

The only two places in the Nexus Frost had not yet visited were the Floor of Hope and the Floor of Purpose. She finally received an invitation for the former, and the latter has still yet to make a formal appearance.

With things now in steady motion it would not be long before she could leave the Nexus and the Ateliers under the care of the Head and Time Reverberation. The Nex Megalopolis kept its mysteries out of sight even from the Eyes, and not to mention that the issue with newfound Corrupted, Originals, Impuritas and the Seeds now plagued the Outskirts away from sight.

But she trusted that the Head – in her absence – would be more than capable of dealing with it, as would the Repenters and the Ateliers.

The Nex Megalopolis was only one small part of the world. Yes, it was closest to the Nexus, but her sights were set to the shattered landmass of Paradise beyond the ocean. The coasts of Grandis could be seen as far as the isolated archipelagos of the old Atlas.

Fallen spires and remains of an era remembered only in memory scattered the outer, broken lands. The trenches that cut through each island were clearly carved by powerful magic. The seabed surrounding the islands were shallow where clear water clashed with the blue of the deep sea. Coral thrived here. They sprouted through the windows of sunken homes as vibrating barnacles grew along the underside of wooden foundations.

Eels hid in the eyes of broken dolls that once belonged to children of the lost city. And beyond the submerged history, far across the hazy seas was the shattered lands of Paradise. In a thousand years from now no historian worth their weight in gold could ever conclude that its gorges and deep passages that ran into the mainland were caused by natural means.

“The story of the loss of Paradise never touches on what happened to the world around it.” Cer said as they headed towards the main segment of Atlas, where its wide streets were crowded with well-dressed individuals who hadn’t a care in the world.

“Yeah, well that’s because you’ll hear the same thing no matter who tells you the story.” Ber followed through. “It just vanished. Everything disappeared with a trace in the blink of an eye.”

“But that’s what hearsay does.” Res added. “The story changes every time because anyone that saw it directly is likely dead. I remember the 3rd Branch Justicers humming about lights that filled the skies when we did our rounds a long time ago.”

“Now that takes me back.” Ber reminisced with a pleasant voice. “Waaaaaaay back. Remember, Cer? When we fought that giant jack in the box with shoe for a head?”

“Oh yeah! Heh. I felt bad watching the Peace Flock get their groins kicked in by that thing.” An unsavory grin crept on Cer’s face.

She clearly felt the opposite.

“Are you telling me there was a Corrupted that went around kicking people’s genitals?” Frost was more shocked that this was even possible in the first place.

“Hey, I don’t make up the rules! That thing was an outlier.” Cer barked. “Besides, you’re telling me you wouldn’t take a groin-kicking Corrupted over a screaming shape like the Re-Entry Cube?”

“You’re putting words in her mouth again.” Res sighed, glancing over at Frost who had a face similar to Nav’s vacant perplexity that spelled ‘does not compute.’

“I can’t imagine what kind of thoughts brought it to life.” Frost didn’t even want to think about it.

A part of her thought that the triplets were kidding but then again, a groin kicking Corrupted was absolutely within the realm of possibility.

She sympathized with the victims of that Corrupted from the bottom of her heart. Even as a woman she could never forget the soul-crushing pain of getting whacked in the scrotum. Just thinking of it made her stomach squeeze.

“We called it the Hateful Windup.” The name Res revealed only caused Frost to further speculate on its origin. In the end, she became sidetracked as they ventured into the streets of Atlas.

However, Nav had something to say.

*“A missed opportunity.”*

*How come?*

Frost had no idea what she was talking about.

*“The name. The Hateful Windup? I can think of a hundred fitting replacements.”*

*Really? Like what?*

Just as she was about to ask the triplets more about Atlas, Nav proudly gave the Corrupted a fitting name.

*“The Nutcracker.”*

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The atmosphere was vastly different from the Nex Megalopolis. Silence prevailed as what was supposed to be the ambience of a bustling city were in fact faint whispers. Even children of the city did not carry the same sparkle in their eyes compared to those from elsewhere.

They were quiet, patient and easily controlled by their parents who also carried an air of apathy. But upon noticing Frost and the triplets their interests sparked as though life had reinvigorated them.

This of course did not extend to the rest of the population. Luxury surrounded them and yet it did little to catch their interest. Extravagance oozed from their apparels as they strode with purpose, but with minds lingering elsewhere as if they had left it behind in homes too big for only one person.

The city never crossed was not the first thing that crossed her mind. No matter how beautiful its contours or architecture were, the people were always the first thing she thought of.

“It’s suffocating, huh. Are there unspoken rules about keeping quiet?” Frost wondered, speaking to match their whispers but her voice was easily carried by the wind, drawing more interested eyes.

Res shook her head and her tail simultaneously.

“Silence. It’s a debilitating Condition that keeps people from using chanted magic. Atlas is overprotected if you ask me. But for good reason.” She pointed her tail up to the sky where the fractured base of the Nexus hovered. “Can you smell it in the air? There is powerful magic at play here.”

A chlorine-scent lingered in the air, difficult to tell apart from ozone. Melded within was a serene freshness that swept across the world. A scent that she could not describe lingered in the air.

It smelt like moldy paper – yet was far from being unpleasant. Buried beneath were undoubtedly libraries and ruins of the old, rotting away to give rise to this ancient scent.

The roads were made from stone bricks, with the mortar replaced with a glass-like material.

Some roads were entirely made of glass, allowing them to walk above the vibrant coral reefs that made up the shallows beneath Atlas. This was only in the outer rings of Atlas. Only one major road ran across the city, intersecting in the center where only exalted individuals were allowed.

The roads leading to the center were vacant. So utterly absent of life that Frost was left wondering just why the roads were built so wide if the population was miniscule in comparison.

Then she remembered the Nexus. The wars. The tragedy of the past and realized that these streets were in fact lanes built to support the march of armies. A figure in grey approached them from one of the buildings to the side. The building itself was built like a small, gothic chapel where individuals dressed in silky, almost transparent white and blue robes went around waving a smoking lantern.

*So that’s the source of the scent, huh. They’re burning paper.*

The figure was a man with long, grey-burnt hair with streaks of red found within. It was styled as a long ponytail. Paper charms written in red were tied throughout his hair in the style of bowties.

His apparel was closer to something found in ancient Mesopotamia mixed with the priest-like style of Act X. It was clear that he was not of this era, his green eyes carrying knowing wisdom far beyond their imagination.

His face bordered on the fine line of masculinity and femininity, likely due to the Elven blood that ran through his veins as evident by his pointy ears.

### **Unlocked Keeper**

< South Atlas Quadrant Expeditor >

**Soul Rank:** Red | **Atelier:** Blood Letters

**LEVEL :** 70   **ORIGIN :** Half-Breed   **HP :** 1,900   **ATT :** 320   **MAG ATT :** 230

**ATT DEF :** 120   **MAG DEF :** 100   **MP :** 5,500   **RESIST :** 65   **AGI :** 70

“A welcome to the Head and her Moons. Oh, how bright our starless night shine. I almost did not recognize you due to your apparel. But alas, the ribbons of this City have drawn me precisely where I needed to be.”

He spoke like a servant of Act X, uttering nonsense between what little sense he spewed out to begin with. His tone was drawn out, and almost ditzzy in a way.

It was a combination Frost never would have expected to hear from the man.

But what caught Frost’s interest the most was his Atelier designation.

*Blood Letters? Looking at those charms he’s probably a part of what the Archivist saw when the Blood Moons visited Chapter: Three – One. So that’s the name of their Atelier, huh. They had healers that weren’t part of Inflow Direct as well.*

*Let’s hope they have answers in store for us.*