on her jaw. Let out a breath that didn't help.

A junior officer approached, glasses, jacket too tight, clipboard in hand. "Sergeant Vi. Your statement on the Sector 6 incident?"

She gave a quick nod, not looking at him. Her fingers tapped the desks slowly. She scrolled through the form, her lips a flat line.

Number of suspects apprehended: 5.

Property damage: Moderate.

Hostile engagement: Yes.

Civilians on site —

She paused. Then checked "NO."

The officer tilted his head, glancing at her. "There was mention of internal conflict? One of the squad..."

"Handled," Vi said flatly. She didn't meet his eyes.

A beat.

He hesitated. “There was also ..uh...structural collapse. A floor gave way?”

Vi nodded once. “Stability hazard. Sub-level gave out during sweep. No injuries.”

“No civilians?”

“None confirmed.”

He blinked, but nodded, scribbling. He didn’t push it. No one wanted trouble from her.

She scribbled to the signature field. Verified. Filed. Closed.

That was that.

The officer left with the form. The door whispered shut.

Alone again, Vi leaned back in the chair. She didn’t move. Didn’t breathe for a moment.

She had left out everything that mattered.

The girls. The fear. Althorin's rage. The punch. The way she wanted to cry and couldn’t.

Just another tidy checkbox in Piltover’s archives.

She stood. Took her gauntlets, slow like she was forcing herself.

Then walked out, shoulders set, heart crumbling somewhere deep under the armour.

.....

The chandeliers sparkled like stars frozen mid-fall, each one a masterpiece of hextech design and excess. The air was perfumed, the laughter artificial, and everything smelled like money and polished marble.

Vi adjusted the collar of her deep navy suit for the fifth time that hour. It was tailored, Caitlyn had insisted. Sharp lines, clean cut. She looked good. She knew it. But it didn’t feel like her.

The wine in her crystal glass was too sweet. The hors d'oeuvres looked like science

experiments. She hadn't eaten since the raid that morning, and nothing here seemed edible. Still, she tried. For Caitlyn.

Across the ballroom, Caitlyn floated through the crowd, effortless. Graceful. The soft folds of her silver gown shimmered like moonlight with each step. She smiled just enough, nodded in all the right places, and delivered clever retorts when needed. Vi couldn't help watching her like she was something rare.

Eventually, Caitlyn returned, fingers wrapping around Vi's wrist with gentle insistence.

"Come meet Councilor Alaric Vandergale. I need company." she sighed clearly not thrilled. "Try not to punch him."

Vi arched a brow. "That bad?"

Caitlyn smirked. "Worse. But he donates to the border reclamation fund."

They joined a small circle of officials and socialites. The conversation turned political almost immediately.

"So," said Councilor Alaric, voice oily-smooth, "tell me, how does it feel to patrol the very streets you were raised to riot in?"

The circle chuckled. Vi didn't.

She smiled. Barely. "I don't riot. I just mop up the mess you all pretend doesn't exist."

Someone choked on their wine. Alaric laughed. "Ah, spirited. But let's be honest, this integration fantasy? It's a time bomb. Zaunites don't want peace. They want power."

"They want air that doesn't poison their kids," Vi said evenly. "Kind of a low bar."

Caitlyn stepped in, voice calm. "Councilor, the accords were drafted in the hope of long-term balance. We're working toward mutual progress, not superiority."

"But it's your kind on the front lines now, isn't it?" Alaric said, eyes on Vi. "Isn't that the irony? Piltover's little pet enforcer from the Lanes." he smirked in Caitlyn's direction.

The silence burned.

Vi tilted her head. "You know, I've been trying real hard tonight. Eating your weird little

cubes, smiling at your jokes, pretending your cologne doesn't smell like fermented smug."

Alaric blinked.

"So let me make it simple... fuck you."

She set her glass on the tray of a passing server and walked away.

Caitlyn glared daggers at Alaric. "Sneer all you like, she's still twice the person you pretend to be." With a sharp shove, she pressed her glass into his hand, her voice flat and icy, and followed Vi.

The night was quiet, cool. The city lights below blinked like restless stars. Vi sat on the edge of the stone terrace wall, legs swinging slightly, jacket unbuttoned, tie loose. Her jaw was tight, her eyes on the sky.

Caitlyn stepped out and paused. Said nothing.

She came close, let her fingers brush Vi's shoulder. No pressure, just presence.

Vi didn't look at her, but she didn't move away either.

Caitlyn stepped around, stood between her knees, hands coming up to gently stroke Vi's hair. Her voice was low, certain.

"I love you."

Vi blinked fast, then pulled her in, arms wrapping around Caitlyn's waist, head pressed to her stomach like a girl lost in a storm.

Caitlyn curled down around her, arms encircling her shoulders, fingers sliding through short pink strands.

After a long, quiet moment, Vi murmured, "Wanna get outta here?"

Caitlyn smiled, leaned down and kissed her, soft and sure.

"Thought you'd never ask."

.....

The fire crackled low, casting shadows that danced along the walls of their quiet flat. A half-finished bottle of amber liquor sat open on the nearby table. Rain tapped faintly on the windowpanes, gentle, rhythmic, like a lullaby just out of reach.

Vi sat on the floor with her back against the couch, sleeves rolled to her elbows, tie loosened and askew. Her jacket was long gone, discarded somewhere between the door and the hallway. A faint bruise bloomed near her knuckles. She hadn't noticed it.

Caitlyn lay against her, curled into the warmth of Vi's chest, one arm draped lazily across her thigh. She cradled a glass in her hand, watching the firelight catch the rim.

Silence lingered. Comfortable, almost.

"You were good tonight," Caitlyn murmured. "Until you weren't."

Vi chuckled softly, fingers drawing idle lines down Caitlyn's spine. "Thought I held out longer than usual."

"You did." Caitlyn smiled against her shirt. "Doesn't make Alaric any less of a cretin."

"I still owe you a dance."

"You owe me several," Caitlyn replied, then fell quiet again, her fingers brushing Vi's forearm absently. Her voice dimmed. "Things are tense. Peace is... thin. Like a silk thread over a blade. I can feel it shifting."

Vi's hands slowed, her breath deepening.

"I know," she said.

Caitlyn shifted, turning just enough to see her face. "Did something happen today?"

Vi exhaled through her nose. "Yeah. Cleanup op in the Lanes. Intel was half-wrong, place was crawling with rigged tech and scared kids. One of ours went too far. I stopped him."

Caitlyn's eyes darkened. "How far?"

Vi didn't answer at first. Just looked into the fire. "Far enough I had to punch him."

She felt Caitlyn stiffen, just slightly.

“They took the guy in,” Vi continued. “Kids stayed. Some woman showed up and pulled ’em away.”

“You filed it?”

Vi gave a non-committal grunt. “The version they wanted.”

Caitlyn sat up a little, looking at her now, glass forgotten on the floor.

“Vi...”

Vi’s smile was soft. “Don’t look at me like that, cupcake. I did what I had to.”

“I’m worried about you,” Caitlyn said, voice quiet but firm. “You’re walking a razor’s edge every day. And I see what it’s doing to you.”

Vi leaned forward, pressing a kiss to her temple. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not,” Caitlyn whispered. “You come home with cracked knuckles and heavy eyes, and I know you lie in your reports, because you want to protect something. Or someone. And I understand, Vi I do. But I’m scared one day you won’t come back at all.”

Vi’s hands found her waist, pulling her close again. “Hey,” she murmured, voice a little lower. “I’ve been through worse, you know that.”

“That’s not the point,” Caitlyn replied, but her voice faltered as Vi pressed a trail of slow kisses along her jaw.

“You love me,” Vi said against her skin.

“Unfortunately,” Caitlyn sighed, head tipping back as her hands slid into Vi’s hair.

Vi smiled. “Lucky me.”

They kissed, wrapped in firelight, hearts pressed close, heat building. But beneath the affection, beneath the teasing touches and quiet kisses, Caitlyn’s worry sat like a stone in her chest.

She didn’t say anything more about it.

She just held on, and Vi let her.

.....

Built into the lower ridges of Zaun's industrial backbone, the old safe house had once echoed with hidden voices, whispered plans, and quick escapes. Now it was just hollow a shell reeking of rust, oil, and old fear. The woman, Silya, who once ferried fugitives through hidden tunnels, kept her movements quiet and her doors bolted. After the morning raid, the girls she scooped up had come back with her. Where else could they go?

In a corner room lit by a single, flickering filament bulb, two sisters sat huddled together on a tattered sofa. The older girl, Mireen, no more than thirteen, held her little sister close, one arm wrapped protectively around Elara's narrow shoulders as the child clung to a ragged cloth bunny. Mireen was all elbows and angles, wiry and watchful, with sharp grey eyes and a tangled mane of hair, the sides shorn short like a gutter rat's defense against lice. Her voice hadn't broken yet, but her silence carried weight.

Elara, just six, was a fragile wisp of a thing, pale and hollow-cheeked, her too-big overalls streaked with soot and patched with copper rivets and scraps of old lace. Her blonde hair hung in limp braids tied with green-stained ribbon, the kind pulled from pipe leaks or scavenged laundry lines. Her blue eyes were wide, red-rimmed from tears, her cheeks raw from cold and fear. Neither looked built for the undercity's war, yet here they were, still breathing.

The radio was off now. The only sound was the ticking of the pipes, and the woman's footsteps.

The small kitchen had steamed with the sharp scent of boiled turnip and brined fish. A dented pot sat over a coil burner, sputtering thin soup into the stale air. Silya, squat and heavy-shouldered, moved like someone who had once fought for space and no longer bothered. She smoked a pipe the colour of scorched copper and leaned on the counter like she owned the world, or didn't care who did.

"Sit," she said, jerking her chin toward the narrow table.

Elara obeyed immediately, hands still trembling, wide eyes darting from the soot-streaked walls to the woman's cracked knuckles. Mireen followed slower, wary. She watched everything, the window, the woman's boots, the door hinge, the glint of a folding knife tucked in the woman's belt strap.

Two mismatched bowls were set in front of them, each half-full with thin soup and half a boiled egg.

"Eat now," Silya said, puffing her pipe. "Only got tonight. After that... we'll see."

Mireen reached for a spoon, tense and silent. Elara set her bunny on the table and slowly took the spoon. She looked up between bites. Her voice was small.

“Is Papa dead?”

Silya let the pipe hang from her lips and took a slow breath through her nose. She pulled it free with two fingers, exhaled smoke into the overhead pipework.

“No,” she said, voice gruff. “Your dad’s not dead. He’s in Stillwater.”

Mireen swallowed hard. Her spoon clicked against the bowl. “What’s gonna happen to us?”

Silya looked them both over, her eyes narrowing, not unkind, just calculating. Measuring what she could risk.

“You’ll sleep tonight,” she said simply. “That’s what’ll happen. Eat while it’s hot. We’ll talk in the morning.”

Elara hesitated. Mireen gave her a small nudge under the table. They both obeyed, quietly. Silya didn’t say another word, she sat at the table, puffed on her pipe, elbow leaning on the edge of the table like a ship captain waiting for a storm.

That night, after they’d finished, Silya handed them two scratchy blankets and led them down the narrow hall to the spare room. Just a mattress on old floorboards, a few crates for a nightstand. She didn’t linger, only muttered, “No noise, you hear me.”

Then she was gone, her boots thudding away.

In the dark, Mireen lay on her side, pulling Elara close, tucking the blanket over both their heads like a shield. Her sister trembled.

“I want Papa,” Elara whispered.

“I know,” Mireen said her voice laced with worry.

They were quiet for a while. The distant hum of the city came through the pipes, steam hiss, distant clanks, the low thrum of turbines that never slept.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Mireen whispered eventually, pressing her forehead against Elara’s. “I promise. I’ll look after us. You’ll see.”

Elara didn't answer. She just clutched the bunny to her chest and nodded against her sister's arm. Her breathing slowed. Sleep pulled her under.

Later that night they came in silence. No shouting, no glass breaking. Just the hiss of a valve somewhere, and then the wet creak of hinges as shadows moved through the entry stair.

Faint creak at the back door. The shift of air, like someone had broken the seal of the house.

Elara stirred. "Miri...?"

Her sister was already awake. Eyes wide. Listening.

"It's okay, bug," she whispered automatically. "Go back to sleep."

Downstairs, the door crashed open. Silya heard the sound too late.

She rose from her bed with a curse, grabbing a rusty spanner and never made it past the doorway.

Heavy boots. Then a gunshot. Loud. Close.

Mireen shot upright. "Get up. Now!"

Elara whimpered, confused. "What's happening?"

"No time." Mireen dragged her little sister across the room, pulling aside a rusted vent panel and shoving her inside, hands trembling. It was too narrow for her. "Don't come out. Don't make a sound. Not for anything. You hear me?"

"Miri..."

"I'll come get you... I promise."

The door burst open behind her.

Three men. Not Enforcers, no blue, no badges, but masked like them, faces hidden behind thick filtration gear, their armor matte grey and featureless. No insignia. No words.

Mireen spun, wide-eyed.

The one in front lifted his weapon.

A single shot.

She dropped like a marionette with its strings cut, crumpling silently to the floor just shy of the vent.

Elara didn't scream.

She couldn't.

Frozen, breath caught in her throat, she clamped both hands over her mouth and watched through the narrow slats as one of the men stepped forward and prodded Mireen's body with his boot.

"Clear," he said flatly.

None of them checked the rest of the room.

Elara whimpered, the sound swallowed by her trembling palms.

The shorter one paused at the threshold, head tilting slightly, listening.

But he didn't turn.

Didn't look.

Then the door creaked shut behind them.

And silence collapsed over the house like ash.

On their way out, one of the men dropped a metal tube into the hallway. It bounced once, then landed with a soft, steady ticking—dials spinning, counting down. Inside, green liquid churned and bubbled.

A low thump. Then another.

Then...

Detonation.

The house vanished in a bloom of fire and steel. Walls folded inward. Beams split. Glass and smoke roared into the alley like a dragon's breath. And then, dust, thick and rolling, billowed through the ruins like a second, quieter explosion.

....