**ACE 36**

Sweating, the hot, fetid air almost oppressive, I dodged the spike, attached to a long, fleshy appendage, a flash of my blade severing the limb as its owner croaked in pain, drops of green blood spraying everywhere, falling into the murky water below.

*“You wanted lizard people, Vi,”* I called out, sighting on another foe, the tiger-sized monster deceptively fast, but, when it landed, I pulled the trigger, my round passing through its eye, and killing it instantly.

“*These aren’t lizards, Jayce!”* my partner called back, leaping up and sinking an armored fist into the side of an amphibious attacker. *“Or people!”*

The hundred-pound frog deformed under the blow, flying off, as another spat a spike-tipped tongue at the girl, who turned, not able to dodge it, but deflected the attack off her metal gloves, reaching out to grip the flesh behind it. Reflexively, the ambush-frog tried to pull its appendage back, toes digging into the muck it stood on, and succeeded, but *also* reeled in a *very* annoyed pugilist, who caved its skull in.

“How is there even a swamp *underground?*” she demanded, as I turned, sighting on another ambush-frog that tried to sneak around the corner. Its bulbus eye met mine, the bar-shaped pupil widening slightly before it exploded into a shower of ichor, my shot passing through it. As I’d thought, while **Wild Defense** protected *me* from animal attacks, my partner had no such protections, and the second I’d stepped in to defend her my protections had dropped, forcing us *both* to fight.

“Not sure,” I shrugged, looking around the wide hallway, pools of off-color dirty water everywhere, with faintly glowing swirls running through it, embankments of silt here and there. It *was* the proper path to get out here, and one I could take Vi on *without* her dying, according to what **Wild Talent** told me, which was of *questionable* veracity.

It was better than nothing, but **Talents** and **Defenses** were only guaranteed to work for their *possessors,* and, though it was in the *finest* of fine print, only up to a certain point. Given that I was staying the *hell* away from Exalted-level bullshit, I *should* be fine, but using it to try and create a predictive model based on factors it was *not* meant to handle meant my path through this wilderness of pipes and poison *was* ‘safe’. . . for given values of safe.

At the white-haired girl’s skeptical look, I took a tentative sniff, the smell *abhorrent,* but underneath that was a hint of. . . salt?

Reaching down, and sticking a gloved finger into the *surely* poisonous fluid filled with *god* knows what, I licked it, repressing my own gag reflex at the taste and. . . *yep.*

*Salt.*

Grabbing my canteen and washing my mouth out, only having done so because of my *hard* immunity to diseases, poisons, and mutagenic effects, at least *one* of those having pinged my **Defences** when I’d taken a taste, I got a better idea of what was going on here, and, looking around, there *was* a subtle flow, from one pool to another, coming from a side hallway that branched off of our path. It *seemed* safe, and I felt like we were making good time, so why not?

“I’ve got an idea, but I’m not sure,” I replied, walking that way, hefting my pistol. I had four more shots left in this clip, but, if we hit heavy resistance, I might need *every* bullet. I still had a full clip in my pocket, but the other two were empty, so, sheathing my blade, I summoned my phone and opened a portal Home, leaning through and handing the spent magazines to Piper, whose face screwed up.

“*Ew!* what stinks?” she asked, taking them both.

“Found a swamp.”

*“Underground?”* she questioned, echoing her sister.

Shrugging, I accepted two filled ones, and replied, “Apparently. Figuring it out now. See you later.”

She nodded, and I leaned back out, closing the Gate, and continuing my walk, going down one hallway that turned to the side. Motioning for Vi to wait, I unsheathed my sword, and poked it around the corner, wondering if my **Wild Defense** protections extended to a *different* group of-

*Clang!*

A bone-tipped spile slammed into my blade, knocking it to the side, telling me the answer was *no*, so I leapt out, pistol up, spotting three ambush-toads, two more getting ready to ‘fire’, and sent a hail of bullets their way.

I only killed one, but the other flinched the moment it launched its attack, the spiked tongue going wide, and Vi followed after me, charging forward, running along the banks of silt as the first AT rechambered its weapon and speared out at her, but the girl had landed and set her feet, deflecting the attack with her fists, charging as the last one pulled its appendage back like a measuring tape retracting, but, with a moment to aim, it’d *just* pulled it back when my shot took it through the eye, ending its life.

It toppled, as Vi killed the last one, the way she did *most* things, by punching it until it stopped moving. Switching out magazines in my pistol, I jogged forward, trying to stay out of the water as much as I could, mostly because, *especially* having tasted it, I *didn’t* want to faceplant directly into it by tripping on something I couldn’t see.

Moving forward, past the dead creatures, I could hear *more* ambush-toads hopping around in the next room, but, waving a sword around the corner, I had no takers.

*Well, we literally killed all the ones before so they couldn’t’ve* ***learned****,* I thought, quickly popping my head around the corner, but, wonder of wonders, the monsters seemed to have been *leaving.* **Wild Talent** pointed out a few near the back that were mostly submerged, waiting to, well, *ambush* us, but as long as I didn’t approach the back wall, where clusters of eggs sat, they’d stay their. . . tongues?

“Stay with me,” I ordered, looking around, seeing *more* ambush-toads lurking in doorways, but with the same ‘don’t go after our eggs, we won’t go after you’ mentality. If I was coming back here, I would’ve started picking them off, since these things were *assholes,* but I could get my answer without having to expend the ammo.

“Found the source,” I stated, stepping over to my partner, close enough she could easily follow my arm, and pointing at the wall to the right. “See? It’s the *metal* pipes. I thought they were carrying chemfluid, but *that* one’s sprung a leak *there* and *there,* in the tops and bottoms, which flows out *there*, and-”

“It’s. . . seawater?” the brawler asked, glancing over, and up, at me. “Is that why you tasted it?”

I nodded, “Yep, and it’s toxic enough it’d *possibly* kill you, or mess you up, but it’s *very* salty. The silt was kind of a clue too,” I added, lightly stomping on the bit of ground we were standing on.

“I, uh, thought it was weird dirt,” she said, looking down, and, trawling Jayce’s memories, with the toxicity of the waters, and with how Zaun was constructed, there was a good chance the girl had never *seen* a riverbank, let alone its delta.

“Understandable,” I gave, “and, given our elevation, we’re *well* below sea level, which just leaves me with one question.”

I waited for a moment, and Violetta got that I was prompting *her*, the girl’s brow furrowing in thought. With an annoyed sigh, she stepped away from me, admitting, “Pow-*Piper’s* better at this stuff.”

“Yes,” I nodded blandly, not reacting to the slightly hurt look that flashed across the girl’s features, “But **that doesn’t make you incapable, that just means you have to work a little harder for it.** You’re not scared of a little *hard work*, are you Vi?”

With the metaphorical gauntlet thrown, she turned, staring at the damaged sections of pipe, leaking filthy water, thick with churned muck, into a pool atop a mountain of silt, which slowly ran down a series of tiny waterfalls before spreading out throughout the chamber. “The question is. . . ‘How long did it break, to leave all this around’?” she put forward, glancing my way.

“That *is* a good question, but one I could probably figure out if I did some research at the Academy,” I replied. “Keep going.”

Vi frowned, looking back, demanding, “Aren’t we in a rush?”

Putting on my best Heimerdinger voice, I replied, *“There’s always time for learning!”*

“. . . what.”

“It’s funnier if you’ve met the Dean,” I shrugged. “But we can burn another ten minutes or so. Consider it a break, since they won’t attack unless we go deeper.”

She rolled her eyes, then looked back at the damaged pipe, one of several, all a couple feet across, running along the wall. “It’s carrying *water.* Water from the *bay,*” Violetta said to herself. “Where?” she questioned, but shook her head before I could respond. “No. How? No. . .” She stiffened, and turned to face me. *“Why* is it carrying water from the bay!”

I smiled, *“Exactly.* If they just needed water, there’s underground rivers they could pull from. A couple run under Piltover, and they’re fairly clean. With *this* level of technology, tapping them would be easy, as would filtering it at its intake, so *why* are they pulling it, dirt and all, and is it the *water* they want, or what’s *in* the water. Trace elements? Mud? Microscopic life? But, more than that, *what are they doing with it?* And, also, *who are* ***they***, because *no one* around today could’ve built this, yet it’s very evidently *here*. Isn’t it all just *fascinating?*”

Vi stared at me, with a somewhat confused yet amused look on her face.

“What?” I asked, looking around. Had I said something odd?

“Nothing, just. . .” she trailed off, walking past me, tapping me on the chest with a single huffing laugh. “Come on, science-guy. We need to get going.”

“O-kay?” I replied, getting another laugh from her, sending one last look around the room before following her out, moving up next to her when we started to get to the edge of the ‘swamp’, as I was *technically* our guide out of here, and would be the one who would know how *not* to lead us into a trap.

Probably.

<ACE>

*I* might not be wanting to walk us into a trap, but my **Talent**, apparently, had other ideas.

*“I’m not liking this,*” Vi commented tightly, as another creature scuttered across our path, metallic carapace glinting in the chemtech lights, the hallways having given way to a series of chambers, and, personally, *I’d rather be back in the hallways.*

Yes, they were rather tight, and our way *could* be blocked, but it was a lot easier to keep track of *two* directions then *all* of them. And I did mean *all,* as one metal millipede shot out of a hole in the floor a couple dozen feet away, stopped long enough to stare at us with dark eyes, then took off to run through the doorway we’d entered this room from.

Which meant they *could* go were we were, they just were choosing *not* to.

“Not the biggest fan of it myself, but the other option was worse,” I muttered, tracking two on the ceiling that were slowly following us, silently, but my **Talent** was at least pulling its weight in telling me where everything *was*. “Are you *sure* you don’t want me to drop you off back Home for a few minutes?”

The brawler, walking with balanced steps next to me, taut as a bowstring, visibly considered that, before shaking her head. “No. They look like they might be smart.”

As much as I didn’t want to agree with her, these things *did* seem to be acting with far more than insectile purpose, which meant my **Defense** was merely an *advantage*, not a protection. “Yeah, I can see that.” And it didn’t help that my **Talent** was telling me *not* to try and talk with them, but just to continue onwards.

The chambers themselves were. . . *interesting*, and the kind of thing I’d *like* to poke around, given the opportunity, a runic array inscribed on one chamber’s ceilings, a number of mechanical arms contained within its circle, and, from the shape of the room and what I *assumed* were drainage pipes, it was used to do *something,* but the occasional stump of wood or other material, long since rotted and degraded, only gave the barest hint of its original purpose, a bit like how the Colosseum of Rome *wasn’t* the ruins you could see.

I’d fought in a faithful recreation of it as part of a seminar that Caeser had given on tactics, ‘dying’ in the process, as had almost everyone else in that class, the magics on the place keeping all damage nonlethal, and I’d understood about one thing in *three* that he’d talked about, but I’d picked up a good bit, though the man’s overreliance on his own, admittedly impressive, charisma had been a lesson *of* its own, when one kept in mind how he’d *died.*

So, this place had obviously done *something,* before it’d been infested, but now?

Not a clue.

I’d recognized *some* of the runes, one for *strength/integrity/wholeness*, one for *cut/sever/division*, and one for *bind/merge/whole*, with ‘wholeness’ being *completely* different than ‘whole’, but some of them seemed downright *contradictory*, confusing the heck out of me.

I really *was* fingerpainting, when it came to this magic stuff, and was now coming across half destroyed murals, with not even a *clue* of how they’d been achieved.

And it didn’t help that, paradoxically, the air had suddenly started to feel *heavier* as we rose in the last few minutes.

It was something I wish I could focus on, but, *hey, look, more metal millipedes!*

“*Jayce?”* Vi called, clearly worried, glancing my way, crimson gauntlets opening and closing nervously.

Putting question after question to my **Talent**, in case I’d missed something, *every* permutation said the same thing. *Keep walking. Look but don’t engage.* And, surprisingly, *Keep you companion in view.*

“This is what we’re supposed to do,” I told her, my sword and gun out, which, weirdly, was *exactly* what I was being directed to do, down to subtly flexing my hand on the blade, *clearly* displaying it as a weapon.

Ruined chamber after ruined chamber was passed through, the number of metal millipedes growing, until there were *dozens* hanging around us, watching, waiting, and then, as one, *they charged.*

I had to lunge to grab Vi, as she got ready to leap forward at them, the girl sending a wide eyed look of betrayal my way, adrenaline pumping, and I *knew* I likely couldn’t stop her completely, but, after a moment, she stopped pulling away, as the snake-like insects scuttered forward, faster than we could run, before stopping a mere two-dozen feet away, a single second’s travel for them, and. . . circled?

Yes, they spun about us, counterclockwise, more and more until it was a solid ring of shiny carapaces, then *two*, the creatures clicking in an almost musical pattern, until they stopped, and rose, all of them staring at us, compound insectile eyes all regarding us coldly.

Two of the closest metal millipedes, one on either side of us, moved forward, only a few feet, and, with my **Talent** feeding me instructions, I *understood.*

“Vi? We’re being *challenged*. Lethal force is perfectly fine,” I snapped off. “But if they escape into the circle, *don’t pursue*, or they’ll try and rip you to pieces.”

“I, *what?*” the girl asked, as our two anthropoidal foes buzzed, starting to get, well, *antsy.*

“Warrior culture strength check. Like a fistfight in the lanes, but worse. *Go,*” I ordered, stepping forward, facing off against my foe. It. . . bowed?

I returned the gesture, and then, with a hiss, it charged me, and I brought my pistol up, snapping off two shots, but, *of course,* the 9mm bullets bounced *right* off the creature’s curved carapace. *How the hell am I gonna make this work?* I wondered, but my **Talent** said I *could,* so I focused, watching as it closed the distance, then leapt forward, bringing my blade up, not trying to meet the creature’s momentum, but using it to catch and deflect its charge, metallic mandibles scraping the steel, gun pressed up to a joint in its back, with just enough clearance for the bullet, as I fired again.

And I *cut the creature in half.*

*what.*

Both halves turned and jumped at me, even as Vi cried out, *“Jayce!?”* and I saw her struggling with two separate millipedes, only one was a *fourth* the size of the original, while the other was two-thirds. Though they differed in size, however, they *both* had mouths full of wiggling, slicing, mandibles and glittering eyes that stared balefully at my partner.

In my distraction, both of *my* opponents latched onto my legs, but, while they tried to *bite* something fierce, the inserts in my pants distributed the force, and the spidersilk held up against their probing teeth, which were thankfully not the *insane* amount of sharp that was needed to cut the weave.

*“Hold the little one up!”* I ordered, sighting, hoping *this* would go better, and pulled the trigger, the gun bucking in my hand, but my aim was true, well true *enough,* and while I missed the eye I was aiming for, I hit the next one over, the creature shrieking as it stopped trying to pull itself down Vi’s arm, the outside of her jacket cut up, *again,* and instead reversed course.

Violetta, surprised, let it go, as it skittered past the circle of watching metal millipedes, which let her refocus on the *larger* foe. Or, as I was realizing, the *three* bugs, with a hundred legs each, stuck together, but their digits weren’t the same setup that *centipedes* had legs, each of their individual limbs stumpy in a way that *would’ve* almost been cute if they weren’t trying to *fucking kill me.*

Giving up on my shins, both of my attackers started to climb up my legs, my face exposed, with *surprisingly* secure holds, as I was forced to use my sword to crowbar one off, while the other I just shoved my gun at, shooting it in its buggy face.

The second one *didn’t* die, but still reared back, falling away, coming apart only for the two halves to just switch places, the uninjured one taking ‘point’.

Thankfully, while this was going on I *wasn’t* waiting around, and fully removed my other attacker, which skuttled about, before outright *jumping* for me, like some kind of demented spider, which I dodged, only in time to realize that it was *heading for Vi.*

*“****HIT HERE HEAD HEIGHT HARD!!!****”* I commanded, throat straining with the force of my **Voice**, and she jolted, turning and punching without thinking, putting her *all* into the hit, and striking with a *crunch* that not only struck true, but sent the creature flying through the air past my head, as *I* charged, her obeyance opening *herself* for attack by the three-part millipede.

Slamming my gun in it’s holster, I ordered, ***“FORWARD!”*** as I stepped into the space she vacated, *thrusting* my blade with both hands into the creature’s gullet, the weight slamming into me as its body flopped, and, taking the blow as the rest of its body hit me, I kicked out, pushing it away and tried to flick it off my blade, but, with a loud *snap*, my sword broke, leaving me just the handle and a sliver of sharp metal.

The front section of my opponent broke off, skittering away drunkenly, but I didn’t stop my attack, *very* glad my boots had reinforced toes as I slammed the *hardest* kick I could muster into the combined two, flipping it and dropping myself down on it with the sharpened fragment, stabbing into the front-one’s leg joints, black blood spurting out.

Before I could stab again, the creature shrieking, the back one let go, flipped over, then grabbed its compatriot and pushed it forward, *both* of them disappearing beyond the circle, which tightened up around it.

Turning, I saw that Vi was wailing on the last combined creature, the shell cracking as it twitched, before it, *too* was pulled away. She started to follow it, but caught herself before I could say a **word**, and looked my way, eyes dipping to my stained, broken blade, then back to my face as I stood and retreated to the middle of the circle.

Pinging my Talent, it just said to *wait*, before, as one, the metal millipedes dipped their foremost sections, turned, and *left,* only the spattering of dark ichor on my hilt, and on the ground, showing they’d been here at all.

There was a clicking to the side, and one of the creatures popped out of a wall, pulled a lever, then disappeared, a hidden doorway opening and revealing. . . *stairs?*

*Go!* my **Talent** ordered, so I started to walk, Vi falling in step with me a moment later. “*You hurt?”* I asked the girl, wincing, my throat a little raw.

“Not really. Just a scratch. *You?”* she asked back.

“*Same. And my throat.* ***Sorry***,” I apologized, each word stinging. “*It was coming for you, and-*”

“It’s fine,” she interrupted, with a shake of her head. “I, that was *messed*, Jayce, but. . . you could *always* do that?”

Wiggling my sword in a *maybe* gesture as we reached the stairs, which went up, and up, and *up,* I replied. “*Backlash sucks. Could train it up. Don’t want to.*”

Violetta considered that, then nodded. “I, yeah. I get it. Heh, speaking of messed, what *were* those things?”

Grimacing I tried to respond, which caused *her* to wince. “Right, sorry,” she apologized. “Don’t talk. But were those things made of *metal?”*

I shrugged, and held up a hesitant thumb up as we both climbed the stairs. Miming reaching down in their direction, I made a grasping motion, then cut the imaginary sample, narrowing my eyes as I held up the theoretical piece.

“Ya think so, but you’d have to have one to see?” she checked, and I nodded. “Right. Well, go up a bit more then take a break?”

I nodded emphatically, and she laughed, giving me a light punch as she commented, “Ya know, you’re a *lot* easier to deal with when you’re quiet.”

At my flat look, she just laughed harder.

<ACE>

After a quick break, grabbing another copy of my ‘rib-sword’ from the armory, and some soothing tea, I was good to go once more, the same supernatural method that tore it up responsible for putting it back together, but *stronger.* If I was *really* a masochist, and wanted to pull a Purple Man, I’d work it like I was working the *rest* of my body, but, while I *liked* having the capability, if only for situations like I’d *just needed* it for, actively seeking to improve my ability to supernaturally influence the minds of others was a bridge too far for me.

With full stocks of bullets, and a single ‘grenade’, wrapped in *saran* wrap to avoid accidental detonation, we were ready to go, giving Piper a wave as we stepped back into Under-Zaun, and climbed the staircase again.

Up and up we went, having gone up two *dozen* flights before taking our break, which *seemed* like a lot, but was really just the height of the trashtapus’ chamber, *not* including the similarly sized ‘funnel’ chamber above it. We passed door after door, and opened one that **Wild Talent** okayed just to see what was on the other side. It revealed a ruined workshop, long corroded pieces of metal that looked like tools *everywhere*, and a broken chemfluid pipe in the back, streaming glowing green fluid into a large pool on the floor, which ran out into the next chamber and had gathered into a small *lake*, but was slowly flowing away.

Everything was fine until something *splashed* in the lake of poison, and my instincts told me the time to sight-see was *over* if I had a guest, so we quickly retreated and closed the door back up, contining upwards.

Another *forty* stories later, we had to take another break, as, while we *could* press on, we needed to be ready fight at *any* moment. Taking a few minutes to sit on the stairs, we both relaxed, somewhat, listening, and watching, but this stairway seemed unused, the doors we passed covered in a thin layer of dust.

“So, Violetta,” I said, gesturing to the far wall, which had some kind of writing layered over it. “You know what that says?”

The brawler scoffed, “I thought *you* were the one that went to the fancy school, Jayce *Talis*.”

“Well *Ms. Vandottir,*” I replied with fake primness, “I thought, with you being a *native* to this area, you might know. Because I have *no* fucking clue.”

“. . . really?” she asked, skeptical.

“*Really,”* I agreed, looking at the oddly shaped squiggles. We were, strangely enough, *speaking* English, but the writing system I got, courtesy of Jayce’s memories, was almost *Coptic*, the middle stage between hieroglyphs and Arabic, though a bit more ‘loopy’ and circular than that. Meanwhile ancient Shuriman was *actual* hieroglyphs, while the modern version was closer to Arabic, and then there was *Noxus*, where you had *both* Ur-Nox and Va-Nox, the old and new version of both, which had their *own* writing systems, which looked almost *malignant,* and then there was *Damacia* that had its *own* two versions, old and new, which were all ‘runes but not really’, and. . .

*Shit was complicated,* to say the least, but ‘Piltovan’ was the trade language, so it worked everywhere, and. . . well, I knew a *number* of languages, as did a *lot* of people, and my brain pretty much just auto-translated it all to English, except for the *actually* magical languages, like Sylvan and Necril, which required me to consciously shift gears.

“I know over a dozen languages, and two of them are *literally magical*, but I have *no idea* what that says,” I finally remarked, waving to the squiggly sigils. “I’m *guessing* the stuff on the left is a number, as it’s been shifting as we go up, but it might be base *thirteen* instead of base ten, which is just. . . *why?”*

“Wait, you know *magic* languages?” Vi checked.

Giving her a confused look, I replied, “You *saw* me speak Necril to the Banshee. I also speak Sylvan, or Yordle. Honestly, I should probably look into picking up a few more. With my *vast amounts of free time,”* I sighed, shaking my head, “But there’s *significant* bleedover with the locals, so for all I know the Void speaks *Aklo*, or maybe Abyssal, and *someone* probably speaks Celestial, which should be a good ‘get out of awkward free’ card if I find myself anywhere near Mt. Targon.”

“You. . . you can learn *magical languages?* Just like *that?”* she questioned, and I stared at her flatly. “Right. Right. Spirit. But,” she mulled it over. “Can I learn?”

“Didn’t take you for one of those ‘academic’ types,” I remarked, with a small smile.

That got me a glare. “It’s not like you making us learn *math* and stuff. I just want to know what people are saying. There’s nothing academic-y about that,” she replied, more than a little defensively, waving a hand dismissively.

“There’s entire *fields of academic study* based on language,” I pointed out, “But *sure*. To be honest, I was planning on teaching you both *Necril*, at least, in case I have to deal with another co-worker, but the language primers are freely available to all Company Agents, and so you can get them too. Just be a little careful with using them, as they’ve got. . . *weight*.”

Waving at the sigils in front of us, I returned to my original topic, “But *this?* Not a fucking clue. It’s some regional bullshit, *possibly* lost, like, well, to follow the *local* naming scheme I’d call it Ur-Piltovan, except for the fact that there *was* no ‘old Piltover’, and if I say ‘Zaunian’ that’s just Plitovan with a different writing system, while, *this* seems like something *entirely* different, or maybe it’s not, and you could talk it like we are now, and it’s just the *writing* system that’s different, and. . . I’ve got nothing.”

Vi stared at me. “That’s a whole lotta words for ‘I don’t know’.”

“it’s a very *specific kind* of ‘I don’t know’,” I defended, “But yeah, I don’t know. And was hoping that *you* would.”

“*Nope,”* she smirked, shaking her head, and getting up. “But we should get moving. Who knows, maybe these stairs go all the way to the surface?”

Standing up, I sighed, “Well, now that you’ve *jinxed us,* it certainly won’t.”

Pausing for a moment, she bluffed, “You don’t *know* that!”

“Nope, but I can guess,” I chuckled, moving to the next flight. “Now let’s see how much higher we can go before we have to deal with *more* of this place’s craziness.”