

# GIRL IN SILK

Vanyia's body curved in the way it had for years, a smooth transition from trick to trick. Thirty feet above the furnished marble tiles and a velvet-gold ballroom she'd never afford, dancing in rich aerial silk.

*Ia, use your core. Slow and graceful.* Her late father's words dripped in her head.

She twirled down, making a drop that parts the crowd in half, clapping. Expensive perfume matched with glitter and jewelry flooded her senses—the city's elite. Exhilarating, always.

For the past two years, Vanyia had been maintaining her family's decaying reputation as a circus business ever since her father died and mother fell sick. After that, their entire empire crumbled, brick by brick. In the half-decade of Vanyia's late father passing, she was creating the clone of their family's former glory show after show. In the midst of it all, she found someone to live for—her lover, Adrein. She abstained from her burden carrying the facade of a fallen business, and started freelancing with Adrein, the talented streetdancer and safe cracker she fell in love with.

It was all glitter and games, until Adrein worked for the *Hüer*, a major gang built on selling illegal dragon and wyvern scales. On one heist to steal gold from a rival gang's coffers, they were caught by the guards. Now sitting in the dingy cells of an Andras *Crobras* quarter, most likely so that he could open the safes of other rival gangs.

This was the first time, Vanyia realized, that she performed by herself in the past two years. She was flying solo tonight, and for a reason. She didn't come here to please the royals, no. She came here for

leverage—the gang leader’s ledger. It could potentially bring down his entire illegal empire, full of costs, black market shipping routes, all sorts of valuable information.

Then she saw him— the man that started it all. A feathered tophat covering the oiled, blond hair of the person up in the private box balcony.

There he is.

A subtle raise of a champagne glass towards him, the feathered hat gestured. *Come, let’s talk trade.* The man, Pyotr, knew that she was here for Adrein. Oh, that Andras *Crobras* scum. Just thinking about him made her blood boil. Gang leader or not, she was going to be his downfall.

Swinging, more grand and violent yet, she leaped and landed on Pyotr’s balcony railing, silk slippers silent and dropped into a deep, mockful bow before him. Pyotr locked his sharp green eyes, full of masked cruelty and ruthlessness on Vanyia. He swirled the champagne.

“You’re late, Vanyia. Or has the Carlis family diminished to a small gremlin like you? I expected you three routines ago.”

Vanyia didn’t falter in her flawless act. “A good performer always makes the crowd wait, Pyotr.” Her eyes found the slight bulge in his fancy tailcoat—*the ledger*. One reach away. “I see you wore your tailcoat this evening. Is it for hiding a lack of spine, or bad posture?”

Pyotr chortled, his square face amused. He leaned forward, enough for Vanyia to smell his atrocious breath laced with alcohol. “It hides many things. Including the keys to that safe cracker friend attempting to bleed my coffers dry last week. Tell me. Is he always that clumsy, or did he just want to see my cells from the inside?”

“He didn’t lose his touch. He just didn’t expect you to change the combination three times in one night,” Vanyia shot back. Her smile never slipped. “Poor camaraderie, frankly.”

“Well, that poor camaraderie shall cost him his life.” Pyotr’s eyes darkened, his gang crest glinting in the spotlight. “He breaks into my vault, he’s mine now. He cracks my rival’s safe at dawn, then he’ll be fed to the wyvern. I assume you came here. To offer yourself as a replacement?”

Oh heavens, was his smirk unbearable. A cold calm fluttered into Vanyia, settling in her heart. “I don’t do labor, I came to make a trade,” she hissed, eyes frigid. “Give me that ledger, and I won’t have to tell the room how you cried during the dock raid last month.”

Pyotr encircled his hand on Vanyia’s wrist, clamping like shackles. “Pretty mouth, but terrible leverage. Look down, my darling. My guards cover every exit and inch of this place. You aren’t leaving with anything other than bruises.”

“Pyotr. You always look at the doors, never at the vault. Did you really think I came here alone?” She gestured towards her thrifted leotard. “While you’re admiring my costume, my *Hüer* are currently emptying your safe house.” She now had to be careful, adding another gang’s name into her bluff.

For a second, Pyotr just blinked, taking one small glance at the guard behind him.

It was all the time Vanyia needed.

Moving swiftly, she wrenched her hand out of the man’s grip, her fingers dipping into his inner pocket with the finesse and fluidity of a striking viper.

*The ledger.*

The gold-embroidered book was now sitting in her hands. She snagged it to the hook in her rope.

“*A shame,*” she whispered, knowing that the victory was hers. “*The tailcoat was a terrible choice.*”

Stepping back into open air, she reached for the aerial silks. Vanyia could see Pyotr's red, drunken face, his body lunging down at the stage below. Smiling, she did a spin-drop, landing on the ground floor.

She drops with the ledger, a trade for Adrein's life.

The audience thinks it was part of the show.

They go wild.

They'll never know the vendetta.

They see a few smoke bombs drop.

Chaos reigns.

And the acrobat disappears into the murky night.