



Chapter 12

The next day, Gordon was already on the pitch throwing footballs at one of the tackling dummies when the rest of the team was escorted out by the guards. Father Kilkenny brought up the rear, carrying a large cardboard tube.

“Well, come on, the routine hasn’t changed,” Gordon called, starting on a slow jog around the pitch after his last pass struck the crossbar where the dummy was swinging . The rest of the team slowly fell in behind him.

“Nice of you to join us on the run today,” Gunn added, sarcastically.

“I have to stretch my legs sometime,” the veteran slinger responded.. A few of them were still feeling the bumps and bruises, but overall they weren't complaining. The guards continued to watch them, but the crossbows, while loaded and kept firmly in two hands, with a finger near the trigger, were no longer pointed directly at the team.

Alex noted that the captain wasn't pushing them as hard. He didn't urge them to sprint coming around the corner for the last time, nor was he exhorting them for rigorous stretching either. They warmed up a bit, did a few sit ups, but Gordon then stopped them. “It's the habit of a number of teams not to train too hard the morning after a game,” he said. “And why should we be any different?”

The players laughed.

Gordon continued. "Well, now that you've had a taste of it. Think you can do that every week?"

The players cautiously agreed.

"Don't feel too bad about the loss. These things happen. You didn't play too badly, especially considering it was your first match. Bear it in mind, even though our opponents were part-timers, most of them have been playing for years."

"So had that dog by the way he caught the ball," Gunn added and the entire team laughed.

"True," Gordon responded, in between chuckles. "But that's the curse, and the beauty, of this game. There's always going to be something unexpected happening during a match and some days, the ball is not going to bounce your way. The best thing to do is just play on, trust in yourself, and tackle the buggie in front of you. I think you've that pretty much down pat, especially Tallin, Jackson and Severin. The passing

and catching is good, I don't think we need that much work there. So, it's time to start work on a few special plays. We'll start with a simple one to begin with. Father K, the plans if you please." The priest brought over the cardboard tube, and Gordon pulled out some large sheets of paper. These he asked Rufus and Father Kilkenny to hold between them. The first sheet had sets of noughts and crosses on it facing each other, with arrows going through and around the crosses.

"Which ones are we?" queried Psycho.

"The crosses," Gordon answered. "Now, this is a very simple play. What we do is stack one side of the field with our bigger players and hitters. They put down the players in front of them, allowing our fielder an easier run down the flank. This comes in very handy if we kick and manage to pre-empt the receiving side, giving us an opportunity to gather possession of the ball, especially if we need two points very quickly."

“Anyone would tink dat ve vere planning for a battle,” Severin commented, in his thick Tsarovite accent.

“That's how the game was viewed in its early days, as a perfect selection method for recruits, both for officer cadets and front liners. Feudball is very tactical game, much like a battle. You have to use your troops accordingly, take advantage of your opponents' weaknesses whilst masking your own.”

“What if the opposing team figures out what we are doing, and stack that side accordingly?”

“A very good question Alex, and one that I'm glad you asked. Well, we have a counter. Next sheet please, gents.”

The second sheet was similar to the first, except that the arrows leading away from the noughts and crosses were on the other flank. “Here is the counter to their counter. You put a speedy player on the flank

here, with an assistant. He strikes wide, pushes the bloke back in field, giving the speedy chap a chance to skirt around the line of defence.”

“Will we get a chance to practice these?” Cam queried.

“Yes. This afternoon, I've got permission to use some of our fellow inmates as an opposition.” There were a few cheerful murmurs of approval.

“Next one please. This one is quite simple as well. With our stronger players in the centre, and a fielder just behind the line, we're going to punch a hole through the middle of their line and go straight down the centre of the pitch. I call it the 'slingshot'.”

“These are good, but are rather basic, seeing you're just relying upon strength, speed and an accurate pass to make the play successful” said Zigis. How about something a little more complex?”

Gordon nodded. "I was saving the harder stuff for later, but since you've asked..." Gordon flipped through the sheets of paper until he found the one he was after. "Okay, this one I think you'll enjoy Zig. This is known as the 'flea-flicker' and as you can see..."

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The team approached the afternoon training session enthusiastically. Gordon had instructed the conscripted opposition to make it tough for his charges, but not too tough considering there was a match to play at the end of the week. The plays took quite a bit of practice to get used to, even the simpler ones. There were a number of collisions between players; plus a few little moments where cons took the opportunity to slip in a few quick punches, creating several small melees that needed a couple of guards to break up. There were also a few real accidents where one of the cons got a little too enthusiastic in trying to stop a play or block a

pass and did himself an injury. When one of the special plays actually worked, the team let off a rousing cheer and slapped each other on the back.

Towards the end of the session, the warden, escorted by a slouching Torpid, ventured out to watch.

When the practice ended, he came forward with instructions. "Mister Payne, I'll see you in my office once you're all packed. Mister Tanner, walk back with me."

Gordon hurried to Warden Potter's side.

"They appear to have bounced back well after yesterday's loss."

"They weren't so cheerful this morning, but their mood improved as the day progressed sir," Gordon commented. "Thank you for allowing them to train against other prisoners." The veteran slinger quickly glanced over his shoulder to notice Stuart Torpid

following a few paces behind, seemingly uninterested in the conversation taking place in front of him.

“Not a problem. I hope there were no injuries.”

“Only to the volunteers. Is there a possibility that my players can have proper uniforms, Mister Potter sir?”

“That’s what I wanted to have a word to you about. Do you have a preference for any colours in particular?”

Gordon thought about this. “Well, one of the semi-professional sides I used to play for had a combination of black, navy blue and white. I always thought it was a good uniform, without being too flashy.”

“Anything else?”

“Boots of course, and matching socks would be nice and perhaps some more protective gear. Shin and elbow guards, protective pieces for the privates especially.”

“I’ll see what I can do. By the way, your opponents for the next match are the Hanged Thief. I want to see an improvement in the team.”

“I’ll work them hard this week sir.”

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Prison life, Alex surmised, was all about routine. A routine similar to life in general but with a number of notable differences. Everything was regimented, subjected to time. The day for most of the cons started at six o'clock in the morning with the bell. Breakfast at six-thirty, and by eight everybody was at their morning details. At twelve you had lunch, and at one you were sent to your afternoon detail. At five you were called back in, and if you were fortunate and weren't on dinner duties you had some relaxation then, at six you ate dinner, and at seven in the evening there was a little more time to yourself until it was time to hit the showers. Finally, at nine, the lights were turned out. By

a month into his sentence, it had become second nature.

Also, at some point during the day, Alex had noted, there would be a fight. It was always going to happen, regardless. Someone was going to get injured, and he just had to hope that it wasn't him, or someone that he knew. Of course, with a fight, there would be retaliation, or, in some cases, the retaliation would happen first. There would also be "accidents" (either truly accidental or "created") and every second week or so, there would be a fatality. Some months there would be more, maybe even three or four. The prisoners bet on these things. One could nominate a victim, a day, or even a mode of death. There were plenty of takers, and there were always new inmates coming in to replace those who died or had been released.

He discovered that there was a secret to staying sane inside and the sooner one worked it out, the better

it was. It was simple – if you dwelled too much on personal events happening beyond the walls, like those with family or friends, then you would go nuts. It was best to distance yourself from them. After all, what could you do about them? Not much, unless you had “connections”. But could those connections comfort you at night as you longed for a loved one's touch? Nope - best to forget about it.

Alex though, didn't have much to worry about outside the walls. After all, there was no family waiting for him, no sweetheart, and no job. In his opinion, he had no worries. All he had to concentrate on was staying alive, and that, he mused, was a full-time occupation in itself.

“A shilling for your thoughts?” said Gordon as he sat down in the empty chair opposite.

“That's being generous,” Alex replied.

Gordon grinned. "I usually give crowns, but funds are a bit tight these days."

Alex laughed. "I was just thinking, this time last year I was working in the office at the lumber firm. If someone had told me that in the coming year I would be arrested, drafted into a pirate crew, re-arrested and playing Feudball for a prison team I would have called for the boys in white to take them away."

"That's life for you. You never know what is going to happen next..." Gordon started. He was interrupted by a loud crash.

They turned around to see a dark prisoner had been smashed face first into his food by a pale-man. The dark con was flailing madly knocking plates and mugs everywhere. One of his arms hit the fair prisoner in the gut, causing him to let go and allowing the victim to pull his face free of the food. He grabbed a mug and rammed it into the fair prisoner's face so that he reeled

backwards, falling onto another con. The third prisoner leapt to his feet and punched the fair con. Then he went after the dark prisoner who had been the original target, and the pair settled in to exchange blows. At this point the guards moved in and forcibly dragged them apart, while another pair picked up the now unconscious antagonist and half dragged, half carried him out of the hall.

“Like I was saying, you never know what is going to happen next, except in here. That fight had been brewing for a couple of weeks from what I'd heard,” Gordon said. “Wasn't the result I was betting on though. Anyway, I've been wanting to have a chat with you. Hardly had the time with all the training and stuff. How are you finding it?”

“Still a bit hard to get used to. But I must admit, it's better than working on the railroad.”

“After a couple of games you'll be right. I think you did okay for your first game. You managed to stay on your feet for the time that you were on, and you made a couple of good tackles, especially that one on the trencher charging at Zig.”

“Thanks. To be honest I didn't really know what I was meant to be doing out there. I just, well, hit him.”

“That's all I ask you to do. The harder, the better.”

“Mind if I join you gents?” Filch arrived with a tray of food. He plonked it down in the middle of the table between Gordon and Alex. “Leftovers, compliments of the kitchen staff.”

“Don't mind if I do,” Gordon said, and grabbed an apple. After briefly buffing it on his shirt he bit deeply into it.

“How did you manage to score all this?” Alex asked.

Filch winked. "I have my sources. You do a favour here, a favour there, y'know how it goes. Say, I found out some stuff that you gents might want to hear."

"Like...?" Alex prompted.

"Like about our Tsarovite striker for starters."

"Go on," said Gordon, in between mouthfuls of apple.

"Well, the butcher bit is true, of that there is no doubt, and yes, he really did turn people into sausages," Filch began. Alex looked at the sausage he had slipped in between two slices of bread from Filch's tray. "Don't worry, he hasn't done anything like that recently."

"That's a relief," Alex said, and bit into the sandwich.

"Anyway, remember a couple of years ago, when all those farm animals were keeling over and

people were getting sick from eating the infected stock?”

“How can we forget?” Gordon said, finishing off the apple.

“Well, that's how Severin got started. Meat prices were going through the roof, so he cashed in on it. Started knocking off stray animals, then was able to purchase a horse or two on the side. He was doing a roaring trade by then, marketing the meats as Tsarov delicacies. Nobody was any the wiser.”

“So why did he switch to people?” Alex asked.

“Well, some people did get a little suspicious about the number of missing family pets and the like in the area, but nobody could prove anything really. When these sources started drying up, he decided to, well, start on humans. He tried dead ones first, raiding a morgue or two, digging up a fresh grave, etc. but he had problems hiding the smell you see.”

“The taste might have been a problem too,” Alex added.

“Maybe not. I’ve heard human flesh tastes a bit like chicken,” Gordon said. Alex gave him a strange look.

“Me too,” added Filch and Alex started to feel concerned. “Anyway, somewhere along the way, he figured fresh meat was better. He bumped off drifters, the homeless, even street urchins. Used to lure them back to the butchers on the pretence of food and a place to sleep for the night.”

“Just how many did he kill?” Gordon queried.

“Well, Severin admitted to at least twenty, but said he lost track of them after a while. Whatever the case, his business was doing very well. One night though, he got a little careless and attacked a patron who had stepped out of a pub to relieve himself. Whilst he was hacking the head and limbs off, a couple of

other drunks witnessed the crime and reported it to a watchman. He didn't believe them, but had a look just in case. When he arrived, with the two drunks in tow, Severin was just disposing of the head down a nearby sewer. The watchman confronted him, and Severin fled. They chased him through the backstreets for half-an-hour before cornering him in a blind alley. Took a dozen watchmen to bring him in."

"So, what I don't get is, why was he only tried for the murder of just one man?" asked Alex.

"No witnesses, no names, and no evidence," responded Filch. "Though they did find what they thought were human remains on the premises, they couldn't exactly tell, since it was all sliced up fine, or ground into mince. Besides, Severin had no idea whom he had killed and even when he looked at pictures of missing people, said he couldn't recognise any of them. He argued it was always dark, and he wasn't interested

in details, he just wanted meat to put in his shop. Besides, the one person he was tried for was a noble. A minor one, Sir Reginald Nobb, but a noble nevertheless. A bit different to a bunch of, well, nobodies whom hardly anyone cared about.”

“Was he married?” Alex asked.

“Yes, had a wife and two kids. When she heard the news she had to be committed to a sanitarium. The kids stayed with friends until she recovered. Once Severin had been tried and convicted, she took them and disappeared. He never saw them again.

Psychiatrists in Lowden did a roaring trade for a couple of years afterwards. He sold so much meat and a lot of people ate it...”

“I bet a lot of people became vegetarians after all that,” Gordon said. Alex promptly threw a carrot at him.

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The remaining training sessions proceeded without mishap.

Gordon drilled them further in the set plays, again with some volunteers from the prisoners, and had spent sessions working on their ball-handling skills, especially in picking up the ball off the ground whilst on the move, and recovering bouncing pigskins. The warden ventured out once or twice to observe them training, but didn't stay for long. The prisoners hardly noticed that he was there at all.

On the Saturday Gordon gave them a light workout in the morning and then closed the session with a few words.

“Well gents, you have trained hard, and I'm pleased to say that you've earned the afternoon off.” This announcement was greeted with a loud cheer.

“You’ve all done well. I’m pleased with your progress and just hope that it can be converted to a better result on the pitch in the upcoming match. Be warned though, the weather, as you’ve all noticed, hasn’t been that good this week, so don’t expect it to improve tomorrow.

“If you guys put in as much effort tomorrow as you have done throughout the week then I believe we’ve a chance to win. Forget the match against the Crow and Eyeball. That’s history. It was your first match as a team, and for a lot of you, your first ever match. Tomorrow, the travelling arrangements will be the same, so take it easy this afternoon, and try and get a good night’s rest. Okay, let’s hit the showers.”