

Minutes ticked like hours. There was no reason to eliminate the Watered Bonds. They had no effect on Frost's vulnerability, and neither were they required to be defeated in the first place. But something ate at her as she watched the ribbons take hold of countless people and Impuritas alike, bleeding them as screams filled the air.

< [Collective Illusion] >

These people were rendered down to a thin, watery liquid as she began to rapidly breathe. Her pants and bouts of panic were unlike her as the seeds of despair continued to sow deeper with each Watered Bonds she vanquished, all the while Ber revelled in the madness, her form no longer like one of a wolf, but of a monster hellbent on the destruction of everything she deemed 'ugly'.

No.

That wasn't right.

<><><> [UNSTABLE: DESPERATE FOR LOVE] <><><>

Ber, using the cloth, dragged herself close to Frost once again, wrapping themselves into a black shell made from her feathers. This time, her clawed drill expanded by fivefold as she tried to excavate Frost's very heart.

The bonds unravelled around Frost's chest, exposing the untouched flesh beneath as well as a black spade.

Blood of the Covenant | HP : 28,800,000

< *Ber* >

< *"Validate this beauty of mine. Tell me how beautiful of a black swan I am!"* >

Ber merely sought for others to perceive her as beautiful. Now that she realized it, those who averted their gaze or could not acknowledge Ber were slaughtered. Frost's blindfold made her Ber's mortal enemy.

Ber, like Ignis, was highly mobile. Her AGI was insane, and Frost's was even greater. Ber's monstrous beak seemed to smile no matter how many times she was struck by the sweeping whips. Innocents. Impuritas. Scarlet Logic forces, and suddenly, at one point –

<><><> [UNSTABLE: SINGING WINGSLASH] <><><>

< *Ber* >

< ***“Look at me! I am the moon hovering in your darkest night! Do not – AVERT YOUR EYES!”***
>

– Her bladed hand extended to over two kilometres in length. The size caused Ignis’ heart to drop as she watched the blade strike her unexpectedly, blocked only by her bone blades as she was dragged through hundreds of buildings, and flung to the outermost rims of the city.

Ignis tried to catch herself, converting both hands into tentacles, but her momentum made it impossible. She stared at the distant clash of purple and black, her crimson eyes reflecting the moonlight of a false moon.

She collided with a Watered Bond, and she stood atop its injured shell, allowing it to futility attack her as she solemnly watched the battle. Even from kilometres away she could *feel* the vibrations of combat. The shockwaves of each clash, and the demented roars that brought back the horrific memories of Divas Pass.

“... I’m not useless...” She assured herself, slashing the bonds away.

Endless booms akin to an erupting volcano endlessly played as secondary shockwaves devastated everything within a 1km radius of Ber. Everything was flattened. No foundation or rock larger than one’s hand existed along that zone of annihilation.

Only sifting gravel did. They moved like leaves caught in a wind, acting as bullets which obliterated rising Dungeons in mere seconds. That was if they weren’t already killed by the black lightning.

< *Frost* >

< ***“I despised how blinded people were. Scarlet Logic knew what they were doing. The Fodders did. But they couldn’t fight back. They were bounded by circumstance, blinded by ideals imposed by a greater body. But that does not make what they did excusable...”*** >

< [Collective Illusion] >

Again, Frost bled every being she could, as if seeking for an answer. Ignis tried desperately not to cry, remembering the moments Frost tried to wring out answers from their enemies.

No one ever did say anything...

Ignis lamented for Frost, but in the grand scheme of things, her emotions mattered little. Her heart was corroded with the darkness of hatred and self-doubt as she feared those closest to her. Those whose bonds were supposed to be unbreakable.

In a way, as her ears slowly drooped to a close to keep the screams away, she realized that it wasn't Frost who was severing the bonds. It was Ber. No. That wasn't right either. It was both of them in their own twisted, malevolent ways.

Insecurities come bubbling up and there's nothing you can do about it... There's one person I never wanted to experience what we did, and that was you Frost.

Ignis returned to her monotonous endeavour to remove the tumours that were the Watered Bonds. At this point, it was to keep her mind straight. To assure herself that she wasn't useless as the wails of the present blended with the ones of the past.

* * *

Ignis' sense of time made it feel like things had been going on for days on end.

<><><> [UNSTABLE: TRANSPIRED INSTINCTS] <><><>

< *"I've abandoned the old and embraced the new. Can you do the same and accept me for who I am!? Love me! Ahaha!"* >

An additional pair of wings grew from the lower half of Ber's back. She was like a black star rather than a moon now. Every inch of the city suffered severe damage as Ignis uprooted every last of the Watered Bonds, sniffing as she tried to keep her composure.

After all this time, her shell chipped away at the sight of losing her loved ones. It never fully settled in until now, and she could not help but to believe that...

< Ignis. Please. I'm still here >

"So is everyone inside of my head! They keep yelling and screaming and crying! I can still hear the kind lady from the Inn! The gardener from across the street! The fisherman who'd bring me snacks!"

Ignis, perhaps out of everyone, suffered the most from this. After assuring herself in the last iteration of the fight that their bonds were unbreakable, it shattered her very sanity to see it all crumble away just hours after.

“How come no one’s here to help again? The White Wing disappeared. Everyone I know is slipping away. I know that it’s not my fault. But how can I think otherwise when it’s happened again!?”

< I cannot say for certain that I know what is occurring on the outside. But there is a chance that this person you call the White Wing may be lending a hand >

< I have still yet to encounter danger. I walk a purgatory of black and white. By staying here, no wish can compromise Frost >

“W-Walking...?” Ignis returned to the healers, following a series of staircases that led into a cellar. “What do you mean?”

< My wish may be – >

Nav’s prompt cut away unexpectedly as the world shook.

The healers rested within, whom of which appeared in a considerably better state. Thankfully, there was a proficient healer amongst them, and they kept the others well and alive.

Seeing Ignis brought smiles upon their faces. The reason why she returned was to prove to herself that she wasn’t alone in this city. Although, she knew deep down that it wouldn’t matter in the end.

If people like Jury and the triplets were susceptible to being consumed by a false narration of their values, then so could she. Ignis didn’t speak to them. Nor could she hear them. Instead, Ignis severed her hands with much hesitation, offering them the bone blade for protection.

None of them touched it. Not until Ignis personally handed it over to one of them, and to their surprise, it latched onto their hand. A stray rat ran into the room, and before the healer knew it, the blade split the rat into two.

The blade was somewhat sapient, carrying a part of Ignis’ will to protect these people. Or in Frost’s terms, the blade was genetically coded with such a purpose. Ignis didn’t realize it immediately, but her mana had disappeared. She had unintentionally used [Gene Expression] for this purpose, and as a result, only two weapons were made.

... healers... can be protected like this too... Frost will praise, wouldn't she? Frost will scratch my head and say thanks... Papa will...

Ignis didn't hear their words. Her hands didn't regenerate, despite how hard the healers tried to help her. She simply walked away, back into the chaotic winds summoned by her broken friends as her body slowly began to melt away.

Blood of the Covenant | HP: 8,200,000

Ber's Unstable [Roost of the Knowledgeable Swan] and [Resounding Voice] caused black thorn to rain, all the while her screams of being beautiful played over and over again like a broken record. Frost could not stop brooding over her despairs over how people were so blinded, and how quick they were to turn on their own.

Impuritas. The Ateliers. People...

Frost had tried to speak to them.

But in the end...

< **Frost** >

< ***"There was only violence..."*** >

"People turned a blind eye to us. I remember seeing them. The Midnight Teams. Floating and buzzing as they watched our home fall. It's happening again." Ignis monologued, returning to a familiar form.

No. Formless.

Ignis became a slime with the characteristics of a cat as she oozed water.

She recalled her memories as a Corrupted.

< **[Assimilating Assimilation]** >

I've become lost. A thorn in this garden of roses again. People around me are gone. How can I be sure that I'm not the problem? I... don't know what I should do anymore.

She was caught by the cloth. Somehow, despite it being made of fabric and strings, she could feel Frost's warmth woven within. Frost felt just like her, and Ignis felt comfort knowing that she wasn't alone.

< Frost >

< *“The crossroads pointed in all directions so clearly. I am not indecisive. I’ve gone down all paths. Explored each street..”* >

Blood of the Covenant | HP: 8,000,000

< [Watered Covenants] >

Ber’s form had slowly decayed over time, revealing small snippets of her real self. The struggle of her dual identities made it appear like the Corrupted was a parasite, desperately trying to reign control over her psyche.

For a small snippet of one’s personality to become large enough to consume its owner was but one of a million horrors of Elysia. And right underneath Ber’s nose, Ignis was swallowed into the expanding spade along Frost’s chest.

< Frost >

< *“But I still feel so lost. I am...”* >

Ignis didn’t feel a thing. Instead, it was somewhat liberating to be held so closely by Frost. In her final moments, the slime-Ignis dreamt of a future where their bonds would be unbreakable, unlike the Scarlet Logic and Impuritas she sought to erase from the face of this world.

I also feel so lost...

< [Directionless] >

< Frost >

< *“There is only one path left to explore... and it’s the one I loathed the most. But therein lies a language known to all. And it’s the one I’ve grown to become the most fluent in.”* >