

The archways eventually led her into the mouth of the Arbiter's Council. All 56 Moons of the Nexus stood waiting at the entrance, each wearing a Receptionist Suit and stripped bare of their Atelier Items.

They split themselves evenly on either side of her. They were self-disciplined and stood erect in a show of respect. Frost's presence instantly mesmerized them as she strode through them, her sweeping gaze acknowledging them.

"Welcome, Moons. Thank you for your patience." Frost opened as she paused at the far end of the assembly, keeping her backs to them as she peered into the spectator stands above.

"My Three Heads of Security are running late. They will be joining us as soon as they arrive. But they are not our focus."

Finally, she turned around, the ribbons fluttering as she quickly performed another headcount.

"I'm pleased that all of you are keen to work with me. Not a single Moon decided to retire. I would have thought that the revelation would be the final straw for some of you. My thoughts were naive. You've faced enough horrors to laugh at it. Rest assured. You are not disposable."

Frost then briefly introduced herself just as she did with the Black Wings. The confusion and panic seen in those healers was entirely absent on the faces of the Moons. Their stoic demeanor translated to an understanding and total acknowledgement of who Frost was.

They seemed eager to work for her even though she had yet to begin. The events that transpired in this very place had already convinced them that the Amalgam was worth working for. They were already agents of the Nexus, so it was a natural course of action.

But the fact that she saw worth in them was the real reason not a single Moon was absent. She could see this in their eyes. Behind those stoic expressions were colors that they could not begin to express due to the effects of Serum G. They were like dolls in a way. Puppets with no control over who they were or what they will be come – only on who they are now.

The Moons were captivated by her every words. Frost's demanding presence was also one that slowly melted away the ice of Serum G. Small snippets of their true selves was only possible whenever they were close to the Amalgam.

Frost suddenly smiled at them warmly, catching them off guard as she tenderly spoke:

"Let me be the first person to say, 'thank you'. We can sleep at night because Moons remain awake. Because of you there can be no eternal night. For that, I thank you from the bottom of my heart." Frost lowered her head, thanking them in the sincerest tone she could muster.

It unsettled them. The image they had of her was as kind as she was terrifying. But to see her personally thank them in a profession where their work was just a given caused calloused hands to curl up, and dead eyes that had seen the worst of the Corrupted and the world to diffuse with an inkling of color.

Frost had learned how powerful a simple gesture of gratitude was, as well as validation. Seeing them tense up reminded her of when Carpalis embraced her and offered no more than a “Good job. You did it.” She wanted to make the Moons feel desired.

No... *needed*.

She admired their tenacity even if it was because of Serum G. To continue on in spite of being abandoned by all was as inspiring as it was heart wrenching. She had seen how much more colorful the triplets had become.

Though their faces could not properly express how they felt, Frost one day envisioned seeing them all able to smile as freely as the triplets. Maybe that was why they were so hated to begin with. Because they could do something they could not.

Regardless, she made her gratitude known to them firstly, and like the Black Wings, offered them a choice of retirement. Unfortunately, they were hard wired for combat. It was all they have ever known, and precisely why they existed.

It came to no one’s surprise that no Moon took the offer.

It was jarring to speak to people that gave such little feedback, but she was used to speaking to comatose patients and cadavers, so this came naturally to her all things considered.

“I was betrayed by a Star.” Frost continued, raising her voice to put emphasis on the tragedy. “But it was only Moons who supported my efforts to return to these heights. Your dedication and persistence have yet to be rewarded. Today, I have come to lay out the groundwork of our partnership moving forward and to award you. You are part of the Head starting from this day forward and will be integrated into Time Reverberation. Beholder Jury is a likeminded person. She will also be looking after you.”

Frost promised, although promises meant nothing until they saw it for themselves.

“I have also heard that Moons do not have a place they can call home... Admittedly, I don’t have reward fitting for your continuous efforts. So, all I can offer you is paradise.”

Finally, the Moons wore a face of confusion. They were stupefied by the proposal.

“... this is not already paradise?” A Demi-Human with dog ears asked, her tail on the cusp of wagging wildly. “The Nexus?”

“The Floor of Amalgamation. You will be invited to call my home on the Floor of Amalgamation as your own.”

Suddenly, many eyes widened, some looking at each other as they tried to make sense of what was being said. But in truth, they understood her perfectly well. It was a strange case of denial, as if her proposal was a figment of their imagination.

It angered Frost that her proposal was seen as a pipe dream to the Moons. They had gone on for so long unrewarded that they became wary of it.

“It’s an unspoiled paradise that mirrors the world of Elysia, with grass so green you’d think it came straight out of a dream. You may live there and call it home. Or you may choose to call Time Reverberation’s Workshop your home. Arrangements will be made.” Frost vowed; her voice raised as to be heard by the Nexus who would co-witness the agreement.

“Is that necessary for us? We rarely rest. We sleep outside of the Nexus. So long as the Nexus is fine, then is that not enough?” A Half-Breed with horns protruding from his head said.

The Moons owed their lives to the Nexus for Blessing them. Their job was a way of repaying the Nexus’ helping hand that saved them from the world beneath. Every single one of these Moons had undergone unspeakable hardships to the point where Serum G became necessary to prevent them from Corrupting.

“I want a place you can return to.” Frost adamantly insisted. “No... Rather, I want a place you *want* to return to. When you feel like you can’t go on, I want you to remember home, because I will be waiting there. I’m aware that Moons are not particularly sociable. Combat is all you know. But the effects of Serum G will inevitably dwindle. Therefore, when the time comes, I wish to be by your side. It’s imperative that I am.”

“When what comes?” A tiny human girl that seemed too young to be a Moon wondered, but deep down she knew exactly what Frost was alluding to.

Just before Frost could answer, another voice suddenly intervened from above.

“A Corruption Event.”

It was Ber. She was flanked by her sisters in the spectator gallery, instantly drawing the eyes of all Moons. There was no one more qualified to explain than Ber. They bathed in the newfound attention they garnered, with Cer raising her chin, and Res just happy that they weren’t called out as Jesters anymore.

They hopped down to join Frost, as Ber elaborated with a hand on her hip.

“Serum G’s going to go. The sole reason we were given it was to prevent us from Corrupting. Now that we know the Ateliers saw us as threats they’d rather cull and send on suicide missions, we can’t trust anything they spew at us. But the fact of the matter is that they’re right. We’re prone to Corrupting. Nothing is going to change that.”

Ber openly admitted as the Moons reacted sourly to the news. But they held onto hope because the person standing before them was once a Corrupted. Not only that but they didn’t seem to full grasp that this was actually Ber. The once mute girl with short hair dwarfed many of them now and exuded maturity unbecoming that devious wolfwoman.

“What can change is us. Corruption used to be the be all and end all. Never in our wildest dreams would we have thought that people can become Corrupted themselves. But we watched it happen. And now take a gander at me. *I’ve* turned into one. There’s a silver lining in everything cause while people can Corrupt, the Amalgam can bring them back.”

“I want to believe that we can change for the better without having to Corrupt.” Res then spoke. “The Amalgam’s intervention should be a last resort. Being prone doesn’t make it easy. But being close to the Amalgam will make so that if anything were to happen to us, then she’ll be there to help. The Amalgam has always had our best interest.”

“There’s no better pride than to work with the Head.” Cer grinned. “The Ateliers wanted us dead. No point in trying to figure out what to do when it’s so blatantly obvious. I’m probably the last person you want to hear this from but think of the Amalgam as a parent. No one’s ever stood up for us. It feels weird now that we have someone, and it hurts our pride, but it’s not a bad feeling.”

“Precisely. You are under my protection as entities of the Head.” Frost added, pleased with the triplets. “You are also under the protection of my Three Heads of Security. Cer, Ber and Res – The Eye, Fang, and Claw. While you are my Moons, these three are extensions of myself, much like the look-alikes you may come across in the Nexus. Their roles will differ greatly from you as they will embark on exceedingly difficult situations, and powerful Corrupted.”

The Moons were curious. They knew the triplets were strong, but were they as strong as Frost made them out to be?

Frost elaborated, firstly referencing their role against the Big Red Heart and the Blood of the Covenant, two Woe of the Fallen Stars; and the Crowned, an Apocalypse risk-classed Corrupted. The fact they were able to hold their own against a Woe of the Fallen Star was impressive enough, but against an Apocalypse?

That was entirely unheard of. Frost of course exaggerated the tales. The Conditions were what allowed them to excel. However, what gave them the edge was Ber’s Blessing of the Amalgam which allowed her to see these Conditions, as well as detect the Corrupted.

“My Three Heads of Security possess an enhanced version of the Blessing of the Nexus. It is my personal Blessing. Unfortunately, the criteria are quite strict and largely out of my control.” Frost did not want to reveal that saving them from the Corruption would grant them the Blessing. The last thing she wanted was to incentivize it.

However, she admitted that the non-Blessed could receive her Blessing. These people would then become Moons under the guidance of the current Moons. Together, it would allow these Moons to understand the Conditions of a given Corrupted, as well as facilitate teamwork over solo endeavors.

“As you are now aware, Moons will rarely be deployed alone.” Frost concluded. “This is to ensure your survival. However, that does not mean it won’t happen. Aspiring Moons will cover your inability to detect or read the Conditions. You will cover the difference in strength. Later I will ask you to each personally find a candidate. I trust you will find perfect partners moving forward. As Moons, you will not only have a competitive role, but multiple across the board. Guidance of the next generation of Moons will be one, as well as an inquisitive role in Time Reverberation. If you have preference, then Beholder Jury and I will

honor it. As a reward, you will each be given Corrupted Personas to wield when the time comes.”

This was a game changer for them. They didn’t immediately understand what a Corrupted Persona was, but soon enough they would become very familiar.

Frost wished to illustrate what the Conditions were to the Moons in the most effective manner possible.

“You will be partially New Moons as a result. You will wield the power of the Corrupted responsibly. As part of the Head, you will be granted access to only the best. To demonstrate what the Conditions may look like, and to facilitate teamwork –”

Nav. Anna. Now.

“*Got it!*” Anna responded, and as soon as Frost raised her hand and snapped her fingers –
– The entire landscape warped, and they suddenly found themselves within a sea of charcoal, burned trees where no stars could be seen in the desolate skies. And in the distance, they saw the light of a thousand stars plastered on the body of a giant, spherical bird.

They were inside of the Black Forest.

//////// < CAUTION > //////////

< CORRUPTIO MODERATA >

**< ETERNAL NIGHT >
< THE ARBITER’S TRUMPET RESONATES >**

One Thousand Eyed Bird

“My Three Heads of Security will demonstrate how to eliminate this Corrupted. Be at ease. Death here does not equal a true death. Through the Corrupted we can learn how to fight together both with fellow Moons and the vulnerable Aspiring Moons; how to deal with Conditions; and most importantly, how to control our Corrupted Persona when you do receive them.

Now then – Watch closely.”