

SKATE THE SEEKER

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Thinklings Books

1400 Lloyd Rd. #552

Wickliffe, OH 44092

thinklingsbooks.com

For my mom,
who showed me that the search is the point.

The Rag and Bone Chronicles, Book 2

SKATE THE SEEKER

by

Jeff Ayers

Thinklings

Thinklings Books, LLC
Wickliffe, OH

PROLOGUE

IN WHICH A CONSPIRACY IS FORMED, A PEACE ACCORD IS
ACCEPTED, AND A DROPPER OF EAVES IS OVERLOOKED.

Barrison Belamy's door slammed open with a bang. Pale light cut through the doorway to illuminate a tableau of ruin. Mechanical devices on the windows ticked and clicked away, oblivious to intruders.

Holding forth the light at the end of her cane, a graceful woman in fine furs stepped in and surveyed the wreckage: a bookcase overturned, the desk missing a leg, the logs for the fireplace strewn about. Another bookcase stood askew, revealing a downward passage into a basement she hadn't known existed.

Laribel Ossertine shook her head. Her boots were tracking in snow, but that was the least of Barrison's worries now. "He has no worries," she muttered. *They were stolen from him, along with his life.*

"What's that? What'd you—" Jack Gherun followed her in and groaned at the destruction. "King's breath, what a mess." He picked up a piece of splintered wood. "The vermin that did this are the lowest of low, Bel. The worst kind of—" Unable to find the proper epithet, he settled for throwing the wood down where he'd found it.

"Thieves," a third voice finished for him. Bakurin Gemhide entered with his arms crossed. His wide jaw was set in his customary frown. "The worst kind of thieves."

"Murderers." Laribel turned to her companions. "Thieves and murderers. They *killed* him. He's *dead*. It was a coordinated effort." In the days since the explosion in the Baron's district, she had pursued every lead through magical means, spying on conversations and peeling back layers of the minds of unsavory witnesses. "It was the girl. The one who stole from me. From *us*. She was one of them." She sneered and all but growled, "Skate."

Laribel placed a gloved hand on a corner of Barrison's broken desk. "He let her in, and she repaid him with theft, lies, and death." Every thief she had managed to find had confirmed one or the other of two things: the criminal cartel was targeting the old wizard for kidnapping or assassination, and the girl Skate had been a member of the gang, working to put the wizard in the Ink's control. The audacity and injustice of the betrayal brought bile to Laribel's throat. "That such a great man was undone by such—*common* brutes is unconscionable. Unforgivable."

Jack and Bakurin came closer, picking their way through the debris with care. "As you say," Jack said, straightening his robe for dignity's sake, "it's an end that such a man did not deserve to meet. His killers should be brought to justice." He dusted the hem of his robe off and cleared his throat. "However, I have not been able to find the girl. My hired magic has failed me."

"It is the same for my own spells," Bakurin grumbled. "She's vanished. I say she perished in the attack that took Barrison, and good riddance."

Laribel shook her head. The spectacle of the Iron Wind's bared power had been the talk of the city, and the events had grown wilder and greater with each retelling. However, her own interrogations had led Laribel to the truth: Skate had run away. "She's alive. Out of the city, perhaps, and protected from our magical prying, but alive. She lives, and Barrison is dead." She bit the last word off so hard that her teeth clicked together. She took a steadying breath.

There was a knock on the doorjamb. The trio turned to see an angular man with shoulder-length black hair, dressed in a fine red doublet. A wicked scar creased the left side of his face. He wore rectangular spectacles and stood with an upright posture, his hands clasped behind his back. His shoulders and hidden hands reminded Laribel of a hawk, perched and waiting. "Good evening. I believe I'm expected." He made his way around the mess to join the trio.

Jack flinched. "You!" He pointed an accusing finger at the man. "You're one of them! The criminals. Bel, this is the one I told you about. He was one of the—the—the *scoundrels* who demanded money from me! He—"

He stopped when Laribel placed a hand on his arm.

"Peace," she said. "I know who he is. Jack and Bakurin, meet Haman Vaerion. He may have used a different name when you knew him, Jack, but that's how he introduced himself to me."

"It is my given name, madam." Haman gave a brief bow to each of the men in

turn. "I won't deny the title of 'scoundrel.' I am a criminal—or rather, I was." He brought a gloved hand with an extended finger up to trace the angry red line across his cheek. "The battle with your late friend convinced me that a life of crime might be too brief for my liking. His power was...immense. I assure you, I am no longer associated with the gang of thieves that I was before." His blank expression flashed into one of discomfort. "In fact, the Ink has all but disintegrated. Your friend decapitated our leadership in that encounter, and various factions have been scuffling to fill the vacuum left by his absence. Better to get out of that life with my own still intact, I should think." He gestured at the men. "Your contracts are herewith dissolved, gentlemen. I don't speak on behalf of any group or in any official capacity, of course, but there is no official capacity. The Ink is gone."

Jack stomped a petulant foot. "You killed Barrison. You and your *Ink*. His blood is on your hands."

Haman pulled the glove off his left hand with ginger care. The hand beneath was raw and red, with a jagged scar running up his wrist and out of sight. "I bear the mark of my involvement in attempting to bring down your friend. The blood spilled was the blood of battle. Of war. A war that I lost." He replaced the glove and sniffed. "I was unable to stop Barrison Belamy or capture him. The only blood that stained my hands was my own." His hands were behind his back again. "For whatever it's worth, his destruction was not my purpose. We were trying to press him into our service, not kill him. At least, that was what we were told. Our leader clearly had other plans."

Bakurin turned his head and spat. "There's what I care for your purpose, and for your dead master. Our friend's gone, and you had a hand in it. We ought to finish what Barrison started."

"You're welcome to try."

Bakurin raised his hands at once, but Laribel stepped in front of Haman to face her companions. "Enough." She tapped her cane impatiently on the floor.

"But, Bel—"

"Enough." Jack blinked at the harshness of her rebuke, but Laribel pressed on. "His part in Barrison's death was a mistake, one that he has paid for. *Furthermore*," she continued, raising her voice over both of her friends' objections, "Haman Vaerion is in the employ of the Baron's Guard, and thereby under their

protection. An attack upon him will be taken as an attack on the city and barony itself.” Jack’s mouth fell open, and Bakurin’s ugly grimace further twisted in disappointment and agitation. Laribel joined them and faced Haman once more. She thought she saw a trace of a smirk at the corner of the captain’s mouth.

Haman cleared his throat and said, “As I said, myself and my friends have left our life of crime behind us. With the unrest in the criminal underworld, it is only a matter of time before there’s open violence in the streets. The turf war will be disastrous, and the Guard needs all the help they can get.”

Bakurin’s derisive snort made a fine mist in the cold. “And who better to catch a thief than a thief?”

“As you say,” Haman agreed. “Which, I believe, brings us to our point of meeting tonight?”

All three turned their attention to Laribel. She met their eyes in turn. “There is one whose hand in Barrison’s death has not been burned. There is one who reached into his life with the intent to end it who has faced no punishment as a result.”

“You speak again of the girl.” Jack’s jaw was set. “But she’s out of our reach. We cannot find her.”

“No,” Haman said, “you cannot. This is no fault of yours or a failure of your magical aptitude, which I am sure is quite impressive. The girl is protected from scrying by magic—probably some trinket or other that she took with her. Utterly impenetrable.” He raised the sleeve of his right arm to reveal a tattoo of a quill pen ending in a vicious point with a drop of dark liquid hanging from the end above his wrist. “Utterly impenetrable, unless you have a way around it.” He smiled and pulled his sleeve back down. “I know exactly where Skate is. I’ve seen her.”

Bakurin barked a humorless laugh. “You’re out hunting for the Guard.”

Haman shrugged. “Me or someone like me. It was my former Boss’s insight. Boss—*Sergeant* Marshall realized with the leadership taken out, conflict would be inevitable, and the first one into the Guardhouse would be the best received. He has quite a mind for opportunities.”

“We can hire Haman’s services,” Laribel said. “The Guard wants any information it can get on anyone involved in the disturbance. We can send people after her.” She brought her cane down again. “We can bring her to justice for Barrison’s death.”

Bakurin frowned and grumbled but did not object. Jack cut his eyes at Haman, but he eventually gave his assent.

Laribel's light made Haman's glasses appear as two white rectangles in the gloom. He was smiling. "Name your price," Laribel told the younger wizard.

No one noticed the two red circles in the gloom outside the door. They flashed in the dark and were gone.

CHAPTER 1

IN WHICH AN ORB IS PILFERED, A HORSE IS SPOOKED, AND A
WOUND IS HEALED.

The morning sun was bright, and the camp was warm despite lingering patches of snow. The porters and merchants were busy packing up tents and bedrolls, while the mercenaries guarding the caravan helped one another into their armor. The driver from Caribol swore as a kettle slipped from the back of his wagon and landed on his toe. He and his passengers had joined up with the small caravan a day after leaving the port city, glad for strength in numbers on the road.

His two fares were off to the side of the dissolving camp, a boy and a girl of an age with each other. Skate, the girl in a comfortable black coat, held a blue glass ball close to her chest, with a yellow book open on her lap. Twitch, the boy with a jacket no less fine, was sprawled out in the grass after a hearty breakfast, watching her strain and struggle in silence.

“Focus,” the steady voice of Petre said again. The man trapped in the glass ball had been repeating that word as a mantra for days.

“Yeah, I got it. That’s not helping.”

“I’m not just saying it to say it,” Petre replied. “You *do* need to focus. This is no easy text you’ve chosen for an early reader.”

“*Yes*, thank you,” she muttered through gritted teeth. She went back to staring at the book. Petre said nothing more. Twitch put a leg on his bent knee.

A slight breeze picked up, and the bare trees gave a rattle in response. By the end of the soft wind, she had made it to the end of the line, but not the sentence. Skate growled in frustration.

“You’ll get it. It takes time.” It was an attempt at conciliation, but it felt more like condescension. Petre continued, “Reading is hard, and reading a text for

learning magic is harder still. If it were easy, everyone would do it.”