

## **Path of Least Resistance**

**By Lauren Carlton**

The wind howled through the Gray, echoing off forlorn walls and decaying pipes. Riven exhaled, her breath dissipating into the gloom.

She hadn't wanted to come here, but she'd made herself do it anyway. The smell of smoke was seared into her memory, along with the deaths that had accompanied it. She'd had to find the source.

Underneath the wind, she heard the mingled screams of enemies and allies alike as they burned.

For days, she'd watched the thugs of various chem-barons enforce their swift, brutal "protection" on those who couldn't or wouldn't pay. She'd seen factory workers returning to their homes so late into the night that it was practically morning; heard their labored breathing as the sludge that passed for air ate away at them from the inside. The poorest children — sumpsnipes, she'd learned, orphans as often as not — scavenged for food, for discarded chemtech, for anything that might earn them a few extra coins to get through the day. Horrific augmentation was a facet of daily life. It wasn't always medically necessary to replace whole sections of the body, but metal was better proof than flesh against the environment, other Zaunites, or one of the alarmingly regular chemtech accidents.

Here, as in Noxus, strength ruled all. But unlike Noxus, if you weren't already at the top, it seemed virtually impossible to prove your merit. Any challenge to power was met with beatings, not an opportunity for advancement.

"You're not from around here."

It was a statement, not a question, although there was an undercurrent of curiosity that made Riven pause before she met this new trial with force.

She looked around. A slim man was sweeping the front steps of a ramshackle building that twisted around a small cultivair. Riven eyed him skeptically, as though anything could wash away Zaun's grime. It had a stubbornly eternal quality that would have impressed even Swain. As she watched, a bit of the tiled roof fell off, vaporizing in a particularly acidic breeze before it hit the ground.

"No," she said, surprised at how awkward she felt admitting the obvious.

"Then you must be terribly confused." The man smiled slightly.

He leaned the broom against the wall, pulled out a flask, and sat cross-legged beside the steps. He took a swig from the flask and held it up, offering to share.

She accepted the flask wordlessly and settled beside him on the plated metal floor, leaning against the bundle that contained the remains of her shattered sword. She took a cautious sip. It was tea, slightly minty, with an aftertaste she couldn't identify.

"Have you been to Piltover?"

"Only in passing," she replied. "On my way down here."

He nodded.

"We used to be the same city, you know," he said.

She didn't. She squinted up in reflexive surprise, her imagination forced to supply the glittering hextech paradise that occupied the cliffs above.

"What happened?"

"Progress." He shrugged, as though it was normal for technological advancement to turn entire swaths of city into polluted, subterranean cesspits.

She couldn't stop herself wrinkling her nose in disgust.

"It's a city of opportunities. Of course, it's not perfect. Far from it." He waved a hand at the encroaching miasma. "But we're free in a lot of ways Piltover isn't. What's forbidden in Piltover, we do here. We prosper... and suffer for it."

Riven opened her mouth to say something incredulous, felt essence of chemtech on her tongue, and coughed instead. She took another drink from the flask, letting the mint wash away the taste of magically charged metal.

"It's hard in a lot of ways. I can't deny that. Plenty of people use Zaun as a means to horrible ends. Plenty more are just trying to survive. But we don't give up." He paused, and smiled again with an affection that clashed jarringly against Riven's suspicion that if she could find a good launching point, she could likely swim through the air. "Zaun is resilient."

That was certainly one word for it. She wasn't sure she would have been able to find any hope down here, but maybe it was easier if you'd never known anything different.

In some ways, she thought, Zaun wasn't so different from Ionia after all.

She let her gaze sweep the largely deserted path, partly reexamining the harsh world that was so far from Ionia's harmony and partly scanning for enemies. It was a habit she'd picked up years ago — one she'd never felt the need to break. Her eyes settled on her unsuitably cheerful companion.

"It's strange," she said. "You remind me of someplace I visited once, a long time ago. But here... Zaun... it couldn't be more different."

"The places may be different," he replied. "But people are the same, no matter where you go. Is there really a place where they don't dream of greatness while struggling to survive?"

She didn't have an answer.

"I still sweep the steps, even though there's no hope of cleaning them. I persist, and Zaun persists." His gesture took in the corroding structures around them and left trails in the murk. She followed his gaze as he glanced back at the cultivair. "And it doesn't take much to make you want to keep going."

She returned the flask, rose to her feet, and hesitated.

"Thank you," she said.

She walked on. The wind had stopped.