**ACE 23**

“I look *ridiculous*.”

Violet stared at herself in the mirror, looking at the results of the hair-dye we’d just finished applying. I’d offered to do it for her, but the girl had refused, only allowing me to hand her things while her sister assisted to make sure she got *all* of her hair.

“No -*pff*- you look -*pfft-* *fine*, Vi!” her sister tried to tell her, before breaking off into a giggling fit.

Rolling my eyes, I told the previously pink-haired girl, “Ignore her, it does *exactly* what you need it to do, and we won’t have to do this again for three months.” It was no surprise that Company cosmetics were top notch, and the hair-dye my Home came stocked with, possibly due to the spycraft seminar I’d taken, came in two versions. The short-term one went on in five minutes, and could be removed in five *seconds* with specially treated wipes, while the longer-term dyes took a few hours to set fully, but also stained the roots, meaning that the next couple inches of growth would *also* be colored, giving the user time to perform long-term infiltrations *without* their roots giving them away.

Natives of Freljord were pretty much just Vikings, though a number of them had unnaturally white hair, the same shade as that which *Violet* now sported. Blue hair was more of an iffy proposition, as it *might* be a thing to Jayce’s recollection, though not in Powder’s . . . *vibrant* hues, which was more akin to a poison dart frog then frost.

However, chances were that, at least in *Piltover,* no one knew the difference.

“Thankfully, we’ve got more than enough time to make our appointment,” I sighed, the process having taken *far* longer than I’d expected, though not longer than I’d feared.

“. . . Appointment?” Violet asked, skeptically.

“Yes, *appointment*, because while your hair now *looks* Freljordian, your cut is *all* Zaun, though the person we’re going to see won’t know that,” I told her. “Leaving half your head exposed would leave half your head *frozen* where you’re supposed to come from, but it looks vaguely warrior-like enough that it should be fine. And Powder,” I hesitated, not sure how to put it. “Your hair looks like you cut it yourself.”

She frowned, taking a lock in her fingers. “I did. Is, is something wrong with it?”

I ignored her older sister’s glare, as I wiggled my head back and forth a little, not *really* saying no, but not *not* saying no either. “For the Lanes, for your age, no. For Piltover, *yes*, which is why you’re *both* getting your hair cut.”

“Wait, *both* of us,” the small girl asked, “but, but I thought it’d just be Vi.”

“Nope, *both*,” I informed her. “While having you look. . . *wild* might help sell the story when we get your identities set up, the points it’ll lose you for looking *other* are not worth it, and your exotic hair colors,” I nodded to Violet, “will be doing that already.”

“A lot of people in the Lanes have blue hair,” the now white-haired girl pointed out. “Won’t they be able to tell anyways?”

“My friend Caitlyn, the daughter of my patron, my *Piltoverian* patron,” I corrected as both girl’s eyes widened. “She’s a Kiramman, not DEATH’s, and she has blue hair, though it’s a darker shade than *yours,* Powder. She got it from her father.”

Which, now that I thought about it, *did* seem a little odd, as, while there *were* a few students with oddly colored hair at the Academy, it was common consensus that they, like Viktor, were from Zaun, though people used far *less* pleasant terms.

“Wait, you have friends?” Powder asked, before realizing what she’d said and slapping her hands over her mouth.

“*Yes,*” I answered with a smile, hesitating, “Well, kind of. I’m friends with Caitlyn Kiramman, and Viktor, hopefully, and. . . okay I have friends. Possibly friend,” I admitted, Jayce having been somewhat. . . *driven,* which really meant *abrasive* during his time at the Academy. In many ways, that was a good thing, as there wasn’t anyone to notice the *radical* change in my attitude as opposed to his, except for Caitlyn, and between my injury and having my life’s work validated, those changes could be easily excused.

*“And us!”* Powder insisted. “We’re your friends too! R-right?” she asked, suddenly unsure.

Violet frowned at that, looking away and muttering, “Speak for yourself.”

The smaller girl shot a glare at her sister, declaring, “I will!” Looking back to me, the fire in her gaze gave way to uncertainty. “So. . .”

Rolling my eyes, I nodded, “*Yes,* Powder, you’re my friend, if you want to b-”

*“I do!”* she insisted, cutting me off.

“And Violet could be, if she wanted as well,” I added, the girl sending me a cross look, but not shooting me down, at least. “In the meantime, it’s time for us to go. Remember, Violet, your name out there is Violetta Vandottir, and Powder, you’re-”

“*Piper* Vandottir!” the younger girl cheered, happy to accept the last name, once I’d explained its meaning. “But I don’t see why I couldn’t be Piper *Talis*,” she added thoughtfully, pointedly ignoring her sister’s unhappy look.

“Because that’s *my* last name, and explaining how I suddenly have a cousin that looks *nothing* like anyone in my family is *far* harder than my original plan,” I reminded her, for the fourth time. “Plus I’d have to doctor a number of family records, and retroactively make *someone* an adulterer, which would make you a bastard, and, no, just no. Now, *let’s go,*” I insisted, waving both girls out of the somewhat palatial bathroom attached to my bedroom and out the door. “And for the love of god, *both of you,* when the hairdresser makes snarky comments, pretend you don’t understand what they’re implying. That goes *triple* for you, Violet. We’re trying to be low-key, which means *not* punching the ‘stupid, smug Pilty in their stupid, smug face’ or something.”

“You think I would do that?” Violet questioned, sending a hostile look my way that completely undercut her statement.

Giving her a flat look, I took on a purposefully over-the-top expression of scorn and dismissal, commenting in falsetto, “Oh, dear, that *hair.* Well I guess that’s to be expected of *you people.*”

Taking a threatening step my way, Violet’s visage was thunderous as she hissed, “*What did you say?* And what do you mean *you people?*”

Not bringing my guard up, even though part of me wanted to, I told her, “I said *exactly* the sort of thing you might hear. And by ‘you people’ I meant *Freljord barbarians*. Because, while I tried to find someone who *wasn’t* a dick, anyone *too* understanding of other cultures might *recognize you two.* That means they’re gonna be a, to use your words, ‘stuck up Pilty asshole’.”

I knew I was being hard on her, but she’d *insisted* she could handle it, only now showing that she *couldn’t.* “You want me to trust you to leave Home and *not* make an incident that either I have to clean up, or *gets you killed*, consider this your *first test*. If you punch them, I *might* be able to spin it as the result of injured Freljordian pride, but not *only* will I have to find someone else, you’ll have *failed your test.* You will have let some random Piltoverian *asshat* get under your skin, when they were barely even *trying,* and in doing so prove *everything* I’ve heard about Zaunites being thin-skinned, low-class *lessers*, when **I *know* you’re not.**”

Violet’s expression, which had gotten increasingly dark, shifted to confusion at my last statement. “So you need to be *better* than them, which, just saying, *not hard,*” I continued, seizing the initiative. The brawler was my better at physical combat, but she was an absolute *amateur* when it came to verbal fights. “That means if some fifty-year-old spinster, who has to try and find *anyone* to look down upon to make her*self* feel better about her shit life, looks at you and says something like, ‘Oh dear me, have you *ever* seen anyone about the *dreadful* state of your hair!’ you’ll respond?”

The brawler considered that, then spat out, “I’m here *now*, ain’t I?”

*“Vi!”* her sister groaned, but I held up a hand. “Wait, really?”

“**That works,**” I smiled, Violet looking at me with disbelief. “Surly is fine, gruff works great. To *that* kind of person you’ll *always* be a northern barbarian, and, to be honest, it wouldn’t be worth it to try and convince them otherwise. And, trust me, they’re *not* worth convincing. Identitarians, people who make the center of their personality and sense of self traits they had *no* choice in possessing, like country of origin or their gender, do so because it feels ‘safe’, but it’s a cage, and deep down they know that *they* didn’t do anything to earn it, and they take that feeling out on *everyone* around them. Some people would think that *you* can’t be dangerous in a fight, just because you’re a girl.”

Violet looked at me, confused, while Powder snorted, incredulously asking, *“Really?”*

I nodded. While back home, even in similar weight classes, a man would win against a woman at least nine times out of ten in *unarmed* combat, throw in blades, guns, and other technological edges, and the difference shrunk until it practically vanished. However, with the presence of *Mana* in the air, that kind of discrimination made no sense, yet it still existed in Runeterra. Piltover and Zaun were exceptions, the former due to having female leaders, namely the Kirammans, as part of their founding group, while in Zaun things had gotten bad enough that such illusions could not be supported, but, from what Jayce had heard, in places like Demacia and Bilgewater, as well as the lesser kingdoms, it still cropped up.

It wasn’t as universal here, as there *were* female Demacian soldiers, but they were a rarity, an overwhelming percentage of the military forces’ male. And then there was, ironically enough, *Freljord,* which was sexist as *fuck,* but in the opposite direction, being a hardline non-hereditary matriarchy. As a Freljordian man, you were *never* going to lead *anything*, and to suggest otherwise would get the same reaction as, say, a woman saying she could be an American president in the 1800’s, namely derision and ridicule, giving way to outright *hostility* if the matter was pressed.

“So, don’t act superior, because that’ll make them *ten times* as nasty, as they’ll feel the need to ‘show you your place’, and they are *slaves* to their feelings, but just don’t mind them,” I advised, “because they’re *idiots.*”

Violet grudgingly nodded, while Powder frowned, thinking. “So, they’re like people that think they’re better, just cause they’re from the Lanes?” she asked, and I nodded, while the older sister frowned. However, before the brawler could say anything, the blue-haired girl looked to her and said, “Remember Marley? And Rime? And Viro? They were kinda dicks. You think *they’re* better than Jayce? ‘Cause *they* would.”

I had *no* idea who those people were, but the now white-haired girl obviously did, and bit back her response of, “But Jayce isn’t-”, and cast a nervous look my way. ‘*But Jayce isn’t a Pilty’* was what she was probably going to say, which she *might* believe would hurt my standing with Powder, revealing my extradimensional nature, but, if I’d judged the smaller girl correctly, it wouldn’t. What *would* hurt her was the knowledge that she’d *killed* the original Jayce, and that would serve to strengthen my hold on her, while weakening Violet’s own connection to her sister.

Just because I wasn’t going to do so, didn’t mean I wouldn’t create opportunities for others to make things easier on me, but, if Violet *was* trying to be a good person, those opportunities would never be used.

“He *is* better,” Powder disagreed, misunderstanding her sister’s statement, crossing her arms petulantly.

“I. . . *yeah,* he is,” the brawler admitted, not looking at *either* of us. “Not that that means much.”

Her younger sister started to object, then paused, agreeing with a shrug and a, “Yeah.” Looking to me, she asked, “So, there’s people like that in Piltover?”

“There’s people like that *everywhere,*” I stressed. “Or at least everywhere you have lazy people, who’d rather count shit they *didn’t* do as achievements because they can’t be bothered to make their own,” I corrected, some dimensions containing people that *looked* normal, but had truly *alien* cultures. One of our training group back in Basic had been from a place like that, and even for a multidimensional conglomeration of losers desperate enough to be willing to work for the Company, he was fucking *creepy*.

“So, can you keep a hold on your temper?” I asked Violet seriously, screening any hint of patronization from my tone. “If not, I need to know now, so I can change our plans.”

“I-” the brawler immediately started to answer, then stopped herself and took a deep breath, actually giving her response some thought. “I can. But if they say anything about Powder-”

*“****I’ll* handle it**,” I informed her. “As the person taking you in, you are my responsibility, and an insult to *either* of you is an insult to *me*. I also am both an adult, *and* know the proper way to take their noses and rub it in the shit they just spewed, in a way that will hurt them. Okay?”

Violet struggled with that a little, but eventually nodded. “Fine. But if they lay a *hand* on her-”

“If they’re rough while cutting her hair, she can take it. If they draw blood, or they strike her, *knock them the fuck out*,”I instructed the brawler firmly. “In this *you* can do more than I can, due to your age and foreign status. I can claim to merely be trying to help you adjust to our culture, which they’ll have to accept, and *they* will still have a wholly deserved black eye.”

That got a vicious nod from Violet, who clearly wasn’t *happy* with my orders, but, having seen where my line was, would likely be more willing to follow them.

From there, things went. . . not *terribly.* Yes, the hairdresser was rude, the woman absolutely *abhorring* the ‘barbarian styles’ both girls sported, especially the fact that Violet, now Violetta, had shaved the left side of her head, though thankfully she hadn’t done so *lately.* That meant part of her head was merely closely cropped, only a little shorter than my own style. To ‘fix’ it, the hairdresser had trimmed the *right* side of Violetta’s hair to match, and, rather than leave the longer center in a sort of ‘downed mohawk’, she’d cut most of it off. Ultimately, Vi had ended up with a modified pixie-cut, all the while the hairdresser was bitching about how she was doing her best to ‘salvage’ this, and how she ‘wasn’t a miracle worker’.

Even *I’d* been annoyed by the time the hairdresser was done, the woman stating that she’d done her best, but warning that, if Violetta wasn’t careful, she might be mistaken for one of those ‘filthy bottom dwellers’. It was almost amusing, watching the brawler be happy that she still looked like she’d fit in down in the Lanes, while also being annoyed at the woman for her bigotry, said woman *reversing* the causes of her client’s feelings in her mind, assuming Vi was pleased with the cut but upset that she might be mistaken as a Zaunite, assuring the teen that, as long as she wore the proper clothing, like she was now, there shouldn’t be an issue.

Powder, meanwhile, had been a *much* easier fix. The woman had, as I’d thought, made a sniping comment about the girl cutting her own hair, which ‘Piper’ agreed she’d had. The hairdresser had sent me an ‘are you being serious with this’ look, prompting me to note that where they’d previously lived, self-sufficiency was a virtue, and that this was likely the *first* time either had ever had their hair-cut professionally, putting enough scorn into my tone to put me on the hairdresser’s ‘civilized’ side of things.

The young tinkerer, bless her heart, had cheerfully agreed that she never had one before, which helped shift the old woman from snooty arrogance to taking pity on the ‘poor girl’, pointing out what she’d done wrong, and commenting that she had tasteful instincts, *unlike her older sister who’d shaved her head of all things*. Vi had glowered at that, but had held her tongue, and ‘Piper’ had absorbed the lessons like a sponge, much to the older woman’s surprise and appreciation.

Heck, by the end the hairdresser was *smiling*, asking us to come back in a few months so she could touch up both girls’ hairstyles, and, with a few more inches of growth, better ‘salvage’ Violetta’s, something I hadn’t expected in the slightest. From there we’d stopped for lunch, at a café, to help with their ‘socialization’, as the girls were both staring at everything around them, the older sister guardedly so, while Piper was openly.

“Haven’t you guys been here before?” I asked Vi quietly, when we weren’t surrounded by others on the street.

“Difference between casing a place and realizing you’re gonna *live* here,” she muttered, frowning. “It’s just. . . why is it so *different*?”

“Do you *really* want to know?” I questioned in return, tone serious.

That earned me a surprised look, before the brawler slowly nodded.

“We’ll talk about it, later,” I promised, Violetta giving me an annoyed glance. “It’s *complicated,* and, yeah, some of it’s pure greed, but at a remove, where one set of people are downright evil, but the people that *they* deal with, and who profit from them, aren’t as bad, and three layers away you have people who are living better than they probably should without knowing what’s being done to maintain their standard of living,” I summarized. “And that’s only *one* aspect of this mess. If it were easy to understand, it’d be a *lot* harder for people to delude themselves into thinking they’re blameless,” I shrugged, which pacified the teen.

Our lunch was okay, though Piper openly stated my cooking was better, something that annoyed our waiter, but, well, *she wasn’t wrong*. However, I did have enough tact to *not* point out that, maybe using a bit *less* butter in the pastries would be better, as there was a point of ‘flakiness’ where you started hitting diminishing returns, and if you went past *that,* pastries got greasy, like the ones we were served were. Thankfully, just hanging around for an hour had blunted the girls’ reactions enough that, by the time we got to city hall, it merely seemed like they were displaying the interest of seeing something new, and not the thrill of being somewhere they *explicitly* were not supposed to be.

Walking through the palatial building, we found the office of one ‘Irrad Darrington’, the official in charge of handling identification paperwork. The middle-aged man looked at both girls with disdain, though he was polite enough, as I spun a yarn about the pair of girls coming from Freljord, and having been to Piltover before. However, from my mother I’d heard about how there had been water damage in one of the record rooms a few years back, and a number of files had been destroyed, which my mother assumed was the cause of my theoretical friend’s difficulties in getting their ‘foreign cousins’ identification.

With my excuse in hand, I sat between the girls and talked about how their father, Van, had preserved copies of their documentation, which I had brought. Reaching into the bag filled with useless notes that I’d prepared for this purpose, I summoned my **Psychic Paper** out of sight of the other man, though not of the other two girls, and handed it to Mr. Darrington, informing him that it was the form he’d asked about.

Thankfully, whatever the man was, he was *not* a genius, and possessed the requisite imagination to guess what could be on the required form, which the minor artefact took and spun into full documentation. Taking out several blank forms of his own, the official checked the blank white card, and then the space below it, filling in various forms himself, and sketching out the ‘Vandottir’ crest that I’d had Vi draw out for me, so I could better represent it to others.

Handing the card back, he drolly asked, “And the proof of previous citizenship?”

Lowering the card into my bag, I mimed searching for something, before pulling the **Psychic Paper** back out and handing it to the man once more, who took it, nodded, and started filling out *another* set of forms. This was repeated *nine more times*, Mr. Darrington frowning a little more with each ‘paper’ given. Powder, now Piper, giggled a little as I took the artefact, waved it through the bag once more, and handed it back to the man.

“Is something *amusing*, young lady?” the official questioned.

“I, uh, no?” the girl replied, panicking a little as she realized she couldn’t explain the joke.

Interceding, I explained, “**Such levels of paperwork are unusual in Freljord. She’s just** **finding it odd.**”

“Hmm,” the bureaucrat mused, “in that case it is for the best that their father was surprisingly complete in his documentation.”

“He wanted to be sure his daughters would be taken care of,” I stated delicately, both girls going quiet at my lie.

Filling out another form, the man commented idly, “If he had been *this* prepared in other things, perhaps he would still be around. But those people are known for being *careless*.”

The silence deepened, and it took me a moment to process what was just said. Powder looked stricken, while Vi grit her teeth, fists balling her pants up. I looked at the girls, both pained by the reminder, both likely blaming *themselves* for Vander death, then turned my attention to the official, slowly spoking, with cold purpose, *“****Mr. Darrington, these girls lost their father not too long ago, and that wound is* still *fresh. Your statement is unbecoming of a representative of our city. As a member of House Talis, and apprenta to House* Kiramman*, I expected better.***”

At my words, the man froze, and paled slightly, understanding the subtext of my statement clearly, as I was *barely* being subtle about it, even if it was obvious the girls did not.

“I, I *yes*,” the official quickly agreed, looking to ‘Violetta’ and ‘Piper’. “Please, have my *sincerest* apologies. I did not mean to give offense.”

“Then what *did* you mean?” Vi growled, glaring at the man, looking every inch like she wanted to beat him bloody, but barely holding herself back.

Darrington glanced my way, but I stared impassively back, waiting, a cold sweat breaking out on the bureaucrat’s brow. “I, I only meant that your father showed surprising command of our processes, for one. . .” he trailed off, clearly wanting to say something along the lines of ‘for one so uncivilized’, but he, *finally,* instead went with, “for one who comes from such a *different* society. Some of these forms,” he stated, tapping the **Psychic Paper**, “while technically required, are rarely used.”

His excuse was a crock of shit, as this clarification in *no way* negated his earlier insulting implications, but Vi just glared at him, as Powder started to cry a little, and the official quickly went back to filling in the paperwork as quickly as he could. I put a comforting hand on the blue-haired girl’s back, and she moved to hold onto me, crying a little louder, and waited.

“I, this is all I needed,” Darrington noted nervously, handing me the **Psychic Paper** back. “All that is left is to create their identification cards. They can be resin coated, for an additional fee, *which is not needed*,” the official informed us as I lifted a brow. “I will return forthwith.”

Practically fleeing from under my steady stare, the bureaucrat left through a back door, and we waited.

*“He’s an asshole,*” Vi noted, quietly.

I nodded, “Many people in government are. They like wielding power that isn’t theirs, so they find positions that give themselves control over people they normally could *never* threaten.” I hadn’t realized it until his last few statements, but the man had clearly been looking for a ‘missing’ document that meant he could deny us, and tell these foreigners to go fuck themselves, in so many words. However, the Paper was bound to *me*, so it would show those that looked at it what would benefit my cause, not what they *wished* it could display to achieve their ends.

I hadn’t given *my* name when I’d made the appointment either, but the girls’, which meant he hadn’t known who *I* was, and the level of hurt I could bring down on his head. I myself hadn’t even thought to do so, expecting it not to matter, something that I realized was wholly from Jayce’s thoughts, and that, perhaps, they were even more skewed than I’d originally assumed.

While the girls had missed it, I’d *just* threatened the man’s job, and, what’s more, he *knew* I could do so, because one did *not* throw around the names of Councilors for long without receiving a *very* unpleasant visit from the Enforcers.

“*Fuckin’ Pilties,*” the brawler spat, and I just snorted darkly. “*What?”*

“Like someone from *Zaun* wouldn’t beat me unconscious in an alley because they liked my jacket?” I questioned dryly, still annoyed at him, and myself. “Or maybe just kill me over it? There’s bad apples everywhere, Vi, the trick is rooting them out, and Piltover’s Council is *far* worse at it than Vander was. Imagine if Vander, Benzo, *Silco*, Sevika, and three others all had to run the Undercity together. It wouldn’t be as good as it was, but it also won’t get as *bad* as the Lanes are probably going to get. This place has got some serious positives, just like it’s got negatives like *that* asshole, but if you’re going to live there, you need to *get* that.”

She didn’t look happy about it, but Violet didn’t argue, just glared down at the floor, and we waited, until the official returned, handing me the two pieces of paper, each protected by a thin transparent coating, that would prove to any Enforcer that they were who they claimed to be.

“One more thing,” I said, as the man took his seat. “They have two younger brothers, who were sent to Damacia instead.”

At my side, Powder, who had stopped crying, stiffened, and Vi’s head snapped over to stare at me.

“Freljordian politics being what they are, they were in less danger, so did not have to run as far,” I continued. “However, they, too, have documentation that might have been lost, and will likely, in time, be needed if they come here. This packet,” I stated, pulling up the **Psychic Paper** one last time, “should have everything you need.”

Mr. Darrington, with a good deal more care, took the artefact, and looked it over, seeing the information I wanted him to see, reformatted into the style that he was looking for. “Mylo and Claggor Vandottir?” the bureaucrat questioned, flipping through nonexistent pages. “Ages. . . five and six?”

I nodded. “Yes. While neither Piper nor Violetta are mages, magic is known to run in women up there, so, obviously, they could not stay in Damacia. **Here in Piltover, we do not let our fears guide us, and treat others fairly**, but Damacia. . .” I trailed off shrugging.

“*Indeed*,” the official agreed, with a touch of the arrogance he’d displayed before, having found a ‘safe’ target. “I’ll get these processed right away, Mr. Talis.”

“Thank you,” I replied politely, and we waited for a few minutes, as the older man furiously, but carefully, filled out two more sets of forms, taking a *tenth* of the time he had used up to process the sisters.

Finally, he was done, and we stood, ‘Piper’ reluctantly letting go, and Mr. Darrington offered his hand to shake. “Thank you for coming, Mr. Talis,” he said. “I’m certain there will be no need to. . . *make note*, of your visit today?”

I stared at the hand for a moment, the man’s nerves almost visibly rattling, before I nodded imperiously, taking the offered limb and shaking it, once. “Of course. You were merely performing your duties, and any miscommunications were quickly clarified. Have a good day.”

And with that, we left, Vi waiting until we were on the street before she hissed, *“Jayce!”*

I subtly shook my head, informing her, “***When we’re Home.***”

She held her tongue as we went down several streets, finding one that was several degrees off the normal thoroughfares, and we ducked into an alley, where upon I opened a portal and led them back to our house.

As soon as we were through, Vi ripped her hand away from mine, and turned, glaring. “What the fuck was *that* about?”

Expecting the question, I clarified, “You mean about Mylo and Claggor?”

“*Yes*, ***THAT!***” the brawler yelled, losing her temper, though she’d kept a handle on it until this point, so. . . progress?

Powder pulled away slightly as well, looking at me curiously, and I smiled at the two sisters.

“Well, I had to make sure the timeline matched up for when I resurrect them.”