

EPISODE 2 – Rock and a Hard Place

Dust devils whipped their grainy tendrils against the cloth scarf covering the mouth of a man born in the desert. The great dunes of the Black Lung area of old Europe rise and fall slowly like waves at sea. Not like the desert man had any idea what one of those was. In the desert, water is measured by the drop, and the man knew exactly how many were left in the metal canteen that rattled with each spray of sand thrown against it. The Scrapper, Grit, leaned into the persistent winds that were lashing his cheeks raw. He crested the top of another dune looking for a sign of his mark through the shimmering haze. He was in the right area: huge desert boulders dotted the wastes, some large enough to hollow out small shelters into the side. He had just left a rock shelter several miles back at first light, following the runes and markings of previous Scrappers etched onto the surfaces of the stones. The markings he followed were still fresh from his trusted source and mentor, Naila, back in Justitian. Grit heard harrowing tales from Naila at The Pipe in the Tech-Central district. The shifting sands, unrelenting heat, and wild gendo dog packs made investigating the Black Lung perilous, but the relics hidden in rusted over caches and abandoned structures were too lucrative to turn down. The allure of finding lost treasures to trade for meals, rations, and extra gas for winter heat was too good for any Scrapper; the trouble was, you just had to find it first. Grit saw a profile of rock several dozen meters ahead that bore signs of excavation. The tool-chipped surfaces made his heart beat faster as he closed the distance and readied his pry bar from his back pack.

Scorpions and lizards skittered across the sand from the clanging sounds of Grit's crowbar finding purchase on a sheet metal hinge. Metal pins screeched briefly as they were sheared off their latches and the darkness within the small cairn of rocks was flooded with bright sunlight. The metal hatch was pitted from the relentless grime and sand but bore Naila's rune signature of overlapping lines. Smaller runes adorned the metal's surface but many were already fading away. Only Naila's welded slag runes remained.

Grit had to bend over to fully enter the small enclosure. He drew a piton and hammer from the tool belt underneath his cloak and staked it into the sand. A length of rope and

a few fast knots held the sheared metal door taught against the rocks anchored in the sand. He felt for the round cylindrical object in his shoulder bag and once he had it in hand, telescoped it open with a flick of his wrist. The electric torch, or e-torch for short, illuminated further scratches on the rock walls. Wind howled outside the tiny space but the reprieve allowed Grit to finally remove a few layers from his face and get a better look at the desert cache. He recognized a few universal Scrapper symbols but no signs of Naila's markings this close to the entrance. This was no surprise to Grit, she was no surface leech. Naila must have travelled deeper to find the relics she showed the onlookers at the Scrapper watering hole The Pipe, in Tech-Central. Scrapper stories were usually swapped over a dram of engine degreaser, and a hot plate of fried locusts and green moss.

"When the world squeezes in around you, show it you have plenty of room to keep inching forward." Naila would say.

Grit closed his eyes and squeezed his shoulder blades tightly together as a sort of meditative stretch. After a deep breath, he opened them again and spied a small opening under overlapping stone shelves just large enough for him to fit through.

When Scrappers go off in search of Tech or Relics, they are more often than not are seeking fame and fortune, like Grit. Tech is a precious resource in the game and Tech Levels (as described in the Katharsys sourcebook) correspond to how much the item is worth at the Jusitian Forecourt Exchange or other large city bazaars. Tech 1 is the most primitive level; think about carved bone and rock to make tools and hunting weapons.

Tech Level V items would be comparable to the technology level of the Bygone Peoples, or the era we live in now. Nanites and thinking machines are commonplace when discussing the Transhuman Age of Tech Level V.

Grit was on his hands and knees, delving ever deeper into the rock tunnel. Every few feet he brandished his e-torch in front of him to get a better look at the umber-colored rocks above him. Naila's symbols were still present on the surface of the stone, her strong lines and clear language stood out from the inexperienced scratch at the entrance to the cache. Grit licked his lips. There was a metallic taste in the air mixed in

with the fine dust stirred up from his knees and hands shuffling the sand. It tasted like iron.

Rust is a good sign for sharp Scrappers. Electrical components and water don't mix well, and so to protect precious equipment and newly found artifacts, Scrappers use metal cases and bins to shield their hauls from the dust and rain. Any abandoned metal boxes get worn down by the pulverizing sands and soaked by scattered showers that roll across the sands. Smelling rust this far under the surface could mean a haul is waiting to be discovered.

The ceiling dropped another 6 inches and Grit re-wrapped his scarf tightly around his mouth as he dropped into a prone position to crawl on his elbows and knees. He burrowed his chin into the warm sand and took slow breaths to make sure the scarf had his mouth well-protected. He inched forward, following the direction of another one of Naila's characters scrawled on the crust above. She'd been in a pinch before and lived to tell about it...Grit felt savvy enough to do the same.

Inch after inch, Grit squeezed his way through the narrow rock shaft. He folded his arm under his chest and put the e-torch in his mouth to shine it freely ahead, sighting a definite end to the shaft another 20 feet ahead. Grit flexed his abdominal muscles underneath his gear and breathed out forcefully as he scooted his way the remaining distance. A thin, rusty piece of metal flashing was directly beneath his flashlight's beam, its surface providing just a fraction of its original luster after remaining in damp and dusty conditions. Grit worked an arm free from the slim rock shaft pinning it to his side and ran a gloved finger along the metal flashing's edge hoping to find a corner. After brushing away compacted sand, he managed to hook a finger underneath the panel and pulled up and out to remove it from the dirt and stone floor. There was barely enough room to stow it behind him in the tunnel, and he strained his neck to look over the lip of the space.

Grit is 20 feet above a large square room 45 feet long. The walls are reinforced, riveted metal that buckle and bend in a few places but otherwise look solid. Four wood and metal banded containers dotted the room, some lined up in makeshift tunnels to help

traverse from one end of the room to the other. Obvious exits are the vent he is in and a metal door in the southwest corner of the room.

Blood rushed to Grit's head as he took everything in from an upside down viewpoint. He retreated back inside the access tunnel to grab 30 feet of braided rope from his belt. He knotted a weighty, iron chunk of metal at the end and fed it hand over hand through the new opening into the cavernous room. The metal anchor landed with a soft *tink* among a pile of junk at the bottom. He pulled himself over the open hole in the tunnel and let his feet dangle in front as he kept his back bent over to avoid the low ceiling. He tucked the free end of the rope underneath his butt and hammered in his second to last piton. After he made sure it was secure, he looped the free end of rope through the piton, tied a knot in it, and descended down feet first.

Grit is a little older at 37 years old, but time spent in the nasty elements of the Black Lung has kept him in great shape. He descends with no trouble and heads directly for the pile of loot on the plate metal flooring. From the ground he can more clearly see the calligraphy of Naila's rune peeking out between the plastic canisters and crates spilling out from the shipping container. There was enough here for a dozen trips to the Forecourt to barter for food. A smile crept onto his tanned, worn face as he began lashing several packages in the debris pile to a string line.

[ROLL SCENARIO]

He could go back up the rope with the supplies tied to his waist, but the Scrapper has an ingenious idea to use a pulley system.

Grit is a Badger in the Scrapper Cult hierarchy. He's spent years making a lot out of a little so his AGILITY + CRAFTING dice pool is fairly high. This ruined cache may not have everything he needs, but let's see if he can have an easier time transporting goods back to the tunnel.

Difficulty - 3S

AN - 6D

2S, 2T, 1F, 1B

1,3, 4, 5, 6, 6

Grit knocks off door hinge off of a rusty container and strips the pins so that the rounded bore of the hinge joint can fit the diameter of the rope. That solves his retrieval problem, but hauling so much weight when he's ready to leave could exhaust him. We shall see later.

Grit drew the last string line rope into a tight knot. Naila's runes was almost completely exposed now, aside from various bits of sand, rubble, and useless trash covering it's edges. With such a hidden trove, he suspected Naila may have done a bit more investigating in the room before turning around. If there was a way out besides the vent, surely Naila would've found and marked it for those who came behind her.

[ROLL SCENARIO]

Grit is a seasoned Scrapper and knows Naila's runes fairly well. Grit will try to look for old paint and things out of place to see what else Naila the Lone Wolf may have left. He'll use his INST+PERCEPTION dice pool

Difficulty – 3S

AN – 5D

2S, 2F, 1B

5, 5, 3, 3, 1

Grit's grime-caked eyes scanned the room and containers for further sigils and runes from Naila, but to no avail. Naila is clever in her writing, and the clues she left Grit he can't quite make out.

Grit decides to give the rest of the area a thorough once-over before taking the trip back up the rope and tunnel. The exit to the southwest was partially blocked by an empty container but Grit is certain he could squeeze through, just like he had with the rock tunnel. He squished his shoulders and back against the eastern wall and sidled along the container until he felt the gap. The open doorframe merged into a 15 ft hallway,

slightly illuminated by amber lamps ahead in a low-ceilinged room. Grit checked for any of his clothing that may have snagged on sharp metal before taking a few steps down the hallway. In the darkness of the hallway, his cleated boot heel crunched on small pieces of glass and broken plastic, shattering the silence in the dim hallway. Grit winced and his pulse quickened. A stupid mistake like that was for rookie Mice in the Scrapper cult.

Pattering sounds on the grungy plated floors filled Grit's ears and he focused his attention several meters ahead. Two shaggy, four-legged silhouettes came into view from the left and right, the backing light of the room casting their features in further shadow. Grit knew the size and shape of the figures immediately and felt his mouth go dry. What were Gendos doing underground, and how did they get here? Grit purged the confusion and questions from his mind, instead focusing on the snarling pair of dogs. The beasts inched closer and the Scrapper minimized his hand movements as he accessed the leather loops and caribeaners on his overcoat. His fingers found the wooden and cloth-wrapped textures on his sawed-off shotgun handle and with a small *clink*, undid the fastener. The metallic report of his caribeaner was all the sound the Gendos needed to rush in, barking savagely with foam and spittle gathering at the corners of their mouths. Grit can smell the fetid mange of the dogs as they close the distance. Time for our first proper battle in Echoes of Eschaton!

[ROLL SCENARIO]

Round 1 Initiative Order:

Grit – 6

Gendos - 7

Grit – 4D + 3 EGO.

AN – 7D

3S, 3T, 1F

6, 6, 6, 5, 5, 5, 3

Gendos – 8D

AN – 8D

2S, 5T, 1B

6, 6, 6, 6, 6, 5, 5, 1

The Gendos charge with a ferocity that Grit wasn't ready for, even with his high initiative rolls. The game offers a base passive defensive score of 1 for all creatures and players, although different factors like whether a combatant chooses active defense or is behind cover can add more stats to passive defense. Gendos are feral dogs and I'll rule that they don't wait for their prey to come to them, so no active defense bonus here.

Additionally the dogs bound over 2 meters of their movement to reach Grit, their target.

Moving over 2 meters during a turn incurs a -2D to subsequent actions taken by that character during their turn, but staying on the move activates an additional 1 point to passive defense. After all, it's harder to hit a moving target. Rows of yellow, rotting teeth snap in front of Grit's face as he prepares to defend against these beasts.

1 Gendo Bite – 7D – 2D (moved over 2 meters in a turn)

AN – 5D

3S, 2F

HIT

Damage – 2+1D

3 points damage – 1 Armor rating (Grit's Fur coat) = 2 points damage

2 Gendo Bite – 7D – 2D (moved over 2 meters in a turn)

AN – 5D

2S, 3F

HIT

Damage – 2+1D

5 points damage – 1 armor rating (Grit's fur coat) = 4 points damage

The first dog bites at Grit's leg wrappings and sharp canine fangs bit into his flesh as he screamed in pain. Now it's the Scrapper turn to bring out Ol' Painless, his shotgun which uses his AGI + Projectile dice pool.

Grit Shotgun blast – 6D (needs 2S to hit from Gendo's passive defense of 1 (+1 from moving 2m+)

AN – 6D

2S, 4F

Phew! Just enough to hit!

HIT

Damage – 10 flat damage

10 points damage – 2 armor rating (Gendo thick fur) = 8 points damage

A blast fills the hallway and brightens the walls with a phosphorous glow for a split second. One gendo is wheezing after getting big shot pellets impact its side but it doesn't let go with its jaws around Grit's left ribcage. The other dog glowers at Grit and prepares to strike.

Round 2 Initiative Order:

Grit – 0

Gendos - 3

Grit – 4D + 2 EGO.

AN – 6D

5B, 1F

1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 2

Gendos – 8D

AN – 8D

2S, 1T, 3F, 1B

6, 4, 4, 2, 2, 3, 1

Oh shit. Even though there are no penalties for botches on an initiative roll, I've buried my face in my hands, concerned about Grit's fate. This is not a strong start for Round 2. Grit will not be actively defending since he has a shell left in his shotgun and should try to take down one before focusing on the other.

1 Gendo Bite – 7D

AN – 7D

4S, 3F

HIT

Damage – 2+1D

6 points damage – 1 Armor rating (Grit's Fur coat) = 5 points damage

2 Gendo Bite – 7D

AN – 7D

4S, 3F

HIT

Damage – 2+1D

7 points damage – 1 Armor rating (Grit's Fur coat) = 6 points damage

Things are not looking good. Gendos are about the size of mountain lion and have large jaws to rip and tear flesh. The punctures on Grit's leg and torso are already leaking blood and he has already exceeded his Fleshwound threshold, entering into Trauma. For every point of Trauma a character or enemy loses, they also lose 1D from their dice pool on every roll. Situations can get out of hand quickly in the Degeneration system, it seems.

Grit Shotgun blast – 6D – 3D (1D for each point of Trauma)

AN – 3D

2S, 1F

HIT

Damage – 10 flat damage

10 points damage – 2 armor rating (Gendo thick fur) = 8 points damage

Grit plugs the barrel of the shotgun into the Gendo's furry ear who is trying to gore part of his torso and he pulls the trigger. The multiple steel shot pellets and concussive force splatters gore and bone across the wall to his left as the acrid smell of gunpowder briefly lingers in the air. One gendo flops to the floor, headless. Grit gnashes his teeth through the pain but bares his canines at the last mangy Gendo left staring him down. Another round of combat begins.

Round 3 Initiative Order:

Grit – 3

Gendo – 6

Grit – 4D - 3D (-1D for each point of Trauma) + 3 EGO.

AN – 4D

3S, 1F

6, 5, 5, 3

Gendo – 8D

AN – 8D

3S, 3T, 2F,

6, 6, 6, 5, 5, 4, 2, 2

The dice pool needs to be bigger for Grit to have a shot at winning initiative, but its hard to do when you've had big bites taken out of you. Let's see if he survives this round, because he's going to use his action to reload his double barreled shotgun.

2 Gendo Bite – 7D

AN – 7D

5S, 2F

HIT

Damage – 2+1D

6 points damage – 1 Armor rating (Grit's Fur coat) = 5 points damage

Grit opens the breach of the shotgun barrel to remove the empty shells but is too late. The last Gendo pounces on him and bites him cleanly in the neck, severing his jugular. He grasps helplessly at the Gendo's coarse fur on its back as it swings his body from side to side in a death roll. Grit's last thoughts are of Naila telling stories at The Pipe in the rubble. She draws everyone's attention with her pneumatic metal shears she found in the wastes. Her smile is the last warm thing he feels as his vision fades to black and his heartbeat slows...then stops.