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A Blood Bowl short story by Ian Hannam

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“Zara!”

The young woman’s fists balled. The worn leather grips of her rusty punch blades creaked and groaned. “It’s Karla!” she snapped, through gritted teeth.

Coach’s bulbous eyes shot out from under his thick brow, as if the meaty fist of an ogre had landed a blow to the back of his head, “Let’s get something straight, nobody gives a flying ‘fling what your name is. You won’t be alive long enough for the crowd to learn it, let alone chant it! Now go go go!”

She adjusted her ill-fitting helmet. Karla Von Kill’s shoulders rose as her stance lowered to a crouch. Her right boot raked at the dirt like the hoof of an enraged minotaur. With a roar of defiance, she leapt into action. Her armour clanked clumsily with every broad stride as she thundered towards the tackle bag and the lineman holding it.

Twenty yards. Now was the time to prove her worth.

Two years ago, Karla had taken an assistant job with the Hochstadt Hellfires: maintaining armour, polishing boots, and sharpening punch blades. On the rare occasions she was not at the stadium or training in solitude, she toiled away on the family pig farm where she was raised; all to scrape together the coin to buy her gear and try out for the team.

Ten yards. The roar of the assembled crowd of hopefuls and main team players bounced around inside her helmet. Cries of, “You don’t belong here,” and “Stick to swine herding,” were punctuated with the oinks and squeals of the

taunting onlookers, hoping to break her resolve. This destiny was hers though, none could deter her.

Five yards. Her gaze was fixed on her tackle bag, blocking out all else. She lurched down, coiled, as a viper preparing to strike. This would be the moment she showed she was more than a pig farmer; more than a boot polisher – a blood bowl player.

Just as Karla kicked off from the ground, Hemrich, the smug lineman holding up the tackle bag yanked it out of her path, cackling as he did. Unable to control her momentum and stop her dive, Von Kill struck the dry ground with excruciating force.

Karla’s head rang inside her battered helmet. She shook off the impact and fought her way up to her hands and knees. The studs of Hemrich’s boot scratched across her steel backplate as he applied downward pressure. The shrill squeal of metal on metal was punctuated by the laughter, cheers and jeers that erupted all around them.

“Face down in the dirt is where you belong, farm girl.” The lineman spat, “You’re never going to make it with the Hellfires, why don’t you try the Grasshuggers, I hear they’re recruiting. They’d put those pigs of yours to use too; as a halftime snack.”

Hemrich’s smug, superior tone triggered something primal in the dust-clad Von Kill. It was the same voice she heard every harvest. The voice of the elector-count’s enforcers squeezing her family for every penny of tithe and threatening eviction if they didn’t yield their finest sows for their liege’s table.

On the farm, she was forced to swallow her anger, grind her teeth and respect the hierarchy. The blood bowl pitch however, had no care for such trivialities. Titles, land and wealth meant nothing to the roaring crowds. On Nuffle’s hallowed turf, grit, skill and blood were the only currency, and here, Karla was as rich as they came.

The time had come to collect *her* dues.

Karla's biceps tensed below her tattered shoulder guards. With a jolt of lightning, she surged to her feet, sending the boot and its owner stumbling. Throwing her punch blades to the dirt, Von Kill lunged towards the staggering Hemrich with frightening ferocity, grabbing the laces of his chest armour with a raw fist.

"You start next week...Karla."

"Calm down now farm girl, It was just a bit of..." Before Hemrich could get the words out, Karla thrust her helmet squarely into his pompous face with the savagery of a blitzing beastman. The crack of his nose breaking was audible; a shower of blood and teeth rained down upon her once green armour. The formerly animated onlookers were stunned to silence.

As Karla raised her free hand, readying herself to pummel the life out of Hemrich, a flurry of shrill whistle blows pierced to air.

"Stop, stop, that's enough!" Bellowed Coach, breaking into a jog.

Releasing her iron grip, Karla allowed Hemrich to slump to the floor. She watched as he writhed in pain, pawing at his bruised and bloodied face.

"You were right about one thing Hemrich," she spat, "I am a farm girl." She tugged at her chin strap, tossing her helmet to ground beside him. "And I've spent a lifetime mucking out pig turds like you."

Out of breath, Coach surveyed the scene, wide eyed in disbelief, "Apothecary!" He belted out.

A pair of puffing halflings bungled the groaning Hemrich onto a stretcher before awkwardly hauling him away to the dugouts.

Breathing heavily, Karla turned to face Coach, her body still pumping with adrenaline.

"That 'pig turd' was one of our most promising new players. Doubt we'll get a season out of him in that state," Coach bristled.

Von Kill's steely eyes met with the intense stare of the grizzled, retiree.