

# Chapter 3

## -Rudeus the Quagmire-

*"Haah... Haah..."*

I'm running through the city in the predawn gloom. My breath pools before me in white puffs; the road ahead covered with a slight layer of frost. A slight cracking noise resound every time my feet hit the ground, leaving behind a pleasant sensation. Casually taking in the sight of the town flashing past me, I concentrate wholly on running.

*"Haaah..."*

I finally stop after arriving in front of my inn.

*"What'd you think of today's run?"*

As I take a deep breath I hear that voice coming from my trembling legs. My right leg, Tindalos; my left leg, Baskerville. I named them both after famous hunting hounds in the hopes that they would become as nimble and agile as them.

*"Fufu, you did well. Good job."*

I pet my legs just like you would a playful dog and then head inside the inn. It's important never to forget the massage that comes after a walk. Healing magic is forbidden for this. Sure, you could get rid of all the aches in your muscles with it, but that doesn't show the same level of love.

*"You did good today."*

I always fondle my legs with love after my runs. The more you love your muscles, the more they'll love you in return. They'll never betray you. They're something that always reward effort with results. On the other hand, if you neglect them, or push them too hard, they'll turn away from you. That's why you have to treat them well, so when the time comes, they'll be there to save you.

*“Oops, almost forgot about you guys. Can’t have that now, can we.”*

Once I finish my legs, I move to my arms. My right arm, Hulk, and my left arm, Heracles. The two arms I named in the hopes that they'd be as strong as their namesake. I always tend to them after my legs. As a mage, I don't really need much arm strength, but that doesn't mean it won't come in handy sometimes. There's all sorts of situations where a person might have to use their two hands. If you don't train them there'll definitely come a time you'll regret neglecting them. Arms are a very jealous creature. On top of that they're the primary body part that connects with the world and transmits information to you. They'll start sulking if you tell them they're not needed.

*“Alright, let's start with a set of 100 push-ups.”*

I lie down on the floor and slowly but steadily start working through my push-ups. My goal isn't to increase the total number I can do, but instead, to train my body. I call out encouragement to my trembling Hulk and Heracles, and continue my push-ups. I'm hurting, but that means they're hurting too. This shared pain will eventually bind us together, turning into strength.

*“Haaah... Good work guys.”*

While thanking them I start massaging and cooling my arms. Hulk, Heracles, and my two legs too. We kept going until we hit that point where it starts feeling good to exercise again. We worked up a good sweat today too.

*“Thanks for today, guys.”*

After washing myself with hot water, I offer a prayer to the shrine that I erected in a corner of the room. I take out the holy relic stored within, carefully fold it, and place it in my pocket. Truth be told, the holy relic is not something that should ever be taken out of its altar, but I'm worried that it might get stolen if I just leave it here, so I don't really have a choice. Everyone knows you take your valuables with you when you're staying at an inn.

*“I hope there's some good requests today.”*

While muttering that, I change into my robe and head out of the inn.

It's been a few months since the Raster Grizzly event. I've once again taken up my muscle training routine--and as planned--become a full fledged adventurer here.

*"Thanks for your help last time, Quagmire!"*

*"You really are reliable."*

*"There's a lot I can learn from how you time your support magic."*

I've made a pretty good start as an adventurer.

*"Oh no, the one who's thankful for the help is me. I just gave a little assistance. It was thanks to everyone else's strength that we succeeded."*

*"So humble! Someone as skilled as you should be a bit more proud of yourself!"*

*"Hey, interested in joining my party?"*

*"Thank you, but no."*

*"Hey, did you forget? Party invitations are a taboo subject."*

*"Oh, yeah. Sorry..."*

*"Ahaha..."*

Technically I'm a solo adventurer, but in reality, I basically offer assistance to parties whom want to take on more difficult requests but are uncertain of their ability to complete them. Kind of like an adventurer mercenary, I help out others. In return, I take a portion of the request reward. In addition, I make 50% of the money I get from the materials I harvest from demons along the way. Not joining a party, but instead making a living through mercenary work isn't exactly considered respectable to the Adventurer's Guild, but since it's not technically a violation of the rules, they let it slide. The guild here also knows that my old party was destroyed, and that even then I'm still searching desperately for my mother. I'm sure if I move to another city though, I'll have to find myself a party to enter, even if it's only temporarily. But, I still have reservations about joining another party.

*"At any rate, I'm glad we hired you. I'll be relying on you again if anything difficult pops up."*

I treat everyone with polite courtesy, but in battle I try to show off my strengths. Thanks to that, the name Rudeus Greyrat is quite well known in this city.

*"Hey, Quagmire!"*

*"Quagmire! Come help us out for this request! We're just about to leave!"*

*"Sorry, but I've already got a request that I plan to take today."*

Though more than just the name Rudeus, it seems like *"Rudeus the Quagmire"* is what's been spreading around here. Probably because I call myself a support mage, and mostly just cast Quagmire and Deep Fog in battle. Thanks to the tricks I learned from Timothy, almost all the adventurers smile at me now when I walk into the guild. 'Course, that's mostly because they think of me as *"young"* and *"skilled but doesn't charge much"*.

*"Doesn't seem to understand the value of money"*, and so on. Everyone smiles at someone that's useful to them, but at the very least, this means that I've gotten all the regulars of the guild here to remember me. At this rate, my name will spread out across town soon enough.

*"Hey, Quagmire! If I hear anything about your mom, I'll let you know."*

*"Oh, thank you very much."*

I ran into a party that's planning to move to a different city in a few days and got them to help me spread the word in the search for my mother. Everything's going well. It's only a matter of time until Zenith hears about me. Well, that's only if she's actually around here of course. The odds of that are astronomically low, but even then, I don't want to believe that what I'm doing here is pointless. If I can manage to make myself famous here, I can do it anywhere else too. If I keep going from city to city spreading my name, I'll be able to cover all the way through to the Eastern part of the Northern Frontier. Eventually, I'll have to run into where Zenith is. It takes about three months for my name to start spreading. About a year for me to be certain I've gotten all I can in a place. This will take an awfully long time, but I've gotta do it. Isn't that right, Roxy-sensei?

*"Hey look, he's praying again!"*

*"Leave him be, he's just really devout. I saw him praying on the road the other day too."*

Oh, whoops. I'd started unconsciously praying to my holy relic again. As long as I've got this, I'm OK. I can keep going. I can keep trying. As long as Roxy-sensei is watching over me, I'm invincible. The invincible Robo-Rudeus, an eternal working machine.

*“Tch---”*

*“Quagmire, huh?”*

*“Just look at how full of himself he is.”*

As with anything, there's still people that don't like me too. It's nothing to be worried about though. At the very least, they haven't tried to directly interfere with me yet. As long as I act humble and polite towards everyone, the number of people liking me will always be higher. Most people don't want to lose someone who's useful to them, so I just make sure I don't get involved with the people who don't like me. Honestly, it'd be nice if they'd help out too, but no point in trying for the impossible. My goal isn't to get along with everyone I meet. I just have to work to find my mom in the most efficient manner possible is all.

*“Ah...”*

While lost in thought, I headed towards the exit of the Adventurer's Guild. At that moment, a familiar face entered the room. It was Sara.

*“Mu---”*

Upon seeing my face, her expression turned to a scowl. It does feel a bit unpleasant.

*“What are you looking at?”*

*“Nothin’.”*

My relationship with her hasn't changed at all. Ever since that first request she's hated me. Even now, all these months later, she still talks to me curtly.

*“Were you about to go back?”*

*“Yeah, I just finished a difficult request so I was going to go back to my inn.”*

*“Hmm... We're just about to take a new request, wanna come with us?”*

*“Umm... Well...”*

I guess we're connected by fate or something. I'd teamed up with the first party I met here, Counter Arrow, a number of times now. It was the party I'd teamed up with the most now, actually. Thinking about it in terms of my overall goal, continually teaming up with one party wasn't the most beneficial thing to do. After I get to know a party decently well and they learn about my goal and see my strength, it doesn't make sense to keep teaming up with them anymore.

*"Uh--- Are you guys planning on leaving tomorrow?"*

That being said, I never turn them down for some reason. I don't really understand it myself. Maybe I just want to pay them back for helping me realize how pathetic I was acting before. With all that in mind I inquired, but upon hearing my words, Sara's mouth tapered to a pout again.

*"You always start out with those half-assed questions. If you don't want to go you can just say no, you know. It's not like we need you or anything."*

As always, Sara's speaking to me quite harshly. Though it feels like her attitude towards me has started getting a little better recently. There's no real sting behind her words anymore like there used to be.

I can't really say we've started getting along, but...

Well, whatever. It's not like I want to be liked any more than necessary for my objective.

*"Sorry for being so indecisive, but it takes me time to make a decision."*

*"And, can you please stop acting so polite? It's disgusting."* Sara said, casually.

She wasn't trying to be mean or anything this time, that was just what she really thought. Though even if you tell me that, I don't have any intention of stopping. After all, I'd decided to keep acting polite and humble to everyone.

*"Step off, Sara."*

The other members of Counter Arrow showed up. The tanned girl with dreadlocks, Suzanne. After her came the red-robed Timothy, then Mimiru and Patris. All the members of Counter Arrow.

*"Fiiiine."*

At Suzanne's words Sara began sulking and turned away.

*"So, Rudeus. You coming?" she asked.*

I'd said earlier that it takes time for me to come to a decision, but I'd already decided from the start. I just like to make it look like I'm always hesitating.

*"Yeah, sure. I'll come along. Thanks for inviting me."*

*"Alright, let's pick our request then."*

*"Alright."*

Sara's hostility aside, the rest of Counter Arrow were all very nice people. There's Suzanne, who's very kind, caring, and slightly nosy; and Timothy who's quite sociable. The rest of the guys are all rather tight-lipped. They have pretty good balance for a party, and even when I'm with them, their coordination is impeccable. It makes fighting go quite smoothly. Of course they want Sara and the vanguard to get more experience so they're still rather strict about not letting me hog the limelight. Rather than me just temporarily helping out, it feels more like we're working together.

I guess in a sense you could say we're... friends.

*"Alright, which one should we take this time? We've got Rudeus with us now too."*

*"What do you think about this one, Ane-san?"*

*"Hmm, an A-rank collection request, eh? Collection of snow drake scales... Hmm... Don't you think that's a bit above our level?"*

*"We've got Rudeus with us this time. We may as well try for a big one while we have the chance."*

Watching them debate about which request to take in front of the bulletin board brings me back. Eris and Ruijerd used to argue about that a lot too. Even though I was the one who ended up deciding in the end anyway...

*"What do you think, Rudeus?"*

*"Eh? Yeah, I think that one's fine."*

Now I'm the one who's being asked an opinion of instead of the one deciding. We didn't really do that back in Dead End. I'm not the leader, or even the vice leader. I'm just an outsider of this group, really. I state my opinion and then I get to let others decide. It's kind of nice, to be honest.

*"Alright then, it's decided. Let's take this one."*

At Suzanne's declaration, our request was decided. It's similar to one we did before, but it's only by piling up experience like this that results start to show.

I'll do my best.



The Next Day.

After finishing my preparations, I went out to meet up with the members of Counter Arrow and left the city together. Our destination was to the south. Apparently the ruins we need to go are two days south of Rozenburg. I've never been there before. I did a bit of research on our request though. Snow drake scale collecting. Around these parts, the only place snow drakes can be found is the aforementioned ruins. As their name suggests, they have scales as white as snow and are a race of lesser dragons. They're usually three to four meters long. Since they don't have wings, they can't fly. Which is why they usually build their nests in caves or labyrinths. They tend to live in flocks and are known to be pretty strong, so they're classified as an S-class monster. However, they dislike light and rarely go outside, and have a relatively gentle personality. Unless you attack their nest, they probably won't attack you so they're not very dangerous. Which is why even at worst, this request won't get a rating higher than upper A-rank. Our plan this time is to head into the Gargau Ruins where they live and search the place for any loose scales that they dropped. Snow drake scales make for pretty good insulation, so they're used a lot in buildings around here. There's a number of good insulating materials here in this cold region, but snow drake scales are among the very best. They're tough, long-lasting and on top of that, the pure white transparent scales give off a dazzlingly brilliant blue shine when light is reflected off them, making them very pretty. They're often used as tiling for the homes of nobles and the like.



They're also used in making armor and shields. Basherant's royal guards all wear armor made from snow drake scales. Only a few adventurers are able to afford such equipment, but because of how effective it is against the monsters in this area, there are a few S-rank adventurers who have snow drake armor. The strongest monster around here is also the strongest in fights against other monsters. In other words, even in combat against other monsters, equipment made from the strongest monster will be effective. Simple, right? And now we're going to be heading towards the territory of said strongest monster. Of course, we don't plan to get near their nest, but there are monsters other than snow drakes living in those ruins. Even if they are supposed to be gentle, you never know if one might come attack us for some reason. Which is why everyone in the party is feeling a little nervous. So before we enter the ruins, we're having a bit more thorough planning session than usual at camp.

*"I brought fire drake arrowheads just in case, but they might not even work."*

*"You think poison would work?"*

*"If they hate light, wouldn't fire scare them off?"*

*"If that was all it took to beat them, then this wouldn't be anywhere near an S-rank request."*

They're all pretty serious. Everyone's pooling their collective information together and trying to find out how best to be able to utilize their abilities for the upcoming fights. If everyone in this party's abilities were maximized, and they were able to gather seven people for a full party, these guys could easily move up to A-rank. Their way of doing things is too serious for most adventurers though, so they'd probably have a hard time recruiting. Most adventurers just ad-lib most of their requests.

*"You haven't said anything at all. You sure you're not gonna slow us down?"*

*"Yes, I'll be fine."*

*"You better be. It's bad enough that my arrows might not work on those guys... If they manage to make it to you, I might not be able to back you up."*

Even Sara's nervous. She's got unparalleled accuracy, but against opponents with scales as tough as theirs, she can't do much. Places such the eyes or mouth are still vulnerable, but that doesn't change the fact that she's at a disadvantage. Unfortunately, there are a lot of A-class monsters that can easily withstand or dodge Sara's arrows. The snow drake is just one of them. Most of the other monsters living in the snow drakes' territory aren't too hard to deal with, but if we run into anything A-class or higher, Sara'll be practically useless. It's pretty frustrating to think about, especially for an adventurer.

There isn't much one can do with their power alone. Even I can't do everything by myself. You see, a lot of people that get conceited thinking they can handle everything, then find themselves completely destroyed by a powerful enemy, or taken down by a surprise attack. This is why you have to live humbly at all times. Sara's still young, so she probably hasn't experienced failure too many times. Even now, she's still thinking, *"How will the party manage without me?"*

So long as we support each other, we should be fine. If we still can't manage somehow... Well, we'll worry about that bridge when we have to cross it.

*"There's no need to get so worked up, guys. At the end of the day, our request is to collect their scales, not fight them. It's just like we're cleaning up after them."*

*"Yeah, let's just try our best not to get into any fights in the first place."*

*"If we find ourselves in trouble we can just run away."*

*"You guys are fast at running, that's for sure."*

*"Mimiru, you're the one who runs away the fastest out of all of us, you know?"*

At Timothy's words, everyone laughed, and some of the tension dissipated. He's usually pretty quiet, but he always knows what to say at the right times. I should learn from him.

*"Alright, let's go guys."*

Suzanne slapped her fist into her palm and everyone's faces got serious as they stood up. The entrance to the ruins were past a mountain stream. Floating bits of ice could be seen travelling down the stream, past the cliff into the valley. A cave entrance waited just ahead of the stream. Half of the cave was covered in ice and huge pillars of it covered the roof like eaves, making it hard to see inside from above. It honestly looked more like a bear's cave than ancient ruins. So much so that I actually wonder if we're at the right place or not. Though, it's been said that the entrance to Gargau Ruins, which had been discovered by accident by an adventurer 10 years ago, was indeed supposed to look like this. There's not much information on the inside of the ruins though.

*"This is the right place, right?"* Suzanne muttered exactly what I was thinking.

*"I can see footprints, so most likely."*

There were indeed footprints where Sara was pointing. The exact amount was hard to tell, but it was obvious a fair number of people had passed in and out.

*“Uh oh... Does that mean someone else took this request too?”*

“No. These footprints are five or six days old, so I don't think so.”

*“But it is possible we'll have company.”*

*“There's footprints leading out of the cave too, they might have gone back.”*

While listening to Suzanne and Sara's conversation, I began making preparations to enter the cave. I take out the torch I'd bought beforehand and light the tip. If you're going to be searching a cave, light is a necessity. A lamp works too, but the torch's fire itself can be used as a weapon, and you can be a lot rougher with a torch without it breaking. In a fight you can throw it and still have it work as a light source as well. It's true that it's possible there's gas spread throughout the cave, so bringing a torch would get you in big trouble. Using too much fire could also consume all the oxygen within, suffocating you, but if you're worried about those kinds of things you're better off not going into caves in the first place. I do wish there was something that gave off a more powerful light than a torch though, like a LED lantern or something.

*“The ground's frozen over in places, so watch your step.”*

Suzanne, who was at the head of the party, called back to us.

Apparently there's some parties who designate a specific member to hold the torch when exploring labyrinths, but in our case, everyone had a torch. None of us have good night vision. Plus, we have an archer with us, so the brighter the better in our case. With all six of us holding torches it was pretty bright. Maybe not quite as bright as it was outside, but still plenty bright.

All idle chatter stopped once we entered the cave. We silently walk forward on the slightly downward sloping path. There aren't very many monsters. Every so often, some centipede like monster comes out, but they're so weak that Suzanne takes them out with ease on her own, so we haven't really been in a battle yet. Well, if a bunch of monsters showed up on this narrow cavern path, we'd be in trouble so it's probably better this way. If it looks like the relative number of monsters is going to keep on increasing as we go deeper, we might have to consider retreating. Even if the very inner parts are devoid of monsters, if the path is full of them we'll have to reconsider the mission. Patches of the ground have frozen over, so you need to watch your step if you don't want to trip and fall. We've put spikes on our boots just in case, but you can still always slip.

*“Ah---”*

*“Whoa!”*

Sara, who’s right in front of me, started to fall backwards, so I quickly shot out an arm to support her. Having a foresight eye comes in handy at times like this. Actually, it comes in handy most times. I haven't really run into a situation where it hasn't.

*“Hey, where do you think you're grabbing?”*

*“Nowhere in particular?”*

I put her back down on dry land, and Sara turned back to glare at me while patting down her chest.

*“.....”*

Her face was completely red, but she was still glaring at me. I guess she's mad that I touched her boobs. Honestly though, I only remember the sensation of touching somewhere hard. I didn't even actually feel her boobs, just the hard breastplate. There's no real need to get mad. It's not like I'm going to get excited by something so trivial. Maybe in the past my heart might have skipped a beat, but I'm no virgin anymore.

*“Sorry.”*



Well, I still apologize anyway. This path really is narrow, so it's only natural that the distance between us is going to get smaller. Right now Suzanne and Patris are taking up the vanguard, Mimiru and Sara in the middle, with me and Timothy at the rear. Basically, double file columns. In front of me is the back of Sara's head, but considering she's a bit shorter than me and in front of her is the fully grown Patris. She probably can't see anything at all. It'd be better if the front row moved a bit to the side so the middle row would have a clear line of sight, but unfortunately there just isn't enough space. We just gotta keep going like this. Worst case, I can always just make an earth wall in front of our vanguard if needed.

“Oh...”

As I was thinking that, the cave suddenly came to an end. As we stepped through, it got bright enough that you'd think we're back outside, and our visibility improved greatly.

“Ooooh...”

Looking up at the ceiling, you could see a countless number of things giving off a bluish white light. I can't tell if it's some kind of jewel, or moss or what. We can't tell what they are, but they're giving off enough light that we'll be fine without our torches. The path's gotten a lot wider too. You could barely fit two people side by side before, but now there's enough room for five people to walk with space to spare. Further in, you could see one side of the road ended at a cliff. The bottom of the cliff is a lot darker so it's harder to make out, but it seems like a lake or river of some sort lies at the bottom. If it's a lake, it's an underground one. There's definitely huge fish and stuff living at the bottom so I certainly don't want to fall in. The path ahead runs parallel to the cliff, ending at our destination. It's old and crumbling, but you can still make out the shape of a giant fortress. That's Gargau Ruins.

*“Gargau Ruins are the remains of an old fortress that was built back during the first great human-demon war. It was created by the Subterranean Demon Lord, Raagon Haagon, who was feared as one of the five great demon lords at the time.”*

Timothy muttered. Sounds like the name of some evil demon the bad guy would summon with his dying breath.

*“The demon lord was a master of God-class earth magic, so he created a fortress where humans could never hope to reach. Then he constructed an intricate network of underground roads to launch surprise attacks on the human forces.”*

“Wow... you sure know a lot Timothy-san.”

*“The area around here used to be the main battleground between the subterranean demons and the humans, so legends of the battles have been passed down since then. I used to hear about it a lot, is all.”*

Stories passed down through the generations, huh?

Well, there *is* a giant underground fortress right here, so the stories are probably true. I guess they made a bunch of roads and forts like this, and launched surprise attacks from underground. Knowing their walls were useless, always afraid of when and where the next attack will come from... I'm amazed the humans managed to win that war considering who they were up against.

*“You were born in Ranoa, right, Timothy?” Suzanne said, turning around.*

*“Yes. I was born in a nameless village in Ranoa, studied at the famous Magic University in Sharia, dreamed of becoming an adventurer and headed off to Asura, found out how harsh reality really is, and now I'm here.”*

Ranoa, eh. I'll find myself heading there eventually.

*“Enemy Attack!”*

As I was spacing out thinking about the future, Sara suddenly shouted, threw down her torch, and unslung her bow. Ahead of us was a one meter long black something that was flying right at us. Pretty fast too.

*“Giant bats!”*

*“Battle formation everyone! Rear guard, I'm counting on you!”*

At Sara's shout, Suzanne began calling out orders, and Patris stood in front of me like a wall. Suzanne, Patris, and Mimiru all took up positions to guard me, Timothy, and Sara. Even if the space had opened up to become wider, with the cliff right next to us, it would be hard to go up against flying enemies with limited mobility. Thus, the vanguard would make a shield wall, and leave attacking to the ranged members of the party.

*“Hya!”*

With a small yell, Sara started shooting arrows one after the other. The arrows all flew towards the fast moving bats as if they were being sucked right to them. Boom, headshot. One of the giant bats spiralled down and fell off the cliff. Each shot was beautiful. It's almost like art.

*"Small embers, burst forth into a blistering blaze, enveloping all! Flamethrower!"*

Timothy went for the less artistic approach. With both hands pointing upwards, he simply opted to roast the giant bats with AoE fire magic. An instant later, two more bats fell into the lake.

*"Blast Wave!"*

I was even less artistic than that. I just raised both of my hands, and created an explosion in midair. I figure for bats of this size, this should be enough. And as I expected, the remaining bats get puncture holes through their wings, making them incapable of flight, and causing them to all fall. As I watched the giant bats lose altitude, I let out a relieved sigh. And all of a sudden, something appeared from the lake.

*"Ah---"*

*"Uwaa..."*

The men's voice of awe and Sara's disgusted squeal overlap. What had come out of the lake and swallowed the giant bats whole was an even larger frog. With that poisonous-looking blue and black speckling, it looks just like a poison dart frog. That guy's gotta be poisonous. I can't tell how big it is from up here, but it swallowed that one meter bat whole, like it was nothing. It's at least five meters long, if not longer. It keeps on turning back and forth energetically, probably wondering if there won't be any more food for it falling down. It's not hibernating even though it's winter, I guess because it's a demon.

*"I really don't want to fall down there..."*

At Suzanne's muttered words, Sara shivered and nodded vigorously. Looks like she doesn't like frogs.

*"Let's get going. Be careful not to fall in."*



At Timothy's words, we started walking down the cliff path. The Gargau Ruins were so huge that looking at them up close overwhelmed you. It was five stories tall, and as wide as a middle school building. It's impossible to tell how deep it goes, but considering how it's buried in boulders, it must go pretty far in. I won't say it's among the very biggest buildings I've seen in this world, but... considering something this big was built entirely underground, I can't help but be amazed. And it was all made with earth magic too. The entrance wasn't a grand front gate, but more a service entrance kind of thing. Really just a hole in the wall. The view in there was spectacular as well. To the left there's the cliff road we came on stretching on forever. On the right you can see a giant cavity, and the lake spreading out beneath it. Even in my old world you would've been hard pressed to find a view like this. At best, you'd be able to see it in a game or a picture somewhere, a true fantasy scene. But right now--seeing it in person--I feel something I'd never be able to feel from just a picture. The smell, the atmosphere, the occasional splash of the frog surfacing, sending ripples along the lake; they all gave this a true sense of reality. I just kept staring blankly at the view, while idle thoughts like *[What would it be like to swim in there?]* crossed my mind.

*"How long are you going to stare?"*

*"Ah, sorry, I'm coming."*

At Sara's words, I shook myself back to reality and rejoined the group.

*"Do you like buildings or something?"*

*"I wouldn't say I like them really. More so, it's just I haven't seen something quite like this before."*

*"Right..."*

I'm still in the middle of a job. If I had a camera or something I'd have taken a picture, but we really don't have time for this. I need to hurry up and finish this mission so I can go home. To that... cold lonely room that houses only me...

*"....."*

I turned my neck, shook off those depressing thoughts, and looked forward.

*"So this is what a fortress made back in the first great demon-human war looks like..."*

Seeing as I had traveled the Demon Continent before, I do have some idea as to what demon architecture is like. Starting from Kishirisu Castle in Rikaris, I've seen a lot of large castles giving off a strange vibe. These ruins gave off that vibe too, but I'm not sure whether it's because it's older or not. The vibe was slightly different from usual. Maybe it's because it was built for war. The scale of it is huge, even the ceiling is five meters high. Despite that, the passageways are quite narrow, giving off a sense of discord. Maybe the ceiling was built this high because the demons that used it were that tall. Unlike humans, there's a lot of different races of demons. They probably built this fortress with that in mind, and made the passages narrow to make it easier to defend if the fortress ever got assaulted.

*"Hmm... Make a right here, Suza."*

*"Gotcha."*

I just realized Timothy's holding a map of the ruins in one hand as he's walking. I guess enough people must have gone in and out of here that a map of the place got made.

*"Sheesh, why'd the demons have to make this place so complicated?"*

Timothy, who's standing next to me, sighed. I took a quick peek at the map in his hand and I saw the inner part was designed like one huge maze. From the quick glance I was able to get, it just looked like they made it needlessly complicated because they thought it'd be cool or something. Considering how demons are, I wouldn't put it past them...

*"Their bodies are built differently from ours, maybe something like this was more convenient for them?"*

*"Makes sense."*

Even if they did hide themselves underground, on the off chance that they'd have to fight in the fortress, they probably built these tall ceilings and narrow passageways so flying demons and demons that can stick to walls could fight properly. Like, it's quite possible that that ventilation duct looking thing was actually a passageway for flying species. Even if it's only for some of them, having passageways demons could traverse that humans could not would probably have been very convenient.

*"....."*

More importantly, we haven't seen any monsters at all since we entered the fortress. Supposedly, there's a lot of bug-like and and amphibian-like monsters inside the ruins, but we haven't seen a single one. There's a few bones scattered here and there and bloodstains in various places, but no sign of an actual monster. Can't really say that it's reassuring though. Just then, the sound of wind rushing past reaches my ears. *[Whoooooosh.]* The kind of sound that sends chills down your spine.

*“Enemy attack!”*

The moment we heard that sound, Mimiru shouted out. Upon hearing his shout, I look in front, behind, and even above me, but I can't see anything, giving me a really bad feeling.

*“Where!?”*

*“Below us!”*

The enemy was below us. A bit further down the road, a pile of fallen bones began to assemble themselves with a loud clattering, and stood up. It was a bone-man! I mean, a skeleton. And then, as if beckoned by the skeleton, a translucent something showed itself. That something has no neck and no legs. With the rough outline of a person, and clad in a fluttering cloak, it slowly glided towards us. It was a ghost.

*“It's some skeletons and a wraith!”*

*“Lure them in as far as you can, Patris!”*

*“Got it!”*

*“Sara, Timothy, Rudeus, get back! Aim only for the skeletons!”*

*“Gotcha!”*

At Suzanne's words, I backed up a little. The skeletons began clattering towards us, rusted swords in hand. They're surprisingly fast.

*“Outta my way!”*

Sara slipped past me and Timothy who were in the rear, and headed forwards. She had her bow slung on her back, and had a large knife in hand instead.

“Rudeus, the skeletons are weak to strong striking attacks!”

*“Perfect!”*

I raised my hands towards the skeletons. Striking attacks are my specialty, these guys are toast.

*“Stone Cannon!”*

My most powerful spell shot towards the frontmost skeleton, and completely pulverised it. The stone bullet kept on going through the first, and smashed another behind it.

*“O’ ye capricious God. Heed my call and sunder thine foe. Stone Cannon!”*

A bit slower than me, Timothy also fires off his stone cannon, but it stops after destroying just one skeleton. Guess I win... Not like this is the time to be competing about sort kind of trivial stuff or anything.

*“We've finished---”*

*“It's not over yet!”*

As I was about to turn around to go support Suzanne and the rest, Timothy's shout had me turn back again.

*“Ah!”*

The skeletons popped into my field of view. The one I'd destroyed was slowly gathering its scattered bones and reforming once more.

*“As long as that wraith’s alive, these skeletons are immortal!”*

Come to think of it, I do remember hearing something like that. Skeletons are completely immortal. Even if you burn them they'll still move around while on fire. If you burn them down to ash, they'll reform from those ashes. That's why the most effective method is striking blows. It's the best way to incapacitate them. Once you've incapacitated the skeletons you can focus on bringing down the wraith. You can bring the wraith down with fire magic, but that's just a temporary measure. Given enough time, even a completely burned away wraith can revive. The most effective way to eliminate a ghost is holy magic. It's far more effective and permanent than fire magic. If you destroy a wraith with holy magic, it can't revive again.

Technically you can completely destroy a skeleton with holy magic as well, turning it into particles of light, but as long as the wraith still lives, it can just keep summoning more.

*“O’ mother earth, grace us with thy blessing! Bring divine punishment down upon those foolish enough to disturb thy holy order! Exorcist Rate!”*

It looks like Mimiru can use holy magic. I turned around upon hearing that unfamiliar chant, and saw Mimiru's ball of light collide with the wraith.

*“Gyaaaaaaaaah!”*

The wraith disappeared with an agonized scream. It's translucent body was torn to shreds and bursts into particles of light. At the same time, the skeletons all fell into a crumbled heap, as if their strings had been cut.

*“Alright, that's all of them! Everyone, return to your positions!”*

At Suzanne's words, Sara slipped past me again, and stood in front of me. Mimiru returned to the middle as well, and our original position was restored. But wow, so that's what holy magic is like.

*“That's the first time I've seen holy magic... and ghost-type monsters to...”*

*“This is only my second time encountering them too. The first time we had no idea how to handle them and one of our comrades died. It was pretty harsh.”*

*“Was Mimiru not in your party back then?”*

*“Well, this was back before this party was even formed. Still, I'm glad we practised our coordination for situations like these.”*

While Timothy and I were talking, Sara turned back to us, and raised a finger to her lips. I guess our conversation was too loud, making it hard for her to hear her surroundings.

*“Sorry.”*

Now's not the time for idle chatter. Complacency leads to death. Still, it's rather strange that ghost-type monsters would show up here. That ghost... It almost looked like a soldier. Maybe it's a remnant way back from the first great human-demon war? Nah. Can't be.

There's no way such an old ghost would still be left here in a place where people pass through a decent amount now. It must've been the ghost of an adventurer who died here a few years past. Namu Amida Butsu. May your soul reach nirvana.

*"Looks like we're here."*

My thoughts returned to the present at Suzanne's words. Ahead of us, the maze-like passageways finally came to an end, opening up into a huge hall. It seemed to span a hundred odd meters, and ended at a crumbled staircase. Rows of giant stone statues lined both walls. The layout just screamed that the room that lay ahead was of great importance.

*"Oooh."*

And then the floor, a huge number of white scales were scattered all over, strewn across the ground like freshly fallen sakura petals. They're what we came here for, snow drake scales. For something that's supposedly so valuable, there sure are a lot of them just lying around. Apparently this location is in the middle of the route that the snow drakes take to find their prey. Before heading out to go catch their prey, or after they've already caught it, they come here to groom themselves. If you want to get their scales, this is the best place.

*"Past this is the snow drakes' territory. Don't go past that last statue over there. Got it, everyone?"*

*"Yes!"*

Everyone gave out a rousing cry and began gathering the scales. I'm in a group with Sara and Timothy. We're on the lookout for any enemies. According to reports, the snow drakes live further in. Giant bats, myconids, wraiths, and giant moles might show up from the other side or the second floor. If snow drakes show up, we hide. If other monsters show up, we bring them down. Amidst all that, we'll continue gathering scales until the six bags we brought are all completely full, then go home. Mission complete. If a battle with snow drakes becomes inevitable, we might be in some trouble, but even then... This is a bit too easy for an A-rank request. Honestly, it wouldn't have been weird to have run into more monsters on our way here either, but we've seen surprisingly few. The only thing of note in here was the wraith. It's always times like this where something bad happens, so I need to be careful.

*"....."*

Thinking that, I keep a close eye on the entrance to the snow drakes' lair. I take a look at the innermost statue. It was in the form of an alluring woman, wearing short pants, a breastplate, and a large cloak, with a hand wrapped in chains at her waist standing with legs spread apart. It's a shame her head's fallen off. In between the space between her legs is an entrance to the other side, the beginning of the snow drake's territory. If they're gonna come, it's going to be from there.

“.....”

For some reason I can't help but feel like I've seen that kind of costume that statue is wearing somewhere else before.

Ah! Could it be? Is that a statue of Kishirika Kishirisu!?

When I saw her before she looked just like a kid though... Eh, I guess the statue was made by exaggerating her features. It wouldn't be strange to paint her as such a beautiful woman. I think they might have exaggerated a bit too much though. Especially her breast size... and height.

Yeah. They're huge...

*“Whoops, no time for that now.”*

Focus, focus. We could be attacked at any time, or an unexpected incident could occur, I need to stay focused. Besides, I've stopped getting so worked up over just seeing a pair of boobs. I mean, I know what the real thing feels like now. I'm no virgin.

*“What was that!?”* Timothy suddenly shouted.

At the same time, a piercing roar reached my ears.

*“I've got a bad feeling about this...”*

*“Everyone, battle formation! Now! Put your bags near the entrance!”*

That bad feeling was right. We all gather together staying vigilant. That piercing roar just now definitely came from further inside, and it's getting louder.

“.....”

We all exchange nervous glances. The number of roars is increasing too. If a huge number of monsters pop out, we'll have to just take the scales we've already harvested and run. The three that were out collecting managed to get enough to fill three bags. That should be enough for the request. Suzanne looked once more to the scales, our bags, and then back where the roaring was coming from.

*"From the sounds of it, they're not heading this way. We should hurry up and collect as much as we can, as fast as we can."*

As Suzanne said that, she glanced back again at the empty bags. It's true that that roar was far off and didn't seem to be heading this way. If something else has gotten the snow drakes all riled up, then it is true that now's our chance to grab as much as we can. At the end of the day, this is all still conjecture, and it's quite possible we might get mixed up in whatever battle's going on. Do we play it safe and finish the request with the minimal amount required to clear it, or do we take a risk and try to get as big a reward as possible? The longer we sit here waiting, the closer that danger gets to us. I guess it is possible that nothing might happen in the end too, but either way, it's best to decide if we're going to run or keep going quickly.

*"I think we should try and get more."*

*"Me too."*

*"It won't take long."*

Sara, Patris, and Mimiru all seem to agree with Suzanne's opinion. Honestly, I think we're better off running away. Unfortunately however, I don't stand to lose anything if we fail this request. I'm not the one that has to pay the failure fee, so I don't say anything.

*"Alright, let's just grab a little more. Be quick about it."*

At Timothy's words, we all return to collecting scales. Our watch was strengthened, and from the sounds of it, the roaring was getting louder and more violent. I tightly gripped my staff, and continued to stare past the statues. The roars were still far away. It felt like they were coming from in front of us, towards us. Perhaps due to the echoing through the ruins, it also felt like they were coming from behind us. It might be better if I seal all passageways except the one we came in through. If I do that though, we'll be doomed if monsters start swarming our previous route. I need to calm down. As long as we don't understand the situation, taking any drastic measures might backfire on us.



Fortunately, we still haven't had to fight much. We've still got most of our strength left. We've got enough spare energy to pull ourselves out of a pinch. Yeah, that's why Suzanne prioritized gathering as well. If monsters show up, I'll beat them down. That's all I need to think about. While thinking that, I wait for everyone else to finish gathering scales. While listening to those roars that almost make my legs tremble, I simply wait.

*"Hm?"*

The closer we get to finishing our harvesting, the smaller the screams seem to be getting as well.

*"Huh...?"*

Suzanne looked up quizzically at the direction the screams were coming from. Looks like my fears were groundless. Maybe it's their mating season and that was just the sound of them courting each other. Certain animals get loud like that when it's their mating season too. Thinking that, just as I was about to release my grip on my staff---

*"Enemy attack!"*

From between the legs where the statue's head had fallen came a giant white clump. Lizard-like creatures with four legs and pure white scales--snow drakes--started pouring out from behind the statue with alarming speed. Seemingly, my field of vision was completely filled with them. With bloodshot eyes they spotted us and stopped suddenly right before reaching our location. I counted six of them. The rest were beyond my line of sight.

*"....."*

Everything happened so suddenly that even Timothy just stopped what he was doing and stared. No one could even say the word retreat. It's as if the other side is just as stunned as we are. I've never seen a surprised lizard before, but these guys' eyes were all open wide.

They all stopped right before us, vigilant, threateningly opening their mouths and bearing their fangs. As if time itself had stopped, we just stared at each other, the snow drakes and us.

*"Run!"*

At my shout it was as if some spell had finally been broken, Timothy and the rest all turned and made a beeline for the exit.

*"Gaaah! Not this shit again!"*

As if Patris' shout had served as some kind of signal, the snow drakes all began to move as well.

*"Earth Fortress!"*

I raised up a giant wall of earth in order to block up the passage, creating a barrier between us and the snow drakes. It rose up to the height of the statues' shoulder, blocking off the snow drakes. Once the wall had been formed, I too turned around and began to run. When I glanced back, I involuntarily let out an undignified scream. The snow drakes are just like lizards. A wall, no matter how high, is no obstacle for them. They started pouring in from the gaps between the wall and the ceiling, and the sides of the passageway. Dammit, at this rate they'll catch up to us. Thanks to my daily jogging routine, I'm not out of breath, but that's all. I'm still slow.

*"Ngh!"*

I turned around, and raised my hands. What's strong against lizards? Cold? I wonder if I can use it to slow their movements down.

*"Blizzard Storm!"*

I instantly fired off an ice magic spell. A frigid wind started to blow, causing the scales on the ground to dance through the air. Frozen spears of ice as thick as my thighs shot towards the snow drakes. However, despite the narrow passageway, the snow drakes were able to nimbly dodge them. A few managed to hit their marks, but they didn't seem to have much effect. They weren't strong enough to penetrate those drakes' scales. I messed up. Their scales are great insulators and hey have to live in this frozen wasteland. Of course ice magic wouldn't work on them.

The wall's being torn down too. From the rubble more white lumps can be seen heading towards us. There's more than I can count on even two hands. Giant white lizards are rushing at me. A bunch of them. I didn't see this many before, but more must have come as they were trying to get past the wall. Despite their huge size, every single of them move as nimbly and quickly as a small lizard. It's no good, I can't outrun them. I'm gonna have to fight. I'm going to have to retreat while fighting. I wonder if I can manage that. Probably not. I wonder if everyone else at least managed to get away. I've left a letter back at the inn in case I die. It's a rule among adventurers that if someone dies, the remaining party members sort out the dead person's affairs. I'm not a member of Counter Arrow, but I wonder if they'll deliver that letter to my family all the same...

I put my left hand in my pocket, and grip what's inside. I prepare myself to face the onslaught of snow drakes.

*“Syah!”*

At that moment, I hear a voice behind me. An arrow flies past me, and strikes a snow drake square in the eye.

*“Guyaaaaaah!”*

The snow drake let out a terrifying scream, stumbled sideways, and crashed into a statue. With its side still scraping against the wall, it slipped past us.

*“Small embers burst forth into a blistering blaze, enveloping all! Flamethrower!”*

From my left, flames leapt up. Scared by the flames, the snow drakes stopped in their tracks.

*“Let's go, Patris!”*

*“Yeah!”*

With Suzanne taking point, Patris and Mimiru leapt out in front of me. Three in the vanguard and three in the rear guard. Somehow with me in the center, that's what our formation looks like.

*“Looks like they're not coming any closer! Just try to repel the ones in front of us!”*

*“You got it!”*

*“From the left!”*

While coordinating with each other, the vanguard began fending off the snow drake flock. Sara provided support with her bow, Timothy with his magic. They came to save me? Why? I'm not even one of their party members.

*“.....”*

While I was staring dumbfounded, Timothy lightly slapped me in the back. They came to save me. The moment I realized that, my heart began overflowing with warmth

*“Nrgh!”*

I forcibly suppress these feelings. I don't know why. I just know I can't handle it right now. I can't handle that warmth.

*“Stop spacing out! Help fight, you dolt!”*

Sara's voice brought me back to reality.

*“G-Got it!”*

I point my staff at the snow drakes and begin gathering magical energy. Thanks to the vanguard holding them back, I'm beginning to regain my composure. It doesn't really feel like they're attacking us. More so we're just an obstacle in their way that they need to eliminate, like they're trying to just get past us. They're avoiding us, and following the walls and ceiling to get behind us. In other words, our opponent isn't all of them. As long as we take care of the ones directly in front of us we're fine. If we deal enough damage, they'll just try to avoid us and run away. They're not like cornered rats, more like fleeing enemies. Sara's bow isn't all that effective, and Timothy isn't dealing any fatal wounds with his magic. Suzanne and Patris' attacks definitely aren't doing much damage either. If we can just hold out, we'll be fine.

*“Stone Cannon!”*

Trying to divert the enemy in front of me, I fire a stone cannon at it. I get a direct hit and destroy its scales, damaging the flesh underneath. But it's still not a fatal wound. That's mostly because of the distance between us. The snow drake just barely managed to angle its body, lessening the impact, but that's fine. It's enough to make it change course. I simply keep repeating that action. That's all that'll keep us alive.

*“Alright, everyone. Start moving towards the wall!”*

At Suzanne's words we all start heading towards the wall. Staying at the side of the wall will put us further out of the way of their rush than staying in the middle of the passage would. And if we follow the wall all the way back, we'll reach the exit. I don't know how long this wave of snow drakes is going to continue for but at this rate we should be able to escape. While thinking that, I continue to slowly move right.

*“HORA HORA HORA!”*

Suddenly a spray of blood spouted from within the wave of snow drakes. Something jumped and ran towards the battlefield at high speed, hacking through the crowd of snow drakes. That wasn't all.

From another place within the wave of snow drakes, something else showed up, firing off fire magic. As if being chased out by those things, the snow drakes continued to run away from them, trying to escape outside.

*"Come on! Is that all you've got!?"*

At the front was a man, taking down one drake after another, and behind him were a few guys supporting him. Reinforcements!

I exchange glances with Timothy, looks like he's thinking the same thing.

*"Alright, we're going on the offensive guys!"*

*"Yeah! Leave it to me!"*

With Suzanne at the front, we began our counterattack



I was the one that took out the last snow drake. I got it right in the head with a stone cannon, boring right through its brain.

*"Guess it's finally over."*

I mumble, still vigilant about my surroundings. Scattered all around were the corpses of snow drakes. Most of them were beaten by the guys who came halfway through the fight, but we managed to take out a good number ourselves. Not a single one was left moving. I looked around at the ceilings and shadows to make sure there weren't any left hiding, but it looks like we're good.

*"....."*

Finally, I make eye contact with the group that came out from deep within the ruins. At the center was a Swordsman wearing a navy blue coat, surrounded by his party. Everyone was looking at us. There's another guy with the sword, one with a shield, and another with a staff... No doubt about it, they're adventurers. The one in the very front is probably a Swordsman. A pretty good one at that. He began walking briskly over towards us. Maybe it was because the battle had just ended, but he had a rather menacing expression still. Regardless, it's still true he saved us so we have to show our thanks.

Thinking that, I exchange glances with Timothy. It's times like this the party leader needs to act like a representative and do the talking. While it is true my slow retreat is the cause of this whole mess, I pull back and let Timothy handle this.

*"Man, thanks for saving us back there. I'm Timothy, of Counter Arrow."*

Timothy says, courteously.

*"We were--- Kuh!"*

Suddenly--with that grim expression still on his face--the man punched Timothy. As Timothy hit the ground, Suzanne and Sara reacted instantly, readying their weapons.

*"You're the ones who stole **our** prey! Don't even think about doing anything stupid."*

He glared at Sara and Suzanne. The man gave off a dreadful aura. You could feel his bloodlust.

*"Steal!? They just suddenly came out and started attacking us! We're the ones who got caught up in this!"*

Suzanne shouted. The man simply smirked, and turned his gaze towards Suzanne.

*"Sneaking in through a backdoor while we're busy working just to snatch some scales--and you're complaining about being suddenly attacked?"*

*"It's not like we knew you were here on a job!"*

*"Everyone knows! We announced it practically everywhere!"*

*"Yeah, well--- We don't!"*



The guy's pretty mad, as are the people behind him. It looks like this conversation's getting nowhere, but I recognize who these guys are now. They're *"Step Treedar"*. An S-rank adventurer party. They're part of the large clan, Thunderbolt, and are highly accomplished. They're based in Rozenburg and are known as the strongest adventurers in the area. This guy must be Step Treedar's leader, Zoldart Heckler. He's a master of the Sword God style, one of the best swordsmen around.

*"Ah---"*

I suddenly made the connection. In response to my sudden exclamation, Suzanne turned back to me. Not just her, everyone there turned to look at me. With this many gazes locked onto me, I winced a little.

*"Did you realize something Rudeus?"*

*"Well... Now that I think about it, I did hear about an S-rank request being taken up back at the Adventurer's Guild."*

Back when Counter Arrow was out on a different request, news of it had been circulating around the guild. They'd been going on about how they were going to take the request and make a huge name for themselves, and that everyone should praise them when they get back and stuff--but that request had been...

*"A request to eliminate the large herd of snow drakes that had suddenly appeared at Ilbron Caverns."*

*"Ilbron Caverns!? That's a full day away from here!"*

Suzanne exclaimed. In response to that, Zoldart frowned and shouted.

*"Are you retarded!? What do you mean a day away? This is Ilbron Caverns!"*

*"What was that!? You're the retarded one! This is Gargau Ruins!"*

A shouting match broke out between Zoldart and Suzanne.

*"Suzanne, calm down."*

Timothy, who'd been punched earlier, stood up and pulled Suzanne back.

*"Timothy... Are you ok?"*



*"Yeah, seems like he held back... Sara, you can put your bow away."*

Timothy patted his neck with one hand, and held the other out to stop Sara. She reluctantly put her bow away.

*"I think I get it now."*

Timothy heaved a sigh, but still smiling, looked up to Zoldart and spoke.

*"It's indeed true that a few days back a large number of monsters appeared in Ilbron Caverns, and the party that went to go eliminate them got annihilated. It's also said the lone survivor came back to report that a huge nest of snow drakes had been discovered... I know that much."*

Yeah, I know that too. The Ilbron Caverns are a series of caverns about a day's travel from Rozenburg that are mostly populated with E to D-ranked monsters. There's a lot of salt deposits in the caverns so adventurers go in there from time to time. A few days back though, a large number of C-class monsters started to show up in the caverns suddenly. There's a town near the caverns, and Rozenburg itself is pretty close too, so it was a rather dangerous situation and an elimination request popped up quite quickly. However, the party that went to go eliminate the monsters got wiped out instead, and the lone survivor came back with reports that a large snow drake nest had been found in the caverns, and the previously B-ranked request got bumped up to an S-rank request. Suddenly no one wanted to risk the request. That's where the S-rank adventurer party Step Treedar, whose primary occupation is labyrinth exploration, came up and took on the request.

*"I'd wondered why we'd seen so few monsters on our way here... but I get it now. It looks like the innermost parts of Gargau Ruins are connected to the Ilbron Caverns somewhere, and for some reason all the monsters started pouring into the caverns from the ruins."*

*"....."*

What is now the Gargau Ruins was once a demon fortress. A castle built underground, with holes leading to the surface so that the demons could launch surprise attacks on the humans. If the Ilbron Caverns are just one of those underground paths to the surface, then... it all makes sense. I don't know if that passage was sealed purposely because of the war, or if cave-ins over a long number of years ended up causing it, but once that sealed passage was reopened, monsters must have followed it to their new feeding grounds, Ilbron Caverns. That's probably why there were so few monsters here.

*"So you guys came here for a completely different request?"*

*"Correct. If you don't believe me, you're free to go check with the guild."*

Zoldart spat in annoyance.

*"Tch. Sorry for hitting you back there..."*

*"No, no. It's perfectly understandable considering there was such a misunderstanding right after that fierce battle. You were probably still just in a battle rage. I'm sorry as well."*

Even though we've done nothing wrong. Even then, Timothy apologized. This is what they call wisdom.

*"But still, these guys were supposed to be our prey, so you'll only get to harvest a single one of these snow drakes, got it?"*

*"Of course."*

Timothy's still smiling cordially, but Sara and Suzanne don't seem very pleased. The reason they're not complaining out loud is because of the tacit agreement among adventurers. If another adventurer party gets involved when your party's fighting monsters, they only get one corpse to loot. Originally, this rule was put into place to prevent parties from purposely stealing the spoils from other parties.

*"Just take your scales and leave. We'll handle the rest, including filling up the hole connecting Gargau ruins and the caverns."*

With that, Zoldart turned on his heel and left. The other members of Step Treedar just shrugged, turned around, and vanished into the depths of the ruins. Guess they're going to harvest all the corpses left back at the nest. Off to hoard even more of the spoils of battle. I won't say it's unfair, but it does feel a bit disappointing to know we're not going to be able to reap the rewards of our hard work. If it wasn't for them, we wouldn't have been cornered by monsters in the first place. Honestly, we deserve compensation from them if anything. But if we asked for it... It'd just turn into a fight, so... Well, it's complicated.

*"Well, I guess we should get our scales and leave."*

Looking at Timothy's tired smile and swollen cheek, I let out a sigh.



Upon returning to the Adventurer's Guild, we see a huge pile of snow drake fangs, claws, and scales stacked up at the back of the room. By the way, the members of Step Treedard were also at the guild, boasting about their battle exploits.

*"So basically, it looks like Ilbron caverns and the Gargau Ruins are connected to each other after all. If it wasn't for us, you guys would be overrun by a horde of snow drakes right now!"*

As Zoldart continued to boast about his feats, those listening around him all wore forced smiles. Looking at him reminded of me of Paul for some reason. Their faces didn't look anything alike but... maybe Paul had been like this when he was young.

*"Let's go."*

At any rate, none of the members of Counter Arrow really wanted to hang around in the guild. With an annoyed look on our faces, we hurry across to the receptionist to finish up the request completion procedures, and leave the guild.

*"Alright, Rudeus, here's your share. Make sure it's the right amount."*

*"Got it. Thank you very much."*

Inside the bag I was handed were a number of snow drake scales. Even if the mood was ruined, the reward was still nice. Despite everything that happened, we were still able to get our hands on more snow drake scales than we expected. Since it's possible that due to this incident the value of snow drake scales themselves skyrocket, we decided to split the rewards in terms of the scales themselves--as opposed to directly converting it all into cash. It's quite possible the value of these scales will increase in half a year. I may have no use for that much money right now, but it's better to have it than to not.

*"Well then, I'll take my leave now."*

*"Rudeus!"*

As I turned around to leave, a voice from behind called out to me. Surprisingly, the one who called out to me was Sara. She looked like she wanted to say something, and halfheartedly stretched out her hand to stop me. It's probably just going to be more insults again, though I thought that, she said

*"Why don't you come join our celebration parties sometime, eh?"*

*"Huh...?"*

*"Well, it's more just us going drinking at the bar than an actual party, but yeah."*

No, I know what she's talking about. Usually adventurers go to a bar or something after finishing difficult requests that took a couple of days to praise each other on their fighting skills, and generally just congratulate everyone on making it back alive. Normally I never bother participating in such things; instead I usually just go back to my room at the inn, complete my prayers, and go to sleep. They know just as well that I usually just go straight home. I'm going to turn them down. I need to go home and report the past few days' worth of events to my goddess, Roxy, and once again reaffirm that I did my best today too. That's what I've always done, and that's what I'm going to keep doing.

*"Sure, I'll come. I guess."*

For some reason I nodded in agreement to her invitation.

*"That's rare..."*

Even though she's the one that invited me, she looked rather taken aback. Maybe she was waiting for me to refuse so she could just badmouth me again.

*"Should I not?"*

*"It's not that--- Anyway, come on, let's go."*

Sara deliberately made an effort not to look displeased and turned back to me with a normal expression. Then she walked past me and began heading towards the bar. Mimiru and Patris lightly patted my shoulders, and then headed on towards the bar as well. Suzanne and Timothy looked happier than usual and lightly patted my back as well. At a bar a ways away from the Adventurer's Guild, we all raised our glasses for a toast.

*"Alright everyone, cheers!"*

*"Cheers!"*

It seems this bar is a bit different from the usual one they go to. They picked a bar close to the riverbank to avoid running into any members of Step Treedar. Chances are those guys are gonna go drinking soon too.

*"You're not gonna drink?"*

*"I'm still a minor."*

*"Man, don't worry so much about your age here."*

Everyone else was gulping down alcohol, but I'd just ordered juice. The only things you can get at a bar without alcohol in them are just juice and goat milk.

*"Come on, come on. It's fine if he doesn't want to drink. It won't make the party any less fun."*

It looks like Timothy also isn't going to be drinking.

*"You just can't handle your drink, dude."*

*"It's not that I can't drink; I just don't want to."*

*"Hahaha!"*

Timothy awkwardly scratched his head, while Mimiru laughed.

*"Sheesh---"*

From the looks of it, Timothy was unable to handle his alcohol and was always the butt of the party's jokes about it. Still, it's kind of rare to find someone who can't drink at all. It's the first time I've seen someone in this world that can't handle their alcohol--and an adventurer at that.

*"At any rate, we were pretty lucky to go up against that many monsters and come out alive. Normally in a situation like that, at least one of us would have died."*

*"You're pretty lucky, Rudeus,"* Sara said, while laughing.

*"Luck, huh? I think it's more thanks to the fact that you guys saved me."*

*"That was part of your luck too. A normal party would have left you to die back there."*

Basically she's trying to say I should be showing my thanks here. Well, she's not wrong...

*"Thanks, for saving me."*

*"I-It's not like I did anything! If you're going to thank someone, thank Timothy and Suzanne."*

As I bowed my head to Sara, she just blurted that out while pouting, and downed her glass in one gulp. Suzanne was grinning and leaning over, lightly elbowing Sara.

*"Even though she said that, the one who dashed back first was her, not me. When Mimiru said there's no way we're gonna make it in time, Sara just yelled 'Yes we will!' and charged in... She's pretty hot-blooded."*

*"Hey! Enough of that, Suzanne!"*

Sara tried to shove Suzanne back, but Suzanne simply dodged, still grinning.

*"It's just I owed you a debt from when you saved us before, so I wanted to make things even between us! I hate owing people--that's all!"*

I avert my eyes after being glared at by Sara. Upon doing so, I make eye contact with Mimiru.

*"Ah, no, no. I'm truly thankful to you for that time a well. Yeah, it's true that I wasn't thinking the most noble of thoughts back then, but I wasn't trying to leave you for dead or anything... OK?"*

*"Yeah, I know."*

Mimiru made the right decision. Besides, even if he said that, he still charged all the way to the front lines to help protect me. That's enough for me.

*"Anyways, we all managed to make it back alive. We also made a ton of money too! All in all, it was a pretty good request, I'd say."*

At Suzanne's summary of things, we all laughed.

*"Yeah, if it hadn't been for those guys showing up at the end, this really would have been a great request... Haaaah..."*

*"What's with those guys anyway? Just 'cause they're the strongest party around here they think they can just go around acting like they're the boss of everyone."*

*“Right? All they do is hole themselves up in labyrinths hunting for glory. What’s with the whole: ‘If it wasn’t for us, the whole town would have been overrun with snow drakes,’ bullshit? If it’d really gotten that bad the army would have made a move, so who cares?”*

*“The one thing I can’t forgive is that he punched Timothy. What kind of party leader just punches a mage like that without even knowing the situation?”*

Everyone starts grumbling about Step Treedar. Complaining like this is necessary to vent your frustrations. Since Timothy managed to let things come to a peaceful resolution, it’d be worse if they couldn’t let out their stress here, and then start a fight with Step Treedar over something small. I don’t really plan to complain much myself. I hate this kind of petty backbiting. After all, I’d been nothing but trash in my past life. I’m sure that swordsman’s got his own fair share of troubles too. Unpleasant guys like him are probably trying their best in their own way too, just like how worthless people are trying their best in their own way. I’m pretty sure that’s why the rest of his party puts up with it too, only expressing their displeasure with bitter smiles. It’s true that Zoldart’s actions back there had been wrong, but simply declaring he’s a bad guy just off the first impression from our first meeting is also wrong I think.

*“.....”*

Of course, I can’t say that here. If I say something like that here, they’ll just exclude me. I want to say it, but I can’t. It’s best that I don’t right now. While thinking that, I simply eat my food. Silently. It looks like it’s some kind of bean soup. The slightly salty flavor stimulates my appetite and satisfies my hunger.

*“At any rate, looking forward to working with you from now on too, Rudeus.”*

*“Yeah, you’re a really reliable guy, you know?”*

*“Thanks. I look forward to working with you all as well.”*

They’re all red-faced from alcohol, enjoying themselves thoroughly. It’d be nice if these fun times continue forever. Then tomorrow, we could just do the same thing and have fun again. Maybe it’s not the most eventful or fulfilling of lives, but it’d be a good life all the same.

*“Ah---”*

The moment I think that, the door of the bar opens, and three men enter. I recognize all three of them. Especially one of them. I’d remember him even if I didn’t want to.

*“Oho.”*

The moment I notice them, they also notice us. He headed towards us with an unpleasant expression on his face. Judging by his red face and unsteady gait, he's already drunk quite a bit somewhere else.

*“Yo!”*

He walked over drunkenly, and slammed his hand on our table. It's Zoldart Heckler.

*“What do you want?”*

Suzanne and the rest only just took notice of him. Their faces soured immediately. That's only natural though. After all, he's the guy they were bad-mouthing literally seconds ago, and now he just suddenly showed up.

*“I think I got a bit too worked up in da caverns back there, so let me say it properly here.”*

Zoldart stared at us straight in the eyes, and said in a loud voice, *“I'm, well... Sorry for what happened back there. I didn't think it'd end up that way.”*

But surprisingly, what came out of his mouth was an apology. The members of Counter Arrow all looked nonplussed. In response, Zoldart squinted menacingly and pointed to Timothy.

*“But, you know, youuuuu. I don't like your fashe. Eben if you did what you did to stop a fight from happening, there are times when a mansh gotta fight, ya know!”*

*“Ah... Well, I guess so. Suzanne tells me that a lot too... I'll be careful from now on.”*

*“Yeah! Ash long ash you get it, ish fine!”*

Zoldart slapped Timothy on the shoulder, and Timothy smiled bitterly and scratched his head. Suzanne and the rest looked on at Zoldart, completely taken aback. I guess this is what they call being dumbfounded. Zoldart nodded, satisfied, and then looked over at me.

*“Hey, Quagmire.”*

*“Yes?”*



I raised my head, surprised at hearing my name called so suddenly. Did I do something to make him mad?

*"Timothy's fine but... You're da worsh!"*

From that point on, Zoldart just let loose a storm of abuse.

*"Why? 'Cause ya always worryin' bout how erryone sees ya!"*

*"And dat smile--it's disgustin'! You may thinkin ya smilin', but ain't no smile at all! Your eyes are just lookin' down on erryone!"*

*"Youuu--- I bet you jus thinkin ya da most unfortunate person in da world. Well don't you, huuuh!?"*

The insults he screamed at me resounded throughout the bar.

*"Is it a fight!?"*

*"Get him! Get him!"*

***"Shuddap!"***

With one shout from Zoldart the cheering crowd went silent.

*"Hey, you understand, Quagmire? Bastards like ya---"*

*"Oi. That's enough, Zol."*

As he turned to me and leaned forward to say something, his friends grabbed his shoulders from behind.

*"Shuddap! Just look at dis bastard's face right 'ere. It just screams 'I'm da unluckiest person in da world!' I don't know what da hell happened in ya past, but stop being so damned pessimistic. All ya doin' is runnin' away! And yet--- Ya keep actin' like ya da only mature one, dat you're da only special one, going around doing your mercenary work! I hate shitty brats like ya!"*

Those words pierced my heart. I hadn't even noticed, but my legs started trembling, and hands balled up into fists. My body, my throat, everything was trembling. And yet, somehow my voice came out calm.

*"Sorry if I've been an annoyance. I'll do my best to stay out of your way from now on."*

At those words, Zoldart slammed his hands down on the table, smashing it. Splinters of wood and food flew everywhere. The red colored bean soup splashes all over my legs.

*“Dun fuck wit me! What's wit dat attitude, huh!? Ya lookin' down on me, huh, bitch!? **Fuck dat!** Whaddya find so fun about sayin' 'Oh I don't need money; just spreadin my name errywhere'!? People like us need dat money to live!”*

I responded to Zoldart's yelling with silence. Silence was all I *could* respond with. There's no point in saying anything to guys like him.

*“Sorry, he drank a bit too much... Come on, Zol!”*

*“Shut da hell up! Lemme go! Oi, come at me, Quagmire! I bet ya pissed! I'm pissin' ya off, right!? Then come at me! If a pig like ya dat just mucks about in mud all day has da guts to fight, then come at me!”*

I simply hung my head, waiting for the storm to pass. There's no point in fighting him here. I won't gain anything from falling for his provocations. Nothing good comes out of confronting a drunk. I need to hold it in, that's all.

*“Zol, cut it out! You're going to far!”*

*“LEMME GO! GODDAMMIT! Hey, Quagmire! Are you really 'aving fun livin' right now!? If ya dun enjoy life then hurry up and die! Just seein' ya face pisses me off!”*

As Zoldart got dragged off by his friends, I didn't meet his gaze. Instead, staring at the slowly spreading soup stain on my pants. I gripped the divine object in my left pocket and emptied my heart. I thought of nothing. I felt nothing. The whole time, all the way until Zoldart had left. Until Sara, who was sitting next to me, wiped off the soup stain.

*“He's scum.”*

At Sara's words, I slowly nodded.



## Sara's Point-of-View

In a fit of rage I return to my room, put my bow and quiver down on the table, throw my coat onto the floor, and flop onto my bed.

*"He's absolute scum."*

It's obvious how mad I am at him by how red my face is. What the hell does he mean *"There's times a man's gotta fight,"* huh!? Even though Timothy's fighting so hard for us all the time, he just spouts nonsense like that. Suzanne told me once before, how that smile of Timothy's is his way of fighting, but he was made fun of for that... Unforgivable. If a man's got times where he's gotta fight, then a party leader has times where he should avoid unnecessary quarrels and keep his party safe. And yet, Zoldart didn't try to do that at all. If it had devolved into a brawl, what would he have done? Did he think he could just kill us all and keep everyone else quiet about the whole thing? Back in the ruins in the midst of a monsters' den? With our escape route still unblocked? He must be real full of himself if he thinks that. The one who's not fit to be a leader isn't Timothy, it's Zoldart. Why'd he have to get Rudeus involved in all this too? When Rudeus had to fight, he fought splendidly, didn't he? He bravely stood alone against that horde of snow drakes to make sure we could escape safely. Even though he doesn't know that, even though he wasn't watching him then, Zoldart still spewed all that crap about Rudeus. It's true Rudeus has an attitude problem. Unlike Timothy, he's always got that fake smile. It pisses me off too. In fact, because he always makes a fake smile even when there's no need for one, I get pissed off every time I see him...

But...

*"....."*

Back in the ruins... I realized I wanted to protect Rudeus. I wonder why? Didn't I hate him? Could it be that--I don't hate him?

*"No way!"*

Yeah that can't be it. No way. I guess that means I hate Zoldart more than I hate Rudeus. Yeah, that's gotta be it. Rudeus is just better than Zoldart. At the very least, Rudeus doesn't hurl insults at us. He always treats Timothy and everyone else with respect. Despite being such an accomplished magician, he never looks unwilling to join us whenever we go out on requests. He even takes up the rear guard even though he's stronger than that.

*"That's why... It can't be that I don't hate him."*

Rudeus is a noble's kid. Maybe he doesn't act very much like a noble, but that doesn't matter. He still has the blood of a noble flowing through him. I hate those noble brats who think they can be adventurers, but I hate real nobles too. My hometown was destroyed because of a noble's negligence, because even when monsters rushed out of the forest and attacked, those damned nobles didn't send out their knights until it was already way too late. My parents died as a result of that. It may be noble's duty to protect his domain, but he didn't protect us. I still haven't forgotten the despair I felt back then. Yeah, yeah, that's right. That's why I hate nobles, and that's why I hate Rudeus--who's also of noble blood.

*"But, Rudeus fought for us..."*

Back when we were getting overrun by raster grizzlies, and again with the snow drakes, he fought for us. He didn't try to run away by himself. He had no duty to protect us. He's not even a member of Counter Arrow! But even then, he tried to be our shield all by himself so that we could run away. Seeing him like that made me think there's no way in hell I'm going to let him die, which is why I went back to help him. It's not like I want Rudeus to die. Yeah, I definitely don't want him dead. But I'm just... surprised that I went back to help him. I'd always thought it'd be fine to abandon him in a situation like that.

*"I'm the worst..."*

Recently when I look at him, I feel like the ground underneath my feet is crumbling. I'm supposed to hate nobles, but I don't hate him that much; it makes me uneasy. I no longer understand what it is I hate and what it is I like. I don't understand anything anymore. But, well yeah. I'll accept it. I don't hate him. He may be a noble's kid, but he's not a noble himself, so I don't hate him. All that means is I don't hate him. I definitely don't like him. Yeah, I don't hate him, but I also don't like him.

*"I don't like Rudeus."*

I confirm it one more time aloud, then proceed to fall asleep.