Until the Candy Comes Out

By Douglas M. Hanke
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For Kari—thanks for laughing when I told you about the medical drama.

Author’s note: No polygons or polygonal characters were harmed during the writing of this novel.
Keep of the Saffron Dragon

LifeMoss can restore an Adventurer to life, if used promptly. PhysPotions will replace lost health. Few parties last long without either.

--The Book of Adventurers

Neugaia was a relatively peaceful world when viewed from space. It boasted a couple of continents, a moon, a ring of debris in a low orbit, and wide oceans. Viewed up close, Neugaia had a few problems. The people living there were divided by a cultural gulf. Adventurers were the kind of people who thought nothing of running around the world, slaying monsters and pilfering treasure, while Citizens were stay-at-home folk who depended on the activities of Adventurers but didn’t really want more out of life than a nice cup of tea and maybe a chance to go their way without being boiled alive by rogue comets, turned into novelty foodstuffs, or enslaved under a ruthless dictator¹).

On the western continent of Neugaia, south of the frigid Wildepeake Mountains and west of Metria Bay, and east of the burning sands of the Al-Amir desert lay the city of Middengard. Roads converged on Middengard from all directions, tracks left by the kangamice² caravans that supplied the city with much-needed foods, potions, and weapons.

Storm and his friends Luca and Sydney had set out the small village of Haven a few days prior, investigating a rumor of a child lost in the warrens of the Keep of the Saffron Dragon. Storm was a typical Fighter-type Adventurer. He wore gray pants checked with

¹ They didn’t even like the dictators named Ruth. Ruth the First was overthrown by a stalwart band of heroes who’d crossed three continents, slaughtered the populations of sixteen different monster species, and beat three different cooking contests in a quest to obtain the Ultimate Weapons needed to defeat Ruth and her Savage Horde.
small squares, shiny black boots, and a black tunic. The ID badge in his wallet described him as 16 (though he was really 18) and listed his blood type as O negative. The scabbard strapped to his back carried a Bronze Sword inlaid with citrines that set off the highlights in his spiky hair, and he generally spoke in monosyllables. Storm was not much of a conversationalist.

Luca fit the mould of the Spellcaster—she was a brown-haired woman of 17, just out of school and eager to prove her prowess in battle. She knew the basic repertoire of a Spellcaster: Fire, Ice, Lightning, Wind, and Heal, but had not progressed into the advanced spells taught to higher-level mages. She carried a Short Staff, wore very comfortable (yet somewhat revealing) black lederhosen with a white peasant shirt, and was currently sporting a Silver Armband as armor. Luca had type A blood.

Sydney was considered the old man of group, having passed his 25th birthday. This was almost over the hill for an enterprise like this, but he was good with a Hand Cannon and knew a thing or two of Fighting. Sydney’s tan and green pants matched his black t-shirt and brown pocketed vest. His right eye had been replaced with a cybernetic implant, giving him increased accuracy at the cost of some charisma. During the replacement, he’d received type O positive blood.

Storm took point as they ran through a series of corridors. Luca and Sydney followed close behind.

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2 Kangamice were about six feet tall, had pink fur, and were a major source of transport on Neugaia. Their ancestors had been small pests, but generations of Farmers and Spellcasters had toyed with their genetic makeup enough that they could pull a wagon of grain with little difficulty. Riding one with a saddle was a guarantee of some soft tissue damage and whiplash, and they did poorly with fragile items, but they were solid pack animals. Large Kangamice were known to give rides to any of their smaller ancestor species.
“We’re almost there, Storm. Then we can save that kid and take him back to his village,” said Luca. She twiddled the Short Staff she carried with both hands. “After that, we’ll start looking again for a way through the Deep Swamp. Somewhere, somebody will know what happened to the people of Cosmia.”

“…” said Storm.

“What, you have a better idea?” asked Sydney. Then he noticed movement. “Hey, look out!”

It was always a surprise when Armor Slugs attacked. They had a tendency to lie in small corridors and wait for unsuspecting parties to pass over, and then attack from behind. By themselves they weren’t much, but in groups they were difficult to deal with—hard to hit and fond of casting Poison and Ineffectual.

Storm and his friends had run into a group of them at the worst possible time. One minute they were running through the Keep of the Saffron Dragon. Now six Armor Slugs surrounded them in a classic front-and-back formation. There was no room to run and they were almost out of time.

They had dealt with far worse before, but right now he and his party were low on PhysPotions and Luca had used the last MentaPotion to replace her energy after the fight with the Banana Baboon two rooms back.

“Everybody behind me!” he shouted. “I’m going to take care of these guys and then it’s off to rescue the kid!”

Storm pulled his Bronze Sword from the scabbard at his back, raised it to the sky, and spun it in a circle around his body. He looked towards the sky and screamed, “Meteor Barrage!”
Piercing the roof of the Keep, six molten rocks came screaming down on the Armor Slugs. Four of them burst into wisps of multicolored light immediately after taking direct hits from the meteors.³

That left two Armor Slugs in the rear. Both of them spit Poison at Storm, one catching him on the arm and the other catching him at the base of the neck with a gob of venom. His skin began to glow green as the poison started sucking his energy away, and he collapsed to the ground.

“Storm!” screamed Sydney. He attacked one of the Armor Slugs with his Hand Cannon, breaking the shell with several rounds and causing another explosion of rainbow sparks.

Luca threw her remaining energy into a Fire spell to take out the last Armor Slug. A final explosion of light and the conflict was over. After habitually searching the floor for coins and weapons, they gathered around Storm. His breathing was shallow and he began to grow indistinct.

“I told you… I’d take care of them,” he gasped. “Meteor Swarm gets ‘em every time.”

“Sydney, do you have any PhysPotions left?”

“A few, but I don’t have any Antidotes at all.”

³The origin of Adventurer-summoned rocks was a mystery until Neugaian Scientists detected the instability of the ring of rocks floating between their planet and the moon of Lunazwei. Leading Scientists determined that either the mere mention of them was enough to bring them down upon their head, or they were just as anxious as puppies to rain upon the heads of anybody that was pointed at in a funny manner. Experimentation with such powers was extraordinarily dangerous, and few curious Scientists lasted long enough to get beyond “I wonder what happens when I do THIS...” Nobody had quite figured out how the rocks knew to do attack creatures from orbit, or how they were able to strike with such accuracy. Neugaian people were not prone to making wild gestures.
“A Tent, maybe? When did we last hit a Save Point? Storm’s not going to last long without some sort of Antidote or rest.”

“Storm, hang on!”

“…”

That was the problem. In their haste to locate the small child, they never recorded their progress at the Save Point at the opening of the Keep. They’d purchased a couple of pieces of equipment from the traditional Merchant stall outside the walls, but they’d forgotten to Save. If Adventurers didn’t Save every so often, they ran the risk of dying in the middle of a dungeon. They could be restored if everybody in their party returned to the previous Save Point within a day or so, but that was miles away. The child would probably be dead by then, and nobody could recall him ever having Saved before.

Luca shook her head. “The kid is just up ahead. I think we can make it and get back to you in time to Save. Then we can rest and you’ll be OK.”

“Go. I’ll just rest here.”

They gave Storm the last of the PhysPotions—a blue elixir designed for restoring wounds for the living that had the added bonus of burning the Undead. He grew a little more distinct, so Luca and Sydney rushed off.

Luca and Sydney found the child in a large room at the end of the hallway. They’d found the key to the door in a Treasure Box not long ago. Luca opened the door to a wide room. In one corner, a small child sat, locked in a cage. The other corner held a Treasure
Chest. Luca opened the chest to find a Fire Ring and some sals. As she removed the loot from the chest, it vanished—its task was complete. Luca opened the cage, grabbed the child by the hand, and ran back to Sydney.

Rushing back down the hallway, they saw Storm prone on the ground up ahead. As they approached, he seemed less and less real. The PhysPotions had not been enough.

“Sydney, grab him and we’ll hurry!”

Sydney picked Storm up and ran towards the entrance. “Luca, I don’t think we’re going to make it!”

Storm finally exploded into a burst of colored light a few feet from the door the Keep. His Bronze Sword bounced off Sydney’s shoulder and fell to the ground.

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4 Sals were the universal currency on Neugaia. They were incredibly light and compact, allowing Adventurers to cart incredibly large sums of money around without breaking a sweat. Few thieves attempted to steal from an well-armed Adventurer.

Banks did not get to lend out as many loans on Neugaia as on other planets, but they made up for it in interest and volume. One bank survived by just making change.
Dynamic Monkey Systems

Save Points are designed with your safety and longevity in mind. However, no system is completely secure. With this in mind, install your new Dynamic Monkey Save Point Mk IV in a safe location.

If you have any questions about the use, care, or maintenance of your Dynamic Monkey Save Point, please feel free to contact your sales representative. We will be happy to assist you.

Dynamic Monkey. Avoiding danger like a frantic ape since 563.
-- Dynamic Monkey Save Point Mk IV User Manual

Brak never imagined he’d be an Adventurer. He shared nothing in common with them—no long-lost military father, no mysterious past, not an heirloom sword to his name, no uncanny ability to change into a giant octopus and rampage through the streets, nothing.\(^5\)

Brak lived as a Citizen in the small village of Erewhon, working as a Writer for a small

\(^5\) Brak’s family lived in the nearby town of Xafraif. He didn’t see them as much as he did before graduation, but they still sent Life Day cards and his mother would occasionally call him to set him up with nice girls she knew. Brak’s father was a Mechanic in a local factory that manufactured video screens, steam-powered automatons, and components for Battle Suits.
engineering firm. He was almost ready for retirement, having reached the grand age of 23. Close friends knew he had O positive blood.

Dynamic Monkey Systems was a renowned maker of Save Point systems. These systems were used throughout the known world of Neugaia for personnel backup and retrieval.

Elisa was an Executive with Dynamic Monkey—she’d been with the company for the last 4 of her 25 years. Elisa’s large glasses and small build lured people into thinking she’d be easy to push around, but they were often surprised by the tenacity lurking within.

She approached Brak’s cube, noting again how his long ponytail and wiry build looked nothing like a typical Citizen, even though he came from the strongest Citizen stock. His clothing was hardly classical Citizen, either. Brak wore several different layers of shirts, topped with a navy tunic and chocolate-colored pants. Several writing and scientific instruments dangled from a large black belt.

A structural diagram of the new Save Point model covered one wall of Brak’s cube. The new model was a waist-high pedestal made of black and silver metal, finished with an impact- and stain-resistant glossy finish. The top of the pedestal was flattened, projecting a gold and blue sphere into the air. Brak had scrawled “Avoid missing ball for high score” on one corner of the drawing.

“Hey, Brak. What ya workin’ on?” she asked.

“Oh, not much. Trying to work out the warning text on the new Mark IV Save Point.”

“What’s wrong with it?”
“I'm trying to figure out a good way to let the user know that Dynamic Monkey Systems is in no way responsible for experience loss if the unit is exposed to lava, the vacuum of space, or excessive kangamouse fur.”

Elisa nodded her head. “That kangamouse fur will get you every time. Did I ever tell you about the time I was on vacation in Brevenwood? There were huge herds of kangamice everywhere, and had allergies like you would not believe. For a minute I thought I was going to catch a big dose of Insanity, I was coughing so much.

“Anyway, finish the warning label and I’ll run it by the Lawyers. I’m going to head down to the Market for some lunch. You want me to pick up something from the Farmers? I think they’ve got that Yummi Fish you like so much.”

“If they have Yummi Fish, I am so there. See if they have any Weeha Fruit, too.”

Elisa left Brak’s cube and went out to the Market. Brak returned to the words on the page. “Would ‘Do not immerse in lava’ be strong enough?” he thought to himself.

Brak stopped for a moment and looked out the window. He started talking to himself. “Maybe I should get out of here for a minute. I hear the Merchants have a new kind of clothing for sale. I’m tired of this outfit. On the other hand, I’ll never get enough sals to buy anything if I just sit around here and mope.”

The minute Brak’s manual revisions left his desk, he felt a rush of energy flow though him. He’d never expected to Level Up as a Writer so soon. It hadn’t been that long

---

6 Weeha Fruit was a delicacy from the far northern city-state of Colwison. Weeha Fruit were usually described in texts as a cross between a hedgehog and a coconut. The smell resembled neither, but had the bouquet of burning peanuts. It was an acquired taste, popular among the Kangamouse Herders. Weeha Fruit were remembered fondly in the popular song, “If You’re Going To Leave Me, Leave The Weeha Behind” by the hit Lower Slum Number Three band, Extra Salty.
since his last Level. Brak jumped up into the air, raised a first towards the sky and held that pose for a moment. “YES!” he shouted.

“Hey, Brak! Good job!” shouted his coworker, Victor. “Next round’s on you!”

“Not a problem. I had no idea I was so close. Last time I checked, I still had a ways to go. Maybe now I can Invest a couple more Points into that Spelling skill I’ve wanted.”

Everybody reacted to a Level differently. Some people spun around in circles. Others performed acrobatics. A few just sat there with folded arms and a slight nod. But everybody loved to Level Up. Adventurers gained Levels far more often than Citizens did, but they needed that extra energy to deal with all of the monsters they encountered on their travels.

Brak concentrated for a moment and put his new energy into Spelling. Now he’d be better prepared for the word “accessible.” He opened his LogBook to record his new statistic.
Lucky Robot Pub

Welcome to the Lusty Robot Pub! Try the special! It’s called the Fintoozler!
-- Message of the Day in the Lucky Robot Pub

The city of Kleinburg was not far from the dominion of the megacorporation FensterCorp. It was a minor stop on any tour of the area, most noted for access to the scenic river Cosmia, which flowed through several valleys to the kingdom sharing the same name. Since FensterCorp had grown so much, they’d bought most of the town and their factories were pouring sludge into the river. Nobody knew what happened to the governing family of Cosmia or what industrial process produced the sludge.

The Lucky Robot Pub was one of the few remaining bright spots in Kleinburg. It wasn’t the best establishment ever, but travelers had few choices anymore. If you drank there, the worst you could expect was a slight case of Poison, and that was if you’d had the Frog Wine. Few people tried the Frog Wine more than once. The local drink of choice was the Fintoozler, followed closely by Sparkling Oil and Rust Inhibitor Daiquiris.
In one of the more secluded corners, a tall man sat with his back to the wall, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible and failing spectacularly. He had gray hair, dark brown skin, AB negative blood, brooding green eyes, and wore a dark robe lined in scarlet. Underneath his robe, he wore a Metal Bangle and a Fighter’s Band. This spring, he had turned all of 21. Next to him, a large Bright Spear sat propped against the wall. Most people were busy enough looking at him that they didn’t notice the blue-haired girl (aged 12) sitting by his side.

“Where are we goin’? Come on, Zurl. We’ve been here all day. I didn’t even get to try the Fintoozler!”

“Quiet, Princess. You know we’re looking for somebody,” he scolded. “You’re not old enough to drink the Fintoozler, anyway.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to use that ‘princess’ word anymore?”

“Of course. You’re right. I’m sorry, Anya. Drink your Milk. We’ll leave soon.”

“OK, but I’d still like a Fintoozler.”

The little girl pulled a small kitten out of a pocket of her robe. “You drink some, too, Jinx. If you want to help me find friends who will help me get back to Cosmia, we’ll need all the strength we can get.”

The proprietor of the Lucky Robot Inn—a small red robot named Sirveaux—floated over to ask the pair if they needed anything else.

“Not right now. We’ll call you if we need anything.”

Sirveaux floated through the crowd, taking orders. He decided to tell FensterCorp about the travelers in the corner of his Inn. If they found out about them through other means, he could get in trouble. The worst they’d do would be dismantling. “My actuators are
shot. I can barely hold this tray. I can’t take what they’d do to me in the Potion Factory.

Sorry folks, it’s you or me. And I pick me.”

Lurking in the corner and nursing a Beer, Zurl thought to himself. “How am I going
to get out of here? We can’t get all the way to Middengard by ourselves, can we?”

Three soldiers wearing the FensterCorp dragonfly emblem surrounded Zurl and
Anya’s table. “Sir, would you come with us? We have some questions we have to ask you.”

Zurl up-ended the table, grabbing his Bright Spear. “Anya, take Jinx and RUN! I’ll
catch up with you.”

“I’m not leaving! YOU OWE ME A FINTOOZLER!”

Zurl and Anya faced off with the three soldiers. Two of them drew Guns and fired
on Zurl, missing with every shot.

Zurl deflected the last round of gunfire with a twirl of his Bright Spear, leapt into the
air and came down on the soldier in the rear. He collapsed, leaving two soldiers for another
round. Or Anya.

Anya emerged from beneath the table. She’d been hidden behind the table for the
most of the evening so few people had noticed the flowing teal robe, the jeweled pendant
around her neck, her cyan Pretty Dress, her type B positive blood, or custom-built shoulder
perch for her cat. Jinx stared coldly at the Dragonfly soldiers, waiting for the chance to
spring at their faces. Anya raised her Ash Wand and closed her eyes while chanting softly to
herself. As she spoke, her hair fluttered in the growing breeze. Ghostly sigils appeared and
spiraled through the smoky air.

--- Sirveaux is just rationalizing here. His arms never worked that well to begin with. The Dragonfly Brigade had
driven a large spike of fear into the hearts of the populace, sometimes a literal spike in the case of some of the
The remaining soldiers had been so busy concentrating on Zurl and his spear they didn’t notice the early gusts of wind at their ankles. As the force of the wind grew, they were thrown up into the air, crashing against the battered rafters and showering the floor with chunks of plaster and dust. They fell to the ground, Knocked Out, and the conflict was over.

Anya and Zurl pulled a Safety Bangle from one of the soldiers, pocketed their sals, and ran out of the Lucky Robot Pub.

“You’d think they’d never run into a small girl before. Don’t they know you are the most lethal creatures on the planet?” asked Zurl.  

“I can’t take you anywhere, can I?” asked Anya.

“At least you didn’t have to bring Jinx into the fight. Come on. We’ve got to get to Middengard.”

---

older Vampire families.

8 Little girls were some of the most dangerous combatants known in Neugaia. They learned a wide variety of spells easily, could tap on vast reserves of inner power, and didn’t know the meaning of fear. Given a choice between mugging a hulking brute and a little girl strolling along with a garland of flowers, a monster would attack the hulking brute every time.
Phoenix Inn

Staying at an Inn restores all of your Health and Mana Points. Anything wrong after that is usually your problem.
-- *The Book of Adventurers*

Rooms in the Phoenix Inn were mostly the same. They all had four beds, reading lamps, a window, and a rug. Few of the rooms had party members fighting as viciously as the contents of room 408 did, though.

“You just left me for dead. I can’t believe that!” shouted Storm.

“We brought you back, didn’t we?” asked Sydney. His shoulder still ached from where Storm’s falling Bronze Sword had struck him. “We restored you at the Save Point and everything!”

“That took what was left of our *sands*, too.” Luca was furious. Storm was usually difficult to deal with, but this was beyond his normal angst-filled ranting. “Should we have left you lying there? I’m sure somebody would have noticed your record in that Save Point. Some day.”
“You guys let me down. We’ve tackled far worse things before,” said Storm. He ran his fingers through his spiky hair. “I can’t believe that an Armor Slug beat me. If we’d run into the Saffron Dragon, that would have been one thing. But an Armor Slug? I’m better than that.

“Look, I have to go away for a while. I’ll catch up with you later.”

Luca pointed her finger at Storm. “I think the Saffron Dragon was taken out by that party we ran into a while ago. You know, the one with the guy who can actually use a Sword? But if you leave us, that puts us all by ourselves here in Erewhon. This place isn’t exactly crawling with replacements.”

“…”

Sydney sighed and waved his arms around. “That’s your answer for everything. Fine. Leave the party. We’ll see you around.”

“…”

Luca and Sydney headed for the door. “Thanks, Storm. We were going to split the loot from rescuing the kid, but you can get your own PhysPotions and Fire Ring.”

The two remaining party members headed downstairs. Storm turned on the video screen and settled down to watch Emergency Clinic, a popular drama that dealt with a hospital for Adventurers.9

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9 The medical aspects of the show were not all that interesting. A sample scene:

Nurse: “Doctor, this patient is losing health rapidly!”
Doctor: “It must be Poison! Antidote. Stat!”

Tonight’s episode was slightly more complicated—the Adventurer patient had been turned into a Wombat and the slightly wan, mopish doctor had to search the city for the cure to Wombat: Sun Herbs. It a race against time, with a Emergency Clinic twist ending, (He had been a Wombat all along!) A number of Adventurers entered the clinic with wounds, where the doctors prescribed PhysPotions. One of the clinic’s rooms contained an Adventurer who’d run into a pack of Lighting Rats. The only real question was whether to give her a PhysPotion or a Mega-PhysPotion.
Luca turned to Sydney, one hand on her hip. “What do we do now? Go back and reason with him?”

“You know his answer.”

They both spoke in unison. “…”

Sydney laughed aloud. “You know, it’s good to be rid of him. I’m sure somebody will turn up.”

Luca’s eyes brightened. She’d had enough of Storm. She didn’t know what was worse: the sullen silence, or his constant staring at her lederhosen and midriff-baring peasant shirt. Floating Eyes were less subtle in their glances.

“I hear that this town has an Item Shop. Let’s check it out. Maybe somebody will give us a clue to what’s going in Cosmia.”

On their way out, they stopped and bought another night at the Inn. Using the Save Point built into the counter, they confirmed their loss of Storm as a party member. There was no going back now.

In another room, a little girl was suffering from a case of Ennui. It was a race against time.

Doctor: “What’s wrong?”

Girl: “I don’t care about nothin’ no more. Everything sucks.”

Doctor: “I need some Happy Stickers! NOW! We’re losing her!”

Nurse: “Here.”

Doctor: “No, I said HAPPY STICKERS! This is Coffee! You use it for Ineffectual patients! Do I have to do everything myself?”

Part of the reason the show relied on narrative tricks was that medicine on Neugaia had identified all nine diseases early on, and developed the cure for the last of them—Petrify—several hundred years ago. Emergency Clinic was popular because few Citizens saw these diseases first-hand, unless their village or town was overrun with monsters. Then it was usually too late. There was also the shocking Emergency Clinic twist, ripped straight from the headlines.
FensterCorp Worldwide Headquarters

We own the world, so you don’t have to. Really, don’t try. It’s been done.

-- FensterCorp brochure

The corporate offices of FensterCorp loomed over the once-scenic Cosmia River Valley. Long known for its scenic Power Fruit vineyards, it had been a source of much of Neugaia’s PhysPotions and MentaPotions after enterprising Scientists had discovered their formulations\(^{10}\).

FensterCorp was named after its founder, Fenster Walia, and their signature building was sculpted in the shape of his widely recognized head. Two large doors, constructed entirely of pearl, formed the front gates. A long overhang sheltered the iridescent doors with its ski-jump slope. The mezzanine was visible through two giant oval windows above the cupola of the overhang. And just like the founder’s glasses, they were filthy beyond belief. There was a standing order not to clean them. The building boasted a thinning rooftop garden, full of windswept trees and flocks of birds.

\(^{10}\) Later Scientists had developed special containers for the Potions, guaranteeing a proper dose regardless of body mass, physical condition, or medical history. Potions were truly one-size-fits all.
Fenster Walia looked out of his office over the now-polluted valley, watching the runoff from his Potion Factory corrupt the once-fertile soil.

“It’s just as beautiful as I dreamed it would be!” he told his chief advisor, Dr. Omna. A small cackle escaped his lips. Fenster danced awkwardly for a moment, biting his lower lip.

Dr. Omna watched as Fenster pulled his glasses from the bridge of his nose and smudged them a little more on the bottom of his coat. “Sir, what is your next plan?”

“Now that we control the market on Potions, I think it’s time to move onto Save Points. Then the entire world will need to give *sals* to FensterCorp, just to live and breathe! Har har har har har!” Echoes of Fenster’s laugh sounded through the large chamber. “Buy out Dynamic Monkey Systems immediately. Then surround the city of Erewhon with our forces. We’ll turn it into a garden, just like Cosmia! Har har har har har har HAR! And then we can work on Plan B!”

Dr. Omna left to carry out his orders. He’d start by summoning his elite Enforcer Squad: Wil, Macht, and Frei. With luck, they would manage to follow orders this time. A henchman’s job was never done.

Omna exited Fenster’s office and walked through the crimson-and-black halls towards his laboratory. The more he thought about it, the more Plan B worried Dr. Omna—sure, there was the idea that FensterCorp could take over the world, but there was also a great deal about heroes showing up. He’d have to prepare for that eventuality.
Super Terrific Happy Shop

You can buy many useful things in a Shop. Investigate every shop you run across—you never know what you’ll find.
-- The Book of Adventurers

After closing his Log Book, Brak left the Dynamic Monkey offices and headed down to the Super Terrific Happy Shop, a local Item Shop that catered to both the Citizen and Adventurer crowds, though the bulk of their business was with the former group.

In the early days of Erewhon, Adventurers were the bulk of the population. The surrounding area was full of wizards’ dens, warrens for bandits, and the occasional Troll cave. Citizens were few in number and were confined to smaller villages. In the Erewhon of today, Citizens still outnumbered Adventurers, unlike the early days where everyone learned Fighting techniques, knew more of the 128 Skills and concentrated on Jobs like Fighter, Spellcaster, or Hunter. The most common job these days was Farmer, followed closely by Shepherd, Merchant, and Innkeeper.

Erewhon was a haven for the local Citizenry, and few Adventurers ventured to the area. The local dungeons had been cleared out long ago, it wasn’t on any trade routes, and
had few remaining Mana resources. All that was left was the fountain in the courtyard of the Battered Shield Inn. Still, it was larger than some towns, as it had both kinds of shop: Item and Weapon.

The streets of the city still had scars from that earlier era of Adventurers. As he walked towards the Shop, Brak noticed the scars in the walls; the wide streets designed for easier combat with monsters, and the surplus of Inns for a city this size.

Brak thought about the past. “Back in the day, they really knew how to live. Nobody’s ever going to read my documentation. They go up to the Save Point and they use it. If they get Knocked Out in some fool errand, they come back. End of story. They don’t even know who built it, or why. It’s common enough that nobody reads the owner’s manual anymore.”

Dynamic Monkey did a lot of business with Save Points in other regions, but they didn’t have to do much replacement of local Save Points. Still, most people were in the habit of saving their progress before venturing out on their day. Brak had been restored from an accident twice; once when he’d been crushed by a inexpertly-summoned ice block during a party at Middengard College— he still didn’t like being cold to this day—and the second time when he’d fallen into an open sewer and been eaten by Plague Rats.

Middengard College was a fine all-around school located in an older part of town. Brak had majored in Writing there, with a double minor in Cooking and Ancient Lore. His roommate that year was a third-year Spellcaster named Gary, and got a bit carried away with Ice spells during the Spring Rites of the Player. When Brak had reconstituted and found out that a) he’d just been horribly crushed by a three-ton block of ice, and b) his roommate drank all of his Beer while he was lying underneath it, he transferred to the more Citizen-oriented dormitory.

Gary later went on to live on Lunazwei, working as a refrigerator in the Cheese Factory in Gamma Colony. He’d gone into graduate work in the field of Ice Studies, and while the cheese factory gig wasn’t the most exciting job, it brought in enough sali to keep him happy. As an added bonus, he got to watch a lot of overweight tourists queue up in long lines for free samples. Gary and Brak sent each other cards sporadically, though Brak always greeted news from the moon with a mixture of excitement and trepidation.
Nobody said being a Citizen didn’t have risks—it just didn’t have as many risks as running around the world looking for treasure and weapons. As far as Brak was concerned, he’d be more than happy to work on the back end of things. Let somebody else save the world. It wasn’t his job.

The Super Terrific Happy Shop boasted a wide selection of Potions, Rings, and Armor. Business had been slow in recent years, but it made a respectable profit on the day-to-day items like PhysPotions and Antidotes. Antidotes were very popular on the days after Festivals.

Brak asked the Shopkeeper what items they had. Sometimes he liked to chat before buying or selling, though once a Adventurer heard his conversation, it never varied. Brak had his own favorite conversation that he used with Adventurers—tradition and common sense demanded that Citizens say no more than needed. There was no use in attracting unwanted attention from the kind of person who wandered the wastes looking for long-lost medallions and carried a genocidal streak a mile wide. “Morning, Clancy. Got anything new for me?”

“Welcome to my shop! Would you like to buy, sell, chat, or exit? Oh, Brak! I didn’t know it was you for a second! Is something different?”

“I finally got those last experience points I was looking for. You’re looking at a man who can Spell, now!”

“Spelling, even! So soon, so soon! Well, take a look and let me know what you’d like. I’ve got a little something for you. Say, and word from the Mayor’s office is that there’s a problem with the Road to Middengard. Seems there hasn’t been much traffic lately.”
Brak nodded. “I’ll keep in mind.” He wandered through the aisles, looking for something to commemorate his newfound victory over tricky words. “Maybe after this, I’ll go to the Market and look for Elisa. Perhaps I can get that raise now.”

There were two strangers blocking the aisle containing the writing supplies. One was a young woman with short hair, blue eyes, nice abs, and a well-worn Short Staff. Her companion, a hulk of a man sporting a Hand Cannon and a cybernetic eye, was talking to her in low tones. They were obviously Adventurers. Brak let them speak first, as was the custom on Neugaia.

“Could you tell us anything about this town?” the woman asked. Brak wanted to say more, but he also knew that getting too close was a bad idea.

He started with his first speech. “Hello. Welcome to Erewhon! We don’t get many strangers around here.”

“What have you heard about Cosmia?”

That was a new one. Nobody had prepared him for that one—it hadn’t been mentioned in any of the news broadcasts. He went with his second speech on reflex, though they’d piqued his curiosity. “You might want to speak to Mayor Heywood. His office is in the center of town.”

The large man rolled his eyes. “Thanks, but what do you know about Cosmia?”

He replied with his first speech again.

“Hello. Welcome to Erewhon! We don’t get many strangers around here.” His mother had always warned him of the perils of getting involved with Adventurers, yet part of him wondered if this was his big chance to get away from it all. His eyes searched theirs as they heard his second spiel. Not a flash of recognition.
The two strangers, knowing they’d received all the information they were going to from him, moved on to other people in the shop. Brak overheard them muttering about “stupid townspeople” and “Let’s head back to the Inn.”

Brak sighed and thought to himself. “Maybe I should have told them about the road to Middengard being blocked? No. It’s not my problem. Still, it would have been nice to get out of this little town for a change.”

Brak left the Shop and headed back to his office.
Dynamic Monkey Systems

Switching Jobs is not something to be taken lightly. Consider all of your Skills before taking the plunge.

-- The Book of Adventurers

Brak took the stairs back to his office two at a time. He hadn’t purchased anything at the Super Terrific Happy Shop, and the encounter with the strangers replayed itself in his mind. Cosmia. What had happened in Cosmia? He didn’t know much about it, other than it had a hereditary throne and was considered a holy land by some Havenite sects.

Brak threaded his way through the twisty maze of cubicles, all alike. Elisa was waiting for him, sitting in his chair.

“Brak, congratulations on your Level Up! I wish it had come at a better time.”

“What’s wrong? Was the Market out of Yummy Fish?”

“Yes, but that’s not the important news I have to tell you. FensterCorp has just purchased dynamic Monkey. They’re closing our office immediately.”

“What? When did this happen?” Brak sat down in his visitor’s chair.
“It was a surprise to me, too. You can check with the Vice-President if you’d like. I hear that you can relocate to the home office of FensterCorp if you are a high enough level.” She handed Brak an Important Paper on official-looking FensterCorp stationery, complete with the company’s dragonfly emblem.

Relocating. Brak could consider that as an option. Maybe it was somewhere more exciting than Erewhon. “Where is this home office?”

“Some little backwater land named Cosmia. I’ve never heard of it, but I’m thinking of trying it.”

Had he been drinking and a Comedian, Brak would have performed a Spittake. Neither parameter being true, he settled for a small jerk of the head.

“Cosmia? I didn’t know that something bad had happened there.” Brak wasn’t sure why he didn’t mention his encounter earlier that day, but held off, even with a trusted friend like Elisa.

Elisa shrugged. “I don’t know much about it. Well, it was nice working with you. We’ll give you the rest of the day to pack up your belongings. You might want to check with the HR Representative before you leave.”

“What are you going to do, Elisa?” asked Brak.

“Who knows? Maybe I’ll move to Cosmia.”

Brak and Elisa hugged. He gathered his meager belongings (nothing more than a Memento, some Pens, and a couple of Pictures) and headed downstairs to the HR

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12 Comedians shared some of the traits of Adventurers. They wandered Neugaia alone. Some Citizens thought they were searching for the Ultimate Joke, while believed they were looking for the Lucrative Media Deal. The most famous Comedian in history had gone on to rule a small kingdom before being heckled to death by a vicious Troll while trying out new material on the road. After being restored from the royal Save Point, he was never quite the same.
Representative’s office. The HR woman had been doing her job for years, and was at least a level 15 Human Resources Representative. Even with the merger and downsizing, there was no way that FensterCorp would replace her. She’d gained the Iron Will and Decreased Emotion skills that were so vital to carrying out her job.\(^{13}\)

Brak handed her his Resume. “Do you have anything for me? I don’t think I want to go to Cosmia just yet.”

The HR lady blew a cloud of smoke through her nostrils. “Let me see your paperwork and LogBook.” Brak handed her his trusty LogBook and settled nervously into the chair. She placed her cigarette into an ashtray and looked over his skills for a moment.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have anything for somebody with your statistics. Maybe if you got another Level in Spelling, I could get you a job as a proofreader.”

The writer gasped. “Another Level? I just got that one today! Are you sure there’s nothing there?”

“Look, sonny. I’ve got fifteen other people in the same boat as you, many of them with far more Experience and Levels than you’ve ever seen. I could probably get you in as a Laborer in the factory in Cosmia if you want. Or wait a couple of days and I’ll what work there is in Middengard.”

Brak stood up and grabbed his Logbook. “I’ll check the Message Boards myself. Thanks for your help.”

\(^{13}\) Other skills for HR Reps included Complete Lack of Technical Knowledge, Insane Qualification Generation, Cronyism, and Speed Dialer.
As he left the Dynamic Monkey offices, Brak wondered what he would do. A quick check of the Message Board in the town square showed nothing of promise. He could stay with his family in Xafraif for a while, and he had enough sals in savings to pay his own way.

Then Brak remembered the strangers in the Item Shop today. They’d been talking about Cosmia as well. What was going on there? Why did they buy Dynamic Monkey? As far as Brak could remember, they manufactured Potions, not Save Points. It didn’t add up.

First off, Brak headed to the bar in the Phoenix Inn. He needed a Milk. No, make that a Beer.
Phoenix Inn Bar—The Phoenix Nest

Tonight’s Specialty: The Killer Shrew. Two for one with all Golden Tickets.

--- Message of the Day in the Phoenix Nest

An early owner of the Phoenix Nest had taken the name to its logical extreme. Everything in the room that could be on fire was. During the busy season, they spent a fortune paying Stickpickers\(^\text{14}\) to gather sticks for the flaming brand in the middle of each table. The insurance for the place was astronomically expensive, but the owner did enough business to make up for it.

Accompanied by his misery at losing a good job writing boilerplate text, Brak nursed the latest in a long line of Thunder Rebel Beers\(^\text{15}\). He muttered to himself. “Buy my company, will you? I’ll show you. Watch. I’ll spell FensterCorp without any help. F-E-N-N-

\(^{14}\) Stickpickers were the most basic Job available since the jobs of Firebringer and Hunter-Gatherer were discontinued many centuries ago. Their ranks included some of the mightiest Neugaian heroes, since they had the furthest to go of anybody. Non-Adventurer Stickpickers had impressive collections of sticks in their houses. In a world of giant robots and magic, people still needed sticks and Stickpickers—sticks didn’t pick themselves up.

\(^{15}\) The label for Thunder Rebel read, “An electrifying brew that won’t fill you up, and grants a +10% defense to all Lightning attacks. But remember: drink and fight responsibly.” The shining face of Lantho, the Thunder Rebel mascot glared on the label, holding a sword in one hand and a lightning bolt in the other.
S-T-Now I know my ABCs, next time won’t you sing with me? And what’s this about Cosmia? Now we’re all going to disappear and nobody will ever hear from us again?”

Two people in long cloaks sat down at his table on either side of him. “Say, friend? Do you really want to say anything about FensterCorp or Cosmia right now?”

The other one piped up. “Soldiers of the First Dragonfly Brigade have been walking through town for most of the afternoon. Now is not a good time to be crossing them.”

Brak looked at each one in turn, trying to decide if there were four of them, or just two. “What business is it of yours? If I ask nice, they’ll let me be a Laborer and everything!”

“Shhhh! Here come some now!” said the smaller one. She pulled an Iron Katana from beneath her cloak and passed it to Brak under the table. “If you play your cards right, we won’t have to use this.”

Five FensterCorp Soldiers wandered over to the table where Brak and his visitors were sitting. Their officer spoke up. “Something bothering you, sir? Don’t you know that FensterCorp is the leading supplier of PhysPotions in Neugaia? And now we lead the world in Save Point design!”

“Save Point design?” shouted Brak. “I’ll bet I know what the warning text on the new unit says!”

“Whoa, mister! I think you’ve had enough.” The cloaked figures looked nervous. “Perhaps you’d like to come with us and discuss it?”

The shorter cloaked figure spoke up, lifting Brak off his seat. “It’s all right, sir. We were just leaving.”

“No, I insist you come with us,” barked the officer.
The taller cloaked figure spoke up. “We won’t trouble you any more.” He made a
motion to leave.

“…” said Brak.

“Fine, have it your way, then. Get them!” The officer pointed his baton at the three
half-crouching figures. The soldiers formed up into two lines of two.

Luca threw off her cloak. “Sydney, it looks like we’ll have to fight our way out! Let’s
go!” Sydney threw his cloak to the side and drew his Hand Cannon.

The soldiers fired their weapons, hitting Sydney and Luca several times and catching
Brak in the crossfire. Luca and Sydney prepared their counterattack.

Brak was stunned. As a Citizen, he could accept some dangers, like Ice-summoning
accidents or being eaten by renegade packs of Plague Rats. But actually being shot was a lot
different than hearing about it on the Message Boards or seeing it on screen. He didn’t like
it, and found himself drawing the Iron Katana that Luca had given him from its scabbard.

Luca and Sydney each attacked a guard, littering the ground with stray bolts of ice
and shell casings. Both of their opponents were Knocked Out. That left two soldiers with
Grenades in the back, and the Officer. Brak held the Iron Katana steady, surprising both
himself and the Officer with the rapidity of his blows. He didn’t know it until later, but he
started to make the transition from mere Citizen to Adventurer at that moment.

“Naaaaaa! Focus Attack!” Slashing his blade, Brak’s cuts formed the strokes of the
character for Focus in the air. The strokes glowed for a moment, shimmered, and collapsed
into a tight ball of energy. The ball of energy shot forward, hitting the Officer in the chest and throwing him backward towards the rear of the bar, knocking over a bowl of pretzels.\(^{16}\)

That left two more soldiers. They fired again at Luca and Sydney while Brak attacked them with his Iron Katana. A series of cuts and the fight was over. Sydney and Luca looked at each other in shock for a moment, then went forward to search the bodies for leftover equipment. They also opened another Treasure Chest that had been sitting unnoticed in the bar for quite a while.\(^{17}\) It contained an Onyx Armband.

Brak noticed a strange sensation flowing from the hilt of his weapon towards his body. It felt like his previous gain of a Level, but different. In his mind, new options were opening up—options he’d never seen before. He wasn’t quite sure what to do about it. He panicked.

“Aaaah! What’s happening to me? Where am I?” He looked around for a familiar face, settling on Luca and Sydney. “You! What did you do to me?”

“I’m not sure. How long have you known how to handle a weapon? I thought you were a simple Citizen?”

“I thought I was too! Now I can hold a sword and it looks a lot like I’ve just declared war on the biggest corporation in Neugaia. What do I do?”

\(^{16}\) One of the bar’s occupants choked on a stray pretzel. He was widely regarded as being one of the dimmer occupants of the town, and spent most of his time stealing from those foolish enough to listen to him. Nobody missed him or bothered to restore him from a Save Point. The moron choking on a pretzel in no way symbolizes the current US president.

\(^{17}\) Citizens left Treasure Chests alone. Most houses had one, traditionally stored in an upper bedroom or hallway. Adventurers visiting a town wandered through houses, opening all the Treasure Chests they could find and taking the loot. Citizens replaced the Treasure Chests when they were opened—it was tradition, and beat the alternative of having a large man shoot you for the PhysPotion in your pocket.
Luca grabbed Brak’s shoulder, steering him towards the back door of the Inn. “I don’t know, but we’ll help you. Let’s go this way. Sydney, let’s move!” The three of them ran out of the door and into the darkened alley.

The party stopped for a breather behind a couple of trashcans. The young writer twitched uncontrollably. “I can’t make it stop!”

Sydney ran to the mouth of the alley and looked around. He returned to Luca and Brak. “The coast is clear, for now. Luca, I think we’re going to have to get out of this town for a while.” Looking at Brak, an eyebrow shot up. “Is he OK?”

Luca placed hand on Brak’s forehead. “I don’t know. I’ve not seen anything like this before. Brak. Listen to me. Slow down and concentrate. You’ve just gained your first Level as an Adventurer. You’ll need to put some Experience into a skill before too much longer, particularly with a new Job like this. Are you with me?”

The young man nodded his head. “I think so. What should I do?”

“OK. Concentrate on your current energy level. Imagine it as a long bar in your mind. See how it’s pulsing?”

“Yeah. I transfer the energy into something else now?”

“That’s right. Think back to your days as a—what were you? A Merchant?”

“No. I was a Writer.”

“OK. Let’s look at your inner LogBook. See how you’ve invested in Skills? What’s there now?”

He concentrated for a moment. “Spelling, Ancient Texts… Wait. What are all these? Slash? Counterattack? These weren’t here before!” The pounding in his head was getting worse all the time. His breathing increased.
Sydney looked nervous. “We’re taking too long. Let’s just leave him.”

The Spellcaster glared at him. “This could be the guy we’re looking for. Did you see how he handled that weapon?” She turned back to Brak. “OK, transfer some of your new energy into Defend. That should help you survive until we can reach a new Save Point, store your progress, and get out of here.”

Brak followed her instructions. The moment he made the transfer, the tension in the back of his head lessened. He felt a little more agile, and could see new ways he could have blocked the incoming fire of the Guns in the Inn. “Thanks. That feels much better. There’s Save Point in the Mayor’s House. That’s not far from here.” They ran through the streets of Erehwon, looking for more Dragonfly Soldiers.
Erewhon Mayor’s House

Ich bin ein Erewhonite!
-- Campaign slogan for Mayor Heywood

Mayor Heywood had just settled down with a good Ancient Text and a cup of Tea. A fire burned merrily in the fireplace, snapping and crackling, behaving very much like a typical fire. The years he’d spent in the wilderness, plundering forbidden temples and buried cities, had not been wasted. A well-worn set of Crystal Claws hung above the mantle, commemorating his days as a Adventurer.

Few people remembered those days now. He and his companions had stopped the Green Moon Cult from crashing Lunazwei into the planet years before. They’d opened up a new interest in space travel as a result, and now the dividends from his investment in Moon Cheese paid for a quiet retirement and small political war chest. A war chest that would get some exercise. FensterCorp had been in town only a day or so, and already they were openly talking about replacing him with somebody else. He eyed the Treasure Chest in the far corner, wondering if the time had come for him to take up his Crystal Claws, retrieve the Knit Scarf from the Treasure Chest, and try to save the world. Again.
The front door swung open, discharged three strangers into the room, and closed again. They ran to the Save Point by the door and scanned themselves in. Heywood started to give his standard “Welcome to Erewhon, this is my house” spiel. Wait—didn’t he know one of them? He’d never seen that posture on him before, nor the Iron Katana at his side. He changed his mind and went with what he was thinking. “Brak, as I live and breathe! Is that you?”

“Yes, it is, Mayor, sir. I… I don’t feel quite the same right now. Can you help us?”

Trouble? Brak? His family was so quiet—what was all this about trouble? “Come in, come in. Sit down and tell me all about it. And introduce me to your friends.”

“This is Luca and Sydney. They helped me with a bit of trouble in the Phoenix Inn. We ran… We ran into some FensterCorp soldiers and there was some trouble and I’m afraid they may be after us now. I’m also terribly attracted to that Treasure Chest in the corner. Attracted in a way I’ve never been before. I never wanted to open the Treasure Chest in my own house until tonight, anyway. Now I’m tempted to go back, even if it is just a PhysPotion.”

The mayor glanced over at the Treasure Chest. He remembered the itching sensation they once induced in his fingers. “You’re more than welcome to it, my son. I think you’ll need it far more than I will.”

The three of them wandered further into the room. Brak opened the Treasure Chest and extracted the Knit Scarf. As he put it on, the chest evaporated into a cloud of blue smoke and red sparks.\footnote{The remnants from evaporated Chests were collected and processed into new chests later on. Nobody had thought to ask the Chests what they thought of the process.}
“What does this do?”

“The Knit Scarf is a thing of wonder, my boy. You’ll find it repels most status attacks, including Wombat.”

“Wombat? Never heard of it.”

“I hope you won’t. I’ve spent time as a Wombat, more than I care to recall, and you never get the dirt out from under your fingernails afterwards.”

Sydney wandered around the room, inspecting the Crystal Claws hanging on the wall.

“Can you help us? We’re trying to get out of here.”

Mayor Heywood crossed his arms and tapped a foot on the ground. He thought for a moment.

“Right now we’re having trouble getting any news from Middengard. I don’t think anything has happened there, but you might want to check it out. And there might be some friends who can help you. When you get there, visit my old buddy Professor Katzen. He may know more than I do. If nothing else, it will get you out of the city.”

All of the mayor’s guests bowed to him. Brak was particularly thankful. “Thank you very much, Mayor Heywood. We will see what’s going on with the road to Middengard.”

Mayor Heywood held the door open and watched his three visitors walk into the night. After locking the door, he went to the study to call his friend Katzen.
Secure the area around Erewhon. Allow no one to enter or exit the town with express written consent of Major League Kangamice Racing or FensterCorp.

-- *Dr. Omna’s instructions to his Enforcers.*

The road between Erewhon to Middengard started out as permacrete slabs, trailed off towards the midpoint, and became a meandering trail through miles of the Misty Forest. There was a renowned Item Shop called the Forest Master Shop near the entrance to the Misty Forest, which was roughly halfway between the town and the city.

The three travelers exited the city walls of Erewhon under the silver-green light of Lunazwei. If they looked hard enough, they could make out the lights of Gamma Colony on the eastern landmass.

After stopping off at the Save Point outside the city’s gate, Luca came over to Brak with an armful of armor and accessories. “Now, Brak, it’s time for a small tutorial about switching gear.”

“Shouldn’t we change clothes? The guards have probably been revived by now, and they’ll know what we look like.”
“Change… clothes? I don’t understand. Weapons and armor, yes, but an Adventurer never changes her clothes.”

“Except to sneak into a guarded fortress or installation,” corrected Sydney.

“Oh, yeah, that’s obvious.” Luca plucked small pretzel shards from the strap of her lederhosen. “Sneaking in somewhere is one thing, Brak. But changing clothes? It’s not in our… our idiom. You’ll get the hang of it. Somewhere around here I have… Hold on.” Luca searched her pockets and pulled out a book with a battered leather cover. “This the Book of Adventurers. It has a lot of the Code that we follow written in it. Learn the contents well, and they’ll take care of you.”

Luca searched her pockets again, to look for a golden bauble. She handed Brak a Fire Ring. “Put this on. Note how you feel slightly cooler? This ring will protect you from a quarter of any fire damage you receive. You can use the Fire Ring or keep the Knit Scarf—if it does what Mayor Heywood says it does, you may want to keep it. If you don’t want it, Sydney or I will take it.”

The three adventurers swapped equipment for a moment, trading pieces of armor and odd accessories. Nobody traded weaponry, as a Adventurer’s weapon was hers forever. Or, at least until the next town when a more potent model was usually waiting in a shop.

Their swapping complete, Brak, Luca, and Sydney visited the Save Point again and started jogging down the road towards Middengard.

Their first obstacle was a group of three Ice Blobs that attacked them along the road. They attacked quickly, throwing bolts of ice at all three travelers. Brak heard music running through his head as he ducked and slashed at the Ice Blob in front of him.
After a few rounds of pointless hacking, Brak grew worried. “It doesn’t seem to be working!”

“Physical attacks mean little to a blob. But watch this! Nothing beats ice like FIRE!”
Luca waved her Short Staff in a complex pattern, finishing her move by pointing at all three Ice Blobs. Each was engulfed in ethereal flame, which blackened the surface of the blobs before they gave up the struggle, exploding into wisps of light.

Sydney waved Brak over to where the Blobs had made their final stand. “Now, Brak, it is customary to search the bodies of the slain. You have no idea how many of them are just carrying sals or Potions or whatnot.”

Brak furrowed his eyebrows for a moment. “Why would an Ice Blob carry sals? It’s not as if they could buy anything with them.”

Luca shook her head. “Nobody knows. All monsters are hoarders by nature. Maybe they’re taken off the bodies of fallen travelers. The important thing is that monster slaying is an important source of income for us. You’ll be glad for those sals after you see the kinds of weapons they have in Middengard. They’re expensive!”

The oily sludge left over from the Ice Blobs had little to offer: 30 sals and a Stability Pill.

“Stability Pill? What’s that?” Brak was no doctor.

Sydney answered. “Counteracts any Insanity you might have.”

“Can I take it right now, then? Do they make one the size of an entire planet?”

The three of them laughed, pocketed the sal coins, and continued down the road. They made a small amount of progress towards the Misty Forest when Luca stopped short.
Two more figures blocked the road. On the left, an oversized TerraBird thrust a huge beak into the ground, showering the adventurers with clods of dirt. Its companion was a shimmering Ghost Lumberjack, drifting in and out of visibility. There was nothing translucent about the giant axe in its hands. Both creatures eyed the party with malice.

Brak looked at his companions. “There’s no chance we can just… walk by them, is there?”

Sydney looked down at the ground for a brief moment. “Sadly, no. We could run away from them. Odds are they’ll peg us a couple of times before we can get away, and I do not like the idea of that axe in my back, if you know what I’m saying.”

Luca nodded her head in agreement. “Sydney’s right. It’s one of the problems you face when you become an Adventurer. Granted, you lose all protection under the law, but you get to make your own way through the world. Often paved with the bodies of monsters like these.

“I know it’s hard, but you’ll get used to it eventually. Come on, let’s see what these guys are made of!”

Luca attacked the Ghost Lumberjack with Wind spells while Brak and Sydney hacked at the TerraBird. It barely had a chance to squawk before falling apart. The Ghost Lumberjack caught Luca in the abdomen with a blow from his axe, stunning her for a moment. Sydney fired his Hand Cannon in its area, riddling what corporeal bits it had remaining with slugs of lead. Brak sliced the axe in two with a downward cut from his Iron Katana, then sliced sideways to finish the spectral clearcutter.

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19 Neugaian armormers had learned that when you absolutely, positively had to kill pretty much anything that walked, swam, flew, crawled, or ooze, a couple dozen rounds of flying lead was a pretty good choice.
As it turned out, both of the monsters were made of little bits of light. Neither of them carried anything, but the conflict did give the group more experience towards another Level. As Brak had just moved into a new job, he leveled much more quickly than his companions—he had more to learn and they had farther to go. That was the advantage to becoming an Adventurer: skills like Double Slash and Ultra-Lightning looked much better on a resume than more mundane skills like Typing Master or Paper Pusher.

Sydney and Brak started to walk off back down the path, but Luca held a hand up for a moment, indicating that she wanted them to wait for her. “Hang on a sec, guys.” As they waited, he searched her lederhosen pockets for a PhysPotion²⁰.

As she chugged the aquamarine liquid of the PhysPotion, it set to work restoring the wounds left by the giant axe. Small scintillas of light orbited her body, and she was left with a sense of well-being. The potion bottle evaporated as she swallowed the last gulp. Luca wiped her hands on her shorts, readjusted her grip on her Short Staff, and led the three of them onward.

They were stopped yet again by a roving pack of monsters. Four Death Rabbits carrying pikes attempted an ambush after a turn in the road.²¹ “This never lets up, does it?” Brak shouted through the war cries of the Death Rabbits.

Sydney called back. “Not really! Once one group of them knows we’re here, they usually don’t let up for a while!”

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²⁰ One of the nice things about Adventurer fashion was the roomy pockets. Luca’s lederhosen didn’t look like much, but she could store up to 99 MentaPotions in the back pocket. Packaging science on Neugaia dealt well with small hand-held items, but Farmers still required a train of Kangamice to carry the output from their farm to market.
Three of the Death Rabbits lunged at Brak while the fourth executed a leaping thrust threw Luca back several feet. Brak managed to dodge the first attack, but the second and third penetrated his defending strokes. The Death Rabbits gave a triumphant scream as their pikes went through his body to emerge out his back. His vision started to dim and he collapsed to his knees. Blood flowed out of the entrance and exit wounds as the sounds of gunfire and magery grew softer. He grimaced in pain. “Oww. That will leave a mark.”

Luca saw Brak fall and regretted dragging him into their mess. She clubbed one of the Death Rabbits with her Short Staff, knocking his pike flying as he exploded in a shower of sparks. Reaching into her pocket, she threw a PhysPotion at Brak, hitting him in the head. The PhysPotion container shattered, spraying Brak’s form with the contents. The PhysPotion was manufactured with unconscious patients in mind, and did not need to be taken internally—it could be absorbed through skin, hair, or clothing.

Brak’s vision cleared a little bit as the healing forces worked through his body, reknitting torn muscles, ligaments, and organs.

Sydney fired his Hand Cannon into the remaining Death Bunnies, littering the ground with shell casings. Most of his shots hit them, tearing them to pieces momentarily before they ruptured into multicolored clouds of light. He and Luca rushed over to Brak to see if he’d recovered.

Luca put one arm around Brak and supported him as he staggered to his feet. “Are you all right?”

Death Rabbits were a product of the high background level of magic—many creatures had developed civilizations and tool usage as the ambient levels of magic warped their form and minds. Many of these societies were dedicated to wiping out everything else, on the grounds that they would stop mutating if everybody would just go away.
“I’ll live, I think. That hurt!” He was still unsteady on his feet, and nearly fell over.

Sydney patted Brak on the back. “You'll heal. And if you’d died, we’d have brought you back from the Save Point and you probably wouldn’t remember any of this.”

“That’s comforting… I think. No. No, it’s not comforting. But it will have to do.”

Luca gave Brak a handful of PhysPotions. “Here. Take these. Use them if you feel you need to. We’ll take off when you’re ready.”

“I think I’m OK. Let’s move on. I’d like to see the Forest Master Shop. Maybe they’ll have better armor.” The three of them set off slowly down the road.

The road out of Erewhon made several turns through valleys before it got to the edge of the Misty Forest. As the valley widened out, Brak got a good glimpse of the surrounding countryside.

The three of them stopped for a breather on the last outcropping before level ground. There was a small plain before the Misty Forest stretched on to the horizon. On the plain below, small, regular depressions dotted the landscape. Some of them were full of deep water and had become lakes, ripe for fishing. Other grooves had collapsed walls, and were filled with sheltered groves of trees and bushes. Some impact areas were wide enough that Brak had trouble recognizing where the caldera from one ran into another.

“What happened here?”

Sydney was silent for a moment. “They don’t talk about this much anymore, do they? A long time ago, probably 1500 years ago, there was a great war. The sky city of Rosso held
this whole continent under its iron yoke. Some cities rebelled, throwing armies at the Rosso forces to no avail.

“To enforce order, Rosso began bombing the cities. These craters you see here are all that remains of the city of Adamante. Its armies were decimated in minutes. The few survivors staggered back to their hometowns, only to find that their populations had been enslaved.

“Four heroes made all the difference.” Hosta had been a soldier from Adamante. Praxis and Aldeba had grown up in a nearby village. The fourth—Shih—was a ninja master from the Shining Sun Province on the Estron continent. Together, they worked for months to acquire the skills and weapons needed to take on the automated hordes of the Rosso Empire.”

Sydney kicked a rock around the edge of the path with his boot. It ricocheted off a couple of rocks and landed in the tall grasses beside the road. He hadn’t thought about this story in a long time, but its overriding message—that a band of truly concerned citizens could change the world—was still as valid today as it ever was.

“Finally, the four Adventurers won their final Kangamouse race, explored every dungeon and forgotten city they could find, and built a colossal airship to take on the floating city of Rosso. It was a battle that tore apart the sky. Hundreds of drones fell before the guns of the airship while the crew battled boarding parties hand-to-hand from the upper

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22 Several Neugaian crime dramas used this particular quirk of the Save Point process as plot points. A recent episode of Mayhem, She Wreaked involved a businessman’s death, subsequent regeneration, later second death, and final regeneration before Julia had figured out the answer. There was always that awkward moment with the newly regenerated where they were told the manner of their previous death. Some cultures refused to tell anyone, figuring it would work out more harmoniously to not know when or where the dice had come up against them.
decks. They broke open the outer defenses, defeated the guardians of the Inner Citadel, and beat the living hell out of the entire government of Rosso.

“The legacy of that battle still remains. Governments had proven ineffective in fighting battles to save the world. Vigilante groups of people were the way things were done. Hosta and his friends founded schools for fighting that exist in some form or another to this day.”

Sydney waved his Hand Cannon at his younger companion. “Weapons like these have been in the hands of Adventurers like us for a long time. So far, we’ve managed to save the world when it’s in danger.” He gave his weapon a brief inspection before returning it to his holster.

“Not to be dramatic or anything, but the time has come again when we have to take up our different weapons, seek out adventure, and put another dent in the growing monster population. Will you help us after we get to Middengard? I know you’d probably go back to your life as a Citizen, and this trip so far has been kind of rough on you…”

Luca chimed in. “We would understand, Brak. Sydney and I have been living this life for quite a while. You haven’t. But it will get easier as you Level Up. And we’ll look out for you. We promise.”

The two experienced Adventurers waited for Brak to finish. He paused for a moment. “Where are you going after Middengard, anyway? I have no idea what’s next.”

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23 Traditional hero bands could number anywhere from three to nine, though in some extreme cases groups had as many as 108 members.
Brak’s companions looked at each other. Luca spoke, “Several months ago, we were further west near the country of Cosmia. Something strange happened there and we’ve been trying to figure it out ever since…”

Brak stopped her. “Does the Forest Master Shop have an Inn? Because I could really use some food right about now. Let’s head there and talk.”

Luca and Sydney nodded. “Fair enough. Let’s go, guys!” The three of them headed down the trail. They had to take the slope somewhat carefully, as the gravel and sand of the trail was prone to giving way when a foot was placed on it. The deep ruts from the kangamice caravans complicated the process, throwing off footing and nearly tripping all of them as they made their way down.

Once the path leveled off, they proceeded down the trail towards the Forest Master Shop. Trees grew more numerous, dripping with moss and creeper vines. Small yellow flowers dotted the underbrush and they started to make out the hunting calls of forest predators.

As Brak, Luca, and Sydney picked their way through the overhanging moss, they found themselves surrounded by an all-too-familiar group of people: Dragonfly Brigade Soldiers. They motioned the party to stop. “Halt! What business have you on this road?”

Luca replied, “We’re trying to get to Middengard. Why are you stopping us? Did we…”

“We’ll do the talking here. Do you have any idea how fast you were running? You could have hurt someone. And I see you don’t have the proper illumination, either. FensterCorp law prohibits travel without lights front and back. I’d like to see your license and registration.”
The three adventurers looked puzzled. “We don’t have any ‘registration.’ You’re more than welcome to look at our IDs. My name is Luca and this is…”

“We don’t care. You’re trespassing on FensterCorp property and you’re under arrest. It’s for your own protection.” The soldiers began leveling their weapons at all three adventurers, motioning with the barrels to move along or there would be trouble.

Brak looked at Luca and Sydney, whispering, “Doesn’t FensterCorp come from Cosmia?” They sidestepped along the path. “I don’t like this. I don’t like it at all.”

Brak drew his Iron Katana and sliced diagonally through the arms and midsection of the guard closest to him, spraying everyone with blood and fragments of sparkling light.

“Let’s get out of here!” Sydney and Luca each readied their weapon, and the three formed a circle with their backs to each other.

The Dragonfly Soldiers opened fire, kicking up a great deal of dirt and knocking leaves from the trees. One of the bullets struck Sydney in the arm, spinning him around and knocking him to the ground. Luca started to prepare a Healing spell in her mind, moving her Short Staff in time with her chanting. Green light surrounded Sydney and his shoulder as her spell began to take effect.

Meanwhile, Brak lashed out at the cluster of guards nearest him. Guns might beat swords in distance attacks, but in melee attacks, sharp swords were just as effective in dealing with the enemy. Time and again he thrust and parried with the soldiers’ outstretched weapons, knocking them aside to pierce their bargain-basement armor.

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24 Marksmanship was not a requirement to join the Dragonfly Brigade. Looking sharp in the uniform was. It was all part of corporate policy: it was better to look good than to shoot good, if you know what I’m saying. And you know who you are.
Luca’s energy had risen to the point that she felt she could risk a Specialty Attack. She closed her eyes, concentrating on each of the remaining soldiers and her party members, then bent over double. Finally, she jumped into the air, spiraling her body through a complete circle before landing on the ground. “Standing Wave!” she shouted.

Waves of lavender and pink energy emerged from the circle she’d drawn in the air. She and her friends brought comfort and healing from the energy, but the remaining foes were all blown backwards by her power, evaporating under the pressure. As the last waves died down, the three found themselves standing alone on the path, surrounded by the remnants of the Dragonfly Brigade unit.

A quick search of the area revealed little except for a copy of some orders, a couple of sub-par pieces of armor, and a Field Tent. “FensterCorp must be as cheap with their pay as they are with their armor,” remarked Sydney. “I could maybe 500 sals between the five of them. That doesn’t go very far these days.”

“Why has FensterCorp taken over this area as well? What are they after?” asked Brak.

“Maybe we’ll get some answers at the Forest Master Inn. If nothing else, we’ll pick up some new gear.”

The three of them left the clearing behind and headed further along the path. They were just within sight of the Forest Master Shop—with its homey exterior, folksy art in the garden, and warm, welcoming light—when another trio of figures stopped them.

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25 Every person on Neugaia had at least one Specialty Attack which was used in moments of high stress. They took various forms, and more advanced Citizens had multiple Attacks. Non-Adventurers sometimes had Job-related attacks—for example, Elisa’s Specialty Attack was a burst of Frantic Writing. The HR representative had Super Pink Slip, allowing her to lay off multiple people simultaneously.
Wil, Macht, and Frei were the personal servants of Dr. Omna. They took care of little things, like enforcing company policy regarding length of bathroom breaks, the distribution of pens, and making sure that FensterCorp environmental projects were carried out. They dressed in identical dark suits with black ties. All three carried clubs. The size and constant use of their cell phones indicated that they were very important people indeed.

Wil broke the silence. “We hear you don’t want to go back to Erewhon. That doesn’t sound right to us.”

Macht and Frei began waving their clubs idly in the air. “We’ll give you another chance to make good. Head back to Erewhon and you won’t feel our wrath. We should warn you that we don’t really like to be angry with people.”

Luca challenged them. “Then perhaps you should find another line of work, because we’re not going back.”

Wil played with the matchstick poking out of the side of his mouth. He adjusted the headband holding back his long black hair and looked narrowly at the adventurers. “That’s too bad, then. I guess we’ll write it down later as ‘Failure to heed company policy,’ or maybe ‘Mysteriously and suddenly beat themselves to death with no warning.’ Whatever the case, hopefully this will be a lesson to you in future lifetimes. Get ‘em, boys!”

The Enforcers did not catch Brak or his friends by surprise. Their attacks were parried by Luca’s staff, a quick dodge from Sydney, and a slice from Brak. As Frei charged

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26 Three minutes. And wash your hands.
27 Buy your own. Pens don’t grow on trees.
28 This usually involved enriching the soil with nutrients like arsenic or mercury, because Fenster had read somewhere that heavy metals were bad for people, but hadn’t read anything about them being bad for soil, water, or other animals.
past him, Brak’s fingers shot into the pockets of Frei’s jacket, stealing a Machine Pistol from an inner hiding place. “I’ll have to give this to Sydney later,” he thought.

Wil’s arms moved through the air, tracing mystic lines and ending with a downward-pointing flourish. All of the adventurers were thrown into the air and earthen spikes erupted from the ground. They were battered and ripped as they fell back to the road. He gloated. “Heh heh heh.”

Brak and his friends focused their attacks on Wil. Sydney shot him several times in the chest, throwing him backwards and pinning him on Brak’s awaiting Iron Katana. Wil’s eyes widened as he saw the point of the blade poke through his chest. Luca muttered a quick Fire spell that scorched Wil’s clothing before slamming into his face. Wil dropped to the ground, stunned and bleeding from multiple wounds.

Macht took advantage of their concentration and swung his club at Luca’s head, cracking into the side of her skull and rebounding into her neck. He grabbed her in a bear hug, squeezing her with his immense strength. Luca dropped her Short Staff and struggled to break free.

Sydney gave Brak covering fire as he ran towards Luca to break her free of Macht’s grip. Careful not to cut his friend, Brak’s downward stroke opened a grisly wound in Macht’s back and side. His hold on Luca grew weaker as he turned around to swing and Brak with his club.

Frei reached into his coat and removed a PhysPotion. He threw the bottle towards Wil and it shattered, spraying his leader with healing fluids. The ruin of his face grew less messy as new flesh knit over his burns and cuts. Wil croaked, “Thanks, man. Let’s waste these buggers.”
Macht had watched as his boss was healed. It was all the opening that Brak and Sydney needed, double-teaming the brute with a series of slashes and shots. Sydney hit Macht point-blank with rounds from his Hand Cannon, narrowly missing Luca. Macht finally dropped her and fell to the ground, struggling weakly before exploding into a spray of rainbow sparks.

Luca regrouped with her friends. They had the odds in their favor now, though it never paid to depend on numbers when people were backed into a corner. Frei made another motion to grab a PhysPotion, and Luca began the words of a Fire spell. She waited for Frei to drink the potion down, then hit him with a wave of burning plasma. “It’s all in the timing! Go, Brak!”

Brak heeded her advice, spinning his blade around his body and driving it deep into Frei’s abdomen. He watched with a sense of revulsion as Frei made a motion to speak and then transformed into another cloud of light.

Wil was totally outnumbered and decided to retreat. “We’ll meet again!” He ran off the path into the bushes, looking for a Save Point to use to restore his friends.

Brak, Luca, and Sydney watched their last foe run off for a moment, then felt a wave of energy run through them as they leveled up. Sydney threw one arm into the air, Luca spun around twice, and Brak jumped into the air before holding his customary pose. Each of them took a quiet moment to transfer energy into newer skills.

Brak chose to invest in Counter Attack, Luca decided to learn Antidote, and Sydney took Increased Damage. Brak gave him the Machine Pistol he’d taken from Frei, then Sydney helped his friends search the ground for sals and equipment. They found an Iron
Guard, an Ice Ring, a MentaPotion, and 600 sals. “Maybe he could have used our Fire Ring,” joked Brak.

After readjusting their equipment and pocketing the loot, Brak, Luca, and Sydney walked towards the threshold of the Forest Master Shop.
Middengard Subway

This is the Basilisk Line. Next stop: Imp Park Corner. Mind the bottomless chasm.

--- Warning on Middengard Subway lines

Middengard boasted an extensive subway system. It had been installed several hundred years ago, and was powered by a combination of steam, electricity, and kangamouse power. Giant wheels contained a miniature breed of kangamouse, powered by their running. The wheel’s hub turned a shaft, which in turn rotated a series of cams and gears, transferring power to ancient electrical generators. Power cables snaked through the tunnels of the subway, delivering current to the streamlined green trains that rushed from station to station.

As each car approached the platform, the doors opened and exiting passengers jostled through the crowds of people waiting to board the trains. Two figures in the East Gate station boarded the Circumference Line train, which traveled widdershins along the rim of the city. One was a man in a gray cloak, fastened around his neck with a silver chain. His companion was a short girl in a teal dress, who appeared to be the steed for a black-and-
white kitten as one shoulder was occupied by a cat and custom-built perch. They sat together at the back of a car near the ends of the train.

The train waited for all passengers to board, then started to move towards the next stop. Work lights and maintenance tunnels flashed momentarily in the windows as it sped down the track. The tall man spoke to the girl at his side. “Let’s keep moving, Anya. I’m sure if we stay in one place, they’ll find us.”

“If you say so. I’m getting hungry. Do you think we could find a place to rest? I could use a break from all this moving, and Jinx is getting hungry. I saw him eyeing the rats on the track at that last stop, and it was all I could do to keep him from leaping after them.”

“That’s probably a sign we need to stop, then. We don’t want to let Jinx down.”

Jinx mumbled to himself mockingly, “We don’t want to let Jinx down.’ You should have thought about that before we moved away from everything we knew by leaving the castle in the dark of night.” He stretched out for a moment, arching his back and blinking slowly.

Anya hushed her cat. “Quiet, you. You’re not supposed to be able to talk.” She placed a hand over his nose and mouth.

With a quick turn of his head, he moved out of the way. “You’re not supposed to be able to summon Big Friendly Creatures, but you do. So we’re even.”

Zurl looked at both of them. “Could you quit bickering for a moment? I’m trying to remember a restaurant near here that we might try. Let’s get off at the next stop.”

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29 Neugaian mages knew of many Big Friendly Creatures who could be called upon to smite monsters and other dangerous things. Big Friendly Creatures lived in sub-dimensions of their own, existing mainly to appear on Neugaia and attack the foes of people they had bonded with. Big Friendly Creatures normally picked people older than Anya, though there were exceptions. The presence of Big Friendly Creatures made Mutually Assured Destruction pacts look like schoolyard threats.
The Circumference line pulled into the Schama Hill station. It was one of the higher points of the city, overshadowing the Leicester District and the terminus of the station was near a tower offering a fine view of Middengard. The city’s center was a cluster of tall towers, connected by skybridges draped with climbing vines. Several buildings had Airship docks, and several buildings had decorative waterfalls on all four sides. The north of the city was more industrial, boasting factories, warehouses, and the giant cooling towers of the Ether Reflex Reactor. Schama Hill was equidistant from the north sector and the first Slum Sector around the East Gate.

Metria Bay surrounded the western edge of the city, and many docks and shipwrights were built along the shore. The Guardia River emerged from the Misty Forest near the high-rent heights of the South Gate. Several bridges spanned the river as it flowed towards the sea.

Anya, Jinx, and Zurl left the subway train and climbed the stairs to the surface of Schama Hill station. Not far off, the Wooster Tea Shop did a brisk business in tea and scones. After taking a Maple Wand from a Treasure Chest in an alley, the man, the girl, and the cat entered the tea shop. They took a table in a corner and ordered a pot of Tea and a plate of Scones.

None of them spoke very much, lost in thought in a strange city. They watched passersby walk past the window and waited for their order to arrive. The owner, Mrs. Jeeves, brought it herself, watching as they attacked the Scones and Clotted Cream while the Tea steeped.

“Hungry group. I wonder where they’re from?” She walked through the tables back to the kitchen, checking on her customers to see to their needs, if any.
Anya took a dollop of Clotted Cream and placed it on a saucer for Jinx to enjoy.

“Don’t eat too much—you’ll get a tummy ache.”

“Define ‘too much.’” Jinx lapped at the thick cream with great enthusiasm. “This stuff is so good. I don’t think you could have too much of it, ever. Had I a mountain of it, that would not be enough.”

Zurl looked around the room to see if anyone was eavesdropping. All of the customers appeared to be engrossed in their own conversations, and most of their words were lost in cacophony of patrons slurping tea and clattering plates. “Now then, before we left the castle, I was warned by your father’s chief advisor—the wizard Pazu—that we should come to Middengard and find his old friend Katzen. We didn’t have much time to talk—he was insistent that you leave before FensterCorp took complete control of the country.

“Have either of you ever wondered why you can summon Big Friendly Creatures at such a young age? He wasn’t sure either, so he started doing research. I’m not sure what he found, but it scared him to death. He told me to take the two of you and leave as soon as possible the minute he had heard about the movements of FensterCorp’s troops.”

The girl and her cat stopped gorging themselves on tea and scones for a moment. They remembered the rush to leave the castle, hiding in a delivery caravan, and the troops hounding them every step of the way. “So where is this guy?” asked Anya.

“I think we’re closer now. Pazu didn’t say where he was exactly, just that he was in Middengard. If we can just stay inconspicuous for a couple of days, we’ll be able to find him. I don’t know if we can stay in an Inn, but it’s worth a try. Then we’ll spend the days looking for him. Sound good?”
“As long as we get to come back here, that would be fine with us,” replied Anya.

They ordered another Pot of Tea and some Finger Sandwiches. When it arrived, they dived into it hungrily.
Forest Master Shop

All of our forest gear is made with you in mind. Note the fine materials, the quality stitching, and the hand-applied finish on all our blades. We demand the best because you demand the best. Try all our wares, from Survival Tents to Coffee Beans to Vicious Serrated Blades. You’ll be glad you did! And this weekend, free Red Balloons\(^{30}\) for the kids!

--- Commercial for the Forest Master Shop

Bernard ran the Forest Master Shop with his wife, Brunhilde. They had lived near the edge of the forest for years, selling equipment to travelers, supply caravans, and the Naturalists who studied the forest and its denizens.

Business had been slow since the soldiers from FensterCorp had taken over control of the road. They didn’t have enough money for the higher-end items, and none of the lower-end items had that great of a profit margin. They were also driving away their more legitimate customers. As the night wore on, they sold little: a couple of Plastic Shields, some PhysPotions, a pair of Replica Soldiers, and a Save Tent. They usually did more business with one party of Adventurers.

\(^{30}\) This was a really good deal, since Red Balloons were very popular after the Slum Level Three band, Extra Salty, released the hit song, “You’ve Got To Follow Your Balloon,”.
They heard a commotion outside—gunfire, the clanging of weapons, some spells, and a great deal of shouting. Not long after, a party walked through the front door. They made a beeline for the Save Point in the foyer, which was always the sign of Adventurers. And Adventurers equaled cash.

Bernard greeted them with a warm smile, a smile calculated for inducing higher expenses to three decimal places. “Welcome to the Forest Master Shop! Would you like to buy, sell, chat, or exit?”

The tallest member of the group, a large man with a cybernetic eye, spoke up. “We’d like to chat, I think.”

Bernard nodded. Discussions usually led to spending sprees. He opened with his standard subjects. “Excellent. Would you like to talk about the area, the current situation, or the legend of the Forest Master?”

The woman spoke out. “The current situation.”

“Right now we have noticed troops in the area. They seem to be interested in preventing anybody from entering and exiting the town of Erewhon.

“Would you like to talk about the area, the current situation, or the legend of the Forest Master?”

“The area.”

“This shop is the last stop before you enter the Misty Forest. The town of Erewhon is to the south. North of the Misty Forest is the great city of Middengard.

“Would you like to talk about the area, the current situation, or the legend of the Forest Master?”

The tall man spoke again. “Who or what is the Forest Master?”
“The Forest Master is said to be the guardian spirit of the Misty Forest. All that travel in the forest do so under his watchful eye. Few people have seen him, but all who do have spoken of his kindness and gentle power.”

“Would you like to talk about the area, the current situation, or the legend of the Forest Master?”

“Skip back a bit.”

“Welcome to the Forest Master Shop! Would you like to buy, sell, chat, or exit?”

“Let’s buy.”

Bernard’s eyes lit up. Maybe this evening wouldn’t be such a wash after all. He opened up his display cases, offering the travelers a glimpse of the wares for sale. “I have weapons, armor, accessories, and medical equipment. Please take as long as you like. “

Luca walked next to Brak and pointed out several pieces of equipment on display. “That Broadsword might be a better weapon for you. It’s heavier than the Iron Katana. We never did get a good piece of armor for you, so you might want to try the Battle Vest. And of course, we should buy as many PhysPotions and MentaPotions as we can afford.”

Sydney came over to the pair. “We’ll spend the night here before venturing onward. I doubt the FensterCorp Enforcers will chase us into the Misty Forest.”

Bernard’s evening turned out fairly well. Luca exchanged her Short Staff for a Power Staff, and traded her Silver Armband for a Gold Armband. Brak purchased both the Broadsword and the Battle Vest that Luca had recommended. Sydney kept his new Machine Pistol, but replaced his Bandolier with an Inlaid Harness. The party depleted the Forest Master Shop stockpile of medical supplies, including most of the valuable LifeMoss. The three travelers booked a suite for this evening, spending more $als on dinner.
Over a plate of Wild Mushroom Pie, the three discussed the escape from Erewhon and their destination.

Brak was curious. “So why did you guys pick me out of the bar? There have to be other warriors in the area—Erewhon may be a small village but does have enough Adventurer business to keep two Shops going.”

Sydney and Luca looked at each other. Luca spoke after a moment. “Well, to be honest, we did have another member of our party. But we’re better off without him.”

Sydney agreed, grabbing another Dinner Roll from the basket on the table. “He was a jerk, Brak. A complete knee-biter. Hopefully we’re through with him.”

“His name was Storm. He was the kind of guy that made statues look like wild conversationalists. He left us after a disagreement on tactics.” Sydney looked around at the Inn. “This looks like a nice place. Bernard might need some help around here. You’re welcome to stay here and the two of us will make our way to Middengard.”

Brak chewed thoughtfully on his Mushroom Pie. “You’ve never told me why you’re going there.”

His dinner partners looked around the dining room before continuing quietly. “Well, a few weeks ago, we uncovered part of something known as the Sylvan Ledger. It was incomplete, and we can’t make out much of it. So we decided to take it to a big city in the hopes of finding a Scientist or Archeologist who could tell us more about it. We think it has something to do with prophecy, and you know how that stuff works out.”

Brak nodded. He knew his history, and the annals were filled with last-minute heroics salvaging victory from the jaws of defeat. Often literal jaws, as the Plague of Land
Sharks in 644.31 “I see. Well, to be honest, there’s not much to go back to. FensterCorp took over my company and I was in their first round of layoffs. I don’t know if Adventuring income counts against my unemployment, but I don’t really care much, either.”

He took a sip of his water. “I hope we find what we’re looking for in Middengard. Maybe Mayor Heywood’s friend can help you with your text problem. If nothing else, It’s been a while since I’ve visited my old stomping grounds in Middengard. It would be nice to see how things have turned out. I’ll go with you until then, at least. There’s safety in numbers and I don’t really want to face another round of soldiers on my own.”

“Thanks, Brak. We’re glad you made that decision.” Luca reached over and squeezed Brak’s shoulder.

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31 Land Sharks were very clever, often posting as friendly dolphins to lure their victims off-guard and complacent. A clever abbot of the Lin-shao Monastery, who figured out their weakness for Gummi Fruit after reading the ancient scrolls in the monastery’s library, defeated them.
Misty Forest

Remember: only you can prevent forest sprites from attacking you and everyone you love.
--- Public Service Announcement from Attacky the Forest Bear

The three travelers spent the night in the Inn attached to the Forest Master Shop. There was a reason it wasn’t mentioned with quite the same frequency as the Shop: not many groups were fond of staying overnight in rickety shacks with thin walls and thinner blankets.

Breakfast made up for the poor sleeping conditions; Bernard served an all-you-care-to-eat breakfast buffet, complete with eggs, toast, waffles, six kinds of sausage\(^{32}\), the traditional weed and root salad of the Duck-men who poled barges down the river to Middengard, some anthracite coal for passing trolls, and small loaves of Brunhilde’s specialty: pumpkin bread. Brak, Luca, and Sydney stayed for several helpings of the pumpkin bread before settling their tab and heading out. They stopped and scanned themselves in at

\(^{32}\)As the renowned scholar Brennttbu wrote, “You don’t want to be tied down to just one variety of tubed meat product.”
the Save Point, made a final check of their weapons, and walked down the path towards the heart of the Misty Forest, and ultimately to Middengard.

“So have you guys ever seen the Forest Master?” asked Brak.

They walked along in silence for a moment. Luca’s brow furrowed in thought. “Not that I’m aware of. We’d probably remember something like that. Maybe we’ll be lucky.”

Up ahead, a lone figure sat at a ramshackle stand near the side of the road. A weathered, hand-lettered sign advertised “Forest Master Souvenirs.” They stopped for a moment. The stand had a display of hand-carved wooden figures, each slightly different, of a figure that could only be the guardian of Misty Forest.

“Welcome to my store, hee hee! Would you like to buy, sell, chat, or exit? Ha ha ha!” The old man’s cackle echoed through the trees of the forest.

“Chat, I think. Is the Forest Master nearby?” asked Brak.

“I’ve not seen him for quite a while. The forest seems darker than usual these days. I hope somebody finds out what’s going on…”

He switched back to his first speech. “Welcome to my store, hee hee! Would you like to buy, sell, chat, or exit? Ha ha ha ha!”

The trio purchased one of the Forest Master figures, thinking it would come in handy in identifying the spirit if they ran across it. They gave the old man some sals and went on their way.

The further they went into the heart of the forest, the thicker the mist became. As they walked, the crunching leaves gave way to thick piles of fallen needles. The trees grew taller and more choked with climbing vines.
After climbing several hills and walking down into a valley, the trio was attacked by a group of five ambulatory Wild Mushrooms.\textsuperscript{33} They erupted from the thick carpet of debris on the path, spraying pine needles in all directions.

“Wild Mushrooms! Brak! Try not to let their pollen get on you!” shouted Luca.

“Got it!”

The first row of three Mushrooms leapt at the party. One bounced off the top of Sydney’s forehead, stunning him for a moment and spraying him in the face with a cloud of pollen. He inhaled in surprise, catching a full dose of the powerful substance, which had several effects.

In this case, it gave Sydney a dose of Ennui. He grew disgusted with the world. “Aw, screw this. I don’t want to fight anymore. This is all pointless.” He threw his Machine Pistol to the ground, sat down, and started picking at rocks stuck in the bottom of his boots.

Luca threw a bolt of lightning at the group of Wild Mushrooms. It struck each of them in a chain reaction, popping three of them in a flash of light. The remaining duo retaliated by firing more clouds of pollen at her and Brak. The wind was blowing in the wrong direction, and the clouds passed safely to the side.

“Sydney! Snap out of it!” Brak swung his Broadsword in an arc, catching one of the Wild Mushrooms and slicing it into another explosion of light.

“What’s the point? Nothing matters anymore.” Sydney pulled a multitool from his belt and began digging at a stubborn rock lodged in his heel.

\textsuperscript{33} Not the same Wild Mushrooms they had consumed the night before. These Wild Mushrooms were a distant cousin to those non-sentient varieties, and had abandoned their sessile ways in exchange for attacking passing travelers in order to obtain enough salts to buy tickets to their favorite movie, “Coupon: the Movie.” Wild Mushrooms were not the sharpest fungi in the woods.
“Luca! You were right about dodging the pollen! This sucks!” Brak started looking in his pockets for the counteragent for Ennui. Was it Coffee Beans? Happy Stickers? He was still so new at this.

“One more to go!” Luca struck the last Wild Mushroom with the end of her Power Staff, knocking it backwards into a large tree, where it rebounded off several branches and a rock before finally bursting into a spray of colored lights.

As Luca and Brak searched the forest floor for goodies, Sydney began to shake off the Ennui. “Sorry about that, guys. Find anything?”

“Not much. A couple of Ticket Stubs and some sals.” Brak pocketed the loot. “Let’s keep going.”

They readjusted their equipment and continued down the ever-darkening path. The conifers near the road began to appear more corrupted, the green leaves and brown bark streaked with oozing black growth.

“What’s this? This doesn’t look right. I’m no Scientist or Farmer, but this seems unnatural.” Brak took a closer look at one of the branches. The corruption appeared to come from further down the path. “Looks like we’ll run into the source sooner or later. Let’s keep moving.”

The Misty Forest grew darker and more twisted. Small fireflies glowed blue-green as it grew darker, and spider webs grew more numerous. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” said Luca.

That appeared to be the cue for a Giant Spider. It sailed down a large thread of silk and swiped at Luca with a giant arm. She jumped back, but not before catching a dose of poison.
Sydney and Brak countered the Giant Spider's attacks, and took defensive postures around Luca, who was beginning to pulse with a sickly green light. “I’ll… be OK.” She began the movements and words of the Antidote spell. A white light emanated from her body as the pulse of green grew softer and finally died away. She sighed in relief. “I knew that would come in handy.”

Working together, the three of them drove the Giant Spider backwards. Sprays of ichor dripped from surrounding ferns as Brak sliced at the Giant Spider’s outreaching legs. Luca cast Invisible Hands at the creature, and it rapidly fell under the blows of her spectral fists. A final burst of gunfire, and it evaporated.

“That was awful. Maybe this is the thing the old man was talking about? Nah. This forest is growing darker by the foot. Onward, then.” Luca found an Antidote potion among the wreckage, along with a couple hundred sals.

Soon Brak had to cut a path through spider webs that barred their progress along the road. The calls of the forest creatures had grown quiet, replaced by an ominous silence that was punctuated by bursts of chittering.

The Misty Forest became an Oozing Forest. The trees were now collapsing into piles of black and dark purple fungus. Sickly green-gray moss grew in clumps along the road, and dark, oily water dripped down from the twisted branches blocking out the sky.

“This doesn’t look natural in any way. I wonder what’s causing it?” wondered Sydney.

There was a clearing up ahead. Black vapor blocked a clear view of what was inside of it. The ground was covered in a film of dark ooze, making the path treacherous to walk on. The air tasted like burning metal and rotting flesh, causing the three travelers to cough
and sputter as they moved nearer. They could hear an ominous hum coming from behind the smoke.

“Should we go forward? Or turn back?” Brak spoke in a low whisper.

Luca moved next to Brak. The three huddled close together near the center of the path. “I think we should investigate what this is. There’s a chance that nobody’s been this far. We could be the first on the scene. It’s our duty to seek things like this out, Brak.”

“All part of the Code, my friend. Help people in distress, investigate the unusual, fight monsters, dress as a woman to get into exclusive clubs… Er, um. That comes later.”

Sydney drank quickly from a canteen at his side, wondering if he’d said too much.

Brak nodded. “OK. I get it. Is the cross-dressing part of sneaking into places?”

“Yes. It’s a sub-clause in one of the appendices of the Code. Look it up at the next Inn.”

“Alright. So we go in. Pity there’s no Save Point or anything.” Brak looked around for a familiar reference.

Luca laughed softly. “Traditionally, they’re on the other side of a ‘boss’ like this.”

“A boss, huh? If they’re anything like the bosses I know, this should be easy. I’ve always wanted to paste the empty-headed fools who decide to sit in their office while other people do all the work, then ride in and make ‘decisions’ by taking a leak all over things, just to tell their kids that they saved the dumb people at work from making an error through the great advice they gave… And then there’s the hair! Every single one of them has that same perfect hair! They spent more time and money on hair care products than I did on food!”

Brak looked around. “Wait. That was out loud, wasn’t it? I’m sorry. Guess I’m still partially a Citizen at heart.”
His friends smiled. Luca whispered, “You’ll do fine. Save that anger for later.”

They made a final check on equipment and health, then carefully made their way to the clearing. As the vapor dissipated, they noticed a giant pillar in the center. It was made of a strange hybrid of metal and organic material, pulsing slowly as if it was distributing fluids from a central core. Small status lights glowed orange on several panels, and cables snaked upwards from the pillar to a canopy of wires and mechanisms overhead.

“What is this?” asked Brak.

“This is the glorious future, young one.” A mechanical voice boomed from somewhere up above. Prefect Motor Industries, working in concert with FensterCorp, is bringing a new future to Misty Forest!”

The three travelers looked up. They could make out a giant arthropod moving rapidly through the maze of machinery above. It boomed again. “We are taking this stupid forest and turning it into glorious material for the new order. Where once stood trees, there is now a factory for lubricant, coolant, and the raw materials to construct a whole variety of products!”

“But what about the trees? What about the air?” shouted Luca. She whispered to her friends, “Get ready. I think he’s about through talking.” She shouted, ”What about the Forest Master?”

“The Forest Master? Hah! He was dull and weak! He didn’t know what hit him, much like you!”

As the MechanoSpider screamed its last word, it dropped onto the party. It was a corrupt hybrid of spider and Sport Utility Vehicle, belching dark smoke from the exhaust ports in its abdomen. It had vicious jaws used for cutting down large trees, and they were
easily adapted to devouring the adventurers. Its armored tentacles shot out to attack each of
them in turn, shooting sparks and trailing droplets of oil as the arms moved through the air.

Brak parried the tentacle attacking him, and countered with a lunge at the creature’s
midsection. He grunted as his blow bounced off its armor. He ducked as another tentacle
whipped towards him, and sliced off half of it as it missed. The tip of the tentacle flew to the
floor of the clearing, twitching spasmodically.

Sydney fired a clip from his Machine Pistol into the midsection of the
MechanoSpider. Great holes opened up in its organic parts, spraying hydraulic fluid all over.
A well-placed Fire spell from Luca widened the holes, weakening the creature further.

The MechanoSpider reared back for a moment with a scream that reached into the
ultrasonic range. It shot a spray of motorcar fuel from beneath its jaws and ignited it,
scorching Brak and his friends and starting several pools of fire in the clearing.

Brak spun his Broadsword around his body and shouted, “Focus Attack!” He carved
a series of strokes in the air, forming the characters for Focus in yellow light. The light held
for a moment, then collapsed into a sphere of glowing force that struck the MechanoSpider
in the braincase.

Luca cast a Heal spell on herself and her two friends. Their burns healed enough that
their agility was back to normal, which they needed to dodge the spray of poison that
emerged from a pair of hoses set into the beast’s midsection.

Brak weaved and dodged through the mass of waving tentacles to attack the
underbelly of the MechanoSpider. He sliced upwards, opening another spray of hydraulic
flood that covered his side. “I could really use the Forest Master about now! Or something!”
“Watch this, then, Brak!” shouted Sydney. He threw a fresh clip of ammunition into his Machine Pistol. He concentrated on his next round of firing. As he set up his shot, bolts of light formed around the room and shot into his weapon. The coruscating energy reached its peak, he fired at the MechanoSpider, shouting, “Sure Shot!” All of his rounds hit the same point on the creature, ripping into it deeply and causing great damage. Brak and Luca followed up with attacks of their own, cutting off more bits and setting parts of it aflame with Fire bolts.

The MechanoSpider let out a final bellow and curled in on itself. It exploded into a titanic burst of light, shattering the pillar in the center of the clearing and knocking Brak, Luca, and Sydney flat to the ground.

They lay there for a moment, trying to catch their breath. Already, the forest felt different—cleaner, more pure, less full of corruption. They gathered themselves and stood up to look at what was left of the clearing. A pulsing glow came from somewhere deep inside the pillar. Brak and his friends gathered around it, not sure what to make of it.

The shattering of the pillar had exposed the central chamber at its core. A green faceted crystal lay inside the wreckage, and the slow pulse of its light was like the beat of a giant heart. Luca reached out to touch the crystal.

The moment her fingertips brushed the surface, an actinic light filled the clearing. Each of the adventurers heard a voice in their head, booming with the echoes of a thousand years of wild growth. “Thank you, my friends. I don’t know how long I have been trapped in that machine. Those monsters captured me and were using me as the power source for their machine that was destroying my forest.”

Brak shielded his face from the light. “Are you the Forest Master?”
“Some call me that. I am Conifera, the guardian of Misty Forest. I am very thankful for your help and will do all I can to help you in the adventures ahead.”

The glow and the crystal vanished. As their eyes adjusted to the new, more natural levels of light, they could see a mossy giant, with bark for skin and hands that were capable of shattering rock. The figure waved its arms in slow circles above their heads. “I am now more attuned to you—if you need me, call my name. I will be there. And now that that foul beast is gone, I can continue to watch over the forest.”

The travelers bowed their head in thanks. They weren’t sure what to make of the phrase “adventures ahead,” but they were now better prepared to face them. They had a Big Friendly Creature. They also found a stash of 4000 sals in the remains of the Prefect Motor Industries machinery.

Brak sucked up to the Big Friendly Creature. “Thank you, Conifera. We will try our best to stop more forest destruction.” They bowed a final time and felt a rush of energy—in addition to their new ability, they had each gained another Level. They sat in quiet contemplation for a moment, placing energy into new abilities. Brak chose Second Slice, Luca learned Big Sister\textsuperscript{34}, and Sydney found he could now Dismantle Machinery.

New growth burst through the formerly corrupted floor. Tender shoots of ferns and young trees reached towards the sky and silver-laced vines and flowering ivy began to blur the lines of the infernal machines. Brak and his companions waved to the now-vanished forest guardian, and went in the direction of Middengard.

\textsuperscript{34} Big Sister was a spell designed by the ancient Enchanted Motorcycle named Harley, whose Progress Quest was legendary in Adventurer circles.
They found a Save Point on the other side. “Told you,” said Luca. “It’s an even worse sign if there’s a Save Point right before a door—that’s when you know you’re in trouble.” The party went up to the Save Point and took turns scanning their new status into its memory banks. They felt refreshed and set out on the path.

They crested a small hill and could just make out the first glimpses of the Middengard skyline through a break in the trees. “Getting closer now, huh?” asked Brak. “Race you to the City Gates!” Whooping and yelling, the three adventurers broke out in a run through the forest.
Southern Middengard

Any fruit to declare?!
--- Traditional battle cry of the Middengard City Watch

The River Guardia river flowed along the banks of the road from Misty Forest to Middengard. Small villages dotted the roads, and the path had become more defined. The dirt trail was replaced by permacrete slabs as the walls of Middengard grew higher and higher.

As the road turned and switched back on itself to maneuver through a particularly thick grove of trees, Brak, Luca, and Sydney ran into three familiar faces: Wil, Macht, and Frei had somehow managed to get around the MechanoSpider and were blocking their path to Middengard.

“How’d they do that? We left them on the other side of the Misty Forest?” asked an exasperated Brak.

“Bad guys travel faster than gossip, I’m afraid.” Luca turned to face the Enforcers. “Let me guess? You’re not going to let us through without the express written consent of Major League Kangamice Racing?”
“Got it in one, little girl,” sneered Wil. “And we owe you for that last time.”

Macht and Frei had exchanged their Clubs for even larger blunt instruments: Cricket Bats. Normally, Cricket Bats were used to fight the Giant Crickets of the El-Amir Desert, so they were capable of great damage. “Are you going to come quietly?”

“What do you think?” shouted Sydney. He knelt down on the ground and summoned his new friend Conifera, the Big Friendly Creature. From a distance, they could hear a great crashing as the huge spirit made its way towards the battlefield. Small groves of trees sprang up from where its feet touched the ground. The Enforcers looked nervous as the earth beneath their feet started to shake with the force of its travels.

Conifera arrived on the scene, throwing off small bits of forest that took root as they hit the soil. It sized up the three Enforcers for a moment, let out a great bellow, and brought both hands down right in the center of the group. Giant redwoods burst through the ground where its blow had landed, catching each of the Enforcers on the top branches and carrying them high up into the air. Eventually they all fell off the trees, falling from the sky and impacting the ground from a great height. Each of them was wrapped with climbing vines and a thick crust of moss. Conifera waved and smiled at his friend Sydney, then rushed back towards the Misty Forest. Giant footsteps receded into the distance.

Brak and Luca attacked the dazed Enforcers, forcing them into Knocked Out status before they could recover and counter-attack. The party watched as the Enforcers sat stunned for a moment, then shrugged off their leafy bonds and making a retreat. Wil yelled, “You haven’t seen the last of us! We’ll be back!”

35 The Giant Crickets were very fond of hitting a ball and running between two gates, though nobody could understand their arcane rules.
They hadn’t dropped much of any value. Brak found a small pouch of 200 *sals* where Wil had originally landed. He looked at Sydney and Luca for a moment, and they all shrugged. “Guess we’ll catch up with them later.” They did all gain another Level from the intensity of the fight. None of them learned any spells, but they did increase their health, defense, and Mana.

“You’re doing pretty good, Brak,” said Sydney.

“It’s a lot quicker to Level as an Adventurer than it ever was as a Writer.”

“You get to drink more coffee as a Writer, though,” countered Luca.

“Yeah, but, um… It was kind of boring.”

“Well, hanging with us will probably be anything but boring,” said Luca.

“Is that a threat or a promise?” asked Brak. They headed towards Middengard.

Just down the road was a kangamice ranch. Herds of kangamice ran in all directions, bounding over the fields and nibbling on grass. One particularly curious kangamouse came close to the fence to get a better look at him. Brak searched his pockets for some Peanut Butter Cups, a particular favorite of kangamice, but didn’t find any.

“Hey, mister. Whatcha doin’?” asked a small voice. At first, Brak thought the kangamouse was talking to him. “Down here.”

Brak looked down to see a small orange-haired girl holding the reins of the kangamouse. “You gotta scratch him behind the ear, like this, see.” She reached behind an ear the size of a dinner plate and began scratching the kangamouse’s favorite spot. “My name’s Edie. This here is… Well, what would you like to call him?”

Brak looked at Luca and Sydney, who shrugged. “Let’s call him… Zeek.”
“OK, Zeek it is! I saw what you guys did back there, and I have a feeling you'll need a kangamouse before too long. You can use them for lots of things—riding around, powering a generator, pulling contests… Feed them right, you can do all sorts of things.”

“I don’t know the first thing about kangamice, really.”

“Take him. I insist. Come back and talk to me if you need any help with Zeek here, OK? I’ll be watching.” Edie taught the group how to feed and care for him, gave them a short lesson on riding and pulling, then waved goodbye as they ran down the path at high speeds.

“We’d never get there this fast on foot!” shouted Brak, hair streaming in the wind. Zeek’s long bounding strides kept them hanging on to the saddle and reins. “Hold on!”

Zeek ran closer to the City Gates. The path snaked through another set of trees, then emerged on a straight path to the Southern Gate. The Southern Gate of Middengard was large enough to emit both land and river traffic, and was heavily guarded by soldiers of the Middengard City Watch. Clusters of guards watched all the traffic in and out of the city. Small airships patrolled the airspace above the metropolis, on the lookout for smugglers or marauding monsters. Air traffic moved in all directions, carrying goods to and from Middengard.

Brak, Sydney, and Luca dismounted their new kangamouse, held on to the reins, and entered the queue to get into the Southern Gate. The line moved slowly as the City Watch inspected cargo manifests, kangamice caravans, and suspicious-looking satchels. After about half an hour, they were at the head of the line.

The head ward looked them over. “Reason for visiting?”

Luca spoke for the group. “Visiting a friend.”
“Any fruit to declare?”

“No.”

“Have your items been in your possession at all times?”

“No.”

“Is this kangamouse full of disease?”

“We think he has a clean bill of health.”

“Do you like pie?”

“Love it. Particularly Yummi Fruit Pie.”

“Has anybody given you a package that you don’t know the contents of?”

“No. Not that we know of.”

“Well, enjoy your stay. Make sure you keep your weapons in their holsters. City soldiers enforce the peace and we are on the lookout for monsters. Follow all of their orders. And please take the time to enjoy the sights—the Waterfall Towers in downtown are particularly pleasant in the evening.”

“Thanks!”

The three led Zeek through the armored doors of the Southern Gate and entered the arch leading through the city walls. The tunnel opened up to a wide thoroughfare that ran north to the middle of the city. Ancient buildings towered over them, with pennants flying from tall towers.

“There are more people on this street than I ever saw in the entirety of Erewhon!” exclaimed Brak. “Where are we going to find Professor Katzen?”
They walked over to a bench on the sidewalk and sat down to plan their next move. Zeek pawed at the ground, looking for seeds.

Sydney spoke. “First of all, we should look for shops and an Inn. Well, before that we should find a stable for Zeek here so we don’t have to look after him in the street. I think there might be one near the Inn, or maybe we can just keep him in the room. We can also find some better armor and weapons, and restock on any supplies we might need. Then we can Save and start looking for Professor Katzen.”

Brak wondered out loud. “Can we call him in any way? I imagine there’s a connection to the MoppetNet around here somewhere.”

“MoppetNet? That still exists?”

“Yeah. It’s been mostly replaced by video, but Katzen may not have one.”

The three left the park bench and wandered down the street. This section of Middengard had an Item Shop and Weapon Shop. There was an Inn several blocks down the road, the Sleeping Lion. Its sigil was a snoozing maned lion, blowing a bubble out of its nose.

As they walked through the door of the Sleeping Lion, they noticed the sleep-oriented décor. There were no chairs in the Sleeping Lion, just giant pillows. Soft silks hung

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36 Many of these questions were instituted as part of the New Cruelty, an aesthetic movement currently en vogue among the city fathers of Middengard. The New Cruelty had originated with the fancy restaurant L’Idiot and had spread to the highest echelons.

37 MoppetNet was a system of communication that depended on the Moppets, an ancient race of creatures. Moppets were about half a meter tall, were covered in gray fur, and had two small antennae on their heads. Moppets ran between cities carrying messages by hand. Moppets were strong believers in face-to-face communication. There were advantages and disadvantages to MoppetNet—the Moppets trusted few people and so the chance of message interception was low. However, the Moppets were nowhere near as fast as other methods. If the Moppets really liked you, they would sell you one of the rare items or weapons they collected on their travels. Nobody gave them a second glance, even when they were carting out a Phased Plasma Rifle with a 400 watt range.
from the walls, and the lights were low. Quiet music was piped through hidden speakers. Fighting the urge to lie down, the party walked over and used the Save Point built into the desk. They were in luck—the Sleeping Lion did have a kangamouse stable and were more than happy to take care of Zeek while they stayed in the Inn.

As they registered for one of the suites, the clerk handed them a note. It was addressed to them and was written on the hotel’s stationery. The spidery handwriting formed a message from Mayor Heywood’s old friend, Professor Katzen. They had some trouble deciphering it at first, but they got used to Kazten’s calligraphy. It read:

Dear friends,
I hope your journey to our fair city was uneventful. Strange things are afoot and I would like to talk to you tomorrow morning. Meet me at the old Mrs. Wiffle’s Frozen Kitchen\(^3\) warehouse in Slum Sector Two. I will talk to you then.
Yours,
Professor Katzen (retired)

“Well it looks like he found us. Even better.” Brak folded the note up and placed it into a pocket. Brak and his friends went up to their room, ordered room service, and spent the night watching video programs\(^3\) and recovering from their journey.

\(^3\) Mrs. Wiffle’s Frozen Kitchen was a line of ready-to-eat frozen meals. The company folded after a particularly bad series of advertisements from a gruff-voiced vocal coach.

\(^3\) Another popular show was *This Old Dungeon*, where a team of Artisans and Craftsmen helped dungeon owners rebuild old dungeons for exorbitant amounts of *sals*. They tore out old booby traps, restored switches, restocked Treasure Chests, and refreshed the puzzle designs. The original host had gone on to his own show after scandals involving endorsements of Prefect Motor Industries spell-enhanced carving tools. The current hosts were a genial pair of trolls, who delighted in running over-budget and off schedule, just to see if they could throw people into fits of Insanity. They were fond of saying, “This is a really nice space,” and, “I love this space,” and “Oh dear, you seem to have cut your hand off with this Rock Carver—would you like a *PhysPotion*?”
Schama Hill District

The history of Middengard is the history of Neugaia. The Waterfall Towers, some of the oldest buildings on the planet, are here. Some of the finest spells were researched in the Sorcerer Schools in the Northwest Sector. And who can forget the Save Point, which was first developed there?

-- The scholar Schama writing in his book, Everything You Always Think You Wanted to Know About Middengard But Were Afraid to Ask

After several days of dining on Tea, Scones, and Finger Sandwiches, Zurl felt that he was getting a handle on the workings of Schama Hill. They’d visited the Library, several Museums, and one Brewery. While Anya and Jinx stayed in their room at the Prince’s Head Inn, Zurl had made initial inquiries into finding Professor Katzen. He gathered that Katzen lived in a variety of places, but could not find a current address.

Anya had adapted well to life in the big city, but Zurl could tell that she and Jinx were giving up hope that they would ever see Cosmia again. They didn’t attack the Scones with Clotted Cream with the same gusto they’d displayed earlier. Not even a Beast Curry would cheer them up. Beast Curry was the next best thing to a PhysPotion in Zurl’s book, so this was serious news indeed.
Zurl began to regret his flight from Cosmia. Perhaps Pazu had finally snapped, and there was nothing ominous about the purchase and subsequent takeover of much of the country. Maybe there was nothing suspicious about the soldiers wearing the Dragonfly badge attacking them back in the Lucky Robot Pub. Indeed, wild Death Bunnies might also exit from his rear and begin suborbital maneuvers.

Zurl was performing a series of exercises with his Bright Spear when Anya came up to him. “I can’t find Jinx anywhere. Maybe we should go look for him?”

“Where did you see him last?”

“He said something about going to the Tower of Felinus to ‘check out the scene.’ Does that mean what I think it means?”

“Hmmm. The Tower of Felinus? What is that again?”

Zurl and Anya went down to the lobby of the Inn and scanned the display racks. There was a small brochure from the Tower of Felinus and the surrounding Felix Temple. The temple was run by a series of monks dedicated to the Cat Style of martial arts, and Felinus was the Big Friendly Creature that they had traditionally summoned in times of danger.

“Typical. I’m sure he’s thinking dark thoughts about the lady cats guarding the temple. Come on, Anya. Let’s go meet our little pilgrim.”
FensterCorp management compensation was approximately 45% of total expenditures. This is justified by the extreme confidence we have in our senior management staff, and should in no way be compared to the 10% spent on the other nine-tenths of the labor pool.

-- FensterCorp Annual Report, 1290 AL

Fenster Walia enjoyed spending time with his herd of Grass Beasts. They were dumber than a bag of hammers, but they appreciated his attention. He was in the middle of feeding them when his aide Dr. Omna approached with the Enforcers in tow.

“Sir, we purchased the Dynamic Monkey company as ordered. Erewhon is now under our control, as is the road leading to Middengard. However, we ran into a slight problem.”

“What’s that?”

“A party of adventurers evaded our regular troops and my Enforcers. They appear to have liberated Misty Forest from control of the Prefect Motor Industry operation as well.”

Dr. Omna was concerned. He had always admired the brutality of that operation.

Fenster looked up from his Grass Beasts. “Really? Who are these people?”
Wil spoke up. “They’re nothing, sir. We’ll get them next time.”

Macht and Frei nodded in agreement. They had a definite order for punishment in mind; they were the kind of people who pounded other people, not the other way around. This insolence would be dealt with, and soon.

“Very well. Find out where they’re going next and stop them. We can tolerate no more interruptions from my plan. Stop by the Armory and take anything you think might be helpful in this mission.”

The Enforcers snapped to attention. “Yes, sir!”

“Dr. Omna, if you would be so kind, please talk to the Prefect Motor Industries people about the next phase of cooperative crossover. I think they may want this problem dealt with as much as we do.”

“Yes, sir!”

Dr. Omna and his Enforcers bowed to Fenster, waved at the Grass Beasts, and walked out of the barn. Fenster turned to Big Stupid, the leader of the herd of Grass Beasts. “This doesn’t hurt us a bit. We will beat them! Har har har har har HAR!” He crossed the barn and opened the door of the refrigerator. “Now, who wants some frozen yogurt?”
**Felix Temple**

Cats are blameless, holy creatures. Cats are full of grace, even when they’re falling off a shelf or getting stuck in a hamper. Cats enjoy food. You should give a cat food every day.

--- Sample text of the handout given to visitors of Felix Temple ---

After a restful sleep and a complete recovery of all wounds, the party left the Sleeping Lion to do a bit of shopping. Brak traded his Broadsword in for an Avenger Blade. Luca put her Fire Ring into a pocket and started wearing an Environment Necklace, which protected her from all types of elemental damage. Sydney looked in vain for another Knit Scarf, but had to settle for a Sun Pendant, which protected the wearer against Wombat but not much else. He was able to find a Blaze Rifle in one of the Weapon Shops near the entrance.

After rearranging all of their gear, Luca and her friends decided to look for the Mrs. Wiffle’s Frozen Kitchen warehouse. After making a quick trip to the stable to check up on Zeek, they went into the street. A young boy named Cid sidetracked them.

“Excuse me, have you seen my cat?”

“What does your cat look like?” Luca bent down to talk to Cid at his level.
“She’s small, brown-and-white, with black spots. Her name is Jester. If you can find her, I’ll give you a treasure.” Cid looked hopeful.

“Well, since you put it that way, we’ll do it,” said Luca. She stood up and motioned Brak over closer.

“What’s going on? Why are we doing this? Odds are the cat will come back of its own accord.”

“It’s all part of the Code, Brak. If we help this kid, he’ll probably give us something it will take us weeks to find for ourselves, if at all.”

Sydney agreed. “Yeah, and we’ll learn more about the town.”

They told the little boy that they would help him in the search for his cat. Cid jumped up and down in excitement and anticipation.

The three adventurers investigated the area for any trace of Cid’s cat. A young woman named Milly thought she might know where the cat was, but she needed a Rare Book to help her with her studies. An older man had the Rare Book, but wouldn’t part with it unless he had some Fine Cheeses. The dealer in Fine Cheeses wouldn’t sell them anything until they brought him a Herring. The fishmonger had Herring, but could only give them one if they’d bring him an 8-in-1 Super Pan.

Brak, Sydney, and Luca looked all over for an 8-in-1 Super Pan, and finally found one in the back of an Item Shop. They had to buy several seemingly useless items before they could actually purchase the 8-in-1 Super Pan.

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40 Including a device that would tell you what was in a Treasure Chest without all that messy opening business. There was a Pocket Mycologist, for growing fungus in your pants for fun and profit, and a Corpse Sealer to catch the sparkles from exploding dead things for use as cheap lights around the home. They were unable to sell them anywhere else, and all of the devices remained with them until the end of their adventures, after which they were donated to the Museum of Adventures.
Once they had the key 8-in-1 Super Pan, the party went back to the fishmonger, who sold them a Herring. Holding the Herring by a fin in one hand and their noses in another, the group then asked the Cheesemaker for some Fine Cheeses. He was happy with his Herring, and quickly sold them what they were looking for. The old man was just as pleased with the cheeses, and gladly gave Luca his Rare Book.

Rare Book in hand, the party tracked down the young woman Milly. They gave her the book and her eyes lit up in surprise. “I’ve been looking all over for this!” She mentioned that she’d seen a cat matching their description on top of a pillar at the Felix Temple.

“Felix Temple, huh? Where is that?”

Milly pointed to the east. “It’s not far from here. It’s in the southeast part of the city. You can’t miss it—the smell of catmint is extraordinarily strong in that area. Thank you for all of your help!” She started leafing through the pages of the book.

The party waved goodbye to Milly and set off for the Middengard Subway. Felix Temple was just two stops away on the Materia line. They walked down the steps to the platform and waited for the next train.

As they boarded the subway car, they noticed how many cats were riding on the heads, shoulders, and arms of their fellow passengers. Luca looked at Brak’s surprised expression. “You’re not allergic, are you?”

“Not that I’m aware of. This would be the best chance to find out for sure.”

Two stops later, they exited the train, found the stairs to the surface, and walked up to the Felix Temple. Stone walls surrounded the temple and its companion gardens of catmint and catnip. All of the pillars were wrapped in cord, allowing local cats to climb to the crossbars. Statues of cats of every breed and size topped many columns, illustrating the
many forms that Felinus could take in its defense of Neugaia. Pilgrims, carrying their cats or walking beside them, made the trek to Felix Temple in the hopes that they would make the acquaintance of Felinus.

Brak and his party examined all the cats in the area closely, looking for one that matched Quinn’s description. They took the guided tour (only five sals each) to see a wider area of the Temple.

Zurl and Anya arrived at the Felix Temple and entered through the northern entrance ten minutes after the tour started. They chose to wander around by themselves instead.

They found Jinx rolling around in a catnip garden near the entrance. “Jinx! We were looking all over for you!”

“Oh. Hi, guys!” Jinx was very distracted through the haze of catnip.

“Let me show you around. This place is great!” Jinx jumped onto Anya’s shoulder and started taking them on a tour. As they wandered through the gardens, Jinx waved a paw at many of the cats as if they were old friends.

“Do you know these cats, Jinx?” Anya had known the cat all of her life, and she had never seen him this friendly before.

“No, but I get a good feeling just being here. I want to be pals with all of these cats. Oooh! There’s one!” Jinx leapt from his customary place on Anya’s shoulder and ran through the crowd, losing his friends in just a few moments. Zurl put a restraining hand on Anya’s shoulder.

“That was fast. Let’s go track him down!” Anya started off after her friend.
“Let’s stay together. I don’t want to have to look for you in addition to that mangy furball.”

“He’s not mangy! He’s just overgrooming because he’s stressed out by the move!”

“If you say so. Stick with me, Anya.”

Anya and Zurl wandered through the crowd. They entered one of the larger buildings, which seemed oddly vacant compared to the rest of the temple grounds. It was an ancient part of the Felix Temple, and time had softened many of the edges on the carvings winding around its walls. “What’s going on here, Zurl?” Anya edged closer to her protector.

“I don’t like the looks of this.”

“This building is much darker than it should be. Are you cold? What’s… What’s that sucking sound and where is it coming from?” Zurl and Anya wandered deeper into the building.

Brak, Luca, and Anya were listening to the tour guide drone on and on about the unique architecture of some of the earlier parts of the Felix Temple. “We are not sure of the function of this building. It appears to be a vault of some sort, but we are unable to determine what, if anything, was buried inside. Teams of Scholars are working on excavating the lower portions right now. We will, of course, be happy to tell you about our findings if and when they become available. None of the writings on the building are legible and our lights are malfunctioning for some reason, so we are literally digging in the dark.”

The ground started to rumble a bit. Several pillars came crashing to the ground as their bases were jerked around violently. Several faint screams came from the inner portions of the building the Scholars were investigating.
“Brak! Quick! That doesn’t sound good! We should help whoever’s in trouble!” Luca rushed inside the building, followed by her friends.

As they ran through the darkened corridors, the party could just make out an eerie light up ahead. It began to strobe as the ambient noise level increased. They entered a large room, with several pits dug into the floor. One of the pits had collapsed, burying several Scholars in some rubble. Two strangers were crouched at the side of the pile of rubble, attempting to dig the workers out.

“Can we help?” shouted Sydney.

“Yes! Help us dig!” shouted the taller stranger. He was wearing a cloak and appeared to be carrying a Bright Spear. The figure next to him was a small girl in a cloak, digging furiously to free a trapped Scholar.

Working together, the five managed to free several workers. Each freed worker helped dig out her companions, until the last was uncovered.

As the final Scholar was freed, the ground began to shake again. “Get back! Everyone!” shouted the lead Scholar. “I think it’s going to collapse again!”

Everyone took several steps back as the floor of the pit gave way, kicking up a cloud of debris and dust. Large chunks of the walls fell down, but none of the adventurers could hear if they landed on any kind of floor.

A great moan came from the darkened pit. Odd whispers carried in the air currents, gagging the Scholars and adventurers with the smell of ancient decay. A voice sighed on the wind. “At last! I am free again!”

“Free again? What does that mean?” asked Brak.
The lead Scholar turned to him. “Just before the dig collapsed, we’d uncovered a stone that said something about an ancient foe. We were in the process of translating…”

Sydney interrupted as the trembling grew worse. A shadowy figure began to take form in the space above the pit. “We don’t have time! Brak! Luca! Help the Scholars back to the surface!”

The tall stranger asked, “What are you going to do? Smile at it?”

“Any time somebody opens anything labeled ‘ancient foe,’ you just know there’s going to be trouble. I’ll hold it off as long as I can.” Sydney looked at the head Scholar. “And you should have known better.”

Brak and Luca grabbed several of the Scholars by the jacket and started directing them towards the surface. Sydney made sure that the safety on his Blaze Rifle was off and rechecked the energy clip. The tall stranger came up to him, shouting over the increasing din.

“We’ll help you!”

“The two of you? But she’s just a little girl!”

“Now who should know better?”

“You’re right! My name’s Sydney! What’s yours?”

“My name is Zurl! This is Anya! And somewhere around here is our cat!”

“Were you talking about me?” A small voice ran from out of the shadows. It was Jinx. He bounded over to Anya and jumped on her shoulder.

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41 Given the risk with opening ancient tombs, most archaeological expeditions hired a small party of Adventurers to deal with any vengeful spirits that might be awakened by a dig. This became a common practice after the ghost of Al-Ras Ghul destroyed not only the party digging into his tomb, but most of the surrounding village. Several people were lost forever when the ghost destroyed one of the Save Points. A passing band of Adventurers defeated the ghost, restored the rest of the town, and took the Cloak of Al-Ras Ghul as a trophy.
“Jinx! Where were you?” Anya was readying her Ash Wand, preparing a defensive spell to protect the party.

“Long story! If this is what I think it is, I think you’ll need my help!” Jinx gave Anya a quick rub on the chin and scampered away again.

The spinning cloud taking shape above the pit grew more distinct. A mouth formed out of the wind and flying dust. “Who disturbs my slumber? I will have my revenge!”


“This prison! I’ve been here forever! I am Hoo-Ver! And I am hungry!” Hoo-Ver whipped a cloud of debris at Sydney, Zurl, and Anya, striking them with particles of rock and broken pottery.

Sydney was not all that surprised. He glanced sideways at Zurl. “Well, so much for negotiation.” Zurl shrugged, and struck the cloud with his Bright Spear. Despite the amorphous nature of the cloud, he made contact with something, as Hoo-Ver bellowed in anger. Zurl jumped away from the rain of stones that Hoo-Ver had sent at him in retaliation.

Anya waved her Ash Wand and spun in a circle. Small transparent Shields formed in front of Sydney, Zurl, and Anya, deflecting some of the blows that Hoo-Ver was sending after them. She smiled at Sydney, who was looking at her in surprise. “Wait until you see the next one…”

Sydney nodded and fired his Blaze Rifle at Hoo-Ver. Bolts of energy did a lot more damage than mundane lead slugs. The cloud that formed Hoo-Ver shook off the damage, gathering up into a small ball.

The ball moved from above the pit to just over Anya’s head. A funnel-shaped tube formed at the base of the ball, sucking Anya into it and tossing her back and forth between
the interior walls of Hoo-Ver. Sydney and Zurl could hear her muffled cries as she struck one wall and then the other. They could see the imprints of her arms, legs, and head as they impacted the walls of the being. Finally, the Vacuum Demon spit her out to the ground.

Anya lay there for a moment. She was down to her last few points of health. “Well, that could have been better.” She abandoned the Gravity spell she had been preparing and searched her belt pockets for a PhysPotion.

Zurl was so enraged at the sight of Anya’s condition that he prepared his Mega-Leap attack. He crouched down, muttering to himself, then jumped to the top of the cavern, screaming “MEGA LEAP!” His head barely missed hitting the painted ceiling. The downward arc of his jump carried him directly on top of the Vacuum Demon, which he hit with the point of his Bright Spear, impaling the ball of wind.

Hoo-Ver shook suddenly, throwing Zurl to the ground, which was a fall of around 20 feet. Zurl’s breath was forced from his lungs by the impact, and he cursed. Sydney was about to fire his Blaze Rifle at the creature, when a small black-and-white cat distracted him.

“Hey, bub. Say the magic word.”

“Magic word? Um, please?”

“No, it’s ‘tuna.'”

“Tuna?”

The cat nodded his head. “That’s it! Time for the Dream of a Thousand Cats!\(^2\)"

\(^2\) All respect to Neil Gaiman, but the true dream of cats was a giant can of tuna, delivered every hour until somebody passed out, and then delivered every couple of hours after that. Cats who had not had tuna tend to dream of chasing tiny people through the grass.
Jinx pointed his mouth towards the ceiling and meowed loudly. Sydney was thrown to the ground along with the others as the building shook once again. This was a more rhythmic movement, as if a large mass of creatures ran towards them.

Part of the building wall collapsed in a torrent of rubble and dust. Hundreds of cats streamed through the hole, growing more blurred as they watched. The blur of felines formed a large cat-shaped, mutating mass, taking one cat form after another. At first, it was a small black cat, which grew to a larger orange tabby, and then a massive gray cat with seal points. The cat form expanded until it was the size of a small house—its paws kicked up tiles from the floor as it moved across the room.

Felinus opened its mouth, roaring more like a lion than a domestic shorthair cat. Claws the size of rapiers lashed out, ripping parts of Hoo-Ver into tiny shreds. Felinus tackled the spinning vortex, eviscerating it with its hind legs. Rolling onto its back, the cat threw the Vacuum Demon up into the air, catching it and throwing it to the ground again. After mauling it viciously, the massive cat scampered off at high speed, meowing triumphantly.

Anya had recovered through the use of a Mega-PhysPotion. She threw a Gravity spell at the wounded Vacuum Demon, crushing it in a wave of increased local gravitation. Sydney got up from his prone position and fired the last of his Blaze Rifle’s energy clip at Hoo-Ver. Zurl finished the creature off with a final thrust from his Bright Spear, shattering the mass of vacuum like frozen candyfloss.

The three Adventurers huddled together as the force of Hoo-Ver’s final moments washed over them. Rocks and pieces of tile ricocheted around the room as air rushed in to fill the void left by its demise. Fields of light surrounded them as they each gained a Level.
Jinx bounded through the rubble, running over to Anya to see if she was alright.

“Are you OK? I thought you were in trouble there for a moment?”

Anya picked Jinx up and held him in her arms. “I’m OK. I was a little cramped in there, but I came out alright. What was that big kitty? I’d like to see him again, if I could.”

“That was Felinus, the guardian of Felix Temple. He’s a Big Friendly Creature and agreed to help me. He’s the one who told me about the Vacuum Monster in this building.”

The combatants searched the pit for any treasure. Hoo-Ver had dropped a bag containing 6,000 sals, along with a Maple Wand that Anya claimed and a new Demon Spear for Zurl.

Brak and Luca wandered down the corridor, making sure their friend was in one piece. As Brak and Anya arrived, they noticed Anya and Zurl next to Sydney. Luca spoke. “What happened? We took the Scholars back to the surface and came back as soon as we could. But the shaking and the noise stopped us. What caused that hole in the wall? And what’s a Felinus?”

“As I said before. Felinus is the Big Friendly Creature. Eons ago, all cats banded together to defeat the Vacuum Monster and imprison him in this tomb. But those stupid Scholars uncovered him. I’m just glad you were able to stop him.”

Sydney picked bits of rubble off of his pants. “It wasn’t easy, and we couldn’t have done it without Felinus’ help. Will he help us again?”

“I think so. As long as we remember the magic word.”

43 And that is why most cats fear vacuum cleaners in our world. Hoo-Ver had destroyed the lost continent of Anlemuris before Felinus could defeat him. The collective cat unconscious remembers this massive battle between cat and vacuum, and they hide in fear.
“That’s right. Tuna. Tuna is the magic word. In fact, when you say ‘tuna’ I start thinking about it and I could use some right now. There’s a gift shop near one of the entrances and you could go get me some…”

Zurl eyed the newcomers. “I don’t think we’ve been introduced. My name is Zurl. That’s Anya, and the creature with four legs, an appetite, and a tail is Jinx. He comes in handy now and again.”

“Hello. I’m Sydney, this is my friend, Luca, and our new friend, Brak. We’ve been traveling from Erewhon and are looking for a friend. What brings you to Middengard?”

The Scholars started to trickle back into the building. They looked around in horror at the damage caused by the fight with the Vacuum Monster. They began salvaging what was left of their equipment and packing up their belongings, their work finished for the time being.

“Let’s go somewhere more quiet, shall we? We know a great place.” Zurl led the group out of the ruined building and back to the Temple Grounds. The abbots of the temple were very thankful, giving the party more sals and a Power Booster each for of them.

“Let’s take care of one thing before we go anywhere. Brak, Luca, do you see what I see?” Sydney pointed to a small cat that matched the description of Jester. “That’s who we came here for, mostly.” He called the cat. “Quinn!”

The cat came over and looked at them. Jinx meowed at her for a moment, and she jumped onto Brak’s shoulder. “This won’t take a moment. Would you come with us? We’d like to talk in private.” Zurl and Anya agreed. Sydney had helped them in battle, and they were glad to have allies with all of the danger they were in.
The five (seven, if you count the two cats) travelers wandered out of Temple Felix, bowing to all of the abbots and paying their respects to all of the cats they saw. They took the Underground back to the South Gate, where they found boy Cid. He jumped with glee as Jester moved from Brak’s shoulder to the ground to his arms. “You found her! I’m so thankful! Here, take this. It’s not much but it’s all I have.” He reached into his backpack for an item and removed it from its leather case.

Cid handed Luca an Imperial Hook. It was a cybernetic claw, razor-sharp and lethal. None of them knew how to use it, and even though it had a high resale value, they decided to keep it. “These things have a way of coming handy, Brak.”

Bowing to Cid, the party returned to the Subway and left for the Schama Hill District. They entered the Tea Shop and ordered a Pot of Tea and some Scones.

“So what brings you to Middengard, Zurl?” Luca spread some Clotted Cream and Jam on her Scone.

Zurl waited to finish chewing his Scone before talking. “We’re looking for a friend of a friend, really. His name is Professor Katzen.”

Sydney dropped his knife on the floor. “Funny, so are we. He sent us some mail this morning and we were going to visit him this afternoon. Would you care to join us? Five are better than three.”

Zurl, Anya, and Jinx nodded in agreement. “We would be glad to.” The group hummed the traditional ballad, “A New Person Has Joined The Party,” and set forth to demolish a plate of Scones.

44 What Cid was doing with an Imperial Hook is a mystery for the ages. It had been in his family for years. Great-grandpa Cid II had found it somewhere during his travels, but would not say much about its origin.
Inns can be helpful for resting. They are also a good source of information.  
--- *The Book of Adventurers*

The night clerk at the Sleeping Lion Inn was just about to get off his shift when three new visitors wandered into the lobby. They looked a little like Adventurers, but bypassed the complementary PhysPotion stored in a Treasure Chest just inside the door. They cradled imposing-looking beam weapons and were making a beeline for the front desk.

“We’re looking for some friends of ours. Tell us you’ve seen them.”

“It’s company policy not to divulge the identities of our guests.”

The leader pointed the barrel of his beam rifle at a decorative vase next to the front desk. He pulled the trigger of his weapon, blowing the vase into a very expensive project for the cleaning staff. His companions chortled as the fragments bounced around the floor of the lobby.

“Get this, guys! He says they don’t want to divulge the identities of their guests!”

The leader pointed his rifle at the clerk’s chest. “Wanna make a new company policy?”
“Um… I-I-I would… be h-h-h-happy to. How may. How may I help you?”


Wil turned to the night clerk again. “We’re looking a couple of groups of people.

The first group of two is a tall guy and a short girl. They have a cat. Seen ‘em?”

“There’s nobody here by that description.”

Wil shrugged. “Didn’t think they’d be in this area. OK, the next group is three

people. A tall guy, a girl, and another guy. The girl you’d probably remember more than the

other two—she’s hot.”

“The girl have huge…?”

“Tracts of land? Yes.”

“Yeah. They just left a few hours ago. I think they were headed to the Felix Temple.”

“Felix Temple, huh? Thanks.”

The night clerk breathed a sigh of relief. The three Enforcers started to walk towards

the front door. “Oh, one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Thanks.” The three raised their weapons and opened fire, catching the night clerk

in the chest and knocking him to the floor. Then they started systematically shooting

everything in the Sleeping Lion, destroying paintings, the Save Point, the curtains, and

setting the wallpaper on fire. In all of the confusion, nobody noticed the kangamouse

bolting out of the stable. The Enforcers left the wreckage of the Inn, laughing to themselves.
Middengard Slum Sector Two

Averlanche Lives!
-- Graffiti in Sector 2, meaning unknown

After finishing their afternoon tea, Brak, Luca, Sydney, Zurl, and Anya visited a nearby Save Point and returned to the Middengard Underground system. They took the Prince Blade line all the way to Slum Sector Two, which was a run-down area in the southwest part of town. Exiting the platform, they made a reflexive check of their weapons before walking up the stairs to street level.

The party formed into two groups. The front line consisted of Brak, Luca, and Zurl. Sydney and Anya brought up the rear. They would make sure that nobody attacked them from behind. As they walked down the street, neon lights reflected off of pools of brackish water.

The warehouse that formerly belonged to Mrs. Wiffle’s Frozen Kitchen stood at the end of a deserted street. Several overturned cars blocked parts of the sidewalk. Scorch marks decorated the overturned cars, the walls near them, and places on the street. Clearly, this place had seen better days.
Brak went up to the sturdy oak door and knocked several times. A slot at eye level shot open and a deep voice boomed out of it.

“Who is it?”

“Is this Professor Katzen?”

“Who wants to know?”

“My name is Brak… Mayor Heywood sent me?”

The voice grew softer. “Heywood, of course!” Brak and his friends could hear the sounds of deadbolts, chains, and other locks opening up. After several moments, the door swung inward, revealing a small hallway. A short figure in a lab coat stood before them. He had gray hair, glasses, and a pair of night-vision goggles was strapped around his head. Bright eyes looked at them. “Come in, my friends! Come in! And welcome!”

The party entered the building, and Katzen locked the door behind them. “Heywood told me about three of you, and my good friend Pazu told me about two more. Let me guess.” He pointed at Anya and Zurl. “You two are from Cosmia and are looking for help.” He waved at Brak, Luca, and Sydney. “And you three know part of the story but not all of it. Cosmia is part of your story, but you may not know why. All of you are destined for trips through the sea and the air.”

“How do you know all of this?” Luca tapped her foot in frustration. “What can you tell us about Cosmia?”

“First, let us all get more comfortable.” Katzen led them to his workshop, which had a small area set aside for couches, chairs, and was decorated by several vibrant plants.

“Tell me? What do you know of prophecy in general?”

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“Tell me? What do you know of prophecy in general?”
Katzen began to pace back and forth around the room. “Let me tell you. The Sylvan Prophecy was your typical millennialist prophecy: long on doom and gloom, archaic spellings, mutterings of a hero unknown, full of dire warnings of the chaos to come after a thousand years if the hero did not arrive in time, and written by a toothless sage high on the combination of burning moss smoke and poor nutrition. Libraries are full of thousands of such prophecies—the great scholar Gabe wrote one of his first masterworks on them, titled ‘Starving Scholars: Good Nutrition and the Elimination of Dire Prophecies Among the Al-Amir Seers.’ Long-winded book, but it got Gabe to a fine start. Do you remember his first maxim?”

Luca’s hand shot up. “Beat monsters until the candy comes out!”

“That’s right! Very good. Beat monsters until the candy comes out, it’s the only way to be sure. He and his partner Tycho would illustrate this lesson in their book ‘Dialogues of the Cardboard Tube and Carbonated Beverage.’” He chuckled to himself for a moment.

“Anyway, back to the Sylvan Prophecy. As you know, not all of these prophecies were false. On our world, anything with a time period of a thousand years has an odd tendency to come about. Time and time again, bands of heroes race against time to stop fate or a rain of toads or an evil wizard from destroying the world. As luck would have it, the Sylvan Prophecy was first set down on a tablet nine hundred and ninety-nine years ago.”

The group fiddled nervously in their chairs for a moment. Could they be a group written about nearly a thousand years ago?

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45 Other lessons included “Save before entering a boss fight,” and “Never leave food in the refrigerator for too long.”
“Not too long ago, several scholars uncovered a set of tablets in the old ruins around Cosmia. Sylva had lived there long ago, and he wrote them after a series of visions. FensterCorp tried to suppress all knowledge of them, but my good friend Pazu was very close to the King and managed to sneak me a copy.” Katzen pulled a small tube out of a coat pocket. He opened it and unrolled a long piece of parchment. “Here, take a look at this.”

Shaky handwriting scrawled across the page. Sylva had a penchant for limericks and half-rhymes in addition to his awful penmanship. Brak scanned the page. Several stanzas were more prominent than others:

The land of Cosmia, you’ll eventually see
Has a Thinge that you might call the Keye.
A thousand Yeart hence
Do the thing that makes fence
Or Neugaia will soon cease to be.

Giant companie rule over the land
One of them extend a dark hand
Group righting the Wronge
More Saline fings fongs
Look out for one hero band

“Does any of this make any sense to you, Professor?” Luca and the others racked their brains to make sense of “fings fongs.” Fing and Fong were fine names from the Estron continent. Was that the connection? Katzen noticed some of their puzzlement. “The phrase ‘More Saline fing fongs’ appears to be about the rock band Extra Salty. They are very
popular around here. Remember, the Neugaia of the past didn’t like to write the letter ‘s’ the same way we do.”

“Oh, of course. How silly of us not to have known that.” Anya started wandering around the room, carrying Jinx in her arms.

Brak’s courses in Ancient Texts started to bubble up from his sub-conscious.

“Professor, what have you made of all of this?”

The professor looked around, lost in thought. “I’ve studied the text until I can recite it in my sleep, and believe me, you don’t want this doggerel in your mind any longer than you need to. In any case, I think Sylva was talking about the rise of the megacorporations like FensterCorp and Prefect Motor Industries. I know you’ve run into both of them by now, and they pretty much own Cosmia. As far as I can tell, later stanzas speak of finding a way to somehow break the hold of these companies over the people of Neugaia.”

Zurl asked, “How do we do that?” He was very unhappy with his forced exile.

“I’m working on that. We will need to make some preparations first. You five are welcome to stay the night and we can begin in the morning.”

The adventurers were more than happy to take the old sage up on his offer. The Sleeping Lion in was cozy, but far too cute for its own good.

Katzen let his guests use his Save Point and then fed them a fine meal of Curried Beast and Rice. Over dinner, they discussed their travels, battles they had fought, enemies they had seen, and the current state of Westron politics. Brak became interested in Professor Katzen and his history with Mayor Heywood.

“How did you and Heywood meet, Professor Katzen?” Brak was curious to know.
“And how do you know Pazu?” Zurl and Anya could not see the connection between their friend the sorcerer and this scientist.

“I can answer both of those questions with the same story. I will tell you, if you are interested.”

“We are indeed.” The five adventurers nodded in agreement.

“You three are probably too young to remember this. Twenty years ago, on the other side of the world, there was a young man named Heywood. He had two good friends, Katzen—always good with tools and science and guns—and his buddy Pazu, who was handy with a spell when you needed it. We were exploring a nearby cave when the ground shook. Making our way through the falling rubble, we emerged into the sunlight.

“Our village had been destroyed in a massive explosion. We searched through the wreckage, to find few survivors. Buying what we could from them, we set off to the Hermit’s Peak outside of town. We thought maybe he could tell us what had happened.”

The scientist looked at each Adventurer in turn, sighed, and continued.

“The three of us were probably 16 or 17 by that point. It seems so young now, but it was the classic age to begin an Adventure. We had the flexibility and belief we were invulnerable required for that sort of thing.

“Katzen, Pazu, and I talked to the Hermit who lived in a decrepit shack on the top of a small mountain. He described the attackers who had demolished our village—they wore the uniforms of the Guardian Star unit from the Weis Kingdom. None of us knew why they had destroyed our village or what they had been looking for.

“The Hermit gave us some weapons and supplies, and wished us luck on our travels. We set out for the nearest large city—Netria. We fought monsters every step of the
way—I’ll never forget the titanic battle with the Grand Rock Dragon where Pazu was
Knocked Out four times—and finally found ourselves at the city gates. Inside the city, we
met a new friend: Delli. She was a Flower Merchant who had grown up near the Weis
Kingdom and had no love for it.

“Soon after meeting Delli, the Guardian Stars attacked Netria itself, destroying much
of the city. As we watched, the Guardian Stars scoured the building wreckage for something
called an ‘Ultimate Stone.’”

Professor Katzen stopped for a moment. He got up from his chair, went over to a
supply cabinet, and poured a sparkling amber liquid from a crystal decanter into a battered
old coffee cup bearing the legend “Liberty Station.” Katzen waved the mug at Brak and his
friends and took a long drink.

“Ahhh. Arraka cactus nectar. There’s nothing like it. Anyway, the four of us hid in
the shadows as the Guardian Star officers discussed their quest for mystic stones mentioned
in ancient Texts. They had recently uncovered a previously unknown book of powerful
prophecy. The Book of Milf46 told of a ritual to use stones of power to grant omnipotence.

“Queen Margot of Weis was obsessed with controlling the world and would stop at
nothing to gain power. We weren’t wild about living under her despotic rule, so we set out to
stop her. We went all over Estron, talking to people and battling the forces of Weis. Many
people wanted to help us—it was a nice feeling that we were part of something larger.

“We had many adventures along the way. Pazu made a ton of money by fishing—he
caught several rare species that brought it a lot of sals. Two more people joined our party.

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46 Written by the renowned scribe Sir-Not-Appearing-In-This-Flashback. It was discovered during an
excavation of Castle Weis’ old Library.
Sprocket was a former gladiator drone. We rescued him from the Combat Arena in Kivat, right before we had to win the Estron Fighting Championship in order to gain passage to our next destination: the city of Coscadia. There in Coscadia’s mighty forests, we found another friend, Kachu, who was a Squirrelman and fine thief.”

He pointed towards a Memory Plate on the wall. “There’s a picture of the six of us there. We look so young, so young.” A much younger version of Katzen looked out from the portrait—his fellow travelers surrounded him as they posed near the statues outside of the Library of Ontos. Kachu’s image was slightly out-of-focus.

Katzen continued after a moment of reflection. “Our journey took us to the City at the bottom of Lake Qudo, the secretive Bandit Town, the orbital station Liberty, the desert town of Arraka, the Lightning Fortress of Barandi, the Library of Ontos, and the Fire Caves of Landar before finally reaching Castle Weis.”

Katzen laughed for a moment. “I thought were specters of doom, since everything we touched was destroyed by our visit. But we pressed on. Castle Weis didn’t blow up the minute we set foot through the threshold, so we knew it was important.”

The old scientist looked lost in thought for a moment, eyes shining in recollection of days long past. “We had a massive series of battles, each more difficult than the last. The entire knight corps of the Weis Kingdom threw themselves at us in a series of duels, and we beat them all. We beat up their jester, we demolished the cooks, Heywood totally destroyed

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47 Which blew up.
48 Which was blown up by attacking Soldiers.
49 Where the orbit decayed due to an accident during combat and it burned up in the atmosphere.
50 Which was invaded by Sand Demons, then blew up.
51 Blown up.
52 Ransacked and later blown up.
53 Which had a partial cave-in, was flooded with molten lava, had an invasion of Fire Giants, and then blew up.
every last member of the Queen’s Honor Guard, and finally we were left with Queen Margot herself. Using the power of the Stones, she transformed into a terrible dragon of extraordinary magnitude. I thought we were dead for sure, and the rest of Neugaia not far behind. Her claws could rend the hardest armor, her breath could melt anything we could hide behind, and she had grown by a factor of at least ten, totally violating the cube-square law but holding herself together with raw power.”

“Cube-square law?” asked Luca.

“Basically, as the size of a creature is squared, the forces acting on it are cubed—you would normally collapse under your own weight if you grow to 12 feet high—the pressure on your bones is as if you were 18 feet tall, and you’re not constructed for that kind of pressure. Anyway, we were all horribly mangled at one point or another in the fight, but we saved ourselves through healing and good defense.”

“What happened then?”

“Well, the minute Heywood and I managed to chop her head off, the castle started to collapse. We ran out of there as fast as we could, barely escaping before the entire structure fell in on itself in a cloud of debris you could see for miles. We’d won. We’d saved the world and it was thankful.”

The old man sighed, taking another drink from his mug. “After the dust had settled, we tried to go back to a normal life. We weren’t exactly ready to integrate back into society. Two of our companions—Sprocket and Delli—vanished into space, off on a wild expedition to find Old Earth. The rest of us settled down—Heywood entered politics and leads a life as a country gentleman, looking after the citizens of Erewhon. Pazu became the chief mage and
advisor to the Kingdom of Cosmia. Kachu has a successful—though slightly shady—import and export business. I’ve continued my research into airship design.”

“You really have an airship?” asked Brak. He’d loved airships since the first time he’d heard about them. “I’d love to see it.”

“You’re more than welcome—come this way. But first, let me say that it’s not like the model we had back in the days when I was running around the world. This one has some… extra modifications.”

Katzen wandered over to a large door, pulling an oversized, complicated-looking black key from a pocket of his lab coat. He inserted the key into the lock of the door, turning it clockwise. The party stepped back as it swung outward, giving a view of the Airship Hangar concealed in the abandoned building that Katzen owned.

“Tell nobody that you saw this. I bought this building in secret and moved this equipment here under the cover of night. I think it will be safe here for a while.”

Professor Katzen’s airship was a massive gray vessel that took up most of the hangar’s available space. One large prop was mounted on the stern of the ship, with two engine nacelles to either side of it, each carrying another prop and some weapons pods. There were 15 props pointing upwards, 6 along each side of the ships rail and three massive props mounted on masts pointing out of the top deck. Portholes dotted the sides of the airship, and it had a nosecone of crystal panes to give a commanding view from the air. Professor Katzen had mounted two more weapon pods on either side of the bow, each containing several lasers, missile racks, and point-defense guns. A ground assault pod protruded from beneath the keel, sporting several deadly-looking weapons for use on surface
targets. The bowsprit of the vessel was a beautiful carving of a woman holding a sword in one hand and a magical staff in the other.

“I call her Indomitable Spirit. She was once the pride of the Estron fleet, but was heavily damaged during our fight with Queen Margot. I’ve spent the last few years rebuilding her, mostly to test theories on weaponry and design, but also for something to pass the time. You have no idea how lonely one can get when few people remember what you did for them when you were just a teenager.”

Professor Katzen took a moment to clean his glasses on his lab coat. “The interior is spacious, fully stocked with supplies, and has a hold for a train of kangamice if you want to start a ranch or something. However, it does have one problem. I don’t have a critical component of the guidance system. I’m looking for a Type-37 Modulator, and the only place I know of where I can get one is on Landing Island, which is way out in the middle of the ocean. Do you think you can go and get it for me? By the time you get back, I should have a better idea of where you can go next.”

An alarm went off on Professor Katzen’s Datapad. “What’s this? I wasn’t expecting any more visitors…” He peered into the screen of his portable computer. “This is bad. FensterCorp soldiers. I have no idea what they’re doing here.” He spoke into a microphone. “Be with you in a minute!”

“Maybe it’s those Enforcer guys again?” Luca wondered aloud. Zurl and Anya looked at her. “We’ve run into them twice already.”

“Could be. Hmmm. There’s a ship that leaves for Landing Island at dusk. I think you can get there in time to board the ship, but you’ll have to make a small detour.”

Zurl and the others eyed the professor cautiously. “What kind of detour?”
“It involves going through the sewers of Middengard. It’s really the fastest way, and sometimes I think that people are missing out.”

Brak looked nervously at his feet. “There wouldn’t be… Plague Rats down there, by any chance?”

“No idea. Look, follow me. I’ll show you the entrance and you can decide there whether to run or stay here and fight the Enforcers and fifty-odd Dragonfly Soldiers.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Oh, I’ll sweet-talk them. Who’s going to believe an old man is a threat?”

Professor Katzen led the Adventurers out of the Airship Hanger and locked the door behind them. They ran through a darkened corridor to a room with a manhole cover set in the floor. “This it. Door. Open door. Ladder. Go down ladder. Straight through the sewers, north by northwest. The boat leaves at dusk. Good luck, and I know you’ll be fine. Look for me when you get back!” Katzen waved at the group and ran off to deal with the Enforcers at his door.

Sydney asked his friends what they thought they should do. “Well, what do you think? Go to the boat, or stay and fight?”

Brak spoke first. “I say go. We get the Modulator, and then show the Enforcers what an airship can do.”

“I’m with Brak,” said Luca. “We can deal with them later.”

“I’d like to give those bozos a piece of my mind, but we should go.” Zurl and Anya were torn between revenge for being forced to flee and the desire to help their new friends.

“Then it’s settled. Off to the sewers.”
Katzen had been thoughtful enough to install a Save Point in the room with the entrance to the Sewer. The party used it before entering its murky waters.
Metria Bay—IPS *Sick Moose*

The story of the Middengard Navy is nothing but coolant, electricity abuse, and the restraining bolt.

— Lord Templemount’s description of the forces guarding Metria Bay

The pirate vessel IPS *Sick Moose* patrolled the coast of Landing Island, looking for merchant vessels visiting the original landing site of the colony ship that settled Neugaia. There was an occasional tourist cruiser, bringing sightseers with too many sals and inadequate guards. They were the best prize, but were more and more likely to be accompanied by the automated gunboats of the Middengard Navy.

The *Sick Moose* tacked to the east and started another leg of its patrol. The lookout in the mainmast kept watch for target vessels, incoming storms, or Aquanite, the Big Friendly Creature who guarded the waters of the bay. Aquanite did not take kindly to pirates. Captain Wolfe asked his first officer, Mister Badwin, how their special project was going. “How is Racter-IX?”

“The preliminary results are promising.” Mister Badwin chewed on the cheroot poking out of a corner of his mouth. “His reaction time is faster than most of our best men,
he’s got armor all over, and we’re making good progress training the squad of monkeys for his final Specialty Attack. I don’t know if we’ll have much to fear from a Middengard Navy boarding party with Racter-IX on board.”

“Excellent. We lost too much time backtracking to a port for a Save Point after the last cut-and-run.” Captain Wolfe watched several striped-shirted crewmen swab the deck and perform maintenance on their batteries of cannon. “Look lively lads! The day is yet young!” He called up to the lookouts. “Anything on the horizon?”

A far voice called from up above, “Not yet, sir!”

“Well keep a sharp eye out, there!” Wolfe straightened the lines of his coat. “I shall be in my cabin, checking the schedules for this evening’s tourists.”

Badwin saluted and handed command over to the second officer. It was a hard life on the Sick Moose, dodging storms on one hand, and the Navy on the other. Add in the constant attacks from sea creatures, and it was a thin profit margin even on good days. The only thing keeping him going was his work on Racter-IX, the latest in a line of pirate crewmen. Badwin had trained as a Scientist before switching to a life of piracy, and he couldn’t decide which was more cutthroat—the world of piracy on the seas, or the world of battling for cybernetic research grants. At least with a tour on the Sick Moose, he could get some fresh air once in a while.

Racter-IX lay on a diagnostic table in the hold Badwin had set aside for his personal use. Screens displayed schematics, current brain function, power-plant status, and weapon charges. Racter-VIII lay in pieces on another table. Badwin had taken it apart after its first field test, during which it had shot three crewman and maimed seven hostages before
exploding in a shower of parts. He’d told Captain Wolfe that it needed a stronger inhibitor on weapons usage, but he’d been overruled. Racter-IX had a better inhibitor, in addition to a network of advanced morality subroutines. Hopefully it wouldn’t get them into quite so much trouble as its predecessor.

Badwin opened the braincase on his creation and set to work on a new set of linkages. He hadn’t quite worked out all of the bugs on the Identify Friend or Foe system. There were a few more species of monsters to upload. Sipping a mug of ale, he started poring through the source code.

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54 Racter models I through VII did not see field service. Most of them exploded into a shower of parts, a typical problem with Neugaian mechanical designs. Designers were loathe to give up the traditional combination of explosive bolts and nitroglycerine-based paints. Badwin was a devoted craftsman in this regard, though he had taken to heart the heretic theory that not all robots needed a 30-gallon tank of kerosene in their chests. Racter-III was the first to use this aviation-fuel-free design, and had instead exploded due to an excess of static electricity.
Brak and his friends climbed down the ladder one at a time. They formed a protective circle and waited for everybody to make it to the floor of the sewer tunnel. Sydney was the last one down, and he closed the hatch after him.

“I hope Professor Katzen is OK. That’s a lot of firepower to take on by himself.”

Sydney didn’t need to worry. Katzen had stumbled to the front door, and opened it to the waiting gun barrels of the Enforcers and their back-up troops.

“No, no, I already get the Middengard Gazette. Don’t need another one. Thank you for asking, though.”

Wil sneered. “Shut up, old man. Where are the Adventurers?” He pointed his rifle at Katzen’s chest. “Talk, or we burn down this whole sector.”

“Do you know who I am?” Professor Katzen’s hands were thrust in his pockets, where he’d secreted some souvenirs from his battle with Queen Margot.
“We don’t really care. This is your last chance, old man.” Macht clicked the safety off of his weapon and joined Wil in threatening the scientist.

Katzen’s eyes rolled back in his head. “Oh, Heywood. We should have signed that merchandising contract when we had a chance.” He pulled a pair of Armageddon Pistols out of his pockets and aimed at the crowd of soldiers. “Have any of you seen these weapons before? These are Armageddon Pistols, the most powerful handguns in the world. I won these in a fighting tournament thirty years and a thousand miles ago. With these weapons, I can blow all of you… into the next Save Point. So you have to ask yourself, ‘Have I Saved recently?’ So have you? Do you feel lucky? Care to find out where your last Save Point was?”

The Dragonfly soldiers were drifting back down the alley, leaving the Enforcers to deal with the lone Scientist by themselves. The three Enforcers looked nervously at each other. Katzen fired his weapons above their heads, demolishing the second floor of a nearby abandoned building and sending showers of bricks and rubble into the street. The noise and power of the old Scientist’s guns were incredible. The Enforcers were stunned. These weapons were way beyond anything they were prepared to deal with, and the old man moved faster than they would have thought.55

As the FensterCorp soldiers ran back to their headquarters, Katzen laughed to himself. “I still have it. I suppose I could have gone with Luca and her friends, but they need the experience… Now, what did I do with my beverage?” He went back inside to call his friend Heywood and do some research on Pazu’s whereabouts.

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55 Given that he was part of a band that had saved the planet once before, Katzen could have faced double their number and not broken much of a sweat. Katzen was a packrat and kept all the weapons he’d used on his previous quests in working condition. Just in case. He outclassed the Enforcers the same way Brak outclassed the Sweet Bean Roll he ate at the last Tea Shop.
As he was closing the door, he heard some more footsteps coming up the path. “What, they’re back again so soon?” Katzen readied his weapons again, but it was only a kangamouse. “Hello! What are you doing here?” Checking the property tag from the hotel, he realized this kangamouse belonged to his friends. Katzen took Zeek into his home. “Let’s get you some Peanut Butter Cups.”

Back in the Sewers, the party could barely hear the gunfire in the streets above. They knew something had happened, but they weren’t quite sure what it was. Shrugging their shoulders, they decided to head to the Docks to catch the vessel that Professor Katzen had spoken of. As they stood in the ankle-deep water, Brak pondered his new friend’s fate. “I hope he’s alright,” worried Brak.

“I’d worry about us more right now,” warned Zurl. “I doubt this will be a walk in the park. Big sewers like this? There’s bound to be a Giant Alligator or something.”

“Zurl’s right. There’s a whole section on metropolitan infrastructure in the Book of Adventurers.” Luca thought for a moment. “Chapter 16, I think.”

Brak thumbed through his copy of the Code for a moment. “Chapter 14… Escaping From Prisons… Chapter 15… Fighting Tournaments… Chapter 16… City Infrastructure. ‘Do not use the sewers to spy on people.’ Anything else? ‘Never drop something in the sewer you don’t want to fight in a climactic battle later on.’ Huh. OK.”

“Brak, you and Anya take the rear. Luca, Zurl, and I will take point.” The group formed up and started splashing down the tunnels leading to the docks. The sewer tunnels were larger than they had expected. Torrents of water rushed through intersections. Maintenance lights illuminated small circles every ten feet, making the Sewer appear more dark and dangerous than it actually was.
As they waded through the muck, Sydney chatted with Zurl. “So you guys never mentioned what Pazu was like.”

“He’s short, has black hair, and is pretty much indestructible as far as we could tell. He and his wife Sheeta had a wonderful house not far from Cosmia castle—they had a robotic butler and a huge herd of fox-squirrels.” They walked along, imagining having a single place to sleep instead of a succession of Inns. “Say, what’s that up ahead?”

Three Plague Rats attacked the party. They were about the size of a housecat on the surface, and were covered in green moss. Their sharp teeth could nibble through solid armor, and their stench was noticeable even in the depths of the Sewer. Two of them jumped at Sydney’s head, barely missing him. The third went for Zurl’s left hamstring, attempting to disable him before he could get away.

Anya recoiled in disgust from the rodents. “Get away!” She threw several Fire spells at them, roasting one and bringing a hint of singed fur to the air before it exploded into a ball of light. The two surviving Plague Rats attacked Zurl, infecting him with virulent Poison. His dark brown skin began to glow with a sickly green light. “Ugghh!”

Sydney caught one of the Plague Rats in the beam of his Blaze Rifle. It had been attempting to run around for another pass at Zurl, but instead met sprayed bits of light into the water. The final Plague Rat saw the hopelessness of the situation, turned, and fled into a grate along the wall. Sydney and Anya poked around in the water, but couldn’t find much more than 50 sals. Luca and Brak came forward. “What happened here?”

“Plague Rats. They tagged Zurl.”

Luca waved her Power Staff over Zurl’s crouched form. The lights of her Antidote spell cascaded down from the ceiling as she neutralized the Poison in his bloodstream. Zurl’s
color returned to normal and he began to breathe more easily. She cast a Heal spell on him for good measure. “There. That should help. Let me know if you need any more.”

The group formed into a line and continued on. They encountered only one other opponent in their travels—a rogue Sewer Sweeper robot that exploded into a cloud of shrapnel under the combined efforts of Anya’s Lightning and Sydney’s Blaze Rifle. Jinx shielded his eyes from the sparks and bits of metal. “When are these guys going to learn? Must have been past its warranty.” They picked up the 200 *sals* it had been carrying and moved on.

After some more wandering through the tunnels, the party ran into a barricade. “What do you think this is?” Sydney examined the sides of the wall. The barricade was a hastily-constructed pile of wood and other debris. “Looks like it was built from the other side. Go around or through?”

Zurl kicked one corner of the barricade, knocking it down. “Through. This wasn’t built very well.”

After passing through the barricade, the Sewer tunnels widened to a large chamber. “I don’t think we’re very far from the docks now,” said Zurl.

“You’ll have to get through me first!” A Giant Goldfish waded out of a deep pool in the middle of the room. “I’m glad you came! It’s been so long since anybody visited me.”

Sydney looked at Zurl and Anya. “A Giant Alligator. I could see that. But a Goldfish? This is ridiculous.”

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56 The unfortunate by-product of hasty funeral of an unwanted pet, several industrial accidents, and a free-roaming full-torso vapor, perhaps a Class 4.
"Oh, if you want, I can get you some Alligators to fight." The Giant Goldfish waved a fin. Two Sewer Gators joined it, grinning evilly. "Is that better?"

The Sewer Gators were large, but moved quickly. One of them rocketed forward, clamping its jaws down on Anya’s arm. She doubled over in pain as it moved back to join its companions. “Right! I’ll do you for that!” She twirled her Maple Wand over her head and pointed at the Sewer Gator that had attacked her. Bolts of Lightning arced from the tip of her wand, striking the Sewer Gator and pinning it to the wall with the force of the electricity. The skeletal structure of the Gator was briefly visible through its skin. The Gator sank to the ground, stunned momentarily.

The Giant Goldfish cast a Healing spell on its toothsome companion, and then concentrated on a Water spell to wash the intruders away. Waves of sewer water spilled from culverts and grates, threatening to pull the Adventurers off their feet and into the depths of the treatment plant. They held their ground, and eventually the waters subsided. All of them took damage from floating debris and the effort to stay in one place.

Zurl hurled his Demon Spear at the wounded Sewer Gator. The force of his blow was doubled by the Fighter’s Band that he wore on his wrist, and it skewered the beast for a moment before it exploded in a ball of light. “That’s one down!”

“Two more to go!” Anya had time to shout before a stroke from the Giant Goldfish’s tail sent her flying to the side and into the wall of the sewer. All of her breath was forced from her body, and she was Knocked Out. “Anya!” cried Jinx. He rushed over to her idle form and started pacing around it in a circle and meowing softly.

Mysterious lights began to form from motes in the air. They swarmed around Anya’s idle form, wrapping it gently in a light orange glow. The tiny lights formed the image of a
Phoenix, the symbol of the House of Cosmia. Crying out, the ghostly Phoenix bent over the little girl, fanning it with fiery beats of its wings. It turned to face the Giant Goldfish and remaining Sewer Gator, sending a torrent of fire at them. The Phoenix’s flame scorched the walls, kicked up a great cloud of steam, and alarmed passersby on the street as manhole covers were thrown skyward from the rise in pressure and escaping gas.

The second Sewer Gator dissolved under the force of the flame. Anya began to stir, revitalized by the strength of the Cosmia Phoenix. Jinx licked her nose, mewing his relief.

The Giant Goldfish retaliated with a stream of Bubbles, immobilizing Zurl in a cloud of translucent spheres. Every time he tried to move, the bubbles held him fast. “I can’t move! Anybody have a pin or something?”

Sydney fired his Blaze Rifle at the Giant Goldfish, blasting some of its scales off and stopping the stream of Bubbles. “I’ve got a Multitool, but I’m kinda busy at the moment! What about that cat?”

“Jinx, help Zurl!” Anya stood up and readied another spell. “Surprise!” A giant yellow box, wrapped in a purple ribbon, took form next to the Giant Goldfish. The ribbon began to unwrap itself, and the lid of the box flew off and disappeared. A Jack-in-the-box holding a cream pie the size of a swimming pool sprang out of the box. It hit the Giant Goldfish with the colossal pie before vanishing in a burst of confetti.

The Giant Goldfish was confused now, and flailed aimlessly at targets that weren’t there. Sydney, Anya and Zurl (who’d been freed from the bubble prison by Jinx’s claws) took turns attacking it. Eventually it lay on the surface of the water, gasping at air, then finally turned belly-up and dissolved harmlessly into a puddle of sparks. The Adventurers
took a moment to heal themselves before searching the room for prizes. Zurl found a new Gold Bangle to wear as armor, in addition to 5,000 *sals*.

Wading through the scene of the battle, the party found a Save Point in the hallway the Giant Goldfish had been guarding. A Treasure Chest opposite it yielded a Lightning Ring, which Sydney used to replace his Sun Pendant. The hall continued on for a few hundred yards, going past waterfalls, intake tunnels, and a pair of spiral staircases leading to the surface. The party determined that they were not close enough to the docks, so they continued on. After several more turns four more rogue Sewer Sweepers and a couple of Treasure Chests later, they found a third spiral staircase to the surface.

They went up the staircase in a single file. Opening the door at the top just a crack, Brak could make out the salt tang of the air. “We must be near the bay. And the docks.”

“Do you see any soldiers?”

“Nope. I think we’re OK.”

The party left the Sewers and ventured out to the docks. Professor Katzen had not mentioned the name of the vessel heading to Landing Island, but they found it after a few inquiries. The MVS *I’m OK, You’re Capsizing* was set to sail at dusk, which was about a half hour after they arrived. They booked passage and boarded the ship.

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57 Which, of course, exploded after being defeated.
58 The first Treasure Chest contained 240 *sals* Worth of Pudding, which broke down to just enough Pudding to raise the hit points of each of them by 10%. The second Chest contained 5 Mental Boosters, which increased the Spell Points of each party member.
Metria Bay—MVS I’m OK, You’re Capsizing

Many of the vessels on Metria Bay were automated to some extent. The Artificial Intelligence of the I’m OK, You’re Capsizing was notorious for its tendency to psychoanalyze its passengers, passing merchant ships, or monsters that were just passing by. I was all for using the thing as target practice for some of the newer gunboats, but it was just fine for the milk run to Landing Island.

-- Lord Templemount, Reflections on a Life At, Under, and Near the Sea

Life aboard a ship was very different from working in a cubicle, Brak decided. First, there was the constant rocking motion. Secondly, the only drowning possible at Dynamic Monkey was a sea of red tape. And finally, his computer terminal at work didn’t ask him questions about his mother.

“No. She’s fine. I like my dad. He’s fine, too. No, I don’t remember my last dream. Goodbye, Eliza!” Brak exited his cabin and went to the stern of the ship, where he found the rest of his group. “Couldn’t take the computer, either, huh?”

“It kept asking if I was compensating for something with this gun,” said Sydney.

“Same thing with my spear,” answered Zurl.
“We just talked about interior decorating and stuff,” said Luca. They all stared at her.
“What? We were just talking. Eliza said I was a summer. Do you think so? I thought I might be more of an autumn.”

The *I'm OK, You're Capsizing* had set off from Middengard Harbor about half an hour ago. They could still make out the lights of the city, but they were getting lower and lower on the horizon. The engines churned up a phosphorescent wake, and the soft humming of the ship’s power plant was sometimes inaudible over the roaring of the waves in the bay.

“Eliza said we should be at Landing Island by morning. That way we’ll have plenty of daylight to find this Modulator and get back to the ship in time for the return trip.” Luca checked her watch. “Plenty of time to get some rest and maybe a shower or something.”

“Where are we going to find this Modulator?” asked Brak. “The Professor was never very clear on just where on the island it was.”

“I think there’s a salvage project going on in parts of the landing site. We can ask there. Or we could get lucky and find a Shop that sells them.”

They all looked at each other. “Doubt it,” said Zurl. “We’ve not been that lucky at any point so far. In any case, we’re calling it a night. See you all in the morning!” Zurl and Anya pulled Jinx away from the hypnotic play of the waves and went back to their cabin. Sydney stretched and yawned. “Look at the time. I think I have enough time to get to my cabin and catch *Emergency Clinic.*  

59 Tonight’s episode, *Enter the Ninja.* The doctors of the Emergency Clinic have to deal with an epidemic of ninja wounds, as four different bands of Adventurers tackle a high-level dungeon—The Ninja Tavern. With special guest star: Nunchuku master Sheena. Parents are advised that tonight’s episode features frantic ninja action and may be too intense for younger viewers.
Sydney wandered back to his cabin, leaving Brak and Luca to contemplate the night air and the spray from the waves. The *I’m OK, You’re Capsizing* sailed through mostly calm waters. To the north, they could make out the Shotokan Peninsula, home of several key robotics factories and rich Mithril mines. The Middengard Plain grew ever smaller to the east. Looking southward, the tip of the Kuo Bluffs reached out to split the waters of Metria Bay from the Southern Ocean.

“The stars are pretty tonight, aren’t they?” asked Luca.

“They’re nice. See the colonies on Lunazwei? They’re particularly visible this evening. Usually they’re hard to see.”

“It’s being out at sea. We’re away from the lights of the cities.”

“What’s that glow to the north?”

“I think that’s the furnaces they use to smelt the Mithril ore. They run day and night. It’s been a while since I’ve seen anything made of Mithril, though. So I have no idea why they’re so busy.”

“Have you been wandering around long? How did you and Sydney meet?”

“About a year, I think.” Luca watched a few dolphins play in the ship’s wake.

“Sydney and I met a few months ago in the kingdom of Cosmia. This was before FensterCorp had taken over completely. He was traveling with a guy named Storm. Storm was a Swordsman, much like you are, but you talk more than he did. Come to think of it, Jinx talks more than he did.”

“Jinx talks more than some people I know.”

“True.” The both laughed for a moment. “Anyway, Storm and Sydney and I wandered around looking for quests and such, but there was always a tension between us.”
We were trying to get powerful enough to be considered for jobs like cleaning out nearby dungeons and the like, but all we could scrounge up were jobs like ‘Find my kitty’ or ‘Rescue my walrus’ or ‘Feed my goldfish.’ That got really old."

“What, and ‘Get this doohickey for my airship’ is better?”

“It’s on a higher level than ‘Fetch me a plank’ or ‘Deliver this lunchpail,’ yes.”

“OK, I can see that.”

“So we were in the middle of a quest to rescue a kid from this place called The Keep of the Saffron Dragon. And earlier bunch of people had killed off the dragon, so it was mostly low-level creatures who’d found an empty niche and moved in. Long story short, we found the kid and got out, though we lost one of our members momentarily. Dissolved into little bits of light—we had to restore him from a Save Point and he felt he was too good for us. So that’s when we found you and now we’re enjoying some night air on the sea.” Luca ran her fingers through her hair. Brak suddenly noticed how attractive she was in the moonlight.

“Where’s that guy now?”

“Oh, probably sulking somewhere. We never did get along very well.” For some reason, this made Brak happier than he had been in a while. “So did you have anybody special in Erewhon? Do you miss being a citizen?”

“There wasn’t much for me there after I lost my job. I had a crush on my manager, but it never went anywhere. Being a Citizen was nice, but pretty dull. You went to work, replaced the Treasure Chest in your house when it was opened, and so forth. But that didn’t happen all that much.”
'People replace those when we open them?’ Luca asked, surprised. She’d never thought about what happened after.

‘Oh yeah. Call it our form of helping. Say you buy a PhysPotion and place it in your house. When an Adventurer comes in, they’ll take it and use it later on, which might help save your town. It’s much cheaper than funding a standing army, I suppose. After a while you don’t even think about it.’

Luca nodded. ‘OK, that makes sense.’

‘I hope Zeek is alright.’

‘I’m sure he’s fine. He’s pretty smart.’

She moved closer to Brak and let him put his arm around her. They stayed and watched the wake of the ship in the moonlight. Brak felt like electricity was flowing through his skin where she was leaning against him; he could feel the warmth of her skin against his shirt in contrast to the cool night breeze. They stayed that way for a long time, talking softly and just being together. Eventually, they went back to their cabins and tried to sleep.
Welcome to Landing Island. Please return all tray tables to the upright and locked position. We will be landing shortly. The ship’s AI has turned on the “No Screaming” sign. In the event of a beached landing, your seat cushion can be used as a floatation device. The Life Preservers cans also be used as a floatation device. Under no circumstances should you use the anchor as a floatation device. Ask your fellow passengers if they are breathing before using them as a floatation device. We know you have a choice in passenger vessels, and we appreciate your choosing the I’m OK, You’re Capsizing. We hope to see you all again real soon. In fact, we’ll be docked all day, so if you wish to return to Middengard, we’ll be here this evening.

-- Pre-landing message from Eliza, ship AI of the I’m OK, You’re Capsizing

The I’m OK, You’re Capsizing arrived at the Landing Island docks right after breakfast. The ship’s computer bade them farewell and told them to take a coat, because it looked like rain. The docks sat on the east side of the island, surrounded by a small village. The island’s Item Shop had a prominent spot near the main square. A permacrete road led out of the village square to the archaeological site, where Scientists dug in the wreckage of the spacecraft that had landed here many centuries ago. The survivors had rebuilt their world

60 The ISS Highwind had crashed on Neugaia after a wormhole incident had scrambled the engines and much of the guidance system. The colonists had a vague idea where Old Earth and its colonies of Spira, Balamb, Terra, Gaia, and Centauri were, but the last expedition hadn’t returned yet.
with what they had left, though there were hopes that some day they’d make contact with
the rest of humanity.\footnote{One tablet buried deep in the heart of the \textit{Highwind} wreckage was engraved with a map to where the
wormhole to the rest of humanity might be, but that is a tale for a different time. Sprocket and Delli were
following a different version of this tablet, though they were in the right general direction.}

The party scanned themselves into the memory banks of the Save Point near the

“Professor Katzen said the Modulator he needs is somewhere on the island. Maybe
we should check out the dig site?” Sydney studied the map of the island. “It looks like it’s
just down this road.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me. Let’s go.”

Before leaving the Docks, the party stopped by the Item Shop. They found a Cute
Dress in a Treasure Chest hidden in an alcove in the back. Anya went into the changing
room to switch into it. “This fits pretty well, and is about 20 points better in the armor
department. Let’s see what the store has to offer!”

The Item Shop had nothing more than PhysPotions and a couple of Souvenirs. They
bought a replica of the \textit{Highwind} for Professor Katzen and some PhysPotions to replenish
their stocks. Leaving the shop, they wandered down the road to the crash site.

Landing Island was an oval-shaped island in the middle of the Avalon Ocean. The
-crash site and its supplementary buildings were near the center of the island. The docks were
on the eastern shore. Small fishing villages dotted the north and west coasts. The southern
coast was taken up by the Landing Institute, a college devoted to the study of the
\textit{Highwind} wreckage and any technology recovered from it. A small airship dock was mounted on the
bell tower. The Landing Institute had a weekly shuttle to Middengard, and would occasionally get visitors from Estron and the learning centers there.

The road from the eastern Dock wandered through a lush meadow. Fishermen from the coasts grew grain and vegetables to supplement their diet, and kept small herds of kangamice for hauling goods. As the party wandered through the meadows, they noticed one herd near the stone wall bordering the road.

“So can we use kangamice for things besides riding?” asked Brak.

“I hear you can make a lot of money in pulling competitions. That’s really popular in Sturmhalla in the north. Maybe we should go there with Zeek when we get a chance,” said Sydney.

“I hear that there’s a big FensterCorp building in Sturmhalla, too,” said Zurl. The hatred for FensterCorp was quite obvious in his voice.

“All the more reason to go,” said Brak.

The party left the herd of kangamice behind and continued on towards the wreckage and archaeological investigation. Scientists had excavated several trenches in a large field near the exposed part of the spacecraft. Each trench was spaced about two meters apart. A steam-powered shovel sat idle in a nearby grove of trees, waiting for the next project.

On the far corner of the field, a small shed held the offices of the Scientists digging at the site. Next to the shed was a medium-sized warehouse used to cataloging and storage of excavated equipment. Brak, Luca, and Zurl entered the office to talk to the Chief Archaeologist, a woman named Yoko.

She greeted her visitors. “Welcome to Landing Dig! I’m Yoko! How can I help you?”
“We’re new to the area and we’re looking for something called an X-37 Modulator. Do you know where we could find one?”

Yoko consulted her database of equipment for a moment. “I don’t think I have one handy, but I can probably find one for you in a couple of hours. Do you think you could help me with something? I have a small monster problem.”

“Don’t you have some Adventurers on call?” Brak was a quick learner.

“Normally we do. This is not really connected to the dig, though.”

“Oh, OK.”

“We have a warehouse near the Institute that’s been hard to use lately. There’s an infestation of Sea Monkeys and we haven’t been able to clear them out. If you can destroy all the Sea Monkeys, I’ll give you the X-37 Modulator you need. Sound fair?”

The group consulted for a moment. “What do you know about Sea Monkeys?” asked Brak. He’d never heard of them before.

“They’re not too bad, or so I gather. They’re amphibious, tend to weak attacks, have a hierarchical social structure, and are overly fond of flinging their own waste products. Shouldn’t be too bad,” said Zurl.

“OK, let’s do it.” Luca turned to Yoko, “We’ll do it. How many are there?”

“At last count, there were twenty Sea Monkeys.”

The party agreed to get rid of the Sea Monkeys and left the dig site. “What have we got ourselves into now?” thought Brak to himself. The Landing Institute was a short walk from the Highwind site. The guard on duty pointed out the warehouse—it appeared normal on the outside, though it had a strange smell. “This isn’t the first time we’ve had problems
with Warehouse 23,” he said. 62 “Yoko called and cleared you for entering the warehouse. Please feel free to use any of our facilities if you’d like.” He waved them through.

Before tackling the warehouse, they visited the Landing Institute Gift Shop. They found a Combat Suit that Sydney wanted. He put his Inlaid Harness away and wore the new Armor. There wasn’t much else in their price range, but they did get a nice manager’s discount on the suit.

They decided on a marching order of Zurl, Luca, and Sydney. Sydney unlocked the door of the warehouse while Zurl and Luca stood with weapons at the ready. “Make sure none of them get out this door,” commanded Zurl. Sydney latched the heavy door open and joined his comrades. They stood in a line at the doorway. It was hard to see inside the building, but they could hear movement coming from behind a wall of boxes. Zurl stuck his hand out. “Ready?” Sydney and Luca each placed a hand on top of Zurl’s. “One, two, three, ready, break!” They ran into the warehouse.

Brak and Anya played with Jinx on the beach while the other three went inside Warehouse 23. The humid air smelled of Sea Monkey, banana peels, and Sea Monkey scat. Brak couldn’t see very far inside the building, but he could hear something going on inside. The fresh sea air carried the sounds of battle—cries from Zurl as he threw his Demon Spear at foes, Luca casting Big Sister at a cluster of Sea Monkeys, the high-pitched whining of Sydney’s Blaze Rifle. Sea Monkey war cries screeched out of the door of Warehouse 23. Brak

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62 Before being infested with Sea Monkeys, the Institute had to hire a group of Adventurers to defeat the Gnomes of Zur-ik. Before that, it was a herd of pink monsters (commonly known as “Pinks”) that were defeated by a pipe-wielding salesman named “Bob.” Bob used his mystical half-Yeti powers to defeat the Pinks, and then later disappeared aboard a disc-shaped flying vessel.
held his sword at the ready for a moment, then relaxed as the sound of battle grew less
distinct as the group moved through the warehouse.

“How do you think they’re doing in there?”

“Not too bad. Zurl loves this kind of thing.” Anya dangled a piece of string for Jinx
to bat at. There was a sudden crash against the side of the warehouse. Somehow Zurl had
thrown a Sea Monkey into the wall, and it struck so hard that it left a simian-shaped imprint
behind. Small sparks of light drifted out from cracks in the wall.

“Nice day for this kind of thing, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. It’s nice. So do you like Luca? She was asking me what I thought about you.”

Brak swallowed and thought for a moment. Was she kidding him? His attention was
distracted as Blaze Rifle fire cut a huge hole in the side of the warehouse, tearing holes in the
sheet metal siding and turning part of the sea into a cloud of salty steam. They could make
out the dim figure of Sydney, who shrugged and went back to fighting the Sea Monkeys.
Brak struggled to think, but was again distracted as a Sea Monkey rocketed out of the roof of
the warehouse, trailing a stream of fire before exploding like an afternoon firework. Tiny bits
of shingle and wood rained down on the beach.

“Yeah, I like Luca. I was scared of her and Sydney when I first met them, but they’ve
helped me a lot. How come Jinx can talk? It’s fairly rare, isn’t it?”

Jinx looked up. “I had an uncle who rode around on a giant Moppet once. But they
didn’t talk about him much in my family. Mostly because talking skips generations
sometimes. But talking cats have always been part of the Cosmia royal household.”

“Jinx and I bonded when he was just a kitten. Now we keep each other out of
trouble. Mostly.”
“Mostly.”

The openings of the warehouse were illuminated by a series of quick strobing lights. Sydney and Luca were throwing a lot of firepower at something.

“Zurl keeps you out of trouble too, doesn’t he?”

“He tries. Sometimes we have to bail him out of stuff.”

Smoke started to pour out of one corner of the warehouse. “I hope they don’t have to destroy the warehouse in order to save it,” said Brak. It was quiet for a few moments, so he and Anya took turns playing keep-away with Jinx’s favorite catnip mouse. “Think they got the last of them?”

“I haven’t heard anything in a while.”

An eerie light spilled out of the doorway of the warehouse. “Boss, you think?”

“Boss.”

They watched anxiously as a spectral barrel formed over the roof of the warehouse.

“We really should help out, shouldn’t we?”

“I may not be old, but I’m learning the Code. Three is the number. They’ll handle it. We’d just distract them at this point.”

The spectral barrel began glowing with a weak emerald light. The top of the barrel flew off into the sea, and legions of yellow monkeys streamed down to the roof of the warehouse, swarming over and around it until they found an entrance. “That does not look good,” said Brak.

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63 At higher levels of power, groups larger than three were a threat to the world on multiple levels—they had a great deal of money, could summon a wide variety of devastating spells, had powerful weapons, and were basically indestructible. Keeping this in mind, early Adventurers formed the base of the Code to prevent any one group from becoming far too powerful. Saving the world was one thing—taking it over in a mini coup d’etat was another.
“You’d be surprised. Sometimes these things aren’t as powerful as they appear.”

The barrel of monkeys evaporated, leaving a smoking warehouse and the roar of the sea. Brak and Anya waited expectantly for their friends to return. “Think we should go in there and check it out? What about checking the Save Point? If they’re dead, we can restore them…”

“If who is dead?” Sydney’s voice boomed out of the warehouse. The Adventurers strolled out of the warehouse, looking somewhat worse for wear. They smelled of smoke and burning fur, but seemed relatively whole compared to the Sea Monkeys they had seen earlier. “That last one was a pain, but the others were cake.”

“Cake?” Jinx looked hopeful. “Where’s my piece?”

“Not actual cake,” said Zurl. “Though we did find some good stuff. Sydney found a Knit Scarf in a Treasure Chest.”

Luca said, “I found a rock. But it’s pretty and keeps whispering something about schooling. Listen.” She held the rock up to Brak’s ear. He couldn’t hear anything. Or could he? “It sounds like the rustling of papers. Why do I smell old books?”

“Because you’ve released me from the prison of the Sea Monkeys!” A large spirit took shape over their heads. “I am Academia,” it said. “I guarded the Landing Institute but I was too late to stop the Sea Monkeys. I will watch over you now, if you will have me.”

“Sure!” shouted Luca.

“Do you know the fight song⁶⁴ to the University of Middengard?” asked Brak. He was homesick for his alma mater, though he wasn’t sure why.

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⁶⁴ Written by one of the campus librarians, it was titled More Fighting and played during all of the blitzball games.
“No, but if you hum a few bars I’ll probably remember it eventually. In any case, if you need somebody to fog your enemy with inertia, I will be there.”

The Adventurers thanked the Big Friendly Creature and returned to the Save Point at the dig site. Yoko was there, beaming. “I’m so thankful for all of your help! The guards called me and told me all about the fight! Here, have the X-37 Modulator. And for all of your trouble, take this Vicious Staff. Please.”

Luca thanked Yoko for the new weapon. “If you ever need our help, please give us a call.” Yoko gave them all a small tour of the Highwind dig before sending them on their way. It was awe-inspiring to realize that their ancestors had made the journey through space in such a vehicle. “They didn’t have mithril or MoppetNet or any of our modern advances. They just had fusion power and primitive sub-conscious computers. Climb down this tunnel to what we think is the main bridge, where you can see that they did not look directly out into space, unlike our modern orbiter/airships.”

The party thanked Yoko yet again for her generosity and headed back to the Docks. They could just make the departure time for the I’m OK, You’re Capsizing.
Badwin: Racter-IX. Question: What is two plus two?
Badwin: Question: Which metal is stronger than iron?
Badwin: Question: what is best in life?
Robot: Racter-IX, thinking. Traditional answer: To crush your enemies, see them flee before you, hear lamentation of their spousal unit.
Badwin: Question: Do you agree?
Robot: Racter-IX, disagreeing. Answer: a continual power source, alcoholic beverages, and sweet, sweet, booty.
Badwin: You’ve been talking to the crew again, haven’t you?

-- Screenplay for the movie “Racter-IX: The Early Years”

Eliza was overjoyed to see Luca and her friends return from the Landing Institute.

She waved the arm of one of her drones in greeting, “Welcome aboard! I trust that you had an educational day?”

“It was fine,” said Luca. “Please take us back to Middengard.”

“I can do that. Would you like to stay in the rooms you had before? They appear to be available.”

“Yes, please.”
Eliza’s drone took their money and showed them to their cabins. They all settled down to watch an episode of *Guards!*. Tonight’s episode took place in Arraka, and the city guards had to deal with a rampaging mass of Giant Worms. They had a great time kibitzing the poor guards, pointing out how their technique could use work, they left an opening, or how they neglected to ticket the Giant Worms for trespassing.

The show’s credits scrolled on the screen when the ship came to a sudden halt. Passengers were thrown from their chairs, several drones fell overboard, and a container of Yummi Fruit cocktail spilled in the galley. “What in the world was that?” asked Zurl. “Let’s go see what happened…”

Zurl led them out of the cabin, weapons at the ready. There was a large shape off the starboard bow. Huge spotlights played over the sides of the ship, illuminating any hiding places. Armored figures pounded up and down the decks, attacking the ship’s remote drones, herding passengers into a huddle on the main aft deck, and securing the holds.

“Metria Bay pirates.”

“I hate Metria Bay pirates,” said Sydney.

“Let’s split up—Brak: you, Luca, and Anya take the port side of the ship. Zurl and I will take the starboard side. We’ll meet at the fore deck and see what we can do.”

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65 *Guards!* was one of the highest-rated shows on Neugaia. It chronicled the lives of city guards in Middengard, Cosmia, Colwilson, Sturmhalla, and other cities. Viewers tuned in to watch grizzled veterans take on hordes of demon-possessed toys, flying breadwarmers, smugglers, or confused Adventurers. Some episodes featured spectacular footage of monster combat, which not many Citizens got a chance to see without being the next target.

*Guards!* was a companion show to *Who Wants To Be An Adventurer?*, a game show for aspiring young Adventurer wannabes. Contestants answered questions about past Adventures, performed tests of skill, and sometimes went out on staged missions, such as fetching pies, rescuing small monsters from gangs of children, and attending poetry readings without going insane. Contestants who did well were recruited by megacorporations, revolutionary groups, teacher’s unions, and other non-governmental organizations.
As Brak and his friends moved up the port side, they began to grow worried. “I don’t see anybody. This seems bad.”

“Keep moving. We’ll find something.”

As they came to the fore deck, the lights grew brighter. “Greetings, adventurers!” A voice boomed over a microphone. “I am Captain Wolfe of the _Sick Moose_. I welcome you as my guests!”

“Let the people go, Wolfe!” Zurl and Sydney rounded the corner. “We’ll let you all go and no questions asked!”

“I beg to differ, my friend. But I will make you an offer. If three of you can defeat just one of my crew, I will let your puny ship go!”

“It’s a deal!” Zurl looked at Brak. “Let’s see. Me, Sydney, and Brak. Luca, you watch after Anya and Jinx. Get away if you can.” He turned to the captain, who was surrounded by striped-shirted crewmen. “Pick your crewman, then!”

Captain Wolfe called back to his ship. “Badwin, bring out Racter-IX!”

“Aye-aye, sir!”

A single hulking figure leapt from the deck of the _Sick Moose_ to the I’m OK, You’re Capsizing. It towered over the rest of the crew. At first glance it appeared human. Then they noticed the huge claw on the right arm. Its left leg had been replaced by a crystal cylinder, which appeared to have gravel at the bottom and was occupied by several brightly-covered fish. The plastrons on its metal chest were painted in black-and-white horizontal stripes. It was wearing a plumed hat and braided shoulder pads.

“My friends, meet Racter-IX, the latest in pirate robot design. If you can beat it, I will let you go free. Racter-IX, destroy them!”
“Racter-IX confirms. Destroy adventurers.” The pirate machine readied the pistols it had stashed in a sash around its waist. It twisted suddenly, and the claw on its right arm telescoped out to hit Brak in the chest. Brak figured it broke at least one rib. He countered with downward stroke from his Avenger Blade, striking sparks from the casing of the robot.

Sydney fired his Blaze Rifle at Racter-IX, setting the robot’s shoulder pad aflame. Zurl leapt into the air and brought his Demon Spear down on its shoulder.

“Racter-IX. Begin routine ‘Yo-ho-ho.’” Racter-IX began spinning around at the waist. Doors in its chest opened, revealing a set of nozzles. The robot began spraying a volatile mix of rum and napalm into the air, which it set on fire with a blast from the pistol in its left hand. Zurl, Brak, and Sydney were scorched by the wall of flame.

“Sure shot!” shouted Sydney, firing several rounds into the robot’s left shoulder. The bolts from his Blaze Rifle nearly tore the arm off. Zurl finished the job with a swing from his Demon Spear. More sparks sprayed out of the robot, setting small fires on the planks of the deck. Brak cut horizontally, slicing the top third of the robot’s hat off.

“Stop! Stop!” shouted a running figure. Badwin grabbed a controller at his belt and yelled into it as he ran towards the battlefield. “Racter-IX, disengage. I repeat. Disengage.” The machine wound to a halt as its programming kicked in.

“Mister Badwin, what is the meaning of this?” bellowed Captain Wolfe.

“I don’t want to see another creation destroyed, sir! I’ve worked too long on this one to see it get trashed!”

“Pirate captains do not reward failure!” shouted the Captain. He pulled a pistol from his belt and fired it at Badwin. The first mate fell to the ground before dissolving, the
controller slid from his hand across the deck to land at Brak’s feet. Captain Wolfe called to his crew, “Kill them, my mateys! Take no prisoners!”

The pirate crew readied their cutlasses and axes. Brak reached down and picked up the controller. “Racter-IX. Defend.” He looked at Sydney, who’d raised an eyebrow at the gesture. “Hey, you never know until you try.”

Starting to life with a violent jerk, Racter-IX turned its head from the adventurers, to the corpse of Mister Badwin, to the oncoming pirates. “Racter-IX. Defend against evil…Acknowledged.” It started towards the pirate crew, knocking them to the ground with blows from its claw. The rest of the Adventurers followed after it. Sydney fired his Blaze Rifle. Anya cast Idiot Wind at a group rushing from the aft deck—they ran in confusion and went screaming over the side of the ship. Luca’s Fire spells ignited the mast of the Sick Moose, sending a signal to any passing ships of their distress.


“I never liked him, his robots, or his cooking. I should have stuck to my first dream, selling used cars.” He rushed the pirate robot, yelling. Racter-IX stuck out his claw reflexively, impaling the captain on it. He looked up for a moment. “We have… a great special… this holiday season… No… money down… Free balloons for… the kids…” His body collapsed into its components of colored light.

Sydney led the search for treasure aboard the pirate vessel. They found a Save Point and located the record for Mister Badwin. They started the reconstitution process and
continued on their search. Sydney found a Macro-Minigun in one of the holds, and was eager to trade it for his Blaze Rifle.

Luca, Anya, and Brak tended to the wounded while Zurl looked for Eliza and the ship’s control room. They regrouped on the deck of the *I’m OK, You’re Capsizing*. “Looks like this ship will need a new computer. Wolfe and his boys fried everything.”

Luca reported her progress. Grime from the fires on board covered her face. “The other passengers are OK, and I think most of the pirate crew will be fine. We’re rebooting Badwin and Wolfe—the authorities will want to speak to them. Oh, here comes Badwin now.”

Racter-IX lead his creator to the group of Adventurers. “Racter-IX says that you beat him in a fair fight. Looks like I’ll have to start work on Racter-X.”

“What about building something different for a change?” asked Anya.

“Yeah, like an automated scratching post!” said Jinx.


“I think it’s up to them,” said Badwin.

“I’d much rather you be on our side than fight you again, Racter-IX,” said Brak. His rib still hurt from the blow from the first fight.

“We’d be happy to have some more help. How good are you with cats?” asked Zurl.

“Racter-IX has cat detection and evasion at high levels. This unit is capable of calming felines down with fine mist of anesthetic. Racter-IX tolerates cats.”

The group sang the traditional ballad, “Yet Another Member Has Joined The Group” while they waited for the Middengard Navy to tow them back to port.
IAV Indomitable Spirit

Under no circumstances should you attempt to land your new Airship on another Airship, or accidental dismemberment and/or death may result.

Perform all safety and maintenance inspections on the included schedule, or accidental dismemberment and/or death may result.

For best results, use parts made by your manufacturer, Lucky Captain Rabbit King Avionics, or accidental dismemberment and/or death may result.

Avoid cleaning upholstery stains with non-approved cleansers, or accidental dismemberment and/or death may result.

Enjoy your new Airship, and fly responsibly. Remember, don’t drink and fly 1200 tons of metal through a populated area.

-- Owner’s Manual for the Gryphon-class Airship

Eventually, Lord Templemount arrived with several patrol ships of the Middengard Navy. He eyed the sad condition of both the I’m OK, You’re Capsizing and the Sick Moose, then ordered both ships towed back to the Middengard Docks.

Professor Katzen was waiting for them anxiously at the dock. He waited for them at the bottom of the gangplank. “How did it go? Did you get the X-37 Modulator?”
Brak waved at him as he crossed the gangplank, nearly losing his balance and falling into the water. “It went fine. Ran into a bit of trouble, but it turned out well.”

“Glad to hear it. Well, come along. We’ll get going. Wait—who’s your metal friend?”

“This is Racter-IX. He’s joined our group.”

“I’m pleased to meet you. Tell me, who designed you?”

The robot replied, “Racter-IX was designed by Badwin, first mate of the IPV *Sick Moose*. This unit was designed to steal goods unlawfully from innocents but has since decided to override this programming. Racter-IX is now helping new friends. Racter-IX enjoys this line of work more.”

“Very good. If you would like, I could help you repair that damage on your shoulder there. That looks nasty.”

“Speaking of helping, I just forgot that we had this!” Anya rooted around in her bag to find the Imperial Claw they had received from Cid for finding his cat. “Do you think you could use this, Racter-IX?”


“Oh, before I forget, do you guys know anything about a kangamouse named Zeek? He showed up at my house right after you left. He’s waiting for you there.”

The party left the docks, waving goodbye to the *I’m OK, You’re Capsizing* and the Navy crew who’d rescued them. They boarded a monorail headed towards the city center, and then took a cab from the Waterfall Tower district to Slum Sector Two, where Professor
Katzen had his compound. It was a different experience traveling to Slum Sector Two above ground. “What’s that bright thing in the sky?” asked Luca. “Should it always be there?”

Walking through the alley, Brak noticed the rubble and shattered bricks left over from the attack by FensterCorp forces. “What happened here?”

“Oh, had a little run-in with your friends. They didn’t want to play with me.”

Professor Katzen opened his front door, pawed through the stack of bills, and then led Brak and his friends to the airship hangar. Once again, he had to unlock it with a massive key and throw the door open. “Now, let’s see this Modulator.”

“What’s the Modulator do for the ship, anyway?” asked Zurl.

“It’s a vital component to both the hot tub and the radio. I can’t let you guys travel third-class, can I?”

“Do you mean to tell me we risked our lives and fought poo-throwing monkeys for a bubbling pool of water?” shouted Luca.

“Obviously you’ve never been in a hot tub flying above the clouds,” said Katzen.

“Let me get this started and we’ll be on our way.”

“Where is our way heading? Don’t tell me you deciphered more of the Sylvan Prophecy…” said Sydney.

“I have indeed. I tried something clever—I tracked down my friend Pazu. It wasn’t easy. But he and I put our heads together and we figured out what’s going on.” Katzen crawled through the hatch of the Indomitable Spirit. The interior was much bigger than it

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66 These were the usual lone scientist bills. Electric coil supply, bubbling fluid, grunt labor, surplus brain procurement, etc. One of them was marked “You may have already won a dream workshop in the Wildepeake Mountains!” and had the smiling face of Tobor, an ex-adventurer known mainly for defeating the half-man, half-pigeon menace of Pepper Avenue.
appeared from the outside—ambient lighting glowed softly in the corners, each hatchway was sealed by a large air-tight door, and it was upholstered in what to Katzen was the height of fashion—deep purple shag carpeting.

“What is this? An airship or a hotel bar?” muttered Zurl.

Brak and the others took a moment to visit Zeek, who was lounging in the stables near the boarding ramp. There was a large portion of the ship that was closed to them, but when pressed about it, Katzen would only mutter, “All in due time. I hope you don’t have to see what’s in the back.”

Jinx ran through the hallways, up the walls, and investigated the new smells of the airship. Katzen found the service panel he was looking for and began releasing the catches. “Help me out with this—turn them counter-clockwise.” They pulled the panel away from the wall, exposing machinery, linkages, and circuitry beneath. Katzen slid the X-37 Modulator in a vacant slot. Small status lights began pulsing along some of the sub-command pathways.

“Hang on. I need to re-route some of the data conduits. Can anybody run a Level 1 diagnostic? Wait, I’m kidding. Some of these jokes are just for me.”

Satisfied that the X-37 Modulator was installed correctly, Katzen replaced the access panel. “OK, let’s head to the lounge for a moment and I’ll fill you in.” They followed him to the lounge near the aft deck. It was carpeted in dark gray pile. Several hanging plants and a free-standing light sculpture offset eggplant-colored walls.

“OK, Pazu and I couldn’t talk long. He’s hiding out in the old Cosmia Palace, keeping watch on what FensterCorp is doing to the place.”

“How are my parents?” asked Anya, anxious and yet reluctant to hear the news.
“They are fine. Pazu has them hiding in a cave. FensterCorp is operating on several levels. The first is their public face—they run a PhysPotion factory, and now they are the chief maker of Save Point systems. So they control a lot of the populace, whether they know it or not.”

“How? Save Points are Save Points. I should know. I worked on them,” said Brak.

“Not really,” replied Professor Katzen. “How do you know your Save Point data is secure? I mean, really know? By the time you need it, it’s too late. FensterCorp has a majority of the population over a barrel.”

Katzen took a drink from a mug before continuing. “They’ve also started to strike a deal with the Prefect Motor Industries people. The Prefect people and the FensterCorp people have gathered together to start destroying certain key areas. Prefect Motor Industries was sucking the life force out of the Misty Forest before you stopped them.”

“Yeah, I remember.” Sydney grew angry at the thought of the corruption among the trees.

“Well, using the Sylvan Prophecy as a guide, they’ve taken over two other areas. The Ice Caverns near Sturmhalla in the north, and river caverns of Costa del Mucho in the south of Westron.”

“How is the prophecy a guide?” asked Sydney.

“Some of the stanzas detail places of power, like the forest, or the heart of the ice field, or the source of Mucho River. They’re down to just the ice fields and the river, since you defeated them at Misty Forest. The stanzas also talk about heroes stopping each of these
endeavors, so they’re trying to destroy causality by attempting to stop heroes before they start. They’re using special troops for that.”

“Which is why the Enforcer people keep getting their hats handed to them by us.”

Brak never could figure out why such hapless individuals were trying to fight them.

“Exactly. So it will get worse before it gets better. It always does. I’d be surprised if they didn’t start recruiting Adventurers to fight you.”

Katzen thought for a moment. “Come to think of it, Pazu mentioned seeing a band of people who looked like Adventurers. One of them had a sword and didn’t talk much. Does that ring any bells?”

Luca stared straight ahead. Sydney glanced at her, then spoke. “Sounds like our old buddy, Storm. I wouldn’t worry too much. He got killed by an Armor Slug once.”

Jinx sniffed. “Heck, I can kill an Armor Slug with one paw tied behind my back.” He sniffed once and started grooming his tail.

“Well, our next stop is Sturmhalla. It will take us a while to get there. Should we wait for the morning? It is getting late.”

“Let’s get there as soon as possible, if that’s not a problem,” said Zurl. He couldn’t wait to fight FensterCorp again. The rest agreed with him.

“OK, I’ll show you all to your cabins and you can sleep on the way.” The airship had cabins to spare, in addition to storage pens for kangamice, a galley, a kitchen, the lounge, a

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67 Destroying causality is never a good idea—this was the fundamental message from Timey, the Chronology Protecting Timepiece. Evidently Fenster hadn’t been watching his public service announcements. All children knew Timey’s catchphrase: “Hey kids, don’t go back in time and kill your own grandfather, or we’ll all cease to exist! Keep the time stream pure! Don’t pollute!” Children bugged their parents for watches with Timey’s face on them—then they pretended to guard time by testing how long seconds took to pass. Parents encouraged this game for their own mental health. Every now and again one child was lucky enough to notice time distortions and summon Timey and his Chrono Buddies.
hot tub, an arboretum, a small library, and a complete workshop for those experiments too delicate to leave at home.68

Brak was washing his clothes in his room when there was a knock at the door. He struggled to button his jacket, then opened the door. Luca was out in the hallway, looking nervously from side to side. “May I come in?”

“Certainly. What can I do for you?”

“I just didn’t want to be alone right now. Thinking of Storm reminds me of how we parted—it wasn’t exactly on the best of terms.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t your fault.”

“I’m also kind of hungry. Do you have anything to eat in your room? I don’t want to bug Professor Katzen. He’s having too much fun piloting the airship through clouds.”

“I grabbed a couple of sandwiches from the galley earlier. Have one. They’re not bad. The roast Beast and dill pickle is particularly good.”

Luca grabbed a sandwich and sat down on the bed. Brak sat next to her.

“So there was nothing between you and Storm, then?”

“Well, he was always looking at me like he wanted to be more than fellow Adventurers, but I was never interested.”

“You’d never date a fellow Adventurer?”

“I didn’t say that. I do like this one guy.“

“Tell me about him.”

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68 The preceding text was brought to you but the Lucky Captain Rabbit King Airship company, who urge you to test-drive the new Gryphon class Airship today.
“He looks out for me and he’s been pretty good with cats and children. He’s also laughed at my jokes.”

“Oh, I get it. You and Jinx are an item. I can understand that.”

Luca hit him on the shoulder. “No, you goof. It’s you. When I first saw you in the Inn, I could tell that you were more than just a plain Citizen. Even drunk out of your skull. But you handled yourself, with, well… You did better than I thought you would.”

“I’ve had a crush on you since you helped me in that alley. And I’ll never forget that night on the bay.”

“So what are you saying—“

Brak stopped Luca’s next sentence with a kiss. They went on for a moment before he broke away. “I’m sorry. I should have let you at least finish your sandwich. Eat. You’ll need your strength for summoning Academia tomorrow.”

“I’m not worried about that at the moment.”

Luca moved closer to Brak, brushing his hair backwards with the inside of her wrist. She leaned over to him, kissing his face and neck, then reached back to turn out the light above the bed. The view ports in the cabin let in starlight and moonlight, and she could just make out Brak in the dim light.

“Tell me,” he whispered. “Are all of your Specialty Attacks combat-related?”

Luca laughed. “No… There’s one…” She kissed his neck. “I’d like to show you…” Speech was difficult for both of them at this moment. “But for you, all of my attacks are special.”

Luca started mumbling to herself, her words barely audible over the roar of the airship props, the rushing wind, and the hum of the motors. “Valencia’s Secret,” she
whispered. Soft azure lights coalesced around her body and began to orbit around the pair of them. Brak grew alternatively warmer and colder, but found that he didn’t care anymore. The two of them grew closer as waves of pleasure and energy coursed through their bodes.

Brak began the preparations for the complementary move. “Play of the Clouds and Rain.” Both of them sighed as they were momentarily transported into another world—one where the next moment wasn’t filled with wondering if a Death Rabbit was going to impale them with an axe. As they both finished, a triumphant call rang through the room. This would happen several times throughout the night.

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69 Valencia was a legendary Madam. Her brothel, the Honey Bee Inn, was famous throughout Neugaia and catered primarily to Adventurer clientele. Valencia had a Heart of Gold, which she’d won in a fighting tournament in her previous career as an Adventurer. In her younger days, Valencia helped overthrow a corrupt oligarchy, established a school for young girls, and wrote several tomes of erotic magic that could not be sold to minors.
Free City of Sturmhalla

When you are tired of Sturmhalla, you are tired of constant avalanche threats, eternal darkness, and pickled herring.
--Tourism slogan of the Sturmhalla City Council, which increased the population of fish-loving manic depressives by 75%

The Indomitable Spirit flew on through the night, passing over the icy ridges of the Wildepeake Mountains, the Weeha Fruit groves of Colwilson, and towards the northern city of Sturmhalla. One by one, they drifted into the spacious control room of the airship. Some thoughtful designer (probably Katzen) had included a small fold-out buffet in one wall of the bridge. Racter-IX served coffee and scones as they drifted over the snowy plains.

“How are we all doing this morning?” Katzen was remarkably chipper for somebody who’d been flying all evening. Most of the group resented this—Adventurers were not morning people, as a rule.

“We’re fine,” said Zurl. “What exactly are we getting into here?”

“Well, there are two things we can do here. The first thing, there’s a FensterCorp factory in the heart of the glacier—they have mining robots that are excavating flash-frozen creatures for use in PhysPotions and MentaPotions. And this whole operation disrupts the
energy flow of the planet, which leads to something awful for everybody, but I haven’t figured out all the details yet. Anyway, if we stop this operation, either through negotiation…”

“Yeah, right,” said Brak.

“Or through some… other method. The other thing that you may or may not be interested in is the kangamice training program they have going here. There is a rumor in some circles that a very powerful Big Friendly Creature can be found, but only with the power of a very good pulling kangamouse.”

“Pulling kangamouse?” Anya had only seen them in herds and with carts.

“There’s a competitive pulling league here in Sturmhalla. If we can train Zeek well, and win a lot of races, we may be able to find this mysterious creature.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Luca. She was nibbling on a Weeha Fruit Scone, which increased her Mana level by 5%.

The *Indomitable Spirit* settled into the holding pattern used for approaching airships. They noticed a few cargo haulers and a couple of private vessels, but none so ornate or as heavily armed as their own. “Are they going to give us trouble about your unusual modifications, Katzen?” Sydney eyed the weapons panel and was more and more nervous about such military-grade hardware aboard a civilian vessel.

“Not that I’m aware of. You’d be surprised what an Adventurer notation on your LogBook can do. And the most powerful weapon aboard doesn’t even show from the outside.”

“Care to tell us what that is?” asked Sydney.

“It’s a surprise. If we need it, I’ll let you know.”
The *Indomitable Spirit* orbited the city of Sturmhalla, waiting her turn in the landing rotation. The towers of Sturmhalla were thicker and less ornate than those of Middengard. They had to be more sturdy to cope with the weight of the ice and snow. The lights of the city burned like diamonds and amber in the snow. “I thought it would be bigger,” muttered Luca.

“Much of the city is underground. Natural and artificial caverns make up the majority of the living quarters. In the middle of the city—you can just make out the dome there on the right—is the giant camphor tree planted by the original settlers. FensterCorp is lucky they haven’t affected it yet, or the population would have torn their operation to shreds by now.”

Finally, it was their turn to land. Katzen guided the vessel to the landing platform with a steady hand, fighting the extreme crosswinds and reduced visibility caused by the backwash of the props. Shock absorbers took most of the jolt out of the initial contact with the ground, and Katzen cut the power to the engines. He unbuckled his safety harness and went to the boarding ramp.

“You’ll find a nice Weapon Shop there in the terminal, and many of the citizens will be happy to show you where the Ice Caverns are. I’ll be here or in docking bay AA 17. When you get back, buzz me on the intercom.”

They thanked Katzen for the use of his airship, collected their gear, and exited the airship. The airport had the customary Save Point right at the center of the terminal. They scanned themselves in and looked around for the Weapon Shop. “There it is! Pohs Nopeaw Weapon Shop.”
They entered the Pohs Nopeaw Weapon Shop. A small man in a gray suit welcomed them to his store. “Welcome to Pohs Nopeaw. My name is Pohs. Would you like to buy, chat, or exit?”

“Let’s chat for a moment, shall we?” Brak looked to the others, who nodded. “Yes, let’s chat.”

“I hear that strange things are afoot in the Ice Caverns. Miners tell of strange goings on, and some of them haven’t come back.” Pohs paused for a moment, then said his customary greeting. “Welcome to Pohs Nopeaw. Would you like to buy, chat, or exit?”

“Let’s buy. What do you have?”

Pohs pointed to a display case, which had many unusual weapons. “Do not be alarmed by their appearance. They are more deadly than you would think.” Sydney and the others counted their sals, then bought one of everything. Brak took a Mithril Butter Knife. Luca found a Sal-and-a-quarter Quarterstaff. Sydney looked at the Water Pistol in his hands, wondering if it was really worth the 1500 sals he’d just paid for it. Zurl’s Demon Spear was in a satchel on his back while he toyed with a Fishing Pole. Anya was the happiest of the lot.

“This Dowsing Rod is cool! And hey, maybe I can find water with it!”

Zurl looked at her for a moment. “There’s water all around us, Anya. It’s called snow.”

Jinx laughed. “Even I knew that.”

Racter-IX purchased a Lobster Claw, and they walked out of the Pohs Nopeaw. Brak examined his Mithril Butter Knife. “OK, tell me why I just spent money for this. I don’t know if it would even spread butter.”
“Look at it carefully, Brak. See its orange aura? You can just make it out if you relax your eyes for a moment.”

Brak attempted to relax his eyes, but mostly ended up with double vision. “I can’t see anything. Oh well, I’m sure we’ll get a chance to try them soon enough.”

They revisited the Save Point, then asked a passing Tourist where the Ice Caverns or the Kangamice Pulls were. “I don’t know anything about the Kangamice Pulls, but I do know the Ice Cavern is to the north of the city. Take the Jotunn Road and you won’t miss it. Watch out for the miners, though. They’re nasty these days.”

Sydney thanked the Tourist and led the group to Jotunn Road. “Let’s see, how should we do this?”

“Let’s have you, Zurl, and me in the front line,” suggested Brak.

“Boys’ night out, huh?” giggled Anya.

“Wait a minute, what gender is Racter-IX?”

The pirate robot answered, “This unit is gender-neutral. You may notice that my creator, Badwin, has given me somewhat male clothing. However, the question of gender is meaningless in an artificial being such as myself.”

“We’ll try to remember that.”

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70 On some worlds, Tourists were a great source of political upheaval. On Neugaia, Tourists were mostly harmless. Some of them were annoying to locals when they used Specialty Attacks like Innate Lack of Direction, Haggle, Shout Incoherently, or Find Obscenely Tacky Gift.
Prefect Motor Industries Offices

Test drive our new Behemoth. Now available with optional Hob-Goblin protective coating. Because it’s all about the children. The precious children. -- *Prefect Motor Industries commercial for their Behemoth vehicle*

Dr. Omna sat at a conference table, sipping a glass of water. The Chief Magical Officer for Prefect Motor Industries sat across from him, studying a folder full of paper.

“This is all we know about the group trying to stop us. They’re quite annoying, but I think together we can eliminate this troublesome irritation before the bottom line is endangered.” Dr. Omna passed a set of images to Rizzo. “Here are the most recent photos we have of them. They were taken in Middengard.”

Rizzo examined the images. “They have a young girl with them. Is she who I think she is?”

“The missing princess from Cosmia?” Dr. Omna had been hoping Rizzo wouldn’t notice that.

“The same.”

“We think so.”
“Does she know what she carries?”

“We don’t think so. But few people saw those writings. My agents were able to smuggle those to me as soon as they were unearthed.”

Rizzo poured himself a glass of water from a pitcher. “We have been working on a new set of combat mechanoid. Would you care to help us… field test it?”

Dr. Omna smiled a rare smile. “We would be happy to. Please deliver them to the FensterCorp Headquarters as soon as possible. We must be ready for any eventuality.” They shook hands and went to a catered lunch.
Ice Caverns

Auntie Zelda’s Hot Chocolate. For the happy times, for the sad, and for boiling and pouring on intruders in times of strife.

-- Advertisement for Auntie Zelda’s Hot Chocolate

Brak, Sydney, and Zurl walked in a line down Jotunn Road. They noticed several workers and a few cargo trucks bearing the FensterCorp logo, but not much else. After a few minutes of walking, they ran into a checkpoint guarded by two FensterCorp drones. “State your business.”

“We want to see the Ice Caverns.”

“Go ahead, but stay out of FensterCorp property. You will note the FensterCorp property by the watch towers, mine fields, and automated death sentries. Sign this waiver and you can go right through.” Have a nice day.”

The party used the Save Point installed at the checkpoint. Entering the initial tunnel, they walked through the caverns, which were warmer than they expected for being
constructed from ice. Stalagmites and stalactites grew out of the floor and ceiling. Each formation was a different hue of blue, white, or purple. Veins of crystal-clear ice ran through the walls, giving the impression of translucent marble. “Why am I not freezing to death?” asked Brak.

“It’s your outfit. Adventurer clothing is tough. For example, you wouldn’t know it from looking at her, but Luca’s outfit is water and lava repellent, can survive small periods of vacuum, and resists tough grass stains.”

“Wow. And it looks good, too.” Brak grinned stupidly for a moment.

“You noticed that, too?” asked Zurl. “Wait. What’s that ahead?” Brak breathed a sigh of relief, thankful that neither of them noticed his embarrassment.

Zurl noticed one of the side-tunnels in the Ice Cavern complex was heavily fortified. The road leading to the tunnel entrance was covered with thick, yellow slush. “Must be the forbidden territory we’re supposed to stay out of.”

“Supposed to’ is the key phrase in that sentence,” said Sydney. They branched off the main tunnel and headed for the gate. “Halt! FensterCorp employees only past this point!” The guard drone raised a weapon-laden arm.

“I want to see if I got my money’s worth out of this,” said Sydney. He raised his Water Pistol and pointed it at the drone. When he pulled the trigger, a stream of acid emerged from the barrel, dissolving some of the armor and melting the barrels of some of its weaponry.

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71 The Ice Cavern waiver read, in part, that the signee did not hold the issuer, FensterCorp Industries in any way responsible for accidental death, dismemberment, crushing due to erosion of cavern support by overmining, attacks by Ice Weasels, frostbite, frostchomp, frostnibble, or frostswallow. (Frost was very very hungry sometimes.) The signee’s copy of the waiver also included a coupon for a discount on frozen yogurt.
“Hmmm. Not bad. Not bad at all.”

“Let me try mine.” Zurl wove his Fishing Pole in a complicated pattern, then thrust it at the smoking guard drone. To his surprise, the tip of the Fishing Pole went right through the drone and emerged out the back, causing the drone to explode. Brak ducked to avoid a large chunk of shrapnel. “That’s awesome.”

“There has to be a downside,” warned Sydney. “This too good to be true.”

A second guard drone emerged from the FensterCorp tunnel. It was accompanied by a FensterCorp sorcerer, who began throwing Lightning spells at Sydney. Zurl and Brak watched in horror as Sydney screamed and thrashed as the bolts hit him. Sydney collapsed to the ground, Knocked Out. “He didn’t hit him that hard!” shouted Brak. He sliced the guard drone in half with the Mithril Butter Knife, causing another spray of sparks to burn small pits in the walls and floor of the tunnel.

“Wait. I know what this is.” Zurl fished around in his cloak for some LifeMoss, then reached over to open Sydney’s mouth. He inserted the LifeMoss in Sydney’s mouth and waited for the drug to take effect. Sydney’s form, which had grown less and less distinct, appeared to be more solid. A beam of light surrounded the still body, and as Zurl watched, Sydney started breathing again. His eyes moved rapidly as he regained consciousness. “Brak! The weapons we bought at Pohs Nopeaw!”

“What about them?” Brak kicked the FensterCorp sorcerer in the stomach, then cut him into component particles with a slice from the Butter Knife. It was getting easier for him to fight and kill—he didn’t even flinch as the cloud of sorcerer sprites surrounded him before dissipating into the icy air.
“They’re what the Book of Adventurers calls ‘Novelty Weapons.’ They’re insanely powerful, but this power is a double-edged sword.” Zurl paused to help Sydney regain his balance, then searched the floor of the cavern for anything the FensterCorp guard drones might have left behind. The frugality of FensterCorp payment continued in this country—Zurl found 150 sals and a Styrofoam Cup.

“How so?” asked Brak. “You see how we cut through those guards.”

“Yeah, and you saw how that guard fried me with a simple Lightning Spell. Novelty Weapons do fantastic damage, but make you extremely vulnerable as well. I think I’ll go back to my new Macro-Minigun.”

Brak shrugged his shoulders. “That seems kind of weird.”

“Well, you know. They look cool, do great damage, but they’re kind of a joke.”

Sydney placed the Water Pistol

“Who came up with this bright idea?”

“No idea, but it was probably the same person who figured out a recipe for Pudding that would increase your spellcasting ability.”

“Fair enough. Shall we move on?”

The three wandered deeper into the cavern. Power cables snaked across the floor of the tunnel, humming softly to themselves. They were warm to the touch. “Where do you think these lead?” asked Zurl.

“Probably to whatever operation FensterCorp’s got going on here,” said Sydney.

Side tunnels branched off from the main tunnel, but most of them were dead ends. One had a Treasure Chest with a second Ice Ring stored inside. “Think somebody is trying to tell us something?” Sydney exchanged his Knit Scarf for the new Ice Ring. “Let’s get
They took a small moment to drink some Hot Chocolate from a canteen, then set off down the tunnel.

The next side tunnel was partially blocked by three Mining Robots. Upon seeing the group, they started screaming, “Stop intruders! Stop intruders!” The automated mining equipment turned from their tunnel digging and pointed their drills at the Adventurers.

“These guys sound like Racter-IX!” joked Zurl.

“Yeah, but without the sparkling personality!” shouted Brak, attacking the lead Mining Robot with his Butter Knife. He sliced part of the drill off with a single blow. Sydney pointed the barrels of his Macro Minigun at the drone, firing a stream of bullets that dissolved the machine into scrap metal, some bits of wire, and dug a three meter gash in the wall of the tunnel. “Now that’s more like it!” He patted the smoking barrel assembly affectionately.

Zurl used his Fishing Pole to skewer the control systems of the right-hand Mining Drone, causing it to shudder for a moment before exploding into several pieces. The last Mining Robot fired its lasers at Brak, burning him on the arms and chest. He countered with a stop-thrust that disabled the large drill on the Mining Robot. This didn’t help with the lasers. Zurl and Sydney both received serious wounds from the mining lasers before the final Mining Robot was destroyed.

“I’m switching back to the Avenger Blade. That hurt too much.”

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72 It should be pointed out at this point that the Macro Minigun was the size of a small tree, had six rotating barrels, and could fire a truckload of ammunition in about two minutes. Calling it a ‘minigun’ was about like calling Jupiter a tiny cloud of gas. On the other hand, the Minigun was small in comparison to the UltraCannon mounted on the great Weis Airship Leviathan, which was so large that the only time it was fired, it dug a two-mile trench in addition to destroying the target drone, the Leviathan and three supply vessels. It’s all relative.
“Same here. Back to the Demon Spear for me. Actually, if you don’t mind, I’d like to
switch places with Luca.” Zurl ran back to the entrance of the Ice Cavern. Luca came
running in a few minutes later.

“Aren’t you cold?” asked Brak. “That doesn’t exactly look like cold weather gear.”

“I’m fine. And we’ll be warm enough soon from fighting.”

“You think?”

“I know. I just have a feeling.” As Sydney started off down the tunnels, Luca leaned
over to Brak and whispered, “Besides, I have a warm feeling whenever I think about the
other night…” She ran off before Brak could answer her.

They found a large switch in one of the side tunnels. “Let’s leave this alone until we
know what it is. For all we know, it could drop a load of Ice Weasels or something,” said
Sydney.

Backtracking to the main tunnel, the group continued on. Several bends passed
without incident, and then the path was blocked by a gigantic set of striped metal doors, the
yellow and black bands indicating a hazard within. “Well, damn. Looks like a dead end.”

“What about the switch?” asked Luca. “Ice Weasels or no, it may be our only
choice.”

Brak was confused. “Why would the switch to the door be all the way back in some
side tunnel? That doesn’t make any sense from a usability standpoint. Sorry. Being a writer is
showing through again, isn’t it?”

Sydney smiled. “Yeah, it doesn’t make sense, but it’s tradition. You always put
switches way on the other side of where they’re useful. I think the reasoning is that intruders
like us will be so busy fighting our way to and from the switch that we'll cease to be
intruding, if you get my meaning.”

“OK, I see it. Well, no time like the present.”

The group backtracked to the switch. It was a large bar mounted in a slot in the wall.
“Looks like I just pull it down,” said Sydney. “Everybody ready?” Luca readied her Vicious
Staff, twisting it in her hands like a tennis racket. Brak swung his Avenger Blade in a few
practice strokes, cutting snowflakes in mid-air. They nodded that they were

Sydney adjusted the strap of his Macro-Minigun so that it hung behind his back, then
reached up to grab the switch. His shoulders heaved with the effort of pulling the switch. It
didn’t move at first, gradually giving way with a loud screech of metal. Sydney felt a final
catch as he moved the lever to its final position. A series of clunks, a turning of gears, and
the walls and floors began to shake with the movement of hidden machinery. The soles of
their shoes rumbled as a series of distant thuds sounded down the tunnel. “Looks like that
was the right one.”

Sydney readied his Macro-Minigun, pointing it at the walls, the ceiling, the switch, his
friends. “Hey, watch where you point that! You pull the trigger, there’s not going to be
enough left of me to put LifeMoss on!” Brak and Luca scurried out of the way of the barrels.
The three Adventurers paused for a moment. “Think we should head back to the Save
Point?” asked Luca.

“Nah, we’ll be fine,” said Sydney. They paused for another Hot Chocolate break,
then started back to the door, which hopefully would be open. “With our luck, it’s a time
lock or something.” As he passed an outcropping of ice, the wall collapsed, spilling four Ice
Weasels onto the snow. “Ice Weasels! Look out!” The furry creatures shook themselves,
kicking chunks of ice down the path. The Ice Weasels came to about midway up Brak’s calf. They were gray, had large, pointy teeth, but looked relatively thin and scrawny.

“Why am I supposed to worry about them?” asked Brak.

The Ice Weasels had formed into a square formation, facing the three Adventurers. One of the Ice Weasels in the back rank gestured wildly. Brak felt the world grow colder as a crust of ice formed on his skin. It grew harder to move as the crust grew thicker, forming a cube of ice that surrounded him on all sides. He shivered violently inside his prison of ice. He tried breaking free, but there was no give in the cube.

As the world grew more and more dim, Brak grew warmer. He could make out the flashes and thunder of Sydney and Luca’s battle with the Ice Weasels. Just as Brak was about to slip into unconsciousness, the ice block shattered due to the instability of quickly-generated ice. Brak’s knees gave way and he nearly fell all the way over.

There were two Ice Weasels remaining—the other two had been destroyed by Sydney and Luca. The left Ice Weasel cast Ice at Sydney, but he just smiled as the rim of frost grew on his arms and shoulder. “Glad I saved this Ice Ring! It’s absorbing a lot of the damage!”

Brak sliced through the left-hand Ice Weasel as Luca cast a Fire Spell at the right-hand creature. It melted briefly under the heat of the Fire bolt before vanishing into dim sparks. The company searched the pitted and scorched floor for any treasure, but came up with nothing.

“That was kind of painful. Let’s head back and Save before going through that door,” said Brak.
They returned to the Save Point at the beginning of the Ice Cavern. “How’s it going? Need a breather?” asked Anya.

“Sure, I could warm up out here,” said Sydney. “Take my place, if you’d like.”

“You go ahead, I’ll stay here,” said Jinx. He moved from Anya’s shoulder to the top of Racter-IX’s hat. “It’s too cold. No self-respecting cat would go in there.”

“Racter-IX. Question: will feline stay here all day? Possibility of shedding,”

Jinx started washing himself. “Well, if you’re going to be that way… I’ll give you ‘possibility of shedding.’”

Brak, Anya, and Luca ran back into the tunnel, finally catching up to the door that had previously thwarted them. Warning alarms flashed in the dimness of the cavern, illuminating a Treasure Chest with an Oak Wand inside. “I knew there was a reason I came along!” Anya stashed her Maple Wand in her cloak and gave the Oak Wand an experimental twirl.

As they walked down the tunnel, Anya and her friends kept a lookout for any FensterCorp guards or assault drones. “It’s too quiet in here,” said Luca. “You’d think that opening that door would have set off an alarm or something.”

“Maybe they’re counting on whatever’s at the center of this complex. What do you think it is? I still can’t figure out quite why this cavern is so important.”

“I’ve been doing some thinking,” said Anya. “You know how energy flows from one part of your body to another, right?”
“Yeah. Everybody learns that in school. Disrupt the energy enough, and you fly apart, which is why all of these monsters fly apart when you fight them.”

“Well, imagine Neugaia is a giant body. Disrupt the energy flow by taking over a forest, or an ice cavern, or a major river in a cavern, and the planet’s energy flows outward, destroying much of the world.”

“Why would somebody do something like that?” asked Luca.

“So they could sell the survivors medical gear and equipment.”

“How horrible.”

“Professor Katzen, Jinx, and I came up with this translation after taking another look at the Sylvan Scrolls. Jinx figures that Sylva must have been some sort of genius at energy manipulation.”

“Wait. Jinx thought that? What is he? Some sort of Scholar?”

Anya smiled. “Yeah, in addition to being a level 2 Cat, he’s a Scholar of Ancient Writings and Energy Flow.”

“Wow. All the cats I know sleep sixteen hours a day. He must be some sort of prodigy or something.”

“Well, he sleeps a lot, but he sort of learns what I learn. And I’ve learned a lot with Pazu as my tutor.”

“He must be really something. I’d like to meet him some day.”

73 There was a small time delay before the body’s own energy turned against it—this allowed PhysPotions and LifeMoss to work. Wrapping a body in non-conductive materials did not, though. Save Points stored the pattern of this energy, replicating it if the original was lost. More sophisticated Save Points could hold multiple versions of the same person, but only one pattern at a time walked around. This story probably would have made more sense if this footnote had come earlier in our tale.
The tunnel was getting wider, with fewer branches. They started finding crates with the FensterCorp logo burned into the side. Some of the crates had Prefect Motor Industries logos as well. The path changed slightly—the floor was no longer made of ice, but metal plates. Their footsteps echoed dully as they walked further towards the center of the FensterCorp complex. They heard more echoes coming from the left.

Luca adjusted the grip on her Vicious Staff. “Company. Get ready.” Three soldiers of the Dragonfly Brigade marched into the tunnel, weapons pointed at the intruders.

One of the soldiers was an officer. He read from a prepared note card. “You are trespassing on FensterCorp property! We will regret to inform you that we do not enjoy trespassing and look forward to serving you in a future incarnation. We will begin firing as soon as I wish you a happy day. Have a happy day.” His two soldiers fired at the Adventurers, hitting Luca and Brak.

Brak sliced at the officer with his Avenger Blade. The officer winced as the sword cut into his shoulder, and he fell to the ground. He looked up at Brak for a moment. “Before you arrived, I was supposed to go to a meeting on assessment. Fenster wants to know how we’re going to assess our effectiveness in stopping heroes like you. Thanks for getting me out of that meeting.” Then he exploded into particles of light.

Anya used her Oak Wand to cast Rope Trick at the remaining guards. A thick cord slithered across the floor, wrapping itself around both guards. The phantom rope began constricting them, forcing the Dragonfly guards to drop their weapons before they followed.

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74 Luca preferred the Westron grip on her Staff, which gave her more control on spins and area attacks. Anya used a modified Estron grip, suitable for more detailed work.
their boss into oblivion. Its job complete, the rope fragmented into individual threads. A search of the area showed the guards had left behind a MentaPotion and three hundred *sals*.

“We must be getting closer,” said Brak. “Let’s press on and see what FensterCorp monstrosity awaits this time. The three distributed the *sals* and headed down the path. They moved cautiously, looking for more guards, Ice Weasels, or mining robots.

One door to the side of the tunnel gave them access to a control room, of sorts. Brak studied the readouts. “I can’t figure out what all of this is for, but this panel here is communications with Corporate Headquarters.” They looked at the communication logs, and the head office had increased the amount of production the day after Brak, Luca, and Sydney had demolished the MechanoSpider.

“Whatever you guys did, it really worried Fenster and this Dr. Omna,” observed Anya. “Then again, you did take away their profits.”

“Well, let’s see if we can mess with their bottom line some more,” said Luca. She led them out of the control room and back into the hall.

“Uh-oh. There’s a Save Point up ahead.”

“We’re in for some trouble then, right?” asked Brak.

“Yeah. That’s how it usually works.” There was a massive door up ahead, with a Save Point installed in a small alcove nearby. They took turns keeping watch as they scanned their patterns into the Save Point. Brak eyed it for a moment. “Hey, this is a new Mark IV. I didn’t think these were at the market yet. Maybe they worked out the bugs in the—”

“Don’t worry about that right now, Brak. We’re here to stop them from destroying the continent for personal gain, remember?” Luca moved in between the Save Point and Brak. “Ready?”
“Yeah. Let’s do this.”

Anya looked around for the switch for the door. “Oh, here it is. The big button marked ‘Door.’ That’s almost too easy.” She slammed the switchplate with her Oak Wand. Status lights lit up, counting down until the mechanism opened a door. Alarms and klaxons sounded, warning lights flashed—they couldn’t hear themselves over the cacophony of alerts. Eventually the timer reached zero. Anya swallowed as the door slid into the wall, revealing a bright light beyond—she couldn’t see anything for a moment as her eyes adjusted to the intensity of the spotlights.

They could hear a loud voice coming from inside. “Welcome, friends! Come in! Don’t be shy!” Looking at each other, they walked forward into the light. It illuminated a large chamber carved out of the living ice. Mining robots dragged feeder tubes, blocks of ice, and mysterious equipment in and out of the chamber, ignoring the armed group walking through their midst. They carried chunks of frozen creatures to a central processor, where they were shredded for use in Prefect Motor Industry manufacturing. 75

A large platform stood at the center of the room. Mining robots entered and exited the passageways cut into its base. At the top of the platform, a steam-powered Power Loader automaton loomed over the scurrying workers. It was roughly human-shaped, if you could find a human with shoulders twice the width of its waist and cargo loaders for hands. Brak could just make out a figure waving at them from the control unit mounted in its powerful chest. “Is that… Wil? Macht?”

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75 Some of the creatures were used as fuel. Their fur was used as stuffing for seats, which gave Prefect Motor vehicles a distinctive musky scent.
“It’s me, Frei!” shouted the figure in the mechanoid figure. “We weren’t sure where you’d go first, so I picked this facility! Those other guys are going to be jealous now!” He maneuvered the mech off of the platform, running towards them with powerful footsteps.

“We should have brought Sydney for this!” shouted Brak as he ducked to avoid the Power Loader’s claws. He struck the Power Loader with his Avenger Blade. The stroke left a small cut in the outer armor, but didn’t do much damage. Luca prepared a Lightning spell. Empyrean bolts shot across the room, frying several subsystems on the Power Loader. “Aw, man!” shouted Frei. “You broke my stereo! I’ll do you for that!”

It was Anya’s turn. She tried tangling the legs of the Power Loader with another Rope Trick, to no effect. Turning the Power Loader, Frei struck her with one arm. Anya flew across the room and hit the wall with great force. She twitched several times and lay still.

“No! Anya!” shouted Luca. She closed her eyes and mumbled for a moment. Everything grew silent. Even the Mining Robots paused and looked up as particles of snow drifted down from the ceiling. One wall collapsed inward, burying several of the FensterCorp robots in ice and snow. A vaporous cloud drifted through the hole, smelling of old books, stale beer, and easy sex. “Academia!” Brak had almost forgotten about the Big Friendly Creature.

“Somebody order a pizza?” bellowed the Big Friendly Creature. It sized up the Power Loader, then hovered over the machine, burying it in an avalanche of papers, notebooks, book bags, and the fear of losing tenure. Running lights dimmed as the Power
Loader’s systems struggled to repair the damage caused by the shower of publication. Academia ran off, humming the Estron Magic University fight song.\textsuperscript{76}

Frei rallied, firing off the Power Loader’s cutting lasers, which burned Brak. He dropped the bundle of LifeMoss he was rushing over to Anya’s still form. Bending over, he picked it up off the floor and placed it on her forehead. Nothing happened. “What am I doing wrong?” he shouted. “It doesn’t seem to be working when I put it on her forehead! Aaaah!”

“Put it in her mouth! LifeMoss should be taken internally!” Luca dodged a swipe from the Power Loader. Brak followed her directions, and watched carefully as Anya regained consciousness.

“OK, now I’m mad now,” said Anya, coldly. She searched for her Oak Wand among the rubble, picked it up, and prepared a Fire spell. Armor melted and ran down the legs of the machine as the heat from her Fire bolts slammed into the torso of the machine. Frei looked worried as the power levels started dropping. Brak, noticing his concern, redoubled his attacks, slicing cables and linkages where he could. Luca and Anya exhausted their Mana supplies, casting all of the spells they knew in an attempt to finish off the machine before it could attack again.

Frei made a last ditch effort, gathering the energy of the Power Loader into a massive bolt of coruscating energy. The Power Loader held the ball of energy in its loading claws, then tossed it at Brak. The bolt hit him in the chest, sending him flying through the air. He struggled for a moment to orient himself and catch his breath.

\textsuperscript{76} Estron Magic University’s fight song was \textit{Fight You Basilisks (Come Back With Your Wand Or As A Pile Of Ash)}. 
Sensing weakness, Luca pointed her Vicious Staff at the Power Loader, directing Invisible Hands to attack it from both sides. The breastplate buckled as the hands rammed into it. The left arm fell off. Small subsystems started exploding, and Frei began preparing to bail out. “See you next time!” he yelled. The canopy of his control pod shot open, and his ejector chair shot into the night sky.

As the Power Loader began its final series of explosions, a chunk of ice flew from an internal compartment into Brak’s hands. “Thank you for freeing me from their clutches,” said a voice in his head.

“Let me guess—you’re a Big Friendly Creature?” asked Brak.

Anya looked over at him. “Who are you talking to?”

“He’s talking to me.” The chunk of ice began expelling a cloud of vapor. Small particles of ice fell from the cloud onto the decking below. “I am Frigia. These monsters were using me as a power source for their vehicle.”

“Funny, they did the same thing in Misty Forest with Conifera.”

“Conifera? How is that old dog? We were in the same college back in the days… Did he ever tell you about the time me and Fira— Wait. Not important right now.”

“We’re happy to help. Can we count on your support again?” Luca looked expectantly at the large frozen being.

“Certainly. Sign me up. I’m not finished with these bozos.” The spirit waved to them, and dissipated into the misty air.

Brak and the others stood quietly for a moment, spending the energy from their Level increase on new skills. After the difficulty of the struggle with Frei and the Power Loader, they decided to concentrate on defensive abilities. Luca learned an evasive spell
called Moving Target, which made people harder to hit. Brak invested in Turtle Magic, which created a shell around the user. Anya concentrated on a defensive spell called I Am Rubber, You Are Glue. “A bit childish, don’t you think?” asked Luca.

“Well, I am still technically a pre-teen,” said Anya.

“OK, I'll let it pass this time.” They all smiled.

Luca looked around the cavern—the confusion and chaos of their battle with the Power Loader had destroyed many of the Mining Robots. “Looks like they’re finished here.”

“Maybe we should make doubly certain that they can’t disrupt this area again,” said Brak.

“Good idea. What do you suggest?” asked Anya.

“Let’s take all of this equipment out with a bang.”

Luca grinned. “OK. Stand back.” She closed her eyes and ran through the words of the spell to summon Conifera. Brak started the summoning procedure for Academia while Anya whispered the commands for their new friend, Frigia. The spirits appeared, looking for somebody to damage. All of them directed their attention to the FensterCorp mining equipment—drills, tunneling equipment, smelters, cargo carriers, and command units. Once they felt that the Big Friendly Creatures had a lock on what they wanted, the three Adventurers ran out of the FensterCorp mining complex towards the entrance to the Ice Caverns.

It was hard to run through the icy pathways as the Big Friendly Creatures approached. Anya and Brak went sprawling as Frigia began pummeling the remaining Mining Robots with blocks of ice—the shockwave traveled up the tunnel, collapsing part of
the wall and making more treacherous running conditions. “Hurry, it’s going to get worse!”

Luca helped her friends up, and they continued sprinting down the path.

Jinx was the first to greet them as they returned to the first Save Point of the Ice Caverns. “What’s going on? Did you break something?”

“You could say that. We threw some of the Big Friendly Creatures we had at their mining operation. They’ll think twice about trying this again, even after they revive themselves from Save Points.” Brak looked around in his satchel for a container of Hot Chocolate. “I’d like to go back to the *Indomitable Spirit* and warm up a bit. I don’t know about you guys, but I’m freezing.”

The group walked back into the main Ice Caverns and returned to Sturmhalla. As they walked out of the caverns, they could hear the sounds of three titanic spirits tearing into mining equipment. Conifera and Frigia were having a contest to see who could throw a Mining Robot farther. Academia won, to everyone’s surprise, with a throw of half a mile. The snow and winds blew across the glacier, burying the mechanism in a few hours.
IAV Indomitable Spirit

Middengard Evening News. You give us your attention, and nobody gets hurt. Our top story tonight: megacorporation FensterCorp Industries is ambushed by terrorists. Film at 11. Also, a charming tale of the little girl, a band of Hob-goblins, and the Adventurers who rescued her.

-- Slogan for the Middengard Evening News

Brak and the others looked for Landing Bay AA 17 in the Sturmhall Aerodrome. They found it after a short search, and walked up to the loading ramp of the Indomitable Spirit. Sydney tapped the call button on the communicator. “Hey, Professor. Let us in.”

The professor’s voice crackled over the speaker. “Ah, my terrorist friends! Come in!” They heard catches on the ramp release, and hydraulics lowered the landing ramp to the ground. Sydney led the group up the ramp and into the amidships lounge. The ramp closed behind them as soon as they were aboard.

“What’s this about terrorists?” asked Sydney.

“It’s all over the news. FensterCorp is blaming the destruction of their destructive machinery on terrorists, and the media is buying it.”

“But that’s not true!” protested Anya.
“FensterCorp is a well-respected company with huge assets. You guys are a bunch of drifters with no fixed address, no marketing division, and no wad of cash to spend on media relations. The press believes what the giant corporations tell them to believe. Here, watch this. I taped it twenty minutes ago.” Professor Katzen pressed a button on his Datapad and the ship’s lighting dimmed. A screen on the wall activated, showing a broadcast from Middengard.

“Our top story tonight, terrorists unleash an attack on FensterCorp holdings. Could your PhysPotions and Save Points be in trouble? We’ll have more on this story in a moment. First, in local news, a neighborhood is rocked with tragedy as a fire consumes much of a downtown building. Three people were consumed in flames, but thankfully all of them are with their families this evening after being restored from a Save Point.” The video screen showed a burning building, with firefighters casting Ice and Water spells to keep the neighboring buildings from catching fire.

“Ack. I forgot about that. Let’s skip ahead.” Katzen fast-forwarded the recording.

“Wait! Stop! I love this commercial!” Jinx waved a paw at the screen.

“OK. Hang on.” Katzen stopped fast-forwarding.

The video screen showed a group of actors playing Adventurers and fighting a Medusa Queen. An announcer spoke in one corner of the screen. “How many times has this happened to you?” The Medusa Queen struck the cute mascot of the group, turning him to stone. “Before, you’d have to hope that your friends had a spare Softening Hammer to use on you. But now, there’s new Soft Gel, the revolutionary new way to combat being turned to stone! Simply rub the Soft Gel on the affected area, and you’re ready to slay monsters! Ask for it in fine Shops everywhere!”
“I don’t get it, Jinx. It’s just an add for some stupid anti-Petrification goo.”

“Wait.”

The announcer had paused for a moment, then whispered in a lower tone, “Soft Gel has been known to cause certain side effects. May decrease gains in experience. Some users have experienced temporary Blindness. Notify your doctor if you notice any of the following symptoms: turning to Jelly, excessive sweating, desire to eat concrete, or momentarily dissolving into a puddle. Stop using Soft Gel if you die and need to be restored from a Save Point.”

Jinx giggled. “That’s why I love that add.”

Katzen and the others chuckled. “That’s pretty good. OK, this next bit is what I wanted you guys to see.”

The Middengard Today newscaster was back on the screen. “Now, on the Westron continent, near the city of Sturmhalla, a FensterCorp operation was attacked and destroyed by lone forces, up to no good. A spokesman for Fenster Walia had this to say…” The video cut to a high-level Public Relations person at a podium.77 “FensterCorp has long prided itself on its long history of caring for the good people of Neugaia. This attack comes as a blow to us, and we would like all citizens to be on the lookout for a band of Adventurers in that area. They are to be considered armed and extremely dangerous. Fenster himself has decreed the elite Enforcer unit of the FensterCorp security forces to take care of the problem.”

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77 They could tell he was a high-level Public Relations person because of his Smarmy Persona, Super Enunciation, and Total Evasion skills. “I’ll bet his Specialty Attack is ‘Sell Ice to Sturmhallians,’” muttered Sydney. This particular PR rep had previously worked on the League of Evil Genius’ campaign, “Hey, we haven’t blown up the world yet.”
Professor Katzen turned the video off as the Adventurers mumbled to each other. “How can they say that they’re serving the people when they are trying to injure or kill as many of them as possible?” asked Luca.

“Racter-IX. Question: Should this group lay low for a moment?”

Zurl scoffed. “These Enforcers don’t seem all that effective. Why are they continuing to use them against us?”

“Where should we go next?” asked Brak.

“One at a time, one at a time,” cried Professor Katzen. “Now I know it seems dark right now, but remember this kind of thing has happened before. When Pazu, Heywood, and I were fighting the Weis Kingdom, we were denounced every other day. It didn’t stop the citizens from selling us goods, offering us Treasure Chests, or giving us helpful advice. This doesn’t really change all that much, though it does make the megacorps like Prefect Motors and FensterCorp feel better about what they’re doing.”

“Racter-IX, question: Identities of Heywood, Pazu.”

“It’s a long story, Racter-IX. I’ll tell you after we’re airborne.” Katzen looked out at his young charges. “Now I have an idea. Let’s take a quick trip to the Kangamice Pulling Arena. I have a feeling we’re going to need all the help we can get for the next phase of our mission. Sound good?”

They all agreed. It would be good to get out of the perpetual ice and snow for a while. “Will they have hot food at the arena?” Jinx was hungry.

The Indomitable Spirit left Docking Bay AA 17 and took off to the east, where the Kangamice Pulling Arena did a huge business.
Kangamice Pulling Arena

What are you gonna do when Pull-o-mania runs wild over you? Have an answer prepared, as many groups are taken by surprise by their enthusiasm for kangamice pulls.

-- The Book of Adventurers

First-time visitors to the Kangamice Pulling Arena were often struck by just how large the place was. The owners had constructed a large airfield, big enough for hundreds of airships. The building itself was immense—it was one of the largest structures of the modern era on Neugaia—and could seat thousands for the kangamice pulls.

Kangamice pulling was a test of strength and endurance. Kangamice were harnessed to a sledge, which was weighted down with slabs of marble. Kangamice were tested in heats of six—each kangamouse had to pull its block of marble along a path, and the block dug into the ground the further along the course the kangamouse moved. Each competitor raced against the weight, the clock, and each other.

Zeek was nervous as they entered him into the first heat. Brak stroked him behind the ears as they got ready to ride. “I’ve never done this before, either. But I know you can win. There’s a hunk of cheese in it for you at the end.” Zeek’s eyes brightened a bit.
Brak crawled into the harness. The roar of the crowd competed with the smell of kangamouse sweat, mud, and the cheese each trainer was using as bait. A race official guided Zeek to the starting line and attached the sledge to the harness. A final safety check, and the countdown began. “3… 2…. 1… GO!” Brak urged Zeek onward, and they quickly pulled ahead of the other kangamice. The block of marble slid down the sledge, driving it into the ground. Zeek’s muscles strained against the weight and he squeaked softly. “You can do it, Zeek!” shouted Brak. He could hear the others cheering them on from the distance. They weren’t hard to spot, as Racter-IX was carrying a flag with Zeek’s name on it. He waved it stiffly, as if he was still trying to figure out what was going on.

The finish line grew ever closer, and to everyone’s surprise, Zeek won the race easily. His stamina and strength increased slightly as he nibbled on a piece of cheese. Luca and the others gathered around the triumphant kangamouse. “Good job, Zeek!” She patted him on the shoulder. “There’s another race in an hour or so. Would you care to go again?” Zeek seemed anxious for another round.

“OK, we’ll stick around until you get tired of it... Brak, if you need us, we’ll be in the stands. I think we’ve found a booth we can stay at.” Luca led the rest of them up to their box seat.

Brak nodded and started grooming Zeek’s fur. “Keep it up, Zeek. Grow big and strong and we’ll be able to find that mysterious Big Friendly Creature.”

Luca and the others sipped drinks in the complementary box seat given to all pulling kangamouse owners. “Just how powerful does Zeek have to become to pull this stone away from the Big Friendly Creature?” asked Luca.
Professor Katzen thought for a moment. “Well, I’m not really sure. There are four classes of kangamice puller, A, B, C, and 1. Right now Zeek is at the bottom of Class C. If he wins enough in C, he’ll move up to the B rank, and so on. Once he dominates the Class 1 ranking, I think we’ll be set.”

“So how long will that take?” Zurl was impatient; this whole venture felt like a sidetrack from their more valuable work. “Right now FensterCorp is polluting the planet, and Fenster Walia walks around a free man.”

“Patience. We may need that last creature more than you think. We’ve not stayed still, nor should we expect FensterCorp to be unprepared for our arrival. Oh, look, there goes Zeek again…” Katzen watched with a critical eye as Zeek strained against the harness and the marble slab. He won handily. The officials cleared the field and set up a new round of pulling.

Katzen continued, “When I was much younger, Heywood and I spent a lot of time in a fighting tournament in Kivat. At first, we weren’t sure if we needed to do it at all, but as it turned out we not only won passage to Coscadia, we met a new friend named Sprocket, who helped us defeat the evil Queen.”

He noticed their stares. “Look, I know I’ve blathered on about this before, but an old man needs to talk about the good old days now and then.” There was some commotion on the field—two racers had collided while getting into position and were arguing furiously. Weapons were drawn.

“No,” said Luca. “It’s not you. It’s the fight between Brak and that other racer. I think I know him. Sydney—am I right?” They could make out the clanging of blades and
cries from the onlookers. This was what pulling fans lived for—either some conflict, an accident, or a kangamouse explosion from over-exertion.78

“It's Storm, alright. He and Brak are dueling on the pulling grounds, which will get them kicked out if they’re not careful…” The Adventurers watched as Brak disarmed Storm and both contestants were led off the field.

The announcer spoke. “Ladies and gentlemen, we are resuming kangamouse pulling after a slight delay. Storm has been disqualified from all future pulling events.”

Luca and Sydney applauded briefly, remembering all of the trouble that Storm had caused them. “Careful—we may run into him again before this is over,” warned Zurl.

The stacks of cups and plates grew larger in the complementary box. Zeek progressed rapidly through the racing classes. Some racers came and went, but Brak and Zeek seemed determined to win their way to the top of Class 1 in one continual run. The weights grew heavier, the competition more fierce, but Zeek never stopped trying.

During a lull in the racing, Brak made his way up to the booth where his friends were staying. “How am I doing? Think we should take a break? This can’t be very interesting for you.”

Katzen smiled. “Take your time. We need to get to the Big Friendly Creature in the Ruins of Antiquity at some point, but don’t worry about us. You just take care of Zeek.”

Anya followed Brak down to the racing pens, where she stayed for moral support. Zeek worked his way through Class C, Class B, and Class A, all in the matter of hours. The

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78 Most trainers had industrial-sized Save Points for use with their prized kangamice. These Save Points were also used as replacement farms on the outer colonies, though the ethics of restoring a creature repeatedly just to kill it and eat it were hotly debated.
more he pulled, the more he wanted to pull. Few competitors remained as long as Brak and Zeek—they got bored, moved on to adventures of their own, or just lost too many times to stay interested.  

Setting a new world record, Zeek finally beat his last competitor in Class 1 after a solid week of pulling. He was a whole new kangamouse. His size, strength, and stamina were now off the scale. His coat was glossy, he’d developed an addiction to Bleu Cheese, and he was ready to tackle the Monolith at the Ruins of Antiquity.

Brak and the others led Zeek out of the Kangamice Pulling Arena to the cheers of hundreds of fans. Many of them had grown rich betting on Zeek, and they were sorry to see him go. Professor Katzen fired up the engines of the *Indomitable Spirit* and set a course for the Ruins of Antiquity—a complex of stones, twisted metal, and broken display cases in the middle of the Al-Amir Desert.

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The FensterCorp crisis was not the only problem facing Neugaia at this time. Another group was attempting to solve the puzzle of why the moon of Lunazwei was growing closer to the planet. One group had been investigating the source of a mysterious message from space. A small group of friends was attempting to find a missing childhood pal. These adventures were chronicled in the media from time to time, and in the *Journal of the Society for Adventurer History*, a scholarly journal devoted to the catalog and study of Adventurers, their equipment, and the monsters they encountered.

Professor Katzen was an emeritus member of this Society, having contributed a long treatise on the events of the Estron continent thirty years ago. The *Journal* was published out of Middengard College and was widely read even by a lay audience, many of whom had hopes of becoming Adventurers someday.
Ruins of Antiquity

The Ancients were more advanced than we are today.

*The Book of Adventurers*

The *Indomitable Spirit* orbited the Ruins of Antiquity, looking for a clear place to set down. The ruins were the remnants of a scientific outpost, dated to almost the same time as the dig of the *Highwind* at Landing Island. Scientists thought that this was an attempt by the colonists to move some of their more valuable equipment to a safe place for long-term storage. They had discovered some unique artifacts—some they could identify, some with purposes unknown.

One of the main attractions of the Ruins of Antiquity was a large stone block. Carvings on the stone indicated a great source of power lay underneath. Attempts to move the block had been unsuccessful—machinery couldn’t budge the block, weapon fire was absorbed by the onyx stone, and explosives didn’t make a dent. Scientists theorized that the Ancients had buried the force and then surrounded it by an energy absorbing force field. Or elves. They debated this point hotly.
“Nobody really knows what’s underneath the slab,” lectured Professor Katzen. It could be something dangerous, in which case moving the slab is the dumbest thing we could ever do. Or it could be a source for power, and the Ancients buried it to prevent it from being tampered with before we were ready for it…”

“Why would they create something that could only be moved by organic power, though? That doesn’t make sense.” Zurl was confused. “Couldn’t we be spending our time on something more constructive, like destroying the Prefect Motor facility in Costa del Mucho?”

“No one really knows what the Ancients were thinking half the time. Why would they name three or four colonies some variant of ‘Gaia’? Why did they come all this way and then forget where Earth was? Why couldn’t they make a cereal that stayed crispy in milk? We manage that, and we’re nowhere as advanced in some fields as they are.”

Katzen smiled for a moment. “Look, at this point you just want to get on with your mission. But finding whatever is at the bottom of this slab will be helpful down the road. And as the *Book of Adventurers* says, there is always time for a sidequest.80"

Their pirate robot friend spoke up. “Racter-IX. Question: should this unit stay in the vehicle? Presence of machinery seems contra-indicated.”

“Oh, good thought, Racter-IX. You should wait here until we get back.”

Brak led the rest of the group to the kangamouse hold. They found Zeek, set his custom harness, and wandered down the loading ramp to the surface.

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80 Sidequests merited a whole chapter in the *Book of Adventurers*. Adventurers were advised to take on any and all sidequests and tests of skill that they could. These built character and were often lucrative. The great heroes Archie and Sammie found a vital Big Friendly Creature during a cooking contest they’d entered on a lark. Epicurea was vital in their battle against the Leaf Monsters of Apsin.
The dust of the Ruins of Antiquity blew across the worn cobblestones. The group of Adventurers picked their way across the broken rocks towards the marble slab that was the source of controversy. “It doesn’t look all that imposing from here,” said Zurl.

“Racter-IX. Analyzing: rock is of-of-of-of… SYSTEM ERROR. Redo from start… Rebooting…” Racter-IX’s voice grew very quiet. They could hear a whirring in his chest as his systems were affected by whatever force emanated from the marble slab. The troop of monkeys hidden somewhere in his torso started chattering.

“Think we should have brought him here?” asked Sydney.

“Let’s take him back to the airship. We must be too close to the monument,” said Luca. She grabbed one of Racter-IX’s arms and pulled. “I’m going to need some help here, he’s heavier than he looks.”

Together the group shuffled the still mechanoid toward the loading ramp of the Indomitable Spirit. Laying him on the ramp, they raised it back into the belly of the airship and returned to the Ruins. Zeek strained at his harness as they grew near. “Listen, do you smell something?” Brak petted Zeek as the others rigged a block and tackle around the base of the monument. “Hey, Brak! This slab has eyebolts installed already!” shouted Zurl. “This should take just a moment!”

Zurl tied a set of ropes to the monument. “Let’s see. The Death Rabbit goes around the tree, through the hole, into space and time…81” Then he tied Zeek’s harness to the monument and backed away. “All yours, Brak!”

81 Before joining the Cosmia Palace Guard, Zurl had done some time as a MoppetScout leader. MoppetScouts had one motto: “Be well armed.”
Brak jumped into the riding harness, said a small spell to improve the defense of his kidneys, and started Zeek down the road. “Go! Go!” Zeek’s well-defined muscles stood out as he pulled on the monument. Initially, he made no headway. As the kangamouse strained against the weight and mass of the stone, it began to move. Slowly.

“It’s working!” shouted Anya, jumping up and down. Jinx fell off of her shoulder.

“Careful! You’ll get dirt on my fur!”

The block moved a few centimeters. And then a few more. Zeek paused for a moment to regain his strength. Brak let him catch his breath, then urged him onwards as the rest of the party cheered him on. Zeek caught some of their enthusiasm, and channeled all of his power into great leaps forward. Gravel and rubble flew in all directions as his feet dug into the soil.

Finally, the monument was off its mounting. Brak urged Zeek to stop pulling as the party rushed over to see what was buried underneath. They could see a maze of complicated machinery mounted underneath, and a small Treasure Chest was mounted in the center. Zurl prodded the lid of the chest open with the tip of his Demon Spear—as it evaporated, they felt a powerful presence take shape.

“For years I have waited for release from that cocoon.” A raspy voice spoke in their minds. Then they heard coughing. “You wouldn’t believe the allergies you develop when all you’re surrounded by is dust and some old machinery. Know that your long quest to build the perfect kangamouse is over.”

“Who are you?” Katzen looked puzzled. He couldn’t see anything. “The writings never mention who or what is buried beneath your monument.”
“If my press agent weren’t already dead, I’d kill him. Before I was locked away in this monument, I was feared by all…” A figure coalesced above their heads. “Know now that you have released Good Morning Puppy, the Scourge of Evil and the cutest thing known to exist!”

Good Morning Puppy took the form of a small dog with an oversized nose. His head was all out proportion to the rest of his body, but none of them could pay attention. Anya openly wept with joy at seeing the extreme cuteness of Good Morning Puppy—Jinx was nonplussed.

Zurl felt a wave of almost hysterical love for Good Morning Puppy, which simultaneously attracted and repelled him from the creature. “We’re… happy to release you. Would you help us defend the world against…” He grew distracted for a moment. “Against the rule of an oligarchy bent on fiscal and world domination?”

Good Morning Puppy thought for a moment. “I would be happy to. Wait until they get a load of me!” He bounced around the Ruins of Antiquity for a moment, then faded away slowly. “Call me when you need me! I will show them the power of my Rainbow Stickers!”

Zurl whispered to Sydney out of one corner of his mouth. “Now I see why they locked him away for all these years.”

Its function complete, the marble slab slid back to its original position, nearly pulling Zeek over. The Adventurers ran back to the Indomitable Spirit, their sidequest complete. As

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82 All rights reserved, Good Morning Puppy Industries. Void where prohibited by law. Good Morning Puppy Industries is not responsible for tooth loss, dizziness, or onset of diabetes from viewing of Good Morning Puppy characters.
the monument slid back into place, bearing its message (which, if translated from the runes of Good Morning Puppyspeak read, “In the grim future of Good Morning Puppy there is only war,” Sydney addressed the others. “OK, let’s see what this little guy can do. And let’s see if Racter-IX is all right.”

They returned to the Indomitable Spirit and reactivated the pirate robot. He joined Sydney and Luca as they investigated a small clearing near the Ruins of Antiquity. They hadn’t been in the brush long when they were ambushed by a Xyleant—an ambulatory tree common to the area. The Xyleant swung its branches at Racter-IX, scratching his paint job but doing little damage. Racter-IX reacted with an automatic attack with the Imperial Claw, stripping leaves and bark from one of the limbs of the tree. “Racter-IX. Analyzing: Tree mobile for reasons unknown. Suggest forensic analysis.”

“Coming right up.” Luca started summoning Good Morning Puppy. “Oh happy, canine! Help!” There was a flash of light and the sun grew dimmer. For a moment, Luca thought she’d finally destroyed the world—why else would the Ancients lock Good Morning Puppy in a rock—before she realized that the sun was just dim in comparison to the shining cloud drifting over the horizon.

Luca and the others could just make out a rainbow contrail as the cloud rocketed towards them. Tangerine and plum sparkles drifted down to the ground as the cloud approached. The puppy’s oversized nose poked over the tip of the cloud, then retreated out of view. The cloud exploded, revealing the overwhelming brilliance of Good Morning Puppy’s body. Digging into a basket at his side, the puppy threw hundreds of happy, smiling face stickers at the Xyleant. “Are you happy yet? Good morning!” shouted the puppy. The Xyleant was buried in a mass of smiling merchandise. One branch waved forlornly as the
tree collapsed upon itself. Small sparks of light drifted through gaps in the pile of stickers. Good Morning Puppy tossed a final pawful of stickers in the clearing, wagged his short stubby tail, and drifted off to the strains of happy music.

Luca looked around. The Xyleant was gone. The clearing was cluttered with Good Morning Puppy merchandise. She nearly tripped over a Good Morning Puppy Bread Machine in her efforts to untangle herself from the Good Morning Puppy and Friends Extension Cord. Bright cartoon characters smiled at her as she uncoiled the rope from around her hiking boots. “No wonder they buried it under a rock. Will the world forgive us for releasing this much marketing on it?”

Sydney shook his head. “Dark times demand dark deeds.”

“Racter-IX. Forensic analysis unavailable. Calculating varieties of merchandise… At present count I find 4,132 separate items, with a retail value of 15,000 sals.” Sydney’s eyes lit up in surprise, then darkened as the merchandise started to evaporate as the Good Morning Puppy’s spiritual energy faded away.

“Let’s head back to the ship.” They left the ruined clearing and returned to the Indomitable Spirit. Jinx was watching an episode of the Adventurer drama *As the Hero Band Plunders*, which gave even more melodrama to the typical quest and band of Adventurers. They said farewell to the Ruins of Antiquity and took off for Costa del Mucho.
Costa del Mucho

Rivers flow, whether they cut through a mountain, flow underground, or float in the air. Rivers in space flow as well, if your definition of flow includes ice crystals rocketing through a vacuum. Adventurers are advised to use their seat cushions as a flotation device in the event of a water landing.

--- The Book of Adventurers

The Indomitable Spirit headed south. Prefect Motor Industries had dammed up the underground river near Costa del Mucho to power their factories. This damaged the local ecosystem and disrupted the energy flow of the planet. Jinx pinpointed the location of the factory on their maps—it wasn’t far from the city. “I'll bet we can get there on the bus or something,” muttered Brak.

Landmarks passed beneath them as they skimmed the bottoms of the clouds. Brak ventured out to the foredeck of the airship and looked over the railing. The wind wasn’t as bad as he had feared. Some engineer had designed a cowling that sheltered the deck from much of the breeze. Small eddies whipped his long hair in the wind as he leaned out to watch their progress.
“Whatcha’ doin’?” Luca’s voice came out of the growing darkness. She walked out of the hatch and joined Brak at the guardrail.

“Oh, just looking. Wondering whether what we’re doing is making a difference or not. They call us terrorists on the news, we just spent a week pulling carts so we could find a magical puppy that crushes things in stickers, and now we’re off to slay some river-destroying creatures. My life made sense last month.”

Luca put her arm around Brak’s shoulders. “This is still pretty new, despite gaining so many Levels. We’re almost there. Then maybe you can rest.”

“There’s no rest for the wicked, is there?” Sydney joined the couple and watched the scenery go past. “When I first started Adventuring, I thought it would be just a matter of weeks before my name was all over the news and I’d saved the world.”

“So what happened?”

“Oh, I was a young kid—almost as young as Anya back there—and I thought after learning a couple of spells and carrying a gun, I knew all there was to know about fighting monsters. But it took some time—the hero bands were already full of their quota of small children, or they were looking to fill a spot with a funny mascot, or they really wanted a female spell caster to fall in love with their main hero, or whatever.”

As he talked, Sydney drummed his fingers on the railing. The glow of his cybernetic eye illuminated the pain on his face. “I was working with a group of novices, not much older than me, when we were in a castle belonging to an old wizard. He’d done the standard kidnap-a-local-princess bit, so we decided to rescue her. It… It didn’t go very well. When it was over, he was dead, the princess was dead, and I had a huge gaping hole in my head. We hit a Save Point before going out—we restored the princess but made the mistake of saving
our progress. Now my record, even if restored, would have this hole in my head. Don’t get
me wrong—it’s not all bad. I can see in the dark, kind of, and I can watch videos by myself if
there’s nothing going on.”

“So how did you hook up with Storm and Luca?”

“Oh, I took some time off, wandered around for a while. Eventually, I started
getting the itch. Storm—well, I find found him in an Inn once. He looked like he had the
role memorized, but he was such an unpleasant guy, I was glad to see him go. Luca joined us
when she was on the same trail as we were—it was a quest to eliminate a nest of Honey
Ants. We worked with Storm for a couple of months before the Keep of the Saffron
Dragon. And then we met you…”

Sydney stepped away from Brak and Luca. “Now come on, join us back in the
lounge. They’re about to start showing *Adventuring Tonight*, and we might be on.\(^{83}\)

“That would be interesting. Let’s go.”

The three returned to the Lounge to watch *Adventuring Tonight*. They weren’t on this
particular episode—except in a passing reference as a group on the move—but they did
watch a good story on a band of heroes on the Estron continent. They’d just won an airship
flying contest and were on the lookout for some more weapons before performing the
traditional Final Battle with the Flash Monsters of Micromedion. After *Adventuring Tonight*,
there was a live feed from one of the fighting tournaments—one group was attempting to
win a new Specialty Attack for one of their members.

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\(^{83}\) This show chronicled the exploits of famous Adventurers, and had profiles of up-and-coming hero bands
and their quests. Viewers got to know the personalities that were saving their world, their scandals, and who
was fighting whose father and why.
The *Indomitable Spirit* reached Costa del Mucho around sundown. They landed at the airship field and ventured into the city. Hitting a Save Point and an Inn, they restored all of their wounds and status, before looking through the city for an Item or a Weapon Shop. They found the Desert Sands Item Shop near the Inn. Brak looked over the merchandise.

“Oooh! A Platinum Armband! Hey, Luca! Does that complete your collection?”

“I think so. Let me see—better defense, and it looks nicer. I'll get one. Oh, and this Triumph Staff will do the trick as well.”

The rest of the group traded in their hard-earned plunder for new equipment. Zurl liked the look of the Platinum Armband so much he bought the matching Platinum Bangle. He picked up a Victory Spear as well. Sydney found a set of Stealth Armor to replace his Combat Suit. Brak’s Battle Vest went into their inventory—he found a Smuggler’s Vest that was a better fit. There was a Bastard Sword in the rack that worked better than the Avenger Blade he had been wielding up to that point. Racter-IX and Anya took turns looking for equipment for each other. Anya found a Corsair’s Hat that fit on the robot’s head. Racter-IX returned the favor by finding a Wonder Dress and a Pearwood Wand for Anya.

After paying their rather hefty bill, the group ventured out into the street. “So what do we now? Look for the underground cavern?” Brak around at the crowd, looking for a Citizen who might have some information.

“Let’s pick a marching order. Let’s say you, me and Racter-IX?” Luca enquired.

“Racter-IX. Aye-aye.”

“Sure, that sounds fair. You guys wait back at the *Spirit*? The other Adventurers looked around for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah, Katzen said something about there being
a really good blitzball match on this afternoon. Give us a call if you need us. We’ll be there.” Sydney led Zurl and Anna back to the airship field.

The three remaining adventurers—the Swordsman, the Spellcaster, and the Pirate Robot—wandered through the bazaars of Costa del Mucho. The city came to life at night, as the oppressive heat of the day retreated and was replaced by a cool breeze from the mountains to the north. Brak stopped an old woman, going to market. “Excuse me, what do you know about Prefect Industries?”

“I know that I hate them. They’re damming up the river for building their massive vehicles, and nobody I know wants to drive one!” She continued past them.

Luca stepped in front of a young girl coming down the street. “Excuse me, what do you know about Prefect Industries?”

The girl stood still for a second, then blurted, “My dog’s name is Ein!” before running down the path. Even Racter-IX didn’t know what to make of that.

Brak stopped a young man coming from the opposite direction. “Excuse me, what do you know about Prefect Industries?”

The man thought for a moment. “Few people know this, but you can get into the factory by canoeing through the Wonder Cave.” Luca and Brak looked at each other momentarily—this was what they had been looking for. “Now, how do we get a canoe? And where is this Wonder Cave?”

“Racter-IX. Analysis: Extremely Dangerous Sports store 100 meters north. Cave complex 200 meters east.” Racter-IX looked at them for a moment. “Racter-IX. Query: This

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84 This blitzball match brought to you by Alton’s Coffee Beans. If you’re ever attacked by a Snooze Hound and find yourself becoming Ineffectual, try the Coffee Bean of champions—Alton’s!
unit must do something while friends interrogate the populace.” The pirate robot thought for a moment before adding, “Arrrrrrrr.”


Abandoning their sidewalk inquisition, the group went 100 meters to the north to the Extremely Dangerous Sports store. The Shop was packed with all sorts of all-conditions gear, including kangamice harnesses, spacesuits for Extreme Parachuting, and some demonstration one-person submarines. “I do hope they have something as mundane as a canoe,” muttered Luca. They did.

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85 Extreme Parachuting involved low orbit, space suits, and homemade parachutes. Even if the participants burned up in the atmosphere, it was not as if they remembered those final few minutes of free-fall and the meteor impression. Stunts like this made the elderly complain bitterly about the old days, when they used to attempt to herd Rock Trolls for fun.
Wonder Cave

The X-Treem Canoe was developed for today’s water-going enthusiast. It will last you many years or until you plunge off a mile-high waterfall, whichever comes first.

-- User Manual for the X-Treem Canoe purchased by Brak and his friends

After purchasing a three-being canoe, the trio maneuvered it down the busy streets of Costa del Mucho, dodging street vendors selling spiced meat pies and balloons. The entrance to the Wonder Cave was at the end of a strangely abandoned alley in the middle of town.

“Why is this so empty? And why does this cave lead to the underground river? Maybe it’s runoff from the sewer or something,” speculated Brak.

Then they noticed the stench. The sewers of Costa del Mucho spilled out of a culvert in the alley and ran down the Wonder Cave towards the underground river.
“Nice,” said Luca. “They drink the water coming in, and what they don’t use they instead pollute with the city. Who set this up? FensterCorp?"\(^{86}\)

They positioned the canoe in the least-polluted part of the runoff, and got in. While Luca and Brak took paddles, Racter-IX extended an outboard motor attachment from a hatch in his back and started powering the canoe down the river into the Wonder Cave. Whitish-brown froth the color of a frozen chocolate shake foamed around the blades of his propeller.

As they wandered up the stream to the Wonder Cave, they were attacked by a pair of Dark Mushrooms—a cousin to the Wild Mushrooms in the Misty Forest, and twice as nasty. Brak and his friends cut them into shreds, taking a fair amount of damage in the process, but gaining a level. After putting more energy into defense, they continued to travel the stream.

The further they ventured from the city of Costa del Mucho, the more fierce the subterranean creatures became. They encountered another pair of Dark Mushrooms, fighting them off with slightly more success. After restoring their health with PhysPotions, Luca asked, “Think we should head on? Or regroup?”

“Racter-IX. Analysis: party combat strength sufficient to meet current threat level. Potion stock plentiful. Move on.”

“I’ll count that as a yes. Brak?”

“Sure. Let’s keep going. I’m beginning to enjoy feeling Pollen burn my hair.”

\(^{86}\) Though she didn’t know this for sure, Luca was partially right. FensterCorp supplied the technology to the Yalon Corporation, who figure in the tale of the hero Taki, his friend Yukari the mage, and their band of warriors. But that is a tale for another time.
They pressed onward, floating past stalagmites poking through the surface of the water. Luca sat in the front and shouted out how to avoid them. “Left! Left! Right! Another left! Straight! Middle!” Their progress was interrupted by constant attacks of the cavern’s denizens. Wild Mushrooms were joined by Hell Bats. Hell Bats were gradually replaced by Cavern Dragons. Both Luca and Brak were knocked out fighting the second Cavern Dragon. As they lay on the ground, Racter-IX considered his options. The Cavern Dragon interrupted his combat analyses by blowing another torrent of steam at Racter-IX. The robot dodged with a spin to the left.

“Racter-IX. Tactical analysis: Restoring companions through LifeMoss inadvisable with current threat level. Possibility of subsequent death 60 percent. Conclusion: Screaming Monkey Assault.”

The Cavern Dragon watched as its final opponent lowered its torso to the ground. The pirate robot’s legs dug into the ground as its torso opened to release a squad of specially-trained attack monkeys. They swarmed across the cavern and attacked the Cavern Dragon from multiple angles. The Cavern Dragon collapsed into a galaxy of sparks as they overwhelmed its defenses. Racter-IX scanned for dropped sals and booty, then revived his companions with LifeMoss.

“Thanks, Racter-IX.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

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87 Mister Badwin had trained the monkeys on a regimen of ropes, macrobiotic diet, esteem-building exercises, sword practice, creative visualizations, and video games. The crew of the *Sick Moose* lived in fear of the monkeys who lost at the deathmatches—they were irritable for hours.
The group moved shoved their canoe back into the water and drifted down the stream. The flow of water grew calmer as the bottom smoothed out. The rapids disappeared, replaced by a swiftly-flowing stream. The cavern overhead widened into a purple and red cave, lit softly by growing crystals. The stream met a small lake, fed by the waters of the Mucho river and the runoff from Costa del Mucho.

“This must be the Wonder Cave,” speculated Brak.

“Which was your first clue? The crystals, or the Wonder Cave Welcome Center over there in the corner?” Luca pointed at a small shack with a Save Point on the shore. Racter-IX steered the canoe to the beach, and they exited the craft. The pirate robot pulled the canoe up on the sands and tied the anchor to a nearby rock.

The Welcome Center had a plaque describing the formation of the cave, its significance to the locals, and the battles fought in it. “Wow. I had no idea that the original founders of Middengard came here to wrestle control of the River Spirit from the Water Elementals that were attacking them in the early days. Learn something new every day.”

They scanned themselves into the Save Point. There was no shop, though they did find a Treasure Chest behind some rocks. It contained an Elixiral, which would heal all of them simultaneously—a rare find.

Scanning themselves into the Save Point again, they decided to head upriver to see the Prefect Motor Industries plant. They could tell that the flow of the river had decreased recently—the watermarks on the sides of the cavern were halfway up the sides, and the water wasn’t enough to float their canoe. “Guess we’ll hoof it from here,” said Luca.

They noticed a blockage around the next bend. It was a Cave Giant. “Looks like we’ll have to go through it.” Brak readied his Bastard Sword.
The Cave Giant was surprised by their attack. Few people ventured this far now that the river had dried up. Brak attacked its shin while Luca sent bolts of Lightning at its head. Racter-IX followed up their barrage with a flying Imperial Claw—it launched from his arm, flew through the air, and rebounded off the Cave Giant’s skull.

Despite the surprise to their attack, the Cave Giant retaliated quickly. Grabbing a rock from the riverbed, it threw it full force into Luca. The impact spun her around in a circle and she dropped to the ground.

“Luca!” Brak abandoned his attack and ran over to Luca, searching his pockets for LifeMoss. The giant attacked Racter-IX, crushing him like a guy in an Australian beer commercial. The robot’s head rolled along the ground, striking Brak in the ankle. Brak flew into a rage, slicing several deep gashes into the legs and chest of the Cave Giant before he, too, was slammed into the ground. All three adventurers dissolved into a miasma of sparkles.

Back in the Wonder Cave, the Save Point detected the pulses in the ambient energy flow. It compared these pulses to the impressions in its data banks, matched them, and began reconstituting Brak, Luca, and Racter-IX. Three columns of light appeared before the Save Point. The columns pulsed with light as circles of energy rotated around the exterior. Forms grew more distinct as Brak and his friends were recreated from the energy around them, their previous matter, and the patterns in the Save Point databanks.

“What… What happened?” People were always disoriented after being restored from a Save Point.

“Racter-IX. Analyzing: We appear to have died. Accessing universal timecode pulses. It appears that we’re about fifteen minutes ahead of when we saved.”
“So it’s something just up ahead. That’s good to know. Pity we don’t know what it was.” Luca did some deep knee bends, stretching out and testing the agility of her (somewhat) new body. Brak tried not to stare too much as he did stretches of his own. Racter-IX tested all of his motors and linkages, decided they were fine, and nodded approval.

“Not a bad job. Thank you, Save Point. I would have hated to have made that trip down the river again.” The three adventurers walked down the dry riverbed, more cautious this time.

The Cave Giant heard their footsteps as they splashed through the puddles standing in deeper parts of the riverway. It bellowed a challenge—while few intruders ventured this far, fewer still came back after it had crushed them.

“A Cave Giant! No wonder!” Luca cast Moving Target on herself while Brak and Racter-IX attacked the Cave Giant.

“These bad?” shouted Brak over the chaos.

“They’re not my favorite!” Luca cast Moving Target on Brak, and then did the same for Racter-IX. Their increased agility allowed them to dodge the glacial attacks of the Cave Giant. After several minutes of slashing, spellcasting, and Specialty Attacks, the Cave Giant burst into a cloud of sparkling light, bellowing a final challenge. It dropped 10,000 sals and a Knit Scarf. All three gained another Level. Brak learned a new Specialty Attack, Cutting Blade. Luca finally had enough energy to learn Mjolnir, a spectral Lightning hammer that both electrocuted and crushed enemies. Racter-IX developed a new Scan ability.

“Let’s head back to the Save Point. I don’t want to do that again.” They made a small detour back to the Save Point before going up the underground river. As they passed
into the riverbed cavern, they fought off more Dark Mushrooms, some Terror Slugs, and a very confused Death Duck. “Somebody’s a long way from home,” wondered Luca.

They knew they were closer to the Prefect Motor Industries site when they were attacked by Sentry Robots. As they exploded into separate components, Racter-IX scanned the area. “Racter-IX. Analysis: We appear to be near the target facility. Recommend caution.” They stopped running down the riverbed, walking carefully through the first fortifications.

“Awful lot of fences. What are they hiding?” Brak wandered through one security door, surprising another Sentry Robot and two Security Guards. “Sorry about this, guys.” Brak sliced through all three of them, cutting them to ribbons of light. Coins dropped to the floor, bouncing every which way. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

They picked their way through the outer ring of defenses, dispatching guards and eliminating any security mechanisms. As they were sitting in a corner, catching their breath, Luca leaned over to her friend. “Brak… Are you OK? Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m fine.” The young Adventurer stood up and readjusted his grip on his Bastard Sword. “I’ve never been better.” He walked off without waiting for the others to catch up.

The riverbed had given way to a series of dams and power generators. The group of Adventurers made their way through offices, hallways, and rooms full of mechanisms in an attempt to locate the main control center for the Costa del Mucho dam. “If we destroy this place, Prefect Motor Industries will have no power to build their useless vehicles,” lectured Luca. She pointed down a hallway with the tip of her Triumph Staff. “This looks promising. What do you think, Brak?”
“Sure. Let’s go.”

“Racter-IX. Query: Should we use the Save Point nearby?”

“Where do you see a Save Point?”

“A Save Point is installed in a room at the end of this hallway. Recommend saving.”

“Agreed. Let’s go.”

They ran through the hallway and into a room with two heavy doors at each end. It appeared to be an airlock, though none of them could figure out what use Prefect Motor Industries would have with an airlock. The installation was two hundred meters underground. They scanned themselves in at the new Save Point, then keyed the controls for the second door. Nothing happened.

Luca thought aloud, “Guess we have to close the other door first?”

“Worth a try.”

Racter-IX pulled the first door shut with a final-sounding clang. The controls for the inner door lit up and a green button flashed in readiness. “Looks like this is the one.” Brak pressed the button with his finger and stepped back to give himself plenty of room to swing his Bastard Sword. The air from behind the door drifted into the airlock. Green vapors floated towards the ceiling, filling the small enclosure rapidly. The humans looked around frantically for a breather or a gas mask—the cabinets in the airlock were empty.

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” worried Luca.

The green vapors seemed fairly harmless. They smelled like the by-product of a sauerkraut factory and a oil refinery. “What’s that smell? I thought they were just blocking the river for power,” wondered Brak.
“No other way to find out. Let’s keep moving.” Luca jumped through the confines of the airlock door. Brak and Racter-IX followed her, weapons readied for combat. The hallway beyond the airlock went straight ahead. They could make out a yellowish-green light at the door at the far end. Walking carefully to the end of the hallway, they stopped to view the opening beyond.

Prefect Motor Industries had dammed up the river at the far end of a massive cavern. Small tubes caught the runoff and channeled it through huge turbines, which powered the manufacturing equipment below. The Prefect machines were laid out in an assembly line, constructing a multitude of armored robots. The robots were mostly human-shaped, with huge shoulders and waspish waists. A huge cannon replaced the right arm, and the left arm sported a menacing-looking pincer.

“This doesn’t look like your father’s Prefectmobile, does it?” Luca pointed with her staff towards the near end of the assembly line, where they spotted the source of the green vapors. Finished Battle Robots were given a quick coat of paint before being placed in shipping racks to dry.

“This does not look good.” Luca looked around for a way down to the factory floor. “Not only are they disrupting the planet’s energy flow, they’re building a war machine simultaneously.”

“Probably so they can drum up more business in other parts of the world.”

“Let’s put a stop to this, then.”

“Racter-IX. Agreement: best course of action is to eliminate immediate threat. Following that, deal with the source of the threat: FensterCorp Worldwide Headquarters.”

“The corporation sells best that sells least, is that what you’re saying?”
“Affirmative.”

Working their way down the stairs to the factory floor, the group encountered some of the newly-minted Battle Robots. Slicing through them with relative ease, they continued their progress to the floor. A larger group tried to stop them, with little success. They withered under the attacks of Felinus, who had been summoned by Luca to clear their path. As the giant cat bounded off in search of other prey, Luca and her friends picked their way through the smoldering rubble.

“We must be getting closer.”

“There’s a Save Point up ahead. Let’s take advantage of it while we can.”

Using the Save Point at the entrance to what appeared to be a Command Bunker, they restored lost health and mana with some of their stock of potions.

“These aren’t addictive in any way, are they?”

Luca smiled. “I don’t think so, but I need them often enough that I’ve never had a chance to go through withdrawal. What do you know, Racter-IX?”

“Racter-IX. Accessing data: Research indicates that prolonged use of PhysPotions has no ill effects. Some studies indicate that the factors that cause multiple PhysPotion use are in fact somewhat damaging to mental health—many Adventurers suffer depression after their quests are over.”

“I see.”

“Yeah, you remember what happened to Saso after he finished the quest of the Temporal Lyre… 88 Luca trailed off, lost in thought.

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88 Saso was a mighty warrior, who lost touch with reality after beating the Goom Demons with the Temporal Lyre. He started attacking strangers in the street and had to be forcibly restrained until he could be retrained and reintegrated with normal society. Not all Adventurers followed this path, but enough to cause the Hospital of the Adventurer’s Guild to stock a large supply of Sanity Pills.
“Oh yeah. That. I remember. Well, let’s get this over with.”

The save process complete, the group ran through the door of the Command Bunker. Inside, they were surprised by the bulbous android perched in front of the command console. “What, you were expecting something else?” The robot laughed, no mean feat with its relative lack of lungs or diaphragm muscles.

“On behalf of the citizens of Neugaia, we demand that you cease this operation at once!” commanded Luca. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

The CommanderBot rotated its torso, displaying an impressive array of beam weapons and missile launchers. “Irrelevant. It’s all a string of ones and zeroes to me.” Deep within the barrels of the CommanderBot’s plasma cannons, hellish light blossomed into existence. It lashed out with its weapons, sending the three Adventurers scurrying for cover. The back wall of the Command Bunker warped in the heat and violence.

Luca and Brak ducked behind one command console, which was rapidly melting into slag. “What was the easy way?”

“I dunno. I’ve never done anything the easy way.” Luca popped up and threw a Lightning Bolt at the CommanderBot. Racter-IX, crouching behind another command console, popped up to spray the opposing machine with rum. “Racter-IX: Operation Yo-Ho-Ho.” A parrot popped out of a hatch in the top of his head, carrying a flaming brand. It swooped in a manic pattern before dropping the flame on the soaked floor. The liquor ignited with a whoomph.

The CommanderBot spoke. “Is that the best you have, little robot? I am the latest in Prefect Motor Industries design.” It fired a volley of missiles and beams at Racter-IX’s
position, blowing the command console into fragments. Brak used the distraction to summon Good Morning Puppy.

The CommanderBot looked around for the source of the light music and sparkles that were filling the Command Bunker. There was a loud crash on the top of the Command Bunker. Armored plates fell inwards as a plush hand punched through. “Good Morning! Wake up to a happy day!” Good Morning Puppy showered the CommanderBot with a load of merchandise, burying in a mass of cheap goods. With a wave and a nod, Good Morning Puppy flew off.

Luca followed this summoning with a Big Friendly Creature of her own. Frigia’s cold winds blew through the opening, freezing the CommanderBot in a block of ice three meters thick. Taking advantage of their opponent’s immobilization, the Adventurers summoned the rest of the Big Friendly Creatures in their arsenal. The CommanderBot was crushed under the dark gown of Academia, the claws of Felinus, and the deep thicket of needles of Conifera.

“Perhaps... I should have... chosen... the easy way...” The visual sensors on the CommanderBot dimmed for the last time. It exploded into fragments, leaving behind three newly-leveled Adventurers and some sals.

“Think there’s enough time to summon them again?” Brak knelt down to catch his breath. “If we get rid of this factory and dam, that will realign part of the planet’s energy flow. Plus, we won’t have to deal with as many robots...”

“Racter-IX. Tactical analysis: agreement.”

“I’m with him. But let’s see what kind of data we can find out about the Prefect Motor Industry agreement with FensterCorp.” Luca wandered over to a surviving console.
Placing her Triumph Staff against the wall, she sat down and started pecking at the keys. Data flashed on the main screen as she worked. “Getting all this, Racter-IX?”

“Affirmative.”

“What’s it look like?”

“It appears that this is the main Prefect Motor Industries facility. Once this goes, that’s the bulk of their manufacturing.”

“Wow. It was almost too easy to get in here.”

“Well, except for all us dying that one time.”

“The main FensterCorp offices are in the Cosmia River Valley. That’s about a day’s flight from here. There are heavy air and land defenses—FensterCorp is a lot more paranoid than Prefect Motor Industries ever thought of being.”

“We’ll summon that Big Friendly Creature when we get to it.”

The group gathered up their equipment and searched for any final Treasure Chests. They didn’t find any weapons or potions, but they did find a collector’s edition model of the BattleRobots. “Hey, let’s collect them all!” said Brak.

“Why?”

“Um, no reason. It just sounded good.”

They set the controls of the assembly line to overload, then climbed to the ridge of the cavern. They summoned all of their Big Friendly Creatures to attack the facility, then ran downstream back to Costa del Mucho.
Costa del Mucho

Inside every adventurer is a psychopath, waiting to get out.
-- The Book of Adventurers

As the group returned to the airstrip, they discussed possible plans for dealing with the air defenses of FensterCorp’s main offices. “What if we painted the airship white and pretended to be a cloud?”

“Bad idea. What if we asked the others if they have an idea?”

“That could work…”

Several small Fallen Bunnies scrambled out of hidden burrows in grassy areas surrounding the airstrip. Brak jerked for a moment, and then ran at them, yelling and slashing randomly. “Leave! Us! Alone!” He lashed out, killing three with a set of savage cuts. Fur and bits of whisker flew threw the air. “We’re trying to hold a conversation here!” Brak kept screaming as he cut the cute—yet evil—rabbits to ribbons.

As the last toothsome creature met its end at Brak’s hand, Luca asked him, “What’s going on, Brak? What’s wrong?”
Brak stood panting in the middle of the field. “I am so sick of all of this! So far all we’ve done since I met you guys is chop things to bits, get killed, get reconstituted like some frozen Yummi Fruit juice, and chop more things to bits!” He threw his Bastard Sword down to the tarmac.

“My life made sense once. I didn’t even plan that—I just chopped those little creatures to bits like I’d done it all my life!”

“Those ‘little creatures,’ as you call them, were Fallen Bunnies. Years ago they made a pact with the forces of evil in return for a magic carrot. Now they don’t have a magic carrot anymore and they take it out on everyone else.”

“Racter-IX. Creature database: As Luca said, Fallen Bunnies attack people to regain their magical carrot. Nobody has their magical carrot, therefore everyone must suffer. We did them a favor by whacking them.”

“That’s your expert opinion! Thank goodness, a talking larcenous automaton tells me the right thing to do is to whack something!”

“Brak! Calm down! This is the way of the Adventurer. If you were a Citizen, what would you have done? Been nibbled to death, most likely.”

Brak thought about the Plague Rats that had attacked him in the sewers of Erewhon so many years ago. “Yeah, probably. Let’s get back to the airship. Maybe I just need a good night’s rest or something.”

Luca picked Brak’s Bastard Sword off the ground and handed it to him. “Here. Take this. Who knows what kind of creatures are infesting the hangar.”

They walked back to the *Indomitable Spirit*, where Sydney and Zurl were watching a blitzball match. They could hear the shouts at the foot of the landing ramp.
“Hey, don’t everybody get up to thank us or anything,” muttered Brak. He went past the lounge into his cabin.

“What’s with him?” Zurl reached out in front of him for a handful of SnackyMix.

“We saw that you guys were successful—there was a news flash at halftime about more terrorists, which made us smile. Racter-IX isn’t dressed for terrorism.”

The pirate robot pushed his hat back on its head. “Hand me some of that beverage. I need it for… samples.”

Sydney grabbed a Beer out of the cooler and handed it to Racter-IX. “Luca, do you want one?”

“Nah. I’m going to check on Brak. Where are Katzen and Anya?”

“They’re talking about energy flows and stuff in the Bridge.”

“OK, well, we should probably look into going after FensterCorp sooner rather than later. Who knows what they will do now that we’ve disabled their major business partner?”

“Yeah. We’ll talk to them while you deal with Brak.”

Luca walked through the lounge into the cabin section of the ship, picking up a tray of food on the way. She knocked on Brak’s door. “Need some company? I brought food.”

“Go away.”

“It’s your favorite… Yummi Fish.”

“Well, as long as there’s Yummi Fish, come in. I don’t think I’m much company.”

“That’s OK. I’m just here for the food.”

The door slid open and Luca walked in. Brak had stored his equipment and was sitting on the bed, staring at the floor. He grabbed a Yummi Fish off the tray of food and
took a bite. “I’m sorry about back there. I just wonder what happened to me. This is not really what I expected the life of an Adventurer to be like.”

“What did you expect?”

“The saving the world part, that much I thought I could deal with, but the world is so big! And the news—we’re terrorists? Plus, nobody seems to want to help us, we have to buy all of our supplies, we destroy most of the places we visit…” He trailed off for a moment.

“Shopkeepers charge money because they’d go broke donating equipment to every group who was out to save the world. They’re in it for the money. The news, I wouldn’t worry about. Nobody in their right mind trusts the news.”

The *Indomitable Spirit* lurched as Katzen started up the engines. Propeller blades on the sides and top started spinning rhythmically. The crew didn’t realize how quiet parts of the ship were at rest until the engines turned on again. “Brak. Look at me.”

“Yeah?”

“Look. You and I have been through a lot together. This is the last bit. I’m glad we got to know each other. You make me want to save the world. It has people like you in it.”

“You make me want to save the world, too.”

“Let’s finish this cheese. I’ll stay here if you want, or I’ll go. Up to you. In any case, we’ve got a few hours before we’ll be near Cosmia and FensterCorp.”

Brak held Luca close to him. “Thanks. Thanks for everything. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

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89 Katzen’s research into the Sylvan Prophecy indicated that another quest might be needed to eliminate the threat of corporate ownership of the media. He hadn’t told his younger friends about this theory yet.
“Probably sit in an apartment in the middle of Erewhon and wonder where your next job was coming from, if my memory of how we first met is any indication.” She smiled at him.

“OK, fair enough.”

“There. You smiled. Behold…”

“If you say, ‘Behold the power of cheese,’ I’m going to kill you, revive you from a Save Point, and kill you again.”

“That’s better.” They both giggled.

The airship flew out of Costa del Mucho airspace. Sydney and Zurl were saddened that they never got much chance to see anything of the city, other than the aerodrome.

“Maybe after all this is over, we can come back and see the nightlife,” mused Zurl.

“If there’s an us or a Costa del Mucho to come back to.”

“Aw, come on. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“The destruction of Neugaia?”

“Oh yeah. That.”
Cosmia River Valley

I have always been in favor of giant robots. My record supports that. However, not only is my opponent against giant robots, he voted to cut funding to regular-sized robots as well.

-- Campaign speech of Winton, Mayor of Middengard

Fenster and Dr. Omna watched the progress of the Indomitable Spirit on their corporate airspace defense radar. “Who are these people and what did we do to deserve them? All we did was follow what was in the ancient document!”

“I blame that meddler Pazu. In any case, they’ll be hard pressed to deal with FensterCorp Headquarters.”

“I’ll prepare for our contingency plan, sir.”

“Do that. And send me some frozen yogurt!”

A few hundred miles out, the airship flew close to the ground, closing with the Cosmia River Valley. The crew all clustered in the bridge, attempting to watch the radar scans, the weapons sensors, the windows, and the navigation chart simultaneously.

“So should we orbit around until we find a weak point, or just go in wherever?” asked Zurl. “I don’t really know if any place will be better than another.”
“I’m more worried about what kind of reception FensterCorp has prepared for us. They probably know we’re coming.”

“Queen Margo certainly did. Of course, Pazu sent a messenger with caricature of her and a note saying ‘We’re coming for you.’ Always was a bit of a braggart.” Katzen grinned.

The plains of the Westron continent gave way to rolling hills. The *Indomitable Spirit* hugged the contours of the hills, swerving in and out of valleys in an attempt to evade any surface-to-air missiles.

“Coming up on ten miles. Hopefully I can drop you off at the Headquarters. Do you have a battle order?”

“Brak, Luca, and me in one group. Zurl, Anya, and Racter-IX in another.” Sydney checked the action of his Macro Minigun. “Maybe we’ll run into a shopkeeper, too. Odds are he’ll have some interesting stuff, this close to FensterCorp…”

“That sounds like a plan— Oh! By the sword of Saso! Incoming! Hold on to something!”

Remote missile stations had fired on the airship. Rockets streamed toward the airship, trailing fire and smoke. The airship’s point defense weapons responded, destroying the missiles before they could hit the vessel. Katzen performed some evasive maneuvers.

“How far are we now? Somebody take the navigator chair!” Sweat rolled down the old man’s forehead as he piloted his beloved airship towards Cosmia.

Anya jumped into the navigator chair, which was next to the pilot’s chair. “Looks like we’re still nine miles out! Instruments read a weapons platform up ahead!”

“Time to try out the ground weapons. Can somebody take the weapons console? I’m a little busy with the flying and the dodging and the more flying and stuff.”
Sydney ran over to the weapons console and sat down. His fingers flew over the controls, activating the missile bays on the front of the airship, the weapons pods in the belly, and the offensive weapons on the engine nacelles. He targeted the FensterCorp missile battery, launching multiple air-to-surface missiles at it. It exploded in a satisfactory manner. Sydney nodded. “Got it.” He scanned his radar again. “Another one coming up. And another. And… Forty more beyond that.”

“I don’t think I installed enough weaponry for that. Time for plan B.”

“Plan B?”

Katzen talked while he flew the airship. He struggled to be heard over the weapons fire and explosions. “As you may have noticed… We have a big cargo space in the back of the ship. There’s a combat robot stored there—it should fit all of you quite easily…” A missile slipped through the defenses and exploded against the armor on the bow. “The problem is that I don’t know if the power source I installed is going to be enough…”

Anya looked up at Zurl. She grabbed the pendant hanging from her neck. “We may have something, Professor.” Zurl put an arm on Anya’s shoulder. “Anya’s carrying the Cosmia Stone. We couldn’t bear the thought of FensterCorp getting it.”

“The Cosmia Stone? You could have something about that! Somebody take over for me—I can adapt the power converter for its power in about five minutes!”

Racter-IX took over the controls. “Destination?”

“Keep them busy until I give the signal.”

“Wait—what’s the Cosmia Stone?” Luca was puzzled.

Professor Katzen took Anya back to the cargo hold. Zurl spoke as he plotted a new course through the FensterCorp defensive grid. “It’s one of the mysterious treasures of the
Cosmian royal family. It fell from the heavens hundreds of years ago. The High Priest said that some day it would be used to save the kingdom. If I miss my guess, today is that day.”

The airship dodged and fought as its occupants made ready for battle. Sydney fired the main cannons as he ran down a mental checklist. “OK, final check!”

“Ready!”

“Weapons!”

After checking their gear, all of the Adventurers called out, “Ready!”

“Supplies!”

Everyone checked their pockets and hiding places. “Stocked!”

“Everybody hit the Save Point on board before we leave!”

“Gotcha!”

Sydney hit the in-ship intercom. “Professor, how’s that mysterious-stone-powered giant robot coming?”

“As well as can be expected! One more adjustment and you can go! There!”

Racter-IX piloted the ship in a wide curve out of the range of the remaining defensive stations. The Adventurers ran back to the cargo hold, where they found a giant robot, laying on its back. It took up most of the cargo space. A ladder rested against the open cockpit in its head. “Come on up!” called the Professor’s voice from somewhere deep inside.

“It just so happens I put six control consoles in this vehicle. Welcome to the Ground Insertion Robot! I call it ‘Gir’ for short.”

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90 The High Priest also had a lot of thoughts about using the stone as a source of power for his spell to turn everyone in the world into sheep, but that is a tale for another time.
“Everybody take a station. The two stations in the middle here control piloting and navigation. The two on the left of the cockpit are weapons control and engineering. The remaining two on the right are communications and sensors.”

The group settled down into their stations. It was cramped in the armored cocoon of Gir’s control room. They heard Professor Katzen walk down the ladder, remove it, and then they closed the armored visor of their giant robot. Brak muttered to himself, “There are always giant robots. Always.” This was a passage from the Book of Adventurers that had caught his eye recently. Gir’s main computer powered up. “I saw a squirrel!”

“Excuse me?” Luca looked around for a tree-loving mammal.

“Oh, sorry. Welcome aboard.”

Anya’s communications panel lit up. “All set back there? We’re heading back now.”

Anya looked around. They all looked ready. “We’re ready, Katzen. Let’s go.”

The FensterCorp defense perimeter noticed the return of the airship. It accelerated at them, striking out with the weapons pods on the engine nacelles and undercarriage. One of the radar operators noticed something unusual. “Sir! A second contact! It appears to be falling from the target vehicle! And it’s big!”

“Hah! We’ve got them now!”

Inside the battle robot, Brak and his friends were rattled as they hit the ground. Gir’s legs took most of the shock, though some traveled through its infrastructure. “Sorry about that,” said the computer. Sydney armed Gir’s weapons systems. Its arms sprouted lasers, rail guns, autocannons, and missile launchers. “All systems go!” Looking through the twin viewports, they ran up the Cosmia River valley as the airship above them rained down fire support from the sky. Inside the FensterCorp defense centers, the radar operator watched in
horror as the second contact destroyed four ground stations in as many seconds. “I think they might have us, sir!”

“Sound the alarm! And alert headquarters!”

Gir and the *Indomitable Spirit* advanced up the river valley, destroying all opposition. Concentrated fire from several ground batteries stopped Gir in its tracks. An energy screen sprang into being around the battle robot, reflecting incoming fire. Katzen’s voice came over the communicator. “Looks like the Cosmia Stone is doing a fine job of running Gir’s systems! I’ll keep you covered. Two miles to go!”

Ten minutes, thirty-thousand rounds of ammunition, and two hundred missile volleys later, they reached the outer walls of FensterCorp Worldwide Headquarters. “Looks like a goofball,” remarked Zurl. “Blast it.” Twin beams lanced out from Gir’s weapon arms, blowing a huge hole in one side of the building. “That’s it! Let’s go in!” They lowered Gir to a crouch and extended the boarding ladder from the back of the robot. Katzen flew around in the airship, launching bursts of suppressing fire on occasion. The six Adventurers ran across the scarred surface to the entrance they had just created.

A voice called across the smoking valley. “Buy my wares, sirs and ladies?” A rotund man waddled out of a shadowy hiding place, carrying two bundles wrapped around a stick across his shoulders.

The group ran over and examined the goods for sale. “What are you doing in the middle of a battlefield?” asked Brak.

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91 The energy expended by both sides during the battle was enough to raise the ambient air temperature so that much of the surrounding soil was sterilized for weeks. This was later repaired by teams of gardening mages.
“Family tradition!” replied Ostlan the merchant. “Find a need and fill it, that’s our motto. How many people have a battle robot as nice as yours? Folks like you, you have an eye for quality! So what will it be?”

Ostlan’s goods were the finest any of them had ever seen. “You’ve got to help us help you,” haggled Sydney. “We’re about to free your kingdom from the tyranny of this company. Can’t you give us a discount, at least?”

“I tell you what. I’ll throw in an Elixir of Life for each weapon you buy. And that’s starving my own children, that is.”

“Fair enough.”

The group purchased all new weaponry—mithril was the order of the day. Brak took some practice swings with his Mithril Blade while Luca blocked them using her Mithril Staff. Sydney took a moment to browse the instruction manual of his new Shortcut Cannon.

“While traveling, it is often useful to take a Shortcut. Oh, that’s awful.”

“Racter-IX. Responding to humor: Ouch. This Mithril Claw is nice, however.”

“Almost as nice as my Fangorn Wand or Zurl’s Mithril Spear!” Anya cast a trial spell of Protect on all of the party. “Thanks, Ostlan!”

“Buy my wares, sirs and ladies?” asked Ostlan hopefully.

“You’ve taken a lot of our money already. Thanks, though!” The group waved to Ostlan and headed into the FensterCorp office building. Saving at the Save Point in the lobby, they split up—Luca, Brak, and Sydney advanced while the others remained behind.
FensterCorp Worldwide Headquarters

Frozen yogurt is good. Frozen yogurt works.

-- Autobiography of Fenster Walia

“Hey there. Long time, no see.” A voice called out of the dim recesses of the office building. All of the normal employees has fled, leaving only fallen papers and overturned chairs. Luca, Brak, and Sydney picked their way through the maze of cubicles and looked for the speaker. The cube farm gave way to a lobby, complete with elevators and commemorative statues of Fenster Walia. Storm was standing on top of a globe, looking down on them. “Told you we’d meet again. What are you doing hanging around with these losers, Luca?”

“They’re my friends, Storm. We’re trying to stop this company from destroying the world in order to make a profit.”

Storm snickered. “Well, isn’t that nice? Saving the world… How quaint.”

“It’s better than sitting around watching videos. What are you doing here?”

Storm laughed. “My new friends Wil, Macht, and Frei are helping me adjust to life as the newest employee of FensterCorp. My job is to keep Adventurers like you from messing
with official company policy. I’ve been pretty good at it—you’re the fourth group this week.”

Sydney snapped his fingers in frustration. “Fourth group? And here I thought we were the only ones on to you guys.”

“What? Everybody with an airship and a weapon of some sort comes in here trying to raid the corporate coffers. They’ve all failed. But enough chit-chat. I’m giving you thirty seconds to get out of here, and then I’m sending you back to your most recent Save Point. Get in that oversized bucket of yours and get out of here. I say this with the full authority vested in me by FensterCorp and its shareholders.”

As Storm waited for them to confer, Luca called up to him. “Sorry, Storm. We need to talk to the president of the company. We’re very concerned about his corporate practices.”

“OK. I warned you. I expected better from you, Luca. Prepare for doom!”

Storm swept his sword around his head. “Meteor Swarm!” Several large meteors fell from the sky, evading the anti-missile fire from Gir and the Indomitable Spirit. They crashed through the roof of the building, damaging it further and putting out one of the huge eye-shaped windows. The Adventurers were thrown to the ground as they were hit by the molten rocks.

Storm turned to Wil and Macht, who joined him fighting the intruders. “Where’s Frei?” asked Storm.

“He didn’t want to face these guys again. He said something about retiring to some town with animals in it. Mammal Crossroads, I think.”
“Pity. But no matter. I know two of these people. We will get rid of them and then deal with Frei.”

The three FensterCorp employees faced off with the trio of intruding Adventurers. Each side cast spells on the other. Macht’s Poison spell dissipated under Luca’s Antidote spells. Wil healed the damage caused by Sydney’s blasts from his Shortcut Cannon.

Sydney cursed as Wil’s spell repaired the gaping wounds in Storm’s chest. “I think I liked him better before he met the Enforcers. If anything, he’s even more of a jerk than before!”

Luca nodded in agreement. “Let’s see if he remembers this!” She closed her eyes for a moment as sudden winds blew around her. “Standing Wave!” Circles of light emanated from her body, healing Brak and Sydney, but throwing the Enforcers to their knees in pain.

Brak took advantage of their vulnerability. He lunged and feinted through Wil’s defenses, ending with a stop-thrust that went straight through his abdomen. “Sorry about this,” apologized Brak. He pulled his sword out of Wil and spun it around, catching him at the nape of the neck. Wil had a brief moment of pain before vanishing in a burst of light.

“Not again!” yelled Macht. He attacked Brak in a rage, striking the Adventurer several times with his club before Sydney and Luca’s crossfire took him down in a second strobing explosion.

Storm was alone against three intruders. He was low on mana and health, but his contempt for them made him ignore this. “Is that the best you have? Luca! Ditch these two and come with me! I’ll show you what real power is like!”

“In your wildest dreams, Storm!” Luca laughed. “You’re nothing to me!”

Storm seethed furiously for a moment. “…"
Storm started towards the group. Luca calmly watched him run at her, sword aloft. With a flick of her wrist and a quick whisper, she summoned Frigia, who flew through the openings in the building and froze Storm solid with an icy wave of its hand. Storm’s body was encased in ice, flash-frozen in mid-stride. Luca walked over to Storm and gave him a small push with her pinky, tipping him over and shattering him into hundreds of pieces.

The three Adventurers gained a brief flush of power as the experience brought new Levels to them. They searched what was left of the lobby for loot, to no avail. “Come on, let’s leave here,” said Luca. “I’ll bet this elevator will take us where we need to go.” One of the elevators was marked Executives Only and was covered in gold leaf and carved marble. Once they entered the elevator car, they noticed two buttons—Lobby and Office. The doors closed after Brak pressed Office. “Think they heard that?”

“If they don’t know we’re coming by now, they’ve got some problems.”

“So how does this work? We beat them into the ground and they stop?” Brak was puzzled. “What if we kill them? They’ll just respawn from a Save Point, right?”

“Not if we destroy this building and everything in it…”

“How are we going to do that?”

“You’ve been neglecting your readings in the Book of Adventurers again, haven’t you?”

“I was… distracted the last time I started reading.” Luca gave him a brief smile, which Sydney either missed or chose to ignore.

“There’s a chapter about bosses and their tendency to wire their buildings to explode if they’re defeated. Most adventures boil down to finding the right person to beat the stuffing out of.”

They all spoke in unison. “Until the candy comes out.”
The elevator dinged. “Looks like this is it,” said Sydney. The doors opened and they walked out in Fenster Walia’s office. A small figure sat in a huge chair behind a massive desk at the far end of the room. It was a thin man with glasses, eating a bowl of frozen yogurt.

“So you are the source of all of my trouble!” Fenster waved at them. “Come closer! Would you care for some frozen yogurt?”

“No thank you. We want you to stop destroying the continent in order to sell more goods.”

“Can’t do that, I’m afraid. Our profits are up 3000% since we started this operation. In fact I’m about to…” Fenster trailed off. He stared blankly at them.

“What? You’re doing what?” Brak advanced around the desk and shook Fenster’s shoulder. He fell face-first into his bowl a knife in his back. It fell into the seat of the chair as Fenster dissolved into sparks. “OK—what happened? It wasn’t me.”

“It was me.” Dr. Omna emerged from behind Fenster’s imposing throne-like chair. “Fenster was going to announce his retirement since the company was doing so well. I’m just helping him along. I am going to prepare our contingency plan, where we blow up Middengard and charge the survivors everything they own for medical care and Save Points. Muahahahahaha! Then if that works, we’ll blow up Neugaia!”

“Won’t that keep anybody from paying you anything?”

“Doesn’t matter! We’ll find a way to write it off!”

Brak whispered to Luca and Sydney out of the corner of his mouth. “I don’t think he’s playing with a full deck of cards… Call the others—we may need them.” Sydney whispered into his phone.
Dr. Omna looked at the Adventurers. “Now you face the might of Dr. Omna!” The figure in the lab coat began to transform. The coat was ripped to shreds as Omna grew taller, a set of wings, and some horns. “Sylva was a fool. He never spoke of me—the reason for all of this destruction—if I destroy enough of this planet, I can bring my fellow demons in and we will rule you all!”

Brak looked his friends. “OK, tell me this is in the Book of Adventurers…”

“It is. There’s always some jerk who’d rather destroy the world instead of ruling it.” Luca looked back as the elevator behind them opened up to reveal their friends Zurl, Anya, and Racter-IX.

“We came as soon as we could.” Zurl looked at Dr. Omna’s new form. “Wait a minute. I’ve seen those demons in the ancient documents in the castle archives! The Ancients banished them to other dimensions centuries ago.”

Anya pointed her Fangorn Wand at the demonic doctor. “Leave my world alone!”

The Adventurers broke into two groups—one on the left of the demon and one on the right. The Omna-demon looked at each group in turn. “Puny humans. This won’t be much of a challenge.” It concentrated for a moment, and a beam coalesced between the horns on its head. The power circulated in a small point in the middle, then cut a slice in the floor at the feet of the group on the right of the demon. Anya, Zurl, and Racter-IX were thrown in the air momentarily before falling to the smoldering carpet.

Racter-IX’s body was still. Small sparks shot out from various panels in his torso. Jinx noticed this and tugged on Anya’s skirt. She handed her cat LifeMoss and went back to casting Invisible Hands. “I hope this works,” muttered Jinx as he put the LifeMoss in the pirate robot’s torso.
Evidently Mister Badwin had anticipated his robot being incapacitated, as its organic matrix rebooted as the LifeMoss was absorbed. “Racter-IX. Restarting: now.” The robot’s eyes grew brighter as its systems began repairing themselves.

The remaining Adventurers alternated between attacking, defending, and healing. As Katzen orbited the building in the *Indomitable Spirit*, he noticed large chunks of the building blasted away from the interior—spells, the Shortcut Cannon, and the Omna-demon’s Death Beam ripped huge holes in the superstructure. He was forced to make a series of quick maneuvers to evade another round of meteors, summoned by Omna in an attempt to knock out the Adventurers to his right. They were mostly deflected by a hastily-erected Magic Barrier, which collapsed under the repeated impacts.

The left side wasn’t faring much better. Sydney and Luca were throwing everything they had at the Omna-demon while Brak searched his pockets for a Menta-Potion. “Found one!” He threw it at Luca’s back, replacing her energy in time to summon Academia. The Big Friendly Creature placed more strain on the sagging roof beams as it threw musty books and empty beer cans at the demon. “Allow us to discuss the scatology of demonic forms! Beginning at the beginning is always beneficial, or so the common wisdom goes and who are we to deny the common wisdom…” The Big Friendly Creature droned on and on as it pelted its opponent with the detritus of education.

The Omna-demon staggered under the weight of moldering textbooks. “I think we might be making a dent in him!” yelled Brak. He summoned Conifera to pile on the Demon as the others cast their strongest spells. He yelled in defiance at his towering opponent. “Hey there, assbag! We’ve faced every challenge thrown at us! No stone has been left unturned! Sure, we could have just sat there and watched a faceless corporation walk all over us, but
no! No more!” As his energy regenerated slightly, he cast Good Morning Puppy. “Take some of your own medicine!”

The Omna-demon—now in a desperate corner with no hope of speedy reinforcement—attacked with the strength of madness. Several blows from its talons felled Luca, Brak, and Zurl. Sydney and Anya took a moment to revive their fallen comrades and renewed their attack. Their numbers restored, the six Adventurers² poured everything they had into defeating the infernal doctor.

Finally, the Omna-demon fell under the finishing blows of Zurl’s staff. As the demon breathed its last, its outward form exploded in a violent crashing. The group of Adventurers ran to the tattered edge of the building after the elevator bank collapsed in on itself. Katzen flew the Indomitable Spirit towards the collapsing building. A bridge extended out of the side of the airship and they ran aboard before flying away from the exploding building. FensterCorp was delisted on the Middengard stock exchange the next day.

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²Seven, if you count Jinx. As he was never a solo combatant, most historians number this group at six. Katzen, never venturing into the field, is usually classified as a supporter.
Cosmia Palace

It’s all over once the media star sings a love ballad.
-- The Book of Adventurers

Brak and his friends sat in the lounge of Cosmia Palace following the award ceremony. He sat on the edge of a couch, fingerling the medal around his chest. “What’s this inscription on the edge? I can’t quite make it out.”

Luca leaned over for a moment, drink in one hand. “Thank you for saving our bacon. I think it’s Anya’s idea of a joke.”

“I blame Jinx, myself.”

“He doesn’t have that much pull, does he?”

A voice came up from beneath the chair. “You’d be surprised.”

“Jinx!” They made room on the couch for him.

“Thanks. Think you’ll enjoy being citizens of Cosmia?”

Sydney looked at Zurl and Anya. “We think so.”

“Racter-IX. Agreement.”
Katzen, Pazu, and Sheeta were singing old war songs in one corner. The officials of Cosmia gave them a wide berth, though they had a large crowd of admirers as well. Katzen caught Brak’s eye and motioned with his wine glass towards the airship hangar. Nodding, Brak took Luca by the hand and snuck out of the reception.

As they boarded the ramp of the *Indomitable Spirit*, they saw that Katzen had hooked Gir’s systems into the airship. “Welcome aboard. Destination?”

“Just take us for a drive, Gir.”

“Affirmative.”

Brak and Luca walked to the observation deck as the vessel cleared the airfield and flew in a random path around the castle. “Look over there—they’ve already started cleaning up the mess. You did it, Brak.”

“We did it.”

“What else did you have in mind to do?”

“I’ll tell you later.” Brak held Luca in his arms, watching the sun set over the continent. A ribbon flew from Luca’s hair, spiraling in the backwash of the airship. It drifted down to the courtyard, over the orchard, and past the balcony of Anya’s stateroom, where Jinx found it the next day.

The airship flew towards the mountains. The mountains were anchored into the continent, which itself was rooted in the plates of Neugaia’s mantle. Neugaia orbited its star—further crises awaited its future, but future heroes waited to be born as well. Neugaia continued on through the seasons, accompanied by its moon, a ring of debris, and a new sense of hope for the future.
Afterword

The Library of Congress urges you to Read More About It. For more information on worlds like Neugaia, try the fine video games by Sony, Sega, Nintendo, Square, Enix, Treasure, Media.Vision, Capcom, Konami, Atlus, Working Designs, and many others. I’ve spent many a happy hour in the worlds that they’ve created.

Very special thanks go to Chris Baty, for starting National Novel Writing Month, which gave me the courage to start (and finish) this project.

I am indebted to my fellow users of JunkBBS—Laura and Vy in particular—who gave me the encouragement I needed to finish this work. There were many long hours where we struggled with the 15-minute game in an effort to get our daily quota. Read their novels.

Thanks go to my friends at Pint Night and the crew of the Lucky Lab. Hopefully we’ll have many more casks to go on future nights.

My cats were a source of distraction, vet bills, and affection as I wrote this.

A great many thanks to Apple Computer for manufacturing the G4 PowerBook I used for writing the majority of this novel.

Very special thanks to my wife, Kari, who put up with me hogging the PowerBook and coming to bed late when I was up writing until the wee hours of the morning.

And thanks to you, the reader, for getting this far. I was never sure if there was an audience for this, but it made me laugh, so I went ahead and did it anyway.

Doug Hanke

Portland, Oregon

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