

Episode 10: The Road to Ignatz

(Before dawn, outside the city of justitian, the southern Rubble)

Etta triple checked the contents of her packhorse's leather satchels slung over the side as Protector Gregor Kant leaned against the bottom of a water tower ladder.

The sheet metal bolted to the rungs further up flexed under his weight, but was rigid enough to thwart desert thieves who would attempt to climb to the top for unauthorized ration access.

Protector Kant spit a wad of tobacco on the ground, the saliva instantly coalescing with the grime and dust. He wiped his mouth with the back of his blackened leather glove and stretched his arms above his head, content to lounge about in the soft morning glow.

Etta's constant movement made the Protector suck through his teeth.

"Quite yer pacin' Etta. You're on time, so what are you worried about?"

"I'm pissed off that I have to wait here for my other charge while day light is burning."

"Well, get used to it. Justitian moves at the speed of bureaucracy. Papers need to be signed, Drafts printed, and Chroniclers need to stick their dicks in an e-cube port to charge before they leave," He said with a greasy smile.

Etta rolled her eyes and shrugged off the comment.

"Aren't Chroniclers supposed to be punctual? Don't they have their days timed down to the second?"

"So the rumors say. I've never had to travel with one before and I don't envy you. Just remember to sleep with one eye open, else it's liable to suck out your life force to power it's internal clock."

Etta crossed her arms, "You keep calling them "it's" Protector Kant. Don't you think it's a

little detached and disrespectful? They are human, after all.”

“Hardly. Freaks, deviants, and killers barely make the grade. That’s why I endorsed penal duties in the Cleft, where all of those things should wind up.”

“Your diplomacy is sorely lacking Protector.”

“That’s why I’m entrusting the younger generation with big and bright ideas to handle this detachment,” Kant said sarcastically.

Etta turned her attention away from Protector Kant and patted her horse on its thick haunches. A flash of orange and yellow raced up the ground toward Etta’s feet as the new day began to dawn over the vastness of the dunes on the horizon.

Upon entering the Rubble, it is only a half day’s walk until one reaches the mighty Justitian. Once upon a time, this region was covered with the shattered cities of the Bygones looming eerily out of the crater ashes. Now it’s nothing but ruins.

Every block of cement has been salvaged, every steel beam melted down, and every shard of glass recycled. For centuries the peoples of the Black Lung ravaged this area, pulverising their own history to build new cities from the plundered remains. The Rubble has retained only its name.

After the fall of Exalt, people returned to this area. Judges enforced the recolonization with peasants who were supposed to dig up and plow through this battered strip of soil. The crops grew and so did their families. The peasants are now called Providers, and the fruits of their labor would make the young city prosper.

Now the yellow wheat fields sway against a steel-gray sky. Beaten paths lead past fortified farmhouses and stables that sprout from the landscape like weeds. In the distance, cylindrical silos rise into the air, bristling with the eight-legged cross of the Spitalians. The silos contain poisons and pesticides to protect their harvests from vermin even at the cost of their own health.

Those who come to Justitian from Liqua are greeted by a dozen colossal water towers that ascend from the barren plain in the southern areas of the Cross Quarter and whose

precious contents ensure Justitian's survival.

Some of these cisterns have a diameter of more than a hundred paces, and rise thirty meters into the sky. The broken cross is emblazoned on the metal-clad outer hulls, ensuring that every newcomer understands who controls the water supply.

Massive concrete pipelines plow through the ground, branching off to finally fan out in small side arms towards the Rubble and Downtown. At junctions, pressure gauges and shut-off devices are mounted to seal off individual segments in the event of a leak or impact. There are tapping possibilities every hundred steps: fist-sized connection rings for hoses with a screw clamp. Once locked in place, token keys must be inserted to open the valves of this pumping system that were installed by the Chroniclers. Water tokens can be purchased through Village Juryman or from the Office of Civil Economics in Uptown.

Etta returned to her pack horse with a small canteen of fresh water from the mammoth tanks and let the animal drink it's fill. She tossed the a token key back to Kant who caught it coolly in one hand and hung it around his neck.

The smacking lips of the horse waivered. Etta turned to see a silent silhouette emerging from around the corner of a water tower and she heard her horse whinny beside her.

[Roll Scenario]

Taming

Difficulty – 1S

AN – 2D

5, 3

Etta quickly grabbed the reins of her horse as it reared from being startled. She calmed the beast, patting its chin and muzzle. Rays of light reflected off the metal water tower to illuminate the face of Sudo, the Chronicler.

Sudo crossed in front of Etta and handed a wax-sealed envelope to Protector Kant. Kant snatched the envelope and opened it indelicately, tear it down the side and sliding out the paper within.

"If you make it a habit of sneaking up on Piotr, we are going to have problems traveling together." Etta said sternly as her boss read the letter. Sudo remained silent, not meeting Etta's gaze.

Protector Kant removed the moist tobacco from his lower lip and use the remaining wetness on his finger to put a dingy signature at the bottom of the letter. "My official

seal," he said grinning at Sudo, tobacco staining his beard stubble under his lip.

"Judge Etta, this is Chronicler Sudo-19. I don't think it talks, but according to this letter, it has enough battery storage on the digi pad to type common English for the entirety of the trip. Sudo carries a vocoder to scare any stray Gendos and.. "

Protector Kant paused for a minute, squinting his eyes to make sure he read correctly, "...requires complete privacy when taking in sustenance. Jesus..." he continued on, "Affirmative is relayed through one radio click, negative in two. Did I get all that right?" *radio click once*

"There, ya see Etta? You're gonna have a nice quiet walk on the way to Lucatore. Plenty of time to take in the sights and sounds."

"Wonderful." Etta sighed.

Protector Kant stuffed the envelope inside his leather coat pocket and came up shoulder to shoulder with Etta. He dropped some of the grit layered in his voice and spoke plainly to his contemporary. "Listen, this ain't the overnight camping trip anyone wants on their first go outside Justitian. Heed your training, sleep with one eye open, and remember: you're the god damn law around the Protectorate. The Alpine Fortress is where your jurisdiction stops and even then, be diplomatic around new faces."

"It's what you sent me to Lucatore for, after all. I might as well get some practice in." Etta said.

[Kant reached around the side of his leather holster at his waist and brought up an open palm. Two spiked brass balls the size of small grapes and match papers lay in the center. "Something for your first rotation out. [[types of bullet grain for muzzle loaders]] powder match grain. A sweet little thing to have for when diplomacy becomes...difficult.]

Etta accepted the gift and clapped Protector Kant on the shoulder. "Keep cracking the whip in the Cleft. You headed to the Ice Barrier next month?

"Sure am. Got a new batch of Clanners that tried to siphon water from Liqua in a theft ring. We'll give em all they can drink...once it melts," he said with a wicked smile.

Etta grimaced but nodded her head as he sauntered off back toward the city, leather trench coat flapping in the breeze behind him.

Etta turned to face Sudo who was staring directly at her.

“Etta Jungbau,” she said, gesturing to herself. She stuck out a hand for Sudo to take but all Sudo did was stare down at the gloved hand. Etta withdrew it and adjusted her own holster and pistol around her waist. The glint of the polished steel barrel flashed across Sudo’s goggles.

“Well, since you can’t, or won’t, talk, I can do nothing but offer advice and provide protection on this detachment. We are to reconnoiter with some Spitalians outside Ignatz. They’ll resupply us for the remaining short trip to Cathedral City. We’ve got a ways to go until the Ignatz crossroads and an additional 30 kms until we get within earshot of Anabaptists. If I give an order, you are to follow. I’m sure we’ve both received our orders from higher ups so let’s do save them a few headaches by listening to each other and we’ll get along famously. Any questions?”

two radio clicks

“Good. Then let’s get a move on.”

Etta clicked her tongue for the pack horse, Piotr, to follow, the reins hanging loosely in her practiced hands. Sudo cocked her head to the side and shuffled behind silently.

Three sets of tracks made impressions in the sand as the great city Justitian, bastion of civilization in the Black Lung, shrank further and further behind.

Etta has a path marked on a map of the Protectorate and it is a 45km haul to get to the Ignatz crossroads. The pack horse helps overland travel and the duo won’t have to expend any of their Ego points to push their limits on the fortified roads laid down over the decades. That may not be the case if they need to outpace an approaching sand storm or trudge through the muck of a Purgaran swamp, but we’ll cross that bridge (or bog) when we come to it!

Overland travel mechanics are detailed in Artifacts and Katharsys rulebooks. I’m calling Piotr a Gaited Horse whose max speed is 1. Add 1 to 5 in the Mount Travel Speed formula in Artifacts to get a 6 km/hr Travel Speed. Multiply Travel Speed by 8km to get the product of Travel Distance per day. Travel Distance for humans is measured by Adding their BODY skill plus Stamina Attribute and multiplying by 5.

The North Borcan desert lay before Sudo and Etta, stretching ever on to some unknown horizon. Signposts dwindled more and more the more as the road winded, all pointing in

the opposite direction the pair were headed. Wind flowed over the tops of grassy plains and to the west, simple crop plains of Providers could be spotted. Tiny human shaped dots bent over sowing and reaping the harvest that provided the food supply to the city further north.

The zenith of the sun had come and gone over the course of their day travel, passing the 15km signpost stuck by a random brick wall and horse hitching station to the side of the rode. Etta still felt fresh, good for another 3-4 Km and the Sudo's presence had faded to the back of her mind as she enjoyed stretching her legs on the fortified road. Her pace was naturally quick to match the stride of Piotr, bolstered by her time spent sprinting through the narrow alleys of the Defiler Streets. It had been a few minutes since Etta had spoken to herself out loud.

"Ah, the infrastructure of the Judiciary and her allies is really a marvel. Don't you think?"

****radio click three times****

"What in the hell does three clicks mean..." Etta began as she turned round to see Sudo seated upon the brick hitching post several meters behind.

"Hey, are you alright?"

click

"Well then let's keep moving. We should at least make another signpost before we stop for the day..."

click click

Sudo was bracing herself on the brick wall. She was trying not to show any weakness after keeping up with Etta's quick pace, but she had almost hit her physical limit, nearing exhaustion.

[ROLL SCENARIO]

Etta's going to make an empathy roll to see if she should push Sudo to keep moving before stopping for the day. the difficulty gets bumped up since Etta can't see Sudo's face and the chronicler certainly isn't going to be any help vocalizing her needs at the moment.

Difficulty - 2S

AN - 4D

4,4,2,2

Etta doubled back with Piotr and as she got closer to Sudo, she could see the heavy rise and fall of Sudo's chest. Slight feedback was creeping from Sudo's vocoder tubes under the mask and Etta swore it sounded like labored breathing.

Etta undid the food pack, sleeping bags, and other kit from Piotr's saddle bags. In a few minutes a small campsite was set up. Sudo took a seat on top of a folded up blanket and crossed her legs.

"The sun will be down soon. Let's set up camp here behind the brick wall. I could murder some dried mutton. Are you hungry? Do you need your...privacy?"

click

"I see. Well, I'll be over behind the cactus for the next hour. No need to use fuel tonight for fire tonight, it was warm breezes all day."

click

Etta chuckled. "I wish life was that simple for me. Just "yes" and "no". Judges have to deal with shades of grey every day, but I'm sure Chroniclers have their own struggles.

Silence.

"Have it your way. My first experience out of Justitian and I get a dial tone for a traveling companion."

The cactus skin was a drab olive color, even in the warm dusk glow. Etta used a small penknife to cut a strip of the succulent and rub the inner flesh across the back of her neck. She closed her eyes as she relished the cooling sensation and once the flesh was squeezed out completely, she chuckledd it over her shoulder.

She stuck a salty piece of dried mutton into her mouth as her eyes refocused on the heat waves rising up from further south across the plains. A lone figure off the beaten path perhaps a kilometer away was moving slowly in her direction. The figure was bent slightly at the waist, like the Providers she'd seen earlier in the day but it seemed to be pulling something behind it.

“Pssh. Scrapper haul.” She said as she chomped down on the sinewy dried meat.

After a half hour or so, Etta headed back to the camp spot. Sudo was in the same position she was in when Etta left, except she had her digital wrist pad open typing with one hand. A twig snapped under Etta’s boot and Sudo’s perked up. She swiped down, hiding the text on her wrist.

“Don’t worry, I’m not looking over your shoulder. I couldn’t even read text that tiny anyway.”

Sudo uncrossed her legs and stretched out on the blanket uncoupling her vocoder and pulling her hood up over her head. She hooked her index fingers underneath both sides of her mask and pulled down to unseal it. The darkness of the hood hid her features from Etta. The City Judge simply shrugged and stretched out on her own bed roll, propping her feet up on a nearby rock for some additional comfort.

All I know is that that Scrapper better not wake me up before the sun or else there will be hell to pay she thought as she put her wide brimmed hat over her eyes and fell asleep.