



Chapter 11

The wake-up bells rang loud and clear throughout the prison.

Alex rolled over and rubbed his eyes. "Is it six o'clock already?"

"Must be," yawned Josh and promptly banged his head on the bunk above.

Gordon jumped off his bunk and hastily pulled on his shirt. "Pity. I was having a nice dream about a tavern I once visited down south. There was a barmaid there... "

"I think we can guess the rest of the story. Come on, we'll need to eat before we head off," interrupted Alex. He tapped the bunk where Kym was

still sleeping. "Are you getting up now?" He received a muffled grumble for a reply.

"Okay, we'll save you a spot."

Breakfast was the usual watery scrambled eggs, a greasy sausage and burnt dry toast with a choice of water or weak tea. In the background, the priest delivered his usual Sunday holy book recital in a dull monotone.

After breakfast the team assembled in the courtyard. Their equipment was being packed into a wagon by some of the prison trusties, supervised by the Dentist. The warden himself was talking to the guards, all of whom were armed with heavy truncheons, while some carried crossbows as well. When Kym turned up, completing the side, the warden focused his attention on them.

"Well, it's time to see if this is a worthwhile exercise. But I must say, if you play as well as you've trained, then not only can I see you lot roundly beaten on the field, but my reputation being soiled as well."

"That's the least of our concerns," Gunn muttered. The players around him sniggered quietly.

If the warden heard the remark he showed no signs. "So could you please put some effort into this

first match today? Now, get aboard. Father, you travel with them."

As the warden turned away, Gunn directed a rather rude hand gesture towards him which got a few more sniggers from the team. "Well boys, you heard the man. Let's climb aboard."

"Okay, one at a time," yelled Wardle. As each player climbed into the wagon, a guard secured their feet to the floor, then snapped a set of handcuffs on their wrists. Gordon was the last player aboard, sitting opposite the priest. Wardle and another guard filled the last seats, the tailgate was shut, the canvas cover fastened into place and the wagon slowly got under way.

"One day, my son, you will pass through these gates without those chains," said the priest.

Gordon smiled. "That's a dream to aspire to."

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"At least we got a new-ish set of clothes," muttered Gunn as the wagon bounced along the poorly maintained road.

"With painted-on numbers no less. Not what you're used to Gordon," Alex grinned.

"Cam, you used to teach this stuff, could you make us a decent set of uniforms?" Gordon asked hopefully.

"Get me some durable material and a few hours on a sewing machine and I'll see what I can do," Cam offered.

All the players focused on Filch. He looked up, his eyes skittishly scanning all the faces staring at him. "Umm, I might be able to arrange something," he stammered nervously.

Suddenly the wagon came to a complete halt. A few moments later the tailgate dropped down and the canvas curtains were drawn aside. Two prison guards appeared, one armed with a loaded crossbow, while Banyard wielded a truncheon. Wardle stepped down from inside the wagon while the guard unfastened the locks securing the cons to the wagon's floor.

"One at a time!" bellowed Wardle. Gordon stepped out first, aided by the guard who hadn't drawn a weapon.

"Oh, how far have I sunk?" he moaned, looking at the sight before him.

The wagons were parked on top of a low hill, looking down over the playing area, which was bathed in the midday sunlight. The edge of the field was marked by an old, once white, painted fence with several palings missing or broken. On the far side stood a small, weather-beaten grandstand. Beyond the field were the roofs of the local town.

The field, thankfully, was mostly green, but the grass was short and a bit rough, with clumps of turf casually strewn about the field and what appeared to be lumps of cow dung. To his left, Alex noticed an ancient scoreboard, with an attendant in an old chair, sipping a mug of ale. A scruffy looking, brown-haired dog sat beside him.

"So, is this the grass roots level?" Alex asked, strolling up to stand beside the veteran. They both slowly scanned the rest of the stadium, if it could be called that.

There was a food tent preparing hot snacks for the handful of early spectators, and a beer tent that was beginning to do a steady trade. A trio of chubby match officials were enjoying some of the local hospitality before the game. Alex felt all three of them were old

enough to be his grandfather and they looked like they would have trouble managing a fast walk.

Gordon sighed, "Yes, the local league. Most of the teams at this level are sponsored by local pubs and hotels, hence their names. The teams themselves are mostly made up of young hopefuls, retiring veterans and never-have-beens."

"Any wise words of wisdom to impart?"

Gordon grinned. "Don't get killed. Nobody will remember you if you die on a cow paddock. Come on, let's go warm up."

The team blundered their way through the warm up exercises that Gordon had showed them during the week. They laughed as the clumsy Josh fell over during the star jumps, and chuckled and uttered dry comments at each other as they staggered through the rest of the calisthenics. Then Gordon took Zigis, Kym and Filch aside and practiced lobbing a few passes, making the fielders run to catch them. The rest of the side took turns dropping their shoulders and charging into a punching bag swinging from a pole.

The warden and his assistant watched them carefully.

"Really can't see them winning today," commented the Dentist.

"Neither can I. I'll be cursing that bloody Duke if we get flogged," Winston muttered. "Come on, let's enjoy a local beverage while we have a moment."

The priest, who was sitting in the shade of one of the wagons and listening, shook his head sadly and rose to his feet. "I s'pose it's up to me to inspire the fallen," he mumbled, as he ambled towards the squad.

The spectators were coming in dribs and drabs. Most traveled in wagons but here and there were a few on horseback. A small group of stable-hands were busy looking after the animals, while the visitors availed themselves of the hospitality tents. A small and out-of-tune brass band began to play, creating an atmosphere more akin to a village fair than a Feudball fixture.

"Lads - if I can have your attention please!" the priest yelled. The convict side stopped their warm-up and gathered around him. "I know this isn't exactly how you may have pictured your first game, but, fortunately, we are not playing the Brython Cavaliers."

The team chuckled.

"And the Warden, as you well know, doesn't have much faith in you lot, but I do. So let's bow our

heads and I shall lead you all in prayer.” He waited until the entire side had done so before he continued. “Oh, Sovereign Lord, lead to forgiveness these stray souls who have separated themselves from your straight and narrow ways. Bless them and let them by their own blood, sweat and tears, toil down the path towards redemption, as they take to the field to save the reputation of an uncaring sod... ”

The team let off a rousing cheer.

“... and by your hand, ensure that if these boys can't manage to defeat their opponents today, at least let them win the fight.”

“Well said, Father!” Gordon slapped the priest on the back, nearly knocking him over. “Well, you heard the man, let's take to the field!”

As the Jailbirds jogged onto the pitch, there were a few boos from the crowd, which now occupied two of every three seats in the small grandstand. There were no words of encouragement forthcoming from the warden or any of his offsidiers, who were off sampling hot pastries. The priest smiled wryly, then wandered over to the dugout.

The three portly officials were waiting in the center of the pitch. Gordon walked over, politely

shaking their hands in turn and engaging them in small talk.

Then the home side jogged onto the field, amidst enthusiastic cheers from the locals.

The team was clad in a variety of protective gear. The three players Alex assumed to be strikers were clad in dented breastplates painted in the team colours of red and black. Two of them wore helmets that could have once belonged to a local militia outfit and the third's helm could well have belonged to a knight, seeing it had a protective face plate. He wondered if it was a hand-me-down or had been looted from a corpse, or quite possibly both.

The fielders both wore padded leather skullcaps and had left-handed gloves with webbing between the thumb and first finger. They were clad in studded leather vests which appeared to have dried blood smudged across them.

The slinger wore a bronze helm with bright feathers sticking out of it. His chain mail shirt looked a little too tight on him, as if he had gained some weight during the off-season.

Finally, the trenchers were clad in items that no doubt had been passed down through three or four

generations. Chain mail vests with missing links, horned helmets with missing and/or broken horns and greaves with one too many dents. A couple of players even had gauntlets, but they too had seen better days.

"A far cry from what we used to wear, Tanner," said a nearby voice. Alex watched as one of the strikers removed his helm and limped slightly as he crossed over to Gordon. The man sported a thick black mustache, had rosy cheeks, and thinning black hair.

"Mark Georgeson? I thought you were still on the continent!" Gordon cried out, eagerly gripping the opposing captain's hand.

"I'm surprised you're still alive. How long do you have left to serve?"

"Fifteen years, eleven if I behave myself. What happened to you? I thought you were still under contract with Homburg?"

"Cartilage problems with my knees. Had my contract paid out and wound up back here after I drank most of my money away."

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but if you're through reminiscing...," started the head referee, whose hair was slightly less grey than his colleagues.

"Oh, sorry, Bob. Your call, Gordon," said Georgeson.

"Thanks. Heads."

The referee flipped the coin then deftly caught it on top of his left hand, flattening it with the palm of his right. He slowly removed it to reveal a crowned monarch.

"Heads it is. Cons, what is your fancy?"

"We'll receive," Gordon replied.

"And we'll stay where we are. Good luck Gordon."

"You too. Like to join you for a drink after the match, but, y'know... "

"You have somewhere else to be," Georgeson nodded, put on his helm and jogged stiffly off.

"Okay, reserves off, visitors to receive!" yelled the referee.

Gordon signaled for Zigis and Alex to approach him. "Sorry, guys, you'll have to start on the bench. I'll take the first drive and we'll see how we go after that. Okay?"

They both jogged over to the dugout where Father Kilkeny gave them each a flask of water. "Keep

your eyes peeled - see if you can pick up anything that might be useful."

Alex watched as the side took up their positions. Gordon and Gunn were at the back, Filch and Kym on the flanks with a trencher each for company, while the three strikers took the center of the pitch with the remaining trenchers. The Crow and Eyeball side lined up differently, placing a striker on each wing with a trencher. The third striker, the one wearing the knight's helm, stood just behind the main line on the right hand side. The fielders patiently waited in their dugout.

The ref's whistle blew, accompanied by a rousing cheer from the crowd as the ball was booted down field. The Crow's flank strikers had pre-empted the call, and with the aid of their accompanying trenchers had managed to muscle past the Jailbirds and race down field. As the rest of the players vigorously contested the trench, the scoreboard attendant's dog raced onto the field, ducking through the legs and expertly catching the ball in its jaws just as it touched the ground.

"What the... ?" yelled Gunn, and dived after the dog. It avoided his grasp and raced towards the goal line. Gordon hared after it and managed to grab its tail.

It yelped, dropped the ball, then raced off the field, much to the delight of the home crowd. The slinger had barely touched the ball before the striker with the knight's helm nailed him with a strong tackle, crashing him into the turf. The ball spilled loose and a second, taller striker, narrowly avoided a grasping Gunn still lying on the ground, scooped up the ball and ran it in for the opening point.

"It's going to be one of those games, eh?"

Gordon muttered as he picked himself off the ground and wiped off the mud, cow patties and other residues.

In the dugout the priest shook his head and took a swig from his whiskey flask.

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Despite the early score, the cons acquitted themselves better after that. The game became bogged down in a bitter contest for possession of the ball, which constantly changed hands.

Filch managed to outflank the trenchers on the edge of the ruck and was sprinting down the left flank. The cover defense, however, came across in time and he was barreled into touch, barely half-a-dozen paces

from the goal line. He was knocked out as he crashed headfirst into the picket fence. Tallin evened the score a few minutes later, upending one of the opposing trenchers and driving him heavily into the turf, arm first. There was a loud 'crack' and the young, fair-haired trencher was in tears as he was helped off the field nursing his injured limb.

A desperation play by the Crows just before halftime had the crowd jumping to their feet. Their fielders went deep, but were carefully marked. The Shark threw himself at the Crow slinger with the plumed helm, but he managed to flick the ball out the back to an unmarked trencher. He in turn handed the ball off to the tall striker who charged through Josh and Cam's tackle and rumbled into the clear.

Gordon saw him coming, but he also noticed another unmarked trencher wearing a helmet with two broken horns loitering near the goal line. He charged at the striker, hitting him in the shoulder with his chest.

Despite Gordon's charge, the ball had been flicked free at the last moment, the broken-horned trencher juggled the pass as he stumbled into the in goal area. He got it under control then held the ball up

triumphantly to the crowd just as the half-time whistle blew.

Gordon shook his head and picked himself up once more. He noticed the Crow's slinger was being stretchered off and the tall striker he'd hit himself wasn't moving much either, though he was still breathing.

"Good hit, boss," Gunn commented as they walked off the field.

"Nine times out of ten that would have stopped the play," Gordon lamented.

"I don't think we were ever going to win today," Gunn added. "It would have been asking for too many miracles."

"Agreed. I think Zigis can start the second half. He needs to be blooded sometime."

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And he was.

The Crow's first pass of the second half was dropped, and Zigis scampered through to pick up the loose ball. His reward was a well struck punch from Gordon's former teammate which broke his nose. But to his credit, Zigis stayed upright and held onto the ball.

Cleaver knocked over Georgeson and Psycho tackled one of the Crow's fielders over the sideline, allowing the reserve slinger room to move.

Kym saw what he was trying to do, and managed to elude his own marker and race down the right hand side, before cutting back towards the center of the field. Zigis saw the agile fielder momentarily in the clear and lined up the pass, ignoring the flow of blood from his battered nose. A pair of opposing trenchers charged towards him. Alex threw himself at one, knocking him flat. Josh tried valiantly to stop the second, but only succeeded in slowing him down.

But it was enough. Zigis launched the ball down field as the defending trencher tried desperately to smother the pass with his arms. Kym caught it deftly in mid stride and raced in to score.

Gordon jumped to his feet and cheered heartily from the bench. It was loud enough to rouse Filch from his slumber. "What did I miss?" he mumbled.

"Our first point my son!" the priest joyously replied. Gordon put on his helmet and jogged back onto the field, where Zigis and Kym were being slapped on the back and congratulated.

"That was a mighty fine throw, Master Z," Gordon said. "Now, go get the bleeding stopped."

Inspired by the score, the cons lifted in spirit and it showed during the next drive. John 'Bull' managed to put a big hit on Gordon's former teammate, stunning him temporarily. Psycho barreled into touch a fielder who had nearly eluded him. The poor Crows player crashed straight into one of the hospitality tents, sending pastries and beer flying. Then Cam and Josh combined to flatten the tall striker and Cleaver injured a trencher who fell awkwardly after a heavy tackle, twisting his ankle in the process.

But the second touchdown for the Jailbirds wasn't coming, despite the best efforts of the team. Gordon's passes were finding their targets, but the receivers were quickly being buried into the turf for their efforts, barely two steps after catching the pass. The veteran tried lobbing the ball over the defenders and using arrow-like short passes to open receivers but no one was getting through their opponents' tight defense.

With time fast running out, Gordon resorted to a desperate play. He spied Kym in open space once more and hurled the ball like a javelin down field towards him. The pass was good, but the Crow's

remaining fielder, who had lost his skullcap, managed to intercept the pass and race off in the opposite direction, with Kym turning to chase. Gordon palmed off an eager trencher and joined the charge. Kym dived, catching the fleeing player's boots and he fell face first into the turf, losing the ball forward. Gordon dived for the fumble, only to see another Crow player scoop up the ball and run it in for another point.

It was Georgeson.

He cheerfully tossed the ball back downfield as the referee signaled the end of game. He walked over to Gordon and helped him to his feet.

"Y'know, with a few more matches under their belts, they will be a pretty reasonable outfit. Good game."

Gordon shook his hand, smiling weakly.

"Thanks. Hope your trencher's arm sets properly."

"So do I. He's a carpenter. It's not like he's in it for the money, heh?"

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The trip home was in good spirits despite the defeat. The priest had managed to acquire some

bottles of home made lemonade and they were being passed around the wagon. Even the guards helped themselves to a swig or two as the bottles passed them by. The home side had also provided them with a large basket of leftover pastries from the hospitality tent, and after the warden removed the best for himself and his companions in the second wagon, the team happily divided the rest amongst themselves. They tucked in as if they hadn't eaten for days.

Apart from Zigis' broken nose and Filch's mild concussion, a few cuts and bruises was all the rest of the team had to show for their efforts. They relived every hit, every jolt, every punch and every kick on the trip back to the prison, but always returned to that magical moment when Kym scored their only point.

"This is what I miss the most," Gordon said as the wagon bumped along. "After the match, a get together, a feed, drinks, discussing the match, comparing injuries, bragging about hits... "

"Of course, you had the luxury of baths and a masseuse, da?" Severin asked.

Gordon nodded. "Plus a case of the sponsor's product. One season we had Toothy's the mead

brewers, as a co-sponsor. Man, you drank half a bottle of that and you soon forgot your injuries."

A few of the players nodded in agreement.

"Guys, you did okay out there today. Despite the score you weren't disgraced and you gave them a match worth remembering. You didn't give in after the second touchdown and if we'd had an ounce more luck, then who knows?"

"Oh, and fewer dogs invading the pitch," muttered Gunn. The team laughed.

"At least we inflicted more injuries," said Psycho. They all cheered and the bottles were passed around once more.

"So, what's next, Gordon?" asked Josh. "A few tricks? A special play or two?"

"Yeah, I think you guys can handle one or two special moves. Next training session I'll run you through them. You never know when they might come in handy."

They all cheered enthusiastically.