



More blood-spattered sports action in the fantasy world of Warhammer!

A BLOOD BOWL NOVEL

RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE

Blood Bowl - 04

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(An Undead Scan v1.5)

“Hi there, sports fans, and welcome to the Blood Bowl for tonight’s contest. You join us here with a capacity crowd, packed with members of every race from across the known world, all howling like banshees in anticipation of tonight’s game. Oh, and yes there are some banshees... Well, kick-off is in about two pages’ time, so we’ve just got time to go over to your commentator for tonight, Jim Johnson, for a recap on the rules of the game before battle commences. Good evening, Jim!”

“Thank you. Bob! Well, good evening and boy, are you folks in for some great sporting entertainment. First of all though, for those of you at home who are unfamiliar with the rules, here’s how the game is played.

“Blood Bowl is an epic conflict between two teams of heavily armed and quite insane warriors. Players pass, throw and run with the ball, attempting to get it to the other end of the field, the end zone. Of course, the other team must try and stop them, and recover the ball for their side. If a team gets the ball over the line into the opponents’ end zone it’s called a touchdown; the team that scores the most touchdowns by the end of the match wins the game. Of course, it’s not always as simple as that...”

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For the life of him, Dunk Hoffnung couldn't figure out what he was still doing on a Blood Bowl pitch. At the end of the last season, he'd led his team — the Bad Bay Hackers — all the way to the Blood Bowl championship. In the course of that, he'd found his true love, repaired his relationship with his brother, and saved the Empire from Khorne the Blood God.

To top it all off, he'd reclaimed his family's lost fortune, including the keep they'd once owned in Altdorf, the Empire's capital. He had fame, friends, and more money than he would ever need. What else did he have to prove?

Dunk had wrestled with these doubts several times over the past week, during the first round of the *Spike! Magazine* Tournament. Now, though, the game demanded his full attention, as the spiked ball sailed down out of the black night and into his arms, making him the primary target for the eleven armed and armoured dark elves playing for the Darkside Cowboys.

"Hoffnung grabs the kick-off, and the final semi-final game of the tournament is underway!" Bob Buford's voice rang out across the stadium over the Preternatural Address system. The crowd roared to answer him, its lust for blood feeding the volume.

"Just listen to those fans!" Bob's partner, Jim Johnson, chipped in. "There's nothing like a pack of people screaming at the top of their lungs!"

"Sounds like you're talking about last night's dinner," the ogre Bob said to the vampire Jim. "Stop it! You're making me drool!"

Dunk scanned the situation downfield. Most of his team-mates — the ones in the yellow and green uniforms with the three-sword H logos on their helmets — raced ahead of him, converging to a point, trying to form a protective wedge behind which he could run. Meanwhile, the pale skinned elves in the black and blue uniforms came charging up the field, seeking to find a way past the Hackers' linemen so they could rip Dunk's heart from his chest.

Dunk spun to the left and charged up behind his brother Dirk, pump faking a pass to the right. Only one of the Cowboys got fooled. He hesitated just long enough for Spinne to smash him to the ground, and then do a little dance on his helmet with her spiked shoes.

"Oh, that's gotta hurt!" Bob said. "I wonder if I could get her to do that to me after the game!"

"Gee, Bob, don't you think her boyfriend, Dunk, would object?"

"Hey, if he wants to watch, he has to pay like everyone else!"

"Really?"

"Okay, I'll let him in for half price, but just this once!"

Dunk ignored the blather over the PA. He wondered if the Cowboys' coach had paid the pair to say things to distract him. It didn't strike him as something the Cowboys would do. Not that they wouldn't cheat, they just wouldn't be that subtle about it.

Unfortunately, it worked. One of the Cowboys blazed straight past McGraw — one of the Hacker linemen — with not even a whisper of protest. Dunk gaped at the oncoming dark elf for a moment: the white dreadlocks flopping out from his helmet on all sides, the snarl on his perfect face, the muscles that were far too big to naturally fit across an elf's shoulders.

The things that drew his eye the most, though, were the long, glittering blades that jutted out from the steel bracers protecting the elf's forearms. One of them was covered with fresh blood.

Dunk knew then that McGraw was dead. If he didn't move fast, he would share his team-mate's fate. He would have liked to have called the man his friend, but he barely knew him. McGraw had made the team in the pre-tournament tryouts, just as Dunk had three years ago, and the only thing he could tell anyone about McGraw was that he thought Bloodweiser was like carbonated seal piss.

"Whoa!" said Jim. "Looks like the newest Hacker is DOA. Er-Rel Towns dropped him without even a stutter in his step!"

"I got dibs on that fountain of blood spurting from his neck!" said Bob. "The fresh stuff is best!"

"Speaking of which, how's that corpse tattooing campaign of yours coming along?" asked Jim.

"The 'Dead-On Label'? More coaches are going for it, especially once they see how much they can get for fresh kills on the open market. They pay for those players and have to get their value out of them somehow!"

Dunk jukeed left again, and then raced to the right. The move faked Towns out of his left shoe, but he still kept after Dunk, snagging the green jersey with his long, thin fingers.

Dunk twisted around, hoping to wrench his jersey from the elf's grasp, but he just reeled him in instead. The Cowboy assassin slashed at Dunk with the blade stabbing from his free arm, and the Hacker thrower put up the only thing he had to block it: the ball.

The edge of the blade skittered off the ball's reinforced surface, its point gouging a long trail in the side of Dunk's helmet. Dunk raised the ball before him again to fend off another slash, then another. A quick glance up the field told him he had to do something to lose this attacker soon, or the rest of the Cowboys would tackle him under a huge pile. If that happened, he'd take more jabs than a dartboard.

Dunk took the ball in both hands and smashed it into Towns's face. The dark elf glanced up at the last second and took the point of the ball right in his faceguard.

And there it stuck.

When Dunk tried to pull the ball back, it wouldn't come. It had got wedged into the faceguard like an axe in an old oak. Try as he might, Dunk couldn't wrest the thing loose.

"Get it out!" Towns screamed. "For the hatred of all that's unholy, get it out!"

From the blood dribbling down the elf's chest, Dunk guessed that the football was wedged in more than just the helmet. Towns let go of Dunk's shirt and began to slash at the football with his blades. They were too long for him to stab the points into the pigskin, though, and the spikes and hide repelled his attempts to saw through them.

Dunk reached for the ball again and grabbed on with both hands. He tried to plant a foot on the elf's chest for leverage, but Towns slashed at him with his blades, and he leaped back.

"Hold still, damn it, and I'll get it out," he said.

Towns ignored Dunk's pleas and charged straight at him, following the sounds of the thrower's voice over the cheering of the crowd. Dunk stepped to the side like a matador and tripped Towns as he went by. The elf went face down into the Astrogranite, where the spike on the other end of the ball stuck.

It was about that time that the ogre showed up.

M'Grash K'Thragsh crushed one Cowboy beneath a massive boot with serrated spikes, then tossed another clear into the stands on his way over to reach Dunk. The hapless dark elf went sailing into the first few rows, fans scattering like cockroaches before a torch. Once the player crunched into the stands, though, he disappeared under a swarm of them.

Moments later, the Cowboy popped up on the upraised hands of the crowd, and Dunk saw him get body-passed straight towards the cheap seats at the top of the stadium. The sight sent a shudder through him as he remembered how the same thing had happened to him in his first game in this very stadium. The various awnings on the outside of the stadium had broken his fall, but the sausage vendor whose cart he'd crushed had beaten him hard enough to put him into a three-day coma.

Dunk put those thoughts out of his head as the ogre stormed up towards him and put a hand on his shoulder. “Dunkel okay?” the massive, tusk-faced creature in the Hackers uniform asked.

Dunk nodded at his friend. “Just get the ball.”

M’Grash reached down to grab Towns by the back of the helmet, and there was a sickening snap. Dunk winced as the ogre handed him the ball with the helmet and head still attached to it. He’d got what he’d asked for, but not what he’d meant.

“Oh!” Bob said. “That’s going to leave a mark!”

“Grave ‘marker’, I think you mean!” said Jim. “So much for Towns renegotiating his contract, unless he plans to play for the Champions of Death! Coach Tomolandry always says any other team’s loss is his gain!”

“What now, Dunkel?” M’Grash started to say. The ogre had a brain the size of Dunk’s fist, which was barely enough to make his body move, much less think of where to move it. He needed constant direction.

“Charge!” Dunk said, pointing down the field towards the distant end zone.

M’Grash knew the drill. He led the way in front of Dunk, tearing through any foes brave or stupid enough to challenge him, while Dunk carried the ball behind him and looked for an open catcher downfield. They’d run the same play hundreds if not thousands of times before. It was simple enough for even M’Grash to grasp it, and it worked.

As they went, Dunk wrenched the football away from the helmeted head, and got up close behind M’Grash. Shielded by the ogre, he juggled the ball up under one arm and held Towns’s head out wide in his throwing hand.

Before they got twenty yards down the field, though, M’Grash fell to his knees, grabbing at his helmet and screaming as if in horrible pain.

Dunk wanted to check on his friend, but he knew that if he stopped moving the Cowboys would pulverise him. So, he scanned the pitch and spotted the team captain, a dark-skinned legend by the name of Rhett Cavre, kicking over a defender and breaking away. Unfortunately, he had two other dark elves converging on him, and a toss in that direction would be a sure interception.

Dunk cocked back his arm and hurled Towns’s head in the man’s direction, hoping it would buy them a few minutes. Without even looking to see if Cavre caught the helmeted remains, Dunk rushed to M’Grash’s side. “Are you all right?”

“Oh yes, my foolish friend,” M’Grash said, his voice thick with a Bretonnian accent. “I am better than ever.”

Dunk knew instantly that something was wrong. He spun on his cleats to sprint off in the other direction. Before he could get away, though, a meaty hand reached out and grabbed him around his lower leg.

M’Grash climbed to his knees, and Dunk got a good look at his eyes. They stood vacant, but for a horrible red glow. Dunk felt like someone had poured ice into his jock strap.

The crowd cheered.

“Interception!” Bob shouted.

“You, on the other hand,” the ogre said in someone else’s voice, “are soon to be beyond all troubles.”

Dunk wanted to scream, but he knew it would do no good. He tried to shake his leg free instead, but M’Grash’s grip only tightened on him as he laughed at Dunk’s pathetic attempt.

“Live by the ogre, die by the ogre,” M’Grash said. “Words to be torn to pieces by.”

Then Dunk knew what had happened. The Cowboys’ team owner and wizard, the legendary liche Berry Bones, must have used some kind of spell to take over the ogre’s mind. That put the undead spell slinger in the driver’s seat behind M’Grash’s monstrous body.

Dunk lashed out with his free boot and caught the ogre between the eyes, smashing his nose into his face. M’Grash dropped the thrower and clutched at the blood flowing from his nostrils.

“Ow!” M’Grash said. “You’d think that ogres would be immune from pain. They must just be too stupid to feel it.”

Dunk grimaced at the mess he’d made of M’Grash’s face. He never wanted to hurt his friend, but the wizard had made it clear that his only other choice was to die. As the ogre reached for him again, he did the wise thing and fled.

The crowd erupted in a cheer. “Touchdown, Cowboys!” said Jim.

Dunk glanced up at the Jumboball, a massive crystal ball through which wizards from the Extraordinary Spellcasters Prognosticated News Network (ESPNN) broadcast images of the game, and spotted a Darkside Cowboy spiking Towens’s head in the end zone.

“Wait a minute, Jim,” Bob said. “The referee in the end zone is waving that off. Seems that’s not the ball ‘Itchy’ Mirvin had in his hands, but it looks like he’s finally secured that starting position over Towens!”

The crowd roared, and Dunk didn’t need to look at the Jumboball to know that every finger in the stadium was pointing at him. He brought the ball up from where he’d been trying to hide it under his arm and cradled it in a proper football hold. The roar grew louder.

Dunk could feel M’Grash’s breath on his neck: hot, steamy, and smelling of the insanely spicy sauce of chimera wings. He risked a glance back and saw his friend reaching for him, the red glow still dancing alongside murder in his eyes.

Dunk put everything he had into a final burst of speed, but it wasn’t enough. The ogre’s legs were too long, and he pounded along too fast.

Dunk had raced against M’Grash in practice and had always beaten the ogre in a flat sprint. He’d long suspected his friend had been throwing the races to him, but then he’d realised what was going on. Dumb as he was, M’Grash didn’t trust the ground under his feet. He ran slower than he could have because he wanted to make sure he didn’t fall.

Whoever was in M’Grash’s head now didn’t share that fear. Assuming it was Bones, he had the ogre’s legs pumping as hard as he could.

Dunk stuck the ball out in his left hand to fake going in that direction, then cut right. M’Grash tried to follow him, but tripped on his massive feet. As he went tumbling forward, he reached out with his humongous hands spread, and one gigantic paw closed around Dunk’s leg again.

The pair somersaulted forward and flipped more times than Dunk could count. His head rattling around in his helmet almost knocked him senseless. His years of training helped him hold on to the ball despite the fact he almost lost his lunch.

They rolled to a rest at the foot of a tree, and for a moment Dunk couldn’t figure out how they’d managed to find themselves outside the stadium. Then he heard Edgar’s voice.

“What the bloody hell’s this then?” the treeman in the Hackers uniform asked as he leaned over Dunk and M’Grash. “Aren’t you two supposed to be on the same team?”

M’Grash glared up at the treeman and roared.

Dunk waved at Edgar until he caught his wide, green eyes, and then stabbed a finger at the ogre, who still had his leg in his fist. “Timber!” Dunk yelled.

The treeman recognised the call and executed the play perfectly. He put his branches up tall, held himself rigid, which wasn’t hard as treemen don’t bend well in the first place, and tipped himself over onto the ogre.

M’Grash yelped in surprise and then pain as Edgar toppled over onto him, crushing the ogre beneath the treeman’s bulk. M’Grash’s hand let go of Dunk as he struggled to reach back to grab Edgar and pull him from his back. The ogre’s muscle-bound arms didn’t stretch that way though. He was stuck.

“By all the dark gods!” M’Grash said. “Get him off! Make it stop!”

Dunk scrambled to his feet and saw at least half of the Darkside Cowboys converging on him. After seeing how he’d tricked them into destroying the most important part of their star catcher’s

corpse, they were out for revenge as much as for the ball. Since he had both, he made a doubly attractive target.

Dunk decided his best bet was to halve his lure. With so many of the Cowboys coming at him, the Hackers' catchers were open. Cavre stood waving his hands in the end zone, an easy score, but Spinne jumped up and down on the opposite side of the field from Dunk. He cocked back his arm and fired a pass off at Spinne.

The Cowboys rushing towards Dunk watched the ball spiral through a perfect arc over their heads and land in Spinne's outstretched hands. She held it high and waved it at them, taunting them, then bent over and smacked the ball on her rump. The crowd erupted at the display of cockiness, and the Cowboys switched their attention from Dunk to Spinne.

"Wow!" Jim said. "How many times do you see a Blood Bowl team pick getting the ball over sheer spite?"

"That's what makes the Cowboys one of the most profitable teams out there! Coach Bill Per-Sells' ruthless fiscal discipline drills this into his players' heads: It's not about blood! It all comes down to the bottom line!"

"Plus, Schönheit did a masterful job of making them mad at her. If you have to choose between revenge for a team-mate or revenge for yourself, there's no contest!"

For the briefest moment, Dunk feared for Spinne, but he felt the same way every time she stepped on to the pitch with him. He'd got over it, mostly. He never liked putting her in danger, but she'd made it clear she expected him to treat her like an equal. In any case, he'd needed a distraction so he could deal with M'Grash.

Dunk reached down and grabbed the doorknocker of a nose ring that hung from the ogre's nose, right where it pierced his slab of a septum. "Let him go," he snarled at the wizard within.

M'Grash stopped whining at the treeman and turned his attention to Dunk. He reached for him with a massive mitt, but Edgar slapped down his arm with a branch.

"That'll bloody well be enough of that," Edgar said.

Dunk wrenched M'Grash's nose ring, and the ogre screamed in pain. Dunk had never heard such a horrible and pathetic sound escape his friend's mouth.

"Get out," Dunk said, "now! Or I rip your nose apart."

The ogre froze. "You wouldn't hurt your best friend."

"It wouldn't bother my friend. Too stupid, right?" Dunk twisted the ring slowly until it seemed like it might pull right through the ogre's skin. "You, though, I'll bet you're smart enough to feel every bit of it."

M'Grash growled in frustration, loud enough to hurt Dunk's ears. Then his face went slack.

As the red light vanished from M'Grash's eyes, the ogre looked up at Dunk. "Dunkel?" he said, his childlike innocence restored.

"Yes?" Dunk asked, relieved to have his friend back, in many, many ways.

The ogre crossed his eyes at Dunk's hands, still on the nose ring. "Let go now?"

"Right!" Dunk let the ring loose and leapt back, waving Edgar off.

"About time," Edgar said as he rolled off the ogre's back.

"Touchdown, Hackers!" Jim said. The crowd burst into screams of excitement.

"Wow!" Bob said. "I haven't seen moves like that since last night's dinner. Those snotlings really didn't want to end up in your belly."

"For all the good it did them." Jim gave a cruel laugh.

Dunk pumped his fist at the crowd. It had been a rough start to the game, but they'd still come out of it well. If the Cowboys had already tried their worst tricks, they had the game in the bag.

"Pardon me," Edgar said from where he'd rolled off M'Grash and on to the Astrogranite. "Do you think the ogre I just bloody well saved might be persuaded to give me a hand up?"

2

“We won!” Dunk ducked as his brother Dirk poured a tankard of ale over his head. The cold, frothy liquid ran down Dunk’s neck and back, making him roar in mock rage. Then he gathered the younger Hoffnung up in a bear hug and growled in his face.

“Championship game, here we come,” Dirk grinned.

Much as he wanted to, Dunk couldn’t be angry with his brother. He was too happy about the victory to begrudge the man such enthusiastic joy.

Before he could say a word, though, M’Grash gathered the two men up into an even larger, lung crushing embrace. “Hackers win!” The ogre topped off his cheer with a howl that caused everyone else in the locker room to cover their ears.

Spinne leapt up on a bench and gently pried Dunk loose from the ogre’s grasp. “Be gentle with him,” she said with a smile.

“I sorry,” M’Grash said, his toothy grin fading.

“I was talking to Dunk and Dirk,” Spinne said as she reached up to give the ogre’s tender nose a pat. “Are you feeling better yet?”

The ogre’s grin returned, wide enough to swallow Spinne’s head. He nodded happily at her. “Doc help.”

“Took half a gallon of my best materials, and three yards of sutures, but he’ll be fine,” said a white haired, sour faced elf with a monocle over the eye not covered with a blood-stained patch.

“Thank you, Dr. Pill,” Dunk said.

The elf growled the gratitude away, just as he always did.

“How about the others?” a dazzling, dark haired woman asked, as she squirmed forward between two players. As she spoke, a glittering gold ball with a hole in one end hovered before her and off to one side. Then it spun its black eye from her towards the ill-mannered apothecary.

“I don’t speak on camra,” Dr. Pill said, regarding the hovering ball with suspicion.

“But I’m Lästiges Weibchen, with ESPNN, and Hackers fans everywhere are dying to know the fate of Standplatz Innen, Sicheres Gegangen and Geborenes Verurteilt.”

“If they’re dying, they’ll be in good company. Innen, Gegangen, and Verurteilt were all DOA. You can thank the Cowboy’s ‘hidden’ blades for that.”

Dunk’s grin fell from his face, and a silence hung over the rest of the room. “Couldn’t you do anything for them?” he asked. As soon as the words left his lips, he winced, ready for one of the apothecary’s biting retorts.

Instead, Dr. Pill shook his head sadly. “They left DNZ orders, ‘Do Not Zombify’, so I, ah, rendered them useless to the vultures from the undead teams.”

“Doctor,” a low voice said from behind Dunk, “that should very well be enough.”

Dunk turned to see Captain Pegleg Haken standing in the doorway of the coach’s office. He held his yellow tri-corn hat in his hands, exposing the top of his head, where Dunk saw that his long, curly, and inky locks had started to thin. A tall, stunning woman with bronzed skin and sun bleached hair stood next to him.

“We’re celebrating a victory here,” the ex-pirate turned coach said, raising his hooked hand in the air as he stepped into the room on his wooden leg, “which is why I prefer to leave the news of our fallen friends until the morning after.” He glared at Dr. Pill as he spoke.

“Never weep for a Blood Bowl player,” Cavre said. Stepping between the captain and any issue took brass, and Cavre had plenty. He had been the team captain and the coach’s right-hand man since long before Dunk had joined the team. If anyone could skirt Haken’s wrath, it would be him.

“Aye,” the captain said, acknowledging Cavre’s wisdom by jutting out his chin. “They died doing what they loved. We should all be so lucky as to carve those words on our headstones.”

“Hear, hear,” the players murmured. The loudest of them was Rotes Hernd, the backup thrower. She sat on the bench much of the time, waiting for Dunk to get tired or hurt, but she’d been close to at least two of the dead players.

Rotes stood as tall as Spinne, but was built broader across her shoulders. She had the arms of a thrower, while Spinne had the hands of a catcher. The two made for an excellent combination during practices, although Dunk and Spinne connected better on almost every level.

“Who’s your friend?” Schlechtes Getrunken, one of the backup linemen asked. With Gegangen dead, he had moved up to a starting position, something he’d been celebrating hard since the final whistle had blown to end the game.

Dunk suspected Getrunken had actually started in with his celebration well before that. Many coaches ignored a player taking an occasional nip from a bottle during a game. The alcohol helped kill the pain most players felt on the field, and the fear too.

Sometimes players went a little overboard though. Dunk recalled one game early in the previous year’s Chaos Cup tournament in which the Greenfield Grasshuggers, a halfling team, had been so drunk that they’d just laid there on the field as the Laurelorn Paladins trampled over them. Being sticklers for the rules, the Paladins had insisted on playing the game as long as Grasshuggers were still on the field, whether they were conscious or not.

Getrunken clearly had celebrated a bit too hard. He leered at the statuesque blonde, who stared the tall, burly man level in the eye and sneered at him.

“I am called Enojada,” the woman said, her spicy accent tinged with disgust at Getrunken’s state. “I have business here with your Captain Haken, and possibly with your team as a whole.”

“I’m part of the team, baby,” Getrunken said, slurring his words. “I can help you with any hole you need—”

Before the man could finish his sentence, the woman had knocked him to the floor with a sweep of her leg. Getrunken went down hard, his head cracking on the stone floor, knocking him even more senseless than he’d been. As he fell into a deep snore, she put a booted foot on his chest and leaned forward to look at the others. Her eyes dared them to retaliate, to come to their team-mate’s defence.

No one moved. Getrunken had only been with the team for just over a week, and none of them had formed much of an attachment to him yet. That rarely happened, Dunk knew, until a player survived a tournament. Then he’d bond with the others on their way back to Bad Bay, aboard the team’s cutter, the *Sea Chariot*. He’d then become a brother, part of the family.

Right now, they only saw a lethal woman standing over a drunken fool.

Haken cleared his throat. “My Hackers? Allow me to introduce Miss Ay-No-Ha-Da.” He pronounced every syllable separately, as if the foreign word felt strange on his tongue. “She hails from Lustria, across the sea.”

Lästiges gasped, and the camra over her shoulder turned on the strange woman. “I’ve heard of you,” she said. “You’re an Amazon, one of the best Blood Bowl players Lustria ever produced.”

The tanned woman smiled, showing all of her glaring white teeth. “That was a long time ago. I’m retired these days. I work for the AFL, the Amazon Football League, now.”

“What brings you all the way across the ocean?” Lästiges asked. “The *Spike! Magazine* Tournament?”

“Partially,” Enojada said. “I watch the games on Cabalvision, of course, but there is nothing like being in the stadium.”

“Why are you really here?” Spinne asked. As she spoke, she held Dunk’s hand and gripped it tightly.

The Amazon smiled at Spinne, sizing her up. Dunk wondered if she was appraising his love for a uniform or a grave.

“In Lustria, we have our own tournament. It is not so famous as your Blood Bowl championship, of course, but everyone in Lustria watches it. This year, the AFL has decided that we should reach out to our companions across the sea, the ones that brought the holy sport of Blood Bowl to us, and invite them to join our league.”

Alarm bells went off in Dunk’s head, starting with the words “holy sport”. Fanatics of any kind, religious, Blood Bowl, or otherwise, put him on edge. He remembered the priest back in Dörfchen who’d tried to sell him out to the chimera menacing that little town. That experience had capped off his opinion of organised religion. Well, that and having to save the whole of Altdorf, the seat of the Empire, from the plots of the Blood God Khorne.

Everyone in the room started to talk at once.

“We can’t go,” Erhaltenes Spiel, one of the starting linemen, said. “We have a championship to defend.”

Dirk smirked. “A land full of gorgeous Amazons to wrestle with doesn’t sound too bad to me.” He elbowed Jammernder Anfäger, a starting lineman, and the younger player laughed.

Lästiges shot daggers at Dirk with her eyes. The two of them had been dating on and off for years, but their jobs kept them apart for weeks at a time. The strain on their relationship often showed, but she was too much of a professional to attack a Blood Bowl player on camra, or so Dunk hoped.

Others chipped in with their opinions, but it all came to a halt with a horrible screech. Dunk turned to see Pegleg scratching a long furrow in the team blackboard on the far side of the locker room. He kept it up until he had everyone’s attention and then scraped a little bit farther just to be cruel.

“We’re not going anywhere,” Pegleg said into the merciful silence. “The money is here in the Old World, not halfway across the planet in the bush leagues.”

Enojada scowled, her plastic demeanour cracking for just a moment before she restored her perfect smile. “Of course,” she said, “we expected as much. It is a pity though. The Lustrian Lusties, the team I used to play for, was very much looking forward to the honour of playing against you. Now I must face the pain of telling my team captain that you have decided she is not worth facing.”

“I’m sorry,” Spinne said, “but I don’t see how that’s our problem.”

Enojada licked her lips at Spinne as if she were a fly that had just wandered into her web. “Not you, of course, my darling.” Her gaze locked on Dunk and then Dirk. “But she will miss seeing the men she loves so much.”

Dunk felt like he’d been disembowelled. Spinne raised an eyebrow at him, and Lästiges looked as if she might pick up a spiky bit of armour and drive it straight into Dirk’s heart.

“Just who is your captain?” Dunk asked, dreading the answer. He didn’t know what game this Amazon was playing, but he suspected he wouldn’t like it.

“I thought you knew,” Enojada said, raising her hand to her mouth in mock shock. “She is called Kirta Hoffnung, of course. She is your sister, no?”

Dunk didn’t need to look at his younger brother to know they’d both come to the same decision. “We’re going,” Dunk and Dirk said in unison.

“Mr. Hoffnung and Mr. Heldmann,” Pegleg said, his whisper more menacing than any shout, “in my office.”

The ex-pirate walked back through the door in which he’d been standing, and Dirk and Dunk stormed through it. As they strode through the shocked silence of the locker room, every eye locked on them. Dunk spared a sidelong glance for Enojada, and had to fight the urge to wipe the smirk off

her face. The woman might be the only link he had to his sister, but she didn't have to be so smug about it.

Pegleg hobbled around behind his desk and said, "Close the door." Before Dunk could slam it shut, Enojada slipped in.

"Out," Pegleg said. "This is team business."

"I believe I might be able to help."

"I think you've done enough, miss."

"Mizz."

"How's that?"

"We Amazons prefer to be called 'mizz', not 'miss'."

Pegleg tossed his hat on the desk before him. His eyes bulged like they wanted to pop from his face. "Get. Out. Of. My. Office."

"She stays," said Dirk. Enojada winked at him, and the man blushed. He recovered and backhanded Dunk on the arm. "If she knows where Kirta is, I don't want to let her out of my sight."

Dunk nodded. Then he looked at Pegleg, and braced himself for the man's reaction. "She stays."

Pegleg spat on the floor. "Fine. She should hear this too: We're not going."

"We are," said Dunk.

"Now, boys," a voice said from behind Dunk. He glanced back to see a rotund halfling, his agent, Slogo Fullbelly, peeking in through the still open door. "Listen to reason."

"Forget it, Slick," Dunk said. "If Kirta's in Lustria, that's where we're heading."

Pegleg scowled. "You can't leave the team. We're in the finals in two days."

"Rotes can take my place," said Dunk. "She's been gunning for my spot for over a year."

"She's not the thrower you are." He glared at Dirk. "And we don't have anyone to replace you either. You're both staying."

"We don't need to leave until after the game," Enojada said. "That still gives us plenty of time to make it to the Tobazco Bowl."

Dunk raised an eyebrow at the woman. "Why do they call it that?"

"Our stadium is formed in the natural crater in the top of Mount Tobazco."

"Crater? What caused that?"

"Well, it is a volcano."

Dunk slapped his forehead.

"So," Slick said, "you boys want to run off to find your sister and play ball in the middle of an active volcano."

"Oh," said Enojada, "it sleeps now."

"You mean it's dormant?" asked Dirk. Dunk could see he was pleased with himself for having come up with the word.

"Yes, that is the word." The Amazon smiled at Dirk.

"See," said Dunk, "safe as can be. It can't be any worse than playing in the Dungeonbowl."

Pegleg slammed his hook into the top of his desk, and there it stuck. "We have an obligation to play in the Dungeonbowl again this year. We have a contract with the Grey Wizards to represent them. We cannot back out of that."

"The Hackers can play. You just won't have Dirk or me."

Pegleg's nostrils flared as he spoke. "As your little agent there can no doubt inform you, Mr. Hoffnung, you have a contract with me. I plan to hold you to it."

"I'll buy myself out of it."

"The contract is not for sale," Pegleg said between gritted teeth.

"Dunk and I have plenty of money," said Dirk, "now that we've inherited our family estate."

"This isn't about gold," Pegleg said.

Dunk, Dirk, and Slick gaped at him.

“That’s the problem with players and their agents,” Pegleg said, “short-term thinking. Of course it’s about the gold, but not the gold I can hold in my hand.”

Dunk squinted at the ex-pirate. “What did you do with Coach Haken?”

Pegleg waved him off. “You don’t get it, do you? Last year, we did just what we set out to do, what I’ve set out to do every year of my career: win the Blood Bowl championship.”

“So? You should be happy.” He stared at his coach. “You’re not happy.”

“He’s never happy,” said Dirk. “Maybe the night after a win. The next day, he’s back to being cranky as ever. Coach Bombardi’s the same way.”

“I get it,” said Slick, rubbing his chubby chin, “he’s after a dynasty now.”

Dunk scratched his head. “What?”

Pegleg sat back in his chair and regarded the others. “A dynasty: a legacy, a chance to build not just a winning team, but a legend.”

“You’re getting old,” Dirk said.

Pegleg catapulted up out of his chair and lunged at Dirk. Unfortunately, his hook was still stuck in his desk from when he’d slammed it down earlier. He’d been trying to free himself the entire time without letting anyone know, but now he’d forgotten himself and almost broken his wrist for his trouble.

Dunk stepped between Pegleg and his brother before the ex-pirate went for his cutlass. He held his hands up in front of him to try to calm the enraged man down.

“What Dirk means, I think,” Dunk said, taking an instant to glare at his brother, “is that you’re starting to think not about what you’re doing, but about how you’ll be remembered.”

“And what in the deep blue sea is wrong with that?” Pegleg asked, still pulling at his hook.

“Nothing at all, but,” Dunk said as he stabbed a finger at his head, “you’re thinking too small.” He gestured towards Enojada. “Just think; you could coach the first team to be the undisputed champion on two continents. Haken’s Hackers would be the first team to truly be known as the best in the entire world.”

Pegleg leaned forward on his stuck hook. “You,” he said to Dunk, “are full of shit. Beating up on a bunch of little girls halfway around the world while we should be back here kicking the tar out of serious opponents will only make us a laughing stock.”

Enojada moved so fast that Dunk saw only a blur. One moment, the desk stood between Pegleg and him, and the next it had been smashed in half. The Amazon stepped back to where she had been standing near the door, and the coach looked down at his free hook and waggled it on the end of his wrist.

“My apologies for the ‘little girls’ crack, mizz,” Pegleg said. He spoke in a soft, steady tone once more. “But my point still stands. From the point of view of the Blood Bowl fan, Lustria is just another bush league. We’re staying here.”

Dunk scowled, and then decided to play his trump card. “We’ll buy the Hackers from you then.”

“What?” Pegleg stuck his hook in his ear and scraped it around, pulling out a good chunk of wax. “Could you repeat that, Mr. Hoffnung? I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

“Dirk and I will buy the Hackers from you. We can sell the keep and the rest of our holdings in Altdorf and have plenty of money to handle the purchase.”

“The Hackers are not for sale.” The man spoke as low as a whisper, but still growled like a mother bear defending her cubs.

Slick cleared his throat, and then spoke, softly and reverently. “Come on now, Pegleg, everything is for sale, at the right price.

Pegleg’s voice rose straight to a scream. “You’d have a better chance putting a bid in on my thrice damned soul! Now get out of my office, now!”

3

At the Bad Water tavern down on the docks of Magritta, Sparky the dwarf bartender had a round of drinks ready before Dunk even reached the bar. The entire place erupted in cheers as Dunk, Dirk, and Spinne made their way in from the chilly night air, with Slick and Enojada in tow.

The Bad Water had become known as the Hackers' hangout while in town, and Sparky and the bouncers there did the best they could to ensure that the crowds wouldn't drive their famous patrons away. They had permanently roped off a few tables in the corner for the Hackers' to sit at, and they'd emblazoned Hacker logos and merchandise over nearly every surface in the bar.

As Dunk made his way towards the bar, a trio of Darkside Cowboys fans in black and blue face and body paint leapt at him from out of the crowd. "Hackers suck!" the three men said in unison.

Before Dunk could even respond, the Cowboys fans disappeared beneath a swarm of kicking legs and swinging arms, all wearing the Hackers' familiar green and gold colours. A moment later, the battered men popped up atop the arms of the crowd and were passed straight towards the wall opposite the door.

"Hold it," Sparky shouted, although no one but Dunk seemed to hear him. There was nothing to do but watch the three bodies passed straight towards the picture window and then get tossed right through it. Dunk heard one, two, three splashes as they tumbled into the seawater below.

"I lose more windows that way," Sparky said as Dunk finally made it to the bar to collect the first round of drinks.

Dunk tossed an extra bit of gold on the bar. "To make up for the destruction."

Sparky shook his head even as he leaned over the bar and pocketed the money. "You don't have to do that. We make enough off you drinking here to cover a new window every day of the week." The dwarf grinned through his thick, bushy beard. "But I do appreciate it."

"Three Killer Genuine Drafts and one Halfkein for Slick," Sparky said. He nodded his head towards Enojada. "What about for your friend?"

"She's an Amazon."

"I think that's clear."

"Really, from Lustria. Got anything that might make her feel at home?"

Sparky leapt down from the narrow walkway that ran behind the bar, and Dunk heard him rummaging around among countless bottles. A moment later he popped back up with a tall, thin, clear bottle filled with a golden liquid. He opened it and stuffed a green wedge into it, then slapped it on the bar in front of Dunk. The label read "Corpse-Rona."

"What is it?" Dunk asked.

"Piss water." Sparky scowled at the bottle. "Seal piss, I think."

"Seriously?"

"How would I know it tastes like seal piss?" Sparky held up a thick, stubby hand. "Wait. Don't answer that."

"What's with the green thing?"

"It's a lime. Sailors eat them on long voyages to stave off scurvy."

Dunk glanced at Enojada. "You think she has scurvy?"

"Nah. The fruit just makes the piss tolerable, or so I'm told. I don't put vegetables in my own drink, and I don't trust drinks that require them."

Dunk nodded his thanks, picked up the tray on which Sparky had set the drinks and toted it over to his table. Dirk, Spinne, and Slick each grabbed their drinks, and Dunk handed the Corpse-Rona to Enojada, who accepted it with a wide smile.

“I had no idea you could find such things here,” she said. “This is awful.”

Dunk stared at her. She pointed at the bottle and laughed.

“In Lustria, this is the kind of swill that no one will drink, so we export most of it. In other lands, the lure of its exotic origin sells it better than its lousy flavour does at home.”

“Do you want something else?”

Enojada shook her head and snatched the bottle from the tray. “It may be the worst part of home, but it’s still home.”

Dunk sat down and decided to get right to it. “Tell us about Kirta.”

“You do not waste much time with pleasantries,” Enojada said. “I like that.”

“So?” asked Dirk.

Enojada took a sip of her beer and rolled it around on her tongue for a moment, clearly enjoying the attention far more than her drink. “Kirta is alive and well. She is our team captain, one of the best blitzers that Lustria has ever seen. She is a natural at it. Clearly the talents required for Blood Bowl run strong within your family’s blood.”

“But how is she alive?” asked Dunk. “We thought she’d died when the Guterfiends arranged for an angry mob to storm our family keep.”

“She escaped,” Enojada said with a simple shrug. “Alone, she found her way outside the city and made her way down the Reik until she came to the sea. When she reached Marienburg, she fell prey to a press gang that captured her and sold her to a pack of pirates.”

Dunk grimaced at the thought of his sweet, little sister among a band of ruthless buccaneers. Spinne reached out and took his hand to comfort him, and he did not push it away.

“Some time later, she wound up sailing down the Scorpion Coast. In the temple city of Tlaxtlan, she was auctioned off as a slave and purchased by the Lusties’ owners. It was the best deal they ever made.”

“Our sister is a slave?” Dirk asked, his temper rising along with his voice.

“No longer.” Enojada’s eyes seemed a thousand miles away. “She proved to be a natural player, and within the space of a single year she was able to demand not only her freedom but a healthy salary.”

“A born negotiator, eh?” said Slick. “She doesn’t share that with her brothers.”

The halfling noticed Dunk and Dirk staring at him. “And thank the gods for that, sons, or you wouldn’t need me.”

“Then where would we be?” Dirk said, daring Slick to answer.

“Now she’s the team captain, you say?” Dunk said, trying to shift the conversation back to his sister. He ran his tongue along his lower gums. “It’s a great story. It really is. I only have one question.”

Enojada raised her thick eyebrows. “Yes?”

“Why should we believe a word of it?”

Enojada smiled. “Of course, you do not know me, and I come to you with the most fantastical story possible, a story too good to be true. Why should you trust me?”

“Exactly.”

“You shouldn’t.”

Dunk sat back to consider this.

Enojada continued. “I’m nobody to you; a woman who comes to you out of the blue with a wild story about a woman you know is dead. No matter how much you care about your sister, how can you possibly want to cross the ocean just to check out my story? Especially when I have a clear motive for wanting to trick you into doing just that?”

Dunk glanced at Dirk, and then looked straight into Enojada's eyes. "That about sums it up."

"Kirta said you would be like that. She hoped you'd be at least that canny."

Dunk felt ill. He'd stood up to his coach over a thin hope bound up in a web of flimsy lies. He knew he'd never forget this. Pegleg wouldn't let him.

"So she told me to tell you this one word, to confirm my story, to let you know that it's all true."

Dunk waited in silence, but Dirk couldn't take it. "What is it?" he demanded.

Enojada pursed her lips and spat out a single word. "Nunya."

Dunk almost fell off his chair. Spinne grabbed him by the arm and straightened him back up. Dirk wasn't so lucky and slipped off his seat to the floor.

"What's it mean?" Slick asked. "Is that someone's name?"

Dunk nodded. "Sort of. It's what she called her doll. She had it since she could talk."

Spinne frowned. "That's an unusual name for a little girl to give a doll. What does it mean?"

"None of your business."

Spinne glared at Dunk. "I was just asking. If you don't feel we're close enough for you to share such information—"

"No!" said Dunk. "That's not what I meant at all. The doll's name is Nunya. N-U-N-Y-A. Nunya Bidness."

4

Dunk burst into Pegleg's office. "We need to talk."

"It's customary to knock, Mr. Hoffnung." The coach peered up at Dunk over a pair of half-moon glasses he'd been using to read a sheaf of papers scattered on the desk in front of him.

Dunk reached out and knocked on the new desk's surface. "We need to talk now."

Pegleg put down the papers. "Today is your day off. Can't this wait until tomorrow?"

"We play tomorrow."

"Then after that."

Dunk shook his head. "We need to deal with this now. I'm going to Lustria, and Dirk's coming with me."

Pegleg removed his glasses and set them on the desk. "You don't say? How about Spinne?"

"She's coming too." Dunk thought she would, at least.

"You're going to undertake a long and perilous ocean voyage to find your sister's ghost on the say-so of a damsel, pardon me: Amazon, you know nothing about."

"Enojada is telling the truth."

"You seem sure."

"I am."

"So, there's no way that a wizard could have stolen a memory from you or your brother or one of dozens of souls who once worked in your family's keep to fabricate this 'proof' you seem to think you have?"

Dunk stopped and thought about this for a moment. "It's possible, sure."

"But you're going anyhow."

"I am."

Pegleg rubbed his goatee with his good hand. More grey shot through the black than when Dunk had first met the man three years before.

"You know, Mr. Hoffnung, coaching a Blood Bowl team is one of the more thankless jobs around. If your team loses, everyone blames it on you, from the announcers to the fans to even the owners, should there be others than yourself. If your team wins, the players get all the credit, at least the star players do. Players like you."

"I'll come back. We all will."

Pegleg raised an eyebrow. "And how would that work? As soon as anyone leaves the team, under his own steam, or feet first, I have to replace him."

"Openings develop after almost every game," said Dunk.

Pegleg nodded. "You're not leaving. I won't let you out of your contract."

"But Coach—"

"Don't give me that, Mr. Hoffnung. Where will I be able to find three seasoned athletes who play together as well as you, your brother, and your woman? And you know that if you leave, M'Grash will be useless for months."

"We're going anyhow."

Pegleg went entirely cold. Dunk had seen the man rage at people before, tearing into them with his hook as well as his furious words. This terrified him far more.

“If you leave, I’ll sue you for breach of contract. I’ll have the Game Wizards track you down and use their magic to compel you to fulfil the terms to which you agreed.”

Dunk stared at the man. “You wouldn’t dare. You can’t.”

“Try me, Mr. Hoffnung.”

“Can he do that?”

Dunk turned to the door, and Slick appeared a moment later. The halfling nodded at Pegleg and swallowed hard. “I’m afraid so. The contract is clear about this. Every Blood Bowl contract has such clauses. They stop the players from wandering off after their first pay day and only coming back after blowing every last copper of it.”

“And you let me sign that?”

Slick shrugged. “It’s standard, son. There are all sorts of clauses that protect you too. That’s why we call it a deal rather than slavery.”

“I never would have—”

“Can you read, son?”

Dunk didn’t like where this was heading. “I read the contract.”

“And you understood what you were signing.”

Dunk nodded. When he turned back to look at Pegleg, the man grinned at him.

“I’m so pleased to know that you can see it my way, Mr. Hoffnung. I hope this incident illustrates to you just what a treasured member of our team you are.”

Pegleg stood and offered his hand to Dunk, as if the meeting were over. Dunk ignored it.

“Isn’t there any way out of this?” Dunk asked. “Can’t I just refuse to work?”

Pegleg chuckled. “Unless you’re physically unable, Mr. Hoffnung, you’re required to take to the field when I order it. Or I can have the Game Wizards make you.”

“Would you really do that?” Dunk stared into Pegleg’s dark eyes. “You’d have those idiots wave me around the field like a puppet on their strings? They’d get me killed before half-time.”

Pegleg dropped his hand. “I’d rather not, truth be told. I… Back in my pirate days, I had just such a spell used on me. I hated every second of it. I swore that I’d do whatever I could to get away from there as soon as I could, and kill everyone I could on my way overboard.”

“Yet you’d do that to me.”

Pegleg spat on the floor. “You don’t seem to be leaving me much of a choice. It’s that or lose the *Spike! Magazine* championship.”

Dunk shook his head. “And the money that goes with it. That’s all you give a damn about.”

Pegleg opened his mouth to speak, but stopped. After a moment, he tried again. “The money is important, true. You and your team-mates like to get paid, as do the referees I have to bribe, and Dr. Pill, and all the other staffers that help us out around here, but that’s not why I do this.”

Pegleg shook his head. “I like to win, Mr. Hoffnung. I live to win, to be part of a team that is better than all the rest, and to lead that team to be the best that it can possibly be.

“You want to run off to find your sister. Your family is important to you. I understand that, believe it or not.

“I don’t have a family of my own. I don’t have a woman to hold.” He glared at his hook. “The Hackers are my family, my cause, my purpose, and I won’t let you or anyone else mess that up.”

The man’s speech, his passion, reverberated with Dunk. He understood just what he was talking about, and he felt shame for having thought that only money meant anything to his coach. But, it wasn’t enough to stop him from doing what he had to do.

“Are you done?”

Pegleg sat back down in his chair and gestured for Dunk to say his piece.

“I feel just horrible.”

Pegleg allowed himself a little smile. “Apology accepted,” he said, waving off Dunk’s words. “No need to say anything more.”

“No,” Dunk said, clearing his throat, and then coughing hard. “I feel horrible, sick that is, ill.”

He sat down hard in one of the chairs in front of Pegleg’s desk. He could smell the varnish on it, but he pretended his nose was so stuffed that a full clove of garlic wouldn’t have got through it.

“I don’t know where I must have picked it up. Some kind of virus.” He pounded on his chest and gave up a few more coughs. Then he laid the back of his hand across his forehead. “I feel faint, feverish, too, I think.”

“You’re going to play sick?” Pegleg sat forward in his chair. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Play? Sick?” Dunk lolled his head on his shoulders as if it had become too heavy to lift. “Sorry, coach. I don’t think I could play sick. I might be contagious. What if it’s the plague?”

“If it is the plague, you’ll get off easy compared to what I’ll do to you.” The cold menace had gone. Pegleg had reverted to rage. “You won’t get away with this.”

“What’s my contract say about that, Slick?” Dunk asked, letting his head fall back so he could stare at his agent with blank eyes.

Slick edged his way back out of the door as he spoke. “It’s pretty clear. The ‘Illness and Injury Clause’, also known as ‘IIC’ or ‘Ick’, states that a coach cannot force an injured or ill player to take the field, period.”

“It’s a sham!” Pegleg stood up and slammed his hook into the top of the desk. “You’re healthier than me, you scurvy dog.”

“Really?” Dunk said. “Maybe you should see someone about that, coach? Dr. Pill could probably get you fixed right up.”

The man started to come around the desk to grab Dunk and haul him to his feet, but his hook was stuck once more. “I’ll take you to Dr. Pill. Gah! I order you to report to him for an evaluation and treatment. He’ll put an end to this poppycock.”

“Oh, I would,” Dunk said, “but as I recall, difficult as it is in my fevered condition, the contract clearly states that we have to use a third party doctor on which we can both agree. Team physicians are just too easily pressured by their employers.”

“He’s right,” Slick said. “That got put in back when coaches kept forcing their players to take to the field in the second half against Nurgle’s Rotters, no matter how many quarts of vomit they produced.”

“You’re playing tomorrow,” Pegleg said, “if I have to kick your rump out onto that field with my wooden leg!”

Dunk stood up, cleared his throat and stared Pegleg in the eye. He’d allowed the man to terrify him for as long as he’d been a player. That was a time honoured part of the player/coach relationship in Blood Bowl, and he’d abided by it. The fact that Pegleg could intimidate the Emperor made that easier, but with one foot already out of the door, Dunk found that the man no longer had such a hold over him.

“Try it,” Dunk said, “and you’ll be wearing two of those pegs.”

Pegleg stopped cold in the middle of taking a breath to start a new rant. He choked the air back and glared at Dunk. Before the coach could say a word, Dunk spoke.

“I’m not playing tomorrow. I’m not playing the day after that. I’m not playing until you release me from my contract.”

He gave a gentle cough into his fist as he turned to leave. “As soon as you come to your senses, I think I can arrange to come to mine.”

“You really think I should still play?” Spinne asked as she adjusted the chinstrap on her helmet. She and the other Hackers stood in the Hackers’ dugout on one side of the field, making last-minute preparations before the game.

“If I happened to catch whatever ‘illness’ it is you seem to have, I think people might understand how that could happen.”

“Get out there,” Dunk said. He clapped his brother on the arm. “You too. I can make my point on my own. No need for the rest of you to suffer with me.”

Dirk cast a wary gaze towards the dugout on the opposite side of the field. “We’ll be out there playing while you sit here safe on the sidelines, far away from Khorne’s Killers. Tell me again who’s suffering here.”

“It’s too late for Pegleg to replace you. If you don’t play, the others will probably get killed.”

“So tell me again why you’re shamming sickness so you can stay out of the game if you’re so concerned about our health.”

“I have to do something to break Pegleg’s will.”

Dirk put a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Can’t you find another way? We’re going to miss you out there, painfully.”

“Don’t you want to find Kirta?”

Dirk winced at this. “Of course I do, if she’s really there. This seems like an awful risk to take on some Amazon’s say-so, even if she did know about Nunya.”

“I don’t trust her either,” said Dunk. “After all, she’s basically working as an agent for the Amazons, and most agents are slime.”

“Hey!” Slick said.

“Present company excepted, of course.”

“Son,” Slick said, “you’ve got it wrong. All *good* agents are slime. It goes with the territory.”

Dunk did a double take, and then decided that the halfling was serious. Sometimes he wondered how he’d ended up with such a person in his life, and why he would trust his agent with not only his money but his life. So far, though, despite his bluster, Slick had never steered him wrong.

Something screeched into the sky and exploded over the field.

“There’s the signal for the start of the game!” Bob said. “Welcome to the finals of the *Spike! Magazine* Tournament, pitting the world champions, Bad Bay Hackers against the bad boys of the Chaos Circuit, Khorne’s Killers!”

Dirk patted Dunk on the back while Spinne mimed a kiss at him through her helmet. Then they followed the others as they charged out into their positions on the field.

Dunk’s heart sank as he watched them go. He’d faced similar dangers with them countless times. Khorne’s Killers couldn’t be worse than the Chaos All-Stars they’d faced in the Blood Bowl finals last year, right? But this time he’d be watching from the sidelines, unable to help.

“Hard, isn’t it?” Pegleg said right behind him.

Dunk almost jumped out of his shoes. He spun around and put a few, judicious feet between him and his coach. Pegleg ignored him, keeping his eyes focused on the Hackers as they took the field.

“Being left behind while the people you care most about in the world go off to play the game, to risk their lives, to grab the glory. It’s hard.”

“Don’t you do that every game?” Dunk asked.

Pegleg nodded. “Aye, Mr. Hoffnung, and that’s why I’m tougher than you. You won’t break me over this. You might as well give up and get out on that field right now. That way you can avoid the heartache of watching your friends get torn to pieces while you sit here on the sidelines, nursing your damned cause.”

The coach’s words stung Dunk more than he would let on. He’d been up most of the night struggling with this question, but as dawn had broken over the horizon he’d known he’d made the right choice.

“You’re only concerned about your team,” Dunk said. “I’m doing this for my baby sister.”

With that, he sat down on the far end of the bleacher from Pegleg. The other players stared at him. Dr. Pill sneered for a moment, and then strode over and perched next to Dunk.

“You should get your lazy, wimpy ass out there,” the apothecary said.

“I’m making a point.”

“You made your point. Now you’re just making me look bad.”

Dunk raised an eyebrow at the old elf.

“You’re ‘sick’. I’m the team apothecary. It’s my job to fix you up. You’re not fixed. I must not be doing my job.”

“Everyone knows that’s not true.”

Out on the field, the Killers kicked off the ball, and the Hackers scrambled into position to grab it. The ball sailed right towards Rotes Hernd, who’d started in Dunk’s place.

“I’m sure the Game Wizards would be happy to hear that.”

Dunk froze. “They’re right behind me, aren’t they?” He could not bring himself to turn around.

Dr. Pill snorted. “I’m not that clever. Besides, as pissed off as I am at you, I respect what you’re doing.”

“You do?”

“Family comes first, even over Blood Bowl, especially over Blood Bowl.”

“But you wish it didn’t make you look bad.”

“Precisely. But that’s the least of your worries, I’m sure.”

The old elf clapped Dunk on the back and stood up to greet the stretcher coming off the field. A pair of thick armed dwarfs carried it from either end, and Getrunken sprawled across it, his helmet dangling from one limp hand.

“What happened?” Dr. Pill asked. “I didn’t see the injury.”

Pegleg came over, caught the front of Getrunken’s jersey with his hook, and pulled Getrunken to a sitting position. The man’s head lolled forward on a limp neck, and his eyes rolled open, bloodshot and vacant. When he exhaled, Dunk could smell the rotgut on his breath, even from where he sat.

Pegleg put a hand over his face and growled in disgust. “It was self-inflicted, before the game began. He’s three sheets, maybe four.”

Dr. Pill shook his head and sneered. “The wimp asked me for something to kill the pain, and then does this.”

“What pain?” asked Dunk.

“Emotional.” Dr. Pill rolled his eyes. “Couldn’t take the stress of starting the game, he said.”

Pegleg slapped Getrunken across the face with his fleshy hand. “Get on your feet, you dog. Get up, or the next slap will be from my hook!”

Getrunken’s eyes snapped to focus on the hook still holding him upright. He started to say something, and then brought up his helmet, inverted like a bowl, and bent over it. Pegleg snatched back his hook as the man retched into his helmet.

“Get him out of here,” Pegleg said to the dwarfs. He shot a glare at Dr. Pill. “Get him sober for the second half. He’s starting again whether he’s ready or not.”

“They’d kill him in a state like that,” said Dunk.

“Better to die on the field than in the locker room.”

Pegleg stabbed his hook out towards a burly young man sitting in the dugout’s far corner. “You!” he said.

“Yes, coach.” The young player charged up to the ex-pirate and snapped off a sharp salute. “Nicht Bereit reporting for duty, coach.”

“This is a Blood Bowl team, not the army, Mr. Bereit.” Pegleg stared at the young man’s vacant gaze, and shrugged, giving up on explaining the differences. “You’re in. Take that sot’s place in the line.”

Bereit quivered with excitement. “Yes, coach. Right away, coach.” With that, he charged out onto the field.

Pegleg glowered at Dunk. “I’ve been reduced to this,” he hissed, and marched off.

Dunk shrugged. As the team took losses during the game, his position only grew stronger. He couldn’t root for his team-mates to get hurt, but he wasn’t above taking advantage of it.

Dunk watched as Hernd connected with Spinne on a long pass. Before Spinne’s feet even touched the ground, one of the Chaos players, a ram headed creature with glowing eyes, wrapped a tentacle around her waist and tossed her to the ground. Dunk gasped, but when the ball rolled free, the Killer went after it instead of Spinne, and a moment later the woman sprang back to her feet.

“It’s not easy to sit here and watch, is it?” a soft voice said next to him.

Dunk turned to see a fair-skinned Estalian beauty sitting next to him, her flowing, black hair spilling over the back of her Hackers uniform as her wide, dark eyes glittered at him. “Camisa Roja,” she said, pointing at herself.

“You just joined the team?”

She nodded with a grin. “This is my first game. I feel so blessed to have made the cut with such a great team. I can’t wait until I get to play.”

Dunk gave her a smile that barely touched his lips.

“It’s so sad that you’re too sick to play,” she said, putting a sympathetic hand on his arm. Then she snatched it away. “Hope it’s not contagious.”

“I’m fine,” he said, waving off her concern.

“Oh? Then why aren’t you out there on the field?” She stared at him as if he’d started to drool.

“It’s complicated.”

Dunk didn’t mind talking to the woman, but he didn’t know her. Dr. Pill’s offhand threat to turn him over to the Game Wizards had made him cautious about trusting anyone, especially when it came to new faces. Her smile returned, more guarded this time.

“I see. It’s just that I’d give just about anything to be able to be out there with the ball in my hands.”

“Funny,” Dunk said, more to himself than her. “I’ve never felt that way about it.”

6

“Heldmann is down! I repeat, Heldmann is down!”

Dunk leapt to his feet and stared out at the field. A huge pile of people and creatures had formed on the far side of the field. Legs, arms, horns, tails, and tentacles thrashed about, and Dunk couldn't make a bit of sense of it.

He jumped out of the dugout and stared up at the Jumboball. The image on the humongous crystal ball showed exactly what Dunk saw: a huge mess. Green and gold jerseys struggled with black and blue ones in a massive scrum that showed no signs of breaking up.

“Did you see that hit?” Bob said. “I haven't seen anyone that brutalised since the end of the last season when you finally came home to your wife after six solid months on the road.”

“True enough,” Jim said. “The little lady packs a heck of a wallop. I spent a week in the infirmary recovering after that!”

A flash of black and white stripes caught Dunk's eye, and for a moment he hoped that a referee had appeared to help break things up. He knew that Dirk had to be somewhere in that pile-up, as were Spinne and the rest of his friends, but he couldn't get a glimpse of him. Then he saw that the ref's shirt was empty, shredded, and covered with glowing, green blood.

“What happened to the ref?” Jim asked. “He's supposed to step in when it gets like this!”

“You missed his transformation? We've gotta see an instant replay for that!”

The image on the Jumboball jumped, and a high-blooded elf appeared in the centre of the crystal, wearing a referee's striped shirt. It seemed to be a break between plays, and the elf reached out and grabbed a water bottle from a bench for a quick drink. As he poured the liquid from the bottle, it began to glow with a sickly, green light.

The referee wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and then stared at the green glow there. A moment later, he fell to his knees, clutching at his throat. As he writhed on the edge of the field, his skin began to turn a bright red, and blades made of bone emerged from his wrists. He used them to tear off his shirt, slicing through the fabric and into his skin.

A line of long, wispy tentacles rose from the referee's spine as he bent his back. A beak sprouted from his face. Feathers sprang from his legs.

“I don't know about you,” Bob said, “but that's the ugliest chicken I've ever seen.”

“Wonder how those legs would taste,” said Jim. “What? They all look the same once they've spent a good hour in a barbecue pit!”

Without warning, the referee launched into the game, his eyes glowing with hatred and the greenish taint of Chaos. A moment later, Dirk appeared on the screen, sprinting along the field, the ball tucked under his arm. The referee leapt at him, his mutated arms spread wide as he flapped into the air on his bent, feathered legs.

Dirk's free fist smashed into the referee, but it wasn't enough to knock the mad creature away. He went down beneath the referee in a flurry of tentacles and feathers.

“Does that count as too many creatures on the field for the Killers?” Bob asked.

“I don't know,” said Jim, “but who's going to call the penalty?”

“If those remains in M'Grash's fists are any indication, the Killers are already a player or three short!”

“Stay here,” Pegleg shouted.

Dunk glanced back to see him facing down the others, holding his hook high and daring them to try to get past him. “I will not have my team start a bench clearing brawl!”

Dunk stared across the field to see the Killers’ coach, Pike PcCarthy, a burly, fish faced fiend with whips for arms, lashing his players back towards the bench. Until he’d seen PcCarthy in action, Dunk had wondered how anyone could keep a pack of monsters like the players of Khorne’s Killers under control. Then he’d seen PcCarthy disembowel a water carrier for supplying water that was too pure.

Still, even PcCarthy didn’t want to be seen instigating an all-out brawl in the *Spike! Magazine* championship game. He knew that if he let his players loose, he might never get them back.

“If you wish to keep your jobs,” Pegleg said, “you will remain with the seat of your breeches scraping for splinters on those thrice damned benches!”

Dunk launched himself out of the dugout and sprinted across the field, straight for the pile up. He ignored his coach’s pleas for him to stop. Dunk wanted to lose his job, and if he could help his brother out in the meantime, then all the better.

The players in the pile didn’t see him coming. They were too busy tearing each other to pieces to worry about outside threats. The Killers in the opposing dugout, though, saw Dunk coming and pointed his advance out to Coach PcCarthy.

Howling in rage, the fish-man called his players to their feet, and sent them sprinting galloping, slithering, and slurping off to show Dunk and the rest of the Hackers a lesson. Dunk had a good head start on them, though, and knew he would reach the pile first. He glanced back and saw that Pegleg had finally relented. The rest of the Hackers had followed him on to the field.

When Dunk neared the pile up, he took a flying leap into the air and came down hard on the first Killer he saw. As he reached the zenith of his arc, Dunk realised he’d made one big mistake. He’d rushed onto the field without his armour.

That not only meant he had no protection, but neither did he have spikes or blades to use against his foes. At the moment, there was little he could do about it. He brought his legs forward and came down with the best-protected part of his body: his feet.

Dunk’s boot stomped the back of the helmet of a Killer in front of him into the Astrogranite so hard that the spikes on the front of the helmet stuck there in the synthetic stone. The creature, jersey number 616, squealed like a pig that’d just learned the big secret of the slaughterhouse as it flailed about helplessly.

Dunk reached out and grabbed the faceguard of another player’s helmet. Reptilian eyes stared back at him when he wrenched the player’s head around, and a forked tongue flickered out to caress the back of his hand. The creature hissed at him as it arched its neck back to strike with its venomous fangs.

Dunk pulled down on the helmet hard, putting all his weight into it. The move bent his foe in half. Thankfully, the snakeman didn’t have any arms to flail at Dunk, and for a split-second he felt safe.

That came to an abrupt end as he saw the creature’s scorpion’s tail arch up behind it. Dunk knew he’d have to let the beast go or suffer its lethal sting.

“Quake ‘The Plumber’ doesn’t look too happy about his new Hacker hood ornament!” Bob said.

“That’s right!” said Jim. “He’s about to give Hoffnung a piece of his, um, tail!”

“Ya gonna sssuffer sssucker,” the creature hissed.

Dunk reached out with his free hand and pulled at the buttons on the side of the Killer’s chinstrap. Just as the tail started to come down, the chinstrap gave way, and the snake-scorpion-man stumbled backward onto its raised tail. Dunk looked down at the spiked helmet in his hand. Now, at least, he had a weapon.

Then he spotted his brother Dirk. He lay on the bottom of the pile up, not moving. A stomping hoof glanced off his helmet, and he did not protest.

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