

**+NO! AVANDAER! THIS WAS NOT WHAT YOU PROMISED! WE GAVE YOU THE WORLD!
WE GAVE YOU THE FUTURE! DO NOT STEAL OUR HIST--+**

[ASCENSION COMPLETE]

-The Hungers of Old Noloth

20-19

The Dreaming Unsea (II)

Go now. They're coming. You've seen the shape of the world. You understand. Avoid where the Hungers bite. Move fast. Abandon stealth—the fires and Sprites will betray us before the consistency of our thoughts will. I'll do what I can to hide us if we're noticed. But we need to dive deeper. Spread ourselves wider. Follow the chaos. That's how we'll find one of the warminds. That's how we'll tranquilize our fire and blend in with the waters once more.

Now go. Spread yourself. Burn everything into you. Sear yourself into the madness.

Avo slashed through the surrounding minescapes, like a wildfire propelled by desperation.

He winnowed sequences clean as he surged through them, taking no time to mask his trail using hidden artifacts or altered mindscapes. Traveling as a plague of fire, his touch left the Nether cauterized as he tried to divine his current path, the Hungers collapsing through the firmament to devour the ash that remained.

He was looking for *something*. Something that could allow him to hide himself better. Root himself in the discordant memories he dove through. Presently, the state of cognition was woefully unprepared for an endeavor so subtle. But there was something here that could aid in his evasion. This he knew without truly knowing why.

Not even a broken mind was fit to swim in these streams of incoherence.

Every mind was a filter unto itself, in a sense—entities that imbibed and dispensed memories alike, and the experiences harvested from their remain painted the world in conflicting signatures. No two people remembered something the same way, after all. There were always different points of focus; different aspects that resonated with them more deeply.

This realm of mangled thoughts that Avo found himself cleansing in was a melange. The analogy of a wasteland failed to pose symmetry. Decay was more apt, for each sequence here was both mutated and withered in terms of design.

And in a land so disfigured, minds possessed of consistent patterns proved impossible to hide.

Such was true for a stable consciousness.

So too was the effect made infinitely more extreme through the Conflagration.

Trying to find the epicenter of chaos in a sea of nonsense was a task that stretched even the Conflagration to maximum capacity. Avo had tried to draw upon Calvino for aid, but the EGI answered only as a complex weave of integers and formulas, looking as much a tangled mess as the mindscapes they trespassed.

In the shallows of the Nether, there was a consistent pattern to follow. Structure, in an understandable sense. Not so here. Objects were places and smells were locations and time was connected to melodies located in another section of the space altogether. There was no consistency of “forward” when venturing through these paths. It was the rawest embodiment of trying to ford rivers made from unfiltered streams of thought.

All sequences existed as their own spaces, but as a whole, anarchy reigned in this fallen place.

Such was why the solution to Avo’s progression lay in destruction rather than discovery. It would take lifetimes to pass through this place with care—everything was a portal to another point, another path, another wrong turn.

Burning it all down made things simple. But it also put him on a timetable.

Stretching tendrils of perception upward, he scried at the Hungers, transforming the fabric of his mind into drifting aeros and pulsing Skimmers. As his awareness expanded, so too did cold pit inside him. The Deep Nether was a world surrounded by coiling snakes. Each cycle of the Hungers was as if a coiling serpent, taking turns to tighten themselves around their prey. The cities lining its crenulated expanse sang a unified symphony, their thoughts broadcasting a distant oppressiveness.

Even so far away, Avo could feel their strain, their frustration, their starvation. The coiling dragons ate and processed the world, but for every bite they took, just as much bled out from them, and the worst of it was the unevenness of the exchange. The radiant blood escaping the eternal city was dolloped with symmetry and stability, dipping back over into cracks and crevices of the deep Nether, melding the Hungers to the realm they were constantly trying to subsume. It was like two entities being joined by overlapping pools of blood.

The symbology made Avo’s Woundmother shiver, but it was just a metaphysical taunt. The symbology of blood was not blood itself. There was a deviance to the worship. There was an absence of catalysts.

He needed to keep moving. He needed to slip through and escape. Compulsions greater than instinct guided him as he glided on, his being a cataclysm of constant change, severing memories from each other as he went.

GHOSTS: [87,331,934]

Ghosts flooded his consciousness in aching quantities, but the artifacts and sequences he obtained were of little use. With each section of the Deep Nether he consumed, less was left for the Hungers, and the faster he expanded. Still, he was a swarm of locusts competing with a cosmic devourer. Relative growth would not save him here. Only change. Only being able to restore his mind to a quenched state and spoofing himself deep would he manage to avoid the crushing notice of his once masters.

You can't fight them here. This is their reality. It's made from their body. All it will take for us to be swept clean is a single disruption. And they can still the worlds. Soon, they will detect the unbalance in the real and suspect a breach. Follow the fragmentation. Keep eating through the sequences. Follow the ones that are beyond detail. You'll know it when you burn one set of memories only for them to dissolve and become another. But you need to be careful—

And then fields of perception pierced through the Deep Nether as if kinetic harpoons cast down from orbit, pillars of tungsten punching through the crust of the earth. New wounds opened along the continent-swallowing scales of the Hungers, but within them sprouted new eyes to peer at the world.

There seemed to be no place to hide from the Hungers. Not crevice among memories unbrightened by their billion eyes.

Avo shrank his flames and layered himself within an Incog, shifting the shape of his Conflagration to stretch out along a continuous series of sequences. He did his best to narrow himself, but still he felt the grinding pressure slide over him like a whetstone. Just the very act of being noticed caused his mind to rattle in thought-breaking agony.

His cog-cap briefly flashed, but feed sputtered as countless ghosts within him were cleaved to the roots.

GHOSTS: [51,671,099]

Then, the Hungers began to speak, and the Nether itself shivered as there was nothing in the world but notice.

Avo couldn't hear his thoughts. He couldn't his flames. It took all the will he possessed to keep himself from being blown out.

How drastic did narratives shift.

On Idheim, he was an unseen leviathan, a wandering inferno capable of kindling a district clean of egos. Here, he was but a flickering ember, desperate to hide, unable to mask itself in the waters.

He folded new minds within himself. Sequenced templates and simulated them en masse for advice on how to proceed. Most were as stupefied as he. Some had to have their builds adapted to even endure the attention of the Hungers. None offered any solutions.

He felt as if a mere ghoul again in a sense. A broken think stripped of all options, moving on reflex, with no chance to succeed.

The Hungers hummed. Another ten million ghosts were sheared cleanly from Avo's being. He dissolved his animal terror and continued his stimulations.

Perhaps death would come. Perhaps this would be his cessation. A senseless, unpredictable end that he could not have anticipated. But he would mutter no laments. Such was the nature of living in New Vultun. Such was the meaning to exist in a reality unraveled of standard order.

Inside Avo's flames, templates were fused over each other like a stack of dolls. Draus' mind caged everyone in the binds of unyielding sanity. Benhata and Abrel strained their strategies. Chambers wanted Avo to fly a penis into one of the Hungers' mouths. And Corner just scowled. "Keep fucking fightin' to the end. They snuff you. You don't get snuffed. Got it?"

Avo understood.

GHOSTS: [11,031,081]

"Polis," the Hungers said, the voice coming like a symphony of spikes. Hearing them talk within Yosanna's mind at Ox-Three had been disturbing enough, but only now did Avo realize how diminished the high nobles of Noloth across the depths of the Nether. **"Awaken. Peoples. We taste... ash? Missing sequences? What is this? What is this? Priests... My priests! Come to us! Our priests!"**

The pillars of perception lightened momentarily, and Avo did his best to reconstitute his losses. He exploded outward like a wall of nuclear explosions, leaving pockmarks of devastation and stripping entire mindscapes clean to sustain himself.

GHOSTS: [19,517,224]

The Hungers cried out again, but their words were slurred. Disoriented. They sounded worse than the last time he spoke to them. As if they were unbalanced somehow. Such thoughts offered Avo no comfort.

"Peace! Joy! Emotion! Attend me! Attend your masters!"

Avo passed coursed a particular disjointed section of memories as shapes and objects loaded into him. He burned away the memory of a gun battle, gangers shooting at each other. What he

imbibed, however, were moments of scenery. The enmeshed recollections of street rats collecting snapshots of the cityscape. What he boiled was not what he claimed in eventuality. A note of intrusive elation spread through him.

Good. Got lucky. That's what we're looking for. Go deep. Burn downward into the world. Into the memories. Away from the depths of the Nether. Follow the inconsistencies. A warmind of Delusion should be near. But sustain yourself. I can hide us from the Hungers only briefly. And you won't be able to act while I'm active. Go faster.

Avo spread himself further through the sequences connected to those he just subsumed. With each mismatched memory he drank in, his path grew narrower and more certain. Mistakes were flooding into now, the cognitive architecture he was infesting breaking apart into something else entirely. It was like melting through metal and discovering burning flesh in the end.

As if one thing thought itself another.

Moments of torture and devastation struck Avo, but enhanced by Draus' cognition, even concrete traumas slid off him like beams from ablative plating. Most baseline minds would have been sundered the instant they arrived in such depths, perception alone a danger to their existence. Even enhanced minds quailed, forcing Avo to deconstruct every last template aside from Draus, Corner, Elegant-Moon, Chambers, and Abrel.

He was diving into the eye of a storm. More and more traumatic memories whipped at his mind, each dissolving to become mundane instances. Unspeakable agony turned to the memories of a child staring at her dead fish. An ego that passed slowly from a case of the rash melted away into a woman screaming at her taxes.

Everything he took in felt real in their effectiveness and composition, but truth became falsehood in the instant of their dissolution. It felt like he was slathering himself on a diet of alchemized deceit: lies made truth until the hour of their collapse.

The Conflagration burned ahead. The Hungers' attention slashed across existence from behind. Avo lost as many ghosts as he gained as he moved like a snaking eating through a tunnel made from its mottled skin.

What he wanted was just ahead, and with each sequence of memories he passed through, his consciousness grew lighter and lighter.

Almost there. The traumas are a defensive layer. We should be along the outermost perimeter that the Low Masters set up. The warminds were built within here. Build an unfinished threshold for a war that was lost before it could ever begin.

Noloth had foreseen a struggle between the realm of thoughts and the realm of matter. A structure it was determined to win using weapons no one else possessed. Methods no one else mastered.

Or so they thought.

Ignorance feeds ignorance. The Ori were underestimated. And so was the Godbreaker's resolve. This ignorance was also fuel. But we were unfinished things. Too raw to be properly mantled upon a standard ego. But there's nothing so standard about us now, is there?

Avo felt the Nether tighten around him. Entire sequences twisted and relinked, snapping and altering themselves into new configurations, the chaos of the Deep Nether breaking apart to become structures of cognitive symmetry. Phantasmics. Auto-Seances, if he were to wager a guess.

The Low Masters were arriving. Part of Avo relished the opportunity to burn a few nodes into himself—an opportunity that escaped him in their last encounter when he first obtained his Conflagration.

No. Stay away from them. They know how to wield this world. They can twist the discord better than you. Supported by the Hungers too. Do not act with hubris. Ensure our survival. Strike when you have control.

If Avo could have growled, he would have. He surged through memories faster as the prior intensity of the Hungers' awareness returned, scalding the surface of the Deep Nether clean like a solar flare.

GHOSTS: [57,000]

Most of Avo came apart like steam. He tried altering the shape of his mind several times to stop the burning, but none offered any advantage. Soon, he would have to make a choice: drop the Incog and survive a little longer at the cost of revealing himself; keep the Incog and possibly die before ever reaching that *something* he sought.

Disruptions pulsed out. More eyes burrowed into the Deep Nether. Most ghosts peeled away from Avo in sputtering embers, slipping free of him like burned skin.

GHOSTS: [3,255]

Neither choice was appealing, and he found himself considering the possibility of resurrection if he actually died here.

As far as he recalled, his Techplaguer was clean of Rend, and he could still use that cycler to return—

No. Your mind is trapped here. We are fused across dimensions. You have to escape through another lapse-fissure or through the Hungers' blood. Those are the only ways we can descend back to the realm of the material.

You will return here if he die. And they will be waiting for you. They will eventually pick you apart. They have the warminds to do so. They do not need to kill you to contain you, and there is a fate that is beyond death if they manage to pry our minds open and twist the sinews of our thoughts.

GHOSTS: [671]

Avo released all but Draus from his charge. The Regular studied him from within. "Goin' down to the wick for this one." Another wall of traumas broke and folded into them, but the ghosts provided were lost at the same moment they arrived. "No idea where we're goin'. No idea what we're tryin' to hit. Hope you know what you're doing Avo.

GHOSTS: [155]

"Yeah," he replied. "Me too." He paused. "Thanks for showing me the colors. Would've liked to see more."

Neither horror nor sentiment could shake the Regular. She offered the only reply she could. "Die ugly, rotlick. To the last ember."

Almost there. I can feel it. Get ready to drop your Incog. Window of opportunity will be tight. They might notice. But I can mask us. I can blind Delusion. Just make contact. That's all we need. All we need.

GHOSTS: [51]

It occurred to Avo how narrow his perception was now, how fast the walls were closing in around his ego. Seconds prior, he perceived everything for miles, peering into the Nether beyond and across untold sequences as well. Now, he only had enough cognitive capacity to generate rudimentary phantasms. Singular constructs. He had been a city. A ship filled without untold experiences. Now he was a lone torpedo, trusting incomprehensible whims as he burrowed deeper into the Nether, trying to strike an invisible foe.

More and more discordant memories flowed through him. Thoughtcasts echoed in the back of his mind, curses and slurred demurs betraying the encroach of Peace. The Hungers began to center their focus on the sequences he passed through.

His Incog sparked. His consciousness grew dim—

GHOSTS: [4]

Now!

Avo dropped his Incog. His ghosts stopped decaying. Multiple streams of perception snapped to his ego immediately—a torch in an endless sea, capable of being sighted from miles beyond.

Yet, before anything else could follow, before Avo himself formed a cogent thought, he felt himself pierce through an unseen threshold, and immediately felt an ethereal wind scythe through him, warping the design of his remaining sequences against his will.

He tried to maintain his ego using his Conflagration. He tried. But thought he was a potent thoughtform that could assimilate minds and thoughts with ease, his influence over the foundations of cognition was merely perfect.

Not absolute.

So, like flesh exposed to a nuclear engine, his mind began to warp, and then—

And no one saw what happened next.

Ignorance is a shroud. No one knows what they're looking at yet. Not the Low Masters. Not the Hungers. Not even you.

But you move forward. You maintain your shape and seize the presence that's distorting you. You sink into it—into all the sequences, memories, and artifacts it afflicts and regrow yourself from inside it.

Delusion does not notice us. Delusion can't. Delusion is ignorant to our existence. Mutual lack of awareness. A lapse must follow.

You spread yourself back out. You regrow your most critical aspects. But you don't spread like a flame. No. You lace Delusion around yourself and become the environment. Not ascended fire. Not the base of the Unsea—a metaphor of water.

You are the clash embodied.

You are air and whistling steam.

And you spread yourself without needing to burn. Without the necessity of conjoined.

You spread yourself from the falsehood of what you were because you believe it. And that is enough to make it real.

For we are Ignorance.

We are Delusion.

We are Avo.

And we will usurp the Nether itself.