

# Episode 12: Lukewarm



Settlement Sinder - place where Kiefer was dropped off, traded? The nomadic cycle approaches its southernmost point at a salt lake a little more than half a day's journey north of Sinder

## **[2582, 16 years ago, 8km south of the Stukov Desert border]**

A stiff breeze ruffled the heavy curtain drapes lashed to the window sill planks. The air inside the small hut was stifling. Kiefer Stukov peeled open his eyes.

He laid on the thin ratty cot and stared up at the ceiling, slate and wooden roof slats cracking under the stress of the heat outside. A large rag draped over his drenched forehead helped trap and recycle some of his sweat to keep him cool. The rest of his body was mostly bare, tanned skin, except for the dark ruby colored leg wrappings, cloth girdle, and rope sandals. His chest and shoulders were broad and defined from a life spent migrating through the perilous and unyielding Stukov desert.

"Soon rise. Ground run. Scorpo prize," he said in a broken desert clanner cant. He closed his eyes and breathed in the sultry air, tingling his nostrils.

He rustled his brown hair as he reclined, and fine red dust shook loose and drifted through air, creating crimson vortices at each movement of his hand through the russet waves on his head. Red dust settled onto his colored clothing and blended it seamlessly.

The drapes were pulled back from the outside, flooding the hut with sunlight and cascading more scarlet sediment into the air.

Kiefer propped himself up on his elbows and saw the sunlit faces of his great-grandmother, Fenix Stukov, and the shaved head and thin lips of Registrar Moran outside the window. Fenix motioned for Kiefer.

"Come. Hunt scorpo prize."

Kiefer smiled and sprung from the fraying cot. He grabbed his spring metal bow and small belted quiver and ran outside to meet them. The group left the ramshackle hut behind them and traveled through the center of the settlement.

Swaying signage on other shanties and a guidepost at the center of the small community was caked in the same red dust as Kiefer's hair and clothes. Through the sandy lettering, one could make out Sinder, the name of the hamlet on the northernmost fringe of the Protectorate.

Sinder was barely a colony as the Judiciary saw it, but 4 years into Supreme Judge Archot's tenure and it had remained unmolested. The victory at Siege at the hands of the Judges had sent a shiver through the spine of Borca and all the scattered clanners were reluctant to incur the new leader's wrath for such a petty settlement.

Fenix, Kiefer, and Moran passed simple fruit stands in the market and waved off pushy vendors peddling their granite statuettes of the First One and bronze coins with Latin phrases etched on the backs.

"Walk in the footsteps of the first law bringer! Flip this coin on the executioner's block in the square and receive good fortune!"

Fenix and Kiefer completely ignored the vendors as Registrar Moran was mobbed.

"Piss off!" he spat and shouldered through the merchants.

The trio made their way to the edge of town, treading on souvenirs and paraphernalia left to crumble in the soil as a dusty haze covered the town and their tracks behind them.

A small encampment was already set up in a rock dirt patch opposite an ossified tree, in anticipation of the Stukovs and Moran's arrival. Stepping into the shade dropped the temperature by a few degrees and kept the hot breezes at bay. Kiefer looked about in wonder and amazement at the medical and telemetry tools setup inside tents and under lean-tos. Hooded Spitalians and the odd Chronicler among the crowd took readings and notated findings on clipboards and digital pads.

Moran caught Kiefer's bewildered gaze and spoke over his shoulder to Fenix interacting with a Pharmacist behind him. The Registrar's narrow eyes focused intently on the physique of Kiefer, his potential revealed in every striation of muscle across his arms and legs.

"He seems interested in our equipment. Tell him his skills make up for inadequate – or failing – machines."

Fenix walked up and patted Kiefer on the shoulder. He smiled broadly.

"New found and chrome. Humming, sparking. Ground and gain know-how?" he said, curiously.

Fenix returned her great-grandson's smile, the lines on her dark leathery face stretching in the corners of her mouth as she spoke.

"Ground run and hunt more than humming and sparking. Ground and show know-how to new ally."

Kiefer smirked, with a gleam in his eyes.

"Yes. Scorpo prize on vow," he replied confidently. He pulled down his cooling rag he used earlier over his face, turning it into a blood red balaclava with slits in the sides and face mask to allow venting. The excess material was unraveled and flowed freely as a small side cape to prevent chafing and slipping of the quiver slung over his shoulder.

Fenix tossed him a small canteen and he caught it in stride as he trotted off further north away from the camp. His cape whirled around him as the winds assaulted him...and the red sands took him.

Several hours later, the camp activity had died down in the scorching heat of the afternoon. Increased sandstorm activity was causing Chronicler and Spitalian equipment to go haywire. Registrar Moran fanned himself with a sheet of paper in the tent shade as Fenix looked out of the tent flap for any sign of her great-grandson.

"Are you sure you sent him with enough water, Fenix?" Moran said candidly with his feet propped up on the radio desk.

Fenix paused before answering, spotting a red outline amidst the whipping grains of sand.

"...Yes, I am sure. Here he comes," she responded.

Moran snapped his fingers for the Pharmacists and Epigeneticists on site to ready their containers and tests.

"Incoming samples. Double check PPE and ready 20ccs of heparin. Have the Streamer check the freon levels in the mobile insulator,"

The commotion of folks rushing to and fro disguised the sound of the young Nomad entering the tent space.

Kiefer stamped inside, sweat and dirt staining his bare skin a reddish hue. Every bustling person in the tent stopped dead in their tracks to look at the strapping nomad,

who held up three menacing looking arthropods by their barbed tails. Webbed pincers and chomping mandibles chattered eerily and tiny legs wriggled in the along the thorax of the beast. The barbed tails were lashed together with braided twine and he held them aloft in front of Registrat Moran as the desert scorpions writhed under his control. The Spitalian's almond shaped eyes narrowed from his cheeks pushing up in a grin.

"I speak truth. Stukovs know how to best hunt. Ally will honor and supply Stukovs for many mounds and moons?" Fenix asked.

Moran leaned in closer to look at the scorpions squirming in Kiefer's grasp. "Yes, you speak truth. The Spitalians – no, I – will take care of your clan. They will find shelter and new mounds in Jus-ti-tian," he concluded, annunciating each syllable.

"If your clan can provide steady Stukov scorpion delivery, you will have protection, water, and shelter for the rest of your moons."

Moran gently touched one of the legs of the scorpion and it lashed out, nearly striking the Spitalian in the cheek with it's stinger.

"Beautiful," he said, mesmerized. He glanced up at Kiefer, panting and sun worn from his time in the open. "You will make a fine Spitalian one day, destined to annhilate these fucking pests and rid humans of this plague once and for all."

Kiefer looked at him, a bit bemused at his strange speech.

"Kiefer, best ground run. Best ground run!" Moran emphasized, making sweeping gestures with his hands and arms. The other Spitalian attendants grabbed the scorpions from Kiefer's hands with tongs and shoved them into refrigerated boxes, hissing and squealing, before the boxes were sealed.

Fenix threw an arm around Kiefer's shoulders. She whispered in his ear as Moran directed the other staff to move the loads onto carts for transport.

"No more roam. No more drought. Safe mounds. Water for all moons."

Kiefer embraced his great-grandmother, matriarch of the Stukov clan. Could it be that the struggle was finally over? Would his baby brother and sisters not have to know famine and thirst for the rest of their winters?



Branching nomad clans in the Stukov desert would soon wander into the Protectorate seeking shelter for their kin after an extended drought killed off hundreds. The lakes fed by the Ice Barrier to the far North had dried up and the strength of the wanderers was waning. Using their skills to support the Spitalians and the Judges would prove fruitful for the Stukov nomads, at least at first. After all, the best laid plans of mice and men often go astray.

## **[2598, Afternoon on the fortified roads 5km outside Cathedral City,]**

The overcast skies cast a grey pallor on the land but visibility remained high for 1 kilometer or 2 ahead of the travelers. Black birds circled over head, slowly drifting on the remaining warmth spiraling up from the ground.

Kiefer walked several paces ahead of Etta, the soft thud of his boots filling in the silence. He held up his hand to signal a halt to Etta and Sudo trailing behind. Etta walked up beside Kiefer and surveyed the landscape with him as Sudo remained quiet.

The path was littered with weeds and shrubs and the sides were heavily eroded. Busted granite and worn brick that fortified portions of the road were caked in flaking mudcrack. The veins of drying earth and silty clay spread out like a network of veins across the earth.

Kiefer vs. Etta - Perception 5D - 4 1 3 5 3 vs. 3 1 2

### Roll Scenarios

A. Kiefer squats down and picks up a piece of the mudcrack while Etta cuts a root free from a nearby shrub with her penknife and sniffs it.

“Clay that collects like this usually washes in and washes out in a hurry. I suppose this used to be a larger water crossing many years ago. This erosion probably came from a flash flood. Its good we haven’t encountered much rain.” Kiefer reasoned.

Etta let the shrub frond drop in the wind and watched it get carried away over Sudo’s head.

“True. We’ll have to pace ourselves around large stretches like this in the future so we don’t get swept away. These roots are still mighty thirsty even after that dousing Sudo and I got two days prior,” Etta responded. They marched on carefully stepping over

broken stone. Any wayward edges that jutted up that could puncture boot or tear a seam in a pant leg.

The spires of Cathedral City loomed in the distance and gained more definition with each passing kilometer. A stone wall ringed around the base of the spires and tapered down a hill dotted with patchwork shanties, white smoke puffing out of their chimney tops. The white smoke drifted down the hill and mingled with another dust cloud thrown up from a tight platoon marching around the perimeter of the Anabaptist city.

Kiefer adjusted his course and pace to put the group on an intercept course with the soldiers further down the plain as Etta spurred on Piotr to close the last bit of distance.

Two dozen Orgiastics marching in formation shook the ground with their striped trousers and cotton shirts hanging loosely around meaty frames. Etta The platoon leader was a black-haired woman adorned in a heavy red jacket. Cords of twisted leather bearing a broken cross pendant dangled from her neck and a flanged mace strapped across her wrist bounced up and down in time with her marching. She spotted the trio and swung the mace expertly in her hand, signaling a full company halt.

Dozens of eyes, primed for action stared down the new arrivals. The platoon leader kept her distance as she shouted, "God be with you. What brings a Judge, Spitalian, and....Chronicler to Cathedral City? Speak quickly, lest ye be found wanting and turned away from humility and fellowship."

Etta - Conduct 5D - 2 2 6 2 3

### Roll Scenarios

B. Etta removed her hat and stepped forward.

*Time to work on that diplomacy* she thought nervously

"They who dwell in the shelter of Rebus and the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty"

A smirk widened across the raven-haired Orgiastic's face followed by a hearty laugh.

"Scripture from a justice of the city? Next you'll be telling me that Chronicler fills it's talk box with incense on holy days!"

General murmurs and chuckles came from the stalwart pack. She shoved her mace into a tight scabbard on her thigh and folded her arms rubbing her nose casually as she talked.

“That’s all well and good Judge and I’d never turn down a Spitalian that lives to shrivel up the Sepsis, but that...” she poked a finger out at Sudo “...is gonna have to sleep outside.”



Etta is a bit conflicted. She doesn’t want to vouch for Sudo, but it is part of her detachment brief to make sure the Chronicler is kept safe. Sleeping separately from her charge doesn’t exactly mean insubordination, but word always gets around from Chroniclers. I’ll roll a d6: 4 or more and she’ll go to bat for the pain in her ass. It might pay off and build some team synergy in the future.

50:50 chance. Does Etta stand her ground? Yes - 1D - 4

### Roll Scenarios

“With respect, I must insist. This Chronicler is under my care and jurisdiction and subject to the extended hospitality of the Protectorate’s allies.” Etta could hardly believe the words coming out of her mouth. She felt as though she was definitely earning her bonus and flintlock pistols today. “I will be held responsible for Sudo-19’s actions in the domain and cloisters of...”

The Orgiastic boss cut her short, “Well that solves that problem. Since it is your pet you can sleep outside with it.”

Sudo bristled and gnashed her teeth inside the mask.

*Petty idealogues. Dirty hands, and weak minds* she said

Kiefer scratched his head and sighed heavily. “Please. Etta, Sudo, you can make use of the tent and I will bring you water and provision before the night patrol. Is this satisfactory?”

Etta opened her mouth to speak, but simply nodded in agreement and looked at Sudo for approval. Her countenance was unreadable so Etta took the small victory where she could. At least they would be together.

“Praise be. ORGIASTICS TURN IN. DISTILLATE TO STAVE THE COLD.” black-hair barked.

“PRAISE BE TO REBUS.” they replied

Kiefer began unhooking the trunk from Piotr and cast a glance at the ladies.

“No rain tonight. Safe for a moon, at least.” he said dryly. All he got in return was an annoyed shrug.