

The Day Before

(A Thousand Reasons)

A Vivienne Vale prequel novelette

by

TITANIA
TEMPEST

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**TITANIA
TEMPEST**

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THE DAY BEFORE

Vivienne Vale's dressing room at Blackwood Studios wasn't a trailer. Trailers were temporary. They suggested someone could be moved. This room had walls, a door with her name in clean black lettering, and a fridge stocked with two bottles of Sancerre and a selection of carefully approved snacks. The mirror was ringed with the kind of warm bulbs that forgave flaws, and the air smelled of powder, steam, hairspray, and perfume.

Viv sat perfectly still at the vanity, watching critically as two make-up artists worked in tandem to perfect her makeup into something exquisite. Her face was in the end stages of becoming itself. Not her face – *the* face. The version the world recognised before it recognised the woman. A stylist's hands moved quickly through her hair, efficient and gentle in the way people were gentle with things that were valuable, and to one side, a junior assistant hovered with a can of product poised like a weapon, watching with the kind of earnestness that usually belonged to trauma surgeons.

Someone had placed a bottle of water on the dresser. Viv hadn't touched it.

Behind her, the door opened without a knock, letting in a brief gust of the studio itself – paint and coffee and hot wiring, the constant hum and chatter of a machine that never quite slept – but Viv didn't glance over. She knew who it was. Only one person in the world entered her dressing room without permission.

Her manager, Elaine, walked in carrying a paper cup and a tablet, wearing her standard *'Why am I surrounded by idiots'* expression. "Coffee," she said, with all the gravitas of bestowing a blessing.

Viv took it as such. She reached for it and sipped, careful not to smudge her mouth. It was exactly the coffee she liked – strong enough to be borderline impolite. The second she'd swallowed, one of the MUAs swooped in to touch up her lipstick and Viv glanced at Elaine. "Thanks. It's been a long day."

"Nearly done, love," Elaine replied briskly. "Another hour or so, and you'll be on your way home."

Viv nodded, stifling a sigh, and Elaine turned to her entourage as they continued with last-minute adjustments. "You lot had better bloody hurry up – she's on in fifteen."

A renewed flurry of movement answered her, and they were finished in two. Viv thanked them, and then they gathered their kit and disappeared. In the quiet left behind, Elaine pulled up a stool to perch next to Viv. She caught her eye in the mirror.

"Are you ready?"

Viv raised an amused eyebrow. "Am I ever not?"

"Let's not jinx it." Elaine looked her over, narrowing her eyes as she checked the angles of her face, and then sat back with a tight sigh. "Can't fault you," she said. "Every inch the queen, as usual."

"My team are bloody good," Viv said mildly.

"They are," Elaine allowed. She turned her attention to the tablet in her hands, fingers flashing as she pulled up what she

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wanted. “Right, then. Your slot’s for ten minutes. They’ll try to steal twelve, of course – don’t give it to them.”

“You’re very possessive of my minutes,” Viv murmured.

“I’m very possessive of what other people do with them.” Elaine’s thumb scrolled, efficient. “Now, listen – because they’ve sent bloody James Jackson to do the interviewing, and he’s an old hand at talking people into a corner. Worse, he’s been here since ten – so he’ll be tired, pushy, and wanting a final quote to justify being here all day. He hasn’t managed to score anything juicy from the rest of them, so you’re his last shot.”

Viv’s attention sharpened a fraction, the smallest internal shift. “Who else has he seen?”

Elaine’s gaze flicked up. “Everyone. The showrunner. Two producers. That new lad. Supporting cast. And Rowan Hart.” Her lips turned sour at the name – then she moved on, brisk. “They’ve saved you for last. You’re their main event.”

Viv smirked. “Flatterer.”

Elaine snorted. “Don’t get sentimental. That’s not a compliment. It’s a *warning*.”

Viv’s smile deepened.

Elaine placed her tablet flat on the table and slid a single printed sheet beside it. It had been folded and unfolded enough times to soften the crease.

Viv squinted at the header upside down in the mirror, and Elaine held out a pair of reading glasses for her. Viv didn’t quite put them on – holding them up to look through so that she didn’t accidentally displace a single eyelash – and read the header properly.

PRE-SEASON FEATURE: SEASON FIVE (BLACKWOOD STUDIOS)

Under it, bullet points. Potential questions. Danger areas. Pivots. The kind of neat, brutal preparation that only came from experience and disaster.

Elaine tapped the paper with the end of her pen. “This is your map. Stay on the roads.”

Viv's gaze flicked to Elaine's reflection. "And if I prefer the scenic route?"

"Then I'll have to spend the next three days cleaning up your tyre tracks," Elaine said. "And I will *not* be pleased – I was planning to sleep at some point this week."

Viv huffed something that might have been laughter.

Elaine continued as if she hadn't noticed. "Rule one: do not refer to Hart like you've met her."

"I *have* met her. Briefly. We've been working in the same studio for four seasons. She's a little hard to miss."

Elaine gave her a look. "That's beside the point. James is going to use her to get under your skin. Keep it cool – no friendly warmth, no witty comments, no teasing, no—" her eyes narrowed as if she could see the exact mischief forming in Viv's eyes, "—whatever it is you were about to do with your face."

Viv's mouth went innocently blank. "My face?"

"Yes. That one. Don't get clever – not today."

Viv's eyes glittered. "You're imagining things."

"I'm imagining headlines," Elaine snapped, but there was a thread of familiar amusement under it. She tapped the sheet again. "Rule two: if you absolutely have to compliment Hart's work – one sentence. One. Then you move on."

Viv sipped her coffee slowly. "*One* sentence?"

"A small one," Elaine said. "We're not composing sonnets in there."

Viv's gaze dropped to the next section: **TRAPS**.

Elaine didn't need to read them aloud. Viv could already predict the shape of them, the way the industry pretended curiosity wasn't just appetite.

Passing the torch. Relevance. Age. Rivalry. Fan speculation. Anything personal dressed up as concern.

Elaine exhaled. "Last thing, then – let's have a quick look at the stills he's been using all day. He's done his damndest to fish for signs of contention between you and Hart from everyone he's spoken to – every interview today has been angled that way."

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She tilted the tablet so Viv could see, and a grid of images flared. Viv looked down at Rowan in costume from last season, caught playing the fool between takes. At a rehearsal table, concentration fierce enough to drown out the entire room. On set with her head thrown back in laughter – candid, human, impossible to package neatly.

Elaine's thumb hovered, then flicked to the one she wanted; Rowan looking directly at the camera. Her lip was curved into the most devilish smirk Viv had ever seen, the kind Viv wouldn't even dare to attempt in public.

"See?" Elaine said, scowling at the picture. "This is the angle he'll take. 'New star.' 'Fresh blood.' 'Next big thing.'"

Viv studied the image in silence for a beat too long.

Elaine didn't miss it. She never missed it.

"Don't," Elaine said flatly.

Viv looked up. "Don't what?"

"Don't look *interested*," Elaine replied. "Not on camera. Not in print. Not even in private. Don't give her a foothold in your head, Viv."

Viv's mouth curved, slow and unreadable. "What am I – a novice?"

"I'd like to hope you're *not*," Elaine shot back. Then, softer, almost grudging, she added, "Keep your distance, all right? I know what happens when you get curious."

Viv's smile dimmed. For a moment, the room felt smaller – not because the walls had moved, but because old ghosts had drifted closer. Viv set the coffee down and reached out, briefly, to lay a hand on Elaine's wrist. A small, intimate gesture that said *I heard you* without quite giving the past a voice.

A knock sounded at the door – brisk and careful.

"Elaine?" a runner called. "They're set. Two minutes."

Elaine didn't even turn her head. "We'll be there in five."

A pause. "Um... okay, thanks – I'll let them know."

The runner vanished.

Viv's lips twitched. "Better late than never?"

Elaine rolled her eyes. "Don't pretend you don't know as well as I do how important it is to arrive with *intent*." She

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leaned in to smooth a crease at Viv's shoulder with the kind of practical tenderness that would have looked like fussing to anyone else, but was, in truth, a straightening of her armour. "Remember you're the last chair this evening," she added quietly. "He's had a long day – and that means he'll probably be cocky enough to try something clever."

Viv's eyes met hers in the mirror. "And if he does?"

Elaine's smile was thin. "Then I'll cut him off at the knees and you'll look gracious while it happens."

Viv's expression warmed by a fraction. "You do love a bit of bloodshed."

"Only when it's earned," Elaine said primly.

With a knowing smile, Viv rose, her burgundy dress settling into place as if it had been designed for her form alone. Elaine held the door open, and Viv paused for a breath before she stepped out. The publicity suite waited – lights, chair, and the man who'd already spoken to Rowan Hart today.

Unbidden, her mind flicked ahead to tomorrow.

Stage 9. A new script. The table read.

The first time she would read with Rowan Hart, herself.

Her smile sharpened.

Elaine, beside her, saw it immediately. "You're not planning to carry that expression out of this room, are you?" she murmured with a dark frown.

Viv didn't look at her, but her voice was silk and obedience.

"Of course not," she said, schooling her mouth to seriousness. "I know better than *that*."

Straightening her shoulders, she crossed the threshold.

The corridor that led to the publicity suite smelled faintly of fresh paint and whatever chemical they used to keep a studio floor clean without ever quite succeeding. Harried crew streamed past, giving them a wide berth, and a grip pushing a magliner cart veered aside to let them through. Elaine didn't break stride. Viv followed at her shoulder, unhurried, as if the building existed to move around her.

A laminated sign on a stand read:

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INTERVIEWS IN PROGRESS.

The door opened before Elaine reached it. A young woman with a headset – unit publicist, by the look of her – smiled too brightly.

“Elaine! Ms Vale – hi. We’re ready when you are. Just a quick sound check, and then James will come in.”

Elaine gestured for Viv to precede, and she stepped through the doorway with measured grace. Inside, the room rearranged itself around her.

It was a conference room pretending not to be one. Two comfortable sofa chairs angled toward each other. A low table with water and flowers. Soft boxes throwing flattering light. A camera on a tripod, another on a slider, both already pointed at the space where Viv would sit. A boom pole hovered at the edge of the setup like a polite threat.

A man in black – sound – lifted a hand in greeting.

“Evening,” he murmured. “Sorry, Ms Vale. Just need to mic you up, there.”

Viv’s lips curved faintly. “Of course.”

He approached calmly, holding up the tiny capsule and wire as if offering jewellery.

Elaine watched him like a hawk. “Try not to strangle her,” she said pleasantly.

The sound tech’s mouth twitched. “Yes, ma’am.”

Viv sat. The burgundy dress was almost black under the lights, until she shifted and it caught a sheen like fine wine. The sound tech dipped briefly out of sight to run the wire cleanly, hands moving fast and discreet. A strip of tape pressed lightly against Viv’s skin near the seam – a small, cold kiss of reality under all the glamour.

“Mic check,” someone called from behind the camera. “Just count to ten for me.”

Viv didn’t look over. “One, two, three...” she said. “...ten.”

“Lovely,” the voice said, far too pleased, as if Viv’s ability to count were a charming surprise.

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The boom bobbed overhead for a second as they found their frame, then retreated. The room settled into a poised, artificial quiet, and Elaine leaned in for a final word.

“Ten minutes,” she murmured, and her tone was all business now, the teasing put away like a blade. “Let him think he’s charming. Don’t give him anything he can use.”

Viv’s gaze remained forward. She gave half a nod, and Elaine stepped away.

The unit publicist floated back in, still smiling, still too bright. “James is just stepping out of his last reset, and then he’ll be right with us.”

Elaine raised one eyebrow. “He’s got about thirty seconds. After that, he can rebook.”

The girl’s glossy smile abruptly vanished, replaced by something akin to panic, and she spun away to enlist whatever help she could find to chivvy him into position.

Viv sat back as powder swooped in for final touches, and she lifted her chin a fraction as the last stray hair was smoothed into place. In the lens of the camera, the mask was perfect.

“Places,” someone said softly.

The door opened, and James Jackson sauntered in – wearing the practised grin of a man who’d been charming people since ten a.m. and still believed it might work.

“Vivienne.” He said it as though her name was familiar on his tongue, as though they’d shared a cigarette on a balcony somewhere once and laughed about the same joke. His eyes flicked briefly to the cameras, then back to her face, assessing the mask with professional greed. “At last. I was starting to think Blackwood had hidden you in a vault.”

Viv stayed seated, legs crossed, shoulders relaxed. She let her gaze skim him once, politely, the way one might acknowledge a waiter approaching with a menu she hadn’t asked for.

“Mr Jackson,” she said, voice smooth and neutral.

“Oh, please.” He waved a hand, already moving into position, lowering himself into the chair opposite with the easy entitlement of a man who’d been allowed too close to

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too many famous women and had mistaken access for intimacy. "Call me James."

The unit publicist fluttered at the edge of the room with a clipboard, muttering something about timings and sound, then disappeared again as if her job were to evaporate whenever the tension got interesting.

Behind the camera, someone murmured, "Rolling."

A small red light blinked on.

James leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands loosely clasped as though he were about to ask Vivienne Vale a question of deep personal importance that only he, James Jackson, could possibly be trusted to handle.

"So," he said, lowering his voice as if they were alone. "Season five."

Viv let a beat pass. Not long enough to be awkward. Just long enough to signal that she would choose the pace of this little exchange.

"Yes," she said, leisurely.

James sat back, spreading his hands. "It's the season everyone's been waiting for – the one the fans have been howling about for months. *The Crystal Throne* is already a phenomenon. But this... this is the collision course."

Viv's eyes remained steady on his. "You seem very invested."

He laughed. "I'm a man of the people. And the people are rabid." He pointed vaguely, as if the crowd in question were gathered just beyond the lights. "Four seasons of build-up, and now we finally get what the show promised from the pilot – Selandra versus Lyric. Queen versus... what is she now? Folk hero? Knight errant? Revolution in leather trousers?"

"Lyric doesn't wear leather trousers," Viv said mildly.

James smirked. "See, this is why they love you. The precision. The disdain. The way you can make a correction sound like a judgment."

Viv gave a cordial smile, but she didn't say anything. She'd been trained by decades of cameras to let other people fill silence with their own mistakes.

James shifted, as though adjusting a dial. “For those who’ve been living under a rock,” he continued, smoothing into presenter mode, “Queen Selandra – your Selandra – has been the series’ great villain from the start. Elegant, ruthless, terrifying. And, the heroine, Lyric—”

“Lyric is not the heroine,” Viv cut in, still polite.

James paused, then tilted his head, intrigued. “No?”

“Lyric is the protagonist,” Viv said. “There is a difference.”

“Fair,” he conceded. “The protagonist, then. Rowan Hart’s Lyric. A former protégé turned rebel, rallying the people—”

“And attempting to return the kingdom to a better version of itself,” Viv finished, because it cost her nothing to be accurate. Accuracy was not warmth.

James looked pleased, as though she’d offered him a gift. “And now, the long-awaited confrontation.” He leaned in again. “People have been counting down to it. They’ve been—”

He glanced down at his notes with the sort of theatricality that implied he didn’t really need them.

“—*shipping* it,” he continued brightly, as if he were announcing an industry secret. “I mean, we have to address it. *#Selaryc*. It’s everywhere. You can’t scroll two inches without someone posting a slow-motion edit of Selandra and Lyric like they’re pining for each other, set to tragic music.”

Viv’s expression didn’t change. “The internet,” she said with mild disdain, “has never been short of strange little hobbies.”

James chuckled, but he didn’t let it go. “Come on. You’ve seen it.”

“The internet?” Viv replied. “Of course.”

He laughed again, but this time it had an edge – the sound of someone being denied the reaction he’d come for. “All right. Let’s talk about *you*.”

Viv remained still. Relaxed. Unbothered.

“You’ve brought Queen Selandra to life in spectacular fashion,” he said. “You’ve made her iconic. You’ve made her—” he searched for the right word, enjoying the performance of searching, “—magnetic. And yet, despite

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sharing a series for four years, you and Rowan Hart have never actually played opposite each other on screen.”

Viv watched his mouth form Rowan’s name as if it were nothing more than a syllable.

“That is correct,” she said.

“So what does it feel like,” James continued, voice warming into faux intimacy, “to finally meet your match?”

Viv’s eyes narrowed by the smallest degree. Not enough for the camera, perhaps, but enough for anyone who understood how to read a woman to know a line had been crossed.

“My match?” she echoed.

James’s grin broadened. “Your equal. Your foil. The new star.” He spread his hands again. “Rowan’s rise has been meteoric, don’t you think? Critics adore her. The fans adore her. And now she’s stepping into the arena with you. Are you threatened?”

Elaine’s chair scraped softly somewhere off-screen – a warning sound, like a blade drawn an inch and then sheathed.

Viv didn’t glance toward it. She kept her attention on James, and allowed her expression to soften into something that looked like amusement.

“Threatened?” she said blandly. “No.”

James raised an eyebrow. “Just no?”

“Would you prefer a paragraph?”

“I prefer honesty.”

“That is honest.”

James shifted again, as if trying to find the angle that would make her break.

“All right,” he said. “Not threatened. Intrigued, then? Excited? Or are you... indifferent?”

Viv’s gaze flicked briefly to the camera lens – not directly, but near enough to remind everyone in the room where the attention really sat.

“I don’t take on work that inspires indifference.”

“Ah.” James sat back, pleased. “So you *are* looking forward to it.”

“I’m looking forward,” Viv replied evenly, “to doing my job.”

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James gave a short, approving sound, as if he couldn't decide whether she was playing him or simply refusing to play at all.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go there, then. Your job – which mostly entails keeping your crown from any and all challengers, yes?"

Viv's expression remained composed. Her mind, unbidden, supplied images that didn't yet exist – scripts she hadn't held, lines she hadn't spoken, the shape of a clash with a younger actress that the world had been waiting for. But she didn't let it show.

"For four seasons," James pressed, "Selandra has been this magnificent, looming presence, ruling with an iron fist. Lyric's origin story is tied to her, yes – trained under her, betrayed by her – but we haven't actually seen them together. It's been all tension, all threat, all build."

Viv nodded once, almost imperceptibly.

"And now," James continued, "season five. The first time Selandra and Lyric will share the screen. Fans can only expect that the crown is going to come into hot contention – and that Selandra is going to be pushed to the edge of her limits. That is an enormous moment – how do you think she'll handle it? The production has kept it under wraps, as expected, but the scripts are – from what I'm hearing – a little... unexpected."

Viv lifted an eyebrow. "You're basing your insights on trade gossip?"

He dipped a tiny frown as if she'd caught him out, and then adjusted his angle again. "Fine. Let me put it another way." His smile returned, conspiratorial. "You've had Selandra under your skin for four years. You know her. You've built her. You've given her depth. You've made people hate her and love her in equal measure." He paused. "As the pressure on her reign increases – what does it take to play a villain that iconic without tipping into caricature?"

Viv exhaled softly. A real breath, this time – not for the camera, but because that was finally a question she could answer properly.

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"It takes discipline," she said. "And respect."

"Respect for the character?"

"Respect for the story," Viv corrected. "For the stakes. For the world you're in." She held James's gaze. "A villain who believes she is evil is uninteresting. Selandra believes she is right. She believes she is necessary."

James nodded, genuinely engaged now, because this was a meal – an intelligent quote, a clip that would play well.

"And this season?" he pressed. "Does that belief get challenged?"

Viv's mouth curved slightly. "It's a revolution season. Everything gets challenged."

James was quick – too quick. "By Lyric?"

Viv's smile didn't shift. "By consequences."

"Right," he said, disappointed. "Consequences." He glanced at his notes again, then back up, smile reassembling itself. "Let's talk about Rowan Hart."

There it was.

Straight through the door Elaine had warned about.

Viv's expression didn't flicker, but inside, something sharpened – curiosity, in the purest sense. It made her lean in, just a fraction, without meaning to.

James's tone softened into admiration that felt calculated. "Rowan Hart has been steadily climbing since she joined *The Crystal Throne*," he said. "But this past season especially – people are calling her performance career-defining. She's got that... fire." He tilted his head. "Care to share your opinion? You've been watching her rise. Everyone knows you've been watching."

Viv's eyes glittered faintly. "Do they?"

"Oh, come on. You're Vivienne Vale. You notice everything."

"Like when I'm being baited?"

James's grin widened, as if delighted by the resistance. He shifted closer, lowering his voice again as if sharing a secret. "Rowan told me something earlier."

Viv didn't flinch. "I'm sure she told you many things – she had to fill an entire ten minutes with you, after all."

He let out a breathy chuckle, undeterred. "Rowan said—"

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Viv cut across him, voice flat. "I don't believe it's very professional to cross-reference interviews."

"It's not cross-referencing. It's—"

"It's uninteresting. A weak move, even for you. Let's keep the questions to the show."

James opened his mouth, closed it again, then gave a brief nod – a gesture that suggested he'd just found the one person in the room who didn't fear him.

"Fine," he said, and then looked at her with exaggerated innocence. "Forget I mentioned it."

Viv lifted an eyebrow. "Spare you an execution, you mean?"

James laughed again, and this time it sounded more genuine – startled, almost – because there it was: Viv's wit, brief and controlled, like a jewel flashed and then hidden.

He seized the moment like a man grabbing an offered hand and trying to pull someone closer than they intended. "Okay. No cross-referencing. But I *can* ask you this. What do you think Rowan brings to this confrontation that the show hasn't had before? Because it's not just another battle, is it? It's legacy. It's the old guard and the new. It's a question of... who walks away with the crown."

Viv held his gaze for a beat, perfectly still, because she knew what he was implying – who would dominate the headlines, by the end. She, or Rowan.

Then she smiled. Not the kind of smile that invited closeness – the kind that made people sit up straighter.

"You're very fond of speculation," she said.

"It's my job to find the answers people want."

"And it's my job," Viv replied, smooth, "to tell the story as it's written. Not the story you wish you could print."

James's smile held, but his eyes narrowed. He tried again, softer, switching tactics – praise instead of provocation.

"All right," he said. "Let's keep it simple." He lifted his hands as if offering her a concession. "As an actress – as someone with your level of experience – what is it like to finally face a scene partner who might meet the bar you set?"

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Viv's gaze was steady. She could feel the camera's attention like a physical touch. Feel the room holding its breath, waiting for her to say something sharp enough to cut, or something warm enough to soothe – something *usable*.

She thought, unbidden, of the montage of stills Elaine had shown her – Rowan's concentration, that devilish smirk that had looked too bold for its own good.

"It's... a relief," she said, and watched James's expression flare with triumph before she clarified, "to work on a show where the standards are high."

James blinked, caught between disappointment and the need to pretend he wasn't.

Elaine gave her the tiniest thumbs-up from the shadows.

James recovered quickly. "And Rowan, herself?"

Viv's smile softened just enough to be polite. "Rowan is very good at her job."

"Very good? That's a little banal. Come on – tell us what you really think."

Viv tilted her head. "Would you like me to lie?"

"No. No, I—" He shook his head as if amused by her, as if she were a charming inconvenience rather than a woman who could dismantle him without raising her voice. "All right. Let's pivot." He flipped another page on his notes, feigning cooperation. "Season five is also the beginning of the end. *The Crystal Throne* is heading toward its finale. You've been part of something enormous. How does it feel, knowing you're stepping into the closing chapters?"

Viv's gaze drifted, just for a second, to the flowers on the table – a ridiculous little arrangement trying its best to look like a sophisticated set dressing choice and not a desperate attempt to soften the room.

"It feels like work," she said.

"That's... wonderfully bleak."

"It's not bleak," Viv replied. "It's honest. This is what we do. We come in. We tell the story. We leave." Her eyes lifted back to him, calm. "If you want sentiment, you should interview someone younger."

"You're killing me," he said, as if delighted by her stubborn grace.

Viv smiled faintly. "Not yet."

The crew behind the camera shifted. Someone's radio crackled softly, then went quiet again. The boom dipped in and retreated, as if breathing.

"Let's have something for the *younger* someones, then," James said with false brightness. "Care to share a nugget of advice for up-and-coming actresses?"

Viv half-raised an eyebrow, swallowing the list of things she wished she'd learned before the bruises, before the bargains. She turned her head and faced the camera directly – a rule she seldom broke. "Yes," she said, soft, and far fiercer than was advisable. "No matter how bright the lights get, keep hold of yourself. Trust your instincts. Screw the rules. Find your courage. It's tough out there."

Across the lights, Elaine stripped Viv with a stony glare. Viv ignored her, settling calmly back in her seat as if she hadn't just taken the epitome of the scenic route.

James nodded, missing the point on purpose. "Great. Love that." He was already glancing down at his notes. His gaze snapped back up, and he sharpened his smile for what he clearly believed was his final strike.

"Okay," he said. "One last thing. For the fans." He lowered his voice like a man inviting confession. "When you step into the studio tomorrow, script in hand, and you finally sit down across from Rowan Hart at that table read... what's the first thought that's going to go through your mind?"

James watched Viv with open anticipation – as if convinced that, if he waited long enough, she'd slip.

Viv let the pause stretch. Not because she was struggling. But because she *could*.

Then she offered him something smooth and empty, a perfectly polished stone.

"That I hope the coffee is better than today's," she said.

James laughed, caught, and forced to admire the neatness of it.

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Behind the camera, someone called, "Time," and the unit publicist reappeared as if summoned by the word.

"Brilliant," she chirped. "That's great, thank you, both – that's it, now."

James stood, still smiling, as though he hadn't spent the last ten minutes trying to crack a boulder open with a teaspoon.

"Vivienne," he said again, lingering on her name like a claim. "It's been a pleasure."

Viv rose with unhurried grace. She didn't reach for the handshake he offered.

Polite – final – she said, "Goodbye, Mr Jackson."

Elaine moved into frame at last, just enough to be seen by the crew as she stepped between Viv and James with the casual inevitability of a barricade.

"Off you go," Elaine said to him, with the clear implication that his usefulness had expired. "Careful you don't trip over your own ego on the way out."

James laughed, but it was thinner now, and he retreated with a wave toward the cameras as if he'd been the one giving them something memorable.

Viv waited until the door clicked shut behind him.

Only then did she let the smallest breath escape.

Elaine turned to her, expression flat. "Well?"

Viv lifted an eyebrow, as if she didn't know exactly what Elaine was going to say next. "Well what?"

"What the hell was all that crap about? *Screw the rules? Find your courage?*"

Viv shrugged. "Seemed pertinent, in the moment."

"It bloody wasn't," Elaine said, face darkening. "You're practically inspiring a generation of anarchists."

Viv held her gaze, unmoved. "Well, maybe it's high time."

"Stop it," Elaine said, her eyes flashing a warning. "*Vivienne Vale* does not 'inspire anarchy'." She stepped closer. "Not. Anymore."

With a sigh, Viv relented. "All right. I'll guard my tongue a little better next time."

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“Damn right,” Elaine scowled. “Don’t waste the twenty years we’ve spent changing *that* narrative. Come on.” She was already reaching for Viv’s elbow to steer her out. “That’s enough for one bloody day. Let’s get out of here before you say anything else you shouldn’t.”

Viv allowed herself to be guided, schooling her mask back into its proper place.

But somewhere underneath it, something in her refused to settle again. She found herself thinking about Rowan Hart. About what she might have said to James Jackson. It must have been something interesting if he’d thought he could bait her with it, and she wondered if it had been nearly as troublesome as the words that had escaped *her*.

Outside, the January night had settled properly over Blackwood – cold, wet, the sort of dark that made everything look slightly more dramatic than it should. The security lights painted the edges of buildings in hard lines. Viv crossed the carpark with her scarf drawn tight and her shoulders bunched against the chill, making a beeline for the waiting limo.

As she approached, Stanley, the chauffeur, opened the rear door for her. Viv dipped into the car with the same controlled grace she brought to a set. Not because anyone might be watching, but because it was easier to keep the shape of herself intact if she never let it buckle at the edges – because at the end of the interview she’d felt the mask loosen, just slightly, and she couldn’t afford that twice in one day.

Elaine slid in beside her, tapping at her phone, and Stanley pushed the door shut with a soft click.

Viv leaned back, grateful for the warmth. The car smelled faintly of leather and clean. The engine started with a muted purr, the studio lights drifting away as they rolled out of the carpark.

For a few minutes, Viv simply enjoyed the silence. Then, Elaine’s phone pinged. She swiped, frowned, and then – after another second – glanced at Viv.

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“Don’t tell me,” Viv said without turning her head, “the interview’s up already.”

Elaine scowled. “And WhatsTheBuzz has jumped on it with endless interpretations and assumptions.”

Viv’s mouth curved, faint and unsurprised. “Of course they have.”

“Luckily, they’ve glossed over your advice-to-the-girls moment. They’ve zoomed in on that last question, instead. The one about your first thought at the table read.”

“About my coffee?”

“About your coffee,” Elaine said, as if she’d like to drown the entire internet in it. “Where you neatly deflected anything to do with facing Rowan – so at least you got *something* right.” She glanced down at the screen again. “They know what it was, though. Clever little caption: *Vivienne Vale plays it cool ahead of the big face-off.*”

Viv made a derisive sound deep in her throat.

“Still,” Elaine continued, scowling, “the bloody fan accounts are already quoting your ‘screw the rules, find your courage’ soundbite like it’s scripture – and it’s going to be fun trying to undo *that*.”

Viv chose not to defend herself, and Elaine let it go – turning her attention back to picking apart the commentary with razor precision. In the beat of quiet, Viv’s eyes drifted to the window. Streetlights slid past in a slow, orange rhythm. London was a pretty smear of wet buildings and soft reflections, comforting in its familiarity.

“Oh, look,” Elaine said, pursing her lips as she skipped through other clips. “James tried that cute little angle about the first table read in Rowan’s interview, too.”

Viv’s gaze flicked to her. “Did he.”

Elaine didn’t look up. “Of course he did.”

“And?” Viv kept her voice level. Neutral. As though the answer didn’t matter.

Elaine’s thumb paused over the screen. “I haven’t watched all of it yet.”

Viv smiled. "I'm surprised. I thought you'd have already consumed every second of an interview with a woman you consider a threat to my career."

"She's a threat to your *peace*," Elaine snapped, finally looking at her. "But I have spent the last ten hours ensuring you survived a press day without doing anything stupid – and we finished on a *very* close call, mind you – so I will watch it in the morning when I've had four hours' sleep and I'm less inclined to commit murder."

Viv's mouth twitched.

Elaine's gaze sharpened. "And *you* are not watching it tonight, either."

Viv looked out at the rain-slick street. "I didn't say I was."

Elaine's silence was the kind that suggested she didn't believe her for a moment, but she didn't push the point.

Viv leaned her head against the window and sighed, wrestling with herself about whether she *would* watch Rowan's interview later. Part of her wanted to. Another part wanted to maintain her carefully curated disinterest.

Either way, she couldn't deny she was... *curious*.

Her mind turned back to her own interview: the studio's stale air, James's grin, the bait.

Rowan told me something earlier.

About Viv, probably.

Viv frowned, remembering the photos Elaine had shown her on the tablet earlier that day. The one of Rowan straight-on still haunted her. The devilish curve of her lip, the directness of her gaze, as if she'd known exactly where to look to unsettle a room.

The car turned a corner. Viv's reflection flared briefly in the glass, ghosted over the wet world beyond. For a moment she saw *the* face, before it flickered and the view became the city once more, and she remembered again the stupid thing she'd closed on.

Screw the rules. Find your courage.

She closed her eyes with a quiet sigh. Neither of those things were safe. Not for women in their world. Elaine was

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right – it wasn't the kind of advice *Vivienne Vale* could afford to give.

Why couldn't she have just said something banal, instead?

Home was quiet. It was not, strictly speaking, *home* in the way the word should mean. It was a rented penthouse within a discreet, elegant building, with a doorman who didn't ask questions and neighbours who pretended they didn't recognise her. It was a place chosen for convenience and control rather than affection. But it was hers for now, and the silence inside it didn't require her to perform. Plus, she liked the view.

Elaine followed her in as if she lived there, too. Still glued to her tablet, she said grimly, "I'm going to go through tomorrow's timings again. Table read's at eight, so you'll need to arrive at—"

"Elaine," Viv interrupted gently.

Elaine paused, mouth still open halfway around a word, and looked at her.

Viv's lips curved. "If you recite the schedule one more time, I may throw you off the balcony."

Elaine's eyes narrowed. "There is no balcony."

"There's a large window," Viv said, and took off her heels with unhurried elegance.

Elaine huffed something resembling amusement. "Go and take your face off," she said. "And hurry up, because I'd very much like to get home at some point tonight."

"You should have just met me at the studio this morning," Viv said dryly. "Then you wouldn't have had to come all the way back here to fetch your car."

Elaine fixed her with a blank stare. "With the paperwork we had to get through? Besides, I wanted to make sure you ate something this evening. I know you – high strung as a thoroughbred mare on interview days."

Viv pulled a face, but she didn't disagree, and moved off through the flat with the easy relief of being somewhere safe. She turned on a lamp as she passed it, and the warm light

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softened everything – the furniture, the walls, her own edges. In the bathroom, she leaned close to the mirror, and for a moment, allowed herself to look tired.

Not dramatically. Not tragically. Just... human.

The pins came out. The lashes. The lipstick. Her face returned to itself in slow, careful layers, and her breathing settled to something far more relaxed.

When she emerged, she found Elaine sitting at the small kitchen island with her tablet, murmuring notes into her phone with quiet intensity. A glass of Sancerre sat beside her, already half empty. Another waited across from it, along with a steaming plate of spinach and salmon gnocchi.

Viv sat down in front of the food with a grateful sigh, inhaling the rich scents and realising she was, actually, famished. Still, as she reached for the fork, she glanced up at Elaine and remarked dryly, “I am quite capable of feeding myself, you know.”

“When you remember to.” Elaine picked up her wineglass, drained the other half, and then – content that Viv had started to tuck into her meal – got to her feet with brisk precision. “Stanley will have the limo ready at seven thirty. I’m not coming here tomorrow – I’ll meet you at the studio later. I’ve got things to sort.”

Viv nodded.

“Don’t be late,” Elaine warned.

Swallowing her mouthful, Viv smiled. “I’m never late.”

Elaine rolled her eyes. “You’re late all the time. You’re just late with such conviction that everyone else apologises for arriving before you.”

Viv’s laughter – when it came – was gentle. Quiet. Real. “I’ll be at the studio early, like I always am,” she said. “But I’ll manage the timing of my entrance like I always do.”

“Of course you will,” Elaine conceded. “Right, then, I’m off. Don’t be up too late – and for Heaven’s Sake, don’t go looking for Rowan’s interview. You don’t need any distractions before the first read, tomorrow.”

Viv lifted an eyebrow. Mildly, she said, “Yes, dear.”

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With a derisive huff, Elaine slipped her tablet into her handbag and shouldered it. “At least don’t take it to heart, all right? Don’t let her rattle you on day one.”

“I doubt it’s *that* bad.”

Elaine’s lips thinned. “Well, I wouldn’t know, would I? I haven’t had a chance to watch it all, yet. Besides, I’m more worried if it’s *good* – I know what a damned fool you can be for flattery. Quite frankly, I’m inclined to hope she said something insulting.”

“She wouldn’t have,” Viv said with a small smile. “Rowan’s far too professional for that.”

“Don’t you get soft on me,” Elaine warned. “Remember the rules.”

Holding her gaze, Viv said quietly, “As if I could forget them.”

Elaine appeared to decide that was acceptable. “See you in the morning, then.”

Viv nodded, and Elaine left.

In her wake, the penthouse fell very quiet. Viv finished her supper, topped up her wineglass, and went to the floor-to-ceiling windows to look out over the city. She lingered for a long moment, watching the rain-slick night breathe, and then turned for the couch with a sigh.

Sinking into it, she let her gaze drift into the distance, trying not to indulge temptation – then relented and reached for her phone.

She stared at the blank screen for longer than she needed to. Not because she was hesitant – Vivienne Vale did not *hesitate* – but because she was weighing the cost of a small thing with disproportionate stakes.

Curiosity was cheap in the moment. It was often expensive later.

She unlocked the phone.

Typed: *Rowan Hart interview James Jackson.*

And her thumb hovered.

But then she put the phone face-down on the coffee table. A controlled choice. A tiny victory. A discipline she’d shaped over decades.

She went to bed.

Sleep eluded her for a long while, and in the quiet dark, Viv could still hear the irritating cadence of James Jackson's taunt.

Rowan told me something earlier.

The next morning, the world was still dark when Viv stepped from her building, breath pluming, cheeks stinging against the pre-dawn bite. Stanley was waiting, and she slid through the door he held open for her with a grateful sigh and settled quickly into the plush, heated seat.

She let the quiet seclusion sink in as the car carried her back to Blackwood, the only sound the soft purr of the engine and a whisper of tyres against wet streets.

The city thinned into industrial estates, warehouses looming like sleeping giants. Ahead, the studio lights stood defiant against the darkness, and they passed through security with the ease of people who belonged. A guard nodded. A barrier lifted.

Stanley spoke over his shoulder with soft deference. "We're a little early, Ms Vale. Would you like to wait in the car?"

Viv adjusted her gloves. "Yes, thank you."

He nodded and pulled into a quieter corner, away from the main flow of crew vans and early call times. Familiar with Viv's penchant for observing without being observed, he switched off the lights. The engine idled in the dark, low and steady.

Viv turned her gaze out the tinted window. Outside, Blackwood lay half-asleep.

A few lights glowed in distant offices. A lone runner crossed the carpark with their head down, hood up. Somewhere further off, a radio crackled softly and then died again.

Viv watched the entrance to Stage 9 with calm detachment as cars continued to arrive, cast and crew spilling out and heading inside with quiet purpose.

The clock on the limo's dashboard ticked forward.

7:46.

7:49.

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7:51...

At 7:52, a dark green vintage Volvo coupé rolled past the security lights and into the carpark proper. Viv recognised it, and her gaze sharpened. She watched it carefully.

It didn't hunt for a space the way the other cars had. It didn't hesitate. It moved with the certainty of habit.

And Rowan Hart parked, as she always did, right at the far end – close to the boundary wall where the shadows were deepest and the carpark felt almost private.

Viv sat perfectly still, observing.

The Volvo's engine cut.

And then – nothing.

Rowan didn't get out.

Viv watched the dark shape inside the car, lit faintly by the dashboard: a silhouette held in stillness. Hands on the steering wheel, as though she'd forgotten what came next.

Time slipped forward. Two more cars pulled in, their occupants hauling themselves towards Stage 9 with a lot more urgency than their predecessors. The gate fell still again. 7:57. 7:59...

Viv's mouth tightened, thoughtful. She wondered if Rowan was pulling the same stunt she was – arriving on time, but delaying her entrance for effect. The sky above Blackwood began to lighten almost imperceptibly. The security lights still dominated the carpark, painting lines of harsh white and deep shadow.

Rowan still didn't move.

Viv glanced at the clock. 8:01. They were both officially late. She returned her attention to the Volvo.

It was not, she told herself, *interest*.

Finally, Rowan shifted – suddenly, as if jolted by an internal alarm. The car door flew open, and she tumbled out with the graceless urgency of someone who had lost track of time and was now attempting to wrestle it back by force.

Viv's eyebrows rose.

Rowan fumbled – keys, bag – shut the door too hard, yanked her coat half-closed against the snap in the air.

And then she bolted.

She sprinted across the carpark, bag swinging, hair loose enough to look like she'd run her hands through it one too many times. In short seconds, she disappeared through the side entrance to Stage 9 in a flash of movement and the thud of a door.

Viv sat very still; her mouth curved with amusement. Not a ploy, then. Just a woman lost in her own head... and then flung, abruptly, back into the world.

How perfectly charming.

Was she nervous for the table read, perhaps?

Viv's smile stretched, softer and wider than it usually did.

Up front, Stanley turned to her with polite patience. "Five more minutes, Ms Vale?"

She schooled her mouth and gave a brisk nod. "Five more minutes."

The difference between arriving... and making an entrance.

Adjusting her coat, she settled back, and waited.

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