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“A thoroughly satisfying
yarn that should keep readers
waiting impatiently for
further installments.”

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THE GIRL OF
HRUSCH
AVENUE

A POWDER MAGE SHORT STORY

The Girl of Hrusch Avenue

Brian McClellan

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Vlora planned on stealing a gun.

The one thing that made Vlora truly happy was to sit atop the flat roofs of the gunsmithies in Adopest and watch them test-fire their rifles and muskets in the alleyway behind Hrusch Avenue.

The black powder smoke would rise up between the buildings and drift over her vantage point, the sulfuric scent filling her nostrils and instilling a sense of focus and energy. There was nothing quite like it. She'd once tried to explain to Amory, the headmistress of her boarding school, but Amory had dismissed it as a childish fantasy.

And though she was only ten years old, Vlora wanted a one of those guns.

Amory would never let her have one, of course. She never let Vlora have anything.

Vlora knew it was wrong to steal, but she *needed* a gun. She needed to fire it, and feel the stock kick against her shoulder and the black powder filling her lungs. She craved the music of the gunpowder blast in her ear.

The gunsmiths would sometimes leave a musket unattended for a few moments while they went into their shop to fetch more powder or bullets. Vlora knew that stealing one just meant waiting for the right moment. She could dash into the alley, snatch a weapon, and then be out and running down the street before anyone could catch her.

A musket or rifle was too big, too unwieldy. She wouldn't be able to hide it beneath her skirts and surely someone in the street would stop her—maybe even one of the Bulldog Twins. And Vlora didn't have anywhere at the boarding school big

enough to hide a musket. If Amory found it, there would be pit to pay.

Vlora would have to steal a pistol.

She slipped from her hiding place, heading across the flat roof above the smithies, and climbed down the old copper drain pipe into the alley below. She headed out into the main thoroughfare and along the raised stone walk that fronted the shops of Hrusch Avenue.

The street was packed, the ring of horseshoes on the cobbles clattering over the cacophony of the crowd. Gunsmith apprentices sat on the front steps of their shops, showing off their master's wares: engraved hunting rifles or dueling pistols for the nobility, plain oak-stock muskets for the soldiers, blunderbusses for the country farmers.

Vlora let her eyes wander over the weapons. Displayed along the raised walks of Hrusch Avenue were dozens of models, just waiting to be snatched. There were too many people out here, though. Someone would call the alarm and she wouldn't have time to lose herself in the throng before she...

Her eyes stopped at the mouth of the narrow alleyway that led behind the Hrusch Avenue shops. A pair of sandy-haired boys sat on empty powder barrels beside the alley. They were each about fourteen, with round, nearly identical faces and upturned noses, their eyes pinched with affected disdain as they watched the passing traffic.

The Bulldog Twins.

Hrusch Avenue belonged to the Bulldog Twins. At least, that's what they wanted all the orphans and urchins to think. No one begged or stole on Hrusch Avenue without permission of the Bulldog twins and if they caught you alone, they'd beat you to a pulp.

Vlora had heard some children at the school whispering that the Bulldog Twins had once killed an orphan and tossed the body down a sewer drain.

She stopped and pretended to examine a pistol behind the

glass of one of the shop windows, her hands behind her back, and hoped that they hadn't noticed her.

"Oi!" she heard a familiar voice yell. "It's Little Highness!"

One of the twins, who called himself "Trigger" and was discernable by the scar above his eye, dropped from his seat and headed toward Vlor, his brother "Bullet" at his heels.

Vlor felt her heart begin to race. With so many people in the street someone would surely help her if she cried out...

Amory always said that depending on the help of others was foolish.

Vlor decided that maybe, just this once, Amory was right. She broke into a run, cutting straight across the street. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Trigger take off after her.

She cut in front of a carriage and then under a barrel being carried between two men. When she reached the opposite side of the street, she sprinted down the raised walk in full view of the Bulldog Twins, then jumped back into the road. Tucking herself between a pair of carts laden with musket boxes marked for the Adran army, she waited.

It didn't take long before the Bulldog Twins sprinted past her hiding spot.

She waited just a few seconds and then emerged, heading the other way down the street at a run. They would realize they had been duped sooner or later and come back this way.

Vlor dashed in front of a horse strutting down the center of the street at a cantor. She hoped to put it between herself and the Bulldog Twins—it was one more thing to keep them from seeing her.

Startled, the horse jerked its head away from her and then reared, whinnying loudly. Vlor reeled in terror as hooves pounded the cobbles and the rider fought to keep his mount under control.

"Piss and damnation!" The man cursed and jerked savagely at the reins, leading the horse to one side. "Blasted gutter rats." He leaned forward in the saddle and Vlor only had a moment to

throw her arm up before his riding crop came down.

The thin end of the crop sliced the length of her arm and she let out a scream. The man lifted his arm to strike again but his horse bucked, forcing him to hold on with two hands to keep from being thrown.

Vlora leapt to her feet and bolted into the crowd, tears streaming down her face. Her arm was soon covered in crimson and stung from her palm to elbow.

She paused at the end of the street and looked back, drying her tears for long enough to seek out the man who'd struck her. He was still in the middle of the thoroughfare, cursing loudly as he tried to get his horse under control. He wore a fine riding jacket and he had a flat, broad face covered in pock-marks. She took a moment to memorize that face.

Vlora left Hrusch Avenue and the scent of black powder and smoky smithies behind, crossing the bridge over the Addown River and into the Old City, where tall houses crowded together on narrow city streets, their brick facades in disrepair. It was in one of these houses that Vlora lived with a dozen other girls and the headmistress, Amory.

Amory was furious when she saw the blood on Vlora's uniform. She cleaned and stitched the wound, then beat Vlora with a stick she kept above the fireplace and sent her to bed without dinner.

Vlora fell asleep thinking of the pistol she wanted to steal and that maybe she should use it on Amory—though she knew she never would.

Vlora awoke the next morning to the sound of her stomach growling, and she waited in bed for the church bell to strike seven. She knew if she bothered Amory too early she would end up with another beating.

Vlora had just gotten herself dressed when she heard an insistent knock on the front door of the school.

She cracked the dormitory door, careful not to wake any of the other girls in the room.

“Come in, sir,” Amory said in response to a man’s warm baritone voice.

Who would come to call at this early hour? The school doors were rarely opened before eleven. Vlora crept down the hallway, careful to avoid the creaky floorboards, until she could look from the landing down into the sitting room of the main floor.

Amory sat with her back to Vlora. Across from her was an older gentleman with dark hair, hawkish features and cold, dark eyes. He wore a black long-tailed jacket and pants, immaculately pressed, and a white undershirt with a folded collar. He held a top hat in one hand and a cane across his lap.

A suitor, perhaps? Amory used to receive men almost weekly. These days she only received one or two a month and she always said that her responsibility to the girls was going to keep her from getting married.

Vlora missed the man’s introduction, but she heard what he said next:

“I’m here to ask about a girl.”

“A girl?” Amory echoed with some confusion.

“Yes. She’s about this tall,” he held his hand up, “ten years old, with dark hair. A friend of mine informed me that she is under your care.”

Vlora felt her heart skip. None of the other girls her age had dark hair. He could only be describing her.

“You couldn’t possibly mean Vlora?”

“That was her name, yes.”

Vlora tried to recall giving her name to any strangers and remembered that there had been a man with dark skin and a reassuring smile that had spoken to her in the street outside the school. He’d asked for her name, and where she lived. That had been months ago, though. Were he and this cold-eyed gentleman connected?

Amory waved her hand as if Vlora were nothing of conse-

quence. “She is my ward, sir. A ward of the state, really. Her father was a na-baron from the north of Adro. Her mother died in childbirth and her father died earlier this year—a pauper. None of her family wanted her, and the crown was loathe to send a child with noble blood to the orphanage. I am granted a small monthly pension in order to see to her education and upbringing.”

Vlora knew that Amory had a self-pitying smile on her face. She always did when she spoke of Vlora.

“She has no one to take her in?” the cold-eyed gentleman asked. “No one at all?”

“None,” Amory said. “I suppose she has me, but she’s an ungrateful child and so...”

“I’d like to buy her.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I can tell that you love the girl dearly, but I’m certain that for the right price you’d be willing to part with her.” The man pulled a cheque book from his breast pocket and flipped it open.

Vlora tip-toed back to her room. She’d heard enough. The man meant to buy her, and she knew what that meant. The abbess at the Kresim abbey where her mother was buried had told her to avoid old men and their perversions.

She gathered her few toys—a wooden horse, a picture book that had belonged to her grandmother, and a ball made of Fatrastan rubber—and folded them into the sheets of her bed with several sets of clothes. It took a few moments to open her bedroom window without making any noise. All the while the drone of the adults’ voices were coming through the wall.

One of the other girls lifted her head from her pillow and asked where Vlora was going. Vlora told her to hush.

She slipped out the dormitory window, sack over her shoulder, and climbed down into the street.

Vlora's mother was buried in the cemetery of Talien Square, an abbey in the district across the river, just north of Hrusch Avenue. It was not the first time Vlora had run away from the school since her father died. The priestesses at the abbey there were always very kind, giving her a cot to sleep on and warm bread in the mornings. When Vlora explained the conversation between Amory and the cold-eyed gentleman to the abbess, she was told she could stay for as long as she needed.

The abbess had never much liked Amory.

Vlora began spending her mornings with the abbess, studying the Kresim gospels, and her afternoons on the rooftop of the smithies in Hrusch Avenue, watching the gunsmiths test-fire their muskets.

Less than a week after she'd run away from Amory, she was in her usual spot, keeping an eye out for the opportunity to steal a pistol, when she spotted the Bulldog Twins skulking their way down Hrusch Avenue.

She saw their target immediately. The boy looked to be ten or eleven. He had black hair and a somber face, and he was walking alone down the raised walks in front of the smithies with a pair of books under one arm. He wore the uniform of a schoolboy with short pants cut off at the knees and long socks that almost made up the difference.

He seemed familiar, and Vlora thought she might have seen him once or twice before on Hrusch Avenue.

She shouted a warning, but it was lost in the noise of the city and the boy seemed deep in thought.

The Bulldog Twins closed in on him from behind. Each outweighed the boy by at least two stone, practically towering over him. Trigger came in from the right, smacking the books out of the boy's hands, and then slapping him across the face. Laughing, Bullet took the books and tossed them into the street.

The boy whirled, a look of horror on his face.

Vlora knew that look, having seen it on so many one-sided fights. She anticipated what would come next: his face would

scrunch up and he'd begin to cry, and the Twins would push him down into the mud and kick him until they grew bored of it.

But the boy cocked back one fist and punched Trigger in the nose.

Trigger reeled back in surprise, clutching his face. The boy stood his ground, hands held at his side, his teeth set in anger. Bullet leapt at him, grabbing him by the waist and throwing him to the ground. The boy kicked and punched, but he was outmatched.

Vlora couldn't believe it. Someone was standing up to the Bulldog Twins. Not an adult, either, but someone her own age! She shimmied down her drainpipe and took to the street, only stopping long enough to snatch up a splintered musket stock from where it had been discarded in the mud.

Trigger watched while his brother wrestled the smaller boy, egging them both on. He turned toward Vlora just in time to take the old musket stock in the middle of the eyes. He crumpled in a heap on the porch.

Vlora planted one foot into Bullet's ribs. It took two more kicks to get the other twin off the boy. Vlora grabbed the boy by the hand and helped him to his feet.

"My books!" The boy pulled away from her and ran into the street, dodging traffic, to get his books from the mud. He returned just as Bullet was picking himself up off the ground.

"Come on," Vlora said.

They left Hrusch Avenue and lost themselves in a myriad of side streets in High Talien before Vlora felt safe.

"Why'd they attack me?" the boy asked as they stood gasping in front of a baker's shop.

Vlora wiped some dirt off the hem of her skirt. "Because you're smaller. Don't you know about the Bulldog Twins?"

The boy shook his head.

"What's your name?" Vlora asked.

"Taniel."

“I’m Vloro.”

He was a little taller than Vloro, with a thin face and hair cut short in the fashion of a soldier. She saw that his knuckles were scuffed, and he had a black eye that had been there long before the Bulldog Twins got to him.

This wasn’t his first scrap.

The boy wiped his bloody nose, and Vloro immediately noticed that the moment of excitement had seemed to pass for him. His eyes were calm, and his breathing, while heavy, was measured. He glanced back the way they’d come as if he contemplated going back for another fight.

“The Bulldog twins are in charge of Hrusch Avenue,” Vloro explained. “They pick on anyone smaller than them. Except for the gunsmith apprentices. They know better than to do that.”

Taniel snorted. “No one’s in charge of Hrusch Avenue,” he said. “Not even the army. That’s what my dad says.”

“Well your dad is probably much bigger than the Bulldog twins.”

“He’d whip them even if they were adults.” Taniel lifted his chin. “My dad wins all his fights.”

Vloro smirked. She’d heard that claim before.

Taniel kept his chin lifted, his eyes daring her to question his word. He held her gaze a moment, then looked down at his books. They were covered in mud, and the cover of one was torn. He leafed through them sadly, and Vloro caught sight of practiced arithmetic and charcoal drawings of trees and animals.

“Sorry they got your books,” Vloro said.

“It’s not the first time someone’s thrown them in the mud,” Taniel sounded glum. “I’ll have to clean them up before lessons tomorrow.” He suddenly perked up. “My dad gave me money for dinner. He’s—” Taniel paused briefly to roll his eyes, “having a conference with my latest governess. Do you want to share a sweet roll with me?”

“Sure,” Vloro said.

Taniel came around again three days later, accompanied by another boy. The other boy had long, reddish-brown hair and was a little taller and broader of shoulder than Taniel. Vlora saw them coming from her hiding spot above Hrusch Avenue and went down to meet them.

“This is my brother, Borbador,” Taniel introduced the other boy. “You can call him Bo. He’s a good fighter. He’ll help us if the Bulldog Twins come around.”

Bo extended a hand, and Vlora shook it. It seemed like a very grown-up thing to do.

“I haven’t seen them for a couple days,” Vlora said. “I think they’re scared after the licks they got.”

Taniel’s somber face suddenly lit with a grin. “My dad taught my how to fight. He says never to start a fight if you know you can’t win.”

“But you do anyways,” Bo said.

Taniel sniffed and shot Bo a look. “Bo’s not really my brother. He’s my best friend, but he does live with us. Bo was from the orphanage. He’s a street kid, like you, even though he doesn’t live on the street any more.”

“Oh,” Vlora said, feeling her cheeks turn red. “I’m not a street girl.”

“You’re not?”

“My parents were...” she stopped, remembering how the other children always called her “Little Highness” when she told them her parents had been nobles. “My parents are dead. I live at a school for girls, but I ran away.”

Taniel nodded seriously. “Governesses and teachers are all the same,” he said. “I don’t like governesses. We have a new one every couple of weeks.” He shared an unreadable glance with Bo. “Why did you run away?”

Vlora was about to explain when she spotted someone over Taniel’s shoulder. “Quick,” she said, “over here.”

They ducked into the nearest alley and Taniel peered out into the street curiously. “Is it the Bulldog Twins?”

“No,” Vlora said, “It’s a noble.” She held out her arm for Taniel to see the long gash running the length of it. It still throbbed whenever she moved her arm and it was only now starting to heal. “He did this to me when I scared his horse.” The very thought of it made her angry.

“Which one?” Bo asked.

Vlora pointed to a man on horseback in the middle of the thoroughfare. She wouldn’t forget his pockmarked face.

He was riding a different horse from last time and he wore a white uniform jacket with gold epaulettes. A sword hung at his side. His shoulders were wide, and his blonde hair was tucked back beneath a white and gold bicorn.

“That’s Baron Fendamere,” Taniel said.

“You know him?”

“I’ve seen him before. My dad knows him.”

“Is your dad a noble?” Vlora looked Taniel up and down. He didn’t seem like a nobles’ son. Nobles’ sons didn’t wander around the city by themselves.

“No, he’s a powder mage. He doesn’t like nobles.”

Vlora didn’t know what a powder mage was. Before she could ask, Taniel went on.

“Dad says there’s nobody crueller in the Adran nobility than Baron Fendamere. See that sword at his hip? Dad says he’s a hab... hab...”

“Habitual,” Bo prompted.

“Habitual duelist. He’ll fight anyone he can. Dad says that on campaign in Gurla, the baron would kill women and children for sport.”

Vlora spotted a steaming pile of horse dung on the cobbles nearby.

“Want to throw shit at him?”

The boys agreed, and they each gathered up a handful of manure and slowly stalked Fendamere down the street as he rode along at a slow canter.

Vlora ducked behind a pair of barrels and turned to her

accomplices. “Ready?” she asked.

The two boys nodded, and they stepped out from behind their cover and each of them aimed and threw. Bo’s shot missed, while Taniel’s slapped into the baron’s white uniform jacket and Vlora’s smacked wetly against the back of the baron’s neck.

The baron whirled, a roar on his lips, but Taniel was already sprinting down the street. Vlora followed hard on his heels, Bo taking up the rear.

“Can you climb?” Vlora asked between breaths. Not waiting for an answer, she swerved down an alley. “This way!”

She shimmied up her drain pipe to the roof above Hrusch Avenue. Taniel and Bo followed her up.

They lay low for some time, watching the baron rage in the street below, kicking over powder barrels and display stands, cursing those damned gutter rats. He looked everywhere for them, enlisting the help of several shop apprentices, before finally giving up and heading off.

Bo slipped away not long after, saying something about an older girl he meant to see.

When Bo had gone, Vlora led Taniel to her spot above the alley where the gunsmiths test-fired their muskets. The alley was empty, but the residual smell of gunpowder made Vlora feel happy.

They threw pieces of broken clay shingles off the rooftop, listening to them clatter in the alley below.

Vlora remembered what Taniel had said earlier about his father. “What’s a powder mage?” she asked.

“You don’t know?” Taniel pulled his arm back and threw a piece of shingle across the alley, where it hit the slanting roof of the opposite building and rolled back down, catching in a gutter.

“Of course I do,” she said. “I was only joking.”

“Oh.”

She waited a few moments, then felt guilty for the lie. “I don’t, really. I just didn’t want you to think I was stupid.”

“Well,” Taniel said, “Everyone *should* know what a powder mage is.”

Vlora looked down at her hands. He did think she was stupid, didn't he?

“I mean, so I'll tell you,” Taniel went on. “A powder mage is a man who can manipulate gunpowder with the force of his mind,” Taniel said. “He can breathe it and taste it and it makes him stronger and faster than regular men. A powder mage can shoot bullets over great distances, miles even!” Taniel leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially. “Powder mages can even kill Privileged sorcerers.”

Vlora had been enjoying his story until then. She turned away and folded her arms.

“What?” Taniel asked.

“You *do* think I'm stupid.”

“I don't.”

“You do. Nobody can kill Privileged sorcerers.”

“Powder mages can. They have.”

“It's not true.”

“They can! I swear it.”

“How do you know?”

“Because my father is one, and he has killed Privileged before. And someday, I'm going to be a powder mage.”

Vlora still didn't believe it. Privileged sorcerers were the most powerful people in the Nine. They could level cities with the flick of their fingers. Who could possibly kill one of them? She tried to imagine what it would be like to kill someone as powerful as a Privileged when a sudden thought sparked in her mind like flint striking steel.

She leaned close to Taniel. “Can a woman be a powder mage?” she asked in a whisper.

“Sure. My mom was a powder mage, too. When she was... alive.”

Vlora tried to contain her excitement. She shifted closer to the edge of the roof so that her feet dangled over. “I'm going to

be a powder mage.”

“You can’t,” Taniel said.

“Why not? I thought you said women could be powder mages.”

“Some women can. Only people with the talent can be a powder mage. Dad says it’s very rare.”

Vlora sniffed. “I want to be a powder mage.”

“Sorry.”

They sat in silence for some time before Taniel got to his feet. “I should get home. I’ve got school in the morning.”

“Thanks for throwing shit at the baron with me,” Vlora said.

Taniel smiled at her. “Let’s do it again soon.”

Amory caught up to Vlora the next week.

Vlora was in Bakerstown. She’d found a twenty krana coin in the street and planned on buying a hot pie to share with Taniel and Bo. The coin clutched in one hand, she had her face pressed up against a baker’s front window, peering in at all the delicacies.

Someone grabbed her by the ear and jerked her backwards. Vlora felt a thrill of fear run through her. Had the Bulldog Twins caught up to her? Or maybe the cruel baron?

She was whirled around only to find herself eye to eye with the headmistress.

Her light brown hair, normally straightened and tied back with a ribbon, was loose and blowing in the breeze. Her eyes were narrowed at Vlora, and the corners of her mouth turned down sharply, her cheeks red.

“You stupid girl,” Amory snapped at her.

Vlora had never seen her so angry.

Amory still had her by the ear. She shook her, hard.

“That hurts,” Vlora said.

“Too bad,” Amory said. “It’s not the worst of it. You’re going to get the stick every night this week. You remember the last

time you ran away? I told you I'd lock you in the cellar for a month, and I meant it."

Vlora tried to pull away, but Amory had a strong grip on her ear. "You're not going to lock me up. You're going to sell me."

"Sell you?" Amory said. "Wait, what's this?" She grabbed Vlora's hand and pried it open to reveal the twenty krana coin within.

"That's mine!"

"Not anymore," Amory said, tucking it in her pocket. "You probably stole it, you little brat. It's mine, now, for all the trouble you caused me. Now come along without a fuss."

"No."

"No? Don't make me beat you in the street! And don't even try to run," she said when Vlora tried to jerk away. "I know you've been sleeping at the Talien Square Abbey. You've got nowhere left to hide."

"You're going to sell me to an old man!"

"I'm not going to sell you." Amory looked toward the sky, as if beseeching Kresimir, then fixed her gaze over Vlora's shoulder.

She did that whenever she was lying.

Amory began to pull Vlora down the street. Vlora let herself sag, falling to the ground as a dead weight.

"I'll drag you the whole way home," Amory warned, and began to do just that.

Vlora jumped up suddenly and kicked Amory in the shin as hard as she could.

Amory squealed and let go of Vlora, clutching at her leg. "Brat! That's two months in the cellar!"

Vlora was already running. She had outrun the Bulldog Twins many times. She knew she could outrun Amory.

It wasn't until she was half way to the Talien Square Abbey that she remembered what Amory had said. The headmistress knew where Vlora had been sleeping. It would be the first place she'd look, and though the abbess didn't like Amory she would have no choice but to hand Vlora over to her.

Vlora had no place to go, and Amory had taken her money.

For the next four days, Vlora slept on the roof tops above Hrusch Avenue.

The days were pleasant but the nights were cold and Vlora knew that winter would come in just a few months. She would freeze to death without a place to go.

She loathed the idea of returning to Amory. She would rather die in the snow and ice.

She was hungry every day without the bread that she used to get from the abbey. She knew what it was like to go a day without food—Amory made her do it all the time—but her stomach tied in knots the second day, and the third day she was shaking and weak.

At the end of the third day an apple cart overturned on Hrusch Avenue, and Vlora was able to get there before the Bulldog Twins, snatch up several big, red apples and carry them in her skirts back to her hiding spot.

It was on the fifth day that she spotted Taniel in the street. He was strolling along, wearing his school uniform, and looking inside barrels and under carts as if he were trying to find something.

Vlora scanned the streets for the Bulldog Twins, but there was no sign of them. Just as she was about to call out to Taniel, someone else caught her eye, causing her to duck down.

It was the cold-eyed gentleman. The one who wanted to purchase her from Amory.

He stood beside the door of a gunsmith's shop, speaking quietly with the gunsmith. His hands were clasped, back straight, and unlike that day two weeks before he was now wearing a sharp, dark blue uniform with silver trim—the uniform of an Adran army officer—and he had a small sword at his side and a pistol tucked into his belt.

Vlora poked her head out of her hiding spot. Taniel was fur-

ther down the street, and the gentleman's back was to her.... She waited a moment, and the gentleman suddenly nodded to the gunsmith and then began to head down the street, away from Vlora.

She waited until he'd entered shop further down the avenue before calling to Taniel.

Taniel looked around in confusion, then up to her. He waved.

Vlora shimmied down her drain pipe and stopped in the alley, suddenly conscious of her dirty state. Her uniform was torn and muddy, her face unwashed for these four days, and her hands shook a little from hunger.

She couldn't let Taniel see her like this! She'd told him that she wasn't a street girl....

It was too late. Taniel came into the alley and he grinned at her. "Hi Vlora."

"Hi." She found the grin funny on his normally serious face, and she realized that dirty clothes were something Taniel wouldn't care about. It made her happy. "Were you looking for someone?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah," Taniel said. "Bo is hiding somewhere. He said that if I find him before he's finished his fruit cake, he'll share it with me." Taniel seemed doubtful that he'd manage it. "He eats pretty fast, though."

"I could help," Vlora said.

"I'll give you some of the cake if you find him," Taniel said.

Vlora nodded, trying not to seem too eager.

They rushed into the street and began checking everywhere that a boy could conceal himself. Vlora knew all the best hiding spots—she'd used them to avoid the Bulldog Twins. She checked the old wine cask in the third alley, and under the wooden steps in front of Durn's Smithy. She even checked back up on the rooftops.

They both kept an eye out for the Bulldog Twins, and Vlora watched especially for the cold-eyed gentleman. She saw him

once, but he was leaving Hrusch Avenue on foot and so she didn't worry too much.

Taniel finally sat down on the raised walk, his chin resting on one palm. "Bugger," he said. "I can normally find him. He probably cheated." He nodded at Vlora, as if it was decided. "Bo likes to cheat. He says that people who play fair always lose."

Vlora nodded back, but she was feeling sick. All the running around had reminded her how hungry she really was, and the promise of fruit cake had made her hopeful.

Her chest suddenly heaved, and she found herself fighting off tears. She knew she had to go back to Amory.

She'd have to take her punishment, locked in a dark cellar for two whole months. Amory might even sell her to the cold-eyed gentleman.

But at least Amory would feed her.

"Are you all right?" Taniel asked.

Vlora rubbed her nose on the back of her sleeve. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." She wasn't going to show Taniel her weakness. No one liked a weak child.

"Are you hungry?" Taniel asked.

Vlora wanted to jump up and scream 'yes,' but she just shrugged her shoulders. "A little."

"There's a meat pie vendor around the corner," Taniel said.

"I could go get some money from my dad and then we could share one."

Vlora hugged herself, wondering if Taniel could see inside her head. How could he know she was so hungry? Was it that obvious?

They began to walk toward the end of Hrusch Avenue, but Taniel suddenly stopped, ducking to one side.

"The Bulldog Twins?" Vlora asked, joining him in a smithy doorway.

"No," Taniel said. "It's Baron Fendamere. See? That's his

coach.”

The one-horsed coach sat at the end of the avenue. It was black with gold trim, and had running boards along both sides and a driver cloaked in crimson sitting up on the coach box. Baron Fendamere’s pock-marked face stuck out of one window, and a gunsmith brought out a long brown package, tied with white string, and began to lash it to the roof of the coach.

“Do you want to get him?” Taniel asked.

“Maybe we should just go get a meat pie.” The cut down Vlora’s arm had finally healed, leaving just a wide, pink scar behind it. She *did* want to do something to the baron, but she wanted to eat more.

“Wait here,” Taniel said.

He returned a moment later with a long steel bar, like the kind Vlora had seen through the windows of the smithies that gunsmiths used to make musket barrels. Taniel could barely carry it, but he had a mischievous grin on his face.

“Watch this,” he said.

The baron’s coach was moving now, coming toward them down the cobbles. Taniel jumped into the street and, as the coach moved past, thrust the steel bar into the spokes of the back wheel.

The wheel suddenly stopped and several of the spokes snapped, the coach lurching forward and then coming to a skidding halt as the driver reined in the horse. The door to the coach burst open and Baron Fendamere appeared, his pock-marked face red with anger.

Taniel took off down the street.

Vlora was just three steps behind him when she felt someone grab her hair. Her legs came out from under her as she was roughly jerked backward.

She stared up into the baron’s eyes, seeing the promise of violence within them. She tried to pull away, but he had her firmly by the hair.

He stank of sweat and strong perfume.

“Got you,” the baron said.

He threw her to the ground and put his boot on the back of her neck. Vlorá’s face pressed against the hot cobbles, and she heard a whimper escape her mouth. Further down the street, Taniel had turned to look and now stood, mouth agape.

“You’re next, boy,” the baron yelled.

Taniel ran.

“Get another coach,” the baron said to his driver. “Hop to it, man. Commandeer one if you have to, I’m not standing in the streets with these mongrels any longer.”

Vlorá felt the boot press down hard against her neck, and then the weight was gone and the baron jerked her to her feet.

“Don’t think I don’t remember you, girl,” he said, tightening his grip on the arm that still bore the scar he’d given her. “You startled my horse and then threw shit at me, and now you’ve broken my carriage...”

Vlorá screamed and bit his wrist.

The baron let go just for long enough to crack her across the jaw with the back of his hand. “Scream all you want, girl. No one is going to help you.” He leaned in to her, close enough that she could feel his hot breath, reeking of wine, against her neck. “You’re going to be great sport for my dogs, girl. I’m going to take you out into the country tomorrow and watch as they tear you apart.”

A coach clattered down the street, the driver yelling for people to move out of his way, and pulled up beside the ruined coach. The driver leapt down and opened the door for the baron.

Baron Fendamere took Vlorá by the back of her neck and threw her violently into the cab. Vlorá immediately scrambled for the opposite door, fumbling for the latch, but the baron leapt in behind her and pushed her onto one of the benches.

“You’ve got spirit, girl. You’re going to give my dogs a chase.” He thumped his fist on the ceiling. “Maybe I’ll cut off one of your feet first, and watch you hop across the field as they come

after you.”

The baron looked out the window, his eyes far away and a smile on his lips.

“Damn it, man,” he said suddenly, thumping on the roof of the coach again. “Why aren’t we moving?”

The driver said, “There’s a boy in front of the horse, sir. He won’t move.”

“Run him down, then,” the baron bellowed.

A voice called out from the street, steady and cold above the racket of the city.

“If you run over my son you’ll be dead where you sit. Baron Fendamere, step out of the coach, if you please.”

The baron leaned forward and slapped Vlora, leaving her ears ringing. “Stay here,” he said, kicking open the door. He raised his voice to address the man outside. “Who the pit do you think you are?”

“You know me, baron.”

“Oh,” the baron said, stopping just outside the carriage. “You.”

There was a noise at the opposite door of the coach and it suddenly opened. Taniel and Bo stood there, eyes wide. Vlora could have sobbed with joy.

“Come on, Vlora,” Taniel said.

She ducked outside with them and crept away from the coach. When they’d gotten far enough, Vlora broke into a run, only to come up short at Taniel’s shout.

“Wait!”

She stopped and turned. Taniel and Bo had hidden themselves behind a stack of musket boxes just to one side of the coach. Reluctantly, Vlora joined them.

“Sorry I ran,” Taniel said. “But I went and got help.”

“Who?” Vlora asked.

Taniel pointed into the street. “My dad.”

Vlora’s heart almost stopped when she looked.

It was the cold-eyed gentleman in the army uniform. He

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