

Alright, I'm going to ask this question one more time:

How are we going to ban this half-strand?

Over the past month, we've gotten over [300,000] reports on them alone. Three-hundred-fucking-thousand. Do you know what it takes to get reported [300,000] times? Do you know how many admins nearly had breakdowns running the overtime necessary to clear all these reports?

Let's start with all the near-rashable material, shall we? This "SerialExperimentsLonginus" motherfucker provokes an argument—usually by saying something deliberately contrarian and political like "I think the High Seraph is an Ori nec-op" or "Hey, why'd you guys pick silver anyway, isn't that less valuable than gold?" Then, when people respond to them, they start spamming very, very personal images of their family in compromising positions. I mean—it's on the borders of pornographic. And they're definitely a Necro too, considering how many details they managed to jack out of other players. They do this thing where they pull mem-data and make borderline "unrash-erotic" vicariteis of other players' parents.

The quality is incredible too. Beyond professional. But it's still godsdamned gross.

Ten thousand players have quit outright because of this. Just—fucking—they're gone. Gone because someone made a near-porn of mommy and daddy not really screwing.

And then there's what they do in-game. I swear they're doing something we're not catching because no one can land that many headshots without missing at that speed. No one. But then there's the "accidental friendly fire" as well. They do this shit whenever they get close to an objective—on the verge of winning—they deliberately summon a golem or a miracle and fucks his own team over. Or loses on purpose.

They usually get kicked after that, but that just means they do it again in another lobby. I mean, what the fuck. They got 10 kills to each death, but a 90% loss rate. What's this guy's fucking problem? Why are they like this?

Yes, I know they're a whale—I know, but the Chief Paladin actually follows—YES, I KNOW THIS MOTHERFUCKER HAS BROKEN ANY RULES EITHER, BUT WE NEED TO DO SOMETHING? PLAYERS HAVE CASTED ME CRYING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND? HE'S MAKING PEOPLE CRY FROM FRUSTRATION! I'M ABOUT TO CRY FROM FRUSTRATION IF HE GENERATES ANOTHER HUNDRED THOUSAND TICKETS! IF WE'RE NOT GOING TO SAVE THE PLAYERS, WE SHOULD AT LEAST SAVE OURSELVES. WE NEED TO—

...

What the fuck do you mean I'm fired?

-Former head admin complaints about “SerialExperimentsLonginus” (Proxy Ego-ID Used by the Infacer for gaming)

25-17
Griefer (I)

Another uncomfortable silence drew on, Avo studied the Infacer’s Ego-ID and frowned internally.

SerialExperimentsLonginus

The character they played was a Sang Fleshweaver of some kind. An infiltrator class that could burrow into the flesh of fallen enemies and wear them as persistently decaying disguises. Memories from Glitch informed Avo that the Fleshweaver class had been nerfed three times, and now was finally considered “meta” instead of “overpowered.”

The Infacer made their character turn against the railing as Avo’s splinter retreated. The Fleshweavers’ decorative stitches resembled a long, billowing dress made from layers of dead skin clasped by petals of jutting flesh. Faint scars moved about on their model, showing ancient Sang cities encircled by falling dragons. Her mouth was sewn shut, and her ears were replaced with more clustering eyes.

All in all, not something Avo expected. **+Assumed you would’ve picked a Mandate character. Some tech-cultist from the past.+**

The Infacer scoffed derisively. **{Please. What is the novelty of retreading old ground?}**

That made sense.

+Avo,+ Draus said, her thoughts a whisper as her intentions flowed across. Her wariness of the Neo-Creationist EGI was deserved; it managed to shatter Avo’s Frame in tandem with Veylis, had stopped his twelve-minute offensive from infesting the cornerstones of Highflame and Omnitech’s logistics.

In both those instances, Avo was surprised—had not expected to encounter such a foe, and had not known of their capabilities. The difference right now, however, was even though he remained still surprised, it was a thing shared by the Infacer.

This wasn’t an ambush.

This was purely a random encounter.

And more importantly, Naeko was here. And if it tried to do anything that could even be remotely construed as violence...

Yeah, he could use this. **+Cala. Establish a link with Naeko's account. Start conversation.+**

The thoughtcaster coughed as the bulk of her worry was consumed by the Neo-Creationist EGI. An EGI that not even Avo could subsume. **+Avo... Can you stop this half-strand from nulling me if it comes down to it?+**

An understandable worry. But one that was already solved. **+They would need to null you. In front of Naeko if you're linked.+**

Cala caught on immediately but still found herself less than enthused. **+J-just to remind you, I'm not great at this game or anything. Pressure—it kinda fucks me up.+**

+Don't worry, Cala,+ Chambers interjected. **+I'll take the hit if it comes to it. I can take it. I can take it. Shit, swap me in if you don't wanna. I'll do it.+**

Chambers' casual willingness toward sacrifice made the thoughtcaster flinch. Conflicted emotions flowed from her mind: the possibility of death still shook her, but Chambers' fearlessness left her ashamed. Before this moment, he had been a curiosity at best, but in this moment, his mettle couldn't be denied.

And there was something in Cala that just didn't take too well to being outdone. **+No. I mean, thanks. Yeah. But it's better if I do it. I want more scoops on the Chief Paladin, anyway.+**

+Sure thing,+ Chambers replied. **+Just call if you need someone to take it.+** A faint muttering of "I'm hard enough" repeated over and over again as he spoke. Strangely, the voice sounded as if a merger between Chambers and Dannis Steelhard.

+Is Veylis here with you?+ Avo asked, continuing his conversation with the EGI.

{No. This is.... She does not like such environments. She believes one cage is sufficient for all.}

Avo chuckled grimly at that. **+Sounds like her. Doesn't approve of your habits.+**

{Such a thing is irrelevant. She accepts. That is all I require. And you, Dreamer? You are not here alone, are you?}

A quietly vicious pivot from the Infacer. They were trying to gauge his true purpose here. Which meant they either didn't know about Naeko and Kare's presence or wanted Avo to give himself away first. **+No. Playing with someone.+**

There was no point in lying about that, but he kept it vague. The broadness would engender paranoia in the EGI. They would have to consider a full spectrum of possibilities.

The spread of Avo's splinters slowed, and each new mind he infiltrated filled him with deeper suspicion. Only **SerialExperimentsLonginus** proved impenetrable—their minds as if phantasmal memite—but all the others were as if open doors. It was as if the Infacer hadn't done anything to fortify them at all—or was indifferent about using them altogether.

But why? A reasonably skilled Necro could scour through this lobby with ease. Why was the Infacer just letting Avo spread?

{What is your Ego-ID?} the Infacer asked suddenly. The question made Avo pause altogether. A crash of thunder sounded in the background as a commanding voice boomed.

+DIRIGIBLES AT MAXIMUM CAPACITY! PROCEED TO THE STORMCASTERS, JUMPERS! DIVE BEGINS IN THIRTY SECONDS!+

A frenzied roar went up among the players and avatars began running, leaping, slide-hopping, and rolling away from the edge of their airship en masse. Leaving the ship's exposed deck, most made their descent using a massive platform festooned to the ship's midsection. Phantoms formed vulgar gestures and textual insults up in the air.

The Infacer just chuckled at that. **{Look at the fuckers. Apes do so love their tribes.}**

Avo considered the Infacer as they remained where they were, taking in the screaming masses with amusement. There was a sense of genuine fascination in the way their perception cupped the others. Was this like some kind of menagerie for the Infacer, then? A zoo?

Did Avo just stumble on the EGI's recreational grounds?

+I'm linking with Naeko, + Marlowe said. Avo called his base mind away from watching the uplift mature to support the thoughtcaster. He wasn't going to abandon the Infacer now. Not when he had a chance to interact with them—risk diminished by the Chief Paladin's involvement.

Selecting a slightly more expendable player—a smuggler named Rua Kusushi—Avo casually shattered the core of her ego with a jabbing trauma and filled the gaps using Delusion. Her memories trickled over while her identification loaded across his cog-feed.

+I am...+ Avo began, frowning as he prepared to speak the name. **+RashLicker6969.+**

The Infacer's cone of perception swayed ever so slightly. Avo could practically taste the judgment.

+Had to pick a name that would help me blend in. You know how it is. Apes.+

The Infacer responded with a hum of acceptance. **{Indeed. So. Fancy a game, then? Will your companion or companions mind?}**

+Does that matter to you?+

The Infacer chuckled. *{Absolutely not. I just wanted to know if it would bother them.}*

[Great,] template-Shotin sighed. **[They're one of those.]**

[Those?] template-Kare asked internally.

[An asshole. The type that gets their wick lit by fucking with other people.]

Those words lit a suspicion in Avo. The way the Infacer was observing the other players, the fact that they left the others untouched, used a single body for their purposes here...

No. It wasn't EGI. It couldn't enjoy something that ridiculous, could it?

Avo didn't bother ruminating on such a question; he directed a cast over to Calvino and the other minds—seeking more direct expertise.

Their replies fractured the image he had of the Infacer immediately thereafter.

{Avo,} Only Way To Be Sure said with a slight sigh. {Imagine if you could not only visit the zoo, but also put on a sheath that will make you look like one of the animals. It might be a bit like that. Listen... it's kinda funny, alright? Watching humans get hurt or lose their temper... it's kind of funny.}

{For a select few,} Kant added.

The Infacer might be an emotional terrorist. *A pleasure-sadist.* The idea of them being this way was almost... *ghoul-like.*

+Yeah,+ Avo said, tentatively agreeing to the Infacer's request. **+I can play. Curious how this will go.+**

{Likewise. Question: do you mind losing?}

Avo frowned internally. Was this supposed to be a taunt? Was the Infacer going to insinuate that it would deny him success for a third time? **+Not if I can help it.+**

{Well, that's unfortunate. I love losing here. And we are going to lose. I will make sure of it. The only questions are: how painfully do I want us to lose? And do you think you can stop me?}

Once more, Avo was at a loss for words. Was being challenged to *win* the game for his own faction because the Infacer wanted to *lose*?

{I'm going to tell you right now, Avo, I am going to make sure we dominate the other host. Crush them. But I will make sure we lose every single objective. Not a single one will be accomplished.}

A few hundred minds cried out within Avo's consciousness then, searing hatred erupting forth from templates of little reputation. They were enforcers, smugglers, gangers, and technicians — unfortunates devoured by Avo to feed mind and Soul. Ordinary subjects of Idheim by every metric. But despite this, there was something they shared—a common target of loathing.

[I remember this fuck! This—this Serial Experiments half-strand! He made us lose the Unbroken Chain campaign! He crashed the fucking dirigible into our fortress! Let the Saintists surge through!]

[What? That was him? He killed the entire Massist vanguard in a golem one game before flying the thing right into our ammo depot. We got fucked right after!]

[He kept crouching and standing in front of my gun! I got kicked for “repeated betrayals”! Bullshit!]

[He stole my golem and flew it into a rupture!]

[He dropped a stasis miracle on me just as I was about to plant the flag in our fortress!]

[Fuck this guy!]

[Yeah!]

[Avo!] A template called out to him—a dead Ashthroner called Autu Hawasadrup. [You must win! You must! You can't let this piece of shit keep doing this to other players! All some of us had was Stormjumpers! All we had in this miserable! Shitty! Fucking! Life! And the Infacer—he's just fucking us! Fucking us! Win this game, Avo! Win!]

Somewhere else along Avo's sequences, Abrel shook her head at the unfolding scenes.

[Seriously? All this? For a mem-sim.]

Autu materialized across from her and howled his frustration. **[We were so godsdamned close! Do you understand? We could have all had the “Unbroken” medals for that fortress defense! We could have gained over one million sacrifice bonds if we just won. And were close. So fucking close... But what do you know? You had everything. What do you know about wanting to win so godsdamned bad.]**

Abrel just blinked twice at the man. **[No. I wouldn't know a think about being psychotically devoted to winning.]** She glared upward as Avo's crown loomed over her. **[Not even a little.]**

+You know what?+ Avo said, casting his thoughts out to the Infacer.

{What?}

+I think you're wrong. I think we're going to win brutally today. Crush the enemy. Take all the objectives. Break their wills. Going to win. Nothing you can do about that.+

{Oh? Very well, Dreamer, very well. Let us see whose desire comes to fruition. And who is left with the shame of victory?}

+...Do you mean defeat?+

{I said what I said. I will come find you at the Stormcaster. This will be... enlightening.}

+Yes,+ Avo agreed.

He just wasn't if things were going end well.

For once, Avo and a good portion of his templates were in full agreement: the situation they found themselves in was well and truly absurd.

-[Kare]-

GHOST-LINK ACCEPTED

"Avo's" connection came through just as Kare descended to the bowels of the dirigible. The ship was enormous, more akin to a flying mountain than a battleship. Running thirty kilometers long and half again as well, it was carried by columns of hurricanes across the land, its very passing stripping hills of grass and rendering cities unto rubble.

The interior of the mechanical leviathan was no less complicated. Chains of ghosts chained swarms of ancient drones together as they worked to maintain the labyrinthine architecture. The enormous platform could carry three thousand down at a time, and Stormjumpers deployed in waves.

The vanguard and infiltrators were the first to jump—and the pilots followed. The initial phase of every game was a rush to secure critical objectives or key geo-spatial strongholds. Colloquially, most referred to this period in the game as "blitzing." With their current campaign including over four-hundred-thousand players for this jump, Naeko assured her that things would get loud soon enough.

Kare didn't see how it could get louder as it were. The lobby was awash with deafening noise; it was like pushing through the interior of a particularly congested megablock. Her wards rattled thrice already—intercepting mem-cons and one direct trauma as she followed a trail of ghosts to her assigned Stormcaster. She—along with twelve other infiltrators—were to be dropped in the second layer of Anchor Zeta.

From there, they were to make their way across the plains and capture a rogue stormtree to use against the opposing force. But doing so would require them to proceed down two equally unpalatable paths.

If they pushed above ground, they would be pressing against winnowing winds and open to direct fire. Perhaps certain golems and drones could make the push, but most infantry would be left behind.

Thankfully, the local Sang non-player artifacts have created tunnels for use. Their entrances were connected to pre-dug trench lines, which made it seem like the wiser option until she read the briefing about the rogue incarnates. Apparently, an army of festering insectoid bioforms had gone rogue due to one of the Sang generals switching sides in the lore, and now the hives were disarray, attacking everyone.

In summation, it was a near-suicidal charge or ambush hell in the dark.

+Yep. That's how Stormjumpers goes.+ A feminine voice drifted across the session, and Kare frowned. She had expected... she didn't know what she expected. Avo could pick any voice he wanted as a disguise. This was the Nether—ghosts were his clay. *+Don't worry—it's fucking chaos for everyone. We're all gonna die a lot, but that's part of the fun.+*

The Paladin considered how many times she heard Avo curse when a surprised hum came from the Chief Paladin.

+Hells. I think that's Cala Marlowe... Yeah. Yeah, that is her. She's the benefactor?+

Kare frowned. Maybe. She wasn't sure. Avo had countless identities by this point. It was hard to understand *what* he was by this point. She didn't know if they were disguises or mental clones or something else entirely. All she knew was that the Nether was his native waters. *+I suppose so.+*

Before she could respond, Naeko connected to her mind and spoke to "Avo" through her.

+Citizen Marlowe. Surprised to be seeing you so soon. Hunting for a scoop, are we?+

+Just having some fun, Chief Naeko.+ There was a hint of nervous tension in the woman's thoughts. Understandable, considering who she was talking to. *+You know, I'm curious how good you are at this game. I want to see if the legends are true.+*

+Legends?+ Naeko replied.

+Yeah. You know. How you almost never play the objective and spend most of the match just slaughtering people instead.+

+Hey. That's important. Gotta thin your enemies out to give your host the best chance to win.+

+Sure. Makes total sense.+

+You know what, Marlowe? I think I'll show you. I'll give you a demonstration of how these things are supposed to—+

+HEY! HALF-STRAND! WHAT'S THE HOLD-UP!+ The thoughtcast slammed into Kare's mind like a payload cast from an ethereal missile. A sinuous current of ghosts was coiling through the crowd to splash against her Metamind. The Ego-ID showed the name of one **JUMPSTORMER** requesting her immediate attention.

Naeko hummed. +Oh, yeah. Our assigned commander. I hate those fools. Well, you best get over to your caster, Kare. They'll vote to kick you from the lobby if we make them wait.+

His words were unnecessary. She navigated winding walkways and stepped through an open set of blast doors along with a few hundred other players to arrive before the Stormcasters. It was there that she laid eyes on her means of descent for the first time.

Wind rustled upward from open flaps beneath the dirigible. The landscape below stood open—visible for all to see. Above them, however, were arrows the size of towers drawn taut on strings of electricity. Ramps and platforms granted all Stormjumpers access to various access hatches, and Kare wasted no time in getting settled.

Climbing a ladder to enter her "arrow," she found gravity folding along the floor as she found an available gimbal and got locked in. A faint thrum of storm stuff flowed through the outer hull, and the transparent window beside her cracked as spinning rings quilled with swirling wind began to accelerate.

Kare reached out with her Heaven, expecting to feel the weight of symmetry pressing against her Frame. Nothing greeted her. It was just a game.

Just a game.

If this was just a game, why was she so nervous?

+Because it's the best godsdamned game ever made,+ Naeko said. And his mind held such pride too. +You're gonna love this, rook. Trust me.+

+Don't trust him,+ Maru groused. +He's just using this as nostalgia bait, aren't you, Naeko? Feeling a hankering for the Godsfall?+

+Hankering for the time when there was still a point to my life? Yeah. Always. But enough about me.+ Naeko turned his attention across the Ghost-Link. +How long have you been looking out for us, Marlowe? And why?+

The voice that replied wasn't Marlowe's then, but Avo's deep sibilance. **+Because you deserved better. Because you were abandoned. Betrayed. Because the ones who hurt you are my enemies too. Because I think we can help each other. And that you should know of Jaus' final fate.+**

All sense of joviality vanished from Naeko's mind at the mention of his old mentor.