

EPISODE 3 – Sworn Duty Pt 1

Ascetics hurry all over Cross Square, sweeping tables, compiling towers of flatbread, stirring up cauldrons of steaming root soup, and rolling in kegs topped off with filtered water. The rush attracts a rapidly swelling crowd of spectators, even the unsavory types like Defiler Street urchins, Bottomland refugees, and newly released prisoners from their labors in the Cleft, just southeast of the Forecourt. They stand in line next to the emaciated Provider families; all of them are eagerly awaiting the massive turbine atop the Church of Saint Zamuel to strike twelve o'clock. That's when the Feeding of the Thousand commences, a weekly religious ceremony draws in visitors from all across Downtown every Sunday. Throughout the day, the Cross Quarter shares its food and water surplus with the poor, faithful, and friends of the Cult.

The mass of people at the base of the Anabaptist cathedral undulated like a ripple across a lake. Hundreds of men, women, and children crammed together in the hot afternoon light in the south-west Anabaptist encampment in Justitian. The fervor of the devout families outside was as palpable to Emissary Zamuel as the incense burning inside the church front vestibule. The tired old man exhaled deeply after finishing his prayer, his senewy flesh flexing tautly into place as he stood from his kneeling position at the deus. The rectory stood in reverent silence as the Anabaptist Orgiastics surrounding him snapped to attention as he rose. Heavy robes lined with fur trim dragged across the frayed crimson carpet as the slow treading footsteps of Emissary [ZAMUEL] approached the front of the Cathedral. A sheathed greatsword was used a type of cane as he shuffled across the carpet. The archway had but one guard off to the right, the Emissary's keeper and closest guard. The mountainous figure nodded respectfully at the Emissary's approach, the leather buckles under his spiked shoulder pads stretched and creaked with age. The nod was returned, and with a swipe of the curtains, his Eminence Zamuel stepped out onto the front Cathedral steps to thunderous applause.

A metal and wood banquet table, 20 meters long, was filled with ample portions of lamb, cabbage, boiled potatoes, and savory spice bread. Each guest at the table had their heads bowed in silence, awaiting the arrival of His Eminence.

Zamuel walked to his seat in the middle of the banquet table. The Church of Saint Samuel rose behind him, a stately bulwark brandishing the Broken Cross symbol of the Anabaptists at the top of the main tower. A low roar grew from the top of the tower as it began to suck in air through its shutter vents. The pitch grew until it hit a crescendo and held it, signifying the top of a new hour. Noon. As every head was bowed, Emissary Samuel began a new prayer, the divine clarity and earnestness in his voice rousing the crowd:

“Lord! We ask you bear witness to this meal of plenty. The sacrificial lamb, the leavened bread, the rich earthen produce. All by our hands granted strength through the Pneuma and Rebus’s divine insight! Amen, and God Bless!”

Fingers in the crowd reach out to touch the negative space between the stacked triangle tattoos adorning their foreheads. Children as young as 5 also reverently repeated the liturgy as everyone at the banquet table pulled up a seat and began to load their plates. With less silverware and adornment, but with similar gusto, the amassed crowd removed haversacks, shoulder bags and cloth totes filled with simple breads, cheeses, and dried figfruit. Pitchers of crystal clear water and clay pots of wine were carefully passed around. Every cup was filled to whet their palates before digging in. Emissary pulled up his chair and seated before being joined by the archway guard, his wide frame stretching far beyond the humble width of the wooden chair’s back. The Emissary spoke heartily, “So, did your family get the special harvest cheese I sent, Uriah?” Sharp green-brown eyes surveyed the crowd for signs of disturbance, and when they’d found none, they settled on His Eminence to answer. “Yes, and I imagine they’ve brought it to this Feat of a Thousand today; why let it spoil?” Uriah replied.

A brief glimpse at a flagon of distillate on the table gave Uriah pause. He gave the Emissary a smile and shifted his eyes instead to the crowd, this time searching for his family.

Uriah saw the tall, graceful shape of his wife, Sara, tending to their young daughter Adina on a blanket in the dirt. Her long shift hid a sleek and athletic physique under the waves of fabric but muscular striations in her shoulders and neck made her stand out among other dutiful wives. Uriah scanned harder to look for his son Isaac, but he was nowhere to be found.

Uriah used a large, gloved paw to scratch his thick red sideburns, distracted by his son's absence. Emissary Zamuel could see the concern on Uriah's face and leaned so as not to talk over the other guests at the banquet table.

"Young Isaac missing a feast with hot lamb and mint herbs?"

Uriah responded dryly, "The rivers Perat and Hiddekel would sooner run dry. He's probably running late from his time with the Ascetics in the grain fields."

The Emissary smiled knowingly, "The scythe and sickle will soon give way to the sword and Spitfire, Uriah. The boy is aching to join the ranks of Orgiastics and fight at your side."

"I know, that is what I'm afraid of..." Uriah let his words hang in the air as he saw the wide shoulders and handsome blonde features of his son emerge from the depths of the crowd to join the mother and child on the church grounds.

Zamuel stayed silent, waiting for Uriah to continue.

"He is as ready to defend the teachings of Rebus as any. My heart swells with pride at the thought..." Uriah exhaled deeply before continuing, "...but my heart also tells me he has more to offer than sword swinging. His destiny seems clouded and what came so easily to me may not...should not...come to him."

Zamuel responded, "The faithful should be so blessed to have leaders like you and I to defend the traditions of Rebus and uphold the family unit. You speak of clouded providence and I agree, not just for Isaac's sake but other wayward brothers and sisters who have lost touch with the Pneuma. Just like you had after your time in Purgare."

Uriah's eyes stayed intently on his brood as he spoke, "And I was thankful to be led

back into Paradise. Shall they be rounded up and compelled for forgiveness as well, your Eminence?"

The Emissary shook his head solemnly as he leaned in a bit closer.

"Wickedness and blasphemy of the most heinous order must be punished. I send you to investigate the defilement and dispel the darkness gathered there. Rumors of a late night rendezvous at Tenkrit's bakery are suspicious but credible from other members of our congregation." Emissary Zamuel dipped his two right fingers into his cup and whispered a small prayer as he coated Uriah's triangular forehead tattoo. "Do this at the command of the 8 Baptists'. God bless you and the illumination you bring to the dark Pneuma. He has turned your hardened heart into a one brimming with love and justice." "Amen." Uriah replied softly. He could feel the thoughts of his family retreat to the back of his mind as the divine blessing upon him made the blood course in his veins. Uriah lived for his destiny every waking moment. An illuminated tool of enforcing God's will. It was all he could do to not pour out his lungs in ecstasy at the table.

Uriah nodded at the old man, the sheen of his silk headband giving off a halo-like aura in the morning sun. The older emissary reached across the table to grab a loaf of bread and broke it in half, giving the other half to Uriah, who accepted it graciously.

Tightly packed favelas and market stands all formed one, giant, ramshackle mass to the north of Cross Square. The Feast of a Thousand had lasted most of the morning into early afternoon but as Uriah walked through the Anabaptist district of western Justitian, there was still very little foot traffic and even fewer Anabaptist out in the streets. The Feast was a holy day, and Anabaptists are encouraged to take the rest of the day off in remembrance and to spend time with family. The long walk to his house on the bank opposite The Harbor gave Uriah time to think about Emissary Zamuel's command. The only bakery he knew of was in Banding Hill. Providers brought weekly grain shipments in from Provider fields to the mill house right next door. The smell of freshly baked loaves always drifted past the temple of Saint Zamuel, tempting all who would break their fast early for some hot bread and butter. Uriah knew of Tenkrit as a man of faith but irregular church attendance.

Perhaps it was best to do some recon first thought Uriah as he continued through the Cross Quarter.

Uriah footsteps carried him along the dirt pathway that led to his family house tucked behind the market stalls and other shanties. He turned a corner to see his beloved, Sarah, tending a small herb garden in raised beds. The small dirt boxes framed the banded wooden door of the brick house. Smoke puffed slowly from the chimney on the side of the building and he looked inside to see Isaac toting a small bundle of wood to the hearth. His daughter, Adina, was tending to the boiling cauldron over the fire, agitating the clothes adding bits of lye flakes and stirring it with a metal ladle. His family working as a unit put a smile on his face.

The chores were finished by sundown and a light meal to supplement the Feast from earlier was set on the table: chunked potato stew with tomatoes and oil on flatbread. The family had eaten their fill when Uriah spoke firmly, "Ike, Adina, please leave your mother and I in private."

Adina, a precocious child, piped up.

"I'm old enough to listen to grown-ups!"

"Then honor us and listen to our request to be alone, dear one," Sarah replied. Adina pouted a bit as Ike took her by the shoulders. He gave his parents a respectful nod as he led her away into the back room past the family dining room.

Uriah's demeanor changed from the caring to grim after his children exited the room. Sarah saw the serious look on his countenance and leaned in as he spoke.

"Emissary Zamuel has made a command. There is evil brewing in the Cross Quarter that must be rooted out."

"And the nature of this evil?"

"Unknown as of yet. Emissary Zamuel mentioned wayward postulates but nothing beyond the drink has kept our brothers and sisters away for long. The worst I imagine has to do with Burn."

Sarah rubbed her brow fiercely as if massaging away a tension headache.

"Burn. Why must this evil substance poach the minds of every generation of family?"

“It is not our duty to question why, my star. The Demiurge’s tendrils worm their way into the earth like vile weeds. Our humble beginnings beg us to tear them out by the root so that true / healthy life may flourish in the abundant soil of life.”

Sarah leaned back in her chair, arms folded. “Well, do we have any clues to investigate?”

“Yes, Emissary Zamuel perceives foul omens at the bakery near Banding Hill. If the situation is as dire as I expect, we should waste no time scouting.”

“Do you think the reserve troops residing nearby are implicated? Most of them have seen horrors I can’t imagine...” Sarah looked at her husband lost in a thousand yard stare. Uriah responded gravely not meeting her eyes. “The horrors are what keep us closer to God’s light. It is the defining line in the sand that keeps our beliefs just and beyond reproach.”

Uriah rubbed his large fingers idly, lost in thought. “Weakness can be overcome, but any Orgiastics or Furors that consort with the Demiurge are no longer brother and sisters of ours.”

Sarah withheld asking any more questions for the moment. “Well, if no more diplomacy is on the table, let’s talk it over more at the Attention Horse.”

Uriah snorted, “I’m sure we’ll find an easy solution to our problems of insurrection and blasphemy by mingling with drunkards. Liquor loosens the lips, as they say.”

Sarah reach her folded arm out to take her husband’s hand in hers. “Just like old times. Our children are smart, we can’t keep our comings and goings secret for much longer.”

Uriah stroked her slender fingers and interlaced his calloused knuckles with hers. “We won’t have to much longer. Ike is ready to bear his own torch and Adina has a head for leadership even at this young age. We must remain careful, but we are blessed.”

“Beyond measure.” Sarah concluded.

Behind the dining room door, Ike removed his ear from the wooden frame. “Corruption among the ranks, Attention Horse, Banding Hill bakery...what the blazes is going on?”

Adina tugged on his cotton shirt. “Come on, Ike! Tell me what they said! What secret mission are Mother and Father going on now?”

Ike smiled at his younger sister. “I’m not sure, Dina. But I aim to find out.”

The air inside the Attention Horse was thick with sweat and smoke. Only fresh breezes from the sealed swinging doors alleviated the stagnant air, if but for a moment. Uriah and Sarah felt the same breeze wash over their face as another drunken Clanner citizen stumbled inside to the bartop. The husband and wife duo made no attempts to hide their faces, but picked a spot out of the main buzz light, opting for a booth in the corner lit with candlelight. The din of the crowd threw bits and pieces of conversation everywhere. There was enough noise to pick up fragments, but never the whole.

“...and the Hellvetics should send one big salvo at the Neolibyan Surge Tanks and *BOOM* African insurrections solved!”

“...if Jehammadans bombed the city once, what is to stop them from doing it again?”

“...sure, the Flotsam carries all the comforts you need and discretely.”

[ROLL SCENARIO]

Uriah is to rolling for Perception to pick out any dialogue about disloyal bastards, forked tongues, and general malignancy cursed upon this already wretched city. Oh, and also *bakeries*

INST+Perception is a dice pool of 6D.

AN 6D

5,4,4,3,1,1

He hears plenty in his little corner of the world, Sarah’s lithe arm draped over his shoulder, smoking tobacco from a corncob pipe. Vulgar and blue language began to supercede the somewhat civil discourse that preceeded it. A stir began in the crowd.

“...and then she swallows it. Your heart will burst out of your chest with pleasure.”

“...the bottom bread shelf lifts up and you’ll see the stairs-“

“—Better a whore’s tongue in my ass than none ha ha!”

Uriah looked up at the mention of a bread shelf, searching unsuccessfully for the mouth that uttered it. Instead, the bawdy interruption of some Apocalyptic guttersnipes behind him made him grunt with rage.

“Save your breath you rotten bastards, always just in the damned way of everything around here” Uriah spat through clenched teeth.

The pair of chuckling Finch Apocalyptics walked into the crowd taunting and jeering as they withdrew.

Sarah stood behind him scanning until she pointed out another Anabaptist looking over his shoulder before leaving through the side exit.

“There,” She whispered to him.

Uriah took his wife’s hand and headed for the door quickly.

The night air cut across their cheeks a second time in as many minutes stepping across the threshold. The pair fanned out and this time Uriah tried again to spot the stranger.

[ROLL SCENARIO]

INST+Perception = 3D.

6, 5, 4, 4, 3, 3

1T

A hood on a figure several yards in front of Uriah blows off as his pace quickened and Uriah caught a glimpse of the man he’d seen inside. Sarah converged on his presence as he moved forward and Uriah searched for any other tri-patterned head marks.

[ROLL SCENARIO]

I’ll rule here that a Cross Quarter patrol of Orgiastics could be in the area. A roll of a 5-6 on a single die will mean some will be around.

6 on the dice roll! Nice, Richter’s getting some backup.

Uriah hears footsteps. Synchronized. Marching. He called out to the passing Orgiastics marching with longswords at their waste. “Brothers in arms! I am Uriah the Emissary’s Hand. Seize that man!”