

THE DM TOOL CHEST

GEARS OF INTRIGUE

THE SHATTERED CORE PART I

AN INVESTIGATION INTO STOLEN MAGITECH TURNS INTO A RACE AGAINST TIME
TO SOLVE A MYSTERY AND SAVE THE LIVES OF THOUSANDS



GEARS OF INTRIGUE

THE RUSTY GEAR



Gears of Intrigue is a Fifth Edition adventure for **three to five characters of 1st to 2nd level**, optimized for **four characters with an average party level (APL) of 1**. Track down a stolen magitech invention and discover the truth behind a deeper conspiracy that threatens the lives of thousands of innocents.

This adventure is part one of a two-part series that takes the characters through 1st through 3rd level. The series takes place in the Etheria steam and sorcery campaign setting, a wild frontier struggling for survival after being ripped apart by a cataclysmic event. Here, arcane magitech and untamed wilderness clash in an unending battle for dominance. The adventure can be modified and placed into any existing setting that utilizes a higher level of technology combined with arcane magic.

ADVENTURE RULES

The 5th Edition core rulebooks are recommended to run this adventure. A free copy of the 5th Edition System Reference Document (SRD) and basic rule set can be found online and can be used in place of the core books.

A boxed description like this is meant to be read aloud or paraphrased for the players. These suggested prompts may be used or disregarded at the GM's discretion.

In this adventure are references that point to information presented outside the module. Magic items, spells, and equipment are *italicized*, and their descriptions are located in either the core rulebooks or the 5th Edition SRD.

NPC and creature names are **bolded** to indicate the stat block referenced for combat purposes. These statistics are located in the core 5th edition monster guidebook, the 5th Edition SRD, or presented in an attached Appendix.

BACKGROUND

Balthazar Gearwright is a curious figure in the bustling city of Iron Heights. A tinkerer turned entrepreneur, he is known for his eccentric personality and wondrous inventions. Balthazar's name echoes through the city's crowded streets, whispered with a hint of amusement and begrudging respect. After all, he is the man behind Gearwright Industries, a burgeoning enterprise helping drive Iron Heights' magitech revolution.



Balthazar's warehouse—a sprawling mass of scaffolding, steam pipes, and the constant hum of aetherite energy—is filled to the brim with curiosities. Devices that emit brilliant sparks, mechanized contraptions that defy understanding, and entire racks of blueprints for ideas yet to come. There's no doubt that Balthazar is a dreamer. But his dreams, as grand as they are, don't always transpire as planned. It's a well-known fact in Iron Heights: when Balthazar's new invention is about to be unveiled, you can expect the unexpected.

One such unexpected twist recently unfurled when Balthazar announced his latest innovation: the Aethercore, a powerful magitech artifact capable of generating near-limitless energy for the poor residents of Iron Heights. It was a testament to his genius but also, as it turns out, a beacon for trouble.

The unveiling caught the attention of the Storm Jackals, a notorious gang of thieves eager to leave their mark on the city. The Storm Jackals are adept thieves and brutes driven by ambition and greed. They've plagued Iron Heights with their audacious heists, but stealing from Balthazar Gearwright was outside their typical thefts. They were hired by a dangerous cult known as the Crimson Cogs, who wish to use the Aethercore for their own sinister ends.

Balthazar, for his part, was far from defeated. In his mind, every failure was a stepping stone to success, and this was no different. He is looking for stalwart individuals willing to uncover the truth of this conspiracy after managing to snap a photo of one of the thieves.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

The inventive yet eccentric Magitech Engineer, Balthazar Gearwright, entrusts the party to retrieve his stolen Aethercore. Pursuing the thieves at a local tavern, they find themselves taken from the city's gritty underbelly to the hazardous beauty of the Emerald Canopy. After navigating the wilderness and battling its mutated creatures, the party discovers the Jackals' hideout among ancient Astromagi ruins. Overcoming brutal traps and bizarre ether-beasts, they face a mechanical monstrosity and learn the shocking truth—the secretive Crimson Cogs cultists orchestrated the theft.

The adventure is broken down into three distinct parts:

Part 1: The Notice. The characters meet with Balthazar Gearwright in Iron Heights and seek out more information about the thieves who stole his invention. They run into some trouble in the Rusty Gear tavern and discover the identity of the thieves and an encrypted note leading to their hideout. After delivering a suspicious package and deciphering the message, the party hitches a ride on a dirigible to an outpost in the Emerald Canopy.

Part 2: The Canopy. After fending off some flying creatures aboard the dirigible, the party arrives at the remote outpost. The party uses their map to navigate the

untamed wilderness of the Emerald Canopy. After battling through the mutated vegetation and aether-infused creatures, the characters discover the thieves' hideout lies in the heart of an ancient magitech ruin.

Part 3: The Ruins. The characters quickly discover the hideout was recently attacked as they make their way through the remaining security and wandering monsters. After making their way to the heart of the ruins, they face the last living member of the gang and learn the truth behind the theft of the Aethercore.

ABOUT ETHERIA

Welcome to Etheria, a vibrant world of magic, technology, and mystery, where the raw energy of aetherite crystals shapes the very fabric of existence. This world is home to an incredible variety of cultures, races, and landscapes, all teeming with unique wonders and latent potential.

In Etheria, ancient arcane energy has melded with the forefront of technology to give birth to magitech, a fusion of spells and machinery that propels civilization forward. Here, you will find floating cities held aloft by magical forces, sentient constructs known as Aether-forged walking alongside humans and elves, and vast forests where the plants and animals pulsate with raw arcane energy.

The Aetherstorm, a wild tempest of pure arcane energy, has fundamentally altered the world. The Aetherstorm has caused some machines to gain sentience, brought new magical abilities to certain individuals, and has generally made the world a far more unpredictable and fantastical place.

From the mechanical city of Iron Heights, a mountainside city accessible only by dirigible and mechanical elevators, to the mystical canopies of the Emerald Glade, where every leaf and petal glows with an otherworldly light, Etheria is a world that defies conventional expectations at every turn. Each locale is a unique setting with its own challenges and wonders, just waiting for daring adventurers to explore.

This adventure begins in the industrial hub of Iron Heights, a sprawling city of invention and ceaseless mechanical activity. It's here where the grandeur of magitech can be observed in its full glory, and it's here where your adventures in the thrilling world of Etheria begin.

As you navigate this world, remember that Etheria is a realm of infinite possibility, and your imagination is the only limit. For a more detailed exploration of Etheria, including comprehensive descriptions of the world's geography, history, cultures, and major factions unique to the setting, please refer to the *Etheria: Rage of the Aetherstorm* campaign setting sourcebook.

ABOUT IRON HEIGHTS

Located on the side of the formidable Mount Gyrion, Iron Heights is an extraordinary steampunk cityscape, bustling with the unceasing symphony of hammer strikes against metal, steam engines' sizzling whispers, and arcane technology's energetic hum. The life of this industrious city springs from the magnificent Iron Falls, whose constant flow powers countless steam machines, propelling the city into an innovative era. Renowned for its remarkable ironclad dirigibles soaring the expansive skies and ingenious steam-powered elevators connecting its various sectors, Iron Heights has established itself as a beacon of commerce and hope in the wild Expanse of Etheria.

Iron Heights is divided into two distinct districts—the Upper Heights, a sanctuary for the city's wealthy and the hub of its technological wonders, and the Lower Heights, the heart of the hardworking class operating the factories that keep the city's pulse alive.

While the city is a marvel of industrial progress, it is not without perils. Mechanical creatures, born from the convergence of technology and arcane magic, occasionally malfunction, causing havoc. The air, thick with smog from countless industries, poses a health risk to the unacquainted. Furthermore, underlying socio-economic tensions between the working class and the elites often hover precariously close to causing civil unrest. Besides these inherent challenges, traversing the city's complex network of steam-powered elevators and complex mechanical infrastructures requires an understanding and proficiency that is not common to outsiders.

SETTING UP

As you set the stage for this adventure, encourage your players to dive deep into their characters' backstories, each developing a compelling reason for being in Iron Heights. Whether they're seasoned locals, born and bred among the bustling factories and steam-driven contrivances, or newcomers drawn by the allure of the mechanical marvels and vast wealth, every character should have a connection to the city. Some might be laborers or inventors, others may be explorers or traders, and yet others might be scholars or spies. New arrivals might be simply seeking a fresh start in the vibrant city. Each backstory should naturally lead the characters into the unfolding adventure, and you, as the one orchestrating this grand play, can weave in these personal arcs throughout the adventure. Personal motivations enrich the roleplaying experience and provide touchstones to keep the characters engaged throughout the adventure. Making the characters' individual stories integral to the narrative sets the stage for an engaging and immersive campaign.

PART 1: THE NOTICE

The adventure begins as the characters make their way to Gearwright Industries in the Lower Heights district of Iron Heights. They are responding to Balthazar's request to help recover stolen goods from his warehouse. Read aloud the following to kick off the adventure:

Perched atop the stern slopes of Mount Gyrion, Iron Heights divides the sky with a skyline of stone, steel, and smoke. The city clings to the mountainside, its Lower District sprawling at the base, while the Upper Heights scale the cliffs, all connected by intricate networks of steam-powered elevators. The thunderous sound of Iron Falls, the city's lifeblood, resonates in the distance, its misty spray caught in the sunlight.

As you tread the cobblestone streets of the Lower District, rows of factories, warehouses, and tightly packed tenements flank you. The air is filled with the musky scent of coal, the whirring of gears, and the distant rhythm of pounding hammers. Above you, the Upper Heights glitter with grandeur, dirigibles hovering like metallic clouds against the backdrop of the sapphire sky.

Through the industrial haze, massive smokestacks of Gearwright Industries loom, churning out an oily cloud of smoke. A grimy sign reading "Gearwright Industries" hangs over an aged warehouse door, its tarnished brass gears creaking in the wind.

A wave of heated air, heavy with the scent of oil and hot metal, engulfs you upon entering the warehouse. Clanking, whirring sounds of industriousness echo off metal walls, and flashes of bright sparks light the shadowy interior.

A wiry halfling—more oil and grime than flesh—waves from behind a counter. His hair is ashen and spiked from the forge's heat, framing a face that has lived twice its years, and a crooked grin reveals an array of gold-capped teeth. The overalls he wears are a patchwork of burn marks and grease stains, bearing the hard-won badges of life in the thrum of industry. His rough voice carries a welcoming cheer, "Welcome to Gearwright Industries, where tomorrow's dreams are forged today! I suppose you're here about the notice?"

The halfling introduces himself as Kipp, Balthazar's trusted assistant. With the energetic hustle characteristic of someone always facing a long to-do list, Kipp ushers the group into a waiting room used to meet with clients. The waiting room, a stark contrast to the industrial chaos outside, offers an odd coziness. Velvet upholstered chairs and a plush carpet, both a faded burgundy, flank a low oak table filled with blueprints and sketches of strange devices. Walls laden with polished gears, clockwork novelties, and peculiar gadgets sparkle under the warm glow of an overhead glass orb pulsating with



energy. "I'll go fetch the Boss," Kipp announces over his shoulder as he scurries out of the room.

At this point, give the characters a moment to introduce themselves to one another if they have not already done so. This waiting period allows them to exchange stories, discuss their motivations for answering the notice, and speculate about their upcoming meeting with Balthazar Gearwright.

Once the characters have introduced themselves, read:

The waiting room door swings open with a loud creak, and in strides Balthazar Gearwright himself. A small gnome with wild, white hair sticking out from beneath a pair of large, round goggles. His apron is smudged with grease and his hands, sporting various cuts and burns, twitch with restless energy. A warm, if somewhat distracted, smile is spread across his face as he adjusts a pair of rimmed glasses with oil-stained fingers.

Balthazar Gearwright (lawful neutral, gnome **engineer**, see the Appendix for statistics), an inventor of eccentric manners and unmatched genius, is the whirlwind behind Gearwright Industries. Born and raised in Iron Heights, Balthazar has progressed from an oil-stained apprentice to one of the city's premier magitech inventors. His reputation as a tinkerer of ambitious ideas precedes him; his inventions, though impressive, often push the boundaries of safety and practicality.

With an air of grandeur, Balthazar finally arrives, bustling into the room with an oil-streaked apron. His eyes, the color of quicksilver, glimmer with intelligence and a twinkle of mirth. His hair, a riot of wild copper curls, frames a face lined with age and frequent laughter. "Ah! My rescuers," he exclaims with a wide grin. He pulls a pile of papers from under his arm, "Just a few legalities to take care of," he says, flashing a non-disclosure agreement in front of the party, "Standard protocol, you understand. All about protecting my inventions from prying eyes."

Once the characters sign the NDA, Balthazar produces a small chest from his coat pocket, unlocking it to reveal 50 ap (aetherium pieces are equivalent to gold pieces in Ethria) for each character as the offered reward for the return of his stolen invention.

Balthazar willingly shares the following information with the party:

- His work primarily focuses on developing a new energy source that could bring prosperity to the Lower Heights.
- A valuable item, crucial to his work, was stolen from his warehouse a week ago—a magitech power source called an Aethercore.
- He has evidence to suggest that the thieves, or at least one accomplice, may frequent a tavern in the Upper Heights named "The Rusty Gear."
- He has an image of the individual captured by his Aethero-graph Lens (a new, work-in-progress inven-



BALTHAZAR GEARWRIGHT

tion). He can provide this image to the party (see accompanying graphic).

- He is desperate for the safe return of the Aethercore and is willing to pay handsomely for its recovery.

Balthazar is willing to increase the reward to an additional 10 ap per character with a successful DC 15 Charisma (Persuasion) check. He cannot go higher as his funding has been devoted to his research. Once the characters agree, he hands them the Farsight picture and wishes them well before returning to work.

AETHEROGRAPH PICTURE

The picture Balthazar produces appears to have been captured by a device that still needs work. The image is blurred and grainy, though the central figure can still be discerned despite the photo's imperfections. The thief stands in profile, his sharp features exaggerated by the monochromatic filter. His hair is shaggy and unkempt, falling over one eye, and a jagged scar runs across his cheek, visible even in the imperfect capture.

EXPLORING THE CITY

Before heading to the Rusty Gear, the characters may wish to explore the city of Iron Heights. It's a veritable treasure trove of innovation, bustling markets, industrial marvels, and a patchwork of districts, each bearing its own distinct character.

The Market District offers a riotous collection of goods, where traders from across Etheria offer their exotic wares. This is where the characters can purchase new gear or offload some precious loot.

The characters might also wish to venture into the Forge District. This part of the city is the heart of its industrial power, where the raw ore from the Iron Falls is transformed into the marvels of the city. Artificers, tinkerers, and crafters of all sorts can be found here, eager to show off their creations or take on a new project.

For those seeking knowledge, the Gearlock Academy in the Upper Heights is a hub of learning and research in the city. Its libraries and workshops might contain useful information or even valuable allies.

Consult the *Etheria: Rage of the Aetherstorm* sourcebook for additional information, encounters, and plot hooks for these locations.

JOURNEY TO THE UPPER HEIGHTS

When the party heads to the Rusty Gear, they must ride one of the city's famed cliff elevators. Read aloud the following once the characters take a ride:

As you step onto the platform of the cliff elevator, the attendant, a sturdy dwarf clad in soot-streaked overalls, pulls a series of levers. With a jolt, the platform lurches upwards. A metal cage encloses you, but the city spreads out below through its bars in a vista of industrial splendor.

You can see the molten glow of the forges in the distance, the hustle and bustle of the market district, and the roofs of the residences huddled together like an army of rusted tin soldiers. And then you're rising above it all, the cityscape shrinking as you ascend. The echo of hammer on metal and the churning hiss of steam gradually give way to a calmer quiet, punctuated only by the clanking of the elevator.

Then the Upper Heights come into view, a stark contrast against the grime and grit of the city below. Gleaming towers, ornate rooftops, and airships tethered to lofty mooring masts, their silhouettes outlined against the open sky.

THE RUSTY GEAR

The Rusty Gear is a bustling tavern, humming with activity from patrons who have known their fair share of toil and turmoil. The interior has a rugged appeal with creaky wooden tables, dim lantern lights flickering in the corners, and a distinctive smell of ale, sweat, and smoky engine oil that seems to permeate the place. The din of animated conversations, clinking glasses, and occasional raucous laughter drowns out the noise from the outside, giving this place a peculiar ambiance.

At the heart of this rambunctious establishment is Juna Thistledown (neutral dwarf **commoner**), a stocky dwarf with fiery red hair and a quick wit. Her bright blue eyes miss nothing, scanning the room from beneath her bushy eyebrows as she wipes down the countertop. She knows everyone and everything about Iron Heights and isn't averse to sharing some juicy gossip for the right price. Juna is a no-nonsense individual. She's friendly to those who respect her establishment but has a short fuse for troublemakers.

Gromforge-12, or simply Grom, is a towering **aether-forged brawler** (see Appendix) with a frame of iron and magitech components, his form worn by age to a rustic patina. With a faceplate punctuated only by two soft cyan lights as eyes, he exudes an air of stoic vigilance, ready to defend the tavern's patrons at a moment's notice.

When the party enters the tavern, read aloud:

A crooked sign, barely hanging from a single rusty chain, depicts a large, gear-like wheel declaring this is the Rusty Gear Tavern. The thick scent of burnt oil, stale ale, and smoky meats engulfs you as you push open the creaky wooden door. The stained wooden floor is slick with years of spilled drink and dirt. The dim, flickering oil lanterns barely light the space, casting long, dancing shadows over the worn wooden tables and roughened patrons.

GATHERING INFORMATION

Characters can attempt a DC 15 Charisma (Persuasion) check to gather information from Juna regarding any information on the heist. On a success, Juna reveals that the biggest gossip lately is that Storm Jackals have recently pulled off a big score and left town in a hurry. On a failure, she says she might know something interesting while covertly rubbing her fingers together. An offer of 5 ap or more loosens the bartender's lips without needing a check.

Alternatively, characters can also choose to spend an hour listening to the gossip around the tavern. A successful DC 12 Wisdom (Insight) check gleams the same information.

Photograph. Revealing the photograph of the thief at any time causes the tavern to fall silent. If the characters persist, one patron—a shifty-eyed tiefling—slips out unnoticed (Perception DC 18 to notice). Juna's eyes go

wide at the photo. She comments that she doesn't want trouble in her establishment and that the Storm Jackals are nothing but trouble (see the "Storm Jackals" sidebar).

TAVERN BRAWL

Depending on the party's actions, but before they leave, three Storm Jackals (human **bandits**), led by the thief from the photo named Vek (**gunfighter**, see the Appendix), barge into the tavern. Vek is a lean human with a scar running down his left cheek, and his eyes are full of venom as he scans the room. Read aloud the following:

As the laughter and clatter of mugs fill the Rusty Gear, the entrance swings open with a bang. Four figures stride in, the ambient noise diminishing as patrons turn to gaze at the new arrivals. Each of them sports clockwork appendages that click and whir with each step. The leader, a lithe figure bearing a menacing scar down his left cheek, surveys the room with predatory eyes, exuding palpable venom. Behind him, his crew skulk in, their presence casting a grim shadow over the tavern's previously jovial atmosphere.

If Vek was already told about the party having a photo of him, he spots them immediately and initiates a confrontation. The Storm Jackals don't like people looking into their business, and he plans to put the characters down permanently. The other patrons clear the tavern once it's obvious a fight is about to start.

The Rusty Gear's bouncer, Grom, stands ready to assist if the fight seems too tough for the characters. Juna otherwise moves to keep them out of the crossfire.

DEVELOPMENTS

If the characters defeat the Jackals, they find a total of 8 ap, 20 sp, and an encrypted note in Vek's pocket. Grom unceremoniously drags the remains of Storm Jackals out the back door to disappear without question, leaving Juna to chat with the party. A DC 18 Intelligence (History) check allows a character to decode the note themselves, revealing it to be in ancient Astromagi language, pointing to a location deep within the Emerald Canopy. On a failure, Juna suggests they take the note to her old friend, Ren, the First Mate of the *Starling*, a dirigible moored in the Steamports. Ren is known to have a knack for deciphering cryptic codes. If the characters decipher the note themselves, she recommends her friend as a way to catch a ride out to wherever they need to go.

Juna gives the party a small, mysterious package for Ren as a parting gift, warning them sternly not to open it. "Ren will know if you did," she says, her usually friendly eyes hardening momentarily. "Take the map and this package to him, and he might be able to help you figure out what the Jackals are up to. But for your own sake, best lay low and get out of Iron Heights for a while."

STORM JACKALS

The Storm Jackals represent the ruthless ambition of Iron Heights' underbelly, a merciless bandit group infamous for their guile and viciousness. Rising from the smoke-choked streets of the Lower Heights, their audacity and cunning strategies have quickly established them as formidable players in the criminal underworld.

The Jackals comprise a collection of humans, dwarves, and aetherforged, each bearing distinctive mechanical modifications indicative of their grit and resourcefulness. These crude enhancements range from hardened steel limbs replacing lost ones to aether-infused optical prostheses granting superior sight. Such modifications enhance their abilities and serve as chilling reminders of their ruthless determination.

Uniformity is discarded for personal flair in the Jackals' ranks, though shades of stormy gray and sky blue dominate their attire, representing the storm they unleash upon their victims. Every member proudly bears the group's symbol—a jagged lightning bolt, signifying their rapid ascension and destructive potential.

The Storm Jackals are as cunning as they are cruel, always staying one step ahead of the authorities. Their rapid rise to power has been fueled by a string of heists and brutal reprisals against anyone standing in their way.



VEK THE GUNFIGHTER



STARLING

The Package. The waxed brown paper package is secured with a stamped wax seal. If the party opens the package, it can be successfully resealed with a DC 17 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check using thieves' tools. Inside the package is a batch of a dozen freshly baked brown sugar cookies with cinnamon frosting that smell delicious.

MEETING WITH REN

As the heart of air travel and cargo in the Upper Heights, the Steamport buzzes with activity. Tucked away amongst the bustling dirigibles, the *Starling* rests, a formidable vessel radiating an amalgam of steam and magical energy. Once the characters reach the Steamport, read aloud:

The Steamport is bustling with activity, and the air is filled with the hiss of steam and the creaking of gears. Dirigibles of varying sizes, their magnificent frames aglow with the shimmer of aether, are tethered to towering mooring masts. Dockworkers hustle throughout the port, their faces smeared with soot as they load and unload cargo or direct the massive automatons assisting with the larger items.

The *Starling's* envelope glistens with a stunning silver sheen, reflecting the hues of the Etherian sky at various times of the day. Streaks of royal blue and bright gold race along the envelope's length. Suspended beneath the envelope, the gondola is made primarily from a robust blend of dark ironwood and reinforced steel. The gondola features a forward cabin with large, arched windows offering panoramic views. The central deck area is nestled behind the cabin, equipped with various navigational and control instruments, extending towards a rear cargo hold. On either side, two large propellers mounted on articulated arms, all gears and pipes exposed, ready to propel the ship forward. The underside, lined with reinforced plating, bears the signs of countless voyages, yet it stands resilient against the test of time and weather.

Any of the dockworkers can point the party toward the *Starling* and Ren's office. Ren is busy with his work and irritated at the party's interruption. However, presenting the package from Juna will automatically soften his demeanor.

THE FIRST MATE

Tall, grizzled, and sharp-eyed, Ren is a seasoned sailor and navigator. His age is evident in his salt-and-pepper hair and creased face, but his bright blue eyes, filled

with a lifetime of knowledge, betray his vitality. While Ren may initially come off as stern and somewhat standoffish, revealing Juna's package shifts his attitude to a more accommodating one.

If the characters broke the seal on the package, Ren notices and charges a fee of 1 ap to decode their note. Otherwise, he accepts the package with a small smile.

Decoding the Note. After accepting the package from the party, Ren breaks the wax seal and peeks inside with a deep inhalation. "A bribe from Juna, I see. Alright, what do ya need?" he says before biting into a cookie.

After a few minutes of work, Ren decrypts the note, which points to a location deep within the verdant expanse of the Emerald Canopy. If the characters have already decoded the note themselves, he verifies their findings and adds additional context based on his extensive knowledge of the Etheria region.

Negotiating Passage. Ren offers passage to Outpost Hurlock, a small settlement near the mapped location that happens to be on the *Starling's* next supply run in the morning. Payment can be negotiated with a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Persuasion) check, offering to work on the *Starling* for half wages (10 sp), or paying the passenger fee of 1 ap per character. The negotiation check is made with disadvantage if the characters opened the package. If the characters fail the Persuasion check, Ren stands firm on his price for passage, and the characters must find the means to pay or accept the offer for work.

Once passage has been negotiated, the characters must return in the morning for departure to the Emerald Canopy.

CHARACTER ADVANCEMENT

Choosing an endpoint for a session depends on pacing and narrative tension. Ideally, a session ends with a moment of closure yet carries an element of anticipation for the next meeting. Two fitting pauses in this adventure could be after the brawl at the Rusty Gear tavern or upon successful negotiation for passage aboard the *Starling* dirigible. Regardless of the chosen stopping point, this adventure stage marks significant growth for the characters. The experience gained from handling the Storm Jackals and navigating passage to the Emerald Canopy should propel the characters to the 2nd level and prepare them for the continued challenges ahead.

PART 2: THE CANOPY

Once the party is ready to board the *Starling*, they get an up-close experience of the craft's majesty, the metallic behemoth rumbling beneath them as the hum of magitech fills the air. The crew efficiently bustles about, preparing for departure, casting off ropes, and cranking wheels. If the characters paid for their passage, they are shown to their rooms where they can rest and relax.

Otherwise, if the party bartered their services, they are shown to the crew quarters before being put to work and help prepare the ship for departure.

The dirigible takes off 1 hour after the party arrives. Read aloud the following once the airship is underway:

As the Starling's engines roar to life, the ground beneath you drops away. The cityscape of Iron Heights recedes as the dirigible ascends, quickly replaced with a bird's eye view of the Expanse. The verdant green of the Emerald Canopy stretches below you, and the crackling darkness of the Aetherstorm dominates the horizon. The hum of the engines and the whistling wind are your only companions on this voyage.

Halfway through their flight, the *Starling* (see Appendix for statistics) is assaulted by a massive swarm of aether-buzzards. These winged monstrosities have wings that shimmer with blue-green energy and razor-sharp crystal talons. The magitech engines of the *Starling* attracted them, and they descend upon the dirigible, scratching against the metal hull as they try to breach the gondola. While the crew works the cannons against the bulk of the flock, four aether-buzzards (they use **giant owl** statistics, and their Talons deal lightning damage instead of slashing).

Once the flock has been defeated, the rest of the trip to Outpost Hurlock is uneventful. Ren pays double the party's fee for their assistance in defending the ship. He thanks them for their help and says they're welcome aboard the flight back to Iron Heights when the *Starling* returns in a few days.



AETHER-INFUSED WOLF



OUTPOST HURLOCK

ARRIVAL AT OUTPOST HURLOCK

The *Starling* eventually reaches Outpost Hurlock, a secluded encampment in the heart of the Emerald Canopy. The small outpost is a bustling hub of frontier life, filled with miners, explorers, and other adventurers prepping for or returning from their adventures into the Canopy. Life here is rough, but the people are robust, their faces marked by the trials and tribulations of living in the wilderness.

Spending an hour in Gary's Place, the local tavern run by a half-orc named Sam, can glean several helpful pieces of information:

- A few of the more veteran explorers speak of a recent uptick in aether activity deep within the Canopy. While such energy surges are not uncommon, their frequency and intensity have been unusual. This might explain the increased aggressiveness of the local wildlife.
- Whispered tales tell of the ruins of the ancient Astromagi Dominion that lie hidden in the Canopy. Said to be remnants of a time when magitech was far more prevalent, these ruins may contain artifacts of considerable power or dangerous traps left by their previous owners.

- Aether-infused plants and creatures are common in the Canopy, but there have been talks of increasingly dangerous mutations occurring. Overexposure to aether can have unpredictable effects on the local wildlife, making them bigger, more aggressive, or even granting them unusual abilities.
- Several explorers have gone missing recently, their last known locations aligning suspiciously well with the area the party is headed towards. This could mean danger or potential allies in the forest.

If you wish to use this information to create further adventures in the Canopy, use the “Crafting Adventures” chapter in the *Etheria: Rage of the Aetherstorm* sourcebook.

ENTERING THE CANOPY

The Emerald Canopy is a vast and mesmerizing jungle that pulsates with life at the heart of the Expanse. Towering trees glow with a soft, arcane light, their leaves shimmering emeralds in the perpetual lightning of the Aetherstorm. This luminous forest, infused with magic, has fostered a unique ecosystem rich with mystical flora and fauna. However, the Canopy is not merely a place of beauty and wonder. The jungle teems with creatures

that blur the line between the natural and the supernatural, making the Canopy equally breathtaking and dangerous.

Once the party is ready to head into the Canopy, read aloud the following:

As you step into the Emerald Canopy, the cacophony of the outpost gives way to an almost serene silence, broken only by the distant calls of unseen creatures and the occasional rustle of leaves. Towering trees stretch as far as the eye can see, their trunks, thick with moss, disappearing into a canopy of vibrant green and purple leaves. The air is thick and humid, heavy with the smell of damp earth and rich vegetation.

The location outlined in the encrypted note points to a location 9 hours away from Outpost Hurlock through difficult terrain. Navigating through the Emerald Canopy tests the party's endurance and survival skills. For every 2 hours of travel, the party must make a group DC 15 Wisdom (Survival) check. On a failure, roll a d20 on the Random Travel Encounters table to determine what the party stumbles across, re-rolling on duplicates. Refer to the "Traveling the Expanse" section in the *Etheria: Rage of the Aetherstorm* sourcebook.

Once the party makes their way through the Canopy, they discover ancient, overgrown ruins that hold the secret hideout of the Storm Jackals. Read aloud the following when they arrive:

As you traverse the final stretch of luminescent underbrush, the thick jungle canopy suddenly breaks, revealing a spectacle of ancient grandeur twisted by time and nature. Shattered towers of weathered metal and seamless stone rise out of the forest floor, their once-pristine surfaces now scored by the persistent efforts of overgrown foliage. The skeletal remains of colossal arches loom among the treetops, teetering precariously as they cling to the vestiges of their former splendor.

At this point, the party can choose to find a space within the ruins to take a short or long rest. If they take a long rest, they may be interrupted by any of the many denizens that randomly roam through this area at your discretion.

HIDEOUT ENTRANCE

A 10 minutes search of the area uncovers a traveled path through the ruins that lead to a set of stairs. At the bottom are a pair of scorched iron doors that appear to have been blown inwards by a powerful blast. Beyond is a winding tunnel with flickering red lights along the wall.

Once the party enters the hideout, proceed to Part 3.

RANDOM TRAVEL ENCOUNTERS

d20	Result
1-3	An unpredictable wild magic storm descends, obscuring vision and confusing senses. Each character must succeed on a DC 15 Intelligence saving through or wander off the path, extending the travel time by an hour per failure.
4-6	The path forward is blocked by colossal aether-infused vines. A DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check or magical means (at least 20 points of fire damage) is required to clear it. Failing this check or causing using fire damage agitates a giant constrictor snake hiding in the foliage.
7-9	A shimmering spring with aether-infused water presents an opportunity for rest. Drinking the glowing water restores 1d10 hit points but requires a successful DC 12 Constitution saving throw to avoid temporary mutations such as glowing skin or luminescent breath.
10-12	A pack of three aether-infused wolves, their hides perfectly mimicking the emerald vegetation, attack. They use wolf statistics with an added resistance to magic damage, and their corrosive bite deals an additional 2 (1d4) acid damage.
13-15	A weary Etherian half-elf explorer named Tylo, wounded and lost from Outpost Hurlock, pleads for assistance. If healed and given directions back, he gratefully shares valuable information about the trails that removes 1 hour from the remaining travel time.
16-18	An aetherite crystal vein sparkles from a rock face. Mining requires a successful DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check, yielding 1d6+2 tiny aetherite crystals (25 gp each). A failure shatters the crystal into 3d8+2 aetherite shards (1 gp each).
19-20	The party makes excellent time through the jungle and removes 2 hours from the remaining travel time.



HIDEOUT ENTRY HALL

PART 3: THE RUINS

In this part of the adventure, the party explores the ancient Astromagi ruins that now serve as the stronghold of the Storm Jackals. A recent devastating conflict with the Crimson Cogs has left the once-secure hideout in chaos, its guardians slain or scattered. Complicating matters, the wild denizens of the Emerald Canopy have started encroaching upon the facility, and a myriad of arcane security defenses still lurk in the shadowed corridors of the hideout. At the heart of the pandemonium, the Jackals' leader, in a desperate act of self-preservation, has morphed into an aether-infused abomination, losing his sanity to the magitech he hoped would be his salvation.

STORM JACKAL HIDEOUT

Burrowed beneath an overgrown Astromagi ruin lies the secret hideout of the Storm Jackals. The outer ruins, once a grand structure of metal and magically smooth stone, are now being slowly reclaimed by the Emerald Canopy. Concealed beneath this wilderness facade, a network of underground passages and chambers stretch deep into the earth, created in the time of the ancient

Astromagi and subsequently refurbished by the Storm Jackals for their covert operations.

Once an archaeological gem filled with technological wonders of a bygone era, the hideout has seen recent tumultuous events. It was the scene of a brutal assault by the Crimson Cogs in response to the Storm Jackals' attempt to raise their price for the theft of the Aethercore. The Cogs blasted through the complex's security measures, decimated the Jackals, and recovered the Aethercore before the party's arrival.

The hideout is a place of chaos and danger in the aftermath of the attack. Unchecked vegetation from the Canopy, now free to grow through breaches in the complex, has begun to claim the once-pristine halls. Wandering beasts and damaged infrastructure provide hazards for anyone brave or foolish enough to venture within.

Deep within the complex, the Jackals' leader, having fused himself with a magitech suit in a desperate last stand against the Cogs, succumbed too late to halt their advance. Now trapped in his metallic prison, he exists in a state of madness, his mind being consumed by the machine.





Lower Level

Storm Jackal Hideout

1 SQUARE = 5 FEET



Ground Level

GENERAL FEATURES

These general features are prominent throughout the Storm Jackals Hideout unless otherwise noted in the area descriptions.

Ceilings, Floors, and Walls. The ceilings are uniformly 15 feet high, apart from larger chambers which reach 20 to 30 feet tall. Floors consist of worn, smooth stone tiles and piles of rubble that are difficult terrain. The walls in the hideout are industrial, composed of metallic piping and smooth granite with the occasional display of faint arcane symbols.

Doors. Doors in the hideout are made of iron and show scorch marks and dents from the recent attack.

Lights. Dim light is supplied throughout the hideout by flickering glow lamps damaged in the recent assault. They are all flashing a red alert from the security warning button in the Guard Post (area 2). They change to a warm orange light once the system has been deactivated.

Climate. The underground hideout maintains a cool temperature, although the incursion of jungle vegetation has led to damp conditions and a musty smell.

KEYED LOCATIONS

The following descriptions correspond to the keyed locations on the provided map of the Storm Jackals Hideout.

1. ENTRY HALL

The entry hall sets the stage for the facility's battle-scarred condition, hinting at the presence of some danger lurking ahead. Once the party enters the hideout, read:

As you push past the warped iron doors, the scent of recently discharged energy and blood fills the air. A staircase descends into a dim corridor lit by flickering red globes along the walls. Scorch marks line the walls, and smoke plumes from remnants of wall-mounted magitech devices. Blood stains the walls and floor in a trail leading deeper into the complex.

Characters who succeed on a DC 13 Wisdom (Perception) check here the sound of crunching and slurping from the aether bear in area 2 echoing from a bend in the corridor to the south.

Treasure. The wall-mounted clockwork blasters can be removed using tinkerer's tools with a successful DC 15 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check. Inside each is a tiny aetherite crystal worth 25 ap. The machines themselves are too damaged to salvage beyond scrap metal.

2. GUARD POST

The guard post reflects the dual nature of its purpose, bearing both the marks of a utilitarian duty station and a leisurely retreat. After the Crimson Cogs attacked, some of the roaming creatures in the Canopy found

their way down and discovered a buffet waiting for them, including the deceased Storm Jackal guard stationed there. Once the characters make their way here, read aloud or paraphrase the following:

A large, dented metal counter stands in the center of this chamber, guarding an iron door that hangs open freely, having been ripped from its hinges. Mismatched chairs and a card table are haphazardly strewn across the room. Peeking from behind the desk is the back of a furred creature covered in blue vegetation. The crunching sounds grow louder as it appears to be eating something out of sight.

The creature is an **aether bear** (see the Appendix for statistics), an aether-infused mix of a bear and vegetation, and the metal counter provides the full cover while it enjoys its meal. The creature can be taken by surprise if the party moves stealthily and succeeds on a group DC 13 Dexterity (Stealth) check. Otherwise, the ether-beast notices the party and roars in challenge before attacking.

Alarm Button. A button under the desk can be found with a DC 13 Wisdom (Perception) check. Pushing it causes the red lights in the hideout to change to a soft white bright light.

Treasure. Searching the deceased guard reveals a small pouch of 15 ap, a clockwork puzzle toy (5 ap), and a pair of loaded dice.



CRIMSON COGS

The Crimson Cogs are a secret society dedicated to hunting down those they believe to be the culprits of Etheria's current state—the Astromagi. This faction, composed mostly of scholars, former soldiers, and skilled hunters, blames the Astromagi for the Aetherstorm and the resulting chaos, believing that their unchecked tampering with arcane forces led to the catastrophe. Their ultimate goal is to prevent the rise of a new Astromagi Dominion and further destruction of their world.

Their leader, known only as The Grand Gear, is a mysterious figure who has never been seen without his elaborate mask, shaped and painted like a crimson cog. He is a charismatic leader whose rallying speeches and strategic intellect have garnered the loyalty of the Cogs' members. His past is shrouded in mystery, but rumors suggest he was a scholar who lost his family in the Aetherstorm.

The Crimson Cogs operate mainly from hidden bases in the Expanse, although their influence extends across all of Etheria. They are known for their guerrilla tactics and espionage, often infiltrating Astromagi sympathizers' ranks to expose their plans. Their operatives are everywhere, always watching, always waiting to strike when the time is right.

3. MAIN HALL

The main hall is split into two levels. The walkways of the upper hall lead to the Storm Jackals' Dormitory (area 4) and Dining Hall (area 5). The lower level was a gathering place for large meetings and where a Storm Jackal is currently barely clinging to life. Once the characters enter this area, read aloud:

The grandeur of the two-story hall strikes you as you enter an upper walkway overlooking an open chamber below. Broad steps descend into a lower hall filled with the remains of fallen Storm Jackals amidst the wreckage of shattered tables and chairs. The northern walkway leads to two separate doors, and the southern to a single closed exit bearing scorch marks. At the far end of the walkway is an open stairwell standing next to a set of silvery doors.

The lower hall holds the wreckage of furniture, an entrance to the stairwell and elevator, and a small lavatory. A search of the destruction uncovers the bodies of half a dozen Storm Jackals killed in the battle with the Crimson Cogs and one barely clinging to life.

When the characters enter the lower hall, read aloud or paraphrase:

A weak groan drifts from behind a broken table. Ahead, slumped against the wall, is a figure in tattered Jackal garb. The breaths he draws are ragged and shallow, each one seeming to take immense effort.

The figure is Crag, a lower-ranking member of the Storm Jackals. The characters have 1d4 rounds before he perishes from his injuries. If the characters choose to help him, a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Medicine) check stabilizes him. Alternatively, a healing spell or potion also prevents his imminent death.

Should the party choose to save Crag, he is grateful and willing to talk. He willingly shares the following information:

- The hideout was attacked by a group wearing red leather outfits and masks known as the Crimson Cogs (see the "Crimson Cogs" sidebar).
- They used highly advanced magitech weapons during their assault.
- He wasn't involved in the Aethercore heist and doesn't know the Crimson Cogs' connection.
- He can share the general layout of the complex and warns the characters about the red buttons near the silvery doors that give a nasty shock (see area 3a for more details).
- Captain Stromgarde Thundertusk is the leader of the Jackals, and his workshop and the vault are down below.

Crag has no interest in learning the fate of the rest of the Jackals and flees the facility as soon as possible, wishing to take his chances alone in the Canopy.

Treasure. A total of 20 ap, 35 sp, and 18 cp can be recovered from the remains of the fallen Jackals.

3A. ELEVATOR

The handleless doors lead to an inoperative elevator linking the upper, lower, and subterranean levels. The Jackals unsuccessfully looked for years to find the mechanism to open the doors, leaving them closed out of fear of what might lie behind them.

Activating the Elevator. Power can be restored to the elevator using the security panel hidden in the control room (area 5a). Before the elevator is powered, pressing any call button triggers an electrical shock. The creature pressing the button must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 2 (1d4) lightning damage on a failed save or half as much damage on a successful one.

Inside the Elevator. Upon activation, the buttons summon the elevator to the chosen level. The heavy doors slide apart with a muted hum, revealing a 10-foot square chamber that can fit up to 1 Large, 6 Medium, or 8 Small creatures.

The elevator floor is covered in cracked stone tiles, and the walls are made from the same smooth metal as the doors, although with added layers of wear and tear. Centuries of grim streak the surface, and a dim light pulsates from several tiny crystals embedded along the upper walls. When the doors open, an aged, crackling orchestral tune emanates from a cracked purple crystal fixed in the ceiling. This crystal is an ancient music player, a relic of the Astromagi era. With a successful DC 14 Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check using tinkerer's tools, the crystal can be carefully removed without causing further damage. On a failure, the crystal cracks further and is rendered useless. This artifact, a piece of historical novelty, could fetch up to 25 ap if sold to the right collector.

Using the Elevator. A three-button control panel is mounted on one wall, each marked with a symbol corresponding to its respective level. A successful DC 17 Intelligence (History) check reveals the same ancient Astromagi language on the note that led the party here. The symbols correspond to the original names of each floor, starting at the bottom level: 1. Golem Fabrication, 2. Aetherium Infusion Lab, and 3. Arcane Analysis Archives. These hint at the complex's original use as an automaton research facility.

Pressing any button closes the doors and moves the elevator smoothly and silently to the chosen floor. However, the first time the elevator is used to move downwards, it drops much faster than normal due to not being used in centuries. Creatures inside the elevator must succeed on a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw or take 1 bludgeoning damage from the fall and land prone.

4. DORMITORY

The Dormitory served as collective living quarters for the Storm Jackals, providing a space for rest and solitude away from their activities. Unlike the rest of the hideout, this area was empty during the attack and remains untouched by the Crimson Cogs' assault. Read aloud the following when the characters enter this chamber:

As you enter the door, a starkly arranged living space reveals itself. Rows of metallic bunk beds, their frames chipped and dented, march in tidy order along the room's length. A sturdy locker stands at the foot of each bed, many bearing the marks of rough usage. A small seating area with a low table and a handful of mismatched chairs occupies one corner.

Treasure. One of the lockers at the farthest corner contains a false bottom that can be found with a successful DC 13 Intelligence (Investigation) check. Inside this compartment is a gold signet ring set with a tiny ruby worth 50 ap, a cunningly crafted deck of marked playing cards, and an intriguing scroll case. The case holds a complex map of the Stormshard Mountains with cryptic symbols (possible future adventure or treasure locations at the GM's discretion).

Enhancement Kit. A character searching under the beds finds a sleek metallic case. The case is protected by an electrical trap that can be found with a successful DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check. Disarming it requires a successful DC 15 Dexterity check using thieves' tools. On a failed attempt, the trap is triggered, releasing a surge of energy. The creature must make a DC 13 Constitution saving throw, taking 3 (1d6) lightning damage on a failed save or half as much damage on a successful one.

The latch opens with a soft hiss, revealing the meticulously arranged set of tools and a small assortment of glittering aetherite fragments of an *enhancement kit* (see the Appendix).



VINE VIPER

5. DINING HALL

The northern door was slammed shut in the turmoil and jammed. It can be forced open with a successful DC 17 Strength (Athletics) check. The eastern entrance is closed and opens easily. Read aloud the following when the party enters the room:

As you push open the heavy northern door, a large dome-shaped chamber sprawls before you, its walls covered in leafy vines. In one corner, a rudimentary kitchen still holds the remnants of a hasty meal, while a small dining area has mismatched furniture. Among the creepers descending from the high ceiling, three serpentine forms slither, their verdant scales shimmering with a luminescent glow.

Three **vine vipers** (see the Appendix) followed the scent of blood from the skirmish, crawling through the greenery-infested walls from the exterior canopy. They'll lash out at any who come close, using their Aether abilities as necessary. The vine vipers are primarily interested in food and self-preservation. A character who offers at least 10 pounds of food and succeeds on a DC 15 Wisdom (Animal Handling) check calms the serpents, and they retreat into the vines above.

5A. SECRET CONTROL ROOM

Hidden behind the curtain of vines is a secret control room that the Storm Jackals have yet to find. The hidden panel to press that unlocks the door can be found with a successful DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check. If the characters did not disable the alarm lights in area 2, this check can be made with advantage as the warning lights in the control room leak through a crack in the wall, hinting at its location.

Control Panels. The 15-foot-square room is covered in metal panels with blinking lights, levers, and buttons. A successful DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana or History) check allows a character to discern the purpose of the clockwork panels—they control certain aspects of the hideout's functions. Depending on the roll, they can gain control of various aspects:

- **DC 10:** They can turn the red warning lights back to normal.
- **DC 13:** They can power the elevator (area 3a).
- **DC 15:** They can deactivate the steam hazard in the stairwell (area 6).
- **DC 20:** They activate the security drone, and it follows their commands.

Security Drone. Failing the control panel checks by 5 or more, they accidentally activate a security protocol, and a wall panel slides open to reveal a hostile humanoid automaton that uses **animated armor** statistics. When defeated, the automaton collapses into a heap that can be scavenged for spare parts worth 50 ap.



COMMANDER STROMGARDE

6. STAIRWELL

The stairwell comprises three floors, each 10 feet high, and is dimly lit with flickering lights. On each floor, a broken steam pipe intermittently releases a jet of scalding steam that fills that section of the stairwell. Read aloud or paraphrase the following when the party enters the stairwell without releasing the steam pressure first:

The sheen of metal steps shimmers in the dim light. The warm air is punctuated by the hiss of escaping steam, filling the stairwell with mist.

Any creature entering or starting its turn in the steam-filled space must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw, taking 4 (1d8) fire damage on a failed save or half as much damage on a successful one.

Disabling Steam. The characters can avoid the scalding steam by jumping down the center of the stairwell, taking 3 (1d6) bludgeoning damage for every 10 feet fallen. Alternatively, the steam pressure in the stairs can be relieved in the control room (area 5a).

7. WORKSHOP

Read aloud the following when the characters enter this room:

Pushing past the threshold, your senses are overwhelmed by the stench of oil, metal, and blood. Twisted bodies lay strewn among haphazardly placed machinery and tools, silent witnesses to a brutal conflict. Dominating the center of the chamber is an enormous, mechanized behemoth on a pair of massive wheels. Behind the slits of its armored head are a pair of wild eyes gleaming with manic intensity. A hollow voice, strained and cracked with madness, echoes in the cavernous room, 'The crimson tides won't cease... they must be held... WE ARE THE WALL!'

The workshop is a chaotic assemblage of machinery where the Jackals' enhancements were forged. The twisted bodies of Jackals lay strewn across the floor from where they fell during their last-ditch effort to defend their vault. Commander Stromgarde Thundertusk attempted to activate a suit of magitech armor using an ancient Astromagi interface that broke his mind. The Crimson Cogs managed to take the Aethercore and escape before he could finish the activation, however, and



he has become trapped within the machine and driven to madness.

THE COMMANDER

Commander Stromgarde is infused with a **magitech armored golem** (see the Appendix). He uses his Charge action to close the distance with melee attacks and uses his Scrap Launcher at spellcasters. He uses his Repair Mode to regain hit points when he drops below half his hit points.

When the characters defeat the Commander, he regains a moment of lucidity and warns the party of the Crimson Cogs' actual target: Luminary Haven. Read aloud or paraphrase the following once the party defeats the golem:

The behemoth shudders, gears grinding and cogs slipping before collapsing with a resounding crash. The eyes in the cockpit lose their manic intensity, replaced with a glimmer of sanity. A hoarse whisper carries through the room, 'They took everything... everything... Luminary Haven... must not fall to... to those Crimson bastards...' The voice trails off, leaving only the echo of the final plea.

Treasure. While the armored golem is unsalvageable, its existence implies the workshop contains valuable components and tools. A character who spends 1 hour searching the scraps can find treasures hidden amidst the debris and machinery with a successful Intelligence (Investigation) check using the DCs, according to the table below. Each treasure can only be found once, and all treasures with lower DCs than the result are found during that hour.

DC Treasure Found

- | | |
|----|--|
| 5 | An assortment of valuable tools worth 50 ap. |
| 10 | 1d4+1 tiny aetherite crystals (25 ap each). |
| 15 | A small, unmarked box holds two <i>potions of healing</i> . |
| 20 | An ancient aetherite pistol with a built-in aetherite crystal that operates like a <i>wand of magic missiles</i> (7 charges, 1st-level only, does not recharge). |

8. COMMANDER'S QUARTERS

The commander's private quarters, a room filled with rich decorations and critical tactical resources, are a stark deviation from the otherwise austere aesthetic of the hideout.

Various personal artifacts that reflect the commander's tastes and past are scattered around the room. Among these are a collection of military medals, a set of encrypted letters about past heists, and a miniature painted portrait of a female orc bandit in steampunk-style armor, possibly a loved one.

Commander's Desk. The large mahogany desk is the centerpiece of the room. Upon it lies an assortment of maps depicting various parts of the Emerald Canopy, many with markings and annotations that hint at potential targets or routes. A detailed map of Luminary

Haven is pinned to the top of the desk, a dagger marking its city center.

Searching the desk reveals a drawer holding the commander's personal log. Spending at least 10 minutes perusing the record reveals key information: the Aethercore was not part of a random theft by the Jackals, but a heist commissioned by the Crimson Cogs (see the "Crimson Cogs" sidebar). The log hints that the Aethercore was stored within the vault, as the commander hoped to renegotiate a higher payment by withholding the delivery to Luminary Haven.

Treasure. While exploring the room, a successful DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check uncovers a small cache hidden behind a loose panel in the wall, containing a velvet pouch filled with 30 ap and 1d4+1 tiny aetherite crystals (25 ap each).

9. VAULT

Once teeming with the Storm Jackals' amassed wealth, the vault now stands emptied and desolate. Its massive doors are left gaping open, a silent testament to the hurried pillaging. Signs of rapid looting are evident throughout the chamber: discarded lockboxes, empty chests turned over, and open drawers hint at the hasty search. Despite this initial appearance of vacancy, the vault is not devoid of valuables.

Treasure. A methodical search of the vault can uncover overlooked valuables in the cavernous space, including a cache of 1d6+2 aetherite crystals, a hefty pouch containing 300 ap, and a unique piece of magitech: an *aether amplifier* (see the Appendix).

CONCLUSION

As the characters leave the silent, hollow remains of the Astromagi Complex behind, they return to Iron Heights carrying the heavy knowledge of the Storm Jackals' fate and the unsettling mysteries that remain unsolved. Their meeting with Balthazar Gearwright is a somber affair, the absence of the Aethercore casting a long shadow over the gathering.

Gearwright listens attentively, his expression grave as he processes the news of the Crimson Cogs' manipulation of the Storm Jackals and the looming threat they now represent. The missing Aethercore is a blow to his efforts, yet Gearwright remains resolute. His eyes glint with steely determination as he pays the promised fee for tracking down the thieves. Balthazar briefly looks upon the party before tasking them with their next critical mission: Travel to Luminary Haven, track down the elusive Crimson Cogs and discover their malicious plot.

The next part of the Shattered Core series, entitled *Crimson Shadows*, explores Luminary Haven, a city deep in the Emerald Canopy controlled by wild aether sorcerers descended from the ancient Astromagi. As the epitome of what the Crimson Cogs hate, the city is in grave peril from their plans and the powerful Aethercore.

APPENDIX

Information regarding the monsters and magic items introduced in this adventure can be found here.

MONSTERS

This section holds the statistics for the new monsters introduced in this adventure:

AETHER BEAR

This enormous bear, standing well over eight feet tall, is no ordinary creature. Its thick fur has a shimmering iridescence, seeming to ripple with energy and the patterns within it forming mesmerizing, astral constellations. Its eyes glow with an uncanny, pale blue luminescence. As it moves, the air around it shimmers, hinting at the raw aetheric power coursing through its massive form.

AETHER BEAR						
<i>Large Beast, unaligned</i>						
Armor Class 11						
Hit Points 34 (4d10 + 12)						
Speed 40 ft., climb 30 ft.						
STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA	
20 (+5)	10 (+0)	16 (+3)	2 (-4)	13 (+1)	7 (-2)	
Skills Perception +3						
Senses passive Perception 13						
Languages —						
Challenge 2 (450 XP)			Proficiency Bonus: +2			
Keen Smell. The bear has advantage on Wisdom (Perception) checks that rely on smell.						
Aether Surge. When the aether bear is reduced to half its hit points or less, it taps into its aetheric reserves. It gains advantage on all attack rolls, ability checks, and saving throws until the end of its next turn. The bear can use Aether Surge once per short or long rest.						
ACTIONS						
Multiattack. The bear makes two attacks: one with its Bite and one with its Claws.						
Bite. <i>Melee Weapon Attack:</i> +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. <i>Hit:</i> 9 (1d8 + 5) piercing damage.						
Claws. <i>Melee Weapon Attack:</i> +7 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. <i>Hit:</i> 12 (2d6 + 5) slashing damage.						

AETHERFORGED BRAWLER

Constructed of a combination of resilient alloys and vibrant aetherite crystals, this seven-foot-tall figure is an imposing sight. The Aetherforged Brawler is built like a heavyweight pugilist, its solid frame designed for physical combat. Veins of aetherite trace along its metallic body, glowing with a soft, pulsating light. Its eyes blaze with the same vibrant energy, revealing a level of sentience unusual for a construct. With each movement, there's a quiet hum of energy, underscoring its readiness for battle.

AETHERFORGED BRAWLER						
<i>Medium Construct, any alignment</i>						
Armor Class 16 (Natural Armor)						
Hit Points 40 (5d8 + 20)						
Speed 30 ft.						
STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA	
18 (+4)	12 (+1)	18 (+4)	10 (+0)	10 (+0)	6 (-2)	
Damage Immunities poison, psychic						
Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, poisoned						
Senses passive Perception 10						
Languages Common and the languages of its creator						
Challenge 2 (450 XP)			Proficiency Bonus: +2			
Aether Infusion. The brawler's unarmed strikes are magical. When it hits with an unarmed strike, it can expend a charge of its Aether Core to deal an additional 1d6 force damage (included in the attack). It has 3 charges which replenish at dawn.						
Constructed Resilience. The brawler has advantage on saving throws against being paralyzed, petrified, or stunned.						
ACTIONS						
Multiattack. The brawler makes two Unarmed Strikes.						
Unarmed Strike. <i>Melee Weapon Attack:</i> +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. <i>Hit:</i> 7 (1d6 + 4) bludgeoning damage plus 3 (1d6) force damage.						
Aether Burst (Recharge 5-6). The brawler releases a burst of aether energy. Each creature within 10 feet of it must make a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw, taking 14 (4d6) force damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.						

MAGITECH ARMORED GOLEM

The Magitech Armored Golems, a testament to the wonders of arcane engineering, can assume various configurations to meet diverse battle demands. Each golem, a union of metallic plates and aether-infused glyphs, carries an air of deadly power. The most traditional form is the bipedal model, built for versatility and adaptability. Its towering silhouette, equipped with a range of deadly armaments, strikes a balance between mobility and destructive capacity, capable of traversing diverse terrains with each resonating step.

However, some golems are adapted for speed and stability, designed with wheeled or tracked lower sections. Wheeled golems boast incredible acceleration, their form streamlined for swift maneuvers on smooth terrains. The tracked versions, on the other hand, are slow but relentless, designed to traverse the most challenging landscapes with ease. Regardless of the configuration, each golem's heart contains a cockpit with an intricate array of magitech controls, allowing the user to command these mechanical beasts with lethal precision. Every variant, in its way, showcases the arcane craftsmanship of their creators, promising formidable opposition to any foe.

MAGITECH ARMORED GOLEM

Large Construct, unaligned

Armor Class 16 (natural armor)

Hit Points 60 (8d10 + 16)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4)	11 (+0)	15 (+2)	3 (-4)	10 (+0)	1 (-5)

Damage Resistances poison, psychic

Condition Immunities charmed, exhaustion, frightened, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned

Senses darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 10

Languages understands the languages of its creator but can't speak

Challenge 3 (700 XP)

Proficiency Bonus: +2

Aetherite Infusion. The golem is powered by a core of magical aetherite crystal. Any spell of 2nd level or higher cast directly at the golem has a chance of being absorbed, causing the golem to regain a number of hit points equal to the spell's level times three. The golem makes a Constitution saving throw against the spell's DC. On a successful save, the spell is absorbed.

Immutable Form. The golem is immune to any spell or effect that would alter its form.

Magic Resistance. The golem has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

Magic Weapons. The golem's weapon attacks are magical.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The golem makes two melee attacks or two ranged attacks.

Slam. Melee Weapon Attack: +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 13 (2d8 + 4) bludgeoning damage.

Scrap Launcher. Ranged Weapon Attack: +6 to hit, range 80/320 ft., one target. Hit: 11 (2d6 + 4) piercing damage.

Aetheric Overcharge (Recharge 5-6). The golem overloads its aetherite core, releasing a blast of energy. Each creature within 10 feet of the golem must make a DC 14 Dexterity saving throw, taking 14 (4d6) radiant damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. After using Aetheric Overcharge, the golem cannot use its Repair Mode feature for 1 round.

BONUS ACTIONS

Repair Mode. The golem uses aetherite energy to repair itself, regaining 2d6 hit points. It can't use this bonus action if it used Aetheric Overcharge in the same round.

ENGINEER

This non-descript individual is clothed in oil-stained work coveralls. Their hands are calloused from a lifetime of handling rough materials and tools. A welding mask perched on their head hides much of their face, but their eyes shine with the keen intelligence of a seasoned craftsman. They carry a tool belt filled with an assortment of strange, mechanical instruments and tools. Despite their humble appearance, they exude a sense of competence and confidence, indicating they are not to be underestimated.

ENGINEER

Small Humanoid (any race), any alignment

Armor Class 12 (Leather Armor)

Hit Points 27 (6d6 + 6)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
8 (-1)	14 (+2)	12 (+1)	16 (+3)	12 (+1)	10 (+0)

Skills Investigation +5, Perception +3

Senses passive Perception 13

Languages Common, and one other language

Challenge 1/4 (50 XP)

Proficiency Bonus: +2

Quick Repair. The engineer can spend an action to restore 1d6 hit points to a construct or a damaged mechanical object using their tinker's tools.

Aether Infused Devices. The engineer carries 3 aether infused devices that they can use as an action. Once used, an aether infused device can't be used again until the next dawn. The engineer carries an aether torch (bright light in a 20-foot radius and dim light for an additional 20 feet), an aether shock device (target must succeed on a DC 13 Dexterity saving throw or take 1d4 lightning damage), and an aether shield (gain a +2 bonus to AC until the start of their next turn).

ACTIONS

Wrench. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 4 (1d4 + 2) bludgeoning damage.

Aetherite Pistol. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, range 40/120 ft., one target. *Hit:* 5 (1d6 + 2) force damage.

GUNFIGHTER

The scent of smoke and gunpowder clings to this daring figure like a second skin. Poised with a casual confidence, a pair of aether-powered pistols sit holstered at their hips. Wearing a blend of practical armor and ostentatious flair, their attire reflects a recklessness that seems inherent to their nature. Keen eyes constantly scan the surroundings, a hand nonchalantly resting on a weapon's grip. An air of danger surrounds them, a promise of violence just below the surface of their seemingly casual demeanor.

GUNFIGHTER

Medium Humanoid (any race), any alignment

Armor Class 14 (leather armor)

Hit Points 22 (5d8)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	16 (+3)	12 (+1)	10 (+0)	12 (+1)	14 (+2)

Skills Acrobatics +5, Perception +3

Senses passive Perception 13

Languages Any one language (usually Common)

Challenge 1/2 (100 XP)

Proficiency Bonus: +2

Aether Pistols. The gunfighter carries two aetherite pistols. These weapons have a normal range of 30 feet and a long range of 90 feet. Each can hold 6 aetherite charges and regains all spent charges daily at dawn.

Bravado. The gunfighter has advantage on saving throws against being frightened.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The gunfighter makes two attacks with their Aetherite Pistols.

Aetherite Pistol. *Ranged Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, range 40/120 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d6 + 3) piercing damage.

BONUS ACTIONS

Fan the Hammer. The gunfighter expends all remaining charges of one of their aether pistols. They make an attack against any number of creatures within 10 feet of a point they can see within their weapon's range, dividing the attacks evenly among the targets. The attacks are made with disadvantage. They can use this action once per short or long rest.

STARLING (AETHER DIRIGIBLE)

The *Starling* is a marvel of magitech engineering, boasting an impressive 120 feet in length. Its hull, constructed of reinforced steel and plated with sheets of aether-infused bronze, gleams under the sunlight. At the helm, located in the ship's forward section, a complex array of brass levers, switches, and dials await the skilled hand of an airship pilot.

The ship's gargantuan size belies its nimble maneuverability, a feat made possible by the Aethercore Engine at its heart. This engine, powered by the inherent properties of aetherite crystals, generates both lift and propulsion, allowing the *Starling* to navigate the skies with surprising grace.

In times of conflict, the *Starling* proves a formidable opponent. Two aether-cannon turrets, mounted on the ship's starboard and port sides, can deliver punishing blasts of radiant energy against adversaries. The ship's pilot can also activate the aether-shield, a defensive mechanism that wraps the ship in a protective aetheric bubble, increasing its armor class.

Moreover, the Aethercore Engine can be pushed into overdrive, granting an additional burst of speed for quick maneuvers or evasive actions. However, such a demand strains the engine, and there is always the risk of a malfunction following its use.

Should the *Starling* take substantial damage, a skilled crew can attempt to perform repairs even in the heat of battle. Repairs are made using the ship's Repair score, which is equal to half its Construction score, and require materials and time. A repairing crew member must make a successful DC 15 Dexterity check, spending one hour and 100 gp in materials for each successful check.

The *Starling* has the following features:

- **Deck Height.** At 15 feet high, the *Starling*'s main deck offers an elevated vantage point, with cannon platforms reaching another 10 feet.
- **Lights.** Interior aetherite lamps give off a soft blue glow, while exterior spotlights can be activated for visibility in darkness, providing bright light in a 120-foot cone and dim light for an additional 120 feet.
- **Rigging.** An intricate network of ladders and walkways crisscrosses the vessel, facilitating the Climbing speed of the crew while on the dirigible.

The *Starling* has the following crew:

- One captain (knight)
- Five officers; a first mate, a bosun, a quartermaster, a surgeon, and a cook (**veteran**)
- Fifteen Engineers (**engineer**)
- Twenty sailors (**commoner**)
- Ten cannons (**guard**)
- Twenty soldiers (**scout**)
- Nine support staff (**commoner**)

STARLING (AETHER DIRIGIBLE)

Gargantuan vehicle (100 ft. by 20 ft.)

Creature Capacity 80 crew, 40 passengers

Cargo Capacity 150 tons

Travel Pace 2.5 miles per hour (60 miles per day)

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
20 (+5)	10 (+0)	20 (+5)	0	0	0

Damage Immunities: poison, psychic

Condition Immunities: blinded, charmed, deafened, exhaustion, frightened, incapacitated, paralyzed, petrified, poisoned, stunned, unconscious

ACTIONS

On its turn, the *Starling* can take 3 actions, choosing from the options below. It can take only 2 actions if it has fewer than forty crew and only 1 action if it has fewer than twenty. It can't take these actions if it has fewer than five crew.

Move. The *Starling* can use its action to move up to its speed of 60 feet in any direction, including ascending or descending.

Fire Cannons. The *Starling* can use its action to fire one or more of its aether cannons. Each cannon must be aimed at a different target, and each attack is resolved separately.

Evasive Maneuvers. The *Starling* can use its action to undertake evasive maneuvers. Until the start of its next turn, any attack roll made against it has disadvantage unless the *Starling* is incapacitated or its speed drops to 0.

HULL

Armor Class 15

Hit Points 350 (damage threshold 15)

CONTROL: HELM

Armor Class 15

Hit Points 50

MOVEMENT: ENVELOPE

Armor Class 13

Hit Points 100; -5 ft. Speed per 25 damage taken

MOVEMENT: PROPELLERS

Armor Class 15

Hit Points 50

Speed (flying) 60 ft.

WEAPONS: AETHER CANNONS (4)

Armor Class 18

Hit Points 25 each

Aether Cannon. Ranged Weapon Attack +6 to hit, range 120/480 ft., one target. Hit: 22 (4d10) force damage.

SPECIAL FEATURES

Ramming. When the *Starling* hits a creature or object with a ram attack, the target takes 13 (2d10 + 2) bludgeoning damage.

Crash. When the *Starling* drops to 0 hit points while in the air, it falls and then crashes, which destroys the vehicle.

Hover. The *Starling* can hover in place. It doesn't fall if it's not moving.

Magitech Engine. The *Starling* has a magical propulsion system that allows it to hover and move through the air. The engine's magic provides the lift necessary for the dirigible to fly.

VINE VIPER

A menacing hiss precedes the slithering arrival of this aether-infused predator. At first glance, it might be mistaken for an ordinary vine due to its deep green scales and trailing, leaf-like fronds. But its bright, luminous eyes and dangerously poised, thorn-like fangs reveal the truth: this is a vine viper, a snake blessed—or cursed—with the wild energy of aether.

VINE VIPER

Medium Beast, unaligned

Armor Class 14 (natural armor)

Hit Points 15 (2d8 + 6)

Speed 30 ft., climb 30 ft., swim 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
10 (+0)	16 (+3)	13 (+1)	1 (-5)	10 (+0)	3 (-4)

Skills Perception +2

Senses blindsight 10 ft., passive Perception 12

Languages —

Challenge 1/2 (100 XP)

Proficiency Bonus: +2

Aether Surge. The viper is infused with aether energy, granting it unique abilities. The viper has a pool of aether points equal to 1d4 (rolled each day at dawn). The viper can use an action to spend points to activate its aether abilities.

- **Radiant Spit** (1 Aether Point). The viper can spit a globule of energy at one creature it can see within 15 feet. The target must succeed on a DC 11 Dexterity saving throw or take 2d4 force damage.
- **Aether Healing** (2 Aether Points). The viper can tap into the aetherite energy within itself to regain 1d6 + 1 hit points.

ACTIONS

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 6 (1d4 + 4) piercing damage, and the target must make a DC 11 Constitution saving throw, taking 10 (3d6) poison damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

MAGIC ITEMS

This section holds the statistics for the new magic items introduced in this adventure:

AETHER AMPLIFIER

Wondrous item (magitech), uncommon (requires attunement by a spellcaster)

Crafted from tiny gears and infused with miniature Aetherite crystals, this hand-sized device enhances the potency of spellcasting.

As an action, you can activate the Aether Amplifier, causing the Aetherite crystals within to illuminate and hum with energy. For 1 hour after activation, you gain a +1 bonus to spell attack rolls. Once used, the Aether Amplifier cannot be activated again until it is recharged. You can recharge the amplifier by expending a tiny Aetherite crystal as a bonus action.

The magical enhancement of the Aether Amplifier does not stack. If you attempt to activate a second Aether Amplifier while already under the effects of another, the newly activated device immediately burns out and loses its magical properties, becoming a mundane item.

AETHERITE ENHANCEMENT KIT

Wondrous item, uncommon

Packed within this unassuming case lies an array of minute Aetherite crystals, arcane-infused oils, and meticulous tools. This kit is designed to temporarily bolster the capabilities of non-magical armor and weapons, granting them a surge of magical energy.

You can spend 10 minutes to apply the kit to a single non-magical weapon or piece of armor, which becomes magical for a duration of 24 hours. A weapon treated with the Aetherite Enhancement Kit receives a +1 bonus to attack rolls and damage rolls. Similarly, armor treated with the kit gains a +1 bonus to its Armor Class. Once used, the Enhancement Kit is depleted and cannot be used again.



AETHER AMPLIFIER



AETHEERITE ENHANCEMENT KIT

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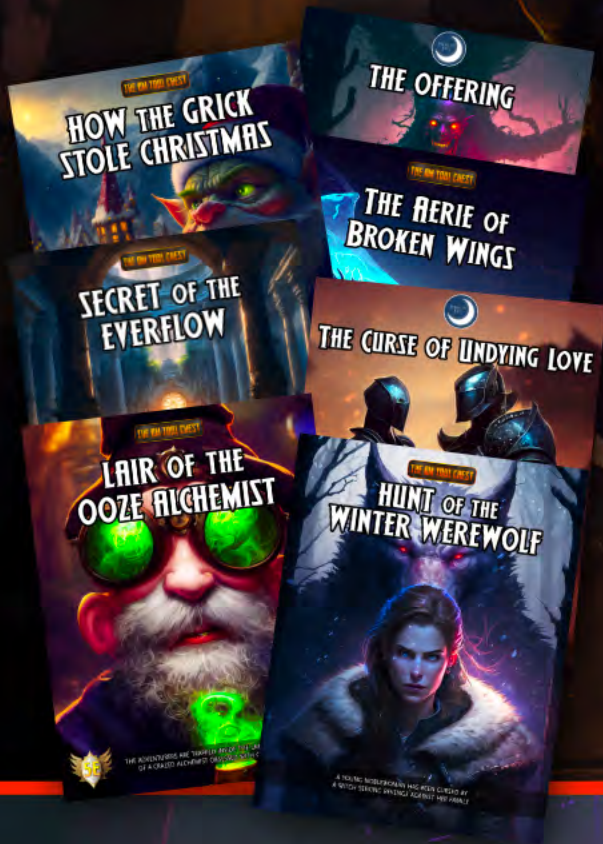
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