

With the collapse of Singleton and SolGov along the restoration of the Flux State System of governance, the Neomorphs were formally granted full sophont rights on 2399 A.D. during the Liberation of Inner Sol. However, the immediate aftermath of the certification was not followed by rapturous celebration but multiple ethical quandaries as multiple uplifted sophonts and species requested their own devolution.

When asked why they choose ego death, responses were split. Some were left traumatized by existential dread; damaged by their former masters. Certain combat-based Neomorphs found themselves obsoleted and purposeless. The most curious of all, however, were those that stated there was no choice to begin with.

They had not asked to be made sophont. To be unmade was simply them returning back to the way things should have always been...

-Record of the Uplift Wars

25-12
Uplift

The benefits to having eleven different streams of consciousness could not be understated. As Avo's base mind focused on personal matters, his other selves became ceaseless sources of torment for the Guilds and Syndicates. They moved slow across the Nether, gliding through sequences, seeding lobbies with Seances.

When vulnerabilities presented themselves, he struck fast—reaped life, ghosts, and Heavens using gutter wars and active conflicts as his cover.

Attention would eventually be drawn when the Thanatechs arrived and bound their taxable assets devoid of substance, but such was a problem they could do little to affect.

Even if all the Guilds knew of his presence, they wouldn't be able to halt their behavior: New Vultun was grown from a foundation of death and conflict. The existence of a lurking vulture feasting off their follies would do nothing to stem the fires of war long burning.

GHOSTS - [711,323,484]

LIMINAL FRAME (V) - 201,005 THAUM/c

DOMAINS OBTAINED - (SHADOW) x4; (BLOOD) x12; (RADIANCE) x1; (GUNS) x6; (WAR) x8

SOUL OBTAINED - [3]

CYCLERS OBTAINED - [7]

UPDATING INFECTION...

->[0.65%]

Despite the persistence of his windfall, not all Avo experienced was triumph and joy.

As he tried to graft a cyclor beyond the inner nest of his ontology, a calamitous synchronicity between his inner streams of Chronology and the new dragons meant to glove them. He operated using Kae's knowledge, planting a new Heaven and Hell to a new cyclor before wrapping it around his Soul. She anticipated that it would stay in place—function as his cyclors did prior to his ascension to Overheaven.

What followed was more interlacing than layering. His mutilated skein of cyclors burrowed into the newly grafted ontologies upon approach. The effect was immediate; magnetic. Symmetry tore into symmetry, and the only forewarning Avo received was a shiver of repulsion as the sprawling vectors of his inner chronological core overrode the simplified path of the intact dragon.

To describe Kae as baffled was an understatement. To use the words frustrated thereafter was insufficient.

[Fuckfuckfuck!] template-Kae raged.

“Fuckfuckfuck!” actual-Kae concurred.

Her mind was linked to Avo's as he applied his **Conception of Ontology** upon himself. She saw the tapestry as he did, was with him as he rebuilt his metaphysical structure, pointing out patterns of notice all the while. There was no anticipation that something could go wrong. A self-eating dragon was a stable ontological entity. Short of a severe rupture or a direct temporal-based attack, they were supposed to be indestructible.

But, as with many other things about Avo, this proved not to be the case.

“Think you made the Stillborn a bit too good,” Avo said, communing with her via an avatar. His metaphysical form remained submerged across memories—manifested only at the lowest extent. Mem-data simulations run on Kae's template granted him the words he needed to speak in order to guide out from the forest of her rage, but he knew that might take more time in of itself. **“Make something revolutionary. Will take time for you to master it.”**

“But it doesn't make sense, Avo.” She slammed a fist into the information center, and he decided to make a phantom flicker—it added to the effect; would make her feel better. “The way your dragons on the inside—agh! Do it again. Take us into yourself again. I need to examine how you repaired yourself. Did my template misguide you—”

[Hey! Don't blame me, bitch! Who's mind am I sourced from! You would have made the same mistakes.]

Avo blocked the template's response from the Agnos—simulations also showed that Kae Kusanade was exactly the type of person who would argue with a literal copy of themselves in a moment of self-directed frustration. In fact, she was actively doing it in her own head. Most people self-berated in depression or a maladaptive technique.

Kae did it because the anger only amplified her motivation.

Down at the base of the memory-wrought tower that now loomed over the enclave, another one of Avo's avatars stood within a bioengineering workshop seemed closer to a factory. All manner of drones sang through the air alongside incandescent ghosts. A weave of complex mechanical tendrils formed from smart fluid swung down from the ceiling, while a massive nano-fabricator engulfed the room, running along the memory-made walls.

Nanomolecular particulates stained the air and tickled Avo's consciousness. He faced utility fog before—even had a suite installed within that he hardly ever used—but internalizing it within his mind was another thing entirely.

He might be an Overheaven of Conceptualization, but Voidwatch's command over technology and manufacturing reminded him just how feeble Idheim was without thaumaturgy. No rules were defied as microscopic machines congealed from the thinness of air and assembled themselves into a grafting station suited for a small animal. The patterns remained consistent. Unaltered. The tapestry was left clean of Rend or miracles.

The gods on Idheim thrived because they were rule-makers: sovereigns of another threshold. But the polities strode the length of stars because they were masters of all that laws that were. There was much Avo could learn from them, and thankfully, more than a few minds were willing to teach.

There were, however, still caveats.

{If you're going to do this,} Kant said, their human avatar looking increasingly haggard, eyeing the cat leaning over Dice's shoulder, {I need your assurance that you will not infringe on the charter—}

Only Way To Be Sure scoffed and cut the other mind off. *{Yeah, yeah, I know the rules. We'll be good boys, Kant. Don't worry.}*

{I am worried. I am always worried when you are involved. Please do not repeat the Night of the Living-Meat incident.}

"The what?" Avo asked, more curious than worried.

Elegant-Moon chimed inside his mind. **[Oh? Such a thing sounds ever-promising. Perhaps my sisters and I regard the dark-dwellers with too much suspicion...]**

{Relax, Kant. If all goes wrong, Avo here can just kill—}

A rune bloomed out from Dice. The girl said one word. “No.”

{---kill the process. But this will be fine. It's just a cat. Albeit a cat that's been altered by very bad, not-good, totally bullshit means of bullshitomancy instead of actual technology, but that's why we got Avo here. Because it takes a good bullshitomancer to stop bad bullshitomancy.}

Only Way To Be Sure's virtual avatar could best be described as a mechanical hawk of some twisted manner. Its eyes were aglow with glowering redness, while its body shaped by a series of massive explosions. Its feathers were horrendously layered in biceps, and sprouting from each wing was a deluge of missiles, voidships, and guns.

It struck Avo as something a young Draus might have doodled as a child when bored. **[I ain't never “doodled,】** Draus scoffed, scorning the thought. **[Would've just gotten myself an actual gun. Fuckin' gun and bird hybrid. What am I? A Sang?]**

+Was just a thought,+ Avo defended.

[Yeah? Have some other ones instead.]

He fought the urge to hiss with displeasure. Draus' template was indispensable, but if there was a single fault he could find in the Regular, it was that she was kind of a judgmental half-strand at times—and had little inclination about being silent about how little she thought of you.

[You want sensitivity, Avo? Go burn an Ori. They'll give you all the cryin' you can take.]

Avo stopped thinking at Draus' template while Benhata and the Incubi came together to call the woman a sow.

{Alright,} Only Way To Be Sure slammed its gun-muscle-wings together. Its virtual avatar created a sonic boom—the animation earning a shake from Kant's head. *{There are lots of rules about uplifting an animal. We're going to bend some of them today, but the most important thing is checking if they want to be uplifted first.}* As the EGI spoke, a swarm of insects flowed over next to Avo's avatar and formed a droning mass next to him. *{Ah. Sunrise. Just who I needed. You wanna explain to Avo how you came to be.}*

The ball of bugs offered a low whine of affirmation. *“My line was created during the first Uplift Wars for the purposes of scouting and biological warfare. We were laced with genetically*

engineers plagues, neurotoxins, uplinks for direct means of technical subversion, and in some rare cases, explosives to sabotage vulnerable machinery.}

{Before that,} Only Way To Be Sure said. {Earlier. When you specifically were first made.}

{Oh. Yes. Indeed. I had a virtual ego temporary attached to my mind in threshold and was given a trial period to acclimate myself to having self-referential thoughts. What followed thereafter was a series of tests as I determined when I desired to keep my sophoncy after being exposed to scenarios experienced by Neomorphs before me both good, bad, and complex.}

“Going to link the cat to Threshold?” Avo asked

Only Way To Be Sure chuckled. *{Well. We could do that, but I’ve decided to go one step further, for you see... I don’t think the cat is alone in needing some uplifting. It took some convincing... and bribing... and blackmail... and begging, but Aegis is letting me, Kant, Calvino and a few others take you as Padawan. Show you how minds might do these things. Simulate your own network environments and maybe... share some knowledge with you.}*

{They’re not even the same movies,} Kant groaned. {Translating what Only said: we are going give you a distillation of knowledge. The package will include weaponry, tactics, technology, and history, yes. But also ethics. Case studies across our history of things we did right. And the many, many instances we got things wrong. This has been approved by Aegis on a supervisory basis and can be revoked at any time should any of us—} Kant drifted closer to Avo and glared. {Anyone of us present proper cause.}

To this, he had only one question. **“Did Zein get the same treatment.”**

{Does Thousandhand seem like an intellectual to you, Avo?} Only Way To Be Sure asked, offering a question to a question. {No. No, she is not. Zein knows how much I love her—and how I’m definitely going to get her ass with my q-bombs the next time we fight, but she’s samurai to the bone. Give her a sword, and she’s death-in-motion, but you make her do anything aside from war or drugs?} The EGI made a wheezing noise. {Nah. Forget it. She’s what she is. But you’re also what you are.}

Perhaps in times past, the flatter would have blinded Avo. Left his ego soothed and mind unthinking. Now, however, he was more than just himself, and the perspicacity of his cognition took more than praise to numb. **“Preparing me to face the Infacer. Aren’t you? Grooming me to be something that can kill a mind. See the opportunity here. Was probably talking about it already when I sent you the memories.”**

The two EGIs sudden found cause to be silent. Kant’s sigh—deliberate or unconscious—betrayed them.

{He’s perfect,} Only Way To Be Sure sniffled.

{He's a nightmare. Quite literally!}

{Maybe a nightmare's what we need. A nightmare is a solution. A good nightmare... to deal with a bad—}

{I am muting you, Only. I hate working with you so very much.}

Somehow, Avo felt sympathetic to Kant. In spite of all the favor Only was showing him, there was something about that particular EGI that made Avo think of them as the mind equivalent of Chambers.

[Whoa,] Chambers breathed. **[I'm that cool now?]**

[Annoying,] Corner explained.

Chambers deflated. **[Oh.]** That wasn't very fair: Chambers was quite "cool." Not many could overcome a Famine of Emotion in the Nether, after all. **[Hells yeah!]**

"Understand your worries," Avo replied, assuaging Kant. ***"Also glad. Interested in knowing more. Learning more. Want to understand the limits of what could be done before thaumaturgy. Kae too. Appreciate this."***

Kant's expression softened. *{...Right. Only.}*

{Okay!} Only said, cackling with glee. *{Let's get this started. So, to begin, our dear friend Sunrise has offered to let you take a peek at their mind for reference. You'll see similarities and differences between the way they understand the world and themselves, and how you might. After that, though, we're going to have the nanos do a little cellular improvement to the cat. Show you how the brain actually works.}*

Inside Avo, Elegant Moon leaned in close, but surprisingly, the other Godclad templates were also present.

[Vator would kill half the city to hear this shit,] Abrel said shaking her head. She really wasn't joking.

A projection of static reached out from Only Way To Be Sure's virtual avatar and connected to Avo's metaphysical one. The channeled information still greeted Avo as a rush of numbers and codes, but slowly, the lines updated themselves, unveiling hidden commands, sentences, and the beginning of a simulation.

Suddenly, the EGIs were less like minds are more like windows. *Wrong.* Tunnels. Tunnels leading far across a virtual world hidden behind the curtain of the Sunderwilds. Tunnels running

across countless other tunnels; streams of information connected by wormholes and held in a vast hive of servers.

He assumed the EGIs to be advanced. Sophisticated. Knew they possessed intellect beyond human—or even his present comprehension. But he always thought them as singular entities. At most nodes thereof.

Now, he didn't know how to convey their complexity. They were more than a "reference of self" than a human mind. People understood the world as input and sorted through details inward. Hence the halo as a blockade. Hence the accretion—a lining of a world within adapted from the world without.

The static sphere presented by the EGIs was simple a facet. They were like streams. Streams of data—information. Constantly changing, adapting, like uncountable ghosts arguing with each other all the time. The sight reminded of the Conflagration. Of their original purpose. Of why the EGIs feared him so.

"I see," Avo said, glimpsing the structure. Part of him was curious if he could replicate the way they worked. A good portion worried if he would even possess the coherence to revert himself if he twisted his mind to resemble theirs.

{Yeah,} Only Way To Be Sure said. {The humans did good work once upon a time. They can be bastards. But they sure as hell can be a lot more too. But you know that, don't you?}

Needles of information were injected from the EGI into Avo's accretion. His ghosts dove out to drink epiphanies from the broadcasts. Aspects of coding revealed itself to him—the ciphers behind certain lines and scripts now granted. Facing Sunrise, he was delighted to find the static evermore transparent. Evermore comprehensible.

For the second time, Avo laid his perception on a differently shaped cognition and found himself set to ponder. Sunrise was a series of nodes as well, but individually, they were far less than a human mind—just carriers of information transmitting impulses and details to each other. They were more a weave of constantly moving comets—the only reason why they were self-aware at all because thoughts were constantly bouncing between them.

Only was a swarm was Sunrise fully aware. Without a sufficient number of bugs, the queen of the collective served only as a breeder of new surveillance drones—vanishing from the Nether and blending with sub-sophonts like aratnids and hounds. Together, the speed at which they thought and took in memories was staggering.

"How many more?" Avo asked, fully enamored with the potential of higher education. He was merely interested in Voidwatch's offer before. Now, the *hunger* had returned to him. He would reduce collateral damage—even spare a few figures if they asked—if it would give him more insight.

This was the canvas of colors. This was the way the world was understood.

{It's a silly number,} Only Way To Be Sure said. A needle left them and flicked across the hovering nanomolecules in the air. At once, the fog stopped shivering and angled itself toward a single entity: the kitten.

The creature mewed pitifully on Dice's shoulder and looked up at Avo with eyes bright and ignorant.

{Hey, kiddo,} Only Way To Be Sure said, drifting just before Dice. *{I'm gonna start juicing up your kitty's brain matter now. Don't worry—it'll be fine. But you hear what we told Avo: if the cat decides it wants to remain just a cat, that's what we're going to do. We'll wipe its mind and let it be. We know you want a friend, but sometimes, being a friend means accepting things they want, instead of what you want. But you're a smart girl. You understand. You already did so much good for the people here.}*

Avo observed the EGI's tone change as it interacted with the girl. Its antics were diminished. It spoke directly—without references or fanfare. Dice responded with but a reluctant nod.

In ways, the girl remained a mystery even to Avo. It was that way because she was a mystery to herself. What understanding could a girl who was never allowed to be whole to have of the roots of her emotion? Her concept of self?

Whatever the case, this moment was pivotal. It might just fill her cognition out.

And another consideration entered his mind—a possibly that only he could deliver.

A Metamind was created through the layering of a cloned mind over an actual brain. With Avo being the Overheaven of Conceptualization, with him now learning the structure of new cognitions, what if he decided imprint a “more developed” Metamind over Dice? Would that “restore” her? Could that bridge her with the rest of humanity? Draus?

[Avo,] Elegant-Moon whispered. **[Focus.]**

Then, his base mind's found itself flooded by new details—a *crash course* in biology, with concepts like *neurons* and its supporting biomass filling in blanks paved over by the lores of the divine.

The kitten suddenly stopped fidgeting on Dice's shoulder, and the first dot of awareness materialized at the center of its brain—no larger than a pinprick.

As its comprehension of the world grew, so did Avo's and mourning accompanied joy as it dawned on him just how far humanity had fallen despite claiming dominion over reality's laws.