

The river flowed downstream into the town's lake. Various smaller streams connected with the main river, appearing like bolts of lightning when viewed from above.

The smaller rivers travelled through the local woodlands. These forests spanned several kilometers in all directions. It seemed much smaller than it did from the outside, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

Forests were nature's mazes, at least that's what Frost believed.

They followed the glistening stream, the polished stones, and the beautiful sloping banks towards the mouth of the forest.

A main dirt path led deeper, and various artificial tree stumps and carved shrubbery surrounded them. The light struggled to peer through the high canopies of the thick trees. Their bark was rugged like ancient oak, but were relatively clean from filth, moss, and other forms of debris.

Small, flat-capped mushrooms grew from their bark like mini spaceships. Frost had never seen mushrooms grow on trees in person. Forests always felt magical to her. The passing rays of warmth only added to its wonder as animals trotted through, evading them and other people that foraged its shallows.

Residents of the town hired Adventurers to defend them from low levelled animals and monsters that roamed the forest. They foraged berries, mushrooms, fruits, and wild vegetables into giant baskets they held at the side of their hips.

The relationship they had with the Adventurers was heartwarming. There never seemed to be a dull moment as Frost and her companions moved through until the main path could no longer be differentiated from the natural forest grounds.

Surprisingly, more people were found deeper within the forest. She wondered how these people were able to find their way back without a trail, but as it turned out, the wind only blew in the direction towards Wharftow. The reason was up in the air, but she figured that it probably had to do with the shape of the land.

Still, it was hard for her to wrap her mind around this. In the absence of winds, the Aquatid would meditate in place and use a sensory organ that allowed them to detect large bodies of water upwards of a kilometer away.

Yes. A kilometer. How that wasn't magic baffled Frost to no end. They used this to find the stream, and from there, they'd be led straight back to Wharftow.

And fun fact! Octopus-folks had multiple brains, one each at the tips of their 8 tentacles. This was what differentiated them from Scyila mostly, aside from their tentacles protruding from either their backs, heads, or arms.

Frost didn't even attempt to dissect how it worked. She was not a vivisectionist, and neither did it matter. Instead, she immersed herself in the lush forest, picking berries as Ber began pointing out the tasty berries from the poisonous ones.

“When they’re bundled like this you know it’s going to be a feast!” Ber exclaimed with a vibrant smile, showing Frost, Jury and Ignis a stick filled to the brim with beads of blue berries.

“If they’re too red then someone’s going to be dead. That’s what we learned back in our village!”

“Eat these and they’ll knock you right out. Narcoberries! But they can’t do much to us.” Ber said, gobbling up whatever berries there were like popcorn.

Poisonous. Paralytic. Tasty. Sour... None of that mattered to her. She was just happy to be surrounded by so many berries.

Her knowledge of foraging was endearing.

As much as a tomboy Ber outwardly expressed herself as, there was a sweet, highly feminine side to her. Her sisters fondly watched on. A rare, silent Cer was invoked because of her sister’s outburst.

Ignis was also the first one Ber called out to whenever she found a tasty berry. Frost didn’t know why, but Ber was fond of Ignis. The two ended up strolling off on their own little side-expedition, all the while Res clasped at her tie and mumbled:

“That’s the Ber you don’t normally see. It’s hard doing the things you love doing when your life revolves around fighting.”

“Takes you back doesn’t it? To simpler times. Hey. Don’t feel sorry for us. Our story’s one of a million. We’re just a part of the lucky ones that managed to get out of there.” Cer said to Frost and Jury, pacing ahead of the pack as she turned to give them a small grin. “That was more than 30 years ago. We’ve sifted through hundreds of Corrupted.”

The creatures steered clear of them at all costs. None were foolish enough to step into the sightlines of what they instinctively knew was beyond their realm of comprehension. Bunnies froze, giant bird-eating spiders scuttled, and even bears turned on their heels to hightail it out of there.

Cer’s words were contradictory to the warning she gave to Frost long ago.

“Corrupted are rare, but that’s because we can’t detect them as easily as you. Hundreds isn’t even a big number. Do you know how many Eternal Nights we’ve fought? Maybe 30. That’s once a year on average!” Cer tried to defend her claim.

Eternal Night Corrupted appeared 2 times a year on average. This only counted the ones that were discovered. They had already come across 2 in less than 2 months, although Frost deeply considered that she may have something to do with their seemingly endless encounters with the Corrupted.

This was made worse now that the only known 3 Corruption Events had occurred directly within her presence.

Woe of the Fallen Star was speculated to appear once every few decades. Apocalypse every 100 years, and Paradise Lost? Once. Monsoon Corrupted popped up roughly in the low tens. Hailstorm and Trickle on the other hand could see upwards of hundreds per year.

Still, in a world as large as Elysia, stumbling upon a Corrupted was still absurdly rare. Except for Grandis. That was no man's land.

All Corrupted lower than Eternal Night were not considered a threat by the Nexus. They were manageable by the non-Blessed and regular Blessed alike.

That being said, any known Corrupted were instantly subjugated. Very rarely were they suppressed. In fact, the triplets couldn't think of a time when they had to suppress a Corrupted aside from one.

The Stuffed Teddy Bear.

"I don't get how emotions make a teddy bear want to strangle kids." Cer hissed. "And I know what you're thinking. Do Ateliers hold onto Corrupted? I don't think so. Too much of a risk in my opinion! ImpulseWorks already harvests them where they die."

"Corrupted can generate Nex. Beholders require Nex. I wouldn't put it past an Atelier keeping them hidden to generate free Nex." Frost said, folding her arms. "You say ImpulseWorks harvests them, but you don't think they might capture Corrupted?"

"I'm only willing to believe they hold onto a few. Anymore and you can tell how much of a disaster that will end up." Res answered, but she was also curious.

The triplets didn't know much else about ImpulseWorks. Each Atelier was secretive in their own right. ImpulseWorks harvesting dead Corrupted was plausible, but what about Nex? Frost refused to believe that an Atelier would function without Nex being at the forefront of their operations, since Beholders effectively required it to exist.

Just like Jury.

Frost succumbed to deep thought. They were bound to figure out the secrets of ImpulseWorks sooner or later. Besides, they needed their help to begin with. Her Coat of Prejudice wasn't going to fix itself. Plus, she also had access to the carcass of the Heart of Ours in the Derma layer.

They may even be able to create something out of it.

All was tranquil and silent. They could have rushed through, but Frost wanted to relax. To take things a little slower than usual. Getting to know her companions better was of utmost priority, and when she was about to bring up the topic of everyone's favorite food; a panicked voice suddenly burst their bubble of silence.

"HELP US! SOMEONE! IT'S A STAMPEEEEEEEEEEEEEED!"

The ground trembled to the might of not one, two or a five oversized Boars.

There were 50.