

“Coffee?”

Chronos smiles, as pleasant as ever.

“Actually, could I get a cappuccino? It’s been a long time.”

I turn my head to Morag who’s already mixing it in a brand new barista uniform. A white symbol showing a cartoon version of her face devouring a sun announces the word ‘StarEater’. She hands me a huge white paper cup. The aroma titillates my nostril with nostalgia of an era where I knew what the fuck I was doing with my life.

“Thank you so much,” I tell her.

I then notice that she wrote my name on the cup. Well, sort of. It reads ‘Stive’.

“You know, I really appreciate it,” I tell them. “I can tell you’re putting an effort into this. Enderlith is being a bit hostile right now, so it helps having two people who support me unconditionally. Thanks,” I say with honesty.

“It’s the least I can do, my champion,” Chronos replies warmly. “I promise that my decision will make sense, in time.”

“I believe you, considering it makes sense now as well.”

I sip my cappuccino in silence. There is no need for me to consider my next move: attack the bombers with force. I’m starting to think Krane knew more than he let on when he told me to focus on myself. Perhaps the force path is doomed in the short term but... the proof is in the pudding. I can’t be sure until I test it. Besides, I could learn something useful.

“Any opinion about me picking the Path of Everything? I didn’t ask last time.”

“Paths are best when they suit the users and their needs. In your case, it does not represent who you are but who you aim to become, and yet I find it also matches your actions so far. Rather than, say, blindly trying to fight an assassin you have no hope of defeating, you have been exploring all of your options to find a way forward. You are trying a little bit of everything to see what sticks. This is already the path of everything in its, shall we say, precursor form. So yes, the path matches you well and I approve.”

I am a bit surprised.

“What happened to cryptic, noncommittal remarks?”

“Those only concern the world. We can talk about you freely.”

“I wouldn’t impose such a thing upon my two most faithful supporters,” I joke. “Well!”

I slap my knees.

“Thanks for the coffee, best cappuccino I ever had.”

I make my way to my notes, noticing that there is a bit more ash on top of my growing pile of corpses. I guess I was vaporized for good, just like with the shield. Live fast, die hard and leave no bodies, that’s my motto. I sit down and write that I can convince Deza by telling her she will be passed over for promotion on the second day of the year between the first and second hours which is practically the middle of the ‘night’.

Fuck I’m so glad I never had a career in corporate. Abyss-born aberrations trying to gnaw my face off is one thing, but office politics? The horror.

Next step is to purchase skills. I had 4711 points at the end of the ‘Swole Steve’ loop and I got 41 last one, for a total of 4752. I will be going into the bowels of the station, so I should get the stealth skill now even though I will be trying the force route.

[Disguise presence. [Knowledge] [Tier 2] cost: 300. Additional requirements: first physical awakening (scales with mana control and soul awakening).

Knowledge adds a new tome to your soul book.

This skill allows you to hide your presence with mana and soul control. Complete understanding of the skill helps with distracting observers and glitching automatic systems.]

I read the book since time is not an issue, although I cannot practice here. The techniques listed inside really cover the basics well starting with breathing exercises and mana manipulation. Later chapters go into details I’m not sure I understand, but apparently it’s possible to mimic other entities’ mana signature with a lot of practice. Most of the basics just teach people how to close themselves, something that is apparently unintuitive. I know meditation helps with absorbing the world energies. I didn’t know people emit and absorb mana passively as well. There is even a soul section! Interesting. I can’t wait to practice.

My next purchase is arcane locksmithing.

[Archaic arcane locksmithing. [Knowledge] [Tier 2] cost: 300. Additional requirements: first physical awakening (scales with mana perception and soul awakening, musical knowledge).

Knowledge adds a new tome to your soul book.

This skill allows you to decipher and unlock security measures around Enderlith that use a tonal lock. A song key is required to operate locks though expert users may bypass it.]

I’m sure it will prove useful, and there is something about the idea of ‘Song Keys’ that fascinates me. The book itself goes into great detail. As far as I understand, the station’s ‘tonal’ locks emit a sort of signature song that must be transposed and played back. I will need to acquire a song key for this. And an actual lock to practice.

For my last purchase, I hesitate though not for too long.

I'm going to have to get good at fighting. Right now I could probably wallop a whole group of Earth people with just my awakening and a staff. Provided they were a little drunk, I guess. I'm definitely still a coughing baby when it comes to the Enderlithian power scale. I have to start sometime, and this loop should be a good one. It should also help with practicing and learning.

'Faint Close Quarter Predisposition [Augmentation] [Tier 2]: Cost: 1000 Requirements: none.'

Augmentations change you on a fundamental level, regardless of when.

This skill makes you unnaturally talented at anything related to close quarter combat.'

I purchase it. I'll just consider this an investment. This still leaves me with a comfortable 3111 points. Now though, I realize I have a need for something unplanned.

It's true that I have notes here, reminders of what I have done and the paths I could explore. There are codes, there is the secret that Krane shared so he would recognize me. Now I add the piece of information shared by Deza. But it would be much, much simpler to have it with me. There is an Eidetic memory skill which would be invaluable for me to function. Unfortunately, it costs 2000 qualia points and if I have to be honest, I'm a bit iffy about it. My memories of the aberration and the call of the abyss have faded with time so now I don't think about them as much, but if it remained fresh in my mind forever, I think I might just, well, not go fully insane, but certainly not do well. And I have a much better option anyway.

'Unsealed Soul Book. [Knowledge] [Tier 2] Cost: 100. Additional requirement:: active soul book.

Knowledge adds a new tome to your soul book.

Technically not knowledge, this skill allows you to edit and add pages to your soul book.'

"Hey I think you can remove the knowledge reference line in the future? I got it now" I tell Chronos.

"I assent."

I consider just copying everything, but then I remember: this place doesn't exactly exist per se. So I just grab my cleaner notes and shove them in the soul book. The sheets of paper obligingly turn ethereal after I grab them. I look at the final page, which is also a bit of a to do list.

Short-term purpose: prevent the explosion

Next attempt: power

If it fails: make sure I learn from Kimera the Fleshcrafter.

Possible side objectives:

Enlist with the Bleak Hounds mercenaries like Xan suggested if I need a break from flesh crafting.

Learn more about the assassin and who is after me.
Find a trainer for my star affinity.
Continue staff training with Xan.

Long-term objectives:

Learn more about the Prosperity Cartel and generally the underground
Research the abyss
Save Kaysari
Find a way to get a lot of money at once just in case.
Explore the depths of Enderlith.
Find a way to defeat Vestalia in a courtroom

Alright that should cover all of this for now. I give the list of acquired skills one last look.

Steve Prentiss.

Qualia points available: 3011

Physical awakening: first stage
Mage tradition: Demetron's soul magic.
Soul awakening: third stage

Time Avatar traits:

Perfect loop (time)
Perfect soul (time)
Reset (time)

Avatar language acquisition (neutral)

Native So-Sah (neutral)
Native Kei-Sah (neutral)
Basic Ten-Sah (neutral)

Art of the Awakening:

Advanced three gates meditation method
Advanced training knowledge
Basic Soul Syphon
Path of Everything

Art of the Soul

Advanced telepath
Advanced locus manipulation
Adept mass communication
Advanced soul sweep
Unsealed soul book

Art of the Warrior.

Basic Defender Operator

Basic staff: Art of the Ape
Basic squad tactics (com specialist)
Adept mass communication
Faint Close Quarter Predisposition

Art of the Thief.
Archaic Arcane Locksmithing (neophyte)
Disguise presence (neophyte)

As I stand, I look at Chronos.

“You know you want to try it,” he says.

I do. I really do, and it’s not like I can hide anything from them. I try to go through a few of the staff forms Xan taught me, finding that my body answers strangely here. It’s as if I went from form to form without the flowing movement in between.

“I don’t really have a body here, do I?”

“That is why you cannot use this space to train. The rules prevent me from altering it in your favor,” Chronos says.

Morag lifts a little scoreboard, the kind used in gymnastics and ice skating competitions. It reads ‘6’.

“You know you’re capable of a lot of sass for someone who almost never speaks.”

“That is why I do not speak,” she rasped. “Imagine if I did.”

“Yes. Imagine that. Alright. Well, last attempt. See you on the other side.”

“Until next time,” Chronos adds, obviously amused.

This is not my flat.

Taking a single step towards the security panel gives me a deep feeling of wrongness to the point I stop, afraid I’m about to catch a drone bullet through the cerebellum, but no. It’s just that the way I walk just doesn’t make sense.

“Huh.”

Placing the cup on the table becomes a listing of all the ways I’m not moving correctly. I find myself adjusting my stance and traipsing around the room trying to correct myself. That’s probably a side effect of the close quarter predisposition now that I think about it. I’m getting sidetracked.

“Right. The assassin.”

Then it's back to my death avoidance routine. After I'm done and I got clothes and my Defender, I call Krane who easily accepts my story. Deza doesn't pick up so I leave her a message even though I don't really intend to have her help, but just in case the plan succeeds. I manage to hide from the assassin and his drones on the way out, but this time I keep the datasheet with access to my bank account. I find a hotel in a much less reputable part of town at only a fraction of a credit a night. Then, it's time to learn the skills I purchased.

Disguise presence is the easiest to pick. The first step is basically breathing exercises designed to feel the flow of mana around me. Using my soul sense as a crutch, I manage to recognize the mana influx. It helps that Enderlith itself is chock full with energy, so it's like learning how to perceive wind on a Scottish island really. I practice for part of the night until my mind tires and I need a lie down. I so wish Chronos had dragged me out of my room after I grabbed the tea bag, so I could start every loop with a few pinches of happiness.

Right, enough wasting time; it's a precious resource. For my next trick, I'm going to need a song key. And I immediately hit a snag. They're not for sale. Anywhere.

“I'm an idiot.”

Of course something that is used to access the bowels of the station would be regulated. Or are they? There has to be a way to get them. Ok, more research, I check the forums I'm more familiar with and I realize something interesting: it's not that there is no supply of it. There is no *demand* for it. Very few people know what it even is. I finally find a mention in the Explorator Guild's domain. Someone asked for a song key and someone else suggested just checking golem supplies closets.

“I'm going to crime,” I bemoan. “Again.”

I will not get a better opportunity than now with most people distracted. I lock my door and step outside, feeling this strange disconnect between how I learned to move and what those new instincts tell me to do. The place I hid in is yet another Between district, its apartments spread across the crystal floor and climbing on the wall as shell accretions on some ancient hull. The lights have dimmed. It smells vaguely of trash and my soul sense only picks the slow radiance of quiescent souls resting after a day of worry. Except that couple fucking in the distance over there. Lucky bastards. Alright, the maintenance access should be to the side since everything is standardized. Someone left dumpsters against the wall which is against regulations and forces me to push away the stinky bins in as silent a way as I can — don't want to wake the innocents on my desperate quest. The maintenance access code is always the same. I'm in. Ok, maintenance closet.

I walk around a bit. I've never really explored this sort of place before. This is golem territory. Those — I am sorry to say — neckless potato people do need a lot of free space. I see rooms filled with cables, spare bulbs, crystals, metal items, crystal items and in general a full panoply of tools and spare parts I could not hope to identify all in unlabelled, perfectly ordered rows. This is going to take a while.

After a while I feel the strange presence of a faint soul a few corridors away. Well, not exactly a soul but the empty shell of one. I recognize it as one of the flesh golems.

What if I... just ask?

Fuck it, I just started the loop anyway. I step out to find the swarthy, neckless creature staring at me from one of the multiple eyes on and below its face. For a certain definition of face.

“May I help you, sir?”

Its voice reminds of a butler’s, though slightly gravelly. It makes me want to call it Jarvis but since I am an adult, I refrain.

“Hello, yes. I was wondering if I could acquire or purchase a song key from you? For training purposes.”

The golem pauses and I am made to wonder exactly how their mind works. I find it a bit hard to read the equivalent of a giant walnut with eyes.

“There is no arrangement with any local authorities regulating the possession and distribution of song keys, sir. As this is an unusual request, and we have a sufficient amount available, I will grant you one.”

Huh. That easy? For once? Could my luck be turning around? The golem ambles on to a separate room where he picks up a disk with thin piano key–like branches, then after it’s determined I no longer need its help, it moves away with a polite goodbye. I’m starting to think that the golems don’t really care that much about who goes where. Returning to the entrance, I open the number pad to reach the tonal lock behind, then take out my soul book. The fact I already know the numerical code should help.

The instructions are rather simple though the exercise itself can be complicated. Arcane locksmithing stands at the crossroad of music and math. Well, a lot of music is actually math. It’s all quite fascinating, really.

I’m getting sidetracked.

Opening a tonal lock requires listening to it, then transposing the song via a type of matrix-like cipher and then playing it back by pushing the appropriate keys. There is a basic cipher that works for all low-level access which is most of the surface apparently, so I will be using that one.

“Here goes nothing.”

I press the key. A faint music emerges, one that pervades my soul too with a feeling of serenity, the chime of a child’s melody designed to bring comfort. It’s an honest song, a pure call without fluff and fanfare, hauntingly familiar like a half-remembered memory. I am so

distracted that I forget to do anything, and yet it doesn't matter. The song still lives in my head.

I hum it just for the pleasure of it. The pale imitation of the real deal makes me feel a little sad, but then, it's fine. The tonal lock blinks slowly as it still awaits my answer. With slow purpose, I transcribe the answer until I'm reasonably sure I have it. Replaying it with the keys is a slow and awkward affair because I'm not too familiar with them yet. I make a mistake. The lock beeps sadly before returning to standby mode.

I stand waiting for an alarm to blare or for the lock to, well, lock me out. It doesn't happen.

"Alright."

I practice the song key until I'm familiar enough to play Lettre a Elise, then since I'm introducing Enderlith to botched Beethoven anyway, I add the Ode to Joy. The soul key is really just a pocket piano, or maybe a Mbira. I grin as the slightly muffled sound echoes in my soul, quite literally. How can the flesh golems even produce such a sound while missing a soul themselves? No, how can a mechanical lock produce a sound that resonates with the soul? Another Enderlith mystery to add to the pile. After I play the deciphered music, I feel like something is wrong. The melody doesn't quite work out. I realize I made a mistake mid-transcription. A quick correction later and I'm ready to try again. I listen to the gate with impatience and trepidation, then it's my turn. I don't think I've been this nervous with an instrument since my hiring audition five... actually it's probably close to seven years ago. My fingers fly awkwardly over the instrument and yet the music flows as if free of my fumbling anxiety, then the lock plays the two melodies superimposed in a harmony a part of me had been longing for. With a last click, the door unlocks.

I've done it. I don't know why it makes me so happy for a while and then I realize it. It might have been with the tiniest of kalimba, and only as a means to an end, but for the first time since coming to this place, I have performed music. On an instrument. It's been... far too long. I was never a genius cellist but only now do I realize how much I've been missing this.

"Dammit."

It's my fault. Nothing was stopping me from buying an instrument before. Nothing was preventing me from doing music. I guess I'm still seeing Enderlith as something that's my responsibility to unpack. I guess I accepted that I'm a local now. I just didn't think about rebuilding a life here yet. Idly, I pluck the sound key a few times, replaying the melody that now dwells at the back of my soul to warm it until later when another song will inevitably chase it away. This is... nice. The district is still a pungent mess of crystal and concrete. I'm still hopelessly weak, but... this is nice. This is really nice. I can work with that, with music.

After a while I decide that I've played enough. Returning to my dingy hotel room, I fall asleep only to wake up to a call from Krane.

"I will be free in two days or so. What's the plan?"

“Do you have any mercenary contacts you could call upon? We’re going to need reinforcements if we are to stop the terrorists.”

“I do, but they will be very expensive. Most respectable outfits will have been contracted for security jobs because of the Year of Judgment. Unless you are sitting on a large pile of money...”

“I have twenty thousand credits on this bank account.”

“That is a large pile of money.”

We pause and I realize I have yet fallen for blind optimism. I don’t have a pile of money. The bank does.

“I’m not sure if all of it is usable though. We will need the mercenaries for, let’s say, two weeks? We will all be going into the Depths. Experience with bombs preferred. I can’t think of anything else.”

“Do you know where we are going?”

“You said their base was in the Spider District.”

“That... complicates matters.”

“How so?”

Krane pauses, hesitating.

“Look, I will explain everything after I have considered all of our options. Do you trust me enough to send me the money?”

“Of course. Whatever I can.”

“Then good. Do so, and we will coordinate further.”

“I’m afraid 5000 is all we can transfer at this moment,” the polished banker informs me.

This is a very small branch, one that would not be a surprise in a Renaissance era movie from the armored guard to the fantastic uniform on the old banker. His long beard is something too. The counter is made out of old and pitted wood which I understand to be a power play with the cost of the material around here. I stay polite, of course. Not just because it’s my first instinct but also because the banker has not yet completed the transaction.

“I see. May I ask why?”

“We have received an injunction from the Temple of Law. There appears to be a claim that the money in question comes from a loan that was contracted illegally. As such, we can only allow 25% of the total amount at the time of the injunction to be withdrawn and used.”

He makes a placating gesture.

“I understand that this situation must be frustrating. This is, after all, your money. Unfortunately, our hands are tied. We must comply with Law’s rules regardless of the merit of the accusations against you.”

“I see.”

“Now sir, would you like to make the transfer?”

“I would still do so, yes, to the maximum amount allowed.”

“Of course, if you would please sign here...”

I go through the proceedings, feeling the gaze of the massive bank guard on my back. It makes me want to turn around so I can keep him at the edge of my field of vision, but this serves no purpose. I’m not here to fight.

“Very well sir. If I may tell you two more things?” the banker adds with a mellifluous tone that must absolutely be the herald of bad news.

“By all means.”

The old banker smiles thinly.

“If a large transfer is made, Law might take it as a sign that the accusations against you have merit, thus demanding that we lock the account in the future.”

“Noted.”

So no transfer back. Not that I wanted to anyway.

“And second, Law requested that we notify them should you make a withdrawal in person. Now, our rules compel me to contact them, but this is my tea break...”

Ah, you canny old man.

“I see. I appreciate the warning,” I respectfully reply.

“You’re more than welcome, citizen Prentiss. We hope to continue doing business in the future.”

I leave at a good pace just in case. This District is dedicated to banks and administrative centers so the buildings are taller, the place cleaner while green vines crawl over the crystal

of the walls, replacing poor dwellings. I find a cafe overlooking the bank a hundred meters or so away. I grab breakfast for a quarter of a credit on the chip.

It takes twenty minutes for the first drone to appear. I leave the datasheet on the table. Instead of attempting the train, I make my way to a maintenance access I open using the song key for practice. This time the tune is slightly different though the cipher remains the same, and the lock gives way after only a few minutes of fiddling. I don't think the assassin will easily find me again but just in case, I think I have an idea.

The Depths Guild's favored gate is guarded by a garrison district, a bit like the place where Xan brought me to get my affinities checked but this one is a Templar base. I assume their metal-encased goons can't just pop into existence ex-nihilo so there must be some training center where they may discard their doubts, fears, and higher brain functions. While the garrison itself is restricted space, the gate itself has been left mostly unguarded. I use soul perception to dodge a few patrols just in case, then I find the massive crystal pane at the end of a corridor wide enough to accommodate a small plane. The song, this time, is longer though just as eerily beautiful. I frown and open my soul book.

'More advanced security measures will sing several musical phrases, each one requiring a different cipher.'

Unfortunately, there are no indications as to which cipher it would be. Fortunately, the book contains the two dozen typical ciphers classified by frequency of use. I don't know who wrote this skill book but I wish I could kiss them. Or at the very least, offer them tea. At first, I fear I might be stuck in front of the gate for hours while I try every different permutations but it turns out that the wrong ciphers make an atonal mess of the melody after only a few notes. There is nothing wrong with atonal melodies, of course — no offense to postmodern music — it's just that the locks favor very simple, almost childish tunes so catchy that I find myself humming them when I get distracted. After only three switches I find the cipher for the first part of the song, then it only takes two attempts to identify the second one. A treacherous sense of pride fills my heart when the lock sings the new harmony back at me. Almost as if getting a perfect soul and practicing music for eighteen years made someone good at soul music stuff. Shocking.

The gate quietly whirs open. Beyond that is a dark district dimly lit by bioluminescent mushrooms. The air smells of must and abandon, colder and wetter than the surface. Most of the buildings I can see are dome dwellings made of sandstone of a beige color that speaks of a blinding light and air warped by heat, but as I move my fingers against its coarse surface, I can only feel the cold. This is a dead place. One day, people who are now bone and dust cut this stone and transported it here at astronomical price. They rebuilt their lives at the center of civilization with hopes and dreams and the feeling of having made it. Now they're gone. That stone saw the last of its sunlight eons ago. It has since been condemned to the dark until it crumbles to nothing, just like much of the station. This district is now a den of marginalized warriors and exiles.

A creature yelps in the far distance.

Ah, the shallow Depths. I have kind of missed it.

It doesn't take long for me to find a suitable abandoned dwelling with a secured door and an escape path at the back. Whatever furniture it might have had is gone, either destroyed or looted. After setting up a basic camp with the supplies I purchased for the expedition, I spend the day practicing with a drive I didn't know I had. I think Xan's ethics and the excitement that comes with new stuff helps me. Going through the forms of the Art of the Ape with a cheap staff really shows me where my balance is slightly wrong, or when I overextend just a bit too much leaving me open to counters. I even manage to fix a persistent flaw I was plagued by where I would lower my guard too early on long form strikes. Soul syphon allows me to really make the most out of my training time. The most interesting thing is, the Depths have slightly more energy to work with, and fewer people who draw on it. That means I progress even faster. And for a few hours, I believe I am a genius for exiling my arse to the suburbs. Until reality comes knocking.

"Shit!"

I jump when there is a rasp on the door. A pale humanoid face considers me through the window, or rather, it cannot because its eyes are closed and clearly atrophied. The creature is blind. Given the distance between the head and the door, it must be close to three meters high. Thick hair braided with bone ornaments clink softly in the silence.

A thin arm goes through the gate and I curse myself for wasting the loop like an idiot. What's the point of dodging the assassin if I end up as a cannibalistic troglodyte stew? Well played, Steve.

But against all odds, the intruding arm ends with a cup. A finely carved stone cup decorated with geometric shapes. The intruder gently taps it against the wall. I get a good look at its contents: dry mushroom shavings.

The mug is aimed at the water currently boiling in the corner of my empty room.

"You want hot water?" I ask in my most polite Kei-Sah.

The creature's second hand follows the first, dangling a furry creature I recognize as a raton, an invasive species known for eating furniture.

"A trade?"

Well it only seems fair. I open the gate and am subsequently left uneaten which is a great start. I soon realize that my guest is a she — and I have been quite rude so far — from the fact she wears very little and all of it is ornamental. It would have been nice if she didn't look like Gollum's evolved and financially successful cousin. At least she smells nice.

My guest clicks and grunts at me while I pour her a nice mushroom cuppa, feeling a rising sense of excitement. She is speaking in a depth tongue then? If there is a tongue then I can learn it! Time to get a proper introduction.

“Steve,” I say, bumping my chest.

“Steef?”

“Yes! And you?”

I hear the following series of grunted clicks and decide to just go ahead and think of her as Martha.

Over the next two days, I have a pleasant time training and meeting the locals. Martha is a little shy but another native who's persuaded carpets are a Patrician ploy to sell shoes shares his Endernet connection with me so I can coordinate with Krane without returning to civilization, such as it is. I get some nice protein from Martha at regular intervals in exchange for the gift of warm water. On the last day before the appointed meeting, I manage to understand that she asks my hand in marriage, which I must sadly decline. I do leave her my water heater as a gesture of my heartfelt appreciation which she graciously accepts. I am even accompanied back to the gate. I think, if I ever need a year away from everything and everyone, that the Depths would be a great spot. Not for the marriage thing though. I'm not ready to commit to a relationship just yet.

I haven't seen such bright lights in days. It feels strange to hear so many voices again, even after such a short period. It makes me wonder how Xan kept me sane throughout the last weeks of training. Voices echo along the length of the crystal walls though, and I feel a large number of souls in the distance. This is as expected. The argument, however, is not. Outside I find Krane in armor with a massive tower shield standing next to a very tall, well, I will call him a lion-headed man with a runner's build at the front of a messy group of around 50 fighters wearing a wide variety of gear. The only unifying factor among them is the glyph on their armbands. Cobbled hand carts show where supplies are stored.

I suppose, even 5000 credits cannot always afford the best. They feel fine though, the large core of them at the third awakening. They warily eye the three templars opposing their march. One of the officers turns to see me and I read hesitation in his posture.

“What's the meaning of this?” I ask as I approach.

“Citizen, do you have a reason to interrupt our investigation?”

“Yes, I'd like to know why you're standing in the way of my contractors. Is there some sort of problem?” I ask.

Krane blinks when he spots me. A thoughtful expression goes over his ruddy features. He grips his broken horn with scarred fingers.

“As I was telling your... contractors, the passage is sealed.”

“I am aware. What it does not explain is why you are standing in their way.”

“The Depths guilds forbids access without a clearance token. Do you happen to have one, citizen?”

“As you can see we are not the Depths guild, therefore their regulations are of no concern to us. I cannot force you or them to open the seal, however getting into the Depths is not against the law. You have no legal grounds to stop my friends here so kindly step aside.”

One of the three guards leans in. Silent communication must occur, because the leader finally turns his attention to me.

“You are technically correct.”

“Excellent. Don’t worry about the delay. I can’t expect law enforcement personnel to know or understand their own laws. Unreasonable request, that.”

Krane coughs in his elbow. The guards stand to the side with some degree of reluctance. I return to the lock feeling strangely giddy, the armories of the Depths guild acting as a futile deterrent over the gate. I almost expect the lock to create a new, more complicated encryption to ruin my vibes. It does not happen. The lingering presence of over fifty curious souls at my back forces me to take a few deep breaths before I play the melody back to the tonal lock. After singing the new arrangement, it obligingly opens.

“I thought only golems could do that?” the lion man whispers.

The Depths beckon.

I cast one last gaze towards the three guards who’d followed us there. They watch us leave like statues, perhaps reporting the incident to their superiors. With the blessing of bureaucratic inefficiency, they’ll send someone after us within the next financial quarter.

The gates close.

We only move past the next district gate before the mercenary captain calls for a halt. Krane introduces the lion man as Captain Sempiternus

“A group of criminals is currently hiding in the Spider district. They are in possession of a soul bomb they intend to detonate under Elysium. We need to find the base and interrupt them, or safely retreat should they prove too strong. This isn’t a suicide mission.”

“So you don’t know about the opposition?” Sempiternus asks with a very flat expression.
“Numbers? Defenses?”

I can feel his soul darkening. Yeah I’m not very sure about it either.

“I know they are dangerous enough to kill a ten people-strong Great Crimes investigation team. I also got a report that they have two avatars, possibly more.”

Sempiternus winces, which reveals sharp teeth and would be more intimidating if I didn’t share his worries.

“Alright. And in the Spider district no less. Is there any specific reason as to why we cannot ambush them on their way to Elysium’s under districts?”

“They will travel with the soul bomb already armed. If they get attacked and start losing, they will trigger it.”

“But not in their base?”

“I cannot be sure, but I doubt it.”

“And why do you doubt it?” Sempiternus asks with what I would say is just a little hostility.

I guess he’s upset about the news. Before I can say anything though, Krane crosses his not inconsiderable arms over his wardrobe-sized chest. This gives me all the authority I need to answer.

“Because if the group contains at least two avatars, then they are on a timer and will want to waste as little time as possible. Their target being Elysium it’s not exactly moving around so they can trigger the attack whenever they want, which means they will very likely move immediately after they’re done readying the bomb.”

“Which will be when?”

“This is unclear, but probably around the end of the month.”

“And you know this how?”

“That’s confidential.”

The lion man rolls his eyes.

“Come on,” Sempiternus says. “I know you have someone on the inside. No way to know all of this without a spy. You can tell us more.”

“That is all I can tell you, I’m afraid.”

“Listen —”

“That is all I can tell you, good sir,” I insist as politely as I can.

Krane clears his throat.

“You signed the contract,” he drily reminds the lion man.

The mercenary captain closes his eyes.

In the distance, a guttural screech pierces the silence. He jumps.

“Oh don’t mind her, it’s just Martha,” I inform him.

His glare fails to cow me.

“I’m going to regret this,” he finally decides. “Let’s go.”