**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 might in a bad life could’ve 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 celebrated. 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% 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 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. The 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?*

Incredible. The skin has a smoothness like it belonged to a Tick-Tock girl, yet Whitey had seen her in action. She did burn, but not in the way you would expect. Whitey had not given his hypothesis that she was a Tick-Tock much credit anyway, and it was certainly reputed by not only the fact that she’s not on the floor melting from the inside, crawling for her life towards the nearest water source. To his understanding, there are still a handful of labs worldwide capable of producing military models, but her graceful movements invalidated that possibility.

Is being ugly a quintessential feature of begin a human?

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.

***Mihn’s point of view***

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

KN: “It smells exciting in here!”, her round face burst out.

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.

KN: “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.”

Kao Nai and Kami, like yin and yang, my friends balance each other out. 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.

KN: “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. Kao Nai 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 Kao Nai, 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 Whitey shoots at her***What are they doing? They can’t do that. They are not supposed to do that. They are animals. Rats can work together, but thinking is reserved for us. They should, rightfully, assign her as the most dangerous opponent, and the attempt to take her down. Sulphur.

Some of my sisters were unfortunate enough to be made 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 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.

## 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.  
*Language:*

**Kao Nai** (she/her): 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,

**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.

## 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. Originates from the fact that many poor refugees get their food from muddy lakes.