

# The Boast

By Clint McInnes

The first thing that drifted across Joaquin's mindscape as consciousness took hold was the thought, *This is not my bed.*

The jaguar's eyes popped open: green registered, green near and blue far away. Something tickled his nose; he squinted and sat up, rubbing the back of one paw across his face, and took in his surroundings. *Grass. Lots of grass. And sky.*

He stood; more, he bounded to his feet. Something else felt different as he turned quickly, scanning the area, identifying the place instantly as a ball field. However, he noted only one goal rather than the usual two. Someone stood in front of it, bouncing a ball from his knee to his head and back. Next he noticed that he was wearing his Brazilian National Team uniform.

Joaquin had awakened a few meters from midfield, and took several steps toward the other fur before the odd sensation hit him again. Then he noticed that the ground seemed abruptly to fall away shortly beyond the bounds of the field, and he stopped, his palms suddenly clammy. Turning his head upward and gradually taking in the blue expanse above him, he failed to locate anything that might be called a sun. Nor, he saw, did he cast a shadow.

"What are you waiting for?"

Joaquin's head snapped around to the other fur, who he noted was a fox, and a big one. He called, "What is this place?"

"Oh, just a little something I whipped up." His voice carried perfectly to Joaquin's ears, yet he used no more than a conversational tone. "You like it?"

Joaquin slowly walked over and stopped in front of the fox. They were roughly the same size, and the jaguar stood at an even two meters. This was easily the tallest fox he'd ever seen. And he was the *only* fox he'd ever seen who had what appeared to be black smoke leaking out of his nostrils in a thin, continuous stream. "I'll ask again. What is this place? Where are we?"

The fox shrugged. "Does it really matter? It ain't home."

"Yeah, that one didn't get past me." He looked the fox up and down. "Who are you?"

"Oh, I think you already know that answer."

"... I think I know what you'd *like* me to think. But I've seen stage magic before."

"Heh. This is real enough. Pull the grass. Go walk off the edge, if you like, though I don't think you'll much care for the result."

"Where's the sun?"

"Wasn't necessary."

# The Boast

By Clint McInnes

“... Hunh.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

“Not even close.”

The fox chuckled. “Didn’t think so.”

“All right. Why am I here?”

“Because you got cocky.”

“Cocky?”

“Oh, please do not even *try* to look surprised. Joaquin Santos, the greatest player in the last two decades? You know, this generation’s Pele, Brazil’s national treasure? Any of that ring a bell?”

“So? It’s all media hype. I didn’t have anything to do with it. I just love to play football. Why blame me for things others say?”

“Not just ‘others’. Your coach.”

“Benito? What did he ...”

A newspaper clipping appeared in the air in front of his nose, and he started and backed up a step. There, on the first page of the sports section, was a photo of him with his coach’s arm draped over his shoulders. As he watched, the people in the photo came to life. A reporter said, “Weren’t you worried, Coach, when the score was tied in the last period?” The figure in the photo clapped Joaquin on the back and said, “Not with Jo-Jo on forward. He could get a ball past Ol’ Nick himself if he wanted to.” The Joaquin in the picture just grinned and gave the reporter a wink. Then the paper vanished.

One eyebrow rose marginally. “So? I still don’t get it. I didn’t *say* anything.”

“But *he* did, and *you* didn’t deny it. That’s good enough in my book.”

Joaquin crossed his arms and stared at the other. “So what’s your deal?”

“Deal?” The fox was the picture of innocence. “What makes you think there’s any sort of deal involved?”

The jaguar snorted derisively.

“Okay, well, maybe there is *something* I’d like you to do for me.”

“I’ll just bet.”

“I thought we’d have us a little one-on-one.”

“Oh, really?”

“Sure. You said you love the game. What could be the harm?”

# The Boast

By Clint McInnes

“And if I lose?”

“Then you’ll owe me one.”

“I don’t think so.”

The fox shrugged. “Your choice.” He turned away and started kicking the ball off the goalpost so that it bounced back to him each time.

“So I can go?”

“Sure. Heave off.”

It only took the cat a second to get a clearer view of the situation. “Ah-huh. I don’t really have any way to do that, do I?”

“Hey, you want to go? Just go. I’m not stopping you.”

“Says the Father of Lies.”

“Why, Joaquin, I’m wounded! That, I truly am!”

“Right. So what happens if I win?”

The grin that appeared on the fox’s face spread *much* too wide and showed off *many* more and sharper teeth than it had any right to. “Why, you get the glory of having defeated me, of course.”

“Not good enough.”

“Very well. You go home, and you don’t owe me anything.”

“And you leave me and my family and my friends completely alone for the rest of our natural lives.”

“Ooooo. Pretty stiff.” He pretended to consider the options. “For a prize like that, I’ll have to up the ante a bit.”

“Such as?”

“Such as ... you serve me for ten years if you lose.”

“*Ten years?!*”

“Wanna go for twenty?”

Joaquin controlled his breathing and temper. “Fine. Ten if I lose.” He narrowed his eyes at the Adversary. “One on one? How’s that work?”

“Oh, *I’m* sorry! I don’t believe we went over the rules.” He tossed the ball up and started dribbling it in the air with his head. “All you have to do is get the ball into the goal.”

“What, just once? One goal?”

“Yep.”

# The Boast

By Clint McInnes

“And how many do you need?”

“I don’t need any. I’m the goalie.”

“... Oh. So I only have to get one ball past you?”

“Just one.”

“What’s the time limit?”

“No limit. But you only get ten tries.”

“So. Ten shots, and if one goes in, I win?”

That grin got huge. “You got it, Bucky.”

“Can I take the shots from anywhere?”

“Anywhere you like.”

“What’s the catch?”

“Heh!” The fox caught the ball with an ankle, rolled it around his foot, and planted that foot on it. “No catch. I don’t need a catch. I’m just better than you.”

“That’s your opinion.”

“Oh-ho! Like I said. Cocky.”

The cat gritted his teeth. “Let’s play.”

A lazy foot tapped the ball his way. He collected it and dribbled around in front of the goal for a few seconds, then shot a rocket toward the extreme upper left corner of the goal. But the fox was there, neatly folding himself around the ball and landing lightly on his feet. He tossed it to Joaquin. “That’s one.”

A slight haziness formed around the goal, and one of the posts moved inward about half a meter. The grass settled down around its base, and the fox turned that unsettling grin on Joaquin.

For his part, the cat just stood there with his mouth hanging open for a moment. Then he frowned, gathered his wits, and said, “So *that’s* how it’s going to be.”

“I’m quite sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Joaquin didn’t honor that comment with an answer. He drove hard at the goal, feinted left and then slammed in a shot to the right that would have knocked most goalies on their kiesters, but miraculously the fox was in front of it ... only this time, to Joaquin, it seemed that his arms were just a bit too long. But when he stood with the ball, everything was proportional again.

And the other goalpost scooted in toward the center.

Joaquin was sweating now, and not from exertion. Three more exceptional shots were blocked, deflected, and caught in turn. On the fifth shot, that weird,

# The Boast

By Clint McInnes

unnatural feeling hit him again, and he could have sworn the ball curved downward. Then he realized that his Adversary was toying with gravity. *And with me*, he thought bitterly, *which is no trick for him. He made this place.*

The goal looked tiny; the fox looked enormous. *He's rigged the game! I can't win!* He saw again that predatory grin and wrestled with his mind and his fear. *Think, Jo! What are you missing? If the stories are true, winning is possible. I just have to find the loophole.*

He dribbled around, back and forth in front of the diminished goal, trying to work out where his advantage lay. The fox was at least as fast as he was, and wasn't averse to fooling around with his body's proportions to make sure of a catch. And he *was* good. To stall for time, Joaquin asked, "Where'd you learn to play football?"

"Learn? Don't insult me. I invented the sport."

The cat stopped and stared. "What?"

"For that matter, I invented all sports. What is a sport if it isn't a controlled sort of war? And who loves war more than I?" He spat on the grass. "Certainly not that namby-pamby who thinks He's in charge. He's all 'love-love-love' and 'let's play nice' and 'put others first' and crap. Make me puke."

Now Joaquin was really worried, not the least because as the fox spoke, his form was morphing, growing, getting wider. The grass at his feet began to smolder. Realizing that he was, for that instant, distracted, the cat made a desperation shot ... and it almost worked. But at the last possible moment, the creature realized what was happening, and extended his arm impossibly, and caught it. His head swiveled to find Joaquin, he held up a finger and wagged it, and said, "Ah-ah-ah! No cookie for you." Then he tossed the ball back.

Joaquin dribbled, waiting while the fox resumed his original shape, and thinking about what he'd just seen. He increased his speed, weaving back and forth, back and forth, and the fox tracked him perfectly. Finally, when he was very close, almost too close to shoot, he brought his leg around, cocked for a mighty power kick, and swung down hard on the ball ...

But he didn't strike it with his instep, as before. His foot chopped into the ground just behind the ball, knocking it lightly up about a meter. And Joaquin wrapped himself around it, tucked everything in, and bowled into the fox at the knees. The surprised creature fell over the cat, scrambled back to his feet, and watched in disbelief as the jaguar stood and dropped the ball *inside* the goal.

"You can't do that!"

"Oh, but I just did. Weren't you watching?"

"You cheated!"

# The Boast

By Clint McInnes

“How so?”

“You touched the ball with your paws!”

“Ah-ah-ah!” He mimicked the fox’s earlier motion with his finger. “That was no part of your rules. You said all I had to do to win was, and I quote, ‘get the ball into the goal’. I did that. I win.”

“You cheated! That goes against every precept of football!”

“But we weren’t playing football, were we?” He held an arm out, indicating the ground around them. “This isn’t a regulation field, is it? Only one goal? And we aren’t two teams, are we? And there are no officials. Clearly, we are not playing football, so official football rules do not apply. There was no cheating, at least not on my part. I win.” He took two steps toward his Adversary. “You thought I wouldn’t get it. You thought my paradigm was so solidly stuck in the game that I wouldn’t see past your little tricks. But you were wrong. And now you have to put me back where I was, and you have to leave me and mine alone for as long as we live.”

The fox’s eyes were a pair of bottomless, flame-filled holes. His body grew dark, and thin, and very, very tall. The ground began to vibrate, then to shake, then to pitch like hurricane-driven seas. But Joaquin held his feet and the fox’s gaze.

“You made a deal. You are bound to honor it.”

The thing’s voice burned a foul, maggoty pock in Joaquin’s mind. “Don’t think this contest is over.”

“Oh, but that is *exactly* what I think. That was our deal. I very carefully *didn’t* ask for any worldly thing. The deal was that you *butt out* of my life and the lives of my friends and family. Period.” He held up a paw and waved. “So, bye-bye! I won’t be seeing you later.”

And with a shriek, the Adversary turned vaporous, all light ceased, and Joaquin fell back onto his bed. His wife mumbled and turned in her slumber, opened sleepy eyes and saw him. She raised herself up on one elbow and asked, “Bad dream, honey?”

“Huh. *Bad* dream? No, I don’t think I’d call it *bad*, exactly. Pretty tense, though.” The mixed smells of the grass and the Adversary’s stench were still in his nose. He patted her shoulder. “You just go back to sleep. Everything’s fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” he said, allowing himself a bit of a smile, “I’m pretty sure.”

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