

# Countdown to **Adventure**

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## **Countdown to Adventure**

### **5: Men from the night**

They came from the night.

Dishevelled, crazed men and women. Perhaps they had once been human, but no more. Their skin was wrinkled, greyed, and covered in bloody sores. Their bodies were thin, bones jutting from gaunt frames. The whites of their eyes were red and the blacks of their eyes were massive. If they had clothing, it was torn, stained, and unrecognizable.

If their bodies were going, their minds were completely gone. Sometimes they were wild, feral, animalistic, sometimes they were quiet, passive, almost nonexistent. One moment they would be sitting, staring at nothing, the next they were scratching at walls and ripping the good people to shreds.

It was only a few, at first, perhaps one every week or so. The polis guards had no trouble with them. The first was mistaken as harmless and nearly killed a guard. After that, they were more careful. The next few were captured and taken prisoner, but they learned nothing. The crazed people either killed themselves or died suddenly in captivity.

Then the arrivals became more frequent. It was still not a problem, not really. Worrying, but they could deal with it. The guards stayed more alert, and regular patrols began to be sent out to keep the roads in and out clear.

At the same time, people started disappearing, from the polis and the surrounding areas. It was not hard to connect the two sets of events. Though they were changed greatly, some swore they knew some of the crazed people. It was deeply disturbing to see loved ones disappear and return as... something else.

Soon, the flood of crazed people began to overwhelm the guards. The polis was safe, protected by thick, high stone walls. It was the outlying areas that were vulnerable, and critical to the survival of the polis. Farmers abandoned their fields because of the threat of attack, leaving them without a local source of food. And with the guards no longer able to keep the roads clear, no traders would risk the journey, leaving them without the usual alternative.

There was nothing they could do. Desperate, the people of Idarous Polis sent runners to the larger poli to the east for help. They never returned. Perhaps they had made it to another polis, perhaps not. There was no way of knowing.

As the days grew darker, supplies running out and more and more attacks coming, the people began considering abandoning the polis, pushing through the crazed people at any cost to get to safety.

It was not an attractive option, and they decided to wait, for the moment, though many quietly prepared. Others prayed to the gods for deliverance.

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### 4: Men who follow

They followed.

Once, they were different. Farmers, bakers, smiths, masons. Nobles, beggars. Wealthy, poor. Intelligent, foolish. Brave, cowardly. Overt, stealthy. What they were no longer mattered. Now, they were all disciples. They were unified in disposition, in purpose, in life.

All had felt the calling, though they had felt it in different ways. Some had sought out the group and joined willingly. Some had sought out the group for their own purposes, and had to be shown the way. Some were found and brought into the light. Some had arrived by chance- no, by divine happenstance.

There were those that could not be saved. They tried to bring them in, to show them the way, but some refused. There was something wrong with either their body, their mind, or their soul. They did not see the gods the same way the others did. Some were turned into mindless husks, some went berserk, and some simply ended their mortal existence.

Many groups like their own had risen and fallen before them. But this time, it was different. Before, only a few could communicate with the gods, and not well. Now, with the strange liquids, they could all get close to the gods without challenge. Even the newest members could be shown the light. No one knew where the liquids came from, but it did not matter.

The liquids had strange names in strange tongues. Lysergic Acid Diethylamide. Tetrahydrocannabinol. Methylketcel Yterogexene. Once, they were hesitant. How could these unknown liquids, unnatural and unholy, get them closer to the gods? Once they had tried them, all doubts washed away. With the liquids, the gods were revealed.

It was their leader that guided them along their path. It was their leader that found the liquids and administered them. It was their leader that guided them in their enhanced meditations. It was their leader that preached the words of the gods. It was their leader that communicated with their patron. It was their leader that interpreted prophecy. It was their leader that would open up the new world.

They lived simply. With few exception, they rose at dawn for a session of worship. Then, after the first meal of the day, they worked on their divine construction. After another meal at midday and another session of worship, they worked more on their task. Then, one meditation, one more meal, and most of them retired for the night. The rest sought out new disciples to join their community.

Their home was once a place of worship of the goddess Atane. The first thing they did was destroy all effigies of the goddess. Even they did not deny her importance to the world of the gods, but she was not their god. Only after they had removed all traces of Atane did they begin raising monuments to Hades. Their god deserved no less.

Their purpose was a a divine one. The world was sinful, impure, and it would soon come to an end. The events lined up with prophecy. It was time. They would open up the gates of Hades itself, begin the final reckoning of the world. There would be great suffering for those who were not saved. But those who were would have eternal glory. The gods themselves would call them heroes.

It was not a simple task. They needed to harness the most arcane engines of magic to even have a

chance of succeeding. These were difficult to acquire, and in truth none of them were really sure where they had come from. Even the most experienced magicians among them had little idea of what the machines were or how they worked. They were marked in strange languages, markings none could understand. Divine, ancient, perhaps even otherworldly, the machines were.

Soon their divine task would be complete, and the world would fall at their knees.

## **Countdown to Adventure**

### **3: Men breaking laws**

They were breaking laws.

In simple terms, they were criminals. Some were simple robbers and thieves. Some were murderers and rapists. Others were dealers or fences. Some were assassins or dissidents. All of them had broken the law at some point. Some were still doing it. Some were fugitives, some weren't suspected. Some were above suspicion.

They resided in the Catacombs of Epikros, a system of ancient tunnels and natural caves that ran under a hill in the Ourapolokis Fields. The catacombs were falling apart, and many sections were collapsing or collapsed. But many sections were reasonably safe, and it was there where they made their home.

A crude approximation of civilization had sprung up in the catacombs. Thieves took the place of farmers and miners. Craftsmen they had- most of them made illegal weapons or were wanted for something else. Dealers and fences acted as merchants. Some of the more organized criminals put together operations that passed for services.

Along with the economic division came a social hierarchy. There weren't many of them, but still, they divided. The dissidents, killers, and rapists formed the bottom tier. Above them were the petty thieves and muggers, then the craftsmen, then the dealers. The most wealthy criminals formed a sort of ruling class.

It was a chaotic place. The only law was force, and there was no honor among thieves. Theft, assault, and murder ran rampant. Those who had something to lose jealously protected it. Even those that attempted to rule only did so through their own gangs of thugs. Very frequently, one would fall and another would take their place.

What authorities existed did not bother them. Neither the Phellean state nor the larger Remarian Empire was overly concerned with what they saw as a small band of thieves in the middle of nowhere. The Idarous militia would occasionally arrest or kill those that ventured near the polis, but dared not enter the cave.

They had an unspoken entente with the cultists. The rise of the cult had not concerned the people of the catacombs much. Just a bunch of fools that would soon destroy themselves. When the cult continued to grow, some were worried. They assured themselves that the catacombs were safe, that the cult would never dare to attack the hardened criminals. And it was true, at least for the time being.

But the cult was growing stronger, and there were fewer and fewer people left to rob. Infighting was becoming worse and worse, and chaos was taking over. It was no longer lucrative, and money was what kept the catacombs running.

Some joined the cult. Some left for better prospects. Some prepared for the worst. Dark times were coming, even to a place that already seemed as dark as it could get.

## **Countdown to Adventure**

### **2: Men of adventure**

They were adventurers.

An adventurer was, literally, someone who went on adventures. Exploring the known or the unknown, straying off the usual path of life. However, because of the work they often found themselves doing, adventurer had almost become a euphemism for problem-solver. Indeed, most adventurers spent more of their time running errands or completing jobs than roaming of their own accord.

It was a key part of the puzzle that was civilization. Organized groups were constrained and conventional. Those outside of the system were free to follow their own paths. Often, by choice or by necessity, these paths crossed with the needs of society. An adventurer may want to slay a monster, but it is the village that needs the monster slayed. An adventurer may want to wipe out a crime ring, but it is the residents that need the crime ring gone. An adventurer may want to explore an unknown land, but it is industry that needs the resources.

They came from greatly differing backgrounds. Common farmers that had taken up arms and refused to put them down. Craftsmen that found the uses of their crafts more interesting than the crafts themselves. Former military that left for one reason or another. Sons of nobles who desired an eventful life more than a comfortable one. All of them had heard the call of adventure, and all of them had answered.

And like their backgrounds, they themselves were diverse. Some were fighters, solving problems with force. Some preferred to use solve situations in an intelligent manner, some focused on mediation and negotiation. Some were specialists, some were generalists. Some had mastered an arcane art or two, others preferred to stick to more conventional techniques. Some were idealists, trying to build a better world, and some were almost mercenaries, in it for the money. Some lived on adventure, some dabbled in it.

Now, the adventurers faced a greater threat than any they had faced before. A threat they had never faced before. A threat they did not know how to deal with. It was not a powerful creature of chaos. It was not an army of evil. It was not corruption or disease or crime. It was not robbery or violence. No, it was much simpler.

Obsolescence.

Nobody could argue that the world wasn't becoming less adventure-friendly every day. Dangerous wilderness gave way to cleared land. Rough, unprotected roads gave way to railroads and paved highways. Lawless regions gave way to tightly administered provinces under the rule of law. Better policing, stronger armies, faster communication, and more coordinated government quickly crushed threats that once required heroes to put down. Even exploration, thought to be an irreplaceable role, was being taken over by government and corporate projects. Simply put, the adventurer would no longer be needed.

The day of the adventurer was coming to a close. But perhaps there was time for one more adventure.

## **Countdown to Adventure**

### **1: Men without souls**

They were without souls.

The Adventurer first encountered them on the path into the village. Some stood in place, unmoving. Some shambled about aimlessly. Some chased wild animals or each other and ripped them apart with their hands. All looked as if they were once human, and now were walking dead. Several of them tried to attack the Adventurer.

The Adventurer did not know what they were or where they came from. Supernatural, perhaps. The creations of evil, maybe. A product of the people from the sky, possibly. In any case, they went down easily to sword and bow. Not as easily as some of the weaker wildlife, but hardly more difficult than any crazed human. That was reassuring.

The Adventurer fought through them with ease. There weren't many of them, at least, not out here. The village had walls, but the gates were open. There was evidence of a struggle inside and outside of the village- blood splatters, dropped weapons, burned patches. Inside were more of those things, and none of the villagers. It didn't take much thinking to figure out what had happened. The villagers had been turned into those things. Perhaps they were converted here, perhaps elsewhere. Either way, they were gone.

The Adventurer tried to find a place to spend the night, as it was starting to get dark. The entire village had a foreboding atmosphere, and seemed to give off a sense of danger. Several of the buildings were intact, and after scavenging a quantity of supplies, one of them was barricaded and turned into a fort.

The Adventurer woke up to find the room empty. Sword, bow, armor- gone. Food, water, herbs- gone. Everything that had been brought was gone, and most of what had been scavenged. Somehow, they had made it through the barricades, and put them right back when they were finished. Why would they leave the Adventurer alive? It was a question that could be asked later. Right now, survival was the top priority.

The Adventurer immediately began to scavenge once again. There was some water in bottles and pouches, and some packaged food. It was the kind from the sky people, the kind that nobody trusted, but there was nothing else. In the local temple was a thick walking stick, which was probably the best weapon that could be had in the town, as even the knives were gone. On an overlook just outside the village, a book on healing was left lying on the ground, perhaps by a monk. That also went in the Adventurer's pack, which had miraculously not been stolen.

The Adventurer stands up and begins the march to Idarous. There would be no going back now.