



ENsider Presents:

Island at the Axis of the World

Part One

A 5E-Compatible Adventure for 3rd-Level Characters



Introduction

WELCOME TO THE FIRST ADVENTURE IN THE ZEITGEIST adventure path. In this adventure the party will save Risur's king from an assassination attempt, track down the traitor responsible, and play a key role in the conflict between Risur's old allies, the fey Unseen Court, and its traditional enemy, the industrial nation of Danor. This adventure, and the adventures that follow it, are divided into acts. Each month, a new act will be published in EN WORLD ENSIDER.

By the adventure's end, the PCs will have earned the respect of their king, which will place them in a position to tackle ever-greater threats to Risur. They'll also have stumbled upon the slightest hints of the grander conspiracy that drives the events of the campaign.

Before you run this adventure, you'll want to be familiar with all the material herein and in the Campaign and Player's Guides, so you can clear up any questions the players have about the setting and their role as constables. Players should be allowed to review (or keep a copy of) the People of Interest handout (see page 6), which presents NPC illustrations and brief descriptions of NPCs the party would know about at the beginning of the adventure path.

Adapting the Adventure.

This adventure assumes the PCs are agents of the Royal Homeland Constabulary. If your players are free agents, they might be attending the launch of the R.N.S. *Coaltongue* as guests of Captain Rutger Smith or as bodyguards of the tiefling engineer Mr. Massarde. One of the PCs might even be a minor noble. If a PC is a Yerasol Veteran, the party might have been invited to help sell the idea of the warship to the public.

Compared to modern Earth, the concept of security is slightly different in Risur, where the king is well able to defend himself even in his seventies, so PCs will be allowed to carry weapons, though they'll get thoroughly checked by the RHC constables before they're allowed on the pier.

Experience & Levels.

As the first adventure of the ZEITGEIST adventure path, *The Island at the Axis of the World* assumes the party is made up of four to five 3rd-level PCs. The ZEITGEIST adventure path assumes GMs will simply advance the PCs in level at appropriate times instead of tracking individual experience points. However, for GMs interested in using these modules outside of the full adventure path, XP totals are provided for combat encounters.

This adventure and all subsequent modules in the series assume that PCs will level up at pre-determined points, with such points being explicitly mentioned in the adventure. In the case of this adventure, the PCs will not level up until the end of the adventure (after completing Act Three) in preparation for Adventure Two, *The Dying Skyseer*.

FROM THE PEN OF
Ryan Nock

EVOCATIVE COVER ILLUSTRATION BY
Shen Fei

STUNNING CARTOGRAPHIC DISPLAYS BY
Brian Patterson and Jonathan Roberts

MASTERFUL INTERIOR ILLUSTRATIONS BY
Brian Lindahl, Claudio Pozas, and ShenFei
Includes art in the public domain

WITH UNPARALLELED LAYOUT AND GRAPHIC DESIGN BY
Eric Life-Putnam



SEAMLESSLY UPDATED TO FIFTH EDITION BY
James J. Haeck

ABLY PRODUCED AND FACILITATED BY
Russell Morrissey

SPECIAL THANKS TO
the hundreds of gamers who backed the original release of ZEITGEIST on Kickstarter, and to the over one thousand generous patrons of EN WORLD EN5IDER whose support has made this Fifth Edition update possible; and to Chris Carter, who got me into mysteries and conspiracy theories, and to J.J. Abrams, who showed me the importance of a great beginning.

PLAYTESTED FOR MAXIMUM ENJOYMENT BY
Jason Boss, David Braught, Josh Brzinski, Ted Brzinski, Sam Coman, Neil D'Cruze, Francis Dickinson, Robert M. Everson, Michael Gallogly, Matthew J. Hanson, Michael Hart, Michael Iachini, Tom Jones, Laura Kertz, Gene McDonald, James Robert Parks IV, Cathy Perez, Romana Perez, Hamid Raoof, Bryan Rennekamp, Tyrone Shekelberg, Judson Stowe, and Eugene Zaretskiy

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Background

Risur and Danor have been at war on-and-off for two centuries for control of the lush Yerasol Archipelago that lies between them. The current ruler of Risur, **King Aodhan**, was just a common soldier during in the Third Yerasol War, which ended forty years ago. He captured territory for Risur, earned the respect of the military and the adulation of the common people, and even seized control of Danor's first steam-powered warship. People of Flint still talk about the day when he single-handedly steered the ship into Flint's harbor as a spoil of war.

The king of the time chose Aodhan as his successor, and in the four decades since Risur has gone from owning a single captured steam engine to having an industrial revolution of its own. Today it prepares to launch its first armored warship to solely use steam propulsion: the R.N.S. *Coaltongue*, named after a mythic warlord said to breathe smoke and fire.

King Aodhan has come to Flint from Risur's capitol to witness the ship's launch. However the king's own sister, **Duchess Ethelyn of Shale**, plots to kill her brother during the maiden voyage of the *Coaltongue* so she can lay claim to the throne, abandon industry, and restore Risur to its traditional values.

The Duchess.

During the Fourth Yerasol War, which ended seven years ago, Duchess Ethelyn governed the city of Shale, Risur's bulwark against Danor. But the king insisted the duchess force her military, that consisted of traditional druid- and shaman-backed units to start using firearms and cannons. Burdened with the unfamiliar new technology, the duchess lost nearly every battle for control of the archipelago.

Bitter for years over the defeat, the duchess recently learned that the king plans to press for peace with Danor. Fearing what could happen, she consulted a skyseer – one of Risur's folk prophets – for guidance, and he told her of a vision:

A globe spins on its axis, and a steel ship sets off to war on a sail of shadows. The world passes into night, and blackness grips all of Risur as the stars fall from the sky. The king's eyes turn a soulless white, and he moves as a puppet, his strings pulled by a man who has already died a thousand times.

The duchess tried to warn her brother of the danger, to convince him to return to the old ways. She tried to remind him of when they both were just commoners, so he would pay more heed to the suffering of workers in the industrial warrens of Flint. But the king was too intent on achieving peace in his life, and did not listen.

Desperate, the duchess spoke with the liaison of the Unseen Court, a powerful eladrin warrior named **Asrabey Varal**. He told her the Court would view Risur as an enemy if it made an alliance with Danor. The duchess decided she would rather betray her brother than her nation's history, and so she began to plan his downfall.

Axis Island.

A year ago, some of the duchess's spies contacted one **Nathan Jierre**. Nathan works as an astronomer on Danor-controlled Axis Island, the eastern-most point in the Yerasol Archipelago. Nathan saw that the island's factories and shipyards were producing weapons and warships, and so he began leaking information to the duchess. He expected she would use the information to encourage Risur to keep pace with Danor's military, and thus ensure neither side would be in a position to start a new war.

The duchess plans to assassinate her brother during the launch of the *Coaltongue*, lay the blame on Danor, then attack Axis Island and reclaim it as Risuri territory. She believes that once she shows proof to her people that Danor was building new weapons of war, she'll be able to secure her claim to the throne and steer Risur in the right direction.

Adventure Overview

Act One: The R.N.S. *Coaltongue*.

The party is assigned to work security at the launching of the *Coaltongue*. The adventure starts after they have already done all the boring work of preparation and canvassing, so now their mission is to ensure the dignitaries' safety during the ship's brief maiden voyage.

As the sun sets the ship weighs anchor, and the PCs are sent to make sure Duchess Ethelyn attends a speech by the king. When they check on her, they find she has fled, and that her handmaiden is leading a plot to sabotage the engine. Right as a naval band starts to play Risur's national anthem and launch fireworks, a desperate chase and fight develops belowdecks. The PCs have to stop the assassins before they cause the steam engine boiler to explode, annihilating anything nearby with fire and a hail of shrapnel.

In the aftermath, the party receives accolades for saving the king. Hundreds of miles away armies prepare for a potential civil war.

Act Two: Three Towers.

One week later, the party is called to meet with tiefling **Lya Jierre**, the Danoran "Minister of Outsiders." She explains that the duchess has attacked Danoran territory – Axis Island – and has kidnapped her cousin Nathan Jierre. She has agreed to let Risur handle the task of removing the duchess, and she quickly briefs the PCs on the oddities and dangers of the island.

The PCs are assigned to accompany and assist more experienced infiltrators, who will create an opening for the Risuri assault fleet. But when an accident kills the infiltration team, the PCs are the only ones in position to finish the mission. Their ultimate goal is a sea gate which protects the entrance to the fortress's harbor. By stealth, trickery, or open assault, the PCs must reach the lighthouse that houses the sea gate controls, open the gate, and signal the fleet to attack.



NPC Roster.

Because of the large number of NPCs the party will meet, you'll want to familiarize yourself with their appearances, goals, and mannerisms. Biographical entries are included throughout the adventure close to the characters' first appearances.

IMPORTANT NPCs.

NPC Entry	First Appears
Thames Grimsley	Act One
Assistant Chief Inspector Stover Delft	Act One
Principal Minister Harkover Lee	Act One
Duchess Ethelyn of Shale	Act One
Sokana Rell	Act One
Captain Rutger Smith	Act One
City Governor Roland Stanfield	Act One
King Aodhan	Act One
Minister of Outsiders Lya Jierre	Act Two
Nicolas Dupiers	Act Two
Asrabey Varal	Act Three
Lieutenant Hessar Marseine	Act Three
Nathan Jierre	Act Three

Recurring Characters. Stover Delft, Harkover Lee, Rutger Smith, Governor Stanfield, Benedict Pemberton, King Aodhan, Lya Jierre, and Asrabey Varal all play prominent roles in later adventures in this adventure path. All the other NPCs who appear in this adventure might recur in minor roles, but feel free to do with them as you wish. If an NPC you need later on dies, you can always replace them with someone thematically similar when the need arises.

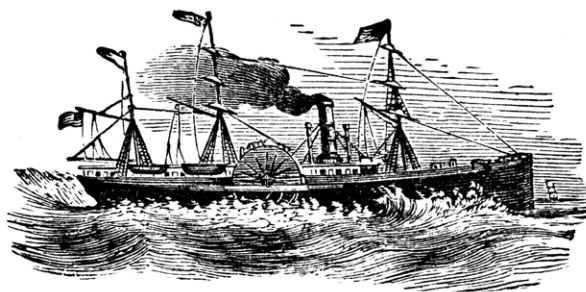
Act Three: Under the Wheel of Stars.

At this point the PCs may think they're out of harm's way, content to let the military take control of the fortress and capture the duchess. But the eladrin liaison of the Unseen Court, Asrabey Varal, has stowed away on a Risuri ship, and the PCs spot him as he heads for the duchess, killing anyone on either side who gets in his way.

Asrabey has come to Axis Island under orders from the Unseen Court to execute the duchess. According to their fey logic, this act will prove that the fey did not endorse the duchess's assassination attempt. Of course, it doesn't matter how many rank-and-file soldiers get killed in the process. The PCs have a chance to intercede, and they have a chance to decide the duchess's fate, as well as whether Asrabey takes Nathan Jierre as a hostage.

Once Asrabey is dealt with, the PCs have only a few hours before Risur must hand control of Axis Island back over to Danor. They can collect a few enigmatic clues to what Danor was up to, but then, as the highest-ranking representatives of the RHC, they are responsible for the official hand-off. Lya Jierre arrives, thanks the party for their help, and casually mentions that she'd like to invite them to her wedding next year, since the king plans to marry her for his peace treaty.

The PCs leave the island, but they have met many powerful individuals who will be enemies or allies later on, and they have the first clues toward a mystery that will forever change the world.



Adventure Layout

In each act we present a quick overview of the situation and the party's goals. Then we detail individual scenes that are likely to occur. Each scene is presented in a format of Title, tag-line, and keywords. Keywords include:

- **Scene Type:** Action, Exploration, Exposition, Puzzle, Social, or Hybrid.
- **Duration:** Montage (a few hours or days), Real-time (a few minutes), or Tactical (round-by-round).

The actions of your players may take things in unusual directions, so don't feel constrained to only using these scenes. Change or drop them as necessary, or add new ones if you think it will add to your group's enjoyment.

Rewards.

At the beginning of Act Two, as the PCs receive their orders to go to Axis Island, they each receive 1,000 gp that they can use to requisition equipment and consumables. Remember, PCs who are part of the RHC do not get to keep anything they recover on their missions. They get a salary, and anything they "looted" they can keep only if they pay for it from their salary.

If the PCs are free agents (not members of the RHC), instead have the Constabulary offer to pay them 300 gp apiece to undertake the mission to Axis Island. The RHC will ask the PCs to hand over Asrabey Varal's sword, shield, and cloak because they have diplomatic value – in addition, his "mundane" armor, amulet, and belt are well above the party's pay grade. But the party can keep other items they find, such as the three *Golden Icons* in the Genius Loci encounter, or Asrabey's *slippers of spider climbing*.

After completing Act Three, the PCs advance to 4th level. Their Prestige should remain at 1 for all groups; it drops to 0 with Risur if they screw up. See Part Two of the *Player's Guide** for details of the Prestige system, and how the PCs can use it to request items.

Finally, Before We Start...

As with any pre-packaged adventure, you should treat everything herein as source material for you to adapt to your own campaign. Only you and your players know what's fun for your group, so feel free to change characters, settings, events, and even tone if you think it will lead to a better gaming experience. You don't have to look at things the same way we do – at least not until the Obscurati complete their grand plan.

* <https://www.patreon.com/posts/zeitgeist-path-2-8283869>



Dramatis Personae

- **Thames Grimsley.** Grizzled sailor. Leads dock union. Dislikes police. Oratorical, theatrical speech patterns. Pause for dramatic effect a lot.
- **Assistant Chief Inspector Stover Delft.** Party's boss. Chews tobacco. Walks with a cane. Spits. Good-natured.
- **Principal Minister Harkover Lee.** King's magical advisor/bodyguard. Straight-backed. Beran accent (sort of Mexican or Spanish).
- **Geoff Massarde.** Tiefling engineer. Drinks, but low-tolerance. Airy voice. Danoran accent (sort of French). Dislikes Danor.
- **Captain Rutger Smith.** Bold. Idealistic. Loves philosophy. Smokes cigars.
- **Duchess Ethelyn of Shale.** King's sister. Considers words before speaking. Old-fashioned. Fondly recalls time before she was rich and powerful.
- **Sokana Rell.** Duchess's handmaiden. Eladrin disguised as elf. Quiet. Tries to avoid attention. Despises Danorans.
- **Flint City Governor Roland Stanfield.** Aasimar. Constant expression of contented optimism. Perfect politician's smile. Old war wound in his lower back.
- **King Aodhan.** Cool-headed. Deflects trouble rather than fight. Healthy despite being 70. Physically feels the emotions of nearby fey.
- **Minister of Outsiders Lya Jierre.** Tiefling martial scientist. Ambitious. Haughty but friendly. Progressive. Wants peace. Arcano-technological vorpal rapier.
- **Mine Foreman Nicolas Dupiers.** Paranoid. Golden icons of earth and shadow. Pistol.
- **Lieutenant Hessar Marseine.** Nasty eye wound. Looking for a fight. Reasonable if you're polite to him.
- **Nathan Jierre.** Tiefling astronomer. Observant but short-sighted. Wants peace, but didn't realize duchess wanted war. Afraid his people will brand him a traitor.
- **Asrabey Varal.** Eladrin warrior of unmatched prowess. Flaming sword. Animated lion shield. Cloak of smoke. Despises Danorans. Sent to execute duchess.





People of Interest

Assistant Chief Inspector Stover Delft. A local Flinter in his early 40s, Delft is your direct superior. Generally good-natured to his subordinates, he has a penchant for grouching about people behind their backs. A much better manager than investigator, Delft has advanced this far in the Constabulary by finding good agents, supporting them on difficult missions, and sharing the accolades from their successes.

Delft chews tobacco, and thinks he looks charming if he grins while sucking on tobacco juices. He walks with a cane because a mimic tore a chunk out of his leg fifteen years ago. He has a habit of poking inanimate objects with the cane before he gets too close to them, and spitting on them when he wants to be extra sure.



Principal Minister Harkover Lee. Perhaps the most powerful mage in Risur, Lee acts as King Aodhan's bodyguard and chief of staff. Straight-backed and virile despite being in his 60s, Lee has a slight Ber-tinged accent, and was said to be quite the ladykiller in his youth. He always dresses in reds and golds and carries a solid gold wizard's orb tucked into his robes. He never eats or drinks in public.



Geoff Massarde. A 40-something thiefling with an airy voice and a fondness for wine that outmatches his ability to handle his alcohol, Massarde is one of a handful of Danoran thieflings working for the Risuri military to help construct warships and other weapons. He has few kind words for his homeland. He is fascinated with ice, and carries a wand which can chill small objects with a touch. Mostly he just uses it as a novelty to cool beverages.



Sokana Rell.



Thames Grimsley.



Benedict Pemberton.



Captain Rutger Smith. Captain of the R.N.S. *Impossible*, one of the RHC's vessels. Smith earned his first command five years ago. Now 37, he has never led his ship into battle. That, combined with his fondness for the Malice-era philosophical writings of the pacifist monk William Miller, has made him the target of mockery by more established naval officers.



Duchess Ethelyn of Shale. The king's sister, Duchess Ethelyn was a commoner before earning her title in the Third Yerasol War. She dislikes industry and leads a coalition of powerful individuals with strong ties to the Unseen Court. She wears extravagant diamond cluster earrings – representing the stars of the night sky – to show her allegiance to the old ways. Accounts tell of her possessing many different types of magic, though many of these could be exaggerated.



Flint City Governor Roland Stanfield. Stanfield witnessed the fall of the eladrin goddess Srasama five hundred years ago and died soon thereafter in the chaos of Elfai-var's fall. But he reincarnated, and has for centuries served as Flint's governor.



King Aodhan. Now in his 70s, the current king of Risur looks rather unassuming, and was a common warrior before the previous king chose him as a successor after the Third Yerasol War. He prefers to resolve disputes by being cool-headed and rationally persuading those who will listen to his side. Despite all this, though, he trains regularly to keep his stamina and swordplay robust, and the rites of rulership grant him daunting magical powers.





Ship Layout

The R.N.S. *Coaltongue* has a wooden hull sheathed with 5-inch thick iron armor plating, engraved with subtle magical icons that grant both defensive and offensive power. Measuring 205 feet long with a beam of 50 feet and a draft of 20 feet, the warship has three lower decks and a two-story command bridge amidships the main deck. The steam engine, powered by heating a boiler with burning firegems, gives the vessel a top speed of 18 knots (roughly 20 miles per hour).

A heavy turret on the main deck fires enchanted shells in a forward arc. Twenty-three cannons line the gun deck, which is capped abaft by the galley. If the ship is being pursued, the galley can be converted into a firing platform.

Below the gun deck is the berth deck, capped by the ship's magazine at the fore and quarters for the ship's wizard and guests at the aft. Finally, the bottom deck contains the engine, fuel bins, and various cargo.

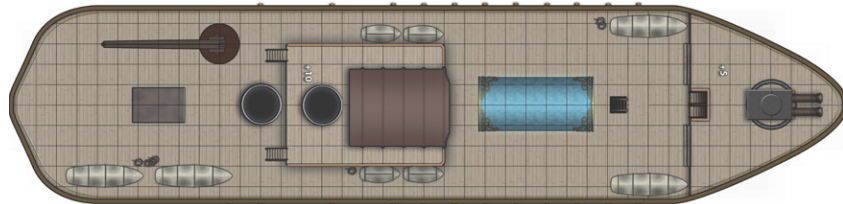
The bridge's main level contains quarters for captain and officers, while the second story command deck has a number of speaking tubes with which to communicate with various sections of the ship; this is where the captain must stand to direct the Brand.

All the lower decks have sections of grated floor panels to help circulate air. Characters can acquire line of sight through this grating.

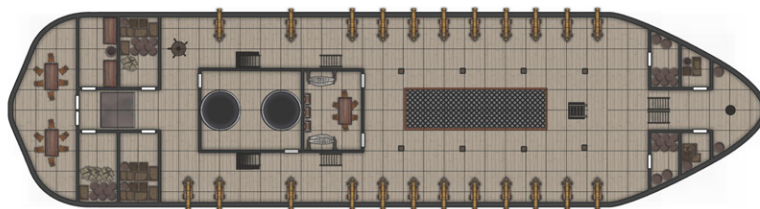
Capacitor and Brand.

On the *Coaltongue's* main deck sits an elaborate glass frame, reinforced by magic to be as strong as steel, and shaped in a half-cylinder to resemble the boiler of a train locomotive. While its design is partially aesthetic, intended to evoke the power of Risur's new industry, this innovative structure is Risur's secret weapon against Danoran warships: a magical capacitor.

Excess energy from the engine is stored within the structure. Even while storing its full power, the interior of the capacitor is perfectly safe to walk through, and its expansive windows let it serve as venue for ceremonies and celebrations. But the capacitor's real purposes are to power attack spells cast by the ship's warmages and to charge the Brand.



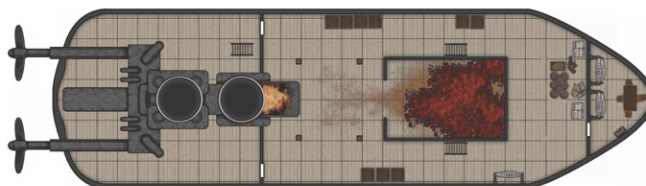
Main Deck



Gun Deck



Berth Deck



Engine Deck

The Brand fires a massive blast of pyromantic energy from the ship's figurehead, often enough to destroy a smaller vessel or cripple a larger one, burning an image into whatever surface it strikes. Its range is limited to about a hundred feet, and after firing it takes hours to recharge the capacitor, but combined with the *Coaltongue's* speed and maneuverability, the Brand should deter attacks by Danor's navy.

Golden Ward.

The gunports, windows, and main deck are all ringed by a thin inlay of gold wire. As detailed in the *Player's Guide*, this prevents teleportation across the barrier.

Act One: The Coaltongue

IN THIS ACT, THE PARTY HANDLES SECURITY DURING the launch of Risur's newest warship, and thwarts an explosive assassination plot.

The Assassination Plot.

Barring PC interference, the duchess's plan would start around eight in the evening, after the *Coaltongue* is launched and has set out for a party on the open water. The duchess and her handmaiden Sokana would retire to an aft room on the ship's berth deck, supposedly for the duchess to nap. There they'd link up with three other saboteurs on the ship—a halfling assassin posing as a cook, and two human engineers who came to the launch ceremony as servants of other nobles unaware of the plot.

At sunset, as the ship weighs anchor, the duchess will use all her magical power to call upon an archfey of the sea: Beshela, servant of the fey titan known as She Who Writhes. The archfey will subtly inhibit teleportation so that the king cannot teleport to safety. Then the duchess will use a scroll of *water breathing* on herself and her allies. Meanwhile, Sokana is given an *elemental gem* by duchess for use in the boiler room.

Shortly after sunset, nearly all the crew will assemble on deck with musical instruments, forming a military band to play Risur's national anthem. With only a skeleton crew below decks, the assassin and two engineers will head to the magazine and engine room, where they will kill the guards and crew. The assassin will return to the duchess to report that the lower decks are clear, at which point the duchess will exit out the window, calling upon Beshela to carry her to safety.

The engineers begin to sabotage the boiler. The halfling will head down to the magazine to remove fire wards, while Sokana goes to the engine room. She'll place the *elemental gem* in the engine's furnace, summoning a fire elemental to heat up the boiler. After summoning the elemental, Sokana will rust the door shut, while the engineers empty the fuel bin and pile the firegems around the furnace, causing it to rapidly heat up. The group then heads back to the duchess's room and dive out the window.

By timing the sabotage to coincide with the blaring music of the national anthem, the duchess hopes people on deck won't notice that steam has stopped coming out of the ship's stacks. The engineers' sabotage will ensure that no warnings alert the crew on the bridge.

As the three-minute anthem reaches its final crescendo, the build-up of pressure will cause a boiler explosion. The shockwave of the steam blast will shatter and ignite the firegem fuel, which will send forth waves of fire through the ship's lower decks. These will in turn detonate the fire dust in the ship's magazine, and the resultant explosion will tear the ship apart and kill anyone within a hundred feet with concussion, shrapnel, and inferno.

Setup

Before launching the first scene of the campaign, give the players a chance to familiarize themselves with each other's characters, since they're part of the same unit in the Constabulary and have likely been working together at least a few weeks. Make sure the players are familiar with the "People of Interest" handout, to help them keep track of the characters they'll be dealing with, and have a copy of the "Ship Layout" handout to show them once they board.

Launch Party

Exposition.

The PCs keep an eye out for trouble before dignitaries arrive for the launch of Risur's new warship.

Read or paraphrase the following to your players.

It is spring of the year 500 A.O.V. (After Our Victory). Seven years after the end of the Fourth Yerasol War, the shipyards in Flint have completed the first Risuri warship powered solely by steam engine, not sail. Your monarch, King Aodhan, has come to Flint to witness the official launch of this mighty vessel. Wooden-hulled but with a heart and skin of iron, the Royal Naval Ship *Coaltongue* will act as a deterrent against future aggression from Risur's enemy across the sea, the nation of Danor.

The Royal Homeland Constabulary has been called upon to provide security, and you have spent the past several weeks working to make sure this event goes off without a hitch — canvassing the docks, performing background checks on the guest list, coordinating with the local police to set up a perimeter around the royal docks, and following various directives of your superiors.

Now, as a warm breeze blows off the sea, mingling with the scents of elaborate floral decorations with the pervasive coal soot that always hovers over Flint, you're at the first of two checkpoints, working with Flint police to let in a crowd of local citizens who just want to line the streets and cheer their king.

Crowd Security

Social. Real-Time.

A crowd of hundreds waits at a security checkpoint. In half an hour they'll line up along streets to cheer the king's arrival, and you must make sure no one dangerous gets through.

To set the tone for the campaign, the first encounter is a quick investigation. Thousands of visitors have poured into the city, hoping to see the king. They've gathered in Royal Square, on the mainland side of a bridge that leads to the Royal Shipyard. The police are counting off exactly seven hundred people who will be let onto the bridge and into Fleet Square on the shipyard island so that they



can cheer as the carriages of the king and other dignitaries arrive.

Four dockers – Coulton, Mercliffe, Iscalio, and a war vet named Dafton – have come to the event, ready to cause some trouble. They're angry that the city police force has been cracking down on docker gatherings; indeed, all of them but Dafton still have bruises from a scuffle earlier in the week. Mostly they just intend to heckle and shout insults, but Dafton plans a more dramatic gesture: he wants to assault Governor Stanfield.

Meanwhile **Thames Grimsley**, a grizzled sailor who is trying to organize an official dockers' guild, has caught wind of the men's plan, and he's trying to get to them before they get themselves arrested or worse.

The four dockers are spread throughout Royal Square, waiting for the cops to finish their count before they link back up. Once the cops reach seven hundred, they'll let the whole crowd through the check point and onto the bridge. The PCs have about half an hour to survey the crowd for possible threats and spot the dockers. If they fail, Thames Grimsley arrives just after the parade crowd is let in. The police won't let him pass, but if the PCs investigate, Grimsley might be willing to help them.

If the PCs are lucky, they can pull the dockers aside early and avert a crisis, but once the crowd gets sent in, the four men will link up, making it much harder to deal with them without a brawl.

Find the Dockers

Skill Challenge (CR 3).

Key Skills: Deception, History, Insight, Intimidation, Perception, Persuasion, Stealth

Difficulty: Unless otherwise noted, all skill checks are DC 15

This challenge has four goals, requiring a total of eight successful skill checks to get a full victory, and six or seven for a partial victory. The party has half an hour to accomplish these goals, and they cannot progress to the next goal until they have succeeded the current goal.

- **Goal One: Brief the Party and Police.** 1 success.
- **Goal Two: Canvass the Crowd.** 4 successes (5 total).
- **Goal Three: Find the Dockers.** 2 successes (7 total).
- **Goal Four: Find the Fourth Man.** 1 success (8 total).

Passage of Time.

Every ten minutes of the encounter is one "round," and each PC can make one skill check per round. All told, a five-person party will get to attempt fifteen skill checks during the half hour, and they need a total of eight successes. For smaller parties, reduce the number of successes needed by 1 for each character below five.

In the first ten-minute round, the crowd waits idly and people chatter amicably. In the second round, a half-dozen messengers hand out lyric sheets of the royal anthem, to make sure people get the later verses correct. In the third round, the excitement builds as people press toward the ropes, and various unsynchronized groups start singing the anthem or other festive sounds.

After the third round, the impatient crowd will go through the checkpoint. If the PCs don't want to let them, the small contingent

Thames Grimsley. A grizzled sailor, still with a full head of hair in his early 50s, Grimsley acts as head of a nascent dock workers guild in Flint. Though he only worked the docks in his youth, Grimsley spent decades sailing—primarily as captain of a ferry service in Flint's harbor, but with a stint in the navy during the last Yerasol War. He took a gash from a policeman's knife on the side of his face in the last big docker riot, and since then has tried to organize a unified front for the dockers' concerns. A couple of months working at a theater as a child gave him a very stylized public speaking voice, one full of unnecessary, melodramatic pauses.

of police they have are insufficient to hold back so many. Only something drastic will get the crowd to stop, but since the whole point of the assignment is to avoid ruining the event, doing so will lessen the PCs' clout. Later in the evening, when real threats crop up, people might not believe the party at first.

Accomplishing Goals.

Each goal requires one or more successful skill checks, and we suggest the skills best suited to each goal (as listed under "Key Skills"). If a character is proficient in a Key Skill, they can use the skill with any ability so long as they can convince the GM – for example, a player might ask to make a Strength (Intimidation) check instead of a Charisma (Intimidation) check.

If a PC comes up with a clever use of a skill not on the Key Skills list, let them use it! Note that some things certainly won't help, like using Arcana to sense for magical threats, since there aren't any here. You might want to nudge the players in the right direction if they start wasting their actions like this. Failing a check doesn't carry a penalty, but remember the party is on a clock.

Skill Challenges?

Do not panic. The ZEITGEIST: The Gears of Revolution campaign was originally published for Fourth Edition DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®, and so included skill challenge encounters as important parts of the ongoing plot. We've included these encounters in the new edition adventures. Skill challenges basically require the PCs to make a sequence of skill checks to accomplish a complex task. All information you need to run the encounter is included.

Skill challenges are optional, of course; you can replace them with single skill checks, group checks, or role-playing as needed.

Skyseer Vision.

If any PC has the Skyseer theme feat, mention that last night he had a vision of a crowd, a purple ribbon, the Beran city Seobriga, a girl with a lisp singing the Risuri royal anthem, an empty bed, and a broken tin whistle. The PC has advantage on skill checks toward the third goal of the Find the Dockers challenge, and if they share their vision with the other PCs, the other PCs gain advantage as well.

When the PCs start looking for suspects, they find squat Coulton drinking from a flask near a tree with a purple ribbon wrapped around it. Lanky Mercliffe stands outside a mapmaker's shop reading a map of Ber in the window, and scummy Iscalio glowers at a young girl trying to sing the royal anthem. The rest of the vision pertains to other threats throughout the day.



Goal One: Brief the Party and Police.

You can't just question everyone. You need a clear idea of what appearances or mannerisms might be clues that someone's a threat.

In preparing for today's event, the RHC determined that four groups in particular are likely to cause trouble. The fastest way for the PCs to search for threats is to figure out who in this crowd of seven hundred people fit any of these profiles.

- Dockers, angry because of how the city treats them.
- Primalists (believers in the old druidic faith), angry at all the new industry.
- Agents of the fey terrorist known as "Gale," who might try to sabotage the ship.
- War veterans, who might target the ship's tiefling designer.

Therefore, the PCs' first goal is a relatively simple one:

- **Create a Threat Profile.** (History or Insight, DC 13) To be able to brief the police and the rest of the party, a PC needs to have a clear sense of the different threats. A PC gains advantage on this check if any member of the party has the Docker or Yerasol Veteran theme feats.

Once any PC makes a successful check, give the party the following information.

Dockers are usually burly working men with eclectic fashion. Primalists have particular hairstyles, wear sandals, and adorn themselves with druidic religious icons. Fey saboteurs are typically elves or half-elves with impeccable grooming from their rituals, though they often try to hide this by dressing in soot-stained clothes. War veterans will usually be either in the mid- to late-twenties, or late-fifties/early-sixties, and they tend to be in better fighting shape than common citizens.

Goal Two: Canvass the Crowd.

You have to look for possible threats out of hundreds of men, women, and scampering children. Work together and with the police to survey the whole crowd.

The crowd can be roughly divided into four quadrants. To search the whole thing for people matching the above profiles, the party has to succeed a total of four checks, but they can do that with any combination of the following methods (or creative ideas of their own). If you have four PCs skilled at Perception, they might all just hang back, but most likely the party will use a combination of skills.

- **Mingle with the Crowd.** (Insight) A PC could go into the crowd and look for people who match the profiles.
- **Recruit the Cops.** (Persuasion) A PC might coordinate a small group of cops to also scan the crowd.
- **Recruit some Rascals.** (Persuasion or History) A PC could try to convince a few kids to be his eyes and ears.
- **Scan the Crowd.** (Perception) A PC can watch from afar to spot people who look like they match the profile.



Goal Three: Find the Suspects.

You've picked out about twenty people of interest, but you need to separate the innocent parade-goers from actual threats.

Failed skill checks here probably result in the party pulling aside innocent people, and then wasting time questioning them before realizing they're not a threat.

The PCs need two successes. The first success identifies Coulton. The second identifies both Mercliffe and Iscalio. If the PCs are smart, they can pull the three aside peacefully, but if they antagonize the men, the dockers might try to fight. If that happens, see Docker Brawl, below.

- **Confrontation.** (Insight) A PC could go to people of interest and ask questions.
- **Lying.** (Deception) A PC might feign camaraderie with the different people of interest in an effort to draw out an admission.
- **Good Cop, Bad Cop.** (Intimidation or Persuasion) This option is only available once the party identifies Coulton. Two PCs must both spend time on this action. One PC makes an Intimidate check, and another makes a Diplomacy check. They each gain a +2 bonus to their check. If both checks succeed, the dockers also rat out Dafton, which counts as a success on goal four.
- **Observation.** (Perception) A PC could watch the various people of interest to see how they react to all the law enforcement activity.
- **Yank Them All** (Stealth). A PC might just grab as many people of interest as possible, but must do so discreetly so that no actual threats get tipped off and try to hide in the crowd.

Goal Four: Find the Fourth Man.

Once the PCs have the three dockers, drop some obvious clue that there's a fourth man, Dafton. The three dockers aren't too bright, and they let slip that someone else is with them, but they don't want to cooperate with the PCs. With likely little time left, the party needs to find the most dangerous member of the group. They just need one success.

- **Various** (Various skills, DC 15). The PCs can use any of the methods from the previous goal.

As with above, Dafton might go peacefully, but if the PCs anger him, he's ready for a fight.

Development.

If a fight breaks out at any point, see Docker Brawl, below.

After the crowd goes through the checkpoint, Thames Grimsley arrives in Royal Square and tries to get onto the bridge. If the PCs didn't manage to achieve Goal Two, they might think he is no threat at all. Regardless, they're scheduled to meet with their superior, so it might not be worth the hassle to listen to what the old sailor has to say.

If any of the dockers got past them, though, Grimsley can point them out to the party. By that point, though, the men will have linked up, and they're so close to their goal they feel overconfident. Almost any attempt to remove them will result in a fight.



Docker Brawl

Action. Tactical.

The gathered crowd panics as a street fight breaks out.

The moment anyone draws a weapon, people scream and the crowd backs away in panic, giving the PCs and dockers the 30-foot wide bridge to themselves. The thick crowds keep the police from getting there for 10 rounds. Of course, if the fight occurs elsewhere, things will go differently.

If the PCs have treated him and his men well, Grimsley might stand aside and let the constables do their job. If they've been rude, he might side with his fellow dockers.

The three docker longshoremen, Coulton, Mercliffe, and Iscalio, use **bandit** statistics. Dafton, a seasoned sailor, uses **bandit captain** statistics. Thames Grimsley uses **berserker** statistics, but fights with his bare fists, gaining the following actions:

Multiattack. Grimsley makes two unarmed strikes.

Unarmed Strike. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target.

Hit: 5 (1d4 + 3) bludgeoning damage.

Tactics.

The three longshoremen (**bandits**) brawl wildly with only unarmed strikes, but pull out daggers when things are looking bad for them. Dafton stands back for a moment and claps a jaunty beat to mock the party, though his performance has no mechanical effect. Then

Taking Prisoners

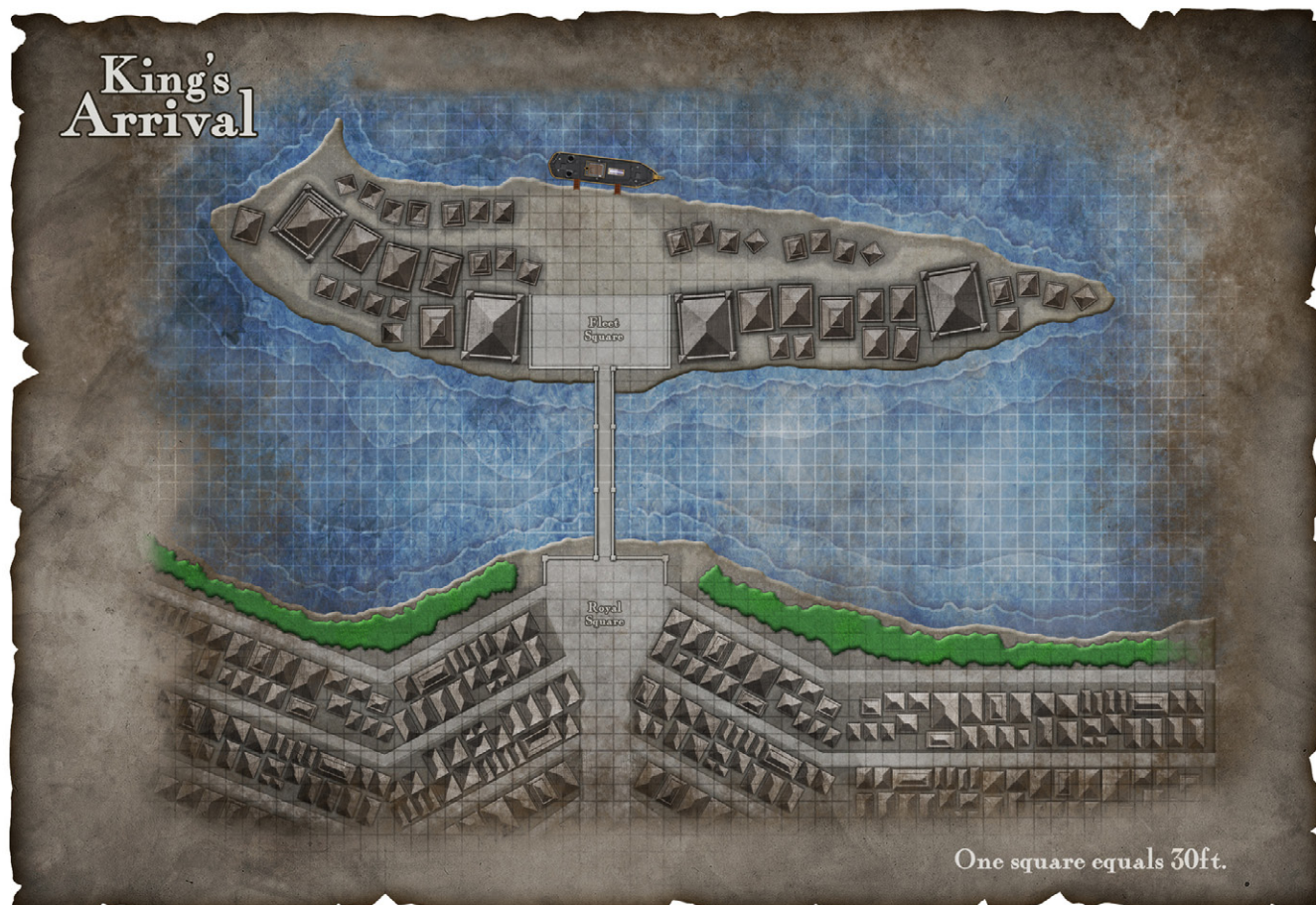
As officers of the law, the PCs should generally take intelligent humanoid enemies alive unless they suspect the enemy can easily recuperate and escape or threaten others. Remind your players that, in Fifth Edition, a character that reduces a creature to 0 hit points with a melee attack can choose to knock the creature out instead of killing it. That creature falls unconscious and is stable.

Additionally, PCs might try to make a Charisma (Intimidation) check to convince heavily wounded enemies to surrender, but it's a difficult thing to pull off, requiring a successful DC 16 check for the longshoremen, and a DC 19 check for Dafton.

he goes after whichever PC has the most interesting melee weapon, trying to disarm them and then take on the rest of the party. If Grimsley gets into the fight, his goal is to grapple PCs so his men can dive off the bridge and flee to friendlier areas of the city.

Terrain. If the fight's on the bridge, it's a 20 foot fall to water (1d6 bludgeoning damage) if anyone goes over the railing. You might add some difficult terrain in the form of an abandoned cart that holds flowers to be tossed and lyric sheets of the royal anthem. Innocent bystanders hang back, but block off the edges of the area.

A PC might be able to get some help from the crowd by making a successful DC 12 Charisma (Intimidation or Persuasion) check as an action. If successful, three people in the crowd come to their aid. They don't fight, but they can use the Help action to grant an attacker advantage.





Aftermath.

The police eventually arrive and arrest the dockers. If any dockers manage to get away, it's ultimately a matter for the cops to handle. The crowd considers the fight a bonus bit of entertainment, and the event can continue with minimal disruption. The PCs will want to clean themselves up a little, then go report to their superior before the nobles start showing up.

Grimsley might ask (or demand) that the party pass a message to the governor for him in exchange for his help. He says his people are tired of the local police harassing them just because a few of the city's nobles don't like being made fun of in tavern songs. Worse, some dockers have been arrested in the past few weeks because they refused to work sixteen-hour shifts loading and unloading industrial cargo.

Grimsley warns that his people are restless. They're raring for a riot, and he's trying to keep them calm. If Stanfield can't take some of the pressure off them, Grimsley fears there'll be blood in the streets. This isn't a concern in the course of this adventure, but the problem rears its head again in Adventure Two, *The Dying Skyseer*.

If the PCs actually deliver the message to the governor, they'll earn the sailor's respect, perhaps even get an invite to a street party a few days hence in a dockside neighborhood. If the party wrongs Grimsley, they win admiration from the police, but for the rest of the campaign they'll have a hard time getting anywhere in the city in a hurry if they have to go by boat, as sailors carry their leader's grudge and do their best to obstruct the PCs.

Long Night Ahead

Social. Real-Time.

The PCs are invited to join this evening's party aboard the warship.

Read or paraphrase the following to your players.

The first of the noble carriages have begun to approach the royal shipyard, and already the crowd on the bridge is doing its job: cheering, throwing flowers, and performing folk songs and dances to show their support.

Before things get too busy, your direct superior — Assistant Chief Inspector Stover Delft — asked you to come to a last-minute meeting to give you your marching orders. You find him chewing a bit of tobacco and eyeing a halfling chef who is carrying a tray of chocolate confections toward the docked *Coaltongue*.

Assistant Chief Inspector Stover Delft. A local Flinter in his early 40s, Delft is generally good-natured to his subordinates, but has a penchant for grousing about people behind their backs. He gets squinty and condescending when his authority is questioned, but he can recognize talent and good work. A much better manager than investigator, Delft has advanced this far in the Constabulary by finding good agents, supporting them on difficult missions, and sharing the accolades from their successes.

Delft chews tobacco, and thinks he looks charming if he grins while sucking on tobacco juices. He walks with a cane because a mimic tore a chunk out of his leg fifteen years ago. He has a habit of poking inanimate objects with the cane before he gets too close to them, and spitting on them when he wants to be extra sure.

His attention turns to you, and he smiles. "Only the finest for our king, right? Now then," he says, "We're about to earn our pay. Lots of nobles about, so first, don't make a scene, and definitely don't talk to any of the nobility unless they address you first."

"Second, if something does go wrong, try to handle it yourselves, would you? I'm going to be busy applying my not-inconsiderable charms to very important people. The Constabulary doesn't get by with just good will and pretty faces, you know."

"And third, you did good work, so I've got a surprise for you."

He grabs his cane and leads you to the gangplank of the *Coaltongue*. But he's not pursuing the halfling chef. Rather, ahead of you waits Principal Minister Harkover Lee, the king's chief advisor and personal bodyguard.

Minister Lee has just finished checking the warship for magical threats. After introductions, in which Delft cheerily refers to Lee as "the old man," the principle secretary says that he's confident the security is in order. Still, he would like some representatives of the RHC aboard this evening. After the fireworks and banquet, the king is planning a major announcement. Lee wants some constables present to be extra eyes and ears, so Lee can get a gauge of how various individuals in the crowd react.

Plus, he adds, there are a few recalcitrant guests who might need corralling. When he says this, he looks in the direction of one of the checkpoints, where a guest and her handmaiden are disembarking from a horse-drawn carriage.

Though this is likely the first time most PCs have seen her, from their briefings and preparation they easily recognize the person who has elicited such distaste from Secretary Lee. This is the king's sister, Duchess Ethelyn of Shale, escorted by an elven handmaiden named Sokana Rell.

Minister Lee says he must prepare for the king's arrival. He encourages the PCs to direct any questions to their boss Delft. After Lee departs, Delft tells them to remember what he said about bothering him, and then he heads off to mingle.

The Crowd

Social. Real-Time.

The king's sister approaches the PCs with a request.

Over the next half hour, more people arrive. All told, the hundred-person crowd consists of about one-quarter dignitaries (nobles, wealthy merchants, and prestigious military folks), one-half retainers and personal servants, and one-quarter local staff, some of whom are plains-clothes police. Try to work in the following interactions, but let the players take the lead.

Tiefling Engineer. The person who stands out the most is Geoff Massarde, the Danoran tiefling who helped Risur design the *Coaltongue*. A few industrialists and military officers hang near him, asking questions about how the ship will hold up under actual combat. Wine glass in hand, he'll gladly talk shop with interested PCs, but he's used to people acting belligerently to him here in Risur, so he has two burly bodyguards standing by him at all times.



Captain Impossible. Also in attendance is Captain Rutger Smith, commander of the distinguished R.N.S. *Impossible*, a swift clipper ship which occasionally assists the RHC on missions. He's discussing philosophy and political theory with a black-bearded dwarf. Smith endorses the post-Malice writings of the old monk William Miller, who said all conflicts could be avoided by sufficient understanding between opposing groups. The dwarf counters with standard Heid Eschatol theory that any ordered system will inevitably be ruined by some random accident, so a single misunderstanding would doom Millerite theories of peace. Both men smoke thick cigars.

Charming Industrialist. Eccentric and genteel industrialist Benedict Pemberton hobnobs and gazes admiringly at the *Coaltongue*. While regaling some other guests with a joke about cooking pigs on his mama's farm when he was a kid, he waves one of the PCs over and without explaining himself draws a short folding knife, flicks it open, and snips a loose thread dangling from the character's sleeve. Then he smiles and finishes his story.

Pemberton is otherwise innocuous, though he occasionally glares smugly at Harkover Lee. He remains primarily a background character until Adventure Six.

The Coaltongue. No one is allowed aboard the ship now. A gangplank leads to main deck, guarded by sailors. Stairs lead up from a pier to a scaffolding beside the ship's bow; it is here that the king will smash a bottle of champagne on the ship's iron hull to officially name it and enter it into the Risuri navy.

The Duchess.

After a few minutes or if the PCs seek her out, Duchess Ethelyn asks the PCs for help.

Duchess Ethelyn introduces herself to you, then says, "It is my understanding that you have some sway over the arrangements of this event. If you could do an old lady a kindness, the air here leaves me winded, and the company is beginning to give me a headache. I know my brother's party is going to run late, so I need a room I can nap in. I'd be very grateful if you'd arrange this for me."

If the PCs strike up a conversation with the duchess, she might admit that she's unenthused about this metal monstrosity, and suspects the only thing keeping it from sinking is infernal tiefling magic. She'll encourage the PCs to remember the old ways of the skyseers and the fey, and not to be tricked into thinking Danor's industry is good for Risur just because her brother uses the word "progress" a lot.

Handmaiden. Something seems off about Sokana, and a successful DC 16 Wisdom (Insight) check reveals that Sokana is actually a eladrin. This is not suspicious by itself, however. Many high elves—especially women—prefer to pose as wood elves to avoid hassle.

Moving On. Before the conversation goes on too long, horns blare, announcing the approach of the king.

Early Discovery.

The duchess is an excellent diplomat and liar, so the PCs shouldn't get any sense that she's up to something nefarious.

However, if she should become aware that the PCs have somehow divined the plot, the duchess uses magic to turn invisible and teleport a short distance away, then she changes her appearance and fades into the crowd. Eventually she reaches her allies and uses ritual magic to teleport to her stronghold in Shale. Sokana, on the other hand, will be left in the lurch. The *Coaltongue*'s launch will certainly be postponed as security forces move in and take charge.

If the PCs manage to stop the duchess from escaping, the plot can still continue as one of the duchess's subordinates leads the attack on Axis Island.

Principal Minister Harkover Lee. Perhaps the most powerful mage in Risur, Lee acts as King Aodhan's bodyguard and chief of staff. Straight-backed and virile despite being in his 60s, Lee has a slight Ber-tinged accent, and was said to be quite the ladykiller in his youth. He always dresses in reds and golds and carries a solid gold orb tucked into his robes. He never eats or drinks in public.

Geoff Massarde. A 40-something tiefling with an airy voice and a fondness for wine that outmatches his ability to handle his alcohol, Massarde is one of a handful of Danoran tieflings working for the Risuri military to help construct warships and other weapons. He has few kind words for his homeland. He is fascinated with ice, and carries a wand given him as a gift by a Drakran train engineer, which can chill small objects with a touch. Mostly he just uses it as a novelty to cool beverages.

Captain Rutger Smith. The bold and idealistic captain of the R.N.S. *Impossible*, Captain Smith earned his first command five years ago. Now 37, he has never led his ship into battle. That, combined with his fondness for the Malice-era philosophical writings of the monk William Miller, has made him the target of mockery by more established naval officers. Smith seems content to just drill his crew twice as hard, encouraging them with philosophical aphorisms between puffs on a cigar.

Duchess Ethelyn of Shale. This dark-skinned, distinguished woman of her 60s speaks with a poet's precision, always pausing to consider her words before speaking, which helps those she's speaking to feel like she's giving them her full attention. She dislikes industry and wears extravagant diamond cluster earrings—representing the stars of the night sky—to show her allegiance to the old ways. Accounts tell of her possessing many different types of magic, though many of these could be exaggerated.

Handmaiden Sokana Rell. Though in her 50s, this eladrin woman looks to be in her 20s. In the Third Yerasol War, Sokana was rescued by the duchess—then just a sorceress in the Risuri military—from the island plantation of a rich Danoran, who had kept her as a trophy wife. Sokana settled with an elven family in Risur, hiding her true identity to avoid retaliation by the Danorans. The duchess helped her rediscover her fey roots, though Sokana only displayed a marginal talent with magic. Today she passes as a wood elf, but when she uses magic her eyes flare an unearthly azure, revealing her heritage.



King's Arrival

Social. Real-Time.

King Aodhan arrives and after brief pleasantries launches the Coaltongue.

With great pomp and grandeur, trumpeters announce the arrival of the king's carriage. Elite guards line the thoroughfare and open the door, and first the city governor Roland Stanfield, then King Aodhan himself emerge.

The king offers a one-sided smile to the crowd and is greeted by his principle secretary and his sister. Children, gathered in advance by royal aides, cheer and sing the traditional crown anthem as the group makes its way to the docks.

Docker Violence. If the PCs failed to remove all the disgruntled dockers, heckling begins from the crowd at this point. The royals and their retinue maintain their composure, but the rest of the crowd murmurs in displeasure, and the PCs spot both Principal Minister Harkover Lee and their boss Delft glaring daggers at them.

Then the docker Dafton, if he's present, yells, "Stanfield! Look at me, Stanfield! You ain't human! You forgot what it feels like. Here, Stanfield. Let me remind you!" He breaks free from the crowd and advances on the royal retinue, cracking his knuckles. Royal guards intercede before he gets close, and though he tries to throw a few punches, he gets smashed to the ground by the haft of a polearm, then held down by three men until the king, governor, and the rest are safely out of the way.

Benedict Pemberton. Owner of experimental arms manufacturer Pemberton Industries, this man looks only about fifty, and has the verve of a young man, but he jokingly exaggerates his infirmities. Though on the cutting edge of mechanical warfare, Pemberton plays up his homely country roots, speaking slowly in a deep voice and often leaning back and tucking his thumbs in his belt loops.

Flint City Governor Roland Stanfield. Stanfield witnessed the fall of the eladrin goddess Srasama five hundred years ago and died soon thereafter in the chaos of Elfaivar's fall. But he reincarnated, restored to life by a sliver of the divine power he absorbed when Srasama was slain. His memories vague and jumbled, he found his way back to his homeland of Risur and eventually settled in Flint, then just a modest coastal port.

In the centuries since he has died with irregular intervals, and with each rebirth he returned to the city he calls home. For most of that time he has served as Flint's governor, having constantly striven to improve himself with each life, from a simple warrior, to a humble leader, to an educated renaissance man nimbly handling the complex challenges of the fastest-growing city in the world. Stanfield wears a near-constant expression of contented optimism, but still occasionally complains of a war wound he took to his back in his first life.

King Aodhan. Now in his 70s, the current king of Risur looks rather unassuming. He prefers to resolve disputes by being cool-headed and rationally persuading those who will listen to his side. For those who won't, he's shrewd enough to give them a sliver of what they want and then distract them with harmless endeavors while those worth dealing with get the job done. Despite all this, though, he trains regularly to keep his stamina and swordplay robust, and the rites of rulership grant him daunting magical powers.

This can have grave consequences later, because people will be less inclined to trust to the party after this screw-up. If the PCs show up during the king's big speech later that evening, yelling that the duchess is trying to blow up the ship, it might take an extra 3 or 4 rounds for people to take the threat seriously.

The Launch. The ceremony goes without a hitch. The king takes a champagne bottle, announces that the ship shall be formally known as the Royal Naval Ship *Coaltongue*, then smashes the bottle across the bow. At that precise moment a steam whistle sounds, and black smoke begins to billow forth from the ship's stacks.

The crowd begins to board the ship, and if the PCs dally, Assistant Chief Inspector Delft reminds them they've got a party to enjoy. Once everyone is aboard and enjoying light refreshments on the main deck, it sweeps toward the center of the harbor, where eight traditional four-masted ships enter formation with it. Against their white sails, the black clouds from the *Coaltongue's* smokestacks makes for a dramatic image, and though the PCs catch the duchess glowering at the sight, they can also see crowds along the shore cheering as the small fleet sets a course out of the harbor, toward open sea.

All Aboard

Exposition. Montage.

Over the next hour, people wine, dine, and take tours of the fantastic warship.

The party has an hour before the *Coaltongue* reaches its destination, just beyond the Ayres Islands north of Flint. Now's a good time to go over the layout of the ship with the players; this can represent a mix of the PCs having researched the location in advance and their taking a guided tour of the vessel.

If the players want to get into details, you can have them meet a few notable crewmembers, but these NPCs are just for flavor, and to tug the players' heartstrings if they turn up dead during the assassination plot.

- **Divianne Athel.** A guard at the ship's magazine, she explains that fire wards hung in the two rooms of the magazine keep the ammunition from accidentally exploding in battle. She says she's stationed here through most of the party, and that she hopes some food will be left when her shift is done.
- **Fitzcairn Luckshore.** A young technician in the engine room, he gets as excited if a woman shows up as he does if anyone asks him about the engine. He gets bubbly describing the intricate interactions of various valves and pipes. The other two men in the engine room give him a hard time, because with his scrawny arms he never shovels an equal load of firegems.
- **Elian Aughtbrook.** A petty officer, Elian has been assigned to keep the visitors happy. He'll interact with the PCs if they actually try to arrange a room for the duchess to rest in. Otherwise, Elian does it on his own. He has a small notebook where he wrote down notes he made in advance about the visitors, and he enthusiastically tries to make small talk based on badly-formed ideas of what nobles and industrialists care about.



A Simple Favor

Social. Real-Time.

The PCs stumble upon the saboteurs in the middle of their plot.

Near nine o'clock, the *Coaltongue* sits anchored just within sight of shore, surrounded by its eight-ship escort. The starry blanket of night hovers overhead, and a quarter moon peeks above the eastern horizon. The crew have set up an outdoor kitchen on the aft main deck, and are using the interior of the capacitor as a banquet room. The ceiling occasionally flickers with silver arcs of magical energy, which the crowd delights in.

The Band. A whistle from the bridge sets off motion as nearly the entire crew starts to line up around the outer deck, carrying horns, drums, and woodwinds.

Indigestion. The king and Minister Lee move for the front end of the capacitor/banquet hall, and a nearby PC overhears the king complaining about indigestion.

"One of the local archfey is upset I parked my ship here," he guesses, laughing it off. "One of the burdens of kingship; the fey can really let me know when they've got an opinion. I always get burps that taste like fish when I sail these days."

From now until they get back to land, the king cannot be teleported.

Errand. Stover Delft detaches himself from a trio of military veterans arguing about small-unit tactics and comes to the PCs. He points out that the duchess hasn't gotten back yet from the nap she went to an hour ago. He suggests the PCs go to the ship's wizards quarters at the aft of the berth deck where the duchess is napping, to check on her and make sure she's not trying to embarrass the king by hiding during his big speech.

What happens next depends on where the PCs go. If they wait more than a few minutes to head belowdecks, their only warning of the imminent explosion is when steam stops coming out of the stacks, so you can skip to the combat section of the next encounter. If they wait a short while then head down, they might cross paths with Sokana and the halfling assassin. If they head straight for the engine room or magazine, they may attempt a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) check. On a success, they notice the guards are missing, and may make a further DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) check to find their bodies hidden behind casks of firedust. If they interrogate the engineer saboteurs, they claim everything's fine.

But most likely is that the PCs go to the quarters where the duchess is supposed to be napping. The door is locked, and Sokana stalls by saying that the duchess is sleeping, while she tries to hide the evidence of her ritual. If the duchess hasn't left already, she opens the aft window and dives out at this moment. Meanwhile the halfling assassin hides by the entrance, ready to attack if the PCs force their way in. If cornered, Sokana might climb out the aft window, clamber along the outside hull, and try to sneak back into the ship through one of the open gunports.

If combat breaks out, the instant the two sides roll initiative is when the military band on the main deck starts to play the national anthem. For the next three minutes, no one up there is going to hear anything belowdecks.

The Sabotage

Action/Puzzle. Tactical (CR 3).

Stop the duchess's agents before they finish their assassination plot.

Sokana (a eladrin sorcerer), Ilton (a halfling spy), and two engineer saboteurs named Jenner and Ostman (human bandits) travel together.

Sokana is a sorcerer. Modify the **cult fanatic** stat block by giving her a Charisma score of 16 (+3) and replacing her cleric Spellcasting feature with the following:

Spellcasting. Sokana is a 3rd-level spellcaster. Her spellcasting ability is Charisma (spell save DC 13, +5 to hit with spell attacks). She has the following sorcerer spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): *blade ward, fire bolt, light, shocking grasp*

1st level (4 slots): *burning hands, mage armor*

2nd level (2 slots): *misty step, scorching ray*

Sokana also possesses two magic items: an *elemental gem* containing a fire elemental, which she intends to throw into the boiler furnace, and the removed antenna of a rust monster. This antenna can only be used 5 fives before it crumbles to dust. Sokana gains the following action:

Rusting Antenna. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +4 to hit, reach 5 ft., one metallic creature or object. *Hit:* If the object isn't being worn or carried, the touch destroys a 1-foot cube of it. If it is being carried, it takes a permanent and cumulative -1 penalty to the AC it offers. Armor reduced to an AC of 10 or a shield that drops to a +0 bonus is destroyed. Creatures made of metal take 15 (3d6 + 5) force damage.

Ilton has two *potions of healing* and a *potion of invisibility* on his person.

The saboteurs each possess a *rusting antenna* as well.

The Duchess and Beshela.

Right as the band starts to play, the duchess dives into the ocean, where she is caught by the archfey Beshela, who appears as a sea nymph riding atop some massive submerged sea creature. The PCs might get a glimpse out the window of the duchess willingly heading underwater with the archfey.

If a PC tries something wild like leaping out after the duchess or attacking Beshela, be merciful. The duchess's stats are presented in Act Three. Beshela is a high level creature, and could easily knock out a PC with a glance, but neither of them wants to waste time fighting. They flee, and the sheer scale of the giant squid Beshela uses as a mount should hopefully clue the PCs in that this foe is beyond them.

Chases and Slow PCs.

What if you have a party full of gnomes in plate armor? Chasing down Sokana before she gets to the engine room is meant to be tough, but there's a risk it might frustrate players with slow characters. If you want to give the PCs a chance to catch up, perhaps the security guards haven't been taken out yet, and they attack Sokana when she reaches the magazine, forcing her to spend a round or two to kill them.



Tactics.

For the saboteurs, making sure the boiler explodes takes precedence over their safety. Only after the saboteurs manage to set the engine to detonate do they turn their attentions to escape.

Sokana's primary goal is to reach the engine room and throw her *elemental gem* into the boiler furnace. If the combat begins in the ship's wizards' quarters, she uses *misty step* to evade the PCs and get to the engine room as fast as possible. Sokana orders her fellow saboteurs to try to keep PCs from pursuing her as she flees alone.

Ilton the assassin tries to hobble and pounce on any PCs who are harassing Sokana; once she's safely away, he'll try to keep attention focused on him as long as possible. He uses his *potion of invisibility* to disappear if things look bad, only to reappear and sneak attack a PC when their guard is down.

In the engine room, Jenner and Ostman first spend actions to disable the relief valves (see "Engine Boiler Relief Valves"). Then they try to force the PCs close to the dangerous heat of the furnace. If successful, they hurry to the magazine, where they remove fire wards, drop them, and then start grabbing casks of firedust and throwing them at the PCs so they can slip past and escape.

Terrain.

- **Deck Access.** Ladders lead between the levels of the ship.
- **Grating.** Parts of each deck's floor are grating, which grants line of sight between decks, but not line of effect. Teleportation can pass through these sections of floor.
- **Magazine Firedust.** At the front of the berth deck above the engine room, a three-chambered magazine stores casks of firedust and cannonballs. A small wreath-like charm hangs in each of the three rooms, marked with "W" on the map. Creatures and objects within 15 feet of it gain resistance to fire damage; except if it is removed from its mount, the charm grants resistance only to the creature carrying it. Their power fades after a day if not renewed by a special ritual.

The ship's wards are designed to prevent firedust from detonating in the magazine. With the wards removed, however, a cask of firedust that takes any fire damage explodes, dealing 1d6 fire damage to all creatures within 5 feet. If multiple adjacent casks explode, the size of the explosion increases to as much as a 10-foot burst, and the concussive force of the explosion pushes any creatures in the area to a square outside and adjacent to the edge of the burst.

Even if all the wards are removed, the design of the magazine prevents an explosion in one room from setting off a chain reaction in other rooms. The only way to detonate all the casks and cause a catastrophic explosion to destroy the ship is to damage them all simultaneously – for example, by setting the steam boiler in the engine room to explode. That much heat is far more intense than low-level fire attacks can cause, so it's not possible to accidentally blow up the ship.

- **Furnace and Boiler.** Any creature that starts its turn or moves in front of the door of the furnace takes 1d6 points of fire damage from roaring heat. Any creature who ends up adjacent to the boiler or furnace takes 1 point of fire damage from making contact with the searing metal.

Steps of Sabotage.

Unless the party finds a way to interrupt them very early, the saboteurs will have already overloaded the furnace and disabled the alarm sirens when this encounter begins. To make sure the engine explodes as intended, however, they must achieve several additional goals.

Countdown. From the start of the encounter, the PCs have 40 rounds before the boiler explodes. They can take actions to gain more time, to get assistance, or to mitigate the effects of the boiler explosion.

Overloaded Furnace. The furnace is crammed full of firegems, hot enough to melt metal. If the door to the furnace isn't rusted shut, a PC can use a shovel to remove some firegems as a standard action, taking 1d6 points of fire damage per round, as detailed above. After a given shovel is used ten times, it slags and is no longer useful. There are two shovels near the furnace, and ten more elsewhere in the engine room. The cantrip *mage hand* can accomplish as much as a shovel without risk.

However, these firegems must be placed somewhere. Every five actions worth of shoveling fills one 5-foot square with firegems, making it difficult terrain and dealing 1d6 points of fire damage to anyone in that square.

If ten actions are devoted to shoveling out firegems, double the rounds left on the countdown. If twenty standard actions are devoted, the countdown stops. The mitigating factor here is damage from heat, and sufficient shovels.

Engine Alarm Sirens. In the room aft of the furnace, the pressure gauge on the boiler that would trigger a siren has been sabotaged. Repairing the siren requires you to have both hands free and succeed on two DC 12 Intelligence checks, each of which takes one action. This repair doesn't help prevent an explosion directly, but five rounds after the alarm is fixed, Geoff Massarde and three of the *Coaltongue's* engineers will arrive to help.

Engine Boiler Relief Valves. Each of the two boiler stacks in the room aft of the furnace has a sturdy valve. As soon as the engineers realize they've been found out, they start trying to disable them. Disabling a valve requires two actions to close it and a use of a *rusting antenna* to break the valve and seal it. Each closed valve removes 5 rounds from the countdown toward explosion.

An unbroken valve can be reopened with just two actions, which returns 5 rounds to the countdown. Fixing a broken valve is impossible in this scene's time frame, but the relief pipes can be cracked slightly by dealing 20 damage to the pipe or by making a successful DC 15 Strength check. This also adds 5 rounds to the countdown, but fills the aft engine room with scalding steam, which grants everyone in the room concealment and deals 1 point of fire damage each round. Breaking a second valve adds another 5 rounds, but doesn't make the steam any worse.

Fuel Bin Firegems. Forward of the furnace is a large bin of firegems, fuel which is normally shoveled in by engineers. Already Jenner and Ostman have filled the furnace to the brim, so the rest are of relatively little consequence.

Magazine Fire Wards. Each ward can be destroyed by dealing 5 points of damage to it. A character can remove or remount a ward with a bonus action. If a PC thinks to toss a fire ward in the



furnace, this adds 5 rounds to the countdown clock, but the ward is destroyed, burned away to nothing.

Elemental Gem. In the berth deck's aft quarters, Sokana will likely have just retrieved her gem from the duchess when the PCs come investigating. If she can toss the gem into the furnace, it flares with light and the furnace begins to shudder with barely-contained arcane energy as a **fire elemental** attempts to manifest within the furnace. Due to the space of the furnace, the elemental has difficulties manifesting and is still linked to the gem. The elemental does not attack, but halves the rounds left in the countdown. Then she or one of the engineers will rust and seal the furnace door.

Opening a rusted furnace door requires a successful DC 13 Strength check. A character who reaches in to pull out the *elemental gem* takes 3d6 points of fire damage, though they can manage to get the gem out first even if the damage knocks him out or kills him. If the character attempting to pull the gem out of the furnace has a passive Perception of 16 or higher, let them know there are a pair of metal tongs within arms' reach. Removing the gem doubles the rounds left in the countdown and the fire elemental dissipates back to its home plane.

Boiling Point.

Once the PCs realize that the boiler is working its way toward a deadly explosion, they have to decide whether to try to undo the damage themselves, seek help, or evacuate the ship. To keep the pressure up, you might want to have a 30 second timer to represent each round; don't be too strict, especially if the players need you to clarify something their characters should know.

Getting Help.

The drunk tiefling Geoff Massarde is not eager to risk his life, but the pressure of everyone looking to him convinces him to go. Massarde can automatically succeed checks needed to destroy the furnace (see "Fix It!" below), and he's quite handy with a shovel, since he's resistant to damage from the heat.

If the PCs propose the capacitor plan to Harkover Lee, he says his duty to the king takes precedence, and he makes the preparations detailed in the 'Evacuate' section below.

Evacuating the Ship.

If the PCs warn the dignitaries fast enough, there's a chance they might be able to escape before the explosion.

King Aodhan gravely orders everyone to remain calm, and then nods to his principle minister. Harkover Lee uses a telekinetic flick of his hand to tear free the nearest piece of gold ward around the ship's edge. After 5 rounds, the ship's crew manages to prep the two life boats, and key political figures pile into them. Then 5 rounds later the lifeboats are in the water, and 5 rounds after that the sailors rowing them get far enough away to avoid the explosion.

Once the lifeboats hit the water in round 10, Harkover Lee urges the king that they have to leave. The king nods, orders everyone else to swim, and then removes a gold ring from one finger. Lee grabs the king and concentrates, planning to teleport a hundred feet to the nearest escort ship. Fey magic from Beshala disrupts his spell, and though Lee teleports away without trouble, the king is



FIRE ELEMENTAL, FREED FROM SOKANA'S ELEMENTAL GEM.

left behind. Lee is only capable of such a jaunt once a day, so he is powerless to help his king.

In round 10, those who aren't in the lifeboats heed their king's orders and start diving into the water to swim to safety. A quarter of the crowd manages to get to safety by round 15, and another half by round 30, but the last quarter are too feeble to swim even that far. They will be caught in the blast. The king, a 70 year-old man, swims with them, and gets to safety 15 rounds after he's alerted to the danger.

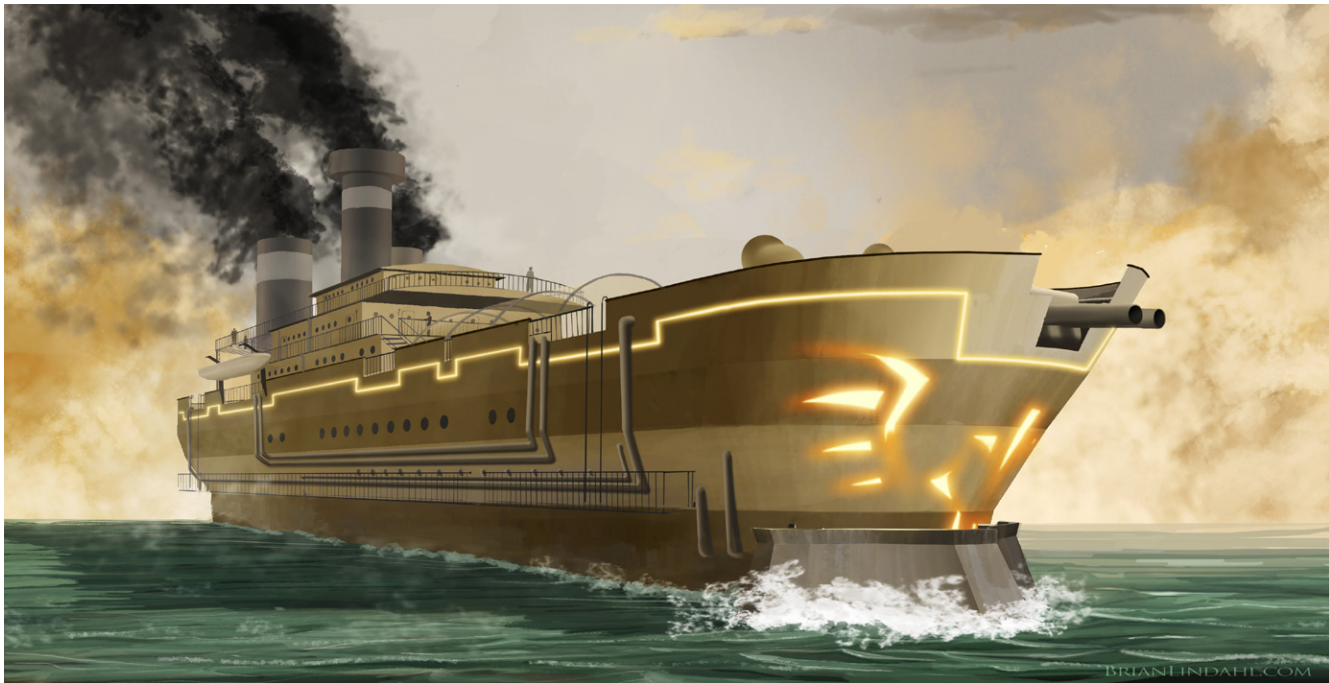
The ocean waters are gentle (Swim DC 10 to swim).

Fix It!

All the easy options the PCs have available only serve to delay the inevitable. Reasonably creative ideas might add a round or two to the countdown clock, at your judgment. A PC who can deal cold damage each round, for instance, might be able to add 1 round to the clock for every 5 rounds they devote to chilling the boiler.

They can mitigate the damage slightly if they replace the fire wards in the magazine. When the boiler explodes, the firedust casks don't explode. The ship's lower hull ruptures, and the whole thing sinks within ten minutes, but that's enough time to evacuate everyone.

Likewise, they might stop the explosion altogether with the unorthodox tactic of detonating five or more casks of firedust in the forward compartment of the engine room. This cracks the hull, and 5 rounds later seawater floods the furnace and kills the reaction.



The most efficient way to stop the explosion is to destroy the furnace, which is too sturdy to be affected by most weapons. A cask of firedust pushed into the furnace immediately detonates, shattering the furnace and dealing $2d6 + 1$ damage to creatures and objects within 5 feet. Alternately, a PC use an action to deduce the best way to place a cask of firedust (Intelligence DC 12). A cask of firedust placed in the proper way will only fracture the furnace when it explodes (and not deal damage); if two casks are detonated this way, the furnace is destroyed.

At the GM's discretion, this either obliterates the relief valves – which fills all the lower decks with scalding steam for 5 minutes (see “Engine Boiler Relief Valves,” above) – or breaks open the bottom of the furnace – which spills out firegems onto the floor, warping metal and forcing an evacuation of the engine room (see “Overloaded Furnace,” above). Once the furnace is destroyed, though, the ship is safe.

Alternately, the PCs might go for a *Star Trek*-style technobabble solution: channel excess fire mana from the engine into the capacitor, then release it through the Brand. Unfortunately, since this was just supposed to be a casual cruise, the Brand isn't calibrated yet. The Brand uses a complicated mix of magical energies, but it can be calibrated if PCs in the engine room succeed on three DC 17 Intelligence checks, one of each Arcana, Nature, and Religion.

The ship shudders, the engine room glows with red-orange light from all directions, and on deck, the capacitor crackles with red energy. The dignitaries scream and cower in fear, and then a gout of flame shoots forth from the figurehead with a roar, vaporizing a spot on the ocean a hundred feet away. The ship shudders one last time, and then the furnace dims to a safe level.

If the PCs come up with other suitably dramatic, risky, or clever plans, those can work at the GM's discretion. If the PCs' efforts are not bearing fruit, and the countdown drops to 10 rounds, you might suggest they simply evacuate with all the haste they can muster.

Aftermath

Exposition/Social. Montage.

The PCs learn the full story of what happened.

What happens next depends on how the PCs handled the boiler sabotage.

Critical Failure.

If the PCs don't stop the boiler in time, it explodes. Every creature in the engine room is slain by the combination of pressure and heat. If the firedust casks are warded, the ship merely has its hull cracked. It sinks 5 feet every round, and 7 rounds later the main deck is underwater. The escort ships rescue everyone, but the *Coaltongue* sits in a watery grave.

If the casks were not warded, though, they explode in a chain reaction that tears apart the bow of the ship. Every creature on board or within several yards of the ship is killed. If this happens and the PCs failed to warn the king, well, they're probably already dead, but the king is too. Continue the campaign with a new set of PCs, perhaps recruited by Lya Jierre to prove that the duchess was behind the whole plot.

Failure.

If the ship explodes or sinks, but the PCs warned the king in time for him and others to get to safety, they are publicly commended for saving the king, but privately reprimanded for losing the ship. When they are recruited to go to Axis Island, it's Stover Delft's attempt to get them a chance to make up for their initial failure.

Success.

If the PCs keep the ship from sinking, they are highly commended, and are given the mission to Axis Island precisely because they have proven themselves.



Critical Success.

The PCs might manage to stop the ship from sinking without even interrupting the king's party. If they end up firing the Brand, it coincides with the crescendo of the national anthem, setting off a round of applause from the crowd. They can come up on deck, discreetly notify Harkover Lee to deal with prisoners, and let the king give his prepared remarks without disruption.

Debriefing.

In the immediate aftermath, the PCs are treated for their injuries and questioned thoroughly by Principal Minister Lee. The king himself asks to speak to them before the night is out, and he thanks them personally. He spares a few minutes at a very critical time to ask their names and inquire about their families. He's especially interested in anyone who has siblings – the king is troubled that his own sister could betray him, and he prays that the PCs never have to find an enemy among their own flesh and blood.

The King's Speech.

Either to a small crowd on the ship, or the next day before a crowd of thousands, the king gives a five-minute speech. He begins by recounting the trials Risur has faced defending itself from Danor – four wars that ultimately earned either side little but hardship. For centuries, the king says, his people have viewed Danorans as cursed and unnatural, while Danorans, in turn, claim Risuri are superstitious and primitive. But ironically their latest efforts to arm for war have actually brought the two nations closer together: Danor has significantly helped Risur with its industrial revolution.

The king goes on to say that he hopes his successor, whoever that may be, will not have to commit to another pointless war and the loss of many young men and women. And so, even though he first started this arms race, King Aodhan now intends to seek peace with his old, respected enemy, the sovereign of Danor. In one year's

time he will convene a peace summit here in Flint, and to seal the proposed treaty he intends to marry a Danoran.

Making peace with a distrusted enemy is normally a tough sell, but the assassination attempt persuades most Risuri to support their king. (The truth is revealed even if the PCs killed all the assassins: within a few days, mages extract from their corpses and souls enough evidence to brand the duchess a traitor.) A vocal minority try to defend the duchess's actions, claiming that Risur is going in the wrong direction and that Danor is not to be trusted, but they are denounced. Some high-ranking supporters of the duchess are driven from their homes and sent fleeing westward to Shale.

What's Next?

By the time anyone knows what's going on, the duchess is long gone, having fled by magic to her stronghold in Shale, where she prepares to launch a naval assault on Axis Island.

Even though the PCs are the heroes of the hour, they're not high-ranked enough to be given any critical assignments. Others in the constabulary are given the task of figuring out who was involved in the plot, and most of the PCs' tasks involve following up on the work of other investigators. Assistant Chief Inspector Delft keeps the PCs busy for the next few days conducting low-level interviews, filling out paperwork for search warrants, and the like.

Journalists press for interviews, but this is an age before 24-hour news and online updates, so even while "famous" the PCs don't hear much about what's going on hundreds of miles away in Shale. And in any case, the PCs' fame fades quickly.

Then, about a week after the *Coaltongue's* launch, the PCs are in the main RHC office late one afternoon filing their paperwork, when one of their coworkers tells them that Delft wants them in his office. What the PCs will learn in that office – detailed in Act Two of this adventure – sets them on the course of war.

