

Chapter 1: Welcome to Middle Earth

It was the break of dawn when I arrived at the crest of a craggy, wind-swept hill bearing the remains of a long-unused and dilapidated fortress. I blinked a few times at the abrupt change in scenery from my bedroom to this somewhat ominous ruin. The wind kicked up, and I shuddered briefly at the chill as I spun slowly in place, taking in the sights from all directions.

The first thing that I noticed was just *how much* I could see. My eyesight hadn't been the best previously, but the Six Eyes made even 20/20 vision seem like blindness. I could pick out individual leaves on half-hidden trees from miles away, and I could see the world in terms of energy. Not just cursed energy, either. Even closing my eyes, I could still see as if I was looking through a high-definition infrared camera, only instead of seeing heat, I could see *everything*.

As expected, the view from Weathertop was ideal for scouting the surrounding area, which mostly consisted of rolling gray-green hills sparsely dotted with lonely trees and boulders. Even with the help of the Six Eyes, there was little of interest to spot within an easy walk, but to the south I could see the long ribbon of a well-worn, though currently unused, road carving its way from East to West across the mostly barren landscape.

Right now, there was nothing notable within my considerable sight.

But that was fine. There didn't need to be anything here. In fact, it was better for me that there wasn't. It just gave me more time to gather my bearings and prepare for what was to come. And there was *a lot* to prepare.

It was just like the first day in minecraft. You had to gather supplies quickly and get a base set up or you could end up being eaten as soon as night fell. Things worked a bit like that here, too, with goblins and orcs and all that unpleasantness crawling out of the woodwork after dark.

Oh god, what had I done?

I took a deep breath, held it for a count of ten, and let it out. First things first. Despite the danger, I was not here completely unprepared.

"Status," I said, and a helpful status window suddenly appeared.

Status

Name: Vinya

Level 1

Job: None

Fatigue: 1

Titles: None

HP: 100

MP: 10

CE: 10

Strength: 10

Vitality: 10

Agility: 10

Intelligence: 10

Sense: 10

AP: 0

Okay, that's about what I was expecting. My stats were the same as Jin-woo's but with an added CE Stat. CE was presumably Cursed Energy, which meant that I'd be able to train it along with my regular MP by raising my Intelligence stat. And even if I couldn't, my Six Eyes made CE more or less irrelevant anyway. As long as I had enough to perform a technique, I would never run out because my efficiency turned the loss of CE into nothing, so my ability to recover should exceed my ability to use it.

At least in theory. I'd have to see what happened when I actually started to use my powers.

Besides that, below the basic stats were a list of passive skills including Unknown, Invictus, Inviolable, Singularity, and Blindspot along with a Lv. of MAX.

Good, good. That was all in order.

As I was reading, an alert popped up indicating that I had unread messages.

"Open," I said, and I was greeted with an alert that I'd met the criteria for the Secret Quest: Courage of the Weak.

"Great Spellcaster Kandiaru's Blessing: The Great Spellcaster Kandiaru has gifted a special spell to you. Kandiaru's Blessing will ensure that you will always be strong and healthy during your lifetime."

It displayed a list of passive abilities including Will to Recover, Longevity, and Detoxification.

I raised my eyebrows at that because Jin-woo had needed to go through hell and nearly die to get what I had apparently gotten for free. Well, not entirely for free. I did have to give up my entire life back home and agree to be dropped into a world that was under very real, very dire threat of complete annihilation at the hands of an evil dark lord.

Yeah, that might qualify as 'courage', and I certainly had been 'weak'.

I still was, to be completely honest. But hopefully not for long.

And this blessing would do a good job of keeping me alive. It wouldn't matter how badly I was hurt. If I could survive the night, I'd be fully healed by morning. It had a bit of overlap with Inviolable, but I wasn't about to split hairs on my immunities.

I mentally closed that window and opened the next. It was the daily quest for 100 pushups, situps, and squats along with a 10km run. Ah yes, the Saitama workout. Very thematic. And sure to be a pain to deal with during certain times. Not that I'd be able to ignore it, however. Not unless I was fully prepared to enter the penalty zone and risk getting eaten by a bunch of giant centipedes. Nope, definitely didn't want to deal with that.

I closed that window as well and opened the third one, which turned out to be an Alert indicating that my Supply Drop was prepared, and would I like to call upon it? The Supply Drop would have things relating to my Gamer power, and while most of the contents was semi-random, there was a note that some items would be consistent across all boxes as long as they were relevant. For example, it would include 1-10 dungeon keys useful for leveling up, a set of consumable items like healing and mana potions, and an item like a weapon, a piece of armor, an accessory, or a rune stone.

My eyes narrowed at the sight of 'rune stone'. Those were normally obtained as rare drops from magical beasts inside dungeons, and they could theoretically include any skill whatsoever, from attack, defense, concealment, or even support skills. Granted, the Supply Drop note didn't say how common those rune stones would be, but if I managed to get my hands on even a few, they would be worth thousands of times their weight in gold.

The alert also contained a warning that the Supply Drop's contents would vary in quantity and quality based on my actions since the previous Supply Drop. Specifically relating to how much I'd used my powers to resolve problems and survive conflicts as well as the overall impact I was having on the world.

As of right now, all of that was a big, fat zero. As evidenced by the "Accomplishments: None" status on the Supply Drop window. It was tempting to wait until I'd actually done something before calling the Supply Drop. But a quick glance around revealed no conflicts or problems that I could use my powers toward. And since any accomplishments would just be accounted for in the next Supply Drop, there was little incentive to wait.

I was, after all, a mere Level 1. This was the weakest I would ever be, and this was the time where I was most in need of extra supplies to get started.

But that same thought made me hesitate. Because this *would* be the only Supply Drop I'd get for the next week. It might be worth it to try and maximize the contents after all. I frowned as I weighed my options. Delaying too long would be pointless, but if I could accomplish something today, it might help me survive my first night here.

Yeah, I could wait a few hours, see what types of problems I could solve with my powers, and hopefully get a few extra goodies in my bag before nightfall.

With that thought, I closed the Supply Drop window, and I got to work on my daily quest. Because I was not going to attempt to do that after dark when these hills might be swarming with assorted bad guys. The one hundred pushups, situps, and squats were decently easy thanks to Charles Atlas, but I ran into a slight snag when it came to the 10km run.

Because I had no track to run on.

I was in the middle of the wilderness, not some city block with conveniently paved sidewalks. The ground here was hilly, overgrown, rocky, and dotted with invisible burrow holes just waiting to snap an unwary ankle. Despite the presence of the hilltop ruin, there weren't even any trails or roads to use. Well, there was one, but it was so steep and rough that I didn't want to risk taking it at more than a brisk walking pace.

But after puzzling it out and pacing around the hilltop for over an hour, I came to the conclusion that I was still thinking like an ordinary human. Because it didn't matter if the ground was uneven. I had the Six Eyes, and they gave me a preternatural awareness of everything around me. I started with a brisk loping trot around the base of the tower, paying close attention to every blade of grass and every dip and rise in the earth below it. After a few circuits around the tower, my confidence grew greater, and soon I was doing a full-on sprint, fully trusting in every step.

Wow, this extra awareness was amazing. But I soon found that it came with a downside. Because by the time I finished my run, I was feeling drained. I pulled up my Status window to check on things and was unsurprised by what I saw.

Fatigue: 57

Yeah, there was a reason that Gojo kept his blindfold on at all times unless he was in a fight. The mental strain of using these eyes was not insignificant, not even for him. And it wasn't like I could turn them off. So, I did the next best thing and closed my eyes instead. I could still see perfectly well, but the ongoing strain was immediately reduced.

It was a little annoying, but I could deal with it, especially since I didn't need eyes to see the message window appear to tell me that I had three quest rewards waiting. Ah yes, it was time to distribute my very first stats.

As I'd been running, I'd turned over my options in my mind. With no skills that required mana, putting points into Intelligence would have little return on investment in the immediate future. The same was true for Sense since my Six Eyes made that entire stat largely redundant. I might need it eventually to deal with attackers that could conceal themselves magically, but that would only be useful once I got into a dungeon.

The remaining options were Strength, Vitality, and Agility. It was tempting to put one point in each, but that wasn't necessary either. Leveling up would grant me one point in each stat, so I wouldn't need to worry too much about being balanced. Now was the time to min-max. And since I was on the same path as Jin-woo, I would trust his judgment when it came to stat distribution: all in on Strength, baby!

After all, all of my wounds would be healed if I made it through the night, so Vitality wasn't something I had to worry too much about right now. And while Agility synergized well with Strength in terms of avoiding attacks, Strength was by far the best way to avoid death. I mean, if I killed my opponents before they could do too much damage, that was a sort of defense too, right? Besides, if I could learn Limitless, that would be practically all the defense I would need.

The next daily reward was the lootbox, which contained a blindfold. Simple, but useful, especially since keeping my eyes closed constantly was harder than it sounded. I also chose to use the status refresh, bringing my Fatigue back down to 0 and alleviating my mental strain. The relief was instant and a stark display of exactly how far I'd pushed myself without even realizing it. These Six Eyes really were a double-edged sword.

But thankfully I had a convenient way to master them.

I sat cross-legged on the ground and began to concentrate, falling into a deep meditative trance. When I opened them again, I was standing in a massive and ornately decorated dojo. One wall had a set of shoji doors thrown open to reveal a carefully manicured courtyard containing a koi pond, a grove of sakura trees raining cherry blossoms, and a lightly-wooded training field.

Inside the dojo was Gojo Satoru.

He wasn't wearing his usual jujutsu high uniform with a blindfold. Instead he wore a wide-necked, long sleeved black shirt and black pants. His feet were bare, and he was wearing a set of circular black sunglasses that let his shock of white hair fall loosely around his face.

"Uh, hi?" I called cautiously.

"Ah, you must be the new student," said Gojo with a broad smile, still unmoving as a window popped up right in front of him. "Don't be shy. Let me know if you have any questions."

The friendly NPC-like behavior was reassuring enough for me to close the distance between us, and I took a look at the window on display. It was in the same style as the Gamer System and displayed the following:

Mastery Meditation Dojo

Select a Skill to Train. CE costs of skills performed within the Dojo are reduced to 0.

Oh. I scrolled through the list of training options, which turned out to be quite a bit longer than I'd been expecting. There were skills I would associate with Gojo, like Infinity, Red, Blue, Hollow Purple, Domain Expansion, Flight, Teleportation, and Reverse Cursed Technique. But there were other things too like Taijutsu, Kenjutsu, Simple Domain, Cursed Energy Enhancement, Binding Vows, Black Flash, Curtain, Falling Blossom Emotion, and more.

I spent quite a while just reading through the descriptions, assured by the knowledge that little to no time was actually passing in the real world. It looked like most skills could be 'acquired' by selecting them here, at which point I would have them at Level 1 and could freely train them from there, but there were a few skills that had additional restrictions. For example, Infinity was a prerequisite for Blue, Blue was a prerequisite for Red, Red was a prerequisite for Purple, and Purple was a prerequisite for Domain Expansion. Actually, Infinity was a prerequisite for all of Gojo's other abilities including flight and teleportation.

I also noticed that each skill had levels and level caps. Most were capped at level 5, but some, like flight and teleportation, were capped at Level 3, likely due to the limited applications of the skills.

After careful consideration, I narrowed my options down to three: Taijutsu, Reverse Cursed Technique, and Infinity.

Taijutsu would be the most useful for leveling up since I didn't actually have any combat skill yet, and I'd need to get some if I wanted to, you know, *win a fight*. But the usefulness of being able to heal from injuries could not be understated. Then again, if it came to fighting techniques, Limitless was practically the end-all be-all of defense. Not to mention, it was the foundation of Gojo's entire skill set and could, therefore, not be ignored.

It was a tough choice, but I ultimately came to the conclusion that since I'd put all of my stats into Strength while ignoring Vitality, I wanted to get a defense skill going first and foremost, and that meant developing Infinity as quickly as possible.

I selected it from the list.

"So, you want to learn the Gojo clan secret techniques?" Gojo asked, sticking his hands in his pockets and moseying toward the center of the dojo. "Infinity is the neutral base state of Limitless and is essentially the power to stop things in motion. It acts as the convergence of an immeasurable series. Anything that approaches Infinity slows down and never reaches the user. This is because the technique takes the finite amount of space between the two subjects and divides it an infinite amount of times."

Gojo went on to explain the mathematical and philosophical aspects of both Limitless and Infinity in great detail. I tried to absorb it all despite math not being my strong suit, but Gojo had a way of taking complicated subjects and making them seem easy to understand.

When he got around to demonstrating Infinity, I examined it closely with my Six Eyes and felt an instant flash of understanding.

"Now, you give it a try," said Gojo.

Okay, my turn. There were no hand signs or words for Infinity. Its existence as the base state of Limitless, which was itself an innate technique, meant that shaping it required very little in the way of actual cursed energy manipulation. Instead, it mostly just fell into place on its own.

Gojo produced an eraser from his pocket and tossed it at me. To my delight, it stopped about a foot away.

"That's good for a start," said Gojo as a message box appeared beside me:

Unlocked

Limitless: Infinity Level 1

"Now let's work on shrinking, expanding, and dispelling Infinity," Gojo continued.

This turned out to be a little more complicated. For the next 4 hours Gojo ran me through various exercises exploring multiple applications of Infinity. After three hours I received a Level Up notification for Infinity. Unfortunately, Leveling Up Infinity didn't come with any abrupt increase in power. Instead, it seemed to mark a threshold of understanding. Like an epiphany. Level 2 meant that I understood how to freely create, dispel, and reshape Infinity at will. I could broaden it to a sphere around my whole body or condense it to a form-fitting armor that followed me as I moved.

According to Gojo, the next step was selective enforcement for myself. At the moment, I was just as far from other things as they were from me, but with practice, I could change that so that I could choose to touch others while keeping them at bay. At that point, I would become just about unbeatable in a fight against any mundane opponent and possibly quite a few not-so-mundane opponents too.

I was looking forward to it.

But for now, my time in the dojo was drawing to an end, which was marked by the sudden arrival of a notification:

Mastery Meditation Dojo Training Time Limit Reached:

Infinity Lv. 2

Mastery Meditation Dojo is now locked and will unlock in 7 Days

Or

Upon using cursed techniques to solve a conflict

'Solve a conflict', huh? Not the most informative description, but it was what I had to work with, so I'd figure it out.

The Dojo melted away, and I was abruptly blinking awake back on Weathertop. Okay, with my daily quest and dojo training out of the way, I now had time to focus on what I needed here.

Namely, what do I need to survive?

Under normal circumstances, that answer would be: water, shelter, and food in that order. But with Inviolable, I no longer required water or food, so that just left shelter. And there wasn't a lot of that around

here, unfortunately. Despite Weathertop still maintaining its general shape as a fortress, there wasn't a whole lot of actual *shelter* here. Anything resembling living quarters was long gone. In my circuit around the fortress, the best place I'd noticed was a cave-like indentation along the leeward side of the hill, but that was about it.

The surrounding hills offered nothing better either. There weren't even many trees. The few that managed to grow on these wind-swept hills were twisted and gnarled against the harsh environment. Still, it was all I had to work with, so I made my way down the long and winding path to a promising looking tree near the bottom of the hill beside a small spring of fresh-looking water that might be useful for a bath at some point. The air was already chilly enough that it would be an unpleasant experience, but maybe after a few days I'd have a different opinion.

I used my Strength stat to help pull down several of the low-hanging branches. When I'd gathered a small bundle of wood, I began breaking apart the branches into smaller pieces and carried them back up to Weathertop. On my way, I also took the time to gather a fair amount of grass, rocks, and dirt. I stored everything in my inventory and brought it to the hollowed-out overhang I'd seen before. There, I piled everything between a half-collapsed stone wall and the rocky hillside, managing to make the saddest, most pathetic lean-to imaginable.

But it was better than nothing. As the sun began to sink over the horizon, I thought about risking a fire but ultimately decided against it. When I was stronger, maybe. But for now I was weak and couldn't risk attracting attention. Certainly not when I was at the top of a watchtower that could be seen for miles around. So I hunkered down beside my sad little shelter and finally opened the Supply Drop, curious if my actions today would warrant anything more than the bare minimum.

To my pleasant surprise, it looked like it did.

Supply Drop Accomplishments:

- Completed Daily Quest (1)
- Allocated Stat Points
- Completed Meditation Mastery Training
- Learned Infinity
- Leveled Up Infinity

Well, well, well, that was certainly a lot better than 'None'. I eagerly opened the box to see what I'd earned.

The contents included two E-rank Dungeon keys, a simple E-rank dagger that offered a +5 to Attack, and a Consumable Kit containing 10 normal health potions, 10 normal mana potions, and 10 normal restoration potions.

Wow, even with the minimal amount of work I'd done so far, the Supply Drop was pretty good. One extra key beyond the minimum, and the potions were a great bonus too. Potions came in a variety of levels including Normal, Heroic, Legendary, and Divine. So these were the lowest grade items, but they were more than enough considering my low amount of HP and MP. The dagger would come in quite useful in a fight as well. Its mere presence offered quite a bit of reassurance already.

I hefted the dagger in one hand, getting used to the weight of it before performing a few experimental slashes and stabbing motions that felt incredibly awkward to my untrained muscles. But that was fine. I would learn to use it eventually.

With a bit more puttering around my makeshift campsite, I soon crawled into my lean-to and watched the last of the daylight fade away. I closed my eyes and set to sleep.

Or at least I tried to. Hard, rocky ground wasn't the most comfortable bed. I tossed and turned, getting up several times to try and clear the ground into something more comfortable. But no matter what I did, I couldn't seem to make a proper resting spot. Then, a few hours after sunset, the wolves began to howl, and I was starkly reminded that I was out in the wilderness with zero protection. Not even a wall or tent to keep out any wild animals that might want to take a bite out of me in my sleep.

No, that wasn't right. I had Infinity.

But Infinity was still in its infancy, so to speak. I couldn't keep it running 24/7 the way Gojo did, which meant that if I fell asleep, I would be defenseless.

It didn't help that the wolf howls seemed to be getting closer as the night wore on until I was certain that they were at the bottom of the hill. I might have been relieved when the howling stopped, but instead it just meant that every rustle of leaves or clatter of rocks felt like something creeping up on me in the dark.

I spent most of the night curled up as far into my lean-to as I could go with my eyes as wide as saucers beneath my blindfold staring out into the darkness. My cave only had one access point which would require cresting the watchtower and climbing down a small slope to reach. So the odds of someone stumbling on it accidentally in the night was somewhat low.

I repeated this to myself many times in the darkest hours of the night until dawn began to slowly lighten the horizon. I must have fallen asleep at some point despite my discomfort and muted terror because I eventually blinked awake in the fullness of daylight. I managed to crawl out of the lean-to and stretch. Thanks to my recovery ability, I actually felt great and refreshed despite my horrendous night's sleep.

It was at least midmorning, and the sky was gray with incoming storm clouds. With the threat of bad weather to spur me on, I got to work immediately with my daily quest workout. When that was done, I opted for my daily loot box first, which was a hooded cloak.

Yep, it was definitely going to rain soon. I brought up the status window to distribute my 3 stat points. I put them right into Strength, still following Jin-woo's wisdom.

Gojo's skills would eventually be useful for offensive combat, but for right now, I needed to increase my raw power. Thankfully there was still nothing in the immediate area that required any form of combat, so I spent much of the afternoon working on my shelter, expanding its size and adding a thick layer of grass to the ground to act as a bed. I also took regular breaks to train Infinity by tossing rocks up over my head and catching them in my technique. This training only became more fun when the rain began to fall. Catching and releasing dozens of water droplets was rather entertaining.

I was also trying to see if I could raise Infinity to Level 3 outside of the dojo. I knew that the next step was selective enforcement, so I tried to hold the water droplets in place while moving my hands toward them, but it didn't work out too well. I either ended up pushing them away, condensing my Infinity, or dropping Infinity entirely. Even after hours of practicing, meditating, and mental gymnastics, I felt no closer to the spark of understanding that would bring me to the next level,

Well, at least the training itself was pretty fun.

Only in the early hours of evening did I retire from my training and settle into my now much more comfortable accommodations. Considering the chill of rain, and since I was feeling more confident in my

abilities, I even decided to take the risk of a small, well-concealed fire. The light and warmth offered hearty reassurance while I settled in for the night.

As I was lulled by the peaceful sounds of a gentle storm, I took out the two E-Rank dungeon keys and considered them. One was green and the other was gray. Their labels both had the same text about opening an E-Rank dungeon at a location of my choice, so I supposed that it didn't matter much which one I used first.

Not that I was ready yet. Jin-woo had taken three days before he was ready to enter his first dungeon, and he'd been far more confident than me. For good reason, too. Despite his weakness, he had years of experience as a hunter that I simply did not possess. He'd also had a +10 sword while I only had a +5 dagger.

But that begged the question: when would I be ready to enter my first dungeon? It was tempting to over-level, so to speak, by simply doing my daily quest until I could one-shot whatever was within the dungeon effortlessly. But something told me that that would be a *bad* idea. I frowned as I turned the keys over in my hands. I couldn't always guarantee that I would possess overwhelming strength. Jin-woo had faced multiple opponents that far surpassed him. Some, like Antares, could not simply be overwhelmed with time spent growing.

No, I needed to learn how to fight. I needed to be able to face down enemies that stood above me. I needed skill and tactics and courage.

Courage of the Weak.

I didn't feel like I'd earned that quest completion reward. But I would. Somehow I would.

I tucked the keys away. Five more days. I could put 12 more stats into Strength and 3 into Agility. It would also be enough time to re-open the dojo and get some kenjutsu training on how to handle my dagger. That would hopefully be enough to cover the gap in skill and equipment between me and Jin-woo while not dallying to the point of making the dungeon completely useless as a tutorial of sorts.

With a plan of action now set, I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning I found myself feeling pretty good. My small fire had burned itself to ash, and the rain had stopped some time in the night, leaving the grassy hills speckled in shimmery dew. I rose and activated Infinity. I wanted to practice keeping it up even without conscious thought. Then I stretched and did my daily quest once more, adding another 3 stats to Strength and receiving a bar of soap as a reward. Which was good because daily exercise and no showers meant that I desperately needed a wash. Camping with zero supplies wasn't fun. I was just grateful for the fact that I no longer felt hunger or thirst. My time here would have been so much more challenging if I'd needed cooking supplies and food too. I just hoped that my next reward was a fresh set of clothes or maybe a hairbrush.

In the meantime, I took the long hike down to the small spring and washed my face and hair. It was too cold for an actual bath, so this would have to do for now. On my way back up, I paused, only just noticing the large canine footprints in the fresh mud. So, there really were wolves. And recently. Those had definitely not been here the last time I'd visited.

Huh, if there were predators around, it wouldn't hurt to train a bit with my dagger, which I did when I returned to the crest of Weathertop. Well 'Train'. It was mostly flailing around as I tried to get comfortable

with the weight and motions of an attack along with getting familiar with my reach. I put a piece of wood on a flat stone near the center of the ring and practiced slicing at it.

I felt a little silly, but I couldn't deny that I was getting used to handling my dagger, even if my actual skill was still more-or-less a figment of my imagination. I kept this up until late afternoon when I finally took a breather only to notice movement from the corner of my eye. There were black shapes on the hillside below. I briefly removed my blindfold and peered over the edge to see what I'd feared: wolves. There were at least six of them, and they were making their way up to my current position.

Not good.

Wolves in modern times weren't typically very dangerous because they'd long since developed a fear of humans, but I was willing to bet that the wolves of Middle Earth weren't the same. These creatures were apex predators known to prey on hobbits and humans alike. If they came up here, I had to be ready for a fight.

I started by scrambling atop one of the nearby columns of stone to give myself a height advantage. Sure enough, a few minutes later, a pair of wolves appeared sniffing around Weathertop. Wow, those things were *huge*. Not quite as large as the Wargs ridden by goblins, but easily the size of ponies. I crouched in wait until one of the wolves looked up and went perfectly still as it spotted me. Its companion noticed the wolf's change in behavior and followed its gaze to meet mine as well.

For a long moment, we simply regarded each other, but then one of the wolves gave an urgent bark and both of them lowered their heads and began to advance.

Well, there wasn't much else I could do. I reinforced my Infinity to keep them at bay and waited. Unfortunately, the first two wolves were quickly followed by the arrival of the other four wolves. One tried to leap up to attack me, but it was quickly stymied by Infinity and fell back down. The wolf yipped in confusion and tried again without success. A few of the others tried as well and met similar results.

Huh, at least I wasn't in any danger even if this wasn't really solving my problem. It gave me a chance to study my opponents. If I couldn't dissuade them, I'd have to attack. But if I wanted to attack, I'd have to drop my Infinity. In theory, that should be fine. Just collapse it to armor, and drop it when I was in a position to strike before recreating it immediately afterwards.

But despite having a working theory for a strategy, I hesitated. It was one thing to say that I would heal in time. It was quite another to be facing down the jaws of a pack of hungry wolves. If I killed one, would the others run away?

Ugh, if this was how I faced a group of ordinary, albeit oversized, wolves, how was I going to handle an *actual dungeon*? Even the weakest monsters in there would be far more dangerous than these things. And at my current level, I couldn't just rely on standing still and hoping my enemies gave up. If I couldn't face these wolves head-on, I would never be able to enter a dungeon. If I wanted to make use of my Strength stat, I had to get up close with them. And that meant taking the risk of being hurt.

Okay, to kill them, I'd have to get down from the pillar. But the moment I did that, I'd have all three pouncing on me at once. Teeth and claws. Those were their weapons. I didn't have any armor to protect me, but that was fine. As long as they didn't get their jaws around my throat, I could survive any initial attack and heal later. The important part was to make sure that I took down at least one before the others could get on top of me.

So I waited, watching as the wolves continued to circle and make occasional bites toward my feet. One of the wolves was the main attacker, while three others circled for an opening and two hung back a bit. The attacking one was probably the best to take down first. I pulled away my blindfold and gripped my knife in one hand. I then waited for it to leap up, and this time instead of drawing back, I jumped toward it, dispelling Infinity and bringing my full weight down on its head even as I slammed my knife down on its neck.

I didn't even have time to register whether or not I'd killed it before I snapped Infinity back into place as three others were on top of me. My Infinity stopped them in their tracks, giving me enough time to pick out my target. I shrank Infinity back into place and sliced my dagger along its throat before pivoting to slash at the next wolf. But that attack was a moment too late as the wolf's jaws snapped shut on my arm and clamped down.

A sudden, white-hot pain shot through me as I felt my forearm snap. My whole body spasmed at the lance of agony. Invictus might have made my mind unshakeable by pain, but that didn't mean I couldn't feel it. Invictus only gave me the presence of mind to counterattack, bringing my dagger up and slamming it hard into the side of the attacking wolf's head.

The wolf immediately went slack, and I pulled my arm from its jaws. I snapped Infinity back into place just in time to stop the fourth wolf from biting me. But I could only grip my arm in agony. After a moment, I used my daily refresh to bring my health back up. It was a risk. I still had three more wolves to deal with, and the element of surprise was now gone. If I was injured again, I might not be able to get back to full health. I still had my healing potions, but so far I hadn't used any of them, and if I was hurt too badly, I could still be overwhelmed by the wolves and possibly killed.

If only I had gotten Infinity to Level 3. Then this would be a non-issue.

Think. *Think*. **Think**.

There had to be some way to make it work. I considered everything Gojo had taught me as the remaining three wolves began to circle, testing the limits of my Infinity. I expanded my Infinity further, widening the distance between us and wondering why the hell they weren't running away.

I'd killed three of them!

Normal wolves would have fled with just one of their pack being killed. But these three showed no signs of backing down. If I wanted to live, I had to fight back. I had to risk it. I tried again to shape my Infinity, thinking and focusing on the infinite divergences of mathematical formulas. Infinite and not infinite.

Achilles and the Tortoise.

Philosophy, math, reality. They were all one. And not. Because people crossed infinite fractions of space all the time. It was only with curse energy and an innate technique to bend reality that the infinity became real. And why should I impose Infinity on myself? What need was there for that? If Infinity could exist and not exist at my command, then it should only exist for them.

Infinity has Leveled Up!

I applied Infinity to the wolves around me and moved through it like it was nothing. Because it was. Reality for me, Infinity for thee.

In three quick strokes, the remaining wolves were dead.

You Leveled Up!

Huh, so killing ordinary animals grants XP too? Not much, though, since it took six wolves to go from Level 1→2.

I took a few moments to breathe deeply and pulled up my status window.

Status

Name: Vinya **Level 2**
Job: None **Fatigue: 6**
Titles: None

HP: 200	MP: 25	CE: 25
Strength: 20	Vitality: 11	
Agility: 11	Intelligence: 11	
Sense: 11	AP: 0	

As expected, leveling up added one point to each stat and refreshed everything except Fatigue. Fair enough.

I also received another notification that the Mastery Meditation Dojo had reopened thanks to me using Infinity to survive my fight with the wolves. Well, that did seem like a fair interpretation of 'Solve a conflict'. With my adrenaline still running high, and with an acute awareness of my present vulnerability, I opened the dojo, and after a bit of consideration, I opted for Kenjutsu training, specifically dagger-fighting. It was a hard choice between that and Reverse Cursed Technique, but having experienced the agony of a broken bone, I thought that this was a perfect case of an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure. Besides, with Infinity now at Level 3, I was confident in my ability to fend off attacks.

At least at the lower level.

Gojo was pretty good at kenjutsu, which was a little unexpected since he seemed to prefer using his fists and had offloaded Yuta's kenjutsu training to Maki in canon. But since this was an NPC version of Gojo, he had access to all of the skills in the series, and not just the ones that he, personally, was skilled at.

The four hours passed in a breeze as Gojo offered words of advice and wisdom every few minutes and showed me stances, attacks, and counterattacks in a way that felt natural and intuitive. By the end of the four hours, I'd acquired the **Dagger Fighting** skill and raised it to Level 2.

The dojo melted away, and I returned to Weathertop

With all threats eliminated, I considered the wolves. I didn't want them rotting in my training area, but I wasn't sure what else to do with them. After a bit of fussing, I gathered up the remains (ew...ew...ew...) and tossed them over the edge of the ruins to the valley below. And then, since there was still light and I was filthy with blood, I took another trek down to the spring where I cleaned up everything as best I could before retiring for the night.

The next day passed more-or-less uneventfully. I woke up, exercised, and accepted my rewards (+3 Agility since a faster reaction speed might have saved me from a broken bone, and a thin white smock, which gave me something to wear while I washed my now thoroughly filthy clothes). The rest of the day was spent alternating training Infinity and my dagger attacks. I wasn't making the same massive strides in skill as I did with Gojo or during the fight with the wolves, but I did notice that my training was improving my skill. Just, you know, at a normal level.

Even so, by the next day, I began to feel a bit more anxiety as I woke up, exercised, and accepted my rewards (+3 Strength and a new sturdy brown dress that, when paired with the smock, would presumably fit right in with the locals). Despite my Strength stat now exceeding Jin-woo's when he'd entered his first dungeon, I still felt woefully unprepared for what I knew was coming. But I was running out of excuses to avoid it.

With a strength of 23, and with **Dagger Fighting** at Lv 2, I exceeded the protagonist in every way except equipment. I held the key uncertainly, feeling the weight of it heavy in my palm. One more day maybe? Or two. Yeah, that was the original plan. I'd just have to steel my nerves for it.

For now, I changed into my new, wonderfully clean outfit and put my old clothes into my inventory for safe-keeping while I once again went back to hacking and slashing at a piece of wood.

I was so focused on it that I didn't even notice that I wasn't alone anymore until someone spoke.

"I have seen many a strange sight in these wilds," said a voice, making me jump. I whirled around to see an old, bearded man dressed in gray robes and a pointed hat. He was practically *glowing* with power. And he was regarding me with a guarded expression, pausing only long enough to look me up and down once. "...but never would I have expected to meet a lone woman in this place with such a truly merciless disposition toward logs."

I stared at him for a long moment with bafflement. Which probably looked a little strange considering my blindfold.

"Come now!" shouted the old man suddenly, making me jump again. "What brings you to this place?"

"...Uh...training?" I asked.

"Training?" he scoffed, entering the ring of ruined pillars. I turned to face him, still holding my dagger half-raised. "Oh, away with that! You shall do more harm to yourself than me with how you flail about. What manner of 'training' brings you here of all places?"

"...The self-study kind," I said, lowering my dagger. He was probably right about it anyway. Scratch that. He was definitely right.

"You, a blind woman, have come to this place alone?" he asked, his voice practically dripping with accusation, which was starting to get on my nerves.

"I can see quite well, thanks," I said, somewhat peevishly. "Um, just to ask, are you...Gandalf?"

"Am I Gandalf?" Gandalf echoed. "I should be curious to know what it means to you if I am. For if you are in the service of the Enemy, you will find my identity is to your misfortune. Though if the Enemy has been reduced to such an unfledged and witless assailant, it seems his influence is spread thin indeed."

Wow, Gandalf just woke up this morning and chose violence, didn't he?

"I'm not in the service of anyone," I said with a hint of irritation after that entirely uncalled-for roast. What was his problem? He wasn't like this with the hobbits! But maybe that was it. Gandalf was typically a kind and friendly figure to the hobbits, but even they were wary of him to an extent.

What was it that they said?

'Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards, for they are subtle and quick to anger.'

Yeah, I could see the 'quick to anger' part right now. I wasn't Gandalf's friend, and if my timeline was right, he'd just been betrayed by Saruman and had been turned away like a beggar by the Rohirim. He probably wasn't feeling particularly friendly or trusting right now.

Still, that was no reason for him to take his misfortune out on *me*.

"I just came here to practice with my dagger," I said. "Which I was doing until you arrived. Can I ask what you are doing here?"

"Where a wizard goes and for what reason is for his council alone," said Gandalf, which was unfair but not entirely unexpected. "Hmm, though you seem acquainted with my name, I cannot recall meeting you before. You have a strange look about you. What is your name, and where are you from? Quickly now!"

The 'strange look' was probably referring to my long, snowy white hair. While it might not have seemed too out of place on an elderly woman, on me it must look quite unusual. As for his question...I hadn't expected an interrogation so soon, so I didn't have anything prepared that fit my Geas. But I couldn't say *nothing*, so...

"Well...my name is Vinya," I floundered. "And I'm...not from around here."

Gandalf 'hmphe'd' as he circled me.

"Yes, that much I can divine for myself," he said, and there was something in his gaze...something deep and searching, like he was somehow looking *beyond* me. It made my skin crawl. "But I have little interest in where you are *not from*. Though perhaps you have reason enough for reticence. There is a shadow about you, though it is not of the Enemy, nor is it one I have spied before. How strange."

I blinked at the odd statement and abruptly wondered what he saw when he looked at me. Blindspot should technically have been enough to protect me, but obviously Gandalf had seen *something*.

"Do you...want something from me?" I asked.

"Answers, though those seem in short supply these days," said Gandalf. "How long have you been present at this location?"

I took a moment to count the days.

"...About five days, I suppose," I said.

"So you came here on September the 29th?" Gandalf clarified.

"If that was five days ago, then sure," I said with a shrug. I didn't bother to ask the year since it wouldn't have meant anything to me anyway.

Gandalf 'hmphe'd' again, clearly unsatisfied as he strode to the edge of the ruins.

"What have you to say about the wolves below?" he asked. "Fresh as they are, you must have some knowledge about the cause of their present state."

"Yeah, I killed them," I said. "They tried to eat me and I...didn't want them to do that."

Gandalf's eyes narrowed. He stared at me searchingly as if he expected to see the word 'lie' written on my forehead in neon ink.

"So you say..." he muttered, casting his gaze to the minced pieces of wood scattered around my training ground. It was too late to disguise the results of my dagger training. And I could understand his confusion. Despite my Strength stat and my Charles Atlas perk, physically I looked like a normal woman who worked out regularly. My muscles were somewhat defined but not particularly large or obvious beneath the loose sleeves of my smock. "So you say, indeed. But no matter. If, as you say, you are in service to no one, then begone from this place! In these black times, there are darker things about these lands than wolves. Whatever foolishness drew you from the comfort of your hearth and kin can very well carry you back."

Heh, 'foolishness'. Maybe it was. The light of adventure seemed dim after five days of self-imposed solitary confinement. Only nine years, three hundred and sixty days to go...

"I have no 'hearth and kin'," I said. "It's just...me now. I have nowhere else to go and no one to return to."

My voice caught as I said that, and I cleared my throat while looking away. Somehow the reality of my situation had escaped me until I'd put it into spoken words. But there it was, as plain as day.

I was alone now.

Very, very alone.

Gandalf muttered something under his breath that I didn't quite catch. When he spoke up again, his voice was somewhat softer.

"If, as you say, you can see well enough behind that blindfold, then take the Great East Road west to the town of Bree," he said. "The time of travel varies between person and season, but since you travel alone and on foot, I should say it would take you eight days or thereabout. Once you arrive, go to the Inn of the Prancing Pony. The owner is a man by the name of Barliman Butterbur. He is a simple, forgetful man, but he is in possession of a good heart. Speak my name to him, and he will help you find employment and lodging. It will not be much, but it is better than fending for yourself here in the wilds at least."

That was a kind bit of advice, but I hadn't abandoned my homeworld to become a barmaid in a medieval tavern.

"Thank you, but no; I have no interest in going west," I said, shifting my gaze in the opposite direction. "When I'm strong enough, I will go over the mountains."

"Oh, and what draws you east?" Gandalf asked.

Good question. I'd been turning my options over in my mind since arriving. My Method Actor Geas was to roleplay as The Drifter, a character archetype defined by having a mysterious past, drifting from place to place every few weeks/months, helping out the locals against their Big Bad, and then moving on to the next town. The Drifter was a great role for exploration, but not so much for world-saving heroism. Thankfully, I didn't really need to worry about that since Frodo and the others should have that taken care

of. In the meantime, I intended to explore Middle Earth. And that meant going east since the Shire didn't yet have any crises a Drifter archetype could use.

At least Mirkwood had a spider infestation they might need some help with.

Of course I couldn't say that to Gandalf so...

"Where I go and for what reason are for my council alone," I said instead, throwing his words back at him.

Gandalf huffed but didn't object.

"If you have sense, you will take heed of my advice and go west," said Gandalf. "But if you have no sense, then at least seek the House of Elrond on your journey east. From there you may travel over the mountain pass if you wish."

It felt a little presumptuous for Gandalf to offer up someone else's house like that, but I wouldn't turn down a chance to visit the elves. Elrond in particular since he seemed like a pretty cool guy.

"Sure, I'll go see Elrond," I said. "Do I just, uh, follow the road?"

The answer was basically yes. The road wouldn't take me the entire way there, but when the road vanished, Gandalf was confident that the elves would find me and guide me the rest of the way. Well, that would be nice of them.

Gandalf also asked me to show him a bit of my training, and I obliged because I didn't have much of a reason to turn him down. My **Dagger Fighting** was only at Level 2, but it was enough to bring me beyond being a complete novice at least.

"You have some small talent with a blade," said Gandalf curiously. "Who is your teacher?"

I hesitated for a moment, but ultimately decided that the name wouldn't mean anything to him anyway.

"Gojo Satoru," I said. Or a simulacrum of him at any rate. "Though we only had two training sessions together, so I'm not an expert."

"Two!" Gandalf laughed, the first display of any positive emotion I'd seen so far. "He must be a skilled teacher indeed."

Yeah, and the special meditation dojo training boosts helped too.

"Anyway, I need to get back to training," I said leadingly. "There's only an hour or two left of daylight, and I want to practice some more. So if you don't mind..."

Gandalf blustered a bit at being shooed away, but he had his own camp to build, so he went to collect his supplies from his horse, Shadowfax, who was waiting patiently in a grassy area below. I was hoping to slip away to my shelter so that I wouldn't have to explain away my complete lack of food, water, and cooking supplies. But Gandalf called me over to his own campsite with the offer of refreshments, which I couldn't really turn down. He'd made his camp near the spring and had an assortment of dried meats, vegetables, and a few apples.

I took a bit of each and savored the pleasure of a full stomach. Just because I didn't get hungry, that didn't mean I couldn't enjoy some food every now and again, right?

Gandalf also built up a large fire and told me that this was the best way to warn off wolves and the more dangerous dark creatures.

Huh, so I should have lit a fire on my first night? Well, I'd survived, so that was good enough.

I also took the opportunity to ask Gandalf a bit about the world. When he wasn't busy trying to wring information out of me, Gandalf was surprisingly talkative, and he didn't press too hard when I didn't want to discuss where I was from. He gave me a pretty good description of the road to the east, the mountain pass, the house of Beorn, Mirkwood, and the cities of Dale and Erebor beyond. He even gave me a brief rundown of his travels with Bilbo and the dwarves and seemed genuinely pleased that I'd heard of them.

Eventually true night fell, and I retreated back to my shelter for what I hoped would be a good night's rest thanks to the protection of one of Middle Earth's most powerful wizards.

What I got was woken up in the middle of the night by the shrieks of four ringwraiths and the shouting of one very overwhelmed Gandalf.

I scrambled out of my shelter, calling up my dagger and hurrying up the slope to the ruins of Weathertop where I could hear Gandalf fighting. What I saw when I reached the top was like something out of a horror movie. The black-cloaked figures were surrounding Gandalf and advancing. There was a rush of *power* and a flash of light as a ball of fire burst from Gandalf's staff. The ringwraiths shrieked but were undeterred. Gandalf had his back to me, and the ringwraiths paid me no mind at all.

I took in the sight and made my assessment.

Against four trained fighters, close-combat was a death sentence. I wasn't even sure if my dagger could damage them since they were wraiths rather than living people. But I had to try. I pulled down my blindfold and called up Infinity before leaping toward the nearest ringwraith. It noticed my presence and parried my dagger easily. It then tried to stab me, but its blade was caught by my Infinity.

I swung my blade around again, this time plunging my dagger into its neck.

It shrieked.

So my weapons *could* actually hurt them. At least a bit. As I leaped back out of immediate retaliation range. What would have been a fatal attack on a human didn't seem to phase the ringwraith too much. *Not good!*

An emergency quest window suddenly appeared before me:

Emergency Quest: Defeat the Enemies

There are enemies nearby that intend to kill the Player. Defeat all foes to ensure your safety. If you fail to follow these orders, you will be given a penalty.

Number of Foes to Defeat: 1

Number of Foes Defeated: 0

What should I do? I'd already stabbed it in its neck, and it was still up and swinging. I didn't *have* any other attack skills! I was only level 2!

I'd just have to keep going. The shriek indicated that it was hurt. Maybe I just needed to do more damage? Even if these things couldn't be killed by normal weapons, neither could the monsters in the gates. And if this dagger was useful against them, then maybe it could kill the wraiths? I hoped so.

I gripped my dagger harder and lunged forward again. I wasn't sure how my stats stacked against these things, but after two hits it became obvious that our strength was about evenly matched with me being slightly weaker. But the ringwraith was *fast*. I could barely keep up, and there was only one of him. And he was already noticeably slower than the others thanks to my first attack.

Off to the side, Gandalf was faring little better against his three ringwraiths, but I couldn't spare much consideration for him when I had my own to worry about. Because the injured ringwraith was steadily pushing me back toward the edge of the cliff.

This wasn't good. I couldn't match him in physical stats, and my skill was so far below him that after my initial attack I couldn't get in a hit. He just kept parrying me like I was nothing, and when his counterattacks were caught in my Infinity, he just pulled back. I needed to get rid of that blade, but the only way that was happening was if he actually managed to stab me.

Wait.

Oh, this was going to be a gamble.

Please let this work.

The ringwraith brought his blade down on me and I leaped forward, dropping Infinity everywhere except my vital organs. As expected, the ringwraith's dagger bit into my shoulder, and I let out a strangled scream, but I still managed to ignore the blinding agony to slash away at him.

Notification

Detoxification:

Debuff: Ringwraith Poison neutralized.

Oh good. Both of us went down hard just as Gandalf unleashed another exploding fireball and led the remaining three ringwraiths down the farside of the hill. Perfect. I wasn't in any position to fight off the rest of them.

As the sound of shrieking wraith and hoofbeats faded, a notification popped up.

Notification

Emergency Quest: Defeat the Enemies



This was quickly followed by another window asking if I wanted my reward. But I didn't care much about that considering my whole arm felt like it was on fire even without the poison. Thankfully, the Emergency Quest Notification was quickly followed by another.

You Leveled Up!

You Leveled Up!

The pain abruptly disappeared with a small shard of blade popping out of my wound before it closed up, as good as new. Two levels for a ringwraith? Well, I was pretty weak. They wouldn't be worth much when I'd gained a few more levels.

I gave a sigh of relief as I sat up and looked toward the fallen ringwraith. By now it was nothing but a heap of tattered black cloth and a few bits of dark armor. I called forth my dagger and poked at the fabric a few times because double tapping was always a good idea. When that produced no response, I stood up and examined the battlefield. It was a complete mess as the scorched earth smoldered from Gandalf's attack. It was still dark out, and I wasn't prepared to wander around in the middle of the night, but I still did a circuit around Weathertop to make sure that the threat had passed.

When I was satisfied, I sat on a half-collapsed wall with a sigh and pulled the blindfold back over my eyes. I then opened up the Quest Rewards window. The first reward was a highly-welcome reopening of the Meditation Mastery Dojo. But the other reward was even more welcome.

+5 stat points, huh? The equivalent of gaining a level.

I thought for a moment about how to allocate them. My first thought was to put it all into Strength, but having been in two actual fights, I was starting to see the value in Vitality. With the wolves, I'd had an epiphany with Infinity to help me fight. And during the fight with the ringwraiths, Gandalf had held off most of them and had drawn them away when I'd been cut down. But if I hadn't had those saving graces, I would have been in trouble both times.

I couldn't rely on status refreshes to save me from the consequences of my low health. Certainly not when it came to clearing an entire dungeon. In addition to that, I'd only noticed the wolves by pure chance, and I'd only woken to the ringwraith's sounds of battle. If I was less fortunate, I could have easily been caught unaware or killed in my sleep.

With that in mind, I put three stats into Vitality and two into Sense.

Status

Name: Vinya **Level** 4
Job: None **Fatigue:** 12
Titles: None

HP: 1000	MP: 55	CE: 55
Strength: 25	Vitality: 19	
Agility: 16	Intelligence: 13	
Sense: 15	AP: 0	

Not bad for Level 4. And with that, I returned back to the dubious safety of my shelter and opted to call it a night. Dojo training could wait until tomorrow, and Gandalf had effectively left me to die, so I was more than willing to let him deal with the remaining three ringwraiths on his own.

Chapter 2: An Unexpected Meeting

The next morning was bright and cold, as I might expect from early October. I started off with the Meditation Mastery Dojo training. This time opting for lessons in Cursed Energy Enhancement: Durability. My **Dagger Fighting** skill and even Infinity hadn't been enough to spare me from a stab wound or a wolf bite, so I thought that a bit of extra defense might be worth it. Besides, I could see the benefits of training even without Gojo's direct supervision, so with that in mind, it was better for me to get an introductory course in as many skills as possible so that I could continue to develop them on my own time.

The four hours of training passed quickly as Gojo taught by example. The training was mainly me tanking Gojo's bare-knuckle attacks, which was akin to being hit by a truck over and over again. There was no pain in the dojo, but I could still sense when he did damage, a bit like watching a health bar for a videogame character go down. Over time, I learned the **CE Durability** skill and raised it to Level 2. It was difficult to quantify my new durability, but when in use, I felt like I was wearing full-body padded leather armor. It wasn't going to be stopping bullets any time soon, but it was so much better than nothing.

I then went through my daily training quest and gained a new pair of leather boots and +3 stat points, which I put straight into Strength. And then I went to the spring below to clean up a bit from my fight last night. My dress was still mostly intact except for a hole from the Morgul blade, but my smock was utterly ruined with blood that would not wash out no matter how vigorously I scrubbed.

I thought wistfully of how I would have preferred getting a bottle of hydrogen peroxide from the loot box, but I had to admit that the leather boots were more practical. Gandalf hadn't seemed to notice my sneakers last night, mostly thanks to the length of my skirt and the fact that my shoes were both dirty and a neutral shade of off-white. If they'd been slightly more ostentatious, it would have been obvious that they weren't from anywhere in Middle Earth. And that would open up more questions that I did not want to answer.

So I heaved a sigh and put on my horribly stained smock and dress. At least the brown of the dress covered up the worst of the stains.

I spent the rest of the day practicing the dagger fighting lessons Gojo had taught me, drilling them into my arms and legs until the stances and attacks were as easy as breathing. Unfortunately, training Durability wasn't quite as easy, so I'd have to leave that alone for now. I then went to bed, got up the next morning for my daily quest, gathered my rewards (bandages and +3 Strength) and after another hour of warmups, I finally pulled out the green key.

There was no real difference between the green key and the gray one, but for some reason, I felt like the green one was the better one to start with. After all, green was associated with good things like plants and yes and go. And I had to start with one of them. I wanted to clear at least one E-Rank dungeon before leaving. If I could handle that, I wouldn't have any problems with most ordinary threats. So, before I could lose my nerve, I took it to the center of Weathertop and inserted it into the air, turning it as if it was in a lock. The air shimmered with sparks and flashes of lightning as a dimensional portal opened in front of me.

As the portal solidified, I glanced over my shoulder at the wide world outside the dungeon. I could always just...leave. There was no reason why I *had* to enter this portal and risk my life. I could just do as Gandalf had suggested and head toward Bree and become a barmaid...

I could.

But I wouldn't.

I took a deep, steadying breath, and turned my back to Middle Earth as I entered the dungeon.

Passing into the instance dungeon was like walking through water, and reality seemed to bend around me. But once I was on the other side, there could be no mistaking what I was looking at.

It was a poorly lit, rundown subway station.

"This looks familiar," I said aloud as I turned back to the entrance of the dungeon as I placed my hand on the surface of the portal. A notification window appeared telling me that I could not leave without a hearthstone or until I had defeated the boss.

Yeah, that was about what I had expected. It was almost a relief. At least now I wouldn't have to suffer doubts about whether or not I should run away. From now on it was do or die.

Literally.

I took another deep breath and descended the stairs until I was in the subway. What should have been as black as pitch was instead dimly lit, though I couldn't actually identify any light sources. It must be an aspect of the dungeon. I crept forward with my dagger in hand, feeling less and less confident with every step.

What was I thinking?

I could barely handle an ordinary pack of wolves and would have died against those ringwraiths without Gandalf.

And I thought I could somehow handle an entire dungeon by myself?!

My heart beat heavily in my chest as I inched forward, looking around with wide eyes to spot potential attackers. There was a foul smell coming from somewhere up ahead. Was that...a monster?

A shadow moved ahead, suddenly leaping out of the dim shadows with its jaws spread wide. I dodged back, barely managing to take in the sight of my first monster: a red wolf-like thing with a steel plate wrapped around its lower jaw.

Steel Fang Lycan

I knew what those orange letters meant. It was about equal to my current level. Thanks to the wolf pack and the ringwraith, I was a higher level than Jin-woo was when he'd entered this dungeon for the first time. And since Level 1 Jin-woo had been able to kill plenty of these things without too much difficulty, I could do the same.

I *would* do the same.

The Steel Fang Lycan lunged forward again, its jaws wide to snap at me. But this time I was ready. I had a Strength of 31 and a dagger with +5 to attack. I dodged to the side of the beast monster and plunged my dagger into its neck, swiping back and dragging the blade across its shoulder and down its side.

The Steel Fang Lycan collapsed in a pool of its own blood.

I huffed a few breaths, more anxious than tired. I looked around for a Level Up! Notification, but none appeared. Well...I was Level 4 right now, so of course it would take more than one E-rank monster to bring my level up.

A growling came from the darkness and I looked up in time to see two more Steel Fang Lycans advancing from the shadows...

But somehow, I wasn't quite so afraid anymore.

I had no way to track time within the dungeon as I thoroughly cleared the first platform. It was pretty slow going, too. I began cautiously because it wasn't long before I was being attacked by multiple opponents. Sometimes up to ten at a time. The results were that my dress quickly gained a multitude of tears from teeth and claws, and I received similar slices. Nothing that would require a total refresh, but I did put the bandages that I'd received from my daily quest to good use. The problem was that using Infinity selectively against multiple opponents was *hard*. It required a level of concentration that I couldn't give easily when I was fighting for my life.

How had Gojo done it?

Likely with a lifetime of practice since jujutsu skills started manifesting at about 6 years old. But that gave me hope. If it was practice I needed, it was practice I'd get. So I steeled my nerves and bandaged my wounds, and I kept hunting.

I also tried to use my **CE Durability** skill, but it turned out to be just another thing I needed to concentrate on.

There were also more beasts here than just the Steel Fang Lycans, but while they had different attack patterns, they were all at about the same level of difficulty. The orange color of the creature's names eventually faded to white when I reached level 8. This was only accomplished after what must have been hours of fighting. Not that it took me hours to clear the platform. But the monsters respawned, so once I finished with one platform and moved onto the next, the monsters on the previous platform had time to regenerate.

It really was just like an XP farm in a game. And with each level, I became more confident in my dagger skills as well as my Infinity and CE Durability. While I did still mess up and drop my guard occasionally, I had gotten to a point where I could manage to maintain my defenses while fighting. I also began fighting with my blindfold on, mostly because it was too draining to fight with my eyesight unrestricted.

My nervousness at the beginning felt almost silly now, and I wondered briefly if I shouldn't have come here a few days earlier. I might have been able to take out all four ringwraiths by myself. Then again, if I'd gone in on day 3, I might have just as easily been Steel Fang Lycan chow.

Well, too late to worry about that now.

Sometime around level 10 I even gained a Title:

Wolf Slayer:

A title given to a hunter proficient against wolves. 40% increased experience against wolf-type monsters.

Wolf-type monsters couldn't be *too* common, but, eh, I'd take it. I certainly wasn't going to complain about *more XP*.

At around level 15, I stopped leveling up entirely even after clearing both platforms an extra time. So either my level had progressed to the point where these low-level mobs no longer offered enough XP for me to move forward in a manageable amount of time. Or...

Or the System was telling me that it was time to move on to the Boss.

Either way, I stood at the top of the stairs and hefted my dagger. It was cracked and looked ready to shatter with one more hit. Just like Jin-woo's first sword in his first dungeon. Despite that parallel, it felt unfair since this dagger was part of my Supply Drop, but maybe I was expecting a little too much from what amounted to a starter-kit.

Besides, I'd gotten a few items from the dungeon already including 30 Steel Fang Lycan fangs, two worn daggers, a hearthstone, and a set of Traveller's Clothes that included a new smock, a dress, and a cloak. This was probably the System's compensation for not providing me with any hydrogen peroxide for the past two days.

I heaved a sigh and drank one of the restoration potions. My Fatigue was 58. Not crippling, but it wasn't a handicap I wanted to carry into a boss fight. The normal restoration potions brought my Fatigue down by 4, so I drank five of them total, bringing me back to a Fatigue of 38. I could save the other five for the next dungeon. I also drank two health potions to heal the minor injuries that I'd sustained since my last level up. They were by no means incapacitating, but I'd rather go in with full health if possible.

With that, I felt pretty good and made my way down the stairs. However, despite my confidence in clearing the upper floors, there was something strangely ominous about the aura creeping up from below.

I already knew what to expect even before my feet touched the third platform so I was entirely unsurprised when the giant snake titled Swamp's Ruler, Blue Poison Fang Kasaka reared up from the swampy water filling the subway platform.

Despite all of my level gains, its name was still orange.

Kasaka tried to slap me into the wall with its tail. Thankfully, Infinity was enough to fend off the attack, but with my Fatigue still high, I couldn't afford to have this fight drag out much longer. I countered by slamming my dagger against its scales, but that only resulted in a shattered dagger.

Oh well, I'd invested in my Strength for a reason.

Punches and a broken sword wouldn't do anything against this thing's hardened scales, but I still had to deal with it somehow. So, strangulation it was. But I had to be careful. Even with a leveling up system, this wasn't like a video game where players could fight just as well at 1% health as they could at 100% health. No, when you got hurt, you slowed down. It became easier to exploit your weaknesses, and it wouldn't take much to turn a simple injury into a spiral of death.

Focus.

I already knew how to win this fight. Jin-woo had given me a roadmap. All I needed to do was follow it. I concentrated all of my attention on my Infinity and my Six Eyes, becoming hyper aware of Kasaka's every movement. Watching Kasaka was like watching a detailed diagram of a giant snake. I could see every

twitch and movement of its muscles, and in doing so, I could anticipate its next move. So it was that I dodged and weaved through its attacks, leaping up to wrap my arms around its neck and *squeeze*.

Kasaka thrashed around, but I had no intention of letting go, and I was even stronger than Jin-woo. So it wasn't long before I wrung the life out of the dungeon boss. Kasaka's momentum carried it through one last thrash, but it was still dead before it hit the floor.

You Leveled Up!

You Leveled Up!

You Leveled Up!

I huffed and puffed from a mix of exhaustion and relief as I collapsed to the floor, my legs giving out after realizing that the ordeal was finally over and that I'd survived.

I took a moment to savor that thought.

I'd survived.

But my elation was tinged with a bit of frustration. Funny how I went into this dungeon with so many advantages over Jin-woo, and I still somehow wound up in the exact same situation. I had higher stats, the Six Eyes, Infinity, and CE Durability. And yet I'd struggled just as much as Jin-woo. Well, maybe a little less, but not as much less as I *should have* with all of my advantages.

Then again, all of my skills and boosts were at a pretty novice level. And yeah, maybe seeing what Gojo could do with his techniques and abilities was an unfairly high bar. Even as a teenager who'd had access to his technique for about a decade, Gojo had nearly been killed by Toji. So maybe I shouldn't expect too much from a skill set I'd only had for a few days. I just needed to work on mastering it rather than beating myself up for not being perfect at it from the start.

After all, I'd survived. I would live long enough to continue growing stronger. And that was the important part.

With that thought, another notification appeared.

You have slain Swamp's Ruler, Blue Poison Fang Kasaka.

Two more windows popped up showing me my rewards.

Kasaka's Fang

Item Class: C

Type: Dagger

Attack: +25

**A dagger made from Kasaka's Fang. Able to paralyze due to leftover venom. Grants Bleed Effect.
Can be equipped, stored, or sold.**

-Effect 'Paralyze': Attacked foes have a chance to become unable to move.

Effect 'Bleed': Attacked foes lose 1% of their Health every 1 second.

...

Kasaka's Venom

Item Class: A

Type: Elixir

A pouch containing Kasaka's purified venom. Obtainable by defeating Kasaka. Unlikely drop rate. Drinking will give you toughened skin, but the venom will weaken your strength.

Effect 'Kasaka's Steel Scales': -20% Physical Damage Taken

Debuff 'Weakened Muscles': Strength -35

Of course, I already knew that the debuff wouldn't work thanks to Kandiaru's blessing, so I drank the venom right away. I'd take a 20% damage reduction any day. And Kasaka's Fang would be a fine replacement for my shattered dagger. Especially since *this* dagger wouldn't break.

As I was examining it another notification appeared.

The Boss has been slain. The dungeon's interior will revert to normal.

The derelict subway station seemed to melt away, and I was suddenly sitting with my back against one of the fallen pillars on Weathertop. It was early evening with the sun just beginning to set.

Well, that was interesting. Despite me traveling a considerable distance while within the dungeon, it brought me back out where I began. Good to know.

As I slowly climbed to my feet, I received yet another notification, this one saying that my Supply Drop was ready. I took a look at the Accomplishments list with interest.

Supply Drop Accomplishments:

- Completed Daily Quest (7)
- Completed Emergency Quest: Defeat the Enemies.
- Learned Dagger Fighting
- Leveled Up Dagger Fighting
- Learned CE Durability
- Leveled Up CE Durability
- Cleared E-Rank Dungeon (1)

Huh, that was a whole lot of work hidden behind seven small bullet points. The list didn't even include my killing of the wolf pack! Though compared to clearing a dungeon or killing a ringwraith, that wasn't really much of an accomplishment.

I Accepted the Supply Drop and a new window opened displaying the contents, which turned out to be three D-rank Dungeon keys, two C-rank Dungeon keys, and a Consumable Kit containing 30 Heroic health potions, 30 Heroic mana potions, and 30 Heroic restoration potions. Lastly, I received something that made the breath catch in my throat: a runestone. I snatched it up and read the description:

Sprint: This skill allows the user to increase their speed by 30% at the cost of 1 Mana per minute.

Oooh, that was nice! With my current mana capacity of 265, and since most of my fights only lasted a few minutes, this was an easy way to boost my speed during a fight. I quickly broke the runestone to learn the skill.

At that, another notification window opened. I was getting quite a lot of them today. This one was just as welcome because it informed me that the Meditation Mastery Dojo was now open again. Ah, well, I'd certainly used my CE Durability to solve the problem of surviving my first dungeon. But I didn't reenter the dojo right away. My whole body ached from exertion and the rough treatment I'd received from Kasaka, but I didn't bother to use another healing potion. I did a quick circuit around Weathertop and saw nothing of note except...

I ducked behind one of the pillars.

Because there were people on the road. They were still quite a fair distance away, and I thought that I would never have spotted them before, but with the Six Eyes, I was able to pick out the travelers easily.

Five of them. One was a tall man. Four were small child-like creatures with large feet. Hobbits.

I could guess at who they were.

But it was late, and they would not arrive tonight. And if they made it here by tomorrow, it would be late. But when they *did* arrive, the ringwraiths wouldn't be far behind.

Should I leave? Find another campsite and...wait. What was I thinking?

I gripped Kasaka's Fang tightly in one hand, and I couldn't help the small smile that spread across my face.

I was not the same Level 2 player that the ringwraiths had attacked two nights ago. And even then, I'd managed to kill one of them on my own. Gandalf himself couldn't claim that victory. But still, there was a vast chasm of difference between one injured ringwraith and five healthy ones.

I also might need to protect four hobbits as well, so even with Aragorn's help, that might be a complicated fight. So, what should I do?

Against their superior skill with blades, my best strategy would be a ranged attack. Unfortunately, as my experiences thus far had proven, Infinity didn't work well as an offensive ability. But now that Infinity was at Level 3, didn't that open the possibility of learning Blue? And since the dojo was now reopened...

I sank to the floor and began to meditate.

The next morning I ran through my exercises with gusto. I also tested out my Sprint skill by activating it while I did my morning run, and WOW! It felt like I was flying!

By the time I finished, I felt more invigorated than tired, so I allocated all of my stat points to Strength and returned to Weathertop to check the progress of our heroes. They'd vanished from sight, probably due to the topography. But that was fine. They wouldn't be here until tonight at the absolute earliest.

That would be more than enough time for me to clear the remaining E-rank dungeon and possibly one of the new D-rank dungeons too! Although that might have been pushing it a bit. Regardless of the exact schedule, I wasted no time in opening the second E-rank dungeon and getting to work. This dungeon turned out to be a cave. Or, more specifically, a labyrinth. As expected, the denizens of this dungeon all

had white names above their heads and followed similar attack patterns to the creatures of the first dungeon. The only real downside was that these creatures were all golem-type monsters rather than wolf-type monsters. So I didn't get the 40% extra XP. Well, there were limits to the generosity of the System.

I carved my way through the dungeon easily and took time to try out Limitless: Blue. At Level 2, I was able to pull objects and enemies to a specific location. It wasn't as lethal as Gojo's ability to explode people's limbs, but I could fling targets around like ragdolls and smash them into each other or the wall without putting myself in harm's way. So it was a start. I was also getting better at holding multiple techniques at once. Using Blue, I could keep enemies away while Infinity shielded me from anything that managed to get too close.

But despite the significant progress, I soon found my way stymied by the fact that I did not have the greatest sense of direction, and this place was *huge*. It reminded me of one of Jin-woo's backstory gates where he'd gotten lost and had nearly starved to death before hunters found and rescued him. That wouldn't be a problem for me, but I soon became frustrated as I seemed to walk in circles. It didn't help that the respawning monsters made it difficult to tell whether or not I'd been in a certain area.

After what happened in the last gate, I was far more cautious about overusing the Six Eyes. So I kept them covered the entire time and never suffered from the lack of extra special sight.

This turned out to be a good decision because what should have been a quick jaunt turned into an all-day affair that resulted in an epic beat-down when I finally, *finally* located the boss monster. This one was a golem like the others, and though its name was pale orange, it didn't stand one single chance against the enraged frustration behind my Gravity Cascade, a self-named attack where I created two Blue nodes, one above the target and one below. I would then activate and deactivate them in quick succession, lifting the target up and slamming them back into the ground over and over again. Once the golem's armor was well and truly cracked, I came in with my fists and shattered its stony head.

In total I gained two levels for the entire dungeon. It was a little unsatisfying considering the amount of time it had taken to clear. But that was the way of leveling up. I might have raced from level 4 to 18 over the course of a single dungeon, but those early gains would soon be well behind me. At least I had new, higher-level dungeon keys now to help in the effort.

The fact that the Supply Drop had given me a mix of D and C-rank keys meant that I was right on the cusp between the two ranks. Or perhaps that my extra stat points made the lower-level dungeons pointless. Hadn't Jin-woo gone straight from his first E-rank gate to a C-rank gate?

Regardless, the rewards of this dungeon were slightly less than the previous one, which was fair since this one was so much easier after my level increase. I ultimately received 30 golem cores, a second set of Traveller's Clothes, and Mason's Stone Breaker.

Mason's Stone Breaker:

Item Class: C

Type: War Hammer

Attack: +25

A war hammer made from Mason's Fist. Able to Stun foes. Grants Knockback Effect. Can be equipped, stored, or sold.

-Effect 'Stun': Attacked foes have a chance to become disoriented.

Effect 'Knockback': Attacked foes are knocked back a distance.

This war hammer was interesting because it notably *wasn't* an item that Jin-woo possessed. In fact, it would have been a poor fit for him since Stun wasn't that different from Paralyze, and Knockback would have prevented him from keeping his opponents in close proximity where he preferred them. I, on the other hand, liked this one just fine. Disoriented opponents could become liabilities to their allies, and for Blue, I preferred opening up the distance between me and my enemies.

In addition to that, since I was now at level 20, I had access to the shop! It included a lot of things I couldn't afford, but there were also some mundane supplies there too which I wouldn't mind buying. The fangs and golem cores I'd gotten from the dungeons could be sold for gold to buy some necessities.

Yeah, overall a good haul.

If only it hadn't taken *so long*. I was really looking forward to a good night's sleep. Which seemed just within my grasp as the dungeon melted away and I found myself standing on Weathertop once more. It was clearly well after dark, but that was just a better sign that it was *definitely* time for bed. So much for clearing two dungeons in one day.

Oh well, there was always tomorrow.

Just then, the sound of soft voices reached my ears, and I peered over the edge of the ruins to where I had made camp below. There were four hobbits, three sitting around a small fire roasting dinner while one slept soundly wrapped in his cloak.

Ugh...

I should have been more cheerful at the thought of meeting the future heroes of the War of the Ring, but it was difficult to feel enthused when my whole body ached and my Fatigue was at 78. Because it meant that I wouldn't be finding any rest tonight at all. The ringwraiths were going to show up any minute now.

Which meant that I should probably get the hobbits up too so that they would be prepared. I pulled out several Heroic Restoration potions and downed them without fanfare to get my Fatigue back down to a manageable state.

I then marched down to the campsite.

"Excuse me, what are you doing in my camp?" I asked loudly, making three hobbits jump and startling the sleeping one awake. They scrambled away from me, but there was nowhere to run in the hollow shelter.

"Back, you hag!" shouted one of the slightly rounder ones as he brandished his dagger at me. His face was an amusing mix of terror and determination.

"Hag?" I asked. "You invade my campsite and call *me* a hag? Although..."

I stopped and looked down at myself, only just realizing how I must look to them. Since my first smock and dress had been ruined by the ringwraith and the first dungeon, I'd opted to wear it into the second one for fear of destroying another outfit. So I was currently dressed in blood-stained tattered rags. I'd also spent the last sixteen hours fighting my way through a dungeon labyrinth and hadn't had a chance to

clean up or bathe since then. On top of that, my snowy white hair hadn't seen a hairbrush since arriving here and was doing an admirable impression of a bird's nest.

So maybe the 'hag' moniker wasn't *entirely* unwarranted.

Still rude, though.

"Please forgive our intrusion," said one of the hobbits in a soft and polite tone. It was the formerly sleeping one. He had a gentle and refined voice that was oddly nice to listen to. "We found your camp some hours ago and supposed that it might have belonged to a friend of ours. We hoped to meet him here should he return. We meant no disrespect and will leave immediately if you permit us to pass safely."

"Well I'm not going to stop you," I said, standing aside so that the way out was clear. Of course, knowing that the ringwraiths were around, sending these four away was probably not the most responsible thing to do, so I casually cast out a bit of bait. "Hmph, I came out here to train in peace. If I'd known how many people would be popping in and out, I'd have camped somewhere else."

At that, their heads perked up.

"Please Ma'am, if you would, could you tell us who has come through here recently?" the hobbit asked. "We would very dearly like to meet with our friend if you have any news of him to share."

So, I'd been upgraded from 'hag' to 'Ma'am', huh? The others were now looking at me with keen interest and a bit of hope, though they were obviously still wary.

"Apart from you four, I've seen a wizard and—" I began, but I was soon interrupted.

"A wizard!" cried one of the hobbits that had been silent until now. "Was it Gandalf? When? Do you know where he is now?"

The other silent hobbit tried to shush him, but I shook my head.

"It was Gandalf, and he was here two days ago," I said. "I woke to see him being attacked by four riders in black. He rode his horse off in that direction and was pursued by the black riders."

I gestured vaguely to the northeast.

"Black riders..." one of the hobbits muttered in muted horror.

"If your friend is Gandalf, then you should let him handle it," I said. "No offense, but you don't look like warriors. And those black riders are dangerous."

"Please Ma'am, is there anything else you can share?" the polite hobbit asked. I was beginning to suspect that he was Frodo. "Your words, though they bring ill tidings, offer some comfort as they mean that our friend was still alive when you saw him last. If there is anything more you can say to ease our hearts, we would very much like to hear it."

Yeah, this really did sound like Frodo. He was a pretty sweet guy. It was a shame what the ring would do to him.

"That's all I know," I said with a shrug. "But if you want comfort, rest assured that Gandalf is tough. He blasted the riders with fireballs twice, so he's not going to go down without a fight. He'll probably be fine. Oh! Also, when I spoke with him, he suggested that I visit the House of Elrond. You might find him there."

"That is of great comfort to me, thank you," said probably-Frodo.

By now the other hobbits had lowered their daggers and were standing awkwardly around the fire. I sighed.

"I suppose that it wouldn't be too terrible if you stayed at my camp for the night...if you want to," I added. "It'll be safer for you, at least, if the black riders come back."

"Thank you for your hospitality," said probably-Frodo. "May we know your name, Ma'am?"

"Vinya," I said. "And you?"

"...Underhill," said Frodo after a moment, giving his companions a quick glance.

"...Samwise Gamgee," said the round hobbit reluctantly.

"Peregrin Took, though you can call me Pippin," said the inquisitive hobbit with a cheerful smile. "Everyone does."

"Meriadoc Brandybuck, Merry," said the otherwise silent one.

"It's nice to meet you," I said, and I was pleasantly surprised to realize that that was true. Tired as I might have been, and with at least one more battle to face tonight, it was still nice to meet them.

But speaking of battles, a shriek soon filled the night, and I looked out into the dark, sensing the five riders even under the cover of shadows.

"Well, they're back," I sighed. "Get your daggers ready and follow me. It'll be easier to fight up top."

I led the hobbits to the crest of Weathertop and showed them how to stand in a simple formation against a stone pillar with their daggers pointing out. Without a word, Sam, Merry, and Pippin placed Frodo in the center.

As for me, I pulled Mason's Stone Breaker out of my inventory and stood between them and the five Nazgul cresting the ridge.

An emergency quest window suddenly appeared before me:

Emergency Quest: Defeat the Enemies

There are enemies nearby that intend to kill the Player. Defeat all foes to ensure your safety. If you fail to follow these orders, you will be given a penalty.

Number of Foes to Defeat: 5

Number of Foes Defeated: 0

Nice.

Since this wasn't a dungeon, I couldn't see colored names above their heads, but with my increased Sense, I could get a good feel for their strength. If I had to guess, I'd peg them each as mid D-rank with the strongest one of them reaching high D-rank. Really, they weren't that strong. And based on the fight I'd seen with the others, their main strength came from the fact that a normal person couldn't hurt them.

But I wasn't a 'normal person'.

A sly grin spread across my face as I cast two Blues in quick succession, performing a quick series of Gravity Cascades on the ringwraiths and slamming them all repeatedly into the ground. All five of the ringwraiths shrieked as my attacks hit them, and they fell back. But physical attacks would never be enough to take them down. Still, the ringwraiths seemed confused. Could they even see the source of my attacks?

I dispelled the first two Blues and created a third, drawing all five of the ringwraiths off to one side and lunging forward with Mason's Stone Breaker. Having 32 in Agility meant that I could easily dodge the one blade that managed to rise against me, and I struck the ringwraith with Mason's Stone Breaker, sending him flying back through a ruined arch and off of the watchtower entirely. It would have been comical if the situation wasn't so serious. And that one attack wasn't enough to deter the four remaining ringwraiths, who advanced against me only to be met by my Infinity. As they tried fruitlessly to close the distance, I struck out with Kasaka's Venom Fang and Mason's Stone Breaker in each hand. I didn't expect Paralyze, Bleed, and Stun to do much, so I wasn't disappointed when those effects didn't stick.

But it hardly mattered since three of the ringwraiths were dispatched with two hits of my dagger and war hammer and the remaining one fled into the darkness with a shriek.

Notification

Emergency Quest: Defeat the Enemies



Wait, really? But at least one of them was still alive. Probably two.

Well, 'defeat' and 'kill' were not synonymous. Maybe running them off was enough? It was the only thing that made sense.

With that taken care of, I shut the rewards window and turned back to the hobbits.

"Alright, it looks like that's it for now," I said.

"...Begging your pardon, Ma'am, but are you a witch?" Merry asked in complete disbelief.

Yeah, that was a reasonable thing to ask after witnessing what I could do.

"Not exactly," I said cryptically. "Anyway, I think that's enough excitement for one night so—"

I turned abruptly as I felt a presence approaching from the dark, but I relaxed when it turned out to be a man, the same one I'd seen with the hobbits yesterday. He was weather-stained from the wilderness, but beneath his rough exterior was an undeniably handsome and vaguely ageless aristocratic face. Yeah, this could only be one person. He took one look at me and then turned to the hobbits huddled nearby, still with their daggers out and ready, and then to the empty robes of the dead riders at my feet. But despite how the scene must have looked, Aragorn sheathed his blade.

"Are you well?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, Strider, this woman saved us!" piped up Pippin. "She felled three of the riders just like nothing! With magic!"

Aragorn again looked at me, his gaze somehow even more searching.

"You have my thanks," he said, bowing his head.

"It's nothing," I said, stepping away from the hobbits since I was sure that he was worried about them. "I think I'll head out in the morning, though. This campsite is a little too lively for me."

"Oh, well why don't you come along with us, then?" Pippin asked eagerly. Merry muttered something in his ear. "What? She's going east, isn't she? And she said Gandalf told her to visit Elrond. If we're all going the same way, it might be nice to have her along."

"Thanks," I said. "It's nice to be appreciated, but I intend to go at my own pace."

If I was going to be traveling all day, I might as well use the opportunity to get my 10km run in each morning. I doubted that the hobbits would be able to keep up.

"You know Gandalf?" Aragorn asked.

"We met two nights ago," I said.

Aragorn had a few more questions for me, but all I had were the answers I'd given to Gandalf and the hobbits. He didn't seem entirely satisfied, but he didn't press me further. He did, however, move the hobbits to another campsite further down the tower. Still within easy reach if the riders should return but far enough to be out of my way.

I appreciated it as I finally managed to crawl into bed for a good night's rest. Before falling asleep, I accepted the rewards from the emergency quest, which made my eyes light up. +10 stats, which I put straight into Strength and...a runestone with the skill: Bloodlust. Bloodlust was a skill that could cause any target weaker than me to decrease their stats by 50% for one minute.

I also saw a message that the Meditation Mastery Dojo was open once again, so I did a quick meditation to raise Blue to Level 3. Feeling well-rewarded for my efforts, I curled up in my sleeping bag and fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, I woke to find that Aragorn and the hobbits were preparing breakfast below. At least if the smell that wafted up to me was any indication. I took the opportunity to change clothes and finger-brush my hair as well as I could manage. I winced at the knotted mess, but there was nothing I could do about it for the moment...or was there?

I mentally opened up the shop and scrolled through the miscellaneous section until I found a hairbrush, which I eagerly purchased and swept through my hair. I also bought a small elastic hair tie for a braid and a small rucksack to carry some of my supplies. I then went through my daily workout of push ups, situps, and squats, and then changed into the clean and untattered set of travelers clothes I'd gotten from my first dungeon. Last, I cleaned up my campsite and headed down to meet the others.

They were around the fire and seemed to be waiting for me.

Frodo politely invited me for breakfast.

"I don't need to eat," I said.

I hadn't wanted Gandalf to know about my powers when I'd been so weak and he'd been so suspicious, but the hobbits and Aragorn already knew there was something off about me, so there was little point in trying to hide just how odd I really was. However, the hobbits insisted, and eventually I caved.

The food was delicious, but I only took a small portion when I saw how little they'd served themselves.

And this time it was Frodo who asked if I would be willing to accompany them.

I had to admit, it was difficult to turn down his sincere request.

"Well...if you'd really like me to, I'm not opposed to it," I said slowly. "But I must continue my training. If you don't mind me leaving for about an hour each day, then that should be fine."

The hobbits didn't mind much at all, so with that, we set off together. The pace was slow by my standards, but that was fine. The hobbits talked easily the entire time, filling me in on their lives in the Shire and asking me about my life before coming here. I couldn't and didn't want to tell them much, which they accepted readily enough, though they seemed confused that I didn't know any songs or tales, not even ones that had nothing to do with my past. But in the end it didn't matter much since they had enough stories for all of us anyways.

Traveling to the House of Elrond turned out to be far less eventful than I would have expected with maybe five ringwraiths still alive and supposedly pursuing us. But over the course of the next two weeks, none of us saw even a flicker of their black cloaks, a fact that they attributed entirely to me. And with what I knew of how events were supposed to turn out, I had to concede that they were probably right. This sudden easing of their journey managed to cheer up the hobbits immensely, and I was glad to see them relaxed and happy. Even Sam seemed cheerier, though he still hovered over Frodo like a mother hen.

Each evening when setting up camp, I went off to do my exercises in private. It was a little embarrassing to do them with an audience, and I took the chance to scout out the surrounding areas. Also, during my next dojo training session, I was finally able to learn Red due to having reached level 3 with Blue. Red was a far more offensive-focused ability than Blue, and it was the gateway to Limitless's ultimate offensive technique: Hollow Purple. In many ways, Hollow Purple even surpassed Domain Expansion for lethality, not least because of its sheer range.

Yeah, when I learned that, dungeons would be far easier to handle.

But I was getting ahead of myself. Also, even a max-level Hollow Purple would likely be useless against something like a Monarch, so I had to look at what would be the best return on investment for my training time and not fall into the trap of relying on a single skill above all others.

During our journey east, I continued with my daily quests. For the first six days I put all of my stats into Strength, but upon reaching a Strength of 78, I thought that my stats were getting a little too lopsided. So I shifted to putting 1 stat in Agility, Vitality, and Intelligence instead. I was currently neglecting Sense because it wouldn't be as useful for me since I had the Six Eyes, but that would probably change when I started entering C-rank dungeons. Those were where monsters started getting tricky. That was where a high Sense stat would start to shine.

Also, along with the stats, I received various daily loot which mostly consisted of food. This was likely because Aragorn and the hobbits had dwindling food supplies, which made their offer of sharing breakfast with me so baffling. So in return I offered them apples, some beef jerky, or a loaf of bread each day. I was

happy to help. The quest was even kind enough to accommodate Pippin's request for an apple pie, but unfortunately fell short of a Shire-style feast, offering only a loaf of bread instead.

On the sixth day of our journey, I also received the next Supply Drop, this one offering 10 C-rank keys, 30 Legendary consumable potions, and a rune stone for a skill called **Critical Attack**. I was really pleased with this even if I didn't have the opportunity to use any of the dungeon keys and tried not to be too disappointed a week later when the next supply drop only offered 3 C-rank keys, a set of 10 Heroic potions, and 500,000 gold. The gold, while initially seeming very impressive, turned out to be pretty lack-luster since most of the decent equipment in the Shop started at about 2 million and went up *rapidly* from there.

But still, it wasn't bad.

Right around that time, we also ran into someone else on the road, a tall and fair-haired elf by the name of Glorfindel who had left Rivendell in search of us. He seemed relieved to see Aragorn and the hobbits well, and he promised to guide us safely to the House of Elrond. He also spoke to Aragorn briefly in the elvish language and regarded me with a now-familiar searching expression. I could only smile at him and wave, which made him frown doubtfully.

But he didn't tell me that I wasn't welcome, which was good. Especially because I could tell that he was *strong*. And not just in a general sense of the word. For example, Aragorn was strong for a human. With my Sense stat, I could estimate him as a mid D-rank fighter. Maybe Level 15. In other words, he was roughly equal to the normal ringwraiths. But Glorfindel?

This wasn't a dungeon, so I couldn't see colored names above people's heads, but if I could, then his name would be blood red.

He was easily B-rank. Possibly A-rank.

Extra stats or no, I did *not* want to get into a fight with this guy.

But although he expressed plenty of interest in me, my past, and my abilities, he displayed no hostility. So I answered what I could, begged off of what I couldn't, and happily showed him my Blue, which he was suitably impressed by. Which made me feel slightly better about the power difference. So it was with that that on the morning of the 20th, we arrived at our destination.

To say that Rivendell was as beautiful as the descriptions would be an understatement. It had an almost eerie perfection about it, like it was a photoshopped postcard from every angle. The architecture, the waterfalls, the gardens. Everything about it was just...perfectly beautiful. It was almost painful to look at sometimes simply due to how *unreal* it's perfection felt.

The hobbits seemed just as in awe of it as I was, though they didn't appear to experience any discomfort about the unnaturalness of it all. Maybe because they lived in the picture-perfect pastoral wonderland of the Shire already and so were accustomed to natural beauty.

We were soon met by a host of armed and armored guards who Glorfindel spoke with briefly in the elven language before guiding us inside. That was when Elrond himself came out to greet us, and he spoke with solemn gravity and greeting. Right behind him was Gandalf.

The hobbits were overjoyed at his appearance and crowded around him like children whose father had just returned from a month-long business trip. I breathed a sigh of relief at Gandalf looking alive and well. I knew that he would be. He was Gandalf, but although I'd been perfectly content to let him handle his

own issues with the ringwraiths that night, I was starting to feel the gnawing edge of guilt. Mostly due to the sweet hobbits' anxiety over Gandalf's wellbeing.

Gandalf eyed me with a furrowed brow and another very thorough searching look, but I just smiled blandly at him as one of the elves came to show us to our rooms. It was a pretty nice setup with wide open doors and windows that let in the perfumed air. It smelled like spring with fresh flowers everywhere. This really was an unnatural place, though not a bad one.

I settled in easily enough, and I took the time to do some Dojo training, this time in Taijutsu since I knew that my eventual fight with Igris would involve throwing fists, and I wanted to be ready for that. As I was plotting out my training regimen, there was a knock on the door, and Gandalf entered.

I gave him a wave but didn't stand up from the table.

"It seems that there is more to you than I originally divined," said Gandalf in lieu of a greeting.

"Oh, I'm doing fine, thanks for asking," I said dryly. "It's nice to see you in one piece."

Gandalf 'hmped' and stalked over to a nearby chair, still watching me like he expected me to sprout bat wings and attack him. But he still sat down, which indicated a level of comfort that an open threat wouldn't have allowed.

"And I am surprised to see the same for you," said Gandalf. "When last I saw you, you had been felled by a Morgul blade. That is not a wound that can be easily surpassed. And yet here you sit whole and hearty."

"Thank you," I said.

Gandalf scoffed.

"Explanations are in order," he clarified.

Unfortunately, that went against several of my Geas, and...I was still a little salty about the whole 'left for dead' thing. I could understand *why* he'd done it. As he said, being cut with one of those knives was more-or-less a death sentence, and Gandalf was carrying the weight of the world with his mission. He couldn't throw his life away for a random woman he'd just met a few hours earlier. Certainly not when she was as good as dead anyway.

For someone that passed millenia like humans passed seasons, one mortal life meant little.

But it was still *my* life.

"Yes, I would certainly appreciate that," I said, giving Gandalf a hard look. "Like why exactly *you didn't warn me* about the ringwraiths pursuing you. I'd like to hear that explanation, thanks. And you're welcome, by the way, for saving the hobbits that *you* should have been guarding."

Gandalf had the grace to look a little guilty as well as annoyed.

"It seems you know more than you initially suggested," said Gandalf. "Though...I do apologize for not properly conveying the severity of the situation or the risk my presence brought to you. However, if you know as much as you seem, I'm sure you'll understand my need for reticence."

"As you understood mine, I can understand yours," I said. Then I sighed. "If you're wondering where I fit into all of this...I don't. I intend to leave and head east as soon as possible. This mission is yours to carry, and I intend to interfere as little as possible. Preferably not at all, but some things can't be helped."

I hadn't had a chance to run through the dungeon keys I'd accumulated, so I was looking forward to getting back out into the wilderness where no one would notice if I vanished for hours or days at a time.

"No, they can't," said Gandalf. "But I will ask again what you seek in the east?"

Now that I'd had a bit of time to think about it, I had a better answer.

"Five set out to Middle Earth, and as of now, only one remains true to the mission," I said. "Radagast has no interest or care for present events, Saruman has betrayed the light, and the blue wizards vanished into the east. Your journey will take you south, but the south is not the only place that must be protected."

Gandalf drew himself up, and when he spoke, there was a strange *power* in his words.

"*Who are you?*"

Huh, wasn't that interesting? His words weren't in the common language I'd been speaking to the others, and yet, I could still understand him. Was it like how Jin-woo could understand the language of the beasts thanks to Ashborn? But it hadn't helped Jin-woo understand Japanese or English. So was the language Gandalf was speaking something divine?

"Vinya, like I said before," I replied. I couldn't speak that language even if I understood it, but I could at least respond. "And there's no need to worry too much about me since I'll be out of your way soon."

Gandalf still didn't look happy, but at this point I didn't expect him to. Even so, he seemed to shrink back in on himself, dispelling the aura of intimidation that he'd summoned.

"Thank you for protecting Frodo," he said. "He is very dear to me."

"He is quite sweet," I said. I thought again about what the ring would do to him and frowned. "Before I go, I have a gift for him. Him and Sam."

Gandalf was curious about the type of gift I would provide to the two hobbits, but because it involved future events that hadn't been decided, I told Gandalf that I would not say until Frodo's choice had been made. And that Gandalf would know the choice as soon as he heard it. Gandalf, like always, was not particularly happy about it, but I assured him that it was in the hobbit's best interest. I didn't want Frodo to feel obligated to do anything because of the gift. As such, I would give him the gift when he'd made his choice.

In the meantime I had a chance to explore Rivendell, which could best be described as a giant garden dotted with ornate and beautifully crafted buildings. After a bit of wandering I came to a central hall with a fire burning merrily in the fireplace. There were several elves here, most reading or playing instruments and singing softly. Without anything to do, I turned to leave, but Glorfindel appeared at my elbow and requested to walk with me.

I obliged and he asked if there was anything I required before I left on my journey. I was about to decline because the System and Dojo would provide everything I required from a training perspective, but as I thought about it, I realized that there were a few things I would like to know. I asked him to show me maps of Middle Earth and if there were any written records of the travels of the Blue Wizards.

He brought the maps out readily enough and disappeared into a library to procure any reading material involving wizards. I had eidetic memory, so memorizing the maps wasn't difficult. But when Glorfindel eventually produced the relevant books, I quickly ran into a problem.

I couldn't read elvish.

Thankfully Glorfindel was more than willing to offer assistance with the translation and he then offered to teach me a bit of the language, which I accepted with ready amusement. Maybe I should feel a bit guilty about implying to Gandalf that I'd been sent by the Valar to aid Middle Earth.

Really, I was just a drifter who happened to spare Frodo from a nasty wound.

Still, I wasn't about to turn down Glorfindel's lessons.

As long as I was here, there wasn't any harm in learning a bit about the locals. Glorfindel started me off on the elvish language of Sindarin by providing a few cursory lessons and a dictionary before he was pulled away to deal with some other matters. It turned out that there were various elven languages in Middle Earth, but Sindarin was by far the most commonly spoken now.

With the help of Clarity of Mind, I was able to memorize the entire dictionary in the four hours it took me to read it. I was pleasantly surprised that I was able to do even that since 'reading a dictionary' was normally something that would bore me to tears. But Clarity of Mind also allowed for improved focus, which meant that I was able to hunker down and brute-force my way through the conjugation tables without too much mental suffering. Of course, rote memorization could only take me so far and was no use whatsoever when it came to intonation and pronunciation, both of which were vital to this particular language according to Glorfindel.

It was also proven that night during dinner when I tried to follow a few nearby conversations and found myself completely lost. Spoken words tended to blend together, and the elves here didn't feel any particular need to slow down and enunciate.

At one point, Elrond asked me how I was finding Rivendell, to which I responded in Sindarin, "*I [am] learning Sindarin.*"

At this, half the table exploded with laughter and amused comments, which reminded me that elves have very sharp hearing. Glorfindel also laughed at that, though not rudely. He commented in Sindarin that I was learning well, but I had to ask him to say it again more slowly before I caught his meaning. Elrond also shared a few comments in Sindarin, thankfully speaking slowly enough that I could understand. So I practiced with him a bit and felt somewhat proud of my halting accomplishments by the end of dinner.

I also had a chance to meet up with the hobbits, who introduced me to Bilbo himself. He was the first truly *old* person I'd seen so far, but even he didn't look as old as I knew he was. Bilbo was very interested in me and my travels, but like always, I had little information to provide to him. He too seemed amused at my learning of the elvish language and told me that he was doing a bit of translation work, and would I like to see it?

Of course I said yes, and we talked well into the early hours of the night before it was time to retire to bed.

I spent the next three days mostly hanging around and practicing my Sindarin with whoever was willing and patient enough to speak simple sentences to me slowly. I found that reading Sindarin was easier than listening to it, and listening to it was easier than speaking it. But I was making a decent amount of progress in all three areas even if I sounded a little slow, halting, and (for lack of a better word) 'touristy'.

I also spent a fair amount of time on the training grounds here in Rivendell. Mostly for my daily quest and dagger practice. It was during the third day when Glorfindel dropped by and offered to spar with me. An interesting request, but there was obviously cause for his interest, so I squared up against him and we ran through a few rounds.

As expected, Glorfindel was a *beast* in combat. If it wasn't for my Infinity, I would have been cut down on the first attack. Thankfully, Infinity was absolutely perfect for these types of matches. For the sake of training, I kept Infinity to a minimum, holding it close against my skin so that he could simulate strikes without actually hurting me. And simulate strikes he did.

Glorfindel was the type of person who could mow down entire legions of enemies if given enough time and space. But although he did not, by any means, exert himself against me, I at least managed to keep up with him. By now I had a Strength of 78 and my other stats were in the upper 30s or lower 40s, so my 'stat-level' was roughly equal to level 37 even if my actual level was only 20. However, even that still paled in comparison to Glorfindel, who I was sure would mop the floor with me if he was inclined to do so. The only area where we could even compete was Strength, and I estimated that I was only marginally more powerful than him. If he had levels, he would have been in the upper 40s with an emphasis on Strength. Maybe higher if he got serious. So, yeah. My estimation of 'possibly A-rank' could be definitively replaced with *definitely* A-rank.

After our match, he commented that I was the strongest person he'd faced since the balrog, so that told me about what I could expect from Sauron's most powerful allies. Good to know. Glorfindel also took the opportunity to give me a few pointers about fighting and swordsmanship. He used a very different style than someone like Gojo, so it was interesting to learn, and I was already puzzling through different ways I could tie the two styles together.

It kept me busy enough while I waited for the council of Elrond, which ended up happening on the 25th of October as men, elves, and dwarves arrived for news and planning. Although I was a little curious about the formation of the Fellowship, long and boring conversations weren't something I looked forward to, so I was happy enough to decline the invitation. That afternoon, Gandalf came to see me with Frodo and Sam in tow.

Frodo looked like he was carrying the weight of the world. And, in a way, he was. I knelt before them and placed one hand on each of their heads. I closed my eyes and passed Blindspot, Invictus, and Inviolata to both of them and then gave them a brief rundown of their new immunities.

Sam was, of course, the first to ask why I was only granting this protection to the two of them, which made me give him a rueful smile.

"Because the two of you are the only ones who possess no desire for power and who do possess a decent amount of discretion," I said. "If I granted these gifts to, say, Boromir, he would take it as an empowerment to use the ring rather than as a tool to help destroy it. Make no mistake. While the ring can no longer influence you, and the Enemy cannot sense you, the ring is still clever and treacherous. Do not take it lightly."

Frodo and Sam nodded at this and Gandalf ushered them away. With that, my purpose in Rivendell had been fulfilled.

Chapter 3: Solo Leveling

I received my supply drop the next evening, and I was pleasantly surprised to see 10 C-rank keys, a kit of 30 consumable Heroic potions each, and a Tenacity rune stone.

Curious, broke the rune stone and took a look:

Tenacity: When the Player's health drops below 30% in battle, any further damage received will be reduced by 50%.

Wow, giving Frodo and Sam those immunities really was worth quite a lot. And it was slightly ominous because how often was my health going to drop below 30% from now on? Well, I was bound to get into trouble sooner or later, and I'd rather have this than not, so I'd accept it gladly.

This was also the incentive I needed to get my butt out of Rivendell and back to training. I now had 3 D-rank keys and 25 C-rank keys to get through, and before getting to them I wanted to cross the mountains. Mostly because the season was marching on, and I had no desire to cross the Misty Mountains in winter. According to Glorfindel, the pass would be open until mid-November, at which point it would become unnavigable. Since the journey over the mountains took 1-2 weeks depending on conditions, if I wanted to go, I had to go now.

Elrond was surprisingly reluctant to let me leave, citing the danger of traveling alone and the presence of goblins in the mountains. But I was adamant. So he simply asked that I delay my departure for another day, which I agreed to. The next morning he arrived with Glorfindel, who offered to be my guide, at least for a portion of the journey. In order to draw Sauron's eyes away from Rivendell, Glorfindel would cross the mountains and go south to Lorien to seek Galadriel's council before turning north and traveling to Mirkwood.

This would leave me to cross Mirkwood on my own (unless I wanted to visit Lorien as well, which wasn't a bad idea), but I was fine with that.

Elrond also provided me with plenty of supplies including camping gear, an extra set of clothes, and plenty of food. I tried to say that this was unnecessary, but Elrond insisted that I keep it. Eventually, I agreed.

So Glorfindel and I set off across the mountains. As it turned out, the weather held fine. Perhaps it was aided by Elrond or even Glorfindel himself, but the air was unseasonably warm, and we weren't bothered by rain, snow, or high winds. At the pace Glorfindel set, I was a little rushed, but with my level and strength, it was easily manageable.

On the first night, the only notable event was taking time to train Reverse Cursed Technique in the Dojo. At Lv 2, it could heal most basic injuries like cuts and broken bones in a few minutes. According to Gojo, the higher levels would heal more and heal faster, so the efficiency gains would make it a viable battle-healing technique.

The only real difficulty came from me getting my 10km run in. Glorfindel asked if I couldn't skip it for a few days, but I was adamant. Thankfully he was able to find a small clearing wide enough for me to run in circles. The same was true on the second day. But on the third day, we spent the entire day on a veritable cliff.

No running allowed.

I had almost resigned myself to finding out what the penalty zone looked like when I had an idea.

I pulled out one of my D-rank keys and opened a dungeon. I let Glorfindel know that I would be gone for a while but would definitely be back before dawn. I then stepped into a dungeon that looked like a grassy meadow in spring.

Perfect for running.

And leveling up.

Sort of.

I only gained one level by the end of this dungeon. The Boss was another C-rank, just like in the E-rank dungeons. It was about the same as or marginally stronger than Kasaka, but that was about it. And I reasoned that this was fair enough. If the bosses were always two ranks above the key level, then I'd be facing S-rank bosses in B-rank gates, and that wouldn't work. The only reason Kasaka had been in an E-rank dungeon was because I'd gained so many levels between starting and ending it.

I was also slightly disappointed by the loot, which turned out to be a +25 attack spiked club with no extra features. Oof. Well, the first two keys were for providing nice starter gear. I couldn't expect superior equipment with each key. The best I could hope for was a wide variety of weapon types that I could use to find something that worked for me. At the moment, I was really enjoying the dagger, but the war hammer was nice too, and I might find something that suited me even better.

This was definitely the case and not at all a coping mechanism resulting from risking my life for something I would never use.

Not at all.

So I took it in stride and left the dungeon, having gotten my 10km run in during the meantime.

The next day, we were still on the cliff, so I used my second key, this time entering a goblin cave, which I felt was highly thematic. Once again, I only gained one level, but by the fifth day, we were on our way down, and a key wasn't required for my exercises. I still used it since I had one remaining D-rank key, but I didn't even manage to gain a single level, which made me feel like it was a bit of a waste of time.

In total, we made it to the other side in six days, just enough time for me to get my next Supply Drop: 3 C-Rank keys, 10 Heroic potions each, and another 500,000 gold. I wondered if that was the default reward for a 'do nothing' type of week. But I now had over 1,500,000 gold, which was significant progress toward some good loot from the shop. Soon I'd be able to purchase the Knight Killer dagger which would be so useful during the job-change quest.

Speaking of that quest, it was long overdue for me to do some level-grinding. So when Glorfindel and I parted ways, I only traveled until nightfall before setting up a somewhat decent basecamp for what I hoped would only be a week or two. Then, as night fell, I took out a C-rank key and got ready to clear the dungeon.

Pulling an all-nighter after a hard day of travel would normally not have been the best idea, but I had so many restoration potions that rest became an unnecessary luxury. And since goblins and wargs roamed these hills during the night, if I was going to be running dungeons, I'd rather do it at a time when I would otherwise be at a high risk of attack. I could always sleep during the day when no one would try to stab me while I rested.

This turned out to be a pretty good strategy. I only cleared a single dungeon that first night, but I was rewarded with gaining two levels. I then slept during the day and cleared two C-rank dungeons the next night, this time gaining three levels. I also had time to do my dojo training. Since I was now in the process of grinding levels for the purpose of gaining the job-change quest, I opted to raise my Taijutsu skill a bit.

Unlike Jin-woo, I already knew some of what to expect, like the fact that I wouldn't be able to rely on my daggers to win against the knights or Igris. Jin-woo had said himself that if Igris had used his blade, he'd have lost. My best bet would be to throw down my own weapon and go in for a brawl as well. I was pretty confident in my strength already, but I still needed skill.

Once the dojo training was complete, I made a point of attempting to clear 3 C-rank dungeons each night and to try and clear at least one of them with no weapons. I felt somewhat giddy at the knowledge that I was now at a point where I could set those types of limitations on my methods, but I wasn't foolish enough to think that I would have an easy time with the job-change quest. That would be the equivalent of an A-rank gate done with no potions or level-up refreshes.

It was, after all, the first real test Ashborn would give me for becoming a vessel for his powers. I wouldn't be able to game it either by waiting a few extra months and overcoming it with a stat increase brute-force method. That was doomed to failure simply because Igris was once one of the wings of Ashborn's Shadow Army. He'd be weakened for the quest, but he was *strong*. If I tried to cheese the quest, Ashborn would simply reduce Igris's power a little less. The whole point was to beat me to near-death and see if I had the resolve to keep going. If I faltered or hesitated for even a moment, Igris would finish the job.

No, I had to go into this accepting that there was a very high probability of death. It wasn't like Ashborn had chosen me the way he'd chosen Jin-woo. I had more to prove and less to prove it with. This would be a fight for survival.

So I continued to clear C-rank gates, gaining levels and passing the days with my stat points spread as evenly as possible. It also turned out that my caution in regards to my camp was warranted as I emerged from a gate one night and immediately spotted *massive* wolf paws. They reminded me a bit of something the Steel Fang Lycan might have left behind, and they were fresh too. But a quick glance around at the immediate area revealed that they'd gone on, though not before tearing apart the small camp I'd made.

That was annoying, but I still had one more gate to clear tonight, so I opened my gate and got back to work.

This continued every other night for the next week, but the wargs destroying my camp were never around when I emerged from the gates. Lucky them. At least for now. It was starting to get annoying. But not annoying enough to interrupt my level-grinding.

Eventually, another Supply Drop arrived with the usual 500,000 gold, but this time I was ecstatic because I'd earned about 1,000,000 gold by clearing C-rank dungeons and selling the loot inside. The result was that I could now just barely afford the Knight Killer Dagger. The +75 Attack was amazing and the 25% damage boost to armored opponents would make life easier for me too.

I also finally received 3 B-rank keys. A sure sign that I was moving up in the world. I regarded the keys curiously. I was now at level 39 and would likely reach level 40 soon. In terms of stats, mine were quite different from Jin-woo, who specialized in Strength, Agility, and Sense while neglecting Vitality and Intelligence. Meanwhile I was a jack-of-all trades with a slight emphasis on Strength. But would that be enough?

The looming Igris fight was weighing on my mind. Even if I could claim that I was willing to accept the possibility of death, I wasn't eager for what I knew was coming...no matter how much I looked forward to the potential reward. First I needed to prove that I was worthy. No, I needed to *be* worthy. Not just of the power.

To summon a shadow soldier meant becoming their true master and gaining their undying loyalty. I had to be worthy of that adoration. Was I? Aside from a few fights with the ringwraiths, granting a few boons, and doing a bunch of training, I didn't really have much to my name.

But I shook my head.

That would come in time. In the end, there was only one person I needed to convince, and there was only one way to do it.

When the dojo opened again, this time I selected Reverse Cursed Technique. I wasn't sure if the job-change quest would allow it since the quest barred healing, mana, and restoration potions, but it couldn't hurt to increase the efficiency a bit. So I took the time to train it to Lv 3. With that done, I prepared to run as many C-rank dungeons as needed to get to level 40. After all, it was now or never, and I'd done everything Jin-woo...

I stopped mid-thought and smacked myself on the forehead.

How could I forget?!

Right, I did have one more trial to complete, and it would be a decent gauge for my strength even if it was coming a little late.

When I completed my daily quest, I doubled all of the requirements and gained access to the S-rank key thanks to selecting the Blessed Random Box. It was more than a little intimidating, but it couldn't be helped. Unlike Jin-woo's key, which required a specific location, this key could be opened anywhere, and so I stepped into the dungeon.

Facing Cerberus was...well, it was a little terrifying. Cerberus was clearly an A-rank enemy, making him stronger than anything else I'd faced before. But I had stats and levels on my side, so despite Cerberus testing the limits of my Infinity, I still managed to take down the giant dog without too much pain and suffering along the way and finally reached level 40. This prompted the job-change quest notification, but I closed the window without accepting or rejecting. The quest would begin as soon as I allowed it, and I wanted one more day to prepare.

In the meantime, I examined my other reward: the Gatekeeper's Necklace, which was an A-rank item that granted me +20 Agility and +20 Sense. I equipped it and opened my Stat window to see where I was at now.

Status

Name: Vinya **Level** 40

Job: None **Fatigue:** 20

Titles: Wolf-Slayer

HP: 6,600	MP: 895	CE: 895
Strength: 101	Vitality: 75	
Agility: 95	Intelligence: 69	
Sense: 92	AP: 0	

Not bad. Right now, all of my stats were higher than Jin-woo's at the start of his quest. This would, hopefully, make things a little easier without prompting Ashborn to raise the difficulty significantly.

Right?

Hopefully.

I was also pleasantly surprised when the Dojo reopened again. I thought that I was starting to understand the criteria for opening the dojo better. It didn't reopen for things like clearing a normal gate, but it *did* reopen for clear milestones where I was fighting something above my current skill level.

I took the chance to raise my Dagger Fighting skill to Lv 3. It was a close match between that and Red, but since I wasn't sure how CE recovery would work in the Job Change Quest, I wanted to work on a skill that didn't require an energy pool. Then I waited until noon the next day to open the gate. I had very deliberately brought my HP, MP, and CE to full while bringing my Fatigue to 0. I also avoided performing my daily quest. It would be 12 hours before it triggered the penalty, and I had no expectation that it would occur at the exact moment I needed it to the way it had for Jin-woo, but after 12 hours of fighting, if I was still alive, I'd be able to take advantage of the chance to rest and recover.

I felt like I would probably need it.

That feeling only redoubled when I stepped into the job change quest gate and was immediately met by a giant, armored knight whose name was bright orange. Right, it was time to get to work.

The early stage of the test went about as expected. There were knights, mages, assassins, and archers to test all of my stats, and I had to be judicious in my application of skills and CE techniques. It turned out that RCT was allowed, but since my CE did not naturally recover in this place, I had to be very selective about using it. Thankfully the Six Eyes were pretty good about keeping costs down, but the tradeoff was increased Fatigue. And since I knew how dangerous that could be, I opted to keep my eyes shut and rely on Taijutsu and Dagger Fighting to get me through most of my opponents.

I powered my way through the halls, having just spent the past week clearing multiple C-rank dungeons in a single night. I'd gotten used to battles of attrition. In the meantime, I gained two more levels, though this didn't result in a status refresh. I did, however, begin to get equipment, including shoes, armor, gloves, and a ring. The shoes and armor had a combined 10% damage reduction, which was always welcome, and the ring gave me a +2 to Intelligence. All the while, I was on the lookout for Igris. I knew that the sooner I fought him, the better even if I dreaded the actual fight.

It was difficult to track time in this gate, but I estimated that my 12 hour time limit was coming due, but that was when I finally found the door and sensed Igris behind it.

I admit that I hesitated.

I still had a hearthstone and could use it if I wished. And if I was smart, I would use it. Because I could tell exactly how strong the person in that throne room would be. But I had the Courage and possibly the Stupidity of the Weak. So I removed my blindfold and opened the door to reveal the throne room on the other side.

Igris appeared, stalking out from behind a pillar. And yep, sure enough, his name was blood red.

Knight Commander, Igris the Red

Well, it was now or nev—

Igris was on top of me, having launched from the other side of the room. I dodged to the side, eternally grateful for the reflexes granted by my Agility Stat, and I performed a counterattack which did absolutely nothing against Igris's armor. Oof. Well, that wasn't unexpected. I shifted to target his vulnerable areas including the gap in his helmet and the joints of his armor, but it was useless. It felt like I was doing no damage at all.

And unfortunately, I couldn't say that Igris was doing the same. While I could dodge and parry most of his attacks, he was adapting quickly to my style, and within a few seconds he'd struck me hard several times, halted only by my Infinity. Even with Knight Killer, attacking him was pointless.

So I took a page from Jin-woo's book and threw my dagger down before balling my hands into fists. If this was the only way to get through that armor, then I'd do it.

Igris paused for a moment before mirroring my gesture and tossing away his weapons. My lips quirked up at his chivalrous display even if a true knight would never have raised his blade to a lady. Then again, I was no noblewoman or damsel. I was a hunter, and I *would* be treated as one.

I regretted this thought almost immediately when Igris then proceeded to pommel my Infinity with strikes too fast to see. Yeah, if I didn't have Infinity, I would be dead or at least in a world of hurt. As it was, Igris' movements were too fast for me to track or to retaliate against. But I tried by using Red and Blue in quick succession. It was more successful than I would have expected considering that Red was only at Level 2, and considering Igris' durability. But maybe that was just the power of spacial manipulation. Either way, Igris' left leg was completely mutilated, crippling him.

This was apparently enough to make him give up on chivalry, because he recalled his blade and tried to bring it down on my head.

Ha.

If anything, the fight until now should have shown how futile that was. Nevertheless, I caught the blade in one gloved hand and, in a moment of inspiration, I used Blue's gravity to give extra strength to my dagger as I thrust it through the gap in his armor, killing Igris instantly.

Two level up notifications appeared in front of me.

Oof.

I couldn't believe that Jin-woo did this with just Kasaka's Fang.

It looked like my extra skills and advantages were finally starting to show their worth, though. This fight wasn't nearly as difficult as it should have been. Which made me wonder if maybe my 'cheating' would

count against me in the eyes of Ashborn. I hadn't actually displayed much in the way of tenacity because I hadn't needed to.

I received another notification about being granted a rune stone for **Ruler's Touch**. I broke the rune stone and received a simple version of telekinesis, which was nice because it had a mana cost of zero.

In addition to that, I received yet another reward:

Red Knight's Helmet

Item Class: S

Type: Armor

-15% Physical Damage Reduction

+20 Strength, +20 Vitality

Yeah, damage reduction and stat increases were always welcome.

Also, on the plus side, my extra stats and better equipment meant that I was better off. I still had 312 MP. But my Fatigue was at 86. That was Bad. I wouldn't be able to use my Six Eyes for this last fight, so I quickly put on my blindfold and hoped for the best. I was finally ready for the actual job-change quest, which began just as I was looking around.

Portals appeared, and from them came the armored knights and mages. There were so many of them. And I was so tired. But that was the point. I steeled my nerves and fired off several Reds, slicing through a dozen knights and one mage. Not bad.

But that was no longer the case for me. There were still plenty of knights and mages to fight against. I got ready for the grind and began punching, kicking, and blasting my way through them all. Meanwhile, I could feel my Fatigue inching up with every second. How many of these things were there? I didn't remember there being this many for Jin-woo.

I grit my teeth at that and kept going, working my way systematically through the mass of metal and magic.

Okay, I already knew the 'answer' to this quest, which was that I had to kill the mages. But the knights weren't making that easy. And I didn't have the Stealth skill that Jin-woo had possessed thanks to killing Kang Taeshik. It wouldn't have concealed me, but it would have done wonders for picking out the mages. As it was, I struggled to locate them all between the pillars and walls of knight armor lumbering around the room.

I made it about 10 minutes before my Fatigue began to climb into the 90s. I was struggling with exhaustion when I saw the Penalty Quest notification and breathed a sigh of relief. It occurred just in time, whisking me away to the desert. I took a moment to look around as I pulled out my strongest Restoration and Mana potions, downing them like my life depended on it. My stats were soon restored. When the centipedes burst forth from the sand, I was ready.

It was time to grind a few extra levels.

By the time the four hours had passed, I'd killed every monster I'd sensed in the vicinity, gaining two levels in the process. And when it was time for me to return, I fully expected the sight that greeted me: a

room full of knights and mages ready for battle. But with a newly refreshed Fatigue bar, I made quick work of them with a rapid series of Reds guided by my Six Eyes. Clearing them away was an easy method of locating the mages if only because killing everything meant killing the mages too. And just like that, the job-change quest was complete.

I received the notifications that I'd passed and had earned extra points for various things. And, as expected, I was given the Necromancer class. I accepted it after a moment of thought that was really just a brief introspection on everything I'd done and survived to get to this point. Then I accepted it and was immediately upgraded to Shadow Monarch.

Of course, I was nowhere near the real thing. Just a pale imitation now, but I would be something more one day. Eventually. The system prompted me for a command word, and of course I chose 'Arise', not only because it was traditional, but also because it just sounded cool. I then used my new powers to turn the knights and mages into Shadows. With my Intelligence stat being higher than Jin-woo's, I was able to keep them all.

And now for the hard part. Without Igris, my path would be difficult, and I held no illusions that his fealty was a foregone conclusion. My Shadow Monarch class was proof enough that I'd earned Ashborn's acceptance. But Igris was not Ashborn, and Igris held another master dear already.

"Igris...Arise," I said, putting as much *force* and *command* into that word as I could manage.

Shadow Extraction Failed.

Two more tries.

"Arise," I said, louder and more insistent as I *pulled* at Igris' shadow.

Shadow Extraction Failed.

One more try.

I closed my eyes briefly and let out a small sigh.

What had Jin-woo said?

I held out my hand.

"Cutting down foes with your sword is your purpose in life," I said. "Knight Commander Igris, do you intend to let it rust in a place like this? If you need someone to whom you can dedicate your sword, then serve me. The owner of the throne you protect is no longer here. Defend the lady that stands before you. **Arise.**"

This time, the shadows burst forth, rising like a maelstrom and coalescing into a massive Shadow.

The system prompted me for a name.

"Igris," I said.

Igris strode past me to join the other shadows, who all knelt before me, silently swearing fealty to me for all time.

"I'll put my faith in you too," I said as I dismissed them back into my shadow.

A new set of notifications appeared, one telling me that the dojo had reopened, and the other telling me that I'd earned the Title:

One Who Overcame Adversity

A title given to those who have overcome adversity. Abilities increase in proportion to lost HP. 1% increase per missing 1% health.

The dungeon began to fade away, leaving me in my camp in the middle of the night.

But I wasn't alone this time. A pack of goblins riding wargs was there to greet me. They didn't notice my arrival right away, but when they did, the goblins laughed and jeered, not seeming to realize where exactly I'd come from.

I couldn't help but laugh too at the absurdity of it all.

"Well, this is a little sooner than I would have thought," I said. "But now is as good a time as any. *Come forth.*"

And my new shadows arose from the darkness, already knowing exactly what I wanted them to do.

Chapter 4: Beornings' Vale

The following morning I did my dojo training for Red. It had done most of the dangerous destructive work against Igris and the monsters in the job change quest, but it was also a stepping stone to my next goal: Hollow Purple. And of course, my domain expansion Infinite Void. Personally, I didn't think that even Hollow Purple would be very useful against the strongest of my enemies, but I had high hopes for Infinite Void since it was a mental attack rather than a physical one. And Antares might not have mental immunities as powerful as his physical ones. Or, at least, I hoped not.

Once I'd trained Red to Level 3, it was tempting to head into the Demon Castle right away and start the process of leveling up both me and my shadows, but I wasn't here just to grind. I still had Middle Earth to worry about and my Drifter Geas to fulfill. So I neatly packed up my bags and began the journey toward the home of the Beornings as Glorfindel had called them. The Beornings were Beorn's descendants, and it was their job to protect the vale between the Misty Mountains and Mirkwood, though they charged a high toll for use of their protected roads and the ford of the Anduin.

The elves typically avoided using these since they were just as comfortable in the wilds, but I knew the risks of getting lost, and although I had memorized the maps, they were ultimately hand-drawn things with omissions and errors that I didn't want to deal with.

So to the road I went. At the loping pace I set, it wasn't long before I found a path leading to a fortress sitting near a ford in the river. It was there I met the Beornings themselves. They were large and rough with wild beards and tangled hair that made them look positively feral. I greeted them cheerfully and we exchanged a few words. One of the Beornings, a man by the name of Beornion who seemed to be the group's leader, asked me where I was from and where I was going. I told him that I'd come from the House of Elrond, and I was heading east to the town of Dale. I also told him about camping in the wilds for a few days and being set upon by goblins and wargs, which I then proceeded to kill.

Judging by their expressions, the Beornings were all skeptical of this, not that I could blame them. But I gave them vague directions to my camp where they would be able to see the corpses of the goblins and wargs that I had left behind. Even without my directions, they'd probably be able to follow my tracks, but they thanked me for my directions anyway.

I also wasn't too worried about what they would find there. My shadow soldiers left no tracks in the ground and the wounds they created were more or less indistinguishable from normal weapons. I'd kept the mages out of that fight for subtlety reasons, but at this point, I was wondering if even that level of caution was necessary.

Despite my difficulty on the road, they still demanded the toll saying that the attack would have been worse without them protecting and patrolling the area. To this, I readily agreed and paid my way with the small amount of Middle Earth money that I'd gotten from my daily loot box that morning. Or maybe it wasn't such a small amount and I was just spoiled by the large number of zeros behind the gold I received from my past few Supply Drops.

Beornion accepted the money and wrote a receipt that I could present at the Beornings' fortress to gain entrance and shelter for the night. I wasn't sure if I wanted to spend the night there when I could clear dungeons more easily in the privacy of the wilds, but when Beornion mentioned the large influx of goblin attacks lately, my Drifter Geas perked up.

Well, that sounded like an invitation to a side-quest if ever I'd heard one.

Also, I still had enough money left over for a few small purchases, and Beornion made sure to emphasize the tastiness of their honeycakes so...

Beornion took some of his men to investigate my camp and one of them escorted me into the fortress to let Grimbeorn, the leader of the Beornings, know about Beornion's investigation. I was obviously not invited to this meeting and was instead pointed toward a small inn and a bakery where I could pay for accommodations and purchase some food.

I poked my head into the inn first where I could see a group of dwarves hanging out in one corner of the common room while a small group of elves huddled in another and some humans were sitting in front of the fire. All three groups seemed to be doing their best to ignore one another, and while I was tempted to ask them about the comings and goings of their respective homelands, I already had one quest to deal with. Hopefully they'd still be here when I returned.

I also went to the innkeeper and asked about the cost of staying for the night, and he told me his price, which was more than my remaining funds, so I thanked him and left. My next stop was the bakery next door.

The food, it turned out, was quite good. I still had plenty of rations provided by the elves, but there was nothing quite like an actual sweet treat to light up my taste buds with appreciation. I also spoke with the baker, a tall and robust woman with wild brown hair. I told her freely about my travels (excluding the Ring, of course). I talked about the wolves, the black riders, and the goblins and wargs. The baker echoed Beornion's comments about attacks growing more frequent and more dangerous. And she even told me about a rumor of goblin caves opening up in the vale just north of the fortress.

Jackpot.

I thanked the baker for the information and turned to head out. The sweet honey cakes had exhausted all of my remaining funds, and it would be easier for me to run dungeons in the wilds anyway. The guards at the gate seemed surprised that I was leaving so soon and warned me that the gates closed at nightfall and would not open again until morning. They cautioned about the goblin attacks and said that the innkeeper was a kind man who would let me stay in the stables for free if I couldn't afford a room.

It was a generous offer but...

"Thanks, but it's easiest to hunt for goblins at night, and I have a lot of goblin hunting to do," I said, waving goodbye and turning north. The Beornings seemed a mix of bewildered and slightly concerned by this, but none of them tried to stop me.

When I was beyond their sight, I pulled out and drank a Divine Restoration potion to bring my Fatigue down enough for a long night of hunting. But it wasn't for goblins, at least not yet. Instead, when I was well away from the fort and after night had fallen, I ran through my remaining C-rank dungeon keys just to get them taken care of before working on other things. It was a grand total of 7 *dungeons* which was more than double the usual amount, but I found that actually clearing the dungeons was trivial with my shadow soldiers.

Even the weakest one stood strong against most of the mobs in the dungeon, and Igris was able to handle the boss monster on his own. I tried to keep back to allow my soldiers to gain XP, so my role in the whole thing was to drink the occasional mana potion and watch the show. I had to admit that it was a nice change of pace even if the XP gains for my soldiers and myself weren't that great.

Still, 7 C-rank dungeons did result in me gaining a level in just one night, so I'd take it.

The following morning after my daily exercise, I sent out my shadow soldiers to examine the surrounding area for signs of goblin activity. I only held back Igris so that we could run my first B-rank gate together. After lounging around all night, it was time for me to put some work in too, right?

The B-rank gate turned out to be another cave-system gate filled with goblins, which was appropriate considering my current location and goal, but although the gate itself had mobs that were easy enough to kill, I ran into something I did not expect: a boss mob that wasn't a goblin at all. He looked almost...human. Almost, but not quite. His coloration was wrong, with purple hair and waxy skin, not to mention a mouth that split into a too-wide grin that a normal human face would never have allowed. And he was wearing a business suit of all things.

It wasn't until the fight began and he literally vanished into nothing that it suddenly clicked.

Kang Taeshik.

This was further confirmed when he used Assassin tactics against me as well as his stealth skill. But they didn't help him much. Jin-woo had fought him prior to gaining his Shadow Monarch class, and I was somewhere around twenty levels higher than he was at that time. So I made quick work of the Not-Taeshik...thing.

And as a reward I received a rune stone from his corpse.

Stealth: allows the user to blend into their surroundings, making them invisible physically and magically. Costs 200 mana to activate with an additional 10 mana per second.

I was a little bemused by this. By now it was obvious that the System was providing me with everything Jin-woo had earned. But if the system was going to give me this skill, why now? Shouldn't I have gotten it prior to the job-change quest?

I'd been grinding so much so surely—Ah!

That was it.

Jin-woo had completed his E-rank dungeon and had started grinding right away with C-rank dungeons. Then he'd gone on to defeat Cerberus. But me? No, I'd effectively taken a month off to travel and hang out in Rivendell. And all the while, I'd accumulated C-rank keys, which had proven enough to get me to the job-change quest level. If I'd been more consistent with my grinding, I probably would have gotten this B-rank key at around level 30.

And in fact, I *had* gotten this key before my job-change quest. I just hadn't used it because I had such a huge backlog of C-rank keys, and I'm not the type of person to skip a chance to grind XP.

Huh, well, even if this skill would have been nice to have during the job-change quest, I'd done okay without it. And now *this* situation offered a bit of an opportunity.

I looked at the corpse of Not-Taeshik.

"Arise."

Normally, Kang Taeshik would only become a shadow soldier for Suho, but I wasn't about to pass up a chance for him to join me.

Not-Taeshik's shadow was called forth on the first try, an Elite-grade shadow that I unofficially named 'Kira' as Suho would have done. Unofficially because he was only an Elite rank right now. I'd give him his name properly when he earned his promotion.

This was also a pretty good indication that one of my first A-rank keys would turn into a Red Gate and result in fighting Baruka. I wasn't too worried about this, but I wondered whether or not I'd be getting both Tank and Kim Chul as Iron before or during that conflict. Also, since I was running these gates solo, and since I couldn't leave any of them, was a Red Gate functionally any different from a normal gate? Maybe I'd have to worry about extra environmental factors like the cold? That shouldn't be a problem. I'd just have to make sure that the shop offered winter gear before heading out.

I should also probably focus on Strength and Intelligence for my daily stat quests too. At least for a while. Baruka would be a strong opponent, but my Sense was high enough to pierce his Stealth skill, and I would need both Strength and MP to handle him and the other Ice Elves. I wondered if I'd be able to extract his shadow if my Intelligence was high enough? I probably shouldn't get my hopes up, but it was something to aim for even if the outcome was unlikely.

With that thought, the B-rank gate I'd just cleared began to fade away. Since it had just been Igris and I clearing the gate, it was noon when I emerged ready for a nap. But my shadow scouts had returned with news of several goblin caves within a few hours' travel, so I set off toward the nearest one.

It was nightfall when I arrived, but because I hadn't slept in quite a while, and since the goblins of Middle Earth were sub-E-rank in terms of difficulty, I left the actual fighting to my shadow soldiers. When they were done, I had Igris bring me the corpse of the apparent leader of the goblins.

"Arise."

The shadow that arose from the corpse was wispy and looked like it would dissolve in a stiff breeze, but when I asked it if it could show me where the other goblins were hiding, it nodded yes.

I spent most of the night following the goblin's pointed directions to the other goblin hideouts and clearing those out too. During the day, I would do my daily quest, run a B-rank gate with Igris while the other shadows scouted under Kira's leadership, and would take a quick power-nap before heading out to kill more goblins. This continued night after night. On the fourth day, I even got a Supply Drop with a **Dagger Throw** rune stone, as well as one more B-rank key and 4 A-rank keys.

Dagger Throw: Allows the user to throw a dagger at an opponent with damage and accuracy depending on the skill 's level. Costs 30 mana per use.

Not bad.

As for the keys, I wasn't totally sure if I was ready for Baruka just yet, so I finished off with the last B-rank key and swapped out B-rank dungeon clearing for clearing the lower floors in the Demon Castle instead. I was given the quest to collect 10,000 demon souls with the reward of any item from the shop and +20 stat points along with an undisclosed reward, which was, naturally, the Holy Water of Life formula. The lower floors were pretty weak overall, and I'd rather get that cleared while I wasn't too busy doing other things.

Things continued like this with the Demon Castle and goblin hunting for an entire week with me replacing the goblin shadows when they ran out of useful information since none of them were really worth keeping. As a system, it was pretty useful even if it was a bit tedious. I also did dojo training for Hollow Purple, raising it to Level 2. Hollow Purple was *amazing*. It wasn't too complicated to use either, making me think

that I could have learned it myself if I'd actually thought to try. It combined the natures of Blue and Red to completely destroy anything it touched, and it could handle all of the demons I'd encountered so far, which showed just how powerful it really was.

But after 11 days total, and another supply drop of 5 A-rank keys and a rune stone for **Advanced Dagger Techniques**, all of the goblins and wargs between the Misty Mountains and Mirkwood were dead or in hiding. I knew this because I received a notification that the dojo had reopened for my actions, which would only be the case if they were no longer a threat to the Beornings. I'd also reached the 49th floor of the Demon Castle. The battles had been somewhat monotonous but not overly strenuous. So, overall? I felt pretty good.

One other upside to clearing out the goblins was the *loot*, and not System-generated loot either. It was gold, jewels, and items from Middle Earth. I had my shadows collect it all for me to review. Some of it looked like pretty nice stuff, but I had little use for wealth in this world since I would be leaving it in 10 years' time. So instead of keeping it in my Inventory to gather dust or leaving it behind, I had my shadow soldiers bring me a small group of badly-frightened ponies that had not yet made it into the goblin's cooking pots and loaded them with the treasure.

I figured that the least I could do was to try and return it to its rightful owners. However, the ponies couldn't travel at my break-neck speed, and my goblin-hunting hobby had taken me pretty far north, so I estimated that it would take three days for me to return.

Not bad, and I wasn't in a hurry.

The first night of my travels, I did another Dojo training with Gojo and my daggers, bringing my skill up to Lv 4. After weeks of intense fighting across dozens of gates, I was feeling exceptionally confident and wondered a bit what Lv 5 for **Dagger Fighting** would bring. More damage probably since I was now preternaturally skilled at hitting weak points.

In the meantime, I had to figure out who I wanted to fight first: Baruka or Vulcan? The first 49 floors of the Demon Castle were relatively easy, but Vulcan wouldn't be a simple foe. Neither would Baruka. I had vague recollections that Jin-woo had been just barely S-class after winning that fight. Was I at that level? In theory I should be close. The Demon Castle's rising level with each new floor meant that I was gaining about 1 new level each day. And my Shadows were gaining levels too. I was at Level 59. In theory, that should put me right around where I needed to be for Baruka's fight.

It was, once again, tempting to hold off and let my stats increase with time. But I needed the battle experience too. So, after much thought, I took a day to do my daily quest, stretch, recover everything I could in terms of stats. And I opened my first A-rank gate.

As expected, it was a Red Gate, and it was indeed different from other System-generated gates. The entrance, which had always been apparent even if it was closed off, was now completely gone. I was alone in a snowy landscape with a forest all around.

Well, there wasn't much else to do. I pulled out the warm coat that I'd gotten as my daily quest reward and put it on. In Red Gates, time traveled differently, so if I wanted to, I could spend a few weeks here doing daily quests and getting stronger, but that seemed a little pointless, so I resolved to get this over with as quickly as possible.

For starters, I needed to find the shadows I would use.

I was interrupted in my musings by a surprise ice arrow attack, but I simply dodged and responded with a Red, which blasted the two ice elves apart even as they still grinned at me. Well, that didn't take long. I supposed that Baruka would know about me soon enough, so I hustled into the trees looking for the ice bears.

Finding them wasn't hard and I set my shadow soldiers on them to clear out as many as possible as quickly as possible. I also turned some of them into shadow soldiers, but I had my eyes on a slightly bigger prize, which we found after only a few hours of searching.

The largest and most powerful ice bear roared at me, but I took it on by myself, cutting it down with a mix of Dagger Skills and old-fashioned punching. When it was finally dead, I said, "Arise" and unofficially named the ice bear 'Tank'.

Now all that was left was to see if I could find a Not-Kim Chul. This turned out to be a bit harder, and I'd already burned through my first day. Unhappily, I spent the night in the Red Gate and performed my daily quest the next day which turned out to be just as fruitless. Sure, I killed more ice bears and added them to my Shadow Army, and I gained two levels, but I still couldn't find the thing I was looking for.

On the third day I had just given up when I was confronted by an almost-human in full plate armor with a horned helm. Ah, there he was. And behind him was...

"You can come out now," I said. "There's no point in hiding when I can sense you."

Baruka dropped his Stealth skill.

I didn't bother with pleasantries and launched straight into the attack while summoning my shadow soldiers to deal with the other ice elves. There was blood and screaming almost instantly, but Baruka didn't seem overly bothered by it or the loss of his people. He was on me instantly with his daggers. But a Hollow Purple completely took out one arm and half of his chest.

Damn, I hadn't expected Hollow Purple to work that well against what had to be an S-rank opponent.

My musing was interrupted by the armored warrior.

"Igris," I said simply, and Igris skewered him without me needing to face the attack. I stood over the Not-Chul and said, "Arise."

A shadow arose and a window appeared asking me to name him. I entered the name 'Iron' and also cast Arise on the fallen ice elves, bringing their strength into my army. I was running out of open slots, but as my Intelligence increased, so would my forces.

And now, for the moment of truth.

I stood above Baruka's felled body and raised my hand over him.

"Arise."

His body lifted slightly as a shadow formed around him, but the shadow burst, leaving the body to fall limply against the snow.

Shadow Extraction Failed.

Yeah, that was expected. But I had to try anyway.

“Arise.”

Shadow Extraction Failed.

I huffed. Even Jin-woo himself hadn't been able to extract this shadow. I should have no hope or expectation of it working. But still...Jin-woo did manage to make Baruka into a shadow soldier in the mobile game. Maybe it wasn't *entirely* canon, but it did give me a bit of hope. I just needed something more to draw him out.

“Is this truly the end of your path?” I asked the still form of Baruka. “A warlord without a will to fight is nothing. Instead of fading into darkness, fight alongside me instead. **Arise.**”

The shadow rose up one more time, but instead of bursting and fading away, it whipped around, twisting and writhing until it formed the shape of an ice elf with a mane of black hair and a wide, unnatural grin.

Shadow Extraction Successful

I grinned to match his expression when I saw the rank of Elite Knight, the first of its kind in my ranks so far.

And as the window popped up asking for a name, I entered one without hesitation: Blades.

Overall, it was a nice addition to my army, but Blades was not my only reward.

Baruka's Dagger

Item Class: A-Rank

Type: Dagger

Attack +110

Agility +10

A dagger once used by the elf warlord Baruka.

When the gate faded away, I found myself back in the vale with snow just beginning to fall.

I received a notification that the Dojo had reopened and trained Hollow Purple up to Lv 3.

The next day I began heading back south again. The slow pace turned out to be a good thing, though, because it meant we could be extra thorough about investigating the area, and we cleared out a few dozen goblins that had arrived from the Misty Mountains as reinforcements.

Blades felt right at home in the snowy landscape even if his new color palette didn't quite fit. He also seemed to truly enjoy rooting out any remaining goblins. Him and Kira together were a downright bloodthirsty duo.

I also felt confident enough to take on Vulcan, which might not have been the best idea so soon after going through a Red Gate, but I was nothing if not fervent about plowing ahead, so it was inevitable. The fight with Vulcan turned out to be a little more terrifying than I'd expected. I think that Jin-woo might have been higher than level 65, which I was at the time. Because even with Hollow Purple at Lv 3, it was a *hard* battle. Mostly thanks to the fact that Hollow Purple had a somewhat narrow destructive path and Vulcan was *massive*. I'd have to do something about making Hollow Purple bigger, especially if I wanted to use it against Antares at some point. I was fervently thankful that I hadn't decided to fight Vulcan first because I wasn't sure if I could have defeated him at my previous level.

Along with raw strength, I had to use Jin-woo's trick of running him into a building and attacking his head, but in the end, and with a wildly beating heart, I came out as the victor.

Barely.

It might be time for me to slow down a bit, especially since I knew that Baran was at the top of this castle, and he was a former Monarch well above S-rank.

I had a lot of levels to gain before I was ready to fight him.

But there was no rush, and I was still growing stronger. Not to mention, I had received a few interesting items from Vulcan:

Demon Monarch Earring

Item Class: S

Type: Accessory

Strength +20, Vitality +20

Set: The Crown Jewels of the Monarch of Demons

1. Demon Monarch's Earring
2. Demon Monarch's Necklace
3. Demon Monarch's Ring

Set Bonus:

1. Set bonus effect 1. All Stats +5 (2 Items)
2. Set bonus effect 2. All Stats +10 (3 Items)

And...

Orb of Avarice

Item Class: A

Type: Magic Item

An Orb made from the blood of the high-demon Vulcan.
The Orb will empower the wielder's magic and increase the destruction caused.

Effect 'Desire for Destruction': Your magic damage is doubled.

I also had a Fragment of the World Tree and two Vulcan's Horns, neither of which were particularly useful to me. I wouldn't need the Holy Water of Life, but I certainly wouldn't turn it down if I achieved it.

Vulcan's defeat also triggered the dojo resetting, which allowed me to raise Infinity to Level 4. Ideally, I would have trained Hollow Purple, but I had to raise Infinity, Red, and Blue up a level first as a prerequisite. Level 4 of Infinity allowed me to run it 24/7 by running RCT 24/7 to keep my mind and body refreshed, which was kinda neat, especially since it meant that I was always at full health.

With Vulcan defeated, it was time to head out, and when I finally managed to drag the ponies back to the Beornings' fortress the next day, I was ready for a break. But before that could happen, I had to unload the pony's treasures.

The Beorning guards were shocked and amused to see me again. They laughed as they greeted me and asked how my goblin hunting had gone. I said honestly that it had gone quite well and that I'd recovered quite a few things from their caves. I gestured to the ponies, which soured their expressions.

"If these are treasures looted from goblin caves, then they are as like as not stolen from our people," said the guard, giving me a hard look. "Would you claim treasure that is not your own and be as much a thief as they who took it first?"

I gave him an exasperated look.

"Of course not," I said. "I found this and brought it here so that the owners can reclaim what is theirs."

At this the guards whispered quickly and ushered me inside and it wasn't long before Grimbeorn was standing in front of me and my heavily laden ponies.

Grimbeorn turned out to be a rough, no-nonsense type of person and asked me to clarify my position in regards to the treasure.

I simply shrugged.

"I'm looking to return these items to their rightful owners, and I thought that the rightful owners would likely be nearby, so I brought them here," I said. "I will lay out all of the items and ask that if you see something that belongs to you or your kin, then take it. If it does not belong to you or your kin, then leave it. I plan to travel east, so if there is anything that belongs to the elves or dwarves, I will return it to them when I pass through their lands."

This caused quite a stir and more calls for clarification. I had to reiterate that I would ask for no proof of ownership. It would be based solely on the honor system. Of course by now word had spread, and the humans, elves, and dwarves staying at the inn had heard of it.

The dwarves were, naturally, the first to object, saying that they had claim to whatever I had brought that was of dwarven craftsmanship.

I really did not care.

"If it is yours, take it," I said. "If it is not yours, leave it. If there are disagreements, work it out amongst yourselves. That is all I will ask of you."

And boy did that turn out to be the wrong thing to say because it ignited what could best be described as an absolute free-for-all that left Grimbeorn laying claim to everything with a bellow possessing both the volume and range of a foghorn.

Once things had quieted down, Grimbeorn gave me an intimidating glare as if waiting for me to challenge him. I just gave him a flat look.

"If it is yours, take it," I repeated simply.

I really did not care enough to object. In fact, offloading it onto Grimbeorn took a weight off of my shoulders in terms of hauling a bunch of junk across half of Middle Earth.

Grimbeorn nodded at this over the objections of the men, elves, and dwarves. But Grimbeorn quickly had them cast out of the fortress. He gave me another look as if he was considering throwing me out too but seemed to decide against it at the last moment and instead invited me to dinner in his keep.

I agreed somewhat reluctantly and was forced to endure a long, tedious evening of interrogations regarding my wholesale slaughter of the entire goblin population within 100 miles north of here. I answered as much as I honestly could, which wasn't very much and the rest I remained silent on.

After a dinner that left no one satisfied, Grimbeorn said that he would make arrangements to return items of elvish, mannish, and dwarvish make to their respective homelands. Which was fine by me. He then asked if I wished to lay claim to any treasure, to which I said no. I told him that I had no interest in blood money. And that was true. My daily quest had given me enough cash for a night at the inn and a few honey cakes for the road, and that was good enough.

Grimbeorn looked doubtful, but I was used to that by now. So after dinner, he dismissed me, and I took a room at the inn. It looked like the men, elves, and dwarves had been let back in. Their expulsion was apparently only long enough for Grimbeorn to take possession of the treasure, so I supposed that he would be sorting through everything tonight and otherwise ensuring that it got to where it needed to go.

Fair enough.

But before I could vanish into my room, the dwarves dragged me over to their corner and demanded much the same answers as Grimbeorn. I thought about fending them off, but the elves and men in the room had gone quiet, so I figured that if I told my tale here, I wouldn't have to repeat it several more times.

So I reiterated everything I could say and remained silent on what I couldn't. Although I did hint to them that I had great power. Glorfindel was already aware, so I expected that most of the elves would be aware of me soon anyway.

Also, since there were elves and dwarves here, I did emphasize that my goal was to remove as many dark creatures as possible and that I would be working my way through Mirkwood seeking dens of evil. The dwarves seemed interested in this and admitted that there were orcs and goblins south of the lonely mountain that might interest me too. One even mentioned Moria with a sort of eager longing, but the others silenced him quickly. I agreed to take a look south of Erebor once I'd made my way through the forest.

At the end of it, the dwarves also tried to convince me to hand over anything of dwarvish make, and I told them honestly that I wouldn't know the difference. Grimbeorn had given me his assurance that he would return anything that belonged to them, so the matter was with him now.

Suffice to say, by the end of it, exactly no one was happy.

Maybe I should have just left the treasure where it was?

But no, the war was coming, and they'd need whatever they could get. There had been plenty of weapons and armor in the goblin's hoard, so it would be useful to keep them alive.

In the meantime, I just had to keep growing stronger.

The only problem with that was with how this whole fiasco had knocked the wind out of my sails in terms of motivation. But maybe this was normal burnout? I'd been going full-speed toward power grinding for almost two months straight.

So I decided to take a few days off. This was easy enough since my daily quest gave me enough Middle Earth money for lodging and food, so I spent my time in the inn's room, mostly sleeping, meditating, and

writing in the journal that I'd been mostly neglecting during the past few weeks. It was a little nice to write everything down and plan where I would go from here.

Ultimately, I spent three days after my arrival just hanging out in the fortress and relaxing as well as I could, leaving only for my daily 10km runs. By the 30th of November, I was feeling somewhat mentally recovered, but the weather was turning truly cold even down here in the vale. But that was fine. I could travel in snow fairly easily, though I would prefer to have better weather.

It was at this point that I received my next Supply Drop which contained 3 S-rank keys, the usual consumables, and...a rune stone for **Monarch's Domain**.

Monarch's Domain: The Player is able to increase the strength of all active shadows by 50% in battle.

Oooh, this was probably for defeating both Baruka and Vulcan in quick succession. And it was the skill that should debut during the Tusk fight. I regarded the S-rank keys curiously. Baruka's dungeon should have been S-rank since Baruka was about S-rank, but it had been disguised as an A-rank instead. Was it an exception because it was a Red Gate? Then again, Kang Taeshik had been in a B-rank gate when he should have been a hidden boss in a C-rank gate, so maybe the rules for who showed up where were complicated. I wondered if Tusk would be in one of the A-ranks I already had or one of the new S-rank keys?

I was itching to find out, especially since I already had the Orb of Avarice to give to him. But first I needed to get out of here.

As I was ready to set out, I spoke again with Grimbeorn, who told me that the journey to Dale would take at least two months, and it would be better for me to remain in their fortress until spring. For returning his people's treasure, he would ensure that I had food and lodging until then. But I declined saying that it was time for me to move on.

Grimbeorn accepted this and said that he was finally ready to distribute the treasure. As expected, he kept the lion's share for himself and his people, but he returned some items of elvish, mannish, or dwarvish make to the representatives of their races after receiving assurances that these items would be taken to their leaders.

It turned out that the elves staying here were mostly from Lorien, sent here by Galadriel for reasons that were unknown to them. But there were also two who were from Mirkwood. They'd met up with the Lorien elves and had decided to hang around until the Lorien elves discovered what they were here for. Which, they apparently decided, was this. They spoke quietly amongst themselves in Sindarin and worked out which items should be taken to which ruler which I shamelessly eavesdropped on. I hadn't had any chance to practice Sindarin since leaving Glorfindel, but thanks to my mental acuity, I hadn't suffered for it. I could follow simple conversations if I paid close attention and used context clues.

The dwarves also made a hasty retreat, setting out for the Lonely Mountain before first light. I was slightly more leisurely about it, but I picked up on the road and began walking. As usual, I wasn't in too much of a hurry, and I had a lot of hunting to do.

Chapter 5: Mirkwood

Rooting out evil in Mirkwood was a little more challenging than in the Vale since it was harder to spot signs of recent activity. So I called up Kira and Blades to scout the area. They both had Stealth skills, so it would be easier for them to remain unnoticed.

While waiting for them to come back with information, I spent three days inside the Demon Castle rising to the 75th floor and killing Metus early on the third day. Just prior to killing Metus, the Dojo reopened, and I raised Blue to Lv 4. Then, after his death and the subsequent reopening again, I raised Red to Lv 4. Like with Vulcan, I received plenty of good loot like the Holy Spring Water and the Demon Monarch's Necklace. I was a little miffed that I couldn't wear this and the Gatekeeper's necklace at the same time, but I preferred this new necklace to the previous one anyway due to the increase in Intelligence rather than Sense.

Demon Monarch's Necklace

Item Class: S

Type: Accessory

Agility +20, Intelligence +20

Set: The Crown Jewels of the Monarch of Demons

1. Demon Monarch's Earring
2. Demon Monarch's Necklace
3. Demon Monarch's Ring

Set Bonus:

1. Set bonus effect 1. All Stats +5 (2 Items)
2. Set bonus effect 2. All Stats +10 (3 Items)

With my shadow soldiers protecting me, it didn't matter quite as much if I couldn't spot all enemies. Not that I'd run into any that I couldn't notice...Maybe I'd overleveled Sense a bit. Anyway, there was nothing that said I couldn't share the Gatekeeper's Necklace, so I decided to give it to Blades when I had the chance since he was already pretty heavily invested in Agility and Sense, and this would boost those proficiencies further.

I also completed the quest to gain 10,000 demon souls, and so was given +20 stat points which I immediately put into Intelligence, any item from the shop, and a hidden reward. The item I selected was obviously the Cursed Random Box to get the key to the Cartenon temple. Though it wasn't labeled as such yet. I also received the recipe for the Holy Water of Life.

Since I still had a bit of time before my scheduled rendezvous, I climbed all the way up to level 80 before returning to Mirkwood.

There Kira and Blades were waiting for me.

Blades was absolutely thrilled when I gave him the Gatekeeper's Necklace, and though he couldn't speak, his expressions and body language said that he was showing off his new accessory to the other shadows. Kira was admiring, Iron was envious, Tank looked nonplussed, and Igris just looked exasperated. Heh, I'd have to make an effort to get them all something too.

Together we made a rough map of all targets within about 100 miles in each direction. I broke my shadows into four teams with instructions on which targets to take, and then I set them loose to do their jobs. By my estimation, they'd be able to handle everything in about 24 hours. As for me, I needed some

time to clear out my remaining A-rank keys before moving on. I wanted to have Tusk on hand for the final fight with the Demon Monarch, and I wasn't sure if he would be in an A or S-rank gate.

Considering that my last A-rank gate had given me Blades, I might have expressed more caution, but I was now 12 levels higher and several S-rank items heavier in terms of stats, so I wasn't too worried. So it was that I entered all 8 remaining A-rank gates with just Igris and Iron for protection. And this turned out to be the right decision since I was able to clear out all of the A-rank bosses without any difficulty. I also added them to my shadow army, though they weren't any higher than Knight-grade.

By the time I was finished, all of my teams of shadows had returned with confirmation of their success. Which was good because I didn't want to go into an S-rank dungeon unprepared, and since Tusk hadn't been in any of the A-rank dungeons, he had to be in an S-rank one instead.

I wasn't sure how many S-rank gates I'd have to clear to find him, but thankfully it turned out to be one. The System could be *nice* like that sometimes.

The fight against the initial wave of High Orcs was simple enough, which made me curious about the fact that a team of A and B rank hunters would have so much trouble with them in canon, but maybe my stacked abilities were just that crazy.

The fight with Kargalgan and his army of High Orcs went even easier than it had in canon, which made me think I'd accidentally overleveled myself a bit. The rewards were pretty good too. I used 'Arise' on Kargalgan and his bodyguards, giving me Tusk and a set of Knight-grade High Orcs. And I received 3 rewards for clearing the dungeon. I was quite curious about these since Jin-woo had rejected them as not belonging to him. I couldn't quite understand his reasoning, but that was just who he was sometimes.

The three rewards turned out to be things that were quite useful. The first was a shield that offered +20 Vitality and +20 Strength. I gave this to Iron immediately, and he was thrilled.

The second was a set of gloves with 20% magical damage reduction. And the last was a cloak that offered immunity to fire damage. This was bound to come in useful for the upper levels of the Demon Castle.

Lastly, I gave the Orb of Avarice to Tusk since he was the only one of my Elite Knights who had magical damage output.

I then did another dojo training to raise Hollow Purple to Lv 4, since creating Tusk qualified for a reopening of the dojo. I was glad for this since Baran was coming up soon, and he would be a challenge.

With everyone all geared up and ready to go, I returned to the Demon Castle to plow through the remaining 20 floors. I felt confident in my powers even if the ultimate boss was a fallen Monarch. If my estimations were correct, I would be about level 90 by the time I fought Baran.

Perfect.

I ended up meeting Esil on the 80th floor as expected, and with a bit of sweet-talking, I received the permit to the next floor along with Esil as an escort. Because the demon nobles were relatively easy to find, clearing all 20 floors took less than a day and ultimately led to me leveling up quite a lot in a short period of time.

And it wasn't just me, either. Igris and Iron went from Rank: Knight to Elite Knight, and Tank and Kira went from Elite to Knight. With Tank and Kira gaining the Knight-grade, I made their names official, which made them pleased.

Blades seemed slightly miffed about not getting a promotion, but it couldn't be helped. Higher-ranked shadows took longer to upgrade, and both he and Tusk were already Elite Knights as well as relatively new additions to my army.

The fight with Baran was about as difficult as I expected it to be, but it was still surprisingly do-able. I was beyond thrilled that Hollow Purple was able to wound Baran directly, which hadn't been a guarantee since he was a Monarch. But despite wounding him, Hollow Purple didn't destroy his body, possibly because it wasn't truly a physical form. That gave me hope that Hollow Purple would be useful against the other Monarchs as well.

And the loot from it was fantastic. I took the daggers and the ring for myself, but I gave Igris the longsword, and I passed Kasaka's Venom Fang to Kira and Baruka's dagger back to Baruka since I doubted that I would use them again.

I also made sure to create a shadow of Kiesel because really, who wouldn't want to ride a dragon?

Lastly, the Shadow Exchange skill was nothing to scoff at either.

Overall, it was an impressive haul.

So I bid goodbye to Esil and returned to Mirkwood.

I still had more hunting to do...

I rode Kiesel south in the night until we were well away from our first hunting ground and sent my forces out again. In the meantime, I trained in the dojo, which had reopened yet again with the death of Baran. It seemed that I was getting an awful lot of dojo time lately, not that I was complaining. This time I was finally ready to begin working on my Domain Expansion: Infinite Void, and I brought it up to Lv 2. Oh, I could not wait to try this on a Monarch since it was my best hope for a trump card against Antares.

I also cleared my second S-ranked gate, and this turned out to be a bit of a surprise because it involved a lot of Nagas with a particularly powerful Naga boss who I named Jima. Weird. Wasn't this gate supposed to happen after gaining Beru? Not that I was complaining exactly. Jima was nice to have, but he wasn't exactly a challenge after everything that I would be facing soon. And maybe that was the point. I was always given level-appropriate keys, so if I didn't get him now, I wouldn't get him at all.

I then received my next supply drop, which wasn't quite what I was expecting. It contained an SS-rank key, 50 consumable Divine Potions each, and a rune stone for a skill called **Restoration**.

This was surprising for a few reasons. First, I didn't even know that there *were* SS-ranked keys, though I guessed that it probably meant a national-hunter level threat. Second, there was only one of them despite me doing quite a lot, both in terms of goblin hunting and dungeon clearing. Normally I would get at least 3 keys for this, but it might be because this key was so much more dangerous. And lastly, I had no idea what the **Restoration** skill was. I mean, I already had self-healing?

Confused, I broke the rune stone and took a look at the description.

Restoration: lets the user heal a target to 100% max HP over the course of 5 seconds (20% max HP/second) and includes limb regrowth, disease and toxin removal, and foreign object removal. Costs 200 mp to activate and 10 mp/second.

I stared at the rune stone with raised eyebrows.

Wow.

Wow.

That was easily an S-rank healing ability like something Min Byung-Gyu would have. And notably, it was a skill that Jin-woo definitely *didn't* have. Well, nothing said that the Supply Drop had to be limited to Jin-woo's items or worse, right? The source material had mentioned healing rune stones being available for auction, and it was *definitely* something that I wanted so...

I grinned and tucked the SS-ranked key away for now. It would doubtless be Beru, and I wanted to be fully restored for that fight even if Jin-woo had made it look easy. After all, it was only three days ago that I'd been clearing out A-ranked gates...

Huh, that was a good point.

Was I actually ready for Beru?

I'd been burning through dungeons so fast that I had fallen behind Jin-woo in terms of stats thanks to the daily quests. I was currently at level 97, and I suspected that the Jeju island raid would put me over level 100. That would mean the opening of the Cartenon Temple and I...wasn't sure if I was ready for that. If I recalled correctly, all of Jin-woo's stats had been over 200 when he fought the Architect, and a quick look at my own stats showed that I still had a ways to go.

Status

Name: Vinya

Level 97

Job: Shadow Monarch

Fatigue: 10

Titles: One Who Overcame Adversity (+1 more)

HP: 17300

MP: 3415

CE: 3415

Strength: 241

Vitality: 182

Agility: 198

Intelligence: 237

Sense: 148

AP: 0

If I wanted to bring Vitality and Sense up to where they should be, I would need to wait about three weeks before proceeding. Maybe longer. Then again, Jin-woo hadn't had any difficulty at all in the temple, so maybe...

No, that was an irresponsible line of thinking. I was getting drunk on my victories. I needed to remember that there were entities that far exceeded my current strength and that I still needed to be wary of them. So, three weeks. That was how long I would wait until it was time.

Or maybe just two weeks since there was a delay between Jin-woo gaining level 100 and when he had to go to the temple.

Sure. Two weeks.

Decision made, I returned to Mirkwood to find that my Shadow soldiers had returned after clearing out every den within another 100 miles. Clearly I wasn't giving them enough to do if they were done this quickly already. So I packed up with Kaisei and relocated again, this time as far south as Dol Guldur and set them to work while I got a bit of shut-eye. I kept my Shadows in the southern half of Mirkwood for the next three days, both as a means of clearing out a particularly densely populated bit of forest as well as a break for me.

Since I was mostly waiting on a stat increase due to daily training, I instead occupied my time with Igris, who was teaching me the finer points of sword fighting. Since my training with Gojo and Glorfindel had focused more on daggers, it was interesting to learn how to handle a longer blade.

After those three days, I was confident that everything evil in the southern two thirds of Mirkwood had been completely eradicated, which meant that it was time to turn north. I'd been avoiding this section of the forest because it was the most heavily populated with elves. Although they wouldn't be a threat to me at this point, I didn't want to frighten them with my shadow soldiers or risk turning them against me.

That was the sad part. Darkness and shadows were so closely tied with evil in this world that learning about my role as the Shadow Monarch would doubtless earn me some enemies. And if the elves became wary of me, humans and dwarves wouldn't be far behind. I didn't exactly relish the thought of being turned away at every door and treated with distrust and hostility wherever I went.

But I wouldn't be able to hide my powers forever either.

Still, I could hold off for a while longer at least.

So I ghosted north with my shadows and began quietly removing all of the dark creatures there too. Unlike before, I kept my forces mostly to Blades and Kira and told them to remain concealed whenever they sensed elves nearby. This slowed them down considerably, but that was fine. There weren't many goblins or spiders in the north anyway since the elves kept it well defended, but there were enough to warrant my intervention.

I spent the next ten days haunting the northern part of Mirkwood and the mountains north of the forest itself, always seeking out more prey to keep my soldiers occupied. I also took the time to rest and relax a bit since it felt like a while since I'd had a real 'vacation'. To my amusement, my shadows seemed to realize this, and they worked to make a nice shelter for me to laze about in for a week or so.

That was both amusing and incredibly cute.

But I still did a bit of training, using the Dojo to train my Domain Expansion to Lv 4. I also received another Supply Drop with a Shadow Cloak that offered 10% damage reduction and the ability to regenerate when it sustained any damage and a second SS-ranked key. I suspected that this was for the Giants or maybe Greed, but I would have to wait to find out.

A week later, I received another Supply Drop, and yet another SS-ranked key and a pair of daggers called Moonshadow Daggers.

Moonshadow Daggers

Item Class: S
Type: Daggers
Attack: +250

A pair of daggers that, when used together, can create additional blades of light and shadow to attack an opponent.

And by now I thought that it was about time to get going. I was a little weaker than Jin-woo had been at the time, but that was fine. My shadows continued to grow in strength, and most of my army now consisted of Knight-rank or higher.

Yeah, I felt ready.

So I did my daily quest, used potions to get myself back into peak condition, and opened my first SS-ranked gate to fight Beru...

...only to be met with a dungeon that was unlike any I'd seen before. In fact, it wasn't much of a dungeon at all, just a massive training field capped with a smooth, silver dome. And inside were 11 humanoids of approximately S-rank.

What were...?

Oooh...

I hadn't thought at all about the pre-Beru sparring session because it wasn't a dungeon, and Jin-woo hadn't claimed any shadows from the S-ranked Japanese hunters. But he *had* expressed regret that he hadn't known about their betrayal sooner or else he totally *would have*. And now it seemed that I had an opportunity to do what he had not.

I grinned and called forth Igris, Kira, Tank, Iron, Blades, Tusk, and Jima. Numbers-wise, it was a bit lopsided in their favor, but by now I was well into national-hunter level, and although Kira and Tank were still technically Knight-grade, they were both due for a promotion soon anyway.

"Let's see what you've got," I said, and the fight began.

What they had, it turned out, was a lot of fighters and little else. Of the eleven Japanese simulacrams, seven were fighters, two were mages, one was a healer, and one was an assassin. They had no tanks or rangers, though rangers did seem pretty rare so maybe it wasn't that unusual. Still, I was hoping for a chance to see how a guild raid team operated as a unit. Unfortunately, with such a lopsided attack force and with the numbers working against me, I had to engage in the fight personally rather than sit back and watch.

The fight was still pretty interesting because my team was slightly more balanced than theirs. Tank and Iron absorbed damage while Igris and Jima dealt damage up close and Tusk dealt damage from behind and Kira and Blades backstabbed everyone they could reach.

As the leader, I took on the most powerful S-rank, who was strong for an S-rank but still well below me. If I had to guess, I'd say that he was mid-80s in terms of level which, while strong, was still not on par with me. I managed to kill him in about 45 seconds and immediately followed up with helping Igris, who was being ganged-up on by three S-ranks. The healer was already dead thanks to Blades, who had moved onto joining Kira against the other Assassin. With Igris and I working together, we took out the three S-ranks in a matter of moments. I cast 'Arise', and with that, the tempo of the battle shifted markedly.

All told, the fight was over in less than three minutes.

I almost felt bad for them. But also, not really.

“Arise.”

The remaining S-ranks became shadows and knelt before me.

“Well then, let’s go hunting...”

I said that, but I decided to hold off on the Jeju Island raid. I was still a week or so early, and this fight really hadn’t been on my radar. It felt almost like the System was telling me to wait a bit longer. I wasn’t ready yet. And though I was confident in my abilities, I also trusted that the System was looking out for me...at least until the point where I knew it wasn’t. For now it felt like a safer bet to simply wait an extra week and go from there.

Also, since this was my first SS-ranked gate, the dojo reopened, and I trained Reverse Curse Technique to Lv 4 simply because I couldn’t be too cautious. But while I was waiting for the dojo to reopen again and for another week to pass, I thought that it was finally time to check up on Glorfindel and hopefully find out what Galadriel had to say. It was nearing the end of December now, so we’d parted almost two months ago. He should be at Thranduil’s home by now. Of course, I could always just visit Galadriel myself, but considering how unwelcoming Lorien elves were, that might not be the best idea.

So I located a road about a day’s walk from Thranduil’s and traveled along it to meet the elves. My pace was easy enough, but I couldn’t help but notice that the path seemed to vanish occasionally, like the forest itself wanted me to be lost. This wasn’t a problem for me though, since my Six Eyes let me locate the path easily enough each time, and I continued on my way. As expected, around nightfall I was ambushed by a group of elves in light armor who demanded to know who I was and what I was doing here.

“*I am Vinya*,” I said in Sindarin, aiming to practice my language skills and maybe soften them up a bit. If the Rivendell elves were anything to go by, they should get a kick out of it. “*I hope to meet Glorfindel. Is he here?*”

Unfortunately, the silvan elves weren’t entirely like the ones in Rivendell, who broke out into gleeful laughter at the sight of a human speaking their language. But even without the merriment, there was a slight but noticeable easing of tension among them.

“*Glorfindel is with our King*,” said a red-haired woman, also in Sindarin. “*We will take you to him. They are expecting you.*”

I couldn’t help but smile at her simple, well-enunciated sentences as well as the fact that Glorfindel had told them of my coming.

“*Thank you*,” I said.

I followed the elves, who were...well, not *entirely* welcoming. But I had to say that my journey was more comfortable than the one Thorin’s company had endured on their trip through Mirkwood. Not that that was a high bar to pass. The elves ushered me quickly along the road, but I had no issues keeping up. And by nightfall we passed the gates into the Elvenking’s Halls. There I was greeted by Glorfindel and Thranduil, but though Glorfindel was not openly hostile, he was frowning at me warily.

"There is a shadow about you," he said in the common language.

Yeah, he did seem like the type of person to have a high level of spiritual acuity. So there wasn't much point in lying, though I suspected that this could very well be the last time we could meet peacefully. And I had to prepare for the very real possibility of needing to fight my way out. I'd just have to do it in a way that didn't actually hurt anyone.

"Yes, I've been growing into my power," I admitted. "I still have a long way to go, but in the meantime, I've been able to clear out plenty of goblins in the Beornings' vale and the spiders in Mirkwood."

"Yes, my people told me tales of your arrival in the fortress of Grimbeorn and the chaos you sowed there," Thranduil said with a haughty frown. "You should know that you will craft no such discord in my halls."

"Oh no, I learned my lesson," I said. "At the time I thought that it would be nice to try and return all of that treasure to its rightful owners, but the wolf pack that tried to eat me when I first arrived showed more manners than everyone who saw what I brought back. So I've changed my approach. Any and all treasure I found in the spider dens of Mirkwood stayed where it was. If anyone wants to get their stuff back, they can darn well put on their hiking boots and get it themselves."

I gave Thranduil a sweet smile.

He just frowned back at me.

"You claim to have dealt with the spiders in my lands?" Thranduil asked. "My people have noticed an abrupt decline in their numbers, but they have also spied dark shadows slinking between the trees. None of them have spoken of *you*."

I shrugged.

Well, might as well get this over with.

"The shadows are mine," I said. "I summon them, and they aid me in battle. The vale and Mirkwood are big places, so I couldn't expect to clear them out on my own now, could I?"

"You admit to ownership of these shadows?" Thranduil pressed.

"Yeah?" I answered with a frown. "Why? Did they do something wrong? They're under strict orders to only kill spiders and dark creatures, so they shouldn't have caused you or your people any trouble."

"They have not attacked us, no," said Thranduil. "But I should like to see one of these 'shadows'. Bring them forth if they are truly yours, as you say."

I wasn't sure that I appreciated his tone, but he was a king on his throne, so I supposed that I would have to accept his demands.

"Igris, Iron," I said.

They weren't as bloodthirsty as Kira, nor as intimidating as Tusk or Tank, and I didn't think it was a good idea to bring out Blades. Hyakki weren't among the elves of Middle Earth, but a malevolent elf might not have reassured the elves standing in front of me.

Igris and Iron appeared beside me, standing on either side like bodyguards. All of the elves in the vicinity stiffened, a few backing away, and others drawing their weapons. I stood perfectly still for a long moment.

"Igris and Iron," I said, gesturing to each of my shadows respectively. "They are two of my shadow guardians."

I could feel several of my other shadows itching to come out, but I held them back. There was no need to show force, and I thought that Glorfindel might have understood the situation for what it was.

While Glorfindel was A-rank, Igris and Iron were both S-rank. Either one would have outclassed him easily, and Glorfindel was the strongest elf alive. Unfortunately, Thranduil didn't seem to understand any of that.

"If you are in the service of the shadow, then you will die here," he said.

I stared at him blankly.

"There is no one here who is capable of hurting me," I said honestly. Even without Infinity, at a certain point, mundane weapons became less dangerous than nerf darts. To test my durability, I'd intentionally tanked direct hits by other S-rank fighters without so much as a bruise. What were some sharp bits of metal supposed to do to me? "And I have no interest in a fight with you or your people. My goal is to remove all dark creatures from these lands as quickly as possible so that they will trouble this world no more."

"And do you count your shadows among those that must be destroyed?" Thranduil demanded.

"No," I said with a shrug and left it at that. It was a silly question, one that didn't deserve justification or argument.

"And for what reason have you sought me?" Glorfindel asked.

"Well, I've finished clearing out all of the spiders in Mirkwood that I could find, and I thought it would be rude to not at least drop by and say 'hello'," I said. And then I added in Sindarin. *"Also, I wanted to practice Sindarin. There are few words spoken in the forest."*

"*You would break from your quest for such <something>,"* Thranduil asked, amusing me by acquiescing to my request. I didn't understand the last word, but I could still guess based on the context. Probably something like 'frivolities' or 'niceties' or 'trivial things'.

"*I am permitted a...*uh, how do you say 'day off' in Sindarin?" I asked.

Glorfindel supplied the word.

"*I am permitted a day off,"* I said.

Thranduil frowned again at this, but he considered the shadows standing on either side of me as well as the fact that only spiders and goblins had been harmed up until this point. He then shared a meaningful look with Glorfindel.

"*I will permit you to stay for the night,"* said Thranduil. "*I will speak with you again in the morning."*

Fair enough, and also pretty good since I was still expecting a sneak attack.

"*Thank you,"* I said, dispelling Igris and Iron and following another elf to my rooms.

I was called back an hour later for dinner where Glorfindel asked me politely about my travels and gently prodded me about my shadows. I told him what I could and remained silent on what I couldn't, as I usually did. He cautioned that Thranduil was not known for his patience or mild manners, but I just shrugged at that and said that I would leave if I was imposing.

The following morning, Thranduil asked for a demonstration of my shadow's fighting abilities, and I had Igris square up against Glorfindel. I gave the order not to hurt him, but the fight was still a one-sided walk-over. While Glorfindel had time and experience that far exceeded my own, Igris was once a member of Ashborn's shadow army and had countless millennia of battle experience too.

Thranduil seemed troubled by this and asked how long I would be staying. Knowing when to take a hint, I said that I would be leaving the next morning to handle any dark creatures south of the Lonely Mountain. I also wanted to drop by Erebor first to ask Dain for an update on the present situation. Thranduil said that I should also look to the mountains to the north and the Northern Wastes.

Good suggestions. And since no one lived up there, it would be a good idea for me to clear them out now anyway. I could swing back south and meet with Dain in a week or two. Thranduil seemed curious about this timeline, but his confusion was cleared up the next morning when he took me to a clearing, handed me some supplies, and I called forth Kaisal to carry me north.

I didn't stick around long enough for them to panic before I was gone.

Probably not the best introduction to my powers, but no one here would ever be welcoming to someone that had control over any type of darkness. They'd be even less welcoming if they learned that my abilities were actually necromancy.

I spent the next week dropping off various groups of shadows throughout the mountains and sending them to root out dens of evil. With 11 new S-ranks thanks to my first SS-ranked key, the hunting was made laughably quick and easy. Also, I actually participated a bit this time too, and I found some interesting things like what appeared to be abandoned dwarven fortresses and dragon nesting grounds. There were, sadly, no dragons here for me to fight and turn into shadow soldiers, but there were plenty of goblins and spiders to kill, though their worth as shadows only extended as far as their knowledge of other hideouts for us to raid. I also trained Reverse Curse Technique to Lv 5 and received another Supply Drop, once again with an SS-rank key, and this time also containing a Mage's Bracelet that offered 20% Magical Damage Reduction.

Finally, on the 31st of December, all of my stats were at 200 or higher. So it was time to fight Beru.

I opened the gate after recovering my stats fully and was greeted by a lush island. This wasn't like the canon raid since there was no South Korea team to take out the queen. But I could work with that. She mostly existed as a tool to create more ants and lead the ant army, so eliminating her would be straightforward.

Still, I didn't want to be overwhelmed with ants, so I had the Japanese S-ranks create a diversion, drawing out all of the ants and handling them while I dealt with the queen and the royal guards. Beru was, surprisingly, nowhere in sight. But there was something else interesting.

A human-like thing that was healing the royal guard ants.

A simulacrum of Min Byung-Gyu.

Well, I supposed that he was, technically, one of Jin-woo's shadows even if Jin-woo did release him immediately after he healed Cha Hae-in.

But I...wasn't quite sure of how to handle him. The simulacrum was clearly not human and was most likely created by Ashborn's powers to give me approximations of the followers that Jin-woo had possessed, but Byung-Gyu had been such a kind guy. And he wasn't trying to hurt me now. He was just healing the royal guards as we fought them. It just didn't feel right to kill him. So I killed the royal guards and the queen, and then I stood before him.

The not-Byung-Gyu simply stood there accepting his fate without fighting.

Yeah, human or not, killing this...thing wasn't right. But what should I do? Just leave him?

I was still puzzling about what to do about him when the Ant King arrived and I was forced to turn my attention to him. The fight with the Ant King was...interesting. I'd waited three weeks for this fight just to bring my stats up, and my stats proved to be overwhelmingly superior. The Ant King's strongest attack couldn't pierce Infinity. He was also slower and less skilled than me in a fight. When he summoned the other ants to aid him, my shadow soldiers were more than enough to easily handle them. In a seeming panic, the Ant King began to devour several other ants and...Min Byung-Gyu. That's right. The Ant King had the Devour skill that could allow him to gain skills and knowledge by killing others. He'd probably eaten the healer to gain self-healing as well as any knowledge from my fight against the royal guards and Ant Queen. But I still felt slightly miffed on the not-Byung-Gyu's behalf.

He hadn't done anything to deserve getting eaten.

So I opted to end the fight quickly, and my shadow soldiers finished the rest of the ants off as well. I summoned Beru, and he responded to my call quickly enough, becoming my first Commander-grade shadow.

And also the first one to speak.

I gave him the name Beru and went over to the corpse of not-Byung-Gyu. What should I do? He'd clearly been brought here for me. I should take responsibility for that, at least. But the real Byung-Gyu would have hated fighting.

"Healer," I said, speaking to the corpse and extending my hand in open invitation. "Even in the face of death, you did not fight against me. And so, I will never ask you to fight for me. But there is more to this afterlife than battle. If you wish to help the innocent, to spare them from death and make them whole when they are not, then join me and I will set you to this task. I will only ask once, and if you deny me, I will leave you to your rest. *Arise.*"

I would not, could not, force an innocent person to fight for me. But it was true that there was more to my ambitions than death. I had the Restoration skill and an S-ranked Shadow Healer already. I did not *need* him per se. But I still wanted to give him this choice. And if he fought back, I would let him go.

I was not Jin-woo with his desperate need to save a fading life.

I could let this healer lie in peace if that was what he wished.

But although his shadow writhed and twisted, after a long moment, it burst forth and coalesced into a shadow.

“Elixir,” I named him. “Thank you for joining me.”

Chapter 6: Mountain Halls

Gaining Elixir and Beru was enough for the dojo to reopen yet again, and I was able to Max out Infinity, which allowed me to differentiate threats based on danger, speed, mass, and any other criteria I could think of. The fight with the Ant King also brought me up to level 101, which was enough to level up all of my job-specific skills and to trigger the key to the Cartenon Temple, which said that it would open in 4 days time.

I didn't want to risk going to another SS-rank dungeon right before the Cartenon temple, so I focused on those few days to refine my training with Igris and Beru. I also accepted my next Supply Drop, receiving yet another SS-ranked key and something called a Warding Potion that, when consumed, offered a 24% Magical Damage Reduction.

Normally for a dungeon I would have kept all of my shadow soldiers with me, but I'd been largely cut off from news since leaving Rivendell. Glorfindel had been cagey with what Galadriel had told him, and I'd decided not to force the issue. But since I wouldn't be able to use my shadows in the Cartenon Temple, I decided to put them to better use as scouts.

I sent Blades to find the entrance to Moria, Igris to check on the status of Dale and Erebor, Elixir to Rohan to possibly help Theodin if he hadn't been healed by Gandalf already, Kira to Isenguard to look in on Saruman, and Iron all the way to Gondor to see what they were getting up to there. With each of them I sent a normal shadow soldier. That way I'd be able to save time by using Shadow Exchange to trade spots with them rather than crossing vast distances myself.

Overall, a pretty decent plan.

When the day finally came to enter the temple, I did so with a pounding heart and finally faced down Kandiaru, the Architect of the System.

He greeted me with his creepy grin and subjected me to his final test. And he sealed all of my shadow abilities. Against the stone statues, I fared well enough. They were strong, but I was stronger. They were fast, but I was faster. But that didn't make the fight easy. Since my shadow skills were locked, I had to rely more heavily on my Hollow Purple to get through the toughness of S-rank stone. But I managed it.

I also leveled up twice during the fight, bringing me to level 103. With that, my **Ruler's Touch** became **Ruler's Authority**.

Kandiaru seemed pleased and brought forth the Statue of God to fight me too.

It fared no better against Hollow Purple.

Kandiaru was beyond thrilled and gave me the final quest of defeating him within 10 minutes.

No problems there.

At least, that's what I thought until he punched me clear across the room, somehow piercing right through my Infinity. What? Well, there were cursed tools in Jujutsu Kaisen that could pierce Infinity. That's how Gojo got butchered when he was a teenager. It was a little silly to think that Ashborn wouldn't be able to provide something like that to Kandiaru. And it felt like a stark warning that I shouldn't rely too heavily on any one ability.

If I did, I would pay the price.

Like right now.

Even with a high Vitality and CE Enhanced Durability, that hurt. It reminded me a bit of my fight with Kasaka, actually.

I'd survived that, and I could survive this.

Kandiaru *wanted* me to survive this.

Not that he was going to make it easy.

He was faster than me, but my one saving grace was the fact that I was stronger and managed to block his relentless attacks. Unfortunately, my attacks against him were mostly useless. Ranged attacks and skills wouldn't work either.

Hollow Purple managed to incinerate an arm, and at that Kandiaru became enraged, wondering aloud how a mere human could do this to him. What? Didn't he *want* me to win? If I died, he'd be back to square one when it came to finding a vessel for Ashborn, right? Well, I supposed that pride could make even powerful beings like Kandiaru lose sight of their higher priorities.

So I braced myself as the attacks kept coming.

But somehow, they were getting easier to avoid, like my senses were sharpening as the fight progressed. I hadn't leveled up again, and yet, I felt stronger. Was this fight...getting easier?

Kandiaru tried to use the stone statues again, but I destroyed them and avoided their attacks easily until I crashed into Kandiaru himself, blasting away his remaining arms and pressing a Demon King's Dagger to his throat.

He acknowledged his defeat.

And a notification appeared asking if I would accept the data stored in my memory.

Of course I said yes.

And I bore witness to the memories of another. Memories of war between monsters and the Rulers. The Rulers were strong and would have won, except...

I saw him.

Ashborn.

He cast Arise upon the dead, and the shadows fought on. They turned the tide against the Rulers. Victory seemed assured, and then...

The Demons and the soldiers of the Monarch of Fangs betrayed him. Ashborn killed Baran after asking why. And suddenly I was standing in Ashborn's place. I felt his black heart beating in my chest.

I turned and saw the Rulers descending from portals in the heavens.

With that, the memories ended, and I awoke back in the Cartenon Temple.

Dispatching Kandiaru was simple enough now that I possessed Ashborn's Black Heart. It came not only with an increase in mana, but also power. Kandiaru tried to fight back, of course, but Ashborn had already locked him out of the System.

At that point, Kandiaru's last hope was long gone.

I killed Kandiaru once and for all.

The Cartenon Temple faded away, and I was left with Ashborn's power.

Nearly there.

I was nearly there.

My body swayed as a sudden wave of vertigo overtook me.

Now I just needed...

I fell into darkness.

When I awoke again, it was light outside, and I was sleeping in a bed. I looked around in confusion as I sat up. I was in a stone room filled with stone furniture, and there was a large window off to one side.

"Beru," I said, since he was the only one of my summons that could speak.

"Yes, my liege?" he asked, appearing at my side.

"What happened?"

Beru filled me in quickly enough. Apparently I'd been asleep for three days, and he'd constructed a shelter for me. I stood up and hobbled over to the window to see that I was currently in some sort of castle.

How...?

Never mind.

"Thank you for looking after me, Beru," I said, reaching up to pat his head. Beru squinted his eyes and flicked his antennae in glee. "If I was asleep for three days, did I get sent to the penalty zone?"

As I asked, I pulled up my status screen, but it didn't have any ability points to distribute so...

"No, my liege," said Beru.

I did receive a notification for my daily quest however, so some part of it must have been on auto-pilot. That was good. I still needed the extra ability points, and it looked like the quest didn't activate if I was unconscious for the whole 24 hour time window.

How conscientious of Kandiaru.

I'd have thanked him for it if he wasn't busy being dead.

I also noticed that I'd gained quite a few levels in the Cartenon Temple and was now at Level 110. Not bad. My stats were also *much* higher than they should have been. About 22% higher across the board. That must have been due to the Black Heart.

I rolled my shoulders and glanced at the notification that the dojo had been reopened. Considering what I would be facing from now on, it would be a good idea to max out some of my skills. For now, I trained Blue to Lv 5.

I then decided to check up on my shadow soldiers. During my fight against Kandiaru, my Shadow skills had evolved, so now I could share senses with them.

Igris was lurking south of Erebor, and the situation there seemed stable. There were goblins and orcs to the south, but they weren't actively attacking yet.

Blades was in Moria, and he was currently observing...

The *Balrog*?!

How???

Gandalf should have killed it on his way through the mines! Had they taken another route?

I quickly checked with Elixir, who was currently in a stable in Edoras healing a bunch of random people. The other shadow soldier with him was observing Theoden and...Wormtongue?

I switched to Kira, who was silently observing Saruman as he built his army of orcs.

And finally I looked at Iron, who was...currently fighting a horde of orcs on some gloomy battlefield alongside a bunch of random humans.

Okay.

So it looked like the fellowship was nowhere to be seen. Had they taken a different route? No, there was no other way. They must have passed through Moria unless...

Unless...

Unless they simply hadn't arrived yet.

I'd known that the fellowship wasn't planning to leave *quickly*, but really? It had been *months*.

Ugh, oh well. This just meant that I could make the journey a little easier for them.

"Alright, Beru, let's go kill a balrog," I said.

Beru clicked happily as I used shadow exchange on the normal soldier I'd sent with Blades.

Killing the Balrog turned out to be pretty straightforward. It was an A-rank monster at best, and Beru had no trouble taking it out alone. Also, because I could, I used 'Arise' to summon it as a shadow soldier. I was pleasantly surprised when it worked. I then used the Shadow Balrog, Blades, and Beru to clear out the rest of Moria.

I also took the chance to test out some of my upgraded skills, because several of my non-shadow skills had upgraded too. Sprint became Quicksilver, Critical Attack became Mutilate, Dagger Throw became

Dagger Rush, and my Advanced Dagger Techniques and Tenacity gained a level. Overall, it was a nice increase in power. And it made the whole process of clearing out Moria take less than a day. This would hopefully make for a nice welcoming gift for the fellowship when they eventually got around to arriving.

Actually, at this point it might be worth it to find them and carry Frodo to Mount Doom myself. Or I could let them get this done in their own sweet time. That was probably the more reasonable thing to do. Even with that thought, I still hung around in Moria for a few more days before giving it up as a lost cause. I was still keeping an eye on my other shadows, but they weren't up to much. Elixir and Iron seemed to be somewhat popular in their respective locations despite their strange appearances and complete inability to talk. But if I was going to handle an SS-ranked gate, I would need them back. So I recalled everyone except the normal soldiers and Elixir, who, as promised, I would not call upon to fight, and I opened the gate.

The sheer quantity of mana that hit me was enough to make me want to turn and flee in the opposite direction.

Damn.

This was an SS-rank gate? This was on an entirely different level than the training arena or Jeju Island gates. The crushing pressure was almost too much. And I saw why almost immediately.

Giants.

30 of them.

Ah, so this was where Legia, the Monarch of the Beginning was imprisoned. That would definitely explain the mana. But if all of the SS-ranked gates had Monarchs, I'd be in trouble. Killing a bound and helpless Monarch was one thing. Killing a fully battle-ready one was something else entirely.

Still, I could worry about that later. Right now, I had some giant-slaying to do. So I got to work. The first 30 giants were relatively easy to deal with. They were all high A-rank, but my shadows and I were able to take them down and bring them into my shadow army relatively quickly.

The problem came when the *giant* giant appeared. This thing wasn't just giant. It was easily over a thousand feet tall. Something that huge should simply not be allowed to exist, and yet here it was. I unleashed my entire shadow army against it, searching for the weakness I already knew was there, but which I still wanted to confirm.

Yep, sure enough, mana covered its whole body except for its eyes. That would be our target. I used Kiesel, Igris, Beru, and Blades while relying on Tusk as a support. Together we targeted the giant's eyes, and eventually there was a large enough opening for Beru to dive inside and begin tearing apart its brain from the inside out.

After that, the fight was over relatively quickly.

But the dungeon still wasn't finished yet.

I proceeded further into the cavernous halls and found Legia bound in chains. Unlike Jin-woo, I had no questions for him. So I dispatched him without much fanfare at all, and the system struggled to figure out how many levels his life was worth.

A lot, it turned out.

When it was all said and done, I had reached level 122.

Killing a Monarch was enough to reopen the dojo as well, so I trained Red to Lv 4. I also opened up my Supply Drop. What greeted me was my first SSS-ranked key. Damn, how many 'S's could these keys have? I supposed that this was probably my first Monarch key aside from Legia's, and his didn't really count since he'd been sealed when I killed him. I wondered what the other two SS-ranked keys would reveal. One had to be Greed, surely, but I would have thought that he'd be an S-ranked key? Oh, well, I'd find out when I entered the gate.

The other interesting thing in the box was a rune stone for a skill called **Shield**, which turned out to be a skill used by tank-type hunters. Useless to me with Limitless, but I wouldn't turn it down.

Since I'd received one SS-ranked key each week, I decided to give myself a week between running dungeons. In the meantime, I sent out my shadows again to get a good look at the current state of affairs, and I used Shadow Exchange to finally meet with Dain in Erebor. By now he'd received word from the elves of Mirkwood because even their deep enmity wasn't enough to keep my existence a secret.

Dain barred the gates of Erebor to me, which was...fair. He spoke to me through the gates, and I told him that I had no interest in invading his home. I just wanted to know about the dark creatures of these lands. And, oh yeah, I cleared out Moria.

As a gesture of goodwill, I brought the book written by Ori during his final battle and gave him my condolences for his lost brethren. Dain thanked me gruffly for the gift and said that he would send others to investigate the depths of Moria to see if what I said was true. For now, he pointed me to the south where the barren wastelands were swarming with orcs and goblins from Mordor. That was about what I expected, so I thanked him and went on my way. I also stopped by Dale and met with King Brand, who seemed incredibly wary of me, especially since his home was not a well-protected mountain fortress.

Since I was clearly making everyone uneasy, I only stayed one night, and then mostly to have a nice bath and a good meal.

Afterwards, I headed south, and in the dark of the night, I unleashed my army across the plains, sweeping over every dark creature we encountered and clearing the entire wasteland by the time I was ready to open my next dungeon. However, when I arrived within the gate, I was surprised to discover a barren wasteland similar to the one I'd just left, only this one was populated by dragons.

For one brief, horrifying moment I thought that I was about to face Antares, but my opponent turned out to be something slightly more manageable: Kamish.

Fighting Kamish was an experience because she was easily on par with the Giant guarding Legia, who I was pretty sure had been empowered by Legia himself. While I didn't sense an external powersource for Kamish, it was clear to me that she had to be one of Antares' more powerful subordinates. The fact that I had to fight her while fending off hundreds of other dragons too wasn't fun either. Suffice to say, I actually made good use of my new **Shield** skill when a horde of dragons were more-or-less constantly bathing the battlefield in dragon fire.

But although Kamish was doing some intense damage to my soldiers, in a battle of attrition, I was practically guaranteed to be the victor. And so it was that when Beru pulled off the same 'eat brains through your eyeball' trick he'd used against the Giant, we found victory again. And I added about one hundred dragons to my army as well. Four were Elite-knight grade, and Kamish herself was my second Commander-grade shadow.

"Let's work well together from now on," I said, stroking her nose as she wagged her tail in glee.

I also received Kamish's rune stone: **Dragon's Fear** from Kamish's corpse. And when I opened my next Supply Drop, I received the pair of Daggers known as Kamish's Wrath.

Kamish's Wrath

Item Class: SS

Type: Dagger

Attack +1500

A pair of daggers forged from the fang of the dragon Kamish. They are mana-sensitive, meaning that their power aligns with their user's strength stat, and also allow their user to alter their weight however they please.

Yes, I would make good use of these.

When I returned, it was to discover that one of my shadow soldiers watching Lothlorien had seen the fellowship arrive, and to my amusement, Gandalf was with them. Well, it looked like they'd gotten around to starting their quest after all. I'd have my soldier keep an eye out so that I'd know when they left. Even with an easy journey through Moria, they were probably happy to have a safe place to rest.

Unfortunately, I was now running out of places to waste my time while I waited a week for my next gate. Because of this, I opted to drop by Isenguard and pay Saruman a visit. And I meant 'visit' in the most violent way possible. Afterwards, I hung out with Treebeard. He seemed a bit curious about me, but I showed him what Saruman had done to his trees, and by extension what I had done to Saruman, and he was willing to entertain me a bit. I also had a chance to drink a bit of Entwash, but its power was so mild that it didn't even register to my stats or physique.

I ended up hanging out in Fangorn Forest until it was time for my next gate, the last SS-ranked one before it was time to move onto the SSS-ranked ones.

This gate did indeed give me a not-Hwang Dongsoo, but it also provided a not-Thomas Andre and a whole lot of other not-humans that probably represented the Scavenger guild.

After facing down Kamish, this fight was almost laughable in its ease. I might have preferred taking on this fight first, but the System didn't always work like that. At the end of it all, I gained two Commander-grade shadows: Greed and Goliath. I wasn't sure what to expect from Goliath as a summon since he didn't have the Ruler's power as a shadow, but he was still amazing.

Once the dungeon was cleared, I opened my weekly Supply Drop to find another SSS-ranked key, the usual consumable potions, and something called **Mage's Grimoire**. Curious, I opened the description.

Mage's Grimoire

Item Class: S

Type: Grimoire

A grimoire with 500 pages. Casting a skill onto a page allows the user to 'save' the skill for future use whereupon it can be instantly cast for a cost of 0 mana. Casting the skill expends it, and it must be re-cast upon the page to be used again.

Oh, wow. It was a little funny, too, because as a necromancer, I was technically a mage-type hunter even if I used the same Assassin-type fighting style as Jin-woo. And yet this was the first real piece of Mage-type weaponry that I'd gotten from the Supply Drop.

And I wasn't even sure if it would be useful to me.

Mostly because I had Ashborn's Black Heart, and the vast pool of mana that came with it. Even against Kamish I hadn't come close to running out of power. But maybe things would be different against the Monarchs?

While I thought about it, I also performed my weekly dojo training, getting my Domain Expansion to (MAX). Now it was time to get back to the basics. I knew that I'd be going fist-to-fist against Antares, and that would require brushing up on my taijutsu, so I'd work on that next. All of this CE training did give me a thought though, and I attempted to cast my domain expansion onto my Grimoire only to see that it appeared on the page. Oh.

Ooooh, that was *nice*!

Despite being mostly unable to run out of Cursed Energy, techniques could be burned out if used too often. This would allow me to use it potentially hundreds of times.

Ah, yes, that was definitely worth looking into.

With that decision made, I continued south, instructing Elixir to move on from Rohan to Gondor since he'd managed to heal just about half of the country's sick people in the past few weeks. He managed to communicate with the Rohirim, who helped him get to Gondor the old fashioned way. Meanwhile I began clearing out the orcs and goblins between Mordor and Osgiliath.

On my way south, I also looped back up a bit to use Shadow Extraction on all of the elves and men who had been killed and left to languish in the Dead Marshes. My Shadow Extraction skill could not keep them, but I didn't really want them anyway. I only wanted to help their souls move on, which they did after several minutes. This is also when I ran into the ringwraiths again.

But our meeting was scarcely worth noting since Kamish incinerated them easily enough. And I supposed that that was the end of that.

I decided to wait out until my next Supply Drop before taking my first SSS-ranked key mostly because this was where I had the most doubts. The problem with SSS-ranked keys was that they were almost certainly for the Monarchs...and Jin-woo had been killed in his first Monarch fight. Granted, it had been against three Monarchs and he'd managed to kill Queresha before being killed by Rakan and Silad. And, of course, Jin-woo had been revived by Ashborn after fully merging with the Shadow Monarch.

But knowing all of that, did I really want to proceed? The best case scenario was that I would face the Monarchs one-on-one until I was killed and merged with Ashborn. The worst case scenario was that I would die right away and be merged with Ashborn. It was a hard step to take, this knowledge that when it was done, I would no longer be entirely myself. And that was if Ashborn didn't decide to just take me over entirely.

After all...

I wasn't Jin-woo.

There was no guarantee that things would go the same way.

And so I sat on it, maybe to savor my life while it was still entirely my own, or maybe out of cowardice more than anything. I could still walk away. There was no compelling reason that would *force* me to use the keys. I could live my life with the incredible powers I'd been granted and with the System to further ferry my growth.

But no.

That had stopped being a realistic outcome the moment I'd chosen this power. I'd known from the start what I must do and what I must risk and what I must endure. I'd agreed to this. I'd asked for this. I'd wanted this.

Ashborn was a good person, better perhaps than any other being in his universe. Better than the other Monarchs who were so quick to betray him, better than the rulers who had done the same, and better than the cruel Absolute Being who had forced him into an existence of unrelenting battle. I could put my faith in Ashborn, I could accept him as part of me even as I would become a part of him.

This resolve made things easier, but the arrival of the next Supply Drop surprised me a bit. Because this one held but a single object rather than the assortment of supplies I usually received. It was a single key labeled:

SSSS-Ranked Key

Mandatory

Time Remaining: 6 Days 23 Hours 59 Minutes

What the heck did that mean?!

There was something above SSS-ranked keys? What could it be? The Monarchs? But what were the SSS-ranked keys? I wracked my brain to think of anything that had happened between Greed and the Monarch fights, but in that time, Jin-woo had just leveled up with a bunch of A-ranked gates in Japan. That wouldn't constitute the three SSS-ranked keys that I'd gotten so far, right?

Then the reality of it struck me like a chord. Could it be Antares? He'd been on an entirely new level compared with the other Monarchs. And the three keys would correspond to the three battles Jin-woo had had against the Monarchs prior to killing Antares. The first would be against Queresha, Rakan, and Silad. And the next two would be against Tarnak and Yogumunt.

Oh, this was bad.

I wasn't ready.

Or maybe that was the point. I've been taking a rather leisurely pace with my keys so far. And it was time to get going. I had one week to sort everything out. And then...?

Then I would need to see if I was ready for the final battle.

The battle that even Jin-woo would have failed without the Rulers.

But before then, I had to face my own demons first. I did my last dojo training before the end, raising my Taijutsu to level 4. It felt like too little too late. But there was no turning back now. I used the key and opened the gate.

What met me beyond was an empty, ruined city. There were skyscrapers with shattered windows, wrecked cars, and torn-up roads. And surrounding me were a multitude of creatures as well as three Monarchs.

I summoned Kamish's Wrath and went on the offensive, casting my Domain Expansion at Level 5 to completely petrify everything within a 200 meter radius. I then followed it up with a round of Hollow Purple. All of the Monarch's creatures within that radius were instantly killed, and even the Monarchs themselves were badly burned, though not dead.

I noted distantly that Queresha was the worst off of the three. Good. That made her an ideal target, and I wanted to handle her first anyway.

Even with the other Monarchs' armies out of the way, I didn't bother to summon most of my shadows. I knew what Silad was planning when it came to capturing and injuring them to drain my mana. Instead, I only summoned Beru, Igris, Blades, and Tusk. They were, unfortunately, quickly captured by Silad, as expected. But I could afford the mana to regenerate them while they worked on getting themselves free.

I focused on Queresha first since she was already weakened and since I knew that I would be immune to her poison. The fight against her wasn't easy since Rakan didn't seem inclined to stand back, but I did actually manage to kill her. Unfortunately, shortly after that, I turned to focus on Silad and Rakan and met the same fate as Jin-woo: stabbed through the chest with all five of Rakan's claws. My Infinity was as useless against them as it was against the Architect.

I used Reverse Cursed Technique, but it was pointless. I knew right from the start that it was pointless. Silad gloated in front of me for a while as I felt my life slip away. And as darkness closed in around me, I watched the notification for the max-level mystery skill activate.

And I...woke up at home in my bed.

"I don't have an S-ranked father to watch out for my real body while I'm in here," I said, looking up. "So there's no time to waste...Ashborn."

The world around me rippled and fell, revealing the Shadow Monarch, and I felt...like I was home.

"I know that I'm not the person you would have chosen," I said. It was not quite an apology because I did not regret what I had done or the choices I had made. But there was a certain injustice in taking the choice from him.

"You are not," Ashborn agreed. "But you chose me, and in that, there is a bond that a stolen life could never fully replace. Though things are different now than they should have been, the end result is the same. And you have brought joy and delight into my shadow where once there was only sadness in pain. Thank you."

I felt his thanks, not just in his voice, but in my heart and soul too.

Thank you.

And I echoed it back until our shared gratitude wove between us like a fine thread as wispy as spider silk and as strong as the foundations of the Earth.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Despite knowing that my real body was in a precarious position, somehow in here I could not bring myself to care. Ashborn and I talked for a time.

He showed me things I knew and yet did not. And as we spoke, I felt a deeper understanding form between us, not like the merging of two people, but rather as the remembrance of things that were buried deep within my mind.

And I understood.

I wasn't merging with Ashborn now. I'd been merging with him all along. Every point and level along the way, I'd become less myself and more of us. And this was just the final step, the moment of looking back and the realization of how far I'd come from that scared little woman lying awake in wide-eyed terror at the howling of distant wolves.

I'd thought that I'd feel contempt or embarrassment at the memory, but I only felt a deep sense of fondness and pride at the courage of one so weak. Alone and frightened and yet still moving forward. Always forward. Through blood and terror and pain.

Always forward.

The will to keep going that Ashborn's suffering had slowly chipped away from his weary soul. I understood, though I didn't want to, what had to come next. And though a part of me wanted to hold onto him, there was a point where even a Monarch needed to rest. So I settled for an embrace instead, one that Ashborn reciprocated after a long moment.

"It will be a long journey even once it is all done," he said. "You know why."

"I do," I said. "But I will do what is needed. And I'll take care of everyone. So don't worry."

"I know," he said, and he pulled away from me, fading into black. "Because I am you. And you...are me...The way out is..."

"I know," I said with a smile as the last of Ashborn's light sank into the shadows. "Because we are one."

I reached inside of me to the System, a simple tutorial meant to suppress my power rather than grow it. And I deleted it completely, unshackling all that I was meant to be.

When I awoke, it was to find my shadows guarding me from Silad. Rakan was nowhere to be found. Unlike Jin-woo, I didn't have any particular gripes against Silad in particular, so I killed him quickly and used my shadow to stretch throughout the dungeon, locating and killing Rakan in four blows.

With that, the dungeon faded, and I sank to my knees.

“My Liege,” said Igris, the first words that he’d ever spoken to me. Unleashing Ashborn’s power was enough to grant Igris his lost strength and abilities. “What now?”

‘What now?’ indeed.

I summoned my SSSS-Ranked key and regarded it thoughtfully.

“Ashborn has gone to meet his final rest,” I said. “And he has entrusted everything to me. There is still much to do.”

The System was now gone, so there would be no more levels or daily quests. But I could still grow my skills and Jujutsu sorcery, though I suspected that they would be of little use against Antares. Even a maxed-out Hollow Purple had only managed to injure the lesser Monarchs rather than kill, and Antares would not be so weak.

Still, there was some use in refining my skills. Since the defeat of three Monarchs had reopened the dojo, I used the time to raise my Taijutsu to Lv 5. And then I told my shadows that I would be establishing a base to grow my power for the final battle.

The spot I chose was in the wastelands north of the Ered Mithrin mountains. It was a gloomy, inhospitable place, but that suited my needs just fine. Beru and his ant brethren got to work right away creating a castle for me while I trained with Igris on sword and dagger fighting techniques.

I was glad to have gotten the daggers made from Kamish’s fang because after merging with Ashborn, I came to realize that all of the loot I’d gotten from the dungeons was actually made with Ashborn’s power, and the gear and weapons were no more potent than my abilities were now. But Kamish’s Wrath was different. It was made from the actual body of a powerful magical beast and thus did actually grant a boost that went beyond my innate abilities.

Not that it would matter much to Antares.

No, I’d need to figure out something else for that.

Two days after the first SSS-Ranked gate, I opened my second one, and as expected, it was Tarnak and his army of monsters.

They fell before me like stalks of wheat to a scythe.

The battle, if it could be called that, was over in the span of minutes.

I took the chance to train in the reopened dojo, training Battle Tactics with Gojo and raising it to Lv 2.

I instead went back to training with Igris for the next two days before pulling out the final SSS-ranked key. This battle was for Mogumunt, and though his portals made him a bit tricky to deal with, it was only a slightly longer battle that ended in the same way. With the dojo opening once again, I raised my Battle Tactics to Lv 3 and was ready for the SSSS-ranked key at last.

Chapter 7: Shadow and Flame

There was no sense of dread for the SSSS-ranked gate. I'd hoped to get my Supply Drop first, but the key was set to go off at exactly the same time, so I couldn't afford to be distracted. I stood at the head of my army with my arms folded as the key dissolved in my hand, turning into a colossal gate in the sky. It then shattered and from within the gate emerged...

Shadows.

Thousands of shadows.

No. A hundred thousand shadows.

And I realized belatedly that I could be a real idiot sometimes. Also, I realized that Ashborn must have a sense of humor, because the knowledge of this gift had conveniently slipped his mind. Mostly. Maybe that was why I wasn't nervous.

I let out a slow breath as Bellion descended from the sky to kneel at my feet.

"Grand Marshal Bellion," he introduced himself. "We respectfully greet our liege."

The other shadows bowed their heads as one.

I couldn't help the small smile that spread across my lips.

"Now we can prepare for the real war," I said, opening my Supply Drop and receiving two items:

SSSS-Ranked Key

Mandatory

Time Remaining: 19 Days 23 Hours 59 Minutes

And...

Ruler's Spear

Item Class: Divine

Type: Spear

Attack: Divine

A Spear made by the Absolute Being and granted to his Fragments of Radiant Light in their eternal war against the Monarchs. This spear is capable of piercing the body of any divine being and ending their existence

So this was the weapon that had killed the Absolute Being. And it was the one I would need to kill Antares. Because unlike with Jin-woo, I knew that there would be no help from the Rulers for me. And Ashborn was gone. There was no one left to save me if I failed.

This was do or die in the truest sense.

And I had a little less than three weeks to prepare.

I began by rallying the troops and setting them in combat formation against one another. This fight against Antares would not go how it had for Jin-woo for several reasons. First, this fight would be in a dungeon, and next, Antares wouldn't have Tarnak and Yogumunt to support him. He would still have his army, though, so I'd need to consider that. An army of dragons, several of whom were Kamish-level, was no small thing to consider.

So I had the shadow army face off against one another in mock combat. And as for me, I had Bellion teach me everything he knew about battle tactics from his time in Ashborn's army. I also consulted with Gojo, who was an incredibly intelligent fighter, and quickly leveled up Battle Tactics to Lv 5. I also maxed out Dagger Fighting at Lv 5 which should hopefully give me some type of edge, but considering Jin-woo's performance, I had little hope of that coming to fruition.

I also received two more Supply Drops. These Drops contained no keys, but contained one item each: **Ruler's Armor** and **Rune Stone: Ruler's Wings**.

The first was a set of high-quality armor that would help keep me alive even against Antares, though it was still inadvisable to take a full-force attack. The second was a rune stone for flight, which was something that I could technically do already, but which was highly unintuitive for some reason. I got the distinct impression that Ashborn hadn't liked to fly without his wings. When I broke the rune stone, I found that wingless flight was as simple as breathing. And that would probably help me in my fight against Antares too.

The night before my final battle, I used my shadow domain to travel to the House of Elrond. I appeared there like a ghost and was greeted with some caution. But I simply came for a bit of food and a bit of rest, and Elrond agreed to provide it. Dinner was tense, but this was the Last Homely House, so there was still music and still cheer even as the elves prepared to depart from this world.

The next morning, I thanked Elrond for his hospitality and returned to my castle to wait for the key to open.

And when the gate appeared before me, I stepped inside into a world of destruction.

Antares wasn't there to greet me, so I took the opportunity to make the first strike. Since Hollow Purple was enough to damage actual Monarchs, it had little trouble handling dragons, and I used Arise to turn them against their brethren. I also sent out my fastest shadow soldiers to the far reaches of the dungeon, taking a look through their senses to find the Monarch of Destruction.

It didn't take long, though sadly the shadow ant that made the discovery was quickly incinerated and lost forever.

Antares descended on my position like a maelstrom, but I had already jumped to another location and left a good sized portion of my army to destroy the dragons there. I then jumped to another location and did the same thing before bouncing back to Antares and using Dragon's Fear to incapacitate his personal guards. Since my own shadows were nowhere near, he couldn't retaliate in the same way.

And then I proceeded to press him hard in the fight, using all of my strength and enhancing it further with CE. But predictably, even an amped up Kamish's Wrath did nothing against the might of the Monarch of Destruction. When he transformed into a dragon and began breathing fire indiscriminately, even destroying his own paralyzed dragons, that was the end of any tactical fighting.

At that point, my only goal was to survive.

It took every fiber of my strength and speed to outmaneuver the Monarch of Destruction. But I managed it. The only downside of his power was that his extra size made him just a little bit slower. Of course, speed was nothing without power to back it up.

Even though I knew it wouldn't do anything, I had to try it.

I formed a giant armor of shadows and fought with Antares like a knight slaying a dragon. Only there wasn't much slaying going on. Eventually, I could no longer hold the form against his attacks, and my armor dissolved, leaving me kneeling in the desolation his breath had left behind.

Antares returned to his humanoid form once again, this time to speak with me and ask for my hand in aiding him against the Rulers.

But I knew the truth. I knew him.

I drew out the Mage's Grimoire and cast a healing spell on myself for free, returning myself to prime fighting condition in an instant. I then cast Infinite Void, and although I knew it wouldn't trap him forever, it startled him enough into stillness as I pulled out the Ruler's Spear and thrust it straight into his heart. Then he was a perfect image of surprise.

"You had this all along," he said. "You waited until I let my guard down to reveal your trump card. That is not something Ashborn would have done. You really do fight like a human. Against something like this, I had no chance of winning even from the start."

"No," I said, though I doubted my own statement.

In a way, we'd both faced an impossible situation. But I'd gone into this knowing my disadvantage while Antares held nothing but confidence. If he'd been a little less bold, a little less enthusiastic, a little less...himself. Then things would have been different.

But Monarchs could only be what they were, which was why Ashborn had needed me. Because unlike him, I could grow and change and become something different.

The dungeon remained until all of the dragons were dead and I had gathered them into my army. And only then, the dungeon faded, leaving me in a desolate wasteland of Middle Earth.

The shadows were cheering and celebrating their victory. I asked Bellion to arrange for a party for everyone, though I was not in the mood for it personally. Instead I cast my shadow over all of Middle Earth for several brief moments and located everything I cared to find.

It looked like the Fellowship was broken, and Frodo and Sam were on their way. I was rather pleased to see that they were looking well. Frodo in particular seemed to be handling the situation excellently. Of course, he was fresh off of a recovery stay in Lothlorien, but I liked to think that the immunities I'd given him played a part in that too. Since I had no pressing need for soldiers at the moment, I sent Blades to track the hobbits' steps and ensure their survival, though he was not allowed to harm anything but goblins, orcs, trolls, and spiders.

I was well aware of the existence of evil men, but I had zero intention of allowing Blades to kill Faramir due to an unfortunate misunderstanding.

In the meantime, I had a party to attend. Or at least something that kinda-sorta resembled a party. Shadows did not eat or drink, so there were no refreshments. And there were only a few shadows that

knew how to do things like play music or dance. The few that knew how belonged to Ashborn's original shadow army, and they did what they could to liven up the atmosphere. Everyone else just stood around and chatted, an interesting development since until recently, most of them had been mute.

With the full acceptance of Ashborn's powers, my skill with manipulating and controlling the shadows had improved. So I could grant them the ability to speak or fly or use magic if I wished. I still needed some practice, though. It was like a half-forgotten talent from childhood. But I had time to figure it out.

I spent most of the party overseeing the modest amount of merrymaking on a throne of Beru's creation and with Bellion and Igris standing on either side. Beru was there too, but he was quickly caught up celebrating with the other ants. I enjoyed watching their antics, especially Iron, who was making a great show of reenacting his part in the battles. Maybe he'd missed his calling as a stage performer.

I also took the time to think about what happens now.

Because this wasn't over.

Not in Middle Earth and not in regards to the Monarchs.

I should have known it from the start, but it was confirmed to me during the next Supply Drop wherein I received yet another key. This one did not bother with any additional and unnecessary S's. Instead, it simply possessed a title:

Rift Key

The implications were clear, and I sighed as I held it.

"My liege?" Bellion asked as I looked up at the stars.

"Ashborn's training is now complete," I said. "I am bound to this world for about the next nine and a half years or so. But when I am free, I will take this key and go in search of the real Monarchs."

The things I'd faced had been so powerful that I hadn't realized it at the time, but against Antares I'd finally seen the truth.

The Monarchs I'd fought were just as much not-things as the false Kim Chul and Kang Taeshik. They'd been created by Ashborn's powers to act as a tutorial.

I'd realized it right away when I'd defeated the Monarch of Destruction when even Jin-woo could not. And it hadn't even been a particularly challenging fight either. Difficult, yes, but not *as difficult* as it should have been. And that was because Ashborn's powers could only create something as powerful as himself, not *more powerful*.

But that was no problem. Because that was why Ashborn had chosen me. I could be more than what I was. I could be different. Greater. I could continue to grow my power. And I would.

Nine and a half years to enter the rift.

Nine and a half years to train.

And from there, it might be the same 27 years of battle that Jin-woo had faced, but I would be ready as he was just the same.

I returned the key into my shadow and set about making my plans.

I could and would continue with my dojo training, though even if I slowed my pace down to once per week with no premature reopenings, I would still manage to exhaust all of what Gojo had to teach me. So I'd have to see about learning other skills as well. Preferably from the experts while I could. I'd have to find Glorfindel again to see if he could teach me his style of sword fighting and learn common useful skills like horseback riding and survival. I had little doubt that I'd be able to learn them if I could just find a teacher, and there would be plenty of opportunities in the next ten years or so.

Until then, I still had plenty to do. Saruman was already gone, Isengard was already destroyed, and his army of uruks was already dead. So Rohan was safe enough. The ringwraiths, too, were no longer an issue, and Iron had done a fantastic job of carving his way from Osgiliath to the foothills of Mordor. There was still a bit of cleanup to do, however, including killing Shelob. She turned out to be a D-rank monster, and I briefly considered not even using Arise on her, but in the end I did opt to keep her and leave her stationed in her web. That way she could handle any goblins that passed through as well as guide Frodo and Sam when they arrived.

If they arrived. They were currently on their way to the Black Gate, and I was seriously considering the merits of just destroying the Gate and letting them through. It would doubtless cut down on their travel time by a few weeks. And really, was there any *need* for the long way?

I decided that no, there really wasn't.

So I sent Bellion to the Black Gate and had him break it down. He then proceeded forward into Mordor and absolutely massacred the armies within. Sauron tried to interfere in his way, but he'd been reduced to little more than a wraith himself and was, at best, a C-rank threat barely clinging to his pitiful existence.

I wondered, briefly, what he might have been like at full power. Not that it mattered now. My armies cleared out Mordor easily enough, and I watched from Sauron's destroyed tower as Sam and Frodo made their way toward Mount Doom.

As expected, Gollum tried to betray them at the end, but Blades took care of Gollum quietly, and Frodo tossed the ring into the fire without much fuss. With that, Sauron was defeated permanently, and I took Kaisel to retrieve the two hobbits before spiriting them back to Gondor where the rest of the Fellowship was waiting. Much of the fighting that should have happened did not thanks to my systematic annihilation of the dark creatures of this world. But there was still some small amount of fighting due to the number of evil men in Sauron's alliances. But even that was quickly quashed by Aragorn.

When I dropped off the hobbits in Minas Tirith, Gandalf came to meet me. I could tell from the look in his eyes that he understood me and my purpose better now. He said that he would do what he could to keep an eye on me while I was here, but that he knew I would be taking a journey once my time in Middle Earth reached its end.

I thanked him, though I wasn't sure if his offer was one of a 'helper' or a 'parole officer', but I figured a bit of decorum was called for. Weathertop was a long time ago, and there was no point in holding inconsequential grudges.

Besides, being petty and waspish was fine when you were weak and had little ability to act on irritable impulses. But those same emotions could be disastrous for someone with a fanatically devoted army hiding in their shadow. I had responsibilities now, both to my shadows and the world around me. So a bit of extra courtesy and respectability were required.

I didn't stay long in Gondor, mostly since I wasn't sure if I was welcome. I did stay long enough to gather up Iron, Elixir, and Solution, though. The people of Gondor threw them a very nice going-away party, and at Elixir's request, I agreed to let him return once every three months to heal the people. He could cycle between four different places: Gondor, Rohan, The Shire, and Erebor. That way he would always have people to help and no one would go too long without aid.

As for myself, I needed a place to stay for the next nine and a half years, and the wastelands up north were...a little bleak. They were fine as a place to train my shadow army, but I was hoping to dig in a foothold somewhere a little warmer and more welcoming.

I eventually settled on the foothills to the west of the Sea of Rhun. There were already people living there, and it technically belonged to Gondor, at least in the vaguest sense of the term, though I doubted that Aragorn would be sending tax collectors my way when I had Beru build me another castle. This one was staffed with shadows that planted and cultivated vast gardens of flowering fruit trees. Normally they wouldn't have had time to grow and develop, but I found that my powers of the Shadow Monarch were pretty broad.

For one thing, I now had access to the Shadow Realm, an entire dimension where I was omnipotent, and in which I could create just about anything. This was where Ashborn had crafted all of my gear, so it was nothing to make a bunch of fruit trees to be replanted in Middle Earth.

I also had Solution put in charge of a healing house within the castle, so anyone in the local, but sparsely populated surrounding areas wouldn't need to journey to a major city for healing.

After that, my time was mostly spent wandering around Middle Earth, learning what I could from the locals in between my dojo training with Gojo. I also still received my regular weekly Supply Drops, but the contents had been reduced to mostly things I would never use plus the occasional rune stone for a skill that I didn't have. In this way, I learned a bunch of different elemental magics, a few buffs, and some basic transformation skills.

Effectively, if it was a skill or power that someone in the Solo Leveling world possessed, I would eventually get something similar via rune stones, though even those began to dry up in about five years or so.

After I'd explored much of Middle Earth, visiting places both as myself as well as incognito, I eventually felt like I'd seen all there was that this world had to offer. I mean, there were only so many taverns to sit in and only so many forest paths to take. I did get a chance to see some changes near the end of my time here, like the dwarves reclaiming Moria and Gimli establishing his home in the Glittering Caves.

I was a little surprised by that since there was no battle of Helm's Deep to bring him there in the first place, but I supposed that fate had a say in things after all. I did also get around to visiting the Shire, and it was indeed as quaint and picturesque as I'd imagined.

But no matter how much I saw or did, I couldn't shake the feeling like I didn't belong, and the truth of the matter was that I didn't.

I had no ties to this world, either in terms of people or abilities. I was from Earth, and I had powers from Solo Leveling and Jujutsu Kaisen. My time here was always going to be temporary, and my Drifter Geas meant that I'd never made even the barest hint of a friend among the locals.

My only real companionship came from my shadows, and with them I was content.

So it was that when my ten years finally reached their conclusion, I took out the Rift Key and stepped into the space between dimensions, ready and willing to finish what I'd started with the Monarchs.

And afterwards?

Well, there were plenty of universes beyond these to explore, and I had a lot of places to be carried off to.

The End