

Chapter 6

Caitlyn's eyes swept across the small room, low ceiling, patchwork walls softened by hand-painted murals that spiraled like vines across the plaster. A curtain of beads sectioned off one corner, where a sleek black chair sat beside trays of meticulously arranged tattooing tools and ink vials glinting under a soft overhead lamp. The shelves brimmed with sketchbooks, jars of pigment, a few dried flowers in a rust-stained mug. The mattress was low to the ground, draped in a patchwork quilt clearly stitched by hand, surrounded by cushions in mismatched patterns. The scent of ink, lavender and cinnamon hung in the air, masking the metallic trace of Zaun's pipes.

She woman raised her hand slightly, not in surrender, but in a slow, deliberate gesture of peace. Her head tilted, the sharp sweep of emerald eyes studying her with cool, unhurried focus.

"Easy," she said, voice smooth as silk as she set the mug down to the small table. "You're safe. My name is Nyx. This is my place."

"What?" Caitlyn demanded, still a bit disorientated, rifle trembling in her hands. "What is this place? Where's Vi and the others?"

"Like I said," Nyx pulled a battered chair over, making Caitlyn nervous. She flipped it, and straddled it backwards, arms draped over the top. "my place. You were bleeding out in the rubble. I patched you up. You're welcome, by the way...Miss Kiramman" she murmured, unfazed.

"And Vi? The others? What happened to them?" Caitlyn gripped her rifle, finger still on the trigger but Nyx didn't seem to care.

"Charoite's got her. My friends are looking for the others."

"Got her where?"

"I don't know yet....We have a pretty good idea but we'll know more when my friends come back."

Caitlyn narrowed her eyes. "How do you know my name?"

Nyx let out a half-snort, brushing a loose strand of green hair from her face. "Honey, everyone knows your name. You're number three on Zaun's 'Most Unpopular' list. Right under a tax collector and a Hextech regulation officer."

Caitlyn didn't smile. "Why were you following me?"

"I wasn't," Nyx said. "I was following your partner."

Caitlyn's heart jumped. Her grip tightened. "What?"

"Relax. I'm not a creep." Nyx leaned her chin on her arms, eyes suddenly less playful. "Charoite's got my brother. I heard Vi's looking for whoever's making people go missing. I recognized you two that night in front of the club, so I thought I tag along."

That stopped Caitlyn cold.

Her arms slackened. The rifle dropped just slightly. The pain returned instantly, like glass stabbing through her ribs. She gasped, nearly doubled over, gritting her teeth.

Nyx sighed. "Told you to take it slow."

"Keep still!" Cait yelled as Nyx pushed back from the chair with a creak, walked over to the kitchen counter

"You're gonna give yourself aneurism. Chill out"

She pulled out a slim glass vial filled with iridescent purple shimmer and held it up to the light. The glow danced across her sharp cheekbones and down her tattooed neck and shoulders.

"Drink," she said simply, stepping closer and offering the vial.

"I will not!!" Caitlyn scowled. "If you think I'm just going to swallow something handed to me by....."

Nyx cut her off. "You've got two broken ribs, a concussion, and more bruising than a synthfruit left in the sun. You're no good to anyone like this. So unless you wanna pass out again or cough up part of your lung, drink the damn thing."

Caitlyn's jaw tensed. Her pride flared. But so did the pain. Hot, raw, grinding into her lungs every time she breathed.

"And put that fucking thing down." Nyx said sitting back again "It'll take out the rest of your ribs if you pull the trigger anyway. And you know it."

After a beat, Cait snatched the bottle from Nyx's hand, she reluctantly put her rifle on the side and knocked the liquid back in one go.

It hit her throat like liquid fire. Burned all the way down. Her body seized up, every nerve lit ablaze. Her scream ripped through the room before she could stop it, her fist slamming the table, rattling the mug.

Then, release.

Like the pain was suddenly vacuumed out of her. She gasped for air, slumped forward, lungs expanding without knives in her chest. Her ribs still ached, but the sharp edge was

dulled. Her vision cleared.

She looked up at Nyx, panting, eyes wide. "What the hell do you want from me?" she rasped.

Nyx didn't answer right away.

She just watched her.

Then "The same thing you want," she said. "To burn that bitch's world down."

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The first thing Vi felt was the bite of cold metal against her wrists. Her eyes blinked open, sluggish at first, the world sliding into focus through a haze. Rusted beams arched overhead, their paint long since peeled to bare, flaking iron. The air stank of mildew, oil, and something sharp, old liquor soaked into the bones of the place. She could hear the slow drip of water somewhere in the shadows, the hollow echo stretching across the cavernous room.

The chair beneath her was bolted to the floor, every shift of her weight answered by the groan of warped metal. Thick leather straps dug into her arms and chest, coarse fibers biting skin already rubbed raw.

A faint shaft of light pushed in through a jagged hole high on the wall, catching dust motes that swirled like lazy snow. Beyond it, the rest of the factory lay drowned in gloom, hulking stills and shattered vats looming like rusted giants, their copper bellies pocked and tarnished.

Now with her eyes open fully, cold dread crawling up her spine as she became painfully aware of the device strapped to her chest. Two glass vials filled with that unmistakable silver liquid glowed faintly, tethered to a cruel mechanism. Her hands fumbled desperately, but the straps behind her back were knotted too tight, biting into her skin. Panic curled in her gut as her gaze flicked around the grimy factory room until a new presence crystallized into view.

Charoite stepped inside like she owned the place, graceful, composed, her every movement a careful calculation. Two men flanked her, silent and watchful, their voices a low murmur Vi couldn't quite catch.

Charoite's eyes locked onto Vi, lips curving in a smile that never reached them. "Well, well," she purred, voice cool as ice, "look who decided to join us."

Vi's jaw tightened but her voice was laced with sarcasm. "Could be worse. Expected at least a drink by now."

Charoite chuckled softly, the sound like broken glass. "Food and drinks will be served later.

The party hasn't started yet, not until Miss Kiramman arrives."

"Oh? A plus one?" Vi smirked despite herself. "Might have dressed a little nicer if I'd known."

Charoite's smile widened, razor sharp. "Darling, you're dressed perfectly. You have one purpose tonight." She stepped closer, the faintest hint of warmth vanishing from the room. "I need you to bring me the Sheriff."

Vi gave a dry chuckle. "She particular about invites? Might skip this one."

Charoite tilted her head, almost amused. "She might." Her voice dropped to a silken whisper edged with steel. "But then... I have other ways to make her come running." She leaned in until Vi could feel the cold brush of her breath. "I could always send you back to her piece...by piece until she accepts it."

Vi smirked, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Piece by piece, huh? Gotta admit, that's creative. Bet you've got a whole scrapbook of sick ideas."

Charoite's gaze swept her up and down, slow, deliberate. "Only for those worth the effort." She circled behind the chair, her footsteps echoing in the hollow refinery. "And you, my dear, are... very worth the effort."

Vi shifted in her bindings, making the chair creak. "Flattered. Though, fair warning...Sheriff's not the type to negotiate with psychos."

"Oh, I'm not negotiating," Charoite said smoothly, coming back into view. "I'm collecting. The Sheriff is merely a piece in a much larger puzzle. You? You're just the message she won't be able to ignore."

Her eyes caught the weak light filtering through a broken window, deep velvet, gleaming with an almost inhuman shine. For a fraction of a second, Vi's throat tightened. But she swallowed, burying the reaction under a crooked grin.

She tilted her head, pretending to think. "Right. So I'm bait. Do I get hazard pay, or just the limb-severance package?"

Charoite's smile sharpened, all teeth and no warmth. "You'll get exactly what you've earned, Vi. One way or another." She crouched slightly, eyes locking onto hers again with chilling precision. "I suggest you hope she plays along... because I can be very thorough when I take something apart."

Vi's smirk wavered, just barely, before she forced it back. "Guess I'll start practicing my 'help me' face then."

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Back at the other end of Zaun, in the cramped second-floor apartment, two women still tried to see eye to eye. The tension between them had thinned like smoke, but it hadn't

dispersed entirely.

Nyx leaned back in the creaking chair, one leg propped against the table, idly rolling a glass between her fingers. "You keep pacing like that you'll wear a groove in the floor."

Cait slowed her steps but didn't stop. "I think better when I move."

"That what you call it?" Nyx's mouth curved into something that wasn't quite a smile. "Looked a lot like stewing to me."

Cait's gaze flicked over, cool but not as sharp as before. "Maybe I am." She stopped near the window, fingers resting lightly on the sill, scanning the haze of Zaun's skyline without really seeing it. "I need to find Vi...I don't even know if my friends are alive or dead. I hate just sitting here when I should be out there. "

Nyx poured another drink for both of them, the amber liquid catching the dim light, and slid one glass across the table toward Cait.

"We don't have time for blind heroics either, darling,"

Cait met her eyes. There was still a wall between them, but it wasn't quite as high.

She sat down taking the glass. "No," she admitted quietly, "and that's what worries me."

Nyx tapped her glass against Cait's. "We'll figure it out, Sheriff."

They both knocked the liquor back in one go.

Cait's throat burned instantly. She broke into a cough, trying to keep her composure.

Nyx's grin widened, a low chuckle slipping out. "Lightweight," she teased, shaking her head. "Should've known...Pilti."

"Shut up" Cait couldn't help but chuckle

But her laugh faltered with a loud knock on the door. She stiffen, her hand instinctively going to the butt of her rifle.

"Stay put," Nyx muttered, already crossing the room. She unlatched the heavy lock and pulled the door open.

Two figures stumbled inside, flanked by two others Cait didn't recognize. Sevika was bleeding from her temple, her augmented arm sputtering and sparking like it had been through hell. Gearhand's arm hung at an ugly angle, his clothes scorched and torn. Both of them looked like they'd been chewed up and spat out by Zaun itself.

Caitlyn was on her feet before she knew it, relief flooding her so fast it caught her off guard. "You're alive," she breathed, crossing the room in few steps and wrapped an arm briefly around Gearhand.

"Just about." Gearhand mumbled tapping her back "Glad to see you breathing too."

In a flash of impulse, she wrapped her arms around Sevika for a quick hug, then just as quickly withdrew, looking like someone who'd accidentally hugged the wrong person.

Sevika blinked, "Careful Kiramman, you're gonna ruin my reputation." she smirked. But there was something in her voice, something softer that betrayed she didn't mind. "The bitch took Vi"

"I know" she nodded

Nyx glanced between them, "Alright everyone. I'm Nyx...Cait, this is Switch and Jorin."

Switch was small, wiry, with choppy, multi-colored hair and a nose ring that caught the dim light. She couldn't have been more than twenty. Jorin was her opposite, tall, broad-shouldered, with an easy presence. When he clasped Caitlyn's hand, the glint of his metallic fingers caught her eye, stirring a flicker of recognition.

"I remember you... You were outside the club with Nyx."

"He was" Nyx smiled, stepping closer to the man, her hand cupping the side of his face with gentle warmth. She leaned in slowly, pressing a soft, grateful kiss to his lips.

"Thanks, babe," she murmured, her smile lingering between them.

He smiled back, brushing a tender kiss to her forehead. "Don't mention it. Just glad we didn't have to drag out corpses," he whispered against her skin, his hand moving to stroke her back in quiet reassurance.

"Do you know what happened to my partner?" Caitlyn's voice wavered with worry. "Please... tell me you know where they took her."

"The old refinery, behind the glass factory. Her usual spot," he said, glancing toward Nyx.

Nyx reached out, resting a steadying hand on Caitlyn's shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll figure out a plan and move as soon as we can."

Caitlyn nodded, gratitude softening her tense features. "Thank you." Though this ragtag group felt unfamiliar, her nerves were stretched tight, and she clung to the hope in Nyx's words.

Switch's sharp eyes darted to Sevika's sparking arm. "Looks like the coupling's blown. I can try to fix it...if you want."

Sevika gave a short laugh. "Kid, you patch this up and I'll owe you a drink."

"Make it two," Switch shot back

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The clock on the library wall ticked past three in the morning, its steady rhythm far too loud in the stillness of Kiramman Manor. Tobias remained in his armchair, a heavy leather-bound book open in his lap. He'd been staring at the same page for the better part of an hour, the words sliding past his eyes without meaning.

The quiet creak of the door broke his restless thoughts. The butler stepped inside, his posture immaculate despite the late hour.

"Sir," he greeted politely, inclining his head.

Tobias looked up. "Have Caitlyn and Vi returned?"

The butler's expression remained carefully neutral, but he shook his head. "No, sir. Shall I notify the authorities?"

For a moment, Tobias didn't answer. His fingers tapped the edge of the book, the weight of unease pressing down on him. Then he closed it with a muted thud and set it aside.

"No," he said at last, his voice low. "Not yet."

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Vi's eyes flicked over the dim, cavernous factory, limbs bound tight to the cold metal chair. On the far side, Charoite stood by the massive factory table, flanked by several men deep in quiet discussion. Their voices were low, words lost beneath the hum of machinery. Charoite's finger traced a slow arc toward the metal bridge suspended by thick cables high above the factory floor. The men nodded, absorbed.

Clearing her throat she caught their attention. "Excuse me," she said, voice sharp.

Charoite pivoted smoothly, her gaze locking onto Vi's with a mix of amusement and appraisal.

"Look, it's getting late, and the party hasn't even started yet. Think I could get a bathroom break?"

A soft laugh bubbled from Charoite. "Do you take me for a fool?"

"Seriously," Vi shot back, deadpan. "You don't want me pissing myself, might short-circuit your little setup here."

Charoite paused, considering the odd request, then nodded slowly. She motioned to the big bald man standing beside her.

With a grunt, he strode over, undoing Vi's restraints and hauling her up like a rag doll.

Vi groaned, rubbing her sore wrists, voice dripping with sarcasm. "Appreciate the chivalry."

She was practically being dragged, the big man gripping her upper arm like it was a lifeline. As they passed Charoite, the woman's voice cut through the air, cold and sharp.

"Don't try anything stupid."

"I wouldn't dream of it." she smirked without looking back.

The man shoved open a rusty metal door and pushed her inside a filthy, battered toilet. The stench hit her immediately, thick, sour, and unmistakably vile.

He crossed his arms, blocking the entrance.

"Really?" Vi raised an eyebrow. "Aren't I getting some privacy?"

He grunted, shutting the door and planting himself firmly in front of it.

Alone now, her lips twisted into a disgusted grimace as she scanned the grimy walls. Her eyes flicked down to the device strapped tight to her chest. Fingers twitching, she studied the volatile-looking bomb, already knowing it wasn't something she could just pry off.

With a low sigh, she glanced at the rust-stained toilet. "Not sure what's worse, the smell or the sight," she muttered, scanning the cramped stall then planted her boots on the grimy toilet seat, the porcelain wobbling under her weight.

Her hands clamped the scuffed metal panels on either side, fingers digging into the chipped paint. With a sharp grunt, she swung herself forward like a pendulum, boots slamming into the cubicle door.

The rusted hinges screamed before giving way sending the door flying outward smashing into the man waiting outside. He staggered, eyes wide, crashing toward the sink.

Vi didn't hesitate. She lunged, fist cracking against his temple with every ounce of strength she could summon despite the heavy weight strapped to her chest.

He reeled back, but before she could follow up, a hand clamped around her throat. Cold steel of a needle piercing her jugular.

A searing jolt tore through her ribs, pain ripping down her muscles. She gasped, body convulsing violently.

The man's cruel smirk blurred in her vision. Her legs buckled. Darkness swallowed her whole.

“Just can’t help yourself, can you?” Charoite’s voice drawled as Vi crumpled at her feet. She nudged her limp body with her boot, then glanced at the man.

“Sort it out, will you? And next time, try using your brain... if you’ve got one.” With that, she turned on her heel and strode out.

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A single bulb overhead, cast warm light over the small, crowded apartment. The table now serving as an impromptu workbench, meeting place, and field hospital all in one.

Gearhand sat on the bed in the corner, face pale but his breathing steady. An older woman with kind eyes and steady hands wound a roll of bandages around his arm, tucking the cloth neatly before pressing a small glass bottle into his good hand.

“Drink it,” she said, voice gentle but firm. “You’ll be fine, but take it easy two, maybe three days. And no fighting.”

He managed a crooked grin. “No promises. Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“Don’t worry about it. You lot are lucky to be alive, all of you.”

“We’ve been hearing that way too often lately,” Gearhand muttered. “Let’s just hope our luck doesn’t run out.”

Caitlyn crossed the room, her steps measured, worry flickering across her face. “How is he?” she asked softly.

“He’ll live,” the woman answered. “But this isn’t a miracle fix. Rest is what he needs.”

“I’ve been through worse,” Gearhand said, pulling his arm carefully through the sleeve of his hoodie.

Caitlyn lowered her voice. “Listen. I need you to go back to the house.”

“What? No. Cait, you need all the hands you can get...”

She cut him off firmly. “No. What I need is for you to take this to my father.” She pressed a sealed envelope into his palm. “Make sure it gets directly to him. No one else. Do you understand?”

Gearhand frowned, his jaw tightening. He leaned in close, voice low. “You don’t know these people. This is Zaun. Watch your back, Cait. Don’t trust anyone.”

She looked at him, eyes softening. Then stepped forward, surprising him with a quick hug and whispered against his ear, “I don’t. That’s why this has to get through. Please.”

When she pulled back, his lips pressed into a thin line, but he nodded. "Alright. But you'd better still be breathing by the end of the day."

"We all will." She smiled softly

He turned, muttering a short goodbye to the others before limping out the door.

Caitlyn exhaled, straightening her shoulders as she returned to the table.

Nyx's sharp gaze followed her for a moment. "Everything okay?"

Cait set herself down, keeping her voice steady. "He went home. He's too injured to be of use here, and my father will be worried."

Nyx tilted her head, accepting the answer with a slow nod, though a flicker of doubt lingered in her eyes before she turned back to Sevika.

Caitlyn caught the flicker, a hesitation like the pluck of a taut string, but let it hum between them unspoken.

At the table, Switch had claimed a spot beside Sevika. Her small toolbox sat open, parts laid out in a meticulous line. The faint smell of shimmer and burnt wiring hung between them as she pried open the damaged casing on Sevika's arm. Sparks popped and hissed, some liquid spilled.

"Damn it...Worse than I thought." Switch muttered to herself as she worked.

Jorin leaned against the wall, arms folded, watching the room like a silent guard. Nyx sat opposite Caitlyn, pen and paper in front of her ready to start making a plan.

"Listen...Before we even start going into plans I have to say...Judging by the way you lot stormed that place you don't know shit about Charoite"

"No shit" Sevika added "It was their brilliant idea."

"There's no need to point fingers now." Caitlyn frowned

"I'm not...just stating facts"

Nyx smirked. "What's done is done...Let's just say you learned one thing today...If you go after Charoite alone, you might as well shoot yourself now."

"I might still consider that." Sevika grunted lighting up a cigarette then took a long drag leaning her elbow on the table "And you know that because?"

"Because we tried." Nyx said, her eyes falling on Jorin across the room. For a moment something quiet and unspoken passing between them before she looked away.

She leaned her weight against the back of the chair, arms draped loosely, voice low and steady.

"Here's a thing....Charoite's dad ran supply routes all across Zaun for over thirty years. Knew every tunnel, every dead zone, every baron's soft spot. One day, he stepped on the wrong toes, some newbie chem baron didn't like the way he did his business. He forced his hand and the whole shipment got lost. He got others to turn against him. They got into dispute and the guy sold him out to the Enforcers. He got thrown in Stillwater."

Nyx paused. Her voice turned bitter. "Old man was decent. Too decent to survive that place. Lasted six days before a guard beat him to death."

Caitlyn blinked, her expression shifting to something more compassionate, familiar.

"That's when Charoite snapped," Nyx continued. "Swore she'd take down everyone responsible, one by one. And she did."

She leaned in slightly.

"But she's not your typical drencher. Girl's got education. Her old man didn't spare a coin when it came to her. Sent her to the finest tutors in Piltover, believe it or not. She speaks three languages, reads code, knows any kind of tech inside out."

Caitlyn frowned. "So she's smart?"

"No. She's a ghost. And she's running on pure shimmer."

That stopped both Caitlyn and Sevika cold.

"What?" Cait blinked and Sevika almost choked on her cigarette

Nyx nodded "Crazy bitch found some chem alchemist, paid him a fortune to swap out her blood. Every vein in her body's filled with that shit. She doesn't sleep. Barely eats. Heals quicker than you can blink. Moves like lightning. You won't see her coming till it's too late."

"I know someone like that" Cait said quietly

"Not like that you don't...Whatever's floating in her veins is not like the old crap. It's new, pure, refined and ten times stronger."

Caitlyn looked at her rifle. Nyx noticed.

"You can't fight her with that," she said, nodding at the gun. "If you want to see your partner again, you're going to have to outsmart her. And that's not gonna be easy. She's clever, methodical, patient and she knows you're coming."

Nyx leaned forward now, the glow from the swinging overhead light catching the edges of her shoulders.

Caitlyn's eyes narrowed, still wary, but something in Nyx's tone had changed. And whatever it was, it made her trust her more.

"Why is she holding your brother?" Cait asked, her voice softer now.

Nyx sighed, rubbing the back of her neck. "My brother. He's an inventor. Built his way up from scraps. Spent years making something outta nothing. Was finally getting noticed. Had a big deal lined up. It was your mother who was gonna invest."

Caitlyn's breath caught, her pulse thudding in her ears. "What did you say?"

"Yes...your mother. Kiramman's a name you don't forget, even in Zaun. Contracts were drawn, prototypes tested. He thought he'd finally made it."

Her eyes darkened. "Then she died."

Caitlyn's face drained of color. "Your brother is the inventor...Mechanical sentries...it was him who made those."

Nyx gave a single, grim nod. "The first version, yeah. Council wanted something big, something flashy. He didn't know what they were gonna use it for...as long as it wasn't weapons, he didn't care. But After she died, no one wanted to touch his work. The whole thing just fell apart."

She glanced away, jaw tight, voice lower now. "Then, few weeks later, someone reached out. Said they were interested. Wanted to fund him. Big payout. All hush-hush. He was over the moon. Told me it was finally happening."

She looked back at Caitlyn, eyes hard.

"He went for a meeting and never came back."

Caitlyn swallowed. "They took him?"

"Not just him" Switch added "People are going missing all over the place. The baker's boy...Same thing. Chemist, got his degree three months ago...Thought he got a shot at real job. Never came home. No-one knows what happened to him."

"People go missing all the time in this place. He wouldn't be the first." Sevika added

"Exactly." Switch nodded "Which is what their counting on"

"Word is my brother is still alive," Nyx said. "Being kept. Forced to work. Probably the only reason he's still breathing. But once they have what they want they will kill him."

A beat of silence stretched between them. Caitlyn's jaw clenched.

"Look...I want the same thing you do. But we need to work together, and we need to be smart.

Sevika exhaled smoke, eyes narrowing. "No offense, sweetheart, but how the hell did you picture this working?" She jabbed her cigarette at Switch. "She's a mechanic. What are you gonna do, tattoo Charoite to death?" Then her finger swung toward Jorin. "And him, I don't even know what he is."

"He's a builder" Switch chuckled putting away her tools. "But he knows how to throw a punch or two."

Nyx smirked, the curve of her lips sharp. "No, we're not fighters... but we do have few aces up our sleeves." She rose from her chair. "Don't be scared."

Suddenly her pupils thinned to slits. The tattoos along her neck and shoulders ignited with a faint emerald glow. In an instant, that light uncoiled from her skin like living tendrils, snapping across the table. The energy wrapped tight around Sevika, hoisting her from her chair as though she weighed nothing at all.

The room froze. Caitlyn shot to her feet, rifle in hand, barrel locked steady on Nyx. "Put her down," she ordered, voice sharp, finger tense on the trigger.

"Woah...easy!" Jorin threw himself between them. "She's not hurting her!"

"Move!" Caitlyn barked.

Switch raised her hands quickly. "It's fine! She's not gonna hurt her!"

Sevika dangled for a heartbeat, her cigarette slipping from her lips to hiss out on the floor. Fury blazed in her eyes as she writhed against the glowing coils. Then, slowly, Nyx released her. The energy retracted in a rush of light, and Sevika dropped back onto her feet. She slammed her fist against the table, rattling the glasses.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" she snarled.

Nyx lifted her hands in surrender. "Hey...relax. I wasn't trying to hurt you. Just answering your question."

"Fuck you," Sevika snapped. "Do that again, and you won't need Charoite to kill you...I'll do it myself."

Nyx's expression softened, almost apologetic. "I said I'm sorry."

Caitlyn's chest rose and fell as she kept her sights fixed on Nyx. "You're Vastaya."

"Yes," Nyx admitted, eyes flicking to the rifle. "Now... can you put that away? Please."

After a long pause, Caitlyn exhaled, lowering her weapon. Her hands still trembled faintly as

she sat back down. "That was really stupid," she muttered.

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The factory floor was eerily silent, lit by battered industrial lamps that hummed overhead, some flickering as though clinging to life. Outside, two guards leaned against the dented metal door, smoke curling from their cigarettes as they traded idle chatter. Inside, Charoite presided over the cavernous space as if it were her private office. Papers sprawled across a heavy table, a half-finished glass of amber liquor sitting at its center. She didn't so much as glance up when the hulking man returned, dragging Vi.

Her body slumped forward, head lolling, as the big man dragged her limp weight back into the chair. Her boots scraped across the floor with a dull squeal until she was planted exactly where she'd been before, as though nothing had happened. The leather straps creaked as he yanked them tight, binding her arms once more behind the metal backrest.

He grunted, wiping the back of his thick neck. "Been almost two hours now," he muttered, "Don't think she's coming."

Charlotte didn't bother looking up. A thin curl of smoke trailed from the cigarette between her fingers, the glow at the tip flaring as she inhaled. She was bent over the wide table, pen scratching across paper with unhurried precision. Her voice came low and measured, almost lazy.

"Oh, she's coming."

The words hung in the air like a promise.

"She's just planning her entrance," Charlotte murmured, exhaling smoke in a slow stream. "Trying to decide if it's the front door... or the shadows."

A corner of her mouth curved, and she leaned forward on the table sealing the envelope, her cigarette smouldering between her knuckles.

She finally lifted her gaze, a glint of cruel amusement in her eyes "But she'll come. Because you..." her eyes traced over Vi, lingering "...are far too precious to her."

The big man shifted uneasily, scratching at his jaw. "You're really that sure?"

Charlotte's smile widened as she stubbed out the cigarette on the ashtray, crushing the embers with deliberate slowness.

"She'd burn this whole city to ash before leaving her behind."

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Back at the apartment everyone cramped around the table. Despite the fact that half of

them had met less than an hour ago, there was an unspoken current in the air, people from different corners of Zaun and Piltover suddenly working in sync. It was in that strange, temporary alliance that Nyx's voice cut through the hum of quiet work.

She leaned over the small table, pencil in hand, rough sketches of the factory spread across the surface. She traced lines and circles, marking doors, windows, and stairwells, her voice low but precise.

"This is the main floor," she explained, "full of guards at every entry point. Charoite likes redundancy. Some of these corridors are probably booby-trapped, and there's likely more than one surprise we won't see until we're too close."

Sevika exhaled smoke, tilting her head back. "Don't suppose you can just teleport us in, can you?" she said with a dry smirk.

Nyx laughed, the sound low and musical. "No, unfortunately not. But... there's another way in." She tapped a small circle on the sketch. "Old vent shafts. They run underneath the building. Entrance's at the pub two blocks over. Used to be smuggling routes back in the day"

Caitlyn leaned in, her eyes sharp, scanning the map with practiced focus. "And you're sure she doesn't know about them?"

Nyx smirked, shrugging. "She wasn't even alive when I worked the pub. There's no way she'd know these routes exist, unless someone's been whispering."

Caitlyn's gaze flicked across the sketch, her mind already assembling the angles, the timing, the potential choke points. One spot caught her attention, an intersection of shafts leading straight toward the rear of the factory.

"And this?" she asked, tapping the sketch with a finger.

"That's a small maintenance access. Easy to overlook, mostly forgotten," Nyx replied.

Caitlyn's lips curved slightly. "That's our way in."

Nyx's eyes glinted, approving, as the others leaned closer, the room buzzing quietly with the sense of a plan beginning to take shape.

"This is where she will keep Vi." Nyx tapped at the main factory hall. "As organized as she is, she's also a creature of habit. She likes to display her power. It also gives her tactical advantage. From there she can see every corner. So be careful."

"Switch, if we need it, can you disable the lights?" Caitlyn asked

"Sure no problem" she nodded

"Great. If I could get this bridge straight away it would give me a perfect ground to cover,

you all. We have to get to the top floor as soon as possible. I can take them out one by one from there."

"We'll get you there." Jorin said

Switch grinned and dug into her satchel, pulling out a handful of small metal orbs and setting them on the table with a clink.

"We got these as well."

Caitlyn frowned, tilting her head. "What are they?"

Jorin's mouth curved into a wry smile. "Nail bombs."

Cait's eyes widened slightly. "Nail bombs?"

"Yap," Switch said, almost cheerfully, rolling one of the spheres between her palms. "We used 'em during the riots against Noxians and Enforcers. Bloody effective. You throw one of these, and when it pops..." she flicked her fingers wide, mimicking the blast "BOOM...the nails go flying everywhere. Sharp, fast, unstoppable. I once saw one tear straight through a guard's eye."

She laughed at the memory, a little too enthusiastically, until her gaze flicked up and caught Caitlyn's horrified expression.

"Oh... sorry," Switch added quickly, wincing and tucking the nail bomb back into the bag.

Nyx smirked. "Gruesome as it sounds, she's right. They'll clear a path if things get tight."

Caitlyn inhaled slowly, pressing her lips into a thin line before nodding.

Nyx pushed herself up, moving smoothly toward an old tin can on the shelf. Its enamel surface chipped, faded flowers barely clinging to the metal. She tipped it over the sink. The sugar that spilled out was only a disguise. A clatter followed, several rounds of ammunition tumbled out, bouncing against the steel basin.

Nyx picked one up between finger and thumb, rolling it as if it were a marble, then extended it toward Caitlyn. "Your rifle can chamber these, right?"

Caitlyn frowned. They weren't ordinary rounds. Each had a dull metal casing, but the tips were translucent, filled with a viscous, glowing pink liquid that caught the light in unsettling ways.

She hesitated, taking one gingerly and lifted it up, holding it to the light. The fluid shimmered, almost alive, as though it pulsed faintly in rhythm with her own heartbeat.

"What... is this?"

Nyx let out a sharp breath. "Something Jorin's dad cooked up for Charoite. Only none of us can shoot, and the few who can...well, none of them are crazy enough to help us."

Caitlyn's gaze flicked back to her, sharp, suspicious. "Do you know what they're supposed to do?"

"I know it won't kill Charoite," Nyx replied flatly. "But it should slow her down."

"Should?" Caitlyn echoed, her tone cutting.

Sevika leaned against the wall, folding her arms. "And what if it doesn't?"

Nyx gave a half-shrug, her jaw tight. "Then we're screwed."

The room fell into uneasy silence, the strange bullets gleaming pink in Caitlyn's palm.

"This looks more promising by the minute" Sevika said flatly stubbing out her cigarette

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Gearhand pushed open the heavy Kiramman door, boots clattering on the marble floor. He barely had time to shut it before a small body hurled itself at his legs.

"Daddy!" his daughter squealed, arms locking around him.

Gearhand staggered a little, then bent down with a soft chuckle. "Shouldn't you be in bed at this hour, little sparrow?" he teased, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

She only giggled, holding him tighter.

The butler appeared from the shadows of the hall. Gearhand straightened, his tone firming. "Please tell Mr. Tobias I must see him urgently."

Inside his study, Tobias sat beneath the warm glow of a desk lamp, the letter from Caitlyn spread open in his hands. His brow tightened as he reread it, the weight of every word pressing down like stone.

He lifted his eyes slowly to the butler. "Have the car ready. Immediately."

The butler inclined his head without question and slipped from the room.

Tobias leaned back in his chair, exhaling. "Thank you, Gearhand. Go and rest now. You've done enough tonight."

Gearhand gave a nod of respect before retreating, leaving Tobias alone with his thoughts.

Moments later, the polished black car rolled through Piltover's lantern-lit streets, its gold rims gleaming under street lights, engine humming low against the sleeping city. Tobias sat

rigid in the back, fingers tapping against his cane, eyes fixed on nothing.

The car slowed, then pulled up before a modest townhouse belonging to his dear friend, the deputy Sheriff. Tobias stepped out, coat brushing against the vehicle, and climbed the stone steps. He raised his fist and knocked sharply, so hard the sound echoed down the quiet street.

Lights flickered on in the upper windows. A moment later, the door creaked open to reveal a man in dressing robes, hair tousled, eyes heavy with sleep.

"Tobias?" he asked, startled.

Tobias's expression was grim, voice low and clipped. "I need your help. And I need it kept quiet."

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Nyx grunted softly as she tightened the strap of the crude, layered corset across her ribs. It wasn't pretty, stitched from scavenged leather and scrap metal, but it had stopped a bullet once before and that was enough. Jorin stepped in without a word, his hands steady as he pulled the last buckle into place.

"You'll crush my lungs at this rate," she muttered with a crooked smile.

"You'll thank me when it stops something worse," he said quietly, smoothing the edge down with a soldier's precision. When she reached for the belt with orbs, he helped thread it through around her waist, fingers brushing against hers as she clipped the nail bombs into place. She shoved a small blade into her thigh holster.

Then, without thinking, he turned her towards him, slow and deliberate. His palm cupped her cheek, thumb sweeping just beneath her ear in a gesture so gentle it didn't belong in a night like this.

"Be careful," he whispered, searching her eyes. "Are you sure about this?"

Nyx only nodded, catching his hand before he could drop it. She pressed her fingers around his, firm, anchoring him. "Don't play the hero," she said. "Stick by me."

He let out a breath that was half a laugh, half a sigh. "Always."

Their kiss was brief, soft, almost stolen, just enough to promise they'd find each other again on the other side.

Across the room, Caitlyn glanced up from where she was checking the scope on her rifle. She caught the moment in silence, the tilt of Nyx's head, the softness in Jorin's eyes. Something about it hit her chest with a pang she didn't expect. She looked away quickly but couldn't stop the faint pull of a smile that softened her own anxious frown. Relatable.

Human. For a breath, it made her remember what this fight was really for.

She pulled the rifle closer, forcing her hands to stop trembling.

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The pub sat only a few blocks from the refinery, its boarded windows staring blankly at the street like tired eyes that hadn't seen laughter in years. The wood of the door groaned as Nyx shouldered it open, dust spilling down in lazy motes. Inside, the air was stale, carrying only the ghost of spilled ale and old smoke. They shined their flashlights around the space. Broken stools leaned against the walls, and the long bar stretched out in front of them, scarred with knife marks and cigarette burns.

Nyx's steps slowed. For a moment her breath caught, and the silence of the pub filled with echoes of her memories, music, laughter, the murmur of voices. She saw herself there, younger, sleeves rolled up, sliding a pint across the counter. A man sat opposite her at the bar, dark hair falling into his eyes as he smirked at something she'd said. They leaned close, teasing, words tumbling into laughter that turned soft at the edges. When she brushed her fingers against his hand and leaned in, their lips met, warm, certain, like it had always been meant. She could still remember the scent of his skin and the softness of his lips on hers.

"Nyx?" Switch's voice cut sharply through the haze.

She blinked, the ghost of the kiss dissolving into dust and mildew. Clearing her throat, she moved quickly behind the bar. "This way," she said, voice low, clipped.

The others followed. The back room was worse, its plastered ceiling had long since cracked, dark liquid dripping steadily from corroded pipes above. Nyx's eyes darted up following the light from the flashlight. Just in time she grabbed Caitlyn's arm and pulled her sideways. The drop landed where her shoulder had been, sizzling as it chewed a shallow hole into the concrete floor.

"Acid," Nyx muttered, giving Caitlyn a brief look. "Best not stand under that."

Cait blinked horrified. She couldn't help but look at the ceiling as she continued to walk, now sticking closer to Nyx.

At the far corner, a half-rotten wardrobe sagged against the wall, its doors hanging crooked. "Help me with this," Nyx said, pressing her shoulder to the wood. Together, they shoved

until the wardrobe scraped aside, revealing a rust-streaked hatch buried in shadow.

The wheel resisted at first, years of rust binding it tight, but with a grunt and all their combined effort, it finally shifted, screeching as they pried it open. A foul, damp stench rushed up, the dark throat of the tunnel yawning before them.

"It's disgusting," Switch muttered, wrinkling her nose.

"Fucking gross...But it'll do," Nyx replied, already lowering herself in.

One by one, they crawled through the pipe. The air was damp, close, and cloying, every scrape of their knees echoing hollowly. Caitlyn nearly shrieked when a rat darted past her hand, its wet fur brushing her knuckles, but she bit down on the sound and kept moving.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the pipe sloped open. They tumbled one by one into a wide, arched tunnel, its walls slick with moisture. Jorin was already there, offering his hand when Caitlyn dropped down, steadying her.

At the very end they reached the metal staircase heading up another maintenance shaft.

"This leads straight to the genitor's office on the first floor." Nyx said turning to Caitlyn

"Perfect. When we up there, I'll head straight to that bridge. You get Vi, I'll cover your back"
"Just look where you're going. Booby-trapped remember" Nyx said

"Understood." Cait nodded

The metal stairs rattled faintly beneath their boots as they began to climb, the hollow clang swallowed quickly by the thick walls of the shaft. Rust smeared their hands when they gripped the rail, flakes falling into the darkness below. Jorin went first, his shoulders straining with the effort of forcing the stiff hatch at the top. It groaned against him, hinges protesting, then lifted just enough for him to squint through the crack.

A dim light filtered from above. Dust motes drifted lazily, disturbed only by the draft sneaking through. Jorin's voice came down in a rasping whisper

"Looks clear. Empty. Old office."

He shoved harder, opening it wide. The others crowded close as he hauled himself up into the room, boots crunching against a carpet of scattered papers. He paused, scanning, then gave a small nod.

One by one, they followed. Each climb was slower than the last, every movement deliberate, as though the silence above demanded respect.

Switch was last, her wiry frame slipping toward the opening with practiced ease. She pulled her bag tighter against her chest, breath short in the stale air.

Just as she braced her boot for the final push, a jagged piece of bent metal from the stair caught the strap of her satchel. The tug jerked her sideways hard enough that the flap tore open.

Something clinked.

Her eyes darted down in horror as a small nail bomb slipped free, tumbling end over end into the shaft. It struck the metal stairs on its way down each impact ricocheting through the darkness until the echoes became a booming announcement in the stillness.

They all froze.

"Fuck" Sevika whispered

Switch's knuckles whitened on the rail, breath caught in her throat. Caitlyn was the first to move, she swung her rifle toward the office door, shoulders taut, jaw clenched.

Switch looked up at Nyx, panic sharp in her wide brown eyes.

Nyx didn't say anything. She just reached down, grabbed a fistful of Switch's jacket, and hauled her up into the room with a swift, silent pull.

The shaft below groaned back into silence.

"I... think we're clear." Jorin's whisper cut through it, low and taut.

The room they emerged into bore the bones of forgotten industry. An old wooden desk sat crooked on its legs, papers spilled across the floor like a long-forgotten flood. Folders lay split open, their labels faded to illegibility. In the corner leaned a filing cabinet, its drawers half-hanging, swollen and warped with rot. A battered clock loomed on the wall, its cracked glass reflecting the faint light. The hands were stopped forever at 1:35, frozen on some ordinary day that had ended in dust.

The air was stale, thick with the smell of rust and moulding paper. Every step stirred the

debris, each shuffle of a boot marking their intrusion into a place time itself seemed to have abandoned.

Slowly they left the room. The hallway ahead was long and dim, lined with cracked tiles and patches of rust where pipes clung to the walls. The stench of oil and old chemicals lingered in the air.

Caitlyn was the first to move, loading her rifle and padding quietly into the gloom. Jorin followed close behind her. A flicker of movement caught their eyes, one of the men, pacing the far end of the hall with a rifle slung lazily in his hands. Too far for Jorin to close the distance without being seen. And Cait couldn't take him down without bringing attention to everyone.

Nyx stepped forward wordlessly, placing a hand on Caitlyn's shoulder. The faint hum of her energy rose around her, swirling like smoke. Her tattoos began to glow, a green haze that pulsed with her breath. Before the man could even register the shimmer, the energy lashed out, wrapping around his mouth and nose. His eyes went wide as he clawed at his face, but he only jerked once before collapsing silently to the ground.

The glow faded as Nyx retracted, her expression calm. She gave Cait a quick nod.

They pressed on. From a side corridor, a second guard appeared suddenly, his boots scuffing against the cracked tiles. He opened his mouth, but Jorin was faster. A sharp step forward and his fist shot out, connecting with the man's temple in a bone-jarring crack. The guard crumpled to the floor before he could make a sound.

Caitlyn continued, covering each step with her rifle. With the bridge now almost in reach, they passed in front of the wide window in the hallway overlooking the factory floor. Her gaze flicked across the open space then froze.

"Vi" Caitlyn gasped

Strapped to a chair, head slumped forward with crude device lashed to her chest, Cait wasn't sure if she was dead or alive.

Her chest hollowed, torn in two. She felt her knees buckle, her throat tightening, cold sweat sweeping her body.

Then Vi's head stirred, groggy, fighting the weight of whatever held her down. Relief punched through Caitlyn's ribs, a single tear breaking loose and tracking her cheek.

A hand pressed down gently on her shoulder. Nyx had stepped in beside her, voice low but steady "Focus. She's alive. Probably just drugged."

Caitlyn's gaze snapped back to the device, its wires and triggers jutting out like broken ribs. Her throat tightened. "That thing... that's a bomb."

"You'll have to take it out. One clean shot. It's the only way. You can do it...right?"

Panic flared. Caitlyn's grip faltered on her rifle, She couldn't...what if she missed. She wanted to argue, to admit the doubt clawing at her. But the words refused to come.

Instead, she swallowed hard, nodded once, and forced her hands steady. Then she turned to Sevika. "I'm counting on you"

"Don't miss" Sevika nodded

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Caitlyn went first. Her boots touched the edge of the bridge, careful and deliberate, one step placed directly in front of the other. The metal groaned faintly beneath her weight, old and brittle, every sound amplified in the silence. For now, luck was holding, though she wondered fleetingly how long it would last.

The others stayed back, waiting as she edged forward. She crouched low, then slowly lowered herself flat against the metal. The bridge shivered beneath her, a faint creak that made her freeze, pulse hammering. Ahead, through the gaps, she caught sight of movement, four men gathered, one of them unmistakably juiced up by shimmer or god knows what.

Breath shallow, Caitlyn eased her visor and lifted the rifle into position. She nestled the stock into her shoulder, finger brushing the trigger. Her heart thudded hard enough she swore it might echo, sweat beaded at her temple. The device gleamed in her sights, one perfect shot and this would be over. But if she missed....

Her finger trembled. She hesitated.

Behind her, Switch glanced at Nyx, brow furrowed in silent question. Nyx shrugged, tense, eyes fixed ahead. Then she stiffened. Her voice slipped out in a hiss of alarm.

"Shit."

Charlotte had walked in.

Caitlyn saw her too. Panic surged, her chance, her shot, gone. She tried to steady her aim, but the weight of Charoite's 's presence froze her hand.

One of the men near Charoite shifted, head tilting at just the wrong angle. His eyes caught a glint of reflected light off Caitlyn's visor. His face twisted in alarm.

"They're here!" the shout split the air like a gunshot.

Charoite moved instantly, a blur of silk and light launching straight toward Vi. But before she could reach her prize, Nyx's energy exploded outward, tendrils of shimmering force slamming into Charoite mid-motion and pinning her against the wall with bone-rattling impact. The tattoos across Nyx's skin burned with light as she pushed harder, teeth clenched. It was sheer force straining against force.

"Shoot her!" Nyx screamed.

Caitlyn snapped out of her paralysis. She twisted the chamber, switching ammo, and fired. The first shot clipped Charoite's shoulder, tearing fabric. The second cracked into her arm, the sound of her scream slicing through the factory floor. Caitlyn reloaded, breath ragged, lining up her next round but a shot whined past, grazing stone just beside Nyx's head.

One of Charoite's men on the floor below had turned his rifle skyward. Caitlyn's scope found him instantly, her trigger jerked, and he dropped but the distraction had cost them. Nyx's focus flickered for a split second, and with it her grip unraveled. Charoite hit the ground free and vanished into the shadows before any of them could react.

"Fuck!" Nyx spat, fury vibrating in her voice.

Switch hurled a nail bomb down the hallway at two men charging toward them. She ducked low, covering her ears. The explosion punched the air out of the corridor, the blast shredding tiles from the walls, shrapnel biting into flesh. Screams followed, cut short.

Sevika thundered toward Vi but a shimmer-enhanced brute stepped into her path, his eyes glassy, body twitching with unnatural strength. Caitlyn fired at him, but her bullets only carved shallow grooves across his skin.

Another gun roared from below. A massive man leveled a weapon not at them, but at the bridge itself. The suspension shrieked, bolts tearing loose. Metal buckled beneath Caitlyn's body, pitching her sideways. Her rifle spun out of her hands, tumbling down to the factory floor with a hollow clang. She clawed at the railing, catching herself at the last possible second. Now she dangled, her boots scraping at empty air.

"Cait!" Nyx shouted, starting forward

Sevika had no time to think. Two shimmer-thugs came at her at once. Her metal arm cracked like thunder, grabbing the first by the chest and slamming him against the wall so hard the plaster shattered. The second swung a pipe at her head, she caught it with her hand, twisted, and brought her augmented fist down through his skull with a crunch that

rattled the floor. Both bodies crumpled, unmoving.

On the floor below, Jorin saw his chance. He vaulted over debris, throwing himself at Vi's chair. Her head lolled lifelessly side to side, eyes half-shut, breaths shallow. He cursed under his breath and worked furiously at the straps, thick leather biting into his fingers. With one final yank, the bindings across her back snapped loose.

But it wasn't only her arms and torso bound. His heart sank as his eyes caught the crude device strapped across her chest, wires, and enough explosive liquid packed into a glass casing to take her and anyone near with her. Swallowing hard, Jorin's hands steadied, working the buckles and twisting the clamps free. Each second felt like an eternity, but finally the weight of the bomb came loose. He wrenched it away from her body and let it clatter carefully to the ground beside the chair.

"Got you," he muttered, voice tight with urgency. He slid her limp body forward, looping her arm over his shoulder. Her legs buckled immediately, feet dragging uselessly across the concrete. The drugs in her system left her heavy, unresponsive, her head falling against his shoulder as he half-lifted, half-dragged her away from the chair.

Movement flickered at the edge of his vision a rifle barrel raised. But before he could turn, a streak of Nyx's energy tore across the room, slicing the attacker clean off his feet. Jorin looked up. Nyx stood above, smiling at him, breathless but alive.

Then Caitlyn screamed.

Another section of the bridge gave way, the twisted metal shrieking as she slipped further, only her raw grip keeping her from the plunge. Nyx didn't hesitate. Energy shot from her again, wrapping Caitlyn's torso and yanking her back up onto solid ground. Cait hit the floor hard, gasping, alive. She ran for her rifle grabbing it with practiced ease and aiming at the next guy in the room.

Her gaze swept across the chaos, scanning desperately. Smoke curled through the factory and voices shouted through the din. Then she saw her. Limp, but alive, cradled in Jorin's arms, her bruised face slack but her chest still rising.

Relief surged like a jolt through Caitlyn's veins. Her heart leapt into her throat, threatening to choke her, but her legs were already moving. She vaulted over shattered bridge and leapt over a fallen body without hesitation.

"Vi!" her voice broke as she landed near them, the weight of the moment cracking through her calm exterior.

Vi stirred faintly at the sound of her voice, her lashes fluttering, and Cait had to fight the urge to fall apart then and there. She pressed her forehead against Vi's for the briefest second, grounding herself in that fragile proof of life before looking up at Jorin with sharp urgency.

"Is she...?"

“She’s alive,” Jorin said quickly, though his own arms trembled from the strain of holding her. “Drugged, but alive. Go...I can handle this.”

Nyx let out a sharp breath of relief but then pain ripped across her shoulder. A blade, quick and cold. She spun instinctively, moving faster than thought, catching her attacker by the throat. The man barely had time to register shock before she twisted, bones snapping like dry twigs. His body dropped limply to the floor.

But Nyx didn’t move.

She froze, staring down at what she had done. Her energy sputtered and retracted, the glow vanishing from her skin. For a heartbeat the battle noise seemed far away, muffled by the horrified stillness that rooted her in place as she watched the palms of her trembling hands.

From the top of the spiral staircase in the corner Switch’s eyes locked on the massive table below. Vi’s gauntlets gleamed under the harsh lights. For a split second she hesitated, then bolted down leaping the final flight of steps and hurling herself forward. Gunfire cracked through the air, bullets whipping past her ears, but she didn’t slow.

A hulking guy stepped directly into her path. Switch skidded to a halt, eyes wide, chest pounding like a drum. She froze, then, in a blur past her shoulder, a bullet split the air and punched clean through his forehead. The brute crumpled instantly.

Switch whipped her head around. A few meters away stood Caitlyn, rifle still raised, smoke curling from the barrel.

“Go!” Caitlyn barked.

No time wasted, Switch sprinted, diving for the table. In one heartbeat her arms slid into the gauntlets, metal locking around her forearms. The cores hummed to life, thrumming with raw energy. Sparks of Hextech light pulsed, and Switch’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“Woowow....Now that’s fucking cool!” she breathed, grin tugging her lips.

Spinning around, she caught sight of Sevika pinned against the wall by her throat, the shimmer-crazed brute snarling in her face. With a yell, Switch hurled herself at him. The gauntlets hissed powering up as her body got propelled into the air. She swung wide and smashed a gauntlet across his jaw, the impact cracking like thunder. He flew sideways, crashing into a heap.

Switch landed hard but steady, chest heaving, adrenaline blazing through her veins. “Yes!” she shouted, fists pumping the air. “Did you guys see that?!”

The smile never had time to fade.

A ripple brushed past Nyx, like the air itself had buckled under sudden pressure. Her instinct screamed, but too late. Charoite was already there. She materialized behind Switch in a blur, one hand gripping the girl's chin, wrenching her head back, the other pressing cold steel to her spine.

"Nyx," Charoite yelled, eyes finding hers across the chaos. Her lips curled into a smile sharp enough to cut. "I'll send your regards to your brother."

"No" Nyx gasped

The gunshot cracked.

Switch jerked violently. A strange tightness coiled in her lungs. Her breath caught, ragged and shallow. Her eyes widened, body locking in place. Legs buckled hard beneath her. She crumpled like a marionette with its strings cut, collapsing onto her knees. The gauntlets hit the floor with a heavy thud as she choked on air that wouldn't come.

Caitlyn's scream tore the air. In a single motion she slammed a chamber switch, breath sharp in her throat, and fired. The bullet punched into Charoite's back, making her stagger, her face twisting with pain. Cait reloaded and fired again. But before anyone could close in, she bolted, vanishing into smoke and steel shadows.

Across the room Jorin watched in horror as his stomach felt like someone's punched a hole in it.

Nyx darted forward, catching Switch, pulling her into her arms before she could hit the ground. She held her tight, cradling her face.

"It's okay... I got you," Nyx whispered, her voice trembling, tears already streaking her cheeks.

Switch's eyes fluttered, glassy with pain. "D—did you... see me?" she gurgled, blood spilling over her chin.

Nyx's hand shook as she brushed the blood from her lips, forcing a smile through the ache breaking her chest apart. She nodded fiercely. "I saw you, baby. You were brilliant. So brave."

For the briefest moment, a weak smile flickered across Switch's face. Her chest hitched once, then stilled. Her eyes rolled back, and a long, rattling breath escaped her lips.

"No...no, no, no..." Nyx rocked her, clutching her tighter, sobs shaking through her body as the world raged around them. "Breathe baby...Breathe damn it!" she yelled shaking her lifeless body.

Sevika released the guy she just choked, his body hitting the floor with a dull thud "Fuck!" She exhaled looking at Switch, her brows furrowed as something tugged deep in her chest.

Outside the roar of engines shook the cracked windows. Tires screech, doors slam. An army of Enforcers in full gear flooded out, rifles at the ready, boots pounding against the broken concrete. One of the Enforcers turned big heavy reflector lights on top of the vehicle pointing them towards the factory. They switched on illuminating the space like it suddenly dawned.

“Move! Lock down the perimeter!” the Deputy Sheriff bellowed, voice cutting through the night like a whip.

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Charoite, her body betraying her, staggered against the wall. She pulled back the sleeve revealing her veins blazing with sickly pink glow under her skin, crawling like fire through glass. She bit back a cry, hand clutching at her ribs, and forced herself forward to the lever on the wall. Metal scraped as she yanked it down then she stumbled, sliding down the wall.

On the factory floor, a guttural clang echoed. One by one, massive hatches grind open, their steel doors slamming against the wall. From the shadows, hulking mechanical sentries unfold, dozens of legs snapping into place as their bodies shudder with life. Bright yellow liquid bubbling through the tubes powering them up. The floor vibrated with their weight.

Heads snap toward them.

“SHIT,” Sevika muttered under her breath. She spat to the side powering up her arm. “Time to go.”

But Nyx didn’t move. Her chest heaved, grief burning into rage. The air itself hummed around her. Her pupils narrowed, hair whipped back as if caught in a storm only she could feel. Power rippled outward, crackling, twisting, alive.

The first sentry lunged, metal shrieking, ground shaking as it's metallic legs pound to the floor. Nyx raised her arms, her energy snatched it mid-charge, its tons of steel and gears lifted like it was nothing more than a child’s toy. With a strangled scream, she hurled it across the room. It smashed against the far wall, legs snapping, sparks exploding.

Another reared, and another. Nyx’s power spiraled higher, energy flooding the chamber in blinding waves. One by one, she tore into the machines, flipping them, slamming them, smashing them into heaps of shrieking metal. The air tasted of smoke and burning oil.

Caitlyn watched, frozen. Her breath caught. The precision-trained officer in her should have been cataloguing threats, calculating escape routes. Instead, she was caught in the collision of awe and horror, watching raw grief reshape the world through Nyx’s hands.

Enforcers poured in from every side, shouting, rifles snapping fire, but their bullets vanished into chaos. One sentry careened toward Cait, Vi, and Jorin. Its back hissed, a chem tank glowing like a beacon. Caitlyn steadied her grip, reloaded her chamber and fired.

The bullet found the tank, the glass cracking. She fired again and again until it finally ruptured with a violent hiss, spraying volatile yellow liquid across the floor. It sizzled where it landed, eating through metal grating. The machine convulsed, crashed down in pieces.

Still they came. Enforcers shouted over the storm, cut off by a screech of rending metal as Nyx tore the last sentrie free from the earth itself.

With one final scream, she hurled it upward. Glass shattered as the machine burst through the skylight, fragments of steel raining down like hail.

Outside, the Deputy Sheriff froze mid-command.

The ruined machine crashed into the asphalt at his feet, twitching, sparking, smoke belching from its broken shell. His men stumbled back in shock, weapons wavering.

Inside, silence followed the shattering.

Nyx crumpled to her knees, spent. Tears streamed down her face, cutting through grime sweat and blood. Her shoulders heaved, every sob tearing loose the strength left in her body.

Cait didn't hesitate. She pushed towards Jorin, pulling Vi into her arms. Vi groaned, half-conscious, her head slumping against Cait's shoulder. Cait pressed her close, jaw tightening. "Go" she said to Jorin

Jorin crossed the short distance lowering himself beside Nyx. He drew her into his arms, steady and quiet, letting her slump into him, head collapsing onto his shoulder. His big hand cupped the back of her head, grounding her as she shook, spent and hollow.

For a moment, through the haze Caitlyn's gaze locked with Sevika's. The older woman leaned against a crumbling beam, blood slick on her arm, her chest rising in shallow pulls. What passed between them was jagged and fleeting, the grim acknowledgment of survivors, the hollow knowledge of what this fight had cost, and a despair neither dared show to anyone else. Sevika's eyes flickered with something like regret, then hardened to stone again. Caitlyn swallowed, and the moment fractured like glass.

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Dawn crept reluctantly into Piltover, the sky heavy with swollen grey clouds that smothered the sun. A fine drizzle clung to the air, beading on rooftops and dripping from the iron rails. Umbrellas bloomed across the streets as people hurried along, their footsteps splashing in shallow puddles. An old car rattled past, its horn blaring sharply at a cluster of pedestrians lingering too close to the curb, the sound echoing against the damp stone facades. The city stirred awake, sluggish and sullen beneath the weight of the rain.

Nyx stood at the tall window of the Kiramman mansion, watching the rain cascade down the glass in silver streaks. The storm outside mirrored the one within her, dark and relentless. She didn't move when she felt Jorin step up behind her—only breathed in the quiet warmth of his presence as his hands traced gently down her arms. She let herself lean back into his chest, her tension yielding as he wrapped his arms around her in a protective embrace. A soft kiss brushed against her hair, steady and grounding.

"You haven't lost him," he murmured.

Her voice cracked low, laced with weariness. "You don't know that."

"They need him," he said, meaning her brother, and perhaps more than that.

Nyx exhaled, long and heavy, before turning to face him. His lips found her forehead, tender, as her fingers curled into the belt loops of his trousers, clinging, melting into the comfort of him.

"I'm gonna burn her to the ground," she whispered, fire threading through the quiet.

Jorin's arms tightened around her, voice certain, steady.

"I wouldn't expect anything less."

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Vi stirred faintly, a low grunt slipping out as her lashes fluttered against the light coming from the bedside lamp. The IV dripped steady, her arm tethered to the metal stand at her bedside.

Cait lay curled against her, head resting on her chest, her arm draped across her waist, fingers brushing idle patterns over her skin as if to anchor her there.

When Vi's eyes cracked open, heavy with exhaustion. Caitlyn lifted her head, a small smile curving her lips.

"Hey... easy," she whispered sitting up and reached out, her knuckles gliding gently along her cheek.

Vi groaned and dragged a hand over her face, wincing at the dull throb still pounding in her skull. But when her eyes finally focused on Caitlyn, the ache seemed to loosen. A crooked grin tugged at her lips.

"Now that's a much better view," she rasped.

Caitlyn's chest loosened with a soft laugh, but before she could answer, Vi frowned faintly.

"What happened?"

"It can wait," she murmured, smoothing her hand down Vi's arm.

Vi's smile turned stubborn, her voice rough but teasing. "Mmmm...alright....But this can't."

With lazy strength she tugged at Caitlyn's arm, pulling her down into a kiss, slow, lingering, a little clumsy but warm. When they finally broke apart, she reached up, brushing a stray lock of blue hair from Caitlyn's face, her thumb tracing the curve of her cheek as though memorizing her.

Caitlyn smiled at the intensity of her gaze. "What?"

Vi's grin softened into something raw and honest.

"Just making sure you're real."

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