

The Nex Megalopolis was impervious to all external threats, designed to ward out even the most dangerous of Corrupted. At the time of its inception external threats were the only things in their mind. The loss of Paradise had brought them together to create the new megacity of Elysia.

The Next Megalopolis was a powerhouse, backed by multiple Ateliers. Each city brought invaluable assets, further empowering their combined might.

The Guilds of the City of Diamonds commanded a network of Adventurers, all motivated by greed and the promises of riches. They were a nation in itself, existing everywhere in Elysia. Carpalis was unaware of how much power she truly held. Or perhaps she was conscious of it, but due to her gentle nature, never dabbled in the thoughts of abusing it.

Regardless, the Associations and Adventurers alike would rally to fight for the Guilds if ever asked. Or, more preferably, as a quest with lucrative rewards...

However, these networks were disabled after the destruction of all Brandar's Hyperlinks and Relay Sites. CogitO's Cognition Transmitters and Receivers had their range severely hampered as well as a result, severing the communication lines between Train Conductors, many of Caldera Industries personnel, and the observant Eyes in the sky.

The Retrofitters and artisans of the City of Hearts were largely responsible for creating exquisite weaponry for the Ateliers and Adventurers alike, with acclaimed heroes from kingdoms affair on request. However, with the Retrofitters missing, ImpulseWorks had little else to offer in the protection of the Nexus aside from its Eclipses.

If anything, they were a liability in combat.

For energy? They were an absolute necessity, for the Ateliers required their invaluable liquified Nex more than anything else. Less they wish to resort to terrorizing people again, as they did in the distant past.

The military presence in the City of Spades was required in the event of a large-scale conflict. However, little did they know that this presence would be used against them. Whilst the Nex Megalopolis was capable of defending against threats from the outside, it was different within, hence why the Dungeons were never easily dealt with, as they could spontaneously appear where they wished, aside from the inner cities.

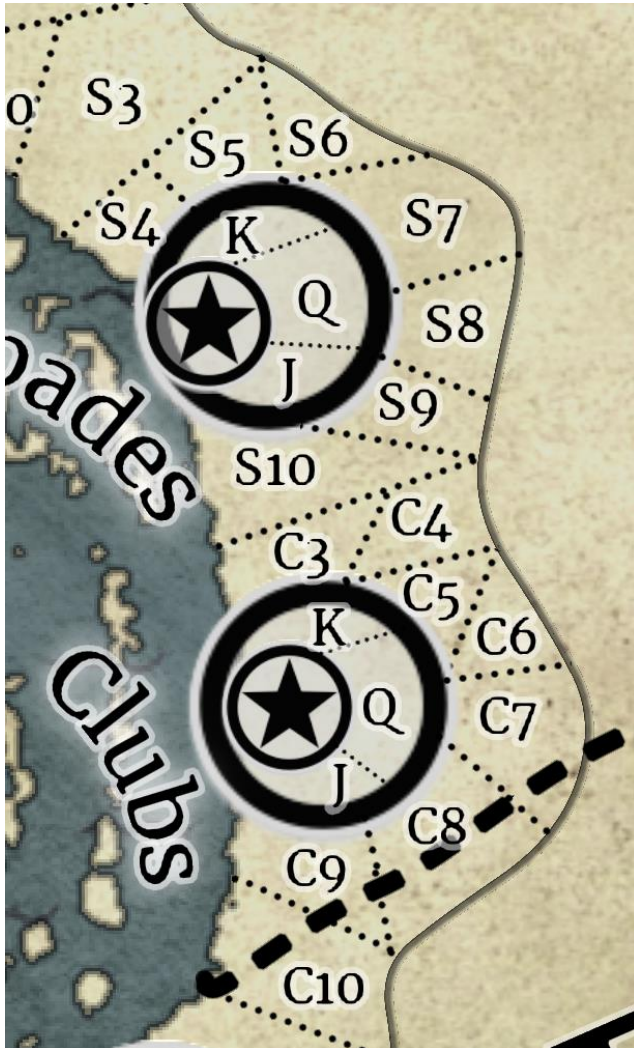
The healers and potions of the City of Clubs allowed personnel to live longer, regenerate from lethal wounds, and recover from incurable diseases. Additionally, they were amongst the oldest Ateliers, and wielded a plethora of wisdom.

It was why the City of Clubs had very little Adventurer presence. Instead of using Adventurers, they used their *own* personnel to defend their citizens. Its utopian society extended past its inner walls to better help facilitate the wants of the healers, who did not wish to solely live within ivory towers.

Although this did come with one small cost.

*“May all those drafted into the ‘pool’ please make your way towards a collection area. Those closest Sector J, Q and K; please present to a designated gate found on your vial.”*

A voice accompanied by a high-pitched, rolling trumpet blared over every Sector neighboring the City of Clubs with the burning City of Spades.



C3, and C4 served as the dividing line. The protocol for all emergencies in the City of Clubs was to immediately begin evacuation efforts, created in an effort to avoid another disaster like H6.

Across the blue tinted cityscape, with luscious greenery found between each city and sector, were oceans of panicked people. Pandemonium broke loose as the bright lights of the Piece of the Fallen Star blinded those who were unfortunately to observe it for longer than a second. It was combined with the dark beams that fired not only from afar, but even *within* the City of Clubs, causing flaming debris to fall from the skies as the Caldera Industries Eyes plummeted.

Children, the elderly, women, men – the debris did not discriminate. The shower of invisible shrapnel was deadlier than the chunks themselves. Healers could not appropriately help

people due to these internal injuries. Instead, they were dragged along on giant, blue furred wolves who wore a white cap with the symbol of a twin snake coiling a syringe.

These wolves were the ambulances of the Nex Megalopolis. Green-furred wolves helped pick up those that lagged behind, flipping people onto their backs as they approached them from the rear with their giant snouts. The fur cushioned their fall as they looked back to see the black streaks of light piercing the world like lances thrown from the heavens.

But it did not compare to the column of fire that devoured the entirety of the inner parts of the City of Spades. As panic wove into their hearts, they prayed that things would be fine. Inflow Direct, and the City of Clubs by extension, was prepared to protect their own to the last man. However, there were people who were already long gone, and others who were unfortunately left behind.

A mother reached out to her trapped son.

A father mourned the dead of his bisected daughter.

A child cried at the loss of their parents.

A grandparent lamented at the loss of an entire generation of family.

But unbeknownst to them, was that lurking underneath the fog of the S10 marched tens of thousands of Scarlet Logic forces. The total retreat into C5 seemed to be an overreaction to many. If it was falling debris, then it did not just occur in C3 and C4. The disaster occurred across all cities.

The reason they evacuated was because Inflow Direct *knew* Scarlet Logic was coming, as well as the Golden Index.

“... that... is a Demon... M-mama...” A child whimpered on the back of a wolf, gazing up to see a colossal Demon, raising a golden, mechanical hand before the gold and black figure brought it down like a mighty hammer into the fog.

“Hush. It – it’s nothing. Just keep looking into my eyes, dear!” A Beastkin woman said, clutching onto her cat-eared daughter’s face before suddenly, a swarm of thousands of Insectid were reflected in her brown irises.

Thousands flew past the hand from the pierced fog wall, clouding the skies afar as the warnings blared again.

*“May all those drafted into the ‘pool’ please make your way towards a collection area. Those closest Sector J, Q and K; please present to a designated gate found on your vial. Please show identification to the on-Site Liquidators to receive your temporary title as a living ‘Vial’, and your dedicated Infusion.”*

Along the way, concrete structures shaped like a giant syringe, found in vast clearings could be found. People holding onto a glass cylinder carrying a message rushed into a staircase found at the base of these monoliths.

They led to a bunker underneath, guarded by tall men and women armed with a giant, mechanical claw much like that of the Wandering Healers, save that theirs were equipped with a green, corrosive liquid. All of their right arms had been severed clean, with some missing their jaws and others existing as more machine than flesh. They adorned blue tunics made with cloth-like steel. Something akin to the string of the Octanids, but stronger, and resilient enough where they could comfortably shrug off the falling shrapnel.

Along their bodies were colorful cylinders filled with all manners of Elixirs and Serums. The Elixirs shone vividly, whilst the Serums were duller in comparison. But make no mistake. The Serums were vastly more superior than their Elixir counterparts.

"... irritating. One's stuck in my skin. Permission to administer 20ml of Serum H?" A woman asked her male superior, whose jaw was made of anodized steel, reflecting the blue of their uniforms, and the red of the world.

"Granted. 25ml documented. Reason: You're clumsy. Additional wounds expected for excavation of shrapnel. 9 hours, 23 minutes, 54.31 seconds. Site: left forearm." He spoke as succinctly as possible all in a single drawn breath.

He did not comment on the state of their city. Rather, he acted accordingly as if to maintain his public image. Or perhaps just like the conversion of his flesh into steel, he had become phlegmatic.

"Ouch~ That extra 5ml better heal this~" She groaned, smiling as she fished a metal claw into her wound." It's getting harder these days to rely on a healer to help us. Oh – Hello~!" The woman shifted from a sneer to an overly receptive smile, the kind that people made when they tried to sell one a product.

She greeted a small gathering of people, who were coated in blood, panting breathlessly, and burning from exhaustion.

"H-Here... Here we are! P-Please – We have the vials! Are we allowed to go in?"

"Hm. Let's see! One. Two. Three. Four. Seven – Hmm~!" The woman hummed delightedly as she let them in one by one. Suddenly, she stopped a father and a daughter in their tracks, holding a claw to the man's throat. "Where's the second?"

"P-Please... I'm the only one who received one." He gulped, begging through clenched teeth.

"Rules are rules. You gotta leave her behind." The female Liquidator stated.

The man was drenched in sweat, but he could not allow himself to part away from his daughter. The Liquidator suddenly took the vial from the man, crushed it with her bare, human hand and unrolled the message as she dragged a needle-like claw around the outline of his chin.

“But~! You know the second part of it!” She suddenly exclaimed enthusiastically, causing her partner to groan as he professionally processed the others in the tens.

“S-Second part?” The man uttered, confused.

“Take a look!” She showed him the contents of the message, pointing at an obscurely placed paragraph that she read aloud. “Section 3.12.1 states that for every person brought along, the original recipient *must* take an additional Infusion. All people brought along will take one, no matter the age. Section 3.12 A. then states that the State – meaning *us* – will have the authority to absorb you in the event of your ‘untimely’ death. Burials, cremation, and all formal death rites will be forfeited. Section 3.12 B. requires to you make a Will. For her sake~”

She remembered all laws, protocols and all manners of rules imposed by Inflow Direct. The man did not exactly know what she meant by this, but since it meant that his daughter could be brought along, he was offered a syringe filled with black ink, which he used to write down his name and signature on the back of the paper.

“T-Thank you! Please be careful up here! I don’t know how you can do it.” He said as the little girl waved at them.

She waved as well, and when they were alone again, a frown crept across her face.

“Heeeeee. Pwaaaaaah. Guess that’s another orphan in the making. The Mothers are going to get busy real soon. As if taking care of our crippled Beholder wasn’t enough.” She complained following a long, frustrated sigh. “Section 3.12’s pretty brutal. But you can’t have it all without a price. Hey, wanna make a bet on what organs are going to be the most popular again?”

“Please don’t say something so disgusting.” He croaked, venting steam from vents along his chin.

“Taking Serum A? Gas form too, hehehehe~! Isn’t that addictive?” She harped, obviously speaking out of boredom.

“Analgesics are required to stop the internal screeching. Our blood is our oil, after all.”

“Maybe you’re just too weak~!”

“Aren’t we all without these liquid miracles?” He spoke rhetorically, flicking one of the vials to create a satisfying chime. “Golden Index. Scarlet Logic. Caldera Industries... Do you believe they are after that light?”

“It’s just at the border of C4 and C5 from the looks of it. Oh –!?”

Suddenly, a giant cloud of fluff rolled into the town square, crashing with abandoned stalls and breaking into the walls of the surrounding buildings. It shivered as a whimper could be heard from within.

And when the ball of fluff turned, they were greeted with the bleeding, peeled, and elongated parody of what was supposed to be the face of a human.

“... help me... help... me... I just wanted to be fluffy... but now I’m – I’m – I’m just a giant cotton ball! Please – *Please!* If – If I knew that wishing for this would end this way, then – then –!”

“It looks like a Corrupted.” The woman spat, thrusting her hand to the side as her syringes retracted, and razor-sharp blades snapped into position. “Not that strong either from the looks of it! A giant fluffy cat toy! Don’t mind if I do~!”

“Normal people would be wary of a Corrupted.” The man coldly spoke, sensing little danger from such a creature.

“No – I’m not a Corrupted – I’m a – AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The woman pounced on it as her partner stood his ground, leaving it all to her. She shredded its make, drawing blood from an invisible body as thick strands of cotton were ripped from the main body.

“A-ahahaha! It’s screaming! Are you hearing this!? The Corrupted is crying! Bahahaha! Ahahahaha~!” Her hysterical laughter haunted the now abandoned town, as did the cries of this bizarre Corrupted.

Clearly, anyone who worked for the Ateliers was missing several screws in their head.

Literally for those who took pride in melding steel with flesh...

The woman turned the fluffy ball inside out and wore it like a coat; the face left to rot along the bricked ground. Inflow Direct were surprisingly well informed considering how prepared they were. In the next 16 hours Scarlet Logic would finally be at their doorsteps, but there wouldn’t be a single person for them to touch.

In order to understand how Inflow Direct was able to detect the encroaching danger, one first needed to go back exactly 6 hours before the light of the wish granting Advent arose over their sky as though a star had fallen.