

World Star Saga

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Beta Copy, for review and evaluation purposes only

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Chapter 1: A Hunt For The Future

“Alright Keeps, I’ll give you 100 joules for the relic!”

“Try 40,000.”

“Hm... 120?”

“50,000.”

Katchi sighed, raising her hands in surrender. “Okay, okay, you drive a hard bargain... 150?”

“No,” the shopkeeper said, rubbing his temples in annoyance. “Seriously kid, don’t you have anything better to do?”

Light flitted in through gaps in the window shades, shining down on the tables and protective glass cases of the Explorer Bazaar. The floors were lined with old, cracked tiles, and the walls with shelves from top to bottom. Every inch of space had something to go with it; some firearms and polished blades, some canned goods and practical supplies, and best of all, some relics.

As she stood before the main counter, Katchi’s eyes fixated on her primary target: a sleek, tan pair of shoes with crimson-lined designs etched into them. Small pairs of wings trailed off from their corners, and shined silver wrapped their soles from front to back. On each was a dial labeled one through ten. What exactly they were for, she did not know, but she was eager to find out.

“Aw, come on, please?” she said, staring longingly at the shoes. “You know as well as I do that any good explorer *needs* a good relic.”

“Well, you’re no good, and you’re certainly no explorer,” the shopkeeper scoffed, rolling his one working eye. “Besides, I didn’t buy from a top-grade supplier so some stupid kid could use them.”

Katchi scowled, leaning over the counter and pulling the blonde hair from her eyes. “Stupid kid?? You’ve got some nerve. When I come back here tomorrow, the whole town will be talking about the brave students chosen to join the Explorer Fleet. You wouldn’t turn down one of them, would you?”

The shopkeeper crossed his arms, unphased. “I would when they’re broke.”

Katchi cringed. “Fair point.”

To her side, Lumine tapped her fingers nervously against the countertop, looking between her friend and the agitated shopkeeper. Her curly brown hair swayed as she moved, and her freckled face turned pink from embarrassment. “Let’s not be too hasty,” she said, putting a gentle hand on Katchi’s shoulder. “I’m sure there’ll be plenty of time for relics once we’re on the road. No sense in rushing things now, right?”

Katch could only slump with the sting of rejection. It just didn’t seem fair. She’d been a bazaar regular for the lion’s share of her life, more dedicated and interested than anyone else, and still the shopkeeper wouldn’t throw her a bone. Supposedly, it was due to her “assertive nature,” as Lumine put it, but she couldn’t see how that was a bad thing. Lumine was the sugar, and she was the spice. Good cop and bad cop, if they were a bit on the short side. They worked well together, their relationship a series of gives and takes... and at that moment, she could tell it was time for a take.

Pulling herself up, she clapped Lumine on the back and glanced at the keeper. “Excuse us for a moment.”

A second later, the pair had secluded themselves behind a nearby shelf. Katchi could see uncertainty in Lumine’s hesitant steps, but between them, that was nothing new. “Hey, remember when I told you about Operation Pitfall?” she asked.

Lumine nodded, but her expression was gruesome. “You want to try that *here*? To steal a *relic*? Katchi, the selection ceremony is tonight. If you get caught, they might not even let you be there for it. And besides...” She looked to the floor. “It’s too embarrassing.”

“I know, I know, but is it really stealing if I only examine them for a few minutes?” Katchi pleaded. “I can’t just let them sit there like that. They’re fresh and vibrant and cool, just like me!” Peeking back at the counter, she couldn’t help but smile. “I swear, this might be my favorite relic ever.”

“They’ve only been in the shop a week.”

Katchi paused. “I swear, this might be my favorite relic this week.”

“...Alright, we can try it,” Lumine said with a small, amused smile, “but I’m keeping the damage to a minimum this time.”

Katchi gave her a thumbs up and winked. “You’re the best.”

With a deep breath and a nod to each other, the two set off in opposite directions. Lumine crept towards an aisle loaded with military supplies, and at the same time, Katchi approached the counter. “So, how are the kids?” she asked.

The shopkeeper raised an eyebrow. “I don’t have any kids-”

“Excuse me, sir!” Lumine shouted from her end of the shop. “Could you help me get something down from the top shelf? It’s really heavy.” Before anything more could be said, a loud, metallic crash echoed across the store, followed by another. “Oops! Uh, don’t worry, everything’s fine. O-Oh, wait a minute.”

Two more came one after the next, and the shopkeeper snapped to attention, his eye twitching. He immediately started off to investigate, but not before giving Katchi a menacing scowl. “You touch anything behind this counter, you’re dead, understand?”

“Yes sir,” Katchi said.

As soon as he was gone, her focus returned to the case. Her hands tingled with anticipation, heart beating faster with each passing second. She’d studied the Central Relic Compendium for as long as she could remember, and knew many of its entries by heart. The shopkeeper might be skeptical of her abilities, but in this case, she knew exactly what she was looking at: The Flights of Fancy.

Relic #8076: The Flights of Fancy

Class: Minor

Discoverer: Unknown

Abilities: When worn, the shoes’ soles produce a small field that repels anything that touches them, regardless of the strength or size of impact. In practical use, this means that the user can walk against any surface with zero friction, similar to skating on ice. Finer adjustments to force and field area have not yet been tested.

Katchi could hardly contain herself as she pulled a pin from her hair and bent it into a lockpick. It might only be for a short minute or two, but thanks to Lumine’s distraction, she could finally investigate a genuine relic outside of class. What sort of secrets might it contain? With such a short description, could there be more potential hidden within it? How could its

reality-bending power be used in a practical setting? Even if the Flights were an insignificant sample, she couldn't help but bask in the wonder and whimsy of it all.

Waiting for a moment the shopkeeper seemed particularly occupied, she reached around the counter and fiddled with the lock. She could hear Lumine struggle to keep up her facade, profusely apologizing as she watched the ploy from afar, but before long, the glass case slid open. The shoes were within her hands.

Katchi ducked behind a nearby shelf before marveling at her prize. Though they were "relics," the shoes seemed remarkably well kept, their colors clear and leather smooth. The material was highly flexible, and she felt an odd tingling sensation when her hands brushed against the steel soles. Aside from odd inclusions like the dials and wings, she wouldn't have guessed they were relics at all.

"It couldn't be a fake, could it?" she mused. Though they appeared to be mere shoes from a distance, she could feel an aura of intrigue radiating off of them, as if to attract any eye that happened to cross it. The longer she stared into them, the more interesting they seemed, and before she knew it, a mischievous grin had crept up her lips. "Hmm... guess I'll need to check for myself to be sure."

Quietly removing her own sand-filled shoes, she moved the relic next to her foot. They were a bit larger than she preferred, but with some lace tightening, she was sure they could fit.

"Hey, where'd the little brat get off to?"

Katchi flinched and shot up from her hiding place. Behind her, she could hear the sounds of the shopkeeper growing closer, but she no longer cared. If only for a moment, she needed to know the sort of sorcery this relic was really capable of!

The shoes slid into place, and at the same time, the shopkeeper and Lumine rounded the shelf she'd been hiding behind. Pure anxiety showed on Lumine's face, and the shopkeeper's hands shook with fury. Instinctively, Katchi moved to allow her to retreat, but as she did, a few faint sparks emanated from the shoes. Her knees began to wobble involuntarily.

"Katchi, be careful!" Lumine exclaimed.

The shopkeeper's steps thundered towards her, traces of fear entering his expression. "Oh, you've done it now, you little thief! I've had just about enough of you brats making a mess in my-"

Before she could react, her feet rocketed off the floor, sending a loud bang through her ears and a torrent of dust swirling outward. The store's shelves swayed and toppled over into each other, sending merchandise in all directions, and in a flash, she launched backwards through the store's front window.

When her eyes opened again, she was lying against the warm red stones of the street, surrounded by piles of glittering glass shards. The midday sun was blinding to her eyes and a trickle of blood ran down her forehead, but she could faintly make out Lumine's figure waving through the new opening in the storefront.

"Run, Katchi! Get out of here," she shouted. "I'll do whatever I can, just go!"

"R-Right!" Katchi said, still disoriented from her sudden trip. Forgetting the relic still on her feet, she attempted to stand before flopping over again. Her cheeks burned red, her hands feeling frantically around the ground, until eventually she grabbed hold of a lamp post and hoisted herself up. All around, passersby dressed in working clothes had stopped to watch the scene, some walking and others on rusted brown bikes. Their looks were scornful and dismayed, keeping their distance as if waiting for someone to arrest this suddenly-appearing hooligan. The message was clear: Even if the damage had been an accident, she needed to leave before things got out of hand.

Taking a hesitant step forward, her feet instantly slid out from under her. She tried to plant herself in place, but to no avail. It was as if the ground itself refused to make contact, and despite the situation, she smiled. She'd never experienced it firsthand, but she assumed this was what the description meant when it mentioned "ice skating." If she could make use of this new power quickly, she could get away faster than she ever would have on foot!

With one last look at the ruined storefront, she let go of the lamp post, wobbling around as she tried to maintain her balance. It was a constant game of shuffling her feet and shifting her weight, but after a few seconds, her legs straightened and she slowly began sliding down the street. The wind blew at her back and the road ran straight, giving her time to come to grips with her new form of transportation.

"Alright," she said, splaying her arms outward. "Now I just need to find a way home-"

Katchi froze. In her hurry to get away, she'd forgotten one crucial thing: the Explorer Bazaar was positioned squarely in the middle of the city of Sol Cielo, at the top of a long, steep,

winding hill. Without traction for her feet, she wasn't going to slow down, and now that she was moving, the only way she could stop was with her face plastered onto a wall!

With no choice but to remain upright, the road before her angled sharply down, and her speed began to grow at a terrifying rate. "C-Comin' through!" she shouted.

Concrete and clay whizzed by one building to the next, blurring the scene together into a mess of earthen tones. The wind blew wildly through her hair, and bits of sand pelted violently against her skin. It was all she could do to swerve around the passerby and keep herself from tripping, but she knew that the further she progressed, the closer she came to the hill's bottom and the massive central plaza beyond it. If she didn't find a way to change course, a crash landing would be unavoidable.

To one side of the crossroads ahead was a construction site, and attached to its scaffolding was a long length of rope that coiled into the street. With little time to formulate a plan, Katchi eagerly snatched it up and watched as it began to unfurl behind her. She bent her knees and tightened her grip, straining to stay upright as it snapped taut, yanking her like a pendulum through a busy intersection. Her legs shuddered under the pressure and her arms felt as if they were being pulled from their sockets, but when she finally let go, she had made a successful left turn.

"Ha ha, yes!" she exclaimed, pumping her fists in the air. "Who's the stupid kid now, huh? Not me!"

She didn't notice the dead end until it was far too late. In a final flurry of movement, her foot caught against a pothole in the road, sending her crashing down the length of a shadow-filled alley. It was only the piles of garbage littered about that saved her from injury, and she could barely keep from passing out on the spot.

"N-Nailed it," she whimpered, face down in the trash.

Carefully, she turned herself over and settled upon her throne of grime. There was no adrenaline left to keep her moving, and at that point, she knew it was a pointless endeavor. Her escape had covered more than enough distance to dissuade any pursuers. In the back of her mind, it was obvious that her plan had been awful from the start, even if she'd never intended to steal the shoes outright. When she'd go to return them, no doubt she'd be banned from the bazaar for life, and likely accrue quite the debt due to the damage she'd caused. But even so, as she stared down at the magical shoes she'd risked life and limb to wear, she couldn't help but laugh.

From her many classes on the subject, she knew that 100 years ago, humans had set out in search of the grandest treasures in existence: relics. The mystical artifacts, capable of defying the laws that govern the universe, were hidden just out of sight on every corner of the globe, waiting for the right person to stumble upon them. Nobody knew how they worked or why they appeared, but one thing was for certain: humanity was completely captivated.

A turbine with the ability to control the sun's rays, allowing farmers to grow crops with incredible speed. An engine with the power to supply limitless energy, providing thousands with the electricity needed to survive. Special stones that could defy the laws of gravity, allowing wooden ships to sail through the skies. Even after decades of exploration all across the world, new treasures continued to be found. They were wonderful, unbelievable things, and as Katchi looked down at the shoes on her feet, she knew that her goal to become an explorer was wholly justified. More than anything else, these were things she could bet her future on.

Off in the distance, footsteps and shouting echoed around, growing closer as they attempted to find the place where she was hidden. Minutes passed as she waited for them to leave, but just when she thought she was in the clear, a small group of three appeared at the mouth of the alley.

As they approached, their details were obscured by shadow, but Katchi could still tell exactly who they were. "Fancy seeing you here, Akura," she said.

Akura was slow as he walked down the alley, eyes panning about before settling on her. He wore the uniform of their academy, its white shirt unbuttoned and sleeves rolled up. His hands were tensed as if he expected a fight.

"Looks like we found her," he said, his tone authoritative. Behind him, his two friends eyed her with curiosity, but he dissuaded them with a raise of his hand. "Ansum, Vin, I've got things handled here. You two go and make sure nobody got hurt."

Without a word, the two nodded, leaving the alley as Akura approached her. As soon as they were out of sight, his stern attitude shifted to a devilish grin. "So, you've added 'thief' to your list of titles, huh?" he mused. "Somehow, I thought you'd be smarter than to get into trouble right before our finish line."

Katchi rolled her eyes, well aware of how pathetic she must appear to him. "What do you want?"

“The academy’s keeping a strict watch right now, sending special patrols to keep peace in the city while we prepare to launch the fleet,” Akura said. “I honestly didn’t expect anything to happen today, but considering this little stunt will probably get you expelled, the timing couldn’t have been better.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Katchi retorted. “They need strong candidates with talent and practical skills to help in the fleet, and I’ve got both in spades. Maybe you’re just jealous that I’m gonna get in and you’re not?”

Akura laughed, though the slightest hint of annoyance twinged on his features. “Me? Do you have any idea where you stand right now? You nearly failed our academic finals, you constantly argue with instructors, and everyone knows that you’re nothing but trouble.”

“Yet the academy heads still give me a chance,” she said with a knowing smirk. “You wanna know why? It’s because those are the marks of a great explorer.”

“They’re the marks of a weakling.” Akura said, stepping forward to look down on her from above.

Dusting herself off, Katchi rose from the garbage pile and met his gaze. “We’ll just have to see, won’t we?”

Before either of them could continue, the sound of heavy footsteps entered the alley. Two figures approached them, one whose stature completely overshadowed the other. As they grew closer, the smaller of the two ran ahead and into a stray beam of light. It was Lumine.

“Katchi!” she cried, running up and grabbing her by the shoulders. “You won’t believe what happened. The shopkeeper at the bazaar was yelling at me for the stuff you did, and I was really worried after watching your getaway, but then this guy came over, and apparently he’s-”

“That’s enough.”

The second figure stepped into the light, and his mere presence caused Lumine to shrink back in nervousness. He stood an entire head and shoulders above her with a long, thin leather coat draped over his shoulders. Where there was no cloth, his skin was tanned on the edge of sunburn, and strapped to his back was a weapon so large that its ends stuck out on either side; to one, the handle of a sword, and the other a gun’s barrel.

Akura frowned, turning to face the man. “Who are you?”

As he ruffled through his dirty brown hair, the man's gaze was narrow and striking, as if he could see directly through them and into the wall behind. "I'm here for the girl," he said with a deep, raspy tone. Ignoring Akura, he looked at Katchi. "You stole the Flights, right?"

"Um... Yeah, I guess I did," she said, "but I was going to return them, I swear. I just really wanted to feel what it was like to use a relic in the field."

"Did you get your fill?"

Katchi blinked, surprised. "Yeah. It was amazing."

The man took a long, drawn out breath, as if her response had somehow disappointed him. "Fine then. Give them to me," he said, "I'll get this situation sorted out."

Katchi nodded dumbly, taking off the Flights and placing them in his outstretched palm. Seeing this, Akura stepped between the two and crossed his arms. "Hey, I don't know what you're playing at, but if you're not with the police or the academy, I can't let you take those," he said, glaring at Katchi. "She's got to pay for what she's done."

The man looked at Akura as if he were a fly buzzing around his head. "She stole my shoes, she plays by my rules."

"They were stolen from the bazaar."

"Who do you think put them there?"

"What? You mean you discovered them?" Akura scoffed, raising an eyebrow. "I know there are some explorers in town for the event tonight, but we were told about all the ones that arrived recently, and you aren't on the-" He stopped mid-sentence, and his eyes widened. "No way..."

Seeing the shock written on his face, the man smirked. Without a hint of hesitation, he turned and started outward toward the streets, walking casually as if he'd said everything he needed to resolve the situation. The weapon on his back swayed with his movements, as if beckoning Katchi to follow. "Tell the cops the situation's been handled," he said, rounding a corner and disappearing from view. "And stay out of trouble, got it?"

The man departed as suddenly as he'd arrived, and his absence left a feeling of blandness lurking in the alleyway. After a moment's pause, Katchi glanced sheepishly at Lumine and Akura. "Guys, seriously, who is he?"

Lumine smiled. "You should know him better than me, Katchi," she said. "After all, he's your idol."

“My idol?” With a flash of realization, Katchi snapped to attention. “Huh? Wait, really?!” In a panic, she looked between her classmates and the place where the man had just stood. Seeing the genuine emotion displayed on their faces, she knew it must be true.

With one arm, she shoved past Akura, using the other to brush off her shoeless feet as she stumbled into the street. The many pedestrians obscured her view in all directions, forcing her to squeeze through as she searched for the man’s distinctive silhouette. No matter how she tried to remain calm, her mind couldn’t keep from spinning out of control. Part of her feared that the minute he disappeared from her line of sight, the man might fade from existence altogether.

“Hey, wait up!” she exclaimed, and as she did, she turned and slammed directly into his back. The man hardly budged with the impact, but his weapon fell to the ground in a heap, the cloth around its base falling away. In the sunlight, Katchi could make out exactly what it was: The BlastCore.

Relic #0001: The BlastCore

Class: Legendary

Discoverer: Erik Core

Abilities: By absorbing sulfur latent in the atmosphere, this handheld cannon has the ability to generate explosions which fire outward through the muzzle. Along with standard midrange shots, the user may also strike with melee attacks by way of the large steel blade that runs along the length of the barrel. While rare, if the air-sulfur concentration is too low, the cannon may not be able to fire.

Both the gun and blade were longer than she’d ever seen, their metal pure black with gleaming silver along the edges. The handle was crowded with various mechanical pieces and a large red jewel lodged at the center. Looking between the weapon and the man standing over it, Katchi couldn’t keep from shaking with excitement. “You’re Erik Core!”

Core cringed, snatching up his cannon and hiding it from view. “Yeah, I am, now quiet down,” he said, peering at the passerby. “It’s bad enough you kids found out, I don’t need anyone else knowing I’m here.”

Despite his words, Katchi grinned. “Wait, are you being followed? Is this some sort of cool famous explorer thing?”

“No.”

“Are you... secretly scouting for a new apprentice?”

“Yes.”

“Really?!”

“No.”

Core seemed entirely indifferent to the disappointment he’d caused her. “I’m keeping a low profile,” he said. “Everyone always needs me for one reason or another. If I announced myself everywhere I went, I’d always be dealing with people of your type.”

“You mean explorers?” Katchi asked with pride.

“Stalkers,” Core replied.

Katchi looked to the ground, embarrassed. “I’m not a stalker. I just have a few questions to ask you.”

With a sigh, Core turned and resumed his trek up the streets, leaving her to follow without a shred of acknowledgement. The roads and people seemed as normal as ever, but as Katchi looked up at the hulking figure before her, she couldn’t imagine a less normal scene. There wasn’t an explorer alive who didn’t know the name Erik Core. He was the “conqueror of the five continents,” the great “pioneer of the postmodern age.” She’d heard his name spouted dozens of times during lectures at the academy, but a clear picture of him hadn’t been seen in years, and his whereabouts were completely unknown. He was a living legend, a myth, and the idea that he could simply appear before her without warning was utterly jarring.

If only to end the silence, Katchi cleared her throat. “So, are you here to see the launch of our fleet this weekend? Did the academy ask you to come?”

Core shook his head. “Personal business, nothing more. Besides, I can’t stand what your academy is doing, sending children out to die.”

“That’s not what’s happening,” Katchi said. “We’ve been training our whole lives to search for relics, and this is the largest group to do it in the history of exploration. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, journeying out into the world to discover the secrets of what relics really are and how they can help humanity. You know, it was the finds of explorers like you that inspired our mission in the first place. We owe you quite a bit.”

Core frowned. “There’s nothing I want that your academy would give me,” he said. “Not willingly, anyway.”

“Ooh, so only the pricey stuff then?” Katchi mused. “Ha! You talk exactly how I always imagined you would.”

As he looked to Katchi and then the long city road before them, his annoyance only deepened. “Oh brother.”

Spread out before them, Sol Cielo was a jungle of sand and stone. The buildings were composed of clay and painted concrete, their roofs with shingles of blue, red, and black. The structures were tall given their basic construction, some with storefronts or large windows on their faces. Misshapen metal tubes ran along the alleyways, transferring water, plumbing, and electricity between the many neighborhoods, and wind blew the desert’s contents into every corner and crevice. The city wasn’t anything she’d call “beautiful,” but it had a specific charm to it that she chose to enjoy.

With its hustle and bustle all around, they made a winding path back through the downtown, ascending the hill that Katchi had traversed in seconds not long before. Core only appeared interested in a small list of errands, but still made attempts to lose her in shops and around corners. But if she knew herself for anything, it was persistence. When she could, she’d ask him some of the million-odd questions that came to her mind, and even received the occasional “Yes,” “No,” or “You don’t want to know.” Eventually, the sun began to set upon the horizon. Even Core’s imposing presence dampened as the air around them cooled.

A long rusted railing came into view, signaling that they’d reached the lookout at the topmost point of the city. As they passed by, Katchi stopped and took in the scenery.

“What, are you finally giving up on following me?” Core asked.

“No, but I always stop by here when I’m in the area,” Katchi said.

“For the view?”

“Of course! It’s so pretty at this time of day.”

From their vantage point, they could see the region in its entirety. Buildings led out to small crop fields and wide, expansive quarries. Untamed desert sands stretched toward a towering mountain range, and with the setting sun, it appeared almost golden on the horizon. However, Core seemed unfazed by the scene’s natural beauty. A mild annoyance crept into his expression, and to her surprise, his attention then turned back to her. “You say you want to become an explorer,” Core asked. “What makes you want to leave this place so badly?”

“Well, isn’t it obvious?” Katchi remarked, waving her hand over the expanse before them. “I mean, just look at all that world out there! There’s so much I want to see, so much I want to do; relics to find and history to make.” Reaching out, she closed her hand around the setting sun. “You know, they say all explorers are looking for something special. It could be wealth or fame or power or to ‘reclaim’ like the academy, but me? I want something more than all that. I’ll find relics that can make the world better, relics that can make tomorrow better than yesterday ever was. If I hunt for anything... I’ll hunt for the future!”

Katchi stood silent for a moment, letting her words sink in as the sun fell below the mountains. Core’s eyes lingered on the spot where it had been. His sharp gaze remained, but his frown had faded. “You really believe that?” he asked. “That you could change the world with relics?”

“Absolutely,” Katchi said. “I mean, it already happened once, didn’t it?”

“Hmph.” Core closed his eyes, waving for her to follow as he resumed his walk down the streets. “It’s late. Let’s get you back to your home.”