**ACE 18**

Needless to say, the Councilors were interested in what Viktor and I were doing.

The presentation after that was a *bit* less over the top, explaining what the Zero-Gate was, and what it represented, while also allowing the Councilors who wanted to the option of, with careful use of a harness, experience zero-gravity.

Heimerdinger went three times.

The Dean was *also* appreciative of the fact that we’d fashioned safety gear, including a Yordle sized harness, congratulating Viktor for it, who then tried to defer the praise. He did so mostly because it *hadn’t* been his idea, but mine, though he did a good job of just seeming bashful, which the old academic ate up without a second thought.

The only one who ended up refusing was Bolbock, who hadn’t changed his anti-magic stance in the last ten minutes, while the others enjoyed the practical demonstration, Mrs. Kiramman somehow managing to float in a *dignified* way, after having watched how I moved, and how Hoskel, the fat one, had a blast but moved with all the grace of a drunk, retarded hog.

“This could be used for construction,” Shoola noted, her neckpiece rigid, so it stayed still even without gravity, “Especially in more vertical spaces.”

I remembered my Patron’s warning that the woman was an outspoken supporter of Zaunites, or as much as she *could* be on the Council, and nodded. “Yes. It’s a negation effect to make sure there aren’t problems with the translocation process of the spell I’ve been trying to deconstruct, but if we can pin it down, there’s *quite* a few uses for the zero-gravity field.”

Thankfully, with the preliminary work I’d done, revealing that the Proto-Matrix was meant to replicate a Mage’s spell wasn’t seen as me ‘attempting the Arcane’, but as the creation of a mold to match a particularly complex tool’s construction. Well, Councilor Bolbock might’ve still seen it that way, but the. . . man? He sounded male. Either way, the thin nonhuman didn’t make a fuss over it, though he was very much giving me the silent treatment.

I wasn’t sure if I’d ever recover.

“But, if it’s a door, where is it going?” Councilor Salo, the dandy, asked.

“Right now? Right here,” I told him, motioning to Viktor, who tossed a rod trailing a bit of string towards the singularity floating high in the air, powering the entire zero-g field. The others all watched with bated breath as it approached, a small arc of mana-lightning licking out from the globe, the test projectile glitching slightly before it was drawn into the miniature star and then ejected out the other end, moving no faster then it had before, the string trailing it in the exact same configuration as when it entered. “Think of it like building a doorway in the middle of a room, not set into any walls. You can go through it, yes, but it doesn’t actually *go* anywhere.”

“Then what’s the point?” Hoskel questioned. “The flying is fun, though. Maybe seal off the. . .” he waved towards the singularity.

“What’s the *point?*” Heimerdinger echoed, offended. “Do you have no *curiosity?* No *vision?*”

On one hand, I was glad the Dean was trying to stand up for me, on the other, I wish he’d *stop helping.* “**I’m sure it’s not that,**” I interceded, as the fat man scowled at being treated like a child. “As it is now, *yes*, the gate isn’t terribly useful but. . . think of it like having a ship in port, versus one that’s travelling somewhere. Once we get a handle on the positioning mechanism, we could send that bar halfway across Runeterra, though the mana requirements would almost certainly be higher. As it now, it takes over a *hundred* ‘transitions’ before the gate will run out of energy and close itself, but **we’re *just* getting started on this.**”

I turned to include the others, “No, with time, the size of what could be sent could be increased. We wouldn’t be sending a bit of metal on a string, or a table, but an *airship*. And we wouldn’t be moving it five feet, we’d five thousand *miles*.”

“But, would that be safe?” Heimerdinger asked, suddenly wary.

I nodded, “The use it’s based on is meant to transport *people*, so I wouldn’t see why not. Mind you, we’re going to test it to heck and back, hence why we’re careful to make sure that no-*one* touches it, but after we can confirm it’s safe, like I’m fairly certain it is, **that is a possibility**. And it *would* have to be an airship, not a naval vessel, because it would be far better to aim *above* a port, and possibly miss by a few hundred feet, then to try and put it down on solid ground, or the surface of an ocean, directly.”

Mel gave me a measuring look. “You’ve obviously put a great deal of thought into this,” she remarked.

*Nope, I’m just cheating,* I thought, smiling in a ‘I’ve been found out’ way. “I mean, I wouldn’t want to waste the Council’s time on something that *wouldn’t* be useful. And this *will* take some time to properly test,” I warned, nodding to Heimerdinger, even as I saw the wheels of greed turning in the heads of some of the others. “But that’s also why the flight effect is something I’d be wary of using on airships, especially any who use a Hexgate, as I’d worry that the doubling of the zero-gravity effects might interact badly. Eventually we might see that it’s safe, possibly, but not any time soon.”

“And if you had a larger lab? More materials? Others working under you?” Mel questioned, clearly testing me, though I was sure it would’ve gone over original-Jayce’s head.

“Eventually, *sure*, but Viktor and I are going to be working on getting the basics down for a bit. At *least* six months,” I smiled, referencing her original suggestion for my time-limit to produce results, and I waved away her offer of more, which would of course come with greater expectations. “I wouldn’t be exaggerating to say that Hextech is an *entirely* new branch of research, and one that we’re going to have to find the workings of on our own. Like the first people who discovered how steam could be directed, or electricity channeled.” *Or how Chemtech could flow,* I mentally added, but mentioning the Zaunite invention would do me *no* favors here.

In truth, I might need a secondary lab to work on that alchemical wonder, but *god* knows I had time to get to it, and pushing forward *that* front in the eternal march of progress could wait. At the very least, I could run experiments at Home with Powder. The main structure of the building was reconfigurable, and even if it wasn’t enough, it shouldn’t be too hard to set up another lab farther away from my Home, and make sure we weren’t sleeping in the blast radius.

Walking the line between possibilities and promises wasn’t exactly easy, but I thought I was doing a fairly good job as the presentation continued, though Mel did through me for a bit of a loop when she asked, “Could these be built in *other* nations? You mentioned that you believe the trip would be one way, so some would say the next obvious step would be to create a second to send ships *back*.”

“Yes, in theory, but in practice. . . it almost certainly won’t be that easy,” I admitted. “The proto-matrix can create *this* Zero-Gate, and we could automate the gate-creation process, but to handle things with more mass will near-certainly require a dedicated array. Something larger, possibly building sized if you want to send a ship to Demacia or Targon. A return array would need to be the same size and complexity but, they wouldn’t be *tunnels*, with a set entrance and exit, they’d be. . . honestly *catapults* would be closer, only *not* violent. With a single array, it would work almost as a second Sun Gate for us, concentrating trade to come here and shave days or weeks of a journey, maybe more. A second array, however, could send ships anywhere *just* as easily as the first could.”

I laughed, “That’s the *point* of this after all. That *none* of the creations we seek to make are personal, unique, and that they *are* reproducible. However, while **I trust the Council wouldn’t abuse the advantage they represent**, well. . .” I hesitated, wondering if I should go ahead and say it.

“Well?” Mel questioned, taking the choice away.

I looked directly at the daughter of a Noxian Warlord, and said, “Where an airship full of goods could be sent, so could an airship full of *soldiers*. Or *bombs.* **Piltover is dedicated to progress, and peace.** Other nations. . . are *not.*”

With half of the Councilors, I had them on economic grounds, the other half, moral ones. I wanted to suggest that they lie and claim that the Hexgate could *only* be built in Piltover, but to suggest that *they* lie would also, in turn, suggest that *I* might be lying. It was beyond obvious that *of course I could be,* but many people just did not think in those directions, and bringing to their attention that I *was* someone who did would, once again, do me no favors.

“Well, *I* certainly have some possibilities to consider,” Mel noted, looking around at the others, who all nodded, even, to my surprise, Bolbock, though it was only once, and it was a small one at that. “Consider yourself supported, Jayce Talis,” she announced with a smirk, like a particularly smug cat. “I’m *certain* that I speak for the Council when I say we look forward to *whatever* you come up with next.”

The other took their leave, but as they did so, I approached my patron, asking her, “Councilor Kiramman, are we still on for what you suggested?”

Doing so caught the attention of the *other* Councilors, which was intentional, and, from the older woman’s slight smile, she realized *exactly* what I was doing. “I believe we are. Thursday?”

“Sounds lovely,” I replied with a smile of my own.

“I shall see you then,” she stated. “I’m sure Caitlyn will be quite pleased.”

*Going in hard, aren’t you?* I wondered, nodding at that. “Tell her the feeling is mutual.”

The dark-haired woman’s smile widened, and she returned my nod, turning her back on me and striding out with a measured, borderline imperious gait, several of the other Councilors pretending they hadn’t just been eavesdropping on us as she did so.

Publicly mentioning my connection to the heiress was a bit more than I’d expected her to do, though the fact that Caitlyn and I had spent a good about of time together hadn’t exactly been a *secret*. Then again, having us two hang out and having her mother openly acknowledge that fact were two *completely* different things.

Then again, I suppose I *had* been flirting a bit with Mel.

It was nothing that was beyond the bounds of politeness, but it was in those grey zones that politics *thrived*. Soon enough, they were gone, and Viktor came to land beside me, at the edge of the null gravity zone. “Your ‘arrangement’ with the Councilor?” he inquired.

“Those lessons I told you about,” I replied easily. “Contingent on us impressing the Council.” Turning to face him, I shrugged, “I’m pretty sure we have. What do you think?”

Viktor stared at me, before shaking his head.

“You, are a *very* dangerous man.”

I snorted, shaking my head right back. “Partner, you’re going to be *right there with me*. You aren’t used to being in the spotlight, I can tell as much, but it’ll be a skill you’ll pick up, just like any other.”

“I, I don’t need to,” he tried to defer.

However, I just gave him a flat stare. “If you’d rather not, I’ll respect that, but ***You need to learn how***. I don’t mind taking the lead, but, if this develops how I think it will, it *won’t* just be the two of us. Preferring not to do something is fine, but being *incapable* of doing something is a *weakness*.” I smiled. “I’m sorry if this sounds arrogant-”

“You? Arrogant? *No*,” Viktor jibed good-naturedly. “It’s not like you just talked to the *entire Council* as if you were their equal.”

Lifting an eyebrow, I replied, “But I am. And *so are you,* even if we haven’t done enough to garner the sorts of attention that we will eventually accrue.” Shaking my head one last time, I shrugged, “Like I said, *this might sound arrogant,* but both of us are the types of people who *change the world,* Viktor. We are great men, though we aren’t there quite *yet*.” I cast a glance towards the door, where the Council had just left.

**“And great men can’t afford to be weak.”**

<ACE>

With the proof of concept done, we switched gears to trying to do exactly what I’d told the Council we would, and tried isolate the anti-gravity effect which was. . . well, it wasn’t *easy* that was for certain. The Proto-Matrix let me ape what Ryze had done, but I didn’t actually *understand* any of it. The fact that I created a *Zero Distance*-Gate was ample proof of that, essentially writing in a command I’d seen before into the DOS-prompt of the universe, and then something had *happened,* but I was effectively a magical Script Kiddie, and I needed to be a magical *engineer*.

In a way, each rune was a word, and the completed set made sentence, but I *didn’t know what I was saying,* which meant we had to break down what each of the four component runes *actually meant*, and then, from there, try and build new sentences, in a way that, if we said something like ‘tear space here’, we could make sure we *wouldn’t* be ‘here’. I didn’t even know if that was possible, but I knew that Mjolnir-esque ‘it doesn’t weigh anything for *me’* gloves were on the table, as was Jayce’s hammer, so a full null-gravity field *probably* was possible, but *figuring it out* was gonna take a *while.*

We’d worked until sunset, at which point I’d called it quits, even as Viktor *very* clearly wanted to keep going, but was unable to argue with my statement of, “It’ll all be here tomorrow. Go home, have a good meal, relax a little, and we’ll be back at it in the morning.”

“And if my relaxing is forming new hypotheses?” he’d questioned.

“Then you do you,” I’d shrugged, “But it won’t be working in the *lab,* so it should help replenish your stocks of mental energy. See you tomorrow.”

From there I’d swung by my parents’ minor manor, my mother relieved to see me, and I spun her a yarn about having been at a different location, letting her assume it was another property the Kiramman’s owned, like my old apartment was, but also that she was free to come visit me at the Academy if she needed something, mostly so she didn’t start looking for my new ‘address’.

She made sure I had dinner, and indulged her, eating with the woman and talking about my meeting with the Council, something she was all a twitter about, and I *knew* she’d disseminate the broad strokes of into the Piltoverian gossip network in *days*, something that would, in turn, raise her *own* position in the lower circle of nobility she hung around in.

After that, though, it was time for me to move onto the *next* step, which was to start my next set of plans. Insertion ended up ending at M, or close enough, which meant it was time for *secondary* objectives, and that meant it was time to go back to *Zaun.*

Changing in my childhood room, I dressed down to not be *instantly* noticed and slipped out, making my way across Piltover easily, now that night had truly fallen. As before, the bridge was deserted, and this time I took the Bathysphere down, in no rush, and future Caitlyn was right, it *did* have a nice view, slowly shifting from Neo-Victorian to *Neon-*Victorian aesthetics, harsh Chemtech lights behind dirty windows reminding me of nothing so much as my decent into the depths on my way to Stillwater Prison.

*And probably as dangerous,* I mused, keeping my eyes peeled as I stepped out of the vehicle, and made my way into the Lanes. I was *also* glad I’d strapped on a knife before I’d left this morning, hidden inside my vest while I was at the Academy, now up my jacket sleeve. If things went *really* bad I’d gate out, but the blade would give me the space, and time, I’d need to do so.

*Note to self, armor the rest of my clothing.* For the foreseeable future, I was going to be a ‘squishy wizard’, as the kind of training that, for instance, Demacian elites went through took *years*, and even then, they were still easily killable with the right tools, it was just harder to do so.

Walking through the stinking subterranean streets, there was an underlying tension that there *hadn’t* been before, but that made sense. Without Vander to make everyone play nice, the true nature of a lot of the movers and shakers of Zaun were coming out to play.

There wasn’t anything *inherent* about the location that made things this way, but the culture here was one of violence, selfishness, and short-sighted excess that Powder and Violet’s father had been keeping in check. With time, and a dozen more people like him, it was completely possible that he could’ve reformed the Lanes, even with the pressures from above to keep them squalid, desperate, and tearing each other down instead of lashing out against their Piltoverian masters. But while Benzo might’ve been the same kind of person Vander was, with them *both* dead in a single night, and their tenure not enough to shift the cultural paradigms into a new alignment, it was going to snap back to a lower level of civilization in a form of societal entropy.

And that was *before* Silco started tipping the scales, to rule the Lanes as a crime-boss, instead of the revolutionary paragon that his predecessor was.

But that would take time, and it’d been less than a *week* since I’d arrived. For now, things were just tense, the foundation gone and the house of cards increasingly unstable, but not yet fallen. And for that, I needed my *own* finger on the pulse of Zaun, and a way to try and tip the scales in the *other* direction. But that, just like my Hextech research, this was not something I was going to accomplish in a single night*.*

But that didn’t mean I couldn’t get started.

Looking around, there were a lot more openly aggressive people on the prowl than Jayce’s memories indicated there should be, hard men and women, many with visible blades, almost like they were on patrol. If I had to guess, they were likely a gang that had already formed, and had taken over the main thoroughfare.

I didn’t know *how* things would develop in the original timeline, only how they’d turn *out*, with Silco having a stranglehold over Zaun, encouraging his people’s worst traits, as long as they obeyed him, and likely *so* that they obeyed him. Well, I knew how things would turn out if I *hadn’t* changed the timeline, but the main point was Zaun likely underwent a *number* of transformations in the seven years of the timeskip, and what I was seeing now was merely the first.

Looking at them, trying not to *look* like I was looking, I tried to pick out gang colors, or a symbol, or anything really, but they didn’t have any *one* thing in common. The closest I got was that a number of them had particularly long knives, while an equally large amount of them wore what looked like a shell-casing as a pendant, but neither identifier was universal enough to be an allegiance-signifier, and the two ‘groups’ often mixed, moving together, some people wearing *both,* so it wasn’t *two* different gangs, unless they were *far* more amicable than most such groups normally were, especially newly emergent ones that were trying to establish their identities.

Regardless, they didn’t give me trouble, though several of them did glance in my direction, one almost seeming to double-take, but they didn’t say a word to me, and we got out of each other’s way while walking.

Soon enough, I was where I needed to be, while also pretending that I *wasn’t*.

“Hey there, *handsome*,” the *trashiest* looking Yordle I’d ever seen purred, as I stopped, looking at her nervously. “You busy? You *want* to be?” the woman cooed, which wasn’t as attractive as she obviously *thought* it was, as she smiled coquettishly, and I noted that she at least had all her teeth. The whore was *old*, skin wrinkled and sagging, in a dress which did her *no* favors, and with so much makeup it looked painted on.

In short, she was *exactly* what I was looking for.