

They were at the dawn of the 4th day. The morning Tribulation was a breeze, just like the previous few. Today, their first encounter was with the Bloody Festival. They sent their sluggish Reorganizers, only to be incinerated by Frost's fire magic.

Her skills saw incremental improvements thanks to them. None had reached over level 10 yet, but Inferno was close, sitting at [7/10]. Out of all the Impuritas they had fought thus far, the Librarians were what she considered the worst solely due to the Paged Disease they could inflict.

Even though they were mostly immune to it, Frost did not want anyone to touch them. The lower-level Librarians could not inflict the Paged Disease as easily as their stronger counterparts. The only reason they were vulnerable in the Derma layer was because of the Heart of Ours' Corrupted Zone.

But in the context of the Workers and Employees, they were considered highly dangerous.

A special object created by the Librarians had managed to bypass Ber's RESIST stat. Not even Moons were safe from them. In the end, there was little they really knew about the Librarians beyond their history-stealing powers and the fact that they now possessed a fragment of Ber's past.

Well, they still only knew so much about the Crimson Hunger, the Sect of Gears, the Blood Festival, the Maestros of Flesh, and finally the Librarians.

Frost had to consider that there might be other Impuritas groups. Knowing that they were essentially a mirror of an Atelier, or at least partially similar in some way, she deduced that there were at least 5 more out there somewhere.

Or under them, rather.

This raised the question of just how expansive the Derma Layer was. Was it just localized to Brandar? Or was it a global phenomenon?

This train of thought did not come from out of the blue. She wanted to know just what kind of Dungeon monsters ImpulseWorks had faced in the past.

The Navigator flipped through a thick manual on the other end of Frost's CogitO earpiece.

"Let's see... Hungry. No. Pages. You already know about them... the only other one I have is the Scourge."

Frost paced the halls in preparation for the final invasion. A Sect of Gears Infestation was predicted. The Dungeon versions were nothing more than chest-sized cogs that brutalized their victims. Tiny shards of metal in the form of almost microscopic cogs would then infect their victims, slowly turning them into cogs themselves.

And that was if they were lucky. Like the Blood Festival, they had their own gruesome way of turning people into gears. If they were useful, these cogs were simply surgically attached to them, be it on their shoulders, organs, or brains.

The reason was shrouded in mysterious nonsense. Fortunately, Frost hadn't seen it for herself.

At least not yet.

"What are the Scourge?" Frost asked, now supervising Ara as she played an invisible violin in her infirmary.

"Trouble. They like to psychologically torment their victims. You'll find plenty in Eleph. Just below Emvita. Also in Zeiyea. You'll find warring humans and demons in both regions." She explained. "We only find them in the Sites down there. But... I think the General Sites were prone to a lot of dungeons. Some we haven't seen before."

Frost thought the Impuritas were a phenomenon unique to Brandar. And she wasn't wrong. Dungeons rarely appeared outside of Brandar, if at all. Usually, they appeared near civilizations of significant size. Cities, for example, usually saw a dungeon appear once a decade, others once a year.

She and her companions thought that it must be the Impuritas who needed people for their ministrations. After all, they needed people to function, while the workshops needed Nex.

Ara played a beautiful song on the air-violin. Her harps were magical, and musical notes rose from her body and disappeared into the ceiling like phantoms. Every good note was blue, and every bad note was red and distorted.

Her music provided a subtle buff in the form of Melodic Stacks, which increased a person's coordination depending on how well they played. Currently, Frost gained an additional 1 AGI. This was due to the way it scaled with people with higher AGI. For example, Ara herself gained an additional 8 AGI, while the others gained 2.

The higher their base AGI was, the less effect it had on them.

"By the way, Black Dove. Have you heard of the Arbiter? It's such a unique name!" She changed the subject, speaking casually.

"I think it's really cool. She's what you call an Archetype. Did you know that?"

"I did. It's actually part of our manual! Clearance Level 0 is at the level of our Beholder. Isn't that amazing?" She said, causing Jury to stare at her, wondering what Frost was going to say next.

And so Frost asked her a question.

"Would you believe me if I told you that I was an Archetype? The Amalgam?"

"Haha! Please. You're funny, Black Dove. There is only one Archetype, and that is the Arbiter! But not many people know about it. Maybe that kind of knowledge is normal for Colors." The Navigator laughed.

Figures. I won't waste my time trying to convince them otherwise. The 'Black Dove' works fine anyway.

She sighed mentally.

"How many times do I have to tell you to call me Frost instead of the Black Dove?"

"Well... you won't call me Papilia, so that makes us even."

She had opened up to Frost a bit, given her similarly optimistic view of the Corrupted. Optimistic in the sense that there were potentially 'good' Corrupted out there. Her hope wasn't unreasonable, and Frost sincerely wished her well.

But not without at least confronting her with the reality of the Corrupted.

"I know that. I had people I lost because of them too... But... between you and me -"

"Is she still talking?" Cer asked, indicating that Papilia had closed communication with everyone except Frost.

Then she whispered in a sincere voice:

"A Corrupted saved me. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for it. So I want to believe that there's good out there. Naïve. I know, but..."

"As long as you understand." Frost said, cheering her up.

"Mm... I'm just afraid of getting people killed. You're leaving after tomorrow too, right? I'm going straight to the new General Site."

"Don't you think it's strange that they're putting a new Navigator in the hardest kind of site?" Frost wanted to understand ImpulseWork's intention behind this move, but the Navigator just chuckled, then sighed.

"Temper Aspirations. That's why."

* * *

//////// < WARNING > //////////

< TRIBULATION IN EFFECT >

SECT OF GEARS

< Infestation >

< "One, two, several, dozens must turn when we all bear a purpose in this machine we call existence." >

The Gears were highly flame-resistant, but they were still no match for Frost. However, what appeared in the halls of the Site were not the giant cogs, but rather a small army of human-sized spiders created by nothing more than blue-tinted cogs.

Clockwork Weaver

Sect of Gears

< Converters >

LEVEL : 45 ORIGIN : Impuritas HP : 1,400 ATT : 130 MAG ATT : 20

ATT DEF : 300 MAG DEF : 120 MP : 100 RESIST : 200 AGI : 35

These spiders were eight-legged, just like the Ocanids, and they had a flattened shell in the shape of a giant cogwheel. It turned as they clattered like a loose machine, and their bodies clicked as they scurried along the walls and ceiling.

In their ranks were other forms of Anid-like monstrosities.

Clockwork Ministrationist

Sect of Gears

< Converters >

LEVEL : 40 ORIGIN : Impuritas HP : 1,200 ATT : 100 MAG ATT : 0

ATT DEF : 300 MAG DEF : 100 MP : 100 RESIST : 200 AGI : 45

They took on the appearance of the Septanid, with sharpened teeth running along their inner tentacle-like legs instead of fur. Only one appeared in each batch, and their roles were made clear as they lunged at Frost with every intention of ensnaring her in their saw-toothed grasp.

And finally, there was another monstrosity that made every hair on Frost's body stand on end. The reaction was so visceral that she accidentally cast Scrutiny, and before she knew it, she unleashed a steady stream of [Liquid Fire] in their direction.

Clockwork Inseminator

Sect of Gears

< Converters >

LEVEL : 20 ORIGIN : Impuritas HP : 1,000 ATT : 0 MAG ATT : 0

ATT DEF : 0 MAG DEF : 0 MP : 0 RESIST : 200 AGI : 5

There was one in every spawn, mimicking the Hexanid's appearance and function. They were an affront to existence itself, for their role was nothing more than to inseminate their prey with presumed Gears.

Knowing the 'how' and 'why' would only further fuel her hatred, and so she reduced them to an almost liquid goo as they stuck to the walls and dripped from the ceiling.

Her emotions rose to the point where she almost reached the First State. The surge of emotion did not go unnoticed. A hidden gauge measuring environmental Nex must have triggered some sort of alarm, for soon after, the Overseer began audibly questioning the origin of this source.

She lamented that they could not convert it into liquid Nex because it was not in one of the containment units. Surprisingly, Frost wasn't the first person suspected. Rather, Ara became the prime suspect.

... Disgusting. So fucking disgusting. I don't even want to know how these things reproduce. Jury. Ignis. Please destroy them...

Frost immediately marched through the molten mess, her clothing smoking from the immense heat. If a worker or employee happened to enter the room, they'd be instantly incapacitated. The heat was like that of an oven. Fortunately, it did not continue to rise.

Anids and Act X. The Sect of Gears and whatever the hell those clockwork things are. I don't think I could hold back from a real Hexanid if I ever saw one in the wild again.

"But you left those Anids alone before, didn't you?"

I did. But only because we had much to lose by fighting them. I was a naive idiot who later let a Wandering Healer almost kill a friend. Never again.

It was strange. Maybe it was because she had grown closer to her body that she had such a visceral reaction to the Hexanids now. The reason did not matter anyway. She was hell-bent on eliminating the Clockwork Sect of Gears until there was nothing left. She didn't even consider them food. They were beneath her, and she happily wiped them out one by one with the black, acrid clouds of her Dream Shatterer.

Not even a single metal file was left of them. Corridor by corridor, the Gears' infestation was cleared away until the sirens stopped blaring and the lights returned to normal.

She sighed deeply, her pent-up emotions fleeing with her breath as Cer met her.

"Anids. Makes you want to scratch your eyes out after seeing them, huh? Grandis was fuuuuull of them once." She said, slapping Frost's back playfully. "Wasn't strange to hear

that someone close to you went to offer themselves to an Anid nest. People need to value themselves more."

"And what about those they kidnap?" Frost groaned, returning to the molten corridor.

"Hope." Cer shrugged. "Not bad. Liquid Fire is the kind of magic an Atelier would call 'innovative.' For twisted reasons. Frost and fire. Gotta love the irony."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you." Frost sighed.

They would have to repair the damage themselves somehow. But to her surprise, the Overseer urged her to leave it as it was. The site was capable of repairing itself. It just needed to be quarantined for a few hours. Those trapped inside would likely be consumed by the site itself.

What a horrible way to die.

Fortunately, this was the last of the Tribulations they had to face. An interesting turn of events awaited them the next day. The Aberrations? The Impulse Artificer? The 3rd Horseman? An Atelier Item?

Frost allowed herself to indulge in these thoughts. She had to calm down and save her wrath for the Scarlet Logic. After all, if the Impuritas were looking for the Piece of the Fallen Star, then they almost certainly were as well.