

The Express Networks were the fastest means of transport in the Nex Megalopolis

Outside of the Chained Theocracy's sealed passages that linked each city's reception, and the Hyperlinks of course.

It would take 24 hours at the most to travel from one end of a City to another using the Express Networks.

Unfortunately, these Networks were no longer in use. The mysterious disappearing trains and the urban legend of the Express Train to Hell rose in infamy. As a result, the trust between Caldera Industries and the public was severely burnt. They were one of the few Ateliers that tried to maintain a positive image, whether through their train's intercoms or simply by the fact that they provided their infrastructure in the first place.

However, Caldera Industries also found themselves at odds with Inflow Direct regarding the losses of their healers. Frost feared that if a war between the Ateliers did break out then no one would know who the real enemy was.

The slower local networks were the only available means of transport for the common folk, and the time it would take to move from H5 to H10 would be a week. Two at most.

But with Snap, they could easily reach H10 in a matter of days.

There was currently only a month and a half left until the Hyperlinks were restored. Frost wanted to further explore the city and undermine the Scarlet Logic during this time. That way, she could provide a convincing case to the Beholders once they arrived at the Nexus.

But this one-and-a-half-month window was a ticking time bomb. This timeframe was their only chance to realize their malevolent goals before other Beholders became involved. Frost was quite thankful that at least the Scarlet Logic's Beholder, Marduk, was also stuck in the Nexus.

Because if Carpalis was anything to go by, then she was far from ready to take on a Beholder.

That being said, she had zero doubt that the Impuritas and Scarlet Logic were plotting their next move.

Frost and her group of trusted companions raced through the City of Hearts for the next few days. The journey to H10 was one of discovery and leisure. The wind never ceased to howl as they followed the main strips that connected every major city and Sectors within the outskirts of the City of Hearts.

They were currently still inside of H5, and it was here where Frost first noticed Caldera Industries finally stepping in to address the sudden spike in train disasters.

H5 had its stations populated with their personnel. They were stationed to defend their trains and technology at all costs now that things had gotten out of hand. Frost wondered if it was complacency that had caused them to leave their precious trains undefended, or if they were genuinely surprised that someone or *something* would target an Atelier as large as themselves.

Were the losses of their trains normal to them? If so, then why create the trains in the first place? *Why* allow people to use it? Frost knew that they did not possess Nex Accumulators, so the generation of Nex was ruled out.

But she digressed. In the end, the Spatial Distortions were rare enough where it was not an issue until recently.

Now, each train always had a pair of Caldera Industries personnel aboard. These people were called Footsoldier Protectorates, and they usually consisted of tall Dwarves.

They were dressed in suits of metal, with their abdomens exposed to reveal their impressive abbs. An orange mantle made from steel wrapped around their throats and shoulders, which then collapsed and clutched onto their back like an exoskeleton.

It was similar to Carpalis' Faustian Bargain, except the Footsoldier Protectorates required this to keep their spines perfectly aligned as they stood guard like statues along the premises of their precious stations.

Why did they require such a restrictive piece of armament wrapped around their backs?

This was because of the gargantuan hammer they wielded. It was a dual-sided hammer with a core hollowed out by a black object reminiscent of the Train Core. This was the Weapon Core, and it allowed for the segmented hammer pieces to gravitationally lock themselves into place.

Indeed. The handle and the two ends of the hammer were not physically in contact. They seemingly floated in place like repelling magnets. They were colored in a similar scheme to their apparel, and the handle itself extended to over a meter and a half.

Suffice to say, their weapons were hardly usable in claustrophobic situations. But where it failed in that end, it made up for by thousandfold in raw kinetic strength. This was because the weapon itself weight over a thousand kilograms in mass. Even Frost had to question whether she was capable of handling such a ridiculous weapon.

So how did they wield them? The trick lay in the fact that the weapon was in a state of perpetual freefall in every direction. This required them to balance it in a manner akin to how one would try to keep a sledgehammer balance on the flat of their palm.

Except their hammer was weightless so long as it was in this state. But the moment it began moving in one direction, it would instantly enter its terminal velocity and devastate everything in its swung path.

The Gravity Hammer. This was the name of their standardized Atelier Weapons, made in-house by Caldera Industries themselves.

Merely holding it in its dormant state required tremendous core strength and an infallible sense of balance. Frost only watched them from afar as Snap rushed through H5's beautiful urban sprawls.

*They don't have an on or off switch for those hammers, huh. I'm honestly shocked by how much shit people can tolerate in this world. Looking around, people can live normally without resorting to the Ateliers.*

Frost pondered as she gazed upon the passing scenery from the comfort of Snap's back. The night was still young, and the magical lanterns lit up the world like fireflies.

But there wasn't a single star in the night sky.

Adventuring wasn't the only way people could survive. Hell, monsters didn't need to be in the picture at all. The Nex Megalopolis allowed people to live how they wanted, proven by the musicians of H5, and the farmers and merchants of the City of Diamonds.

Hospitality was another method. Frost threw these ideas around as they came. This amused them for some reason, some smirking as they let her vent her poorly hidden frustrations.

"People can cook. Play instruments. Farm crops. Create items. The Guilds even throw in fetch quests to help with people and their daily lives. Kind of like mobile nurses in a way. Does everyone have to resort to Adventuring one way or another?"

"It's ingrained into people." Cer mentioned as they soon departed from sleepless nights of the city into the silent plainlands. Small pastures and grain silos could be seen along its wavy fields. The ambience of rustling grass and long stretches of wheat fields played like a lulling song.

Frost's eyes glowed in this darkness, as did Jury's. No one said a word to Frost. There wasn't a snicker or a giggle either from the triplets. They simply listened to her take of the world; their hearts filled with silent critique.

Her world views were optimistic. She knew this. But in the end, it did not change that people lived amongst monsters.

"What does 'civilization' mean? Is that what you're asking?" Jury spoke.

"I guess so. I know the Nex Megalopolis hasn't been around for that long. I know the mindset of the past is still ingrained into people. I just find it sad that in places like Grandis people can't live without power." Frost indirectly mentioned Calfasio, who despaired over their inability to protect their loved ones.

Even if they moved to Brandar would it be possible for him to merge? Frost believed it was possible. But money was firstly required, which was what made many head into Adventuring in the first place.

"Half-breeds from afar can't come to Brandar on their own violation. Because they can't escape alone. To me, it feels like a lot people in this world are forced into one path. But... seeing the faces around us proves me wrong as well." Frost added, smiling as she watched the silhouettes of people run hand in hand underneath the moonlight.

"Freedom of choice, huh. Hard to say, but I get you." Cer said, but also shrugged.

"Figuratively for all of us. Literally for the Blessed. We don't have much of a choice when it

comes to our growth. The Nexus decides what we gain and what we lose. But people like us will gladly give up freedom for other things. Like getting away from the world down here.”

“ImpulseWorks Workers have a choice. It feels like a forced choice, but it’s a choice nonetheless. Elysia’s a horrible place, but up there in the shiny Nexus it’s a heaven for us Blessed.” Res whispered. “Normal Blessed don’t need to struggle.”

“Don’t have to mess with greed.” Cer said.

“Their hearts are their own I bet.” Jury added.

“No blind conquests. Just missions with a clear-cut goal.” Ber cleared her throat.

“... And the Nexus only cares if you have enough Nex. Violent rules won’t kick you out for disobeying them. Just Nex and Nex, huh? Haaaah... I guess it really is a heaven up there.” Frost let loose of an exasperated sigh, wanting to cleanse her chest from the heavy thoughts. “Being ‘civilized’ is as simple as being kind. At least that’s what I think. But when you look at what’s happened to the healers, you realize that ‘kindness’ is just a weakness. I hate that so much.”

“In Ara’s words ‘It is what it is.’” Ber said as Jury repositioned herself behind Frost and slowly brought her into her bosom. As usual, she could tell whenever her emotions wavered or became misaligned.

“I think that saying is just an excuse to run away...” Jury tenderly whispered.

It always boggled her how Jury ‘just knew’ when to comfort her. But it was one of the mysteries of the world she wished to remain as one, because she wanted to believe that it was the product of their love.

Invisible love hearts appeared all around them, like they were communicating their love through the emojis of the alter Frost’s.

There were only 3 more Corrupted left until the Awakening of the Floor of Civilization. The same for the Floor of Judgement. Laying half-buried in Jury’s bosom, Frost wondered if the Awakening was the be-all and the end-all of everything.

What would happen afterwards? Would all of their problems just magically disappear? Jury’s hands slowly slid into her coat and slither its way into her undershirt where she pressed the palm of her hand against her soft belly.

Jury always loved touching her directly like this, and it caused Frost’s mind to clear up as she reared her head and saw the only pair of stars in the skies that mattered.

“Are you worried?”

“A little. But with you? Not so much.” Frost reached up and pulled her head towards hers, gently pressing their foreheads together. “It’s not like me to sulk and brood. But I just wanted to get it off my chest. Carpalis taught me a valuable lesson. I plan to cherish her words moving forward.”

“Beholder Capralis is a weirdo. But seeing that you speak so fondly of her, I guess I can get behind trusting her too.” Cer cheekily said.

“You never trusted her?”

“Dunno. We have a lot of trust with that snake Galia, but she’s about the only Beholder we respect. Marionette? Depends. She helped us personally with Orth and Thras. Without her, they would have...” Cer suddenly trailed off. She folded her arms and stared off into the distance.

Ahead stood a wall of trees, and behind it was an increasingly large bulge. It was like a mountain, but not quite high enough to be one. The formation was still many kilometers away.

That place was H6.

“... Hey Frost. Jury. Ignis~ Snap, and you too disembodied Nav. Ever wondered why we never joined an Atelier?” Ber suddenly said, creeping beside a laying Ignis who happily allowed her to stick close. “Thank you~ So, wanna know or what?”

“Mhm. Go right ahead. We’re all ears.” Frost gladly accepted.

“Uh-huh...?” Cer tugged on Snap’s fur, causing Res to swiftly slap her hand away.

“Shhh! Figuratively!” She hissed.