

SEVENTEEN

OR

THE BLOOD CITY TOMMY O'REILLY
BENEFIT TOUR

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SilverWood

*To Mum, who gave me a sixpenny soldier from
Woolies every day...and so much more*

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The Swallow Keepers

Vic Swallow was chopping wood when he became aware of the approaching horsemen. To people of a certain world and time, the picture was of a squat, heavily muscled man with a cigarette dangling from his mouth, wiping sweat from his brow before continuing to work. To others of others, the sweaty shirt would be similar but the mounts would be motorbikes, the man would be younger and taller, wielding the axe to no apparent purpose. In Cibola, Vic had not yet worked up a sweat in his unbuttoned old 17th Cavalry tunic. He did not lack a wiry strength, retaining most of the slimness of his goalkeeping prime, which had led to much punning around 'Swallow dives' from the unimaginative Blood press corps.

‘Put the cawfee on, Ian, we got visitors!’ he hollered into the dark doorway of the wooden homestead, not really expecting any reply or compliance. If the sun was barely up yet, his twin was hardly likely to be.

Vic had no fear of riders approaching so openly. He had no living enemies and nothing worth stealing. One attraction of living way out on the Meseta Central, whose ever growing heart was the capital: you did not have to fear casual violence. Unless it was from your brother.

The four of them, two Knights and two Arab Pirates, slowed their horses to an unthreatening walk as they drew up in front of Vic, who took his time over splitting the last log before burying the axe in the block. He had instantly recognised the former captain and vice-captain of Blood City, but they no longer had any power of command over him.

‘Morning, Victor. RFD 17 was all the address we had, a fair stretch from Blood.’

‘You got that right, Sir Tristram.’ Vic returned the formality of greeting to the older Knight, always a bit of a stiff, unbending bugger. There was now a physical stiffness about him too as he dismounted.

‘Jakob you know, of course. His brother, Malabar. May have been after your time – had a few games between the sticks for us.’

Vic could see no family resemblance between the two Arabs, unless turbans and beards counted. Jakob O’Reilly fairly sprang out of the saddle. He had succeeded Sir Tristram as skipper of the City, also going on to captain the Pirates’ international team with distinction. If Malabar had made any

splash in the football world it had passed by Vic, who hardly followed the game after leaving his only club.

In his yellow robes, having failed to acknowledge Vic, let alone offer a by-your-leave, Malabar was taking the two Arab stallions towards the barn. The newer Knight was doing the same with the heavier horses on which he and Sir Tristram had come.

‘Tristan, where’s your manners? Say hello to Mr Swallow here. This is my whelp, Vic – fancies himself as a tricky inside forward.’

‘I’m sorry, Dad. Mr Swallow.’

‘Hi, kid. Why don’t you let the Ayrab take all the horses? Being as he didn’t have the decency to introduce hissen, I’m not inclined to let him into my house.’

Malabar did not turn at the comment, designedly loud enough for him to hear. Jakob’s hand was at his belted scimitar as he replied, evenly enough, ‘An Ayrab’s as good as Westerner trash any dey of the weak, Swallow. My brother’s got no language for you, but I can speak for him if need be. We’ve come a ways to talk – we can do it just as well here as indoors. You decide.’

‘Prickly as ever, Jake. Come on in. Not often I see old teammates. You can meet my own brother – you may struggle just as much to get a civil word outa him.’

Perhaps Malabar had the right of it, staying outside in the cool barn with the animals. The twins’ living quarters were a single room, with a single bed on either side, above which were small, grimy windows. There was a fireplace with a pot on it but no appetising smell of food, or drink brewing. Sprawled

on one cot was a soldier with his face to the wall, wearing only a pair of trousers with a yellow stripe down the outside of each leg. Vic pulled a knife from the rough surface of the table at the centre of the room and, already looking towards the grate, stabbed it into the sole of his brother's bare foot. He turned at the stifled gasp from Tristan, matching the yowl of the figure on the bed.

‘What, lad, you think I should be more gentle? I’d sooner start blood from him than waste water chucking it at his head. Don’t work anyways. You ever need tell me and my brother apart, just take us boots off, you’ll find a pretty patchwork on the bottom of this ’un’s feet.’ Abruptly changing his tone, he addressed the woken man: ‘You slackin’ bastid, Ian, din’t you hear me yelling?’

There was no reply from the Swallow now sitting on the edge of the cot, apparently oblivious to the blood welling between his toes before soaking into the dirt floor of the shack. He had his head in his hands, as if stopping his ears.

‘We only needed to register one of these boys back in the dey’—Sir Tristram continued his son’s instruction—‘at least as far as looks were concerned. Like as two beans in a bait. Pretty different as goalkeepers, mind, in talent and temperament both.’

Ian Swallow looked at the Knights through bloodshot eyes. ‘Don’t tell me it’s pre-seesun already. My deys of training hard just to warm the bench while others play are long past, Tram.’

‘Training hard?’ Jakob was not having it. ‘You were more bone idle than Sir Septimus – lucky to be on the roster at all.

You'll be glad to hear you won't be needed this time round.'

'We only got the two mugs, so it'll have to be sharesie. What you mean, Jakob, this time around?'

'I'll let our captain tell you, Vic.'

'Wait on me while I cop a urination.' Ian hobbled to the door, where he paused to shield his eyes against the watery sun. 'We may be twins, but we ain't telepathic. I need to hear whatever you gonna tell him. We's pards as well as brothers, ain't that right?'

'He still a boozehound then,' Jakob stated bluntly as Ian found his way outside.

Vic seemed about to contest the point, then smiled. 'That he is.'

'Can he still hold a gun? Best sharpshooter in the 17th, that soldier once was, Tris,' said Sir Tristram. 'Or was it only from himself I heard that?'

'You might well of, but there's plenty as would of agreed with him. That may be about the only time his hands don't shiver and shake, but sure he can hold a gun still. Mostly to bring home our dinner, whether it's muntjac, meerkat or just jackrabbit.'

'Yeah, we'd starve if it was left to my older brother. *And* I was a better keeper than him too, new 'un, whatever they may say.' Ian rejoined the company with a meaty slap to the side of Vic's head, at which he appeared to take no more offence than had Ian to his stabbing.

'You could make impossible saves, I'll grant you that.' Jakob grew notably more animated whenever talk turned to football. 'What about that time you threw the ball into your

own net against Ajax, though? Only cost us the double. No thanks, Vic.' The Arab declined a mug of sludgy liquid.

'We won't be facing Ajax this time.' Sir Tristram steered the conversation to the purpose of their visit. 'You boys heard of the Torneo Sesquicentenario? The Seskie?'

'You must have,' Tristan interjected. 'Everyone's been talking about it in Blood for, like, mums, even United fans.'

'We don't get much news out here since the Injuns switched from smoke signals to satellite, boy, but I'm sure your dad will tell us what it's all about. Sorry we don't have a chalkboard here for like when you used to give us our tactics talks, Tram.'

'I only hope I won't be wasting my time like I was back then. The Seskie's a trophy to mark 150 years of the oldest club fixture in the world, which I don't need tell anyone here is Blood City v Young Faithfuls. Only they're not playing it just with the current teams. No, it's so-called Legends of Yesteryear that'll be contesting the tournament.'

'People like Dad who played in that very first game.'

'That gag's wearing a little bare, son. As I've told you many times, I didn't make my debut until 117 years ago.'

'I was in that team too, boy. Not you, Ian – you was still tomcattin' around Casablanca. And you, Jake, didn't you come a bit later, replace that Army guy Reaney at right-back? What a team we had!'

'I was the one to wear the painted 2 shirt when the league began.' Jakob put him right.

'I agree about the team we had, Vic, and that's the one I've been charged with reuniting. By King Henry himself.'

‘Henry Morgan,’ Ian cut in scornfully. ‘I can’t believe he’s letting us compete in that Seskie-whatever. Din’t he already rewrite the Subbutay Registers to make like Morgan’s Marauders was the second team ever formed? He would have quit the Faithfuls the honour of being first if he thought the football folk memory would stand for it.’

‘He may have his reasons for not wanting the Marauders involved. For one thing, they’re a Casablanca team, like the Yofas. He wants this match to catch the imagination of all in Cibola, not just one city.’

‘So will it be two legs then?’ Vic asked. ‘Even Morroco sticks more to Blood than the coast, so there’s no neutral territory for a single match.’

‘I thought so myself at first. But Henry is king. It will be in Piedra, Zanzibar. A single match for the Seskie trophy, with extra time, then penalties, then a fight to the death between the two captains, if needed to get a result.’

‘Wait a minnit, Dad, you didn’t say anything about a fight to the death. You’re joking, right?’

‘No, Tris. That’s only if 136 minnits and seventeen penalties each can’t decide it. Very unlikely to happen.’

‘But Dad...’ He fell silent at his father’s raised hand.

‘You boys seem a bit surprised?’ Sir Tristram looked at the dumbstruck Swallows.

‘Zanzibar? Does that island even exist? Has anyone actually been there? Been there and come back, I should say.’

While Vic’s tone was one of puzzled wonder, his brother was more forthright. ‘*Now* I understand why the current teams won’t be going. In fear of their lives, I should think. That place

makes the Casablanca dockside look like the Embassy Quarter in Blood.’

‘It need not trouble you, Ian. You will not have to face your fear and go. We will, in fact, be under the protection of my brother Tommy, for so long already Morgan’s Grand Vizor in Zanzibar.’

Seeing that Ian was not going to respond either to the provocation or the information – other than with a smile suggesting that whatever Jakob may say he, Ian, knew better – Vic ventured a further question. ‘Jakob, no offence, but are you blowing smoke up our butts? I mean, I knew Tommy personally, a legend, but I also mind the stories of when he went off to Zanzibar all them years ago. For every soldier said it was to develop the colony, another said he’d run foul of Old Henry, still new in his kingship then, and it was a kind of exile. Zanzibar is the Last Ground, the place we all end up when our casts are broken.’

‘That’s mobo-jobo Vic. I’m surprised at you. Zanzibar is a real place, an island not so far beyond the horizon from Casablanca.’ Sir Tristram knew his job would be hard enough without letting footballers’ superstitions complicate it further.

Jakob also wanted to answer Vic. ‘The O’Reilly clan heard all the rumours back then, that it was only our strength of arms and importance in the Pirate horde that saved our pa-brother Tommy’s life. Rumours that Morgan was jealous of the love the people had for him, people of all the four Houses, and would have him out of the way. All that’s old news.

‘I say now: Tommy O’Reilly remains the most powerful soldier in the Zuni Kingdom. Save the king,’ he added

grudgingly. 'I have heard Zanzibar now has a stadium that will not disgrace the Seskie, fit to rival the Theatre of Blood or the Casablanca Capitarium.'

'I'm not frit of the unknown, and whatever you may say, Jake, nor ain't my brother Ian. Still, it's a long way to go for a football match. What about the tut? The money, Tram, what about the money? We can't all live by the Knights' Code of Camelot, and we don't all have a birthright of Arab clan millions.'

'All expenses will be found. I daresay you will live better than you are now, and I believe there will be medals of gold for the winners. For us.'

As if exhausted by his brief spell upright, Ian Swallow was again lying on his cot, head propped against the back wall. He sipped from a small bottle, then crooked it protectively in his right elbow. 'Up to you, my dear brother, but all that depends on if you live to get your mitts on the money.'

'Always with the fear of death!' Jakob flared. 'Zanzibar and the road and sea to reach it are not without hazards. If they are too many for you, so be it. We are not here to beg. Remember, Tram, how I said we should have looked to Nkulu the Zulu to be our number 1. He has his own place in Blood City folklore.'

'Glad to hear you admit there could be some risk to everybody's hide from this tour, and innaresting you mention the Zulu.' Ian seemed more relaxed the more annoyed Jakob became. 'You big-shot internationals may not remember my nickname at the City? The Judge – because I spent so much time on the bench, ha bluddy ha.'

‘When I went out to take a whizz I was fixin’ to shoot someone in with our horses, till I realised he must be with you folks. I thought he looked kinda familiar, and now my head’s a bit clearer I sussed it was Malabar. You mind he don’t take your place and money both, Vic, leave you all the training and graft but none of the glory. He’s got family connections – we don’t.’

‘Is that right, Tram? Is that the way yawl thinking?’ Vic frowned.

‘The man’s drunk at sunrise. Why would you listen to him?’

‘It’s all right, Jakob, I’ll take this one. I know back in our dey it was mainly eleven against eleven – less than that if someone didn’t show up, or there was a murder or two. It’s a squad game now, and on matchdey it will be two squads of seventeen facing off. Two keepers are always included. I swear on this boy’s life’—since when did he need to raise his arm to put a hand on Tristan’s head? he wondered—‘it’s not about the money. I’m trying to recruit not eleven, but seventeen at least, to give us a squadron with the best chance of completing the mission successfully. The final squad, the seventeen, will all get the medals.’

‘Dvaeba, you make it sound more like a war raid than a benefit match. So you sayin’ the money’s safe, but my place in the starting line-up may not be. Have I got that right?’

‘That’s about the measure of it, Vic.’

‘And you won’t be going to that other Pirate, Nkulu the Zulu? I already lost my place to him once sixty yeers ago. I can’t see he was a BC legend anyway – brought his boy Mbulu up Ajax, din’t he?’

‘Maybe I’m too sentimental, but I tell you straight what I’m doing. I’m looking for the same first eleven as in my first few seasons, the ones with the numbers painted on their backs over that red shirt. You were the number 1, sure as I was 4. That was a team, the team I knew best and, for all its faults, one I trust. This tour is about more than football, trust *me* on that.

‘Whatever his football background, Malabar would be coming with us as Jakob’s brother and pick, just as I *might* take this newbie of mine along for the ride. You don’t need to come with us right now, but I need your word one way or another if you’ll be with us in Blood, ready to go, this time next week.’

‘Hell, yeah. You were always good at the speeches, Tram, but tell you the truth you had me at the chance of getting between the sticks for the City again. You headin’ back to Blood right now or will we break bread first?’

‘No, soldier, thanks. We made an early start because we’re heading up to Busted Jaw.’

‘To the Injun ski and gaming resort, I imagine, not the township. Bit of R ‘n’ R for you boys?’

‘We’ll be spending the night there, but the main job is to try putting the left side of our defence in place – numbers 3 and 6. Always build from the back, like I said on our way here to get our goalie, right, Tris?’

Malabar was ready with their horses when the visitors left the cabin, accompanied outside only by Vic. He watched them disappear in the direction of the Mighty Morroco Mountains, hoping that his brother would not give him too much grief about his decision to hit the road. If he was already back asleep,

he might wake with no memory of the recruiting officers' call.

Sir Tristram and Jakob O'Reilly rode far enough ahead of the other two to keep their conversation private – a poor deal for Tristan. A talkative and friendly boy, he was scarcely able to get a word from Malabar.

'I tell you Tram, I never liked either of the Swallows much, but today I was tempted to kill the drinking one. I do not trust him.'

'Come on Jake, we've both played in defence long enough to know you can never trust a goalkeeper. I need your support as vice-captain all the way, right down to putting up with Ian on the tour.'

'What? I thought we made it clear only Victor was invited. My brother is no Yashin, but Malabar is perfectly adequate backup in goal. We don't need the other Swallow.'

'Not as a keeper, I agree. I've never known those two be separated for long, is all. If Ian does show up with Vic in Blood, I tell you now I may take him along. I suspect in his wild days he might have gone across to Zanzibar a few times, before transit was officially restricted to Army only. We may need all the specialist help we can get.'

Sir Tristram had every intention of taking Ian if he turned up, for reasons he had not discussed with his vice. He had been forbidden to do so by King Henry himself. An extra crack gun might make a big difference in the non-footballing aspects of the tour Morgan had outlined secretly to his chosen skipper.