**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 created a cult following around a children’s game 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 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.”

**Could add a Mihn chapter here.**

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

***After first match***

First combat round 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 she been alone amongst fresh 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 amongst 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 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 metal eyes sees better than any Old World bird’s ever did, but only his voice reveals his worries.  
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, Sai 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 the boys later further teased 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 body.”  
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 cop 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. 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: “You just have to trust me. 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.

***Second match***

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 ‘. The Red Devils was assigned the Whistling Assassin, and to counteract her distracting whistle, they roared their grito de guerra. They met 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.

***After second match***

He lied. Whitely hates 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, which when turned to worry brought Whitely out of his analysing trance, and not the slashed jugular veins. Is ugliness a quintessential feature of begin human?

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

But why would the wound have disturbed him? It does not hurt; the cut is perfect. Yet, as Vici currently shouted into his face, he is bleeding at a rate critical for a human. 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 had stopped the worst bleeding using an 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. Vici and two other Devils gathered around him, asking what happened, and they were given a lie without any thought. Her mind and body must truly be connected, her nervous system the speed of a superconducting highway. How close could electrons get to the speed of light in a human body?

Vici: \*In Portuguese, including the word azul/azula\*: “She is a blue dragon!”

***Trip to the principal***

“Sai, would you turn on your Companion?”

Before Whitey had a change to protest, his teacher followed up by 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 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. When he 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 thus had not heard the whistle herself.

The whistle contained sounds in frequencies bordering what the human ear could hear, and focused on that which a baby’s cry lies in.

“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 work itself 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 police, and finally his own after-action report given what he could squeeze out of the police investigation. The police could not conclude he did it, so he went free. His calculations were not deterministic either, but to his surprise, the probability of him doing it was 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, 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 is as close as one can get.

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, 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, he was deep into analysing the job assignment he had received the moment he accepted.

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, somebody would have to let the others know Fortball would be cancelled.

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

***Mihn’s point of view***

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: “Yes, yes, 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. To think 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. 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 these primitives with my display of excellence. So be it. Good thing they wouldn’t be able to have their Companions, how I despise that word, share 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. Disgusting.”

Kami sighed, knowing well that it would be better not to let her thought 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.”

I wanted to give up the thought, declare that it was nothing. That someone was in 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 Kao Nai had instructed the confused college students to build.

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 rot 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. 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 whores 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. 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 alive. Blasphemous freak, spoiling sacred flesh by making them into sex icons. I couldn’t help but glance at my body and give Mother a rare, truly grateful thought. 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 cleansed. I’m not suggesting that I was the first to probe that question, 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.

***When Whitey shoots at her***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 slug brains 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 hear my whistle. Made fun of my face, kept shouting ‘rosto de desenho animado’, like I didn’t know.”

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 stupid monkeys’ game? There’s still a third round, is there not?”

She was right. There is a third round. Now we know that by some anomaly, their amoeba brains have produced something worth of note. We know what they are capable of now. *Sulphur knows what you are capable of.* By some pure chance of probability, my group had experienced an 8 standard deviation event. I’m the outlier! I would make sure they could not ignore me.

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

***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.

Kai Lin “sneaks” (just naturally stealthy) up on him

KL: “Ey yo, you’re gonna attend the meeting or not?”.

Comment on the fact that she is modelled after Old World cartoon ideals, but clearly rejects them, which Whitey had never heard of before.

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 my friends are many things, patient is not one of them.”

Why did it have to be Sulphur? Of all the miserable lifeforms that could walk through that door, it was Sulphur. Yet, it behaved exactly how creatures like it was supposed to. Only talked when talked to, sat properly, addressed 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.

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 her? 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 was afraid. The stoic expression was cracking, and fear was 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 looked at me with awe, like primitives ought to. *Could a primitive beat you?* It pained me that I needed to know.

Mihn: “Send me all calculations and documents you have stored 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?”

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.

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. His eyes flickering around the room, from the now standing and stretching Kai Lin, to the unlocked door, and finally to Mihn. This was the first time he had seen anything close to a genuine smile of joy appear 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.”

***After meeting***

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 Junkfields. 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 besides Mihn down the college hallways, he did not feel regret at the thought of death. She is the superior lifeforms, 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. 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. Where I blessed your tragic excuse of a shot.”

He mumbled that it had healed up soon after, they had used an Instawound+. She knew that was nowhere near enough and assured him that it wasn’t too late to turn the termination from a formality to reality. His annoyance nearly exceeding his use to them. It finally clicked, his eyes in focus again. He was an asset to them.

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

**In the heart of Sanguine Science**

Structure:

* Mihn: “Zuko 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 “Zuko” 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 Jinai. 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. Zuko tries to take the blame, but Mother cuts him off, knowing well it wasn’t him.

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. Jinai 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 set a foot in the commercial drowned streets of Inner Copenhagen could tell you who Empress Weili, head of Sanguine Sciences, are. Clearly with an effort to keep his composure, Jinai 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 Jinai’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 disc 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 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 it burrows into his chest.

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

Her finger buzzes with lightning, yet it seems 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 mutant blood is worth anything? Who knows, maybe your blood 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 was becoming 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 Jinai praying to the disc that now featured their 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.”

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

Jinai: “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 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.”

Jinai: “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?”

Jinai 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.”

Jinai: “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 Jinai 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.

Jinai: “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 Jinai, 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.

**Descent**

Jinai 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. 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.

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 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 accidently doing 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.

## 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:*

**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,

**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, of course,

**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”.

**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.

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

## Notes

**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.

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

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

**Junkfields:** 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.