

**Five years ago, in simpler times...**  
A Thieves' Guild short story by CG Hatton

"Nice."

NG leaned on the balcony overlooking the Cage and tried hard not to smile.

"Who's fighting?" she asked.

"Hilyer and Sorensen," he said. "Two and three in the standings."

"Impressive."

Hil landed a punch that sent Sorensen reeling.

"Which one's which?"

"The big lad is Sorensen," NG said.

Hil spun and kicked, and Micah Sorensen hit the floor. Hil didn't relax, taking a step back, fighting stance, throwing half a glance and a grin at the other field-ops watching, cheering and jeering. There was money riding on the fight. Nothing the Chief would approve of.

"Who's top?"

NG looked at Devon and watched her reaction as he said, "Far corner, blond kid on crutches. LC Anderton."

She squinted, wondering what he'd done to hurt himself.

"Broke his leg two days ago," NG said.

"Out on assignment?"

"Out on a tab, yeah."

Devon was watching LC, thinking that he looked too young. He could hear her thinking that they all looked too young. NG included. She couldn't quite believe that she was here. On the Alsatia. The infamous, legendary, almost mythical Thieves' Guild.

Sorensen was back on his feet, bleeding from a cut above his eye. He wasn't beaten. Hil was favouring his left hand side. They went at it again to louder cheers from the watching crowd.

Devon was still watching LC.

"Your boys play hard," she said. "Who was it that broke into the Chamberlain facility last year?"

Trade secrets, but she had a right to know; as the new section chief of Legal, she was going to be negotiating their tabs.

"LC," he said.

"Pity he's out of action."

NG did smile then. "He won't be out for long. What do you have in mind?"

He knew fine well, could see it in her mind, the plotting and conniving. Now that she was here. It was a new game and she was enjoying playing it.

"I know someone," she said slowly, "who would pay a fortune to get their hands on an original Monet."

There were only three in existence – two at the Imperial Palace on Earth. The third was rumoured to be in a corporate vault.

It was a challenge. An outright dare. It wasn't exactly what the Thieves' Guild thrived on but then, she had a lot to learn.

She laughed. "Tell me more about Anderton."

NG smiled. "I sent the files on our key personnel to your office."

Devon shrugged. "I haven't had time to read them all."

She had but he humoured her anyway. "He's from Kheris. Never knew his father. Mother was killed in a bombing raid when he was five. Ultimately he fell in with the rebels because he had nowhere else to go and they used him to run recon because he was small and could get

away with it. He survived the worst years of the conflict, managed to stay invisible despite the amount of intel he was running. You ever hear about the Gemini incident?"

"On Kheris? Of course."

"That was LC."

She almost didn't believe him. The worst breach in Imperial security in the history of the colonies was down to a child?

"A thirteen year old kid?" she said.

"Twelve, thirteen. It's one of the reasons he got away with it for so long. No one even stopped to think it could be a kid until they caught him red handed. Mendhel was in the camp on a recon assignment for us. They were about to put a bullet in the back of LC's head when he heard what had happened. He stopped it and brought the kid in."

She wanted to know more, fascinated. LC had that effect on people.

"He doesn't look eighteen," she murmured.

NG leaned against the rail. He didn't look a hundred and twenty – looks could be deceptive.

"How did he get caught?"

He knew but he didn't say. "He doesn't talk about it."

"Who else knows his story?" she asked, looking round.

"The Chief, Mendhel. No one else."

Devon looked straight at him. "I did some work on Kheris." Her eyes glinted.

"I know."

She laughed. And she turned back to watch LC. "How did he break his leg?"

He'd already told her it was on a tab.

She read his expression. Perfectly. Impressive. "I thought he was supposed to be good," she said dryly.

"He is."

"If any of our people ever broke their leg on a job, we'd move in and finish them off."

She wasn't joking.

That wasn't the way the Thieves' Guild operated.

"LC had already acquired the item. From a high security enclave. Yarrimer." He let that sink in. "Tech stolen from one of our clients. He got it back. Wiped their systems and extricated successfully."

She was staring at LC. The kid was tired but hiding it. The other field-ops were laughing now. Hil had the upper hand and was toying with Sorensen.

Devon flicked her gaze back to the fight as Hil spun, flipped through the air and caught the bigger field-op with a neat kick, throwing himself into a backwards somersault. He was playing.

Sorensen ended up on his knees.

They were kids, Devon was thinking. When the Assassins played, they spilt blood and people died.

"What happened?" she said vaguely.

"The client paid ten million," NG said.

"What happened to Anderton?"

NG hesitated. That wasn't in the kid's file. LC had admitted to the Chief that he'd screwed up and taken too long to get clear. What he hadn't owned up to was going back. In the five years that the kid had been with them, it had become very clear, very fast, that he didn't take well to orders and rules.

"He broke his leg," NG said simply. "Made it back to the extraction point and came home."

Devon rolled her eyes. She was smart and she knew she wasn't going to get any more.

“What about Hilyer?” she said, watching with something bordering on admiration as Hil stripped off his shirt, fight over as far as he was concerned, throwing a wave to the onlookers. Money started to change hands. Sorensen had other ideas. The bigger field-op had a couple of years and a good few pounds on Hilyer and he wasn’t about to yield that easily. He pushed himself to his feet, wiping blood from his mouth, and the two started circling again, Hil laughing, taunting Sorensen and dodging a couple of lightning fast jabs. The kid got in one of his own and sent the big lad reeling again.

“He’s very good,” Devon murmured.

“He’s cocky.”

Sorensen made his move, Hil danced aside from the body blow easily, didn’t see the feint and dropped as Sorensen caught him with a cross punch to the jaw.

Devon laughed. “What’s his story?”

“Juvie record as long as your arm. Earthside. Street gangs on a string of orbitals and colonies. Used to escape from detention as fast as he used to run away from foster homes. Mendhel was watching him for a long time. He stepped in when Hil was fourteen and up on a manslaughter charge.”

That wasn’t in Hilyer’s file. It piqued her interest. She looked back at Hil with renewed interest. He was sitting, laughing as Sorensen claimed the win and leaned over to offer him a hand up.

“Manslaughter?”

“Street fight,” NG said. “Hil claims it was self-defence. The authorities thought otherwise. It cost us a small fortune to obtain him.”

Devon was dividing her attention, watching Hil but glancing at LC still.

“Has Anderton ever killed anyone?”

That would have impressed her. She wanted to know what she was dealing with.

“No. Not that we know. He refuses to carry a gun with anything but FTH and even then he doesn’t use it. He gets in and gets out. No contact. All of our field-ops are trained to do that. As a general rule, we don’t go out of our way to kill people.”

She smiled. She was thinking that would take some getting used to.

She looked at him suddenly. “How old are you, NG?”

He smiled back without a word.

“Not much older than me, I’d guess,” she said.

According to her file, she was thirty two.

She stared at him. “That’s young to be in charge of such a powerful organisation.” She turned back to the Cage. It was emptying. Showers then bar was the routine. And more often than not after a session like this, the fighting would carry on, with less discipline and more emotion once the drink started flowing and the grunts got involved.

Devon leaned back against the rail, arching her back.

It was getting late.

“Join me for a drink?” she said.

It was a dance they’d started when they’d first met.

He obliged with a nod. “Welcome on board.”

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