



Chapter 13

Lightning flashed as the prisoners boarded the wagon. The same routine was followed with the chains and the guards. The priest was the last to climb aboard. In one hand he carried a large sack, the other, a large bottle of liquid.

“What’s in the bottle?” Filch inquired.

“Something you might need at half-time,” the priest grinned. There were a few chuckles from the players nearby.

The dentist made a quick head count. “Okay – let's move 'em out!” he yelled and the wagon lumbered off.

“So, Filch, did you manage to learn anything out about the team we're playing today?” Gordon asked.

“Not much boss. The Hanged Thief is just another pub side, although I do know that they have a couple of ex-professionals in the squad. A slinger by the name of Cole Brady and a striker, Marten Lindsey.”

“An ex-rookie for the Cavaliers. I've heard of them both, Cole didn't have the mettle for the professional circuit. Liked partying more than playing. Listen up men, Marten has a short temper, which is probably why he's playing for a pub side now. If anyone feels like “taking one for the team” we can easily get him sent off, provided the referee is watching. As for the slinger, I don't know any more about him, but he's

probably carrying the side. The longer he spends off the field, the better.”

“Just don't get caught, eh?” Psycho said.

“Exactly,” Gordon winked.

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The match was a hard, grueling affair. It started to rain heavily and constantly as soon as the team arrived at the ground. The smooth, green surface was quickly transformed into a quagmire and possession and field position was at a premium. The ball was lost repeatedly. Passes were not sticking, slingers were fumbling the ball as they shaped to pass, and picking it up was nigh on impossible.

The ball spent a lot of time on the ground, and several times the players forgot all about it, resorting to old fashioned fisticuffs and dirty tricks as they tried for a numbers advantage. Psycho was able to carry out his “chosen” mission for the match, and hit the opposition

slinger with such a heavy shoulder charge that it had him lying unconscious by their sideline just before half-time.

With the game locked at nil all, the teams trooped off the field to their benches.

The priest passed around the large bottle, which proved to be some form of prison made-spirit, and was well appreciated.

“We need to try something unusual after the break.” Gordon announced as they wiped the mud and sweat off their faces. “Kym, stay off. Zigis, you come on. Cleaver, reckon you could open up a little gap for me in the line when we get the chance?”

The second half started with the home side in a fresh set of uniforms, but no ex-professional slinger on the pitch. They booted the ball deep down field. Gordon recovered it, then handed it off to Zigis, practically punching him with the ball in order to make sure he got

it. Filch then brushed off his marker and raced towards the opponents in-goal area, whilst Gunn prepared to defend the reserve slinger as they marched down field.

The bait was taken, and Filch was pursued by two opposing players. Cleaver took the opportunity to flatten a scar-faced trencher that was marking him, allowing Gordon to step over the stunned player, with Alex close in support.

Zigis grinned. “Sorry Gunn,” he said and handed over the ball before running away from him.

“What the... ?” the ex-miner stammered, surprised to see the leather oval in his hands.

“Quick – over here!” Zigis cried out. Gunn, still in a state of shock, looked at the reserve slinger a few paces away, then noticed an opposing striker and a trencher heading straight for him.

“Why give it to me in the first place?” he yelled, and shoveled the ball back towards Zigis. He juggled

the slippery oval like a piece of soap, getting it under control just as Gunn was buried in a two man tackle and Filch was getting barreled into touch three-quarters of the way down the pitch.

Which left the veteran thrower in the clear. Before the defence realised what was happening, Zig ran through the gap, and lobbed a short pass to a waiting Gordon.

“Keep them off me!” he bellowed as he made a mad dash for the line. Zigis turned around only to be trampled by a rushing striker, who fell awkwardly into the mud with him.

Alex dropped another player nicely with a copybook tackle around the midriff. He picked himself up quickly and saw a lanky fielder trying desperately to run Gordon down. The player had cleverly avoided Cleaver's diving tackle, and was now closing in on the veteran slinger. Alex raced in to intercept.

Gordon glanced over his shoulder and realised he wasn't going to make it. “Apples!” he yelled, and tossed the ball over his left shoulder just as the fielder tackled him around the legs.

Alex saw the ball land near him and then bounce tantalizingly towards the goal line. He raced after it, but as he bent over to scoop up the ball, he skidded face first into the mud. With his arms groping blindly in the mush, he somehow found the ball and lurched back up to his feet.

A referee's whistle blew. Alex looked, puzzled, before it dawned on him that he was over the line.

“Point – Cons!” the referee yelled over the downpour, pointing to where Alex was standing dumbfounded with the ball. Gordon was the first to reach him – nearly squeezing the life out of him with a mighty bear-hug.

“That’s the way to do it!” Gordon yelled.

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The mood on the wagon on the return trip was as if the team had just won the divisional title. The priest's bottle was empty, but he had managed to secure some more for the trip home. The wagon guards joined in the festivities as well. Prison animosities were being temporarily forgotten in the revelry.

“Y'know priest, I didn't think we'd win a game all season,” Gordon confided.

The priest nodded. “You probably weren't alone with that sentiment my son.” The priest took another swig as a bottle was passed around again. “But, as you know, the Lord moves in mysterious ways... “

“Amen to that brother,” Gordon replied and took another swig.

In the other wagon, the mood was more sombre.

“How on earth did they manage to win that match?” the Warden muttered.

“Pure luck I would imagine.” the dentist replied.

“I didn't think they would win a game all season.”

“I'm sure you weren't the only one who'd thought that.”



The Jailbirds, as they had come to call themselves, were naturally optimistic when they headed off for their third match. It was a beautiful sunny morning, with only a handful of clouds in the sky. The mood was lifted even more when Filch relayed some very important news as the wagons rumbled past the gates.

“The word from my informant is that the Drowned Rat side has suffered a setback at a training session during the week.”

“Interesting, please tell me more,” Gordon responded.

“Well, their leading player, Birch Carroll, a heavy hitting striker, tripped, fell heavily and twisted his ankle on Tuesday night. Apparently he didn't see a rabbit burrow.”

“That is rather unfortunate for them. Do they have a replacement?”

“Well, my source anticipated that question, and found out that they have recalled an old-pro from semi-retirement.”

“A freebooter?”

“I believe so.”

Gordon mulled over the words for a few moments, then grinned. “Freebooters can be a double-

edged sword. They can easily win matches, or they can lose them just as well. However, I would prefer to eliminate him from the equation at the earliest possible moment in the game. Shark, Cleaver, Psycho – your mission, if you choose to accept it... “

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Gordon started the match, relegating Zigis to the bench with Kym when he lost the toss and the Jailbirds had to kick-off. He scanned the opposing line-up, and was easily able to spot the freebooter as his armour was in better condition than that of his temporary teammates. The striker trio came over to Gordon before they took their positions.

“Dat him boss?” asked Cleaver in his unmistakable accent, motioning with his head towards the grey haired veteran.

“Yep. I know his face from somewhere, but I can't pick where.”

“He'll be picking it up from the turf shortly,” said Psycho, spitting onto the ground.

“Just be careful. Freebooters can be cunning bastards and they've always got a trick up their sleeve. If you're going to do something nasty, make sure the refs aren't watching.”

The trio nodded, and jogged into position.

Cam booted the ball downfield. The Drowned Rat side signalled their intentions early, with their fielders quickly skirting the defence and getting into position. The old pro even created an opening in the centre, flattening the Shark when he tried to put a hit on him. A trencher whose chainmail shirt appeared to straining under the pressure from his bulging stomach took the opportunity to run through.

“Cam! Cover the trencher!” Gordon yelled as he ran off to mark the fielder to his left. Gunn went after the one on his right.

Cam reacted slowly, but made a concerted effort when he realised the opposing slinger had just launched the ball straight at the chubby trencher. He desperately launched himself at the spiralling ball, practically snatching it right out of the trencher's hands. It was only when he hit the turf that he suddenly realized what he held.

“Get up and run!” yelled Psycho, as he flattened a fair-haired trencher. Cam obeyed, and darted through the hole his striker had just created. Tallin brushed off another trencher then rumbled through with him. The dark-skinned trencher saw the opposing slinger line Cam up for a block, and got in between them. The slinger bounced off the Moor's dropped shoulder and fell awkwardly. He grinned at Cam and pointed towards the goal line.

Cam didn't need any more advice and increased his pace. He looked over his shoulder to see two

opposing players in hot pursuit so went even faster. He needn't have worried, as Alex, Josh and Tallin were taking care of the pair between them.

“Point – Cons!” bellowed the ref.

The dentist and the warden were completely stunned.

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The home side rallied quickly after their early setback, and equalised with a simpler running play, as their regular slinger was sidelined with a brace around his neck as a result of Tallin's shoulder charge.

But that was to be their only joy for the match. On the next drive Psycho accomplished his mission, and upended the freebooter in a vicious tackle, ending his match as he landed with a heavy thud on his back, his head snapping back and slamming into the turf. Gordon took the opportunity to sneak through the opening, and grinned when he saw Filch in the clear.

His pass found the mark, and Filch's joy could barely be contained when he raced in for the team's second point.

With the side in front at the break, Gordon decided to chance his arm in the second half. With the three strikers wrecking havoc with the opposition's defence, he had a number of receivers to choose from in the opening drive.

With both his fielders marked, Gordon picked an unlikely target for his next pass.

Josh just managed to see the long pass come his way. He caught the ball, fell over, then picked himself back up. He started to run when he saw a lone, stocky trencher bearing down on him. Cleaver came to his rescue, tackling the trencher hard into the turf.

“Run little man! Score!” he yelled. Josh obliged, and was mobbed by every member of the team still standing.

Gordon tried his luck again when they next held possession. The home side now had a shortage of players, and Gordon could not believe his luck when he spied Kym in the open. He lined him up and delivered a perfect pass which Kym caught on the run and then just kept on running.

The captain felt his shoulder ache from the long passes, and decided to give Zigis a taste of the action. To his surprise, as he walked off the field, a large part of the crowd gave him a standing ovation. He smiled, gave them a wave, then went to the bench. The preacher gave him a towel and a water bottle.

“I haven't had a standing ovation in nearly seven years,” he said.

“You earned it son. It's your day.”

“Our day, you mean,” and heartily slapped the priest on the back.

The warden and his offside just couldn't believe the carnage that the Jailbirds were inflicting on the scoreboard and on the field. The Shark added another casualty just as a light shower began to fall. His target was an unfortunate fielder who landed on his arm, breaking it instantly. John 'Bull' Harrington clashed heads with another trencher, and both players had to be stretchered off after knocking each other out.

Then Alex was caught unprepared by a striker charging at him. He managed to drop his shoulder just in time, but was still knocked over by the charge. He groggily lifted himself up just in time to see Zigis fire a pass downfield which was expertly caught by Filch. After evading an attempted tackle, he strolled in for the final point. The referee blew time.

The attacking striker hadn't moved. He lay motionless on the ground. Alex staggered over to where he was lying while the rest of his team

celebrated the win. Gordon could see the look of concern in his face, and raced onto the field and then signaled for help.

The team's physician to come onto the field where he examined the player for a few moments and then sadly shook his head.

“He's dead,” he announced “the neck's broken.”

Alex was stunned. “He can't be.”

Gordon put his arm on Alex's shoulder. “He is. There's nothing you can do about it.”

“But, how?”

“It happens in the game Alex. It just happens.”

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The mood was a little sombre on the trip back to the prison. Alex spent most of the journey in contemplation of the death of the opposing player, whilst the rest of the team quietly passed around the liquor bottles.

The priest sat beside Alex for the trip, and tried his best to offer some consolation.

But Alex was inconsolable. He kept on muttering: "It should have been me, it should have been me."