

Darkness clouded her vision. No matter how hard she tried to move in her dark ocean she would only be met with a wave of cold dullness. It felt like she wore nothing. The tickling of her Coat of Prejudice and the constant tightness of her leggings were strangely absent.

... Nav...? Where am I?

Nav did not answer.

Nav? Hello? Nav...? Are you there? Jury? Anyone?

She was completely alone in this strange voyage in the dark. Minutes passed for what felt like hours in this timeless place as she tried to wrap her groggy mind around her situation but came short on any ideas.

Her mind was still skewed. Confused, as if having recently been roused from a deep sleep. Little by little, she felt a slight warmth return to the tips of her fingers.

Her hands... they felt a little larger than usual. Or normal, actually.

They felt like the same hands she had prior to arriving in Elysia.

“Hey... Um...” A timid voice suddenly called out to her.

The world immediately unraveled before her very eyes.

The darkness dissolved away as she suddenly found herself surrounded by a flower field that stretched as far as they eye could see. Small rolling hills and a beautiful backdrop of snowcapped mountains were only the beginning of this magical place.

What is this place? I can't move my body, but I can feel everything like normal.

She stood at the top of the largest hill; her eyes fixated on a behemoth of a city beyond the flower field. It was nothing like the medieval cottages of Grandis, nor the baroque architecture of the towns and cities of Brandar.

It was like a city from Earth, but it also wasn't. Because there was no orange glow that highlighted the horizon in this world's sunset. Only a hazy, slightly blue darkness filled the horizon, originating from a celestial body she could not perceive.

“Are you ignoring me?” The timid voice asked as a series of soft scrunches arrived by Frost's side.

Her head turned to look down at an unfamiliar girl. She had long hair styled into a ponytail, and round glasses that were so big that it was almost comical. Her apparel was a dress-like uniform, and she gave off the impression of a librarian.

Why did she look so familiar?

Frost involuntarily shook her head, as if controlled by someone else.

“Oh. Sorry, I was dozing off. Did you need something?” Frost spoke in a professional tone.

But more than that, her voice was no longer feminine. This voice was her male voice, yet it was a tone that she did not recognize either.

Indeed. Upon looking down at herself she realized that she was dressed in a highly militarized garb, not too dissimilar from the Hired Arm.

Then she realized...

This is a memory... This was me, right? I don't remember anything. I can't even make out this woman's face.

The woman stood there, hugging a clipboard as her diamond brooch glistened like her sapphire eyes to the blue sunset. These flat plains were just like Brandar's in a way, except there wasn't any innate fear of being pounced on by the Impuritas judging by how comfortable they were all the way out here in the wild.

"You're always lost in thought." She pouted cutely. "Look at this. I've recorded the data for every flower here. What do you think, _____?"

My name's censored. Yeah... this is definitely a memory. Either that, or a fever dream. I need to wake up. We're still fighting the Heart of Ours.

The woman held out pages upon pages of illustrations, arranged like an encyclopedia. Frost was taken aback by the sheer detail as *his* eyes glossed over the impressive write up. *He* passed the paper back to her, and she cuddled it.

"... 'What good will archiving do?'. 'Wasting _____'s resources for a suffocating aspiration'... You know, you never told me what you thought." She held her hands together and fidgeted in place.

Archiving? Is she... Could she be the Archivist!?

"We're all trying to make sense of everything. Trying to save whatever we can. If that's your way of helping, then who are they to judge?" Frost stated in a deep, foreboding voice that possessed little emotion. "Give me the names. Organizations. Positions. Time. Date –"

"A-Ah... No fighting! No violence!" The girl suddenly folded her arms into a giant cross. Her clumsiness caused the pages to spill all around them. "O-Oh no... I'm sorry –!"

"No, no. That's my line. I'm sorry. I was trying to joke with you." Frost suddenly broke into a small laugh, helping the woman out. "Yeah. No violence is right. But it's not easy when no one can get on the same page." He slowly spoke, piling the many pages together before he gently handed them over to the woman.

"... Doesn't it get tiring? Always fighting?" The *Archivist* suddenly asked.

Frost did not answer her. He only smiled as the woman reluctantly took the papers away. She obviously had something she wanted to say, but she hesitated.

"Want to join me tonight?" Frost then threw a curveball at her, obviously without ill intent.

"Huh!?" The *Archivist* hopped.

“Stargazing. You still haven’t recorded all the kinds of stars up there. Well, what’s left of them.” Frost clarified, not that he needed to in the first place.

The two watched the blue sunset. It was difficult to tell what exactly that celestial object was. It dominated the sky, encompassing nearly their entire vision as a light blue darkness eventually permeated across the world.

It kind of looked like an accretion disk.

“Should I record more celestial bodies? But... Hmm... Uh, what good will they be if they don’t exist anymore?” The Archivist asked as they laid themselves against the bed of flowers, gazing up into a nearly empty sky.

“It’ll be proof that they did exist.” Frost said, causing the girl’s eyes to widen. “Someone is bound to stumble upon those archives one day. Imagine the fascination it’ll inspire. Us, the moons, stars, and the invisible great nothing that binds them all together. It all sounds magical.”

“You say that like magic doesn’t already exist... but... Yep. It sounds wonderful.” The Archivist agreed. “I’ll do it. Even if they keep telling me that my heart is in the wrong place. I’ll show them how far a commoner’s determination can go!”

The woman reached for one of the fleeting stars of the night sky.

And then, everything shifted to black again.

* * *

“... ost...”

Another voice called out to her.

“...gel...”

“Fro...”

The blackness dissolved, revealing a world of red. This voice belonged to Stella from what she could tell. The girl huddled over her body, shaking her in desperation as Ponea could be seen rushing to as many people as possible.

Then, Ber entered her vision and placed both hands against her chest.

“Ang...”

“Frost! Angel! Wake up! Please wake up!”

“GET OUT THE WAY KID!” Ber shouted. “What was it again!? Oh, right – CLEAR!”

Suddenly, she was jolted awake by a surge of electricity. Her body cracked into the ground as she took Critical Damage, which multiplied Ber’s already doubled ATT by 5 times.

Suffice to say; it was more than enough to reel her back to reality.

“Ah... Ah... Hah... What – What’s happening now!?” Frost instantly shot upright, trying to make sense of the situation. She found herself and the others within the streets of the Triple Paw Complex.

“Our Scarlet Healer’s been cleansing us for the last few minutes! Good thing you’re already awake! C’mon Frost! Get up! Please help Res! Jury also won’t wake up!” Ber could not keep herself composed, her hands flailing all over the place as she tried to explain.

“Wait – Please Angel... Please Frost! Help my friends! They won’t stop talking!” Stella exclaimed, pointing to her friends who were lined up beside Res and Jury, half wrapped by her Touch of Golds.

... They’re still wrapped. Thank goodness. No one’s missing. Wait, where’s Sana!?

The distance that they were thrown by the pressure could not be understated. Her immediate gut instinct was to check on Sana. Such an insane amount of pressure would have instantly killed her, but to her surprise, the girl was alive and even aiding Ponea with her healing endeavors.

“Chaos... It’s all just chaos! L.S and Broker are trying to get everyone to run! People are having their hearts ripped out!” Cer exclaimed, kneeling beside Res who tumbled and clawed at the earth in her sleep. “Res! Res! Wake up! Help her! HELP RES!”

“Please help my friends! Angel! Angel!” Stella clutched onto Frost’s feathers, begging her as Aster and the children laid somewhere to the side, muttering in their rest as they groveled and clutched at their hearts.

Frost could only manipulate her Touch of Golds to heal them and provide comfort; but she immediately knew that it wouldn’t be enough. Things were quickly spiraling out of control... No, it already had, and it was going to get worse.

Nav – Anything to note!? Anything new!?

“It’s the same Stolen Heart Condition. But now it has taken its well documented effect. Aspirators are emerging as we speak. Ponea can repel the Condition temporarily thanks to her proficiency in [Cleanse] and [Cure Disease]! But she cannot cure it!”

Nothing short of pandemonium filled the crimson air as screams of grief, terror and anguish replaced the music of the City of Vocals. People *drowned* in their poisonous aspirations, unable to take control of it as they clutched at their hearts in the hundreds.

Ponea was the only one who could temporarily stop this illness. However, not everyone could be saved. Further away, down the street in the direction of the City of Vocals she found an array of bouncing hearts. They only numbered in the low tens, but no one dared to go anywhere near them.

People were brought to their knees, and had their hearts burst just from mere proximity alone.

Aspirator

AFFINITY : Civilization

LEVEL : 150 **ORIGIN** : Trauma **HP** : 25,000 **ATT** : 4,500 **MAG ATT** : 4,500

ATT DEF : 4,000 **MAG DEF** : 4,000 **MP** : 0 **RESIST** : 250 **AGI** : 12

The bouncing hearts were the Aspirators, and those stats screamed of unfairness. Even the triplets would find it difficult to kill them with those absurd DEF stats.

It had been easy so far, but now when faced with the threat that required the combined effort of all the Ateliers – She realized that no ensemble of Moons could ever dream of taking them down on a whim.

It was lucky that she was able to bolster their stats. That way she and the Hired Arm wouldn't be the only one who could deal with them.

< *"Can you feel it? The heartbeat that thumps outside our chests?"* >

< *"They were drowned by their own ambitions. So they united into one to stay afloat."* >

But this was not all. The reddening of the entire cavern was attributed to the colossal entity that loomed at the gates of the City of Vocals. A 200-meter-tall *heart* pumped with enough force to instantly shatter rock within its immediate vicinity.

The red light it emitted illuminated the dark cavern, hence the blood-like coloration that bounced on the walls and painted their bodies crimson.

Big Red Heart

AFFINITY : Civilization

LEVEL : 220 **ORIGIN** : Disorder **HP** : 15,000,000 **ATT** : 0 **MAG ATT** : 0

ATT DEF : 15,000 **MAG DEF** : 15,000 **MP** : 300,000 **RESIST** : 550 **AGI** : 8

The sheer size could not be understated. If the Greed Counter was like a multistoried building; then that was essentially a skyscraper. Even though she could see its proportions, her mind refused to believe that such a colossal heart physical existed.

< **CONDITION** : The Big Red Heart will inflate your aspirations. If your aspirations outweigh your determination, then you will transform into an Aspirator. The Big Red Heart can only be damaged by those DETERMINED >

< Aspirators and those afflicted with Stolen Heart or Aspiring will infectiously convert nearby hearts that haven't joined the Heart of Ours. The effect is stronger the closer they are to the Big Red Heart and the weaker one's inherent determination is >

< **SUPPRESSION REQUIREMENT** : Know your heart. Be DETERMINED to uphold your heart's desires to RESIST losing it >