

Pre-release sample chapter for

SKATE THE THIEF

Chapter 1

*In which a question is asked, a blanket is acceptably cleaned,
and a deal is struck.*

Skate peered into the shadowy room through the window. She sniffed and brushed a snowflake off the end of her nose, careful not to shift too much of her weight around. Twitch grunted anyway, muttering under his breath. She ignored him. His job was to hold her up, and there was no avoiding some movement, especially in this cold.

Some people liked the snow. *Those people are stupid.*

“Well?” Twitch asked, his small voice straining to both be heard clearly and stay quiet. He managed to do neither, so Skate shushed at her feet while she dug her heel into his shoulder.

She turned her attention back to the dark room. A glow from a light upstairs helped her see shelves upon shelves of books lining the walls, with unidentifiable shapes resting with them. That junk could be valuable, maybe enough for the pair of them to meet their quota for the week, even the month. The books were treasures, but the Boss didn’t like trying to find buyers for stuff like that.

“I’ll go in and grab what I can.”

Twitch nodded his blond head impatiently. Skate pulled a wire from the waist of her shabby pants. She slipped the thin piece of metal through the hairbreadth crack in the window. There were not many windows that this sort of simple device would work on in the area, but this building was old and showing its wear; the stones and large windows showed it to be older than anything around it.

The pair had observed the house for a week and determined that the tenant was a shut-in, an old man who spent all of his time in his upstairs rooms. He only came downstairs to get a new book off one of his shelves. Though elderly, he seemed spry, carrying heavy-looking volumes up and down the open stone stairs set in the wall with ease. His upstairs light stayed lit all night. Twitch had guessed that the old man liked to have it on in case he woke and needed to use the chamber pot. Skate had agreed and pointed out that the white color of the light probably meant it was magical. Magic in the house meant money. It was a good mark, and Boss Marshall would be pleased with whatever they could grab. They just had to get Skate in first.

"I'll leave the window open and toss down what I can. Once I've grabbed my fill, you'll need to help me out—"

"I *know*," Twitch hissed, his voice strained with effort. "J-just hurry up!" He was starting to shake, and it wasn't only from the cold; his muscles were clearly tiring.

"Oh, fine, you big baby," Skate said, and the soft click of the latch disengaging shot through the alley. The window swung outward, and she caught it to keep it from slamming against the outer wall. "Lift up," she said, pulling herself over the threshold and rolling silently into the shadowy den.

As she scanned the room, Skate heard a noise from upstairs: the crinkle of paper. The old man was still awake, and apparently reading. The room was as icy cold as it had been outside, and her breath formed puffs of cloud. There was a fireplace here, with a full rack of firewood beside it, but the hearth was empty, neglected, and forgotten for some time—covered in a thick layer of dust and choked with cobwebs.

Even though the Boss didn't want books, Skate was drawn to them. She ran a finger along the spine of the nearest tome, then shook her head. The trinkets were the better target; besides, she couldn't read any of the stories.

A statuette above the fireplace caught her eye. It was roughly the length of her forearm, and depicted a woman dancing—or maybe swimming; it was difficult to make out clearly from her vantage point in the dark. *Leave it*, she told herself; *get smaller stuff first*.

Three objects were among the books on the nearest shelf: a silver locket, a sheathed dagger, and a delicate-looking sculpture of metal. Skate pocketed the locket in the fold of the thin rags she was wearing, and examined the dagger. It came free of its jeweled leather sheath with silent ease. It was sharp, suffering no signs of wear or neglect. There were markings etched along the flat of the blade.

Skate nodded and put it back into its protective leather. *It should be worth a few scepts, at least*, she thought, smiling at the prospect of handing Boss Marshall more than a month's worth of payments for one night's work. She stuffed the blade into her belt and moved on to the third treasure. The golden thing was a complicated moving sculpture studded with diamonds. The shape warped slightly when she picked it up, but quickly returned to its original circle shape.

The thing was heavy in her hands; the gold was not merely plating. She had never held something so obviously valuable, whatever it was.

Another page turned upstairs.

Skate kept the golden object in her hands as she looked around for more. There was a desk at the far end of the room, on which a small ornate box sat slightly ajar. She was careful that none of her pilfered treasures made any noise as she walked toward her mark. Had the floors of this place been made of wood, they would undoubtedly have creaked. The cold stone, however, made no noise under her practiced feet.

Skate gingerly opened the box the rest of the way and suppressed a gasp of giddiness at its contents: ten polished red stones on black velvet cloth. *A jewelry box.* In the shadowy cold, the gems almost glowed.

Closer examination revealed flaws in the interiors of each, but her disappointment with the faulty goods was short-lived. The stones held images, not flaws. Her nose an inch from an orb, she saw a pair of open hands within, reaching toward some small person.

“Please don’t touch those.”

Skate dropped the golden thing and squawked at the clatter it made. She locked eyes with the source of the voice.

The old man stood in the middle of the long room. He was wearing a rich dark green robe trimmed in bands of gold and black and matching slippers on his feet. His eyes were heavy with suspicion, and he was holding a heavy tome under his arm. A glint of red flashed in his eyes as he stared her down.

Skate closed the jewelry box and put it back on the desk.

“Come here.”

She did not move except to shudder at the cold.

The old man was unbothered. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Skate placed a hand on the large chair next to her and glared up at him defiantly. “These are yours?”

The old man ignored her mockery and set the book on the desk. He gestured in Skate’s direction, and the golden thing floated off the ground back to its place on the shelf.

She gaped only for a moment. “You’re a wizard!” Wizards were not common, even in a city as cosmopolitan as Caribol; producing dangerous wonders was a skill that took years of training and education, and payment for apprenticeships was expensive. Only fools and the mad would try to steal from such a person.

“Did you take a locket? I’ll have that back, too.” He held out a hand, and the locket was tugged from her pocket. It landed in his hand, and he stuffed it into a pocket of his own. The old man scanned the room and nodded, apparently satisfied. “Right. Now, why were you trying to steal from me, young lady?”

Skate bristled, despite the dangerous situation. “*Young lady?*” *Make fun of me, will you?* A quieter, darker voice whispered in her head, *He forgot the dagger.* “I was going to sell some stuff in order to pay for a room for the night, maybe a meal.”

It was a lie, but not too far from the truth. His face became less severe. “You have nowhere to stay?”

“No. Me and my friend,” she said as she nodded toward the open window, “we got nowhere.”

The wizard turned to walk toward the window, and Skate took her chance. She charged forward and almost dropped the knife from her belt. She snatched it up and, at the same time, pushed the old man out of her way. The old man grunted as she ran past him through the open window and took a flying leap, hoping to land

against the other wall, then blunt the rest of the fall into the snow.

Three feet outside the window, Skate slowed, then stopped. She spun slowly in midair, suspended by nothing. Twitch was where she'd left him and was staring up at her, mouth agape.

"Run!" she said, before flying back through the window. The midnight alley disappeared in a blur, and the window clicked shut behind her as she, for the third time that night, passed through it. Dizzy from the sudden shifts in direction, Skate skidded to a stop near the middle of the room, a few feet from the fireplace with the small statue. She scrambled to her feet and found herself staring into the face of the old man.

She didn't have the dagger anymore; the sheath was lying on the floor a few feet from her. The old man was glaring at her. He impatiently gestured again, this time toward the rack of firewood, and three logs slammed into the hearth. With another flash of his hands and some words that Skate couldn't make out, the old man stretched a palm out. A thick blast of fire flew from his crooked fingers into the fireplace with such force that the logs almost came tumbling out to land on her. They didn't, and the room now glowed orange and red from a crackling fire.

"What were you thinking?" the wizard said, gesturing toward the window. "That is at least eight feet off of street level. You could have broken a bone!" He walked over to the window and looked down below. "Surely, you didn't think the snow would help—"

There was a metallic click against stone, and he stopped talking. He looked down at his side, and in the shadowy illumination, Skate could not see what he was looking at. Then he took three unsteady steps closer, and she gasped. It was the blade, buried right up to the hilt into his side. In her mad dash out the window, it had flown out of its sheath and stuck him.

No blood stained the robe yet. The old man was staring at the knife in disbelief.

A wave of nausea washed over Skate. *Don't think about it. He'll fall, and I'll run. I'll yell for help on the way, and maybe the healers at the church can help him.*

The wizard placed a hand on the hilt and stuck his chin out pugnaciously. "You stabbed me." He stomped right over to her. "You *stabbed* me! What is wrong with you? This could have hurt me!" He pulled the jeweled blade out. It was clean. With another wordless gesture from him, the discarded sheath clattered off the floor and floated over. He put the knife back in its holder and then placed it on the shelf. "Explain yourself!"

"I—I—what do you mean, 'explain myself'?" Already confused, Skate found a scolding too much to handle. "You're a wizard, and obviously a hard one," she said, waving a hand at the fireplace, "and you'd just caught me trying to nick your stuff. I had to get out, didn't I? I just tried to knock you down, not cut you. And how aren't you hurt?" She pointed an accusatory finger toward the apparently harmless wound in his side. "Is it a fake dagger or magic or what?"

"Don't go trying to change the subject, young lady," the wizard said. Skate felt

the flush of heat as her cheeks turned red in embarrassed anger. "You can't just go around stabbing people you're afraid of."

"Who else are you supposed to stab?" Skate asked, throwing her hands up. That she had not actually meant to stab anyone had temporarily slipped her mind.

"Well, if you're going to insist on stabbing other people, then you can cross my name off your 'stab if you feel like it' list, because I won't have any more of it, and it won't do you any good anyway. What's your name?"

"What?"

"Your name." His tone was less offended now, and back to being merely haughty. He ran his hand across the fabric of his robe, and as he did so, the jagged cut disappeared. "You've got one, haven't you?"

"Skate," she huffed, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"That's not a name."

"Is so. It's the only one I got." *The only one I got now.*

The old man rolled his eyes. "Fine, 'Skate.' Were you lying about a friend outside? I didn't see anybody."

"Yes." Twitch needed to stay away from this man. He hadn't hurt her yet, but no wizard was ever truly safe to be around. Her eyes reflexively darted to the fireplace. "There's no one."

"Why?"

"To get you to go look so I could escape."

"So you could escape by stabbing me."

"I'm sorry," she said, and now it was her turn to roll her eyes. "I'm so sorry for stabbing you, mister, okay? Even though it was an accident, even though it didn't hurt you at all, even though it didn't even scratch your clothes for very long, I'm sorry for using your own knife—that I stole," she added, seeing him about to interrupt and correctly guessing what that interruption was going to be. "That I stole from you. I am very, truly sorry that I accidentally stabbed you to try to get away from your home. Okay?"

A long time passed in silence. "Okay." The wizard went over to the front door and put his hand on the handle, but checked his movement. He turned toward her, the hint of a red glare still in his eyes. "Do you really not have anywhere to go?"

"No." She could return to one of the Ink's hideouts around the city, but showing up empty-handed after a job was frowned upon amongst the thieves, thugs, and murderers who made up the rank and file of the group. Boss Marshall wouldn't be happy, certainly, especially after she and Twitch had promised a sizable score. The half-truth seemed a safe bet. "I don't. I really was stealing in order to survive." This last part, she took some small pride in, was absolutely true. *Easy to lie with some truth mixed in.*

There was more silence. The old man's hand stayed unmoving on the latch. Skate had the sense that he wasn't really looking at her, but had simply fixed his eyes on her while thinking. His neatly trimmed white moustache twitched. When

he spoke, his thin beard bobbed up and down. "Rattle! Blanket!" he shouted at the stairs. Refocusing on Skate, he asked, "Would you like to stay here, then? At least until morning?" His hand dropped to his side. "I find that I can't turn you out into the cold."

Skate opened her mouth, then closed it again. As far as she could tell, he *could* turn her out into the cold and would have every right to do so—or burn her to a crisp, or turn her over to the Guard. She'd been caught red-handed stealing his stuff. *You also stabbed the old man; don't forget that.* "I wouldn't mind, I guess," she said, not wanting to offend him.

"Good. I can't offer much in the way of comfort. Rattle is bringing the only blanket I have down. Here he is now." The blanket came first, but Rattle took all of her attention. For a moment, Skate wished she still had the blade. A yelp escaped her.

Rattle was a swollen bat. That was the only thing her mind could categorize it as. In truth, the leathery wings were where the similarity ended. The wings joined at the top of a lidless eyeball the size of an adult's fist. It looked wet. Beneath the eye were six spindly legs, jittering spider's legs; each one was at least two feet long. The pupil of the eye darted around at random while Rattle descended. It brought the blanket to the old man, who took it with some measure of disgust. The blanket was filthy and full of holes.

Without anything to hold, the spindly legs clicked together as the eye bobbed to and fro in the creature's stationary flight. "Thank you, Rattle. Go back to reading."

The spider-bat turned around and, after sparing a glance at Skate, floated up the stairs.

"That was Rattle," the wizard added unnecessarily as he began to fix the holes in the blanket with passes of his hand.

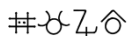
"What is it?"

"He's a—hmm. I never gave him a name beyond 'Rattle.' I made him. He's a construct, a guardian. Mostly, he just likes to read. He's a lot like me, that way." The dirt and holes faded with each pass of the hand until it resembled something she might have stolen from a vendor in the market. "Here." He held out the blanket for her to take, though she was too far away.

Skate didn't move. "Why didn't you already have the fire going?" Much had been strange since the old man had come down, but this bothered her the most. That fireplace had not been used in a good long while, and warmth was absolutely necessary this time of year. "Magic? I mean, if you've got magic to keep warm, why have a fireplace with wood ready?"

The corners of the wizard's mouth twitched up into a small smile before he said, "You ask many questions for an uninvited guest." He dropped the blanket and turned toward the stairs. "Stay here for the night. Sleep by the fire. I want to talk to you before you go in the morning." As his feet disappeared from view, the jewelry box lifted itself off the table and floated gently up after him.

Skate turned toward the fire. She was warm. The blanket was comfortable enough, and there was a rug. She meant to go to the door, but found herself first sitting, then reclining in front of the crackling flames. Despite her confusion and unanswered questions, she soon drifted off to sleep.



Skate shot straight up. There was clicking. The horror that was Rattle was floating by.

Skate rubbed the sleep out of her eyes while Rattle moved through a door in the back of the room, carrying something. The fire still burned, and a few more logs had been added to increase the flame. She noticed with passing interest that there were no fewer logs in the holder.

Dawn was breaking through the windows. Skate's stomach growled as she sat there smacking her mouth to try to get the stench of sleep out. It had been many hours since she'd eaten.

The door to the next room was ajar, and it sounded like the bat thing was hammering metal on metal in an attempt to rouse her from rest. "I'm up!" she shouted toward the open door. Rattle glanced at her as it passed as if to confirm her claim. It then continued on its way, doing whatever noisy task it had started.

Skate was about to yell again when she heard footsteps. The old man had made no noise last night coming down; he should have. He was old. She was good at hearing. Had he cast a spell of some sort—a muffling or silencing enchantment—before coming down the previous night? "I'm gonna go," she said, disentangling herself from the blanket.

"You don't want breakfast?" the old man asked.

Rattle suddenly ceased its clamor and came out of the kitchen, a pot of water dangling at the end of three legs and an empty pan in two others. It looked slowly back and forth between her and the old wizard.

"No, I don't," Skate said.

With a final loud clang, Rattle dropped both the water pot and the pan. Some of the water splashed out onto the stone floor. By the time the pan had settled, Rattle was almost out of view up the stairs, its legs twitching as the bat wings flapped harder than before.

"He likes to cook," the old man said reproachfully. "Even if you're not hungry, you could have let him do the cooking." The old man had not changed his clothes since the previous night; living alone must have left him unconcerned with the normal social niceties of the wealthy.

"Definitely not. I don't know where those legs have been. Besides, it can still cook for you."

"He doesn't cook for me." The old man grimaced, struggling with something.

Gas, she thought, and stifled a laugh. He opened his mouth several times as if

to speak, but instead closed it each time. *He looks like a fish out of water.* She failed to stifle the laughter this time.

"Listen," he said at last, ignoring her snorts, "I have an idea. You've got no home, right?"

"Right, thanks so much for the reminder."

"But you're pretty good at...finding things."

She smiled. "Yes, I'm very good at *finding* things." She leaned into the euphemism, trying to make the old man uncomfortable. It didn't work.

"Well, then, here's a business proposition: If you can find me a new book a week, I'll let you stay here. I've got a room upstairs that Rattle could clear out, one that has a vent connected to this room, so the warmth gets in there. Meals, too—and I promise, despite your protestations: Rattle's clean enough for you." His face had become impassive, a mask.

Skate thought for a moment. She didn't particularly want to live with this strange man, but having an in here could make for a fantastic haul when she decided to cut and run. She guessed Boss Marshall would be happy to hear that, despite her having nothing to show for the previous night. "I 'find' you a book and get to stay out of the cold for a week?"

He nodded. "But it'll need to be one that I don't have. Finding a book I already own is useless to me. And of course, if you get caught, I'll deny everything."

Skate pretended to mull the offer over but had already made her choice; she'd have to be an idiot to refuse the mark's offer to come and go as she pleased. After much feigned deliberation, she spat into her hand and stuck it out. "Deal."

The old man did not spit in his own hand, but he took hers without hesitation. "Wonderful! And welcome, officially, to the residence of Barrison Belamy, Skate. Let me show you to your room."

