

Episode 6 Sworn Duty (Part 4)

Twilight's glow was muddled with dust and dirt stirred up by the evening breezes that flowed across the city of Justitian. A tarnished umber sky gave way to magenta clouds across the landscape as the sun dipped below the highest courthouses of Uptown and the Judge's gargantuan armament factory, the Steel Monolith, adjacent to the Forecourt. The last structure to be touched with waning sunlight was the Church of Saint Samuel, its stout concrete walls absorbing the last bits of warmth before the night chill crept in.

[Night, the Cross Quarter]

The Chronicler's loudspeaker announcement dismissing citizens from trade in the forecourt wavered across the low slate and clay rooftops of Banding Hill. Below, a massive silhouette moved under each awning of the shop stands. Two smaller silhouettes followed nimbly behind, careful not to stretch their gaits too far into the streetpole buzzlight and lit braziers that dotted street intersections.

Isaacs forehead was slick with sweat and stray locks of his blonde hair stuck to his skin. He pushed them back as he quickened his pace to keep a single file line behind his father and mother. All three moved with a practiced grace, muscles and nerves taught with anticipation.

Night birds cawed and tittered to each other over the canvas awnings, giving Isaac a minor start. He could see better than he'd ever had at night with a freshly doused headband, almost as if the oils gave him an animal sense. The trio passed a group of sickly beggars being rounded up by a single Spitalian Orderly. The Orderly wore an unenthused look on her face regarding the after-hours cleaning and shots she had to administer, all to make sure these vagrants weren't spreading disease or spore infestation to others.

Once the Spitalian was out of sight, Uriah, Sarah, and Isaac rounded the last corner before laying eyes on Tenkrit's bakery. It was a squared off dark brick building with a rounded dome on the southern side topped with a chimney. The white smoke that poured forth from the bread

furnace stack during the day had tapered into small wisps in the soft evening. The building was 13x10 meters with a wooden addition on the front for customers and deliveries from the mill. Uriah crossed the open street with his wife and son in tow, making a path for the abandoned grain cart for cover on the north side near the customer entrance.

The Anabaptist family stacked up neatly next to the spoked wheels of the cart and Uriah peeked his head around the corner to spy through the small windows.

Inside the bakery, wireframe carts on wooden casters held dozens of loaves of middling bread to be given to the church and poor the next day. Only the freshest bread could be bought and traded for, while the stale loaves from the day before were to be handed out for free as per Justitian city code, not just in the Cross Quarter. The inside was completely dark except for the ambient streetlight that illuminated the baked goods and the front wooden countertop with a hinged flap, granting access to the back of the bakery.

“The inside looks clear. No sentries I can see on duty,” Uriah said softly to Sarah. Isaac saw his mother withdraw a tiny set of flat metal tools from her leather bodice and unfold them. Each tip had a different shape like a hook, fork, and screw. She sidled up to the front bakery door and inserted two of the shapes into the keyhole, fidgeting with her hands all the while. Isaac and Uriah kept their eyes peeled for any passerby who might want to linger too long, but alas, no one came as Sarah worked.

After some handiwork with her lockpick, the handle loosened and Sarah opened the door wide enough for her and Isaac to squeeze through. Uriah backed in, wary of passerbys who could foil their subterfuge. He needed almost every inch of the door’s width to enter without knocking into the frame.

The smell inside the bakery still lingered long after the fires had been put out in the earthenware oven. The smell of sesame and caraway spices hung above each loaf, permeating

the entire bakery. Aprons hung on hooks beside the counter and large burlap bags were piled on top of one another, the seams straining under their own weight. Isaac swung up the countertop flap and held it for his parents as they progressed further inside. To the right were three large metal racks fastened to the floor, and each held wicker proofing baskets. Dozens of dough balls were rolled each afternoon and set for an overnight rise using the residual heat from the oven filling the space. Three wooden tables stood empty next to the large oven opening, dusted with flour and spelt. Streaks and handprints from kneading dough and pounding it into shape dotted each baker's workbench. Some were dainty, feminine, while others were large and masculine. Sarah looked at the bakers' ghostly imprints, a tinge of sadness on her face. She reached out and placed her hand gently into a print that looked roughly the size of hers.

The poisoned ground waits for an honest hand's work, she thought before swiping the handprint away, showering the stained wooden floor with fine, powdery flour.

Isaac stood watch at the counter while his father searched for clues next to the bread shelf racks.

[ROLL SCENARIO]

Uriah is looking for a bread shelf that lifts up to reveal a staircase. At least that is what he overheard in the Attention Horse from an unseen party. He will use his INST+Perception attributes to search for clues or things that stick out.

Difficulty – 2S

AN – 6D

6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 2

Uriah held his hand up for Sarah to stop moving next to the tables and walked around each powdered footprint, careful not to confuse the tread on his boot with others co-mingled on the floor. One streak of flour stood out as it had been shuffled and dispersed to a bread rack in the corner of the wall. Uriah knelt down and wedged a huge paw underneath the wireframe of the bottom shelf, deflating the balls of dough as he rummaged around. He grabbed a corner lined with solid plate metal and lifted up.

The entire bread rack lifted up on hydraulic casters with a spring loaded pivot, and swung out a bit so that it could be swung to the side. The bread shelf revealed a limestone set of stairs reinforced with timbers that descended into pitch black darkness. Uriah tested the steps with a heavy foot before descending a few steps to try and peer through the dark. Sarah and Isaac came up behind Uriah and looked down over his shoulder.

“Do either of you see anything further down?” Uriah whispered.

“Not in this light,” Sarah answered.

Isaac squinted his eyes. He could faintly make out the bottom of the steps some 5-6 meters down and relayed it in a hushed voice to his father.

“Two flights down, father. I think I see...fabric at the foot of the stairs.”

“Gather up and stick close. Sarah you pull up the rear guard and be ready to run if we are overwhelmed. The other exit is the metal door to the right of the oven upstairs. They use it for dropping off wood to stoke the fire. Meet Simeon and the others outside.”

Sarah acknowledged and pulled out the slim stiletto she kept in her hip sheath strapped around brown patched leather trousers. Uriah undid a waterskin from his waist and passed it back toward Isaac.

“Re-douse your headband, son. Let the waters of Perat wash over you.”

Isaac took the container and felt light sloshes inside. Only enough for one dose.

“Father, what about you?”

“I’ll be fine. You will need your eyes fully opened for your first proper taste of combat.

Remember what Simeon taught you and don’t underestimate anybody you see.”

Isaac popped the cork loose and shook some onto the cloth. He let the oils seep into his headband, sweeping his hair back once again and tying a fresh knot behind the crown of his head.

The Anabaptists descended further into darkness, feeling in front of them for handholds on the damp staircase. Uriah reached out and felt rough cloth drapes in front of him. He pushed several fingers through to peel back the veil...

Uriah’s eyes took in sights of carnal sins and heresy fit for the Flotsam or Apocalyptic pleasure house in Justitian. Fifteen or so naked men and women, all adorned with Anabaptist forehead tattoos, lounged on dark cream and crimson throw pillows in candlelight. Thick rugs covered the stone floor and a small altar at the south wall supported a copper bowl atop a black cloth table runner. Heretical imagery painted on the moss covered walls depicted mutant abberants in the wastes swallowing babies whole and swarms of cockroaches crawling from The Council of Emanations mouths. Those in attendance watched silk covered dancers flaunt their bodies with hypnotic, sensual grace. Others were lost in tangles of arms and legs, pleasuring each other and moaning.

Uriah watched as a pallid young girl wearing nothing but undergarments and a tiara made of tiny bones walked up the alter stairs, a vacant look on her face. Scars from former cuts criss-crossed her arms as she held her wrist out over the copper bowl and slashed it, letting the heavy drops of blood drip into the bowl, slowly, then more rapidly as she pressed on her veins. She grew misty-eyed and collapsed at the base of the wicked alter, crimson streams still pouring from her arms. A middle-aged portly man pulled himself off the other men and women with whom he was engaged in sexual congress and emptied a glass decanter of wine into the bowl, mixing the liquids together with a pewter goblet. He scooped a cupful from the bowl, it's foul contents sloshing over the side as he decried drunkenly, "Our cups runneth overs! *hiccup*" "Raise your hearts and lungs to the Demiurge, from whom all cursed blessings flow!"

The crowd cursed and howled in praise, lost in their lust. There were only three clothed members of the orgy below the bakery. Against the west wall two men in leather armor glanced up occasionally at naked breasts and penises while they ran whetstones over their huge Anabaptist longswords, called Bidenhandlers – lengthy iron blades that could skewer two men at once. They groped and kissed the women that rubbed their necks. Uriah strained an ear to listen as they talked.

"Always a nice reprieve to be away from the other Pack members, eh Josiah?"

"Too right Ethan. Laika's box is warm but nothing beats a little fresh strange."

A third man leaned casually against an inverted tombstone bearing the insignia of the broken cross. Atop the cross and broken wheel was a huge skull and jawbone of a Psychonaut. Seeing the head of Earth's plague, the spawn of damnation and sworn enemy of Rebus, being praised in the night sent a large shiver down Uriah's spine.

Isaac grew impatient and wanted to know what his father was seeing. He opened his mouth to whisper to Uriah, but almost as if by instinct, Uriah held up a finger to silence his son. Sarah put a hand on his shoulder to steady him further as he gritted his teeth.

Uriah shifted his weight to see more of the darkhaired man leaning against the sacrilegious artifact. He turned slowly and Uriah could make out the features of Tenkrit, his mark. He leather cape dragged at his heels and a dark blue turban on his head was pulled back at the top of his forehead to reveal a shaved patch of hairline. The crowd stirred and began grunting as Tenkrit pulled his own oil costrel from his belt and sloshed a cloudy, speckled liquid onto his head. Women appeared from either side to massage it into his scalp and he began speaking over the cult mumblings.

“Brothers! Sisters! Scions of Nihil! Our calling was never to be in the fields of wheat breaking our backs for the invalids and the hungry mouths that never give thanks in return.”

“No!” Screamed the crowd

“Our calling was never to deify a man like Rebus: weak, fleshy, with a soul as black as soot.”

“No!”

“Our calling is to prepare for the end of all things. To celebrate the new cycle of life that should’ve claimed the ground we stand up 500 years hence!”

“Yes!”

The chanting was reaching a feverish pitch. Tenkrit’s voice pierced through the chatter.

“Our greatest gifts come from the Demiurge! And we were too spoiled and sinful to know what true deities really are. Burn is our redemption and our salvation. The spores lets us communicate with the one, true, divine.”

“Show us Tenkrit!”

“Tell us what you see!”

The two women retreated from Tenkrit’s side as he gazed up at the fearsome looking skull on the cross. He lifted a hand and stroked the jaw mandible gently as if petting a helpless animal.

“The Demiurge speaks....WE SHALL CRACK REBUS’S BONES AND GRIND THE NEOGNOSIS TO DUST! Deliver your Burn cusps to any empty hand that wants it. Help others to see the truth!”

The crowd cheered madly again as Tenkrit spun around to face them, eyes wide and glassy. Uriah quickly withdrew from his spy hole in the curtain, certain that he wasn’t spotted. That is, until he heard Tenkrit laughing.

“Ha ha ha ha! It seems as if we have a few uninvited guests in our humble abode. A young man and...an imposing figure of man. Uriah the Drowner! I’m surprised I couldn’t smell your drunken stink first. But...I seeee youuuu.”

Uriah furrowed his brow in frustration. How in God’s name could he see his band through the curtains? It made no difference now, they had been spotted. Sarah backed up two steps on the stairs. At least she hadn’t been made out and that could still work to their advantage. Uriah shut his eyes, inhaled deeply and offered up a quick prayer for righteous victory during the pregnant pause. He turned and touched Isaac’s cheek with his gloved mitt. Isaac smiled the same three cornered grin that he had had since he was a boy, now steely certainty replacing the boyish charm.

The curtains were yanked briskly aside as Uriah and his battle brother Isaac stepped into the flickering candlelight.

“Our long lost cousin returning to his true family. A handful of my Scions tell me of your heroic exploits on the battlefields of Purgare. If throwing children into rivers and swamps can be considered heroic!” The crowd jeered at the memory. Uriah stood stock still.

“And he doesn’t even deny it! What a paragon of holiness he is! He probably can’t even remember his drunken campaigns with the old fool Zamuel, and now he is relegated to emptying the old man’s piss pots. Come Uriah, be made new again at the foot of the Demiurge. Forsake this nursemaid and patriarch role and give in to your real desires. Be...in Unity.” Tenkrit gestured to the altar, a pair of women fondling themselves at the base.

Uriah’s eye twitched. The culmination of every old memory he’s had over the past few days hit him like a runaway horse carriage. His hands, for the first time in his life, felt tired.

Isaac shifted his stance as he looked at his father. Something smelled foul in the air beyond the scents of copulation and tobacco. It smelled musty and spicy at the same time.

[ROLL SCENARIO]

Burn has been mentioned before when Uriah suspected it might be at the root of illegal trade within Tenkrit’s secret cadre. He couldn’t have known that these fallen Anabaptists would be using it regularly in their celebrations of evil. Burn comes from fungal blooms gathered in sprawling spore fields far outside settlements on the edge of inhospitable wilderness. The Spitalians spend their lives trying to sanitizing spore fields to keep Burn from being harvested but it is a never ending battle, and some is bound to slip through the cracks. Once cracked open, Burn cusps produce spores that can be inhaled to various effects. For this episode, I’ll rule that the spores are dense enough to permeate the air, causing Uriah’s mind to be clouded. He’s recognized the effects before from his wartime experience, but it has been decades since he’s trained his mind against such an ephemeral foe. He’ll be rolling a PSY+Faith roll to try and resist the spores, coupled with the honeyed words of Tenkrit and his haunting memories. I’ll rule that

the proximity of his family gives him an extra 1D but It's no understatement that this is a critical role.

Difficulty – 3S

AN – 7D

6, 6, 3, 3, 3, 1, 2

Uriah lumbers toward the alter, mind reeling with a flood of emotions. He can see the pained faces of people he drove his sword through in the battlefields. He hears the screams of the women as their mutant children, deemed unworthy to live, are wrestled from their clutches. He so longs to be rid of his burden of guilt, he seeks refuge in the Demiurge with a clouded mind. Even the protests from Isaac sound muted to his ears as he blinks slowly, marching past the fold of nude heretics on the ground.

Isaac burned with rage. He took a step after his father and tugged on his huge bicep only to be cast off.

Tenkrit laughed at Isaac splayed out on the stone. "Patience young one. Your turn will come and there is plenty of room in the tendrils of the Demiurge. Keep breathing in and out..."

His father was twice as big as he was but Isaac knew pain still cut across all sizes. He leapt to his feet and drew his sword quick as a flash. He maneuvered around his father's left side and slashed upward, severing his father's two left fingers. Isaac fought back tears as his father roared in pain, grabbing his mangled hand.

"Father, come back to us!" Isaac cried.

Josiah and Ethan dropped their whetstones and pushed away the women. They were on their feet, brandishing their huge cleavers. Tenkrit drew his longsword too, as the mood in the

chamber shifted from mocking to murderous. “There’s nothing you can do to save your father. He has been lost for decades. You will join him in death and your souls will be forfeit to me, Scion Supreme!”