

“New Season Shakedown”

A Blood Bowl short story by James Fultrum

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Hans felt relief, after escaping what may have been certain death back in the city and now sat in a roadside tavern.

A dreary run-down sort of place, the kind often found in between places people actually wanted to be. The stable lad had looked dubious when Hans had passed him the reins of the knackered looking horse, which he had hastily squandered half his purse on before fleeing. But the fire inside had been welcoming, even if the landlord had been rather sullen.

Now, ensconced in a quiet corner, Hans stared morosely into the mug of tepid ale he had ordered whilst debating whether to eat or get drunk.

The few mucks and pfennigs rattling around in his purse would not allow both, unless he was to sleep outside for the night, a prospect he didn't particularly relish.

Never having been much of a drinker, he resolved to get some practice in before moving on again in the morning. Hans rubbed the stump where the last two fingers of his left hand had once been, the result of a particularly fierce scrimmage against an orc team back in his playing days, as he took in the nearly empty room.

The door opened as a few country looking lads strolled in. By their dress and the way, they greeted the farmers at the bar it seemed obvious that they were local farm hands. Hans looked up to see one had detached himself from the group and was stood next to Hans' table staring at him intently.

“Ere, don't I know you from somewhere?” the lad enquired.

“Ahem, I er wouldn't think so,” Hans responded, “not that I recall in any case.”

He then made the mistake of running his left hand through his blonde and slightly greying hair.

The lad's eyes widened when he noticed the missing fingers,

“But ain't you that Hans Frisk, the famous blitzer for the Freiburg Falcons as was?”

Damn, thought Hans, so much for remaining incognito. “I think you might...”

“I'm sure of it! My daddy, Sigmar rest is soul, used to take me to games after delivering grain to the markets when I were a nipper.

Never forget that time you tackled that Boganhafen Ballers catcher into the crowd, whilst he was in mid-air, and broke his neck.

The crowd were mightily disappointed to find they were kicking a corpse I can tell you! Let me get you a drink, what're you having?”

Things were beginning to look up. The lad soon returned with his friends in tow, presenting a large flagon of yellow liquid which smelled faintly of pears.

An evening of drinking whilst Hans told stories of his playing career followed, which was thoroughly enjoyable right up until Hans passed out on the table blissfully numb from his woes.

Pain, an all-encompassing throbbing pain, was all Hans could feel.

It started behind the eyes, which he dare not open, and passed outwards through the rest of him. Celestial heavens, he hadn't had a hangover this bad in a long time, the reason behind his usual abstinence from drink. Strangely both his hands and feet were numb and he couldn't seem to move them either, almost as if he was tied into the chair in which his he was slumped....

“What,the....?”

“Ahh, Meister Frisk you are awake at last,” said a voice Hans had hoped never to hear again. “You wery nearly gave us ze slip yesterday, but you cannot escape your gambling dues quite so easily. Especially not when it is to Ludwig Von Stinshaff to whom you owe zem, eh?”

“Hnah, hnah, hnah”

“Hur, Hur, Hur”

Hans opened his eyes and took in the, blissfully, dimly lit room in which he was tied up.

A table was a few feet in front of him, behind which sat the bookmaker cum gangster Ludwig.

Either side of him were two of his henchmen, a slimy black-haired fellow named Leech and his side kick Bargut, a hulking ogre of few words.

It was from these two lowlifes that the sycophantic laughter had originated.

"I swear I was just going to get you the mon..." Hans began.

"Do not lie to me, Frisk. It vont do you any good."

Von Stinshaff tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the table, Hans swallowed nervously realising his luck had completely deserted him.

"I am at a loss, you see, Meister Frisk. Normally I would invite ze boys here, as you know, to remove a few digits from your hand as a first varning."

Leech and Bargut looked up hopefully.

"But zat wouldn't be an entirely new experience for you, nor do you deserve a varning! This whole situation is incredibly wexing to us... vot to do..."

"Please, Ludwig, I'm sorry. I'm just a simple ball player. I..." Hans pleaded.

"Ah don't worry my boy. As it happens, I have a plan in mind for you. I am finding ze constant need to bribe players and referees, is becoming altogether too onerous. So, it occurred to me, wouldn't it be easier if I owned a team? Zat way I could influence ze games much easier, as I will already own ze players and ze coach. So zat is exactly vot you will do for me, as the coach of my wery own team."

Hans had been thinking that matters could not get any worse, but it now seemed he was entirely wrong.

"I..."

"No need to thank me, I realise just how generous I am being by letting you have this opportunity. So, you will start recruitment tomorrow and your coaching assistants," Von Stinshaff indicated his now grinning henchmen, "will ensure everything runs smoothly"

Hans' levels of self-pity had reached new height, or more accurately lows, and he could see no way out of it.

THUD, THUD, THUD.

A greasy looking man was hammering a notice onto a post at one end of the market square, whilst a group of four older looking youths looked on. It showed a very roughly printed image of a Blood Bowl player with a brief script beneath.

WANTED

Blood Bowl Hopefuls

For the all new Alt Valley Patriots

Trials next week

Sign up this market day in the merchant's quarter with head coach Hans Frisk!!!

"Wow," said one of the four youths, a lanky fair-haired young man with a cheerful and enthusiastic disposition.

"Hans Frisk! I'm signing up for sure, what about you guys?"

"Sure thing Eppy! Always wanted to play on a team haven't we Fred?" Replied a rather solid looking red headed lad, who towered over the one called Eppy but not the almost identical looking member of the group who nodded in response to his question.

"Pah! Not me! They don't allow us halflings to play on human teams, and I don't fancy a treeman throwing me around like a bag of beans neither!" This from the shortest and most mischievous looking member of the group.

"Suit yourself Tad, but the rest of us are going," the one called Eppy retorted as the group walked off down the street.

Hans, recovered from his hangover, sat behind a table in the small stall area of the market where he and his minders had set up.

A small queue of hopeful players had formed outside, though the hulking form of Bartag had seemingly prompted a few to pick a different career.

One by one the odd assortment of people approached the desk, giving their names and explaining what experience they had or what position they thought they could play.

An exasperated Hans had diplomatically responded with placations such as;

"I'm not sure you're right for the team..." or,

"Good Blood Bowl players generally have two arms..." and,

"I SAID, YOU MIGHT HAVE MADE A GOOD PLAYER 40 YEARS AGO, you deaf old coot."

After refusing the first dozen or a rather exasperated and rancid smelling Leech leant forward and jabbed Hans in the ribs. Forcefully whispering in his ear,

"We don't need to win the Chaos Cup, you know..."

"Hur Hur Hur" Interjected Bartag.

"...just pick enough to make a team like the boss says"

Rolling his eyes, Hans stood and surveyed the remaining applicants with a sense of grim resignation. Only half listening to the latest applicant, a young blonde teenage lad, say, "My

name is Eponymous Steero, but my friends call me Eppy. I'm really good at throwing."

He wasn't at all sure he could make any of these people appear like they were an actual team and not some gangsters attempt at rigging games which, in fact was exactly what they would be.

Looking across the crowded market square, Hans could see a commotion around one of the food stalls.

“Oi! Stop, thief!” the proprietor of the stall shouted, as a halfling evaded his attempts to grab him and fled with a large ham tucked under one arm.

The halfling began to duck and weave through the crowd, dodging all attempts to catch him.

“Now that’s some skill there” Hans muttered to himself, as an idea began forming in his mind.

“Right, if you lot are serious about joining this team then catch me that halfling! The person who brings him here, with or without the ham, is guaranteed a professional contract!”

There was a pause as the applicants glanced at one another, followed by a sudden scramble to get after the fleeing halfling.

Several of the less nimble hopefuls tripped over one another and landed in an untidy heap on the floor, whilst a few of the more agile and younger ones hared off after the fleeing ham thief.

Hans had hoped to make an escape of his own during the kerfuffle, only to find both Leech and Bartag move to stand close on either side of him as the chase started. Strangely one of the younger aspirants didn’t run off immediately, instead calling to two of his friends “Fred, Gus, its Tad. You’ll never catch him like that!”

His cries went unnoticed, however, and so he jogged off after the chase but turned quickly into an alley seemingly heading in the wrong direction.

Meanwhile the two brothers, Fredrich and Gustav, split up, hoping to trap their fleeing friend in a pincer movement at a crossroads just outside the market.

Assuming, of course, that one of the two other wannabe players who, having been at the back of the queue, had a head start on the remaining chasers.

These two ran after Tad as fast as their legs would carry them, greatly out pacing the short-legged halfling and rapidly gaining on him.

They’d closed the gap as Tad burst out of the crowd, onto the main street out of town.

Both began reaching for his collar like runners stretching for the finishing line, as tad first jinked one way and then the other before darting between the legs of a large bullock pulling a cart towards the market square.

An easy manoeuvre for someone under four feet in height, though not for the rather surprised pursuers, who ran slap bang into the unfortunate animals’ flanks.

Having sprinted for their lives, both Fredrich and Gustav were approaching the main street from opposite directions at just the right moment.

As Tad attempted to dash between them, they leapt, arms outstretched, both certain of winning the contract Hans had offered to the victor.

Tad, however, wasn’t about to relinquish the prized gammon which he was currently working so hard to keep.

Slamming his heels into the ground, he simply spun on the spot and hared off back towards the marketplace at full speed.

All this happened in a flash, leaving the two brothers flying towards one another, horizontally, in mid-air.

A look of surprise on each other’s faces was the last they saw, before colliding with one another, crown to crown.

As the now panting Tad careered back through market stalls, his two friends lay prostrate upon the ground like the hands of a clock at half past twelve.

The remaining crowd around Hans’ stall stood open mouthed as the halfling sped back past them, with the ham tightly tucked under one arm like a ball.

Heading for the same alley way into which Eppy had disappeared a few moments earlier, Tad was nearly in the clear.

Not to be left out, the normally slow witted Bartag, decided to join in with the fun.

The ogre reached over into the neighbouring market stand, picking up a disgruntled goat which had been nibbling away at a pile of hay.

Sighting along one arm Bartag hurled the now extremely alarmed goat at the passing pork thief, attempting to bring him down.

Once again Tad sidestepped the threat and disappeared down the alley way out of sight.

The unfortunate goat, however, bowled over several people and a nick knacks stall before coming to rest against the town stocks, bleating frantically the whole time.

Checking that the pursuit had, at least temporarily, halted, Tad crouched down by the side of the ally and wiggled a plank in the fence at the rear of an apparently vacant building.

A small gap opened, just wide enough to admit Tads more than ample midriff and his honey roasted prize.

The space beyond was gloomy enough for him not to notice Eppy waiting for him in the shadows.

He carefully returned the loose plank to its setting as his human friend reached out and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Omph,” Eppy exhaled as Tads elbow reversed at speed into his stomach.

“Oh, it’s you. What do you wanna give me a fright like that for? Sigmars balls you made me jump out of my skin!”

"Listen Tad, the people chasing you didn't care that you'd stolen a ham! Didn't you notice two of them were Fred and Gus?"

"What? Oh, er, no not really. So why was everyone trying to tackle me like it was a game of Blood Bowl.... oh of course, it's because of those posters isn't it?"

"Yes!" replied Eppy, unable to keep the excitement from his voice. "Frisk said that whoever catches you gets a professional contract! And now I've caught you, you can help me win that contract and get on the team."

"Now, hold on a minute, I'm not going back out there. Not till the market has closed at any rate, don't want to risk getting caught by the town watch now do I. Been there before and no thank you very much!"

"Oh, come on Tad, please. You know how much I've always wanted to be a proper Bowler. And to train with Hans Frisk, that's just a dream come true. I'd do it for you."

Tad mused on this for a few moments, he knew Eppy was right and had helped him out of mischief plenty of times before.

Though his card was marked with the local sheriffs and he didn't fancy ending up in the stocks or worse.

Sensing his reluctance Eppy added,

"We can sneak in through the back of the stall, its right in front of this building. Then as soon as I've shown I've caught you; you can disappear back in here out of the way."

"Fine, but the ham stays here, out of sight!" Agreed Tad, "but if this takes a turn for the worse, I'm out of there and you won't see me for dust."

Things had begun to return to normal back in the market square and Hans was taking a few names of potential recruits, including the very groggy Fred and Gus and the two runners who had collided with the cart.

There were now some eight players on the list, mostly possible linemen but little in the way of positionals.

He wasn't quite sure how to fill the remaining places as the last few applicants in the queue were definitely past their prime.

Suddenly he could hear a commotion behind him.

The young lad he had ignored earlier was attempting to get past Leech and Bartag and speak to him.

Slightly annoyed Hans realised that the lad had the light fingered halfling by the collar, though the ham was nowhere to be seen.

"Hang on a minute you two," Hans barked. "let them through." Turning to Eppy, he said in a friendlier tone, "Congratulations! I see you succeeded where others could not. I guess I will have to find you a place on the team now."

Eppy grinned and released his grip on Tad only for Bartag to lift the halfling bodily from the ground before he could escape once more.

"Wot do ya want me to do wiv im, Meister Frisk?" Asked the ogre as Tads feet flailed in mid air.

Ignoring the ogres question Hans turned to the halfling and asked, "what is your name master halfling?"

"Tad," was the surly response.

"Tad? A tad what? Short?" interjected Leech, much to his own amusement.

Both Hans and Tad glared at the henchman, though with less effect on Tads part as he was shaken about by Bartags guffawing as he finally understood the joke.

"That was some of the finest dodging I've been fortunate enough to witness." Hans informed Tad.

"I've a mind to make a place on the team for you also.

Along with your friend here, you and Bartag can make up the remaining players I need to field an eligible team. How about it?"

Tad simply glared at Hans, who added "Of course, we can just hand you over to the watch, as I'm sure they would be interested in having a little chat with you"

Tad glared at his friend and then back at Hans before giving the briefest of nods. "Splendid, well that's that sorted then."

"Hang on a minute," Leech interjected leaning in close to Hans. "You can't field a halfling in a human league team, it's against the rules!"

"Ah, well that's where you're wrong my, er, Leech. The NAF have changed all the regulations this year. New season, new rules."
