

I have to say the barracks here are much nicer than I anticipated. I suppose generational wealth builds up over the eons, so I do my best not to gawp like an idiot at all the fancy wall decorations on soft wood panels I spot on the way. Very neat and proper, I like it. The attendant rushes down the corridor without looking back and I realize I would have struggled to follow before the awakening but now, everything is easier. I move faster, I can anticipate other people's gestures more easily just because I can see them move more easily. It all compounds to making everything better and easier. I'm almost disappointed when we turn into a large office. False sunlight falls from a carved stone ceiling, snaking between roots of a tree that looks alive as far as I can tell. The gentle light centers on a table covered in reports. A small bunk bed lies open near the back wall, its sheets messy.

The man who stands in front of the table with bloodshot eyes gulps a cup of something that resembles coffee. He looks like a scarred old man with twin black horns looping back from his forehead and over his scalp. One of the horns is broken halfway. Scars cover half of his virile face. Man's got a chin that could flatten a bearing ball and a perpetual scowl.

He just looks so sad.

"Hello," he greets.

The attendant flees. The man raises a hand to ask me to wait which shows he's missing a finger. He downs whatever excitant he's holding then drops the ceramic cup on top of a pile of equally stained ceramic cups. His soul is entirely closed to me which implies he's notably stronger than the bugged-out appearance would suggest.

"You are... Steve. Soul-awakened gate guardian, yes. Was there something you wanted?"

He blinked. Slowly.

"I would like information on the explosion that killed the Law and Might avatars. I'd like to have the details, the official ones. Not the rumors."

I can see he's going to refuse.

"Look, you are Krane, the Avatar of Redemption so maybe you have a way to check if someone is being sincere or not."

"I do not," he replies with a raised brow. "In fact."

"... but I promise I want to help Enderlith."

"Hmmm."

He moves around the table. I notice he's only marginally taller than me which isn't much here, but he's built like a brick shithouse under that uniform. A brick shithouse that stole a smaller brick shithouse's lunch money. Absolute unit of a fucker.

"I can tell you are genuine, and yet..."

“The harm’s done so... no more harm, right? Can’t explode the station a second time,” I argue.

Krane’s gaze grows distant.

“By all the gods, I hope not. But yes, your request is a strange one yet I feel no malice, and... I doubt you have the power to destroy us, with all due respect.”

“I wouldn’t even if I did.”

“What is it you are trying to achieve?”

I hesitate. If I had a way to go back in time by five minutes, I could blunder my way to success but alas, I cannot. If I fail then I fail for this loop, not to mention there is no guarantee I’ll succeed again. The second time I went to Mercy’s temple, I failed to get my roommate’s trust because of the way I was dressed and spoke. That means, I’m unwilling to take too many risks and giving someone else information on what I can do is a risk. Chronos swears I’m immortal and my soul cannot be destroyed but that doesn’t mean I can’t suffer, or be temporarily broken. It doesn’t mean I don’t get fatigue. I can’t afford to fuck this up too much.

“I... cannot tell you. You wouldn’t believe me anyway.”

“Perhaps I would.”

He shrugs.

“If I’m going to waste time helping you for some unknown cause, the least you can do is return the favor.”

He raises both hands in anticipation of my protests, which weren’t coming but hey.

“Now I am not belittling your significant contribution to our struggle. I merely want proof that you really care.”

He extends a hand.

“We have flesh crafters in our raiding parties, some of whom are rather clueless when it comes to defending themselves.”

He shudders.

“Unlike others. In any case, I will request that you sacrifice your Defender. Offer me the wand, and I will satisfy your request.”

I place my hand on the silvery guard. I like the Defender, but I am being realistic if I say it wouldn’t save me. Probably. So with deliberate gestures, I drop it on the table.

“Good,” Krane says, looking at the weapon. “Yes, very good.”

“Can I get the information? You can send me a package.”

“What?”

He blinks.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary. I know what happened.”

He grabs the wand.

“In more normal times, I would need you to sign this over to me or risk getting a manufactorium hit squad on my ass, but they waived the ownership transfer requirements so... In any case.”

The sentence is interrupted by a long yawn.

“Where was I? Oh yes. First of all, we don’t know if Might died there. There are no records of Might’s avatar showing up so we are still uncertain as to their fate, however we know Harmony and Deceit perished there too.”

He glances up.

“Those are the diplomatic and intelligence avatars, respectively.”

“Ok. Where was the bomb placed?”

Krane frowns. He grabs a datasheet and taps a few fingers at a quick staccato. A moment later, the sheet blinks and I’m looking at blueprints.

“The explosion was 800 paces core-bound, directly under the ceremony’s location. It wasn’t secured because, well, it was past a reinforced piece of the station’s armature and shouldn’t have been a vulnerability at all.”

“Do we know how the explosion could damage the station that much? Everyone seems to say it shouldn’t have been impossible.”

Krane gives me a measuring look before shrugging, his massive shoulders moving his robes on the Richter scale.

“What do you know about soul bombs?”

“Fuckall.”

There is a sort of shift in his soul, one I cannot read beyond the ice of his poker face.

“Soul detonations are an ancient and forbidden technique that defiles an individual’s very essence for impossibly destructive results. We believe this is the only way to create an explosion that can damage the material that makes up Enderlith’s structure. Even then, it should have been much more contained. I am not sure what more to tell you.”

“Well...”

I have a location and a date. What else would I need?

“What would a soul bomb even look like?” I finally ask.

This time, there is a long pause.

“I am not sure, but it would be fairly large for this sort of damage. Car-sized at least.”

I have seen hover cars as large as small planes here so it doesn’t mean much. Wouldn’t fit in a trunk though, at least, so there is that.

“I see.”

“I will be honest, Steve. You sound as if you could do something about it. Can you go back in time or something?”

Huh.

“Huh. You can,” Krane asserts.

I suppose I’m not exactly being subtle. Congrats, fucking Steve. Found out after all of two minutes. Richard III I am not. At least I messed up with the officially recognized avatar of redemption, someone who has minimal risks of betraying my trust.

“Or at least, you believe you can. The powers the gods grant are... beyond understanding. Beyond what makes sense, so, maybe, just, maybe...”

For the first time since we met, the mantle of control he has over his soul cracks and a burst of emotions so concentrated I flinch explodes out, like a volcano finally cracking its basalt shell. The eruption is intense, monstrously so. There is guilt, despair, and powerless anger at the back but the emotion dominating his mental landscape is one he clearly doesn’t know how to handle.

It’s hope.

“No, no, but that would mean... Could it be? You must be an avatar of great power, but... No. No one must find out, just in case.”

He looks up. I feel a little embarrassed seeing the tears in his eyes rolling over the scar tissue of his cheeks. It feels voyeuristic, like I haven’t earned the right to watch this happen.

“No one else can know, just in case. Maybe you are crazy. Maybe we both are. Listen, because this is important. The explosion was probably the work of another avatar. A mighty one, to find a soul bomb of a power never seen before.”

He gives me a pointed glare.

“So if you can go back in time, don’t go at it alone. Hypothetically.”

“I’m very far from doing anything alone. Say, hypothetically, if I were to try and convince you that I’m a time traveller, what would I say?”

I can’t believe I’m getting an ally straight away. Obviously I can’t accomplish anything by myself just yet, so getting friends would have become a priority down the line. Having one now could make a world of difference.

“You would call my number right away. My home number. I’ll write it on a piece of paper. Make sure you remember it. Mention that you know something happened in Tulku.”

“Something... happened in Tulku?”

“Yes, and I will not tell you what. I am the Avatar of Redemption. I’ll let you guess what made this redemption... desirable. Albeit undeserved.”

His eyes narrow.

“You should probably keep the time traveler thing to yourself.”

“It’s my bad, I intended to but...”

“But you asked all the questions one after the other without misdirection, expecting that I wouldn’t infer your goal? Are you familiar with the concept of deception?” he asks with impatience.

“Look, I’m really new at this.”

“So you haven’t used your powers yet?”

I do not reply.

“That’s a yes.”

It’s actually a no but if I have to practice deception, might as well start with something easy.

“So I need to memorize the number and mention Tulku. Anything else?”

“I assure you that it should be enough to at least get my attention. Perhaps I will share more if this works.”

He sighs, then returns to his desk. His massive mangled hands fall on the table with a light thump. They make the table look small.

“Now you are making me hope. How cruel of you. I have to tell you now, that things are not going so well.”

He shuffles the papers a bit. As an afterthought, he remembers to write his number down.

“We are holding the line and killing those creatures by the thousands every day, but they evolve too, and there is no end to their number. Deeper in the core, there are entire tribal nations that never saw the light of our star. The traditionalists on the other side have refused to coordinate with us. The far tip of the station doesn’t have our might. If they fall, millions more will join the ranks for the mutated. I fear time is against us.”

“There are rumors that they are hive creatures.”

He grunts.

“You have soul perception. You know they are hive creatures bound together by *something*. Right now, we have no way to look for that source. They are simply too numerous.”

He looks up.

“Perhaps something you might help with.”

“Preventing the explosion should be my first priority.”

“Hypothetically.”

“Yeah.”

He smiles, then his gaze falls on the stack of paper.

“Then perhaps this isn’t meaningless. Very well. Oh, and catch.”

I grab the Defender midair. He’s returned it.

“I lied. None of the fleshcrafters would perform better with a piddly stun wand. I have seen them fight and they are nasty. Now go. And... good luck.”

“To both of us.”

The days merge into weeks and the weeks, into months, an exhausting contest of wills that knows no truce. There are no nights, holidays, or celebrations here, only the ceaseless probes at our defenses. Sometimes I start believing we might win but then another district falls, or we learn of the death of yet another irreplaceable Elder. Even the Sallurians

approach the conflict with a sort of grim determination that means, in their culture, that we're pretty much done for. As a foot soldier in this war, I don't know what's going on. Krane has kept dialogue to a minimum, only sending me a few pictures of soul bombs taken from some dusty archives. They look more like elaborate research stations built around a sarcophagus than bombs to me but what do I know? In the eighth month, something changes.

The mood has been tense for hours. In front of the gate, Sallurians and city guards maintain a death grip on their cold weapons and flamethrowers. I'm not needed because this is a border district and anyone who could have been evacuated has been gone for a long time now. Sometimes, we hear the tortured shrieks of large claws scraping the outer crystal. People jump, reposition and then... nothing. Pressure is still mounting. I feel it in my soul, like a hot pinprick at the back of my neck. Something is coming. Suddenly, consternation shakes our ranks. Datapads are exchanged faster than I can follow. By my side, Vargo whispers, bubbling with dark excitement. I guess, after all this time, any news of something different brings a note of hope.

"Hyperspace signatures, and many of them. The docks are gearing up. It's going to land very close too."

She stops.

"You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

I guess I am a transparent book.

"Hyperspace signatures are the marks of voidships. Those are massive constructs capable of bridging star systems. They require a massively powerful team of awakened to operate so, each one is also a warship. I assume you saw the *Fortuna*?"

Wait a moment.

"That gaudy yacht we always fly by?"

"That's the one. The *Fortuna* is the smallest and most harmless of her kind."

Wasn't that thing like two kilometers long? Bloody hell.

"Void ships can carry smaller ones in their trail. You get one of those, rookie, and you're set for life."

I give her a dubious glance.

"Sure, let me just save a few more months of my magnificent pay aye?"

She snorts.

“So is it a good thing? Because I’m not feeling a good thing coming,” I reply.

“You bad buoy. Don’t jinx it.”

Space is breached.

We all feel it. We all look up towards the surface of the station through kilometers of ki-infused crystal, through the beating hearts of thousands of beings. We do not feel space break but we feel what comes through. It wants to be seen and acknowledged. It could be sneaky and hide, but it elects not to. It does not need to. The red-hot prick on the back of my neck turns into a vice drilling in my head. I must have fallen to my knees at some point. I think I’m also screaming. Everyone is. He has come.

WAR.

The skin of Enderlith rumbles with impacts. The skies are torn asunder. The pressure moves steadily towards the dock, opposed but not slowed down.

WAR.

Cut limbs cracked bones torn entrails ivory rictus splattered brains skewered hearts. Rivers of blood. Blades falling spears piercing spells flying men dying. Cries and screeches and the wet thud of ruptured skin. He is coming.

WAR.

By the time I come to, Stone has killed Tor, stabbing him in the neck. Our side gate has been cracked open and abominations are rushing hapless defenders. Vargo grabs me by the hand so we run.

It has been one week since War assaulted the docks. The Endernet is on the verge of collapse but I saw footage of the ‘battle’ if it can even be called that. A group of raiders took over the lightly defended gun controls, preventing those massive weapons I saw from shooting his warship out of the sky. The remaining defenders still gave a good fight, but War used the refugee flotilla as shield, and then as improvised weapons. He didn’t conquer the docks. He destroyed them. The carnage left only one path free into the city but it doesn’t seem like he cared.

Krane is dead.

Now it seems like everyone is out for themselves. The organized resistance has collapsed so Stone, Vargo and I just flee along maintenance corridors in the hope of outrunning the tide of flesh abominations. We find refuge in a cut off section and for a month, resume our guard duties while War and the newly revealed Avatar of Transformation duke it out, or so we hear. Footage is rare and too blurry to make up anything beyond a red man in heavy armor and an ethereally beautiful woman with the bottom body of a mantis. She's behind the flesh things. Gruesome shit but at this stage I just can't find the strength care anymore. Everything feels numb, and every new piece of news is just shelved for later, when I have the time to process it. Sometimes, I just grab the crinkled piece of paper with Krane's number on it to remember that I'm not insane, that I am an avatar and not some random bloke condemned to death. Because if I were, I would be tempted to cash out. At the end of the tenth month, the abominations breach our walls. Stone protects us as we race towards the one cleared gate, across crowded streets and wailing children. I stun one of the monsters with the Defenders to protect a teen only for another monster to kill him half a second later. The sound of bones and flesh twisting to form a new drone is sickening. I think they're faster too. We find the gate too crowded but Vargo knows of a maintenance access we miraculously find open just as a squad of monsters corner us. Vargo and I rush in. I stop with the Defender to see if I can cover Stone, maybe stun one of them. He turns, and our eyes meet.

The memory of Tor's calm face as Stone slices his head off overwhelms me. Second-hand guilt scours my brain while Stone slams the gate open.

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Vargo screams, alone in the dark corridor. I hear the thump of a detonating flamethrower, then nothing.

It takes me a minute to drag her away. She has stopped screaming and beating the half-melted mechanism, but now she feels empty. I don't know what else to do but run.

It has been eleven months since the start of the year of Judgment. Society has fully collapsed. Sometimes, I feel the presence of roving bands of soldiers so I drag Vargo to the side and we hide. I can hear them kill in the districts we bypass. She found booby traps too. I would have died without her vigilance. Once, we approached the surface and I saw pieces of flaming debris float by. I think there might be a new contender in this hellish contest for the half-devoured corpse of the station.

Vargo is speaking again so there is that.

It is dark. At some point the electricity grid collapsed, leaving us creeping through the empty bowels of the city like ants in the ruins of a skyscraper. The station groans ominously every

night and I find myself wondering if it will crack like an egg, crushing us or sending us tumbling into space. Vargo isn't doing well at all but I can feel her pride and determination to outlast me, even though I have to pretend I don't hear her sob every night. We find other groups of survivors scrounging for supplies in the darkness, each one sticking to themselves out of fear of looters and infiltrators. Sometimes, I drag us to alternate paths and hidden alcoves to avoid slithering packs of flesh creatures. From the screams we hear, others are not so lucky. After two weeks of this hell, I can only stop Vargo from snapping by continually sharing the relative calm I feel. Not that I'm really calm but the poor girl is a damn wreck.

"How do you do it?" she finally spits as we approach one of the outer passages, just because I need to see light or I'll go mad myself.

"How do you keep calm despite... despite all of this!"

The last gate is partially open, the crystal twisted by some herculean grip. Flaky bloodstains cling to its surface so it looks like the place itself has bled and died. I see the hint of space through the narrow opening. Looks like we won't be able to go through but at least we get some light.

I sit down. She paces instead, her foot bumping against me every second. We both stink, and so does the station. Whatever scrubs the atmosphere in this section probably failed without the golems keeping it running. It smells rank. Like cold meat.

"I..."

I hesitate but... I am at my wit's end here. I feel like I'm going crazy. I need to get it out. I also need to keep her from screaming or one of us will kill the other. I just don't care about the risks anymore.

It's been months. I'm so damn tired.

"I'm the Avatar of Time."

"You *what*?"

She laughs, an insane, grating sound that makes me want to hit her. Strike her face, see her fall. I resist the urge to scratch my itchy beard. My kingdom for a fucking bath.

"You're joking right? You're joking. Or you're insane."

"Neither, I'm afraid. I'm the Avatar of Time. One month from now, when the Year of Judgment ends, I will be sent back in time to the first day of the year to try again."

"You're crazy," she whispers. "You're fucking crazy. Ok, prove it. Tell me something about the future."

"I don't know. I've never made it this far."

The laugh stops abruptly. She's about to break, I think, so I bear my heart. I let her feel my sincerity. I share the memory of the drone at my back, of the shock of being splattered against an elevator's wall by a mine.

"You're serious," she whispers.

"It's only the beginning. I'm still... incredibly weak."

"No shit, mud."

I take a deep breath. Soul awakening sure is something because I think I would have tried to stab her otherwise.

"Sorry," she finally whispers.

With heavy steps, she comes to sit by my side.

"So... all of this. All this death. It will be undone?"

I nod.

"And... we'll meet again?"

"Not for a while. I need to learn how to stop this shit from happening starting with the explosion that kills Law and the rest. It's not going to be easy but I'll manage. You have my word."

"I won't remember any of this?"

I shake my head. I cannot look her in the face.

"None of you will. I think."

I shrug.

"Maybe one of the other avatars has a way to remember as well. I don't know. What I know is that this isn't the end. All the deaths we've seen, I can prevent. Not now but... next time."

"Next time. Next time, Stone... So, it's not so bad."

Hope surges in her heart.

"It's not so bad, right? You'll save us? How many times can you do it? Because you're still super weak, no offense."

"None taken and... as many times as it takes."

This time I meet her eyes.

“As many times as it takes,” I repeat.

“Ok.”

She pauses.

“Ok. I believe you. The void take my stupid ass but I do. It’s... something. Maybe we’re not all doomed after all.”

I nod but I say nothing. My eyes keep looking for the stars outside. With this angle I can barely see them. Without another word, I slowly drift off to sleep.

When I awake, Vargo is gone. She left me all the food we have and I decide that I’m close enough to the tip of the station anyway. This is a good spot with a broken water pipe nearby and plenty of hiding spaces. And the light. I’ll be waiting here for the end.

There are distant fights that make the station shudder, monstrous impacts that ring through Enderlith’s tortured frame like bangs from a god’s forge. Someone is still fighting but I will not seek them. I am practicing my meditation. Without working out, the gains are marginal but I don’t have the willpower or calories to do sports. On occasion, I must hide from roaming bands of flesh creatures racing in the outer tunnel beyond the broken gate, where the light is. They sometimes sniff the opening before giving up. When I don’t meditate, I like to look at the stars with dark Obis in the distance, its fires extinguished. I sometimes sit on a broken barrel and pretend I’m holding my cello. My fingers dance over the strings like when I warm up just before playing. I remember the Swan by Saint-Saens, Bach’s studies. Popper’s Tarantelle, one of my old favorites. Sometimes, I hum the tune if I think I can afford it but my voice breaks too soon from a lack of use. I’ll get the cello back, one day.

If I’ve counted correctly, there are three days left. The water in the broken pipe finally dried out. I have a little bit saved but not much. I guess I will be thirsty.

Breathe in, breathe out. Energy rushes in through my heart gate. With careful nudges, I direct the current so it stays stable. I’m an old hand at this by now. If I were to use a metaphor and it wouldn’t even be able to describe the experience well, I’d say it’s getting just the right amount of water going through a pipe so a rusty cap stays open without being carried away. It’s accepting sadness without falling apart, or joy without becoming obnoxious. The balancing act is now natural after one year of constant practice with emotions being something I am more familiar with, the music helping.

With the first gate stable, I move to the lower one. This one is in the navel. It’s the most physical and visceral of the three and requires an understanding of the body, like a muscle

flexing or a weight pulled from the ground. I break into sweat but I keep going and soon, the second flow is stable. That leaves the third and most difficult one for me: the head. I don't think I'm stupid but I don't pursue knowledge or wisdom the way others do. The third gate is more abstract, more focused. Still, I persist. With calming breaths. And then, it clicks. After over ten thousand attempts. My mind gate stabilizes.

All three gates are open and suddenly, the transfer is effortless. A deep calm overtakes me. My body quickly saturates but for a beautiful minute, the world makes sense again.

I regretfully stir from the lotus position, feeling twitchy and overloaded. I would be rushing to the gym if I were not so thirsty, starving, and exhausted. And reeking. Then, with feverish fingers, I lean forward towards the broken gate. I see Obis, sick and wounded and this time, there are no fires. No lights. Just deep blue darkness.

The station shudders. Ancient speakers rumble to life, cracking from disuse. I realize I haven't heard sounds of battle in three days. The voice that comes is male, exhausted and empty, a death knell over the cool corpse of the station.

"The Year of Judgment is over. Lilith Seranne Kerentis, the Avatar of Space, is the new Archon."

Death count: 7

Loss count: 1

Qualia points acquired: 487

Survived the entire loop and saw a fragment of what awaits: 74

Second awakening advanced telepathy mastered: 56

Endured with sanity maintained: 45

Defender basic combat proficiency: 3

Void movement journeyman, basics of salvage business: 8

Mastered So-Sah, Kei-Sah, basic Ten-sah, basic cultural understanding of Enderlith's docksides, basic contact with voidling culture, Sallurian warrior culture: 71

Survived an aberrant and met its 'mind': 13

Successful negotiation with an Elder: 3

Made the first loop-transcending bond: 4

Achieved the first physical awakening for the first time: 90

Three gates meditation achieved: 120

Total available: 711