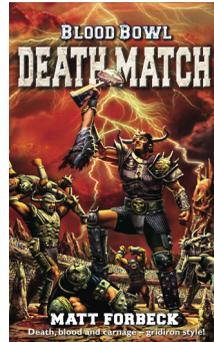


# ***DEATH MATCH***

*The third novel in the Blood Bowl series*

*By Matt Forbeck*

*This is the year that the Bad Bay Hackers make a run for the Blood Bowl. They finally seem to have the right team in place and, if they can survive until the Blood Bowl tournament, then they stand a good chance of winning it all! But there will be hell to play when an evil scheme transports the Blood Bowl tournament from Altdorf into a daemonic realm. To survive, Dunk Hoffnung must play an all-star game against the worst players that Chaos has to offer. If they win, Emperors Stadium returns to its own world. If they fail, all of Altdorf is doomed to join them in this hellish realm forever.*



## **About the Author**

Matt Forbeck has worked full-time in the adventure game industry for over 15 years. He has designed collectible card games, roleplaying games, miniatures games, and board games, and has written short fiction, comic books, and novels. His previous novels include the critically acclaimed *Secret of the Spiritkeeper* for Wizards of the Coast. *Death Match* is his third novel for the Black Library.

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The following is an excerpt from *Death Match* by Matt Forbeck.  
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The last thing Dunk Hoffnung remembered was the ogre trying to knock his helmet off his head with a bench torn from the first rows of the end zone. Dunk had just scored a touchdown for his team, the Bad Bay Hackers, and the crowd had gone wild. From hard-won experience, Dunk had avoided letting those battle-crazed, blood-thirsty bastards pull him into the stands. He knew that even fans who liked you often got carried away once they got their hands on you.

That's probably why he hadn't seen the ogre coming up behind him. He couldn't remember which one it was anymore. All of the Oldheim Ogres looked the same under their cauldron-sized helmets and with their tent-sized jerseys draped over their massive plates of spiked and sharp-edged armour: like gigantic

servants of death with mean hangovers.

The ogre had picked Dunk up with one hand and held him dangling in the air by his ankles, like a bad daemon baby in need of a fatal spanking. Then the creature reached into the stands with its other hand and pried the bench off one of the bleachers there, sending the fans who had been sitting on it scrambling for their lives.

Dunk remembered one snotling still clutching one splintered end of the bench as the ogre hoisted it into the air as a makeshift club. The hapless thing had got its Hackers fan jersey snagged on the splinters. It started to try to gnaw through the fabric with its wide, flat teeth, but there hadn't been enough time.

Dunk had heard the green-skinned midget squeal in horror as the bench came swinging down at him, but he couldn't muster any pity for the thing. He was too busy trying to angle himself out of the way of the ogre's mighty swing.

As the blue painted plank came at him, Dunk reached for his toes, which hung high above him, still in the ogre's grasp. The weight of his own armour made this nearly impossible, but the terror-fuelled adrenaline coursing through him inspired the heroic effort.

The board went sailing underneath him, right through the space where his head had once been.

'Jim, I haven't seen a swing that feeble since you tried to dismember that dwarf for dinner last night!'

Bob Bifford's voice rang out over the Preternatural

Address system, echoing across the stadium and throughout the nearby streets of Magritta.

'I still enjoy a bit of sport with my meals,' Jim Johnson grumbled. The retired ogre player's massive, battle-scarred mug flashed across the gigantic crystal ball perched at the far end of the stadium. Then it cut straight back to Dunk, squirming in the Oldheim blitzer's grasp.

'It seems Gr'Nash down there shares your passion for a good fight,' said Bob, 'and your skill!'

The crowd erupted in laughter, and the sound drove Gr’Nash even madder than before. The ogre swung at Dunk again, but the Hackers’ star thrower managed to angle himself out of the way once more.

Dunk wondered where the rest of his team could be.

They wouldn’t just leave him up here forever, would they? M’Grash K’Thragh – the Hackers’ own ogre – was Dunk’s best friend. Spinne Schönheit shared his bed. Edgar – the treeman they’d picked up in Albion last season – was as solid as his trunk. And Dunk had played alongside Cavre and Reyes for two years now.

Of course, the other players had only been on the team since the start of the tournament. Few of them had set boots on a Blood Bowl field before, and none of them had ever faced down an opposing team of eleven angry ogres.

Dunk barely knew these new players at all. If it weren’t for the fact that their names were stenciled across the backs of their green and gold armour, he didn’t think he’d have been able to pick them out from each other in the game. Still, they were on his team, and he expected them to come to his aid.

A glance at the Jumboball – which piped the Cabalvision broadcast to the fans in the stadium via the most advanced mass communications magic of the day – showed Dunk that the other Oldheim Ogres had formed a wall of armour-plated flesh between

Dunk and his team-mates. He knew that the wall couldn’t stand forever. Sooner or later his friends would get around it. M’Grash would just plough right through it. But it would take time, something he didn’t have.

Gr’Nash raised the busted bench up for another swing, and the snotling on the end broke free and went sailing off into the stands. The fans there batted the poor creature into the air again, bopping it back and forth like a beach ball, the pathetic beast squeaking like a living chew toy with every blow.

‘It’s always great to see the fans working together to entertain themselves,’ Bob said. ‘That just might be our Bloodweiser

Beer play of the day.’

‘I don’t know about that, but keep your attention on that end zone,’ Jim said. ‘It looks like Hoffnug has a great, early shot at being named the game’s Most Violated Player.’

Seemingly to prove the point, Gr’Nash lowered his arm and slammed Dunk headfirst into the Astrogranite below. Stars flashed before Dunk’s eyes, and his head felt like the muscles in his neck had turned to rubber.

‘I thought the MVP went to the ‘Most Violent Player,’ said Bob.

‘It’s a double-edged acronym,’ said Jim, ‘and here’s Gr’Nash to stake his claim for the other side of the award.’

Stunned, his arms flailing about, Dunk swung his head around to his left. He saw a flash of blue and smelled fresh-cut lumber. Then everything went black.

The next thing Dunk knew, he was lying flat on his back. This didn’t seem so unusual, what with the savage blow to the head he’d just taken, but he couldn’t see or hear a thing. He started to panic, then realized his eyes were closed, which at least explained why he was blind.

His eyes felt like they might have been glued shut, but he finally managed to peel them open. He instantly regretted it.

He stared up at the ceiling above him, the light of a number of lanterns flickering across its rough-finished surface. He recognised it as belonging to one of the team locker rooms in Magritta’s Killer Stadium, for which the legendary brewing company had bought the naming rights. The holes in the plaster from when

M’Grash had leapt with joy after their last victory told him that this was the locker room in which the Hackers had started the day.

‘How’s your head?’ The voice sounded like it had been forced through the chewed end of a halfling’s pipe: smoky and distant.

Now that the speaker mentioned it, Dunk realized that his

head felt like his brains were beating away at the inside of his skull with spiked warhammers. 'Not good,' he rasped through a mouth coated with an all too-familiar flavour: dried blood.

The speaker leaned over into Dunk's field of vision.

He was an old elf with a bloodstained patch of white fabric slung over his right eye, his lips curled in a disgusted sneer. 'You'll live,' the elf said as he shook his head, his voice dripping with disdain. 'I've seen little halfling girls take punches better than you.'

'There was a board and an ogre involved,' Dunk said. He started to get angry, but the rush of blood to his head made his brain switch over to using steampowered jackhammers. To placate them, he let out a deep sigh instead of the string of curses he'd been preparing.

Then the elf slapped him in the jaw, and the stars started swirling around his vision again. 'Sit up,' the elf said.

'Take it easy on him,' another voice said, one that

Dunk knew as well as any. It belonged to his agent, a tubby halfling by the name of Slick Fullbelly.

'Don't worry,' the elf said as Dunk used his wobbly arms to shove himself halfway up into a sitting position.

'I won't punch your meal ticket here.' The elf fitted a bulging monocle over his good eye and squinted through it at Dunk. 'Looks like the ogres nearly took care of that for you already. If they'd succeeded, maybe a scumbag like you would finally have to go and find some honest work.'

'Like gathering illegal substances to concoct potions designed to get players back on the field?' Slick asked.

Dunk saw him flittering around the elf's feet, trying to get the apothecary's attention, but the elf ignored him as if he were nothing more than a fly hunting for carrion.

'Do the Game Wizards know about the little operation you have here, Dr. Pill? Maybe Wolf Sports would be interested in running an exposé.'

The elf removed his monocle and started to rummage through

a wooden rack filled with iron flasks.

Some of these looked fresh while others rested under thick layers of dust. The elf scratched his chin, and then selected a flask, possibly at random. He turned towards Slick and blew the dust off the bottle and into the agent's face.

As Slick tried to hack the dust from his lungs and rub it from his eyes, the elf pulled a rusty scalpel from a sheath on his belt and worked it around the red wax seal covering the flask's cork. 'Who do you think supplies me with those truly hard-to-find ingredients?' the elf asked, ignoring Slick once more. 'Do you think ratings go up or down when an injured player manages to hobble back onto the field for a few more plays?'

Dr. Pill stabbed his scalpel into the top of the broken seal and used it to pry the flask's cork free. It came loose with an explosive pop that sent it and the scalpel flying into the ceiling, where they embedded themselves next to one of the holes M'Grash had made.

A green and slimy substance bubbled forth from the flask's open top, spilling down over Dr. Pill's hand, which Dunk now saw was covered with a rubber glove. Where the stuff plopped on the floor, it hissed and sizzled like water on a hot, greased griddle.

'Drink this,' the elf said, shoving the potion at Dunk.

The flask smacked him in the face and knocked him back to the table again.

Dunk growled and sat right back up again. The elf grimaced at him, shamefaced. 'My apologies,' he said, pointing at his eye patch with his free hand as he offered up the bubbling flask again. 'No depth perception.'

Dunk crossed his eyes to stare at the flask of frothing gunk, which hung too close to his face, but at least it hadn't smashed into him this time. He felt the sharp scent of it scorch the hair in his nostrils right off.

'How does he know that's not some kind of poison?'

Slick squeaked out between coughs.

‘Oh, it’s a poison, all right,’ Dr. Pill said, staring at Dunk with his one good eye, ‘arsenic, to be precise.

Smell the bitter almonds in it? That’s always a dead giveaway.’

‘What?’

‘But it has an antidote mixed into it, along with some other things, the so-called ‘secret ingredients.’

This volatile combination can strip the paint off your armour, but it’ll put your head right too. Otherwise, it’s weeks in the sickhouse. You’ll miss not only this game but the rest of the tournament too.’

From somewhere above, Dunk heard a low, muffled roar. The plaster shook loose from the ceiling, and the cork and scalpel came tumbling down, barely missing Slick’s feet as they stabbed juddering into the floor.

The agent leapt back in dismay.

Dunk reached out with an unsteady hand and snatched the potion from the leering elf’s hands.

Before his other arm could give out and send him collapsing back on the table, he tipped the flask back, opened up his throat, and swallowed its noxious contents in one determined gulp.

Slick looked up at Dunk as if the thrower had promised him another beer, and Dr. Pill glared at him, his good eye seeming as dead as the other. Dunk felt the potion swirl its way down into his belly where it began its work. Warmth spread out from his stomach to his head, fingers, and toes until he felt like he wanted to jump into a sauna to cool off. Sweat poured off his skin, streaming down from his hairline and into his eyes. His eyeballs started to burn from the inside, and his teeth felt like glowing coals in his mouth.

‘Water,’ Dunk rasped. ‘Please.’

‘Here,’ Dr. Pill said. He handed Dunk a wide funnel attached to a long, rubber hose that wound its way under the table on which the rack of flasks rested.

Dunk squinted into the funnel, unsure what to do with it.

Would it fill with water for him to drink?

Should he hold it over his head and let a cascade of water shower him? He needed something to drink so badly that he thought of sticking his face into the funnel and sucking on it until the water came out.

Then his stomach turned on him hard, flipping and flopping like a fish on a dry dock, gasping for water, drowning in air. Dunk's eyes flew open, as wide as the zeroes on a scoreboard.

'What's happening?' Slick asked. 'Son, are you all right?' The halfling turned on the elf, 'I swear to every bastard god that ever sinned I'll turn you over to our own team's ogre if he dies. Dunk's like a brother to M'Grash. He'll take it hard – and he'll take it out –'

Dunk interrupted Slick's tirade of threats by unleashing the contents of his stomach into the funnel.

It started with a savage roar, travelled through the gush of a flooding river, and trickled off into a sickly whimper punctuated with a hack and a spit.

'Nuffle's leathery balls!' Slick said as he rushed to Dunk's side. 'What have you done to him? Son? Son!'

Dunk wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve and sat up, ready to be knocked over by the tiny force of the halfling's breath. Instead, as he shook his head, he realised it felt fine. The throbbing that had been there was gone, his brains having dropped their excavating tools and called it a day.

'I'm good,' he said, bounding off the apothecary's table, 'better than ever, maybe. I feel great!'

Slick squinted up at Dunk suspiciously. 'When we brought you in here, son, you were half-dead. I thought we'd have to go with a closed coffin at the funeral. How's this quack manage—'

'It's customary to thank those who save your life,' Dr.

Pill said, 'although I'm accustomed to not receiving such pleasantries from primitives.'

Dunk smirked at the apothecary. He wanted to be angry at the man and his sour attitude, but he felt too damn fine to be

bothered with such things. ‘Thank you,’ he said sincerely.

‘Just doing my job,’ the elf said, the sneer back on his face. ‘And at the rates I charge I suspect your employer would prefer it if you ceased joining in this riveting knitting circle here in the locker room with your agent and me and got back out on that pitch to do your job.’

Dunk bounded off the table and cracked his neck back and forth. ‘On my way,’ he said as he headed for the door.

As he left, he heard Slick ask Dr. Pill a question, trying to curry his favour. As an agent, Slick found it his duty to work every possible angle on Dunk’s behalf, and being able to call on someone who could heal an injured player like that might come in handy.

‘That’s an amazing contraption you have there to catch your patients’ illnesses. Does it just vent into the sewers?’

The elf snorted. ‘Do I just throw it away? Of course not. Do you have any idea how much those materials cost? I find they can last for three or four applications at least.’

Dunk raced out through the tunnel that led to the Hackers’ dugout, certain he didn’t want to hear any more.

*More Blood Bowl from the Black Library, by Matt Forbeck*

BLOOD BOWL  
DEADBALL