

The City of Spades was surprisingly diverse in its landscape. Gone were the flat plains of green. Instead, a world of chasms, gorges and canyons of volatile land crept through its sectors like ivy.

These passages were known as the 'fast route', or the highways of the Outskirts. Trains were not used in the City of Spades. Instead, the railways were built above the fog across the entire span of these hidden lands. The view from those trains would be akin to one seen within a plane.

Only the City itself stood over the clouds. Red blades reached well above the fog, arranged like blades of grass. But to Frost they were no more than weed growing between the cracks of the Nex Megalopolis, and she vowed to uproot them.

They were built atop the highest point of the City of Spades, shining like a beacon of light. People of the Outskirts yearned to climb its sheer cliffs, scale its towering walls, and live within the comforts of the Scarlet Logic's ranks. They were driven like moths to a flame, but they were wingless and could only stare up at the only thing that cut through their grey skies.

Frost wondered if they knew the truth of the Scarlet Logic. Not about their involvement of the Impuritas and Iscario, but rather their methods which made them immortal. Still it was hardly a deterrent to the desperate and those that sought to escape their hell.

These thoughts filled her mind at every step of the way. Exposed sewer lines, abandoned settlements, and all manners of ruins littered the artificially carved landscape. Every scar along the ground originated from a conflict. Walled compounds of small settlements could be found along the path they blazed along S4.

Dust kicked up as they moved. Their unnatural speed stirred rubble and undisturbed waste into the air. With only a week left Frost believed that the Scarlet Logic were close to enacting some sort of assault on the city.

"You think they know the Hyperlink is about to reactivate?" Ber wondered as they stumbled across a brick-walled settlement.

"They predicted us disappearing into the Derma Layer. It's safe to assume they do." Res answered as they approached the edge of a cliff and made a short observation of the settlement below.

The shanty houses were as dilapidated as the ones in the Sleeping Dogs territory. From what they gathered the deeper they went, and the closer they moved towards S4 – one of the condemned dumping grounds for the most twisted individuals – the stronger the Syndicates became.

The village was hardly intricate, and again, much to her disgust, the hallmarks of violence and enforced fear were apparent by how corpses were laid out along the streets. Another round of judgement was inevitable, and Frost could barely wrap her mind around the grim reality of the City of Spades.

They knew what needed to be done. Furthermore, the Syndicate underneath would serve as information dispensers, so there was an extra incentive to eliminate them. Perched at the edge, Frost reached out to a still Ignis and patted her head, wary of Ignis' exposure to all of this. From Divas Pass to the Derma Layer, to now this – Frost could not help but to worry for her wellbeing.

Because Ignis was still a child.

"Ignis. Things are going to get worse. More than the Derma Layer at this rate. If at any time you feel like you want to scream, cry or yell, then come straight to me." She said softly, bending a little to match her height before she issued a gentle smile. "It's been nightmare after nightmare, huh? Since... Yeah. Since Divas Pass."

Ignis nodded, taking Frost's hands into hers as she tried to smile. The face she made was always funny to Frost. Her smile rarely appeared natural but when it did, it was always so bright, like that of a child's.

Her red-haired friend wrapped her tail around Frost's wrist and spoke with a voice carrying the conviction of thousands.

"I also want to find the people responsible for what happened to my home... and to Papa. Like how you want to find the person who hurt you. I want revenge. It's scary. It always is. But if Papa was still here, then he would've still tried no matter how scary things were."

"Mhm. Good to know you're just like him. Ignis. You three. Jury – Same thing again. If you have a better method to get them to talk, then do it." Frost ordered, turning to the others with dangerous eyes.

Cer normally would have began panting. But she was well aware that now was not the time. Instead, she folded her arms and muttered: "'You three'. There goes my image of us being close. I'm kidding. Kind of bittersweet messing with Syndicates, ain't that right Res?"

"Good Syndicates don't litter their streets with bodies." Res had already deemed the people below as irredeemable, her eyes glowing slightly as she refrained from obliterating the village with a single blast.

"Anything goes?" Ber cracked her knuckles, eager for a beatdown.

"Depending on the color of their heart." Jury answered. "Seeds, fingers and a pair of lovers. They're the three things we need to figure out before we walk into danger. They'll be expecting us."

"Exactly. The more we know, the better." Frost said.

"They're a small-time Syndicate, with abooooout... 50 homes under their control? Pretty lackluster. Bigger Syndicates can go up to the hundreds or thousands. The largest can control entire Kingdoms from the shadows." Cer smirked, waving a hand like it was no big deal.

"I'm guessing your brother controlled a large Syndicate." Jury wondered, causing Res to shake her head in a 'no' but to their surprise:

“Bigger than you think... Fingers and hands... Ber, are you ok?”

“Hmm? Yes?” Ber was surprised to hear Res ask. Still, it put a smile on her face and caused her to bear hug her precious, stoic sister from behind. “No one’s going to take my hands again. I’d like to see them try!”

Ber brightened the mood with her enthusiasm, punching the air with her galvanic power.

“What’s a Syndicate to a Moon? Taking hands and fingers sounds like Grandis all over again.” Cer clicked her tongue. “Alright. Enough wasting time! Let’s go ruin some lives – I mean, save some lives!”

“There won’t be a life to ruin after we’re done with them.” Res assured.

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Frost was the first to descend from the cliff. The 30-meter plunge was nothing to her. It was merely one step along a gargantuan staircase for titans like themselves.

Her landing did not create a crater as seen in movies. Frost was smaller than the average person to begin with, and her weight was in line with a normal human’s, therefore resulting in a lackluster landing.

But caused her to appear like a black bird descending from the heavens. Her landing was graceful, and the moment her foot touched the floor, she launched herself in the direction of the village.

*Nav. Do you think the Archivist has an answer? She seems to know a lot but isn’t willing to say anything.*

*“She thoroughly apologizes. It is not something she wishes to discuss.”*

*Then She can keep that apology to herself. I don’t know why she can’t open her mouth. What the fuck is stopping her in the first place?*

*“She will not respond.”*

*I don’t get it. She can tell us some things but the moment it touches anything remotely important she refuses. At this point I’m wondering if she’s relaying our thoughts to the Impuritas, since she can hear me as well. Probably through you, right?*

*“Correct... However... Frost. She asks if that’s what you truly think.”*

Frost, upon reaching the gates alone and finding a brigade of unsuspecting men and women brandishing their weapons as they ‘guarded’ their village, instantly assaulted them with Scrutiny. All were forced to freeze in place, and as she read the colors of their hearts, her fists curled, and her eyes sharpened to a razor’s edge.

“What else am I supposed to think? I’ve never seen her in person, so I don’t know if she’s really with us. For all we know she’s buddied up with the Librarians... Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah. I’m sorry. Nav. Right now I’m questioning every little thing we come across. But what do you want me to do?” Frost rambled aloud, carrying little of who overheard.

*“... point taken. She answers that she’s just afraid.”*

“Afraid when she’s stuck inside of her impenetrable Library.” Frost remarked, but at the same time, she had to believe that there was a reason for it. In the end, she was so sick of all this madness that she inadvertently took out her frustrations on the Archivist, to which she apologized again.

But the anger hadn’t been vented yet, and so, she turned to the soon-to-be punching bags and introduced herself with a voice that caused their bodies to demand they keel over and surrender.

*Status.*

“Side Breakers. Interesting name for a Syndicate. Better than Sleeping Dogs. It’d be in your best interest to cease all resistance.” Frost spoke as she approached one individual.

Because of how weak their RESIST stats were, they could not even conceive of the idea of fleeing. It was as if their fight or flight response had been cleansed.

Their bodies had already declared them as dead.

“Show me your boss of your pathetic organization. Looking around it looks like you’re also in with the finger-snatching business. Believe me, you’ll be losing much more than your fingers if you don’t start moving that mouth. I won’t lie, it’s not fun for me to scare people like this. To demand and break people down. But I doubt you’re that civilized to honor a conversation.”

Frost then placed her palm onto the woman’s face, causing a burst of steam to explode as she began to scream. She had already determined her heart as a foul, and began to extract dozens of strings before she promptly healed her, much to all of their shock.

“So, if you don’t want to be cooked alive and turned into string, then escort me straight to your boss. I won’t kill anyone. I assure you, I’m a... *woman* of my word.”

Frost lied as naturally as she breathed.

These people could not be swayed by money or had the same heart as hers to be considered ‘good’. Power was all they aspired, and so long as they could impose themselves on the weak, then they were happy.

It was unforgivable.