**ACE 39**

It was starting to get late, but I had painkillers, energy drinks, and a time-limit that was seeming more and more like I was going to miss it no matter *what*, so we pressed onwards. Thankfully, the handful of dangers we ran across were easily taken care of, the hazards navigated, and the wild ‘animals’ either avoided or easily put down.

As we continued to climb, though, a very *different* kind of problem slowly grew, and it was only stopping back Home for a quick drink that led me to notice it, as the difference between the Piltoverian environment it’d auto-calibrated to and the one Vi and I found ourselves walking back into was *stark*.

The mana in the air was ***thick***, to the point it made it a little hard to breathe, and I yanked Violetta back through the portal as soon as she exited it.

“What gives?” the white-haired teen questioned, not fighting me on this, only confused.

Retrieving breathing masks, I tossed her one, as well as goggles, slipping on a set myself.

“Mana oversaturation,” I told her. “I haven’t studied Runeterra’s magic enough to be comfortable with it, but it usually works along the lines of *radiation*.”

“The stuff from the sunlight?” Piper asked, as I’d only *barely* touched on the advanced sciences with her, though, given who I worked for, both of them already knew I had knowledge from other worlds, so I didn’t have to maintain a ‘cover’ like I would with Viktor or Caitlyn.

“*Yep*,” I nodded, “but sunlight’s the radiant expression, not the thing that makes the radiation itself. Different kinds of radiation are stopped by different amounts of material, like sunlight is stopped by your skin, but a lot of the stuff that’s stopped by your skin other than sunlight is *really really bad* to get inside you. Mana is only *like* radiation, *probably*, so it *might* be fine, it might even be beneficial, but if you get that much in you it’s just as likely to be *really really* ***bad***,” I stated seriously.

At their worried looks, I explained, “It’s not been bad enough, *yet,* for me to see any direct effects, but if it were something like a slow poison, a catalyst, or even some kind of nutrient that enhanced you it’d do its job without me noticing. Skin contact *should* be fine, problems from direct exposure don’t often come from *pure* Mana, and neither of us are mages so *that* won’t be an issue, but making sure we don’t get any *in* us would help limit problems. The goggles also helps protect mucus membranes,” I stressed.

“Like, snot?” the younger sister questioned, trying to figure out what I was saying, smiling as I nodded, pointing at my eyes, then nose, and finally my mouth.

“Anything that gets naturally wet, pretty much,” I agreed. “There’s extra blood-flow, and the wetness means things can transfer on contact in a way they don’t *normally* through skin.”

The blue-haired girl frowned, glancing at the portal. “Can I see what it’s like?” she questioned, in a way that said she knew the answer would almost *certainly* be no.

“Of *course* not,” Vi replied, on que, then turned an annoyed look my way when I didn’t instantly agree. *“Jayce.”*

“We were breathing it in for an *hour*, Violetta, and it’s only *now* gotten to levels where I’m worried. Also, this should be a way to tell if she’s a mage. She’s probably *not*,” I quickly added, as Piper blinked, clearly never having thought about that, “but it’s good to know what it’s like, just to possibly recognize it later. Some of my Hextech experiments get pretty Mana intensive, but not *this* bad, and not this *constant*. If things in the lab ever get *this* intense, it’s a good indicator to shut down the experiment, and, if you can’t do that, *run.*”

The white haired teen mulled that over, *clearly* not happy, but slowly nodded. “Fine, but just for a minute.”

“Agreed,” I replied, holding a hand out to Piper, who took it, and I led her through the gate back into the hallway.

The small girl smiled, taking a deep breath, only to stiffen, paling.

“What’s wrong?” I asked quickly, trying to think of what it could be, the blue haired child’s grip on my hand tightening, as she shook a little. Kneeling down next to her, her eyes were wide, and she wasn’t looking *at* me, so I picked her up, Piper latching onto my arms as I did so, and I almost ran into Vi as I came back Home.

“What’s wrong?” the older sister questioned, unknowingly echoing me. “Jayce, what’d yo-, what happened?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, moving to a seat, sitting on it and positioning Piper so that she was secure in my lap. *“****Powder, talk to me,****”* I gently urged.

*That* snapped her out of it, the girl jerking, blinking, looking around like she didn’t know how she’d gotten here. “J-*Jayce?”* she questioned, a little out of it.

My thoughts raced, as I tried to figure out what could’ve created such a harsh reaction. If she *had* been a mage, she should’ve started manifesting some kind of magic, but all she’d done was freeze up, with no other symptoms, which suggested a *psychological* response, but she’d *already* seen hextech activations, and dealt with that, but-

*Right. Hextech* ***activations****, not another* ***Resonance Cascade***.

“**Did that remind you of that night?**” I questioned softly, and, hesitantly she nodded. “**I’m sorry, Piper, I didn’t think-**”

“*It’s okay,*” the girl interrupted, scowling, though not at me, starting to work herself up “It was *my fault!* It’s *all my fault!*”

*“****No,****”* I countered, changing tactics, seeing she wasn’t going to budge on this, while also getting the sense that, *just maybe*, we weren’t talking about what had *just* happened. “**It’s no one’s *fault.* I made a mistake, and you’re *still healing*. No one’s hurt, everything’s fine. Okay?**”

The small girl hesitated, *wanting* to argue, emotions unsteady, but having trouble putting her objection into words.

“That night?” Vi repeated, confused, eyes widening as she realized what we were talking about. “*Shit*, Powder, I, *I* didn’t think of that either,” she stated, voice full of self-recrimination.

“**See, mistakes all round,**” I smiled a little, getting a rueful chuckle from the traumatized tween. “**So, are you gonna be okay while Violetta and I keep going?**”

Piper frowned, clenching her small fists, looking up to stare me in the eye as she declared, “I’m going back out there!”

“**What?** ***No****,”* I replied, getting a hurt look from the girl, and dialing back the **Song**. “Maybe some other time, but-”

“She should,” Vi argued, and I paused, turning an incredulous look the white-haired teen’s way. “You said a minute’d be safe, right?”

I tried to figure out where the brawler was going with this, but I just didn’t have enough of a mental model to work with, so I slowly replied, “*Should* be.”

“And we’ll be right there with her, right?” the older girl pressed.

“*Obviously*,” I stated.

“Then, if Pow-, if *Piper* wants to try it again, what’s the harm?”

Said girl nodded, imploring, *“Jayce, please.”*

I took a moment, and sighed. “Piper’s been through a lot, Violetta, and I don’t want to put her through *more,* but. . . *fine.* But only for a minute, and if you freeze up again, you’re going *straight* Home, ***okay?****”*

“Okay!” the blue-haired girl chirped, then realized *what* she was arguing for, and wilted a little. *“O-okay,”* she repeated, still confident, but not nearly as eager. Piper jumped off my lap, but, as I stood, she held a hand out, waiting for me to take it.

I walked her to the gate, and, hesitating, Piper held her other hand out to Vi, who, a little surprised, took it, and the three of us stepped through, back into that hall *thick* with Mana. Both Violetta and I watched the small girl carefully, as she took a deep breath, shook a little, but said, either to herself, or to us, “I-I’m okay. I can handle this. I *can* handle this.”

Neither of said anything, just waited, as, shakily, the girl let go of first her sister’s hand, then mine, her breathing quick and shallow, fists clenching and unclenching, until she calmed, taking increasingly slower, deeper breaths.

When it’d been *two* minutes, and Piper had gotten control of herself, I put my hand on her small shoulder, causing her to look up at me in surprise. “**Good job,**” I smiled. “**You were right, you *can* handle this. Now your sister and I need to keep going. You good holding down the fort back Home?**”

“I am. I. . . *am,”* she smiled, surprised, clearly tired, but with the same determination she had before. “I, thanks, Jayce!” she beamed, giving me a hug. “And thanks, Vi!” she added, twisting about and giving her sister one too, then turning around and facing the portal she couldn’t perceive. “No, how do I. . .” she trailed off.

I started to offer her a hand, but she shook her head. “If some stupid mouthy *bats* could then. . . and it’s. . .” she muttered, reaching out a hand to grab my jacket, and Vi’s shirt, before, with a grunt of effort, picking herself up, so she was suspended between us, swinging back and forth, several times, before with an *“oof!”* launched herself forward, twisting automatically to try and avoid the portal, pulling hard on my jacket, but, hemmed in as she was, she just bounced off of me.

*And fell right through the Gate.*

I blinked, as, *that shouldn’t be possible,* the very nature of the perception filter over the portals forcing you to avoid them, only, she *had*, but only *after* she’d committed, *over-*committed really, to her course of action, and, *like the bats*, had no choice *but* to pass through.

That. *Was.* ***Brilliant!***

*Yeah, that’s the genius that resulted in the destruction savant known as Jinx*, I thought, shaking my head, and she’d figured it out in *seconds*. It’d require *knowing* where the Gate was, in order to zero in on its entrance; a band of physical capability where, too much, or too little, and you wouldn’t have the strength to set yourself up or have *enough* to get out of it; and the ability to mentally partition enough to hyper-focus on your current actions, so only the *last* part of the sequence was corrupted by the filter, but *damn* if she didn’t pull it off.

Vi frowned, glancing to me, and jerked a thumb in the general direction of the portal she couldn’t perceive. “I thought we couldn’t do that?”

I shrugged, “Piper’s just special like that.”

The white-haired teen thought about that, shrugged, and replied, “True.”

<ACE>

If I thought the mana was thick *before*, it only got worse as we rose, to the point that it actually started to impede our movement, somewhere between walking through water and doing so normally, the air shimmering slightly. Pausing to take a breath *without* the mask, holding a hand up for Vi to *not* copy me, I could feel my **Defenses** doing. . . *something*, confirming that the rebreathers were *absolutely* needed.

And, if that wasn’t bad enough, it’d gotten *clean* again.

Chemtech fluid rushed through the walls, as did pipes full of other things, each with its own particular noise, some sluicing through like water, while others gurgled thickly, all of the tubes completely intact so I couldn’t use their broken spewings to try to identify their contents. **Wild Talent** started giving more and more specific instructions, which Vi and I followed to the letter, slipping through rooms, down hallways, and across well-maintained catwalks.

*‘Stop’,* it directed, high up in a room where pumps worked, a device glowing red as it heated the contents of one pipe, a device with yellow chemtech doing something else, though, as the pipe was solid metal, I couldn’t tell *what*, only that the yellow glowing tubes themselves were double-walled for some reason, and I *really wanted to know why*.

Holding a hand up, we waited, as one of the automatons slowly stumped its way through the chamber, and only *after* it’d already been gone for a full minute did we get the go-ahead to press forward. I still turned my phone’s camera to get everything I could, but didn’t try and tarry, the goal for this trip to *get the hell out of here,* ***not*** for research. I could always come back, *properly equipped* and, more importantly, *with additional time*.

Though, as we pushed our way ever higher, taking a stairway up to the next floor, and the Mana intensified *even more*, I realized that I’d need to invent magical *hazmat* suits first.

Now, though, the ambient energy in the air could be *seen*, giving everything a pearlescent, iridescent shine like rainbow mist that started to obscure things too far away. Taking a quick trip Home, we both staggered as soon as we passed through the portal, our movements suddenly free, as colors streamed from our clothing, spreading out into the air.

*“****Get back,***” I ordered as Piper started to run over to us, and we ‘decompressed’, the energy leached from us as the pocket dimension, like a freezer, ‘cooled’ us by eliminating the Mana that spread from our bodies as soon as it was no longer conceptually part of ‘us’. Holding up a finger, I popped my mask off, but, breathing in, *still* pinged my **Defenses** for several seconds, and only when that *stopped* did I nod to the teen, who did the same.

Both Vi and I still *glowed*, faintly, the colors of our clothing, our hair, but *not* our eyes, oddly **vibrant**. More than that, I felt *good*, energetic, and it was only my Company **Defenses** that weren’t causing me to worry, and not just **Mind Defense**.

Nodding to Piper, she approached us, cautious, asking, “Are two okay? You had, uh, rainbow BO.”

That got a snort out of me. “Just absolute *tons* of Mana. We’re taking a break, and I’m gonna collect some samples.” She opened her mouth, and I kept going, “No, you can’t come with me to help. This stuff is *very* dangerous, and you don’t know the proper safety protocols. Because they don’t exist. *Yet.* I can handle it, and Vi, go take a shower and change into a clean outfit. Leave the one you’re wearing in the lab, I want to see if there’s permanent effects.”

The brawler nodded, then paused, “But, like, *I’m* okay, right?”

“Should be,” I agreed, and at her concerned look I added, “that’s the best I can offer you right now. We’re not just on the cutting edge of this, we’re on the *bleeding* edge, and need to be careful to make sure it isn’t *ours*. I’d say I could do this on my own-”

*“Jayce,”* Violetta started to argue.

“*But I know you wouldn’t agree,*” I finished. “Now *go*, I’m gonna go get some samples.”

The older girl nodded, and jogged off for the stairs, as I followed her, snagging the cart as I did so. Stopping by the lab, I grabbed vacuum canisters, and a pump, piling them up and taking the cart back down, heading for the gate when Piper yelped, panicked, *“Jayce!”*

I paused, looking to her, and she pointed to her face, insisting, *“Mask!”*

For a second I wanted to point out that, with my abilities, *I didn’t really need it,* but the girl had *enough* problems with proper lab safety, so it was better to model it for her. “Thanks!” I smiled, picking the rebreather up and securing it, the girl giving me a shaky thumbs up, which I returned confidently.

Stepping back through the gate, high up and out of the way, the catwalk thankfully sturdy enough to count as ‘floor’ to the portal system. Turning on the pump, the internal batteries worked just fine, Company Tech built to function even in *anomalous* environments, I popped off my mask and took a deep breath, the feeling *very* uncomfortable, though not as bad as breathing dirty *oil,* my **Defenses** hard at work.

Popping my goggles off as well, my company protections redoubled their efforts, but easily handled it.

Still stung like a *bitch* though.

Gritting my teeth at the *very* uncomfortable sensation, not *true* pain, the pump shut off, having filled one canister, and I blindly swapped it out for the next, blinking away tears, that dropped, glimmering, hitting the metal at my feet and *sizzling* in a way that was *really* concerning.

*Yeah, this was dumb,* I thought, banking on my **Defenses** to screen out damage while letting *enhancements* through, and, while I had to deal with *more* sizzling tears, the sealing material for the goggles absorbed the charged moisture, the uncomfortable feeling slowly fading.

Looking around, the odd shimmering flow seemed a little more *distinct* now, though I had no idea if I was just trying to put a positive spin on my idiocy and blowing smoke up my ass.

Or Mana.

*Regardless*, I was reminded of the fact that intelligence was an *intensifier*, and that it didn’t stop you from being dumb, it just meant that when you *were* dumb, you were *intensely* so*.*

Filling up all the canisters, I stepped back Home, and only had to wait a couple seconds for the ‘Mana decompression’ to finish, having absorbed a lot *less* of it in that shorter time. Violetta and Piper were both waiting for me, and helped store the now Mana-filled canisters.

“What’re you gonna do with these?” the brawler questioned, as we locked them up.

“No idea, but it’ll *certainly* be interesting,” I smiled in return, heading back down, securing my goggles and mask, making *sure* Vi did the same, before we both re-entered the Mana-filled chambers, stopping as a chemtech robot stomped by underneath us, then stopped and slowly looked up in our direction.

I grabbed my travel partner and dragged her *back* through the portal, and, five minutes later, carefully stuck my head through, the coast now clear. Waving her after me, we stepped through once again, back into the thickened air, but to mercifully empty chamber.

Pressing onwards, the next level up was *worse*, the Mana now *clearly* visible, flowing in distinct currents, the prismatic mist channeled in a single direction, the same way we were going. Slowly following it, Vi stopped me, pointing, as the metal walls were inscribed with glowing lines that confused me until I realized they were tightly-packed *rune-clusters*, continuous arrays that fed into each other in a manner that I couldn’t understand in the slightest.

*Yet.*

Regardless, our path took us along one of these ‘flows’, which ran from one room to another, gathering in density, my skin tingling as my **Defenses** prickled, and I looked to Vi, the girl jittery and glowing slightly, as I’m sure I was too, the next room separating into a higher and lower path, and, despite my misgivings, I followed my **Talent**’s suggestion of taking the high road, the pattern of increasing Mana density breaking as there was *less* energy up here, even if it was still *far* denser than normal.

The dangerous feeling abated slightly, and I relaxed a little, as we pressed on, *doubly* sure of our path as the next chamber saw more chemtech robots moving about the ground floor, tending various devices, and, where crystals had started to form on bits of metal, smashing them apart, turning them back into vapor. The Mana mists condensing more and more, until they ran in thin rivulets, *up* troughed ramps in defiance of physics, more and more of the charged vapor pulled into the growing river of pure energy, which I *really* wanted a sample of, but there was *no* way to gather some without *also* gathering the attention of the deadly droids below.

The Mana level in the upper layers started to increase again, but was still at manageable levels, as Vi and I silently made our way through the next doorway, stopping as the girl swore, *“What the fuck?”*

Seeing what lay before us, [*I had to agree*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cO00vwy2JWw&ab_channel=Arcane-Topic)*.*

It was another large chamber, though thankfully not the size of the canyon crossing, filled with *hundreds* of vats, all in various states of ‘done-ness’ creating patterns of light, each one with pipes filling it with thick, gooey mud, churned and heated by autonomous chemtech arms, light bending around them oddly, as, in troughs, thin streams of solidified mana were added.

As the crystalline liquid dripped in, light started to bloom, spreading throughout the mixture.

*Green* light.

As solidified magic was introduced, the thick substances inside melted slightly, becoming first a slurry, then a thick syrup, the viscosity lowering as the glow increased, until, finally, it ran like liquid, and the *chemfluid* was drained from the vat, arms scraping it clean, then scraping each *other* clean, everything washed with a blast of water, which was then drained through a *different* aperture, only for the process to start anew, as thick black mud was pumped into the empty vat.

“*This* is where it comes from,” I muttered, presented with the solution to a mystery I hadn’t even *begun* to crack. “*This* is how it’s made.”

I’d checked the archives, but no one I could find in my cursory investigation at the Academy knew how chemfluid was created. Well, there were a few people that *claimed* they could do so, but they refused to share *how*, to the point I was fairly certain they’d just lied about it.

It *was* possible there was some sort of trick to it, given that this was a *magical dimension*, so substances with anomalous properties were to be expected, it was just the fact that chemfluid was *so damn versatile* that had led me to try and figure out how to use it, *despite* its extreme toxicity.

The fact that the damn stuff was on *tap*, though, running through the walls of Zaun, had confused the *fuck* out of me, only, with everything I was learning, suddenly it didn’t seem so far-fetched after all.

No one knew *where* Zaun had come from, when it had been built, or really *anything* about it, ‘book-learnin’’ discouraged in the Undercity, while the Academy of Piltover was *suspiciously* incurious about it.

*The question, then, is if they knew and were hiding this, or if they just learned that they didn’t want to know?*

There’d been a psychological experiment I’d read about, as cruel as it was insightful in the way such things could be, where researchers had put monkeys in a room with a ladder, and, suspended over that ladder, was a banana. After letting the monkeys climb up and get the banana a few times, the scientists had started spraying down the chamber with ice-cold water *anytime* a monkey got halfway up the ladder, dissuading the simians from going for the food. It worked, *obviously,* until none of the monkeys would go for it, and that’s when the *real* experiment began.

You see, they started introducing *more* monkeys into the chamber. These new test subjects would then see the banana and start to go for it, only to be attacked by the others, who didn’t want to be sprayed down and chilled, the ‘veterans’ knowing what would happen if any of them tried. Then the scientists had removed a few of the old monkeys, adding others, the pattern continuing, with each new monkey trying, only to be stopped, often *violently*, by the more experienced apes, until every single simian from the *first* group was gone.

Now, every monkey there hadn’t been sprayed, even once, hadn’t experienced anything to *personally* understand the problem with ascending the ladder, but they *still* attacked the new ones when they tried to go for the banana, and, in doing so, enforced a ‘taboo’ with no idea of *why it existed in the first place.*

So, did Heimerdinger and the others *know* what was down here, or did they, like those monkeys, just know it was ‘bad’, and that was it?

Regardless, there were dozens upon dozens, maybe over a *hundred* automatons in this chamber, each one individually a deadly threat, a team of three repairing one vat, while another disassembled one with cracked metal plating, the robots keeping this *entire* edifice working, their creators likely long, *long* gone, but that didn’t matter to their creations.

“*Jayce,”* Vi whispered, pulling at my jacket, her voice muffled by her mask. “*We need to go.*”

*“****Right,***” I murmured, tearing my eyes away from all of this, a discovery that I *would* explore.

*Later.*

***When I could survive it.***

Following my implanted instincts, I led her through the catwalks, high above the chamber, plumes of Mana and chemical laden air buffeting us, but, *thankfully*, the thick mist that covered the production chamber’s floor obscured us from the sight of the chemtech constructs, as we crossed the chamber, and, *finally*, entered a doorway found where the roof dipped down past the walkways, revealing stairs that we took up, and *out*.

Climbing them, it was a bit like leaving the underworld, the Mana-levels in the air dropping rapidly, each step a little easier than the last, the colors getting paler, until, *finally*, the ascent ended, leading to another doorway I opened up, Vi following me as we stepped out into a rusted metal hallway that seemed downright *dreary.*

Removing the gas mask, I took a deep breath, and the air seemed oddly. . . *lacking.*

The closest thing I could compare it to was the environment of a heated home in winter, lacking the characteristics of *desert* air, but feeling, ever so slightly, as if something was *missing*, and like it was being leached *out* of you. *That* was because, as the heat of gas increased, so did the ability of it to hold humidity, so what would be *normal* at a colder temperature became unnaturally arid if a humidifier wasn’t used in conjunction with a heater.

Only it was *magic* that was lacking, not anything as mundane as water.

Regardless, we pressed on, through the mana desert, the spaces bare, and lifeless, finding another stairway up to the next floor, then the next, then the next, the *leaching* feeling, never enough to ping my **Defenses**, slowly fading as we put distance between ourselves and the Chemfluid Creation Chambers, until the sensation faded completely, and, we once again had to deal with the wildlife.

It started small enough, insects, rat-things with a dozen legs that leapt with surprising speed, more of those pipe-eels that we gave a wide berth to, but they didn’t *stay* small.

Things got larger, until, as Vi and I were making our way through flooded corridors, we heard *something.*

Something *large.*

<https://cdn.discordapp.com/attachments/1003885584311386185/1039033809737359410/d3a00062-804f-4a76-bd0c-fceaea4ade49.png>



The passageways were tight, almost cramped compared to others, with only the occasional chemtech light illuminating the space, when, ahead of us, something *yowled*, the noise *far* too deep to be normal, reverberating down the flooded halls, the water that’d sloshed at our feet vibrating slightly.

*“Okay, not that way,”* I started to say, when another sound came from *behind* us, though not anywhere close by, **Wild Talent** remaining silent, which could either mean there wasn’t a danger, there wasn’t a danger to *me,* or whatever made that sound was *sentient* and thus a massive danger to *both of us.*

“*Jayce?”* Vi questioned, as I called my phone to me, and tried to open a gate home, only for it to spit an error message back at me, the location ‘unsuitable.’

Glancing around, I realized that, *again*, the water was messing things up, its slowly flowing nature not providing a stable location, and the few bits that stuck up weren’t large enough for the gateway to connect properly.

“*Follow me,*” I instructed, pressing onwards, trusting my **Talent**, which stirred enough to give me a vague feeling, leading us down several turns, trying to move without splashing *too* much, with moderate success, catching something *large* passing by in the distance: a flash of faded white skin, and a long, whip-like tail.

*‘Stop’* commanded my grafted instincts, and I did so, holding up a hand, Violetta doing the same, though I didn’t know *why.*

A *growl* echoed through the hall, and slowly turning, I saw a hairless cat’s head, only one the size of an *oven*, peering around the corner, large, milky-white eyes staring sightlessly in our direction. Vi and I froze, waiting, until it turned away, and lethargically made its way down a different passage.

Moving then stopping, again and again, whenever my **Talent** commanded us to, we threaded our way through those flooded halls, avoiding the *rhinoceros* sized hairless cats, at one point needing to push ourselves against the walls as a hissing screech filled the space.

Not hesitating, I grabbed Vi, who moved with me, as I stepped up onto a bit of fallen pipe, pressing her against the metal wall with my own body, whispering, *“****Stay quiet****,”* as one, then another, of the creatures ran down the passageway, a third *slamming* into me as it did so.

I absorbed most of the force, biting back the pain as it aggravated my injury, but not fully, and the girl still grunted a little from the blow as well, the creature coming to a splashing hall with a confused, curious, *“****MROW?***”

It came back to us, sniffing a bit, until it nudged my side painfully, but my **Talent** was commanding me *not to move*, so I did just that, until, a few seconds later, another *yowl* in the distance caught its attention, and it took off in that direction once more.

Slowly, I pulled away from Vi, quietly asking, *“You okay?”*

“Y-yeah,” she replied, having been able to watch the thing as it approached, while even moving *my* head might’ve been enough to doom us both. “You?”

“Could be better, *definitely* could be worse,” I replied, the painkillers starting to wear off and that ‘nudge’ had hit me *right* in my bruised ribs. “Lets get the fuck out of here.”

*“Agreed.*”

<ACE>

Another dozen floors, and we *had* to be getting close, the ambient Mana seeming to have stabilized to Zaun standard, and we must’ve climbed *several miles* by this point. More than that, the architecture was getting, by degrees, less and less *industrial*. It was a subtle thing at first, long degraded personal touches here and there, half-corroded metal buttons, a broken ceramic cup on a table, and so on, but there were signs of *life* here, and not just living things.

Then, turning a corner, and going through a set of double doors, I stopped, as I looked down a wide hallway, chemtech pipes arranged almost *artfully* to create light, walls lined with doors that just looked. . . *different.*

Pinging my **Talent**, there was no danger here, so, hesitantly, I moved to one of them, finding it locked. Gesturing to Vi, who smirked and stepped forward, the brawler slammed a kick into the door that shoved it open with the sound of tearing metal, before she grandly waved me in.

Obliging, I stepped inside, the rooms dark in a way that was *rare* down here, one hand stupidly going out, to flick on a light-switch, only to *hit something*. Feeling it, I found a knob, and turning it, light blue radiance bloomed throughout the space, revealing an old, but mostly intact, *apartment.*

*what.*

Violetta stepped inside, looking around, eyes narrowing as she pointed, one corner of the space *obviously* a kitchen, with a number of old, dust-covered appliances sitting on it, one of them connected to the kind of chemtech port you’d see in homes in *Zaun*. “Jayce? It looks like *our* place. A little. What does that mean?”

*Solve one mystery, get another,* I thought, as I shook my head, trying not to think about how someone would combine *incredibly toxic fluids* with ***meal prep***. “It means it’s past midnight, I’m tired as shit, and we can figure this out *tomorrow*. And by tomorrow I mean later today. This place isn’t going anywhere, and I’ve had *quite* enough of today. Yesterday. *You know what I mean*.”

The white-haired brawler looked around again, as I opened the portal Home, the girl questioning, “But, like, we *are* going to look around, right?”

For half a second I considered teasing her again, the self-avowed ‘non-academic’ showing a curiosity that was *absolutely* in line with the very things she scoffed at, but I was tired, and my sense of how much was *too* much tended to suffer when that happened, so I instead settled on a much safer smile, as I reminded her, *“Come on, it’s me we’re talking about here.* Of *course* I’m gonna go poke things I probably shouldn’t. Actually, if it seems safe, want to bring Piper over?”

The older sister started to say no, stopped herself, and looked around the room once more, slowly nodding. “You know, I think she’d love that. We-” she cut herself off, yawning, which, of course set *me* off. “But tomorrow. Today. When we wake up.”

“Yeah, *that,*” I agreed, offering her a hand, which she took, and we both went Home, for some *well*-deserved rest.

*I had to agree - The City of Progress*