



# ZEITGEIST Adventure Number 4

# Always on Time



A Fantasy  
Role-Playing  
Adventure by  
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*Undercover aboard the famous Avery Coast Railroad, the party must root out a conspirator and get their hands on his eldritch invention before he delivers it into the hands of his masters.*

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# INTRODUCTION

## Wherein a Lantern Heralds Dark Days

In the previous ZEITGEIST adventure, the party discovered a tiefling philanthropist named Caius Bergeron was a member of a conspiracy known as the Obscurati, which appears hostile to the party's nation, Risur. The party also learned that Caius planned to take a trip by train to a meeting in a foreign city. In *Always on Time*, the party uses that lead to outmaneuver and unmask the conspiracy.

Risur's traditional enemy, the nation of Danor, operates the 3,000-mile-long Avery Coast Railroad, which connects numerous nations. With the support of Risur's Royal Homeland Constabulary, the party will go undercover aboard this train and seek clues to what business Caius was traveling toward. Meanwhile, agents of the Obscurati assemble for a gathering of members of the conspiracy, bringing with them a magic lantern that is key to their ultimate goal.



## BACKGROUND

The Obscurati, detailed more fully in the *ZEITGEIST Campaign Guide*, plan to alter the nature of reality. This requires a massive ritual to change the planets in the night sky that imbue this world with different energies and essences. They're still over a year away from the culmination of their plot, but one key component has just been completed.

### The Lantern

**Luc Jierre**, a socially awkward tiefling arcanoscientist with a nervous stutter, has invented a magical lantern. By burning fuel attuned to a specific plane, the device can channel planar energy through its light and suffuse its surroundings with the traits of that plane. This can create a variety of magical effects, making the lantern useful both as a weapon and as a tool of control.

The lantern's settings can be adjusted to change intensity and scope. For instance, if fed fuel attuned to the fiery planet Jiese, the lantern could simply make a single object become highly flammable, or it could allow fire elementals from that world to temporarily enter this world. Since Jiese influences wars, the lantern could instead stir people toward conflict, either a whole area or just a few targets to whom the lantern has been properly attuned.

The lantern is a prototype, and it will be duplicated in large form in lighthouses across the continent. The Obscurati intend to use these lighthouses to keep the world stable while they transition the planes. More insidiously, the lighthouses will let them placate populations by manipulating their emotions *en masse*.

### Recruitment

Luc is not yet a part of the Obscurati. His uncle Sovereign Han Jierre, ruler of Danor and one of the conspiracy's three leaders, encouraged Luc's education, groomed him through life to pursue this invention, and made sure Luc had access to all the resources he needed. Under intense pressure to live up to these expectations, Luc grew up awkward and nervous, but nevertheless brilliant.

## ADAPTING THE ADVENTURE.

All the low-level ZEITGEIST adventures assume the PCs are agents of the Royal Homeland Constabulary. If, however, your party is a group of free agents, they might have been hired by the RHC, especially if they had previously uncovered Caius's secrets in *Digging for Lies*.

If you are using this adventure in another setting, the central element of a coastal rail line can be made into a pseudo-medieval pilgrimage route that travels 90 miles in six days. Several later encounters that use the train as a physical space may need to be heavily altered or omitted, but the core of the adventure still works.

Several scenes can be easily used as stand-alone encounters, including a naval engagement against a ship captained by an ice mage (page 13), a rescue of a damsel from a trio of wizards in an arena (page 34), or a cursed island and the dungeon beneath it (page 44).

Nephew of Danor's sovereign, Han Jierre, and brother of the country's Minister of Outsiders Lya Jierre, Luc has always felt inferior to his family. From childhood, his stutter made him socially withdrawn, but he found comfort in the arcanosciences. He could express himself on paper in clear formulae, and he could learn a skill the rest of his family did not possess.

Only recently did Luc realize that his family had been grooming him all along. He resents them somewhat, but cannot deny that he values power. He hopes that his new invention will earn him a place of respect. Now that he has finished the lantern, he expects he'll work on countermeasures to Risuri magical technology, or perhaps improve mana-storage devices, to let magic items last longer in Danor.

Once he's inducted into the Obscurati, he'll be given a major role in Lantern Cell, preparing larger version of his lamp and testing their ability to affect the minds of the public at large. That possibility will enthrall Luc, who has never before had the ability to make people do what he wants.



## Spy Mission.

The party's mission is to learn as much about the Obscurati as possible. All they have to go on, though, is the train schedule of a dead tiefling philanthropist. Chief Inspector Delft tasks the PCs to ride the same train and look for anyone Caius might have been meeting. With luck someone will lead the party to a meeting of the conspiracy.

It is important to stress that the PCs are not expected to run in and attack the conspirators when they find them, since they'll be severely outgunned. A victory in this mission would be to learn the identities of key conspirators and escape without being noticed. While we have included plenty of climactic combat, make sure you prepare your players to understand that they're trying to complete a mission, not win the war in one fell swoop.

## The Railroad.

The main theater for this adventure is the Avery Coast Railroad, the pride of Danoran technology, and a showcase of the nation's engineering prowess. Though Danor has numerous railroads connecting its cities, the Avery Coast line is the longest in the world, spanning 3,000 miles, from the city of Beaumont on Danor's west coast, through the Malice Lands, Drakr, various minor nations, and finally ending in Vendricce, on Crisillyir's border with Elfaiivar.

See Appendix One: The Avery Coast Railroad (page 58) for extensive details of the train's route, history, design, and crew.

## Luc's Entourage.

Before Caius Bergeron was killed, he had already made security arrangements for the train trip with Brianne Kaldeckis, called **Bree**, a Danoran veteran of the Fourth Yerasol War. Caius gave her a gold ring to wear, which has an internal inscription that reads "Oathkeeper Bree's Sword." Any high-ranking member of the conspiracy who sees this inscription knows that Bree is working for Golden Cell, but she is tier five: useful but with no knowledge of the Obscurati's agenda.

Bree has not heard from Caius for a couple months now, and as a good soldier she's trying to complete her mission as best she can. She has enlisted two men as "plainclothes" guards—**Olivert Boone**, a carousing tiefling who performs gunslinging shows around the country; and **Verzubak Tantalovich**, a dwarf mage who manipulates fate and chance. They'll board the train between Beaumont and Cherage.

## The Gathering in Vendricce.

The Obscurati have planned a gathering of all the heads of the various Obscurati cells to meet in Vendricce on the 20th of Winter, 500 A.C.V. (After Our Victory). To minimize the risk of discovery, the VNs will stagger their arrival across a week; Luc Jierre arrives on the 16th. His sister **Lya Jierre** will be waiting to greet him. The party meets in *Adventures One, Island at the Axis of the World*, and she is set to marry the king of Risur as part of a peace treaty.

The Ob know that the PCs were investigating Caius Bergeron (during *Adventure Three, Digging for Lies*), but they have no reason to think the party knows about the gathering in Vendricce. And the party's superior, Chief Inspector Stover Delft, encourages them to trust no one.

## DEAD AND WILD MAGIC.

Within Danor's borders, magic quickly seeps away. Spells with a casting time of more than 1 round cannot be cast within Danor. Static benefits of magic items function normally over the short term (i.e., you won't have to recalculate the stats on your character sheet). However, most activated powers of items don't function, and after a number of weeks equal to the item's level, its magic will be drained away entirely.

A creature's own innate magical powers still function, such as any spell-like ability granted as a racial ability.

Just beyond Danor's borders, in a broad swath hundreds of miles wide, the fabric of magic is damaged but not destroyed. In these places, known as the Malice Lands, whenever a character casts a spell, uses a magic item power, roll an unmodified 1d20. On a 1, a mishap occurs. This usually takes the form of the power backfiring, manifesting as a free-willed monster, or otherwise going dangerously awry.

## TRAIN ROUTE.

The train passes through seven main points during the adventure.

- **Beaumont.** Major shipyard on the west coast of Danor. Train leaves here the morning of the 11th of Winter.
- **Cherage.** The Danoran capital, which has an evening curfew. Train arrives on the evening of Winter 11.
- **Orithea.** The only stable city in the Malice Lands. Train arrives on Winter 12.
- **Trekthom.** The capital of Drakr. The train arrives on Winter 13.
- **Nalaam.** A decadent casino city run by mages in the mountainous border states between Drakr and Crisillyir. Train arrives on Winter 14.
- **Sid Minos.** A haunted island city off the coast of Crisillyir. Train arrives on Winter 15.
- **Vendricce.** A forested border-city in Crisillyir, where the Obscurati have their palace. Train arrives just before sunset on the 16th of Winter.





Bree knows that Caius wanted her to come with him to a meeting at the Sovereign's mansion in Cherae, so she intends to follow that much of his plan. There she meets Luc and is given clearer instructions.

Luc has an escort of his own, **Ottavia Sacredote**, a deaf elf woman who is a spy within the religious hierarchy of Crisillyir. She is a bit conspicuous, especially in the company of a tiefling, but she's one of the few highly-ranking operatives the Obscurati can spare who is capable of communicating via *sending*, making her invaluable in case anything goes wrong. Also, just in case, a handful of passengers in the common cars are hired mercenaries who will come to Ottavia's aid if she gives the right signal.

Ottavia wears a silver ring that says "Orthodoxy Bolsters Gods," marking her as tier four of lantern cell.

### Unrelated Actors.

The challenge for the party is the large number of passengers aboard the train. These include a half-orc businessman from Ber who has run afoul of a criminal syndicate, a Danoran madam who is taking a young high elf woman to sell into slavery, a turncoat Risuri spy, a militia member working with train robbers, and a dirty hobo with an unlikely connection to someone the party has met before.

### RING CODE.

Each ring has a three word inscription. The first two words can be anything, as long as their initials are O.B. The number of letters in the third word indicates what tier of the conspiracy he's in. Tier three includes just a handful of cell leaders like Lya Jierre and Roland Stanfield. Tier four members are their trusted servants who nevertheless only grasp a fraction of the conspiracy's scope. Tier five is for useful minions who are not privy to any major secrets.

A gold ring indicates he's part of Golden Cell. A silver ring is Lantern Cell. A bronze ring is Colossus Cell. Other cells use some local tree's wood. Caius wore a gold ring that read "Original Bergeron Gold."

These characters have plotlines of their own that the PCs are likely to get involved with as they try to sort out real leads from red herrings. While each is a distraction from the main mission, if the PCs get involved and help people in need they can benefit greatly later in the campaign. Some of their fellow passengers might even prove instrumental in the success of this mission.



Born deaf, Ottavia was given to a Clergy orphanage where she grew up devout in her faith, despite being an elf in a predominately human religion. She learned to communicate through sign language and even speak, albeit with some difficulty. When she reached maturity she began to hear the whispers of angels, and was trained to use magic. But as she rose in prominence among the Clergy, she began to doubt the purity of those in power.

Though still earnest in her faith, Ottavia was susceptible when an agent of the Obscurati noted her concerns and offered her a chance to make a difference. She believes the conspiracy just to be a group of enlightened thinkers who want to reform society and improve the lot of the poor and weak. In Crisilyir she has been subtly acquiring information to disgrace hierarchs she thinks are abusing their power, while helping promote more generous priests.

Ottavia took an instant liking to Luc when she realized the man knew her sign language. She believes Luc's lantern will be used to shield and illuminate the weak when an inevitable reckoning occurs. Throughout the trip she presses Luc to make sure his creation is used for the right purpose.

Ottavia has an enchanted headband that lets her project her thoughts. This helps her be understood more clearly by people who cannot sign, but makes it nearly impossible for her to lie, so she tries not to use it unless necessary.



## FINONA DUVALL.

The PCs learned of Caius's plans by recovering a letter from the philanthropist to a lady friend he was trying to seduce, a tiefling mage named Finona Duvall. The party likely defeated Finona in combat, and even if they spared her she probably died at the hands of an extraplanar monster that ate her brain. But it's possible she survived and could be pressed into service as a double agent, or that one PC might try to pose as her.

This play could provide an "in" for the party to more quickly identify Luc and his entourage, so don't be afraid to reward the party for clever thinking. Remember that the focus of the mission is not Luc, but rather whom he's meeting at the end of the line.

## COMPARTMENTALIZED SECRETS.

It's important to understand that at the start of the adventure, only Ottavia knows about the Obscurati, and even she just thinks that they are an organization of enlightened thinkers who are opposed to the Clergy. She knows nothing about the Axis Seal, the colossus being built in Flint, or the conspiracy's ultimate plan.

Bree knows she's working for a secret society, but not much else. Boone and Verzubak are just hired muscle, albeit very talented muscle. They don't ask questions.

## ADVENTURE OVERVIEW

The party sails to Beaumont, but on the way the PCs are intercepted by two privateer ships working for the Ob. The party has to lie, fight, or flee in order to reach Beaumont on time.

Their ship drops them off and sails ahead, and will be waiting for them in Trekhom, Sid Minos, and Vendricce, ready to provide supplies, support, and escape at mission's end. However, an experimental Ob submarine stealthily follows their ship's movements.

After some brief down time in Beaumont, the party boards the train and heads out. The first day provides many opportunities for the party to interact with other passengers, to try to get a sense of whom they should be keeping their eyes on. Suspects include **Damata Griento**, a nervous orc businessman who is taking his family on a first-class trip and **Elanor Yanette**, a fat, brusque enchantress accompanied by a veiled woman.

By the time the train stops in Cherage for the first night, Bree, Verzubak, and Boone are all aboard, but they pretend not to know each other. Bree sneaks off into the city to meet with Luc and Ottavia. Overnight, a masterfully athletic hobo stows away on the train. This is Andrei von Recklinghausen, who goes by the name **Mister Mapple**.

The morning of the second day, Luc and Ottavia board the train, but they try to stay out of sight. Also boarding is **Cardiff Hengehill**, a Risuri spy with secrets about the Danoran military. He has regular contact throughout the day with **Malia Baccarin**, a member of the train's militia who is Cardiff's contact with his buyers.

### Complications.

Over the next five days, the party has multiple opportunities to observe each suspect, while other threats and mysteries provide their own distractions.

On the second night the train stops in Orithea. While most of the passengers sight-see or conduct innocuous business, Luc and Ottavia

head to the city's lighthouse, where Luc meets with a local Obscurati cell leader. He shows how his lantern works and provides documents to help the local cell convert the lighthouse into a large scale version.

On the third day, bandits raid the train as it travels through the Malice Lands. They provoke a screaming hydra-like beast to emerge from a swamp and attack the train as a distraction, and the PCs have to weigh the risk of blowing their cover with saving the lives of the passengers—possibly even Luc and his crew.

That night the train limps into Trekhom. There Cardiff tries to sell his secrets, while Damata attends a lecture by the famous dwarf philosopher Vlendam Heid. Luc again sneaks away to a lighthouse to show off his invention to another cell leader. Meanwhile, Ottavia receives a *sending* warning her that Risuri agents are after Luc. Luc's bodyguards become more wary and try to figure out who's spying on them.

On the evening of the fourth day, the train reaches Nalaam, where most of the plot-lines of the side characters come to a head. Since he has no Ob cell to meet with, Luc and Ottavia spend the evening preparing surprises for the party.

On the fifth day, as the train pulls into Sid Minos, Luc triggers a replica of his lantern, attuned to the PCs and infused with energy of the planet Nem. The PCs' souls are pulled from their flesh and trapped into a ghostly version of the train. If they do not manage to reach the train's engine and disable the lantern quickly, they'll never be able to reunite with their bodies.

They return to this world just as the train pulls into Sid Minos station. Ottavia boards a carriage and uses illusions of Luc and company to try to lure the party to follow her. She takes a boat to a nearby cursed island, and when night falls undead rise from the sea and attack the party. Ottavia confronts the party above a tomb, which provides safety from the horde of the dead, but also serves as a prison for an ancient demon, **Ashima-Shimtu**. Though bound by magic far greater than anything the