



Chapter 14

Gordon was busy cleaning his boots when Filch tapped on the cell door. He looked up, stained rag in one hand, half-polished boot in the other. “What’s up?”

“Two things. First, Father Kilkenny wants your help with Alex.”

“Okay. Tell the priest I’ll be there as soon as I finish my boots. What’s the second item of news?”

Filch smiled. “Several bundles of cloth have turned up.”

“Really? Any particular colors?”

“Black, dark blue and white, along with new boots, matching socks and some protective gear.”

Gordon grinned. “You didn't have anything to do with this, did you?”

Filch responded in kind. “I wish I could take credit, but I can't.”

“Well, either we have a mysterious benefactor or the warden has finally got his act into gear. Pass the news on to Cam, He might want to get started on those uniforms. I'll come down and have a look after I've seen Alex. Anything?”

“Oh, yes. We're playing the Broken Sword this Sunday.”

“You are full of news this morning.”

“Just doing my job,” Filch grinned and strolled off down the corridor. Gordon went back to his boot cleaning. He started humming an air as he cheerfully finished his polishing. When the boot was done, he

popped the footwear up on the shelf above his bunk to dry and put away his cleaning gear.

He sensed a different atmosphere as he walked down the corridors past the other prisoners. Cons that had never spoken a word to him during his time inside were now offering salutations and congratulating him on the big win. Guards were touching their hats to him as a mark of respect and some of the trusties were offering him a multitude of services and potential gifts. He noticed he wasn't the only one gaining in popularity. The ex-cop John Bull was proudly showing off his scar from the head clash in the last match to a small group onlookers, and Josh was recounting the tale of his touchdown to yet another group of cons.

Gordon smiled. "Ah, it's nice to belong."

In the small chapel, where Father Kilkenny was offering some spiritual guidance to a handful of prisoners, Gordon noticed Alex sitting at the back, away

from the group. The priest saw him enter and pointed to his small office.

“Come on son, let’s have a chat.”

Alex sat down in the visitor's chair in the little office while Gordon opened up the priest's cupboard. He picked out a book, opened it and removed a small bottle of whisky. He poured shots into two battered mugs and offered one to Alex. The former clerk accepted it and sipped the heavy liquor.

“It's tough,” Gordon said as he downed his drink in one gulp. He examined the whisky bottle thoughtfully and poured another shot. “But it's part of the game. I can still remember the first time I saw someone killed on the field. It was in my second match as a rookie, and it was quite ugly.”

“What happened?”

“A fielder, one of the up and comers in my squad, had just caught a pass I'd thrown. It was the

second match of the season, and we were up 3 – 0. He was hit by an opposing striker, in probably the worst tackle I've ever seen. It nearly snapped him in half. The fact that I'd had thrown him the ball didn't help me either.”

“So how did you get over it?”

“Same thing as I'm doing with you now. One of the old pro's had a talk to me, put it in perspective. That's what I have to do for you. Y'know Cleaver's a serial murderer, the Shark and Psycho have crippled people, even Tallin, Gunn and John Bull have inflicted grievous bodily harm at some time in their lives. Hell, half the people in this rat's nest, including the guards, have probably killed or seriously injured people. Some are doing time, some are making sure we're doing time. You killed a bloke on the Feudball pitch in a game, accidentally, but legally. Everybody dies son, it's just a matter of when and how. Trust me, there are a lot of

crippled veterans out there who wish they had died on the field rather than living their lives selling their story for a shot of rum. It's probably a lot better to be killed on the pitch doing something you enjoy rather than dying forgotten in a pauper's asylum, or beaten to death in a urine-soaked alley behind a pub. I'm not saying it's good that you're responsible for somebody's death, but it is a better death than what a lot of people in this country will have. At least his funeral expenses will be covered by the league and his widow and children will be taken care of."

Alex let the words soak in and sipped his whisky quietly. "Have you ever killed somebody?"

Gordon smiled wryly. "Alex, I'm in here for manslaughter. A reporter had found out some dirt on me from my rookie year, and was going to sell it to the highest bidder. I decided to scare him, and set fire to his house. It backfired, horribly – the reporter and a few

other people died in the flames that ended up burning half the street down, just to protect my reputation. I was tried for murder and got jailed for manslaughter because I had some standing as a starting slinger. Now I'm just a convict like everybody else here.”

“Does it haunt you?”

Gordon nodded. “Every day, and every night. You're a good kid and you'll get over that incident. I'm a bad man and I'll have to live with my crime for the rest of my life. But I intend to make amends, somehow. Now, Filch says some gear has arrived for us, including some cloth for uniforms. You were a clerk, come and take an inventory for me.”

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At the next training session, the warden surprised the team by making an appearance, escorted only by the dentist and Banyard. Gordon was about to call the team to attention but the warden held up a hand

and shook his head. “No, don't stop them on my behalf. I want to see them train.”

Gordon nodded. “As you were gents. Continue.”

For a few moments the head man of the prison observed the team going through their aerobic exercises. He made no comments, offered no observations, and seemed quite content just to watch until they had finished their routine.

“A moment of your time Mister Tanner,” the warden said quietly. Gordon nodded and passed the whistle to Father Kilkenny.

“Okay gentlemen, passing and tackling drills – hop to it.”

The warden started walking away from the scene and Gordon hurried to catch up. He noticed neither Banyard nor Rufus were following.

“Things going well?” The warden enquired.

“Yes sir. Can't complain at the moment.”

“No personal problems between the players I take it?”

“None that I know of sir.”

“And the equipment that arrived, was it satisfactory?”

“Yes indeed sir. I already have Mister Bavington working on the uniforms.”

“Good. I hope they will be ready for our next fixture.”

“He assures me that they will be, provided he doesn't get any other distractions.”

“I'll make sure that he has plenty of time to finish them.” The walk continued in silence for a few more moments. Behind them the team were going through their practice drills – passing, catching and tackling. The dentist and the guards watched on in silence. Suddenly, the warden stopped. “Is there anything else you require at this time?”

Gordon was taken aback at the warden's show of generosity. It was uncharacteristic. He tried hard to show that he was not surprised. "Well sir, so far during this season we have been lucky that we have suffered very little in casualties. But, in my experience, these periods have a nasty habit of ending abruptly. I'd like to be prepared. I need another player."

"Understandable. Who would you like to add to your team?"

"Well, another fielder would be handy. Is Rodney Lightfoot available?"

The warden turned around and yelled at Banyard "Fetch Mister Lightfoot."

"At once sir," the guard replied, and marched off to the main prison complex.

"I'm sure that between you and the rest of the team, you'll make him aware of his duties and responsibilities now that he is part of this side. Make

sure he understands the penalties involved if he misbehaves, or tries to escape.”

“Yes sir. We'll make it as clear as crystal.”

“Good. Train them hard, Mister Tanner. I expect a good result this weekend,” and with that, he walked off towards the administration buildings.

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Cam had laboured long and hard over the uniforms. He had carefully measured every player, and Father Kilkenny as well. On the eve of the fourth match, the team was called together, and Josh proudly displayed the team's new kit. Pants in black, and a jersey of dark blue and white horizontal halves, with the player's numbers in black in the white half of the shirt. There was a chorus of wolf-whistles, then a hearty round of applause for Cam, who was blushing.

There had been enough material to make a blue robe for the priest, with black pants and a pair of white

shirts. He tried on the robe and admired himself in a nearby mirror. “My dear Cam, I have never had a robe that has fitted me so well!”

“Note, I added something extra.” Cam said. The priest looked down to see a finely embroidered magpie cuffed in a ball and chain on the right breast.

“How apt, a jailed bird! A very clever play on words!”

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Alex had been a bit surprised at first when Rodney was drafted into the side. Both Filch and himself had expressed misgivings about it when they had a private moment with the captain, but Gordon had explained to them that the recruit was on a tighter rein than the rest of the team.

“The new guy always is,” he started, “especially in this case. Rodney is fully aware of who runs this team, and if he doesn't want to fit into the side, then he

can go back to whatever work detail he was on. Besides, after he's had a taste of the action on the field, he'll shut up and toe the line, much like everybody else has.”

The Broken Sword home ground was conveniently located across the road from their tavern. In appearance, it was not dissimilar to the Crow and Eyeball's cow paddock. However, the stand at the ground was in a bit better condition and around the ground some temporary tiered seating, in the form of heavy wooden planks and cast iron supports, allowed more spectators to sit and watch the match in reasonable comfort. Alex surmised that the team had done well on occasions and put some of their winnings back into their venue.

As the team went through their warm up routine on a spare piece of turf, a few spectators cheerfully

offered a few words of encouragement as they headed towards their seats.

“Gaining in popularity it seems,” said Alex.

“We should enjoy it while it lasts,” Gunn replied, waving to a few cheering fans.

The opposition wasn't in a fair mood, and came at them hard right from the start. It was heavy going, but the cons, buoyed by a sense of new found pride, negated all the determined attacks. The trenchers mostly stood firm, and the strikers were able to pick off those who got too adventurous, including a long-haired fielder who managed to sneak his way down the flank. His support didn't arrive in time to stop him from being heavily thumped by Alex, who had peeled off the defensive line. Gordon then picked up the rolling ball. Gunn created an opening and Gordon snuck through with John Bull in tow. The ex-cop took out the last line

of defence, and covered his rear, enabling the veteran slinger a clear run to the line.

Gordon bore a smile from ear to ear as his team-mates rushed in to congratulate him. “Man that feels so good!” he yelled as he hurled the ball into the air.

Zigis and Rodney started the second half. The third fielder didn't have a dream beginning – being knocked out in the first tackle to which he was subjected. The Broken Sword side, eager to even up the score early in the second term, tried hard to put Zig off his game and recover the ball. With fewer defenders guarding the flanks, Kym saw a chance to sneak through the defensive line untouched. Gunn defended the slinger stoutly, ably supported by Cam. Then Zigis finally got an opportunity. He faked a pass to Alex, who was closer to him, and temporarily unmarked, then

lobbed a beautiful pass down field to Filch who was in the open, and he strolled in for the second score.

The home side became desperate and really started chancing their arm, but to no avail. The defence was picking off the receivers no sooner than they had caught the passes, with some being unceremoniously bundled off the field. On one such occasion the crowd tossed the ball back onto the field, and it came to a stop barely an arms length away from Zig. He took it and ran with it. Gunn once again provided some cover for him as the reserve slinger raced into a perfect position to pass. He spied Kym open near the goal-line, and threw a spiralling pass down field. Kym caught the ball easily, then dodged away from a desperate diving tackle to score the third point and finish off the scoring. The match ended with the Shark putting on a big hit on the Sword's reserve slinger, who had to be stretchered off as the referee called time.

This time on the trip home, there were no sad faces in the players wagon.

But the warden and his offsider had plenty to think about, namely, what to do with the winnings the side was earning.

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Gordon knew of their next opponents, the Headless Goat.

“These players are dirty, even by major league standards. We played a pre-season warm-up against them once when on a tour of Brython and they had five players sent off for fouling. Mind you we had three players who missed the opening match of the season and two of those carried niggling injuries for the rest of the year. They couldn't play then, and by all reports, they can't play now, but they still know how to foul. If we can walk away with a draw from this match and with a

full squad for the next round, we'll be doing very well indeed.”

His words were to be proved accurate early in the match. Filch and Kym were fouled, with the latter having been given a heavy concussion while carrying the ball. Gordon was thumped hard into the turf in a two man tackle whilst trying to recover the loose ball, and he watched helplessly as the home side picked up the dregs and ran it in for a score.

But the cons weren't to be outdone. Psycho followed up a hit on a trencher by dropping on him with a cocked elbow whilst Rodney casually stood on his leg. The trencher screamed as the attack broke a rib, and despite harsh words from the opposition, the referee elected not to award a penalty.

“Nice one Psycho, but please be a little less obvious next time?” Gordon said during a lull in proceedings. Psycho just grinned.

Once again, Gordon allowed Zigis to start the second half, and he was targeted by a number of vicious assaults. Gunn came to his aid as often as he could, but even he was overwhelmed by the number of fists flying at his face.

The Jailbirds only received one opportunity to score in the second half, and they took it. Tallin had thrown a powerful block on the Goat's slinger, and the ball bounced and ricocheted around the ruck until it reached Cam. He somehow picked up the ball, and with players coming after him, he quickly threw a short pass to Zigis who was suddenly unmarked. The pass found it's target, and Zigis ran downfield. Cam was hit hard after the pass and had to be carried off.

Gunn moved up on Zig's left, Alex took the right. Cleaver removed one of the human obstacles, giving the trio room to move. The two trenchers then withstood

three assaults to give the slinger an easy passage to the goal-line.

It was with great relief that the referee called time soon after.

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The next match against the Blighted Ash was played in unusual conditions. Heavy snow had covered the pitch the night before the game, and as the players arrived at the ground, it started to fall again, making conditions quite difficult for both sides. The ball was nearly impossible to pick up, and when it was, the play was completely centered around whoever was carrying it at the time.

Gordon tried to create some opportunities, but only one of his passes stuck. Filch tried desperately to try to break the deadlock, but ended up slipping and falling flat on his face, knocking himself out only yards from the goal-line. Somehow the home side was able to

recover possession, and hang onto it despite the Jailbirds' attacks. It was a slow, hard fought march down field for them, but it eventually resulted in a point on the board.

After the score someone decided to throw snowballs. It didn't take long for all the players to get involved, and then some of the crowd. The game was then forgotten when the referee was bowled over by a rock covered in snow, and fists started flying instead. The two assistant referees called the half over as the militia and officials tried to separate the two sides and the spectators.

There was no let up to the snow after the break and players still had trouble trying to stay upright and pick up the ball. But somehow the Jailbirds managed to get into a scoring position when the Shark pulled off the hit of the game. The opposing player was trying to bust his way through the defence and Shark's hit knocked

him back a yard or two, the pigskin popping out of his grasp when he landed heavily on the snow-caked turf. There was a mad scramble for the loose ball, and Gordon somehow came up with it.

“I'm open!” yelled a voice. Gordon saw John Bull standing in the clear just on the edge of the ruck. Gordon ducked under a wild blow aimed at his head, then carefully jogged over to slip him the ball. An opposing striker saw what was happening, and charged at them. Gordon dropped the shoulder and caught him square in the chest, knocking him flat. As Bull advanced down field, Gordon warily covered his back and made sure the trencher scored the equaliser.

As John Bull was scoring, Psycho carried out one of his patented elbow drops on an unsuspecting trencher he had just flattened. When a penalty wasn't forthcoming, nor the point disallowed, the crowd rioted again. The match officials decided to quickly call time

and scampered off the field as the militia struggled to fend off the protestors. Psycho had to be dragged away by Tallin after head butting a spectator in a thick coat with a woolen scarf who came at him with a broken bottle. During the melee, the dentist managed to grab a large bank bag that contained the team's share of the gate-takings, but had to fight his way back to the wagons after being set upon by half-a-dozen fans.

The match report took up the entire front page of the local broadsheet the following Monday, complete with an artistic line drawings of the match-ending riot and some of the people involved. Gordon was constantly ribbed about his portrait caption “the noble captain of the convict side” and Psycho gained extra notoriety with “the villainous scoundrel whose unsportsmanlike actions caused the riot”. Extra copies were smuggled in much to the delight of the team, and they later adorned many a cell wall, with the description

of the melee being read over and over again and recounted at every opportunity in the mess hall or the exercise yard.

Even the guards framed a copy for their off-duty lounge. Winston didn't like it, but met stout opposition when he tried to have it removed.

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The team was surprised when the warden decided to visit the players at the conclusion of their last training session for the week. Rufus wasn't far behind him.

“Gentlemen, a few moments of your time,” he started.

“All we have is time,” muttered Gunn. There were a few muffled sniggers. If the warden heard the remark he chose to ignore it.

“I must admit, I am surprised at your performance so far this season. You have galvanized

well as a team, and have held your own against some more experienced sides. However, the season is not over yet, and there is still at least one match to go. Anything but a loss will have you playing off for a finals berth next week. Your opponents, the Mean Fiddler, are also quite keen to make the semi-finals, as they have been part of the final four for the last five years. Defeat them or draw with them tomorrow, and you'll have to have a night away from this prison, since we'll have to travel some distance to get to the next game. And gentlemen, no more repeats of the riot from last week's match. It was quite embarrassing. Local authorities informed me they had considered laying charges against some of you, but I was able to dissuade them. That is all."

The team waited for him to exit the training yard before anyone spoke. "Charges? Gees – I'm scared!"

Gunn said. The rest of the squad burst out laughing.

Even a few of the supervising guards chuckled.

“But hear dat – a night away from dis hole,”

Cleaver said. “Dat's somethin’ to play for!”

“Even if they do lock us up in the local jail before the match, it's still a night out!” John Bull added. The team cheered in agreement.

And with that to inspire them, the Mean Fiddler side had no chance, even though they scored first, benefiting from Cam and Josh being knocked out cold early in the proceedings. The extra gaps in the defence gave them an opportunity to run in an easy score.

But then the Jailbirds took over. Tallin started with a gut-wrenching tackle on a thickset striker, who was only saved from serious injury by the team's healer. The Shark snapped the leg of one of the long-legged fielders, and Gordon threw a quick pass to Kym, who flew down the sideline for the equaliser. The Mean

Fiddler tried to respond with a passing play, but Filch plucked the ball out of the air before it reached it's intended receiver, and ran it in unopposed for a second point.

Gordon started the second half, and with Gunn and John Bull in tow, he went after the opposing slinger. Gunn and Bull picked off his support, and Gordon lined up his opposite and buried him with a heavy hit. He scooped up the loose ball, and with Alex running as a block, he sprinted off to score the team's third point for the game.

Zigis then entered the fray, and dazzled the crowd with a couple of well thrown long passes. The second one rewarded the side with a fourth point. Kym once again caught a beautiful pass on the run but was caught by the cover defence. Thankfully, Rodney was lurking nearby. Kym flicked a one-handed lob to him with an opposing player desperately trying to knock it

down. The ball somehow reached the reserve fielder. He juggled it once, twice, then brought it under control and strode in for his first point and the team's fourth for the match.

Josh assisted Psycho in fouling off the Fiddler's other fielder (naturally upsetting the crowd when it wasn't spotted by the referee), then Cleaver injured two players in quick succession with a couple of brutal tackles. The game ended with a heavy three man tackle on the Fiddler's reserve slinger, who was practically thrown into the crowd by Gunn, Cam and Alex, ball and all.

Most of the players were quite delirious when they arrived back at the prison later that evening. Word had reached the prison of the victory, and the team was greeted by boisterous cheers from the inmates, despite it being after lights out. The guards, under orders from the warden, tried to silence them. When their efforts

were having no effect on them Winston retired to his quarters in disgust, leaving the guards to put up with the noise.

When Gordon finally entered B26, he found a wooden box with a small note attached to it resting on his bunk. Alex was surprised when he saw the note. “To the captain of the Jailbirds, from your benefactor,” it read.

“I hope it's a file and a length of rope,” Alex said as the captain cracked open the box.

There were two bottles of sparkling white wine, with a bottle opener, packed in amongst the shredded paper.

“Well, that's something you don't see every day,” Cam said, looking over his shoulder.

“I'd better hide them. Don't want them confiscated now, do we?”