

- Nightfall: A Matter of Economy - Day 2: 12:00 pm

I turned the artifact over in my hand as I studied it under the monocle. There were several imperfections which, while invisible to the average ignorant observer, were glaring to anyone who had knowledge about such things. I did not have this knowledge; I just knew where to look, because the person who made the fake was sitting before me, and I had the original in my other hand. The fake was simply designed to impress those who wished to be impressed. "Well done," I said, looking up from it to the craftsman who had made it.

I held the Chalice of Turama in one hand, and in the other a well made but obvious fake, which had been put together personally for me by a skilled craftsman named Knowles. It broke his heart to be forced into crafting such blatant imperfections into the replicas, but I wanted to be sure that anyone who had in mind a caper would understand that these were fakes they would be dealing with, and know not to bother. Yes, every artifact in The Circle was a replica, with the exception of the original artwork which would be considered worthless to any save the most open minded art lover. No one would want to steal a painting that cost two gold coins on the street.

I had purchased the Chalice of Turama for a modest price about a week and a half ago from Lord Ursula, who had recently been hit by one or more burglars. They managed to steal just about everything he owned – except for the chalice. Ursula was in great need of liquid assets, so it did not take much bargaining for me to convince him to part with the artifact, in spite of its spectacular nature. The burglars also were given payment for being so generous as to not steal the chalice. If I wanted to display the item in the museum, it had to have been bought legitimately, rather than stolen.

I smiled to Knowles, who was looking at me expectantly, and nodded, saying, "Very good work, and good speed too." I placed both the copy and the original chalice in my travel bag, and dropped a pouch of coins, twenty gold, onto his table. It was the standard fee.

Knowles gave me a half smile as he scooped the payment up. "One of these days, Milord," he said, "you're going to have to ask me to make something real. I am sick of working with lead, glass, and paint. Give me some gold and gems, and I will make anything you wish, something beautiful, something real for your museum!"

I smiled more and shook my head. "Only to have it stolen? But you are right, one of these days, I will have you create something beautiful for me, but if that were to happen, it would be as a gift to an enchanting lady, one so devious as to have stolen my heart, and not for my museum."

Now his half smile turned into a smirk, and he pointed at me,

"and one of these days, Master Nightfall, one of these aristocrats who your thieves are robbing are going to catch on to your little game, and you'll wake up to find your throat slit."

"Is that a threat, Mister Knowles?"

His eyes went wide and he threw his hands up. "What the taff? No it's not a threat! It's just good advice! You're a good man, Milord, you've kept me in business far longer than I would have had you not come along, and I don't want to see you get your blood spilt because you're playing foolish games with villains! Your museum is not worth your life!"

"The chalice was purchased legitimately, Knowles. You have nothing to fear. As for the necklace last week, its owner was Duke Egress, who can't even keep his own staff under control, let alone inspire any form of police action against me. If I felt otherwise, I would have had it disassembled, the gems re-cut, the gold melted down, and each part sold separately for their basic commodity value."

He frowned and shook his head. "I just don't see why you have to be caught up in that villainy in the first place. I try to make an honest living. Sure, it's hard, but at least I sleep at night. At least, I did, up until I started working for you."

"I can appreciate that, and I am sorry. Maybe I should find a new artisan?"

He held up his hands, "I... now that's not fair. Blast, caught me being a hypocrite. Alright, I see your point. No, I need the business, I really do." He let out a long sigh and placed his hands back on the table. "We're all touched by sin here in The City, builder help us," he uttered.

"That we all are, my friend." I reached my hand out to him, my face graced with a slight smile as I looked to him to close the matter. With a slight air of reluctance, he took my hand firmly and we shook. The instant he let go my hand slid along the rim of my hat before drawing it quickly upwards and fitting it neatly on my head. "Enjoy your afternoon," I told him. Finally he echoed my smile as he got the door for me, simultaneously fetching my walking stick from its place of honor in the customary walking stick crock.

"And you as well, Master Nightfall."

The door closed behind me. The leather of my glove groaned faintly as I gripped my walking stick tighter; tapping it firmly on the stone walk before me. I lifted my eyes to the scene; the rim of my hat a dark inverted plateau shielding my eyes from the blue sky above. The Master was afoot in The City.

I launched myself into the streets at a speed appropriate only for one who truly has business at hand. The throngs of humanity parted ever so slightly in my path; these people, these wayward souls who called this place home. All that each of them wished in this very moment, and I

was no exception, was to be left alone to their business, that they may travel unabated by beggar or hawker as they surged this way and that, pushing with great friction against one another – yet not once actually touching – with feet trampling ancient cobblestones, just as millions have before.

The City. A place such as this needed no other name. To most who lived here the word was synonymous with country, with continent. There was naught else to consider; nothing else on their mind. So many a great-great-grandfather had never set foot outside the sheltering walls nor aboard a ship moored at the docks – and great-great-grandson alike. That is what they were content with. That was the stuff of life.

As I walked I lifted my eyes to the handsome structures which towered above the beaten and trodden streets. At the base these buildings were of stone and wood; rough, sturdy, ugly materials fit for the dust and the mud of the traffic below. As the structure climbed to the second and third floors, the stone was replaced with marble, the wood with delicately sculpted ceramic. The separation was as literal as it was metaphoric. Ornately formed window casing framed expertly crafted fields of lead and glass. From these portals gazed privileged eyes; their vision tinted to whichever hue pleased them; arcing above the streets, never a glance below, seeing only one another.

But that was a world pressed between two others. Though down below sprawled the streets and paths of the commoners, above lay another highway – the realm of the thief.

How would life be then, for ones such as these, who hoard and covet, to be visited from one who traveled on the highway above, and then cast into the highway below? How cruel was this? And how evil was I for supporting this? For encouraging this activity to thrive? What hatred did I hide deep within my heart which fueled the flame of joy I felt at the sight of these plump gentle beasts reduced to swine in the streets? What allied me to the wretched scum, the vile bundles of filth who preyed on the comfortable and the happy, that their victim's misery may be their prosperity? What madness was this?

Ah yes, but it could be said either way; who here is the victim? Who holds the greatest misery? Who the greatest prosperity?

Yes, The City. My feet stepped firmly on stone and brick in my path as I worked my way ever closer to my place of business; The Circle of Stone and Shadow. I was a part of this game now; no longer above it, no longer below it. I was in The City and The City was within me. I would go there and sit in my office, and they would come one by one. Look here, one would say; I stole this. Dangerous it was, this thing I did, but I did it knowing of you. Some coin I could have taken; or some naughty gems, but no, this heirloom is what I took. So valuable it is, and so

dangerous for me to have done this, but in you I trust. I know you will buy this from me, give me gold and riches, and keep me hidden from wrath.

And it would be so. A wealthy child would lose their bauble; a thing of priceless value, only because they would have never sold it. A thief so paid for his work now has meat on his table; and a butcher now has coin for grain to feed his livestock. And I? I had more work for Mister Knowles, thus he too is paid, and another item of interest for my museum. My coffers filled as curious observers passed through; a gold to see the painted gallery; a silver to see the long lost crown of some dead lord; a copper to nose through the pages of some old manuscript – perhaps poetry will be of interest today. All of this, because a crook, a wretched example of the worst humanity has to offer, slid into the porcelain domain of the wealthy; one possibly as reviled as he; and stole a bit of metal and stone, valued only for its beauty.

And did I care so little for the bits of glinting treasure which I gathered and displayed? Was there not some shred of appreciation for the beauty, the craftsmanship, which went into each piece? It would be a lie to deny this. However, the goal was not in the gathered, but in the act of gathering. The City held treasures far beyond the value of stone and metal, and I was of mind to gain these treasures. Every day, as they came to trade their spoils for a bit of coin, brought the chance that one of these true treasures would find its way into my hands. For that, all of this was worthwhile.

And then the sanctity of the ebb and flow of the streets was shattered. In an instant, a torrent of violence erupted dead ahead of me. A man, screaming obscenities, was thrust to the ground by an armed soldier; a Gryphon. Beside him, moaning in his pain, was another Gryphon, clutching his bleeding side with one hand, sword still firmly grasped in the other. Lord Canard's men were at work. Two more were then upon the screaming man, beating him with the hilts of their swords and kicking him with their sharp boots. As quickly as it began it had ended. Only for an instant did I see him being dragged away, now silent, before the crowd in the streets closed back in, obscuring their path of withdrawal.

It was only when it was all over did I realize that I had not slowed my pace a step; nor gave an instant's pause. A scene such as this was only barely less common than the usual friction. Soon even I will have forgotten it.

Now the walls of The Circle's court loomed above me, and my journey drew to a close. I passed through the iron gate, held wide for all to pass through, into the brief yard which separated the building itself from its perimeter fortification. Crossing the threshold was like traveling a thousand miles. It was as if the air itself had a different makeup.