

Towns. Cities. Kingdoms. Domains. Empires. These were all Nex-rich environments.

She was surprised to find that even Colors were allowed to have a flick through so long as they were granted permission by Level 1 personnel, which consisted of solely the Overseer and the Navigator.

ImpulseWorks was a morally challenging topic. On one hand Frost could not forgive how dispensable people were within the Atelier, as well as the placements of the Sites. But at the same time, she could not ignore that if it were not for ImpulseWorks, then the world would have been a living hell centuries ago.

Although, it was not that far off anyway. At least in Grandis and the Derma Layer.

Interestingly, her group was allowed access to the Training Manual. The 30+ paged manual oozed with all manners of answers. For once she understood an Atelier from the ground up. The only question that remained was who exactly wrote this book.

The Beholder? A secret circle of Clearance Level 0 personnel? The latter was the likely answer. Frost had only glossed through roughly half of the manual before she took the initiative to explore F-H5 in all its glory.

Beautiful wooden floorboards. A kitchen packed with utensils and the common firestone-stoves were found in the dormitories of the administrative level, which was located at the very top of all Sites. The metal doors lifted open automatically, utilizing a magical stone embedded within that reacted to light.

They were surrounded by a glass shell right in the center of the thick-cut doors. The words "Destroy in case of emergency!" were written in bold.

"Black Dove? Um. We can do that remotely as well. Well, through a Site Upgrade. Not all sites are as advanced." The Navigator spoke into Frost's mind.

A light glimmer appeared beside her ears. The kidney-ear pieces nestled cozily in her ears, as well as the others. Ignis had trouble fitting them due to the shape of her ear, which prompted Ber to fit them on for her.

Snap also wore a pair and had them magnetized to its monocular eye. Of course, Snap did not require them as Nav could relay the Navigator's words on the fly. Still, Snap wanted to try them out for some reason.

So cute...

Frost matched her pace with the following Snap and smothered herself against its cheeks.

"Be careful, alright Snap? Don't get yourself into trouble. You can only move so much here." She said, right before Snap brushed its fuzzy head alongside her.

"Brrr. Bzzzt!"

“Too close. Aha. It tickles~ Hm... Yeah, you’re wondering if Nav might have been a Navigator too, huh. It does talk to us in our heads.” She said as Jury took Snap’s other side, with Ignis riding atop its back.

“I thought the Archivist would have fit that role better.” Jury stated, her voice echoing as they ventured through a hollow, metal corridor.

No two rooms were ever the same, but there was a consistent, luxurious theme they followed. The administrative floor was not home to the Corrupted, so the Employees had much freedom.

The Site was far larger than they anticipated, and it expanded in all four cardinal directions. How the Overseer was able to manage the Workers caused Frost to wonder if it was due to his experience, or through some other means, because she could not even begin to place herself in his boots.

Well... Sort of.

Back on Earth, she was used to managing upwards of 8 complex patients at once. 12 was pushing it, and any more was frankly impossible for one person to bear. Granted, she didn’t have people to delegate the workload, but the mental strain of memorizing everything was bound to break someone’s mind.

There were over 70 Workers in this Site, with 30 Corrupted, and another hundred or so Employees. How does one person even memorize this all?

The answer resided with the Navigator.

“Encyclopedic knowledge, huh. Isn’t that what the voice in your head does? Nav. You can hear us, right? Do you know our last name?” Cer asked, patiently waiting for a response as she kicked her heels into the air.

“I don’t believe she has a last name.”

You know what, that reminds me. I don’t think I remember anyone telling me their last name.

“Does it matter?”

No. Not at all. Hell, I don’t even know mine.

“Last names are a custom in Emvita. It is a status more than a familiar thing. They adorn their titles like last names. You will hear names along the lines of ‘Brandal the Great’, with an elder brother called ‘Sandal the Greater’.”

Frost smirked, causing Cer to easily misinterpret it as a taunt.

“Well, whatever you’re thinking is wrong. Completely wrong. Demi-humans don’t get last names. Ever. Leave that to royalty and nobles. But I know Lizardfolk who *love* that stuff.” She shrugged, right as they entered a rectangular elevator.

There was only a single lever with 4 marked notches. It was currently set to the top, meaning this controlled the elevator. Frost quietly asked the Navigator, whose name was Papilia if it was ok to use the elevator.

"You guys are strong. I'm guessing. I think? Then you can pull the lever straight away to the 3rd floor. Oh wait... just the 1st floor? You only have to pull it to the notch saying '1'." Her instructions were intricate and easy to follow.

Although, there was little that could go wrong with elevators. Or so she thought, because there was a reason why she asked them about their strength.

This reason followed the logic of deepwater bell-divers. Heading from floor to floor rapidly would induce certain effects similar to nitrogen narcosis and pressure illnesses. It was hardly noticeable in the first 2 floors, but from the third and beyond it was easily fatal, and Frost foresaw entire shafts filled with minced bodies in the worst-case scenario.

If the elevator went from floor 1 to 7 instantly, then the Workers inside would be crushed by the immense pressure found deep underneath according to the Navigator and the Manual. On the other hand, rising too quickly would cause them to violently explode.

This was why Workers needed to decompress between each floor. The rule of thumb was 15 minutes before they could proceed in the Shallows. In deeper floors it could take upwards of an hour, to days at a time.

This of course meant nothing to Frost.

But what about Snap?

"Brrr." Snap whined sadly.

"We can arrange people to protect your pet – S-Sorry. I meant friend... Snap is a strange Anid. It really reminds me of the Corrupted bonds you sometimes see." Papilia noted. *"... Um. Black Dove? Can I ask what that other voice is? The monotone one?"*

"My subconscious." Nav answered in Frost's stead, pretending to be her.

"It's ok Snap... We won't be gone for long." Ignis assured Snap as they all showered it with cuddles and caring strokes. "Someone will pick you up."

"We've found another weakness for you. But I think it'll be for the best if you stay up here. I'm sorry Snap. It's always you that's never in the action, huh?" Frost placed her forehead against Snaps.

Soft, silky fur tickled her neck as Snap adamantly shook its head to say, 'It's fine'.

"See you soon~!" Frost grinned as the others offered their share of goodbyes.

"What's with the emotional bygones?" Cer sighed, activating the elevator with a single tug.

A heavy metallic churn like that of a humming fridge played from behind the walls. The doors automatically sealed shut with a grating hiss, and before long, the elevator plunged straight to the 1st Floor.

Cer's eyes remained fixed on Frost for a short moment before she asked: "Attributes. Affinities. All sorts of Corrupted. For an Atelier that's been around for hundreds of years you would expect them to know everything about the Corrupted." She shrugged, and Frost agreed.

Although this did not change the fact that Frost and Jury were the only ones that could detect the Affinities of the Corrupted thanks to their eyes. Ignis and Snap were capable of the same feat thanks to Nav.

Frost's planned to familiarize herself with the Site's layout, as well as the Corrupted they stored. The elevator came to an abrupt stop and the doors rolled open, revealing a pale dormitory that was minimally furnished.

This was the dwelling of the Workers that were assigned to the 1st floor. Like commercial deep-ocean divers, Workers were required to live where they worked. This was the equivalent of their diving bell, and it contained all the necessities for life.

From there, 4 corridors led in all cardinal directions. Frost ventured southwards and she was greeted with a certain prompt the same moment they left the dormitory.

//////// WARNING //////////

< TRICKLE >

< THE ARBITER'S TRUMPET BEACONS >

Trickle was the first and lowest of the Arbiter's Trumpet Risk Classification of the Corrupted, and they were relatively harmless so long as a person wasn't caught off guard. Frost patrolled the corridors, marveling at the simplest things such as signages, janitorial closets, and even the strung-along lights that ran through the ceiling like high-voltage wires.

She had to remind herself that Elysia was at its core a sword and magic fantasy world. Just with an assortment of magical technology that put Earth's to shame. The Village of Virt came to mind and she could not believe these two places existed in the same world.

That being said, Frost was granted significant freedom as the Site's primary security force. This meant that she and her group needed to be the first to respond to all emergencies, and to provide aid to those in need. Her job could not be any easier. The Corrupted were only Trickle-classed, and Nav even confirmed that they did not possess the same Criteria as the Corrupted Frost was used to facing.

They essentially replaced the Scarlet Logic response teams for the Code Red Protocol, which would have them quarantine entire sections of the Site during an emergency measure. How they dealt with the breached Corrupted and personnel was up to them so long as two conditions were met.

The Site needed to return to normalcy, with all Corrupted returned to their containment units, and all secondary Corrupted must be terminated before quarantine may be lifted.

What were secondary Corrupted?

Minions, creatures created by a Corrupted. The Denizens of the Black Forest were an example of this.

They were designated by an additional -01 affix at the end of a designation chain. In the case of the Heart of Ours, which was M-A-081-05, the hearts it created would be M-A081-05-(01).

They passed an air-tight door which was flushed with the walls. There, a single Worker arrived with a small wave. With a deep breath and a shallow, nervous nod, the suited Worker slipped into the containment unit of a Corrupted known as M-V-124-06; named Satisfactory.

Satisfactory

M-V-124-06

< Endlessly churning produce day by day >

AFFINITY : Wrath

LEVEL : 12 ORIGIN : Trauma HP : 1,200 ATT : 10 MAG ATT : 0

ATT DEF : 25 MAG DEF : 0 MP : 0 RESIST : Nil AGI : 0

“Please do not enter an occupied containment unit. You’ll further lower the Distress Level.”

The Navigator warned as Frost was taken aback by how they managed to get the name of the Corrupted correct.

The Navigator explained that certain Workers, known as the Unit Managers, were attuned to the Corrupted and were able to hear the voices of the Corrupted, just like Stella. Each floor had their own Unit Manager, which commanded a brigade of Workers and Employees under the supervision of both the Overseer and Navigator.

This was how the Overseer was able to manage hundreds of personnel without losing their sanity.

Before long, an icon outside of the containment unit showed an orange sad face, indicating that they had achieved a negative outcome. The Distress Level also shifted from 2 to 1, meaning that a positive interaction was required to push it up unless they wanted to risk a breakout.

The Worker returned with various scratches and a crushed finger, to which Frost motioned them to approach for healing.

“Hey. Here. Let me heal you. And can I ask you something? Do you enjoy doing this?” Frost quietly asked this person.

They rolled their shoulders.

“Enjoy? No. But it’s not like we can live a better life outside. I know it looks bad. Really bad, but we all agreed to this.” The Worked assured, tapping Frost’s shoulder casually. “We lived good lives thanks to ImpulseWorks under the pretense that we’d be sent to work with the Corrupted. You got family, miss Color? No? Figures. Then it’ll be hard for you to understand.”

This person made it clear that they did this for their loved ones outside. Their sacrifice allowed them to live happy lives, and she realized that the families of all Workers were located within the walls of the City of Hearts itself, rather than its Sectors.

With that said, the Worker disappeared further up the corridor, leaving them to dwell in deep thought. Dangerous work was not uncommon back on Earth. Even the most developed countries had ridiculously high death rates in certain jobs, namely commercial divers, and miners.

In less developed parts, nearly every job was deadly in some way whether through the lack of infection control, safety regulations or because it was simply cheaper to forego safety altogether.

ImpulseWorks was a weird breed between the two. They considered Workers as disposable but offered immense protection to them and their families. Workers outside of their Sites were granted protection on par with the healers. If someone happened to slight them, then they’d disappear.

“They’re indebted to ImpulseWorks, huh. Good for them. But that would be like us feeling indebted to that bitch D-13.” Cer knocked on the walls. “At least they have family out there. They’re already luckier than 99% of every one of the demi-humans and half-breeds out there.”

“Do you think Raoul would do the same for us?” Ber wondered, wagging her tail as they loitered outside of the containment unit.

“Don’t know, and don’t care.” Res sharply interrupted. “Frost. Do you want to enter?”

“Yeah. I’m curious to see what they mean by ‘interaction’. I know it’s Wrath, but its known attribute is Vigor.” Frost wondered if they were both the same thing just with different names. Whatever the case was, she wanted to push the Distress Level back up, and with a kind order from the Overseer, she was granted access into its containment unit.

“Fight. Get physical with whatever’s in there. What’s a Trickle to a Color? That reminds me. Why don’t they just get Moons to do this work?” Cer wondered.

“Do you think Moons can suffer like normal people? If they want to wring every droplet of Nex, then they are not going to use us.” Res spited their methodology, but the rational part of her understood that without the necessary Nex, they risked obliterating a large portion of H5.

Rational. I think I'm also twisted for thinking that's rational as well. Frost was ashamed to admit this as she unlocked the latch and slid into a small air-locked compartment. It was dark, and only a single red bead of light illuminated the 1-meter-wide room. Then, the doors ahead unlocked as she was given the task of netting a positive outcome through *violence*.

The room was similarly pale to the corridors outside, but she could immediately tell that they were thicker. The walls absorbed the sound as a mechanical churning filled the room with a subtle heat. There, she was greeted by a human-sized corn-harvesting machine made from nothing but a yellow alloy.

It took a primitive, rudimentary form and was made up of a random assortment of metal. The only reason frost called it a corn harvester was simply because of its shape.

And it rocked as if alive, and the blades located at its collecting mouth began to slowly spin.

< *"Jump in for the satisfaction they wished."* >

< *"They won't stop yelling. Before and after they were repackaged."* >

< *"Does this suit your needs? What about mine? Do you care?"* >

The containment unit itself was around 7x7x7. As large as it seemed, it was still considerably smaller than she anticipated. But this mattered little to her. Frost, undeterred by the Corrupted, took the blades into her hands and lifted the entire machine from the ground.

She didn't know the basis of a Vigor interaction. But if it involved violence –

– Then they had the right person for the job.

Using her healing magic, she kept the Corrupted alive and used [Goodnight] to lay as many hits into its weak frame as possible. Her normal punches would have outright obliterated it. She heard an audible gasp on the Navigator's end as she took it apart piece by piece, all the while maintaining its lackluster HP pool.

It really doesn't have a Condition. Nothing at all.

"Only resistances to certain Affinities. I believe you are correct with the Attributes being Affinities in a different name."

Then – Do you think you can tell me what the 'Identity' Attribute is?

Frost and Nav shared a casual conversation during the carnage. In less than 30 seconds the Navigator urged her to end the interaction and to leave things as they were. It turned out that healing the Corrupted and beating them into scrap metal was another method of

gaining materials, although, these were considered low quality compared to what the Corrupted personally gifted with a high enough mood.

When Frost exited, and was left underneath the ominous glow of the red light, Nav uttered:

“Amalgamation most likely, as it is the culmination of all Attributes.”

Identity was one of 11 known Attributes of the Corrupted, which most certainly mirrored another 11 Affinities. Obsession and Trepidation were the only remaining Attributes Frost failed to decipher.

They hoped they could find at least one Amalgam Affinity Corrupted in this Site. That way Frost could better understand her own existence.

But Identity, huh. They pretty much nailed it.

“How so?”

Think about it. I’m the Archetype of Amalgamation. But I used to have 2 past bodies. I think. I remember my Earth self, and that other burning one. And there’s this me. Identity might be the underlying theme of Amalgamation.

Frost could not see it in any other light, and if she was correct, then she had to wonder just what the Amalgamation Corrupted entailed.

Particularly the ones that contributed to her tale and Floor’s Awakening.