

Mike Cartmell

Prodigy

For the children on Winter Moss playing fields, and the unfortunate parents and guardians who had come out in the torrential downpour to watch them, Sunday afternoons meant one thing: football. The St. Michael's under-12s were taking on Greendale Rovers, and were already 6-0 down by half-time.

Not that anybody had expected any different. In fact, the parents of the St. Michael's goalkeeper were positively thrilled with the scoreline, voicing their praise for their son who had made two saves - one of which may have been accidental - but had still surely played his part in preventing the deficit from being much greater. Generally, keeping their opponents within ten goals reach was considered a success.

Nobody was more aware of this fact than their manager and coach, Bartholomew North, known as 'Westy' among his team. However, while the parents generally took pride in the fact that their children were doing any kind of physical activity, and took little notice of the inevitable scorelines, Westy was more than a little aggrieved by the present circumstances. He, who had no children of his own but aspirations of becoming a manager in the higher leagues, could not stand his team's constant drubbings by their opponents. Especially when the coaches of said teams did not share his passion and ambition for the game.

Despite their relatively successful display in the first half, he was somewhat more angry and animated than usual with his team talk. The score had given him a faint glimmer of hope, deciding he should try twice as hard to motivate his young players, which generally meant a furious blast of expletives and gesticulation, for which he frequently received complaints. That didn't deter him one bit, however. You had to be tough in this game; he was here to win, not make friends.

Ultimately though, his efforts were to no avail as St. Michael's slumped to a 15-0 defeat; the opposing striker probably breaking a few league records with his quadruple hat-trick. He was left wondering where it all went wrong, reviewing his tactical mistakes, while the parents collected their mud-drenched children and headed off. He rarely got chance to deliver his post-game thoughts these days, he sighed, and went about taking the nets down. It was then that he caught glimpse of a strange-looking woman approaching him, shimmering in the rain as though she herself was made of water. He wiped the rain from his brow to get a better look.

She was tall with long, silvery-grey, very old looking hair, and was dressed in black gothic-looking clothes. He admired her black boots, her long legs and stunningly slender figure. Quite attractive, he thought, were it not for her face: terribly wrinkled, like the face of an ancient fortune teller. She looked a hundred years old or more. But still, those legs. He found himself considering this paradox. Perhaps he had been lonely too long.

'Good afternoon,' the woman said. Her accent was peculiar; Eastern European? He wasn't sure.

'You're too late for the game,' he said, still weighing her up. It was only then that he noticed she had a boy with him. 'We lost again.'

'Ah. You see, I was hoping I might be able to help you there,' she said, putting her hand on the boy's shoulder. 'This is Nikolai. He is an exceptional footballer.'

Westy scoffed. What would she know about football?

He looked at the boy. He was skinny and short, bony even, and looked ill; his skin was an unnatural grey. His eyes looked tired.

'Is that so,' he said, not trying to hide the fact that he was unconvinced. 'It's not easy to get into St. Michael's, you know. We've got some top players. Train hard.' He expected her expression to change, but she didn't flinch. 'What I'm saying, lady, is... You sure Nick's up to it?'

The woman appeared to move closer, without actually doing so. The wind dropped and there was an eerie pause. Westy suddenly felt a chill. 'Nikolai will bring you great success. It is his destiny.'

Maybe she really was a fortune teller, he thought. Still, he had no real intention of turning the boy away. At the very least he could make up the numbers in training, and inside he knew Nikolai couldn't be much worse than the rest of his squad anyway, as much as he wished things were different.

'Right. Well let's give it a shot. Training's 7pm Wednesday.' He tossed Nikolai a shirt that one of the other kids had abandoned.

'You will regret this,' she smiled, and walked away with the boy. He reckoned that was probably a mis-translation. Or perhaps her accent. He continued to wonder where it was from as he finished packing up the equipment.

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Nikolai was introduced to his classmates at St. Michael's the next day. Miss Jackson, tutor for class 6A, explained he was interested in sports, but had little extra information to give about the peculiar looking boy, and Nikolai himself said nothing at all. It wasn't obvious that he could even speak English, and the teacher seemed just as bewildered at this as the rest of the class. She briefly wondered how he had managed to be admitted to the school if this was actually the case. But then, she knew the school was lacking in diversity - she'd brought this up in meetings herself often enough - so was quietly pleased to be introducing a foreign student.

The rest of the class were not so impressed, however, and were immediately suspicious of their new arrival. His quietness annoyed and frustrated them, and they had laughed sarcastically when it was announced that he'd be joining the football team. Some were already looking forward to taking him out with a rough tackle; show him what English football is all about, and hopefully put him off the insulting notion that he could ever get into their team.

When break-time came, the big shots of the class were eager to get to know Nikolai, and more importantly give him a gentle introduction to their social hierarchy. Not that they had anything against the boy, or even enjoyed the intimidation, but it had become expected of them as the alpha of the class. And not to mention there were girls watching; they couldn't disappoint.

So Marcus, one of the eldest and physically fearsome members of the class, approached Nikolai and introduced himself. Nikolai simply stared back at Marcus, which unsettled him; that didn't usually happen. He tried asking the boy some trivial questions about his country, his family, and what he'd brought for lunch; the mocking tone earned sniggers from the crowd that was starting to gather, but could not get Nikolai to speak, much to his increasing frustration. Out of ideas, he decided to challenge him to a game of tennis. Marcus was not the top player, but he was good, and surely a mismatch for the diminutive and shy new student. There were some protests who thought that the inevitable

humiliation would be too unfair - it was his first day, after all - but the majority were in support of the idea and the two headed to the tennis courts.

In a show of confidence and eagerness to impress rather than any kind of sportsmanship, Marcus allowed Nikolai to serve first. But he stopped short of allowing him to use his own fancy and expensive racket, leaving just the worn wooden one for the visitor to play with. Just in case; he was confident, but not a charity.

The crowd raised cheers in mock support of Nikolai as he awkwardly bounced the ball, causing Marcus to showboat and lower his racket. He didn't even notice as the tossed the ball and smashed it past him, rattling the fence behind as the crowd fell silent. That must have been the fastest serve he had ever witnessed, and hoped it had been a fluke. He retrieved the ball and threw it back to Nikolai, who proceeded to hammer another three aces into the exact same spot, on a sixpence. It didn't matter that he could see it coming; there was no way he could return a serve of that power.

Marcus upped his game on his turn to serve, suddenly realising that this wasn't going to be a walk in the park and that his reputation could be at stake. He managed to get a few rallies going with the boy, but was hopelessly outskilled. Nikolai's speed and reactions were unbelievable, defying his appearance and amazing the crowd. His movements seemed unnaturally fast and effortless, dominating every point. Where was this coming from?

Having been comprehensively and publicly defeated, Marcus at least had to show he was not a sore loser. He went to shake the hand of Nikolai, who accepted his offer, and had become somewhat of a hero during the course of that one game. Everyone was talking about him, and those on the football team suddenly became very interested in playing alongside him. He might look strange and not say much, but if he could show half that speed on the football pitch then they'd be happy to ignore his flaws. As long as he didn't want to socialise with them.

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Westy was somewhat surprised when Nikolai turned up to training on Wednesday. He'd forgotten all about him. He was even more surprised to see him arrive with some of the other players, who were quick to express their praise of the new-found star. 'Nik's class boss, you should see 'im'. 'Got some mad skills.' He figured they were taking the piss; the boy looked about as mobile as a cadaver. In fact, he looked like a stiff in general. But even if they were pulling his leg, they seemed way more enthusiastic than usual, so that alone was an improvement on the usual.

He couldn't help but wonder about the woman who had introduced the boy, though. Shouldn't she be here? There was something about her that disturbed him greatly. He didn't want to admit it - it was totally against his nature - but she was distracting his thoughts. Her face was hideously old, yet he found her manner of talking attractive, not to mention her physique. Gah, he thought, and stopped at that.

'Alright lads, got some good news and some bad news,' he said. He paused to make sure they were listening. 'Good news is, we've got a cup game next week.' The players responded with excitement. Cup games involved teams from the lower divisions, and younger players - sometimes even worse than them. It was their best chance to get a win. Or at least maybe a goal.

'The bad news is, we've got Tower Hill in the first round.'

That definitely meant they were getting knocked out. Tower Hill were top of their division, having won all their games this season. They did their best to fake disappointment.

'Anyhow, looks like we've got enough for a game today. What's your position, new kid?'

'He's a striker, boss' one of the other children said. He remembered that Nikolai wasn't much of a talker, and so giving him a position would probably have been pointless anyway.

'Alright, just play wherever. Sort yourselves into teams.'

There was a brief scuffle as the two captains decided who would get to have Nikolai on their team - especially as there was an odd number of players - but it was decided he should go on the team with fewer players. Destined to bring success, he thought. He would have to bring a bloody miracle.

Miracle soon seemed like an appropriate word, as Nikolai sprung into life. Within seconds of the kick-off, he had dispossessed the opposing team, dashed into their penalty area and slipped the ball past the hapless goalkeeper, who swore he didn't even see the kick.

The game quickly turned one-sided, as Nikolai continued to dart around the pitch at an extraordinary pace. Not even the fastest sprinters in the squad could get near him. The boy seemed equally proficient at tracking back at tackling as he was at getting forward, dribbling and putting crosses in. And the power that he put into his shots was incredible for such a small boy. Westy was astounded, but also brimming with glee. With this boy on his side his team could go on to great things, and he'd surely get rewarded for finding such an incredible talent. Nikolai was the best player he'd ever seen at this level; this could put him on the map. He could see the headlines now: 'Under 12s Manager Discovers Football's Next Star'. That should get the attention of the bigger clubs.

His thoughts were interrupted by a cry from the pitch. One of the players had gone down holding his head, while Nikolai was sat on the floor, still. Westy jogged onto the pitch to have a look.

'What happened?' he asked, as he noticed the blood on Nikolai's shirt.

'Just a clash of heads' said the boy on the floor. 'I'm all right, I think.'

'God, there's a lot of blood' he said, crouching to look at Nikolai's head.

'It wasn't that hard boss, honest, just a knock like'

He had expected to find a cut, perhaps some blood in his hair, but there was none. It was only after glancing down that he noticed the blood wasn't from a head cut, but seeping from Nikolai's neck, dripping onto his shirt.

Jesus, he thought to himself.

'Okay lads, that's it for today anyway. Get yourselves home while I look after Nik. And don't forget the cup game. Want you all there by midday sharp'.

A few of the boys glanced over as they left, but did as they were told. Westy thought he heard one of them mutter 'freak', but took no notice.

He used a bib to wipe the blood from the boy's neck. He didn't notice at first, but when looking closer there appeared to be a thin, hairline cut that extended all the way around the neck. He hadn't seen anything like this before, but he sure knew it wasn't from a clash of heads. It was making him feel a bit sick.

Nikolai stood up and started to walk away.

'Wait. Are you-'

'I'm fine, leave me alone' Nikolai replied, in a deep, robotic voice that made Westy recoil in shock. He stood still for minutes after the boy had gone, until he could convince himself that he might have imagined it.

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Westy was a stubborn man, and on a typical evening it would have taken an earthquake or similarly bad thing to distract him from his usual routine: deep tactical studying for the next football game, and 70s exploitation films. But this was no typical evening, and he could not muster any of his usual creativity. He couldn't lose himself in the intricacies of set-plays, or the perfect counter-attack, or the merits of the offside trap as he so often did; his concentration was shot, constantly drifting to Nikolai and the questions he wanted answers to.

Everything about the situation made him feel uncomfortable. Were it not for the boys talent, he'd have had no qualms about kicking him off the team for good. End of story, then; he'd never have to see him or his ghastly mother figure again. Sod the mystery; if it wasn't winning him games, it wasn't his problem. But it was his problem. He needed a player like Nikolai, whatever the cost, so he would have to put up with the doubts. And the woman, so smug with her introduction of the boy, she obviously knew something he didn't. That pissed him off most of all. He sighed, and resigned to her creepy ass-ugly superiority. For now at least; he vowed to get to the bottom of it one day. That didn't make him feel any better.

Even his entertainment for the night, *The Curse of the Bee Girls... in Space*, could not help him relax. Featuring more than an adequate number of nude women, it was normally his sort of thing. Indeed, he'd been looking forward to this one for a week after reading reviews and catching a good deal off an eBay seller. But he found himself unable to get in the right mood. When the pertinent scene came, with the bee-headed nudes entwined and floating about each other, it only made him feel worse. For their breasts were masked in thick blood that poured from their necks, and their demonic bee eyes were like darts to his own.

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When the cup game came, Nikolai was back to his usual, mute self. There was no sign of any further injury - Westy made sure to check - and in fact he couldn't make out the hairline scar no matter how closely he looked. If anything, the boy looked better than normal; there was even some colour to his skin, although he was still a far cry from looking healthy, let alone athletic.

Still, he didn't want to take any chances of arousing suspicion from his opposing team. Westy's reputation when it came to abiding by the rules was not exactly squeaky clean, and he'd been warned for foul play a number of times by the authorities. Ironically, he had nothing to do with Nikolai's abnormal abilities, and had no reason to suspect any rules were being broken anyway, but he wanted to take extra care with his star player. So he'd brought along a snood, which he'd heard were fashionable anyway among professional players, and wrapped it around the boy's neck.

'Thought you said we couldn't wear snoods, boss.'

'Yeah, didn't you say they were for girls?'

'Shut it,' Westy replied, thinking up a response. 'Nik isn't used to the weather over here, so we're going to make an exception. And anyway, it's the only one I've got.'

There were some groans from the players. Then one asked:

'Where is he from then?'

'What does that even matter?' Westy said. 'We don't discriminate against nobody, not at

St. Martin's.' Not when they're good at football, he thought, but didn't add. 'My mum says he's from Transylvania' someone suggested, which brought laughs from those that got the joke, and confused looks from the others.

Westy went through the pre-match tactics, which the boys were surprised but not displeased to find were somewhat more condensed than usual, and named the team. Nikolai was to play central midfield, since he'd probably be able to cover most of the pitch from there. The boy that had to make way for Nikolai immediately went into a sulk. For any of the starting eleven to lose their place was practically unheard of, and he dreaded what effect it might have on his school life.

Tower Hill took an early lead, through a ridiculous looping shot from the kick-off, and any illusions Westy had that his team might stand a chance were quickly put in their place. Or so he thought. From the following kick-off, Nikolai fired an even more spectacular effort into the opposing goal, which his team celebrated wildly. It was the first goal they'd scored in a long time.

From then on, Nikolai was a one-man show. The snooded maestro, as one onlooker described him, was practically playing every position by himself. So effectively that Westy thought he'd probably do better if he took some of the other players off the pitch; if anything they were getting in the way. But that kind of thing would probably be frowned upon. Even he wasn't that heartless.

The game was not a total walkover, however. After all, Tower Hill were a very good side, and quickly took to surrounding Nikolai after identifying him as a danger. And for a while it worked. They pumped long balls to their forwards over Nikolai's heads, and scored goals from set-pieces. But despite their best efforts, they could not contain him for long, and eventually St. Martin's came out on top as they pulled off a shock 5-2 victory.

'Got yourself a one-man team there, North,' the Tower Hill coach had said after the game. Westy took that as a compliment. 'Look after him, I would.'

'I intend to. Didn't think we'd beat your lot though.' Westy replied. It was a novel feeling to be on the winning side of this exchange.

'Yeah, steady on. We've got a few players injured, an' a few playing for the county, you know? Probably our weakest side there today' the man said, and walked off in a huff.

Westy grinned to himself. The taste of victory was even sweeter than he imagined, and it made him thirsty for more. As he noticed Nikolai walk away from the playing field, he half thought about whether the boy's wound had opened, but it was only a mild concern, and he easily ignored it.

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Nikolai continued to excel in football, tennis, and just about any sport the school decided to test him with. Even cricket, which was not, they thought, a popular sport in Eastern Europe, he seemed to have an innate talent for, judging every ball he hit with timing and precision that neither absurd luck nor ordinary skill could account for. His general grades in other subjects were not as good - below average, though not failing - but the teachers were more than satisfied that his physical excellence made up for it. In fact, they allowed him to skip some of the less important classes to take part in sport with the older students, where the timetables overlapped.

It was no surprise to the staff at St. Martin's, or anyone who had watched Nikolai with a passing interest, that he began to catch the attention of a wider audience. He received party invites and the occasional love letter from his female classmates, which all went without reply, and not unrelated became the subject of envy for some of his male peers who could not hope to match his sporting success. Scouts from county teams began to attend their football matches, and his progress in a local tennis tournament even began to make the local newspaper headlines.

It was one such paper that gave Westy, chugging an ale at his local watering hole, a moment of serious, troubling concern. For one thing, he had wanted to keep the boy somewhat protected; as his manager he had felt and wanted that responsibility. But there was something else bothering him. The photo of Nikolai, in action returning a serve, showed him to be heavily bandaged around the neck in a way that no injury that could conceivably allow him to continue playing would have accounted for. Yet there was no mention of this in the text of the article. Westy checked and double-checked to make sure, but despite going into great deal on the match and what was known of the boy's background, there was no attempt to question or explain the seemingly bizarre injury. He took his phone from his pocket and looked up the article online, browsing the comments to see if any of the public had mentioned it, but again he found nothing. The photo had even been shared several times on his Facebook feed, with the only comments related to the boy's appearance noting how pale he looked for a tennis player.

Westy stroked his double-chin. Was he thinking too much? Was there really nothing too unusual about Nikolai, other than his reluctance to talk and his extraordinary physical skill? But they hadn't seen the things he had seen. They hadn't seen the blood on his neck, his creepy-as-hell voice. To his knowledge it was only he who had seen the woman he was with. Had been with. He realised he hadn't seen her since that first day, since her guarantee as to Nikolai's fortune, and her mis-translated - was it? - that he would come to regret the event.

He wanted answers. Holding the newspaper right up to his face, as though by looking closer at the ink he might see something he had missed, he saw the date of the boy's next tennis game. He would watch it himself from the crowd, to make sure there was nothing he saw that many others wouldn't also see, and to reassure himself that he was not in fact going insane.

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School benches, chairs and temporary stands surrounded the tennis court, where Nikolai was firing serves to warm up. Westy bought himself a double cheeseburger from the lone van that had set up for catering, and was most annoyed at having queued for fifteen minute only to find that they did not serve onions. Seriously, what self-respecting burger van does not have onions? Nevertheless, he made his way to a free seat on the end of a bench, and tucked in to his food.

There was a good turnout. Not from Nikolai's fellow pupils, who were by now growing quite tired as well as envious of his success, but from the more mature members of the local community who had fancied watching a bit of tennis. The weather was warm and the sun was shining. One lady remarked that it reminded her of Wimbledon, where she'd been perhaps five times, or was it six?

Westy scanned the crowd. Apart from a few journalists and cameramen, there was nothing

out of the ordinary, and no mysterious woman. Not that he expected different; he'd gotten used to her elusiveness by now. He would have to be content with watching the game, though he was fairly sure he knew which way the result would go. He was starting to regret coming at all when he could be watching the weekend's football instead, inside. He hated the sun.

Nikolai was again wearing a bandage-like wrap around his neck, but seeing it like this did not seem too unusual. It could just as easily have been a sweat band, or something, and did not strike Westy as something that would concern the onlooking crowd. He sighed. Perhaps he had been worrying over nothing.

The game started, and Nikolai eased to a comfortable lead. His opponent was barely able to return his serve, even though, Westy thought, they were not particularly powerful serves. He couldn't see how the other boy had managed to reach this stage of the tournament, but he supposed the competition was not exactly fierce. Nikolai looked to be holding back somewhat, only doing enough to ensure the lead, which was relatively little by his standards. The crowd still applauded each point, but it was not the wonder-display they were expecting. The first set ended 6-0, and the umpire announced a short interval.

The crowd rose from their seats as Nikolai headed towards the school changing rooms. Westy half-thought about getting another burger, but saw the queue and realised he had not been sharp enough for that. Instead, he edged away from the crowd and when he was sure that he would not arouse suspicion by doing so, followed Nikolai into the school.

The corridor reeked of cleaning chemicals, even though it was the weekend, and were eerily silent. His first footsteps sent echoes that brought Westy flashbacks of his youth, likely from having to stay late at school for detention. He shuddered forcefully and, unsure whether it would be better to walk quickly or quietly to avoid detection, if that was even his goal, walked at a medium pace as he followed the signs to the boys' changing rooms.

He hesitated at the door for a moment, considering for the first time what he was hoping to achieve by this spur of the moment quest, but as he did so heard a voice from within the room. It was a woman's voice, and not unpleasant either. Westy suddenly became interested; he was getting to do some detective work. As he listened closer, he could still just hear the one voice, but it was in a language he didn't understand. The accent sounded vaguely Russian, like Anna Kournikova, but he was pretty sure it was not either of those things.

Before he could study the voice much longer, it stopped, and Westy heard a shriek of pain. He recognised the voice he had heard just once before. Instinctively, he kicked the door open and when his eyes adjusted to the dark he met the gaze of the face he had hoped never to see again. She was hunched over, agitated, her bony face and dishevelled grey hair dripping sweat. In her hand shone the reflection of a sharp instrument, its razor edge flecked with fresh blood. His eyes wanted to drift to Nikolai but it didn't matter. He already knew. Oh my dear God, he thought. She's cutting him open.

The woman dropped the knife and turned, darting into the adjacent room which Westy knew were the showers. The only way out was through the door which he had entered. Stupid hag, he laughed, she'd trapped herself.

He picked up the knife and went into the shower room. His whole body was trembling, rushing adrenaline pushing him on. His feet splashed on the tiles and he almost slipped.

The woman was crouched in a corner, cursing and hissing at him like a wild animal.

He'd heard that the only way to defeat a more skilled opponent in a fight was to lower them to your own level or fight dirty. Trying to match them on technique was a sure way to get yourself hurt. So with that in mind, he clenched the knife in his hand, and took a running dive at the woman, in a move not too dissimilar to a body splash in wrestling. By a stroke of luck - or perhaps she was not much of a fighter after all - the knife in Westy's right hand had landed directly in her face. The impact of the lunge had forced the knife to carve a horrific diagonal from jaw to cheekbone, like a pumpkin gone wrong. Judging by the chunks of flesh that had spilled onto the floor of the showers, Westy deduced that she was very dead, that he had killed her, and that he probably ought to get the Hell away from there before somebody found him. And so that's what he did.

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Westy spent the immediate days following that day keeping a low profile, not going out of the house unless absolutely necessary. He was sure that they would catch him, waiting for the inevitable knock on his door which would lead to his arrest and the end of his life as he knew it. He tried out various stories and explanations in his head: he was saving the boy's life from some kind of monster, and had acted in self-defence. But he didn't think that sounded plausible enough; after all, she was unarmed - he'd attacked her with her own weapon - and she had been cowering in a corner.

Eventually, Westy started to entertain the thought that he'd got away with murder. Surely any investigation of the case would have led them to him by now, given his connections to Nikolai if nothing else. Everything was suspiciously quiet, he thought. When he dared to check the local news - which generally considers theft of a garden gnome a serious crime - there was no mention of any murder case or death. Everything seemed to be running as normal, to his relief.

So he took the under-12s training session as normal, as if nothing had happened. He was a little apprehensive despite his best efforts to stay poker-faced, but none of his players said anything; they were only interested in playing football. Nikolai was there too, clearly having found another method of transport to the playing field.

The players noticed something amiss before Westy did. They passed the ball to Nikolai and nothing happened. They caught him in tackles with surprising ease, and could easily match him for pace. 'What's up Nik, you not trying or something?' one of them asked, without reply. 'Vampire boy's lost his form.' Westy followed Nikolai intently and saw, curiously, that they seemed to be right. To say he was out of form would have been an understatement. He showed none of his impressive abilities, in any area: speed, agility, power, strength; they were all missing. In fact, he was playing like Westy had imagined he would in the first place. A skinny, shy young boy who was physically outmatched by the majority of his teammates.

This was not good. He hoped it was a blip, an illness, or something. Or perhaps the fact that he'd stabbed the boy's guardian to death in the school changing rooms had affected him more than he was letting on. That seemed a reasonable explanation. But still cause for concern. They had another cup game coming up, and Westy knew as well as everyone else that they didn't stand a chance without their star player.

Things did not improve. Nikolai was emphatically knocked out of the tennis tournament,

and nobody seemed more surprised by his opponent who had clearly been expecting a defeat. He seemed almost embarrassed that his shots were enough to beat the young prodigy that everyone had been talking about.

He continued to underperform in the training sessions too, so much so that the players began to question whether Nikolai should remain in the team at all. Playing as he was, he was no longer their star player: in fact he was probably the worst. Westy found himself having to quell the unrest in his camp, and the fear of losing; not something he remembered ever having to do before.

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Match day arrived for the next cup game, and Westy chose to keep Nikolai in his team's lineup. More out of desperation than anything; he had shown no sign of recovering from his current dip, but a miracle recovery was the only way they were going to get anything out of this game. It was his last hope.

For the first 10 minutes, the score stayed 0-0. The opposition were still trying to contain Nikolai and not concerning themselves with making any offensive moves. This was obviously their pre-planned strategy, and allowed St Martins some extra chances from the space that the other players found them in. That space didn't last for long, though. Once they realised they didn't need 3 players to mark Nikolai out of the game, and that even 1 was unnecessary, they began to overwhelm the players on the rest of the pitch and started creating more chances.

Westy found his team 3-0 down at half time, and his hopes of a decent run in the cup were vanishing just as suddenly as they had appeared in the first place. He cursed fate; there was nothing crueller than a glimpse of success, only to have it snatched away by forces outside your control. He started to sweat. He might actually have been angry.

The team talk lacked inspiration. Whatever he could have said would have been pointless, like telling the blind they could see; everyone knew their hopes pinned on one player and there was no point denying it. He could do nothing.

He could do nothing. Or could he? As that thought entered his mind he had another, quite disturbing idea, but one which in the context of strange events that had occurred recently seemed actually quite plausible. Once you had killed someone, he mused, there were few unthinkable things left.

After sending the rest of the team back out onto the pitch, he kept Nikolai behind. The boy didn't flinch as Westy produced a Swiss Army knife from his inner coat pocket, nor when he flicked out the considerable blade, and merely closed his eyes as, with just a brief hesitation, it sliced a red line through the soft tissue in his neck.

The fact that the boy was not resistant to this treatment reassured him somewhat. He grinned smugly, as he would when completing a tough crossword, and wrapped the boy's neck with fatherly care. He was getting good at this.

He was not sure that it was going to work, but somehow it seemed to matter less now. He was discovering something much greater. Something which was not often shared with ordinary men.

Nikolai was unstoppable in the second half, effortlessly passing defenders who were taken by surprise by the sudden change in form. They tried to adapt their shape, revert to their original pre-game strategy but nothing worked, and they soon found themselves resigned to their inevitable defeat.

Westy accepted the congratulations from his opposing manager in a graceful fashion. But on the inside, he was feeling very proud of himself.

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Things were suddenly looking good. He had taken on something he did not understand, something quite probably inhuman, and had won. The woman was gone. He had committed murder and got away with it, and above all his football team were actually winning games. These were remarkable times. Good times. And good times, he had always said, called for celebration. So he'd put on a decent pair of shoes - after dusting them off - and was in the queue for The Pit.

The Pit was a rock club, and so he'd have no trouble meeting their modest entry requirements. He could only remember being refused entry once in its 20-year history, and that was after he'd socked a boy for jumping the queue. The boy happened to know the bouncer, and had this not been the case it would probably have been fine, but as it was he'd ended up with a broken nose himself. Just bad luck. Win some lose some.

He was not the oldest in the queue, but certainly far above the average age. Kids these days were getting skinnier, he thought, and so pale. They crossed their arms and shivered and huddled to keep warm. There was a cloakroom inside; was it worth freezing to avoid the charge? He didn't think so. He thought about how unattractive the girls looked, and why that changed inside the club. Everyone started to look the same inside clubs. Like socks in a washer machine.

He nodded to the bouncer, a tank of a man, who returned the gesture. A sign of mutual respect. He'd seen the guy before, perhaps at the gym.

On the inside they were playing Smashing Pumpkins, an early song which he didn't remember the name of. They're one of those timeless bands that are always cool to play in clubs. Like Nine Inch Nails. There was a lone guy on the dancefloor, rocking out ecstatically, mouthing the words as if screaming but without actually voicing them. This guy always did the same thing; you could set your watch by it. But once a few more people entered the dancefloor he'd vanish; clearly it's not cool to enjoy something once other people do too.

He walked over to the bar, which was empty - most people would prefer to get drunk beforehand than waste their money - and ordered a Brown Ale. The barmaid had seen him coming and already poured half of it. She had two studs in her neck on a heart-shaped lump.

Someone slapped him on the back. It looked like a boy from his football team but that would make him 12. Surely not.

'Westyyyyyyy my sonnn'. The boy was clearly wasted. He ordered a dozen Jagerbombs. 'All right?' He replied, sipping his own drink, unsure of the boy's name. 'Buzzing mate. What a winnnn!' He made some sort of victory gesture with his fist. 'Oh

mann, not drinking that stuff are you old man? Here do one of these with me.' Why not, he thought. He was in the mood for a good time. He threw the golden-coloured liquid down his throat. It tingled. 'Nice one mate.' Another slap. 'Catch you later yeah, take care yeah?' He was gone.

Iron Maiden's Fear of the Dark came on and there was a surge towards the dancefloor. He was not quite at the dancing stage yet, and had a full drink to finish first, but still tapped his foot and nodded along in approval. The DJ was earning his respect.

He suddenly felt a bit sorry for everyone that was not in the club at that moment. They were missing out on a great time. Boys like Nikolai, who didn't talk so surely didn't socialise or go out, what did they do with their free time? Were they happy? He made his drink disappear and ordered another. The barmaid served him along with another Jagerbomb, apparently for free, which he downed instantly. He then heard the next customer complain the he'd ordered 4 Jagerbombs but only had 3. He moved away from the bar.

He could not pinpoint the moment that he crossed the line into intoxication, but it rarely worked like that. Generally speaking, unless you were specifically looking not to get drunk, you usually did. He didn't mind too much.

He found himself reacquainted on the dancefloor with the boy who had bought him a drink earlier. The music was far too loud to talk, so they grinned at each other instead, and banged their heads in loose rhythmic appreciation of the music. He soon found himself in a human train, perhaps initiated by the same boy, which seemed to entangle most of the people within the club. It moved at quite a pace, around both dancefloors, past the bar, through the toilets (male and female, although it rarely worked like that in practise) and through fire exits and other corridors they were probably not allowed in. He was sure the place wasn't this big from the outside, and started to wonder if he was even in the same club anymore.

Like a dream, the train vanished, and he realised he was tapping his feet to a beat that was no longer playing, and holding the waist of a person who was not there. A female voice laughed playfully behind him, catching her breath, and squeezed his own waist before letting go. She had apparently become detached from the rest of the train too, yet still adjoined to his carriage.

The dark room was spinning and he had double vision, but he only had to focus on one of her images to see that she was quite attractive. A tight black corset, with long black hair, high cheekbones and a tiny chin. Pale as a sheet.

'Where are we?' he asked, quite genuinely.

She laughed. 'Erm, the toilets?' she replied, indicating the basin with her eyes. Her voice had a sing-song quality.

'Oh, right' he said, embarrassed, trying to act cool and compose himself. There was no need though; her hands were already under his shirt, working their way across his chest. 'Oh...' he said again, and gave her buttock a confident pinch.

He breathed in deeply, taking in her smell and enjoying her touch. She lifted her head slowly from his chest and he felt her own breath as it moved over his neck. With her hand she turned his chin, revealing more of his neck on which to place her lips. He clenched her back with his hands as her teeth touched his skin, anticipating her bite with eagerness, but unable to prevent letting out a gasp of pain as she pierced his skin. Only when it really

stated to hurt did he realise her vice-like grip. And as the blood began to flow onto his shoulder and down his shirt, he noticed her hair was not sleek black, but a straggly, horrible grey.

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His head throbbed as he woke, as though a balloon had trapped itself in his skull. His hangovers were terrible, and he cursed himself for constantly forgetting this. He tried to prize his eyes open - they might have been stuck together with glue - but a bright ray of sunlight made him think twice. He was not at home. Oh God, he thought. Not again.

But this was different. He lay on something hard and solid, and the room was vast. He squinted away from the light and saw a blur of colour which, he blinked a few times, became a stained-glass painting of a crucifixion.

Westy, he thought to himself, you must never drink again.

'Take your time', a woman's voice echoed. He recognised it as the woman from last night, and he strained to lift his neck to see her stood at the foot of the bed. She wore the same clothes from last night. But stood holding her hand was Nikolai, dressed in shimmering white robes. His eyes were wide and had no iris; blood outlined them and ran down his cheeks like tears.

He looked at her again, trying to find some of the comfort and warmth that she had shown him last night. She seemed to recognise this, and her whole body appeared to melt briefly, as her features turned to water and back again, and she became the hagged woman that he had met and had killed. Her jaw had been restored to normal.

He let his neck slump back, hitting his head against the concrete and amplifying his headache.

She cackled cruelly. 'We cannot be killed, foolish human.'

He had worked that out for himself.

'You think you have a hope of understanding us? Did you actually think you could challenge us?'

'I just wanted to win' he said.

'I told you he would bring you success, did I not? I have been watching your games and you appear to have been doing rather well.'

'Yes, but-'

'Then what exactly was the problem? Did I not give you what you wanted?'

'I just didn't expect the blood.'

'Ungrateful human!' she shouted. 'Why do you meddle in things you don't understand? You have everything you want, yet you try to break it apart.'

'You were cutting his neck!'

'That didn't seem to trouble you when you cut him yourself.'

He suddenly felt embarrassed that he thought he knew what he was doing. He was just guessing; he had a lot more to learn.

'It's not... right. Whatever he is. It's not fair on the other boys.'

She scoffed. 'Suddenly you have a conscience? Don't be so naive. There are many more like Nikolai.'

'Vampires?' he asked.

'Yessss, of course. You don't think a human could have speed like his?'

That did explain a lot, he thought. How the boy could outmatch everyone on his team so effortlessly, and their opponents. He guessed it would also explain the blood, although he was not sure quite how that worked. He didn't know a lot about vampires, and this didn't look a lot like Twilight.

'So, umm, there are more of you? More vampires?'

'You might have heard of some of us.'

There was a sloshing noise as she turned to water again. When she reformed, she was Ray Reardon, complete with waistcoat and snooker cue.

He laughed loudly, which echoed around the church. He could barely catch the breath to reply. 'Ray 'Dracula' Reardon? He was a vampire all along? Oh come on.'

'Six world championships and world number one at the age of 50. Is that normal? I don't think so.' she replied, in a Welsh accent.

He was practically wetting himself. 'I don't believe this.'

Nikolai spoke, in a demonic voice: 'Foolish human.'

She morphed again. Her waist expanded outwards and her hair rolled back. Her chest sprouted hair and her arms became tattooed. He recognised her as Ted Hankey, darts player.

He exploded in laughter, tears emerging from his eyes. He slapped his hand against his leg.

'Ted Hankey? Ted 'The Count' Hankey? You can't be serious.'

She shook her head. 'We used to be more subtle. But we realised the obvious approached worked just as well. And was more fun.'

'Oh God, you are serious.'

'Yes. But there is a problem. Now that you know...'

'I won't tell anyone.'

'We can't rely on that I'm afraid. We have rules.'

He stopped laughing. Nikolai let go of her hand and stepped forward, with a sudden ferocity in his eyes that he had not seen before. It troubled him.

The boy tilted his head and with his fingernail began tearing into his neck. The blood poured out like the bursting of a dam, covering Westy's body and getting in his nose and mouth. When he could no longer see through his eyes, he thought back to the football games he had won; of success.