

“Bitten”

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‘The fog was rolling in from the woods as Alfredo walked through the village, clouding his vision more than the cheap ale he’d been enjoying moments ago.

He cursed under his breath, he was sure his camp wasn’t that far from the tavern.

All the buildings looked the same, tiny wooden huts with thatched roofs.

People back in Luccini would probably think of this as picturesque, but now he just wanted his bed.

He slowed a little, catching his breath. There was a sound, a heavy panting noise nearby, but he couldn’t tell from which direction.

He walked on faster, trying to whistle a tune. He’d never been able to whistle properly at the best of times and now, a hint of panic crossing his mind and more than a little tipsy, he just ended up dribbling down his chin.

He looked around but could see nothing. Actually nothing, he was clear of the village and into the woods. The panting was louder in the still air between the trees.

He broke into a run, weaving around the undergrowth as if back on the pitch. As in the game this afternoon, that he’d been celebrating a bit too hard, he found himself racing from something. Then it had been an orc blitzer charging behind him, wanting to do him grievous harm and possibly get the ball back. This time, he wasn’t sure... but he wasn’t carrying a ball, that much he was certain of. Unlike a Blood Bowl pitch, apart from the odd game against halflings, this time there were trees in the way.

He ducked instinctively under a branch but his toes caught on a root and he stumbled slightly.

The panting was much louder now and suddenly something crashed into his back, pain searing through his back and pressure clamping around his right shoulder. The grassy ground rushed up to meet his face as he fell forwards, but everything went dark before impact.

A thudding noise dragged Alfredo from his slumbers. He ached all over and it was a few moments before he risked opening his eyes. Pain. He closed them again. He wasn’t in bed. He scratched at his head, a nail catching on the skin of his scalp.

Must trim those nails, don’t remember them being that long.

He rolled over onto his back, wincing as something hard dug into his spine. Slowly he raised himself to be seated and felt around. He wasn’t ready to risk the light again but wanted to know more of his surroundings. Leaves. Mud. Possibly grass. A tree root? Some memories came back. A prank, it must have been one of his team-mates. Martino or Paolo were the most likely suspects. He let a tiny sliver of light between his eyelids. Yup, he’d crashed out somewhere in the woods.

He got up slowly, letting his brain settle itself at whatever pace it needed to. The thudding noise kept on and he realised it was a hammering from within his head. A dull ache throbbed deep in his shoulder. He could hear the tinkling sound of water nearby and managed to locate a stream. He gulped down some water, only now realising his thirst, then splashed some on his face to freshen himself up. His reflection stared back from the crystal clear shallows. His face looked tired, and bristly around the edges, though nothing a few minutes with a razor couldn’t fix. He shook his head, and stood.

Better find my way back to the village before anyone misses me.

‘Go long!’

Simone Brezza’s distinctively deep voice rang out clear across the pitch. Alfredo looked downfield, spotting a gap where an elf had just been blocked away by Benito. Ignoring the pitiful cries Alfredo sprinted past his prone opponent and found himself in space. He glanced over his shoulder, knowing the ball would be arcing towards him. He veered slightly to his right to meet it, cradling the pigskin safely in his arms.

Then his head went a bit fuzzy.

Not now!

This had been happening too often of late, his mind clouding over for a few moments and he would black out.

Not a good time!

A flash of light. Shouting. He was kneeling on the ground, panting heavily. He saw the ball in front of him, a shiny black boot either side.

What?

He looked up to see Brezza giving him a very confused look. Alfredo felt the same. Both men reached out for the ball at once but suddenly a white-clad elf appeared between them and kicked it free before disappearing again. Alfredo got up but heard a whistle before he could get his bearings again.

What just happened?

The team ran round quickly to set up for the next drive, with only a few minutes left in the game and the Slammers now a touchdown behind.

Alfredo lined up on the left flank as usual, though something was nagging at him.

A slight pain in his stomach, a warm tingling itch in his legs.

He looked across the field, seeing the elves lined up. In their midst was a treeman, white paint daubed over his trunk displaying his team colours.

Alfredo found himself walking towards the wooden creature, the clouds appearing at the edges of his vision again.

He shuffled his legs, adjusting his armour as he walked.

He knew what he needed to do, though part of his brain was fighting it. He opened his trousers and let a stream rush free, and the nagging pain gave way to a blissful relief.

‘OI’ came a loud roar.

He looked up to see the dark eyes of the treeman fixed upon him.

What am I doing here?

He suddenly realised what he was doing and hurriedly tried to put himself away. He fumbled with his kit, looking back up just in time to see a large branch swing around and connect with the side of his head.

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The next week passed slowly. Alfredo was kept under close supervision by the team’s doctor. The infirmary was actually a relief, as it meant the coach couldn’t get him alone... after Alfredo had been told what happened during the last match he was pretty sure the former chef would have taken a cleaver to him.

The doctor did not know what was causing the blackouts, but Alfredo was kept away from the rest of the team in case it was infectious.

The Slammers had their next game scheduled against an orc team, playing a special night-time exhibition just for Cabalvision.

Both moons would be full, there would be spellcasters hired to add pyrotechnics for extra lighting. The game itself was going to be shorter than usual, the networks aiming for younger audiences with shorter attention spans. Alfredo shook his head, the sport didn’t need fireworks and fancy gimmicks.

The coach came in the day before the game, giving Alfredo a glare which told him he was still not forgiven for his antics. There was a heated discussion between coach and doctor which Alfredo could not hear, though he was pointed at on more than one occasion. The doctor shook his head but the coach pushed him away and stormed out. The doctor adjusted his scrubs and walked over.

'So it seems that the coach needs players for the game tomorrow night,' he said. 'The networks are asking for a full bench for each team so you can't be given the rest you need.'

Alfredo shook his head. 'But I feel fine, doc.'

'Maybe so, but I don't like it. We still don't know what's wrong with you! But... I am paid to get you on the pitch, not to look after you.' He handed over a large bag of pills. 'Take some of these before the game, and any time you feel the clouds coming back - come and grab a few more.'

'Will they stop it?' Alfredo felt his heart lifting, he was not enjoying losing moments of his life to these blackouts, and knew that in a dangerous career like his the next one could be fatal.

The doctor shrugged and ushered Alfredo out of the door he held open. 'No idea,' he said. 'But there's nothing more I can do for you.' He was toying with the golden coin around his neck, which Alfredo knew meant he was quietly praying to Ranald for favour.

This doesn't bode well.

The doctor was not generally a religious man, usually only relying on his deity when gambling away his pay in an evening.

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It was the night of the game. The orcs were clad in deep blue armour with white leggings, and buoyed by the flashes of lightning and fire they had smashed into the humans with a fervour not often seen in friendly games. Alfredo looked at the bench around him.

There were a good few players laid out.

The doctor rushed around madly, throwing water on some, forcing pills or potions into the mouths of others, but it was looking more and more likely that Alfredo's rest was going to be broken.

Sure enough by the interval he was needed. As the officials helped clear the pitch of debris and bodies from the halftime show, Alfredo joined his remaining teammates on the field.

A cold breeze swirled around the pitch, and he shivered, no longer sheltered from it in the dugout.

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He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a small handful of the pills, gulping them down.

The taste was foul but he didn't want to forget what he was doing just when an enraged orc was barrelling towards him.

Mario Insanguinato patted him on the shoulder as he ran past into place. 'Clear your head, 'Fredo' his captain said. 'We know you're suffering, and although the coach might look threatening the rest of us know you're doing your best.'

Alfredo smiled. Insanguinato had always been able to pick a player off the ground, literally as well as metaphorically, which was why he was such a good captain for the team. Then he winced, the blitzer had managed to hit exactly where the deep pain was worst. Alfredo shoved another of the large pills into his mouth.

The whistle went and an orc booted the ball deep into the Slammer's half.

Brezza grabbed it and headed into a pocket of players. Alfredo started studying the orc line, trying to see where could break through.

It was not looking good, all he could see was a wall of green skin and blue metal.

The wind howled around him and the pitch was suddenly lit by a blinding red light. A cheer from the crowd told him this was just more fireworks.

Once the red glow dissipated it still seemed lighter than before. Alfredo looked up.

The clouds were parting, whipped away by the wind, and the moons were appearing.

Huge, bright, clear. He couldn't pull his eyes away.

Swirling lights spun around his vision, and the moons merged into one, growing bigger, closer.

Hazy mists were encroaching at the edges of his vision but soon even these were taken over by the beautiful brightness. His throat tightened and his body tensed. There was a howling noise. Wait a minute, he thought, just before his mind went blank again.

That howling noise is me...

His hands were wet, he could feel it without opening his eyes. He rubbed at his stubbled face and it seemed wet too. There was a smell of blood, and his heart was racing. Something was in his mouth. Salt?

He wasn't sure. He spat. He could hear the crowd cheering madly. He was on the pitch, and the game was still going.

I'm alive.

He smiled.

Opening his eyes he surveyed his surroundings.

There was carnage around him.

He looked at his hands and they were stained a deep red. He noticed a faint pain in his right arm and investigated, seeing some deep scratches.

Just then he realised he was holding something in his left hand. It appeared to be a tube of blue metal.

He turned it over then dropped it suddenly, recoiling.

As it fell to the floor, a green arm slid out.

The crowd cheered again, even wilder than before.

Alfredo looked around. A couple of his teammates were nearby, though they seemed to be cowering away as he looked at them. Another was running away, it looked as if he was carrying the ball. Years of training kicked in and Alfredo stumbled forwards to support, almost tripping over something at his feet. It was the referee. Or rather, it had been... it looked as if something had taken a chunk of his neck out.

Are those teeth marks?

He shook his head, that didn't matter. He ran downfield.

A replacement official ran on just in time to signal for the touchdown, then motioned that the game was over.

The Slammers had won, though there were only a small handful left walking to celebrate. The orcs seemed to have disappeared.

There was a clap on his back and he spun around.

The coach was there, the doctor lurking behind him.

'Kid, you did great,' the coach said, smiling broadly. 'I think you may have taken a couple of our players out. And a few fans. But I've never seen orcs run away from a fight before, it was worth it.' He lowered his voice, and tapped his nose. 'The referee was a nice touch too.'

With that he spun around and walked off again, before barking in the direction of the doctor. 'Doc, get more of those pills. I want him doing that more often!'

The doctor gave Alfredo an apologetic look then raced off after the coach. Alfredo could feel his heart slowing down now, and was starting to feel a bit sick.

What is happening to me?

The last game of the tour, and it was a sell-out. Alfredo was tanked up on the pills, the coach having forced a few more down his throat before letting him head out for the kick-off.

He watched as today's opponents, a team of skeletons clad in dull grey armour, shambled slowly onto the pitch opposite. Already he could feel the clouds appearing in his eyes again.

He looked over at the dugout, hopeful he could catch the eyes of the doctor, but the small man was not to be seen. His coach gave him a broad smile. Who is that?

There was another man in the dugout, who he didn't recognise. Dark robes, pulled back over a skinny face surrounded by crazy white hair. He was deep in conversation with his coach.

The whistle blew and dragged his attention back to the game.

A skeleton ran up to the ball to kick it. Alfredo's heart was beginning to race again, his palms were sweating, and his tongue felt dry. He felt as if he was watching everything on a slow-motion Calabvision replay, though he had faced skeletons before and had often felt like that.

There was a dull thud and a crack. The ball sailed through the air, over his head. Something else was following it, long and thin. He looked back towards the opposition and saw the kicker on the floor, trying to pick itself up. It starting hopping towards the dugout, it's kicking leg missing.

Alfredo span around. It was there, just a few yards from him. Brezza had the ball but Pepe was nearby, looking at the bone.

'It's mine!' Alfredo roared, without realising, and he charged into his teammate at full speed. Pushing him away he grabbed the leg bone between his teeth, running almost on all fours. He looked around madly. His teammates were backing away.

Good, this is mine. Where can I take it? Where can I hide it?

Why do I want a bone?

I need to hide it so no-one else can get it!

He ran towards the dugout, leaping into a dark corner, and began scrabbling at the dirt.

Lucky I let my nails grow this long. Didn't I cut them yesterday? They really help with digging.

Why am I digging a hole again?

He glared around as he heard movement behind him but it was the robed figure, and he didn't seem interested in the bone.

It is still mine.

It tasted dry and cold and felt good against his teeth.

Bone good.

The necromancer smiled to himself, watching the human scrabbling in the dirt. He tapped his fingers together, carefully, his long sharp nails clicking as they met.

'My pets have done their job well,' he chuckled quietly to himself. 'And my new player is almost ready.'

Reaching into the folds of his black robes he pulled out the contract, and passed it back to the human coach.

'Just sign here and I'll take him off your hands.'