The city of Veloria had two constants, the glow of neon lights, and the chaos that followed Vex wherever he went. Tonight was no different. Sirens wailed through the air, smoke disappeared into the violet sky, and there he was, standing on top of a half-collapsed skyscraper, grinning like the devil himself. Below, Captain Rhea Vale, Veloria's strongest guardian tightened her gloves and squinted through the haze. Her comm crackled.

"Vale, we've got reports of a rogue power source on Tower Twelve. Looks like Vex again."

"Yeah.." she muttered. "I can see his smug face from here." She climbed the final flight of crumbling stairs, the hum of her energy gauntlets lighting the way. When she reached the rooftop, Vex was waiting, leaning casually against a chunk of concrete, silver eyes reflecting the flames below. "Captain Vale.." he purred. "You showed up. I was starting to think you didn't care anymore."

"I don't." she said flatly, activating her gauntlets. "What did you steal this time?" Vex let out an exaggerated sigh, hand over heart. "Always business with you. No 'how have you been, Vex?' No small talk? Tragic."

"Last time we talked, you tried to blow up the bank."

He grinned wider. "Got away too, if I recall."

Her fist tightened at her side. "And I ignored that too."

"Cold as ever.." he said, pretending to shiver. "I like that." She lunged. The rooftop lit up with yellow light as they clashed, energy and shadow, justice and chaos. Sparks flew. The ground split beneath their feet. But even as they fought, something was wrong. The air vibrated. The clouds above churned in unnatural spirals. Rhea broke away first.

"What the-"

Vex turned, face suddenly serious. "Oh. That's..not me." The sky tore open. An enormous rift cracked the heavens, and something.. Something vast and metallic pushed through. A myth, the old city legends whispered about. The Core of Veloria, a war machine left behind by the founders who built Veloria. It descended like a god of ruin, destroying buildings with a sweep of its arm.

Rhea steadied herself. "Evac teams can't handle that thing."

Vex tilted his head. "Guess we're on the same side for once."

She blinked. "You're joking."

"Please. If the city's ash, who will I annoy?" Before she could respond, he leapt from the roof, shadows curling around him like a cape. She swore under her breath before she followed. They moved through streets filled with debris and chaos, an unfamiliar partnership forged by necessity. Rhea coordinated rescue efforts through her comm while Vex shot out blasts of black energy pulses.

"Didn't think you'd stick around!" she said.

"I like the view." he said, glancing at her mid-fight. "And by view, I mean-"

She threw a punch that sent him sprawling into a pile of rubble. He groaned. "Okay, deserved that." Still, they worked well together, her precision balancing his unpredictability. Together, they drew closer to the Core, the source of the energy ripping the city apart. By the time they reached it, a glowing sphere, floating in the heart of the machine, they were both bleeding, panting, and holding on for dear life as the machine continued to move, wrecking more of the city.

"So," Vex said, holding onto the metal wall. "What's the plan, Captain?"

"Same as always. I save the city. You get in my way."

He smiled faintly. "Not this time." She looked at him and realized he was holding a black crystal, glowing with the same light as the Core's sphere.

"Vex-"

"It's my tech they're using.." he said softly. "I can shut it down. But it'll take everything I've got."

Her eyes widened. "No. We can find another way."

He shook his head. "You know we can't. You're the hero, Vale. I'm just the mess that keeps you busy between crises." Before she could stop him, he stepped forward and pressed his hand against the sphere. Energy crackled through the air, pushing at both of them. She grabbed his arm, trying to pull him back.

"Vex!"

He looked at her, half-grinning through the pain. She didn't think before she moved. She grabbed his face and kissed him. It was brief, desperate, full of everything they'd never said.

When she pulled back, her voice broke. "Don't make me regret that."

He smiled softly, for once. "Too late." Then he pushed her away as the crystal dissolved. The explosion was blinding. The Core of Veloria roared and collapsed. When the dust cleared, only Rhea stood among the ruins, her armor scratched, her heartbeat echoing in her ears.

"Vex?" she whispered. No answer. Only silence, and the distant wail of sirens.

<center>~~~</center>

Days passed. The city held a memorial. The Core of Veloria's remains were dismantled, the skyline still falling apart but standing.

Rhea stood alone at a small grave in the outskirts of the city, a simple marker that read:

<center>

VEX THORNE
Criminal. Genius. Savior.

</center>

She wasn't sure who had written the epitaph. Maybe it was him, somehow. The sky was quiet now. No rifts. No chaos. Just the hum of the wind moving the leaves.

"I don't know why I came.." she said softly. "You'd just make a joke anyway." She placed a small black crystal, like the one he'd used to save the city, to save her..on the grave.

"You were right. I never did care," she whispered. "Not until it was too late. But I swear.. I'll find who stole your tech and brought that stupid machine back to life."

A voice behind her made her flinch. "Sorry I'm late, traffic was bad." Rhea froze. That voice.. She turned.

There he was, leaning against a tree, alive, smirking, a few new scars tracing his jawline. His coat was torn, his hair a mess, but he was *alive.* Her lips parted, disbelief and relief clashing in her chest. "Vex…"

He smiled "Damn, who died?"