

Episode 15 A New Threat

DAY 13-14 Windy, Friendly Encounter

Resources: 16

Sudo blinked her eyes open and gazed at the woven stitches in the tent material above her head. cross hatching threads spun themselves together in her mind's eye. The crust in her lids softened with fresh tears brought out by the morning light. It leaked in through the gaps and rips across the fibers.

It was still blustery outside the tent and the gusts ebbed and flowed over the course of the night. She blinked again to refresh her eyes, counting the rows and columns of jute thread overlapping in a patched corner near a tentpole.

Two hundred seventy-four. Someone missed a row.

"Good morning Sudo, you feeling better?" Etta chimed.

Sudo hadn't even realized she'd spoken out loud. Her dreams faded last night in a wash of static noise. She righted herself and focused on the present. She'd need to be sharper to focus on the purview of her mission, starting now.

"Yes. Heuristics are restored. This one's pain is...manageable," Sudo said timidly drinking from the bottle of distillate. Burning and fire still coated her throat but was nowhere near the chestful Kiefer made her choke down several days earlier.

"The distillate is strong, just remember to dose effectively," Kiefer said. He was concentrating on taking his vitals in the corner with a rubber cuff and bulbous cap stretched around his upper bicep. Neoprene material compressed the rubber further, making the muscle look even bigger outside of his form fitting sleeve. His mouth opened and closed in minor repetition as counted the beats of his own heart.

Etta sat cross legged in the opposite corner, looking at Sudo over the top of her mug. Steam drifted up and away from the small winds drafting through the tent. Loose leaf tea and ground ginger root washed over her tongue, stinging the rough flesh. Out of habit she licked the hole in her tongue but caught herself and swallowed a mouthful of the hot herbal liquid. Sudo coughed again and massaged her shoulder and arm tenderly, careful not to dislodge any of the gauze wrapped around the sling. Early

morning birdsong was absent, replaced only with puffs of air banging the tent canvas until Etta spoke.

“Sudo...how old are you?”

Sudo lowered her pain relieving distillate mid sip. Kiefer opened one eye curiously.

“...what does that matter?”

Etta held her tin mug between her hands in her lap, its warmth radiating down her legs and driving the chill inside the space.

“It’s a long way to Lucatore still and we already know you can put more than two words together. The conversation doesn’t have to sparkle, it would just make the time a little easier. Don’t you think?”

“This one’s command is data collection in Lucatore. Talking about winters and summers has no bearing on how that is accomplished.”

Kiefer remained quiet.

“I didn’t mean to offend. I’ll share first it makes it easier – I’ll be celebrating my quarter century this autumn harvest. I wanted to put on a gathering at the Garamond with some compatriots from the barracks. Perhaps even Fellick will be there to blow the froth off a couple, if he isn’t patrolling night shifts in the Defiler Streets, that is.”

“Fellick? A close friend of yours?” Kiefer asked, removing his cuff and stowing it in his travel bag and retrieving a notebook from a top pouch bearing a red eight pointed cross emblazoned on it.

“A juryman ward of mine. He’s much to learn, can be a bit clumsy, but is full of the right spirit. I’d wager he’d be the one doing enough talking for all of us if he was here,” Etta remarked, the happy memory warming her face.

Kiefer nodded. He spoke off-handedly as he jotted down his vital readings in the small notebook with a pencil. “Chief Devant has been my mentor and cohort for the past year. She personally selected me for her detail. I respect her genius and procedure but...she can be obsessive in her work.”

“...and you aren’t?” Sudo chimed in, noticing his meticulous handwriting.

Etta brought the mug back up to her face to disguise a grin, steam filling her face.

“Consider it a common trait, Chronicler. I’ve seen you absorbed on your digipad late at night, that is, when you’ve had the full faculty of both your arms. You seem to be as

dedicated as I am to doing a job well.”

Sudo opened and closed her hands, tapping her fingers idly.

“This one thanks you.”

“Just a simple observation. I don’t presume to make big heads or round egos.”

“No. I mean thank you for this,” Sudo pressed. She wiggled her bandaged arm.

Etta loudly sipped from her mug and cleared her throat, glancing sharply at Sudo.

“Well, it was either that or let you alert every Cockroach within a dozen kilometers to our presence with your vocoder. It seemed to be a pressing matter,” Kiefer said flatly.

The dour Chronicler chortled through her nose, making Etta almost spill some of her tea.

“Call off the wars and wave a white flag, I don’t believe I’ve ever heard a Chronicler laugh,” Etta mused.

Sudo rolled her eyes and threw up her cowl to cover chilly ears and an icy stare. “Leave it to a Judge to talk a moment to death. Senate floor or mountain wilderness beside.”

She laid on her side and propped her head on the bunched up cape.

Kiefer scribbled a bit on his notebook and tore out a page, passing it over to Etta. She turned it over, seeing only a single word written in squat letters.

‘Teenager’ it said. She bit her lip and looked up at Kiefer, swabbing and pricking his finger to draw a blood sample. The stoic Spitalian seemed to be stifling a grin as well.

Another firm series of windy torrents swept through the flats and crags. The party decides it’s as good a time as any to wait out the storm and catch up on some rest.

END OF OVERLAND TRAVEL

DAY 15 N/A

Resources: 13

For now, the travel companions have exited the wilderness and are firmly rooted at the Frankan border traveling south. Clumpy silver clouds rolled overhead scraping the stratospheric peaks that inched ever closer. Kiefer orients their path once more to run directly into the isolated settlement of Eixel.

Weather grew muggy and thick as vermin buzzed through the soupy air, pestering and biting open skin at the party’s wrists and necks. It was still cool enough to don an extra

bit of cloth without becoming overheated, though, and Kiefer would remind everyone that bugs can bring decay and sickness as quickly as open exposure could.

The group closes the last kilometers and the sound of flowing water fills their ears yet again. Except this time, it is much louder.

Snow melt from smaller peaks feeds into a large river that gushes and gurgles, flowing across smooth speckled stones under clear water. Kiefer signals a halt and opens his supply trunk. He runs his fingers over a shelf or two before selecting a dark green glass bottle from the rack and shakes it near his ear. He approves of the tiny rattles inside and kneels down by the bank to draw up a small sample of water. Etta and Sudo stand near Piotra, eating a bit of dry tack from their supplies as he runs his experiment for potable water.

Several paper test strips are dipped into the water and he holds them up to the overcast sky, giving a nod of approval. Etta unhitches Piotra and leads him close enough to a shallow embankment so he can drink his fill as they refill all of their canteens.

They follow the bends of the river, noticing an increase in the amount of detritus and scrap littering the sandy brown soil.

Roll Scenarios

Kiefer Perception - 2 5 6 4 6

Etta Perception - 1 4 4

Sudo - 4 2

Sudo pulls up the rear of the caravan while Kiefer and Etta take point. A large pile of trash catches the eye of Sudo and she makes it known to Etta and Kiefer up front. The trio rifle through pitted sheet metal, discarded animal skins, and broken hand tools. A glimmer of metal glint's in Kiefer's eye and he flips over a broken stage coach wheel. He brushes the dirt and loose surface rust from a cylindrical casing, turning it over in his palm. A bullet casing.

"No shortage of those around old settlements. Probably from a hunter's group" Etta says.

"Perhaps. Maybe even a soldier's round? Take a look," Kiefer says tossing it to Etta who sniffs the casing and looks at the rim at the bottom. She passes it to Sudo as well who holds up a pinky finger along the cylinder to gauge it's thickness

Roll Scenarios

Kiefer Engineering - 3 6 1

Etta Engineering - 4 1

Sudo Engineering -4 1 1 1

Due to the rough edge of the primer rim, no one is able to determine the caliber.

“Comparative analysis could help determine this in the future.” Sudo says as she pockets the empty cartridge.

A distant yell refocuses everyone’s gaze several dozen meters ahead. Etta shields her eyes to get a better look and makes out two figures pushing and shoving further up the river bank. The group hustles to investigate further and see a man and a woman, engaging in an altercation on the ground. Etta calls out as she runs.

“Hey. HEY! Break it up!”

Her orders fall on deaf ears and the group sees the woman flip the man over and put a knee on his chest. Kiefer breaks out into a sprint, backpack slapping against his suit as he closes the distance. The woman clutches a nearby rock and raises it up, ready to clobber the man under her weight.

Etta pulls out her flintlock pistol from her waistbelt and cocks back the hammer, lowering the barrel straight at the woman.

“STOP! In the name of the Judiciary (cheesy)!”

Roll Scenarios

Etta Domination - 2 4

A granite rock is brought down with speed on the man’s face as he screams in terror.

Crack

Another strike and wet crunch hangs heavy in the air as Kiefer throws himself upon her, tackling her off the victim. The man’s arms, raised in defense, drop to the ground as heavy as the stone from his attackers clutches. Gouts of blood pour from his broken face and skull as Etta drops her pack and falls to her knees beside him.

“Shit. Fuckin’ hell.” Etta stammers as she fumbles for the scarf around her neck to stem the rushing of blood. The man’s nose is caved into his face and his eyeball hangs

loosely from its cavity.

Kiefer pins the woman to the ground and holds her down as she screams at him, trying to bite his hands and arms with a mouth full of rotten teeth.

“Stop. NOW!” Kiefer roars at her.

Roll Scenarios

Kiefer Domination - 6 2 3 6

Remarkably, the woman’s flailing stops. She grunted and spat up white fuzzy mucus, coating Kiefer’s neck in the vile stuff. Sudo stood frozen behind Piotra, who shifted from hoof to hoof and snorted.

“KIEFER. I NEED YOU HERE RIGHT FUCKING NOW.”

“If you move, I will break you. Stay,” he snarled in her face. His eyes met hers, still glassy and fierce with rage. Dilated pupils widened at the command and the venom on her face receded. Sobbing and weeping struck her as well as violent fits of coughing as she vomited more of the white phlegm, staining the green grass a sickly pale color.

“SUDO. Roll her over on her side but keep your hands away from her mouth. Don your mask and don’t breath around her, either.”

Kiefer doubled back to the bloodied man on the ground and Sudo walked past them all and kicked the woman in the ribs with a rubber boot to roll her over as she dry heaved.

Sputtering labored breathing emanated from the man’s mouth. Fingers twitched and seized, grasping at air, and grass and Kiefer mopped the blood from his face. More just pooled up around his eyes and nose.

“Impact trauma, viscerocranium. Orbital cavity compromised. Possible cerebral edema,” Kiefer said robotically. More sputtering and wheezing. Every time the man’s lungs emptied, it became harder to breathe back in.

“He’s choking. Blood in his throat. Etta give me your penknife,” Kiefer said.

Etta fished it out of her pocket in a panick and unfolded it.

“Emergency tracheotomy. Incision through larynx cartilage. Etta, notebook and pencil in my backpack. Cleanly tear at least 10 pages. Wet the long edges and roll them as tight as you can around the pencil.”

Roll Scenarios

Emergency medical procedures are tricky even with proper equipment, extra staff, and clean hands. Kiefer is going to make an INT+medicine roll. Difficulty: 4S Action Number: 6D

Kiefer Medicine - 2 1 4 4 2 6

Kiefer straddled the brutalized man's torso with his weight. He was a fair bit bigger than the victim, as he was with most people.

"Hold his head as still as you can," Kiefer whisper as he leaned in with the small penknife, the tip an extension of his steady finger. Etta squeezed her knees around the man's head and took a deep breath.

Skin unzipped from the knife's tip, leaving a 2 inch hole in the middle of his adam's apple. Without taking his eyes off the fresh incision, Kiefer held out his hand, palm up.

"Remove the pencil from the middle and give me the paper."

Etta removed the pencil from the center and dropped a tiny stiff tube into Kiefer's hand.

Thick finger tips parted the incision slightly, revealing drops of blood in the moist esophagus below. Etta squinted, hoping that narrowing her vision would make her stomach turn less at the sight. It didn't, but she stayed as focused as she could to aid the Spitalian. Thick blood absorbed into the outer edges of the paper like some macabre red ink but the hole in the center remained unclogged. Breath returned to the victim, albeit shallow and ragged.

"Next step, stem the blood loss." he unstrapped the velcro pocket at his waist and pushed the trunk key into Etta's hand.

"All the gauze, now."

Etta skidded to a stop in front of the trunk, sparing a glance for Sudo, who had her foot on top pf the woman's ribs as she continued coughing. The white foam had been tinged with brown on the grass.

She unlocked the trunk and flung open one side, snatching 2 rolls of the stretchy white cloth and sprinting back to Kiefer. He was leaning back on his haunches, and held up a hand for her to stop.

"Save the material. Keep it clean and put it back," he said with resignation. His head tilted back as he exhaled, looking up at the sky. A huge halo of black on the grass around the man's head told Etta everything she needed to know and her head dropped.

Splashes of water and fierce scrubbing sounds came from the river bank as Kiefer scoured his arms and hands.

Etta stood over the savage woman, passed out from whooping and hacking. Sudo squatted over her, patting her body down. She reeked of urine and body odor. Her cloth tunic was threadbare and hung loosely from her skinny frame dragging along her bare feet. Her leg wrappings were stuffed with dried grass for warmth and tied around her calves with animal gut. The man wore similarly ratty clothing, but was shoed and at least looked and smelled as though he had bathed within the week. The entirety of his vest was soaking up the remains of his blood. Mosquitoes and gnats had already begun to gather around his body, ready to feast on the last bit of warmth his body had to offer.

Through her mask lenses, Sudo spied a tattoo curling around the nape of the wild woman's neck and turned it carefully to see the rest. It was a simple outline of a bird, wings spread wide, silhouetted against a half circle. Like an eagle rising above a sunrise.

Splotchy pink rashes dotted the tattoo around the woman's neck and shoulders and Sudo traced a finger down the irritated skin to the middle of her collar, pulling it down to her sternum. The fabric unraveled and gave way to the pull, revealing the shape of a mandala etched into the supple tissue and breastbone of the woman.

It was the Frankan stigma: a tripartite design, with spindly arms that radiate outwards like the spokes of a wheel. A symbol of the unyielding struggle against the Sepsis, a reminder of the ever-present threat of death that looms over the world. Each additional circle marks the cost of survival, a haunting tribute to the sacrifices made by those who bear the mark.