Being ‘jarred’ was risky, but Ria was no stranger to risk. She had gotten into sticky situations before, and it had always worked out, which she knew was a dangerous thing, because it built up confidence that nothing *could* go wrong, or that every situation was recoverable. Harmon hadn’t liked the plan, but he knew her well enough to know that argument would just make her dig her heels in unless he could come up with something she hadn’t already considered.

When she came back to life, she was armed and ready, wearing a modified version of her standard dungeoneering loadout. There were, she wagered, a very limited number of people in the world who could have gotten the jump on her, and most of them were her friends. Still, being unjarred meant coming into an unknown situation, and it was *possible* that she’d be immediately facing down trained adversaries who were ready and waiting to slit her throat — though if they wanted her dead, and were already deep into her extradimensional space, all they would have to do was to smash the jars.

When she came to, there was no threat, only five children looking at her expectantly, as though *she* was the danger. She lowered the two force fields, let her sword fall to her side, and undilated time down to normal, so they wouldn’t just see her as a blur of motion. She checked her diagnostic entads, largely concerned with the time, and was mildly shocked to see that it had been four days. The shock faded fast though, because it wasn’t the sort of thing that was good to dwell on. Though she didn’t need diagnostics for it, she was pleased to note that she wasn’t dead.

“We’re safe,” said Alfric. “For now.”

“It’s my first time through,” said Ria. “Yours as well?”

Alfric nodded.

“Good, then we don’t need to deal with disclosure,” said Ria with a smile. “We’re five minutes off from the witching hour. That’s good, it means there’s much less of a chance that we’ll be retroactively ambushed.” She looked at Verity. “How has it been?”

“Four days,” said Verity, swallowing.

“No, not how long, I know it’s been four days, how has it *been*?” she asked. “You’ve been treated well?”

“Very well,” said Verity. She seemed self-conscious. “Better than ever before in my life.”

Ria regarded her. She was in different clothes, and they seemed like *new* clothes, a blouse with a dark blue vest and a fair amount of cleavage with a lighter skirt, slit up the side. She was clean and styled, in spite of the lateness, and it was fairly clear that the girl hadn’t suffered much if any hardship.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like for you to relate the events of the last few days,” said Ria. “Use as much detail as you can, particularly about the layout.”

This took some time, and Ria stayed silent for as much of it as possible, which helped encourage the other children to stay silent as well. Verity started somewhat guarded and uncertain, but grew more enthusiastic as time went on, letting her enjoyment of the place seep into her descriptions of the places and people. When she got to their revival, some of that enthusiasm dampened. She had done well, overall, Ria thought, not giving anything away, pulling them at the right time and place, being cautious about what she revealed. They were late, but they appeared to have maintained secrecy. Verity had been careful to use the book a few times, for the sake of making it look like it was just an entad that she'd brought along for storage.

Ria, of course, had some pointed questions. "Have you made contact with anyone?"

"I saw Lin," said Verity. "There's been no sign of Kell, but I haven't found a way to ask that wouldn't arouse suspicion. Kali lives in the palace, but I didn't speak with her."

"Not asking after someone you personally knew *could* arouse suspicion," said Ria. "But I don't fault you, you were never trained as a spy."

"What are we doing now?" asked Alfric, turning toward her.

"Escaping, to prove it can be done and get the details on what's been happening in the last four days," said Ria. "Then I'll reset and we'll get to work."

"We want to burn a whole day on that?" asked Mizuki.

"Want to?" asked Ria. "No. Need to? Yes. I need to assure Alfric's father that I'm alive and have things handled."

"Alright," nodded Alfric. "And we shouldn't burn a day with you in here and Verity on the outside?"

Ria hesitated. "An entire day where I do nothing but get a report from her?" asked Ria. "I … can see the sense in it. But no, I don't think that level of caution is necessary. We also need to be cautious of the intricacies of the priority system. If Cate has set up methods for it, she might be able to send a message back." She let out a breath. Alfric could seem so *mature* sometimes, in ways that made him hard for her to relate to. She worried that he'd been raised wrong, but with six children, she'd learned that they were simply people with their own personalities. It was hard, sometimes, to see that.

"Should we go with you?" asked Alfric.

"What would be best would be for the four of you to stay in here, saying nothing, possibly re-jarred," said Ria. She turned to Verity. "And you should go back out, as though nothing had happened."

"Alright," said Verity. "I'll do that now. I need my sleep anyway." She picked up the lute and hesitated. "Shall I strum you out?"

“Now, please,” said Ria. She looked at Alfric though. “If you’re bored, jar yourself.” She turned back to Verity. “And if a day passes and for whatever reason I’m not back, you unjar them, then all of you flee. Leave the rest of these people behind.”

She hoped that the children would deal with it appropriately, if it came to that. She trusted Alfric, at least.

They unnested themselves from the various extradimensional spaces, and as soon as she was on the ‘ground floor’ of the demiplane, Ria began using the magical device that had been prepared for them. She had tested it three times before they’d put this plan into motion, using a friend’s demiplane, and she prayed that it would work here — a prayer to Kesbin, for help with escape. She was in the demiplane itself for only moments, the dark bedroom that apparently now belonged to Verity, and then she was in the woods, still whole. She’d worried that she would end up in the crystal cage Verity had described, which would be a minor disaster, but the device worked as advertised, pushing her through the barrier between worlds.

She ended up somewhere in Tarbin, her map told her, but it was the work of a moment to make her way back to Dondrian, teleporting and then leaving an entad behind to teleport her a second time, more permanently.

Harmon was waiting for her.

“We’re safe,” said Ria.

“It’s my second time through,” said Harmon. He hesitated for a moment, then wrapped her in a hug. There was a tension to him that didn’t seem to go away, even as their embrace went on.

“Let me have it,” said Ria.

“The argument, or the facts?” he asked.

“The facts first, please,” said Ria.

“A day after picking up Verity, the very last thing that Cate did was to put out information and release memories,” said Harmon. “She claims to have relocated — she never says that there’s a demiplane, but it’s more or less the only option that makes sense — along with roughly a thousand people who went of their own free will. Because she released memories en masse, we also know of a number of people who she approached that said no, and their statements are still being collected and collated. I imagine that this was her plan all along, but it means that there’s very unlikely to be much national response, *especially* given that most of the people she invited to her demiplane were relative outcasts, disconnected from their communities in some way. So far as we know, she hasn’t stepped foot out of her demiplane since then.”

“So it’s up to me to dig up the dirt,” said Ria.

Harmon had a pronounced frown. “The argument was about whether you should extract,” he replied. “You felt that you needed to stay, to gather information, to confront this woman, and I argued that you were pursuing risk and seeking thrills in a way that I had *hoped* you were over.

I'm extremely thankful that you were able to get out, and that does give you a cushion of safety, but this woman is an unknown."

"You think that I couldn't best her in single combat?" asked Ria. She was keeping the levity in her voice, though Harmon was doing his best to be serious. That was how it went sometimes. She thought that Alfric likely got his seriousness from his father.

"I think, first, that it wouldn't necessarily *be* single combat, especially if it's as you fear and Cate is setting herself up as a benevolent dictator," said Harmon. This was the sort of thing that Ria didn't particularly like, when someone repeated back words you'd never said. She supposed that it was accurate to her feelings, but it still grated. "Second, I think there's a legitimate chance that Cate herself *could* beat you. She has a 'living' demiplane, which as described to me has workable weather, permeable borders, and who knows what else. She has this, and has been able to keep it quiet. That means she likely has *other* unknown powers. This is *aside* from whatever enormous entad cache she's got. Incidentally — and it may mean nothing — that table you described to me matches one that was stolen seventy years ago."

Ria frowned. "We did entad tracing then?" she asked.

"We're still doing it," said Harmon. "As best we can, anyway."

"Hrm," said Ria.

"Did you want to have the actual argument?" asked Harmon. "About why it might be best for you to simply leave?"

"Kali is, by some measure, my niece," said Ria. "Family matters."

"That's weak and you know it," said Harmon. "It's your sense of justice, and more than that, your sense of adventure." He sighed. "We really *don't* need to have the argument, because you decided that you would do your own thing, and I let you know that I would do my part in shoring you up, even if I didn't like it."

"Thank you," said Ria. She kissed him, going up on her toes to get the extra inch of height. "I'm spending the day out here, to gather as much as I can, then going back in for another time through, this one to gather information on *that* end." She paused. "The children are well?"

Harmon nodded. "They're mostly grown. You going off to do a dungeon isn't the most shocking thing in the world to them."

She hadn't wanted to lie to the children, but she also hadn't wanted to have five teenaged — or near teenaged — people who could potentially leak information. She would tell them later, of course, but lying to children was no way to engender trust.

"Alright," said Ria. "Then let's get to the task of finding out what we can."

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“There’s a lot we don’t know,” said Ria. “What we *do* know is that she’s hiding something. There’s prior history to this place, and the ‘living’ demiplane needs to be explored. Unfortunately, the best method of exploration would be to have us go out, but the minute we step out there, there’s a good chance that we get detected. I don’t *just* mean remote viewing, I mean census-like entads, which there’s a good chance she’d have acquired, given she’s acquired so much else.” She turned to Verity. “Today, I’m going out. It’s going to be dangerous, and late in the day, but your job is to do the day as normally as you can. Be a model citizen. Can you do that?”

Verity nodded.

“Good,” said Ria. “Then we burn the day on this, we wait, and we probe.”

The waiting was difficult, especially with the children. They weren’t *actually* children, Ria knew that, but she was in her late forties, and the oldest of her boys was twenty-two. He’d been talking about children with his pactmate — they’d been living together for almost six years now — but she thought once she was a grandmother maybe her view on what a ‘child’ meant would change. Or maybe they would always be children in her mind.

“Talk to me about your loadout,” said Mizuki. “Unless you’ve already told me?”

Mizuki liked her, and in the time Ria had been around the party, it had been Mizuki that had come to her most often, maybe because the girl was without her own mother. They had more than a few conversations, many of which hadn’t risen to the level of requiring disclosure when the day had been undone. There was a viciousness and violence to Mizuki that Ria liked, and if the girl had been a chrononaut, she’d have made a perfect match for Alfric so they could temper each other’s impulses. Alfric’s pact situation was a complicated one, and she wanted to get it settled one way or another, mostly so it wouldn’t be hanging over his head. At eighteen, he wasn’t yet thinking about children, but in her opinion, it was best to have them early.

“Certainly,” said Ria, smiling at her.

This took the better part of two hours, which had a lot to do with the number of questions that Mizuki asked. She was very curious, and also seemed to have a desire to *touch* things, which wasn’t a particularly good instinct when dealing with a high-elevation dungeoneer’s things. Ria had ten swords in her standard rotation, all kept in extradimensional space and ready to be pulled out at a moment’s notice, three sets of armor she could rotate through and a fourth set that could be worn beneath the other three, and more ‘trinkets’ than almost anyone she knew. From experience, she wasn’t invulnerable, but it was as close as she could reasonably be.

“Entads are funny,” Ria explained. “It’s quite rare for there to be *complete* immunity to something, but not at all uncommon for that limit to be *quite* high, high enough that you wouldn’t normally need to worry about it. Sometimes entad sellers will shorthand it and say ‘this will make you immune to heat’ when what they *mean* is that you can safely dip your hand in molten steel, never contemplating that you’ll be fighting monsters so hot that they burn the air itself.”

“So you run it past a cleric of Qymmos?” asked Mizuki.

“Ideally, yes,” said Ria. “Not *personally*, since I have a counterparty for that sort of thing, but yes, Terra is my minder, he deals with all that sort of thing.”

“So *are* you immune to fire?” asked Mizuki.

“Complete fire immunity eludes me,” said Ria with a sigh. “But yes, I can withstand temperatures hot enough to flash-boil steel. I *do* have a complete immunity to acid though, which is neutralized on contact with me or anything I’m wearing, and likewise electrical attacks get stored in an internal reservoir to be used at my leisure.” The list of defenses was *quite* long.

“Wow,” said Mizuki. “Is there *any* possible way that I can see you in action?”

Ria laughed. “Only in dungeons, I’m afraid, or on undone days.”

“Undone days?” asked Mizuki.

“All out sparring,” said Ria. “Unfortunately, you mostly remember the losses rather than the wins.”

“You fight *people*?” asked Mizuki.

“High-elevation dungeoneers,” Ria replied. “And yes, I do. Mostly other chrononauts though, which is a safer display of power.”

“Safer in a ‘they will come for you at the witching hour’ kind of way?” asked Mizuki.

Ria raised an eyebrow. “Alfric’s been telling you our stories?”

“Yeah,” said Mizuki. “It’s important for him, I think, so I try to listen.”

Ria liked Mizuki, even though she was a bit like an overeager puppy dog. Though Mizuki did eventually drift back over to the others, there was a sense in which Mizuki was clearly a fan, which wasn’t entirely the relationship Ria wanted to have with Alfric’s party.

They slept in what the children had dubbed ‘Lutopia One’, in beds that Alfric had apparently made by hand. She hadn’t known that he’d taken up woodworking, and felt a pang of loneliness that he hadn’t shared it with her.

They ate food made by Ria’s entads, a selection of exotic fruits and meats, exotic not in the sense that they were from another land, but in that they had never existed except in the dreams of the entad. All of it was safe, and most of it was delicious, but it gave a feeling of strangeness that Ria normally liked. You couldn’t *quite* place the taste of anything, and sometimes the meat seemed to have been cooked with strange spices, which meant that there were layers of strangeness.

Verity returned to them after what felt like an enormous amount of time, but was almost exactly appropriate given what Ria’s timekeeping was telling her.

“How was the day?” asked Alfric.

“Pleasant,” said Verity. She seemed intensely uncomfortable, beneath the blank face she kept. “I saw Kell. Apparently he’d been out in what they call the Wildlands, the places beyond the permeable border.”

“Doing what?” asked Alfric.

“Exploring,” said Verity. “Mapping.” She shrugged. “Is this important? I did ask questions, but he didn’t seem to want to talk with me, and I didn’t want to seem overeager.”

“I don’t know,” said Alfric. “There’s a chance it might be important. If this is a ‘living’ demiplane, that might be a vital distinction.”

“It wouldn’t change that she picked these people up under such poor circumstances,” said Ria.

“He didn’t seem surprised to see me,” said Verity. “He was pleasant, if a bit curt.” She glanced at Mizuki.

“What?” asked Mizuki.

“I don’t know,” said Verity. “He didn’t ask about you, and I’d thought that he might want to. But I’m *glad* that he didn’t ask, because I would need to lie.”

“The coast is clear?” asked Ria. “I should remind you all that this is going to be an undone day, so if there’s something you want reported back to yourself, you should tell me now.”

“Oh no,” said Mizuki. “You’re going to have to explain your loadout again.”

“It was my pleasure, I don’t mind doing it twice,” smiled Ria. She looked around. “Anyone else?”

“Stay safe,” said Alfric.

“She’s immune to fire,” said Mizuki.

“I’ll be safe,” said Ria.

And with that, she had Verity strum her out. The children would stay in there until the witching hour, which was for the best.

Night had fallen over the demiplane, and the irregular grid of stars above were shining. Most of the houses were unlit, and Ria looked around for a moment before cloaking herself. She didn’t have all that much for infiltration, just a pen that made her blend into shadows, a gauntlet that made her silent and impossible for wizards or sorcerers to view by magic, and a necklace that made people forget about her if they were within ten to a hundred yards of her. A few of those had been borrowed from the family stash. Harmon had true invisibility and incorporeality, but those were from entads bound to him.

Verity had left the door open, and Ria slipped out into the small town.

She rose into the air, surveying the demiplane, intensely worried that she would be seen or found. She had nothing to guard her from a pseudo-census entad, or from other entad surveillance. Entads were notorious for that sort of thing: they interacted with each other often, but it was through the medium of the world, and if you wanted to not be counted as a person for some entad that was looking for you, virtually the only way to do that was to not be a person.

There was the village, where the lights were slowly winking out, and the palace, which was still a blaze of illumination, including a grand fire in the courtyard, where people were dancing and merry-making, their music and chatter floating easily through the empty air. The courtyard was situated within the mountain, in a sort of caldera, the holes poked through the rock providing views of a large, sheltered park which the courtyard was a part of.

Beyond, there was wilderness, *true* wilderness, rambling forests and rushing rivers that seemed to have been completely untouched by human hands, or touched so long ago that there was no trace of the last fingerprints of civilization. It was beautiful, in the way that Ria always found nature to be beautiful, unspoilt, or having regrown from spoil. She saw animals among the woods, but enhanced senses were enough to identify them as owls, deer, badgers, foxes, nothing terribly unusual by the standards of Inter's biosphere.

More than a mile away from the palace, there was a ruined tower, and Ria swept toward it, looking for answers, if there were any answers to be found anywhere. Harmon thought that this was all for nothing, that perhaps Cate really *had* been setting up a paradise. This could be nothing more than that, paradise, though Ria had a healthy skepticism of anyone who organized their own planned community away from the oversight of others. Cate could be faulted for the secrecy with which it was done, for the ways in which proper emigration proceedings had not been followed, for the months during which the families of the disappeared had worried, but it was very possible that there was no other fault. From everything that Verity had said, there was no real reason for anyone to leave, aside from homesickness.

The tower had been made of stone and was half-melted, the rocks heated so much that a few of them had exploded from water in tiny crevices. The stones which had been put in place with mortar had merged together as they grew pliable in the heat. It was clear there was nothing to learn here — it was too burnt, too old — but perhaps later on it might be possible to come back and watch the past. Whatever had happened, it had been a long time ago.

Ria heard the fluttering of cloth before she had eyes on Cate. The other woman was flying through the air, effortless and serene, exactly in the direction of the ruined tower.

Ria flew off in a random direction, not wanting to get close.

Cate changed course, moving the same direction.

This wasn't promising.

They flew, and it was clear that Ria was slower, if only just. How she was being tracked, she didn't know, but she *was* being tracked. It was unnerving, but if it came to a fight, she couldn't imagine that she would lose. Cate was not, by any account, a dungeoneer, and even if she'd

been surreptitiously buying up entads for a decade or two, there were limits on how powerful a person could get without direct access to bound entads or a good party. There were also limits on how powerful a person without direct combat experience could be.

The edge of the demiplane was marked only by a transition of the stars. Rather than the irregular grid, they were chaotic, sprinkled across the sky haphazardly. If these were ‘Wildlands’, they looked little different from what had come before, though they were changing slowly, different with every mile. The trees were getting larger, some of them with ‘horns’ of dead wood sticking from the top. The rivers had widened, sometimes gouging deep canyons through granite. And there was variety to it as well, the sorts of things that Ria had only ever seen before in dungeons, staggering rock formations and trees that swayed with red fronds that seemed to breathe, plains filled with calico grazing beasts.

Eventually, Ria came to a stop. It had been a half hour, at least, and the gentle pursuit of a silent shadow seemed like it could have gone on for ten times that long, if they had allowed it to. Unfortunately, that would take them past the witching hour, which Ria could not allow.

Cate stopped when Ria did, probing at the hundred yard border of memory and eventually moving forward in spite of it. Dropping the cloaks would have allowed a conversation, but Ria wanted to see what Cate could see, and what the other woman would do.

Cate moved within ten yards, close enough that the memory entad wouldn’t suppress anything. Her lips curled in a smile.

“Sofia Lagrange,” she said.

That was the name that Ria was known by to the census. There were entads that could change your name, and Ria *had* changed her name, not too long ago. So far as Ria knew, removing your name outright was impossible, but Sofia Lagrange was innocuous enough, not liable to raise suspicions. It was comforting, in a way, to know that the false name had worked.

“Or should I say Ria Overguard?” asked Cate. There was only the faintest smile on her face. Not smug, exactly, but Ria wouldn’t have objected if someone else had called it smug.

There was silence in the air. Cate’s flowing dress was slightly askew from the flight, and her hair was tousled, but as Ria watched, these imperfections righted themselves, dress adjusting itself, hairs moving back into place. The sense of calmness was incredible, and it didn’t feel entirely aesthetic in nature.

“I don’t suppose I know what you hope to accomplish by staying mute,” said Cate. “You’re going to reset the day anyhow, and there’s no harm in speaking with me. In fact, it might get you information, which is the stock and trade of the chrononauts.”

Ria removed the entad that was silencing her. She was still a barely-perceptible shadow. “You know my name.”

“I *do*,” said Cate, smiling. “And I don’t believe that I invited you to my demiplane.”

“Is that what you call what you’ve been doing?” asked Ria. “Inviting?”

“Please,” laughed Cate. “Did you really want to sneak in where you’re not wanted and then lecture *me* on morality? Tell me, did you come here under the authority of Inter, of Greater Plenarch, or simply on your own?”

“On the authority of Inter,” said Ria. This was only technically true, and her authority didn’t extend very far at all. Certainly she wasn’t allowed to simply snatch people from the demiplane, even if that was what she wanted to do. It was also an authority that had extended from a single judge, without any outside review. It was flimsy, and Ria knew it.

“And how shall we settle this?” asked Cate, who didn’t seem to care very much at all.

“Allow people in,” said Ria. “Allow stock to be taken of conditions here, a census of those you took as compared against the missing persons report. Interviews with the people here, to make sure they’re here of their own free will. Government agents need to be allowed to bond to the demiplane core, even if they’re set up to go into a small, special room that you keep barred.”

“Hmm,” said Cate. “No, I rather think I don’t like that. My counteroffer is that you and anyone else who entered without my permission will leave, immediately, without talking to anyone you might have come here for. You could even do it in an undone day, so I wouldn’t have to bother with knowing about you.”

That implied that Cate had first learned of Ria when she’d exited the extradimensional space, but this might well have been a bluff. Cate could *easily* have prior knowledge through a higher priority chrononaut. There was no good way of telling, and while the chrononauts had procedures for locking down the channels, there was no way that anyone would have approved doing that for this. It would explain how Cate had known Ria’s name.

“And if you don’t leave,” Cate continued. “Then by right of the dominion I claim over this place, I will drive you off.” A sliver of cold steel appeared from the hem of her sleeve and extended, traveling parallel to her arm, until a full eleven feet of thin sword was resting casually in her hand. It was, Ria was certain, an entad.

Her own sword appeared in a flash, black as pitch.

There was a part of Ria that wanted to say ‘Don’t you know who I am?’ She kept silent though, because she *didn’t* know who Cate was.

“I suppose this battle won’t be a battle,” said Cate. “It’s information gathering for you. You have no idea where the demiplane core is, and neither does anyone else, which would mean that you’d doom everyone here to being trapped here for eternity. I’m sure you had the wizards build you a pry bar to get out of here, but I doubt you’re equipped to take ten thousand.”

“That’s the population?” asked Ria. “We had thought less.”

“I’ll give you that for free,” said Cate. A second sliver of metal appeared from her other sleeve, this one brass or something like it, burnished and brown. It was, likewise, incredibly long and

held with calm and reserve. “It’s an interesting question, whether I try to kill you with the full force of my abilities, or whether I do as little as possible, attempting to hold back so you don’t know until you have to.”

“You seem confident,” said Ria. Her grip tightened on her sword, then she relaxed, so she’d be ready.

“You have *no* idea,” replied Cate. Her smile had widened.

The attack came quickly, a spinning attack that seemed wildly impractical until it was there. Ria’s sword dilated time, but Cate seemed to have some similar effect. For an outside observer, they would have appeared impossibly fast, but Ria’s perception was that they were equally matched.

That was a *very* bad sign. There was no particular reason for their powers to be matched, and every reason for them not to be, which meant that Cate was playing with her, and worse, outclassed her, at least on that metric.

Ria parried the spinning attack and moved away, far enough that Cate should have lost her memory of their encounter and indeed, any memory of Ria’s existence at all. There was, briefly, a moment of confusion on Cate’s face, and it might have been the time to attack, but Ria held back, watching.

Dungeon monsters, at Ria’s elevation, were incredibly dangerous, even if you were nearly invulnerable along a wide number of axes, and even if you could regenerate limbs or bounce back from having half your face blown off — which Ria could. One of the things that made these dungeon monsters so difficult was that their abilities were, from the outset, unknown, and could be almost anything. Nine tenths of them could be sliced through easily and from a distance, but the other tenth could be *incredibly* difficult. One approach, the one Ria favored in her old age, was a probing approach, attacks at full power followed by backing off if those didn’t work. Observing a target would show its weak points, more often than not.

Cate wasn’t immune to the memory entad, which was good, and strict immunity would be highly unexpected. She had some way of reorienting herself at speed though, and focused on Ria after only a few moments. Finding the chink in her armor would be difficult. What was it? You could get around memory-affecting entads by recording the interaction then playing it back, usually, though that wouldn’t work for this particular case. Ria had other ways of cloaking herself, but worried they wouldn’t be reliable.

This time it was Ria who made the probing attack, thrusting her sword behind her through a ten-inch wide portal created by one of a few rings she wore inside her gauntlet. The other end of the portal was directly behind Cate’s back. The thrust wasn’t just parried, which Cate accomplished with the silver blade, but her brass blade slipped through the small portal, using it for a thrusting attack. Cate had done this blind, her hands manipulating the swords behind her back with apparent ease. The tip of the brass sword had stopped an inch from Ria’s armor, deliberately so.

“You’ll have to forgive me for showing off,” said Cate. “It’s so *rare* that someone is foolish enough to try killing me.”

Ria flew backward, extracting her sword from the portal in the process, then closing it so she would be at the right distance to be forgotten. Again, there was a moment of confusion, but it didn’t last nearly long enough.

“Ah,” said Cate to the open air. “A mysterious stranger, pestering me. I think I understand this better now. Tell me, stranger, are you trying your best? Because I should let you know that I’ve been giving you only a taste of my true power.”

Ria had not, in fact, been trying ‘her best’, but then, there was nothing to be gained from this battle except an understanding of who Cate was and how she fought. If the battle was one of information, then it seemed that Cate was losing it … but it also seemed like that loss might be deliberate.

Ria teleported two miles away, intending to wait about the forest there. What she saw instead was the world blooming into being below her, the stars blossoming into haphazard positions across the sky. It seemed to start from where she was floating in the air, spreading out rapidly. There was a lot she didn’t understand about the Wildlands, and that seemed like it was going to be a problem too.

When the landscape around her had grown firm and filled in, Ria *did* wait, though she wasn’t entirely sure that Cate would come.

The attack came from behind. It was the same thing that Ria had done, only without the small portal. Instead, Cate had simply *appeared*, showing off her own teleportation.

This time, the silvered sword crossed Ria’s first defensive line, and the reaction was instant. A thousand flechettes burst forward, tiny and razor sharp, so fast that they were accompanied by a heavy blast of wind. It was a response that had killed a great number of dungeon monsters, and Ria was pleased to see that Cate was wounded. There were punctures through her gossamer outfit and a few spots of blood. The silver blade had been blasted back, Cate’s grip on it lost, but it arced through the air for only a few moments before appearing back in her hand.

The blood flowed freely, but Cate hung in the air, head hanging down slightly. There was too much blood, in fact, more than should be in a person, streaming down to the ground below. It was the time for a riposte, if Ria was going to make one, but she hesitated, put off by the sheer amount of blood. It was enough to fill several people.

The blood arrested its motion, almost at once, then began moving in ways completely divorced from gravity. Ria backed up again, putting distance between her and Cate, right in the zone that should have removed memory, but the blood kept moving either way, coalescing in the air into three separate spots. They were first spots of blood, then blood *creatures*, each of them a feminine figure that bore some token resemblance to Cate.

Ria had fought against what might have been as many as a million monsters spun up by the dungeons, and held a special hatred toward liquid types, which swords passed through easily. For this very reason, she had a sword for the occasion, and she switched to it with a thought, hurtling through the air at what she'd internally dubbed the blood fairies. Her sword sliced straight through the first she reached, and the magic of the scimitar superheated the blood, which caused the entire construct to explode apart, thankfully not hot enough to overload her heat resistance.

The second and third fairies gave as little problem as the first, their bodies no match for the sword, and the flash-boiling made a mist of blood through the air, as though she was popping bubbles. There was a particular *smell* to flash-boiled blood, but Ria was taking no chances, and had been breathing ectad-generated air since she'd come out of the extradimensional space.

The sword worked on people too, if you could stab them where they had enough blood. So far, Ria hadn't landed a hit.

It was time to end the fight. Part of it was the creeping sense that perhaps there *wasn't* a winning move, or that the time for a decisive blow had somehow come and gone, but Ria knew most of what she needed to know, and the fight wasn't without risks. Incapacitation was virtually impossible given the countermeasures that Ria had in place, but 'virtually impossible' wasn't the same as 'impossible'.

Ria's weapons, all ten of them, emptied from their extradimensional space. Nine of them floated in the air, while the tenth, her black sword, was held in her hand.

"Oh?" asked Cate. Her robes showed no sign of wear, and the blood had vanished. "Are we getting *serious* now?"

Ria rushed in, fully armored, her weapons leading the way. One of the swords positioned itself for Cate's heart and then fired off faster than an arrow, crossing the hundred feet between them in a blink. It was parried aside with impossible speed, so fast that even dilated, Ria couldn't sense it happening. That attack had failed only a handful of times before, and never against another person.

Cate countered with a bolt of lightning, one which struck Ria full in the chest, but the power of it was stored, and Ria launched it back through an outstretched palm without slowing her pace. It was too much to hope that Cate would be fried by it, but the way that it bent around the woman was disheartening.

Ria's twin blades were next, flying out ahead of her, sharp enough to cut a hair in half lengthwise. These weren't parried, but instead Cate simply turned herself into smoke, and the blades passed through.

Ria's spear bounced off, as though made of rubber. Her mace shattered apart into pieces no larger than grains of sand, utterly destroyed. It was happening fast, each defense seconds apart from the others, and the only sign that Cate was exerting any effort was a slight heaviness to her breath. Ria's falchion was caught between two hands, drawing blood in the process, but it

was then thrown back at Ria with such speed and force that it screamed through the air and was impossible to dodge. Ria was struck with her own weapon, activating her secondary defense, placing her two hundred feet to the left, in a different spot in the sky.

Before Ria could use the last of her weapons, Cate counterattacked. She teleported in, opened her mouth impossibly wide, unhinging her jaw and stretching the skin of her cheeks.

Then, she unleashed flame, so bright and hot that Ria was blinded just before she roasted to death.

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“She’s debatably stronger than me,” said Ria. “We had a battle and felt each other out. The fact that I remember it means that she didn’t go to someone else about it, and I retained priority. It’s entirely possible that didn’t happen every time though. If she can beat me, she might have been on her second time through the day, which would help explain *how* she beat me.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” said Alfric. “How can one person be that strong?”

“Strong enough to beat me?” asked Ria with a laugh. “Money would do it, collected carefully and out of sight of the tax collectors, or stolen carefully so that no one noticed. How can a person collect ten thousand people from around Inter and beyond without getting caught?” The numbers didn’t line up. Harmon had said a thousand, Cate had said ten. “Patience, a willful violation of the law, there are all kinds of methods.” She managed to keep the frown from her face. “So far as I know, Verity was fine out there. We can go to the next day, if we absolutely have to.”

“If she’s stronger than you,” Alfric began.

“Stronger in some sense,” said Ria. “I haven’t attempted a decapitating strike from the shadows. I *suspect* that it would work, though I can’t say for certain. And again, cutting her down isn’t our primary goal here. Our *goal* is to ideally pin her to the wall with some sort of malfeasance, get Inter involved as much as they can be involved, find the demiplane core, and so on. Once I can enter and exit at will, we can bring this under the umbrella of proper governance.”

“Which isn’t usual for demiplanes,” said Alfric. “*Normally* they have known custodians who bring in surveyors.”

“We need to get to the point of negotiation,” said Ria. “And in order to do *that*, we need leverage. We don’t even truly understand this ‘living’ demiplane, what it is, where it came from, and what Cate’s goals are here.”

“Some kind of perfect colony, right?” asked Mizuki.

“Maybe,” said Ria, shrugging. “It’s hard to say.”

“She found you,” said Alfric.
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“Yes, and it’s unclear how,” said Ria. “That’s something that we need to probe with my remaining days. What I’m going to do *first* is to see whether it was *me* or whether it would apply to anyone else. Which means that I need a test subject to go out there.”

“Me,” said Mizuki. “It’s gotta be me, right? Also, staying in here for a day seems incredibly boring.”

“You’ll still have to stay here,” said Ria. “You’ll go out only at night, for a few hours, in disguise, to see whether she tracks her way to you.”

“Can do,” said Mizuki with a nod. “Whatever you need.”

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“I think, based on what we know, any of you are safe going out,” said Ria. “It’s not clear to me *why*, but Mizuki could spend four hours out there, while Cate came to me almost at once. Now, it *could* be that Cate knew perfectly well about Mizuki’s presence and chose not to intervene, but I’m *hoping* that it’s a gap in her defenses.”

“What could it possibly be?” asked Alfric. “You had mentioned pseudo-census.”

“There are a lot of differences between me and Mizuki,” said Ria. “The biggest one that’s built into the Editors’ information structures, and the one which I don’t have the power to change, is elevation.”

“Oh,” said Mizuki. “What’s your elevation?”

“Forty-seven,” said Ria.

“Wow,” said Mizuki.

“Mizuki thinks elevation is bunk,” said Alfric. Mizuki gave him a dirty look.

“It’s a number,” said Ria with a shrug. “I wouldn’t go so far as to say that it’s Editor idiocy, but yes, it can be hard to pin that number to actual real-world meaning, especially since so much of combat preparedness comes down to entad loadout. That’s neither here nor there though, what we need *now* as the days tick down, is some measure of a plan. I’ll be sending you out in the morning now to see what systems are in place to respond to you.”

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Ria rubbed her face. “It appears you can move freely, so long as you don’t run into Cate herself.”

“Did we?” asked Mizuki.

“Yes,” said Ria. “But I *think* we can burn days avoiding that. Which means that our scheme for today will be poking around at the edges of this ‘living’ demiplane, getting some answers on

what that means and why it might be important, as well as getting a full inventory of who's here, and importantly, who *isn't*."

"We're still doing this?" asked Verity. "From what you've said, you've been through this day four times and haven't found anything incriminating."

"You have a soft spot for her and her cause," said Ria. "That much has been clear." It seemed, disappointingly, as though that was one of the reasons that they'd been in four days rather than one, though perhaps that read on it was just Ria's frustration talking. "What she's doing here, setting herself up as the supreme authority, cannot be allowed. There are *reasons* that we don't organize our societies in that way. It would be bad even if she were being forthright about what she knows and what she doesn't, but she *isn't* being forthright. There's no oversight if things go wrong. On top of that, we have no idea what mechanisms are in place, if any, for when someone wants to *leave* this place."

"I didn't mean to say that we don't have any reason for concern," said Verity, holding herself stiffly. "Only that I want to know what happens if we find nothing of concern. *I* didn't agree to this in order to bring Inter's government into things."

"Inter only debatably has authority," said Alfric. "Demiplanes aren't part of the collection of hexes controlled. They're more akin to vassal states, and could easily be vassals of other nations, which some of them are."

"I know this, son," said Ria.

"I want to know more about the demiplane," said Alfric. "It's unusual. But I have a feeling that my interests aren't about making sure that people are safe and under good governance, and I want to be clear about that."

There was something almost scrupulously fair about Alfric that sometimes grated, as much as Ria didn't like to admit that about her own son. Some of the children had taken many repetitions of specific lessons in order to understand fairness, honesty, circumspection, and all kinds of other things, and it seemed that Alfric had picked it up far more quickly than the others. In some sense, having the lessons repeated so much for the benefit of his siblings might have pushed them in a bit too hard for Alfric, though it was difficult to say. Alfric was somewhat famous within the family for not swearing: he'd been taught, when he was four, that certain words were bad words that you weren't supposed to say, and he'd never said any of them in front of anyone, going so far as correcting others with a particular sort of insistence. At fifteen they'd explained to him that it was okay — and expected — to let loose a stream of curse words at times, but he hadn't budged much.

"Either way, we need to gather information," said Ria. "Alfric, I'd like you to go into the Wildlands to find out what you can. Verity, I want you to speak with Cate and those around her — the village seems to be a good place for you to lay low, but she doesn't seem to come here often, which means the palace will be the place for you to be." She turned to the other three. "I'd like you to go out and make friends. From what Verity has seen, there's nothing in the way of a police force or central authority in the village, and we don't know precisely what happens when

someone steals, or assaults someone else, or anything like that. We don't know if there *are* answers to those questions, but given the amount of preparation and planning that's gone into everything else, I assume that Cate has something. Nonetheless, there's no one to report you, at least in theory, and no one who has full knowledge of who lives within the village."

"So we're spies now?" asked Hannah.

"If you'd been paying attention, we've actually been spies since we started looking into the past," said Isra. Her arms were folded.

"And that's the plan for today," said Ria. "If it goes well, we keep it. If you're not all back here by nightfall without incident, we don't keep the day."

"We don't reset if people know us?" asked Alfric.

"There's a strong temptation to stay hidden away, knowing everything only through undone days," said Ria. "I think that's the wrong tack, here, because we *need* those memories, especially once we go back to Inter to talk with others about what's been going on here."

"I guess," said Alfric. He seemed slightly uncomfortable, though whether it was about the spying or the loss of secrecy going into the next day, she couldn't say.

"Well then let's do it," said Mizuki. "*I'm* ready."