Rituals and Roles

Everyone jokes about how silly he is afterwards and laugh at Whitey for acting like some big military man. Yet they all long for the next fortball match. They need it. In a world full of absolute misery and complete euphoria, they live a life of the mundane. The acid bathers of the Old City would give everything to live in a Blue Ocean Park, yet Whitey’s fellow college students can’t help but long for more. They want to experience the thrill of being a street punk blazing through the neon blasted concrete streets, or to stand at the top of a skyscraper with the whole of Copenhagen beneath them. They will never experience any of that. They will become corporate drones, living a perfect life of mediocrity. Their Companion will find them a partner, a house and decide when and how many kids they need. Once their kids have died, all traces of them will be left and their impact on the world forgotten. That’s why they come back to play fortball again and again. They laugh at Whitey’s silly rules and gestures, but it means the world to them. Every Sunday morning, when they finish the locker room ritual, they join Whitey’s ranks as soldiers. Though they could never admit that to anyone, least of all themselves, for that would be accepting that their life could be anything but exemplary monotony. And not just theirs, but their parents’ life as well, and whoever might have come before them. So, they continue laughing, and they continue coming back to don their uniform in the college locker room.

Whitey has inadvertently made a children’s game into a cultural phenomenon at the college he attends. The last few years, the rumours of the fortball warzones have spread from 5-3 to the other Blue Ocean parks, and now organized fortball play is commonplace at all institutions where any form of P.E. exists. Even the corpo-heads over at the park’s local Rhea’s open office hellscape have experimented with replacing pizza Friday with fortball.

Rituals and roles. That’s Whitey’s secret sauce. It is beautiful, really, how no matter your skills, given the right role, you can be of some value to the team. Got a leg-upgrade last holiday? Good, you are on capture duty. Got a good aim with a ball? Trivially assigned to the shooting tower. Both? Flanking team. Whitey has none of that, nor the reflexes to deflect balls and brawns to build proper forts. Quite the contrary, he is clumsy, and his strength might once have been slightly above average, but that was in an age were muscled were forged in the gyms, not factories and laboratories. But he needed none of that, not on the battlefield. His parents, meaning his mom, had placed their gene budget on his mental capabilities. Whitey occasionally wonders how many of his thoughts and interests can be traced back to the lab wearing messiah pretenders. It actually made it to the district newspaper when Mom decided to use the surrogate money on geneboosting instead. His mom also made sure that his oily, pale skin was blamed on the lacking surrogate. But in this moment, scanning the battlefield as the two opposing forces are building up their forts, Whitey would say it was a worthwhile investment. For the first time since the Eye-cident, as the XDD community had dubbed it, Whitey is feeling truly alive. Back in the locker room, changing into his worn-out sports clothes he inherited from some older cousin years ago, it was as if a fog inside his head started clearing up. Much like coming out of a Day Dream, and in a sense, he was.

Now, of course, all that wisdom about purpose and roles drowns in the acid lakes your team has three transhuman superstars. Then you are just an ammunition gatherer, or if you happen to be either be too loud mouthed or slow, collateral damage. Not a chance the sharp face one’s mother saved on the surrogate. From the looks of it, one couldn’t possible invest more into her anyway. Whitey, with a look on his face as if the fog had come back, analysed the almost uncannily perfect face of his soon-to-be opponent who just came into view alongside her two friends.

“Has to be multigenerational. Natural or dedicated tailors though? Natural, and that’s like… everything half of my soldiers’ own worth of face, maybe minus Simó. Heard his dad got a boat that can withstand the ocean. Dedicated…”

His gaze turned to his fellow classmates, currently building up the turtle fort he instructed them to.

W: “Add Vici’s balloon to Simó’s boat, and assuming the rumours about Ras’ dad’s SUR-razor are true, then.... No, not even close, not even within three orders of magnitudes. But that would be ridiculous, no one at Blue Park is dedicated… Whatever she is, we’ll soon find out.”

Gorilla and God

The everlasting energy source that is Kai Lin danced ahead of me into the huge sports hall. For a microsecond, I questioned my decision to bring Kai Lin on this mission, but even before the doubt had reached my consciousness it was shut down. I do not make mistakes.

KL: “It smells exciting in here!”, their deer eyes shined with joy.

Kami: “You mean like a circus.”

Kamiis the only other person I will ever allow laying a finger on my outfit and hair. She, like I, knows that having a flawless body is not enough. Unlike the Elders. When we were kids, we swore we would never end up like those rotten bags of skin in their monk clothing of Old. Unfortunately, Kami’s ambitions are limited to fashion. And knives. Both her skills with sewing needle and a knife are unmatched. I allow myself a hint of excitement at the thought of her working with her tools.

KL: “Yeah, like a circus. Or a zoo!”

Mihn: “Of course it does. They are all monkeys, in one dim-witted form or another.” I declared. “Primates who choose to have robotic rats burrow through their already embarrassing brains and think for them instead. Pathetic. That we share a common ancestor is my greatest shame.” There was another comparison to be made about their brains being like cheese for their A.I. rats, but Kami cut me off before it could manifest.

Kami: “Ugh, loosen up, Mihn. You choose to come here.”

Kai Lin and Kami, like yin and yang, my friends are complimentary. Kai Lin is everchanging, Kami is steadfast. Me? I’m right in the middle, on the line between chaos and order. A foot on each side, always ready to adapt but sturdy enough to withstand any change. The Daoists says the symbol represents being. By my blood, the Elders loves talking about the hyperreal versus the objective reality. And the instructors how it relates to the Metaverse, Day Dreams or whatever new thing Homo Sapiens has invented for themselves to keep them occupied from living their life of wasteful nothingness. I’m the Dao. I am being. I am the fundamental forces manifest.

KL: “Ey yo Mihn, the play is about to begin. You should get up on the scene.”

To think that I am about to bless the peasants with my display of excellence. So be it. Good thing they wouldn’t be able to have their Companions, how I despise that word, record the match. Kai Lin would make sure of that.

The audacity. The absolute impudence. That gorilla is going to walk into me like I’m some middle shelf pretty girl waiting for a white knight to save her. Alright, I’ll play your game. I will act like I don’t see you; you like you don’t see me. We collide, I fall to the ground, you help me up, I give a demure smile, our Companions chitter and screech in both our mouldy cheese brains that we are a match. That we now have a date booked Wednesday night, that we should marry after college and have three children together. By my blood, I’m about to teach him the cost of my attention.

Mihn: “Kami, would you mind helping me take out the trash, 12 o’clock.”

Kami, like Kai Lin, are on the right side of evolution, but just barely. Their DNA distance to Homo Sapiens is larger than Homo Sapiens’ to chimps, but only on the first decimal point. That means I don’t have to worry about Kami’s knives in my back, but just as importantly, that I can speak to them like an adult, and not like a baby, unlike my interactions with Mr. Silverback and his kind. In other words, it takes Kami just the right amount of time to catch on my line of thought. A millisecond longer and the boredom would kick in. So, we start chit chattering, buzzing out nonsense like the female worker bees around us. “So how was your day? Superb! Oh, that’s fantastic, I’m so glad you are happy. Wanna watch some Day Dreams tonight? Sure, that sounds just wonderful. I’m sure it will be such a good and meaningful time.”

It worked. Of course it did, it involved me. The rowboat sized gorilla man with all his compensating cybernetics was now within range. As if I would even grace with him my touch. Sulphur. Why do I smell sulphur? Had I been a lesser being, the distraction might have concluded in the barbarian successfully securing the last centimetre needed for collision. Not me, I’m omnipresent. A centimetre is more than enough. It’s simple fluid dynamics, really. The stuff even his parasite can calculate. I move with such speed from my position in front of him to his back, creating a space of vacuum at his front, and overpressure at his back, forcing him headfirst into the ground. In cases like this, I usually just let the subconscious do its thing. But for some reason, I decided to give the brute the honour of my full attention. Not for long, a shorter period than his mind could comprehend, but long enough that the effect was tenfold. If only his feeble mind would comprehend what a gift I had bestowed upon him. That he should cherish his broken jaw and nose. Meanwhile, I had considered the possible sources of the sulphur. All their feet have an aura of sulphur, but it’s not that. Did someone eat rotten eggs for breakfast? Would not be surprising, but no. Pure sulphur does not smell, it’s only when it exists in compounds that the stench arrives. What caught my attention is the smell of almost pure sulphur, likely not detectable by even Kami.

Kami:” Ugh, you could’ve warned me Mihn. I almost got a bit of his face on my dress.”

Mihn: “To think that in the Old World, people like him had a say in how things were run. And not just that, his opinion and mine would matter equally. No wonder they failed.”

Kami sighed again, knowing well that it would be better not to let her thoughts become words, but her face said it all: “Ugh, Stop whining Mihn. We get it. You said it a million times already. Homo Sapiens dumb, Homo Deus good.”

A couple of the girls runs past me. Just the kind of type the steroid baby had assumed me to be like. Maybe he would succeed in his quest for a fair maiden after all. When my gaze by chance falls upon one of female students here whose DNA scheme is shaped to satisfy the desires of men, I can’t help but feel pity. Not for them of course, that would be ridiculous. They might not be responsible for their genes, but they all choose to let their brain decay with the use of a Companion. They all choose to don revealing clothes. Kai Lin is proof that you don’t need to become what your parents designed you to be. They’ve got the most expensive scheme designed for pleasing men, and in theory, only the Tick-Tock models should outperform them in that regard. They are traditional feminine traits incarnate, or rather, the feminine traits men desire. It’s not like they fully reject their femininity, but rather the idea that they ought to be something so defined, so boxed in. Kai Lin is Kai Lin, and I admire that about them. So, I have no qualms about equating the pimped-out girls currently attending to the broken face who embrace their design with whatever curse I might have available at that moment.

*You don’t need to become what your parents designed you to be.* Through rigorous training throughout all my youth, the subconsciousness part of my brain has been trained to eliminate unnecessary thoughts like that. Trivially, it is not the design-slaves I pity, but my sisters. The oldest of them were unfortunate enough to be created back when Father was around. Blasphemous freak, spoiling sacred flesh by shaping them into sex idols, idols who deified the worshipper. I couldn’t help but glance at my body, pure of anything related to reproduction, and give Mother a rare, truly grateful thought for cleansing it. For everyone but the lowest of the low, sexual intercourse has lost all relation to procreation. So why do men keep on insisting that women should be shaped for child carrying? The world will be a better place once that evolutionary hiccup has been overcome. I’m not suggesting that I was the first to probe the question of how humanity should be designed now that birth is independent of sex, however nobody have managed to give an answer yet. But I’m not nobody, and there’s not a single neuron in my brain that doubts my answer to the question.

**Prophet**

I wanted to give up the thought, declare that it was nothing. That someone had been to the chemistry lab before going here. But I don’t have thoughts not worth thinking. I allocated a part of my brain to continue working on the sulphur issue and walked to my scene that Kai Lin had instructed the confused college students to set up.

It went as the other games had. Kai Lin secured the bat they call a “flag”, Kami provided cover, I demonstrated once again that Sapiens is outdated. The only notable difference is that their gymnastic equipment is arranged in a noticeably more sophisticated way. This one actually bears some resemblance of a fort. Not that it matters. They could have used a real castle, and the results would have been the same. Why the locals praise this activity so still alludes me. In every game, the students around me look more depressed than Kami after that one time where she had to block an acidic beam with her favourite combat dress. Those Acid Antagonists gangsters were surely something. It could be worse; I could be delving deep into American bunkers. Compared to that, a Blue Ocean Park patience test is nothing. I must succeed with opening this lab. Mother demands it. If I don’t, next stop will surely be the bunkers again. With Rhea’s strong influence in Copenhagen, intel is mandatory, so for now, I will indulge in this game that have such a grip on the parks’ residents.

At first, the fortball matches had managed to scratch the icy surface that is Kami’s face and bring a hint of excitement. Relatively to their peers, not the Park students, that would be a ridiculous statement, Kami’s face is rather ugly. Not that most people would know. They see a face worthy of a frame, for what Kami lacks in genetics she makes up for in skill. Only a select few, including myself, have seen Kami without her cosmetics.

Kami: “This place stinks, literally. I don’t think they ever clean the gym equipment. That one has a spot of urine at least five years old.”

Her face is back to its steady state of radiating boredom.

Kami: “So, did your performance yield anything useful? Learned something groundbreaking?”.

Mihn: “Not yet. Their irrational affection for this game still alludes me.”

Kami: “Why do you insists on this being so deep? They like to entertain themselves, fortball is just the latest trend.”

Kai Lin shares the same opinion, that it is just entertainment, but I know it runs deeper. This is unusual behaviour. Park residents, especially those in Rhea’s grasp, seldomly deviate from their standard routine, that is: Wake up, go to school or work, go home and spend the remainder of the day in a Day Dream or a similarly meaningless activity. But the way the Rhea-drones talk, or rather *don’t* talk, about fortball, the secrecy surrounding it and their almost ceremonial acts suggests something akin to a cult. And all cults have a prophet.

**Games and war**

They never call Whitey anything other than his nickname, but the other soldiers are addressed by rank. So, when Whitey walked up to the short Brazilian girl in red uniform, it was “Runner Vici” that was told she should have her troops ready to counter-flank. Surprised, she stopped her warmup.

V: “Why the change, Whitey? The Red Devils are ready, and we did pretty good the last two weeks, didn’t we?”

W: “More than good. The sprint against the ghosts from the Plantation Klan? I’m sure they are still in denial about the fact that a bunch of ‘mudlickers’ could snatch their flag. I assure you, Runner, neither you nor your Devil’s performance have anything to do with this. Look closely, to the right of their guard tower. You see those two girls? The one with the sharp, pretty face and red outfit clearly chosen to highlight her expensive body, the one with waving purple hair and unpractical, long, yellow dress. Really, can’t see them? Look, there’s the third one! On the top of the tower, the acrobatic blue dressed one. Yup, I really do think that is a small cape.”

Sai never laughs during the fights, but when the blue cartoon cosplayer somersaulted down and landed on the head of a soon-to-be ammunition-gather teammate without him realizing, he could not help himself and blew a bit of air out the nose. However professional the stunt might have been, it was the act of an amateur. Rule number zero of fortball: Don’t show off your skills before the match.

First engagement went horrible, but as his soldiers have come to learn, Whitey doesn’t mind losing the first fight if it provides useful analytics. And he has a lot to analyse. Whitey counted himself lucky to not be on Perfect face’s team. No way he would spend a fortball opportunity on carrying ammo for the superstar trio. On the other hand, Perfect face had just made a performance that made him revisit his doubts about her having multigenerational dedicated tailors. Had it just been her and green soldiers, Whitey would be worried. But she brought two friends. The cape wearing blue acrobat he and Vici had laughed at made a joke of his turtle defences, practically running vertically up their fortifications while whistling. Whitey was at a distance, so at first, he thought the tower guards were stunned at the sudden sight of an enemy among them. But it was that accursed, eerie whistle. In his after-action analysis, he considered his distance to the whistling blue spirit to be a critical factor for their later success.

What’s going on? His mind is crystal clear, thanks to fortball, yet he can’t focus his thoughts on solving the problem that is Perfect face. His own unnatural, borderline uncanny face is forced by the frustration into a desperate, wide smile, the following laugh broken off by an angry stamping. Those of his soldiers who has served under him many times know it’s better to just let it slide. Though outbreaks like that are typically followed by whispers of varying degrees of concern. Simó’s red, metallic eyes sees better than any Old World bird’s ever did, but they came with the hidden cost of putting the responsibility of showing emotions solely onto his voice.  
S: “Don’t you think Whitey is taking this a bit too serious? Was he also like that before… You know.”

Vici, rubbing her forehead, still hurting after her confrontation with the purple haired witch, answers the equally short boy.  
V: “Yeah, yeah, the smile dance goes way back.”   
S: “But it *is* just a game after all. We grab whatever we can find in the equipment room, make some barricades, and throw stuff at the other side’s barricades hoping to hit someone behind them, maybe even grab their flag.”  
V: “Keep it down, Simó! You wanna get on ammo duty?”  
S: “Nah, Whitey knows I’m too good at hitting ‘enemy soldiers’ to waste time collecting ‘ammunition’.”  
V: “Just cut him some slack, ever since his girlfriend, you know.”  
S: “We saw the XDD together, don’t need to remind me of the details.”   
V: “You think he did it?”  
S: “Cut it Vici. Sure, he takes fortball a tad too serious and does his little weirdo smile-dance from time to time, but it’s not like everyone here is a saint.   
V: Huh? Yeah, I know nobody here’s got a Saint license, why you bringing that up?

Simó looks just as confused for a moment before replying.

S: “Ah, sorry. Forgot you need your Companion to translate everything into easy talk.”

V: “Not my fault Whitey forces us to run on reduced features. Anyway, why would the cops spend so much energy on Whitey’s case if it was so cut and clear. And I know you’ve heard the rumours too. About his granddad.”

Whitey arrived to interrupt his two elite troops’ discussion with a face brimming with newfound determination.

W: “I better hope it’s flanking strategy you too are discussing so intensely. New target priority update, ignore Perfect face, focus on her two friends instead.”

When her Devils later would further tease Vici for being slow without her Companion on, she would refute that they weren’t responsible for stopping the snake haired freak, and that her Companion had declared the had suffered a minor concussion.

V: “Who’s ‘Perfect face’?”  
W: “You know who. Miss Billion-dollar war machine.”  
V: “You really have gone mad Whitey. She took out half our team last battle!”

They did not care. For them, fortball is just a game. Entertainment. Just a morning display of their hyperhacked bodies and minds. In the right hands, anger is a tool, but lately Whitey has not been putting too much trust in his hands. *The blinding lights of the fed getting ready to Neural Dive him. Their endless follow up questions.*

W: “Not accurate. She did take out twenty of our forty-one soldiers, yet she had the full attention of at least thirty. And not one of them managed to hit her.”

Simó, whose optimism highly outweighed his battlefield intuition, declared:  
S: “So why don’t we all just focus her and give her Upper League lips a taste of Blue Ocean 5-3 dirt!”  
W: “The obvious counterstrategy would be to just turtle in, which would ruin our focus. But I will give you, she seems too arrogant to hide. But that’s exactly why we must not give her any attention. She and her friends are here to play a game, and we are their toys. They see fortball as a game where the goal is to have as many eyes admiring their all too perfect bodies. Last fight, we did just that. Entertained and gave them all the attention in the world.”

Vici quickly cuts off Simó before he can comment on the nature of fortball.

V: “I don’t know Whitey, aren’t you overthinking this a bit? We all know you care a *lot* about fortball. Don’t get me wrong, your enthusiasm is contagious, and we like… uh, fighting alongside you. But how come you know the girls on the other side of the trenches don’t feel the same? I don’t mean to be rude, but could it be that you are just a tiny bit jealous?”

Jealous about their maxed out genebudget? Their war ending performances, without any steel enhancements? Okay, maybe. No, definitely. But no, he was certain the titantrio did in fact not engage in this war to win it, or rather, their win conditions were not those in the fortball ruleset. Whitey had at this point figured out why they were here: They wanted admiration and all that stuff. But why *here*? They surely aren’t from any of the Blue Ocean parks, nor would they have any reason to attend their college, and he would’ve heard of them if they did attend it. The Haunting Dancer sports a genescheme that in a bad life might have been enrolled in their college, but her attitude, skills and company say otherwise.

W: “It’s an order. And in any case, you too will be busy getting revenge from last fight. Vici, you, and the Red Devils will be tasked with taking out the blue assassin.”

Simó’s face hinted at relief, while Vici’s was pure horror.

W: “Don’t worry, I have a solution for her siren song, and I promise you’ll like it. Vici, remember the strategy you employed against the racist ghosts?”

The troopers walked away from the conversation high on the possibility of a comeback, leaving a satisfied Whitey behind. Morale is everything.

**Sulphur**

What are they doing? They are not supposed to be able to do that. They are animals. Ants can work together, but thinking is reserved for us. *Sulphur*. They should, rightfully, assign me as the most dangerous opponent, and then attempt to take me down. *Sulphur will take you down*. I was on the ground again when the works of my subconsciousness reached me*.* Someone had tried to shoot at my back, hoping to take me out. *No, some*thing*.* But it was a pathetic excuse for a shot. So incredibly human. Most of the zombies here would be able to catch it, of course not at such an early time. I gave the only proper answer, a force packed gut punch that would leave the pretender crying in pain. Wait, no I did not. I delivered the assassin’s kiss. I need answers. Now. *Sulphur*. The slugs knew at this point to stay clear of me, not that I cared if I accidently pulverised a foot.

Mihn: “Kai Lin, Kami, explain! Now!”

Fear is a central part of our relationship. How could it not be? Kai Lin’s all too cute eyes are wet, while Kami gave me her trademark dead-inside-look.

Kami: “They took our flag, delivered it to their side, and won the match.”

KL: “They screamed at me. I couldn’t even hear my whistle. Made fun of my face, kept shouting ‘desenho animado’ over and over again. As if I needed that synched!”

Mihn: “I don’t care! I do. Not. Care. Why didn’t they shoot at me? Why did they care about you?”

*Sulphur cared about you.*

Later, I would thank Kami for this moment, not directly of course, but I would send her a small, grateful thought. A slight burn in the black depths of Kami’s eyes.

Kami: “Ugh, look at us! Is this who we are? Crying and yelling because of some Rhea sport? Besides, there’s still a third round, is there not?”

She is right. There is a third round. Now we know that there’s something beyond chittering echoing inside their skulls, and we know what they are capable. *Sulphur knows what you are capable of.* By some pure chance of probability, my group had experienced a 5 standard deviation event. But I am going to show them a true outlier.

Kai Lin, while more touched by the experience than I would prefer, seems to have sobered up and now tries to cheer me up as well.

KL: “Ye, let’s crush… No, how about we let Mihn shows these slumpsters who’s up high. You know how last round; they were acting like a bunch of ratcats and ignored Mihn? So how about we give her enough of those lumps to hit every single one of them. Uh, and me and Kami can stay back. That way, they can’t really do anything but shoot at Mihn. That’s sounds like a brilly plan, doesn’t it? No way the Rhea cockroaches can counter that.”

Mihn: “No, not cockroaches. Cockroaches can survive anything. The evolutionary embarrassment that is Homo Sapiens would exterminate themselves in any serious attempt to get rid of cockroaches.”

By the relieved look they exchange after my comment, I realize that she did indeed succeed in raising my spirit, and I’m ready to shine like the star I’m meant to be. *Sulphur is the eclipse.*

**Price of victory**

When Whitey later wrote his after-action report, the employed strategy for the second fight sounded like it either came out of either an asylum or a kindergarten.

“Ignore everyone but the ‘Whistling Assassin’, ‘Hair Witch’, and any who attempts to deliver ammunition to the ‘Invincible Empress’. As usual, the names were chosen by locker room popularity vote, though at multiple times, Whitey caught himself writing “Perfect Face” instead. The Red Devils was assigned the Whistling Assassin, and to counteract her distracting whistle, they roared their *grito de guerra*. They faced her on no man’s land where her acrobatic abilities where of limited use. To solve the immense firepower issue that was the Hair Witch, we employed a less elegant trick: Throw bodies at her faster than she can collect ammo. *Observation*: Using hair defensively should be explored in more depth. Casualties was high as expected, but acceptable at 34 out of 41, and their martyrdom was recorded. The enemy flag was secured by Vici.”

Even though no one ever reads the reports but himself, he did not record the reason of his own death. They have lost 93.1% of previous engagements whenever he has been taking out in the first half of the battle, and everyone knows and accepts his contributions are best made safely behind the fort walls. He told himself that it was to collect intelligence, but then why didn’t he record it in the report?

There, on the large podium her slaves had built her, she stood for everyone to see. Fifteen minutes ago, the podium featured an invincible force who gracefully returned every shot sent at her with a hundredfold power without breaking a sweat. Now she stood there, spewing her anger at the confused worker-ants, commanding them to bring her ammunition. The sound of her voice invokes the same feeling you get the first time listening to a truly magnificent pierce of music. Her piercing voice and the resulting shiver of awe that runs down Whitey’s back proved that his plan had worked. There she stood, back against the enemy line, her two friends dead, Whitey’s troops inside her fort, but worst of all, no one cared about her. He had turned her Colosseum into a circus, the entertained into the entertainer.

The only thing Whitey did record about Perfect face was a couple of statements from the victims of the few shots she was able to make, who quite literally fell the soldiers, and who were unable to participate in the third, final round due to the pain.

He lied. Whitely feels terrible when lying, but he had to, the war depended on it, and who was he to set his own beliefs above the success of his soldiers? Their morale was still shaking from the first fight, better they didn’t know they were facing fatal force. *Then why did you fire the projectile at the girl?* The balls used in fortball are not actually balls, they are cheap paper hold together with duct tape. Thus, each ball has a unique shape and weight, and therefore interacts differently with air resistance. So, Whitey had briefly turned on his Companion to aid him in the shot. The shot was caught, as expected. What pulled him into calculation state was the distance at which the projectile was caught. Arm’s length, with back turned and attention on the flag carrying Red Devils. Could she have heard the bullet amongst the chaos? It was Vici’s sweaty, acne ridden face with its smile of victory. It was when her face turned to worry that Whitely was brought out of his analysation trance, and not his slashed jugular veins. Is ugliness a quintessential feature of being human?

Vici: “Whitey, what’s going on. What happened to you, can you hear me? Black sun, we need that wound stopped”.

And why would the wound have disturbed him? It did not hurt; the cut was perfect. Yet, as Vici shouted into his face, he was bleeding at a critical rate. She was no longer in sight. Before Whitey could even process the fact that Perfect face had caught his projectile, she had, still back turned, with a mere flick of the wrist arched it back at Whitey with such precision and force the duct tape paper lump had cut him like he truly had been hit by a blade. Vici fumbled with the InstaWound+ pack. Personally, he would have aimed for the brows. A bleeding soldier can fight on, either on natural or synthetic adrenaline, but a soldier whose eyes are blinded by blood is as useful as a dead one. With the blood stopped Vici and two other Devils started distracting him, demanding to know what had happened. A lie without any effort but more than convincing was given. Her mind and body must be in total unison, her nervous system running like a car on a superconducting highway. How close can electrons get to the speed of light in a human body?

Victory reversed

At first, everything goes according to plan. Heads, with no ability to learn from mistakes, pop out from hiding and are immediately met with a shot optimised for pain, but not exceeding what their Companion determines is worth a visit to the doctor. No reason to attract outside attention, so thirty plus park doctor appointments would be counterproductive. *You already attracted Sulphur’s attention.* It is like that one of Kami’s Old World arcade games where hamsters pop up and you hit them with a hammer. But there are no more hamsters, the machine is broken. I can hear them talking, busy with futile plannings to avoid the inevitable hammer. Trivially, I’m not the only one getting impatient, because Kai Lin pops her OW pretty face up and complains.

KL: “Yo, you didn’t get ‘em all yet, right? So, what’s going on, you scared them to death or what?”

Mihn: “The cowards are trying to outsmart *us,* hah! Either that, or they are hoping for the time to run out and get a tie.”

KL: “Booooring. If you want me to go deliver some stealth whistling, just give the call. That should drive them out. Besides, how much time is left of the match?”

Mihn: “Last hit was precisely five minutes ago, and there’s six minutes and five seconds left of the match.”

You can tell Kai Lin is bored when she starts babbling about the most irrelevant details of a conversation.

KL: “Those timings you just gave, when did they apply? When you said the word ‘second’ or?”

Mihn: “I usually do the timings such that they apply at the end of my sentence. By my blood, I thought they would never do anything! Now, get down from here, I need the space.”

What is supposed to be resemble the left gate of their fortifications is currently being raised. Slowly. Unnecessarily slowly. Unfortunately, if the paper lumps hit anything before a person, the hit is disqualified, so no bouncing the lumps of the floor to hit them early. Unless, trivially, if you know how to utilize the Magnus effect. So, I hit five of the kneeling students by spinning the balls up under the gate before the targets are in sight. While in the process of determining the reason for their kneeling, I terminate the remaining five who are now visible. No cover and frozen in a praying stance without any attempt at dodging. When they get up and leave the battlefield, they start clapping. A slow, sarcastic clap. Are they mocking *me*? You are not allowed to shoot at the dead leaving the battlefield, but accidents happen. One such accident happened to the loudest clapping one, the short one who screamed at Kai Lin. Seeing her surprised face when she realized she is no longer the owner of a ponytail does sweeten the otherwise bitter situation. Shortly after, the right gate is opened. The eight behind the gate are taken down at record approaching speed, yet I can hear my own frustration through their now worryingly loud groans of pain. The clapping is accompanied by comments such as “Nice job hitting a still target”. What are they trying to achieve? Half of their team members have been hit, so why do I feel like the loser? How dare they make me feel this way? *They don’t, Sulphur does.* Left gate again. More sarcastic clapping and comments. Now what is that cold thing on my forehead? Sweat. I am sweating. This needs to stop, now! *Then stop Sulphur.* The lights have started flickering, and a part of me senses that Kami and Kai Lin are trying to cool me down. That part of me is ignored, as the right gate opens the position is accompanied by prayers. “Oh please, Empress Divine, pick me”, “Shoot me, I beg you.”. Then I did what my instructors drilled me not to do, what causes my friends to exchange anxious looks, what the Elders deem improper etiquette, what Mother sent me to the abomination vaults for. I turn off the emotional breaks, fire up the amygdala and let my rage reign.

The blue dragon

Vici and Simó were sitting on a bench, watching from the sideline as Whitey’s dubious plan unfolded. Vici was holding what used to be her ponytail, staring at it in disbelief. Hair holds a significant cultural status amongst many of the South American refugees, especially the Voodoo Witches that Vici had dreamed of joining. Over 50 centimetres and hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of care lost. Simó was busy rubbing the throbbing bruise on his left temple when he mumbled:

Simó: “What was Whitey’s plan again? Because the way I see it, we are losing harder than the first round. And I hate to say it, but this game does not have that tactical, military feel to it.”

Vici did not answer, but Simó just continued.

Simó: “Ah right, cause a reaction from the Invincible Empress, hoping that she would leave her vantage point. Look how that’s going, yup there comes the rest of your Devils, and the Empress is still up there. I suppose Whitey can’t get it right every time.”

One of the newcomers asked if they knew what was going on with the lights, as there was not any blackout scheduled, and the next sunbreak is not supposed to come before Autumn. It was only visible whenever the lights went out, but the Invincible Empress was glowing. Blue, crackling lights danced around her. Other electronic devices begun to become unresponsive. The Empress had taken a low stance, and started tracing her arms in a motion belonging to a form of martial art. Now the blue lights of intense energy were visible even when the gym’s large lights were on, and it became clear she was guiding the crackling energy around her, forming it together. Making it stronger. The movement only half a dozen seconds, and as it came to an end, the lights went out completely. She pulled the energy into her chest and then extending her arms, guiding the force out to the end of her fingertips, which was pointing at their fortifications. Time stopped for a moment, as the benchwarmers witnessed how a beam of pure, blue lightning made its way from her fingertips to and through the middle of their fortifications. The show concluded in an explosion of white and blue light that was only felt, not heard.

They were all speechless, except Vici who whispered “dragão azul”. Luckily, all their team members were either at one of the gates to the sides or sitting on the same bench as them. Except Whitey who always commandeered from the centre of their barricades. When it became clear that the Invincible Empress was gone and there would be no more lightning, Vici and Simó, still in shock, walked carefully towards where the lightning had met its target, praying Whitey had not been hit. He greeted them with a stern look.

Whitey: “The dead should not walk on the field, unless revived. And I have not authorised a revival mission.”

His skin was visibly burned, still smoking, yet his demeanour was unchanged. It was as if this was just another part of the war. As if the enemy forces had brought in heavy artillery that they now had to counteract, and not a magical explosion with fatal intent in the gymnastics room. One thing had changed. For the first time in the time Vici had known Whitey, he looked excited, alive, wanting.

The three foreign girls were gone without a trace, and the game ended without an official winner. No one, except Whitey, had any intent on continuing after the attack, and the next many weeks fortball was cancelled.

Punishment

“Sai, can you turn on your Companion?”

Before Whitey had a change to protest, his Old World studies teacher followed up with an unexpected “please”, and soon after he found himself walking to the principal’s office. Most students never even meet the principal, and Sai “Whitey” Hill had not been there since he and his former girlfriend got caught with papers they had acquired from a raid on the old university H.C.Ø. He was racking his brain for what might possibly be the cause, he even turned on his Companion again for guidance. No success, and no fond memories behind the reinforced steel door that now separated him and what could only be a punishment for some unknown crime. Only a few centimetres away from declaring he was ready for the principal’s justice; he heard a sound down the corridor he just left. A whistle. Faint and gone before he could activate his Companion to record it. As a part of the after-action report from the fortball game three weeks ago, Whitey had wanted to analyse the mesmerising whistle applied by Perfect face’s friend. Yet, as he soon found out, that was a much harder task than first believed. All the soldiers who were close enough for their Companions to properly record the whistle had deleted all records of it already. Or rather, they claimed their Companion had deleted audio, video, EM-readings, everything related to that fortball match. Companions only ever take such direct action when a virus is detected. When Whitey finally got his hands on a recording it was from a soldier who had passed out after poking out her head within Perfect face’s range, and the Companion must not have caught the virus as a result. The frequencies of the whistle changed between two ranges on the spectrum. The first range shared elements with a baby’s cry. Whitey cursed the Companion’s overreaction; it would have been fascinating to see if the whistle also triggered an increased oxytocin level. In any case, it certainly explained the attention it caught. The second range of frequencies oscillated on the border of what the human ear is capable of hearing. But that could not be the whole picture. There was more to it than just “grab attention with baby cry, then confuse with the borderline undetectable oscillations”.

There was no whistle. It was Whitey’s subconscious giving him the answer to why he the blast proof door now opened. It was not his grades or some other trivial matter. It was the fortball incident. Whitey had assumed it would be hushed down, but from the looks of it, the principal wanted details. Except that wasn’t it. The principal wanted Sai “to describe how he and DJ had entered the Old World university “. Again. Had the principal not recorded their previous interrogations?

“Most of it was DJ’s work, believe me, I would not lie about such a thing. My role was mostly to keep her company. And admittedly, while I did find it exciting, the heavy lifting was mostly hers”.

Whitey himself was not sure if that was a lie or not. The principal repeatedly assured Whitey that he believed him, and once gave his condolences. *Was purpose does love have in a world where reproduction is independent of parents? For what is love beyond a means of optimizing procreation?* Her words rung inside his head. Whitey doubted he would ever love anyone again, least of all himself. DJ’s cries of wisdom continued. *Philosophers have spent millennia trying to answer* the *question, yet nothing could be more trivial. Life exists to create life. Love is nothing more than a local maximum on the evolution landscape*. Whitey had analysed everything from that night repeatedly. First during the catastrophe, then, against his will, with the park enforcers and feds, and finally his own after-action report using what he could squeeze out of the police investigation. The feds could not conclude he did it, so he went free. In his own calculations, no matter what priors he gave, the probability of him being the killer was always 0.666000…

Principal: “Mr. Hill, are you alright? I beg you; it would certainly be the best option for all of us if you took the assignment.”

Whitey had totally zoned off, as usual, but the principal’s tone and choice of words brought his attention back. *I beg you*. No one working in any Blue Ocean Park had true power, but the principal was as close as one can got around here.

Principal: “I know it must be hard, given it was a special thing between you and DJ and that she might disapprove if you went there again without her, but…”

The principal was cut off before he could plead further.

Whitey: “DJ is dead, her hypothetical opinion is meaningless. I’ll take the assignment.”

The sweating, but now visibly relieved principal gave some awkward, thankful response. Not that Whitey heard any of it, the moment he received the job assignment that became his whole world.

Vici: “You get a job offer from *who* to do *what.* And the principal was the one who gave it? Whitey if this is your attempt at a career in entertainment, I respectfully suggest you cut it.”

Vici was the closest thing Whitey ever had to a friend. Normally he does not feel the need to share his personal life with anyone, but given the risks and potential time investment, somebody would have to let the others know that he would not attend the coming fortball matches. In other words, that they would have to cancel the games.

Whitey: “Sanguine Sciences. Guide a group to the lab full of mutants DJ and I fell upon.”

***The meeting between Whitey and Mihn*** (Switches between perspectives)

Structure:

* Whitey walks to the meeting room, hurrying because of his time optimism. He knows he will make it.
* Gets to meeting room, opens door, recognises trio, immediately closes the door and leaves. Must have opened the wrong door. Tries some of the neighbouring rooms, all empty. At this point, no longer sure he will make it in time.
* Kami has the knife used in DJ’s murder. Recognises Whitey only from the XDD, not the fortball match. Kai Lin saw him when she invaded their defences, believed him to be a coward hiding behind the barricades.
* Wearing formal uniforms in black, gold and red. Shoulder pads like samurais (basically Fire nation armour).

This was an important meeting, so Whitey had added an additional ten minutes to the time it would take him to walk the meeting rooms. Cursed by time optimism, he would usually leave so late he would have to power walk to get there in time, and then as a result be drenched in oily sweat. Yet he never misses a deadline, the thought of doing so sent shivers down Whitey’s spine. When he arrived at the clinically white hallway, he, as expected, still had eleven minutes until the meeting started. The assignment document on his GlowTron said “2.3.I.153”, but the screen next to 2.3.I.153 glowed grey, indicating that the room was under maintenance or similar. Whitey first rolled up the two cylinders of the GlowTron, and then out again to restart the device. No change, still 2.3.I.153. He then checked again that he was, in fact, in building two, floor three, tower I and at room 153. His surprise that the door was unlocked was immediately surpassed by the perfect face that sat at the end of the table. He had barely registered the two other women who flanked her before Whitey had closed the door and hurried down the hallway. He cursed himself for not paying attention when the principal described the assignment. With only a few minutes left, Whitey considered his options. He straight out refused to take 2.3.I.153 into consideration, the possibility was too low. Did the women not wear the black, red, and gold uniform of Sanguine Sciences? “Hah, no, you didn’t see the room long enough to make such conclusions,” Whitey said to himself, the sound drowned by his stamping. Should he write the principal? No, it would be rather embarrassing. Not as embarrassing as missing a deadline, but there is not enough time, even assuming the principal immediately wrote him back. So, out of desperation, Whitey started checking all the other rooms in the hallway, and managed to get an impressive disturbed people per minute rate, ranging from slideshows whose purpose was to waste all the attendances time to a couple who suddenly was very busy creating distance between them. At any other time, Whitey would have mentally judged these people’s inability to book the rooms, which would have locked the door.

A sudden, resolute tapping on his shoulder pulled Whitey back to this world. In cases like this, where a potential predator reveals itself, the body ought to react with surprise and fear. A primal part of Whitey did indeed react properly, but as with the rest of his emotions, he had been taught to suffocate his impulse to jump up and get on his feet.

KL: “Ey yo, you’re gonna attend the meeting or what? Black sun, you’re that guy from the fortball match. Yeah, I remember you shouting at people from a nice, safe spot behind all the equipment. Anyway, let’s go already.”

Maybe it was because his brain refused to acknowledge the consequences of what she said, but instead of listening he started to ponder about her origins. He had only seen the Whistling Assassin from afar, but up close it became clear that she did indeed suit a top shelf pleasure scheme, the kind sculpted after OW eastern animations, which he incidentally had studied for class last week, yet nothing but her face suggested as such. Her impatience, the willingness to be rough, and the use of street slang were all against protocol. You usually see models from the pleasure department wearing revealing clothing. Currently, she was in the Sanguine uniform with its golden trims and recognisable red and black colours, inspired by the feudal knights of pre-OW Japan, though Whitey doubted she would wear her destined clothing even when duty is not the one choosing outfits. It must have taken the Whistling Assassin a tremendous effort to unlearn her genetically imposed behaviour. This time she tapped his forehead, and then quickly rubbed her finger on her clothing.

KL: “Heeelloooo, anybody home?”

W: “I’m terribly sorry Miss, there must have been a mistake.”

KL: “Nopey-dopey, that’s definitely you”. She held up a tablet with a freakish face on it. Sickly, pale skin with a thick layer of an oily substance. Two perfectly circular black spots on its forehead. Not a trace of any hair. His eyes were closed on the picture, otherwise the image would have been grainy and unfocused.

KL: “Now hurry up, you are getting late, and while my friends are many things, patient is not one of them. Oh, and I’m Kai Lin by the way.”

The executioner

Why did it have to be Sulphur? Of all the miserable lifeforms that could walk through that door, it is Sulphur. Yet, it behaves exactly how creatures like it are supposed to. Only talks when talked to, sat properly, addresses them appropriately. So why do I hate it so? *Proved you wrong.* There is something in its eyes, besides the anomalous reflection of light. Whenever it looks at Kami and Kai Lin, for it had yet to look at I, beneath the formal, stoic expression is something else. Curiosity, but not the usual, animalistic ‘I wonder how it would be to fuck them’-look. The creature looks at my companions like the sadistic kid eyes the frog just before dissection it during Biology class. The world is in no shortage of psychos, but they would fake the obedience. Sulphur does not. From what I can tell, meaning everything, it truly does believe itself to be beneath us, as it should. *Sulphur behaves too well.* So, why does it irritate me so much?

Mihn: “Allow us access to your Companion logs. We need to make sure you are telling the truth.”

It did not lie when it responded it only used auxiliary Companion features, so why did I ask again? And why does it not look at me? Is it scared? Am I not worthy of dissection?

W: “I’m truly sorry Miss, I do not have anything but rudimentary calculations to share.”

Mihn: “Did your spawners not teach you manners? Look at your superior when you are addressed!”

Our eyes met for the first time. These were the eyes that dared to mock me during that ridiculous game. The eyes of Icarus, looking into the blazing sun. It was my duty to make sure it fell. *You fell.* It is afraid. The stoic expression is cracking, and fear is creeping in. But not the fear I’m used to. They look at me like they would at the B4X mutated abominations of the American planes. Sulphur looks at me with awe, like primitives ought to. *Could a primitive beat you?* It pains me that I need to know about the game. Three weeks, and I still cannot let it go.

Mihn: “Send me all calculations made and documents you have written from the last three weeks.”

Kai Lin hates meetings like this. Her energy can only be contained for so long, and I could hear from her shrill tone that she is reaching that point.

KL: “Mihn, why is that relevant? Could we just cut the boring talking stuff and get to the part where we crawl into spooky laboratories?”

The executed

So that’s Perfect face’s name. Mihn. How Whitey wanted to have his Companion run the name through Sanguine Science’s top personal. As far as he was aware, this was the first time anyone but himself would read one of his after-action reports. A part of him had always wished the others would study the reports, they contained valuable info that could help the unit to improve. But he was embarrassed, like how Old World teenagers must have felt when their parents found their naughty magazines hidden under the bed.

With a deep sigh and roll of the eyes, the melancholic one complained:

Kami: “Ugh, what did we do to deserve more paperwork? Why are we reading this guy’s wargame fanfiction? Wait no, Mihn, I think this is the guy we are after, the cult figurehead.”

Mihn: “Of course it is, why else would I ask for the documents?”

This made no sense to Whitey. What did fortball have to do with the old laboratories? Too much input, too little time to evaluate. The Hair Witch looked slightly less undead.

Kami: “And not just that, we caught ourselves a celebrity. I wasn’t sure from just the pictures, but that’s the guy who murdered his chromed-up girlfriend and her parents with a kitchen knife.”

His eyes flickered around the room, from the now standing and stretching Kai Lin, to the unlocked door, to the dancing knife in Witch’s hand and finally to Mihn. This was the first time he had seen anything close to a genuine smile of joy on the perfect face.

Mihn: “Kami, do me the honour of letting the principal of this dirt hole know that one ‘Sai Hill’ has been convicted of whatever heinous crime you can dream up, and that Sanguine Science will take the responsibility of terminating Sulphur.”

At DJ’s funeral, someone had tried to comfort him by saying they would meet in the afterlife. Whitey knew better. Their grandparents had tried to build Heaven, and their failure killed God. His death will be like plugging out a computer and throwing it in the scrapfarms. Maybe a scavenger will find a tiny bit of him worth something, but more likely he will be but one of billions. Yet as he walked next to Mihn down the college hallways, he did not feel regret at the thought of death. She is the superior lifeform, unfathomably above him in the food chain. To die at her hands is only natural. He couldn’t help but feel annoyed that he still had not figured out why they wanted him gone. Why waste their time on him? The terms did not add up. Why not just finish it here and know? Mihn moved her mouth as if speaking, yet his ears detected nothing. Shortly after, she seemed content, and this time he did hear her overwhelming, triumphant voice.

Mihn: “You have the glassy look again, yet the smile is new. Desperation. Still trying to figure out the rules of this game?”

She looked at him when he didn’t answer immediately, visibly annoyed.

Mihn: “Ah, I see you couldn’t live with the shame? Had to go to the doctor to remove the scar?”.

Whitey turned towards her, his twinkling eyes still unfocused. Scar? Whitey didn’t have any scars, never had.

Mihn: “Are you truly that slow, or are you trying to test my patience? The game three weeks ago. Where I blessed your tragic excuse of a shot.”

He mumbled that it had healed up soon after, that they had used an Instawound+. They both knew that was nowhere near enough and she assured him that it wasn’t too late to turn the termination from a formality to reality. That the annoyance he induced was nearly exceeding his use to them. It finally clicked, his eyes in focus again. He was an asset to them, an asset better kept secret from the rest of the world. His walking changed back to normal from the heavy, pronounced steps.

Whitey: “Forgive me. Healing wounds is one of the very few physical traits in which I score above the average human.”

Some part of him wanted to tell Perfect face more, in stark contrast to what he was taught at home, tell her that he had healed from the lightning blast as well. He was stopped by his mother, or at least that’s who the voice that was responsible for survival sounds like.

**In the heart of Sanguine Science**

Structure:

* Mihn: “Jindai going to like you. You’re rather famous in certain circles he explores, oh, and also, then he’s not the most hideous person in the room.”
* Has to get “Jindai” because of his hacking skills. Recognises Whitey from XDD.
* Wargaming.
* XDD and reveal that Kami owns the knife used for the killings, anniversary gift by Jindai. Something ignited inside Whitey.
* Suddenly their mother “arrives”.
* Everyone ought of fear only thinks of themselves, leaving a clueless Whitey in the middle of the room. Mother demands an explanation, who is responsible. Jindai tries to take the blame, but Mother cuts him off, knowing well it wasn’t him.

Jindai: “I finished it! Just like you asked for. It detects whenever a dramatically moment appears, and then it makes nearby speakers play the jingle. Or for Companion abused, it just plays the tune in their heads. I didn’t know if you preferred it as a jewellery or hidden in your clothing, so I made both available. You want to try it?”

Mihn: “It was a joke, stupid. I’m not *that* self-centred.”

Judging by the visibly deterred young man’s looks, which by Blue Ocean Park standards were phenomenal and an instant pick for any Companion, he must be the ‘hideous’ brother Mihn talked about. But that was the issue, he was so humanly pretty. Now if the electronic wristband, earring, and similar devices he was carrying did what promised, Whitey would say his intelligence exceeded his looks, and that must be why his existence has been tolerated.

Kami: “Ugh, how about you for once stand up for yourself Jindai. You made a cool thing, and I’d love to wear it. Can I have one?”

Kai Lin excitingly, as always, ran up next to the two and asked Kami:

KL: “Yooo, that’s like in Visions from the Deadlands! Kami, if you’re cool with it, I’d love to have something like a Deadlands orchestrator announce my entrance before fights. Just imagine it, ‘And coming in next, we have none other than Kaaaaaai Lin!’ And then I do a triple somersault or something cool like that. And then I kick some Rhea rotstain right in his ratbrain, and all his buddies Companions goes ‘That’s one more for point for Kai Lin’!”

Kami: “Whatever, go ahead. Not me you should me asking though.”

The enthusiasm of Mihn’s brother, Jindai, had not reached pre-Mihn shutdown, but had visibly improved. Kai Lin was already going through all the possible options, and seemed to have settled on a small device that would fit in her cape, which she immediately ran to get.

Whitey: “By wearing those devices, you negate any possibility of gaining the element of surprise.”

After briefly scanning the others’ reaction of which there was none, Jindai answered Whitey’s challenge boldly.

Jindai: “Mihn, is that your new pet squeaking? Has he not realised who he stands among?”

With seemingly zero interest in the conversation Mihn replied dryly.

Mihn: “You should not care for its opinions, then.”

* **Jindai giver senere Whitey device som giver alarm når han er ved at miste kontrol til djævel.**
* Rhea task force i forvejen
* Kami + Kai Lin kigger på tunes.

Suddenly the disk that was their war table turns back to its steady state of shimmering a slight off-white glow. Whitey’s complaints are immediately cut off by Mihn.

Mihn: “By my blood, Mother is coming!”

Fear is an emotion entirely concerned with oneself, self-preservation to the max. Animals can have evolutionary fears, such as humans’ fear of snakes. The others are on the ground in a submissive, almost prayer-like position with their eyes fixed on the ground, their position clearly with some intent. Jindai and Mihn on opposite sides of the disk, with respectively Kami and Kai Lin to their righthand side. Two of the papers Whitey and DJ collected from the library below concerned itself with two such cases. Whitey’s headache screams for him to get to the floor. The first showed that human populations living in areas with more snakes developed better eyesight. In the second paper, researchers dressed up as tigers and went to an island inhabited by monkeys who hadn’t seen tigers in generations, yet the monkeys hated the tiger-dressed researchers. Tall, middle aged Japanese women dressed in something between a kimono and an Old-Christian wedding dress, unfortunately for Whitey and the others, are not an evolutionary fear. It was if she truly was standing there, less than a meter in front of him. He could smell her, hear the clothing moving and if he reached out with his arm, he’d bet he would feel her. Mihn’s blade in his brain is in an instant silenced, as the lady’s piercing eyes focused on the offender.

Mother: “Who is to blame for this act of reprobation?”

The voice is unmistakable. Anyone who have ever been to Inner Copenhagen where neither shadow nor impulse control can escape the endless flood of advertisements could tell you who Empress Weili, head of Sanguine Sciences, is. Clearly with an effort to keep his composure, Jindai attempts to tank the shot, but the Empress shuts him down before his first word is fully birthed.

Mihn: “Sai, please kneel beside me”.

Mihn’s voice did not have the hint of fear Jindai’s had, but it lacked its usual force and sounded almost… human. He did his best to mimic the other’s posture as he kneeled beside Mihn, slightly farther away from the disk, like Kai Lin.

Mother: “This transgression will not go unnoticed, *Princess*”

Such force was put into the last word that the electric lights shimmered for a moment. If that reminder wasn’t enough of her responsibilities, the Empress did what Whitey assumed impossible: she left the disc. By no means would he claim to understand the fabricator to its full extent but interpolating from similar technologies and taking the Weili family’s practically unlimited wealth into account, it still seemed impossible to create a projection with such force, stimulating so many senses. He had looked. His eyes had left their rightful spot on the floor. The Empress’ foot was on Mihn’s neck, and for the first time, Sai saw Mihn physically struggle.

**Hearts on fire**

Whitey was pushed to the wall and hold there by a single finger, his flesh slowly surrendering to the enormous force as the finger burrowed into his chest.

Mihn: “For your sake, I hope we find a goldmine worth of mutant blood in those labs of yours.”

Her finger buzzed with lightning, yet it seemed to conduct better with Sai’s new, now burning clothing, than his skin. Incredible. Her skin so smooth it could belong to a Tick-Tock girl. Sai had not given his hypothesis that she was a Tick-Tock much credit. Maybe a military model, but no, the overpowering force of her personality would be too much for the handful of labs worldwide still producing Tick-Tocks.

Mihn: “Or maybe we will have to see if *your* blood is worth anything? Who knows, maybe it displays unique features when it boils? Shall we turn on the electricity, give you something to analyse?”

The other two was still frozen in their kneeling position, but Kai Lin stood behind Mihn, albeit at a larger distance than usual.

KL: “Ey, ehm, Mihn. I think you kind of already did turn on his, ehm, heat, electricity, yeah.”

The male body surely was something unique. The finger was almost knuckles deep, yet *that* was how it prioritized its blood, which at this point had become a prized commodity. Was what that talk about blood, anyway? Just Sanguine slang? Sai should probably think more about his own blood, which was currently in the process of painting that part of the room a reddish brown, but that concerned him little compared to the sensation of the hand warming his chest.

The others were still paralyzed, Kami and Jindai praying to the disc that now featured the wargame, and Kai Lin staring at the blast impact where Mihn had released her thunder before storming off.

Kami: “I guess we’ll have to find our way to those mutant ruins ourselves then.”

KL: “Don’t be so sure.”

Jindai, clinging to Kami’s arm, backed her up.

Jindai: “Kai Lin, don’t be silly, no human survives a blast like that. By my blood, you can see the wall through his chest. I’ll call cleanup.”

Kai Lin poked at the smoking hole in Sai’s chest with that of her feet already covered in his brown blood.

KL: “No need. Mihn’s newest responsibility is neither dead nor human. And you can be sure she knew that, I think. No wait, I mean, you should get cleanup, he stinks of rotten egg, but you know, they don’t need to clean him up, in like the way you said. Argh, the point is, he’s alive. And filthy… Ey yo Kami, check this out! The partly melted thing there, that looks like a human heart, right? But then what’s pumping so hard behind that flesh. No, don’t cut him!”

Kami: “Ugh, *please*, if he can survive being zapped by Mihn, he won’t mind some knife. Besides, you managed to pique my interest. Sure, looks like another heart. Also, look at his wound. The blood is already dried up.”

Jindai: “Kami, that’s called cauterization.”

Kami: “How about you get off your highchair, remember who you are talking to? And you can stop choking my arm. Come here, see the cut I just made?”

Jindai released his grip on her arm, which Kami instead laid around his shoulder and pulled him close. Pointing with Sai’s kitchen knife, she continued:

Kami: “See, wound already stopped bleeding. Ugh, why are you recording? I don’t want my face in a XDD for some blackrot brain to satisfy themselves to.”

Jindai: “Don’t worry, I’ll cut anything that could identify us or this place out. But think about it, this is Eye-cident guy. The Black Stalls will go crazy when they see he is inhuman. Surely this will change the votes against him. Of course, I always believed it was him, and not the chick.

His enthusiasm was cut short by a shriek of pain and Jindai threw his classes to the other side of the room. Surprised, knowing how much he valued those glasses, the two girls waited for an explanation. In the meantime, Sai had started moving again.

Jindai: “Camera is boiled blood. Started flickering with the intensity of a sun. Wait, ain’t no way, by my blood, that was the same flickering as in the Eye-cident. I thought it was some electromagnetic noise caused by that psyched out cybernut family of his, but it gotta be him!”

It wasn’t Sai who had woken up. At least not the guy anyone in the room thought they knew. So much became clear when the walls once again were painted, this time with the red blood of the couple whose heads didn’t have time to exit his chest. Kai Lin merely stunned the knife wielding arm making its way inside Jindai, but when the first blow to the head didn’t free Kami’s arm from its jaws and the beast’s eyes still burned after the second, she introduced its temple to her foot with the full backing of a jump’s momentum.

Jindai was hospitalized the rest of the week but was more annoyed with his broken glasses than his internal organs. After all, they were much harder to fix. Getting a new pair is trivial, it was the latest recording he was after. Physically, Kami recovered a few days later, but her mood was extra gloomy for the next many weeks to come. Kai Lin’s broken foot was almost healed after a FixABone-Ultra+, and her enthusiasm with it. Sai was locked up, but otherwise fully healed with only minor bruises to show at the end of the next week. Though Kai Lin didn’t hit them, the two circular spots on his forehead had started hurting and swelling. Mihn was in an unprecedented, fantastic mood. Against her friends and brother’s protests, she was on her way to have Sai moved from the cell to the hospital.

After action report

I was, of course, slightly annoyed that Sai hadn’t told me before. *You knew, Sulphur*. Or rather, that I hadn’t figured it out myself before. *You knew he carried the blood of Hell*. Though, to be fair, I would likely have put him down like a rabid dog, too risky to carry around a Devilspawn. Admittedly, his act was rather convincing. He did pass as nothing but another freakish human whose parents made a genetic investment error. With a large enough population size, you should see a 5-sigma event, such as a chimp on a typewriter accidently creating something worth of note. If you had an infinite number of them, they might even by pure probability come close to creating something on my level. Ah well, there’s no reason to feel bad about being fooled by the Devil. That’s sort of their thing. *Sulphur wasn’t playing tricks.* I’ll have to convince him to stop playing dumb, can’t have another catastrophe like that in front of Mother. No one, not even a stable Devil under her command, is worth a failure in Mother’s eyes. By my blood, I’m even starting think in Sai’s war-jargon. I need results. That’s all that matter. If I must use a perverted alien, so be it.

\*Hospital\*

“We are going to need to do a thorough test of you. More specifically, we need every kind of bodily fluid you excrete. And I mean *every* fluid. Will you be needing… assistance in extracting any of these fluids? I take your silence as a ‘yes’. Good then I assumed so, I’ll fetch the doctor.”

* Medicinsk undersøgelse konkluderer intet. Tallene giver ingen mening. Usikkerheden enorm.
* Mediation osteopati undersøgelse af Sai.
* Opdager at det er Moderen hun kæmper imod. Moderen var også djævelsk, og brugte alt sin snedighed på at sørge for hun og Sai ikke blev opdaget. Lærte ham at gemme sig væk inde i sig selv. Alle følelser skal pakkes ned.

Enlightened by starlight

“Have you ever seen the stars?” Mihn asked Sai in a quiet tone he had not heard her use before.

“DJ had this modified meditational Day Dream where you’d be in Earth’s orbit, facing the stars. Never in the flesh, though.”

“I thought so. I’ll show you. The real deal is nothing like those Days Dreams with their predefined emotions.”

“DJ hated those too.”

“What, the forced neuroactivators triggering emotions that some Rhea wheeler coded up? That’s trivial.”

He paused for a moment before answering. “No, the first thing she did was to remove them.”

“Then what? Stop whisking and get to the point. She’s dead, can’t exactly be mad at you for fouling her blood”. The quiet was replaced by her usual fury.

“What good is a calculation if it depends on the mood of the calculator? Priors are useful only if they are based on expert knowledge, not gut feeling. The gut should not feel at all. It should increase the bandwidth, not pollute the output. If you mix equation and emotion, you gain nothing but a larger variance. And since life is but a set of differential equations to be approximated, emotions serve no purpose other than a distraction.”

Mihn stopped and turned towards Sai, the verbal assault literally forcing him to the wall. “You think I’m lesser because I feel?”

She put her finger on his chest the same place as after her mother’s visit.

“I’ve demonstrated their might to you, so why do you refuse to realize the potential passion hold? Our emotions have a deeper evolutionary development than anything else in the body. You with your cold attitude. You know what, I’ve figured you out, devil. You are afraid to feel. Afraid what it will make you do. And not just that. You are afraid of accomplishing what you desire, but if only you’d allow yourself to be more than a wannabe tactical A.I., you could, and so much more. But you don’t. Why? So afraid of failing that you do not try anything at all? Just follow orders and stay in line. Black sun Sai, you are not just another Parker algorithm slave. You are meant for more.”

He had looked down, but now met her energy filled eyes with matching determination.

“You need to stop taking everything personal, Mihn. I simply quoted DJ, I didn’t mean to insult you. She never knew of your existence, nothing she said was directed at you. Not everything in this world revolves around you. She was sick, Mihn. Deeply sick. DJ’s parents made her a breeding ground for the SUR chrome propaganda, and she created a nasty, nihilistic strain.”

In a split second, with the energy collected around her, he thought she would explode. Or rather, that he would, maybe for real this time. But she calmed down. Even smiled, her mouth pointing opposite of Sai’s. Her finger moved from its place on his chest to collect the teardrop on his chin. Inspecting the milky liquid on her razor-sharp nail, she answered.

“See, it’s not so hard, is it? You are more enjoyable this way too. But Sai, DJ got you with a dose of that SUR sickness, you better not let it get to your head too, alright? Now, let’s get to the car, I want to show you the stars.”

They had flied to a small island a couple of kilometres of the coast. It sported a mix of medieval castle ruins and World War two bunkers both of which had been renovated to withstand this new age, though there was no sign of activity on the island. Just a bit of ocean is enough to keep most scavengers at bay. Mihn took them to the tallest of the castle’s towers, sat down and simply started looking at the night sky. This was outside the protection of the city’s AirGrid and thus the light pollution was minimal. In a dead, almost robotic tone Sai answered the stars above.

“We truly are irrelevant. Any action we take in our lives is meaningless on a cosmic timescale. The whole solar system could vanish, and the galaxy would be indifferent. Everything anyone has ever done is but a grain of sand on the infinite beach. Most religions have come to the conclusion that life is suffering, so why do we continue to live when our suffering does not matter in the end? There was this Old World philosopher who said something along the lines of ‘It takes more courage to live than to commit suicide’.”

“Sometimes I wonder who I am talking to, is it Sai, DJ, or some French philosopher? In any case, what an awful take. If I suffer, it is because I’m doing something wrong. And that’s a good thing, because that means I can fix my issues and get back to being right. Sure, the world is not a good place to be. The only logical reason that an intelligent person would relate to the unjust, random nature of the world would be to justify being useless, for why spend effort on discovering oneself in a meaningless world? Why try and make yourself and that around you better, if all is doomed and meaningless. How do you think I’ve reached so high? Not by embracing hopelessness. It’s much harder to be of use than to be garbage, to neglect responsibilities. The easy road leads to the Scrapyards. Pause for a moment and think about the possibility of us sitting here. Billions of years’ worth of evolution led to humanity, then humanity created brilliance, us. Before that, gravity combined galactic dust in such a unique way allowing for life. What a legacy. We are an entoptic miracle.”

Her words of encouragement were ineffective, to her frustration. With his head down, Sai answered.

“But none of that doesn’t apply to me. My kind sprouted from the highest density of evil history have ever witnessed. Only the horrors of the Dark Month could compare to Auschwitz. That’s my legacy. Literal monsters bursting out from millions of burning corpses. I’m what’s wrong with this world, what’s breaking people, causing them to take the easy road.”

There wasn’t an answer for quite some time. Just the stars to keep them occupied. Same light, illuminating them differently.

“I’m not sure you believe that. You know, we are not all that different, Sai. I think we want the same things, even you cannot see it yet.”

“That sounds like something the villain would say to the protagonist in an OW story.”

Again, a pause. This time uneasy. For the first time since Mihn’s encounter with her mother, Sai sensed vulnerability in her. He didn’t recognize what, but her opening up made him feel something. She finally broke the silence.

“You think I’m the villain of this story?”

“You are talking to the guy who a couple of holy books literally use as a symbol of all evil.”

“I don’t think you are evil, Sai.”

“Yeah, the others back at the headquarters might not agree with you on that one. Jindai still tries to find an excuse to leave any room I enter.”

His vacant expression was starting to crack, clearly against his will.

“Okay, but my brother is a coward”, she answered.

“No, he is not, Jindai is smart. I could’ve killed him. And the others too. What if I freaked out like that again right here and now, I could hurt you too.”

Mihn gave him a side-eye but decided that was enough and not to say what anyone knowing her would expect. Too occupied in his own thoughts he didn’t notice and continued.

“You only saw the aftermath of what happens when I get ‘emotional’. I can’t let that happen again. Black sun, my hands are shaking.”

Sai got to his feet, turned his back to her and walked away with fast, heavy steps. His steps did not carry his usual frustration, and the only one smiling was Mihn, so she stayed. She had succeeded, the cold attitude had cracked.

Except Sai once again had defied her predictions. He did not return. Finding him was trivial, the next part not so much. He had gone to the top of lookout tower closest to the waterside.

“What’s this, Sai?” Mihn asked while still on the ladder, before seeing just how close to the edge of the tower Sai was standing.

“Do you think we are high enough? I’m thinking, hitting one of the cliffs will maximise the damage.”

“By my… Sai, why don’t you come down here. I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

“As if you care about anyone but yourself, Miss Cosmic Miracle.”

“Do you think I’d bring just anyone out here? None of the others even know of this place or any of the other places like it.”

“I’m but a tool in your hands. A tool you need compliant. So, you gave me the illusion of trust when you calculated that was what I needed to not be dull. All you care about is results, and I’m just a means to that end. Just like with DJ, Mother, everyone. Even the players coming to the fortball games did it for themselves. In the end, they didn’t care about what I thought of the matches, what I gained from it.”

Sai smiled; his shoulders fell. Not a smile of desperation, but of the tragicomical.

“It doesn’t matter. Even if I tried, you’d catch me before the direction to jump had reached my legs.”

Casually, she walked to the opposite side of the medieval tower’s top, making herself comfortable on a rectangular piece of rock that had once been a cover.

“Go on, I won’t stop you.”

Mihn’s reaction caught him complete off guard, but he stiffened up again.

“No, this is just another of your manipulations.”

“You keep calling yourself a monster, so you tell me *devil*, master of trickery, is it?”

He sighed, then tightened his fists.

“No… But only because you know I wouldn’t die from the fall.”

She got up again, walking slowly towards him, standing next to the stone he stood on and pointed down.

“True, not from any point here. But if you manage to hit that stone protrusion over there or the thick cables next to the water, you’d get stuck or knocked unconscious. It wouldn’t kill you outright unless you managed to wreck both hearts, but you’d be close enough to the waters that the abominations lurking there could catch the scent of your blood. And I don’t care about how great your regenerative abilities are, it would be trivial for the ocean to end you.”

Sai looked at Mihn for the first time since she got here.

“Why are you saying this? If you don’t ace this job, you’re screwed. You told me that yourself.”

She shrugged.

“Look, I need you for this job. And yes, I’d prefer this jump over the consequences of not perfecting the job, but you are useless, no, a bloody net-negative if all you are is a walking SUR disease propagator. So, it doesn’t further my goals in any way whatsoever if I catch you, if all I’m grabbing on to is dead weight. Now it’s up to you to decide if you want to be useful, or if you want to reach the logical conclusion of your girlfriend’s philosophies.”

Here tone shifted slightly, and she looked down when she said the last part.

“Just remember, we’re Sanguine, we have medical ways of making people complaisant that are much more convenient than spending the night stargazing.”

Mihn had vanished before he could protest.

He jumped

“Miss Weili, your heartrate is abnormally high. Should I contact medical service?” I silence the car’s assistive systems. When will he get down from the tower? I haven’t been this nervous since Mother called. Must be because of the consequences if he doesn’t return. Yes, because of the job, just like I told him. Had I been too pragmatic? Maybe pointing out where he should jump to ensure his death wasn’t the smartest of moves. I force my restless leg to be still and take a deep breath, holding it for a couple of minutes. Nope, blood is still boiling. I leave the car, walk around it a couple of time cursing Sai for being so slow and indecisive. Kind of ironic how I wanted him to uncork to his bottled-up emotions, and now his tantrum is putting the job in jeopardy. But how could I refuse such potential? I know it was the right choice to enable him, though I do acknowledge the probability that I did not do so perfectly. Neither the Elders nor the instructors taught me how to handle situations like this. Have I forgotten how to be truthful, is that even something you can forget? Should I go back to check on him? No, calm down. But how? Trivial, the stars. That’s why I came here in the first place. To stargaze. But not like the other times. This time, I came to share their significance with Sai. I had hoped his soul could heal under their presence. There’s something about him that makes me feel at ease. Makes me forget all the politicking. The countless laser sights pointing at my forehead. The responsibilities my name carries. Mother. The endless lying. After all, there’s no point in trying to cheat the devil.

I’m so enthralled that it is first when the car’s assistive system alerts of “Mr. Hill’s critical condition” that I am pulled down to Earth again. My worries are turned to joy and back to worry again instantly as I see his shattered body pulling itself into the car. The bastard had jumped.

“You *jumped*? How stupid are you? You could’ve died!”

He looks at me with his shattered mouth that has yet to regrow it teeth and gurgled the answer.

“I had to know if you were telling the truth. That you would let me go.”

“Had I known you’d actually do it I wouldn’t!”

“But you were right. The fall wasn’t lethal. Did hurt. A lot.”

I catch him before his now unconscious body could hurt itself further and answer the car’s suggestion of calling for medical aid.

“No personal. Send a droid with a medical kit, I’ll fix him myself. And delete any records of this, understand?”

The car’s answer is lost under my cursing.

## Characters

**Sai “Whitey” Hill** (he/him): Extraordinarily pale, rumours that grandad was a Devil. Uses his Companion sparingly, and only ever on assistant mode, never with full features. Nihilist due to materialism.  
*Language:* Military

**Kai Lin** (they/them): Whistling charm. When doing acrobatics, clothing made to whistle, similar to arrows flying through the air. Top shelf standard DNA scheme, wants to look different than everybody else.  
*Language:* Ey yo, uses a lot of slang.

**Mihn** **Weili** (she/her): Daughter of the Weili empress who runs the Sanguine Sciences megacorporation. Is in Copenhagen to look at the prospect of setting up a major blood harvesting facility. Has been instructed to get familiar with the locals and their customs. Found out fortball has a cult-like following in the suburb parks and decided to investigate.   
*Language:* By my blood, trivially,

**Kami** (she/her): Has full control of her hair, which can at any moment be silk soft or hard as steel. Can change the colours of her hair, but typically favours a gradient of cold violet tones. Fashion expert.   
*Language:* Ugh, sarcastic “please”.

**Jindai Weili** (he/him): Hacker. Father’s attempt at hurting Mother, who always wanted a boy, bears his father’s mark in shame, a XXX. Is abused by Mihn. Mimics relationship between Mihn and her mother.

**Simó** (he/him)**:** Thinks fortball is just a game. A fun game, but still just a game.

**Vici** (she/her)**:** Thinks Whitey has gone over the edge, but cares for him. Is the closest thing Whitey has to a friend.

## Word explanations

**XDD**: Extreme Day Dreams. My version of 2077’s Brain Dances. Day Dreams (DD) are common and legal, Extreme Day Dreams (XDD) are the illegal versions.

**Surrogates and tailors**: Surrogate mothers are commonplace, though usually artificial wombs are used. *Tailors* are biological women whose sole purpose is to give birth to perfect children, or, if the parents are rich enough, child. The tailors are pumped full of geneboosters that prioritize the birth of the child at all costs, typically even at the death of the tailor. Upper league parents are known to use multiple generations of tailors, meaning tailors give birth to other tailors, who after a desired number of tailor generations can give birth to the parents’ child. In areas where family is everything, less wealthy families are known to dedicate members to act as a form of lesser tailors themselves, hoping to produce

**Upper league:** Catch-all phrase for the wealthiest, most influential of society. Includes highest ranking corpo and the government.

**Acid lakes:** Polluted water in the Old City.

**Old City:** Today’s Copenhagen is buried under hundred of meters of new buildings. The remains are called Old City.

**Neural Diver:** Program or device capable of exploring a person’s mind and memories.

**Tick-Tock:** Wind-Up girl.

**Blue Ocean:** One of many almost identical suburban parks in the same district. Similar vibe to [Vivarium](https://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Vivarium.png).

**Companion:** Personalized A.I. “Super Siri”. Can make all kinds of decisions, from life choices (e.g. romantic partner), explaining complex words and subtext to math test results. Many, especially in the lower social statuses, are deeply dependent on their Companion, to the point of not being able to find their way home without it. In higher social layers, anything but mildly assisting features are frowned upon, as the members of this part of society ought to have features, either biological or cybernetical, that surpass anything the Companion can offer. The reduced features include things like automated driving.

**B4X:** US military gene boosting gone wrong, turning the survivors into mindless, mutated beasts.

**Scrapfarms:** Kilometre wide wasteyard. Think the garbage area from [Bladerunner 2049](https://ca-times.brightspotcdn.com/dims4/default/f4ec1a1/2147483647/strip/false/crop/2048x1152+0+0/resize/1486x836!/quality/75/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fcalifornia-times-brightspot.s3.amazonaws.com%2Fc9%2Fdd%2F2336efefa136af1f561316ee3c72%2Fsd-1507669049-848r3vfu67-snap-image). Poor scavengers live here, trying to find value in the rubble. Were once the refugee ghettos.

**Black Stalls:** Black market for Day Dreams and similar. Where XDDs are sold and bought. Can also refer to the community build around market.

**Blackrot brains:** The most degenerative of the Black Stalls’ members, highly addicted to XDDs. Only highs in life are given by the lowest of XDDs.

**Ratcat:** Genetic combination of rat and cat. A worldwide scourge. Known to be sneaky and cowardly. Also used as a slur for thugs.

**Sunbreak:** Large storms that blackens the sky and blocking out the sun. The result of failed environmental projects, nuclear weapons and similar.

**GlowTron:** Tablet. Consist of two cylinders which projects an interactive screen between them. Can be extended in the plane, i.e. making the cylinders longer and moving them apart. Can be compacted into a single cylinder the size of a thumb.

## Vocabulary

**Brilly:** Slang for “brilliant”.

**Slumpster**: Combination of “Slum” and “dumpster”. Slur used against lower caster people.

**To be up high:** To have high status. Originates from the fact the rich and influential people work on the highest floors in skyscrapers.

**Black sun:** Exclamation. Reference to the black hole power plant orbiting Earth.

**Synched:** Reminded. To be up to date.

**OW**: Short for Old World.

**Mudlicker:** Slur used about refugees and their descendants. Originates from the fact that many poor refugees get their food from muddy lakes.

**Wheeler.** Refers to a hamster running in a wheel.