

A COMPANY OF THIEVES

MIKE DIXON

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PROLOGUE

The message scrap had left a damp rectangle in Nimbo Dee's palm by the time he reached the guild's back door.

Two words in Tarbot's square hand.

Come now.

Direct summons meant trouble. The absence of a price usually meant Tarbot had not yet decided how much of the trouble he intended to admit to.

Nimbo found him alone in his office, seated behind the broad ebony desk with a bottle open beside one elbow and two clean glasses waiting.

That was worse.

Tarbot only prepared the second glass when he expected an argument.

"Nimbo." The guild master glanced at the clock on the mantel. "You came quickly."

"You wrote quickly."

Tarbot poured the brandy. He did not offer the glass across.

On the desk between them lay a charcoal sketch of a many-sided stone. Even in rough black strokes, the artist had caught something unpleasant in the way its facets met, angles that seemed to turn inward rather than out.

Nimbo lowered himself into the chair.

"What is it?"

"The Diamond of Dravmir."

He knew the name in the way a sensible man knew the names of deep-sea monsters and eastern plagues: well enough to avoid learning more.

"That sounds expensive."

“It is.”

“And cursed.”

Tarbot considered. “Probably.”

Nimbo looked at the untouched second glass. “You’ve always known how to tempt a man.”

A smile almost reached Tarbot’s mouth.

Almost.

“The diamond sits in Malachar Veyneth’s tower.”

The room seemed to contract around the name.

Nimbo leaned back. “No.”

“You haven’t heard the price.”

“I don’t need to hear the price. Men who hear Malachar’s price usually spend the rest of their lives wishing they’d gone deaf.”

“The wizard leaves the city two weeks from tonight.”

“And the tower goes with him?”

“No.”

“Then my answer travels with him.”

Tarbot finally pushed the brandy across the desk. Nimbo left it where it was.

“The guild is opening the contract to the floor,” Tarbot said. “I cannot stop others trying.”

“Then let others die ambitious.”

“They will.”

There was no satisfaction in it.

That caught Nimbo more surely than any promise of coin.

Tarbot turned the charcoal sketch with one finger. On its reverse, someone had drawn the tower in hurried lines: a black spike above the noble quarter, too tall and too thin, as though the city itself had tried to grow a knife.

“The information is incomplete,” Tarbot said. “But there is a way in. Patrol gaps. A weakness in the western face. Some detail on the inner wards.”

“Some.”

“Enough for the right thief.”

“And you think that’s me.”

“I think you’re the only man on my books old enough to mistrust the map and stubborn enough to survive what it forgets.”

Nimbo studied him. Tarbot had given compliments before. They usually concealed a blade.

“Who wants it?”

“The client prefers privacy.”

“Clients always do when the work is likely to kill somebody else.”

“The money is real.”

“So is Malachar.”

Tarbot’s gaze dropped briefly to Nimbo’s hands. Flour still sat pale in the creases of his knuckles from the morning’s stocktaking. The Flying Carpet had been quiet all winter. Quiet enough that Sara had begun moving numbers between ledgers as though changing their order might improve them.

Nimbo curled his fingers beneath the desk.

“How real?” he asked.

Tarbot named the sum.

The shop roof repaired. The winter accounts cleared. Jack and Tina provided for through years leaner than this one. Enough left over that Sara might never again have to pretend she had not noticed an unpaid invoice tucked beneath the tea tin.

It was an absurd amount of money.

Which meant the danger was worse than Tarbot had said.

Nimbo reached for the brandy but did not drink.

“You knew I’d ask who the client was.”

“I knew.”

“And you prepared not to tell me.”

“I prepared to tell you what you need.”

“That is not the same thing.”

“No.” Tarbot’s face hardened by a degree. “It rarely is.”

For a while there was only the clock and the quiet settling of the guild house around them.

Nimbo turned the sketch back towards himself. The charcoal diamond waited at the centre of the page, all those impossible angles leading somewhere the artist had not been able to draw.

“If I take this, I scout it my way. I choose the route, the tools and how I get out. No second crew coming in behind me. No eager apprentice sent through a side door to improve the odds.”

“The night is fixed,” Tarbot said. “Malachar leaves the city two weeks from now. That is the only window you’ll get.”

“I know.” Nimbo tapped the drawing of the tower. “But once I put a hand on that wall, the job is mine.”

“The contract must remain open. Guild law.”

“Guild law can come and scrape the others off the pavement afterwards.”

Tarbot held his gaze. “I can promise no one will knowingly interfere with your attempt.”

There it was.

The narrow wording. The clean place around the lie.

Nimbo should have stood.

Instead, he thought of the coin box beneath the shop counter and how light it had felt that morning.

“Two weeks,” he said.

Tarbot released a breath so quietly another man might have missed it. “Two weeks.”

Nimbo took the tower sketch and folded it into his coat.

“If this goes badly, you look after Sara and the children.”

Tarbot’s answer came without hesitation.

“You have my word.”

Nimbo looked at him for a moment longer, then drank the brandy.

It tasted expensive enough to be an apology.