

Stretching for Practice

By holodrom

Hunter "The Pit" Holmes was having a rough season playing for the Chicago Dreamboats. The maned wolf's batting average was low, and his strikeouts were up. The only thing he had going for him was his outfield game—which had earned him his nickname—and even that was lagging this season. He had only famously popped his uniform buttons and beached himself out of a game twice so far. This many games in, he'd usually have managed it four or five times.

Hunter let out a deflating sigh as he recalled his performance so far and tried to let all of the negativity go with his breath. He was being escorted by a GlaceTech secretary to a private dining event hosted by one of the Dreamboat's biggest sponsors: Angelus Glace. Hunter had never met the man, but the Dreamboat's stadium was named after Angelus's company, so he could feel the weight of the impending meeting trying to push him into the hardwood flooring even as he tried to perk himself up and put on a brave face.

Hunter had never been quite good enough to play for the major leagues. He knew this, but he still wanted to pursue his passion for the game which led him to star in a slightly smaller and more niche league: Dineball.

Dineball was a baseball league that sat somewhere between the minor and major leagues. It attracted two types of players: people like Hunter who barely missed the cut for the major leagues, and people who got their kicks from eating people or being eaten themselves. After all, Dineball got its name from the unique rules governing players eating one another on the field. A runner that gets tagged out is eaten by the one who tagged them. Three outs, and the batter was eaten by whoever fielded their out. Rules like that were the core of what made Dineball a popular spectacle.

The frustrations and grudges that arose from players getting eaten also heightened the drama compared to the MLB, especially since anyone who was digested was back within a day and perfectly capable of spiting the player that gulped them whole. Hunter had been eaten a few times, but befitting his nickname, he was more likely to be sloshing across the outfield, catching fly balls while lugging a uniform-busting trio (or more!) of opposing players in the pit of his stomach.

He hoped that his meeting today with Angelus would help turn his performance around. Unfortunately, our down-on-his-luck Dineball player was about to hit rock bottom.

The door to the dining room opened, and Hunter let out a soft and puzzled "Ah...?" It was a small private dining room with seating for four at the most, a much smaller venue than he imagined when he received the invitation listing a "dining event." The entire back wall was a window that looked out over the city, and the light of the sunset poured in, creating a rim light effect around the only other person in the chilly dining room.

Angelus looked up from a steaming coffee he was stirring, locking his icy eyes on Hunter. The arctic fox's expression was inscrutable for a moment before his expression melted into a soft smile.

"Well if it isn't Hunter 'The Pit' Holmes. I'm glad you were able to make it." Angelus gestured for wolf to take a seat as the secretary pulled out a chair across from the fox. Hunter

took his seat and pushed his butt against the back of the chair to keep his long legs from bumping against Angelus under the table. "Care for a drink before the first course is brought in?"

Hunter winced hearing his nickname from Angelus. Normally he was amused by the reference to how many people he could eat before having to retire from a game, but coming from Angelus it felt scathing. "Uh, thank you, sir. I'll take a coffee as well. And just Hunter will do. Are we going to be the only ones here today?" Hunter tried to relax, but his fur was puffing up and his fluffy mane was fighting the tightness of his shirt collar. He tried to tell himself it was from the chilly air, but there was a cold sweat under his fur that he couldn't shake.

"That's right. I was wanting to have a chat, just the two of us. Face to face, of course." Angelus's white and black-tipped tail flicked and he waved off the secretary to fetch Hunter's coffee.

"I'm flattered, sir. You're a huge sponsor for the Dreamboats after all. GlaceTech Park is lovely to play in, and the fans love it." His hands were folded in his lap and his fingers were twitching with unease. When the coffee arrived he grabbed it eagerly just to give his hands something to do. His ears flicked at the first sip. It was exceptionally good for black coffee, likely an expensive blend Angelus himself preferred. Not too bitter, and with hints of toffee, and what he guessed might be apple...

"Thank you. I did have it constructed to favor the home team as much as possible. Ample covered seating, enough food kiosks and restrooms to ensure lines are never more than a couple of minutes long. Nothing but the best for my favorite team." Angelus sipped his own coffee, but his blue eyes were always locked on Hunter, who was starting to feel more like prey as Angelus's gaze bored through him.

He nervously swallowed a large gulp of coffee. "We all really appreciate it! Not to mention how well maintained it is. Even fans of our opposing teams rave about how nice the stadium is."

"Naturally. GlaceTech has a reputation for exceeding expectations, and that extends to all pies our fingers are in, if you catch my meaning." Angelus's smile had gradually fallen flat, and his tone was heavier and serious.

"Y-yes, of course. I uh-" Hunter could feel where this was going.

Angelus sighed and rubbed his temple with one hand, closing his eyes for the first time since Hunter had entered the room. "Then you understand why you're here."

"Well, I know I've been, ah-"

The fox's eyes snapped open, and cold of the room clawed at Hunter's skin. "Do you have any idea how disappointing you are? You're *ruining* my favorite team," Angelus hissed. His claws glinted as they flexed out.

Hunter pushed his chair back and nearly toppled out of it as he got to his feet. His breath fogged in the air. "I, you know, I really appreciate the dinner offer, but I just remembered I have to uh, I left my oven in the dryer, so I really have to go!" He stammered and reached for the door, but it was locked from the outside. He rattled the handle and yanked on the door to no avail. "L-let me out!" he shouted and pounded on the door to try and get the attention of someone, anyone.

"Tisk tisk. This is how you show gratitude to your team's biggest sponsor? You're going to make me so sad, Mister Holmes."

Hunter turned back to the table a moment too late. He was struck over the head by something hard and cold, and he blacked out.

Hunter's eyes snapped open with a gasp. The memory of Angelus striking him on the head replayed in his mind, making adrenaline pump through his blood as he shot to his feet and swept his surroundings for any sight of the frigid fox. He was nowhere to be seen, but they weren't in the dining room at GlaceTech HQ anymore. Even in the dim glow of moonlight, Hunter recognized GlaceTech Park. He was standing in the batter's box, and someone else was on the pitcher's mound, just getting to their feet.

Whoever it was, it wasn't Angelus, so Hunter moved to approach them. They stopped short and gagged as they felt a tug on their fluffy neck. Their hands moved up and grasped a metal collar that had been fastened around their neck. A metal leash secured it to the ground with a railroad spike. The chain was just long enough to let Hunter wander a few feet from the batter box and no further.

There was a grunt and a metallic rattle from the stranger on the pitching mound. Hunter's ears turned and his eyes followed. Whoever they were, they were collared and chained the same way. Before he could call out, the stadium's lights turned on, bringing an artificial midday to the grass, dirt, and stands. Hunter winced away from the light and shielded his eyes with an arm as the loudspeaker system crackled.

The voice that called out turned his blood to ice. "Good evening, gentlemen." Angelus's voice was cold and calm, and so measured it barely echoed even as it was broadcast over speakers to empty stands. "I'll be with you in a moment. Please change into your uniforms and ready your gear. We'll be starting an extra special mid-season practice game in a few minutes." There was a pop of static as the speakers were shut off.

Hunter hadn't noticed that his uniform and cleats were sitting in a neatly folded pile on top of home base. His pounding heart sank. He was being ordered to change his clothes out in the open while chained to the ground like an a ferocious animal. Unfortunately, he'd gotten a taste of what Angelus was like, and he didn't want to risk making things worse. With shaking hands he slipped out of his shoes and pulled off his pants, leaving him in just his boxers and undershirt.

He hurriedly squeezed into his white and purple pinstripe baseball pants and then pulled his matching jersey on and buttoned it across his front. He tucked it into his pants and tightened the belt around his waist, making his slight belly more pronounced. He grumbled a bit as he pulled on his cleats while balancing on one foot since there was nowhere to sit. Lastly he picked up his cap and gazed at the Dreamboat's orange emblem embroidered on the purple front. He grit his teeth and pulled it on.

The pitcher also got changed, though he and Hunter politely looked away from one another. By the time Hunter was in uniform, he could hear footsteps approaching from behind, and the sound of a single claw raking along the chain link fence. "You look ready to play," Angelus cooed as he came into view. He was, as ever, dressed in his suit jacket and tie, seeming to accept that he'd get a bit of dirt on his nice shoes and pants cuffs. "Good. It's time to get in some extra batting practice. It's your weakest area this season. Open your mouth."

"Wha-MRMPH?" Opening his mouth to respond was the wrong move. Angelus shoved a muzzle contraption over his mouth that clamped his jaws down around a rubber hose with a rigid nozzle. Hunter flailed and grabbed the hose, trying and failing to pull it out.

Angelus raised an eyebrow as he watched Hunter struggle, and he waited until the maned wolf tired himself out. Hunter was left hunched over and panting through his nostrils, looking at Angelus with a mix of anger and anxiety. "All done? Good. Now I can explain." He grabbed Hunter by the chin and pulled him upright. "Batting practice. He pitches, you hit. If you hit, he inflates. If you miss, you inflate. The game stops when you've either both improved, or one of you explodes." He paused, but Hunter just gave him a bewildered look and shook his head. Angelus frowned.

"Oh you don't want to play? But I basically own you. So you should entertain me." Angelus picked up a bat from the ground and gave it a few test swings dangerously close to Hunter's head. "You see, you can play, pop, and come back tomorrow. Easy enough, right? Not too different from getting eaten in a game." He lowered the bat and tapped Hunter's knees. "But if you don't play, I'll break both of your legs, and both of the pitcher's arms, and you'll both be out all season." He shoved the bat into Hunter's hands as the wolf's eyes widened with fear. "You have ten minutes to warm up. If you don't start by the end of that timer, I'll break you both." Angelus retreated to the stands just behind the batting cage to watch.

Hunter took the first two minutes to calm his nerves. He closed his eyes and let himself feel the warm, electric glow of the stadium lights. The heat mingled with the grassy smell of the night breeze. His ears flicked and he could almost hear the roar of the crowd as he stepped up to bat, the tinny voice of the announcer over the loudspeakers, and the stifled burps of his stuffed, benched teammates. The feeling of the muzzle and collar binding him slipped away, though they were still very much there.

He opened his eyes. He was no longer trembling. His tail was relaxed, and his heartbeat was steady. He shifted his grip on the bat and raised it into a ready position, holding it out a little further than most due to his long arms. He dug the spikes of his cleats into the dirt and took a few test swings. The metal bat whooshed through the air, swinging in a wide but powerful arc. The bat was nice and light, and it cut through the air with little resistance. He adjusted his stance and the angle of his swing as he acclimated to the feel of it.

The pitcher was also on the Dreamboat's roster, and he had thrown one too many runs for the opposing teams this season. The horned lizard was standing on the pitcher's mound, and beside him was a large ten-gallon bucket filled to overflowing with spare baseballs. Roberto "Rob" Rodriguez was best known for his fastball, and he was busy warming up his throwing arm while trying to ignore the restraining gear clamped around his neck and face. He and Hunter locked eyes and they shared an awkward wave of familiarity—the best they could manage with their mouths muzzled and stuffed with hoses.

Ten minutes were up, and the siren for starting a game sounded out, echoing between the empty stands. Angelus was sitting behind the batter box, a devious smirk showing teeth at the corners of his curled mouth. He lifted a microphone to his lips, and his voice crackled over the sound system. "Play ball."

Rob didn't want to explode his teammate, but he wasn't looking to get his own scales stretched either. Still, as a show of good faith, he lobbed the ball up and down a couple of times, and pointed straight ahead to try and indicate his throw.

Hunter nodded, expecting the obvious. Fastball.

He was right. Rob reared back, baseball held in his knuckles, and he pitched forward, letting it fly straight from his hand.

Hunter heard the air whistle as the ball soared through it. It approached in the blink of an eye, and he took a swing at it as it closed in on the batter box.

His bat sailed through the air, failing to make contact with anything. His ears perked up and his neck fluff stood on end as he heard the fastball crash into fence behind him. Angelus clapped slowly. "Wow. Just as I expected, really. Good. Job."

A compressor rumbled to life, rattling on the ground and kicking up a bit of dirt as it forced pressure through the rubber hose. Hunter tried to bite down on it to stem the flow, but the nozzle was made of stainless steel, leaving him gnawing on it uselessly. His cheeks puffed up and the pressure forced him to swallow the burst of air which settled in his stomach like a belch that he couldn't release. His uniform felt tighter with a liter of air pumped into his gut, but he pushed the feeling aside and tipped his bat back into the ready position.

Rob strained to see if there was any change in Hunter, but despite being able to hear the brief rumble of the compressor, Hunter didn't seem any bigger. Just to be safe, he waited until Hunter had his bat up again before throwing another pitch. This time he fired a slider which hurtled toward home base while sliding to the edge of the batting box.

Hunter's long arms gave him a bit of an advantage over this kind of pitch. The ball slid to what would be the very edge of the reach of most players, which usually at least got them to foul. Unfortunately for Roberto, Hunter hit the ball dead on. The sound of the ball striking metal reverberated through the bat and out into the stands, and the ball sailed right between first and second bases, landing in the outfield. In a moment of instinct, Hunter tried to break into a sprint, only to choke himself with the collar and skid out in the dirt, landing on his ass as his feet flipped out from under him. He grunted and grumbled an embarrassed but unintelligible string of curses as he got to his feet and dusted off.

Rob couldn't help but snicker as he watched his teammate cartoonishly flop into the dirt. His quiet chuckling ramped into a muffled yelp as he felt a rush of air pressure into his mouth. The brief burst made him shiver as he swallowed it down, leaving him feeling like he needed an antacid for the bloating. He couldn't even belch with the way his muzzle was clamped shut, so he just grabbed another ball and readied a pitch.

Strike. Strike. Strike. Hunter would have been out in a regular game, but his current predicament was much worse, and more embarrassing. Every whiffed swing kicked the air compressor to life and pumped more air into the long-limbed wolf. He felt the pressure in his guts rise in bursts, and his stomach bloated until he could feel it pushing out against the confines of his uniform. He was visibly rounder, and the fabric pulled into taut creases around the buttons. He could feel his arm resting on the top curve of his stomach as he readied his bat again.

Rob pitched the ball and Hunter took a swing. He felt the bat connect, but the ball veered off at an awkward angle and flopped into the foul zone. Angelus scoffed and shouted a mocking "Foul!" at the both of them as BOTH air compressors turned on. Hunter and Roberto both gave the icy fox bewildered glances, which he met with a bored expression. "Oh what, are you surprised? It was a bad pitch because it was hit, and a bad hit because it wasn't a run. You're not practicing to be more mediocre. Keep going."

Rob kept throwing. Hunter kept swinging. The odds were tipped in Roberto's favor, as Hunter whiffed more swings than he hit. Rob was filled in sparse but powerful bursts, and he began to anticipate the hit of air when he heard the metallic ring of the bat smashing the ball. He relaxed his throat and let the air rush down, stretching his stomach scales under his elastic uniform.

Hunter was doing worse. The balls kept coming, only delaying long enough for him to ready himself before they whistled through the air and forced him to swing. Every miss punched the back of his throat with a blast of air that made his head jerk back and his feet shuffle. His ExpandEx uniform stretched around his gut, bending the pinstripe pattern out into ribbed curves that accentuated his increasing roundness. Despite being designed to stretch to hold a gut with at least one whole person wiggling around inside, the uniform still gently squeezed his stomach, a feeling that was more obvious from being filled with air instead of other players.

The bloat was a strange sensation in other ways. Hunter caught himself subconsciously leaning back as if he was trying to offset the weight of his stomach. At his current yoga-ball belly size he'd typically be hauling around two hundred pounds of Dineball player, but his blimped middle was effectively weightless. Because of that weightlessness, it was swollen into a nearly uniform orb which caused it to press up toward his chest. His arms bumped against it when he raised his bat, and they grazed along the top with every swing. And with every miss, it became more of an obstacle.

The rising pressure made his head spin. His thoughts wheeled around as he tried to pick up any pattern to determine what throw Rob was going to use next. His swings went wider, faster, more erratic. His arms bounced against his stomach as he tried to keep his swing straight. Balls that he missed started to zip dangerously close to the edge of his expanding stomach. He felt like the air compressor never stopped, that the pitches were flying as though Rob was flinging them like a pitching machine.

The night air chilled the bottom of his groaning stomach as it slipped free of his uniform. His legs wobbled with pressure drunkenness and he could barely keep swinging the bat with how much his stomach was in the way. More balls whizzed by. The buttons on his uniform popped open one by one, and each one caused his earthy-orange belly to bounce as it was freed.

Rob's own uniform was stretched and sliding against his belly scales with each inhale before he pitched. He kept up a steady and slow pace, but it was enough that he was watching Hunter swell up like a helium balloon. The lizard was only half Hunter's size and even he was feeling the strain, both in his uniform and his stomach. He wasn't as capacious as his fluffier teammate, and his throws sent shocks through his creaking surface that made him wince through watering eyes.

Angelus raised his hand. "Hold." The players stopped and turned to look as the fox stood up and walked around the batting cage, approaching Hunter. He took the liberty of pressing a cold hand against Hunter's belly. It had very little give, feeling firm as he pushed against it. Hunter shivered from the chill and grunted as the push shifted the air pressure around inside of his stomach. "Hmm. Yeah, you're done." He dragged his claws along the tight surface and drummed them once before letting go. "Miserable performance, but there was some slight improvement before you became too large of a blimp. I expect to see that reflected with interest in the next game."

He stepped back and leaned back against the fencing that penned in the batter's box. "You, pitcher. Your best fastball, right to the gut."

"HRMGGH?" Hunter shouted into the muzzle and dropped his bat to grab at the chain that collared him to the ground. Frantically, he yanked at it, trying to rip it out of the ground while panting through his nose. His arms burned from all of the swinging and his nerves tingled as he continued to strain them to try and get free.

"Hey. I said throw. Now."

Roberto stomped on the pitcher's mound and paced in the small circle his leash allowed him. He winced at Angelus's barking, but he didn't have a choice. He got into position, pulled back his leg and arm, and whipped the ball forward with all the force he could muster. For a split second, the idea of launching the ball at Angelus's face crossed his mind, but the instant his eyes flicked over to the fox he felt an icy grip around his heart, a horrible, sickening sinking. The thought evaporated from his mind, and the ball flew straight at Hunter.

The baseball collided with Hunter's infamous Pit at full velocity. It dimpled the surface, sending a shock of pressure that bounced against the far end of the lanky wolf's stomach. His eyes bugged out for an instant from the force of the impact, and then he exploded. His body blasted apart with a deafening BANG. The blast of wind buffeted Angelus, covering him in tufts of orange fur. The grass bent away from the wind and Rob raised an arm to cover his eyes as it swept past him and dissipated in the outfield.

Hunter's pinstripe pants and unbuttoned uniform fluttered down to the ground after being blasted to the top of the batting cage. Angelus stepped forward and caught the clothing on one arm before they hit the ground. He couldn't hide the wolfish grin that spread over his muzzle as he dusted fur off of his black blazer. "Oohf, ears are ringing...~" His own voice was muffled, briefly deafened from the blast as he was.

He reveled in the sensation before turning his gaze to Rob, still showing teeth through his sharp smile. "Show of hands my friend. You have two options. Raised open palm if you want to blow too. Closed palm if you want to leave. I don't care if you deflate explosively or spend the next twelve hours belching. Choose."

Rob hastily raised his balled fists.

Angelus rolled his eyes and sighed. "Disappointing. But fine." He fished a key out of his pocket and flicked it across the grass and onto the pitcher's mound. "Free yourself. I'm leaving." He gave a bored wave and headed back towards the stands.

Rob fussed with the key and got the muzzle off of his face and the collar off of his neck. They hit the ground with a clank, and Rob spit into the grass to get the taste of rubber and metal out of his mouth. He groaned as he held his stomach with both hands, unable to get his arms to link around it. It was light but cumbersome, and a belch blasted from his mouth, relieving a slight bit of the pressure within.

The lights turned off, a clear sign that Angelus was truly done for the night. Rob's eyes adjusted to the dark. He used the ample moonlight to head off the field and out to the parking lot so he could call a ride. He sighed and furrowed his spiked brow. He'd need to call a van to fit his gut into the vehicle like this.

Damnit. He should have let Angelus turn him into scale confetti.