

EPISODE 8 PROTECT AND SEVER

[The city of Exalt, Night, December 15th, 2409. 336 years after Eshaton

Blankets of ice and unrelenting cold winds battered the two Judges on guard in the central plaza. They had their collars upturned, rubbing their hands for any semblance of warmth in the blizzard. Tapered concrete buildings inlaid with geometric designs buffeted the wind near the residential areas and livestock pens but in the open stretch between the Exalter's mezzanine and the fabrication mills, there was no reprieve. One judge bumped the other with his elbow, gesturing toward a shape in the whiteout. A hooded figure approached through the icy haze, plastic cape billowing in the wind like a charcoal sail. The two judges turned to square themselves against the oddity that closed the distance and held onto their wide-brim hats to keep them from flying off their heads.

The chronicler Metatag stopped a few feet short of the two men and gave a singular nod. The chronicler handed over a package wrapped in oiled cloth. Through the feedback of their amp, they shouted "The Testament!" and disappeared again in the swirling snow without turning back. The Judges unwrapped the splotchy cloth and looked down in wonder at the First One's travel diary, holding his collected experiences, epigrams and pages full of hand written paragraphs. It was the words of The First One, the Hammer of the Wastes, the first wandering Judge who brought justice to the scattered clanners of Borca. The knowledge of a just life and the testament to his successors, collected in tiny, scratchy script on greasy pages. In the years to come, the book would unite the Judges and serve as the foundation upon which they erected the Protectorate's law and order. Soon, every Judge in Borca had a copy of the Codex and followed it's edicts when separating the innocent from the guilty. Others analyzed the book, interpreting and deciphering the countless fragmentary articles. Practitioners and theorists arose in time to add and delete passages for their own machinations. But for the time being, the context of these passages. These memes allowed Judges to fight for justice and integrity in correspondence with the First Judge's cause.

[The city of Justitian, mid-morning, 190 years later]

A beautiful day in the city, a rare summer day without scorching heat. Shoulder to shoulder merchant stalls traded goods and services as a functioning daily clockwork in the Righteous Fist of the Protectorate. Suddenly, raised voices caused a stir at a Scrapper stall in .

“Judges! Someone! Come catch this petty scum!”

The apocalyptic Magpie, Tuco, raced through the crowded backstreets of Brennan, bumping and shoulder ramming any passerbys unfortunate enough to stand in his way. He rounded a corner and put his hands on his knees, sucking in air to alleviate the stitch in his side from sprinting. He heard heavy footfalls reverberating off of the surrounding dusty brick walls and started off again heading further north through Brennan into the Stukov Quarter. The [RANK]’s heartbeat pounded in his ears as he bounded off of loose debris and trash strewn about the thin alley. Peeking over the rooftops and clotheslines were the open parapets of The Old Fortress in the Stukov Quarter.

Nowadays, little remains of Stukov’s splendor. Only the Old Fortress is still enthroned in the center of the district, jutting forward like a relic of a time long past, incapable of adapting to the constant modernization of the city around it. Defiantly, the fortress sits on the banks like a stubborn child refusing to grow up, like a distant memory that no one wants to reflect on. Several entrances secured with rusted portcullises lead into the narrow compound. Alleys snake their way up the small hill, over to the watchtowers and battlements. The houses are carved from rough granite and coated with blooming red lichen, with stubborn ivy entangling the brickwork. Three main buildings divide the Old Fortress and are surrounded by a multitude of adjoining side wings and warehouses.

The slippery Magpie ran through an open portcullis past several artisan stalls. The proprietors of each were in the front of their shops, tending to customers buying tailored clothes, repairing shoes at the cobbler, or updating their favorite cartographer with news

on Scrapper caches found in the desert wastes beyond the borders of the city. The Apocalyptic was breathing harder now, still looking over his shoulder. He shuffled off the main thorough fare and ducked into a small tannery. The smell of tannins, oils and limewater made him sick to his stomach, already queasy from running, but he held his breath and craned an eye to look through a knothole in the tentpole supports. Only dust devils and the odd Justinian crossed his field of view.

I think I lost her he thought. He reached inside the satchel lashed to his waist and touched the rigid edges of the e-cube power bank. He bit his lower lip in satisfaction and cinched the satchel shut again. He relaxed his shoulders a bit and adjusted his disheveled clothes, stepping back out into the daylight. He strode back across the street, headed for a narrow exit in the fortress wall to the west when he heard a voice that made him freeze in his tracks.

“Tuco, tsk tsk tsk” the female voice said behind him. “You have too much confidence for a fat and stupid slob. Empty the bag and show me your hands.”

The Apocalyptic, Tuco, unshouldered the bag with his stolen item inside and held it out in a gloved hand. He unfastened the rope cord that tied the bag closed and turned it upside down. The metal cube caught a brief shimmer in the daylight as it landed in the sand and rock below.

“Thieving an e-cube for the black market at the Flotsam eh? Looking to cash in on a few nights with some of Hector’s girls?”

Tuco swallowed a frog in his throat before speaking. “Listen Jungbau...”

“That’s City Judge Jungbau to you, you fucking thief.”

“City Judge Jungbau, we’ve played our cat and mouse game for a while now. Nobody’s been hurt from lightening pockets on occasion and you’ve got the goods back. How’s about letting me off? I’ll be sure to tell the others not to encroach on your patrol route.”

The judge walked casually up to the Apocalyptic and kicked him behind his knee, causing him to falter. He clenched his fist and whipped around for a strike, judgement be damned. “You miserable bit-“ The threat stayed in his mouth as he now saw the burnished head of a judgement hammer held aloft at his temple, it’s deadly weight evidenced by the judge’s tightened grip on the dark wooden handle.

“You stand accused by eye witness citizens in south Brennan of breaking commandment 7. Leave to Others What is Theirs!”

Tuco stayed silent, fuming at being caught.

“Show me your hands or lose both, thief,” The judge commanded.

Tuco shot a murderous glare at Judge Jungbau and ripped a stictched leather glove off of his left hand. Patches of vermillion red and ochre yellow stains on Tuco’s knuckles and fingernails were evident even in the bright sunlight. The patches of color were fading across the top of his palm, but the five digits still had bright splotches in between the folds of the skin.

“You jumped back into the game too soon, methinks,” the judge mused. She removed her wide-brimmed hat and used the back of her long sleeve to mop the sweat from her forehead. A short crop of black hair fell to either side of her ears and she tucked the hair back under her hat, flicking the brim for punctuation. Another judge, a jurymen, trotted around the corner, panting heavily. “Judge Etta...I finally...caught up to you...I lost...the perp...back in Brennan,” he said with a wheeze.

She stood up tall, barely winded from the footchase, and patted her jurymen in training, Fellik, on the back. “You flushed him right to me, Fellik. Well done.”

Fellik gave a weak salute as he sputtered in the dust. Etta pulled a small leather booklet from her breast pocket and leafed through a few pages before finding the edict she needed to carry out sentencing on the spot:

From the Codex: Commandment 7, Section 2, Article 3 commands that all stolen goods be relinquished to the Judges. Judge Etta Jungbau presiding for preliminary judgement Para Primus Inter Pares. Persuant to Article 5, the accused has already been marked for theft and will therefore not be granted clemency. Punctum!” she announced loudly as a small crowd of onlookers gathered, whispering to each other in awe of the scene.

“On your feet Tuco. I’ll be fair and give you a choice to ponder on while you’re marching to public castigation: We can break your left hand now or we use it for 3 months in the Cleft.”

Tuco scowled but held his tongue.

“Fellik, bind his hands,” Etta ordered. Fellik pulled a pair of manacles from underneath his duster and approached Tuco, still on bended knee. In his kneeling stance, Tuco drew a crude shiv from his boot and stabbed at Fellik’s ribcage as he fiddled with the manacles.

[ROLL SCENARIO]

Tuco – BOD+Melee 1S

6, 1

Etta – PSY+Reaction 2S

6,6,3,2

The knife tip barely punctures Fellik's diaphragm and he yelps. Etta stands over Tuco with a fierce twisting grip on his wrist. He drops the knife in the sand and she kicks it aside. Fellik puts one hand on his belly and shakily grabs Tuco's empty hands with his other, clasping the metal shackle over his forearm. Etta grabbed him by the collar and forced him forward.

"It's a long march to the Uptown court, Tuco. I'd advise against any further violence against court representatives to make sure you arrive there in one piece," she said gruffly.

The gathered crowd gave the judges and their captive a wide berth as they made their way East to the Uptown Elevator.

Steam vents from open shafts and tubes hissed violently as Steel gears the size of horses and multi-tonne counterweights on thick chains rattled in their guides as the Uptown elevator reached its final rising height, 60 meters above the Forecourt. With a jolt, the platform sets into the docking bay as the gear pins are locked into the teeth for stabilization. Etta, Fellik, Tuco, and a mix of 3 dozen other citizens unload from the massive diamond-plated platform.

A Judge Assessor greeted a few of the citizens with a rubber stamp in hand to catalogue different types of summons and confirm proof of new citizenship.

A pair of Chronicler Observers (1 to count, 1 to verify) took diligent headcounts of every person getting off of the platform into Calendar Square. Once their tally was complete, they spoke into handset radios clipped next to their source modules. Chain monkeys and ropers ran to and fro, preparing for the elevators again for descent. A new group of people leaving uptown boarded the platform and the safety gates were closed behind them. After a clearance hand signal to the control cockpit and a sudden jerk, the platform roared beneath their feet and slowly sank down out of sight.

[Mid-day, Uptown]

Etta breathes in air much fresher than the dust-choked atmosphere of Downtown. The low cloud cover paints the road to Judgement Alley with fast moving shade on the way to Judgement Hall. Supreme Judge Archot's, the Colossus, casts a punishing and unyielding gaze on all who cross it's path. There's no clamor or excessive noise like below in the Forecourt, as everyone follows along unquestioningly in the maximum security zone of the Judiciary.

Past the elevator check point, the whole area teems with movement. Etta spies a platoon of Spitalian Famulancers marching in lockstep from Judgement Hall towards the square with their Splayers held high, black banners with the eight pointed cross flying in the wind. Other Judges set off from the Barracks nearby on horseback and on foot, ready to bring more scum to Justice in the pits below. Fellik checked his hands for signs of blood flow from stab wound in his belly.

"It didn't penetrate too far, Judge Etta. I should be ok to attend the hearing for this guttersnipe."

"I admire your fortitude, Jurymen Fellik, but I think you're more likely to incur damage from Senators and custodians if you get blood on the clean floors of Judgement Hall. I dismiss you to the Barracks to get that cleaned and dressed. I will handle this one."

Fellik nodded at Etta and broke away, falling in behind several Judges headed toward the Barracks to wind down after their patrols.

Etta and her charge crossed the long boulevard to Judgement Hall, walking into and out of the tall shadows Supreme Judge concrete busts lining Judgement Alley. A wide multifaceted granite and polished stone building sat distinct against the open skyline. Arched panes of stained glass on the second floor took the brutalist edge off of the structure, but the imposing stone entryway greeted every visitor with the old Latin message "Per Aspera, Ad Astra" or "through hardships to the stars". It is the unifying

maxim of the Cult, the one latin phrase that every low-ranking Vagrant must learn on their first day.

Amber glass braziers burned brightly at the top of Judgement Hall staircase and the heat from the knee-high circular firepits radiated far along the staircase for people to stay warm, even in the shade of a cool and crisp evenings.

Etta led Tuco through the front corridor to the main reception where wood and metal teller windows allowed guests and members of the Judiciary to receive assistance from Assessors and Arbiters. Etta approached an Arbiter's window, keeping her gloved hand firmly on the rolls of Tuco's pudgy neck.

"Good afternoon Arbiter Othello. I'm requesting to hold this arrested man for further questioning as it relates to an Apocalyptic e-cube theft ring. Punishment for larceny is forthcoming: quia quod notam non defluxit. Eyewitnesses have been notated and catalogued for an Assessor's seal."

She withdrew slightly crinkled and dirty tan pages from her chest pocket within her coat and passed them through the window. The Arbiter smiled and stamped her pages before placing one in a two-tiered filer by his desk, already filled to the brim with other legal paperwork, and handing the other back to Etta.

"Good, good, good. City Judge Etta, always dotting the is and crossing the ts." Arbiter Othello gestured to two muscly Protectors who filled in the gaps between the windows. They each took an arm of Tuco, who sullenly resigned himself to follow.

"However, you may not have time to question him. You're presence has been requested by City Official Jungbau in the Office of Locality."

Etta looked up from stowing her remaining papers.

“For what reason? I’m on duty now.” She said huffily stuffing them into her breast pocket

“Well...ahem...it is a matter of reassignment as I understand it.”

Etta squeezed the thick leather belt around her waist to adjust her pants.

“I suppose I should go now? Will my supervisor be made aware of my absence?”

“Hmm, yes. I delivered the letter to Protector Kant this morning. I thought he would’ve found you to deliver the news by now, which is why I have the gentle reminder seeing you here.”

Maybe I didn’t want to be fucking found Etta mumbled under her breath. She straightened her clothes again before sighing and turning on her heel to leave.

“Thank you Arbiter Othello. Have a nice day.” She gave a small wave over her shoulder as her leather coat flapped behind her.

On my way, Father. I simply can’t wait to be raked over the coals: first for tardiness, the second for whatever else I’ve failed to accomplish in his eyes. Give me temperance and virtue, Mom.

Etta’s footsteps echoed across the main corridor as she walked back to the Uptown boulevard outside. She passed the vast Judgement Hall mural etched in granite and carefully painted on the interior walls. The imagined utopia depicted the first Judge, a shining, central figure pacifying the peoples of the Black Lung, reaching out with leather bound Codex and Hammer in hand.