



FAIR GAME

ALAN DURANT

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HOME

TOMMY DONBAVAND

KIDNAP

TOMMY DONBAVAND

MAMA BARKFINGERS

CAVAN SCOTT

SITTING TARGET

JOHN TOWNSEND

THE HUNTED

CAVAN SCOTT

THE CORRIDOR

MARK WRIGHT

WORLD WITHOUT WORDS

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For the Coldean Honey Badgers



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CHAPTER 1

PENAL COLONY 156

My name is Billy B. The B stands for Balentine but no one ever calls me that. In the year 2074 I was sent to prison for a computer crime. I crashed the state betting system for a week with a virus. I served my time on Penal Colony 156 in Deep Space 7. That's no holiday resort. Deep Space 7 is a wilderness of dead stars. Penal Colony 156 is its black heart. Only the worst criminals end up there. The judge sent me there to teach me a lesson.

I learnt a lesson all right. A year later I came back to Earth a changed man. But not in the way the judge had hoped. On Penal Colony 156 I learnt, for the first time, the thrill of real, live sport. We boxed, we raced, we threw... but, best of all, we played football. Nobody I knew on Earth had ever played football. We'd gamed it on screen with simulators, yes. But not on a pitch, kicking a real ball. No one did that any more. It was stupid, violent, dangerous... That's what we were told, anyway. But what I found out in prison was that it was also wild, amazing, fun. And I couldn't get enough of it.

It's all thanks to Danny Marconi. He's a lifer on Penal Colony 156. His grandad was Tony Marconi, a famous football star when it was the most popular game in the world. Thousands of people used to go to stadiums to watch it. That was back before simulators took over. There are no simulators in prison. You have to make your own fun. So Danny started games of football.

The football on Penal Colony 156 wasn't like the game I'd played on screen. It was hard and tough. The ball was a pig's bladder. The goals were chalked on the prison yard walls. You couldn't handle the ball (unless you were the keeper), but you could handle your opponent. It was like a cross between football, rugby and wrestling.

I lost count of the times I was thrown to the ground the first time I played. I was grabbed every time I got the ball. I ended up with a mass of cuts and bruises. But I learnt fast. The secret was to keep one step ahead of your opponent. You had to think fast and move with speed. I was quick on my feet and had skill too – a lot of it. I could go past a man with ease. And I had a good shot on me. I could score with my right or left foot from a long way out. After only a few games I was the prison's star player. Every team wanted me on its side.

I got offered 'gifts' to buy my services. My work duties were covered. I was given the best food. My bedding became luxurious. Other prisoners looked out for me. I made some good friends. But I made some enemies, too. Pablo Martinez, for example. He'd been the star player before I showed up and he didn't like me being better than him. He didn't like it at all. More than once he'd threatened to kill me. I knew it was only talk, though. He wouldn't dare harm me. Danny Marconi would have killed *him*. I liked Danny. He was good to me even before he saw how good I was at football. He liked my spark, he said. Most of the prisoners on Penal Colony 156 had lost their spark years ago. I didn't

blame them. If it hadn't been for football, I'd have lost my spark pretty fast. The football made life OK.

I was glad the day my sentence was up. But I knew I'd miss the football and the friends I'd made – Danny, Mitch Brown, and my cellmate, 'Cog' Lorenzo...

"See you around, Cog," I said when I walked out the cell door.

"I hope not," Cog said grimly. "You don't want to come back here."

I smiled and raised my hand.

Little did either of us know just how soon I'd be back.

CHAPTER 2

BORED

I found it hard to settle back on Earth. I was given a place to live. There were no jobs but I had my state bounty. Every citizen had one – a sum of money to live on. I had no family – my parents and my two sisters had died in the Great Plague of 2069. I'd had a few friends but I couldn't get back into my old life. I'd been happy to spend my days at the X-Dock before I went to jail. We'd played on the simulators all day and tried to think up new virtual games. But when I came back it all seemed so empty, pointless, a waste of time. I wanted action, exercise. I wanted to play football. My friends just laughed at me when I told them.

“Why would anyone want to kick a pig's bladder?” they said. They thought the whole idea was ridiculous. They thought I was nuts. Maybe I was. A year on Penal Colony 156 was enough to turn anyone crazy. But I didn't feel crazy. I felt full of life and energy. I didn't want to spend my life sitting in front of a screen. I wanted to get out in the open air, to play a game with physical contact. I wanted to play proper football.

I was bored. Every day was dull as dull could be. I even started to wish I was back in prison. I thought of Danny and the others on the Penal Colony, playing football, and I envied them. Why was everyone on Earth so boring? Why didn't they want to get out and play, like me? Surely, I thought, there must be other people who felt the way I did? I sent out some blogcasts asking if anyone was interested in playing real football. I said what fun it was and what good exercise, too.

I looked up some sport organisations on the net. There was one called 'Real Sport'. I called them up on my videobox. A young guy answered. I told him about my interest in playing real football.

“What do you mean 'real football'?” he asked.

I laughed. “You know, kicking a ball around a pitch. That kind of real football,” I said.

He looked at me like I was mad. “You call that real football?” he said with a smirk.

“Yeah. I've played it before. I'd like to play it again.”

“Where exactly did you play?” he questioned.

I told him. His smirk slipped and turned into a scowl. The videobox went blank.

These organisations said they were into real sport. But they weren't. Well, not my idea of real sport anyway. They were just betting syndicates. Gambling was run by the state.

Private gambling was banned. But there were lots of illegal gambling sites and clubs. You could bet on anything if you wanted to. ~~Betting on virtual sporting contests was a big thing. To some people, sport was only real if you had a bet on it.~~

I hated gambling. My dad had lost all his money gambling. We'd been poor as hell for the last couple of years before the plague came. We had to keep moving because Dad owed money to gambling gangsters. I went to bed every night scared that we were going to be killed in our sleep. It was almost relief when the plague came. At least the fear was over... We all got sick. I thought we'd all die. The others did, but somehow I survived.

It was after the plague that the state took over gambling. They started their own betting system. It made me angry. I hated gambling and I hated the state for encouraging people to do it. I swore I'd do something about it. And, eventually, I did. I hacked into the system and planted a virus I'd created. It caused havoc. In the end, they traced it back to me. But I didn't really care. I'd made my point. I hadn't expected to be sent to Penal Colony 156, though. That had been a bit of a shock.

I'd just about given up on 'real sport' organisations, when I got a call. I couldn't see the caller's face because the room he was in was dark.

"Is that Billy Balentine?" he inquired.

I told him it was.

"I hear you're interested in playing some real football?"

"That's right," I nodded.

"Come and see me tomorrow at ten," he said. He gave me the address and rang off.

Maybe things were looking up at last, I thought.



CHAPTER 3

TWO ENCOUNTERS

The man called himself Gull Reeves. He leaned across the desk and shook my hand.

“Pleased to meet you, Billy,” he said.

“And you,” I replied. He waved at me to sit down.

“It’s a pleasure to meet a real sportsman,” he added with a smile. He was a stocky, middle-aged man with tanned, plague-pocked skin. He had neat, brown, lifeless hair that had to be a wig. He smiled like a crocodile. “I hear you know Danny Marconi?”

I nodded.

“He’s a good man, is Danny,” Gull said. He opened his large, lined palms. “We go back a long way.”

“Did you know his grandad?” I asked.

Gull raised an eyebrow. “I saw him play a couple of times when I was a kid,” he said. “He was a great footballer, Billy. He had such skill. They called him The Wizard.”

I didn’t say anything. We’d had our small talk. Now it was time for business.

“I guess you didn’t call me in to talk about Danny and his grandad,” I said.

Gull smiled again. “Danny told me you were sharp, Billy boy.”

“You’ve spoken to Danny?” I said, amazed. I had no idea prisoners could have contact with people on Earth. I never had.

“Danny has a special arrangement,” Gull went on. “We chat now and then.” He leaned back in his chair. “He told me about you, Billy. He said you were a real football star. He was sad to lose you. And then I see this blogcast you’ve been sending out. I see you are looking for people to play football. And I get an idea.”

“Yeah?” I said, not sure this was going anywhere.

“Yeah,” he confirmed and he told me his idea.

Gull wanted me to form a football team to play against the prisoners on Penal Colony 156. He'd help with finding the players and pay all expenses, he said. I was puzzled.

"Why? What's in it for you?" I asked.

He smiled his toothy, crocodile smile. "Money, lots of it."

Then it came out. Gull Reeves ran a betting syndicate. Or he had, before the state banned them. Now he was in charge of the state's betting system. The problem, he explained, was that people were bored of betting on virtual sport. They wanted something new, exciting. And my idea of real football could be just the thing. What could be more thrilling than a real football match between two top teams, broadcast live all over the world?

"Two top teams?" I queried.

"I hear Danny's boys are pretty hot," Gull said. "And I'm sure you can put together a strong team."

He may have been sure; I wasn't. But it didn't matter anyway. "I'm not interested," I said.

Gull moved forwards in his chair with a look of shock. "Billy, Billy!" he pleaded. "Why would you turn this chance down?"

I told him my feelings about gambling – and why I'd been in prison.

"Things are different now," Gull soothed. "The bad old days of gambling gangsters are over." He said it with a kind of regret, it seemed to me. I guessed he'd been one of those gangsters himself.

"I won't have anything to do with gambling," I insisted.

Gull threw up his hands. He stared at me like I was a very complex sum he couldn't work out.

"You love football, right, Billy?" he said at last. I nodded. "You want people to play the game, really play the game?" I nodded again. "So you need to show them what fun it is and what they're missing. Right?"

"I guess so," I agreed.

"Well, you'll never get a better chance than this," Gull stated. "Millions, no billions, of people are going to watch this match. It'll put real, physical sport back on the map." I could see he had a point. But I wasn't going to admit it.

"Look, don't decide now. Go away and think about it," Gull told me.

"OK," I said. "But don't expect me to change my mind."

Gull gave me another of his toothy smiles. "We'll see, Billy," he said. "We'll see."

On the way home I stopped off at a Rest and Refresh lounge and ordered a chocshake. I'd just started drinking when a guy slipped into the pod next to me. He was wearing a dark suit and sunglasses.

"Billy Balentine?" he said. He spoke in a croaky whisper.

"Who wants to know?" I retorted.

"Someone with your best interests at heart," he croaked.

"That's nice," I said.

"Yes," he agreed. He took off his sunglasses. It didn't make much difference because his eyes were black as ebony. "I've been sent to warn you. Stop what you're doing. Physical contact is wrong. It causes injury and disease."

"Says who?" I queried.

"We do," the man replied. "The Protectors."

"I don't need protection."

His black eyes bored into me. "We all need protection, Mr Balentine. Physical contact with strangers is dangerous. That's how plagues start..."

I laughed. I'd never heard anything so stupid.

"This isn't a game, Mr Balantine," he said darkly.

"But that's just what it is," I argued.

His stare got harder. "This is your first and last warning. Stop your quest..."

"Or?" I prompted.

"Or we'll kill you." He put his sunglasses on again. "Good day, Mr Balentine," he croaked and he slid away. On the back of his neck was a black tattoo. It looked like a flower of some kind.

When I got back to my apartment, I called Gull Reeves up on the videobox.

"I'll do it," I said.

"That was a quick change of heart," he grinned.

"Yeah, well, something came up," I said.

No one was going to stop me doing what I wanted to do. I was going to play proper football – even if

killed me.



CHAPTER 4

TRIALS

Gull kept his word. He put out ads all over the net. ‘Want to be part of the biggest sport event EVER?’ they said. He knew how to big things up all right. He sorted out a place for me to hold my team trials too. It was an old school playground on the edge of the city. It was a dump with holes in the concrete, but it did have a couple of old goals. Gull even gave me a few footballs. They were good too – round and hard and bouncy.

“Where did you get these?” I asked.

Gull smiled his crocodile smile. “I have my contacts,” he said.

There were three days of trials. The first day it rained ... and rained. It was like someone had cut open the black sky and the water fell in a solid lump. No one showed up. I sat in an old metal hut and shivered.

“How did it go?” Gull asked that evening.

“Well, so far we have a team of one,” I said.

“Ah, well, Rome wasn’t built in a day,” Gull said.

“Rome wasn’t built in three days, either,” I reminded him.

“Tomorrow the sun will shine. Things will be better, you’ll see,” said Gull.

I wasn’t hopeful, but Gull was right. The next day the sun did shine. The playground was dry when I got there.

A tall, skinny kid was waiting. He looked even younger than me. “Are these the football trials?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “You want to play?”

“That’s why I’m here,” the kid replied. He had an odd, stiff face, as if his skin had been pulled too tight. He didn’t smile at all.

“Let’s get started then,” I said.

The boy's name was Rob. He was a goalkeeper, he told me. "I'm very good," he said. "I've got my own gloves." Again, there was no smile.

I told him to get in goal. I picked up one of the balls and bounced it. Then I threw it high to Rob's right. He stuck out a big hand and caught it. I did the same the other side. Again, he caught the ball with ease. I threw some low balls and he gathered those too.

"Not bad," I said.

"I told you I'm good," he said.

"Now for the real test," I said.

I started kicking balls at him. I shot from different sides. Once I hit the bar so hard it almost broke. But that was as near as I got to beating Rob. He wasn't just good; he was amazing. I told him so. He just shrugged.

"I know," he said. I asked him how he had got so good.

"I play football every day on the simulator," he said. "I'm always the keeper. Other kids try to beat me. They never can – like you." He almost smiled. Almost.

"You mean you've never actually played football for real?" I said, amazed.

He shook his head. I laughed. "Well, you're on the team, Rob," I said. I held out my hand. He frowned at it for a moment, then he shook it.

The rest of the day didn't go so well. A steady stream of would-be players came and went, but none was anything like as good as Rob. Most of them looked as if they hadn't left their room for years, never mind doing anything active. They were pale, fat, unfit and had the football skills of a drunk donkey. I did get three more players. They weren't very good but at least they could kick a ball.

"Sounds to me like you're being too fussy, Billy boy," said Gull on the videobox that evening. "If they've got two legs, sign them up. You can teach them the rest."

"Danny Marconi's lot will kill us," I said. "If I can't get enough decent players, we may as well call the game off."

Gull wasn't having that. "Ah, now, Billy boy, that isn't going to happen. There is too much at stake." His pocked face creased in a frown. "You *will* get a team together and this game *will* go ahead. Do I make myself clear?"

It seemed like everyone was threatening me. "I want to play," I said, "but you've got to get me some better players."

"All right, Billy boy. I'll see what I can do," Gull soothed. The crocodile smile was back.

The sun shone on the third day of the trials. There was already a queue when I arrived. Maybe Gull had done something, I thought. But my hopes soon dropped. By the end of the morning I'd added three more players to the team, but they were hardly stars. Then two brothers, Quincy and Carl, showed up. They were raw, but had real talent. They had a friend, Jackson, who was OK, too. He was a bit clumsy but he was big and strong. He'd make a good centre back. At least now I had a full team, even if it wasn't amazing. But the best was still to come.

Lennox appeared right at the end of the day. He looked the part all right – well-toned, black, athletic and he was a gem. He was fast, skilful and had a powerful shot. He was a box of tricks. Like Rob, he was very good and he knew it. Unlike Rob, he was also very cocky.

“You left it late to show up,” I said.

“Well, you know what they say,” he grinned, “leave the best till last.”

Now, at last, I was starting to have real hope. The team had a strong core: keeper (Rob), centre back (Jackson), centre midfield (me) and striker (Lennox). Maybe we could give Danny's boys a game after all...



CHAPTER 5

BACK ON 156

We spent the next two weeks training. It was tough. It had to be. We worked on football skills and tactics in the morning. That was the easy part. The afternoons were fitness training. We trotted, sprinted, jumped, pumped, stretched. We did sit-ups and press-ups. We strained and sweated. I found it hard going and I was quite fit. Most of the others groaned and moaned, puffed and panted. Jackson was the worst. He had a large gut from years of sitting and eating. He didn't need to be fit, he reckoned.

"I ain't gonna run, man," he said. "Those prison guys are gonna have to run round me."

He had a point, but I couldn't let him get away with it. We were all in this together. We all had to work hard. Jackson grumbled, but he knew I was right. By the end of the two weeks he'd lost twenty kilos. He wasn't as big but he was stronger – and he was fit. We all were. We were ready for our big test.

Last time I'd flown to Penal Colony 156 it had been in the state's prison shuttle. I'd been in chains. My fellow passengers had been convicts. It had been the most uncomfortable ride of my life. This time, thanks to Gull Reeves, we travelled in luxury on the media shuttle. We did have to put up with having cameras in our faces – and we had to answer lots of dumb questions – but we had beds and food and we were treated like stars.

"I could get used to this," Lennox grinned.

"Make the most of it," I told him. "It's going to be very different on 156."

It was. Even I was shocked at how bleak and dour the colony was. It really was the arse end of the universe. How could I ever have envied the men who had to spend their days here?

They put us up in the prison warders' complex. I'd never seen that bit of the prison before. It was no palace, but it was a lot nicer than the prisoners' cells.

I was told that Danny Marconi had asked to see me. "Sure," I said. I couldn't wait to meet the old guy again. "Take me over." I asked the warders to lead me out the back way. I wanted to meet Danny without all the cameras and stuff. They could do all that tomorrow.

Two warders led me down the tunnel to the cellblock. I knew them and we chatted a little. They didn't reckon I had any chance of beating Danny's men. "The betting's all against you," one said.

“Well you should bet on me,” I said. “You’ll get great odds.”

“We haven’t got money to throw away,” the other man laughed. So no one thought I’d win. That was fine. I was happy being the underdog.

The warders took me into a secure area. They each had to have their fingertips checked, flash their passes and stare into a scanner before the door would open. Then they had to do it all again to open the next door.

At last we were in.

Danny Marconi was sitting at a metal table. His bald head was gleaming in the overhead light. His round, pumpkin face bore a warm smile. “Hello, Billy,” he said. “Good to have you back.”

“Hello, Danny,” I smiled back. I nodded in turn to the two men on either side of him. “Hi, Cog. Hi, Pablo.” One grinned back; the other scowled.

“Pablo’s our skipper now,” Danny said. “He’s better than when you were here.”

“He couldn’t be worse,” I said. Pablo’s scowl grew. Danny laughed.

“Your lot any good?” he asked.

I shrugged. “We’ll see tomorrow.”

“You never were much of a talker, Billy, were you?” said Danny.

“You know me, Danny. I do my talking on the pitch,” I said.

“Yeah, and it’s good, very good,” Danny nodded. He gave me a deep stare. “If we do this right, we could make football a proper sport again,” he said. “Like in my grandad’s days.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “That’s the idea.”

“May the best team win, then,” Danny smiled. He held out his hand.

“Here’s to a fair game,” I said and I shook his hand.

Danny made Pablo shake my hand, too. It was the quickest, most unfriendly handshake ever. Then I shook Cog’s hand.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

“Same old,” he replied with a sigh. “At least I can sleep now without your snoring...” He held on to my hand while we spoke. As he pulled it away I felt him press a piece of paper into my palm. I closed my hand around it.

“See you guys tomorrow,” I said. Danny nodded. Then the warders led me back to the others. I could feel Cog’s note burning a hole in my hand.

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