

What entered the Derma Layer were no more than the pillars that would allow Caldera Industries to claim it as their foothold. They were like the instruments used for the Root-Pillar Complex, only these prevented Spatial Distortions from occurring in the immediate vicinity.

However, it had a debilitating side effect. A low enough Soul Rank meant being spaghettified by their immense gravitational force, hence why they were never installed in the Epiderma Layer. The Subderma Root-Pillar Complex also had the same side effect, yet civilizations were said to thrive at the base of its roots, further expanding the scope of life in this enormous world.

One by one, the pillars ploughed through the portal at lightning speed. They carried the force to level a city and yet, their momentum was abruptly destroyed as if they hit an invisible wall. Above a black hole belonging to Knalzark forced these kilometer-long pillars into the ground. He drove them like stakes, using nothing but what seemed to be a telekinetic force.

In truth, it was no more than him altering gravity to his whims. Since they had a Core of some kind within, he was able to control them like how a star forces planets to orbit it. They moved gracefully in the air despite their immense weight and were shaped like putty by the mere movements of his hands.

And when they were driven in the ground – the entire sterilized cavern quaked. Some semblances of an industry already existed but was highly limited to only a select few of his trusted Architect, and other unnamed beings that Frost never had the chance to encounter.

The Head had already disappeared from the limelight as soon as her job was over. The reins were now in the hands of Caldera Industries. However, she did not leave without first meeting with a certain legion of vengeful Moons. She went alone for this, as the Three Heads of Security did not want a reunion with the same Moons that tried to kill them.

In their minds they were as guilty as the Stars, and only once they were fully vindicated would they bother to show them any glimmer of respect.

In a separate section of the Gigaforge where no Dwarf was allowed to tread, Frost strode across a frozen sea. Across were the structures of an entirely different era, most castles with few being the concrete homes from either Earth or the past Elysia.

Shattered stone and signs of combat riddled the sea. They eventually entered a channel that led towards the heart of the urban ruins. Frozen vegetation grew through the cracks of cobblestone which meshed with what appeared to be an asphalt road. Despite the hints of a modern time, it was still far more medieval.

Giant castle walls stood proudly in the distance. They were green as moss seeped into every crack, and blue from the ice. A satisfying crunch accompanied her every step as her feet sunk slightly into the uneven terrain.

Eventually she approached a place where the light could not reach, and where only bioluminescent, cylindrical lamps lit up the pathway. They were closer to fluorescent lightbulbs – the same found implanted into the backs of the Vermillion Moons.

Deep within the ruins was the cavity carved straight out of a building, its floors on the brink of collapse. And there, several campfires could be found. Rings of rusted metal seats surrounded them as crudely chopped meat cooked over the open flames.

It was clear that it was only recently attended, and as Frost wondered where the inhabitants had disappeared to, her senses alerted her of a foreboding presence.

She walked into their territory, straight into the darkness. And at once, she took off her shades and commanded:

“Unfortunately for you, your Serums are hardly suitable to hide within the darkness.”

Indeed. Waiting above her within the ruined building were hundreds of fluorescent lamps – the same kind found outside. Except these belonged to the Vermillion Moons. Four of the longest tubes glowed ominously despite their dark coloration.

Shuffling could be heard above before they dropped before her, one by one with a heavy thud. Soon, innumerable whispers surrounded her as she stood before them.

“The Amalgam is here.”

“Here...!”

“To talk with us?”

“A meeting so soon!”

“In casual wear. That was a taboo for us.”

“Not even the Queens allowed us to see them once. Yet the Amalgam came to us directly.”

“It’s because she’s just as invested into us as they were.”

“Scarlet Logic never tried to seek us individually like this. What brings the Head herself to us in this lowly place?”

Surprise. Shock. Confusion. Slight trepidation. Perplexity. No number of words could describe how they felt, but a unanimous sense of reverence filled their crimson eyes. It was a blessing for the Head herself to approach them, and they could only imagine the reason why.

To send them off into the Derma Layer? To give them more orders? To test their newfound strength? The questions filled their minds as their chests heaved with anticipation. Their tight skinsuits rubbed like latex as they leaned forward as if to hear the Amalgam better.

However, much to their shock –

“Disregard the formalities. I’m here to say hello. If I came to test you then I’d come in more formal wear.”

– The Head herself came to greet them. Nothing more, nothing less. It was difficult to gauge their reaction but as one could imagine, they thought they heard wrong.

“All Moons are precious to me regardless of your past. What matters is that you are redeemable. Onto less pressing matters – I assume you’re adapting well with the changes?” She looked at the fluid-filled tubes attached to their backs.

A part of her wanted to ask how they were able to sleep with that, but she refrained and instead, moved through the crowd to sit herself down on a rusted chair.

“Go on. Take a seat. Let’s be civil here. No Ateliers are here to govern how you should and shouldn’t act. Think of me as a guest. A friend.”

“There’s no way we can –!”

“So I came here for nothing then.” Frost interrupted the voice of one, silencing them as another quickly spoke:

“Please stay right there. Everyone...” She nodded to the rest of the Moons as they each took their seats, some almost in disbelief that they were able to sit so close to the Amalgam.

This Moon was the same one Frost had held back within the prison. She sat just across her from the flames as she slumped over, her elbows resting on her knees.

“A friend? You should know how hard that is for people like us. When someone of higher power cuts in it’s never just ‘friends’. People take advantage of the weak all the time. If they’re nice to you then they’ll find a way to wring out the worth out of you.” She explained why they were so apprehensive by the Amalgam’s claim to be a friend.

“Even weaker people want to take advantage of the strong. No one can trust anyone anymore. But that’s how it’s always been. Brandar’s different because no one’s fighting to survive every single day. Out there it’s different.”

“No. It’s hardly different here too. But on the bright side it aligns with what we want to do. Shit. It’s nerve-wracking, I won’t lie – being stuck face to face with someone that can Corrupt people is terrifying. You can see why it’s hard for us to tell if you’re good or evil.” Another Moon said, folding her arms defensively as if Frost would strike them down.

However, another Moon then mumbled beneath her breath just loud enough for them all to hear as a brief silence crept in.

“But still, you offered a hand to us. That much we know.”

“And that’s the most we want to know if we’re being honest.” One said, patting her knee as she stared into the open flame. “Everyone has their own sob story of how they got to where they are. Ours just happened to be a few pages longer. Moons don’t have the luxury to sleep in a place called home. We’re soldiers through and through.”

“But you hit the nail on the head. What a lot of Moons want is a place to belong. Argh... No, it’s more than that because its easy for us to feel lost. Probably like our moon, we’re just looking a planet to orbit.”

Some laughed at her. Others smiled, and few stared with sunken eyes. They all understood what the Moon meant by seeking a 'planet', but whether because of pride or something else, it was not easy for them to outright admit it.

Seeing that Frost's eyes shifted empathetically stirred the silence around them. Then, another Moon spoke up with a wry smile.

"Hey, at least the Amalgam isn't a Beholder. She's still human, right?"

"An Archetype. Two completely different things. You can smell it too."

"On the bright side you don't look like you're being eaten by something. That's probably because you'll eat them back." One snickered, grabbing a stick of meat and munching down on it.

"Well, in the end, even Beholders are looking at a place somewhere not here. That goes for all of us. Even as Moons – something that's supposed to be up there in the sky – we're still looking elsewhere."

*Yeah. It's always felt that way, huh. People in this world are always fixed on a place somewhere far away.*

There were always the metaphors, the allegories, the motifs, the aspirations, the desires, hopes and dreams of going elsewhere. The symbolism of the birds, and the dreams of chasing and even becoming a 'star' were prevalent ever since she set foot into this world.

Stars to Frost were just stars. As someone from Earth she never realized that the Stars in Elysia...

... were simply reflections of their ambitions, hopes, dreams and somehow nightmares. They were abstract things that only held meaning to individuals and the collective.

*"But did the Stars and the things above possess their own meaning?"* Nav did not expect her to answer.

It was more food for thought to fuel what little they knew of the world beyond Elysia's reach.