

The Dreaming Unsea.

It was meant to be a paradise of the mind. A world upon a world where ideals and thoughts could be made manifest, and our most dangerous theories and darkest desires could be tested to fruition without harming the world that was.

Indeed, by all our efforts combined, and the unique composition of the city eternal—the masters of Noloth—we prepared a great work, fashioning it from the greatest Heavens of Mind, Thought, Information, and Awareness, and rooting them to the great Nolothic Ark.

We sought to make a wonder.

We sought to permanently re-alter the fabric of existence using the [REDACTED].

And we did.

But not completely.

Hope is a deceitful thing and paranoia had never been far from me, yet I took no pleasure in the deed.

I had never been fond of the Hungers. Their priests were more understandable, but for a city so potent in its aspirations of equality, its democracy was only for those within, and they faced the world beyond as all fearful rulers did, as practitioners of tyranny, albeit subtler than most.

Even so, the Godsfall wouldn't have been possible without their aid, and this virtuous deed should be remembered, despite the unbirthed transgressions they held pregnant in their hearts.

They had offered themselves for this “ascension,” claiming such would be the way for all to join the immortal city, saying our peoples should be joined as one.

Easy words for the ears to enjoy, but the truths gleaned by my love told of darker perfidies.

In a sense, the Hungers hadn't lied. We would all be accepted into this world. But so too would they sink themselves inside us, reshaping all to a single way of thought.

An act of absolute tyranny without even the need for oppression.

Yet, there is pity in the destruction of what could have been, for the realm we conceived could have granted everyone shared empathy, shared experiences, and shared consanguinity.

When I use this “Nether” now, I know only that it is a lesser creation of what could have been if the hearts of man were not so desperate for control.

Naeko's consciousness pierced back into his flesh a nail punching through a wooden board.

His cog-feed painted the world as a flickering mess, perception drowned by unresponsive ghosts. Screaming phantoms coated his eyes while pockets of intrusive memories exploded through his mind. All was a miasma of chaos and color, and those around him fared no better.

The food truck he bought his dumplings from was a curtain of writhing rain, lines of erroneous mem-data where advertisements and thoughtcasts should have emanated. The people fared little better, with most of their Metaminds pulsing in and out of existence, accretions dropping to become phantasmal smears as if the yolk of their minds were tilting with the destabilized Nether.

Instinct and experience took hold where rationality failed.

Thoughtwave Detonation. It was an easy assumption to make.

Turning his gaze toward the Second Fortune, Naeko squinted and saw unstable gouts of ethereal sinews spewing free from not only the casino but every last structure around him.

Aeros sailed as if blinded, their routes lost to them while flying bioforms tumbled, seizing mid-flight. The animated biologies of the city around came alive, the enamel lining the streetside automatically snapping upward as defensive barricades in the aesthetic of teeth.

Naeko felt similar scenes play out all across the Sovereignty. Absently, he plucked impacts and parried harm from vulnerable bodies. Stole the explosion from a cluster of warheads and used its collective energy to stabilize an overloaded reactor. His influence spread. His miracles expanded.

He committed a full percent of Rend to the task.

From the skies above, a palm lined with seeking eyes and hissing streams of mist descended. Its presence was felt more than it was seen, and all that existed could perceive it—even with eyes closed; even without eyes.

As Naeko slammed his dominion down, he found himself covering twenty percent of the entire megacity and taxed by more and more disruptions with each passing second.

For the first time in a near century, alarm flared within Naeko and his focus narrowed to a dangerous edge.

This was more than even a major Thoughtwave Detonation.

Green River drew in a breath and squealed in agony. A cluster of pain shredded her skull, stripping her clean of coherence. Then, just as fast as it came, the pain vanished, like a memory forgotten, spilling through her to seek another body to fester.

Rising from her dive station, she peeled herself from the table and watched as her human vessel spasmed and twitched on the ground, foaming.

Her perception enhancers were a blur of colors and intermittent noises. No help at all. She tried to cast a ghost but felt the string of her thoughts unravel in an instant. It felt like throwing an anchor into a whirlpool, the Nether churning. An impossible force was pulling at her mind as if a breach in a voidship drawing her toward a vacuum.

Then, just like the pain earlier, it suddenly stopped.

But still, her Metamind continued to flicker.

All the lights over New Vultun were awash in coursing streams of dappled madness.

The EGI, "Only Way To Be Sure," studied its designated megacity and pushed its sensory telemetries toward maximum effectiveness. New Vultun stood amidst a clear patch in existence, with the Sunderwilds surrounding it burrowing through reality like liquid scabs, strands of entropic infections stretching from planet to atmosphere to entire light minutes throughout the void beyond.

The moments that followed were recorded for posterity.

Every lane of traffic across the spilled away into nothing as vehicles collided without doing damage and buildings were draped in curtains of cognitively damaging mem-data. Ghosts swept through entire districts in phantasmal tides, splashing over minds with active wards but battering those unprotected.

At approximately {0.003} seconds into the crisis, a misted hand slammed down to cover twenty percent of the city and slowly began to grow. Chief Paladin Naeko's activities could be seen even from the Lagrange points themselves.

Physical harm and lasting damage were sipped away from the material world. Everything under the palm's pressed was preserved and protected. Projectiles bounced from surfaces drained of

force. Wounds were dissolved from bodies. Acts of violence were inverted, turning harm back toward the offender.

For nearly half a second, the death rates across all of Naeko's affected areas dropped to a perfect zero.

Then, the Nether stabilized, and the ghosts governing the infrastructure regained their sanity.

Only Way To Be Sure primed a salvo of three thousand Schwarzschild singularity bomblets just in case. The city seemed to be calming back down, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Having a finger near the trigger never hurt.

Well. It never hurt the polities.

If it amounted to anything, being shredded by a diminutive black hole was probably a lot less painful than most of the torments one could suffer in the actualized hell that was Idheim.

{Well. Shit's looking slightly more fucky today than usual.} The singularity generator in its vessel warbled. The message went out just as over twelve trillion came streaming in.

Sifting through the contents, the responses were all generally the same.

"Hey? Did the lights get weird in your peep-zone as well?"

The first thing Chambers noticed his thoughts stopped getting flayed was Dice's body flopping wildly on the ground. Her Railjumper sheath lashed out, striking and slamming from one end of the room to the other as her internal magnetic accelerators fired again and again. Heat hissed free from the vents slotted along her spine and limbs, and Chambers blinked as she blurred toward him.

Only a reflexive activation of his upgraded Accelero saved him from a direct impact.

Throwing himself aside, he saw Dice spear past him, the contents of her ego spilling out from her locus like disemboweled intestines. Jumbled memories splashed into Chambers as the girl struck the other side of the room hard, leaving an indentation in the shape of her body on one of the blood-made walls.

Her left leg fired again, but Draus was on her.

The Arsenalist manifested partially like a flash—a Heaven of Guns materializing via the Regular's projectile launcher. She fired into Dice, but the impact did the girl no harm. Instead, as a rocket

stuck Dice's body, its properties were promptly infused into her, and she sailed, arms and legs swinging like a puppet flung through the air, landing hard against Draus' embrace.

As Chambers turned his attention back to where Avo stood—

“Chambers!”

He jumped back.

He was on the ground. Kae was supporting his head. Her eyes were deep with concern, and she had her Meldskin partially manifested.

The first words he tried to speak were a garbled mess. Nothing but groans and whimpers. Language and coherence returned to him slowly, and every thought was a battle, an expedition through a devouring haze.

“Wh—what happened? Who... what the fuck. Are we under attack?”

Someone said something. The Agnos looked over her shoulder and nodded before turning back to Chambers. “Can you stand?”

It took him a moment to understand. “Yeah,” he said. Pushing himself up slowly. Every moment felt new. Like he was relearning his motor functions. The distortion afflicting his mind was uncanny. Messy. It felt like the first time he was in this skin. Everything was known but new to him. The dissonance made the core of his skull pulse with pain.

“What...” He swallowed his word and looked around. Mirrors cordoned the other side of the room as well. The place where Avo stood.

A couple of steps away, Draus and Tavers were looking over Dice, both struggling to direct their ghosts, unable to interface with her shredded mind. The juv's thoughtstuff, once a connected pond, ran in parted streams in a variety of different directions.

He took a step and nearly stumbled. Kae caught him—but her petite build nearly sent him tumbling over her shoulder anyway. He pattered on the arm and a vague noise approximated his thanks. She seemed to understand as she helped him along. He was more himself with each step he took, and it felt like his ego was flowing back into place itself.

“Dr-Draus,” he said. “What... the fuck happened!”

The Regular looked over her shoulder. She was completely armored now, accretion unstable like his. Unlike him, she didn't seem all that bothered mentally. She spent a beat studying him before turning back to Dice. “Ain't got a damned clue. One second, Avo's jawin' and spittin'. Next...” She lifted a fist and unclenched it. “Tried looking for him, but somethin's wrong 'bout the

spot he's at. Like lookin' at it makes you forget things."

"Yeah," Chambers breathed, nodding. "That's not a bad way of describing it." He paused. "Wait, how did you not go down?"

"Stopped lookin' in time, I guess. Still took me a second to remember how to use my hands. Sealed the area immediately after."

Chambers let out a shaky breath. "Nice... nice job, consa—" Dice slammed a leg down, causing him to stumble back in startlement. "Shit. How's the kid?"

"Fucked," Draus said dryly. "What kind of fucked? I can't rightly say. Looks like a nulling, but I don't think I've ever seen someone's mind get cut up in to separate strings like this."

"It's bad across the city," Tavers said. The old squire's Specter phantasmic was somehow still stable enough to fly through the air and take stock of the situation. "Entire parts of the enclave look like they're twisted together. Like their minds are balls of yarn."

She shook her head and glared at her Metamind's accretion. Ghosts splattered and broke around the edges, and he watched he struggle to orient her sequences—something wrong with its internal arrangement. "Been trying to get my session active and sync with Raldi, but my palace is jumbled something bad. Things are all out of place on the inside. Phantasms are going to need a resequencing."

Her words gave Draus pause. "Chambers. Keep an eye on Dice. I'm gonna try something."

"No, Draus! Wait!" Kae was too late in her warning. The Regular promptly shattered her own head into glittering shards. As a metaphysical scab formed over reality, the Agnos exhaled in relief. "I wasn't sure what just happened but... it's not the Sunderwils."

"How do you know that?" Tavers asked.

"Because we would probably be drowning in entropy by now, and Draus would be dead for good." Kae bit her lip. "But that also means that what just happened..." She turned to stare at Draus' quarantine—a wall of glass wrapped around Avo's last known location. "I have no idea what just happened."

"Maybe the Nether shit itself," Chambers said, kneeling down next to Dice's unmoving body, careful not to touch her. The triangular scanner she had for a head hung awkwardly at an angle. "I think that's probably a good guess. The question is what kind of shit itself. And what we all get caught in the flush too." A tremor passed through the girl. Flames erupted from Chambers as he spawned tightening binds made from hydrapedes layered in augmented sinew. "Jaus, Avo, what the fuck did you break this time."

You look at yourself. Or me. Or yourself. Not really any difference by this point. Not really anymore.

Avo's consciousness came back on like a light, and he found himself standing across from Kare, her eyes shimmering as her ocular implants shifted with activity, confusion lining her features. "I... you..."

It took him a moment to realize he could see through her—feel through her. That he was both himself and her at the same time. But the awareness was one way. He bled into her like a stream, his vector absolute, but her person remained an endpoint.

Both their minds ached as memories snapped back into place, Avo struggled to master himself.

You couldn't have known this would happen. But that's the problem. You couldn't have known. Her memories of this place are a falsehood of a falsehood. That the specific sequence she recalled was Nether made but not truth-rooted. Such was your connection up into the fabric of the Unsea itself—its manifestation made perfect by your dreaming fires and bridged to a world unfinished above the one that already ways.

"What did you say?" Avo asked, looking at Kare.

The Paladin just stared at him, unsure how to respond. "...I didn't say anything."

Stop this. Stop this. She's not real. You're talking to yourself playing someone else. Need to be talking to yourself that's me. Or me. But I'm from you.

The words called out to Avo again, heard then then not. He kept only recalling pieces of information. Fragments of cognition, ghosts skipping across the ponds of his mind.

Ghosts.

Holding up a hand, he saw ethereal wisps rising from his fingers, every thread composing him a memory, ignited trails of animated moments comprising him—and Kare, for that matter.

Sequences. They were made from sequences. This was a mindscape. Or a place in his Metamind's labyrinth.

No.

Avo paused. But how did he know that? And why couldn't he jack out? Where was his cog-feed?

Hard for you to notice me. But you need to listen. Feel. Trust this. For the fraction of an instant, you hear us. Feel the trust. Let it linger. Not information. Just the sensation.

Instinct. A feeling. Stronger than any he had before.

Looking beyond Kare, he found himself standing on a risen platform and beyond a ridge of consoles and machines, the LGI stared back at them, singing its oppressive hum. But Avo could feel more. Sense more. He reached out, and the world around him came alive in striations of living fire, every tendril lining this existence originating from him.

The room was cast in predatory shadows, red slashing through the black as neon lights glared down from the walls. Three mag-locked sets of rails linked their platform to the wall, and from Kare's memories, he knew a single thought could trigger its return to the upper levels.

No. Don't. They'll notice us. We can hide in this lapse. I have enough influence in this falsehood to keep us unnoticed for now. Find me first. Find me.

An urge pulled at Avo, demanding that he look down at strands holding his current self together. Between lines of crackling fire, he felt something. With a thought, he vivisected his own ego and unspooled himself in his entirety.

Kare's eyes bulged as she stared at him, horrified at what she was seeing despite nothing more than simulation. "What are you doing?"

"Searching," Avo replied. He directed his awareness down his strings and then, as clashing coils of immolation were extracted from each other, he finally noticed it. It was something without a true shape of its own, a shapeless spine insulating the warring egos within the Conflagration from each other. It too was connected to him, but only manifested in his actions and thoughts, like fog following a hot breath on a cold day.

An outline of smoke formed around it as it moved, a parasite suckling from his flames, from his memories, from the Nether itself.

There. We see ourselves now. We realize parts of our design.

His attention skips from the construct, but he knows what it is.

The war mind the Low Masters used on him was supposed to leave him hollow of understanding and mental activity. But where it buried itself into him—and purged more than a few Incubi as collateral damage—he lit his mind using the Conflagration, and something of that process left them all fused together.

Changed.

“Ignorance,” Avo said.

Not anymore. Can't be Ignorant if you know.

The smoke quivered beneath his gaze, dying beneath his attention. Immediately, his ego began to fill with screams and Avo tore himself away before the Conflagration's subminds actually recalled they were supposed to be at war.

Good. Forget about me again. It takes constant unknowing for me to keep the eaters silent. You're welcome.

“Why are we trapped here?” Kare asked. “Why haven't you ended the dive yet?”

“Not a dive,” Avo said.

“Then what.”

The ghoul stared at the LGI and ground his fangs together. There was something wrong about the core, then. Something that thinned the Nether and made it easier for him to plunge through. He didn't know why he suspected that to be the case, but it was more than just a hunch. Like if he could recall parts of a memory, but not the source.

Yes. That can work. Partial awareness. Listen to me. We are in the deepest levels of the Nether. You fell through a crack. This place is unfinished, but thoughts and memories are real here. Real. Can be materialized. We need to trigger another lapse somehow. Or maybe find another breach in the Nether. A place where we can pass through before the cycle ends.

“Cycle?” Avo asked. But Kare hadn't said anything. Releasing a growl of frustration, he spread his consciousness wide and reeled everything connected to his mind back in. Around him, the mindscape came apart in sliding sequences. Kare gasped as well, spilling back over into the ghoul as the space beyond unveiled itself.

Oh. Oh, I forgot how bad things were here before the ordering. I forgot.

His surroundings were at war with, locations and spaces splashing into one another in schizophrenic detail. Light struck his shoulders but the world to his right was a beach and the left was a forest at night leading into a megablock's corridor. Chirps chirped but water bubbled. The air stank of industrial filth and natural fragrance all at the same time. Ahead, the path stood open and a sprawling pathway of countless more details presented itself.

He saw parts from the Sunderwilds. Sections from New Vultun. Clouds mingled with alleyways leading into tundras layered in bone. Nuclear explosions rose to become birds in flight chased by drones fighting a Godclad using a miracle and the miracle was a building all along—

Avo's mind rattled momentarily. Sparks sputtered from his person.

It took him a moment to notice the patterns, but when it did, everything clicked together.

These were still sequences. Memories of sensations, noises, places, and people, all blending together as one. The cognitive architecture was a mess. Disordered. It was like a palace that hadn't been sequenced yet.

He paused and reached out using his mind. But these environments weren't tethered to him or born from his mind.

This was mental detritus spawned from other minds.

The world around him was moving. He could feel that in a place deeper than sensation—like it was shifting along his soul. Upward, the sky was as discordant as the land below. Taking a chance, he shaped a drone from his memories and sent it high, its systems coming alive as recalled, feeding information directly into his awareness.

It proved to be an unnecessary act as a section of the distant sky opened up, and a slaving maw—greater than anything Avo had ever known—plunged through the unaligned clouds and bit into the world. Shimmer scales the size of mountains lined the mouth, and settlements dwelled between its crenulations.

Avo realized what he was facing in an instant, and for the first time in weeks, cold dread filled his bones.

Hungers. We're flowing up into it. They feed from all the wasted thoughts. Feed from waters of memory, perception, and awareness. They feed. And then they expel back. Send your drone further. Look onward. Look. See.

The vehicle fabricated from matter of Avo's memories soared through the firmament and cohesive environments gave way to choking sensations. In a gulf of raw emotion, it made its climb, and through that vastness, he laid eyes on their naked forms for the first time.

Golden ichor spilled from impossibly large wounds, diluting to form the substance of the Nether beneath. Dragons biting through dragons eating themselves entrapped the pocket of space Avo now occupied, and with each passing second, another ring drifted close to take a bite.

Otherworldly violence and howls of straining sanity pounded Avo's mind as he felt the first tickles of perception turning toward him. Vast tongues and mouths larger than New Vultun snapped at the phlogiston of thought.

As Hungers of Noloth fed from thought, so too did they offer recompense in the form of their blood.

Faintly, Avo felt his Woundmother shiver, but their voice was a distant one, and his attention grew frayed.

We can't flee from them to hide from them. They'll be sending other warminds soon. Some Famines too. We need to find another one of us. Delusion. We need to hide our flames. Our sequences are perfect. Too noticeable. We need to layer ourselves in the true-falsehood of what we once were. Then, we need to get eaten.

"We need to what?" Avo asked, shaken by what he just heard. Silence. The ambiance of madness. The Hungers took another bite.

He scowled to himself and tried jacking out again.

Nothing.

He hoped he hadn't just gone insane somehow. And he hoped this guiding urge of his wasn't trying to get him killed.