**ACE 34**

With everyone fed and watered, I sighed, and stood, heading over to grab my ‘Justice’ coat and weapons, the other two following me, both girls confused. “What are you doing, Jayce?” Piper inquired, as I started making sure *all* the belts were properly secured over my armored shirt, which the Home had provided extras of after it’d ‘learned’ the design. *That* meant I was doubling up on my armor in ways that didn’t exactly work well together, but, *given what I’d found,* I’d take the extra protection, my ring not having the same requirements as Vi’s bracers.

“Getting ready to head back out,” I told her, looking at a copied gas mask, weighing the pros and cons of using the spider silk balaclava instead, before saying *fuck it* and wearing both to protect my lower face.

Both girls stiffened at that. “What, *why?*” Vi demanded. “That place was. . .”

Before I could reply, though, Piper spoke up. “It’s the portal. You need to move it.”

*“****Yep*,**” I said, **Singing** without meaning to, just feeling like I *should* in-costume. Pushing that instinct down, I noted, “It’s about eleven pm on Friday. I have until about eight am on Monday to make it to the surface, or else people are going to start asking questions, which is something I’d rather avoid. And, with how far we fell, we’re. . . *deep.”*

Shaking my head, I’d considered how to do this, and none of my options were good. “Theoretically, the fastest way out would be to just go the way we came in, and if I could rig some kind of hextech anti-grav harness that *might* actually work instead of blowing me up I’d give it a shot, but I’m nowhere *close* to that. Worse, I don’t remember all the twists and falls we took, and we were falling for *minutes* which means we went a *ways* down, but what little I could make out then tells me that there were other tunnels that fed into the one we were in, so it’d be a three dimensional maze and. . .” I shook my head. “Maybe this is dumb, but I think trying to hoof it’s a better chance and getting out quickly, and, well, I’m ***curious***,” I offered with a grin.

“*Curious*,” Violetta echoed, incredulous.

“Yeah, as far as I was aware, the Sump was the lowest level of the Undercity, right?” I asked in turn, getting a nod from Piper. “Well, in that case, *where the fuck are we?*”

“Uh, at your house?” the small girl questioned, then glanced at the Gate. “Oh, you mean out there? . . . dunno. Somewhere old?”

“Well, *yes,*” I smiled, “But I expected, given the portal opens up a couple *miles* below the junkyard, that it’d just be caves, not some kind of hidden *megastructure.*” I paused, making connections to things Jayce had learned, but not given much thought to, combined with distant bits of lore I’d picked up. “Though, given that Zaun managed to crack their kingdom in *half* trying to make the Sun Gates, that suggests a level of industry beyond what the Lanes have to offer.”

“Undercity’s plenty big,” Vi disagreed. “Hell, there’s places no ones used in *ages*. They coulda done it.”

I paused, mid-way through strapping on my pistol’s holster. There was something. . . *wrong* with that statement, but I didn’t know *why* it was wrong. Putting that aside for later consideration, I loaded up the cart with stacks of ammo, not sure how much I’d need, but, thinking ahead, it would better to have something for the girls to do, if they wanted to help, instead of just walking out and leave them to just wait. They *could* just go to sleep, as I had this, but while Vi probably would, *Piper* certainly wouldn’t.

Thinking about it, I loaded it up the cart with some more Semtex, along with detonators, swinging by the kitchen as the Piper followed, Vi having left while I’d been busy. Grabbing a couple bottles of Company-brand Gatorade, which lacked any labels that might cause problems if taken to un-initiated worlds, I headed down to the Gate room, surprised to see Violetta was already there, flexing the fingers of a new pair of combat gloves.

“What’s up?” I questioned, confused.

“I’m coming with,” she declared, challengingly.

Normally, I’d let that pass, but now? “**No,**” I stated, definitively.

“What’dya mean *‘No’*?” she echoed scornfully. “You said you don’t know what’s down there, so you need someone to watch your back.”

“I mean ***No****,*” I reiterated. “I’ve got protections that you don’t. The reason why the oil-beast went for you, and *not* me, is because of that.”

“And what you have works on *everything*?” she checked, and I started to say yes, but hesitated, as once creatures hit a certain degree of intelligence, *no, those protections didn’t.* The Trashtapus crossed it, which is why I had to negotiate with it instead of commanding it, my **Wild Defense** only able to let me get my metaphorical foot in the door and open negotiations, but if it *really* didn’t like me, for whatever reason, then I would’ve been fucking *dead,* having been dropped in the *center* of its territory instead of approaching the edge, and being allowed to escape.

Reading my expression, the white-haired girl nodded. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. I’m coming with.”

“***No, you fucking aren’t,****”* I growled, the girls arrogance having gotten us *into* this problem. “**Yeah it’s not gonna be a walk in the park for me, but-**”

I was cut off by a tug on my coat, looking down to see Piper staring up at me. “Jayce?” she questioned, and I said nothing, waiting. “*Please* take Vi with you.”

My instinct was to tell *her* no too, but Piper’s perspective, while different, I’d found was worth at least viewing. “**Not saying I will, but *why?****”*

“It’s like the Under- like *Zaun* down there, right?” she questioned in turn.

I nodded, pulling back on my **Song**, “Turned up to *eleven*, but yes.”

“Well, she *knows* Zaun. More than I do, and more than *you* do, Jayce. At least for now,” the small girl argued. “And, you’ve got instincts and stuff, but you don’t know what they *mean.*”

Part of me was annoyed that I’d explained my ‘abilities’ to the girl, but when I’d grabbed hot metal, temperature no longer a concern, and then had to lunge to stop *her* from doing the same thing a few minutes later. I’d wanted to brush past them, however, when she’d asked, wanting to know if there was something *she* could do to be able to do what I did, seeming vulnerable, I’d told her about my special **Defenses**, and why they were unique to *me.* She’d been disappointed, but had accepted it, and, when I’d told her that, when she was older, I’d see what I could do, she’d just nodded and brightened back up.

But that meant that she knew the limits of my abilities, and could use them against me. Well, not *against* me, but. . .

I sighed, “That’s. . . a good point.”

The blue-haired tween nodded, then turned on her smug looking sister, and commanded her, “And *you* need to listen to Jayce, Vi! If he says to do something, you need to do it!”

Violetta frowned, “I can look after mys-”

“*Can you?”* her sister demanded, cutting her off, suddenly aggressive. “Or did Jayce have to save you, Violet? *Twice?*”

“I, he saved *you too*,” the older girl argued.

However, whatever kind of impact that point was supposed to make didn’t stick, as Piper just shot her sister a dismissive look. “Like, *duh,*” the small girl replied. “I’m a *kid*, I was in *trouble,* and he’s *Jayce!”* I lifted a finger, as that didn’t make a *lot* of sense, but she wasn’t done. “And he only needed to this time because you *didn’t listen.* Because you *don’t listen!”*

Her sister scowled, “I-”

*“No! You DON’T!”* the blue-haired girl screamed, both Vi and I taken aback by it. *“You-”*

*“****Piper,***” I interrupted, putting my hand on her shoulder, her meltdown *clearly* not about what it was about, especially with it coming out of nowhere as it seemed to be. “**Take a deep breath, and center yourself. I’m not going anywhere until we have this settled.**”

The girl blinked rapidly, struggling with herself, before she did what I asked, holding onto my coat tightly. “**Now, what’s wrong?**” I prompted.

She frowned, taking a deep breath to start yelling again, *“VI-”*

“**No,**” I cut her off. “**Why are *you* scared?**”

That caught her off-guard. “I. . . *what?*”

Going down on one knee, I looked across at the unstable tween. “**You’re scared, Piper. Of what. Of Violetta not listening to me, obviously, but *why?***”

“I. . . She almost got you *killed!*” she sniffed.

“What? No I-” the older sister started to argue, and I could *see* Piper start to get worked up, so lightly squeezed her shoulder, interrupting the brawler myself.

*“****Yes. You did,***” I stated without condemnation, while not breaking eye contact with the younger girl. “**I understand why, but stop reacting and *think.* Didn’t Vander talk to you about taking responsibility for your actions?**”

Without looking, I could see out of the corner of my eye as the white-haired girl flinched, as if slapped, falling silent. Waiting, I watched Piper, waiting. The small girl bit her lip, then whispered, fearful, “*I’m worried you’ll leave me. Like everyone else did. Like Vi did.”*

*Well*, ***shit****.* I brought the girl in for a hug, and she clung to me. Quietly, I checked, “**And am I right in thinking you’re not worried about me leaving, but me dying?**” She didn’t say anything, but nodded into my collar. *Then if she’s such a liability, why did you want me to bring Vi at all?* I wondered, having assumed it was Piper trying to help her sister ‘feel useful’, like we’d talked about, and supporting her, but. . .

Looking at it from another, *less* pleasant direction, Piper didn’t want her sister to come with to help *her*, she wanted Violetta to come to help *me*, even if the white-haired girl got hurt in the process, and the smaller girl expected her sister to go along with it. And when Vi was, well, *Vi,* then suddenly the brawler wasn’t going to help me, but she was someone that might get *me* killed trying to protect her, like we’d *both* almost died a bit over an hour ago. And, had we not gotten lucky, and landed on spikes, or were buried and crushed to death under the trash-valanche, or any *number* of other outcomes, we *would* have died.

To be fair, I was pretty certain **Mind Defense** was helping to keep me stable, or maybe it was my own tendency to focus on what I *could* do, but, *again*, I was the only one of us three who had such a thing.

And, had we died, Piper would’ve been left here, waiting for us to come back, *forever*.

Which triggered the traumatized girl *hard*.

But she’d tried to hide that.

For our sakes.

*“****It’s okay,****”* I told her, gently patting her on the back. *“****The fall happened, and it was dangerous, but I’m not going to leave you.****”*

*“E-Ever?”* she whispered, her broken tone cutting me deep.

*“****As long as you want me to stay,****”* I settled on. I was *pretty* sure that, if I died, I’d get another chance, given who I was working for, but I didn’t *know* that, nor would **DEATH** likely ever tell me, and it would be best to assume I only had the one life, and be pleasantly surprised, then count on it, and leave her alone without support. “**Life is dangerous, but I’m doing everything I can to get stronger, so I can handle what comes our way.**”

The girl sniffled a little, but just held on to me, and I waited, *knowing* I only had so much time, but *this* was more important. Finally, Piper asked, and I had to strain to hear her. *“And, and if that’s not good enough?****”***

“**Then I will have done my best, and I’ll take comfort in that,**” I replied softly. “**I can’t-**” I paused, my *own* memories scraping internally at my soul. “**It’s not *reasonable* for me to save the whole world. But I can help who I can. *Do* what I can. And that’s alright. As long as I’m true to myself, as long as I do what I think is right, and as long as I do my best to make sure I *am* doing what’s right, that’s all I can ask. Of myself, or others.**”

A silence stretched between us, Violetta awkwardly standing off to the side, and while she probably couldn’t hear her sister, she *had* heard me. I stayed there for a few minutes, Piper holding onto me, her grip tightening when I started to stand, but, after a couple seconds, she let go. “Do you have to. . .” she started to ask, but caught herself, and shook her head. “Can I help?” the young girl asked instead.

Smiling I nodded, pointing to the cart I’d loaded up, and she smiled at that, nodding her head, collecting herself once more as she headed over to it.

Turning my attention, I faced her sister. “**I appreciate the help, but, if you’re coming with me, I *am* in charge,**” I declared, my tone hard, with no give to be found, partly for her, and partly for Piper. “**There’s a good chance you’ll notice things I won’t, and I will hear out any suggestions you have, but while you have experience, I have *other* Talents, which *you* do not possess. If I give you an order, that is not a suggestion, it is not a debate, you *will* do what I tell you to, just as you would’ve expected Mylo or Claggor to do what *you* would’ve told them to do. You agree to that, we’ll head out. You can’t, stay here and maybe help your sister. You agree and *ignore me*, I’ll save you if I can, but that won’t be an honest mistake, it’ll be you trying to get us *both* killed, no matter what excuse you might think you have, and I’ll be well within my rights to *let you die*. *Understood?****”*

“I. . . yeah,” she nodded. “I understand.”

“**I hope you do,**” I noted, my throat starting to burn, but I ignored it. “**Do you agree to my terms?**”

“You don’t have to be such a dick about it,” the brawler frowned.

I lifted an eyebrow, pressing *into* my words, “**Given your actions, *yes, I do.*** **Now, *Do. You. Agree?***”

Violetta stared at me challengingly, and I didn’t move, completely still, waiting for her response. Eventually, she looked away. “I, uh, yeah. I agree. I’ll do what you say while we’re out there.”

I sighed, relieved, letting up on the **Song**, “*Good*. I appreciate the help, Vi. I really do. But just like I don’t want your sister hurt, I want to make sure you’re not, at least past your ability to heal. And if I take you out there with me, I’m responsible for you, just like *you* were responsible for your siblings when *you* did jobs.”

Smiling ruefully, I added, “And I know you’re not much for words, but, well, my actions *should* speak for me, even if they apparently *aren’t*. If I didn’t care about your safety enough to risk my own, I could’ve ridden that board to safety, and you would’ve met that thing on your own, assuming you survived the fall. Now, gimme a sec to check that the passageway’s safe before we head out.”

Walking to the Gate, the girl stiffening as I passed her, I ignored the teen, carefully moving to the glowing gateway. Standing to the side of it, I stuck a hand through, waited a second, before I leaned over, sticking my head through, following standard ‘uncertain gate’ procedures. I needn’t have worried, the passageway was empty, and, unholstering my weapon, I stepped through, at the ready.

However there was truly nothing there, as I moved around the gate, the swirling flat oval obscuring my vision. Someone who lacked the proper ‘permissions’ wouldn’t see the gateway, instead assuming what was there, their brains filling in the blindspot subconsciously, not instantly seeing me as I emerged, a nice little safety feature. Opening a Gate to hide behind, however, wouldn’t function similiarly, as the ‘hiding itself’ feature prioritized the Gate over the user, and would transmit to any who saw me step behind it what I was doing right up until the moment I ‘vanished’ by stepping through. It wouldn’t even protect against incoming fire, if the gate was facing me, as they’d pass right through without issue, the Conceptual Screens keeping discrete items from accidentally falling inside unless they naturally entered through environmental factors, or were thrown in by a white-listed user.

Essentially, while it was useful, Company R&D had made *sure* that the Gates couldn’t be easily cheesed, both to try and get us all to buy additional items, and to cut down on discovery by non-Company assets.

Stepping back Home, I waved Violetta over, turning to Piper, asking, “Want to take a look? You’re not coming with, and stay by my side, but it should be safe.”

“I, *yeah!”* the small girl brightened, running over, while her older sister shot me a wary glance, but apparently realized that she had *no* room to talk, and merely followed, both of us stepping into the corridor. The tiny tinkerer stopped as soon as she passed through, wrinkling her nose at the smell, but allowed me to maneuver her out of the way to prevent Violetta from walking right into her.

“It stinks,” she commented, going to hold her nose, but paused, taking a sniff. “Or, does it?”

I nodded, “Yeah, the air’s. . . *heavy,* but with *what* is the question.” I didn’t have *any* of the tech know-how to qualify for a mass-spectrometer for my workshop, but I was sure that there were other, less advanced ways of figuring that out, and, when I had some of that know-how, I’d be back to test that.

“Smell?” the small girl offered, with a shrug. “Or not-smell?”

Rolling my eyes, I told her, “*Yeah, but which?* And what’s it *made of?*” Shaking my head, I pointed down one hallway, telling her, “*That* way is the oil-lake, while the other is where we’re going.”

The small girl took a half-step towards the way we came, but caught herself before my hand, which had snapped forward, reached her, and I pulled it back as she turned around. “I, uh, I can’t see it, can I?”

“No, that’d be a *terrible* idea. And good on you for asking,” I praised, though I had an idea. “Actually, stay here with your sister. It’s safe for me, and I’ll be right back.”

Waiting for her to nod, and stand over by Vi, I jogged back down the corridor, to the oil-lake, taking out my phone, and recording a video, the creature inside lifting a questioning tentacle. ‘Just taking one last look, have a nice day’, I fed into my talent, my throat gurgling oddly, the tentacle waving goodbye before slipping back under the waves. Ending the recording, I jogged back, both girls a little nervous, but relaxing somewhat when they saw me, Piper more than Violetta.

“This is way easier,” I told them, setting the video to play. “Watch this.”

They watched, the tween enraptured, clapping her hands together as the creature waved before disappearing below the surface. “Oh, it’s cute!” she declared.

“No, it isn’t,” Vi shot back.

However, before the younger girl could reply, I backed up Violetta, “Your sister’s right. Let me zoom in.” moving to one of the frames showing the tentacle, I zoomed in, and in, and in*,* until you could see the hundreds of gaping, toothed mouths it used as suckers, flexing blade-like teeth. “Each of those is this big,” I told her, opening my hand in a fake-mouth. “Which means that tentacle was *over a hundred feet long.*” Zooming back out, I let the video play until it finished. “It likes *me*, but it would *kill you*, Piper, in an instant, which is why you’re staying Home, and why Violetta is only with me because she *will* listen to me. Okay?”

The blue-haired girl blinked, processing that, before she nodded cheerfully. “Okay, Jayce. But, when you get tired, come back Home, okay?”

Smiling, I messed up her hair fondly. “That’s the plan. We’ve got a safe-zone on command, and we’d be *foolish* to ignore it. Now, take my hand, and let’s get you there.”

It only took a moment to lead her through the Gate, which I closed behind her, warning Piper that when it opened we’d either be running, need a reload, or need a grenade, and she nodded seriously, telling me she’d be ready. Given that it was *already* kind of late, though Vi and I were keyed up enough we could get a few hours of travel in before we called it quits, I fully expected to find the young girl asleep at her table when we did so.

“Gate’s closed, let’s get going,” I informed Violetta, who nodded, and fell in step next to me, though at a bit over arms’ length, her attention partly on me as we continued down the glowing corridor, the dust and rust-particles thick enough to muffle our steps, like a thin coating of fresh snow, though this was *anything* but fresh.

Slowly, the hallway curved, before splitting up into three other directions, the path we were on one section of a three way fork, the main, larger tunnel in front of us, but, as I looked down it, something about it seemed. . . *wrong.* Looking down the other two directions, which would require us to backtrack somewhat, one was fine, with no feeling at all, and the other was. . . *good?*

“This way,” I said, starting to walk.

After a moment’s hesitation that I noted but didn’t react to, Vi followed, asking, “Why this way?”

“No clue, but the big passage was a trap,” I replied, a bit curious myself, and, hesitantly, putting forward the idea of throwing a rock down the main way, I got. . . nothing. *A grenade?* I proposed. That was. . . *better*.

Holding up a hand, I stopped walking, opening a Gate, and leaning through, Piper at full attention. “Grenade, small one please. No danger, but I’m testing something.”

“Can I see?” she asked, but when I shook my head no, she just nodded, handing me the explosive, going to the raw materials and putting together a replacement as I left, the tech we were using essentially foolproof.

Leaning back out, and closing the portal, I held a finger up to indicate silence, and waved Vi to follow, as we retraced our steps, coming back to the intersection. Priming the grenade with one hand, I set my phone to record, sticking the camera around the corner and nothing else, the vague feeling telling me *not* to step any further.

Setting the grenade on a five-second timer, I hurled it around the corner, while bringing my hand up to cover Vi’s mouth and keep her still as I gently pressed her against the wall. The gesture made her frown, but she didn’t pull away, the explosion going off, which made her jump a little, but the following unholy ***SCREECH*** made her gasp, her *“What?”* muffled, as whatever it was screamed bloody murder, before a chorus of other *screeches* joined in, these. . . *hungry,* the sound of wet, tearing meat echoing our way, as I pulled my phone back and, gesturing for quiet, motioned for her to continue onwards, on our chosen path.

It was only when I felt the faint pressure on my mind fade, that I stopped, motioning her over. “Okay, lets see what was there,” I commented, queueing up the video.

“You don’t know?” Vi asked, and I shook my head.

“All I knew was that going that way was a *bad idea*,” I stated, hitting play.

We watched as the vantage point shook slightly from my throw, and the white sphere, the small black detonator that was flashing red stuck in the middle of, flew down the hall, only for what I’d *thought* was a tube to lash out, some kind of. . . well, it was a snake, if a snake had two long, bony arms that ended in a single talon each, and a mouth full of sharp teeth in addition to its fangs. The sixteen-foot long ‘snake’ pierced the sphere, which is what let me guesstimate its size, bringing the grenade up to its mouth and biting it, but then it paused as it realized its ‘prey’ wasn’t alive, pulling it back, looking at it almost curiously.

Which is when it exploded.

The screaming, quiet through the speakers, started, as it thrashed, missing one arm, bronze-colored body discolored as some of the scales had been pulverized, dripping dark blood, as it lost itself to the pain.

Then, a moment later, a dozen smaller ‘snakes’, each the size of a boa, came out from crevices, and fell upon the maimed leader, taloned arms sinking deep into its flesh in a way that suggested hidden blades, which was just *all* the nope.

Both of us stood there for a moment, looking at the last frame, the creature’s frozen, several with mouths full of what, if I had to guess, *used* to be the alpha’s flesh.

“Whelp, glad we’re going this way,” I commented blandly, dismissing my phone into mist and shadows. “Let’s *not* show Piper that one, unless she gets bratty about wanting to poke around here. Sound good?” Looking over to her, my companion was staring at the space the phone was in. “*Vi?”*

She flinched, taking a step back, hands coming up and at the ready, while I didn’t move, waiting. “I, uh,” the brawler articulated, glancing around the passageway we were in nervously. “Are there more of them?”

“Not here, but. . . probably?” I shrugged. “Normal ecological rules kinda go out the window when you mix in hyper-tech and magic. But right here is safe, at least right now. . . You okay?”

Violetta relaxed a little, opening and closer her hands, giving the corridor another searching look, before she nodded, and stood up straighter, coming out of her fighting stance. “I, yeah. *Yeah*. Let’s go.”

*Okaaaay?* I thought, but did not say, as we pressed onwards, through a couple more intersections. At the first one, my companion was so tense that, if I plucked her, she’d probably produce a B-sharp, but none of our choices gave me the ‘It’s quiet, too quiet’ feeling that first one had, leaving us nothing to do but walk for an hour as I tried to feel my way through each intersection, through corridors that were similar, but never identical. Some where well lit, almost cheery if it weren’t for the unnatural colors, while others were dark, barely with enough light to see by, though after the first one I stopped back home to get us flashlights we could clip onto our shoulders.

There were also odd noises, with burbles, hisses, and the occasional intermittent shriek of steam that made us both jump, along with the rare sound of small scurrying feet which *didn’t help*, but nothing really made me go ‘maybe we should double back’.

“*Jayce*,” Vi said out of nowhere, down one corridor that had glowing blue tubes running its length, the chemtech fluid certainly going *somewhere* at speed, and, having waved a hand near it, I knew the tubes were electrified, something I’d warned my companion about.

The serious way she said it made me freeze, hand going to my gun, as I looked around, trying to spot what I’d missed. “What is it?” I asked, on edge.

“What?” she questioned in turn, having taken a few more steps ahead before she turned around, confused, and confusing *me*, before she shook her head. “No, it’s not that.”

“Oh,” I replied, relaxing a little. “What is it then?”

Violetta didn’t say anything, struggling with herself, before, with a scowl, stated, “I’m sorry. And thanks.”

“For. . .?” I prompted, when it was clear that was *all* she was going to say.

“For, for *all* of it,” the teen stated, and when I still clearly had no idea what she referring to, she sighed, turning away, taking a few steps, running gloved fingers through her hair, pausing at the motion, then shaking her head and walking back. “For being there for Powder, when I couldn’t. For coming to get Ekko. For coming to get *me.* And then, and then for putting up with my ass when I’ve been worse than *Mylo* ***ever*** was.”

I shrugged, a little uncomfortable with the praise. “Well, um, you’re welcome? You’d been through a lot. And I was just being-”

*“Shut up!”* the brawler snapped, then winced. “I, *sorry.* I, you, *stop being nice,*” she ordered, clearly not having an easy time of this. “I’ve been *horrible* and you, you’ve *killed people,* but. . .”

Starting to see the edges of the cognitive dissonance that was tearing this traumatized girl’s psyche apart, I gently asked, “But I’ve been nothing but kind towards you?”

“You’ve been an *asshole* too,” she countered angrily, before instantly trying to walk back her statement, “I mean, you’ve-”

“Perhaps *kind* is the wrong word,” I agreed, catching her attention. “But. . . there isn’t really a good word for it, or if there is I don’t know it. I’m aware that I’m ruthless to my enemies. That behind me is a road made of corpses. I had to be, to survive. But you aren’t my enemy, Vi, and unless you try to *willingly* hurt myself or my allies, you won’t be. And, like the difference between using weapons and not in a brawl in Zaun, I approach you differently than I would someone who *truly* meant me harm. Because, I don’t think you do. Do you?”

“No, *of course* I. . . no, I don’t,” she started to say, catching herself, and correcting. “You pulled me out of. . . and then you took me in. But, when I fell, you, you hesitated.”

“Of course I did,” I replied, which took her aback. “By your own words, you’ve been *absolutely* *horrible*, Vi, and your death would’ve meant I wouldn’t need to put up with that any longer, as well as the situation being, karmically, one where I was blameless, as I had *just told you* not to go any further, and you’d pushed by me. However, your death *would* hurt Powder, and, despite your. . . *difficulties,* you’re a good person, Violetta. And-”

*“No I’m not!”* she interrupted, scowling.

I cocked my head. “Other than being a colossal bitch, and lashing out at me on the regular, what have you done that would make you *not* a good person?”

*“I got everyone killed!”* she shot back, angrily. “They trusted me, and now they’re *dead!*”

“I’m fairly certain that was *Silc-*” I started to point out, as we’d *had* this discussion, but she wasn’t done.

“*I* was the one who started this *ENTIRE THING!*” she yelled. “If I hadn-”

*“****Get off your high horse; you’re not that powerful,***” I snapped right back, as I realized that she apparently hadn’t listened. *At all*.

She blinked, confused, “I, what?”

“**Shit happens, and unless you can see the future, *sometimes you fail,****”* I told her, glad my throat had recovered from earlier, because I apparently needed *Conceptual Voice Powers* to get this girl to understand me, as she’d heard, but apparently not *listened*. “**I get you’re used to taking responsibility, and Vander gave you a talk about taking responsibility for what happens to those under your command, but flagellating over what happened, wallowing in that misery, while it feels horribly comfortable, and *trust me, I know exactly how that is,* doesn’t do *shit* other than keep you *in* the shit. But being evil takes *malice,* it takes a willingness to hurt the innocent to get what you want, while being good takes *self-sacrifice,* a willingness to give up your own time and energy to help those who *deserve it.****”*

I took a step her way, and she backed up, before realizing what she was doing and took a step forward, not giving ground, as I continued, “**It’s more complex than that, but not by much, and there’s a whole stretch of ‘neither good nor evil’ there, but, Violet, the night your old life *ended* you were willing to go to Stillwater, even if you truly didn’t understand what was waiting for you there, to protect your family. Someone who *wasn’t* good would have tried to escape that, while someone who was *evil* would’ve tried to get some other pink-haired girl to take your place. Or, *hell*, would’ve tried to get Mylo, Claggor, or even *Powder* to take the fall instead of you.**”

“I, *what!?*” she gasped, horrified at even the idea. “No, it was *my* responsibility-”

*“****EXACTLY,****”* I stressed, taking another step. “***You. Are. Good. And bad shit happens to good people All. The. Time. There’s some worlds where fate itself tries to enforce such things, but Runeterra Isn’t. One.***”Another step brought me right up to her. “**While the Gods exist here, they’re either assholes, impotent, or have some other reason why the worlds so shit, and *none* of them are operating in Zaun or Piltover, so that leaves it up to people like *us* to do the right thing.**”

I shook my head, “**Evil’s favorite tactic is to blur the lines of what makes Good, *Good,* to abuse people’s better natures to allow their evil actions to go unopposed, to the point that even *calling* oneself Good will get one attacked not just by Evil, but by the masses who are neither but have been decieved, for a *variety* of reasons. And it’s easy, *very easy*, to just throw one’s hands up and go, ‘I’ve done a bad thing, that means I can *never* be Good, so *why bother*’, but you *can’t,* because then *Evil wins.***” I realized I wasn’t really talking about Violet anymore, having had this argument too many times with those in my squadron in Basic, some of the people I’d worked with Evil themselves, hating when I named the problem, but it’d always been personal attacks and sophistry with them, as they’d never been able to explain *why I was wrong.*

Bringing it back to *her* problem, though, I lifted a hand, putting it on her shoulder, even as my throat started to burn, “**So, *yes,* Violet. You *are* Good. If you weren’t, I would’ve kicked you to the curb, setting you up somewhere out of the way, safe, and *not where I live,* or at least not risked my *own* life to save yours. Because no part of being Good means dying to savethe *unworthy*. Ekko is good as well, as is Powder, as is Babette, as is Viktor, my partner at the Academy, and as were Vander, Claggor, and even Mylo, because having a big mouth didn’t stop him from *being there with you, trying to save your father*, even when things looked bad.**”

“But, then, *why?”* she questioned. “If we’re good people, then *why*. . .”

“**Why did everything go bad?**” I questioned, guessing where she was going, and getting a nod of confirmation. I’d said so before, but maybe putting it a different way would help. “**Because being good isn’t a shield against misfortune, or the acts of Evil, it only means that, when you’re hurt, there are those that come to your aid. That’s why Silco had to come at Vander in the dead of the night. Because, had they known about it, *all of the Lanes would have come to his aid,***” I told her.

“Then, then why *didn’t they?*” Violet demanded. “From what Babette said, they just rolled over, and turned on each other, and, now everything’s getting worse, and, and it’s like nothing Vander did *mattered!”*

*Ah, this isn’t just about me,* I realized. Yes, I’d shaken the girl’s worldview pretty hard, like I tended to do to *most* people I was around, to be honest, but while talking with Babette had been good for her, it’d also created *other* issues. Issues that her trip, disguised as she was, into the Lanes earlier today had only exacerbated.

“**But most people are *not* Good, Vi, so if they could convince themselves nothing had to be done, or *be* convinced by Silco, they wouldn’t feel pressured to risk anything themselves. You could’ve possibly roused them, that night before everything went completely wrong, but, while you’re almost an adult, Vi, you were *never* taught how to wield that sort of power, or even that it exists, because *Vander* didn’t want to wield that sort of power. Because being Good, and being *wise,* are two *entirely unrelated things.* I’m the first one, to a degree, but *not* the second. So, *as I keep on saying,* and as I keep on trying to *show you with my actions*, I think you’re Good, and worth saving.**” I laughed, “**Even if, between the two of us, we’ve managed to turn you apologizing into *yet* *another fight.***”

“I. . . *shit*, we *did*, didn’t we?” the brawler smiled ruefully. “I, what the *hell?* Do you have to make *everything* so, so *serious*, Jayce?”

“**Only the things that matter**,” I told her, trying not to cough, at my limit, and pulling back on my **Song.** “I’m a good person, or at least, I *try* to be, but I can get a bit. . . *thorough.* To avoid miscommunications. Too many times I’ve thought someone understood what I meant, only to find out later. . .” I realized my hand was still on her shoulder, and let it drop. “Right, that’s, that’s not important right now. So, you were apologizing?”

Violetta just stared at me for a long moment, before she shook her head. “You’re. . . how can you make being encouraging sound so *dickish*?”

“Because I’m also calling you an idiot at the same time I’m telling you that I believe in you,” I offered easily, getting a surprised laugh out of the teen. “I’m good, and supportive, but I’m not *nice*, because I think you’re worthy of honesty.”

That got me a narrow-eyed stare, “That’s, that’s *not* how that works.”

“Is for me,” I shrugged.

“But not for, like, *anyone* else,” she argued.

I shrugged again, replicating the movement exactly, “Maybe it should.”

“God, why are you *so* hard to deal with?” she sighed.

Smirking slightly, I replied, “Because I answer questions instead of dismissing them.”

“But do you have to do it *all the time?”* she demanded, likely rhetorically.

“Only for those I respect,” I answered.

“But I haven’t done anyth-*stop it!”* Violetta warned, as I opened my mouth to disagree. “I. . . *fine.* You’re right. I’ve done *some* good things. And you’re *trying* to help. And, and you aren’t as full of shit as you sound. *Happy?*” she challenged.

“Words are cheap, it’s actions that matter,” I replied, having a bit of fun tossing her own words back at her.

Vi glared at me. “*That’s not*,” she started to say, before stopping herself. After a moment’s thought, she worked her jaw, and nodded. “So I need to, what, try and be nicer?”

“Eh, ‘nice’ is nebulous,” I offered. “Maybe just stop assuming I’m ‘full of shit’, even when I say something that sounds crazy? Because,” I opened my arms to indicate the hallway, “my life *is* kinda bonkers, and yours will be too for being around me, but also far better for it.”

“See, it’s shit like *that!*” the brawler shot back. “How do you just *say* shit like that with a straight face?”

Smirking, I fired in return, “*She said, feeling healthier than she ever had before, wearing finer clothes than any she’d worn in her life, including* ***literally magic armor****, knowing that wherever she found in her journey she had a safe place to sleep and good food waiting for her at any time.*”

Violetta poked me in the chest, though any impact was lessened by the multiple layers of armor I was wearing, opening her mouth to respond, thought better of it, tried again with another poke, stopped again, and finally settled on a punctuated, “You’re *still* a dick!”

“And you’re still a bitch, but I’d jump into another trash-valanche to so save you,” I replied blithely.

She poked me in the chest again, trying to come up with a response, but grimaced, her hand dropping down. “Yeah. You did, didn’t you. *Thanks*. And sorry.”

“You’re welcome,” I told her. “So, want to keep going for an hour or two, or call it quits here for the night? I’m good for a bit, but I promised your sister I’d let you watch my back, which means we both need to be on our game. And, while we’re on a time limit, we’re in no rush, so going to bed an hour early and getting started a bit earlier tomorrow is no big deal.”

“You’re asking *me?*” she questioned, brows knitting.

“. . . Yes?” I questioned in turn. “I’m the lead here, but I’d be a shit leader if I didn’t look out for the people I was working with.”

Something about that took her aback, and I wondered if I was unknowingly echoing Vander, as opposed to the times I’d done so *on purpose.* The white-haired teen looked introspective for a sec, opening and closing her gloved hands, then nodded. “I’m good for a bit more. And, yeah, in two hours we should stop. And it’s weird that we *can*. You know that, right?”

I exaggeratedly looked around the blue-lit seemingly burnished brass corridor. “And this place *isn’t?*”

“Yeah, it is. What even *is* this place?” she questioned, falling into step with me as we continued onwards.

“I don’t know, though I’m looking forward to finding out if we can, on our way out,” I offered, which Violetta thought about, before nodding in agreement.

This time, the silence that stretched between us wasn’t tense, but. . . almost comfortable, the brawler walking right next to me instead of keeping me at arm’s length, and her attention was not partially focused on me, watching what I was doing, but all of it was turned outward, a certain degree of trust there that hadn’t been there before.

*Well, at least something good’s come out of all this,* I smiled, wondering what challenges lay ahead of us.