

The Anomaly Recovery Unit, or ARU for short, were teams specifically equipped with recovering the bodies and materials from fallen Corrupted. ARU members were split into 7 distinct tiers, each designated by a letter that defined their capabilities.

Starting from O, which on the recovery of White Monsoon Corrupted, to B, A, F, G, K and finally, M which targeted Green Trickle risked Corrupted.

Their designation of Type G revealed that were rated to recover the materials from a Blue Trickle-classed Corrupted. But Frost wondered if dead Corrupted were all they were after. The triplets assured her that capturing living Corrupted would be too dangerous.

A cleanup crew best described them. After the defeat of a Corrupted they were deployed to haul back their remains which could then be converted into an Atelier Item by Impulse Artificers. Where this occurred was unknown even to the triplets. They only had access to Retrofitters, who had direct communication with the Impulse Artificers.

ARU forces carried a mix of certain personalities. The triplets briefed Frost in less than 10 seconds, noting that a Blessed always acted as the group's informant and scout, and that ARU forces wore conventional clothing to blend in with the world. The Operator was the head of each ARU group.

Each ranking held multiple ARU groups. There were a little over a dozen known, with only one falling into the Type O category. However, the accuracy of the triplet's information was unfortunately unreliable.

"Go. Approach them. I bet you wanna figure out what the hell those lackeys are doing out here." Cer said. "We didn't pass a Corrupted. That means they're after the anti-healing object. What else is out here?"

"But that's odd." Res added, her eyes slightly narrowed. "Even if it's something as small as a bomb, Scarlet Logic would be the first to arrive. No one else. They'd be walking right into danger. Unless they're aware it's nothing more than an anti-healing object?"

The ARU always arrived in the aftermath of any major conflict involving a Corrupted or suspected Corrupted. They never, *ever* arrived before. They were at least competent enough to hold their own if things went downhill judging by their stats.

But it was strange. That object was there for a month already. Why had they only *just* arrived?

ImpulseWorks' inner working were opaque. The Golden Index was the only Atelier where they understood how things ran. It was no secret. Everything was available to the public so long as they had a keen eye.

And unlike the Golden Index, there was a strict order of operations and an enforced hierarchy in ImpulseWorks. Management was far less lax, and like the Scarlet Logic, Frost could tell that they were seasoned.

Because the moment they even came close to passing them, one motioned with their hands and they unanimously became conscious of their group. Surveilling eyes tracked their every

movement as Snap came to a gracious stop. It was at that moment when Frost became aware of their cordial façade.

She could tell that ARU were tense. Snap's presence alarmed them as the only Blessed in their group, the ARU Scout, shaped their hands into symbols and held it by their chest.

The Operator who donned chainmail and layered cloth apparel, blinked three times. Looks were deceiving, because their DEF stats were insanely high for what they adorned. They spoke in code and pure body language. Frost was only able to notice these thanks to her one thousand eyes, which processed every minute detail.

She was the first to open her mouth. After all, she was the one who wished to stop by and greet them.

"Wharfrow? What's ImpulseWorks doing sending you guys in their direction?" She did not pull any punches. They came in the same direction, so she wanted to know what Corrupted corpse collectors were doing out here.

"And who might you be?" The person at the head of the group, who Frost recognized as the Operator, spoke up with a cold tone. The others had their hands gravitate to their weapons, which caused Ber to click her tongue.

"Big weapons for grave diggers." She scowled with a smirk. "When'd you maggots get an upgrade?"

It did not take a genius to tell that while the triplets were close to ImpulseWorks, they had bad blood with them.

"Ignore my companion's bad mouth. Please. Be at ease. We're not here to fight with friends." Frost introduced herself, flashing her Guild Plate as she presented herself like a deity. "Where are my manners? I am the Black Dove. The Black Incandescent Color. I couldn't help but to wonder what you were doing out here."

She did not want to be on bad terms with them. But she also needed to make them aware of her identity. With what she knew about the Colors and their relationships with the Ateliers, she wanted to claim a better standing.

Also, it would make things much easier if they knew she was a Color upfront.

"Black? A Color? Here?" The unnamed Operator sent a side-long gaze to his team. The Blessed Scout nodded. "Confirmed. Got a name?"

"Frost."

They scanned them from head to toe. The slightest movement only caused their hands to draw nearer to the handles of their blades. But with one deep breath, the Operator swiftly exhaled, shattering the tension.

"... Good." He suddenly sighed in relief, nodding back to the Scout. "Good. Good. Brush my manners aside, will you please. It's just part of our protocol as per interacting with the

Blessed. In case you weren't who you claimed you are. Never heard of a Black Color. Or an undetectable creature that *isn't* a Corrupted."

The Blessed were only known to be people. There was never an incident where an animal or monster became a Blessed. She instantly realized why they were so tense as her mind went back to one of the first warnings the triplets had spoken to her about.

*If you can't see the status of something, then there's a good chance it's either a Blessed or a Corrupted. Snap looks like a golden Octanid. A Blessed could easily mistake it for a Corrupted.*

*"Precisely. These people sound diligent. They would have attempted to intercept."*

*They're sharp. It's like I'm talking to soldiers. They feel different the Scarlet Logic Dawn Team.*

*"They have a life they wish to preserve. All appropriate steps should be taken."*

*... Yeah. That's right. They're not immortal.*

Frost smiled. It was neither one of her pleasant smiles, nor the warmhearted ones. It was purely a business smile, and it preserved her overbearing presence befitting that of a Color like herself.

She gracefully slipped from Snap's back and joined them on foot.

"Please, there are no Corrupted present. Our dear eight-legged friend has more RESIST than you think. It's a specialized Anid." Frost elegantly lied.

"Our boy Snap's of royalty. A Goldanid." Cer chimed in. "Nothing to take, so don't even think of kidnapping it. You don't want to anger a Color~"

"Never heard of the species. But neither have we ever seen a Blessed creature." The Operator was not going to let this slide so easily.

They were thorough. Frost could of course strongarm them *physically*, but she did not want to convince them with violence. Instead, she noticed a blood-soaked bandage wrapped around the arm of one of the ARU personnel.

She invoked [Area Healing]. Magical, *black* particles lifted from their bodies like tiny balloons. Ever since she had gained the Black Dove's Commitment, the particles of light turned black.

As hardened as they were, seeing black particles that *healed* them caused all eyes to fall onto the Scout, who was the most knowledgeable of them all. Cer and Ber were elated for the nth time. Seeing people react to Frost's healing magic never grew old.

"Do you take me for a liar?" Frost calmly asked.

The ARU personnel checked their wounds and were astonished to find that it was indeed healed. It finally registered that Frost was indeed a healer, and they were non the wiser to believe her.

But it was still strange.

“No white hair. Dressed all black. You’d think your companion up there with the white hair would be a healer, but she’s not human.” The Operator spoke exactly what went through their minds, following it with a long sigh. “*Healers don’t lie*. Can’t exactly speak to a Facility Overseer or a Navigator. For confirmation. You’re heading to H5? Or just passing?”

The Operator opened up, but they were careful with their words. Frost wasn’t the only one present, after all.

“H5. For business. We’re after an Impulse Artificer.” Frost answered.

“Then you’ll have to go through a Retrofitter, since you know that name. Just follow the —” Another individual, the Field Mapper, was about to issue her a complete set of directions right until Cer interrupted.

“Main strip. Exactly 30 intersections. Afterwards, take a right on each crossroad until you’re at the major marketplace. Take three more rights... You understand what I’m saying, *right?*” Cer made it clear that they weren’t dealing with amateurs.

And being companions of a Color was also telling of their strength. The ARU personnel did not say another word. They deeply understood. This was clearly not the first time they had dealt with someone like Cer, but it was hard for them to talk back to someone who could fold them in half in less than a second.

“We’re skipping the line. Retrofitters don’t just work with special people. If you’ve got the coin, then those beasts are going to get an order for you.” Ber explained. “But we don’t have a year to spend waiting on that damned list. That’s where *we*, *you*, and that correspondence comes in.”

“I assume that correspondence comes from the City of Diamonds?” The Operator asked.

“Directly from upper management. You understand.” Frost’s words were powerful and implied that she was either employed by an Underboss, or by the Golden Index’s mysterious big Boss. “Wharftow’s in the clear. You can turn back. We’ve disposed of the object already.”

“Hold on. I-if you don’t mind me asking – Er... how did you dispose of an Anti-Healing component?” The female, human scout uttered in confusion.

“We shall leave that to your imagination.” Frost slightly bared her teeth through another business-like smile. “Please do not question my capabilities as a healer.”

They conversed for a short while. The tension remained due to the triplets and Snap’s contrary existence. Every fine movement it made caused them to reach for their weapons out of reflex. Snap made a sad ‘Brrr’ sound, causing Ignis to hug its head, whispering: “Don’t worry.”

“Everyone else loves you.” Jury assured, stroking its fur.

“Anid and a healer. There’s no better duo aside from a Wandering Healer and a Wayfarer.” One commented. “We still need to investigate. Protocols, we’re afraid. It’s not our job to investigate, but the Scarlet Logic have been unreliable as of late.”

Their hearts fluctuated at the mention of Scarlet Logic, when she pried, they only mentioned that they weren't consistent with the Corrupted hunting, so in turn, the ill-equipped ARU teams like themselves were sent out to investigate.

Then, they tipped her with one last crucial note. The Operator glanced around, seeing nothing but hills and said:

"Lots of Anti-healing relics are sprouting up. Watch yourself, healer. We'd much rather have one insane healer than two in Brander."

He referenced the Wandering Healer of Brandar, whose designation was unknown to them.

"Still. Colors are pretty rare nowadays. Our cities stopped seeing them for a long time. Ever since... well, you're heading to H5, hey? If they need you, then they'll tip you further. Cause Scarlet Logic won't do – tch – fuck all." He finally spat, breaking through his friendly façade.

"Operator. Need an amnestic?" The Amnestic asked, pulling out a vial which Res whispered was an Elixir, specifically Elixir A for amnestic purposes.

Of course, this was created by Inflow Direct, and served as a middle ground between potions, which were available only to the public, and Serums, which could only be used by healers and Inflow Direct personnel, like their Liquidators, who were only as strong as the Serums they possessed.

Amnestics were used by the ARU during the cleanup on locals and other people that strayed too close. This contributed to the perception of the low numbers of Corrupted in the world.

"Do I look like a trainee Overseer? Let's go. At the very least we can consider it a day off. A pleasure meeting you, Black Dove. And companions. Good to know we have some tangible strength currently in Brandar."

"The pleasure was mine. I look forward to our next meeting." Frost politely bid farewell, as did Jury, Ignis, and even Snap who gently wiggled the tip of one of its legs.

"Goodbye. Don't get killed." Cer coldly said.

"Try not to die, I guess." Ber shrugged.

"Take care. And don't trust the Scarlet Logic." Res warned on Frost's behalf.

"*You're telling us?*" One reflectively laughed as they departed. "If you knew how they suppressed our breakouts then you'd also want to storm right through their forts and strangle each and every one of those sick monsters."

There was already a divide. It was as the triplets said – the Ateliers were in a cold war and were secretly at each other's throats. But they still all needed each other in one way or another. Scarlet Logic's sheer manpower made them invaluable to the others.

The raw emotions caused Frost to hold her breath as she watched them disappear behind a hill.

"I can't believe it... those idiots." Res facepalmed. "Do you know why they asked you your name?"

"No? Why?" Frost asked.

"Mimicry. Those morons still believe in that urban legend." She sighed in defeat, and before long, they were back on their journey to H5. "It *better* be an urban legend."

"Yeah. I'm really not in the mood to fight another Corrupted already." Frost groaned, also hoping it was nothing more than a canard.

They carried on to H5 with invaluable information and questions awaiting answers.

A facility? Breakouts? Overseers? Navigators?

The terms were foreign to the triplets, and Frost couldn't wait to unravel the inner workings of their proposed ally – ImpulseWorks.