

Once A Thief

Cemen Colony

Alexandra A. Cheshire

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Once A Thief

Wind Valley, July-10

Of the four seated around the table in the large, elegantly decorated dining room, only the three men are actually eating. The woman is sipping her rapidly cooling tea without touching the contents of her plate. The only sounds are of cutlery on dishes. Or at least until one of the men speaks.

“Did she take anything?”

A second man glances up at the speaker, “Her blade.”

“She'll be okay then.” The first man nods to himself.

“You really think so?” The woman frowns, clearly concerned.

“She needs some time and space...” The second man takes a deep breath, “Honestly, so do I.”

“Meaning?” The woman continues to frown.

“Will and I leave for Belstrand tomorrow. We'll be back when we're ready.”

“You'll look for her then?” The first man guesses.

“Long as I'm still able to track her down.”

“And if you can't for some reason?” The woman demands.

The first man shakes his head, “She won't be hard to find when she's needed.”

* * *

Settlement City, November-61

The wind blows scraps of garbage along the alley. Several people huddle down in ragged blankets and other scrap cloth. All of them shiver except for one petite form.

The figure is female, seemingly in her teens, with long, matted, blonde hair and eyes like the cold wind. She is wearing a loose, ragged t-shirt and ancient dark jeans. Her arms, feet, and head are bare. She crouches down against a brick wall, not seeming to see anything around her.

A ragged small child comes running into the alley and launches herself at one of the shivering heaps of blankets. Fabric wrapped arms emerge to pull the child inside the blankets. Moments later, giggling can be heard. Most of the cold faces around them break into smiles. The petite female rises to her feet and walks away.

The silent petite figure pauses at the alley entrance. Pale, cold eyes take in the scene in front of her.

Two ragged women are doing their best to shelter a small girl from a heavy set man wielding a large handgun. Both women are pleading and crying. The child is cowering and whimpering.

Before the petite female can react, the gun goes off twice and the women fall. The child bolts, narrowly evading the man's reach, right into the petite female. The small girl stumbles as the man lunges towards them. Suddenly, something silvery flickers through the air and he falls.

The petite female approaches the prone form and kicks it over. Reaching down, she retrieves a knife and wipes the blade clean on his clothes. The knife vanishes as the petite female turns to leave the alley.

The small girl is shaking as she slowly gets up. She eyes the petite female warily. Then her eyes go to the fallen women. Before she can start towards them, the petite female catches her. The small girl kicks and struggles, but cannot break free. The petite female holds on until the small girl falls limp.

The garbage littered alley looks nearly identical to any other alley in the neighbourhood except for a single symbol roughly scratched into the wall beside the far door. As they approach, the petite female checks on the small girl in her arms. The child is still unconscious. At the end, the petite female shifts the child enough to allow her to raise one hand to knock. A cold wind whips along the alley, redistributing the garbage and causing the unconscious child to shiver.

Finally, the door opens just enough to reveal a poorly dressed, irritated looking woman, who eyes those outside warily, "Wha' d'you want?"

The petite woman shifts the child to one arm so she can pull up the left sleeve of her t-shirt to reveal a tattoo. The woman in the doorway studies it with a rising eyebrow.

"That doesn't entitle either of you to anythin'. Not here," She scowls, "Not when we can't even feed our own."

The petite female raises a sceptical eyebrow, allowing her sleeve to drop and shifting her hold on the child again.

"What?" The other woman's scowl deepens, "Times 're hard an' the Church spares no quarter for those beneath their notice."

Cold eyes study her critically, but the woman's expression only grows darker. Finally, the petite female shakes her head and turns away. As she walks the length of the alley, she can hear the door slam.

The small girl in her arms stirs as they leave the alley, but does not wake. The petite female keeps walking, her eyes glancing over the buildings around them. Eventually, one heavily boarded up old shop catches her eye. She glances over what can be seen of the front before circling around to see what there is for a back door. What she finds is a basement entrance with a heavy duty padlock on the door. The concrete steps going down to the door are crumbling and the landing at the bottom is layered with indistinguishable debris, some of which is sharp even to the petite female's hardened feet.

Setting the still sleeping child on a relatively clear step, the petite female fishes a piece of old wire from the mess and bends it into the shape she wants. She uses the makeshift tool to pick the padlock, which she sets aside. When she tries the door, it sticks in the frame, requiring a hard yank to open. Once it is open, she steps into the doorway to survey what can be seen of the dark space by the light from outside.

Old boxes and crates are stacked haphazardly and there is a strong smell of old alcohol mixed with dust. There are no visible windows and the whole space appears to be one open area, which is only a little warmer than outside.

The petite female scoops up the child and carries her inside. Setting the small girl by the wall, just inside the door, the petite female pulls the door tightly closed and locks it from inside using the deadbolt. Once her eyes adjust to the near complete blackness, she turns her attention to checking the contents of the crates and boxes, most of which turn out to be empty. The full ones are stacked into a

wall to prevent access to the inside stairs. The rest are moved against one end wall, leaving most of the floor open. Once that is done, the petite female pauses in the middle of the floor to survey the dark space.

A whimpering comes from beside the door and rapidly grows into a full blown cry. The petite female goes over to the small girl, crouching down beside her and reaching out to rest a hand on the matted hair.

“So dark.” The girl clings to the arm, tears pouring down her face.

The petite female purses her lips momentarily before standing and helping the child to her feet. She takes one small hand in hers before unbolting and opening the door. Outside, she replaces the padlock, ensuring it is securely in place.

“What is this place?” The girl looks up uncertainly.

The petite female does not respond. Nor does she loosen her grip on the child's hand as they mount the steps.

On the street, they walk in a seemingly random direction and are soon mingling, barely noticed, with the other pedestrians in a busier part of town. Eventually, their route takes them into an alley where both lean against a wall. The petite female empties her jeans pockets, coming up with three fat wallets. She quickly rifles through them, pocketing the cash and tossing away everything else. The small girl also empties her pockets, shrinking a little under cold eyes as she sifts through wrapped hard candies, pens and other small items of little value. The petite female slowly shakes her head as the child tucks her treasures back away.

The two link hands again before leaving the alley and walking to a junk shop near the abandoned building they had visited earlier. When they enter, the clerk eyes them warily. The petite female guides the small girl over to a chair near the till and sits her in it with a silent warning to not move. The child grips the edge of the chair, shivering under the wary eyes of the clerk, as she watches the petite female move around the shop.

She picks through a mountain of questionable looking bedding before finally selecting two sleeping bags and several of the best blankets. Those are brought over to the counter and piled beside the till. Next, she rifles through rack after rack of clothing, slowly gathering an armful of garments which are eventually piled with the bedding. Then she picks up a battery operated lantern and any useful batteries. Lastly, she moves to a bin of miscellaneous kitchen items and selects a few things. Once she brings those over to the till, she produces the wad of bills from her pocket. The clerk rings up the sale, names a total, and accepts the appropriate bills. The whole pile of items is packed into a box, which the petite female takes. She indicates for the child to accompany her in leaving the shop.

The two of them walk back to the abandoned building where the petite female picks the padlock and opens the door. Inside, they unpack the box. Once the lantern is working, the sleeping bags and blankets are turned into two fairly cosy beds in one corner. The clothes are sorted out into what will fit the child and what will fit the petite female. Then each picks an outfit to change into.

The small girl pulls on a long sleeved tunic over fleece pants. There are also boots and a lined felt coat with a hood. The petite female slips into a fitted black leather vest which zips up the front. That is paired with black jeans and slip on shoes. Elastics are used to pull back the matted hair of each into very rough ponytails. Each of them also transfers the contents of their pockets from their old clothes to the new ones.

Once they are changed, they leave again, this time headed for the closest grocery store. The small girl is set inside a shopping cart and watches with wide eyes as they pass through aisle after aisle of food and other items. The petite female is very selective of what she adds to the basket, mainly choosing fruits, vegetables, nuts and breads for food. Some cheap dishes are added, as is a large container of olive oil. A few personal items including hairbrushes finish off the shopping trip. When they reach the check out, the whole lot costs the petite woman nearly all the money she has left. This time everything is packed into bags, which get split between the petite female and the child for the

walk back to the basement they are slowly converting into a home.

Inside, the grocery bags are set inside the box which had been used to transport their purchases from the junk shop. Both eat a little bit. Then the petite female picks up the olive oil and a hairbrush.

She has the small girl remove her shirt and settle herself on the floor. The petite female pours a generous amount of the oil onto the girl's hair and works it in well before removing the packaging from the brush. As gently as she can, beginning with the ends, the petite female works the brush through the badly tangled hair. The small girl squirms a little, but remains sitting through the entire process. At the end, once her hair is as smooth as it will ever get, the petite female braids it, securing an elastic around the end of the braid.

The small girl is yawning widely, her eyes glazing over, by the time the petite female is finished. Once she is free to move, she goes over to curl up in one of the newly made beds and is quickly asleep.

Now the petite female works a generous amount of the oil into her own hair and begins the even longer task of detangling it. Eventually, she is able to braid it. As soon as the braid is tied off and the cap is back on the oil, she strips off her clothes, turns off the lantern, and retires to the second bed.

The small girl is still asleep when the petite female gets up and dressed. This time the vest is black denim and laces up, but it is paired with the jeans and shoes from the previous day. Only then does she turn on the lantern, which flickers a little before settling into steady light. In the other bed, the small girl stirs, but does not quite wake. Leaving her be, the petite female helps herself to a bit of cold breakfast.

The child finally wakes, looking disoriented, as the petite female is cleaning up from her meal. The small girl blinks in the lantern light before shrinking back into the blankets. The petite female holds out a piece of fruit, but the child hesitates, wide eyes fixed on the face above the proffered food. Then her growling stomach decides her and she takes the fruit.

While she eats, the petite female surveys the room. After a moment, she shifts around some of the empty crates to form a table and two seats plus some rough shelving. Once those are in place, she unpacks the contents of the box onto the shelving.

When the fruit is gone, the child creeps from her bed, coming over to get more food, which the petite female sets out on the makeshift table. The small girl clambers onto one of the seats and starts into her breakfast. Done organizing their home for the moment, the petite female sits opposite, watching the child eat.

Finally, her stomach more full than at any time in her short life, the girl turns her attention to her companion, studying her critically.

“Who are you?”

The petite female takes a deep breath, her expression turning to a frown, “I...” Her voice is rough from disuse, “I don't...” She coughs to clear her throat, “I don't remember now.”

The child frowns, “How can you not remember?” She tilts her head to one side, her eyes still studying the petite female, “Grama once said you'd been around forever. She didn't think you could talk.”

The dry chuckle is rough and ends in another cough.

“You don't look very old. Not like Grama.”

Again the dry chuckle and cough.

“You don't remember your name at all?”

The petite female shakes her head, “Or my age or where I came here from.”

The girl's curious frown deepens, “So what do I call you?”

The response is a shrug, “Pick somethin'.”

The child's expression twists indecisively, “I donno.”

“What's your name?”

“Brina.” She looks around the room, “How d'you know how to do all this?”

The petite female shrugs, "Someone somewhere trained me well, I guess."

"How'd you get so much money yesterday?" Brina slips from her seat and goes to examine the contents of the makeshift shelves, "I never get anythin' that useful."

"You don't pick your marks well."

Brina frowns as she turns back to the seated woman, "Huh?"

"Sure you know how to pick pockets. Most kids here do. But you can't tell a person who'd have money or other valuables from one who doesn't."

The girl's shoulders slump as she turns back to her examination. A moment later, she straightens a little and turns to the petite female again, "Did you do all this for me?"

She shrugs, "It felt necessary."

The words earn her a confused expression, "Felt necessary?"

The petite female just shrugs again.

Brina returns to her seat at the table before asking another question, "Now what?"

"Now..." The petite female studies the child critically for a long moment, "Now you learn to make somethin' of your life."

The girl's frown returns again, "Like what?"

"So long as you're willin' to learn an' try new things, you can become anythin'... anyone... you want to be. Have you ever had a day dream?"

"Kinda," Brina swallows hard, "I wanted me an' Mommy an' Grama to live in a real house an' have good food an' good clothes. Like all the people who walk by an' never see us."

The petite female chuckles, slowly shaking her head, "One lesson at a time, I think. You need to learn to pick your marks."

Brina's shoulders slump, "How's that gonna help?"

"It'll keep us in money so we can eat while you learn the next lesson."

"The next lesson?" The girl looks sceptical.

The petite female chuckles, "One lesson at a time. Let's go." She stands and Brina does the same. Together, they leave their new home, making sure the padlock is secure on the outside of the door.

"Wow!" Brina swallows hard as she watches the petite female count out bills and coins, "That's so much money."

The petite female laughs, pocketing the bills and handing the coins to the girl, "It's less than we spent yesterday."

Brina looks sceptical as she pockets the coins, "Now what? We still have food."

"How 'bout a hot meal?"

The girl nods, her whole face brightening. Then her shoulders slump, "The restaurants never let people like us in."

"We don't look like we did," The petite female reaches for a small hand, "It'll be okay. You'll see."

Hand in hand, they walk to a small diner several blocks from their home. When they enter, the waitress behind the counter barely glances over them. However, once they are seated in a booth, she brings over menus.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Water, please." The petite female requests.

"Water." Brina echoes.

"Okay." The waitress hands each of them a menu before going to get glasses of water.

While she is gone, Brina opens the menu. She studies the pictures for a minute before looking up at her companion.

"What is this?"

"It's a menu. It lists all the food the diner serves," The petite female chuckles, "Any idea what you'd like?"

Brina shrugs, "Somethin' hot. I dunno."

The waitress returns to set two glasses on the table and take their order. The petite female orders for both of them and the waitress leaves again.

Brina glances around, seeming somewhat lost in thought before focusing on her companion again, "So what's the next lesson?"

"You learn to read so you can order your own food."

The girl scrunches up her face at the idea, "Learn to read? Just for that?"

The petite female laughs, "Well, not just for that. You'll be amazed what becomes possible when you can read."

Brina appears sceptical, but quits asking questions.

When their food arrives, the girl turns her attention to eating. Or at least until she is full. Then she spends some time studying the petite female across from her.

"You really don't remember your name? At all?"

The petite female takes a deep breath, "I know I've been here a very long time. There was... something... I wanted to forget. But in forgettin' that thing, I seem to 've forgotten a lot of other things."

"Somethin' bad?" Brina shivers.

The petite female shrugs, "Just think of somethin' to call me for now. My memory seems to be slowly comin' back. One day I'll be able to tell you my name."

"I guess," Brina grimaces, "I just... I don't know. You saved me. You aren't family... exactly..."

"Family is what you make it."

The girl frowns, "Huh?"

"Maybe one day you'll understand." The petite female spots the waitress returning with their bill. After a glance at the paper, she hands over a couple bills. The waitress takes them. While she is gone to the till, Brina and her companion leave the diner.

Once they are out on the street, Brina looks up, "So how do I learn to read?"

"We need to buy a few more things." The petite female takes the girl's hand and they start walking, "Paper and pencils would be a good start."

The girl frowns, but seems to withdraw into herself. Just before they reach their destination, she finally brightens and looks up.

"Could I call you Sanah?"

"Sure."

March-63

"Sanah!" Brina is breathing hard and pouring sweat when she dashes inside and slams the door closed. She bolts it securely before leaning against it, "What's the thieves guild?"

The woman across the room looks up from cleaning the knife in her hand, "What happened?"

"I took that job... the one for Reict..." Brina pants, "Any street kid could've done what he wanted an' the pay seemed good..."

Sanah nods, "I thought you would. But what happened?"

"These people came when he was payin' me," Brina slumps down to sit against the door, "Said I shouldn't work for him. Said it was thieves guild territory an' I shouldn't be there. Reict laughed at them. Said they're a useless bunch of nobodies."

"The guild here is a useless bunch," Sanah sets aside the knife, "They've been a joke for years... claimin' to be professional thieves, but can't feed their own any better than anyone off the street."

"So why do this now?" Brina, now breathing easier, straightens up, "What can they really do?"

"There may be a new local guildmaster," Sanah takes a deep breath, "I've been keepin' an eye on them, but they exist so far underground it's hard to get anythin' accurate."

Brina frowns, "How d'you know so much?"

"Come here," The woman turns so the girl can see her left shoulder clearly, "This tattoo is

somehin' given to those who qualify for thieves guild membership, but choose not to join. They like to track potential trouble."

Brina's frown deepens, "How long 've you had it?"

"I wish I knew. What I do know is it's a variation on a guild trainer's crest which hasn't been used in a very long time."

"A variation?"

Sanah shrugs, "I think... any guild trainin' I might've had was secondary to somethin' else. Somethin' more important."

"There was somethin' else..." Brina takes a deep breath, "When the guild people came after me... Somethin' 'bout the infamous Amy. Is that a person? Do you even know?"

Confusion and uncertainty chase each other across the woman's face, "A person... I think. The name's familiar." Finally, she shakes her head, "You did get paid?"

Brina nods, "Reict said he'd send word if he has more work for me. I guess he isn't worried 'bout the guild people."

"I wouldn't worry 'bout them either." Sanah picks up the knife to finish cleaning it.

The girl nods again. A moment later, she queries, "So what's the next lesson? Now that I can pick pockets an' locks an' fight a bit an' read an' write an' do some math."

"Safes," Sanah looks up, "You already have a good eye for value. But learnin' to open safes 'll really increase the jobs you can take."

"Prob'ly." Brina nods to herself.

March-65

As they finish eating their usual cold breakfast, Brina looks at her companion and teacher, "The job I'm s'posed to do today... It'd be a lot easier with two people. The pay's enough to split."

Sanah nods, "Shouldn't be a problem."

The two of them get themselves ready before leaving. As always, they ensure the door is securely locked. Then they set out walking.

Before they have gotten more than a couple blocks, two large men appear on the sidewalk ahead of them. Sanah's eyes turn colder than usual. Brina swallows hard, but keeps up with her companion.

"You shouldn't be here." The man who speaks is just slightly taller than his companion.

Sanah stops just short of them, but does not speak. Brina does the same.

"You shouldn't even be alive," The second man looks contemptuous, "If you're really..."

"You think you know who I am?" The woman shakes her head, "You can't resurrect a dying guild chapter by drivin' others away. If you can't do the work, you won't get the jobs."

The first man draws a gun and the woman explodes into motion, knocking the weapon away and laying out both men before either has opportunity to react. As quickly as she had attacked, the woman is calm and walking again. Brina shivers as she hurries to keep up.

"You really still don't remember how you know how to do these things?"

The woman takes a deep breath, "I think... I think I was merc trained."

"Merc trained?" Brina frowns, "Like the professional trained mercenaries they tell stories about? There hasn't been a school in decades... longer."

Sanah shrugs, "There's still a lot I don't remember."

"Merc trained and guild trained?" Brina continues to frown, "Who could've gotten both even when the merc schools did exist?"

"Someone who was somethin' more than either."

At the new, female voice, both turn to see a woman with long black hair, blue eyes, and an intricate piece of jewelry dangling from one ear. She is holding an identical piece in one hand.

Sanah frowns in confusion, "I know you."

The black haired woman sighs, "Yeah, you do. But I'm guessin' you did a number on yourself this

time.”

Brina glances back and forth, looking wary, before addressing the stranger, “Who are you?”

“Most people know me as Lexa Hyrin. I was her trainin' partner... back when we were in trainin'.”

“Lexa...” Sanah reaches for the pendant, “This's mine, isn't it?”

Lexa nods, “I had a feelin' you'd need it back. I'm just not sure why you picked now to piss off the thieves guild.”

“I didn't set out to,” Sanah studies the piece of jewelry before tucking it into a pocket, “We're on our way to a job. Will you be around later?”

“For a day or so,” Lexa nods, “Then I have my own job to get to. I'll find you this evenin'.”

Sanah nods, “Later then.”

When Brina and her instructor return home around sunset, they find Lexa seated on the steps. She stands on hearing them approach. Brina frowns warily.

“How'd you find this place?”

Lexa chuckles, “Wasn't that hard.”

Sanah just nods to herself and goes down to let all three into the building basement. Only once the door is closed and locked does she return her attention to their visitor.

“Why look for me now?”

Lexa studies her carefully, “How much d'you remember?”

The other woman sighs, “It's comin' back in bits an' pieces. I know I didn't deliberately block my memory. It was trauma... not that I remember what.”

Lexa nods to herself, “How 'bout your name... any or all of it?”

“Amy. Or at least that's what most people call me.”

“Well, everyone 'cept your mother an' her best friend,” Lexa chuckles, “Most round here 'd prob'ly remember you as Amy Hyrin.”

Brina frowns, “Remember her as?”

“Long, long story,” Lexa pulls over a crate to sit on, “Has she told you any of what she has remembered?”

“Mostly just stuff related to what she teaches me,” Brina gets herself a drink from the ice filled cooler chest beside the shelves holding the kitchen things, “She did say she'd tell me her name once she remembered it. You aren't family...”

“Family is what you make it,” Amy sets some food out on the table before pulling up her own seat, “Pretty sure I told you that years ago.”

“Somehow I'm not surprised you'd remember that,” Lexa looks bemused, “Not sure what else you could call it after this long.”

“So you just came to return my pendant?” Amy studies her with a raised eyebrow, “Or is there somethin' else up?”

“Other than you pissin' off the guild? Or at least the local bunch.”

Amy grimaces, “Back when I first rescued Brina here, I tried to take her to the local guild. They turned us both away. Said they could barely feed their own, which hasn't actually changed. But there's a new local leader who thinks they can make themselves better again by runnin' any potential 'rivals' out of town.”

“So...?”

“So I've been teachin' Brina what I can remember an' we've been takin' odd jobs to get by. Not even necessarily work that could be the guild's jurisdiction, but it doesn't seem to matter. The local guild is fallin' apart faster all the time an' they want to blame everythin' an' everyone but themselves.”

“You could just take her out of here.”

Amy shakes her head, “Not that simple. Anyway, think you could help me get my pendant back in?”

“Prob'ly.” Lexa grimaces.

“Pendant?” Brina frowns, looking from one woman to the other.

“The mark of a trained merc,” Lexa explains, “The pendants are given on graduation. And there're very few mercs who'd willingly give theirs up even temporarily.”

“I'm not most mercs.”

“You're more merc than anything else,” Lexa shakes her head, “Always were.”

“Long as no one else turns up here.”

“Prob'ly the next person who'd come lookin' for you is your husband.”

“Husband?” Brina raises an eyebrow.

“He isn't on the continent.”

“Yeah, well, you two have very different ways of copin',” Lexa shrugs it off, “Undoubtedly he'll turn up when he's ready.”

Brina frowns, “So... what...?”

Amy chuckles, turning to her, “I'm not goin' anywhere just yet. You're far from finished your lessons.”

“I kinda figured.”

“Well, I already told you I'm on my way elsewhere,” Lexa reminds them, “You need or want anythin' else, you'll have to get someone else to get it for you.”

“I think I've got anythin' I need for now.”

April-69

As Amy is walking past the front of the building, she spots a paper tacked to the boards over the door. Going over to investigate, she finds a notice from the city. A frown forms as she reads through the information, deepening rapidly when she realizes the implications. Leaving the paper where it is, she goes around to the basement entrance and lets herself in.

Brina is inside, working on some of her tools, but glances up when Amy enters. On seeing the woman's expression, the teen frowns.

“What happened?”

“That developer's plan was approved,” Amy helps herself to a drink from the cooler before sitting, “We have three weeks 'fore they knock the whole area flat.”

“Three weeks?” Brina swallows hard, glancing around the basement which has served as their home for eight years, “Where do they expect everyone to go?”

“The people will resettle... find new homes,” Amy opens her drink and swallows some of the liquid, “The developer an' city council 're right. This area's an eyesore. There's nothin' left to salvage except the people.”

“But it's home to...” Brina breaks off on seeing the woman shake her head, “You've lived here way longer than anyone... longer than anyone's grandparents... how can you not care?”

“Sometimes change is necessary,” Amy's eyes meet the teen's, “Sometimes you have to let go an' move on. It isn't about caring or not caring.”

Brina blinks, swallowing hard, “Where could we even go? Maybe we don't have much, but to not have a home anymore...”

“We'll have a home,” Amy takes a deep breath, “Pack what you need for work or absolutely can't live without.”

“Today?”

“We'll go once you're packed.”

Brina frowns, “What about you?”

“I have anythin' I'll need.”

“So as soon as I've packed my stuff?” Brina shivers, “That's...” She shakes her head, “I don't have a job today, so I might as well pack once I'm done with this.” She returns to the task she had been

working on.

Amy watches silently, sipping her drink, while the teen finishes her work on her tools.

That done, Brina packs everything away neatly in a hardened leather case. The case is the first thing packed into an ancient old backpack which has been lying around. She adds any other equipment she needs for her jobs and all her clothing. Then she pauses in the middle of the floor, surveying the basement which looks much more like a home than when they had first moved in. Finally, she shakes her head and zips up the backpack.

“All done?” Amy eases herself to her feet.

Brina nods, “Let's just go.”

Amy leads the way out of the basement, pausing to padlock the door, before mounting the steps to the street. Brina keeps close, growing increasingly nervous as they walk through the streets. They leave the neighbourhood they have lived in for as long as Brina can remember and cross the city to an area of wider streets and much larger, better cared for homes. Beyond that, they reach a subdivision filled with walled and gated mansions. Brina shrinks close to Amy, who is paying more attention to the street numbers than anything else. Eventually, she stops to open one of the gates and usher Brina onto a property no different from the others around it. Amy follows a narrow stone path to a side entrance into the garage and stretches up, her fingers feeling along a crack beside the door frame. Coming up with a key, she unlocks the door, replaces the key, and ushers Brina into a huge garage containing a single small car.

“What is this place?”

“I'll explain later,” Amy leads the teen across the garage and up an inside staircase. At the top, they follow a hallway to the main foyer. An elderly woman appears from one of the rooms on the far side. She studies Amy with widening eyes before shaking her head.

“Ma'am,” The elderly woman swallows hard, “Did you just arrive in town?”

“Not exactly,” Amy takes a deep breath, “Mrs Gurail?” She waits for the woman to nod before turning to Brina, “This is the housekeeper, Mrs Gurail,” Addressing the elderly woman again, she continues, “This is Brina. She'll need rooms... probably for a while.”

The elderly woman nods, “Yes, ma'am.” She disappears up the stairs.

Brina gazes wide eyed around the foyer before turning to Amy, “You... own... this place.”

“It's one of the properties included in the estate my husband controls,” Amy leads the girl into the dining room where they can sit until the housekeeper returns, “I haven't been here since Mrs Gurail was newly appointed housekeeper... she was much younger then. But it's a roof over our head the city won't attempt to knock down.”

“I guess,” Brina swallows hard, “Now what?”

“You finish training,” Amy's eyes meet the teen's, “You'll have access to the library here an' I'll be takin' you to a range for firearms trainin'. You're also comin' up on old enough to learn to drive an' if you want to do that, there're people I'll need to talk to 'bout the arrangements.”

Brina slowly nods, “I don't have any ID. I'm not sure my birth was even registered.”

“There're ways around that,” Amy shrugs it off, “Right now, you need some time to settle in here. You're also gonna learn a few things 'bout copin' in polite society.”

The teen makes a face, “I'd never pass for anythin' 'cept a street rat.”

Amy chuckles, “You'd be surprised what a street rat can be capable of.”

Brina studies the woman critically, “Did you really grow up on the street somewhere?”

Amy nods, “Not here,” She sighs, “Not anywhere that exists now.”

“Your home was destroyed?” Brina shivers.

“The entire town burnt to the ground one summer an' it was decided it wasn't worth rebuildin'.”

“A whole town?” The teen looks sceptical.

Amy shrugs it off, “A whole town worse than the neighbourhood we just left. 'Tween that an' the Church, there isn't much out there these days.”

“The Church.” Brina scowls.

“It is what it is an' it seems to be here to stay a while.” Amy does not say anything more because the housekeeper enters the room.

“Ma'am, the master suite is open for you. A suite beside it has been opened for the young lady.”

“Thank you.” Amy stands, indicating for Brina to accompany her. Leaving the dining room, they go upstairs. At one end of the hallway which runs the width of the house, Amy ushers Brina through an open door.

“Take some time to settle in an' unpack. I need to make a call.”

“Okay.” Brina swallows hard as she looks around the first room.

Leaving her there, Amy goes down to the telephone in the library. It takes her a moment to remember the number she wants. Once she does, she dials and then listens to it ring and ring and ring. Finally, a breathless female voice answers.

“Hello, Austlan House.”

“It's Amy. I need some of my belongings shipped to the house in Settlement City.”

“Yes, ma'am. What would you like?”

“My motorcycle an' helmet. My saddlebags, which should have all my tool an' weapon kits in them. My ID an' bank cards. My wedding rings,” Amy pauses to think for a moment, “That should be everythin'. Has Malcom been in touch?”

“No, ma'am. To the best of my knowledge, he and Will are at Belstrand. I'll have your belongings shipped as soon as possible.”

“Thank you.”

“Anything else, ma'am?”

“Not today. I'll call if I need anythin' else.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Amy hangs up the receiver, but remains near the telephone for a time before leaving the library and going upstairs to check on Brina.

“So how's this gonna work?” Brina scowls at the papers on the table in front of her, “I don't know any of this.”

“Once we get through these, you'll legally be my ward,” Amy rolls a pen across the table, “So one blank at a time. You know your first name.”

The teen nods and picks up the pen to fill in the first space on the form.

“You'll use my family name since you don't remember any names from your own family. K-R-E-S-S.”

Brina frowns, but writes on the third space, “I don't need a middle name, do I?”

“Most people on this continent don't even have one. This form is usually used for immigrants.”

The teen looks up at her, “Do you?”

“Amy is my middle name.” The woman's expression turns wry. A moment later, she moves on, “Write unknown in the spaces for your parents' names.”

“Okay.” Brina does as instructed, “What about my birth date? I guess I was born here, but I'm not even sure how old I am. Or do you remember?”

“February, fifteen years ago.”

Brina makes a face, “You don't remember the specific day?”

“You were born at a free clinic some time around the middle of the month,” Amy shrugs, “Your mother an' grandma were off the street nearly a week.”

“So call it the fourteenth,” Brina figures, “Less you think the clinic would have the record.”

Amy shakes her head, “That specific clinic burned to the ground years ago. All of their files were lost in the fire.”

The teen sighs, “So much for that. What about the rest of this?”

“The rest is for me to fill out an' file. I seriously doubt the CPA 'll contest the request.”

“Why would they?” Brina shakes her head, passing the forms and pen across the table, “Most foster kids don't have things this good. But won't they want me in school?”

“You'll be registered as a home schooler,” Amy picks up the pen, “Which is nothing more or less than the truth. Maybe you'll never quite be grade twelve equivalent, but what you are learning will serve you better.”

Brina nods to herself. “What about your husband?”

“I don't think he'll be returnin' to the continent before you come of age,” Amy shrugs it off, “Honestly, even if he did, he wouldn't say anythin'.”

The teen takes a deep breath, her eyes going to the woman's face, “Do you remember what happened? Why you're livin' apart? Why you even came here?”

Slowly, Amy shakes her head, “Not so far. But it may be the last thing to come back.”

September-72

Amy is in the garage, doing a little bit of work on her motorcycle, when Brina slips in the side door. The young woman comes over to watch the older one work.

Amy glances up, “What happened now?”

“The guild,” Brina sighs, “Seems like nothin' can stop this guy.”

“The thieves guild has existed since shortly after the Migration,” Amy shrugs lightly, “Jailin' a few local leaders isn't gonna make it go away.”

The young woman scowls, “Mostly I wish they'd leave me alone. They leave you alone.”

“They can't touch a trained merc,” Amy sits back on her heels, “Unfortunately that's a protection I can't extend to you.”

“So...?”

“You will have your place,” The older woman's eyes meet the younger one's, “You've pretty much finished anythin' I can teach you.”

“Am I?”

Amy nods, “You prob'ly know more than I did at your age. On the other hand, you're benefittin' from all my years of experience workin' and some improvements in technology over those years.”

“You work pretty low tech,” Brina grimaces, “Considerin' what's out there.”

Amy shrugs, “You may, one day, meet my husband. If you want to talk tech...”

Brina shakes her head, “So how do I stop these guild idiots from harassin' me when I'm workin'? It doesn't seem to matter what kind of jobs I take.”

“There's a confrontation comin',” Amy returns to her task, “I'm tryin' to give you everythin' you need to come out on top.”

“On top?” Brina raises an eyebrow, “I think I'll settle for survive.”

Amy chuckles, “You're gonna have to do better than survive. For now, just keep alert when you're out.”

Brina nods, “I need a partner for the job I'm doin' next week. I looked around the area an' there's no way just one person could do what they want.”

“Yeah, fine.”

On hearing soft movement behind her, Amy turns to see Brina approaching.

“We're done?”

The young woman nods, “We just need to report in.” She moves past Amy, who follows her in the direction of their employer's office. They reach the office and get paid without incident, but when they emerge, it is to find several women waiting on the sidewalk. The oldest of them swallows hard on seeing Amy.

Brina scowls, “What now?”

“We need help,” The woman takes a deep breath, “If somethin' doesn't change, we're gonna be cut off. We already can't support ourselves.”

“So...?” Brina continues to scowl.

“We need a new leader. Someone who actually knows how to be a thief,” The woman glances at Amy, “We'd ask you, if it wouldn't get us into more trouble than we're already in.”

Amy nods, her expression wry.

“So why me?” Brina is still scowling, “I'm not connected to anything or anyone except her.”

“That's why we can ask you,” The woman meets her eyes, “Becomin' a guild member is simple. Findin' someone with your trainin' without ties to another organization isn't.”

Brina's expression turns sceptical, “What makes you think I'd help you?”

The woman takes a deep breath, “Because he's decided to have you killed. He's plannin' to hire an assassin... maybe already has. He won't quit 'til you stop him because no one else can now.”

“I doubt that.” The scowl returns.

“You don't want to wait for him to find an assassin who'll take the job,” Amy's voice is soft, “End this now, Brina.”

The scowl deepens, “I guess.” The young woman sighs, “Where can I find him?”

“You'll have to come with us.”

Brina turns to Amy, “You'll come too?”

Amy just nods.

The whole group starts walking, headed towards the building which has housed the local thieves guild chapter since their forced eviction from their previous location. When they get there, they find large thugs guarding all entrances. The woman who had requested Brina's help tries to ignore them and approach the front door, but is stopped.

“No one enters or leaves.”

“Since when?” She does not back away.

“Since now.” The thug does his best to look intimidating.

Brina's eyes pass over him, “You aren't even a guild member.”

“I'm bein' paid to make sure no one enters or leaves.” He turns a scowl on her.

There is a flash of silver and he topples over, not quite unconscious, but in too much pain to impede the group. Brina pauses to retrieve the unopened pocket knife she had thrown before accompanying the others inside.

In the main foyer, they find every door closed. The woman who had asked for Brina's help leads the way straight across to a door which turns out to be locked. The others watch, many of them wide eyed, as Brina disarms a clumsily rigged trap and picks the lock. Once the door is open, they enter a dimly lit hall with every door off it closed. The group is led straight to the far end, to another trapped and locked door. Again, Brina disarms the trap and picks the lock.

“He did all this in the time you were gone?” Brina studies the lead woman with a raised eyebrow.

“I think he might've just been waiting for us to leave. Now we really have to be careful. He should be in this next room.”

Brina nods. Cautiously, she pushes the door open.

Nothing happens except the women are nearly blinded stepping from the dim hall into the brightly lit room. Brina and Amy blink rapidly until their eyes adjust and they can see the man seated on the far side of the room, surrounded by two rows of the large thugs.

“No one was to enter or leave.” The man at the back scowls.

“You would lock people out of their own home?” Brina's voice carries clearly, “You would have someone who's never acted against you killed? You hire outsiders to guard you against your own people? You don't deserve that seat.”

“Ain't your business.” His scowl blackens.

“Except you keep makin' it my business,” Brina shakes her head, “An' I'm gettin' sick of it. You

want somethin' done about me, come do it yourself.”

“Get them out of here!” His voice spurs the thugs into action.

The first row steps towards the group of women. Brina launches herself forward, easily evading the nearest thugs. She manages to slip through the second row as well, although not quite as neatly. Another step brings her face to face with a drawn gun. Brina ducks faster than he can change his aim, moving around to a position beside his chair. From there, she can see the other women struggling with the thugs. Amy is behind the others, only watching the proceedings. As the gun swings around, Brina catches the man's wrist and wrestles the weapon away from him. She tosses it behind the chair, out of easy reach, then has to dodge a physical attack.

Knowing the man is both larger and stronger than she is, Brina uses all her training in leverage and dirty tricks to subdue him quickly. Soon she has him pinned, the blade of her pocket knife against his throat.

“Call off the thugs.”

He scowls, struggling against her and getting the skin of his throat cut in the process, “You won't do anythin' if I don't.”

“How deep do you think this blade 'll go?” Brina shakes her head, “Call them off.”

“You're nothin' without your teacher.”

“My teacher isn't doin' anythin'. Take a look. This's all me an' those who requested my help. Now call them off.”

He struggles harder, the knife biting deeper into his throat.

“Call them off while you still have a voice.” Brina feels him tensing for another attempt to dislodge her. When he makes no effort to stop the thugs, she uses the butt end of the pocket knife to knock him out.

“No one here's gettin' paid for this.” Her voice carries over the sounds of fighting.

“What d'you mean not paid?” The nearest thug turns to face her, then swallows hard on seeing the blood dripping to the floor from the cut in the man's throat, “You killed him?”

“Not killed,” Brina shakes her head, “Not yet. Just cut up a little an' out cold. But whatever pay he promised you isn't gonna happen.”

The thug frowns, considering her words and eyeing the unconscious man on the floor, “Let's just go,” His words are directed to the other thugs, “This's a waste of time.” He and those nearest him start for the door. As they get closer, the thugs fighting the guild women disengage and follow. Amy moves aside to allow them to leave. Only once the last of them are out does she move into the room, although just to a place near the door.

The woman who had asked for Brina's help crosses the room to where the young woman is cleaning the blade of her pocket knife on the man's shirt.

“No one here can do anythin' like what you just did,” She swallows on seeing the unconscious man, “He isn't...?”

“He's still alive for the moment,” Brina eases herself to her feet, “Not that I'd count on anythin' useful from him. Any place we could lock him up for the moment?”

“There...” The woman takes a deep breath, “There're cells, in a level below the basement.”

Brina nods to herself, “Is there a way to borrow trainers from other guild chapters? I seriously doubt my trainin' was quite the same.”

“Maybe,” The woman shrugs, “I don't know what's where right now.”

Brina's eyes meet Amy's, “Any ideas?”

“Your trainin' isn't really that far off the guild's usual,” Amy tells her, “But this is a mess you'll have to sort without my help.”

Brina makes a face, “Do I still have a home?”

“For as long as you need it.” Amy chuckles, “I doubt I'll be goin' too far just yet.”

The young woman takes a deep breath, “Thanks.”

"I'll see you at home." Amy leaves first the room, then the building.

December-77

On hearing the front door, Amy sets her book down. She can hear the housekeeper's hurried steps followed by voices.

"Good afternoon, Miss Kress. Is there anything you need?"

"Just to know where Amy is."

"The library, I believe."

"Thanks."

A moment later, Brina enters the library. After a glance around, she crosses the room to claim the chair beside Amy's. The young woman's eyes go to the book on the arm of the older woman's chair.

"Did you used to read so much?"

Amy nods, "Mainly history an' classical literature, but yeah." Her eyes study the young woman, "What's up?"

"I'm movin' to the Capitol," Brina takes a deep breath, "The continental guildmaster wants me as his apprentice."

Amy raises an eyebrow, "That's an honour."

The young woman nods, "The local guild will actually be in good hands. All most of them needed was a real trainer. Will I see you again?"

"I'm sure you will," Amy smiles, "I'd like you to keep in touch, but I'll be in Wind Valley."

"Wind Valley?" Brina frowns.

Amy nods, "My husband is back on the continent. He's comin' here first, but Wind Valley 's always been his home."

Slowly, Brina nods to herself, "Did you ever remember why?"

The woman sighs, old pain and exhaustion flickering over her face, "Yeah."

Brina glances at the clock on the far wall, "I need to go pack. I'm leavin' by bus this evenin'." She leaves the library.

Amy's eyes go briefly to her book before shifting to the nearby window.

Amy is standing in the library doorway when Brina comes down, carrying one large bag over her shoulder and another in the opposite hand. The young woman turns almost instinctively to the older one.

"Thank you."

Amy smiles, "You're welcome. Take care of yourself."

Brina nods, "You too. I think my ride to the depot's here. I'll be in touch."

"You better." Amy watches as the young woman goes to the front door to step into her shoes. She remains where she is as Brina leaves the house and the door closes. Outside, a vehicle can be heard pulling away. Almost before the sound fades, another vehicle can be heard pulling into the driveway. That sound is followed by three car doors. Moments later, the front door opens and two men step into the house. Amy crosses the foyer to meet them and is swept into a tight hug. Her arms go around her husband, her face pressing into his chest. After a long moment, the two of them step apart, although only to arms length. Their eyes meet, but neither speaks as they head up to the master suite.

About the Author

Alexandra. A. 'Lexa' Cheshire lives in northern British Columbia, Canada. She is a wife and mother who enjoys to read and write fantasy and science fiction. Her blog is at aacheshire.wordpress.com

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