

## Chapter 4

The back room of the club was a concrete box with one flickering bulb and the faint stench of blood, liquor, and ozone. The kind of place where bad things happened and worse things got decided.

Crates were stacked haphazardly along one wall, half-open and leaking packing straw. A row of dented metal filing cabinets leaned at odd angles, their drawers barely able to close. In the corner sat a ragged old sofa, its stuffing poking out through cigarette burns and a suspicious dark stain no one talked about.

At the center of it all, trying desperately to pass for authority, was a battered wooden desk. Papers spilled across its surface like a bureaucratic landslide, weighed down by a chipped glass bottle half-full of cheap liquor. A crooked lamp buzzed dimly over the mess, and the ashtray beside it overflowed with cigarette butts and probably few teeth someone forgot to take with them.

The runner sat in the leather chair, jaw locked, sweat gleaming on his forehead. His right hand was a mess, bruised, swollen, fingers jutting out at wrong angles like snapped twigs.

Kneeling in front of him, one of his guys, wiry, pale, knuckles like gravel was calmly snapping each dislocated finger back into place.

Pop.

“Fuck!” the runner yelped, whole body flinching. “Give a warning next time, you sadistic prick!”

“Keep yapping and I’ll twist the next one for fun,” the guy muttered, deadpan, not even looking up.

The runner jerked his head toward the bouncer slouched in the corner, cradling his busted shoulder like it was glass. He glared at the floor like he was trying to set it on fire.

“You were supposed to be my insurance, yeah?” the runner snapped, voice sharp and shrill. “Not get folded by a pint-sized girl with too much confidence!”

The bouncer grumbled without lifting his head. “How the fuck did you get folded by two small girls?”

The runner lunged like he was ready to kill him right there, but another snap from the medic sent a scream tearing out of his throat as he crumpled back down onto the crate.

“Fuuuuck!... Just find them!”

The bouncer spat on the floor. “Where the fuck am I supposed to start? They could be halfway to topside by now.”

The last finger was set with a dull crunch. The runner stood, face slick with sweat, and lit a cigarette with trembling fingers. One long drag, exhale, calm... then he moved like lightning.

He grabbed the bouncer by the throat and slammed him against the wall, cigarette still burning between his teeth.

“I don’t give a fuck where they are. Turn the city inside out if you have to.”  
He leaned in close, smoke curling between his words. “Bring. Them. To. Me.”

He let go with a shove that left the bouncer wheezing.

“Next time you let a pair of girls get the jump on us...”

He didn’t finish the sentence. He didn’t have to.

The bouncer sagged against the wall, gasping, rubbing his throat. The runner didn’t spare him another glance.

He flicked ash off the tip of his cigarette, then reached into the drawer of a wooden desk pulling out a metal case with a cracked purple seal. Inside, nestled in black foam, was a small injector filled with sickly violet shimmer.

He stared at it for a beat, jaw tight, eyes cold. Then he jabbed it into the side of his neck.

The hiss of pressure was followed by a violent shudder. His body jerked as the shimmer surged through him, muscles tensing, veins lighting up faintly under his skin like molten wire. The pain disappeared. The twitch in his fingers steadied. His breathing evened out.

He rolled his neck once, then slipped his cigarette back between his lips and exhaled slowly. The heat was back in his blood.

“Fuckin’ hate this shit,” he muttered.

He pulled on his jacket adjusting the collar with a flick. His fingers, just minutes ago a broken wreck, flexed like nothing had happened.

He turned for the door, the flickering bulb above casting sharp shadows across his face.

"Now I gotta clean up this whole fuckin' mess myself," he growled, voice low and venomous. "Unbelievable."

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The dumpling shack had emptied out with the late hour, the cook long gone quiet behind his grease-streaked counter. The flickering lantern above their table cast soft gold over bent chopsticks, a half-eaten meal, and a trio of tired souls tucked into the corner of the city that never really slept.

Caitlyn had drifted somewhere between wakefulness and dreams, head resting against Vi's chest, legs drawn up on the bench. Her breath was slow, even, her pulse just beneath Vi's fingers where they stroked gently over the side of her neck. Vi's free hand cradled a glass of whatever passed for strong drink in this part of Zaun, probably flammable, definitely illegal.

Gearhand was hunched across from her, arms covered in old burns and fresh bandages. He was halfway into a story about an underground dive bar where a jazz player lit his trumpet on fire mid-song and nearly took out the front row. Vi chuckled, low and warm, careful not to jostle Caitlyn.

"Whole place smelled like singed hair and whiskey for weeks," Gearhand muttered, smirking behind his cigarette.

Vi took a sip from her glass. "Sounds like a Tuesday."

Caitlyn stirred then, shifting slightly. Vi adjusted her grip, pressed a kiss into her hairline. She didn't open her eyes, just mumbled, "You're loud when you think you're whispering."

"You love it," Vi murmured back, still stroking along the edge of her neck.

Then... ping.

A soft metallic tone from inside her jacket.

Vi froze. Her expression sharpened in an instant, the softness in her eyes turning to focused. She pulled the small disc tracker from her pocket.

"He's on the move," she said.

Caitlyn blinked groggily, eyes fluttering open. "What..?"

Vi kissed her hair again, quick, grounding. "Cupcake, I need you and Gear to head back."

Caitlyn pushed upright, still foggy. "No... wait. You are not going after him alone."

"Not a request, Cait." Vi stood, already pulling on her jacket. "You're running on empty. You've got a gash on your head and busted up arm. Let me handle this."

Gearhand stubbed out his cigarette, frowning. "Vi...this is dumb. You shouldn't be doing this alone. What if they clock you?"

Vi tossed some coins on the table and took another sip of her drink. "Then I'll make new friends."

"Vi..." Caitlyn started, but Vi cut her off gently.

"I've kept my own back safe longer than either of you've known me. And you are not walking the lanes alone at this hour." She turned, brushing a thumb over Caitlyn's cheek. "I'll be fine."

That earned a weak glare. Vi grinned.

Gearhand looked like he wanted to argue more but thought better of it. He just grunted and pulled on his hood up.

"Make sure she gets home safe." Vi said and turned to Caitlyn again, kissed her, soft and brief, like a promise, then touched her face, fingers sliding behind her ear.

"I'll be back before you know it," she said, voice low.

"Please be careful." Caitlyn whispered, gripping her sleeve.

Vi winked stepping back pulling her hood up, the edge shadowing her eyes, as she stepped off the curb. The glow from the overhead lantern caught the curve of her jaw and the faint bruising along her cheek as she slipped between two rust-streaked alleyways and

disappeared into the murky blue-green haze of Zaun.

Caitlyn stood frozen for a moment, watching her go. Her gaze tracked Vi's figure weaving into the night, steady, purposeful, head low, hands in pockets, until the crowd swallowed her whole.

Lanterns swung, steam hissed, voices rose and fell around her, but all she could see was that empty space where Vi had been.

A touch on her shoulder made her flinch.

"Come on," Gearhand said softly.

She turned toward him, blinking like she'd been pulled from underwater.

His expression was unreadable, but calm. Steady. He didn't press, just gave a faint nod and turned toward the walkway that led back toward the safer streets above.

Caitlyn hesitated for only a moment longer, then followed, her steps slow at first, boots tapping over metal grates slick with condensation. But her eyes kept drifting back over her shoulder, toward the shadows where Vi had vanished.

And in the silence between their footfalls, Zaun pulsed around them, steam and lights, flickering like a heartbeat under skin.

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Vi slipped through the crowd with her hood low, boots scuffing over uneven steel plating and damp cobbles slick with factory runoff. Steam hissed from broken vents, casting bursts of warmth into the night air. The glow from the streetlamps above flickered intermittently, most choked by soot, others long dead, leaving pools of shadow that moved with the city's breath.

She paused at a corner, ducking under a rusted scaffold as a pair of drunk workers stumbled past, laughing too loud and smelling of oil and rotgut. When they were gone, she stepped into the shadows and drew out the disc.

The smooth brass casing felt cold against her fingers. Vi flipped it open, revealing the humming blue at its center. The inner ring spun once, then locked, glowing gently as it pointed toward the alley on her left.

She clicked her tongue. “Still moving...”

A faint pulse of light flared across one of the outer runes, whispering a direction, northeast, deeper into the lanes. She snapped it shut and slipped it back into her coat.

The noise of the upper walkway faded behind her. Ahead, the city narrowed, tighter passages, lower ceilings, rust-covered ladders bolted to the walls. Clotheslines swayed in the shadows, strung between leaning support beams like veins. The scent of burnt grease and damp stone thickened.

Neon signs flickered in green and pink, buzzing above shuttered shops and half-closed gambling dens. A pair of women passed by, faces painted in glowing ink. A lanky chem-punk dealer leaned against a wall with wires threading from his nose into a glowing device on his chest.

Vi moved past them without a word.

Every footstep was deliberate now. Quiet. Measured.

Zaun was different at night, not just darker, but older. Quieter. Like it was holding its breath.

Somewhere up ahead, that little rat was still running. And Vi wasn't far behind.

She spotted him just as he slipped out of the side entrance of a bar, pulling his collar up and glancing around like a weasel looking for a hawk.

Vi didn't move. She leaned against a pipe stack across the lane, letting the shadows swallow her. Watching.

He was jittery. Boots scraping quick over pavement. Eyes darting. He cut across the narrow street and disappeared into one of the narrower side lanes, the kind built more by erosion and neglect than intention.

Vi waited. Then she pushed off the pipe and followed, quiet as breath, keeping her distance just close enough to catch movement, just far enough to not spook him. Her jacket brushed the wall beside her, damp and peeling. Somewhere overhead, a vent fan clicked slowly, like a ticking clock about to give out.

The runner didn't notice.

But Vi missed something.

Two houses down. A shadow shifted.

Not loud. Not clumsy. A whisper on the edge of silence.

High above, crouched between the pipes of an old service walkway, a figure moved in tandem with her. Close enough to see, but just far enough to remain unseen.

Emerald eyes caught the faintest light from a tinted lamp. They narrowed slightly as they watched Vi move below.

Vi turned a corner. She ducked her head lower and picked up the pace. She was gaining on him.

But now... so was someone else.

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The door of Kiramman house clicked open with a quiet groan, and Caitlyn stepped inside, boots muffled by the polished floorboards. The scent hit her first, lavender, lemon, and something astringent. Cleaning agents. Sharp and fresh, scrubbed into every surface until not a trace of blood or chaos remained. Or almost.

The mess from the night before was gone. Furniture upright, broken glass and wooden shards removed, the rug repositioned neatly beneath the sitting room table. Even the books had been stacked again on the shelf, though in the wrong order. But the broken banister still leaned against the stair rail, and bullet holes pocked the plaster on every wall small, ragged reminder that something violent had once lived here.

Zaun's air still clung to the back of her throat, thick with smoke, damp, grease, and rust. The sour sting of burnt chemicals and alley oil hadn't left her lungs yet.

Gearhand hedged up the stairs then stopped halfway turning over his shoulder.

"It's been a rough day. You should rest."

"I will. You too."

"Nite"

"Good night." murmured, barely audible, then after a beat "Oh and...Gearhand...thank you."

"Don't mention it." he gave a slight nod before disappearing down the corridor to his room.

Caitlyn turned toward the stairs but paused as a low voice drifted from the library calm, measured, unmistakably her father's.

"Caitlyn? Is that you, sweetheart?"

She stepped to the threshold and leaned inside. He was still in his chair, spectacles perched halfway down his nose, a book resting across his lap, though he hadn't turned the page in some time.

"Yes, Papa," she answered gently, crossing the room. She bent to kiss his cheek, catching the familiar scent of pipe tobacco and peppermint tea. "You ought to be in bed. It's late."

"I rather think I might," he murmured, peering up at her with tired eyes. "Is everything quite alright?"

"I'm fine. Just tired."

"And Vi?"

"She's still out. Following a lead."

His brow arched slightly. "Alone?"

Caitlyn exhaled, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Yes."

He gave a slow, knowing nod, then rose carefully, placing a kiss against her forehead. "I'm sure she knows what she's doing," he said softly, his hand brushing her arm with quiet reassurance. But as his gaze lingered, he caught the wound at her temple and gently moved her hair aside. "You've had trouble."

"It's nothing. Just a scrape."

He frowned but let it go. "Then do us both a favour and rest."

Caitlyn offered a faint smile, touched his hand once in return, and slipped out without another word.

She stepped into her bedroom and shut the door behind her. The quiet inside was deafening. Moonlight slanted across the pale bed linens. Her fingers moved automatically,



unclipping the belt, peeling away corset and the shirt. Each piece fell to the floor with a whisper.

She didn't stop until she was bare.

The hot water hit her skin like a breath she hadn't known she was holding. It ran down her back in clean rivulets, washing away smoke, blood, Zaun.

But not the ache.

Never the ache.

She tilted her head back, eyes closed, letting the steam gather in her lungs. Her arms wrapped around herself, exhausted, tired. Utterly, utterly tired.

And Vi was still out there.

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The storefront looked half condemned rusted signage, soot-black windows, and a flickering bulb that buzzed like it was ready to die. But the side alley told a different story.

Vi crouched behind a crooked pipe stack as the runner slipped through a narrow gap between buildings. He tapped twice on a metal side door, sharp, specific. A moment later, a sliding latch scraped open just enough for someone to peek through. A grunt. A clunk. Then the door creaked wider, and he vanished inside.

Vi didn't move.

A nearby pipe hissed steam, cloaking the alley in a soft, industrial hush. Her breath fogged faintly in the still air. She shifted her weight soundlessly, head tilting to trace the strip of light glowing from a window one floor up. Shadows passed behind it, one, then another. Conversation, too muffled to catch.

She couldn't follow through the door. Not without being seen. Vi's gaze lifted.

A rusted fire escape spiraled up the wall, skeletal and half-eaten by time. One metal awning jutted out beneath it, slick with residue and dripping steam. Her fingers twitched.

Easy pickings.

She pulled up her hood and moved, quiet, quick. Stepped onto a broken crate and scanned upward.

Above her, tucked into the deeper shadows of a ledge, a figure lingered, still and silent. Emerald eyes caught the faintest glint of light.

The moment Vi looked up, the figure slipped out of sight, quick, fluid, and silent as smoke.

Vi's gaze swept past, never catching the movement.

She vaulted onto the awning's lip. The sheet metal groaned faintly beneath her boots. She paused, tense, then climbed higher, hand over hand up the rusted fire escape. Her fingers found purchase where bolts hadn't yet given way. Her boots skimmed slick brackets. Zaun climbing standards.

At the top, she crossed a narrow pipe and crouched low behind the ledge of the neighboring rooftop, just across from the upper-floor window. Close enough to see in, but far enough to stay out of sight.

Vi stilled, eyes narrowed, ears tuned for every scrap of sound.

Inside, the runner paced like a caged dog, arms flailing. Two others were there, one near the door, the other lit by a low amber glow from a desk lamp.

"...Now wait a minute...I'm the one who got my fingers broken, bleeding and barely standing."

"Bleeding and barely standing," Charoite echoed, voice as smooth as lacquered wood. "So, the part where you couldn't keep your mouth shut and led two enforcers directly to my operation... that was just a happy accident, was it?"

"Don't pin this on me, Charoite," he snapped. "I'm not the one who fucked up and left him breathing, they didn't clean up the mess and you know it."

She stood just out of the light, cigarette holder glinting as she exhaled slow and deliberate. Her purple hair swept into a coiled chignon, pinned with surgical precision. Corset sharp, satin black beneath a structured waistcoat. She looked like she belonged on a runway, if that runway were lit by blood and secrets.

Her heels clicked as she stepped forward. The desk between them was surgical, neat vials,

an open ledger, a burning lamp.

"You were paid, Klem," she said, calm but cutting, "very well, to do one thing. Move product. Quietly. Predictably. Not to bleed all over Zaun like a gunshot pig. And certainly not to bring Caitlyn Kiramman and her little brawler girlfriend sniffing at my doors."

"You know better than to come here."

Klem rubbed the back of his neck, eyes skittering sideways.

Charoite tapped ash into a crystal tray, the motion elegant and cold. "Do you know how much it costs to move an entire network?" she asked softly. "To pay off guards, reroute shipments, dismantle labs, bury half a dozen distribution points?"

She didn't wait for an answer.

"I'll tell you...more than you're worth."

Klem's jaw flapped. "C'mon, Charoite. I can fix this, just give me..."

She raised a hand. The room fell still.

"Give you what? You think I'm gonna let you fix it?" she said, tilting her head slightly. "No, darling. That window's closed."

"Don't do this... Your father..."

"My father would break both your arms and tie a rock to your ankles," she snapped. "Which, frankly, I'm still considering."

She turned her back on him and crossed to the far wall, rolling down a large city map pinned in segments, red lines slicing through key arteries.

Vi crept a little closer along the roof, careful not to draw breath too loud.

The map caught her eye. Familiar outline. But her focus locked onto one red-marked location and her blood went cold. She knew about the place. Or rather told about it when she was still a kid.

An old mine shaft. Buried deep in the Sump chasms. Sealed off years ago, unstable, flooded, too dangerous for use. Or so she thought.

Charoite tapped her cigarette holder at a point near the docks. "We move in two days. Burn this place once we're clear. No trace."

Klem balked. "Two days? That's not enough time!"

"It wasn't a question," she said, voice turning glacial.

Vi shifted again, trying to see more.

Her boot pressed on a loose bolt. It slipped, fell.

Sharp, Echoing. Too loud.

Vi dropped, instantly flat.

Inside, Charoite's head snapped toward the window. Her eyes scanned the rooftop. Cold. Calculating.

A rat skittered across Vi's leg. She didn't flinch.

Charoite watched. Saw the rat vanish across the tiles and turned back towards the room.. Her expression didn't soften.

She crossed to a drawer beneath the desk and opened it with a soft click.

From within, she drew out a slim device, brass-capped at both ends, the center a clear glass chamber sealed tight. Inside swirled a dense silver liquid, gleaming with an oily sheen. It pulsed faintly, like it had a heartbeat of its own.

Vi's eyes widened.

Charoite turned, her nails tapped against the glass, sharp and thoughtful.

"Klem," she said without turning.

"This is your last chance," she said, silk over steel. "Two days. Move everything. No loose ends. If you screw this up, I don't just cut you loose...I make sure you never existed."

Klem swallowed hard.

Charoite smiled. It didn't reach her eyes.

She tossed him the glass container. He fumbled, nearly dropped it, then caught it with trembling hands, sweat practically dripping down his temple.

She turned back toward the window one last time, not quite looking at Vi, but enough to send ice crawling down her spine.

Vi didn't move, didn't breathe.

Not until Charoite finally turned away. Only then did she exhale the breath she'd been holding.

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Hours later Vi eased the door shut behind her, the click quiet in the stillness of the house. The air inside was cooler, cleaner, and dim, save for a single glow spilling faintly from under the study door. Her steps were slow, shoulders sore from the past 48 hours and the tension she hadn't quite shaken.

Light flickered behind the doorframe, soft and rhythmic. Not just a lamp. The familiar bluish pulse of the Spectrographic Viewer. Vi smirked.

Of course.

She stepped into the doorway and leaned her shoulder against the frame, arms crossed. Caitlyn sat with her back to her, bent slightly over the circular screen, its brass frame catching glints of light. Her hair was pulled back loosely, a few strands escaping to fall against her cheek. She hadn't noticed her.

Vi tilted her head. "So," she said, voice casual and low, "this thing ever gonna tell you the meaning of life, or are we still stuck on floor plans and family secrets?"

Caitlyn jolted upright with a soft gasp, the slide tray on the viewer clattering as she spun around. Relief flooded her features, almost melting them, and before Vi could take another step, she was already across the room and wrapping her arms tightly around her.

"Vi!" Her voice was thick with breath and emotion. "You're back...I was worried sick. It's nearly morning."

Vi let her chin rest on Caitlyn's shoulder for a second, her hands settling at the curve of

Caitlyn's waist. "I know," she murmured, brushing a kiss into her hair. "I'm fine."

She leaned back slightly and gave her a crooked smile.

"But right now, I really need a shower before I start peeling off in layers."

Caitlyn wrinkled her nose, laughing as she cupped Vi's jaw. "You smell like something died on you."

Vi arched a brow. "Wow. Good to know I'm still your delicate flower."

Caitlyn grinned, undeterred. "I still love you."

Vi gave her a mock-serious look, then spun her around by the shoulders. "I should fucking hope so."

Caitlyn was already laughing, the sound bouncing off the quiet walls as Vi nudged her toward the stairs.

"Go warm the bed while I'm scrubbing off half of the Undercity." Vi's hands slipped to Caitlyn's hips, then cheekily down to give her bum a nudge up the stairs.

"Rude" Cait giggled over her shoulder

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The room was quiet but not silent. Rain tapped softly against the windowpane, a slow, steady rhythm that filled the dark like breath. The warmth of the bed held back the chill, but the sheets were heavy and the blankets drawn close.

Caitlyn lay facing the wall, her back to Vi. Still. Awake.

Vi knew the difference between sleep and silence. She didn't say anything at first, just slid closer, curling her body gently around Caitlyn's, resting a hand on her stomach.

"You're thinking too loud," Vi murmured, lips brushing the shell of her ear.

Caitlyn laced let out a slow breath. Not quite a sigh. Not quite a response either.

Vi pressed a little closer, spooning her, thumb tracing small circles through the fabric of her

shirt. "Talk to me, Cupcake."

She paused. Then, very softly "It's Gearhand." Her voice was barely a whisper. "What he did to that man tonight.... I can't get it out of my head."

Vi didn't move, didn't rush her. Caitlyn's hand came up to rest over Vi's, grounding herself.

"I know that man probably deserved it," Caitlyn continued. "But I keep seeing his fingers. The way he screamed. And Gearhand didn't even blink. He just... kept going. Like it didn't cost him anything."

She turned her head slightly over her shoulder, eyes catching Vi's in the low light. "How are you not haunted by that?"

Vi exhaled slowly. She tucked her nose into Caitlyn's hair and spoke against her skin, voice low and rough like gravel softened by time.

"Because I've seen worse," she said. "And because I know what grief does to people when they've got no one left to scream for them."

Caitlyn blinked. Her throat bobbed.

"Gearhand's not a bad guy" Vi continued, slow and steady. "He didn't break that guy because he wanted to. He did it because he's got a grave back home. Because the people who did it think they could get away with it. And because in places like the Undercity, the only justice you get is the kind you take with your own hands. It's how things are done down there Cait. It's not brutality, it's survival. It's also a message to keep away from his other kid or they will have to go through him first."

She kissed the side of Caitlyn's neck. "Doesn't make it right. Just makes it real."

Caitlyn turned, slowly, until they were face to face. Her fingers came up to Vi's cheek, brushing a small scar there, thumb lingering at the edge of her jaw.

"How did you stay... you?" she whispered. "After everything you've been through. How did you not let it rot you from the inside out?"

Vi looked at her for a long beat, eyes shadowed but clear.

"I didn't," she said quietly. "Not all the way. There were days I was angry enough to tear the world down just to see if anyone noticed. But then I found people worth holding on to. My

sister...and I found you.”

Her hand came up to rest over Caitlyn’s heart.

“She’s the one who kept me going behind bars.... And ever since she’s gone...You keep me from falling through those cracks.”

Caitlyn’s breath hitched. She pulled Vi close, pressing her forehead to hers.

“I don’t want to lose myself again, Violet” she murmured. “Not to all of this.”

“You won’t,” Vi whispered. “Not while I’m around.”

Caitlyn leaned in and pressed a kiss to Vi’s lips, slow at first, almost searching. But when Vi kissed her back, something loosened between them. Like the tension of the day, the blood and grit and ghosts, began to dissolve in the warmth of each other.

She shifted, gently pushing Vi onto her back, her thigh sliding between Vi’s legs as she moved over her. Their mouths met again, deeper now, and Vi’s fingers threaded into Caitlyn’s hair with a quiet exhale. One kiss followed another, slower, more deliberate.

Her other hand drifted down Caitlyn’s back, curving along the line of her spine. Her touch lingered at the small of it before wrapping around, coaxing, preparing to roll her beneath her.

But just as she shifted, Caitlyn broke the kiss with a quiet murmur against her lips.

“Mmm....No.”

The word was soft but firm, final in the most loving way.

She moved with grace and quiet strength, sliding Vi’s hand from her back and pinning it gently to the pillow above her head. Then she kissed her again, not giving her room to argue.

She stilled beneath her, heat simmering just under her skin. For once, Vi didn’t try to take back control. She let Caitlyn lead, surrendering to the certainty in her touch, the reverence in her lips.

Caitlyn’s lips trailed away from her mouth, across the curve of her jaw, the angle of her throat. She kissed down the line of Vi’s collarbone, her breath warm, her hand slipping



under the blanket and then beneath Vi's shirt pulling it over and disregarding it on the floor.

Vi's head tilted back against the pillow, her eyelids fluttering shut. Her hand cupped the back of Caitlyn's neck, the other splayed wide over her back, fingers curling in her hair as Caitlyn's lips moved lower in quiet devotion, disappearing beneath the covers with the same determination she carried into every battle.

Beneath, Caitlyn moved like water, smooth, patient, precise. She didn't rush. She didn't want to. Every inch of Vi's skin she touched, she treated like something precious, something earned. Her hands moved over bruises, old scars and new scrapes. Her lips followed like a trail of healing pressed into a map of damage the world had left behind.

And Vi's breath hitched from the overwhelming, aching gentleness of it.

No one had ever touched her with so much love and adoration, disarming her completely, leaving her bare for taking.

Caitlyn's hand traced a slow path along Vi's side, fingers gliding over ribs feeling the rise and fall of her breath, then higher brushing just beneath the curve of her breast before her palm settled fully over it. And then her lips followed kissing the swell of it, slowly, delicately. Her lips brushed across the skin with aching patience.

Vi gasped, trembling beneath her, a soft sound breaking from her throat, her back arching into the warmth, chest rising to meet the touch that sent shivers skipping down her spine.

Caitlyn pressed another kiss just below her collarbone, and her hand continued downward, sliding past the curve of her waist, over the slope of her hip.

Then lower.

Her fingers dipped along Vi's inner thigh, slow and sure, until her palm cupped behind her knee and gently coaxed her open.

Vi obeyed without a word, head tilted back, her arm flung over her brow, breath trembling against the pillow.

Her whole body was buzzing like too many nerves firing at once. Like her heart couldn't decide whether to race or break as the other woman kissed her way lower.

Mouth worshipping each line, each muscle, each tremble of tension beneath her tongue

until Vi's spine arched against her. One hand clutched the sheet. The other threaded into Caitlyn's hair.

Her breath broke in half. Her hips lifted instinctively, aching for more, but Caitlyn wasn't rushing, she was savouring. Her lips brushed over Vi's stomach in slow, reverent kisses, the soft dip of her navel, the rise and fall with each shaky breath.

Vi inhaled sharply, skin tightening under the heat of her mouth. Her body trembled from the quiet unraveling her touch always brought. Like she was being unwrapped, one careful layer at a time.

Then Caitlyn kissed the inside of her thigh, slow, warm, and deliberate. The heat of her breath against the sensitive skin made Vi flinch and shiver all at once. A soft sound escaped her, half-gasp, half-plea, fingers curled tighter in Caitlyn's hair as her lips brushed over her mound.

And in that moment, everything changed. Her body didn't brace. It melted.

Her breath caught. Her spine arched in a helpless curve as Caitlyn's tongue found her. The touch was soft, devastating, and utterly sure. Her thighs twitched, her fingers fisted in the sheets. She felt everything, every press, every stroke, like lightning trapped under her skin. It wasn't just pleasure. It was a kind of breaking. A silent, aching surrender.

Her hips rolled, chasing Caitlyn's mouth without thought, without pride. Heat coiled in her belly, deeper than need. It was hunger. Worship. Home.

A fractured sound slipped from her lips — breathless, wrecked. “*Gods...*” she whispered, like a prayer she didn't know she still believed in.

And when Caitlyn finally eased herself inside her, Vi let out a sound soft, ragged, helpless. Like something deep inside her cracked open.

The walls she wore like armour day after dayfists, sarcasm, muscle, silence, dissolved in the heat of Caitlyn's mouth, her hands, the way she moved inside her like she knew her. Not just where to touch but how. Why.

Vi clung to the edge, biting her lip, trying to hold herself together. But Caitlyn never let her go. Her pace was steady, patient, full of reverence. She let Vi feel it, all of it. The pleasure. The unbearable weight of being wanted, not just for strength or violence, but for the soul buried beneath all that bruised steel.

And as the tension crested and Vi finally came undone breathless, thighs trembling a single tear rolled down the side of her face into the pillow.

She didn't even try to stop it.

Caitlyn stayed right there with her. Never breaking rhythm. Never leaving her. She smiled softly pressing a gentle kiss to her lovers' stomach.

Vi reached up blindly, fingers curling around Caitlyn's wrist, guiding her up. Caitlyn followed, rising slowly, easing her body along Vi's until their skin met again. Vi pulled her into a kiss, soft, deep, trembling at the edges. There was no fire left in her now, just aching need to feel Caitlyn close, to be held in the quiet that followed.

As they kissed, Caitlyn's fingers brushed Vi's cheek. She drew her thumb along the faint, wet trail beneath Vi's eye, then she leaned in, lips brushing tenderly over her nose, her cheekbone, the corner of her mouth, small, tender kisses like the gentlest balm.

Vi's lashes fluttered. Her chest still rose and fell too fast.

"I love you" Caitlyn whispered

Vi smiled softly, her fingers brushing a few loose strands from Caitlyn's face, tucking them gently behind her ears.

"Love you too, Cupcake," she murmured, her voice low and honest. "So damn much it hurts sometimes."

And Caitlyn kissed her again, just once more, slow and full before curling into her side and laying her hand against Vi's chest, where her heart still beat too hard, too fast, too alive.

Vi let out a long, breathless sigh as she rolled them gently onto their sides, pulling Caitlyn with her. Their legs tangled easily, bodies fitting like they'd been made to find each other in the dark. Vi's arms closed around her, strong but tender, like she never wanted to let go.

Their faces hovered so close they were breathing the same air, their noses nearly brushing. Caitlyn's fingers came up instinctively, brushing back a damp lock of hair from Vi's temple. Her thumb found the small spot just beneath her ear, her favorite place, softly stroking it like a secret only she was allowed to know.

They kissed again, but this time it was slower, deeper in a quieter way. No urgency. Just the kind of closeness that said everything else could wait. Just this. Just now.

Caitlyn watched Vi's eyes flutter closed, sleep tugging at her features like a tide. The tension in her jaw softened. Her breathing evened out.

A cool wind slipped through the cracked window, threading in with the scent of rain on stone. It brushed across her bare shoulder, raising goosebumps in its wake. She nestled in closer, pressing herself flush to Vi's warmth.

Vi moved in her sleep, arms tightening slightly. One hand drifted up, fingers finding the back of Caitlyn's head and cupping it with sleepy instinct, guiding her down to rest against her chest.

Caitlyn let her eyes close as she pressed her cheek into the crook of Vi's neck. Her breath stirred Vi's skin, she sighed in return, low, content and home.

.....

The scent of crisping bacon drifted through the manor, curling through sunlit halls and drawing Caitlyn like a promise. She padded barefoot into the kitchen, still wrapped in her robe, hair tousled from sleep.

Vi stood at the stove, sleeves rolled, already dressed, her hair damp at the ends from a quick rinse. The morning light caught the ink across her arms, making the tattoos look almost alive as she stirred something in a pan with intense, almost comical focus.

Caitlyn leaned against the doorway for a moment, watching with a crooked smile. "I see you chased off the cook again, didn't you?"

Vi didn't even glance back. "She needed a break."

Caitlyn chuckled and stepped behind her. Her hands slid slowly down Vi's arms, fingers brushing over muscle and ink, until they found the curve of her hips. She hooked her fingers into belt loops pressing a soft kiss to her shoulder. "You keep doing that, and she'll think you're trying to take her job."

Vi shrugged one shoulder, turning just enough to toss her a grin over it. "Didn't say I wasn't."

Caitlyn smirked, then yelped as Vi popped a strip of bacon into her mouth. "Hey!...Hot!"

Truth was, Vi had a bad habit of not asking the house staff for anything. Ever. Not even a cup of tea. She barely tolerated them, bringing up fresh towels and clean sheets. But more often than not, Caitlyn would find her seated behind the kitchen entrance, leaning on a back stool, sipping drink and chatting with the staff like they were old friends. She knew every

name, every birthday, every cousin's engagement. The gossip of Piltover and Zaun ran through her faster than it did through the Kiramman parlour.

Vi might've grown up in Zaun, but somehow she'd made herself just as at home in the servant's corner of Kiramman's house.

That had started to shift things.

Since they'd moved in together, Caitlyn had quietly rerouted a generous portion of her personal funds toward Zaun's shelters, soup kitchens, and displaced families. It wasn't for recognition, Vi would have hated that, it was for the knowledge that somewhere, someone had eaten because of it. Someone like her Vi, once lost and forgotten deep inside the Stillwater.

Vi would never ask. But Caitlyn did it anyway.

Caitlyn leaned against the counter now, watching her with that same softness she reserved for early mornings and late nights.

Vi plated the eggs and toast, sliding one toward her. "Coffee's fresh. Don't get used to it."

"Oh I won't," Caitlyn teased, taking a sip anyway. "I fully expect the housekeeper to file a complaint the moment she walks in."

Vi smirked, throwing Caitlyn a crooked grin.

"She already did. Last week. Smacked me upside the head for nicking prawns off the silver tray, apparently, they were for your father's guests." She rolled her eyes, mock-offended. "Didn't see his name on 'em."

Caitlyn stared at her for half a beat, then buried her face in her hand with a groan.

"Vi..."

"What?" Vi shrugged, completely unrepentant. "They were just sitting there, all fancy and unloved. I was doing them a favour."

"You were stealing hors d'oeuvres," Caitlyn said, trying not to laugh.

"Semantics."

Caitlyn shook her head, grinning despite herself. "You're impossible."

"And yet, here you are, madly in love with me." Vi winked.

They both laughed, and for a moment, the world felt far away, just sunlight, coffee, bacon, and the sound of home.

.....

Caitlyn set her mug down and turned, the warmth in her face shifting into something more focused.

"We need to talk about the raid."

Vi raised an eyebrow, still chewing a mouthful of toast. "That was subtle."

Caitlyn ignored the jab, folding her arms. "I want us to lead the strike team. We know the area. We've got the timing. And if she's really planning to move everything in two days, we don't have time to waste the only problem is I don't know who I can trust."

"We will think of something..but..." Vi nodded, chewing a little slower now. "You think we'll catch her there?...Charoite won't stick her neck out unless she has to. But I think we'll find something that leads us to her. Or at least slow her down."

"I agree." she leaned back against the counter, thinking.

"The operation is already relocating. We'll never find it if we wait too long."

"I agree"

A pause.

Vi's brow furrowed, the tension slipping back in. "What about the mine?"

Caitlyn's expression darkened slightly. "We won't know anything until we get down there."

Vi reached out for her drink "That's what worries me." She sighed leaning back in her chair, cradling a glass between her fingers "It's a tactical nightmare, Cait. If they're holed up in those tunnels down in Sumps... we're not just walking into a trap, we're walking blind."

"I know," Caitlyn looked up. "You know it?"

"I've heard of it," Vi said getting up and leaned on the counter, voice low, "Vander used to warn us off it, said it was cursed. Collapsed decades ago. Acid leaks, tunnel rot. No one's touched it in years."

She hesitated. "At least... no one should've."

Caitlyn studied her a moment, then stepped closer, fingers brushing Vi's knuckles. "You think it's a trap."

She paused before answering.

"I think," she said finally, "if we go in unprepared, we might not come back out."

The silence stretched between them for a beat, the kind that carried weight and shared understanding.

Caitlyn nodded slowly sitting at the table. "Well then, I suppose we will have to make sure we're prepared."

Their conversation was cut short by the soft shuffle of small feet against the marble floor.

Elara appeared in the doorway, hair tousled, still brushing sleep from her face with the back of one hand. In the other, she dragged behind her a floppy-eared stuffed bunny by the arm, its paw trailing along the polished tiles.

"Morning..." she mumbled, voice barely above a whisper.

"Good morning Elara." Cait said

Vi turned, her face softening instantly. "Hey, kid."

The little girl walked straight up to her and wrapped her arms around Vi's waist, nestling her face against Vi's stomach like it was the most natural thing in the world. "Look at you," Vi murmured, running a gentle hand over her back. "Barely awake and already going for the charm offensive."

Caitlyn blinked, a smile blooming across her face as she watched them.

Without a word, the little girl let go, padded across the kitchen, and surprised Caitlyn by planting a small kiss on her cheek. She blinked again, eyes wide, then looked over at Vi across the room.

Vi raised her brows, smirking. "You're in the club now."

Cait gave her a dry look, though her hand came up to touch the spot the kiss had landed, almost in disbelief.

"So..." Vi said pulling out a chair "...park your butt right here. Breakfast incoming."

The girl climbed into a chair with her bunny and looked around. "Where's Dad?" she asked still rubbing her eyes, and Caitlyn moved to pour her some juice.

"He had a few things to take care of," Vi said, pulling out another plate

As she settled in, her gaze wandered up to Caitlyn.

"Who's that angry lady in the painting next to our bedroom?" she asked, her small voice laced with pure curiosity.

Caitlyn blinked mid-pour. "That... would be my grandmother."

Vi promptly choked on her drink. Coughing and laughing at the same time, she pounded her chest. "Sorry...sorry. It's just..." she wheezed, wiping her mouth, "

Caitlyn shot her a mock glare. "She ran half the Kiramman estate and survived three coups. I'd look like that too."

Vi was still snorting into her napkin. "That explains so much...totally makes sense."

Elara looked between them, entirely unfazed, then shrugged reaching for a piece of toast like this was all completely normal.

.....

Once an abandoned excavation site, plunged deeper than memory, forgotten by most and buried beneath the lower veins of the Sumps now throbbed with grim purpose.

The factory floor sprawled in a chaos of motion and shadow. Rusted girders hung like skeletal ribs overhead, while weary Zaunites moved beneath them, ghostlike figures with soot-smeared faces and skin marred by chemical burns. Their eyes were flat, dulled by the monotony of endless shifts. Conveyor belts groaned and hissed, ferrying metal casings, curved plating, and the cold glint of unfinished shells. The air reeked of oil and sweat, a stench that seeped into every pore.

Now and then, something sparked, a crackle of electric blue arcing across a coil, briefly illuminating the skeletal frame of a half-assembled weapon.

And high above, behind a thick pane of glass set into a fortified wall, sat a room that didn't belong. Polished, deliberate, and wholly out of place, it watched the factory like an eye that never blinked.

At the center of it, a wood-and-metal table groaned beneath an array of brass-and-glass vials, each filled with the oily silver liquid.

Next to it stood the Boss.

Tall and immaculately dressed, he wore a high-collared coat of deep oxblood velvet trimmed in gold thread, its silhouette tailored sharp as a blade. The buttons gleamed. A silk cravat, pinned with a brass accent, lay crisp beneath his throat. No grease, no dust, no wrinkle dared linger on him. His appearance was a message of control and elegance, danger not to be mistaken for the chaos below.

He was the will behind the wheel. The architect. He ran the labs, the supply lines, the enforcement circles. If there was money moving in Zaun, it moved through his hands.

His name, Solan

Few even knew his name.

Those who did rarely said it aloud. He operated in the margins, a ghost among louder tyrants. Not a Chembaron, though many mistook him for one. He rose from the chaos left in



Silco's wake, not by force or fire, but with silent cunning, picking apart what others scrambled to claim. While the Barons clawed and bled for territory, he built something cleaner, colder. His operation moved beneath theirs, above theirs, and far beyond Zaun's borders

Nobody knew where he came from.

Not truly. Not even the ones he worked with. He wasn't born of Zaun's smoke and rot, that much was certain.

His circle was small. Trusted. Watched. Controlled.

He picked his allies the way a jeweler picked stones, deliberately, without sentiment, and with an eye for value over loyalty.

Solan was not the kind of man you stumbled into.

You were invited.

And only once.

His eyes, pale and cold, inspected the vial in his hand, then flicked toward Caleum with irritation barely contained beneath that lacquered calm.

"How long?" The question drifted through the stale air, heavy with impatience and steel.

Caleum didn't look up at first. He hesitated, tapping one metal finger. Finally, he straightened.

"It's working. We've tested it, but it's not stable yet. Not for long-term applications."

He set the vial on the table with precise care. "It degrades. Needs time... refinement. I need at least another week, maybe two before we can scale."

Solan didn't flinch. Instead, he leaned forward, voice steady.

"We don't have that kind of time. The Enforcers are crawling over Piltover and threading into Zaun. Caitlyn Kiramman's nosing around. Klem slipped. Charoite's losing her nerve. How long can we keep this quiet?"

'We'? This is chemistry, not bureaucracy," Caleum snapped. "You want this stable? Give me the hours. Give me the resources."

Solan walked to the window. His eyes swept the factory floor below.

"Pressure's building, my friend. The Council's starting to catch wind of the cracks. My lines are fraying, eyes are turning, and every hour I'm bleeding time and money just to stay a step ahead."

Caleum's face darkened. "And I'm supposed to build miracles overnight?" His voice rose. "Listen, keeping Enforcers off your back isn't my goddamn job. You were supposed to clean up the mess. Get Kiramman off our backs."

Solan turned to him slowly, the lamplight catching the brass of his cravat pin.

"If you thought you could run an operation of this scale without Enforcers sniffing around, you're more naïve than I gave you credit for, my friend." His voice was low, measured. No heat—just gravity.

He tapped Caleum's shoulder on the way to his desk.

"Miscalculations happen. Labs get burned. Tech gets found. That's the cost of playing this game."

He sat down, adjusted the cuff of his velvet coat, and reached for a cigar. He lit it with a flick, the flame briefly illuminating his face.

"What matters is how you respond." He pointed the glowing cigar at Caleum. "You adapt. You refine. You move forward." His eyes held Caleum's.

"Remember this, professionals don't point fingers. They solve problems."

....

The lab smelled faintly of ozone and melted crystal. Cool light slanted through tall arched windows, brushing across cluttered tables and glinting off the brass fittings of intricate machinery. Caitlyn stepped inside, boots quiet on the stone floor, coat still damp from the misty air outside.

"Lystra?" she called gently.

From behind a bank of equipment, a familiar voice answered, "Over here."

Caitlyn followed the sound, weaving between workbenches until she found her, sleeves rolled up, goggles resting in her hair, and a magnifier monocle still clipped to one lens.

Lystra looked up, her face brightening at the sight of her. "Cait! Saints, you look like hell."

Caitlyn chuckled wearily. "Lovely to see you too."

Lystra stepped forward and hugged her tight, concern softening her expression. "I heard about the attack at your estate. Are you alright? Was anyone hurt?" she asked pulling back

"I'm fine," Caitlyn said, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "We're still sorting through the mess. Thank you for checking in."

"Of course," Lystra said, voice low. "Your dad?"

"As calm as ever."

Lystra smirked. "That sounds about right."

They exchanged a look, the moment lingering before Caitlyn gestured toward the covered tray. "You said you had something?"

Lystra's expression shifted. She walked toward a workbench and pulled back a linen cloth, revealing a shallow metal dish and several glimmering fragments of gemstone, some no bigger than a fingernail.

"It's not much," she said, "but it's... strange. The liquid you gave me...whatever it is...it doesn't behave like anything I've seen."

Caitlyn leaned closer. "How do you mean?"

Lystra gestured toward the microscope. "Take a look."

Caitlyn peered through the lens. On the slide was a tiny sliver of Hextech gemstone.

"It's a gemstone?"

"Yes...but watch what happens if I add this." She added the tiniest drop of silver liquid and Caitlyn leaned over the machine again.

The liquid moved smoothly towards the gemstone like it was drawn to it by invisible forces. Then suddenly started consuming it, wrapping itself around it.

"It's gone," Caitlyn's eyes snapped towards Lystra. "The gemstone ...it's breaking down. It just destroyed it." she said horrified.

"No," Lystra said quickly. "That's what I thought too at first, but I've run it four times. It's not melting or eroding the structure." She pulled out the bunch of papers and passed them to Caitlyn "It's not dissolving it. The crystal's still intact."

Caitlyn straightened slowly taking look at her notes. "Then what is it doing?"

Lystra shook her head, rubbing the back of her neck. "I wish I could tell you. It's like the gemstone is still there but as if it's being submerged. Covered in something we can't detect."

"Hidden?" Caitlyn asked.

"Maybe," Lystra said. "But hidden by what? And why?"

She folded her arms, thoughtful. "It's not like any reagent or solvent I've worked with. And it

definitely doesn't belong in any Zaunite catalogue I've seen."

Caitlyn's eyes drifted to the sealed case across the room where the original vial sat, faintly shimmering under reinforced glass.

"Keep working on it," she said softly.

Lystra gave a half-smile. "I haven't slept since Tuesday. Don't worry."

"Thank you. I really appreciate it." Caitlyn squeezed her arm. "Let me know the second you learn more."

"You'll be the first call," Lystra said. Then, teasing: "Try not to get shot again, alright?"

"No promises," Caitlyn said over her shoulder, and disappeared into the hallway.

.....

Vi stood alone in the Kiramman's gym, a sprawling space lined with tall, arched windows that looked out over the manicured garden. Sunlight poured in through the glass, striping the polished floor with gold. The place was a fusion of elegance and grit, sleek Piltover machinery beside worn sparring mats, heavy ropes, and reinforced gear that had seen countless friendly brawls.

Usually, this room echoed with the sounds of their laughter, of Caitlyn's playful taunts and Vi's smug comebacks. The two of them side by side, exchanging punches and kisses in equal measure. Fierce competition had a funny way of turning into something softer between them. But today, it was quiet.

Vi was barefoot, dressed in loose trousers and a dark binder stretched tight across her chest, exposing a set of defined stomach muscles that flexed with each breath. She stood at the edge of the sparring zone, carefully wrapping her hands with the familiar white bandages, knuckles, wrist, loop through the thumb, pull tight with her teeth. Muscle memory. Ritual. Focus.

Her gaze flicked to the machine in front of her. A towering, polished thing of reinforced alloy and brass, a far cry from the dented training posts she used to hammer on as a kid in the Undercity. This one was faster. Smarter. Meaner. It could punch back with deadly precision.

Vi cracked her neck, rolled her shoulders, then tapped the activation panel.

With a sharp hiss, the machine sprang to life. Multiple articulated arms shot out in unpredictable patterns, whirring and snapping with alarming speed.

Vi was faster.

She ducked the first jab, twisted around the second, and delivered a clean uppercut to the

padded target. The machine retaliated with a sweeping hook, she pivoted, drove a fist into its side. Her body was a blur of power and precision, dancing through the onslaught the way she'd done this all her life. Each punch she threw was tight, deliberate, honed through years of clawing her way through Zaun's chaos and sharpened again by Stillwaters brutality.

Sweat started to bead along her brow, but it didn't bother her.

This? This was the kind of therapy she could get behind.

The machine whirred down with a hiss, its limbs retracting into standby mode. Vi stepped forward and leaned her forehead against the padded surface, breath heaving as she worked to steady it. Sweat clung to her skin, heart still racing, muscles twitching with leftover adrenaline.

The gym was quiet again.

"Can you teach me?"

The voice was tiny, barely more than a whisper. Vi turned her head over her shoulder, side-eyeing the unexpected visitor.

A little thing stood by the edge of the mat, dwarfed by the room. Trousers new but slightly too long, a loose t-shirt hanging off one shoulder, and a mess of long blonde curls pinned in a bun that had definitely seen better hours. A few strands had broken free from fancy pins Caitlyn got her, brushing her pale cheeks. She looked like she'd snuck out of a nap and wandered into a world she wasn't meant to see.

Vi straightened up, wiping a forearm across her brow. "You need to stop sneakin' up on people like that," she muttered, not unkindly.

The girl didn't flinch. She padded further in, eyes scanning the gym with open curiosity. Her fingers trailed along a thick rope that marked the edge of the sparring ring, her touch featherlight, reverent.

"Will you..." she hesitated, looking up at Vi with wide eyes, "teach me?"

Vi arched an eyebrow, arms crossed now, one hip cocked. The smirk that curled her lips was real but soft. "Why d'you wanna learn how to fight, kid?"

The girl fidgeted with the hem of her shirt, her voice quieter this time. "If I knew how to fight like that..."

A beat. "...maybe my sister wouldn't've died."

Something inside Vi cracked. A quiet, cold fracture.

But none of it reached her face.

She didn't blink. Didn't breathe heavy. Just gave a slow nod like it didn't slice her clean through. Then, without a word, she turned toward the supply shelf by the wall and pulled down a clean set of binding tapes, small ones, the kind that might just fit tiny wrists.

"Alright," Vi said, "First lesson, you never throw a punch with your thumbs inside your fist. Unless you really like breaking your own fingers."

The girl's eyes lit up.

And Vi, well, Vi felt the ache in her chest settle into something steadier. Something like purpose.

"Right kiddo," she tossed the wraps to the girl, who caught them like a squirrel might catch a falling nut, clumsily, but determined. "Let's see what we're workin' with."

The little girl stared down at the binding tape in her hands, then looked back up at Vi.

"...What do I do with it?"

Vi raised a brow. "Well, I was gonna tell you to mummify yourself, but maybe let's start with your hands."

She crouched beside her and took one of the small hands gently, looping the wrap through the thumb, then around the wrist. Her movements were steady, practiced, gentler than she was with her own hands, not that she'd admit that out loud.

"Like this... Tight enough to hold you together, but not so tight your fingers fall off. Trust me, learned that one the hard way." She shot her a sideways smirk.

The girl giggled.

"That's better," Vi muttered. "Not a great start if my first student bursts into tears before we even throw a punch."

"I'm not gonna cry," the girl said defensively, wrinkling her nose. "I'm six."

"Oh, six," Vi gasped mockingly, holding a laugh. "Well in that case, welcome to the elite division."

Another giggle.

Vi stood and beckoned her over to the center of the mat. "Okay. Lemme show you the stance. Feet like this...no, wider. You wanna be a tree, not a newborn deer."

The girl shuffled into place. It was... not terrible.

"Alright, kid, that's actually not bad," she said, circling her like a coach. "Now keep your fists up. Higher. Unless you want someone to boop you right in the nose."

The girl raised them, arms trembling a bit with the effort.

Vi reached out and gently adjusted her elbows. "There. Good. You wanna protect your face. It's a cute face. Be a shame to ruin it on day one."

"You think I'm cute?"

Vi gave her a dry look. "I think you think you're cute. Which is worse."

That earned a full-blown laugh this time, and Vi bit back her own smile.

"Now, punch me."

The girl blinked. "What?"

"You heard me." Vi tapped her own open palm. "Right here. Let's see your meanest shot."

She hesitated, then threw a wild, floppy punch that barely reached Vi's hand and made a pathetic little thmp noise.

Vi stared at her hand dramatically. "...Did you just try to pet me?"

"I hit you!"

"Oh, that was a hit? Should I lie down now or wait until my vision comes back?"

"Stop it," the girl said, but she was grinning ear to ear.

Vi chuckled and ruffled her hair. "You got spirit, kid. Terrible aim, no form, but spirit? I can work with that."

The girl squared her shoulders. "Then teach me the rest."

Vi's smirk softened. "Alright kid. Let's make your sister proud."

She clapped her hands together. "Lesson two, how to punch like you mean it, and not like you're high-fiving a pillow."

....

"Violet?"

Caitlyn's voice echoed faintly through the halls of the estate. She'd just come in, coat still slung over one arm, her boots silent against polished floors as she moved room to room, searching.

No response.

She sighed, a familiar smile tugging at her lips as she turned toward the gym.

Of course.

As she neared, the sound of voices filtered through the slightly open door, one high-pitched and enthusiastic, the other dry and unmistakably Vi.

Caitlyn paused outside, leaning a shoulder against the frame, listening with a soft, fond smile.

"Higher, Elara! Unless you want your opponent to poke you in the eye and steal your lunch money."

"I am trying!"

"Trying to what, tickle me into submission?"

Caitlyn bit back a laugh, shaking her head.

Peeking in, she saw them on the mat, Elara, red-faced and determined, throwing another punch at Vi's palm, and Vi, crouched in front of her, grinning like she was having the time of her life.

Vi's tone was sarcastic but teasing in that way only she could pull off without bruising a kid's ego. And Elara, sweaty, wild-haired and focused, was absolutely thriving under the attention.

Then Caitlyn stepped in.

"Well, what do we have here?" she asked, tone mock-serious as she pushed off the frame and entered the room.

Elara squealed with delight and immediately ran to her, nearly bouncing. "Miss Caitlyn! Vi's teaching me how to fight!"

Caitlyn raised an eyebrow, shooting Vi a look. "Oh, is she now?...And it's just Caitlyn" she tucked the loose strands behind her ear "So how is the new pupil doing?"

Vi walked over, unwrapping one hand and nodding with a lopsided smirk. "Kid's got guts. First lesson was a solid five out of five."

Elara beamed.

"Go on, time to clean up," Vi said, ruffling her curls. "And if you want lesson two tomorrow... you gotta eat all your veggies at dinner. Even the green ones."

"Ugh! Fine," Elara groaned with dramatic flair, before dashing off with a grin that lit up her whole face.



Once the door clicked shut behind her, Vi turned and reached out, fingers brushing under Caitlyn's jaw, thumb grazing her cheek as her hand slid back to cup around her ear.

Then she pulled her in for a soft, brief kiss.

When they parted, Caitlyn's eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Did you miss me?" she asked, her voice low, playful.

Vi smirked. "What gave it away?"

Caitlyn shrugged, smug. "The part where you kissed me like you'd been thinking about it all afternoon."

Vi didn't bother with a reply, just leaned back in and kissed her again, longer this time, until Caitlyn's hand curled into her hair.

"Mm," Caitlyn murmured against her lips. "Definitely missed me."

Vi grinned. "Maybe a little."

When they parted, Caitlyn glanced past her at the training machine, narrowing her eyes at the score.

"Hm," she said casually turning towards the door "Impressive. Whose face were you seeing in it today?"

Vi grinned wickedly, slipping her fingers around the back of Caitlyn's neck as they started walking out together. Her thumb brushing just beneath her ear in that way that always made Caitlyn lean in just a little.

"Several," she said, "Couple council pricks. That one chem-baron with the chin. One guy who cut the line at the bakery. Might've thrown in Silco for old time's sake."

Caitlyn laughed under her breath. "Glad to know I didn't make the list."

Vi gave her a sideways look, amused. "Please. I see your face and forget how to throw a punch."

Caitlyn gave her a sideways glance, lips twitching. "That's the most romantic thing you've ever said to me."

Vi winked. "I try."

.....

Steam drifted lazily through the bathroom, curling at the edges of the mirror and drifting around Caitlyn as she sat on the edge of the clawfoot tub. One leg crossed neatly over the other, arms resting on her knee.

"Lystra finally got back to me," she said, voice calm but tight. "Her diagnostic equipment shorted out. Three machines completely fried. She suspected the liquid, so she started digging."

Behind the glass, water still hissed down. Vi's voice echoed faintly over it.

"And?"

"So she tested it on the gemstones and came across something quite worrying."

Vi didn't say anything just peaked behind the glass.

"She showed me the sample under the microscope. It was... unsettling."

"Unsettling how?"

"There's this invisible force...like a pull that draws the liquid toward the gemstone. Almost magnetic, almost like it's alive. At first glance, I thought it was destroying the gem right before my eyes. But Lystra ran every diagnostic she could, and there's no sign of damage, no corrosion, no decay, nothing physical at all. The structure remains entirely intact."

The water shut off.

After a moment, the door to the shower creaked open, and Vi stepped out, bare shoulders dripping, hair clinging to her forehead, a towel slung low around her hips. Her brow was furrowed, sharp blue eyes scanning Caitlyn with open concern.

"She know what it does yet?"

Caitlyn shook her head. "She wouldn't say. Told me she needs more time. Doesn't want to assume anything."

Vi muttered a curse under her breath and stepped out fully, rubbing a towel over her hair.

"I gotta talk to someone," she said, pacing toward the mirror. "There's a chemist I know, the one I was gonna see the other day. We should pay him a visit. If something like this is floating around down there, he'll have heard of it. Maybe he has some information...And if it's not from the Lanes... then that's even worse."

Caitlyn watched her quietly, the way her back flexed as she tossed her towel over her shoulder. Water slid down the line of her spine.

"...if it's that reactive to hextech, we have a serious problem." Vi continued "You think it might have something to do with our gear going nuts?"

There was no reply, Caitlyn eyes drifted to the floor.

"Cait?"

Caitlyn blinked.

"You listening?"

Caitlyn cleared her throat and sat up straighter, "I'm listening....sorry....I'm just...You go."

Vi raised an eyebrow. "Okay."

"I want to stay here. Go through everything. Lystra's notes, the shipment logs, the connections. And I'm going to figure out how to get into that woman's estate without setting off a war."

Vi nodded slowly, "Alright."

But Caitlyn's voice had gone quiet.

She turned toward her, then stepped closer gently hooking her finger beneath Caitlyn's chin tilting her face up, gaze steady and patient. "What's wrong Cupcake?"

Caitlyn hesitated, then exhaled, her voice quieter than before.

"First Marcus, now this. People turning. Lying. Selling us out. I don't know who to trust anymore, Vi. Some days I look around and all I see are cracks. And I can't tell who's on our side or who's just waiting to twist the knife."

Vi's jaw ticked slightly. She ran her thumb along Caitlyn's jaw in that familiar way, grounding her.

She didn't pull away from Vi's touch.

If anything, she leaned into it, just a little. Letting that quiet pressure of her fingers under her chin keep her tethered.

But after a moment, she exhaled, shaking her head.

"I can't run an investigation like this," she said, voice low and raw. "Not like this. I can't work when I don't know who's feeding me lies or who's leaking intel. I have more questions than answers. And more dead people every day. And the Council will want answers."

Vi said nothing, just listened, her expression sharpening slightly with every word.

Caitlyn looked past her, eyes distant. "I've already restricted access to the investigation files from about half of my team because I no longer trust them. It won't be long before someone

notices. Then what? I'm undermining my own command. Undermining the system."

Her voice cracked just slightly on that last word.

"I need people I can trust, Violet " she said. "If we're really going to do this right, if we're going to expose whatever's behind this and do it properly, I need more than you, me and Gearhand"

She laughed bitterly. "So, who does that leave me with? Us three... and Sevika?"

Vi's eyes flickered, the corner of her mouth twitching despite the heaviness in the air.

"Sevika's dependable. Grumpy as hell, but she doesn't sell out easy."

Caitlyn shot her a dry look. "She also betrayed your dad and tried to kill us both."

Vi grinned. "Yeah, but she's mellowed."

Caitlyn sighed and rubbed her face with both hands, the humor fading just as quickly as it had arrived. "I'm serious, Vi. I don't know how much longer I can do this. Not alone. How the hell do I organise this operation knowing we're not falling into a trap?"

"Then fuck the enforcers"

"Viii..."

"No hear me out.... You're not alone," she said. "And yeah. We don't have an army. But we've got people. People who chose to stand on this side, even when it stopped being easy. Hell, I might be able to lean on Ekko if it comes down to it, not that I want to get him involved in this mess, but I'm sure he doesn't want another Silco on his back either. And neither does anyone normal down there..."

Caitlyn looked up at her, vulnerable for just a second. "And if it's not enough?"

"Then we make it enough."

Caitlyn let out a shaky breath, then reached up, fingers curling lightly at the edge of the towel still sitting loosely around Vi's hips tugging her gently.

She leaned forward slowly and pressed her forehead against Vi's stomach, eyes closing as her hands stayed right there, holding on like she might fall apart otherwise. Vi's breath caught, but she didn't move, one hand rising to gently stroke the back of Caitlyn's head.

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Vi moved through Zaun like a quiet echo, boots soft against worn stone, shoulders slightly hunched beneath the weight of memory.

She'd taken the long way, on purpose.

The alley she turned into was one of her favourites. Only ten minutes walk from The Last Drop, tucked between two rusted drainage pipes and an old elevator shaft, it felt almost untouched by time. Lanterns of coloured glass hung from cast-iron balconies overhead, pinks, blues, soft greens swaying slightly in the breeze. They cast dappled light over the alley walls, painting the cobblestones with sleepy colours.

It smelled like metal and salt and steam. And dinner, something rich and savoury drifting from the windows above. A frying pan hissed somewhere overhead. Someone was laughing in the apartment opposite.

Vi let herself walk slowly, eyes scanning familiar places.

The trinket stand was still there. A crooked wooden table propped up with bricks and strung with fine chains, bangles, enamel pins in all shapes and sizes. She stopped for a moment, fingers brushing the display.

She remembered Powder pressing her nose to the edge of it, eyes wide, begging for clips or bracelets. She always liked the ones with stars.

Vi's hand drifted over the velvet tray and picked up a tiny necklace, thin chain, little charm shaped like a gear with a single blue stone in the middle.

Cute. Not too shiny. Elara would love it.

She handed over a few coins to the bored teenager behind the stall and tucked the necklace into her pocket.

A few paces on, she passed the old newspaper shop Vander used to send her to on Sundays for his tobacco. She'd always manage to scrape together enough spare coins for a new comic too. The sign was rusted now, and the paint had peeled, but the same old man still sat behind the glass, grey streaks overtaking his hair. He looked up absently as she passed, and Vi gave him a small nod.

He blinked like he half-recognised her, but didn't stop her.

She passed the belt maker, the old woman with hands like tree bark threading leather through brass buckles, humming to herself as always.

The knife sharpener was there too, sitting out front with his goggles on, sparks flying as he honed a thin blade to a gleam.

It was like the alley hadn't changed. Or maybe it had, and Vi just didn't want to see it.

At the far end, tucked behind a leaning brick wall covered in chalk drawings and mold, was the door she'd been heading for. The windows were fogged and the wood was green with

age, but the tiny bell still sat above the frame, crusted in copper.

She pushed the door open, and the bell jingled softly.

Inside, the warm glow of hanging lights cast a golden hue across the shelves of jars and vials, some bubbling, others quietly glowing. The scent of dried herbs and something faintly chemical hung in the air, sharp, but not unpleasant.

A short man with a low ponytail was facing the shelves behind the counter, pouring something with intense focus.

“Good evening,” he said absently, not looking.

Vi smirked.

“Evening, Doc.”

He froze.

Turned like someone had stabbed him in the backside.

“Vi?”

His voice cracked halfway between disbelief and offense.

Vi’s grin broke wide across her face.

The man behind the counter let out a stunned breath, then burst into motion, practically vaulting around the side table in two strides.

He caught her in a crushing hug, arms tight around her ribs, lifting her clean off the ground.

“Hey!” Vi wheezed, laughing through the squeeze. “Doc...I need lungs to live!”

But she didn’t pull away. She folded into him, forehead resting against his shoulder, her eyes unexpectedly glassy.

He smelled the same. Old herbs. Rust. Oil. Safety.

“I never thought I’d see you again,” he muttered, voice rough in a way it never used to be. “Not after what happened...”

He eased back, hands on her shoulders, eyes scanning her like he still didn’t believe it.

“Look at you,” he said. “You’ve grown. Proper broad now. And bloody hell, you’re pretty.”

Vi blinked, visibly caught off guard. She gave a little cough, looking away like the compliment hit a bit too directly.

“Right. Well thanks...I guess.”

Later, just around the corner from the shop, they sat on a low stone ledge near the edge of the alley. The buzz of Zaun hummed in the distance, pipes hissing, a kid laughing somewhere on a rooftop, muffled footsteps passing by.

Vi leaned back on her elbows, legs stretched out in front of her. Doc sat beside her, picking at the edge of a biscuit wrapper, his faded coat fluttering with the breeze.

“I heard about your sister,” he said finally, voice quieter now. He sniffled and wiped his nose on a well-worn handkerchief, then tucked it carefully back into his coat pocket.

“I’m sorry, Vi. She was... a good kid. Bright. I remember that infection she caught when she was little, half the Lanes were convinced she wasn’t gonna make it. But not her. Stubborn little thing.”

Vi’s jaw tensed slightly, but her smile was soft.

“She liked you,” she said. “Said you smelled like burnt tea leaves.”

He gave a wheezing laugh. “That’s because the kettle always bloody boils dry before I remember it’s on.”

They sat in silence for a beat. Then he looked at her sideways.

“How the hell did you survive Stillwater?”

Vi let out a sharp snort and smirked.

“Mostly my fists. Some attitude. And two teeth shorter than I went in with.”

He whistled low through his teeth. “Stillwater doesn’t let go easy.”

“No,” Vi agreed, looking down at her knuckles. “It doesn’t.”

He was quiet again for a moment before his gaze slid back to her.

“So... the badge, huh?”

Vi tilted her head, smile tugging sideways. “Knew you were gonna bring that up eventually.”

“I don’t blame you or nothin’,” he added quickly, raising his hands. “Just... it’s strange. Seeing you in blue.”

She nodded slowly, eyes distant. “Yeah. Still not sure it fits.”

A pause.

“But if wearing it means I get to pull people like Silco off the streets? I’ll wear the damn thing every day. Even if the colour still makes me feel like puking.”

Doc let out a deep, knowing sigh. “Fair enough.”

Doc leaned back, hands resting on his knees. “So,” he said after a moment, voice casual but eyes sharp. “Why’d you come?”

He smirked. “Please tell me it’s just ‘cause you missed my charm and stunning jawline. But I doubt I’m that lucky.”

Vi huffed a laugh through her nose, glancing sideways at him. “You’re close. I did miss that tragic excuse for a beard you’re still tryin’ to grow.”

He gasped, hand to chest. “Cruel.”

Vi chuckled, but then her expression shifted. She leaned forward, forearms resting on her knees, fingers laced loosely together as her voice dropped lower.

“I found something weird on one of our raids,” she said. “Silver stuff. Looks like mercury, but thicker. Moves wrong. Like it’s got weight, but no mind to obey gravity.”

Doc’s brow furrowed, but he didn’t interrupt.

Vi continued, her voice harder now. “Everyone who’s been connected to it, dead. The warehouse it was in got scrubbed clean before we even showed up. Whoever’s behind it isn’t just playing games.”

She turned her head, locking eyes with him.

“I’ve been hearing things. That someone’s hiring, quietly. Pulling in people with skills. Engineers, chemists, tinkerers. Assembling little teams across the city. All off the books. All in the dark.”

She let the silence settle for a beat, then added:

“And I figured... if anyone might know something about it, it’d be you.”

Doc didn’t answer right away.

Instead, he pushed himself to his feet with a quiet grunt, brushing his hands against his trousers as if wiping away the dust of the conversation. Then, without a word, he held out a hand to her.

Vi took it without asking.

She didn’t need to.



She knew that look.

The one he used to give her and Powder when things turned serious—when it wasn't a matter of *if* something was wrong, but *how deep* the trouble went.

He led the way back into the shop, the bell above the door giving a soft chime as it shut behind them.

Inside, the lights seemed a little dimmer now, the quiet of the room wrapping around them like a secret.

Doc pulled out one of the rickety wooden chairs near the small round table tucked in the corner of the room, next to a wall lined with jars of dried leaves and flickering tubes of bubbling liquid. He dropped into the seat with a slow exhale, then pulled a slightly bent cigarette from his pocket and struck a match. The flame hissed to life, curling smoke rising toward the ceiling.

He took a long drag, eyes fixed ahead, then gestured wordlessly to the other chair.

Vi scraped it back with the heel of her boot, turned it backward, and straddled it—arms folded over the top. Her eyes never left his face.

She didn't push.

She gave him time.

He took another drag, the cigarette burning low between his fingers. Smoke curled from his nose as he leaned back slightly, eyes narrowing like he was pulling the story from memory one thread at a time.

"Bout two months ago, word started creeping 'round the edges," he said. "Someone was hiring. Not flashy. Quiet. Different sectors. Gears, burners, mixers, chem-flingers. All under the radar."

He shrugged slightly. "Nothin' too strange for the Lanes. People get scooped up for work all the time. Underground labs, gang-run shops, private security, you know how it goes. No one raised a brow."

He tapped the ash into a jar lid. "But then there was this one guy, proper sloshed one night down at Flinn's. Could barely stand, but wouldn't shut up. Started talkin' real loud about some job he did. Kept sayin' they were cookin' somethin' up in the old mines. Said it was new. Big. 'Revolutionary,' was his word."

Vi raised a brow.

Doc nodded, bitter amusement curling his lip. "Everyone laughed. Thought he'd fried his brain on shimmer or had one too many. But he just kept goin'. Said he'd done the drop-off

himself. Seen the setup.”

He mimicked a slurred voice with a smirk, “Production line, he said. Real thing, down there in the ghost shafts. Lotta metal, lotta noise. Real hush-hush.”

“Folks took the piss. ‘What, they got ghosts assembling bombs now?’ someone said. Place has been dead for years. Nothing down there but rot and rust.”

He paused, looking into the smoke.

“Then he says they were rounding people up. Street rats. Junked-out shimmer heads. Anyone no one would miss. Said they were vanishin’ down there.”

Vi’s expression darkened slightly, but she stayed quiet.

“Next thing, guy gets into a scuffle. Someone smacks him, he stumbles out into the street. Nobody gave a damn. Just another loudmouth on the drink.”

Doc’s eyes dropped to the floor, voice lowering.

“Three days later, they pulled him out the river by the bridge. Face down. Pockets turned out. Everyone said he was too drunk, slipped in and drowned.”

He glanced at Vi.

“But I’ve seen too many accidents in this city to believe in coincidences.”

Doc took one last drag of his cigarette before stubbing it out. The smoke lingered between them, curling around the weight of what had just been said.

He sighed, long and low, rubbing his palms on his thighs.

“That’s all I’ve got, Vi. I wish I had more,” he said, voice rough around the edges. “If I knew names, places, anything solid, I’d give it to you straight. But you know things down here don’t always come with labels.”

Vi gave a small nod, pushing back from the chair with her forearms. She stayed there a moment, watching him, jaw ticking faintly.

“You gave me enough,” she said, standing. Her voice was softer now, but steady. “More than you know.”

He looked up at her, one brow raised.

“Be careful, kid. You go sniffin’ in the wrong place, and they’ll be pullin’ you out of the river.”

Vi smirked faintly. “Yeah, well... they’ll have to catch me first.”

He chuckled, shaking his head.

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The dive bar was thick with smoke and low synth-bass vibrating through the floorboards. Greasy yellow lights buzzed overhead, and half the patrons looked like they hadn't seen daylight in weeks.

Sevika sat in the corner booth, her usual haunt, one arm slung over the backrest, cigarette balanced between her fingers. Across from her, two men laughed too loud at something the big one had said, bald, tattooed, built like a prison door. The other was wiry, with an augmented leg that clicked every time he shifted.

Sevika rolled her eyes and sipped her drink, tuning them out.

Then a glass hit the table.

All three looked up.

Vi dropped into the empty seat like she'd been invited, legs sprawled out, one boot propped on the rung of the bald guy's chair. She slouched into it like she owned the damn joint, grin cocky as hell.

"What's up?" she said, raising her glass in mock toast. "Boys' night out?"

Sevika choked, nearly inhaling her cigarette.

Vi winked. "Miss me?"

The two guys looked between them, confused and a little unsettled.

Sevika took a long, slow drag, eyes locked on Vi like she was deciding whether to punch her, laugh, or both. Then she turned her head toward the men.

"Give us some space."

The tattooed one blinked. "But we just..."

"Now."

Neither of them argued. Chairs scraped, drinks were grabbed, and in seconds they were gone, muttering as they shuffled off toward the bar.

Sevika leaned forward, elbow on the table, cigarette dangling from her fingers.

"What the hell do you want?"

Vi swirled the drink once in her hand before tossing it back, then set the glass down hard enough to make Sevika's cigarette ash tremble.

"I came to talk strategy," she said. "Since you gave your word to my wife and all."

Sevika's brow arched at that, but she poured herself another drink and leaned in with a grunt. "I'm listening."

Vi sat forward, elbows on the table, tone shifting.

"Charoite's back in the game. Resurrected her old man's operation."

Sevika gave a half-shrug. "Is she? And?"

Vi narrowed her eyes. "Don't insult me. I know you know. You're not stupid."

Sevika smirked. "Never claimed I didn't hear the rumors. But sure. Fine. What about it?"

"What's she moving these days?"

Sevika blew out a breath of smoke. "How the fuck should I know?"

"Oh I don't know...maybe you heard the rumours?" Vi said, drumming her fingers on the table. "Something new. Something silver. Looks polished."

Sevika's face didn't twitch. "There's new crap hitting the Lanes every other day. Be more specific."

Vi's voice went low.

"You still gonna sit there and pretend you don't know what I'm talking about?"

Sevika finally leaned back, dragging her eyes over Vi.

"You done playing detective? 'Cause I don't report to your wife, and I sure as hell don't report to you."

Vi's jaw ticked, but she grinned anyway. "You know everything that moves through Zaun. Don't act like you don't. You're not talking to Cait now. I know how this works. You were never gonna blow the whistle, just keep the powder keg from lighting."

Sevika took another slow drink. "My job's to keep this shit from turning into a street war. I don't care who's dealing what, long as no one's bleeding in the gutters. Not part of my job description."

Vi leaned forward again, eyes sharp. "Then let's talk about the part that is."

She let it hang just a second before locking eyes with her.

"This new chem... whatever the hell it is...is worth enough to kill for. We don't know what it does, who's behind it, or what they're planning. You really wanna sit there and wait to find out?"

She shrugged, smile going razor-thin. "That 'not my job' attitude? Gonna cost you that fancy Council chair if this thing blows wide open. And it will."

Vi leaned back in her seat, arms draped loose over the backrest, gaze steady but sharp.

"So what's it gonna be, Sev? You still pretending this isn't your problem?"

Sevika's fingers drummed once against the rim of her glass. She didn't blink. Didn't shift. Just stared at Vi like she was weighing a bet and didn't like the odds.

Then finally she let out a slow breath through her nose, leaned back in her chair, and muttered,

"Alright. What do you want?"

"We need to shake Charoite's place. But we can't use enforcers. That's gonna light the whole city on fire."

Sevika stared at her.

"You're insane," she said flatly. "You'll never come out of there alive...." "You want me to burn one of the oldest families in Zaun to the ground," she said, voice dry as rust. "No badge. No backup. No plan?"

Vi didn't flinch. "Yeah. That about sums it up."

Sevika raised an eyebrow. "And where's your better half while you're plotting suicide missions? Hiding behind her paperwork?"

Vi's jaw ticked. "She still plays by the rules. I don't."

That got a smirk out of Sevika. A bitter one, but real. "Right."

She took another drag, then exhaled slow. "You've got nerve. I'll give you that."

Vi leaned forward, arms resting loose on the table, voice lowering with intent. "You gave your word. I'm here to hold you to it."

Sevika considered that. Then reached for the bottle and poured herself another finger of liquor.

"If I help you," she said, "I want something back."

Vi raised an eyebrow. "Naturally."

"I want access to whatever Caitlyn's little investigation digs up. I don't care how clean or dirty it is, I want the details. If I agree I wanna know what I'm agreeing to."

Vi hesitated, just for a breath, then nodded. "Done."

Sevika's eyes narrowed. "And if I drag Charoite into the light, next time the Council tries to gut Zaun's trade lanes, I want your fancy wife to veto it."

Vi snorted. "You think I control her?"

Sevika smirked around her cigarette. "No. But I think you influence her."

Vi didn't answer, because they both knew Sevika wasn't wrong.

Sevika downed her drink in one go, then slammed the glass down on the table.

"You die in there," she said, "I'm not dragging your corpse out. Just so we're clear."

Vi grinned, shoving her chair back with a scrape. "Crystal... Goes both ways."

Sevika poured another drink, this time for Vi and slid it toward the edge of the table without looking up.

"We're gonna have shot at this," she muttered, her voice quieter, gravel-deep. "Don't waste it."

Vi paused.

Glanced at the glass.

Then back at Sevika.

She reached for the drink, fingers curling around it like she was accepting something heavier than liquor.

"I won't," she said.

Then she tipped it back in one smooth pull, set the glass down with a clean, quiet click and walked away.

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