

# DESCENT INTO AVERNUS THE ALEXANDRIAN REMIX

## SPOILERS FOR DESCENT INTO AVERNUS

*If you're a local player in my campaigns, you might want to steer clear here. I may be running Descent Into Avernus in the future, but not for people who've read the plot.*

Last year I wrote the [Alexandrian Remix of Waterdeep: Dragon Heist](#). It sought to revise the published campaign in order to create a richer, more dynamic, and (importantly) more robust scenario. People seemed to like it. They liked it a lot, in fact, and I've been repeatedly asked to do a similar remix for [Baldur's Gate: Descent Into Avernus](#).

Which is obviously why we're here today.

I've done a few of these in-depth remixes in the past, and they're generally of two types:

- Expansive remixes, like I did for [Eternal Lies](#), where I'm primarily creating lots of cool new stuff (props, dioramas, new spin-off scenarios) to enhance an already great experience.
- Design remixes, like the one I did for [Keep on the Shadowfell](#), in which I'm primarily focused on fixing the flaws and shortcomings of a scenario.

In the latter, the flaws I'm looking at are usually in the [scenario structure](#). This is not because shortcomings in the scenario structure are the only problem published adventures suffer from. Rather, in order for me to *want* to spend the considerable time and effort necessary to remix an adventure, there must be both (a) something about the adventure that needs to be fixed and (b) something that makes it worthwhile to do so.

This almost always means that the adventure has some really cool stuff in it. It's worth remixing specifically so that you can bring that cool stuff to your table in the best possible way. If there wasn't any cool stuff to start with, it wouldn't make much sense to spend a lot of effort remixing it: Just move on and either find better material to start with or make something new from scratch.

(For example, there was no mystery about how [the scenario structure for Hoard of the Dragon Queen needed to be fixed](#): Ripping the railroad apart and reassembling it into a [node-based structure](#) would have been pretty straightforward. I describe how you can do it in [Remixing Hoard of the Dragon Queen](#). But I never actually did it because the actual material in *Hoard* didn't excite me.)

When I started looking at *Descent Into Avernus*, it was almost immediately clear why people were asking me to remix it. Its structure was badly, badly flawed. There was, in fact, a goodly span of time where I thought it was going to end up being more like *Hoard of the*



*Dragon Queen* than *Dragon Heist*. Its structural flaws were so significant that it seemed as if fixing them would mean throwing out virtually everything of value in the adventure and starting over from scratch with a vaguely similar premise. (At which point, again, why bother?)

Fortunately, thanks in large part to a vigorous discussion with [the patrons of my Patreon](#) and also [my followers on Twitter](#), I had a series of key insights that, at the end of the day, will radically transform *Descent Into Avernus*, but do so in a way that still leaves a lot of the meat on the bone (so to speak). It is primarily because I think these insights will be useful to others that this project is happening.

With that being said, the Alexandrian Remix of *Descent Into Avernus* will probably be a bit more “hands on” than my previous remixes. My plan is to critically look at each section of the adventure and then lay out what steps are necessary to redress the problems we’ve found. In some cases, those fixes will be specific and detailed. In others, though, you may have some “homework” to do before actually running the adventure.

(Of course, I basically said the same thing about *Dragon Heist* and then I ended up diving into all the nitty-gritty details. So we’ll see how it goes!)

One thing I learned from doing the *Dragon Heist* remix, though, is that it’s a lot easier for people if I tackle the material sequentially instead of topically. So rather than, for example, looking at all of the heists and then looking at all of the mysteries (like we did with *Dragon Heist*), we’ll instead be largely walking through the book step by step. This might mean that some of our early installments get a little top-heavy, but I think it will all work out in the end.

The actual remix will kick off tomorrow. This page will serve as a landing page and navigational portal throughout the whole thing. Please note that I usually add navigational links when a post is *scheduled*, so if you see a dead hyperlink to the “latest” post, it probably means that post hasn’t actually gone live yet.

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If you're new here at the Alexandian, you might find it useful to dive into these articles before the remix kicks off, as they include deep discussions of topics we'll be visiting here:

- [Three Clue Rule](#)
- [Node-Based Scenario Design](#)
- [Jaquaying the Dungeon](#)

There are many more articles at [Gamemastery 101](#) that you might also enjoy!

# PART 1: THE BEGINNING

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[by Justin Alexander – March 15th, 2020](#)



*Descent Into Avernus* begins by having the PCs stand around doing nothing while the GM describes an NPC doing awesome stuff. It then proceeds almost directly to, “If the players don’t do what you tell them to do, the NPCs automatically find them and kill them.”

It’s not an auspicious beginning.

## THE PREMISE

Let’s back up for a second and briefly sum up the essential back story:

- 140+ years ago, an angel named Zariel convinced the holy knights of the city-state of Elturel to ride with her on a glorious charge into Hell itself.
- This went poorly: Many knights deserted the campaign, fled home, and shut the gate behind them. The rest of Zariel’s army was wiped out, Zariel herself was captured.
- After her capture, Zariel was tempted to evil. Swearing fealty to Asmodeus, she became the Archdevil of Avernus. Still filled with hatred for the knights who had betrayed her, she watched Elturel from afar and waited for an opportunity to present itself for revenge.
- Meanwhile, the knights who had fled back to Elturel lied about the glorious battle they had fought on the other side and their order became known as the Hellriders.
- Many decades later, Elturel was plagued by a new evil: The High Observer of the city was secretly a vampire lord. In this, their darkest hour, the god Amaunator responded to their holy prayers and the Companion appeared in the skies above the city: A second sun that burned through the night and whose light no undead could endure.
- Except this was a lie: The Companion had actually been crafted by Zariel, who had cut a deal with someone in Elturel (more on this later). Under the light of the Companion, the entire city of Elturel was bound to an infernal pact. After fifty years, the entire city and the souls of all its inhabitants would belong to Zariel.
- A few days ago, that happened: The entire city of Elturel was pulled into Avernus, the first layer of Hell.

- Among those lost in Elturel was Grand Duke Ravengard, ruler of Baldur's Gate, who had been visiting the city on a diplomatic mission.
- Refugees fleeing the catastrophe head down the River Chionthar to Baldur's Gate. The city is overwhelmed and orders the gates closed.

*Descent Into Avernus* opens with a blob of boxed text that informs the players that, due to the crisis, they have been drafted into the Flaming Fist, the mercenary guard who has served as Baldur's Gate's military and police force for hundreds of years, and ordered to report to Flame Zodge at the Basilisk Gate.

(The adventure actually refers to him as "Captain Zodge," but there are no captains in the Flaming Fists. Their ranks are: Fist, Gauntlet, Manip, Flame, Blaze, and Marshal. Later on a "Commander Portyr" similarly shows up who should actually be either Blaze Portyr or Marshal Portyr.)

The PCs show up at Basilisk Gate just in time to stand around while the GM describes Flame Zodge jumping into the middle of a riot, kicking ass, and being awesome. Once the cut scene wraps up, Zodge comes over to the PCs and tells them that cultists worshipping the Dead Three (Bane, Bhaal, and Myrkul) have been taking advantage of the current crisis to go on a murder spree. They need to go meet with an informant named Tarina at the Elfsong Tavern.

If the PCs refuse to do it, he has them "executed on the spot."

If they accept the gig, but then don't follow through, he sends a squad of soldiers to track them down and "kill anyone who refuses to go."

If the PCs escape, Zodge sends two more squads to murder them.

## REMIXING

The "do what I say or I'll arbitrarily kill your characters" motif is problematic for what I'm hoping are fairly obvious reasons. The fact that *Descent* repeats it three times in rapid succession here, however, mostly serves to point a big, flashing arrow at the more significant problem:

Neither the players nor their characters are given any reason to care about what's happening.

What you have here, basically, is a broken scenario hook that the designers have so little confidence in that they feel the need to hold a gun to the players' heads.

So how do we fix it?

As I wrote in [my design notes for scenario hooks in \*Over the Edge\*](#), a scenario hook should be *specific*: What is the specific thing that gets the PCs involved in the current situation?

"You've been drafted by the Flaming Fist" is specific, but its first failure is our next requirement: The *players* should experience the hook. By having the PCs get drafted off-screen before play even begins, *Descent* distances the players from the hook. Not only will this make them care less about the hook, it will also make the hook less memorable. This should be particularly avoided with the hook for an entire *campaign*, because you don't want the players to get three or four sessions into things and completely forget why any of this is happening in the first place.

Ideally, the PCs (and players) should also be *motivated* by the hook. And it's better if this motivation aligns with what you want them to do. (This is less critical if you [design situations instead of plots](#) because then you don't actually care what the PCs actually *do*; you just want to expose them to the situation so that they can begin interacting with it.)

Being press-ganged and threatened with death can certainly motivate you, but what it's primarily motivating you to do is *get out of that situation*. That's why *Descent* is obsessed with tracking down PCs who bail out on the job: On some level it recognizes that it hasn't motivated the PCs to investigate the murders; it's only motivated them to escape the Flaming Fists.

(Designing the scenario hook so that it motivates the PCs in *multiple* ways is also pure gold if you can pull it off. Or, alternatively, simply align multiple hooks to all point in the same direction.)

Finally, the best scenario hooks won't be transitory or disconnected from what happens next. Instead, they will continue to resonate — thematically, structurally, meaningfully — not only with the adventure, but with the campaign as a whole.

None of these are hard-and-fast rules. But they're useful rules of thumb.

Now, I don't want to completely toss out Flame Zodge or the mission he gives to the PCs. (That would require a much more thorough transformation of the first act of the campaign.) But what we will do is restructure the opening beats of the campaign to get a hook that will drive us all the way to the Gates of Hell.

## REFUGEES



The central pillar of *Descent Into Avernus* is the city of Elturel: What happened to it? Why did it happen? How can it be saved?

Everything revolves around this city... or, at least, it should. In practice, it is curiously absent from the campaign, particularly during the first act. The PCs need to *care* about what happens to Elturel, but they're never given a reason to do so.

The easy solution here, of course, it to simply have the players create characters from Elturel or with strong connections to Elturel. That's fine, but you again run into that off-camera problem: You've *told* the players that their characters care about Elturel, but you haven't actually *shown* that. You need to actually bring that connection to the table and let the players experience it.

Our method for doing this is obvious: The refugees.

Instead of starting the adventure with Flame Zodge, we'll start with the PCs guarding a caravan of refugees trying to reach Baldur's Gate. Broadly speaking, there are four ways to do this:

- **IN MEDIA RES:** We open the campaign with the PCs already journeying along the road with the refugees heading towards Baldur's Gate.

- **REFUGEES ON THE ROAD:** The PCs are riding along the River Chionthar when they begin encountering refugees coming from Elturel. One group of refugees is put in danger (an attack by bandits perhaps), and the PCs have to respond to it. The refugees then ask them to guard them the rest of the way to Baldur's Gate, "where we are sure to find safety and refuge."
- **NEAR MISS:** The PCs are journeying to Elturel. At the top of one hill they see the gleaming city ahead of them. They go down into a valley, there's a cataclysmic clap of thunder, and when they reach the top of the next hill they see that the city has vanished! They are right there at ground zero as the crisis begins.
- **PRELUDE TO DISASTER:** The PCs are actually in Elturel when something goes horribly wrong with the Companion in the sky above. Black lightning seems to be attacking the guardian of the city! Then black lightning begins lancing down, as well, striking buildings, streets, and people. Panic sets in and some people begin trying to flee the city. The PCs barely escape when the city suddenly vanishes!

Generally speaking, the further down the list you move the more immediate and visceral the crisis becomes, but it also becomes more difficult to ensure that the PCs end up heading towards Baldur's Gate. Having them actually in the city sounds amazing, but there's a risk that they won't take the cue to get the hell out of Dodge (pun intended)!

*Option: Start with the "In Media Res" option, but then flashback to earlier scenes so that the players can actually roleplay through the crisis, triaging survivors, organizing the caravan, etc. You can alternate these flashback scenes with various Crisis on the Road scenes.*

*Option: Instead of just opening with "Near Miss", launch the campaign as if it's a perfectly normal campaign based out of the city of Elturel. Send the players out of the city on a typical 1<sup>st</sup> level quest. Something simple like a [5 Room Dungeon](#). (Maybe this dungeon could actually include some subtle clue or foreshadowing of the Cult of Zariel, see Part 3 of the Remix.) As they ride back towards Elturel – BAM! Cliffhanger. End of session.*

## PREPPING THE CARAVAN

You're going to prep and run the refugee caravan as if it were a party. (See the [Party Planning](#) game structure for more details.) This might seem weird at first glance, but structurally it makes a lot of sense.

**REFUGEES:** At a minimum you're going to want to prep 4-6 refugees. I'd actually recommend 10-15. Use the [Universal Roleplaying Template](#) to make these characters really come alive. It may make sense to start with a smaller caravan that slowly gathers more people as time passes. In either case, there are likely more refugees than just the ones you've prepped, but the ones you've prepped will be the "face" of the crisis that the PCs interact with the most.

**MAIN EVENT SEQUENCE:** Many of your events will be crises that the PCs have to face along the road, but they can also include landmarks, encounters with other refugees, etc. A few thoughts along these lines:

- Bandits attack.
- They find the corpses of other refugees who were ambushed.
- Alyssa, one of the refugees traveling with them, is pregnant and goes into labor.
- The axle of one of the wagons breaks.
- They pass [Fort Morninglord](#). It remains a cursed place that even refugees shun instead of using for refuge. The nearby temporary fort of the Order of the Companion has been overwhelmed by refugees.
- Mischievous fairies are stealing their food.

- They pass a campground where a large number of refugees are gathering.
- They encounter a ship sailing up or down the River Chionthar.
- A large number of ships come sailing up the River; word has reached Baldur's Gate and an impromptu alliance of fishermen has gathered supplies and is sailing up river to see what they can do.
- A group of Hellriders goes galloping past (either towards or away from the city).
- Cult of Zariel members attack the refugees. (They might have actually been traveling with them as refugees.)
- A platoon of Flaming Fist is marching towards Elturel. They are stopping refugees and roughly questioning them, attempting to ascertain the fate of Grand Duke Ravengard.

Include the need for food and water here. I wouldn't recommend a full simulation: Just include a few events where food or water is running short and the PCs need to figure out how to solve the problem.

As you're creating your refugee NPCs, you'll also discover interpersonal conflicts that can be seeded into the main event sequence.

The distance from Elturel to Baldur's Gate is nearly 200 miles. Given the pace at which the refugees are likely to be traveling, it'll probably take ten days for them to reach Baldur's Gate. Don't feel like you need to pack in a lot of events every day. Two or three is more than enough to set the tone, and many of those can be very brief. Once the PCs manage to establish a routine, it might also feel right to sum up a couple days of travel in a short bit of narration before zooming back in for the next crisis.

**RUNNING THE CARAVAN:** When running a party, there's a persistence of action as you're generally playing things out in [Now Time](#). For the caravan, things are going to be more abstract; you're going to be using eliding narration and doing sharp cuts between interesting moments. Make sure to both give time and frame scenes for the PCs to interact with the NPCs. The mental checklist for running a party remains useful:

- Which NPCs are talking to each other? (Consult your refugee list.)
- Who might come over and join a conversation the PCs are having? (Again, refugee list.)
- What are they talking about?

You might find it useful to habitually frame an "evening camp" scene each day – a sort of "mini-party" where you can pack in a bunch of different social interactions. Other opportunities include:

- While traveling the road.
- While relieving yourselves on the side of the road.
- While sharing a night's watch.
- While sharing a meal or filling waterskins in the river.

If the players are enjoying themselves, let them feel the full ten days of the journey. If they don't seem to be getting into it, make sharper cuts and move the clock forward, but still try to make sure they get a chance to really interact with the refugees.

*Design Note: At some point, I recommend having one of the refugees mention that Elturel has never faced hardship like this; not even during the Night of the Red Coup and the rule of the Vampire Lord Ikaia (see [Part 4B](#)).*

## AT THE GATE

When the refugee caravan arrives at Baldur's Gate, they find the situation as described at the beginning of *Descent*: The gates have been shut. A huge refugee camp is growing outside the walls, but it's clear that supplies are short out here. If they want to keep their refugees safe, they'll need to figure out how to get



them inside the city. (If nothing else, from there they could arrange passage on a ship sailing to safer ports.)

If they approach the gates directly, they meet Flame Zodge. Otherwise, someone will point them in Zodge's direction as the "guy who can solve your problems if you can make it worth his while." Alternatively, Zodge hears rumors about how the PCs kept their caravan safe on the road and comes out into the refugee camp to find them.

**ZODGE'S DEAL:** Basically, Zodge sizes them up, concludes they might be useful, and offers them a deal. If they agree to be deputized as members of the Flaming Fists and investigate the killings, he'll let their refugee caravan into the city.

This is important: **Deal-making is another central theme of the campaign.**

The deal Zodge is offering isn't literally a diabolical one (it's actually quite reasonable and there's no hidden loophole waiting to stab the PCs in the back), but it's a minor echo of the infernal pacts that are coming later. So don't just shake hands on this: Have him actually produce enlistment papers and make sure the PCs sign them.

*Option: Produce the enlistment papers as actual props and have the players sign them at the table. Once they've done so, whisk them away and make a point of tucking them away somewhere safe where they can't get to them.*

The enlistment contract contains a reddish sigil in the form of a watermark. Once the papers are signed, Zodge will produce a *symbolon* knife and make an irregular cut through this watermark, giving the half he slices out to the PCs along with their badges of office. (The irregular edge of the watermark can only be uniquely matched to that specific contract, allowing all signers to verify the agreement. This interaction foreshadows the contract sealed between Zariel and Elturel, as described in Part 4 of the Remix.)

In addition, as we'll discuss in more detail in Part 3 of the Remix, **the killings are specifically targeting refugees.** Here, again, we are tying the details of the scenario hook to the wider themes of the campaign.

**LEVEL UP:** Once the PCs have signed their enlistment papers, they can advance to 2<sup>nd</sup> level.

One of the problematic elements in *Descent Into Avernus* is the pace and timing of the PCs leveling up. For example, the PCs are supposed to level up after the first SCENE of the adventure. (So you create your characters and then maybe 20 minutes later you pause the narrative so that they can level up.)

We'll probably do a more in-depth discussion of this issue in Part 8 of the Remix as we're wrapping things up, but we'll get started by cleaning it up here.

(If you don't want to run the full-fledged refugee caravan adventure described above, then I recommend just having the players create 2<sup>nd</sup> level characters straight out of the gate.)



## THE MYSTERY OF ELTUREL'S FATE

The last element we want to strongly establish for the campaign here is the mystery of Elturel's fate. This can actually be broken down into three separate revelations:

- What happened to Elturel? (It was taken to Hell.)
- Why did this happen? (The city was sold as part of an infernal pact.)

- The true history of the Hellriders. (They betrayed Zariel and left her for dead in Avernus.)

In my opinion, the PCs should NOT know (or even suspect) any of these answers when the campaign begins. (If you're using the "Near Miss" or "Prelude to Disaster" openings, you'll want to give careful consideration to exactly what the PCs actually witness when Elturel vanishes.)

In [Getting the Players to Care](#), I discuss a number of ways in which GMs can get their players to actually care about the lore of the world. These include:

- #2: Make It Plot
- #4: Make It Mystery
- #5: Make It Personal
- #7: Make It Repetitive

And we're going to use all of these to make them care about Elturel's fate.

**RUMORS OF ELTUREL:** We're going to create a sense of enigma around Elturel's fate primarily by making it the #1 topic of conversation. Virtually everyone the PCs talk to has a different theory or has heard a different version of what happened to Elturel. (And what's going to happen next? Are more cities going to be destroyed? Is Baldur's Gate in danger? Did you hear that Waterdeep has been destroyed, too?) You can find twelve fully developed rumors of Elturel's fate in the [Rumors of Elturel](#) addendum to the Remix.

Seed these rumors into:

- Conversations with the refugees, and with others met along the road to Baldur's Gate.
- People desperately asking for fresh news as the PCs arrive in the refugee camp outside the city.
- Flame Zodge's briefing.
- Town criers shouting out the latest headlines on the street corners of Baldur's Gate.
- Conversations at the Elfsong and Low Lantern taverns.

And don't just have the NPCs deliver these rumors. Flip it around and get the players involved by having NPCs ask the PCs what they think happened. (This will force the players to actively engage with the rumors and really think about them.)

**ESTABLISHING THAVIUS KREEG:** Among the rumors and other discussions, make sure to repeatedly establish that Thavius Kreeg was (a) the High Observer of Elturel and (b) he's missing and presumed lost with the city. (We'll discuss this more in Part 3, but you want to firmly establish these facts so that the players will understand the significance of finding Kreeg alive later.)

**THE SOLUTIONS:** The PCs will be able to gather clues to the first two revelations (What happened to Elturel? and Why did this happen?) throughout *Part 3: The Vanthampur Investigations* before getting definitive answers in *Part 4: Candlekeep*.

The true history of the Hellriders can be discovered in *Part 5: Elturel* and *Part 6: Exploring Avernus*. (This is deliberate: We want them to learn and fully care about the official history as it's been known for hundreds of years before revealing the truth. You can't yank the rug out from under them if you don't let them walk onto the rug first!)

We'll discuss these mysteries in more detail (and probably look at complete revelation lists) as they come up.

# AVERNUS – RUMORS OF ELTUREL

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by [Justin Alexander](#) – February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020



As [Descent Into Avernus](#) begins, the city of Elturel has fallen, sending waves of desperate refugees down the Chionthar River to overwhelm the resources of beleaguered Baldur's Gate. The true story of what happened is detailed in the adventure, but in such times of confusion and chaos it is likely that many stories – some based in a faulty understanding of the truth, others being entirely fabrication – will be flying around. You can use the following rumors to draw an air of mystery around the fall of Elturel as your campaign begins. In those early days, each time the PCs interact with someone they are likely to hear some new version or radical variation of the tale. Others will also be desperate to find out the truth and will likely quiz the PCs on what they know and what they've heard.

## 1. ELTUREL LIVES!

The Companion – Amaunator's Gift, the shining orb which hangs as a second sun above the city of Elturel and has long protected it from the scourge of the undead – sensed that a great evil was threatening Elturel. It bathed the city in its holy rays and drew it across time and space to the Keep of the Eternal Sun, the stronghold of Amaunator, God of Sun and Time. Unfortunately, many who sought to reach the city before its ascension were unable to do so. In some versions of this rumor, when the danger has passed the city will be returned. (Or, alternatively, this was a reward for the city's holiness. All those within have been transformed into angels to continue their holy works upon a higher plane of existence.)

## 2. FIRE OF DRAGONS

A dozen ancient dragons flew out of the west and burned the city. Some report that there were riders on one of the dragons or all of the dragons (a woman in white, death knights, storm giants). The tales might say that all the dragons were of the same color (usually red or black, even though the latter would be incompatible with the dragons burning the city). Others report that the dragons were of many different colors, suggesting that Tiamat might be responsible. A few days later, the PCs might run into a morphed version of this story in which Tiamat herself was leading the dragons in their destruction of the city.

## 3. ARMY OF DEMONS

Thirteen planar gates opened at various points within Elturel and thirteen balors leading thirteen demon armies flooded through and laid waste to the city. When the last refugees fled, it's said they looked back to see a citadel of obsidian being raised in the center of the city – a spire of black corruption reaching up towards the dimming light of the Companion.

#### **4. METEOR!**

It was a meteor strike! It fell from the sky and landed near the center of the city, wiping it out in a cataclysmic explosion that could be heard for miles around.

#### **5. ELTUREL BESIEGED!**

Elturel has not actually fallen! It is merely besieged by a necromancer's army of the undead / a horde of orcs / an army of devils that has ridden out of the Nine Hells to seek revenge against the Hellriders who had once ridden through a *gate* into Avernus itself! The Flaming Fist is refusing to ride forth and break the siege, even though Grand Duke Ulder Ravengard — who had been visiting the city on a diplomatic mission — remains trapped inside. The rumor identifies some other member of the Council of Four — Thalamra Vanthampur, Dillard Portyr, Belynne Stelmane, or a conspiracy involving all of them — as manipulating the Fist in order to see Grand Duke Ravengard dead.

#### **6. THE EGG**

The Companion was not the boon that the people of Etlurel long thought! It was actually some strange, celestial egg! And now it's hatched! Some report that a titanic humanoid figure standing several hundred feet high and glowing with a golden light now stands in the ruins of what was once Etlurel, gazing towards the southwest. Others say that the egg's hatching unleashed a swarm of hellwasps or thousands of giant, ever-burning spiders that have wreathed the city in their webs. (There might still be time to save most of the people if we act quickly! Most have only been cocooned by the spiders!) And so forth.

#### **7. RAVENGARD'S BETRAYAL**

Grand Duke Ulder Ravengard, having entered Etlurel under the pretense of a diplomatic envoy, betrayed High Observer Thavus Kreeg and slaughtered the leaders of the city at a banquet held in his honor. His knights then sacked and burned the city. (In some versions of this rumor, soldiers from either Fort Morninglord or Fort Tamal, or both, rode to the city's defense and are now counter-sieging the Grand Duke, trapping him in the ruins of the city.)

#### **8. COMPANION'S END**

The Companion — the second sun which had long hung in the sky above Etlurel — exploded! The city was completely wiped out, leaving nothing but a smoking crater where it had once stood. Some claim that the devastation was due to the Sun God withdrawing his holy blessing from the city, and priests of Amaunator can be seen throughout the refugee communities in Baldur's Gate preaching apocalyptic messages or flagellating themselves in the hope that they can regain their god's blessing through the mortification of their own flesh. Others suggest that the Companion was sabotaged: Natives of Baldur's Gate suggest that it must have been devils from the Nine Hells (possibly in retaliation for the Hellriders who long ago invaded Avernus; everyone knows devils have infinite patience in their schemes and that revenge is best served cold!). Many among the Etlurian refugees, however, whisper that it is Baldur's Gate itself which is responsible! It's no coincidence that Grand Duke Ravengard was in Etlurel when the explosion happened!

#### **9. ILLITHID ATTACK**

A fleet of flying, squid-shaped ships appeared suddenly out of black portals above the city. They destroyed the Companion -- sucking it into some sort of black vortex or singularity -- and then fell upon the city below. The ships have now erected a pulsating field of black-and-purple energy around the city. No one knows what's happening inside now. (Later reports might describe how those touched by the writhing tentacles of the ships were turned instantly to ash, while knowledgeable sages will say that the victims were *actually* teleported into the illithid ships.)

## 10. CIVIL WAR

The soldiers of Fort Tamal, which guards the Boareskyr Bridge on the northern frontier of Elturgard, rebelled, rode south, surprised the defenses of Elturel, and have seized the city. It is said that a black knight rode before them. Some say that it is Tamal Tent — the paladin who would have become the next High Observer if Thavus Kreeg, who became High Observer in his place, had not had him assassinated — returned as a death knight. Others say that it is a Hellrider banished to Fort Tamal for heresy who has become infected with the blood of Bhaal, the dark dog who was slain by Cyric at the site where the fort stands. (See [Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide](#), page 73.)

## 11. THE SECOND CITY

Elturel wasn't the first city to be obliterated: Scornubel, the City of Caravans that lies further east along the Chionthar River, was scooped out of the ground (or pummeled by divine lightning or overthrown by a cabal of illithids within the government or any of the other rumors above) three days before the fall of Elturel.

## 12. THE LEGACY OF MORNINGLORD

In 1476 DR, Fort Morninglord — which guarded the border between Elturgard and Baldur's Gate long the Chionthar River, was found abandoned. The entire garrison had vanished overnight, the stones of the fort were blackened, and every door and window had been fused shut. High Observer Thavus Kreeg of Elturgard, fearing that the fort had been contaminated by some evil, ordered it sealed and declared that anyone entering the fort would be outlawed.

Three days ago, the seals on Fort Morninglord burst and the former garrison — now riding as death knights upon fiery steeds and leading an army of devils out of the Nine Hells — rode east and sacked Elturel. Various stories suggest that after Elturel's fall they continued riding east, and that Scornubel will fall next.



# PART 2: CHARACTER CREATION

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[by Justin Alexander - March 17th, 2020](#)



In [Part 1](#) we briefly discussed the idea that players should create characters for *Descent Into Avernus* that were either from Elturel or had other strong connections to the city. Although we concluded that such connections cannot singlehandedly make the *players* care about the city, that doesn't mean you shouldn't encourage players to create characters like this. Quite the opposite, in fact. Although stuff that actually happens at the table will always be more relevant than stuff that just exists in a character's back story, establishing stuff in a back story provides a vector for bringing it to the table.

(Could we turn "at-table" into a word just like "onscreen" or "onstage"? Feels like it would be useful. But I digress.)

On the other hand, don't feel as if EVERY character needs to have that personal connection. It's fine if they do, but I'd actually argue it's probably better if they don't. It may feel like having all those personal connections will make for a richer experience, but by eliminating the outsider's point of view you've actually *narrowed* the range of available experiences.

(This advice can be generalized: If I've said "this game is about X, everybody create a character who is Y" and one of the players comes to me and says, "I was wondering if I could actually play a not-Y?" I've learned to actually stop and think about how we can make that work. Partly because, like most "default to yes" practices, it's inherently a good idea to follow the players' lead on what they're interested in, but also because I've learned that having a not-Y at a table of Y's creates valuable diversity.)

## GMPCs

Mostly, though, we're here today to discuss the GMPCs of *Descent Into Avernus*.

GMPCs are not the same thing as NPCs. A GMPC is where the GM essentially tries to be a player in their own campaign by running a character that's indistinguishable from being another PC in the party.

Although technically possible (and you can find success stories here and there), this tends to fail spectacularly for one of two reasons:

First: The GMPC becomes the unabashed star/spotlight hog of the entire campaign and/or is used to forcibly railroad the players.

Sometimes the GM specifically chooses to do this, but it's often not intentional. The root of the problem is that the GM has privileged information unavailable to the other players. When they're prepping the adventure, the fact that they can predict what the GMPC will do with 100% accuracy can become a crutch that's easy to rely on. When they're "playing" the adventure, they know how the scenario was designed and what the intended course of action is, which unavoidably biases their decision-making. Furthermore, the other players *know* that the GMPC has this privileged relationship with the adventure, so even if the GM can successfully firewall the character side of their decision-making from the GM side of their decision-making, it will still influence the PCs' relationships with the GMPC.

The other common outcome is for the GMPC to become a weird half-character who awkwardly doesn't participate in group decisions and/or frequently "vanishes" from the game world because everyone forgets that they're there.

This usually happens because the GM is specifically trying to avoid the first problem. For example, they know that if they say, "I think we should go check out the Nattic Wood," that the other players will interpret that as, "The GM is telling us to go check out the Nattic Wood." So their GMPC never offers opinions. (This scenario often arises when the GMPC is being played to fill something that's perceived as an "essential" role in the group. The GM would basically prefer to *not* have the GMPC there, but feels compelled to do so for some reason.)

I've previously written [an article about this](#), but the short version is that I try to avoid both GMPCs and NPC allies in general. (When running games with henchmen or hirelings, for example, I prefer to let the players run them.)

Regardless of how you feel about GMPCs, the ones in *Descent Into Avernus* are generally being used as design crutches and it would be great to eliminate them. The easiest place to eliminate them is in character creation: If you can take any essential role being fulfilled by a GMPC in a scenario and incorporate it into a PC, then you can easily delete the GMPC.

## REYA MANTLEMORN

Reya Mantlemorn is the most obvious GMPC in *Descent Into Avernus*. She fulfills three functions:

- She walks up to the players in the street and says, "Hey! High Observer Kreeg is still alive!"
- When the group *plane shifts* to Elturel, Reya Mantlemorn needs to say, "We should go to the High Hall."
- As a Hellrider, she gets to have all kinds of cool, "I can't believe it?!" emotional reactions whenever the big twists in the campaign happen.

The first of these is just bad design in general: Instead of the PCs discovering that Kreeg is alive (shocking twist!), a random NPC they've never met before just walks up and tells them. So we can just eliminate this whole thing.

For the second, we're going to be completely revamping our approach to Hellturel in Part 5 of the Remix, so we won't need her for that either. If you decide not to go with these changes, then you can just have literally *any* NPC in Elturel tell the PCs the same thing ("Lo! The GM has spoken unto me and said that thou must journey unto the High Hall!").

For the third, it's clearly very effective to have a Hellrider who can feel personally betrayed in her oaths and then later shocked by the revelation that the entire history and identity of her order is based on lies told by traitorous cowards. (Oddly, the adventure as written has Reya leave the group before the latter bit can happen, but nonetheless.)

It's probably fairly obvious, though, that it will be even MORE effective if it's a PC who's been positioned to have those reactions.

So, in short: **Encourage at least one player play a Hellrider.**

And just like that, we've eliminated Reya's whole reason for existing. Delete her from the campaign.

*Note: Make sure to give anyone playing a Hellrider of a knight of the Order of the Companion a copy of the Creed Resolute (see [Part 4B](#)).*

## LULU THE HOLLYPHANT

Slightly more unusual is the case of Lulu the Hollyphant.

Lulu, in her form as a golden mammoth, served as Zariel's warmount during the Charge of the Hellriders. After the Hellriders were defeated, Zariel gave Lulu her holy sword and ordered her to hide it somewhere in Hell. Lulu was later betrayed and sprinkled with the waters of the River Styx, causing her to lose her memories.

Recovering Lulu's memories is one of the major pillars of *Descent Into Avernus*, which we'll be looking at in more detail in Part 8 of the Remix. Playing Lulu as an NPC works just fine, actually: She's more of a cute sidekick or familiar than a true GMPC.

But there's no reason that Lulu *couldn't* be a PC.

The players are far more likely to get invested in Lulu's lost memories and the mystery of her past if she's "one of them." And playing a small, glowing, gold pachyderm will definitely be a cool and memorable experience for the player.

If you've got a player who's willing to play non-traditionally, just grab the stat block for a hollyphant on p. 237 of *Descent Into Avernus* and let them go. (Restore her abilities slowly over time as per p. 50.) Alternatively, you could try to rework the hollyphant into a playable PC race. Donathin Frye and Kienna Shaw have done the work for you [here](#).

Of course, the stat block is only one part of the challenge: In the campaign as written, Lulu doesn't show up until *Part 4: Candlekeep*. What's the solution?

Just have her show up sooner.

One option would be to use a very short version of the "Prelude to Disaster" opening: The PCs (who might not even know each other) are walking down a street in Elturel. One of them happens to be a small, flying elephant. Suddenly something goes wrong with the Companion in the sky. "Oh no!" the elephant says. "I know what this is!" Out of sheer, instinctual fear she teleports herself and the people closest to her (i.e., the other PCs) into the wilderness just outside of town.





Once there, she doesn't know why she did it. She also doesn't know *how* she did it (she doesn't regain her *teleport* ability until later). She just knows that they needed to get out of that city ASAP! (And a moment later the entire city *crumples* into the ground and vanishes, proving that to be true.)

(You could even use this setup if Lulu isn't a PC, but it may need some additional thought about how her presence in the first few scenarios will affect things.)

Isn't it *very convenient* that the PC group just *happens* to include Zariel's amnesiac ex-warmount? Well... yes. But no more so than Lulu just happening to be hanging out with the guy who the PCs randomly get sent to in order to *plane shift* them to Avernus. If you want to justify it more than that, give Lulu a holy vision that told her she needed to be at such-and-such a place or needed to seek out such-and-such a PC, but you probably don't need to.

If you don't have a player willing to fly into Lulu's shoes, I recommend nevertheless giving her a physical presence at the table with [Gale Force 9's statuette](#) or [Beadle & Grimm's plushy](#).

## TARINA

Tarina is not a GMPC. She's the spy that Flame Zodge sends the PCs to meet at the Elfsong Tavern. Her function in the campaign is to point them to a bathhouse where Dead Three cultists have been seen.

But this is actually an ideal way to introduce a PC: Instead of being sent to meet with Tarina, Zodge's contact is the last PC. Give that player the information Tarina was supposed to have and let *them* brief in their fellow players. (Unlike Tarina, of course, they'll be accompanying the group on the op.)

There are a couple reasons this can be a good idea:

- The player who gets to have the "secret" information and perform the briefing feels special; they're getting to do something cool and unusual.
- From a metagame perspective, the players will all feel more invested in this mission because it was another PC telling them about it and not some random NPC.

Organically introducing PCs to each other like this at the beginning of the campaign can get a little tricky, but, once again, by putting this stuff at-table you make it more meaningful. (How much more interesting is it to see Luke and Obi-Wan meet Han Solo and Chewbacca for the first time compared to the GM saying, "So you're all on a space freighter heading to Alderaan.>")

If you're using the refugee caravan scenario described in [Part 1](#) of the Remix, swapping out Tarina like this is less convenient and may not work. So I mention this here mostly as an interesting opportunity I noticed, particularly for people who are running the campaign closer to "by the book."

With that being said, you could still make this happen. Obviously if you've got a player who has to miss the first session... ta-da. Problem solved.

Alternatively, you can pull this off by just getting the player a little more onboard: Ask them to play one of the refugees in the first scenario. Maybe they get brutally murdered by the Cult of Zariel near the end of the session. Or they survive just fine and simply say goodbye when they reach Baldur's Gate. Then a few scenes later, the party meets their new PC at the Elfsong Tavern.

I've not infrequently used a similar technique when I need to introduce a replacement character or new player to a campaign. Most recently, in my second run of [Eternal Lies](#), I had a new player coming onboard but the group was on an expedition far from where there could be any reasonable explanation for how the new PC could have found them. So I had the player take on the role of a local guide with the expedition.

He played this character for several sessions, and because both I and the player knew that this character wasn't permanent we both took big risks with him: He eventually ended up completely insane and needing to be institutionalized after gnawing off several of his own fingers.

The rest of the group was shell-shocked: We didn't plan it this way, but we had never explicitly told the other players that this *wasn't* the new player's PC, and while we assumed they knew, they didn't. So the complete unraveling and destruction of this character hit them really hard, because they thought it was a PC.

(We can all pretend that players should care as much about every NPC as they do a PC; or that the audience cares as much about Random Mook #23 getting mowed down by machine gun fire as we do about Iron Man dying. But that's not the way our brains are wired. The PC/NPC divide is particularly real because you empathize with what the other player at the table is "going through" as their character. I've seen people literally break down crying at the game table because of an NPC; I'm not saying no one ever cares about NPCs. I'm just saying that the line between Josh at the game table and Santino in the game world is a little less well-defined than the lines between creators and created in other mediums.)

But I digress.

# PART 2B: ELFSONG TAVERN

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[by Justin Alexander – March 19th, 2020](#)



Since we were just discussing Tarina in the Elfsong Tavern, let's take a moment to talk about the tavern itself.

The tavern is described with:

- A list of tavern patrons
- A map
- A detailed key for all the rooms (upstairs and downstairs)
- The lyrics of elfsong sung by the local ghost in tribute to lost Elturel

(The tavern has apparently lost the stuffed baby beholder that used to hang over the bar in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.)

Structurally, however, this is what happens at the tavern:

- The PCs talk to Tarina, who refuses to give them the information until they help her kill some pirates who are coming to attack her.
- They wait for the pirates to show up.
- The pirates show up. They fight.
- Tarina gives them the information.
- They leave.

The first problem here is that the structure doesn't make it easy for the GM to leverage all the material presented about the tavern. The most egregious example of this is the sahuagin priestess Oshalla: Three hundred words are dedicated to describing this NPC who the PCs don't know about, no one mentions,

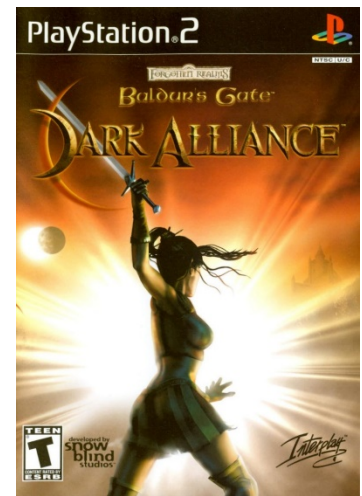
and who is behind a locked door on the second floor of the tavern. (Remember: The PCs have no reason to ever leave the common room of the tavern.)

She seems sort of interesting, but what the hell is she doing here?

Part of the explanation here is that the Elfsong Tavern appeared in the [Baldur's Gate](#) and [Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance](#) computer roleplaying games. Its inclusion is a nostalgic love letter that will resonate with a lot of players, so its gets an uber-detailed description. On the other hand, this ultimately just emphasizes the problem: If we care enough about the Elfsong Tavern enough to describe it in encyclopedic detail, why not structure the scenario so that the players at the table can experience that content?

The second problem is that the scenario structure here is very weak. Tarina basically says, "I will help you after the next cut scene." But then the GM is supposed to make the PCs wait an arbitrary and unspecified amount of time before triggering the cut scene in a location where there's basically nothing for them to do except say, "We wait."

(The more cynical take is that the writers are expecting the PCs to act as if they're in a CRPG and go around picking the locks on every private door in the joint.)



## ENTER TARINA

Tarina is the reason that the PCs are there, so she's going to be the lynchpin of whatever structure we apply here. The biggest problem we have here is the entire "I've heard a rumor some pirates might show up and try to kill me tonight" interaction: It's overly complicated and it doesn't really make a lot of sense.

The book says that the intention here is to give the PCs time to explore the tavern while they wait. But if they're supposed to be bodyguarding Tarina, they're probably not going to wander away, right?

We're going to make a simple tweak here:

- When the PCs show up at the Elfsong Tavern, Tarina isn't here.
- She shows up.
- She tells the PCs the information they need.

And that's it. We don't need any frills to get the job done here.

## ELFSONG

The Elfsong Tavern is haunted by the spirit of an elven woman who periodically sings a ghostly lament for a lover lost at sea. According to *Volo's Guide to the Sword Coast*, "the voice is never heard more than twice in an evening, but usually at least every three nights, and never during the sunlit hours." The song is always the same.

*Descent Into Avernus*, therefore, has a really interesting moment in which the spirit unexpectedly begins singing a lay to fallen Elturel. This includes a full set of beautiful, poetic lyrics which I suspect some might be suspicious of, but which I think can actually create a great moment at the gaming table.

Unfortunately, the moment won't actually work because the adventure doesn't put in the necessary work to make it land. "This surprises everyone," the book says... except the PCs. Because the PCs have never

heard the spirit sing before, don't know that it never changes its tune, and don't know that this isn't the regular tune.

**RULE OF THREE:** The Rule of Three is a narrative principle in which you (1) establish something, (2) reinforce it, and then (3) pay it off. (And the pay off can also be a reversal of the expectation you've established.)

We'll do the same thing here:

- The Elfsong is being sung when the PCs come through the door. They walk into the "customary hush that falls over the tavern while the ghostly voice sings her sad lament" (*Volo's Guide to the Sword Coast*).
- The spirit begins singing again when Tarina arrives. (Some or all of the PCs are likely to be upstairs when you trigger this moment. Note that the song can be heard everywhere in the building.)
- As they're finishing their conversation with Tarina (just after she's given them the information), the spirits sing the lay to fallen Elturel.

Basically, you *show* the players what's usual so that you don't have to *tell* them when it's unusual. The moment is allowed to speak for itself. (You can still reinforce this, of course, by describing the haunted reaction of the tavern regulars.)

**THE REGULARS:** It's fairly plausible that the first or second instance of the song will prompt the PCs to ask someone what the song is all about. Try to color this with that NPC's personal opinion and relationship with the song. For example, Alan Alyth, the owner of the tavern, might tell about his grandmother, Lady Alyth Eldendara, heard the song just once and bought the tavern that very night. The former owner agreed only on the condition that he would always have a seat in the tavern where he could come each night to listen to the song. Theomon's Chair still sits in the corner, sacrosanct and unused by any patron.

(No, I don't know why Alan's last name is his grandmother's first name.)

This allows the Elfsong to become a potential icebreaker or easy topic of conversation as the PCs interact with the NPCs here.

**THE FIRST TIMER:** You might also add an extra touch to the first or second instance of the song by describing its effect on another first timer. Also from *Volo's Guide to the Sword Coast*: "A first-timer ... who breaks down into tears upon hearing the song is usually embraced and comforted by the nearest regular patron."

(This is superior to trying to tell the players that their characters "feel really sad" about hearing the song. Telling players what their characters are feeling is generally a bad idea.)

## OSHALLA

While the PCs are waiting for Tarina to show up, Alan Alyth comes over to their table. He's seen the Flaming Fist badges they're wearing and he'd like their help. He has a tenant renting a room upstairs who has fallen behind on her rent. She's locked her door and refuses to come out.

The tenant in question is Oshalla, the sahuagin priestess I mentioned above.

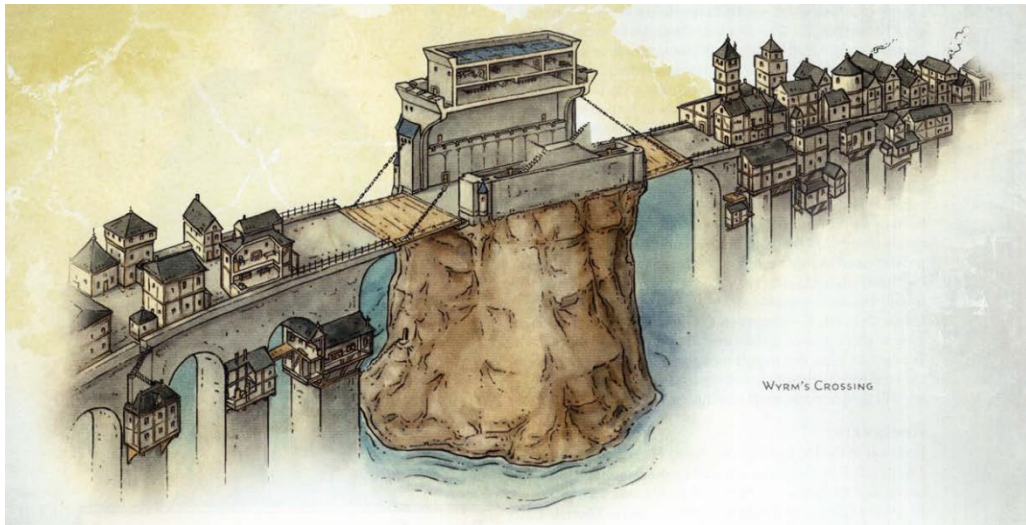
(This leverages Oshalla so that the PCs will actually interact with her. It also reinforces their new role as members of the Flaming Fist.)

# TOPICS OF CONVERSATION

**FALL OF ELTUREL:** Use the [Rumors of Elturel](#) addendum to seed the conversation here. This will continue building up the enigma around Elturel's disappearance. (As does the lay sung by the elf spirit later, of course.) As in [Part 1](#), make a point of including High Observer Thavius Kreeg (and the fact he's presumed to be lost with the rest of the city).

**FLAMING FIST LEADERSHIP:** With Grand Duke Ravengard missing and presumed dead in the Fall of Elturel, there's a lot of speculation about who will become the new Marshal of the Flaming Fist.

- Blaze Beldroth over in the western Lower City has reportedly promoted himself to Marshal and is issuing orders. It's unclear how many Flames are actually following those orders.
- Duke Portyr has recalled his niece, Liara Portyr, from Fort Beluarian in Chult. It's assumed he's planning to push her into the leadership position.
- Blaze Mukar, commander of Wyrms' Rock, is also in a powerful position.
- This is all just a test by Grand Duke Ravengard to see who's loyal and who's not.
- The Eltan family, heirs of the Eltan who originally founded the Flaming Fists but sold off their shares in order pay off debts, is preparing to buy back in, with Taraphael Eltan becoming the new Marshal.
- Yvandre Rillyn, a Flaming Fist veteran, has been running the Rillyn School for Swordplay. The school is actually the front for a conspiracy to seize control of the Flaming Fist. Rumor has it that Rillyn "students" were seen in Elturel before its fall. (See *Descent Into Avernus*, p. 182.)



**THE NEXT GRAND DUKE:** Ravengard's death also opens up the position of Grand Duke. Use this gossip to establish all of the surviving dukes (see *Descent*, p. 162):

- Duke Belyne Stelmane
- Duke Dillard Portyr
- Duke Thalamra Vanthampur

As for the filling the fourth ducal position, any number of patriarch families might be mentioned (including Taraphael Eltan). See p. 165 of *Descent Into Avernus*.

**REFUGEES:** There are those who think Baldur's Gate should be doing more to help. There also those spewing out all kinds of anti-refugee rhetoric and conspiracy theories (like the rumor on p. 18, "I'll bet

my last copper piece that those so-called refugees are advance scouts for an army that's preparing to attack Baldur's Gate!").

## REDUX REFUGEE

Grab one of the refugees from the refugee caravan (or a small group/family) and have them come into the Elfsong Tavern. They're trying to find lodging, but everywhere they've checked is sold out. (So is the Elfsong Tavern... unless the PCs have created a vacancy upstairs.)

That refugee who was pregnant and now has a newborn baby is probably a great choice for pathos here.

That guy who was spewing vile anti-refugee conspiracy theories a couple minutes? It's a great time for him to open his stupid mouth again.

## THE PIRATES

I'll be honest: I think the pirate encounter is kind of dumb. I think the setup with Tarina knowing they're looking for her is awkward at best and the whole thing ultimately contributes nothing to the scenario and means nothing. I suspect it's largely here because the writers needed to level the PCs up and felt it was even more ridiculous to do without at least *some* kind of fight.

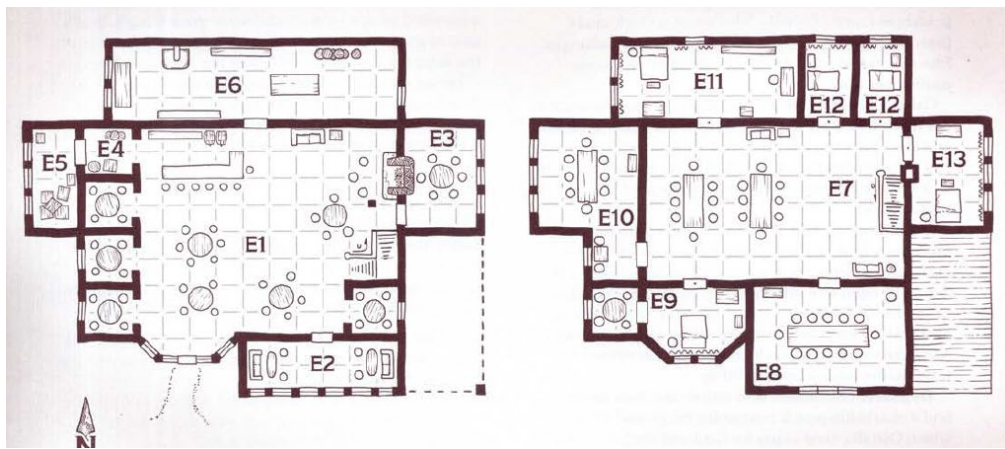
(If, as I've suggested, you've either run the refugee caravan scenario or simply had the players create 2<sup>nd</sup> level characters, then this is completely unnecessary.)

**THE SURPRISE:** If you still want to include the pirates, then just have them burst through the doors as Tarina finishes briefing the PCs. "Oh crap, these guys again," she says, and asks the PCs to help her deal with them.

**THE RUNNING GAG:** If you've replaced Tarina with a PC, the pirates could be worked in as a running gag as long as they're in Baldur's Gate. Everywhere they go... more bloody pirates seeking revenge.

**THE TAVERN BRAWL:** Alternatively, just start a brawl in the tavern. If the PCs do something stupid, great. Otherwise, have a quarrel over the refugees escalate until somebody breaks a bottle.

## EVENT SEQUENCE



A quick summary/checklist of everything we've just talked about:

- Entering the Elfsong Tavern while the Elfsong is being sung.
- Tarina isn't there yet.
- Alyth comes over to ask them to deal with the deadbeat Oshalla.
- Refugee enters, desperate for lodging.
- Tarina arrives. Elfsong again.
- Tarina briefs the PCs.
- Elfsong: The Lay of Elturel.
- Optional: Pirate Booty Kickin' / Tavern Brawl

This should give you enough narrative space to frame conversations around the PCs (implicitly inviting them to join in), have NPCs approach them for a friendly chat, and/or let the players take the initiative and find someone to talk to.

## ALTERNATIVE CAMPAIGN HOOKS

What if the PCs get clever and figure out a way to get their refugees into Baldur's Gate while doing an end-run around Zodge so that they never get enlisted or charged with solving the killings?

Well, we did establish that these killings were targeting refugees, right? Pick one of the refugees from the caravan (preferably whichever one was the players' favorite) and murder them. Other refugees from the caravan find the PCs and ask for their help again. (The refugees might have found lodging at the Elfsong Tavern, so you can still frame this scene there.) You can then use *Part 3D: Investigating the Murders* to bring the PCs into the Vanthampur Investigations.

(Alternatively, if you prefer to follow more closely the structure of the original book, you can use an [investigative montage](#) to point the PCs at the bathhouse the Dead Three cultists are using.)



# PART 3: THE VANTHAMPUR INVESTIGATIONS

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[by Justin Alexander – March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020](#)



The PCs' time in Baldur's Gate is entirely dedicated to investigating the machinations of the Vanthampurs. (You can try to squeeze other stuff in, but there's not really any space to do it: The PCs are told to investigate the murders by going to the Dungeon of the Dead Three, immediately follow leads from there to Vanthampur Manor, and then immediately follow the leads from the Manor out of town. Realistically speaking, they'll spend less than 48 hours in the city. Probably significantly less.)

In practice, these investigations are designed to lead to three central revelations:

- The murders ordered by Duke Vanthampur
- The devilish schemes involving the *Shield of the Hidden Lord*
- The truth of Elturel's Fall

As written, there are significant problems with all three.

## PROBLEM: THE MURDERS

The Vanthampur “plan” to seize power in Baldur’s Gate doesn’t actually make any sense: Duke Vanthampur has hired Dead Three cultists to murder people in order to “shatter confidence in the Flaming Fist” so that the city will stop paying them and they’ll... leave?

First, Baldur’s Gate is already notoriously the murder capital of the Sword Coast and has been for centuries. If “bunch of murders” was going to break public confidence in the Flaming Fist, it feels like it would have happened a long time ago.

(For context, the entire adventure begins in a [tavern](#) where everyone goes armed because otherwise you’re likely to get murdered. It’s one of the nicer taverns in town.)

Second, the Flaming Fist is a “mercenary army,” but they’re not just visiting. They’ve been a fundamental institution of power in Baldur’s Gate for more than a hundred years. They’re also the *only* meaningful military force in town. Historically speaking, when you abruptly stop paying the army, the result is not “they peaceably go away and leave you in charge.”

The result is that the army is now in charge.

Even beyond that, it’s entirely unclear how getting rid of the Flaming Fist is supposed to make Vanthampur the new Grand Duke. The book says that she “has brokered a deal that will enable her to claim the role of grand duke once the Flaming Fist disbands,” but brokered with *who* exactly? To become grand duke you have to be elected by the Parliament of Peers. Why would any significant portion of the parliament want to disband the Flaming Fist? And if they did, why wouldn’t they just vote to do it?

To sum up: It doesn’t make sense that Vanthampur is trying to do what she’s trying to do, and the way she’s trying to do it will never work.

## PROBLEM: SENDING BALDUR’S GATE TO HELL

Duke Vanthampur and/or Thavius Kreeg (it’s a little vague) also have another plan: They’ve stolen the *Shield of the Hidden Lord*, a powerful magical artifact containing a trapped pit fiend named Gargauth which “fuels the avarice and ambitions of evil-minded folk in Baldur’s Gate.” (The book is inconsistent on whether the pit fiend does this by loquaciously convincing people to do bad things or if it just exudes an aura of evil that ramps up the murder rate citywide.) They’re going to use the *Shield* to suck Baldur’s Gate to Hell, just like Elturel was!

First, I just want to briefly comment on how bizarrely warped the lore of the *Shield of the Hidden Lord* has become. In 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Gargauth was a demigod; he was the Tenth Lord of Hell who had been cast out by his fellow devils and chose to wander the Prime Material Plane. The *Shield of the Hidden Lord* first appeared in 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, and it was a powerful evil artifact that allowed Gargauth to communicate with and subtly influence its bearer.

Gargauth vanished in 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, but in 5<sup>th</sup> Edition he reappeared in *Sword Coast Adventurer’s Guide* as “a mysterious infernal power who seeks godhood while trapped in the world within a magical shield.” *Descent Into Avernus* then reveals that this is, in fact, the *Shield of the Hidden God*, which is no longer an evil artifact created by Gargauth, but instead a celestial artifact in which Gargauth has been imprisoned.

(I mention this primarily to explain why, when I completely jettison a lot of this lore and replace it with something completely different, I’m not going to feel particularly guilty about it.)

Second, the Companion hung in the sky above Elturel for fifty years before the city could be sucked into Hell, but apparently you can do “much the same thing” (p. 11) with a pit fiend bound inside a celestial shield.

This doesn't make a lot of sense, and the book's lack of interest in providing any explanation for how this is supposed to work is really just a symptom of *Descent's* lack of a clear vision for the metaphysics and continuity involved in Elturel's fall.

For example, *Descent Into Avernus* is built around the central concept that High Observer Thavius Kreeg made a deal with devils to create the Companion and, in exchange, he sells the city he rules to the Nine Hells.

The problem is that this cannot possibly be true.

Thavius Kreeg wasn't High Observer when the Companion was created because:

1. The position of High Observer came into existence *after* the Companion.
2. Kreeg wasn't the first High Observer.
3. The Companion was created in order to overthrow the existing (vampire) lord of the city.

The beginning of *Descent Into Avernus* recognizes the problem and tries to fudge a fix: Kreeg, who was not the ruler of the city, “took credit for summoning the Companion, was hailed as the savior of the city, and rose to become its high overseer.”

By the time the book gets to Candlekeep, however, the writers have forgotten both the original continuity and the continuity described at the beginning of the book: Kreeg is now the ruler of Elturel when he made the deal with Zariel (and before the Companion was created).

Be it known to all that I, Thavius Kreeg, High Overseer of Elturel, have sworn to my master, Zariel, lord of Avernus, to keep the agreements contained in this oath.

I hereby submit to Zariel in all matters and for all time. I will place Her above all creatures, living and dead. I will obey Her all my days and beyond with fear and servility.

I recognize the dispensation of the device called the Solar Insidiator, hereafter called the Companion. In my capacity as High Overseer of Elturel and its vassal territories, I acknowledge that all lands falling under the light of the Companion are forfeit to Zariel. All persons bound by oath to defend Elturel are also considered forfeit. I further recognize that this dispensation will last fifty years, after which the Companion will return whence it came, taking Elturel and its oath-bound defenders with it, if that is Zariel's wish.

All this is my everlasting pledge.

On the one hand, this actually makes more sense (because otherwise you're saying that just any random dude in a city can agree to send it to Hell, which makes it unclear why the devils haven't scooped up all

the cities of Faerun a long time ago), but on the other hand you've got a superpositioned continuity glitch in which both of its quantum states have really glaring problems.

(*Descent Into Avernus* has so little care for actual continuity here, that they somehow changed Kreeg's title from "High Observer" to "High Overseer" and nobody noticed the error.)

It's certainly possible to slide some continuity glitches past your players, but this is literally the entire adventure: They *have* to know how Elturel was damned so that they can figure out how to save it.

## PROBLEM: THE TRUTH OF ELTUREL'S FALL

At the end of the Dungeon of the Dead Three, the PCs meet and interrogate Mortlock Vanthampur, who will flat out state the premise of the scenario: "If [my mom] gets her way, Baldur's Gate will share Elturel's fate and get dragged down into the Nine Hells."

This is the first time the PCs will be able to learn this, so they're going to have some questions. The GM will also have questions (like, how does this NPC know this but his brothers don't, even though his brothers are explicitly more trusted by their mother? How much does he actually know?), but the adventure isn't going to be helpful in answering any of them.

What I'm more interested in here is the pacing of major revelations in a campaign: This isn't how you do it. Don't just dump the entire solution to a major mystery into the PCs' laps as an offhand comment in an unrelated conversation.

In [Part 1](#), I talked about how the Mystery of Elturel's Fate is the central, driving mystery in this first part of the campaign. We can now break this down into five specific phases of revelation:

1. Elturel was destroyed
2. Elturel was destroyed by devils
3. High Observer Kreeg is still alive!
4. Kreeg is responsible!
5. Elturel wasn't destroyed, it was actually taken to the Nine Hells.

Once you break it down like this, you can see how each one of these revelations packs a big punch. If you do it right, each one should be a "Holy shit!" moment for your players.

But you can also see how the conversation with Mortlock short-circuits this entire process of discovery, jumping straight to the end. All those big, cool, memorable moments are just thrown away.

Everything else in this chain of revelations is similarly dysfunctional.

For example, instead of the PCs discovering that Kreeg is still alive (shocking twist!), a random NPC they've never met before walks up to them in the street and tells them. (It's almost insulting how pointless this is, by the way: The PCs are literally on their way to a location where they'll discover Kreeg for themselves when the NPC shows up to steal their thunder.)

Later there's an *infernal puzzle box* that the PCs need to take to Candlekeep and have opened. When they do, they find inside the infernal contract Kreeg signed that doomed Elturel. This should be a mind-blowing revelation of epic proportions...

...except the person who tells them to go to Candlekeep to have the puzzle box opened literally tells them what's in the box before they open it. (And then another NPC makes sure to reiterate it immediately before opening it.)

So there's this big, cool mystery that the entire campaign is framed around. But *Descent Into Avernus* constantly undercuts the revelation of that mystery and ferociously deprotagonizes the PCs while they "investigate" it.

## PROBLEM: THE INVESTIGATION TRACK

What I'm referring to as the Vanthampur Investigations consists of three nodes:

- Dungeon of the Dead Three
- Amrik Vanthampur @ the Low Lantern
- Vanthampur Manor

These are largely presented as a linear chain in *Descent Into Avernus*. Unfortunately, this chain is *extremely* fragile. This is mostly due to Mortlock: The PCs are supposed to find him in the Dungeon of the Dead Three, interrogate him, and basically get all the information they need to proceed.

There are several problems:

First, as we'll discuss in Part 3F, it's very easy for the PCs to never find Mortlock.

Second, if they find him, he's being attacked by another cultist and will be killed if the PCs don't jump in and save him. (What if they don't?)

Third, if they do save him, the first thing he'll say is, "I'm the serial killer you've been looking for." (Odds that the PCs will now kill him without further ado? Pretty high in my experience.)

Fourth, having just confessed to being the serial killer the PCs are here to kill, Mortlock will now say, "Hey, can you help me take revenge on the people who tried to kill me?" (I'm not making this up.)

Fifth, remember that the PCs have been pressganged into a very simple job: Destroy the Dead Three cult. So the last thing Mortlock says is, "If you've made it this far, you've killed most of the leaders of the Dead Three cult. Without them, the cult will break up." In other words, "Congratulations! You're all done! This adventure is 100% complete!"

If you get past all of that, Mortlock tells the PCs what they're supposed to do next: Kidnap his brother Amrik so that they can use him as leverage while negotiating with his mother.

But negotiating with his mother to do... what?

The adventure doesn't seem to know. In fact, it promptly forgets the entire idea except to briefly tell the DM later that it definitely won't work. ("Proud to a fault, [Thalamra] would rather die than surrender or be taken prisoner – and she happily watches any of her sons die before consenting to ransom demands.")

The failure of the scheme doesn't bother me. ("Go ahead and kill him," is a perfectly legitimate moment and builds pretty consistently from her known relationship with her kids.) What bothers me is that there doesn't seem to BE a scheme. The PCs are told to do a thing, but are given no coherent reason for doing it.

(This is a somewhat consistent problem in the adventure that we'll discuss at greater length in Part 6.)

# REMIXING THE INVESTIGATION

We're going to largely focus on three things in order to fix the Vanthampur Investigations:

1. Revise the lore and back story so that it makes sense
2. Do some minor rehab work on each individual node
3. Toss out the current investigation structure and replace it with revamped [revelation lists](#), made robust by applying the [Three Clue Rule](#)

Those of you familiar with my work will probably be unsurprised to discover that we'll also be introducing some [node-based scenario design](#) to give the whole thing more flexibility. (There's only three nodes, of course, so we're not going to go too crazy here.)

# PART 3B: LORE OF THE VANTHAMPUR INVESTIGATIONS

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[by Justin Alexander – March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020](#)

We'll be cleaning up the lore and structure of the Vanthampur Investigations. For the purposes of the Remix, this post should be considered authoritative: Any place where this material contradicts the published version of *Descent Into Avernus* is almost certainly a deliberate change made to fix continuity problems. Ignore the published version and use the continuity described here.

## LORE OF GARGAUTH

Gargauth (referred to in some ancient texts as Gargoth) is currently trapped in the *Shield of the Hidden Lord*, which is being carried by High Observer Kreeg. A quick overview of his history:

- Gargauth first rose to prominence in Hell in the early days of the Blood War when he discovered that the demon Astaroth had infiltrated Asmodeus' court and actually managed to become Treasurer of Hell. With his deception revealed, Astaroth fled. As a reward, Asmodeus made Gargauth the new Treasurer of Hell.
- Gargauth's rise continued until he was named an Archduke, ruling over Avernus as one of the Lords of the Nine.
- He was overthrown by Bel, who had risen from a lowly lemure before engineering the coup that left him in charge of Avernus. (Bel, in turn, would be overthrown by Zariel.)
- Gargauth then chose to leave Hell and journey on the Material Plane. He became known as the Tenth Lord of the Nine, the Lost Lord of the Pit, the Hidden Lord, the Outcast, and the Lord Who Watches.
- Gargauth's ancient feud with Astaroth had never truly ended. Astaroth, for his part, had become a demigod in his own right and was on the cusp of achieving godhood itself, with a number of cults scattered across Faerun. Gargauth sought out Astaroth and slew him before he could immanentize his divinity. (Some claimed that this was done at Asmodeus' behest, and that Gargauth, despite having been "cast out" of Hell, was actually still loyal to Asmodeus.)
- Gargauth actually assumed Astaroth's mantle for himself, effectively impersonating the dead demon and receiving the worship of Astaroth's cultists. It was Gargauth's first taste of godhood.
- Perhaps overconfident in his new power, Gargauth joined an alliance of the Dark Gods (Bane, Bhaal, Loviatar, and Talona) to invade Hell itself and seize it from Asmodeus.
- The invasion failed. Gargauth himself was captured. Asmodeus offered him a choice between utter destruction and a pact. Gargauth chose the pact and Asmodeus bound him into the *Shield of the Hidden Lord*. In order to be freed from this bondage, Gargauth must bring thirteen cities to Hell.



- The *Shield* was then given to Zariel, who was in charge of the Dock of Fallen Cities (see Part 5). She cast Gargauth out onto the Material Plane, and he has been working on his charge ever since. (Elturel may or may not have been his first success. Perhaps cities far from the Sword Coast have been taken. Or it is possible that there are, in fact, many *Shields of the Hidden Lord*, with Gargauth's essence refracted across a multitude of Material Planes.)
- In the case of Faerunian history, the *Shield* has been prized by Astarothian cultists (who still hear the voice of their God in it), Dead Three cultists (who honor Gargauth for his alliance with the Dark Gods), and the Cult of Zariel (see below).
- In one notable instance, Dead Three cultists managed to temporarily free Gargauth from the *Shield* (or possibly just manifest his Avatar from it) as part of an assault on the Sign of the Silver Harp, an inn that was used as a gathering place for the Harpers in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It turned out the entire affair was an elaborate trap set by Elminster and Khelben Arunsun, and Gargauth ended up defeated and back in the *Shield*. (See [Code of the Harpers](#), p. 27.)
- In the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, Gargauth infiltrated the Knights of the Shield. The Knights had originally been dedicated to the Shield of Silvam (one of the Kuldannorar artifacts once held by the Tethyrian royal line, see [Lands of Intrigue: Book Three](#), p. 26), but Gargauth corrupted an inner cabal of the Knights. Because the original Shield of Silvam had been lost, this inner cabal was able to create a "secret history" that Duke Tithkar Illehhune in the 9<sup>th</sup> century had brought the shield to be safeguarded by the Knights in their sanctum. Those inducted into the "inner mysteries" of the Knights believed that the Shield of the Hidden Lord was actually the Shield of Silvam, and Gargauth became the object of their veneration.
- Gargauth has historically been interested in seeking out the method by which Toril was sealed from the other planes during the Time of Troubles, believing that if he could replicate this it would both free him from the *Shield* and perhaps allow him to seize a great deal of divine power while the other powers are cut off from the Realms. His agents are reportedly scouring many ancient ruins of the Imaskari Empire, whose wizards managed long ago to partially bar the Mulhorandi and Untheric pantheons from entering the Realms (see [Powers and Pantheons](#), p. 23).
- Gargauth has most recently been working with the Cult of Zariel in Elturel (see below). The Shield was taken to Elturel by a member of the Hhune family (who were part of the inner cabal of the Knights of the Shield).

*Option: If you'd rather cleave a little closer to the established history of Gargauth – which, as we described in Part 3, featured him being an unfettered demigod until during or sometime after the Spellplague – simply flip him out for a completely different pit fiend with the same back story described here. For more on Gargauth, check out Powers & Pantheons (p. 23).*

*We're also going with Descent Into Avernus' version of the history between Bel and Zariel. It's completely inverted from [Guide to Hell](#) (p. 39), [Book of Vile Darkness](#) (p. 142) [Fiendish Codex II](#) (p. 35), and [Rise of Tiamat](#) (p. 10) in which Bel overthrew Zariel (the original Lord of Avernus!) and not the other way around, because the original version of the continuity is completely incompatible with the story of Descent Into Avernus. What I've done here is essentially insert Gargauth into the original role of Zariel in the story, creating a chain of succession from Gargauth to Bel to Zariel which, through the Shield, gives the PCs a window into the politics of Hell.*

*If you want to instead maintain the "Zariel was the original ruler of Avernus" continuity, replace Zariel's role in Descent with a different Archdevil; one of the Dark Eight would work well because they're regularly killed and replaced (making it easy for the fallen celestial who led the Charge of the Hellriders to have become one of Avernus' generals).*



# THE CULT OF ZARIEL

The Cult of Zariel is briefly described in [Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes](#) (p. 21). As Archduchess of Avernus, Zariel oversees the armies fighting at the front lines of the Blood War, and her focus is usually on the corruption of knights, mercenaries, and soldiers who can most aid her cause. It is particularly effective to corrupt entire knightly orders or mercenary companies, institutionalizing Hell's recruitment, and it's not unusual to find the Cult of Zariel working from within such organizations, often having hollowed out the original leadership and purpose.

There are actually two different Zariel cults in the Remix, although they're working together closely enough that the PCs may not make the distinction between them. (They don't really need to.)

The **Vanthampur cult** in Baldur's Gate is relatively new. Their primary goal is to seize power in Baldur's Gate. In addition to all the normal advantages to be gained from such temporal power, they particularly want to corrupt the Flaming Fist and turn the whole mercenary company into a recruitment drive for the Blood War. Towards this end, Duke Vanthampur arranged for Grand Duke Ravengard to be present in Elturel when it was sucked into hell. She's also planning to assassinate Duke Portyr in order to further the power vacuum.

The **Cult of the Companion** has been secretly wielding power in Elturel for generations. They forged the original pact with Zariel for the Companion (see below), and their current leader is High Observer Thavius Kreeg himself. They have been guided in these actions from the beginning by Gargauth, speaking from the *Shield of the Hidden Lord*, which has been a prized artifact of the cult.



## THE MURDERS

Having been utterly triumphant in their schemes, the Cult of the Companion is now working mop up.

We'll discuss the details and specific history of the infernal pact that doomed Elturel in Part 4, but there's one thing we need to know now: Anyone descended from a Hellrider or a member of the Order of the Companion has had their soul forfeited to serve as a devil in Zariel's armies after their death. Those who were in Elturel at the time of its taking have already been taken, but a number of descendants either escaped the city or weren't in the city at the time of its fall. If they die before Elturel sinks into the Styx (and the pact is completed), however, then their souls will also be sucked to Hell.

The Cult of the Companion is therefore working with the Vanthampur cult to hunt down Hellriders and their descendants in Baldur's Gate and murder them. Think of it as a final recruitment drive.

## DEAD THREE CULTISTS

The Cult of Zariel has reached out to local Dead Three cultists for the manpower they need to identify, locate, track, and murder Hellrider descendants. This alliance was primarily forged because the Dead Three cultists still venerate the *Shield of the Hidden Lord* and view Gargauth's pronouncements as coming from their dark gods, but Duke Vanthampur was able to sweeten the deal by offering them an ancient temple site dedicated to the Dead Three.

Duke Vanthampur, who manages the city's water utilities and sewer system, originally became aware of this temple when a sewer work crew accidentally broke into it. She had the sewer breach sealed, killed the workers who'd done it, built a bathhouse over the temple site in order to gain access to it, and then killed the workers who'd done that work, too.

She didn't really have a specific purpose for it at the time, but figured having a private underground lair would come in useful at some point. The complex has been used at various times to store drugs, slaves, and other illicit goods. The Vanthampurs have also used it to hold and torture prisoners. Unfortunately, the contamination of the air by subterranean gases (see Part 3F) has limited its utility and, therefore, value. The Dead Three cultists nevertheless consider the restoration of this holy site an almost incomparable gift, putting them deeply in Duke Vanthampur's debt.

*Note: In the adventure as published, the relationship between the Dead Three cultists and the Vanthampurs is confused. In some places it's suggested they're allied to common purpose (although it's not certain what that is); in other places the Vanthampurs are just paying the Dead Three cultists to kill people. But if the Dead Three cultists are just mercenaries, then it's unclear why the Vanthampurs have built a temple dedicated to the Dead Three in the dungeon they found/own. The revision of lore found here attempts to simplify, straighten out, and strengthen this continuity.*

# PART 3C: THE VANTHAMPUR REVELATIONS

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[by Justin Alexander – April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020](#)



As we discussed in [Part 3](#), the Vanthampur Investigations consist of three nodes:

- Dungeon of the Dead Three
- Amrik Vanthampur @ the Low Lantern
- Vanthampur Manor

To these we're going to add a fourth node:

- The Poisoned Poseidon

*The Poisoned Poseidon* is a beached ship that's been repurposed into a tannery. It's also the location where the Dead Three cultists are killing refugees before dumping their bodies. There are a couple of reasons why we're adding this node to the scenario:

First, as we'll see in "Portyr Politics" below, I wanted to enhance this section of the campaign by giving the PCs a window into the evolving political situation in Baldur's Gate (and how that ties into both the refugees they care about and Vanthampur's schemes). The most effective structure for that material required an extra "beat" before the Dungeon of the Dead Three, which means that we need an extra node.

Second, extensive feedback from DMs online suggests that the Dungeon of the Dead Three is a better experience for 3<sup>rd</sup> level PCs than for 2<sup>nd</sup> level PCs. Adding an extra node here also provides a natural opportunity for a milestone. In Act I of the campaign, the PCs should level up after:

- Reaching Baldur's Gate
- Poisoned Poseidon OR Amrik Vanthampur (whichever they do first)
- Dungeon of the Dead Three
- Vanthampur Estate

Meaning they'll be 5<sup>th</sup> level when they head to Candlekeep (and, subsequently, Avernus).

## REMIXING THE CONSPIRACY

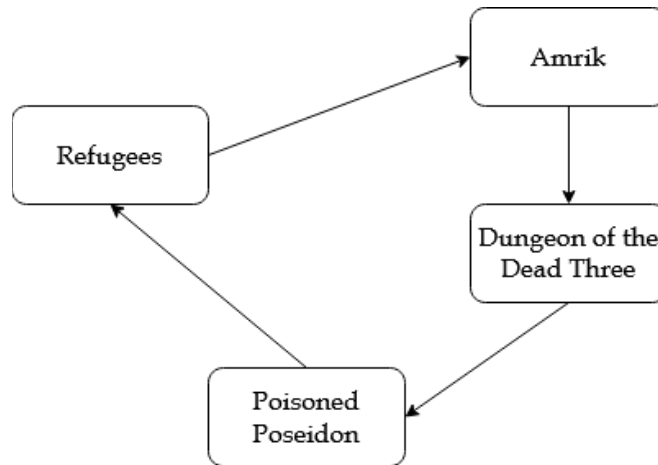
There's a million and one ways to create a thing, but generally the first thing I do when designing an adventure or campaign is to simply brainstorm ideas. (I describe a quick version of this in [5 Node Mystery](#).) We're remixing the raw material from *Descent Into Avernus* here, so we can largely skip that step.

When it comes to the actual design work — when I start thinking about how a particular scenario is going to work *in play* — however, the first thing I'll actually do is focus on how the scenario works *in the game world*. Once I know that, I can start figuring out what sort of scenario structures to use, how the PCs can get hooked into the scenario, and so forth. (Along the way, I'll almost certainly tweak how the game world is arranged in order to facilitate the table experience, but balancing these factors of simulation, challenge, drama, practicality, scope, etc. — and which ones are more important or more valued — is (a) a matter of personal taste, (b) dependent on circumstance, and (c) a bag of worms I'm not going to dive into today.)

Long story short, in the Remix this is how the Vanthampur conspiracy to kill descendants of Hellriders and knights of the Order of the Companion works in the game world:

- Amrik Vanthampur has set himself up as a black market resource for smuggling refugees into Baldur's Gate. His agents circulate through the refugee camps outside of the city and he holds court at the Low Lantern, fleecing refugees who want to bring their loved ones inside the city. (This will be described in Part 3H.)
- This puts Amrik in a position to identify and track refugees of the desired bloodlines.
- Duke Vanthampur, with the aid of Thavius Kreeg and Gargauth, has cut a deal with the Dead Three Cultists to actually carry out the murders. (See [Part 3B](#).)
- The operation is overseen by Mortlock and the Dead Three cult leaders at the Dungeon of the Dead Three. Once Amrik has identified a target, he sends word to Mortlock, who instructs the Dead Three cultists to put the target under surveillance. (See Part 3F.)
- The actual murders are carried out by Dead Three cultists operating out of the *Poisoned Poseidon*. Once a target's location and identity have been confirmed, the surveillance teams will report that information to the *Poisoned Poseidon*.
- A *Poseidon* strike team will then kidnap the victim, bring them back to the slaughterhouse, kill them, and dump the body in Insight Park.

At this point, we could put together a little diagram of how the scenario works:



Refugees go to Amrik for help, Amrik gives their information to the Dungeon of the Dead Three, who passes the target information to *The Poisoned Poseidon*, who kill the targeted refugees.

(You don't necessarily need to actually draw this out on a sheet of paper, but you may find visualizing it useful.)

Note that this has nothing to do with the PCs or their involvement in the scenario. I'm not focused on that at all right now. All of my attention is on figuring out the practical details of the situation in the game world.

The nature of these practical details can also vary a lot. In situations like this where the bad guys are in the middle of an ongoing project, though, the result will usually be some sort of logistical map for information, money, people, etc. This usually lends itself naturally to [node-based scenario design](#).

*Option: On p. 197 of Descent Into Avernus, there's a group of Dead Three cultists based out of the Hamhocks Slaughterhouse who are ALSO murdering people across the city of vague and unspecified reasons and then dumping their bodies at the Smilin' Boar tavern. I'd originally planned to just scoop them up and add them to the Vanthampur conspiracy, but realized I couldn't quite make it work: The Slaughterhouse is outside the city because no hooved animals are allowed inside the walls, and it doesn't make sense for the Dead Three to smuggle refugees OUT of the city, murder them, and then smuggle them back INTO the city to dump the bodies.*

*However, if wanted to add more complexity to this section of the campaign you could still scoop up this material. Now there would effectively be two Dead Three operations hunting refugees: One inside the city walls and one outside the city walls.*

*(I even had a cool clue for the Hamhocks Slaughterhouse that I didn't get to use: Blue blood on one of the victim's clothes. In Baldur's Gate, only the Hamhocks Slaughterhouse practices the slaughter of giant spiders.)*

## HOOKS

Once we understand the scenario, we can start looking at how the PCs can get involved. Because [we're not prepping a plot](#), we could theoretically generate [lots and lots of scenario hooks](#), pointing them at any or all of the nodes we've designed. In practice, however, this is the point where we'll usually start thinking about the scenario structurally in terms of how the PCs interact with it, which in the case of a

conspiracy usually translates into a hook pointing somewhere at the periphery of the conspiracy (so that the PCs can learn more and more about the conspiracy as they work their way towards its center).

In this case, our little flowchart is a perfect loop: What's the periphery? Well, we know that the Dungeon of the Dead Three is the control hub for the conspiracy. And, structurally, it will also be where the major leads to the next section of the campaign (Vanthampur Manor) will be found. Therefore, we can look at the point furthest from the Dungeon of the Dead Three: The refugees.

Once we've made that determination, a clear structure kind of leaps out at me: From the murdered refugees, the PCs can work their way up the ladder in either direction (or both).

It can also be useful to remember that the form of the hook and the content of the hook are two different things. For example, in the published adventure Flame Zodge tells the PCs to talk to Tarina, who tells them to go to the Dungeon of the Dead Three. But Zodge could just as easily tell them to go to the *Poisoned Poseidon* or investigate the dead refugees or question Amrik or even just go straight to Vanthampur Manor.

So even though we're shifting where the hook points us, we don't need to abandon the basic structure of the hook.

**ZODGE'S BRIEFING:** Zodge is actually going to point the PCs in two directions. As detailed in [Part 1](#), he makes a deal with the PCs to investigate the killings:

- The city is in chaos. Grand Duke Ulder Ravengard is missing; presumed dead in the fall of Elturel. (He could mention a few [Rumors of Elturel](#) he's heard.)
- Some people blame the Elturians; others think the refugees have a secret agenda; tensions are high, violence is everywhere, and the Flaming Fist is stretched thin trying to keep the city from falling apart.
- Someone is killing refugees. Zodge thinks it's a coordinated effort, but the Flaming Fist doesn't have the manpower to mount proper investigation or response.
- If the PCs agree to investigate the murders and bring the perpetrators to justice, he will immediately allow the refugees from their caravan to enter the city.
- Beyond that, the refugees will be on their own: They'll have to make whatever arrangements they can. (But it will certainly be better than the refugee camp outside, where conditions are getting more desperate every day.)

*Note: If the PCs make exceptionally good time to Baldur's Gate with their refugees, you may want to have them spend a day or two with the refugees stuck in the camp before Zodge tracks them down (or vice versa) so that there's enough time for the killings to start.*

Once the PCs agree to the deal (or even if they just ask questions), he'll give them a full briefing:

- A half dozen bodies have been dumped in Insight Park, located in the Brampton neighborhood south of Cliffgate.
- Ritual symbols associated with the Dead Three – the gods Bane, Bhaal, and Myrkul – have been carved into the bodies. Zodge isn't sure if it's *actually* followers of the Dead Three or if someone is just using them as a scapegoat.
- The PCs are authorized, as deputies, to kill whoever is responsible on sight.
- A Flaming Fist informant named Tarina has sent word to Zodge that she has a lead on the killings. The PCs are to meet at the Elfsong Tavern tonight, find out what she knows, and then follow up on whatever lead she has.
- Zodge gives them a bag with 50gp to pay Tarina for the information.
- They should keep him apprised of their progress.

The briefing actually gives the PCs *two* leads: They're likely to go and meet with Tarina, but they could also decide to independently investigate the murders.

**TARINA'S LEAD:** The lead Tarina gives the PCs in the Elfsong Tavern is straightforward: She's seen Dead Three cultists around the *Poisoned Poseidon* in the Brampton docks.

**INVESTIGATING THE MURDERS:** If the PCs decide to investigate the murders themselves, they have several options. We'll discuss this in Part 3D.

## LEADS (THE SCENARIO SOLVE)

In [Advanced Node-Based Design](#), I talk about the two prongs of mystery scenarios: There are the clues you need to figure out the fundamental truths or revelations about what's really happening (the *concept solve*) and there are the clues (or leads) that tell you where to look for more clues (another location or character or event; the *scenario solve*).

The concept solve is the answer you're trying to figure out; the scenario solve is what you actually *do*.

The [revelation list](#) for the scenario solve is generally identical (or nearly identical) to the node list. In the case of the Vanthampur Investigations, we have five scenario solve revelations:

- Poisoned Poseidon
- Amrik Vanthampur
- Dungeon of the Dead Three
- Vanthampur Manor
- Infernal Puzzlebox

(The *infernal puzzlebox* is a scenario solve because it's the structural link to *Part 4: Candlekeep*.)

Let's take a closer look at this revelation list. Because this is a revelation list, we'll be listing the clues that point *to* each node; not the clues that are found *in* those nodes. The location of each clue is indicated in parentheses. (I typically wouldn't provide descriptions of each clue on a revelation list; but I'm doing so here because the material this list refers to won't be available until after this post goes live.)

### THE POISONED POSEIDON

- **Tarina's Lead.** Tarina tells the PCs to go check out the *Poisoned Poseidon*.
- **Tanner's Fluid** (*Investigating the Murders*). One of the victims has an alkaline solution of wood ash and lime staining her clothes, an alchemical used to rotten and loosen the hair of hides. (The nearest tannery is the *Poisoned Poseidon*.)
- **Staking Out the Murder Scene** (*Investigating the Murders*). When the next corpse is dumped, the PCs can follow the murderers back to the *Poisoned Poseidon* or question them.
- **Amrik's Paperwork** (*Trafficking Amrik*). Correspondence from *Poseidon* and notations on the genealogical reports. Amrik can also be questioned to this effect.

### AMRIK VANTHAMPUR

- **Refugee Papers** (*Investigating the Murders*). Forged refugee paperwork found at the murder scene and on bodies in the morgue can be traced back to Amrik.
- **Canvassing Victims** (*Investigating the Murders*). Those who knew the victims can report that they'd been smuggled into the city by Amrik.
- **Questioning Mortlock** (*Dungeon of the Dead Three*).
- **Assassin's Orders** (*Dungeon of the Dead Three*). The assassin targeting Mortlock carries a note with instructions from Amrik. The assassin could also be questioned to similar effect.

## DUNGEON OF THE DEAD THREE

- **Questioning Killers** (*Investigating the Murders*). If the PCs stakeout Insight Park, they can question the cultists dumping the bodies.
- **Poseidon Correspondence** (*Poisoned Poseidon*). Reports from the Dead Three leadership mention the bathhouse.
- **Poseidon Cultists** (*Poisoned Poseidon*). Following or questioning Poseidon cultists can lead to the bathhouse.
- **Amrik's Paperwork** (*Trafficking Amrik*). Amrik is sending reports and receiving instructions from the Dead Three leadership. He can be questioned to similar effect.

## VANTHAMPUR MANOR

- **Vanthampur Boys** (*Trafficking Amrik/Dungeon of the Dead Three*). Knowing that one or more Vanthampur heirs are involved can be enough to trigger an investigation of Vanthampur Manor all by itself.
- **Amrik's Paperwork** (*Trafficking Amrik*). Amrik has correspondence from his brother Thurstwell.
- **Mortlock's Correspondence** (*Dungeon of the Dead Three*). A letter from his mother detailing how to access the dungeons beneath the bathhouse. Mortlock can be questioned to similar effect.
- **Missives of the Hidden Lord** (*Dungeon of the Dead Three*). Correspondence from Thavius Kreeg, passing on instructions from Gargauth to the Dead Three leaders (and inadvertently revealing its presence in Vanthampur Manor).

## INFERNAL PUZZLEBOX

- **Amrik's Paperwork** (*Trafficking Amrik*). Amrik's correspondence with his brother Thurstwell mentions the *infernal puzzlebox* (Thurstwell has removed it from the family's vaults where it had been secured because he was fascinated by it).
- **Missives of the Hidden Lord** (*Dungeon of the Dead Three*). The missives also mention the *puzzlebox*.
- **Questioning Mortlock** (*Dungeon of the Dead Three*). Mortlock knows that a powerful cult leader escaped from Elturel just before its fall and that his mother is protecting him in the basement of Vanthampur Manor. The cult leader brought two powerful artifacts with him, one of which was locked in a box (or maybe the box is the artifact? Mortlock isn't sure).
- **Finding the Box** (*Vanthampur Manor*). Oh. Hey! There it is!

(If you're wondering how this revelation list was designed: I literally listed the five revelations and then started adding clues to each one, following the logic of the game world and our intention of being able to follow the leads "up the ladder" in both directions.)

## CONCEPT SOLVE

As we've discussed previously, there are several core concepts that the PCs *should* figure out during the Vanthampur Investigations, but which are not actually *required* for them to proceed:

- The murder victims are descended from knights of Elturgard (either Hellriders or the Order of Companions).
- The *Shield of the Hidden Lord* is hidden in Vanthampur Manor. (Ideally, this results in them finding and taking the shield.)
- Thavius Kreeg is a cultist.
- Elturel was destroyed by devils.

## VICTIMS DESCENDED FROM KNIGHTS OF ELTURGARD



- **Canvassing Victims** (*Investigating the Murders*). In speaking with those who knew the victims, the fact that they either were knights or were related to them will be a common theme players might notice. One victim is notably NOT a refugee; in their house hangs the mantle of a Hellrider (their father's).
- **Amrik's Paperwork** (*Trafficking Amrik*). His paperwork includes the genealogical records he's cross-referencing.
- **Missives of the Hidden Lord** (*Dungeon of the Dead Three*). The missives also reveal that the Dead Three cultists must "seek the blood of the holy orders of Elturgard."
- **Thurstwell's Correspondence** (*Vanthampur Manor*). Includes queries from Amrik regarding Thurstwell's efforts to assist him.

### GARGAUTH/SHIELD OF THE HIDDEN LORD

- **Interrogating Cultists** (*Dungeon of the Dead Three*). They know the history of Gargauth and know that the Vanthampurs hold the *Shield of the Hidden Lord*.
- **Missives of the Hidden Lord** (*Dungeon of the Dead Three*). Name says its all.
- **Questioning Mortlock** (*Dungeon of the Dead Three*). Mortlock knows that a powerful cult leader escaped from Elturel just before its fall and that his mother is protecting him in the basement of Vanthampur Manor. The cult leader brought two powerful artifacts with him, one of which was a shield in the likeness of a demonic face.
- **Finding the Shield**. Oh. Hey! There it is!

### KREEG'S A CULTIST

(Most of these clues are more oblique. It's fairly possible for the PCs to NOT realize that Kreeg is a cultist, instead "rescuing" him from the Vanthampurs.)

- **Amrik's Paperwork** (*Trafficking Amrik*). The genealogical records Amrik is using come from Thavius Kreeg's office in Elturel.
- **Missives of the Hidden Lord** (*Dungeon of the Dead Three*). These are signed with the initials "TK."
- **Questioning Mortlock** (*Dungeon of the Dead Three*). Mortlock knows that a powerful cult leader escaped from Elturel just before its fall and that his mother is protecting him in the basement of Vanthampur Manor.
- **Encountering Kreeg** (*Vanthampur Manor*). Uh... Hi. Nice to meet you. Whatchu doin' down here?

### ELTUREL WAS DESTROYED BY DEVILS

- [Rumors of Elturel](#)
- **Altar Prophecies/Adulation** (*Dungeon of the Dead Three*). Tales and prophecies of Elturel's fall can be found in the chapels of the Dead Three.
- **Questioning Gargauth, Kreeg, or Duke Vanthampur** (*Vanthampur Manor*). All three of these NPCs know the truth (that Elturel was taken to Hell). All three of them will lie obliquely, referring to Elturel's Fall and — if pushed to it! — that the legions of Zariel "fell upon the city" (and similar euphemisms).

## PORTYR POLITICS

The last thing I want to layer in here is the wider impact of current events in Baldur's Gate: In addition to the refugee crisis itself, the emerging ducal politics of how the power vacuum left by Grand Duke Ravengard's apparent death is going to shake out is not only really interesting, it's also immediately relevant to Duke Vanthampur's schemes.

As the campaign begins, you have the position of Grand Duke, an empty ducal seat, AND Marshal of the Flaming Fists all up for grabs. These might go to the same person OR three different people. Then, over in [the Adventurers' League scenarios](#), Duke Portyr is assassinated just AFTER putting his niece in a position where she might be able to become Marshal of the Flaming Fists.

Can she consolidate that position? Or does the whole Portyr power base fall apart?

How can we bring this into the campaign? How can we give the PCs (and players) a window into what's happening?

Our mechanism is going to be Zodge. We have five potential interactions with Zodge (when he hires them and then once after each of the four nodes in the Vanthampur Investigations as the PCs check in with him), and we're going to use them like this:

**FIRST INTERACTION.** Zodge hires them.

**SECOND INTERACTION.** Blaze Portyr has arrived in Baldur's Gate. It's probably most dramatic for her to sweep into Zodge's office while the PCs are in the middle of briefing him, but maybe she's already *in situ* discussing strategy with him when the PCs show up.

See the "Topics of Conversation" in [Part 2B](#) and figure out how many of the rumors about rival claimants to the position of Marshal are true. (Could be all of them, could be none of them, or anything inbetween.) Portyr's current agenda is securing the allegiance of Flames (like Zodge) in her own bid for Marshal.

It's important to establish that Blaze Portyr is the niece of Duke Portyr in this scene. You can do that by having Zodge say something like, "I'm assuming your uncle is supporting you? Duke Dillard's political backing will make the difference in the Upper City." (But whatever works.)

*Tip: Either way, Zodge won't have had time to brief Portyr on the PCs' investigation. When Portyr wants to know what's going on, have her ask the PCs instead of Zodge. Let your players brief her in: Not only does it make them the active protagonists of the interaction; it will also be a great way to organically make them remind themselves of what they know and what their goals are.*

*If you want the players to like her, have her enthusiastically endorse Zodge's initiative in seeking justice for the refugees.*

**THIRD INTERACTION:** This interaction is optional, or it might happen after the Fourth Interaction, depending on the sequence in which the PCs go to the various nodes and whether or not they check in after each node. Portyr and Zodge are still plotting together.

- She's declared herself Marshal.
- Flame Zodge has been promoted to Blaze.
- One of the rivals established in the Second Interaction has been eliminated. (For example, Blaze Beldroth has been arrested. Or Blaze Mukar of Wyrms' Rock has sworn allegiance to Portyr. Or she's gained the Eltan family's support by having her uncle buy back their shares in the Flaming Fist for them.) Even if you're going with the "lots of rivals" options, only have one of them get resolved here. (It's a project in progress, not the whole enchilada.)



**FOURTH INTERACTION:** At the end of *Part 3F: Dungeon of the Dead Three*, we'll discover that Duke Vanthampur has ordered the Dead Three cultists to assassinate Duke Portyr. The PCs rush to the political rally where Duke Portyr is being targeted, but they're almost certainly too late.

When Marshal Portyr learns that Duke Vanthampur is responsible for her uncle's death, she asks the PCs to wipe out the Vanthampur family. For political reasons, they'll be disavowed. But if they succeed, she'll offer them either promotions within the Flaming Fist or a big cash reward (whatever appeals to them more).

*Note: It's a relatively minor thing, but in the adventure as published it's a little odd that the PCs are assumed to murder one of the Four Dukes and the response of the Flaming Fist is a collective shrug. Here we've contextualized the action within the general political crisis in the city (all of it flowing directly out of Elturel's disappearance and the loss of the Grand Duke) and also given the PCs' a clear agenda heading into Vanthampur Manor.*

**FIFTH INTERACTION:** After the PCs assassinate Duke Vanthampur, Marshal Portyr will suggest/encourage/support them getting out of Baldur's Gate for awhile until the political complications arising from Vanthampur's death are settled. (More details on this in *Part 4: Candlekeep*.)

*Note: When the PCs get back from Hell and bring a probably totally still alive Grand Duke Ravengard back to Baldur's Gate only to discover that he's been "replaced"... Well, that's when politics are going to get REALLY interesting.*

## ALTERNATIVE HOOK

In [Part 2B](#), I mentioned the possibility of the PCs figuring out an end-run around Flame Zodge and using the murder of one of their refugees to pull them into *Part 3D: Investigating the Murders* as an alternative hook to the campaign.

If you use this alternative hook, does it mean you miss out on the Portyr Politics?

Not necessarily.

First, if the PCs have avoided Zodge entirely, he might get wind of their investigation after the first or second node they've explored. He might approach them directly or through Tarina (who is most likely to have identified the PCs) to figure out what they're up to (and potentially bring them onboard in an official capacity).

Second, if the PCs turned down Zodge's offer, they're still likely to run into Marshal Portyr after her uncle has been assassinated. She'll want to know what their investigation has uncovered so far, and you should be able to weave in a few details of her current schemes to secure control of the Flaming Fists into the resulting scene.

Failing all that, these events will still provide some great [background events](#) for bringing Baldur's Gate to life.

# PART 3D: INVESTIGATING THE MURDERS

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by Justin Alexander – April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020



Whether the PCs learn of the refugee murders from Flame Zodge or through the alternate hook of the refugees themselves, don't be surprised if they decide to investigate the murders for themselves. If they've been recruited by Zodge, this might happen before they go to the Elfsong Tavern to meet with Tarina. The PCs might also detour to investigate after meeting Tarina but before going to the *Poisoned Poseidon*. Or they might backtrack and start investigating the bodies after (or during) any of the early Vanthampur nodes (although the rewards for doing so will rapidly taper off).

## THE VICTIMS

There have been six victims:

- Edmao Eduarda
- Wemba Oshrat
- Madhuri Akhila
- Leiv Diomidis
- Aneta Diomidis
- Annika Silverleaf

Each body was found in Insight Park. All of them were then taken to Candulhallow's mortuary to be prepared for burial. More details on each victim can be found below in "Canvassing Victims."

### ADDITIONAL VICTIMS

It's overwhelmingly likely that the PCs will shut down the murder operation out of the *Poisoned Poseidon* within twenty-four hours of taking the case. If for some reason that doesn't happen, additional victims will turn up (probably one per day):

- Shohreh Letitia
- Iolanthe Oshrat (sister of Wemba Oshrat, the second victim)
- Valeria Nuska

- Weronika Nuska (sisters)

These victims are most likely to appear if the PCs have somehow gotten lost or confused in their investigation. So use them to aggressively push increasingly obvious clues to the *Poisoned Poseidon* and Amrik.

Note that, as the scenario begins, Shohreh has already been killed and her body is in the *Poisoned Poseidon*. Valeria and Weronika are both taken at the same time, but Weronika might still be rescued from the *Poisoned Poseidon* after Valeria's body turns up.

If it becomes clear that corpses cannot be safely dumped in Insight Park, the cultists will start dropping them in random locations around the city.

## INSIGHT PARK



Insight Park is described on p. 189 of *Descent Into Avernus*. It takes up a fairly large plot of steep, gullied land that backs up directly onto the wall in the southeast corner of Baldur's Gate, south of Cliffgate. Forty years ago it had been an illegal junkyard, but a druid named Torimesh used magic to cause the rusting piles of refuse to become overgrown by a verdant forest overnight.

At the center of the park is the Drawing Tree, which Torimesh can use to produce prophetic images (see the write-up in the book for details).

*Note: The published version of the park is significantly smaller than what I'm describing here. But the map doesn't really match the description in the book, either.*

**TIMELINE:** See "Candulhallow's Mortuarium," below, for a description of the corpses (which, for example, Torimesh would know).

- **10 Days Ago:** The first victim, Edmao Eduarda, is found by Torimesh at the foot of the Drawing Tree.
- **8 Days Ago:** Wemba Oshrat's body is found in a clearing up near the wall by a halfling named Marvias Fleecefoot who was out for a morning walk.
- **5 Days Ago:** The bodies of Madhuri Akhila and Leiv Diomidis are found Torimesh. They'd been dumped in separate gullies. (Madhuri Akhila was actually dumped the day before, she just wasn't found until today.)
- **3 Days Ago:** A fisherman named Zendreya Vereni who was tying up her boat on the piers near where the park meets the Dock Road spotted the body of Aneta Diomidis (Leiv's sister) just inside the park boundary.
- **1 Day Ago:** Annika Silverleaf's body was found, once again in front of the Drawing Tree.

You may need to adjust this timeline somewhat depending on how quickly the PCs reach Baldur's Gate / how long it takes them to get involved. The important detail is that the murders CANNOT start before Elturel's Fall.

In fact you *should* adjust this timeline so that the first murder literally happens on the same day as Elturel's disappearance. (The cultists knew it was coming.) Savvy players will likely pick up on the "coincidence."

**TORIMESH THE DRUID:** Torimesh the druid is an elderly man now. He is both furious and heartsick about the bodies being dumped in the park. He'll rage about the fact that the Flaming Fist has done nothing ("Nothing!") to put a stop to it.

Torimesh can tell them:

- The timeline and identities of the victims found.
- He's never seen any of the victims in the park before.
- The bodies were marked with ritualistic carvings he knows to be associated with the Dead Three.
- The corpses were collected by the corpse carts of Candulhallow's Mortuarium.

He can also act as a guide, taking them to each of the sites where bodies were found.

**DRAWING TREE:** If the PCs don't alienate Torimesh, he'll offer to reveal a prophetic image from the Drawing Tree (see *Descent Into Avernus*, p. 190). Or, if you want it to feel more portentous, the bark of tree might simply start cracking and peeling back when they draw near.

The resulting image depicts:

- A large sword being held aloft by an angelic figure with feathered wings.
- The arms of the angelic figure are bound with chains.
- Below the figure is a large tablet or slab of some kind that is cracking into two pieces while being consumed by flames.

*Note: You could swap this image out for something that would provide a more immediate clue to the murders. (And perhaps if the PCs bring one of the victims' family members back here and ask Torimesh to do a divination for them, that could happen.) But we've got a pretty solid revelation list and it will be more interesting to present a prophecy that evocatively indicates the end of the campaign. See [Foreshadowing in RPGs](#).*

**SEARCHING THE PARK:** There are two clues to be found in Insight Park. You can predetermine which murder scenes they're located at, put them at the first location (or first two locations) the PCs search, etc. Whatever works. The refugee papers should not belong to Annika Silverleaf or Wemba Oshrat, as their papers can be found at Candulhallow's Mortuarium.

If you're predetermining their placement, I recommend NOT putting either clue at the Drawing Tree. You can then put the refugee papers at another location and the tanner's fluid at two different murder scenes. That gives you a cool interaction with the prophecy at the Drawing Tree, clues at three of the other four locations, and then a fourth location with nothing to be found (giving you a pretty good variety of experience).

**CLUE 1 - TANNER'S FLUID:** On the ground at or near a murder scene, a PC making a DC 12 Intelligence (Investigation) check can find a strange alchemical substance on the ground (or rubbed up against a tree or whatever).

#### **Intelligence (Arcana) / Wisdom (Medicine)**

- DC 12: It's an alkaline solution of wood ash and lime.
- DC 15: This alchemical is often used in tanneries to rotten and loosen the hair of hides.

They can similarly identify the substance and its likely origin by following up with any likely authority in the city. The nearest tannery to Insight Park is the *Poisoned Poseidon*.

**CLUE 2 - REFUGEE PAPERS:** These can be found blown into a bush or thicket near where one of the bodies was found. The papers appear to authorize the refugee to enter and reside in Baldur's Gate. A DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) test, however, reveals the papers to be forgeries. The forgery can also be detected if the PCs look to verify the origin of the papers (for example, by cross-referencing the refugee lists in the High Hall; or tracking down the official *tabularius* whose authorizing seal supposedly appears on the papers).

A DC 12 Charisma (Investigation) check can be used to ask questions around town about the forged papers. On a success, the PCs are directed to Amrik Vanthampur at the Low Lantern tavern (see *Part 3H: Trafficking Amrik*).

**STAKING OUT THE PARK:** If the PCs decide to stake out the park, they'll like spot two Fists of Bane (DIA, p. 232; passive Perception DC 10 to spot them) dumping Shohreh Letitia's body. They can be either questioned or followed back to the *Poisoned Poseidon*. (Shohreh could also easily have her refugee papers or a tanner's fluid stain on her clothing to provide additional or reinforcing clues.)

## CANDULHALLOW'S MORTUARIUM

All of the bodies were picked up by corpse carts from Candulhallow's Mortuary (see *Descent Into Avernus*, p. 187) and taken back to their morgue. As part of an ongoing investigation, *gentle repose* spells have been used to preserve the corpses in the Candulhallow morgue. The PCs can discover this by asking Zodge, Torimesh, the victims' families (who have been notified where their kin are being kept), or just by making general inquiries about where bodies are typically taken. (In the latter case, the PCs might end up checking Harborside Hospital (p. 189) or the Shrine of Suffering (p. 192).

*Option: You could also have the bodies split up among the three different locations, with perhaps the oldest bodies already interred in the Cliffside Cemetery. Any bodies taken to the Shrine of Suffering would have likely been at least partially devoured by the rats in the crypts already.*

**RITUAL CARVINGS:** All of the bodies have been sliced into with a sharp knife or razor. These grisly ritual carvings are primarily in lokharic characters (the alphabet used for the Draconic and various arcane languages), but there are also other pentagrammic sigils and glyph circles suggestive of some terrible, bloody rite. In addition, each victim has a brand at the base of their spine depicting three symbols in a roughly triangular pattern (see graphic).

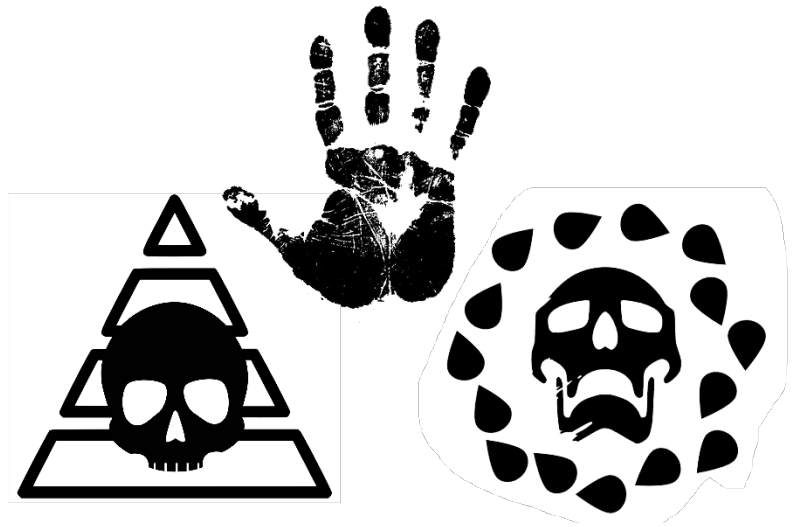
### Intelligence (Arcana/Religion)

- DC 10: The runes are choral praises to dark gods, invoking their right of dominion over all of the mortal plane. “All cities shall fall to darkness,” “that which was foretold in the Prophecies of Blood is upon us,” “the Spawn shall rise from mortal flesh,” “none shall live save those who offer their kin unto the heirs of Jergal,” and that sort of thing.
- DC 15: Although to an untrained eye the symbols would appear to belong to some arcane rite or spell, the arcane components are just nonsense. They don’t really mean anything or do anything, and seem to have been carved for effect rather than purpose.

### Intelligence (Religion)

- DC 10: The branded symbols as the holy symbols of Bane, Myrkul, and Bhaal; the three gods who raised themselves to divinity by slaying Jergal, the ancient God of Death.

**Wisdom (Medicine) - DC 12:** The brands were inflicted post mortem.



**TANNER’S FLUID:** An DC 12 Intelligence (Investigation) check finds a strange alchemical substance staining the clothes of one of the victims.

### Intelligence (Arcana) / Wisdom (Medicine)

- DC 12: It’s an alkaline solution of wood ash and lime.
- DC 15: This alchemical is often used in tanneries to rotten and loosen the hair of hides.

They can similarly identify the substance and its likely origin by following up with any likely authority in the city. The nearest tannery to Insight Park is the *Poisoned Poseidon*.

**REFUGEE PAPERS:** Annika Silverleaf and Wemba Oshrat’s personal effects include their refugee papers, authorizing them to enter and reside in Baldur’s Gate. A DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) test, however, reveals the papers to be forgeries. The forgery can also be detected if the PCs look to verify the origin of the papers (for example, by cross-referencing the refugee lists in the High Hall; or tracking down the official *tabularius* whose authorizing seal supposedly appears on the papers).

A DC 12 Charisma (Investigation) check can be used to ask questions around town about the forged papers. On a success, the PCs are directed to Amrik Vanthampur at the Low Lantern tavern (see *Part 3H: Trafficking Amrik*).



*Option: The Baldur's Gate gazetteer in Descent Into Avernus does an exceptional job of seeding the locations in the city with cool scenario concepts that a DM can quickly expand on. Candulhallow's is no exception, with the Candulhallows engaged in a variety of necromantic scams, including corpse theft. PCs coming around to ask after specific corpses (that Leylenna Candulhallow may have used to replace more high profile corpses that she's claimed for her experiments) is an excellent opportunity to accidentally reveal the corruption, and it would be relatively easy to spin this off as a small side quest (albeit with some small risk of becoming a red herring that completely derails the PCs from the main investigation).*

## CANVASSING VICTIMS

If the PCs backtrack the victims they'll be able to find friends and/or family who can provide them with background information on the victims. You can prep this material ahead of time, but with the brief biographical sketches and key information summarized below it should be fairly easy to simply improvise the interactions.

Things to think about during these improvisations:

- If they're refugees, think about the stories that might be told about how they got from Elturel to Baldur's Gate.
- What's a notable experience they had as refugees after reaching Baldur's Gate?
- How were they kidnapped by the Dead Three cultists? Were there witnesses or evidence left behind that could be used to describe the kidnapping? (Actual witnesses should be rare, but could confirm that there were definitely Dead Three cultists involved.)

In addition, there are three key clues that the PCs can acquire here:

- **Forged refugee papers** pointing back at Amrik. A DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) test, however, reveals the papers to be forgeries. The forgery can also be detected if the PCs look to verify the origin of the papers (for example, by cross-referencing the refugee lists in the High Hall; or tracking down the official *tabularius* whose authorizing seal supposedly appears on the papers).
- **Verbal reports** that the victims were smuggled into the city by Amrik.
- A variety of clues indicating that all of the victims were either Elturgadian knights or related to them.

Each victim's description includes a brief summary of the pertinent clues.

**EDMAO EDUARDA:** The first victim. Taken from his home ten days ago. Unlike the later victims, Eduardo was a native of Baldur's Gate. He's survived by elven wife Neske and his half-elven son Luus.

- Hanging on the wall above Eduarda's fireplace is the mantle of a Hellrider. It belonged to Norbaer Eduardo, Edmao's father, who retired to Baldur's Gate after he married (and before Edmao was born).

**WEMBA OSHRAT:** Wemba's sister, Iolanthe, was an apprentice to a wizard name Bèr Nölmien in Elturel. When the crisis began, Bèr used a *teleportation circle* to evacuate Iolanthe, Wemba, and about a dozen other refugees directly to Baldur's Gate. Wemba vanished just one day after arriving in Baldur's Gate and his body was found the next day.

- Iolanthe and Wemba were among the first refugees who got their papers from Amrik. (The gates hadn't been closed yet, but they still needed proper documentation and Amrik offered to get it

for them at a fraction of the price using his “connections at High Hall.”) Iolanthe still has hers; Wemba’s are with his personal effects at Candulhallow’s.

- Iolanthe can also describe the final minutes before Elturel’s Fall. Her master Bèr would have realized that the entire city was being influenced by some incredibly powerful magical field. Notably, they were expecting more people (including Bèr) to follow them. A second *circle* opened, but then abruptly winked out of existence (Elturel had just been sent to Hell, disrupting the spell). A successful DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) check might indicate that the spell winking out like that would be consistent with a *counterspell*, an *antimagic field* suddenly coming into effect, or one end of the portal being shifted outside the range of the spell.
- Iolanthe and Wemba’s mother is a knight of the Order of the Companion.

**MADHURI AKHILA:** Madhuri arrived in Baldur’s Gate in the first wave of refugees, catching a ride on a boat heading downstream. He has no other family in the city, but had been bunking with Sjang and Albaer, two other refugees who came in on the same boat. They found the door broken down and Madhuri missing seven days ago.

- Like Iolanthe and Wemba Oshrat, they were among the first refugees to get their papers from Amrik. (The gates weren’t closed yet, but they still needed proper documentation.)
- Madhuri’s paperwork was left behind in the room he shared with Sjang and Albaer. It would turn up if the PCs look through his meager personal belongings. (Sjang and Albaer also have their papers.)
- Madhuri’s father was a Hellrider. (Sjang and Albaer might mention this if asked about next of kin; or just spontaneously lament that they don’t even know how to contact him... assuming he’s still alive. Madhuri had mentioned his father on the boat ride down from Elturel.)

**LEIV & ANETA DIOMIDIS:** Leiv and Aneta were siblings; they were also both Hellriders. Supposedly there has been a Diomidis in the Hellriders since the legendary Charge of the Hellriders. Like the PCs, they led a caravan of refugees down the river to Baldur’s Gate only to find the gates closed. They disappeared six days ago.

- Many of the refugees they helped will report that Leiv and Aneta had helped them get their papers from Amrik Vanthampur, getting all of them into the city despite the gates being closed.

**ANNIKA SILVERLEAF:** Annika Silverleaf was a half-elf knight of the Order of the Companion. She’d been organizing fundraising in the city for relief supplies to be delivered to the camps outside. When she disappeared two days ago, she’d been negotiating with the Captain’s Guild to ship refugees south to Amn or north to Waterdeep as a humanitarian effort.

- She’d also been working closely with Amrik Vanthampur, connecting refugees in the camps to his services. (It’s uncertain if she *knew* his papers were forgeries, but it probably wouldn’t have mattered if she did.)
- Her own papers are with her personal effects at Candulhallow’s.
- Annika was one of the founding members of the Order of the Companion. She joined High Watcher Naja Bellandi’s resistance on the Night of the Red Coup, her elven father having been turned into a vampire by High Rider Ikaia (see [Part 4B](#)).

# PART 3E: THE POISONED POSEIDON

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[by Justin Alexander – April 18th, 2020](#)



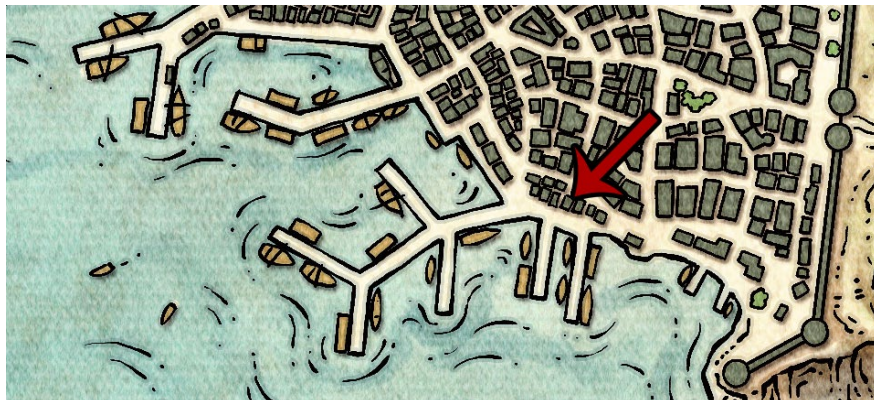
Forty years ago, the *Poisoned Poseidon* was a pirate ship that tormented the Sword Coast. Its captain was the warlock Kelton Hunter, who used his ill-gotten gains to fund his infernal spellcraft. In 1457 DR, the pirate warlock sailed the *Poseidon* at the head of a pirate fleet into the harbor of Baldur's Gate itself. In a duel with local adventurers, powerful spells caused the massive ship to be washed ashore, leaving it high and dry nearly a hundred feet from shore in the Brampton neighborhood. Kelton himself is said to have vanished, although locals still tell the story of how devils dragged him through a portal to Hell itself.

No one wanted to pay to have the hulk removed, and so for several years it lay abandoned, slowly sinking into the muck while serving as a breeding ground for rats and a lair for various ne'er-do-wells. When the old retaining walls of the dock (damaged during the Spellplague) were finally repaired in the 1470s, however, the ground around the *Poseidon* stabilized and new construction sprang up around it. The ship itself was converted into a tannery.

In 1492 DR, Dead Three cultists quietly took over the tannery. Other employees were cycled out and cultists were brought in. The *Poseidon* still operates as a profitable tannery, but serves a front for cult activities.

## LOCATION OF THE POSEIDON

The *Poisoned Poseidon* is located here:



I'd originally looked at placing it on the far western edge of Brampton, but realized this would basically put it directly across the street from the Low Lantern (see *Part 3H: Trafficking Amrik*). Nonetheless, we can see how the investigation is going to send the PCs tramping about in the Brampton neighborhood, so it'll probably be a good idea to review the details on the neighborhood and see what else is in the area before running this session.

Of course, since I'm creating the *Poisoned Poseidon* out of whole cloth, it doesn't actually appear on the map. But I did pick a section of the map that fit my general image for the tangled warren of buildings I imagined lying around the ship. (Take a peek at [Random GM Tip: Visualizing City Block Maps](#).)

With a little bit of photoshopping, though, I was able to add the ship to Baldur's Gate (and threw in Insight Park, too):

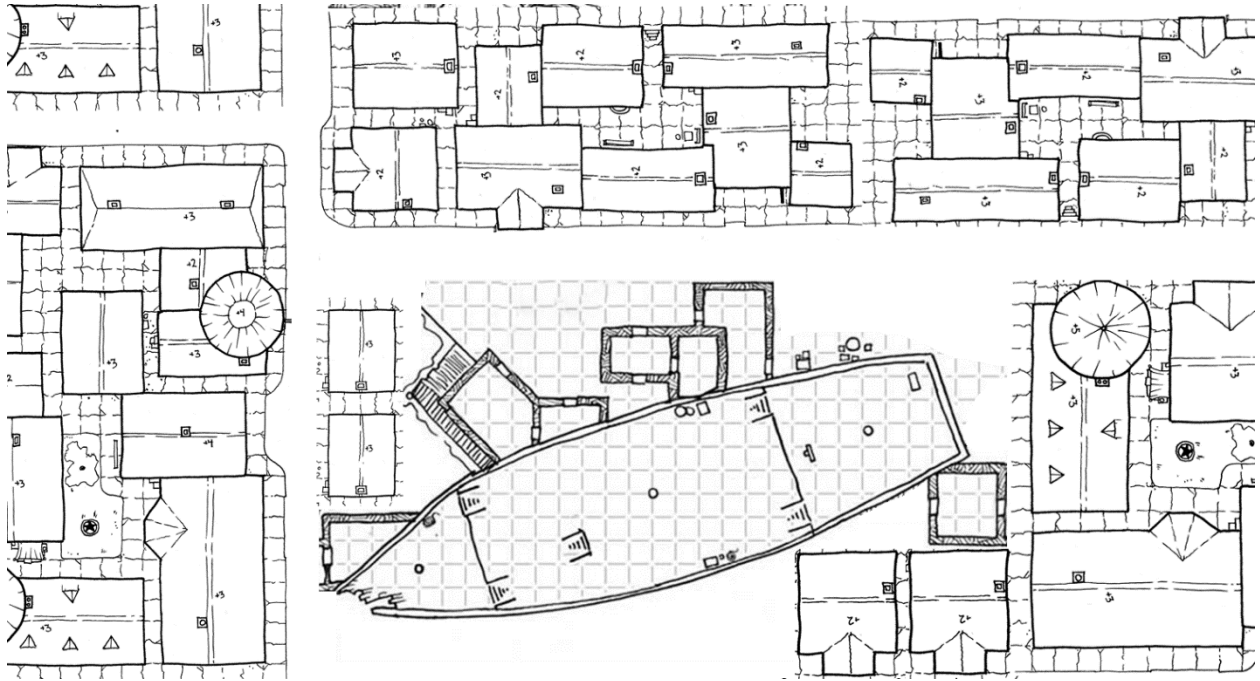


You can buy the high-resolution [isometric map](#) and [top-down map](#) from Mike Schley's web store. The image above is a relatively tiny section of the isometric view, but I've maintained the same resolution so if you buy the map you should be able to add it seamlessly using any image manipulation program.

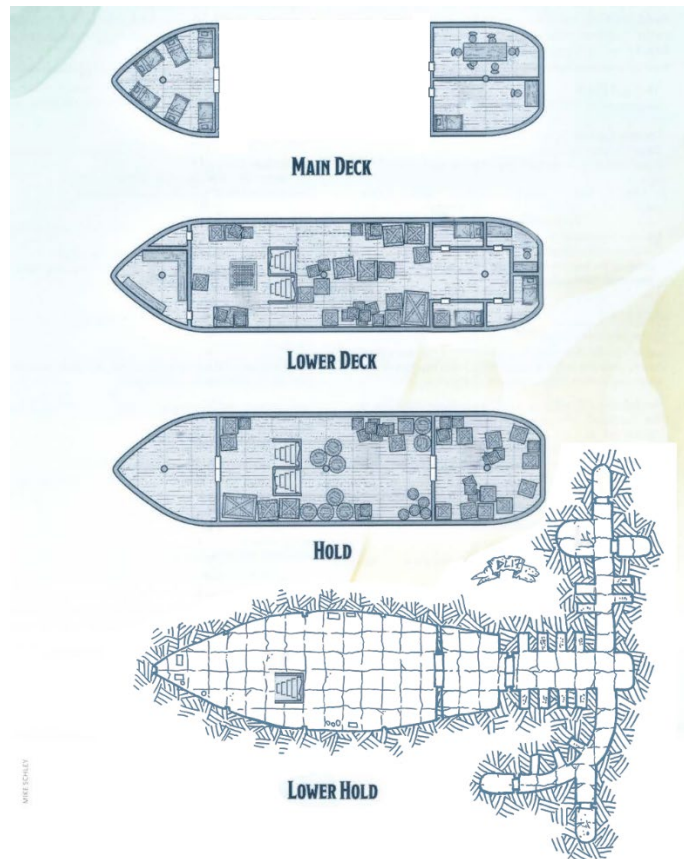
**REFUGEES ON THE DOCKS:** One of the reasons for using the *Poisoned Poseidon* and placing it on the Docks, is to provide an opportunity to the Elturian refugee crisis from a different angle. The docks just to the east are crowded with refugees trying to find passage on already overbooked ships. Where to? For most of them, it almost doesn't matter. They're hoping that the situation will be better in Amn or Waterdeep or Daggerford or Neverwinter or almost anywhere. (Many of them might believe that whatever happened to Elturel is coming for Baldur's Gate next and they just want to get as far away as possible. See [Rumors of Elturel](#).)

## MAPS OF THE POISONED POSEIDON

In creating the *Poisoned Poseidon*, I hacked together several different maps. First, to position the ship into the urban environment, I took Dyson Logos' map of Mistshore from [Dragon Heist](#) (a slice of which you can see [here](#)) and hacked it together with the [Third-Story Run](#) map from his website.



For the lower decks of the ship, I grabbed one of Mike Schley's maps from [Ghosts of Saltmarsh](#), did some quick photoshopping to make it match the neighborhood map of the ship, and then added a Lower Hold from Dyson's [Buried at Sea](#):



Dyson's map had actually been of an ersatz ship — a crypt that had been made to resemble a ship — but that didn't matter: For our purposes, the Lower Hold is the part of the ship that had sunk into the muck. As some point, this unintentional "basement" was expanded by knocking a hole in the back of the ship.

(It was this image that actually decided me on the *Poisoned Poseidon*: When considering locations that could serve as a murder sites for the Dead Three cultists, Dyson's [Wolf Tower](#) and [Vanshiro Reliquary](#) were also on the short list.)

And, of course, because we're hacking maps together here, the "set dressing" is that of an active ship rather than one which has been converted into a tannery. The scale also changes from 10' squares to 5' squares.

## KEYING THE POISONED POSEIDON

I'm going to describe the *Poisoned Poseidon* in broad strokes. If you want to write up a detailed key of each room, it should be a fairly straightforward extrapolation.

As the PCs explore the *Poisoned Poseidon*, they'll also be exploring a medieval-style tannery. My primary reference for this was Kim Rendfeld's short article "[Odd Jobs — Tanning: A Medieval Dirty Job](#)," which I recommend checking out.

**OUTBUILDINGS:** A wooden staircase on the north side of the ship leads up to the deck. A number of buildings have been directly next to the old hull. These mostly contain supplies for the tannery (chemicals, blades, stretching racks, etc.).

**MAIN DECK:** The main deck is generally kept clear, but there might be a stack of tanned hides ready for sale. A crane has been installed on the poop deck that is used to raise and lower heavy material from street level.

**MAIN DECK - CABINS:** The Master of Souls' quarters are found in the fore cabin. One of the aft cabins is a meeting room. The *Poseidon Correspondence* handout can be found here.

**LOWER DECK:** Most of the lower deck is used to store the untreated skins of slaughtered cattle that are delivered to the tannery, along with the blood, dirt, manure, hooves, and horns that come with them.

**LOWER DECK - CABINS:** The aft cabins are used as sleeping quarters for the murder squad. The smaller fore cabin has been converted into an armory. The larger fore cabin contains three small shrines, one dedicated to each of the Dead Three.

**HOLD:** The fore chamber is a work floor where skins are trimmed. The aft chamber has huge vats. Here skins are sprinkled with urine or soaked in an alkaline solution of wood ash and lime before being folded, hair-side in, and taken down to the Lower Hold.

In the main hold, skins which have been treated in the Lower Hold are brought back up and placed in stone treatment vats containing a solution made from the bark of spruce firs. They remain here for as long as a year before being ready for sale.

**LOWER HOLD - CATACOMBS:** The various niches lining the catacomb halls are stacked with urine-soaked skins (they are kept here until the rotting hair has loosened). The four iron doors lead to small cells where prisoners are held to various purpose.

**LOWER HOLD:** The lower hold is studded with wooden racks on which treated hides are spread. Special knives, which hang on the walls, are used to scrape the hair off one side and whatever flesh remains on the other. Several huge vats are then used for washing: A solution of pigeon droppings or dog shit removes the lime.

In the center of the Lower Hold is a table. Shohreh Netitia's corpse lays there. A side table contains a disturbing variety of surgical instruments and three brands (each with the holy symbol of one of the Dead Three). The *Poseidon Papers* handout can be found amidst these instruments and Shohreh Netitia's refugee papers can be found among her personal effects.

- **Refugee Papers:** A DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) test reveals the papers to be forgeries. The forgery can also be detected if the PCs look to verify the origin of the papers (for example, by cross-referencing the refugee lists in the High Hall; or tracking down the official *tabularius* whose authorizing seal supposedly appears on the papers).

## ADVERSARY ROSTER

|  |                      |                   |
|--|----------------------|-------------------|
| Iron Consul + 3 Fists of Bane          | Main Deck            |                   |
| 2 Commoners                            | Lower Deck           | (tannery workers) |
| 2 Fists of Bane + 2 Necromites         | Lower Deck - Cabins  | (resting)         |
| Reaper                                 | Hold                 |                   |
| 4 Commoners                            | Hold                 | (tannery workers) |
| Master of Souls (Remigio) <sup>1</sup> | Lower Hold           | (preparing body)  |
| 2 Fists of Bane                        | Lower Hold - Tunnels | (guarding cells)  |

<sup>1</sup> Remigio has already cast *animate dead* today, leaving him with only one 3<sup>rd</sup> level spell.

Stat blocks for Dead Three cultists can be found in *Descent Into Avernus*, p. 231-235.

See [Art of the Key: Adversary Rosters](#) for details on using an adversary roster.

**OBSERVING THE POSEIDON:** PCs who place the *Poisoned Poseidon* under observation will be able to observe the regular routine of both the tannery and the murder operation.

- Fists of Bane and Necromites from the Lower Deck cabins relieving the watch on the main deck.
- Tannery workers collecting supplies from the outbuildings.
- A shipment of raw cattle hides being delivered from the Hamhocks Slaughterhouse.
- Tanned hides being loaded onto a cart and taken to the Wide for sale.
- The reaper leaving to go the Frolicking Nymph Bathhouse (see *Part 3F: Dungeon of the Dead Three*) and then returning with written instructions. (He's likely to then meet with the Master of Souls in the Main Deck cabins.)
- A necromite and two Fists of Bane leaving with Shohneh Letitia's corpse (to be dumped in Insight Park).
- A messenger from the Frolicking Nymph Bathhouse carrying a letter indicating that they've located Iolanthe Oshrat. (The messenger then returns to the Dungeon of the Dead Three.)
- A necromite and two Fists of Bane leaving to kidnap Iolanthe Oshrat (their next victim).

**QUESTIONING CULTISTS:** Cult members can be interrogated, although they won't cooperate easily. All of them know that their instructions come from the cult leaders at the Frolicking Nymph bathhouse. Only the Master of Souls knows that they are specifically targeting Elturgardian knights.

(The tannery workers are *also* Dead Three worshippers. They know the murders are happening, but they aren't "read in," so to speak. They do know that instructions come from some other cell of the cult, specifying who the targets are.)

Some names you can use for cultists, if needed:

- Fahul (a Fist of Bane)
- Thando Ora
- Joslyn Ifa
- Zangaroa

## POSEIDON CORRESPONDENCE

Remigio –

*I'm not really surprised to hear that Fahul is complaining about living in a tannery, the fastidious little weasel. I'm pretty sure Vaaz just wanted him out of his hair when he assigned him to you. If he keeps giving you a headache, remind him what the alternative is. I doubt he'll find the noxious fumes of this sewer we've been gifted under the bathhouse any better.*

Flennis

Remigio –

*Expect more Fists from the Frolicking Nymph within the tenday. And probably a couple of Night Blades. Now that the Agent has his operation fully established, he should be able to start feeding us targets at a faster clip.*

Flennis

Master of Souls,

*I hope all things are well. I have heard complaints from one of my Fists, but I assure you that neither I nor the Emissary lend it any credence. The Emissary does suggest, however, that your minions begin dumping the bodies farther afield. He wants us to "spread the terror," and is also concerned that the park may become a security concern.*

Vaaz

## POSEIDON PAPERS

SHOHREH NETITIA

*Hazel skin. Green eyes. Dark brown hair braided in two tresses.*

*Residence: Cuiric's Boarding House*

*Relation: Great-Grandmother*

*She lives near the Frolicking Nymph. An abduction squad or observers could be sent from the bathhouse if it would be easier.*

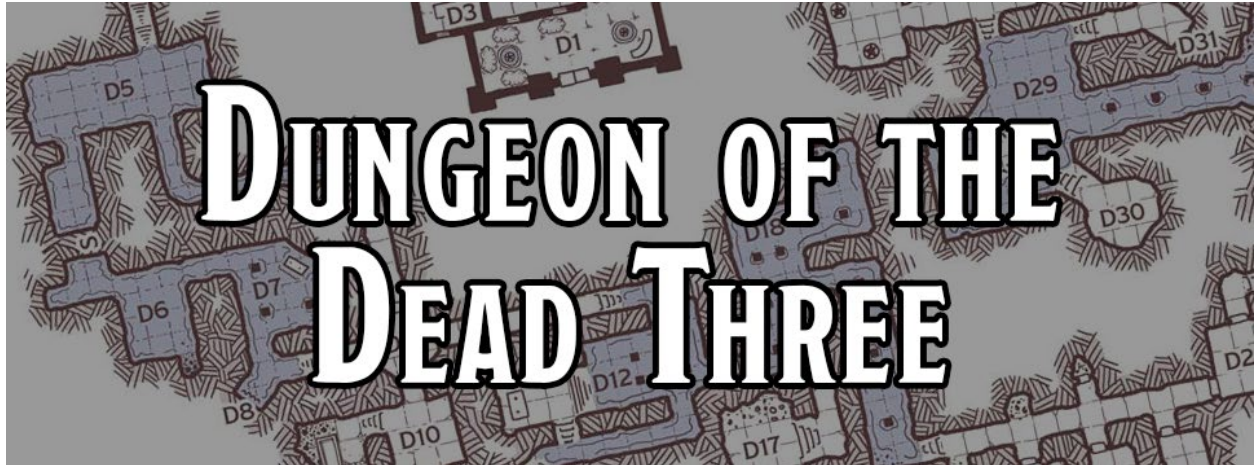
**FOLLOWING UP:** Cuiric's been dead for a hundred years, but his boarding house is run by his great-granddaughter Laila. She found the door to Shohreh's room broken down and reported it to the Flaming Fist, but there's been no follow-up. Shohreh's great-grandmother was a Hellrider, but there's no clear way of discovering that (unless, of course, the PCs get clever). The relevant clue here is that whoever is feeding names to the Dead Three cultists is interested in who they're related to (which might prompt the PCs to ask questions when backtracking the other victims, see [Part 3D: Investigating the Murders](#)).



# PART 3F: DUNGEON OF THE DEAD THREE

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by Justin Alexander – April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020



The revised background for the Dungeon of the Dead Three is covered in [Part 3B: Lore of the Vanthampur Investigations](#). Short version: Duke Vanthampur discovered an ancient temple dedicated to the Dead Three under the Heapside neighborhood. She sealed off the connections to the sewers and built the Frolicking Nymph bathhouse on top of it in order to create a secret entrance. She has most recently offered the temple to the Dead Three cultists in exchange for their assistance (which currently takes the form of murdering refugees).

## DESIGN NOTES

There are a number of elements in the Dungeon of the Dead Three that we're going to be adjusting, polishing, or enhancing. We'll start by looking at those issues in detail, then present a revised key, and round things out with an adversary roster.

### THURSTWELL'S IMP SPIES

We'll start in the very first room of the dungeon: D1, the Courtyard.

*An invisible **imp** is perched on the southeast fountain. If the characters look as though they intend to cause trouble, the imp observes them quietly until they enter the bathhouse, then flies to Vanthampur Villa in the Upper City to alert Thurstwell Vanthampur, the oldest of Duke Thalamra Vanthampur's sons. Thurstwell instructs the imp to return to its post but takes no further action, hoping that the characters dispose of his brother, Mortlock*

Thurstwell's imp spies actually turn up several times and they almost always do the same thing: They invisibly watch the PCs while taking no action. Then they fly to Thurstwell and report what they saw. And then Thurstwell doesn't do anything with that knowledge.

Ever.

My first instinct when seeing an element that's designed so that the PCs never become aware of it and which has no impact on anything the PCs will do or experience is to just delete it. (It's actually kind of amazing how many published adventures include this sort of thing.) But there are a couple of clever imp

interactions and the central idea of Thurstwell as a crippled spider stuck in his home, able to exercise his will upon the world only through his imp servitors while jealously observing his able-bodied siblings going out and about in the world, is a really great character beat.

So what we really need here is for the imp spies to become meaningful. Which primarily means that Thurstwell needs to take meaningful action in response to what the imps see. A few possibilities:

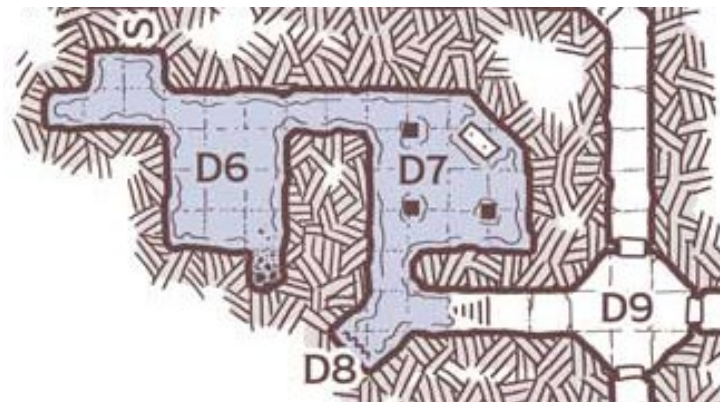
- He sends an imp to barter with the PCs. (He'd probably like them to kill one or both of his brothers. If he's feeling daring, or if the PCs have already succeeded at eliminating his brothers, he might even ask them to kill his mother so that he can take her place at the head of the family. If the PCs were to go all in on this, you could have an alternate trajectory where, the job done, he asks them to take the *infernal puzzlebox* to Candlekeep and have it opened.)
- He sends a murder squad of Dead Three Cultists (*Descent Into Avernus*, p. 28) to kill the PCs.
- He sends an abduction squad to kidnap a refugee that the PCs care about so that he can use them as leverage. (Maybe to leverage them into an alliance. Maybe to force them to back off.)

Basically, if you play Thurstwell as proactive and Machiavellian, he can either become an unexpected ally or a hated enemy (or both).

## WATER LEVELS

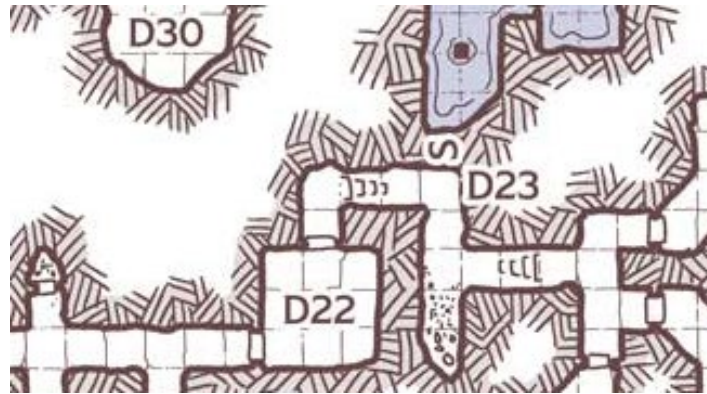
There are several text-to-map mismatches in the dungeon, but the most significant are those related to the flooding in the dungeon.

First, Area D8 is described as a "dry alcove":



In addition to the coloring, the stairs should be placed NORTH of D8, not east.

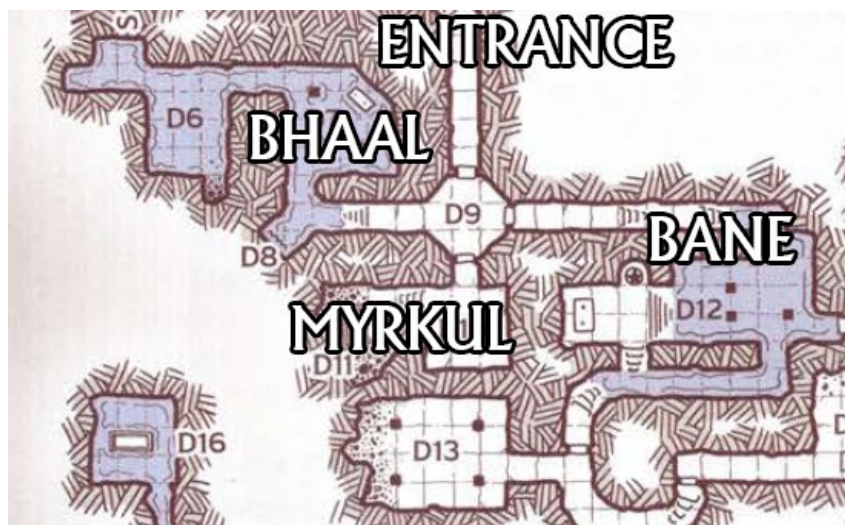
The design of the dungeon actually does a good job of having the flooded portions of the dungeon consistently lower than the rest of the dungeon. Which is why the failure to color in Area D23 (which is correctly described as flooded in the text) is also an error:



You may want to mark your copy of the map to make sure you get these details right while running the adventure.

### THE DEAD THREE DOORS

Let's take a look at Area D9. There are four passages that lead out of this area: One comes from the entrance, while the others lead to cultists/shrines belonging to one of the Dead Three Gods (Bhaal, Bane, Myrkul).



There are also three doors in Area D9:

- *East:* Bane
- *North:* Bhaal
- *South:* Myrkul

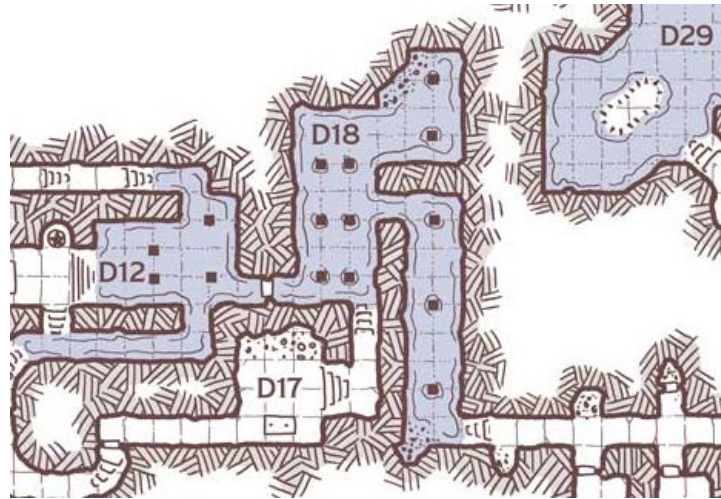
Am I crazy or should the door to the north actually be to the west so that all of the themed doors match the themed content behind them?

In practice, this would mean that the PCs are likely to come in from the entrance and be presented with three creepy doors that they have to interpret and choose and between. Not only is this a cool moment that would set the tone for the entire dungeon, it's also an opportunity for a meaningful choice. Instead, there's just a random choice stripped of meaning.

The simple solution here is to just move the door (and you'll see that in the revised key below), but we'll also be delving more deeply into the possibilities here in *Part 3G: Jaquaying the Dead Three*.

## DUNGEON GAS

Area D18 is filled with explosive gas.



The gas these properties:

- Invisible
- Lighter than air
- Smells like rotten eggs

These are the properties of modern natural gas (which is actually odorless, but since 1880 has had the smell added through the use of an odorant called mercaptan). I'm fairly certain this is not a coincidence, and the designers probably just defaulted to the explosive gas they were most familiar with.

But it's a choice worth examining. For example, D18 is actually the lowest point in the complex, so it might make more sense to go with a heavier-than-air gas that could CONCENTRATE here, rather than a lighter-than-air gas that dissipates. This would allow you to describe the faint smell elsewhere in the complex where the gas is entering the area (D13, D17, and D19 would be good choices).

This is about more than just being "logical" or having an "accurate simulation" (the layout of the dungeon is designed; you can design it however you want). It's about meaningful choice and problem-solving: If the PCs can detect the presence of gas leaks before entering Area D18, it gives them the opportunity to gather information and then *use* that information.

(The adventure kind of does this by saying that any character approaching D18 detects the smell and can make a skill check to recognize its significance. But that's just a bang-bang interaction; not an opportunity to think, analyze, and make meaningful choices.)

Similarly, D18 is a chokepoint. You have to walk through it to get from one side of the dungeon to the other. "Bringing a lit torch or other open flame into the gas-filled room triggers an explosion..." But: "Followers of the Dead Three carry torches..." Hmm.

The adventure notes that the cultists will extinguish their torches before passing through Area D18, but it's probably a stronger choice to go one step further here and give them light sources that reflect the environment: Safety lamps or *light* spells, for example. PCs, seeing this, could realize the danger of an open flame.

In addition to problem-solving, this type of thing also gives the dungeon the feeling of a complete environment rather than just a bunch of disconnected, individual rooms.

So what we're looking for is a gas with these properties:

- Invisible
- Heavier than air
- Has a distinctive smell (naturally, without the addition of odorants)

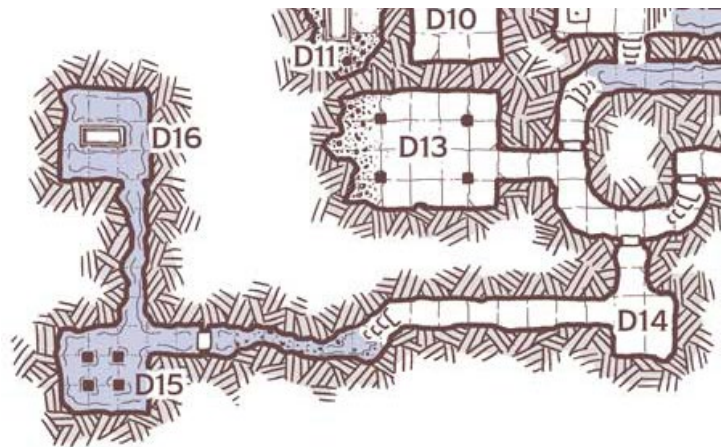
In researching safety lamps I discovered that the word *dampf*, in German, means "vapour." In England, the term became used to describe a variety of gases encountered during mining:

- **Firedamp** refers to a flammable gas, most often methane.
- **Whitedamp** refers to a smothering, toxic gas (usually carbon monoxide resulting from burning coal). This is the gas which canaries were famously used to detect.
- **Stinkdamp** is hydrogen sulfide. Poisonous, corrosive, and very flammable, with the foul odor of rotten eggs.
- **Afterdamp**, the toxic mixture of gases left in the aftermath of an explosion. Could be any mixture of the above.

So we can look at that list and identify **stinkdamp** as the gas we're looking for.

In remixing the dungeon, however, there are a few more things I'd consider.

First, the risk of an explosion in Area D15. (Looking at the map it seems logical that gas flowing down to D18 would also flow down to D15.) Whether the PCs encounter D18 or D15 first, even if they trigger one explosion they'll have an opportunity to apply that lesson and avoid the next one. (Or, if they've figured out how to avoid the explosions, they potentially get twice the pay-off for it.)



Second, there should be some clear indications that the cultists are trying to *fix* the gas leak problem. (And probably the sewage flooding the place, too. Yuck. They're not [Moander](#) worshippers.)

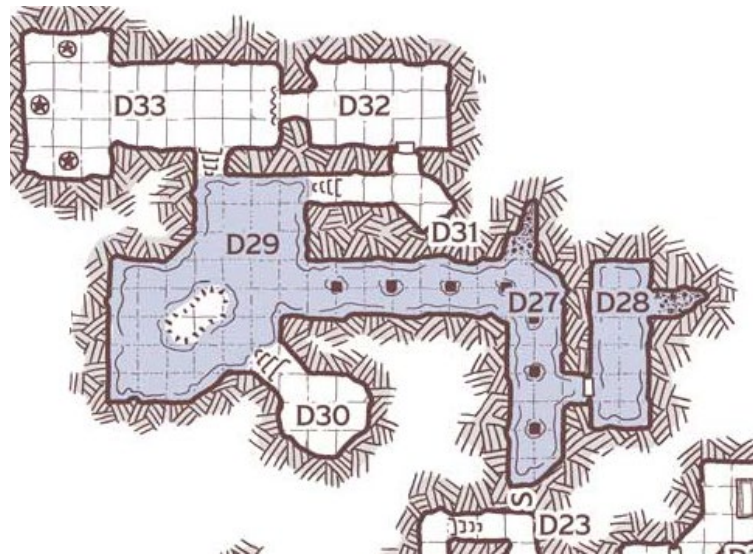
Third, I think it would be cool if the cultists were USING the gas for something. Experiments in the Morgue (D13) seem cool. So rather than using stinkdamp, we're going to use **corpsedamp**. Usually extracted by necromancers from rotting corpses, corpsedamp can be useful to their work in a number of different ways. I've previously written about corpsedamp [here](#), including stats for **corpsedamp zombies**. So we'll also swap out some of the skeletons and replace them with these experimental undead.

## ELUSIVE MORTLOCK

We'll talk about this in more detail in Part 3F, but looking at the dungeon on a macro-level it's relatively easy to see that it's fairly linear: There are a couple of side branches and a couple of loops, but the design

strongly funnels you through the full dungeon to Area D29, where the essential encounter with Mortlock that links you to the next scenario is located.

We talk about some of the other problems with this encounter in [Part 3](#) of the Remix, but the thing to note here, once you identify D29 as the essential Must Have Encounter™ for the adventure to continue, is that the only way to get to Area D29 is through the secret door in Area D23:



I was initially going to describe this as a weird choice, but I think we can realistically describe it as simply being a bad choice. This is something [I've talked about before](#), but you've created a chokepoint here which makes your scenario very fragile: If the PCs don't find/go through that secret door, you literally have to toss out the next 232 pages of the book. So a secret door is a bad choice.

But they've also sort of tripled down on this bad choice:

- The secret door is in a weird location: Just sitting in the middle of a hallway. That actually makes it far more likely that the PCs will simply never think to look for a door there.
- They've put a cultist guard here who, upon spotting the PCs, runs off to a different area. This will have the effect of making the PCs chase him, making it even more likely that they won't take the time to search this random chunk of hallway.
- They go to oddly great lengths at several points in this dungeon to specifically prevent the PCs from learning about this secret door. (Which, again, is *absolutely necessary* for the entire campaign to happen.) For example, in Area D14 there is a rat. They actually take the time to specifically tell the DM that if the PCs use *Speak with Animals*, this rat DEFINITELY won't tell them about the secret door.

I'm not a big fan of this kind of needless stonewalling in any case, but here it's basically perverse.

Now, the work we've done revising the revelation lists for the Vanthampur Investigations (see [Part 3C](#)) has greatly reduced the fragility of Act I of *Descent Into Avernus* overall, and this is no longer a Must Have Encounter™. However, it's still structurally ideal for the PCs to confront Mortlock here: You don't need to force it to happen, but it also doesn't make a lot of sense to go out of your way to prevent it from happening.

One way we could remove the fragility of this secret door would be to use the same solution we've applied everywhere else: The Three Clue Rule. Simply add three clues pointing to the existence of the secret door, giving the players a robust opportunity to have the revelation that it exists and then track it down.

Another solution might be making it explicit that (a) Mortlock Vanthampur is in the dungeon and (b) you need to confront/kill him. That way if the PCs have seemingly cleared the entire dungeon but HAVEN'T found Mortlock yet, they'll know that there must be a secret door and they can scour the place until they find it.

But in this case the solution is considerably simpler:

Get rid of the secret door.

There's absolutely no reason for this door to be a secret door, so just make it a regular door.

## CRAMPED CORRIDORS

This is actually not a complaint which I have about the scenario, but one which I've seen expressed by a number of GMs (including several who have contacted me directly about it): The Dungeon of the Dead Three is filled with 5-foot-wide corridors and relatively small rooms, and this results in unsatisfactory combat encounters.

I haven't actually run the scenario (so take this with a grain of salt), but I've run enough similar dungeon compounds over the years that my initial reaction to this complaint is strong skepticism. The claustrophobic conditions of a dungeon like this present unique strategic challenges, but it behooves the players to turn those strategic challenges to their advantage (rather than vice versa).

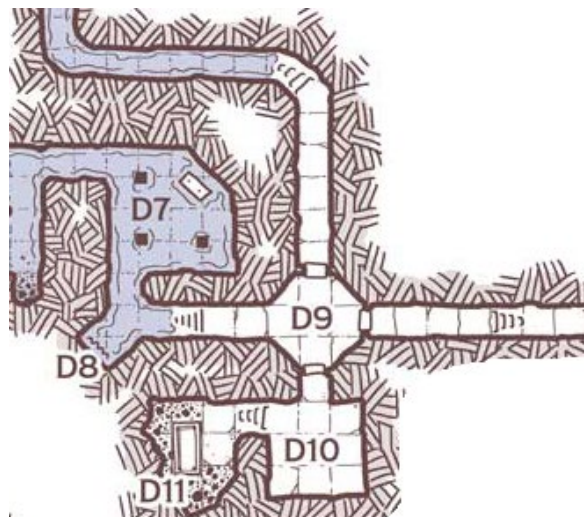
With that being said, to make a dungeon like the Dungeon of the Dead Three really come alive, you need to break the preconception (that's been subconsciously ground into you by dozens, hundreds, or thousands of encounters from published scenarios) that fights "belong" to a particular keyed room.

For example, if you look at the necromite fight keyed to Area D10:



... that looks like a really boring fight. A 15' square? With three of those squares being occupied by NPCs?

But what you need to do is recognize that THIS is the real encounter area for the fight:



It's particularly important to understand this if you're using a battlemat! It's very easy to hamstring an interesting encounter by artificially limiting what you actually draw or present as the battlemat for it.

(I talk about these issues more in [Running the Campaign: Dungeon as Theater of Operations](#) if you're interested.)

With all that being said, if this is an issue that concerns you, it looks to me like you can just interpret the map as being drawn at a 10 foot scale instead of a 5 foot scale. Nothing seems to go particularly wonky in doing so.

## CULTISTS DOING WEIRD SHIT

Is it weird that one of the cultists has decided to stand guard in D23 "standing in the water" when he could go up the nearby stairs and not have his feet rot off? Yes.

But the cultists down here are doing all kinds of nonsensical shit that I don't really understand, so maybe it's just a gimmick that I don't understand. For example, two days ago they killed a guy and just left his corpse floating in the water for no apparent reason. Or there's the room where three cultists are lying on the floor "pretending to be dead" ... just for fun? On the off-chance somebody chooses this precise moment to stop by?

I don't get it. Maybe you do. But if you don't, it's something you might want to think about before running the dungeon.

## DEAD THREE LEADERS

One subtle thing that I almost forgot to talk about because I actually did it subconsciously: Although the local leaders of the Dead Three cults do appear to be named in *Descent Into Avernus* (Yignath, Flennis, and Vaaz), only one of them is explicitly identified as such. The Remix not only calls particular attention to their identity for the benefit of the DM, it also gives some methods for the PCs to learn their identities.

Identifying the leaders isn't strictly essential, so I didn't bother doing a full Three Clue Rule work up for it, but you'll note that I've dropped their names into various pieces of correspondence and you should also make a point of having cultists blabber them out when questioned.

Giving the players an opportunity to figure out the bad guys' hierarchy here will give them a target list to aim for. This not only gives them the satisfaction of figuring something out, it also gives the Dungeon of the Dead Three a structure in play that's just slightly more meaningful than "[clear the dungeon](#)" (even if, in actual practice, they still end up clearing every room).

## TIAMAT TREASURE

There's this weird little, somewhat abortive subplot here where the Vanthampurs have somehow stolen treasure from the hoard of Tiamat in Avernus. Some of the treasure is here in the Dungeon of the Dead Three and some of it is in Vanthampur Manor. As the PCs leave the dungeon, they encounter Tiamat cultists who have come to retrieve the treasure.

The original intention appears to have been for this stolen treasure to be a significant plot point (*Descent Into Avernus*, p. 6): "By returning her stolen treasure, characters can convince Tiamat to break Elturel's chains." But it appears to have been dropped at some point during development (although mentioned in this opening summary, the treasure doesn't actually factor into any negotiations the PCs have with Tiamat later in the scenario), leaving only some weird vestigial bits.

**OPTION #1:** My initial inclination was to basically finish expurgating the material from the adventure by removing the encounter with the Tiamat cultists and basically not caring about where the cultists' treasury came from. It feels like very little (if anything) is lost if you do this, and you can easily just excise the encounter if you'd like.



**ESTABLISHING LORE:** However, I did see an opportunity to use the Tiamat relic in the treasury to establish the key piece of lore that Tiamat is imprisoned in Avernus (since she will factor into the Avernus section of the campaign).

**WHERE DID THE TREASURE COME FROM?** The explanation (and significance) of how and why the treasure was stolen from Tiamat's hoard appears to have been lost at some point during the campaign's revision. Rebuilding all of that from scratch is probably more complication than I'm interested in dealing with, and if you're going with Option #1 it's largely irrelevant.

However, some of the additional material added to the Remix established that the Dead Three cult leader Yignath is easily distracted and may be pursuing projects other than the refugee murders. I decided this would include a burglary at Hhune Manor, in which he stole this treasure and also kidnapped Satiir Thione-Hhune. Mortlock allowed Yignath to keep the money, but has sent Satiir to Vanthampur Manor to be used as political leverage.

(Because the Shield of the Hidden Lord is no longer stolen from the Hhunes in the Remix, this also explains Satiir's presence in Vanthampur Manor.)

**OPTION #2:** Having done all this, I realized that the Tiamat cultists had suddenly become both relevant and interesting again. In this option, the Hhune treasures included a number of Tiamat-related artifacts, including two pieces — a mask and a crown (see relevant lore below) — that were deeply desired by Arkhan the Cruel. Wards of the Hhune vaults had long hidden them from Arkhan's sight, but once they were removed from the vault they became vulnerable and the cultists were sent to retrieve them.

- The cultists' interest in the artifacts will direct or redirect the PCs attention to them, allowing us to emphasize the key piece of lore.
- If the PCs are aware that the mask has been removed from the cache and taken to Vanthampur Manor, they may be able to convince the Tiamat cultists to assist them in raiding the manor.
- Alternatively, the Tiamat cultists might figure out where the mask is independently and complicate the PCs' raid by executing their own raid at the same time.
- If the PCs assist the cultists in retrieving the artifacts, they are thanked "on behalf of Arkhan the Cruel." If they encounter Arkhan when they travel to Avernus, he will be more inclined to aid them.

**RELEVANT TIAMAT LORE:** The full history of Tiamat is a twisted knot that I'm not going to attempt to unravel at the moment. There are three key facts:

- She once ruled Avernus, but the evil dragons born of the vast spawning pits she created proved ineffective in the Blood War and Asmodeus deposed her. (This epoch of Avernus would have predated even Gargauth's rule by eons.)
- Tiamat is somehow imprisoned in her lair, which also guards the entrance from Avernus to Dis, the second layer of Hell.
- In the Year of the Bloodbird (1346 DR), Untheric cultists successfully summoned an aspect of Tiamat in the form of the Dark Lady. When the Dark Lady first appeared, she wore a simple crown and mask. It is, in fact, this crown and mask which the cultists seek. (They have no magical powers; they are merely historical curiosities held in great reverence by those who have pledged their fealty to the Dragon Queen.)



# REVISED KEY

For ease of use, these key entries are designed to completely replace the matching entry in the book (unless otherwise noted).

*Design Note: My actual process for assembling the revised key is pretty straightforward. First, I run through my list of things that I think need to be changed. When I'm not writing essay-long explanations of my thought process for public consumption, this would usually just be a short, bullet-pointed list.*

*In addition to stuff that I think needs to be fixed, this list would also include any cool ideas that reading through the key had spurred in my imagination. You can see a little bit of that here with Area D13 and the corpsedamp zombies, but I've mostly eschewed it for this exercise.*

*Once that's done, I simply run through my revelation list (as seen in [Part 3C](#)), and place every clue that's supposed to appear in the location. It's not unusual for this to be a two-way street, with additional clues being added as I develop the revised key and then being added to the revelation list (instead of vice versa).*

## D4. NORTH MASSAGE ROOM

In addition to the normal key for this room (DIA, p. 20).

**Secret Door:** Opened by rotating a circular piece in the stained glass window next to it.

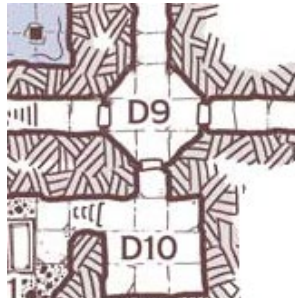
## D7. BHAAL'S ALTAR

In addition to the normal key for this room (DIA, p. 21) there is a **wax tablet and stylus** lying on the altar next to the entrails. This tablet contains various prophecies which have been divined from the entrails:

- When the box is opened in the house of Alaundo, the path forward shall be revealed.
- One of four shall be damned to Hell. One of four shall be struck by a thunderbolt. One of four shall rise.
- The great Sun shall be blackened and the devil legions of Avernus shall conquer Elturel.
- Conflict shall come to the Great Cities of Waterdeep, Athkatla(?), and Iriaebor.
- Volcanic fire shall tremble the peaks of Orsraun.
- Of the West shall speak the Tears of Selûne, and they shall weep upon the Inner Sea.

*GM Note:* The "house of Alaundo" refers to Candlekeep (Alaundo founded Candlekeep and foresaw the coming of the Bhaalspawn). The "great Sun" refers to the Companion. The other prophecies are either nonsense or unrelated to *Descent Into Avernus* (although players might conclude that "one of four" refers to the Council of Four).

## D9. DEAD THREE DOORS



Each door is carved with a full-figured bas relief of a different person.

**Wisdom (Perception) - DC 10:** The carvings are very old. The stone is worn and some of the carving show other signs of damage, along with some evidence of recent repairs. (For example, one of Bhaal's scythe-like hands appears to have been broken off and only recently re-attached.)

**Intelligence (Religion) - DC 10:** On success, recognize the figures as depicting the Dead Three.

- **East Door - Bane:** A tall, armored man wearing a bucket helm. His right gauntlet is painted black and clutches a set of shackles.
- **South Door - Myrkul:** A cloaked figure whose face is hidden under a cowl. In his skeletal hands he clutches a screaming human skull.
- **West Door - Bhaal:** A powerfully built, skull-headed man with long, curved blades where his hands should be.

## D12. BANE'S ALTAR

Generally use the normal key for this room (DIA, p. 22), but if Yignath is present, rather than torturing Klim Jhasso for fun, he is using a [blacksteel](#) razor to carve infernal text into his skin. (If Yignath is no longer present, the blacksteel razor lies on the altar.)

**Blacksteel Razor:** Blacksteel is dark, silent, and nonreflective. It makes no noise when striking other objects or creatures (even if it is broken or shattered). Blood clings to the razor, rather than spraying or dripping.

**Infernal Carvings:** "In the name of Bane, we offer adulation to Zariel, Archduchess of Avernus. In the name of Bane, we give the blessing of one god to another. In the name of Bane, we give blessing unto the unholy conquest of Elturgard. In the name of Bane, we offer adulation under the fear and tyranny born in her name."

## D13. MORGUE

- Far end of the room has collapsed. Four wooden beams brace the ceiling.
- Three sarcophagal slabs have been converted into work tables. Two are covered with vials, alembics, and similar alchemical and arcane apparatus. The center slab has a human cadaver lying atop it, partially dissected with its various organs and viscera neatly organized around it. (If Flennis is taken by surprise here, she will be actively studying the corpse.)
- Several large pipes have been bolted to the collapsed wall of rubble. They twist their way towards a huge vat of iron standing near the sarcophagal slabs.
- If they have not been taken from this room, three bloated corpsedamp zombies are strapped to the north wall. Various tubes leading from the iron vat are attached to the corpses.

**Wisdom (Perception) - DC 14:** Notice the very faint smell of rotten eggs. It can be traced back to the collapsed wall, where the smell is stronger. (Anyone specifically inspecting the collapse will automatically detect the smell.)

- This is corpsedamp gas. See areas D15 or D18 for full description (including guidelines for identifying the gas and its properties). There is no risk of explosion here as the gas is not sufficiently concentrated.

**Iron Vat:** This is a pressurized vessel, collecting corpsedamp gas that's leaking through the collapsed wall. The tubes connected to it are designed for the creation of corpsedamp zombies (the current crop is more or less ready to go). The tubes have long needles at the end of them and are basically just jammed into the corpses.

- If the pipes weren't harvesting the corpsedamp gas here, the leak would be much more significant.

**Dissected Corpse:** A DC 14 Intelligence (Arcana) test suggests that someone is experimenting with exposing internal organs individually to the corpsedamp gas.

**Work Tables:** The *Missive of the Hidden Lord* Ω handout can be found here.

## D15. SMALL FLOODED ROOM & GAS BUILDUP

**On Approach:** DC 10 Wisdom (Perception) check to notice the smell of rotten eggs. (Once in the chamber itself, the smell intensifies to a putrid stench anyone will immediately notice.)

- Four rotting wooden beams rise from the murky water to brace the ceiling here.
- A pile of rubble in the northwest corner.
- Northern tunnel narrows to just 2 ½ feet wide.

**Rubble:** Nothing of interest here.

**Corpsedamp Gas:** Open flame triggers **explosion** (4d6 fire damage, DC 15 Dexterity saving throw for half damage). All wooden beams are destroyed by the explosion, which may trigger a roof collapse. The explosion burns away the gas, which builds up slowly and becomes dangerous again after 24 hours.

- **Intelligence (Arcana) / Wisdom (Survival) - DC 12:** Misidentifies the gas as stinkdamp; a toxic and explosive gas.
- **Intelligence (Arcana) / Wisdom (Survival) - DC 15:** Correctly identifies the gas as corpsedamp. Most often extracted by necromancers from rotting corpses, it has a number of properties favorable to their work.
- **Intelligence (Arcana) - DC 18:** Corpsedamp gas is particularly notable for allowing the creation of corpsedamp zombies — shambling undead literally bloated by the mass of gas used to animate them. Corpsedamp zombies are vulnerable to fire, but explode when killed.

**Roof Collapse:** If beams destroyed, 25% chance of roof collapsing. 4d10 bludgeoning damage, DC 15 Dexterity saving throw for half damage. Room remains open, but is difficult terrain.

- A roof collapse in this area will have an additional 50% chance of extending 1d4 x 5 feet up each passage leading to this room. (Check for each passage.)

## D17. MYRKUL'S ALTAR

- A dry room.
- The north wall is partially collapsed.
- A stone altar in the center of the room with humanoid skulls and bones piled around it. The top of the altar is covered with dozens of half-melted, unlit candles made of black wax.

**Wisdom (Perception) - DC 14:** Notice the very faint smell of rotten eggs. It can be traced back to the collapsed north wall, where the smell is stronger. (Anyone specifically inspecting the north wall will automatically detect the smell.)

- This is corpsedamp gas. See areas D15 or D18 for full description (including guidelines for identifying the gas and its properties). There is no risk of explosion here as the gas is not sufficiently concentrated.

**Altar:**

- If one or more black candles are lit, they shed a green light that reveals black writing on the walls. It reads, in Common, "RISE AND BE COUNTED!"

- If someone says, “RISE AND BE COUNTED!” within 5 feet of the altar, the words vanish as bones hidden under the debris at the north end of the room rise up and knit together, forming three animated human **skeletons** that obey the commands of whoever spoke the words.

**Black Candles:** These candles have been marked with the names of those targeted by the Dead Three cultists – Edmao Eduarda, Wemba Oshrat, Madhuri Akhila, Leiv Diomids, Aneta Diomidis, Annika Silverleaf, Shohreh Letitia, Iolanthe Oshrat. (Valeria Nuska and Weronika Nuska would also be included if Amrik has identified them.)

- **Intelligence (Religion) - DC 14:** These candles symbolically offer “Myrku’s blessing” (i.e., death) unto those named upon them. Myrkullites believe that the smoke from the candles rises up, seeks out the lungs of the one so “blessed,” and blackens them. (Some magical versions of the candles do just that.)
- *GM Info:* This ritual is not a required part of the cultists’ dark work. It’s just the priests’ way of offering an unholy blessing to their task.

## D18. LARGE FLOODED ROOM & GAS BUILDUP

**On Approach:** DC 10 Wisdom (Perception) check to notice the smell of rotten eggs. (Once in the chamber itself, the smell intensifies to a putrid stench anyone will immediately notice.)

- The room is flooded.
- The ceiling is supported by numerous wooden beams.

**Corpsedamp Gas:** Open flame triggers **explosion** (4d6 fire damage, DC 15 Dexterity saving throw for half damage). All wooden beams are destroyed by the explosion, which may trigger a roof collapse. The explosion burns away the gas, which builds up slowly and becomes dangerous again after 24 hours.

- **Intelligence (Arcana) / Wisdom (Survival) - DC 12:** Misidentifies the gas as stinkdamp; a toxic and explosive gas that is heavier than air.
- **Intelligence (Arcana) / Wisdom (Survival) - DC 15:** Correctly identifies the gas as corpsedamp. Most often extracted by necromancers from rotting corpses, it has a number of properties favorable to their work. It is easily mistaken for stinkdamp, and is similarly heavier than air.
- **Intelligence (Arcana) - DC 18:** Corpsedamp gas is particularly notable for allowing the creation of corpsedamp zombies – shambling undead literally bloated by the mass of gas used to animate them. Corpsedamp zombies are vulnerable to fire, but explode when killed.

**Roof Collapse:** If beams destroyed, 25% chance of roof collapsing. 4d10 bludgeoning damage, DC 15 Dexterity saving throw for half damage. Room remains open, but is difficult terrain.

## D19. PARTIALLY COLLAPSED CRYPT

- Most of the room has fallen in.
- Debris field mostly buries a stone sarcophagus.

**Wisdom (Perception) - DC 14:** Notice the very faint smell of rotten eggs. It can be traced back to the collapsed south wall, where the smell is stronger. (Anyone specifically inspecting the collapse will automatically detect the smell.)

- This is corpsedamp gas. See areas D15 or D18 for full description (including guidelines for identifying the gas and its properties). There is no risk of explosion here as the gas is not sufficiently concentrated.

**Sarcophagus:** Empty. Looted years ago.

## D20. HALF-PLUNDERED CRYPT

In addition to the normal key entry for this area (DIA, p. 24) the far wall of the crypt is badly cracked, but shows signs of being repaired. (Corpsedamp was also leaking into this room, as in Area D19, but efforts have been made to seal the cracks and prevent the leak.)

## D23. DOOR

Instead of a secret door, the door leading to D27 is a normal wooden door.

## D26. BHAAL'S REST

- The middle of the room is occupied by an open stone sarcophagus, but the floor has been cleared (as a resting place for the followers of Bane).
- There are six dusty bedrolls on the floor.
- Sconces in the north and south wall.
- There are three footlockers against the far wall.

**Footlockers:** Two of these are battered and worn with years of use. The third is clearly of better construction and is also padlocked. (This latter footlocker belongs to Vaaz and contains the *Missive of the Hidden Lord* and *Vaaz' Correspondence* handouts.)

## D30. TIAMAT'S STOLEN TREASURE

Use the normal key entry for this room (DIA, p. 26) except for Chest 4.

**Chest 4** contains a bronze crown with fire spires (250 gp) that weights 2.5 pounds. Each spire is shaped and painted to resemble one of the five kinds of chromatic dragon (black, blue, green, red, and white). It has been carefully packed in shaped padding; there is a second hollow in this packing material that would appear to fit a mask, but there is nothing in it. (*GM Note:* It does not fit the mask from Chest 3. This mask is located in Vanthampur Manor.)

**Crown:** Around the interior of crown is an inscription, written in Draconic: "From Avernus we summon her. To Tiamat we pledge fealty."

# ADVERSARY ROSTER



## BATHHOUSE (NIGHT)

Imp  
3 Night Blades  
Necromite

D1 - Courtyard  
D2 - Baths  
D4 - North Massage Room

(spies for Thurstwell)

## DUNGEON

2 corpsedamp zombies  
3 Necromites  
Yignath (Iron Consul)<sup>1</sup>  
Kazzira (Fist of Bane)  
2 Flying Gauntlets  
Flennis (Master of Souls)<sup>2</sup> + Skeletal Rats  
3 skeletons  
3 corpsedamp zombies  
Fist of Bane  
4 Fists of Bane  
Reaper  
2 corpsedamp zombies  
Mortlock<sup>3</sup> + Vaaz<sup>4</sup> (Death's Head)

D6 - Bloated Corpse  
D10 - Necromites' Room  
D12 - Bane's Altar  
D12 - Bane's Altar  
D12 - Bane's Altar  
D13 - Morgue  
D17 - Myrkul's Altar  
D21 - Zombie Crypt  
D23 - Secret Door Sentry  
D25 - Bane's Rest  
D26 - Bhaal's Rest  
D28 - Old Cellar  
D29

(must be summoned)

(must be summoned)  
(use stats for **swarm of rats**)  
(must be summoned)  
(must be summoned by Flennis)

(sleeping)

(must be summoned)  
(programmed encounter)

<sup>1</sup> Key ring with seven keys (shackles in D12 & D22, chests in D30).

<sup>2</sup> Carries spellbook (see DIA p. 23) and *Missive of the Hidden Lord* Ψ handout.

<sup>3</sup> Carries *Mortlock's Correspondence* handout.

<sup>4</sup> Has *Assassin's Orders* handout.

Stat blocks for Dead Three cultists can be found in *Descent Into Avernus*, p. 231-235.

Corpsedamp zombie stats can be found [here](#).

See [Art of the Key: Adversary Rosters](#) for details on using an adversary roster.

# QUESTIONING CULTISTS

## CULTISTS

- The abductions/murders are actually being carried out by a team based out of the *Poisoned Poseidon* in the Brampton neighborhood.
- They have the support of one of the Council of Four! (Or, at the very least, someone very powerful.) Most of the low-ranking cultists don't actually know who it actually is, and they might speculate: Ravengard, Stelmane, Portyr, Vanthampur. The ducal representative (Mortlock, although not all of them know his name) is here in the dungeon.
- The local cult leaders are Yignath (Iron Consul of Bane), Flennis (Myrkullian Master of Souls), and Vaaz (Death's Head of Bhaal). They may be able to give some indication of their current location.

## CULT LEADERS

Yignath, Flennis, and Vaaz are obviously more knowledgeable than the rank-and-file cultists.

- They have been receiving missives from the Shield of the Hidden Lord, which is currently in the possession of the Vanthampurs. (See "Lore of Gargauth" in Part 3B of the Remix.)
- Under Gargauth's guidance, they have formed an alliance with Duke Vanthampur. They have also received this temple complex in exchange for their service (proving the divine purpose of their actions).
- They know that Duke Vanthampur is a Zarielite. They believe that Zariel is responsible for the fall of Elturel, with an army of devils responsible for sacking the city.
- Their primary liaison with the Vanthampurs is Mortlock Vanthampur. Mortlock provides them with the target list for their murders. (They don't know where Mortlock gets the names.)
- Each leader also knows the contents of the *Missives of the Hidden Lord* addressed to them.
- **Vaaz:** Can also reveal the information in the *Assassin's Orders* (that he was hired by Amrik and Thurstwell Vanthampur to kill their brother and was to send evidence to Amrik at the Low Lantern when the job was done). Within just the past hour, he has dispatched an assassination team to kill Duke Portyr at a charity event being held at the Beloved Ranger in the Wide.

## MORTLOCK VANTHAMPUR

Mortlock is not inclined to betray his family, but if he realizes that the attempt on his life was coordinated by Amrik and Thurstwell he will feel betrayed himself and be more likely to help the PCs (if they agree to giving him an amnesty for his own role in all this).

- The Vanthampurs are Zarielites. Mortlock is not a true believer, but he's loyal to the family.
- Duke Vanthampur is using the Dead Three cultists to murder specific targets. Mortlock's brother, Amrik, is responsible for identifying these targets: He provides the names to Mortlock, who passes them along to the Dead Three cultists.
- Amrik has set himself up as a black market resource for smuggling refugees into the city. He holds court at the Low Lantern, fleecing refugees who want to bring their loved ones inside the city.
- Duke Vanthampur is working in coordination with a powerful cult leader that escaped from Elturel just before its fall. The Duke is protecting this cult leader in the basement of Vanthampur Manor. (Mortlock does not know the identity of this cult leader.)
- The cult leader brought two powerful artifacts with him from Elturel, one of which was a shield in the likeness of a demonic face. Mortlock's other brother, Thurstwell, was fascinated by these artifacts.



- He also knows the history of the Dungeon of the Dead Three, and how it was given to the Dead Three cultists in exchange for their alliance.
- If questioned, he can provide background on the Tiamat treasure found in Area D30: Yignath had his followers steal it from a vault owned by the Hhune noble family. They kidnapped Satiir Thione-Hhune in the process. Satiir and one of the artifacts were taken to Vanthampur Manor at his mother's request.
- Duke Vanthampur has ordered the assassination of Duke Portyr. A Dead Three assassination team has already been dispatched to a charity event at the Beloved Ranger where the Duke is planning to make a speech within the hour (see *Part 3J: The Portyr Assassination*).

## HANDOUTS

### ASSASSIN'S ORDERS

*Vaaz –*

*My brother Thurstwell and I are agreed. Mortlock is not only a liability to us, but a liability to you, taking credit for all of the good work that you and your Fists are doing for us.*

*Rid us of our troublesome brother and send his right ring finger to me at the Low Lantern as proof and I will see to it that you are raised about Flennis and Yignath in this affair. You will be the liaison between the Shield of the Hidden Lord and your fellow cultists. It will be your face that Gargauth sees. He will know that YOU are the one responsible for carrying out his will! Bane himself will know your name when Gargauth sings your praises unto him!*

*Act swift, with the strength of the fist and the finality of the knife, my friend!*

*Amrik of the House Vanthampur*

### MORTLOCK'S CORRESPONDENCE

*My dearest Mortlock,*

*The temple is located beneath the Frolicking Nymph. In the north massage room, rotate the circular element in the stained glass window and the door will open. Vaaz, Flennis, and Yignath, along with their minions, should already be ensconced.*

*Flennis will be relatively easy to manage, but you may have some difficulty with the other two. Yignath is too ambitious. The trick will be keeping him reined in, otherwise he could easily compromise the bloodletting with some other foolhardy endeavor. Vaaz, on the other hand, is simply bull-headed. He'll strain against the leash unless you pull it. So pull it hard.*

*You should not return to the manor until the work is done.*

*Mother*

*Mortlock,*

*I warned you to keep a leash on Yignath! What's done is done, but I hope this will be the last bit of foolishness you'll allow to happen.*

*The kidnapping of Satiir Thione-Hhune is particularly vexing, but perhaps we can turn it to our advantage as long as she's not harmed. (Or, at least, not harmed*

*until it's useful for us to do so.) Take custody of her and transfer her to the manor as quickly as possible.*

*Thurstwell is also intrigued by the mask they found. Send it along with Satiir so that he can study it.*

*Thalamra*

*Mortlock,*

*That fool Portyr has emerged from his mansion. He'll be giving a simpering speech in support of his misguided Confraternity of Refugee Relief at the Beloved Ranger. This is the opportunity we've been waiting for. If we kill him now, it should disrupt his brat Liara's attempts to steal the Flaming Fist from us.*

*I'm enclosing a packet of information for Vaaz, along with a very special weapon which has been prepared just for Portyr. Act quickly, my son!*

*Thalamra*

**DESIGN NOTE:** If you can, add the date of the confraternity event (i.e., whatever today's date is when the PCs raid the Dungeon of the Dead Three) to the second note.

## MISSIVE OF THE HIDDEN LORD Ω

*Flennis,*

*Know ye that these missives pass through holy hands directly from the Shield of the Hidden Lord, which speaks with the True Voice of Gargauth, Once Lord of Avernus and Treasurer of Hell, the Tenth Lord of the Nine, the Hidden Lord, the Lord Who Watches, and Legatus of the Dark Gods.*

*When the devils of Avernus brought down Eturel, the Grand Duke of Baldur's Gate was claimed as a prize for Hell. So too shall you claim for Zariel the souls of those who once served Eturel. You can know this to be truth, for I hold here, at Vanthampur Manor, secure within its infernal puzzlebox, the pact with Zariel; the declaration of the powerful purpose to which we set our hands. Lay to rest your doubts.*

*-T.K.*

## MISSIVE OF THE HIDDEN LORD Ψ

*Yignath,*

*Know ye that these missives are inscribed under the gaze of the Shield of the Hidden Lord, which speaks with the True Voice of Gargauth, the Tenth Lord of the Nine, the Lost Lord of the Pit, the Outcast, Daemon of Astaroth, and Legatus of the Dark Gods.*

*In completing this work, your reward shall be to rise to the rank of Black Gauntlet in the esteem of Bane. And when the Cult of Zariel claims the Flaming Fist, the Fist shall become the Left Hand and Bane's Gauntlet shall become the Right Hand of the Council. The old temples shall be overthrown and their fanes given over to the black hand, the white skull, and the bloody tear.*

*-T.K.*

## MISSIVE OF THE HIDDEN LORD ☉

*Vaaz,*

*Know ye that these missives are inscribed by my hand at Vanthampur Manor, passing through holy hands directly from the Shield of the Hidden Lord, which speaks with the True Voice of Gargauth, Once Lord of Avernus and Treasurer of Hell, the Outcast, and Legatus of the Dark Gods.*

*Seek ye the blood of the holy orders of Elturgard. That is the commandment of this hour. Let the great work which was begun in the light of the Companion be completed here under the aegis of the Dark Gods.*

*Vanthampur shall remain within her manor for this time, for she has mighty work to do and must consult constantly with us in its pursuit. But just as she has given unto you the temple of your forefathers, so you shall obey the fruit of her loins. Her three sons speak with my voice and work to our common cause.*

*-T.K.*

## VAAZ' CORRESPONDENCE

*Vaaz,*

*Duke Portyr will be delivering a speech at the Beloved Ranger in the Wide during an event held by the Confraternity of Refugee Relief. Give the iron barb I have enclosed in this packet to your best assassin.*

*I know that you will serve me well in this.*

*Duke Thalamra Vanthampur*

**DESIGN NOTE:** If you can, add the date of the confraternity event (i.e., whatever today's date is when the PCs raid the Dungeon of the Dead Three) to this note.

# PART 3G: JAQUAYING THE DEAD THREE

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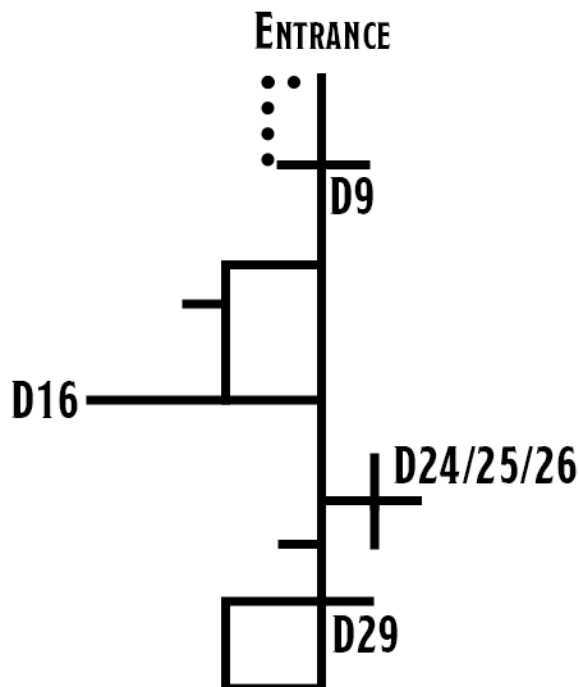
by [Justin Alexander](#) – April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020

“Dungeons should always be heavily jaquayed.” - [Jaquaying the Dungeon](#)

This article will probably make more sense if you read [Jaquaying the Dungeon](#) first, but the short version is that non-linear dungeons are more interesting than linear ones. The latter feature, at best, navigational pseudo-choices which lead the PCs through an inflexible sequence of prepackaged experiences. A jaquayed dungeon, on the other hand allow each group to...

*...actively make the dungeon their own. They can retreat, circle around, rush ahead, go back over old ground, poke around, sneak through, interrogate the locals for secret routes... The possibilities are endless because the environment isn't forcing them along a pre-designed path.*

As demonstrated in [Jaquaying the Dungeon](#), you can use Melan diagrams to look at the navigational structure of the dungeon (removing the “noise” of passages which twist around without every deviating from a single path). For example, this is what the Dungeon of the Dead Three looks like (minus the secret door that we removed):



Broken down like this, it's immediately apparent, as we briefly discussed in [Part 3E](#), that this is fairly linear dungeon: There's a couple of loops and a few side branches, but the furthest you'll ever get off the straight path from entrance to Area D29 (where the preprogrammed conclusion of the adventure is located) are the three rooms leading to the dead end in Area D16.

(Even moreso than other installments, this one will probably benefit from directly cross-referencing the module. The map for the Dungeon of the Dead Three is located on p. 21 of *Descent Into Avernus*.)

To be clear, this a well-designed dungeon. The two early loops (D5 thru D9 and the D12-D13-D14-D17-D18 loop) joined by a chokepoint give some tactical flexibility. What we refer to as minor elevations shifts (where areas on the same conceptual level of the dungeon are nevertheless at different heights relative to each other) are used ambitiously and to good effect, particularly when emphasized with the flooding in the dungeon (and, in the Remix, the corpsedamp gas leaks).

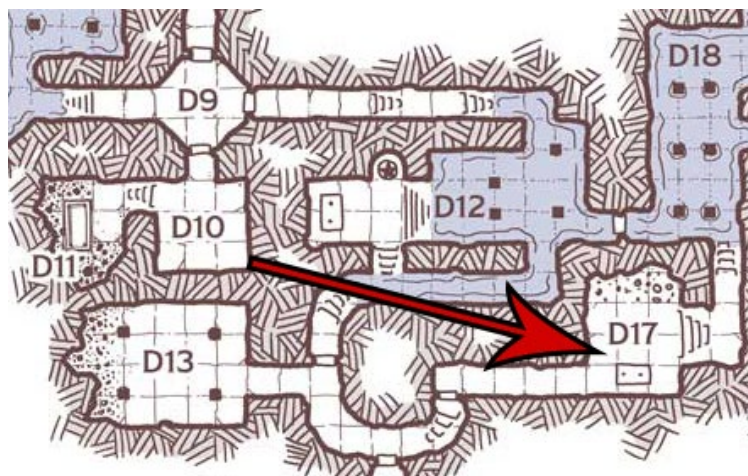
But as I was reading *Descent Into Avernus*, I couldn't shake the feeling that the Dungeon of the Dead Three was calling out to be jaquayed.

## THE LYNCHPIN

The lynchpin, for me, is Area D9. As we already discussed in [Part 3E](#), this room has three doors decorated with bas reliefs — each associated with one of the Dead Three. As part of the Remix, we've already realigned these doors so that the images are associated with the cultists behind each door:



But although the Bhaal and Bane locations shown on the map above are the primary shrines of those gods, the Myrkullian cultists behind the third door are just hanging out in that room. Myrkul's altar is way over here, on the far side of Bane's altar:



The image I have in my mind is to even more strongly base the dungeon around the three doors in Area D9: to have those doors give a very strong indication to the players of the dungeon geography that lies ahead of them.

The first broad stroke, therefore, is to reconfigure things so that Myrkul's temple lies behind the southern door in Area D9.

**QUICK TEMPLE VERSION:** If that's all you want do, you could move D17 – Myrkul's Altar so that it lies between D10 and D11. I'd recommend also taking D22 – The Torture Chamber and placing it where D17 currently is to keep that strong second loop. You could leave the current location of D22 an empty room or just have the corridor run through there.)

## THE FULL JAQUAYS

But if you wanted to fully jaquay the dungeon, you'll need to do more than that. My first step would be to mentally break the dungeon down into distinct "chunks." For example, you can think of the three separate "temple complexes" – the small clusters of rooms each associated with one of the Dead Three Gods.

My conceptual chunks for the dungeon are:

- The three temple complexes.
- A "crypt complex" that has been partially converted into living quarters (Areas D19 thru D26, sans the torture chamber in D22).
- The "inner sanctum" (Areas D27 thru D33, everything behind the secret door in the original dungeon)
- The "D15 complex" consists of D14, D15 (explosion #1), and D16.
- Area D18 (explosion #2) is a major feature by itself and not really part of another room complex.

Next, we'll want to make sure we maintain the cool vertical variation in the dungeon, with the lower recesses flooded and gas leaks entering in the mid- or upper levels of the complex. If we just want to redo the layout (without re-keying any of the areas), we'll want to make sure D15 and D18 are positioned in relation to the gas leaks in a way that makes sense.

With everything broken apart in conceptual chunks, we can play around with how we want to arrange them at a macro-level. My creative instincts immediately suggest:

- Connect all three temple complexes to the deeper recesses of the dungeon (in the same manner that the Bane temple is connected).
- Do at least some cross-connection between the temple complexes. I'm leaning towards the idea of a secret connection between two of them.
- There should be a kind of "plateau" or set of plateaus where the gas leaks (in our original key these are D13, D17, and D19) are designed to flow down into D15 and D18.

The next question is how to position the crypt complex and inner sanctum. Broadly speaking, I think there are three options:

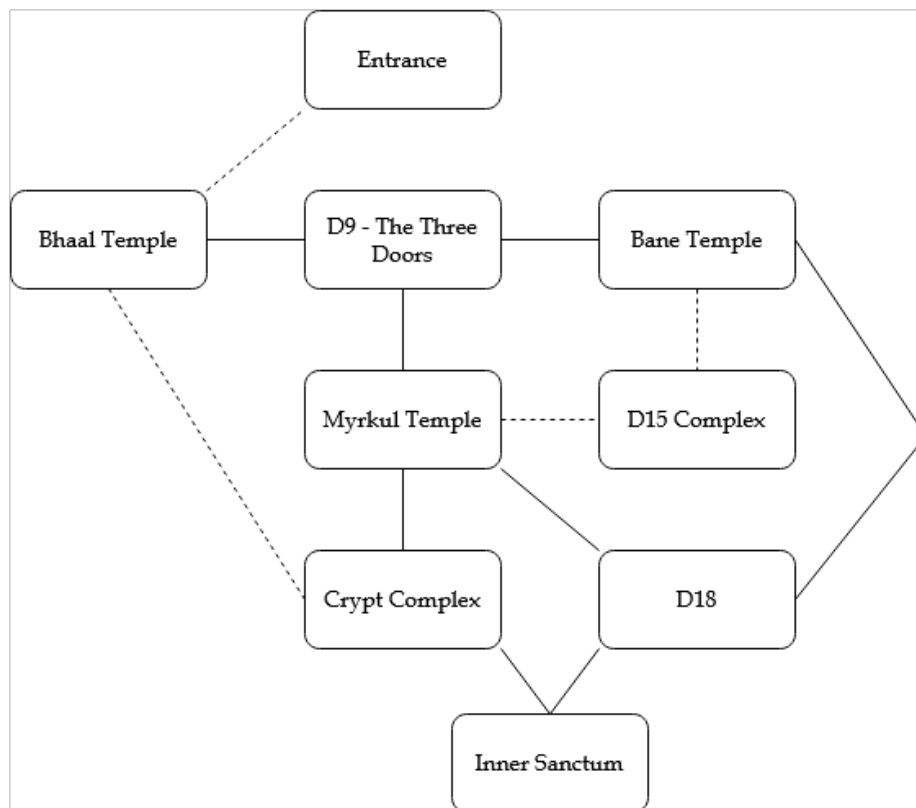
- The temple complexes could all connect to Area D18, and then the crypt complex and inner sanctum could branch off from there.
- The temple complexes could all independently connect to the crypt complex (temples connected to shared living quarters makes sense), and then the inner sanctum lies beyond them (probably connected via D18?).
- The temples could connect to both the crypt complexes and Area D18, and then those could both lead to the inner sanctum. (You could also Venn diagram this, where two of the temples go to the crypt complexes and two go to Area D18. That would mean one of the temples would need to walk all the way through the inner sanctum or through a different temple to get to their quarters, though, which may not make sense.)

We also have the D15 complex, which could be used in a couple different ways:

- It probably just branches off at whatever location makes sense based on the gas leak and, just as in the published adventure, dead ends.
- Alternatively, it could do that (it needs to be positioned so that gas can leak down into D15) and ALSO be extended so that it serves as the connective tissue between two other sections described above. (For example, it could be the secret passage connecting two of the temple complexes. Or it might be the passage you have to follow from the crypt complex to the inner sanctum in the third option above, although that means you have to go through an explosive chamber no matter which route you take... maybe that's good? Maybe that's a little boring in terms of variable navigation?)

(This, it should be noted, is also how I usually design a dungeon from scratch: I list the big conceptual chunks that I want the dungeon to have and then I move them around until I have an interesting configuration. Stuff will still shift and change once I start mapping out the details, but it's a lot easier to figure out the big picture first. This advice extends beyond dungeons, too: When I was working on "Seversen's Mysterious Estate" with Jonathan Tweet for [Over the Edge: Welcome to the Island](#), Jonathan brainstormed a bunch of cool stuff for the estate, I brainstormed some more, and then the pieces got juggled around until they had a compelling flow. But I digress.)

Looking at our brainstorming here, we can make some "final" decisions and sketch it out:



## MAPPING THE DUNGEON

The next step would be to actually map out the revised dungeon. I'm going to leave that as a project for you to pursue if you're so interested, but here are a few thoughts:

- The Bhaal Temple remains essentially identical to the map as it currently exists, except that there's a secret passage behind the tapestry in Area D8 that leads to the crypt complex. (I think the passage is probably NOT secret coming the other direction.)
- Coming from the Myrkul Temple to the Bane Temple, you basically have D14 to D15 to D16, and then another stair up from D16 that goes into the Bane Temple.
- The "plateau" of rooms from which gas leaks down into D15 and D18 is in the junction between the Myrkul temple complex and the crypt complex: Areas D13 and D17 are, of course, part of the Myrkul temple and Area D19 must be kind of in the same "corner" as the stairs leading down to D15 and D18.
- I imagine the Banites getting to their quarters in the crypt complex by going through the D15 Complex and briefly passing through the corner of the Myrkul temple complex (but not the temple itself).
- The Inner Sanctum is also largely identical to the current map, with passages from the crypt complex and D18 coming together to enter Area D27 through a single door.

Make sure to include the minor elevator shifts and keep the flooded portions in the lower section of the dungeon! If you can actually arrange it so that the collapsed sections of D13, D17, and D19 are all clearly part of the same collapse, that would probably also give a good effect!



# PART 3H: TRAFFICKING AMRIK

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[by Justin Alexander - May 4th, 2020](#)

As we've previously discussed, Amrik has set himself up as a black market for smuggling refugees into Baldur's Gate. He uses this position to identify and locate refugees who are or are related to Elturgardian knights and target them for the Dead Three murder squads, but it's also an extremely profitable operation in its own right. He's also beginning to branch out, offering assistance to refugees who are already in the city and looking to get passage out via the Docks.

Although Amrik is aware of the whole Vanthampur operation, it should be noted that he has no direct communication with the *Poisoned Poseion* or the Dead Three cultists in general. Once he identifies a target, he sends that information to Mortlock at the Dungeon of the Dead Three and it's Mortlock who coordinates with the Dead Three cult leaders.

## SURVEILLANCE

As described in *Descent Into Avernus*, Amrik holds court at the Low Lantern tavern. If the PCs put his operation under surveillance, this is the type of activity they might observe:

**Refugees meeting with Amrik.** They're likely looking to get help for family/friends still located outside the city (Amrik has some odd questions for them regarding family names, ancestors, etc.), but they might also be meeting with Amrik about money they still owe him or to make arrangements for their own passage out of Baldur's Gate. (Having Amrik meeting with a set of refugees when the PCs first show up is probably a good choice.)

**Amrik's agents.** Generally reporting or checking in with Amrik. These agents all have official government passes allowing them to pass in and out of Basilisk Gate (reputedly for business with Little Calimshan). If the PCs follow them, they'll actually head into the refugee camps north of the city, where they circulate looking for those who can either pay Amrik's fees or have some connection to Elturgardian knights. There are six of these agents (**spy**, MM p. 349):

- Botros Cloudfury
- Petra Czismadia
- Neroni
- Theophila
- Apolena Giolla
- Ratnam

**Cliffgate runs.** Amrik has bribed Gauntlet Fausti, who guards Cliffgate at night. Amrik's agents lead small groups of refugees along old smugglers' paths on Dusthawk Hill during Gauntlet Fausti's shift, pay off Fausti, and lead them into the city.

*Design Note: If the PCs are shadowing one of these Cliffgate runs and you want to add a little texture, it may turn out that somebody lays claim to the smugglers'*



*path that Amrik's operation has been poaching. A bunch of thugs working for Straightstick (DIA, p. 171) intercept the refugee group and make it clear that their boss expects a cut of the action. And they're going to make an example of the refugees to make sure their message is heard loud and clear.*

*Maybe the PCs are actually doing one of these runs for themselves! You could include details in Amrik's paperwork indicating that a Cliffgate run is already scheduled: By taking out Amrik, they've left the refugees waiting for him in the camp high-and-dry.*

**Messengers**, bearing messages from Amrik to the Dungeon of the Dead Three and/or Thurstwell at Vanthampur Manor. These duties could be variably carried out by Amrik's agents, Dead Three cultists, or Thurstwell's imps.

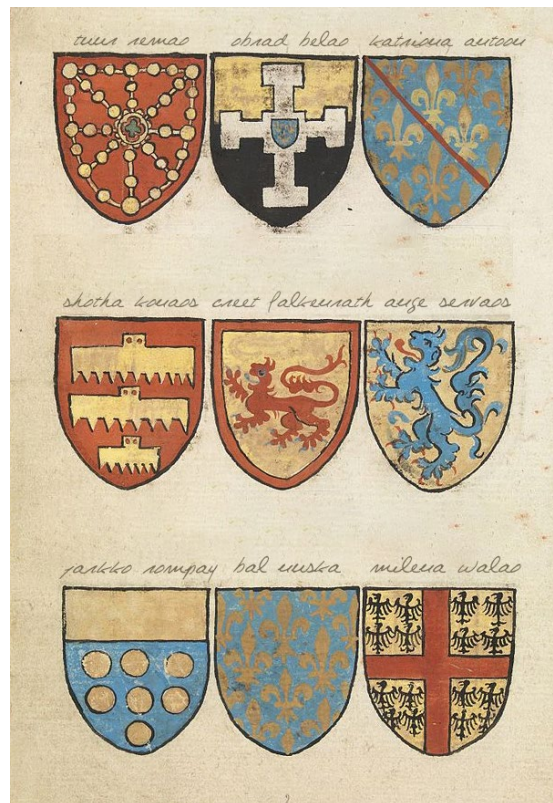
## AMRIK'S PAPERWORK

Amrik has a variety of papers associated with this work that are usually spread out on the table in front of him at the Low Lantern. In the late evening, when he returns home, he carries them in a valise. Overnight they are kept in the locked chest in his bedroom (Area V15 in Vanthampur Manor).

I recommend shuffling these up into a random order before handing them over to the players.

### ARMORIAL ROLLS OF ELTURGARD

*This bundle of vellum scrolls proves to be the Armorial Rolls of Elturgard, detailing the name, coat of arms, and date of accolade for every knight in the Order of the Companion and the Riders of Elturel.*



**GM NOTE:** Closer inspection and a DC 14 Intelligence (History) or Intelligence (Perception) check reveals that these do not appear to be merely copies of the Armorial Rolls; they bear the High Observer's seal and must have been taken directly from the High Hall in Elturel.

## A PORTFOLIO OF GILTED RED LEATHER



*A portfolio case containing an eclectic collection of genealogical and property records, most of which seem to be focused on or around the city of Elturel. Sheets of parchment are covered in notes relating to these records, tracing patterns of inheritance originating from a seemingly arbitrary selection of progenitors.*

*In other cases, it appears that the opposite work is being done, with lines of inheritance being traced backwards into the past. Some of these are marked with the small sigil of a sword in the upper left-hand corner; others have black X marked in the same spot.*

**GM NOTE:** The progenitors in this case are all Elturgardian knights. Those having their lines of inheritance traced backwards are all refugees who have presented themselves to Amrik's agents. The names on Amrik's List (see below) are all marked with the sword sigil (indicating they are descended from Elturgardian knights).

## AMRIK'S LIST

*For the Poisoned Poseidon:*

*Remao  
Akhila  
Aneta D.  
Servaos  
Silverleaf  
Braam  
Oshrat  
Nuska  
Edmao  
Tuur S.  
Veer  
Stien*

## LETTERS FROM THURSTWELL

*Amrik,*

*I completely concur with your last. I recommend using the imp who brings this letter to you to send word to Vaaz to proceed. He'll be able to slip into the Frolicking Nymph quietly and invisibly, deliver the missive undetected, and then return to me at the manor with none the wiser.*

*Thurstwell Vanthampur*

*Amrik,*

*On your advice, I have removed the Elturian puzzlebox from the family vault where mother had secured it. I have no idea how angry she might be if she found out, but I am utterly fascinated by it. I am certain that there are secrets of Zariel locked within it that will perhaps unlock power – the sort of power you and I have often dreamed of.*

*Unfortunately, I have had no luck in determining how to open the thrice-damned thing. But I will keep you informed of any progress I make.*

*Thurstwell Vanthampur*

## LETTER FROM MORTLOCK

*Amrik,*

*Thank you for the most recent targets. I will pass them along to Flennis immediately so that he can send out his teams and begin surveillance. He did request that, if possible, you include more information on those currently associating with them, as those relationships often make tracking them down easier given the general chaos of their circumstances.*

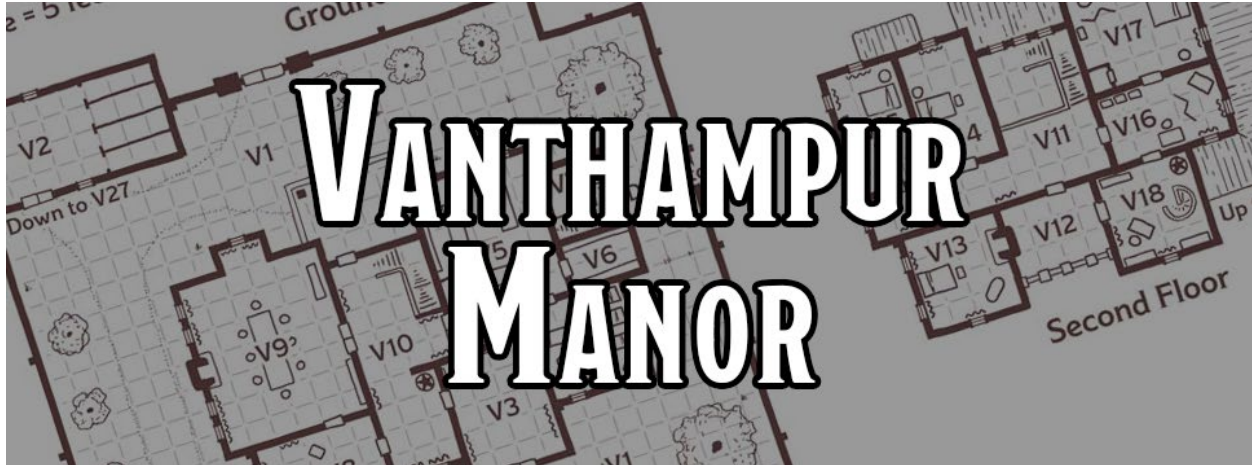
*There will be no need for you to send any of your agents to the bathhouse. Not only do I have things well in hand here, but you know as well as I do that mother had good reasons for keeping your operations separate from those of our allies.*

*Mortlock Vanthampur*

# PART 3I: VANTHAMPUR MANOR

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by Justin Alexander – May 6th, 2020



Compared to the [Dungeon of the Dead Three](#), we're going to have a fairly light touch on Vanthampur Manor. For the most part, we'll just be tying off some of the loose ends created while we were remixing other scenarios in Part 3, with a particular look at how this effects the various denizens of the manor.

## MANOR VS. VILLA

The published book refers to this location as Vanthampur Villa, but I've changed it to Vanthampur Manor. Why?

Short version: Waterdeep has villas. Baldur's Gate has manors.

Feels like a minor thing (and I get the appeal of the alliteration), but this is actually baked pretty deep into Baldur's Gate, which features things like the Manor Gate, which leads to the Manorborn neighborhood, which is filled with the Patriar Manors.

The other option would be to push strongly in the opposite direction and have the fact that the Vanthampurs own a "villa" instead of a "manor" be a commentary on how Thalamra Vanthampur wasn't born into privilege (she wasn't "manorborn") and is instead a self-made woman. But (a) that's a theme which would require a lot of extra work to meaningfully bring forward in the adventure and (b) I'm not really that interested in a theme that boils down to "the real problem with Baldur's Gate is not the entrenched greed of its upper class, it's the low-class upstarts trying to rise above their station."

Also, minor though it may be, this does seem to subliminally draw a distinction between the noble culture of Waterdeep and the noble culture of Baldur's Gate that I think helps to distinguish the two cities, particularly if you just recently got done running [Waterdeep: Dragon Heist](#) for your players.

## THAVIUS KREEG

Thavius Kreeg's role in the manor is largely unchanged, but it may be useful to remember, as we discussed at the beginning of [Part 3](#), that there are some substantial contradictions and problems with Kreeg's back story. We'll be straightening those out in Part 4 of the Remix, but the changes should be kept in mind here.

I also recommend dropping the whole "Kreeg has the shadow of a pudgy devil" thing:

- It's a cool concept, but it doesn't really make sense. (Why him and none of the other cultists?)
- If it works as intended (the PCs immediately realize he's evil), I think that's less interesting than having ambiguity and the PCs either (a) figuring it out or (b) getting gulled.
- But I think there's a pretty big risk it WON'T work as intended and the PCs, instead of concluding that Thavius Kreeg is evil, will conclude that this ISN'T Thavius Kreeg and is actually a devil in disguise. This will thoroughly muddy a fairly key revelation.
- If you still have Reya Mantlemorn involved, this detail is simultaneously scripted to be painfully obvious to the PCs *and*, for some reason, completely irrelevant to Mantlemorn. ("His altered shadow is not damning enough evidence.") This is likely to result in a really frustrating interaction.

As I was typing this up, I think I figured out where we can repurpose this cool idea.

## THE TRUTH OF ELTUREL'S FALL

Duke Vanthampur, High Observer Kreeg, and Gargauth all know the truth of what happened to Elturel (it was taken to Hell). Everyone else in the manor (who know anything about the cult's business at all) are under the impression that devils under the command of Zariel laid siege to the city and destroyed it. They believe that their unholy mission is to similarly prepare Baldur's Gate for Zariel's scourge.

Even Vanthampur, Kreeg, and Gargauth will not readily give up the truth. All three of them will, instead, lie obliquely, by referring to "Elturel's Fall." If they're pushed on the point (if caught in a *zone of truth*, for example), they'll talk about how the legions of Zariel "fell upon the city" (and similar euphemisms and half-truths).

The dramatic goal here is for the players to NOT know Elturel's true fate until the *infernal puzzlebox* is opened in Candlekeep. This is not absolutely essential (so if the PCs get clever or are particularly efficacious in hammering in on this point, there's no problem in letting them get the truth out of one of them), but you will get a MUCH bigger impact from the *puzzlebox* if that's the moment that the PCs discover the truth of Elturel's fall.

## RAID, HEIST, OR CRAWL?

As written, Vanthampur Manor is largely designed to function as a dungeoncrawl, although adroit players might be able to turn at least the first part into a raid. The Remix, however, does open up the possibility of approaching the whole thing into a heist.

Let's take a second to distinguish these three concepts: A **dungeoncrawl** features a room-and-key design which the PCs largely explore blind. A **raid** is similarly based on a room-and-key design, but the locations is designed so that the PCs can grok the entire floorplan and some (or all) of its defensive measures. A **heist** is similar to a raid, but the floorplan and defenses can't be easily observed, so there are additional phases of play in which that information must be gathered. (It's also fairly typical for a heist to be focused on achieving a specific goal while minimizing open conflict, whereas raids are often about planning a full-out assault with the goal of tactically clearing the location. But there can be a lot of overlap here.)

Check out [Scenario Structure Challenge: Raiding the Death Star](#) and [Scenario Structure Challenge: Heists](#) for a more detailed overview of these structures.

The opposition in Vanthampur Manor isn't so overwhelming that the PCs can't just kick down the front door and start clearing the place room by room: That's what I mean when I say it's designed as a dungeoncrawl.

However, it takes no significant effort to carefully observe the manor house itself and figure out the layout of the first and second floor, the location (and patrols) of guards, etc. So this first chunk of the scenario can easily operate as a raid (with smart PCs who take this course of action likely benefiting from

their planning) up to the point where they find the entrance to the dungeon lair below, at which point they'll have to descend into the unknown.

The Remix, however, creates the opportunity to approach Vanthampur Manor as a heist, with the PCs likely planning to either steal the *infernal puzzlebox*, kill the Vanthampurs, or both. To briefly review [the five steps of the heist](#):

1. Identify the score.
2. Gather information.
3. Onsite surveillance.
4. Prep work.
5. The Operation.

There are enough cultists and associates of the Vanthampurs wandering around this section of the campaign that PCs will almost certainly be able to grill them for information about the manor. Pursuing official records might also give them the layout of the manor, and the records of the Master of Drains and Underways could reveal that Duke Vanthampur had the sewers under her mansion sealed off and redirected. (The latter could carry some risk, however, as Duke Vanthampur was once the Master of Drains and Underways and the department still remains under her thumb.)

Onsite surveillance opportunities are trickier to imagine: Arranging a meeting with Thurstwell Vanthampur (after he contacts them via imp) might offer an opportunity, though. (Or could simply serve as the opportunity for the heist itself.)

It is important to note that this *is not a choice you need to make as the DM*. Or should make. Step back and let the players figure out how they want to approach the manor, and then follow their lead.

## ADVERSARY ROSTER

### MANOR HOUSE

|  |                                |                                  |
|--|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 3 x 3 Guards                             | V1. Yard                       | (patrolling counter-clockwise)   |
| Groundskeeper Sarvinder Peck (01-75%)    | V2. Stable House               |                                  |
| 4 imps                                   | V3. Foyer                      | (invisible)                      |
| Gray, Peck, D'Vaelan, Fallwater (76-00%) | V4. Servants' Quarters         | (resting or sleeping if here)    |
| Cook Gabourey D'Vaelan (01-75%)          | V5. Kitchen                    |                                  |
| Duke Vanthampur (01-05%)                 | V8. Parlor                     |                                  |
| Butler Fendrick Gray (01-75%)            | V10. Gallery                   |                                  |
| 5 Guards                                 | V11. Upstairs Hall             |                                  |
| Thurstwell Vanthampur                    | V13. Thurstwell's Bedroom      |                                  |
| Duke Vanthampur (06-10%)                 | V16, V17, or V18. Master Suite | (50% sleeping)                   |
| Helmed Horror                            | V18. Duke's Study              | (must be summoned by Vanthampur) |
| 2 imps                                   | V19. Tower Peak                | (invisible)                      |

### DUNGEON

|                           |                         |                                |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 3 spined devils           | V20. Cellar             |                                |
| 3 x 2 Cultists            | V22. Sewer Tunnels      | (patrolling counter-clockwise) |
| 1d4 Cultists (50%)        | V24. Dining Room        | (subtract from Area V33)       |
| Barbed Devil + 4 Cultists | V26. Temple of Zariel   |                                |
| Duke Vanthampur (11-25%)  | V26. Temple of Zariel   |                                |
| Duke Vanthampur (26-00%)  | V28. Secret Shrine      |                                |
| Bearded Devil             | V29. Prison             | (ordered to guard prisoners)   |
| 2 Cultists                | V32. Connecting Tunnel  |                                |
| 6 Cultists                | V33. Cultists' Quarters |                                |
| 1d3-1 Cultists            | V34. Ritual Chamber     | (subtract from Area V33)       |
| Thavius Kreeg             | V36. Vanthampur Vault   | (unlikely to leave sanctuary)  |

### RANDOM ENCOUNTERS - MANOR:

- 1 in 10 chance that Amrik is unexpectedly visiting during the day.

- 1 in 20 chance that Mortlock is unexpectedly visiting during the day.
- 1 in 6 chance per room that Slobberchops (DIA, p. 34) is there.
- 1 in 10 chance per room of encountering an imp.
- If not in V4. Servants' Quarters, randomly determine Maid Ambra Fallwater's by rolling 1d20.

**SCHEDULE:** Vanthampurs all gather for dinner (V9. Dining Room) once per tenday.

## PRISONERS & ENEMIES OF VANTHAMPUR

There are several friendly characters in (and around) Vanthampur Manor that need to be tweaked slightly. Most of these are prisoners behind held by the Vanthampurs.

**REYA MANTLEMORN:** As previously discussed, having Reya Mantlemorn tell the PCs that Thavius Kreeg (instead of having the PCs discover that for themselves) is a bad choice. So if you still want Reya to show up, you need a different explanation. Fortunately, this is pretty simple: Reya knows that the devils of Avernus were responsible for the fall of Elturel. There's nothing she can do for lost Elturel (particularly since she believes it destroyed), but she'll honor her oaths as a Hellrider by seeking vengeance: Following her own leads, she's discovered that the Vanthampurs are part of some sort of Zariel cult. (This will almost certainly not be news to the PCs at this point.) She wants to break into the manor to continue her investigation (and probably kill the Vanthampurs and any other cultists inside).

*Option: If you don't want to run Reya as a GMPC here, but do like the idea of her investigating the Vanthampurs, you can split the difference by having her locked up in Area V19. She investigated, she came, she got caught, she got locked up. Duke Vanthampur is trying to figure out how to safely ship her to the Poisoned Poseidon to be murdered.*

**FALASTER FISK:** In the adventure as written, Falaster Fisk tells the PCs to take the *infernal puzzlebox* to Sylvira Savikas in Candlekeep to have it opened. He also, for some godforsaken reason, tells them exactly what's in it before they do so. As with Reya, the adventure is shooting itself in the foot by needlessly deprotagonizing the PCs.

So what is Fisk doing here? This only requires a slight adjustment: Sylvira Salkiras, like Reya Mantlemorn, followed independent leads and came to suspect that Duke Vanthampur is secretly a Zarielite. She sent Fisk to investigate. He got into the manor by pretending to interview for the recently vacant housekeeper position (DIA, p. 33), but got careless and was caught. Duke Vanthampur is still trying to get him to confess who sent him and how much they know.

If Falaster sees the *infernal puzzlebox*, he'll recognize it for what it is as a result of his work with Sylvira. He'll still recommend that the PCs take it to her in Candlekeep: She's an expert in such devices and will know how to safely open it. (He can also warn them of the disastrous psychic consequences of a failed attempt to open it.)

**SATIIR THIONE-HHUNE:** Satiir Thion-Hhune is described in *Descent Into Avernus* as a seventy-year-old aristocratic human woman. My brain somehow parsed that as **seventeen**-year-old, and I ended up picturing her as basically a young Claudia Christian:





It's a strong visual image, so it's probably going to stick for me. (The seventy-year-old Satiir can be her grandmother.) As previously discussed in [Part 3E](#), she was kidnapped by Bhaal cultists who were looting a Hhune treasury and taken to the Dungeon of the Dead Three, then transferred to Vanthampur Manor to be used as political leverage against the Hhune family when Vanthampur makes her move to become Grand Duke.

I put in some effort to untangle the Hhune family lore, but largely gave up when it became clear the effort involved was probably not worth it for what will almost certainly be a very minor character (see "Design Notes," below, if you're interested in taking up the project). The one important thing to note is that the Hhune family were once (and possibly still are) part of the inner cabal of the Knights of the Shield that venerated the Shield of the Hidden Lord and knew its true identity (see "Lore of Gargauth" in [Part 3B](#) of the Remix). This means that Satiir is likely to **recognize the Shield of the Hidden Lord**. This could take several forms:

- She could be a true believer and member of the inner cabal. As a Gargauth cultist, she'll know the Shield of the Hidden Lord for what it is. She will either attempt to convince the PCs that the Shield was stolen from the Hhune treasury so that they will "return" it to her, or she'll report back to her family that the PCs have it (and the family will send Knights of the Shield to take it).
- She could be a true believer and NOT a member of the inner cabal. She'll recognize the shield from its depictions, but believe that it's the Shield of Silvam. (Possibly to similar effect as the above. Or maybe she just fan-girls over it, misleading the PCs as to its true identity. Gargauth will happily play into being a stolen royal relic.)
- In either of the scenarios above, Gargauth might telepathically communicate with Satiir and prompt her to similar (or different) effect according to his current agenda.
- For something completely different, Satiir could be a rebellious teenager who's familiar with the family's secret worship of Gargauth, but has rejected it. This version of Satiir would recognize the Shield and warn the PCs that the Shield "speaks with the voice of Gargauth", filling them in on at least part of its true history.

*Design Notes: In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Duke Inselm Hhune was the leader of the Knights of the Shield. He was somehow related to the Illehhune family. (Duke Tithkar Illehhune was responsible for first bringing the Shield of the Hidden Lord into the Knights of the Shield.) Duke Inselm was married to Lucia Thione-Hhune.*

*Duke Inselm was a self-made noble who bought his Tethyrian title of nobility and ALSO had a nephew who was part of the nobility (see [Murder in Baldur's Gate](#), p. 51). He arranged a marriage between his nephew and the heir of a patriar family in Baldur's Gate. He then purchased the patriar family's estate, and this somehow made the Hhunes a patriar family. (The estate also became the headquarters of the Knights of the Shield.)*

*At this point, logically, you'd have the Thione-Hhunes as Tethyrian nobles descending from Duke Inselm's line and the Hhunes of Baldur's Gate who would be descended from Inselm's nephew.*

*But in Descent Into Avernus, you have both Satiir Thione-Hhune (who is being held "as leverage in the event that the Hhunes find out who stole the Shield of the Hidden Lord") and Lady Lutecia Hhune, the head of the Hhune patriars who has no heirs and "faces the prospect of leaving her family home to a detested branch of the family when she dies."*

*The Thione-Hhunes must be the detested branch, right? But if so, why would Duke Vanthampur kidnap one of them for "leverage"?*

*"Ah ha!" It must be that the Thione-Hhunes, being descended from Lord Inselm, have continued as Gargauth cultists while the patriar Hhunes have broken away from that. Lady Lutecia detests the evil branch of the family. Vanthampur stole the Shield from the Thione-Hhunes and that's why Satiir would give meaningful leverage to –*

*No. They stole the Shield from Lady Lutecia. Lutecia keeps the Shield locked up and wants it forgotten, but is also still a member of the Knights of the Shield and has devils working for her. Also the Knights are now a completely secret organization that nobody knows exists (instead of being a public organization with a secret cabal inside of it).*

*This is the point where I gave up.*

**SHALEEN ZORAZ:** Shaleen is locked up because she discovered that Duke Vanthampur had rerouted the sewers to seize control of the Dungeon of the Dead Three. Minor tweak, but I recommend that Shaleen dug a little deeper and ALSO discovered that Vanthampur had similarly rerouted the sewers beneath her own manor.

**KAEJIL ORUNMAR:** Kaejil is also locked up with Shaleen in Area V19. No changes required.

# THURSTWELL VANTHAMPUR

Thurstwell is a crippled spider stuck in his home, able to exercise his will upon the world only through his imp servitors while jealously observing his able-bodied siblings going out and about in the world.

Thurstwell's imp spies can be found throughout the Vanthampur Investigations. As previously discussed, you'll want him to take meaningful action in response to what his imps see. Options include:

- He sends an imp to barter with the PCs. (He'd probably like them to kill one or both of his brothers. If he's feeling daring, or if the PCs have already succeeded at eliminating his brothers, he might even ask them to kill his mother so that he can take her place at the head of the family. If the PCs were to go all in on this, you could have an alternate trajectory where, the job done, he asks them to take the *infernal puzzlebox* to Candlekeep and have it opened.)
- He sends a murder squad of Dead Three Cultists (*Descent Into Avernus*, p. 28) to kill the PCs.
- He sends an abduction squad to kidnap a refugee that the PCs care about so that he can use them as leverage. (Maybe to leverage them into an alliance. Maybe to force them to back off.)



## V13. THURSTWELL'S BEDROOM

In addition to the normal key entry for his room (DIA, p. 35), this room includes a work table covered in papers, books, and other items. On this table can be found:

- The *infernal puzzlebox*.
- The *Thurstwell's Correspondence* handout.
- A draconic mask made of bronze with a strange glaze upon its face. The mask shimmers different colors depending on the angle you look at it, varying from black to blue to green to red to white. (GM Note: This mask taken from the Tiamat relics stolen from the Hhunes, see the Dungeon of the Dead Three.)

## THURSTWELL'S CORRESPONDENCE

*My dear Thirsty,*

*It's done. I've sent word to Vaaz. We'll be rid of the oaf soon enough.*

*I could use more of your divinations, though. My research using Elturgard's armorial rolls suggest that the Majerus family were quite bountiful with their loins both during and after their service to the Companion. Given how many brats they seem to have had, they were probably rutting in their saddles. It's likely they have any number of heirs in the refugee camps, so I think it'll be well worth your time to cast forth your seventh eye or whatever and identify them for me.*

*Amrik*

**GM NOTE:** The armorial rolls identify the name, coat of arms, and date of accolade for every knight in the Order of the Companion and the Riders of Elturel. See *Part 3H: Trafficking Amrik*.

# PART 3J: THE PORTYR ASSASSINATION

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by [Justin Alexander](#) – May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020

At the Dungeon of the Dead Three, the PCs discover that Duke Vanthampur has ordered the assassination of Duke Dillard Portyr during a speech he's giving at a charity event for the Confraternity of Refugee Relief.

**DUKE DILLARD PORTYR:** See *Descent Into Avernus*, p. 162. He was once the Grand Duke (see [Murder in Baldur's Gate](#), p. 36), but now isn't for some reason. He's the uncle of Marshal Liara Portyr.

**CONFRATERNITY OF REFUGEE RELIEF:** Established by Duke Portyr, this secular charitable organization seeks to raise funds and provide relief to the Elturian refugees. Whereas other figures of power in the city are panicked about the disruptive force of the refugees, Portyr is both legitimately concerned about them and has also made the mental calculation that, if Elturel has truly fallen, the refugees probably aren't going anywhere – there's going to end up being a Little Elturgard outside the city walls and a significant chunk of the city's population will be made up of former refugees. If they all have a friendly opinion of or even feel indebted to the Portyrs, that could be a lasting political legacy.

**THE EVENT:** The confraternity has been organizing free meals for refugees and has commandeered (under Portyr's authority) a section of the Wide around the statue of the Beloved Ranger to do so:



Today, Duke Portyr plans to stand on the base of the Beloved Ranger and give a speech pledging his support and the support of Baldur's Gate to succor the refugees.

## THE ASSASSINATION

As the PCs rush into the Wide, they see Duke Portyr mount the Beloved Ranger and begin giving his speech.

*I would like to lead my fellow citizens of Baldur's Gate in welcoming our Elturian friends! I know that times are difficult now, but we will find a way to persevere – TOGETHER!*

*There have always been those who thought the people of Baldur's Gate and the people of Elturel must live in strife. But Amaunator has given us a gift of time;*

*the gift of a precious moment in which to see that we are not rivals, but rather brothers joined by the water of the Chionthar. And if we stand together –*

**THE INFERNAL ARROW:** That's as far as Duke Portyr gets before a blood-red arrow, glowing with infernal light, streaks from the crowd from and strikes him in the chest. The Duke staggers, gasps, and then explodes in a shower of blood and gore. Several devils climb out of his putrid remains before tearing into his guards with vile glee.

If the *infernal arrow* is recovered it will be found to still glow red hot (1d4 fire damage if picked up without gloves), but its one-use conjuration effect has been used up.

**THE DEVILS:** Two **imps** (MM, p. 76) and four **nupperibo** (*Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes*, p. 168). They'll attack Portyr's guards and then the crowd, unleashing panic across the Wide. At the start of each round, roll 1d6 to determine a random complication:

1. A young child falls nearby and is in danger of being trampled to death unless someone takes an action to save them.
2. The riotous crowd swirls around the group, reducing their speed by 10 feet.
3. A member of the crowd grapples (+0) a character (escape DC 10), screaming for help.
4. A random character stumbles on a pothole and must succeed on a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw or fall prone.
5. An overzealous **guard** (MM, p. 347) thinks the PCs are working the assassins or devils or both and attacks!
6. The statue of the Beloved Ranger is toppling over. A random character must make DC 14 Dexterity saving throw or be crushed beneath it for 2d6 bludgeoning damage (they also fall prone a DC 18 Strength check is required to lift the statue off of them).



**THE ASSASSINS:** The shot was taken by a **night blade** (DIA, p. 233) accompanied by four **fists of Bane** (DIA, p. 232). They strategically located themselves near an entrance to the Undercellar (DIA, p. 182) and will attempt to escape through its labyrinthine depths.

**CHASE THROUGH THE UNDERCELLAR:** If the PCs give chase, the assassins may try to split up. Use the chase rules from the DMG (p. 252). Complications can include:

1. The chase goes through the middle of a pit fight between two **giant weasels** (MM, p. 329). You either need to circle the pit (40 feet of additional movement) or suffer an opportunity attack from a weasel.
2. A crowd blocks the way. Make a DC 10 Strength (Athletics) or Dexterity (Acrobatics) check. On a failure, the crowd counts as 10 feet of difficult terrain.
3. A maze of barrels, crates, or similar obstacles stands in the way. Make a DC 10 Dexterity (Acrobatics) or Intelligence check to navigate the maze. On a failed check, it counts as 10 feet of difficult terrain.
4. The ground is slipper with rain, spilled oil, or some other liquid. Make a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw. On a failed save, you fall prone.
5. The assassins slam and lock an iron gate shut as they pass through it. It costs them 10 feet of movement, but it will require a DC 18 Strength check to smash through it without slowing down. On a failure, no progress is made this round. A Dexterity check using Thieves' Tools can undo the lock.

6. The assassins cut through a brothel or indulgence den. Make a DC 10 Strength (Athletics), Dexterity (Acrobatics), or Charisma (Intimidation) check to weave through. On a failure, the brothel counts as 20 feet of difficult terrain.
  7. A storage corral collapses as the assassins run over the top of it. A huge plume of flour fills the air. Make a DC 12 Wisdom (Perception) test or treat the cloud as 10 feet of difficult terrain.
  8. A beggar blocks your way. Make a DC 10 Strength (Athletics), Dexterity (Acrobatics), or Charisma (Intimidation) check to get past. On a failed check, the beggar counts as 5 feet of difficult terrain.
  9. You are forced to make a sharp turn to avoid colliding with something impassable. Make a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw to navigate the turn. On a failed save, you collide with something hard and take 1d4 bludgeoning damage.
  10. A portcullis ahead of you begins to shut. Make a DC 15 Dexterity (Acrobatics) check to slide under it. Otherwise it requires a DC 12 Strength check to lift it, and you lost 10 feet of movement (but can hold it for others behind you so that they don't lose speed).
- 11-20. No complications.

## AFTERMATH

As noted in "Portyr Politics" ([Part 3C](#)), when Marshal Portyr learned that Duke Vanthampur is responsible for her uncle's death, she will ask the PCs to wipe out the Vanthampur family. For political reasons they'll be disavowed, but if they succeed, she'll offer them either promotions within the Flaming Fist or a big cash reward (whatever appeals to them more).

If the PCs don't find the clues revealing that Duke Portyr is about to be assassinated (and kill Mortlock before he can shout something like, "You're too late! Nothing can save Portyr now!"), or if they simply don't act on them, then the assassination will obviously still happen even in their absence. In this scenario, Duke Portyr's guards managed to kill one of the assassins and they've been identified as a Dead Three cultist. If the PCs don't already have evidence of Vanthampur's complicity in the assassination itself, the evidence they have of her working with the Dead Three cultists will nevertheless make Liara Portyr suspect it: She'll order the PCs into Vanthampur Manor to find evidence implicating Duke Vanthampur.

(If the PCs share none of this with Liara Portyr — which is quite plausible if they're not working with the Flaming Fist and don't or can't attempt to prevent the assassination — then the assassination will just be a [backdrop event](#).)

## DESIGN NOTES

The continuity around Duke Portyr's assassination is taken from *Inglorious Redemption*, Season 9 of the Adventurers' League. As I've noted previously, I think the current political situation in Baldur's Gate is really interesting, and this canonical assassination plays a big part in it.

With that being said, I've shifted the continuity here slightly. Like other seasons of the Adventurers' League, *Inglorious Redemption* reflects the events of that year's major campaign book, in this case *Descent Into Avernus*. But in this case it reflects them rather more closely than other seasons I'm familiar with. *Inglorious Redemption*, quite implausibly, features a *different* Cult of Zariel in Baldur's Gate murdering refugees for a *different* reason while being instructed by a *different* devil whose name starts with G (Gharizol).

When I first looked at the Adventurers' League material I was actually hoping it might provide the basis for a [second track](#) that could complicate the Vanthampur Investigations and draw the PCs even more

deeply in to Baldur's Gate. Once I saw it was going to feature more Cult of Zariel stuff, I thought it might be good source of material to enrich the Vanthampur Investigations. The samey-samey design, though, doesn't offer much of value to work with, and would probably just create a sense of either *déjà vu* or unnecessary repetition.

So the only thing I ended up grabbing was this assassination, which I adapted so that it was part of Duke Vanthampur's schemes instead of being unrelated. It's specifically taken from M.T. Black's [DDAL09-04 - The Day of the Devil](#): The *infernal arrow* and crowd combat complications (with modifications) are taken from there. You can blame me for the confraternity and the Undercellar chase.

**TIME OF DAY:** Note that the specific meal the confraternity is providing here is left undefined. This gives you a good deal of flexibility (breakfast, second breakfast, lunch, afternoon event, dinner) depending on what time the PCs discover the clues in the Dungeon of the Dead Three and go rushing forth to stop the assassination. (If they went in at night, for example, the sun can just be rising for the breakfast event as they emerge back onto the city streets!)

**SAVING THE DAY:** If you'd rather give the PCs an opportunity to prevent the assassination, that works, too. That will probably require tweaking the set-up a bit to give them some meaningful structure of taking security precautions.

# PART 4A: THE ROAD TO CANDLEKEEP

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by Justin Alexander – May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020



## THE CANDLEKEEP REVELATIONS

In order for *Descent Into Avernus* to continue beyond this point, the PCs need to go to Candlekeep and have Sylvira Salkiras open the *infernal puzzlebox*. (Theoretically they could also figure out an alternative way of opening the *puzzlebox* and also an alternative method of getting to Hellturel after they do so. More power to them.)

There are two things that are required for this to happen.

**FIRST:** The PCs must have possession of the *infernal puzzlebox*. In [Part 3C: The Vanthampur Revelations](#) we added multiple clues pointing to the existence (and importance) of the *puzzlebox* specifically so that the PCs would know to look for it when they went to Vanthampur Manor. (If they brief Zodge or Marshal Portyr on this information, they will also encourage the PCs to seize the *puzzlebox* due to its obvious importance to the cultists.)

**SECOND:** The PCs must know to take it to Candlekeep in order to open it. There are three ways for the PCs to learn this:

- Falaster Fisk can recognize the *puzzlebox* and tell them that Sylvira Salkiras has opened similar boxes in the past.
- If the PCs research the *puzzlebox* (with an Intelligence (Arcana or Religion) check), they can learn the basic properties of the *puzzlebox* and also be pointed in the direction of Candlekeep as a place where they could learn even more. (This wouldn't necessarily identify Sylvira, but could. If it doesn't, they'll be pointed in her direction once they start making inquiries at Candlekeep.)
- Marshal Portyr will order them to take the *puzzlebox* to Candlekeep to find out what it is (or strongly support that action if they've already proposed it). (As also discussed in Part 3C and Part 3J, she will be interested in getting the PCs out of Baldur's Gate until the political heat from



the assassination of the Vanthampurs dies down. This is as good a reason as any and the *puzzlebox* is an enigma she'd like solved in any case.)

It would also be useful for the PCs to learn that they **need to donate a unique book as an entrance gift in order to gain entry to Candlekeep** before they leave Baldur's Gate (because this will give them an opportunity to obtain one). Any of the leads above (Fisk, research pointing them to Candlekeep, Portyr) can and should inform them of this.

## DOWN THE COAST WAY



The thing that I immediately notice about the "Journey to Candlekeep" (DIA, p. 43-44) is the obvious missed opportunity: The refugees from Elturel.

If refugees are pouring down the Chionthar River and then being turned away from Baldur's Gate, then they're going to start heading north and south along the Coast Way. As we discussed in [Part 1](#), the plight of the refugees is the emotional connection that the PCs (and players) have to Elturel. At this point we're heading straight towards the campaign-changing revelation that ELTUREL WAS NOT DESTROYED, so this is the perfect time to refresh the thematic work we laid down at the beginning of the campaign.

As written in *Descent Into Avernus* there were three encounters along the road. None of them currently feature the refugees, but with a few simple tweaks all of them COULD.

### WYRM'S CROSSING

*Wyrms Crossing is a cutpurse's paradise, and every traveler here runs the risk of being pickpocketed. As the characters make their way from one end of Wyrms Crossing to the other, have each player roll a d20. (Don't roll for NPCs traveling with the party.) The character or character with the lowest roll are targeted by a pickpocket.*

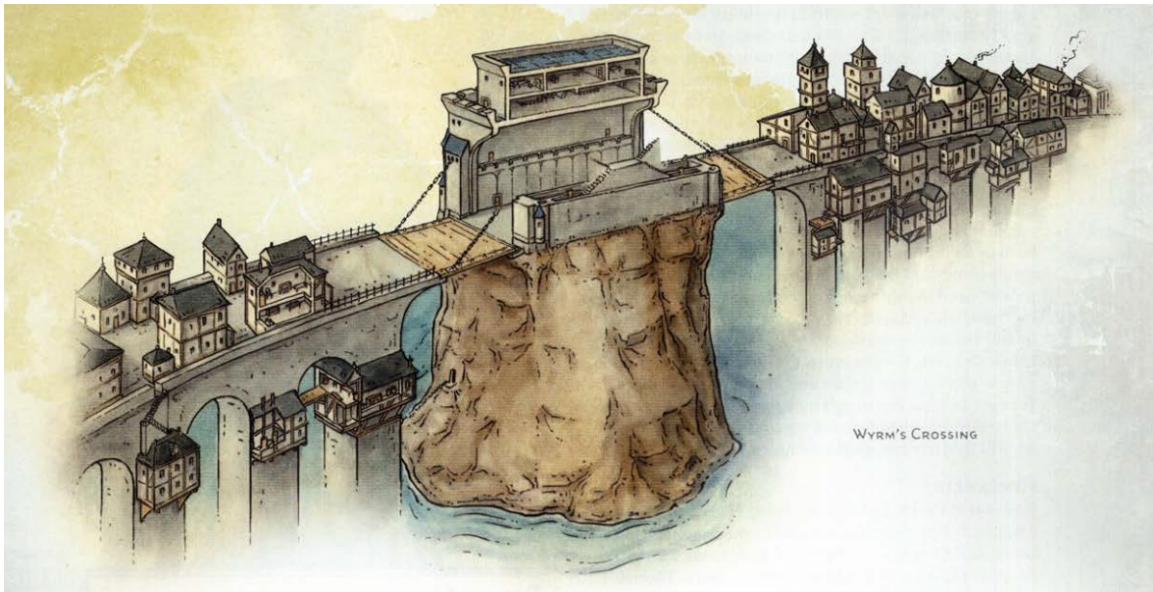
(Tangentially: If you want to randomly pick one of the PCs, [just roll a die on your side of the screen](#). Asking the whole table to roll d20s, then collecting and comparing that data is a terrible technique. You're wasting your players' time with busy work.)

As written, the pickpocket is a generic encounter that's resolved, one way or another, without interaction from the PC who's targeted:

*Use a character's passive Wisdom (Perception) score to determine whether a theft made against that character is successful. If the character's score is 11 or higher, the theft is detected and thwarted. Otherwise, the thief makes off with one item weighing 1 pound or less (such as a coin pouch or potion).*

**REFUGEE TWIST:** The pick pocket is a refugee. A kid named Frens Nölruth (**bandit**, MM p. 343). If at all possible, he's not grabbing money, but snatching rations.

If the PCs catch Frens, they'll have to decide what to do with a refugee who's simply hungry and desperate. If they don't then when they discover the theft they'll reflect on the fact that someone in the pressing throngs of refugees could have taken their coin purse, but instead took their bread.



## KNIGHTS OF THE SHIELD

In this road encounter, the PCs are ambushed by a devil disguised as a local farmer.

*Coming up the road toward you is a human farmer riding on the front of hay-filled wagon pulled by two draft horses. The farmer gives you a friendly wave as the wagon draws near.*

**REFUGEE TWIST:** The bad guys aren't disguised as local farmers. They're disguised as refugees; one of the many families or small groups that the PCs have been passing on the road all day.

(These small clots of refugees are an additional encounter in their own right: Describe them. Give the PCs a chance to respond to them — providing succor where they can, riding past while studiously ignoring them, whatever — and then *after* that describe the devil leaping out of a group they pass further down the road.)

*Design Note: As scripted, these are Knights of the Shield ambushing the PCs in an effort to grab the Shield of the Hidden Lord. There's a bunch of ways that this might not make sense (the PCs might not have the Shield or they may not have encountered any Knights who could report that they had the Shield), but it's not terribly hard to justify: Marshal Portyr might have a leak in her organization, for example.*

*On the other hand, the essential beat here is “trouble is following you from Baldur’s Gate.” It’s a minor beat, but it provides a nice sense of pressure on the group. You can achieve this same effect by having some other faction that the PCs have pissed off attempt to ambush them (remnants of either Cult of Zariel are an obvious choice).*

*Avoid the [Quantum Ogre](#), however: If the PCs specifically take efforts to sneak out of Baldur’s Gate undetected, use some kind of appropriate [counter-intelligence](#) resolution to see if they’re successful. (And, of course, if they are, they can’t be ambushed.)*

## TALE OF THE HELLRIDERS

The final encounter has Reya Mantlemorn share the history of the Hellriders with the PCs while they’re gathered around the campfire.

**REFUGEE TWIST:** If you’ve eliminated Reya Mantlemorn as a GMPC (see [Part 2](#)) this is actually a great time to leverage the character. She’s been riding up and down the road helping refugees in need; seeing their campfire she approaches, thinking at first they might be refugees, but then welcoming a chance to rest for a little while.

Alternatively, if Reya IS journeying with the PCs, their camp can be similarly approached by another Hellrider (Bran Nestoon). Reya is excited to share news with a fellow Hellrider. Later, or prompted by something in that shared news, Reya and the Hellrider share the history of the Hellriders with the PCs.

**REVISED TALE:** One important revision to how lore is being handled in the Remix is that it is NOT widely known that Zariel, the Archduchess of Avernus, was once the same angel who led the Charge of the Hellriders.

We’ll be delving into the full history of the Charge of the Hellriders (as I call it) in Part 7 of the Remix, where we’ll also be straightening out the continuity glitches around it. The key thing for right now is that Zariel is nameless, so that her role in the Charge can come as a revelation (see Part 4C).

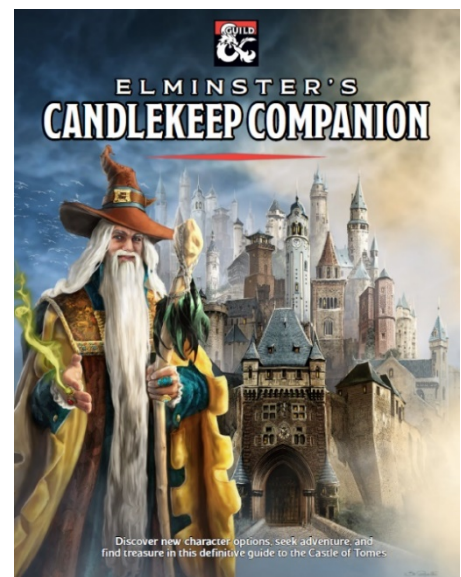
## ARRIVING AT CANDLEKEEP

If you really want the PCs’ brief sojourn at Candlekeep to pop, I recommend checking out [Elminster’s Guide to Candlekeep](#) on the Dungeon Masters Guild. It features a ton of play-oriented material that not only highlights the stuff that’s cool about the Castle of Tomes, but also gives you the tools to inject those cool things directly into your game.

Start with the PCs **arriving at Candlekeep**: The book gives you plentiful detail on the procedures around the presentation of the **entrance gift**. (And when the PCs are looking for potential entrance gifts back in Baldur’s Gate, the *Candlekeep Companion* also includes a random table of books that you can use.)

Once they’ve gained admittance, **build their journey** through the tangled halls of Candlekeep. The *Companion* features a number of random tables for determining the rooms, towers, and passages they go through while traveling from one place to another.

(The *Candlekeep Companion* also features a beautiful poster map of Candlekeep by Marco Bernardini that’s well worth using.)



*Design Note: If the PCs weren't guided to Candlekeep by Falaster Fisk, they won't be looking for Sylvira when they arrive. This isn't really a problem: The minute they start making inquiries about infernal affairs or the infernal puzzlebox, they'll be pointed in her direction.*

**RESEARCH AT CANDLEKEEP:** The *Companion* also includes guidelines for conducting research at Candlekeep. If you want to make sure the PCs have the full Candlekeep experience, I recommend tweaking Sylvira's ritual for opening the *infernal puzzlebox* so that it takes most or all of a tenday (we can imagine the puzzlebox suspended in the energy fields of some strange, technomantic device as its fractal layers are slowly unraveled one by one).

## SYLVIRA & TRAXIGOR

As designed, this section of *Descent Into Avernus* is:

- The PCs are told to travel to a loremaster who lives in a castle.
- They do so.
- The PCs are told to travel to a loremaster who lives in a tower.
- They do so.

It's kind of repetitive and also feels fairly pointless. The adventure even goes so far as to say:

*Although Sylvira can prepare the plane shift spell, there's no point, as magical wards placed on Candlekeep prevent creatures from using such means to go to or from the library.*

Which is just silly because... walk out the front gates and cast the spell.

I'd recommend either conflating these two characters into one (in which case I'd pick Traxigor as I find the magical otter to be an infinitely more interesting character) or simply put them both in the same lab at Candlekeep as partners.

The rough sequence probably looks like this:

- PCs meet Sylvira and Traxigor.
- The PCs show them the infernal artifact(s) they have.
- Sylvira and Traxigor begin sharing their lore on those (see Part 4B).
- At some point during this, Lulu comes flying into the room. She's here sharing her memories of Hell with Sylvira and Traxigor, aiding them in their research. She might even have something to add on the *infernal puzzlebox* or Gargauth's history. (This, of course, assumes that Lulu isn't being played as a PC, see [Part 2](#).)
- Sylvira opens the *infernal puzzlebox*.
- They establish why the PCs need to go to Avernus (see Part 4B).
- The PCs help Traxigor look for his lost tuning fork.
- Traxigor leads the PCs out of Candlekeep (when they're ready) and *plane shifts* them to Hellturel.

### LAB RUMMAGING:

*Characters can help Traxigor search for his missing tuning fork, which is keyed to the Nine Hells. Whoever rolls the highest Wisdom (Perception) check finds the tuning fork. Whoever rolls the lowest finds a random trinket, determined by rolling on the Trinkets table in chapter 5 of the Player's Handbook. Traxigor doesn't care if the characters keep the trinket or not, and doesn't remember how or when he acquired it.*

I really like this mechanical interaction: It's a nice, subtle touch to reward the low roll in addition to the high roll, coupled to imagery that reinforces the environment. If you want to add a little more sizzle, consider using [101 Curious Items](#) or the random oddities tables from [Arcana of the Ancients](#). (If you want to add A LOT of sizzle, use the random cypher tables from *Arcana of the Ancients*.)

# PART 4B: THE ROAD TO AVERNUS

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[by Justin Alexander - May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020](#)



We've finally arrived at the big moment: The PCs are going to discover what really happened to the holy city of Elturel and then they're going to descend into the depths of Hell!

(If we were to look at the campaign in terms of [three-point plotting](#), the destruction of Elturel is the **DISRUPTION** that the characters **MUST** deal with and the revelations at Candlekeep are the **REVERSAL**, the moment where the whole campaign becomes *an entirely different campaign*.)

There are a couple of problems we need to address here.

First, as discussed in [Part 3](#), we lack a clear vision of how the pact that sent Elturel to Hell works. On the one hand, the metaphysics of the pact (literally *how it works*) is simply underdeveloped to the point where it's mostly just vigorous handwaving. On the other hand, the historical background on how it happened (who made the pact, what their relationship was with Elturel, when the pact was made, etc.) is riddled with continuity errors (both in terms of *Descent Into Avernus* itself and also in relation to preexisting continuity).

Second: We've reached the point where the PCs *plane shift* to the Nine Hells!

The book so blithely presents this as the next thing that happens (it's the name of the book!) that it might take you a moment to realize that the PCs have absolutely no reason to do this.

"But they've just learned that the city of Elturel has been transported to Hell!"

Uh huh. So what?

They're 5<sup>th</sup> level PCs. They have no special resources or knowledge that puts them in a unique position to solve this problem and we've already established that Eturel is filled with high-level paladins, spellcasters, and others that obviously haven't been able to solve the problem. In fact, since the PCs have *no idea* how to solve the problem, the solution could just as easily be found in Waterdeep or the Eturelian crater or Iriaebor as in Avernus!

Frodo taking the One Ring to Mordor? Sure. He has a unique vector for destroying Sauron's power that no one else in the world has.

Some random halfling without the One Ring heading to Mordor to "save the day"? It makes no sense. It's suicide.

Yes, there are some NPCs standing right there who can say, "I have received a message from the Great DM in the Sky! Thou art supposed to get on the train!" if the players haven't intuited the rails. But we can do better than that.

## LORE OF THE PACT OF ETUREL

*Note: As with other "Lore" sections of the Remix, this material should be considered authoritative. Any place where it contradicts the published version of Descent Into Avernus is a deliberate change. Ignore the published version and use the continuity described here.*

At this point we're going to be providing a broad overview for both the metaphysics of Eturel's fall (providing a framework for how this could be done to any city) and the history of Eturel's fall (i.e., the specific events for how it actually happened).

As we dive into the history of Eturel, it may be useful to know that a lot of this is based on a mistake: When writing the 4<sup>th</sup> Edition *Forgotten Realms Campaign Guide*, Rich Baker confused Elversult (which had an artificial sun) with Eturel (which now ended up with an artificial sun). See [Addendum: A Textual History of Eturel](#) for more details.

### THE HISTORY OF ETUREL'S FALL

In 1439 DR, High Rider Klav Ikaia led an expedition of Hellriders into the High Moor. A feral vampire had begun turning large numbers of orcs, trolls, and ogres into vampire spawn which were threatening the peace of border communities that had been placed under the protection of Eturel's Guard. The expedition was a success and the feral vampire, along with most of its spawn, was destroyed. Unbeknownst to the rest of the expedition, however, High Rider Ikaia had become infected.

The new vampire lord of Eturel kept his true nature hidden, but the darkness of his curse ate at the city like a cancer. In 1444 DR, the secret was discovered by Naja Bellandi, the High Watcher of Helm. Naja managed to escape from the High Hall before she was turned into a vampire herself, fled through the moonlit shadows of the Garden, and escaped from the vampires hunting her by jumping from the Maiden's Leap into the canal below.

Naja's discovery and subsequent escape triggered the Night of the Red Coup: High Rider Ikaia and his vampires had already infiltrated the highest ranks of the government; now they swept through what remained, killing or converting dozens. The Hellriders themselves were betrayed, caught off guard, and slaughtered in a vampiric frenzy.

Naja Bellandi, having dragged herself from the canal, returned to Helm's Shieldhall only to find it an abattoir. She gathered any survivors she could find and sent word to the patrols still operating outside the city. A siege was raised, but the Hellriders were ill-equipped for such an action and their one-time

allies had been alienated by High Rider Ikaia's imperial actions (even before he became a vampire). Inside the city walls, Bellandi ran one of several guerilla resistance groups, but for fourteen days a reign of vampiric terror gripped the city.

**THE CULT OF ZARIEL:** There was a Cult of Zariel in Elturel at this time, being led by Gargauth. In this chaos Gargauth saw an opportunity. Members of the cult approached High Watcher Bellandi and told her that Zariel could help her... all she had to do was agree to a Pact.

Bellandi initially rebuffed their offer, but then came the High Harvest Slaughter: Vampires broke into High Harvest Home, the temple of Chauntea, and murdered the entire congregation which had taken refuge there. Hundreds of men, women, and children were killed and the worship of Chauntea in the city was virtually wiped out.

The Zarielites came again, and this time Bellandi accepted their offer. She formed a Pact with Zariel, accepting the Archduchess' help in overthrowing High Rider Ikaia. In return, the entire city would be forfeit to Zariel in fifty years. (Bellandi believed she had bargained well in gaining the fifty years, but in reality Zariel needed that time to secure her grip on the city.)

That night the Companion arrived in the sky above Elturel. The vampires were taken by surprise and most were destroyed by its "holy" light, although High Rider Ikaia himself escaped into the catacombs beneath the city.

*Note: The inner mystery of the Cult of Zariel claims that they have been secret puppetmasters in Elturel ever since Zariel first rode into Avernus in the Charge of the Hellriders. Although it is perhaps possible that the local cult dates back that far in one form or another, if they had actually been pulling strings the entire time, the city probably would have fallen to Hell long ago.*

**AFTER THE COMPANION:** High Watcher Bellandi became High Observer Bellandi and began the painful process of reconstruction. Only she and the Cult of Zariel knew of the Pact that had been made, and in her hubris Bellandi believed that in the fifty years she had left that she would either be able to find a way of breaking the Pact or, perhaps, evacuate the city or find some other solution for the people to escape Zariel's snare.

In 1446 DR, the Cult of Zariel had Bellandi assassinated.

Bellandi was replaced by High Observer Cathasach Restat, one of the founding members of the Order of the Companion. Restat was a good man, completely ignorant of the Pact that had been made. In 1448 DR he converted to the religion of Torm, a god of order and righteousness who was growing increasingly popular in a city desperately craving such things. It was under Restat that Elturel became increasingly theocratic, with the Order of the Companion becoming ascendant over the Hellriders, the High Hall reconsecrated as a temple to Torm, and Restat himself becoming not merely the High Observer, but the High Observer of Torm.

The reign of High Rider Ikaia had been a true gift to the Cult of Zariel. With the vampires' death, all the upper levels of the Elturian government had been stripped away. The cult stepped into the power vacuum, placing their people in key positions throughout the new government. Although High Observer Restat was not a Zarielite, this process only accelerated after Bellandi's assassination, and they also





established auxiliary cults in the cities conquered by the newly christened empire of Elturgard. Eventually they were ready to take the next step.

High Observer Restat's heir apparent was a popular paladin named Tamal Thent. In 1479 DR, she and her entire retinue mysteriously disappeared near the Boareskyr Bridge. (They were ambushed by a company of Zarielite Hellriders.) When Restat died in 1481 DR, Thavius Kreeg, a member of the Cult of Zariel, became the new High Observer instead. He's ruled the city for the past thirteen years.

*Design Note: If you wanted to keep more strictly consistent with the idea from Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide that Thavius Kreeg has been High Observer for forty years, you can eliminate Cathasach Restat from this timeline: Bellandi is assassinated. It looks like Tamal Thent is going to succeed her, but then she mysteriously vanishes and Kreeg gets the position instead.*

*Since [the continuity is a mess anyway](#), I felt comfortable making this change, however. Primarily I think it's more interesting if the person who makes the pact with Zariel ISN'T a cultist, but then that person can't stick around too long. I also think it's more interesting if Thavius Kreeg is a younger man and the heir of a decades-long scheme, rather than the mastermind who has orchestrated Elturel's fall from the beginning. This creates a gap which has to be filled, and I also think Elturgard has a bit more heft as a political entity if there's an actual succession of rulers (as opposed to it being a one-generation gimmick). I also found it was a lot easier to explain the rise of Torm in Elturel once Restat was in the picture.*

*I also played with the idea of simply abandoning the city's unexplained conversion from Helm to Torm, particularly once I realized how natural the High Watcher → High Observer progression was. But the Torm stuff is pretty baked in at this point, and I think this version works well.*

## THE METAPHYSICS OF ELTUREL'S FALL

The goal of Zariel and Gargauth is to have a mass recruitment of new devils for the Blood War. They do this in two ways:

1. They corrupt the oaths of the Hellriders and the Order of the Companion. When the Pact's term comes due, any knights in Elturel are immediately claimed by Zariel. As detailed in [Part 3B](#), this is also true for any of these knights (or their descendants) who die on the Material Plane before Elturel sinks into the Styx (and the Pact is completed).
2. When Elturel sinks into the Styx, the waters of the river will wash over the city. Not only will everyone in the city be drowned, but their minds will be wiped clean. Dying in this immediate state of *tabula rasa* at the very moment that the Pact completes will allow Zariel to scoop up the souls of everyone in Elturel, giving her 40,000 new foot soldiers to throw into the Blood War.

**THE COMPANION:** The role of the Companion in Zariel's scheme is multifaceted. First, of course, it was the price paid to High Watcher Bellandi to form the Pact, and its light was, indeed, malefic to the undead.

Second, the Companion was the source for all the "holy" spells cast by the false clerics and "paladins" of the Cult of Zariel. Although this could only be done within the Companion's light, it allowed them to infiltrate churches and organizations in Elturgard that would have otherwise been inaccessible to them. (Note that the Companion could be seen as far away as Boareskyr Bridge and Berdusk as a bright star hanging low in the sky.) This effect was achieved due to the planetar trapped within the Solar Insidiator (aka, the Companion): The artifact effectively "borrowed" the planetar's energy signature, harvesting and manipulating it not only to create the "holy" spells, but also to mask Zarielites from common divinations that would otherwise have exposed them.

Third, transporting an entire city to another plane takes *a lot* of magical mojo. The Companion's light, having bathed Elturel for fifty years, slowly infused the buildings, streets, and even people. This created an incredibly huge negative etheric charge. When the Pact came to an end, Zariel flipped the "polarity" of the Companion, snapping the charge back to neutral in an instant and releasing a huge wave of energy that helped propel the entire city into Hell.

*Note: This effect, although quite vast, was also quite subtle. It's possible that various arcanists became aware of something strange in the Ethereal Plane around Elturel, particularly in later years. Some might have even begun researching it. If so, they would have been either assassinated or discredited by the Cult of Zariel.*

**RELIGIOUS SUBVERSION:** There was one last and extremely vital requirement for Zariel's plan: Elturel had to be stripped of its divine protection. If the forces of Hell just swoop down, kidnap thousands of a god's followers, and whisk them off to Avernus, they're inviting the god (and probably a bunch of their pantheonic friends) to intervene. Maybe you can do it in a pinch, but it's a lot easier if you can first nudge those people out of the god's column so that the god no longer has divine standing (like legal standing, but more complicated) to come stomp on Avernus.

Of course, you also have to be subtle about all of this. Otherwise, gods like Helm and Torm will send visions to their meddling priests and tell them to start looking that second gift sun in the mouth. So Zariel's plan proceeded gradually across several years:

- Start by sowing confusion about the origin of the Companion. Let every god just kind of assume that some other god must have been responsible.
- Institutionalize and escalate this with the Creed Resolute, which — in the name of Unity — forbids any who take the oath from claiming that the Companion was the gift of any particular god. Let that belief seep into the general populace: The Companion was a gift from all because it was a gift from none. It is simultaneously divine, but not of any god.
- Spend decades infiltrating every major religion in Elturel. Slowly corrupt their religious services (either from the top down or bottom up) so that they are venerating the Companion. (A fairly typical form is to give some form of thanks to the divine gift of the second sun, which "walks beside us every day, a constant companion to us in times of trouble." Importantly, it's a divine gift which custom and, increasingly, engrained belief says you cannot ascribe to your own god. So your religious rites are now venerating a "divine" thing which is not your god.)

To seal the deal, three years ago in 1491 DR Thavius Kreeg passed the Unity Laws. These subtly torqued the, by now well-established, Elturian belief that Unity meant not ascribing the Companion to any god so that Unity now meant explicitly giving thanks to the Companion *before* your god.

**Unity Prayers** were to be given before any public event. These were initially limited to non-religious events, but, without any explicit government action, the Zarielites within the churches soon added them to most religious services, too. Their forms varied, but were typically something like:

*Before all, we give thanks to the Companion, whose light gives us the bounty of the fields and shields us from the dark; whose eternal presence is a constant ally against all those who would threaten Elturgard. Let all those who stand within its blessing remember that it is a beacon of righteousness, which we will follow to our greater glory.*

**Unity Tributes** were erected in various public spaces — small sculptures of the Companion or the emblazoning of the twin sun heraldry of the Order of the Companion. Although labeled "tributes," it would be more accurate to call them shrines. Coins were often dropped into unity fountains for good fortune. In some cases, people would "pay tribute" by leaving small effigies of themselves under an idol of the Companion — a custom which started with knights leaving Elturel to go on patrol (so that they could symbolically always be within the Companion's light), was picked up by merchants similarly

leaving the city on various journeys, and eventually spread to the population in general even if they weren't going anywhere. Eventually, these tributes were added outside (or even inside) churches and temples throughout the city.

You can't quite legislate a requirement that people say things like, "Bless the Companion!" when they receive good fortune; or "We thank the Companion for our refectation" before a meal; or "If Sajra agrees to marry me, I swear I'll never leave the Companion's light!", but you can certainly lead the horse to water.

The end result of all this was that the churches of Elturgard were suborned into a form of idolatry aimed at the Companion. To be clear, at the time of Elturel's Fall there were many people who actually *were* still true and faithful followers of various gods (and many more who thought they *were* faithful followers and could probably be guided back onto the true path if given the right leadership). Just not enough of them. Distanced from Elturel so slowly that they didn't even notice it was happening, none of the gods saw what was coming and none were left with divine standing when the final hour came.

*Design Note: The religious subversion stuff is getting a lot more attention here than seems immediately warranted. It does not play an essential role in the Fall of Elturel and, unlike the other metaphysical aspects, the PCs don't really need to understand any of this to make the scenario work. However, I found it interesting. I think it will also have an impact as the PCs begin exploring Elturel; and I think it also ends up being insightful for roleplaying Elturian characters.*



## THE PACT

*On this, the fifteenth day of Flamerule, in the one thousandth, four hundredth, and forty-fourth year of the Dale Reckoning, I, Naja Bellandi, by my authority as the High Watcher of Helm and the highest surviving mortal authority in the city of Elturel, do swear this Oath to pledge my soul and the entire city of Elturel unto the Archduchess Zariel, to be so passed into her custody at the end of fifty years, the latter to be transported to Avernus and the former to be taken into her service.*

*In exchange for which, Zariel, the Archduchess of Avernus and faithful representative of Asmodeus, the Archfiend, Lord of the Ninth and Nessus, Supreme Master of the Nine Hells, bestows the Gift of the Companion, a Solar Insidiator which shall be placed in the sky above Elturel for at least the term of this agreement and whose light will scourge the undead from the city. She further swears to render whatever aid may be necessary to end High Rider Klav Ikaia's reign if the Gift of the Companion prove insufficient to this task.*

*In consideration and honor of these mutual covenants, we sign in blood upon the day and year first written above,*

*Zariel, Archduchess of Avernus*

*High Watcher Naja Bellandi of Elturel*

**CREED RESOLUTE:** The Creed Resolute was the founding document of the Order of the Companions, but in the 1470's it was also "adopted" by the Hellriders. (This was actually somewhat controversial at the time, and it was more forced on them by the High Observer of Torm than freely taken up. By 1494 DR, however, this controversy is largely forgotten and the Hellriders mostly embrace the Creed enthusiastically.) The full Creed is actually a lengthy document proscribing and prescribing various courses of action that are "right and proper" for a knight. This includes some guidance that's ethical and moral (mostly chivalric code-type stuff), and other guidance that's more practical (like codes of dress and the list of arms and armor which any follower of the Creed must maintain). Even Elturians who haven't sworn the oath to uphold the Creed Resolution will often say things like "recall the Creed."

The crucial bit in terms of Elturel's Fall, however, is the oath the knights swear to uphold the Creed:

*I solemnly pledge my soul and blood and blade to serve as a knight of Elturel and share the Oath of the High Observer in honoring the Gift of the Companion. I shall guard the realm of Elturgard and all those lands which lie under Elturel's Shield, upholding the laws of Elturgard and the commands of the High Observer. I shall live my life in strict accord to the Creed Resolute, placing it and this oath above all other doctrines. I shall be bound to all others who swear this oath, declaring them now and forevermore, whether in life or beyond the veil of death, to be my brothers in arms. To ensure the perfect harmony of our brotherhood, I shall permit no difference in faith to come between us, but rather hold the Companion, which I shall never attribute to one god or another, as our common star.*

Metaphysically, there are two important things to note:

- They pledge their soul to "share the Oath of the High Observer." The implication is that this is the oath to uphold the Creed Resolute, but, of course, that's not the case. It's actually the oath that High Observer Bellandi made to Zariel in the Pact. Everyone swearing this Oath sells their soul to Zariel, just like Bellandi did.
- They also pledge their "blood." This is the clause that damns all of their offspring and leads directly to the murders described in [Part 3](#).

Pro tip, kids: Don't swear to oaths you've never seen.

*Design Note: I don't know if this was intentional (I don't think it was), but in Middle English the word "resolute" also meant "paid," in the sense that one had paid a debt.*

## TOME OF THE CREED RESOLUTE



Everyone who swears the formal oath to the Creed Resolute pricks their thumb and places their blood-mark in the *Tome of the Creed Resolute*. Their signature then magically appears within the book (which also magically gains pages whenever needed). The *Tome* dates back to the founding of the Order of the Companion and thus contains the signature and blood-mark of every knight who has ever sworn the oath.

The first page of the *Tome* has the text of the Oath. The next several pages contain the current text of the full Creed Resolute. The particulars of the Creed (but not the Oath) can be modified by the High Observer and the High Knights of Elturel, and has been on several occasions over the last several decades.

What no one living knows is that if you rip the *Tome* apart, you will find the full text of the Pact between Zariel and Naja Bellandi written in golden ink (actually the blood of a celestial) on the inside of the book's spine. The *Tome of the Creed Resolute* is not a true infernal pact, but it is an important focus for binding the soul and blood of those who swear the Oath to the original Pact. Importantly, it prevents anyone who has sworn the oath from forswearing it and, thus, escaping Zariel's claim to their soul.

If you destroy the *Tome of the Creed Resolute*, it will not free those who have already been claimed by Zariel. But it will:

- Free the descendants of Elturian knights.
- Stop Elturian knights from turning into devils the moment that they die in Avernus (see Part 5).
- Allow Elturian knights to free themselves entirely by forswearing the oath their swore and receiving the benefit of a *remove curse* spell.

Pherria Jynks currently has the *Tome of the Creed Resolute* in the High Hall of Elturel.

# PART 4C: AT THE THRESHOLD OF HELL

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by Justin Alexander – May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020



At this point the NPCs are going to give the players a huge infodump. This sort of thing can be really fraught with problems, not only provoking a lot of glazed eyes around the table, but also making it difficult for players to actually retain vital information.

So let's talk about how we're going to make it work.

First, we've already put a lot of work into the campaign before we ever got to this point. I talk about this in more detail in [Random GM Tips: Getting the Players to Care](#), but if you've set things up so that the players have spent a half dozen or more sessions actively struggling to piece this information together, then they will be (a) actively invested in seeing it all come together and (b) incredibly excited to receive a *glut* of information after spending so much time fighting over little tiny scraps of data.

On a similar note, we're going to deliberately frame this information as a reward: You worked hard to get the *Shield of the Hidden Lord* and the *infernal puzzlebox* to Candlekeep, and now you can turn in your plot coupons and get very specific rewards (in terms of information received) for each one.

Third, although I primarily frame stuff as "things Sylvira knows" for the sake of simplicity, the other reason I recommended in [Part 4A](#) that you should include Traxigor in this scene is that you can use the sequence of introducing new NPCs – Sylvira, then Traxigor, then Lulu – to break up the tidal wave of information.

There are also some places where I recommend that Sylvira and Traxigor disagree with each other, particularly over what course of action they recommend. Feel free to push that farther as you improvise the scene. (For example, Sylvira might say that Gargauth joined an alliance with Bane, Bhaal, and Loviatar to invade Hell. And then Traxigor says, "No, no, no. Lothiak's *Infernal Chronicle* is quite clear on the point that Talona, the Lady of Poison, was also part of the alliance and an absolutely crucial part of the campaign.") Not only will these back-and-forths between the NPCs break up the scene, they will (a)

encourage the PCs to *also* engage with the scene as a conversation and (b) force the players to *think* about the disagreement and make their own decision about what they believe.

We're also going to break up the infodump with some action (i.e., the *infernal puzzlebox* being cracked open and possibly Traxigor asking the PCs to help him find his planar tuning fork). You can enhance this option, if you'd like, by using the suggestion in Part 4A that opening the *puzzlebox* might take a full week (giving the PCs a chance to research topics at Candlekeep). That way you'd have a small infodump, a big break, and then another infodump (launching off the revelation of what's inside the puzzlebox).

Finally, we're going to proactively prompt PC expertise. Although the initial revelations obviously need to come from the Candlekeep experts (otherwise the PCs wouldn't need to have come here in the first place), once those doors of knowledge have been unlocked, it's quite possible that one or more of the PCs will have relevant knowledge. (For example, they might recognize the *infernal contract* inside the *puzzlebox* and know it's significance.) This not only gives players another opportunity to be actively involved with the scene, it also frames the scene so that Sylvira and Traxigor are *peers* who are working *with* the PCs, not lecturers who are giving them a homework assignment.

Some of what's summarized below appears elsewhere in the Remix. It's comprehensively listed here so that it will be crystal clear exactly what information Sylvira, Traxigor, and Lulu give to the PCs (including the information they get wrong) and what information they don't have.

## SYLVIRA: THE SHIELD OF THE HIDDEN LORD

If shown the *Shield of the Hidden Lord*, Sylvira will recognize it as an infernal artifact:

- It was created by Gargauth, an archduke and demigod of Hell.
- Gargauth can speak through the shield.
- Anyone in contact with the shield is said to hear the Whisperings of the Hidden Lord. It's unclear whether Gargauth can read or control the wearers' thoughts, but it can definitely communicate telepathically with them.
- In some accounts, the wielder of the shield can create *walls of fire* and *fireballs*.
- It's possible that there are multiple such shields, each allowing Gargauth to speak through it but perhaps manifesting a unique cluster of magical powers. In any case, the shield has turned up repeatedly throughout history, always as the instigator of great evil.

She's also passingly familiar with Gargauth himself:

- He was once the Archduke of Avernus, the first level of Hell, as one of the Lords of the Nine.
- He was overthrown by a devil named Bel (who was, in turn, overthrown by Zariel, the current ruler of Avernus).
- Gargauth became known as the Tenth Lord of the Nine and the Lost Lord of the Pit, among other titles.
- While wandering the material plane, Gargauth feuded with a demon named Astaroth who was seeking to become a god. Gargauth slew Astaroth before that could happen and actually assumed Astaroth's mantle for himself, effectively impersonating the dead demon and receiving the worship of Astaroth's cultists.
- Gargauth later joined an alliance with the Dark Gods (Bane, Bhaal, Loviatar, and Talona) when they attempted to invade Hell itself and seize it from Asmodeus. The effort failed.
- Ever since then, Gargauth has been seeking power here on Toril. He's known to work with Astarothian cultists (who still hear him as the voice of their God) and Dead Three cultists (who honor him for his alliance with the Dark Gods). In one notable instance in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Dead Three cultists summoned Gargauth as part of an assault on the Sign of the Silver Harp, an inn

that was used as a gathering place for the Harpers. (In that instance, it turned out the whole thing had been an elaborate trap staged by Elminster and the Blackstaff Khelben Arunsun. Gargauth and the cultists were defeated.)

- His agents have been frequently reported to have a great interest in the Imaskari Empire, for reasons which are unclear.
- If the PCs think/know that he was working with the Cult of Zariel, Sylvira will consider it an odd development given his antagonistic history with Asmodeus.

**SYLVIRA'S RECOMMENDATION:** Initially, Sylvira will be eager to take the *Shield of the Hidden Lord* into her own custody for study. (Traxigor might argue that it should instead be locked up in Candlekeep's vaults and forgotten. "It's too dangerous.")

Regardless of what the PCs decide at this point, when it later becomes clear that they're heading to Avernus, Sylvira will tell them that the shield should be thrown into the River Styx. She believes that this will destroy its link to Gargauth and end its legacy of harm. (She's more right than she knows: Since Gargauth is actually trapped within the shield, being plunged into the Styx will erase all of his memories. See *Addendum: Playing Gargauth*.)

*Design Note: Sylvira's understanding of the Shield of the Hidden Lord is deliberately incorrect/incomplete, skewing closer to the item's original continuity. The key thing being withheld here is that Gargauth is actually IN the shield, not just communicating through it. The PCs might discover more accurate information by researching Gargauth and/or the shield at Candlekeep, and will also have the opportunity to unravel more of Gargauth's story once they go to Hell.*

## SYLVIRA: THE INFERNAL PUZZLEBOX

Sylvira is familiar with *infernal puzzleboxes* and has opened several of them in the past.

- They are crafted by devils of the Nine Hells.
- They are usually made of infernal iron, but some are made of bone or horn.
- They are designed to safeguard their contents, but also as infernal temptations. "Any lock can be picked. But a puzzle *entices*."
- The process of solving the incredibly intricate puzzles which seal the box, if done incorrectly, can lure a person into unwittingly performing an infernal rite that will bind them to the devil who made the box.

Sylvira has perfected several spells and/or technomantic equipment that will allow her to open the *puzzlebox* safely.

**MECHANICS:** A creature that spends 1 hour trying to open an *infernal puzzlebox* can make a DC 30 Intelligence (Investigation) check. If the check succeeds, the creature figures out the trick or sequence of steps needed to open the box (and can do so reliably in the future without a check). If the check fails by 5 or more, the creature must make a DC 18 Wisdom saving throw, taking 12d6 psychic damage on a failed save (or half as much on a successful one). If this damage would drop the creature's hit points to 0, it instead results in the creature becoming affected as per the *dominate person* spell by the devil who created the box: The devil can communicate with them telepathically across any distance and the victim is particularly susceptible at night (when the devil can control their body like a puppet unless they succeed on a DC 12 Wisdom saving throw). This acts as a curse, as per the *bestow curse* spell with a permanent duration.



# SYLVIRA: THE INFERNAL CONTRACT

Inside the *infernal puzzlebox* is a platinum tablet inscribed with Infernal characters. One side of the tablet is jagged and rough, as if it had been ripped apart through some tremendous force.

**THE TEXT:** The text on the tablet is the Pact signed between High Watcher Bellandi and Zariel (see [Part 4B](#)).

**INFERNAL CONTRACTS:** Anyone making a DC 14 Intelligence (Arcana) or Intelligence (Religion) check will recognize this as an infernal contract. A DC 16 test reveals the following information. Sylvira is familiar with this information in any case and can brief the PCs if none of them are familiar with infernal contracts.

- Infernal contracts are magically binding agreements between mortals and devils, almost always involving the mortal's soul being forfeit in return for some service or gift.
- When infernal contracts are signed, there are two identical copies written on the same medium (a tablet, scroll, skull, or whatever else). These are then split apart, with the mortal keeping one copy and the devil keeping the other.
- The contract can only be destroyed if BOTH copies of the contract are brought together, and even then the wards upon the contract make it quite difficult to actually do it. (Sylvira will suggest that the fire of an ancient dragon might do the trick. Traxigor will suggest dropping the conjoined contract into the River Styx, causing its contents to be forgotten. A *wish* spell would also work.)

*Design Note: I chose to have the tablet made from platinum because it was alchemically believed to represent the durability of a union or agreement.*

**HISTORY OF ELTUREL:** PCs can also make a DC 14 Intelligence (History) check to recall pertinent details from Elturian history. (Some of this they are likely to have already picked up, if it wasn't part of their character backgrounds to begin with.)

- High Watcher Naja Bellandi became the first High Observer of Elturel.
- High Rider Klav Ikaia was the ruler of Elturel in 1444 DR when he was revealed to be a vampire lord. On the Night of the Red Coup, High Rider Ikaia and his vampires began a reign of terror which plagued the city for fourteen days.
- On the fourteenth night, the Companion — believed to be a gift from some unnamed god — appeared in the sky above Elturel as a second sun. Its light destroyed the vampires.
- Naja Bellandi, who had led one of the major groups of resistance fighters, was hailed as a hero and became the first High Observer.
- She was assassinated a couple years later and replaced by High Observer Cathasach Restat, who had been one of the founding members of the Order of the Companion.

*GM Tip: You might want to prep these chunks of information as handouts you can give to players who make these skill checks, allowing them to brief the other PCs in-character.*

## WHAT NEXT?

There are two key revelations here:

1. Elturel was NOT destroyed. It's trapped in Hell.
2. The Pact which traps Elturel in Hell cannot be broken unless the two halves of the contract are brought together.

These are major twists. Give the players some time to think about them and really process this new information. If all goes well, they'll reach the crucial conclusion by themselves: Even if the people in Elturel are fighting to save themselves, their cause is hopeless. Nothing they do can save the city unless someone takes THIS half of the contract to Avernus. The PCs have the key (or, at least, one half of the key) to saving the city.

Otherwise, one of the NPCs can lay this out for them.

If Reya Mantlemorn is here, she's a strong candidate for this. "Take it to the High Knights at the High Hall!" She'll have complete faith that the High Knights will be able to save the day if she and the PCs can just get the tablet to them.

**TIME TO GO:** Once the PCs decide to go to Avernus, Traxigor will ask them to help him find his tuning fork. (He'll accompany them out of Candlekeep so that he can cast *plane shift* and take them to Elturel.)

**MAP OF AVERNUS:** While the PCs (or some of the PCs) are helping Traxigor find his tuning fork, Sylvira will dig out the Avernus poster map. She'll explain that:

- There's no guarantee that it will even be the right part of the Avernian planes, but it's one of the few known maps of Avernus in existence and the only one in her possession.
- It was created by the cartographer Nico Sovanna, an infernal researcher (much like Sylvira herself) who was interested in the Charge of the Hellriders and actually journeyed to the location in the Nine Hells where he believed it took place.
- Unfortunately, Sovanna went quite mad as a result of his expedition.

*Design Note: More on the map in Part 6 of the Remix. Mostly I'm providing a plausible explanation for why a random map of an infinite plane just happens to be of exactly the right region.*

**MAP OF ELTUREL:** The PCs might like to get a map of Elturel before they go. They can dig one up in the archives of Candlekeep easily enough and copy it. (Or, if you prefer, Sylvira can just give them this map, too.)

What you'll want for this, obviously, is a pre-Avernus map of the city. You can find one in [Forgotten Realms Adventures](#). (Unfortunately, the resolution in the scanned PDF WotC is currently selling isn't great.)

The mismatch between this map and the reality they find on the other side of the *plane shift* will lead to some potentially cool navigation and a visceral sense of the disaster. On the other hand, it will give them a notable advantage in Elturel and so you may not want them to automatically get the map (so that they only gain the advantage if they earn it for themselves).

## INTRODUCING LULU

If Lulu is not being played as a PC (see [Part 2](#)), this will be the moment when she's introduced. We'll be doing a comprehensive look at Lulu's background (and straightening out all of the continuity problems it has) in Part 7 of the Remix, but for right now this is the key information:

- Lulu's earliest memory is of waking up in the red sands of the Avernian wastelands.
- She wandered down the River Styx for several years, have many adventures before finally returning to Toril.
- Sylvira became aware of a hollyphant in Amn who could tell tales of the Nine Hells. She made a special journey south and tracked Lulu down. The two hit it off and Lulu decided to come back

with Sylvira to Candlekeep to continue assisting her with her research; the two of them are now good friends.

- Lulu has a few fragmentary memories of the time before her memory loss: She particularly remembers that she was friends with a beautiful warrior angel, who came to the city of Eturel long ago and led the knights of that city on a charge into Hell itself. ("I don't remember the actual battle," Lulu says. "But we must have lost. I guess that's how I lost my memories.") Sylvira is 100% convinced that Lulu was actually *at* the famous Charge of the Hellriders and she's been trying to figure out how to help Lulu get more of her memories back, particularly about that event. (Because Lulu has this connection to Eturel, she'll be particularly interested by any PCs who come from Eturel and to learn anything they know about the city's disappearance.)

I recommend having Lulu flutter into the lab somewhere in the middle of the infodump; this will provide a nice change of pace, but should definitely happen before the *infernal puzzlebox* is opened. To demonstrate her familiarity with the Nine Hells, have her drop useful commentary. For example:

- She might be the one to mention Gargauth's other titles (Tenth Lord of the Nine, Lost Lord of the Pit, etc.) because she met a devil who absolutely *loathed* him for his betrayal of Asmodeus.
- She likely recognizes the *infernal puzzlebox* for what it is, and could babble excitedly about how much she loves seeing Sylvira open them. ("It's like getting a Caravance gift!")
- She could be the one to reveal how infernal contracts can be destroyed... but then have no memory of *why* she knows that.



Here's the key bit, though. When the infernal contract is read out loud, Lulu will suddenly recover a key bit of her memory:

*"Zariel! That was the name of my angel!"*

And this is mind-blowing (to Sylvira and Traxigor if nobody else). The angel who led the Charge of the Hellriders is Zariel, the Archduchess of Hell? And Lulu was her good friend?

*Yes! Yes! I remember! Through the gate we went, tearing through devils like a song through the air! And Zariel was signing songs, with the knights joining her celestial voice!*

*But then... we were betrayed? Yes. I remember the betrayal. But who? I don't know. I just... No. I don't know.*

And that's all she remembers. (For now.)

Of course, when the PCs decide to take the infernal contract to Avernus, Lulu will volunteer to go with them: She's the only one there with first hand experience of the Nine Hells, and she wants to help however she can. (If the PCs turn her down, she'll insist. And then she'll try to sneak into their bags.)

# ADDENDUM: A TEXTUAL HISTORY OF ELTUREL

by Justin Alexander – May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020



In working on the [Alexandrian Remix](#) of *Descent Into Avernus*, I ended up doing a lot of research into the history of Elturel. It's rather a tangled mess, and I thought there might be some benefit in briefly summarizing what I found.

## FORGOTTEN REALMS CAMPAIGN SETTING – 1<sup>ST</sup> EDITION

Elturel's first appearance in print receives five paragraphs. The year is 1358 DR:

- It is divided between the Dock District and the High District (located on a bluff overlooking the River Chionthar).
- It's a "huge city," similar in size and capability to Scornubel and Iriaebor.
- Ruled by the High Rider, currently a cavalier named Lord Dhelt (a former leader of the Hellriders).
- It is a member of the Lords' Alliance.
- Has a way-base for the Dragoneye Dealing Costers (a merchant company).

The **HELLRIDERS** are:

- Well-equipped, mounted troops who patrol and provide caravan escort from Waterdeep to Iriaebor.
- Take their name from the story that a company of Riders had ridden into Avernus. (Note that this is specifically characterized as a story that took place in the apparently legendary past from a current date of 1358 DR.)
- A mixture of warriors and clerics.
- Led by a Marshal.
- They ride in plate armor of crimson and white, marked with an upturned crescent.

## FORGOTTEN REALMS ADVENTURES

The city is greatly expanded with a two page entry. Notable new details include:

- Population of 29,000 in winter and about 33,000 in the summer. Warehouses and cellars beneath the city allow it to briefly hold up to 400,000 during times of siege. Note that this means it has

actually shrunk. It was previously the same size as Iriaebor (81,000 to 119,000) and Scornubel (50,000).

- Lord Dhelt has leveled up and is now a 16<sup>th</sup> level paladin of Helm.
- Helm's Shieldhall is the most powerful church in the city and ruled by a High Watcher.
- The Dragoneye way-base has become the huge Dragoneye Docks.
- The people are "Elturians" (not "Elturelian").

The city is given its first **MAP**.

The **HELLRIDERS** are:

- 2,000 strong.
- Ride in patrols of 30, with guardhouses and regular patrols throughout the Fields of the Dead. There are also warning beacons set across the farmlands north, east, and west of the city.
- Lord Dhelt is no longer described as a former Hellrider and now leads major expeditions himself.
- Berelduin Shondar ("Bereld the Just"), the patriarch of Helm's Shieldhall, leads as many Hellrider patrols as Lord Dhelt.
- There are additional shrines to Ilmater, Tempus, Tymora, and Waukeen.

## FORGOTTEN REALMS CAMPAIGN SETTING – 2<sup>ND</sup> EDITION

The date is now 1367 DR. The short city entry from the first boxed set is expanded with material from [Forgotten Realms Adventures](#) and updated with a smattering of new details:

- The Chionthar is narrow and shallow here; it can be crossed with poling barges.
- It is now a "major center" for the Dragoneye Dealing Coster (following in line with the Dragoneye Docks).
- The shrine to Waukeen has become a shrine to Lliira.

The **HELLRIDERS**:

- Are named "from the story that a company of Riders had in the past ridden into Avernus, first of the layers of the Nine Hells, **to rescue a companion.**" (emphasis added to the new lore)
- Ride in patrols of 30 warriors accompanied by at least one priest of Helm and led by a Marshal. (Note that the Marshal now leads the *patrol*, not the whole organization. Also note that they have not been referred to as knights up to this point.)
- Lord Dhelt is back to being a *former* leader of the Hellriders, but still leads major expeditions.
- One-tenth of their earnings go directly into Elturel's coffers.
- The total Hellrider force numbers around 2,000 women and men.

## VOLO'S GUIDE TO THE SWORD COAST

The Elturel entry here mostly rewrites material from *Forgotten Realms Adventures* and then describes two taverns (the Bent Helm and Pair of Black Antlers) and two inns (Gallowgar's Inn and Phontyr's Unicorn) at greater length.

There are a few interesting tidbits:

- Lord Dhelt is back to being the current leader of the Hellriders.
- The text diegetically creates a third district: The "more prosperous and orderly homes and shops west of the heights are still part of the Dock District, but are increasingly referred to as Westerly." (Westerly is never mentioned again.)
- Raulavin Oregh, who was the Harvestmaster of High Harvest Home in the *Forgotten Realms Adventures*, has become Baulavin Oregh.

## FORGOTTEN REALMS CAMPAIGN SETTING – 3<sup>RD</sup> EDITION

The date is now 1372 DR. Elturel's entry has been shrunk down to a single paragraph:

- The population has fallen to 22,600.
- Lord Dhelt has leveled up again. He is now a 17<sup>th</sup> level paladin.

The **HELLRIDERS**:

- Are now only 200 strong (instead of 2,000).

If we were to interpret these changes diegetically, clearly some horrific tragedy has struck the city: Thousands are dead and the Hellriders have been reduced to one-tenth their former strength. That does not, however, appear to be the case. These changes are retcons, not updates.

## FORGOTTEN REALMS CAMPAIGN GUIDE – 4<sup>TH</sup> EDITION

We have now leaped forward in time to 1479 DR.

It's probably useful to note that everything from this point forward is based on a mistake: When writing the 4<sup>th</sup> Edition *Forgotten Realms Campaign Guide*, Rich Baker confused Elversult (which had an artificial sun) with Elturel.

Let's talk about the city:

- It is now the capital of an imperial theocracy. Elturgard, also known as the Land With Two Suns, has conquered Iriaebor, Scornubel, Triel, and Berdusk.
- There is now a state religion dedicated to Torm.
- The ruler is now the High Observer of Torm.
- Elturel's population has shrunk again, this time to 17,000. (This might be intentionally diegetic given the Spellplague. But, oddly, the text repeatedly refers to people fleeing to Elturel and the population swelling as a result of its imperial expansion.)
- The Dungeon of the Inquisitor is a vast, subterranean maze that lies deep beneath the streets of Elturel. (Parts of this complex consists of natural caverns, the full extent of which have not been determined. Some of the prisoners work in mines down there. The strong implication is that there's a connection to the Underdark down here.

The **HELLRIDERS**: Don't seem to exist. They are not mentioned in the text and appear to have been completely replaced by the **PALADINS OF ELTURGARD** (who are a knighthood led by the High Observer).

- Despite Elturgard having a state religion, many of the paladins "do not serve the same god."
- All of the Paladins of Elturgard wear the "blazing insignia of the Companion."

**THE COMPANION**: "The heatless second sun is called the Companion or Amaunator's Gift, though no one but the High Observer knows if the object was truly bestowed by the sun god."

- Undead cannot "abide its sight." (Exactly what that means is unclear, but even people suffering from mummy's curses seem to find respite here.)

*Note: Even beyond the Elversult/Elturel mix-up, there's a lot going on here that I can't really wrap my head around. Somehow the city has abandoned Helm and become an intolerant theocracy of Torm worshipers while SIMULTANEOUSLY receiving a second sun that reputedly comes from Amaunator. Also the religiously intolerant Torm worshipers wear Amaunator's holy symbol on their chests and are tolerant of paladins from any old god serving in the Paladins of Elturgard?*

## SWORD COAST ADVENTURER'S GUIDE

The year is now 1489 DR (or possibly 1490 DR).

- City is still ruled by the High Observer, but he's no longer referred to as the High Observer of Torm. The current High Observer is a cleric of Torm (Thavius Kreeg).
- Elturgard is now known as the Kingdom of the Two Suns (instead of the Land of the Two Suns).
- It is no longer a member of the Lords' Alliance. (The textual history here is complicated: As far as I can tell, no explicit list of Lords' Alliance cities was given in 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition; Elturel did not appear on the explicitly incomplete lists which did appear. The Lords' Alliance isn't mentioned at all in 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, with the rather strong implication, in my opinion, that it no longer exists. In the [Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide](#), however, the Lords' Alliance is affirmed to have existed continuously since its founding, but Elturgard and several other cities have been explicitly given the boot.)

**COMPANIONS OF ELTURGARD:** These appear to be the same thing as the Paladins of Elturgard referred to in 4<sup>th</sup> Edition.

- Made up of paladins of gods such as Tyr, Torm, Helm, and Amaunator.
- They wear the "symbol of Elturgard."
- Their heraldry (which may or may not be the same as the symbol of Elturgard, but probably is) is now a pair of suns: The larger sun and a smaller sun with blazing light around it.
- Led by the High Observer.
- They're also referred to as the "Order of the Companion."
- **Creed Resolute:** Created by first High Observer. A series of oaths and maxims that, among others things, prohibits the Companions from ascribing the Companion to any one god.

**HELLRIDERS:** They're back!

- The Hellriders "aspire to join the Companions." But they are also a separate organization. They are also referred to as "knights" for the first time.
- They wear the same heraldry as the Companions of Elturgard.
- At some point they also began swearing the Creed Resolute.
- They are named Hellriders because "long ago warriors of Elturel literally rode through a gate into the Nine Hells to pursue and destroy devils that had been plaguing their people." (emphasis added to the lore change).

**THE COMPANION:**

- A golden orb that gives a warm, golden light. It can be seen as far away Boareskyr Bridge and Berdusk.
- Vampires "burn away to dust" in its light, while "other undead quailed in its illumination."
- Still referred to as "Amaunator's Gift," but no one knows where it actually came from and it's "ascribed to one deity or another."
- Called the Companion because it's a companion to both the sun and the city.

**RISE OF ELTURGARD:**

- 1439 DR: Elturel had conquered territory belonging to several neighbors and put them under "Elturel's Guard." The High Rider was then revealed to be a vampire.



- Undead swarmed the city.
- The Companion showed up in the middle of the night. High Rider and his vampire spawn were outside at the time and instantly destroyed.
- The first High Observer created the Creed Resolute.
- Modern Elturgard refers to the lands that lie under “Elturel’s Shield” (meaning anywhere the light of the Companion touches; although that includes neighboring kingdoms that aren’t amused by the claim).

#### RISE OF THAVIUS KREEG:

- The heir apparent to the post of High Observer, a paladin named Tamal Thent, went missing with her entire retinue near Fort Tamal near the Boareskyr Bridge. This cleared the way for Thavius Kreeg to become High Observer.
- 1449 DR: Thavius Kreeg becomes High Observer.
- It’s possible that, after becoming High Observer, Kreeg was assigning paladins who might be a threat to him to Fort Tamal at the Boareskyr Bridge (far from Elturel itself).

*Note: The changes between 4<sup>th</sup> Edition and 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, in my opinion, do not appear to be diegetic. The theocratic elements of Elturel appear to have been deliberately toned down using retcons, particularly the central importance of Torm. To at least some extent, this also appears to be an effort to straighten out the confusing contradictions from 4<sup>th</sup> Edition.*

## DESCENT INTO AVERNUS

There’s a lot of lore pertaining to Elturel to be found in *Descent Into Avernus*, although it is not as clearly presented as the previous sources we’ve looked at (and I may easily overlook something in this summary). Upon reflection, it is interesting to note that Elturel is probably more thoroughly and usefully described in the two pages of *Forgotten Realms Adventures* than in all of the blather in *Descent Into Avernus*.

The current year is 1494 DR. Regarding Elturel:

- It is a holy city.
- The vampire lord now conquered Elturel in 1444 DR instead of 1439 DR. (This is because the *Sword Coast Adventurer’s Guide* described it as happening 50 years ago... and apparently it ALWAYS happens 50 years ago, no matter what the current year actually is.)
- The appearance of the Companion did NOT destroy the vampire lord. (It instead “sent the vampire lord scrambling for the shadows and laid waste to his undead army.”)
- The city is now led by the High Overseer instead of the High Observer. (This is not a diegetic change: The ruler has been the High Overseer since the Companion first appeared.)
- The list of gods venerated in the city is now Lathander, Torm, Helm, and Tyr. (The Lathander/Amaunator stuff is a wormhole to go down at another time.)

The **MAP** of fallen Elturel is the first map of the city since *Forgotten Realms Adventures*. It’s clearly based on the previous map (right down to the outlines of individual buildings, suggesting – somewhat implausibly – that the building has seen essentially no new construction in the past 136 years). Most of the changes appear apocalyptic in nature, but there are a couple of significant exceptions:

- The Grand Cemetery has been added to the west side of the city.
- A ravine has been added to the east side of the bluff. (You may, at first glance, assume this to be an apocalyptic scar, but the text confirms that the bridges of Torm’s Blade and Torm’s Reach crossed a ravine here *before* Elturel went to Hell. A direct comparison also reveals that the streets around the bridges have been redrawn to accommodate them. If you wanted to explain this diegetically, we could perhaps theorize that the ravine was the result of damage inflicted during the Spellplague.)



**THE ORDER OF THE COMPANION:** Is not mentioned.

**HELLRIDERS:** The Hellriders are described in various places as now being follower of Torm. (This may be a diegetic shift, but it appears more likely that the authors have simply retconned the Hellriders and Order of the Companion into a single, muddled organization.)

- In the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, Zariel came to Elturel and trained the original Riders.
- In 1354 DR, Yeenoghu (a demon lord from the Abyss) attacked the village of Idyllglen. The Riders of Elturel stopped the attack and Zariel herself threw Yeenoghu through a portal that sent him back to the Abyss, but not before several villagers had been killed.
- Swearing vengeance against Yeenoghu (again: a demon lord from the **Abyss**), Zariel and the Riders of Elturel opened a portal to Avernus and rode through to wage a holy war in the... Nine Hells?
- Or, according to a different section of the book, Zariel tracked the demons (still from the Abyss) back to the portal they'd originally come through... a portal which then took the Riders to the Nine Hells!
- Many of the Riders became panicked when they reached the Nine Hells and fled back through the gate, sealing it behind them and trapping Zariel and the other Riders. Those who fled in shame became the famous Hellriders; the others were slaughtered upon the fields of Avernus and Zariel was corrupted into the Archduchess.

*Note: None of this, of course, makes any goddamn sense.*

**THE COMPANION:**

- Is actually a Solar Insiadiator, created by Zariel (see DIA, p. 153-4 for more details).
- Contains an imprisoned planetar.

**RISE OF THAVIUS KREEG:**

- Thavius Kreeg was a priest of Torm who appealed to any power to save the holy city. Zariel answered and provided the Companion. Thavius Kreeg took credit for the Companion and became the first High Overseer (presumably in 1444 DR), not an heir to the position.
- Or, according to a different section of the book, Thavius Kreeg was *already* High Overseer when he struck the bargain with Zariel.



# ADDENDUM: PLAYING GARGAUTH

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[by Justin Alexander — June 1st, 2020](#)



Gargauth in the *Shield of the Hidden Lord* has the potential to be a persistent element that accompanies the PCs for the entire campaign... or he might be gone before they even realize what and who he is.

## GARGAUTH: ROLEPLAYING TEMPLATE

**NAME:** Gargauth (Once-Treasurer of Hell, the Tenth Lord of the Nine, Lost Lord of the Pit, the Hidden Lord, the Outcast, the Lord Who Watches)

**APPEARANCE:** A shield of silvered, vanadium steel embellished with bronze decorations suggesting the horns, eyes, and fangs of a pit fiend.

**QUOTE:** "You have no idea the secrets which I could share with you! If you would only serve me!"

**ROLEPLAYING:**

- Wants nothing more than to be released from its prison.
- Craves power, with little care for what form it takes.
- Speaks in either a sibilant, seductive whisper or a baritone roar.

**BACKGROUND:** See "Lore of Gargauth" in [Part 3B: Lore of the Vanthampur Investigations](#).

**STAT BLOCK:** See *Descent Into Avernus*, p. 225.

## MEETING THE SHIELD OF THE HIDDEN LORD

When the PCs first find the *Shield of the Hidden Lord*, Gargauth will claim to be the Shield of Silvam and that the Vanthampurs stole him from the Hhune family.

The Shield of Silvam is one of the Kuldannorar artifacts once held by the Tethyrian royal line. A DC 16 Intelligence (History) check will reveal that the Shield of Silvam was created before the Eye Tyrant Wars, was lost during the Strohm Dynasty (between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries), and briefly resurfaced in the 14<sup>th</sup> century before vanishing again.

A DC 18 check will recall that the chronicles record that it was a mithral shield with an inset “eye” of crystal (i.e., not at all what the *Shield of the Hidden Lord* looks like). If confronted with this fact, Gargauth will at least initially attempt to claim that the Shield of Silvam recovered in the 14<sup>th</sup> century was a forgery.

## FREEING GARGAUTH

Gargauth’s overriding objective is to free himself from the shield, so let’s briefly discuss how he can do that.

First, he can **fulfill the pact with Zariel** by bringing thirteen cities to Hell. Having succeeded with Elturel (which may or may not be his first success), he’s now looking for the next viable target.

Second, the shield can be **unmade Bel’s Forge** in Avernus. As it was originally created there, so can it be destroyed.

Third, Gargauth can be **freed by Asmodeus or any Archduke or Archduchess of Hell** who touches the shield and says his name.

Finally, Gargauth can be **temporarily freed** by casting *dispel evil and good* on the shield. Each casting has a 1% chance of freeing him for 1 minute. Using a higher level spell slot to cast the spell can either increase the percentage chance of him being freed (stepping 5%, 10%, 25%, 50% for each additional spell level), the duration of his release (stepping 10 minutes, 1 hour, 12 hours, 24 hours for each additional spell level), or a combination of both. (For example, a 9<sup>th</sup> level spell slot could have a 10% chance of releasing him for 1 hour. Or a 50% chance of releasing him for 1 minute.)

*Note: This section explicitly supercedes the “Freeing Gargauth” section of Decent Into Avernus.*

## THE MANY AGENDAS OF GARGAUTH

Gargauth is an incredibly clever, incredibly perceptive, and incredibly persuasive devil who is keenly aware of how vulnerable he is while trapped within the *Shield of the Hidden Lord*. He will adapt to whatever situation he finds himself in. He will deceive freely. He will prey on trust, but not abuse or alienate it needlessly. To be most effective, he needs to be in the possession of someone who will *do what he says*; but what needs to avoid *at all costs* is to be stuck in a position where he cannot influence anyone around him. He will endure a weak position and bide his time for an opportunity to turn it to his advantage, rather than losing his temper and burning his bridges.

Upon encountering (and most likely being acquired by) the PCs, his first agenda will probably be to *get away from them*. He’s been around the block enough to know that wandering heroes who go around trying to save the world are terrible candidates for helping him achieve his goals, and Baldur’s Gate is filled with far more promising prospects.

Thus, his first strategy of posing as the Shield of Silvam so that they’ll return him to his “rightful owner.”

If that fails, another plausible strategy Gargauth might employ is using his *telepathy* to “call for help” from anyone nearby who might be more receptive to him. You can use this to justify the “Knights of the Shield” encounter in [Part 4A: The Road to Candlekeep](#), for example, by assuming that at some point while

they were walking through Baldur's Gate with the *Shield of the Hidden Lord*, they happened to pass a member of the Hhune family and Gargauth telepathically contacted them. (You can easily imagine any number of similar hijinks.)

If there comes a point where Gargauth perceives the PCs as perhaps being in a serious position to save Elturel, then he would be highly motivated to *stop them from doing that*. (Sucking cities to Hell is not particularly easy, he needs thirteen of them, and he put in 50+ years on this one.) My guess is he'd go for subtle misdirection and disinformation here.

In [Part 4C: At the Threshold of Hell](#), when Sylvira says she'd like to keep the *Shield of the Hidden Lord* to study it, Gargauth might have one of two reactions: If he thinks it will be easier to take advantage of Sylvira's fascination with the Nine Hells and corrupt her, he'll happily jump ship. If he's already got a good thing going with one or more of the PCs, on the other hand, he may make some strong offers to convince them to keep him.

On the other hand, when Traxigor tells the PCs that they should drop the shield into the River Styx in order to destroy it, Gargauth is going to get real serious real quick. He might telepathically reach out to Sylvira and offer to help her in her research, potentially seeding a debate about whether the shield should stay or go. Alternatively (or if that fails), he'll try to make himself appear as useful as he possibly can to the PCs. (First up: He knows Avernus and can serve as a valuable guide.)

Once they're in Avernus, Gargauth is likely going to try to get them to take him to Bel's forge and then manipulate them into destroying the shield (and freeing him). One tactic might be to telepathically convince someone the PCs are interacting with to tell them how the shield can be destroyed at Bel's forge (while conveniently not mentioning that this will *free* Gargauth, not destroy him). Another might be to simply take the PCs to Bel's forge while pretending to guide them somewhere else (and then hoping he can spin the situation accordingly).

If the PCs are intransigent, Gargauth will probably continue trying to arrange for his escape. (Signaling nearby devils and ruining PCs' attempts to sneak through Elturel, for example.)

If pushed absolutely to the wall (i.e., they're on the banks of the Styx and about to throw him in), Gargauth will be willing to negotiate his knowledge for how to save Elturel. He'll be able to tell them that they have to destroy the contract, destroy the chains, and arrange for Elturel to return to the Material Plane (see Part 7). He can even offer up his own services (if they free him!) in destroying the chains.

## INTO THE RIVER STYX

What actually happens if the PCs *do* throw the *Shield of the Hidden Lord* into the River Styx? (Which is, I think, the most likely outcome.)

**Option #1: It's destroyed.** Trapped in the shield as he is, Gargauth is entirely an entity of *nous* (or mind). His memories are thus the entirety of what he is, and when the shield is dipped into the River Styx he is utterly destroyed. As Gargauth is the source of the shield's powers, all that is left is a well-crafted, mundane shield.

**Option #2: A tabula rasa spirit.** Gargauth's mind is wiped clean. What's left inside the shield is an incredibly powerful pit fiend with no memories and no innate form. In a campaign about Hell, damnation, and redemption, this has the potential to become a powerful thematic opportunity: How is this essentially newborn entity possessed of tremendous power influenced by the PCs and their actions? Is this new entity saddled with Gargauth's sins? As this entity's personality develops, does that influence what powers the shield manifests? If the PCs lead this new entity down a path to goodness and then later free it from the shield, what actually appears? A reformed pit fiend? An angel? Something else?

**Option #3: Punt it down the road.** Traxigor emphasizes that the shield has to be immersed in the Styx for several days (or a week or a month or whatever). The only realistic option is to just toss it into the deepest part of the river and walk away.

# PART 5: HELLTUREL

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[by Justin Alexander - June 9th, 2020](#)



Before the PCs arrive in Elturel, we need to talk about the current state of the city, because there are some basic issues that should be addressed.

First, the city is broadly described as if the Fall of Elturel just happened. There's one reference to a family's supplies running out (although not how many supplies they had to start with), but other than that pretty much everything in Chapter 2 is described as if the city were still in the earliest hours and confusion of the crisis.

Except this isn't true: It would take at least ten days for the first refugees to reach Baldur's Gate. Even if we assume the gates were immediately closed (although that's an iffy reading of the text), the PCs still need at least a couple of days to investigate the murders. Then it's four days to Candlekeep. So Elturel was actually taken at least 15-20 days ago by the time the PCs show up.

On the flip side, when the PCs are done in Elturel they're going to head out on a quest to find the Sword of Zariel. As they leave, they must suspect that they will be gone for at least days. In point of fact, it's likely that they will be gone for *weeks* before they can return to save the city.

The problem is that nothing about the current situation in Elturel makes it seem plausible that there will be anything worth saving by the time the PCs get back: Demons and devils are freely roaming the streets of the city, more or less systematically slaughtering people in their homes. There's no organized resistance and no reasonable expectation that there's going to be one. (Ravengard supposedly "organized a defense," but has actually just spent 2+ weeks cowering in a basement and now his meager retinue of guards has been wiped out.)

This creates a situation where the PCs need to do X in order to save the city, but have no reasonable expectation that they can actually achieve X in time to save the city. The result is not a sense of urgency, but rather a conclusion that the plan can't work. A plan that doesn't work, of course, will be discarded,

and the PCs will end up looking for a different solution: They might stay in Elturel and try to spearhead a defense themselves. Or they might abandon the entire idea of “saving the city” and look for other alternatives, like simply escaping themselves or organizing some kind of inter-planar evacuation for as many people as possible.

Of course, you could use an NPC to say, “I promise you, as the Dungeon Master, that you’re supposed to go on this quest and I guarantee that the city will not fall and a bunch of people won’t be slaughtered in a devilish genocide while you’re gone.”

The result, however, still won’t be urgency: The players will probably go and do the thing, but Elturel will lose any sense of reality for them and the “crisis” will lose all meaning. Like a video game where the world remains frozen in a state of status quo until you hit the button labeled Next Plot Point, the world will be reduced to two-dimensional cardboard cut-outs.

So what we need are two things:

1. A clear understanding of what’s been happening in the city in the fortnight since it was sent to Hell, and what the current situation is when the PCs arrive.
2. Some form of status quo in which the city seems secure enough that the PCs can leave, do their quest, and have a reasonable expectation that there’ll still be a city to save when they come back.

However, we don’t want the status quo to feel *too* safe. The city is in Hell and being dragged to its destruction in the River Styx. There’s a very fine line that needs to be walked here between the PCs feeling that Elturel will still exist if they can hurry up and save it and the PCs feeling like there’s nothing to worry about.

For similar reasons, although we can easily imagine a scenario in which the status quo has already been firmly established by the time the PCs arrive (most likely some variant of Ravengard actually securing the city), that’s probably also the wrong direction to go: The PCs are walking into *Hell*. We want them to feel that; not enjoy some weird *Pax Elturian*.

**WHERE ARE THE LEADERS?** In the adventure as written, the highest surviving authority of Elturgard is supposedly a lone acolyte named Pherria Jynks. *Descent Into Avernus* tries to explain this with a meteor that fell out of the sky and destroyed most of the High Hall.

But that still doesn’t make a lot of sense, does it? Even in a *Designated Survivor* situation where the “entire” government is in a meeting that explodes, you still have the vast majority of the military and civilian infrastructure and chain of command intact. You don’t end up in a situation where the entire government is just one DMV clerk.

**WHERE ARE THE DEVILS?** *Descent Into Avernus* tries to explain why the legions of Avernus haven’t overrun the city already with the Battle of Elturel. At the very moment that Elturel popped in, a huge army of demons crossed the Styx and attacked the assembled legions. A huge battle broke out.

The battle has continued, without change, for 15-20 days.

It will continue, without any change, for the next several *weeks*.

Despite this, the battle is incredibly isolated: No reinforcements are arriving. No one in the area even seems to be aware of it.

In short, the Battle of Elturel is a valiant effort to explain why Elturel remains largely unmolested, but it actually contributes greatly to the sense that Elturel can’t possibly survive long enough for the PCs to save it. Yes, *we* know that the battle is just a permanent, unchanging video game instance with the same actions playing on an endless loop, but if you accept the situation at face value, then it would seem as if the battle would certainly conclude shortly and the city would be overrun.

# THE PHYSICAL & METAPHYSICAL

The Companion now hangs low and large in the sky, basically on a level with the High Hall. It emits a strange, purplish-black light that mixes kaleidoscopically with the reddish light of Hell itself. Thunder from the lightning crackling across its surface intermittently cascades across the city.

Elturel is floating in the sky above the Avernian plains, connected to the Dock of Fallen Cities by huge chains.

**THE CHAINS:** The chains obviously have a physical reality, but they are also a metaphysical construct. The both represent the corruption of the city and are operant upon it. They are not just physically dragging Elturel down into Hell, they are also dragging down the souls of everyone in the city.

This is possible due to the influence of the Companion and the Writ of the Pact. To be clear, this process doesn't mind control the people in the city or somehow make them evil. It's subtler than that; a contamination of the city's collective souls with something akin to original sin. Conversely the city remains afloat because the souls of the city are fighting against this taint.

As described in "The Metaphysics of Elturel's Fall" ([Part 4B](#)), the final stroke comes when the city completes its descent into both sin and the Styx: The population drowns not only in the waters of the river, but in their own sin at the very moment that their minds are wiped clean and the Pact completes.

**DOCK OF FALLEN CITIES:** Elturel is not the first city to suffer this fate. It is actually tethered to an ancient facility known as the Dock of Fallen Cities. The chains are connected to huge pillars that rise out of the Avernian plains. Between and around this pillars are the overlapping layers of countless cities which have been pulled down and drowned in the Styx. The river still floods their broken and forgotten streets.

These cities are most likely drawn from across the multiverse, so when the PCs pick their way through the ruins you should feel empowered to get romantic with your descriptions of the melancholy, cyclopean ruins. They are most likely haunted by strange will o' wisps, which are perhaps related to the [Many Colours Out of Space](#) that are here the spiritual detritus left behind by a dozen dead civilizations.

**WHERE ARE THE DEVILS?** The Dock of Fallen Cities here takes the place of the Battle of Elturel: There was no demonic invasion. There is no endless, looping confrontation.

So why hasn't Zariel sent her legions into Elturel to pacify the city?

Largely because she doesn't need to. With a few key exceptions (described below), killing the population before they can drown in the Styx is actually contradictory to her goals. There are some devils stationed around the pillars to make sure no one messes with the chains (not that there's actually anything the PCs or anyone else in Elturel can do to the chains without a lot of help, see Part 8), but they honestly don't care if a few people manage to "escape" the city.

## HOSTILES

Even though Zariel isn't motivated to stage an invasion of a city she's already conquered, that doesn't mean that the city is in any way safe.

**ZARIEL CULTISTS:** Zarielites from across Faerun had learned what was coming and made the city a sort of pilgrimage site in the final days before its Fall. (They knew it was going to Hell and they hitched a ride.)



Once they arrived in Hell, groups of these jubilant cultists emerged onto the streets in a millenarian orgy of sin and destruction. Many have indiscriminately pillaged and burned. Others have set up little gangland fiefs of oppression and misery. Regardless, they all know the party ends when the city hits the Styx, and they're mostly okay with that (believing that in the moment of the Pact's completion they will be exalted as powerful devils).

In addition, while many members of the Cult of the Companion (see [Part 3B](#) and [Part 4B](#)) fled the city before its Fall (much like Thavius Kreeg), other remained. Many of those became Hell Knights (see below), but others remain as a sort of fifth column. (Adding such a fifth columnist to the refugees in the High Hall is an obvious choice.)

Devil cultists have the shadows of devils here. Those in the former group tend to delight in this; those in the fifth column will obviously take efforts to hide it.

**HELL KNIGHTS:** Before the Fall, the High Knights were the upper echelons of the Elturian government. The term originally applied to those who could lead (or had led) a grand expedition of the Hellriders, including the High Rider and the High Watcher of Helm's Shieldhall. The use of the title formalized and then expanded over time until essentially every senior member of the government was a High Knight (along with a fair number of lower positions as well).

By the time Thavius Kreeg became High Observer, many of the High Knights were already Zarielites, and Kreeg made sure that most of the remaining High Knights were also replaced by cultists. By the time of the Fall, the High Knights were largely synonymous with the inner circle of the cult. These cultists had sworn special oaths above and beyond the Creed Resolute, and as Elturel was pulled into Hell they immediately transformed into devils, becoming Hell Knights.

These Hell Knights had two immediate goals: First, they began slaughtering the other knights under their command. As noted previously, any Elturian knights who had sworn the Creed Resolute and killed after Elturel was sent to Hell had their souls immediately claimed by the Pact. Here in Hell itself, this meant that any knight killed was immediately transformed into another Hell Knight.

Second, as their ranks swelled with devils, the Hell Knights targeted wizards, clerics, and other high-level or important characters who might pose a threat. Most of their targets were eliminated within the first few hours of chaos, and the Hell Knights continue hunting for those who escaped the initial purge.

(You can use any devil stats for a Hell Knight. They generally still wear the armor of their former orders.)

**DEVIL RAIDERS & DEMON INVADERS:** Although Zariel is not sending in her legions, Elturel is not free from devils. Small groups of devil raiders from the Avernian plains have snuck into the city to loot and rend what they can before the city's final destruction. (Would you sell your soul to escape Hell? They can offer that, too.)

In addition, a lieutenant of Yeenoghu named Liashandra has led a platoon of demonic troops into the floating city. They're perhaps the most immediately dangerous to the common people of the city, reveling in wanton destruction as is their demonic wont. However, Liashandra's primary mission is to sabotage the Fall of Elturel if she can and prevent Zariel from recruiting the entire city into the ranks of her legions.

This means that all of these hostile factions (Zarielites, devil raiders, and the demonic incursion) are as likely to be fighting each other as anyone else. Liashandra might also be an unexpected ally in saving the city.

**THE VAMPIRE LORD:** When the Companion first appeared in the sky above Elturel, the vampire lord High Rider Ikaia was not destroyed. He fled into the vast cavernworks beneath the city and lurked there for decades. Now the Companion is gone and the High Rider has emerged.

He does not, however, command a slaving horde of vampires. He and a select few “sons and daughters” are actually a bastion in the northeast of the city: Elturgard maintained vast storehouses in the caverns beneath the city, with supplies that could support hundreds of thousands of people for *months* if the surrounding farmlands had to be evacuated into the city and a heavy siege were laid. Ikaia has secured some of these storehouses that were scooped up along with the rest of the city and is now distributing them to people in need (see Part 5C).

## A STABLE ELTUREL?

Last but not least, what needs to happen for the situation in Elturel to feel stable enough that the PCs will feel comfortable leaving?

Well, to some extent I think we’ve tweaked things enough so that the city still feels like a warzone without feeling like such a genocidal horror that the PCs would reasonably expect everyone to be dead within a week. So it’s possible that you’ll just glide past this point without the PCs thinking about it.

Failing that, there’s also the clear cosmological deadline of the city being drawn down into the Styx. Yes, you could help here, but it’s all meaningless unless someone can get the sword and save the day!

But it’s quite possible that the players will still feel it necessary to help stabilize the situation in Elturel. Or maybe you’re interested in more exploring that idea.

Unless you want to radically expand this section of the campaign, what you’ll want is a **Grand Gesture That Turns the Tide**; i.e., one big thing that the PCs can do (or help do) that can be framed as essentially putting things on the right track. Possibilities might include:

- Joining the east and west sides of the city. This might be leading attacks on the bridges, clearing them of demon infestation and helping Ravengard set up garrisons there.
- Forging alliances between the surviving enclaves. This would send the PCs around the city essentially as ambassadors.
- Securing the supplies necessary for survival. Ravengard, for example, might know that somebody on the east side of the city has a cache of supplies. When the PCs investigate, they find High Rider Ikaia. They might negotiate with him for access to the supplies; or they might track Ikaia’s people back to the cache they’ve secured and then clear them out.
- Some sort of mass combat (most likely with Ravengard and his men). That might be leading a siege on Helm’s Shieldhall and shattering the stronghold of the Hell Knights. Or returning to the cemetery and cleaning it out.

I’d recommend following the players’ lead here: They’re unlikely to just say, “We need to secure the city... but how?!” They’ll rather have some specific problem that they’re looking to solve (the population is starving, Ravengard doesn’t have enough soldiers, etc.). They might even have a plan. You just need to make sure to give them the opportunity to carry out that plan and then frame the outcome as the city turning a corner in its struggle for survival. “This has made all the difference. Now go get that sword!” says Ravengard (or whoever).

If you DO want to radically expand this section of the campaign, then you’ll want to provide a structure for the PCs’ efforts. This will most likely consist of specific needs that the city has and flexible options for how those needs can be achieved. Off the top of my head:

- **Food & Water.** Seizing or gaining access to Ikaia’s storehouse. Finding alternative storehouses. A magical fountain. Organizing rationing.
- **Security.** Eliminating specific threats. Forming alliances. Restoring one of the demonseals which once protected the major citadels of the city by scavenging components from each.

- **Shelter.** Forming neighborhood patrols. Securing citadels which can house refugees in safety away from the demon-infested streets.

Once again, be flexible in responding to and empowering ideas the PCs come up with to fulfill these needs. I would go so far as to track these needs with specific gauges; i.e., put hard numbers on this and let the PCs' schemes score points towards filling those gauges. (And, conversely, allow enemy factions to damage the gauges.)

## THE RETURN TO ELTUREL

Later in the campaign, the PCs will return to Elturel. What do they find when they come back? How has the situation developed?

To a large degree, the answer to this should be extremely idiosyncratic and heavily based on what the PCs did: The version of Elturel where the city ended up divided between Ravengard in the west and Ikaia in the east is very different than one where the PCs managed to form a Council of the Resistance which included Liashandra as a prominent member.

If we're talking about a baseline situation here the PCs did very little to shift the status quo in Elturel, then here's what I'd suggest:

- High Rider Ikaia has secured the eastern side of the town. Citizens have volunteered to become vampires in order to have the strength to defend themselves and their fellow citizens, and these Vampire Riders run regular patrols and control the bridges.
- Things are much worse in the west. The Hell Knights have mustered their forces and laid siege to Ravengard in the High Hall.

# ADDENDUM: ELTURIAN NAMES

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by Justin Alexander – June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020



As both a writer and a GM, I often use the [Random Name Generator](#) at [Behind the Name](#). In the case of *Descent Into Avernus*, I began hitting the generator hard in [Part 3](#) of the Remix when I needed names for murder victims. The generator ended up randomly giving me a couple of Limburgish names, and after diving into that a little bit I thought it would be a fun way to give the Elturians a distinct flavor.

Having done this, of course, I realized I would need to stick with it. And that would notably include improvising names for incidental NPCs in both the refugee camps outside Baldur's Gate and in Elturel itself.

Which, of course, brings us to this addendum of Elturian names (which is somewhat idiosyncratic and not purely Limburgish). A full list of male, female, and last names appears on the next page for convenient printing and reference at the game table.

You might also check out [my ol' trusty list of fantasy names](#), [Infinity: A List of Names](#), and [The Names of Legend](#) for other discussions of names (improvised and otherwise) in RPGs.

# ELTURIAN NAMES

| <u>MALE NAMES</u> | <u>FEMALE NAMES</u> | <u>LAST NAMES</u> |
|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Baer              | Nora                | Baert             |
| Lambaer           | Betje               | Wynia             |
| Servaos           | Lucia               | Alkema            |
| Frenske           | Thei                | Laanen            |
| Jan               | Mien                | Gallas            |
| Antoon            | Treis               | Ry                |
| Edmao             | Margreet            | Griffel           |
| Jehan             | Justine             | Sprik             |
| Jón               | Vera                | Haren             |
| Nöl               | Aleena              | Sturms            |
| Sjang             | Gabreel             | Heeg              |
| Alfons            | Ina                 | Pohle             |
| Mao               | Noortje             | Koetje            |
| Pitt              | Elisabeth           | Kraai             |
| Lau               | Mina                | Ramaek            |
| Adriaan           | Steen               | Linden            |
| Hoebaer           | Margriet            | Mentink           |
| Wöllem            | Veerke              | Loden             |
| Tuur              | Katja               | Mont              |
| Dulf              | Luus                | Minten            |
| Sjarel            | Eleonora            | Maas              |
| Ambroos           | Wilhelmina          | Ribbens           |
| Albaer            | Mathilde            | Rood              |
| Lor               | Kerstina            | Ryken             |
| Alda              | Amalia              | Moll              |
| Norbaer           | Theresia            | Krol              |
| Braam             | Nes                 | Taffe             |
| Broen             | Christine           | Langstraat        |
| Sjra              | Theodoor            | Maat              |
| Remao             | Edelgard            | Terpening         |
| Nölke             | Veer                | Triest            |
| Pitter            | Gallia              | Kaas              |
| Laurens           | Adele               | Devaal            |
| Aldegonda         | Albina              | Ulin              |
| Frens             | Franziska           | Dol               |
| Maan              | Hanne               | Vaas              |
| Klaos             | Heidrun             | Boeve             |
| Reneer            | Kathrin             | Warmoth           |
| Rutger            | Katinka             | Voort             |
| Artur             | Kornelia            | Zeedyk            |

# ADDENDUM: DUNGEON MASTERS GUILD

## CAPSULE REVIEWS

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[by Justin Alexander - ???, 2020](#)

The [Dungeon Masters Guild](#) is a truly fantastic resource for 5<sup>th</sup> Edition games, and when it comes to supporting published campaigns utterly unique in the annals of the RPG industry. The ability to draw from and tap directly into Wizards of the Coast's books is incredibly powerful, and it means that every time a new campaign comes out a whole flood of well-developed and professionally presented support material springs up.

While working on *Descent Into Avernus*, I made it a point to periodically survey the available material on the Guild and grab anything that looked interesting or potentially useful. (This was made possible by both [my Patreon patrons](#) and also those who click on the DriveThruRPG affiliate links here at the Alexandrian. I wouldn't be able to justify this cash outlay without you, and as a result you're supporting not only me, but also these other creators!)

Many of these books I have already recommended or referenced in the Remix itself. But I thought it might be useful to also offer up some capsule reviews of the various books and other products I looked at.

A few quick provisos before we begin:

- I'm generally aiming for a capsule review, which means just a very high overview of my thoughts/impressions of the book.
- Unless otherwise noted, none of these reviews represent actually playtesting the material.
- I was reading these books with a specific agenda: Can I use this in the Remix? I've not specifically reviewed or graded them with that in mind, but it's probably worth your while to keep that bias in mind.

You may also want to review this [Guide to Grades at the Alexandrian](#). The short version: My general philosophy is that 90% of everything is crap, and crap gets an F. I'm primarily interested in grading the 10% of the pile that's potentially worth your time. Anything from A+ to C- is, honestly, worth checking out if the material sounds interesting to you. If I give something a D it's pretty shaky. F, in my opinion, should be avoided entirely.

**ELMINSTER'S CANDLEKEEP COMPANION:** The [Candlekeep Companion](#) is great. Ed Greenwood himself does some writing on the book and served as a Creative Consultant, giving it a very impressive imprimatur. But where the *Companion* really excels is relentlessly keeping the focus on play-oriented material. In *Part 4A: The Road to Candlekeep* I already described how the book's delightful random tables can be used to instantly bring the PCs' journey through the Castle of Tomes to life, and really the whole book is like that. It is constantly about what the PCs can do (or will want to do) in Candlekeep, what the DM needs to do to run those things at the table, and a nice set of tools to empower the DM while they're doing it.

M.T. Black presents a "Director's Cut" of the Candlekeep chapter from *Descent Into Avernus* that was actually what got me excited about buying the book, but I ended up being underwhelmed by it. The scenario ends up just being a bunch of NPCs dragging the PCs around by the nose to little effect. There are a couple of ideas here (using the Prophecies of Alaundo to push the PCs towards Avernus and using the original gateway used for the Charge of the Hellriders to reach Avernus), but they both need a bit of TLC.

The book is rounded out with some PC character options that look very interesting to me (albeit with maybe a few too many dissociated divination mechanics for my taste) and a rich selection of original spells and magic items that just beg to be used ASAP.

Also of note is the absolutely gorgeous poster map of the castle by Marco Bernardini. The book is probably worth buying for this poster map all by itself, and I'll almost certainly be hanging a copy of it on my wall when the PCs head to Candlekeep.

- *Grade: B*

**SHIELD OF THE HIDDEN LORD:** Written by M.T. Black, one of the co-authors of *Descent Into Avernus*, [Shield of the Hidden Lord](#) tweaks the continuity so that the Vanthampurs are still looking for the Shield. Following leads from Vanthampur Villa, the PCs can go racing to an abandoned temple beneath Hhune Villa and grab the shield first. I don't really grok this hook: Since the PCs don't find out about the Shield until the Villa, they won't go looking for it until *after* the Villa... which mean the Vanthampurs have probably been eliminated and there's no urgency in their search for the Shield. It would make a lot more sense, in my opinion, to seed the clues into the Dungeon of the Dead Three and then have the PCs race the Vanthampurs to get the Shield. (This would even allow you to add a Vanthampur delving team to the adventure.)

The design of the sealed temple is pretty good. The key is filled with a lot of evocative ideas. But it can be tricky to do a dungeon that's been sealed up for a hundred years, and this unfortunately becomes clear as the adventure becomes overly dependent on creatures who have, totally coincidentally, *all* managed to accidentally stumble inside the place within the last few weeks just before the PCs arrive.

I really don't like the fact that the maps are only located as separate files (and not included in the PDF layout), but including versions both with and without numbers gets two huge thumbs up from me. (Hard to believe in an era of virtual tabletops people are still getting this wrong.)

Since the Remix gives the Shield of the Hidden Lord a different history, you'd obviously have some continuity issues here. With a little elbow grease (and some problem-solving) you could swap out the Shield in this adventure for the Tiamat relics.

- *Grade: D*

**BALDUR'S GATE - THE FALL OF ELTUREL:** [The Fall of Elturel](#) provides an alternative starting point for either *Descent Into Avernus* or *Tyranny of Dragons*. Conceptually it's not bad: You start in Elturel, head out into the wilderness to deal with Tiamat cultists and Dead Three cultists, and go back to find Elturel a smoking crater in the ground. Along the way they stage several encounters with Elturgardians so that the PCs will have at least a light personal connection to the city's inhabitants.

But there's just nothing terribly exciting about the content, and the structure is problematic. The initial hook is weak and the adventure immediately saddles you with Reya Mantlemorn as a GMPC who constantly tells the PCs what they're supposed to be doing at every single step (right down to prompting them for specific skill checks). If you're going to use Reya later it makes sense to introduce her here, but doubling down on her as a railroading GMPC obviously doesn't work.

It should also be noted that the adventure's alternate hooks into *Descent* and *Tyranny* skip significant chunks of both campaigns. (The hook for *Descent* is only designed to skip a small chunk of material, but it missteps by immediately identifying Duke Vanthampur as being behind the Dead Three cultists, completely short-circuiting and/or deflating the whole first act.) These hooks are also completely incompatible with the Alexandrian Remix, so if you're using the Remix I'd definitely skip this one.

- *Grade: D*

**LULU'S GUIDE TO HOLLYPHANTS:** Written by Kienna Shaw & Donathin Frye, I already recommended [Lulu's Guide to Hollyphants](#) in the Remix because it includes a playable PC hollyphant race that will let one of your players take up the role of Lulu. The rest of the book is a little thin (although it does have a good selection of hollyphant NPC stats, including an evil variant, so you can easily add more of them to your campaign). The interpretation of hollyphants is quite twee and full of sparkles, which may limit the utility for you.

- *Grade: D+*

**CHARACTER SHEET BY SHELBY ROSMYTH:** Shelby Rosmyth designed [a really nice Avernus-themed character sheet](#). I wouldn't use it until the PCs actually head to Hell, but once there I think it will offer a really nice thematic feel at the table. The major drawback is the lack of equipment and spell list support, but the package does include a form-fillable PDF.

- *Grade: B-*

**MARISA'S BLADES:** [Marisa's Blades](#) by Justin M. Cole came to my attention as being a tie-in for both *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist* and *Descent Into Avernus*, potentially serving as a bridge between those two campaigns. This turns out to not actually be the case, so the adventure was somewhat wrong-footed for me from the start. Cole does a very interesting job of taking elements from a lot of other DM's Guild supplements and mixing them together into an original adventure (an approach which, in my opinion, enhances the value of both *Marisa's Blades* and the other material). Unfortunately, the actual adventure itself is somewhat incoherent: Marisa's brother has made a deal with a devil, so she arranges for their whole gang to be arrested by the PCs to "solve" this problem... only it's not at all clear how it would solve anything. The tone is set early with one of the hooks: "Laeral Silverhand walks up to the party on the street." That doesn't quite work does it? Multiple hooks, though! That's smart! Cole has a lot of potential, but this is, unfortunately, unusable.

- *Grade: F*

**ABYSSAL INCURSION:** The basic concept of [Abyssal Incursion](#) is that Avernus is the front line of the Blood War; thus demonic armies should constantly be pressuring the defensive lines of the Styx and occasionally making deep raids onto the Avernian plains. Thus we have three such demonic incursions designed to be injected into an Avernus-based campaign. Where the supplement excels is Introcaso's creativity: A gargantuan, demonic worm that serves as a living troop transport/tank. A war barge that carries maze-gates linked to the Abyss which can spit out demon strike forces onto the banks of the Styx. These are fantastic concepts.

Where *Abyssal Incursions* comes up a bit short for me is its actual utility: Billed as a supplement for *Descent Into Avernus* (a campaign for 1<sup>st</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> level characters), both Baphomet's battle barge and Yeenoghu's worm feature impossibly difficult demon armies. Despite this, they are both primarily (and almost exclusively) presented through the lens of combat. For example, the notes for roleplaying the CR 23 Baphomet (who is accompanied by a literal horde of demons and can summon even more three times per day) are: "Unless the characters find a way to gain the upper hand, the Horned King attacks them on sight." and the story hooks include things like, "The characters want to kill ... Baphomet."

(And if the PCs do kill Baphomet, it causes the battle barge to immediately spit out three more demon hordes.)

This would be *very* useful for a higher level campaign in Avernus, however. (Or perhaps scenarios in which the PCs can gather a horde of their own to go demon hunting.) And, as of this writing, I'm planning to use the third incursion (a crashed elemental galleon from Eberron that's crashed on the banks of the Styx) in my Avernian hexcrawl. So very much recommended.

- *Grade: B-*



**WARLORDS OF AVERNUS:** This supplement caught my attention particularly because I'm hoping to beef up the warlords of Avernus (we have title!), and it delivers quite nicely with four new warlords with very cool concepts supported by a full suite of stat blocks. I would have perhaps liked just a touch more flavor (more fully drawn personalities for the gang members in addition to those given for the warlords themselves), but Rodrigo Kuerten has presented a really great, tight package with high utility. [Warlords of Avernus](#) is very much worth \$2.

- Grade: B-

**BALDUR'S GATE - CITY ENCOUNTERS:** When I was running *Dragon Heist*, I got a huge amount of quality play from [Waterdeep: City Encounters](#) (lead design by Will Doyle). That book contains 75 different encounter types, most of which have 3-6 variations, and a random table that splits them up across the different neighborhoods of the city. Borrowing a technique I brainstormed while writing [Thinking About Urbancrawls](#), whenever the PCs went somewhere in the city I would just roll a random encounter for the neighborhood they were going to. It filled the city with life.

So when I saw that there was a [Baldur's Gate: City Encounters](#) book, I snapped it up right quick. Unfortunately, this book (lead design by Justice Arman and Anthony Joyce) is considerably less useful than the *Waterdeep* version. It includes two sets of encounters: Neighborhood Encounters and Tension Encounters.

The Neighborhood Encounters consist of one encounter for each neighborhood in the city, which is just enough, in my opinion, to not be particularly useful. If I sort of squint at it sideways I can sort of see how you could theoretically have a one-encounter-per-neighborhood structure where the first time PCs enter or pass through a neighborhood you'd use the encounter, which would establish the tone/environment of that neighborhood for the group. (But the encounters here don't really do that.)

The Tension Encounters are potentially more interesting: They present a five step scale modeling the current level of "tension" in the city and then support this scale with different encounters that can be had at each tension level. How the PCs choose to resolve the encounters can then affect whether the city tips more towards chaos or order!

Conceptually this sounds great, and could provide a great contrapuntal development as the PCs are [pursuing their investigation and getting tangled up in Portyr politics](#). But there are significant problems in practice: First, the scale is supposedly between Order and Chaos, but the actual scale has Pandemonium on one side (with the Cult of the Dead Three performing blood sacrifices in the streets) and Martial Law on the other side (with a corrupted Flaming Fist declaring martial law and instituting pogroms while politicians are assassinated in the streets). It's thematically incoherent, largely negating the whole point of the exercise.

Second, while promising a system by which the tension meter would change over time, the effort to provide such a system apparently ran aground, with the designers ultimately just throwing their hands up and saying "the DM decides what impact, if any, the encounters in aggregate had on the level of tension in Baldur's Gate."

Third, a lot of the tension encounters are kind of nonsensical. Like, there's one where the PCs are walking down the street when Liara suddenly draws up next to them in a chariot, gives a speech declaring herself Grand Duke of Baldur's Gate (not how that works), and then offers a ludicrously paltry 250 gp bounty to anybody in the crowd who assassinates any remaining dukes in town.

On that note, the biggest problem I have with the book is that many of the encounters aren't encounters: They're scenario hooks to much larger scenarios that the GM would then need to design. (Random encounters spawning unintended scenarios and digressions is a thing that can happen, but they shouldn't be half-baked into the design.)

The book also includes a neighborhood map of Baldur's Gate which, for reasons I don't really understand, doesn't match any other extant maps of Baldur's Gate.

- *Grade: D*

**MONSTER LOOT - DESCENT INTO AVERNUS:** I snagged [Monster Loot: Descent Into Avernus](#) because it seemed to directly address something that I feel is, in fact, generally lacking in the 5<sup>th</sup> Edition adventures I've seen: Loot. In short, Anne Gregersen supplies a loot listing for every encounter in the campaign.

The book includes two major new mechanics for equipment: First, the option to harvest body parts from foes. Second, broken items that don't work until you repair them. Unfortunately, it's largely on the shoals of these two mechanics that the book runs aground.

The problem with the **broken** mechanic, primarily, is that it's just massively overused. Virtually every single weapon and piece of armor listed has been broken. On the one hand, this is relatively easy to just ignore. On the other hand, it feels indicative of a certain skittishness in letting the PCs get "good loot" that's kind of antithetical to what I wanted the book for.

With a book specifically dedicated to customizing loot lists for every NPC, I was really hoping to see some unusual, eclectic, and flavorful stuff. Instead, in almost every case, it's just "the weapons they're carrying, the armor they're wearing, and it's all broken." Which, frankly, I don't really need. That stuff is already *in the stat block*.

Where *Monster Loot: Descent Into Avernus* really unleashes, though, are those harvesting rules: You can skin flesh, yank teeth, and cut off tails that do all kinds of crazy stuff. I was actually really interested in this because I find hunter-based play interesting in my open tables and I'm always wishing I had better support for it. But in this specific instance I found the result slightly... distasteful.

The book says that "harvesting body parts, such as hide and flesh, from humanoid creatures is not something this document covers because we don't encourage adventurers to tear into the bodies of people." But it means that in the most literal sense of the *humanoid* monster type. The book happily provides you the details on skinning angels and all kinds of intelligent creatures (including bipedal intelligent creatures).

At just \$2.95 I flirted with giving this one a D, but ultimately I think I'm not going to bother having this at the table when I run the campaign. So, unfortunately...

- *Grade: F*

**THE HELLRIDERS' KEEP:** This supplement adds a new location to Elturel. Conceptually it's great. Not only does making Elturel a richer location for the PCs to explore make a lot of sense, but Carter VanHuss very astutely notes that the published adventure doesn't cleanly clue the PCs into the true history of the Hellriders and designs this scenario to remedy that. The descriptions of the environment are really good, with lots of little details that are not only specific, but also packed full of lore. Exploring this space will immersively draw players into the world.

Unfortunately, the book does get a little hamstrung by a couple of structural issues. First, the hook is just another, "NPC tells the PCs to go some place, the PCs got there" affair. To some extent, I can see how his hands were tied by the published campaign itself, but it feels like with a little extra effort several hooks could have been more organically woven into the campaign to make PCs aware of the Hellriders' Keep.

The more significant problem is the lack of a map: The entire structure of the adventure is exploring the castle, but the two maps in the product are instead battlemaps. Individual areas are keyed and an effort is made to describe how they relate to each other, but without a map it's all needlessly confusing.

Despite this, I think it's worth grabbing a copy of this if you're going to run *Descent Into Avernus* (even if you will end up needing to draw a map).

- *Grade: C*

**MONSTER HUNTS – AVERNUS:** This book promised to be a bunch of plug 'n play side quests for use with *Descent Into Avernus*. I thought this would be a slam dunk in terms of usefulness, providing all kinds of awesome content for fleshing out a hexcrawl of Avernus.

Unfortunately, not one of the one-page scenarios is actually set in Avernus. In this case, "for use with *Descent Into Avernus*" means that it uses the stat blocks from the appendices of *Descent Into Avernus*.

Ignoring the disappointing bait 'n switch (which renders the book completely unusable for what I wanted it for), the scenarios themselves are also very poorly designed (so that I wouldn't want to use them for *anything*): For example, most of the dungeon maps, instead of being keyed, are described in rambling, unfocused paragraphs. The text is frequently filled with *prima facie* nonsense (like a claim in the first scenario that it will take PCs forty minutes to walk two city blocks). And it's almost impressive how many times they try to force a railroad on PCs even when they're just exploring a simple dungeon.

The book also promises an "easy to use hunting system," but I can find nothing of the sort. Instead, the majority of the scenarios lead off with some form of "make this skill check to find tracks or skip the rest of this adventure."

- *Grade: F*

**HELLTUREL:** James Introcaso has really hit the nail on the head with [Hellturel](#). This 32-page supplement presents four new locations for Elturel, nicely fleshing out the city for PCs who want to explore it. Not only are the locations well-designed, they are connected using [node-based scenario design](#) so that exploring one location will provide leads pointing to the others.

The only thing I would have liked to have seen would be some guidance for how clues could be added to the locations described in *Descent Into Avernus* in order to *also* link them to the locations in *Hellturel*. That creates a little bit of extra lifting. There are also some minor continuity glitches (for example, the first location says the Order of the Gauntlet has moved to the second location, but at the second location there's only one member of the Order of the Gauntlet and, as far as I can tell, no indication of what happened to the rest of them) that probably need to be cleaned up.

But, as I say, really good stuff. Recommended.

- *Grade: B-*



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