**ACE 5**

The Kirammans didn’t want to ‘talk’, at least not entirely. No, they wanted me over for *dinner*. Which meant ‘talk’, but in a way that provided guest rights, not that the people of Piltover, believed in such things. It’d been a *key* part of the ‘How not to get killed by your boss’ lessons that were mandatory for *everyone* in Class B, and even though I’d been switched to Class D, those modes of thought stuck. Furthermore, it, in addition to *wasting my time,* was obviously meant to show how the Kirammans supported me, how they appreciated me as one of the few people that this high noble house sponsored, and to almost *assuredly* try and keep me from getting pulled away from them, as Canon Jayce had eventually shown he’d cared more for Mel Medarda’s opinion than *theirs*.

The boy would’ve still utilized the resources they provided, once his Hextech research was green lit, but any loyalty the boy felt towards them after the way things *should* have gone would’ve vanished, only being an alliance of *convenience*, and nothing more. The young man was many things, but *loyal* was not one of them, though the Kirammans, by voting for his expulsion, had shown that it wasn’t one of *their* defining traits either. Or at least, the matriarch wasn’t, preferring political safety over supporting a tainted asset, and her husband’s current boast of ‘never doubting me’, given I knew the man had argued for his wife to *drop me* the second there was the possibility of scandal, didn’t endear me to him in the slightest.

*Caitlyn* meanwhile was downright smug, making sure to take a seat right next to me in their parlor while we waited for the meal to be prepared. Something that made her father frown, while Mrs. Kiramman just gave me a consideringly look over. The girl, with the air of the feline that had filched the fowl, made sure to mention her defense of me to her parents, and how she’d *tried* telling them about what I’d been studying, but they had never been *properly* appreciative, like *she* was, and now everyone else would see how *great* I was!

The girl had one *hell* of a crush on me, something that Jayce had appreciated, feeding into it a little for his own aggrandizement, and for the way her parents could fund his research, but he considered her a *child*. Given that *my* idea of the girl was of her in her early twenties, my conception of Caitlyn was different, and with time, she’d match it. Furthermore, with the *basest* of my Talents, time was something I was going to have in *abundance*.

Just, you know, *not tonight.*

But, while the sun was getting low, I *was* going to need this connection going forward, and running off now would rouse far too many questions. As the meal was ready, we moved to the dining room, only for Caitlyn’s seat to be directly across from mine, something that surprised both her and her father, to their respective delight and dismay, while Mrs. Kiramman just looked on behind a patrician mask of indifference, a poker face so obvious it might as well be painted on.

We took our seats, Mrs. Kiramman to my left, Mr. Kiramman to my right, as one fact about the Kiramman noble family slowly trickled through my mind.

*It was* ***Matrilineal.***

The fact that Caitlyn was their only child, in another family, would be a cause for alarm, lacking an heir. However, in this family, while they did not have a *spare*, the line of succession was secure. Kind of put another spin on her parents not liking their only daughter joining the police force, and the line of fire, one that I hadn’t considered previously.

Meanwhile, the Talis family was *Patrilineal*, meaning, if we were to have kids, there’d be no issue of one house subsuming the other, any daughters, Kirammans, while any sons of House Talis. Assuming that I *became* the Talis patriarch, of course, which was not likely, given that I had practically nothing to do with the family’s internal politics, uncles and so on in the family hammer business of higher internal position, keeping it going, while Jayce had his nose tucked away in the ivory towers of the Academy, but considering such eventualities was one of the primary skills of powerful nobles.

We ate, the food was fabulous, as always, even though some part of me, almost certainly **Faerie Feast**, whispered how I could make it *even better*, and I considered the situation before me, new plans forming. Looking to Mrs. Kiramman, the matriarch's attention was *definitely* on me, so I glanced to Caitlyn, then back to her, the older woman giving me a smallest of smiles, and the barest of nods.

Returning it, I took another bite of the well-cooked crab in a creamy wine sauce, and examined what I knew of the social situation from Jayce’s memories that the show had largely skipped over, that rollercoaster ride more Dishonored than Downton Abbey. Piltover was *very* much Not-Victorian in nature, which meant that the average marrying age was mid-twenties instead of teens. However, at the same time, long engagements were standard amongst nobles, and the seven-year age gap between us wouldn't even raise any eyebrows. The only *real* difficulty would be in class differentials, but, as the son of a minor house, I was within the 'acceptable' range, in a way that *literally* everyone in Zaun *wasn't.*

With Jayce's volatility on the stand, something that likely blindsided, and scared, his Patron, being expelled and then favored in a single night, it was possible the Kirammans had distanced themselves, privately instead of publicly, or maybe they didn't, the time-skip in the series obfuscating a *lot* of details. We got the larger strokes, like the fact that Caitlyn had gone from her current 'I love my parents and can laugh about the position of privilege it gives me' nature to an 'I resent my parents and are annoyed that they care about my safety' attitude she displayed in seven years, the series picking up on Piltover's two-hundredth Progress Day Celeberation, which gave me a hard date to guide myself by.

Though, if I did my job, *that* day would go off without a hitch.

*I need to deal with things as they are, not as they'd be if I did****nothing****, because that's not the world I'll live in*, I reminded myself, finding the safety of the 'known' timeline far more, not exactly *seductive*, but *absolutely* a temptation that would only lead to ruin. There was a certain power that came with knowing how things 'would go' that'd let you flawlessly maneuver oneself to counter moves, block events, and otherwise make the world dance to your tune, but it was a *fleeting* gift, and one that, when relied upon farther than it extended, would drop you into a whole *mess* of problems, one that many Agents never found their way out of.

So. . . we knew that things *had* changed, but not ***how****,*which, honestly was the far more important detail I’d need if I was going to make plans around them, and was the kind of thing that *I didn't have.* So, fly off Jayce's memories for context, and make things up as I go. The girl liked me, her parents liked me, and I now had the opportunity to go from minor noble to *city-defining personage*, and, thus, I had the *chance* to pursue her daughter, the normal long-engagement, if we even *got* that far, serving as a safety net to see if I could become a proven commodity, or if I'd flare out and fade away, in which case they could reap the rewards of having attached me to their name, but, *obviously,* I would not be worthy of marrying their heiress.

It was cold, yes, but this was *how* these sorts of families maintained their generational wealth and status, even growing them, instead of the normal three generation vector of affluence and influence. Most of the time the first generation made the wealth, and tried to teach their kids how to do so, but often left out some of the more distasteful parts; the second generation maintained the wealth, but did not understand the parts that the first generation didn't quite cover, or maybe they just didn't care, wanting to do things ‘better’ without understanding *why,* and also did not raise their children in the same way they had been raised, assuming that they didn’t pawn such things off to someone *else* entirely; and then the third generation, taking it all for granted, and not understanding things *at all*, wasted the wealth, squandering and spending it, killing the golden goose because they were hungry and didn’t realize what they were doing, until they were back down at the same level as everyone else, if not lower.

Ancestral holdings, or agreements that created passive income that the individual generations could *not* mess with could create a cushion, but short of governmental support, that's what happened, and *maintaining* that governmental support was its *own* skill set.

And the Kirammans were *old* money, or at least old for this area, dating back to before Piltover was founded, though Jayce, to increasingly less surprise each time I discovered this sort of failing, had *no* idea where they came from before that point. His attention had been focused *solely* on creating Hextech, nothing else mattering, even *the history of his own patrons*, which was. . . I could understand it intellectually, I'd been like that about things when I was a kid, but the man was in his mid-*twenties*, and only the lack of a metaphorical boot to the head had allowed him to keep himself in his little bubble of academia, compared to my own history, which had been a great many boots, only *some* of them actually deserved.

But, while I didn't know what he didn't know, I knew I didn't know the kinds of things I *should* know, which would let me fill in the gaps.

Later.

Because I had *shit to do* right now.

*Time to move this onwards,* I thought, knowing the dinner would stretch until we actually talked about whatever it is they wanted to make sure of. *But how to get the ball rolling?*

Taking another bite, I made a *‘mmm*’ of enjoyment swallowing and taking a sip of the wine, **Body Defense** making sure I wouldn’t get intoxicated. “Delicious as always,” I smiled. “After I finish the prototype, I’ll have to make something for you all in celebration.”

“You cook?” Caitlyn asked, surprised but interested. “But all I’ve ever seen you make are *sandwiches!”*

I shrugged, smirking, “I was busy. But in a week or two, I’ll be done. I’m *that close.*”

“Then your statements to the Council weren’t bluster?” Mrs. Kiramman questioned.

I held up a hand, thumb and pointer an inch apart. “A *little*,” I told them, getting a laugh from Caitlyn, then waving it away, “but for the things I gave definite timelines? No. I wasn’t lying about taking things slow. With a proper lab, I could probably have it done *tonight*, but I was trying to figure out how to make it work *without* the ensuing pressure wave that’d break every window in the room. I had a feeling the Enforcers would want to have a fairly pointed discussion with me if I did that, and, well, I was right,” I offered.

Mrs. Kiramman didn’t smile, but the corner of her mouth twitched upwards slightly, and she noted, “Indeed.” There was a beat of silence, before she continued, “You seem to be a man of many hidden talents, Jayce. I did not know you were such a skilled orator.”

*Don’t look guilty,* I thought, but did not obsess over the imperative, which would lead me to doing exactly what I wanted to avoid, so I shrugged again, as if it was no big deal. “I’m less of a speaker than I am a scientist, and, with your support, there was no reason to be one before. If my arguments were convincing, it’s because **my words had the ring of truth**,” I stated, opening my arms. “Just as if I were to tell you, honestly, that **I am appreciative of everything you’ve done for me**, I hope you’d believe me, as I am being nothing if not sincere.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Caitlyn giving her father a look that practically shouted *‘See? I’m right!’* but didn’t comment on it, even as her mother’s eyes flicked to her daughter, and the hint of a fond smile graced her stern features. “I suppose they do,” she remarked, expression neutral once more. “Though truth alone is not always enough, I hope you understand that.”

Which was advice and test, all at once, but a multi-layered one, Jayce’s extra intelligence, turned in ways he’d never use it, letting me pack in a lot more thought then I would’ve normally been able to in the moment before I answered. If I was an idiot, or just naïve, I’d respond that truth *should* be enough, countering my Piltoverian patron’s advice to her face, and I could almost see Caitlyn wanting to do exactly that. If I was capable, but overconfident enough to try and play *this* woman, I’d respond. . . with something along the lines of accepting the advice, advice that I’d *already shown to have known* in my speech earlier today, and tell her I’d make sure to do so in the futre. But I wanted to be both seen as capable, but also, as I’d just said, *loyal,* which meant being open and honest, to a certain respect, as being *completely* honest would go very badly, *very quickly*.

“Of course,” I smiled. “There was a reason I attributed the various traits I did to the various members of the Council.”

There was *something* in Mrs. Kiramman’s eyes, but I couldn’t identify it, as she nodded slightly, asking, “And did you suggest my trait was Empathy because you thought I had it, and would agree with you, or that you thought I wanted it, but lacked it, and would agree with you because of that?”

This one was easy. “Neither. I had done nothing wrong, and believed that your Patronage would ensure your backing, as, as you said, you were aware of my character, so I suggested your trait was Empathy so that others would view you as having it. *I* know you do, but you have a professionalism that others there. . . *lack,* which could be misconstrued as indifference,” I lied, not having meant *any* of this at the time, but, after the fact, as long as it didn’t contradict what I’d said before, I could re-assign motives as I wished.

There was a moment of silence, and I wondered if I’d fucked up, before Mrs. Kiramman chuckled to herself, “So you thought to do us a favor, even then? You were *mostly* correct, Jayce,” she informed me, *actually* smiling now. “Shoola would have been more convinced had you said her trait was empathy, not skill. She is quite clear on her caring for the poor. Particularly those in the undercity, even when they don’t deserve it. Your inclusion of helping them in your other statements covered that, however.“

I nodded, thinking that over, and I could see how that would work, if I’d been fully willing to commit to the single piece of information I remembered about the woman, who was apparently named Shoola. “*Understood*,” I replied, pausing before smiling slightly, “Given that I am likely to eventually be interacting with them in the future, do you have any other insights to share? I would be most grateful.”

“After you’ve shown the Council you can do what you have claimed,” the woman deferred, then turned a thoughtful look her daughter’s way. “Then, perhaps *Caitlyn* could do so. She’s had an education in such things. *Too* many lessons, according to her.”

The blue-haired girl groaned. “Mother, those lessons are so *boring!*”

I however, just looked to her, and smiled, casting my gaze back towards the older woman, “I’d be delighted to.”

It was subtle, but there was a subtle look of vindication in Mrs. Kiramman’s eyes that I was a little confused by, until I ran it by my Jayce model, and realized the boy, and he was a *boy,* would’ve tried to defer, to get out of them, not seeing the point, and not wanting to be in a, to him, subordinate position to someone that he thought he was smarter than, though he’d never be able to put those feelings to *words*.

My acquiescence of the offer stated several things I hadn’t meant, though nothing that I didn’t disagree with. It spoke of my valuing of Caitlyn, it spoke of my valuing of the art of Statecraft instead of ignoring everything except for Science (like Heimerdinger often did), and it spoke my acceptance of giving up some of my time to do as my patron wished. Time *after* I’d shown myself as a valuable commodity, where, if I was *unable* to produce results, she could wash her hands of me.

The girl looked at me, asking in disbelief, “*Really?”*

“Of course,” I responded easily. “Caitlyn, *your* family is Noble in every respect, it’s one of the reasons I sought their patronage, but not all of them are. And the farther away you get, the worse it often becomes. Good people are everywhere, yes, but corruption, well, *exists,* getting more prevalent the deeper you go*.* Unfortunately, many people have to be *convinced* to do the right thing, and, knowing who they are, what they value, and so forth, *lets you do that*.”

I spun up an example, gesturing with a fork, “Telling a ruthless factory owner that working their people in sixteen-hour shifts is cruel will not get them to budge. Tell them of the suffering it causes, and they will not care a whit. But if you can point to how *productivity* falls off after eight hours of work, how accidents, in addition to causing deaths, which he cares *nothing* about, as he thinks he can always find more workers to replace them, will rise in frequency, and thus will stop down production for a time while the gear is cleaned and repaired, and how their actions will then cause *other* workers to seek to steal from the owner in retaliation for perceived wrongs, with no word on if they are correct in their perception or not, and you will *have their attention*.”

“Now, the owner’s proposed solutions might be *just* as horrible as their previous actions,” I warned, “and it will almost certainly *not* go smoothly, with the ruthless industrialist suddenly ‘seeing the light’, but if you can discuss things in terms of profit, of how the reality of the situation will ensue instead of a theoretical model they’ve put together to make *their* proposed solution work, and be careful to *never* attack the man, or woman, directly, you can very well change the actions of a personage of poor character where moral arguments would lie fallow, falling on deaf ears. But to do *that*, you have to know who the person is to begin with, as everyone is a little different, and what works on some, will not necessarily work on others.”

I finished, Caitlyn looking at me, fascinated, but with the light of understanding in her eyes, and a silence stretched across the table, and I glanced to the other two present, Mr. Kiramman frowning, while his wife’s expression was a mask of careful indifference.

“I mean, that’s how I see it. I might be *completely* off-base,” I offered, looking to my patron for confirmation.

The girl across from me followed suite, looking to her mother with a questioning stare, who, in turn, slowly nodded. “I would not put it in such *blunt* terms,” Mrs. Kiramman noted with careful neutrality, “but it is close enough to correct. Admirable, for one untrained.”

“But why didn’t you *say* that?” Caitlyn inquired of her mother. “You just said it was something ‘A young lady of your standing’ should know!”

I wanted to answer her, but held my tongue, as it wasn’t my place, especially in front of the girl’s parents, something that, from the flick of the older woman’s eyes, she noticed. “I would, in time,” the matriarch stated. “You are young, and still learning.” *And if you tried to use your lessons, before you understood the dangers, you could get yourself in a whole mess of trouble*, went unsaid, and, from Caitlyn’s expression, unheard. “Can I assume you wouldn’t mind teaching Jayce?” Mrs. Kiramman questioned, distracting the girl, who smiled, brightening and nodding excitedly.

“Then I’ll endeavor to not keep you waiting too long,” I offered Caitlyn with a smile, one that, to a lesser extent, I noticed on her mother’s face, even as her father practically glowered at me, though that was to be both expected, and honestly, *didn’t matter*.

After that, the conversation was light, and I left, night having fallen, the storm almost upon us, and deferred the use of the family driver, wanting ‘a bit of exercise to get the blood flowing, and to help me heal’, which they accepted, with another dinner invitation next week, the kind of thing that they’d never offered before. I accepted, waving goodbye to both Mrs. Kiramman and a smiling Caitlyn, and headed out their gate, turning in the direction of home and taking off with a spring in my step, which lasted until I was out of sight.

From there I started jogging, turning a corner and heading towards the bridge that divided Zaun and Piltover, getting a good bit of distance before heading down an empty alley, opening a portal and jumping through. I quickly stripped off my bright red tie and white and blue vest, leaving only my maroon button up shirt. My shoes and pants were also stripped, the flat leather soles, while comfortably soft and fancy, were *not* going to be good for sprinting through dirty, rain-slick streets, not having dried from the previous storm.

On went the black pants, really just formal pants from my bedroom’s wardrobe that I’d sown spider-silk panels along the interior of. Against a blunt blow, they’d be useless, a hammer to the knees still crippling, but they’d be effectively knifeproof, and bullet *resistant*, which was the best I’d get with soft armor. Then the workboots, the synthetic soles able to find purchase on anything short of oiled *ice*, and, while heavy, wouldn’t slow me down too much.

Hesitating, I dashed upstairs and grabbed a coat with a high cowl, something that’d serve to further hide my identity, not grabbing the mask after a moment, as it would be too much and make me *more* conspicuous, and then back down, through the portal and out the street, feet pounding as I pushed myself to my limit, **Body Talent** having made sure that Jayce, despite his lackadaisical attitude towards his own fitness, was still in perfect fitness, at least for someone who wasn’t a trained warrior. On Runeterra, even ‘normal’ people could train themselves to ludicrous extents, but that had more to do with the nature of Magic than any biological differences.

Mana ran *thick* through the world, and, even if one couldn’t control it directly; it infused the air you breathed, the food you ate, and the water you drank. Even in a ‘low-magic’ area like Demacia, where anti-magic stone formed the bedrock of their city, it was still present in such amounts that, through extreme training, one could eventually pull off superhuman feats of speed and strength. So, by *their* standards, I was still a weakling, but I was more than up to sprinting down the dark city streets to get to my destination.

I attracted a few stares, a couple of Enforcers moving as if to follow, but since no one was obviously *chasing* me, no alarms going off, even though I probably looked like the hounds of *hell* were after me, they made no move to follow. If I had more time, I’d be less conspicuous, but it was already dark, and I had *miles* to go.

Crossing the bridge, ten minutes later, I looked around for the Zaunite memorial, not seeing it, but not stopping, finally catching a glimpse of small lights ahead of me, dashing past the pictures and lanterns set up off to the side, with not a glimpse of Vander or Violet, and cursed. I could see the rain coming in, it would be upon me before an hour was up, which meant I was running *late.*

*Or you could be wrong,* came the thought. *It could be tomorrow, and you’re pushing yourself for nothing.*

But I ignored it, as the consequences of being wrong about it being *tonight* would be a minor inconvenience, and maybe a few awkward questions, but if I was right, and put it off, the consequences would be *catastrophic*.

I entered Zaun, not stopping, eyes forward, as the sound of distant lightning could be heard. I could go down, try and hit Benzo’s to see if Silco had made his move, but if he had, I had less time than I thought, and if he hadn’t, while it would tell me I might be a day early, it *also* might put me in the sights of the man’s Shimmer-fueled berserker. So instead I kept going down the top-layer of streets, the late hour and the storm emptying them, for the most part.

One man started to swagger out, moving into my path, and he started to drawl, “Hold your horses there, topsider. What’s got yo-”

Which is when I hit him, shortening one of my steps so I could power through the blow, a rising palm strike to the bottom of his jaw that took him off his feet, slamming his teeth shut as I tossed him to the side, maintaining forward momentum as I kept moving, speeding back up to a full sprint, not willing to stop. By the time he hit the ground, I was already a few dozen feet away, his friends starting to get up, but they were thugs, not fighters, and without ranged weapons, fighting a fleeing opponent only worked if you were faster, or if you could trap them, and neither was the case here.

Further and further I ran, Zaun wide as well as deep, legs burning, heart pounding, chest bellowing to give me enough tainted air to keep going, through ever-dirtier city streets, flashes of light over the sea visible, and I ducked into an empty alley, opening another portal. This time I tossed off my shirt, and the wristband Jayce wore nigh-religiously, having forgotten to take it off earlier, pulling on the spider silk shirt so hard a little of the stitching in the back tore, then the coat, the pistol, the extra magazines, the sword, the goggles, and the balaclava, the moment of rest enough to let me recover a little, wanting to take longer, but I *couldn’t*.

Leaping out, I bust down out of the alley, an old woman shrieking in fright, but I didn’t care, I *didn’t have time*, as I could see the shoreline, which was *full* of abandoned looking buildings, but I didn’t know *which one was the right one.*

Then, to my horror, the world seemed to offer an answer in reply to my problem, helpfully identifying my destination as a distant, ghostly roar rippled through the air, a column of blue light piercing the sky, lighting up the dark streets with harsh shadows, crackles of mana-lightning reaching up from the earth into the skies, an unnatural storm of destruction moving in reverse.

Before me, the street ended, one of the elevators that’d take one down to the city proper descending out of sight, having missed it by seconds, a several hundred foot drop down into Zaun proper before me. It’d take me the over an *hour* to get there if I used the bathysphere, having to wait for it to return, less if I ran for it, but I *wasn’t* that confident in my freerunning ability, more likely to fall to my death if I hurried than not.

*I’m out of time,* I thought, dropping down to Plan *U*, and that, that was *not* a good plan.

It wouldn’t be pleasant, but it would be *safe*, and, and there was *no* way to get there in time, so it was the best I was going to get.

*. . .* ***no.***

No, I hadn’t *planned* on it, but I *had* the resources, if I was willing to use them, and I called my phone to my hand, someone gasping to the side as it materialized out of thin air, and I checked that, *yes*, yes it was doable.

Taking a deep breath, I took off running, *and leapt off the cliff.*