**ACE 14**

Waking, I found myself not as alone as I’d been when I’d gone to sleep.

*I’m gonna have to get her to stop doing this,* I thought, shaking my head, once more slipping out of my shirt to go take a shower, Powder holding onto it tightly. She was gone when I was done, my top in the clothes hamper, so at least she wasn’t waiting for me, or something.

As I was making breakfast, the small girl walked in with a smile, hesitating as I shot her an assessing look. “After we wake Violet up, you’re going to need to sleep in your own room, Powder,” I informed her. By her frown, she didn’t like that, opening her mouth to argue, but cut herself off. Guessing where she was going, I added, “And if you don’t want to sleep alone, I’m sure she wouldn’t object to sharing her bed with you. It might even make *her* feel better, but I’m not sure about that.”

The not-quite-teen took her seat at the counter, but obviously wasn’t happy. Not looking at me, she muttered, as if she didn’t want to be responsible for her words, “But *Vi* didn’t come for me. You *did*.”

“Violet *tried,*” I argued, “and, after what she went through, I’m pretty certain she’s going to have nightmares.” Honestly, I’d be concerned if Violet *didn’t* have any, as, by my read of the girl from Arcane, she seemed fairly normal, and a lack of such things would mean I’d completely missed the mark on her. “*You* could help with that, in a way that I can’t.” At Powder’s confused expression, as she turned to look at me directly, I gestured to myself, “You know, being a *man* that she’s only met *once before*, as opposed to her *little sister* whom she *loves very much*.”

The girl nodded at that, unable to argue, though quickly asked, “But, not *right* now, right?”

“We need to do it today, but I want to give her one more once over, since she might have some. . . *objections* to me doing so later,” I replied, aware of the situation, but also of how *bad* of a condition Violet had been in, and how, even *with* Runeterran healing, there was a very real possibility for permanent scarring or damage if she didn’t receive proper medical care. If I had to put off waking her up for another day to make sure she got that care, instead of having her refuse for any number of understandable, but foolish, reasons, I’d do it. “I need to make sure she’s at the point she can take care of herself.”

“And if she’s not?” Powder inquired, not hiding her hope very well, *not* that her sister was that injured, but that Powder could put off confronting the older girl that, in *her* opinion, had abandoned the blue-haired child.

“Then we wait a few days,” I shrugged in turn. “But only *if*. In two days I’ll get busy again, so I’d rather do it now.”

The girl didn’t have any response to that, so we ate breakfast in silence, with her getting increasingly nervous as we finished, Powder insisting that we wash the dishes first, then following me back up to the medical bay. Changing Violet’s soiled bedsheets, we then cleaned the girl herself and removed her bandages. For someone from Earth, her recovery would be miraculous, but from the Company’s records, it was only a little better than normal for standard Runeterrans.

Full ‘Legends’ of the League, whose bodies had been infused with Mana to the point they could fight on a superhuman level, could keep going past the point they should collapse, and bounce back with only a day or two of rest, and that was assuming they *took* that level of damage in the first place, but Violet was likely a Tier 3 at this point, *maybe* Tier 4, as opposed to the Legends’ Tier 5 status, while Jayce, when I had dropped in, was at the lower end of Tier 3, at the edge of what was humanly possibly *without* superpowers, but not having crossed the threshold into Tier 4’s range of power.

Looking over the pink-haired girl, the stitches had already half-dissolved, her flesh raw, but healing, the teen in better shape than *I* was, for the most part. Her lifestyle in the Lanes, while not the *best*, had seemingly led to her putting herself through the kind of conditioning that Demacian soldiers endured, though not the ridiculous that their *elites* were capable of, though that in turn might have been because of the fact that she was *fifteen* instead of a *fully grown adult*. Because of *that*, her Mana infusion levels were *much* higher than my own, something I needed to rectify, *after* I finished healing, though the healing process would, in a small way, *also* help with that, as, like a broken bone would regrow stronger, the repeated growth of cells would in turn take in more and more ambient Mana as they filled in the injury.

I could set my **Sweet Home** only to places that I’d visited and opened a portal into before and thus allowing it to ‘sample’ the conditions, which meant I was stuck with Piltoverian and Zaunite enviromentals, going for the former for obvious reasons, but I mentally added a trip to Ixtal and Ionia to my *long* list of ‘get to eventually’ tasks. Being able to up the elemental or spiritual components of the Mana in the air, the same thing that led to so many mages of those types being born in those countries, would be interesting, at the very least, and possibly beneficial. It’d *also* let me do tests on how those things effected Hextech, and other possible inventions, without having to try and go and *set up a lab* in those foreign countries.

The ‘Not-Asia’ of Ionia was seemingly peaceful, but between the monsters, the bandits, and other ‘local’ dangers any ‘foreigners’ would get noticed quickly, and seen as easy marks. The country also took after Asia in its semi-isolationist nature, where they *would* trade with you, but think of themselves as superior, and it was a coin toss on if they’d try and screw you over, at least according to Jayce’s memories hearing about them from the other members of house Talis.

Ixtal, the ‘Not-South-America’ of this world, was worse in that respect to a *ludicrous* degree. Most of what Jayce knew about the nation was from hundreds or thousands of years ago, the nation ravaged when the ancient Icathian empire fell, and then scarred in the Rune Wars, and then. . . nothing. *I* knew there was still a nation, hidden deep in the jungles, though I had no idea *where*, but, as far as Jayce was concerned, Ixtal was an uninhabited green hell, where a few barbaric tribal villages might mete out a pitiful existence, but nothing was left of the great elemental mage-kings of old.

But before I could visit either, I had a *lot* of work left to do in Piltover.

Applying another layer of salve, I rebandaged Violet up. For better or worse, most of the serious damage had been limited to a specific area. The scattered hits and cuts she’d taken from fighting Silco’s men, and then likely the prison’s Enforcers, who were currently rotting in hell, were of a much lower severity, and were also most of the way healed, contusions mere fading bruises and cuts thin red lines on her skin. *Those* injuries got a bit of medical paste as well, though a different type meant to handle those kinds of ‘everything’s mostly good’ injury, as applying *this* other substance to an *open* wound might lead it to healing the wrong-way-round, sealing the skin too quickly and leaving a pocket of air, along with anything that might still be in the wound tract, stuck inside, leading to the possibility of *nasty* infections.

“She still looks bad,” Powder commented as I finished up, leaving the medical bay. “We should let her rest. We’re letting her rest, right?”

Going into what would be Violet’s room, next to Powder’s, something I’d assigned to the older girl through the **Sweet Home** controls on my Company phone, I started putting together an outfit, something that could go over Violet’s wrappings. For a culture in which hospitals existed, as I understood them, waking up in a hospital gown, while a little uncomfortable, was also understandable. However, *here* doctors either made house calls, or you were so poor you went somewhere of. . . less than sanitary conditions, but either way you normally just wore your clothes, so the. . . *specifically lacking* garment would just cause further confusion and create more problems, which I wanted to *avoid*.

“Powder,” I said, glancing at the nervous looking girl. “We talked about this. Putting it off won’t help. Now let’s get her dressed. It’s time.”

The girl quite obviously *didn’t* want that to be true, but, I had to give it to her, she didn’t run, leaving me to wake up Violet alone, and she easily could have, especially in some kind of bid to try and delay things, as I was forced to track her down if I wanted her to be there when I woke her sister up, but she merely followed, wanting to help. Soon enough, the teenager was dressed, her IV’s removed in the process, and the last of the suppressants were metabolizing themselves out of her system.

Opening the windows to get some air flow, and try and reduce the harsh smell of medicine and cleaners, Violet started to stir, and I motioned to Powder, who moved to her sister’s side, while I retreated, not wanting to crowd the teen.

*“Wha’?”* the pink-haired girl moaned blearily, trying to open her eyes, but quickly shutting them and trying to lift an arm to block out the light, only to wince as she pulled on her mostly healed, but still present, injuries.

*“Vi! It’s okay!”* Powder told her sister, worries forgotten in an instant, clearly wanting to hug the older girl, but holding herself back.

*“P-Powder?”* Violet questioned, the last of the drugs fading from her system, and forcing her eyes open, focusing on the younger girl. “W-what?”

“Jayce saved me! And he saved *you!* And we’re at his house! It’s in *another world!* Isn’t that *cool!?*” the smaller girl chattered, and I realized I *probably* should’ve been more explicit in what I meant by ‘giving your sister time to wake up’, and that it extended to *talking* as well.

“I, what?” Violet questioned, obviously lost, but taking in the medical bay. Spotting me, she focused, staring, mind working, before quietly, asking, “That. That was *real?*”

Grimacing at the memory, I nodded. “Yes. I got you out. Didn’t think anything like *that* was going to happen,” I told her, wanting to say more, but *not* wanting to go into detail, especially as, if I was right, the girl was about to have a, *completely justified*, nervous breakdown over what happened to her right before she passed out. Being in a safe place, the lessened pain of her injuries, being dressed, and Powder’s presence would ameliorate the worst of it, but-

“Oh. *Oh.* Oh ***God!****”* the teenager gasped, clutching her hands to her chest, eyes widening as if on cue, as what’d happened hit her. Had she been Stamped, **Mental Defense** would blunt the worst of it but. . . that needed to be a punishment, or an offer, or I’d find *far* too many excuses to use it to solve my problems. And, while I know knew there *was* no such thing as universal karma, my **Defenses** such that I’d be immune to it even if there *was*, while I knew that going Stamp-happy would have no direct negative consequences, in fact the Company would approve of it, that made my own morals all the more important to hold on to.

Because they were a commitment to *myself*, and if I couldn’t even keep *that*, what was I?

Because could I rightly object to the actions of others, warping and molding minds as they wished, when I would do the same?

Because while I might do so with the best of intentions, so might someone else, and while intentions gave *context* to actions, the actions themselves were of prime importance.

So, in one way, while I *was* refusing to help the girl with her in-progress breakdown, help was not to be *forced,* and there was no way for her to accept a choice of that magnitude right now. An offer like that, presented under *that* kind of coercion, was *also* something I refused to do.

Having accepted the Company’s offer under such conditions, ***that woman’s*** actions ‘legal’ by The Company’s viewpoint, but morally bankrupt, I would *not* do that to another.

Powder, trying to help, moved to her sister and moved to lay a comforting hand on the girl’s arm, telling her, “It’s *okay*, Vi! We’re *safe* here!”

I wasn’t sure *exactly* which way the older girl would break, if she’d stay frozen, cry, hold onto her sister and *then* cry, start demanding answers, but I had plans for all of them.

Violet flinched away from her sister, and, in a motion that looked like it was supposed to be fluid, but was really stumbling as, despite the painkillers still in her system, she was *still* injured, the teen darted across the medbay, but not for me, as I shifted my stance, having hoped she wouldn’t *physically* attack me, but having planned for that eventuality.

No, she jumped out the window.

. . . *Okay. Didn’t plan for that,* I thought, a little stunned, even as Powder, shocked and pained, yelled, “*Vi! Wait!”*

The small girl was blindsided, as was I, but for her it was obviously the reopening of still-healing wound, though one of the heart instead of the flesh, as she looked to me, desperately, and I saw the opportunity, one I didn’t expect.

Powder *still* cared for her sister, despite what she said, and did so deeply. I’d been helping her recover from Violet’s ‘abandonment’, while also putting myself in a position to be there for the eleven-year-old girl. In one way you could argue that I was doing so selfishly, inserting myself in her life, while in reality I just wanted to help her and give the girl, who both needed and deserved it, a friend. It was easy to ascribe whatever motives one wished to a single event, and only through looking at them in context and in aggregate could one understand someone’s mindset, as I’d hoped my recruiter had had a good reason for her actions, only to find out the woman had more in common with Class A than myself.

However, now that Vi had run, *again*, for reasons I. . . didn’t quite understand, after I’d been pushing Powder to reconcile, I could break that connection now, and easily at that. Separating the two of them before, from a single event, would’ve been difficult. But two? Two started a pattern, and a third would be easy enough to find, or create if need be. I knew I was visibly surprised, which I could spin as *trying* to be there and help, but, now that Vi had once again ‘abandoned’ Powder, it would suggest that I was wrong previously, had been overly forgiving and optimistic, and that the blue-haired girl should *now* renounce her older sister over her actions, a renouncement I would admit was correct, showing me to be just as human and hurt as Powder was, further establishing our rapport.

I’d lose Violet as a possible asset, sending her on her way to avoid interference. . . or would I need to? *Actually. . .*playing them off each other, I could try and ‘help’ them reconcile, but make myself central to the process, not *stopping* it, but slowing it, while making each believe that I was a central component and that, without my presence, such things would be impossible.

Because, even if Powder broke things off, the ragged edges of the emotional connection would hurt, and push her to try and *re*connect, so I could use them to gain control over the girl, while Violet, who I was ninety-nine percent sure *still* loved her sister but was, well, *having a mental breakdown*, would want to reconnect as well, giving me a hold over *her* as I played gatekeeper while seemingly understanding and trying to help Powder ‘understand’ Violet’s position, implying that she wouldn’t normally.

It would be a somewhat difficult balancing act, but not the *worst*, and would even be self-maintaining to a certain degree, as if they both thought me central to things, they’d go out of their way to include me as, in their minds, reconciliation *without* me would ‘obviously’ not be possible. Playing up Violet’s dismissiveness of anything that wasn’t straightforward and punch-able, as evidenced her support-less vague encouragement of her little sister’s explosive inventions, and playing up Powder’s intelligence, which Violet could not easily match except through me as I broke the concepts down to her level of understanding, then anything that involved *most* of what either sister liked to do would require me to ‘translate’, as someone who was capable of both invention and brutal combat.

With this being a pocket-world Violet wasn’t going anywhere, so I could spend the immediate future binding the now drifting Powder to me, then, with the caveat that *I* needed to be the one to handle the girl’s belligerent sister, approach Violet. . . .Or let her approach us on her own, making it an action made of her own will, and forcing her to come in from a lesser position, which would work on her psychologically, as I doubted the Zaunite had sufficient bushcraft to survive indefinitely. Additionally, my domain had no poisonous plants, predators, venomous fauna, and didn’t get so cold that her life would be in danger, and thus allowing her to attempt to ‘survive’ in the wilderness did not present any of the normal risks such a play might entail.

It was a nearly-perfect plan, and one *well* within my capabilities to carry out.

*Especially* with my **Song**, able to patch holes and cover unexpected developments. It would not allow me to mold their minds *directly*, as that would be a step too far for me, but to. . . *push* them, gently, in the proper direction, it was an undeniable asset. It wouldn’t be enough to *make* them believe whatever I wanted, but it would be a slight finger on the scale to help tip things my way, but never so much as to force them to do something they truly did not want.

Yes. . . this could work, and bring them both to me, in ways the Stamp did not, and then, when they both got old enough, I’d make them the offer, and they’d be mine, ***forever****.*

Except, of course, I wasn’t a fucking *asshole.*

“She’s not fully aware yet,” I told Powder, walking over to the girl and kneeling, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Your sister just woke up after something *terrible,* and she’s not thinking straight. ***Violet didn’t mean to leave you again. She just felt trapped and needed to be alone to get her bearings,***” I **Sang**, almost certain I was right, addressing the girls fears.

“*R-really?*” the girl asked, eyes bright with unshed tears, *desperate* to believe that, after getting her hopes up, she would not have them shattered again.

I nodded, patting the girl on the shoulder, and standing, I spotted Violet had already starting to slow as she reached the tree line a couple hundred feet away. The older girl was looking around in confusion, as she came to a stop and realized she *wasn’t* in Piltover anymore, slumped over, hands on her knees, and my ideas of what was likely going on in her head solidified. Looking down at the small girl, I gestured for the door.

“Go out to her, I’ll be there in a few minutes,” I directed, having a handle on how Powder would act, and Violet might respond, a dozen plans spinning up in my mind, every single one resulting in victory, though at varying costs. *All* of them were worth it, though.

Because, despite their issues, Powder *deserved* to have her sister, and Violet deserved to not be abandoned either.

And I’d make *sure* that happened.