

PICTURE OF SUCCESS



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“Vice President Singhania?” came the attendant’s voice beyond her door. “The ceremony will start when you’re ready. I’ve loaded the latest speech onto your datapad if you’d like to—”

“I’ll handle it.” Vaira had bought herself fifteen minutes. It hadn’t been difficult—she could buy herself anything once she set her mind to it—but it felt like an achievement, nonetheless. The Vishkar Awards for Excellence in Reimagining Architechnical Applications were always a production, and this year’s were no exception. Every minute of the event had been carefully planned; it was vital to not only balance budget and spectacle but to maximize impact and efficiency. Her keynote speech was to be the highlight of the evening. The only problem was, whoever had written this script had done a rather poor job; it seemed as though they hardly knew her at all.

Vaira sighed. “Well, if I must deliver this speech tonight, I should at least be well-rehearsed. Let’s see what they’ve written for me now . . .” Vaira leaned against her dressing table as she prepared to read through the latest draft and make the best of what she’d been given.





“Thank you all for being here today. It is my honor to present this year’s Vishkar Award for Excellence in Reimagining Architechnical Applications to a most worthy candidate. But before I speak of our honoree, allow me to introduce myself. As you surely know, my family—”

Vaira stopped short and swiped through the line on her datapad, crossing out a few words before erasing it entirely.

“My fa—they can’t be serious. Bringing up my family before even mentioning my own achievements? Introducing myself as if everyone doesn’t already know who I am?”

She scanned the page, landing on another disappointing turn of phrase.

“The Singhanian family’s connections to Vishkar are—”

“Augh! Connections? Once I say *connections*, I’ve lost them. They’ll think only of the Singhanian name on the plaque outside and my grandfather’s legacy.”

She tightened her grip on the datapad. The screen flickered, and she took brief pleasure in imagining it to be something alive and perhaps intimidated by her vitriol.

“Vishkar isn’t a dynasty. Well—” She paused, considering. “I suppose it is. But it’s not as though I was handed this position. I’ve trained years, proven my worth. I—”

Vaira caught her shoulders rising. She took a deep breath and swiped to the next page of the speech, but what she found there was no better.

“What utter drive! They truly expect me to spend three minutes extolling our architects, prattling on about their ‘expertise’? About how ‘this company would be nothing without their hard work and dedication?’” She gave the datapad one last withering look before tossing it onto the dressing table behind her. With intention, she pushed off the table and began to pace the room.

“Enough. I am the one in charge here. My fortune bankrolls their academies. My contracts secure their assignments. I’ve already dedicated an entire evening to their success; I hardly think they deserve more of my praise.”

Normally—or, well, *out there*—Vaira hardly ever walked. The mag-lev technology incorporated into her wardrobe ensured she floated just above the ground everywhere she went. But when she was alone, Vaira liked to feel the earth beneath her feet. The pinch in her heels and the weight of her own body

kept her grounded. It all reminded her that she was still here—that she existed outside the public eye.

“This speech is useless,” she muttered as she turned on her heel to walk back the way she’d come.

Vaira had always found it easier to focus while on the move. When she was expending less energy on looking poised, she could better direct her thoughts toward the matter at hand. Sitting for family portraits as a child, for example, had always been a nightmarish exercise in restraint.

“Enough pandering. I’ll speak to my own talents. I—”

The mechanized arms at her back shifted into one of their reactive positions, prepared to applaud at the mention of her prowess. They had been expensive to design and manufacture, but they were proof of her ingenuity—a grand equalizer between her and the architects this speechwriter seemed so desperate to idolize.

“I *will* speak for myself.” She smoothed her dress and recollected herself. “Again, Vaira. In your own words. From the beginning.”

In a conscious effort to shift her mood, Vaira took a patient breath.

“It is my duty as an executive for the Vishkar Corporation to project the same lightness of being that we manufacture and provide to our partners across the globe,” she began. “With Vishkar’s hard-light technology, anything is possible. Entire cities can now be crafted by the hands of a skilled architect.”

She twisted her own wrist as she spoke, imitating the movements she might have her arms make onstage.

“Just as Vishkar’s architects go out into the world and demonstrate the superior nature of our technology, it is my honor as Vishkar’s esteemed vice president of development and operations to stand as a cornerstone of this company’s image.”

Yes, that was better. Vaira smiled to herself, running over the words in her mind before continuing.

“As an architect and an entrepreneur, I have found a wealth of success. Some have called me too generous for sharing my victories with the company, but . . . a rising tide elevates every ship, as they say.”





Then again . . . did she really need to spotlight Vishkar's architects any more than they did themselves? Always so insistent about their talents, so quick to treat their work as if it were derived from some font of inspiration that flowed deep within them.

"And under my oversight, no single group has risen higher than Vishkar's talented architects. To those present in the room tonight—know that talent alone may only take you so far. It was my drive that carried me through my schooling and earned me the position I now hold."

No, they wouldn't believe that. They would think of her family first. Vaira would have to address that before anything else.

"Proud as I am to bear the Singhania family name, I don't solely attribute my success to my upbringing. Their support was always rather . . . specific in its focus. As critical as the public can be, one's own kin can sometimes be far crueler."

The early failures of her youth still haunted Vaira. She recalled her first hard-light creations, all organic and ill-defined. She'd thought of them as art, once. Her family disagreed.

"Though my family may not have bought into my initial forays into hard-light manipulation, the care and resources I subsequently put toward mastering the craft taught me more than any academy could."

Even now, the memory of their disappointment filled Vaira so quickly with shame. She could feel herself growing defensive—noticed an indignant heat rising in her chest. "I learned not to tolerate anyone who would question the merit of my work or insinuate that I have not earned my position," she rambled, her pace and words quickening. "Certainly, there's value in '*the artistry of hard-light manipulation*', but what about the art of *negotiation*? Of presentation? Shaping oneself to be perfect, crafting not just a reputation but an image, something untouchable, something worthy. *That* is the true test of talent, the real—" As Vaira moved past the mirror, she caught a glimpse of her own reflection. Her speech came to a sudden halt as she stared, slack-jawed, at her own visage. She was hunched; her usually captivating presence suddenly seemed dim.

It took seeing the hard-light of her nails flickering in the mirror to loosen the grip she held on her own arms, folded tight across her chest and now bearing small, curved indentations as signs of her distress. And her eyes . . . They were both terrified and tempted by whatever emotion she might find reflected in them, as she stepped closer to the mirror.

She gave a shuddering sigh. “What are you saying, Vaira? Even if it were the truth, no one would respect you—let alone believe you—if you shared your own perspective.”

She studied her features closely. Through the makeup, she saw the faint beginnings of lines around her eyes. When she brushed aside her fringe to look closer, she noticed the weight of the gold strands—and how much thinner her natural hair felt in contrast.

“No,” she chided. “Just give them what they want. Deliver the speech. Hand out the award. Smile.”

After all, if anyone had wanted the truth, they’d have asked for it. And of all the things they questioned her about over the years, the truth had never been one of them.

Vaira turned from her own reflection. She took a deep breath and pulled the pieces of herself back together.

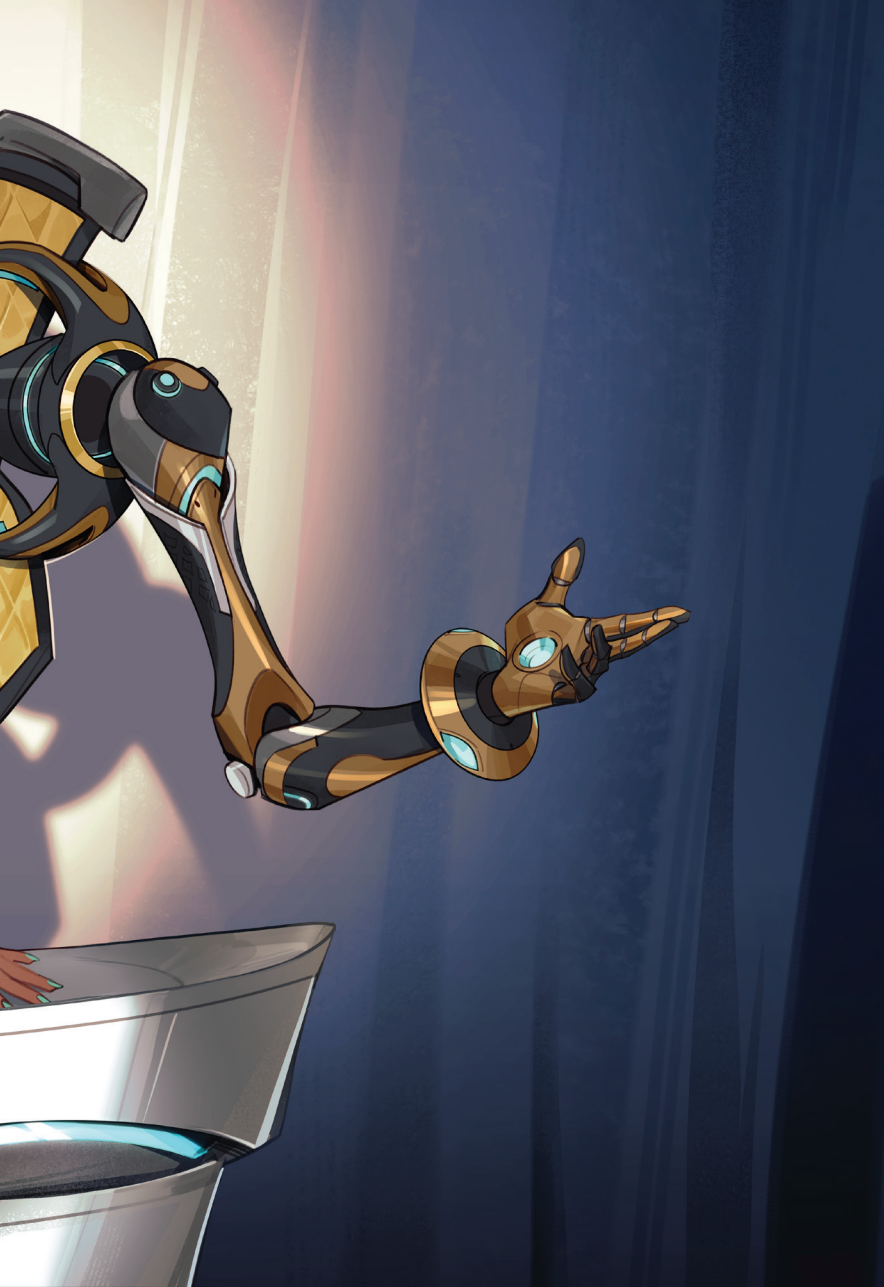
“You’re Vaira Singhania. Heiress to the Vishkar dynasty. Keeper of the family fortune. Inheritor of innovation.” With every affirmation, she felt calmness returning to her.

Vaira closed her eyes and envisioned herself as she truly was. Not how the mirror showed her, but how the people saw her. Confident. Elegant. *Flawless*.

“You will be the one to lead Vishkar into its better, brighter future,” she assured herself, her voice just enough above a whisper to feel like a command. When she opened her eyes again, all hesitation had left her. She made a gesture, and the mechanized arms at her back shifted into position. The familiar quiet hum of mag-lev activating surrounded her, and then she was weightless once more.

When Vaira crossed the threshold, everyone was waiting for her. They lined the area backstage, heads bowed reverently as she approached. They saw her for the woman she’d made herself to be—and they *respected* her.





She was, unquestionably, the right woman for the job.

The same, pitiable attendant from before came running after Vaira, stumbling over herself as they handed her the latest version of her speech—they'd seen her deletions and had already found more suitable replacements for the language.

But Vaira barely acknowledged their presence, continuing toward the stage in graceful silence. One of her mechanized arms accepted the datapad, and the other brushed the attendant away.

The doors opened, and Vaira exited into darkness. Alone for one more moment, she reminded herself why she was here.

“They want you to be perfect, Vaira.”

At the edge of the stage, beyond the velvet curtain, Vaira glimpsed an image of herself displayed above the podium. She looked stunning.

“It's a good thing you are.”