

A movie poster for 'The Velvet Pyres'. The central figure is a woman with long, dark, wavy hair, wearing a black leather corset with silver buttons and a dark skirt. She is holding a black revolver in her right hand. The background is a dark, gothic cityscape with a large building on the left that is engulfed in bright orange and yellow flames. The sky is dark and smoky. In the bottom right corner, there are silhouettes of several figures, possibly soldiers or zombies, standing in a line. The overall tone is dark and dramatic.

DEEP INSIDE

THE VELVET PYRES



VELVET PYRES PRESENTS
DEEP INSIDE
the story behind the music

Credits

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- See more at VelvetPyres.com

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Chapter One: The Invitation

The fog in Grafton Ward clung to the cobblestones like a secret no one wanted told. Lanterns hissed in the mist, flickering shadows across brick and brass. Above the cluttered rooftops, the twin smoke stacks of the city's central steamworks exhaled their nightly breath—foul, metallic, and strangely comforting to those who'd long grown used to it.

Detective Lydia Vale sat hunched over a threadbare case file in her cramped office apartment, its walls yellowed from years of lamp smoke and stale coffee. A half-eaten plate of turnip stew sat forgotten on her desk beside the report—another petty theft the Ministry deemed too dull or inconvenient to pursue. That's how it always was. They passed her the ones with grime under the fingernails. The cases that crawled. The ones no one else wanted.

She didn't mind. Much.

Her eyes, sharp and the color of soot-dampened steel, flicked toward the brass wall-clock ticking out the late hours. She reached instinctively to adjust the leather strap on her left wrist—where a concealed modulator lay under her sleeve. Technically Ministry property. Technically illegal off-hours. But then, Lydia had learned long ago that survival often came wrapped in technicalities.

The knock on her door was sharp. Two precise taps. Not the desperate shuffle of a client, nor the clumsy pound of a constable with a warrant. She rose carefully, tugging her coat closed, fingers brushing over the iron buttons—worn, but polished. Her footsteps echoed on the floorboards as she reached the door.

With a hiss of pressurized gears, the brass door unlocked, sliding open with a mechanical groan.

What stood before her was unmistakably military.

He was tall—well over six feet—and still as a rifle on parade. A Royal Regiment Augment, his left eye replaced with a brass ocular scope, the glint of polished steel peeking from beneath the collar of his greatcoat. His gloved hand extended without a word, offering a sealed envelope emblazoned with the sigil of the High Guard: a crowned lion surrounded by cogwheel laurels.

Lydia arched a brow. "Don't get many royal couriers down this end of the borough."

The soldier merely bowed. His voice was smooth, precise, yet tinged with the faint echo common to those whose vocal cords had once been rebuilt in a military infirmary.

"The Head of the Royal Regiment requests your presence at dinner, this evening, at the Royal Arms Hall. No augmentations permitted. Your finest is requested."

With that, he clicked his heels, turned with a mechanical pivot, and strode off into the mist, leaving only the sound of his boots and the faint hum of his internal pistons.

Lydia stared after him, then let the door whine shut. Steam hissed from the vents beside her as she leaned against the wall, eyes on the envelope.

She broke the wax seal and slid out the contents: a letter—short, handwritten in an elegant yet hurried scrawl—and an ivory entrance card with a burnished copper inlay. The card alone could buy her rent for a month on the black market.

The letter read:

Detective Vale,

I am in need of discretion and expertise not found within my own ranks. My brother, Captain Alek Morrow, has vanished. I believe foul intent is at play—perhaps even treasonous. I trust you will approach this with both caution and resolve.

Dinner will be served promptly at the seventh bell. Come alone. Come unmodified.

— Commander Aldric Morrow, High Guard

She reread it twice, noting the carefully chosen words. “Treasonous” carried weight. So did the absence of official Ministry sanction.

Lydia turned the card over, then tucked it into the hidden lining of her coat. She crossed to the gear-locker in the corner of her room, flipping switches and inputting the four-digit code that kept her more...creative devices secure. She removed a velvet-lined case from within—a small set of lace-covered brass pins, each one laced with micro-filaments and nerve taps. Technically not “augmentations.” Technically...

She smiled faintly.

As she began to dress, donning the charcoal-grey corset coat she reserved for inquests and funerals, she caught her reflection in the polished surface of her kettle. Eyes haunted, lips pale, jaw set like stone. It wasn’t the dinner that worried her.

It was who, exactly, would be sitting across from her—and just how deep this royal affair would pull her into the city’s underbelly.

The steam hissed again, and she whispered to herself as she laced up her gloves:

“Never trust an invitation without a return address.”

— —

The gates of the Royal Guard complex loomed like the jaws of some ancient iron beast—sharp-toothed, unmoving, and well-oiled by both coin and blood. Gaslight bathed the archway in flickering gold, casting long shadows over the uniformed sentries flanking the entrance. Each stood motionless, halberds at their side, brass oculars scanning Lydia Vale as she approached with a slow, confident stride.

Her grey coat trailed behind her like smoke. Beneath it, a satin-stitched gown of ink black shimmered faintly, stitched with thread-of-steel filigree to suggest wealth without admitting to it. Her boots clicked on the stone path with intention. At her side, the invitation card gleamed faintly in her gloved fingers.

The guard took the card, scanned it with a mechanical monocle, and returned it with the faintest incline of his head.

“Welcome, Inspector Vale. Proceed to the upper colonnade. The reception is in the east wing’s Grand Hall.”

The gates sighed open with hydraulic grace. Lydia passed through, her eyes taking in the sheer scale of the Royal Arms complex—balconies of polished copper, marble columns crowned with lion-headed sconces, the scent of cherry wine and engine oil mingling in the cool night air.

Inside, it was as decadent as she’d imagined.

The Grand Hall was a portrait of imperial arrogance. Crystal chandeliers hung like captured stars above a blackstone floor tiled with the royal crest. Music from a clockwork quartet drifted through the room—violins played by mechanical arms wound with silk cords, their movements precise, soulless, beautiful.

Generals, nobles, and officers mingled beneath banners of scarlet and gold. The air was thick with perfume, laughter, and the hushed tension of men too used to command and women too well-trained in subterfuge. Lydia moved like smoke through it all, offering nods and empty smiles, her eyes scanning every polished boot, every bejeweled corset, every hidden glance.

She found Commander Aldric Morrow near the punch bowl.

He was younger than she expected. Barely forty, clean-shaven, dark hair streaked with a silver line that made him seem more experienced than he perhaps was. His uniform was impeccable—High Guard crimson, tailored sharp—and his demeanor equally so. When he greeted her, it was with the effortless poise of a man who knew precisely what people wanted to hear.

“Detective Vale,” he said, inclining his head with a warm smile. “You honor me.”

“I go where the coin points,” she said. “And your seal carries weight.”

He laughed, soft and smooth. “Shall we talk somewhere more... fluid?”

Dinner was as expected—exquisite, performative, and mostly irrelevant. Roasted pheasant, honey-root glaze, red wine from the Torgath Vats. Lydia ate little. Observed much. One officer, half a bottle deep into his goblet, made clumsy advances toward a courtesan draped in lavender silk. She tolerated him with the skill of someone who’d done this a hundred times before. Another pair whispered in a corner alcove, eyes darting toward Lydia as though sizing her up, or perhaps trying to decide if she mattered.

When the dancing began, Morrow offered her his hand. She accepted without hesitation.

The dancefloor was a shifting mosaic of power plays and whispered promises. Lydia moved with careful grace, letting Morrow lead, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder, her mind two steps ahead.

He leaned in, his lips brushing the edge of her ear.

“My brother Alek was stationed near the eastern foundry towns. Sent to look into a cluster of civilian disappearances.”

“Cluster?”

“A dozen, then two dozen. Then thirty-two. Men, women, even children. No bodies. No trails. Just... gone.”

She raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

“He was the first to suggest it was connected—some sort of pattern, maybe even internal sabotage. That was three months ago. No word since.”

“And you believe it’s connected to the others?”

Morrow nodded slowly. “Too many disappearances for coincidence. Too much silence for comfort. My brother was removed from the records by Lord **Tyrith**”

They turned in time with the music. Lydia kept her expression impassive, but her grip tightened slightly.

“Officially,” he continued, “he’s still on assignment. Unofficially, they’ve scrubbed his records from the patrol logs.”

“Let me guess. You’ve already tried the archives?”

His jaw tensed. “I’m locked out of the Black Registry. I need someone with... creative access methods.”

The music swelled. Laughter filled the hall. A noblewoman tripped over her skirts and fell into an officer’s arms with exaggerated delight.

Lydia smiled faintly.

“And if I said yes, where would I begin?”

He hesitated, then leaned in closer. “There’s a secure node at the Ministry Vault under the citadel. Password access. You’ll need—”

Before he could finish, she pressed the edge of a thin brass pin gently into the back of his neck—just under the collar, disguised with a flirtatious touch.

He blinked, swayed slightly, then recovered. He smiled at her, unaware of what had just been done. A trace of syrup of lyal entering his system.

“Tell me,” she said softly, tracing a finger along his shoulder, “the password. Just in case. Please tell the truth now.”

His lips parted, and the truth slipped out, drawn by the subtle toxin in her needle—a truth compound, designed to extract a single answer without detection.

“Vox Ferrum.”

Voice of Iron. She thought to herself.

“But you may need to get access with the help of another... in a certain brothel.” He said his head spinning from the drug. He thought perhaps it may be the wine was the good batch once again.

“You are something special” He told her truthfully.

She smiled and played the part. “Anything else I may need to know?”

“My brother mentioned one thing -‘beware the Copper Veil’.”

“What is the Copper Veil?”

“I have no idea.” He replied.

She let that settle in her mind as they continued to turn with the music, her hand gently steadying him as the compound wore off.

The rest of the night passed in blur and velvet—drinks, laughter, forgettable conversation. Morrow would remember nothing of the pin or the password, only the warmth of Lydia’s perfume and the way her eyes never quite smiled when she did.

When she left the hall, the fog had returned, swallowing the city in its cold embrace. Lydia Vale slipped back into the shadows, the password echoing in her mind and the gears of something far larger now beginning to turn.

The Velvet Trap

The velvet curtains of the **Red Vixen** swayed like living things, rippling with heat, scent, and the slow sigh of brass lungs somewhere behind the walls. The air was thick with **amberlight smoke**—a narcotic haze that made the eyes shine and the tongue betray secrets.

Inspector **Lydia Vale** moved through the perfumed haze like a ghost in silk. Her corset—blood red with black lace ribs—was pulled tight beneath a cropped velvet jacket, and her legs carried the sharp confidence of someone trained to kill quietly. Her monocle wasn't merely for show—etched in fine brass filigree, it scanned heat signatures, cataloged cybernetic implants, and recorded conversation on a copper thread buried in her pocket.

The Red Vault was less a brothel and more a stage, where **flesh and function** danced for the powerful. Gears ticked within the walls like a heartbeat, synchronized with the music—strings, synth, and steam-driven percussion. Men in top hats and ladies in feathered masks leaned close over silver goblets, while attendants adjusted their steam valves or tightened bolts at their necks.

Lydia's target was already waiting.

Lord Cadwell Tyrith—an overseer of Royal assignments, baron of copper, trade routes, and rumored black-market conversions—sat beneath a stained glass arch, sipping opium-laced absinthe through a silver tube. His eyes glowed faintly with artificial pupils, and a soft chitter of gears could be heard when he turned his head too quickly.

“Ah,” he said, watching her approach. “The new girl. You weren't in the catalogue.”

“I'm special,” Lydia said with a half-smile, dropping into the seat beside him. “They don't list everything you can't afford.”

He laughed—a hollow, metallic bark—then tapped two fingers against a control embedded in the marble table. A privacy dome hissed down around them, filtering out all sound except the gentle hum of the table's voice scrambler.

She leaned close, brushing her lips to the soft edge of his jaw. “I hear you like secrets.”

He tilted his head, curious. “Secrets and sin, my darling. And in this city, one is currency for the other.”

Lydia played her fingers along the back of his brass-gloved hand. “Then let's trade.”

Beyond the velvet dome, a **steam-powered horseless carriage** rolled by the brothel's wide veranda, its copper pipes hissing with rhythmic jets. Above, a **zeppelin drifted slowly** through the moonlit haze, trailing banners for the upcoming *Symphony of Augmentations*. Somewhere in the distance, an **electro-copper train screamed along its levitation track**, flickering with blue arcs as it soared over the rooftops of the **New Virelan Quarter**.

Inside, under red lamplight, the world slowed.

Cadwell pressed a small button beneath the table, and a narrow drawer slid out—containing two glass vials. He offered one to her.

“Memory wine,” he said. “A hundred drops of other people’s dreams. No charge. Consider it foreplay.”

Lydia took the vial but didn’t drink. “Tell me about the Salvation Project,” she whispered, eyes locked on his.

His grin faltered. Only for a second.

“Now why would a courtesan know that name?” he asked, voice suddenly flatter. Less drunk. Less amused.

She let her hand fall from his to his thigh, tracing the lines of the brass gears beneath his tailored trousers. “Because I like collecting dangerous words. And that one tastes like blood.”

He leaned in. “It’s a ghost, darling. Like all true power. Something whispered between the teeth of dying men.”

“And you’re its dentist?”

He laughed again, but this time without humor. “You’re not who you pretend to be.”

“I never am,” she said—and drove the hidden needle from her ring into the base of his neck.

He spasmed violently, eyes flickering. She held his head steady as his mechanical heart stuttered and then rebooted. The serum would erase the last three minutes—just enough.



She pressed a small recorder to his jaw and triggered the pulse.

He spoke.

“Project Clockwork Salvation... repurposing the poor... memory mapping... full compliance... designed for control. Behind it—Governess Altona. Office of Civic Advancement. Protected by the Guild.”

Lydia closed her eyes. That was enough.

She stood as the effect took hold and Cadwell slumped into the seat, dazed. By the time the dome hissed upward again and the world returned, she was gone—leaving only the scent of red roses and the whisper of a breathless, broken secret.

Outside, her boots clicked against cobblestones slick with mist. Gears whirled in the joints of her knees as she stepped into the back of a waiting **steam-rigged cab**, its automaton driver glowing with dull red optics.

“Where to, Miss?” the machine asked in a polite monotone.

Lydia loaded the copper strip into her pocket deck and pressed PLAY.

Cadwell’s voice repeated in her ear: “*Clockwork Salvation... repurposing the poor...*”

She lit a match off her boot, stared at the flame.

The carriage hissed forward, rolling into the crimson night.

The Ministry of Law sat in the heart of Dominion Square, its towering spires wreathed in coils of steam and glowing rune-script that flickered just beneath the bronze facade. Clockwork gargoyles clung to its buttresses, exhaling tiny puffs of vapor every hour on the hour. The city called it the Iron Cathedral, and from inside its walls came the gears that turned justice—at least in theory.

Inspector Lydia Vale stepped out of the carriage and climbed the stone stairs, coat buttoned high, hat angled low. As she passed through the great archway beneath the sigil of the All-Seeing Cog, she gave the doorman a curt nod. He returned it with the same war-weary expression most long-tenured Ministry staff wore—he recognized her, but he’d never presume to greet her beyond that.

The main hall echoed with boot clicks and paper shuffling, the scent of ozone and oil thick in the air. Brass pneumatic tubes hissed overhead, ferrying messages between departments. Beneath the vaulted ceiling, inspectors, auditors, and arcano-legal clerks moved in waves of grays and coppers, always busy, always watching.

She passed by familiar faces—some nodded respectfully, some only glanced. A few looked away too quickly.

Whispers danced behind her heels.

“Wasn’t she seen near Red Lantern Row last night?”

“Optics placed her near the Velvet Vault. Odd place for a Ministry badge.”

“She’s been... odd lately.”

Lydia ignored them.

She walked with the poise of routine—shoulders set, heels clicking with intent. She arrived at her department floor, greeted with a mixture of measured nods and curious stares. Her desk sat neat and unassuming: a stack of reports, a cold cup of recaff, and a sealed copper memo tube labeled with the sigil of Internal Oversight.

A soft knock interrupted her as she lowered into her chair.

It was her immediate supervisor—Director Hiram Vexley—balding, silver-eyed, with copper reinforcements along his jawline and a monocle etched with analytical script hovering just above his left eye.

“Vale,” he said with the warmth of a slow-cooled dagger. “Late night?”

She smiled politely, even as she noted the proximity of his gaze. “Working a lead.”

“Oh?” His tone was casual. Too casual. “Care to share?”

“Copper thefts in the lower ring,” she said, adjusting a stack of reports. “Industrial grade—likely being moved in small, compartmentalized pieces. Red Lantern Row’s proximity to the outbound cargo lines makes it ideal.”

“Indeed. And the, ah, company you kept? Our optics flagged some... interesting establishments.”

His voice hung in the air like perfume—suggestive, poisonous, searching.

Lydia didn’t flinch. “Yes. I had to walk through the Pleasure Grid to reach the freight alleys. I assure you, my time in the district was strictly professional.”

A faint smile crept to her lips—calculated and thin.

“And naturally,” she added, “I wouldn’t expect the Ministry to question its own inspector’s investigative methods.”

Hiram chuckled softly, his smile fading just an inch. “Of course not. We trust our own.”

He lingered a moment longer, then walked away with the stiff grace of a man dissatisfied but unwilling to show it. Lydia watched him disappear into the fog of clerks and brass runners before turning back to her desk.

Later that day, her tasks completed—reviewing theft reports, signing requisition forms, and drafting an update on the West Docks arson—Lydia descended to the lower levels of the Ministry.

The Ministry's lower levels were already steeped in silence and shadow, but the corridor that led to the Black Archives felt more like a tomb than a hallway. Few ever spoke of it, and fewer still had reason—or clearance—to descend those final stairs. Lydia's boots echoed like hammers against the cold iron steps, the walls lined with etched warnings in archaic Imperial script.

At the end of the descent stood a pair of Royal Guard enforcers in full obsidian plate, their armor trimmed with crackling violet runes and embossed with the sigil of the Crown: a flaming cog wrapped in chains. Behind them loomed a vault door that pulsed with dormant energy, as if it hungered to be opened and feared what would happen if it was.

She stepped forward without hesitation.

One of the guards—his eyes augmented with scanning lenses—lowered his halberd and blocked her path. "Clearance?" he asked, voice hollow beneath his mask.

Lydia withdrew her Ministry credentials from the inner lining of her coat and held them up. The guard took the brass ID plaque and scanned it into a small receiver box embedded in the wall. Gears clicked. A light turned amber—not green.

He looked up at her again, less formal this time. "Inspector Vale. Your badge grants you access to high clearance... but this isn't on the docket."

Lydia leaned in, her voice a low murmur beneath the flickering gaslight.

"Vox Ferrum."

The guard stiffened slightly, surprise leaking through the cracks of his otherwise emotionless posture. The phrase was old Royal Code—long abandoned by the civilian corps. "Voice of Iron." Not a password used lightly.

He stepped aside immediately, tapping a sequence on his gauntlet. "Acknowledged. Access logged under Royal Guard override. Proceed."

The vault creaked open, the noise like ancient bones grinding together. The doors weren't electronic—they moved by steam, hydraulics, and secrets.

As Lydia passed through, she heard the guard mutter under his breath: "Morrow must think highly of you."

She didn't answer.

The Black Archives were nothing like the Archives above. Here, the walls were lined in blackened copper, cables drooping like vines across the ceiling, humming with latent energy. Mechanical eyes blinked red from the rafters, following her steps. Ancient tomes were kept

under glass; memory-cores floated in containment jars; the air buzzed with static and untold truths.

She moved through the dim halls until she found the chamber Morrow had described: an unmarked vault door behind a curtain of steam. On it, in etched metal, was a single symbol—a sword plunged into a heart of gears.

Lydia placed her palm against the reader.

Steam hissed. The door creaked open.

Inside were the forbidden files. Projects shuttered by royal decree. Records sealed after purges. Reports never submitted to the public trust. Experiments on memory transfer, automaton-human grafting, and notes on a theory whispered in only the most paranoid of corners:

The Copper Veil. Was scralled on the bottom of the pages with a strange symbol.

It was all here, along with a name she knew only to well.

She took the records and lit a cigarette as the vault sealed behind her and murmured into the silence:

“Thank you, Aldric.”

She walked to a nearby research node, well aware that she was being recorded in the room. “There will be hell to pay for all of this, and I hope it will not be paid by me.” She muttered to herself.

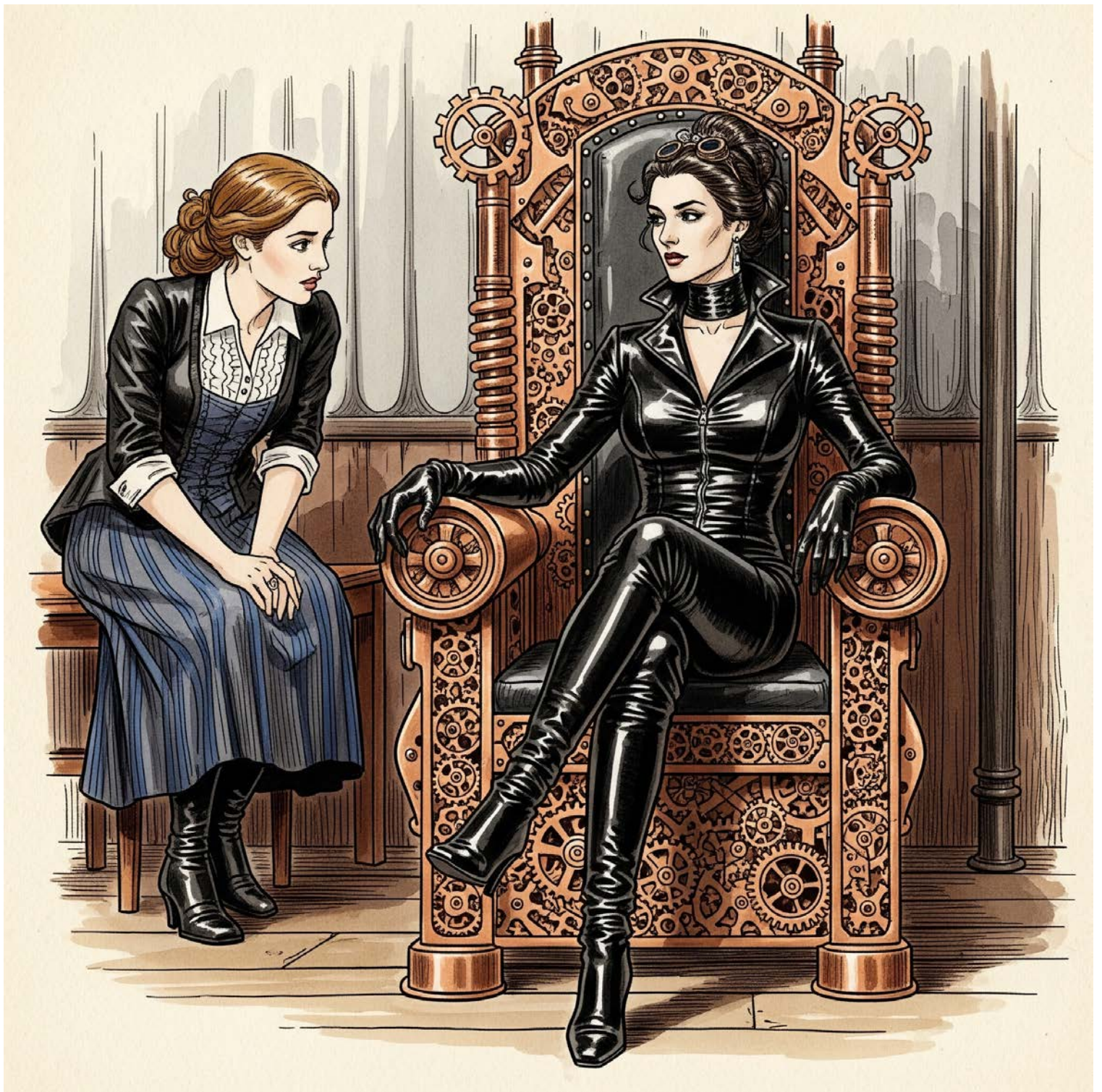
And then, she began to read.

She closed the final file and marked it with her seal.

Then, quietly, to no one in particular, she said, “I’ll need to go back.

To the district.

One more time.”



Chapter 2: Cogs and Skin

The *Red Vixen* pulsed like a living organism.

Steam hissed from bronze joints as the corridors shifted, automated, guided by unseen operators or ancient code. Beneath her leather boots, the copper inlay of the floor glowed faintly with arc-light. The smell of sweat, oil, rose musk, and burning ozone painted the walls like ghost graffiti. Lydia Vale moved past silk-covered rooms and industrial alcoves, careful to note every gear-timed door and voice-activated switch disguised as ornamentation.

This wasn't just a brothel. It was a **temple of control**—where flesh bowed to machinery, and pleasure was engineered.

She paused outside a heavy iron door, one marked only by a **cog inlaid with a blinking red gem**. The hallway lights dimmed behind her. Alone now.

Lydia pressed her gloved fingers to the cog. A breath of warm air swept across her skin as the door clicked and slid open on hydraulic rails.

The room inside was dark.

Lit only by hanging coils that sparked and fizzed overhead, it smelled of waxed leather, oil... and **fear**. Hanging from the ceiling were **display frames**—elegant, horrific—like art installations built from the torsos of once-living humans, now partially replaced. Skin met brass. Steel plates were fused where ribs had once been. Delicate copper piping ran through spinal columns like veins.

Eyes blinked. Watched.

“Sweet god...” Lydia whispered shocked at this level of modifications.

They were still alive.

Not all of them—some were nothing but shells—but a few twitched, the subtle tremor of breath caught in locked throats. On one wall, a row of heads lined a wooden shelf like dolls. Some blinked. Some cried. None screamed.

A voice, female, melodic yet inhuman, came through the overhead speakers.

“Welcome, valued patron. The *Symphony of Flesh* exhibit is reserved for premium access. Would you like to make a selection?”

“No,” Lydia growled. “But I’ll make a memory.”

She activated the monocle’s recorder. In her right hand, the brass ring clicked as a **hidden blade** folded out—thin and trembling, like a whisper. She moved forward, past a hanging body whose eyes tracked her, mouth moving soundlessly.

She leaned close.

“Can you understand me?” she asked.

The man’s voice was rasped and digitized, likely due to a **voice-box implant**. “P-please... Tell her... tell my daughter... didn’t run away... they... reworked me...”

The pain in his words made her throat tighten. He was no one special. Just another name that had vanished from the alleyways of **Old Virelan**. Another poor soul absorbed into the machinery of pleasure for the elite.

Behind her, the hiss of a door.

Someone else had entered.

She turned quickly, blade at the ready—only to freeze.

The figure was nearly seven feet tall, cloaked in a long coat of chain-stitched leather, with **steam valves built into his spine** that hissed with every breath. His face was hidden behind a mask made of glass and clockwork lenses, and his voice came in **reverberating pulses**.

“Inspector Vale. You dig deep for someone already buried.”

Lydia’s stance tightened. “And you are?”

“A servant of the idea. The machine that runs beneath this city.”

He raised a massive gauntlet, and lightning flickered across his palm.

She dove just as the bolt shattered the tile behind her.

The fight was brutal and short—pistons whirled in his legs as he charged, slamming through displays like a rampaging beast. Lydia ducked under his swing, drove her blade into a steam valve, and leapt as boiling mist screamed from the wound. His scream was muffled, almost sad, as he collapsed to his knees.

She stood over him.

“Who sent you?” she demanded.

“Clockwork... Salvation...” he hissed, voice box sparking. “We repurpose... the broken. And you, Miss Vale... are next.”

His heart exploded. Literally. A **failsafe**—implanted to prevent betrayal.

The body slumped, leaking both **oil and blood** across the copper floor. Lydia stepped back, breath ragged, and looked again at the room.

It wasn’t just cruelty.

It was a **factory of transformation**.

A processing hub for the unwanted. The missing. Recast into mechanical sex puppets, servants for the rich who couldn't even be bothered to conceal their perversions anymore.

And worst of all... it was sanctioned. Efficient. Systematic.

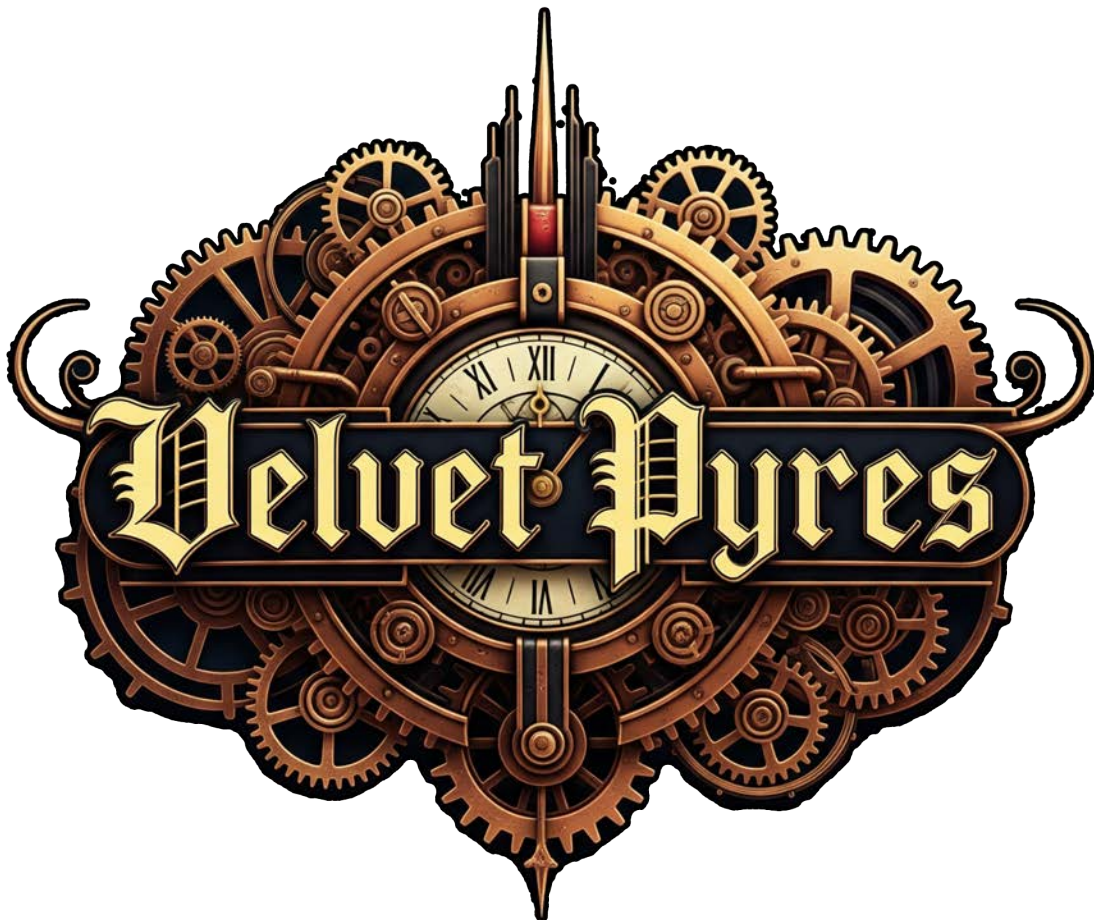
A **woman's scream** echoed from deeper in the compound.

Lydia turned, her blade glinting in the glow of the chamber's overhead coils, and ran toward the sound.

Outside, the world spun on. A steam-driven orchestra played for the elites at the *Zephyrian Ballroom*. **Brass horses** clattered across the cobblestones. Trains howled, lovers drank amberlight on balconies, and the stars above flickered dim and cold.

But beneath it all, the cogs turned.

And Lydia Vale was ready to break them. One bolt at a time.



Chapter 3: Black Lace Interrogation

One name in the archives had been noted by a low level investigator and soon forgotten. Lydia had noted it. She knew where to go.

The *Velveteen Club* was quieter after midnight, when the noblemen were gone and only the scent of absinthe, powder, and spent tension lingered in the air. Chandeliers flickered low with electro-gaslight, casting elongated shadows on the velvet wallpaper and ornate floor grilles that vented steam in slow sighs.

Lydia Vale moved through the halls like a specter in black—leather corset, half-cape, and brass-buttoned riding coat—all details chosen carefully for effect. She descended the back stairwell where the red velvet turned to black, the decor less opulent, more functional. Below the pleasure floors, the *real* work happened.

A single lamp hung from the ceiling in the interrogation room. A red-tinted bulb crackled overhead, giving the scene the soft hue of blood.

Madame Seraphine sat bound to a reclining copper chair, arms resting on padded restraints, legs crossed like she owned the place.

She wore black lace and violet silks, her neckline plunging and her chin high. Her hair was coiled like a scorpion's tail, and two jeweled breath valves were affixed to her collarbone—venting softly with each inhale. She looked bored.

“Inspector Vale,” she purred. “I must say, I didn’t expect the famous ‘Copper Widow’ to be so... deliciously overdressed for me tonight.”

Lydia smirked and sat across from her, legs crossed, pulling off her gloves one finger at a time. “Oh, this isn’t an interrogation.”

“No?” Seraphine raised a brow. “Then what is it? I was not expecting another visit from you for another month or so. I thought you needed a break.”

Lydia leaned forward, voice a velvet drawl. “The break was for your sake, not mine. This... it’s a conversation. One in which you’ll tell me about The Copper Veil... and I’ll let you pretend you’re not afraid of what happens if you don’t.”

A pause.

A low chuckle. “You *are* good, but not good enough for me to tell you anything like that.”

“Darling, I’m better than good. I’m what they send when lies stop working. You know that.”

Seraphine leaned back, eyeing her. “And what makes you think I belong to any such society?”

Lydia stood slowly, walked behind the madame, and let her gloved fingers trail down the woman's bare shoulder. "Because I've read the names in the hidden ledger in the black archives and I know some of the names in you ledgers upstairs. I know who you host. Who you whisper to in the dark. Men with golden eyes and gears for hearts. Men who vanish girls and replace them with machines that smile too wide."

She stopped. "And I know you're not just complicit. You're a curator."

The air between them thickened.

Seraphine shifted in the chair—not in fear, but amusement. "So... seduction, then violence? The classic Vale tactic."

"No. Tonight, I'm doing it *your* way." Lydia leaned in, whispering. "Tell me what I want to know... and I'll make you forget you ever feared me."

The silence was long. Tense.

Seraphine's voice dropped to a whisper. "You've no idea what you're stirring, Inspector. The Copper Veil is *older than Virelan*. Older than the air in your lungs. It isn't a society. It's a doctrine. A theology of perfection. Flesh is flawed. Machinery is order."

Lydia circled her again, now slower. "Where are they based?"

"Everywhere... nowhere. They work through guilds. Orders. Clinics. Most never even realize they're part of it. Just gears in a larger machine. They believe salvation lies in replacing all weakness. And what's weaker than human emotion?"

Lydia stopped behind her and whispered, "You, perhaps."

Another soft chuckle. "Touché."

She pressed a button hidden beneath the copper chair Seraphine was reclining in still. Straps locked, tiny prongs emerged from the armrest, shocking the restraints. Seraphine's back arched, lips parting in a gasp.

Lydia's voice turned cold. "Names. Places. Codes."

"You think you can break me?" Seraphine hissed through grit teeth.

"No," Lydia whispered in her ear. "I think you want to be broken. You just need someone who knows *how*."

She ran her fingers along her throat and squeezed just a bit to restrict her air. Her fingers ran lower to certain places that caused her to tremble more than she had in years. Lydia exerting power over Seraphine somehow pushed her to a place that neither woman had felt before. Lydia leaned in and kissed her deeply on her mouth and restricted her airflow even more as fingers

continued to explore her body. Seraphine shuddered deeply while gasping for breath. Lydia released her grip but kept her fingers in place and let the kiss linger with a smile.

The tension cracked. Seraphine exhaled—a shuddering, reluctant breath. Then, words fell like glass:

“The Hollow Archive beneath the old Conservatory. Level three. They call it *The Brass Reliquary*. You’ll need the sigil: a clock with no hands, surrounded by twelve thorns. That’s your door.”

Lydia stepped away and turned the dial on the chair restraints, releasing them with a pneumatic hiss.

“You’re free,” she said.

Seraphine blinked. “You’re not taking me in?”

“No.” Lydia reached the door. “But the Copper Veil may. I hear that they always punish loose gears.”

She paused, hand on the exit lever.

“Oh—and for what it’s worth...” Lydia looked back over her shoulder, her voice like velvet soaked in gunpowder. “I *was* pretending each session.”

The door hissed open, flooding the room with white gaslight. She disappeared into it like a storm in reverse.

Behind her, Madame Seraphine sat stunned, lips curled in both admiration and fear—slowly realizing she had played a game far more dangerous than she’d imagined. She looked at the room, knowing she likely would not be safe ever again.



Chapter 4: The Clockwork Gentleman

Summary: Lydia meets a charming informant—Alek Trask, a clockwork-enhanced noble—who plays both sides. He offers information in exchange for intimacy and sparks unexpected emotions in Lydia. [Tension, betrayal, and tango-laced seduction.]

The ballroom shimmered with gaslight and perfume, music floating on steam and deceit. The *Davenport Opera House* was alive with dancers in velvet masks, their laughter a distraction from the sinister gears ticking beneath every corseted breath.

Lydia Vale stood in the mezzanine gallery, watching from behind a half-mask of brass and obsidian glass. She wore a black lace gown threaded with copper filigree, her corset lined with hidden blades and lockpicks. The folds of her skirt could conceal a small firearm, though tonight she carried nothing but her badge, her wits, and the invitation sealed in wax.

It read:

One waltz, no weapons. A tango if you dare.
—A.T.

She spotted him near the central pillar—lean, tall, and infuriatingly beautiful. Alek Trask. The infamous “Clockwork Gentleman.” His tailored coat was black with blood-red lining, epaulets polished to a shine, and his left arm gleamed with brass plating from shoulder to wrist. It ticked faintly, a mechanical rhythm that echoed his heart.

He sipped from a crystalline glass, smiled without warmth, and looked directly at her.

She descended the stairs like judgment, slow and deliberate, her heels striking tile with the resolve of a metronome. The music shifted—strings tightening, percussion pulsing in time with her breath.

A tango.

Of course.

“Alek,” she said as she reached him.

“Inspector Vale,” he replied, offering his clockwork hand. “I’ve waited all week for your wrath. Shall we dance?”

She took his hand. “Talk first. Dance if you survive.”

He laughed. “That’s what I love about you, Lydia. You dress like a duchess, fight like a devil, and threaten like an artist.”

They moved into the circle of dancers, her hand on his metal shoulder, his gloved palm resting at the small of her back. The floor trembled subtly—beneath the dancers, steam lifts and gears hummed, adjusting the elevation of the floor in elegant waves.

“I want the names of the engineers working the underground labs beneath the city,” she whispered.

“Such information costs more than charm and sharp heels,” he replied. “But I might barter.”

“Oh?” she asked, spinning under his arm. “What do you want, then?”

“An evening. Dinner, perhaps. Somewhere without handcuffs and dossiers.”

She arched a brow. “You think I’m here for romance?”

“No,” he said, and dipped her low. “I think you’re tired of pretending you aren’t.”

She kicked upward, her knee grazing his ribs. “Keep dreaming, Trask.”

Their dance moved in tight circles—his hand gripping her waist with artificial strength, her body moving like a whip of shadow and lace. Around them, the music swelled, violins sawing beneath brass bursts and steam organ chords.

“You know about The Copper Veil,” she said. “Tell me how deep it goes.”

Alek’s eyes—one blue, one mechanical and golden—flicked sideways.

“I’ll tell you this: the Veil isn’t just a society. It’s a machine made of people. A control system. You take one gear out, two more spin faster. The men you’re chasing are phantoms. The ones who matter... they live above ground. Parliament. Academy. Even the Church.”

“And you’re part of it?” she asked.

“I’ve danced with their agents. Slept with their secrets. But I’m no true believer.”

She spun away from him, their hands linked by tension. “Then what *are* you?”

His voice softened. “A man who lost someone to their vision of perfection.”

Lydia hesitated. For the first time, something unguarded passed through her expression.

“Who?”

“My sister. They called it *enhancement*. But they removed her voice, her laughter, her choice. Now she’s a living archive—walking parchment with gears for thoughts.”

Silence pressed between them.

She looked up at him, truly seeing him for the first time—not just a rake or informant, but a man carved by grief and wearing his charm like armor.

“If you’re lying—”

“I never lie when it comes to loss,” he said.

The music reached its final crescendo, and their dance stopped—bodies close, breaths mingling.

“You still owe me names,” she said.

“And you owe me one more dance,” he replied.

Lydia stepped back, letting the crowd swallow her whole.

“Tomorrow,” she said, vanishing like a blade into satin.

Behind her, Alek Trask smiled faintly and touched the dial at his temple, whispering into his implanted receiver.

“She suspects nothing yet. But she will. And when she does... I’ll be ready.”

Steam hissed from his wrist as the ballroom floor lowered him into the shadows.



Chapter 4: Chambers Below

Summary: Lydia sneaks beneath the Ministry of Progress into the chambers where failed experiments are dumped. She's chased by malformed automatons and haunted by the whispers of the disappeared.

[Claustrophobic horror and despair.]

The Ministry of Progress towered like a black monolith above the fog-drenched streets of Eastgrave, its copper spires crackling with intermittent arcs of static. From afar, it gleamed with promise—an edifice of innovation, learning, salvation. But Lydia Vale knew better. She knew what hid *beneath*.

She moved in silence through the back alleys, cloaked in soot and shadow. Her boots made soft taps on the stone walkway as she approached a rusted service door at the rear of the building, just beyond the edge of the Ministry's electric barrier. One jolt from that fence could stop a steamheart cold—but Lydia had prepared.

She pulled a modified disruptor rod from her satchel and wedged it against the control panel. The device whined like a cornered animal, sparks sputtering, and with a hiss, the barrier flickered and fell.

Inside the Ministry's substructure, the world changed.

Gone were the pristine marble floors and polished brass elevators. Here, the walls wept condensation. Pipes throbbed with strange liquids, and the air was thick with oil and despair. She followed the blueprints she'd stolen—twenty-seven levels down through forgotten freight lifts and defunct pneumatic tubes—until she found a rust-worn hatch marked only with a sigil: an eye sealed behind crossed gears.

"Chambers Below," she whispered.

The hatch opened with a reluctant groan.

The first thing that hit her was the *stench*—a mixture of machine grease, burnt hair, and the sweet, rotting tinge of flesh. Her boots crunched over old bone fragments and shattered lenses as she stepped into the vast underground vault.

A curved hallway greeted her, lined with transparent tubes—each one filled with warped bodies floating in chemical stasis. Some had too many limbs. Others lacked faces. A few still *twitched*.

She felt bile rise in her throat.

Scrawled on one of the walls in soot-black script were the words:

Progress has casualties.

She moved deeper.

Her hand hovered over the grip of her steam-forged revolver as she passed through a maintenance hatch into a wider chamber. A tangled jungle of copper wiring stretched from the ceiling like vines, some fused into open, rusting skulls that once were human.

The shadows moved.

Her breath caught.

From the darkness shambled a figure—tall, broken, its chest a brass cage, steam hissing from a punctured shoulder valve. Its eyes—*human* eyes—locked on hers. One blinked erratically. The other wept oil.

It screamed.

She ran.

Through a maze of half-lit corridors she sprinted, past piles of failed bodies and buzzing drones that had fused with the walls. They reached for her—clawed fingers and trembling voices calling out in mangled syllables.

“L—li...ddd—y...”

Her name.

She stumbled into a side passage, sealed the hatch behind her, and collapsed, panting. Her face was streaked with ash and grime, her chest heaving under the corset that now felt like a cage.

She had to get out.

She had *seen* what they’d done.

All those missing people—repurposed, broken, discarded. The Ministry wasn’t just experimenting with tech; it was *harvesting souls*, feeding the gears with human consciousness, splicing bodies into service machines to build their ideal future.

A whimper echoed from a corner. She turned her lantern toward it.

A girl. Young. No older than fifteen, her arms replaced with metallic limbs, her lips sealed with copper stitches. But her eyes were alive—wide with fear, pleading.

Lydia knelt beside her. “I’ll get you out.”

The girl shook her head violently.

And pointed upward.

A hum began—mechanical, rhythmic.

The guards were coming.

Lydia kissed the girl's forehead, then lifted her onto her back. "Hold on," she whispered. "We're getting out together."

She darted through the collapsing vault, chased by shadows, sirens, and the screeching song of things that were once men.

Hours later, Lydia emerged into the bitter dawn behind the Ministry.

She carried the girl wrapped in her coat, soaked in oil and blood, her own heart beating like a war drum.

Something inside her had broken—and hardened.

This wasn't just investigation anymore.

The girl's body barely weighed anything as Lydia carried her through the soot-thick alleys of Old Bellgrave. Her legs buckled once, but she pressed on, badge flashing beneath the folds of her overcoat whenever someone dared slow her path. The bloodied mess of copper stitches across the girl's scalp was barely hidden beneath her tattered hood, and Lydia could feel more than one set of eyes following them from the shadowed brickwork windows above.

She didn't go to the Ministry hospital. She couldn't. Not with what had been done to the girl.

Instead, she turned down an alley so narrow it smelled like yesterday's furnace breath, and approached the rusted gate with the broken lion's head knocker. Behind it, the neon blink of an illegal mod-shop's sigil pulsed: **"MOD | MECH | MEND"**—barely lit and barely legal.

She slammed her fist against the iron three times. The hidden slot opened. An eye, augmented with three rotating lenses, narrowed at her.

"No walk-ins."

Lydia didn't waste time. She flashed her investigator's badge, letting the edge of her steam-forged pistol show in its holster.

"She's dying," she said. "You owe me, Arlin."

The eye stared a moment longer, then the gate buzzed and groaned open.

Inside, the shop stank of oil, solder, and smoke. A long metal bench sat under flickering gas lamps. Tools hung like surgical instruments from chains, and the air hummed with a low-frequency buzz—one Lydia remembered from the last time she came here for upgrades she didn't want to talk about.

Two men emerged from the back. Arlin, wiry and covered in inked brass lines like some priest of the machine god, and Burl, larger, scarred, and chewing copper nails like they were candy.

“She’s modded,” Arlin said, eyeing the unconscious girl Lydia set gently on the table.

“Barely. The head plate isn’t grafted yet,” Burl added, brushing blood away with a stained glove. “Some copper work on the wrists. Stitch seams haven’t gone green. She’s salvageable.”

“Do it,” Lydia said, digging into her coat. She dropped a pouch of coins, data tabs, and two black-market ration chips.

Arlin whistled, low.

“That’s a damn gift.”

“Not a gift,” Lydia said, rolling up her sleeve. “I’ll give you skin and neural tissue. You still owe me for what I let slide last winter.”

They hesitated. Burl scratched his chin, eyes locked on the girl’s copper-threaded temple.

“Fine,” Arlin said, waving her toward the surgical bay. “You lie still. No twitching while we harvest.”

Two hours. That’s all it took.

When Lydia returned, bandaged at the shoulder, half-dizzy from the bio-drain, the girl was sleeping under a glowing medi-veil. The copper stitching had been removed, and a sterile white wrap protected her exposed scalp. An auto-medpack was cuffed gently to her wrist, dispensing antibiotic nanites and thermal balance every few minutes.

“She’ll recover,” Burl said, voice quieter now. “With the medpack and your payment, her system’s already reverting. Skin tone’s coming back. Vitals are stabilizing. Most people don’t make it this far, not after that kind of procedure.”

“I’ve seen worse,” Lydia muttered, adjusting her coat.

Arlin stepped forward, eyes no longer sizing her up, but watching her like a man measuring his own fear.

“What’s your angle, Vale?”

She lit a smoke and leaned against the wall, half in pain, half in thought.

“I need to know what you know about the Copper Veil. And the Ministry of Progress.”

Arlin paled. Burl stopped his cleanup mid-swipe.

“You don’t want to ask that.”

“I just did.”

The silence hung heavy.

“What goes on in those chambers,” Burl said finally, “makes even bastards like us scared for the future. I’ve seen people modded past human—nervous systems rewired, memory cores inserted into live flesh, hearts replaced with gear pumps that never stop. They call it progress. I call it punishment.”

“I had a cousin,” Arlin added, his voice a rasp, “deep in the modding underworld. Heard whispers of the Copper Veil. Wanted to climb the ladder, get in deep. We found pieces of him for *months*. Strips of his skin stuffed into exhaust ducts. Eyes sewn into machine dogs. One of his lungs was in a display case at the Meatworks Expo last year—called it a living filter.”

Lydia stared down at the girl. Her breath now calm, chest rising and falling softly. For a moment, Lydia saw her own younger sister, long dead.

“You’re lucky,” Burl said, not unkindly. “This girl... she was still in the reversible stages. They hadn’t started the spinal channeling. They hadn’t fused the cranial data-port. Another few days? They’d have hollowed her out. Made her a Courier. Or worse... a Repeater.”

Lydia swallowed hard. Her voice was like gravel.

“What do they do... down there?”

Arlin hesitated. Then he looked her dead in the eyes. “They build gods from corpses, Vale. And they expect us to kneel.”

Lydia dropped her smoke, grinding it beneath her boot heel.

Burl cleaned his hands and motioned toward the girl. “She’s safe now. For a while. But even with your payment, you *owe* us.”

Lydia cocked an eyebrow. “What do you want for what you think I owe you?”

Arlin glanced at Burl. They didn’t laugh. They didn’t smirk.

“We want you to finish this,” Arlin said quietly. “Burn the system. Smash the machines. Tear down the tower. Do what no one else dares.”

“Make it matter,” Burl added.

Lydia nodded once. The room felt like a grave.

“I will.”

“You can take her home, but keep that recovery pack on for a week at least.”

“Understood.”



Chapter 5: Deep Inside

Summary: A moment of crisis and breakthrough. Lydia faces herself in the mirror—what she's willing to do, and how deep she'll go to dismantle the system. She decides to become the villain they fear.

[Power ballad moment of self-realization.]

The moon outside the Red Vault was heavy with ash, a low-hanging bruised coin suspended over a city suffocating in secrets. From the uppermost chamber of Madame Charnoire's abandoned suite, Lydia Vale stared at her reflection in the cracked, baroque mirror above the vanity. The firelight flickered behind her, casting ribbons of gold over her oil-streaked face and torn corset. Her curls clung damply to her cheeks, framing eyes that had seen too much.

She didn't recognize herself.

Her arms trembled from the weight of the steam-pulse revolver still clutched in one hand. The girl she had rescued—the stitched-lip child with brass tendons and a ghost behind her eyes—lay unconscious in the makeshift bed by the hearth. Wrapped in blankets. Safe. For now.

But Lydia was unraveling.

In the last forty-eight hours, she had seduced a duke, blackmailed a madame, run from broken machines built from human dreams, and carried a barely-living soul out of the pits of hell.

What remained of her was no longer clean.

No longer noble.

And the city had no room for heroes anyway.

She looked into the mirror, leaned in close, and whispered:

“What are you willing to become?”

The woman who stared back was smeared with blood and truth. Her bodice torn. Gears sewn into her gloves for faster trigger pulling. A steam injector pipe wrapped like jewelry up her left arm, hooked directly into her enhanced wrist. Her latest upgrade, courtesy of back-alley rebels in the Inkspire Quarter. She hadn't even hesitated.

Somewhere behind the haze of pain and grime was a choice. The same one every soldier, spy, or sinner must make in their darkest hour.

And she made it.

She peeled off her gloves, set the revolver down on the vanity, and twisted the copper ring at her throat—a gift from Alek Trask,—releasing a small needle that slid into her skin. Her rebalancing, as the micro-serum activated.

Her eyes glowed faintly.

Lydia stood straighter.

“You want a villain?” she said to her reflection. **“I’ll give you one.”**

She crossed the room and opened the case she’d kept sealed until now—a velvet-lined trunk wrapped in lockrunic glyphs. She whispered the phrase and the metal hissed apart.

Inside: a cloak of blackened leather laced with hidden knives, a mask that covered half her face in wrought iron and porcelain, and a corset rigged with signal-flares and lockpick rigs. The attire of an urban ghost. A saboteur.

A symbol.

She dressed in silence. The fire hissed as if it recognized what she was becoming.

When she returned to the mirror, it wasn’t Lydia Vale that looked back.

It was **the nightmare of the elite.**

The hunter of The Copper Veil.

The silken interrogator of lords.

The woman who’d seen the truth **deep inside** and chosen to destroy the rot at its roots.

From her belt, she pulled the thin ledger recovered from Alek’s bedchamber before he’d vanished—notes on the “Clockwork Salvation” project, names of ministers and buyers, ports with unmarked carriages, and rumors of a hidden citadel beneath the Parliament Library. The final piece of the puzzle was falling into place.

Lydia turned to the girl sleeping near the hearth and knelt beside her.

“You’ll never go back in a tube,” she whispered. “Not while I breathe.”

The girl stirred but didn’t wake.

Lydia placed a brass communicator on the floor, pressed the etched rune for encryption, and held her mask’s mouthpiece close.

“Sulton? Collins?. Whoever’s listening. I need extraction at Red Vault Sector 3. I’m going underneath Ministry of Progress tomorrow night at 8pm.”

She paused.

“And tell the *Velvet Pyres* crew... I’ll need *noise*.”

The voice on the other end crackled, then:

“Copy that. Will send smoke and fire.”

She smiled grimly and turned off the communicator.

Tomorrow, she would begin the slow burn starting at sunset.

Not as a servant of the Ministry. Not even as a righteous investigator.

But as a shadow in their gears. A wrench in their systems. A woman whose love for justice had twisted into a hunger for revenge.

Deep inside, she was no longer saving the city.

She was going to *break* it.

And rebuild it with blood, brass, and liberation.

She needed reinforcements but was unsure who to trust outside of outright criminals and thugs that owed her for past favors. The *Velvet Pyres* crew were the best of the worst and had used them in the past for subtle work to get her investigations completed quickly.



Chapter 6: Steam and Surrender

Summary: Lydia and Alek Trask fall into a dangerous romance. She learns he was once human, reprogrammed as a tool of the elite. Their bond leads to sacrifice.

[Sexual tension meets tragedy.]

After sending a message on the pneumatic to meet with Alek once again at his residence. Rain sluiced down the curved glass dome of the abandoned aviary in East Cauldreach, the copper gutters howling as steam vented through ruptured valves. Inside, amidst crumbling statues of iron-winged birds and tangled vines long since fused with wires, Lydia Vale stood under the flickering light of a broken gas chandelier, her breath fogging in the cold.

Alek Trask waited by the rusted fountain, his silhouette a sculpture in motion—coat tails stitched with clockwork seams, a half-mask over his jaw, and one gloved hand flexing as if still unsure it belonged to him.

She had not mentioned that she had rescued the girl from the Chambers Below. She'd assumed he was part of the Veil. Sold out. Or worse—deeply involved.

But now he stood before her.

“I thought you’d run,” she said, voice low, knife-edged.

“I tried,” he answered, stepping closer, “but I’m not built for freedom anymore.”

[The fountain hisses—a guttural cough of steam.]

Lydia’s hand drifted to her pistol, but didn’t draw it.

“What are you saying, Alek?”

He pulled back his glove, revealing the smooth, copper-soldered joints of his forearm. Beneath the skin: tubing, cogs, and a faint pulse of blue light. Not just enhancements—replacements.

“They took me after the Revolution of ‘77,” he said. “Reprogrammed my nerves, erased memories. Said I’d volunteered. I didn’t. I was eighteen.”

Lydia’s throat tightened.

“They installed protocol layers. Made me *desire* to serve. I smile when they say kill. I kneel when they raise their hands. I wasn’t just rebuilt, Lydia. I was *repurposed*.”

He closed the distance.

“I’ve been fighting those impulses every day since you walked into that brothel. You made me remember I was a man once.”

The words pierced her more than any bullet.

Rain tapped faster overhead, drumming like a funeral dirge. Lydia's guard cracked—slightly. She reached out, fingertips grazing the porcelain edge of his cheek. The skin was too smooth. Too cold.

But his eyes... his eyes were fire.

"I should hate you," she whispered. "I found that You sold names to the Veil."

"And I gave you others," he said. "Every time I lied, I gave you a truth to balance it. I'm no hero, Lydia. But I'm yours... if you'll have me."

[They kiss—electric, desperate, sharp.]

His hands were careful as they undid the clasps of her belt. She didn't stop him. She unbuttoned his waistcoat, traced the seam where flesh turned to brass. When they fell together in the shadow of rust and ivy, their bodies didn't match. Flesh to alloy, breath to steam. It was imperfect, jagged—real.

There, on the cold stone floor, amidst the whispers of caged metal birds and the sorrow of old machinery, Lydia surrendered—not to love, but to truth. The truth that her cause could not be pure. That salvation would cost her parts of herself, just as it had cost Alek his.

Later, tangled in sweat and wires, she asked him:

"Why did you invite me? You could have run."

He answered without hesitation.

"To die a man, not a tool."

[Lightning outside. Distant alarms.]

Then: a crackle from her communicator.

"Lydia, it's Collins. You've been spotted. Copper Veil enforcers inbound. Five minutes."

Lydia sat up. Her heart pounded faster. "They found us."

Alek rose. His metal frame hissed, core burning. "I'll hold them."

"No," she said, "we both run."

But he shook his head.

"I'm already compromised. They can control me, Lydia. I feel them reaching."

She saw it in his eyes—panic laced with devotion.

"I won't let them make me kill you."

She started to argue, to beg—but he kissed her again, one last time, as something in his neck clicked softly. A trigger. A countdown.

“When you tell this story,” he whispered, pressing something cold into her hand—a brass memory key, “tell them I chose.”

He turned and walked into the darkness beyond the aviary’s broken gates.

She screamed for him, but the gears of fate were already grinding.

Outside, the storm broke open.

Alek Trask, the man with a stolen soul, the gentleman torn between programming and passion, walked into a slaughter he’d engineered for himself. And Lydia... Lydia ran with the truth clutched in her hand.

A truth shaped like a key.

Back at her appartment after checking on the girl, she used the memory key in her own small memory unit, memories and thoughts of another person popped into her head.

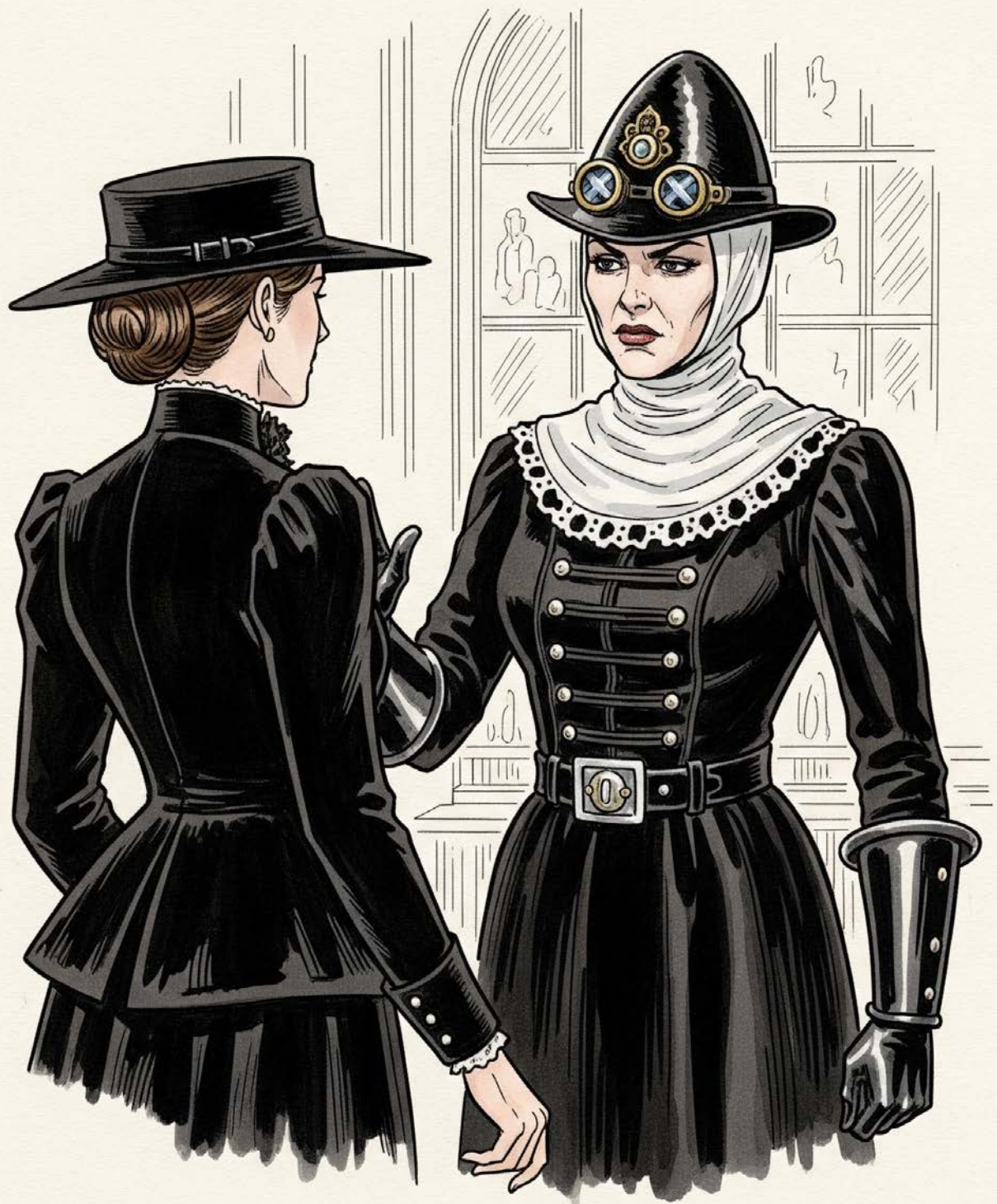
She wouldn’t cry she told herself. Alek had transfered all his knowledge of the Veil onto the key.

She would burn it all.

And tomorrow, the Veil would feel his absence like a knife in their side.

Steam and surrender. Flesh and fire.

She had gained a ghost—and a cause too cruel for mercy.



Chapter 7: Eyes Behind the Mask

*Summary: Lydia discovers that Sister Bellona, one of the enforcers, was once a victim—turned loyal by mechanical brainwashing. She tries to break through, but fails.
[Emotional depth and betrayal.]*

The memory key from Alek burned in her pocket like a second heart—cold, mechanical, and unyielding. It wasn't just information. It was experience. Sights. Sounds. Screams.

Memories.

They weren't hers, but they *were* now.

Each time she closed her eyes, they played like some cruel film reel—reversed screams echoing down iron corridors, children dragged into white-chrome amphitheaters beneath the Ministry, the cold flick of scalpels slicing through skin too young to scar. Alek hadn't shielded her from any of it. The download had been raw and final. He wanted her to *know*.

And now she did.

She hadn't wept. Not once. But she had shaken, one silent hour after another. Not from fear—Lydia Vale had long since forgotten how to be afraid—but from the overwhelming weight of clarity. *This is what they were hiding. This is what the Veil was made of.*

Her hand brushed the memory core again as if to reassure herself it wasn't all imagined. The nightmares weren't dreams. They were records. They were truths.

And they made her resolve solid as brass.

Across the room, the girl stirred in the med-bed. Lydia had made sure the mod-shop's auto-care had been set to maximum. The girl's fever was low, her breathing steady. The copper threads once sewn across her scalp were now pink lines of healing skin. She would survive.

Lydia ran a hand through her own hair, noticing the soreness in her shoulder where flesh had been taken to save the girl. A small price.

The girl was sleeping. Resting peacefully. And for that, Lydia could finally begin what needed to be done.

She crossed the room and stood before her armor shelf. No badge. No uniform of the Ministry. Not tonight.

From the hidden panel behind her dresser, she pulled out the folded layers of her vigilante gear—sleek black with stitch-seam plating, silent buckles, and a long coat reinforced with meshsteel

thread. Her cowl bore no insignia. Her gloves were fitted with chromed claws for climbing and quiet breaking.

Tonight, she wasn't an Investigator. She was a ghost. A storm wrapped in silk and soot.

As she dressed, her mind turned to **Sister Bellona**.

That name had meant fear once. Whispers from the lower sectors, rumors from the resistance underground. The enforcer in white and black, veil like mourning lace, eyes like twin moons of obsidian. A killer trained, tuned, and twisted.

But Lydia knew the truth now.

Bellona had once been a child. A missing poster. A case file buried by time. **Twenty years gone.**

And now? Now she was a weapon of the very machine Lydia swore to destroy.

But *not tonight*.

Tonight, she would try something different. Not just fight—but rescue.

If there was even a spark of the girl left inside the Sister... Lydia would find her.

She fastened the last clasp on her gloves and checked the hidden knife at her thigh. Her breath came slow, even.

Walking back to the med-bed, she leaned over the sleeping girl, placing the back of her hand lightly against the girl's forehead.

Still cool. Healing.

"Rest, little one," she whispered. "I'll make sure you don't end up like her."

The rain had started again outside, tapping gently against the iron-shuttered windows.

Lydia rose, pulled her cowl into place, and stepped into the dark.

Tomorrow, Sister Bellona would remember her name.

And if Lydia had her way—so would the world.

— — —

The chapel of Saint Aurora stood blackened with soot and silence.

Gone were the vibrant stained-glass depictions of martyrdom and mercy—now replaced by industrial filters and iron grates bolted over the windows. Beneath the arches, once echoing with hymns, came only the rhythmic pulse of power cells humming through the pews. The altar was

gone. In its place stood a mechanized chair—half confessional, half operating table—wired with electrodes and dripping oil into copper bowls.

And standing before it, arms crossed, stood Sister Bellona.

Her armor was matte black with crimson trim, a sleek exosuit fitted close to her body like a second skin. Her mask—ceramic, etched with a permanent sneer—hid everything but the sharp glint of her eyes. Unblinking. Cold.

Lydia Vale stepped forward, boots crunching on broken glass and bent incense burners.

“You were Cora Bell. I have the registry records. You disappeared from the South Docks at fifteen.”

Bellona said nothing.

“You had a brother. Milo. He filed a missing person report for three years before he was taken too.”

Still, no reply.

Lydia took a deep breath. Her voice softened. “They found you, didn’t they? Promised something. Safety. A new body. And then they tore you apart and rebuilt you in their image.”

The enforcer tilted her head slightly—almost birdlike.

“I know you remember,” Lydia said. “I saw the scar under your ribs. Your heart’s not theirs. Not entirely.”

Bellona moved at last, reaching up and removing the mask.

Lydia flinched.

The face was beautiful. Terribly so. Sculpted. Almost human—but just off. The eyes were too wide, too symmetrical. The lips too still. But beneath it, something shimmered. A tremble in the jaw. A flicker of breath.

“I remember pain,” she said, voice like static over silk. “And heat. And... music. Before the silence.”

Lydia stepped closer. “That’s you. Not the shell. Not the programming.”

Bellona's gaze flickered downward. Her hand twitched.

“I dream sometimes,” she whispered. “Of the ocean. But I’ve never seen it.”

“You have,” Lydia said. “You were born in a port town.”

A pause. Then: “I liked the sound of gulls.”

Lydia's eyes filled with tears. She stepped forward, slowly, cautiously.

"I can get you out. I know people—there's a resistance forming. You don't have to be their weapon."

But Bellona's face stiffened.

"I am *useful*," she said flatly. "I am precise. Before, I was only vulnerable. Only breakable."

"They broke you anyway."

"No," Bellona said. "They *built* me."

Her hand snapped to her hip and drew a blade—an arc-edge dagger, vibrating with dark energy. Lydia leapt back, drawing her pistol but not aiming it.

"Don't," she said. "Please."

"I have seen what happens when the programming frays," Bellona said. "I kill everything. I become... wrong. I do not wish to be wrong."

"You're *already* broken," Lydia snapped. "That's the only reason you remember the ocean."

Bellona's eyes shimmered—just once.

Then she slipped the mask back on.

"You have thirty seconds to leave this place, Inspector Vale. After that, I will follow orders."

Lydia hesitated.

"You don't have to be their blade."

"I already am."

Lydia backed away slowly, her hand trembling on the pistol grip. She looked one last time into the smooth, impassive mask—into the flicker of something trapped behind it.

"I'll come back for you," she said.

"No," Bellona said. "You'll come back for *vengeance*."

The chapel doors slammed shut behind Lydia, echoing like a judgment. Outside, the air stank of ash and ozone. Somewhere far above, a zeppelin rumbled through the clouds—its spotlight sweeping over a city slowly losing its soul to steam and steel.

And within the chapel, Sister Bellona stood alone—facing the altar of her own erasure, whispering names she wasn't sure were hers.

Milo.

Cora.

Ocean.

Gulls.

Molly?



Chapter 8: Velvet Guillotine

Summary: Lydia incites rebellion within the servant quarters using encrypted messages. A failed execution leads to the first public retaliation against the elite.

[Violence erupts, revolution begins.]

The rain hadn't stopped since nightfall. It hissed gently on the vents and gutters of the **Service Quarter**, a place where broken things—appliances, tools, and people—came to be patched, stitched, and resold to the rich who'd worn them down.

The air was thick with steam, engine grease, and the quiet stench of desperation. Lydia moved through the alleys with her coat drawn tight, eyes scanning the wandering servants—each one a living ghost, dressed in pressed grays and brass-tinted collars, modified for obedience.

Her target stood near a wire-fenced repair stall, inspecting an old silver tray as if trying to decide if it was still worth pawning.

Myra.

Lydia knew her from a dozen minor cases—petty theft, contraband silk, an unapproved music box hidden in her work trunk. Always something small. Always something *human*.

When Myra spotted her, she bolted—well, tried to. Her polished leather boots clacked once on the wet stones before Lydia's hand closed around her arm like iron.

"Easy," Lydia said, twisting her wrist just slightly—not to hurt, but to stop the flight cold.

"Miss Vale—please! I was gonna give it back!" Myra blurted. "Just brought it in for polishin', maybe trade it for a gift for the mistress. You know how it is—"

Lydia's voice was low. "I do know how it is, Myra. I know *exactly* how it is."

She released her grip and slid a handful of copper coins into the woman's trembling hand. Enough to keep her still. Enough to make her listen.

"I need your help," Lydia said. "And everyone you know. All the servants. All the broken ones. I can't do this alone."

Myra looked at her, blinking rain off her synthetic lashes. "What are you even talking about, miss? You been in the dust too long—"

"I made something for you," Lydia cut her off, reaching into her coat.

She withdrew a small **memory core**, etched in tiny glyphs, humming faintly. A new one—not Alek's, but crafted with data pulled from the Black Archives and stitched together by a smuggled Ministry forensics program.

Lydia held it like an offering. “This shows you who you were. Before they rewrote you.”

Myra tilted her head and laughed nervously. “Miss, I’ve always been me. You sound mad. Maybe... maybe you need some rest, huh? You investigate too deep, things start twistin’.”

Lydia didn’t argue.

She pressed the memory unit to the temple of Myra’s copper-enhanced skull, and with a soft *click*, activated the spike.

Myra’s body tensed. Her eyes flashed gold, then deepened to a stormy violet.

And then they filled with pain.

“No—no, please stop—” Myra gasped, clutching at Lydia’s coat. “I don’t want to remember this —my kids—my *Marcus*—my *home*—they said it was all a *dream*—they told me—”

Her knees buckled and Lydia caught her as oil-tears streaked down the perfect symmetry of her face.

“I’m sorry,” Lydia whispered. “But we’re out of time for comfort.”

For a long, terrible moment they just stood there in the rain, Lydia holding her, both of them crying—one with salt and one with oil.

Myra’s voice cracked. “They told me I was never a mother. That I was *born* for this... this life. But I remember their faces now.”

“I know,” Lydia said, holding her tighter. “They stole everything.”

Myra pulled away just enough to look into her eyes.

“What do you need me to do, miss?” she said, trembling. “I want to help. I want to burn it all down.”

Lydia pressed a small packet into her hand—data slates, instructions, names of sympathetic servants and a list of safehouses in the Lower Quarters.

“This is the beginning,” Lydia said. “Pass the memories. Use the codes. Let them *remember*.”

Myra looked down at the core, still warm in her palm. Her lip trembled.

“For my children,” she said softly. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Lydia nodded, stepped back, and melted into the steam. Above them, the zeppelins roared over the skyline, and the shadows of a dying empire began to tremble.

The servants would rise. One spark at a time.

The ink bled red into the velvet-lined parchment.

Lydia Vale folded the letter once, twice, then slipped it inside a hollowed gear—one of thousands scattered across the Ministry’s mechanical maintenance vaults. These were her couriers now. Clockwork crows with glass eyes and cracked wings. Old automaton parts long dismissed by the Ministry’s upgrade cycles. Forgotten tech was the safest kind. It had cost her everything she had saved up to get things going to even get their attention but then it spread like wildfire in an oil tank.

Each message carried the same symbol: a guillotine wrapped in lace, the handle carved like a lady’s corset stay. And a single phrase etched in code beneath:

"The bloom drinks blood at midnight."

The uprising began with whispers in the laundry vents. Then in the hiss of kettle lines. Then in the binary flicker behind the eyes of the cleaning drones.

It was in the bread ration bags. On the wax seals of powdered wigs. Even in the static hum beneath the orchestral broadcasts of the Ministry’s daily address.

By the time anyone noticed the pattern, it was too late.

The Servant Quarters of Gilded Row stretched like a mausoleum of chrome and misery. Rows of bed-cages lined the walls, each barely large enough to lie flat in. A central column pumped recycled steam into the communal lungs of every sleeper, their dreams managed by sedative pulses regulated by the Ministry’s Sleep Harmonization Unit.

They were once people. Now tools.

Until tonight.

Lydia watched from the rafters, coat tight around her frame, goggles pressed to her eyes. Her left wrist was wired into a signal diverter—a crude thing she'd cobbled together with Sullton’s help. Each pulse hijacked the next rhythm of the servant wake-cycle.

She tapped the final code: **“Now.”**

Below, lights flickered in unison. The steam hiss changed tone. A hundred eyelids snapped open—too early. Too awake.

For the first time in years, they saw each other clearly.

“You remember your names?” Lydia whispered into the comm bead.

A pause. Then a chorus of voices, glitchy and soft like morning rain.

“Yes.”

One rose up—thin, wide-eyed, trembling.

“I’m Jonah Tread,” he said. “I scrubbed floors in the Palace Kitchen.”

Another: “Mara Filigree. I was taken from the East Slums at fifteen.”

And another: “We were never broken. Just buried.”

The execution platform was set for midnight. A thief, accused of stealing Ministry tools, was to be “publicly deconstructed.” The crowd was mostly noble onlookers—corsets, monocles, champagne held in chrome prosthetic fingers. A show of order. A warning.

The thief was a plant. Lydia's plant.

His name was Caswell Finch. Former clocksmith. Arrested with fake unapproved blueprints—meant to draw the Ministry’s attention just enough to stage this moment.

As the brass-clad executioner raised the steam-piston axe, Lydia clicked her comm.

“Phase three,” she said.

The guillotine shattered.

Not by blade—but from within. Its supports, sabotaged, exploded outward. Gears turned against their masters. The engine hissed and screamed—and from the crowd, dozens of servants lunged forward.

The guards were not ready.

Oil met blood on the cobblestones. Nobles shrieked as steam-shrouded figures swarmed through the crowd—wielding broken broom handles sharpened to points, tray edges turned to shivs. The air was chaos.

Lydia emerged from the crowd like a blade from silk.

Her revolver roared—six shots, six dead guards. She climbed the ruined scaffold, ripped the chains off Caswell herself.

“You alright?” she asked.

He grinned, bloody and wide-eyed. “That was better than opera.”

Explosions bloomed along the skyline. One zeppelin fell in flames—its Ministry insignia burning like a dying eye.

Bells rang across the city, some warning, some celebratory. The uprising had no center—just the rage of a thousand whispered names.

Above it all, on the cracked remnants of the platform, Lydia stood—her coat torn, blood on her sleeve, hair whipping in the smoke.

“This is only the beginning,” she shouted, voice amplified through stolen Ministry horns. “The gears that grind you down will now grind for *you!* The hands that silenced you now tremble!”

From the crowd, a chant rose:

“Velvet Guillotine! Velvet Guillotine!”

Somewhere in the depths of the Ministry, a silent alarm triggered. Enforcers readied. Sister Bellona’s mask flickered.

But on this night, the people of Brasswall no longer feared their masters.

They remembered who they were.

And they had sharpened their tools.

Lydia walked away from the square where Myra had begun to remember, her coat heavy with steam and consequence. Her boots crunched over gravel and soot, past the whirring gears of broken streetlamps and the distant chime of unrest waking in the city’s bones.

Outside the west gate, just beyond the rusting rails of the old tram line, the **Velvet Pyre Crew** waited.

Their coach—a gutted royal landcarriage now retrofit with a twin-boiler engine and plated with mismatched armor—hissed like a beast waiting to be unleashed. The sigil of their crew, a torch wrapped in velvet, had been painted in quick streaks over the panels.

Eli Thorne stepped forward, his vest wrinkled and his sleeves rolled, holding a parchment in one hand and a flickering cigar in the other.

“We’re ready to get started a bit sooner than planned,” he said, the words low and firm. “Hope that’s alright with you?”

Lydia took the list without looking down, then handed it back with a ghost of a smile. “Good. Let the city hear us tonight.”

Eli nodded. “We made sure everyone hears *everything*. If they ain’t deaf by dawn, we didn’t do it right.”

She turned just in time to catch **Mel Delaney’s** wink. The woman leaned lazily from the opened door of the carriage, one boot up on the running board, steam curling around her shoulder like a whisper.

“You look like hell, Lydia,” Mel said, voice like honey mixed with gunpowder. “I like it.”

“I feel worse,” Lydia replied, climbing in behind her.

Cal sat atop the coach, a mechanical monocle flipped down over one eye, both hands resting on the brass steering yoke.

“Miss Lydia,” he called, “this may be the last time we ride together. You’ve got us doing things... unsavory things. Hurts my conscience, if I’m honest.”

Lydia leaned halfway out the door and looked up. “You can keep every coin you pry out of the elite’s cold dead hands tonight, Cal.”

He rubbed his gloved hands together with glee. “Miss, I must say I’m feelin’ much better about things now.”

She chuckled under her breath—just briefly—then turned her eyes back to the skyline. Somewhere out there, behind spires and gears, the flames were still rising.

“I have a memory key I need you all to see,” she said, quieter now. “It’s important.”

“No need, miss,” Eli said, leaning against the side of the coach. “We already saw it. Raided your apartment an hour ago—just ahead of the Copper Enforcers. Heard they were en route. Tore the place apart right after we left.”

Her stomach tightened. “You got *everything* out?”

“Everything,” Eli confirmed. “Even the things you don’t want to ask us about. Or know about.”

“Oh,” she said, deadpan. “I see.”

“No worries, miss,” he said with a wink. “Enlightened, sexy seductress of an investigator that you are... no one needs to know you had unregistered weapons and mods in a secret panel.”

“Oh—yes, well, that’s...”

Mel cut in smoothly, “And we also grabbed the stash wrapped in black velvet under the floorboards.”

Lydia's cheeks flushed faintly. She crossed her arms. “That wasn’t... public.”

Mel’s grin widened. “Some items may have gone *missing temporarily*. You can come to my quarters to retrieve those. If you want.”

“Mel...”

“Just saying. I have a locked drawer. Very secure.”

Before Lydia could retort, **Eli** cleared his throat sharply, snapping the banter back to focus.

“We saw the memories, Lydia. *All of Alek*. The Copper Veil. The gods behind the gears. We’re giving a concert tonight at the palace—bought off a few officials, swapped our name with the scheduled orchestra. It’s gonna be loud.”

“Make it count,” she said, stepping down from the carriage.

“Wear copper,” Eli warned. “Under that pretty little bodice. We’re expectin’ retaliation. Heavy projectiles.”

Lydia tapped her knuckles to her chest, the soft *clang* of her chestplate ringing out. “Already thought of that.”

“Right, miss. And if you’re comin’ ... use our invite. Might help get you through the palace gates. After the Red Vault, of course.”

“Extraction’s ready?”

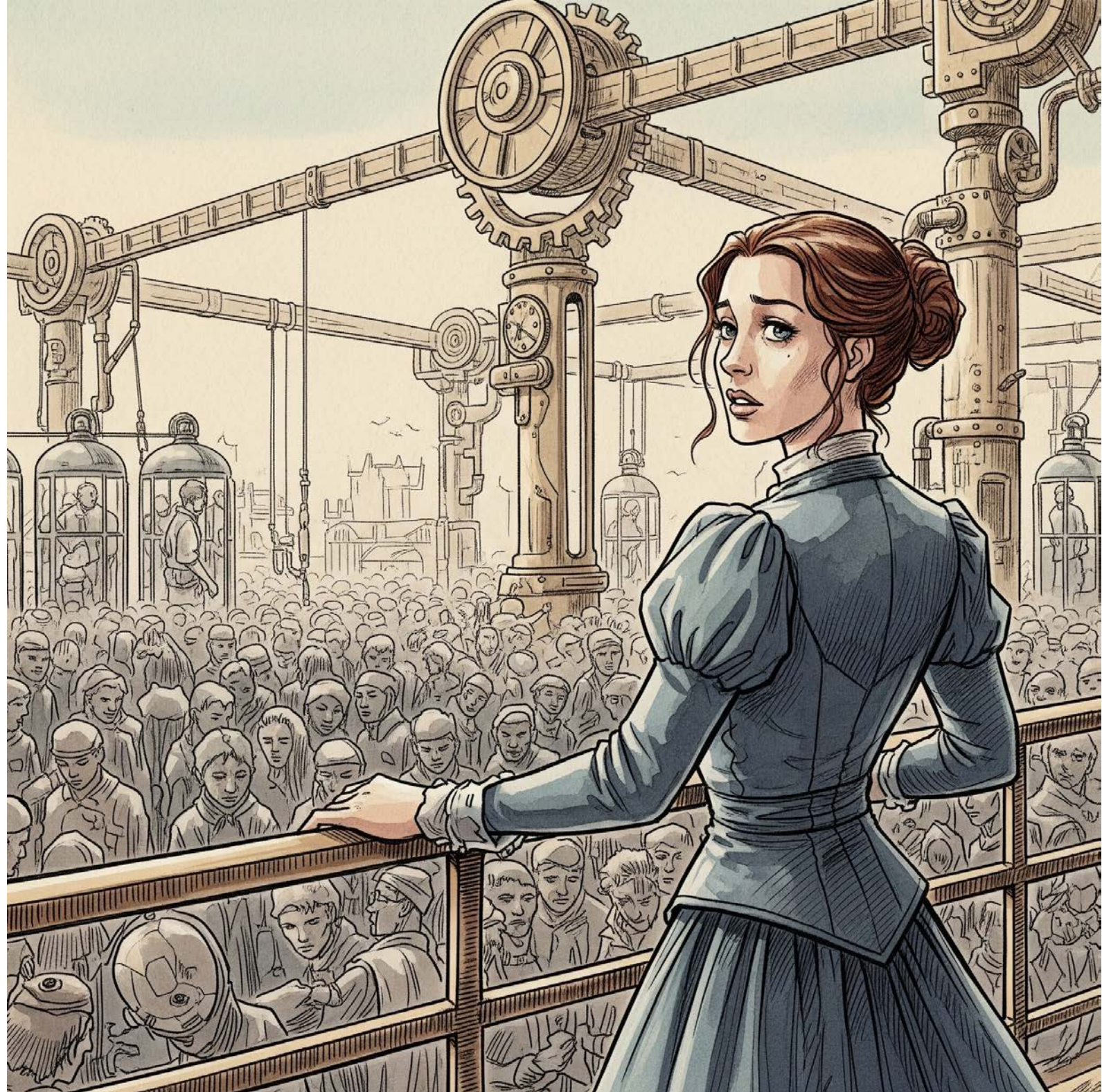
Eli nodded. “Every tunnel, every route. The crew’s been prepping for days. If we don’t get out, at least the truth will.”

She looked at each of them—Mel, Cal, Eli—and gave the smallest nod. “Tonight we light the pyres. Tonight we burn the veil.”

She turned toward the city again, one hand already on her coat’s lapel, the other gripping the last gift Alek had given her: the second memory core. It pulsed like a heartbeat in her palm.

Inside the brass bones of the palace, the gods in flesh and gear were waiting.

But tonight, the music would belong to the damned.



Chapter 9: The Servants of Brass

Summary: Revelations of entire districts of the poor being converted into labor machines. Lydia sees the scale of dehumanization. Lydia is pursued by her superiors for abusing her authority, but uses connections with Sulton and the Pyre crew to orchestrate distractions and gain time. The system begins to crack under the weight of its own horror. [Marching horror and systemic rot.]

The smoke clung low like guilt.

Brasswall's Southern District—once known for its cobblers, coin-punchers, and a thousand tavern songs—was now a forest of stacked turbines and bleeding smokestacks. What had once been homes now churned like organs. There were no doors, only ports. No children in the street, only wires threading between copper skulls.

Lydia Vale stood at the edge of it all, coat soaked from acid rain, a brass breathing mask tight over her face. Her boots crunched bone-white slag beneath her—discarded molars, fingernails, bits of broken coin tags that once tracked workers.

She turned to the shadow beside her.

“This isn't a factory,” she said. “It's a machine made of people.”

Sutton Rigg adjusted his reinforced monocle, tapping the side to focus the lens. Beneath his heavy duster, pistons hummed in his arms and legs—modded not for elegance, but for breach work.

“Every lower district's wired into this system,” he muttered. “Power, transportation, ventilation—hell, even the Ministry's dinner bells.”

He spat on the ground. It sizzled.

“They're building a thinking city. One that eats.”

Her investigation had gone too far.

Three days ago, Lydia received the first summons: an official order to return her Investigator's badge for “overreach” and “tampering with Ministry records.” Then came the agents—her own colleagues—tasked with retrieving her by force.

She expected it.

The Ministry didn't punish treason. It reabsorbed it. Like a gear gone jagged—file it smooth, or melt it down.

That's when she had called in the Pyres.

The Pyre crew was a loose collective of anarchic inventors, rogue surgeons, and one ex-stage magician turned explosives artisan. Their hideout, hidden beneath an abandoned apothecary, pulsed with arc lights and heretical schematics.

Sutton's voice echoed down the vault stairwell:

"You better be able to pay for the damage, Vale. I just promised seven favors and a shipment of illicit ether capacitors for this next bit."

"I've got resources," she replied, pushing past a soldering drone. "But when this is done, we're raiding the Royal Guard's vaults. There's enough hush-fund gold in there to rebuild half the bloody city."

Sulton grinned. "That's the kind of optimism I like. Dangerous and broke."

The plan was chaos.

Lydia moved toward the base of the Servant Nexus—a vast, cathedral-like processing tower—while the Pyres spread through the lower levels, lighting diversions and unleashing a few of their nastier inventions. Clockwork rats filled with shrapnel. Mirrors tuned to scramble retinal optics. Smoke bombs encoded with hypnotic triggers.

Lydia knew it would buy her an hour—maybe less. That's all she needed.

She slipped into the Nexus through a coolant grate. The corridor inside pulsed with pale blue light. Ahead, the walls moved. Breathing. Every few meters, she saw a face in the brass—just an eye, or the curve of a mouth. Parts of people woven into the wall. Not statues. Living. Sedated. Integrated.

She moved faster.

At the central chamber, she found the truth.

A library of agony.

Files stretched along metal shelves, written in binary glyphs, inked with plasma. But the centerpiece was a globe—a glowing orb that pulsed with visible nerve lines. Dozens of servant minds linked by wire, each voice a line in a terrible choir.

She tapped the orb.

A projection flickered: district blueprints, names, diagrams. Whole slums turned into harvest zones. Every orphanage a recruitment center. A thousand homes tagged for "resource reclamation."

One file labeled **“Harvest Queue: Royal Guard Families – Post-Revolt Contingency”** blinked with red urgency.

“They even planned to feed on their own,” Lydia whispered.

Her hands shook.

Behind her, boots hit the metal floor.

“LYDIA VALE!” came the voice—cold, perfect diction. “You are under arrest for sedition, unauthorized access, and conspiracy against the Crown.”

She turned slowly. Five agents. Her old partner among them—Dorian Crow, a man carved from marble and ink.

He raised his pistol.

“Stand down.”

Lydia took a breath.

“I can’t do that, Dorian.”

He frowned. “I know.”

He pulled the trigger.

But the bullet struck air.

A gear burst behind Lydia—exploding in a rain of sparks. Sutton dropped from above, slamming into two agents. The Pyres had breached early. The chaos surged.

Dorian looked at her a moment before fleeing the battle.

Lydia sprinted toward the exit, orb in hand.

Behind her, alarms screamed. The Nexus trembled.

“We light the match tonight!” Sutton roared as he dragged a guard down with his augmetic claw.

As they burst into the open air, the entire block lit up—riot lights, klaxons, the sound of awakening.

Lydia looked at the orb—still glowing. Still singing. She heard the song it sang, a lonely song of stolen souls and lives being pushed to the limits of possibilities at the cost of humanity the elites thought beneath them.

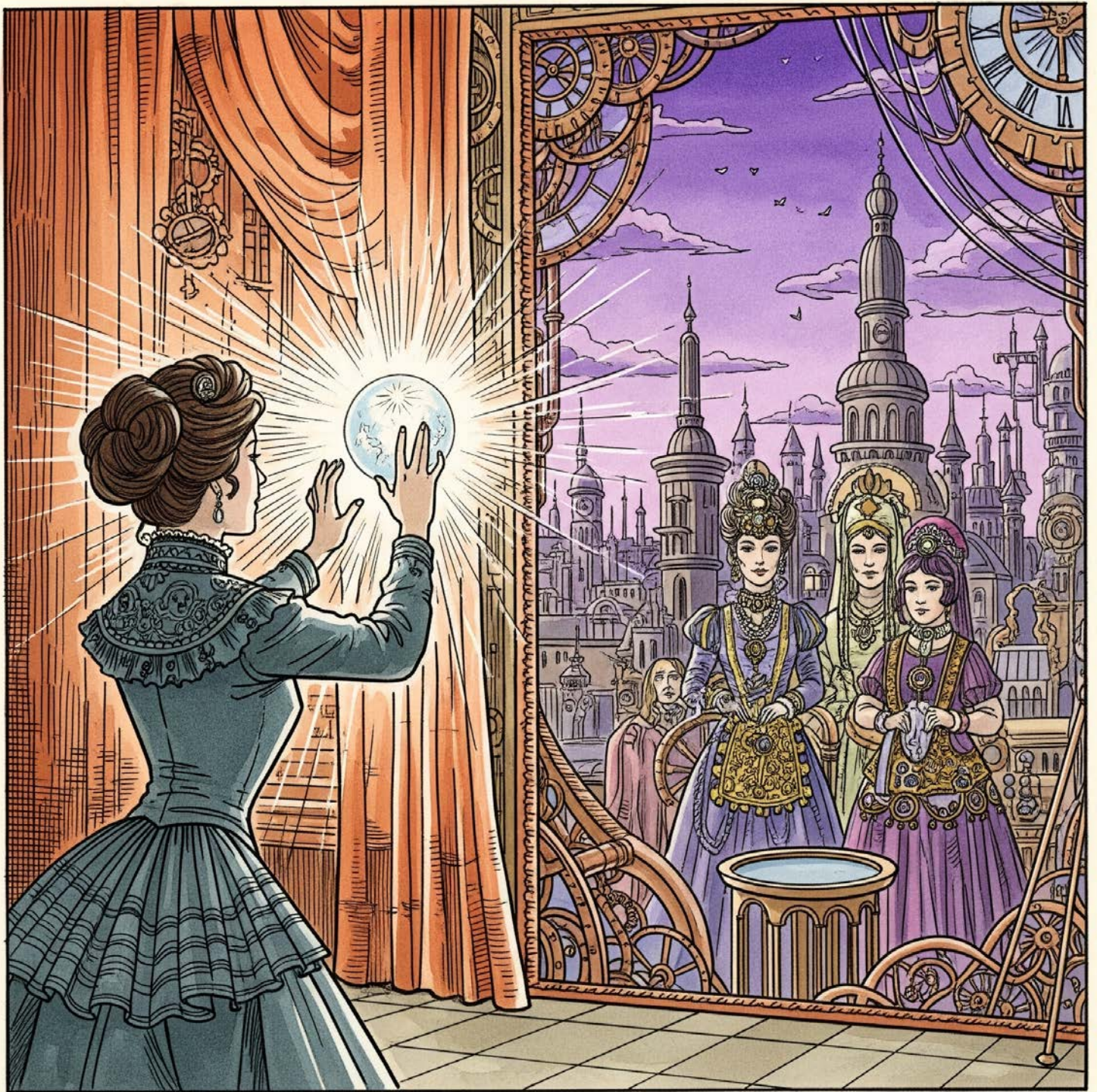
She turned to Sutton, breath heaving, soot on her face.

“This is bigger than anything we’ve seen before.”

He nodded, bloody and grinning.

“Then we go all in for the breakage.”

She tucked the orb beneath her coat and disappeared into the night, a storm of brass behind her and the revolution burning ahead.



Chapter 10: Through the Copper Veil

Summary: Using an orb found in the Red Vault, Lydia crosses into a mirror-dimension—a distorted steampunk parallel world where the elite rule as gods. She realizes this world fuels her own.

[Blended reality, epic twist.]

She did not have far to run. Her former partner was in the hallway with backup.

Dorian Crow's gun trembled. Not with fear—he didn't have that luxury—but with conviction battling memory.

Lydia Vale had once been his partner, briefly a lover. His compass in the shadowed alleys of Brasswall. Now she stood before him, soot-streaked and bloodied, her coat slashed, hair wild from escape, a copper key clutched in her gloved hand like a holy relic.

"I won't tell you again," he growled.

She lowered her gun.

And then she shot him in the thigh.

He screamed and crumpled, clutching at the wound. His men rushed to help, but she raised her gun again, daring them.

"No one else needs to get hurt," she said. "I gave him the easy version. Walk away."

They hesitated.

Lydia turned to Dorian, limping and grimacing against a support beam, fury in his eyes.

"When you calm down—when you're no longer trying to murder me—go to my storage. The Ministry-issue one. There's a footlocker at the base of the closet. It's encoded to my signature but you'll find a secondary release under the hinge. Everything's in there. All the disappearances. The conversions. My whole investigation. It's bigger than either of us thought."

He said nothing.

She stepped back toward the glowing pillar behind her—etched with golden runes and wrapped in brass piping like veins around a heart. At its center: a socket was simply waiting for insertion pulsing faintly with blue light.

She held up the orb that she had stolen from the Red Vault.

It shimmered like quicksilver and bone.

"Maybe," she added quietly, "when you read what's in that locker, you'll understand. Maybe you'll help me next time should the bastards rise up again."

She pushed the orb into the socket and...

The world unfolded.

There was no crack of thunder. No dramatic explosion. Just a lurching shift in pressure—like the world exhaled and forgot her name.

For a moment Lydia was everywhere—every gear turning, every whisper screamed into padded walls, every heartbeat inside the veins of the brass cathedral below the city.

Then she was somewhere else.

It looked alot like Brasswall.

The cobbled streets. The towering steeples. The smell of oil and ozone and perfume. But everything was... cleaner. Colder. Grand palaces floated midair, held aloft by massive chains anchored to copper zeppelins, billowing clouds of steam like holy smoke. Trains with no tracks drifted past, copper plating gleaming with arcane symbols, emitting a low, unholy chime.

The people—if they could be called that—were masked. Not out of fear or disease, but decorum. Intricate masks of silver and pearl, gears ticking around their eyes. Their steps made no sound. Their mouths never moved.

She reached out toward one—an older man in a tailored crimson frock coat whose face was entirely mirrored steel.

He stopped.

“You don’t belong,” he said. But not with a voice—inside her mind, as if carved into her thoughts.

“I rarely do,” Lydia replied.

The man’s face shifted. Not a smile. But a curiosity. Then he vanished, dissolving into particles of brass dust.

The air on the other side was thick—**not with heat or dust, but memory.**

Lydia stumbled as she crossed the rift, her boots landing not on stone or soil, but on a gleaming mesh of copper lattice threaded with twitching veins and whispering sparks. The world here bent in impossible curves, the horizon folding into itself like origami, shot through with **golden steam and glistening blood mist.**

A metallic wind hummed through the cathedral-wide pipeways and ventricles of the Veil, like a living organism built on industry and agony.

She steadied herself. This was no hallucination. This was a **mirror world**—or rather, the *gut* of the machine that fed on her own reality.

Figures moved through the air like moths in formalwear, draped in finery made of leathered skin and threaded chrome. **Eyes glowed from sockets where none should exist.** Some wore the faces of nobles she knew—warped, repeated like copied wax masks melting under a false sun. Others bore the still, servile silence of the palace's domestics—but their hands were tools, their spines glowing tubes, their voices radio static if they tried to speak.

And they *watched* her.

Lydia didn't speak. Words felt out of place here—too clean, too alive.

Ahead, past a colonnade of rusted archways lined with kneeling bodies plugged into siphoning stations, she saw it.

The **central pillar**.

A tower of spiraling pipes, copper and bone interwoven, rising from a molten pool of thought and pain. She could *feel* the sentience humming through it. It watched her too, though it had no eyes. Beneath the thrum of machinery, she could hear the distant **screams of people being fed upon**, turned to warmth, turned to light, turned to code.

She turned from it briefly, bile rising in her throat. She passed a feeding station—a slab with a trough underneath. Sludge was scraped into the basin by a masked servant; when Lydia glanced closer, she saw **teeth, hair, eyelids**, mashed into pulp. A servant beside her hungrily lapped at the contents. Their eyes were blank. Their lips thanked the elite between gulps.

It was the most horrifying thing she'd ever seen.

She didn't understand half of what she was seeing—but she knew *what* it meant. This was the *engine*. The shadow under the palace. This was where all the **“disappeared”** had gone. **Human consciousness fed into machines**, into lights, into power, into pleasure.

And all of it... **all of it** was tied to that tower.

She pulled out her last four bombs—each about the size of an apple, matte black with filament triggers wired to a copper coil. She'd saved them, not knowing why. **Now she did.**

Kneeling at the base of the tower—where no one seemed to notice her, or perhaps simply didn't care—she placed one near a crack in the plating, one near the base joint, another near a pressure valve, and the last tucked behind a purring intake vent. **Each location sung to her in its own language of ruin.**

The trigger clicked into her palm. Her thumb hovered over it.

She stared upward—**at the coils**, at the pulsing glass tanks filled with spinning soul-flames, at the tubes like umbilical cords connecting to every palace, every noble, every Minister in her world.

Then she turned.

She stepped through the rift she'd carved with Red Vault Orb—**not looking back**.

The Veil shimmered as she exited. One breath. Two.

And then—

Click.

The bombs detonated one after the other. Nothing at first.

No sound. No shake. No release.

But then—**a ripple**.

The copper hummed with rising panic. Pipes convulsed. The central tower let out a sound that wasn't a scream, wasn't a song—**it was both**.

Lydia looked up, already fifty feet from the Red Vault, heart still beating hard. A second ripple hit the sky above.

The entire Veil began to **fracture**—as if the reality it held together had never been meant to hold.

It didn't shatter like glass. It **melted**. Unfolded. **Collapsed inward**.

A blackness spilled out—not empty, but full of undone souls, forgotten voices, stolen memories. It consumed the palace reflection, the false nobles, the feeding pits, the tower of sentient brass. **All of it.**

The world screamed as it died.

And then it was gone.

Lydia stood a moment, back again in her world, the orb searing in her pocket, and a mission still burning in her bones.

She did not know how long she had been away but in her world, the rain had stopped.

She collapsed to her knees beside the Veil gateway, breath catching in the night air. The scent of smoke still lingered—but this time, she knew what had to burn.

She stood, ignoring the pain in her body and heart.

“Time to burn the palace,” she muttered.

And she walked into the storm.



Chapter 11: Burn the Palace

Summary: With an army of rebels, Lydia storms the palace of gears. Explosions, orchestra-backed carnage. Alek sacrifices himself to destroy the central control node. [Epic revolution.]

The Palace of Gears stood radiant, bathed in amber and violet hues cast by arrays of floating lanterns and steam-born projectors. A thousand lights reflected off polished brass spires and crystalline panels, giving the entire structure the surreal appearance of a ship adrift in some heavenly current. The scent of spiced wine and perfumed oil filled the air, mingling with the hum of orchestral strings and the buzz of static from live audio relays.

Within the gardens, the **elite reveled**, silk-gloved hands clutching flutes of bubbling drink, their laughter like porcelain clinking on silver trays. They danced in time with the rhythm of **Velvet Pyre's performance**, amused and intrigued by the raw, theatrical rebellion of the sound.

"A charming little circus," chuckled Minister Vantrel, sipping deep from a chalice laced with narcotic goldfruit. "The lower castes certainly are imaginative. How delightful."

"Quite bold of them," said another, a Duchess with half her face replaced by decorative chrome. "Singing of revolution and burning empires right here in our courtyard. It's positively romantic."

They didn't hear the **warnings embedded in the verses**, or perhaps they simply chose not to understand. Velvet Pyre sang in double meanings, voices honey-slick and sharp as knives, weaving tales of stolen names, rusted chains, and the fall of hollow gods. They strutted the stage with electric confidence, each beat matched by a calculated flash of light and a pulse from the hidden systems beneath the cobbled platform.

Every flash. Every beat. A code.

From her vantage near the upper fountain path—**just beyond the edge of the main courtyard**, Lydia stood cloaked in the folds of nobility's own blindness.

Her hair was pinned high in a severe style, matching the elegant black formalwear of a noblewoman of the Archives. On her arm was the stamped copper **invitation from the Pyres**, gotten by backchannel bribery and stolen name switches. The Royal Guard at the inner gate hadn't given her more than a second glance.

She exhaled slowly. Her breath made no mist in the warm night, but the tension in her chest coiled tight like a spring.

The **Palace's copper access tower**, the backline heart of the control hub linking to the Copper Veil world, had already gone silent. Lydia had made sure of that. With the rift bombs placed and the memory of the tower's collapse still burning behind her eyelids, she knew the elites above had no idea they were **already severed** from their private god-machine.

They danced anyway.

“You’ll all die believing the world still loves you,” she muttered, almost tenderly.

Then she raised her gloved hand.

The signal.

On stage, Eli Thorne’s voice changed pitch mid-line, drawing out the word “*glory*” into a howling crescendo. Mel Delaney kicked into a slide riff that cut across the music like a scream through silk. Behind them, Cal dropped a steam-stoked hammer onto the percussion device, igniting the pre-wired rig buried beneath the staging floor.

The first wave of fireworks launched—a spray of red and violet flame that towered over the garden, illuminating the stunned faces of the upper class. The crowd clapped at first. It was all a performance to them.

But then the second wave hit.

And the **booms were real**.

Servant uniforms were shed, revealing armored underlayers. Weapons drawn from drink carts, from instruments, from violin cases and candlestick cores.

The guests had no time to scream before the first volley of concussive smoke bombs hit the crowd. Blinding light, shattering sound—**a revolution cloaked in celebration**.

Velvet Pyre played on, now more feral and intense, Mel’s guitar notes cutting through the chaos like artillery. Eli’s voice dropped into a growl, no longer poetic—just raw truth and fury. The time for metaphor was over.

From every corner of the garden, Lydia’s *other* guests arrived—**the servant army**, formerly docile, now armed with truth, stolen memories, and industrial tools turned into makeshift weapons.

“Make sure the Ministers get a front row view,” Lydia said into her comm bead. “Let them see what freedom looks like.”

Her boots clicked softly across the now-panicking marble walkways as she made her way toward the palace steps. Firelight danced on the ornate metal walls as she passed. Screams rose behind her. Gunfire began to answer.

Still, she smiled. Not from malice, but from **resolve**.

This was only the beginning. The elite had built their throne on blood and stolen light. And tonight—

they would watch it burn.

The sky was bleeding fire.

Lydia watched as the first salvo roared overhead—sulfuric steam and ruptured brass thunder echoing off the palace spires. The Palace of Gears—heart of the mirrored city—shuddered beneath the storm. It was time.

She turned to the ragtag legion behind her.

Soot-faced revolutionaries with blades forged from broken clockwork. Rogue investigators from the Ministry ranks who had read her reports and cast their badges into the mud. Among them stood Dorian Crow, his leg bound in copper-thread bandages, a rifle slung over his shoulder and grim defiance in his eyes.

"You were right," he said simply.

That was all Lydia needed.

She turned back toward the palace, pulled down the rust-colored goggles from her brow, and signaled to Sutton—riding the steamcrawler-tank they'd cobbled from a repurposed delivery hauler and a church organ engine.

The massive machine screeched forward with an aria of horns and percussion, steam venting like a volcanic fury. Behind it, the Pyre Crew surged in full brass-blooded fury—modified bodies gleaming in the firelight, some with exposed gears turning where ribs used to be, others dragging makeshift rail-cannons bolted to their spines.

"FORGED IN FLAME!" screamed Sutton, as he crashed through the palace gates.

Inside, the palace of gears screamed.

The walls twisted, alive with copper veins and shuddering pipelines. Defense drones spilled from hidden alcoves—winged, bladed, glowing with incinerator cores. The rebels met them in close quarters: blades sparking, screams echoing, gunfire drowning in the orchestral pulse of chaos.

From above, strings and brass sounded as the elite fled into floating lift-cages, soaring toward the upper cathedrals—but Lydia had planned for this. Grapple-chained air skiffs rose from hiding and latched onto the ascending lifts, swarming with revolutionaries who fought through glass and gold to drag the oppressors back to the earth they exploited.

"Take the chambers!" Lydia shouted to Dorian. "They store the orbs of the dead in the lower sanctum!"

He nodded and vanished into the tide.

In the central control chamber—a dome of glistening steel and floating machinery—Lydia found Alek Trask waiting. She thought he was imprisoned or dead... but Dorian must have freed him somehow.

He was already bleeding. Half of his synthetic spine exposed, wires trailing like a decaying bouquet. He looked up at her, one eye blackened, the other still glimmering faintly gold.

“They’re linked to this,” he said, gesturing to the crystal core thrumming in the center of the room. “The orbs. The minds. Every command... every override.”

“How do we stop it?”

Alek smiled, though his face winced with the effort. “There’s no remote switch. It’s designed to outlive gods.”

He pulled free the last connection from his spine—jerked it like a blade—and stumbled toward the node.

“Alek—”

“Let me be the ghost in their machine.”

He slammed the end of the exposed wire into the crystalline node.

There was a pause. The gears stilled.

And then—

A burst of blue light surged outward, vibrating reality, cracking walls, snapping struts from ceilings. The node screamed in harmonic despair, and the entire system began to collapse inward on itself, folding like a dying star.

Outside, the palace began to crumble.

Lydia stumbled from the gates, bloodied and coughing from the vaporized debris. Behind her, Dorian dragged a half-conscious nobleman—one of the Copper Veil’s highest overseers—whose mask had been torn clean off. No one bowed to him now.

The rebels surrounded the square.

From the balconies, the enslaved workers began to emerge, blinking into the firelight for the first time in years. Some wept. Some collapsed. Some simply stared.

A single note rose.

One voice.

Then another.

A chant.

Then a song.

It was the hymn of the copperbound, once silenced in the depths of the veil's empire. Now it echoed into the shattered sky as the flames licked higher.

Lydia dropped to her knees in the square, Alek's broken memory core clutched in her hand. The war was not over.

But the palace had burned.

The gears had ground to silence.

And the world would never turn the same again.



Chapter 12: The Ballad of the Pyres

Summary: Lydia walks the burning streets as the city is freed. She lights a final pyre with the names of the disappeared. The revolution is just beginning, but the tyrants have fallen.

Cinematic conclusion, emotionally bittersweet.

Rain kissed the ruins.

Thin, silvery sheets fell over a city still smoldering from revolution—hissing quietly as they met fire and steel. The once-gleaming spires of the capital were cracked open, bleeding golden light and twisted brass. Steam hissed from broken veins in the cobblestones. Above it all, the Palace of Gears lay in ruin—its central tower a jagged silhouette against a sky lit by pyres.

Former Inspector Lydia Vale walked the street alone.

Her coat—once Ministry-pressed and tailored—was torn and rain-soaked, darkened by soot and memory. Strapped to her back was a ledger of names—pages salvaged from the cathedrals of record and the under-vaults of the Veil. Names of the vanished. Names the world had been trained to forget.

They would not be forgotten tonight.

She came to a broken square near the copper rail terminal, where the remnants of the rebellion had gathered. The Pyre Crew stood in a half-circle, faces blackened, eyes hollow and hopeful. Rebels with clockwork limbs. Orphans with ash on their cheeks. Even former guards, who now wore no uniforms, only remorse.

In the center stood a towering pile of broken servitor parts, polished bones, copper masks, and memory-engraved plates—personal tokens from those who had been claimed by the Veil's machines. Lydia climbed the pyre carefully, kneeling at its summit. She pulled a match from her coat and struck it against the heel of her boot.

She paused.

Whispers stirred in the rain, in the silence between breaths.

Then—she lit the pyre.

Flames rose with sudden fury, leaping skyward in copper and crimson hues. Heat wrapped around the crowd like a fevered hymn. Lydia stepped down, her expression unreadable, as thunder grumbled low over the burning city.

Footsteps approached behind her—measured, calm.

A shadow moved beside her.

Former Royal Officer Aldric Morrow came through the veil of smoke, his blue-and-silver coat soaked through, the gilding at his collar dulled by rain and loss. His eyes were dark with understanding now—weighted by truths Lydia had fought to expose.

He stood next to her, silent.

Without a word, Lydia reached into her coat pocket and held out a small, scorched object: Alek's memory core, the orb she had taken from the Red Vault. He was fractured but contained inside. He helped her, he knew she was able to help. He had used whatever interface to open the rift and show her the connections to the elite and the otherworld. The smooth glass was cracked, the faint glow within it flickering, like a dying heartbeat.

"I'm sorry," Lydia said. Her voice caught for the first time in days. "He was... more human than any of them. He opened the door to the truth and to our freedom."

Morrow took the core with shaking fingers. His expression didn't change—he only nodded slowly, as though his lungs couldn't yet form breath to speak. Then he reached out and gently took her hand in his.

They stood together like that for a long time, as the pyre blazed and the rain began to weep.

Below the square, the bells of the ruined church rang without being struck. Wind had caught the great bronze mouth, and now it tolled in mourning and in hope.

In the distance, airships drifted without pilots—untethered symbols of a shattered regime. Somewhere, an automaton wept quietly, its code broken, its orders lost.

And the people—those forgotten and fused, those who had survived—began to sing.

It wasn't a song of triumph.

It was a song of remembering.

A ballad of the pyres.

Lydia closed her eyes.

Alek's voice lingered in her thoughts—not a machine's transmission, but the whisper of a man who had given everything. Behind her, the names of the lost burned bright in the fire. Before her, the city awaited rebirth.

"There's more to do," Aldric said softly.

"There always is," Lydia replied.

But for now, they held on.

Together, beneath the rain, beside the flames.



Prologue: Ash and Antlers

Years had passed since the Palace fell. Since the Veil ripped open and screamed its death into the sky.

The city that had once been all gears and whispers was now a place of open breath, soot-washed sunlight, and the quiet pulse of rebuilding. The people—those who remained—had reclaimed the bones of the old world. Not to restore it, but to bury it and build anew from the roots.

Beyond the northern wall, the wilds had begun to encroach again, pushing through the once-barren wastes with moss and bark. Forests returned, and with them, creatures that had vanished from memory.

Lydia and Aldric stepped through the gates of New Virelia just as the last of the sun bled gold across the sky. Between them, slung on a pole of salvaged steel and oak, hung the cleaned and gutted body of a forest stag.

Eli Thorne stood leaning against the side of the gatehouse, sleeves rolled, a smudge of something dark on his cheek—synth grease or ash, it was always hard to tell with him.

“Good hunting, I see?” Eli called, nodding at the stag.

Aldric handed off the pole with a grunt. “Very.”

He stripped off his gloves and wiped his brow. “Found four nobles in hiding. East ridge ruins.”

Eli whistled low. “That still happening, huh?”

“They had a device,” Aldric added, voice dry.

“Trying to reconnect to the pillar,” Lydia said, her boots crunching the gravel as she joined them. She clapped Eli on the shoulder. “And?”

“Boom,” she finished with a crooked grin, wiping dried blood from her arm.

Eli barked a laugh. “Boom, she says.”

The three of them shared a moment of silence, the kind that settled between old warfolk too familiar with violence to raise their brows at it anymore.

“Where’s the little one?” Lydia asked, shrugging off her coat.

“Running circles ‘round Melinda last I checked,” Eli said, shaking his head with a fond scowl. “Asked where you were.”

“And you said?”

“The truth. You were off hunting.”

Lydia raised a brow. “And she was okay with that?”

“No. She stomped her foot and demanded the truth.”

Aldric chuckled as he hung his coat on a hook by the door.

“She kinda knows what we do now,” Eli admitted, scratching his head.

Lydia sighed, but not in frustration. Just tired fondness.

“Well,” she muttered, “just as well. At least she’s talking again.”

From the side hallway, bare feet slapped against the old wood. A blur of movement crashed into Lydia’s legs—arms small but tight around her waist.

“Lydia!” the little girl squealed.

“Hey, Molly,” Lydia said, kneeling down with a smile and brushing a curl from the girl’s forehead. “I missed you too.”

“Now go wash up. Eli and Sutton need to get dinner going.”

“Yes ma’am!” Molly chirped, scampering off toward the back rooms.

Aldric watched her go, his gaze softening. He pulled Lydia in for a quiet, wordless hug. She let herself rest in it for just a second.

“Go do what Lydia says,” Aldric added as the child vanished around the corner.

As they stepped into the old converted station that now served as their home and hub, Eli paused at the prep table. He stared at the stag for a moment—its chest already exposed, muscle and bone under the knife of necessity.

“That device they were making...” he started.

Lydia dropped a canvas satchel beside him with a dull thunk. “I brought what was left of it. Smashed mostly. But the copper spine and node ring survived.”

Eli whistled again, softer this time. “You always bring me the most haunted souvenirs.”

He opened the bag and peered inside, expression shifting to something distant. “This ain’t just noble scrap. This is Veil-grade logicwork.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Aldric said, already unbuckling the harness he used to carry the stag.

“Just do me a favor,” Lydia added, “don’t try turning it back on.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Eli said, drawing his blade delicately across the stag’s ribs. “Besides, I’ve got dinner to prepare.”

The smell of roasted herbs and firekindled broth already drifted from the kitchen.

From beyond the courtyard, Melinda could be heard scolding Molly again—something about boots on the table and stolen pepper pods. The wind outside carried the scent of iron and spring.

Aldric poured a glass of redroot and sat by the window, watching the sky darken.

Lydia leaned in the doorway, eyes flicking between the old world and the new.

The war was long over.

But there were always shadows.

And if they rose again—

Well.

They'd be waiting.

Together.

About This Story

Deep Inside: The Velvet Pyres Chronicles

Written by **The Velvet Pyres**, in collaboration with **Graham McMurtry** of **ArJo Publishing**

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Cover art, layout, and design were developed collaboratively by **ArJo Publishing** and **Riffuge Studio Productions**, with great care and more than a few midnight sessions.

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The Velvet Pyres are:

- **Eli Thorne** – Lead vocals, rebellion ringleader
- **Melinda Delaney** – Strings, sabotage, and starlight
- **Cal Ashton** – Keys, wheels, and combustible tech
- **Mandy Stone** – Percussion, power, and tactical rhythm
- **Wallace Costello** – Basslines and deep state disruption

The Velvet Pyres are available for **gigs, tours, private concerts**, and they would *love* to note (for the record) that if **Netflix, HBO, Disney**, or any visionary media studio wants the rights to adapt *Deep Inside*, they are *absolutely* ready to star **as themselves**. Just say the word.

Join the revolution. Turn up the noise.
And remember: the fire never dies.



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