

MALICIOUS MANUSCRIPT

AN ADVENTURE FOR CHARACTERS OF 1ST TO 3RD LEVEL



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MALICIOUS MANUSCRIPT IS A FIFTH Edition adventure for three to six characters of 1st to 3rd level, optimized for a party of four 1st-level characters. A magical virus implanted within a bestselling novel has infiltrated a local bookstore, creating magical havoc as it attempts to establish a "network" through which it can begin corrupting the shop's entire inventory. The party must navigate the store's now-dangerous environment, disable the virus's protective warding, and contain the threat before the shop's entire inventory is corrupted beyond repair. This adventure takes place in the city of Dorran in Cartosia, but the names of people and places can be changed to place this adventure in any urban environment across a variety of campaign settings.

BACKGROUND

Firestone's Bookstore has been a cornerstone of Dorran's academic district for three generations. The current proprietor, Shai Firestone, maintains her family's tradition of curating an exceptional collection of both mundane and minor magical texts. Though modest in size, the shop's intimate atmosphere and carefully chosen inventory have earned it a loyal following among the city's scholars and mages. Recently, a criminal enterprise known as the Index has begun targeting businesses throughout Dorran's merchant quarters. This group, composed of rogue artificers and hedge wizards, has developed a new and particularly insidious method of extortion. They have created a magical "virus" capable of infecting and corrupting written works, threatening to destroy entire inventories unless their demands are met. Shai was to be their first test subject for this method.

When Shai refused the Index's initial demands, they enacted their threat. One of their agents slipped an infected copy of "Through the Mageweave Veil"—currently the city's most popular romance novel—onto Firestone's shelves. The book contains a sophisticated enchantment designed to spread through proximity to other texts, gradually corrupting their contents into nonsense while making copies of the original infected novel. The virus, which uses "Through the Mageweave Veil" as its "master tome," operates in two distinct phases. First, it establishes a defensive ward around itself by creating three "anchor points" throughout the store, each manifesting as a hovering, corrupted book that feeds energy into the ward. Only after this network is established can the virus begin its true purpose of mass corruption.

The Index's message arrived shortly after the first signs of the virus's activity: unless Shai delivers 500 gold pieces to a specified location by midnight, her entire inventory will be corrupted beyond salvation. What the Index didn't account for was Shai's connections among Dorran's adventuring community, earned through years of helping research

obscure threats and mysteries. Rather than give in to their demands, she has decided to call in some favors.

GETTING THE QUEST

The party's initial contact with this situation may occur through several channels. Whether they are regular patrons of Firestone's Bookstore, contacts of Shai through previous research assistance, or simply nearby when the trouble begins, the party finds themselves drawn into the magical chaos. If the party has no established connection to the shop, they might witness a peculiar sight as they pass through the academic district—books flying past the windows of Firestone's, accompanied by flashes of arcane light, while a small crowd gathers outside in confusion.

Regardless of how the party becomes involved, they soon meet Shai Firestone (NG she/her halfling **commoner**), a slender halfling with graying dark hair pulled back in a practical bun. Reading glasses hang from a chain around her neck, and ink stains mark her fingers. Despite the crisis, she maintains a composed demeanor, though worry lines crease her brow.

Shai explains that she opened the shop this morning to find a strange copy of "Through the Mageweave Veil" hovering near the romance section. Before she could investigate, the book began emitting bursts of magical energy. To her horror, one of the reading chairs suddenly animated and lunged toward her. She barely escaped, locking the shop behind her to contain whatever magic had been unleashed.

She shows the party a note she discovered slipped under her door after fleeing:

"Your bookstore now hosts our creation. By midnight, every volume you own will be corrupted beyond salvation unless 500 gold pieces are delivered to the empty fountain in Cobbler's Square. Each attempt to interfere only accelerates the process. Pay, or watch generations of knowledge dissolve into gibberish."

The note is signed simply with a symbol resembling an open book with a dagger through it—unfamiliar to Shai, who has never experienced extortion before. She's heard no rumors of similar incidents elsewhere in the city. A character who makes a successful DC 15 Intelligence (History) check recognizes the symbol as belonging to the Index—a nascent, uniquely resourced crime syndicate with a focus on blackmail, extortion, and magical means.

"The note was delivered less than an hour ago," Shai explains, "and I've already sent my assistant Nevri to watch the fountain in Cobbler's Square. According to his message, there's no sign of anyone waiting there. They're clearly expecting the money at midnight exactly—over eight hours from now—and I suspect they might be monitoring

me somehow to see if I've called for help." She glances nervously at her surroundings. "The greater concern is that I suspect that the books are already starting to change. If we wait until midnight, I fear much of my inventory will be beyond saving."

Shai offers the party 200 gold pieces to stop the enchantment and save her inventory—all she can afford after a difficult winter season. Shai hands them the shop key with trembling fingers, admitting she has no idea what might await them inside beyond the animated chair and flying book she witnessed.

FIRESTONE'S BOOKSTORE

Firestone's Bookstore occupies a charming single-story building within Dorran's academic district. Though respectable in reputation, the establishment deals primarily in mundane texts—scholarly tomes, fiction, and reference materials that command no special security measures. The few magical volumes kept in stock possess only minor enchantments: books that glow for night reading, texts that translate themselves, or volumes with animated illustrations. This relative lack of powerful magical inventory explains the shop's minimal security and made it particularly vulnerable to the sophisticated threat now contained within its walls. Unless otherwise stated, the bookstore's features are described as follows:

Ceilings, Walls, and Floors. The bookstore has 15-foot vaulted ceilings in the main area, with a western mezzanine level that creates an 8-foot ceiling height in portions of the shop. The exterior walls are sturdy stone, while interior partitions are constructed of wood and plaster. The floors are polished hardwood throughout, covered in places with decorative rugs.

Entrances. The store has two entrances: a main entrance facing south and a secondary entrance on the east wall. Both are single wooden doors reinforced with iron bands. These doors have AC 15 and 20 hit points, and both are currently locked.

Light. During daylight hours, tall windows allow natural light to fill the main shopping area. Ornate lanterns with continual flame enchantments provide warm illumination throughout the store during evening hours or in areas away from windows.

Bookshelves. The store is filled with oak bookshelves that reach from floor to ceiling. Many are positioned perpendicular to the walls, creating narrow browsing aisles throughout the main shopping area. The shelves are sturdy enough to climb with a successful DC 10 Strength (Athletics) check.

The following areas are keyed to the provided map of Firestone's Bookstore:

I. MAIN HALL

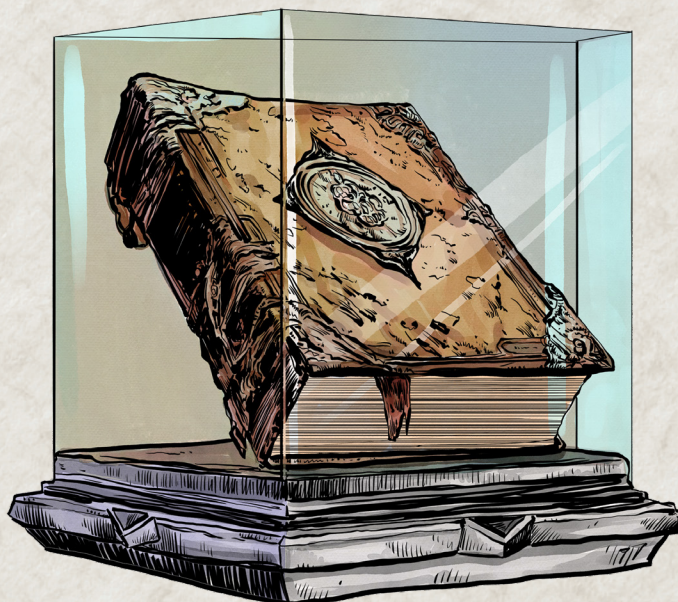
The bookstore's main hall opens before you, its vaulted ceiling rising fifteen feet overhead. Towering oak bookshelves create narrow aisles throughout the space,

their shelves packed with volumes both humble and ornate. To the east, several steps lead up to an elevated wing filled with reading nooks, while a wooden staircase ascends to a cozy mezzanine level that overlooks the store. Above, a book trailing purple energy zips back and forth across the upper level, occasionally pausing to discharge crackling arcane energy into the surrounding air. Three books hover at different points throughout the store, each surrounded by the same sickly purple glow. Thin arcs of energy pulse between these hovering tomes and the book above, creating a web of magical connections that thrums with power.

This main hall serves as the store's primary shopping area. Bookshelves are arranged to create a natural flow through the space while maintaining clear sightlines to the checkout desk to the immediate right of the entrance. The magical effects have left this area in disarray, with several books knocked from their shelves and small scorch marks where magical discharges have struck surfaces. A character who makes a successful DC 13 Intelligence (Arcana) check can discern that the three books hovering throughout the store are magically lending energy to a sort of protective ward around the tome zipping about the mezzanine.

Main Hall Anchor Point. One of the corrupted books hovers above the checkout desk, suspended within a cage of crackling purple energy. Four different-colored books (red, blue, green, and gold) float nearby. If a character grabs a book and flips it open, they find that each has been magically altered to display only a single sentence on its first page:

- Red book: "Only when spring yields to summer do my pages turn"
- Blue book: "After leaves fall, my azure depths await"
- Green book: "My verdant tales begin our story"
- Gold book: "Between winter's cold and summer's warmth I shine"



FIRESTONE'S BOOKSTORE



This is a logic puzzle—the books must be arranged in the correct sequence (Green, Blue, Gold, Red) on the desk to disrupt the energy cage. Green must be placed first (“begin our story”). Blue comes after Green (“leaves fall”). Red must also come after green (“only when spring yields to summer”), however Gold must be between Blue and Red (“Between winter’s cold and summer’s warmth”). Each incorrect arrangement triggers a voice that emanates from the anchor point (similar to the *magic mouth* spell) that taunts the party with phrases like “The narrative structure appears... unstable” or “Your story, I fear, has lost its way.” When solved correctly, the energy cage disintegrates with a sound like pages being rapidly turned, and the node’s connection to the main virus is severed.

2. EAST WING

Plush chairs form intimate reading nooks throughout this area, illuminated by brass reading lamps on small side tables. Large windows along the eastern wall bathe the space in natural light. The tranquility of this space has been disrupted—books lie scattered across the floor, and one of the reading chairs shifts menacingly, its upholstery rippling as if it contains muscles beneath the fabric.

This quieter section of the bookstore is typically reserved for customers seeking a comfortable place to examine potential

purchases. The elevated position offers partial views of both the main hall and mezzanine.

Encounter: East Wing Anchor Point. One of the corrupted books hovers near the northwestern reading nook in this area, protected by an animated chair. The book glows with purple energy and occasionally whispers fragments of twisted stories. Arcs of magical energy visibly connect this book to the master copy above. An animated chair lingers here, infused by the magic of the virus to protect this anchor point. The chair attacks any who approach within 5 feet of the book. It uses **animated armor** statistics and fights until it is destroyed, at which point it collapses into splintered pieces. Characters with a passive Perception of 12 or higher notice a conspicuously empty spot on a nearby bookshelf. When the anchor book is returned to this spot, its connection with the master tome is severed.

3. MEZZANINE

Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves line the walls of this cozy upper level that overlooks the main hall below. Here, floating in the center of the mezzanine, is a corrupted book, its pages fluttering as if caught in a gentle breeze. The book is enclosed within a gently pulsating sphere of purple energy, and the strongest beam of arcane force connects it to the tome that periodically zips past overhead.

The mezzanine houses the store's rarest volumes and offers a quiet retreat for serious readers. From this vantage point, customers can observe the activity below while enjoying relative seclusion.

Encounter: Mezzanine Anchor Point. The third corrupted book hovers within a sphere of protective energy at the center of the mezzanine. As characters approach, a spectral mouth manifests above the book and speaks in a booming voice:

"Silent and steadfast without my interlocutor. Revealing secrets to one while keeping them hidden from another. My purpose is fulfilled through partnership. What am I?"

Each incorrect answer offered to the node results in a discharge of harmful arcane energy. All creatures within 30 feet must make a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw, taking 2d4 force damage on a failed save, or half that amount on a successful one. The correct answer to the riddle is "a lock."

When the correct answer is spoken by a creature within 10 feet of the book, the sphere dissipates and the book falls to the floor, its connection with the master tome severed.

THE MASTER TOME

This is the source of the magical virus—the book containing the Index's enchantment. As long as it remains active within the store, it will continue working to corrupt Shai's inventory. If the party attempts to attack or capture the master tome before disabling all three anchor points, their efforts are doomed to failure. Spells targeting the book dissipate harmlessly against its ward. Physical attacks pass through it as if striking an illusion, and attempts to grab it cause the book to teleport 10 feet away in a burst of purple energy. A character who makes a successful DC 13 Intelligence (Arcana) check realizes the protective ward must be dismantled by severing its connections to the anchor points.

When the party successfully disables the three anchor points, read aloud:

With the final anchor point disabled, the protective ward around the master tome visibly flickers and fails. The book—a once-elegant copy of "Through the Mageweave Veil"—now hovers at the center of the mezzanine, its pages riffling rapidly as if caught in a violent wind. Purple energy crackles across its cover, and glyphs that certainly weren't part of the original text pulse with malevolent light. The book seems to sense its vulnerability, its movements becoming more erratic as it prepares to defend itself.

Once the protective ward has been disabled by deactivating all three anchor points, the master tome becomes tangible but immediately prepares to violently fight back against any attempt to interrupt its work. The tome uses **flying sword** statistics, with the following changes:

- Its Longsword attack is replaced with **Cutting Page**. Ranged/Melee Weapon Attack: +3 to hit, reach 30/60 ft., one target. Hit: (1d8 +1) slashing damage.
- **New Ability: Summon Page Swarms (1/Day).** The tome tears pages from itself, creating two swarms that appear in unoccupied spaces within 20 feet. The swarms use **swarm of ravens** statistics, but are constructs instead of beasts.

If reduced to 0 hit points, the master tome falls to the floor, inert, its enchantment broken. The purple energy dissipates, and any remaining paper swarms immediately become harmless. The book itself appears normal except for several pages that have been rendered blank where the enchantment was housed. Characters who carefully examine the book find a small Index symbol stamped on the inside back cover. This could be valuable evidence if they decide to pursue the group responsible for the attack.

AFTERMATH

With the master tome neutralized, the magical virus's influence quickly fades from Firestone's Bookstore. Any remaining animated objects return to normal, and the purple energy dissipates like morning mist.

Returning to Shai with news of their success, she examines the captured tome with a mixture of fascination and revulsion. Approximately 5% of her inventory has been corrupted—pages filled with gibberish or bizarre, constantly shifting text. Still, the damage is far less than what would have occurred had the virus completed its work. True to her word, Shai pays the party 200 gp and offers each character a book from her "special collection" (equivalent to a single-use spell scroll of 1st level, or a book that might contain information pertinent to one of the party members, or an ongoing quest).

If the party decides to visit the empty fountain in Cobbler's Square at midnight after neutralizing the magical virus, they find the area conspicuously empty. After waiting for approximately twenty minutes, a street urchin approaches



cautiously, clearly expecting to see Shai or her representative with payment. When questioned, the child admits they were paid a few copper pieces by a hooded figure to collect any bags left at the fountain and bring them to a drop point several streets away. The urchin knows nothing about the Index or their operations—they're merely an unwitting courier in a chain of intermediaries designed to keep the true collectors at a safe distance.

If the party is interested and at GM discretion, the captured master tome might provide valuable evidence against the Index. Characters can pursue several avenues if they wish to investigate further. The guard would be interested in evidence of a new criminal enterprise operating in Dorran. The Mages' Guild might be able to identify the creator through magical signatures in the virus. Furthermore, other merchants in the district could be warned, potentially revealing similar threats.

While the immediate danger has passed, the Index likely won't take this setback lightly. They invested considerable resources in developing their magical virus, and the party's intervention represents both a financial and reputational blow. The criminal enterprise might mark the characters for future retribution or attempt to recover the evidence they now hold.

REFERENCES

This work includes material taken from the System Reference Document 5.1 ("SRD 5.1") by Wizards of the Coast LLC and available at <https://dnd.wizards.com/resources/systems-reference-document>. The SRD 5.1 is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>.

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