



Chapter 10

“Tanner! The warden wants to see you – now!”
bellowed Windsor from the door, a good half hour
before the scheduled start to the day.

All the occupants of B26 awoke with a start. In
the few weeks that Alex had been at Flagstaff, he had
come to the conclusion that Windsor was the most
inconsiderate of the all the guards.

“Hey, we were trying to sleep!” Cam cried out.

The guard strode over and roughly pulled the
blanket off him, then lent over so his mouth was almost
touching Cam's ear. “Consider it an early morning
wake-up call, free-of-charge!” he roared. Cam cringed.

“Come on Tanner!” Gordon dragged on a pair of trousers. He didn't bother to lace up his boots, and pulled on a shirt as he followed Windsor out.

He returned just in time for breakfast, with a stunned look on his face.

“You're never going to believe this, but Warden Potter has just appointed me to coach a Feudball team.”

The entire table dropped their cutlery almost simultaneously. “What?” they chorused.

“Flagstaff Prison is to have a Feudball team. We are going to play in the local league.”

They were all incredulous.

“It's true,” said Gordon. “Seems Warden isn't too keen, but he has been given his orders and we are the guinea pigs. At least it means nobody goes to work today as I have to run selection trials.”

There was a cheer at this.

“Of course,” continued Gordon, “you may all wish you had been at work when I've finished with you.”

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Alex looked around him. The entire railway crew except for Gordon had been assembled on the playing field, along with prisoners other work details. Guards were hovering around, with a few of them armed with loaded crossbows, and three held back big black dogs on straining leashes.

It was a very grey morning, and even the recent hot porridge did little to fortify him against the cold. Greg and his offsideers gave him vicious glares and Alex quickly refocused on his two cellmates. Josh sneezed a couple of times, and Kym shivered. Gunn was whistling and obviously enjoying the chilly morning air.

“Ah, just like home,” he took a deep breath, held it for a few seconds, then exhaled, smiling. “So good to be outside and in the fresh air.”

“I'd rather be inside, scrubbing the pots,” muttered Kym.

“Give me my mop and bucket,” Josh agreed, just managing to get the words out just before he sneezed again.

“The mop and bucket was my specialty in my pirating career Josh,” Alex said. “I'm really not used to this weather. Back home, even late at night in mid-

winter it was never this cold. I've never even seen snow.”

“I love the snow,” Gunn commented. “It's great fun! You can build snowmen, have snowball fights, write your name in it...”

“Say, look, the guards are bringing out somebody else,” Alex interrupted. Four more guards appeared at the courtyard gate with two handcuffed prisoners between them. One of these was tall, handsome and walked with the grace of nobility, despite being in irons. The other walked with a swagger that suggested that his confidence and self-esteem still hadn't been eroded by prison life. His shoulder-length blonde hair had obviously seen better days but was now rather tangled and tatty. When he smiled though, his teeth gleamed.

“Ah, that's the Shark,” Gunn said.

“I've heard of him,” Alex said. “He was arrested for fraud wasn't he?”

“Yes. Though he should've been hung for murder. Shark by name, shark by nature. His teeth are capped with metal. He's been in solitary for the last month.”

“What for?”

“Assault on a guard. Bit one of his fingers off.”

“Remind me not to sit too close to him at meal time. Who's the other bloke?”

“Couldn't tell you. Haven't seen him around before,” said Gunn.

“That's Severin,” Kym interjected. “He works in the kitchen.”

“How did he get here? He looks like an actor,” Alex said.

“No, he's definitely no actor. Forget Shark, or that wannabe Greg. Severin is definitely the one man you do not want to mess with.”

“What's he in for?” asked Gunn.

“That's Cleaver – the butcher! Don't you know?” Kym responded, surprised.

“Not the people sausage maker?” Gunn asked, wide-eyed.

“The very one,” Kym replied.

“Oh man – have I heard of him! I was expecting some monster of a person, not someone who looks as if they've just come off the stage. And they let him work in the kitchen?”

“Yup. He's not that bad once you get to know him, but don't get on the wrong side of him. He really

does know how to use a butcher's knife – trust me. Say, isn't that Psycho over there?”

Alex and Gunn looked to where Kym was pointing. There was a man, not much taller than Alex, with a bald head and no shirt. His back was covered with tattoos, and he was obviously in excellent physical condition, despite the number of scars he sported. He appeared to be shadow boxing.

“Yup, that's Psycho. His friends call him Lucas,” Gunn said.

“But he doesn't have any friends,” Kym added.

“My point exactly,” Gunn said, with a large cheesy grin.

“What's he in for?” Alex asked.

“GBH, multiple counts,” replied Kym. “I hadn't seen him since they moved him to Section C.”

“What did he do to deserve that?”

Gunn answered. “Beat up one of Greg's cronies who tried to steal the bread from his lunch tray. Rammed it so hard down the man's throat he nearly choked to death.”

“What a pity he didn't succeed,” Alex sarcastically remarked. “Who's that with Cam?” He pointed to where the former teacher was talking to a

rather large man with wide shoulders. The thick mustache wasn't the only noticeable feature on his face. He appeared to have been in a fight recently, with a black eye, a crooked nose, and a thin ribbon of red across his right cheek that hadn't quite healed.

"Don't know," Kym said. "Haven't seen him before."

Gunn called out to them and soon they were introducing themselves.

"Alex, Kym, Gunn, this is John Harrington. He came in a few weeks ago."

"What were you put away for?" Alex asked, as he grasped John's big palm.

"I took some money that I shouldn't have," he replied.

"Same here," Alex grinned. "What institution were you transferred from?"

"Pentonvale."

Kym was lost in thought for a moment. "That's a prison for soldiers and watchmen."

John nodded briefly then lowered his head.

"Yes, it is."

Gunn looked at him for a moment, then smiled and gave him a pat on the back. "Friend, doesn't matter

what your occupation was on the outside, we're all cons now. Stick with us.”

“Thanks,” John managed, quite relieved.

“Hey, there's Gordon,” Alex said. The ex-Feudball player was walking towards the large group of cons, with Father Kilkenny right beside him carrying a clipboard. Wardle, the steel haired guard, carried a large sack behind them.

“Gents, thank you all for coming,” Gordon said. “You are probably wondering why you are all gathered here and not currently out chopping down trees or lugging railway sleepers.”

“Well, now that you mention it...” Gunn started, but was drowned out by laughter.

Gordon's smile almost stretched from ear to ear. “Well, I'll give you a clue,” and he took the sack from Wardle, pulling out a battered oval leather football.

There were quite a few exclamations of surprise from the gathered group. “Everybody, I take it, has at least heard of the game?” Gordon asked.

They nodded in unison.

“Good, now, hands up if you've actually played it at all.”

Alex watched as half responded, including Gunn and John.

“It's almost as if we were back in school,” an anonymous voice muttered. Gordon threw the ball at the voice, but Filch plucked it out of the air before it reached its intended target.

“Well, Mister Psarras, looks as if you're volunteering.”

“Aww, bugger,” Filch groaned as the rest of the prisoners laughed and jeered. Gordon beckoned him to come on over, but Filch tossed the ball instead, which Gordon deftly caught with the sack.

“I want you to go and stand about twenty paces down the field. I'll be there to join you in a moment. Now, is there anyone, apart from me, who thinks they can throw one of these?”

Everybody put up their hands.

Father Kilkenny laughed. Gordon just shook his head. “I knew this would happen. Okay. Line up next to Mister Wardle. I don't care what order you go in, alphabetically, chronologically, how long you're in for, whatever. Incoming!” he yelled, and threw the ball towards Filch, who effortlessly caught it with both hands. “I'll make this simple, since I need to narrow

down the field in a hurry, those of you who can get the ball to Filch without him having to stretch or dive too much will continue. Those of you who can't, well, take a patch of turf near Mister Banyard and think of another position to try out for.”

“Another position? Anyone would think you were organising a team,” someone remarked.

Gordon grinned. “I am indeed, Warden's new orders.”

The prisoners looked at each other, then at Gordon, in disbelief. “Um, dare I say, what for?” Kym asked.

“Quite simple really. The Warden has been instructed to form a team to play in the local league. Since the Warden doesn't want to get his hands dirty, I'll be doing all the work. There'll be plenty of time for questions later. Now, only one of you can be the reserve slinger...”

“Reserve?” questioned Greg.

Gordon turned towards Filch. “Go back another twenty paces,” he ordered. The prisoner obliged. “Alex, come here and hold this bag open for me.” Once his volunteer catcher was in position, Gordon pulled out a ball, aimed, and let loose with a throw. No sooner had

he released the first ball, he was reaching into the bag for a second, which he quickly threw. Filch had barely caught the first ball when the second one was almost to him. Gordon let a third one fly, then a fourth, then a fifth.

“Hey – no fair!” Filch yelled when the third, fourth and fifth balls hit him in quick succession. The prisoners, with the exception of Greg and his cronies, laughed and applauded. Even a couple of the guards were visibly impressed.

“If anyone else reckons they can equal or better that, step up now,” Gordon challenged.

He waited for a minute. There were no takers.

“Okay then. Take a number and get in line. Filch, to me.”

Filch, Gordon, Father K and one of the guards stood at Filch's original mark. One by one the prospective throwers stepped up to test their arm. Some, naturally, were unable to make the distance, and were jeered and laughed at by their fellow inmates. Others were throwing it way too hard, with the ball sailing high over Filch's head. Others were hardly anywhere near the target at all. An even dozen

however managed to get the ball on target, which Gordon had Father Kilkenny note down.

Alex was the last to throw. He tried to imitate Gordon's action, but even though his pass looked accurate, it landed a couple of paces short. Gordon chucked the ball back, then strode over to Alex, giving him a friendly pat on the back. "Nice try Al. Y'know, with your build, why don't you have a go at trencher?"

"You think so?"

"You've survived a pirate attack, I think you could handle being a trencher on a Feudball team," Gordon grinned. "Take a seat. Now, we're going to try it at a different distance. Filch, go back ten, no fifteen paces." He nodded, and strode back the required distance. "Okay, same deal. Those of you who can get the ball to him can continue."

Once the pair was in position, Gordon signaled for the throwers to begin. One by one they lobbed the ball downfield. Only five managed to get the ball on target, with the other passes landing short or going wide. Alex was surprised that Greg had made it through.

"Okay. Now gents, I'm going to make this a bit more difficult. I can see you can all hit a target standing

still, now, let's see if you can successfully target a moving player. Filch, back to your original mark. When I tell you to, start running downfield, and don't forget to keep an eye out for the ball, okay?"

Filch nodded, and ran back to the mark. Five times Gordon yelled for him to run, and five times the ball was thrown towards him. The first two passes went astray, including Greg's, but the last three throwers were all on target. Greg was not pleased at being cut, and made some threatening gestures towards Gordon.

"Who gave you the right to cut and pick as you choose?" he snarled.

Gordon smiled sweetly at him. "The Warden. If you have a problem with my selection methods, go have a talk to him."

Greg glared at Gordon but the latter was unfazed. Banyard stepped in and drew his weighted club, giving Greg a hard look. "You heard the man, Warden's orders. Go sit down with the other rejects."

The bully sneered, spat on the ground and reluctantly withdrew. Gordon nodded his thanks to the guard then turned to Father Kilkenny. "Okay, who do we have left?" he asked.

“Stace, Thornton and Tillers,” the priest responded.

“Well, I'll need to try something different. Gents, you've done well to get this far, now for the final test. Filch will run again, but this time, I'll be coming at you. Just think that I am an opposing trencher, who is hell bent on blocking your pass. Mister Thornton, you first.”

The prisoner nodded, and picked up a football. “Go!” Gordon yelled, and Filch took off down field. Gordon then ran at the thrower, arms outstretched. As the hopeful slinger launched the missile, Gordon raised his hands above his head. One of them stopped the ball in mid-flight.

“Sorry son. Filch, back to your mark!” Gordon yelled then walked back to his. “Okay, ready Shark? Go Filch!”

The fielder took off, and Gordon charged at Shark, adopting a similar approach with his arms. This time the thrower was able to get the ball over the raised hands. Gordon stopped, then turned around to see the ball land well beyond the catcher.

The Shark cursed and stood beside Thornton. “Back to your mark Filch. Okay Mister Tillers, let's see what you can do.”

The bespectacled, black-haired man nodded and picked up a ball.

“Go!” Filch once again took off downfield, Gordon charged at the thrower, this time madly waving his arms in the air in order to distract him. It didn't have any effect. The pass flew over his flailing arms, and straight downfield to a running Filch. The fielder turned around just in time to see the ball spiraling towards him. He made no mistake with the catch.

Gordon grinned, and slapped the thrower on the back. “You'll do nicely son!”

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“Right. A good fielder has to be fast, and has to be agile. If you can't outrun or outdodge the defense, then you're going to be in a world of hurt. At the moment, I want someone who can run. We'll work on the catching side of things later. Anyone who believes that they can match it with Filch, line up with him half-way down the pitch. This will be even simpler than the throwing test. I'll take the four fastest. Filch, if you aren't one of them, then I'm going to be very disappointed and will have to kick you off the side. Understood?”

Filch nodded.

“Good. Gentlemen, if you please. Father K, do you have a timepiece?” Gordon asked. The priest handed over a rather battered pocket watch. Gordon flipped the lid open to see the faint outline of an inscription etched into the inside of the lid. “To Father Seamus Kilkenny, from his grateful parishioners, for ten years of inspirational service.”

“Better days,” the priest sighed.

Gordon smiled wistfully and nodded. “Perhaps there might be more to come, eh?” He noted ten other convicts were lined up with Filch. As Gordon pretty much expected, they included a couple of Greg's cronies. He was surprised though to see the tall Severin amongst the group.

The Shark very quickly offered odds. “Okay – gents, what will it be? Three to two on Filch.” He was quickly mobbed. The guards, for a moment, turned a blind eye. A couple even made private bets amongst themselves.

Gordon had one eye on the watch and one eye on the runners. “Okay gents. On your marks, get set, go!”

The group surged forward as one, but within half-a-dozen paces three had already fallen behind. Filch was in front, but was kept in check by both of Greg's cronies, who were surprisingly quick. Severin was only a few paces behind the trio and the bulk of the group were a couple of strides behind him. Half-way into the race, Kym put on a burst of speed and caught up with Filch. He saw the challenge, and accelerated, with the two cronies desperately trying to keep up. Kym somehow matched his spurt, and the pair streaked away, matching it stride for stride and leaving the rest of the field behind. At the finish it was Kym, stretching forward by half a stride. The two cronies came in five paces behind, with Severin close on their heels.

“Make a note of the first four, and Severin as well.” Gordon said.

“Why him?” the priest asked.

“A bloke that tall, who can run that fast, will make one hell of a striker!”

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“Okay. Now that I have some 'candidates' for the fielder and slinger positions, it's time to see what

the rest of you can do. Let's have a game!" The group responded with a hearty cheer.

"Now, Zigis, you can lead one side, I'll take the other. Take Filch and Rodney for your fielders and we'll divide the rest of the players evenly. You can have first pick."

The bespectacled Zig nodded and scanned the rest of the hopefuls. "Shark," he said, pointing to the convict. The blonde-haired prisoner walked casually over and stood beside him.

"Clever," Gordon responded.

"Psycho."

"Tallin."

And so it continued until all the prisoners had been chosen. Alex stood beside Gunn on Gordon's team, looking at the bunch of ruffians on the other side. Most of them were quite frightening from a distance. Close-up, they were even more intimidating, reminding him of the crew of the *Narwhale*, minus the cutlasses.

"Okay – my side, shirts off." Some of the players responded quite enthusiastically. Alex was a bit reluctant, not for his build, but the fact that it was still quite chilly, even though it was mid-morning. Gunn didn't hesitate at all. The stocky ex-miner eagerly pulled

off his shirt and threw it to the sideline, revealing a pale chest covered in clumps of short black hair. Alex noted that Kym was very hesitant. Gordon noted this as well and strode over to him.

“Well, come on. Don't be shy,” the bare-chested slinger said. “We're all blokes here – we don't have anything to hide.”

“I do,” said Kym. “I have a rash. Need to keep the shirt on,” he stammered.

Gordon appeared to give him the benefit of the doubt. “Okay. Filch! You're swapping sides.”

“Aww, do I have to?”

“Yes!”

Kym smiled gratefully at Gordon and trotted off to join Zigis' team. “Right, gentlemen. Even though this is trial, I want you to take it seriously. Now, just a few basics. One – protect your slinger when he's looking to throw, that goes without saying. Two – fielders, try not to get too involved in the ruck. Come in to assist with a tackle, that's fine, but remember, you're supposed to be scoring points, not cracking skulls. And finally, I know some of you probably have scores to settle, please try and keep it to a minimum. You're trialling for a Feudball

team here, and don't forget it. We'll kick. Zig, don't be afraid to pass, I want to see what you can do."

The sides lined up rather predictably. The fielders stood on the flanks, the slingers well behind the line, and everybody else jostling for positions in the centre. A pair of guards walked to each end of the field to indicate where the goal-line was.

Gordon suddenly gave the ball a swift kick downfield and the game was on. The fists started flying a second later. Players wrestled, punched, kicked and even bit each other in the opening melee. Half-a-dozen were down even before Zigis retrieved the ball. Alex wrestled with a con he didn't even know and threw him to the ground viciously. Then he saw Zigis pick up the ball and had a sudden urge to rush at him, so he did exactly that.

Zigis saw him coming just at the last moment. He threw the ball just as Alex drove him into the turf. The pass was wayward, completely missing all the players on the field and ending up amongst the guards who stood near a pair of old wooden benches. They were laughing at the fighting going on the field. Not one of them made any effort to stop the proceedings, but

one did pick up the ball and casually toss it back onto the field.

One of Greg's henchmen, Rodney, managed to break free from an attempted tackle and scoop up the loose ball. He tried to take advantage of some empty space in front of him, but his freedom was short-lived. Gunn raced in, hitting Rodney hard around the waist and driving all the wind out of his lungs. The player's head hit then hit the turf, knocking him out cold. The ball squirted loose, but was casually kicked back into play by another of the guards.

Greg charged at Gunn. The ex-miner saw him coming, and dropped the shoulder. The bully practically bounced off, and landed with a dull thud. Before he could get up, Psycho raced over and took the opportunity to give the prone player a good, hard kick in the groin, despite the fact they were on the same side. Greg writhed in agony, clutching at his private parts. Psycho grinned at Gunn and waded back into the melee.

Gordon somehow ended up with the ball. He quickly looked around the field as Gunn moved in to protect him. Filch and Kym were taking it in turns to push each other and the other catcher on his side was

flattened by a heavy hit from Shark. Then he saw Alex downfield near the prone Zigis. “Al – heads up!” he yelled.

Somehow Alex heard him above the commotion and turned around. He watched the ball as it spiraled towards him. It hit him square on the chest, his arms instinctively smothering it. With Zig still trying to catch his breath, he casually strode past the guards at the far end of the field, then walked back to help him up.

“No hard feelings I hope,” Alex said.

“Nope, none at all,” the slinger replied. “All part of the game I suppose.”

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“So Mister Windsor, what are your impressions of the prospective players?”

Warden Potter looked up at the guard from his paperwork, which was neatly arranged on his desk. On the left hand side sat a steaming cup of tea and a small plate with two biscuits.

The former army drill instructor stood at attention in front of the desk, along with two fellow guards. “It wasn't pretty to watch, that's for certain,” he

responded. The other two guards nodded in agreement. “They were more for getting square with each other rather than playing a game.”

“Begging your pardon Mister Potter sir, but are you sure this is a good idea?” asked one of other guards, a man with a receding hairline and a bulging stomach barely held in place by his uniform.

“Mister Banyard, to be honest, I really don't think it is a good idea. But of course, I'm under orders myself, so it's irrelevant whether we think it's a good thing or not. What I want to know is, can any of them play?”

“Tanner can, that's for certain,” said Torpid, the third guard. “There's a few others that at least look as if they know what they're doing. That stocky feller with the beard, Lohmann...”

“Yeah, those two we had to pull out of solitary – Stace and Klosowski,” added Windsor.

“And that fella with the glasses – Tillers,” put in Banyard. “He got off a few good passes.”

“Is there enough for a team though?” asked the warden.

The guards nodded. “You could probably get twelve, or thirteen. They'll need plenty of work though. When's the first match?”

“In three weeks, against the Crow and Eyeball team.”

“Ah, pub side,” commented Banyard. “To be honest, if they play like they skirmished today, they'll get thumped.”

The warden nodded. “Well, tell Mister Tanner to have a team list prepared for me by tomorrow lunch time. If he needs another 'session' this afternoon, he can have it.”

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It had been a long day. Alex felt like he had gone ten rounds with a heavyweight boxing champion. His body ached from head to toe, and was bruised in many parts in between. He had seen a number of matches played out on his father's crystal receiver, and realised that the game was a lot more brutal when you were actually in the middle of it. There had been quite a few injuries, and at least half-a-dozen had to be stretchered off to the infirmary, whilst the walking wounded was assisted off by the guards.

Gunn was actually quite disappointed when Gordon finally called an end to the day's play. “I was

really enjoying that,” he grumbled. Then he strode over to Gordon and shook his hand. “That would have to have been the best day I've had inside this prison!” he said, and keenly helped the ex-professional pick up all the balls.

Not many of them felt like eating after a day on the paddock, and the evening shower was a welcome relief. Alex's regret was that it wasn't long enough.

Josh limped in to the cell, Kym was sporting two black eyes and a bloody nose.

“I wish I was back on the boat,” said Alex checking some of his bruises out. He winced a couple of times as he prodded his damaged flesh. “Gordon was sure enjoying himself.”

“Nice touchdown by the way,” said Kym, as he collapsed onto his bunk.

“Thanks. You didn't do too badly yourself. How many times did you score? Two? Three?”

“Four,” Kym said. “Would've been five if it hadn't had been for Filch's intercept.”

“You had to admit, it did look good,” said Josh. “He plucked it practically from your fingers.”

“That bastard, I'll get him next time. What happened to Greg?”

Alex grinned. "He's in the infirmary. That second kick in the goolies from Psycho pretty much finished him off."

"And Shark, then Cleaver took care of his two associates. I've never seen an arm break like that before," said Kym.

Gordon and Cam finally entered the room. The former seemed quite pleased with himself. "More days like that, and this sentence will float by," he grinned.

"How are you feeling Cam?" Kym asked.

"I haven't been in so much pain since I was arrested," he groaned. "Have to admit though, it sure breaks up the monotony."

Filch finally scampered into the room, just a step ahead of the guard. "Okay gents, you've had your fun for the day. Lights out!"

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"With yourself as captain, that's quite an interesting line-up you have Mister Tanner," said the warden, carefully placing the sheet of paper into an open folder. "A serial murderer, an ex-watchman, an ex-teacher, con artists, thugs, thieves, even a pirate

and a religious fanatic. How did you come to this conclusion?”

“Well, it's quite simple sir. Some of this line-up have a natural talent for the game. The rest make up for it with fortitude, luck and a bit of heart. The other key aspect I've looked for is willingness to learn and train. I do have to admit, some that looked more promising than these players are currently in the infirmary and are of no use to me at the moment.”

“Yes, quite. I had to bring in more beds and clear out a room that was being used for storage to accommodate the amount of injured.”

Gordon smiled. “Sorry sir, but that's the game for you. It can be quite brutal, and we were only having trials. Wait until the real competition begins.”

“Quite. Well, what do you require from me?”

“Well, sir, some training gear for starters. Boots, protective clothing, helmets, maybe a uniform. If we're going to play in a competition, we need to look the part.”

“Okay. What else?”

“Time off from other duties. I'll need plenty of time to train this side. And all of the team need to be together, preferably in adjoining cells.”

“That can be arranged. Anything else?”

“What about a physician? The players will get injured.”

The warden thought about this. “I’ll see. Is that all?”

“Can you ask your guards not to pick on my personnel?”

The warden smiled. “I shall have a word with them. Now, when do you want to start training?”

“Tomorrow, after breakfast. Will you be in attendance?”

“Perhaps, but Mister Payne will be supervising the team in my absence.” The Warden smiled again, but it was not friendly.

Gordon nodded. “Okay sir. Thanks for your time.”

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Alex noticed that Gordon had made a hasty exit from breakfast. He, like most of those who had tried out yesterday, was still feeling quite sore. He still managed a grin when he noticed that Greg’s entourage had been significantly reduced. Even the bully himself was

sporting a rather black eye and was looking a little sorry for himself. Alex was pleased that Greg had discovered the hard way that there were tougher criminals in the prison than him.

Towards the end of the meal, Ullrich Windsor and the warden's chief trustee, Rufus Payne, mounted the small stage. The latter, a rather tall and lean man, was carrying a single sheet of paper. "Convicts, your attention please. Mister Payne has a special announcement to make," Ullrich boomed. Despite the fact that he was sitting towards the back of the dining hall, Alex could still hear him clearly.

"The following people have been excused from all prison work details until further notice: Bathgate, Bavington, Fullwood, Harrington, Hone, Klosowski, Lohmann, Petch, Psarras, Stace, Tillers and Turku. You are all to report to myself and Mister Tanner on the oval once you have finished your meal. These people are to report to Mister Banyard at the courtyard for special work detail: Armin, Beaufort, Collins, Dutch, Frenzen, Goodman, Hollinger, Kartman, J Smith, T Smith, Wiseman and Young. If your name wasn't read out, you're still on your regular details. That is all."

The noise level in the hall increased significantly. Alex looked across the table at Josh, who returned his quizzical stare. An overjoyed Gunn arrived and slapped the ex-pirate heartily on his shoulders, nearly banging his head into the morning meal of watery scrambled eggs and tough, over cooked bacon. “Did ya hear that? We made the bloody team!”

“But how?” Josh responded. “There must have been better players than us yesterday.”

“Who cares? See you guys out on the pitch!” Gunn wandered off to where the ex-city watchman and Cam were sitting.

“I bet Gordon had something to do with this,” Alex said. “I don't know how many times I got knocked over yesterday. I was sure that I wasn't good enough to make that side.”

“Look out, Greg's heading this way,” Josh warned. Alex nodded and rose just as the bully reached the table. The blackened-eye made him look more terrifying. Other prisoners sitting at the table hastily retreated as soon as he arrived.

“How did you make that bloody team then? Did you get pally with the Warden all of a sudden?” he

sneered. "Or have you been doing favours for that failed has-been Tanner?"

"Cleverer must have really rattled you yesterday, or was it that second kick in the cods from Psycho that prevents you from thinking straight?" Alex retorted.

"He doesn't think at all," muttered Josh. He went bright red, as if he was surprised at what he had said. One of his offsiders motioned to hit Josh. The fist was intercepted by one of the guards before it had a chance to gain momentum.

"Any problems here gentlemen?" asked the guard.

"No Mister Banyard sir," Alex responded. "Greg was just congratulating me and Josh on making the team."

"How nice of him. Now, if he's finished, he has a work detail to get to." The bully looked at Alex, then at the stern face of Mark Banyard. The guard's stare was unrelenting, and the bully backed down and slowly wandered off with his entourage. "Now, Mister Bathgate and Mister Petch, just because you have made the squad, doesn't give you the right to go around starting trouble. Understand?"

"Yes sir," they chorused.

“Good. Now finish your breakfast and get out to the ground. You've got five minutes.”

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Gordon was there to greet the rest of the team, along with half-a-dozen guards, Father Kilkenny and Rufus Payne. Once they were all assembled together, Gordon began to speak.

“First, let me say congratulations to you all on making the team. In the professional world of Feudball, this process would have taken a lot longer, however, I don't have the time, and this is not a professional league, so I had to speed up the selection process somewhat. Some of you are probably wondering why you're here instead of someone else...”

“Absolutely,” interjected Alex.

Gordon smiled. “Well, to put simply, I wanted a squad now, seeing it's less than three weeks to the first league match. I won't mince words – some of you are here because, well, you're still intact, which is a lot more than I can say for some of the other cons.” There was a hearty burst of laughter from all of the players, even from the ones who were usually quiet and

brooding. Gordon waited until the laughter had died down before he continued. “Survivability counts for a lot in this game, which is another reason why you all got picked ahead of someone else. You must all be warned however, it will be like that practice match week in and week out playing in a league. There'll be lots of training, and I will not be taking it easy on any of you, despite the fact that I know some of you pretty well. I will make you train and play if it's raining, snowing or even blowing a gale; some of you will even be cursing my name before too long, which is fine by me. So, if some of you feel that you are not up to the task, by all means leave now.”

Alex looked around him. None of the players stirred.

“Good. That's what I expected. Before I go on too much longer, some of you are probably wondering which position you'll be playing. Zig, Kym, Filch, I think you already know which slots you'll be filling. Jackson, Severin and Lucas, I have selected you three to play strikers. The rest of you will be trenchers. Don't take that as an insult to your abilities – many a game has been won on the strength of the humble man in the trench. You guys will have to absorb a lot of

punishment, and at the same time you'll have to protect your slingers and fielders as well as support your strikers. Right, now the fun stuff begins. On your feet, time to warm up, which is what we'll do first thing every session. Nothing fancy, just a few simple stretches, some calisthenics..."

"Calli what?" queried the Shark.

"Exercises you dopey bugger," grinned Psycho, and gave him a playful tap on the back of the head. The rest of the group laughed.

"Thank you Lucas. After that a couple of laps of the oval, then I'll teach you how to play this game properly. And whilst you're limbering up, I'll get you all in turn to introduce yourselves and tell us where you're from, what you're doing time for, if you've any surviving family, whatever. If we're going to play as a team, then you all need to be familiar with the bloke standing next to you on the paddock. Okay, standing straight, try and touch your toes. Alex, start us off."

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Gordon had been quite prophetic. By the end of the first week, the players were openly cursing him,

especially when training was conducted on wet and windy days. “You need to know how to play in all conditions,” he had yelled above the downpour the first time it had happened. “Not every game is going to be played in sunshine, sunshines!”

He had begun with the basics, like ball-handling skills. Each of them in turn ran towards a ball lying on the turf and attempted to pick it up in mid-stride. Some showed a natural ability at it, like the two catchers and Zigis, who made it all look too easy. Some though, like Josh, and even Cam, made it look quite difficult, and often tumbled over as they tried to scoop up the ball. Alex found it difficult at first, but with practice, all of them were able to achieve it. Some just took longer than others.

The next task was attempting to pick up bouncing or rolling balls. Gordon had an innate ability to make each one he rolled or bounced do something unexpected, which frustrated many of the players, or cause laughing fits amongst those watching the drills. Then came practicing the hand-off, and finally the short pass. “Most of you will never throw a pass all season, but there may come a time, perhaps to score a crucial point or stop the opposition from gaining possession

when you're about to be pummeled," he had added. Zigis, naturally, he pulled aside for some extra training. When the time came, he left Rufus to manage the trenchers and strikers, whilst himself, Zigis and the two fielders practiced passing and catching drills. Once or twice Gordon felt a twinge as he tried to cast the ball that extra yard down the pitch.

Later came catching practice. All of them took turns receiving passes from Gordon or Zig. Then came tackling practice, which some of the players scoffed at. However, the veteran slinger's words and experience prevailed, and the team were soon hitting the tackling bags like they were opposing players. Even Zig and the two fielders had to take their turns. "Everybody must learn how to do this!" He had insisted.

In the final week before the game, he pulled a few players aside and gave them special tasks to perform during the match. He had singled Gunn out particularly, giving him the onerous duty to protect himself or Zigis as they were recovering the ball or preparing to throw. "When that happens, you'll be acquiring the attention of many an opposing player on the pitch."

“Bring them on!” Gunn had enthusiastically replied.

Gordon slapped him hard on the back. “I feel safer already,” he had added.

On occasions the Warden had ventured out to see how the team's training was progressing. He generally didn't stay for long, and usually just had a brief chat to either Gordon or Rufus. The latter, at the end of every day, gave him a full report of the team's progress, which was duly noted and filed away with everything else related to the team. Rufus, it appeared, did not leave anything out in his reports. If there was an argument between a couple of the players, it went into the report. If there was a harsh word said about the Warden during the training session, it went into the report. If Gordon appeared to be playing favorites or taking it easy, he had said so. The Warden had wanted to know everything.

When the final training session had ended, Gordon had gathered them together for one final talk. “Gents, I am very pleased about your progress over the last few weeks. You have all worked very, very hard to get to the end of the orientation period. Some of you have improved dramatically in that time, and I am

happy to say that you are all ready to take the field tomorrow. The first game won't be easy, it never is. I'll be just as nervous as the rest of you, seeing it's been a few years since I last took the field, but I'm sure you guys will put in a good performance, regardless of the score line. Tonight, I suggest you try and get a good night's rest. You'll definitely need it."